

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.

A variety of Syrian armed groups, including those associated with the new transitional government, the Assad regime, and hardline Islamic groups, have committed a series of extrajudicial killings since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. CTP-ISW absolutely condemns these extrajudicial killings.

A Salafi-jihadi group ideologically close to the Islamic State (IS) is conducting extrajudicial killings against Syrians perceived to be tied to the now-deposed Bashar al Assad regime. The group—Saraya Ansar al Sunnah—called for the killing of an Assad informant in Aleppo on April 13 and has claimed two killings targeting informants since then.[1] The group has conducted 19 other attacks targeting former Assad officials and the Alawite minority in western Syria as well.[2] The group has also announced that it will attack the Druze community in southwestern Suwayda Province.[3]

Saraya Ansar al Sunnah appears to support IS and share its extremist ideology. The group has stated that it seeks to excommunicate the “apostates” who fought IS, suggesting that the group opposes Assad supporters and the transitional government and could eventually fight both.[4] The group has also stated that it rejects worldly laws and modern borders, meaning that it recognizes neither the transitional government nor the borders of the Syrian state.[5] These statements indicate that Saraya Ansar al Sunnah would only acknowledge an Islamic polity under its interpretation of Sharia law, and that does not conform to internationally recognized borders. These views are extremely close to those

of IS. The group denied that it cooperates with IS but acknowledged that cooperation “may happen in the future and will be announced as [it] happens.”[6]

Saraya Ansar al Sunnah likely seeks to destabilize the fragile political transition in Syria as part of its effort to establish an Islamic state. The group opposes a Syrian state that includes Alawites, Druze, or Shia, further indicating that it opposes the ongoing transition.[7] The group’s killing of Syrians considered close to the Assad regime may be meant to stoke renewed conflict between Assad regime elements and the transitional government. These killings could generate support for the group from other sectarian Islamists and encourage Assad loyalists to reorganize militarily to defend themselves. Saraya Ansar al Sunnah could probably co-opt easily some of the sectarian Islamists who have already formed vigilante groups to attack Assad loyalists.[8] A reorganized force of Assad loyalists could seriously threaten the transitional government. Saraya Ansar al Sunnah could exploit the ensuing tensions to recruit new fighters and form an armed, hardline opposition to the current transition process. Saraya Ansar al Sunnah is not currently strong enough to seriously threaten the transitional government, though it could strengthen over time.

Saraya Ansar al Sunnah is exploiting real grievances in Syria caused by a lack of transitional justice in order to justify its attacks on Assad loyalists. The group’s killing of alleged Assad loyalists reflects that some Syrians believe that there has been no justice for the atrocities that the Assad regime committed.[9] Saraya Ansar al Sunnah likely views the punishment of Assad loyalists as secondary to the establishment of an Islamist state, however. Concerted efforts by the transitional government to hold former Assad officials accountable should undermine Saraya Ansar al Sunnah’s messaging, nonetheless. CTP-ISW absolutely condemns the extrajudicial killings conducted by Saraya Ansar al Sunnah and vigilante groups of all political persuasions.

Iran has reportedly established ties with extremist groups to destabilize the Syrian transition, meaning that Saraya Ansar al Sunnah’s destabilizing activities could support Iranian objectives.[10] There is no evidence that Iran supports Saraya Ansar al Sunnah at this time. But Iran has previously engaged other extremist Salafi-jihadi groups, such as al Qaeda, in support of its objectives.[11]

Iran continues to expand its nuclear infrastructure near Natanz. The Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) reported on April 23 that Iran is constructing a security perimeter around two underground nuclear tunnel complexes located within Mount Kolang Gaz La, south of the Natanz enrichment complex, citing commercially available satellite imagery.[12] The International Atomic Energy Agency has not visited either site. Imagery from March 2025 shows partially erected wall panels and road grading and leveling efforts to install a security perimeter. The security perimeter appears to encircle the base of the mountain and join with one side of the perimeter around Natanz. Iran announced in September 2020 that it was building a tunnel complex near Natanz to make advanced centrifuges after a former centrifuge production facility was destroyed in July 2020.[13] More advanced centrifuges enable Iran to enrich uranium at a faster rate.[14] These centrifuges may allow Iran to rapidly rebuild its nuclear program in the event that, after a nuclear deal, Iran decreases its amount of highly enriched uranium and then the nuclear deal collapses. The second, much smaller, tunnel complex located within Mount Kolang Gaz La was revealed in 2007 but was inactive until recently, according to ISIS.[15] ISIS reported that the complex may store enriched uranium stockpiles or centrifuge-related equipment. The report also stated that construction of the security perimeter has

been ongoing at least since 2023, but has accelerated in recent months. The United States and Israel have repeatedly threatened to strike Iranian nuclear facilities.[16]

Iran continues to coordinate with China and Russia on nuclear issues ahead of talks with the United States, highlighting growing alignment between major US adversaries. Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi met with Chinese Vice Premier Din Xuexiang and Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi in Beijing, China, on April 23 to discuss nuclear negotiations and deliver a written message from Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian.[17] Araghchi emphasized Iran’s intent to brief China, alongside Russia, on all nuclear-related developments, citing China’s roles as a UN Security Council and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board member.[18] Unspecified diplomatic sources told anti-regime media that Araghchi also carried a written message from Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to Chinese President Xi Jinping, affirming that the any agreement with the United States “solely intended to reduce tensions” and Iran will not alter its “Look to the East” policy or the terms of its 25-year Sino-Iranian cooperation agreement.[19] The Look to the East policy aims to strengthen ties with non-Western countries, like China, to expand its global partnerships and boost its economic and political interests.[20] China also remains the largest importer of Iranian oil. China’s Iranian oil imports help Iran circumvent US sanctions.[21] Iran reportedly seeks to include provisions in a potential nuclear deal to guarantee oil exports—especially to China—and prevent future US “maximum pressure” sanctions that could disrupt its energy revenues.[22]

Syrian President Ahmed al Shara will very likely fail to secure weapon supplies from Russia as part of an emerging deal for military basing rights in Syria because Russia cannot spare military equipment for Syria. Shara alluded to procuring weapons from Russia or additional countries as part of developing new military basing agreements in an interview with the *New York Times* published on April 23.[23] Russia is currently facing a serious materiel shortage over the medium term, and its commitment to fighting in Ukraine will take priority over shipping arms and other military equipment to Syria. Russia will likely already face materiel shortages in 2026 and 2027 if Ukrainian forces continue to inflict damage on Russian forces on the battlefield at the current rate, and many of these assets will be difficult to replace.[24] Russia and the Syrian transitional government have engaged in months-long talks over the future of Russian bases in Syria.[25] These talks have thus far not resulted in an agreement about Russian basing rights in Syria. Syrian and Western media have reported that Russian forces remain present at three military bases in Syria: Hmeimim airbase in Latakia, the naval base at Tartus, and Russia’s former helicopter base in Qamishli, Hasakah Province.[26]

Shara will likely pursue weapon supply agreements with alternative partners as it becomes clear Russia will not exchange arms for basing rights. The Syrian transitional government’s armor, mechanized vehicles, and aircraft consisted predominantly of Russian-made models seized from the Assad regime.[27] Some of these systems were probably inoperable by the fall of the regime, though Israeli airstrikes have also destroyed a significant portion of Syrian stocks since December 2024.[28] It is unclear at this time how Shara would finance these arms purchases from other states, given the dire state of Syria’s economy. Shara confirmed to the *New York Times* that he had not yet received offers from “other nations to replace Syrian arms.”[29]

Key Takeaways:

- **Salafi-Jihadi Group in Syria:** A Salafi-jihadi group ideologically close to the Islamic State (IS) is conducting extrajudicial killings against Syrians perceived to be tied to the now-deposed Bashar al Assad regime. The group has stated that it seeks to excommunicate the “apostates” who fought IS, suggesting that the group opposes Assad supporters and the transitional government and could eventually fight both. The group likely seeks to destabilize Syria’s fragile transition.
- **Iranian Nuclear Program:** Iran continues to expand its nuclear infrastructure near Natanz.
- **Iran, China, and Russia Continue Cooperation:** Iran continues to coordinate with China and Russia on nuclear issues ahead of talks with the United States, highlighting growing alignment between major US adversaries.
- **Syria and Russia:** Syrian President Ahmed al Shara will very likely fail to secure weapon supplies from Russia as part of an emerging deal for military basing rights in Syria because Russia cannot spare military equipment for Syria.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

The Iranian rial depreciated from 802,000 rials to one US dollar on April 22 to 807,000 rials to one US dollar on April 23.[30]

Iranian Artesh Air Force Commander Brigadier General Hamid Vahedi visited the 6th Tactical Air Base in Bushehr Province on April 23 to conduct an operational assessment and evaluate combat capability at the base.[31] This visit is likely part of a series of inspections that senior Iranian military commanders have conducted at Iranian air defense sites in southern Iran in recent weeks.[32]

Syria

Kurdish political parties, including the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC)—two longtime rivals—will call for decentralized administration and security forces in northeastern Syria. The Syrian transitional government has consistently rejected this demand. The KNC announced that several Kurdish political parties will convene on April 26 to present a unified Kurdish stance for future negotiations with Damascus.[33] The conference agenda listed a series of demands, including the constitutional recognition of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), the political administration controlled by the PYD in the northeast, and its current “administrative and security institutions” as the future models for decentralization.[34] Damascus has so far rejected any calls for decentralization in northeastern Syria during its negotiations with the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).[35] The conference agenda also called for formal recognition of the SDF as a “part” of the new Syrian army, and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) as a subordinate unit within the SDF.[36] The SDF-transitional government agreement, which is a framework agreement signed on March 10, requires the SDF to integrate into the Syrian Ministry of Defense (MoD).[37] Integration into the MoD does not imply that the SDF needs to be dissolved as an organization.

This announcement suggests that the Kurds are increasingly concerned about an Islamist-dominated government in Damascus. The announcement of the unity conference comes amid recent reports stating

that the Syrian transitional government began consultation to form a People's Assembly, that will likely closely resemble Shura councils employed by HTS and other Syrian Islamist factions during the civil war.[38] These developments have likely alarmed Kurdish political groups, which are generally more secular and have fought many Islamist opposition groups during the civil war.[39] Kurdish political groups have previously condemned Damascus for its failure to include Kurds in the transition process.[40]

This unified Kurdish position will make it more difficult for Shara and the transitional government to play the two main Kurdish parties—the PYD and the KNC—off each other to maximize Damascus's gains at the expense of the Kurds. The stated unity between the SDF, which is controlled by the PYD, and the KNC is notable because the two groups are long-time rivals in Syrian Kurdish politics. The PYD and KNC will need to maintain their unified front to successfully stymie Shara; however, PYD-KNC unity has proved difficult to achieve in the past.[41]

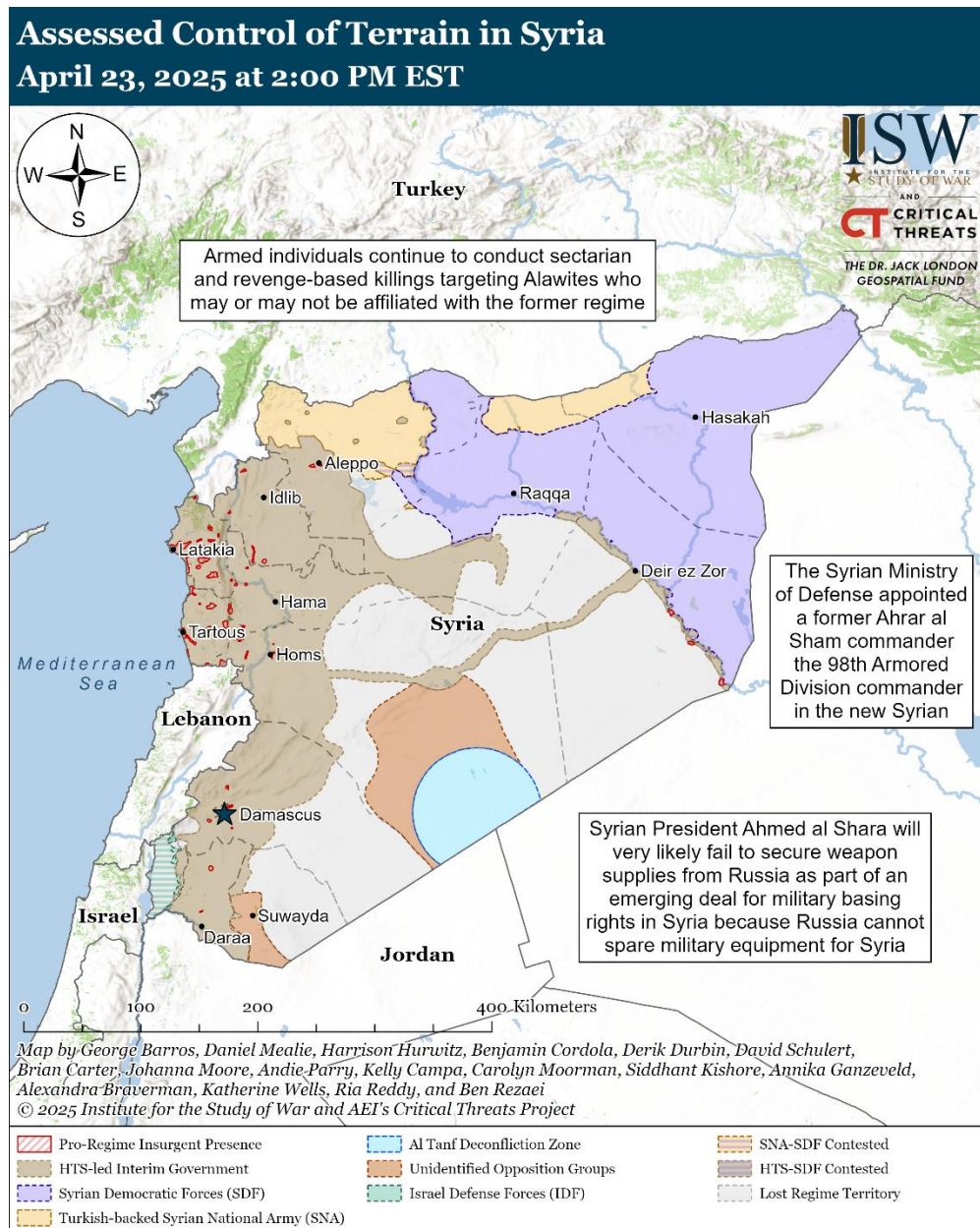
Syrian Finance Minister Mohammad Yusr Barnieh and Central Bank Governor Abdulqader Husrieh attended the International Monetary Fund-World Bank Spring Meetings in Washington, DC, on April 23.[42] World Bank Vice President for the Middle East and North Africa Ousmane Dione discussed priority areas for recovery and reform in Syria with the minister and governor.[43] Saudi Arabia reportedly agreed to pay Syria's \$15 million debt to the World Bank, which will enable the transitional government to request additional financial assistance from the World Bank to help rebuild its public sector.[44] Syrian President Ahmed al Shara has consistently lobbied for sanctions relief and international funding that would enable Syria to rebuild.[45]

Syrian Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra discussed border security with Jordanian Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Major General Yousef Huneiti on April 23 in Damascus.[46] Jordan and Syria have established at least five sectoral committees to coordinate bilateral relations in recent days.[47]

Jordan banned all Muslim Brotherhood activities and affiliation in Jordan on April 23.[48] Jordanian security services confiscated the group's assets across the country. Jordanian Interior Minister Mazen Fraya also announced that anyone promoting the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology would be "held accountable by law." [49] Jordanian authorities arrested 16 individuals linked to the Muslim Brotherhood on April 15 for planning rocket and drone attacks in Jordan.[50] The Jordanian government's decision to ban the Muslim Brotherhood may decrease the effectiveness of Iranian efforts to penetrate Jordan via Hamas's Muslim Brotherhood connections and develop Axis of Resistance groups there. Iran has recently placed greater importance on Jordan in its regional strategy.[51] Israeli and Jordanian police thwarted multiple Iranian-led attempts to smuggle small arms and other weapons to the West Bank via Jordan in 2024.[52]

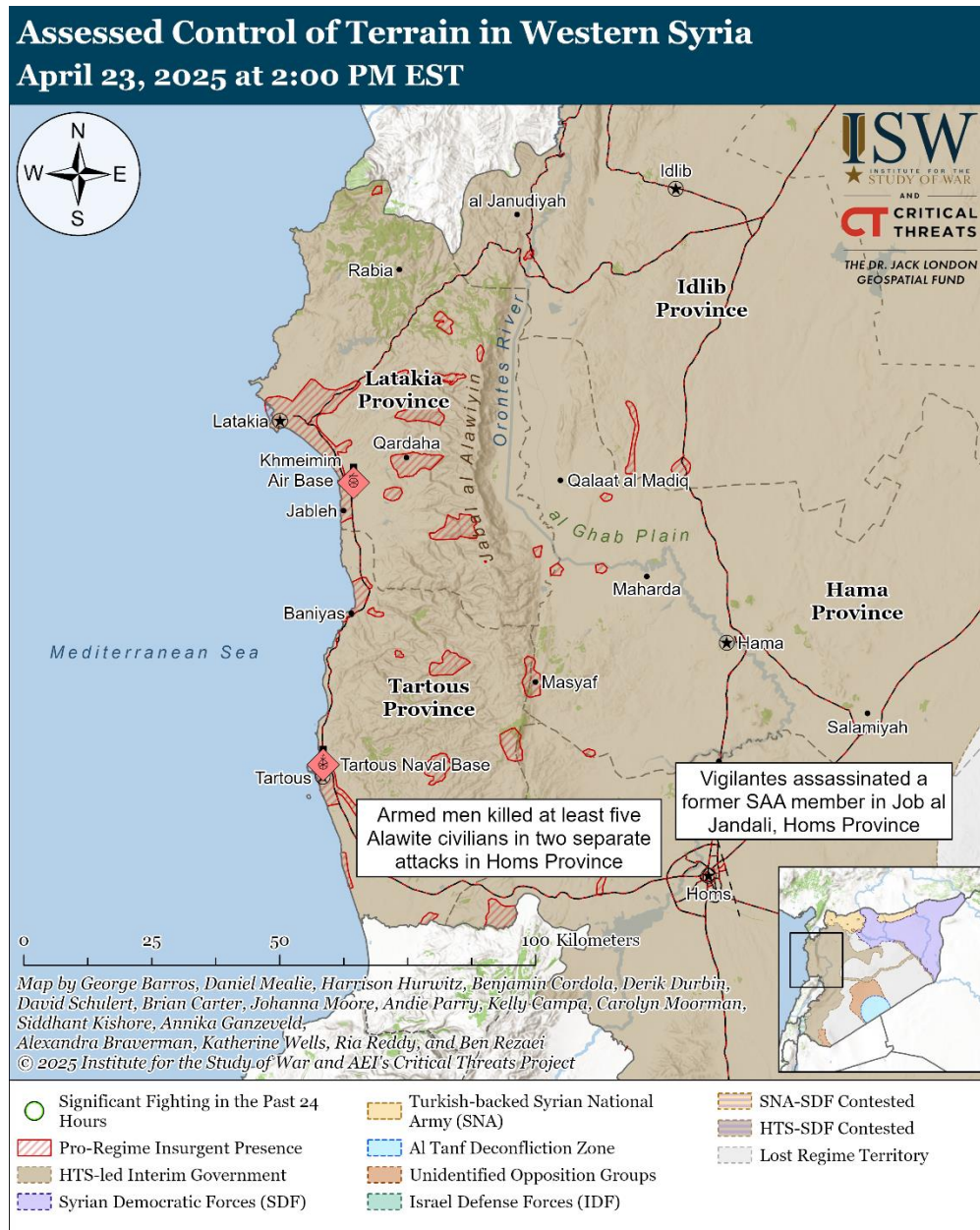
Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) internal security forces thwarted an ISIS mass escape attempt and attack plot in al Hol camp, Hasakah Province.[53] The SDF arrested 20 ISIS members and collaborators over a five-day operation in al Hol Camp beginning on April 18.[54] An ISIS cell inside the camp reportedly coordinated with a cell outside to organize a mass escape attempt.[55] ISIS cells orchestrated a prison break from a Hasakah facility in 2022 that spiraled into several days of heavy fighting that required US air and infantry fighting vehicle support, underlining the danger of these plots.[56] Al Hol camp continues to constitute a serious risk to Syrian stability and US national

security due to the presence of ISIS supporters in the camp. Al Hol is a refugee camp for ISIS family members and persons displaced by ISIS in Hasakah, northeastern Syria. The United States plans to reduce its presence in Syria “to less than a thousand” personnel over the next several months.[57] 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 through escapes such as the April plan at al Hol camp. US forces provide critical intelligence and logistical support to the SDF and assist SDF units in managing and securing detention camps in northern Syria.



Armed individuals continue to conduct sectarian and revenge-based killings targeting Alawites who may or may not be affiliated with the former regime. Armed men killed at least five Alawite civilians in two separate attacks in Homs Province on April 23.[58] Vigilantes separately assassinated a former Syrian Arab Army member in Job al Jandali, Homs Province, on April 23.[59]

Unspecified armed men separately killed an Alawite civilian in Jableh, Latakia Province, on April 23.[60] These attacks follow a consistent pattern of sectarian killings in Syria, which suggests that the Syrian transitional government has so far failed to prevent sectarian violence in western Syria. Failure to prevent such attacks risks deepening sectarian divides and enables Alawite insurgents to exploit growing grievances.



The Druze-majority Suwayda Military Council (SMC) Commander Tariq al Shoufi claimed that the group aims to implement the political decisions of Druze spiritual leader Sheikh Hikmat al Hijri.[61] Shoufi said on April 23 that he has placed the SMC “under the control” of Hijri and that the group operates according to Hijri’s political principles.[62] Hijri has not given his support to the group, and his office has denied other similar claims by the SMC about its relationship with Hijri.[63] Shoufi clarified that the SMC does not seek to secede from Syria and hopes for a good

relationship with the transitional government.[64] Shoufi has been consistently critical of Syrian President Ahmed al Shara.[65] The SMC is a small group composed of Druze fighters who were previously aligned with the Assad regime, and there is little indication that the group has serious influence in the Druze community.[66] More prominent Druze militias in Suwayda, including the Men of Dignity Movement, have already signed an agreement with Damascus to integrate their forces into the Syrian transitional government.[67]

Syrian media reported that the Syrian Ministry of Defense (MoD) appointed a former Ahrar al Sham commander as the 98th Armored Division commander in the new Syrian army.[68] Abdul Basit al Jamal (Youssef al Hamawi) led a splinter of Ahrar al Sham after a split in the organization following the appointment of Amer al Sheikh as Ahrar al Sham's leader in January 2021.[69] The Ahrar al Sham wing that was not aligned with Sheikh reportedly backed Jamal.[70] Jamal commanded several Ahrar al Sham units active in SNA-controlled northern Syria.[71] Jamal was reportedly active in Ahrar al Sham beginning in 2011.[72] Jamal later went on to command an armored brigade within Fateh al Mubin, the HTS-led operations room that overthrew the Assad regime.[73]

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

Iranian-backed Iraqi actors continue to oppose Iraq-Syria normalization. A Shia Coordination Framework source told Iraqi media on April 23 that the head of Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Asaib Ahl al Haq, Qais al Khazali, did not attend a Shia Coordination Framework meeting on April 22 due to disagreement over Syria-Iraq relations.[74] The Shia Coordination Framework is a loose coalition of Shia political parties, some of which Iran backs. State of Law Coalition head Nouri al Maliki reportedly left the meeting early for the same reason.[75] This report follows Sudani's recent invitation for Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara to attend the Arab Summit in Baghdad in May.[76] The source added that Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani said during the meeting that Iraq-Syria coordination will support Iraqi national security interests. Iraqi officials remain very concerned about the Islamic State (IS) threat in Iraq.[77] Iranian-aligned Iraqi political figures have continuously opposed normalization between Iraq and Syria due to Shara's al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) roots.[78] The Zulfikar Forces, a militia that claims to be a part of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, condemned Sudani's invitation to Shara on April 20.[79] The Islamic Resistance in Iraq is a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias.

Iraqi media reported disagreements between members of Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani's Decision coalition on April 23.[80] Sudani, the Badr Organization's Fatah Alliance, and Popular Mobilization Committee Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh's Ataa Movement will reportedly establish the Decision coalition.[81] A Shia Coordination Framework source said that Sudani and Badr Organization head Hadi al Ameri have considered competing on separate lists in the upcoming elections.[82] The source added that negotiations over Sanad bloc head Ahmed al Asadi joining the coalition have stalled due to disagreements over the leadership of the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and the proposed PMF law.[83] Sudani has recently attempted to

pass the PMF authority law to extend Fayyah's chairmanship and reinforce Sudani's control over the PMF.[84]

Arabian Peninsula

Axis of Resistance objectives:

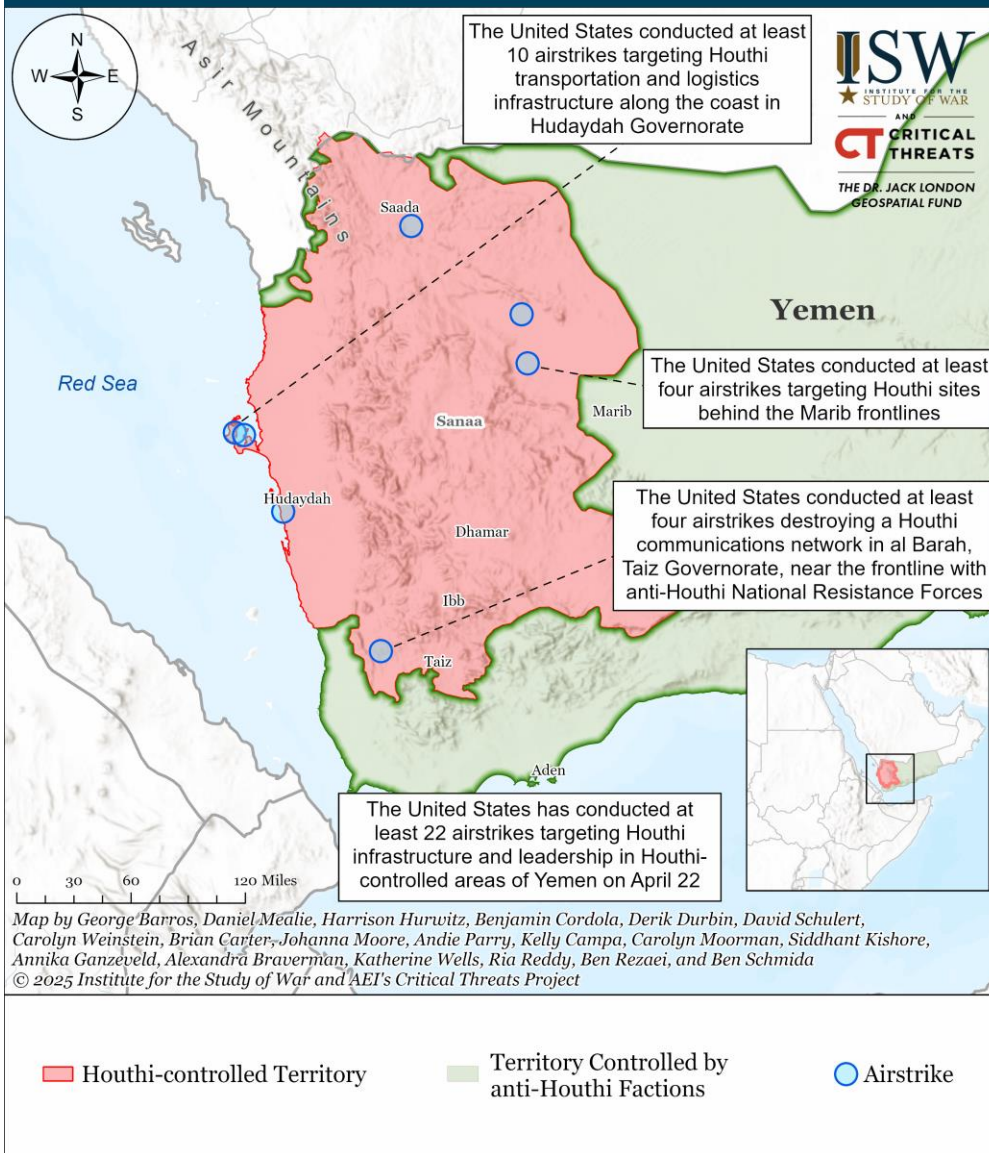
- Harden the Houthi regime against internal dissent in Houthi-controlled areas
- Destroy the anti-Houthi opposition in order to control all of Yemen
- Erode Israeli will to continue the war in the Gaza Strip

US Central Command (CENTCOM) has conducted at least 22 airstrikes targeting Houthi infrastructure and leadership in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen on April 22.[85]

CENTCOM conducted at least three airstrikes targeting Houthi barracks in Majzar District, Marib Governorate, and an unspecified number of airstrikes targeting Houthi facilities in Hazm District, al Jawf district Governorate, both of which are behind the Marib frontlines.[86] CENTCOM also conducted at least four airstrikes targeting Houthi facilities on Kamaran Island, at least two airstrikes targeting al Salif Port, and at least four airstrikes targeting Hudaydah Airport, all in Hudaydah Governorate.[87] CENTCOM struck a Houthi communications site in western Taiz Governorate behind the Houthi-National Resistance Forces frontline.[88] The National Resistance Forces are one of several factions loyal to the Yemeni government.[89]

US Strikes Against Houthi Targets

April 23, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



The Houthis claimed on April 22 that they launched an unspecified number of drones and cruise missiles at the USS *Harry S. Truman* in the Red Sea and the USS *Carl Vinson* in the Arabian Sea.[90] CENTCOM has not confirmed either attack.

The Houthis used a domestically produced surface-to-air missile to shoot down a US MQ-9 Reaper drone over Sanaa Governorate on April 22.[91] The Houthis claimed that they have shot down 22 US MQ-9 Reaper drones since the start of the October 7 War.[92]

The Houthis claimed on April 23 that they launched a drone at an unspecified Israeli military target in Tel Aviv, central Israel.[93] The Houthis also claimed that they launched a ballistic missile targeting an unspecified Israeli military target in Haifa,

northern Israel.[94] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) intercepted a missile from Yemen.[95] The IDF acknowledged that the IDF's early warning system had a delay before the IDF intercepted the missile.

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.

The Iran Update provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities abroad that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests. It also covers events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making of the Iranian regime. The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) provides these updates regularly based on regional events.

CTP-ISW defines the “Axis of Resistance” as the unconventional alliance that Iran has cultivated in the Middle East since the Islamic Republic came to power in 1979. This transnational coalition is comprised of state, semi-state, and non-state actors that cooperate to secure their collective interests. Tehran considers itself to be both part of the alliance and its leader. Iran furnishes these groups with varying levels of financial, military, and political support in exchange for some degree of influence or control over their actions. Some are traditional proxies that are highly responsive to Iranian direction, while others are partners over which Iran exerts more limited influence. Members of the Axis of Resistance are united by their grand strategic objectives, which include eroding and eventually expelling American influence from the Middle East, destroying the Israeli state, or both. Pursuing these objectives and supporting the Axis of Resistance to those ends have become cornerstones of Iranian regional strategy.

POWERED BY:



BABEL STREET

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