

Iran Update



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April 15, 2025, Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm ET

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei may calculate that engaging in nuclear negotiations with the United States is the best option for preserving the Iranian regime's stability. Khamenei discussed the United States-Iran nuclear talks and economic priorities during a meeting with senior Iranian government officials on April 15.[1] Khamenei called for mitigating the impact of international sanctions on the Iranian economy while simultaneously expressing support for nuclear talks with the United States. Khamenei's main priority is preserving the Iranian regime. The *New York Times* reported on April 11 that President Masoud Pezeshkian, Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei, and Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf convinced Khamenei to approve nuclear talks with the United States to avoid a potential "two-front war" against both external military threats and internal unrest.[2] Khamenei may calculate that engaging in nuclear negotiations with the United States will improve Iranian economic conditions and prevent a strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. Senior Iranian officials have recently expressed concern that Iran's worsening economic conditions could cause internal unrest.[3] Khamenei would likely be skeptical of any agreement that Iran signs with the Trump administration, however, given that US President Donald Trump withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018. Khamenei stated that Iran must "proceed carefully" in the negotiations with the United States and emphasized Iran's distrust toward the United States during the meeting with government officials.

Khamenei also likely seeks to manage domestic expectations about the possibility of Iran reaching a nuclear agreement with the United States. Khamenei cautioned against both "excessive optimism and pessimism" and stressed that Iran's progress must continue "independently of the negotiations" during his meeting with government officials.[4] Khamenei's cautious position may seek to protect the regime from internal backlash if the talks fail or produce only limited economic benefits.

US President Donald Trump discussed the ongoing nuclear talks with Iran with senior US foreign policy and national security officials on April 15.[5] The United States and Iran began nuclear talks in Muscat, Oman, on April 12.[6] Axios reported on April 15 that there is "intense debate" in the administration about the trajectory of the talks and potential US compromises. Unspecified individuals briefed on the talks told the *Wall Street Journal* on April 14 that the Trump administration intends to discuss Iran's support for the Axis of Resistance with Iran but that "the topic didn't come up for discussion" on April 12.[7] Iranian sources previously stated that Trump's March 5 letter to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei included demands that Iran curtail its support for the Axis of Resistance.[8] Iran and the Axis of Resistance have conducted an information operation targeting the West in recent weeks that seeks to obfuscate Iran's role in leading the Axis of

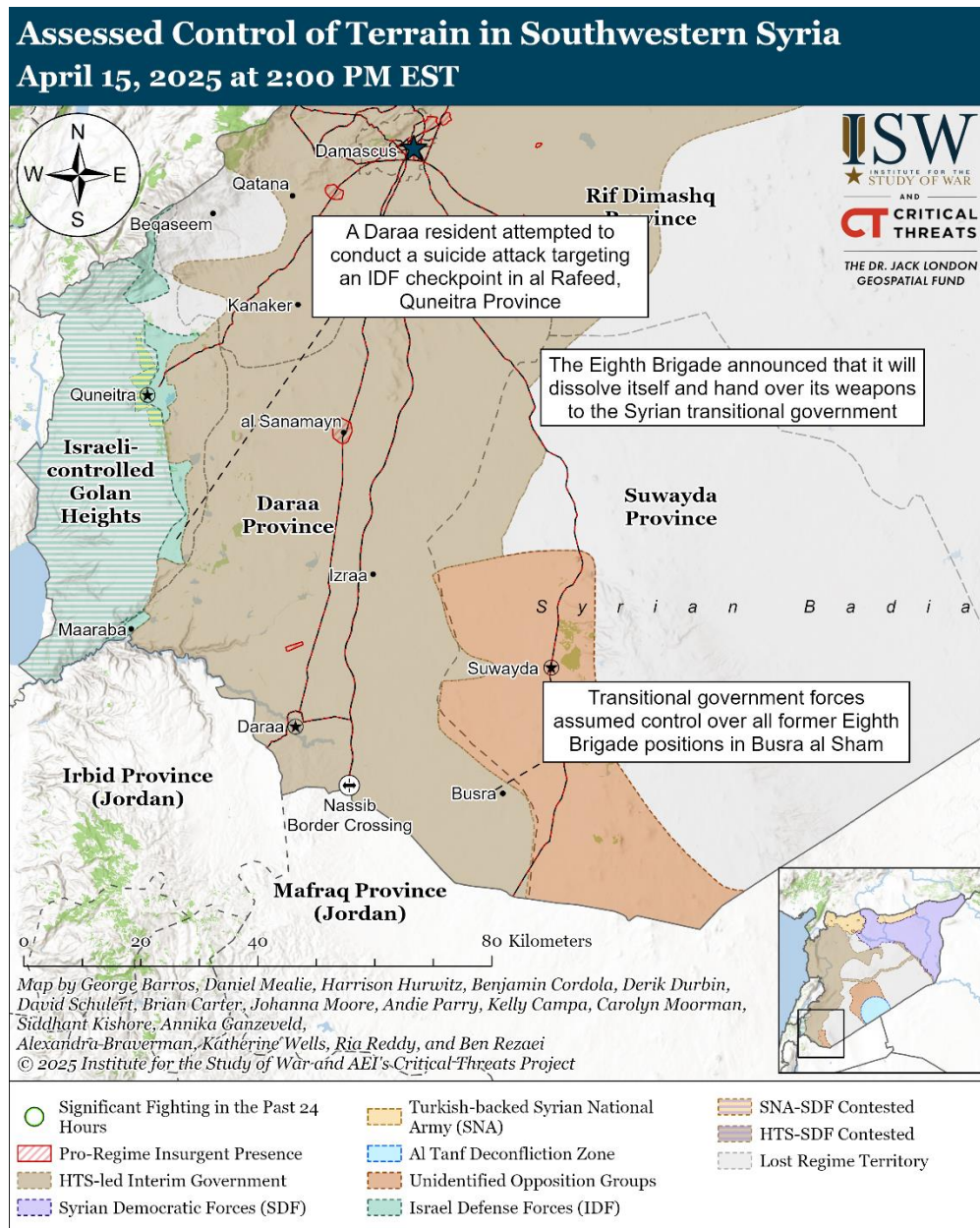
Resistance.[9] This campaign likely seeks to set conditions for Iran to argue during negotiations that it has already distanced itself from the Axis of Resistance. This informational campaign is part of a long-running Iranian campaign that seeks to obfuscate Iran's support for its proxies and absolve Iran of responsibility for its proxies' actions. Iran and the United States are scheduled to hold a second round of talks in Muscat, Oman, on April 19.[10]

US Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff stated in an interview on April 14 that Iran “do[es] not need” to enrich uranium past 3.67 percent.[11] Witkoff later posted on X (Twitter) on April 15 that any nuclear deal with Iran must “stop and eliminate” the Iranian nuclear enrichment program.[12] Unspecified Iranian officials told the *Wall Street Journal* on April 12 that Iran would be willing to reduce its uranium enrichment to 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) levels.[13] The JCPOA limited Iranian uranium enrichment to 300 kilograms of uranium hexafluoride enriched up to 3.67 percent for fifteen years.[14] Iran currently has 274.8 kilograms of 60 percent enriched uranium, which is enough uranium, if enriched further, to produce around six nuclear weapons.[15]

Witkoff stated on April 14 that nuclear negotiations with Iran would also focus on ensuring “verification on weaponization,” which includes monitoring the kinds of missiles that Iran has.[16] United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSC) 2231, which endorsed the JCPOA in 2015, stipulated that Iran cannot undertake “any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons...until the date eight years after the JCPOA Adoption Day.”[17] The missile restrictions in UNSC Resolution 2231 expired in October 2023. Iranian officials have repeatedly stressed in recent weeks that Iran is unwilling to negotiate on the Iranian drone and missile programs.[18] Iran is unlikely to agree to curtail its missile program because doing so would cause it to lose one of its primary deterrent powers and means with which it seeks to achieve its strategic objectives. Iran uses its ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones to pressure its adversaries and increase its military influence in the region.[19]

The Eighth Brigade announced on April 13 that it would dissolve itself and surrender its weapons to the Syrian transitional government amid government pressure on the group. Eighth Brigade spokesperson Muhammad al Hourani announced the group's “complete” dissolution and readiness to hand over all “human and military resources” to the Syrian MoD.[20] The Eighth Brigade, which is based in southeastern Daraa and led by Ahmed al Awda, is comprised of former opposition fighters who reconciled with the Assad regime. The militia has operated as an independent organization in recent weeks despite nominally integrating into the General Security Services (GSS) since February 2025.[21] The transitional government deployed significant forces to Busra al Sham after Eighth Brigade members in the Busra al Sham GSS shot an MoD official on April 10.[22] The transitional government negotiated the handover of the Eighth Brigade members who had committed the attack and pressured the Eighth Brigade to dissolve during these negotiations.[23] Eighth Brigade Commander Ahmed al Awda has not publicly confirmed the group's dissolution, but it is unlikely that Hourani would announce the Eighth Brigade's dissolution without Awda's approval. The government assumed control over all former Eighth Brigade positions in Busra al Sham and confiscated the group's remaining military equipment and assets in the city and surrounding countryside.[24] GSS members called on all residents in the area to hand in their weapons at GSS checkpoints.[25]

The transitional government appears to be trying to reduce the Eighth Brigade's influence over security in southeastern Daraa. Senior Daraa provincial and security officials discussed on April 12 opening a new GSS center in Busra al Sham that would be led by reliable GSS members from outside of the area.[26] The GSS appears to recruit local fighters, which enabled the Eighth Brigade to effectively reflag themselves as a GSS unit and continue to control the southeastern Daraa countryside. Deploying non-local GSS members to Busra al Sham could reduce the Eighth Brigade's influence in the area and serve as a model for integrating other militias into Syrian security services.



Iran is reportedly cooperating with Sunni extremist groups in Syria, including ISIS, following the collapse of its networks in Syria after the fall of the Assad regime.[27] Unspecified European and regional security officials cited by the Washington Post on April 12 claimed that Iran has reached out to Sunni extremist groups to try to destabilize the Syrian transitional

government and facilitate smuggling.[28] The sources did not specify how Iran is working with extremist groups to try to destabilize the transitional government. Iran has previously cooperated with other Sunni extremist groups, including al Qaeda, to pursue various regional objectives.[29] CTP-ISW previously assessed that Iran is attempting to inflame sectarian tensions in Syria, likely to try to destabilize the Syrian transitional government and thereby re-entrench itself in Syria.[30] Several Sunni extremist groups have formed in western Syria since the fall of the Assad regime and the transitional government has fought a counterinsurgency campaign in the areas where these groups operate since early March 2025.[31] There is currently no evidence that these groups have any connections to Iran, but Iran could seek to work with these groups to try to advance its strategic objectives in Syria.

There appear to be emerging localized formations in Hasakah Province, northeastern Syria, that seek to undermine the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). A group called the Free Hasakah Forces released a statement on April 14 urging Arab tribal leaders to distance themselves from the SDF.[32] The group threatened to assassinate four tribal leaders who they claim have cooperated with the SDF and urged others to defect from the SDF. This group's statement closely mirrors a recent statement from another anti-SDF group called the Ahrar al Jazeera Brigade.[33] The Ahrar al Jazeera Brigade claimed that it assassinated an alleged SDF informant in Qamishli, Hasakah Province, on April 13.[34] Both groups included the Syrian revolutionary flag in their statements, which suggests that the groups likely do not oppose the Syrian transitional government. The SDF has historically relied on support from Arab tribal networks to maintain its presence in areas under its control and to conduct anti-ISIS operations.[35] Continued threats against pro-SDF tribal leaders in Hasakah Province could cause these leaders to reduce support for the SDF, which would in turn likely undermine SDF influence in the area.

Anti-Houthi Yemeni factions are reportedly planning a ground offensive against the Houthis to recapture the western coast of Yemen, including Hudaydah Port, according to US and Yemeni officials speaking to the *Wall Street Journal*.[36] A successful ground operation against the Houthis would require some degree of political and military coordination among the fragmented anti-Houthi Yemeni factions. National Resistance Front (NRF) leader and Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) Vice President Tariq Saleh met with the Yemeni Defense Ministry operations chief on April 14 in Mokha to discuss cooperation among anti-Houthi factions.[37] Saleh has argued that “military action [is] the only way to end the threat” posed by the Houthis, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. [38] The NRF controls territory in southwestern Yemen near Mokha and would, therefore, likely be involved in an offensive on Hudaydah Governorate.[39] The Joint Forces on the West Coast, which is a militia that supports the internationally-recognized Yemeni government, stated that the Joint Forces on the West Coast is ready to “liberate Hudaydah and all areas [under] Houthi control – with or without American involvement.”[40] The Joint Forces on the West Coast is backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and includes around 40,000 fighters from the Guards of the Republic, the Southern Giants Brigades, and the Tihama Resistance.[41]

The UAE, which provides financial and military support to anti-Houthi Yemeni factions, has discussed the ground campaign plan with US officials in recent weeks, according to the US and Yemeni officials speaking to the *Wall Street Journal*. [42] The US officials noted that the United States has not decided whether it would support a ground offensive against the Houthis. Unspecified Saudi officials have

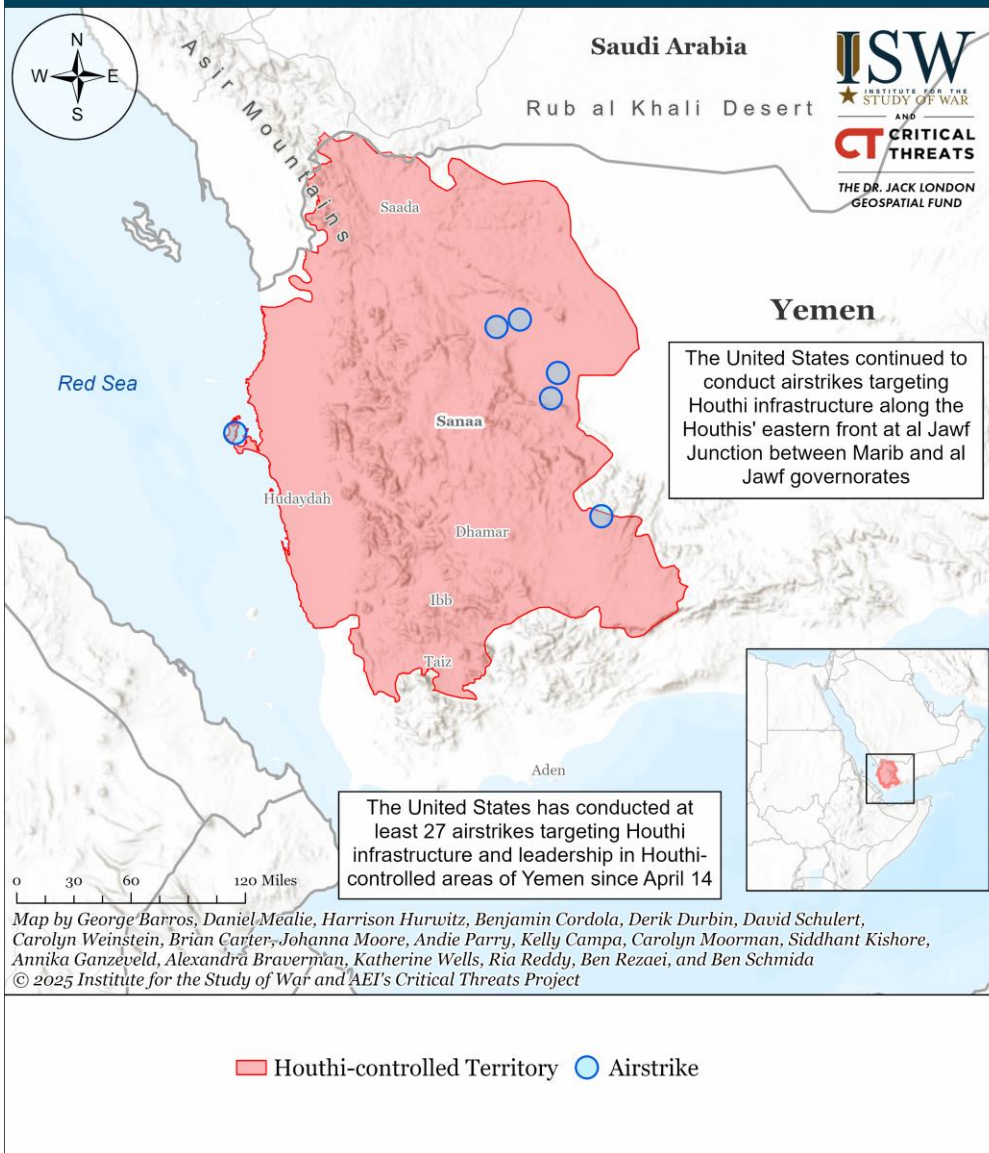
stated that Saudi Arabia would not get involved in a ground offensive because the Saudi government is concerned that participating in such a military operation would cause the Houthis to resume drone and missile attacks targeting Saudi territory.[43] The Joint Forces on the West Coast spokesperson told the *Wall Street Journal* that a ground campaign against the Houthis would require the support of the internationally-recognized Yemeni government and the Saudi-Emirati military coalition.[44]

The US and Yemeni officials stated that US private security contractors have been advising Yemeni factions on a potential ground offensive.[45] Private security contractors have previously worked alongside the Yemeni Armed Forces and UAE-backed anti-Houthi militias in Yemen.[46]

US Central Command (CENTCOM) has conducted at least 27 airstrikes targeting Houthi infrastructure and leadership in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen on April 14.[47] CENTCOM conducted at least seven airstrikes targeting reported Houthi barracks and weapons depots on Kamaran Island, Hudaydah Governorate. These airstrikes mark the ninth time that CENTCOM has targeted Houthi infrastructure on Kamaran Island since the start of the CENTCOM airstrike campaign on March 15.[48]

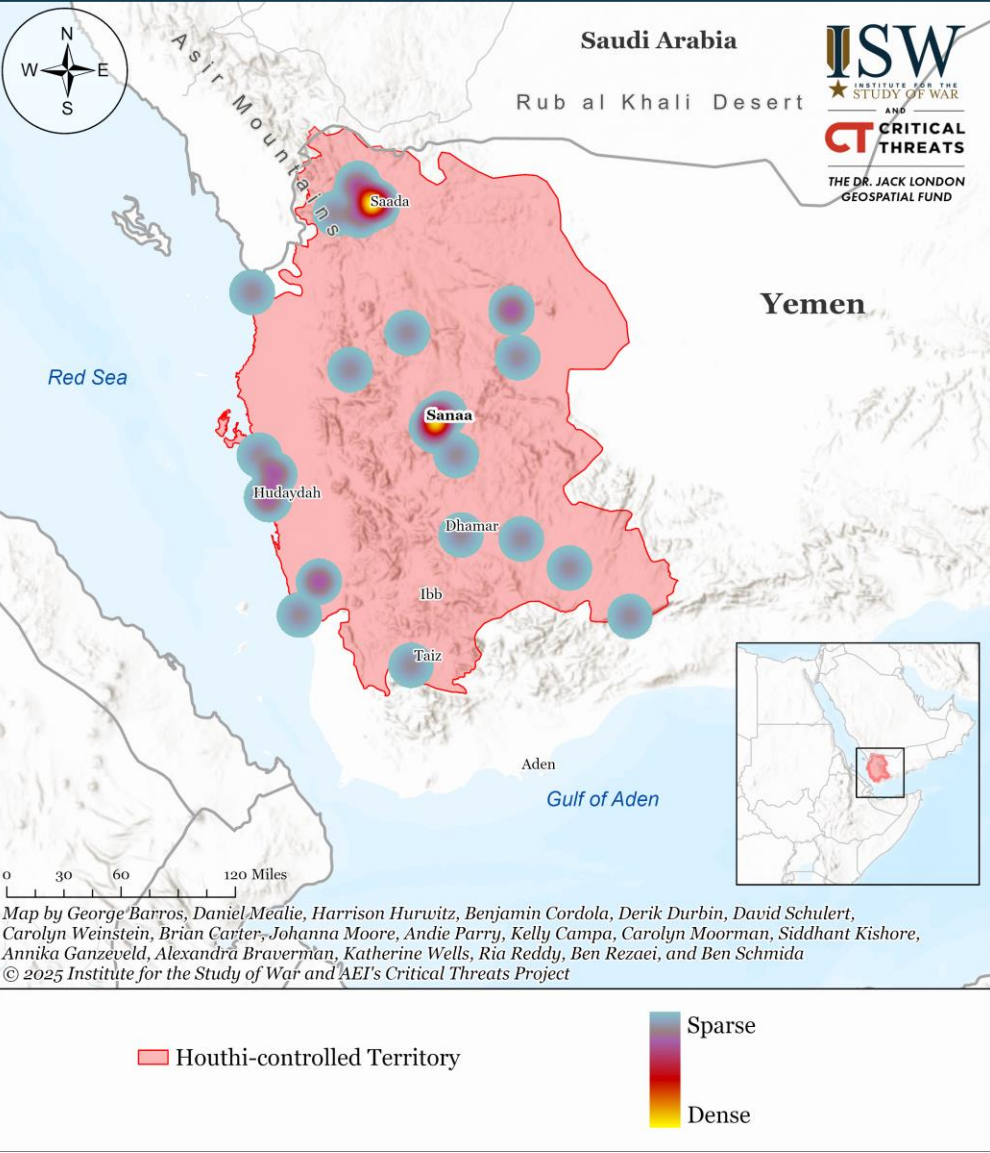
US Strikes Against Houthi Targets

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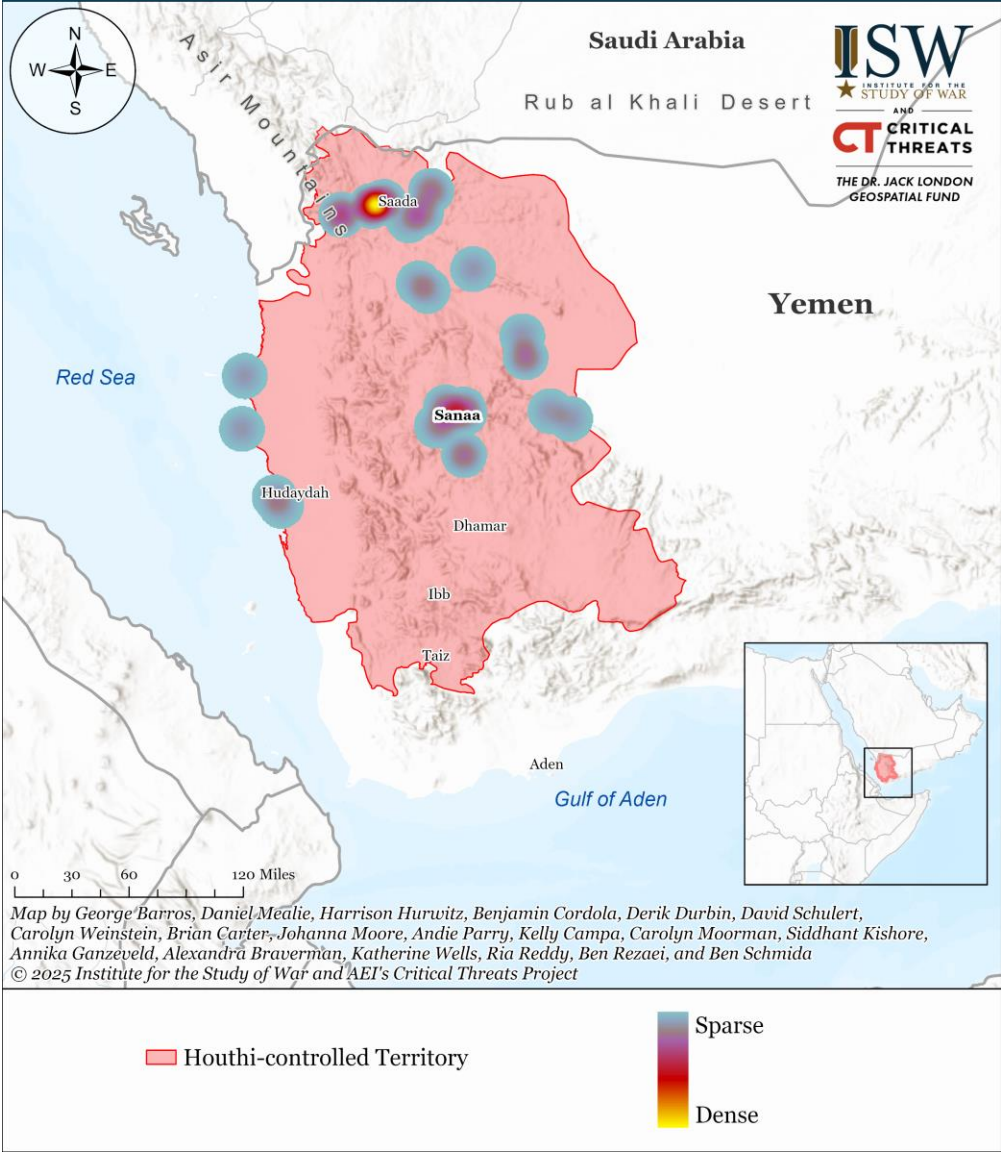


CENTCOM has continued to target Houthi military bases near the al Jawf Junction that connects Houthi supply lines from Sanaa City to the Houthis' eastern front in Marib and al Jawf governorates.[49] Many of these bases, including the Mass Military Base, were previously Yemeni Armed Forces bases before the Houthis occupied western Marib and al Jawf governorates in 2020.[50] These bases include Houthi underground facilities, weapons depots, missile and drone launch sites, and command and control centers, according to an independent Yemeni defense outlet.[51] The outlet reported on April 15 that the Houthis control the Nihm and Heelan mountain ranges in the area, which is where the Salb Gold Extraction Company is based. This company is an important source of income for the Houthis.[52] The outlet added that the Houthis have recently moved heavy weapons, including tanks, artillery, and military equipment, to its eastern front.[53]

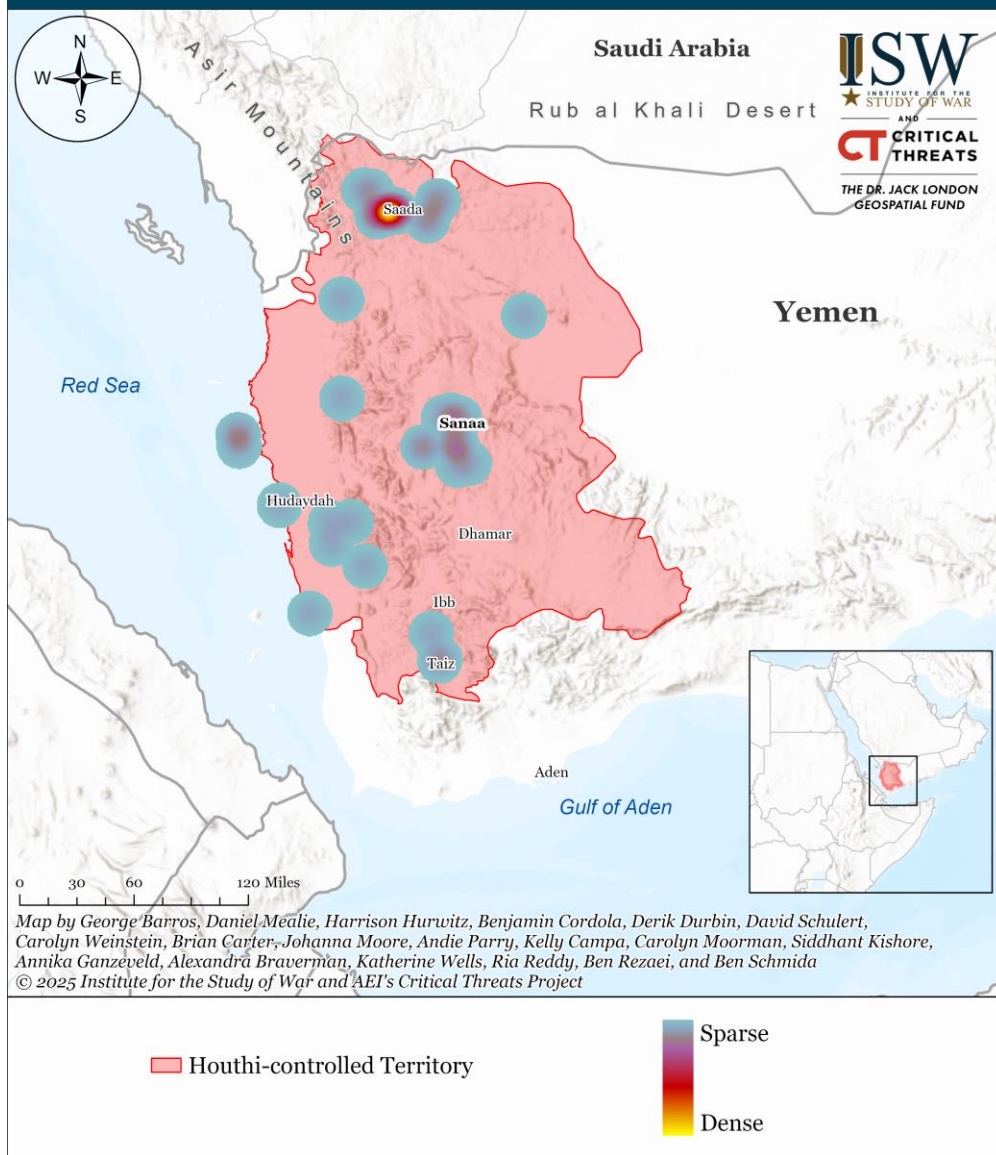
US Strikes Against Houthi Targets
March 16 to March 22, 2025



US Strikes Against Houthi Targets March 23 to March 29, 2025

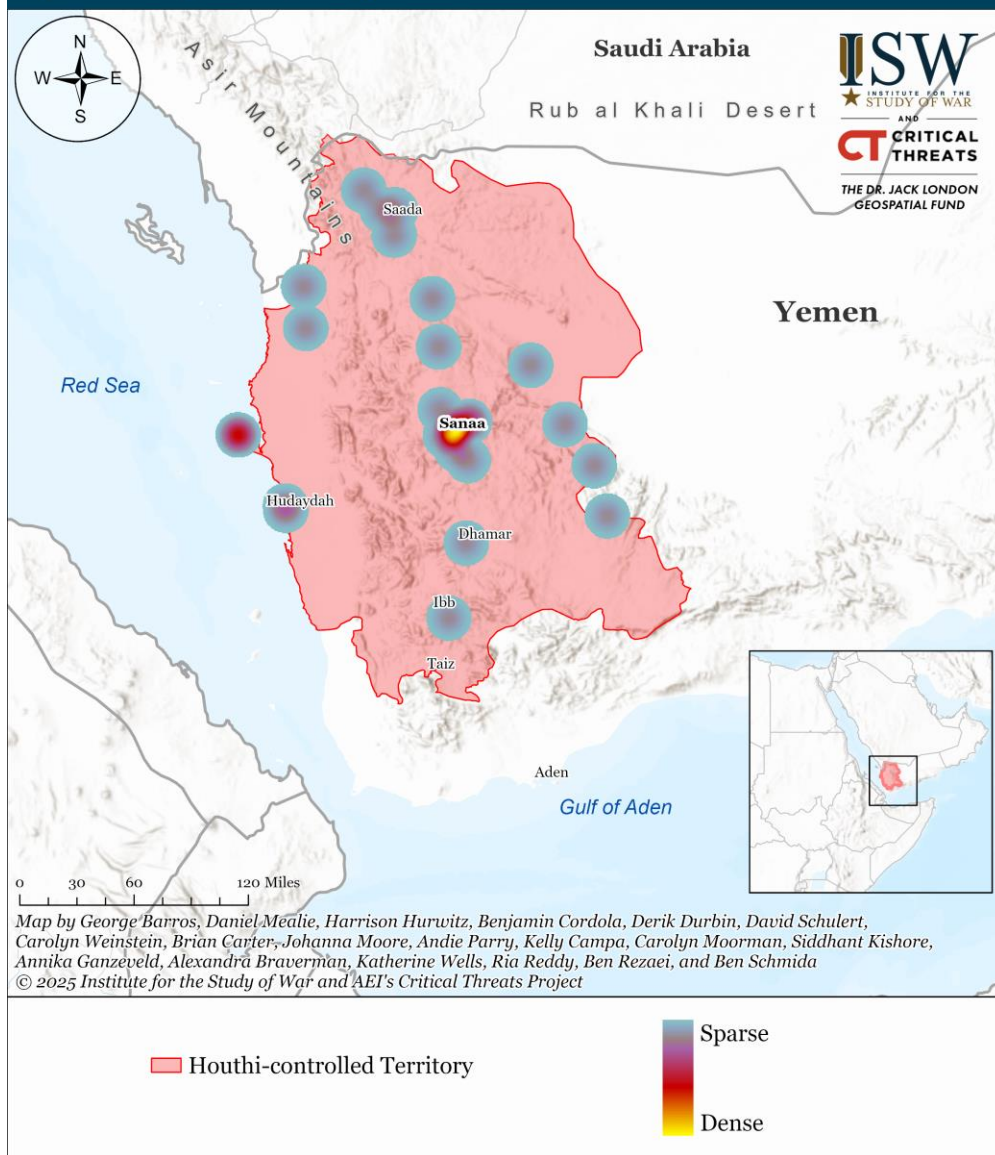


US Strikes Against Houthi Targets March 30 to April 5, 2025



US Strikes Against Houthi Targets

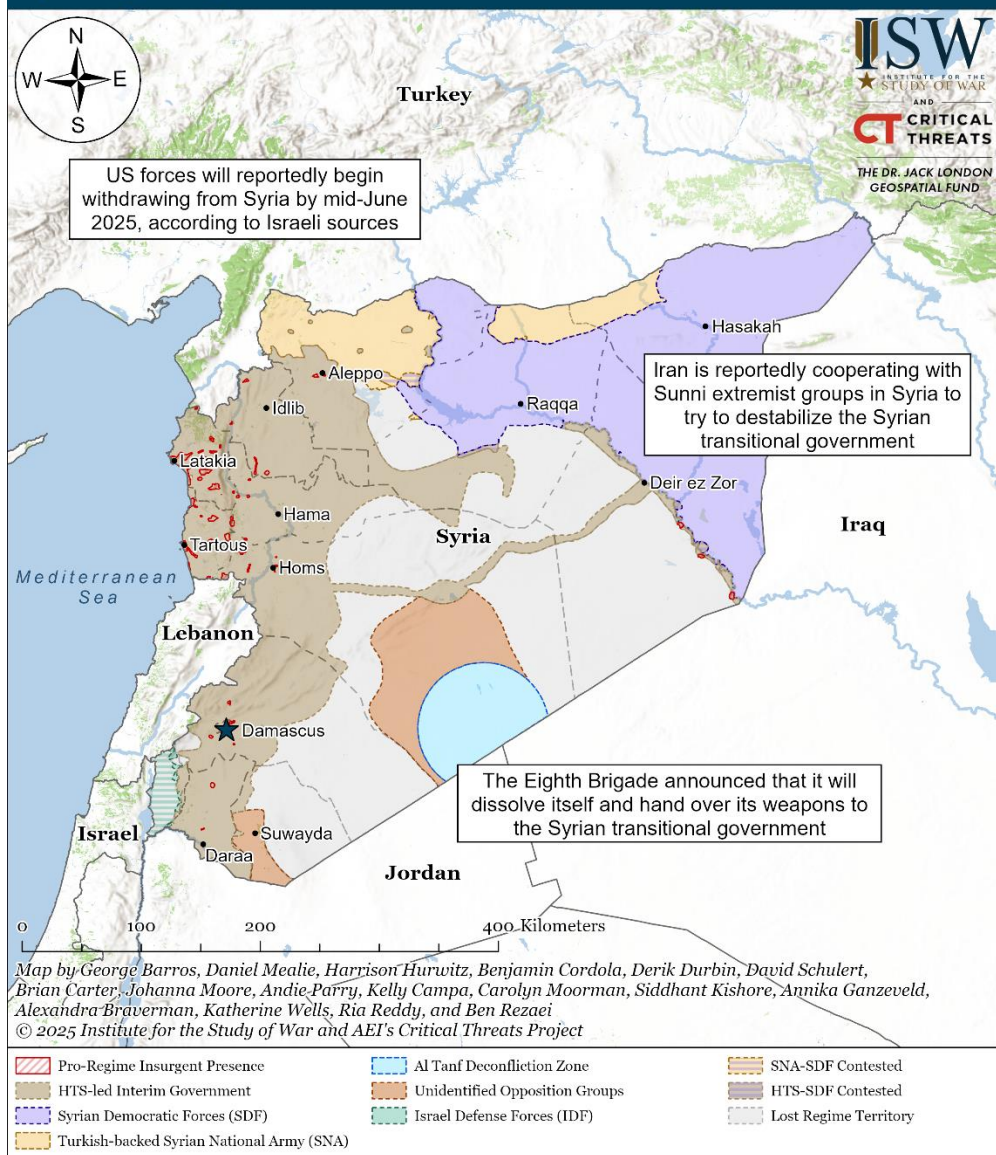
April 6 to April 12, 2025



US forces will reportedly begin withdrawing from Syria by mid-June 2025, according to Israeli media.[54] The Trump administration ordered the US Defense Department to begin preparing plans for the withdrawal of US service members from Syria in early February 2025.[55] CTP-ISW previously assessed that ISIS could resurge in Syria in 12 to 24 months without a US presence there.[56] US Central Command warned in July 2024 that ISIS is trying to reconstitute.[57] A US withdrawal would severely undermine the counter-ISIS mission in Iraq and Syria and would create a vacuum that ISIS could exploit to reconstitute.[58]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

April 15, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Jordanian authorities arrested 16 individuals linked to the Muslim Brotherhood on April 15 for planning rocket and drone attacks in Jordan.[59]

Jordanian authorities said that the Muslim Brotherhood trained and financed some of the individuals in Lebanon. Jordanian security services located dozens of rockets at a rocket manufacturing facility and a drone factory on the outskirts of Amman. The suspects had manufactured rockets with a three-to-five-kilometer range to strike Jordanian targets and had enough material to produce 300 rockets.[60] There is currently no evidence that links Iran or Iranian-backed actors to this incident. The incident is notable given that Iran has recently placed greater importance on Jordan in its regional strategy, however.[61] Israeli and Jordanian police thwarted multiple Iranian-led attempts to smuggle small arms and other weapons to the West Bank via Jordan in 2024.[62] CTP-ISW previously assessed that Iran could seek to invest

further in building networks in Jordan to develop Iranian-backed militia infrastructure in the West Bank. A prominent Iranian-backed Iraqi militia separately claimed in April 2024 that the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, which is a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, planned to “equip” 12,000 “Islamic Resistance in Jordan” fighters with weapons.[63]

Key Takeaways:

- **Iranian Nuclear Negotiations:** Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei may calculate that engaging in nuclear negotiations with the United States is the best option for preserving Iranian regime stability. Khamenei’s main priority is preserving the Iranian regime. Khamenei may calculate that engaging in nuclear negotiations with the United States will improve Iranian economic conditions and prevent a strike on Iranian nuclear facilities.
- **Iranian Nuclear Negotiations:** US President Donald Trump discussed the ongoing nuclear talks with Iran with senior US foreign policy and national security officials on April 15. Unspecified individuals briefed on the talks told the *Wall Street Journal* on April 14 that the Trump administration intends to discuss Iran’s support for the Axis of Resistance with Iran but that “the topic didn’t come up for discussion” on April 12. Iranian sources previously stated that Trump’s March 5 letter to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei included demands that Iran curtail its support for the Axis of Resistance. Iran and the Axis of Resistance have conducted an information operation targeting the West in recent weeks that seeks to obfuscate Iran’s role in leading the Axis of Resistance.
- **Syrian Militia Integration:** The Eighth Brigade announced on April 13 that it will dissolve itself and surrender its weapons to the Syrian transitional government amid government pressure on the group. The transitional government appears to be trying to reduce the Eighth Brigade’s influence over security in southeastern Daraa.
- **Iranian Efforts in Syria:** Iran is reportedly cooperating with Sunni extremist groups in Syria, including ISIS, following the collapse of its networks in Syria after the fall of the Assad regime. CTP-ISW previously assessed that Iran is attempting to inflame sectarian tensions in Syria, likely to try to destabilize the Syrian transitional government and thereby re-entrench itself in Syria. Several Sunni extremist groups have formed in western Syria since the fall of the Assad regime and the transitional government has fought a counterinsurgency campaign in the areas where these groups operate since early March 2025. There is currently no evidence that these groups have any connections to Iran, but Iran could seek to work with these groups try to advance its strategic objectives in Syria.
- **Potential Ground Offensive Against the Houthis:** Anti-Houthi Yemeni factions are reportedly planning a ground offensive against the Houthis to recapture the western coast of Yemen, including Hudaydah Port, according to US and Yemeni officials speaking to the *Wall Street Journal*. A successful ground operation against the Houthis would require some degree of political and military coordination among the fragmented anti-Houthi Yemeni factions. The Joint Forces on the West Coast spokesperson told the *Wall Street Journal* that a ground campaign against the Houthis would require the support of the internationally-recognized Yemeni government and the Saudi-Emirati military coalition.[64]

- **Potential US Military Withdrawal from the Middle East:** US forces will reportedly begin withdrawing from Syria by mid-June 2025, according to Israeli media. The Trump administration ordered the US Defense Department to begin preparing plans for the withdrawal of US service members from Syria in early February 2025. CTP-ISW previously assessed that ISIS could resurge in Syria in 12 to 24 months without a US presence there.
- **Jordan Attack Plot:** Jordanian authorities arrested 16 individuals linked to the Muslim Brotherhood on April 15 for planning rocket and drone attacks in Jordan. There is currently no evidence that links Iran or Iranian-backed actors to this incident. The incident is notable given that Iran has recently placed greater importance on Jordan in its regional strategy, however.

Syria

A Daraa resident attempted to conduct a suicide attack targeting an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) checkpoint in al Rafeed, Quneitra Province, on April 15.[65] The attacker reportedly used grenades in the attempted attack.[66] Using grenades to conduct a suicide attack is more rudimentary than using a suicide vest (SVES) that has explosive materials connected to a detonator.[67] The attacker reportedly fled from the checkpoint unharmed after the IDF opened fire at him.[68]

Syrian President Ahmed al Shara met with Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad al Thani during a visit to Doha on April 15.[69] Thani personally welcomed Shara and his delegation at the international airport in Doha, a notable gesture of diplomatic support.[70] Qatar was the first Arab country to recognize the new Syrian government after it reopened its embassy in Damascus in December 2024.[71] Thani was the first foreign leader to visit Syria after the fall of the Assad regime.[72]

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

Multiple Iraqi parliamentarians affiliated with Iranian-backed Iraqi militias urged the Iraqi federal government on April 15 to investigate several Sunni groups in Kirkuk and Ninewa provinces for their alleged ties to Turkey.[73] A member of Asaib Ahl al Haq's Sadiqoun bloc called for the Parliamentary Security and Defense Committee to investigate the Ninewa Guards and Kirkuk Shield Forces.[74] A Badr Organization parliamentarian separately urged the Iraqi Defense Ministry to "vet" these groups and hold accountable any forces that do not operate under the Iraqi federal government.[75] Asaib Ahl al Haq leader Qais al Khazali claimed on April 1 that Turkey equips the Ninewa Guards and Kirkuk Shield Forces and that the groups have "infiltrated" the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) 59th Brigade.[76] Former Ninewa Governor Atheel al Nujaifi established the Ninewa Guards in 2014 to fight ISIS.[77] Turkey and the United States helped train the group's members. The Ninewa Guards integrated into the Mosul-based PMF 59th Brigade in 2017.[78] Asaib Ahl al Haq-controlled media claimed on April 11 that the Ninewa Guards includes former senior Baathist officers and is equipped with "light and medium weapons," including mortars.[79] Asaib Ahl

al Haq-controlled media, citing unspecified documents seized by the Counter Terrorism Service, also reported that Turkey and former Baathist officers train Kirkuk Shield Brigade members.[80] Senior Baathist officers from the Saddam Hussein era are likely elderly now, and it is unclear why Asaib Ahl al Haq is accusing these officers of working with the Ninewa Guards and Kirkuk Shield Forces. Asaib Ahl al Haq-controlled media claimed that Turkey pays the Kirkuk Shield Brigades hundreds of dollars a month to guard the Turkman Front party's headquarters in Kirkuk and gather intelligence for Turkey.[81] This report comes as Iran and Iranian-backed Iraqi actors have recently expressed concern about Turkish regional influence, particularly after the fall of the Assad regime in Syria.[82]

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

See topline section.

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

See topline section.

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 879,000 rials to one US dollar on April 14 to 890,000 rials on April 15.[83]

Iranian Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister Brigadier General Aziz Nasir Zadeh met with Tajik Defense Minister Lieutenant General Emomali Sobirzoda in Tehran on April 15 to discuss strengthening defense cooperation.[84] The two ministers

emphasized the role of organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in addressing regional security threats. Iran has increased defense cooperation with Tajikistan in recent years. Iran opened a drone production facility in Dushanbe in 2022, for example.[85]

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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