

Iran Update



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The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) publish the Iran Update, which provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests. CTP-ISW publishes the Iran Update every weekday.

Click [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of the ongoing opposition offensive in Syria, and [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations. The Syria map is updated daily alongside the static Syria maps in this report. CTP-ISW ended daily maps of Israeli ground operations in February 2025.

We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We utterly condemn violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

Senior Iranian officials are trying to obfuscate Iran's role in leading the Axis of Resistance by denying that Iran exerts direct control over groups like the Houthis, likely to avoid escalation with the United States. Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei delivered a Nowruz speech to Iranian officials in Tehran on March 21 and claimed that the people of Yemen and resistance groups in the region "have their own motivation" and called Western claims that these groups act on Iran's behalf "a big mistake."^[1] Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Commander Major General Hossein Salami separately claimed on March 16 that the "Yemenis" are an "independent and free nation" and that Houthis make their own strategic and operational decisions that Iran does not direct.^[2] These statements ignore that the Houthis have repeatedly highlighted their coordination with the Axis of Resistance prior to conducting operations.^[3] Iran leads the Axis of Resistance and provides IRGC Quds Force (IRGC-QF) officers to advise the Houthis, including senior IRGC Quds Force commander Abdul Reza Shahlai.^[4]

Khamenei and Salami's remarks echo other Iranian statements that have come amid US threats to target Iran or key Iranian assets in the region. In early 2024, for example, IRGC-QF Commander Esmail Ghaani traveled to Baghdad to direct Iranian-backed Iraqi militias to stop attacks targeting US forces in Iraq. Senior Iranian officials simultaneously attempted to obfuscate Iran's own involvement in the attacks and avoid a US response against Iran for the January 2024 Iranian-backed Iraqi militia attack that killed three US servicemembers in Jordan.^[5] US President Donald Trump warned on March 17 that the United States could respond to Houthi attacks as if those attacks came from

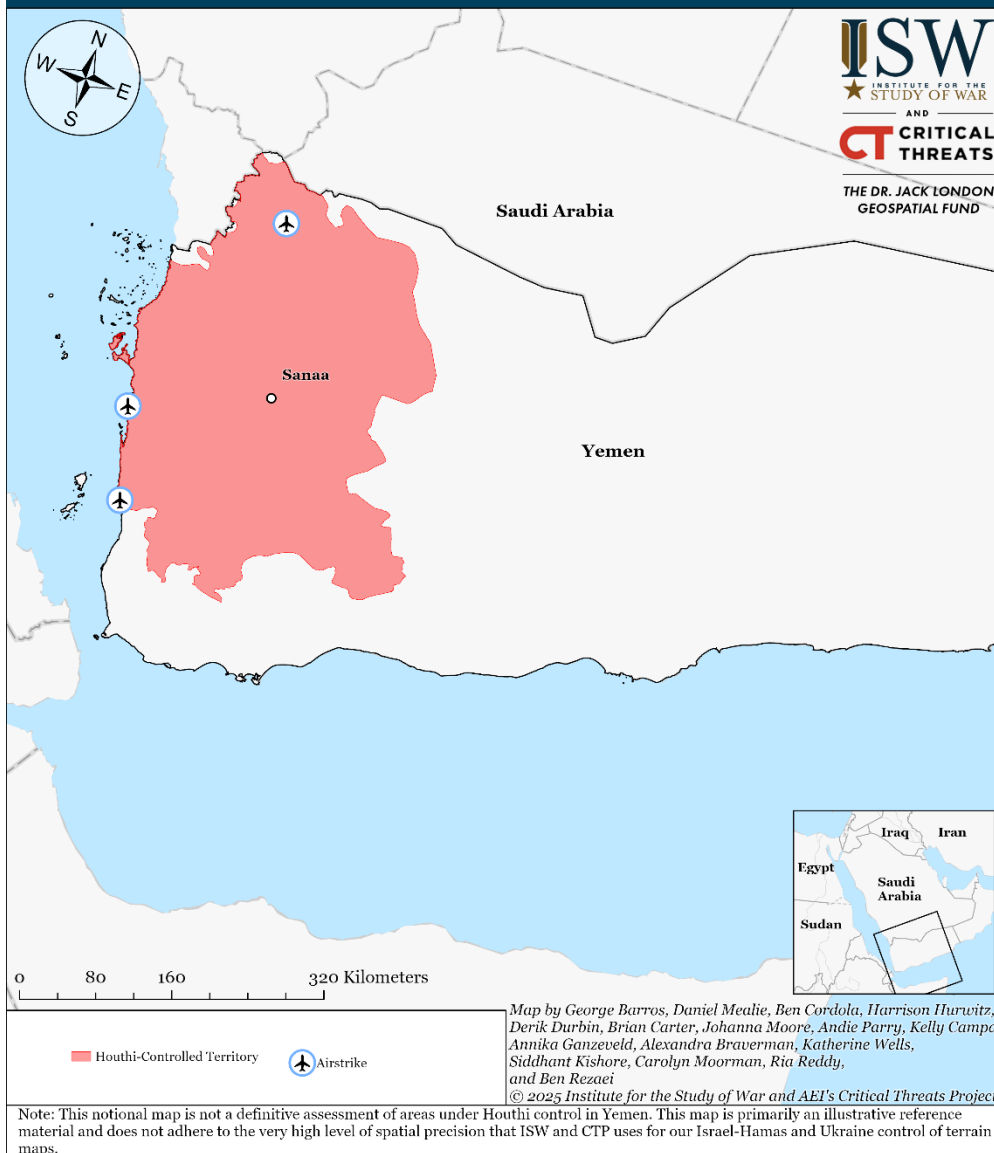
Iran.^[6] Iran likely seeks to reduce the risk of a direct confrontation with the United States while maintaining its leadership of the Axis of Resistance—including the Houthis.

The United States deployed another US aircraft carrier to the Red Sea, according to an anonymous official talking to the Associated Press on March 21.^[7] US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth ordered the USS *Carl Vinson* carrier strike group to sail from the Sea of Japan to the Red Sea for a three-month deployment. The USS *Carl Vinson* group is set to arrive in April. Hegseth also extended the USS *Harry S. Truman* carrier strike group's deployment to the Red Sea by a month. The decision to extend the *Truman* group's deployment by one month will enable CENTCOM to maintain at least one carrier in the Red Sea without gaps in coverage.

US Central Command (CENTCOM) has conducted at least seven airstrikes targeting Houthi infrastructure in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on March 20.^[8] CENTCOM reportedly targeted a Houthi military base in the al Fazah-al Tuhayta area, south of Hudaydah Port.^[9] CENTCOM also struck an unspecified location near Safraa in the Houthi stronghold of Saada City on March 20.^[10] The Houthis did not launch retaliatory attacks targeting the *Truman*, as it has done previously.^[11]

US Strikes Against Houthi Targets

As of March 21, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST

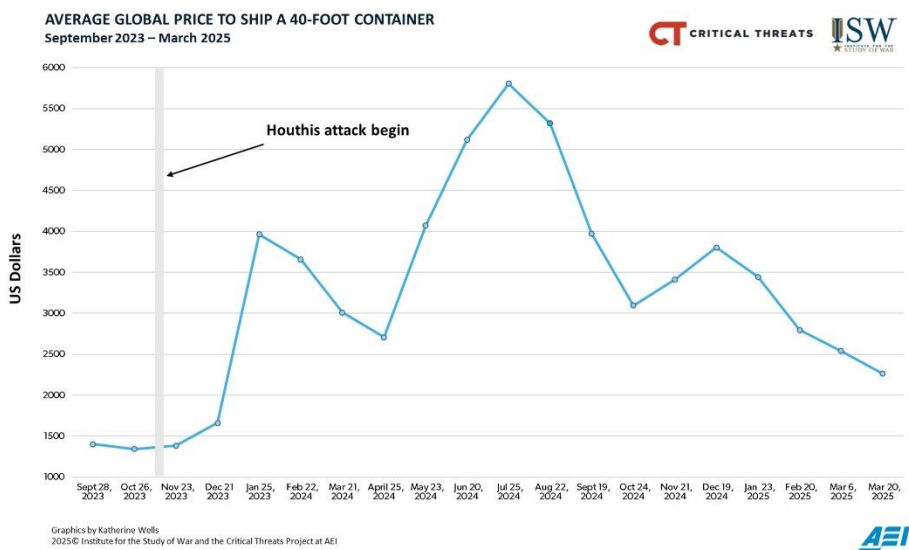


The Houthis separately launched a ballistic missile targeting an unspecified Israeli military site south of Tel Aviv in central Israel on March 20.^[12] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) intercepted a Houthi missile before it entered Israeli airspace.^[13] This is the third attack the Houthis have launched targeting Israeli territory since the Houthis announced the resumption of their campaign against Israel, which they said is in response to Israel not sending aid into the Gaza Strip.^[14]

The US Treasury is allowing energy imports to Yemen loaded before March 5, 2025, to proceed until April 4, 2025, despite US recent sanctions on the Houthis. After April 4 all energy imports will require specific US Treasury authorization.^[15] The Houthis have monopolized control of Yemeni oil imports by striking government-controlled port facilities, forcing those facilities to shut down and redirect traffic to Houthi-controlled Hudaydah port.^[16] The Houthis

do not control Yemen’s energy resources, meaning they cannot export Yemeni energy resources from Hudaydah.

Shipping companies are set to avoid the Red Sea transit route until a more comprehensive peace agreement is reached, according to the *New York Times*.^[17] Approximately 200 cargo ships transited the Bab el Mandeb Strait in the southern Red Sea near Yemen in February 2025.^[18] Two hundred cargo ships still represent an increase from the 144 ships that transited the Red Sea in February 2024, but it is still significantly fewer ships compared to before the Houthi attack campaign targeting maritime shipping, according to the *New York Times*.^[19] Global freight prices also remain significantly higher than before October 2023 though freight prices have decreased since December 2024, when the Houthis halted their attacks on international shipping.^[20] The Houthis have not targeted commercial vessels in the Red Sea since announcing their resumption of attacks on “Israeli shipping” on March 11.^[21]



Widespread reports about likely Sunni-perpetrated sectarian and revenge-based attacks targeting the Alawite community threaten to fuel the Alawite insurgency in western Syria. Alawite media has widely reported on instances of violence committed against the Alawite community by Sunnis and government forces.^[22] CTP-ISW cannot independently verify all of these reports at this time, but these reports will likely exacerbate Alawite distrust towards Sunni communities and Sunni-majority security forces. This distrust delegitimizes the interim government among the population and could enable insurgents to move in as security guarantors for the Alawite community.^[23] Insurgent groups seek to exploit insecurity and abuses to control the population and establish themselves as the primary security guarantor in a community.^[24] Failure by the interim government to hold perpetrators of these abuses accountable and rebuild trust within the Alawite community will undermine any counterinsurgency campaigns.

Unspecified vigilantes also conducted two separate attacks targeting former Assad regime officials outside of the Syrian coastal area. These vigilante-style attacks may become more common as a result of a lack of government-led transitional justice.^[25] Unidentified gunmen killed former Baath Party Secretary for Izra, Daraa Province, Mohammed Sharif al Zoubi.^[26] Unidentified gunmen also killed

the former mayor of Khaldiya district, Aleppo City, Ibrahim Othman.[27] Othman was accused of being an informant under the Assad regime.[28]

Syrian government forces continued raids and arrests targeting elements of nascent insurgent networks elsewhere in Syria. Government forces arrested a Deir ez Zor City-based insurgent cell on March 20 that was planning an attack on a security headquarters.[29] The cell was affiliated with the US-sanctioned Qatirji Company.[30] The Qaterji Company facilitated Iranian oil sales to Syria and China under the former Assad regime, generating "hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue" for the IRGC Quds Force and the Houthis.[31] The Qaterji Company was a key revenue stream for the IRGC Quds Force and its affiliated proxies under the Assad Regime.[32] These militiamen may form the core of a more broad-based insurgency outside of Alawite areas, given that they have lost economic power after the fall of Assad.

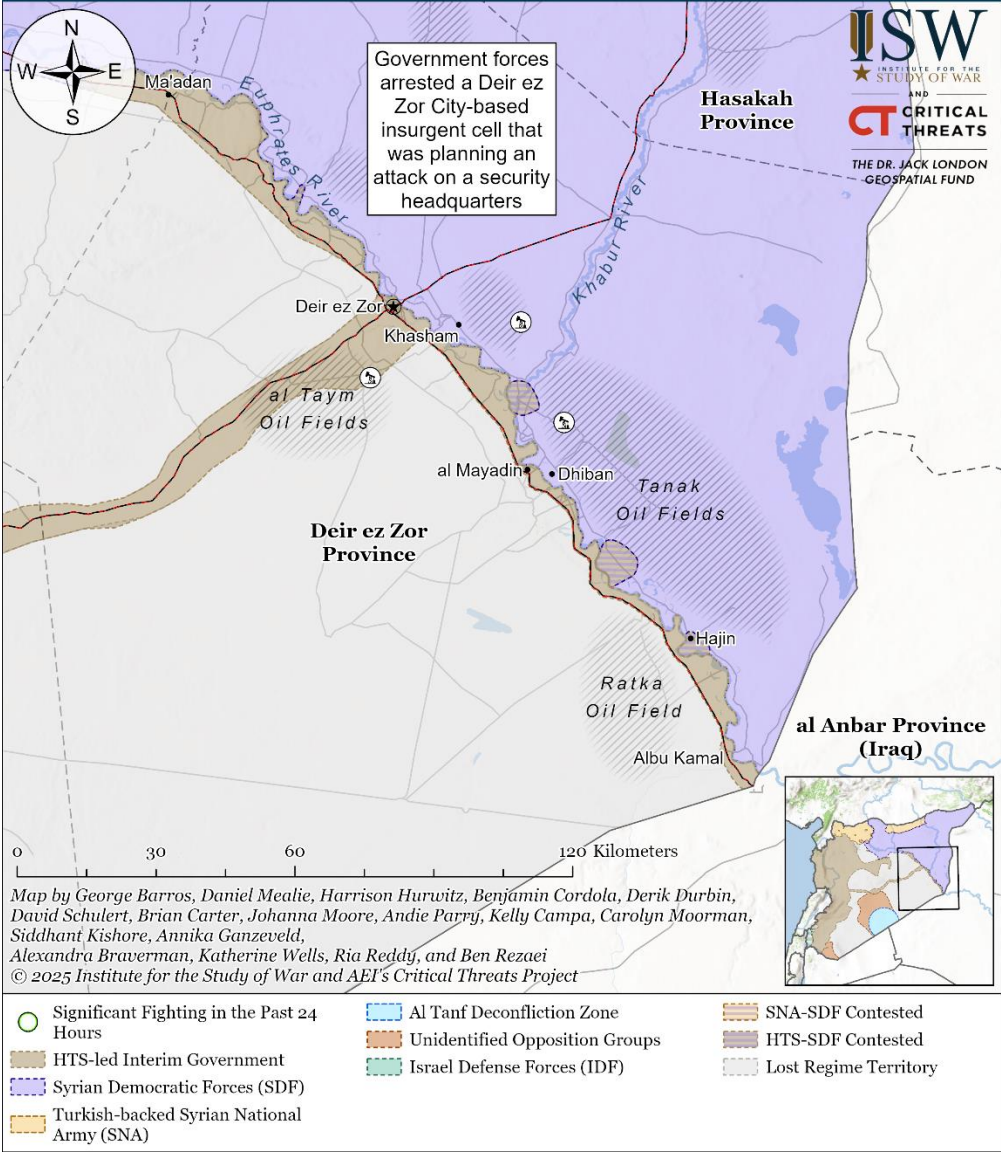
Assessed Control of Terrain in Western Syria

March 21, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Assessed Control of Terrain around Deir ez Zor

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Key Takeaways:

- Iran and the Axis of Resistance:** Senior Iranian officials are trying to obfuscate Iran’s role in leading the Axis of Resistance by denying that Iran exerts direct control over groups like the Houthis, likely to avoid escalation with the United States. Khamenei and Salami’s remarks echo Iranian statements in early 2024 that came amid US threats to target Iran or key Iranian assets in the region.
- Houthis in Yemen:** The United States deployed another US aircraft carrier to the Red Sea, according to an anonymous official talking to the Associated Press on March 21. The US secretary

of defense also extended the *Truman* group's deployment by one month, which will enable CENTCOM to maintain at least one carrier in the Red Sea without gaps in coverage.

- **Maritime Shipping in the Red Sea:** Shipping companies are set to avoid the Red Sea transit route until a more comprehensive peace agreement is reached, according to the *New York Times*.
- **Alawite Insurgency in Syria:** Widespread reports about likely Sunni-perpetrated sectarian and revenge-based attacks targeting the Alawite community threaten to fuel the Alawite insurgency in western Syria. Alawite media has widely reported on instances of violence committed against the Alawite community by Sunnis and government forces.
- **Other Insurgent Elements in Syria:** Syrian government forces continued raids and arrests targeting elements of nascent insurgent networks elsewhere in Syria. Government forces arrested a Deir ez Zor City-based insurgent cell affiliated with the US-sanctioned Qaterji Company on March 20 that was planning an attack on a security headquarters.

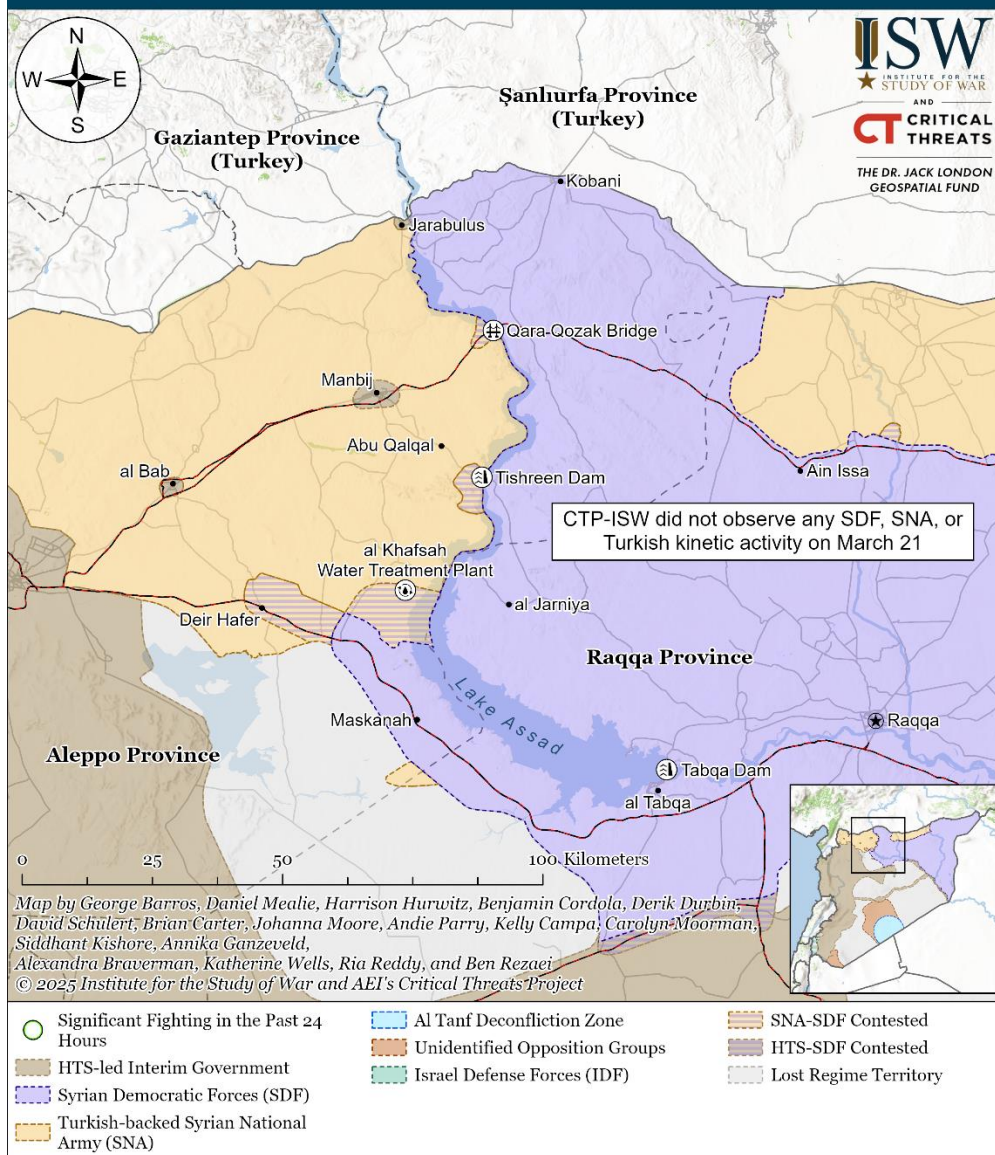
Syria

Neither Turkey nor the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) appear to have attacked SDF positions or assets in northern Syria since March 18. A cessation or decrease in kinetic activity on the northern front is notable as SDF-Syrian government talks continue. Turkey has conducted near-daily drone strikes and airstrikes targeting SDF positions in Aleppo, Raqqa, and Hasakah provinces since late December 2024.[33] Many of these strikes targeted SDF supply lines, personnel, or positions to support the SNA's active operations against the SDF near Tishreen Dam and Qara Qozak Bridge. The Syrian interim government and SDF agreed to a ceasefire on March 10, but a Turkish defense military source said that this deal did not affect Turkish "counterterrorism" operations in Syria.[34] Turkey and the SNA continued to target SDF positions with airstrikes and artillery for several days despite the agreement.[35] CTP-ISW has not observed any reports of Turkish air activity or SNA ground and air activity targeting the SDF in northern Syria since March 18, however.

This pause in Turkish and SNA activity could be a temporary phenomenon, but it is notable amid continued SDF-Syrian government talks. Turkey and the SNA appeared to halt attacks on the SDF on March 19, which was the same day that the Syrian interim government met with the SDF at al Shaddadi base in Hasakah Province to continue negotiations over the SDF's integration into the Syrian government.[36] A Syrian journalist claimed that the two parties discussed the SDF withdrawals from Raqqa and Deir ez Zor province and the formation of an SDF-affiliated army division in Hasakah.[37] SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi continued to push for a ceasefire in all Syrian territories before integration into the Syrian MoD. The SDF could not safely integrate or withdraw in good order while under active military pressure from the SNA and Turkey. A ceasefire could allow for negotiations between the government and SDF to progress further.

Assessed Control of Terrain around Manbij

March 21, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Turkey continues to support elements of the new Syrian army by providing needed military equipment.

A Syrian media outlet reported on March 21 that Turkey has provided more than one “installment” of Turkish armored vehicles to “Syrian army-affiliated military factions.”^[38] The outlet posted a video showing a convoy of about 20 armored tactical vehicles, including Dragoons and Okotar Cobras.^[39] Syrian Interim Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra said in early February that the Defense Ministry needs critical “infrastructure” to replace or supplement outdated Syrian armor and other materiel.^[40] Turkey has pledged to support Syria in building and training its new army.^[41]

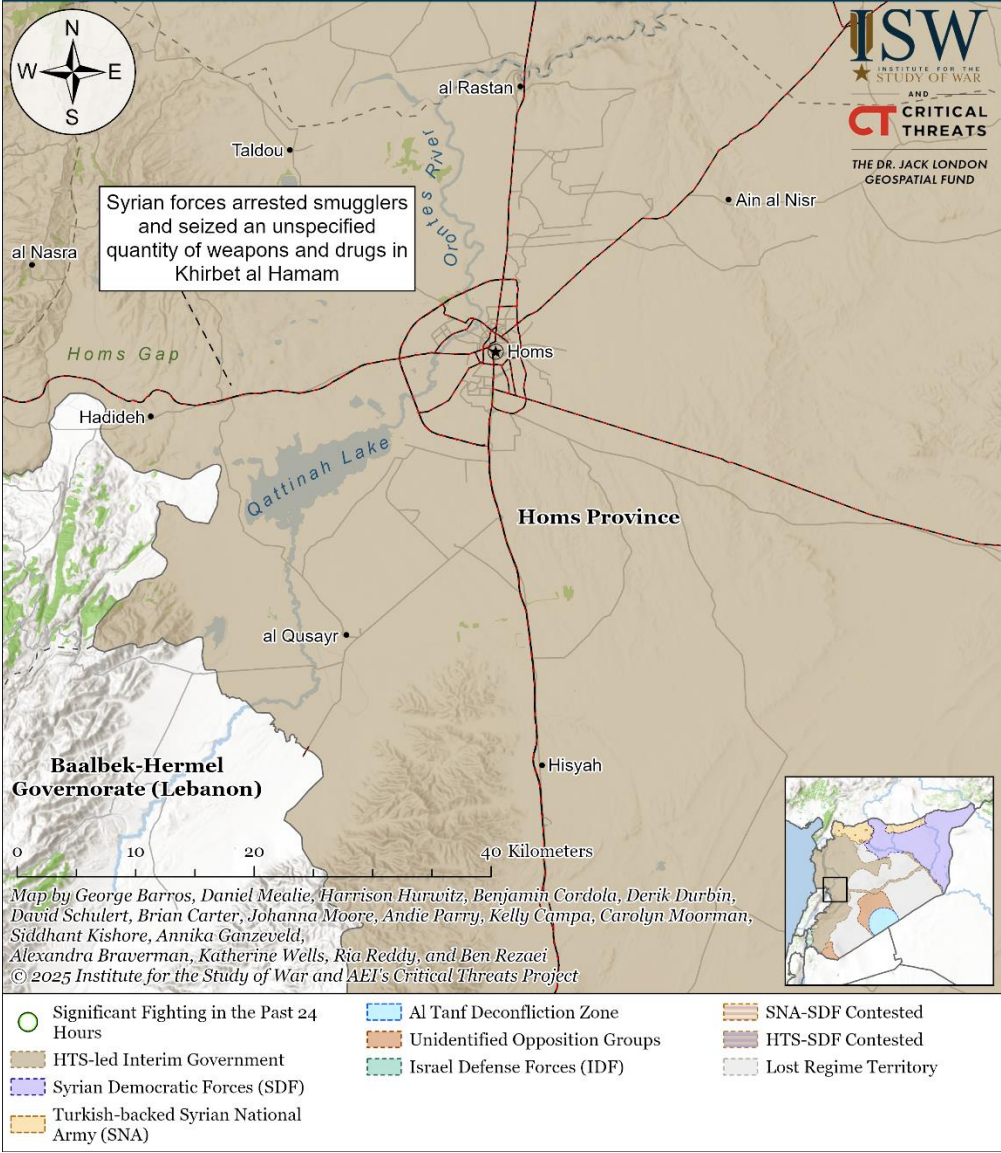
The Syrian outlet's reference to “army-affiliated factions” suggests that Turkey may be providing these vehicles to the SNA. The Syrian government claims that Syrian armed factions have “dissolved” into the Syrian army, but there has been no evidence that any of the Syrian armed factions have actually

dissolved themselves at this time.[42] Some units, including US-designated Turkish proxy Abu Amsha's 62nd Division, appear to be reflagged SNA formations rather than wholly rebuilt new units loyal to the Syrian defense ministry and the official chain of command.[43] Turkey has long provided the SNA with material support and equipment.[44]

Weapons smugglers along the Syria-Lebanon border along the M1 Highway are probably supporting insurgent activity in western Syria. Syrian security forces arrested smugglers in Khirbet al Hamam, Homs Province, and seized an unspecified quantity of weapons and drugs.[45] Syrian security forces previously seized a weapons depot in Khirbet al Hamam on January 12, 2025.[46] Khirbet al Hamam and Balqasah, 4.82km to the north, saw heavy fighting between the Syrian government and pro-Assad fighters in late December 2024. [47] The continued discovery of weapons depots and smuggling activity suggests that smugglers have continued to use the area for their operations. The M1 Highway is a key ground line of communication between Homs City and Western Syria.

Assessed Control of Terrain around Homs

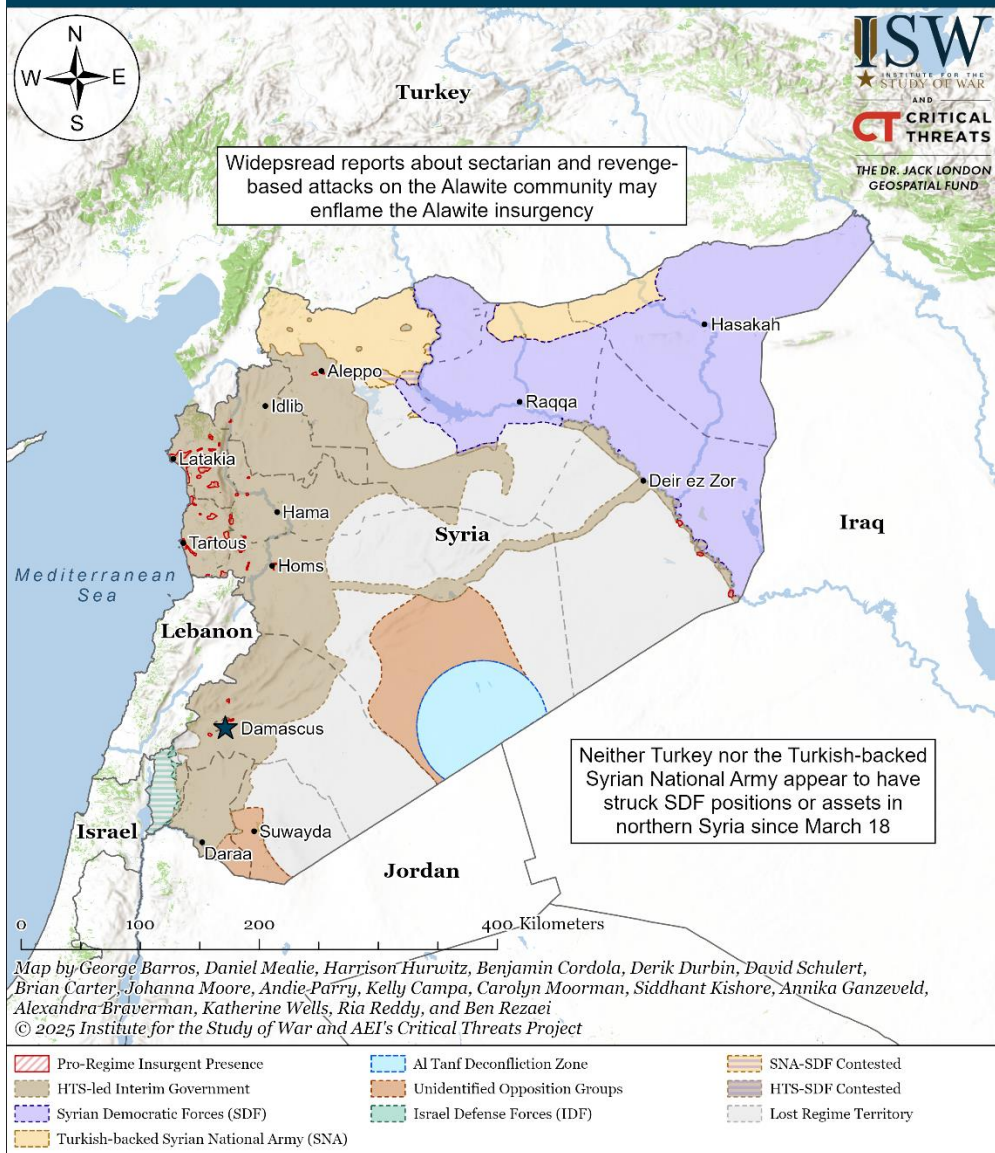
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Two US-sanctioned tankers transporting Russian oil will reportedly offload at Baniyas Port in Syria in the coming days.[48] A US-sanctioned tanker carrying 100,000 tons of Russian oil onboard reached Baniyas Port on March 20. Another US-sanctioned tanker carrying Russian oil will reportedly reach Baniyas Port on March 25. Russian oil transfers to Syria are part of Russian efforts to increase economic support to Syria and secure Russian military basing rights in exchange.[49]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

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Iraq

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Strengthen Iranian and Axis of Resistance influence over the Iraqi state and society
- Harden the Iraqi government against internal dissent

Nothing significant to report.

Arabian Peninsula

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Harden the Houthi regime against internal dissent in Houthi-controlled areas
- Destroy the anti-Houthi opposition in order to control all of Yemen
- Erode Israeli will to continue the war in the Gaza Strip

See topline section.

The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Erode the will of the Israeli political establishment and public to sustain clearing operations in the Gaza Strip
- Reestablish Hamas as the governing authority in the Gaza Strip
- Rebuild and reestablish Hezbollah in southern Lebanon
- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

CTP-ISW will not be covering the new Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip. We have reprioritized our Middle East coverage to focus on Iran's nuclear program, Iranian domestic security, and Iranian efforts to rebuild its networks into the Levant, including the Palestinian Territories. Given that Israel and its partners have destroyed Hamas' military organization and severed the group's ability to resupply itself, we are now focused on how Iran seeks to rebuild its lines of communication with Hezbollah and Hamas through Syria.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

See topline section.

The Iran Update provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities abroad that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests. It also covers events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making of the Iranian regime. The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) provides these updates regularly based on regional events.

CTP-ISW defines the “Axis of Resistance” as the unconventional alliance that Iran has cultivated in the Middle East since the Islamic Republic came to power in 1979. This transnational coalition is comprised of state, semi-state, and non-state actors that cooperate to secure their collective interests. Tehran considers itself to be both part of the alliance and its leader. Iran furnishes these groups with varying levels of financial, military, and political support in exchange for some degree of influence or control over their actions. Some are traditional proxies that are highly responsive to Iranian direction, while others are partners over which Iran exerts more limited influence. Members of the Axis of Resistance are united by their grand strategic objectives, which include eroding and eventually expelling American influence from the Middle East, destroying the Israeli state, or both. Pursuing these objectives and supporting the Axis of Resistance to those ends have become cornerstones of Iranian regional strategy.



[1] <https://www.leader dot ir/fa/content/28095>

[2] <https://www.tabnak dot ir/fa/news/1294467>

[3] <https://www.timesofisrael dot com/houthi-leader-says-group-will-coordinate-with-axis-of-resistance-to-attack-israel/> ;

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https://www.timesofisrael dot com/liveblog_entry/houthi-rebels-fire-drones-toward-israel-from-yemen-says-security-agency/

[4] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-27-2024> ;

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2024-03-27/the-us-no-fail-mission-to-protect-the-red-sea-isn-t-working>

[5] <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/article/3659809/3-us-service-members-killed-others-injured-in-jordan-following-drone-attack/> ;

<https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-january-31-2024> ;

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[6] <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-piles-pressure-yemens-houthis-with-new-airstrikes-2025-03-17/>

[7] <https://apnews.com/article/pentagon-warships-middle-east-carrier-increase-0801c2c12cac065eefa06bd73667fd69>

[8] <https://x.com/TvAlmasirah/status/1902770244172541975>

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[9] <https://x.com/Alsakaniali/status/1902914191045902828>;
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[10] <https://x.com/TvAlmasirah/status/1902782406228316202>

[11] <https://x.com/army21ye/status/1902560137694364084>; <https://x.com/army21ye/status/1902157248425566266>;

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[12] <https://x.com/army21ye/status/1902845162587341065>

[13] <https://x.com/idfonline/status/1902776319097602133>

[14] <https://x.com/army21ye/status/1902560137694364084>;
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<http://x.com/army21ye/status/1899563866599678368> ;
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[15] <https://ofac.treasury.gov/media/934046/download?inline> ; <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2757#:~:text=HOUTHI%20ILLICIT%20SHIPPING%20FACILITATORS,to%20ships%20transporting%20this%20cargo>.

[16] <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/yemens-war-economy-a-key-factor-in-the-ongoing-conflict/>; <https://sanaacenter dot org/the-yemen-review/october-2022/19004>

[17] <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/21/business/economy/red-sea-shipping-houthis.html>

[18] <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/21/business/economy/red-sea-shipping-houthis.html>

[19] <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/21/business/economy/red-sea-shipping-houthis.html> ; <https://www.lloydlist.com/LL1152364/Shipping-starts-to-test-Red-Sea-waters>

[20] <https://www.drewry.co.uk/supply-chain-advisors/supply-chain-expertise/world-container-index-assessed-by-drewry>; <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/756ca769315d4b879ca7fdd6bd4a82be>

See Graphic Below

[21] <http://x.com/army21ye/status/1899563866599678368> ;
<https://x.com/TvAlmasirah/status/1899883401034842138>

- [22] <https://x.com/AlawiteMediaLab/status/1902977130184495515> ; https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1057874903034418&id=100064357555751 ; <https://www.facebook.com/swe-da2021/posts/pfbidowiJa4wkWEDRbrfoVwr2tmpYgdd5kbjd6kHGUhcsE3kevQdFnqhChAtM9qPLuREbyl> ; <https://www.facebook.com/shm.wjrh1/posts/pfbid02x4BLGcDKm4Y13hC9dwaHcEru7NbrWhuGFocnRcc5cDK91iaCW6WTRYotTLWXFGXQl> ; <https://x.com/AlawiteMediaLab/status/1902720068514971759> ; <https://x.com/AlawiteMediaLab/status/1902619995684659339> ; <https://www.facebook.com/CoastSyrian24/posts/122112073574795072> ; [https://www.facebook.com/CoastSyrian24/posts/122112045236795072?_cft__\[o\]=AZXPMnI46yN5SkubUeLMSoMlgVRFkUpeTAoSd9ymvzQE3qZY4xGxpLiY9zLLRr2QAohXoeLfXPvYmWRf9Aqy2WJ7GOAksAsawG7p8GmDoNL6pKSxFr4XffWM9p56g7mCT9VUM8pDITT7wugimkLDZUsZxm3IIIOrrqM2MQUyodkdzZmqzKoaD9eFDMTdKjE9kal8gbP WpIoutd r8gwg&_tn_=%2CO%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/CoastSyrian24/posts/122112045236795072?_cft__[o]=AZXPMnI46yN5SkubUeLMSoMlgVRFkUpeTAoSd9ymvzQE3qZY4xGxpLiY9zLLRr2QAohXoeLfXPvYmWRf9Aqy2WJ7GOAksAsawG7p8GmDoNL6pKSxFr4XffWM9p56g7mCT9VUM8pDITT7wugimkLDZUsZxm3IIIOrrqM2MQUyodkdzZmqzKoaD9eFDMTdKjE9kal8gbP WpIoutd r8gwg&_tn_=%2CO%2CP-R) ; https://x.com/Daraa24_24/status/1902809632080347410
- [23] https://www.marines.mil/portals/1/mcwp%203-33.5_part1.pdf
- [24] https://www.marines.mil/portals/1/mcwp%203-33.5_part1.pdf ; <https://www.understandingwar.org/jaysh-al-mahdi> ; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/iran-update-april-27-2023>
- [25] <https://x.com/jihadyazigi/status/1902993611836301724>
- [26] https://x.com/Daraa24_24/status/1902809632080347410
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- [31] <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2712>
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- [33] See author for data.
- [34] <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-says-forces-killed-24-kurdish-militants-syria-iraq-week-2025-03-13/>
- [35] https://x.com/SDF_Syria/status/1899227562577985612; <https://t.me/nahermedia/45664>; <https://x.com/SOHEB2019/status/1900644339627299189>; <https://x.com/SiyamandAli/status/1901418407913763111>
- [36] https://x.com/SDF_Syria/status/1902358921949368823
- [37] <https://x.com/SOHEB2019/status/1902725209364271177>
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