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 <u>here</u> to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of the ongoing opposition offensive in Syria and <u>here</u> 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.

Iran will likely attempt to use nuclear negotiations with the United States to delay a potential strike on its nuclear facilities and the imposition of snapback sanctions. *Axios* reported on April 11 that Iran may propose that Iran and the United States first negotiate an "interim deal" prior to beginning negotiations on a comprehensive nuclear agreement.[1] Iran and the P5+1 (the United States, the United Kingdom, China, France, Russia, and Germany) reached an interim deal in 2013 that froze elements of Iran's nuclear program in exchange for temporary sanctions relief prior to further negotiations that led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015.[2] US President Donald Trump reportedly set a 60-day deadline to reach a new nuclear agreement, which will begin on April 12.[3] Trump previously warned on March 30 that 'there will be a bombing' if Iran does not agree to a new nuclear deal.[4]

Iran may calculate that an interim deal with the United States could delay or prevent the imposition of snapback sanctions by European JCPOA signatories. The E3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom) threatened to impose snapback sanctions on Iran in June 2025 if a new nuclear deal was not reached.[5] The June snapback deadline coincides with Trump's reported 60-day deadline for reaching a new nuclear deal.[6] Snapback sanctions are a mechanism established by the JCPOA that allows current signatories to reimpose sanctions on Iran within thirty days in the event of "significant non-performance by Iran of JCPOA commitments."[7] The United States cannot unilaterally trigger

snapback sanctions as it withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018.[8] The snapback sanction mechanism is set to expire in October 2025.[9]

Senior Iranian officials persuaded Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to approve negotiations with the United States in March 2025 to avoid being forced to fight a "twofront war" against the United States and the Iranian people.[10] The New York Times reported on April 11 that Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei, and Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf met with Khamenei in March to convince Khamenei to change his position on negotiations, citing two unspecified senior Iranian officials familiar with the meeting.[11] Khamenei repeatedly and explicitly rejected negotiations with the United States in February and March 2025.[12] Pezeshkian, Ejei, and Ghalibaf reportedly warned Khamenei that rejecting negotiations may trigger a strike on Iranian nuclear facilities that could escalate into a "two-front war," which reportedly convinced Khamenei to approve indirect negotiations with the United States in late March.[13] The three stressed that a two-front war could worsen Iran's economy and stoke internal unrest, which may pose a threat to regime stability. The Iranian rial hit a record low-at that time-after Khamenei categorically rejected negotiations with the United States for the first time on February 7.[14] Khamenei reportedly ultimately agreed to a two-step process that starts with indirect talks and potentially moves to direct talks.[15] Khamenei laid out conditions for negotiations, stating that Iran was willing to negotiate on its nuclear program, including its uranium enrichment, but Iran's missile program was off-limits. Khamenei also appointed his close advisors, Kamal Kharazi, Ali Larijani, and Mohammad Forouzandeh, to manage negotiations with the United States along with the Iranian foreign ministry, according to four unspecified Iranian officials speaking to The New York Times.

Khamenei agreed to these negotiations as a means to preserve regime stability rather than solely a desire to improve his economy. Khamenei reportedly only decided to approve negotiations after he was convinced that a failure to accept negotiations could lead to a war that, in combination with a poor economic situation, would seriously threaten the regime's stability. The negotiations buy Khamenei more time to address regime stability, even if negotiations ultimately fail and the United States or Israel strike Iran.

IRGC-affiliated Tasnim News Agency reported on April 11 that Omani Foreign Minister Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi will mediate indirect talks between Iran and the United States in Oman on April 12.[16] Tasnim reported that Iran will emphasize its red lines—no threats, no excessive demands, and no discussion of its defense sector—and signal readiness for "continued negotiations" if the United States acts in good faith. US Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff told The Wall Street Journal on April 11 that the United States' "red line" is to stop Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.[17] Unnamed sources told Tasnim that Iran remains open to confidence-building steps "if sanctions are lifted" but warned that the United States will be responsible if talks collapse.[18] Iranian ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali separately stated on April 11 that the meeting in Oman will likely focus on "defining a framework" for future negotiations, indicating that Iran may aim to draw negotiations out over multiple sessions.[19] Iran's messaging may indicate that Iran will try to limit the scope of the talks strictly to the nuclear issue while preemptively blaming the United States for any failure.

Saudi outlet Asharq al Awsat reported on April 10 that Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei told Iranian-backed Iraqi militias in late 2024 to prepare to defend unidentified Iranian interests if negotiations with the United States "falter."[20] Iran remains concerned that the United States or Israel would strike Iran if Iran-US negotiations fail. Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have recently threatened to target US forces in response to attacks on Iran.[21]

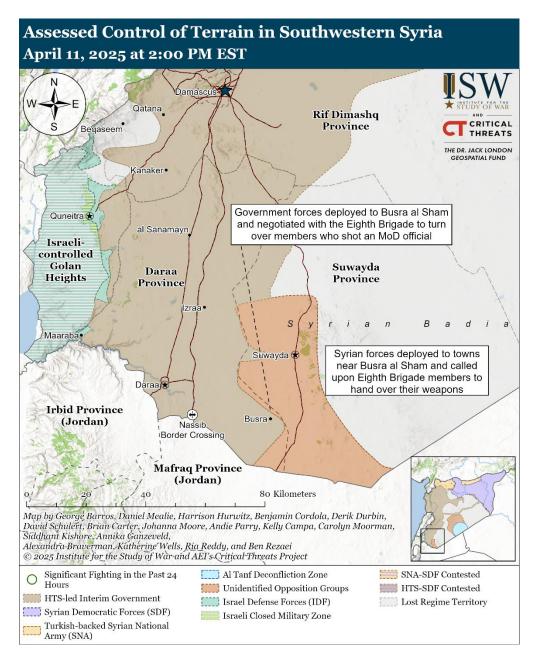
Iran also deployed a "small Iranian team" to ensure Iraqi militias respond as directed, illustrating the degree of coordination between Iran and its proxies and partners in Iraq. Asharq al Awsat reported that Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani assigned a "small Iranian team" to ensure that the militias do not target US forces in Iraq and Syria, per previous Iranian direction.[22] Ghaani previously ordered the militias to halt attacks targeting US forces in early January 2024 after a militia attack killed 3 US soldiers in northeastern Jordan.[23] Iranian-backed Iraqi militias conducted sporadic attacks targeting US forces after Ghaani's order and did not claim an overwhelming majority of these attacks.[24] Ghaani's reported enforcement of Iranian directives demonstrates Iran's continued ability to exert control over members of its Axis of Resistance.

An armed group in Daraa Province has only nominally integrated into government security forces and continues to pursue its parochial interests, which demonstrates the political challenges Damascus faces as it attempts to exert its control over Syria's armed groups. The Eighth Brigade remains an independent organization and still exercises a "degree of autonomy" over some of eastern Daraa, such as Busra al Sham, even though it has nominally integrated its fighters into government forces since February 2024.[25] The Eighth Brigade is a Daraa-based faction led by Ahmed al Awda that is comprised of former opposition fighters who reconciled with the Assad regime.[26] Awda is an experienced militia commander from Busra al Sham, Daraa Province, and initially fought against the regime from the start of the civil war until he reconciled with the regime.[27]

The government appears to have permitted the Eighth Brigade to reflag itself as the General Security Services (GSS), which enabled the Eighth Brigade to continue to dominate certain areas. All GSS members in Busra al Sham are former Eighth Brigade members.[28] The GSS is a gendarmerie. It is not clear if the government intentionally allowed the Eighth Brigade to reflag some of its elements to secure Awda's support. Eighth Brigade militiamen in the Busra al Sham GSS shot Syrian Ministry of Defense (MoD) official Bilal al Droubi on April 10.[29] Droubi is a former Eighth Brigade member whose recent recruitment of Eighth Brigade fighters into the MoD reportedly angered the group, which highlights the group's continued interest in its parochial interests.[30] The GSS is not part of the MoD. Several MoD and GSS convoys deployed from Damascus to the eastern Daraa countryside on April 11.[31] An Eighth Brigade militiaman in the GSS told Syrian media that the Eighth Brigade had gathered forces within the city and prepared to defend the city against government forces.[32] The government negotiated the surrender of the four Eighth Brigade members involved in the attack on Droubi and called on Eighth Brigade members to surrender their weapons in several nearby towns.[33] That the Eighth Brigade directly challenged the government demonstrates that it continues to value its parochial interests over the government's objectives.

The government has not contained this command-and-control issue because it has failed to exert its control over Awda. Awda's significant influence among eastern Daraa-based security forces demonstrates Damascus's weak command-and-control in the area and suggests that the government may face similar command-and-control issues across Syria. Awda has not publicly pledged support for the Eighth Brigade's dissolution and integration into the government, though Awda's subordinates have negotiated with government officials to set up integration processes.[34] The integration of these groups will be irrelevant unless they answer to the formal chain of command. Awda did not surrender to authorities on April 11.[35] Shara will continue to face challenges from armed groups and local commanders because local commanders will almost certainly resist Shara's efforts to subordinate them to a national army or police force like the GSS.

This incident and other reports also demonstrate the mixed reliability of the GSS. The GSS appears to recruit from local fighters—thereby reflagging local militias as GSS—as well as unaffiliated individuals and directly from the more disciplined HTS outfits.[36] The GSS in Busra al Sham was not beholden to any command authority, but an Alawite resident of Homs said the professional GSS units in Homs City successfully prevented massacres of the Alawite population during the coastal massacres in early March.[37] The fact that the government decided to deploy GSS units from Damascus to Busra al Sham also indicates that the GSS's reliability is not uniform.



President Ahmed al Shara extended the mandate of a commission to investigate violence on the Syrian coast by three more months.[38] The commission spokesperson, Yasser al Farhan, reported on April 7 that the commission has not completed its investigations within the initial one-month timeframe due to procedural delays and would not release its findings until it completed a full legal and evidentiary review.[39] Farhan said the large scope of the investigation is the primary cause of the delay.[40] Shara established the commission in late March to investigate crimes that government forces committed during the pro-Assad Alawite insurgent uprising in early March in coastal Syria.[41]

The success of the commission will be determined by the government's ability to prosecute the perpetrators of the violence, regardless of their sect. The commission can present its findings to the government, but it cannot prosecute perpetrators. The government's ability to transparently and fairly

prosecute all perpetrators of sectarian violence will create an opportunity for the government to curtail the root causes of the burgeoning insurgency in western Syria.

The commission has reported that unspecified groups are intimidating Western Syria residents. This intimidation indicates that either insurgents retain significant influence in the countryside or the Sunni groups responsible for sectarian violence have continued to intimidate civilians. Farhan noted that several unspecified groups intimidated families to prevent them from cooperating with the investigators.[42] Intimidation by government-affiliated groups involved in sectarian violence and revenge killings against Alawites will erode public trust in the commission and risk discrediting its findings as partial or compromised. Attempts by insurgents to obstruct the investigation also reveal that Assadist factions continue to wield considerable influence in coastal Syria, particularly within Alawite communities. The committee must prevent these groups from intimidating families in order to avoid obscuring the commission's findings. Shara must take concrete legal steps, including charging, prosecuting, and sentencing perpetrators of sectarian violence, to ensure the commission's overall credibility.

The US military deployed a Patriot battalion from the Indo-Pacific to the Middle East.[43]

CENTCOM also published footage of the USS *Carl Vinson* Carrier Strike Group working alongside the USS *Harry S. Truman* Carrier Strike Group in the Red Sea on April 10.[44] The *Carl Vinson* recently sailed from the Indo-Pacific to the Middle East.[45]

An open-source analyst also published satellite imagery of two US-flagged oil tankers at Diego Garcia Island on April 10.[46] The tankers were likely the US oil tanker *STENA IMPERATIVE* and the *USNS Guadalupe*, which is a replenishment oiler for the *USS Carl Vinson* carrier strike group. The United States has recently increased its military presence at Diego Garcia Island by deploying B-2 Spirit bombers.[47]

Key Takeaways:

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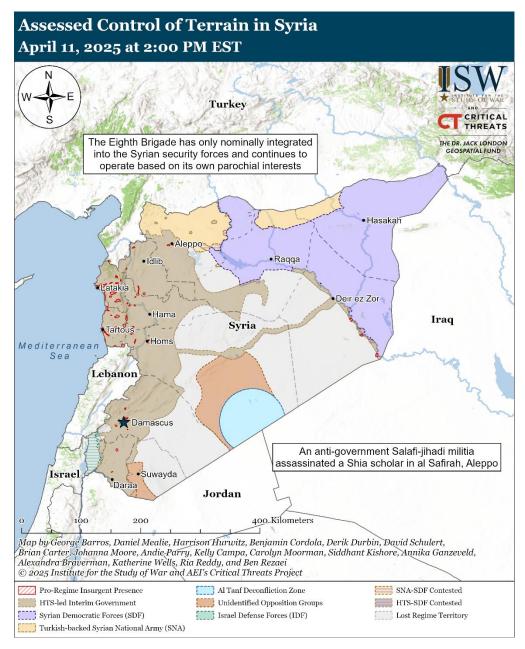
- Nuclear Negotiations with Iran: Iran will likely attempt to use nuclear negotiations with
 the United States to delay a potential strike on its nuclear facilities and the imposition of
 snapback sanctions.
- Iranian Negotiation Calculus: Senior Iranian officials persuaded Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to approve negotiations with the United States in March 2025 to avoid being forced to fight a "two-front war" against the United States and the Iranian people. Khamenei agreed to these negotiations as a means to preserve regime stability rather than solely a desire to improve his economy.
- **Iranian Red Lines in Negotiations:** An IRGC-affiliated outlet reported that Iran will emphasize its red lines—no threats, no excessive demands, and no discussion of its defense sector—and signal readiness for "continued negotiations" if the United States acts in good faith during negotiations.
- **Iran in Iraq:** Saudi outlet Asharq al Awsat reported on April 10 that Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei told Iranian-backed Iraqi militias in late 2024 to prepare to defend unidentified

Iranian interests if negotiations with the United States "falter." Iran also deployed a "small Iranian team" to ensure Iraqi militias respond as directed, illustrating the degree of coordination between Iran and its proxies and partners in Iraq.

- **Syrian Government and Security Forces:** An armed group in Daraa Province has only nominally integrated into government security forces and continues to pursue its parochial interests, which demonstrates the political challenges Damascus faces as it attempts to exert its control over Syria's armed groups. Recent violence in Daraa Province and other reports also demonstrate the mixed reliability of the General Security Service, the Syrian transitional government's gendarmerie.
- Truth and Reconciliation in Syria: President Ahmed al Shara extended the mandate of a commission to investigate violence on the Syrian coast by three more months. The success of the commission will be determined by the government's ability to prosecute the perpetrators of the violence, regardless of their sect. The commission has reported that unspecified groups are intimidating Western Syrian residents. This intimidation indicates that either insurgents retain significant influence in the countryside or the Sunni groups responsible for sectarian violence have continued to intimidate civilians.
- **US Deployments in the Middle East:** The US military deployed a Patriot battalion from the Indo-Pacific to the Middle East. An open-source analyst also published satellite imagery of two US-flagged oil tankers at Diego Garcia Island on April 10.

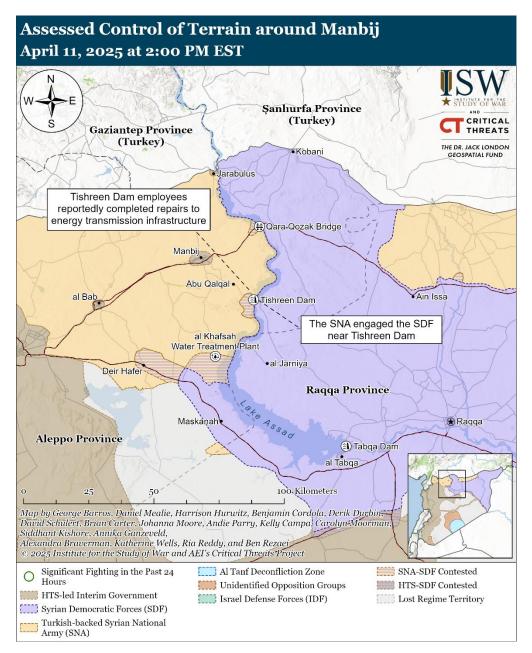
Syria

Suwayda transitional governor Mustafa al Bakour denied that Damascus is at odds with Druze spiritual leader Sheikh Hikmat al Hijri and other Druze groups on April 11. [48] Bakour said that he "tends to agree with" Hijri's opinion that security forces in Suwayda should be made up of locals. [49] Bakour was very likely responding to an article published by NPR on April 11 in which Druze officials said that they have significant reservations about the transitional government and that there is "no consensus" with Damascus. [50] Bakour confirmed that the transitional government had begun to pay salaries and provide equipment, such as vehicles, to these local forces. [51] Bakour also expressed appreciation to Druze militias "for help in maintaining" civil order in Suwayda. [52] Syrian President Ahmed al Shara decided to allow Suwaydawi-led security forces to oversee security in Suwayda Province on March 6. [53]

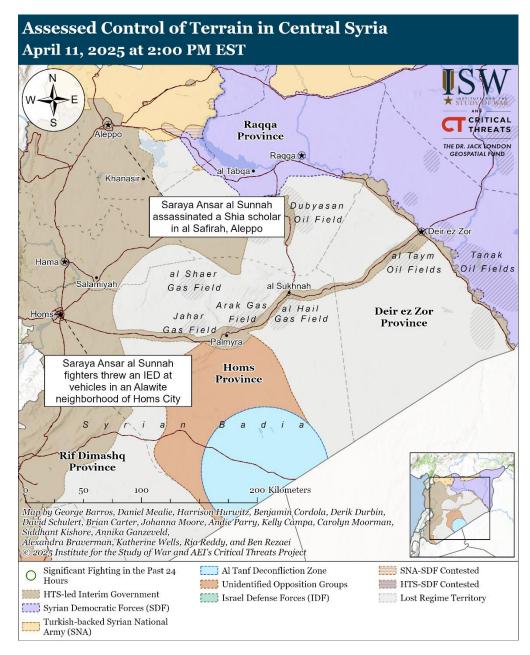


Syrian Transitional President Ahmed al Shara attended his first multilateral international meeting in Turkey on April 11.[54] Shara met with his counterparts from Kosovo, Azerbaijan, Qatar, and Libya at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum.[55] Shara also met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan.[56] Erdogan said during the forum that Turkey would continue to provide support for Syria to achieve stability."[57]

An anti-Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) source posted a video of Syrian National Army (SNA) fighters firing heavy machine guns at SDF positions near the Tishreen Dam in eastern Aleppo Province on April 11.[58] Dam employees completed repairs on the dam's energy production capabilities on April 11.[59] Syrian sources, including those close to the interim government, claimed that the SDF's withdrawal from Tishreen Dam was the result of "a preliminary agreement" to create a demilitarized zone around frequent engagement sites.[60]



Anti-government Salafi-jihadi militia Saraya Ansar al Sunnah continues to target non-Sunni individuals in Syria on a sectarian basis. Saraya Ansar al Sunnah claimed that it assassinated Shia scholar Muhammad Hajj Barakat in al Safirah, Aleppo, on April 11.[61] Saraya Ansar al Sunnah fighters separately threw an improvised explosive device at vehicles in an Alawite neighborhood of Homs City on April 10.[62] The IED caused no casualties but damaged civilian property. These claims are consistent with Saraya Ansar al Sunnah's hardline Salafi-jihadi ideology, which is similar to al Qaeda and ISIS ideology, that calls for the genocide of non-Sunnis.[63]



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 Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani discussed Iraq-Iran bilateral ties and cooperation during a phone call with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian on April 11.[64] This phone call comes amid Iranian concerns about a potential US or Israeli strike on Iran.[65] Sudani emphasized that Iraq rejects any threats to Iran during a phone call with Pezeshkian on April 1.[66]

A parliamentarian from Nouri al Maliki's State of Law Coalition condemned the Iraqi federal government's recent announcement that the November 2025 parliamentary elections will occur under the current Iraqi electoral law.[67] Maliki has repeatedly stated that he seeks to amend the election law prior to the elections.[68] An Iraqi parliamentarian with ties to Iranian-backed Iraqi militias also submitted an electoral law proposal to the Iraqi Parliament on April 1 that would advantage smaller political parties.[69]

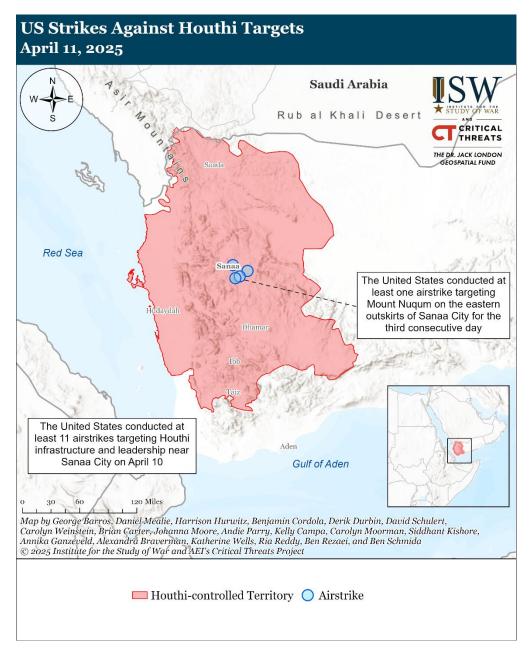
Turkey continued to target Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) positions in Duhok Province, Iraqi Kurdistan, on April 10. Kurdish media reported that Turkey struck PKK positions and clashed with PKK fighters near Shiladze District, Duhok Province.[70] Turkish artillery shelled PKK positions near the Gara Mountains.[71]

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

US Central Command (CENTCOM) conducted at least 11 airstrikes targeting Houthi infrastructure and leadership near Sanaa City, Sanaa Governorate, since April 10.[72] CENTCOM conducted at least one airstrike targeting Houthi underground facilities and weapons depots in Mount Nuqum, which is on the eastern outskirts of Sanaa City, for the third consecutive day.[73]



Senior Houthi political bureau member Mohammed al Bukhaiti warned the Yemeni government that mobilizing against the Houthis would "mark [its] end," in an interview with Al Jazeera on April 10.[74]

Images of Houthi intelligence deputy chief Abdulqader al Shami indicate that the Houthis did not arrest Shami for leaking Houthi military sites. [75] A Saudi news outlet claimed on April 7 that the Houthis had arrested Shami. [76] A Yemen analyst posted pictures of Shami attending the Houthis' pro-Palestinian protest in Sanaa on April 11. [77]

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

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.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

The Iranian rial appreciated from 1,009,500 rials to one US dollar on April 10 to 1,005,500 on April 11.[78]

The United States sanctioned UAE-based Indian businessman Jugwinder Singh Brar on April 10 for working with Houthi financier Said Jamal to obfuscate Iranian oil exports. [79] Brar used smaller vessels, often with disabled AIS systems, and ship-to-ship transfers to export Iranian oil. The United States additionally sanctioned two UAE-based and two Indian-based companies that owned and operated Brar's 30 vessels. The United States also sanctioned the Chinese-based Guangsha Zhoushan Energy Group on April 10 for purchasing Iranian petroleum products. [80] This follows a Reuters report on April 10 that China increased its Iranian oil imports by at least 20 percent in March compared to February. [81] US Energy Secretary Chris Wright told Reuters separately on April 11 that the United States can "follow the ships leaving Iran" to stop Iranian oil exports and enforce maximum pressure during his visit to Abu Dhabi. [82]

Iran and Armenia conducted a joint border exercise in Norduz, East Azerbaijan Province, northwestern Iran, on April 9 and 10 to enhance border security and counterterrorism coordination.[83] The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Ground Forces' 31st Ashura Operational Division and the Armenian Armed Forces conducted the exercise.[84] Iran and Armenia have a history of economic cooperation, but this is the first time both states have conducted a joint military exercise.[85] Iran has previously conducted joint military exercises with its other South Caucasus neighbor, Azerbaijan, Armenia's regional rival.[86] Northwestern Iran borders the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone between Armenia and Azerbaijan.[87] Azerbaijan seeks to build the Zangezur Corridor through Armenia, linking Azerbaijan proper to its enclave in Nakhchivan.[88] Iran has opposed the Zangezur corridor because the corridor would impede Iran's access to trade routes to

Europe via Armenia and potentially reignite the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.[89] Iran's policy aims to balance its relationship with both Armenia and Azerbaijan to avoid another conflict in the South Caucasus, which has the potential to spill over or flare up ethnic Armenian and Azeri-Iranian tensions in Iran.[90]

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.



- [1] https://www.axios.com/2025/04/10/iran-nuclear-deal-us-interim-agreement
- [2] https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2013/11/why-the-iranian-nuclear-agreement-is-agood-deal?lang=en; https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kerry-in-genevaraising-hopes-for-historic-nuclear-deal-with-iran/2013/11/23/53e7bfe6-5430-11e3-9fe0-fd2ca728e67c_story.html
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