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.

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.

The United States has asked the Syrian interim government to curtail foreign fighters' influence in the Syrian government in exchange for partial sanctions relief, according to Reuters.[1] Unspecified US and Syrian sources told Reuters on March 25 that US Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Levant and Syria Natasha Franceschi gave a list of US conditions for partial sanctions relief to Syrian Interim Foreign Minister Asaad al Shaibani in Brussels on March 18.[2] The conditions reportedly include counterterrorism cooperation between the US and Syrian governments, the destruction of any remaining chemical weapons stockpiles, the appointment of a liaison to assist efforts to find missing US citizen Austin Tice, and the prevention of foreign fighters' appointments to "senior roles in Syria's governing structure."[3] The United States is considering extending an existing sanctions exemption by two years and possibly issuing another sanctions exemption if the Syrian interim government fulfills these conditions, according to six unspecified US and Syrian sources.[4] The United States would also reportedly issue a statement expressing support for Syria's territorial integrity.[5]

Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara will likely oppose the condition to bar foreign fighters from senior government positions given that this condition would require him to sideline individuals who are deeply loyal to him. "Foreign fighters" likely refers to non-Syrian fighters whom Shara has promoted within the ranks of the Defense Ministry since coming to power. These fighters include Abdul Rahman al Khatib, a Jordanian, and Omar Mohammad Ciftci, a Turk. [6] Khatib and Ciftci are HTS fighters who are loyal to Shara and have fought alongside Shara for over a decade. [7] Shara recently appointed Khatib and Ciftci to command the Republican Guard and Damascus Division of the new Syrian army, respectively. [8] These positions are key to maintaining security in Damascus and protecting Shara and the interim government, underscoring Shara's trust in both men to protect his nascent rule over the country. Shara will likely oppose dismissing Khatib and Ciftci from their posts and appointing other, potentially less trusted, commanders to their posts. Shara's likely reluctance to dismiss foreign fighters

may complicate the interim government's efforts to secure sanctions relief from the United States and would indicate that Shara prioritizes protecting his own power over securing economic relief for Syria.

Iraqi Shia political parties have reportedly reached an agreement to integrate Iranianbacked Iraqi militias into the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Such an agreement will likely further facilitate the Iranian capture of the Iraqi security sector. The PMF is an Iraqi state security service that includes many Iranian-backed Iraqi militias. These militias include elements that operate outside of the PMF.[9] "Informed political sources" told Iraqi media on March 25 that the Shia Coordination Framework has reached a "preliminary agreement," with Iranian approval, to integrate Iranian-backed Iraqi militias into the PMF.[10] The Shia Coordination Framework is a loose coalition of Shia political parties, some of which are backed by Iran. The agreement reportedly requires the militias to refrain from attacking US interests in Iraq and conducting attacks outside of Iraq.[11] The agreement also stipulates that PMF brigades and units can only carry out orders that the Iraqi prime minister gives them. The Iranian-backed Iraqi militias that are part of the PMF currently answer to Iran, not the Iraqi prime minister, and it is unclear whether the agreement includes an enforcement mechanism other than "security surveillance" to prevent militias from conducting activities outside of the state.[12] The integration of militias into the Iraqi security establishment must be predicated on a commitment by the militias to stop abiding by Iranian orders and a commitment by the Iraqi federal government to respond to any militia attack on US or allied interests in the Middle East. CTP-ISW previously assessed that the integration of militias into the security establishment in a way that does not meet these criteria would harm US interests in the region.[13]

This agreement comes amid US pressure on the Iraqi federal government to dissolve and disarm the PMF and reported plans to sanction PMF leaders.[14] This agreement also comes as the Iraqi parliament is debating the Popular Mobilization Authority Law, which is meant to replace the 2016 PMF Commission Law and clarify the PMF's structure and administrative functions.[15]

Iran is continuing to try to deter a potential Israeli strike by highlighting its missile capabilities. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) unveiled a new underground missile base in an unspecified location on March 25.[16] This base is the third underground missile base that Iran has unveiled since January 2025.[17] The facility contains both solid- and liquid-fuel ballistic missiles, including Kheybar Shekan, Ghadr, Sejjil, Emad, and Haj Qassem missiles. Iran used Kheybar Shekan, Ghadr, and Emad ballistic missiles during its April and October 2024 attacks on Israel.[18] Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri claimed on March 25 that the new facility includes enough missiles for Iran to conduct an attack "dozens of times" greater than its October 2024 attack on Israel.[19]

Open-source reports suggest that the United States recently increased its military presence at Diego Garcia Island in the Indian Ocean.[20] Commercially available satellite imagery shows that B-2 Stealth Bombers, KC-135 refueling tankers, and a C-17 cargo plane recently arrived at Diego Garcia Island.[21] The United States has not confirmed the arrival of these aircraft at the time of this writing. The military buildup comes amid the US air campaign targeting Houthi infrastructure and leadership in Yemen.[22]

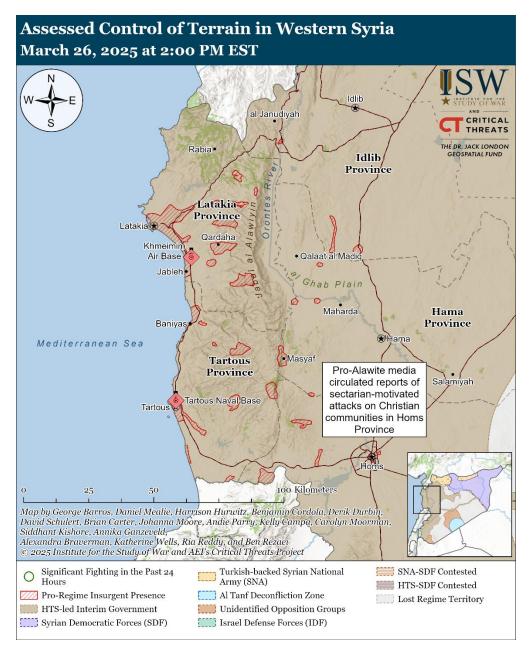
Key Takeaways:

- US Sanctions Relief for Syria: The United States has asked the Syrian interim government to curtail foreign fighters' influence in the Syrian government in exchange for partial sanctions relief, according to Reuters. Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara will likely oppose the condition to bar foreign fighters from senior government positions given that this condition would require him to sideline individuals who are deeply loyal to him. Shara's likely reluctance to dismiss foreign fighters may complicate the interim government's efforts to secure sanctions relief from the United States and would indicate that Shara prioritizes protecting his own power over securing economic relief for Syria.
- Iranian-backed Iraqi Militias' Integration into the PMF: Iraqi Shia political parties have reportedly reached an agreement to integrate Iranian-backed Iraqi militias into the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Such an agreement will likely further facilitate the Iranian capture of the Iraqi security sector. The agreement reportedly requires the militias to refrain from attacking US interests in Iraq and conducting attacks outside of Iraq. The Iranian-backed Iraqi militias that are part of the PMF currently answer to Iran, not the Iraqi prime minister, and it is unclear whether the agreement includes an enforcement mechanism other than "security surveillance" to prevent militias from conducting activities outside of the state.
- **Iranian Deterrence Efforts:** Iran is continuing to try to deter a potential Israeli strike by highlighting its missile capabilities. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) unveiled a new underground missile base in an unspecified location on March 25. This base is the third underground missile base that Iran has unveiled since January 2025.

Syria

The pro-Assad Syrian Popular Resistance claimed on March 25 that it conducted a "biological weapon" attack targeting Syrian interim government forces.[23] The Syrian Popular Resistance claimed that it poisoned government forces' food and water supply using the highly toxic chemical botulinum. The group's claim is likely false given that CTP-ISW has not observed any reports of poisonings, which would be expected if the group actually conducted such an attack. The number of attacks that the Syrian Popular Resistance has claimed has decreased since early March. The claim about a biological weapon attack may therefore be an attempt by the group to maintain relevancy within the broader anti-government insurgency movement.

Pro-Alawite media circulated reports of sectarian-motivated attacks on Christian communities in Homs Province.[24] Alawite media reported on March 26 that Syrian government forces seized homes, vandalized religious sites, and harassed locals in Fayrouzah, Qattinah, Zaydal, Rableh, and al Damina.[25] CTP-ISW cannot independently verify many of these attacks. The informational effects generated by these reports feed into insurgent efforts to delegitimize the Syrian interim government and its ability to protect the population.[26]

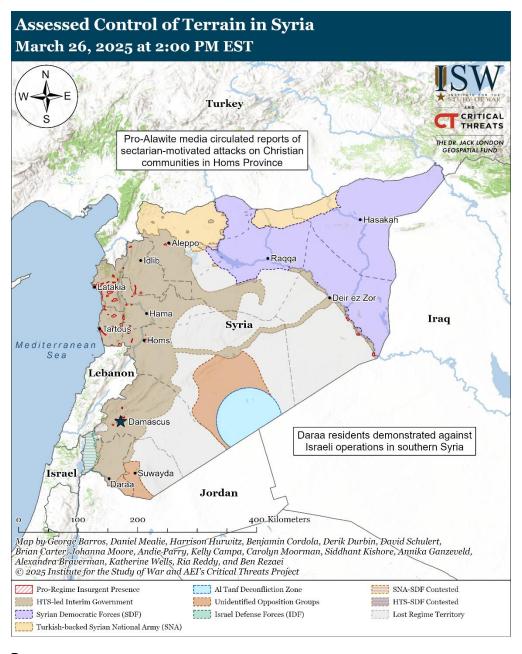


The Syrian interim government deployed forces to Sahnaya, Rif Dimashq Province, on March 25 following clashes between Druze militias and individuals from Deir ez Zor Province.[27] Individuals from Deir ez Zor clashed with members of the Men of Dignity Movement in Sahnaya after Men of Dignity Movement members reportedly harassed two Deir ez Zor residents in the area.[28] Interim government forces deployed to Sahnaya to restore order and took control of a checkpoint that the Men of Dignity Movement previously controlled.[29] Deir ez Zor tribal leaders reportedly met with Druze militia leaders in Sahnaya on March 26 to negotiate a reconciliation agreement.[30]

The Syrian Interim Defense Ministry reportedly appointed a defector of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), Colonel Khaled Omar, as the Chief of Staff of the Aleppo-based 80th Division.[31] Omar defected from the SAA in 2012 and later joined Harakat Nour al Din al Zenki,

which is an Aleppo-based militia that HTS co-opted and subordinated to itself. [32] Omar will serve under former Harakat Nour al Din al Zenki commander Ahmed Rizk, who currently commands the 80th Division. [33] Omar's appointment is part of the Syrian interim government's efforts to appoint individuals loyal to HTS leader Ahmed al Shara to senior military positions. [34] The Syrian Interim Defense Ministry has not officially announced Omar and Rizk's appointments at the time of this writing.

Daraa residents demonstrated against Israeli operations in southern Syria on March 25 after Israeli artillery shelling reportedly killed seven civilians in the village of Kuwaya, Daraa Province.[35]



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

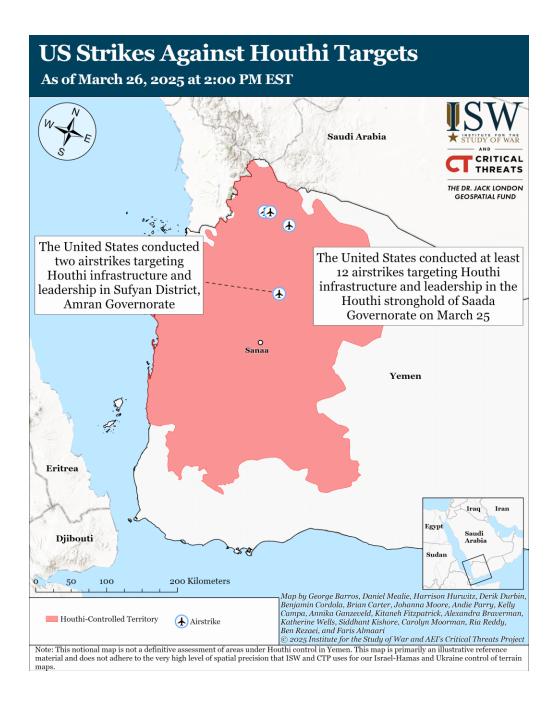
Iraqi media reported that Turkey struck a Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) position in Amedi District, Duhok Province, on March 25.[36]

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

US Central Command (CENTCOM) has conducted at least 14 airstrikes targeting Houthi infrastructure and leadership in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on March 25.[37] The Houthis conducted a combined missile and drone attack targeting the USS *Harry S. Truman* aircraft carrier and US destroyers in the Red Sea on March 25.[38]



The Houthis separately launched an unspecified number of drones at unspecified military targets in Tel Aviv on March 25.[39] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has not confirmed the drone attack at the time of this writing.

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

The Iranian rial depreciated from 1,025,000 rials to one US dollar on March 25 to 1,026,000 rials to one US dollar on March 26.[40]

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.



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^[2] https://www.reuters.com/world/us-gave-syria-list-conditions-partial-sanctions-relief-sources-say-2025-03-25/

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[8] <u>https://x.com/ALBADIA24/status/1889296890627272975</u>

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[9] https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/leadership-and-purpose-iraq%E2%80%99s-popular-mobilization-forces

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[12] https://shafaq dot com/ar/%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D8%AD%D8%B8%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%B7%D9%87%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AAD%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%AD-%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%B8%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AAMD9%81%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%85-%D8%B9%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A-

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