

Iran Update

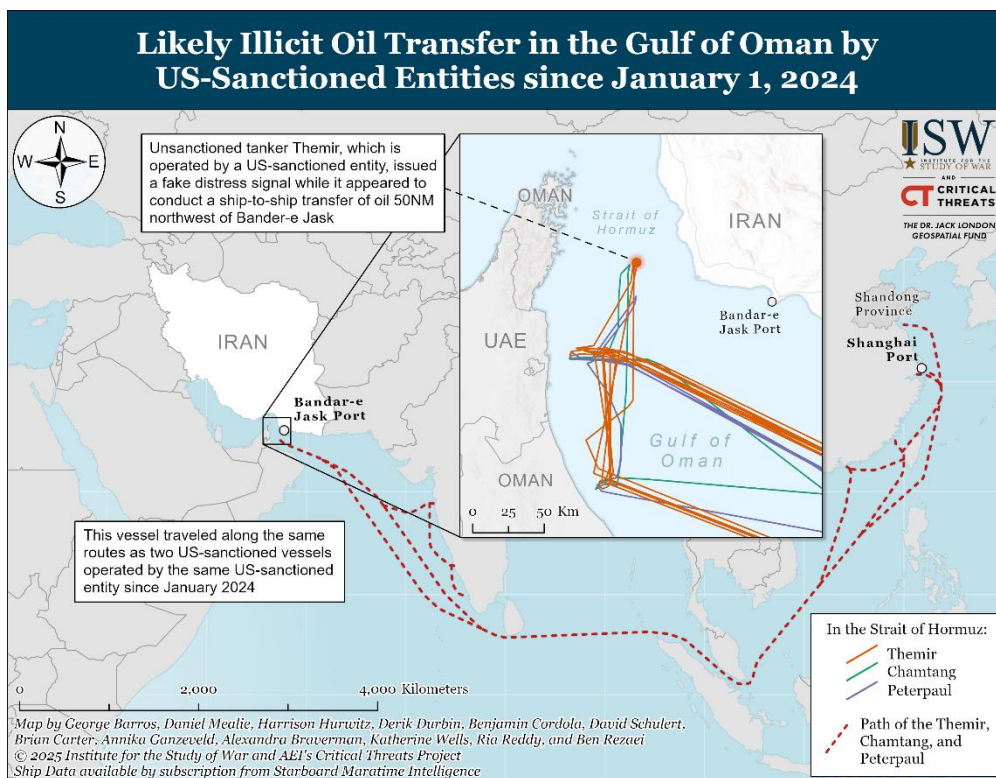


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Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm ET

An unsanctioned oil tanker that is operated by a US-sanctioned entity and has probably illicitly transported oil to the People's Republic of China (PRC) from Iran issued a false distress call in the Strait of Hormuz on May 20.[1] The Panamanian-flagged oil tanker the *Themir* likely issued a distress call that claimed it had been hijacked.[2] A British maritime security firm said that the distress call occurred 51 nautical miles northwest of Bandar-e Jask, which is consistent with the *Themir's* position. The firm confirmed on May 21 that the hijacking call was a false alarm.[3] It remains unclear at the time of writing why the *Themir* issued the false distress call, but the vessel is linked to Iranian efforts to illicitly transfer oil.[4] The United States sanctioned the *Themir's* Malaysia-based owner, IMS Ltd, on February 24 for aiding the Iranian oil export network, as part of US President Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" policy.[5]

The *Themir's* pattern of behavior suggests it may have conducted a ship-to-ship transfer at some time while off the coast of Iran.[6] Iran and the PRC use ship-to-ship transfers to obfuscate the transportation of PRC purchases of Iranian oil, and ships travel in circular holding patterns when conducting ship-to-ship transfers.[7] The *Themir* was in a circular holding pattern 51 nautical miles northwest of Bandar-e Jask Port on the southern coast of Iran at the time of the distress call, according to maritime data.[8] The ship and its two sister ships—the *Peterpaul* and the *Chamtang*—have regularly sailed between the Gulf of Oman and the PRC.[9] Both the *Peterpaul* and the *Chamtang* are sanctioned for illicit transfers of Iranian oil to the PRC.[10] The ships usually enter circular holding patterns in the Gulf of Oman before sailing eastwards to PRC ports. Circular holding patterns can indicate that the ships are executing ship-to-ship transfers.[11] The *Themir* also previously travelled from the Gulf of Oman to the PRC's biggest oil offloading port, Shandong Port, in September 2024.[12] The US Treasury Department recently sanctioned refineries in Shandong for importing billions of dollars in Iranian oil.[13] The *Themir* has also travelled along similar routes as its two sanctioned sister ships from near Bandar-e-Jask Port to eastern PRC through the Gulf of Oman and Malacca Strait five times since January 2024, suggesting that the *Themir* has previously illicitly transported Iranian oil to the PRC.[14]



The fifth round of the US-Iran nuclear negotiations will take place in Rome on May 23.[15] Two unspecified diplomatic sources in Iran told anti-regime media on May 21 that Iran asked Omani mediators to convince the United States to ease US demands in negotiations, likely referring to the US demand for zero uranium enrichment.[16] The issue of zero uranium enrichment is the main sticking point in the US-Iran nuclear negotiations.[17] The Trump administration's negotiating position appears to have cohered around zero uranium enrichment, but Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei explicitly rejected the US demand for zero uranium enrichment during a speech on May 20.[18] CTP-ISW previously assessed that disagreements between Iran and the United States about the issue of zero uranium enrichment may stall the negotiations or delay a deal.[19]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov falsely accused the Syrian transitional government of “ethnic [and sectarian] cleansing,” which supports the objectives of the pro-Assad Alawite insurgency in western Syria.[20] The Coastal Shield Brigade, a pro-Assad Alawite insurgent group in western Syria, said in March 2025 that it seeks to undermine international support for the transitional government by triggering mass reprisal killings of Alawites in response to its attacks. Lavrov said that Russia is deeply concerned about the situation in Syria and claimed that “radical militant groups are carrying out real ethnic cleansing and mass killings of people based on their nationality and religion.”[21] Lavrov also claimed that Western countries ignore crimes around the world as long as they do not conflict with the West's global agenda.[22] Lavrov characterized the violence on the Syrian coast in March 2025 as “ethnic cleansing,” which echoes false Russian state media claims that over 1,500 people were killed during the coastal violence.[23] This number is double the amount recorded by Syrian human rights organizations.[24] Lavrov made these comments despite a marked decrease in sectarian violence on the Syrian coast since March.[25] There have been no major massacres since early March, despite continued sectarian killings and other murders in western Syria.

These killings and murders, while serious and concerning, are not systematic” cleansing” as Lavrov implies. The Syrian transitional government also did not in March 2025 and still does not exert complete control over various armed factions that make up the Ministry of Defense (MoD), which indicates that the March 2025 violence was spontaneous and seriously threatened Syria’s stability, but it was not systematic.[26] The Syrian transitional government took steps during the insurgency to limit violence, which included the removal of military units involved in massacres as well as the establishment of an independent committee to investigate the events on the coast.[27] The government, despite these steps, still must take real, tangible steps to arrest, try, and convict those accused of sectarian massacres along Syria’s coast.

A group of unspecified fighters attacked Russian forces stationed at Hmeimim air base, Latakia Province, on May 20.[28] The Syrian transitional government is extremely unlikely to have sanctioned any attack on Russian forces at Hmeimim, given Syria and Russia’s active negotiations over the two countries’ economic and military cooperation. The militants attacked the southwest perimeter of the airfield but retreated after Russian forces killed at least three fighters.[29] The fighters killed two Russian soldiers at the base.[30] Russian sources at the time of the attack claimed that the attackers were Uzbek foreign fighters who were unaffiliated with Syrian security forces.[31] Syrian sources later claimed that the attackers were foreign military trainers for HTS who attacked the Russians without orders, however.[32] Uzbek nationals and Central Asians have historically made up an important portion of HTS’s military structure, including training HTS special forces.[33] HTS-allied Central Asian and Caucasian armed groups such as Katibat al Tawhid wa Jihad (KTJ), the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), and Ajnad al Kavkaz (Soldiers of the Caucasus) are known for their extreme loyalty to HTS.[34] It is unlikely that these factions and their associated private military companies would act independently of HTS’s chain of command, given that HTS has integrated foreign fighters into the transitional government’s military.[35] Foreign fighters in HTS are particularly unlikely to disobey HTS leaders because they have few options if they disobey orders and are deported or imprisoned. A return to their home countries would result in jail time at a minimum.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Western Syria

May 21, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Key Takeaways:

- Iranian Activity in the Persian Gulf:** An unsanctioned oil tanker that is operated by a US-sanctioned entity and has probably illicitly transported oil to the People's Republic of China (PRC) from Iran issued a false distress call in the Strait of Hormuz on May 20. The tanker's pattern of behavior suggests it may have conducted a ship-to-ship transfer at some time while off the coast of Iran. Iran and the PRC use ship-to-ship transfers to obfuscate the transportation of PRC purchases of Iranian oil.
- US-Iran Nuclear Negotiations:** The fifth round of the US-Iran nuclear negotiations will take place in Rome on May 23. Two unspecified diplomatic sources in Iran told anti-regime media on

May 21 that Iran asked Omani mediators to convince the United States to ease US demands in negotiations, likely referring to the US demand for zero uranium enrichment.

- **Syria and Russia:** Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov falsely accused the Syrian transitional government of “ethnic [and sectarian] cleansing,” which supports the objectives of the pro-Assad Alawite insurgency in western Syria. Lavrov made these comments despite a marked decrease in sectarian violence on the Syrian coast since March.
- **Russians in Syria:** A group of unspecified fighters attacked Russian forces stationed at Hmeimim air base, Latakia Province, on May 20. Syrian sources claimed that the attackers were foreign military trainers for HTS who attacked the Russians without approval from HTS.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

The Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry announced on May 21 that Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli has been appointed as Iran’s new ambassador to China.[36] This appointment suggests Iran may aim to strengthen political and security cooperation with China, given Rahman Fazli’s background in internal security and his connections to the 2021 China-Iran cooperation agreement. Rahmani Fazli previously served as the Iranian Interior Minister under former President Hassan Rouhani and held senior security positions, including Law Enforcement Command Deputy Commander in Chief and the National Security Council head.[37] The United States sanctioned Rahmani Fazli in 2020 for authorizing lethal force against protestors during the November 2019 protests, which killed hundreds of Iranians, including minors.[38] Rahman Fazli has a strong relationship with senior Supreme Leader Adviser Ali Larijani, who played a key role in elevating Rahmani Fazli to Interior Minister in 2013. Larijani and Rahman Fazli cooperated in the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), the National Security Council, and the Iranian Parliament.[39] Rahmani Fazli’s appointment as ambassador to China aligns with Larijani’s long-standing role overseeing the Iranian strategic partnership with China, including the 25-year cooperation agreement signed in 2021.[40] Rahmani Fazli’s background in internal security and high-level state coordination may reflect an Iranian objective to strengthen political and security cooperation with China.

Iranian Artesh Commander Major General Abdol Rahim Mousavi met with Belarusian Deputy Chief of the General Staff Major General Vladimir Kupriyanyuk on May 21 to discuss defense cooperation.[41] Both sides emphasized the importance of strengthening ties in key areas, including military training, experience-sharing, and broader defense coordination. Iran and Belarus previously signed two memoranda of understanding on defense and trade cooperation in March and April 2024, respectively. Iran has begun work on establishing a military drone factory in Belarus since May 2023 to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[42] Cooperation between Iran and Belarus, a key Russian ally, comes amid increased engagement and defense coordination between Iranian and Russian defense officials since Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine.[43]

Iranian Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS) Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri inspected ongoing efforts to fortify Iran’s eastern border during a visit to Sistan and Baluchistan Province on May 21.[44] Bagheri stated that sealing the eastern frontier remains a top priority in order to counter terrorism, drug trafficking, and illegal border crossings. The project includes four-meter-high concrete walls equipped with drones, 360-degree cameras, and smart sensors. Border

security will eventually cover 300 kilometers. Iran's ongoing efforts to fortify its southeastern border are likely motivated in part by an uptick in attacks by anti-regime groups, especially Jaish al Adl. Jaish al Adl is a Baloch Salafi-jihadi group that has targeted Iranian security personnel and infrastructure in Sistan and Baluchistan Province since December 2023.[45]

The Iranian rial appreciated from 843,000 rial to one US dollar on May 20 to 841,000 rial to one US dollar on May 21.[46]

Syria

Top Syrian officials met with the Turkish intelligence chief, likely primarily to discuss the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).[47] Syrian President Ahmed al Shara, Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al Shaibani, and Syrian Intelligence Chief Hussein Salama met with Turkish intelligence chief Ibrahim Kalin in Damascus on May 20.[48] The officials discussed the integration of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into the Syrian state, border security, and counter-ISIS activities, including transferring supervision of detention camps in northeastern Syria to the Syrian state.[49] Salama, who was a key HTS leader, has been responsible for negotiations with the SDF and its constituent militias across Syria, including in Aleppo City and Deir ez Zor Province.[50] Turkey has recently expressed concern about the slow integration of the SDF.[51] Salama's presence suggests that the SDF was a major point of focus during the discussions. Counter-ISIS activities and the transfer of detention camps to government control would fall under the umbrella of SDF issues because the SDF plays a very prominent role in counter-ISIS operations and controls the detention camps where ISIS fighters are held.[52] Syrian and Turkish officials have met since January 2025 to discuss joint defense concerns, including Turkey's military presence in Syria and Turkish assistance to the Syrian army.[53]

Turkey and Israel reportedly established a de-confliction line in April 2025, according to a recent report by a Turkish journalist.[54] The de-confliction line seeks to prevent misunderstandings or military incidents between Turkey and Israel, according to two sources familiar with the matter.[55] Recent Turkish tensions with Israel may have delayed several Turkish initiatives to develop a military presence in Syria.[56] Israel struck several Syrian bases in March and April 2025 as a "warning" to Turkey before it positioned its assets at the bases.[57] Syrian military sources told Western media on April 7 that Turkish military teams planned to visit the T4 and Palmyra air bases in Syria but had to cancel the visit after Israel struck both bases hours prior, thus making them unusable.[58] Turkey and Israel held their first "technical" meeting in Azerbaijan on April 9 to establish a de-confliction mechanism.[59] Turkey and Israel have reportedly held several meetings since April 9 and are scheduled to meet later this month to discuss a broader de-confliction deal.[60] This open line of communication between Turkey and Israel could possibly prevent a potential stand-off between the two parties, which both have strategic interests in Syria. Syrian government representatives and the head of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Operations Directorate Oded Basyuk also reportedly held direct talks in Azerbaijan to resolve joint concerns.[61]

The United States and Turkey held a new round of the Syria Working Group in Washington, DC, on May 20.[62] The Syria Working Group is a high-level US and Turkish working group that aims to synchronize policy and deepen bilateral cooperation in Syria between the two countries.[63] The US and Turkish delegations discussed shared priorities in Syria, including sanctions relief and combating terrorism.[64] Several US and Turkish officials attended the meeting, including

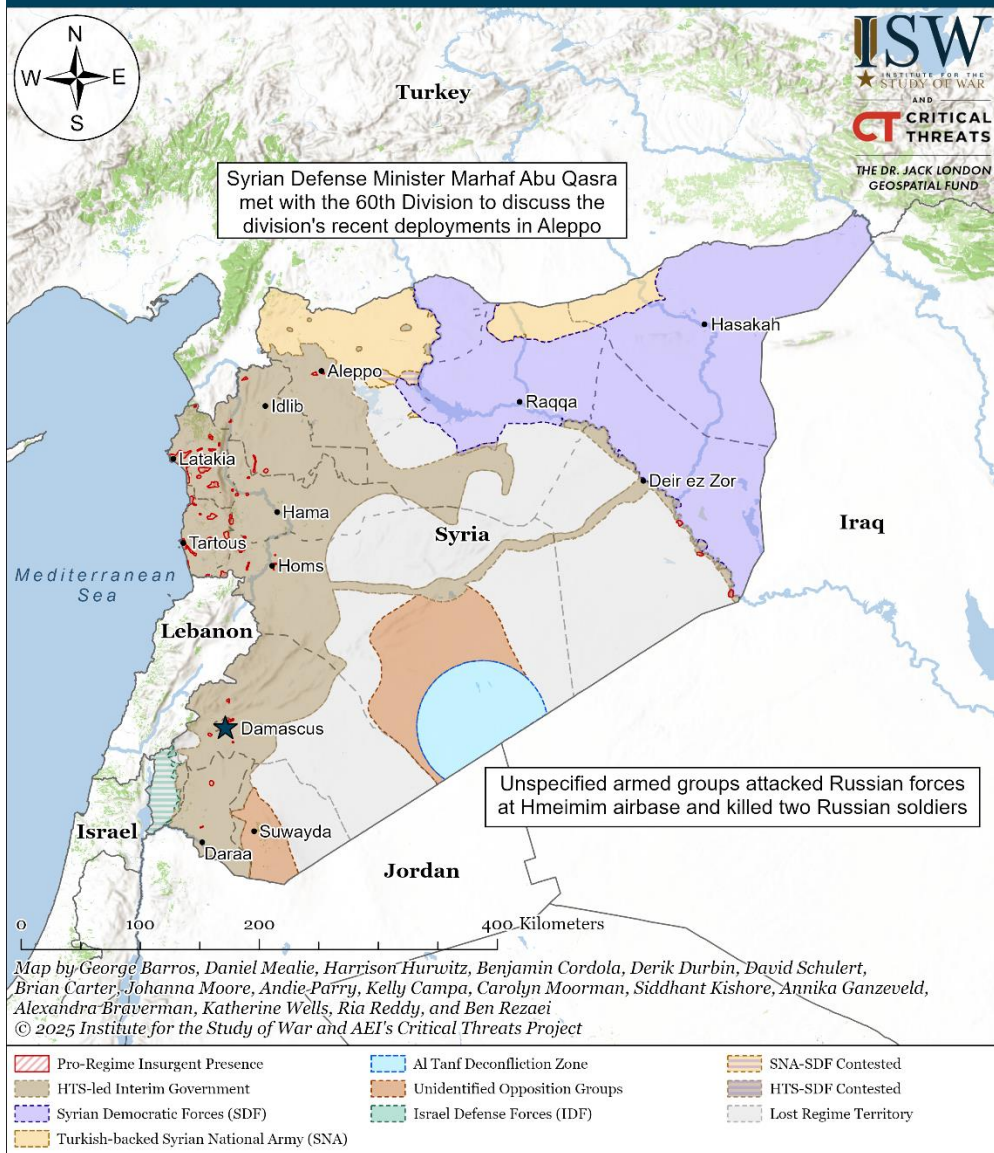
US Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau, Turkish Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Nuh Yilaz, US Ambassador to Turkey Thomas Barrack, Jr., and Turkish Ambassador to the US Sedat Onal.[65] Barrack was reportedly tapped as the US special envoy to Syria on May 21.[66] US and Turkish officials affirmed their commitment to increasing cooperation and coordination on Syria's stability and security.[67] US President Donald Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan have both previously stressed the importance of a US-Turkey partnership for Syria's stability and security.[68]

The United States announced on May 21 that it will begin to restore normal diplomatic relations with Syria.[69] Unspecified diplomatic sources told Western media that the United States would appoint current US Ambassador to Turkey Thomas Barrack Jr. as a special envoy for Syria.[70] Trump administration officials also announced that the United States will issue a temporary sanctions waiver that covers much of the Syrian economy before the US Congress passes a new law to repeal sanctions targeting Syria.[71] The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, which is the most stringent of US sanctions imposed on Syria, will require an act of Congress to remove. The Caesar Act targets anyone who provides support to the Syrian government, supports the Syrian oil and gas industry, exports aircraft or military equipment to Syria, or provides construction or engineering services directly or indirectly to the Syrian government.[72] The complicated legislative steps in the United States and decades of US sanctions targeting Syria mean that it will take time for the United States to fully lift sanctions on Syria.[73] A previous temporary US sanctions waiver issued in January 2025 did not lead to significant investment in Syrian industries, partly due to confusion over what activities were included in the waiver.[74] Internal instability and uncertainty regarding Syria's future may similarly deter investment in the short- to medium-term. It will therefore likely take weeks or months before the removal of sanctions generates visible and tangible economic effects throughout the country.

Syrian Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra met with the 60th Division to discuss the division's recent deployments in Aleppo on May 21.[75] Qasra met with 60th Division commander Brigadier General Awad Mohammad (Abu Qutayba al Shami) and other division commanders and personnel.[76] Abu Qutayba was a commander within HTS's predecessor organization, Jabhat Fateh al Sham, since at least 2016.[77] Abu Qutayba then oversaw HTS's Aleppo Sector and commanded an HTS brigade in 2020.[78] The Syrian MoD stated that Qasra and the 60th Division commanders discussed the division's recent deployments to northern and eastern Aleppo Province.[79] The 60th Division deployed to villages west of Tishreen Dam on April 14 to monitor the area and conduct de-mining operations after the SDF withdrew from its positions there as part of its agreement with the transitional government.[80] It is notable that Qasra met with this force, which is controlled by HTS personnel, after SNA forces reportedly clashed with the SDF on May 19.[81] Qasra may have discussed those clashes and ways that the 60th Division can respond to them in the future.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

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Iraq

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani announced on May 21 that his Reconstruction and Development Coalition will contest the November 2025 Iraqi parliamentary elections.[82] The coalition includes parties led by Popular Mobilization Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh and former Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) spokesperson Ahmed al Asadi. The coalition notably does not include Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Badr Organization head Hadi al Ameri, whose absence follows reports that Ameri left Sudani's coalition over disagreements with Sudani.[83] Iran recently urged unity amongst Shia Coordination Framework leaders (presumably including Sudani) ahead of the elections to improve the likelihood that Iranian-backed parties will maintain control of the Iraqi government.[84] The Shia Coordination Framework is a loose coalition of Shia political parties, some of which Iran backs. The Coordination Framework supported Sudani for prime

minister in 2022. State of Law coalition head Nouri al Maliki and Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Asaib Ahl al Haq leader Qais al Khazali will reportedly run separate lists in opposition to Sudani.[85]

The Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission rejected the Sunni-led United Anbar Coalition's participation in the upcoming parliamentary elections.[86] The party is opposed to major Sunni politician Mohammad al Halbousi. Top Sunni politicians formed the United Arab Coalition in 2022 in opposition to former Parliament Speaker Mohammad al Halbousi.[87] It includes former Finance Minister Rafai al Issawi. Former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki's administration charged Issawi with corruption in 2013 after Issawi condemned Maliki's policies.[88] Maliki weaponized the IHEC against his political opponents during his administration.[89]

A Kataib Hezbollah-affiliated Iraqi parliamentarian called for the dismissal and trial of the Sadrist Basra governor on May 21 after the governor attempted to demolish homes in an area in which Iranian-backed parties may have substantial economic interests.[90] Kataib Hezbollah is a key Iranian proxy in Iraq.[91] Prime Minister Sudani sent a letter to Basra Governor Asad al Eidani on May 19 in which Sudani requested that Eidani delay the demolition of houses in Basra Province. The head parliamentarian of the committee formed to investigate Eidani noted that the Basra provincial government has taken steps to remove encroachments for years and implied that the provincial government is currently working to remove encroachments in al Zubair District.[92] Al Zubair District hosts an oil field that produces about 200,000 barrels per day, and the district is a stronghold for Iranian-backed Iraqi political parties, who have repeatedly attempted to create a separate province for the district.[93] The involvement of al Zubair District and its oil rents may have motivated Iranian-backed actors to act against Eidani. Multiple parliamentarians said that the committee's investigation of Eidani and call for his dismissal falls outside of parliament's jurisdiction.[94] Another Iranian-backed parliamentarian praised the creation of the committee and subsequent call for his dismissal.[95]

It is notable that Iranian-backed parliamentarians have called for the removal of a Sadrist governor ahead of the upcoming elections.[96] Eidani is also reportedly an ally of Sudani, who has formed a coalition that will oppose other Shia Coordination Framework parties.[97] A Basra parliamentarian implied that the investigation intends to politically target Eidani because he is a contender for the premiership.[98]

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

Nothing significant to report.

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:



BABEL STREET

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