

Iran Update



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Information Cutoff: April 21, 2025, 2:00 pm ET

The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) publish the Iran Update, which provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests. CTP-ISW publishes the Iran Update every weekday.

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 and the United States held a second round of nuclear talks in Rome on April 19.[1]

The *New York Times* reported that Iran and the United States agreed on an agenda for “rapid-paced negotiations” during the talks on April 19.[2] Fast-paced negotiations would not necessarily indicate that Iran and the United States have made progress toward resolving outstanding issues, such as Iranian uranium enrichment levels. Iranian officials told the *New York Times* that the “rapid-paced negotiations” would not require Iran to dismantle its nuclear infrastructure. Iranian officials have emphasized in recent days that Iran is willing to reduce its uranium enrichment but have rejected demands to completely dismantle the Iranian nuclear program.[3]

Senior US, Iranian, and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) officials conducted a series of meetings on the sidelines of the nuclear talks in Rome.

IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi met with US Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff in Rome on April 19.[4] Grossi previously met with senior Iranian officials in Tehran on April 16 and 17 to discuss technical issues and the US-Iran talks.[5] Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi also met with Italian Foreign Affairs Minister Antonio Tajani in Rome on April 19.[6] Israeli Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer was reportedly in Rome at the time of the talks.[7] Dermer and Witkoff met in Paris on April 18.[8]

Iran and the United States plan to hold technical-level discussions in Muscat, Oman, on April 23, followed by a third round of high-level talks in Muscat on April 26.[9]

The *New York Times* reported that the technical-level talks will focus on the maximum level to which Iran could enrich uranium and mechanisms for monitoring and verifying Iranian compliance with a nuclear agreement.[10] The *Wall Street Journal* reported on April 19 that major intelligence gaps remain in the IAEA’s understanding of Iran’s nuclear program.[11] Iran’s removal of monitoring equipment and limits on inspector access in recent years has contributed to these intelligence gaps.[12]

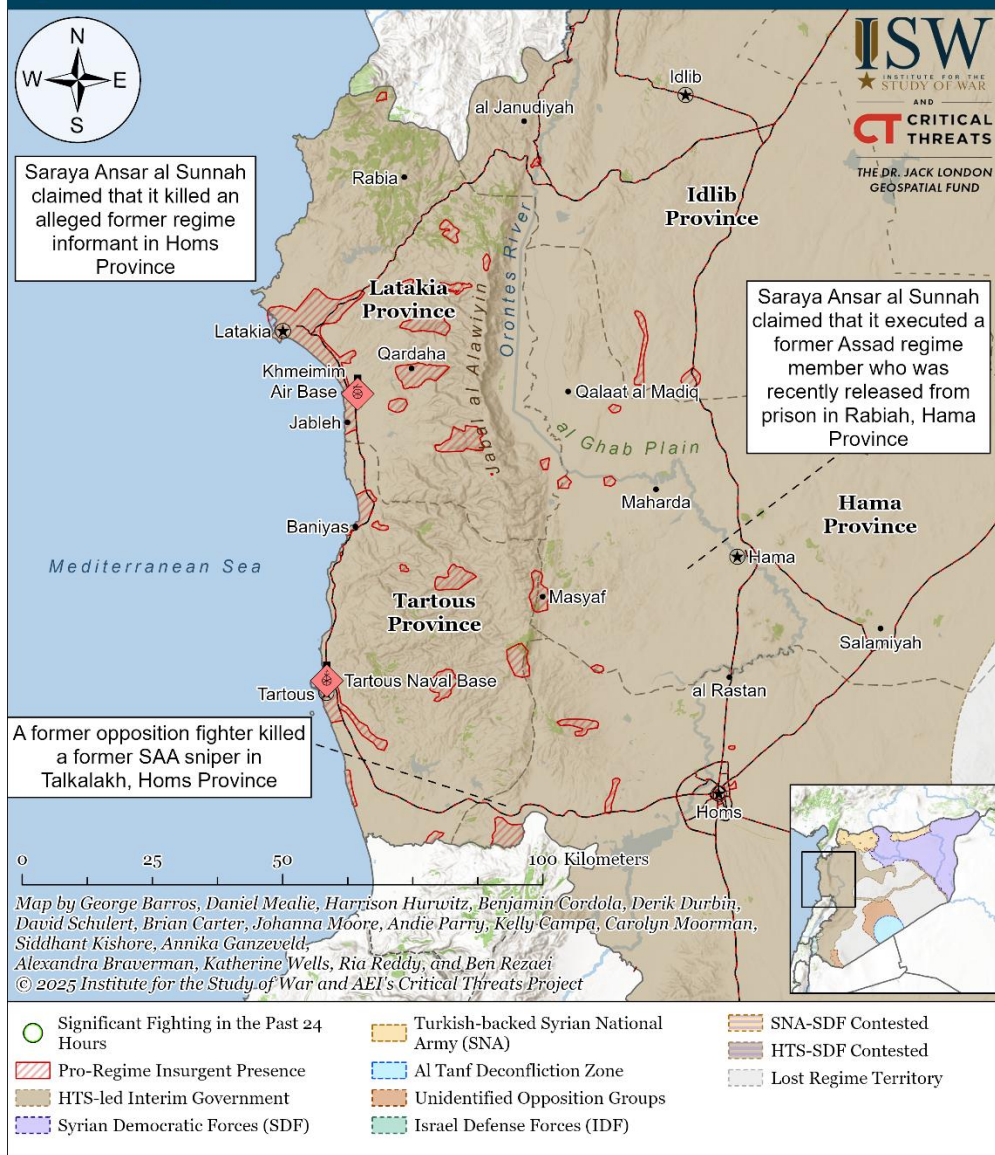
The US Department of Defense will reduce the number of US forces deployed in Syria to "less than a thousand US forces" in the coming months.^[13] Pentagon Spokesperson Sean Parnell announced on April 18 that the reduction of troops will be a "deliberate and conditions-based process."^[14] The United States maintained roughly 900 US personnel in Syria between 2019 and 2024, when the United States increased the number of troops to 2,000 US personnel.^[15] Two senior US officials told the *New York Times* on April 17 that the United States will close three bases in Syria, including Mission Support Site Green Village and Mission Support Site Euphrates.^[16] Both bases have enabled US forces to support Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) counter-ISIS operations along the Euphrates River in zones where ISIS cells operate. A full US withdrawal from Syria would severely undermine the counter-ISIS mission in Iraq and Syria and would create a vacuum that ISIS could exploit to reconstitute. Parnell said that US Central Command (CENTCOM) will remain "poised" to conduct airstrikes targeting ISIS members in Syria and will continue to support coalition partners to degrade ISIS.^[17] Parnell called on the international community to repatriate their nationals from detention camps in northeastern Syria.^[18]

Anti-Assad groups appear to be conducting acts of vigilante justice in response to the Syrian transitional government's failure to prosecute and hold accountable former Assad regime officials. A group of Aleppo-based former opposition fighters formed a "task force" on April 21 to kill former Assad regime members.^[19] A Syrian source claimed that the group has begun tracking former regime members in Aleppo Province.^[20] A former opposition fighter killed a former Syrian Arab Army (SAA) sniper in Talkalakh, Homs Province, on April 20.^[21] The opposition fighter claimed that he had filed a complaint with the government that accused the sniper of killing his relatives. The opposition fighter stated that he took matters into his own hands after the government failed to respond to his complaint. Anti-government Salafi-jihadi militia Saraya Ansar al Sunnah separately claimed on April 19 that it executed a recently-imprisoned former regime member in Rabiah, Hama Province.^[22] Saraya Ansar al Sunnah said that the execution was part of a new campaign targeting former regime members who were recently released from prison.^[23] The Syrian transitional government has released at least three groups of former Assad regime officials from Adra Prison in Damascus since March 2025.^[24] Most of the released prisoners are former SAA personnel, including commissioned officers.^[25] Saraya Ansar al Sunnah separately killed an alleged former regime informant in Homs Province on April 20.^[26]

These acts of vigilante justice highlight the urgent need for the Syrian transitional government to conduct transparent transitional justice. The transitional government has thus far failed to publicly prosecute high-profile former Assad regime members who committed crimes against the Syrian people under Assad. The transitional government must charge, prosecute, and sentence former Assad regime members to demonstrate its commitment to transitional justice. Vigilante justice undermines trust in the transitional government and can create fear among those being targeted.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Western Syria

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Documents leaked by Iraqi militias suggest that Syrian President Ahmed al Shara's time in Camp Bucca may have been instrumental in enabling him to return to Syria to establish Jabhat al Nusra. The documents are also mostly consistent with Western reporting and Shara's own statements about his background. US forces detained Shara in 2005, probably only months after he returned to Iraq at some point between late 2003 and early 2005.[27] Shara spent five years at Camp Bucca after a brief stay at Abu Ghraib.[28] Camp Bucca was a notorious incubator for future Islamic State (IS) commanders and Shara's detainment at Bucca probably enabled him to build relationships with the "intermediaries" who put him in contact with IS "caliph" Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.[29] Leaked internal IS letters suggest that Shara and Baghdadi had a contentious relationship with major ideological differences.[30] These differences, combined with

Shara's relatively minor status, probably explains why Baghdadi only gave Shara 50-60,000 USD and 6 other fighters to establish Jabhat al Nusra after Shara originally asked for 100 men.[31]

Saudi media reported on April 19 that the Houthis have placed landmines around Hudaydah City in preparation for a potential Yemeni Armed Forces ground offensive, citing unspecified government sources.[32] The Houthis have previously used landmines to fortify Houthi positions against Yemeni Armed Forces attacks.[33] Landmines are a relatively inexpensive way for the Houthis to fortify their defensive positions on the coastal plains in Hudaydah Governorate against a potential ground incursion from the south.

Cryptocurrency fraud investigation company TRM Labs reported on April 17 that the Houthis are part of a cryptocurrency network that includes Russian and Chinese military equipment manufacturers.[34] TRM Labs reported that eight Houthi cryptocurrency addresses sent over \$900 million to addresses connected to a Russian broker that sells drones and other military equipment on behalf of Chinese manufacturers.[35] The Houthi addresses sent transactions through an intermediary address, which has conducted several transactions on behalf of financial facilitators linked to Hezbollah. US-sanctioned Houthi financier Said al Jamal's network is also part of this cryptocurrency network. The US Department of the Treasury previously connected five cryptocurrency addresses to Jamal in December 2024.[36] TRM Labs reported that these five addresses have received over \$330 million in incoming transactions.[37]

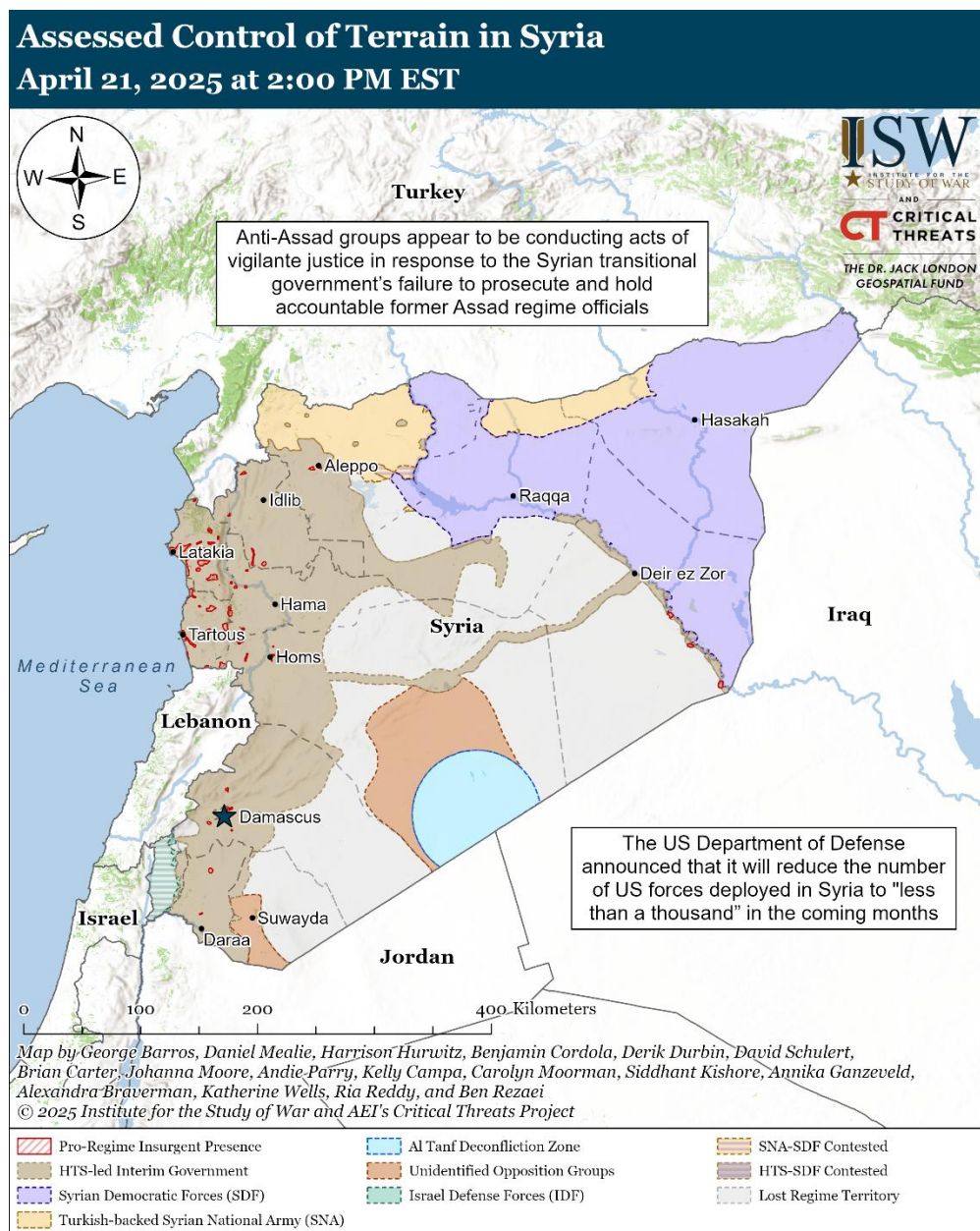
Key Takeaways:

- **US-Iran Talks:** Iran and the United States held a second round of nuclear talks in Rome on April 19. Senior US, Iranian, and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) officials conducted a series of meetings on the sidelines of the nuclear talks in Rome. Iran and the United States plan to hold technical-level discussions in Muscat, Oman, on April 23, followed by a third round of high-level talks in Muscat on April 26.
- **US Military Withdrawal from Syria:** The US Department of Defense will reduce the number of US forces deployed in Syria to "less than a thousand US forces" in the coming months. Two senior US officials told the *New York Times* on April 17 that the United States will close three bases in Syria, including Mission Support Site Green Village and Mission Support Site Euphrates. A full US withdrawal from Syria would severely undermine the counter-ISIS mission in Iraq and Syria and would create a vacuum that ISIS could exploit to reconstitute.
- **Vigilante Justice in Syria:** Anti-Assad groups appear to be conducting acts of vigilante justice in response to the Syrian transitional government's failure to prosecute and hold accountable former Assad regime officials. The transitional government has thus far failed to publicly prosecute high-profile former Assad regime members who committed crimes against the Syrian people under Assad. The transitional government must charge, prosecute, and sentence former Assad regime members to demonstrate its commitment to transitional justice.
- **Ahmed al Shara:** Documents leaked by Iraqi militias suggest that Syrian President Ahmed al Shara's time in Camp Bucca may have been instrumental in enabling him to return to Syria to establish Jabhat al Nusra. The documents are also mostly consistent with Western reporting and Shara's own statements about his background. Camp Bucca was a notorious incubator for future

Islamic State (IS) commanders and Shara's detainment at Bucca probably enabled him to build relationships with the "intermediaries" who put him in contact with IS "caliph" Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.

- **Houthi Military Preparations:** Saudi media reported on April 19 that the Houthis have placed landmines around Hudaydah City in preparation for a potential Yemeni Armed Forces ground offensive, citing unspecified government sources. The Houthis have previously used landmines to fortify Houthi positions against Yemeni Armed Forces attacks.

Syria



Outstanding disagreements between the Syrian transitional government and the US-

backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have prevented the government from asserting full control over the Tishreen Dam in Aleppo Province. The transitional government was expected to take over the dam on April 19.[38] The SDF reportedly demanded on April 19 that the Syrian Ministry of Defense (MoD) authorize the SDF Internal Security Forces (also known as Asayish) to supervise the dam.[39] The transitional government rejected the demand and insisted that the Syrian Energy Ministry will oversee the operations of the dam instead.[40] The transitional government will allow SDF-appointed staff to continue working at the dam under the Syrian Energy Ministry's supervision.[41] The Syrian government's position is consistent with the March 2025 SDF-MoD ceasefire agreement that stipulated that the dam would be a demilitarized zone.[42]

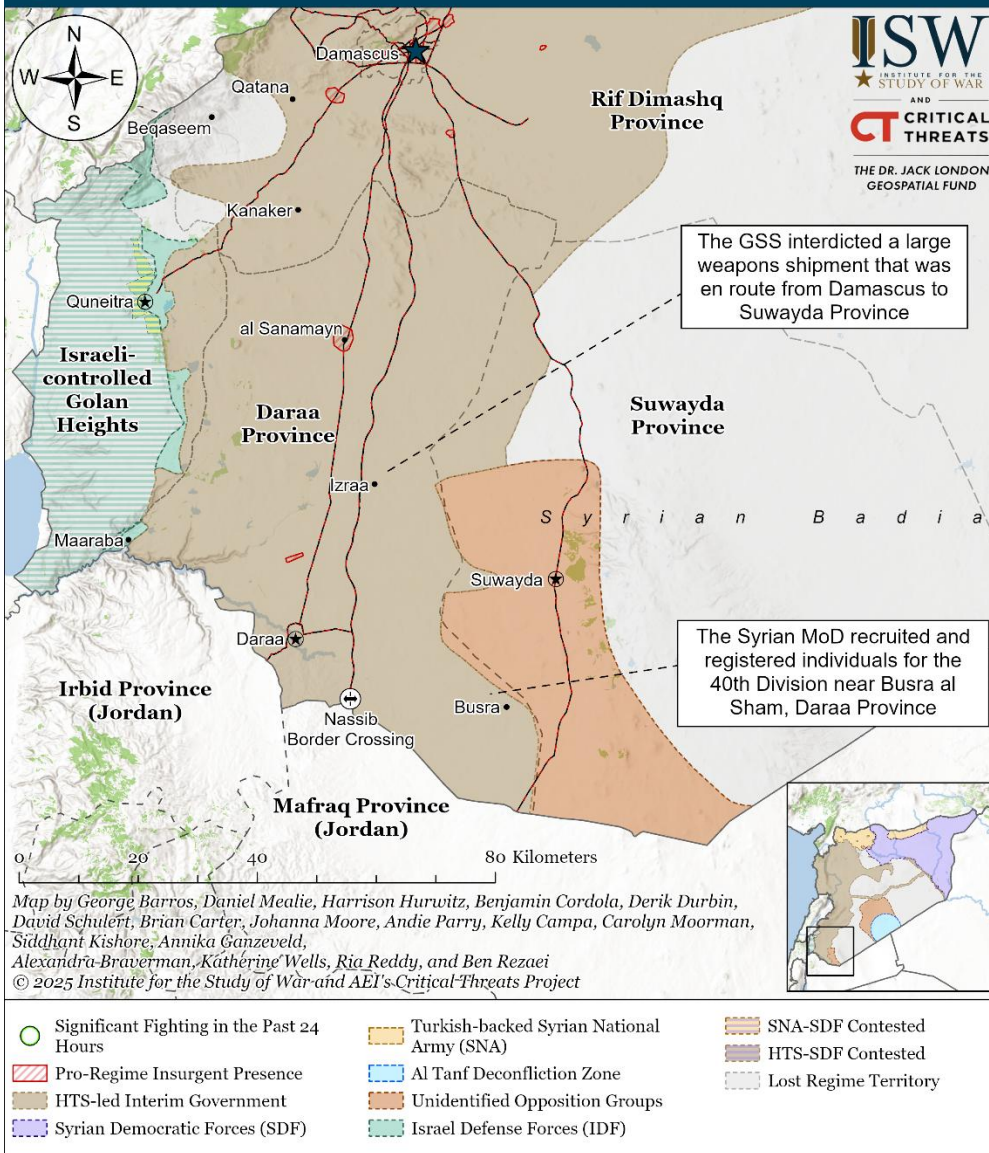
Anti-SDF media claimed that a Turkish drone struck an SDF vehicle, killing two SDF leaders, along the M4 highway in Raqqqa Province on April 19.[43] A Kurdish source rejected these claims, stating that the vehicle hit an improvised explosive device (IED).[44] SDF-affiliated social media accounts have not confirmed that a drone attack took place. The claims of a Turkish drone strike come after the SDF and Turkey reportedly agreed to a ceasefire on April 17.[45]

The Syrian General Security Services (GSS) interdicted a weapons shipment in Izraa, Daraa Province, on April 21 that was en route from Damascus to Suwayda Province.[46] GSS forces seized 40 anti-tank missiles, around 60 Iranian-made 107mm rockets, and an unspecified number of heavy machine guns.[47] GSS forces arrested a driver who had transported the weapons.[48]

The Syrian Ministry of Defense (MoD) began recruiting and registering individuals for the Syrian army's 40th Division near Busra al Sham, Daraa Province, on April 21.[49] 40th Division Commander Colonel Binyan Hariri, MoD commanders, and local leaders met on April 20 to discuss military affairs and recruitment.[50] A MoD-affiliated committee will oversee the recruitment process.[51] CTP-ISW previously assessed that the Syrian government appears to be trying to reduce the Eighth Brigade's influence over security in southeastern Daraa. A military source told southern Syria-based media that the 40th Division is expected to begin training within the next two weeks.[52]

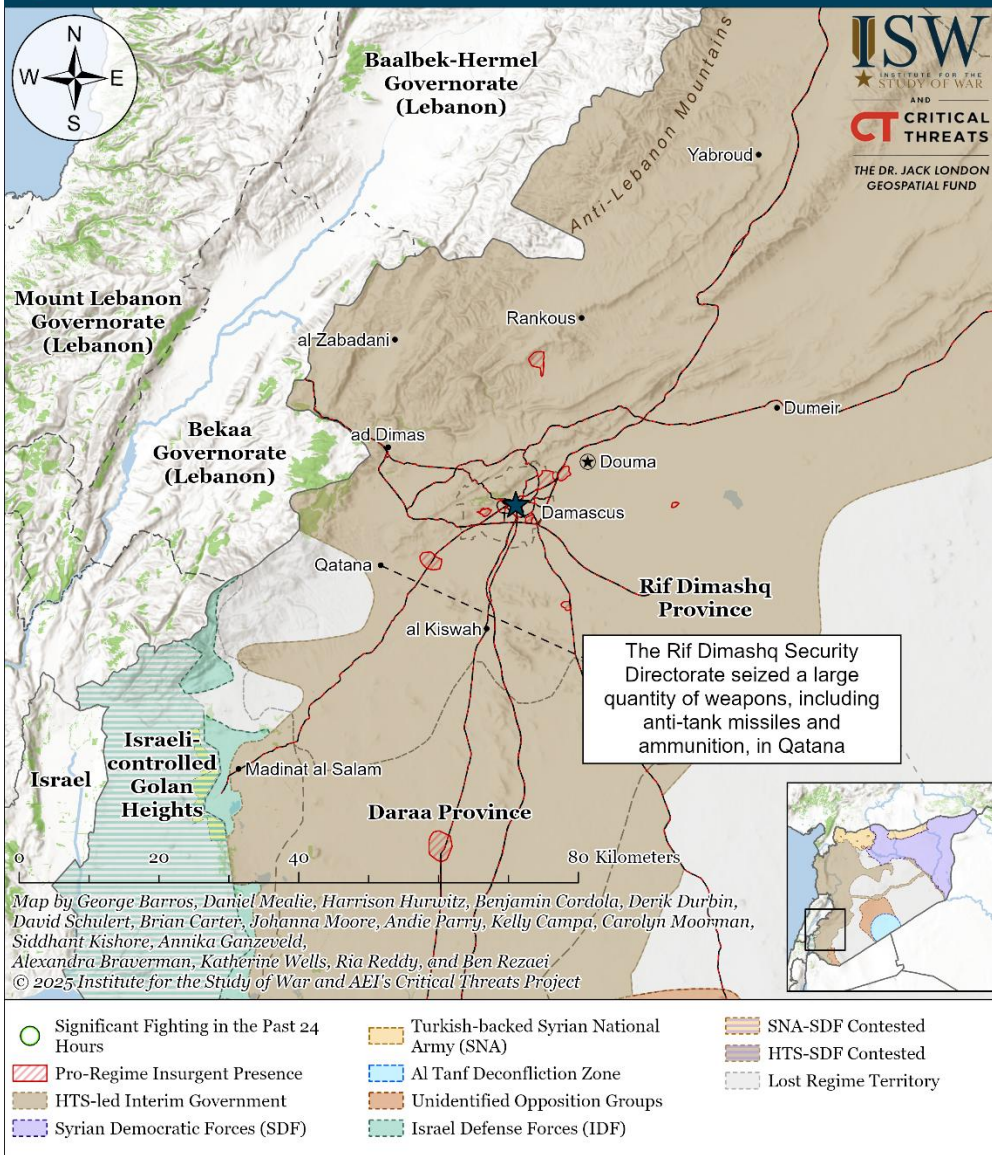
Assessed Control of Terrain in Southwestern Syria

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The Rif Dimashq Security Directorate seized a large number of weapons, including anti-tank missiles and ammunition, near a warehouse in Qatana, Rif Dimashq Province, on April 21.[53] The Rif Dimashq Security Directorate stated that unspecified actors intended to smuggle these weapons to an unspecified location outside of Syria.

Assessed Control of Terrain around Rif Dimashq April 21, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Syrian President Ahmed al Shara met with US representatives Corey Lee Mills and Marlin Stutzman on April 18 and 21, respectively.[54] Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al Shaibani also met with Representative Mills and discussed the impact of unilateral US sanctions on the Syrian economy.[55] Representative Stutzman stated that lifting sanctions would be very beneficial for the Syrian economy but that any decision to lift sanctions “would be President Trump’s decision.”[56]

The Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations (UN), Abdullah al Dardari, told Western media on April 19 that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank will discuss the possibility of resuming financial support for Syria.[57] The discussions will take place on the sidelines of the IMF and World Bank Spring Meetings in Washington, DC.[58] Syrian

Foreign Affairs Minister Asaad al Shaibani, Finance Minister Mohammed Yusr Barniyeh, and Central Bank Governor Abdul Qader al Husriya will attend the meeting.[59] This meeting comes amid recent reports that Saudi Arabia plans to pay off Syria's approximately \$15 million debt to the World Bank.[60] Dardari stated that the Saudi payment would allow the World Bank to provide support to Syria through its International Development Association.[61] Dardari also said that the UN Development Program (UNDP) hopes to provide Syria with \$1.3 billion over a three-year period to support various Syrian sectors.[62] The UNDP recently obtained an exemption from the US Treasury Department to raise funds of up to \$50 million to repair Syria's Deir Ali Power Plant.[63] Three unspecified sources told Western media that the World Bank is exploring providing hundreds of millions of dollars in grants to Syria to support essential Syrian services.[64]

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

The Shia Coordination Framework is reportedly divided into at least two factions ahead of the 2025 parliamentary elections.[65] The Shia Coordination Framework is a loose coalition of Shia political parties, some of which Iran backs. Shia Coordination Framework members have become divided over their support for Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani's participation in the upcoming elections.[66] Sudani will establish the "Decision" coalition with the Badr Organization's Fatah Alliance and Popular Mobilization Committee Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh's Ataa Movement.[67] Badr Organization Secretary General Hadi al Ameri and Fayyadh have recently supported Sudani's efforts to pass the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) Authority Law, which would extend Fayyadh's chairmanship and reinforce Sudani's control over the PMF. Former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki, Maliki's son-in-law Yasser Sakhil, and Asaib Ahl al Haq leader Qais al Khazali oppose Sudani's participation in the upcoming elections. Maliki and Khazali have opposed Sudani's efforts to pass the PMF Authority Law.[68]

The secretary general of the National Affiliation Party in Anbar Province announced on April 20 that six lists from Anbar Province to participate in the 2025 parliamentary elections.[69] Former Parliament Speaker Mohammad al Halbousi will lead the Progress Alliance, Qimam, and National Monument lists. Ahmed al Alwani, who is a relative of the head of Qimam, was released from prison on April 20 after being detained for 10 years.[70] Alwani led demonstrations against former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki and accused the Iraqi government of marginalizing Sunnis.[71] Azm Alliance leader Muthanna al Samarrai and Sovereignty Party leader Khamis al Khanjar, who are long-time political rivals of Halbousi, will register separate lists.[72] Other smaller political parties in Anbar are expected to register on a single list to compete with Halbousi's larger political coalition.[73]

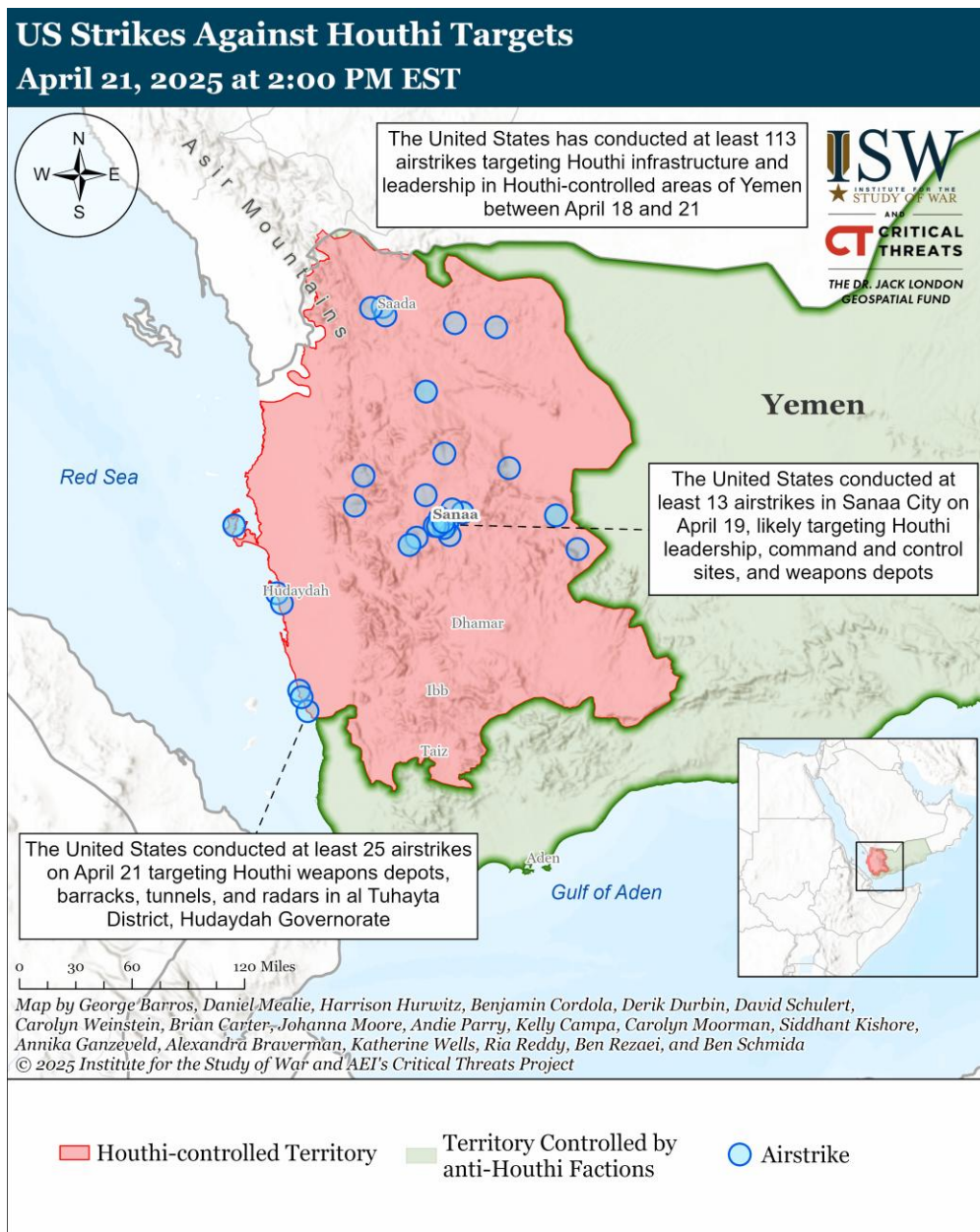
Arabian Peninsula

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) has conducted at least 113 airstrikes targeting Houthi infrastructure and leadership in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen since April 18.[74]

CENTCOM conducted at least 25 airstrikes on April 21 targeting Houthi weapons depots, barracks, tunnels, and radars in al Tuhayta District, Hudaydah Governorate.[75] CENTCOM conducted at least 13 airstrikes targeting Hudaydah Port and Airport.[76] CENTCOM also conducted at least eight airstrikes in two separate sorties targeting Houthi facilities on Kamaran Island, Hudaydah Governorate, on April 19 and 20.[77] CENTCOM conducted at least 13 airstrikes in Sanaa City on April 19, likely targeting Houthi leadership, command and control sites, and weapons depots.[78]



Open-source analysts assessed that two attacks on April 20 in al Mahwit Governorate and Sanaa City, which Houthi media reported as CENTCOM airstrikes, were more likely unsuccessful Houthi missile attacks.^[79]

Anti-Houthi media reported that US airstrikes in Yemen since March 15 have killed at least 200 Houthi fighters, citing field sources.^[80]

Houthi President Mahdi al Mashat stated that the Houthis are “prepared for all scenarios” during a meeting with senior Houthi commanders on April 20.^[81]

The Houthis claimed on April 19 that they shot down a US MQ-9 Reaper drone with a domestically produced surface-to-air missile over Sanaa Governorate.[82] The Houthis claimed that they have shot down 21 US MQ-9 Reaper drones since the start of the October 7 War.

The Houthis claimed on April 21 that they launched an unspecified number of drones at an unspecified target in Ashkelon, southern Israel.[83] The Houthis also claimed that they launched an unspecified number of drones at Eilat in southern Israel. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has not commented on either attack at the time of this writing.

The Houthis claimed on April 21 that they launched two drones and two missiles at the USS *Harry S. Truman* in the northern Red Sea.[84] The Houthis also claimed on April 21 that they launched four drones and three missiles at the USS *Carl Vinson* in the Red Sea. CENTCOM has not confirmed either attack.

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

Hezbollah Secretary General Naim Qassem stated on April 18 that Hezbollah will not disarm.[85] Qassem stated that Hezbollah will “confront” anyone who tries to disarm Hezbollah.[86] Qassem’s statement comes amid an Iranian-led information operation that aims to obfuscate Iranian support for its proxies. A senior Hezbollah official recently claimed as part of this information operation that Hezbollah would be willing to disarm.[87]

The IDF killed Hezbollah Unit 4400 Deputy Commander Hussein Ali Nasser in an airstrike in southern Lebanon on April 20.[88] Nasser worked with Iranian officials to facilitate Hezbollah reconstitution by smuggling weapons and funds into Lebanon, including through Beirut International Airport. Nasser facilitated the purchase of weapons from smugglers on the Syria-Lebanon border to Hezbollah.

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 853,000 rials to one US dollar on April 18 to 828,000 rials to one US dollar on April 21.[89]

Senior Iranian officials continue to be concerned about a potential US or Israeli strike on Iran. Khatam ol Anbia Air Defense Headquarters Commander Brigadier General Alireza Sabahi Fard assessed the operational readiness of the Siraf Air Defense Group and inspected the Shahid Bushehrian Air Defense Zone in Bushehr Province on April 20 and 21, respectively.[90] These visits are part of a series of inspections that Sabahi Fard has conducted to Iranian air defense sites in southern Iran in recent weeks.

The Iranian Defense Ministry displayed domestically-produced drones, missiles, and small arms at the 17th International Defense Exhibition in Baghdad, Iraq, on April 20.[91] The Iranian Defense Ministry displayed models of Iranian air defense systems and surface-to-air missiles.

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:



BABELSTREET

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