

# Iran Update



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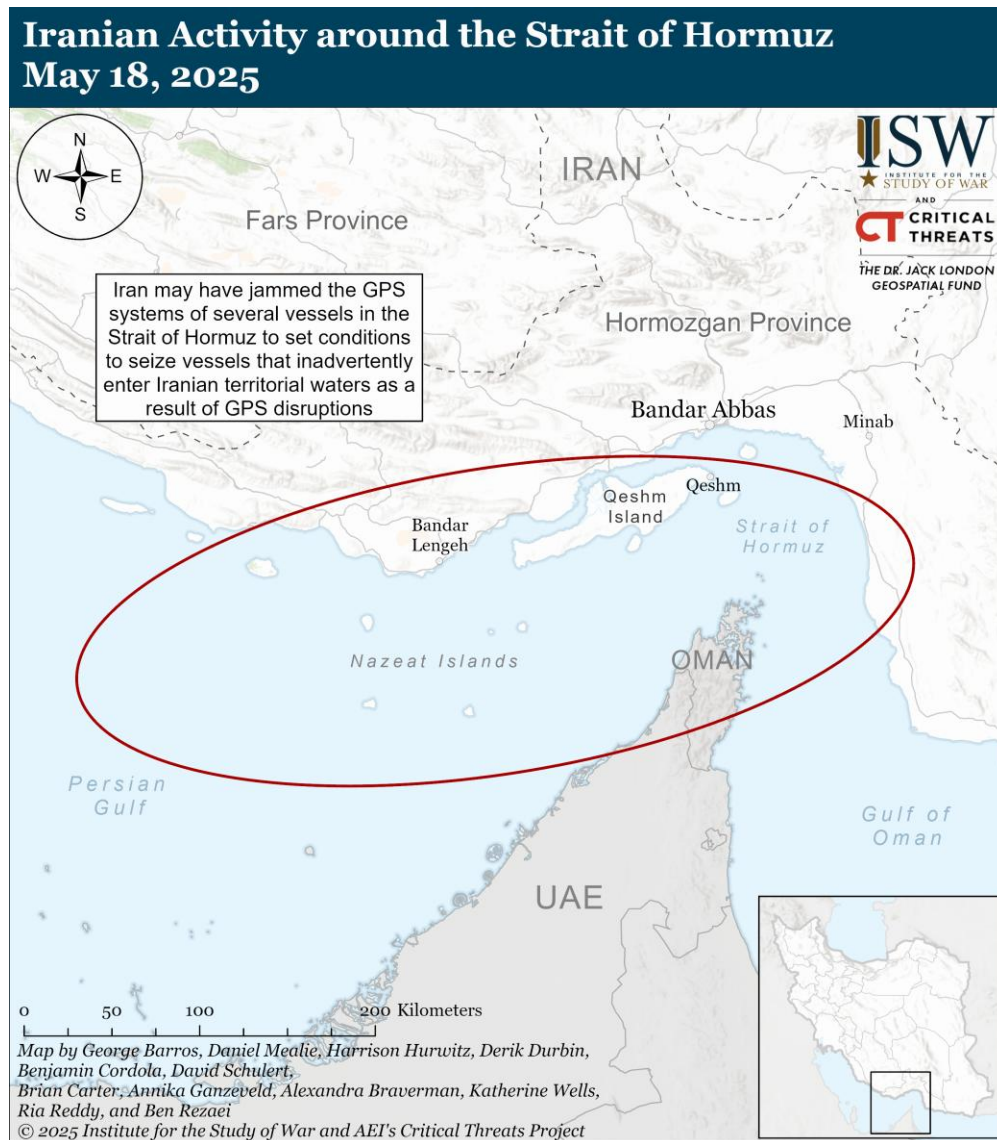
**May 19, 2025    Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm ET**

**Iran may have jammed vessel navigation systems in the Strait of Hormuz in order to set conditions to seize vessels that inadvertently enter Iranian territorial waters as a result of navigation issues.**<sup>[1]</sup> The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) reported that several vessels experienced Global Positioning System (GPS) interference in the Strait of Hormuz for several hours on May 18.<sup>[2]</sup> GPS interference disrupts ships' ability to navigate, and they may veer off course as a result. GPS interference around the Strait of Hormuz can cause vessels to inadvertently enter Iranian territorial waters, which Iran can then use to justify seizing vessels.<sup>[3]</sup> Iran previously conducted GPS jamming in 2019 to try to lure vessels into Iranian waters.<sup>[4]</sup> The GPS jamming in 2019 was part of a broader Iranian response to the US "maximum pressure" campaign that also included seizing and attacking vessels. The recent GPS interference incidents come after Iranian Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri threatened on May 12 that Iran would retaliate by disrupting international commercial shipping, among other things, "if the US military makes a mistake."<sup>[5]</sup> Bagheri was likely referring to a potential US strike on Iranian nuclear or energy facilities. Iran also deployed missile-capable fast attack craft (FAC) as well as geospatial intelligence and surveillance technology to Iranian islands in the Persian Gulf on May 12.<sup>[6]</sup> Iran can use FAC to attack and harass ships.<sup>[7]</sup>

A possible Iranian vessel recently harassed a commercial vessel in the Persian Gulf on May 10. The UKMTO reported on May 10 that a small craft collided with a merchant vessel and attempted to collide with other vessels about 80 nautical miles northwest of Jebel Ali, the United Arab Emirates (UAE).<sup>[8]</sup> The UKMTO reported that the merchant vessel later received Very High Frequency (VHF) messages from unidentified individuals claiming to be "local authorities."<sup>[9]</sup> Iran's partner, the Houthis, have similarly used GPS jamming and small boats to harass international shipping and have seized vessels in the Red Sea, specifically the Bab el Mandeb Strait, another important maritime trade chokepoint.<sup>[10]</sup>

**This recent series of events suggests that Iran may be in the very early stages of an escalation campaign against international shipping around the Strait of Hormuz.** Iran previously threatened international shipping through this important waterway in 2019 in response to US President Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" strategy.<sup>[11]</sup> Iran's preparations for its campaign in 2019 mirror actions that Iran is taking today.<sup>[12]</sup> Iranian officials inspected Iranian military sites near the Persian Gulf in 2019 before Iran conducted attacks on vessels.<sup>[13]</sup> Senior Iranian military commanders, including Bagheri and Artesh Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Irani, have

recently visited Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Artesh Navy sites along the Persian Gulf coast.[14] Iran later used drones to harass vessels passing through the Strait of Hormuz and used GPS jamming to coax vessels into Iranian territorial waters.[15] IRGC-affiliated media recently published videos of Iranian drones following US naval vessels in the Persian Gulf. [16]It is unclear whether Iran is preparing for a campaign targeting international shipping in the Strait of Hormuz or trying to signal to the United States that it can threaten freedom of navigation through the Persian Gulf to try to deter a potential US strike on Iran.



**The United States appears to have adopted a more cohesive position on Iran's uranium enrichment as zero uranium enrichment continues to be the main sticking point in the US-Iran nuclear negotiations.** US Special Envoy to the Middle East and lead US negotiator Steve Witkoff stated on May 18 that enrichment is the Trump administration's "one very, very clear redline." [17] Witkoff said that the United States cannot allow Iran to retain "even 1 percent of an

enrichment capability." White House Spokesperson Karoline Leavitt reiterated Witkoff's comments and stated on May 19 that the United States is "100 percent committed to that red line."<sup>[18]</sup> Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi called Witkoff's remarks "far from reality" and emphasized that Iran will continue to enrich uranium.<sup>[19]</sup> Other senior Iranian officials stated that the US-Iran negotiations "will not yield results" if the United States continues to demand zero uranium enrichment.<sup>[20]</sup> CTP-ISW previously assessed that Iran's rejection of the US demand for zero uranium enrichment may stall the talks or force negotiations toward a less expansive agreement than what the United States reportedly desires.<sup>[21]</sup>

The Guardian reported on May 15 that mediators urged Iran to accept a deal in which Iran would suspend uranium enrichment for three years to "build trust" with the United States. The proposal reportedly stipulates that Iran would be allowed to resume uranium enrichment at 3.75 percent, similar to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) limit, after three years.<sup>[22]</sup> Iranian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister for Political Affairs Majid Takht Ravanchi claimed on May 19 that mediators never presented such a proposal to Iran.<sup>[23]</sup> It is unclear if Iran would accept a temporary suspension of its uranium enrichment. It is also unclear if the reported proposal includes limits on Iran's centrifuge capacity. Former UN weapons inspector David Albright warned in April 2025 that Iran could make enough weapons-grade uranium in 25 days, even with a small low-enriched uranium stockpile, if it maintains all of its current centrifuges.<sup>[24]</sup> Iran is developing new advanced centrifuges, such as the IR-8, which Iranian officials have claimed is "sixteen times" more capable than the IR-1 centrifuge.<sup>[25]</sup>

**Iranian Supreme Leader Adviser and former Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Ali Shamkhani appears to be playing a prominent role in the US-Iran nuclear negotiations.** An Iranian expert close to the regime responded to criticisms of Shamkhani on May 16, emphasizing that Shamkhani is the "head of [Iran's] nuclear committee" and "guides negotiations."<sup>[26]</sup> The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran and Iranian media previously identified Shamkhani as the "person responsible for Iran's nuclear case."<sup>[27]</sup> These claims sparked a debate in Iran about whether responsibility for the Iranian nuclear file had been transferred from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to Shamkhani and the broader SNSC.<sup>[28]</sup> It is possible that Shamkhani is overseeing and guiding the current negotiations while the MFA is conducting the negotiations. The MFA stated in February 2025 that the MFA is responsible for "conducting talks and negotiations on the nuclear issue" while the SNSC is responsible for "determining the negotiating strategy and coordinating between relevant agencies."<sup>[29]</sup> Shamkhani's stated position on the nuclear negotiations has aligned with the Iranian negotiating team's position.<sup>[30]</sup> Shamkhani told NBC News on May 14, for example, that Iran is ready to sign a deal with the United States and willing to limit enrichment to "civilian levels", which likely refers to the 3.67 percent limit set by the JCPOA.<sup>[31]</sup>

**There appear to be tensions between Iran and the E3 (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) regarding the US-Iran nuclear negotiations and the Iranian nuclear program.**

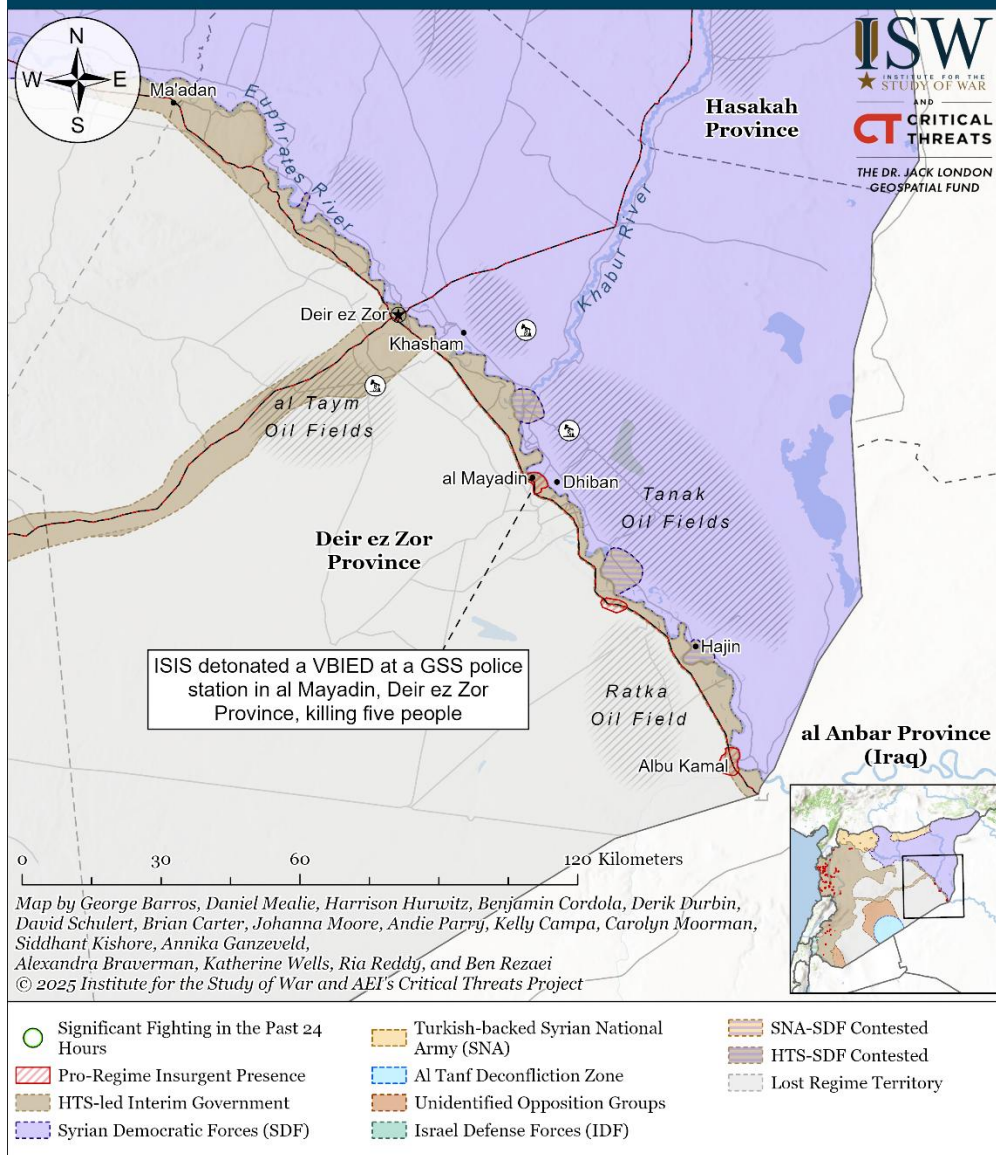
Iranian hardline outlet Farhikhtegan reported on May 18 that the Iran-E3 meeting on May 16 was “tense.”[32] The report stated that the E3 “raised sharp positions” and threatened to trigger snapback sanctions. The JCPOA snapback mechanism allows JCPOA signatories to reimpose UN Security Council sanctions on Iran in the event of “significant non-performance by Iran of JCPOA commitments.”[33] Unspecified diplomats similarly told Reuters on May 13 that the E3 may trigger snapback sanctions on Iran by August 2025 if Iran and the United States do not reach a “substantial deal” by then.[34] Farhikhtegan also reported that the E3 demanded that any future US-Iran nuclear deal include a snapback mechanism that would allow the E3 to reimpose UN sanctions on Iran, similar to the snapback mechanism in the 2015 JCPOA.[35] Iranian officials reportedly called the E3’s demand “illegal” and “inappropriately worded.” The E3 has notably not been included in the US-Iran nuclear negotiations for a new nuclear deal.

**The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has developed the ability to conduct attacks in the Middle Euphrates River Valley with logistically advanced vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED).** ISIS attacked a General Security Service (GSS) police station with a VBIED in al Mayadin, Deir ez Zor Province, on May 18.[36] The attack killed at least four GSS members and one civilian and severely damaged the police station.[37] GSS forces implemented a curfew, deployed reinforcements, and searched the city in response to the attack.[38] This attack appears to be the first time that ISIS has attacked transitional government security forces in Deir ez Zor Province since the fall of the Assad regime. The VBIED attack in al Mayadin suggests that ISIS has developed the capability to produce VBIEDs to attack the transitional government as well as US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) positions in northeastern Syria. The production of a VBIED powerful enough to crater concrete and damage nearby cement buildings requires significant logistical capabilities, including the ability to procure and modify vehicles, manufacture explosives, and develop a detonation system that is either remote or vehicle-operated.[39] This attack indicates that ISIS has established a relatively sophisticated logistics network near al Mayadin to produce VBIEDs and is emblematic of ISIS’s continued presence in eastern Syria.

**Syrian security forces raided ISIS cells in Aleppo City on May 17.** The GSS killed two ISIS members and arrested four others during raids in al Jazmati and al Haydariyah, Aleppo City. A separate ISIS member detonated a suicide vest during one of the raids.[40] ISIS fighters killed two GSS members in small arms clashes during the raids.[41] The GSS captured weapons, improvised explosive devices (IED), and suicide vests.[42] These raids follow an Islamic State publication on May 14 that claimed that ISIS has a growing presence in the “countryside and [city] outskirts” in Syria.[43] Salafi-jihadi groups ideologically aligned to ISIS, such as Saraya Ansar al Sunnah, have conducted assassinations in Aleppo City as recently as May 8.[44] The Aleppo raids and ensuing clashes mark the first direct engagement between ISIS and the transitional government in western Syria since the fall of the Assad regime.

# Assessed Control of Terrain around Deir ez Zor

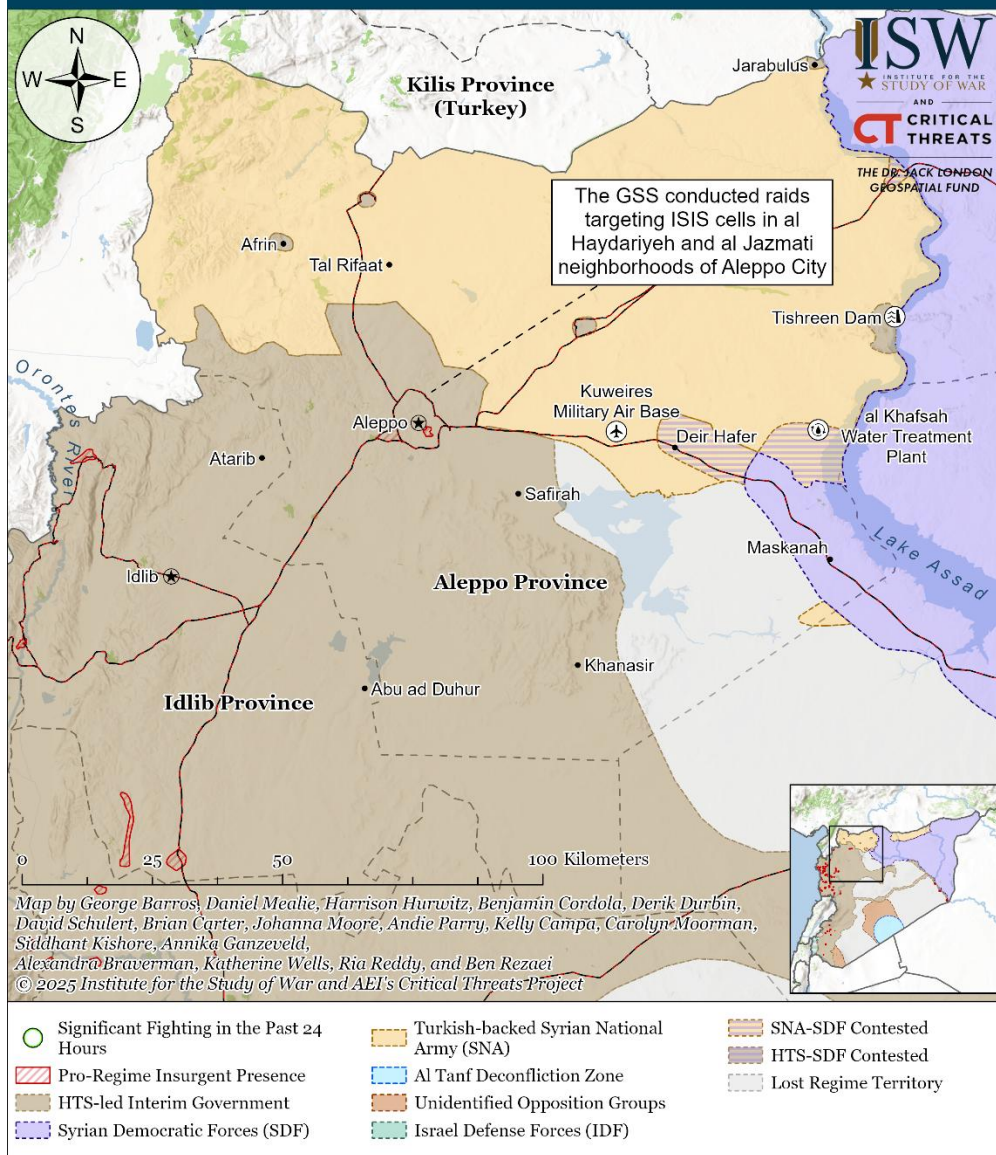
May 19, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST





## Assessed Control of Terrain around Aleppo

May 19, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST

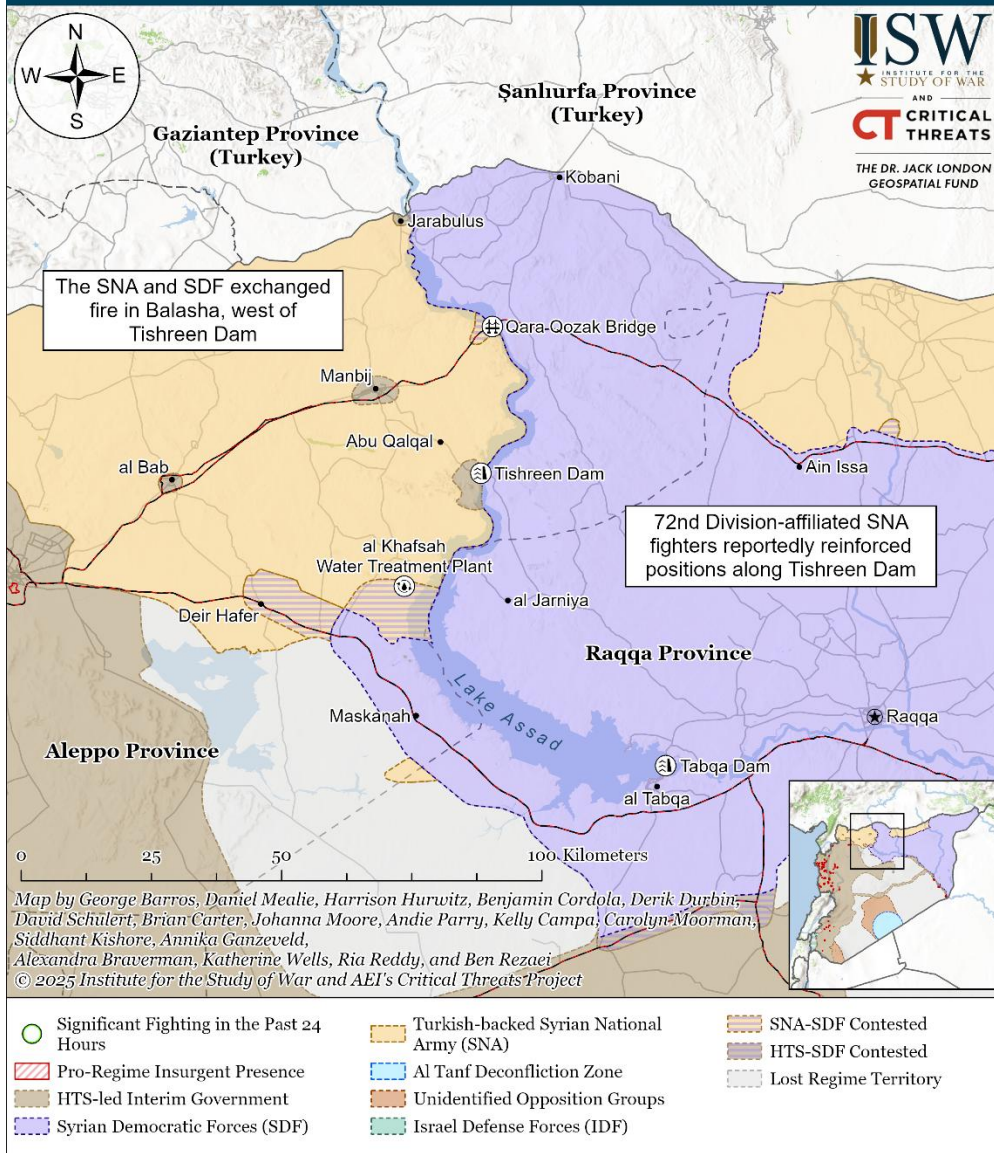


**The Syrian transitional government's nominal integration of some armed groups into the Ministry of Defense (MoD) in order to rapidly assert state control over Syrian factions risks diminishing the government's command and control over these groups.** Syrian Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra announced on May 17 that armed groups that have not yet integrated into state security services must do so within 10 days or face unspecified penalties.<sup>[45]</sup> The MoD began forming a new Syrian army comprised of former opposition factions in January 2025.<sup>[46]</sup> Many Syrian opposition groups, particularly those affiliated with Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) or HTS's former operations room, have "integrated" into the Syrian MoD since January.<sup>[47]</sup> The Syrian MoD has effectively re-flagged several factions as divisions or brigades within the new army without requiring commanders to reform or restructure their forces.<sup>[48]</sup> Syrian media reported on May 18 that the Syrian government re-flagged the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) as the new 84th Division in the

Syrian army.[49] TIP is an al Qaeda-affiliated Uyghur jihadist group that has fought alongside HTS and its predecessor organizations since the mid-2010s.[50] The group is fully subordinate to HTS despite its al Qaeda affiliation, however, and will therefore likely follow HTS's chain of command.

Re-flagged Syrian National Army (SNA) factions are far less likely to adhere to the formal chain of command than groups that have subordinated themselves to HTS. These less responsive groups risk alienating minority groups, such as the Kurds, by conducting unsanctioned operations or attacks against these groups. Both anti-Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and pro-Kurdish media reported that the SDF and SNA factions advanced toward each other west of Tishreen Dam in the Manbij countryside on May 18 and briefly exchanged fire in the area on May 19.[51] The SNA also reportedly reinforced several of its positions west of the dam for the first time since late March 2025.[52] Syrian media reported that the SNA factions that engaged the SDF are affiliated with the Syrian army's 72nd Division, which is reportedly comprised of five SNA factions.[53] The MoD has allowed several SNA factions to join the MoD without restructuring their forces and many of the fighters in these factions are loyal to their faction commander rather than Syrian President Ahmed al Shara. It is unclear if Damascus sanctioned the SNA's recent activity near Tishreen Dam. The transitional government and SDF agreed to a ceasefire and reached a deconfliction agreement in April 2025.[54] The existence of SNA-dominated army units that do not answer to Damascus risks discouraging Kurdish militants from integrating into the state due to the SNA's historic abuses against the Kurdish population.[55] The Syrian government is unlikely to tolerate any lack of adherence to the chain of command in the long term and may take steps to gradually subordinate the factions over time, but it appears to be tolerating the presence of more independent SNA factions within the new Syrian army for the time being. Shara likely calculates that he needs the support of certain SNA commanders to avoid infighting among powerful factions. Shara also likely recognizes that the Syrian government does not yet have the manpower to attempt to subordinate the SNA by force.

## Assessed Control of Terrain around Manbij May 19, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



### Key

### Takeaways:

- Iranian Activity in the Strait of Hormuz:** Iran may be in the very early stages of an escalation campaign against international shipping around the Strait of Hormuz. Iran may have jammed vessel navigation systems in the Strait of Hormuz in order to set conditions to seize vessels that inadvertently enter Iranian territorial waters as a result of navigation issues. The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations reported that several vessels experienced GPS interference in the Strait of Hormuz for several hours on May 18. GPS interference around the Strait of Hormuz can cause vessels to inadvertently enter Iranian territorial waters, which Iran



can then use to justify seizing vessels. Iran previously conducted GPS jamming in 2019 to try to lure vessels into Iranian waters. The GPS disruptions on May 18 come after a possible Iranian vessel recently harassed a commercial vessel in the Persian Gulf on May 10.

- **Iran-US Nuclear Negotiations:** The United States appears to have adopted a more cohesive position on Iran's uranium enrichment as zero uranium enrichment continues to be the main sticking point in the US-Iran nuclear negotiations. US Special Envoy to the Middle East and lead US negotiator Steve Witkoff stated on May 18 that enrichment is the Trump administration's "one very, very clear redline." Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi called Witkoff's remarks "far from reality" and emphasized that Iran will continue to enrich uranium. The Guardian separately reported on May 15 that mediators urged Iran to accept a deal in which Iran would suspend uranium enrichment for three years to "build trust" with the United States. The proposal reportedly stipulates that Iran would be allowed to resume uranium enrichment at 3.75 percent, similar to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) limit, after three years. It is unclear if Iran would accept a temporary suspension of its uranium enrichment.
- **ISIS Capabilities:** The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has developed the ability to conduct attacks in the Middle Euphrates River Valley with logistically advanced vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED). ISIS attacked a General Security Service (GSS) police station with a VBIED in al Mayadin, Deir ez Zor Province, on May 18. The attack severely damaged the police station. The production of a VBIED powerful enough to crater concrete and damage nearby cement buildings requires significant logistical capabilities, including the ability to procure and modify vehicles, manufacture explosives, and develop a detonation system that is either remote or vehicle-operated. This attack indicates that ISIS has established a relatively sophisticated logistics network near al Mayadin to produce VBIEDs and is emblematic of ISIS's continued presence in eastern Syria.
- **Syrian Security Forces Raids Against ISIS:** Syrian security forces raided ISIS cells in Aleppo City on May 17. The GSS killed two ISIS members and arrested four others during raids in al Jazmati and al Haydariyah, Aleppo City. A separate ISIS member detonated a suicide vest during one of the raids. ISIS fighters killed two GSS members in small arms clashes during the raids.
- **Integration of Armed Factions into the Syrian Defense Ministry:** The Syrian transitional government's nominal integration of some armed groups into the Ministry of Defense (MoD) in order to rapidly assert state control over Syrian factions risks diminishing the government's command and control over these groups. Syrian Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra announced on May 17 that armed groups that have not yet integrated into state security services must do so within 10 days or face unspecified penalties. The Syrian MoD has effectively re-flagged several factions as divisions or brigades within the new army without requiring commanders to reform or restructure their forces. Syrian media reported on May 18 that the Syrian government re-flagged the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) as the new 84th Division in the Syrian army.
- **Integration of Armed Factions into the Syrian Defense Ministry:** Re-flagged Syrian National Army (SNA) factions are far less likely to adhere to the formal chain of command than

groups that have subordinated themselves to HTS. These less responsive groups risk alienating minority groups, such as the Kurds, by conducting unsanctioned operations or attacks against these groups. Both anti-Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and pro-Kurdish media reported that the SDF and SNA factions advanced toward each other west of Tishreen Dam in the Manbij countryside on May 18 and briefly exchanged fire in the area on May 19. It is unclear if Damascus sanctioned the SNA's recent activity near Tishreen Dam. The existence of SNA-dominated army units that do not answer to Damascus risks discouraging Kurdish militants from integrating into the state due to the SNA's historic abuses against the Kurdish population.

### **Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy**

**Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei highlighted Iran's continued pursuit of its main strategic objectives in a speech to Iranian educators on May 17.**<sup>[56]</sup> Khamenei reiterated Iran's goal to expel the United States from the Middle East and destroy the state of Israel. Khamenei emphasized the importance of indoctrination and instilling Islamic principles in Iranian youth.

**Jaish al Adl claimed on May 17 that it detonated an improvised explosive device (IED) targeting an Iranian Law Enforcement Command (LEC) vehicle in Saravan City, Sistan and Baluchistan Province.**<sup>[57]</sup> Jaish al Adl is a Baloch Salafi-jihadi militant group that regularly attacks Iranian security forces in southeastern Iran.<sup>[58]</sup> Jaish al Adl threatened to conduct further attacks on May 18.<sup>[59]</sup>

Jaish al Adl fighters have separately set fire to at least 29 Iranian construction vehicles in two separate incidents in Sistan and Baluchistan Province in recent weeks.<sup>[60]</sup> Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)-affiliated media reported on May 18 that unspecified "terrorist forces" set fire to road construction machinery in Bampur City and in Iranshahr City.<sup>[61]</sup> IRGC-affiliated media reported that the group seeks to disrupt development in southeastern Iran.<sup>[62]</sup> Jaish al Adl seeks to disrupt the development of the Makran coast, which is a coastal strip that extends between southeastern Iran and southwestern Pakistan.<sup>[63]</sup>

**The Iranian rial appreciated from 829,000 rials to one US dollar on May 16 to 820,000 rials to one US dollar on May 19.**<sup>[64]</sup>

### **Syria**

**Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al Shaibani attended the Arab Summit in Baghdad on May 17.**<sup>[65]</sup> Shaibani stated in his speech at the conference that the Syrian government will soon appoint "a national parliament representing the entire Syrian spectrum" and draft "a permanent constitution that enshrines rights, safeguards sovereignty, and establishes a state of law."<sup>[66]</sup> Shaibani's statements come after the Syrian government unveiled a draft constitution on March 13 that initiated a five-year transition period.<sup>[67]</sup> The Constitutional Declaration stipulates that Shara will appoint a third of the Syrian parliament, called the People's Assembly, and select the committee that will appoint the other two-thirds of the legislature. These provisions will enable Shara to consolidate his power over the Syrian state.<sup>[68]</sup> The People's Assembly is a transitional legislative body that will propose, adopt, and amend Syrian laws, according to the Syrian Constitutional Declaration.<sup>[69]</sup> Syrian Constitutional Committee member Ahmed al Qabri previously told Qatari media on April 18 that the Syrian government had begun "consultations" to select the committee that will select two-thirds of the People's Assembly.<sup>[70]</sup>

Shaibani separately claimed during his speech that the Syrian government has conducted inclusive national dialogue and succeeded in forming an inclusive government.[71] Various Syrian minority groups and Syrian political and civil society factions have criticized the Syrian government's transitional Constitutional Declaration and National Dialogue Conference for centralizing power under Shara and failing to include Syria's diverse minority communities.[72]

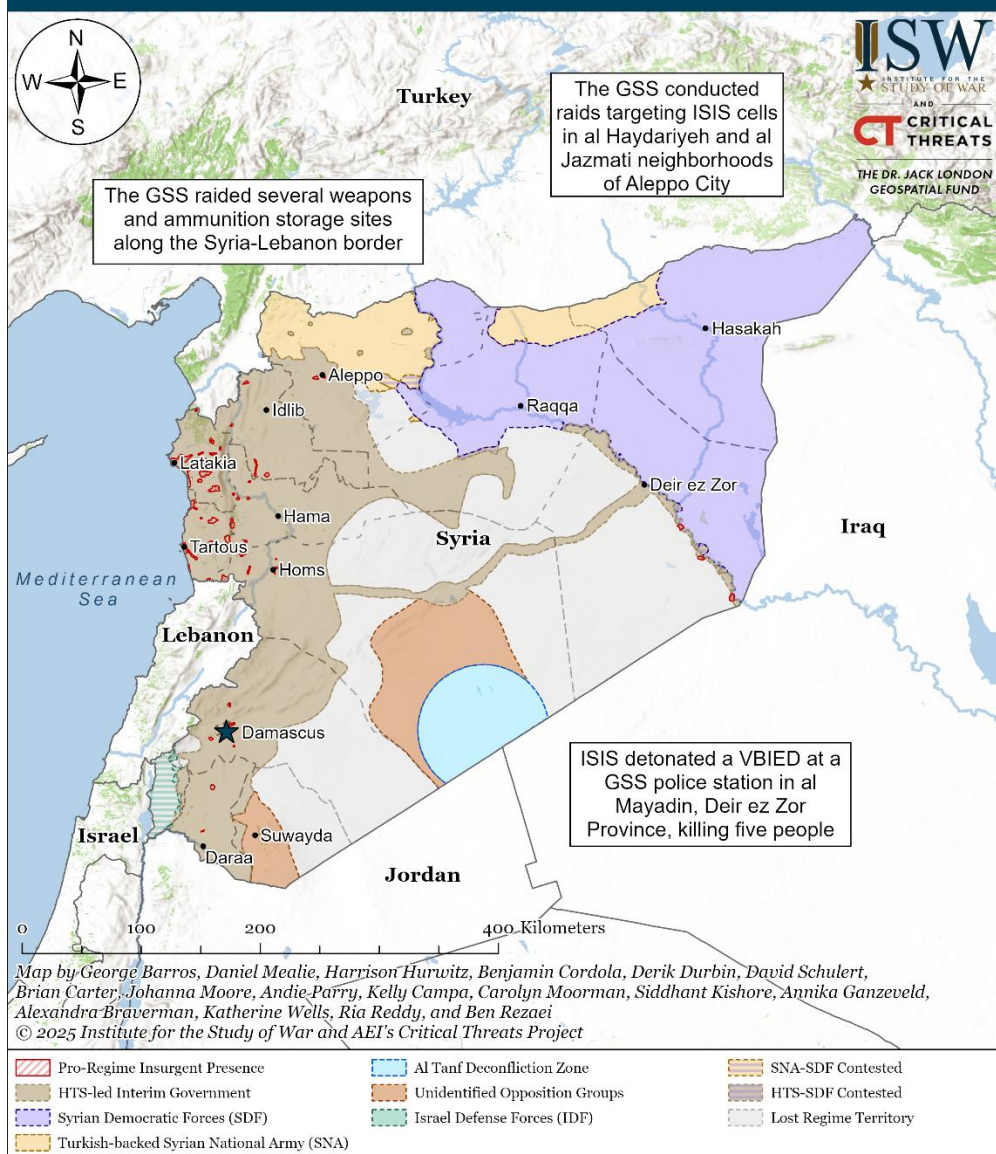
**Syrian President Ahmed al Shara formed the National Transitional Justice Commission on May 17.**[73] The commission is responsible for investigating crimes committed by the former regime, holding individuals who committed crimes accountable for their actions, compensating victims, and establishing principles of national reconciliation.[74] Shara stated that the commission has legal, financial, and administrative independence, and will operate throughout Syria.[75] Shara appointed Abdul Basit Latif as the commission chairman.[76] Latif previously served as the political bureau head of the Free Syrian Army (FSA)-affiliated Jaysh Usud al Sharqiya and as an administrator in the FSA's 20th Division.[77] Shara's announcement comes as various groups have conducted extrajudicial killings targeting alleged former Assad regime members.[78] These killings reflect that some Syrians believe that there has been no justice for the atrocities that the Assad regime committed. The National Transitional Justice Commission could alleviate some of these grievances, but the transitional government must also charge, prosecute, and sentence former Assad regime members to demonstrate its commitment to transitional justice and build trust among targeted communities.

Shara also formed the National Commission for Missing Persons to create a database of missing individuals, search for missing persons, and document cases.[79] Shara appointed Muhammad Radhi Jalkhi as the commission chairman.[80] Jalkhi is a Syrian lawyer and academic from Idlib Province who was previously a member of the committee that drafted the Constitutional Declaration.[81]

**GSS forces raided several weapons and ammunition storage sites along the Syria-Lebanon border on May 16 and 18.**[82] GSS forces seized small arms, grenades, rocket-propelled grenades, launchers, and other weapons near Mount Hermon, Rif Dimashq Province, on May 16.[83] Syrian media reported that the seized weapons were likely intended to be smuggled.[84] Mount Hermon is located south of several Hezbollah smuggling routes between Syria and Lebanon.[85] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have maintained a position on the Syrian side of Mount Hermon since December 2024.[86] GSS forces separately discovered ammunition in an underground cache near Jandar, east of Qusayr, on May 18.[87] GSS forces have recently interdicted several weapons shipments likely bound for Hezbollah near Qusayr, Homs Province.[88] Qusayr previously served as a strategic logistical corridor for Hezbollah.[89]

## Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

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**Syrian media reported that the Interior Ministry will soon adopt several reforms. These reforms are likely meant to centralize state control over Syria and improve government responses to internal threats and crises.**<sup>[90]</sup> An unspecified Interior Ministry source told Syrian media on May 16 that the ministry will assign officials to oversee each of the five main geographic sectors in Syria.<sup>[91]</sup> These officials will report directly to Interior Minister Anas Khattab.<sup>[92]</sup> The source said that the new division of power and resources will not impact Damascus' centralization of power but will better facilitate security operations across Syria.<sup>[93]</sup> The Interior Ministry source also said that the ministry will create two new departments: the Department for the Pursuit of Outlaws and the Rapid Intervention Forces.<sup>[94]</sup> The source suggested that the former department will pursue former Assad regime members and other "undisciplined" groups.<sup>[95]</sup> The Interior Ministry currently oversees both the GSS and the police command.<sup>[96]</sup> The reliability of the GSS as a security organization



has been mixed and has often depended on the composition and behavior of individual units.[97] New departments could, in theory, relieve the GSS of some of its responsibilities and thereby enable the GSS to prioritize professionalizing its forces. It is unclear if the two new departments will pull resources and personnel from the GSS or police or will recruit new personnel, however.

## **Iraq**

**Iraqi media published new details on May 19 about which Sunni political alliances and parties will compete in Ninewa Province in the upcoming November 2025 Iraqi parliamentary elections.**[98] Iraqi media reported that former Ninewa Governor Atheel al Nujaifi will lead the National Path Party list and former Salah al Din Governor Ahmed al Jubouri will lead the Civilians Party list. Ahmed al Jubouri is part of the United Sunni Leadership Coalition, which is a political coalition that five prominent Iraqi Sunni politicians formed in January 2025.[99] Iraqi media also reported that the National Decision Party list, which is led by Defense Minister Thabet al Abbasi, and the Ninewa for its People Party, which is led by former Ninewa Governor Najm al Jubouri, will jointly compete in the upcoming elections.[100] Najm al Jubouri was disqualified from competing in the December 2023 Ninewa Provincial Council elections, during which Shia parties won the majority of seats in the Ninewa Provincial Council.[101] Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish groups have long vied for control in Ninewa Province, and many Sunni and Kurdish residents resent Shia groups' presence and influence in areas of the province.[102] Sunni political parties recently tried to remove the Ninewa Provincial Council chairman, who is a member of Popular Mobilization Committee Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh's National Contract Bloc.[103] Atheel al Nujaifi accused Fayyadh of making last-minute attempts to win votes in Ninewa Province on May 19 after Fayyadh stated that only four percent of the population of Ninewa Province "has been proven to be affiliated with ISIS." [104] Nujaifi argued that Fayyadh should have made this statement when Ninewa residents were previously persecuted "based on suspicion of belonging to ISIS" rather than in the lead-up to the parliamentary elections.

**Iraqi Foreign Affairs Minister Fuad Hussein discussed the US-Iran nuclear negotiations with Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi on the sidelines of the Tehran Dialogue Forum on May 19.**[105] Araghchi emphasized Iran's readiness to resume nuclear negotiations with the United States and thanked the Iraqi federal government for "creating the appropriate conditions for diplomacy" between Iran and the United States. This meeting comes after Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani traveled to Baghdad on May 14, reportedly to encourage Iraq and other Arab countries to convince the United States to end its maximum pressure campaign on Iran and conclude a new nuclear deal.[106]

**Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani attended a conference focused on Kurdish energy development in Washington, DC.**[107] Barzani oversaw the signing of two agreements that give US-based energy companies rights to develop petroleum resources in Iraqi Kurdistan.[108] Barzani is scheduled to meet with several senior US officials during his visit.[109]

## Arabian Peninsula

### **Axis of Resistance objectives:**

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

**The Houthis launched two ballistic missiles and a drone targeting Ben Gurion Airport in central Israel on May 17.**<sup>[110]</sup> The IDF intercepted both ballistic missiles.<sup>[111]</sup> The Houthis launched a total of six ballistic missiles targeting Ben Gurion Airport between May 12 and May 18.<sup>[112]</sup> The IDF responded to these attacks with airstrikes targeting Hudaydah and Salif ports on May 16.<sup>[113]</sup>

**The USS *Harry S. Truman* aircraft carrier left the Red Sea through the Suez Canal on May 17, according to an open-source analyst.**<sup>[114]</sup> NATO Allied Joint Force Command Naples stated on May 19 that the USS *Harry S. Truman* will participate in an upcoming NATO naval exercise in the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>[115]</sup>

### The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon

**Arab media reported that an IDF airstrike on May 13 killed Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip Mohammad Sinwar.**<sup>[116]</sup> Various Israeli and Arab media outlets reported on May 18 that unspecified individuals located Sinwar's body in a tunnel in Khan Younis.<sup>[117]</sup> The IDF struck an underground command-and-control complex in Khan Younis on May 13 where it believed Sinwar was hiding. The IDF has not yet confirmed his death, however.<sup>[118]</sup> Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on May 18 that "according to all the indications Mohammad Sinwar was eliminated."<sup>[119]</sup>

*CTP-ISW will not be covering the new Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip. We have reprioritized our Middle East coverage to focus on Iran's nuclear program, Iranian domestic security, and Iranian efforts to rebuild its networks into the Levant, including the Palestinian Territories. Given that Israel and its partners have destroyed Hamas' military organization and severed the group's ability to resupply itself, we are now focused on how Iran seeks to rebuild its lines of communication with Hezbollah and Hamas through Syria.*

*The Iran Update provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities abroad that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests. It also covers events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making of the Iranian regime. The Critical Threats Project (CTP)*

at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) provides these updates regularly based on regional events.

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



[1] [https://www.ukmto.org/-/media/ukmto/products/20250520\\_ukmto\\_advisory\\_incident-020-25.pdf?rev=9fboce7704fa410c922d519d1992fa3e](https://www.ukmto.org/-/media/ukmto/products/20250520_ukmto_advisory_incident-020-25.pdf?rev=9fboce7704fa410c922d519d1992fa3e)

[2] [https://www.ukmto.org/-/media/ukmto/products/20250520\\_ukmto\\_advisory\\_incident-020-25.pdf?rev=9fboce7704fa410c922d519d1992fa3e](https://www.ukmto.org/-/media/ukmto/products/20250520_ukmto_advisory_incident-020-25.pdf?rev=9fboce7704fa410c922d519d1992fa3e)

[3] <https://www.noaa.gov/jurisdiction-over-vessels#:~:text=Thus%20a%20State%20has%20jurisdiction,nationality%20or%20the%20vessel's%20flag.>

[4] <https://www.businessinsider.com/iran-is-jamming-ship-gps-navigation-systems-to-seize-them-2019-8>

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# Iran Update



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**May 20, 2025, Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm ET**

**Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei expressed pessimism about the US-Iran nuclear negotiations and explicitly rejected the US demand for zero uranium enrichment.[1] Khamenei's statements are consistent with CTP-ISW's assessment that disagreements between Iran and the United States about the issue of zero uranium enrichment may stall the negotiations or delay a deal.[2]** Khamenei explicitly rejected the US demand for zero uranium enrichment during a speech on May 20.[3] This speech marked the first time that Khamenei had publicly discussed the US-Iran negotiations since they started on April 12.[4] Khamenei stated that the US demand for zero uranium enrichment is "very wrong" and emphasized that Iran will "follow its own policy and method" regarding this issue.[5] Khamenei's stated position is consistent with recent statements from other senior Iranian officials.[6] Khamenei also compared the current US-Iran negotiations to previous negotiations under former Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, stating that negotiations under Raisi never reached a conclusion and that the regime "do[es] not think they will reach a conclusion now." [7] An unspecified Iranian political insider told a UK-based outlet that there is an internal discussion in Iran "over the utility of attending further talks at this time," given the US demand for zero uranium enrichment.[8] Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister and lead negotiator Abbas Araghchi stated on May 20 that Iran has not yet accepted a proposed date for the fifth round of the US-Iran negotiations.[9]

Khamenei may have framed the US-Iran nuclear negotiations negatively to lower public expectations for a deal and imminent economic relief. Senior Iranian officials have repeatedly emphasized that the main goal of the US-Iran negotiations is to lift sanctions on Iran.[10] Iran is facing a severe economic and energy crisis amid international sanctions. Iran's economic situation has fueled public frustration, which may stoke protests that could threaten regime stability.[11] CTP-ISW previously assessed that Khamenei may calculate that engaging in nuclear negotiations with the United States will improve Iranian economic conditions.[12] The Iranian rial appreciated from a near-record low of 1,0005,500 rials to one US dollar on April 11 to 879,000 rials to one US dollar on April 14 after the first round of the US-Iran nuclear negotiations on April 12.[13] Khamenei's messaging may aim to manage domestic expectations about the possibility of a nuclear deal in an effort to protect the regime from potential internal backlash if the talks fail and Iran does not secure sanctions relief.

**The Iranian Passive Defense Organization Supreme Council met on May 20, likely to coordinate preparations to protect critical infrastructure ahead of a potential US or Israeli strike.[14]** The Passive Defense Organization is a government body that is responsible for planning, coordinating, and directing activities to protect civilian, military, and nuclear infrastructure from military, chemical, cyber, or economic threats.[15] The Passive Defense Organization Supreme

Council is chaired by Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri.[16] Senior Iranian defense officials, including Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister Brigadier General Aziz Nasir Zadeh and Artesh Commander Major General Abdol Rahim Mousavi, attended the meeting.[17] Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad notably also attended the meeting, which suggests that Iran is concerned about a potential strike on its energy infrastructure. Israeli officials reportedly considered striking Iranian oil production facilities in response to the Iranian attack on Israel in October 2024.[18]

**The Houthis announced on May 19 that they will target Haifa Port in Israel in retaliation for recent Israeli airstrikes on Houthi-controlled ports in Yemen. Attacks on Haifa Port would support the Houthis' October 7 War objective to economically isolate Israel.[19]**

The Houthis announced on May 19 that they will impose a “naval blockade” on Haifa Port in northern Israel in response to Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip and Israeli airstrikes in Yemen.[20] The most recent Israeli airstrikes in Yemen on May 16 targeted the Houthi-controlled Hudaydah and Salif ports, damaging berths and cargo loading infrastructure, which impeded the Houthis' ability to receive supplies through these ports.[21] The Houthi military spokesperson, Yahya Sarea, warned all shipping companies with vessels present or heading to Haifa Port that the Houthis will target the port.[22] The Houthis have conducted drone and missile attacks on Israel since October 2023 as part of a campaign to economically blockade Israel in response to its operations in the Gaza Strip. The Houthis conducted at least four joint drone and missile attacks on Haifa Port with the Islamic Resistance in Iraq in June 2024.[23] Haifa Port is an important economic gateway to the Mediterranean Sea for Israel and hosts an Israeli naval base.[24]

**The Houthis are attempting to enforce this economic blockade while adhering to the terms of the US-Houthi ceasefire.** The Houthis agreed on May 5 to not attack “US vessels” in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden in exchange for the United States halting its airstrike campaign on the Houthis.[25] The US-Houthi ceasefire did not require the Houthis to stop attacks on Israel or non-US-flagged or owned merchant vessels, however.[26] The Houthis likely warned vessels near and heading to Haifa Port that the group will target the port in order to avoid striking a “US vessel” and thereby breaking the US-Houthi ceasefire agreement.

**International airlines have suspended flights to Israel due to concerns about Houthi drone and missile attacks targeting Ben Gurion Airport. The suspension of flights will likely hurt the Israeli economy.** At least 10 international airlines have suspended flights to Israel until mid-June 2025, according to Israeli media.[27] Several of the airlines suspended flights after Israeli air defense systems failed to intercept a Houthi missile near the airport on May 4.[28] Flight suspensions to Israel in 2024 contributed to a decline in tourism, the closure of tens of thousands of businesses, and a decrease in Israel's GDP growth forecast by half by the third quarter of 2024.[29] Flight suspensions in 2025 will likely have similar effects on the Israeli economy.

**Iran is deepening high-level defense cooperation with Armenia, likely as part of a broader strategy to counter Israeli, Turkish, and Western influence in the South Caucasus.** Iranian Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister Brigadier General Aziz Nasir Zadeh met with Armenian Defense Minister Suren Papikyan in Yerevan, Armenia, on May 20.[30] The Iranian Defense Ministry is responsible for foreign arms sales and defense agreements. Nasir Zadeh expressed support for peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan, stating that Iran is ready to help accelerate



the peace process between the two countries. Nasir Zadeh and Papikyan signed a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) between their respective defense ministries. Nasir Zadeh's visit likely reflects advanced defense talks rather than initial Iranian outreach to Armenia, given Nasir Zadeh's seniority in the Iranian regime.[31] Iran has historically maintained close ties to Armenia and has reportedly provided security assistance to Armenia in recent years. Israeli media claimed in July 2023, for example, that Armenia had used Iranian Shahed drones in its conflict with Azerbaijan.[32] Iran and Armenia recently conducted their first-ever joint military exercise in northwestern Iran on April 9 and 10 to bolster border security and counter-terrorism coordination.[33] Iran may seek to increase military and defense cooperation with Armenia in the coming months, particularly as Iran appears to be growing increasingly concerned about Israeli, Turkish, and Western influence in the South Caucasus.

Iran is simultaneously maintaining military, political, and economic ties with Azerbaijan to counter external influences in the South Caucasus. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Ground Forces Mirza Kuchak Khan Special Forces Brigade and Azerbaijani Special Forces began joint exercises along the Iran-Azerbaijan border on May 17. The exercises will continue until May 21.[34] The exercises included coordinated tactical drills and simulated counter-terrorism operations. Armed Forces General Staff-affiliated media framed the exercises as a strategic show of force aimed at enhancing combat readiness, expanding bilateral defense cooperation, countering Israeli "military movements," and reinforcing Iran's role in shaping regional security and stability in the South Caucasus.[35] This exercise follows a series of high-level Israeli-Azerbaijani engagements in recent weeks. Israeli government officials have recently called for including Azerbaijan in the Abraham Accords and increasing "trilateral cooperation" between Azerbaijan, Israel, and the United States.[36] US Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff visited Baku on March 14 to discuss US-Israel-Azerbaijan trilateral coordination and strengthen ties between the three countries under the Abraham Accords framework.[37] Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz separately met with his Azerbaijani counterpart in Israel on May 19 to discuss bolstering defense cooperation.[38] The Iranian regime has historically accused Baku of allowing Israel to use Azerbaijani territory to launch operations against Iran.[39] IRGC-affiliated media in February 2025 called the Israeli-Azerbaijani alliance a direct threat to Iranian national security and warned that Israel uses Azerbaijani territory for intelligence operations and exploiting ethnic tensions inside Iran.[40]

**The European Union's (EU) and the United States' plan to lift economic sanctions on Syria in the coming weeks will help stabilize the Syrian economy, but will not address other sources of potential instability in Syria.** The EU Council of Ministers lifted economic sanctions on Syria on May 20 to "help the Syrian people rebuild a new, inclusive and peaceful Syria." [41] EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas acknowledged that "there can be no peace [in Syria] without the path to economic recovery" but noted that the EU retains the ability to reimpose sanctions if the transitional government does not make "progress." [42] The EU can immediately lift economic sanctions on Syria, but there are several legal obstacles that the Trump administration must overcome before it can remove "all" sanctions on Syria.[43] The complicated legislative environment in the United States and decades of US sanctions targeting Syria means that it will take time for the United States to fully lift sanctions on Syria.[44] A previous temporary US sanctions waiver issued in January 2025 did not lead to significant investment in Syrian industries, partly due to confusion over what activities were included in the waiver.[45] Internal instability and uncertainty regarding Syria's future may similarly deter investment in the short- to medium-term. It

will therefore likely take weeks or months before the removal of sanctions generates visible and tangible economic effects throughout the country. Some key state functions, such as the provision of salaries to government employees, will have an immediate and important impact on parts of the Syrian population, however. [46]

**Sanctions relief does not preclude the possibility of renewed internal conflict in Syria caused by other factors.** Renewed internal conflict could be driven by sectarian and ethnic fears caused by the civil war. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continue to refuse to disarm because they are concerned that elements of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) that have previously perpetrated human rights abuses against Kurds could attack Kurdish communities.[47] Druze militia members have separately negotiated with the transitional government to keep their arms due to distrust of the transitional government's ability to protect their communities.[48] These fears can lead to renewed conflicts, such as fighting along SNA-SDF contact lines in eastern Aleppo Province or violence in Druze areas of southern Syria. These geographically limited conflicts can spread to other parts of Syria if the transitional government does not quickly and adequately address them.

**The EU and the United States can continue to impose targeted individual sanctions to encourage the Syrian government to rein in the most extreme elements of its security services. Targeted sanctions could assuage minority groups' concerns about extreme elements committing abuses against their communities.** The EU decided to retain its arms embargo and may impose additional targeted sanctions on individuals accused of human rights abuses.[49] Syrian President Ahmed al Shara has included some individuals in the Ministry of Defense (MoD) structure who have previously committed human rights abuses, likely because he calculates that he needs the support and cooperation of these groups to extend his control over Syria. Shara has appointed SNA commanders accused of human rights abuses, including Suleiman Shah Commander Abu Amsha and Hamza Division Commander Sayf Abu Bakr, to lead divisions of the Syrian Army.[50] Sultan Murad Commander Fahim Issa holds an even more prominent role as deputy defense minister.[51] Shara likely recognizes that ignoring these factions or attempting to subordinate them by force is too difficult for his relatively meager armed forces. Targeted sanctions may incentivize Shara to remove these powerful faction leaders or give him the political cover required to do so. The removal of destabilizing elements within the transitional government's security force could reduce the risk of renewed major internal conflict.

### **Key Takeaways:**

- **US-Iran Nuclear Negotiations:** Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei expressed pessimism about the US-Iran nuclear negotiations and explicitly rejected the US demand for zero uranium enrichment. Khamenei's statements are consistent with CTP-ISW's assessment that disagreements between Iran and the United States about the issue of zero uranium enrichment may stall the negotiations or delay a deal. Khamenei may have framed the US-Iran nuclear negotiations negatively to lower public expectations for a deal and imminent economic relief.
- **Iranian Preparations for a Potential US or Israeli Strike:** The Iranian Passive Defense Organization Supreme Council met on May 20, likely to coordinate preparations to protect critical infrastructure ahead of a potential US or Israeli strike. The Passive Defense Organization is a government body that is responsible for planning, coordinating, and directing activities to

protect civilian, military, and nuclear infrastructure from military, chemical, cyber, or economic threats. Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad notably also attended the meeting, which suggests that Iran is concerned about a potential strike on its energy infrastructure.

- **Houthi Campaign Against Israel:** The Houthis announced on May 19 that they will target Haifa Port in Israel in retaliation for recent Israeli airstrikes on Houthi-controlled ports in Yemen. Attacks on Haifa Port would support the Houthis' October 7 War objective to economically isolate Israel. The Houthis are attempting to enforce this economic blockade while adhering to the terms of the US-Houthi ceasefire.
- **Iranian Strategy in the Caucasus:** Iran is deepening high-level defense cooperation with Armenia, likely as part of a broader strategy to counter Israeli, Turkish, and Western influence in the South Caucasus. Iranian Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister Brigadier General Aziz Nasir Zadeh met with Armenian Defense Minister Suren Papikyan in Yerevan, Armenia, on May 20. The Iranian Defense Ministry is responsible for foreign arms sales and defense agreements. Iran has historically maintained close ties to Armenia and has reportedly provided security assistance to Armenia in recent years. Israeli media claimed in July 2023, for example, that Armenia had used Iranian Shahed drones in its conflict with Azerbaijan. Iran is simultaneously maintaining military, political, and economic ties with Azerbaijan to counter external influences in the South Caucasus. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Ground Forces Mirza Kuchak Khan Special Forces Brigade and Azerbaijani Special Forces began joint exercises along the Iran-Azerbaijan border on May 17.
- **Sanctions Relief in Syria:** The European Union's (EU) and United States' plan to lift economic sanctions on Syria in the coming weeks will help stabilize the Syrian economy, but will not address other sources of potential instability in Syria. Sanctions relief does not preclude the possibility of renewed internal conflict in Syria caused by other factors. The EU and the United States can continue to impose targeted individual sanctions to encourage the Syrian government to rein in the most extreme elements of its security services. Targeted sanctions could assuage minority groups' concerns about extreme elements committing abuses against their communities.

### **Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy**

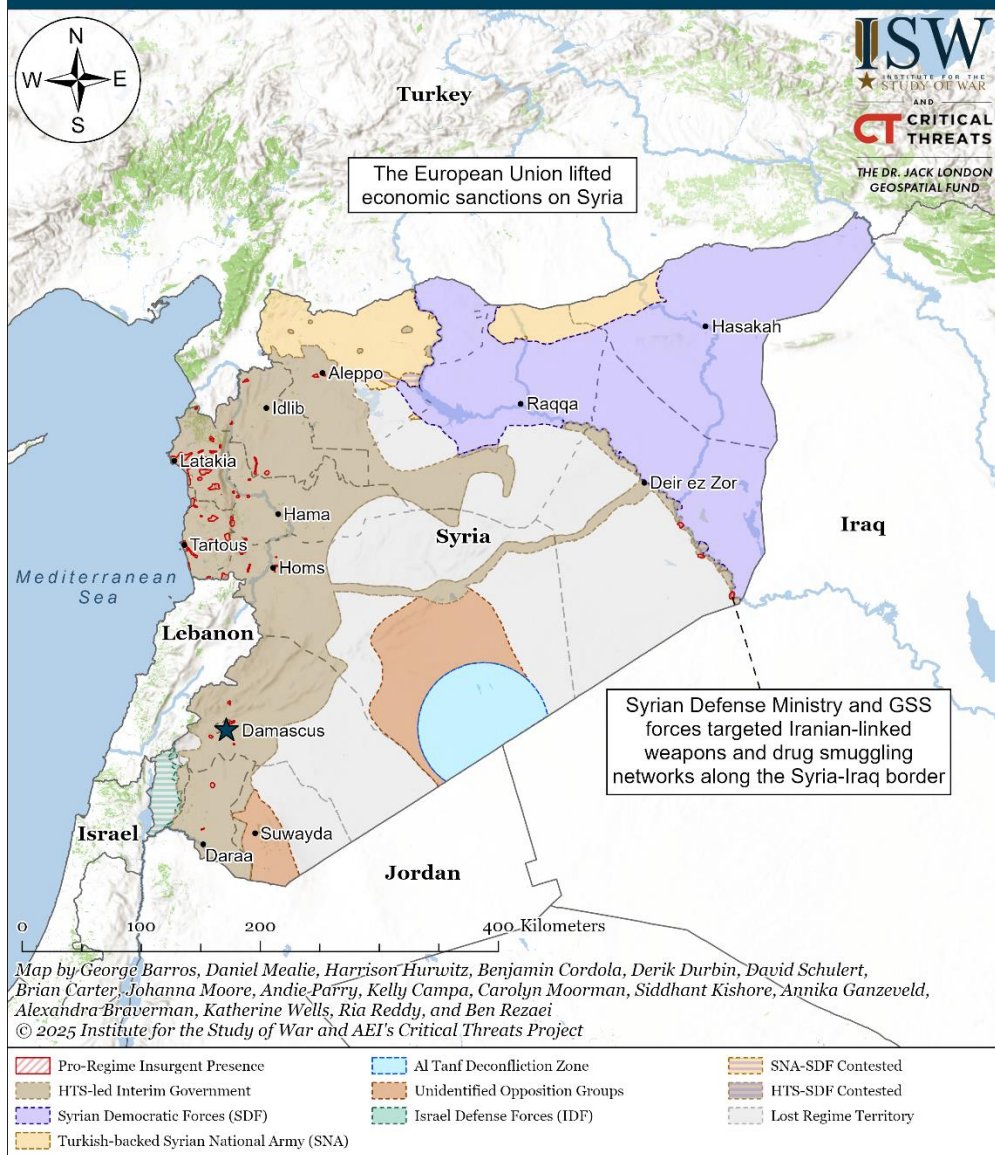
**Four unspecified armed individuals kidnapped a Shia cleric in Iranshahr, Sistan and Baluchistan Province, on May 20.[52]** The individuals kidnapped the cleric outside of the Amir al Momenin Seminary where the cleric worked.[53] The Iranian Law Enforcement Command (LEC) began an investigation to locate the cleric and arrest the kidnappers. No group has claimed responsibility for the kidnapping at the time of this writing.

**The Iranian rial depreciated from 820,000 rials to one US dollar on May 19 to 843,000 rials to one US dollar on May 20.[54]**

### **Syria**

## Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

May 20, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



**Syrian Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra met with a high-level Western defense delegation for the first time on May 15, possibly to try to obtain military assistance.[55]**

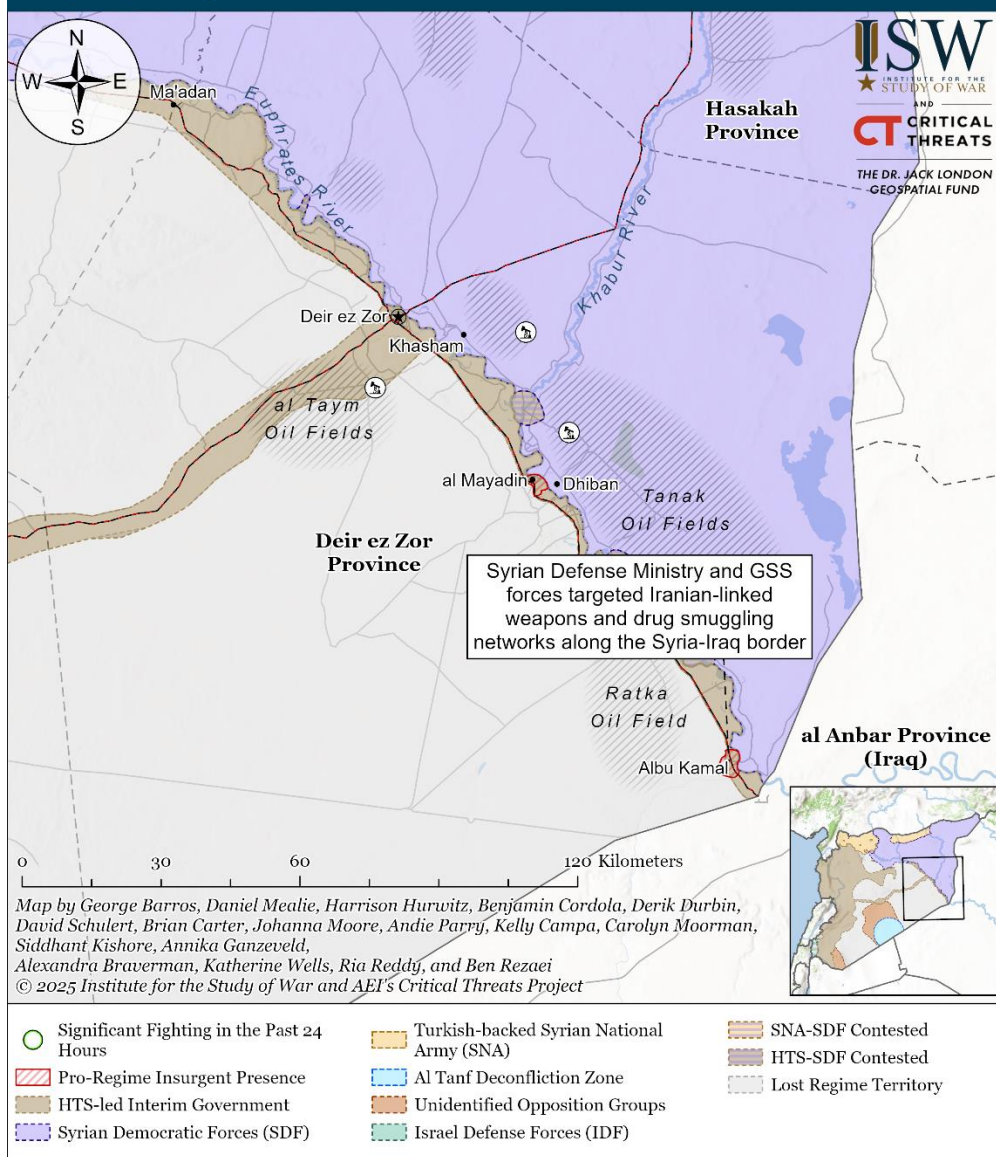
Qasra met with UK Defense Ministry official Charles Smith in Damascus to discuss the development of the Syrian armed forces.[56] Qasra and Smith's meeting comes after the United Kingdom decided on April 24 to lift asset freezes on the Syrian Defense Ministry, Interior Ministry, and General Intelligence Directorate.[57]

**Defense Minister Qasra met with the Turkish Defense Ministry's General Director for Defense, Ilkay Altindag, in Damascus on May 20.[58]** Qasra and Altindag discussed enhancing military cooperation and coordination.[59] Syrian and Turkish defense officials have held several meetings since January 2025 to discuss Turkey's military presence in Syria and Turkish assistance to

the Syrian armed forces.[60] Syrian President Ahmed al Shara stated on April 23 that the Syrian government is negotiating with Turkey over the future of its military presence in Syria.[61]

**Syrian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and General Security Service (GSS) forces targeted an Iranian-linked weapons and drug smuggling network along the Syria-Iraq border on May 20.[62]** Syrian forces raided several warehouses and smuggler hideouts in al Hari and Albu Kamal, Deir ez Zor Province, that were run by Ahmed Hussein Ali al Jghaifi.[63] Jghaifi reportedly facilitates smuggling operations for senior Iranian militia leaders in Iraq and Syria.[64] The forces seized large quantities of anti-tank guided missiles, thermal missiles, ammunition, machine guns, night-vision equipment, narcotic pills, and hashish.[65] Syrian media reported on May 20 that smugglers within al Jghaifi's network were transporting weapons to Lebanon and Iraq.[66] Syrian forces arrested over 35 individuals, including Jghaifi.[67] The Albu Kamal border crossing with Iraq was a key smuggling route for Iran and Iranian-backed groups under the Assad regime.[68] Syrian transitional government forces have conducted several raids in recent weeks targeting Iranian-backed smuggling networks and infrastructure along the Iraq-Syria border.[69]

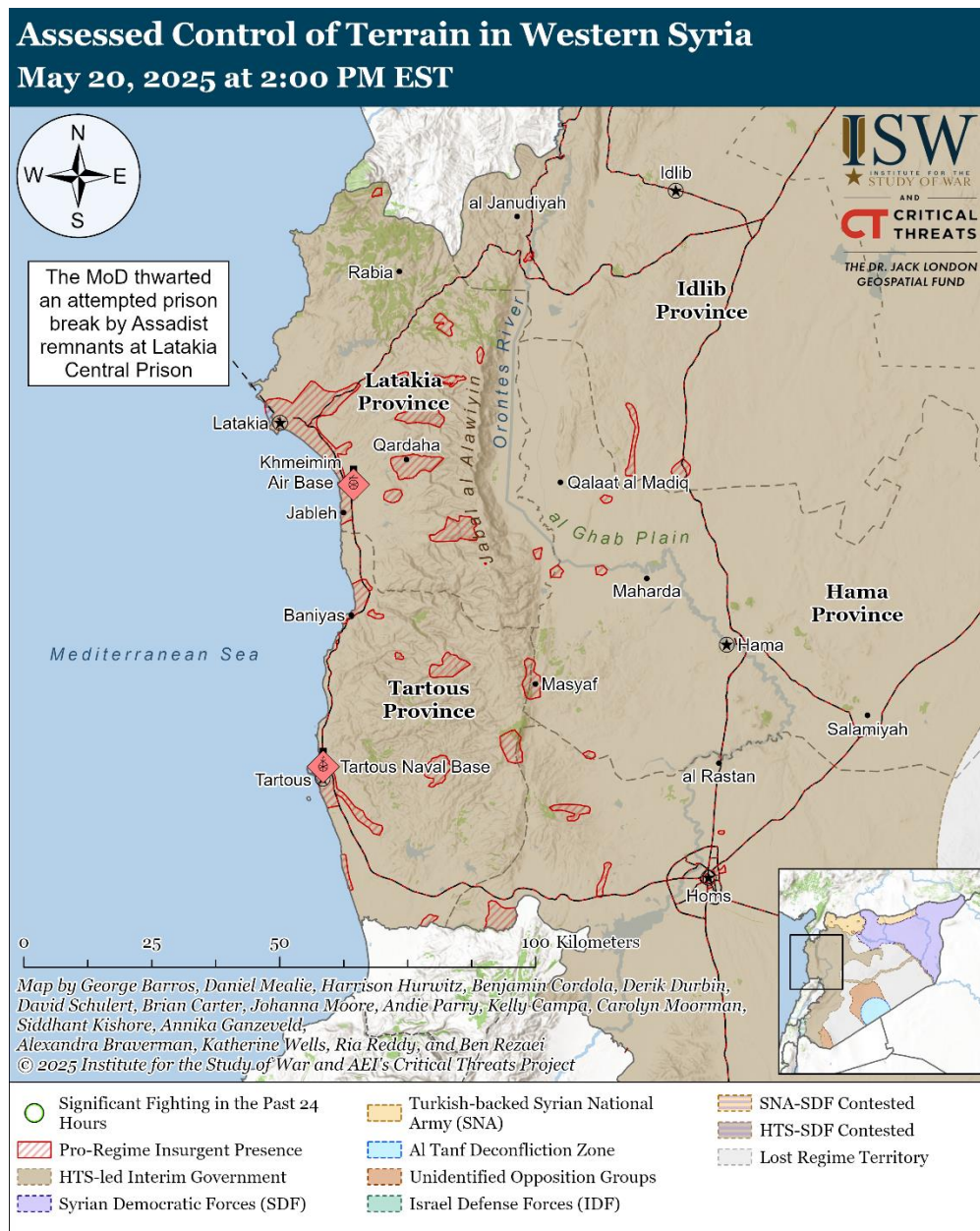
## Assessed Control of Terrain around Deir ez Zor May 20, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



**Syrian Foreign Affairs Minister Asaad al Shaibani met with a Jordanian delegation led by Jordanian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister Ayman Safadi in Damascus on May 20.[70]** The Jordanian delegation also included the Jordanian water, transport, industry, and energy ministers.[71] Shaibani and Safadi signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to establish a “supreme coordination council” between the two countries.[72] The council will hold periodic meetings to strengthen coordination between the two countries.[73] The council will submit reports to Syrian President Ahmed al Shara and Jordanian King Abdullah II.[74] Safadi emphasized that Jordan will support Syria in “building a free, sovereign, stable, and secure Syria.”[75] Safadi stated that Jordan has and will continue to cooperate with Syria on defense and security issues that threaten both countries, such as drug and weapons smuggling.[76]



Safadi also stated that Jordan will coordinate with Syria to prevent further Israeli military operations in Syria and will work to facilitate the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Syrian territory.[77] Safadi claimed that Israeli attacks on Syria represent an attack on Jordan, given that attacks on Syria threaten Jordan's northern border and destabilize the entire region.[78] Shaibani reiterated Syria's call for Israel to adhere to the 1974 Disengagement Agreement, which would require Israel to withdraw from Syrian territory.[79]



**Syrian MoD forces thwarted an attempted prison break by Assadist remnants in Latakia Province on May 20.**[80] Assad regime remnants reportedly attempted to free prisoners from al Bassa Central Prison and clashed with MoD forces at the prison.[81] Units from the Syrian Army's 50th Division repelled the attack. Two division members sustained injuries during the attack.[82] The Assadist remnants retreated, and security forces conducted a search operation in the surrounding area

to pursue the individuals who attempted the prison break.[83] The Assad regime remnants may have sought to free Assad loyalists from the prison.[84]

## **Iraq**

*Nothing significant to report.*

## **Arabian Peninsula**

### **Axis of Resistance objectives:**

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

**The Houthis are seeking to acquire Chinese-made data dumping devices for their security and intelligence agencies, likely to increase their domestic surveillance capability.[85]** An independent Yemeni defense outlet, citing an unspecified leaked document, claimed that the finance aide to the Houthis' domestic intelligence services chief, Majed Ahmed Salman Marai, is trying to purchase \$60,000-worth of Chinese-made data dumping devices.[86] Data dumping devices can manipulate large amounts of data and transfer data between devices.[87]

## **The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon**

*Nothing significant to report.*

*CTP-ISW will not be covering the new Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip. We have reprioritized our Middle East coverage to focus on Iran's nuclear program, Iranian domestic security, and Iranian efforts to rebuild its networks into the Levant, including the Palestinian Territories. Given that Israel and its partners have destroyed Hamas' military organization and severed the group's ability to resupply itself, we are now focused on how Iran seeks to rebuild its lines of communication with Hezbollah and Hamas through Syria.*

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

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

*these objectives and supporting the Axis of Resistance to those ends have become cornerstones of Iranian regional strategy.*

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# Iran Update

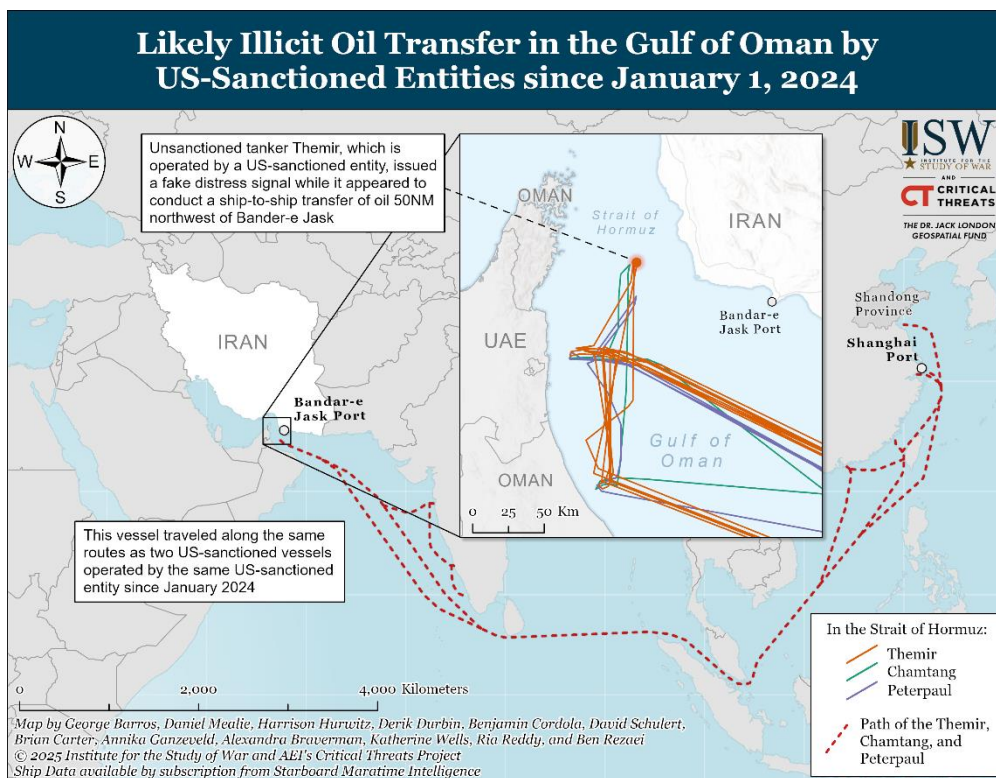


Katherine Wells, Ben Schmida, Ria Reddy, Ben Rezaei, Carolyn Moorman,  
Avery Borens, Andie Parry, Kelly Campa, and Brian Carter

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

**An unsanctioned oil tanker that is operated by a US-sanctioned entity and has probably illicitly transported oil to the People's Republic of China (PRC) from Iran issued a false distress call in the Strait of Hormuz on May 20.**[1] The Panamanian-flagged oil tanker the *Themir* likely issued a distress call that claimed it had been hijacked.[2] A British maritime security firm said that the distress call occurred 51 nautical miles northwest of Bandar-e Jask, which is consistent with the *Themir's* position. The firm confirmed on May 21 that the hijacking call was a false alarm.[3] It remains unclear at the time of writing why the *Themir* issued the false distress call, but the vessel is linked to Iranian efforts to illicitly transfer oil.[4] The United States sanctioned the *Themir's* Malaysia-based owner, IMS Ltd, on February 24 for aiding the Iranian oil export network, as part of US President Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" policy.[5]

**The *Themir's* pattern of behavior suggests it may have conducted a ship-to-ship transfer at some time while off the coast of Iran.**[6] Iran and the PRC use ship-to-ship transfers to obfuscate the transportation of PRC purchases of Iranian oil, and ships travel in circular holding patterns when conducting ship-to-ship transfers.[7] The *Themir* was in a circular holding pattern 51 nautical miles northwest of Bandar-e Jask Port on the southern coast of Iran at the time of the distress call, according to maritime data.[8] The ship and its two sister ships—the *Peterpaul* and the *Chamtang*—have regularly sailed between the Gulf of Oman and the PRC.[9] Both the *Peterpaul* and the *Chamtang* are sanctioned for illicit transfers of Iranian oil to the PRC.[10] The ships usually enter circular holding patterns in the Gulf of Oman before sailing eastwards to PRC ports. Circular holding patterns can indicate that the ships are executing ship-to-ship transfers.[11] The *Themir* also previously travelled from the Gulf of Oman to the PRC's biggest oil offloading port, Shandong Port, in September 2024.[12] The US Treasury Department recently sanctioned refineries in Shandong for importing billions of dollars in Iranian oil.[13] The *Themir* has also travelled along similar routes as its two sanctioned sister ships from near Bandar-e-Jask Port to eastern PRC through the Gulf of Oman and Malacca Strait five times since January 2024, suggesting that the *Themir* has previously illicitly transported Iranian oil to the PRC.[14]



**The fifth round of the US-Iran nuclear negotiations will take place in Rome on May 23.[15]** Two unspecified diplomatic sources in Iran told anti-regime media on May 21 that Iran asked Omani mediators to convince the United States to ease US demands in negotiations, likely referring to the US demand for zero uranium enrichment.[16] The issue of zero uranium enrichment is the main sticking point in the US-Iran nuclear negotiations.[17] The Trump administration's negotiating position appears to have cohered around zero uranium enrichment, but Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei explicitly rejected the US demand for zero uranium enrichment during a speech on May 20.[18] CTP-ISW previously assessed that disagreements between Iran and the United States about the issue of zero uranium enrichment may stall the negotiations or delay a deal.[19]

**Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov falsely accused the Syrian transitional government of “ethnic [and sectarian] cleansing,” which supports the objectives of the pro-Assad Alawite insurgency in western Syria.[20]** The Coastal Shield Brigade, a pro-Assad Alawite insurgent group in western Syria, said in March 2025 that it seeks to undermine international support for the transitional government by triggering mass reprisal killings of Alawites in response to its attacks. Lavrov said that Russia is deeply concerned about the situation in Syria and claimed that “radical militant groups are carrying out real ethnic cleansing and mass killings of people based on their nationality and religion.”[21] Lavrov also claimed that Western countries ignore crimes around the world as long as they do not conflict with the West's global agenda.[22] Lavrov characterized the violence on the Syrian coast in March 2025 as “ethnic cleansing,” which echoes false Russian state media claims that over 1,500 people were killed during the coastal violence.[23] This number is double the amount recorded by Syrian human rights organizations.[24] Lavrov made these comments despite a marked decrease in sectarian violence on the Syrian coast since March.[25] There have been no major massacres since early March, despite continued sectarian killings and other murders in western Syria.

These killings and murders, while serious and concerning, are not systematic” cleansing” as Lavrov implies. The Syrian transitional government also did not in March 2025 and still does not exert complete control over various armed factions that make up the Ministry of Defense (MoD), which indicates that the March 2025 violence was spontaneous and seriously threatened Syria’s stability, but it was not systematic.[26] The Syrian transitional government took steps during the insurgency to limit violence, which included the removal of military units involved in massacres as well as the establishment of an independent committee to investigate the events on the coast.[27] The government, despite these steps, still must take real, tangible steps to arrest, try, and convict those accused of sectarian massacres along Syria’s coast.

**A group of unspecified fighters attacked Russian forces stationed at Hmeimim air base, Latakia Province, on May 20.**[28] The Syrian transitional government is extremely unlikely to have sanctioned any attack on Russian forces at Hmeimim, given Syria and Russia’s active negotiations over the two countries’ economic and military cooperation. The militants attacked the southwest perimeter of the airfield but retreated after Russian forces killed at least three fighters.[29] The fighters killed two Russian soldiers at the base.[30] Russian sources at the time of the attack claimed that the attackers were Uzbek foreign fighters who were unaffiliated with Syrian security forces.[31] Syrian sources later claimed that the attackers were foreign military trainers for HTS who attacked the Russians without orders, however.[32] Uzbek nationals and Central Asians have historically made up an important portion of HTS’s military structure, including training HTS special forces.[33] HTS-allied Central Asian and Caucasian armed groups such as Katibat al Tawhid wa Jihad (KTJ), the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), and Ajnad al Kavkaz (Soldiers of the Caucasus) are known for their extreme loyalty to HTS.[34] It is unlikely that these factions and their associated private military companies would act independently of HTS’s chain of command, given that HTS has integrated foreign fighters into the transitional government’s military.[35] Foreign fighters in HTS are particularly unlikely to disobey HTS leaders because they have few options if they disobey orders and are deported or imprisoned. A return to their home countries would result in jail time at a minimum.

## Assessed Control of Terrain in Western Syria

May 21, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



### Key Takeaways:

- Iranian Activity in the Persian Gulf:** An unsanctioned oil tanker that is operated by a US-sanctioned entity and has probably illicitly transported oil to the People's Republic of China (PRC) from Iran issued a false distress call in the Strait of Hormuz on May 20. The tanker's pattern of behavior suggests it may have conducted a ship-to-ship transfer at some time while off the coast of Iran. Iran and the PRC use ship-to-ship transfers to obfuscate the transportation of PRC purchases of Iranian oil.
- US-Iran Nuclear Negotiations:** The fifth round of the US-Iran nuclear negotiations will take place in Rome on May 23. Two unspecified diplomatic sources in Iran told anti-regime media on



May 21 that Iran asked Omani mediators to convince the United States to ease US demands in negotiations, likely referring to the US demand for zero uranium enrichment.

- **Syria and Russia:** Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov falsely accused the Syrian transitional government of “ethnic [and sectarian] cleansing,” which supports the objectives of the pro-Assad Alawite insurgency in western Syria. Lavrov made these comments despite a marked decrease in sectarian violence on the Syrian coast since March.
- **Russians in Syria:** A group of unspecified fighters attacked Russian forces stationed at Hmeimim air base, Latakia Province, on May 20. Syrian sources claimed that the attackers were foreign military trainers for HTS who attacked the Russians without approval from HTS.

### **Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy**

**The Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry announced on May 21 that Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli has been appointed as Iran’s new ambassador to China.[36] This appointment suggests Iran may aim to strengthen political and security cooperation with China, given Rahman Fazli’s background in internal security and his connections to the 2021 China-Iran cooperation agreement.** Rahmani Fazli previously served as the Iranian Interior Minister under former President Hassan Rouhani and held senior security positions, including Law Enforcement Command Deputy Commander in Chief and the National Security Council head.[37] The United States sanctioned Rahmani Fazli in 2020 for authorizing lethal force against protestors during the November 2019 protests, which killed hundreds of Iranians, including minors.[38] Rahman Fazli has a strong relationship with senior Supreme Leader Adviser Ali Larijani, who played a key role in elevating Rahmani Fazli to Interior Minister in 2013. Larijani and Rahman Fazli cooperated in the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), the National Security Council, and the Iranian Parliament.[39] Rahmani Fazli’s appointment as ambassador to China aligns with Larijani’s long-standing role overseeing the Iranian strategic partnership with China, including the 25-year cooperation agreement signed in 2021.[40] Rahmani Fazli’s background in internal security and high-level state coordination may reflect an Iranian objective to strengthen political and security cooperation with China.

**Iranian Artesh Commander Major General Abdol Rahim Mousavi met with Belarusian Deputy Chief of the General Staff Major General Vladimir Kupriyanyuk on May 21 to discuss defense cooperation.[41]** Both sides emphasized the importance of strengthening ties in key areas, including military training, experience-sharing, and broader defense coordination. Iran and Belarus previously signed two memoranda of understanding on defense and trade cooperation in March and April 2024, respectively. Iran has begun work on establishing a military drone factory in Belarus since May 2023 to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[42] Cooperation between Iran and Belarus, a key Russian ally, comes amid increased engagement and defense coordination between Iranian and Russian defense officials since Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine.[43]

**Iranian Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS) Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri inspected ongoing efforts to fortify Iran’s eastern border during a visit to Sistan and Baluchistan Province on May 21.[44]** Bagheri stated that sealing the eastern frontier remains a top priority in order to counter terrorism, drug trafficking, and illegal border crossings. The project includes four-meter-high concrete walls equipped with drones, 360-degree cameras, and smart sensors. Border



security will eventually cover 300 kilometers. Iran's ongoing efforts to fortify its southeastern border are likely motivated in part by an uptick in attacks by anti-regime groups, especially Jaish al Adl. Jaish al Adl is a Baloch Salafi-jihadi group that has targeted Iranian security personnel and infrastructure in Sistan and Baluchistan Province since December 2023.[45]

**The Iranian rial appreciated from 843,000 rial to one US dollar on May 20 to 841,000 rial to one US dollar on May 21.[46]**

## **Syria**

**Top Syrian officials met with the Turkish intelligence chief, likely primarily to discuss the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).[47]** Syrian President Ahmed al Shara, Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al Shaibani, and Syrian Intelligence Chief Hussein Salama met with Turkish intelligence chief Ibrahim Kalin in Damascus on May 20.[48] The officials discussed the integration of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into the Syrian state, border security, and counter-ISIS activities, including transferring supervision of detention camps in northeastern Syria to the Syrian state.[49] Salama, who was a key HTS leader, has been responsible for negotiations with the SDF and its constituent militias across Syria, including in Aleppo City and Deir ez Zor Province.[50] Turkey has recently expressed concern about the slow integration of the SDF.[51] Salama's presence suggests that the SDF was a major point of focus during the discussions. Counter-ISIS activities and the transfer of detention camps to government control would fall under the umbrella of SDF issues because the SDF plays a very prominent role in counter-ISIS operations and controls the detention camps where ISIS fighters are held.[52] Syrian and Turkish officials have met since January 2025 to discuss joint defense concerns, including Turkey's military presence in Syria and Turkish assistance to the Syrian army.[53]

**Turkey and Israel reportedly established a de-confliction line in April 2025, according to a recent report by a Turkish journalist.[54]** The de-confliction line seeks to prevent misunderstandings or military incidents between Turkey and Israel, according to two sources familiar with the matter.[55] Recent Turkish tensions with Israel may have delayed several Turkish initiatives to develop a military presence in Syria.[56] Israel struck several Syrian bases in March and April 2025 as a "warning" to Turkey before it positioned its assets at the bases.[57] Syrian military sources told Western media on April 7 that Turkish military teams planned to visit the T4 and Palmyra air bases in Syria but had to cancel the visit after Israel struck both bases hours prior, thus making them unusable.[58] Turkey and Israel held their first "technical" meeting in Azerbaijan on April 9 to establish a de-confliction mechanism.[59] Turkey and Israel have reportedly held several meetings since April 9 and are scheduled to meet later this month to discuss a broader de-confliction deal.[60] This open line of communication between Turkey and Israel could possibly prevent a potential stand-off between the two parties, which both have strategic interests in Syria. Syrian government representatives and the head of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Operations Directorate Oded Basyuk also reportedly held direct talks in Azerbaijan to resolve joint concerns.[61]

**The United States and Turkey held a new round of the Syria Working Group in Washington, DC, on May 20.[62]** The Syria Working Group is a high-level US and Turkish working group that aims to synchronize policy and deepen bilateral cooperation in Syria between the two countries.[63] The US and Turkish delegations discussed shared priorities in Syria, including sanctions relief and combating terrorism.[64] Several US and Turkish officials attended the meeting, including

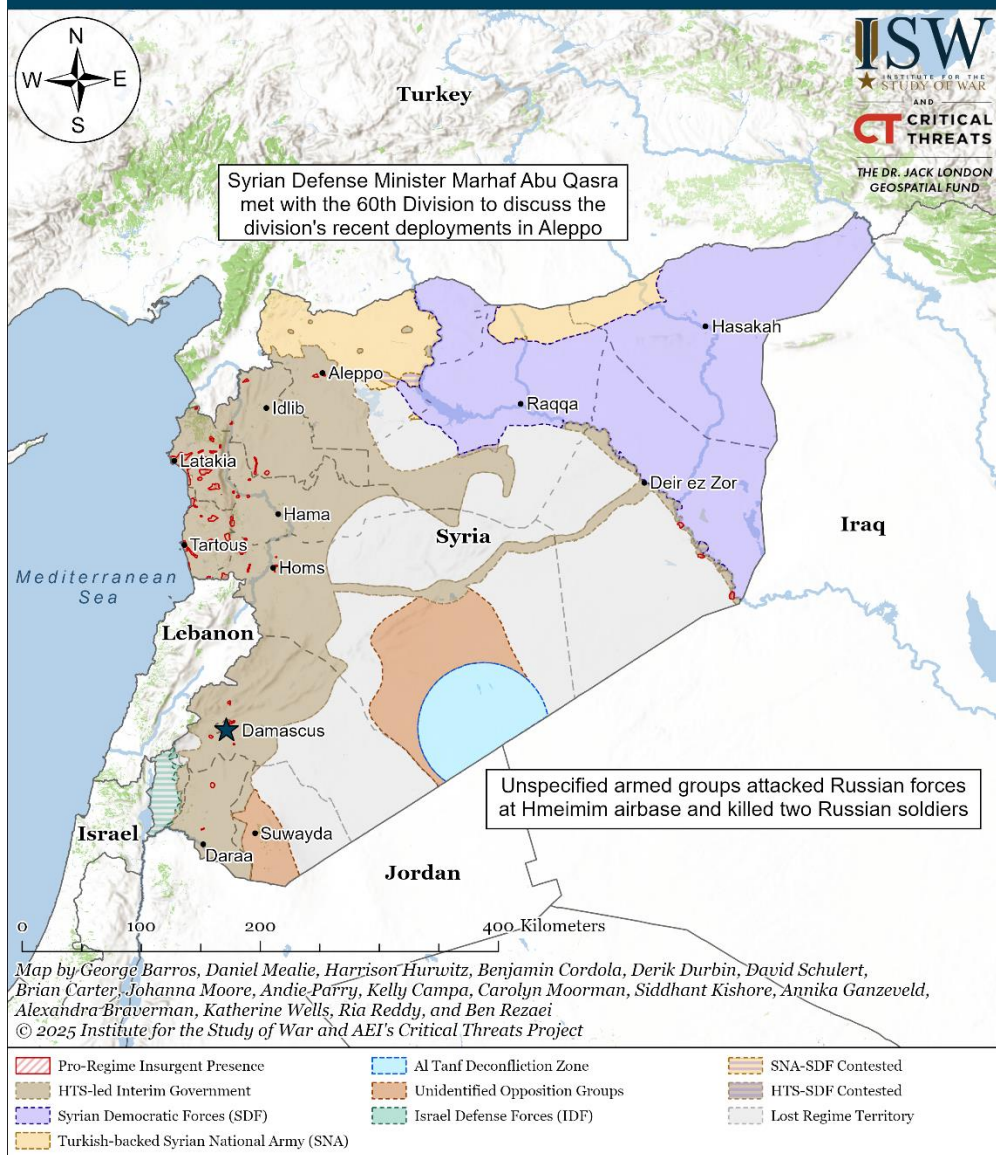
US Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau, Turkish Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Nuh Yilaz, US Ambassador to Turkey Thomas Barrack, Jr., and Turkish Ambassador to the US Sedat Onal.[65] Barrack was reportedly tapped as the US special envoy to Syria on May 21.[66] US and Turkish officials affirmed their commitment to increasing cooperation and coordination on Syria's stability and security.[67] US President Donald Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan have both previously stressed the importance of a US-Turkey partnership for Syria's stability and security.[68]

**The United States announced on May 21 that it will begin to restore normal diplomatic relations with Syria.[69]** Unspecified diplomatic sources told Western media that the United States would appoint current US Ambassador to Turkey Thomas Barrack Jr. as a special envoy for Syria.[70] Trump administration officials also announced that the United States will issue a temporary sanctions waiver that covers much of the Syrian economy before the US Congress passes a new law to repeal sanctions targeting Syria.[71] The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, which is the most stringent of US sanctions imposed on Syria, will require an act of Congress to remove. The Caesar Act targets anyone who provides support to the Syrian government, supports the Syrian oil and gas industry, exports aircraft or military equipment to Syria, or provides construction or engineering services directly or indirectly to the Syrian government.[72] The complicated legislative steps in the United States and decades of US sanctions targeting Syria mean that it will take time for the United States to fully lift sanctions on Syria.[73] A previous temporary US sanctions waiver issued in January 2025 did not lead to significant investment in Syrian industries, partly due to confusion over what activities were included in the waiver.[74] Internal instability and uncertainty regarding Syria's future may similarly deter investment in the short- to medium-term. It will therefore likely take weeks or months before the removal of sanctions generates visible and tangible economic effects throughout the country.

**Syrian Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra met with the 60th Division to discuss the division's recent deployments in Aleppo on May 21.[75]** Qasra met with 60th Division commander Brigadier General Awad Mohammad (Abu Qutayba al Shami) and other division commanders and personnel.[76] Abu Qutayba was a commander within HTS's predecessor organization, Jabhat Fateh al Sham, since at least 2016.[77] Abu Qutayba then oversaw HTS's Aleppo Sector and commanded an HTS brigade in 2020.[78] The Syrian MoD stated that Qasra and the 60th Division commanders discussed the division's recent deployments to northern and eastern Aleppo Province.[79] The 60th Division deployed to villages west of Tishreen Dam on April 14 to monitor the area and conduct de-mining operations after the SDF withdrew from its positions there as part of its agreement with the transitional government.[80] It is notable that Qasra met with this force, which is controlled by HTS personnel, after SNA forces reportedly clashed with the SDF on May 19.[81] Qasra may have discussed those clashes and ways that the 60th Division can respond to them in the future.

## Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

May 21, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



## Iraq

**Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani announced on May 21 that his Reconstruction and Development Coalition will contest the November 2025 Iraqi parliamentary elections.[82]** The coalition includes parties led by Popular Mobilization Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh and former Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) spokesperson Ahmed al Asadi. The coalition notably does not include Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Badr Organization head Hadi al Ameri, whose absence follows reports that Ameri left Sudani's coalition over disagreements with Sudani.[83] Iran recently urged unity amongst Shia Coordination Framework leaders (presumably including Sudani) ahead of the elections to improve the likelihood that Iranian-backed parties will maintain control of the Iraqi government.[84] The Shia Coordination Framework is a loose coalition of Shia political parties, some of which Iran backs. The Coordination Framework supported Sudani for prime

minister in 2022. State of Law coalition head Nouri al Maliki and Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Asaib Ahl al Haq leader Qais al Khazali will reportedly run separate lists in opposition to Sudani.[85]

**The Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission rejected the Sunni-led United Anbar Coalition's participation in the upcoming parliamentary elections.[86]** The party is opposed to major Sunni politician Mohammad al Halbousi. Top Sunni politicians formed the United Arab Coalition in 2022 in opposition to former Parliament Speaker Mohammad al Halbousi.[87] It includes former Finance Minister Rafai al Issawi. Former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki's administration charged Issawi with corruption in 2013 after Issawi condemned Maliki's policies.[88] Maliki weaponized the IHEC against his political opponents during his administration.[89]

**A Kataib Hezbollah-affiliated Iraqi parliamentarian called for the dismissal and trial of the Sadrist Basra governor on May 21 after the governor attempted to demolish homes in an area in which Iranian-backed parties may have substantial economic interests.[90]** Kataib Hezbollah is a key Iranian proxy in Iraq.[91] Prime Minister Sudani sent a letter to Basra Governor Asad al Eidani on May 19 in which Sudani requested that Eidani delay the demolition of houses in Basra Province. The head parliamentarian of the committee formed to investigate Eidani noted that the Basra provincial government has taken steps to remove encroachments for years and implied that the provincial government is currently working to remove encroachments in al Zubair District.[92] Al Zubair District hosts an oil field that produces about 200,000 barrels per day, and the district is a stronghold for Iranian-backed Iraqi political parties, who have repeatedly attempted to create a separate province for the district.[93] The involvement of al Zubair District and its oil rents may have motivated Iranian-backed actors to act against Eidani. Multiple parliamentarians said that the committee's investigation of Eidani and call for his dismissal falls outside of parliament's jurisdiction.[94] Another Iranian-backed parliamentarian praised the creation of the committee and subsequent call for his dismissal.[95]

It is notable that Iranian-backed parliamentarians have called for the removal of a Sadrist governor ahead of the upcoming elections.[96] Eidani is also reportedly an ally of Sudani, who has formed a coalition that will oppose other Shia Coordination Framework parties.[97] A Basra parliamentarian implied that the investigation intends to politically target Eidani because he is a contender for the premiership.[98]

### **Arabian Peninsula**

#### **Axis of Resistance objectives:**

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

*Nothing significant to report.*

### **The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon**

*Nothing significant to report.*

*CTP-ISW will not be covering the new Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip. We have reprioritized our Middle East coverage to focus on Iran's nuclear program, Iranian domestic security, and Iranian efforts to rebuild its networks into the Levant, including the Palestinian Territories. Given that Israel and its partners have destroyed Hamas' military organization and severed the group's ability to resupply itself, we are now focused on how Iran seeks to rebuild its lines of communication with Hezbollah and Hamas through Syria.*

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

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

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# Iran Update



**Ben Rezaei, Ria Reddy, Kelly Campa, Ben Schmida, Carolyn Moorman, Johanna Moore, Alexandra Braverman, Alexis Thomas, and Brian Carter**

**May 22, 2025 Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm ET**

**A visit to southeastern Iran by a senior Iranian officer illustrates Tehran's security concerns over anti-regime militancy in southeastern Iran.** Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS) Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri inspected air, naval, land, and air defense forces in Sistan and Baluchistan Province from May 21 to 22.[1] Bagheri stated during his visit that “takfiri groups”—a term used by Iran to refer to Salafi-Jihadi organizations like Jaish al Adl—threaten the security of Sistan and Baluchistan Province.[2] Jaish al Adl is a Baloch Salafi-jihadi armed group that has historically targeted Iranian security personnel and infrastructure in Sistan and Baluchistan Province. Iran has taken steps to target anti-regime militant groups following an uptick in anti-regime militancy in southeastern Iran since December 2023.[3]

**Bagheri may have also met with air defense and naval units to discuss new Iranian operations planning for the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz and threats to Iran's nuclear facilities.** Bagheri previously traveled to southern Iran on May 12 to discuss new deployments to the Nazeat Islands as part of a new Iranian operational concept for attacking vessels in the Strait of Hormuz.[4] Likely Iranian and Iranian-linked vessels have behaved abnormally in and around the straits in recent days after his visit by issuing distress calls and harassing merchant vessels.[5] Bagheri could have discussed similar issues during this visit. Senior Iranian officials also expressed concern about US B2 Spirit stealth bomber deployments to Diego Garcia in March 2025, which Iranian officials appeared to interpret as a threat to Iran's nuclear facilities.[6] Several Iranian officers have traveled throughout Iran to inspect air defenses in April and May 2025, which CTP-ISW assesses is a part of Iranian preparations to defend against an Israeli or US strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

**Recent Iranian statements suggest that key Iranian leaders are considering moving nuclear material to unspecified “secure” locations to protect nuclear material from a strike after recent leaks about a potential Israeli strike.** Iranian Supreme Leader Adviser and former Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Ali Shamkhani suggested on April 10 that that Iran could transfer enriched uranium to “secure locations” if the United States and Israel continue to make military threats.”[7] Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi threatened on May 22 that Iran will take “special measures” to preemptively protect its nuclear facilities amid recent Israeli threats to strike Iranian nuclear facilities.[8] Araghchi and Shamkhani's statements indicate that Iran is considering moving enriched uranium specifically. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is currently able to monitor Iranian enriched uranium stockpiles stored in declared sites. Iran appears to be responding to widespread leaks about a potential impending Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear



facilities.[9]

### **Key Takeaways:**

- **Iranian Security Perceptions:** A visit to southeastern Iran by a senior Iranian officer illustrates Tehran's security concerns over anti-regime militancy in southeastern Iran. The officer was probably meeting with air defense and naval units to discuss new Iranian operations planning for the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz and threats to Iran's nuclear facilities.
- **Iranian Nuclear Program:** Recent Iranian statements suggest that key Iranian leaders are considering moving nuclear material to unspecified "secure" locations to protect nuclear material from a strike after recent leaks about a potential Israeli strike. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is currently able to monitor Iranian enriched uranium stockpiles stored in declared sites.

### **Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy**

**The Iranian Defense Ministry showcased Iranian defense equipment at the 12th International Exhibition of Arms and Military Machinery (MILEX-2025) in Minsk, Belarus, on May 22, likely as part of an Iranian effort to promote and sell its weapons systems.[10]** The exhibition included 150 companies from Iran, Russia, China, Pakistan, and India. Iranian Defense Ministry Spokesperson Brigadier General Reza Talaei Nik met with Belarusian Defense Minister Lieutenant General Viktor Khrenin and Chief of the General Staff Major General Pavel Muraveiko on the sidelines of the exhibition. Senior Iranian officials, including Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri, have repeatedly stated that Iran aims to export military capabilities to "friendly" countries.[11] The Iranian Defense Ministry is responsible for foreign arms sales and defense agreements.[12] Iran's efforts to increase its military and defense exports come amid the US "maximum pressure" campaign aimed at driving Iranian oil exports to zero.[13] Iran may seek to increase its military exports to offset the effects of US sanctions, though these exports cannot replace the loss of oil revenue. The Iranian Defense Ministry reportedly showcased more than 50 military systems at the MILEX-25, including drones, rockets, and loitering munitions.[14] Iran separately has begun efforts to establish a military drone factory in Belarus since May 2023 to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[15]

**The Iranian rial appreciated from 827,500 rial to one US dollar on May 21 to 843,000 rial to one US dollar on May 22.[16]**

### **Syria**

**Recent criminal incidents underscore the challenges faced by the transitional government and Druze forces in maintaining security in Suwayda Province.** Local armed groups have engaged in "repeated" incidents of theft and other various criminal activities in Suwayda in recent days.[17] An armed group stormed Suwayda Governor Mustafa Bakour's office on May 21 to demand that Bakour release a relative that security services had detained on vehicle theft charges.[18] Bakour ordered the relative's release under duress, and the Men of Dignity and Mountain Brigade—two

prominent Druze militias—intervened to engage the local group and move Bakour to safety.[19] Suwayda’s three most prominent Druze sheikhs announced that they instructed local Druze militias to reinforce local police forces in order to improve law and order in response to the incident.[20] Druze leaders and the Syrian government agreed on May 1 to allow Suwaydawi-led police forces to operate under Damascus’s Interior Ministry as part of a security compromise following tensions over attacks on the Druze community in Jaramana, Sahnaya, and Suwayda.[21] Many of these police units do not appear to have been activated at this time.

The government’s reliance on prominent Druze militias to resolve a security incident involving the governor and the need to deploy these militias across the province to bolster police presence suggests that the police forces that do exist are limited in capability, undermanned, and therefore ineffective.[22] A Men of Dignity leader deployed outside Suwayda’s Criminal Security building on May 22 complained that the government has not provided local police institutions with any logistical support or equipment since the May 1 agreement.[23] Druze factions’ deployments and the lack of a strong police presence also suggest that Damascus may be facing challenges in integrating Druze fighters into security forces or coordinating between different new units. The May 1 agreement did not explicitly require the main Druze factions in Suwayda Province to disarm and join state security forces.[24]

**Syrian Kurds and some Druze are taking political and military action due to distrust in the government.** Democratic Union Party (PYD) leader Aldar Khalil announced in an interview with Kurdish media on May 22 that the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) will represent the Kurdish interests in upcoming negotiations with Damascus.[25] The PYD’s military wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG), is part of the SDF. Khalil said that the AANES delegation intends to negotiate with Damascus over the structure of Syria’s system of government, army, and possible amendments to the Syrian Constitutional Declaration.[26] Kurdish political parties, including the PYD and rival party Kurdish National Council (KNC), recently issued a unified political position and called for a federal Syrian structure that would create a unified entity to administer all Kurdish-majority regions in northeastern Syria in late April.[27] Khalil’s summary of Kurdish priorities ahead of upcoming talks is consistent with the post-Assad positions of Kurdish groups on autonomy and decentralization. The Kurdish groups remain very concerned about the concentration of power around Syrian President Ahmed al Shara and the government’s de-prioritization of Kurdish security and rights.

A new Druze faction known as the “National Guard Forces” recently formed in Suwayda Province, likely due to continued distrust between some Druze and local Sunni communities and the government’s continued security challenges.[28] The Syrian Ministry of Defense (MoD) denied any connection to the group on May 19.[29] Syrian activist Malik Abu Khayr told UAE-based media on May 19 that Druze leaders founded the National Guard to “lead the security and military scene in Suwayda” after recent attacks on the Druze community in Jaramana, Sahnaya, and Suwayda Province.[30] Abu Khayr called on Syrian Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra to “end the control of jihadist groups that attack [Suwayda] city.”[31] Abu Khayr is likely referring to the likely Sunni militias that continued to conduct attacks targeting Druze populations in Suwayda Province since the Jaramana-Sahnaya tensions ended on May 1.[32] It is unclear how this group is tied to Abu Khayr, who has led the Suwayda-based political party and armed group Hizb Liwa al Souri from France since 2021.[33] Hizb Liwa al Souri’s military

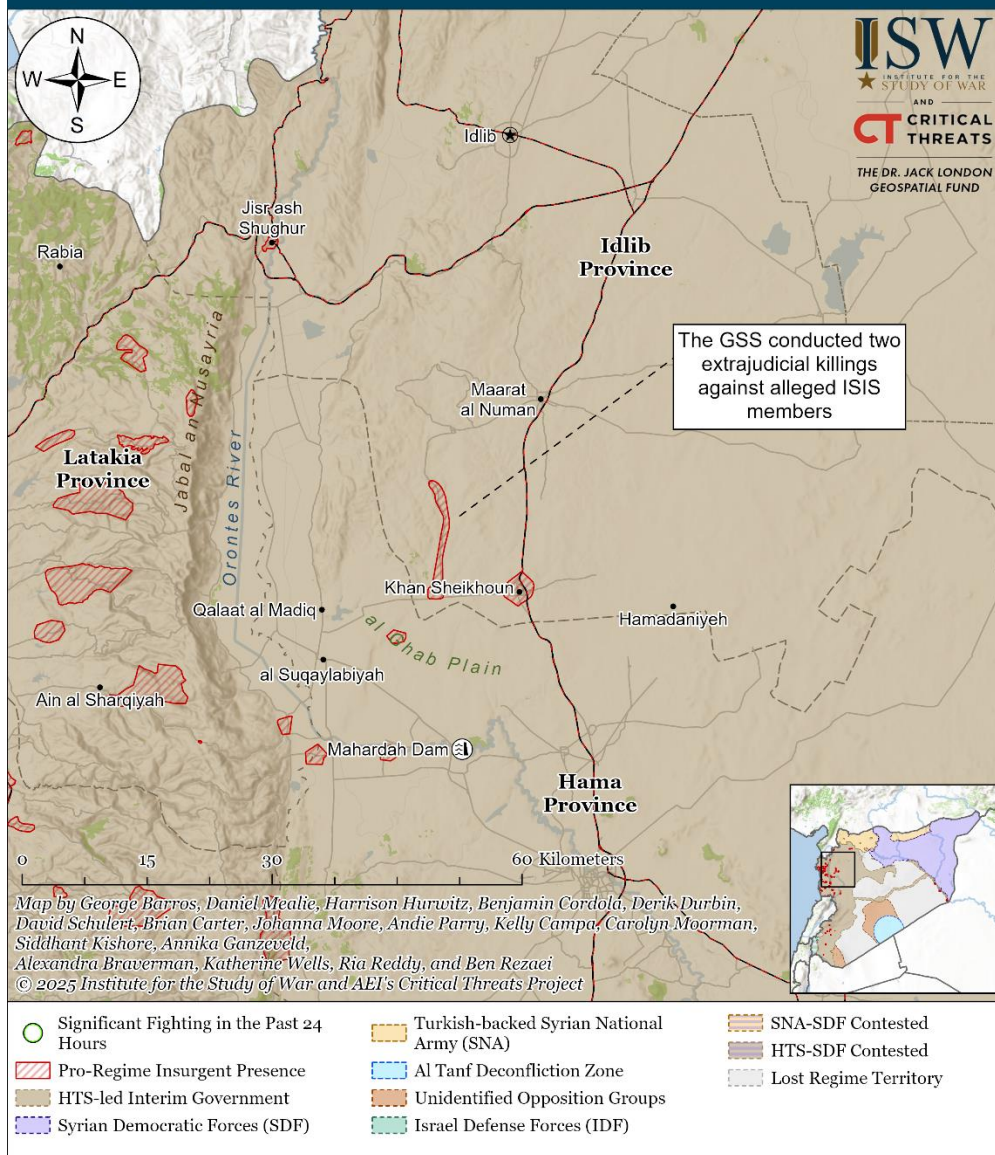
wing also focused on protecting Suwayda Province from external threats, such as Iranian-backed militias and ISIS.[34] The National Guard Forces may be formed from some remnants of Hizb Liwa al Souri's military wing, given Abu Khayr's knowledge of the group. Abu Khayr also claimed that prominent Druze leader Hikmat al Hijri's son founded the group, but a Syrian media outlet said that it could not confirm this detail.[35]

**A Turkish journalist reported on May 21 that Israel and Turkey continue to discuss the "Palmyra line" and that Israel may be "amenable" to Turkish deployments north of Palmyra, Homs Province.[36]** Israel conducted airstrikes on two air bases near Palmyra in March and April 2025 that Turkish military teams had planned to visit ahead of planned Turkish construction at the bases.[37] Turkey and Israel reportedly established a de-confliction line in April 2025 to prevent future misunderstandings or military incidents between Turkey and Israel in Syria.[38] A Turkish journalist for Middle East Eye, citing an unspecified source familiar with Israel-Turkey negotiations, reported that the Israelis are "comfortable" with the deployment of Turkish infantry and armor to Syria.[39] Israel is reportedly more concerned about Turkey's deployment of air defense and radar systems in Syria, particularly near Palmyra.[40] Two unspecified sources previously told Middle East Eye in early April that Turkey planned to possibly deploy Hisar and S-400 air defense systems at the base.[41] The Hisar-A and Hisar-O systems are Turkish short- and medium-range surface-to-air missile systems, respectively.[42] The S-400 is a longer-range system that can engage targets up to 400 kilometers.[43] Turkey does not appear to have attempted to install air defense systems at Syrian bases since Israel struck the bases in March and April 2025.[44]

**The General Security Service (GSS) conducted an extrajudicial killing of two alleged ISIS members in Idlib Province, on May 21.** GSS forces arrested two alleged ISIS members accused of killing a MoD officer in the town of Kafar Sajnah, Idlib Province.[45] Footage posted on May 21 appeared to show members of the GSS beating the two alleged ISIS members after the GSS detained the ISIS fighters.[46] The GSS members executed the two alleged ISIS members and posted images of the dead ISIS fighters on social media.[47]

## Assessed Control of Terrain around Idlib

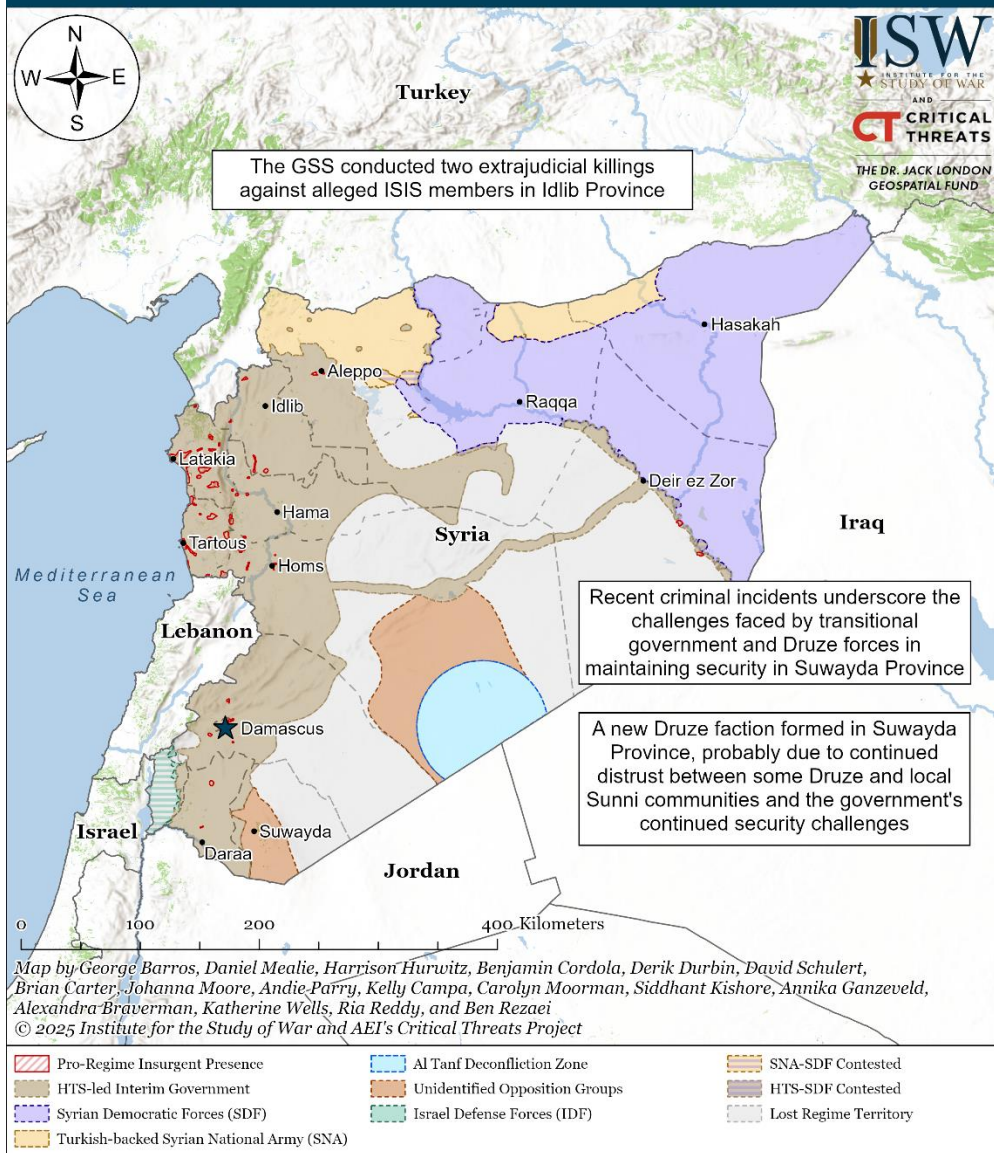
May 22, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



**The Syrian Energy Minister Mohammed al Bashir and Turkish Energy Minister Alparslan Bayraktar signed an energy agreement on May 22.[48]** The agreement stipulates that Turkey will export six million cubic meters of gas and one thousand megawatts of electricity to Syria per day.[49] Bashir said that energy infrastructure to facilitate the energy imports into Syria will be operational by the end of the year.[50]

## Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

May 22, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



## Iraq

**Former Parliament Speaker Mohammed al Halbousi's Progress Party announced on May 22 that it will run unilaterally in the upcoming November 2025 Iraqi parliamentary elections.[51]** Halbousi and Khamis al Khanjar, a long-time Halbousi rival, reportedly agreed in early May 2025 to compete in the elections together or form a post-election alliance.[52] Halbousi's party could still join Khanjar's after the election, however. Khanjar and Halbousi's other historical rivals are members of the United Sunni Leadership Coalition, which formed in early January 2025 and has explicitly supported long-held Sunni political demands.[53] This announcement could indicate that the



Halbousi-Khanjar agreement failed. CTP-ISW assessed on April 28 that Halbousi may be cooperating with the Shia Coordination Framework to unseat current Parliament Speaker Mahmoud al Mashhadani, who has also long opposed Halbousi.[54] Halbousi's party could form a post-election alliance with Shia Coordination Framework parties to accumulate more power. The Shia Coordination Framework is a loose coalition of Shia political parties, some of which Iran backs.

## **Arabian Peninsula**

### **Axis of Resistance objectives:**

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

**The Houthis conducted two separate ballistic missile attacks on Ben Gurion Airport in central Israel on May 22 as part of the Houthi campaign to enforce an economic blockade on Israel.**[55] The IDF intercepted both missiles.[56] Some international airlines have temporarily suspended flights to Israel through mid-June 2025 due to concerns of Houthi attacks on Ben Gurion Airport.[57]

**The Houthis also claimed two separate drone strikes targeting unspecified Israeli targets in Tel Aviv and Haifa on May 22.**[58] The Houthis said on May 19 that they would target Haifa Port in retaliation for recent Israeli airstrikes on Houthi-controlled ports in Yemen.[59] Haifa is a key Israeli economic hub and port of entry. The Houthis could theorize that attacks on Haifa support their objective to economically isolate Israel in retaliation for its operations in the Gaza Strip by damaging the Israeli economy.

## **The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon**

**Unspecified Hamas and Arab officials confirmed that Israel killed Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip Mohammed Sinwar on May 13.** The *Wall Street Journal* quoted the officials on May 22, who stated that Sinwar was attending a meeting with other senior Hamas commanders at the time of the strike.[60] The sources confirmed that Hamas' Rafah Brigade commander Mohammed Shabana was also killed in the airstrike. Shabana had served as the Rafah Brigade commander since the beginning of the October 7 War.[61] Hamas' Gaza City Brigade commander Izz al-Din Haddad is one of the frontrunners expected to replace Mohammed Sinwar.[62] Haddad is the only surviving Hamas brigade commander who was alive at the start of the war.[63]

*CTP-ISW will not be covering the new Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip. We have reprioritized our Middle East coverage to focus on Iran's nuclear program, Iranian domestic security, and Iranian*



*efforts to rebuild its networks into the Levant, including the Palestinian Territories. Given that Israel and its partners have destroyed Hamas' military organization and severed the group's ability to resupply itself, we are now focused on how Iran seeks to rebuild its lines of communication with Hezbollah and Hamas through Syria.*

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

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

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# Iran Update



**Andie Parry, Ria Reddy, Kelly Campa, Alexandra Braverman, Carolyn Moorman, Johanna Moore, Alexis Thomas, and Brian Carter**

**May 23, 2025 Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm ET**

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

*Click [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of the ongoing opposition offensive in Syria, and [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations. The Syria map is updated daily alongside the static Syria maps in this report. CTP-ISW ended daily maps of Israeli ground operations in February 2025.*

*We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We utterly condemn violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.*

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

**Iran may try to secure an interim nuclear deal before negotiating a comprehensive nuclear agreement to delay or prevent a US or Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear facilities and the imposition of snapback sanctions by the E3 (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany), as CTP-ISW previously assessed.**<sup>[1]</sup> The *Wall Street Journal* reported on May 23 that the United States and Iran are considering negotiating a framework deal, citing unspecified individuals familiar with the US-Iran nuclear negotiations.<sup>[2]</sup> An unspecified senior official familiar with the negotiations told the WSJ that the goal would be "to establish an understanding on the key points that would constitute a final agreement."<sup>[3]</sup>

Iran and the P5+1 (the United States, the United Kingdom, China, France, Russia and Germany) reached an interim deal in 2013 that froze elements of Iran's nuclear program in exchange for temporary sanctions relief prior to further negotiations that led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015.<sup>[4]</sup> Iran agreed to eliminate its 20 percent enriched uranium stockpile, refrain from operating any inactive centrifuges, halt the production and installation of new centrifuges, cease



construction of the Arak heavy water reactor, and accept new International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) oversight measures in the 2013 interim deal.[5] It is unclear what concessions Iran would be willing to make for an interim deal in the current nuclear negotiations.

**The United States and Iran held their fifth round of nuclear talks in Rome on May 23.[6]**

US Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff and Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi led the US and Iranian delegations, respectively.[7] Omani Foreign Minister and lead mediator Badr Albusaidi said the latest round of nuclear talks ended with "some but not conclusive progress." [8] Two unspecified Iranian sources separately told CNN that Iran is participating in the fifth round of talks to gauge the Trump administration's position, likely referring to the US demand for zero uranium enrichment, which continues to be the main sticking point in the US-Iran nuclear negotiations.[9] Araghchi posted on X (Twitter) on May 22 that zero enrichment means "we do not have a deal." [10] Technical teams accompanied both the US and Iranian delegations, which suggests the talks covered technical issues such as Iranian uranium enrichment levels.[11] CTP-ISW previously assessed that disagreements between Iran and the United States about the issue of zero uranium enrichment may stall the negotiations or delay a deal.[12] Iran and the United States could agree to an interim or framework deal that does not explicitly include the US demand for zero uranium enrichment.

**The Artesh Ground Forces deputy commander unveiled new tactical drones on May 22 in Sistan and Baluchistan.[13]**

The new drones, which were developed by the Artesh, may reflect some lessons observed from the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. The new drones will probably contribute to the development or implementation of new tactics to counter anti-regime militant groups, including the Baloch Salafi-jihadi militant group Jaish al Adl that regularly attacks Iranian security forces and infrastructure in southeastern Iran.

Deputy Commander of the Artesh Ground Forces Deputy Commander Brigadier General Nozar Nemati, unveiled three new drones: the Didban, Shahin-1, and Homa.[14] All three drones have vertical take-off and landing capability.[15] Nemati stated that the drones will be integrated into regional combat units stationed in Sistan and Baluchistan Province to "confront any [security] threat", which is an implicit reference to Jaish al Adl.[16] The Didban is a reconnaissance drone that can reportedly fly at 6,000 feet.[17] The Shahin-1 is a high-speed first-person view (FPV) drone that is reportedly capable of striking stationary and mobile targets. The Homa can reportedly fly above 12,000 feet and operate at night. Iranian media claimed the Homa can conduct reconnaissance missions "in electronic warfare (EW) situations," suggesting it is hardened to EW disruptions.[18] The proliferation of EW capabilities on both sides has been a predominant characteristic of the war in Ukraine.[19] Both sides use EW capabilities to disrupt FPV and other drones, which have been critical for both sides in the war. Iran's development of these capabilities may reflect lessons learned in the war in Ukraine.

The newly unveiled drones may be part of a broader Iranian effort to leverage drone warfare to confront insurgent threats in Sistan and Baluchistan Province. These drones, which are small and man-portable, could increase the amount of tactical-level intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms available to Iranian security forces operating in Sistan and Baluchistan Province. The FPV drones can provide small Iranian units with an organic precision strike capability that they currently lack. Iranian units could use the recon drones to provide targeting intelligence that can then be exploited by FPV drones without the need to coordinate with larger formations to use higher-end assets.

Artesh Ground Forces Commander Brigadier General Kiomars Heydari recently emphasized the importance of expanding drone capabilities in Sistan and Baluchistan Province.[20] Heydari stated on May 22 that Iran has recently established three new drone bases in Sistan and Baluchistan Province as part of a broader effort to secure southeastern Iran.[21]

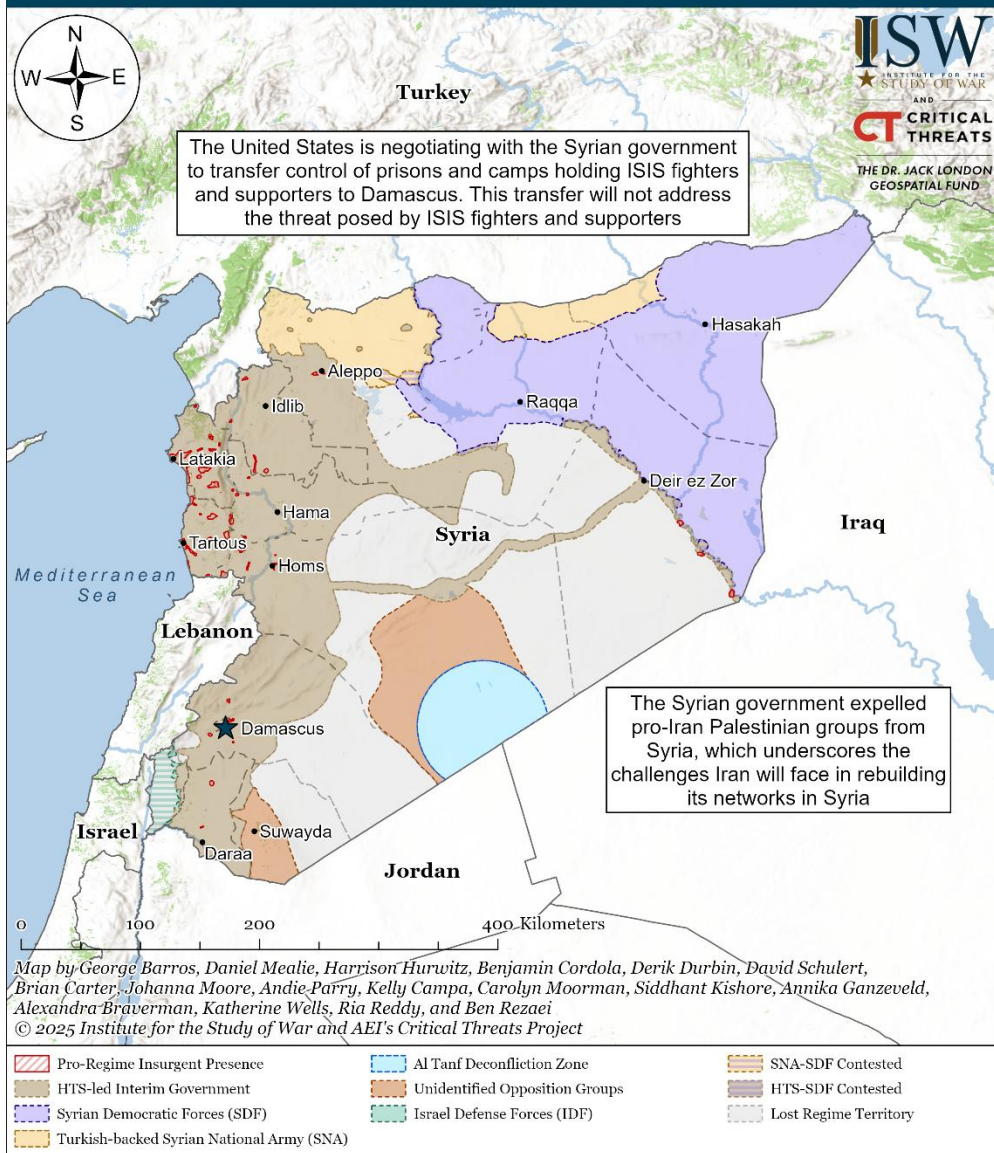
**The United States is negotiating with the Syrian government to transfer control of detention facilities and camps holding Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters and supporters to the government. This will not address the threat posed by ISIS fighters and supporters.** US President Donald Trump asked Syrian transitional President Ahmed al Shara on May 13 to “assume responsibility” for detention centers holding over 9,000 ISIS fighters in northeastern Syria.[22] US Central Command Commander General Michael Kurilla has called these ISIS fighters “an ISIS army-in-waiting.”[23] The US Mission to the United Nations separately publicly requested on May 21 that Syria “assume responsibility for the detention facilities and the al Hol and Roj displaced persons camps” from the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which currently administers the camps.[24] The Trump administration has also engaged Turkey, Syria, and Iraq to form a working group to address the ISIS detention centers, according to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.[25] This working group will presumably plan a handover from the SDF to the Syrian government.

**An agreement to transfer these ISIS fighters and supporters to Syrian government control would not decrease the threat they pose to the United States, however.** A transfer of control to the Syrian government would not mean that these facilities and camps no longer exist or that the Syrian government could easily repatriate or integrate ISIS fighters and supporters. The United States and the SDF have been attempting to repatriate ISIS fighters and supporters in northeastern Syria, but progress in decreasing the population of detention facilities and camps has been slow.[26] The Syrian government would presumably face similar challenges as it attempts to send hardened terrorists back to their home countries.

The Syrian government would very likely require significant support to successfully secure these facilities, just like the SDF does. The United States has continually improved SDF detention facilities, while US officials have continued to emphasize that repatriation is the only solution to the ISIS detention problem in northeastern Syria.[27] The United States also supports SDF operations in al Hol IDP camp—home to over 40,000 ISIS family members and supporters—with ISR.[28] The Syrian government still lacks organic, well-developed ISR. US military capabilities have also been crucial in countering ISIS prison break operations. ISIS attacked a detention facility in southern Hasakah City in January 2022 and freed up to 300 ISIS fighters.[29] The prison break caused the US military to use M2 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicles and ISR and close air support aircraft to suppress the ISIS attack.[30] ISIS has also recently developed the ability to conduct logistically advanced vehicle-borne improvised explosive device attacks in the Middle Euphrates River Valley and could use similar methods to free its members from the detention centers in northeastern Syria.[31]

## Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

May 23, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



### The Syrian government expelled pro-Iran Palestinian groups from Syria, which underscores the challenges that Iran will face in rebuilding its networks in Syria.

Palestinian faction leaders told Agence France-Presse on May 23 that the Syrian transitional government pressured Palestinian militia leaders in Syria to flee the country and disarm their forces.[32] Many Palestinian militias maintained a presence in Syria under Assad. The government previously formed a committee to monitor Palestinian faction activities in Syria and has detained several Palestinian militia members since April 2025.[33] The transitional government reportedly did not issue formal requests for the leaders to leave Syrian territory, but pressured them with restrictions and property confiscation.[34] A Palestinian faction leader told AFP that Palestinian leaders have evacuated to Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon after their expulsion from Syria.[35] Palestinian militias like Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) have historically maintained envoys in Houthi-controlled areas of

Yemen and conduct fundraising activities there to generate funds for the October 7 War.[36] This history makes the Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen a welcome place for these Palestinian militia leaders.

**A Syrian armed group claimed a May 20 attack on Russian forces at Hmeimim air base and gave the Russians one month to leave Syria before it attacks again.**[37] A group of fighters attacked Russian forces stationed at Hmeimim air base, Latakia Province, on May 20, and killed two Russian soldiers.[38] A group known as "Burkan al Furat" claimed the attack on May 21 and acknowledged that two of its fighters were killed, including ex-Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) military trainer Abu Jihad Masri.[39] Burkan al Furat commander Mohammad al Shami warned in a separate statement that the group will attack Russian forces again if they do not withdraw from Syrian territory within one month.[40] Burkan al Furat appears to be comprised of former FSA and Syrian National Army (SNA) fighters from northeastern Syria, according to Syrian and Lebanese media.[41] The group reportedly participated in the HTS-led offensive that toppled the regime.[42] Shami identified his fighters as former "HTS brothers" and referred to Burkan al Furat as part of the Free Syrian Army (FSA).[43] This characterization indicates that the group did not act under Damascus's orders when it attacked Hmeimim, despite some of its fighters' former associations with HTS.

Burkan al Furat's threat to attack Russian forces if they do not withdraw from Syrian territory within one month is unlikely to compel the Russians to withdraw. Damascus has allowed limited Russian forces to remain at Hmeimim after the majority of Russian forces withdrew from Syrian territory in December 2024.[44] Russia has sought to maintain bases that it previously held before the fall of the regime, including the port of Tartous, and is therefore unlikely to withdraw, barring direct orders from Damascus.[45] Syrian President Ahmed al Shara does not appear to have decided on the future of Russian influence in Syria. Recent and newfound high-level engagement with the United States may influence Shara's calculations.

### **Key Takeaways:**

- **US-Iran Nuclear Negotiations:** Iran may try to secure an interim nuclear deal before negotiating a comprehensive nuclear agreement to delay or prevent a US or Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear facilities and the imposition of snapback sanctions by the E3 (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany), as CTP-ISW previously assessed.
- **Iranian Military Learning:** The Artesh Ground Forces deputy commander unveiled new tactical drones on May 22 in Sistan and Baluchistan. The new drones, which were developed by the Artesh, may reflect some lessons observed from the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. The new drones will probably contribute to the development or implementation of new tactics to counter anti-regime militant groups, including the Baloch Salafi-jihadi militant group Jaish al Adl that regularly attacks Iranian security forces and infrastructure in southeastern Iran.
- **US-Syria Relations:** The United States is negotiating with the Syrian government to transfer control of detention facilities and camps holding Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters and supporters to the government. An agreement to transfer these ISIS fighters and supporters to Syrian government control would not decrease the threat they pose to the United States,

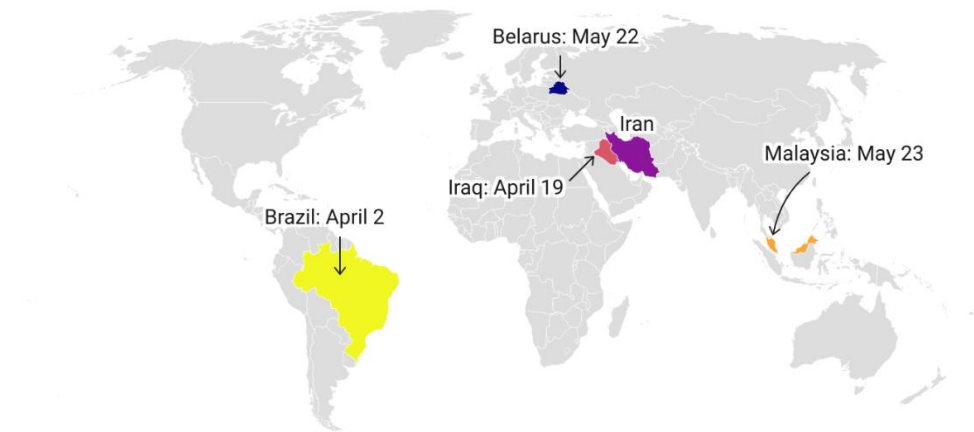
however. The Syrian government would very likely require significant support to successfully secure these facilities, just like the SDF does.

- **Syria and Palestinian Groups:** The Syrian government expelled pro-Iran Palestinian groups from Syria, which underscores the challenges that Iran will face in rebuilding its networks in Syria. A Palestinian faction leader told AFP that Palestinian leaders have evacuated to Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon after their expulsion from Syria.
- **Syria and Russia:** A Syrian armed group claimed a May 20 attack on Russian forces at Hmeimim air base and gave the Russians one month to leave Syria before it attacks again. This group's threat to attack Russian forces if they do not withdraw from Syrian territory within one month is unlikely to compel the Russians to withdraw.

### **Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy**

**Iran may be trying to increase its defense exports to mitigate the effects of Western sanctions.** The Iranian Defense Ministry showcased missiles, warship models, naval equipment, radars, and guided bombs at the Malaysian International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition in Langkawi, Malaysia, on May 23.[46] Iranian Ambassador to Malaysia Ali Ashgar Mohamadi and Malaysian Deputy Defense Minister Adly Zahari discussed opportunities to expand bilateral defense cooperation on the sidelines of the exhibition. The Iranian Defense Ministry has showcased Iranian defense equipment at expositions in Belarus, Brazil, and Iraq since April 2025.[47] Iranian efforts to increase its military and defense exports come amid the US “maximum pressure” campaign aimed at driving Iranian oil exports to zero.[48] Defense exports are, however, unlikely to compensate for the loss of Iranian oil revenue. The United States imposed sanctions prohibiting foreign arms sales to and from Iran in 1979.[49]

#### **Iranian Participation in Defense Exhibitions in April and May 2025**



Map: Annika Ganzeveld • Source: Author's Research • Created with Datawrapper

**Senior Iranian officials are continuing to prepare for potential US or Israeli strikes on Iran.** Khatam ol Anbia Air Defense Headquarters Commander Brigadier General Alireza Sabahi Fard visited the Semnan Air Defense Training Center in Semnan Province on May 23.[50] Semnan Province

houses multiple critical defense industrial sites within proximity to the Semnan Air Defense Training Center. The Semnan Missile Complex, located in central Semnan Province, includes a ballistic missile production facility and an area to test missiles.[51] The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) previously operated the Shahroud Missile Facility in Semnan Province. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) destroyed the facility in its October 2024 strikes on Iran.[52] The IRGC used this facility to build solid-propellant ballistic missiles and launch Space Launch Vehicles (SLV) into orbit.[53] Sabahi Fard's visit follows a series of similar inspections at Iranian military and defense sites across Iran.

**The Iranian rial appreciated from 843,000 rial to one US dollar on May 22 to 828,500 rial to one US dollar on May 23.[54]**

## **Syria**

**Unspecified fighters likely detonated an improvised explosive device (IED) on May 22 that killed three Syrian Civil Defense volunteers in the northern Hama countryside.[55]**

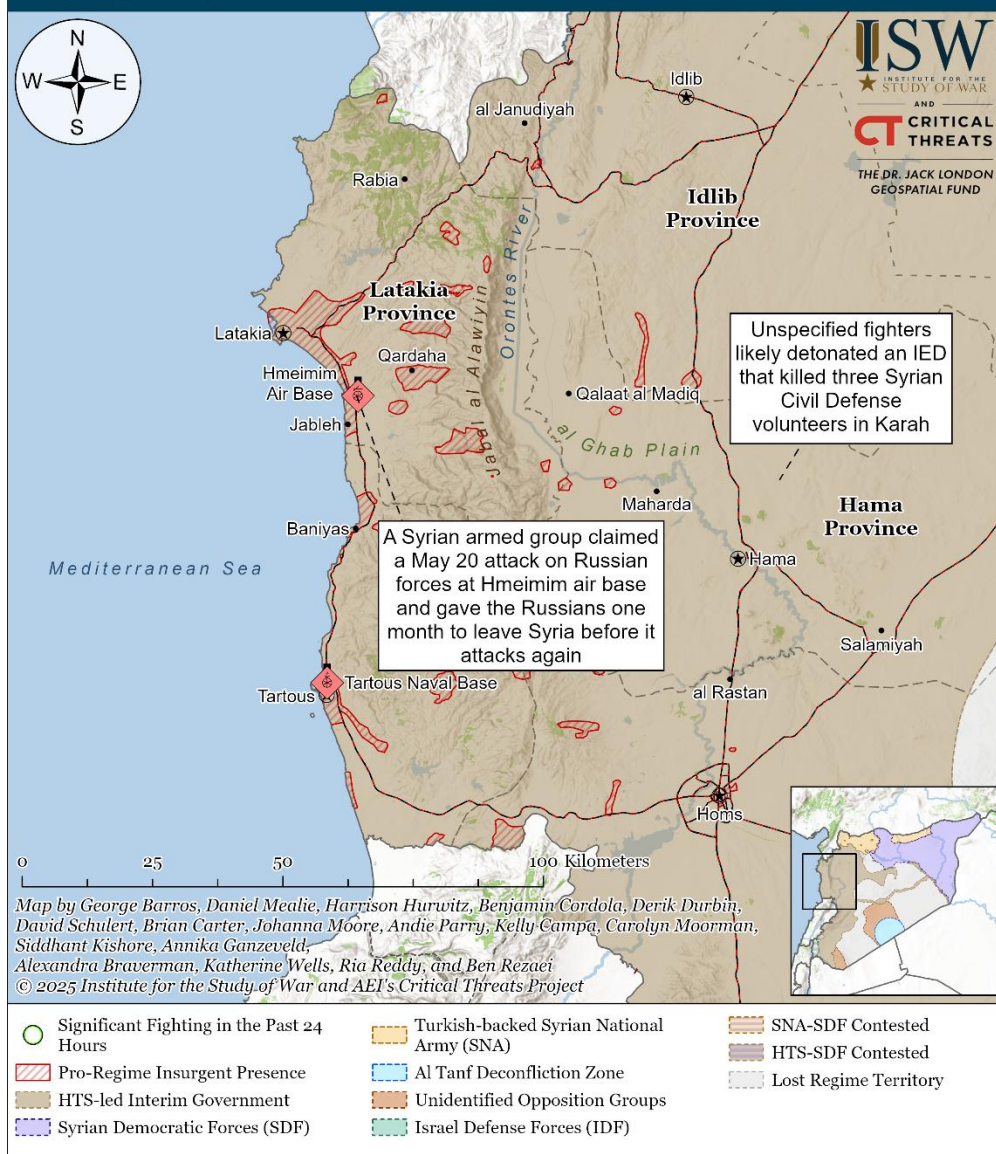
The Syrian Civil Defense Organization, also known as the White Helmets, announced that four volunteers responded to a call about a suspicious object in Karah in the northeastern Hama countryside. One of the volunteers reported that his colleagues realized that the object was a command-initiated IED shortly before the device detonated.[56] Three volunteers were killed in the detonation.[57] The Syrian Civil Defense assessed that unspecified individuals may have “deliberately targeted” the team.[58]

No actor has claimed responsibility for this incident at the time of this writing. Two Salafi-jihadi groups that oppose the new government, Saraya Ansar al Sunnah and ISIS, are present near Karah, however. Three fighters from Saraya Ansar al Sunnah recently assassinated a former National Defense Forces (NDF) fighter in Taybat al Imam (8km southeast of Karah) on May 7.[59] Saraya Ansar al Sunnah is explicitly opposed to the new government but has not yet claimed an attack targeting government-affiliated forces.[60] General Security Service (GSS) forces arrested and executed two alleged ISIS members accused of killing a MoD officer on May 21 in the town of Kafar Sajnah, Idlib Province.[61] Kafar Sajnah is 30 kilometers northwest of Karah. ISIS has a vested interest in limiting the transitional government's ability to reconstruct certain areas of Syria because slow reconstruction would create opportunities for ISIS recruitment. ISIS has also extensively used IEDs to conduct targeted attacks in rural areas.[62] Alawite insurgents probably did not conduct this attack because Alawite insurgents have little to no IED capability and have not conducted any attacks in recent weeks.



## Assessed Control of Terrain in Western Syria

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**GSS forces arrested Assad regime militia leader Asef Rifaat Salam in Latakia Province on May 23.[63]** Salam has been accused of committing war crimes in the Zabadani and Madaya areas of Rif Dimashq. Syrian state media reported that Salam led the Homeland Shield Brigade, a pro-regime, Iranian-backed militia that operated in southern Syria during the civil war.[64] Syrian state media claimed that the Homeland Shield Brigade was affiliated with Syrian businessman Rami Makhoulf.[65] Makhoulf is former Syrian President Bashar al Assad's maternal cousin.[66] Makhoulf previously controlled several pro-government militias through his al Bustan Charitable Association.[67] Makhoulf claimed in April and May 2025 that he had "assembled forces" to defend the Syrian coastal region and Alawite communities against the transitional government.[68]

**The United States appointed current US Ambassador to Turkey Tom Barrack as US Special Envoy to Syria.[69]** Barrack is a former private equity executive and a long-time advisor to

US President Trump.[70] He will serve as Special Envoy to Syria while retaining his ambassadorial appointment in Turkey. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said that Barrack has worked with local Syrian officials in his role as ambassador to Turkey to understand Syrian aid needs.[71] Barrack said on X on May 23 that the cessation of US sanctions on Syria will "give the people of Syria a chance for a better future" and preserve the integrity of the US counter-ISIS mission.[72]

## **Iraq**

**Emirati media claimed that the United States made a series of demands of Iran that are inconsistent with the nature of the ongoing US-Iran negotiations.**[73] Unspecified "high-level" Iraqi sources told *al Erem* that Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein conveyed multiple US demands to Iranian officials during his visit to Tehran on May 19 and 20.[74] The US letter reportedly demanded that Iranian-backed Iraqi militias withdraw from Iraq within the next two weeks and that Iran allow US inspectors to inspect 31 Iranian military, nuclear, and research sites. It is highly unlikely that the Iraqi foreign minister would convey these demands instead of the US negotiators currently negotiating with Iran. The United States has previously pressured the Iraqi federal government to dissolve and disarm the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) as part of its maximum pressure campaign against Iran.[75] Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)-affiliated media denied that the United States made demands for inspections or the withdrawal of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias.[76]

The same source separately claimed that "high-level" Iraqi sources said on May 20 that Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS) head and Badr Organization operative Hamid al Shatri and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani planned to discuss potential operations against Iranian-backed Iraqi militias with US National Security Council officials in Washington, D.C., on May 22 and 23.[77] A Badr Organization operative like Shatri is highly unlikely to give intelligence on Iranian-backed Iraqi militias to the United States.[78] Unspecified diplomatic sources claimed that the United States is seeking information on militia capabilities and their presence within Baghdad.[79] CTP-ISW cannot verify that Shatri visited Washington on May 22 and 23.

## **Arabian Peninsula**

### **Axis of Resistance objectives:**

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

**The Houthis conducted a ballistic missile attack on Ben Gurion Airport in central Israel on May 23 as part of the Houthi campaign to enforce an economic blockade on Israel.**[80] The IDF intercepted the missile.[81] Some international airlines have temporarily suspended flights to Israel through July 2025 due to concerns about Houthi attacks on Ben Gurion Airport.[82]

## **The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon**

*Nothing significant to report.*

*CTP-ISW will not be covering the new Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip. We have reprioritized our Middle East coverage to focus on Iran's nuclear program, Iranian domestic security, and Iranian efforts to rebuild its networks into the Levant, including the Palestinian Territories. Given that Israel and its partners have destroyed Hamas' military organization and severed the group's ability to resupply itself, we are now focused on how Iran seeks to rebuild its lines of communication with Hezbollah and Hamas through Syria.*

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

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

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