

Iran Update



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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 the ongoing opposition offensive in Syria, and [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations. The Syria map is updated daily alongside the static Syria maps in this report. CTP-ISW ended daily maps of Israeli ground operations in February 2025.

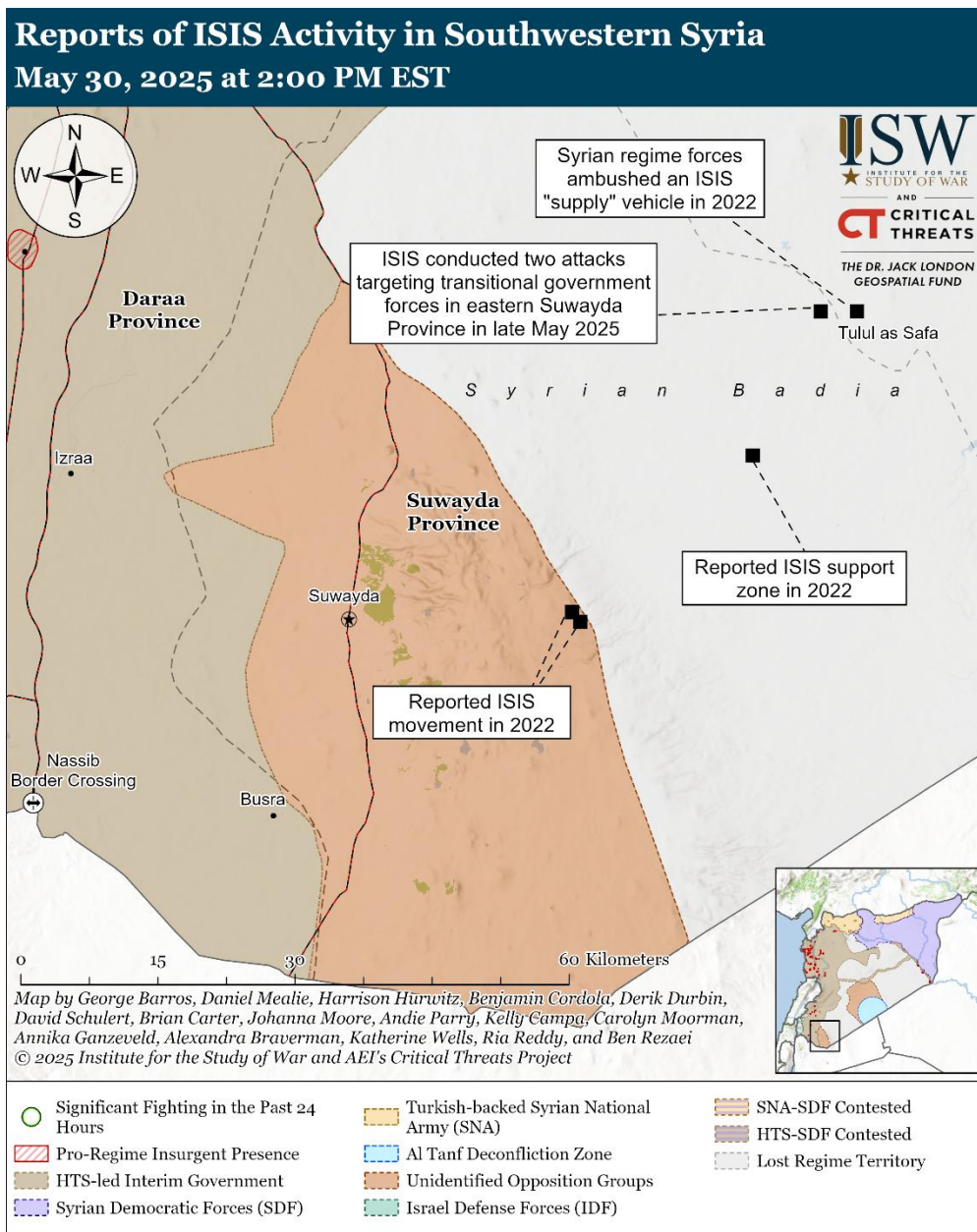
We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We utterly condemn violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

A variety of Syrian armed groups, including those associated with the new transitional government, the Assad regime, and hardline Islamic groups, have committed a series of extrajudicial killings since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. CTP-ISW absolutely condemns these extrajudicial killings.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) conducted two attacks in late May 2025 targeting transitional government forces in eastern Suwayda Province, demonstrating that ISIS retains a presence along ground lines of communication (GLOC) between the central Syrian desert and southern Syria.[1] ISIS fighters detonated improvised explosive devices (IEDs) targeting Syrian Ministry of Defense (MoD) vehicles in separate attacks in Tulul al Safa on May 22 and 28.[2] These IED attacks are the first attacks that ISIS has claimed in southern Syria since 2023 and the first attacks that ISIS has claimed against the Syrian transitional government.[3] The attacks targeted vehicles from the Free Syrian Army and the 70th Division, which are Syrian opposition units that are supported by the United States in the al Tanf Deconfliction Zone.[4] ISIS has probably maintained attack cells in southern Syria and along the GLOCs leading to central Syria since 2023 despite the lack of attacks. ISIS claimed a large number of attacks in Daraa Province in 2023 that it had conducted months prior.[5]

These attacks demonstrate that ISIS maintains cells between the central Syrian desert and southern Syria, where the group has historically sheltered some senior leadership in recent years.[6] ISIS fighters could use the GLOCs between southern and central Syria to retreat from southern Syria into central Syria or vice versa when under pressure. ISIS uses central Syria's sparsely populated desert as a sanctuary where it can rest, refit, and train new fighters. ISIS maintained likely support zones in eastern Suwayda Province in 2022, and the Assad regime ambushed ISIS "supply" vehicles in Tulul al Safa in June 2022, demonstrating that ISIS previously operated in this rural area and used it to resupply fighters.[7] ISIS announced in mid-May 2025 that it has a growing presence in the "countryside and [city] outskirts" in Syria, but historic ISIS activity in eastern Suwayda suggests that these attacks are not part of the group's alleged expansion.[8]

These IED attacks are part of a trend of increased activity by Salafi-jihadi groups in Syria in May 2025, however. Syrian Interior Ministry Spokesperson Nouredine al Baba said that ISIS activity has spiked in the period since the fall of the Assad regime due to ISIS cells' seizure of former Assad regime weapons.[9] The transitional government has conducted three large-scale raids targeting ISIS cells in Aleppo, Rif Dimashq, and Deir ez Zor provinces since May 17, compared to three counter-ISIS raids between December 2024 and early May.[10]



Gulf leaders are reportedly urging Iran and the United States to conclude a nuclear deal. Gulf countries likely support a US-Iran nuclear agreement because they are concerned that the collapse of the US-Iran nuclear negotiations could trigger a potential US or Israeli strike on Iran, which could in turn prompt an Iranian retaliation against Gulf states or oil trade routes. Saudi, Emirati, and Qatari leaders reportedly urged US President Donald Trump to prioritize a nuclear agreement with Iran and prevent military escalation during Trump's recent Gulf visit in mid-May, according to three sources speaking to *Axios* on May 29.[11] An unspecified source told *Axios* that Saudi, Emirati, and Qatari leaders warned Trump that a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities may threaten Gulf states that host US bases. Unspecified sources similarly told Reuters on May 30 that Saudi Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman told Iranian leaders in April 2025 to "seriously" consider Trump's proposal for a nuclear deal.[12]

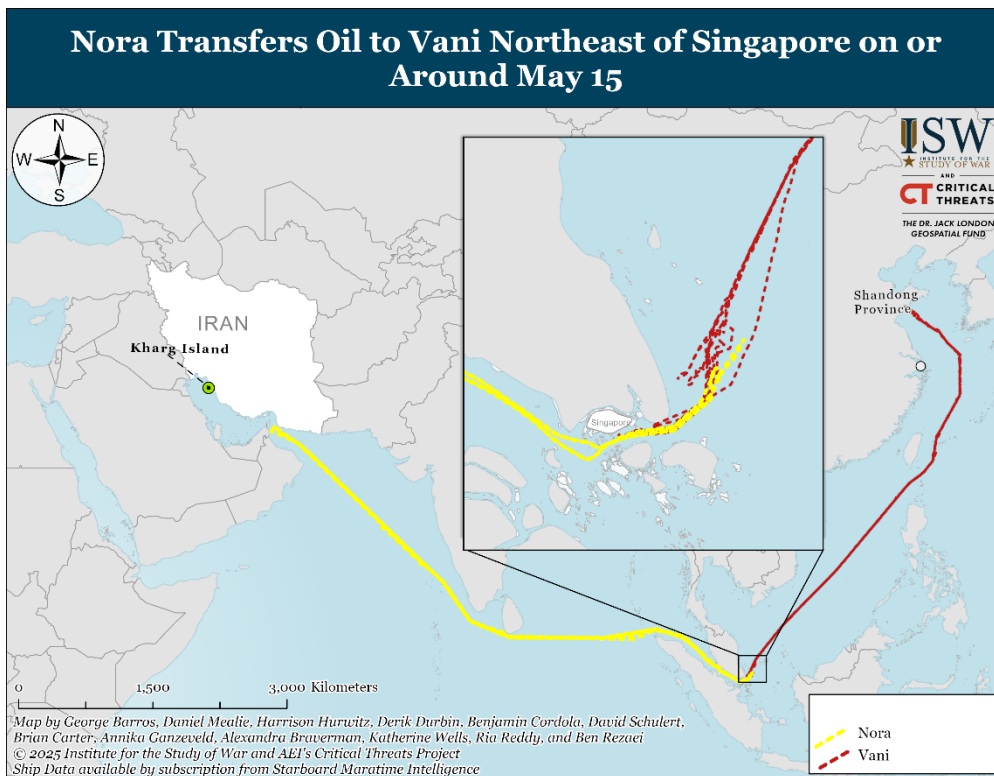
Gulf countries may be concerned that Iran would attack US bases or energy infrastructure in the Gulf or close the Strait of Hormuz in retaliation for a US or Israeli strike on Iran. Senior Iranian military commanders, including Khatam ol Anbia Central Headquarters Commander Major General Gholam Ali Rashid and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Commander Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajji Zadeh, have repeatedly threatened in recent months to strike US bases in the Middle East in response to a strike.[13] Senior Iranian military officials have also recently threatened to disrupt international shipping. Iranian Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS) Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri threatened on May 12 that Iran would respond to an attack by disrupting international commercial shipping.[14] Gulf leaders likely support a US-Iran nuclear agreement because they seek to avoid disruptions to international shipping and oil exports through the Strait of Hormuz, given that such disruptions would cause an economic downturn.

Senior Iranian military commanders are continuing to prepare for potential US or Israeli strikes on Iran. Khatam ol Anbia Air Defense Headquarters Commander Brigadier General Alireza Sabahi Fard inspected Iran's Southeastern Air Defense Zone in Bandar Abbas, Hormozgan Province, on May 30, to conduct an operational assessment of military units and defense capabilities at the site.[15] Sabahi Fard and Iranian Artesh Commander Major General Abdol Rahim Mousavi conducted separate inspections at the same air defense zone on April 4 and May 16, respectively. These inspections follow AFGS Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri's May 12 order to implement a new operational plan around the Nazeat Islands in the Strait of Hormuz to enhance missile and drone strike capabilities, fortify air defenses, and integrate advanced command-and-control infrastructure.[16]

Iran continues to coordinate with China and Russia on nuclear and economic issues, which illustrates cooperation between major US adversaries. Russia has opposed stated US objectives in the nuclear negotiations by supporting Iran's "right" to enrich uranium. Russian Permanent Representative to the UN in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, stated on May 30 that the US-Iran nuclear negotiations may "require" another round of trilateral deputy-level consultations between Iran, China, and Russia.[17] Iran, China, and Russia previously met in March and April 2025 in Beijing to discuss the Iranian nuclear issue.[18] Ulyanov stated in early March 2025 that Iranian production of 60 percent enriched uranium has "no weapons risk." [19] China has separately defended "Iran's right to" peaceful nuclear energy and criticized sanctions on Iran.[20] International Atomic Energy Agency Director (IAEA) Rafael Grossi stated in March 2025 that Iran has enough 60 percent enriched uranium, if enriched further, to produce six nuclear weapons.[21] The Iranian, Chinese, and Russian permanent representatives to the United Nations reportedly also met on May 29 to coordinate positions on the US-Iran nuclear negotiations.[22] Ulyanov emphasized the importance of trilateral coordination before the next IAEA Board of Governors meeting on June 9 and 10. Ulyanov's timeline is notable given that Iran and the United States are reportedly trying to reach a "political framework text" before the June Board of Governors meeting.[23] CTP-ISW previously assessed that Iran may calculate that reaching an interim deal with the United States before the meeting would delay or prevent snapback sanctions.[24] Iran, China, and Russia previously issued a joint statement in March 2025, effectively condemning the US "maximum pressure" strategy vis-a-vis Iran.[25]

Iran and China continue to cooperate to undermine the US "maximum pressure" campaign targeting Iranian oil exports. Bloomberg reported on May 30 that vessels responsible for shipping illicit Iranian oil to China are disabling their transponders to conduct ship-to-ship transfers

in order to obfuscate the origin of the shipments.[26] These vessels are disappearing from tracking systems near eastern Malaysia, a hotspot for Iranian ship-to-ship transfers.[27] The unsanctioned San Marino-flagged Vani oil tanker sailed from Shandong Province, China, to the eastern Malaysian coast and "went dark" on May 15 and reappeared on May 20 fully loaded after conducting a ship-to-ship transfer with the US-sanctioned Guyana-flagged oil tanker Nora.[28] The Nora had sailed from the Persian Gulf to the eastern Malaysian coast. Starboard Maritime Intelligence data flagged an "encounter" between the two vessels east of Singapore, which indicates that the two vessels were either less than 50m apart for 10 minutes or less than 200m apart for 30 minutes.[29] Vani is currently headed to Qingdao, China, a hub for illicit Iranian oil exports.[30] China remains the largest importer of Iranian oil, which helps Iran circumvent US sanctions.[31]



Key Takeaways:

- ISIS Activity in Syria:** The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) conducted two attacks in late May 2025 targeting transitional government forces in eastern Suwayda Province, demonstrating that ISIS retains a presence along ground lines of communication (GLOC) between the central Syrian desert and southern Syria. ISIS fighters detonated improvised explosive devices (IEDs) targeting Syrian Ministry of Defense (MoD) vehicles in separate attacks in Tulul al Safa on May 22 and 28. These IED attacks are the first attacks that ISIS has claimed in southern Syria since 2023 and the first attacks that ISIS has claimed against the Syrian transitional government. ISIS has probably maintained attack cells in southern Syria and along the GLOCs leading to central Syria since 2023 despite the lack of attacks.
- Cooperation Between Iran, Russia, and China:** Iran continues to coordinate with China and Russia on nuclear and economic issues, which illustrates cooperation between major US

adversaries. Russia has opposed stated US objectives in the nuclear negotiations by supporting Iran's "right" to enrich uranium. Russian Permanent Representative to the UN in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, stated on May 30 that the US-Iran nuclear negotiations may "require" another round of trilateral deputy-level consultations between Iran, China, and Russia. The Iranian, Chinese, and Russian permanent representatives to the UN reportedly met on May 29 to coordinate positions on the US-Iran nuclear negotiations.

- **Gulf Countries' Concerns about Regional Escalation:** Gulf leaders are reportedly urging Iran and the United States to conclude a nuclear deal. Gulf countries likely support a US-Iran nuclear agreement because they are concerned that the collapse of the US-Iran nuclear negotiations could trigger a potential US or Israeli strike on Iran, which could in turn prompt an Iranian retaliation against Gulf states or oil trade routes. Saudi, Emirati, and Qatari leaders reportedly urged US President Donald Trump to prioritize a nuclear agreement with Iran and prevent military escalation during Trump's recent Gulf visit in mid-May, according to three sources speaking to Axios on May 29. Unspecified sources similarly told Reuters on May 30 that Saudi Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman told Iranian leaders in April 2025 to "seriously" consider Trump's proposal for a nuclear deal. Gulf countries may be concerned that Iran would attack US bases or energy infrastructure in the Gulf or close the Strait of Hormuz in retaliation for a US or Israeli strike on Iran.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

Iranian security forces reportedly arrested at least 40 people for fuel smuggling at Kargan Port in Hormozgan Province on May 29.[32] Some social media users circulated unconfirmed reports on May 30 that Iranian security forces arrested Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) fighters. The BLA is a Pakistan-based Baloch separatist militia group. Social media users claimed that Iran received "cross-border intelligence" about planned BLA-linked attacks against Iranian infrastructure.[33] CTP-ISW cannot confirm these reports.

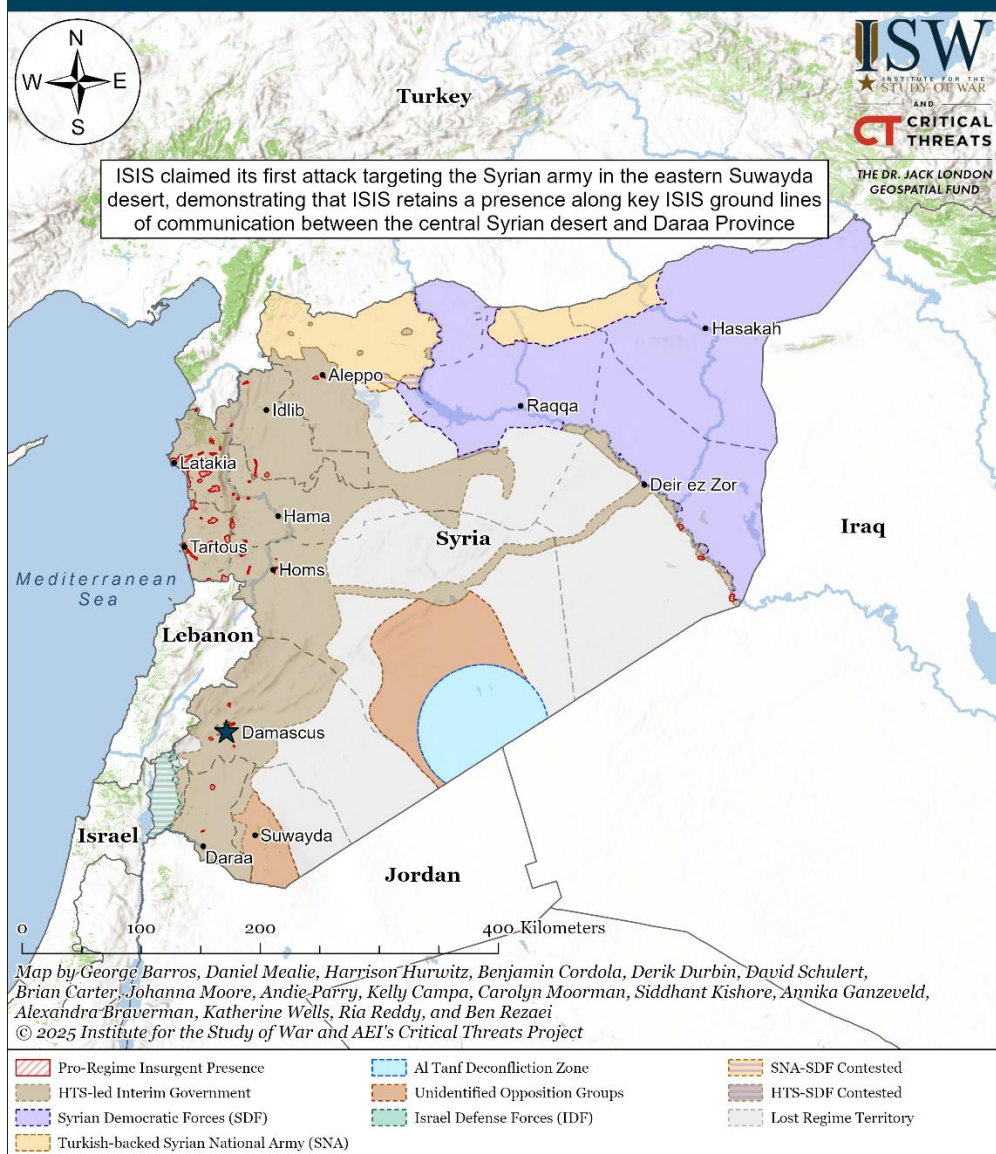
The Iranian rial depreciated from 823,000 rials to one US dollar on May 29 to 824,000 rials to one US dollar on May 30.[34]

Syria

Japan lifted some sanctions on Syria on May 30.[35] The Japanese Cabinet unfroze the assets of Syria's Industrial Bank, Popular Credit Bank, Savings Bank, and Agricultural Cooperation Bank.[36] Chief Cabinet Secretary Hayashi Yoshimasa said that Japan decided to lift the sanctions to improve living conditions and encourage "positive developments" in Syria.[37] The removal of international sanctions will promote economic stability in Syria, but there are other factors, such as deep-rooted ethno-sectarian distrust between the Syrian transitional government and minority groups, that continue to threaten internal stability.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

May 30, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



The Syrian Ministry of Defense (MoD) released the new Syrian army's code of conduct on May 30 amid its efforts to develop a professional and disciplined force.[38] The new code of conduct is roughly analogous to the Code of Conduct for Members of the US Armed Forces.[39] The MoD described the new army as Syria's "impregnable shield" that is trusted by and defends the Syrian people.[40] The MoD noted that the army values adherence to "good morals rooted in Syrian society" and respect for the military hierarchy.[41] The code of conduct calls on military personnel to protect civilians without discrimination, obey orders and civilian laws, and observe military and human rights standards when engaging enemy combatants.[42] The code of conduct also prohibits soldiers from using slogans that harm national unity, disturb civil peace, or abuse authority for "personal interests." [43] All military personnel are subject to the code of conduct and will be prosecuted and held accountable if they do not abide by it.[44] It is not clear to what laws they will be held, unlike the US

Armed Forces code of conduct, which specifies the Uniformed Code of Military Justice. The MoD has failed to control some militias. Some militias do not answer to the MoD and have committed unsanctioned violence against civilians after integrating into the army.[45] The MoD will need to ensure that all forces adhere to the code of conduct to build a professional army.[46]

Iraq

Nothing significant to report.

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 conducted a ballistic missile attack targeting Ben Gurion Airport in central Israel on May 29 as part of the Houthi campaign to enforce an economic blockade on Israel.[47] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) intercepted the Houthi missile.[48] Some international airlines have suspended flights to Israel through July 2025 due to concerns about Houthi attacks on Ben Gurion Airport.[49]

The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon

Nothing significant to report.

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.

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:



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