

Iran Update



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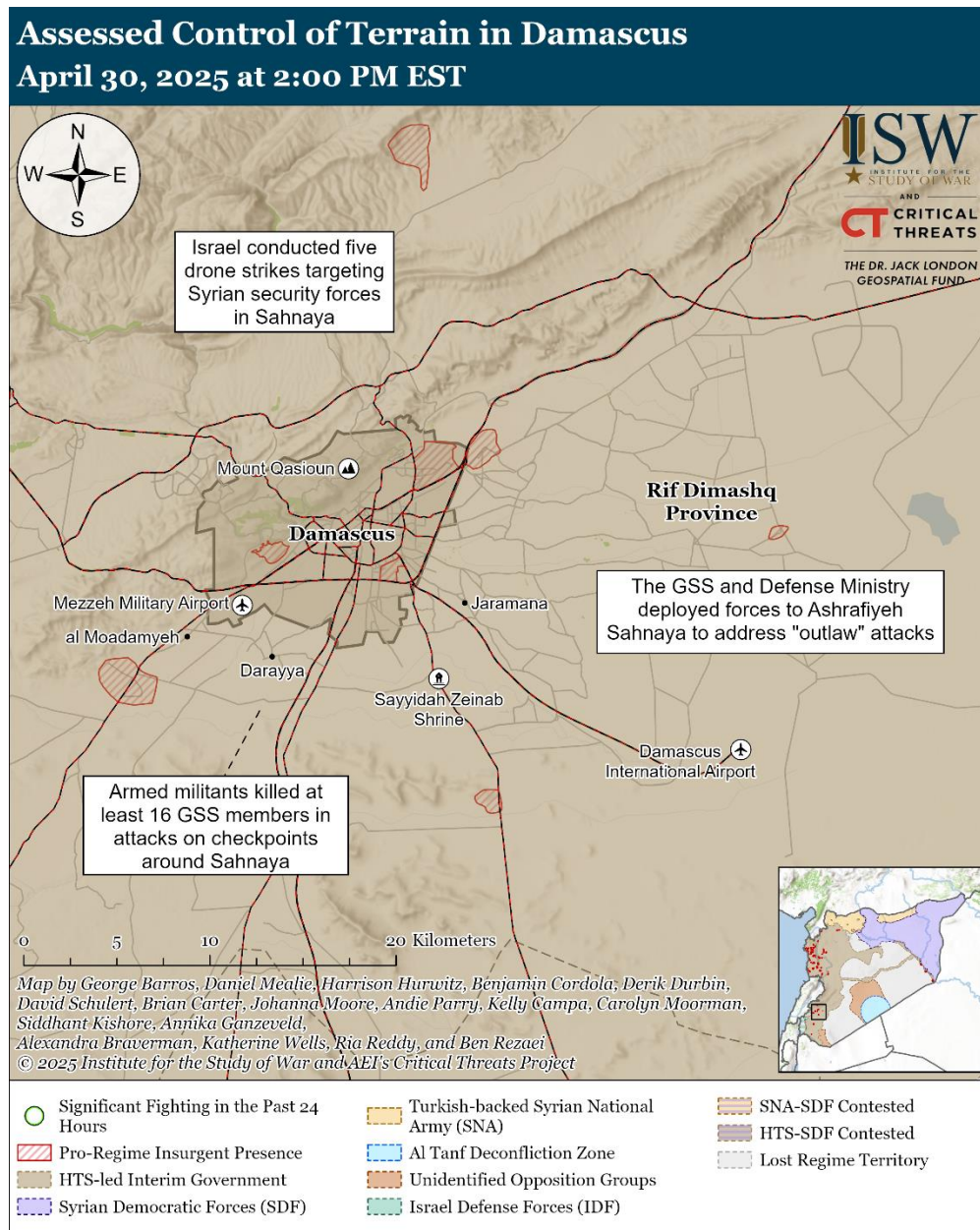
April 30, 2025, Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm ET

Confessionalist-motivated armed clashes spread to additional Druze majority communities near Damascus on April 29 and 30.[1] Tensions initially rose between the Druze community and Muslims after an audio in which a Druze sheikh allegedly insulted the Prophet Mohammad circulated on social media on April 28.[2] The General Security Forces and Defense Ministry deployed forces to Sahnaya and Ashrafiyah Sahnaya to address "outlaw" attacks that targeted both Druze civilians and transitional government forces manning checkpoints.[3] Druze militias also deployed to restore security in the towns.[4] At least 16 General Security Forces died in the small arms and mortar attacks conducted at least in part by local Druze militias.[5] At least one Druze fighting with the transitional government through the Men of Dignity faction died in the clashes.[6] There were also reports that some local Druze and government forces fought together against attacking Sunni extremists, however, which illustrates the complexity of the situation and diversity of the actors involved.[7] Syrian Defense Ministry forces withdrew from Ashrafiyah after search and cordon operations ended with several arrests on April 30.[8]

The transitional government appears to have responded slightly better to the recent spate of violence compared to the sectarian-motivated violence that swept coastal Syria in March 2025. The General Security Service reportedly prevented additional external Sunni groups from entering Ashrafiyah Sahnaya and participating in the clashes targeting Druze militants and civilians on April 30.[9] Sunni gunmen from neighboring towns have still been able to target Druze communities in initial attacks, but by cordoning off areas of violence, the transitional government has reduced retribution killings and cycles of violence.[10] Druze militia leaders accused "extremist individuals who recently joined the Ministries of Defense and Interior" of targeting Druze, however.[11] The transitional government's ability to respond and protect these communities is imperfect. A Salafi-jihadi group ideologically close to the Islamic State (IS) and hostile to the transitional government claimed that it attacked Druze civilians in Sahnaya at the start of several hours of clashes.[12] The transitional government has also learned to engage local notables and community power brokers early on in these crises. Governors from Suwayda, Rif Dimashq, and Damascus met with Druze leaders from Suwayda near Ashrafiyah during the clashes to end the crisis.[13] A transitional government delegation also met with Jaramana's Druze leaders on April 29 and agreed to hold the perpetrators responsible.[14]

Confessionalist violence in Rif Dimashq may discourage minority groups, including the Syrian Druze, from disarming and integrating into the state. Slow governmental response to large-scale confessionalist-motivated attacks against the Druze community epitomizes Druze fears about the new

government. Kurdish political parties recently cited government protection of Kurdish citizens and their rights as one of their most important demands of the government.[15] Continued confessionalist violence will exacerbate bandwidth problems that the Syrian transitional government is attempting to solve through military recruitment and integration of minority groups into the Defense Ministry.



Iran reportedly urged unity amongst Iranian-backed Iraqi political leaders ahead of the Iraqi parliamentary elections in November 2025, likely to improve the likelihood that Iranian-backed parties will maintain control of the Iraqi government.[16] An informed source told Iraqi media on April 30 that Iran recently sent a message to Shia Coordination Framework leaders encouraging the parties to remain unified and to avoid competing on separate lists in the upcoming elections.[17] The Shia Coordination Framework is a loose coalition of Shia political parties, some of which Iran backs. The Shia Coordination Framework reportedly plans to run at least three lists

in the elections, with opposing lists currently led by Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani, State of Law coalition head Nouri al Maliki, and Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Asaib Ahl al Haq leader Qais al Khazali.[18] Shia Coordination Framework parties have continuously disagreed in recent months on various issues, including Iraqi government attempts to integrate the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces into the Iraqi security establishment and disarm Iranian-backed Iraqi militias.[19] Iranian-backed Iraqi parties lost a significant number of seats in the 2021 elections, due to inter-party competition that advantaged a more unified opposition like Sadr's Shia National Movement.[20]

Iran likely shares Iraqi concerns that Sadr's non-participation in the upcoming elections will cause instability, but hopes that the Shia Coordination Framework's unity will overcome Sadr's popularity. Iran's message to the Shia Coordination Framework also reportedly emphasized the importance of Iraqi Shia nationalist cleric Muqtada al Sadr's participation in the elections.[21] Sadr announced on March 27 that his Shia National Movement will not participate in the elections and called on his followers to boycott the elections.[22] Iraqi politicians from across the political spectrum have called on Sadr to reverse his decision, likely due to the concern that Sadr could use a position outside of government to destabilize a future government.[23] Sadr has periodically called for protests, including after the 2021 elections.[24] A Sadrist source told Iraqi media on April 28 that Sadr could reverse his decision depending on unspecified Iraqi political developments within the next two months.[25] Sadr's Shia National Movement ran on a single list in the 2021 elections, which allowed Sadr to win the largest share of seats in the election.[26] The withdrawal of Sadr's political bloc from Parliament in 2022 after failing to form a government without Iranian-backed Iraqi parties allowed the Shia Coordination Framework to gain a majority in Parliament.[27] Iran likely views both Sadr's participation in the elections and the Shia Coordination Framework's unity as vital to ensure stability that will enable continued Iranian influence in Iraq. Either a major electoral loss caused by fractured pro-Iranian blocs or Sadr's destabilizing activities could imperil Iran's influence.

Iran and the E3 (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) will hold talks in Rome on May 2.[28] Iran likely aims to coordinate with the E3 on snapback sanctions ahead of the fourth round of US-Iran talks in Rome on May 3. French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot said on April 28 that the E3 will not hesitate to reinstate snapback sanctions against Iran if Iran's nuclear program threatens European security.[29] The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) snapback mechanism allows JCPOA signatories to reimpose UN Security Council sanctions on Iran in the event of "significant non-performance by Iran of JCPOA commitments." [30] The snapback mechanism expires in October 2025. The E3 reportedly gave Iran a June 2025 deadline to conclude a nuclear deal before the E3 imposes snapback sanctions.[31] This deadline is approximately consistent with US President Donald Trump's 60-day nuclear deal deadline.[32] CTP-ISW previously assessed that Iran may calculate that reaching a deal with the United States would delay or prevent snapback sanctions.

Key Takeaways:

- **Violence in Syria:** Confessionalist-motivated armed clashes spread to additional Druze majority communities near Damascus on April 29 and 30. Confessionalist violence in Rif Dimashq may discourage minority groups, including the Syrian Druze, from disarming and

integrating into the state. **CTP-ISW will provide additional analysis on Israeli actions in Syria related to the Druze on May 1.**

- **Iraqi Election Preparations:** Iran reportedly urged unity amongst Iranian-backed Iraqi political leaders ahead of the Iraqi parliamentary elections in November 2025, likely to improve the likelihood that Iranian-backed parties will maintain control of the Iraqi government. Iran likely shares Iraqi concerns that Sadr's non-participation in the upcoming elections will cause instability, but hopes that the Shia Coordination Framework's unity will overcome Sadr's popularity.
- **US-Iran Talks:** Iran and the E3 (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) will hold talks in Rome on May 2. Iran likely aims to coordinate with the E3 on snapback sanctions ahead of the fourth round of US-Iran talks in Rome on May 3.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

The Iranian rial depreciated from 813,000 rials to one US dollar on April 29 to 815,000 rials to one USD on April 30.[33]

The United States sanctioned seven entities and two vessels on April 30 for facilitating Iranian petroleum and petrochemical products trade.[34] The sanctioned entities include an Iran-based cargo inspection company that helps obfuscate sanctioned Iranian oil and reduces the risk that sanctions violators face. These sanctions are part of the US "maximum pressure" campaign, which seeks to drive Iranian oil exports to zero.

Iran is continuing to participate in BRICS meetings as an opportunity to deepen economic and security ties with non-Western powers and to mitigate the effects of sanctions. Iranian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister for Economic Affairs Rasoul Mohajer led Iran's delegation to the BRICS Foreign Ministers meeting in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on April 29.[35] The meeting focused on trade protectionism, global economic fragmentation, and the future of multilateralism.[36] Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Akbar Ahmadian separately arrived in Brazil on April 30 to attend the BRICS Security Summit.[37] Ahmadian proposed a supply chain security committee to ensure transport, an anti-sanctions trade corridor, a support fund to counter foreign sanctions, and a BRICS digital currency.[38]

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy continues to expand its conventional maritime capabilities. IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri claimed on April 30 that the IRGC Navy has built a new fast attack craft (FAC) capable of carrying missiles and reaching speeds of 116 knots (215 kmh), making it the fastest IRGC FAC to date.[39] No image or technical details of the newly claimed FAC have emerged. The reported speed of the new FAC suggests that it is similar in role to the Zolfaghar, Azarakhsh, and Heydar-110 FACs.[40] The Zolfaghar, Azarakhsh, and Heydar-110 are lightweight high-speed, missile-equipped FACs designed for coastal strike and defense. The IRGC previously added the Heydar-110 FAC to its fleet in February 2025, which can reach 110 knots (204 kmh).[41] The IRGC employs FACs as expandable vessels designed for rapid strikes and to support its asymmetric naval strategy that counters larger naval forces through high speed and short-range missile capabilities.[42]

Syria

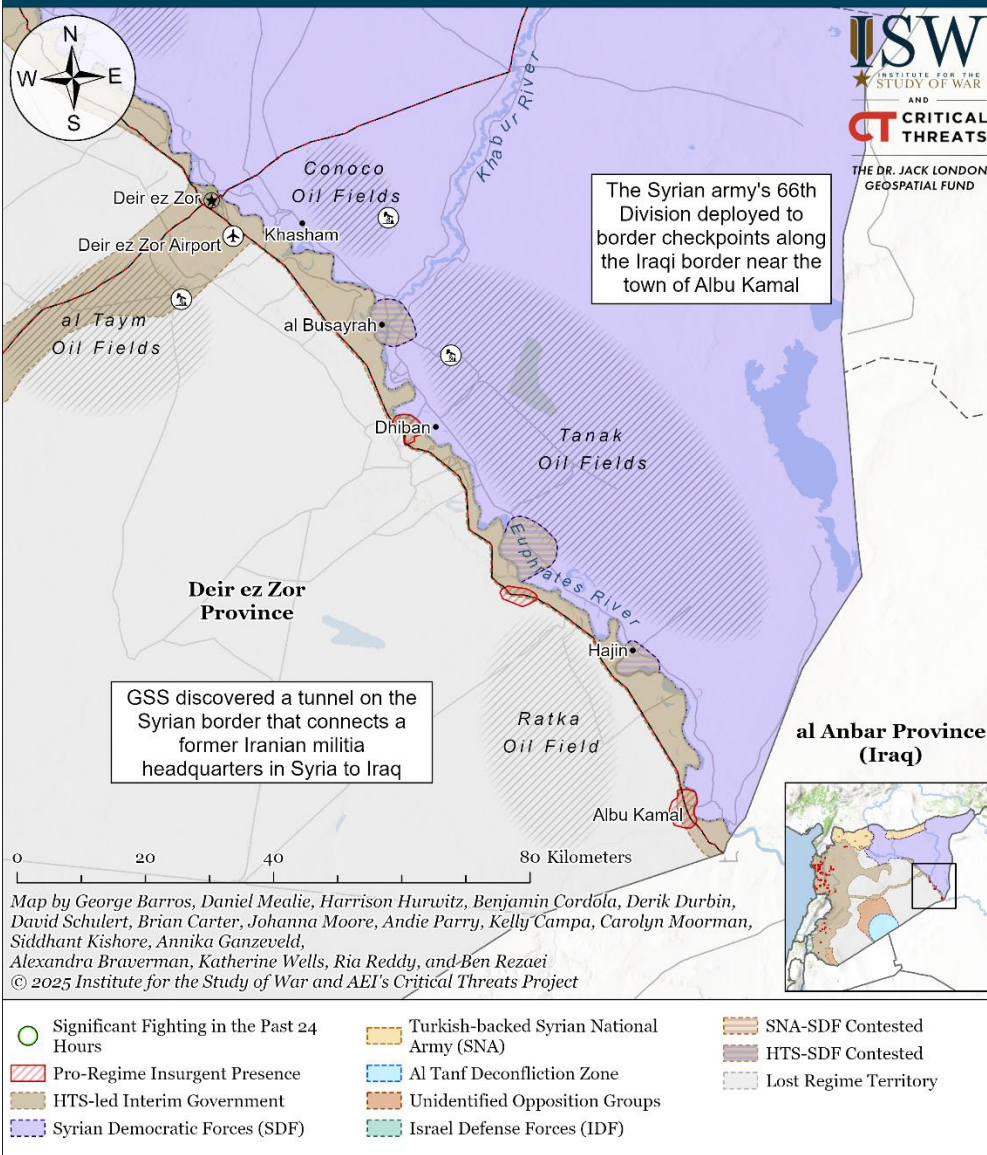
The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) conducted at least five drone strikes targeting Syrian security forces in Sahnaya, Rif Dimashq Province, on April 30.[43] The strikes killed one Syrian MoD fighter and injured at least two Druze civilians.[44] IDF Chief of Staff Eyal Zamir ordered Israeli forces to strike Syrian army positions if the Syrian government fails to stop violence against the Druze population.[45] Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Israel Katz issued statements urging the Syrian government to protect Druze civilians.[46] The IDF also evacuated three injured Druze civilians to Israel for medical treatment.[47] These actions followed pressure from the Israeli Druze community, which demanded that the Israeli government intervene to halt attacks on Syrian Druze civilians.[48] The IDF separately prevented a group of Israeli Druze from crossing into Syrian territory on April 30.[49] Netanyahu previously warned that Israel would not tolerate violence against Syrian Druze and called for a complete demilitarization of southern Syria.[50] **CTP-ISW will provide additional analysis on Israeli strategic and operational objectives in Syria on May 1.**

General Security Services discovered a tunnel on the Syrian border that connects a former Iranian IRGC base in Syria to Iraq.[51] GSS forces reported that the tunnel extended approximately 500 meters into Syria and connected to the IRGC Imam Ali base in al Hari, Deir ez Zor Province.[52] The IRGC established the Imam Ali base in 2019 to facilitate weapons shipments to members of the Axis of Resistance and serve as a training ground for various Iranian-backed militias.[53] The Syrian army 66th Division deployed to the Syria-Iraq border near al Hari on April 29 to remain at border posts and checkpoints.[54] Iranian backed militias and smugglers controlled illegal border crossings on the Syria-Iraq border under the former Assad regime to support Axis military operations and generate funding.[55] The deployment of the 66th division to the Iraqi border marks another step that the Syrian transitional government has taken to combat smuggling of weapons and narcotics along Syria's borders.

The 66th Division is led by Brigadier General Ahmed al Mohammad (Abu Mohammad al Shura), a former HTS Shura Council member.[56] The area near al Hari, which includes Albu Kamal Border Crossing, is valuable terrain due to the revenues the Syrian government could draw from the border crossing. The 66th Division, even if it does not control the crossing, could give Shara a trustworthy eye near the crossing to ensure it is properly functioning.

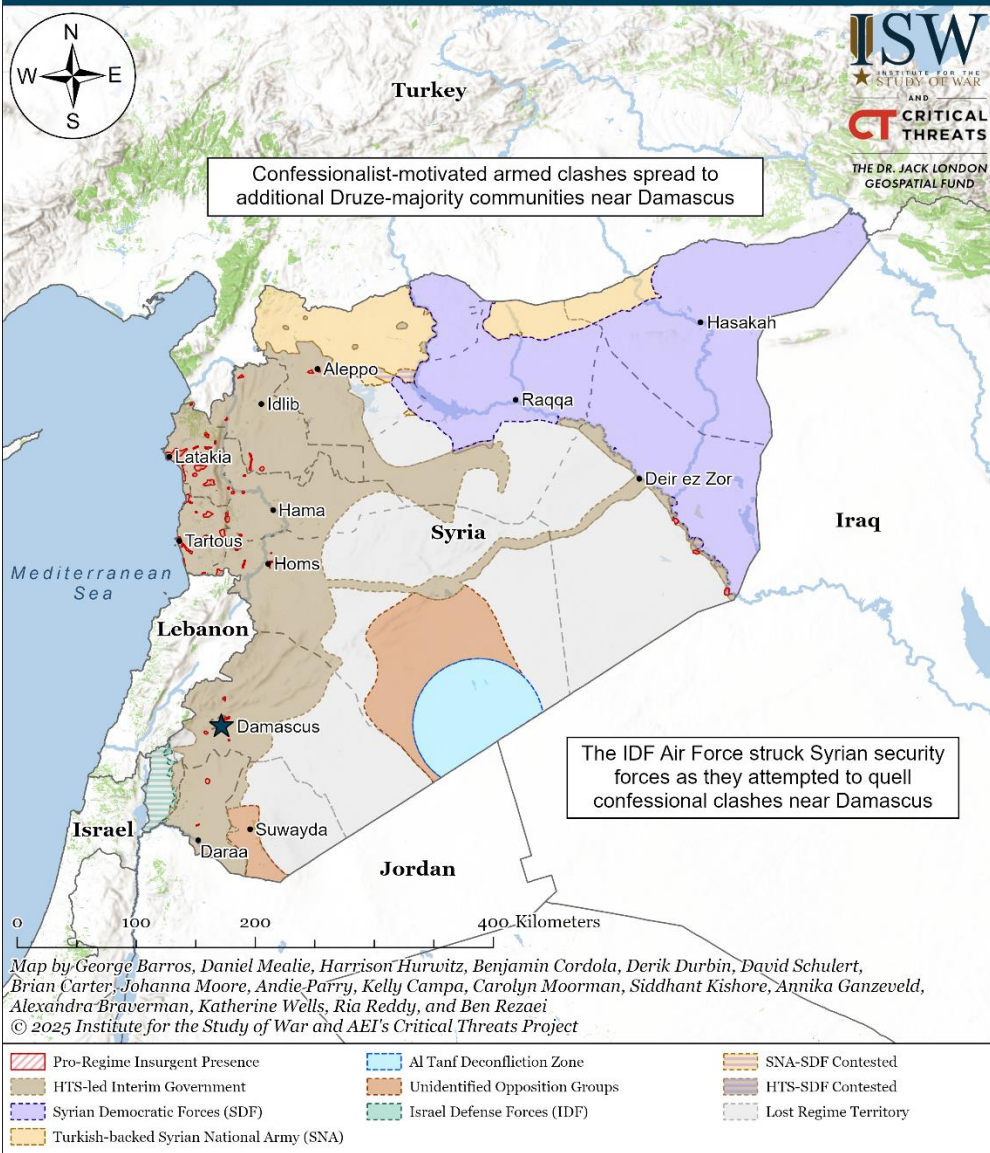
Assessed Control of Terrain around Deir ez Zor

April 30, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

April 30, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Iraq

See the topline section.

Arabian Peninsula

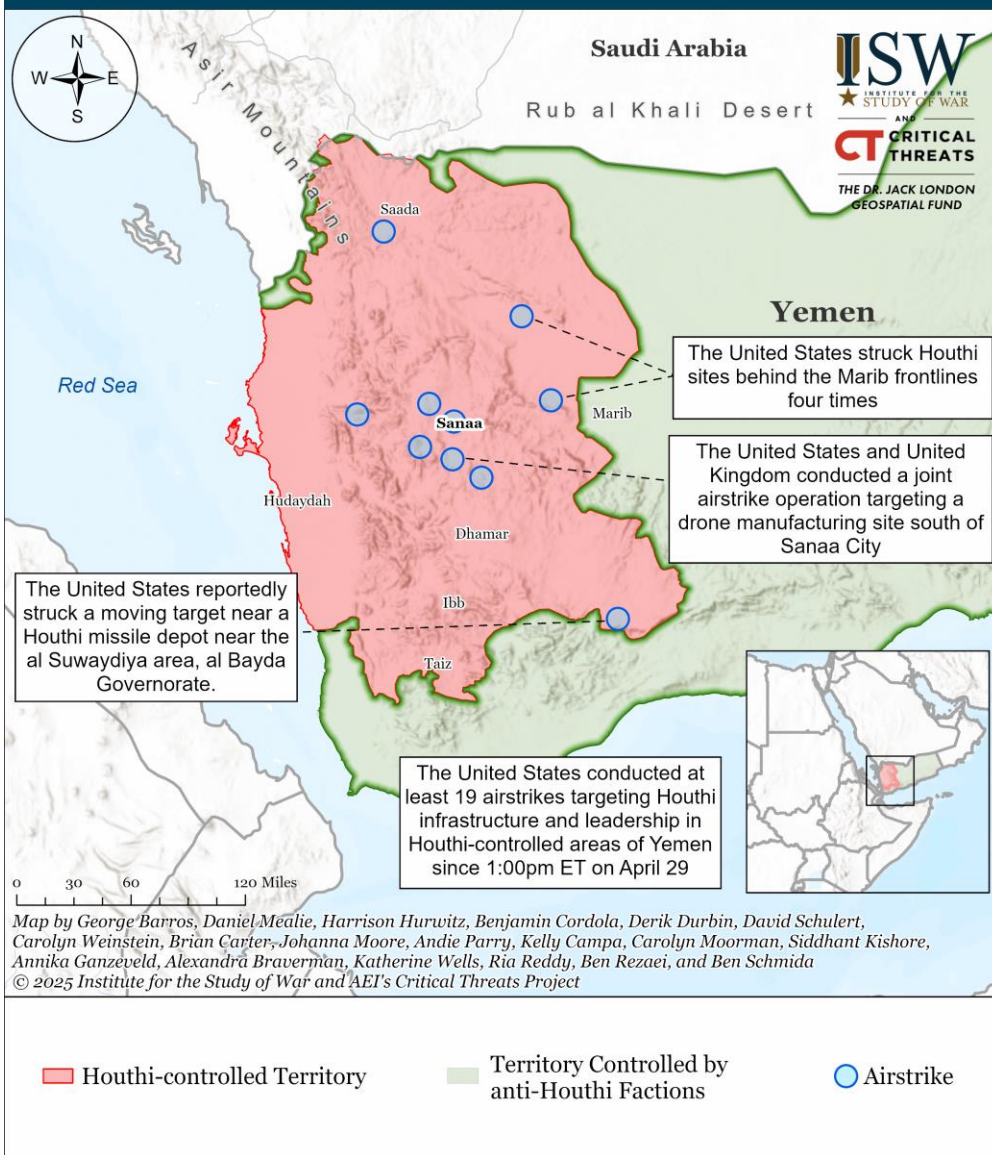
Axis of Resistance objectives:

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

US Central Command (CENTCOM) conducted at least 17 airstrikes targeting Houthi infrastructure and leadership in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen since 1:00 pm ET on April 29.[57] CENTCOM conducted at least four airstrikes targeting Houthi infrastructure in the Sahar District, Saada Governorate, on April 29.[58] CENTCOM also conducted at least three airstrikes targeting Houthi infrastructure in al Khalq, al Jawf Governorate, and at least one airstrike targeting Mass military base in Madghal District, Marib Governorate, on April 29, which are less than 50 kilometers (km) behind the frontlines in Marib Governorate.[59] CENTCOM reportedly struck an unspecified moving target near a Houthi missile depot in al Suwadiya, al Bayda Governorate.[60] CENTCOM also struck Houthi sites across Sanaa Governorate at least nine times.[61]

The United Kingdom announced on April 29 that the Royal Air Force conducted a joint airstrike operation with CENTCOM targeting a Houthi drone manufacturing site 24 km south of Sanaa City.[62] This is the first time the United Kingdom has conducted airstrikes on Houthi targets since the start of CENTCOM's Operation Rough Rider on March 15. The United Kingdom has previously conducted joint airstrike operations with CENTCOM against the Houthis since 2024, however.[63] A Yemeni analyst assessed that the joint US-UK airstrikes on April 29 likely targeted the Hubayshi steel factory in the Qaail al Qaydhi area, south of Sanaa City.[64] The analyst explained that the businessman who owns this factory also owns another Hubayshi steel factory in Bajil, Hudaydah Governorate, which CENTCOM struck on March 17.[65]

US Strikes Against Houthi Targets April 30, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



A Yemeni journalist reported on April 29 that a Houthi missile misfired and landed in Bakul Village, Arhab District, Sanaa Governorate.[66] The journalist did not specify if there were any casualties.

The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon

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.

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