

# 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 Israeli ground operations, and [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of the ongoing opposition offensive in Syria. These maps are updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.*

*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.*

**Recent tit-for-tat sectarian killings and local support for pro-Assad insurgent cells will likely hamper Syrian interim government efforts to promote security and community reconciliation in coastal Syria.** Assadist insurgent cells attacked Syrian interim government personnel across Latakia, Tartous, and Homs provinces in early March, which caused a spate of violence and extrajudicial killings across coastal Syria.[1] Revenge killings and kidnappings have continued to take place in coastal provinces over the past week even as coordinated insurgent attacks and extrajudicial sectarian killings by interim government forces have decreased.[2] The kidnappings have targeted both interim government forces and civilians from Alawite, Sunni, and Ismaili communities.[3] Tit-for-tat sectarian killings increase fear and feelings of insecurity among members of targeted communities. This fear makes it less likely that community members will disarm or turn in insurgent leaders because they do not have guarantees from the interim government that government forces will prevent future attacks on the community.

Local notables in Tartous villages have gathered hundreds of weapons to surrender to the interim government but it is difficult to determine what percentage of village residents retain weapons.[4] Local Alawite villages in the same area have refused to turn in around 40 insurgent leaders, which indicates that the residents of these villages support the insurgents or at least are willing to cooperate with them.[5] This support may be predominantly driven by fear that Sunni interim government forces could conduct extrajudicial killings if insurgents are not present to protect villagers rather than by ideological support for the deposed Assad regime.

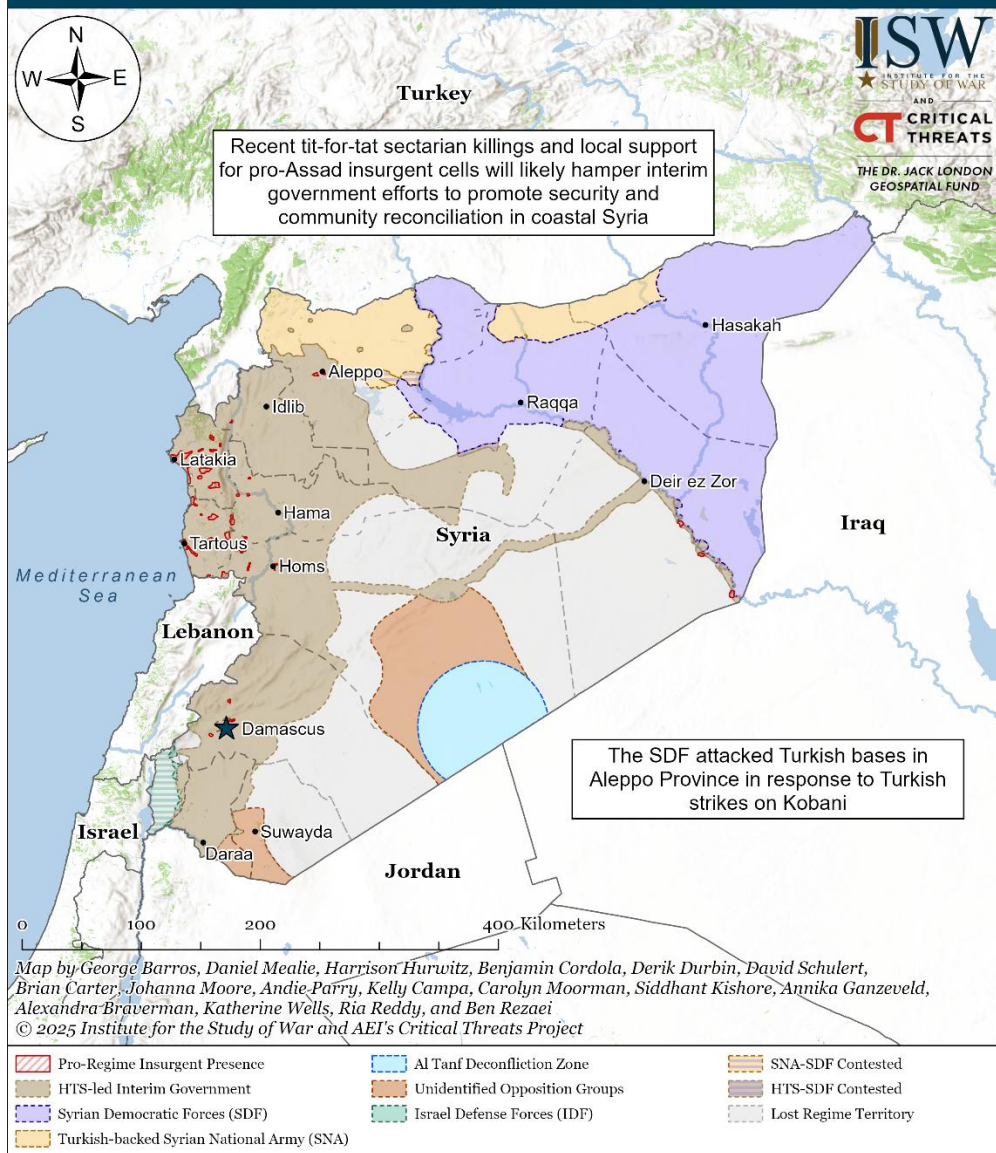
**Alawite insurgent leaders likely designed the early March 2025 attacks to trigger sectarian violence against their community in order to stoke fear among Alawites and thereby increase support for the insurgency.** Insurgencies attempt to control local populations by stoking fear and reducing a community's faith in government forces.[6] The coordinated and violent Assadist insurgent attacks in early March were likely intended to cause interim Defense Ministry deployments to the coast and trigger violent government reprisals.[7]

The Ismaili Shia-majority town of Qadmus and its surrounding Alawite villages in Tartous Province had established a positive working relationship with interim Interior Ministry units since mid-December 2024 but did not have the same positive relationship or trust with interim Defense Ministry units.[8] Extrajudicial killings and violence committed by rogue interim Defense Ministry units in Tartous and Latakia provinces increased panic and fear in local communities and erased the goodwill and trust that interim Interior Ministry units had established with these communities.[9]

The majority of interim Defense Ministry forces have withdrawn from coastal Syria, but some forces continue to guard checkpoints and harass local Alawite communities.[10] The interim Defense Ministry forces' continued presence in Alawite areas will likely increase local support for the insurgency in coastal areas. Increased local support will allow the insurgents to sustain their operations and will drive recruitment for insurgent groups beyond the group's initial power base and community. Failure to hold perpetrators of extrajudicial killings during the recent clearing operations accountable will similarly exacerbate fears that government forces are targeting civilians and further drive support for insurgent cells.

## Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

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### Some Iraqi groups have continued to amplify sectarian rhetoric against Sunnis following the recent flare-up of sectarian violence in Syria.

The United Council of Sheikhs and Notables of Basra and Iraq, which is a tribal committee that appears to be affiliated with the Basra Provincial Council, called on the Iraqi federal government to sever ties with the Syrian interim government on March 18.[11] The council called on the federal government to monitor Syrians in Iraq and hold individuals, such as Sunni Azm Alliance leader Khamis al Khanjar, accountable for "inciting sectarian strife." [12] Khanjar expressed support for the Syrian interim government's efforts to counter pro-Assad insurgents in coastal Syria on March 7.[13]

The council added that Basrawi tribes are prepared to protect Iraqi holy sites—likely referring to the Shia shrines in Najaf and Karbala—and to confront anyone who attempts to ignite sectarian strife in Iraq.[14] Unspecified Shias in Basra separately announced a demonstration at the Turkish consulate in

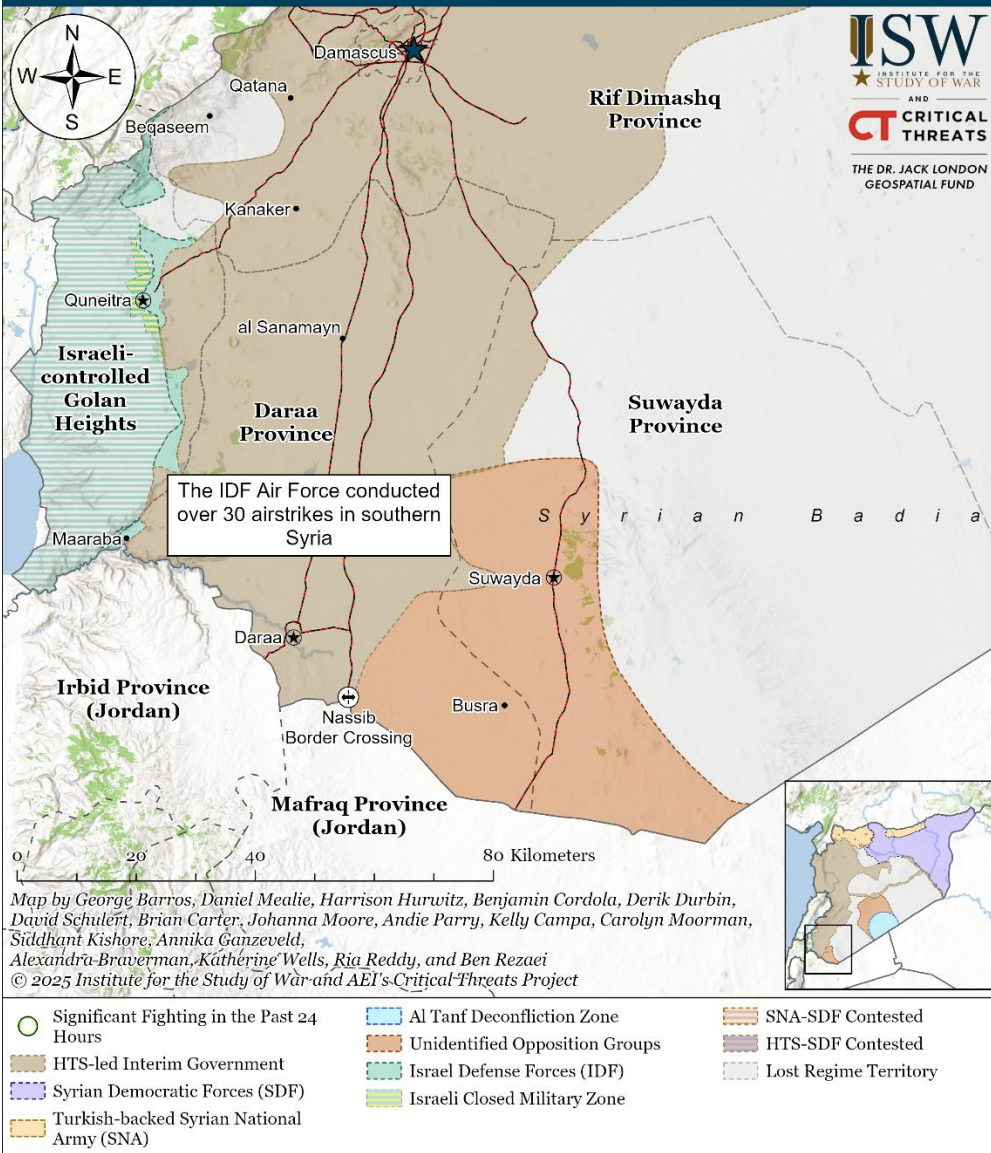
Basra on March 18 to protest the suppression of Shias in Syria by “takfiris.”[15] The term “takfiri” refers to apostates and is commonly used by Iran and Iranian-backed Iraqi figures to refer to armed Sunni organizations.[16] Iranian-backed Iraqi actors have described the fall of the Assad regime as a “Turkish conspiracy” and Iranian media has accused Turkey of condoning the killing of Alawites in Syria.[17]

Some Iranian-backed Iraqi political figures seek to prevent the Iraqi federal government from developing ties with the Syrian interim government because they view the interim government and its leader, Ahmed al Shara, as “terrorists.”[18] Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, including the Badr Organization, fought al Qaeda in Iraq in the 2000s and presumably view Shara as an al Qaeda in Iraq ideologue. Iraqi media reported on March 17 that Shia Coordination Framework leaders refused to meet with Syrian Interim Foreign Affairs Minister Asaad al Shaibani during his recent visit to Iraq.[19] The Shia Coordination Framework is a loose coalition of Shia political parties, some of which Iran backs. State of Law Coalition head Nouri al Maliki reportedly called Shaibani’s visit “normalization with terrorism.”[20]

**The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Air Force conducted over 30 airstrikes on March 17 targeting former Syrian Arab Army (SAA) positions in southern Syria that unspecified actors sought to repurpose.**[21] Syrian media reported that the IDF struck the 132nd Brigade outside Daraa City, the 175th Regiment near Izraa, and al Thaala Airbase in western Suwayda Province.[22] The strikes killed at least two individuals and injured 19 others.[23] The IDF said that it attacked military headquarters and SAA weapons and equipment that unspecified actors were attempting to use.[24] The IDF was likely referring to Syrian interim government forces’ attempts to repurpose former SAA positions in southern Syria as part of the interim government’s efforts to rebuild the Syrian army in the south. The Syrian interim government began recruiting soldiers in Daraa and Suwayda provinces on March 11 and has established several recruitment centers across Daraa Province to recruit soldiers into the 40th Division of the new Syrian army.[25] Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in late February 2025 that Israel would not allow “forces of the [Hayat Tahrir al Sham] or the new Syrian army to enter the territory south of Damascus” and called for a fully demilitarized southern Syria.[26] Syrian Interim Foreign Affairs Minister Asaad al Shaibani strongly condemned the Israeli strikes, describing them as part of a “campaign waged by Israel against the Syrian people and stability of the country.”[27] Shaibani called on the United Nations to stop Israel’s actions and enforce the 1974 disengagement agreement.[28]

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Southwestern Syria

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An anti-Israel militia, the Islamic Resistance Front in Syria-the First of the Brave, acknowledged that the Israeli airstrikes targeted one of its positions in Daraa Province.[29] The group said that the strike killed one of its fighters and injured two others.[30]

**The Houthis have reportedly rejected Iranian requests to halt attacks on international shipping and to reduce tensions with the United States and Israel.[31] The Houthis' refusal to "dial down" tensions with the United States and Israel, despite Iran's reported call for calm, demonstrates how the Houthis are aligned with Iran but do not answer directly to Iran.[32]** The Houthis launched several drones and cruise missiles targeting the USS *Harry S. Truman* aircraft carrier and a US destroyer in the Red Sea on March 17.[33] The Houthis separately resumed their attack campaign against Israel on March 18 by launching two ballistic missiles at the Nevatim Air Base in central Israel. The Houthis claimed that the attack was in response to Israeli

airstrikes in the Gaza Strip.[34] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) intercepted a Houthi missile before it entered Israeli airspace.[35] Iranian officials may be trying to distance Iran from Houthi attacks against international shipping and Israel to try to prevent the United States from retaliating against Iran for Houthi attacks.[36]

**US Central Command (CENTCOM) continued to conduct airstrikes targeting Houthi infrastructure in western Yemen on March 17.[37]** US Joint Staff Operations Director Lieutenant General Alexis Grynkewich stated that the United States will continue to conduct airstrikes “in the coming days until we achieve [President Donald Trump’s] objectives.”[38]



## **Key Takeaways:**

- **Insurgency in Syria:** Recent tit-for-tat sectarian killings and local support for pro-Assad insurgent cells will likely hamper Syrian interim government efforts to promote security and community reconciliation in coastal Syria. Revenge killings and kidnappings have continued to take place in coastal provinces over the past week even as coordinated insurgent attacks and extrajudicial sectarian killings by interim government forces have decreased. Tit-for-tat sectarian killings increase fear and feelings of insecurity among members of targeted communities. This fear makes it less likely that community members will disarm or turn in insurgent leaders because they do not have guarantees from the interim government that government forces will prevent future attacks on the community.
- **IDF in Syria:** The IDF Air Force conducted over 30 airstrikes on March 17 targeting former Syrian Arab Army (SAA) positions in southern Syria that unspecified actors sought to repurpose. The IDF was likely referring to Syrian interim government forces' attempts to repurpose former SAA positions in southern Syria as part of the interim government's efforts to rebuild the Syrian army in the south.
- **Houthi Attacks:** The Houthis have reportedly rejected Iranian requests to halt attacks on international shipping and to reduce tensions with the United States and Israel. The Houthis launched several drones and cruise missiles targeting the USS *Harry S. Truman* aircraft carrier and a US destroyer in the Red Sea on March 17. The Houthis separately resumed their attack campaign against Israel on March 18 by launching two ballistic missiles at the Nevatim Air Base in central Israel.

## **Syria**

**The Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) met in Hasakah City on March 18 to negotiate a unity agreement.[39]** The PYD is the political wing of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the KNC is a minority Kurdish political party that is dominated by the Syrian wing of the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Kurdish media reported that the two parties met for the first time in several years to resume stalled unity talks and “finalize” a unity agreement.[40] The PYD and KNC are longtime political rivals. The two parties signed a unity agreement to share power in northeastern Syria in 2015, but the deal never materialized.[41] Several actors, including the KDP, have encouraged the SDF to “unify” Kurdish parties in Syria amid negotiations between the SDF and the Syrian interim government in Damascus.[42]

SDF Commander Mazloun Abdi, who attended the meeting, described the meeting as the first of a series of meetings to unify the Kurdish position.[43] KNC official Sulaimani Oso said that the parties will meet again in the near future to form a joint committee to represent Kurdish interests in negotiations with Damascus.[44] The SDF recently agreed to integrate the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) civil and military institutions into the Syrian state and future negotiations will likely focus on the terms of their integration.[45]

**The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Turkish pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy (DEM) Party warned that ongoing Turkish airstrikes in northeastern Syria**

**could threaten the peace process between the PKK and the Turkish government.** Kurdish media reported that Turkey conducted a drone strike in the Kobani countryside on March 17 that killed nine members of a family.[46] Turkey denied that it conducted the strike.[47] DEM Party leaders condemned the strike and warned that such strikes could cause “great harm” to the peace process.[48] PKK co-founder and leader Cemil Bayik said on March 17 that the peace process will only be successful if Turkey “fulfills its responsibilities.”[49] Bayik implied that the conditions include Turkey adhering to the ceasefire and freeing imprisoned PKK founder Abdullah Ocalan so that he can oversee the PKK’s disarmament.[50] The PKK Executive Committee recently released a statement that noted that Turkey has decreased its attacks on PKK fighters in northern Syria but that the reduced attacks are “still not enough.”[51]

**The SDF attacked Turkish bases near the Qara Qozak Bridge in Aleppo Province on March 18 in response to Turkish strikes on Kobani.[52]** The SDF said that it attacked two Turkish bases on the western and southwestern axes of the Qara Qozak Bridge. The attacks reportedly destroyed a Turkish radar system.

**The SDF reportedly engaged the SNA along eastern frontlines in Raqqa Province on March 18.** The SDF said that it thwarted an SNA attack on Bir Arab village, which is located along SDF-SNA frontlines in the Tal Abyad countryside.[53] The SDF did not specify the type of attack it thwarted, but SNA ground attacks in this area are rare. The SDF said that it launched a counterattack against the SNA in the area.[54] Anti-SDF media separately reported that the SNA and SDF clashed along the “Skiru Axis” near Ain Issa.[55]

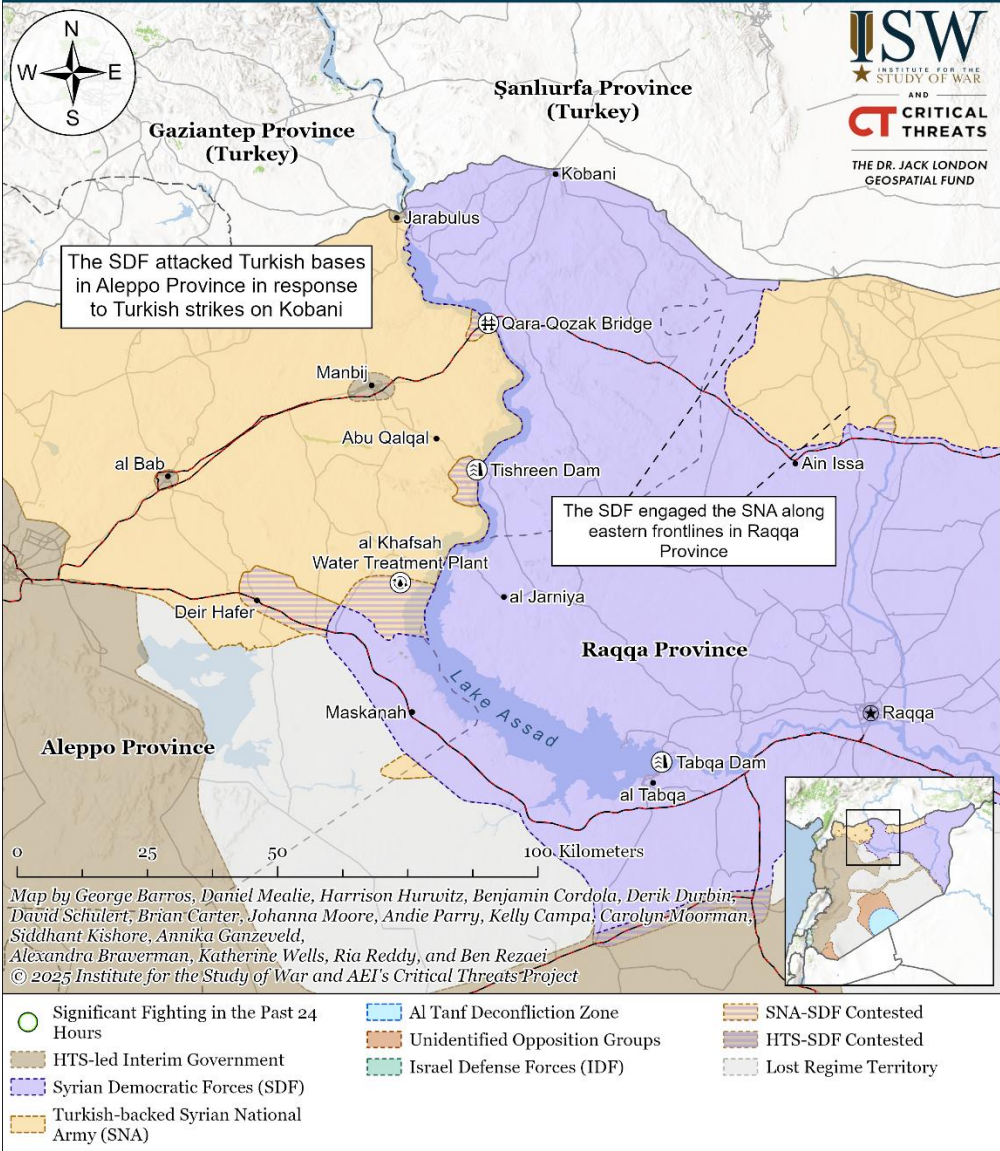
**The SDF engaged the SNA near the Tishreen Dam on March 18.[56]** The SDF said that the SNA attacked SDF positions north of the dam.[57] Anti-SDF media reported that the SNA and SDF clashed in Qishla village.[58] The SDF claimed that it killed three SNA fighters and killed or injured additional SNA fighters who were preparing to attack SDF positions from south of the dam.[59]

**The Syrian Electricity Distribution Corporation director announced that Qatar began providing two million cubic meters of natural gas per day to Syria on March 18.[60]** The Qatari provision of energy is expected to increase the electricity supply in Syria by three to four hours per day.[61] The current gas agreement between Qatar and the Syrian interim government will last for three months but is renewable.



# Assessed Control of Terrain around Manbij

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**The Syrian and Lebanese defense ministries reached a ceasefire on March 17 following clashes near the Syria-Lebanon border in recent days.**[62] Likely Hezbollah-linked Lebanese smugglers kidnapped and killed three Syrian soldiers near Qusayr, on the Syria-Lebanon border, on March 16.[63] Syrian forces subsequently shelled Lebanese border villages. The Lebanese Armed Forces stated on March 17 that it “responded to the source of fire.”[64] Syrian forces conducted clearing operations in Syrian villages near the border prior to the ceasefire to expel Hezbollah fighters and dismantle smuggling infrastructure.[65] A Syrian journalist and Lebanese media reported that Syrian forces killed at least four Hezbollah-linked Lebanese smugglers during the clashes on March 16 and 17.[66] CTP-ISW is monitoring reports that clashes have resumed on the Lebanon-Syria border as of the time of this writing.[67]

## **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

**Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Sarkhat al Quds announced on March 15 its readiness to target US interests in the region in response to the recent US airstrikes targeting the Houthis in Yemen.** Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have increased cooperation with the Houthis since the start of the October 7 War.[68]

## **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**

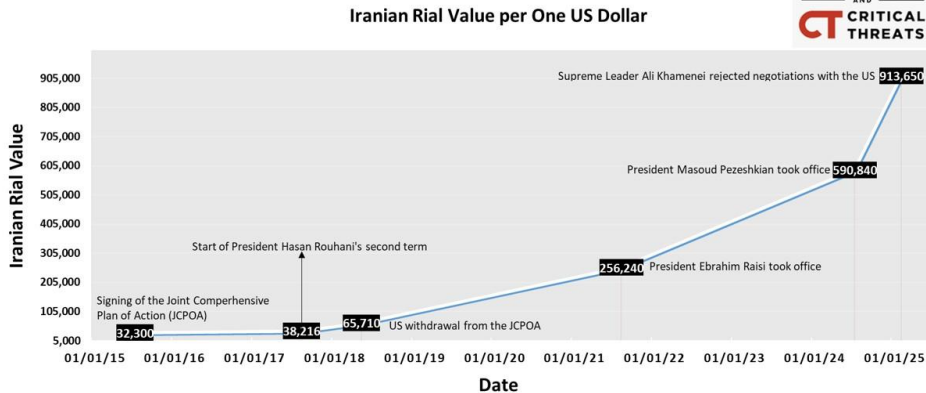
### **Axis of Resistance objectives:**

- 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**

**The Iranian rial depreciated from 943,200 rials to one US dollar on March 17 to 976,600 rials to one US dollar on March 18.[69]**



**Iran, Russia, and China continue to signal their intention to strengthen trilateral cooperation.** Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi met with Russian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Grushko in Tehran on March 17 to discuss strengthening bilateral relations and trilateral ties between Iran, Russia, and China.[70] Iranian, Russian, and Chinese officials recently demonstrated their alignment by condemning the US “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran and defending the Iranian nuclear program during a meeting on March 14.[71] Iran, Russia, and China also conducted a joint naval exercise on March 11 and 12.[72]

*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]

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