

Iran Update



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March 4, 2025, Information Cutoff: 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.

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.

Russia offered to mediate between the United States and Iran, according to unspecified sources speaking to Bloomberg.[1] Russian mediation would reportedly cover Iranian nuclear activities and support for the Axis of Resistance. It is far from clear that Russia would help secure US interests through this mediation, however, especially regarding Iranian support for the Axis of Resistance. Russia has cooperated extensively with the Axis of Resistance over the past decade. This cooperation has included working with Iran and Iranian-backed militias to attack US forces in the Middle East. Russian and Iranian-backed conducted a combined attack on US forces in Syria in 2018, for example.[2] Russia also supported the Axis of Resistance against Israel throughout the October 7 War. The Kremlin provided targeting intelligence to the Houthis to support attacks on international shipping and US vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.[3] Moscow and Tehran signed a strategic cooperation agreement in January 2025, underscoring further their close collaboration and their alignment in working to erode US global influence.[4]

Russia's support for the Axis of Resistance does not necessarily mean that Russia has leverage over its behavior. Russia has historically been the dominant partner in the Russo-Iranian relationship, but this relationship has become more balanced in recent years, particularly since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Russia relies heavily on Iranian military support, such as drones, to sustain its war against Ukraine.[5] These shifting dynamics have made Iran a more equal partner in its strategic

partnership with Russia. Moscow trying to coerce Tehran into curbing its regional activities would risk damaging their partnership, which is critical to sustaining Russia's war against Ukraine.

Russian weapons experts traveled to Iran at least twice in 2024 likely to discuss their growing military cooperation. Reuters reported on March 4 that seven senior Russian weapons experts, including one with a background in advanced weapons development and one with a background in missile testing, traveled to Iran in April and September 2024.[6] A senior Iranian defense ministry official stated that unspecified Russian missile experts conducted multiple visits to Iranian missile production sites, including at least two underground missile facilities, in 2024. The September 2024 visit notably occurred days after Iran began sending short-range ballistic missiles to Russia.[7] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) struck Iranian mixing equipment used to produce solid fuel for ballistic missiles in October 2024, which could disrupt Iranian ballistic missile shipments to Russia in the near future.[8]

The Russian weapons experts may have traveled to Iran in April 2024 to assess damage to Russian-made air defenses following an exchange of strikes between Iran and Israel. The visit occurred five days after the IDF struck the tombstone engagement radar of a Russian-made S-300 air defense system in Iran. The strike rendered the S-300 inoperable by destroying its ability to track and engage targets.[9]

Iraqi State of Law Coalition head Nouri al Maliki reportedly supports the participation of Iraqi Shia nationalist cleric Muqtada al Sadr's Shia National Movement in the October 2025 parliamentary elections in order to diminish Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani's political influence.[10] Iraqi media reported on March 4 that the Shia Coordination Framework expects Sudani's Euphrates Movement to win between 40-55 seats in the upcoming election.[11] The Shia Coordination Framework is a loose coalition of Shia political parties, some of which are backed by Iran. Unidentified Shia sources previously told Saudi media in September 2024 that Sudani has allied with 50 unspecified Shia Coordination Framework members, around 60 parliamentarians, and multiple provincial governors.[12] Maliki reportedly believes that the participation of Sadr's Shia Nationalist Movement in the elections would decrease the number of seats that Sudani's party wins.[13] Sudani notably left Maliki's State of Law Coalition in 2019.[14]

Iraqi media suggested on March 4 that Sudani could ally with political figures who oppose Maliki, including former Prime Minister Haider al Abadi and National Wisdom Movement head Ammar al Hakim.[15] Abadi attempted to form a political party with Hakim in 2020 that supported then-Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhimi and opposed Iranian-backed groups.[16] Hakim has recently fought with Maliki over his outsized influence in the Shia Coordination Framework and involvement in the removal of the Dhi Qar governor, who is a member of Hakim's party.[17] A National Wisdom Movement official said on March 4 that the party remains close to Sudani.[18] A potential Sudani-Hakim-Abadi alliance could hurt the Shia Coordination Framework's performance in the upcoming elections.

Maliki remains concerned that Sadr's lack of participation in the upcoming elections could destabilize Iraq. Maliki said that Sadr's participation is "crucial" for Iraqi political stability in an interview on March 2.[19] CTP-ISW assessed on February 20 that Shia Coordination Framework members may seek to include Sadr in the upcoming elections to mitigate the risk of Sadr calling for protests, as he did after the 2021 elections.[20]

Key Takeaways:

- **Russo-Iranian Cooperation:** Russia offered to mediate between the United States and Iran, according to unspecified sources speaking to *Bloomberg*. Russian mediation would reportedly cover Iranian nuclear activities and support for the Axis of Resistance. It is far from clear that Russia would help secure US interests through this mediation, however, especially regarding Iranian support for the Axis of Resistance.
- **Russo-Iranian Cooperation:** Russian weapons experts traveled to Iran at least twice in 2024 likely to discuss their growing military cooperation. The Russian weapons experts may have traveled to Iran in April 2024 to assess damage to Russian-made air defenses following an exchange of strikes between Iran and Israel.
- **Iraqi Parliamentary Elections:** Iraqi State of Law Coalition head Nouri al Maliki reportedly supports the participation of Iraqi Shia nationalist cleric Muqtada al Sadr’s Shia National Movement in the October 2025 parliamentary elections in order to diminish Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani’s political influence.

Syria

A pro-Assad militia announced on March 3 that it will resist efforts by Israel, Turkey, and the United States to “divide Syria.”[21] The commander of the Islamic Resistance Front in Syria-The First of the Brave, stated that the group aims to represent all Syrian religions and sects. The group previously claimed an attack targeting Israeli forces near the 1974 disengagement zone on February 18, although CTP-ISW cannot verify the group’s claim. The group’s iconography and name initially suggested that the group is affiliated with Iranian-backed actors, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, that have historically operated in Syria. The groups’ cross-sectarian statements about unity break from the Iranian messaging that has tried to stoke sectarian tensions in Syria, however. The statements from the group indicate that the group opposes Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS).[22]

Former Assad regime members attacked and killed two interim government security officers in Latakia City on March 3.[23] It is unclear whether the attackers are part of an organized anti-HTS group, such as the Islamic Resistance Front in Syria-The First of the Brave. Interim government forces deployed to al Datour, Latakia Province, on March 3 to arrest individuals who participated in the attack.[24]

Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara met with Arab and regional leaders at the emergency "Palestine Summit" hosted by the Arab League in Cairo on March 4.[25] Shara and his government have prioritized gaining legitimacy among regional states since the fall of the Assad regime. Shara’s participation in the Arab Summit — a forum from which former Syrian President Bashar al Assad was banned until 2023 — is a key step for the interim government in establishing international legitimacy.[26] Shara addressed the IDF’s presence in southern Syria during the summit, saying that he is committed to the 1974 Disengagement Agreement and stressing that “it is unacceptable for the Israeli side to continue ignoring this agreement.”[27] Shara’s public criticism of Israel follows Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s demand that three southern Syrian provinces become a demilitarized zone without an HTS presence.[28] Shara lacks the ability to seriously counter Israeli operations militarily and risks destabilizing the political transition process even if he could respond

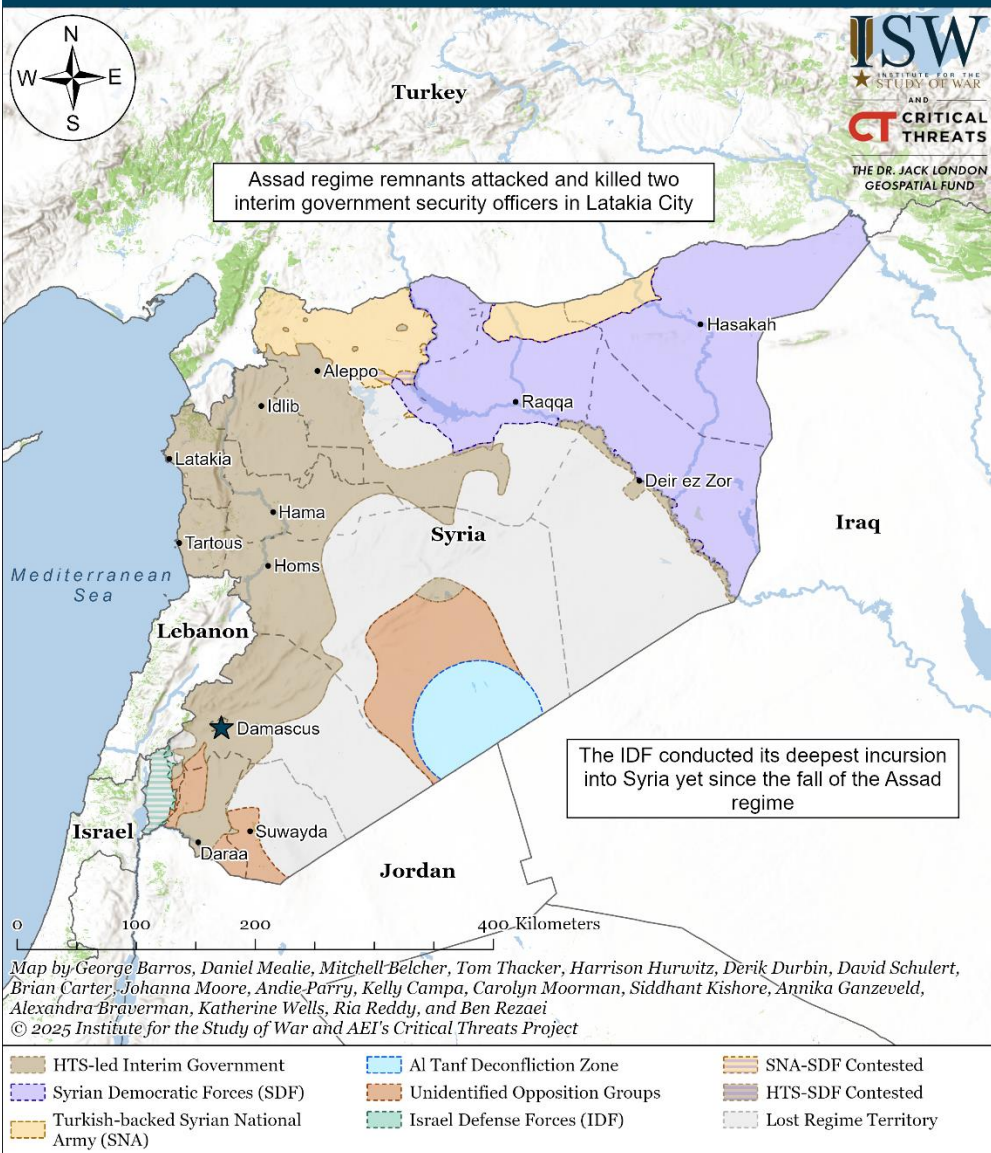
militarily to Israeli operations in southern Syria. Shara likely recognizes these constraints and has noted that the interim government does not seek a fight with Israel.[29]

The Syrian interim government is continuing to appoint individuals loyal to HTS leader Ahmed al Shara to senior military positions. Syrian media reported on March 3 that the Syrian Interim Defense Ministry appointed Ahmed Rizk as the commander of the Aleppo-based 80th Division.[30] Rizk previously served as the commander of Harakat Nour al Din al Zenki, which is an Aleppo-based militia that HTS co-opted and subordinated to itself.[31] Syrian media separately reported on March 4 that the Interim Defense Ministry appointed Ahmed al Muhammad as the commander of the 66th Division.[32] This division operates in Deir ez Zor and Raqqqa provinces.[33] Muhammad previously served as a commander in the HTS-led Military Operations Department in eastern Syria during the HTS-led offensive to topple the Assad regime in December 2024.[34] Muhammad also previously commanded an Idlib-based militia called the al Zubair Brigade.[35] The Syrian Interim Defense Ministry has not officially announced these appointments at the time of this writing.

The Syrian Interim Defense Ministry reportedly appointed Naseem al Khatib as commander of a Special Forces Brigade in Idlib Province on March 3.[36] Khatib previously served as the commander of the National Liberation Front's "central operations" and led Faylaq al Sham's commando unit.[37] Faylaq al Sham is an Islamist militia group that was close to Turkey and cooperated with HTS prior to the fall of the Assad regime.[38] It participated in the offensive that toppled Assad.[39]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

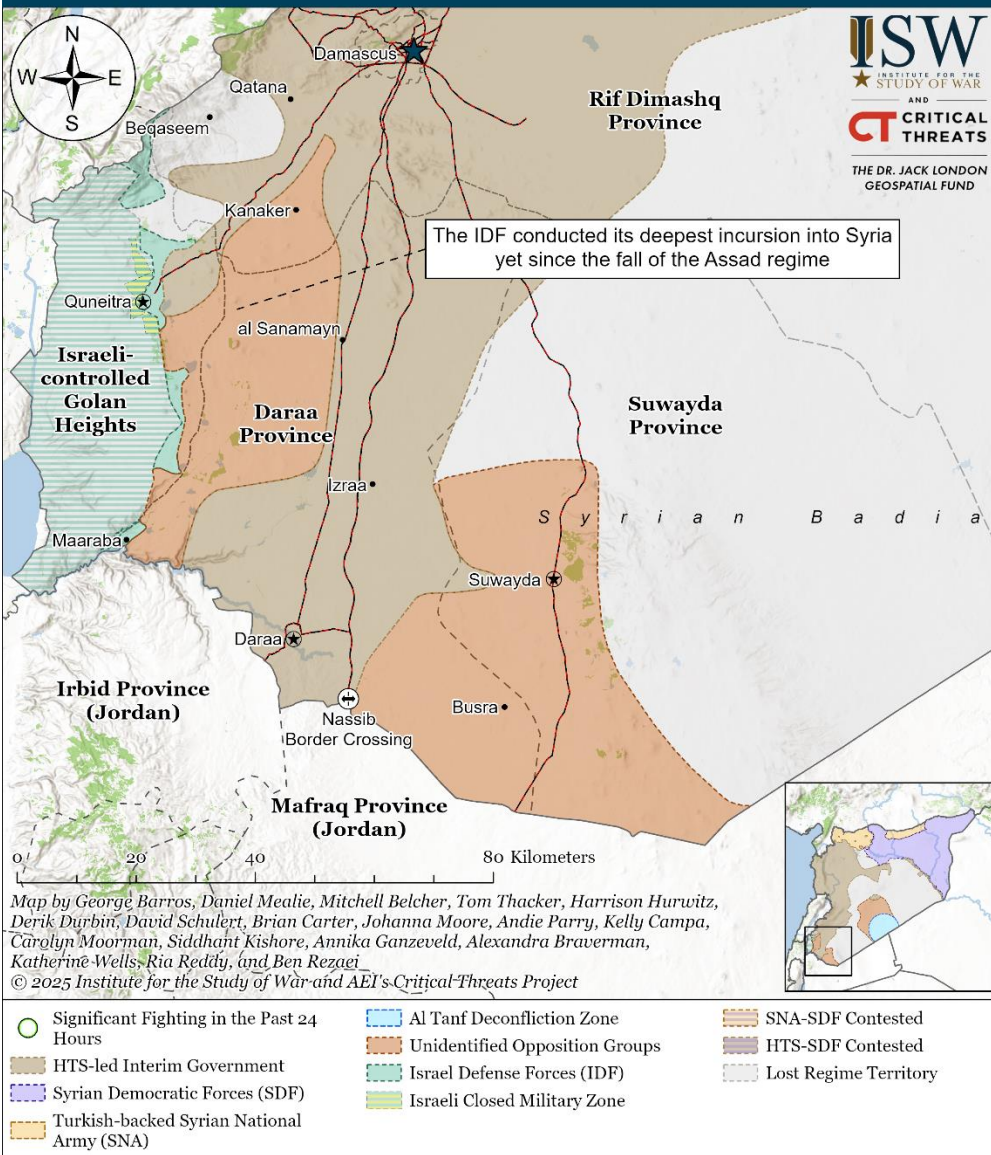
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The IDF conducted its deepest incursion into Syria yet since the IDF launched ground operations in southern Syria in December 2024.[40] Syrian media reported on March 3 that Israeli forces raided a former Syrian Arab Army (SAA) base on Tell al Mal, Quneitra Province.[41] Syrian media reported that Israeli bulldozers destroyed infrastructure in the base.[42] The IDF reportedly used helicopters during the raid, presumably to deploy an assault force.[43] Tell al Mal is around 16 kilometers from the 1974 disengagement zone. Syrian media reported that Israeli forces separately patrolled Ruwaihaniya, Quneitra Province, on March 4.[44]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Southwestern Syria

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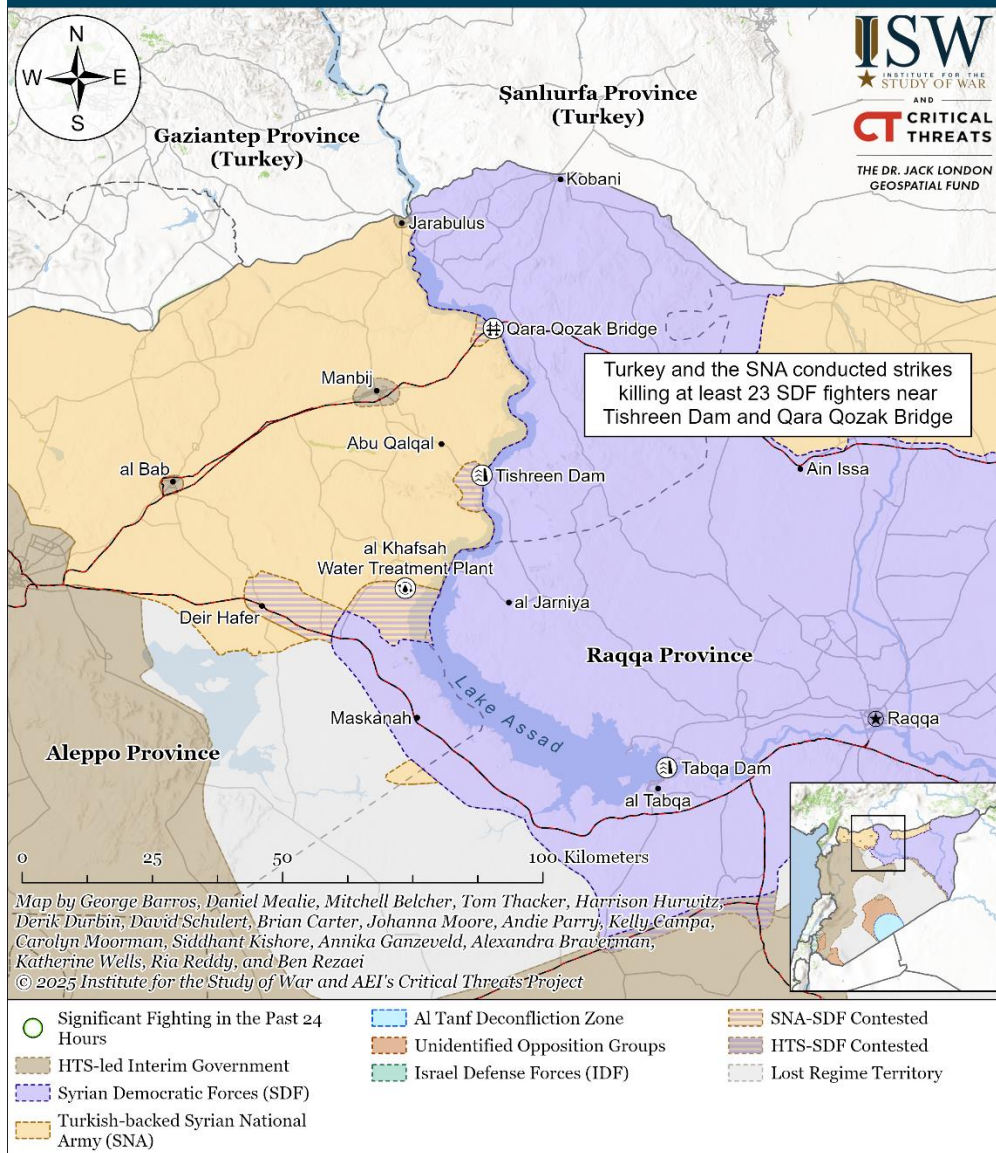
Druze leader Sheikh Hikmat al Hijri reaffirmed his support for Syrian unity during a meeting with a delegation from Jaramana, Daraa Province, on March 4.[45] Hijri said during a press conference with the delegation that “our project is Syrian” and that he opposes those who advocate for anything outside of the “national” project.[46] The delegation’s meeting with Hijri comes after the Druze group Jaramana Shield Brigade attacked and killed two government-affiliated security personnel on March 1.[47] Jaramana is a former Assad regime stronghold with several regime-aligned Druze militias.[48] Hijri has generally supported and coordinated with the Syrian interim government as it has attempted to centralize Syria under one government.[49] Hijri previously denounced the formation of military organizations outside of the central government and has warned armed groups against conducting unsanctioned operations.[50]

An Israeli newspaper that supports Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reported that Israel urged the United States to prevent Turkey from establishing military bases in Syria. Israel Hayom reported on March 3 that the Israeli National Security Council asked US officials to discourage Turkey from establishing three military bases in Syria, citing unspecified sources.[51] This report follows recent reports that Turkey seeks to establish several military bases in Syria as part of a potential defense agreement with the Syrian interim government.[52]

CTP-ISW cannot verify Israel Hayom's reporting. That Israel would seek to prevent the establishment of Turkish bases in Syria is consistent with Israeli officials' concern about Turkish influence in Syria since the fall of the Assad regime.[53] The IDF launched a Turkish-language X (Twitter) account on March 4.[54]

Turkey and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) struck Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) positions near Tishreen Dam and Qara Qozak Bridge, east of Aleppo, on March 4. Anti-SDF media reported that Turkish airstrikes and SNA artillery shelling killed at least 23 SDF fighters near Tishreen Dam and Qara Qozak Bridge.[55] Turkish aircraft also struck SDF positions in Sarrin, southeast of Qara Qozak Bridge.[56] The SDF reportedly moved weapons and personnel to reinforce its forces near Tishreen Dam.[57]

Assessed Control of Terrain around Manbij March 4, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



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 State of Law Coalition head Nouri al Maliki said on March 2 that the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) should integrate into the Iraqi military establishment and operate under Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani.[58] The United States has recently pressured the Iraqi federal government to disarm and integrate Iranian-backed Iraqi militias into the Iraqi military establishment.[59] The PMF, on paper, reports directly to the Iraqi prime minister, but

in reality, many of the militias that comprise the PMF answer to Iran.[60] Iraqi media reported on March 3 that unidentified Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have refused to disarm and integrate into the Iraqi military despite Iraqi federal government warnings about Israeli and US economic and political consequences if the militias fail to do so.[61] CTP-ISW previously assessed that the integration of militias that answer to Iran into the Iraqi security establishment will increase Iranian influence in the Iraq security sector.

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 designated the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization on March 4.[62] Houthi officials have threatened to conduct unspecified military action if the United States sanctions Houthi leaders. These threats come amid recent Yemeni media reports that the United States might sanction Houthi Supreme Political Council Chairman Mahdi al Mashat and chief negotiator Mohammed Abdulsalam.[63]

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

The United States has granted 95 million US dollars in military assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), according to two US officials speaking to Axios.[64] An unspecified US official described LAF deployments to former Hezbollah positions in southern Lebanon as “major progress.”

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

The Iranian rial appreciated from 907,200 rials to one US dollar on March 3 to 906,800 rials to one US dollar on March 4.[65]

Iran and China are continuing to find ways to circumvent US sanctions on Iranian oil exports. Iran has started using smaller and more agile vessels instead of very large crude carriers (VLCC) to transport Iranian oil to China since February 2025, according to ship-tracking data.[66] Bloomberg reported on March 4 that Iran has likely switched to smaller vessels because they can offload oil barrels in shallower waters.[67] Bloomberg added that large terminals are less likely to allow

sanctioned vessels to dock. China's Shandong Port Group banned sanctioned tankers from docking at ports in Shandong Province, a hotspot for Iranian oil exports, in early January 2025.[68]

Iranian officials continued to criticize Turkish regional policy on March 4. Supreme Leader International Affairs Adviser Ali Akbar Velayati called on Turkish officials to avoid "repeating baseless claims." [69] Velayati was responding to Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Hakan Fidan's threat on February 28 to support opposition groups in Iran in response to Iranian support for militias across the Middle East.[70] Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry director general for the Mediterranean and eastern Europe separately met with the Turkish ambassador to Iran on March 3 to discuss Fidan's comments.[71] The Iranian and Turkish foreign affairs ministries summoned the Turkish and Iranian charge d'affaires, respectively, following the meeting. The current dispute between Iran and Turkey highlights how Iran and Turkey's opposing interests and policies in Syria and other parts of the region can generate fissures in the Iranian-Turkish relationship.

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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