

Iran Update



Katherine Wells, Johanna Moore, Kelly Campa, Carolyn Moorman, Siddhant Kishore, Annika Ganzeveld, Alexis Thomas, Faris Almaari, George Ekmekjian, and Brian Carter

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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.

US sanctions on Houthi officials for coordinating with Russia demonstrate how Russia facilitates Iranian-backed groups' terrorism in the Middle East. The United States designated the Houthis a foreign terrorist organization and sanctioned eight Houthi officials for facilitating attacks on international shipping and for recruiting Yemenis to fight for Russia in Ukraine.[1] Houthi officials threatened unspecified military actions in response to US sanctions.[2] Russia has both provided intelligence for attacks on international shipping and attempted to recruit Yemenis to fight in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, according to Western reporting.[3] The US Treasury stated that Russia and China colluded with the Houthis to ensure that the Houthis would not attack Russian and Chinese-flagged vessels in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.[4] The Kremlin reportedly provided targeting intelligence to the Houthis to support attacks on US and international vessels. This activity, which includes the provision of intelligence to the Houthis that could improve the Houthis' ability to damage US or international vessels and kill US Navy sailors or third country merchant mariners, demonstrates how Russia seeks to undermine US interests in the Middle East. Russia, given its role supporting Iranian-backed Houthi campaigns in the Middle East, would not help secure US interests in the Middle East as a mediator between the United States and Iran.[5]

Interim government forces engaged a militia consisting of former pro-Assad fighters on March 5 in al Sanamayn, north of Daraa.[6] Anti-Assad media said that a militia led by Mohsen al Haymed killed two interim government security personnel in al Sanamayn, which caused the interim government to deploy forces to al Sanamayn in response[7] Haymed's faction has operated in al Sanamayn since at least 2018 when the group reconciled with the Assad regime and began collaborating with regime Military Intelligence, according to Syrian opposition media.[8] HTS-led forces previously deployed to al Sanamayn on January 4 in response to fighting between Mohsen al Haymed's armed

faction and other local factions.[9] Haymed's group turned over heavy weapons to the HTS-led forces but was allowed to retain personal small arms.[10]

Sectarian Sunni group Saraya Ansar al Sunnah set forest fires that it claimed targeted Alawites in Qardaha, Latakia Province.[11] Saraya Ansar al Sunnah has made repeated sectarian statements that warned it would target Alawites for crimes committed under Assad and that the group would continue its attacks until the Alawites and Shia were "eliminated" or displaced from the region.[12] It is not clear whether the group is conducting these attacks itself or if it is falsely claiming security incidents.

Saraya Ansar al Sunnah is also active in other areas of Syria. Unknown fighters detonated an explosive that damaged the Nasser Ibrahim Asaad Shrine in Tel Abdul Aziz, Hama Province.[13] This is the third sectarian-motivated attack close to Tel Abdul Aziz in the last month. Unspecified gunmen reportedly executed five Syrians in al Anz, 11km northwest of Tel Abdul Aziz, on January 27, and Saraya Ansar al Sunnah executed four Syrians in Tel Dhihab, 5km south of al Anz, on February 2.[14] The gunmen in al Anz targeted a local mayor responsible for reconciliation in the area with the Assad Regime.

The Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displaced announced on March 5 that Iraq will not repatriate Iraqi citizens from al Hol camp in northeastern Syria for four to six months.[15] Ministry Spokesperson Ali Abbas said that Iraq will resume repatriating Iraqi citizens once Iraq rehabilitates 3,500 Iraqi citizens in al Jada camp, Ninewa Province. The Iraqi federal government last repatriated Iraqi citizens from al Hol in early February 2025.[16] Abbas told Kurdish media on February 15 that the Iraqi government may suspend repatriation from al Hol due to a lack of US funding as a result of the USAID funding freeze.[17]

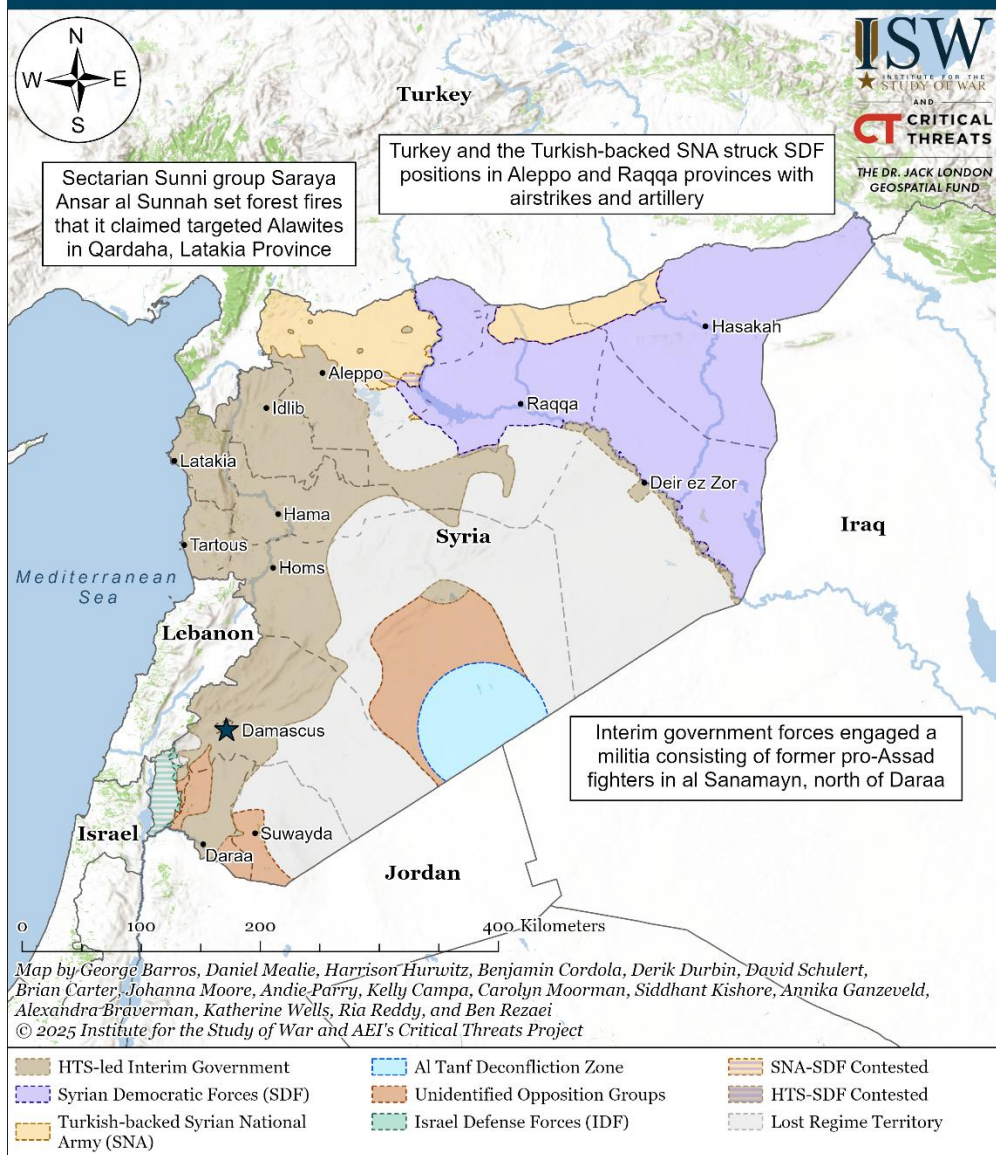
Key Takeaways:

- **US Sanctions for Houthi-Russian Collusion:** US sanctions on Houthi officials for coordinating with Russia demonstrate how Russia facilitates Iranian-backed groups' terrorism in the Middle East. The United States designated the Houthis a foreign terrorist organization and sanctioned eight Houthi officials for facilitating attacks on international shipping and for recruiting Yemenis to fight for Russia in Ukraine.
- **Pro-Assad Militias:** Interim government forces engaged a militia consisting of former pro-Assad fighters on March 5 in al Sanamayn, north of Daraa.
- **Sectarian Sunni Militias in Syria:** Sectarian Sunni group Saraya Ansar al Sunnah claimed that it set forest fires targeting Alawites in Qardaha, Latakia Province. Saraya Ansar al Sunnah is also active in other areas of Syria, particularly in Hama Province.
- **Iraqi Repatriation: The Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displaced announced on March 5 that Iraq will not repatriate Iraqi citizens from al Hol camp in northeastern Syria for four to six months.** Abbas told Kurdish media on February 15 that the Iraqi government may suspend repatriation from al Hol due to a lack of US funding as a result of the USAID funding freeze.

Syria

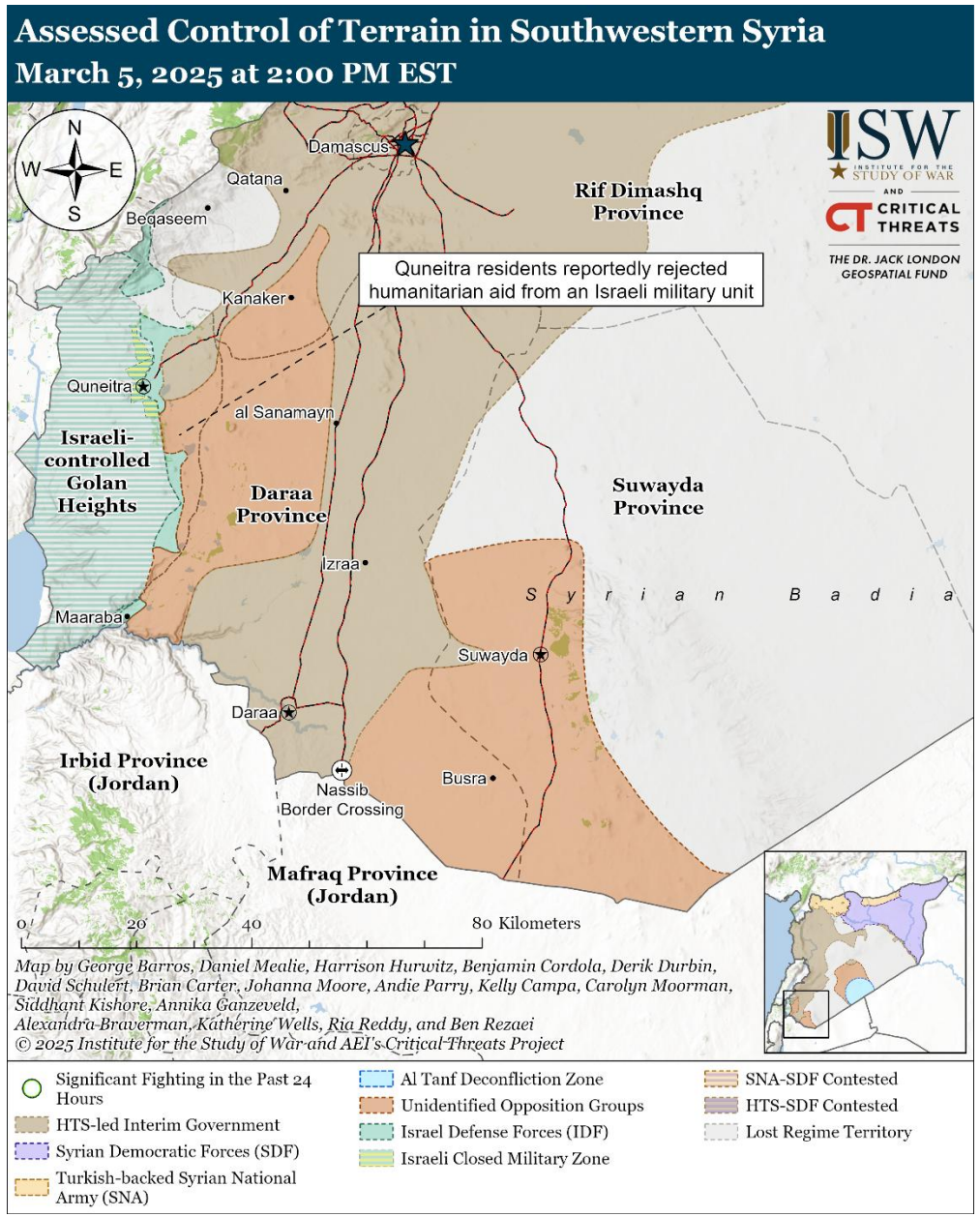
Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

March 5, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Residents in southern Syria, including Syrian Druze, have continued to reject Israel’s presence and activities in southern Syria. Syrian state media reported that “national, political, and social forces” met in Suwayda City on March 5 to affirm support for the Syrian national project and reject any attempts that would undermine unity.[18] This meeting follows an incident in which Suwayda City residents tore down and burned an Israeli flag that unknown individuals had raised over the city’s northern entrance.[19] Suwayda City is a Druze-majority city, and Syria’s Druze population has been the focus of recent Israeli interest to “demilitarize” three provinces of southern Syria and “defend” the Druze community.[20] Protests erupted across Syria following Netanyahu's comments, particularly in majority Druze areas, and several prominent Druze leaders have denounced his statements.[21] Opposition to Israeli activity in southern Syria is not limited to Druze-majority areas, however. A southern Syria-based journalist reported that Quneitra residents rejected an Israeli unit’s

offer of food, gas, and other aid in Dawaya and Suwaysa on March 5.[22]



A Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) founding member re-affirmed the PKK’s support for a ceasefire with Turkey and called for imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan’s release. PKK executive council member Mustafa Karasu confirmed that the PKK would abide by Ocalan’s call and “end the armed struggle.”[23] This follows the PKK’s executive committee’s March 1 announcement of an immediate ceasefire with Turkey.[24] Karasu said it is important that Turkey release Ocalan so that he can participate in the PKK’s “dissolution congress” but did not predicate the PKK’s cooperation on Ocalan’s release.[25] Ocalan’s message called upon the PKK to convene a “congress” to discuss and

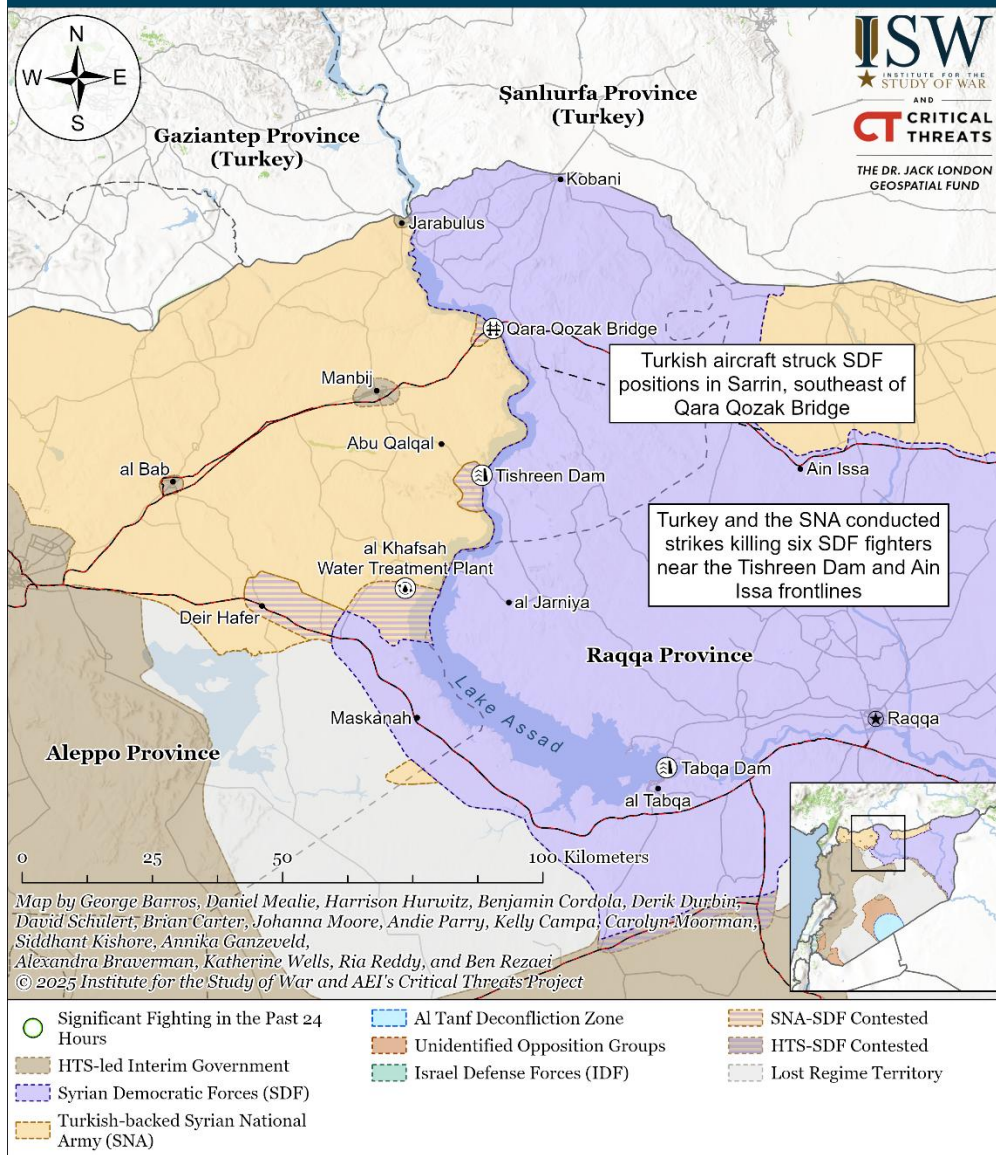
plan its dissolution. [26] Erdogan and his Justice and Democracy Party (AKP) have repeatedly stressed that they will not negotiate with the PKK and that PKK disarmament is a unilateral process.[27] Pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy (DEM) Party co-chairs Tulay Hatimogullari and Tuncer Bakrhan announced that the party will meet with Turkish political parties in Turkey and begin negotiations for the next stages of the peace process.[28] The DEM Party has met repeatedly with Ocalan in recent months as part of the talks to disarm the PKK.[29]

Turkey has appointed a military attaché to Syria. The Turkish embassy confirmed that Lieutenant Colonel Hasan Goz began work as Turkey's military attaché to Damascus on March 4.[30] Goz's appointment comes amid recent efforts by both Syria and Turkey to strengthen Turkey's involvement in Syrian defense and security.[31] Turkish Defense Ministry spokesperson Rear Admiral Zeki Akturk announced on February 27 that Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara's visit to Ankara in early February added a "new and important dimension" to Syria-Turkey relations and that a military attaché would be assigned to Damascus.[32] A technical delegation from the Turkish Defense Ministry is also expected to visit Syria soon.[33]

Turkey and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) continued to strike Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) positions in Aleppo and Raqqa provinces on March 4 and 5.[34] Anti-SDF media reported that Turkish airstrikes and SNA artillery shelling killed six SDF fighters near the Tishreen Dam and Ain Issa frontlines in Aleppo and Raqqa provinces on March 5.[35] Turkish aircraft separately struck SDF positions in Sarrin, southeast of Qara Qozak Bridge in eastern Aleppo.[36] SNA artillery also shelled SDF positions along Highway 4, near al Tabqa, west of Raqqa, on March 4.[37]

An anti-SDF journalist reported on March 5 that the SDF maintains control over several towns and villages west of the Tishreen Dam. The journalist said that the SDF still controls Mahshiyet al Sheikh, Mustafa al Hamada, Hajj Hussein, Khirbet Tueni, Khirbet Khalid, Khirbet Zamala, and Shash al Bubna and parts of its surrounding mountains, near the Tishreen Dam.[38] Mahshiyet al Sheikh is located around 4.6 km west of the Tishreen Dam.

Assessed Control of Terrain around Manbij March 5, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara met with Lebanese President Joseph Aoun on the sidelines of the emergency “Palestine Summit” in Cairo on March 4.^[39] Syrian Interim Foreign Minister Assad al Shaibani separately discussed the issue of Syrian detainees held in Roumieh Prison in Lebanon with his Lebanese counterpart Youssef Rajaji on the sidelines of the summit on March 4.^[40]

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

The Ninewa Provincial Council voted on March 5 to remove its chairman, Ahmed al Hasoud.^[41] Hasoud is a member of the National Contract Bloc, which is led by Popular Mobilization Committee Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh.^[42] The United Ninewa Bloc, which is an alliance of Sunni parties, spearheaded the effort to remove Hasoud.^[43] The United Ninewa Bloc includes the Azm Alliance (led by Muthanna al Samarra), Sovereignty Alliance (led by Khamis al Khanjar), and Progress Party (led by Mohammad al Halbousi).^[44] Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish groups have long vied for control in Ninewa Province, and many Sunni and Kurdish residents resent Shia groups' presence and influence in areas of the province.^[45]

Iraqi media reported on March 5 that Turkish forces clashed with PKK fighters near Amedi district, Duhok Province, Iraqi Kurdistan.^[46]

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

The Houthis claimed on March 4 that they shot down a US MQ-9 Reaper drone over Hudaydah Governorate, Yemen on March 3.^[47] Houthi military spokesperson Brigadier General Yahya Sarea claimed that it was the fifteenth US drone the Houthis have shot down since the start of the October 7 war.^[48] Houthi media published footage from the shootdown on March 4, the same day the United States designated the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. CTP-ISW cannot verify the Houthi claim.

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

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

The Iranian rial appreciated from 906,800 rials to one US dollar on March 4 to 887,900 rials to one US dollar on March 5.[49]

Senior Iranian regime officials continue to emphasize sectarian divisions in Syria. Supreme Leader’s International Affairs Adviser Ali Akbar Velayati stated that there are sectarian divisions in Syria, which could lead to a civil war “at any moment,” in an interview with Iranian media on March 4.[50] Velayati added that Israeli presence in southern Syria is worsening these divisions.

Anti-Iranian regime media reported that Iranian security forces injured four civilians when they reportedly opened fire and beat Takab Municipality workers protesting wages in Takab, West Azerbaijan Province.[51]

Iran and Turkey continue to cooperate over energy trade in central Asia, but it is unclear if Turkey is looking for alternative regional partners for energy imports. Iranian Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad confirmed on March 5 that Iran’s National Iranian Gas Company signed a contract permitting Turkmenistan to export gas to Turkey through Iranian territory.[52] Iranian media also circulated Turkish officials’ announcement of the plan on March 4 and included Turkish comments about the cheap price of Turkmen gas.[53] Iranian media added that it is unclear whether Turkey is replacing Iranian gas exports to Turkey with Turkmen gas exports.

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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