

Iran Update



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Information Cutoff: March 11, 2025 2:00 pm ET

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 Syrian interim government has taken initial steps to prosecute individuals who committed crimes during recent insurgent activity in western Syria between March 6 and 10. Interim government forces arrested five individuals on March 11 for committing extrajudicial killings.[1] Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara acknowledged accusations that interim government-affiliated forces committed extrajudicial killings and promised that the interim government would hold those who “exceeded the powers of the state” accountable during a speech on March 9.[2] Interim government raids targeting former Assad regime members since December 2024 have fueled reports of revenge-based attacks and harassment, particularly against the Alawite community.[3] The interim government will need to take concrete action and ensure a fair legal process, including charging, prosecuting, and sentencing perpetrators of sectarian violence, in order to demonstrate that the state is willing and able to protect minority communities. Prosecuting perpetrators of sectarian violence will enable the interim government to restore trust among Syrians, particularly Alawites, and could undercut any insurgent recruitment efforts.

Pro-Assad insurgent cells remain active in western Syria following the conclusion of interim government clearing operations. The commander of the pro-Assad Coastal Shield Brigade, Mikdad Fatiha, posted a video of himself traveling near Safita Dam, Tartus Province.[4] Fatiha’s ability to move relatively freely in Syrian coastal areas demonstrates that insurgents feel relatively safe moving around the countryside by road and do not fear government patrols or checkpoints. Checkpoints are commonly established on major roads and not on small roads and trails that local fighters may be aware of and can use to bypass checkpoints. Static checkpoints also do not destroy an insurgent force and usually fail to protect civilian populations.

Qardaha and its surrounding neighborhoods may be support zones for the pro-Assad insurgency. Interim government forces evacuated residents from Salata, Latakia Province, on March

11 following intense fighting between pro-Assad fighters and interim government forces in the area.[5] Salata is around two kilometers west of Qardaha, which is Bashar al Assad’s hometown and a former Assad regime stronghold.[6] Former Assad regime members have conducted periodic attacks targeting interim government forces since at least January 2025.[7] Qardaha residents demonstrated against interim government forces operating in Qardaha and called for their removal prior to the recent outbreak of violence between March 6 and 10, which suggests that the population may be sympathetic to pro-Assad insurgent cells and support their activity.[8] Insurgents in Qardaha fled to nearby hills on March 7 after interim government forces began clearing operations in the area.[9] Insurgents may draw away resources from the town and intimidate locals to prevent them from cooperating with security forces.



Iran likely seeks to exacerbate sectarian tensions in Syria to try to destabilize the Syrian interim government. Iranian media has accused the Syrian interim government of committing acts of sectarian violence. Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)-affiliated media claimed that the interim government has targeted innocent Alawite civilians with "no political affiliation," for example.[10] An outlet linked to the Islamic Propaganda Organization separately argued on March 8 that Kurdish, Druze, and Christian groups in Syria must coordinate to ensure the success of the "Alawite uprising." This statement may seek to encourage minority groups in Syria to band together to resist the interim government.[11] The same outlet also claimed that the possibility of "disintegration and civil war in Syria is very high." [12] These reports focus on Syrian interim government crimes against Alawites but do not acknowledge that the recent flare-up of sectarian violence in Syria has also included sectarian killings and other extrajudicial killings perpetrated by Alawite, Assadist insurgents.[13] Former Assad regime members initiated the violence on March 6 by attacking interim government forces in Latakia Province.[14]

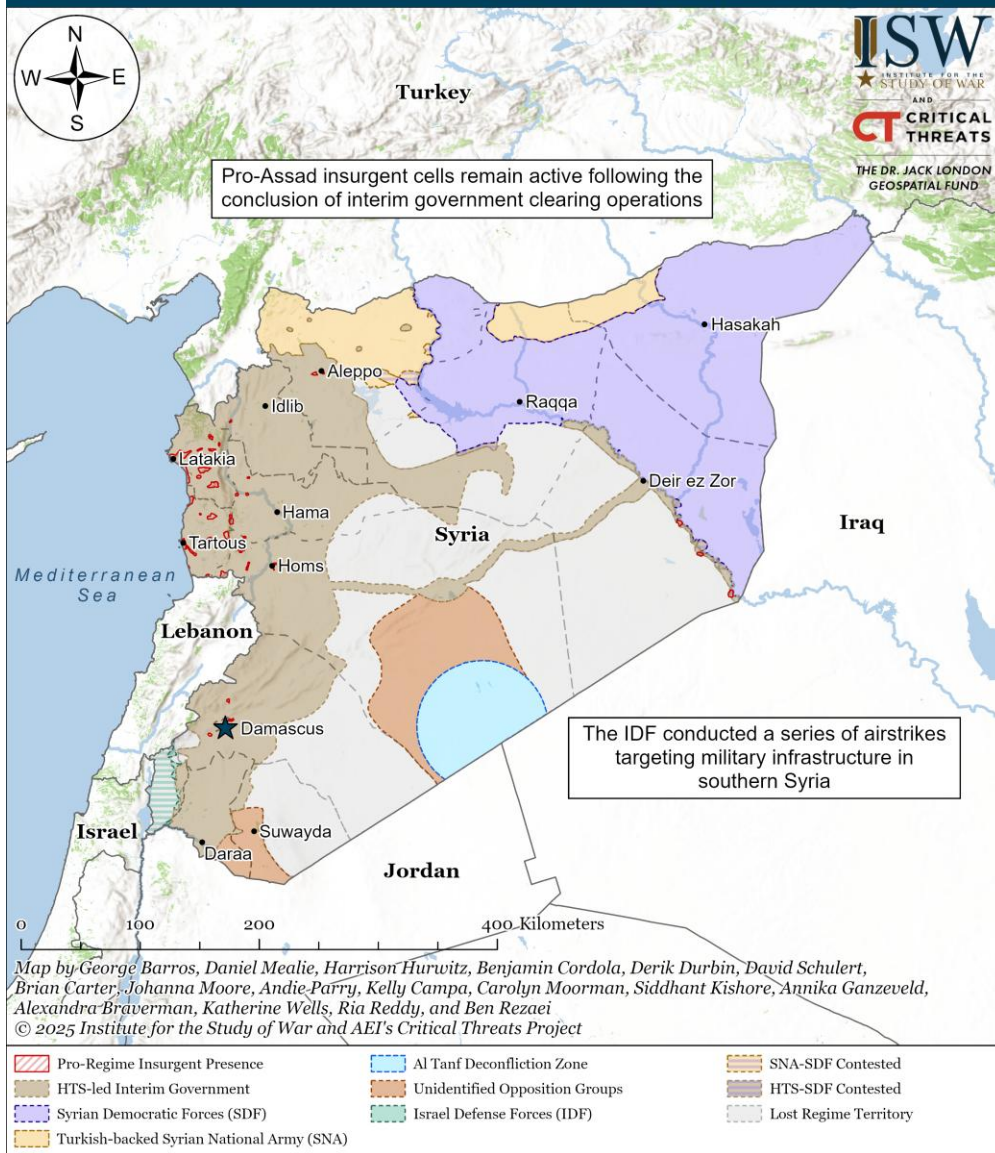
Iran appears to be growing increasingly frustrated with Turkey's influence in Syria and Turkish regional policy. Iranian media circulated reports that claimed that Turkey interfered in Syrian affairs and condoned the killing of Alawites. An outlet linked to the Islamic Propaganda Organization claimed that the Syrian interim government is a Turkish proxy.[15] Iran views Turkey's influence in Syria as a threat to its long-standing strategic regional objectives. Iran and Turkey's opposing interests and policies in Syria and other parts of the region could increase fissures in the Iran-Turkey relationship.

The Syrian interim government began integrating militia members from Daraa Province into the interim Defense Ministry on March 11.[16] A Defense Ministry-affiliated committee registered Syrians from multiple towns in western Daraa and assigned the new soldiers military identification numbers. The soldiers will join the 40th Division, which the government initially called the Southern Division. Colonel Banyan al Hariri will command the division.[17] Hariri defected from the Syrian Arab Army in 2011 as a warrant officer and later helped create Ahrar al Sham in Daraa Province before moving north in 2018 instead of reconciling with the regime.[18] The Syrian Defense Ministry promoted Hariri to the rank of colonel in December 2024 and recently assigned him to command a task force overseeing Daraa Province in southern Syria.[19]

Details about the formation of this division suggest that the new Syrian Army may employ independent brigade combat teams rather than use a division-centric structure. A General Security member told local leaders on February 21 that the new division will consist of four brigades located in Izraa, Nawa, and Daraa City, Daraa Province, and Suwayda City, Suwayda Province.[20] Each brigade will be "independent" with organic infantry, armor, administration, medical, reconnaissance, and "technical," capabilities.[21] "Independent" presumably means that the brigades will be able to—in theory—operate independent of division-level headquarters and division-level assets. These independent brigades will be better suited to conduct small-scale tasks associated with counterinsurgent or low-intensity operations—either against ISIS, former regime supporters, or well-equipped smugglers—compared to large divisions.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

March 11, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Iranian-backed Shia political parties are hampering the Iraqi federal government’s efforts to prevent US sanctions on Iraq. Iraqi media reported on March 11 that there are “deep rivalries” in the Shia Coordination Framework over resistance by the Iranian-backed factions to the Iraqi federal government’s efforts to avoid US sanctions.[22] The Shia Coordination Framework is a loose coalition of Shia political parties, some of which Iran backs. Iraqi media has reported in recent weeks that the United States plans to sanction Iranian-aligned Iraqi actors.[23] The United States has pressured the Iraqi federal government to disarm and integrate Iranian-backed Iraqi militias into the Iraqi military establishment.[24] Some of these militias have refused to disarm and dissolve despite warnings from the Iraqi federal government about Israeli and US economic and military consequences if the militias fail to do so.[25] The economic consequences likely refer to sanctions Iranian-backed

political parties' unwillingness to work with the Iraqi federal government to avoid US sanctions highlights the control that Iranian-backed groups hold in Iraq.

Key Takeaways:

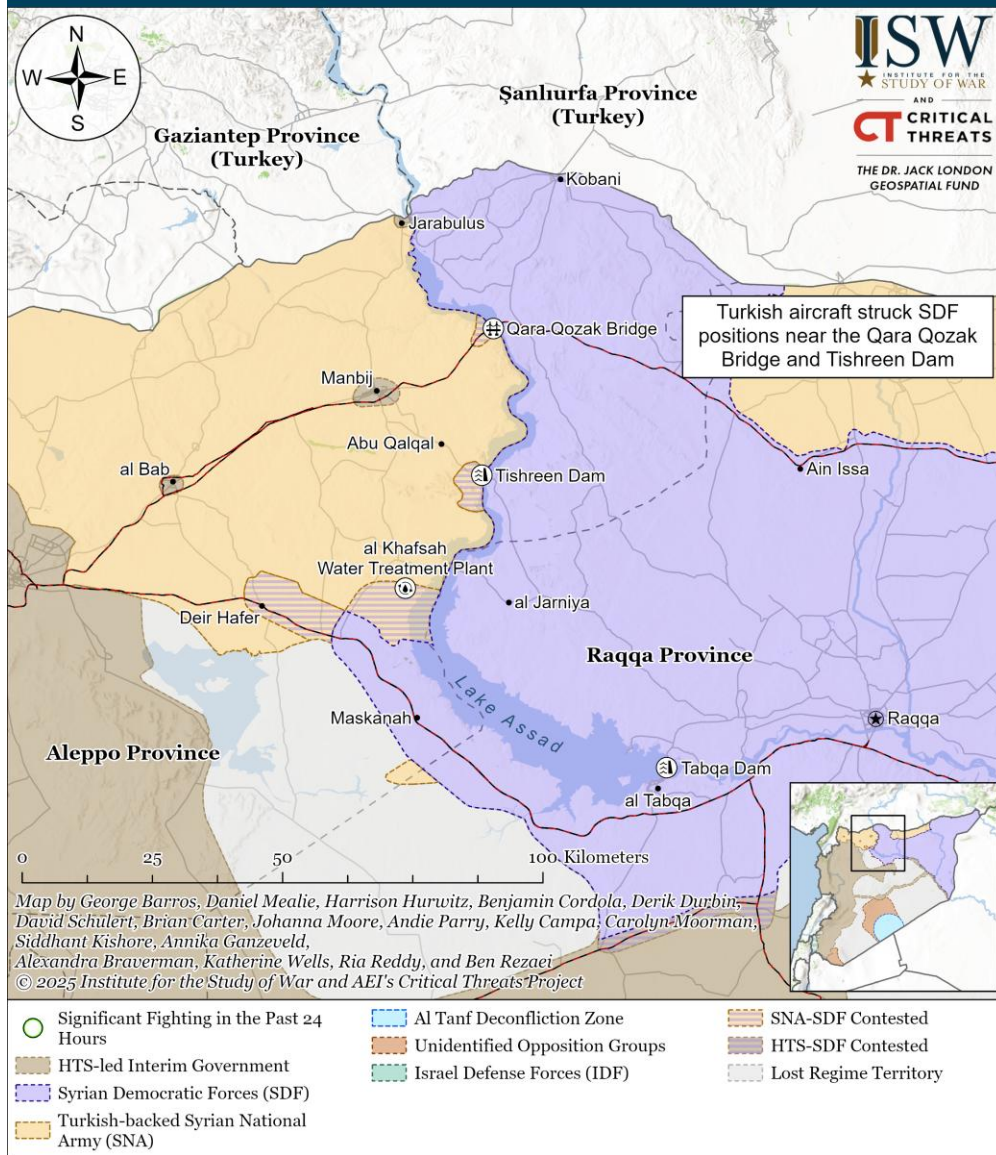
- **Pro-Assad Insurgency:** The Syrian interim government has taken initial steps to prosecute individuals who committed crimes during recent insurgent activity in western Syria between March 6 and 10. The interim government will need to take concrete action, including charging, prosecuting, and sentencing perpetrators of sectarian violence, in order to demonstrate that the state is willing and able to protect minority communities. Pro-Assad insurgent cells remain active in western Syria following the conclusion of interim government clearing operations.
- **Iranian Response to Syrian Insurgency:** Iran likely seeks to exacerbate sectarian tensions in Syria to try to destabilize the Syrian interim government. Iranian media has accused the Syrian interim government of committing acts of sectarian violence. These reports focus on Syrian interim government crimes against Alawites but do not acknowledge that the recent flare-up of sectarian violence in Syria has also included sectarian killings and other extrajudicial killings perpetrated by Alawite, Assadist insurgents.
- **Integration of Syrian Armed Groups:** The Syrian interim government began integrating militia members from Daraa Province into the interim Defense Ministry on March 11. The militia members will join the 40th Division, which the government initially called the Southern Division. Details about the formation of this division suggest that the new Syrian Army may employ independent brigade combat teams rather than use a division-centric structure.
- **Iraqi Political Fissures:** Iranian-backed Shia political parties are hampering the Iraqi federal government's efforts to prevent US sanctions on Iraq. The United States has pressured the Iraqi federal government to disarm and integrate Iranian-backed Iraqi militias into the Iraqi military establishment. Some of these militias have refused to disarm and dissolve despite warnings from the Iraqi federal government about Israeli and US economic and military consequences if the militias fail to do so.

Syria

Turkish aircraft have continued to target SDF positions near the Qara Qozak Bridge and Tishreen Dam in Aleppo Province since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on March 10. Turkish aircraft struck SDF positions near Sarrin, southeast of the Qara Qozak Bridge.[26] Anti-SDF media reported on March 10 that Turkish airstrikes prevented an SDF attack on Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) positions near the Tishreen Dam.[27] Turkish aircraft also struck SDF positions near the Tishreen Dam on March 11.[28]

The SDF fired artillery targeting SNA positions in the Manbij countryside, southwest of the Qara Qozak Bridge, on March 10.[29]

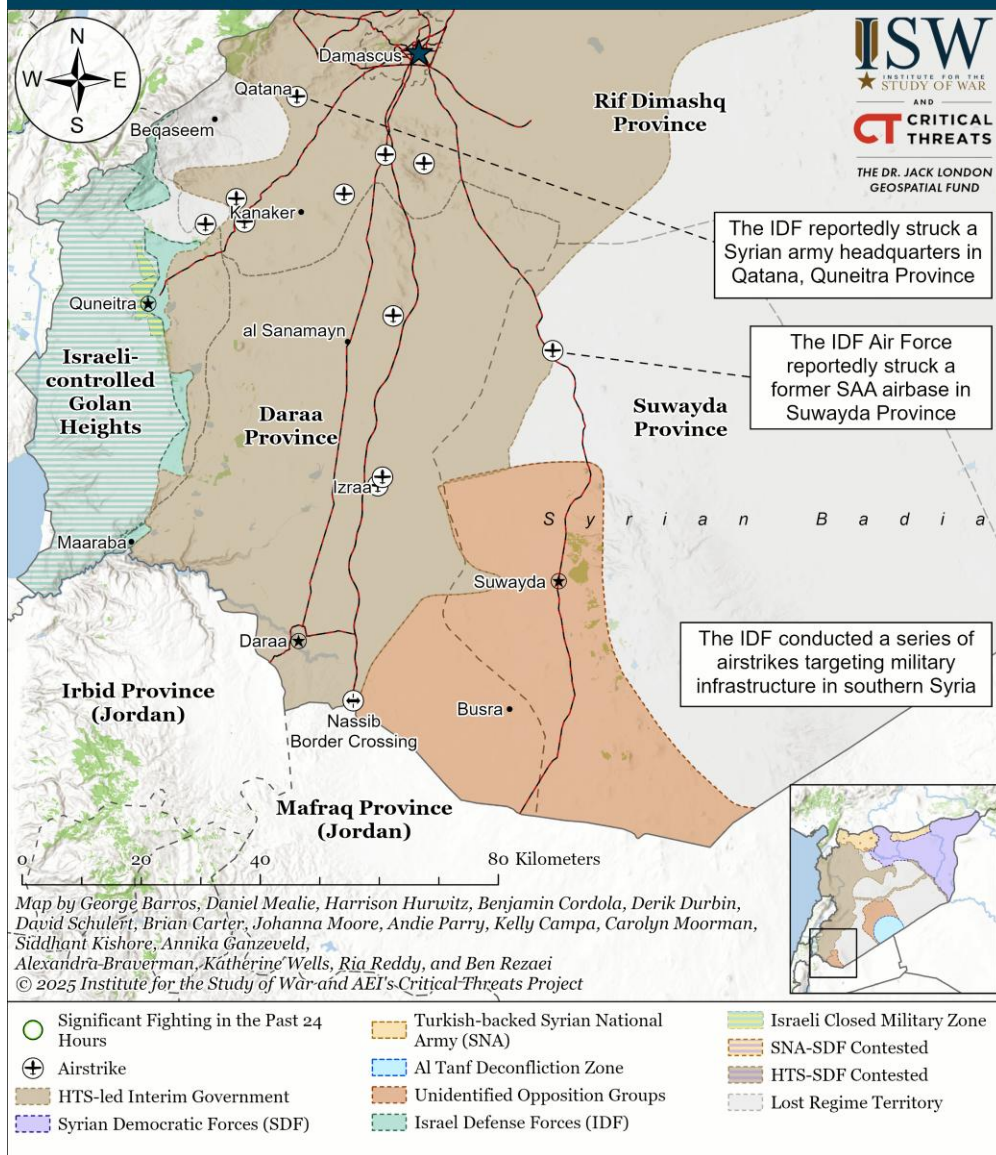
Assessed Control of Terrain around Manbij March 11, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



The IDF conducted a series of airstrikes targeting military infrastructure in southern Syria on March 10 and 11. The IDF said that it struck radars, military headquarters, weapons storage facilities, and other military sites belonging to the new Syrian army.[30] Syrian media reported that the IDF struck the new Syrian army 10th Division headquarters in Qatana, Quneitra Province.[31] The IDF separately struck former Syrian Arab Army (SAA) military sites in Daraa, Rif Dimashq, and Suwayda provinces.[32]

A southern Syria-based journalist reported on March 11 that the IDF operated in Saidah, Quneitra Province.[33] Israeli forces withdrew from the area after around two hours, according to the journalist.[34]

IDF Airstrikes in Southern Syria March 11, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



A Druze militia provided new details on March 11 about the agreement that prominent Druze militias and the interim Syrian government concluded on March 6. The Men of Dignity Movement stated that the agreement includes the establishment of security forces with Suwaydawi cadres under the control of the interim Interior Ministry in Suwayda Province.[35] The agreement also stipulates that the Syrian interim government will appoint a governor and police chief for Suwayda Province who may or may not be a Suwaydawi.[36] Suwaydawi cadres would enable Druze militias to maintain significant influence within these new security forces, regardless of the official chain of command.

The Syrian government's simultaneous but separate agreements with Druze militias in southern Syria and the SDF in northeastern Syria indicate its willingness to grant concessions to minority groups under specific conditions.[37] Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara has, for the most part, rejected

minority groups' calls for any type of federalist system. The agreements include the integration of the SDF and Druze militias into the interim government, which will enable the interim government to maintain a degree of control over these groups and territory they hold.[38] These agreements lay the foundation for future negotiations over how the SDF and Druze militias will integrate into the interim government and the degree of autonomy the SDF and Druze militias will retain in their respective territories.

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 Iraqi Supreme Administrative Court overturned the decision to dismiss Ninewa Provincial Council Chairman Ahmed al Hasoud on March 9.[39] The Ninewa Provincial Council voted on March 5 to remove Hasoud.[40] Hasoud is a member of the National Contract Bloc, which is led by Popular Mobilization Committee Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh.[41] The United Ninewa Bloc, which is an alliance of Sunni parties, spearheaded the effort to remove Hasoud.[42] The United Ninewa Bloc includes the Azm Alliance (led by Muthanna al Samarrai), Sovereignty Alliance (led by Khamis al Khanjar), and Progress Party (led by Mohammad al Halbousi).[43] 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.[44]

The Basra provincial council chairman and Basra governor have come into conflict in recent days.[45] Iraqi media reported on March 9 that Basra Governor Asaad al Eidani dismissed the Basra Investment Committee chairman and took over the committee. Eidani is a Sadrist who leads the Sadrist-aligned Design Alliance. The Design Alliance faced opposition from the Shia Coordination Framework during the 2023 Iraqi provincial council elections.[46] The Shia Coordination Framework is a loose coalition of Shia political parties, some of which are backed by Iran. Many Shia Coordination Framework parties compete with Iraqi nationalist Shia cleric Moqtada al Sadr's Sadrist Movement for political influence in Iraq. Basra Provincial Council Chairman Khalef al Badrani rejected Eidani's decision to dismiss the investment committee chairman. Badrani is a member of the Iranian-backed Badr Organization, which is part of the Shia Coordination Framework.[47]

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

Saudi media reported on March 11 that an unspecified actor conducted an airstrike targeting Houthi radars near Hudaydah Port.[48] Yemeni media also reported on March 10 that an unspecified actor conducted an airstrike targeting a Houthi naval base in al Kathib, west of

Hudaydah Port.[49] A Yemeni source claimed that an aircraft from the USS *Harry S. Truman* aircraft carrier flew near Houthi missile launch sites around the time of the airstrike on March 10.[50] CTP-ISW cannot verify these reports.

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

Lebanon and Israel agreed on March 11 to begin negotiations to set conditions for the IDF to withdraw from five outposts in southern Lebanon.[51] The negotiations will also aim to resolve the status of thirteen areas along the Israel-Lebanon border that Israel and Lebanon have disputed since the United Nations established the “Blue Line” land boundary in 2000. The negotiations will also focus on securing the release of Lebanese prisoners that Israel detained during the October 7 War. Israel released four Lebanese prisoners on March 11 whom the IDF detained during the war.[52]

Hezbollah is attempting to reconstitute its military capabilities in southern Lebanon. The IDF conducted an airstrike on March 11 that targeted Hezbollah Badr Unit air defense head Hassan Abbas Izz al Din in Nabatieh Governorate, southern Lebanon.[53] The Badr Unit is based in southern Lebanon between the Litani River and Sidon.[54] The IDF reported that Izz al Din has attempted to acquire new weapons for Hezbollah and restore Hezbollah air defense systems in recent months.[55]

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

Iran and Russia have begun jointly searching for lithium deposits in at least three provinces in Iran, possibly in order for Iran to export lithium to Russia amid US sanctions targeting Russian lithium mining.[56] The United States sanctioned a Russian company that owns the rights to develop Russia’s largest lithium mine in January 2025. Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasized on February 21 the need for Russia to expedite lithium mining plans and boost domestic production of critical minerals.[57] The Iranian Industry, Mines, and Trade Ministry announced in March 2023 that Iran discovered a lithium deposit that reportedly contains 8.5 million tons of lithium.[58] The ministry also stated that it planned to use technology from “two developed countries,” possibly referring to Russia and China, to extract and process Lithium.

The Artesh Navy and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy started a three-day joint military exercise with China and Russia in the northern Indian Ocean on March 11.[59] Iran, China, and Russia annually conduct a joint naval exercise and last conducted such an exercise in March 2024.[60]

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.

POWERED BY:  BABEL STREET

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