

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.

Top Iranian officials reportedly authorized Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi to "advance any diplomatic initiative in relation to the United States," according to an Iranian expert close to the regime.[1] It is not clear who precisely authorized Araghchi to begin "any diplomatic initiative," but Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei would almost certainly make such a decision. Araghchi has historically taken a softer line on nuclear negotiations with the United States compared to the regime's hardline elements. Araghchi said on March 24 that Iran is open to indirect talks with the United States "through various channels," though it rejects direct negotiations.[2] Former President Hassan Rouhani and former leading member of the Iranian nuclear negotiating team Mohammad Javad Zarif were previously given "full authority" to advance nuclear talks during the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action negotiations.[3]

An expected announcement of Syrian President Ahmed al Shara's cabinet and ministerial appointments will signal how and if Shara intends to extend his personal authority within the executive branch. Shara announced on March 25 that the interim government will comprise 22 ministerial portfolios led by a majority of "newcomers," suggesting that he will replace the 22 existing ministers.[4] This likely includes dissolving the office of Prime Minister Mohammed al Bashir.[5] Emirati media reported in late February that Shara's ministerial changes are imminent and are supposed to reflect that Shara understands the concerns about his consolidation of power.[6] This follows widespread concern over Shara's concentration of executive authority and the lack of checks and balances on the Presidency outlined in the recently announced constitutional declaration.[7]

Shara's current roster of transitional ministers is nearly entirely composed of bureaucrats that formerly served in the Idlib-based, HTS-controlled Syrian Salvation Government (SSG).[8] At least 18 of the 22

ministers that Shara appointed shortly after coming to power in December 2024 have close ties to or deep experience working with Shara, either through the SSG or through direct participation in HTS.[9] The SSG was nominally independent of HTS but, in practice, subordinate to HTS. Men who have been deeply loyal to Shara and have worked with him since his Jabhat al Nusra days currently hold the largest and highest priority ministerial portfolios, including foreign affairs and intelligence.[10]

Shara's appointments in the coming days will be a strong indicator of the sort of government and state Shara intends to lead. A bias towards non-SSG, non-Sunni, non-Islamist, and non-HTS backgrounds would indicate Shara's willingness to form a representative government that represents all of Syria. An opposite bias towards Sunni Arabs, Sunni Islamists, or former HTS and SSG members would indicate that Shara is not willing to form a representative or inclusive government at this time and instead seeks to cement his own control. This would also likely increase the distrust of the Shara government among minority communities, including the Alawites, Kurds, and Druze communities.

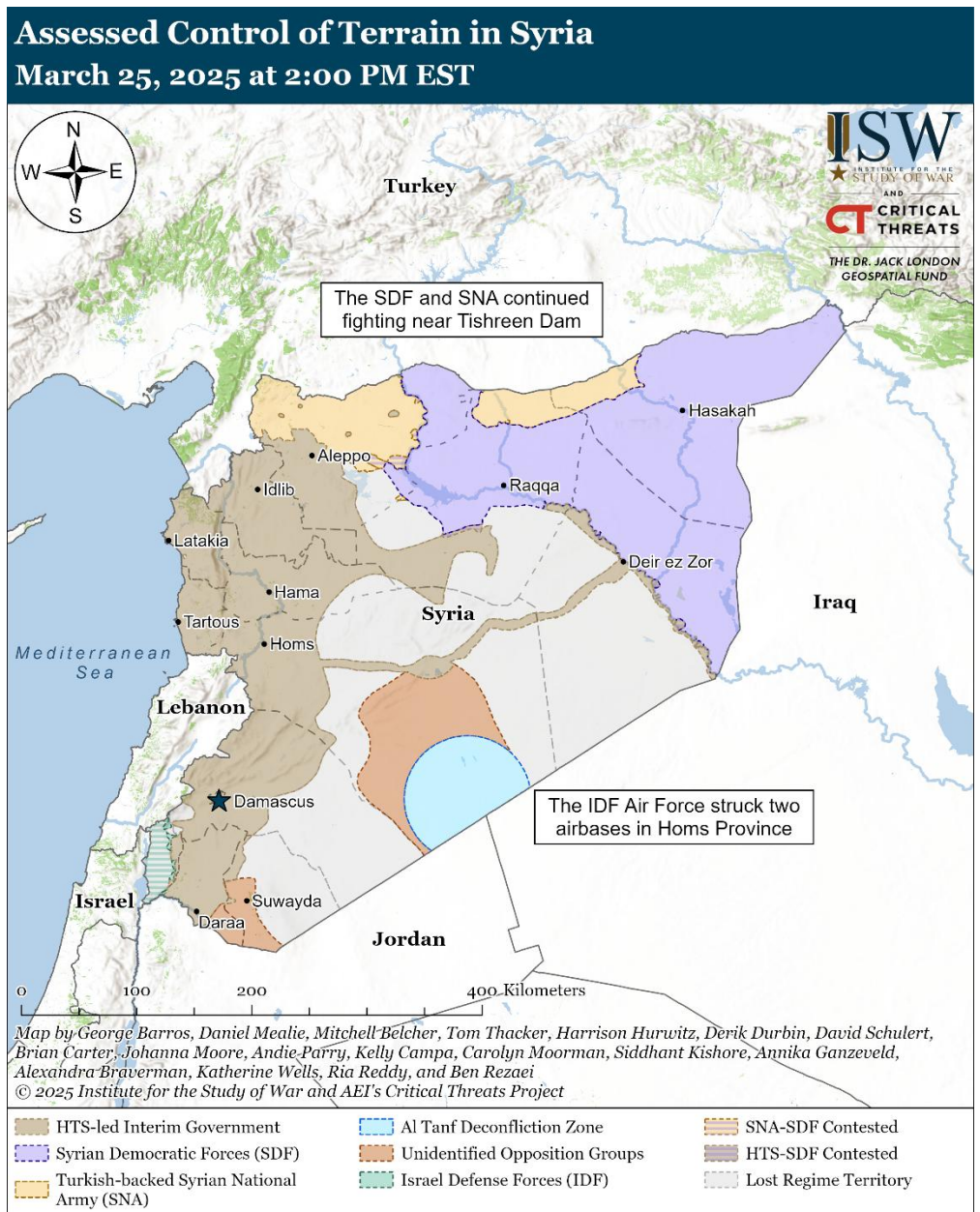
The Houthis continue to supplement their Iranian-sourced weapons arsenal by acquiring additional arms and dual-use components through Russian and Chinese commercial suppliers, according to the 2025 Annual US Intelligence Community Threat Assessment report.[11] Local media reported on March 24 that Yemeni border customs seized 800 Chinese-made drone propellers in a shipment bound for the Houthis at the Sarfait border crossing with Oman in southeastern Yemen.[12] The Houthis have previously procured dual-use items for drone and missile components on the international market.[13] The Houthis smuggle these shipments through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and through land borders, particularly from the Omani-Yemeni border via the Yemeni government-controlled Mahra and Hadramawt governorates in eastern Yemen.[14] The United States sanctioned China-based electronics companies for selling dual-use components to the Houthis in October 2024.[15] The Houthis also imported hydrogen fuel cylinders from unspecified Chinese suppliers in August 2024, which were aimed to increase the range and payloads of the Houthis' drones.[16]

Key Takeaways:

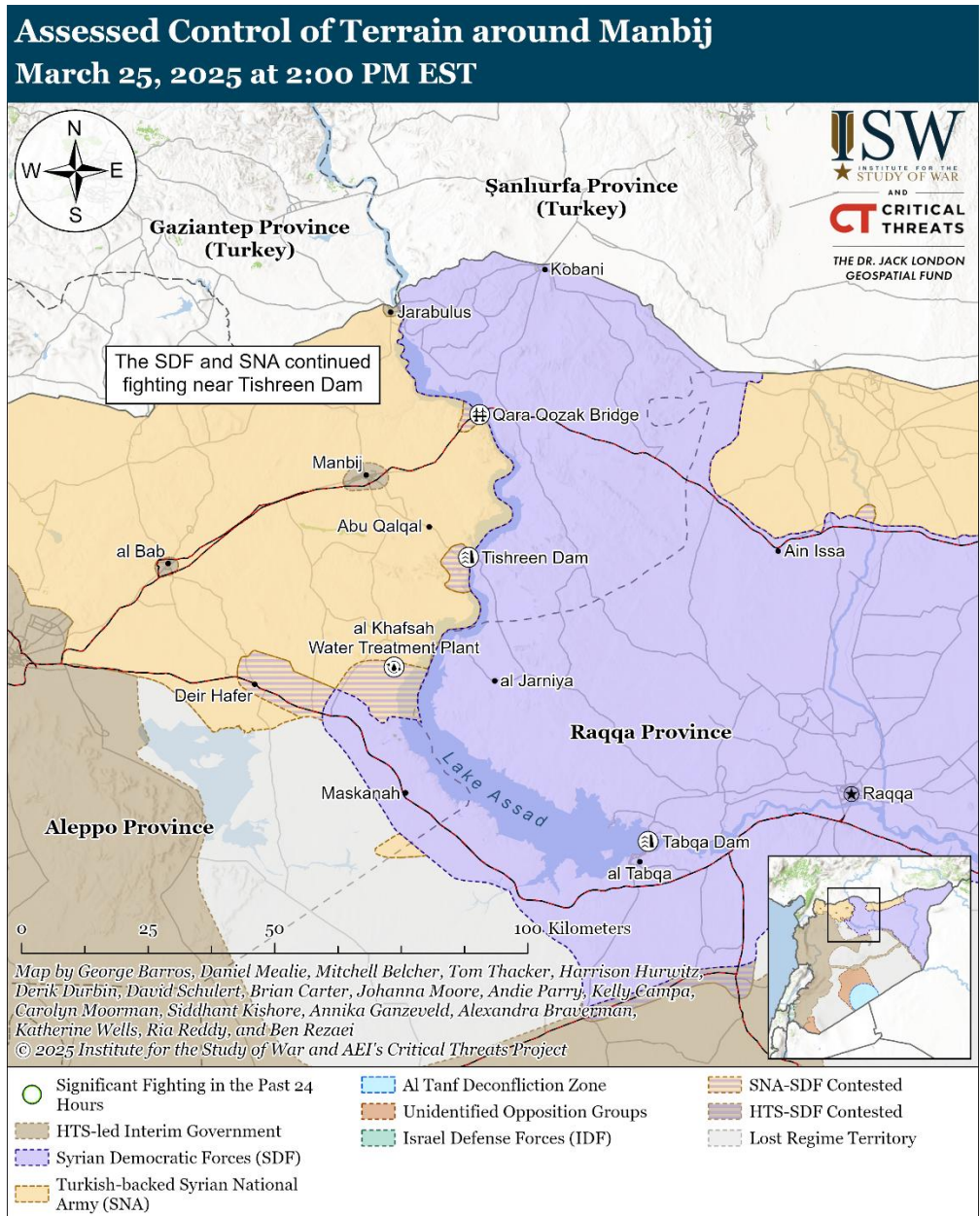
- **Iranian Nuclear Negotiations:** Top Iranian officials reportedly authorized Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi to "advance any diplomatic initiative in relation to the United States," according to an Iranian expert close to the regime. It is not clear who precisely authorized Araghchi to begin "any diplomatic initiative," but such a decision would almost certainly be made by the supreme leader.
- **Syrian Transitional Government Formation:** An expected announcement of Syrian President Ahmed al Shara's cabinet and ministerial appointments will signal how and if Shara intends to extend his personal authority within the executive branch.
- **Houthi Arms Smuggling:** The Houthis continue to supplement their Iranian-sourced weapons arsenal by acquiring additional arms and dual-use components through Russian and Chinese commercial suppliers, according to the 2025 Annual US Intelligence Community Threat Assessment report.

Syria

The Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) met in Qamishli, Hasakah Province, on March 25 to continue negotiations to form a Kurdish unity agreement.[17] The PYD is the political wing of the People’s Defense Units (YPG), which dominates the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the KNC is a minority Kurdish political coalition that is dominated by the Syrian wing of the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi and US officials mediated the meeting. Abdi also mediated the previous PYD-KNC dialogue session in al Shaddadi on March 18.[18] Two senior KNC officials told Kurdish media that the PYD and KNC may conclude an agreement by the end of March.[19] The PYD and KNC are longtime political rivals. The KNC-PYD negotiations began on March 18 after several actors, including the KDP, encouraged the SDF to “unify” Kurdish parties in Syria amid negotiations between the SDF and the Syrian interim government in Damascus.[20]



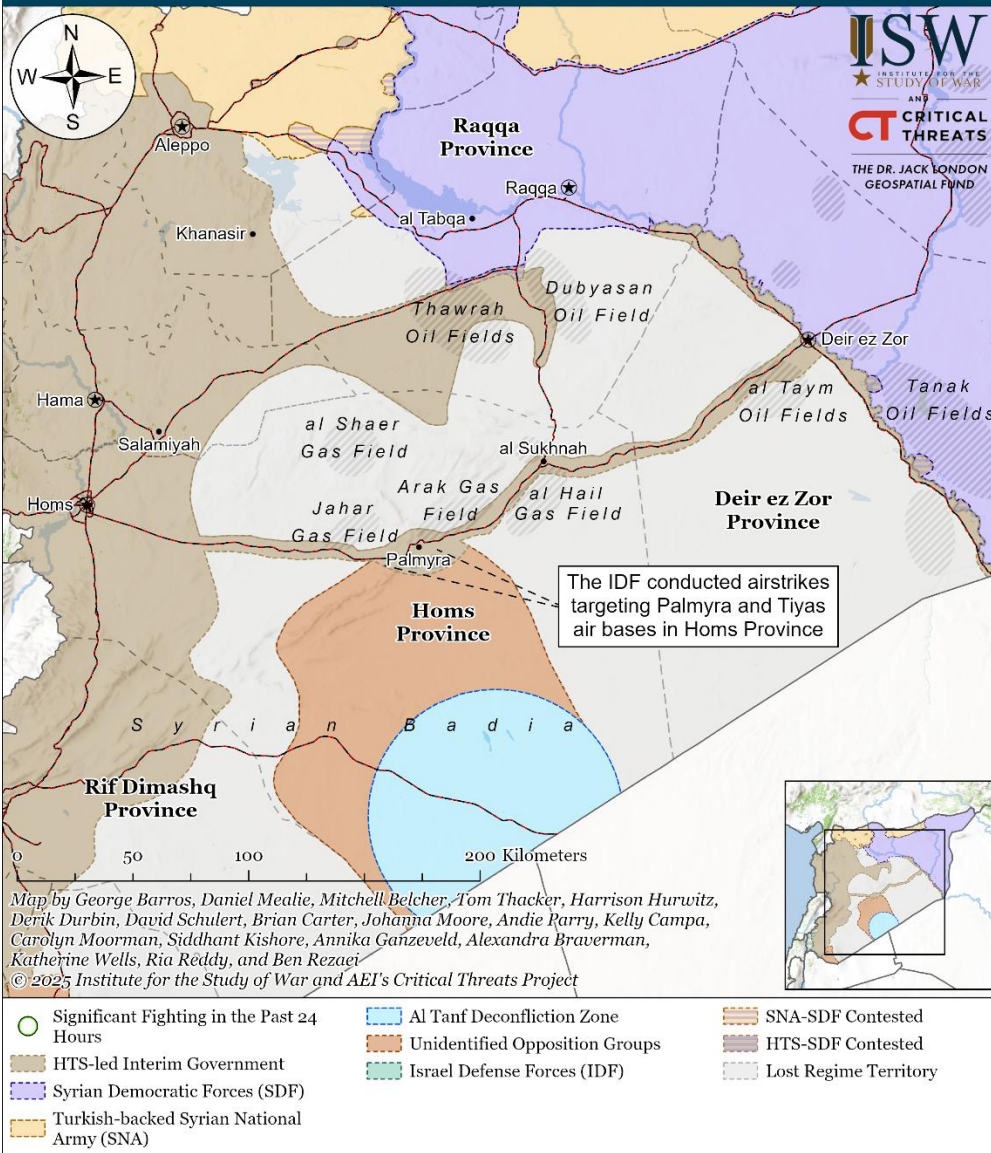
The SDF and SNA continued fighting along the Tishreen Dam frontlines in eastern Aleppo on March 24.[21]



The IDF Air Force conducted additional strikes on Palmyra and Tiyas air bases, eastern Homs Province, on March 24.[22] The IDF previously destroyed approximately 20 aircraft hangars at the bases on March 21.[23] The IDF stated that it struck “strategic military capabilities” in the bases in its most recent round of strikes.[24] The airstrikes reportedly killed at least five Syrians.[25] Homs Province is outside the IDF-declared “demilitarized” zone in southern Syria.[26] An unspecified regional intelligence official told Reuters in early February that Turkey seeks to establish airbases at Palmyra and Tiyas as part of a possible Syria-Turkey defense agreement.[27] Israeli officials have increasingly expressed concern about the rise of Turkish influence and the establishment of possible Turkish bases in Syria.[28]

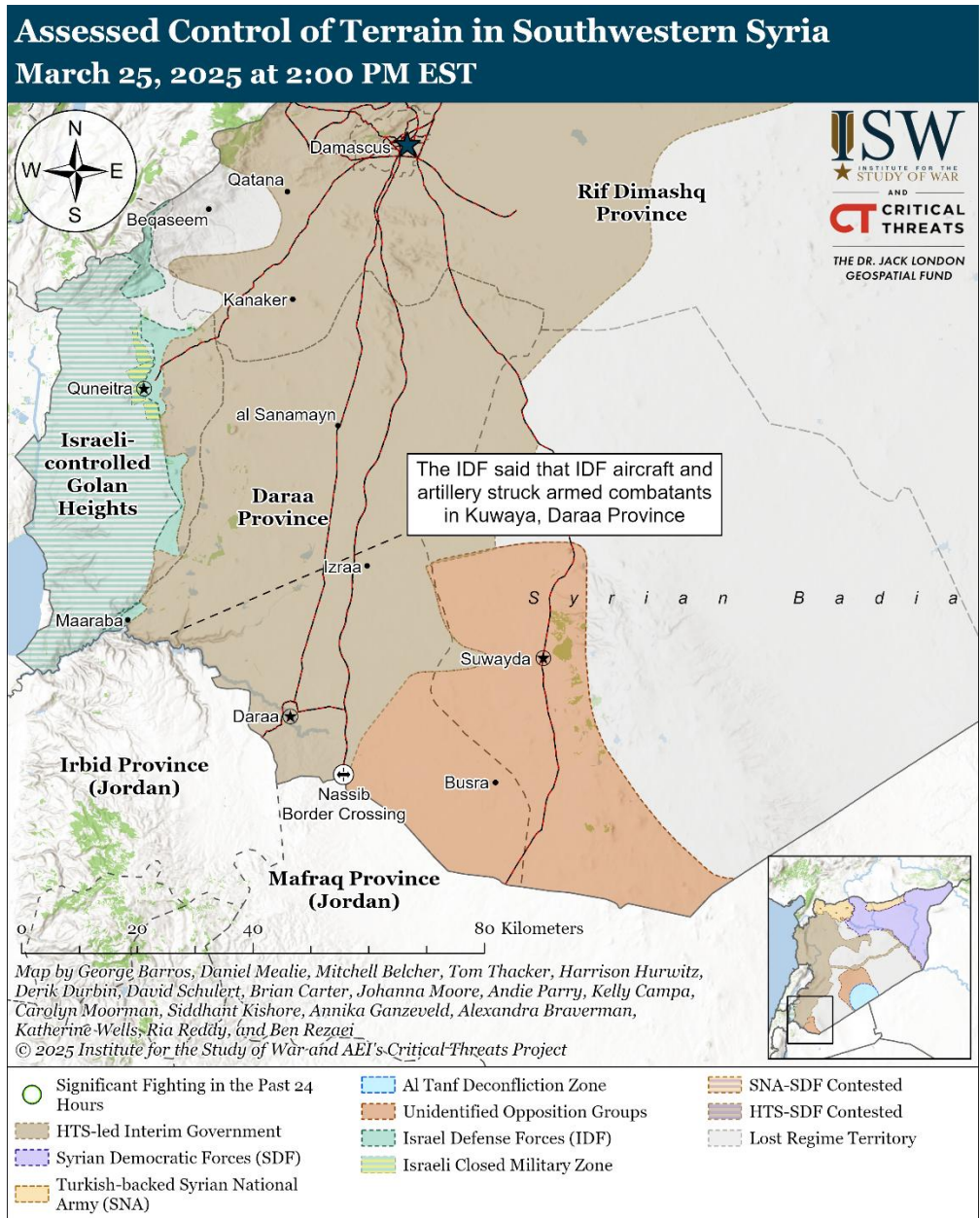
Assessed Control of Terrain in Central Syria

March 25, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



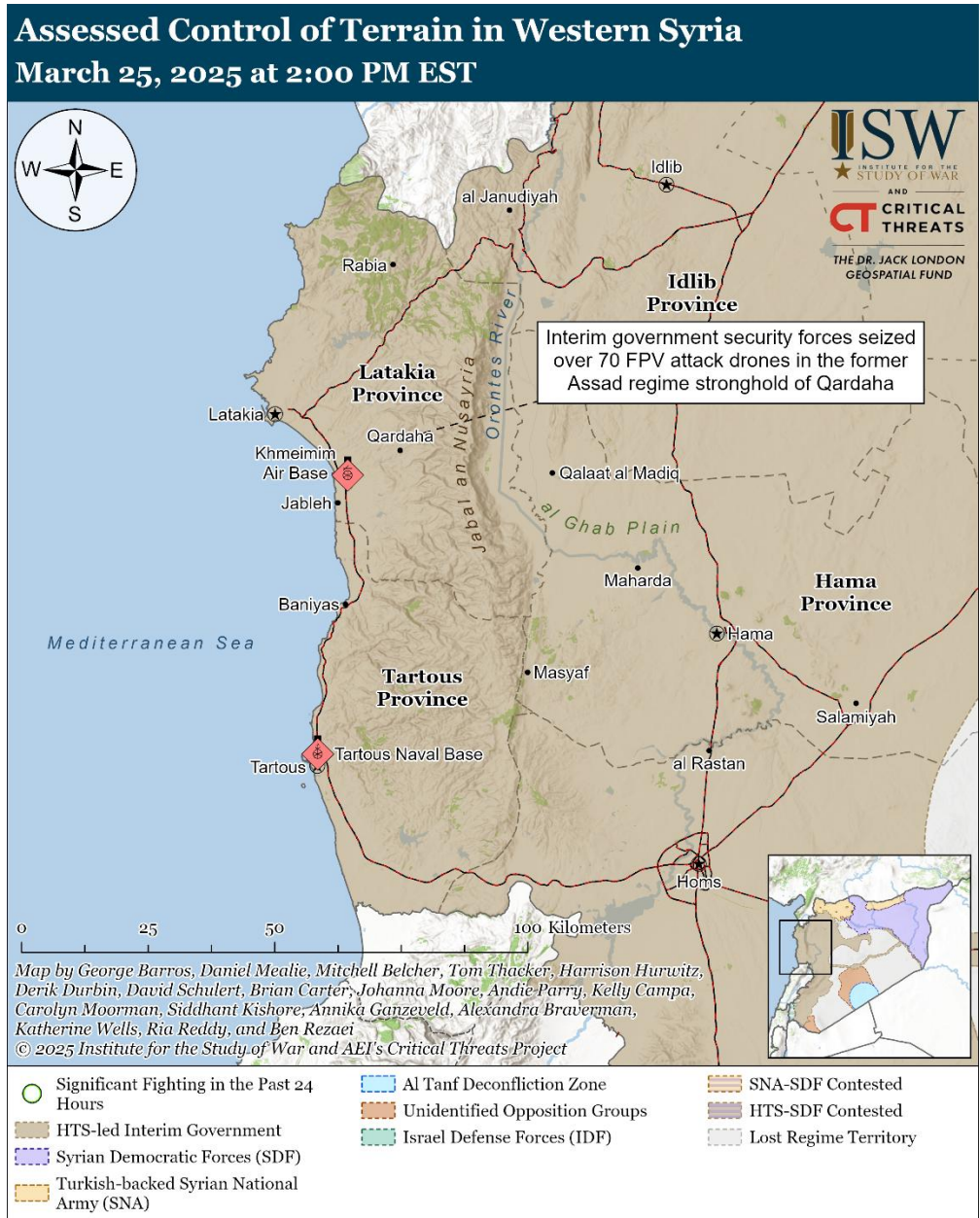
The IDF conducted airstrikes and artillery shelling targeting armed combatants in the southern Syrian village of Kuwaya, Daraa Province, on March 25.[29] Armed combatants, including armed villagers, attacked the IDF when Israeli forces entered Kuwaya on March 25.[30] The IDF returned fire and conducted an airstrike that killed at least four fighters of the Islamic Resistance Front of Syria-the First of the Brave, in Kuwaya.[31] The Islamic Resistance Front in Syria-the First of the Brave is an anti-Israeli militia that uses Iranian iconography common among groups affiliated with or inspired by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. The group announced its formation on January 9, 2025.[32] The IDF also shelled Kuwaya from an IDF base in Marbah village, Daraa Province, which is around 3.5 kilometers west of Kuwaya.[33] The shelling reportedly killed seven civilians in Kuwaya.[34] The IDF previously briefly operated in Kuwaya in December 2024 and withdrew after residents demonstrated against IDF presence.[35] The Syrian interim foreign ministry issued a

statement that condemned Israeli operations in southern Syria.[36] The ministry called Israeli strikes in Kuwaya a “dangerous escalation” and called for an international investigation against Israeli activities in Syria.



Interim government security forces seized at least 70 first-person view (FPV) attack drones from Qardaha, Latakia Province, on March 25.[37] The Public Security Directorate said that the drones were prepared to target interim defense ministry and internal security sites.[38] Qardaha is Bashar al Assad’s hometown and a former Assad regime stronghold.[39] Qardaha and its surrounding neighborhoods are likely support zones for the pro-Assad insurgency that was responsible for a spate of violence in early March. Qardaha residents demonstrated against interim government forces operating in Qardaha and called for their removal prior to the violence in early March, which suggests that the population may be sympathetic to pro-Assad insurgent cells and support their

activity.[40] Insurgents in Qardaha fled to nearby hills on March 7 after interim government forces began clearing operations in the area.[41] The insurgency has continued sporadic attacks on interim government forces but has not used FPV drones in those operations.[42] The interim interior ministry said that the “Civil Peace Committee in Qardaha” agreed to turn over the drones to the government, suggesting that not all local officials support the Assadist insurgents.[43]



The interim government's independent fact-finding committee investigating sectarian violence in coastal Syria issued an update on its findings in Latakia Province on March 25.[44] Syrian interim President Ahmed al Shara appointed the committee, which includes two Alawites and several competent, professional judges, on March 9.[45] The committee will also conduct assessments in Tartous, Hama, and Idlib Provinces.[46] Committee spokesperson Yasser al Farhan said that it is too early to disclose the results of the investigation and that the committee will need more than

the original month it was given to complete its study.[47] Farhan noted that the committee recorded over 90 testimonies and visited nine sites as part of the investigation.[48] He stated that armed Assadist insurgents maintained a presence in the “areas surrounding” the investigation in Latakia.[49] He said that the committee aims to establish a special court to prosecute perpetrators of the violence.[50] Failure to hold perpetrators of extrajudicial killings during the recent clearing operations accountable will exacerbate fears that government forces are targeting civilians and further drive support for insurgent cells.

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 security forces arrested four Syrian nationals in Baghdad on March 24 for “promoting terrorist organizations,” including al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra.[51] The Iraqi security forces may be referring to support for the Syrian government, considering that Jabhat al Nusra no longer exists, but several former Jabhat al Nusra commanders hold senior government positions. Iraqi security forces have arrested several Syrian nationals in Iraq since March 8 for promoting sectarianism and extremism.[52] The arrests follow a flare-up of sectarian violence between Alawite insurgents and Sunni interim government forces in coastal Syria since early March 2025.[53] CTP-ISW previously assessed that the risk of sectarian violence spilling over from Syria into Iraq is increasing.[54]

A source affiliated with the Shia Coordination Framework told Iraqi media on March 23 that Iranian-backed Iraqi militia-affiliated political parties will contest the upcoming parliamentary elections in separate blocs.[55] The Badr Organization will reportedly join Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani’s Euphrates Movement, while Asaib Ahl al Haq’s Sadiqoun party will run independently.[56] The source added that other Iranian-backed Iraqi militia-affiliated parties will join “other lists.”[57] The Badr Organization, Sadiqoun, and other Iranian-backed militia-affiliated political parties contested the 2021 elections as the Fatah alliance.[58] This development corresponds with recent Iraqi media reports that Sudani may ally with the Badr Organization and Popular Mobilization Chairman Falah al Fayyadh’s al Ataa Movement in the elections.[59]

An official from the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), which is the Iraqi electoral commission, told Kurdish media on March 25 that all preparations are complete to hold parliamentary elections on November 25, 2025.[60] An IHEC official told Iraqi media on March 19 that preparations for the elections remain “on track, while Iraqi officials have repeatedly said the elections will occur in October.”[61] Iraqi electoral law requires parliamentary elections to occur at least 45 days prior to the end of the four-year legislative term, which corresponds with November 25.[62]

The Iraqi Administrative Court reinstated Diyala Provincial Council Chairman Omar al Karwi on March 25 after the Diyala Provincial Council attempted to dismiss and replace Karwi.[63] Karwi is a member of Khamis al Khanjar’s Sovereignty Alliance.[64] The Provincial

Council unanimously voted to dismiss Karwi and elected Nizar al Lahibi as Chairman on March 23.[65] Lahibi is a member of former Parliament Speaker Mohammad al Halbousi's Progress Party.[66] Khanjar and Halbousi are longtime political rivals who compete for political influence among Iraqi Sunnis. The Iraqi Administrative Court reinstated Karwi after the Diyala Provincial Council attempted to dismiss him and replace him with Lahibi in October 2024.[67]

Arabian Peninsula

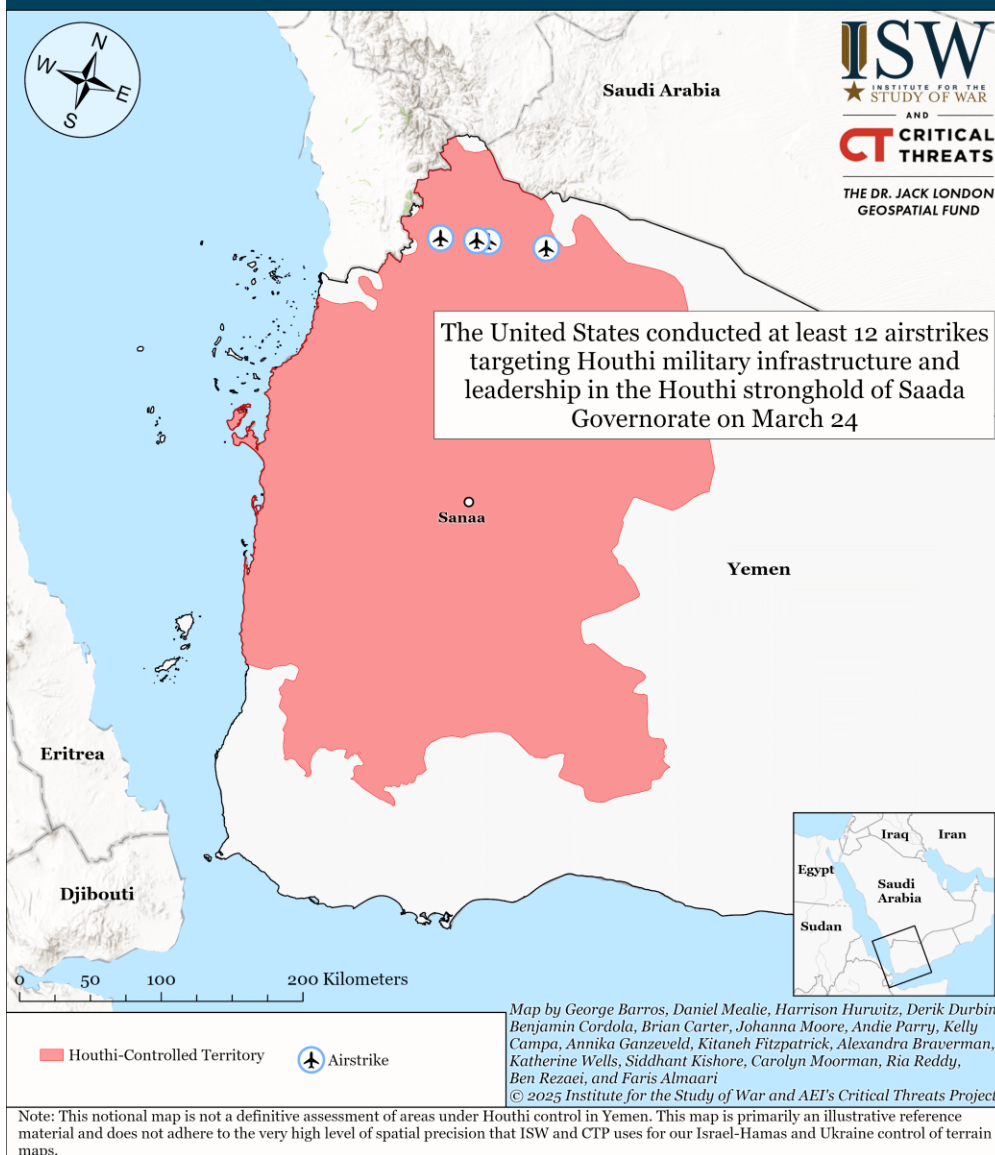
Axis of Resistance objectives:

- 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 United States Central Command (CENTCOM) conducted at least 12 airstrikes targeting Houthi military infrastructure and leadership in several locations in the Houthi stronghold of Saada Governorate in northern Yemen since CTP-ISW's last data cut-off on March 24.[68] Senior Houthi officials stated that the Houthis will continue to target Israel in defense of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip despite CENTCOM airstrikes.[69] Senior Houthi Political Bureau Mohammad al Bukhaiti confirmed in an interview with al Jazeera on March 24 that the CENTCOM airstrikes in Yemen have caused losses but did not elaborate.[70] The Houthis also launched a combined missile and drone attack targeting the USS *Harry S. Truman* aircraft carrier and US destroyers in the Red Sea on March 24.[71]

US Strikes Against Houthi Targets

As of March 25, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



The Houthis separately launched two ballistic missiles targeting Ben Gurion Airport in central Israel on March 24.[72] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) intercepted a Houthi missile before it entered Israeli airspace.[73]

The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon

Axis of Resistance objectives:

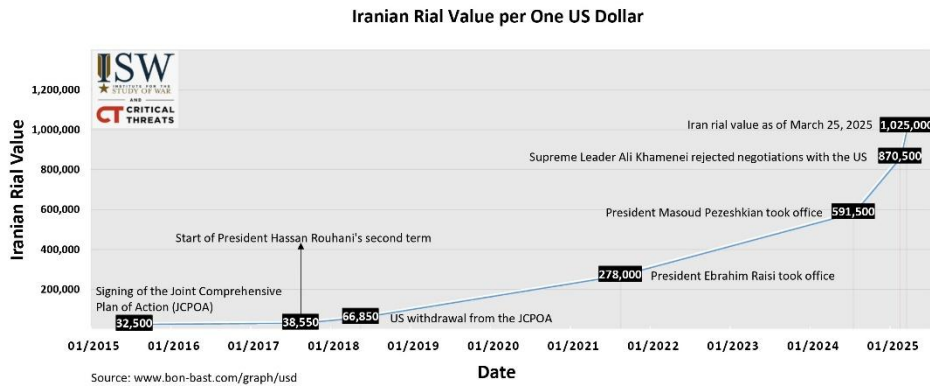
- Erode the will of the Israeli political establishment and public to sustain clearing operations in the Gaza Strip
- Reestablish Hamas as the governing authority in the Gaza Strip

- 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 989,000 rials to one US dollar on March 24 to 1,024,100 rials to one US dollar on March 25.[74] Iran's currency dropped to a record low on March 25, reflecting Iran's deepening economic instability amid renewed US "maximum pressure" sanctions and diplomatic deadlock.[75]



Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi and Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein held a phone call on March 25 to discuss bilateral ties and regional developments.[76] Iranian reformist outlet Entekhab News and Iraqi media outlet Shafaq reported that Araghchi informed Hussein of the contents of US President Donald Trump's letter to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.[77] Hussein expressed hope that the exchange of messages could help open channels for dialogue between Iran and the United States.[78] A source close to the UAE government claimed on March 21 that Trump's letter included demands for the dissolution of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).[79] If accurate, this would have implications for Iran's regional influence, especially in Iraq.

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi met with Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan on March 25 in Yerevan, Armenia, to discuss bilateral ties.[80] Araghchi stated that Iran and Armenia agreed to ease transit constraints, reduce customs fees, and build a new bridge over the Aras River.[81] Araghchi separately met with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and expressed support for the "Crossroads of Peace" plan and highlighted strong, growing ties between Iran and Armenia.[82] The Crossroads of Peace is an Armenian government initiative to

promote regional connectivity through roads, railways, and other infrastructure based on sovereignty, equal access, and mutual control by all participating countries.[83]

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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