

Iran Update



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Information Cutoff: December 8, 2024, 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.

Click [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations, and [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of the ongoing opposition offensive in Syria. These maps are updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

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.

Syrian opposition forces toppled the Bashar al Assad regime on December 7 after only 11 days of fighting.[1] Opposition forces declared victory over Assad as they advanced into Damascus.[2] The regime negotiated its surrender as Assad fled to Russia without making any statements to his people to acknowledge the instability.[3] The opposition group led by Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) noted that regime supporters even “laid down [their] weapons” in Sayyidah Zeynab in southern Damascus, where Iran has long held deep influence.[4] HTS leader Abu Mohammad al Julani arrived in Damascus on December 8.[5] Opposition forces separately entered the final remaining regime strongholds of Jableh, Latakia, and Tartus on the Syrian coast on December 8.[6]

HTS under Julani is beginning to consolidate power in Damascus and across formerly regime-controlled territory.[7] The “Military Operations Management” of opposition groups issued orders to protect public and private property in Damascus and issued a curfew in the city.[8] Opposition forces attempted to restore order after a bank heist on the Central Syrian Bank as well.[9] Opposition leaders have visited the former regime stronghold of Latakia as a show of goodwill and religious tolerance toward the Alawite people there.[10] The opposition forces quickly established alternative political and security institutions in Aleppo City, consolidating control and support of the local population and former regime elements after seizing control there on November 30.[11] It remains unclear what government structure will emerge among the opposition groups in the coming weeks; it is not a given that HTS will by default lead the next Syrian government.

All groups in control of Syrian territory have praised the fall of the Syrian regime and articulated a hopeful but unspecific view for the future. HTS's relationship with other groups that remain in control of Syrian territory remains ambiguous, making the coming days of consolidation and negotiations pivotal. Both the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) have capitalized on the HTS-led offensive to expand their territory, including by fighting with each other.[12] Clashes between the SDF and SNA continued on December 8.[13] An SNA-affiliated operations room praised the overthrow of Assad on December 8 and emphasized the importance of preserving state institutions, the need for cooperation, and the "sense of responsibility" shared by the Syrian people.[14] SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi called Assad's fall "an opportunity to build a new Syria based on democracy and justice" but without elaborating further.[15] A key Druze leader who holds influence with the southern opposition groups called on December 8 for a transitional administration to create a new, united, and free Syria.[16]

HTS-affiliated forces appear to be taking control of the western bank of the Euphrates River in Deir ez Zor Province, which the SDF had seized from the Syrian regime on December 6.[17] SDF units have reportedly struggled to keep control over the local population in Deir ez Zor Province despite issuing a military curfew.[18] The HTS-affiliated opposition spokesperson said that opposition forces had entered Deir ez Zor City and that hundreds of regime soldiers surrendered.[19] Local sources reported tribal militias joined the HTS-led opposition and seized the Albu Kamal-al Qaim crossing between Iraq and Syria from the SDF on December 8.[20] HTS-affiliated convoys traveled along the Deir ez Zor-Albu Kamal road on December 8.[21] Opposition forces reportedly seized control over the main Damascus-Deir ez Zor road that runs through Sukhnah and Palmyra in Homs Province, which was essential to Iran's former ground line of communication to Lebanese Hezbollah.[22] Opposition groups, possibly those based in the al Tanf Deconfliction Zone, seized Palmyra on December 7.[23]

The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) clashed with the SDF in Manbij in eastern Aleppo Province on December 8. An SNA-affiliated operations room claimed to seize all of Manbij on December 8 after days of clashes in the surrounding area.[24] The SDF rejected the claim and stated later in the day that clashes were ongoing in several neighborhoods of Manbij.[25] The SNA claimed that it seized several formerly SDF-controlled towns west of Manbij on December 8.[26] CTP-ISW is not prepared to assess control of Manbij at this time.

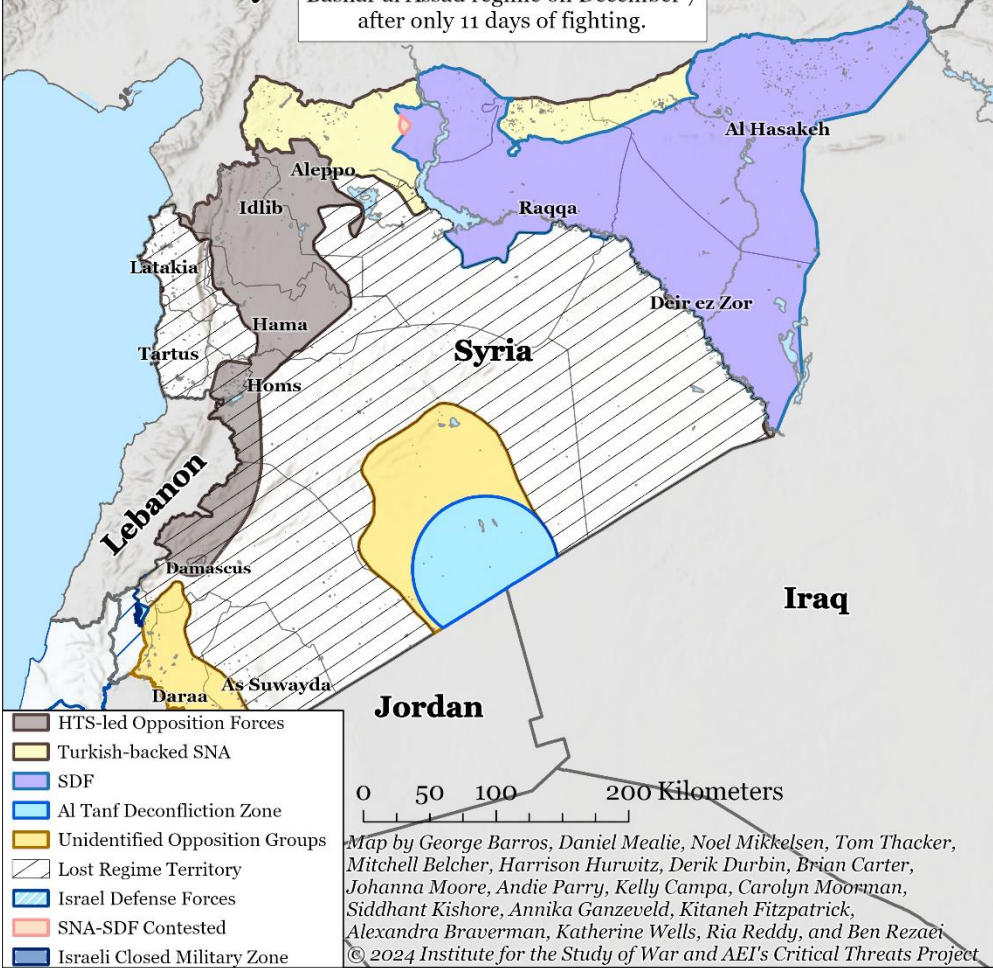
Reported Control of Terrain in Syria

As of December 8, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



THE DR. JACK LONDON
GEOSPATIAL FUND

Syrian opposition forces toppled the Bashar al Assad regime on December 7 after only 11 days of fighting.

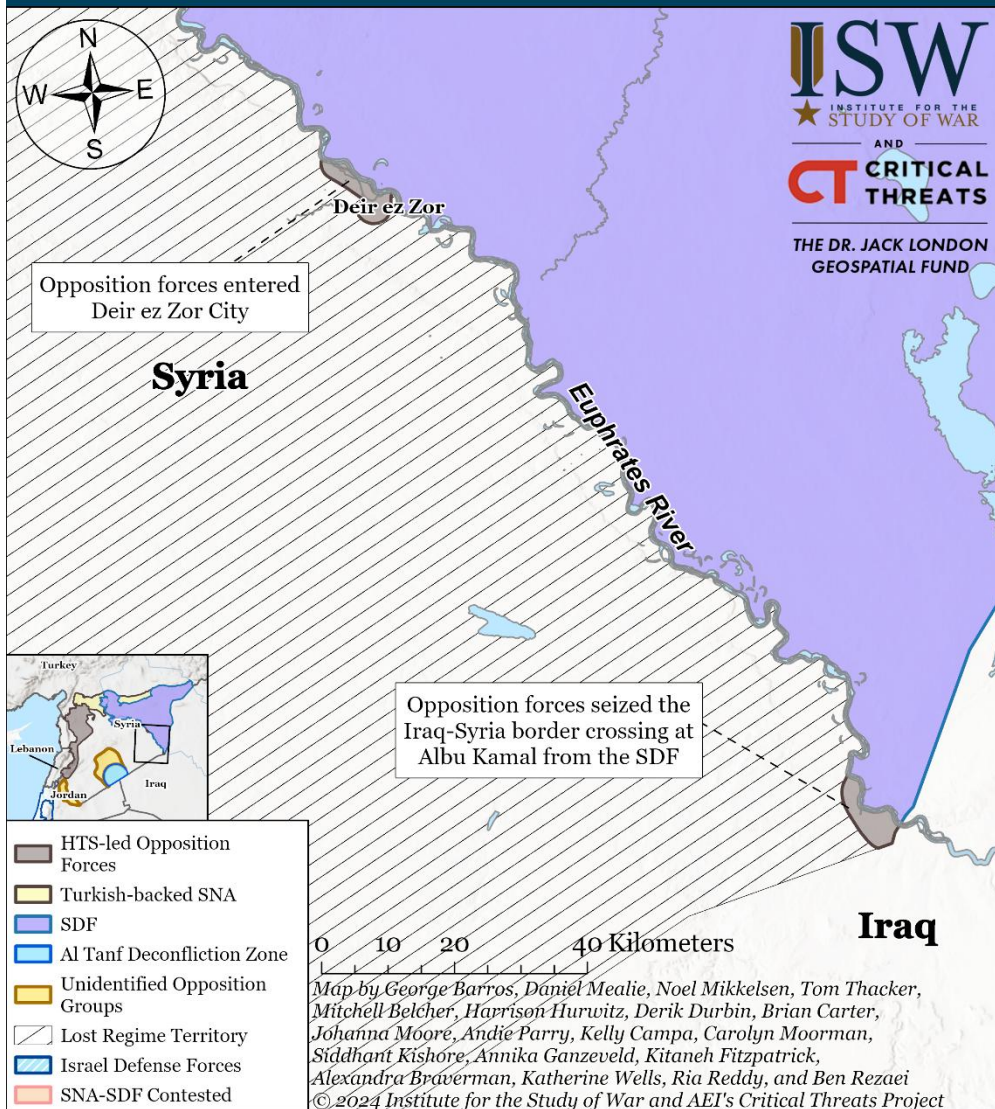


Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Noel Mikkelsen, Tom Thacker, Mitchell Belcher, Harrison Hurwitz, Derik Durbin, Brian Carter, Johanna Moore, Andie Parry, Kelly Campa, Carolyn Moorman, Siddhant Kishore, Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Alexandra Braverman, Katherine Wells, Ria Reddy, and Ben Rezaei
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Note: Unidentified Opposition Group layer displays areas previously assigned as Regime-controlled where ISW now assesses that local opposition groups have established control beyond mere presence. Inclusion of a town under this layer does not imply that ISW assesses that the town is part of any organized frontline. ISW cannot assess with confidence that these opposition groups control areas between these towns, however. This does not imply that regime forces retain a strong presence in the countryside.

Control of Terrain in Deir ez Zor, Syria

As of December 8, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



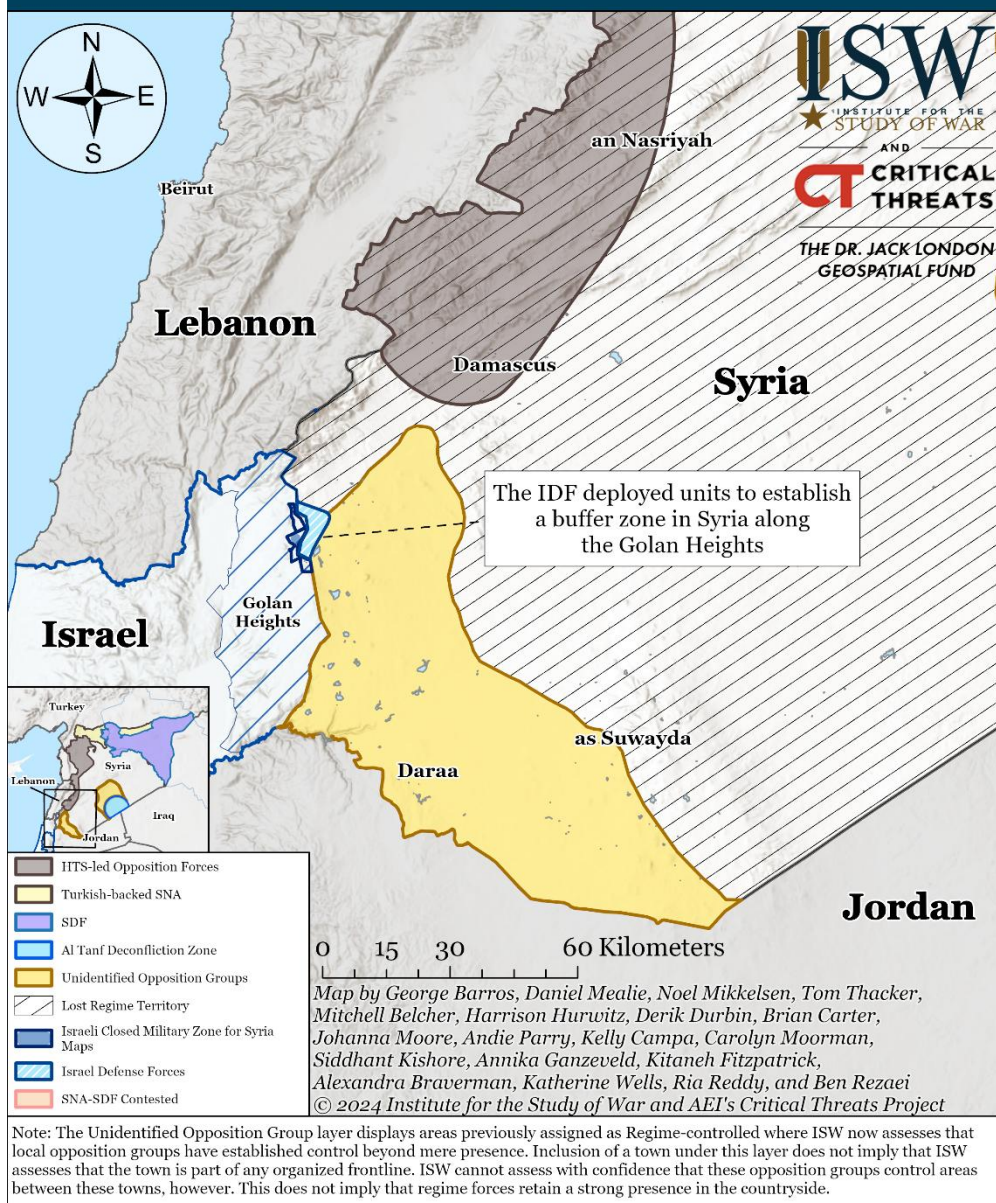
Control of Terrain in North Syria

As of December 8, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Opposition Advances in Southwest Syria

As of December 8, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) deployed forces to establish a buffer zone in Syria along the Golan Heights.[27] The IDF stated that these deployments are a defensive and temporary operation to protect Israel from possible instability in Syria resulting from the fall of the Syrian regime.[28] Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on December 8 that he considers the 1974 disengagement agreement on the Golan Heights to have “collapsed” with the fall of the Syrian regime.[29] Netanyahu said that he ordered the IDF to take the vacated Syrian Arab Army (SAA) positions “to ensure that no hostile force” took them.[30] IDF activity is concentrated around Khan Arnabeh in the center of the disengagement zone in Quneitra Governorate.[31] The IDF Arabic-language spokesperson issued warnings to residents of Ufaniya, Quneitra, al Hamidiyah, Samdaniya al

Gharbiya, and al Qahtaniah in Syria to stay inside on December 8.[32] Israeli Air Force's Shaldag special operations forces unit captured an SAA position at the top of Mt. Hermon without resistance on December 8.[33] The IDF continued building defensive features, such as trenches, along the border.[34] HTS-led opposition forces announced that they took control of Quneitra on December 7.[35]

The IDF Air Force (IAF) conducted airstrikes targeting former SAA sites, including advanced weapons and ammunition depots in Syria to prevent opposition groups from acquiring these materials.[36] The IDF conducted airstrikes targeting a weapons and ammunition depot in Mayadin, Deir ez Zor Province.[37] The IDF hit at least seven military targets in southwestern Syria, including Mezzeh Military Airport and the former SAA 4th Division base at Mount Qasioun outside Damascus.[38] The IDF also struck the former SAA 90th Brigade base near the Israel-Syria border and Khalkhala airbase north of Suwayda City in southwest Syria.[39] The IDF also targeted the Scientific Research Center and a security complex in Damascus, including intelligence and customs administration buildings, which unspecified regional security sources told Reuters had both been used previously by Iran to develop and store missiles as well as sensitive military data and other equipment.[40] Opposition-affiliated sources reported that an IDF airstrike hit the al Qusayr crossing on the Lebanon-Syria border, which Hezbollah has previously used to transport arms into Lebanon.[41] Israel is destroying Iranian military infrastructure in Syria, which will hinder Hezbollah efforts to reconstitute in Lebanon and thus limit the Iranian threat to Israel.

The United States conducted airstrikes against more than 75 ISIS targets in central Syria on December 8.[42] The airstrikes targeted ISIS personnel and sites and caused no civilian casualties.[43] US President Joseph Biden and US Central Command Commander General Michael Kurilla separately emphasized that the United States would prevent ISIS from reconstituting and exploiting instability in Syria.[44] These statements reflect the risk that the collapse of the Syrian regime could enable ISIS to consolidate and expand its position in Syria. Kurilla warned that the United States would hold accountable any actor in Syria that supports or partners with ISIS.[45]

The Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry issued a generic statement acknowledging the collapse of the Syrian regime. The ministry stated that the Syrian people should determine the future of their country without foreign interference.[46] The ministry expressed readiness to engage “all influential parties” and “help establish security and stability in Syria.” The ministry also expressed interest in friendly relations with a future Syrian government. Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian reiterated separately that the Syrian people should determine the future of their country.[47] Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi expressed support for UN Security Council Resolution 2254, calling for a political settlement, wherein “all different parties have their role.”[48] An internal Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) memo stated that Iranian leaders “accepted the fall of Assad and...lost the will to resist,” according to the *New York Times*. [49]

A hardline Iranian parliamentarian stated that Iran should focus on "atomic bomb testing" following the fall of the Syrian regime. Ahmad Naderi posted on X (Twitter) on December 8 that Iran should focus on testing nuclear bombs and reviving the Axis of Resistance.[50] Naderi has previously stated that Iran should acquire a nuclear weapon to restore deterrence.[51] Naderi's rhetoric is consistent with growing calls from senior Iranian officials encouraging Iranian

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to revoke his 2003 fatwa banning the production and use of nuclear weapons.[52] This rhetoric is especially noteworthy given the recent expansion of the Iranian nuclear program, which is making it easier for Iran to build a weapon. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported in November 2024 that Iran continues to develop its nuclear program outside the parameters of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.[53] Iran notified the IAEA on November 29 that it plans to expand its uranium enrichment capacity significantly by installing over 6,000 additional centrifuges and activating some at the Fordow and Natanz nuclear facilities.[54]

Iraqi media reported on December 7 that between 2,500 and 2,700 former SAA soldiers and officers and Syrian regime employees have entered Iraq over the past day.[55] Iraqi media reported that the soldiers and officers handed in their weapons before entering Iraq.

Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have not commented on the overthrow of the Assad regime at the time of this writing.

Key Takeaways:

- Syrian opposition forces toppled the Bashar al Assad regime after only 11 days of fighting. HTS under Julani is beginning to consolidate power in Damascus and across formerly regime-controlled territory.
- HTS-affiliated forces appear to be taking control of the western bank of Deir ez Zor Province, which the SDF had seized from the Syrian regime. The SDF clashed with the Turkish-backed SNA east of Aleppo City.
- The IDF deployed units to establish a buffer zone in Syria along the Golan Heights. The IDF also conducted airstrikes targeting ammunition depots and advanced weapons to prevent opposition forces from acquiring those materials.
- The United States conducted airstrikes against over 75 ISIS targets in central Syria. US leaders emphasized that they would prevent ISIS from reconstituting and exploiting the instability in Syria amid the collapse of the Syrian regime.

Gaza Strip:

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Erode the will of the Israeli political establishment and public to sustain clearing operations in the Gaza Strip
- Reestablish Hamas as the governing authority in the Gaza Strip

The IDF continued clearing operations in the northern Gaza Strip. The IDF reported on December 8 that its 143rd Division and Yahalom combat engineers had destroyed a Hamas tunnel system that was hundreds of meters long in Jabalia in recent weeks.[56] The IDF found rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) in the tunnel system.[57] The IDF reported that Hamas fighters used the

tunnel system to attack Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip.[58] Hamas fired an RPG targeting an IDF tank in Jabalia refugee camp on December 8.[59] A local Palestinian journalist reported gunfire from Israeli vehicles east of Jabalia refugee camp on December 8.[60]

Geolocated footage posted on December 7 shows the establishment of a new refugee camp in al Rimal, southwestern Gaza City, for Palestinians displaced from Jabalia and Beit Lahia.[61] An Israeli Army Radio correspondent reported on December 5 that over 90,000 Palestinians have evacuated Jabalia, Beit Lahia, and Beit Hanoun since the IDF restarted clearing operations in the northern Gaza Strip in early October 2024.[62]

Palestinian militias continued to attack the IDF around the Netzarim Corridor on December 8. The Mujahidin Brigades conducted a rocket attack targeting an IDF command-and-control site along the Netzarim Corridor.[63] The Martyr Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades and National Resistance Brigades separately mortared the IDF along the Netzarim Corridor.[64]

The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades detonated two improved explosive devices (IED) targeting the IDF east of Deir al Balah on December 8.[65]

Palestinian militias continued to attack the IDF in eastern Rafah City on December 8. Hamas and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades detonated IEDs targeting Israeli armor in the al Janina neighborhood in eastern Rafah City.[66] Palestinian militias, including Palestinian Islamic Jihad, mortared the IDF in the al Janina neighborhood.[67] The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades claimed that a sniper shot an Israeli soldier in the al Janin neighborhood.[68]

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

As of December 8, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



The IDF destroyed a Hamas tunnel network in Jabalia



Palestinian militias mortared the IDF around the Netzarim Corridor

Palestinian militias mortared and detonated IEDs targeting the IDF in eastern Rafah City

0 5 10 20 Kilometers

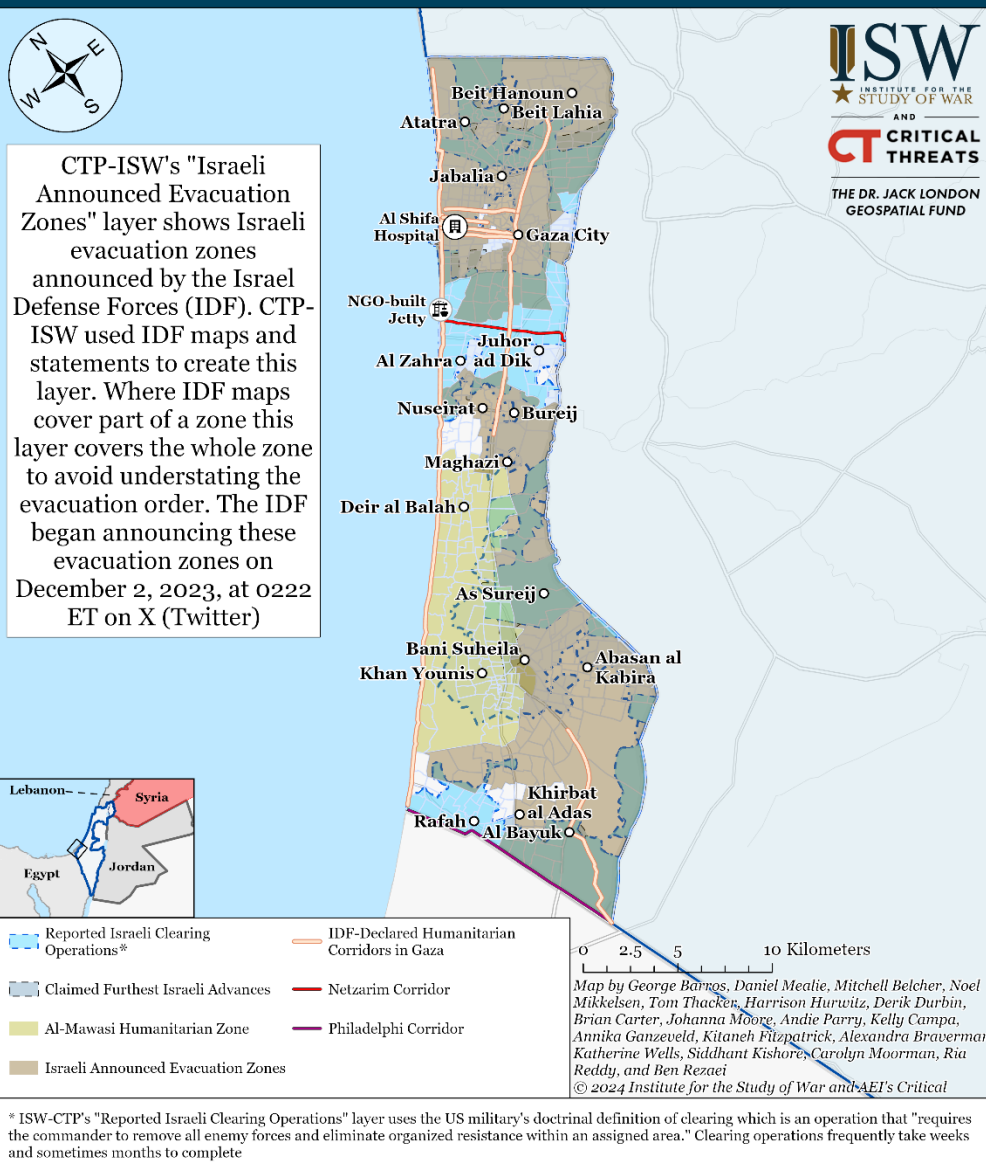
Map by George Barros, Daniel Meale, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Tom Thacker, Harrison Hurwitz, Derik Durbin, Brian Carter, Johanna Moore, Andie Parry, Kelly Campa, Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Alexandra Braverman, Katherine Wells, Siddhant Kishore, Carolyn Moorman, Ria Reddy, and Ben Rezaei - © 2024 Institute for the Study of War and AEL's Critical Threats Project

- Reported Israeli Clearing Operations*
- IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridors in Gaza
- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances
- Netzarim Corridor
- Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone
- - - Assessed Furthest Extent of Israeli Clearing Operations
- Philadelphi Corridor



* ISW-CTP's "Reported Israeli Clearing Operations" layer uses the US military's doctrinal definition of clearing which is an operation that "requires the commander to remove all enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance within an assigned area." Clearing operations frequently take weeks and sometimes months to complete

Israeli-Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip As of December 8, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



West Bank

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

Nothing significant to report

Northern Israel and Lebanon

Lebanese Hezbollah objectives:

- End Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip
- Survive the October 7 War as a capable political and military organization with control over Lebanon

The IDF 98th Division continued to operate in southern Lebanon. The IDF 7th Armored Brigade destroyed weapons warehouses containing anti-tank rockets, mortars, grenades, and a vehicle carrying rocket launchers.[69] The IDF also located and destroyed multiple shafts leading from the weapons depots to Lebanese Hezbollah underground infrastructure.

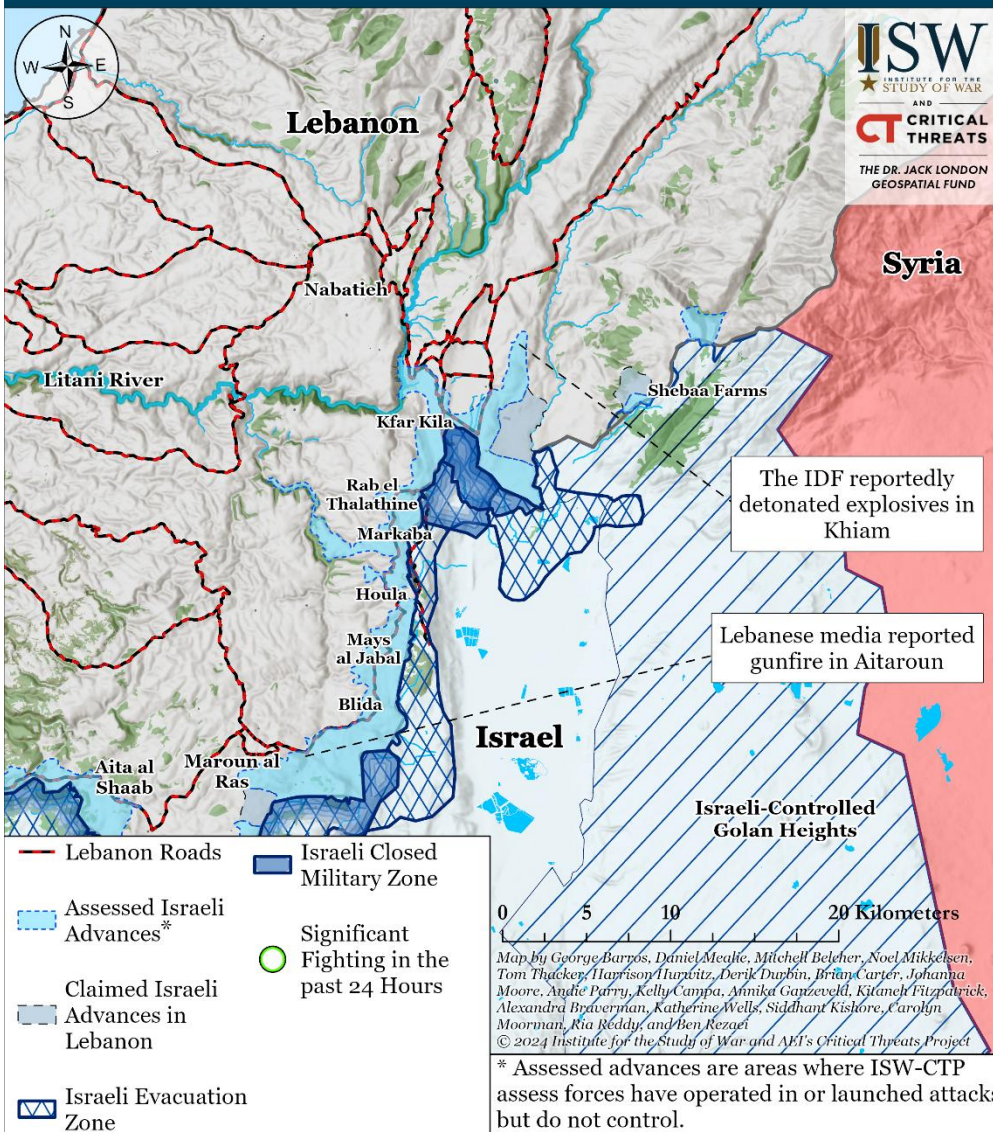
The IDF continued to operate around Khiam. Lebanese media reported that the IDF detonated explosives in Khiam on December 7.[70] Lebanese media also reported shelling west of Khiam on December 7.[71] Lebanese media last reported Israeli clearing operations in Khiam on December 6.[72]

Lebanese media reported that the IDF has demolished civilian infrastructure around Odaisseh, southeastern Lebanon, since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on December 6.[73]

Lebanese media reported on December 7 gunfire around Blida, southeastern Lebanon.[74] Lebanese media reported on December 3 that the IDF had advanced from Blida deeper into southern Lebanon.[75]

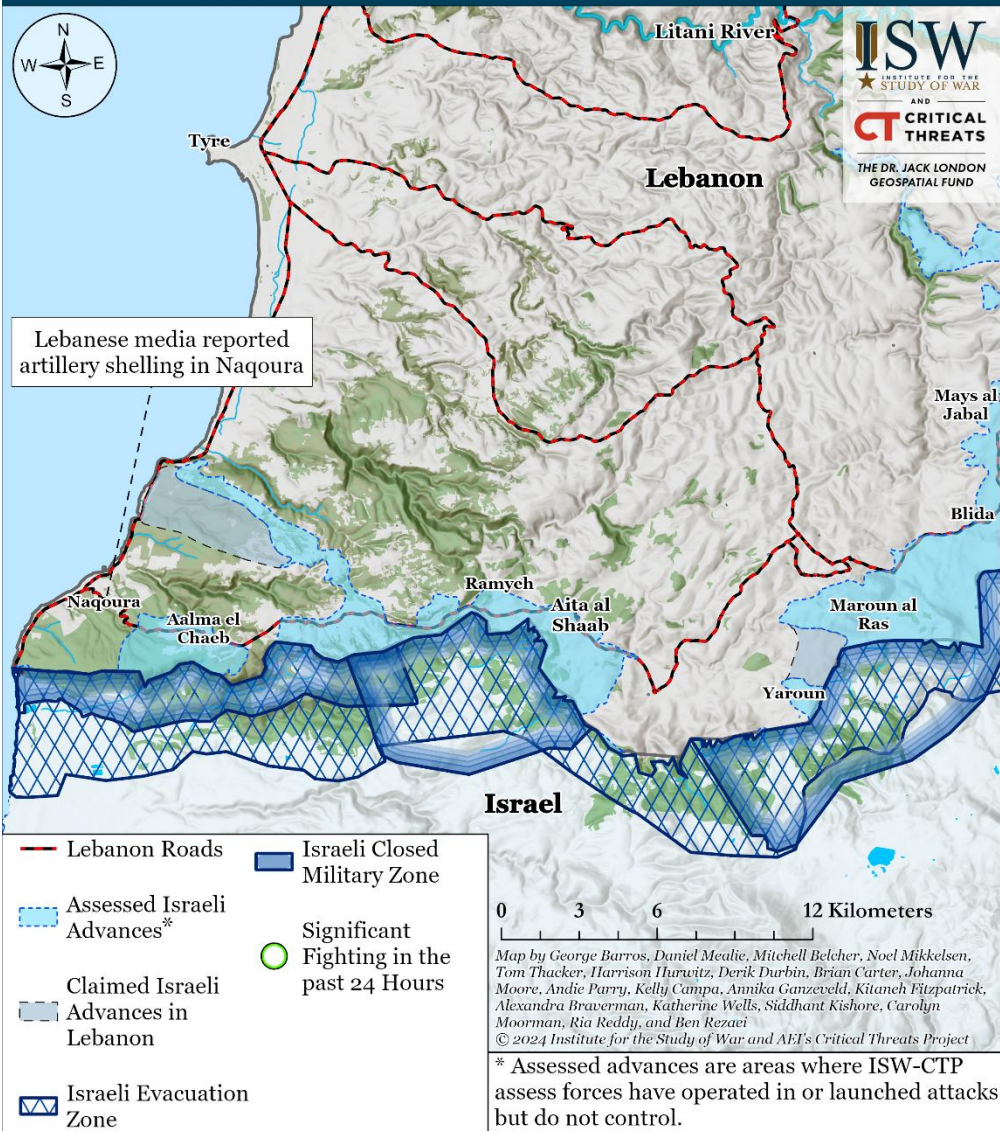
Lebanese media reported on December 7 gunfire around Aitaroun, southeastern Lebanon.[76] Lebanese media reported that Israeli forces conducted clearing operations in Aitaroun on December 6 and reported the sound of gunfire and explosions in the center of the town.[77]

Reported Israeli Operations in the Eastern Sector As of December 8, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



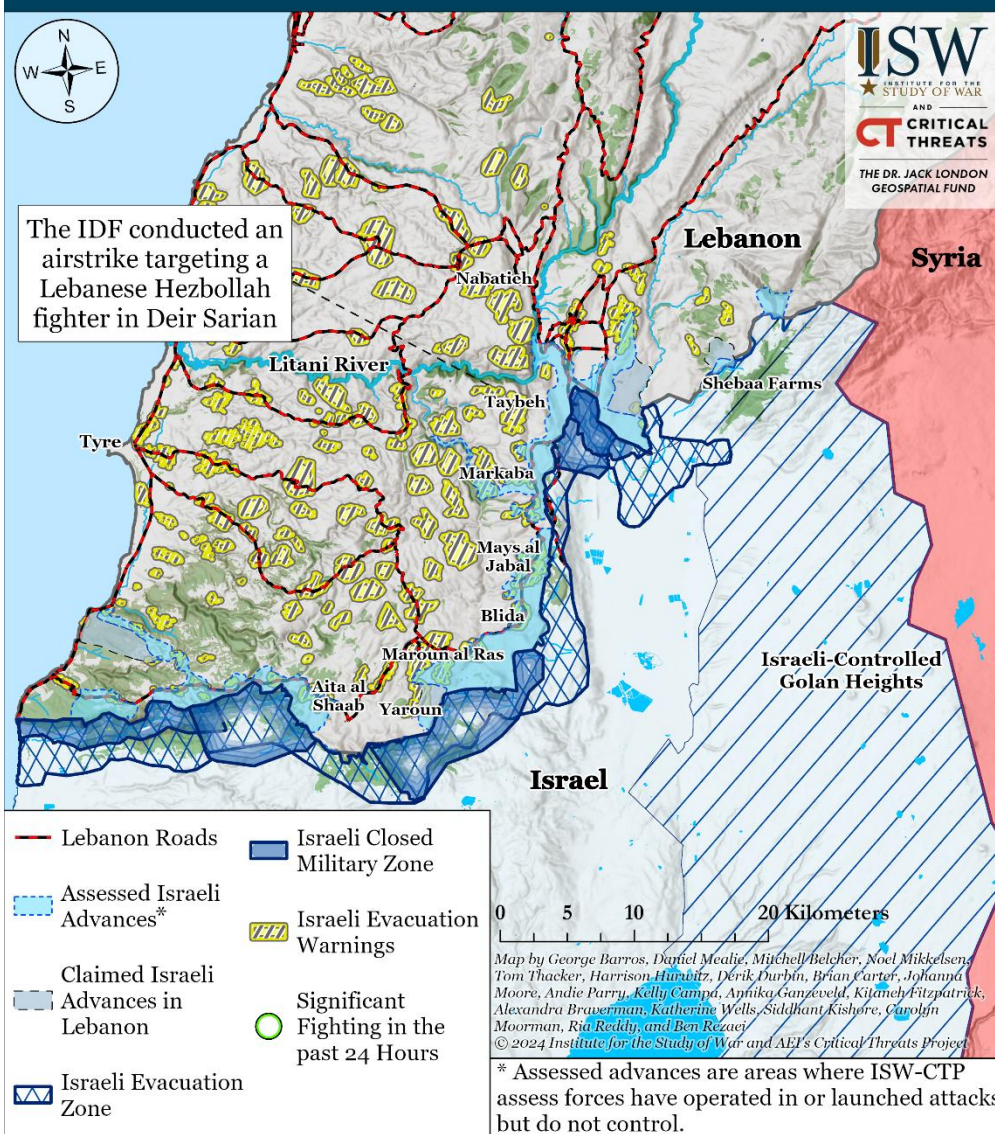
Lebanese media reported on December 7 shelling in Naqoura, southwestern Lebanon.[78] The IDF has operated southeast of Naqoura in Aalma el Chaeb since at least November 18.[79]

Reported Israeli Operations in the Western Sector As of December 8, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Reported Israeli Operations in Lebanon

As of December 8, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



The IDF Air Force has conducted airstrikes targeting Hezbollah fighters and infrastructure in southern Lebanon since CTP-ISW's data cutoff on December 6. The IDF Arabic-language spokesperson posted footage on December 7 of an IDF airstrike targeting a Hezbollah fighter in violation of the ceasefire.[80] The IDF Air Force struck Hezbollah fighters in a weapons depot near Dibbine, southeastern Lebanon, on December 8.[81] Lebanese media has reported airstrikes in multiple areas of southern Lebanon since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on December 6, including around Beit Lif, Kfar Zabad, Mari, and Yohmor.[82]

Iran and the Axis of Resistance

Nothing significant to report

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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