

Iran Update, February 16, 2026



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Analyst Notes: Data Cutoff: 2:00 PM ET. CTP-ISW is publishing an abbreviated Iran Update on February 16 in observance of Presidents' Day. We will resume full coverage on February 17.

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The Syrian government is transferring all residents from al Hol internally displaced persons (IDP) camp in Hasakah Province to Aleppo Province and Iraq.[1] The government will close the camp in the coming days.[2] The Syrian government had reportedly planned to close both al Hol and al Roj IDP camps by the end of 2026, but al Hol's early closure is almost certainly a response to the reported escape of over 10,000 residents from the camp since the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) withdrew from the camp on January 20. The Syrian government told the United Nations (UN) that it is relocating the remaining families from al Hol to Akhtar in camp in northern Aleppo Province.[3] Syrian and Iraqi officials reportedly agreed on February 14 to transport al Hol's remaining Iraqi population back to Iraq.[4] A significant proportion of al Hol camp residents — particularly third country nationals — are family members of ISIS fighters and left the last ISIS territorial possession at Baghouz when it was seized by the SDF in 2019.[5]

The extreme mismanagement of the al Hol IDP camp handover created the conditions for residents to escape or depart from the camp. The SDF withdrew from the camp on January 20 as its forces collapsed in the wake of the government's major offensive to take over Kurdish-held territory in northeastern Syria.[6] Multilateral organization and aid officials told a Syria-focused analyst that at least 10,000 al Hol residents escaped from the camp during the six hours between the SDF's withdrawal and the Syrian army's arrival at the camp on January 20.[7]

Syrian government forces were able to briefly restore security within the camp but were unable to maintain it, likely due to insufficient training, personnel, and discipline.[8] Interior Ministry forces deployed to al Hol on January 21 and were able to briefly re-establish security at the camp.[9] CTP-ISW has not observed any evidence that these forces received training in managing large and dangerous IDP camps before taking over al Hol. The United States previously trained SDF forces at al Hol to properly manage the camp. Interior Ministry forces reportedly lacked sufficient forces to complete basic security tasks such as manning the camp's perimeter.[10] Government forces were unable to contain a "mass riot" by Syrian residents on February 10, and "thousands" of residents reportedly escaped the camp between February 10 and 12.[11]

It is also possible that certain government-affiliated fighters have facilitated the escape of Islamic State in

Iraq and al Sham (ISIS)-affiliated al Hol residents due to sympathy for these residents.[12] A local nongovernment organization (NGO) worker told news outlet the New Region on February 16 that dozens of foreign fighters affiliated with the Syrian transitional government transferred many foreign ISIS-linked women and their children from al Hol to Idlib Province.[13] The worker said that some of the women married foreign fighters in the Syrian army.[14] An unspecified source in Idlib told an analyst focused on Kurdish issues that several ISIS-linked women and children also traveled from al Hol to other camps along the Turkish border, including Firqat al Ghuraba's camp.[15] Firqat al Ghuraba is a French, Salafi-jihadi-aligned foreign group that resides in a compound on the Syria-Turkey border in Idlib Province.[16]

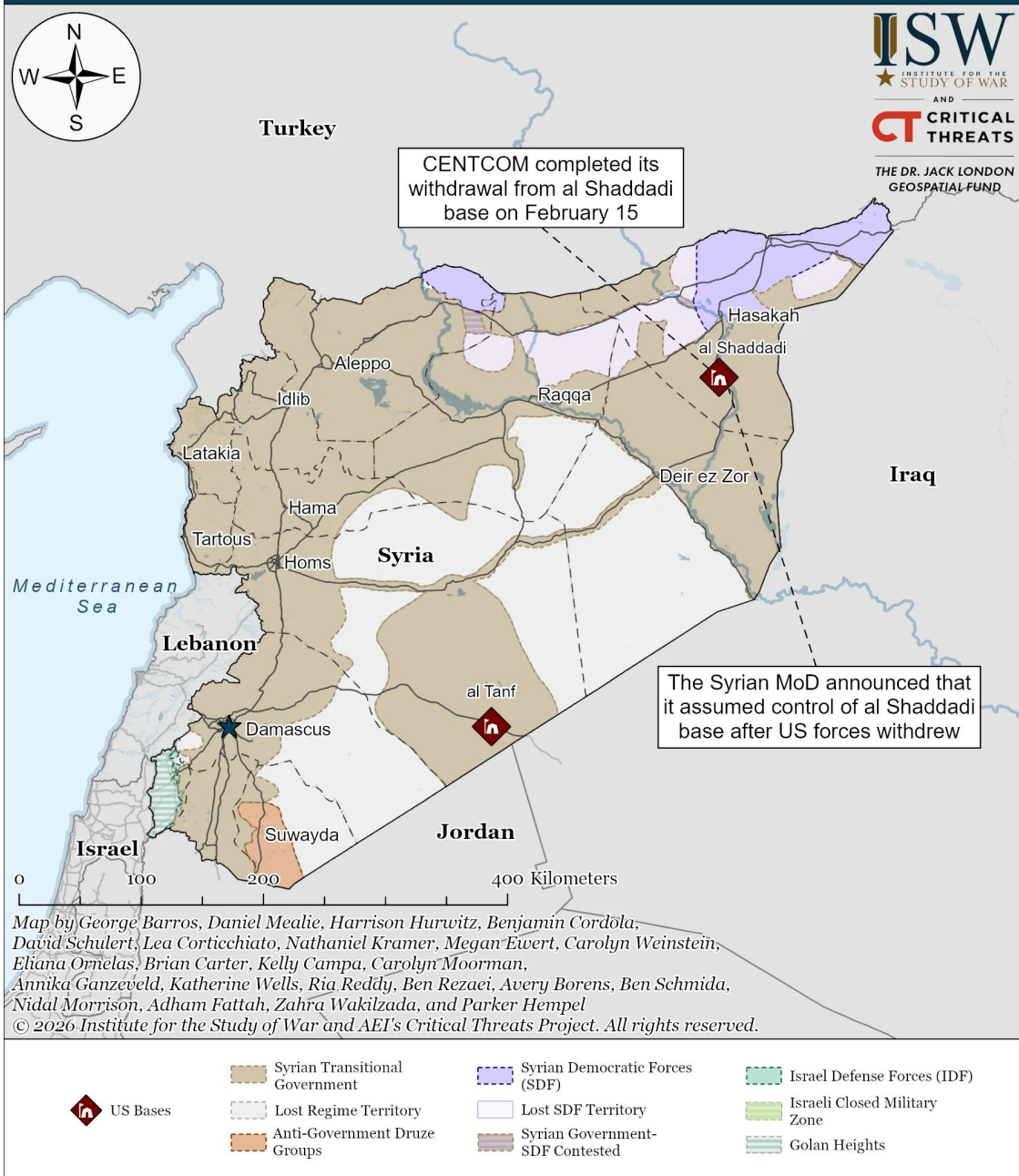
ISIS and other Salafi-jihadi groups will likely capitalize on al Hol's closure to increase recruitment efforts among escapees and residents who may be released in the future. Over 10,000 al Hol residents have reportedly escaped the camp since January 20 to other Syrian provinces and Lebanon.[17] Many of these residents have ties to ISIS, and they may have escaped from the camp with support from ISIS-affiliated networks and may support ISIS recruitment.[18] Some of the residents from al Hol are hardened ISIS supporters, and some will face severe isolation from their communities upon their return. The thousands of escapees may be unable to successfully reintegrate into Syrian society, particularly without Syrian government support. Isolation has historically led to recidivism. ISIS remains a viable insurgency in Syria that aims to recruit fighters, and isolation provides an opportunity for ISIS or other Salafi-jihadi groups to generate support networks in areas where ISIS insurgents are active or in areas where they were not previously active.[19]

The Syrian transitional government will also likely struggle to rehabilitate and integrate ISIS-affiliated families and individuals from al Hol that are transferred to Aleppo Province, which further risks creating an opportunity for ISIS recruitment in Syria. The government reportedly intends to assess residents from al Hol camp for potential release and reintegration after relocating them to Akhtar in northern Aleppo Province.[20] Iraq has faced immense challenges since it began repatriating thousands of ISIS-affiliated families and IDPs in 2021. The Iraqi government struggled to integrate ISIS families and IDPs into their new communities, and returnees often faced extreme isolation and suspicion from these communities, which in many cases were victims of ISIS violence.[21] The treatment of returnees by their neighbors was not dependent on whether or not the returnees were actually ISIS supporters; their neighbors usually assumed any returnee was associated with ISIS.[22] The presence of ISIS-affiliated cells in major Syrian urban areas also increases the risk that ISIS may attempt to recruit released and reintegrated al Hol residents. Syrian security officials told United Arab Emirates (UAE)-based media on February 14 that ISIS fighters have moved from the central Syrian desert to their hometowns near major urban areas such as Aleppo, Hama, and Damascus.[23]

US Central Command (CENTCOM) has completed its withdrawal from al Shaddadi base in northeastern Syria.[24] The Syrian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced that it assumed control of al Shaddadi base in Hasakah Province on February 15 after CENTCOM withdrew its forces from the base.[25] A local source reported that US forces prepared to withdraw from the base following the Syrian government's offensive against the SDF in January.[26] US forces established al Shaddadi base in 2017 to support the SDF's efforts to counter ISIS.[27] CENTCOM's handover of al Shaddadi base to the MoD is a further indication that the United States has shifted its counter-ISIS partner from the SDF to the Syrian government. CENTCOM's withdrawal from al Shaddadi base follows CENTCOM's withdrawal from the al Tanf Garrison in the central Syrian desert and the successful transfer of over 5,700 ISIS detainees from northeastern Syria to Iraq.[28] The *Washington Post* reported on February 13 that US forces will withdraw from Syria in "the coming days and weeks." [29]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

February 16, 2026 at 2:00 PM ET



Several Arab tribes and clans in northeastern Syria, which have historically opposed the SDF, threatened to mobilize forces against the SDF if the Syrian government and the SDF continue to implement the January 30 agreement. Twelve sheikhs of Arab tribes and clans in Hasakah Province sent a letter to Syrian President Ahmed al Shara on February 15 in which they demanded that the Syrian government dissolve the SDF, including the SDF-affiliated Revolutionary Youth Movement, and halt SDF raids and arrests against Arabs in SDF territory.[30] Multiple human rights organizations have accused the SDF-affiliated Revolutionary Youth Movement of forcibly recruiting child soldiers within SDF territory.[31] The letter also called for the Syrian government to deploy the MoD and General Security Service (GSS) forces throughout Hasakah Province to establish complete state control over the province and its border crossings with Iraq.[32] The Arab tribes threatened to declare a general mobilization of tribal forces inside and outside of Syria against the SDF if the government failed to meet their demands or if the government attempted to implement the January 30 agreement “by force.” [33] The sheikhs of

the Jabour tribe, the Sharabin tribe, the al Tai clan, and the al Halabsa clan were among the signatories of the letter.[34] The Jabour and al Tai clan have both historically opposed the SDF and any form of Kurdish autonomy in Syria. Both tribes previously sided with the Assad regime to suppress the 2004 Kurdish uprising in Qamishli, Hasakah Province.[35] Arab tribes inside and outside of SDF territory have repeatedly mobilized or threatened to mobilize against the SDF since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 for a variety of reasons.[36]

Some Iranian officials and media have suggested that the United States has softened its position on the issue of uranium enrichment. US officials have not indicated a shift in the United States' position on this issue, however. The United States and Iran will hold a second round of nuclear talks, led by Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi and US Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff, in Geneva, Switzerland, on February 17.[37] Iranian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister for Political Affairs Majid Takht Ravanchi told the BBC on February 16 that the United States understands that it must focus exclusively on the nuclear issue if it seeks to reach a deal with Iran. Ravanchi added that, "as far as Iran is concerned," the US demand for zero enrichment is "not on the table anymore." [38] Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)-affiliated media similarly claimed on February 16 that the United States has agreed that negotiations will only address Iran's nuclear program and accepted the "principle of enrichment." [39] US President Donald Trump told reporters on February 13 that the United States does not "want any enrichment," however.[40]

Iranian officials have continued to offer limited nuclear concessions. Ravanchi stated in his interview with the BBC that Iran is willing to dilute its highly enriched uranium stockpile if the United States lifts sanctions on Iran.[41] Ravanchi did not specify what level Iran would be willing to dilute its highly enriched uranium to. Some regime officials have recently suggested that Iran could limit its enrichment to 20 percent, which is far above the 3.67 percent limit outlined in the 2015 nuclear deal.[42] An Iranian journalist close to the regime reported on February 13 that Iran rejected a recent proposal from Witkoff to halt enrichment for three to five years and then enrich uranium at 1.5 percent.[43] The journalist added that the proposal also called on Iran to transfer its roughly 400 kilograms of 60 percent enriched uranium.[44] Ravanchi stated in his interview with the BBC that it is "too early to say" whether Iran would be willing to transfer its 60 percent enriched uranium stockpile. The BBC noted that Iran previously transferred 11,000 kilograms of enriched uranium to Russia under the 2015 nuclear deal. The 11,000 kilograms included Iran's most highly enriched uranium at the time, uranium enriched to 20 percent.[45] Iran has since produced over 400 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60 percent, which is enough uranium, if enriched further, to produce at least 10 nuclear weapons.[46]

CTP-ISW continues to assess that any agreement that lifts sanctions on Iran without seriously limiting Iran's ability to develop its ballistic missile and drone programs or provide support to the Axis of Resistance would pose a long-term threat to US interests in the region by enabling Iran to reconstitute these capabilities. Ravanchi emphasized in his interview that Iran will not negotiate on its ballistic missile program.[47] He stated that Iran's ballistic missiles "came to [Iran's] rescue" during the Israel-Iran War.[48] Iran fired multiple missile barrages at Israel during the war and conducted a missile attack on al Udeid Airbase in Qatar.[49] Iran's use of missiles during the war highlights how Iran's missile program poses a threat to US forces and allies in the Middle East.

Iran is proposing economic incentives that are unrelated to core US demands regarding the nuclear talks, likely as part of an effort by the regime to extract US concessions on its key demands regarding Iran's ballistic missile program and support for its proxies and partners. Iranian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister for Economic Diplomacy and member of the Iranian negotiating team, Hamid Ghanbari, stated on February 15 that the first round of US-Iran nuclear talks on February 6 included discussions on economic cooperation in the fields of oil, gas, and minerals, as well as the

possible purchase of US aircraft.[50] Ghanbari added that any deal must be economically beneficial to the United States for it to be sustainable.[51] Ghanbari's statement echoes Araghchi's statement on February 1 that a nuclear deal could lead to "great opportunities for economic cooperation" between the United States and Iran.[52] Iran may calculate that the United States may be more willing to focus solely on Iran's nuclear program in the ongoing talks if Iran offers economic incentives.

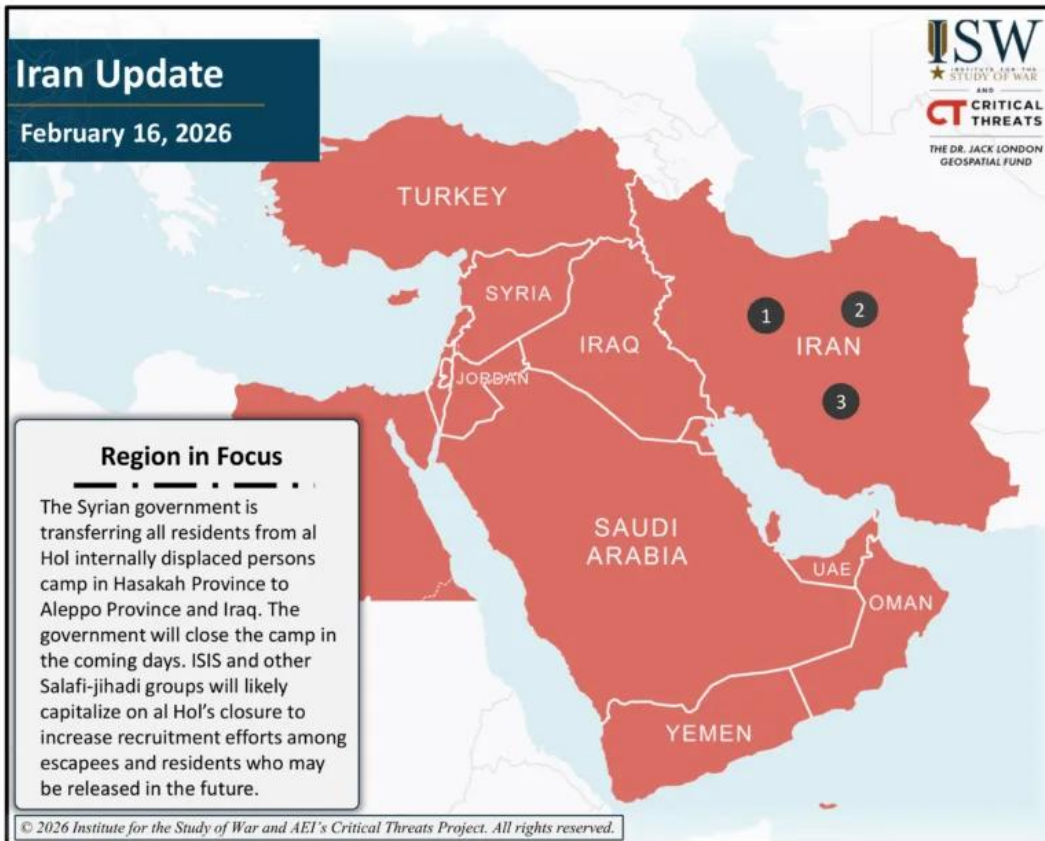
Iran is continuing to try to deter and prepare for military escalation in and near the Strait of Hormuz amid US threats to attack Iran. The IRGC Navy began a "Smart Control of the Strait of Hormuz" exercise on February 16 to test the readiness of IRGC Navy units and review security plans.[53] Rapid reaction battalions reportedly practiced offensive and defensive tactics, tested missiles, and conducted operations in "electronic warfare conditions." [54] "Smart control" may refer to targeting and preventing specific vessels from transiting the Strait of Hormuz.[55] Artesh Navy Deputy Commander Rear Admiral Faramarz Bemani separately inspected the Shahid Nezafat Naval Base in Pasabandar, Sistan and Baluchistan Province, which is located near the entrance of the Gulf of Oman, on February 15.[56] These security efforts come amid the ongoing US military buildup in the region, including the upcoming arrival of the USS Gerald R. Ford carrier strike group.[57] Trump reportedly told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on February 11 that the United States will increase economic pressure on Iran and "go full force" on its maximum pressure campaign.[58] US officials told the *Wall Street Journal* on February 11 that the Trump administration was considering seizing Iranian tankers transporting oil but held off due to concerns about Iran's retaliation.[59] The IRGC Navy exercise and Artesh inspection are likely at least partially part of a broader Iranian effort to deter US action by highlighting Iran's willingness and ability to retaliate.

Iran analyst Hamidreza Azizi assessed on February 16 that Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Defense Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani are maneuvering to consolidate their power and ensure their relevance in a post-Khamenei Iran. This assessment is consistent with CTP-ISW's assessment that different factions within the Iranian regime are vying for influence to determine future Iranian policy after the Israel-Iran War.[60] The Iranian regime established the Defense Council after the Israel-Iran War to streamline decision-making during wartime.[61] A political analyst close to the Iranian regime reported on February 5 that the Defense Council will operate independently of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC).[62] Azizi reported on February 16 that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei agreed to allow the Defense Council to operate independently "at the insistence" of Ghalibaf.[63] Ghalibaf's role in making the Defense Council an independent institution is consistent with previous reports that he played a significant role in the initial establishment of the council in August 2025.[64] CTP-ISW previously assessed that Ghalibaf's involvement in the establishment of the Defense Council was part of a broader trend of pragmatic regime elements leading the restructuring of Iran's decision-making apparatus following the 12-day war.[65]

Shamkhani-affiliated media has also played a significant role in advocating for and supporting the Defense Council and recently reported on February 5 that President Masoud Pezeshkian had appointed Shamkhani as secretary of the Defense Council.[66] Azizi reported that the regime did not intend to publicize the Defense Council's independence or Shamkhani's appointment as secretary "to avoid signaling internal frictions." [67] Shamkhani-affiliated media may have publicized Shamkhani's appointment to highlight his prominent position within the regime, however.[68] The Defense Council's independence may enable the council and its secretary to play an important role in shaping Iran's security and defense policies and thereby consolidate Ghalibaf and Shamkhani's authority within the regime.

The Iranian regime has sentenced Iranians who participated in the recent protests to death and killed numerous detained protesters, according to human rights organizations and

Iranian sources speaking to Western and Israeli media.[69] Israeli media, citing Iranian sources and human rights organizations that monitor developments in Iran, reported on February 16 that the Iranian regime has sentenced hundreds of protesters to death.[70] The same sources told Israeli media that security forces have killed thousands of detained protesters.[71] The Israeli media report comes after a Western media outlet, citing Iranian lawyers defending detained protesters in Iran, reported on February 6 that the Iranian regime plans to execute thousands of protesters.[72] A human rights organization reported on February 13 that the Iranian judiciary ordered the execution of a protester in Qom Province.[73] Another human rights organization and Iranian diaspora media separately reported on February 12 and 13, respectively, that security forces killed two detained protesters.[74]



- 1 IRAN.** Some Iranian officials and media have suggested that the United States has softened its position on the issue of uranium enrichment. US officials have not indicated a shift in the United States' position on this issue, however.
- 2 IRAN.** Iran analyst Hamidreza Azizi assessed on February 16 that Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Defense Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani are maneuvering to consolidate their power and ensure their relevance in a post-Khamenei Iran. This assessment is consistent with CTP-ISW's assessment that different factions within the Iranian regime are vying for influence to determine future Iranian policy after the Israel-Iran War.
- 3 IRAN.** The Iranian regime has sentenced Iranians who participated in the recent protests to death and killed numerous detained protesters, according to human rights organizations and Iranian sources speaking to Western and Israeli media.

Key Takeaways

1. **Counter-ISIS Efforts in Syria:** The Syrian government is transferring all residents from al Hol internally displaced persons camp in Hasakah Province to Aleppo Province and Iraq. The government will close the camp in the coming days. ISIS and other Salafi-jihadi groups will likely capitalize on al Hol's closure to increase recruitment efforts among escapees and residents who may be released in the future.
2. **US-Iran Negotiations:** Some Iranian officials and media have suggested that the United States has softened its position on the issue of uranium enrichment. US officials have not indicated a shift in the United States' position on this issue, however.
3. **Iranian Internal Politics:** Iran analyst Hamidreza Azizi assessed on February 16 that Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Defense Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani are maneuvering to consolidate their power and ensure their relevance in a post-Khamenei Iran. This assessment is consistent with CTP-ISW's assessment that different factions within the Iranian regime are vying for influence to determine future Iranian policy after the Israel-Iran War.
4. **Iranian Regime's Crackdown on Protesters:** The Iranian regime has sentenced Iranians who participated in the recent protests to death and killed numerous detained protesters, according to human rights organizations and Iranian sources speaking to Western and Israeli media.

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Endnotes

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Carolyn Moorman, Kelly Campa, Katherine Wells, Zahra Wakilzada, Avery Borens, Parker Hempel, Nidal Morrison, Annika Ganzeveld

Analyst Notes: Data Cutoff: 2:00 PM ET

Toplines

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei rejected the United States' demands for Iran to halt uranium enrichment and limit its ballistic missile program in a speech on February 17.[1] Khamenei's speech coincided with the second round of US-Iran talks in Geneva, Switzerland.[2] Khamenei stated that Iran has a "right" to have a "nuclear industry," which is a reference to Iran's nuclear program and uranium enrichment capabilities.[3] Khamenei also described Iran's "possession of deterrent weapons," almost certainly in reference to Iran's ballistic missiles, as "essential and obligatory" and claimed that this issue has "nothing to do with" the United States.[4] Iran's ballistic missile program poses a threat to the United States because Iran has used its ballistic missiles to target US forces and allies in the region.[5] Iranian officials at all levels have echoed Khamenei's position on these issues in recent days.[6] Khamenei's speech comes as the United States and Iran held a second round of talks in Geneva on February 17.[7] Chief mediator and Omani Foreign Affairs Minister Badr al Busaidi said that both sides made "good progress towards identifying common goals and relevant technical issues" during the talks.[8] Iran and the United States do not appear to have agreed on anything substantial, however. Iranian lead negotiator and Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi acknowledged after the talks that the United States and Iran "still hold positions that require work to reconcile." [9] A former adviser to Araghchi described the atmosphere of the talks as "not great" but later deleted his comment.[10] US Vice President JD Vance told Fox News on February 17 that US President Donald Trump "set several red lines that the Iranians are not yet willing to acknowledge and work through." [11] A US official speaking to Western media on February 17 noted that the Iranian delegation agreed to resume talks in two weeks to address the "open gaps" between the Iranian and US positions.[12]

Iran has presented several proposals to the United States that do not meet the United States' demand for zero enrichment. Iranian diplomats have reportedly suggested in negotiations that Iran could agree to temporarily halt enrichment for up to three years or establish a regional enrichment facility on Iranian soil to provide low-enriched uranium to regional countries, according to US, Iranian, and regional diplomats speaking to Western and Israeli media.[13] Temporarily halting uranium enrichment would enable Iran to continue enriching uranium in the future. Iran reportedly rejected a recent proposal from US Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff to halt uranium enrichment for three to five years and then enrich uranium at 1.5 percent, although a US official denied that Witkoff presented such a proposal to Iran.[14] Establishing a regional enrichment facility in Iran would similarly

enable Iran to continue enriching uranium. The United States previously proposed a regional consortium framework before the June 2025 Israel-Iran War that would have given Iran access to enriched uranium.[15] Iran rejected this proposal because the consortium's enrichment facility would have been located outside Iran.[16]

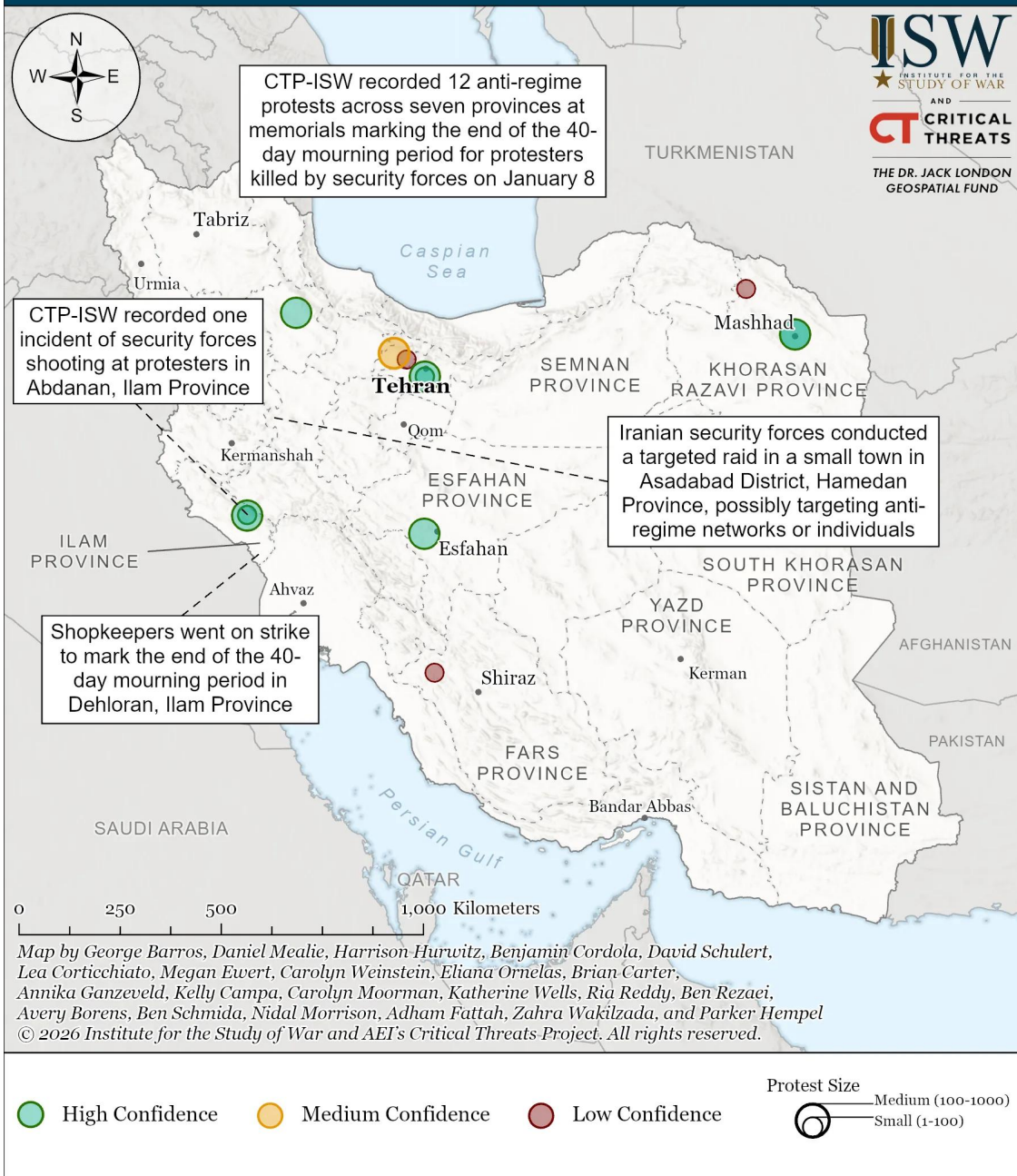
Iran seeks significant economic relief in return for the limited nuclear concessions it is offering to make. Iranian officials told the *Wall Street Journal* that, "at a minimum," Iran wants the United States to unfreeze the \$6 billion USD worth of frozen Iranian assets in Qatar.[17] The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran head recently stated that Iran could dilute its highly enriched uranium if the United States lifts "all sanctions" on Iran.[18] Iran could use the money that it gains access to through an agreement with the United States to develop its missile program and support the Axis of Resistance, which would pose a threat to US assets and allies in the region.

Iran is continuing to try to prepare for and deter potential US military action by conducting a multi-day naval exercise in the Strait of Hormuz.[19] The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy started an exercise on February 16 and reportedly closed off areas of the Strait of Hormuz to conduct various offensive and defensive drills. These drills include deploying fast attack craft and testing unspecified missiles and drones.[20] IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri claimed on February 17 that the IRGC Navy has deployed military equipment during this exercise that it did not use in the June 2025 Israel-Iran War.[21] The IRGC Navy will conduct the second phase of this exercise on February 18.[22]

Some Iranians held anti-regime protests on February 17 despite the regime's recent brutal crackdown on protesters, which highlights how some parts of the Iranian population remain extremely frustrated and disillusioned with the regime. CTP-ISW recorded 12 protests across seven provinces on February 17 during ceremonies marking the end of the 40-day mourning period for protesters killed on January 8.[23] The 40th day of mourning marks the end of the initial mourning period and is often observed with public commemorations and gatherings in Shia Islam. CTP-ISW recorded one instance of Iranian security forces shooting at memorial participants who were chanting an anti-regime slogan in Abdanan, Ilam Province.[24] Iranian security forces pressured a family to cancel its 40-day memorial in Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi Province, which highlights the regime's concern that memorials honoring killed protesters can transform into anti-regime protests.[25] Shopkeepers in Ilam Province also closed their shops in solidarity with those mourning the killing of protesters.[26] Protest activity peaked on January 8 and 9.[27] Iranian Health Ministry officials previously told TIME Magazine that security forces may have killed over 30,000 protesters on January 8 and 9 alone.[28] The protests on February 17 highlight how the regime's repression of its population creates greater disaffection and anger toward the regime, which can in turn set conditions for further anti-regime activity.[29] CTP-ISW previously assessed on January 15 that the regime had suppressed the recent protest movement, but that protests could resume if the regime eases its securitization measures, and because the regime has not addressed the underlying grievances that triggered the recent protest movement.[30]

Protests in Iran

From 3:30 PM ET on February 16 to 3:30 PM ET on February 17, 2026



Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Harrison Hurwitz, Benjamin Cordola, David Schulert, Lea Corticchiato, Megan Evert, Carolyn Weinstein, Eliana Ornelas, Brian Carter, Annika Ganzeveld, Kelly Campa, Carolyn Moorman, Katherine Wells, Ria Reddy, Ben Rezaei, Avery Borens, Ben Schmida, Nidal Morrison, Adham Fattah, Zahra Waklzada, and Parker Hempel
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Iranian security forces conducted a targeted raid in Chenar town, Asadabad District, Hamedan Province, on February 16, likely to preempt or disrupt some kind of anti-regime activity.[31] It is unclear what type of activity the regime sought to prevent or disrupt, but the timing of the raid suggests that security forces may have sought to prevent protests from breaking out during the 40-day mourning ceremonies. The fact that security forces only conducted a raid in a small town in Hamedan Province suggests that this raid is not part of a broader regime effort to crack down on mourning ceremonies across Iran. The limited scope of the raid suggests that security forces were instead targeting a specific individual, network, or infrastructure in the town linked to anti-regime activity.

Most of the Iraqi Shia Coordination Framework has agreed to rescind State of Law Coalition head and former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki's nomination as prime minister designate if Maliki does not voluntarily withdraw his nomination in order to avoid US sanctions, according

to a senior framework political adviser speaking to an Iraqi journalist on February 16.[32] The adviser said that the United States has threatened to sanction “Iraq’s oil lifeline and financial core,” including the State Organization for the Marketing of Oil, the Iraqi Central Bank, the Oil Ministry, and senior Shia officials linked to Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, if the Shia Coordination Framework continues to support Maliki’s nomination.[33] The adviser added that the United States would implement these sanctions on March 1.[34] The United States has repeatedly expressed its opposition to Maliki. US President Donald Trump warned on January 27 that the United States will “no longer help Iraq” if Maliki becomes prime minister, for example.[35] Maliki pursued authoritarian and sectarian policies after the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, which contributed to the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) in Iraq.[36] The United States ultimately conditioned its support for Iraq against ISIS in 2014 on Maliki’s removal from power due to his direct role in destabilizing Iraq.[37] The United States has also threatened to limit the Iraqi federal government’s access to its oil revenue if Iranian-backed Iraqi militias are included in the next Iraqi government.[38] Oil revenue accounts for about 90 percent of Iraq’s state budget.[39]

Maliki’s insistence on the premiership will probably force the framework to revoke his nomination. Maliki has continued to affirm his desire for the position, and a member of his coalition claimed on February 16 that the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the United Arab Emirates support Maliki.[40] Maliki has claimed that he would withdraw from the premiership race if a majority of the framework supports his withdrawal, but it is unclear if he would follow through on this promise if the framework rescinded its support for him.[41] The framework nominated Maliki as prime minister designate via a majority vote on January 24.[42] Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Asaib Ahl al Haq head Qais al Khazali reportedly failed on February 10 to convince unspecified Iranian officials to abandon their support for Maliki’s nomination.[43] CTP-ISW assessed on February 10 that framework leaders who oppose Maliki, including Khazali and National State Forces Alliance head Ammar al Hakim, likely sought for Iran to withdraw its support for Maliki after US and domestic opposition to Maliki failed to pressure the framework to nominate a new prime minister designate.[44] The Iranian regime may have refused to revoke its support for Maliki in order not to succumb to US opposition to Maliki.

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani continues to vie for the premiership. It remains unlikely that the framework will select him, given many framework members’ long-standing objections to Sudani. A member of Sudani’s Reconstruction and Development Coalition told Iraqi media on February 16 that the coalition rejects extending Sudani’s current term or the framework for choosing a “compromise candidate” because both options risk reducing Sudani’s chance of a second term as prime minister.[45] Sudani currently leads a caretaker government with limited powers.[46] This parliamentarian’s statement comes after an unspecified “influential” framework member reportedly proposed extending Sudani’s premiership for one year due to the current political deadlock.[47] A framework source told Iraqi media on February 9 that Sudani would have “specific and conditional powers” if his term was extended and that Sudani is expected to discuss the proposal at upcoming framework meetings.[48] It is unclear which framework party proposed this extension, given that many framework leaders oppose Sudani remaining in power.[49]

Unspecified individuals close to Sudani suggested to Iraqi media on February 16 that Sudani’s control of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias is a “trump card.”[50] This statement could reflect an effort by Sudani to use his purported control over the militias to gain US support for him to become prime minister amid US objections to Maliki. The United States has pressured the Iraqi federal government since early 2025 to disarm Iranian-backed Iraqi militias.[51] Sudani heads the Iraqi security establishment, which includes Iranian-backed Iraqi militias that operate under the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).[52] Many of the militias that operate under the PMF answer to Iran instead of the prime minister, however.[53] Sudani has taken limited steps to meet US demands to

disarm the militias, such as withdrawing a bill from parliament in August 2025 that would have formally institutionalized parts of the PMF due to US concerns over the legislation.[54] Maliki has similarly attempted to gain US support by claiming that he could disarm Iranian-backed Iraqi militias while in office.[55] CTP-ISW continues to assess that Maliki would likely attempt to transform elements of the Iraqi security establishment into a force that he could use to enhance his personal power as prime minister, however.[56]

The Syrian government transferred some authorities from the central government to governors and local officials on February 15, which may satisfy some of the Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) demands regarding decentralization.[57] The Syrian Ministry of Local Administration's Decision No. 13 aims to expand the powers of governors and city council heads.[58] The Syrian government delegated several environmental, financial, and administrative powers, including the authority to appoint and transfer personnel, to governors to allow them to make decisions "without returning to central authorities." [59] The decision also delegates the authority to oversee "employee affairs" to city council heads.[60] The decision builds on Law No. 107 of 2011, which is an Assad-era law that devolves important economic and community support authorities to local leaders but places them under a centrally appointed governor.[61] Law No. 107 gave significant authority to governors and comparatively less to local leaders, as does Decision No. 13.[62]

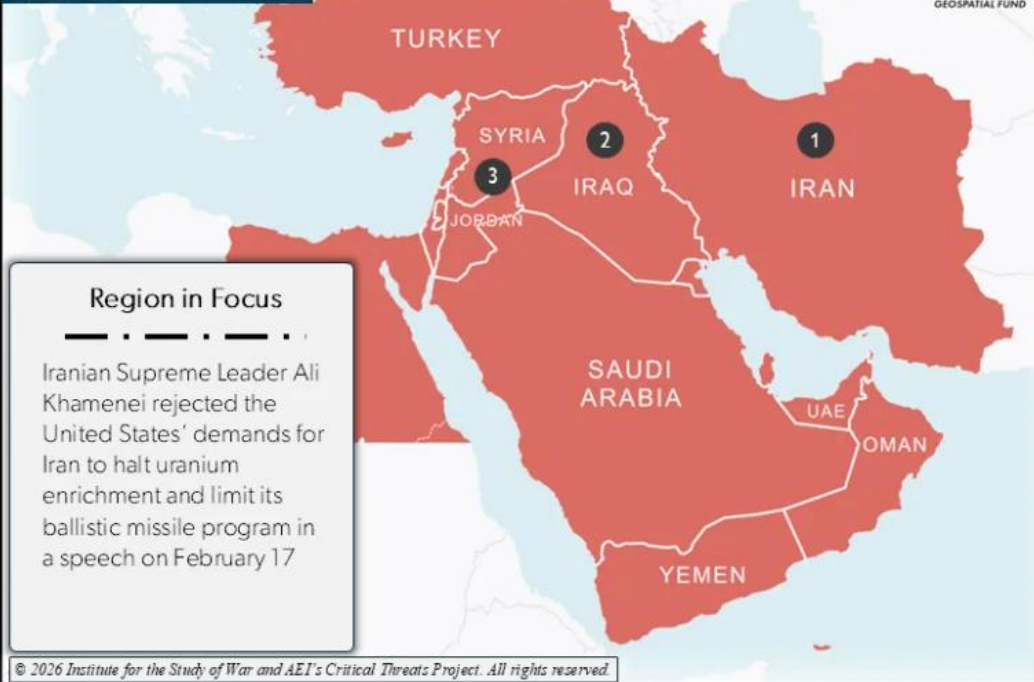
The Syrian transitional government and the SDF's fundamentally different interpretations of decentralization were one of the principal political issues that delayed the SDF's integration into the Syrian state prior to the government offensive.[63] The Syrian transitional government insists that a central authority should rule Syria through appointed governors and views SDF decentralization as a path toward secession.[64] Syrian President Ahmed al Shara in particular has continually insisted on a highly centralized government model.[65]

The SDF has not explicitly responded to Decision No. 13, but the delegation of certain powers to Syrian governors and local officials could satisfy some of the SDF's demands regarding decentralized governance, particularly in Hasakah Province. The SDF views decentralization as a way to ensure local authority over regional affairs and views the government's push to concentrate power in Damascus as an attempt to impose autocratic rule.[66] SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi told Kurdish media on February 16 that Syrian Kurds' core demand is "decentralized local rule." [67] Abdi has previously defined this demand as a decentralized form of governance in which "powers [are] distributed between the center and the provinces" within a unified Syrian state.[68] The only Syrian governor who is not centrally appointed is Hasakah Governor Nouredine Issa Ahmed, who was nominated by the SDF.[69] Decision No. 13 delegates certain central authorities to Ahmed and allows him greater autonomy to delegate authorities to local officials and leaders, if he chooses to do so.

The Syrian government's decision to delegate some local powers may be in response to the United States' clear preference for decentralization. Shara's offensive in northeastern Syria compelled moderate Kurdish leaders to drop their opposition to Shara's model of state centralization and accede to Shara's demand to integrate the SDF and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) into the state without decentralization under the January 30 agreement.[70] The United States has reportedly told Shara to exercise flexibility in addressing the SDF's demands.[71] An unspecified Western official told Reuters on February 13 that the United States has advised Shara to avoid taking a hardline stance and that the United States supports granting the Kurds a degree of autonomy as long as it does not threaten Syria's central authority in Damascus.[72] Senior US officials, including US President Donald Trump, played a meaningful role in encouraging Shara to exercise restraint during his offensive against the SDF.[73]

Iran Update

February 17, 2026



- 1 Tehran, Iran.** Some Iranians held anti-regime protests on February 17 despite the regime's recent brutal crackdown on protesters, which highlights how some parts of the Iranian population remain extremely frustrated and disillusioned with the regime.
- 2 Baghdad, Iraq.** Most of the Iraqi Shia Coordination Framework has agreed to rescind State of Law Coalition head and former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki's nomination as prime minister designate if Maliki does not voluntarily withdraw his nomination in order to avoid US sanctions, according to a senior framework political adviser speaking to an Iraqi journalist on February 16. Maliki's insistence on the premiership will probably force the framework to revoke his nomination.
- 3 Damascus, Syria.** The Syrian government transferred some authorities from the central government to governors and local officials on February 15, which may satisfy some of the Syrian Democratic Forces' demands regarding decentralization.

Key Takeaways

- 1. US-Iran Negotiations:** Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei rejected the United States' demands for Iran to halt uranium enrichment and limit its ballistic missile program in a speech on February 17. Khamenei's speech coincided with the second round of US-Iran talks in Geneva, Switzerland. Iran has presented several proposals to the United States that do not meet the United States' demand for zero enrichment. Iran seeks significant economic relief in return for the limited nuclear concessions it has offered to make.
- 2. Protests in Iran:** Some Iranians held anti-regime protests on February 17 despite the regime's recent brutal crackdown on protesters, which highlights how some parts of the Iranian population remain extremely frustrated and disillusioned with the regime.
- 3. Iranian Security Forces Activity:** Iranian security forces conducted a targeted raid in Chenar

town, Asadabad District, Hamedan Province, on February 16, likely to preempt or disrupt some kind of anti-regime activity. The limited scope of the raid suggests that security forces were targeting a specific individual, network, or infrastructure in the town linked to anti-regime activity.

4. **Iraqi Government Formation:** Most of the Iraqi Shia Coordination Framework has agreed to rescind State of Law Coalition head and former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki's nomination as prime minister designate if Maliki does not voluntarily withdraw his nomination in order to avoid US sanctions, according to a senior framework political adviser speaking to an Iraqi journalist on February 16. Maliki's insistence on the premiership will probably force the framework to revoke his nomination.
5. **The Iraqi Premiership:** Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani continues to vie for the premiership. It remains unlikely that the framework will select him, given many framework members' long-standing objections to Sudani. Unspecified individuals close to Sudani suggested to Iraqi media on February 16 that Sudani's control of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias is a "trump card." This statement could reflect an effort by Sudani to use his purported control over the militias to gain US support for him to become prime minister amid US objections to Maliki.
6. **Syrian Decentralization:** The Syrian government transferred some authorities from the central government to governors and local officials on February 15, which may satisfy some of the Syrian Democratic Forces' demands regarding decentralization.

Iran

The Mobarizoun Popular Front (MPF), which is a coalition of anti-regime Baloch groups, claimed on February 15 that its fighters targeted and destroyed an Iranian security forces vehicle. The group claimed that the vehicle was headed to Saravan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province, to "suppress citizens." [74] The MPF has carried out several attacks against Iranian security forces since the group was formed in early December 2025. [75]

Iraq

Iraqi Parliament Speaker Haibat al Halbousi asked the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court (FSC) on February 15 to issue a ruling on whether the Iraqi parliament can continue to hold sessions even though it has not elected a president. [76] Halbousi asked the FSC to provide its "legal opinion" on parliament continuing to hold sessions without "including the item of electing the president" on its agenda. [77] The Iraqi Constitution stipulates that parliament must elect a president by a simple majority with a two-thirds quorum within 30 days of parliament electing a parliament speaker. [78] Parliament elected Halbousi as parliament speaker in late December 2025 but has not yet elected a president.

Syria

The Syrian government has begun to transfer families from al Hol internally displaced persons (IDP) camp in Hasakah Province to Aleppo Province. [79] A Syrian government official in charge of the camp's activities told Kurdish media on February 17 that the Syrian government started to move residents from the camp on February 17 in preparation for the camp's closure "within a week." [80] Syrian media and journalists reported on February 17 that the Syrian government transported around 300 primarily Syrian and Iraqi residents from al Hol IDP camp to Akhtarin camp. [81] Akhtarin camp is a "largely vacant" IDP camp in northern Aleppo Province. [82] The transfer of families and impending

closure of al Hol camp come as Syrian government forces have been unable to effectively manage the camp since Syrian government forces arrived at the camp on January 20.[83] At least 10,000 al Hol residents have escaped from the camp since January 20.[84] Multiple al Hol residents told New Lines Magazine that they intentionally “sought to make daily life impossible” by rioting and starting fires at the camp, not necessarily to escape, but rather to force Syrian government authorities to transfer them.[85] A significant proportion of al Hol camp residents—particularly third-country nationals—are family members of ISIS fighters and left ISIS’s last remaining territory in Baghouz when it was seized by the SDF in 2019.[86]

The Syrian government continues to face challenges in repatriating third-country nationals.[87] Syrian officials told Reuters on February 16 that the Syrian government returned 34 Australian citizens who were supposed to return to Australia to the al Roj IDP camp due to unspecified “technical reasons.”[88] The Australian government later announced on February 16 that Australia “is not and will not repatriate people from Syria” due to national security concerns.[89] Many countries have little incentive to repatriate their nationals who joined or supported ISIS.

US Central Command (CENTCOM) has continued to strike ISIS targets in Syria in recent weeks.[90] CENTCOM reported on February 14 that it conducted ten strikes targeting more than 30 ISIS targets, including ISIS infrastructure and weapons depots, between February 3 and 12.[91] US officials have recently stated that the United States will continue to conduct counter-ISIS airstrikes despite the United States’ handover of its bases to the Syrian government.[92] US CENTCOM Commander Admiral Brad Cooper said on February 12 that US forces remain “poised” to address and respond to threats from ISIS.[93]

SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi announced the formation of a united Kurdish leadership body to represent the Kurds on February 16.[94] Abdi told Kurdish media on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference that the Democratic Union Party (PYD), Kurdish National Council (KNC), and other smaller parties have come together to create a “Kurdish political body.”[95] Abdi stated that this body represents the “general interests of Kurds,” even though there may be political differences among its members.[96] Several SDF and AANES leaders have expressed an intent to “shift” the struggle for Kurdish rights from military action to political and legal advocacy.[97] Kurdish political parties will almost certainly continue to attempt to advocate for Kurdish rights in Damascus, as they have done since the fall of the Assad regime. Abdi noted that the joint Kurdish delegation—which includes officials from rival political parties, the PYD and the KNC—will soon travel to Damascus to discuss Kurdish issues with the Syrian central government.[98] KNC officials reportedly traveled to Damascus to meet with Syrian President Ahmed al Shara on February 3 without the support or foreknowledge of the PYD, possibly in an attempt to sideline the PYD.[99]

The Syrian government and the SDF continue to negotiate the terms of the SDF’s military integration into the Syrian army. The SDF and the Syrian government agreed on January 30 to integrate the SDF into the Syrian army by establishing three brigades comprised of SDF fighters that will be deployed in Hasakah Province.[100] SDF Spokesperson Farhad Shami said on February 13 that there will be a “Hasakah Brigade,” “Qamishli Brigade,” and “Derik Brigade,” referring to the geographic areas in which each brigade will operate.[101] Derik is also known as al Malikiyah and is located in northeastern Hasakah Province near the Iraqi border. SDF and Syrian government officials told Reuters on February 13 that they reached a preliminary understanding on a brigade near Qamishli but have not reached an agreement on the locations of the other two brigades.[102]

Abdi also alluded to an unspecified “problem” regarding the appointment of SDF nominee Azad Simi Jia Kobani for Assistant Defense Minister of the Eastern Region.[103] Kobani is the SDF’s intelligence chief

and a member of the SDF's General Command.[104] Kobani has previously collaborated with US forces during counter-ISIS operations in northeastern Syria.[105] Pro-Erdogan Turkish media have alleged that Kobani has played a role in Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) attacks in Turkish territory, including the PKK's 2007 Daglica attack.[106] Abdi did not provide any information about the "problem" with Kobani's appointment, but it is possible that Turkey played a role in the "problems" regarding Kobani's appointment, given that Turkish officials have previously sought to bar senior People's Protection Units (YPG) commanders from assuming leadership positions in the Syrian Defense Ministry.[107]

A northern Syria-based source reported that Syrian Interior Ministry forces deployed to several villages south of the M4 highway between Qamishli and the Syria-Iraq border on February 17.[108] The source reported that Interior Ministry forces deployed to the villages of Qasrak al Syriac, Abu Fara, and Abu Hujira Fawqani in Hasakah Province.[109] The January 30 agreement requires Syrian army and SDF units to withdraw from frontlines in Hasakah Province and for their respective internal security units to backfill these positions.[110]

Arabian Peninsula

CTP-ISW suspended its coverage of Yemen beginning on January 9.

Palestinian Territories & Lebanon

The United States and regional actors are reportedly attempting to reach a security agreement between the Lebanese government and Israel. Informed sources told Lebanese media on February 17 that the United States and regional actors are holding discussions on a potential preliminary proposal to hold "parallel" discussions between Israeli and Lebanese officials.[111] The preliminary proposal stipulates that Hezbollah would not conduct any attack against Israel, and the ceasefire monitoring mechanism would ensure that Hezbollah does not use its weapons.[112] The proposal would also include some Israeli concessions, including the cessation of Israeli operations, an Israeli military withdrawal from some of its permanent points in Lebanese territory, and the release of a number of Lebanese prisoners held in Israel.[113] The sources stated that the United States has demanded that Israeli and Lebanese officials move talks to a "new level," including direct discussions on security agreements beyond the November 2024 Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire agreement.[114] The "new level" presumably refers to engaging in higher-level negotiations between Lebanese and Israeli officials.[115] Hezbollah reportedly does not oppose the terms of this proposal with the United States.[116]

Neither Israel nor the Lebanese government has changed its position, however, which may complicate these diplomatic efforts. Lebanese officials insist on maintaining the ceasefire monitoring mechanism instead of participating in direct, high-level negotiations with Israel.[117] The Lebanese government also reportedly supports expanding the role of the ceasefire monitoring committee.[118] CTP-ISW previously assessed that Lebanese officials likely seek to avoid high-level negotiations with Israel because such negotiations would presumably require the Lebanese government to make firm commitments to disarm Hezbollah across all Lebanese territory, which it has thus far been hesitant to do.[119] Israel reportedly supports negotiating with the Lebanese government outside of the mechanism and confining the mechanism's discussions to economic cooperation, according to Lebanese media.[120] Israeli officials, including Defense Minister Israel Katz, have also maintained that Israel will not withdraw its forces from southern Lebanon so long as Hezbollah maintains its weapons.[121] Katz also noted on February 17 that Israeli forces' presence in southern Lebanon is separate from the ceasefire

agreement.[122]

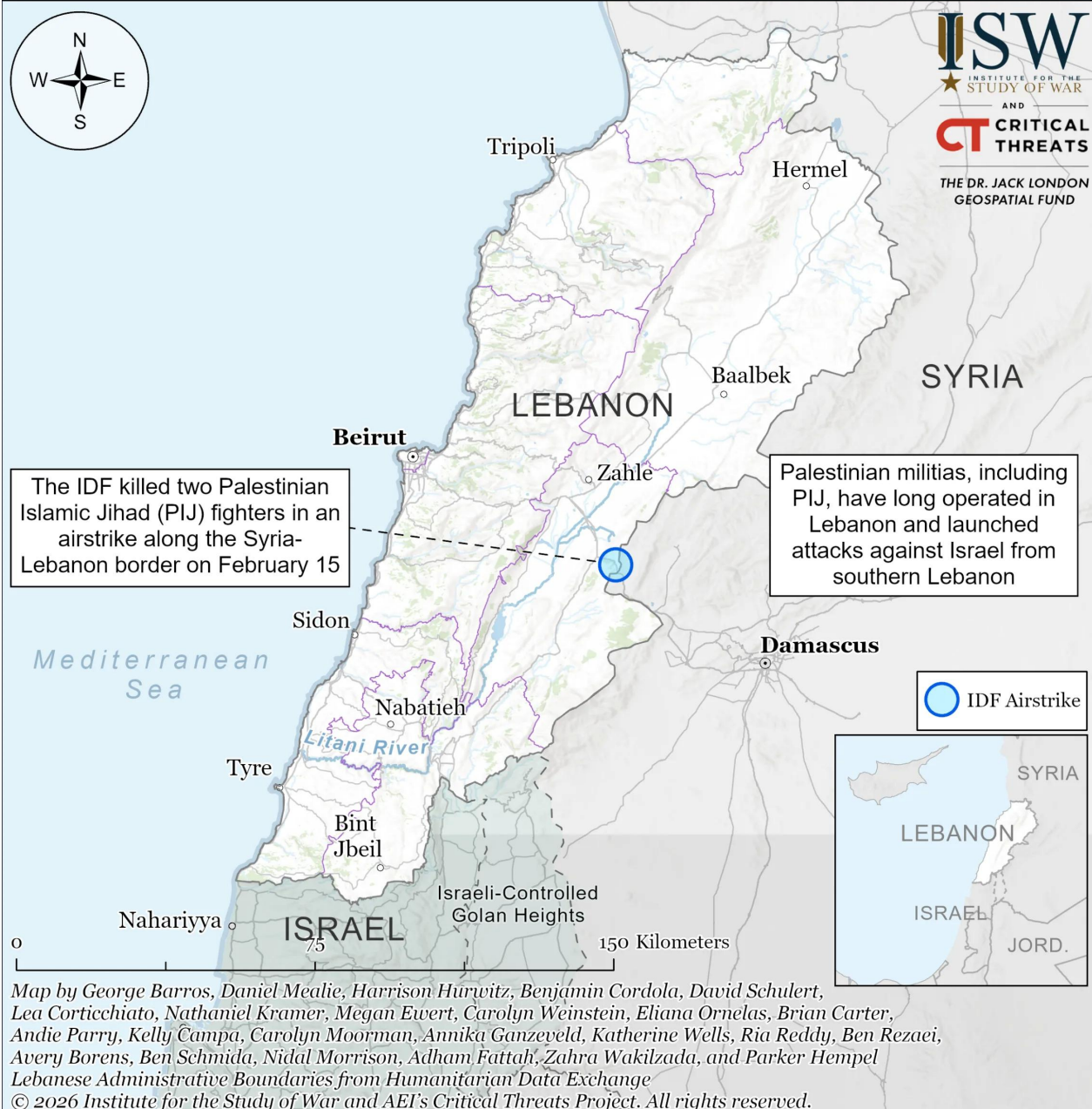
The Lebanese government has given the LAF a four-month deadline to implement the next phase of its disarmament plan. LAF Commander Rodolphe Haykal presented the LAF's plan for the next phase of its disarmament plan to the Lebanese cabinet on February 16.[123] The second phase of the LAF's disarmament plan includes Hezbollah's disarmament between the Litani and Awali rivers.[124] Haykal did not provide details about the second phase but noted that the LAF has started conducting reconnaissance as part of the second phase.[125] Haykal reportedly asked the Lebanese cabinet for an eight-month deadline to implement the second phase, but the Lebanese cabinet gave the LAF four months.[126] Lebanese Information Minister Paul Morcos confirmed the four-month deadline but noted that it is extendable "depending on available capabilities, Israeli attacks, and hindrances on the ground." [127] The Lebanese cabinet's deadline aligns with the amount of time that it took the LAF to complete its first phase.[128] The LAF's request for an eight-month deadline reflects how the LAF is adopting a cautious approach toward disarming Hezbollah north of the Litani River, given that Hezbollah has framed its disarmament in the north as an existential issue.[129]

LAF Commander Rodolphe Haykal met with multiple international officials at the Munich Security Conference in Germany between February 13 and 15 to garner international support for the LAF.[130] Haykal held a series of bilateral meetings on the sidelines of the conference with US, European, and regional officials, including US Senior Adviser to US President Donald Trump on African and Middle Eastern Affairs Massad Boulous, to discuss enhancing cooperation and support for the LAF.[131] Haykal's meetings are part of the Lebanese state's efforts to increase international support and funding for the LAF.[132] Lebanon's regional and Western partners, including the United States, France, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, continue to prepare for the March 2026 French-hosted LAF support conference.[133]

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) killed two Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) fighters in an airstrike along the Syria-Lebanon border on February 15.[134] The IDF struck and killed two PIJ fighters in Majdal Anjar, eastern Bekaa Valley, as the fighters reportedly attempted to cross the border from Lebanon into Syria.[135] The IDF said that PIJ has taken steps to advance its "terrorist operations" against Israel from Lebanese territory.[136] Palestinian militias, including PIJ, have long operated in Lebanon and have launched attacks against Israel from southern Lebanon.[137] The Syrian government and Syrian President Ahmed al Shara pressured Palestinian militia leaders, including PIJ leaders, to leave the country and disarm their forces at the request of the United States between April and May 2025.[138] Many Palestinian militias operated in Syria under Assad.

Israeli Strikes in Lebanon

As of February 17, 2026 at 2:00 PM ET



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Iran Update, February 18, 2026



Nidal Morrison, Adham Fattah, Katherine Wells, Parker Hempel, Avery Borens, Kelly Campa, Brian Carter

Analyst Notes: Data Cutoff: 2:00 PM ET

Toplines

An unspecified adviser to US President Donald Trump told Axios on February 18 that Trump is frustrated with the insufficient progress made towards an agreement with Iran.[1] CTP-ISW continues to assess that both sides' negotiating red lines make reaching an agreement unlikely unless the position of either side changes. The Iranian regime has not indicated that it is willing to commit to US demands of zero enrichment, limiting its ballistic missile program, or ceasing support for its proxies and partners in the region.[2] The Trump adviser told Axios that there is a "90 percent" chance of US military action "in the next few weeks." [3] Other unspecified sources described a joint US-Israeli campaign that would be "massive," "weeks-long," and "existential" for the regime.[4] Two Israeli officials told Axios that Israel is preparing for a military conflict to possibly take place "within days." [5] The United States has moved a large number of assets into the region, including the upcoming arrival of the USS Gerald R. Ford carrier strike group.[6]

Some Iranians continued to hold anti-regime protests on February 18 despite the Iranian regime's brutal crackdown on the recent wave of protests, which emphasizes the deep public frustration and disillusionment with the regime for its refusal to address the people's grievances. CTP-ISW recorded six anti-regime protests across five provinces on February 18 at memorials that marked the end of the 40-day mourning period for protesters killed by security forces on January 8 and 9.[7] A BBC journalist reported that security forces fired tear gas targeting protesters and detained several protesters at Behest-e Zahra cemetery, Tehran City, on February 18.[8] Another Iranian journalist circulated photos of several Basij personnel in Sattarkhan Neighborhood, central Tehran City, on February 18.[9] An Esfahan City resident told Reuters on February 18 that "people are [still] angry" and "frustrated" at the regime and asked "how long can [the regime] kill people to stay in power?" [10] The Iranian Teachers Union held a nationwide strike on February 18 to mark the end of the 40-day mourning period as well, which resulted in the closures of many schools across Iran.[11] Security forces killed at least 7,000 individuals and detained well over 50,000 protesters during the recent protests, according to a US-based Iran human rights organization on February 15.[12]

Protests in Iran

Between 3:30 PM ET on February 17 and 3:30 PM ET on February 18, 2026



The Shia Coordination Framework is reportedly divided over State of Law Coalition leader and former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki's nomination for the premiership.

Iraqi media reported on February 18 that the Shia Coordination Framework is divided into three “camps:” parties that support Maliki’s nomination, parties that oppose him, and several neutral parties.[13] Iraqi media characterized the Shia Coordination Framework into the following groups:

- **In favor of Maliki's nomination:** Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani, Badr Organization head Hadi al Ameri, and Iraqi Foundation Alliance head Mohsen al Mandalawi support Maliki’s nomination.[14]
- **Opposed to Maliki's nomination:** Asaib Ahl al Haq leader Qais al Khazali, National State Forces Alliance leader Ammar al Hakim, Reconstruction and Development Coalition member Ahmed al Asadi, Victory Coalition leader Haider al Abadi, and Imam Ali Brigades head Shibl al Zaidi are opposed to Maliki’s nomination.[15] Khazali and Hakim have led intra-framework opposition to

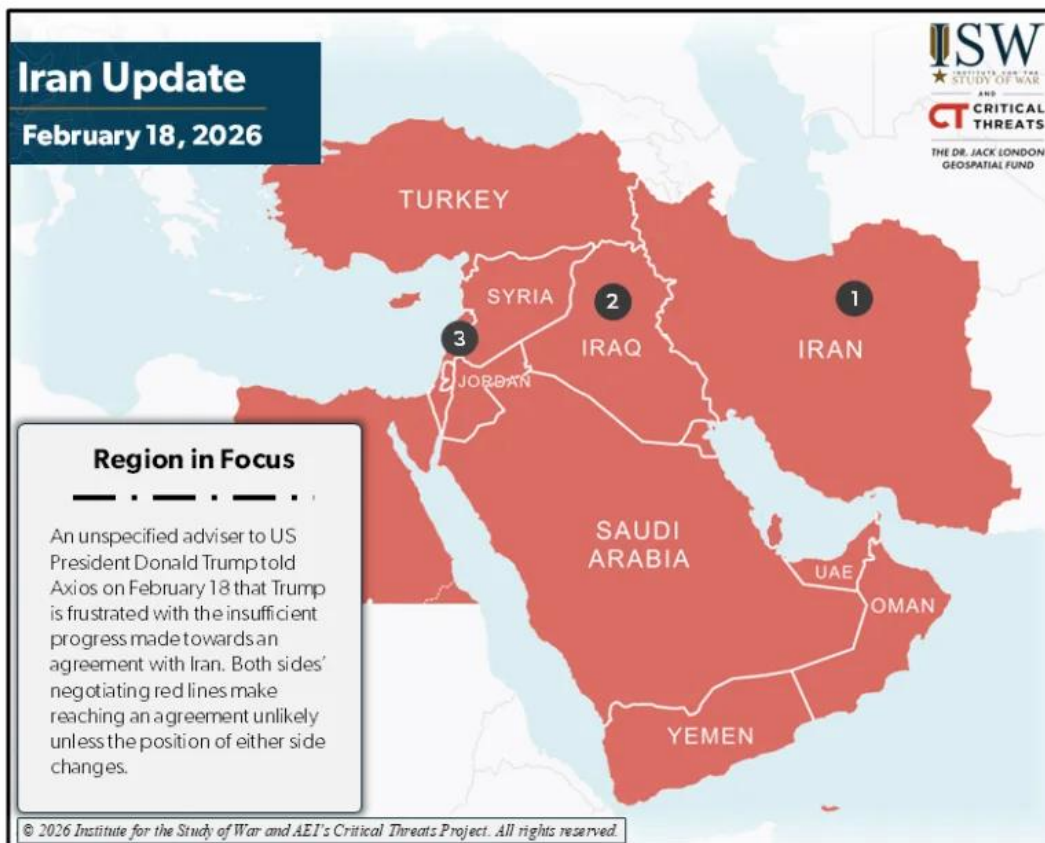
Maliki's nomination since the framework nominated Maliki in mid-January 2026.[16]

- **Neutral to Maliki's nomination:** Absher Ya Iraq head Humam Hamoudi, Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada leader Abu Alaa al Walai, Tasmem Alliance member Amer al Fayez, and the Virtue Party.[17] Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada's political wing and the Virtue Party are allied with Maliki's State of Law Coalition.[18]

Some Shia Coordination Framework parties likely want Maliki to withdraw from the premiership race voluntarily to avoid publicly succumbing to the United States' staunch opposition to Maliki while also avoiding US sanctions. The United States has repeatedly expressed its opposition to Maliki. US President Donald Trump warned on January 27 that the United States will "no longer help Iraq" if Maliki becomes prime minister, for example.[19] Unspecified sources told Iraqi media on February 18 that some framework members want Maliki to voluntarily withdraw from the premiership race because the framework "fears" replacing Maliki directly.[20]

These framework parties may be concerned about the political repercussions of publicly capitulating to US pressure against Maliki, but nonetheless remain concerned about US sanctions. Several Iraqi officials and framework members criticized "foreign interference" in Iraqi affairs following Trump's statement about Maliki.[21] A senior framework political adviser also told an Iraqi journalist on February 16 that most of the framework has agreed to rescind Maliki's nomination if he does not voluntarily withdraw in order to avoid US sanctions.[22] The adviser said that the US threatened to sanction "Iraq's oil lifeline and financial core," including the Oil Ministry and Iraqi Central Bank, on March 1 if the framework continues to support Maliki.[23] US opposition to Maliki is derived from authoritarian and sectarian policies that Maliki pursued after the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, which contributed to the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) in Iraq.[24] The United States ultimately conditioned its support for Iraq against ISIS in 2014 on Maliki's removal from power due to his direct role in destabilizing Iraq.[25]

Maliki's continued insistence on the premiership will probably force the framework to revoke his nomination to end the ongoing deadlock, as CTP-ISW assessed on February 17.[26] Iraqi media reported on February 18 that Maliki cancelled two "crucial" framework meetings due to his fears of the framework voting to replace him.[27] Maliki's intervention and attempts to delay his own ousting are likely tied to the deadlines that the United States has set and extended to pressure the framework to nominate a new prime minister.[28] A Kurdish journalist reported on February 16 that the United States gave the framework a February 16 deadline to nominate a new prime minister.[29] An unspecified political source told Iraqi media on February 18 that the new deadline is February 19, however.[30]



- 1 **TEHRAN, IRAN.** Some Iranians continued to hold anti-regime protests despite the Iranian regime's brutal crackdown on the recent wave of protests, which emphasizes the deep public frustration and disillusionment with the regime for its refusal to address the people's grievances. CTP-ISW recorded six anti-regime protests across five provinces on February 18 at memorials that marked the end of the 40-day mourning period for protesters killed by security forces on January 8 and 9.
- 2 **BAGHDAD, IRAQ.** The Shia Coordination Framework is reportedly divided over State of Law Coalition leader Nouri al Maliki's nomination for the premiership. Some Shia Coordination Framework parties likely want Maliki to withdraw from the premiership race voluntarily to avoid publicly succumbing to the United States' staunch opposition to Maliki while also avoiding US sanctions.
- 3 **BEIRUT, LEBANON.** Hezbollah appears to have deterred the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) from confronting Hezbollah north of the Litani River in the second phase of its disarmament plan. The LAF may adopt the cautious and non-provocative approach that its forces implemented in southern Lebanon.

Key Takeaways

1. **US Military Action Against Iran:** An unspecified adviser to US President Donald Trump told Axios on February 18 that Trump is frustrated with the insufficient progress made towards an agreement with Iran. CTP-ISW continues to assess that both sides' negotiating red lines make reaching an agreement unlikely unless the position of either side changes. Unspecified sources described a weeks-long, joint US and Israeli military campaign targeting Iran to Axios on February 18.
2. **Iranian Anti-Regime Protests:** Some Iranians continued to hold anti-regime protests on February 18 despite the Iranian regime's brutal crackdown on the recent wave of protests, which emphasizes the deep public frustration and disillusionment with the regime for its refusal to address the people's grievances. CTP-ISW recorded six anti-regime protests across five provinces on February 18 at memorials that marked the end of the 40-day mourning period for protesters

killed by security forces on January 8 and 9. The Iranian Teachers Union also held a nationwide strike on February 18.

3. **Maliki for Prime Minister:** The Shia Coordination Framework is reportedly divided over State of Law Coalition leader and former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki's nomination for the premiership. Some Shia Coordination Framework parties likely want Maliki to withdraw from the premiership race voluntarily to avoid publicly succumbing to the United States' staunch opposition to Maliki while also avoiding US sanctions. Maliki's continued insistence on the premiership will probably force the framework to revoke his nomination to end the ongoing deadlock, as CTP-ISW assessed on February 17.
4. **Hezbollah Disarmament:** Hezbollah appears to have deterred the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) from confronting Hezbollah north of the Litani River in the second phase of its disarmament plan. Saudi and Lebanese media reports that the LAF will "adopt a gradual approach" and will not confront "any Lebanese faction" in the next phase of its disarmament plan suggest that the LAF is unwilling to disarm Hezbollah fighters using force. The LAF may adopt the cautious and non-provocative approach that its forces implemented in southern Lebanon.

Iran

Iran is continuing its efforts to fortify the Taleghan 2 facility at Parchin Military Complex, which is consistent with Iranian efforts since the Israel-Iran War to rebuild its nuclear program and harden nuclear facilities against future airstrikes. The Institute for Science and International Security reported on February 17 that Iran has covered the facility with soil, after the regime had already encased the facility with a concrete "sarcophagus" to protect against airstrikes.[31] Parchin is a defense industrial site that Iran has used to develop and manufacture explosive materials, rockets, and other munitions.[32] Iran used the Taleghan 2 facility to test explosives that are needed to detonate a nuclear device before it suspended its nuclear weapons program in 2003.[33] Israel struck Taleghan 2 and destroyed equipment that would be needed to design and test explosives used in nuclear devices in October 2024.[34]The Institute for Science and International Security has assessed in recent weeks that Iran is also hardening infrastructure at the Esfahan Nuclear Technology Center and Kolang Gaz La Mountain nuclear facility in preparation for possible future strikes.[35] CTP-ISW previously assessed that Iran may prolong the talks with the United States to provide itself additional time to reconstitute its nuclear and/or ballistic missile programs.[36]

Iranian Construction at the Taleghan 2 Nuclear Facility

Southeast of Tehran, Tehran Province, Iran
35.5606995°N, 51.7846503°E



Iraq

Nothing significant to report.

Syria

Nothing significant to report.

Arabian Peninsula

CTP-ISW suspended its coverage of Yemen beginning on January 9.

Palestinian Territories & Lebanon

Hezbollah appears to have deterred the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) from confronting

Hezbollah north of the Litani River in the second phase of its disarmament plan. The Lebanese government gave the LAF a four-month deadline on February 16 to implement the second phase of the LAF plan to disarm Hezbollah.[37] The second phase concerns disarmament operations between the Litani and Awali rivers.[38] Unspecified security sources told Saudi media on February 17 that the LAF will not confront “any Lebanese faction” in the next phase of its disarmament plan, almost certainly in reference to Hezbollah.[39] The sources did not specify whether they are referring to general confrontation or specifically military confrontation. An informed source told Lebanese media on February 16 that LAF Commander Rodolphe Haykal will “adopt a gradual approach” toward disarming Hezbollah.[40] The sources’ comments to Saudi and Lebanese media suggest that the LAF is unwilling to adopt a confrontational or aggressive posture toward its efforts to disarm Hezbollah north of the Litani River. Such a posture would presumably require the LAF to disarm Hezbollah fighters using force. The LAF may adopt the cautious and non-provocative approach that its forces implemented in the first phase of the LAF’s operations to disarm Hezbollah in southern Lebanon.[41] The LAF did not appear to seize arms from any active Hezbollah sites with Hezbollah personnel present in southern Lebanon during this phase of LAF operations, nor did the LAF militarily confront Hezbollah. The success of LAF efforts to disarm Hezbollah in the south was due mostly to Hezbollah’s acquiescence rather than forced disarmament.[42] The LAF was also hesitant to search private property during the first phase and only searched a limited number of private properties despite serious Israeli pressure on the LAF to do so.[43] Hezbollah has framed its disarmament in the north as an existential issue and has issued threats of political unrest, protests, and internal conflict to encourage the LAF to slow or cease its disarmament efforts.[44] These threats have likely affected Lebanese leaders’ willingness to forcibly disarm Hezbollah north of the Litani River.[45]

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Iran Update, February 19, 2026



Benjamin Schmida, Avery Borens, Adham Fattah, Katherine Wells, Carolyn Moorman, Brian Carter

Analyst Notes: Data Cutoff: 2:00 PM ET

Toplines

US President Donald Trump stated on February 19 that he will likely decide on whether the United States will strike Iran within the next ten days.[1] Trump warned Iran to accept a deal and threatened unspecified consequences if it does not.[2] One US official told Axios on February 19 that Iran has until the end of February 2026 to present the Trump administration with substantive steps to address US concerns regarding its nuclear program, which is consistent with Trump's ten-day deadline.[3] A second US official voiced pessimism that the Geneva talks on February 17 would result in a deal.[4] ISW-CTP continues to assess that Iran is unlikely to meet US demands of zero-enrichment, limiting its ballistic missile program, or ceasing support for its proxies and partners in the region.[5] The US statements come amid a large number of US military deployments to the region, including the upcoming arrival of the USS Gerald R. Ford carrier strike group.[6]

Iranian naval forces hosted an Iranian-Russian naval exercise on February 19, which Iran likely used to signal its solidarity with Russia and practice offensive and defensive maneuvers in and around the Strait of Hormuz in preparation for US military action against Iran. The Iranian First Artesh Naval Base in Bandar Abbas hosted a joint Iranian-Russian naval exercise in the Gulf of Oman and the southern tip of the Persian Gulf on February 19, during which Iranian naval forces rehearsed detecting and freeing a hijacked commercial vessel using coordinated air, sea, and special-forces operations.[7] Iranian Artesh and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) units - alongside Russian naval forces, helicopters, and a Steregushchiy-class corvette - participated in the exercise to practice joint command-and-control, rapid response, and combined assault methods.[8] Iranian and Russian naval officials said that the February 19 drills aim to counter maritime security threats, enhance cooperation through counterterrorism operations, and strengthen bilateral naval interactions.[9] Iran also issued a notice to airmen for missile launches on February 19 across southeastern Iran and in the Gulf of Oman, which appears to be related to the joint naval exercise.[10] Iranian media said the exercise demonstrated Iran's independence in maintaining regional security and highlighted Iran's growing long-range anti-ship and missile capabilities.[11] The IRGC Navy recently conducted a similar exercise in the Strait of Hormuz on February 17 and 18.[12]

Iranians held the most protests on a single day since January 11 on February 19. There were five large protests and 14 other protests. ISW-CTP classifies protests as "large" when they are estimated to include at least a thousand protesters. These protests illustrate that the

motivations driving the initial days of the protest movement have not abated despite the pause in protests in late January and early February 2026. ISW-CTP recorded 19 protests across eight provinces on February 19 during ceremonies marking the end of the 40-day mourning period for protesters killed on January 8 and 9, which is when protest activity peaked. The 40th day of mourning marks the end of the initial mourning period and is often observed with public commemorations and gatherings in Shia Islam. There were at least 1,000 individuals present in five of the 19 protests, which are the first protests of this size since at least January 11.[13] ISW-CTP previously assessed on January 15 that the regime had suppressed the recent protest movement, but that protests could resume if the regime eases its securitization measures, and because the regime has not addressed the underlying grievances that triggered the recent protest movement.[14]



Israeli and Lebanese officials appear to believe that there is a legitimate chance that Hezbollah may participate in any future conflict between the United States, Israel, and Iran.

Israeli media reported that Israel has initiated a state of alert on its northern border over concerns of an escalation with Hezbollah.[15] The Israeli Home Front Command and Israeli rescue services have reportedly been instructed to prepare for war.[16] Israeli commanders have noted that Israel is preparing for a “large, multi-front scenario.”[17] Israel Defense Force (IDF) 91st Division Commander Brigadier General Yuval Ges said that the IDF has operational plans for immediate action in Lebanon, and has forces deployed along the Israel-Lebanon border and deep in Lebanese territory.[18] Lebanese Parliament Speaker and Hezbollah ally Nabih Berri is reportedly initiating intense political and security talks with Hezbollah in an attempt to prevent Hezbollah from militarily backing Iran.[19] Israel and Lebanese officials’ actions come amid reports that Iran is exerting pressure on Hezbollah to take part in any upcoming confrontation.[20] Israeli media reported that Iran has undertaken a series of actions to increase pressure on Hezbollah.[21] Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi’s visit to Beirut in January 2026 reportedly sought to ensure that Hezbollah would intervene in the next war.[22]

Hezbollah Secretary General Naim Qassem threatened that Hezbollah could retaliate and “defend” against Israel’s frequent airstrikes targeting its operatives in Lebanon during a speech on February 16.[23] Hezbollah is almost certainly attempting to highlight the Lebanese government’s inaction against Israel to justify its position as the “defender” of Lebanon. Qassem criticized the Lebanese government for protecting itself and emphasized that the Taif Agreement stipulates taking all necessary measures to remove Israeli forces from Lebanese territory.[24] Qassem noted that Hezbollah has been waiting for the state to take action, but added that the “situation we are in cannot continue.”[25] Qassem’s recent statements imply that Hezbollah has attempted to allow the Lebanese government to expel Israeli forces, but the state has failed to do so, which now (in Hezbollah’s incorrect framing) requires Hezbollah to step in. Hezbollah’s existence, of course, is the reason for Israel’s presence, and the Lebanese government would not need to expel the Israeli forces if Hezbollah disarmed. Hezbollah officials, including Qassem, have consistently stated that Hezbollah will not respond with force to ongoing Israeli operations and will instead rely on the Lebanese state to resolve outstanding issues through political channels.[26] Qassem said in October 2025 that Hezbollah has not responded to any Israeli airstrikes because it is the state’s responsibility, for example.[27]

Lebanese officials have continuously called on the international community to pressure Israel to halt its operations in Lebanon since August 2025.[28] The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) have historically not participated in any direct conflicts with Israel and have not directly confronted the IDF in recent months.[29] Israel has maintained that it will continue to operate in Lebanon until Hezbollah is disarmed, however.[30]

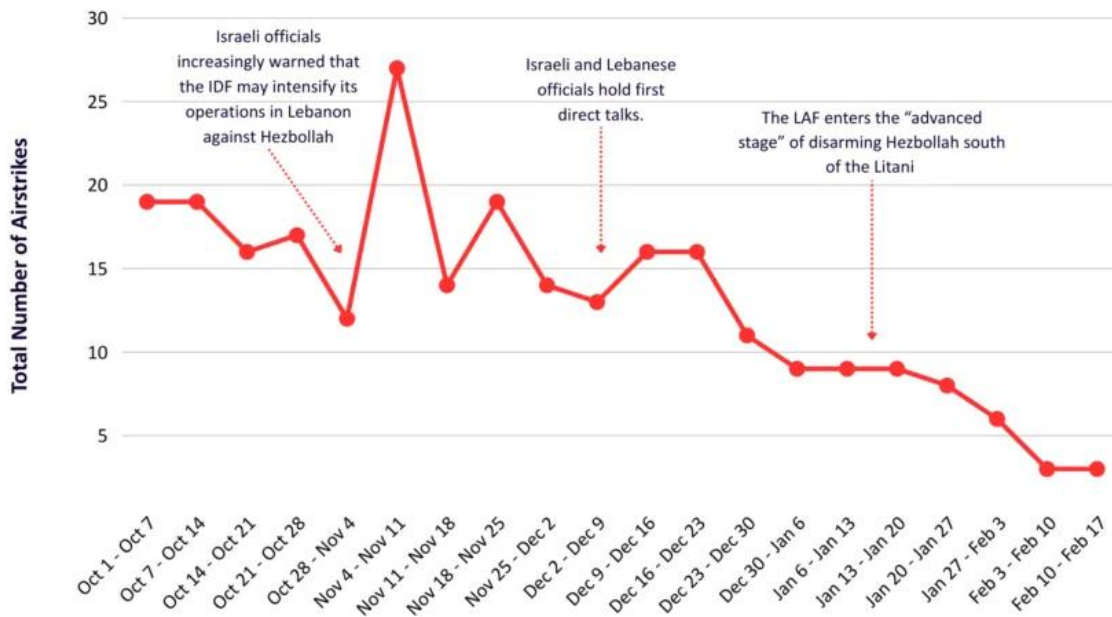
Hezbollah has employed this narrative about its role in Lebanon’s defense for decades, and since August 2025, has used continued Israeli operations in Lebanon to reject the Lebanese government’s plan to disarm Hezbollah.[31] Hezbollah has consistently initiated wars against Israel while using the excuse that Lebanon needs Hezbollah to “defend” against Israel to refuse disarmament. Hezbollah continues to view its weapons as the group’s core and has previously referred to its weapons as its “soul.”[32] Hezbollah refused to disarm after Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, arguing that its weapons remained a critical element of national defense against any future Israeli operations.[33] Hezbollah attacked Israel in July 2006, kidnapping three Israeli soldiers and triggering a major Israeli ground operation.[34] Hezbollah subsequently similarly used national defense as justification to retain its arms after the 2006 war, despite the Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire, which called for the disarmament of all armed factions in Lebanon under UN Security Council Resolution 1701.[35] Hezbollah also entered the war against Israel on October 8, 2023, by conducting offensive operations against northern Israeli towns.[36] Qassem emphasized on February 16 that Hezbollah does not seek war, which is true only in that Hezbollah likely does not seek to fight Israel or the United States directly at this time due to the group’s present weakness.[37] Hezbollah’s *raison d’être* is the destruction of the Israeli state, which

requires offensive wars against the Israeli state at places and times of Hezbollah’s choosing.[38] Israel has only fought wars against Hezbollah in response to Hezbollah attacks after the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000.[39] Hezbollah officials, including Qassem, have continuously rejected calls to disarm and have maintained that Hezbollah will not disarm until Israel halts its operations in Lebanon and withdraws from southern Lebanon.[40] Hezbollah has called for negotiations on a national defense strategy once Israel withdraws, which Qassem previously suggested would entail Hezbollah retaining its weapons and acting alongside Lebanese security forces.[41]

This narrative is incorrect because Hezbollah is not the national army of Lebanon, and Israel would not attack Lebanon if Hezbollah did not present a threat to Israeli national security. Israel has decreased the number of airstrikes it has conducted south of the Litani since January 2026 and instead prioritized obvious Hezbollah reconstitution north of the Litani, which indicates that Israel perceives a reduced threat south of the Litani.[42] This decrease also suggests that reducing the threat that Hezbollah poses to Israel decreases Israel’s military activities in Lebanon.[43] Israel, therefore, would have no reason to enter Lebanon, and therefore the LAF would have no reason to “defend” against Israel, if Hezbollah did not attack Israel in the first place. This suggests that decreasing Hezbollah’s presence in Lebanon and its threat to Israel would decrease IDF actions in Lebanon, which in turn would undermine Hezbollah’s narrative that it is “protecting” Lebanon from Israel.[44]

Israeli Airstrikes South of the Litani River Since October 2025

October 1, 2025 to February 17, 2026



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All data from Lebanese, Israeli, and regional media reports.



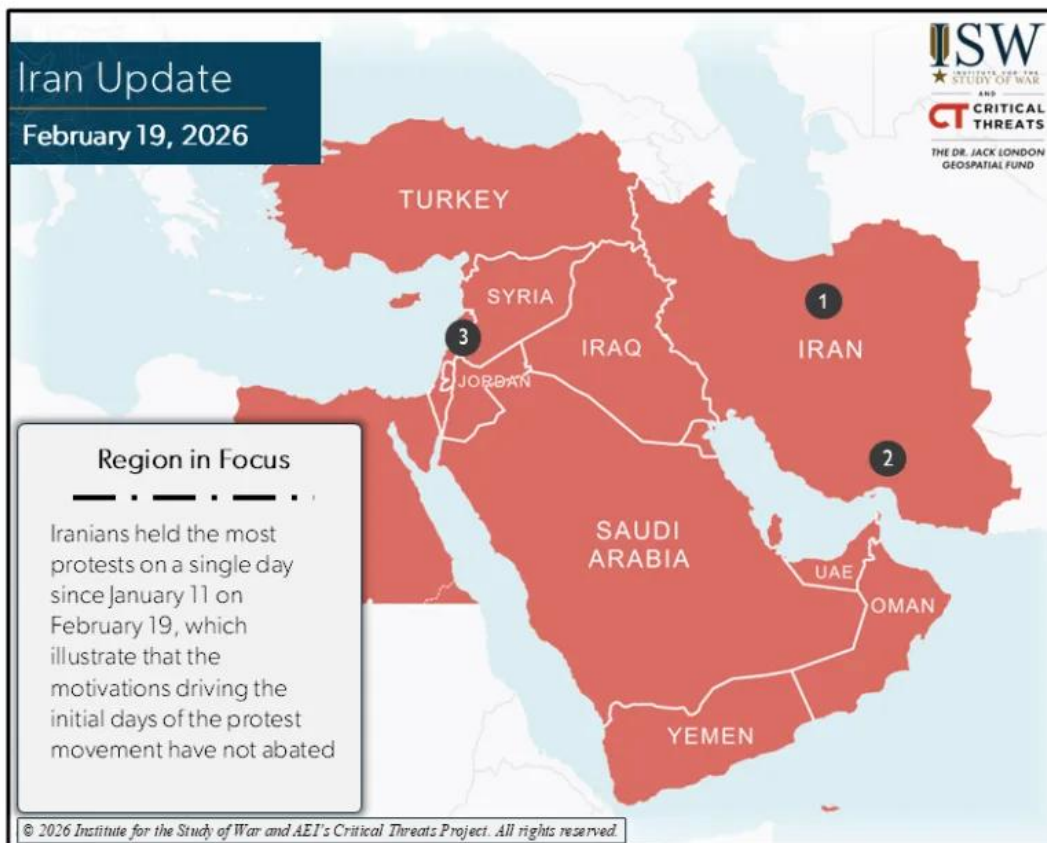
The Syrian government is likely undermining the governing authority in Suwayda Province and pressuring it militarily to eventually reintegrate Suwayda into the Syrian state either through negotiations or through a rapid military offensive that leverages internal fissures in the Suwayda governing authority. The Suwayda Supreme Legal Committee, an autonomous governing authority led by Druze Sheikh Hikmat al Hijri, controls a large portion of Suwayda Province and has repeatedly demanded Suwaydawi autonomy.[45] The province subsists on international and Israeli aid and struggles to function as a self-sufficient entity due to its lack of resources.[46] The committee

controls an armed militia, the National Guard.[47] The Syrian government has recently increased the pressure on Suwayda Province, and the government's internal security commander said on February 16 that the government would enter the province "soon" after he spoke with Suwaydawi civilians.[48] He elaborated on February 18 that he would like to enter Suwayda peacefully, but implied military force could be necessary.[49] His statement on February 16 came on the same day as the defection of a Suwaydawi notable who said he left the region to "stop the bloodshed" between the central government and the Suwaydawi authorities.[50] The notable's grandfather launched the Syrian revolt against French colonial rule in the 1920s.[51] The notable justified his defection with the slogan "Religion is for Allah, and the homeland is for everyone," which suggests that the notable is at least partially supportive of the government's efforts to extend Damascus's control over the whole country.[52] The Suwayda National Guard spokesperson said on February 17 that the Syrian government resorted to "cheap tactics, and fabricated narratives," and implied that meetings and other coordination between the government and local Suwaydawis were ongoing.[53] He also urged the people of Suwayda Province not to listen to lies from the Syrian government.[54] The spokesperson's accusations indicate that the government is attempting to undermine the governing authorities in Suwayda politically because his claims mirror prior efforts by Damascus to subordinate other political factions.[55] Damascus undermined the SDF through months-long engagement with tribal figures in northeastern Syria, for example, and their defection from the SDF accelerated the SDF's collapse.[56]

The Syrian government is likely leveraging the discontent among Suwaydawis caused by the ineffective governing of the province by the Supreme Legal Committee to undermine the committee's authority. Unspecified Suwayda "National Guard" fighters accused the Men of Dignity militia, a Druze faction integrated into the "National Guard," of stealing weapons and collaborating with the Syrian government on February 16.[57] The Men of Dignity denied the accusation on February 17 and said that it had secured an abandoned weapons cache to prevent arms traffickers from using it, and provided video evidence to support their claim.[58] Unknown fighters then reportedly kidnapped former Men of Dignity leader Yahya al Hajjar in Suwayda Province on February 19.[59] A pro-Hijri Suwaydawi source said that Hajjar was returned to the Men of Dignity's headquarters on February 19, however.[60]

The Syrian government has largely consolidated its control over most of Syria, except for Suwayda Province, after the January 30 agreement with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).[61] Suwayda Province likely represents the next and final step for the Syrian government to consolidate its control over all of Syria. The Syrian government likely perceives the reported infighting and instability in Suwayda Province as an opportunity to undermine and subordinate different Druze factions over time by using a combination of political and military means. The Syrian government has previously employed similar "divide and conquer" strategies to integrate armed factions under government control, such as the mutinous Daraa Province-based Eighth Brigade in April 2025.[62]

US officials told the Wall Street Journal on February 18 that all remaining US forces are currently withdrawing from Syria as part of a "conditions-based" withdrawal.[63] Unspecified US officials said on February 18 that US forces will withdraw from the United States' remaining bases in Syria "over the next two months," but noted that the withdrawal would be contingent on Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) activity. The US officials added that US forces would have the flexibility to return to their positions in the event of an ISIS resurgence in northeastern Syria and would still be able to respond to any ISIS-related threats.[64] [65] US Central Command (CENTCOM) reported on February 14 that it conducted ten strikes targeting more than 30 ISIS targets, including ISIS infrastructure and weapons depots, between February 3 and 12.[66] The withdrawal of all US forces from Syria demonstrates that the United States has shifted its counter-ISIS partner from the SDF to the Syrian government.



- 1 **Tehran, Iran.** US President Donald Trump stated on February 19 that he will likely decide on whether the United States will strike Iran within the next ten days.
- 2 **Strait of Hormuz.** Iranian naval forces hosted an Iranian-Russian naval exercise on February 19, which Iran likely used to signal its solidarity with Russia and practice offensive and defensive maneuvers in and around the Strait of Hormuz in preparation for US military action against Iran.
- 3 **Beirut, Lebanon.** Israeli and Lebanese officials appear to believe that there is a legitimate chance that Hezbollah may participate in any future conflict between the United States, Israel, and Iran.

Key Takeaways

1. **US Military Action Against Iran:** US President Donald Trump stated on February 19 that he will likely decide on whether the United States will strike Iran within the next ten days.
2. **Iranian-Russian Naval Cooperation:** Iranian naval forces hosted an Iranian-Russian naval exercise on February 19, which Iran likely used to signal its solidarity with Russia and practice offensive and defensive maneuvers in and around the Strait of Hormuz in preparation for US military action against Iran.
3. **Iranian Anti-Regime Protests:** Iranians held the most protests on a single day since January 11 on February 19. There were five large protests and 14 other protests. ISW-CTP classifies protests as “large” when they are estimated to include at least a thousand protesters. These protests illustrate that the motivations driving the initial days of the protest movement have not abated despite the

pause in protests in late January and early February 2026.

4. **Hezbollah's Participation in a US-Iran Conflict:** Israeli and Lebanese officials appear to believe that there is a legitimate chance that Hezbollah may participate in any future conflict between the United States, Israel, and Iran.
5. **Hezbollah Disarmament:** Hezbollah Secretary General Naim Qassem threatened that Hezbollah could retaliate and “defend” against Israel’s frequent airstrikes targeting its operatives in Lebanon during a speech on February 16. Hezbollah is almost certainly attempting to highlight the Lebanese government’s inaction against Israel to justify its position as the “defender” of Lebanon. Hezbollah has long employed this incorrect narrative about its role in Lebanese defense.
6. **The Syrian Government's Control of Suwayda Province:** The Syrian government is likely undermining the governing authority in Suwayda Province and pressuring it militarily to eventually reintegrate Suwayda into the Syrian state either through negotiations or through a rapid military offensive that leverages internal fissures in the Suwayda governing authority.
7. **US Forces in Syria:** US officials told the Wall Street Journal on February 18 that all remaining US forces are currently withdrawing from Syria as part of a “conditions-based” withdrawal. The withdrawal would be contingent on Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham activity.

Iran

The Iranian regime remains concerned that anti-regime Kurdish militant groups will infiltrate Iran from Iraqi Kurdistan and incite protests in Iran. Norway-based Kurdish human rights organizations reported on February 18 that Iran launched a drone strike targeting a vehicle in Sulaymaniyah Province, Iraq, which killed at least one Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)-affiliated Peshmerga fighter and injured two others.[67] Local Iraqi Kurdish media reported that an unknown actor targeted a civilian vehicle either by a drone or an improvised explosive device (IED) in Sulaymaniyah Province on February 18, but did not attribute the attack to Iran.[68] The Iranian media has not acknowledged the incident at the time of this writing. Iranian authorities have reportedly launched previous attacks against Kurdish groups in Iraqi Kurdistan, including a January 21, 2026, ballistic missile and drone attack against the Kurdistan Freedom Party's Kurdistan National Army Unit in Koya District, Erbil City.[69] The Iranian regime has long been concerned about cross-border Kurdish militant activity and has cooperated with Iraq to counter this activity as part of the March 2023 Iran-Iraq border security agreement.[70] Iran is particularly concerned that these anti-regime Kurdish militant groups may infiltrate Iran and incite unrest, especially in the wake of the recent protest wave. Several Kurdish groups called for an economic strike in western Iran during the recent protests, which Iranian media called “an incitement of terrorism.”[71]

Iraq

Some Iraqi political parties that previously publicly supported State of Law Coalition head and former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki's bid to become prime minister are now suggesting that the Shia Coordination Framework should reconsider Maliki's nomination due to US pressure.[72] Sunni Azm Alliance Spokesperson Ali al Mutiouti said on February 19 that the party had told unspecified framework members that it supports a prime minister who does not cause Iraq to have problems with the United States, which is an implied rejection of Maliki.[73] The United States has repeatedly expressed its opposition to Maliki.[74] The Azm Alliance has publicly supported Maliki in recent weeks, though most other Sunni parties reject Maliki.[75] ISW-CTP previously assessed that Maliki may have offered Azm inducements to back him, such as the parliamentary speakership.[76] A parliamentarian from Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada's political wing, which is allied with Maliki, told al Araby al

Jadeed on February 18 that Iraq cannot ignore its economic ties with the United States because Iraq is an oil-producing country.[77] The United States has threatened to limit the Iraqi federal government's access to its oil revenue if Iranian-backed Iraqi militias are included in the next Iraqi government.[78] The parliamentarian suggested that the framework reconsider Maliki's nomination.[79] The United States reportedly threatened in February 2026 to sanction Iraq's "oil lifeline and financial core," including the Iraqi Oil Ministry and Central Bank, on March 1 if the framework continues to support Maliki.[80]

A member of Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani's coalition told Iraqi media on February 19 that Maliki should voluntarily withdraw his nomination for the premiership, which corresponds with Sudani's continued efforts to obtain the premiership himself.[81]

Sudani has publicly remained supportive of Maliki becoming prime minister in recent weeks, even as he indicates his continued interest in the premiership.[82] Iraqi media leaked a letter from the Iraqi parliament to the Iraqi electoral commission on February 2, in which Sudani refused to assume his parliament seat, which would force him to relinquish his position as prime minister.[83] Sudani currently leads a caretaker government with limited powers.[84] A member of Sudani's coalition also told Iraqi media on February 16 that Sudani's coalition rejects extending Sudani's current term as caretaker prime minister and choosing a "compromise candidate" because the former option reduces and the latter option extinguishes Sudani's chance of a second term as prime minister.[85] Sudani has probably supported Maliki's bid for the premiership publicly with the aim of becoming prime minister if Maliki withdraws from the race.

ISW-CTP continues to assess that the framework is unlikely to nominate Sudani for another term due to many framework members' long-standing objections to Sudani. Top framework leaders chose Sudani for his malleability, not his independence, in 2022.[86] Sudani's decision to form his own power base and parliamentary bloc, combined with his national popularity, has increased his independence at the expense of the framework.[87]

Syria

See topline section.

Arabian Peninsula

ISW-CTP suspended its coverage of Yemen beginning on January 9.

Palestinian Territories & Lebanon

See topline section.

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Endnotes

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Iran Update, February 20, 2026



Avery Borens, Adham Fattah, Zahra Wakilzada, Carolyn Moorman, Brian Carter

Analyst Notes: Data Cutoff: 2:00 PM ET

Toplines

Iran is unlikely to make any meaningful nuclear concessions in its upcoming draft proposal to the United States. Iran may calculate that it can delay the strikes if it offers a sufficiently conciliatory proposal, however. US President Donald Trump gave Iran on February 20 a deadline of “10 to 15 days” to agree to a nuclear deal. Current and former US officials speaking to the *Washington Post* on February 19 said that the United States may be ready to launch an extended military assault on Iran but is waiting for the arrival of the USS Gerald R. Ford.[1] Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi stated in an interview with Western media on February 20 that Iran will present a proposal to the United States “in the next two or three days” that can then be “seriously” discussed in a future round of talks to occur “within a week or a little more.”[2] Araghchi also claimed that the United States did not demand zero uranium enrichment during the last round of US-Iran nuclear talks in Geneva on February 17.[3] A US official speaking to MS Now on February 20 clarified that the US negotiating team confirmed Trump’s zero-enrichment demand but told Iran to present the safeguards it will place on its nuclear program.[4] Araghchi may have been attempting to delay future talks, which is a negotiating strategy the regime has previously adopted with the United States.[5] Iranian negotiators have previously offered to dilute enrichment levels or build a regional enrichment facility on Iranian soil, which clearly do not meet the stated US demand for zero enrichment, in order to continue negotiations without encroaching on Iran’s red lines.[6]

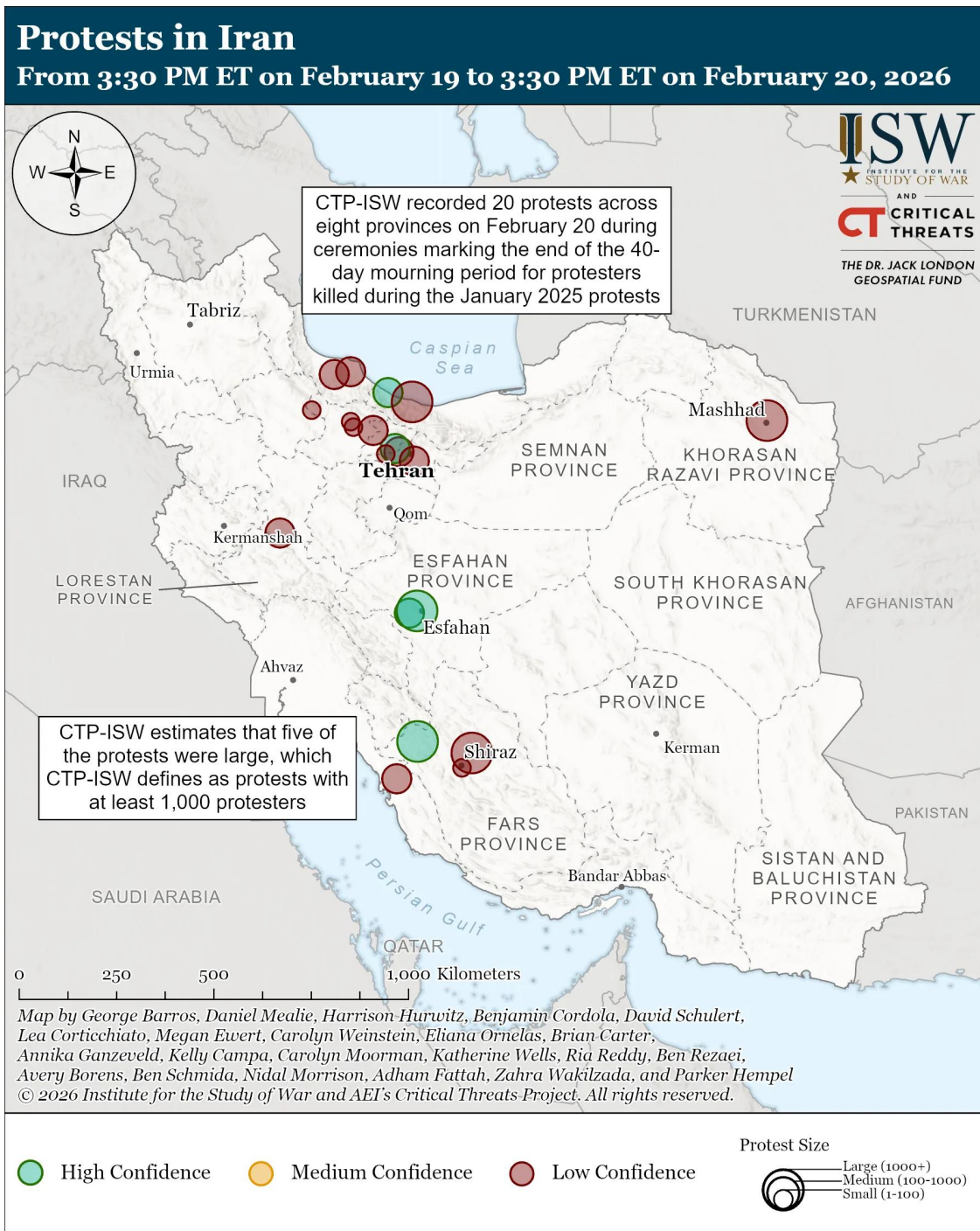
Iran could use any delay in talks to continue to prepare for a potential military conflict with the United States or Israel. Iranian military officials have made numerous visits to Iranian air defense and naval bases in recent weeks to inspect their defensive capabilities and combat readiness.[7] Khatam ol Anbiya Air Defense Headquarters Commander Brigadier General Alireza Elhami visited the Khatam ol Anbiya Northwestern Air Defense Zone Base in Tabriz, East Azerbaijan Province, on February 10, the Shahid Zarafati Group in Babolsar, Mazandaran Province, on February 18, and the Khatam ol Anbiya Eastern Air Defense Zone Base in Birjand, South Khorasan Province, on February 20.[8] Artesh Navy Deputy Commander Rear Admiral Faramarz Bemani also inspected the Shahid Nezafat Naval Base in Pasabandar, Sistan and Baluchistan Province, on February 15.[9] Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Abdol Rahim Mousavi and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Commander Brigadier General Majid Mousavi inspected an unspecified IRGC aerospace underground missile facility on February 4.[10] All of these inspections are presumably last-ditch efforts to ensure that the Iranian armed forces are as prepared as possible.

Iranian Military Visits to Air Defense and Naval Bases in February 2026 February 20, 2026 at 2:00 pm ET



Iranians held 20 protests on February 20—one more than on February 19—which indicates continued public anger and frustration with the regime for its refusal to address the people’s grievances. CTP-ISW recorded 20 anti-regime protests on February 20 across eight provinces at memorials that marked the end of the 40-day mourning period for protesters killed by security forces during the January 2025 protests.[11] Five of these protests involved at least 1,000 individuals.[12] Protests may be occurring beyond what CTP-ISW has recorded due to the regime’s severe internet restrictions that continue to limit the information leaving Iran. CTP-ISW observed that some protesters intentionally paused or cut their video recordings before they began chanting anti-regime slogans.[13] US President Donald Trump stated on February 20 that the regime killed 32,000 people during the recent protest wave. Trump added that the regime paused its plan to execute 837 protesters two weeks ago due to Trump’s warning that the United States would strike Iran without waiting for negotiations if the regime executes protesters.[14] The regime has reportedly sentenced at least 26 protesters to death at

the time of this writing, including one minor, according to Radio Farda, however.[15] CTP-ISW assessed on January 15 that the regime had suppressed the recent protest wave, but not the proto-revolutionary movement that has driven the repeated protest waves over the last decade. The unsustainable nature of the regime’s securitization measures and the regime’s unwillingness to address the underlying issues make it difficult for the regime to stop future protest waves.[16]



Hezbollah may decide to participate in a future conflict between Iran and the United States or Israel if Hezbollah perceives that the US or Israeli war aims seek to topple the Iranian regime. Hezbollah adheres to the principle of Velayat-e Faqih and takes its orders from the supreme leader.[17] A war that Hezbollah thinks is an attempt to collapse the Iranian regime could trigger Hezbollah’s intervention even if it faces domestic limitations within Lebanon. Hezbollah is in a far weaker position militarily following Israel’s campaign in Fall 2024, which has caused the group to avoid any direct military conflict with the United States and Israel in recent months.[18] The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria

has made the group's reconstitution process more difficult.[19] This limitation is especially important because Hezbollah is also in a weaker political position compared to pre-Fall 2024. The Lebanese state has exploited Hezbollah's weakness to launch a disarmament campaign, which caused Hezbollah to move the bulk of its combat forces from southern Lebanon to areas north of the Litani River.[20]

Hezbollah's close relationship with Iran may mean that Hezbollah can overcome its reticence to enter a regional war, however. Hezbollah has historically taken military and political action to support Iranian objectives in the region.[21] The group remains deeply ideologically aligned with Iran and relies on Tehran for substantial financial support.[22] Sources close to Hezbollah have indicated that Hezbollah currently feels very vulnerable and is concerned that it may lose its "top sponsor," which refers to Iran.[23] A war that causes the collapse of the Iranian regime would be a major setback for Hezbollah and its regional goals.

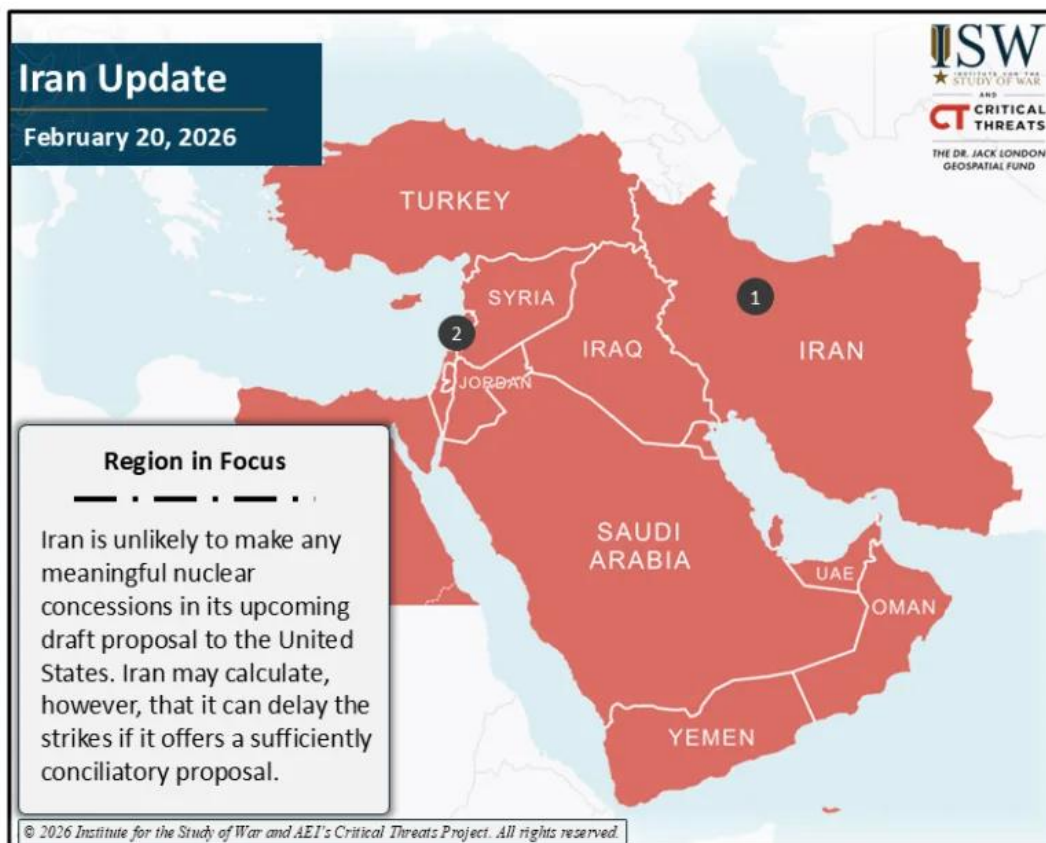
This assessment assumes that Hezbollah will continue to prioritize its relationship with Iran when Iran is under existential threat over certain domestic considerations. This assessment will be invalid if Hezbollah has made or makes a decision to prioritize domestic considerations over its membership in the Axis of Resistance. **CTP-ISW has observed no indications that Hezbollah has made a decision to prioritize domestic considerations over its obligations towards Iran.**

CTP-ISW has identified multiple courses of action Hezbollah may take in the event of a US or Israeli strike on Iran. All of these courses rely on the assumption that Hezbollah remains ideologically aligned with and financially dependent on Iran, as noted above. These courses of action are not mutually exclusive, and any Hezbollah course could combine these options or move through them sequentially.

- **Hezbollah launches a few projectiles towards open areas of northern Israel in a symbolic attack.** CTP-ISW assesses that this is Hezbollah's most likely course of action. Hezbollah has a precedent of conducting small-scale, symbolic attacks that target uninhabited areas of northern Israel in order to not to provoke a large Israeli response.[24] Hezbollah fired two rockets at an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) border position in the Israeli-controlled Shebaa Farms in early December 2024 as a "warning" against Israeli ceasefire violations, for example.[25] Israel responded aggressively to these rocket attacks, however, and Hezbollah has not conducted any similar attacks after that incident.[26] Hezbollah would pursue this course of action because it would allow the group to justify its existence and maintain its long-standing narrative that it is defending Lebanon against Israel. Hezbollah could calculate that this course would also avoid a major Israeli escalation that would threaten Hezbollah's domestic position.
- **Hezbollah fires rockets, mortars, or other projectiles targeting an Israeli position in Lebanon.** Israel currently maintains forces at five outposts in southern Lebanon.[27] These forces are more exposed relative to Israeli units in Israel, and Hezbollah could frame any attack on Israeli forces in Lebanon as "resistance" against an "occupier." A direct attack on Israeli forces would risk a limited but serious Israeli response, however, and an Israeli response could increase the risk of discontent among Lebanese in southern Lebanon who are still slowly recovering from the fighting in Fall 2024.[28] Any resumed conflict in Lebanon that could be blamed on Hezbollah could have negative repercussions for the group's image among Lebanese civilians and its Shia support base.[29]
- **Hezbollah fires munitions targeting IDF positions in Israel.** Hezbollah has previously fired medium-range rockets at IDF positions in Israel.[30] Hezbollah largely conducted these attacks in response to Israeli kinetic action in Lebanon or the Palestinian territories, including the Israeli response in the Gaza Strip to the October 7 attacks, the killing of Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah in September 2024, and Israel's October 2024 ground invasion.[31] An attack against Israel along these lines would have significant political implications for Hezbollah. Such an

attack could generate more political support for the Lebanese state's disarmament plan because these attacks would be perceived as another round of Hezbollah-initiated escalation and almost certainly evoke a large-scale Israeli response.

- **In a most dangerous course of action, Hezbollah launches missile and drone attacks on civilian areas across Israel in several large salvos.** Hezbollah has previously conducted such attacks, including its October 2024 drone attack targeting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's house.[32] A missile or drone attack on Israeli civilian areas could trigger a major Israeli response that would imperil both Hezbollah's reconstitution and support for the group from its Shia base in southern Lebanon. This option risks triggering major Israeli aerial operations in southern Lebanon at a minimum, but the IDF has conducted offensive exercises to rehearse its response to major Hezbollah operations in recent weeks as well.[33]



- 1 **TEHRAN, IRAN.** Iranians held 20 protests on February 20—one more than on February 19—which indicates continued public anger and frustration with the regime for its refusal to address the people's grievances. CTP-ISW recorded 20 anti-regime protests on February 20 across eight provinces at memorials that marked the end of the 40-day mourning period for protesters killed by security forces during the January 2025 protests.
- 2 **BEIRUT, LEBANON.** Hezbollah may decide to participate in a future conflict between Iran and the United States or Israel if Hezbollah perceives that the US or Israeli war aims seek to topple the Iranian regime. CTP-ISW has identified multiple courses of action Hezbollah may take in the event of a US or Israeli strike on Iran.

Key Takeaways

1. **US-Iran Nuclear Negotiations:** Iran is unlikely to make any meaningful nuclear concessions in its upcoming draft proposal to the United States. Iran may calculate that it can delay the strikes if it offers a sufficiently conciliatory proposal, however.
2. **Protests in Iran:** Iranians held 20 protests on February 20—one more than on February 19—which indicates continued public anger and frustration with the regime for its refusal to address the people’s grievances. CTP-ISW recorded 20 anti-regime protests on February 20 across eight provinces at memorials that marked the end of the 40-day mourning period for protesters killed by security forces during the January 2025 protests.
3. **Hezbollah’s Participation in a Future Iranian Conflict with the United States or Israel:** Hezbollah may decide to participate in a future conflict between Iran and the United States or Israel if Hezbollah perceives that the US or Israeli war aims seek to topple the Iranian regime. CTP-ISW has identified multiple courses of action Hezbollah may take in the event of a US or Israeli strike on Iran.

Iran

See topline section.

Iraq

Nothing significant to report.

Syria

Nothing significant to report.

Arabian Peninsula

CTP-ISW suspended its coverage of Yemen beginning on January 9.

Palestinian Territories & Lebanon

See topline section.

POWERED BY:  BABEL STREET

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