

# Iran Update Special Report, April 19, 2026



**Benjamin Schmida, Avery Borens, Adham Fattah, Nidal Morrison, Carolyn Moorman, Annika Ganzeveld**

**Analyst Notes:** Data Cutoff: 2:00 PM ET

*The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute are publishing daily updates to provide analysis on the war with Iran. The updates focus on US and Israeli strikes on Iran and Iran and the Axis of Resistance's response to the strikes. The updates cover events from the past 24-hour period.*

## Key Takeaways

1. Any US settlement or resolution of the conflict that enables Iran to control traffic through the Strait of Hormuz would represent a major US defeat and set a precedent with critical implications for global trade, given the strait's role as a critical energy chokepoint. Any US acceptance of Iran's ability to regulate transit would undermine the principle of freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz and enable Iran to condition access to the strait on compliance with its demands, thereby enabling Tehran to exert persistent pressure on the global economy and the United States and its allies.
2. Iran is attempting to establish a protection racket in the Strait of Hormuz by granting priority transit to vessels that pay fees and comply with Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) protocols as part of its effort to try to consolidate control over the strait. Iran has also continued to prevent non-Iranian-linked vessels from transiting the strait.
3. US forces seized an Iranian-flagged container ship for the first time during the war. Commercially available shipping data indicates that the US Navy also forced at least three Iranian or Iranian-linked ships to change course toward Iranian ports on April 19.
4. US Vice President JD Vance, US Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff, and Jared Kushner are expected to travel to Islamabad, Pakistan, to engage in negotiations with Iran on April 21. ISW-CTP has not observed any Iranian sources confirming Iran's participation in the negotiations as of 6:00 PM ET on April 19, however.
5. Incomplete reporting about the damage that the US-Israeli combined force inflicted on Iran's ballistic missile and drone programs precludes the development of a quantitative assessment about the threat that Iranian missiles and drones still pose.
6. A statement released by Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah on April 18 appears to confirm that IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani discussed preparations for renewed conflict with the United States and Israel during his meetings with Iraqi militia leaders in Baghdad on April 18. Ghaani may have specifically discussed enhancing coordination between

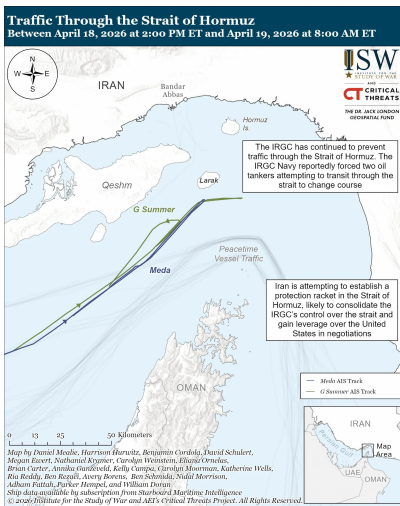
Iraqi militias and other Axis of Resistance groups against the United States, Israel, and the Gulf states in the event of renewed conflict.

## Toplines

**Any US settlement or resolution of the conflict that enables Iran to control traffic through the Strait of Hormuz would represent a major US defeat and set a precedent with critical implications for global trade, given the strait's role as a critical energy chokepoint.** Iran has repeatedly claimed sovereignty over the Strait of Hormuz, but Iran has no legal claim to the strait, which international law defines as an international waterway.[1] Iran has repeatedly attempted to regulate traffic through the strait by directing vessels through Iranian territorial waters, extracting fees, and attacking and threatening maritime traffic.[2] Recent Iranian proposals to the United States have also implicitly demanded that the United States and international community recognize Iran's "control" over the strait.[3] Iran has offered to "let" vessels transit the strait in these proposals, but Iran's "letting" traffic through the strait implies that Iran can "let" traffic through an international waterway.[4] These proposals are consistent with persistent Iranian messaging throughout the war that Iran seeks to impose a new status quo for transit through the strait.[5] Any US acceptance of Iran's ability to regulate transit would undermine the principle of freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz and enable Iran to condition access to the strait on compliance with its demands, thereby enabling Tehran to exert persistent pressure on the global economy and the United States and its allies.

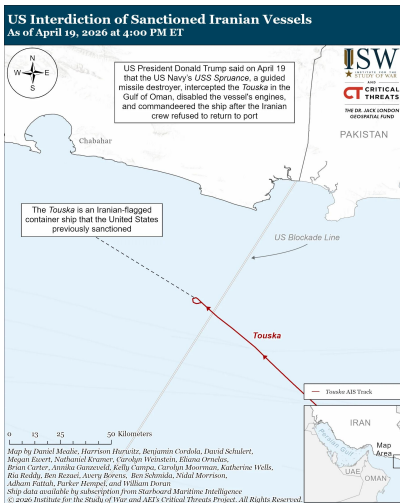
**Iran is attempting to establish a protection racket in the Strait of Hormuz by granting priority transit to vessels that pay fees and comply with Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) protocols as part of its effort to try to consolidate control over the strait.** A senior Iranian official told CNN on April 18 that vessels that pay "security fees" and comply with the IRGC's protocols will receive priority transit through the Strait of Hormuz, while those that refuse to pay will face delayed passage.[6] Iran has reportedly charged vessels around \$2 million USD to transit the strait.[7] Extracting fees from commercial vessels enables Iran to earn income amid the United States' efforts to impose economic pressure on Iran through its blockade of Iranian ports.

**The IRGC has also continued to prevent non-Iranian-linked vessels from transiting the strait.** Bloomberg reported on April 18 that at least five liquefied natural gas (LNG) tankers reversed course after Iran warned the vessels' captains that it had closed the Strait of Hormuz.[8] No LNG tankers have exited the Strait of Hormuz since the war began in February.[9] Iranian media separately reported on April 19 that the IRGC forced the Botswana-flagged *Meda* and the Angola-flagged *G Summer* to change course after the vessels attempted to cross the Strait of Hormuz.[10] Commercially available shipping data indicates that the *G Summer* later transited the Strait of Hormuz via the Iranian-approved route on April 19.[11]

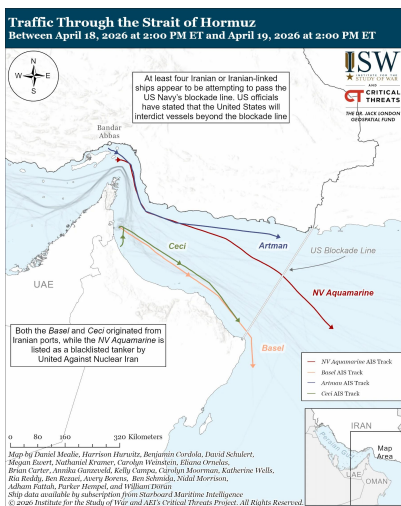


**US forces seized an Iranian-flagged container ship for the first time during the war.** US President Donald Trump announced on April 19 that the US Navy's USS *Spruance*, a guided missile destroyer, intercepted the *Touska* in the Gulf of Oman, disabled the vessel's engines, and commandeered the ship after the Iranian crew refused to return to port.[12] US forces seized the *Touska* after it attempted to pass the US blockade line. The United States previously sanctioned the *Touska*, which is owned by the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines.[13]

**Commercially available shipping data indicates that the US Navy also forced at least three Iranian or Iranian-linked ships to change course toward Iranian ports on April 19.** The vessels include the US-sanctioned Guinea-flagged *Raine* tanker, the Iranian-flagged *Shamim* container ship, and the Hong Kong-flagged *Flora* tanker, which was previously Iranian-flagged.[14]



**At least four Iranian or Iranian-linked ships appear to be attempting to pass the US Navy's blockade line.** US officials have stated that the United States will interdict vessels beyond the blockade line. The vessels include the Iranian-flagged *Artman* container ship, the Liberian-flagged *Basel*, the Marshall Islands-flagged *CECI*, and the Vietnam-flagged *NV Aquamarine*. [15] Both the *Basel* and *CECI* originated from Iranian ports, while the *NV Aquamarine* is blacklisted by United Against Nuclear Iran. [16] US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Dan Caine and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said on March 16 that US forces will interdict any ship that crosses the blockade line, which runs diagonally across the Gulf of Oman from Ras al Hadd, Oman, to the Iran-Pakistan border. [17]



**The US Navy is reportedly conducting naval mine-clearing operations in the Strait of Hormuz to restore the official transit route through the strait amid the Navy's continued blockade of Iranian ports.** The *Wall Street Journal* reported on April 19 that the US Navy is using uncrewed surface vessels (USV) and submersible drones to clear an unspecified number of Iranian naval mines in the Strait of Hormuz.[18] Clearing Iranian naval mines from the Strait of Hormuz is necessary to restore trust in the safety of the official traffic separation scheme, where Iran has reportedly laid the mines.[19] Military analysts told the *Wall Street Journal* that US Navy USVs and submersible drones could identify naval mines in the strait relatively quickly and that the US Navy could then deploy a second wave of drones to conduct explosive ordnance disposal operations.[20] Iran deployed a limited number of naval mines in the Strait of Hormuz in March 2026, but a former US Navy official told the *Wall Street Journal* that Iran laid fewer mines than expected due to US military pressure that constrained Iran's use of large mine-laying ships.[21]

**US Vice President JD Vance, US Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff, and Jared Kushner are expected to travel to Islamabad, Pakistan, to engage in negotiations with Iran on April 21.[22] ISW-CTP has not observed any Iranian sources confirming Iran's participation in the negotiations as of 6:00 PM ET on April 19, however.** Unspecified Iranian sources, including an unidentified member of Iran's negotiating team, told Iranian state media on April 19 that Iran does not currently have any plans to participate in the next round of talks.[23] IRGC-affiliated media reported on April 19 that there are no clear prospects for future negotiations due to the United States' demands and continued naval blockade of Iranian ports.[24] ISW-CTP assessed on April 18 that the IRGC has likely consolidated control over Iran's negotiations policy.[25] Iranian officials echoed similar sentiments to Pakistani officials on April 19.[26] The 14-day ceasefire between the United States, Israel, and Iran is set to expire on April 22.[27]

**A statement released by Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah on April 18 appears to confirm that IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani discussed preparations for renewed conflict with the United States and Israel during his meetings with Iraqi militia leaders in Baghdad on April 18. Ghaani may have specifically discussed enhancing coordination between Iraqi militias and other Axis of Resistance groups against the United States, Israel, and the Gulf states in the event of renewed conflict.** Kataib Hezbollah Security Chief Abu Mujahid Aasaf issued a statement after Ghaani's visit to Baghdad that called for increased coordination between the "resistance forces and other parties," which implicitly refers to military cooperation.[28] The "other parties" may refer to other Axis of Resistance groups such as the Houthis or Hezbollah. Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have launched drone and rocket attacks targeting US and foreign interests in Iraq, as well as the Gulf countries, during the war.[29] Iran, Hezbollah, and the

Houthis may have attempted to coordinate some attacks during the war, but ISW-CTP has not observed any instances of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias coordinating their attacks with other Axis of Resistance groups.[30]

**Incomplete reporting about the damage that the US-Israeli combined force inflicted on Iran's ballistic missile and drone programs precludes the development of a quantitative assessment about the threat that Iranian missiles and drones still pose.** Multiple US officials told the *New York Times* on April 19 that Iran retains around 40 percent of its attack drones, around 60 percent of its missile launchers, and around 70 percent of its missile stockpile.[31] The officials stated that the 60 percent of missile launchers includes around 100 launchers that Iran has dug out from underground facilities since the ceasefire went into effect.[32] ISW-CTP previously assessed that Iran is exploiting the ceasefire to reorganize and regenerate its ballistic missile forces on a tactical level, including by clearing debris from tunnel entrances to retrieve missile launchers from underground missile bases.[33] The recent assessments about Iran's remaining offensive capacities do not specify whether the launchers that Iran has dug out from underground facilities are intact or operational. Shockwaves from combined force strikes may have damaged launchers stored in underground facilities without directly hitting them. The recent assessments also do not specify what kinds of launchers Iran has retrieved. Iran possesses different kinds of launchers for ballistic missiles with different ranges. These gaps preclude the development of a quantitative assessment about the current status of Iran's missile program.

## US and Israeli Air Campaign

*See topline section.*

## Iranian Response

*Nothing significant to report.*

## Israeli Campaign Against Hezbollah and Hezbollah Response

**The Israel-Lebanon ceasefire agreement appears to be holding despite reports of limited engagements in southern Lebanon.** A Middle East-focused journalist reported that Israeli forces engaged Hezbollah fighters in Deir Seryan, southeastern Lebanon, on April 19.[34] Two Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers were killed, and 37 were wounded in southern Lebanon in the past 24 hours.[35] The majority of the wounded soldiers were injured by improvised explosive devices (IEDs).[36] Israeli and Lebanese sources reported that Hezbollah planted the IEDs, which also killed the two Israeli soldiers, before the ceasefire.[37] Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz announced on April 19 that he and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the IDF to use "full force" on the ground and in the air to protect Israeli soldiers in Lebanon "from any threat." [38] Katz noted that the IDF has received orders to "remove" homes in border villages that Hezbollah used and added that the IDF aims to disarm Hezbollah and remove the threat that Hezbollah poses to northern Israeli villages.[39]

**A diplomatic source told Lebanese media on April 19 that Lebanese and Israeli officials will hold their second preparatory meeting next week.[40]** Israeli and Lebanese officials will reportedly use the preparatory meeting to reach an agreement on the date and location for direct negotiations.[41] It is unclear which Israeli and Lebanese officials will attend the preparatory meeting. A Lebanese ministerial source told Saudi media on April 18 that Lebanese officials' top priority is to request an

extension of the temporary ceasefire.[42] The proposed extension period would reportedly range from 10 days to one month.[43] Israel and Lebanon's current 10-day ceasefire is set to expire on April 26.[44] Lebanese President Joseph Aoun and Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam are reportedly leading an effort to establish a unified Lebanese position.[45] Lebanese sources stated that the Lebanese government has prepared its proposal for negotiations, which revolves around a ceasefire, the withdrawal of Israeli forces, the release of Lebanese prisoners held in Israel, and the 13 disputed points along the Israel-Lebanon border.[46] Israeli officials have consistently stated that Israeli forces will not withdraw from Lebanese territory, however.[47]

**The IDF has established and maintained control over approximately 55 villages in southern Lebanon.**[48] The IDF announced on April 18 that Israeli forces established a "yellow line" in southern Lebanon, where Israeli forces control approximately 55 southern Lebanese villages.[49] An Israeli Army Radio correspondent clarified that the IDF does not have a physical presence in all 55 villages and that some of the villages are considered "fire control and observation" areas, where the IDF maintains control from a distance without a physical presence.[50] The IDF noted that five IDF divisions and naval forces are currently operating in the area.[51] An Israeli journalist noted that Israeli forces aim to dismantle all Hezbollah infrastructure up to the "yellow line." [52] An Israeli military source similarly noted that Israeli forces are conducting clearing operations between the Israel-Lebanon border and the "yellow line." [53] Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz noted on April 19 that Israel's "yellow line" must be extended to the anti-tank zone in southern Lebanon, which refers to the "anti-tank line" that Israeli forces have established several kilometers into southern Lebanon.[54]

**The IDF has continued to conduct ground operations in southern Lebanon in accordance with the temporary ceasefire agreement.** The temporary ceasefire agreement contains a provision that permits Israel to act in self-defense against any "planned, imminent, or ongoing" Hezbollah threats against Israel.[55] The IDF 162nd Armored Division has continued to conduct operations in southern Lebanon to remove direct threats to northern Israeli towns.[56] The IDF reported that the division's forces have killed over 250 Hezbollah fighters, destroyed over 405 Hezbollah sites, and seized over 1,000 weapons in southern Lebanon since the start of the conflict.[57] The 162nd Armored Division has been operating in southern Lebanon since at least March 26, including in Bint Jbeil, southeastern Lebanon, which IDF forces "completed [their] siege" of on April 15.[58] Israeli media reported on April 19 that Israeli forces have established a new position in Aita al Shaab, southwestern Lebanon.[59] Lebanese media reported that Israeli forces demolished buildings in several areas of southern Lebanon on April 18 and 19.[60] Unspecified sources speaking to Israeli media on April 19 reported that dozens of heavy machinery vehicles have moved to areas of southern Lebanon in recent weeks to support the IDF's clearing operations.[61] Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has continued to reiterate that Israeli forces will continue to operate in southern Lebanon.[62]

**The IDF announced that it killed over 150 Hezbollah fighters and struck over 300 Hezbollah sites in the 24 hours before the ceasefire came into effect on April 16.**[63] The IDF stated that it struck approximately 300 Hezbollah sites across Lebanon, including launch sites, command centers, and weapons depots.[64] The IDF noted that it has killed over 1,800 Hezbollah operatives and commanders since the IDF started its campaign in Lebanon on March 2.[65] The IDF confirmed that it killed Hezbollah senior military commander Ali Reda Abbas in Bint Jbeil on April 15.[66] Abbas was one of the most senior commanders in Hezbollah's military command and had significant experience fighting against Israel.[67] Abbas received training in Iran and held various positions in Hezbollah during his 40 years in the group.[68] Regional media previously reported in September 2024 that Abbas was appointed Hezbollah's Radwan Force commander following the death of former Radwan Force Commander Ibrahim Aqil.[69] Abbas was reportedly a crucial figure in the reconstitution and reorganization of the Radwan Force following the fall 2024 conflict.[70] The IDF stated on April 19 that Abbas was Hezbollah's Bint Jbeil sector

commander during the current war.[71] It is unclear when Abbas became the Bint Jbeil sector commander.

**Syrian forces dismantled a Hezbollah-linked cell on April 19 that reportedly planned to launch rockets from southern Syria toward Israel.[72]** Syrian forces arrested two individuals and seized several rockets.[73] Hezbollah denied the report and reiterated its claim that Hezbollah has no presence in Syrian territory.[74]

## Other Axis of Resistance Response

See *topline section*.

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### Endnotes

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**CORRECTION:** ISW-CTP incorrectly reported on April 19 that the Vietnam-flagged *NV Aquamarine* is under US sanctions. The *NV Aquamarine* is not sanctioned by the United States. We apologize for this error.

# Iran Update Special Report, April 20, 2026



**Benjamin Schmida, Avery Borens, Nidal Morrison, Adham Fattah, Ria Reddy, Katherine Wells, Annika Ganzeveld**

**Analyst Notes:** Data Cutoff: 2:00 PM ET

*The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute are publishing daily updates to provide analysis on the war with Iran. The updates focus on US and Israeli strikes on Iran and Iran and the Axis of Resistance's response to the strikes. The updates cover events from the past 24-hour period.*

## Key Takeaways

1. Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf appears to be engaged in a serious intra-regime debate with Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Commander Major General Ahmad Vahidi and other senior regime officials opposed to negotiations with the United States.
2. Vahidi appears to have the upper hand over Ghalibaf at the moment. Vahidi is reportedly the only Iranian official with direct access to Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei and is serving as a conduit for relaying key decisions to other regime officials, according to Israeli media on April 19.
3. US and Iranian delegations will reportedly meet in Islamabad, Pakistan, for a second round of talks in the coming days. US and Iranian demands appear to have largely stayed the same, however.
4. The US Navy continued to enforce its blockade of Iranian ports, directing 27 vessels to change course since the start of the blockade. US forces likely forced two Iranian-linked vessels attempting to violate the Navy's blockade to turn around.
5. The Khatam ol Anbia Central Headquarters claimed that the April 19 seizure of the Iranian-flagged, US-sanctioned *Touska* by the US Navy violated the US-Iran ceasefire. Unspecified security sources told Reuters that the *Touska* was likely transporting dual-use items from China to Iran.
6. The Iranian Parliament is attempting to formalize Iranian "control" over the Strait of Hormuz by drafting a bill that would ban Israeli-linked vessels from transiting the Strait of Hormuz, require vessels from "hostile countries" to obtain approval from Iran's Supreme National Security Council to transit the strait, and bar states that "caused damage" to Iran from transiting the strait until they paid reparations to Iran.

## Toplines

**Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf appears to be engaged in a serious intra-regime debate with Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Commander Major**

**General Ahmad Vahidi and other senior regime officials opposed to negotiations with the United States.** Ghalibaf publicly defended negotiations on Iranian state television on April 18, arguing that diplomacy with the United States, alongside military power, is necessary to secure Iran's objectives.[1] Ghalibaf also reportedly criticized hardline officials, including Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) member Saeed Jalili and hardline parliamentarian Amirhossein Sabeti, for their opposition to negotiations during a meeting with advisers, but his criticisms were likely implicitly directed at Vahidi. US officials separately told Axios on April 20 that the US negotiating delegation thought it was "negotiating with the right people" in Islamabad on April 11 and 12 but that the IRGC effectively told the Iranian negotiating delegation upon their return to Tehran that they "don't speak for" the IRGC.[2] Senior regime officials, including former IRGC Intelligence Organization Chief Hossein Taeb, reportedly called the Iranian negotiating delegation back to Tehran after it surpassed its mandate.[3] A second US official told Axios that "we aren't sure who's in charge and neither do they." [4] This report is consistent with ISW-CTP's assessment that there is a division between Vahidi and his inner circle and members of Iran's negotiating team over Iran's negotiations policy.[5] This report is also consistent with ISW-CTP's assessment that Iranian Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei has not played the role of cohering and arbitrating between various factions as his father used to do, which has likely exacerbated intra-regime fighting.[6]

**Vahidi appears to have the upper hand over Ghalibaf at the moment.** Vahidi is reportedly the only Iranian official with direct access to Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei and is serving as a conduit for relaying key decisions to other regime officials, according to Israeli media on April 19.[7] Israeli media also reported on April 19 that Iranian officials' inability to contact Mojtaba is a significant obstacle to continued US-Iran negotiations.[8] Ghalibaf's push for diplomacy and apparent effort to reach a deal may also be a bid to protect his domestic position and maintain credibility.[9] Ghalibaf reportedly fears that both his and Araghchi's positions are at risk if the IRGC consolidates control.[10] Ghalibaf's removal as the parliament speaker would represent a major defeat for Ghalibaf and his domestic positions and signify a victory for Vahidi. These reports are consistent with ISW-CTP's ongoing assessment that Vahidi and members of his inner circle have likely consolidated control over not only Iran's military response in the conflict but also Iran's negotiations policy.[11]

**US and Iranian delegations will reportedly meet in Islamabad, Pakistan, for a second round of talks in the coming days.**[12] Two US officials speaking to the *New York Times* on April 20 stated that US Vice President JD Vance will travel to Pakistan on April 21. Two Iranian officials told the *New York Times* that Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, who led the Iranian delegation in the first round of talks, would attend the upcoming talks if Vance attended.[13] US and Iranian demands appear to have largely stayed the same. US officials speaking to the *Wall Street Journal* stated that the US delegation is pushing for the immediate reopening of the Strait of Hormuz, a pause in Iranian uranium enrichment for at least 20 years, and the removal of Iran's highly enriched uranium (HEU) stockpile from Iran.[14] The *Wall Street Journal* reported that Iran's demands are Iranian "control" over the strait, the lifting of sanctions on Iran, and a shorter pause in uranium enrichment.[15] US President Donald Trump previously indicated that a pause in enrichment would be insufficient to meet US demands.[16]

**The Khatam ol Anbia Central Headquarters claimed that the April 19 seizure of the Iranian-flagged, US-sanctioned *Touska* by the US Navy violated the US-Iran ceasefire.**[17] The spokesperson for the Khatam ol Anbia Central Headquarters, which is functionally controlled by the IRGC, warned on April 19 that Iranian forces will respond to the US seizure of the *Touska* and asserted that the United States had "violated the ceasefire." [18] Unspecified security sources told Reuters that the *Touska* was likely transporting dual-use items from China to Iran.[19] The sources added that the *Touska* had previously transported dual-use items to Iran.[20] US Central Command (CENTCOM) told United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) on April 16 that it considers raw materials such as oil, iron, steel,

aluminum, and certain civilian goods with both civilian and military applications to be “conditional contraband.”[21] CENTCOM also defined electronic components, computer systems, machinery, and power generation equipment as “conditional contraband.”[22] The *Touska* visited the port of Zhuhai in China in March.[23] Zhuhai Port is considered a loading port for chemicals, including missile fuel precursor sodium perchlorate, according to the *Washington Post*. [24] The *Wall Street Journal* reported that a subsidiary of the US-sanctioned Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL), Rahbaran Omid Darya Ship Management, owns the *Touska*. [25] Two vessels owned by Rahbaran Omid Darya Ship Management transported approximately 1,000 tons of material used in missile propellant in 2025, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. [26]

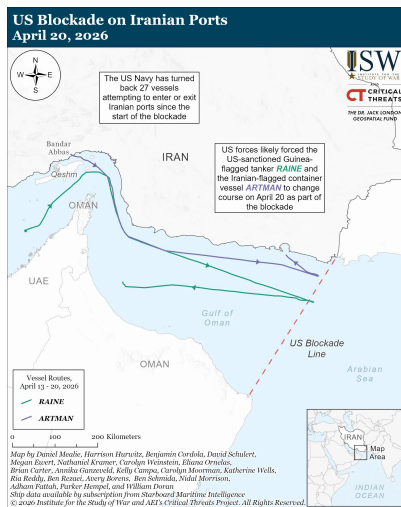


**Iran likely continued to prevent non-Iranian-linked vessels from transiting the Strait of Hormuz.** Commercially available shipping data indicates that Iran forced the Marshall Islands-flagged *Capetan Costas S* and the Curaçao-flagged *Lumina Ocean* to alter course after they attempted to transit the strait via the Iranian-approved route following their departure from Basra, Iraq.[27] These incidents follow a similar incident on April 19, when the IRGC forced the Botswana-flagged *Meda* and the Angola-flagged *G Summer* to change course after the vessels attempted to cross the Strait of Hormuz.[28]

**The Iranian Parliament is attempting to formalize Iranian “control” over the Strait of Hormuz.**[29] Iranian parliamentary legislation requires additional approval from the Guardian Council before it is enacted into law.[30] Iranian media reported on April 19 that Iran’s parliament is drafting a bill that would ban Israeli-linked vessels from transiting the Strait of Hormuz, require vessels from “hostile countries” to obtain approval from Iran’s Supreme National Security Council to transit the strait, and bar states that “caused damage” to Iran from transiting the strait until they paid reparations to Iran.[31] The Iranian parliamentarian who announced the bill said that Iran would allocate some of the revenue from Strait of Hormuz transit fees to fund the Iranian armed forces’ reconstitution under the bill.[32] This report follows a similar report on March 26 that Iran’s parliament was working to formalize a process for vessels to pay Iran in exchange for safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz.[33] Iranian Parliamentary National Security and Foreign Policy Commission head Ebrahim Azizi told the BBC on April 20 that Iran will “never” be ready to give up its “control” of the Strait of Hormuz.[34] Azizi added that Iran’s “control” of the strait will be signed into law, in reference to the Iranian parliamentary bill described above.[35] Azizi characterized Iran’s “control” of the strait as “one of [Iran’s] assets to face the enemy.”[36] These comments reflect the Iranian regime’s view that the Strait of Hormuz is Iran’s main point of leverage vis-a-vis the United States.

**The US Navy continued to enforce its blockade of Iranian ports and likely forced two Iranian-linked vessels attempting to violate the Navy’s blockade to turn around.** CENTCOM announced

on April 20 that US forces have directed 27 vessels to change course since the start of the blockade.[37] These vessels likely include the US-sanctioned Guinea-flagged *Raine* tanker and the Iranian-flagged *Artman* container ship, which both changed course after approaching the US blockade line on April 19, according to commercially available shipping data.[38] Both ships likely sought to pass the US blockade line before being forced to change course.[39]



**ISW-CTP is unable to assess whether two vessels that originated from Iranian ports and passed the US blockade line are in violation of or exempt from the US Navy’s blockade.** Commercially available shipping data shows that the Liberian-flagged *Basel* and Marshall Islands-flagged *CECI*, which departed from Bandar Imam Khomeini Port, Khuzestan Province, on April 15 continued to transit along the Omani coast toward separate ports in Brazil on April 20.[40] CENTCOM announced on April 14 that it would not allow vessels to enter or exit Iranian ports.[41] UKMTO reported on April 16 that vessels carrying humanitarian goods are exempt from the blockade, however.[42] It is unclear what cargo the *Basel* and *CECI* are transporting.[43] CENTCOM has noted that all Iranian vessels, vessels under US sanctions, and vessels suspected of carrying contraband are subject to the right of visit and search, regardless of their location.[44] ISW-CTP previously noted that US forces can interdict vessels almost anywhere in international waters until they reach their final destination.[45]

A third vessel, the Vietnam-flagged *NV Aquamarine*, has also continued sailing, but this ship is likely exempt from the US blockade and considered “neutral shipping,” given that it departed from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and is not under US sanctions.[46] ISW-CTP incorrectly attributed United Against Nuclear Iran’s blacklisting of the *NV Aquamarine* as evidence that the vessel was an Iranian-linked vessel attempting to pass the US Navy’s blockade line on April 19.[47]

## US and Israeli Air Campaign

**Satellite imagery confirms that the US-Israeli combined force conducted multiple strikes on a reported IRGC command center in the Jamaran complex in northern Tehran Province.[48] The strikes occurred before the ceasefire.** An Iranian OSINT analyst assessed that the United States struck the site with massive ordnance penetrator bombs.[49] Iranian media previously described the site as the most important and “strategic” broadcast transmitter in Iran.[50] The analyst claimed that the site also serves as a surveillance, signal-jamming, and command center for the IRGC.[51] Fox News, citing unspecified high-level sources, reported on April 6 that the United States struck an underground IRGC headquarters in Tehran, which the analyst assessed was referring to the strike on the Jamaran complex.[52] The analyst claimed that the strike targeted a meeting of at least 50 IRGC officers at the

underground complex.[53] ISW-CTP cannot independently verify that the targeted site was an IRGC command center, or that IRGC officers were meeting at the site at the time of the combined force strikes.

## Iranian Response

**Iran reportedly planned to conduct covert sabotage operations against Israeli-linked sites, energy infrastructure, and other unspecified sites in Azerbaijan in recent weeks.[54]** An Israeli military correspondent reported that Mossad and Azerbaijani authorities thwarted several Iranian sabotage attempts and planned attacks in Azerbaijan “several weeks ago.”[55] Mossad stated that an Iranian-backed militant cell was preparing to target the Israeli Embassy in Azerbaijan, a synagogue in Baku, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline with improvised explosive devices (IED) and drones.[56] Israeli airstrikes at the start of the war killed the senior IRGC leaders behind these planned operations, including Unit 4000 Chief Rahman Moghadam, IRGC Intelligence Organization Chief Majid Khademi, and covert operations official Mohsen Suri, according to Israeli media.[57]

**The IRGC Intelligence Organization’s covert operations Unit 4000 also reportedly smuggled drones through Turkey and conducted reconnaissance against US forces at Incirlik Airbase in Turkey.[58]** Israeli intelligence reported that a Unit 4000 officer coordinated the smuggling of drones from Iran to Cyprus via Turkey.[59] The same officer also reportedly headed operations to gather intelligence on US forces at Incirlik Airbase in southwestern Turkey.[60]

**Emirati state media separately reported on April 20 that Emirati security forces arrested 27 members of a group with connections to the Iranian regime and external actors who were planning to conduct terrorist attacks.[61]**

## Israeli Campaign Against Hezbollah and Hezbollah Response

**Lebanese and Israeli officials will meet in Washington, DC, on April 23 for the second round of direct ambassador-level talks.[62]** Lebanese and Israeli officials met in Washington, DC, on April 14 for the first direct talks between the two countries in over 30 years.[63] Lebanese Ambassador to the United States Nada Hamadeh Moawad and Israeli Ambassador to the United States Yechiel Leiter will attend the talks.[64] It is unclear which US officials will attend the talks at the time of this writing. A Lebanese official told the Associated Press on April 20 that the upcoming talks will focus on “solidifying” the 10-day ceasefire and the logistics of future negotiations.[65] A Lebanese ministerial source previously told Saudi media that Lebanese officials’ top priority is to request an extension of the temporary ceasefire.[66] A senior Israeli political source recently told Israeli media that Israel assesses that it will need to agree to a ceasefire extension in Lebanon in the next few days.[67] The proposed extension period would reportedly range from 10 days to one month.[68] Israel and Lebanon’s current 10-day ceasefire is set to expire on April 26.[69] These preparatory and logistical meetings aim to lay the groundwork for Israel and Lebanon to have direct negotiations in the future over long-standing issues, such as Israel’s presence in Lebanese territory and Hezbollah disarmament.[70]

**US and Lebanese officials have held a series of meetings in recent days, likely in preparation for the upcoming direct Israeli-Lebanese talks.[71]** Lebanese President Joseph Aoun spoke to US President Donald Trump on April 16 to discuss the Lebanese government’s request for a long-term ceasefire.[72] Aoun similarly spoke to US Secretary of State Marco Rubio on April 16.[73] Rubio affirmed that he will continue his efforts to achieve a lasting ceasefire.[74] Aoun and Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri both met with US Ambassador to Lebanon Michel Issa on April 20 to discuss recent

developments and means to extend the ceasefire.[75] These meetings come as Lebanese officials, specifically Aoun and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam, have taken steps to establish a unified Lebanese position and prepared the Lebanese government's proposal for negotiations.[76] Aoun reiterated on April 20 that he seeks to halt Israeli operations in Lebanon, secure an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanese territory, and deploy the Lebanese army to Lebanon's southern borders.[77]

**Hezbollah is reportedly attempting to pressure the United States and Israel to agree to extend the temporary ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon.** Hezbollah senior official and parliamentarian Hassan Fadlallah stated on April 20 that Hezbollah has contacted and briefed Iranian officials on Israel's ceasefire "violations" so that the Iranian officials could convey this information to Pakistani mediators.[78] Fadlallah added that Hezbollah hopes that Pakistani mediators will exert pressure on the United States, presumably to get the United States to pressure Israel to extend the ceasefire.[79] Fadlallah emphasized that Hezbollah wants the ceasefire in Lebanon to continue and for Israeli forces to withdraw from Lebanese territory.[80] Sources familiar with ongoing discussions within Hezbollah's leadership similarly told a Lebanese media outlet on April 18 that Hezbollah is warning the United States that Israel's "violations" could cause "everything" to collapse.[81] Hezbollah sources and officials have warned that Hezbollah will not return to a policy of "strategic patience" or allow a "unilateral ceasefire," noting that Hezbollah is prepared to resume fighting against Israel.[82] Hezbollah Secretary General Naim Qassem stated on April 18 that Hezbollah fighters will remain in "the field with their fingers on the trigger" and will respond to Israeli "violations" accordingly.[83]

**The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) conducted at least three airstrikes in Lebanon on April 19 and 20, which marked the first Israeli strikes since the ceasefire came into effect on April 16.[84]**

The temporary ceasefire agreement contains a provision that permits Israel to act in self-defense against any "planned, imminent, or ongoing" Hezbollah threats against Israel.[85] The IDF stated that it struck a Hezbollah launcher, which was loaded and ready to launch projectiles at Israel, in Qalaouiyeh, central southern Lebanon, overnight between April 19 and 20.[86] The IDF reported on April 20 that forces under the IDF 98th Paratrooper Division directed an Israeli Air Force (IAF) strike on Hezbollah fighters in Bint Jbeil, southeastern Lebanon.[87] The IDF 98th Paratrooper Division recently deployed and began operations in southern Lebanon in early April.[88] The IDF reported that the 1st (Golani) Infantry Brigade (36th Armored Division) also directed an IAF strike on Hezbollah fighters near a bridge in Qaaqaait al Jisr, which is located along the Litani River.[89] The IDF previously conducted several airstrikes targeting bridges on the Litani River that Hezbollah used to move weapons and personnel from northern Lebanon to southern Lebanon.[90]

**The IDF has continued to conduct ground operations in southern Lebanon in accordance with the temporary ceasefire agreement.** The IDF reported on April 19 that the 769th (Hiram) Territorial Brigade (91st Territorial Division) is continuing to conduct operations in southern Lebanon to prevent any direct threats to northern Israeli communities.[91] The IDF stated that the brigade's forces killed a Hezbollah fighter who crossed the IDF's "forward defense line" in southern Lebanon on April 19.[92] The IDF Arabic-language spokesperson issued a warning on April 19 to southern Lebanese residents to refrain from returning to 58 towns in southern Lebanon and approaching the Litani River area.[93] The IDF spokesperson's warning aligns with the IDF's recent post identifying its "forward defense line" or "yellow line." [94] The IDF's "yellow line" extends several kilometers inside Lebanese territory and denotes the area where Israeli forces control approximately 55 southern Lebanese villages.[95] Israeli media noted on April 18 that the IDF is continuing to conduct ground operations up to the "line" to "cleanse the area of Hezbollah" and protect northern Israeli residents.[96] Lebanese media also reported that Israeli forces demolished buildings in several areas of southern Lebanon on April 20.[97]

## Other Axis of Resistance Response

**The US Embassy in Baghdad warned on April 20 that Iranian-backed Iraqi militias continue to plan attacks against US citizens and targets in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan.[98]** This warning comes after Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah appeared to confirm on April 18 that IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani discussed preparations for renewed conflict with the United States and Israel during his meetings with Iraqi militia leaders in Baghdad on April 18.[99] Kataib Hezbollah Security Chief Abu Mujahid Aasaf issued a statement after Ghaani's visit to Baghdad that called for increased coordination between the "resistance forces and other parties," which implicitly refers to military cooperation.[100] Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have launched drone and rocket attacks targeting US and foreign interests in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan throughout the war.[101]

The US government also urged US defense contractor V2X on April 9 to evacuate its employees from Kuwait and Iraq, according to four sources speaking to *The Guardian* on April 20.[102] Hundreds of US contractors, mostly from V2X, work at Iraq's Balad Airbase to support the Iraqi government's F-16 fighter jet program.[103] Likely Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have conducted multiple one-way drone attacks targeting Balad Airbase during the war.[104]

**The United States suspended security coordination meetings with Iraqi leaders until the Iraqi government identifies the perpetrators of recent attacks targeting US interests in Iraq, according to unnamed sources speaking to Saudi media on April 20.[105]** Saudi media also reported that the US government froze funding for unspecified Iraqi security institutions.[106] This report comes after the US Treasury Department sanctioned seven Iranian-backed Iraqi militia officials on April 17 for their involvement in attacks targeting US positions in Iraq.[107]

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### Endnotes

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# Iran Update Special Report, April 21, 2026



**Ria Reddy, Ben Rezaei, Nidal Morrison, Avery Borens, Katherine Wells, Parker Hempel, Benjamin Schmida, Adham Fattah, Brian Carter**

**Analyst Notes:** Data Cutoff: 2:00 PM ET

*The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute are publishing daily updates to provide analysis on the war with Iran. The updates focus on US and Israeli strikes on Iran and Iran and the Axis of Resistance's response to the strikes. The updates cover events from the past 24-hour period.*

## Key Takeaways

1. The United States extended its ceasefire with Iran “until such time as [the Iranian] proposal is submitted and discussions are concluded.” Trump confirmed that Washington will maintain its blockade of Iranian ports.
2. Conflicting reports on April 20 and 21 about Iran’s participation in the scheduled negotiations and Iran’s failure to produce a unified proposal reflect the ongoing intra-regime power struggle between Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Commander Major General Ahmad Vahidi. ISW-CTP continues to assess that Vahidi appears to have the upper hand over Ghalibaf at the moment.
3. Iranian-backed Iraqi militias conducted up to half of the roughly 1,000 drone attacks targeting Saudi Arabia during the war, according to unnamed sources speaking to the Wall Street Journal on April 21. ISW-CTP previously assessed that it is very unlikely that Iranian-backed Iraqi militias would conduct drone attacks against regional states if the Iranian regime opposed such attacks, which suggests that Iran has not ordered its militia partners to cease attacking regional states.
4. Hezbollah attacked Israeli forces in southern Lebanon and northern Israel for the first time since the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire took effect on April 16. The IDF struck the Hezbollah rocket launcher responsible for the attack on Israeli forces in Rab el Thalathine.

## Toplines

**The United States extended its ceasefire with Iran “until such time as [the Iranian] proposal is submitted and discussions are concluded.”**[1] US President Donald Trump stated on April 21 that Pakistani mediators urged the United States not to resume attacks while Iranian leaders work to produce a “unified proposal.”[2] The reference to a “unified” proposal appears to imply that previous proposals were not unified in some way, which is consistent with ISW-CTP’s assessment that one challenge with the

ongoing negotiations is the divided nature of Iran's negotiating team. The ceasefire extension comes after a second round of US-Iran negotiations scheduled for April 21 in Islamabad, Pakistan, was cancelled because Iran did not confirm its participation and did not respond to US positions.[3] Trump confirmed that Washington will maintain its blockade of Iranian ports.[4]

**Conflicting reports on April 20 and 21 about Iran's participation in the scheduled negotiations and Iran's failure to produce a unified proposal reflect the ongoing intra-regime power struggle between Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Commander Major General Ahmad Vahidi. ISW-CTP continues to assess that Vahidi appears to have the upper hand over Ghalibaf at the moment.** *The Wall Street Journal*, citing unspecified sources, reported on April 21 that Iranian officials initially signaled that they would attend the talks but later introduced a precondition following pressure from the IRGC that the United States lift its blockade before negotiations begin.[5] That the regime then adopted this precondition as official regime policy suggests that senior-most IRGC commander Vahidi and aligned actors currently wield significant influence on Iranian decision-making. This dynamic is consistent with reporting that Vahidi is the only senior official who maintains direct access to Mojtaba Khamenei and relays key decisions, which gives him significant power.[6] Ghalibaf has publicly supported negotiations and has not explicitly called for preconditions.[7] The Trump administration seems to have been willing to negotiate in talks without preconditions.

The reported precondition that the United States lift its blockade before talks would only lift the blockade before and during the talks. The United States could then reimpose the blockade at any later time. This precondition is thus not a major concession because the blockade would be extremely time limited. The limited nature of the precondition suggests that Vahidi and those around him may have sought to derail negotiations rather than secure meaningful economic relief.

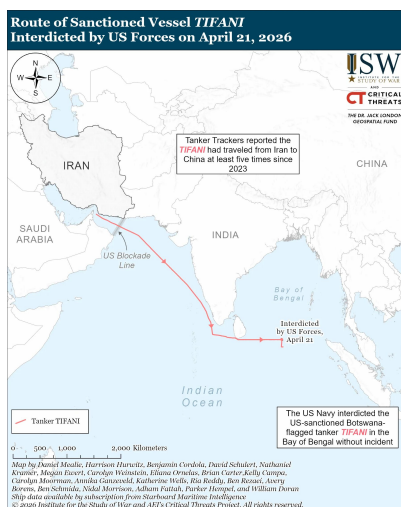
**Iranian officials and IRGC-affiliated media are signaling readiness for the imminent resumption of war.** IRGC-affiliated Tasnim News Agency reported on April 21 that Iran has prepared for a new phase of fighting.[8] Tasnim added that Iran has assessed the likelihood of renewed conflict as high over the past two weeks and has conducted certain military redeployments and prepared new target lists accordingly.[9] Iranian Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei separately assessed on April 21 that the likelihood of renewed US and Israeli attacks is high and emphasized the need for preparation.[10] An unspecified senior Israeli security official told Israel's state broadcaster on April 21 that Israel is preparing for the resumption of fighting with Iran as well.[11] The official assessed that the United States and Iran will fail to reach any understanding and noted that Israel is ready to immediately resume the war.[12]

**Some senior Iranian clerical and political figures have expressed support for negotiations and for the negotiating team, but this support remains limited and does not yet reflect a unified shift within the regime.** Prominent Iranian Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid publicly advocated for a negotiated resolution and criticized hardline Iranian officials for risking renewed conflict.[13] Abdol Hamid is the most prominent Sunni cleric in Iran and the Friday prayer leader in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province, and he openly challenged the regime during the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests.[14] Abdol Hamid stated on April 21 that a "fair agreement" is the only viable solution and warned that hardliners obstructing such an outcome will bear responsibility for the "homeland's devastation." [15] Abdol Hamid previously called for "strong diplomacy with full authority" during his sermon on April 17 and emphasized that Iranian diplomacy should not be constrained by hardliners.[16] These remarks support the broader line that some Iranian political and clerical figures favor diplomacy and may be pushing back, at least indirectly, against the IRGC-centered camp that has constrained negotiations. Abdol Hamid remains an influential clerical figure, but his position is unlikely to meaningfully affect Iran's

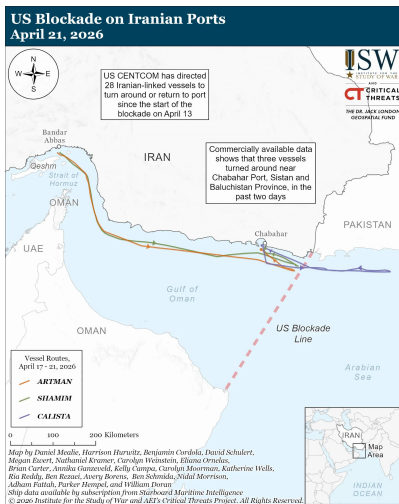
foreign policy decision-making. Prominent Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Hossein Nouri Hamedani separately cautioned against actions that undermine negotiators and explicitly praised the role of Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf.[17] Expediency Discernment Council member Mohammad Reza Bahonar emphasized confidence in Iranian negotiators and in Ghalibaf, stating that Ghalibaf is defending Iran's achievements with commitment and calling on political factions and the public to support negotiators.[18] ISW-CTP has observed that Ghalibaf appears to be engaged in a serious internal dispute with IRGC Commander Major General Ahmad Vahidi (see above).[19]

## Maritime Developments

**The US Navy's interdiction of the US-sanctioned *Tifani* oil tanker in the Bay of Bengal on April 20 and 21 illustrates that US forces can interdict any vessel that violates the US blockade on Iranian ports far beyond the Gulf of Oman.[20]** The US Navy interdicted the US-sanctioned Botswana-flagged tanker *Tifani* in the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) area of responsibility in the Bay of Bengal overnight on April 20 and 21 without incident.[21] A US military official told the *New York Times* on April 21 that the White House would decide on the disposition of the sanctioned vessel and its cargo after US forces took it into custody.[22] Commercially available shipping data shows the *Tifani* vessel abruptly made a sharp turn south and moved out of a popular shipping lane in the Bay of Bengal.[23] This could indicate that US forces are escorting the *Tifani* to a port in order to impound the vessel. The maritime intelligence organization Tanker Trackers said on April 21 that the *Tifani* had traveled from Iran to China at least five times since 2023.[24]



**US Central Command (CENTCOM) stated on April 21 that US forces have directed 28 Iranian-linked vessels to turn around or return to port since the start of the blockade on April 13.[25]** Commercially available data shows that three vessels turned around near Chabahar Port, Sistan and Baluchistan Province, in the past two days.[26] Two of the three vessels, the Iranian-flagged and US-sanctioned *Artman* and *Shamim*, turned back towards Chabahar after approaching the US blockade line.[27] The third vessel, the Comoros-flagged *Calista*, left from Chabahar towards Karachi, Pakistan, but turned around and returned to Chabahar.[28]



**Iranian media claimed on April 21 that one of its vessels, the *Felicity*, bypassed the US blockade with the support of the Artesh Navy.[29]** The *Felicity* delivered two million barrels of Iranian crude oil to India around April 12 following a US sanctions waiver, one day before the start of the blockade.[30] Commercially available data shows that the *Felicity* stayed in the Gulf of Kutch, India, for about three days before heading back towards the Strait of Hormuz on April 18.[31] It is theoretically possible for the *Felicity* to have turned off its transponder on April 18 and crossed the US blockade line in about four days, but there is no evidence that this occurred.

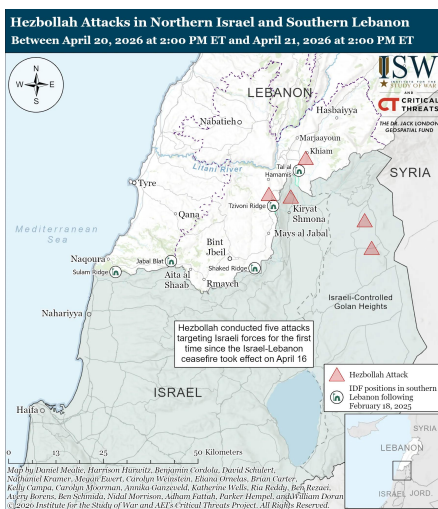
## US-Israeli Air Campaign

**The United States continues to degrade Iran’s ability to reconstitute its drone and missile program through economic sanctions.** The US Treasury sanctioned 14 individuals, entities, and aircraft based in Iran, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on April 21 for their roles in procuring and transporting drones, missiles, and key components on behalf of the Iranian regime.[32] The US Treasury sanctions targeted procurement agents, front companies, and logistics facilitators involved in acquiring servomotors, propellant precursors, and aircraft parts for Iran’s drone and ballistic missile programs. The US Treasury also imposed sanctions on entities that enabled the transfer of Iranian weapons and drones abroad, including shipments to Venezuela under former Venezuela President Nicolas Maduro in coordination with a Venezuelan state-owned airline.[33] The US Treasury also identified two Boeing 777 aircraft owned by regime-run Mahan Air as blocked property, reinforcing US efforts to disrupt Iran’s proliferation pathways and international weapons transport networks.[34]

**Satellite imagery confirmed that the US-Israeli combined force conducted multiple strikes on an IRGC Aerospace Force missile base and launch site in Bid Ganeh, Tehran Province, between February 28 and March 17.[35]** Open-source intelligence (OSINT) analysts identified damage to several buildings at the Amir al Momenin missile launch site, Imam Sajjad Missile Base, and nearby barracks in Bid Ganeh, south of Tehran City.[36] Anti-regime media reported airstrikes in Bid Ganeh, where an IRGC base and site are located, on March 2.[37] Iran likely housed medium-range missiles at Amir al Momenin missile launch site—also known as the Bid Ganeh Missile Facility—based on the presence of 17-meter-long truck-mounted containers seen in satellite imagery, according to a weapons expert assessing Israeli airstrikes during the June 2025 Israel-Iran War.[38]

# Israeli Campaign Against Hezbollah and Hezbollah Response

**Hezbollah attacked Israeli forces in southern Lebanon and northern Israel for the first time since the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire took effect on April 16.**[39] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) reported that Hezbollah fired rockets targeting Israeli forces in the vicinity of Rab el Thalathine in southeastern Lebanon's Marjaayoun District, near the Israel-Lebanon border.[40] Hezbollah also claimed that it fired rockets and drones targeting an IDF artillery position in Kfar Giladi, in northern Israel.[41] The attacks caused no reported casualties.[42] Hezbollah accused Israel of over 200 ceasefire "violations" in southern Lebanon since the ceasefire took effect on April 16 in its explanation of the attack.[43] The IDF called Hezbollah's rocket and drone attacks "blatant violations" of the ceasefire.[44] The IDF struck the Hezbollah rocket launcher responsible for the attack on Israeli forces in Rab el Thalathine.[45]



**The IDF conducted at least six airstrikes targeting Hezbollah fighters in southern Lebanon since ISW-CTP's last data cutoff on April 20.**[46] The temporary ceasefire agreement permits Israel to act in self-defense against any "planned, imminent, or ongoing" Hezbollah threats against Israel.[47] The IDF stated that it conducted three airstrikes targeting groups of Hezbollah fighters crossing Israel's "forward defense line" into Israeli-held territory in southern Lebanon on the night of April 20 and the morning of April 21.[48]

**The IDF has continued to conduct ground operations in southern Lebanon in accordance with the temporary ceasefire agreement.** The 35th Paratrooper Brigade (98th Division) commander stated on April 21 that Israeli forces are in "intense" fighting in Bint Jbeil, southeastern Lebanon, and are now operating with "full force." [49] The commander specified that Israeli forces are engaging with Hezbollah fighters in the city's central district and at Bint Jbeil Stadium, which the IDF seized on April 13. [50] Bint Jbeil has consistently been a hotspot of fighting between Israeli forces and Hezbollah fighters over the past several weeks. [51] Bint Jbeil is operationally significant for the IDF because it is located at the nexus of multiple main roads in southeastern Lebanon, including the Tebnine-Bint Jbeil road, which the IDF could use to advance north and link with Israeli forces advancing from other axes. Bint Jbeil is also symbolically significant to Hezbollah because it is where former Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah proclaimed Hezbollah's "victory" in 2000. [52] IDF Northern Command Commander Major General Rafi Milo stated on April 21 that hundreds of Israeli forces are operating across southern Lebanon to remove every threat to northern Israel. [53] Israeli forces are currently positioned and operating up to Israel's "forward defense line," which runs between five and ten kilometers deep inside Lebanese territory. [54] A geospatial intelligence analyst and Lebanese media also reported that Israeli forces demolished buildings and fired artillery shells in several areas of southern Lebanon, particularly in southwestern Lebanon, on April 20 and 21. [55]

**Israeli officials have reaffirmed that Israel's campaign in Lebanon ultimately aims to disarm Hezbollah and eliminate threats to northern Israeli communities.** Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz stated on April 21 that Israel is working to achieve these objectives through “a combination of military and political steps.”[56] Katz warned that the IDF would act on these objectives by continuing its military operations in Lebanon if the Lebanese government does not take steps to disarm Hezbollah.[57] Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu similarly noted that Israel's goal of disarming and dismantling Hezbollah requires “sustained effort, patience, and endurance” by Israeli forces and will not be achieved in the short-term.[58] Netanyahu added that Israel's goal also requires Israel to wisely navigate “the diplomatic field.”[59]

**Israeli and Lebanese officials continue to disagree on long-standing issues, which will continue to pose a challenge to US efforts to reach a long-term agreement between the two countries.** The IDF recently defined its three core conditions that must be met to reach any agreement with Lebanon.[60] Israel's three core conditions include the creation of a buffer zone in southern Lebanon up to the Litani River that does not have any Hezbollah presence or infrastructure, the preservation of full operational freedom to act against any threats in any area of Lebanon, and the initiation of a long-term process to disarm Hezbollah under US supervision.[61] The Lebanese government, on the other hand, has continuously stated that its conditions are a complete Israeli withdrawal from all Lebanese territory, the cessation of Israeli operations in Lebanon, and the return of Lebanese prisoners held in Israel.[62] Israeli officials have not specified any conditions for an Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanese territory, however. Israeli Defense Minister Israeli Katz noted in March that Israeli forces would maintain control over “the entire area” between the Israel-Lebanon border and the Litani River even after Israel concludes its operation in Lebanon.[63] Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu similarly noted that Israeli forces are not leaving southern Lebanon.[64] These outstanding issues have previously caused US diplomatic efforts to stall.[65]

## **Other Axis of Resistance Response**

**Iran allowed some Iranian-backed Iraqi militias to conduct attacks without the Iranian regime's approval during the war, according to three Iraqi militia members and two other unspecified officials speaking to Western media on April 21.**[66] An Iraqi militia member stated that “various forces” now have the authority to conduct operations based on their own “field assessments without referring back to a central command.”[67] The sources added that “hardline factions” are operating under a decentralized command structure with Iranian advisers.[68] These “hardline” factions could refer to Iranian-backed Iraqi militias Kataib Hezbollah and Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba, both of which are relatively more subordinate to Iran than other militias.[69]

**Iranian-backed Iraqi militias conducted up to half of the roughly 1,000 drone attacks targeting Saudi Arabia during the war, according to unnamed sources speaking to the *Wall Street Journal* on April 21.**[70] Some of these sources added that Iraqi militias launched drones targeting Bahrain after US President Donald Trump announced the US-Iran ceasefire on April 8.[71] ISW-CTP assessed on April 13 that Iranian-backed Iraqi militias are responsible for at least some of the recent drone attacks against Gulf states.[72] ISW-CTP also assessed that it is very unlikely that Iranian-backed Iraqi militias would conduct drone attacks against regional states if the Iranian regime opposed such attacks, which suggests that Iran has not ordered its militia partners to cease attacking regional states.[73] Bahrain's Foreign Ministry summoned the Iraqi charge d'affaires on April 13 in response to “continued” Iraqi militia drone attacks targeting Bahrain and other Gulf Cooperation Council states.[74] Saudi Arabia similarly summoned the Iraqi ambassador to Saudi Arabia on April 12 for the same reason.[75]

**A Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba political council member reportedly confirmed that Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have sent personnel and financial support to Iran during the war.[76]**

Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba political council member Firas al Yasser said Iranian-backed Iraqi militias sent “support convoys” and financial aid to Iran from Iraq, according to anti-Iranian regime media on April 21.[77] Yasser said the Iranian-backed Iraqi militia support was a sign of Iraq’s solidarity with Iran.[78] An Iraqi official speaking to anti-Iranian regime media claimed on March 30 that Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) fighters have deployed to Basij bases in Khorramshahr and Abadan in Khuzestan Province.[79] The same outlet previously reported that PMF fighters had entered Iran via the Shalamcheh crossing.[80] The PMF is an Iraqi state security service that includes many Iranian-backed Iraqi militias that tend to report to Iran instead of the Iraqi prime minister.[81] Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba is affiliated with the 12th PMF Brigade, for example.[82] ISW-CTP previously assessed that the regime may be mobilizing PMF fighters, in part, to strengthen control over previous protest hotspots.[83]

**Axis of Resistance groups, including Iranian-backed Iraq militias and the Houthis, have signaled their preparedness to resume operations against the United States, Israel, and other regional countries if the war resumes between Iran and the United States.**

Likely Iranian-backed militia front group Saraya Awliya al Dam warned on April 20 that the group is “fully prepared” to resume attacks against US interests in Iraq and the region.[84] The militia said that it is ready for a “long war” and threatened to conduct attacks with “more advanced weapons.”[85] It also urged the supporters of the “resistance” to support Iran and Lebanon.[86] This warning comes after Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah appeared to confirm on April 18 that IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani discussed preparations for renewed conflict with the United States and Israel during his meetings with Iraqi militia leaders in Baghdad, Iraq, on April 18.[87] Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have launched drone and rocket attacks targeting US and foreign interests in Iraq, as well as the Gulf countries, during the war.[88] Houthi Supreme Leader Abdulmalik al Houthi warned on April 21 that the Houthis will not remain neutral and would “escalate” if the United States and Israel escalate against Iran.[89] Abdulmalik warned that the current fragile truce is coming to an end and the possibility of escalation is “high.”[90]

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# Iran Update Special Report, April 22, 2026



**Ben Rezaei, Benjamin Schmida, Ria Reddy, Parker Hempel, Carolyn Moorman, Adham Fattah, William Doran, Kelly Campa, Brian Carter**

**Analyst Notes:** Data Cutoff: 2:00 PM ET

*The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute are publishing daily updates to provide analysis on the war with Iran. The updates focus on US and Israeli strikes on Iran and Iran and the Axis of Resistance's response to the strikes. The updates cover events from the past 24-hour period.*

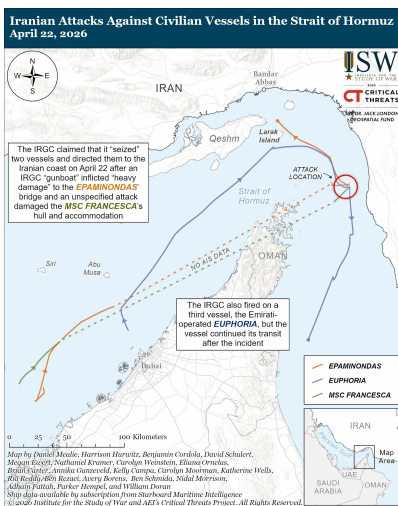
## Key Takeaways

1. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy attacked and likely redirected two vessels towards Iran on April 22, likely to enforce Iranian claims of sovereignty over the strait to disrupt global shipping and extract US concessions. The IRGC also may have redirected the two vessels in response to the recent US Navy seizure of the Iranian-flagged, US-sanctioned *Touska* in the Gulf of Oman.
2. The IRGC's attacks on shipping and IRGC Commander Major General Ahmad Vahidi's apparent willingness to scrap US-Iran talks indicate that Vahidi is prepared to resume the war if needed. Vahidi appears willing to risk incurring a potential US military response to assert Iranian "control" over the strait.
3. Iranian decision-making remains fragmented and in disarray, which explains Iran's inability to formulate and communicate a coherent negotiating position. Iranian officials have not reached a unified decision on whether to return to negotiations in recent days, and competing regime power centers appear to be blocking consensus on core issues. The regime's formal decision-making and coordinating mechanisms are also not functioning effectively.
4. US officials have recently leaked quantitative estimates of the number of different Iranian assets remaining after the ceasefire. It is extremely difficult to deduce the degree of degradation to Iranian forces based on these estimates because the number of remaining systems is only one of many data points required to form a complete evaluation of military strength.

## Toplines

**The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy attacked and likely redirected two vessels towards Iran on April 22, likely to enforce Iranian claims of sovereignty over the strait to disrupt global shipping and extract US concessions.** The IRGC claimed that it "seized"

two vessels and directed them to the Iranian coast on April 22.[1] The two vessels — the Liberian-flagged, Greek-owned *Epaminondas* and the Panamanian-flagged *MSC Francesca* — appear to have been exiting the Strait of Hormuz at the time of the attacks.[2] An IRGC “gunboat” inflicted “heavy damage” to the *Epaminondas*’s bridge, and an unspecified attack damaged the *MSC Francesca*’s hull and accommodation.[3] Both vessels changed direction, sailed into Iranian territorial waters, and idled about seven nautical miles off the coast of Iran. Commercially available maritime tracking data showed that the *Epaminondas* continued to transit north in Iranian territorial waters. It is unclear why the vessels would have changed course and sailed further inland towards the Iranian coast if not under Iranian escort. The IRGC also fired on a third vessel, the Panamanian-flagged, Emirati-operated *Euphoria*, but the vessel continued its transit after the incident.[4] The IRGC has demanded that the United States lift its blockade over the Strait of Hormuz and effectively halted traffic through the strait on April 18 by attacking several vessels.[5] The IRGC likely aims to raise international shipping prices to extract concessions from the United States, such as ending the US blockade or yielding other demands. The IRGC also may have redirected the two vessels in response to the recent US Navy seizure of the Iranian-flagged, US-sanctioned *Touska* in the Gulf of Oman on April 19.[6] The Iranian regime had pledged to respond to the incident.[7]



The IRGC has also used its “control” over the strait as a means for IRGC Commander Major General Ahmad Vahidi to flex his own power over internal rivals, such as Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf. Vahidi and his inner circle recently used the IRGC’s leverage over the strait to exercise influence over Iran’s negotiating position.[8] The United States extended the ceasefire yesterday to allow for Iranian leaders to produce a “unified proposal,” but Iranian leaders remain fragmented over Iran’s negotiating strategy, as noted below.[9]

**The IRGC’s attacks on shipping and IRGC Commander Major General Ahmad Vahidi’s apparent willingness to scrap US-Iran talks indicate that Vahidi is prepared to resume the war if needed.** Vahidi currently holds the most influential position in the regime at this time, apart from the Supreme Leader, who is reportedly seriously injured or incapacitated.[10] The IRGC’s recent attacks on commercial vessels suggest that Vahidi is willing to risk incurring a potential US military response to assert Iranian “control” over the strait and achieve the subsequent intended effects, as described above. Vahidi also may seek to derail the negotiations and may be attempting to do so by introducing preconditions and interfering with efforts to produce a “unified proposal.”[11] These actions suggest that Vahidi and his inner circle have accepted and are prepared for the risks that such actions would lead to the resumption of the war with the United States.

**Iranian decision-making remains fragmented and in disarray, which explains Iran’s inability**

**to formulate and communicate a coherent negotiating position.** ISW-CTP previously assessed on April 15 that the United States is negotiating with a divided committee of hardliners and pragmatists that lacks a cohesive and unified position.[12] This intra-regime division has continued in recent days as senior Iranian officials have publicly diverged over negotiations.[13] Some reporting indicates that key actors, including Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi, lack the authority to represent the regime's position.[14] Iranian officials have not reached a unified decision on whether to return to negotiations in recent days, and competing regime power centers appear to be blocking consensus on core issues.[15] Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Esmail Baghaei told the BBC on April 21 that Iran has made "no decision" on whether to send a delegation to Islamabad and said officials continue to discuss conditions for returning to negotiations.[16] CNN reported on April 22 that US officials believe that intra-regime factions prevented a response to the US "list of broad points." [17] An unspecified US official told Axios on April 22 that there has been "an absolute fracture" between the negotiating team and the military and assessed that neither side has access to the supreme leader.[18] Axios added that IRGC leadership rejected much of what Iranian negotiators discussed with the United States after the first round of talks, which indicates that the negotiating team lacked the authority to represent the regime's position.[19]

The regime's formal decision-making and coordinating mechanisms are also not functioning effectively, instead reinforcing fragmentation. An unspecified US official told Axios on April 22 that Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr is not effectively coordinating between the IRGC, civilian leadership, and the supreme leader, which suggests that overlapping authorities and factional disputes are delaying Iranian decision-making and preventing the regime from presenting a unified negotiating position.[20] Vahidi reportedly pressured President Masoud Pezeshkian to appoint Zolghadr, which may have increased Zolghadr's challenges in fulfilling his duties as a key coordinator between Vahidi and other leaders.[21] The SNSC is formally responsible for aligning national security and foreign policy decision-making across the Iranian system and for generating consensus among key regime stakeholders, including civilian leadership and military commanders.[22] The apparent inability of the SNSC to produce a unified negotiating position or coordinate between competing actors suggests that the regime's primary decision-making mechanism is not functioning effectively.

US officials are increasing pressure on Iran to produce a unified response, however. Unspecified US officials told Axios on April 22 that US President Donald Trump is giving Iran a limited window of several days to present a coherent counteroffer before reconsidering military action.[23] Pakistani officials and intermediaries have simultaneously worked to keep talks "alive" and tried to secure a response from Iran, according to the Associated Press.[24] Iranian officials have continued to frame US actions, particularly the naval blockade, as the primary obstacle to negotiations, however.[25] Senior Iranian figures, including President Masoud Pezeshkian, have emphasized that "breach of commitments," blockade measures, and threats prevent "genuine negotiations." [26] An adviser to Ghalibaf stated on April 22 that the ceasefire extension "has no meaning" and called for a military response to the US blockade.[27]

**US officials have recently leaked quantitative estimates of the number of different Iranian assets remaining after the ceasefire. It is extremely difficult to deduce the degree of degradation to Iranian forces based on these estimates because the number of remaining systems is only one of many data points required to form a complete evaluation of military strength.** Recent US intelligence assessments indicate that roughly 50 percent of Iran's ballistic missile stockpile and its launch systems remain "intact," about 60 percent of the IRGC Navy still exists, and two-thirds of Iran's air force remains operational.[28] Some of these numbers are vague and incomplete. It is unclear, for example, what assets are included in the determination that 60 percent of the IRGC Navy is "still in existence." Other issues exist with these numbers because military strength and the capabilities

of a military organization rest on more than sheer numbers. The leaks assert that “two-thirds” of Iran’s Air Force remains operational, but it is unclear what that two-thirds includes and the quality of operational aircraft. There are significant qualitative differences between Iran’s F-4s and F-5s (both first flew in the late 1950s, and the United States flew in Vietnam) and the American and Israeli F-35. The size of the remaining missile stockpile is relevant, but a missile force is more than its stockpile; a more complete assessment would include assessments of the status of the personnel, command and control networks, production networks, logistics assets, and more. US air campaigns seek to achieve qualitative effects, some of which are invisible in the open-source information space, and others are difficult to observe because the effects take considerable time to become apparent.[29] Assessments that rely only on quantitative measures can overlook these critical effects and therefore fail to sufficiently evaluate the campaign.

## Maritime Developments

**ISW has observed reports citing maritime intelligence companies Vortexa and Lloyd’s List stating that a large number of ships have violated the US blockade without being stopped.** US Central Command has issued a statement denying that any ships have breached the blockade and specifying the whereabouts of the three ships named in these reports, stating that two of them returned to the Iranian port of Chabahar and one is under US Navy escort in the Indian Ocean.[30] Vortexa has issued an update confirming the CENTCOM report about two of the ships and describing the challenges of satellite-based maritime tracking. ISW is unable to offer an assessment of its own of the competing statements at this time.

## US and Israeli Air Campaign

*See topline section.*

## Intra-Regime Dynamics

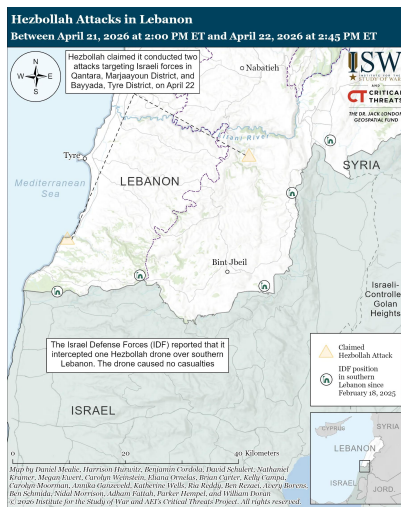
**Some Iranian companies have laid off workers due to economic pressure from the war.** Anti-regime media reported on April 22 that Rajaei Port in Bandar Abbas, Hormozgan Province, has laid off some workers because some ships are no longer working.[31] The combined force struck Rajaei Port on March 10.[32] Anti-regime media also reported that “major industries such as Mobarakeh Steel” have had to lay off workers due to the war.[33] The combined force struck the Mobarakeh Steel Factory in Esfahan Province on March 27.[34]

**Iranian security forces targeted Mobarizoun Popular Front (MPF) fighters, which is a coalition of Baloch anti-regime groups, in Rask, Sistan and Baluchistan Province on April 22.[35]** The security forces killed several fighters and seized a weapons cache.[36]

## Israeli Campaign Against Hezbollah and Hezbollah Response

**Hezbollah has continued to conduct attacks for the second consecutive day despite the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire.[37]** Hezbollah claimed that it conducted two attacks targeting Israeli forces in southern Lebanon on April 22.[38] Hezbollah previously conducted two attacks on Israeli forces in

southern Lebanon and northern Israel on April 21, for the first time since the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire took effect on April 16.[39] Hezbollah claimed an attack with two first-person view (FPV) drones targeting IDF personnel and a command vehicle in Qantara, Marjaayoun District.[40] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) intercepted one Hezbollah drone over Bayyada, Tyre District, and the attacks caused no reported casualties.[41]



**The IDF conducted at least four airstrikes in southern Lebanon since ISW-CTP 's last data cutoff on April 21.**[42] The IDF stated that it conducted an airstrike targeting two Hezbollah fighters crossing Israel's "forward defense line" in the vicinity of Qantara after Israeli forces in the 7th Brigade (36th Division) identified the infiltrating fighters.[43] The Qantara strike may have been related to the Hezbollah FPV attack in Qantara described above. The temporary ceasefire agreement permits Israel to act in self-defense against any "planned, imminent, or ongoing" Hezbollah threats against Israel.[44]

**The IDF has continued to conduct ground operations in southeastern Lebanon in accordance with the temporary ceasefire agreement.** The IDF announced that the 769th "Hiram" Brigade (91st Territorial Division), 1st "Golani" Brigade (36th Armored Division), and 933rd "Nahal" Infantry Brigade (146th Reserve Division) seized Hezbollah weapons caches in southeastern Lebanese towns, including Kham, Aadchit al Qoussair, and Taybeh, all in Marjaayoun District, and Beit Lif, Bint Jbeil District, respectively, on April 22.[45] Lebanese media reported that IDF units have continued to demolish buildings in southern Lebanese towns south of the "forward defense line" on April 21 and 22.[46] The IDF also announced that the 769th Brigade raided a Hezbollah compound and directed IDF airstrikes that struck over 70 targets and killed more than 20 Hezbollah fighters in Dibbine, before the start of the temporary ceasefire on April 16.[47]

**The Lebanese government reportedly seeks a month-long extension to the temporary ceasefire amid preparations for the second round of the second round of direct ambassador-level talks on April 23.** A Lebanese official told AFP that Lebanon will request a one-month ceasefire extension, an end to Israel's bombing and demolitions in Lebanon, and a commitment to the ceasefire during a meeting in Washington, DC, on April 23.[48] Lebanese President Joseph Aoun said on April 22 that Lebanon's primary objectives for the meeting are extending the April 16 ceasefire and halting Israeli demolitions in southern Lebanon.[49] Aoun said that Lebanon would provide "no concessions, no compromises, and no capitulation." [50] Israel and Lebanon's current 10-day ceasefire is set to expire on April 26.[51] Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar said on April 22 that Israel has no "serious disagreements" with Lebanon and that Hezbollah remains the sole obstacle to peace and normalization between Lebanon and Israel.[52] Saar urged the Lebanese government to "work together" with Israel against Hezbollah.[53] Israeli and Lebanese officials continue to disagree on long-standing issues,

including the presence of an Israeli buffer zone in southern Lebanon, however.[54]

### **The Lebanese government has continued to take steps to disarm Hezbollah in Lebanon.**

Lebanese President Joseph Aoun instructed the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and other Lebanese security forces to intensify raids on weapons caches in Beirut and other areas of Lebanon during a security meeting on April 22.[55] Aoun said that Lebanese security services should show “no leniency” to “any party” since “no one” is allowed to obstruct the Lebanese government’s implementation of security measures and the Lebanese state’s monopoly over weapons.[56] Aoun emphasized that maintaining civil peace in Lebanon is a “red line.”[57] Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam ordered the LAF on April 9 to immediately enforce the Lebanese state’s monopoly over weapons in Beirut.[58] Lebanese media reported on April 10 that the Lebanese Armed Forces deployed units, including soldiers from its Commando Regiment, to secure the Government Palace and begin patrols in Beirut.[59]

## **Other Axis of Resistance Response**

### **The United States has reportedly suspended its funding for some counterterrorism and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) training programs until Iranian-backed Iraqi militia attacks cease and the Iraqi federal government takes unspecified steps to “dismantle” the militias.[60]**

An Iraqi Defense Ministry official told the *New York Times* on April 22 that the loss of funding would affect logistical support for the Iraqi Air Force and military training programs.[61] A security advisor to Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani claimed that the United States suspended its funding due to Iraq’s continued failure to form a government following the November 2025 parliamentary elections.[62] The United States has continuously pressured the Iraqi federal government to disarm Iranian-backed Iraqi militias and dissolve the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which is an Iraqi state security service that consists of numerous militias that answer to Iran instead of the Iraqi Prime Minister.[63] Saudi media reported on April 20 that the US government postponed security coordination meetings with Iraqi leaders until the Iraqi government identifies the perpetrators of recent attacks targeting US interests in Iraq.[64] Iranian-backed Iraqi militias conducted numerous attacks targeting the US Embassy in Baghdad and US interests in Iraqi Kurdistan during the war, as well as a drone attack targeting a US security convoy transporting previously kidnapped US journalist Shelly Kittelson to Baghdad International Airport on April 8.[65]

### **US and Iraqi officials told the *Wall Street Journal* on April 22 that the US Treasury Department has temporarily halted shipments of Iraq’s oil export revenue via the US Federal Reserve due to concerns about Iranian-backed Iraqi militia behavior.[66]**

The officials said that the United States first blocked a shipment of dollars to the Central Bank of Iraq when the war began in late February 2026, and recently blocked a cargo plane delivery of nearly \$500 million in US banknotes.[67] The Central Bank of Iraq has managed an account at the New York Federal Reserve on behalf of the Iraqi Finance Ministry since 2003 that holds the Iraqi federal government’s revenue from oil exports in US dollars.[68] Oil revenue accounts for about 90 percent of the Iraqi state’s budget.[69] US officials confirmed the temporary hold on Iraq’s dollar shipments to the *Wall Street Journal*. [70] The United States has previously threatened such action, such as when the United States reportedly warned Iraqi officials in early February 2026 that the United States would reduce Iraq’s access to oil export revenues if State of Law Coalition head Nouri al Maliki becomes prime minister again.[71]

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# Iran Update Special Report, April 23, 2026



**Adham Fattah, Katherine Wells, Parker Hempel, Ben Rezaei, Benjamin Schmida, Nidal Morrison, William Doran, Carolyn Moorman, Brian Carter**

**Analyst Notes:** Data Cutoff: 2:00 PM ET

*The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute are publishing daily updates to provide analysis on the war with Iran. The updates focus on US and Israeli strikes on Iran and Iran and the Axis of Resistance's response to the strikes. The updates cover events from the past 24-hour period.*

## Key Takeaways

1. US President Donald Trump's messages have appeared to elicit a choreographed response by the Iranian regime that is directed both to regime factions and to the United States. The heads of Iran's three branches of government issued a series of statements likely aimed at defending themselves from accusations of "moderation" in the Islamic Revolutionary context. Iranian Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei acknowledged Ghalibaf, Pezeshkian, Ejei, and Aragchi's obeisance several hours later in a choreographed manner that likely seeks to demonstrate unity and signal an end to the internal competition between pragmatic and hardliner officials.
2. Iranian Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei is likely unable to seriously impact Iranian decision-making due to injuries sustained during the war. The *New York Times* reported on April 23 that Mojtaba is under frequent medical attention and heavily reliant on the advice and guidance of senior IRGC commanders led by Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Commander Major General Ahmad Vahidi, citing a number of former IRGC and current regime officials.
3. Vahidi continues to support Iranian sovereignty over the Strait of Hormuz and efforts to retain the nuclear program, because he views negotiations with the United States as having no present value, according to IRGC sources and anti-Iranian regime media. Vahidi is part of the first generation of revolutionaries, and he prioritizes ideological purity and hard power over the economy and well-being of Iranian citizens.

## Toplines

**US President Donald Trump's messages have appeared to elicit a choreographed response by the Iranian regime that is directed both to regime factions and to the United States. The choreographed response was an attempt to portray unity between the "moderate" and "hardliner" factions in the regime by stating the same message affirming belief in the Islamic**

**Revolution’s core values.** Trump stated on Truth Social on April 23 that Iran is “having a hard time figuring out who their leader is.”[1] Trump highlighted infighting between the regime’s “moderate” and “hardliner” factions, adding that the United States will maintain the blockade on Iranian ships and ports until the regime is “able to make a deal.”[2]

The heads of Iran’s three branches of government—Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei, and Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf—issued a series of statements aimed at defending themselves from accusations of “moderation” in the Islamic Revolutionary context. Pezeshkian, Ejei, and Ghalibaf published nearly identical messages on X on April 23 in which they emphasized their allegiance to the principles of the Islamic Revolution.[3] All three leaders rejected that the regime contains “hardline” and “moderate” factions and circulated the slogan “One God, one nation, one leader, and one path—the path of victory for Iran.” Ejei published the statement first, followed by Pezeshkian and Ghalibaf. Ejei, while a hardliner historically, allied with the pragmatic Iranian leaders during efforts to end the 12-Day War.[4] Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi, who, along with Ghalibaf, has been leading Iran’s negotiating delegation, posted a similar message on X in which he emphasized the regime’s unity.[5] Senior IRGC commanders such as Vahidi and SNSC Secretary Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr did not circulate similar statements, but other IRGC-affiliated figures did several hours after Pezeshkian, Ejei, and Ghalibaf’s messages (see more below).

**The publication of these messages and the context of the events surrounding them indicate that Pezeshkian, Ghalibaf, Ejei, and Araghchi likely sought to defend themselves from accusations of moderation, which Vahidi could use to challenge their commitment to the revolution.** Araghchi, Ghalibaf, and Pezeshkian have adopted a more pragmatic approach toward the United States in negotiations, a stance that Vahidi and those close to him likely view as a diversion from the ideals of the Islamic Revolution. Vahidi attempted to insert Zolghadr into the first round of negotiations with the United States in Pakistan despite the protests of Araghchi and Ghalibaf.[6] Vahidi almost certainly did this to ensure that someone from his inner circle could keep tabs on whether Araghchi or Ghalibaf tried to negotiate outside of Vahidi’s red lines, which include maintaining support for the Axis of Resistance, recognizing Iran’s “right” to enrich uranium, and preserving Iran’s “control” over the Strait of Hormuz. US officials told Axios on April 20 that the US negotiating delegation thought it was “negotiating with the right people” in Islamabad on April 11 and 12, but that the IRGC effectively told the Iranian negotiating delegation upon their return to Tehran that the negotiating team “[does not] speak for” the IRGC.[7] Ghalibaf publicly defended the approach of negotiating with the United States in a speech on April 18 and criticized hardline officials—including SNSC member Saeed Jalili and hardline parliamentarian Amirhossein Sabeti—for their opposition to negotiations during a meeting with advisers.[8] ISW-CTP previously assessed that Ghalibaf’s criticism was likely implicitly aimed at Vahidi because Vahidi also opposes negotiating with the United States.[9]

**Iranian Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei acknowledged Ghalibaf, Pezeshkian, Ejei, and Araghchi’s obeisance several hours later in a choreographed manner that likely seeks to demonstrate unity and signal an end to the internal competition between pragmatic and hardliner officials.** Mojtaba suggested that the statements represented a spontaneous unification of the regime’s divided factions and portrayed this unification as a direct response to Trump’s statement. ISW-CTP has rendered Mojtaba’s statement in English below:

“Due to the extraordinary unity forged among our compatriots, a fracture has appeared within the enemy. With active gratitude for this blessing, our cohesion will become stronger and more ironclad, and the enemies will be further humiliated and disgraced. The enemy media operations, by targeting the minds and souls of the people, aim to undermine national unity and security; May this evil intention not be realized due to our negligence.”[10]

IRGC-affiliated Tasnim News Agency portrayed the messages solely as a response to recent comments from Trump.[11] It is not clear who is writing Mojtaba's online messages, given that he is in poor physical condition (see below).

A number of IRGC and IRGC-affiliated regime figures posted similar statements hours after the "moderates'" statements to express agreement with and support for Mojtaba's position. These messages present an apparent unified front against the United States. But they also allow the IRGC to deflect attempts by pragmatists to blame the IRGC or hardliners if war resumes by spreading the blame across the entirety of the "unified" government. Figures like IRGC Aerospace Commander Brigadier General Majid Mousavi, former SNSC Secretary Ali Akbar Ahmadian, IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani, and Artesh Commander Major General Amir Hatami posted messages affirming the "One God, one nation, one leader, and one path" message and unity against the United States.[12]

**Iranian Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei is likely unable to seriously impact Iranian decision-making due to injuries sustained during the war, however.** The *New York Times* reported on April 23 that Mojtaba is under frequent medical attention and heavily reliant on the advice and guidance of senior IRGC commanders led by Vahidi, citing a number of former IRGC and current regime officials.[13] One adviser to former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stated that Mojtaba is running the country like it is a company board, with the senior IRGC commanders as the members of the board. The report noted that regime officials have difficulties communicating with Mojtaba, including because they need to send messages secretly and via multiple runners. The article also noted that Mojtaba has been heavily influenced by IRGC commanders due to his close historical ties with them from the Iran-Iraq War. Supreme Leader Military Affairs Adviser Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi has reportedly served as Mojtaba's top military adviser, as he did with Mojtaba's father, Ali Khamenei. The *New York Times* report is consistent with ISW-CTP's assessment at the time of Mojtaba's assumption of power that he would likely be influenced by the more hardline elements of the Iranian regime due to his close ties to them.[14]

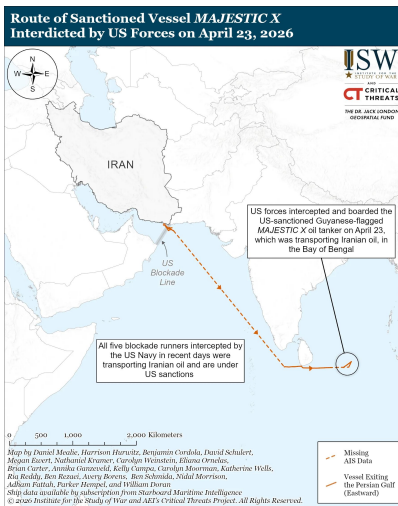
**Vahidi continues to support Iranian sovereignty over the Strait of Hormuz and efforts to retain the nuclear program, because he views negotiations with the United States as having no present value, according to IRGC sources and anti-Iranian regime media.**[15] An IRGC-affiliated outlet argued on April 22 that negotiations over the Strait of Hormuz are "unnecessary" because such negotiations would signal doubt over Iran's sovereignty over the Strait of Hormuz.[16] The same outlet stated that negotiations under these conditions would grant the United States a low-cost victory and violate declared red lines, particularly on Iran's nuclear file and "regional cooperation," which is likely a euphemism for the Axis of Resistance.[17] Senior Iranian parliamentarians broadly echoed this hardline posture on April 22 and 23 by portraying negotiations as damaging to deterrence and acceptable only under tightly constrained, Iranian-defined terms.[18] Anti-regime media reported on April 23 that Mojtaba's office, which Vahidi appears to run, opposed the discussion of the nuclear issue.[19] Araghchi reportedly contended that, under the Supreme Leader's orders, participation in negotiations offers little benefit and effectively amounts to a "death sentence" for the talks.[20] Vahidi and several other generals reportedly did not see the point in negotiating with the United States because the US naval blockade of Iran demonstrated that US President Donald Trump was not interested in negotiations and instead sought to pressure Iran to surrender, according to officials and two members of the IRGC briefed on the meeting who spoke to the *New York Times* on April 23.[21] Pakistani officials told Saudi media on April 23 that Iran-Pakistan contact continues, but confirmed that discussions are stalled due to Iranian opposition to the US naval blockade.[22] The officials noted that Iran has not formally responded to the possibility of future talks.[23] These reports of Vahidi's unwillingness to negotiate are consistent with ISW-CTP's April 22 assessment that Vahidi is deliberately accepting the risk of potential US military response to assert Iranian "control" over the Strait of Hormuz.[24]

**Vahidi is part of the first generation of revolutionaries, and he prioritizes ideological purity and hard power over the economy and well-being of Iranian citizens.** The regime figures who appear more pragmatic and are concerned with the economy — Pezeshkian and Ghalibaf — also appear to have accepted Vahidi’s positions in pursuit of unifying the Iranian political class.[25] Pezeshkian and Araghchi disagreed with Vahidi and other IRGC officials’ view that talks are pointless, according to officials and two members of the Guards briefed on the meeting who spoke to the *New York Times* on April 23.[26] Pezeshkian also warned that financial gains from negotiations — likely in reference to the lifting of the naval blockade, sanctions relief, and the unfreezing of Iranian assets abroad — are needed to pay for the estimated \$300 billion in losses from war with the United States and Israel.[27] Vahidi and the IRGC dismissed Pezeshkian’s concerns over the economy, as they have done since the start of the war, according to anti-regime media.[28] Vahidi almost certainly gives precedence to ideological orthodoxy and hard power over ideological flexibility that would present the sort of agreement that would dampen economic challenges. Hard power, in this logic, is essential for the Iranian regime’s control over Iran from both internal and external threats. Economic distress remains one of the regime’s most significant internal vulnerabilities, as demonstrated by the December 2025–January 2026 protests.[29] Ideologically orthodox revolutionaries who prioritize hard power believe that such vulnerabilities can be guarded against through force.

## Maritime Developments

**The US Navy has continued to demonstrate its ability to enforce its blockade on Iranian ports.** US Central Command (CENTCOM) announced on April 23 that it has directed 33 Iranian or Iranian-linked vessels to turn around or return to port since the start of the blockade on April 13.[30] US forces have also boarded or intercepted at least four other vessels east of the blockade line in the Indian Ocean in recent days. The four ships that the US Navy intercepted have been shipping Iranian oil in violation of the blockade. Some sources indicate that the US Navy also intercepted a fifth vessel. **The following window into US Navy blockade enforcement suggests that blockade runners have consistent characteristics: all five are under US sanctions and are transporting Iranian oil.**

- US forces intercepted and boarded the US-sanctioned *Majestic X* (IMO: 9198417) oil tanker on April 23, which was transporting Iranian oil, in the Bay of Bengal.[31] The *Majestic X* previously operated as the *Phoenix* and has previously helped Iran export oil while falsely operating under a Guyanese flag.[32]
- US forces intercepted the OFAC-sanctioned *Deep Sea* (IMO: 9357353) oil tanker, according to an April 23 Reuters report.[33] The *Deep Sea* was partially loaded with Iranian crude oil.[34] The vessel has had its automatic identification system (AIS) transponder off since March 22, according to commercially available shipping data.[35]
- US forces intercepted the OFAC-sanctioned *Sevin* (IMO: 9357353) oil tanker, according to the same Reuters report.[36] The *Sevin* was carrying roughly 650,000 barrels of Iranian oil when it was intercepted.[37] The vessel has had its AIS transponder off since March 15, according to commercially available shipping data.[38]
- US forces intercepted the Iranian-flagged, OFAC-sanctioned *Dorena* (IMO: 9569669), which is under US Navy destroyer escort in the Indian Ocean as of April 22, after the vessel attempted to run the blockade.[39] The *Dorena* is fully loaded with 2 million barrels of oil.[40]
- Reuters reported that US forces “may” have also intercepted the Iranian-flagged, OFAC-sanctioned *Derya* (IMO: 9569700) tanker, according to shipping sources speaking to Reuters.[41] It was also transporting oil.[42] This vessel is off the coast of India as of April 18, though it previously left the Gulf on March 9.[43]



**Iran is leveraging coercive maritime actions, transit controls, and escalation threats to shape conditions in and around the Strait of Hormuz and assert sovereignty over the waterway.**

IRGC-affiliated Fars News reinforced the Iranian regime line that Iran has sovereignty over the Strait in an April 22 op-ed by arguing that negotiations over the Strait are unnecessary because Iranian control is an established “geographical and legal reality.”[44] Fars also warned that discussing it would undermine the current status and signal doubt in Iran’s sovereignty.[45] Iranian officials also stated that Iran has received the first revenue from transit fees imposed on vessels transiting the Strait of Hormuz, which authorities deposited into the Central Bank of Iran.[46] The IRGC published footage on April 22 showing IRGC fast attack craft intercepting and seizing the MSC Francesca and Epaminondas in the Strait of Hormuz.[47] White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt stated on April 22 that US President Donald Trump does not view these seizures as a violation of the ceasefire framework because the vessels were not US or Israeli vessels.[48]

Iran’s measures coincided with the regime’s efforts to reinforce its military capability to enforce control over the maritime activity in the Strait. Iranian Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei stated that the IRGC “swarm fleet,” composed of fast boats and unmanned surface vessels, waits in maritime caves on Farur Island for US naval vessels to conduct saturation-style attacks.[49] Fars additionally argued on April 23 that Iran could respond to a continued or intensified maritime blockade by fully closing the Strait of Hormuz through extensive minelaying, closing the Bab al Mandeb Strait, and conducting broader retaliatory operations.[50] Arab officials told *The Wall Street Journal* on April 13 that Iran pressured the Houthis to “close” the Bab al Mandeb Strait, which supports the assessment that Iran is framing maritime pressure as a trigger for escalation across multiple chokepoints.[51] ISW-CTP previously assessed that the Houthis are unlikely to expand attacks in ways that would jeopardize their domestic position, however.[52]

## US and Israeli Air Campaign

**Satellite imagery confirmed that the combined force struck four helicopters at the IRGC Ground Forces Fath Aviation Base in Alborz Province between March 27 and April 6.**[53] Satellite imagery from March 17 previously confirmed that the combined force conducted multiple strikes targeting north of the base.[54]

**Iranian state media reported on April 23 that air defense in Tehran was activated to “counter hostile threats.”**[55] An IRGC-affiliated media correspondent claimed that air defenses in Tehran and several unnamed cities were activated in response to the presence of “small drones” in Iranian

airspace.[56] An unnamed witness told anti-regime media on April 23 that several drones flew over Parand, Tehran Province.[57] IDF sources speaking to Israeli media denied operating in Iranian airspace.[58]

## Israeli Campaign Against Hezbollah and Hezbollah Response

**Hezbollah has continued to conduct attacks targeting Israeli forces in southern Lebanon for the third consecutive day despite the ceasefire in Lebanon.[59]** Hezbollah claimed that it conducted two attacks targeting IDF personnel in Taybeh, Marjaayoun District, southeastern Lebanon, since ISW-CTP's last data cutoff on April 22.[60] An Israeli military correspondent reported that Hezbollah fired an anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) targeting Israeli forces in southern Lebanon.[61] This may correspond to Hezbollah's claim that it fired "appropriate weapons" at IDF personnel in Taybeh on the evening of April 22.[62] Hezbollah also claimed that it launched a first-person view (FPV) drone targeting IDF personnel in Taybeh on April 23.[63] The IDF did not report any casualties from Hezbollah attacks since ISW-CTP's last data cutoff.



**IDF has continued to conduct air and ground operations in southern Lebanon in accordance with the temporary ceasefire agreement.** The IDF reported that it has conducted around 50 airstrikes that killed over 25 Hezbollah operatives since the start of the temporary ceasefire on April 16.[64] The IDF also said that it has destroyed hundreds of Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon since the beginning of the ceasefire.[65] IDF reported that it conducted an airstrike that killed a Hezbollah fighter at a rocket launch site near Sejoud, Jezzine District, southeastern Lebanon, on April 22.[66] IDF units have continued to kill Hezbollah fighters and destroy Hezbollah infrastructure, including weapons caches and tunnels, in southern Lebanon.[67] The IDF 300th Infantry Territorial Brigade (146th Reserve Division) soldiers also arrested a Hezbollah Radwan Force member during an operation to seize Hezbollah infrastructure in southern Lebanon on April 23, for example.[68]

**US President Donald Trump announced that Israel and Lebanon have agreed to extend the temporary ceasefire for an additional 21 days.[69]** Trump said that US Vice President JD Vance, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, US Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee, US Ambassador to Lebanon Michel Issa, and himself met with Israeli Ambassador to the US Yechiel Leiter and Lebanese Ambassador to the US Nada Hamadeh at the White House for the second round of direct ambassador-level talks between Israel and Lebanon on April 23.[70] Trump stated that the United States will work with the Lebanese government to "protect itself" from Hezbollah.[71]

**Israeli and Lebanese officials continue to disagree on long-standing issues, including the presence of an Israeli buffer zone in southern Lebanon, however.**[72] Israeli officials have repeatedly stated that the IDF will remain in Lebanon to protect northern Israeli communities from Hezbollah infiltration efforts and anti-tank guided missile fire.[73] Lebanese PM Nawaf Salam told the *Washington Post* on April 23 that any agreement with Israel must include a full IDF withdrawal and a removal of the Israeli “buffer zone” in southern Lebanon.[74] Salam said that the Lebanese government is urging the US to pressure Israel to extend the 10-day ceasefire and to scale back some of its demands.[75] A Lebanese official told Reuters that the Lebanese government wants a ceasefire extension as a prerequisite for talks before talks expand beyond the ambassador level.[76] Lebanese President Joseph Aoun reiterated on April 23 that Lebanon’s primary objectives for the meeting are extending the April 16 ceasefire and halting Israeli demolitions in southern Lebanon.[77]

**Israeli officials have signaled the IDF’s readiness to resume operations in Lebanon after the conclusion of the temporary ceasefire.** Israeli military officials told Israeli media on April 22 that the IDF is preparing for the possibility that the temporary ceasefire in Lebanon could “collapse at any moment.”[78] The officials said that Hezbollah is reorganizing its forces and attempting to change “the rules of the game” during the temporary ceasefire.[79] IDF Chief of Staff Major General Eyal Zamir said on April 22 that the IDF remains on high alert and is “prepared to return immediately and forcefully to combat in all sectors.”[80] Lebanese media reported on April 21 that Lebanese President Joseph Aoun received a warning that if Hezbollah obstructs negotiations between Israel and the Lebanese government, then Israel will launch “a broad and crushing war on Lebanon.”[81]

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## Endnotes

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# Iran Update Special Report, April 24, 2026



**Ria Reddy, Ben Rezaei, William Doran, Parker Hempel, Avery Borens, Katherine Wells, Annika Ganzeveld**

**Analyst Notes:** Data Cutoff: 2:00 PM ET

*The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute are publishing daily updates to provide analysis on the war with Iran. The updates focus on US and Israeli strikes on Iran and Iran and the Axis of Resistance's response to the strikes. The updates cover events from the past 24-hour period.*

## Key Takeaways

1. Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi and his inner circle have repeatedly blocked attempts by Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and other “pragmatist” officials to push the regime toward a more flexible negotiating position. Vahidi appears to have prevailed in this internal power struggle and will likely shape the regime’s approach toward negotiations and the war with a maximalist and uncompromising stance. Ghalibaf likely lacks the leverage to alter this trajectory in a meaningful way at this time.
2. Recent reports that Ghalibaf may resign from being a member of the negotiating team are consistent with ISW-CTP’s assessment that Vahidi has emerged as the winner of the intra-regime rivalry. Sources told Western media that Ghalibaf has grown frustrated with internal divisions and has considered resigning from the negotiating delegation, while some outlets have claimed that Ghalibaf has already resigned from the negotiating team due to disagreements over nuclear concessions.
3. “Pragmatist” officials may continue to advocate for a more flexible approach, but their efforts are unlikely to meaningfully shape regime decision-making in the near term.
4. Vahidi’s apparent victory will likely have significant implications for potential future US-Iran negotiations. Vahidi has also shown greater willingness than “pragmatist” officials to accept the risk of renewed conflict with the United States.
5. Iran and the United States are both sending delegations to meet with Pakistani mediators in Islamabad this weekend, but it remains unclear whether the delegations will engage in a second round of negotiations at the time of this writing. Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi arrived in Islamabad on April 24, and US Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner will travel to Islamabad on April 25. Sources told Axios that a trilateral meeting between Araghchi, Witkoff, and Kushner could take place following separate bilateral discussions between Witkoff, Kushner, and Pakistani mediators.
6. Likely Iranian-backed Iraqi militias conducted two fiber-optic drone attacks on Kuwaiti border posts

on April 24. Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have not claimed these attacks at the time of this writing. Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have demonstrated their ability to use fiber-optic first-person view (FPV) drones during the war, however.

7. The US naval blockade appears to be constraining Iran's oil storage capacity. Tanker Trackers reported on April 23 that Iran has recommissioned the retired very large crude carrier (VLCC) *Nasha* into service, likely to expand Iran's floating storage capacity near Kharg Island in the Persian Gulf as Iran's onshore storage capacity decreases.

## Toplines

**Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi and his inner circle have repeatedly blocked attempts by Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and other “pragmatist” officials to push the regime toward a more flexible negotiating position. Vahidi appears to have prevailed in this internal power struggle and will likely shape the regime’s approach toward negotiations and the war with a maximalist and uncompromising stance. Ghalibaf likely lacks the leverage to alter this trajectory in a meaningful way at this time.**

ISW-CTP has observed and reported on a sustained intra-regime rivalry between Vahidi and his inner circle and a “pragmatist” bloc that includes Ghalibaf, President Masoud Pezeshkian, and Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi since late March.[1] The rivalry has shown significant divergences between the two blocs over how to approach the war and negotiations. The divergences first surfaced around March 28 when Pezeshkian criticized the IRGC's actions in the war. Pezeshkian subsequently accused Vahidi and Khatam ol Anbia Central Headquarters Commander IRGC Brigadier General Ali Abdollahi Ali Abadi of “acting unilaterally and fueling escalation.”[2] The United States and Iran agreed to a ceasefire on April 7 after Araghchi reportedly persuaded the IRGC to accept it, which suggests that Vahidi disapproved of the ceasefire and, likely, negotiations. Vahidi and his inner circle then took steps to constrain the authority of Iran's negotiating team, which included Ghalibaf and Araghchi, by attempting to insert Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr into the delegation and limit its mandate, particularly regarding Iran's missile and nuclear programs.[3] ISW-CTP previously assessed that Vahidi almost certainly attempted to insert Zolghadr into the delegation to ensure that someone from his inner circle could keep tabs on whether Araghchi or Ghalibaf tried to negotiate outside of Vahidi's red lines.[4] Zolghadr accused Ghalibaf and Araghchi of showing flexibility on certain issues during negotiations in Islamabad on April 11 and 12, after which IRGC leaders called the delegation back to Tehran.[5] The talks collapsed without an agreement, and reports emphasized that the Iranian negotiating team lacked the authority to finalize an agreement.[6] Vahidi continued to reject “pragmatist” efforts to ease tensions with the United States after the first round of negotiations. The IRGC harshly criticized Araghchi after he announced that the Strait of Hormuz was “completely open” on April 17, and the IRGC Navy subsequently attacked several commercial vessels and declared that no vessels of “any type or nationality” were permitted to transit through the strait, for example.[7] Recent US-Iran talks that were expected to take place on April 21 or 22 before the ceasefire expired were canceled due to regime infighting and likely an effort by Vahidi and his camp to derail the talks. Vahidi has consolidated power throughout this rivalry while the “pragmatist” faction has lost influence over regime decision-making.

**Vahidi appears to have prevailed over Ghalibaf at this time.** Officials from various factions issued coordinated statements on April 23 and 24 that emphasized unity and reaffirmed revolutionary principles.[8] Ghalibaf, Pezeshkian, Araghchi, and Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei started this messaging, followed by figures aligned with the hardline camp, including Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei, Zolghadr, IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani, and ultra-hardline politician Saeed Jalili.[9] The participation of “pragmatist” figures in this display of unity behind

“revolutionary” principles indicates that they have, at least for now, accepted Vahidi’s dominance.

**Recent reports that Ghalibaf may resign from being a member of the negotiating team are consistent with ISW-CTP’s assessment that Vahidi has emerged as the winner of the intra-regime rivalry.[10]** Sources told Western media that Ghalibaf has grown frustrated with internal divisions and has considered resigning from the negotiating delegation, while some outlets have claimed that Ghalibaf has already resigned from the negotiating team due to disagreements over nuclear concessions.[11] The latter reports are consistent with reports that the Iranian negotiating delegation discussed the nuclear issue “contrary to instructions from Tehran” during the first round of negotiations. Ghalibaf’s resignation, if confirmed, would further signal his defeat and reduce the pragmatists’ influence over negotiations, as well as further consolidate Vahidi’s position within the regime.

**“Pragmatist” officials may continue to advocate for a more flexible approach, but their efforts are unlikely to meaningfully shape regime decision-making in the near term.** Some senior Iranian officials reportedly signed a secret letter to Mojtaba in recent days, warning that Iran’s economic crisis is unsustainable and that serious negotiations with the United States over Iran’s nuclear program are unavoidable, according to unspecified individuals familiar with the matter speaking to an Iranian journalist and media executive.[12] The signatories of the letter reportedly included Ghalibaf, Pezeshkian, Araghchi, and Mostafa Pourmohammadi. Pourmohammadi is a hardline politician and cleric from Qom who has served in several positions in the regime.[13] Pourmohammadi implied in May 2025 that he supported US-Iran talks.[14] Repeated failed efforts by this camp to shift policy suggest that the “moderate” or “pragmatist” camp has lost influence over regime decision-making for at least the time being, however.

**Vahidi’s apparent victory will likely have significant implications for potential future US-Iran negotiations.** His camp supports maximalist demands that are irreconcilable with stated US demands.[15] Vahidi prioritizes ideological consistency and hard power, and he views concessions as incompatible with the principles of the Islamic Revolution. Vahidi’s rejection of certain concessions and control over the scope of talks reflects this view. Iran will likely adopt positions that do not align with stated US demands if Vahidi continues to dominate decision-making.

**Vahidi has also shown greater willingness than “pragmatist” officials to accept the risk of renewed conflict with the United States.** ISW-CTP previously assessed that the IRGC’s actions in the Strait of Hormuz suggest that Vahidi and individuals close to him have accepted the risk of incurring a potential US military response in order to assert Iranian “control” over the strait.[16] IRGC-affiliated media has also recently signaled readiness for renewed hostilities, and Iranian military preparations have reportedly intensified.[17] Senior officials have also warned of a high likelihood of renewed conflict.[18] The ostentatious Farsi-language show of regime unity behind “revolutionary principles” is likely part of an effort to prepare the Iranian people for a return to war under an ostensibly unified government, as ISW-CTP has previously assessed.[19]

**Iran and the United States are both sending delegations to meet with Pakistani mediators in Islamabad this weekend, but it remains unclear whether the delegations will engage in a second round of negotiations at the time of this writing.[20]** Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi arrived in Islamabad on April 24 for talks with Pakistani mediators.[21] Araghchi stated that the purpose of his trip is to “discuss bilateral relations and regional cooperation.”[22] IRGC-affiliated media, as well as Pakistani sources and an unspecified Iranian source speaking to Western media, emphasized that Araghchi will not negotiate with US officials while in Islamabad.[23] Ghalibaf is notably not part of the Iranian delegation despite leading the Iranian delegation during the first round of negotiations in Islamabad on April 11 and 12.[24] Araghchi stated that he will travel to Oman, which has

historically mediated between Iran and the United States, and Russia after his visit to Islamabad.[25] Araghchi's planned trip to Russia comes as the Iranian regime is preparing for a potential resumption of conflict (see above).[26] The White House confirmed on April 24 that US Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner will travel to Islamabad on April 25.[27] White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt stated that "the Iranians want to talk" and "they want to talk in person, and the president is always willing to give diplomacy a chance." [28] Leavitt added that "we have certainly seen some progress from the Iranian side in the last few days." [29] Pakistani sources told Western media on April 24 that a US technical and logistics team is in Islamabad, while a Pakistani official told Axios that the possibility of a trilateral meeting involving Iran, the United States, and Pakistan would be assessed after Araghchi meets with Pakistani officials.[30] Two other unspecified sources told Axios that a meeting between Araghchi, Witkoff, and Kushner could take place on April 27 following separate bilateral discussions between Witkoff, Kushner, and Pakistani mediators.[31]

**Likely Iranian-backed Iraqi militias conducted two fiber-optic drone attacks on Kuwaiti border posts on April 24.**[32] The Kuwaiti Army reported that unspecified actors launched two fiber-optic drones from Iraq that hit two Kuwaiti border posts, causing material damage but no casualties.[33] Iraqi Interior Minister Abdul Amir Shammari condemned the attacks in a call with Kuwaiti Interior Minister Fahad Yousef Saud al Sabah.[34] Shammari stated that the Iraqi government will form a specialized committee to investigate the attacks and identify and arrest the perpetrators.[35] Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have not claimed these attacks at the time of this writing. Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have demonstrated their ability to use fiber-optic first-person view (FPV) drones during the war, however.[36] FPV drones can be used for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, or outfitted with strike capabilities to conduct precise targeting.[37] Open-source intelligence (OSINT) analysts have assessed that drone footage posted by Iraqi militias during the war appeared to be from fiber-optic FPV drones, which are immune to jamming.[38] ISW-CTP previously assessed that Russia is the most likely actor to have provided Iran with fiber-optic drone capabilities, which Iran likely shared with Axis of Resistance groups, including Iranian-backed Iraqi militias.[39] Russia and Ukraine have extensively used FPV drones in their war.[40]

These attacks come after three Iraqi militia members and two unspecified officials told Western media on April 21 that Iranian-backed Iraqi militia "hardline factions" are operating under a decentralized command structure with Iranian advisers.[41] ISW-CTP assessed that these "hardline" factions could refer to Iranian-backed Iraqi militias Kataib Hezbollah and Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba, both of which are relatively more subordinate to Iran than other militias.[42]

**The US naval blockade appears to be constraining Iran's oil storage capacity.** Tanker Trackers reported on April 23 that Iran has recommissioned the retired very large crude carrier (VLCC) *Nasha* into service, likely to expand Iran's floating storage capacity near Kharg Island in the Persian Gulf as Iran's onshore storage capacity decreases.[43] An Iranian parliamentarian warned on April 24 that Iran continues to produce and store oil on Kharg Island but may have to shut in oil wells if Iran's storage capacity runs out.[44] He noted that restarting production would require billions of dollars.[45] These developments indicate that the blockade is not only limiting Iran's oil exports but also creating downstream pressure on Iran's production system by reducing Iran's available storage capacity. Iran's Petroleum Products Exporters Union Spokesperson, Hamid Hosseini, told Iranian media on April 16 that the US naval blockade makes a reduction in oil production "inevitable." [46] Hosseini added that alternative export routes, such as pipelines, can only handle limited volumes and cannot replace the Strait of Hormuz.[47] Shutting in oil wells risks permanent damage to the wells because the wells may not be able to return to previous output levels.[48]

## US and Israeli Air Campaign

**The US Navy has continued to enforce its blockade on Iranian ports.** US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dan Caine stated during an April 24 press conference that US forces have forced 34 vessels to turn around since the start of the blockade and that US forces remain prepared to intercept any vessels that attempt to breach the blockade.[49] US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth separately described the blockade as “ironclad.”[50]

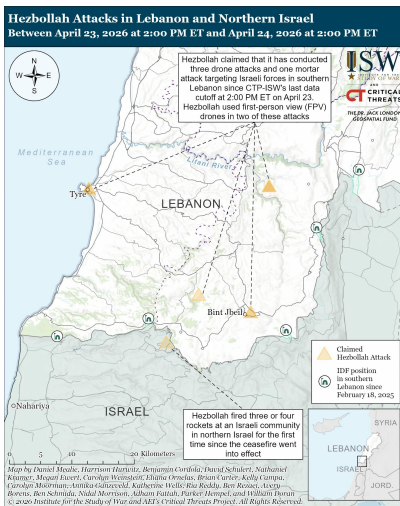
**An unspecified US official and a source with knowledge of the issue told Axios on April 24 that the IRGC Navy laid additional naval mines in the Strait of Hormuz this week.[51]** If this report is true, the IRGC’s decision to lay additional mines in the strait would be consistent with the IRGC’s effort to try to assert its “control” over the strait. Axios added that this marks the second time that Iran has mined the strait since the war began and noted that it remains unclear whether all of the previously laid mines have been found and cleared.[52] US officials estimated that the United States has destroyed more than 90 percent of Iran’s large mine-laying vessels and mine storage sites but assessed that Iran still retains mine stockpiles along its coast.[53]

## Iranian Response

**US President Donald Trump told reporters on April 23 that US forces struck around 75 percent of the targets that the US Military identified during the war with Iran.[54]** Trump acknowledged that Iran may have reconstituted its weapons stockpiles “a little bit” in the past two weeks amid the ceasefire but that the United States could “knock that out in one day, if they did.”[55]

## Israeli Campaign Against Hezbollah and Hezbollah Response

**Hezbollah claimed that it targeted an Israeli community in northern Israel for the first time since the ceasefire went into effect on April 16.[56]** Hezbollah claimed that it fired rockets targeting the northern Israeli border community of Shtula on April 23.[57] The attack coincided with a US-brokered meeting between Israeli and Lebanese officials in Washington, DC, on April 23.[58] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) reported that Hezbollah fired a small barrage of three or four rockets targeting Shtula and that the Israeli Air Force (IAF) intercepted the rockets.[59] Hezbollah also claimed that it has conducted four attacks, including two first-person view (FPV) drone attacks, targeting Israeli forces in southern Lebanon since ISW-CTP’s last data cutoff on April 23.[60] Israeli media characterized IDF and Hezbollah operations during the ceasefire as a “low-intensity conflict” on April 23.[61] Hezbollah parliamentarian Ali Fayyad called the ceasefire “meaningless” on April 24 because it allows the IDF to respond to imminent Hezbollah threats. Fayyad claimed that Israeli military activity gives Hezbollah “the right to a proportionate response.”[62]



**Lebanese Ambassador to the United States Nada Hamadeh said that the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire will remain in effect until May 17, three weeks past its original expiration date on April 26.[63]** US President Donald Trump also announced on April 23 that Israel and Lebanon agreed to extend the ceasefire by three weeks.[64] Lebanese leaders previously requested that Israel agree to extend the ceasefire for up to 60 days.[65] Israeli Ambassador to the United States Yechiel Leiter, the Israeli government’s primary point of contact with the Lebanese government, urged Lebanese officials to cease their demand for a full Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon during the April 23 Israel-Lebanon meeting.[66] Israel’s military presence in southern Lebanon remains a key point of disagreement between Israel and Lebanon.[67] Israeli media reported on April 23 that Israel’s security cabinet has not yet decided whether to pursue joint initiatives with the Lebanese government to disarm Hezbollah or to act unilaterally and expand military operations against the group.[68]

## Other Axis of Resistance Response

**The IDF reported on April 24 that the IRGC Intelligence Organization’s covert operations Unit 4000 oversaw and financed a planned “subversive plot” by Iranian-backed Iraqi militias in Iraq.[69]** The IDF, Mossad, and Shin Bet released a statement on April 20 warning that Unit 4000 established a global network to target Israeli officials and “strategic infrastructure.”[70] The Israeli security organizations stated that an Iranian-backed militant cell was preparing to target the Israeli Embassy in Azerbaijan, a synagogue in Baku, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline with improvised explosive devices (IED) and drones, for example.[71]



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# Iran Update Special Report, April 25 2026



**Ben Rezaei, Parker Hempel, Ria Reddy, Avery Borens, Brian Carter**

**Analyst Notes:** Data Cutoff: 2:00 PM ET

*The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute are publishing daily updates to provide analysis on the war with Iran. The updates focus on US and Israeli strikes on Iran and Iran and the Axis of Resistance's response to the strikes. The updates cover events from the past 24-hour period.*

## Key Takeaways

1. Prospects for meaningful US-Iran negotiations remain low as Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Commander Major General Ahmad Vahidi and his inner circle continue to dominate Iran's decision-making and oppose compromise. ISW-CTP assessed that in recent days, the IRGC has sidelined civilian officials and that Iran's negotiating team lacks the authority to make independent decisions, which helps explain continued inflexibility and the absence of tangible progress.
2. US President Donald Trump canceled US Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner's planned trip to Islamabad, Pakistan, for talks with Iran, due to Iran's unchanged negotiating positions.
3. Hezbollah may be conducting smaller-scale attacks targeting uninhabited areas of northern Israel and Israeli forces in southern Lebanon to demonstrate that it has the ability to threaten Israeli security and will respond to Israeli operations in Lebanon. This strategy accepts the risk of a return to war, but is still attempting to keep the attacks below a threshold that would trigger major Israeli attacks.

## Toplines

**Prospects for meaningful US-Iran negotiations remain low as Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Commander Major General Ahmad Vahidi and his inner circle continue to dominate Iran's decision-making and oppose compromise.** Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi met with senior Pakistani officials in Islamabad, Pakistan, on April 25 to convey Iran's "observations" on ending the war.[1] Araghchi departed Pakistan after his meetings and arrived in Oman on April 25, according to Iranian media.[2] Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Esmail Baghaei stated that no meeting between the United States and Iran was scheduled and that Iran would convey its positions to the United States through Pakistan.[3] A Pakistani journalist, citing unspecified sources, reported on April 25 that Iran will not meet the US delegation and that Iran remains unwilling to engage

directly and continues to insist that the United States end its blockade as a precondition for negotiations.[4] This pattern reflects a consistent IRGC-driven negotiating line that includes no flexibility, insistence on maximalist demands, and the use of preconditions to delay or constrain talks.[5] Iranian media reinforced this approach by framing Araghchi's regional tour as part of a broader strategy to prioritize engagement with mediators and strategic partners, such as Pakistan, Oman, and Russia, rather than an effort at direct negotiations with the United States.[6]

ISW-CTP assessed that in recent days, the IRGC has sidelined civilian officials and that Iran's negotiating team lacks the authority to make independent decisions, which helps explain continued inflexibility and the absence of tangible progress.[7] The *Wall Street Journal* similarly reported on April 24 that internal regime infighting, driven in part by figures such as Vahidi and other anti-compromise officials, has made compromise difficult.[8] The report noted that Iranian officials became vague when pressed for specifics during earlier talks in Islamabad, which indicates the lack of a clear and unified negotiating position.[9] The IRGC's consolidation of control over Iranian decision-making indicates that the Iranian political officials do not have the authority to independently determine Iran's negotiating position.[10]

**US President Donald Trump canceled US Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner's planned trip to Islamabad, Pakistan, for talks with Iran, due to Iran's unchanged negotiating positions.[11]** Trump posted on social media on April 25 that he canceled Witkoff and Kushner's trip to Pakistan because the 18-hour flight would waste time and be "too much work" if the Iranians failed to change their negotiating positions.[12] Trump also said that no one knows who is in charge in Iran, including the Iranians, which has resulted in "tremendous infighting and confusion." [13] Trump told Fox News and Axios on April 25 that it did not make sense for him to send Witkoff and Kushner to Pakistan "to sit around talking about nothing." [14] Trump also told Axios that he canceled Witkoff and Kushner's trip due to Iran's position on negotiations.[15] Iran appears to be continuing to make maximalist demands (see above). Trump told Axios that his decision not to send Witkoff and Kushner does not mean that he will resume the war with Iran, however.[16] Trump said that if the Iranian leadership wants to talk, then "all they have to do is call." [17]

## Maritime Developments

**The United States has continued to enforce its blockade on Iranian ports.** US Central Command (CENTCOM) intercepted a US-sanctioned, Iranian-flagged tanker attempting to transit to an Iranian port on April 24.[18] US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth reiterated on April 24 that the United States will continue to enforce its blockade on Iranian ports.[19]

## US and Israeli Air Campaign

*Nothing significant to report.*

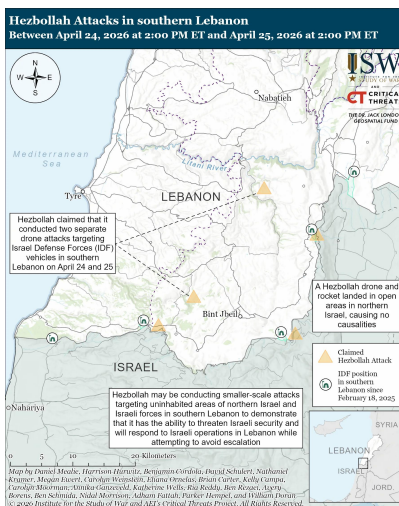
## Iranian Response

**Iran is facing escalating economic pressure that will likely worsen its already severe economic crisis.** The US Treasury Department sanctioned Chinese company Hengli Petrochemical Refinery Co., one of Iran's largest crude oil customers, on April 24.[20] The Treasury also targeted 40 shipping firms and vessels involved in transporting illicit Iranian oil.[21] The United States recently froze \$344 million USD in cryptocurrency linked to Iran and associated with "unlawful conduct." [22] These

steps to further constrain Iran’s economy come amid an ongoing US naval blockade that restricts Iranian exports, including oil, which is a critical source of revenue for the regime.[23]

## Israeli Campaign Against Hezbollah and Hezbollah Response

**Hezbollah may be conducting smaller-scale attacks targeting uninhabited areas of northern Israel and Israeli forces in southern Lebanon to demonstrate that it can threaten Israeli security and will respond to Israeli operations in Lebanon.** This strategy accepts the risk of a return to war, but is still attempting to keep the attacks below a threshold that would trigger major Israeli attacks. Hezbollah claimed that it conducted two separate drone attacks targeting Israel Defense Forces (IDF) vehicles in southern Lebanon on April 24 and 25.[24] The IDF reported that Hezbollah also fired two rockets and two drones towards northern Israeli towns on April 25.[25] Two of the projectiles landed in open areas of northern Israel, causing no casualties.[26] Hezbollah officials have noted that Hezbollah will continue its attacks against Israeli targets and called the ceasefire agreement “meaningless” because it allows the IDF to respond to imminent Hezbollah threats.[27] Hezbollah’s attacks during the ceasefire are relatively smaller in scale compared to Hezbollah’s rocket attacks prior to the April 16 ceasefire, which contained approximately 40 rockets.[28] Hezbollah has previously conducted small-scale, symbolic attacks targeting uninhabited areas of northern Israel in order not to provoke a large Israeli response.[29]



**Hezbollah has continued to use first-person view (FPV) drones in its attacks targeting IDF vehicles in southern Lebanon since the ceasefire took effect on April 16.** Hezbollah claimed that it conducted two separate FPV drone attacks targeting IDF vehicles in southern Lebanon on April 22 and 23.[30] Hezbollah also published footage on April 24 that shows two separate FPV drone attacks targeting IDF vehicles on April 13 and April 15.[31] Israeli media noted that Hezbollah has increasingly used FPV drones in its attacks against Israeli forces in recent weeks.[32]

## Other Axis of Resistance Response

*Nothing significant to report.*



## Endnotes

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