

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.

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.

US Central Command (CENTCOM) is conducting a military operation in Yemen that aims to render the Houthis unable or unwilling to continue attacks that threaten US ships and freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. This does not imply that CENTCOM must destroy all Houthi missiles, drones, and launchers in Yemen. US President Donald Trump ordered the US military to restore the freedom of navigation and prevent attacks on US shipping in the Red Sea.[1] Western media reported on April 4 that Pentagon officials have told Congress and US allies that the US air campaign in Yemen has had only limited success in destroying Houthi missiles, drones, and launchers in Yemen.[2]

There are likely multiple different operational concepts that would successfully render the Houthis unwilling or unable to continue attacks targeting international shipping. A focus solely on missiles, drones, and launchers would be very unlikely to make the Houthis unwilling or unable to target international shipping because it would be very difficult to destroy all Houthi weapons stockpiles and missile launchers. Such an operation would not seriously threaten Houthi control in Yemen. The Houthis' top priority remains maintaining control over Houthi-controlled territory and ultimately defeating the internationally recognized government of Yemen.

CENTCOM can render the Houthis unwilling or unable to continue attacks without destroying all Houthi missiles, drones, and launchers in Yemen. Yemeni media and officials and US officials have

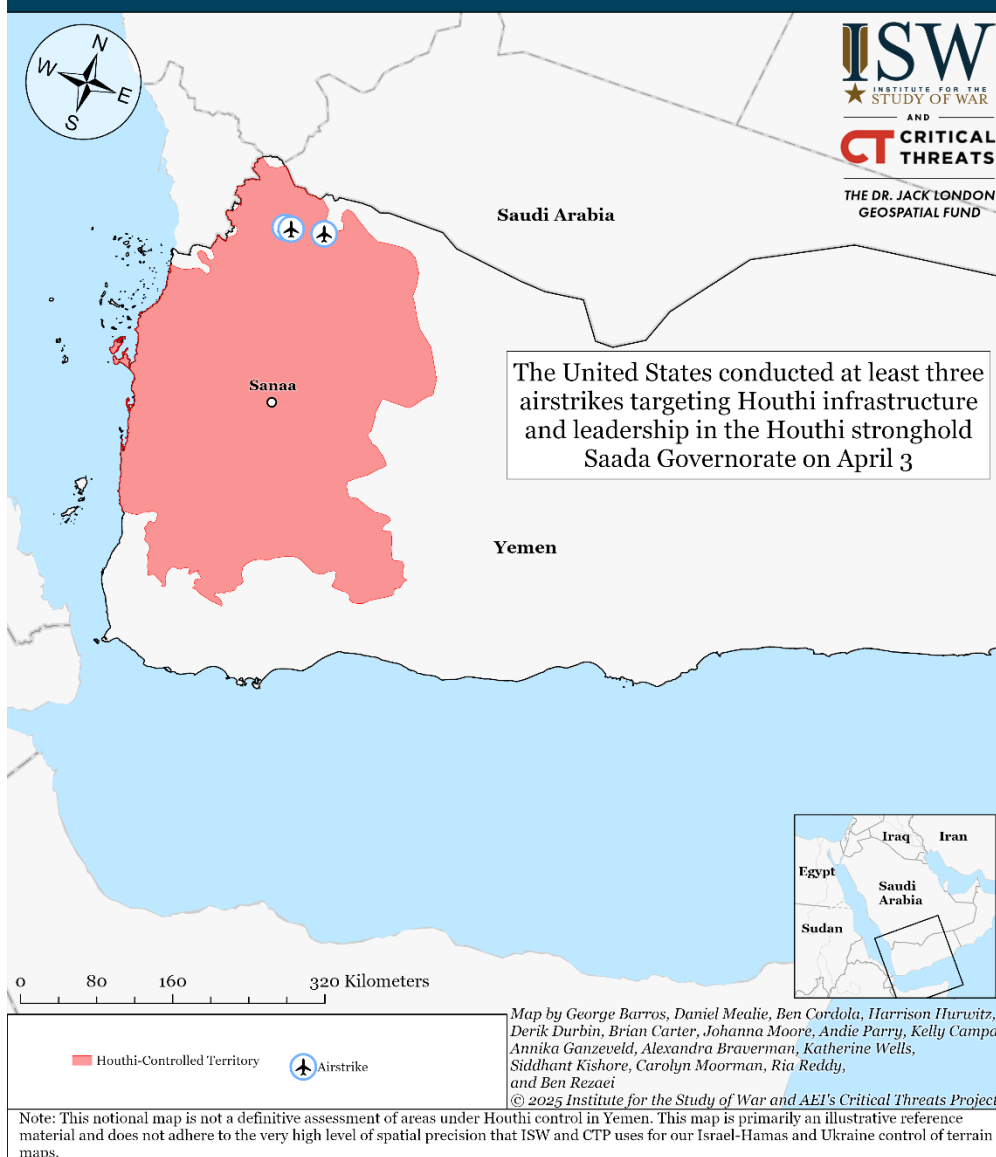
reported that CENTCOM has targeted Houthi communications, training centers, underground facilities, leaders, and other assets.[3] CTP-ISW cannot currently assess the overall impact of these strikes on Houthi decision-making. These strikes could degrade the Houthis' ability to target shipping by disrupting targeting cycles and command networks, however. Leadership strikes, particularly against mid-level leaders responsible for imposing local Houthi control, could disrupt Houthi internal security over time.[4] US officials currently assess that the initial US strikes targeting Houthi assets have disrupted the Houthi command-and-control network and limited the Houthi ability to target international shipping. This would suggest that the air campaign has achieved some temporary military effects, though these effects are temporary without continued pressure on the Houthis.

A US airstrike killed a Houthi Hudaydah Governorate Police supervisor on April 4.[5] Continued US airstrikes targeting Houthi supervisors could destabilize Houthi internal security over time. The Houthi regime uses a “supervisory” system to maintain control over its governance structures. Supervisors fill a similar role to political commissars in the Soviet Union by ensuring that non-Houthi government leaders remain loyal to the Houthi movement.[6] A sustained air campaign against these individuals could seriously disrupt Houthi internal security in certain areas.

CENTCOM has conducted at least three airstrikes targeting Houthi infrastructure and leadership in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on April 3.[7] CENTCOM conducted an unspecified number of airstrikes targeting Houthi sites in the Houthi stronghold of Saada Governorate, northern Yemen, including likely command and control sites in Saada City and eastern Saada Governorate.[8] The Houthis conducted a combined cruise missile and drone attack targeting the USS *Harry S. Truman* aircraft carrier and US destroyers in the Red Sea on April 4.[9] CENTCOM did not confirm the attack.

US Strikes Against Houthi Targets

As of April 4, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have increasingly threatened to target US forces in Iraq and Syria, likely to both deter a US strike on Iran and to ensure the US forces withdraw from Iraq. Newly formed militia Harakat al Ashtar said on April 3 that its fighters are “preparing major surprises” for US forces and swore to burn US vehicles.[10] The Popular Campaign to Expel the American Occupation, another likely pro-Iranian Iraqi militia formed in early February 2025, posted a video on April 3 threatening US forces and said that the United States has no choice but to withdraw “humiliated, defeated, and broken.”[11] Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba, a larger Iranian-backed Iraqi militia, implicitly warned on March 20 that Iranian-backed Iraqi militias would resume attacks targeting US forces in Iraq and Syria if US forces do not withdraw by the end of 2025.[12] Other militias have implied that they would respond to a US or Israeli strike on Iran.[13]

These militia threats mirror Iranian efforts to discourage a US or Israeli strike on Iran by threatening attacks on the United States in Iraq. Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have previously conducted attacks targeting US forces to both encourage a US withdrawal and to fulfill other strategic objectives. The militias have continued to threaten to attack US forces since January 2024, but have claimed few attacks since that date.[14] The United States and Iraq agreed in September 2024 that hundreds of US-led international coalition forces would withdraw from Iraq by September 2025 and that the remaining forces would withdraw by the end of 2026.[15] The removal of US forces from Iraq and Syria is a long-standing Iranian objective, and Iranian-backed Iraqi militias frequently conducted attacks targeting US forces in Iraq and Syria between October 2023 and January 2024.[16]

Najaf-based Iraqi Shia cleric Sadr al Din al Qabani separately threatened that US bases in Iraq are within the striking range of Iran and Iranian-backed Iraqi militias during a sermon on April 4.[17] Qabani urged US President Donald Trump not to start or threaten war, referring to Trump's threat to bomb Iran if Iran does not agree to a new nuclear deal.[18] Qabani is a member of an Iranian-aligned Iraqi Shia political party and has ties to Iraqi Shia nationalist cleric Muqtada al Sadr.[19]

Senior Iranian officials appear increasingly concerned about a potential US or Israeli strike on Iran. Khatam ol Anbia Air Defense Headquarters Commander Brigadier General Alireza Sabahi Fard and IRGC Aerospace Commander Amir Ali Hajizadeh visited Iran's Southeastern Air Defense Zone based in Bandar-e Abbas, Hormozgan Province, on April 4 to conduct an operational assessment of military units and defense capabilities at the zone.[20] The visit comes as Iran continues to pursue efforts to strengthen its air defense capabilities amid growing concerns about a potential conventional conflict with the United States or Israel.[21]

The United States continues to pursue direct negotiations with Iran to secure a comprehensive deal that will fully dismantle Iran's nuclear program, according to an unspecified senior US official speaking to the *Wall Street Journal* on April 4.[22] US President Donald Trump told reporters on April 3 that direct talks "go faster." [23] Iranian officials have repeatedly rejected direct negotiations with the United States.[24] An Iranian expert close to the regime told *The Atlantic* on April 3 that Iran seeks a "secret," two-step process that starts with indirect talks and "potentially" moves to direct negotiations.[25] US officials have previously warned that the United States will pursue military options if the Iranian regime does not engage in direct negotiations.[26] Indirect talks likely allow Iran to buy time, avoid public pressure, and preserve its image while quietly weighing US demands it may eventually have to accept in some form.

Senior Iranian official Ali Akbar Velayati criticized the interim Syrian government's handling of recent violence in coastal Syria and Israeli operations in Syria, likely as part of an Iranian effort to discredit and undermine the Syrian government.[27] Velayati stated on April 4 that the Syrian government has "no legitimacy" and has targeted "innocent civilians" in Latakia, likely referring to a period of violence in coastal Syria in early March.[28] Velayati also criticized the government's inaction against Israeli operations in Syria.[29]

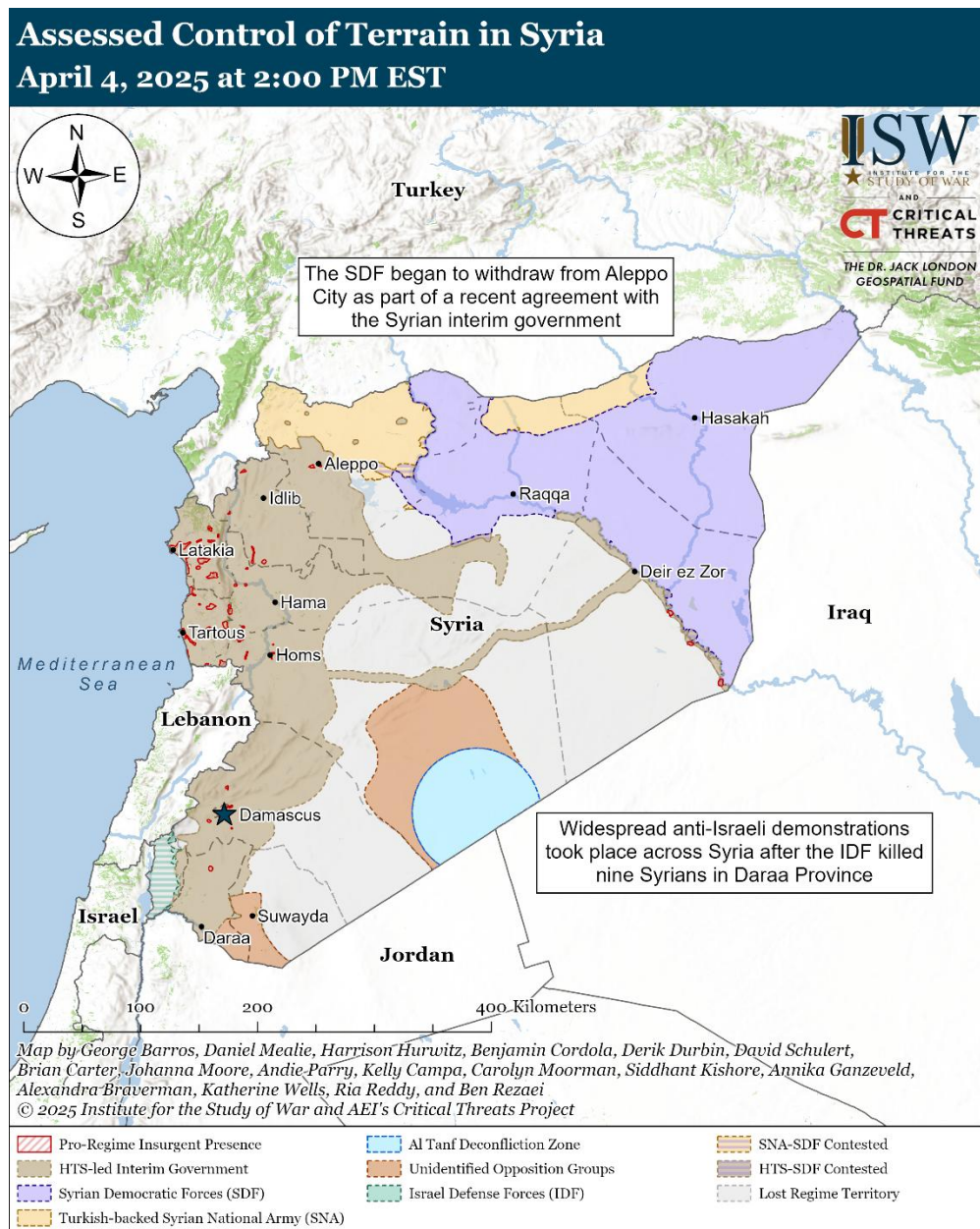
Velayati's statements and the Iranian efforts to discredit and undermine the Syrian government reinforce insurgent objectives to delegitimize the government with foreign audiences.[30] Anti-government actors, including Alawite social media accounts and Alawite insurgents, are driving sectarian narratives in the Syrian information space that support insurgent

objectives.[31] Both Iran and the insurgents likely calculate that highlighting the Syrian government's sectarian tendencies will make it more difficult for the government to secure foreign aid and make it more likely that the government becomes increasingly unstable. This would provide an opportunity for Iran to reinsert itself into Syria, as it has expressed interest in doing.

Key Takeaways:

- **Yemen:** The US Central Command (CENTCOM) is conducting a military operation in Yemen that aims to render the Houthis unable or unwilling to continue attacks that threaten US ships and freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. This does not imply that CENTCOM must destroy all Houthi missiles, drones, and launchers in Yemen. The current air campaign could render the Houthis unable or unwilling to continue attacks in the Red Sea by disrupting Houthi targeting cycles and command-and-control networks.
- **Iranian-backed Militias in Iraq:** Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have increasingly threatened to target US forces in Iraq and Syria, likely to both deter a US strike on Iran and to ensure the US forces withdraw from Iraq.
- **Iranian Nuclear Negotiations:** The United States continues to pursue direct negotiations with Iran to secure a comprehensive deal that fully dismantles Iran's nuclear program, according to an unspecified senior US official speaking to the *Wall Street Journal* on April 4.
- **Iran and Syria's Insurgency:** Senior Iranian official Ali Akbar Velayati criticized the interim Syrian government's handling of recent violence in coastal Syria and Israeli operations in Syria, likely as part of an Iranian effort to discredit and undermine the Syrian government. Velayati's statements and the Iranian efforts to discredit and undermine the Syrian government reinforce insurgent objectives to delegitimize the government with foreign audiences.

Syria



Syrians demonstrated in several locations across Syria on April 4 after Israeli ground operations reportedly killed nine Syrians in Daraa Province on April 2.[32] Dozens of demonstrators gathered after Friday prayers in multiple locations in at least nine of Syria's 14 provinces.[33] Relatively large-scale protests took place in Talbiseh, Homs Province, and in Damascus City, where hundreds of Syrians participated in anti-Israeli protests.[34] This marks the most widespread anti-Israeli protest since the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) launched ground operations in southern Syria in December 2024.[35] Armed combatants, including armed villagers, have engaged Israeli forces at least twice in the past two weeks in Daraa Province.[36]

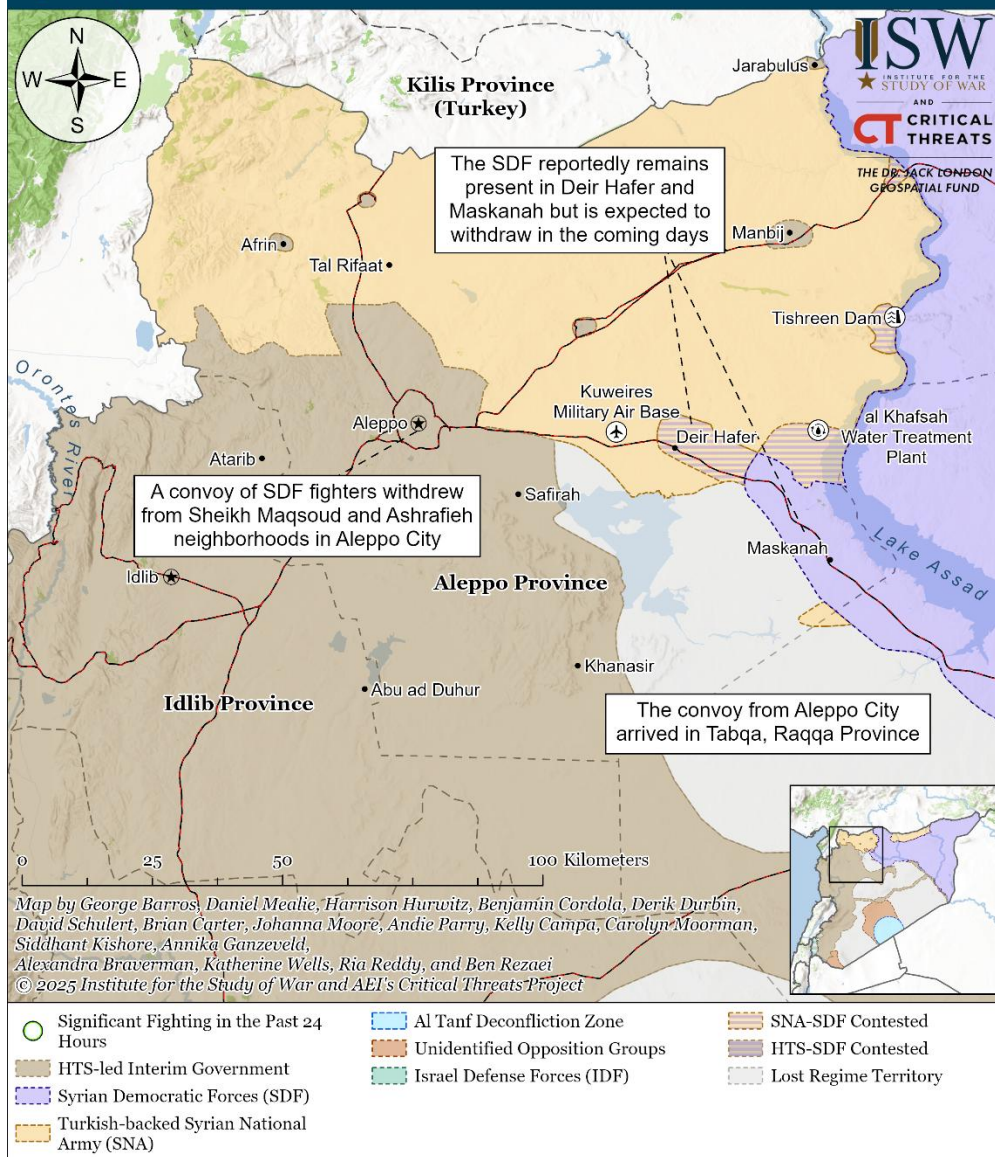
Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan condemned Israeli airstrikes on Syria on April 4 but emphasized that Turkey does not want conflict with Israel in Syria.^[37] The IDF has repeatedly struck a military site in Syria where Turkey reportedly seeks to establish an airbase in central Syria as part of a potential defense pact with the Syrian interim government.^[38] Unspecified Israeli sources told Israeli media on April 2 that the IDF conducted the strikes to send a message to Turkey that Israel will not allow Turkey to establish military bases in Syria.^[39] Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz called the strikes “a warning for the future.”^[40] Fidan noted that repeated Israeli strikes on Syrian military facilities are eroding the new government’s ability to deter threats from common enemies like the Islamic State and contribute to regional instability.^[41] The Turkish Foreign Affairs Ministry separately released a statement on April 3 that labelled Israel “the greatest threat” to regional security.^[42]

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) began to withdraw from two historically Kurdish neighborhoods in Aleppo City on April 4 as part of a recent agreement with the Syrian interim government. Syrian social media circulated footage on April 4 of a convoy of fighters flying the flags of People’s Defense Units (YPG) and Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) and leaving the Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh neighborhoods.^[43] Local Syrian media reported that at least 500 SDF fighters withdrew from the neighborhoods and arrived in Tabqa, Raqqqa Province, in SDF-controlled territory.^[44] Syrian interim government forces supervised the withdrawal.^[45] Local sources circulated a video of the Syrian interim government accompanying the SDF convoy near Deir Hafer.^[46] SDF units in Deir Hafer and Maskanah are expected to withdraw towards Raqqqa Province in the coming days.^[47]

The SDF withdrawal from Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh is part of the implementation of the April 1 agreement between the SDF and the Syrian interim government.^[48] The Syrian interim government and the SDF exchanged over 200 prisoners on April 3.^[49] Syrian media reported that many SDF members are expected to continue to withdraw in the coming days before the neighborhoods come under full government control.^[50] Syrian Interim Interior Ministry General Security forces deployed to the two neighborhoods to backfill the SDF.^[51] Kurdish media has reported that members of the SDF Internal Security Forces (also known as Asayish) from Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh will integrate into local police forces.^[52]

Assessed Control of Terrain around Aleppo

April 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

See topline section.

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

Houthi President Mahdi al Mashat thanked Iran for its support and leadership among Muslim nations in a phone call with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian on April 3.[53] This follows an Iranian information operation that sought to drive a narrative that Iran had withdrawn support for the Houthis.[54]

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 IDF conducted an airstrike on April 4 that killed the Hamas western sector commander in Lebanon.[55] The airstrike follows at least two attempted rocket attacks into Israel by unknown actors in Lebanon in March 2025.[56] Hezbollah denied involvement in both attacks.[57]

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 1,042,000 rials to one US dollar on April 3 to 1,050,000 rials to one US dollar on April 4.[58]

Residents of Esfahan Province held a large protest on April 4 to demand access to more water resources from the Zayandeh Rud River.[59] The protest came after farmers in Esfahan Province damaged a pipeline on April 2 that transfers water from Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province to Yazd Province, leading to widespread water outages and a two-day government shutdown in Yazd Province.[60] Iranian security forces fired tear gas at protesters on March 30 in Esfahan Province, where residents had gathered to protest water shortages and the continued drying of the Zayandeh Rud River, a vital regional water source for Esfahan and neighboring provinces.[61] Such protests, though

limited in size, could trigger wider unrest as grievances emerge alongside mounting economic pressures, including the devaluation of the rial, high inflation, and energy shortages.[62]

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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