

Iran Update



Ben Rezaei, Ben Schmida, Johanna Moore, Katherine Wells, Annika Ganzeveld, Nidal Morrison, and Brian Carter

Information Cutoff: May 26, 2025, 2:00 pm ET

CTP-ISW is publishing an abbreviated Iran Update on May 26, 2025, due to the Memorial Day holiday. We will provide resume our normal coverage on May 27, 2025.

Truck drivers across Iran have launched a nationwide strike over rising insurance and maintenance costs and worsening economic conditions.^[1] The truck drivers are protesting the government's plan to cut the amount of subsidized diesel allocated to truckers.^[2] Strikers also cited unaffordable insurance premiums, stagnant freight rates, and deteriorating road infrastructure.^[3] The government-subsidized insurance premium for truck drivers increased by approximately 45 percent earlier this year.^[4] The strike began in Bandar Abbas, Hormozgan Province, which is Iran's primary shipping hub, on May 18 and has since spread to other major Iranian cities.^[5] Economic-related protests and strikes have the potential to escalate into anti-regime protests similar to how demonstrations against increasing gas prices morphed into anti-regime protests in 2017 and 2018.^[6]

The ongoing strikes will likely worsen Iranian freight transport issues, especially after a recent explosion at a major port in Bandar Abbas. The Shahid Rajaei port in Bandar Abbas, which handles 85 percent of Iran's container traffic and a significant share of oil exports, suffered a major explosion on April 26 that has disrupted container traffic and cost Iran an estimated 25 million US dollars per day.^[7] The ongoing strike has reportedly strained domestic freight transport, particularly agricultural distribution during the harvest season.^[8] Iranian officials rejected claims that fruit and vegetable prices increased by 50 percent and stated that only a few staples saw "temporary" increases due to recent transport issues.^[9] An Iranian judiciary official reported on May 26 that Fars Province security forces arrested and prosecuted individuals who blocked the movement of freight trucks on roads.^[10] Iranian Law Enforcement Command (LEC) forces separately clashed with strikers in Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province, on May 25 with pepper spray.^[11]

Key Takeaways:

- **Internal Unrest in Iran:** Truck drivers across Iran have launched a nationwide strike over rising insurance and maintenance costs and worsening economic conditions. The ongoing strikes will likely worsen Iranian freight transport issues, especially after a recent explosion at a major port in Bandar Abbas.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

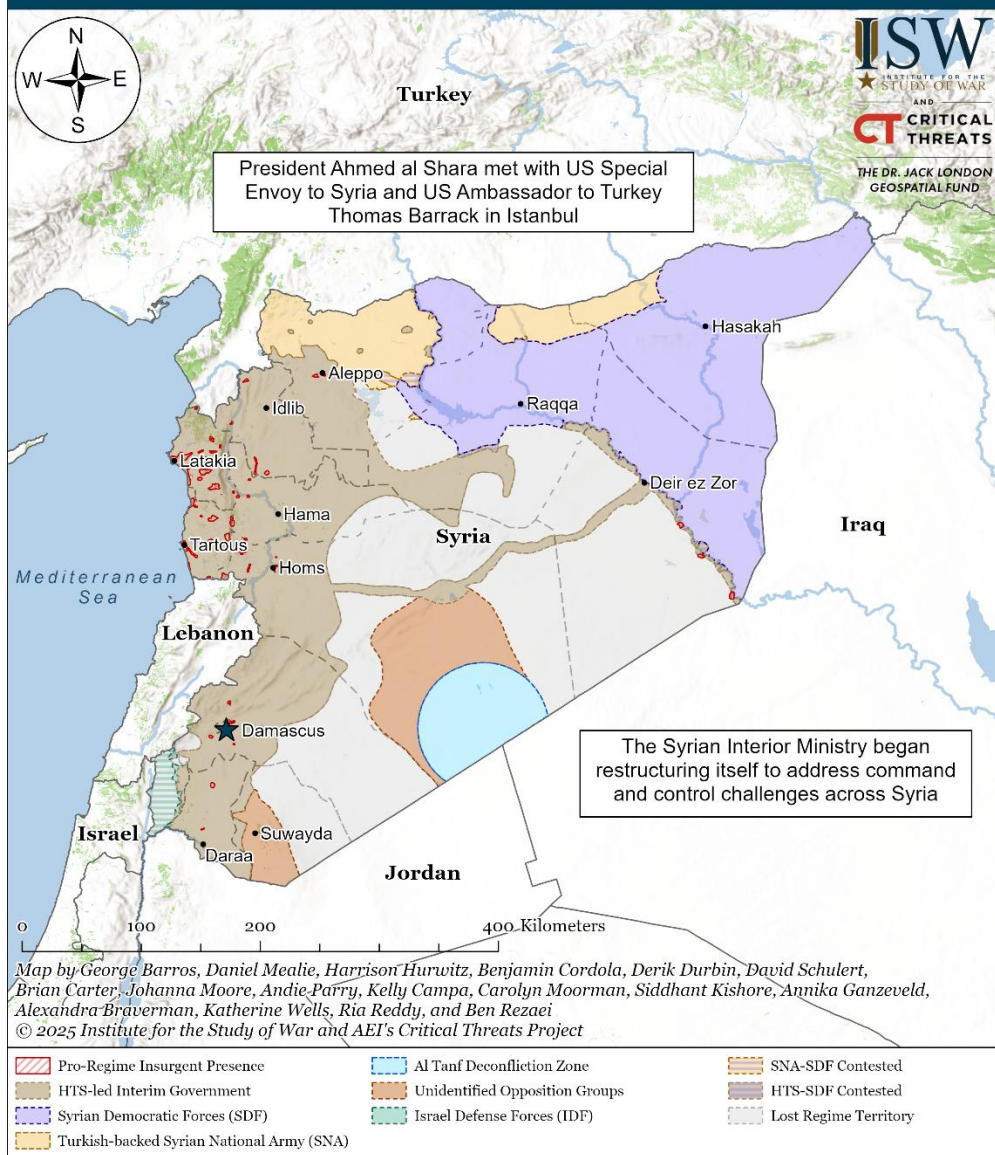
The Iranian rial appreciated from 828,500 rial to one US dollar on May 23 to 821,500 rial to one US dollar on May 26.^[12]

Syria

The Syrian transitional government's Interior Ministry announced a series of organizational changes on May 25 to improve effective command over security issues across Syria.^[13] The Interior Ministry will merge police and General Security Services (GSS) under the Provincial Interior Security Command.^[14] Unspecified sources told Syria24 on DTE that the Interior Ministry planned to adopt a regional command structure to improve the Interior Ministry's command and control throughout the country.^[15] The Interior Ministry has not yet announced a regional command structure, but the Provincial Interior Security Command could fill a similar role to the rumored regional command structure. Provincial-level commanders will report directly to the national-level head of the Provincial Interior Security Command.^[16] Provincial-level commands will oversee policing and intelligence operations within their respective provinces.^[17] The Interior Ministry appointed commanders of provincial security on May 25 to 11 of the 13 Syrian provinces.^[18] The Interior Ministry and Defense Ministry will coordinate to establish a Border Security Guard and Road Security Department.^[19] CTP-ISW will provide further analysis on the new provincial commanders over the coming days.

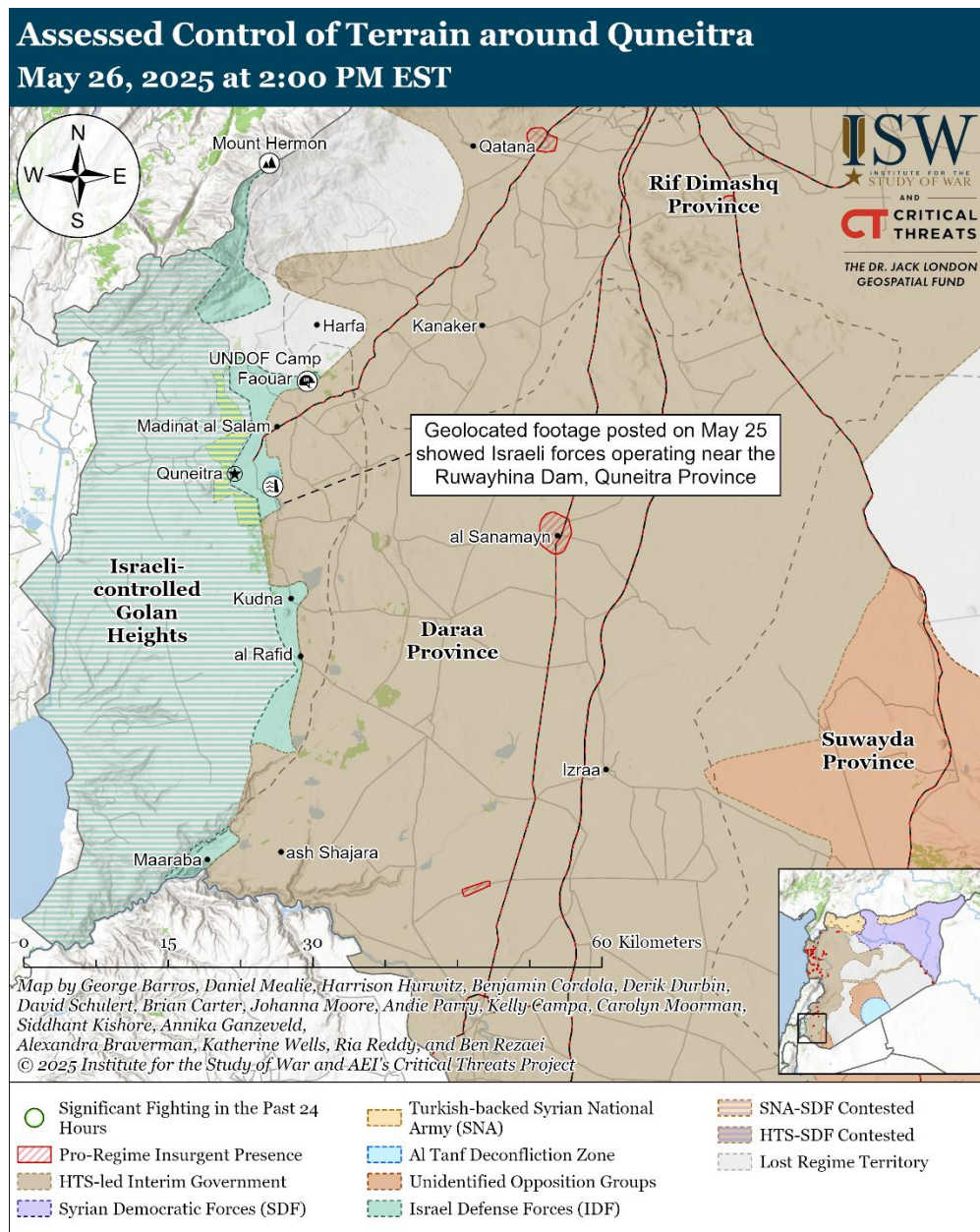
Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

May 26, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Syrian Transitional President Ahmed al Shara met with US Special Envoy to Syria and US Ambassador to Turkey Thomas Barrack in Istanbul on May 26.^[20] Shara probably discussed a variety of issues with Barrack, including sanctions relief, counterterrorism efforts, and the detention centers and IDP camps holding ISIS fighters and supporters in northeastern Syria. The US State Department previously issued a six-month waiver for the 2019 Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, and the Treasury Department lifted sanctions that banned US citizens and companies from conducting financial transactions with Syrian entities on May 23.^[21] President Shara welcomed the State and Treasury Departments' decisions to provide sanctions relief to Syria.^[22] Barrack praised Shara for taking steps to meet US demands for sanctions relief, which include the removal of foreign terrorist fighters, counter-Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) measures, diplomatic engagement with

Israel, and maintaining ISIS prison camps and detention centers in northeast Syria.[23] The Syrian transitional government has taken steps to expel Palestinian and Iranian-backed armed groups in Syria, some of which are US-designated foreign terrorist organizations, but the government has continued to integrate foreign fighters into the Ministry of Defense (MoD).[24] The United States is also currently negotiating with the Syrian government to transfer control of detention facilities and camps holding ISIS fighters and supporters to the government.[25] Shara and Barrack committed to further dialogue between the US and Syria in order to develop private sector investment in Syria to rebuild the nation's economy.[26]



Geolocated footage posted on May 25 showed Israeli forces operating near the Ruwayhina Dam, Quneitra Province.[27]

Iraq

Nothing significant to report today.

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 25 as part of the Houthi campaign to enforce an economic blockade on Israel.[28]

The IDF intercepted the missile.[29] Some international airlines have temporarily suspended flights to Israel through July 2025 due to concerns about Houthi attacks on Ben Gurion Airport.[30]

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



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

May 27, 2025 Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm ET

Salafi-jihadi groups, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), have increased their activity in Syria in May 2025. Syrian Interior Ministry spokesperson Nouredine al Baba said that ISIS activity has spiked in the period since the fall of the Assad regime due to ISIS cells' seizures of former Assad regime weapons stocks.[1] ISIS cells have since attempted to "infiltrate" MoD positions and recruit regime remnants.[2] The transitional government has conducted three large-scale raids targeting ISIS cells in Aleppo, Rif Dimashq, and Deir ez Zor provinces since May 17, compared to a single counter-ISIS raid between December 2024 and early May.[3] Interior Ministry forces seized ammunition, explosive devices, man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS), and suicide vests on May 25 from the ISIS cell in Rif Dimashq.[4] The ISIS cell reportedly seized this weapons stockpile during the fall of the Assad regime, which demonstrates that ISIS has the capability to rebuild and arm its cells even in areas currently under firm transitional government control in western Syria.[5] ISIS has also recently developed the ability to conduct attacks in the Middle Euphrates River Valley with vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, which require significant logistical tails and support zones.[6] ISIS announced in mid-May that it has a growing presence in the "countryside and [city] outskirts" in Syria.[7] The Islamic State has also attempted to use discontent with the Syrian transitional government among Salafi-jihadi hardliners to undermine the government and expand recruitment.

The agreement between the Syrian government and Kurdish-dominated authorities in northeastern Syria to transfer internally displaced persons (IDPs) from al Hol camp may create an opportunity for ISIS to recruit new fighters and reengage supporters. The Syrian transitional government reached an agreement with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) on May 26 to evacuate Syrian citizens held in ISIS prison camps in northeastern Syria, according to the Associated Press.[8] Al Jazeera reported that the government and the SDF will review detainee files for IDPs in al Hol, presumably to vet whether the IDPs can be released.[9] Kurdish authorities announced that local AANES authorities, transitional government representatives, and an international coalition delegation created a "joint mechanism" to return families from al Hol camp in Hasakah Province.[10] The Syrian transitional government lacks the capacity to effectively rehabilitate and integrate Syrian families returning from al Hol camp, some of whom are supportive of ISIS. Al Hol camp houses an estimated 37,000 people, and the majority of camp inhabitants are the family members of ISIS fighters.[11] Kurdish authorities refuted reports that the administration of the camp will be transferred to the Syrian transitional government in the near future and denied that they discussed this with the visiting delegation or with Damascus.[12] The authorities did not refute reports that some IDPs

would be returned to their homes, however. These returnees will provide fertile ground in which ISIS can embed itself, if it chooses to do so.

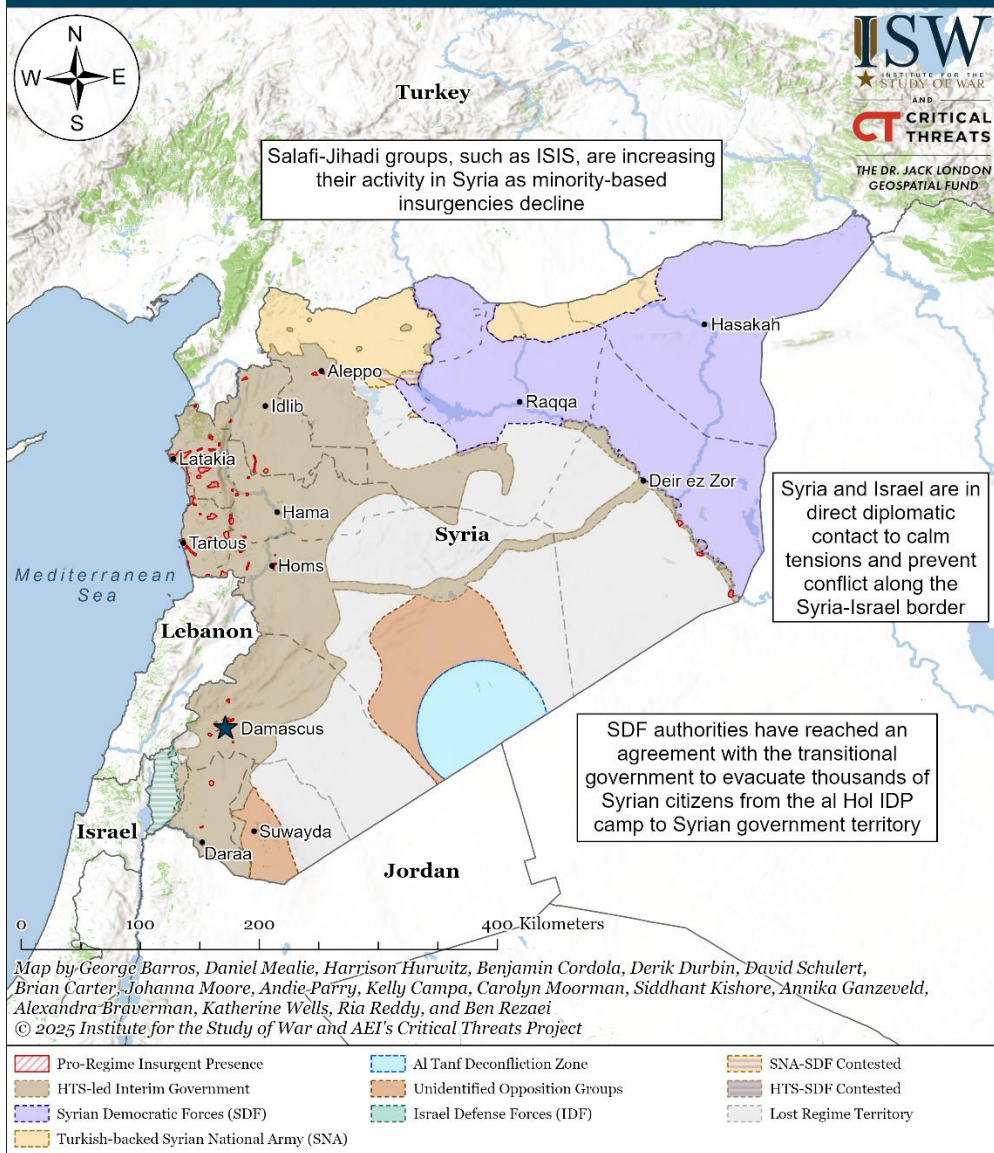
The Syrian transitional government will likely struggle to rehabilitate and integrate ISIS-affiliated families and individuals who return from al Hol camp, which risks creating an opportunity for ISIS recruitment in Syria. Only countries that have repatriated small numbers of fighters and possessed both the administrative and financial means and will to do so have successfully reintegrated ISIS family members.[13] Iraq began to repatriate thousands of ISIS-affiliated families and IDPs in 2021 and has faced immense challenges doing so since.[14] The Iraqi government struggled to integrate ISIS families and IDPs into their new communities, and returnees often faced extreme isolation and suspicion from these communities, which in many cases were victims of ISIS violence.[15] The treatment of returnees by their neighbors was not dependent on whether or not the returnees were actually ISIS supporters; their neighbors usually assumed any returnee was associated with ISIS.[16]

The transitional government is still attempting to build a state with functioning institutions after Assad's collapse, meaning it faces additional challenges that Iraq does not. Iraq has a fully functional police force and military, despite its flaws. It also has some rudimentary resettlement organizations and a Migration Ministry.[17] Syria's institutions are not yet fully functional. Some of the residents of al Hol remain hardened ISIS supporters, and others will face severe isolation from their communities upon their return. Isolation has historically led to recidivism and provides an opportunity for ISIS or other Salafi-jihadi groups, such as Saraya Ansar al Sunnah, to generate support networks in areas where they were not previously active.[18] ISIS remains a viable insurgency in Syria that aims to recruit fighters.

A Salafi-jihadi group ideologically close to the Islamic State (IS) described its operational concept in Syria on May 21. A Saraya Ansar al Sunnah leader said that the group is building control zones in rural areas before expanding to attack zones in likely government-controlled cities.[19] Saraya Ansar al Sunnah's operational concept may complicate the transitional government's efforts to combat the group because the transitional government will naturally prioritize urban areas with large populations and significant economic potential over outlying rural areas. Other insurgent groups, including al Qaeda in Iraq, have used a similar strategy focused on rural areas with success. CTP-ISW has not observed an increase in attacks claimed by Saraya Ansar al Sunnah, but the group likely continues to pursue this operational strategy. Saraya Ansar al Sunnah announced on May 21 that it would cease to publish public claims of its attacks targeting minority groups due to operational security concerns.[20] Unclaimed attacks consistent with Saraya Ansar al Sunnah's tactics have continued in western Syria since May 21.[21]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

May 27, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



US President Donald Trump warned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu against taking any action that would potentially jeopardize US-Iran nuclear talks in a phone call on May 22, according to Axios.[22] Israeli media reported that the phone call was characterized by “heated disagreements.”[23] US Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem stated on May 25 that Trump “wants...Netanyahu to be on the same page with him” following Noem's meeting with Netanyahu in Jerusalem.[24] Noem told Fox News in an interview on May 26 that she urged Netanyahu to “stay united and let [the US-Iran nuclear negotiations] process play out.”[25] An unspecified Israeli official told Axios on May 27 that Noem told Netanyahu to “give [the United States] a week,” likely to allow the US and Iran to continue negotiations.”[26] Israeli Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer and Mossad Director David Barnea arrived in Washington, DC, on May 26 to meet with US Vice President JD Vance, US Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff, and CIA Director John Ratcliffe to discuss

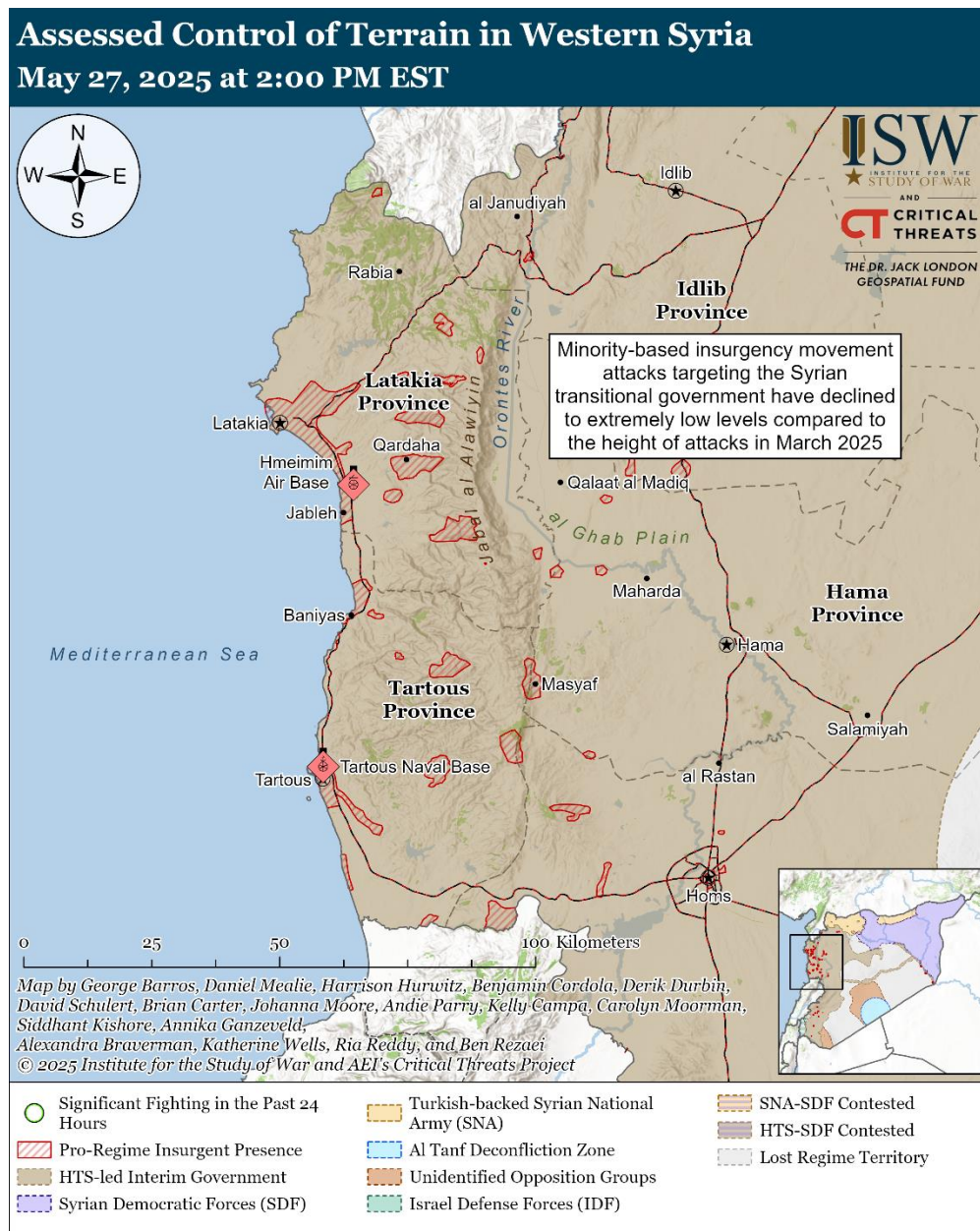
Iran.[27] These conversations follow reports that Israel is preparing to strike Iranian nuclear facilities if the US-Iran nuclear talks collapse.[28]

Iran appears to be evaluating some Omani-mediated offers about uranium enrichment following the fourth and fifth rounds of talks with the United States. US Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff reportedly proposed after the fourth round of US-Iran talks on May 11 that Iran suspend uranium enrichment for up to three years as part of a potential agreement and to build trust, according to Western media.[29] Iran and the United States subsequently held a fifth round of talks in Rome on May 23, which primarily focused on the US demand for zero enrichment.[30] Iranian Parliamentary National Security and Foreign Policy Committee member Ahmad Bakhshayesh Ardestani told Iranian media on May 26 that Oman had reportedly proposed during the fifth round of US-Iran talks that Iran suspend enrichment for six months and resume later.[31] Iran did not accept this offer, according to Ardestani. Araghchi also separately stated on May 25 that Iran is reviewing proposals from the Omani foreign minister aimed at overcoming obstacles in the recent indirect talks.[32] Ardestani is only a parliamentarian, and it is unlikely he would be privy to this sort of information about the talks. Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi briefed the Iranian Parliament National Security and Foreign Policy Commission on May 25 and discussed the details of the recent US-Iran talks with its members.[33]

Pro-Assad Alawite insurgent attacks targeting the Syrian transitional government and Sunni communities have become increasingly rare compared to the height of insurgent activity in March 2025. Insurgents have largely stopped attacks on transitional government forces in the Alawite-majority coastal Syria, though there was a high-profile attempted prison break by Assadist remnants in Latakia Province on May 20.[34] The lack of insurgent attacks in April and May 2025 contrasts sharply with insurgent activity before March 2025, when insurgents targeted government forces multiple times per week. This suggests that the insurgency has weakened significantly since March 2025.

Multiple factors, including a lack of Alawite support, government pressure, and poorly executed insurgent operations, have probably contributed to the decrease in insurgent activity. The pro-Assad Alawite insurgency portrays itself as Assadist remnants who, at minimum, seek to restore Assad-era power structures in Syria, if not Assad himself.[35] Assad relied upon his Alawite community, other minorities, and a small, select group of Sunnis to rule Syria.[36] The entire Alawite community did not support Assad, and many Alawite notables opposed him.[37] Many Syrian Alawites are unlikely to join a pro-Assad insurgency even if they remain distrustful of the Syrian transitional government. Government forces have also arrested Assad-linked insurgents, seized weapons stockpiles in insurgent support zones, and conducted community-based outreach to individual Alawite towns in coastal Syria.[38] These efforts have probably disrupted insurgent operations, though the recent prison break attempt illustrates the continued offensive capabilities among small insurgent cells. These government operations also probably benefit from poorly executed insurgent operations that have resulted in the capture of insurgents and presumably intelligence from detained fighters.[39] This could have enabled intelligence-driven operations, though it is unclear to what degree government operations are driven by intelligence.

Fighting in southern Syria between local Sunni fighters, Druze militias, and government forces has also largely ceased since early May 2025. Negotiations with Druze leaders since April 30 to establish mechanisms to address the recent violence between Sunni militants, Druze militias, and government forces in Druze-majority towns and regions in southern Syria have largely halted violence and insurgent attacks in Druze-majority areas.[40] Druze leaders also remain distrustful of the government, but new security mechanisms that allowed Druze militias to retain their weapons calmed the situation.



The Houthis may be attempting to increase the speed of their drones, which decreases the flight time of the drones and gives less warning to the target.[41] The Yemeni National Resistance Forces intercepted a Houthi shipment on February 13 containing jet-propulsion engines that are likely used for jet-powered drones, according to a Yemeni think tank report on May 22.[42] Iran's Shahed-238 jet-powered drone has a top speed of 600 km/h, though the greater engine weight

has implications for fuel capacity and warhead size.[43] CTP-ISW has not yet observed jet-powered Houthi drones, but a Houthi jet-powered drone with a similar speed to the Shahed-238 could reach Eilat, Israel, from Saada in two hours and 48 minutes and the center of the Red Sea from Saada in 25 minutes. This is significantly faster than the propeller-driven Shahed-136, which has a top speed of 185 km/h and takes nine hours to reach Eilat from Saada and one hour and 20 minutes to reach the center of the Red Sea from Saada.[44] The increased speed means that friendly air defenses have less time to detect and intercept the target. Israel and its partners intercepted every drone launched from Iran during the April 2024 Iranian attack on Israel in part because of the distances and time involved. Ukraine, by comparison, finds it relatively more difficult to intercept Russian-launched, Iranian-designed Shahed drones because of the shorter distances and times involved.[45]

The increased speed of Houthi drones is unlikely to meaningfully increase the rate at which the drones penetrate Israeli air defenses, given the distance involved. The increased speed could increase the threat to maritime shipping if the Houthis resume their attack campaign, however. Israeli aircraft routinely destroyed drones launched from Iraq during the October 7 War, even though a Shahed-136 takes only roughly two hours and 10 minutes to travel from western Iraq near Rutba, Anbar Province, to the northern Israeli border.[46] The Houthis could return to targeting international shipping at any time and for any reason, however.[47] Jet-powered drones would make intercepting Houthi attacks more difficult, given the shorter distances involved. US Navy vessels have intercepted Houthi anti-ship ballistic missiles, which are far faster than jet-powered drones, however. The Houthis could also use these jet-powered drones to target or threaten to target sites in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Houthis have previously targeted energy infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and the UAE during the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in Yemen.[48] The Houthis, since they ceased attacks on the Gulf after the 2022 ceasefire agreement, have threatened attacks on both Saudi Arabia and the UAE to deter them from supporting anti-Houthi forces in Yemen.[49]

Iran is continuing to strengthen ties with revisionist actors such as Russia and North Korea. An Iranian delegation led by Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Akbar Ahmadian arrived in Moscow on May 27 for the three-day 13th Moscow International Security Conference.[50] Russian state media reported that the conference will focus on strengthening global security cooperation and feature a Russian defense exhibition.[51] Delegates from over 150 countries will reportedly attend the conference, including delegations from BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states. North Korean media reported that a delegation led by North Korea's Minister of State Security will attend the conference.[52] Iran's engagement with BRICS and the SCO is part of a broader Iranian effort to establish a parallel international order that challenges Western "dominance." [53] Ahmadian emphasized the importance of developing BRICS and the SCO upon his arrival in Moscow.[54] Ahmadian also stated that he will meet with officials on the sidelines of the summit and discuss progress on the January 2025 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty with unspecified Russian officials.[55] Iran and Russia have continued to expand ties since they signed the agreement, which covers military, economic, energy, and nuclear cooperation.[56] Iran has provided significant support to Russia's invasion of Ukraine by providing Fateh-360 ballistic missiles and launchers and Shahed drones. Iran also reportedly purchased Russian Su-35 fighter jets in January 2025, which illustrates Iran and Russia's mutual defense cooperation, though Russia has not yet

delivered the Su-35s.[57] Russia has also coordinated with Iran on the latter's nuclear program during US-Iran negotiations.[58]

The Shia Coordination Framework announced on May 27 that it will run in the upcoming November 2025 Iraqi parliamentary elections in Ninewa, Diyala, and Salah al Din provinces in “unified alliances,” likely to ensure it does not split the vote between its constituent parties.[59] The Shia Coordination Framework is a loose coalition of Shia political parties, some of which Iran backs. This announcement follows Iranian pressure on Shia Coordination Framework leaders to remain unified ahead of the elections to improve the likelihood that Iranian-backed parties can remain an influential bloc in the formation of the Iraqi government.[60] The Shia Coordination Framework likely wants to run together in Ninewa, Diyala, and Salah al Din to ensure that they do not split the vote and enable more unified Kurdish or Sunni parties to win more seats. The Shia Coordination Framework would risk dividing the Shia among multiple parties. Divisions among these Shia political parties cost them many seats in the 2021 parliamentary elections.[61] The disunity of the parties that later formed the Shia Coordination Framework meant that they split votes, which enabled smaller but better-organized parties to win certain seats.

The Framework probably feels less pressure to run as a unified list in the southern, Shia-dominated provinces, because there are fewer alternatives that could beat them. Shia Coordination Framework parties have reportedly registered to run on multiple lists. Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani, State of Law Coalition head Nouri al Maliki, and Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Asaib Ahl al Haq leader Qais al Khazali will oppose each other on competing lists in most Iraqi provinces.[62] Iranian-backed Iraqi parties lost a significant number of seats in the south in the 2021 elections due to inter-party competition that enabled more unified Shia political movements, like Shia nationalist cleric Muqtada al Sadr's Sadrist Movement, to win seats against the other fractious Shia parties.[63] Sadr announced in late March 2025 that his party would not participate in the elections.[64] Sadr is a mercurial political leader and could change his mind about participating in the elections before November 2025. But Sadr's absence in these elections means the Framework only faces a threat from small, independent parties in the south.

Key Takeaways:

- **ISIS in Syria:** Salafi-jihadi groups, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), have increased their activity in Syria in May 2025. A Syrian Interior Ministry spokesperson noted the increase in activity after three recent raids targeting ISIS cells in May.
- **Syrian IDP Camps and ISIS:** The agreement between the Syrian government and Kurdish-dominated authorities in northeastern Syria to transfer internally displaced persons (IDPs) from al Hol camp may create an opportunity for ISIS to recruit new fighters and reengage supporters. Iraq began to repatriate thousands of ISIS-affiliated families and IDPs in 2021 and has faced immense challenges doing so since. The transitional government is still attempting to build a state with functioning institutions after Assad's collapse, meaning it faces additional challenges that Iraq does not.
- **Iranian Nuclear Negotiations:** Iran appears to be evaluating some offers regarding uranium enrichment following the fourth and fifth rounds of talks with the United States. US President

Donald Trump warned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu against taking any action to potentially jeopardize the US-Iran nuclear talks in a phone call on May 22, according to Axios.

- **Syrian Insurgencies:** Pro-Assad Alawite insurgent attacks targeting the Syrian transitional government and Sunni communities have become increasingly rare compared to the height of insurgent activity in March 2025. Multiple factors, including a lack of Alawite support, government pressure, and poorly executed insurgent operations, have probably contributed to the decrease in insurgent activity.
- **Houthi Drone Capabilities:** The Houthis may be attempting to increase the speed of their drones, which decreases the flight time of the drones and gives less warning to the target. The increased speed of Houthi drones is unlikely to meaningfully increase the likelihood they penetrate Israeli air defenses, given the distance involved. The increased speed could increase the threat to maritime shipping if the Houthis resume their attack campaign, however.
- **Iran, Russia, and North Korea:** Iran is continuing to strengthen ties with revisionist actors such as Russia and North Korea. An Iranian delegation led by Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Akbar Ahmadian arrived in Moscow on May 27 for the three-day 13th Moscow International Security Conference.
- **Iraqi Parliamentary Elections:** The Shia Coordination Framework announced on May 27 that it will run in the upcoming November 2025 Iraqi parliamentary elections in Ninewa, Diyala, and Salah al Din provinces in “unified alliances,” likely to ensure it does not split the vote between its constituent parties. The Framework probably feels less pressure to run as a unified list in the southern, Shia-dominated provinces, because there are fewer alternatives that could beat them.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

Senior Iranian political and military officials met with a Pakistani delegation in Tehran on May 26 and 27, likely to discuss efforts to confront anti-regime Balochi groups along the Pakistan-Iran border.[65] Pakistani Army Commander General Asim Munir separately reaffirmed Pakistan’s commitment to border security cooperation during a meeting with Iranian Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS) Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri in Tehran on May 27.[66] Bagheri stated that the two countries share a “firm resolve” over the border issue. Iranian Interior Minister Esmail Momeni also announced plans to expand counter-smuggling and counterinsurgent efforts along the border during a meeting with Pakistani Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi in Tehran on May 27.[67] Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei met with Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif in Tehran on May 26 and called for greater collaboration between Iran and Pakistan to revitalize the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO).[68] These high-level meetings follow an uptick in militant activities in southeastern Iran since December 2023.[69]

The Iranian Parliament re-elected hardline Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf for a sixth term on May 27.[70] The Parliament Speaker serves a one-year term.[71] Ghalibaf is a longtime member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and maintains close personal and political relations with the highest echelons of the IRGC that date to the Iran-Iraq War.[72] Ghalibaf also served as Iran’s police chief between 2000 and 2005.[73] The Parliament also

elected Ali Nikzad as First Deputy Speaker and Hamidreza Haj Babaei as Second Deputy Speaker.[74] Nikzad previously served as the Second Deputy Speaker, and Babaei served as the First Deputy Speaker in 2024.[75] Ghalibaf previously appointed Nikzad as his campaign manager in June 2024, during Ghalibaf's most recent unsuccessful presidential campaign, indicating that Nikzad is close to Ghalibaf.[76]

Iranian media reported that two unidentified attackers killed Shiraz Criminal Court head Ehsan Bagheri in Shiraz, Fars Province, on May 27.[77] Iranian media did not provide details on the attackers' motives or clarify the significance of Bagheri's judicial role beyond his title. The incident follows a recent incident in which unidentified armed men kidnapped a regime-affiliated Shia cleric in Sistan and Baluchistan Province on May 22.[78] Fars Province is in south-central Iran and is separated from Sistan and Baluchistan Province. A judiciary office employee also previously killed two senior judges at the Iranian Supreme Court in Tehran on January 18.[79] It remains unclear whether these incidents, which have all targeted members of Iran's judiciary system, are connected. The regime may perceive Bagheri's killing as part of a broader threat and blame foreign intelligence activity rather than treating the killing as an isolated act, however.

Iran and Iraq continue to cooperate on joint transportation projects. Iranian Roads and Urban Development Minister Farzaneh Sadigh visited Iraq on May 24 and 25 to discuss progress on bilateral transportation initiatives.[80] Sadigh met with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani, Iraqi Transport Minister Razzaq Muhaibis, and Iraqi Interior Minister Abdul al Shammari.[81] Sadigh and Muhaibis discussed the importance of the Shalamcheh-Basra railroad to facilitate the movement of pilgrims during the Shia Islamic Arbaeen pilgrimage.[82] Iran and Iraq began construction on the railroad in September 2023.[83] Sadigh and Muhaibis also discussed a project to connect the Iranian city of Khosravi to the Iraqi city of Khanaqin to further facilitate the movement of pilgrims.[84] Sudani stated during his meeting with Sadigh that the main goal of these projects is to link the region with Europe.[85]

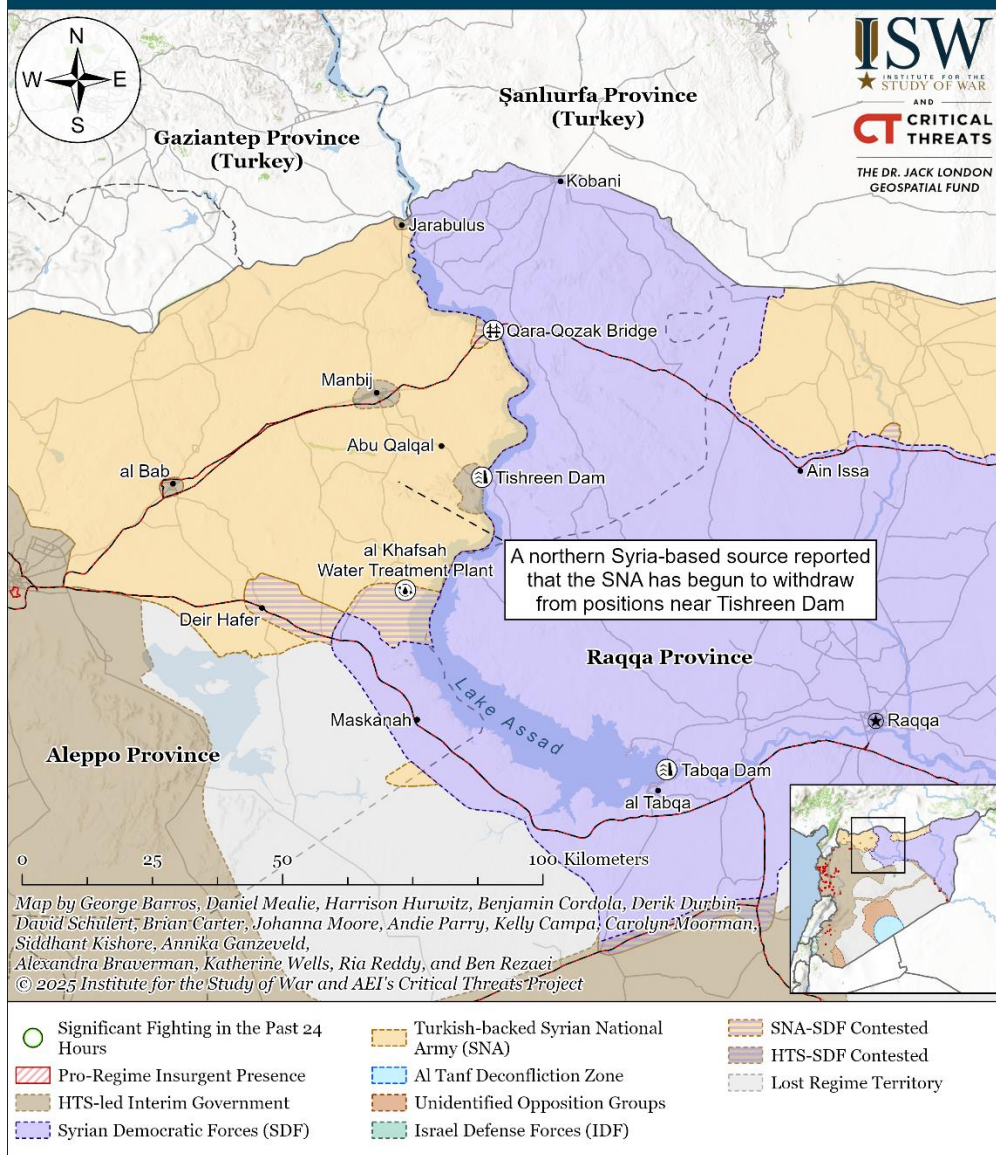
The Iranian rial depreciated from 821,500 rial to one US dollar on May 26 to 827,500 rial to one US dollar on May 27.[86]

Syria

A northern Syria-based source reported on May 27 that the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) has begun to withdraw from positions along frontlines near Tishreen Dam, Aleppo Province.[87] The Syrian army is expected to backfill the SNA in these positions.[88] The withdrawal of the SNA and deployment of the Syrian army to the dam is part of the Syrian government's April 2025 ceasefire and de-confliction agreement with the SDF.[89] It is unclear which Syrian army units will be deployed to the dam. Some of these units consist wholly of SNA militias. The 72nd Division, which comprises five SNA factions, was recently deployed at positions near the dam as of May 19.[90]

Assessed Control of Terrain around Manbij

May 27, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Reuters reported on May 27 that Syrian and Israeli officials have held direct talks to calm tensions and prevent further conflict in southern Syria.[91] This direct engagement follows UAE-sponsored secret negotiations between Syria and Israel, which were originally reported on May 7.[92] The Syrian delegation has been led by the former Quneitra Province Governor Ahmad al Dalati led the Syrian delegation.[93] Damascus recently appointed Dalati to oversee the Ministry of Interior's security forces in Suwayda Province on May 24.[94] Unspecified sources told Reuters that meetings between Syrian and Israeli officials have been along the Syria-Israel border, including reportedly in territory controlled by Israel.[95] These talks currently only focus on preventing increased Israeli-Syrian conflict and reducing IDF incursions into Syrian villages. Two sources told Reuters that these talks may pave the way for broader political understanding between Israel and Syria, however.[96]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov invited Syrian Foreign Affairs Minister Asaad al Shaibani to visit Moscow after a meeting with Turkish diplomats in Moscow on May 27.[97] Lavrov met with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and discussed the importance of maintaining Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty.[98] Lavrov also referenced Russian President Vladimir Putin's phone call on February 12 with Syrian Transitional President Ahmed al Shara in which the two leaders discussed "trade, economic, and other relations." [99] Lavrov's comments and invitation to Shaibani sharply contrast with his recent statements accusing the Syrian transitional government of ethnic cleansing.[100]

Iraq

The Iraqi Foreign Ministry refuted a recent report that Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein conveyed a US demand for Iran to withdraw Iranian-backed Iraqi militias from Iraq to Iranian officials.[101] Unspecified "high-level" Iraqi sources told an Emirati outlet on May 23 that the United States demanded that Iranian-backed militias withdraw from Iraq within the next two weeks and that Iran allow US inspectors to inspect 31 Iranian military, nuclear, and military sites.[102] CTP-ISW noted on March 23 that these alleged US demands and the method in which the United States conveyed the supposed demands are inconsistent with the nature of the ongoing US-Iran negotiations.[103]

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 have withheld the names of at least 15 mid-level Houthi commanders killed in US airstrikes from March to May 2025, according to a Yemeni defense outlet.[104] The defense outlet, citing unspecified sources, reported that the majority of these commanders were responsible for the Houthi drone and missile programs.

The Houthis fired ballistic missiles targeting Ben Gurion Airport and a "vital" Israeli target near Tel Aviv, central Israel, on May 27 as part of the Houthi campaign to enforce an economic blockade on Israel.[105] The IDF intercepted the two missiles.[106] Some international airlines have temporarily suspended flights to Israel through July 2025 due to concerns about Houthi attacks on Ben Gurion Airport.[107]

Explosions at two separate Houthi weapons facilities near Sanaa City on May 22 and Hudaydah Port on May 24 resulted in significant casualties and damage.[108] A Yemeni journalist reported that explosions at Houthi weapons depots north of Sanaa City killed and injured at least 50 people on May 22. The explosion also caused significant damage to nearby infrastructure.[109] A Yemen analyst reported that a fire at the weapons depot reportedly ignited other ammunition stores, creating a chain reaction of explosions.[110] The same analyst also reported separate explosions near al Hudaydah Naval Base near Hudaydah Port on May 24.[111] The analyst also noted that some local

sources speculated that foreign actors, such as Israel, may have been involved in the depots' explosions.[112] Another Yemeni journalist insinuated that these explosions occurred because of Houthi negligence.[113] The journalist added that Houthi weapons depots in residential areas have witnessed at least six similar explosions between 2017 and 2024.[114]

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



Ria Reddy, Kelly Campa, Ben Rezaei, Katherine Wells, Alexandra Braverman, Ben Schmida, Carolyn Moorman, Johanna Moore, and Annika Ganzeveld

Information Cutoff: May 28, 2025, 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.

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.

The US Treasury lifted most sanctions on Syria on May 23. The US Treasury issued Syria General License (GL) 25 to provide “immediate sanctions relief” to Syria in accordance with US President Donald Trump’s May 13 order to lift all sanctions on Syria.[1] The removal of sanctions will allow the United States to conduct transactions with the Syrian transitional government, the Syrian Central Bank, and state-owned businesses.[2] GL 25 also removed the Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) designations on Syrian President Ahmed al Shara and Interior Minister Anas Khattab.[3] The United States previously designated both individuals as SDGTs for their membership in al Qaeda in Iraq in 2013 and 2012, respectively.[4] The US Treasury noted that GL 25 does not lift sanctions on “terrorist organizations,” perpetrators of human rights abuses, drug traffickers, or former Assad regime members.[5] GL 25 does not have an expiration date, but the US Treasury stated that the United States implemented GL 25 with the understanding that Syria will not provide a “safe haven for terrorist organizations” and will protect its ethno-religious minority communities.[6] The US State Department separately issued a 180-day waiver under the Caesar Act on May 23 to ensure that the Caesar Act does not obstruct economic investment in Syria or prevent the provision of critical humanitarian assistance to Syrians.[7] US congressional approval is required to permanently repeal the Caesar Act. The State Department’s temporary waiver may allow for the international community to provide short-term reconstruction assistance to Syria, however.

The European Union (EU) adopted a resolution to lift economic sanctions on Syria on May 28 but also imposed sanctions on Turkish-backed Syrian army commanders and

armed factions that committed human rights abuses during the Syrian coastal massacres in early March 2025.^[8] The European Union removed sanctions on 24 entities, including the Syrian Central Bank and oil and media companies.^[9] The EU Council released a statement that it lifted “all” economic sanctions on Syria except those “based on security grounds.”^[10] EU Foreign Policy Chief Kaja Kallas stated that the decision to remove sanctions is “reversible and conditional” and warned that the European Union can re-impose sanctions on Syria if the Syrian transitional government does not continue to make “progress.”^[11]

The European Union imposed new sanctions on two Syrian army commanders and three Turkish-backed armed factions for committing human rights abuses during the Syrian coastal massacres in early March.^[12] The EU Council sanctioned 62nd Division Commander Mohammad al Jassem (Abu Amscha) and 76th Division Commander Saif al Din Boulad (Sayf Abu Bakr) for commanding forces that conducted arbitrary killings, torture, and other targeted violence against civilians, particularly Alawites, in early March 2025.^[13] The European Union also sanctioned Abu Amscha’s Suleiman Shah Brigade and Abu Bakr’s Hamza Division.^[14] The European Union sanctioned another Turkish-backed militia, the Sultan Murad Division, for its involvement in human rights abuses on the coast, though the European Union did not sanction Sultan Murad Division Commander Fahim Issa.^[15] Issa currently holds a prominent role in the Ministry of Defense (MoD) as the defense minister’s assistant for the northern region.^[16]

Shara’s promotion of militants who have committed human rights abuses to prominent defense positions will threaten Syria’s long-term stability. Shara has allowed men, such as Abu Amscha, Sayf Abu Bakr, and others, to continue to operate with relative impunity in Syria and has even promoted several of these men to high-ranking positions within the new Syrian army.^[17] The promotion of these commanders, and the fact that these commanders have remained in their positions even after widespread allegations of participation in the coastal massacres, suggests that Damascus will not hold these men accountable for their previous and recent abuses.^[18] Shara likely promoted men such as Abu Amscha, Abu Bakr, and Fahim Issa to senior positions within the Syrian army and government because he is reliant on their support and loyalty to consolidate his control over Syria. Shara appears to be prioritizing the near-term centralization of state authority over longer-term security and stability in doing so.

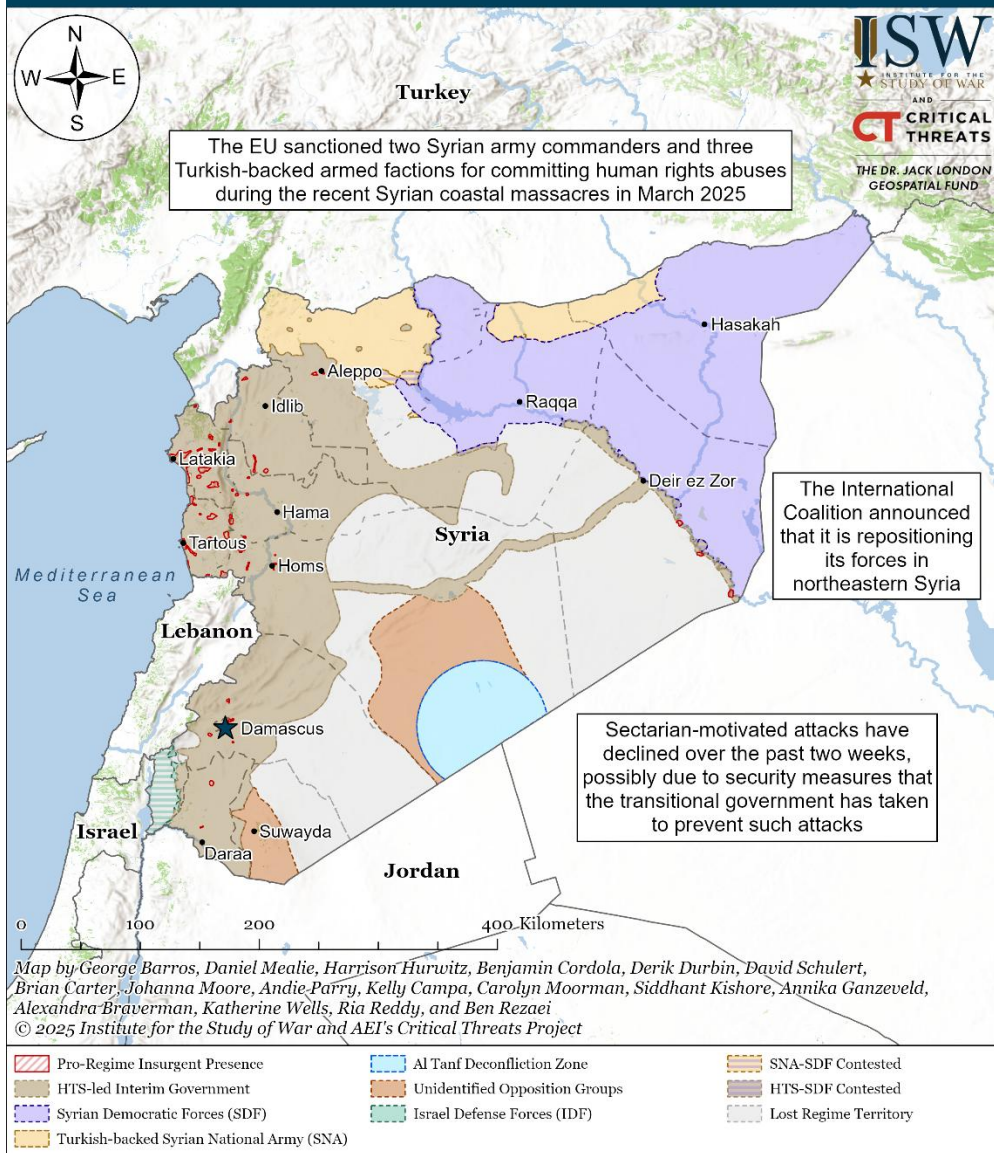
Shara’s promotion of individuals who have previously committed human rights abuses against Syrian minority communities will likely increase these communities’ distrust in the transitional government, which threatens to destabilize the Syrian transition. Syrian minority communities, such as the Alawites and the Kurds, will likely look at Damascus’s elevation of these commanders as a threat to their safety and as an indicator that Damascus prioritizes maintaining the loyalty of extremist Sunni Arabs over protecting minorities. The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) condemned Damascus’s appointment of Abu Hatem Shaqra and stated that the decision “taint[s] state institutions.”^[19] Locals from Ismaili-majority Salamiyah in Hama Province recently expressed alarm after the MoD deployed Abu Amscha and his division to the area.^[20] Syrian social

media users circulated rumors in late April 2025 that Abu Amsha and his 62nd Division were deploying to Jaramana to conduct violence against Druze citizens, which generated immense fear in the Druze community.^[21] Alawite insurgents have used the massacres that Sunni Arabs committed against Alawites on the coast in early March to recruit support for the insurgency.^[22] These incidents highlight how Damascus's retention of thugs and warlords in positions of power creates an atmosphere of distrust between minority communities and the transitional government. Long-term stability requires most Syrians to trust the government and for the government to represent all Syrians. Damascus's potential alienation of minority communities is not conducive to building an inclusive state over the next five years. The removal of destabilizing elements from the transitional government could reduce the risk of renewed major internal conflict.

The international community, including the United States, should maintain individual sanctions on these commanders even as it removes sanctions that target Syrian government and economic institutions. The United States has already sanctioned Abu Amsha, Abu Bakr, and Abu Hatem Shaqra, who recently assumed command of the 86th Division and has been accused of committing abuses against civilians.^[23] Other commanders who lead sanctioned factions, such as Sultan Murad leader Fahim Issa, should be held responsible for actions taken before the fall of the Assad regime and actions taken as leaders within the new Syrian army. It is unclear if Shara will make efforts to curb the influence of these commanders in the future given the possible political ramifications of doing so. Targeted sanctions by the international community may incentivize Shara to remove these powerful faction leaders or give him the necessary political cover to do so.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

May 28, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Iran and the United States appear to be trying to secure an interim nuclear deal before negotiating a comprehensive nuclear agreement. It is unclear if the reported interim deal that Iran seeks will satisfy US demands. Western media reported in late April 2025 that Iran asked the United States to negotiate an interim deal.^[24] The *New York Times* reported on May 28 that US Special Envoy to the Middle East and lead US negotiator Steve Witkoff has dropped his opposition to an interim deal, citing unspecified participants in the US-Iran nuclear negotiations.^[25] Reuters separately reported on May 28 that Iran may be willing to agree to an interim "political deal" that would require Iran to suspend uranium enrichment for one year and ship part of its highly enriched uranium stockpile abroad or convert it into fuel plates. The United States would reportedly release frozen Iranian funds and recognize Iran's right to uranium enrichment in exchange, according to two

Iranian sources.[26] The United States previously agreed to release \$6 billion of frozen Iranian assets as part of a prisoner swap agreement with Iran in August 2023, but Iran did not gain access to these funds due to the start of the October 7 War in October 2023.[27] It is unclear whether the United States would agree to acknowledge Iran's right to uranium enrichment given that US officials have repeatedly emphasized that Iran cannot maintain its uranium enrichment program.[28] The Iranian sources also told Reuters that Iran would not dismantle its nuclear program or infrastructure or close its nuclear installations.[29] It is unclear whether the United States would accept an interim deal in which Iran could maintain its nuclear infrastructure because such a deal would allow Iran to keep its centrifuges. Iran could quickly restore its highly enriched uranium stockpile if it retains its centrifuges. Former UN Weapons Inspector David Albright warned on April 18 that Iran could enrich enough weapons-grade uranium in 25 days for a nuclear weapon, even with a small low-enriched uranium (LEU) stockpile, if it maintains all of its current centrifuges.[30]

Iran may be portraying itself as willing to make concessions in order to prevent the talks from collapsing and potentially triggering an Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear facilities.

Atomic Energy Organization of Iran Director Mohammad Eslami claimed on May 28 that Iran could "reconsider the acceptance of American inspectors through the IAEA" if "Iran's demands are taken into account and an agreement is reached." [31] Eslami may have made this statement to try to portray Iran as making a concession to the United States given that Iran has previously excluded US inspectors from inspections of its nuclear sites.[32] Eslami's statement, as well as Iran's reported willingness to reach an interim "political deal," come amid reports that Israel is preparing to strike Iranian nuclear facilities if the US-Iran nuclear talks collapse.[33] Axios reported on May 27 that US officials are concerned that Israel may strike Iran's nuclear facilities or take other actions to undermine the talks.[34] Trump recently called on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to avoid taking any action that could potentially jeopardize the US-Iran nuclear negotiations.[35] Iran has conducted military inspections and air defense exercises in recent months in preparation for a potential strike.[36]

Iran is continuing to deepen ties with non-Western countries to try to challenge the US-led world order. An Iranian delegation led by Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Akbar Ahmadian met with several senior officials in Moscow on May 27 and 28 on the sidelines of the 13th Moscow International Security Conference.[37] Ahmadian met with the following individuals:

- **Iraqi National Security Adviser Qassem al Araj:** Ahmadian and Araj discussed the implementation of the March 2023 Iran-Iraq security agreement.[38] This agreement requires Iraq to disarm and relocate Iranian Kurdish opposition groups based in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region away from the Iranian border.[39] Ahmadian emphasized the need to remove "espionage networks" near the Iranian border.
- **Brazilian Presidential Adviser Celso Amorim:** Ahmadian and Amorim called for expanding scientific and commercial cooperation between Iran and Brazil. Iran and Brazil are both members of BRICS.[40] Amorim affirmed Brazil's support for Iran's right to peaceful

nuclear energy and enrichment activities. Ahmadian previously traveled to Brazil in April 2025 to attend a BRICS security summit, where he discussed security arrangements among BRICS member states.[41] Iran separately participated in a defense exhibition in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in early April 2025.[42]

- **Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu:** Shoigu stated that bilateral cooperation between Russia and Iran is developing “in all fields” based on the guidance of the two countries’ leaders.[43]
- **Russian Presidential Aide and former Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev:** Ahmadian and Patrushev discussed the bilateral agreements and the construction of the Rasht-Astara railway, which is part of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).[44] The INSTC is a trade route that connects India, Iran, Russia, and Central Asia via road, rail, and sea to reduce transit time and costs between South Asia and Europe.[45]

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) conducted four airstrikes targeting the Houthi-controlled Sanaa Airport on May 28, rendering the airport temporarily inoperable.[46] The IDF airstrikes destroyed the airport's runway and the last operational Yemenia Airways airplane, according to the airport’s director.[47] Previous Israeli airstrikes on May 6 destroyed three other Yemenia Airways airplanes.[48] The IDF stated that the Houthis used the aircraft destroyed on May 28 to transport Houthi fighters.[49] Yemenia Airways, which is the only airline that operates at Sanaa Airport, halted flights to and from the airport on May 28 until further notice.[50]

The IDF conducted these airstrikes in response to repeated Houthi drone and missile attacks targeting Israel, including recent attacks that targeted key Israeli entry points, such as Ben Gurion Airport and Haifa Port.[51] Houthi Supreme Leader Abdulmalik al Houthi stated on May 28 that Israeli airstrikes will not deter the Houthis from launching drone and missile attacks on Israel.[52] The Houthis have claimed at least 24 drone and ballistic missile attacks targeting Israel in May 2025. Israeli air defense systems intercepted most of the attacks.[53] Israeli air defense systems failed to intercept a Houthi ballistic missile attack targeting Ben Gurion Airport on May 4, however. The attack injured eight people.[54]

Key Takeaways:

- **Syria Sanctions and Stability:** The US Treasury lifted most sanctions on Syria on May 23. The European Union (EU) separately adopted a resolution to lift economic sanctions on Syria on May 28 but also imposed sanctions on Turkish-backed Syrian army commanders and armed factions that committed human rights abuses during the Syrian coastal massacres in early March 2025. The EU Council sanctioned 62nd Division Commander Mohammad al Jassem (Abu Amsha) and 76th Division Commander Saif al Din Boulad (Sayf Abu Bakr) for commanding forces that conducted arbitrary killings, torture, and other targeted violence against civilians,

particularly Alawites, in early March 2025. Shara has allowed men, such as Abu Amsha, Sayf Abu Bakr, and others, to continue to operate with relative impunity in Syria and has even promoted several of these men to high-ranking positions within the new Syrian army. Shara's promotion of individuals who have previously committed human rights abuses against Syrian minority communities will likely increase these communities' distrust in the transitional government, which threatens to destabilize the Syrian transition.

- **US-Iran Nuclear Negotiations:** Iran and the United States appear to be trying to secure an interim nuclear deal before negotiating a comprehensive nuclear agreement. It is unclear if the reported interim deal that Iran seeks will satisfy US demands. Western media reported in late April 2025 that Iran asked the United States to negotiate an interim deal. The *New York Times* reported on May 28 that US Special Envoy to the Middle East and lead US negotiator Steve Witkoff has dropped his opposition to an interim deal, citing unspecified participants in the US-Iran nuclear negotiations. Reuters separately reported on May 28 that Iran may be willing to agree to an interim "political deal" that would require Iran to suspend uranium enrichment for one year and ship part of its highly enriched uranium stockpile abroad or convert it into fuel plates. Iran would reportedly not dismantle its nuclear program or infrastructure or close its nuclear installations under this deal. It is unclear whether the United States would accept an interim deal in which Iran could maintain its nuclear infrastructure because such a deal would allow Iran to keep its centrifuges. Iran could quickly restore its highly enriched uranium stockpile if it retains its centrifuges.
- **Iranian Supreme National Security Council Secretary in Russia:** Iran is continuing to deepen ties with non-Western countries to try to challenge the US-led world order. An Iranian delegation led by Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Akbar Ahmadian met with several senior officials, including Russian, Iraqi, and Brazilian officials, in Moscow on May 27 and 28 on the sidelines of the 13th Moscow International Security Conference.
- **IDF Strikes in Yemen:** The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) conducted four airstrikes targeting the Houthi-controlled Sanaa Airport on May 28, rendering the airport temporarily inoperable. The IDF airstrikes destroyed the airport's runway and the last operational Yemenia Airways airplane, according to the airport's director. Previous Israeli airstrikes on May 6 destroyed three other Yemenia Airways airplanes. The IDF conducted these airstrikes in response to repeated Houthi drone and missile attacks targeting Israel, including recent attacks that targeted key Israeli entry points, such as Ben Gurion Airport and Haifa Port.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian met with senior Omani officials in Muscat, Oman, on May 27 and 28. Pezeshkian met with Omani Sultan Haitham al Tariq, Deputy Prime Minister Fahd bin Mahmoud al Said, and Foreign Minister Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi to discuss efforts to strengthen bilateral cooperation and address regional issues.[55] Pezeshkian emphasized the need to increase connectivity between Iran and Oman through seaports and air routes in order to bolster trade, investment, and industrial cooperation between the two countries.[56] Pezeshkian and senior Omani officials signed 18 Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) covering legal, economic, political, health,

defense, energy, and mining cooperation.[57] Pezeshkian also likely discussed the ongoing US-Iran nuclear negotiations during his visit to Muscat given that Oman is mediating these negotiations.

Iran is increasingly taking steps to facilitate its removal from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) blacklist. The FATF blacklisted Iran in 2020.[58] Iran's blacklist designation requires the 40 FATF member countries to sanction and limit economic engagement with Iran.[59] The Iranian Expediency Discernment Council reviewed the Combating the Financing of Terrorism (CFT) laws on May 28, but did not reach a consensus and decided to continue discussing the CFT measures in a future meeting.[60] The CFT is a set of laws that aim to restricting state funding for terrorist organizations.[61] Iran must approve and implement both the CFT and the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, also known as the Palermo Convention, for the FATF to remove Iran from its blacklist.[62] The Expediency Discernment Council approved the Palermo Convention on May 14.[63] An Iranian delegation separately discussed Iranian efforts to rejoin the FATF with representatives of the Eurasian Group on Combating Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism (EAG) on in Moscow on May 26.[64] The EAG is an associate member of the FATF that is comprised of nine countries, including China, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.[65]

The recent Iranian efforts to rejoin the FATF are notable given that Iran's FATF membership has historically been a controversial issue within the Iranian regime.[66] The FATF will decide whether to suspend countermeasures imposed on Iran, such as sanctions, if Iran ratifies and implements the Palermo Convention and CFT in line with FATF standards.[67] It is very unlikely that Iran would cease financial support for US-designated terrorist organizations, including Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis, even if the Expediency Discernment Council approved the CFT.

Iran is continuing to support the Axis of Resistance despite military setbacks that Israel imposed on the Axis of Resistance throughout the October 7 War. Supreme Leader International Affairs Adviser Ali Akbar Velayati met with Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) representative to Iran Nasser Abu Sharif and Hamas representative to Iran Khaled Qaddoumi in Tehran on May 28.[68] Velayati reiterated Iran's longstanding objective to destroy the state of Israel by using proxy groups.[69] Sharif stated on May 14 that Iran has continued to fund PIJ.[70] Velayati also praised the Houthis for their continued attacks targeting Israel.[71]

Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy Commander Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri inspected the Shahid Bahmad Bagheri Specialized Center for Electronic Warfare and Information Technology on May 28.[72] Tangsiri and unspecified military commanders inspected production sheds at the center. Tangsiri's visit to a center that specializes in electronic warfare follows recent reports that several vessels experienced Global Position System (GPS) interference in the Strait of Hormuz on May 18.[73]

Artesh Air Force Commander Brigadier General Hamid Vahedi appointed Colonel Alireza Shirpour as the new commander of the 8th Tactical Air Base in Esfahan on May 28.[74] Shirpour previously served as the operations deputy of the 8th Tactical Air Base.[75] Vahedi emphasized the base's critical role in defending eastern and southwestern Iran. The 8th Tactical Air Base, hosts F-14 Tomcats, J-7 fighter aircraft, and Yak-130 training jets, and is located near key Iranian nuclear facilities, including Fordow, Natanz, and the Arak heavy water reactor.[76] The IDF struck a

Tomb Stone target engagement radar that was part of an Iranian S-300 air defense system at the 8th Tactical Air Base in April 2024 following Iran's first-ever direct attack on Israel.[77]

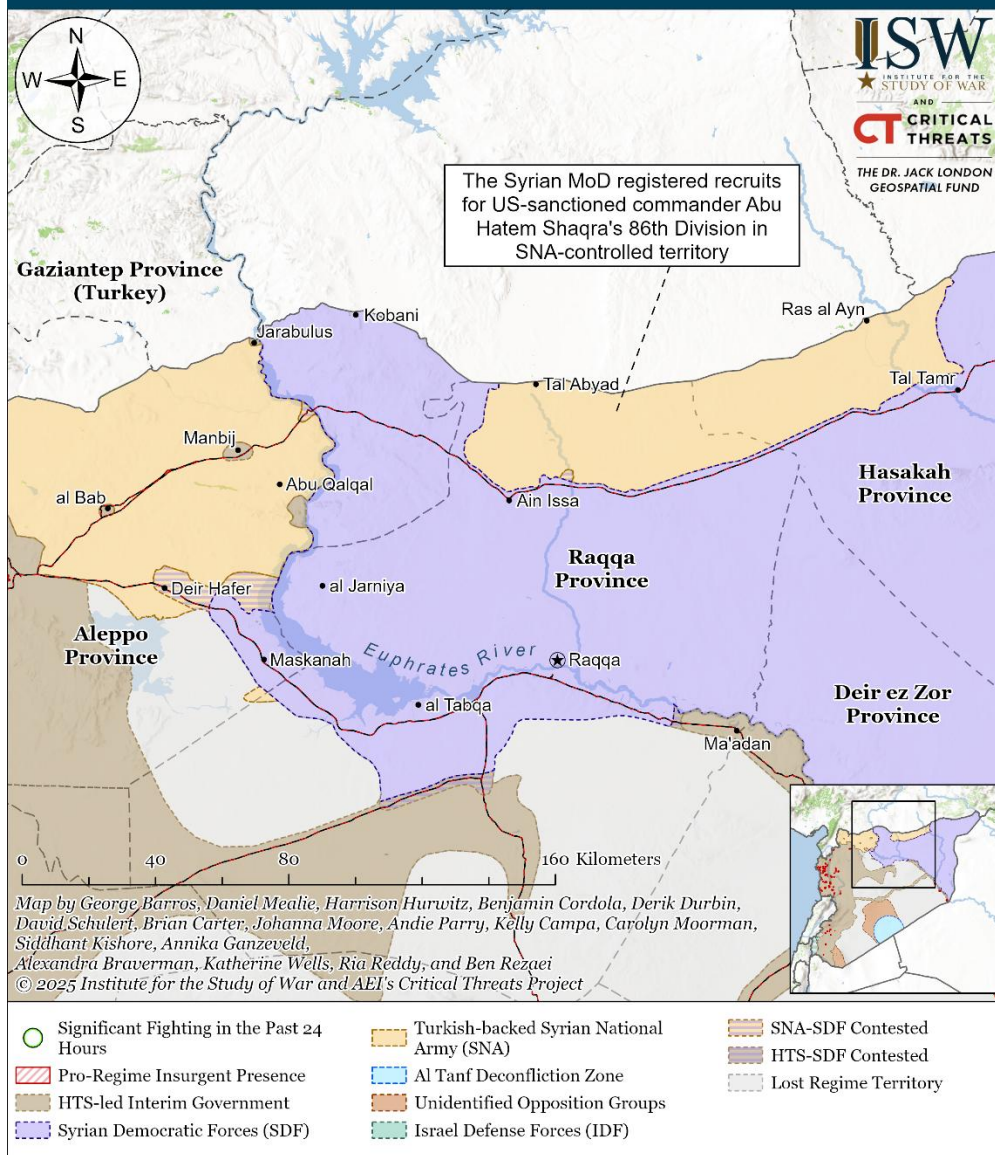
The Iranian rial depreciated from 827,500 rials to one US dollar on May 27 to 828,800 rials to one US dollar on May 28.[78]

Syria

The Syrian Ministry of Defense (MoD) registered recruits for the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA)-led 86th Division in SNA-controlled territory on May 27.[79] A northern Syria-based source reported on May 27 that an MoD committee registered fighters for the 86th Division in Suluk City, Raqqqa Province.[80] Suluk is located in SNA-controlled territory near the Turkish border. The MoD has taken steps to integrate fighters from northeastern Syria into the new Syrian army following the April 2025 ceasefire between the SNA and US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).[81] Ahrar al Sharqiya Commander Abu Hatem Shaqra commands the 86th Division. [82] The 86th Division will reportedly operate in Raqqqa, Hasakah, and Deir ez Zor provinces.[83]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Northern Syria

May 28, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



An Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) delegation arrived in Damascus on May 28 to continue negotiations with the Syrian transitional government.

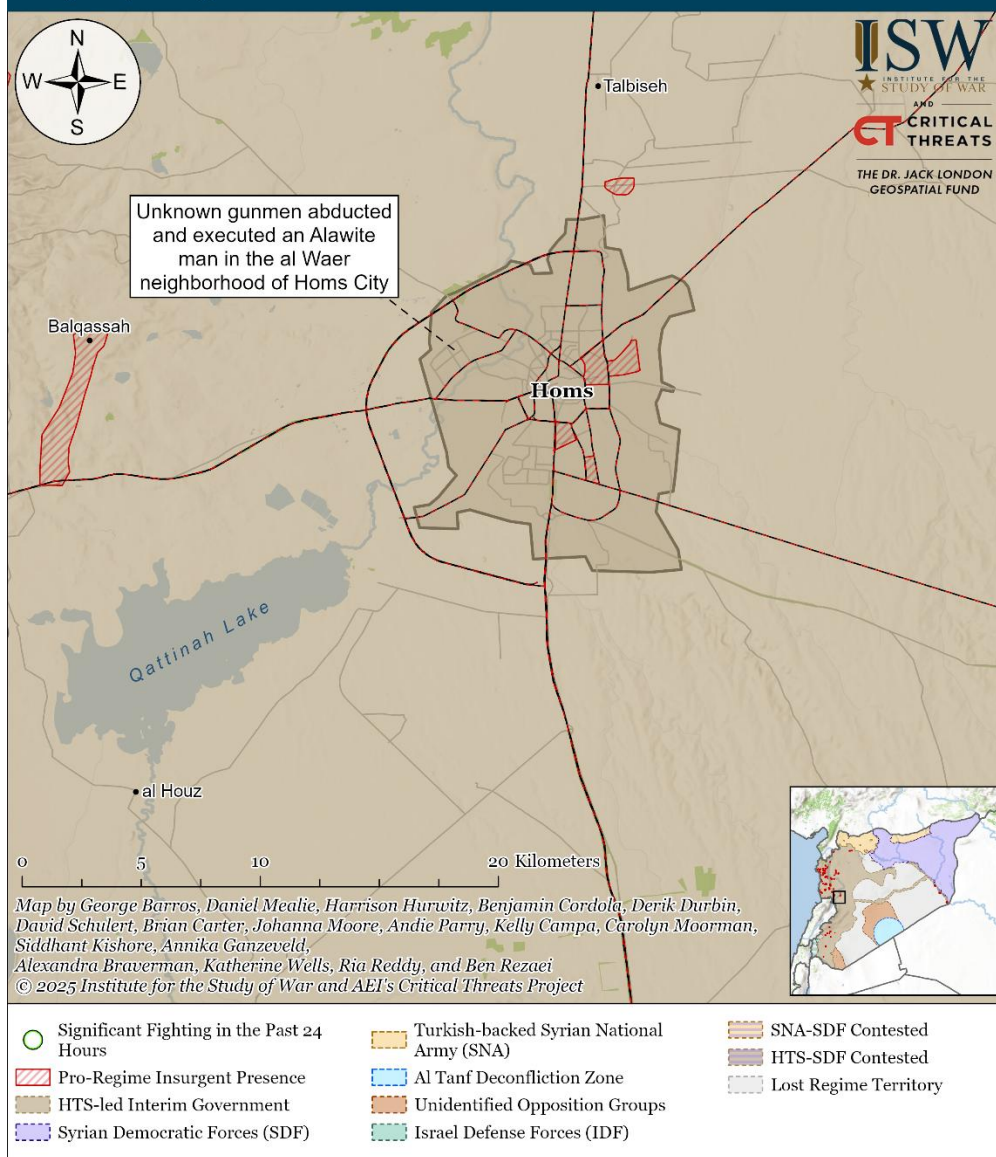
Damascus and the SDF signed an eight-point framework agreement on March 10 to politically and militarily integrate the SDF into the Syrian state.[84] The agreement did not resolve the main issues between Damascus and the SDF and appeared to lay out starting positions for future negotiations, which have taken place in the months since. Both Damascus and the SDF continue to disagree on the form of government administration in the northeast and the terms of the SDF's integration into the MoD.[85] The AANES delegation consists of representatives from the SDF, Democratic Union Party (PYD), and Arab and Syriac communities.[86] A senior SDF commander said on May 28 that the delegation seeks to find a "comprehensive and sustainable solution" to strengthening Syrian unity.[87]

Coastal Shield Brigade Commander Midad Fatiha released a video statement on May 28 to reassure the group’s supporters that the group will continue its campaign to expel the transitional government from coastal Syria.[88] The Coastal Shield Brigade is an Alawite insurgent group that is primarily composed of former Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and Assad regime members. Fatiha claimed that the Coastal Shield Brigade has conducted attacks “in silence” and without documentation. Fatiha called on the transitional government to release Alawite sheikhs and influential individuals who he claimed the government arrested arbitrarily. Fatiha threatened to detain twice as many prisoners as the transitional government is allegedly holding. Fatiha thanked members of the Syrian diaspora community for continuing to enable Coastal Shield Brigade operations. Prominent Syrian businessman and maternal cousin of Bashar al Assad Rami Makhoul has repeatedly claimed to have assembled forces in coastal Syria and framed himself as a defender of Alawites.[89] Mohammed Jaber, a UAE-based Syrian businessman and former Assad regime militia commander, also admitted on April 8 that he cooperated with the Alawite insurgency in early April 2025.[90] It is unclear if Makhoul or Jaber support the Coastal Shield Brigade. Insurgencies are sustained through popular support and perceived legitimacy within a population.[91] An Alawite insurgency that relies on external actors will likely struggle to build and maintain legitimacy among the Syrian population.

There has been a decline in sectarian-motivated attacks in Syria since May 14, possibly due to security measures that the transitional government has taken to prevent such attacks. CTP-ISW has observed a decline in sectarian violence in major cities such as Homs, Aleppo, Hama, Latakia, and Damascus since May 14.[92] CTP-ISW recorded one sectarian-motivated attack on May 27 in which unknown gunmen abducted and executed an Alawite man in the al Waer neighborhood of Homs City.[93] CTP-ISW observed 15 instances of sectarian violence, primarily against Alawites in Homs, Latakia, and Hama provinces, between May 1 and 14 by comparison. The Syrian transitional government has enacted several security measures to prevent attacks in these areas. The General Security Service (GSS) banned motorcycle usage at night in Homs City on May 6 and issued similar bans in Deir ez Zor on May 14 and Latakia on May 15.[94] Gunmen have used motorcycles to conduct extrajudicial killings across Syria since the fall of Assad.[95] CTP-ISW has not recorded any killings conducted by gunmen on motorcycles since May 15. This measure, along with recent GSS deployments across major cities, may have contributed to the decline in sectarian-motivated attacks across Syria over the past two weeks.[96]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Homs

May 28, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Revenge killings targeting former Assadists have decreased across Syria since May 15.

CTP-ISW has recorded eight revenge killings targeting former Assad regime members, primarily in Hama, Aleppo, and Daraa provinces, since May 15.[97] CTP-ISW, in contrast, recorded 17 revenge killings targeting former Assad regime members between May 1 and 15.[98] Revenge killings and assassinations of Assad regime officials have occurred in Daraa since before the Assad regime fell in December 2024.[99] Revenge killings are in part due to a lack of government-led transitional justice efforts to punish those responsible for crimes committed during the civil war, which causes vigilantes to take matters into their own hands.

The International Coalition is repositioning its forces in northeastern Syria to continue combat operations against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The International

Coalition announced on May 27 that it is repositioning forces in northeastern Syria as part of a “deliberate and conditions-based process.”^[100] ISIS has conducted a relatively higher rate of attacks since the United States began to draw down forces in April 2025 as compared to January through March 2025.^[101]

Iraq

The Shia Coordination Framework appears to be adopting different electoral strategies in different areas of Iraq for the November 2025 Iraqi parliamentary elections. Iraqi media reported on May 28 that multiple Shia Coordination Framework leaders will compete separately in Baghdad Province in the upcoming parliamentary elections.^[102] The Shia Coordination Framework is a loose coalition of Shia political parties, some of which Iran backs. Badr Organization head Hadi al Ameri, State of Law Coalition head Nouri al Maliki, Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani, and Deputy Parliament Speaker Mohsen al Mandalawi will reportedly compete against each other in Baghdad Province.^[103] Competing on separate lists will increase competition among Shia Coordination Framework parties in Baghdad. There was previously immense competition among Iranian-backed political parties to win seats in Baghdad in the October 2021 parliamentary elections. Iraqi media also reported that Former Prime Minister Haider al Abadi and National Wisdom Movement head Ammar al Hakim will reportedly run together in Baghdad.^[104] Abadi attempted to form a political party with Hakim in 2020 that supported then-Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhimi and opposed Iranian-backed groups.^[105]

This report comes after the Shia Coordination Framework announced on May 27 that it will compete in Ninewa, Diyala, and Salah al Din provinces in “unified alliances.”^[106] The Shia Coordination Framework likely wants to run together in Ninewa, Diyala, and Salah al Din to ensure that they do not split the vote and enable more unified Kurdish or Sunni parties to win more seats.^[107] Iran has reportedly pressured Shia Coordination Framework leaders to remain unified ahead of the elections to increase the likelihood that Iranian-backed parties can influence the formation of the Iraqi government.^[108]

Iraqi media additionally reported on May 28 that former Parliament Speaker and Progress Party head Mohammad al Halbousi may compete in the upcoming elections in Baghdad Province instead of in Anbar Province.^[109] Halbousi competed in Anbar Province in previous elections.^[110] Halbousi will reportedly compete in Baghdad unless Maliki’s State of Law Coalition refrains from running in Karbala Province and Ameri’s party refrains from running in Diyala Province.^[111] The State of Law Coalition won a third of the seats in Shia-majority Karbala Province in the 2021 parliamentary elections.^[112] Ameri’s party won half of the seats in Diyala Province in the 2021 parliamentary elections.^[113] A

member of Halbousi's party won the second highest number of votes after a member of Ameri's party in a Diyala district in the 2021 elections.[114] It is unclear why Halbousi seeks to diminish Maliki and Ameri's influence in Karbala and Diyala provinces specifically.

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

United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg recently discussed the US-Houthi ceasefire agreement with senior Houthi, Iranian, and Omani officials in Muscat, Oman.[115] Grundberg stressed that the Houthis must release UN workers whom they are holding hostage and return to the Saudi-led peace roadmap.[116]

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, May 29, 2025

May 29, 2025 - [ISW Press](#)



Iran Update, May 29, 2025

Ria Reddy, Kelly Campa, Ben Rezaei, Johanna Moore, Katherine Wells, Ben Schmida, Andie Parry, and Annika Ganzeveld

Information Cutoff: 2:00pm 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.

A US journalist reported on May 29 that Iran and the United States are trying to reach a "political framework text" before the next International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors meeting on June 9 and 10.[1] CTP-ISW cannot verify this report, although Iran may calculate that reaching an interim deal with the United States before the meeting would delay or prevent snapback sanctions. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) snapback mechanism, which expires in October 2025, allows JCPOA signatories to reimpose UN Security Council sanctions on Iran in the event of "significant non-performance by

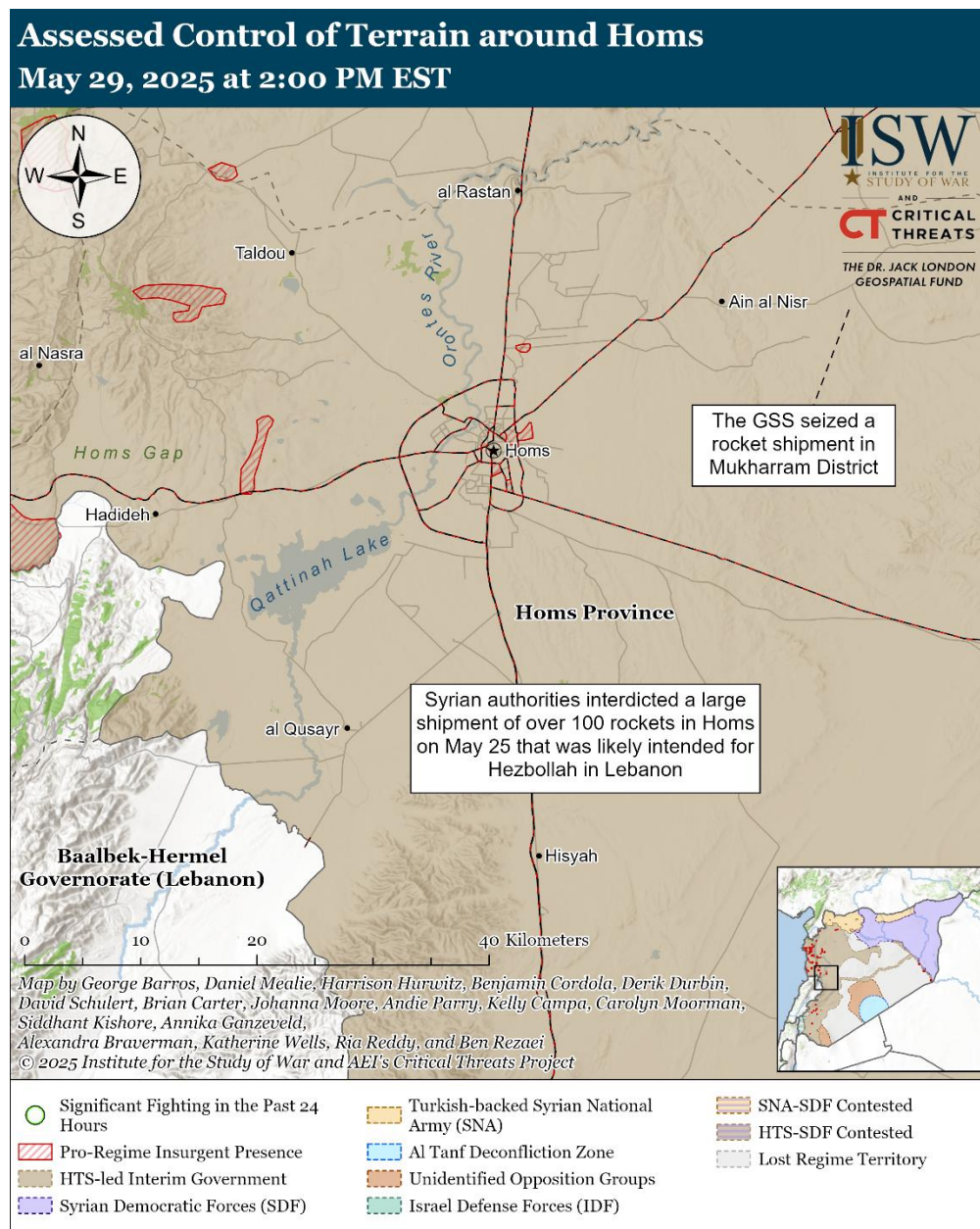
Iran of JCPOA commitments.”[2] The IAEA releases a quarterly verification and monitoring report on Iran’s nuclear program.[3] The IAEA Board of Governors will discuss the IAEA’s next quarterly report at the June Board of Governors meeting. The IAEA previously passed a censure resolution proposed by the E3 (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) in November 2024 that requires the IAEA to produce a “comprehensive report” about Iranian nuclear activities in addition to the IAEA’s regular verification and monitoring reports.[4] IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi stated on May 28 that the IAEA will release the comprehensive report “soon.”[5] The IAEA’s next quarterly report and the comprehensive report will both almost certainly confirm Iranian noncompliance with the JCPOA, which will lay the foundation for the E3 to impose snapback sanctions. The E3 recently threatened to trigger snapback sanctions on Iran by August if Iran and the United States do not reach a “substantial deal” by then.[6] Iran may calculate that reaching an interim deal with the United States would delay or prevent snapback sanctions by demonstrating Iran’s willingness to resolve the nuclear issue.[7]

IAEA Deputy Director General and head of the IAEA Safeguards Department Massimo Aparo inspected two undeclared Iranian nuclear sites in Tehran Province on May 28 as part of the March 2023 IAEA-Iran Joint Statement.[8] The joint statement identified three locations in Iran that contain undeclared nuclear material and equipment: Turqzabad, Varamin, and Marivan.[9] The IAEA reported in May 2023 that Marivan is “no longer an outstanding issue,” which suggests that Aparo visited the Turqzabad and Varamin sites during his visit to Iran.[10] The most recent IAEA Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Safeguards Agreement report from February 2025 stated that there was no progress toward implementing the March 2023 Joint Statement between November 2024 to February 2025.[11]

The United States and Syria continued to strengthen ties on May 29. The United States Special Envoy to Syria Tom Barrack and Syrian Foreign Affairs Minister Asaad al Shaibani raised the US flag over the US Ambassador’s residence in Damascus on May 29.[12] The United States lowered the flag at the residence in 2012 following former Syrian President Bashar al Assad’s violence crackdown on protestors.[13] The United States has not yet reopened its embassy in Syria, which it also closed in 2012. Barrack stated that Syria will no longer be designated as a State Sponsor of Terrorism during the flag raising ceremony.[14] US President Donald Trump must submit a report to Congress certifying that the Syrian government does not support acts of international terrorism before the United States can remove this designation.[15] The State Sponsor of Terrorism designation restricts US foreign assistance, bans defense exports and sales, enforces controls on certain dual-use items, and restricts other forms of financial assistance.[16] The US Treasury issued a Syria General License 25 on May 23, which lifted most sanctions on Syria.[17] Barrack also suggested potential negotiations between Israel and the Syrian transitional government to establish a “non-aggression” agreement and discuss border issues during the ceremony.[18]

Hezbollah appears to be cooperating with the Lebanese state to disarm itself in southern Lebanon while likely attempting to regenerate its forces north of the Litani River. Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam told the *Wall Street Journal* on May 28 that the Lebanese state has achieved about 80 percent of its objectives to disarm Hezbollah in southern Lebanon.[19] Unspecified senior Arab officials said that the United States has provided Israeli intelligence to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) about Hezbollah’s remaining stockpiles and positions in

southern Lebanon.[20] An unspecified Israeli military official said that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is "pleased by" the LAF's success in disarming Hezbollah.[21] Hezbollah has reportedly cooperated with the LAF to reassert state control over southern Lebanon since the November 2024 Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire, including by reportedly ordering its fighters who are not from southern Lebanon to vacate positions and allowing the LAF to take control of the area.[22] Unspecified senior Lebanese security officials confirmed on May 28 that Hezbollah has cooperated with the LAF to disarm it in southern Lebanon.[23] Hezbollah's cooperation with the LAF in the south likely reflects its degraded state and its prioritization of "sheltering and rebuilding" its forces.[24] Hezbollah also likely seeks to focus its near-term efforts on recalibrating its domestic political strategy and resecuring its political future in Lebanon.



The Syrian transitional government's frequent interdictions of weapons shipments heading to Lebanon from Syria suggests that Hezbollah is attempting to replenish its weapons stockpiles north of the Litani River even while cooperating with the LAF in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah efforts to rebuild weapons stockpiles are likely part of a larger effort to reconstitute its military forces. The Syrian General Security Service (GSS) frequently interdicts weapons moving from Syrian territory into northern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, often along well-established smuggling corridors that Hezbollah formerly operated with Assad regime- and Iranian-backed smugglers. The GSS recently seized over 100 rockets and dozens of machine guns in a shipment transiting Homs Province on May 25.[25] Syrian media reported that the munitions were heading to Hezbollah.[26] Syrian authorities also seized similar shipments of rockets, launchers, and artillery shells in Homs Province on May 22 and 28 that were en route to Lebanon.[27] Many of these shipments were likely headed to Hezbollah-affiliated fighters in the Bekaa Valley, given that the weapons were interdicted in Homs Province, which borders the Bekaa Valley. These consistent smuggling busts indicate that Hezbollah is attempting to rebuild its stockpiles of rockets and other munitions through pre-established smuggling networks. The replenishment of equipment and munitions stockpiles is a key element of a force's regeneration.[28] Hezbollah may calculate that cooperation with the LAF in the south will buy enough goodwill with the Lebanese and Israeli governments to ensure its long-term survival and allow it to focus on reconstitution north of the Litani River. Iran is likely supporting or attempting to support efforts to send weapons to Hezbollah, given Iran's recent efforts to financially support Hezbollah's military reconstitution.[29]

The Syrian transitional government has continued to dismantle Iranian-linked smuggling networks between Iraq and Syria, which may decrease weapons shipments to Lebanese Hezbollah. The Syrian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and GSS forces targeted an Iranian-linked weapons and drug smuggling network along the Syria-Iraq border on May 20.[30] The GSS has seized several weapons caches used by smuggling cells in Albu Kamal, Deir ez Zor Province, since May 20.[31] Iranian-backed militias controlled the Albu Kamal border and used its infrastructure as a key node in the ground line of communication to between Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah during Bashar al Assad's rule.[32] The Syrian transitional government asserted control over the border crossing shortly after the fall of the Assad regime and has begun to dismantle the Iranian-backed smuggling network that operated there.[33] The transitional government's stronger control over the eastern Syrian border could reduce the amount of materiel that Iran and its allies can transport through Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon and thereby slow down Hezbollah's reconstitution.

Key Takeaways:

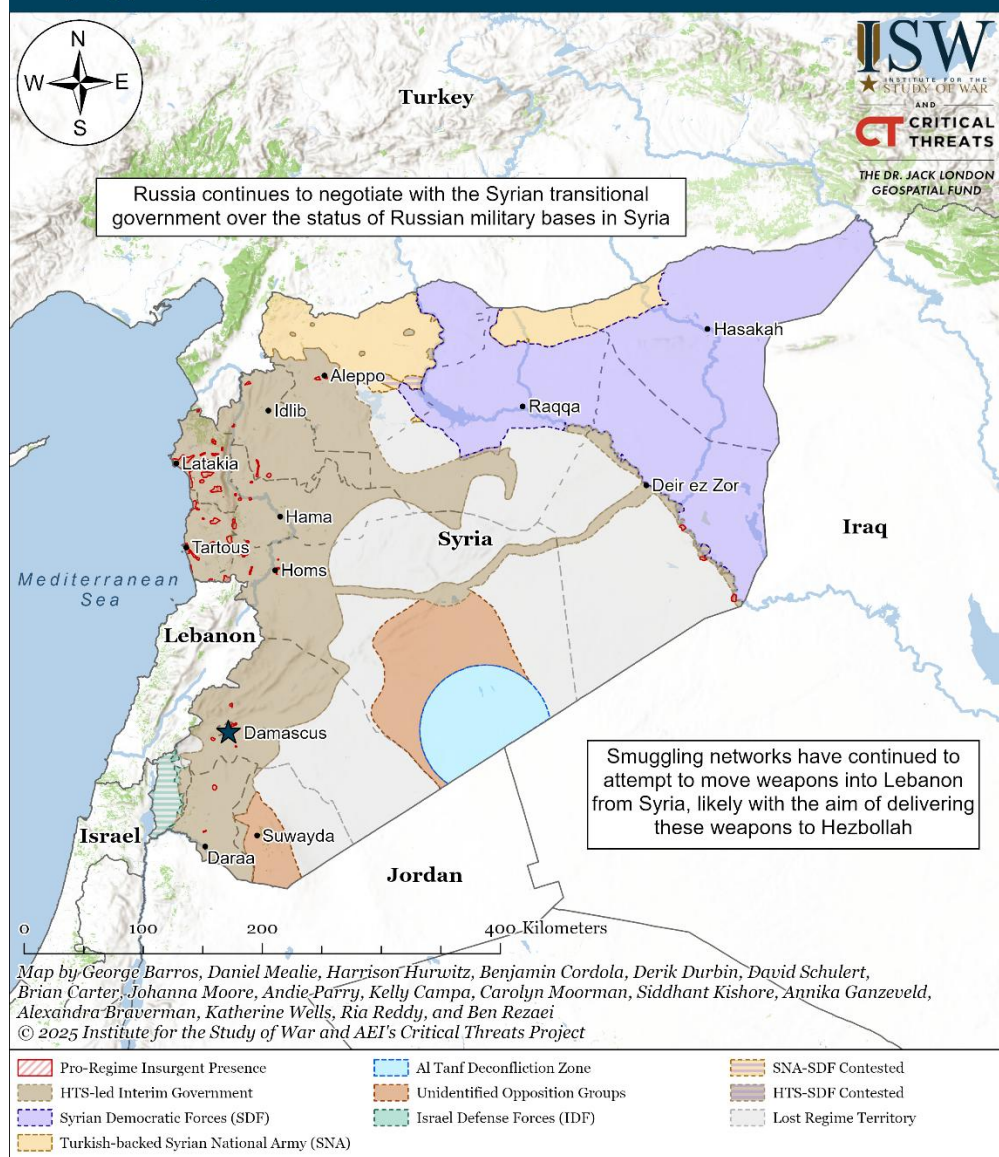
- **US-Iran Nuclear Negotiations:** A US journalist reported on May 29 that Iran and the United States are trying to reach a "political framework text" before the next International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors meeting on June 9 and 10. CTP-ISW cannot verify this report, although Iran may calculate that reaching an interim deal with the United States before the meeting would delay or prevent snapback sanctions.
- **US-Syria Ties:** The United States and Syria continued to strengthen ties on May 29. The United States Special Envoy to Syria Tom Barrack and Syrian Foreign Affairs Minister Asaad al Shaibani raised the US flag over the US Ambassador's residence in Damascus

on May 29. Barrack stated that Syria will no longer be designated as a State Sponsor of Terrorism during the flag raising ceremony. US President Donald Trump must submit a report to Congress certifying that the Syrian government does not support acts of international terrorism before the United States can remove this designation.

- **Hezbollah Reconstitution:** Hezbollah appears to be cooperating with the Lebanese state to disarm itself in southern Lebanon while likely attempting to regenerate its forces north of the Litani River. Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam told the *Wall Street Journal* on May 28 that the Lebanese state has achieved about 80 percent of its objectives to disarm Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. An unspecified Israeli military official said that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is "pleased by" the LAF's success in disarming Hezbollah. The Syrian transitional government's frequent interdictions of weapons shipments heading to Lebanon from Syria suggests that Hezbollah is attempting to replenish its weapons stockpiles north of the Litani River even while cooperating with the LAF in southern Lebanon. The Syrian transitional government has continued to dismantle Iranian-linked smuggling networks between Iraq and Syria, which may decrease weapons shipments to Lebanese Hezbollah.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

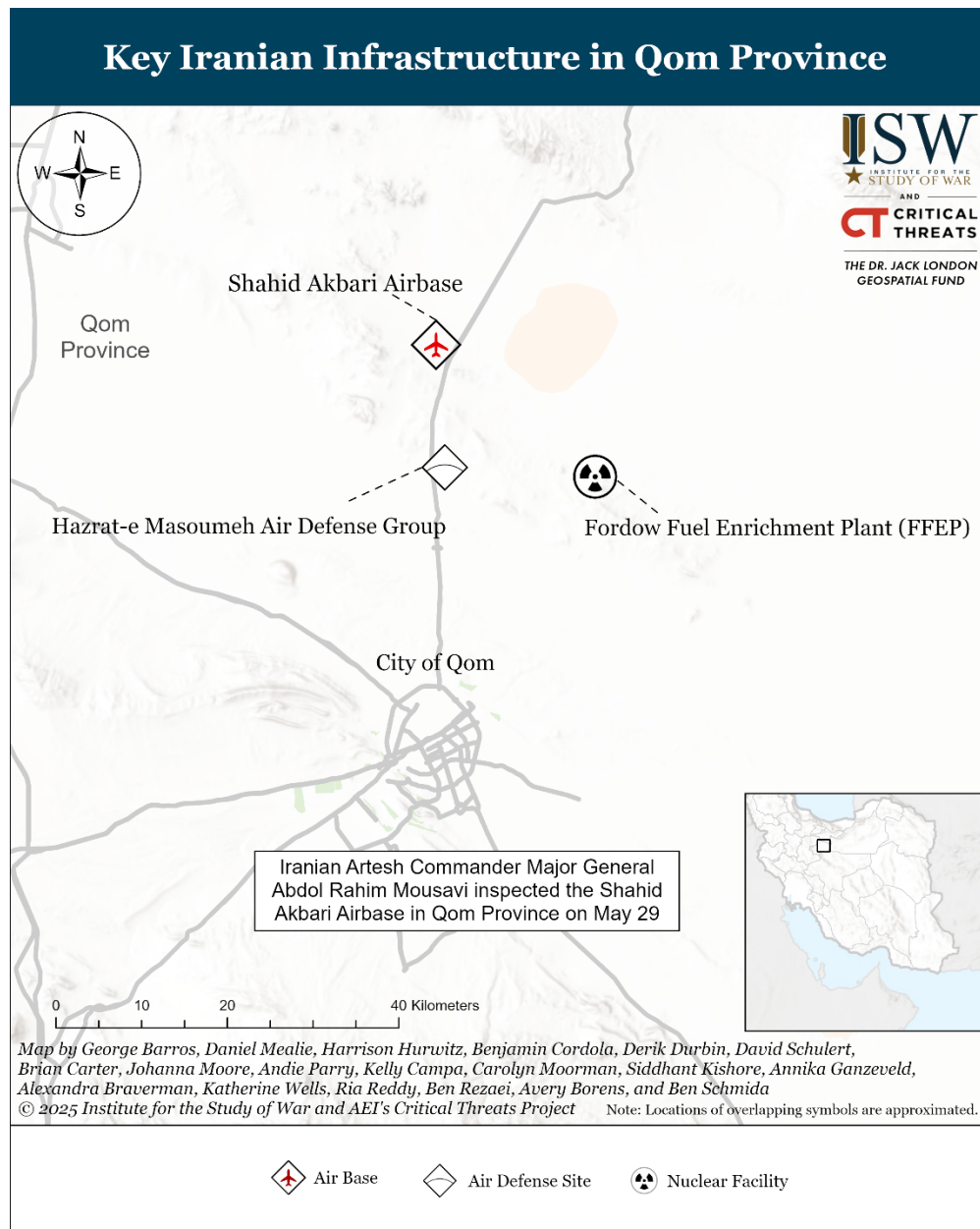
May 29, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

Senior Iranian military commanders are continuing to prepare for potential US or Israeli strikes on Iran. Iranian Artesh Commander Major General Abdol Rahim Mousavi inspected the Shahid Akbari Airbase in Qom Province on May 29.[34] The airbase is located approximately 12 miles from the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant (FFEP) and 10 miles from the Hazrat-e Masoumeh Air Defense Group. Khatam ol Anbia Air Defense Headquarters Commander Brigadier General Alireza Sabahi Fard previously visited the Hazrat-e Masoumeh Air Defense Group on April 16 to assess the unit's operational readiness.[35] The Artesh Air Defense Force conducted air defense exercises near the FFEP in January 2025.[36] Iranian leaders likely assess

that an Israeli or US strike on Iran would target critical Iranian nuclear infrastructure, including the deeply-buried Fordow nuclear facility.



Iranian Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Akbar Ahmadian discussed deepening Sino-Iranian economic and security cooperation with Chinese Communist Party Politburo member Chen Wenqing on the sidelines of the Moscow International Security Summit on May 29.[37] Ahmadian and Wenqing likely discussed Iran’s continued illicit oil exports to China via its "ghost fleet" and mechanisms for the two countries to evade US sanctions on Iran.[38] The officials also likely discussed the US-Iran nuclear negotiations. China has recently defended Iran's civil nuclear program and called US sanctions on Iran "illegal." [39]

Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Spokesperson Brigadier General Ali Mohammad Naeini expressed concern about Iran's response to perceived "cognitive warfare."[40] Iranian officials use the term "cognitive warfare" to describe Iran's enemies' alleged efforts to conduct psychological operations and instill feelings of distrust and hopelessness among the Iranian population in order to facilitate regime collapse. Naeini stated that Iran faces "serious challenges" confronting "cognitive warfare," particularly "cognitive warfare" that is directed at Iranian youth. Naeini claimed that Iran's enemies seek to undermine Iran's national and cultural identity through narrative manipulation, media distortion, and perception warfare. Naeini urged structural reforms to strengthen the regime's narrative control and cultural resilience. Naeini also called for intensifying "explanation jihad" efforts to counter cognitive threats. "Explanation jihad" is an Iranian regime theory that indoctrinating and ideologizing the population, especially Iranian youth, will increase public support for the regime and reduce anti-regime sentiment.[41] Iranian officials have historically sought to expand ideologization efforts to confront anti-regime sentiment rather than address the core issues and grievances that generate this sentiment.[42] Iran's proposed 2025–2026 budget significantly increases funding for religious and ideological institutions, which highlights the regime's efforts to expand ideologization efforts.[43] The IRGC Baghiyatollah al Azam Sociocultural Headquarters and Islamic Propaganda Organization are set to receive a 233 percent and 177 percent funding increase, respectively, in the current .[44]

The Iranian rial appreciated from 828,800 rials to one US dollar on May 28 to 823,000 rials to one US dollar on May 29.[45]

Syria

The Syrian transitional government signed a \$7 billion agreement with international energy and construction companies on May 29 to rebuild Syrian energy infrastructure.[46]

Syrian Foreign Affairs Minister Asaad al Shaibani signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the Syrian transitional government, Qatari-based UCC Holding, Turkish and Emirati-owned Kaylon GES Enerji Yatirimlari, Turkish-based Gengiz Enerji, Qatari-owned Power International, and Qatari-based Orbacon Holding to rebuild Syria's power stations and electricity grid.[47] The CEO of UCC Holding claimed that the reconstruction projects are expected to create 300,000 Syrian jobs.[48] Foreign investment in Syria's energy sector is critical to supporting economic growth. This agreement will not produce immediate economic relief for Syria, however. Economic growth in Syria also only addresses one of many factors that contribute to instability in Syria. The Syrian transitional government has not addressed deeply-rooted ethno-sectarian distrust between it and minority groups in Syria. This distrust discourages cooperation with the government and can lead to renewed conflicts across Syria

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Vershinin suggested on May 29 that Russia is continuing to negotiate with the Syrian transitional government about the status of Russian military bases in Syria.[49] Vershinin told Russian state media that "Russia continues its dialogue with Syria on a range of bilateral relations that take into account the interests of both sides," likely in reference to Russian basing rights. [50] Russia and the Syrian transitional government have engaged in negotiations about the status of Russian bases in Syria since January 2025.^[50] Syrian and Western media have reported that Russian forces remain present at

three military bases in Syria: Hmeimim Airbase in Latakia, the naval base at Tartous, and Russia's former helicopter base in Qamishli, Hasakah Province.[51] Vershinin's statement follows Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's invitation to Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al Shaibani on May 27 to visit Moscow and an attack on Hmeimim Airbase by militants unaffiliated with the Syrian government on May 20.[52] CTP-ISW previously assessed that Russia appears to have begun an incentives-based economic relationship with Syria, possibly as part of its effort to secure basing rights.[53]

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

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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Tags

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<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iran-update-may-29-2025>

Iran Update



**Andie Parry, Ben Rezaei, Ria Reddy, Kelly Campa, Ben Schmida,
Katherine Wells, and Annika Ganzeveld**

May 30, 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.

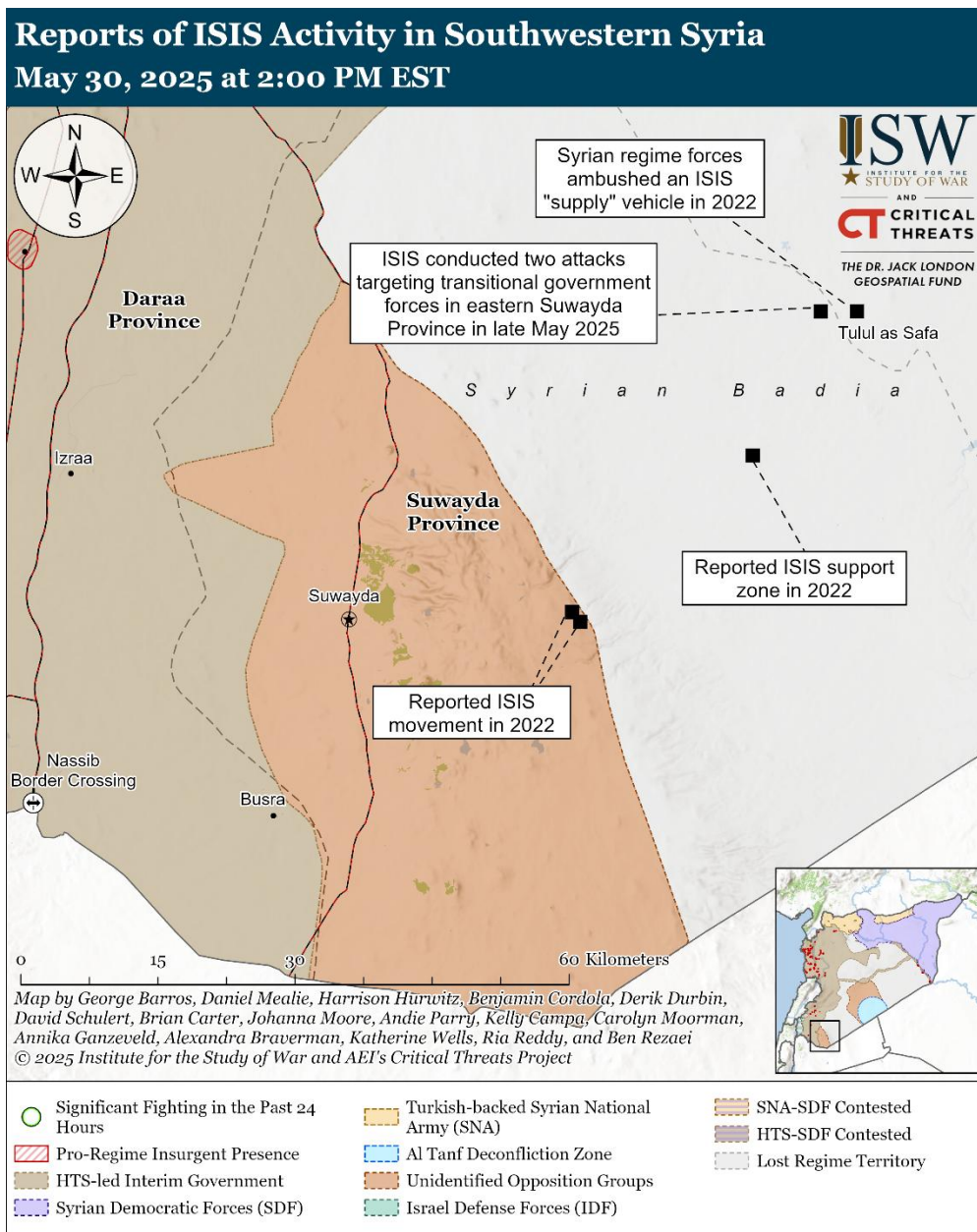
We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We utterly condemn violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity even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

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) conducted two attacks in late May 2025 targeting transitional government forces in eastern Suwayda Province, demonstrating that ISIS retains a presence along ground lines of communication (GLOC) between the central Syrian desert and southern Syria.[1] ISIS fighters detonated improvised explosive devices (IEDs) targeting Syrian Ministry of Defense (MoD) vehicles in separate attacks in Tulul al Safa on May 22 and 28.[2] These IED attacks are the first attacks that ISIS has claimed in southern Syria since 2023 and the first attacks that ISIS has claimed against the Syrian transitional government.[3] The attacks targeted vehicles from the Free Syrian Army and the 70th Division, which are Syrian opposition units that are supported by the United States in the al Tanf Deconfliction Zone.[4] ISIS has probably maintained attack cells in southern Syria and along the GLOCs leading to central Syria since 2023 despite the lack of attacks. ISIS claimed a large number of attacks in Daraa Province in 2023 that it had conducted months prior.[5]

These attacks demonstrate that ISIS maintains cells between the central Syrian desert and southern Syria, where the group has historically sheltered some senior leadership in recent years.[6] ISIS fighters could use the GLOCs between southern and central Syria to retreat from southern Syria into central Syria or vice versa when under pressure. ISIS uses central Syria's sparsely populated desert as a sanctuary where it can rest, refit, and train new fighters. ISIS maintained likely support zones in eastern Suwayda Province in 2022, and the Assad regime ambushed ISIS "supply" vehicles in Tulul al Safa in June 2022, demonstrating that ISIS previously operated in this rural area and used it to resupply fighters.[7] ISIS announced in mid-May 2025 that it has a growing presence in the "countryside and [city] outskirts" in Syria, but historic ISIS activity in eastern Suwayda suggests that these attacks are not part of the group's alleged expansion.[8]

These IED attacks are part of a trend of increased activity by Salafi-jihadi groups in Syria in May 2025, however. Syrian Interior Ministry Spokesperson Nouredine al Baba said that ISIS activity has spiked in the period since the fall of the Assad regime due to ISIS cells' seizure of former Assad regime weapons.[9] The transitional government has conducted three large-scale raids targeting ISIS cells in Aleppo, Rif Dimashq, and Deir ez Zor provinces since May 17, compared to three counter-ISIS raids between December 2024 and early May.[10]



Gulf leaders are reportedly urging Iran and the United States to conclude a nuclear deal. Gulf countries likely support a US-Iran nuclear agreement because they are concerned that the collapse of the US-Iran nuclear negotiations could trigger a potential US or Israeli strike on Iran, which could in turn prompt an Iranian retaliation against Gulf states or oil trade routes. Saudi, Emirati, and Qatari leaders reportedly urged US President Donald Trump to prioritize a nuclear agreement with Iran and prevent military escalation during Trump's recent Gulf visit in mid-May, according to three sources speaking to *Axios* on May 29.[11] An unspecified source told *Axios* that Saudi, Emirati, and Qatari leaders warned Trump that a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities may threaten Gulf states that host US bases. Unspecified sources similarly told Reuters on May 30 that Saudi Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman told Iranian leaders in April 2025 to "seriously" consider Trump's proposal for a nuclear deal.[12]

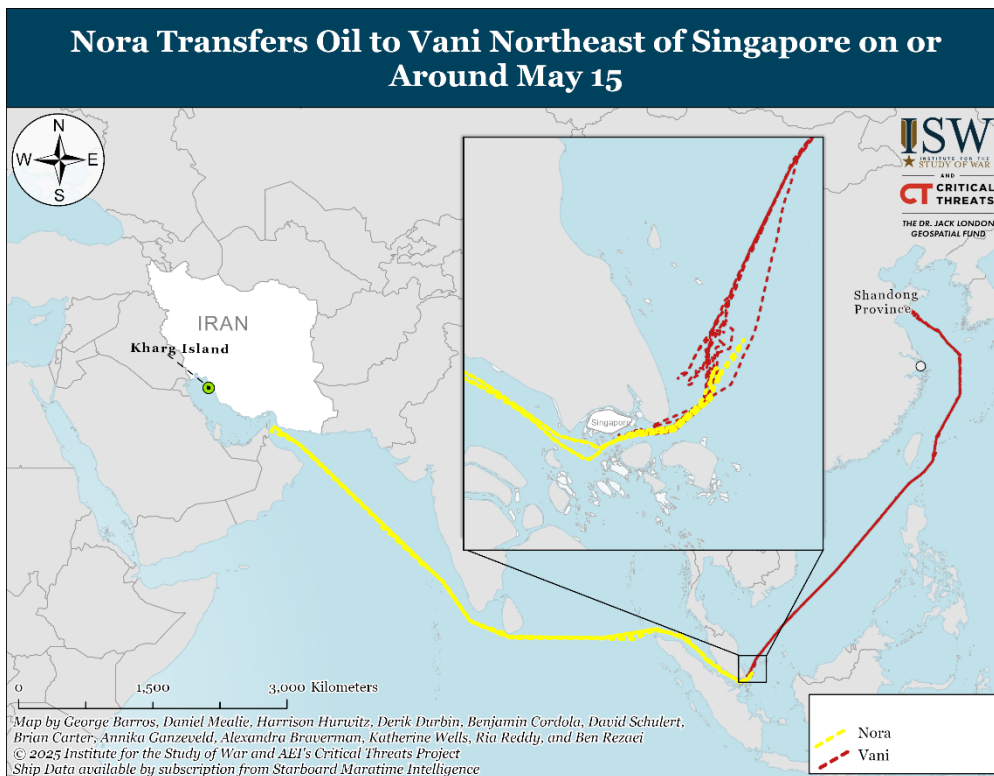
Gulf countries may be concerned that Iran would attack US bases or energy infrastructure in the Gulf or close the Strait of Hormuz in retaliation for a US or Israeli strike on Iran. Senior Iranian military commanders, including Khatam ol Anbia Central Headquarters Commander Major General Gholam Ali Rashid and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Commander Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajji Zadeh, have repeatedly threatened in recent months to strike US bases in the Middle East in response to a strike.[13] Senior Iranian military officials have also recently threatened to disrupt international shipping. Iranian Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS) Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri threatened on May 12 that Iran would respond to an attack by disrupting international commercial shipping.[14] Gulf leaders likely support a US-Iran nuclear agreement because they seek to avoid disruptions to international shipping and oil exports through the Strait of Hormuz, given that such disruptions would cause an economic downturn.

Senior Iranian military commanders are continuing to prepare for potential US or Israeli strikes on Iran. Khatam ol Anbia Air Defense Headquarters Commander Brigadier General Alireza Sabahi Fard inspected Iran's Southeastern Air Defense Zone in Bandar Abbas, Hormozgan Province, on May 30, to conduct an operational assessment of military units and defense capabilities at the site.[15] Sabahi Fard and Iranian Artesh Commander Major General Abdol Rahim Mousavi conducted separate inspections at the same air defense zone on April 4 and May 16, respectively. These inspections follow AFGS Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri's May 12 order to implement a new operational plan around the Nazeat Islands in the Strait of Hormuz to enhance missile and drone strike capabilities, fortify air defenses, and integrate advanced command-and-control infrastructure.[16]

Iran continues to coordinate with China and Russia on nuclear and economic issues, which illustrates cooperation between major US adversaries. Russia has opposed stated US objectives in the nuclear negotiations by supporting Iran's "right" to enrich uranium. Russian Permanent Representative to the UN in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, stated on May 30 that the US-Iran nuclear negotiations may "require" another round of trilateral deputy-level consultations between Iran, China, and Russia.[17] Iran, China, and Russia previously met in March and April 2025 in Beijing to discuss the Iranian nuclear issue.[18] Ulyanov stated in early March 2025 that Iranian production of 60 percent enriched uranium has "no weapons risk." [19] China has separately defended "Iran's right to" peaceful nuclear energy and criticized sanctions on Iran.[20] International Atomic Energy Agency Director (IAEA) Rafael Grossi stated in March 2025 that Iran has enough 60 percent enriched uranium, if enriched further, to produce six nuclear weapons.[21] The Iranian, Chinese, and Russian permanent representatives to the United Nations reportedly also met on May 29 to coordinate positions on the US-Iran nuclear negotiations.[22] Ulyanov emphasized the importance of trilateral coordination before the next IAEA Board of Governors meeting on June 9 and 10. Ulyanov's timeline is notable given that Iran and the United States are reportedly trying to reach a "political framework text" before the June Board of Governors meeting.[23] CTP-ISW previously assessed that Iran may calculate that reaching an interim deal with the United States before the meeting would delay or prevent snapback sanctions.[24] Iran, China, and Russia previously issued a joint statement in March 2025, effectively condemning the US "maximum pressure" strategy vis-a-vis Iran.[25]

Iran and China continue to cooperate to undermine the US "maximum pressure" campaign targeting Iranian oil exports. Bloomberg reported on May 30 that vessels responsible for shipping illicit Iranian oil to China are disabling their transponders to conduct ship-to-ship transfers

in order to obfuscate the origin of the shipments.[26] These vessels are disappearing from tracking systems near eastern Malaysia, a hotspot for Iranian ship-to-ship transfers.[27] The unsanctioned San Marino-flagged Vani oil tanker sailed from Shandong Province, China, to the eastern Malaysian coast and "went dark" on May 15 and reappeared on May 20 fully loaded after conducting a ship-to-ship transfer with the US-sanctioned Guyana-flagged oil tanker Nora.[28] The Nora had sailed from the Persian Gulf to the eastern Malaysian coast. Starboard Maritime Intelligence data flagged an "encounter" between the two vessels east of Singapore, which indicates that the two vessels were either less than 50m apart for 10 minutes or less than 200m apart for 30 minutes.[29] Vani is currently headed to Qingdao, China, a hub for illicit Iranian oil exports.[30] China remains the largest importer of Iranian oil, which helps Iran circumvent US sanctions.[31]



Key Takeaways:

- **ISIS Activity in Syria:** The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) conducted two attacks in late May 2025 targeting transitional government forces in eastern Suwayda Province, demonstrating that ISIS retains a presence along ground lines of communication (GLOC) between the central Syrian desert and southern Syria. ISIS fighters detonated improvised explosive devices (IEDs) targeting Syrian Ministry of Defense (MoD) vehicles in separate attacks in Tulul al Safa on May 22 and 28. These IED attacks are the first attacks that ISIS has claimed in southern Syria since 2023 and the first attacks that ISIS has claimed against the Syrian transitional government. ISIS has probably maintained attack cells in southern Syria and along the GLOCs leading to central Syria since 2023 despite the lack of attacks.
- **Cooperation Between Iran, Russia, and China:** Iran continues to coordinate with China and Russia on nuclear and economic issues, which illustrates cooperation between major US

adversaries. Russia has opposed stated US objectives in the nuclear negotiations by supporting Iran's "right" to enrich uranium. Russian Permanent Representative to the UN in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, stated on May 30 that the US-Iran nuclear negotiations may "require" another round of trilateral deputy-level consultations between Iran, China, and Russia. The Iranian, Chinese, and Russian permanent representatives to the UN reportedly met on May 29 to coordinate positions on the US-Iran nuclear negotiations.

- **Gulf Countries' Concerns about Regional Escalation:** Gulf leaders are reportedly urging Iran and the United States to conclude a nuclear deal. Gulf countries likely support a US-Iran nuclear agreement because they are concerned that the collapse of the US-Iran nuclear negotiations could trigger a potential US or Israeli strike on Iran, which could in turn prompt an Iranian retaliation against Gulf states or oil trade routes. Saudi, Emirati, and Qatari leaders reportedly urged US President Donald Trump to prioritize a nuclear agreement with Iran and prevent military escalation during Trump's recent Gulf visit in mid-May, according to three sources speaking to Axios on May 29. Unspecified sources similarly told Reuters on May 30 that Saudi Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman told Iranian leaders in April 2025 to "seriously" consider Trump's proposal for a nuclear deal. Gulf countries may be concerned that Iran would attack US bases or energy infrastructure in the Gulf or close the Strait of Hormuz in retaliation for a US or Israeli strike on Iran.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

Iranian security forces reportedly arrested at least 40 people for fuel smuggling at Kargan Port in Hormozgan Province on May 29.[32] Some social media users circulated unconfirmed reports on May 30 that Iranian security forces arrested Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) fighters. The BLA is a Pakistan-based Baloch separatist militia group. Social media users claimed that Iran received "cross-border intelligence" about planned BLA-linked attacks against Iranian infrastructure.[33] CTP-ISW cannot confirm these reports.

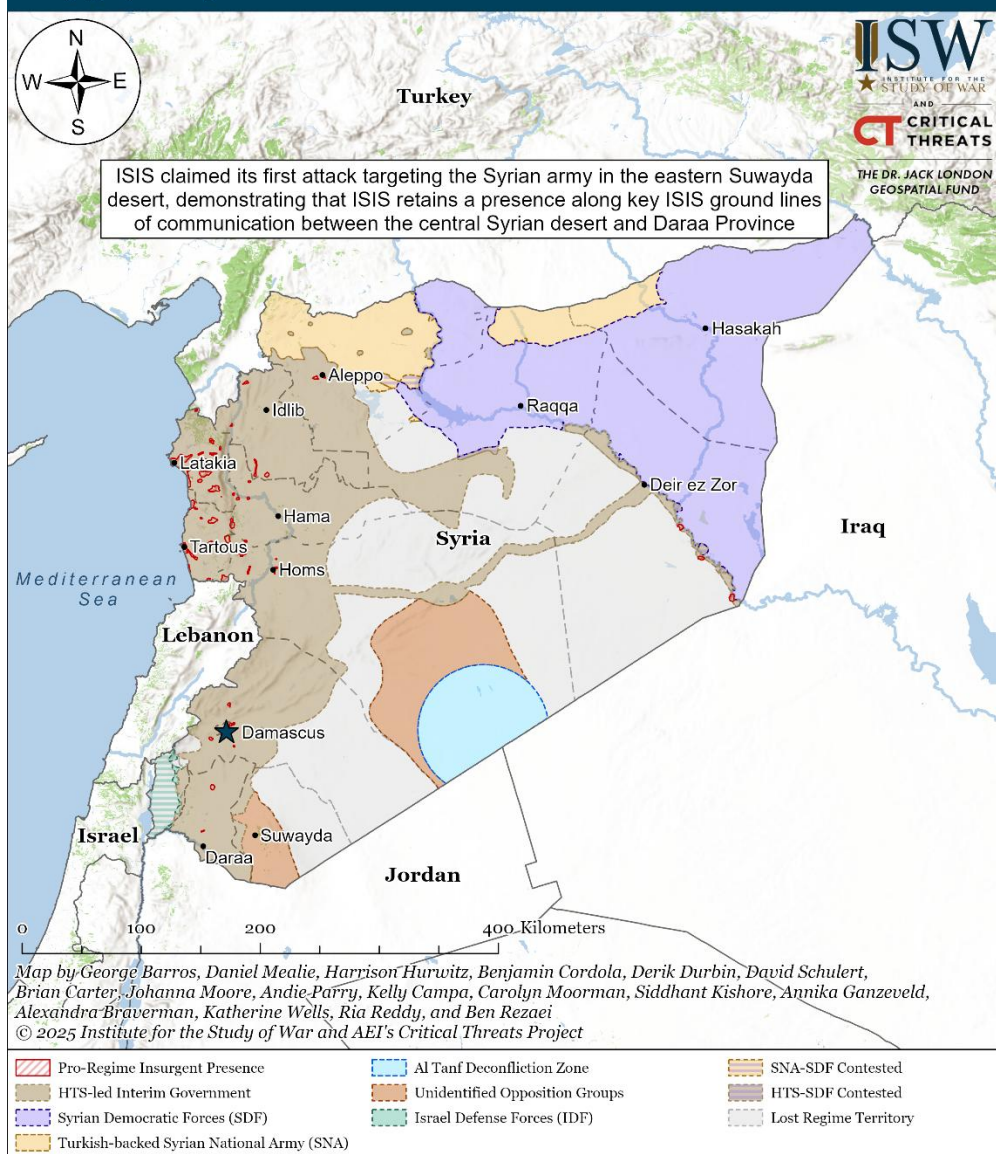
The Iranian rial depreciated from 823,000 rials to one US dollar on May 29 to 824,000 rials to one US dollar on May 30.[34]

Syria

Japan lifted some sanctions on Syria on May 30.[35] The Japanese Cabinet unfroze the assets of Syria's Industrial Bank, Popular Credit Bank, Savings Bank, and Agricultural Cooperation Bank.[36] Chief Cabinet Secretary Hayashi Yoshimasa said that Japan decided to lift the sanctions to improve living conditions and encourage "positive developments" in Syria.[37] The removal of international sanctions will promote economic stability in Syria, but there are other factors, such as deep-rooted ethno-sectarian distrust between the Syrian transitional government and minority groups, that continue to threaten internal stability.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

May 30, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



The Syrian Ministry of Defense (MoD) released the new Syrian army's code of conduct on May 30 amid its efforts to develop a professional and disciplined force.[38] The new code of conduct is roughly analogous to the Code of Conduct for Members of the US Armed Forces.[39] The MoD described the new army as Syria's "impregnable shield" that is trusted by and defends the Syrian people.[40] The MoD noted that the army values adherence to "good morals rooted in Syrian society" and respect for the military hierarchy.[41] The code of conduct calls on military personnel to protect civilians without discrimination, obey orders and civilian laws, and observe military and human rights standards when engaging enemy combatants.[42] The code of conduct also prohibits soldiers from using slogans that harm national unity, disturb civil peace, or abuse authority for "personal interests." [43] All military personnel are subject to the code of conduct and will be prosecuted and held accountable if they do not abide by it.[44] It is not clear to what laws they will be held, unlike the US

Armed Forces code of conduct, which specifies the Uniformed Code of Military Justice. The MoD has failed to control some militias. Some militias do not answer to the MoD and have committed unsanctioned violence against civilians after integrating into the army.[45] The MoD will need to ensure that all forces adhere to the code of conduct to build a professional army.[46]

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 conducted a ballistic missile attack targeting Ben Gurion Airport in central Israel on May 29 as part of the Houthi campaign to enforce an economic blockade on Israel.[47] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) intercepted the Houthi missile.[48] Some international airlines have suspended flights to Israel through July 2025 due to concerns about Houthi attacks on Ben Gurion Airport.[49]

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.

POWERED BY:



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