

Iran Update



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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.

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.

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei attempted to justify Iran's sacrifices in Syria and emphasized resilience amid setbacks during a speech on January 1 that commemorated the death of former Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Commander Qasem Soleimani. Khamenei praised Soleimani's leadership and defended Iran's regional interests.[1] Khamenei asserted that the sacrifices of "Defenders of the Shrine" in Syria were meaningful and essential, dismissing claims that their efforts were in vain. Iran refers to all of the Iranian and allied personnel who fought in Syria as "defenders of the shrines." This speech adopted a notably defensive tone by attempting to justify Iran's efforts rather than lashing out against the United States for the strike that killed Soleimani. Khamenei has previously said that Iran would seek revenge for the killing of Soleimani by attacking the United States and its partners.[2]

The speech also omitted references to current IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani, who some in Iran hold responsible for the rapid unraveling of Iran's project in Syria and the defeat of Hezbollah and Hamas. This is the second time Khamenei has discussed Soleimani publicly while eschewing any mention of Ghaani.[3] An unspecified Iranian official claimed in early December that many officials in Iran blamed Ghaani for the fall of Assad and were calling for his removal as IRGC Quds Force commander.[4]

Khamenei continued to advance a hard line on Syria, however, emphasizing that Syrian youth will resist "foreign occupation" in Syria, comparing the "Syrian youth" to Iraqi militias mobilized by Soleimani in the mid-2000s against the United States. These militias, which continue to operate in Iraq and today

control many government institutions, formed death squads to kill Sunnis and contributed to the ethno-sectarian civil war in Iraq that al Qaeda in Iraq launched in the mid-2000s.[5] Khamenei emphasized that Syrian youth will expel "foreign occupiers," which presumably include the United States, Turkey, and possibly HTS.[6] Khamenei previously emphasized the role of Syrian youth in a December 11, 2024 speech, again likening their efforts to Iraqi militias.[7]

Lebanese Airport security forces searched an Iranian Mahan Air flight in Beirut on suspicion of transporting funds to Hezbollah, which is in line with Lebanese obligations under the Lebanon-Israel ceasefire agreement. The Israel-Lebanon ceasefire agreement requires the Lebanese government to "monitor and enforce" the entry of arms and related materiel to prevent the rearming of Hezbollah.[8] Lebanese media reported that Beirut-Rafic Hariri International Airport increased security measures following leaks to the media on January 2 that Iran was planning to transfer "millions of dollars" to Hezbollah via a Mahan Air flight.[9] Mahan Air has frequently transported Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force funds, weapons, and operatives in support of Iranian proxy activities abroad and to support Hezbollah directly.[10] The airport security forces searched an Iranian Mahan Air flight that landed at Rafic Hariri International Airport on January 2.[11] An Iranian delegation refused to allow Lebanese security forces to inspect a diplomatic bag containing funds for embassy operations.[12] Iranian media claimed that the security forces did not find suspicious cash transfers for Hezbollah during their searches.[13] Lebanese media posted videos on X (Twitter) on January 2 showing a small group of pro-Hezbollah supporters protesting the inspection of the Mahan Air flight.[14]

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) have continued to clash in villages west of Tishreen Dam since CTP-ISW's last data cut off on January 2.[15] The SDF claimed its forces had killed 72 SNA fighters between January 2 and January 3.[16] Anti-SDF media reported that the SNA advanced into or seized two towns west of Tishreen Dam on January 2 after clashing with the SDF in the area.[17] Anti-SDF media also reported that the SNA set up north-facing defensive lines in front of the village Shash al Bubna, a town on the southern end of the SDF advance.[18] Well-prepared SNA defensive lines in this area could prevent the SDF from linking forces with the SDF's southern advance further south along the west bank of the Euphrates River. SDF supply lines currently flow across the dam itself. The SDF claimed on January 3 that SNA attacks have caused "significant damage" to parts of Tishreen Dam which poses risks to its stability, and connecting the two SDF advances would presumably strengthen supply lines in the event of critical damage to or destruction of the Dam.[19]

Anti-SDF media reported that Turkey conducted an airstrike targeting an SDF position in al Hurriya, northwest of Raqqa.[20] Al Hurriya is located along an SDF supply line between the Manbij frontlines and Raqqa City.[21]

Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said that the US has no plans to establish a base in Kobani and dismissed local Syrian reports as "inaccurate."[22] Syrian media posted footage of a convoy of trucks entering Kobani, northern Syria, on January 2 and unloading concrete T-walls in a suburban square in a western neighborhood of the city.[23] One of the trucks in the convoy bore a US flag. There were no obvious US military vehicles in the convoy.

Key Takeaways:

- **Khamenei Commemorates Soleimani:** Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei attempted to justify Iran’s sacrifices in Syria and emphasized resilience amid setbacks during a speech on January 1 that commemorated the death of former Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Commander Qassem Soleimani. The speech also omitted references to current IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani, who some in Iran hold responsible for the rapid unraveling of Iran’s project in Syria and the defeat of Hezbollah and Hamas.
- **Khamenei on Syria:** Khamenei continued to advance a hard line on Syria by emphasizing that Syrian youth will resist “foreign occupation” in Syria and comparing the “Syrian youth” to Iraqi militias mobilized by Soleimani in the mid-2000s against the United States.
- **Lebanese Security Forces Search Iranian Flight:** Lebanese Airport security forces searched an Iranian Mahan Air flight in Beirut on suspicion of transporting funds to Hezbollah, which is in line with Lebanese obligations under the Lebanon-Israel ceasefire agreement.
- **Fighting Continues in Northern Syria:** The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) have continued to clash in villages west of Tishreen Dam since CTP-ISW’s last data cut off on January 2. The SDF claimed on January 3 that SNA attacks have caused “significant damage” to parts of Tishreen Dam which poses risks to its stability, and connecting the two SDF advances would presumably strengthen supply lines in the event of critical damage to or destruction of the Dam.
- **US Presence in Syria:** Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said that the US has no plans to establish a base in Kobani and dismissed local Syrian reports as “inaccurate.”

Syria

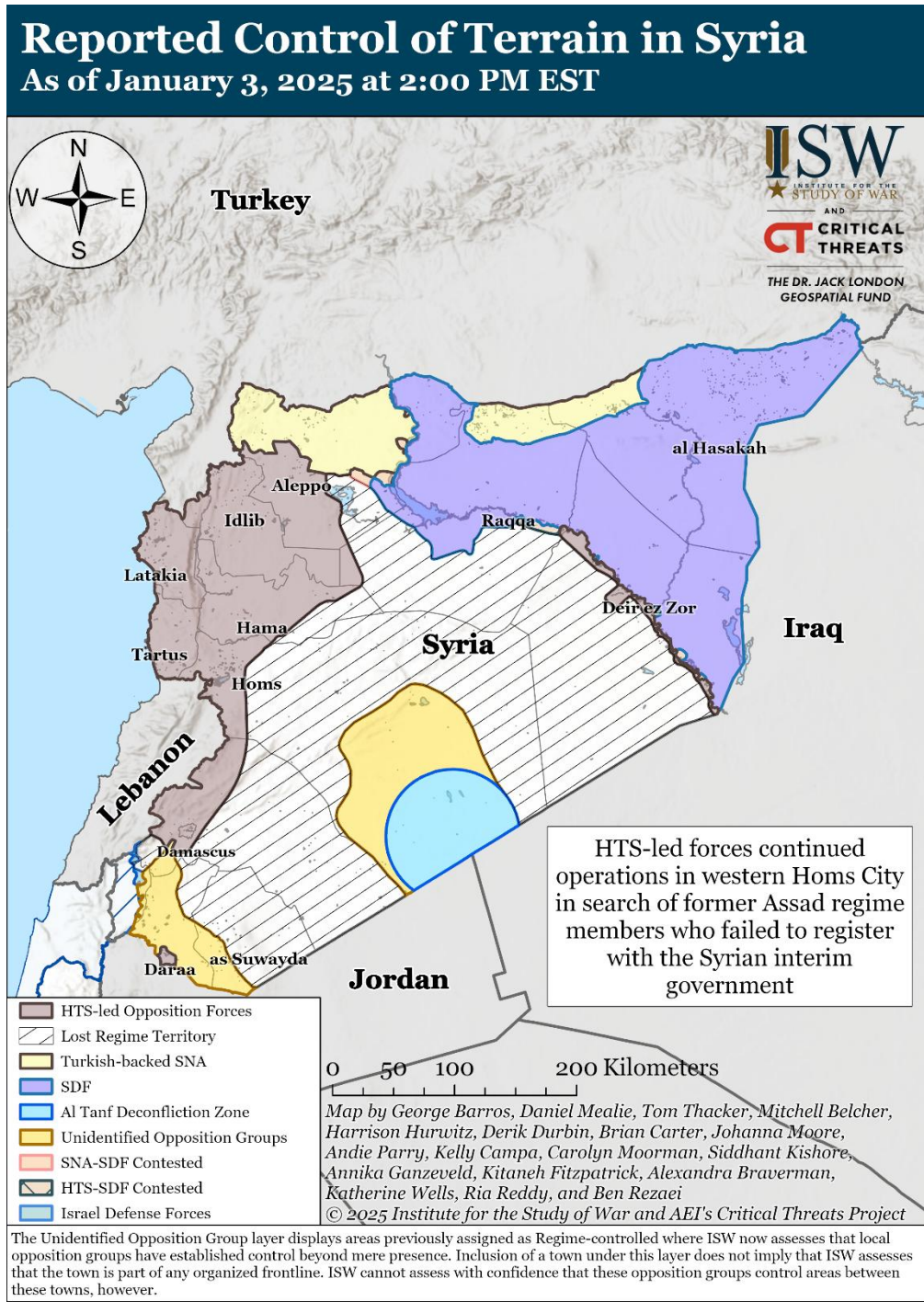
Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Reestablish ground lines of communication through Syria to Lebanon
- Reestablish Iranian influence in Syria

Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)-led forces continued clearing operations in Homs City on January 3 in search of former Assad regime members who failed to register with the interim Syrian government.[24] A Homs security official speaking to Syrian state news reported that security forces operated in the al Sabil, al Abbasiyeh, al Muhajireen, and al Zahraa neighborhoods. The al Zahraa neighborhood is reportedly a stronghold for former pro-regime militias recruited and armed by the Assad regime (also known as Shabiha) that targeted demonstrators and conducted sectarian attacks.[25] The al Abbasiyah neighborhood, adjacent to al Zahraa, is a Shia-majority neighborhood with reported ties to Iranian-backed militias.[26] HTS-led security forces began clearing operations in Homs City on January 2.[27]

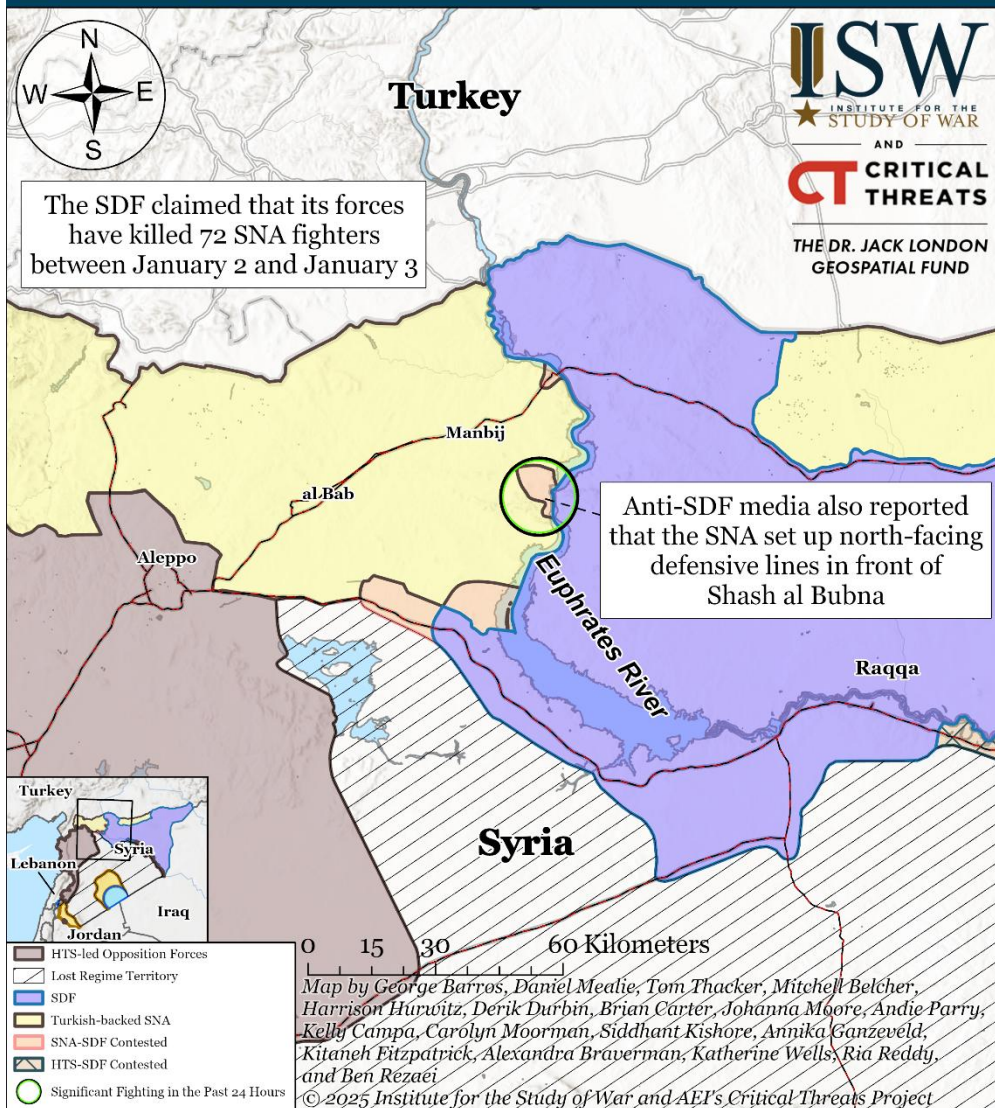
French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot and German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock met with HTS leader Ahmed al Shara in Damascus on December 3.[28] Shara has previously called for Western nations to lift sanctions on Syria.[29] Baerbock stated that the

delegation traveled to Syria to express its support for a peaceful transition of power and convey clear expectations that a new Syria includes Syrians of all ethnicities and religions in its political process.[30] Barrot and Baerbock are expected to meet with representatives of Syrian civil society during their trip.[31] The European Union’s (EU) Foreign Policy Chief Kaja Kallas stated that the EU will not lift sanctions on Syria until a unified government guaranteeing the protection of rights for minorities and women is formed.[32]



Control of Terrain in North Syria

As of January 3, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST

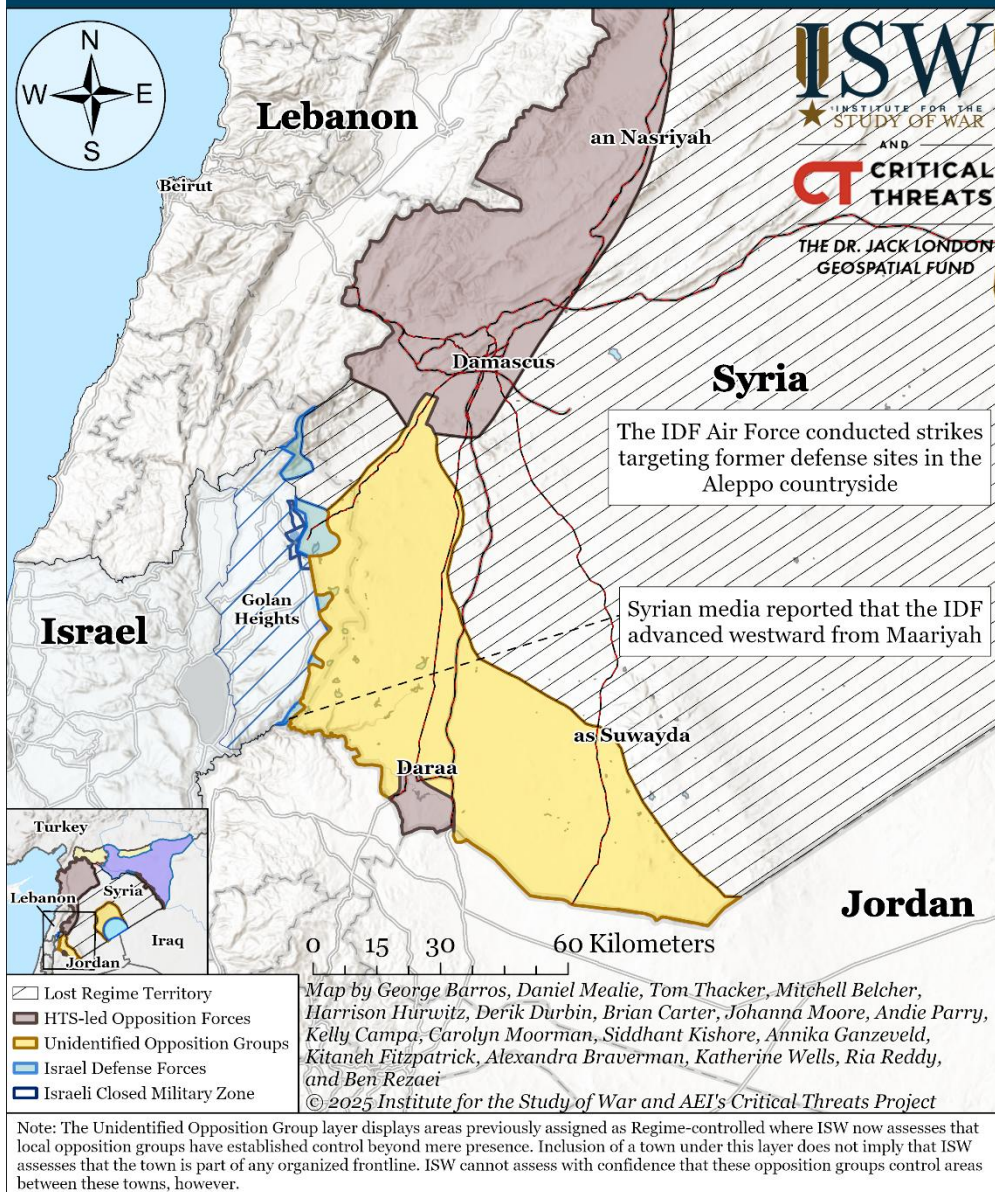


The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) continued operations in Daraa province on January 3. Syrian media reported that the IDF advanced westward from Maariyah, approximately one kilometer from the Israel-Syria disengagement zone, towards the al Jazeera barracks, near Maariyah in the Yarmouk Basin.[33]

The IDF Air Force conducted strikes targeting former Assad regime weapons production facilities and weapons warehouses in Aleppo Province. Syrian media and Syria-focused analysts reported that the IDF struck near the Safira Defense Factories, southeast of Aleppo.[34] Syrian and Israeli media reported on January 3 that the IDF Air Force conducted airstrikes targeting a separate weapons warehouse in the Aleppo countryside.[35] Israeli media reported that the weapons manufacturing factory did not produce advanced weapons such as missiles.[36]

Opposition Advances in Southwest Syria

As of January 3, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



The Jordanian Armed Forces said it engaged and killed several drug smugglers attempting to enter Jordanian territory from Syria on January 1.[37] Southern Syrian media reported that Jordanian forces killed five Syrian smugglers and destroyed three vehicles.[38] The smugglers were reportedly from the Syrian Badia and were affiliated with former pro-regime smuggling groups.[39] Syrian media reported that this is the first cross-border smuggling incident on the Jordan-Syria border since the fall of the Assad regime.[40] The Jordanian army has conducted numerous raids and airstrikes since 2023 to disrupt Iranian-backed smuggling attempts.[41] It is not clear how intact these networks remain following the withdrawal or settlement of former Iranian-affiliated elements in

Syria. The Syrian report claimed that smuggling networks in the Syrian Badia had seized former regime positions when the regime fell.[42] CTP-ISW cannot verify local reporting.

The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) reported on January 3 that unspecified fighters on the Syrian side of the Syria-Lebanon border attempted to use a bulldozer to open the closed border crossing in the Maarboun-Baalbek area.[43] The LAF fired warning shots into the air, and the unspecified Syrian "militants" subsequently opened fire on the LAF.[44] The LAF later reengaged the fighters in the same area later on January 3. The fighters wounded four LAF soldiers.[45] Lebanese Interior Minister Bassem Malawi told Saudi-owned al Arabiya that the Syrian gunmen who clashed with the LAF were not members of the new HTS-led Syrian interim government.[46] Lebanese and Syrian media reported that the clashes ceased after the HTS-led interim government sent forces to Serghaya, a town opposite Maarboun on the Syrian side of the border, and contacted the Lebanese side to express their desire to end the clashes.[47]

Iraq

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Strengthen Iranian and Axis of Resistance influence over the Iraqi state and society
- Harden the Iraqi government against internal dissent

Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Sarkhat al Quds claimed on January 2 that US and Israeli bases, barracks, and “espionage dens” are valid targets.[48] “Espionage dens” is frequently used by Iraqi militias to refer to the US Embassy in Baghdad. Kataib Sarkhat al Quds issued the statement to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the US airstrike that killed former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani and former Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Chief of Staff and Kataib Hezbollah Secretary General Abu Mahdi al Muhandis in January 2020. Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah also released a statement on January 3 denouncing the deaths of Soleimani and Muhandis.[49]

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 drone and missile attack targeting a power plant and an unspecified military target in central Israel on January 3, but the IDF intercepted both attacks.[50] Houthi media reported that the group launched a Palestine-2 ballistic missile at a power plant in the Tel Aviv-Jaffa area and conducted a separate drone attack targeting an unspecified military location in the same area.[51] The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) confirmed that it intercepted both the missile and the drone launched from Yemen.[52] The IDF intercepted the drone before it entered Israeli

airspace. The Palestine-2 missile entered Israeli territory before the IDF intercepted it and missile fragments fell in the Modi'in area.[53]

The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon

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
- Rebuild and Reestablish Hezbollah in southern Lebanon
- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

The Gaza Strip

The IDF Air Force struck over 40 Hamas “concentration points” and command-and-control sites throughout the Gaza Strip since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on January 2.[54] The strikes killed dozens of Hamas fighters. Concentration points could refer to staging areas for attacks, but it is otherwise unclear what the IDF means by “concentration points.”

The IDF 162nd Division continued clearing operations in Jabalia, northern Gaza Strip, on January 3.[55] Israeli forces located weapons, destroyed militia infrastructure, and killed Palestinian fighters in Jabalia in the past week. Israeli forces located large quantities of weapons in former schools. The IAF also struck and killed militia fighters planting an improvised explosive device (IED) near Israeli forces in Jabalia. The National Resistance Brigades and Hamas conducted separate mortar and IED attacks targeting Israeli forces and armor east of Jabalia on January 3.[56] Hamas also detonated an explosively formed penetrator (EFP) targeting Israeli armor west of Jabalia camp on January 3.[57]

The IDF 162nd Division killed Palestinian fighter cells during clearing operating in Beit Hanoun, northern Gaza Strip, in the past week.[58] Israeli forces also destroyed underground infrastructure and weapons including rocket launchers, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), uniforms, explosives, and a booby-trapped shaft. The IDF Air Force struck a rocket launcher that Palestinian militias used to target Israeli territory.

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

As of January 3, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



The IDF 162nd Division continued clearing operations in Jabalia and Beit Hanoun



The IDF has intercepted several smuggling attempts from Israel into the Gaza Strip in recent days

Hamas and the National Resistance Brigades launched a shoulder-fired surface-to-air missile targeting an Israeli helicopter



Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, 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 - © 2025 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

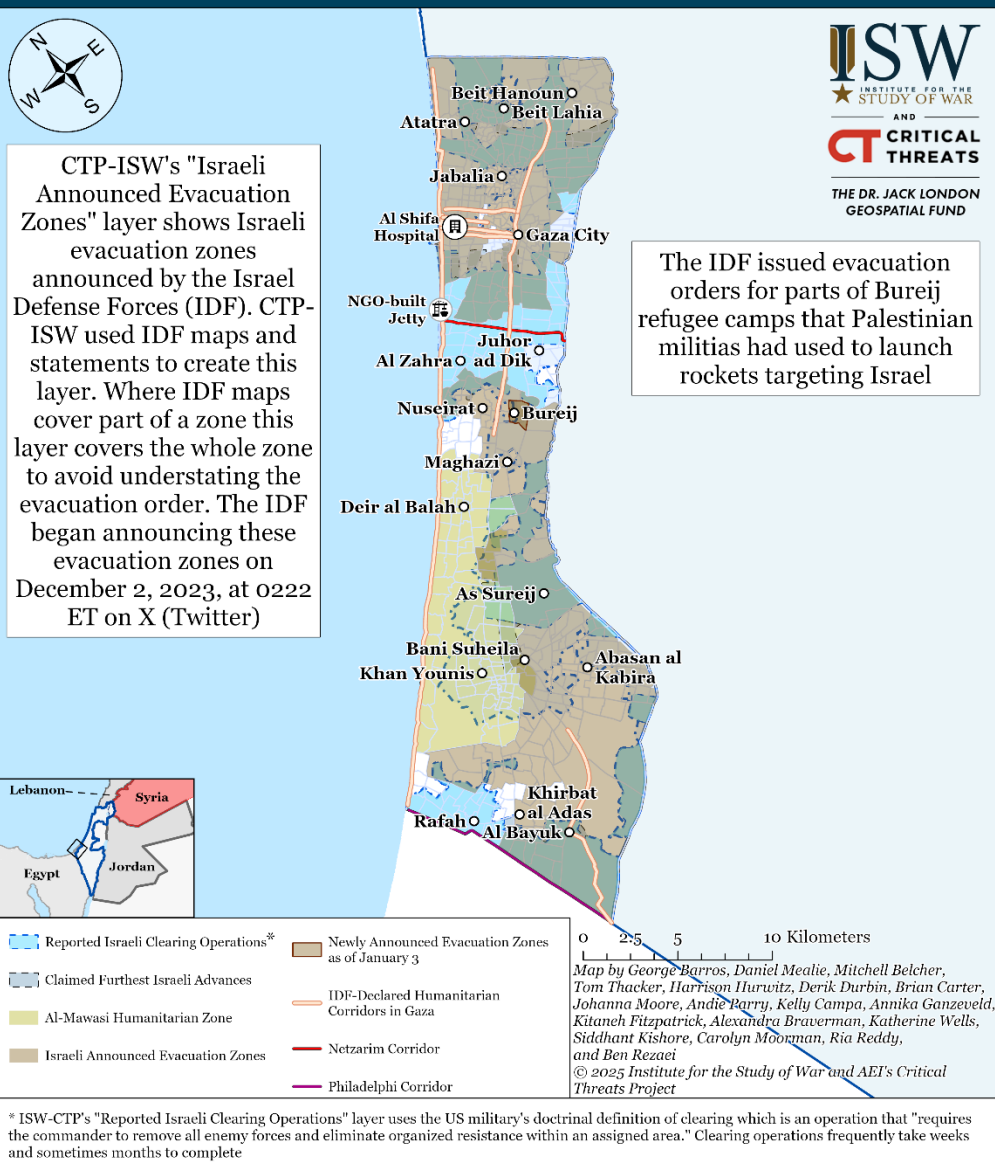
- Reported Israeli Clearing Operations*
- IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridors in Gaza
- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances
- Netzarim Corridor
- Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone
- - - Assessed Furthest Extent of Israeli Clearing Operations
- Philadelphi Corridor



* 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

The IDF re-issued evacuation orders for areas of al Bureij refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip on January 3 after Palestinian fighters fired a shoulder-fired surface-to-air missile from the area.[59] Hamas and the National Resistance Brigades targeted an Israeli helicopter with the surface-to-air missile.[60] The IDF previously issued evacuation orders for the same areas of al Bureij on December 31.[61]

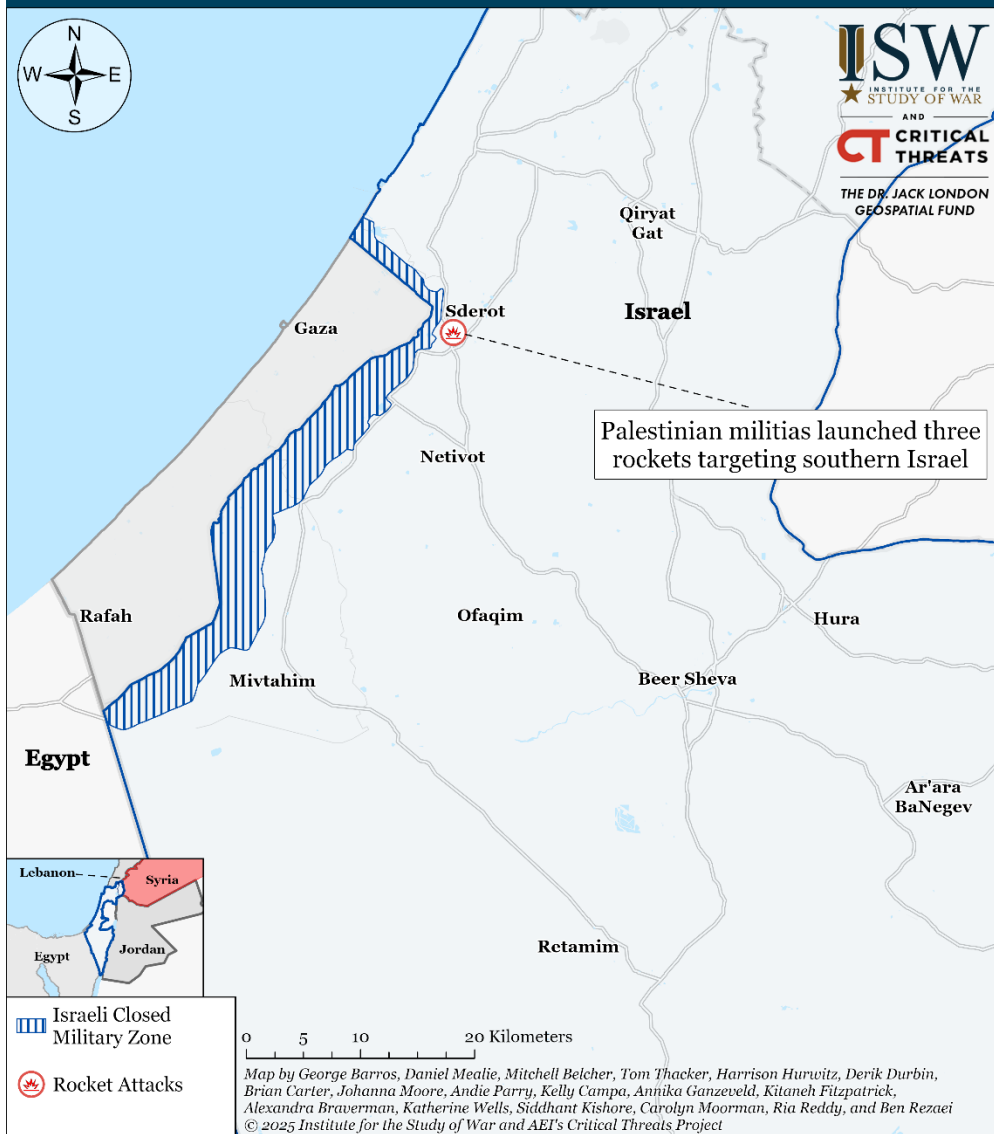
Israeli-Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip As of January 3, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Palestinian militias claimed one indirect fire attack targeting southern Israel on January 3.[62] Unidentified Palestinian militias launched three rockets targeting southern Israel from the northern Gaza Strip.[63] Two of the rockets fell in southern Israel and one malfunctioned and fell within the Gaza Strip. No Palestinian militia has claimed these attacks as of the time of this writing.

Attacks into Israel from the Gaza Strip

As of January 3, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



The IDF said on January 3 that Israeli forces recently intercepted several smuggling attempts from Israeli territory to the Gaza Strip via drones.[64] Israeli forces intercepted a smuggling attempt on January 2 and arrested the smuggler.[65] The IDF located another drone carrying drugs in the smuggler's car.[66] Hamas and other Palestinian militias may sell drugs to finance a future rebuilding effort or to pay current fighters and new recruits. An Israeli media correspondent reported on January 3 that unspecified individuals conducted 10 successful smuggling operations from Israel into the Gaza Strip this week.[67]

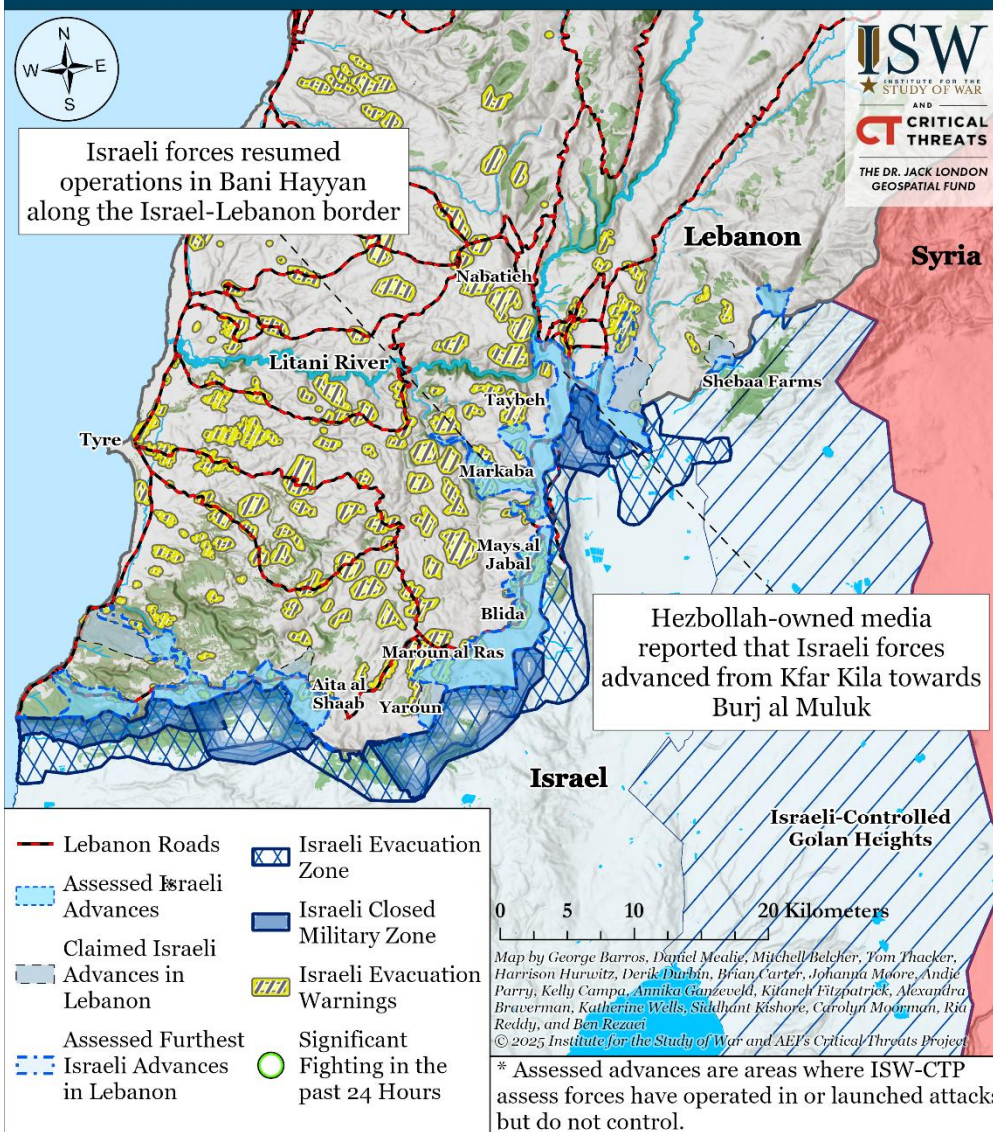
Lebanon

Israeli forces resumed operations in Bani Hayyan, southeastern Lebanon, on January 3.[68] Lebanese media reported that Israeli forces detonated explosives in Bani Hayyan, southeastern Lebanon.[69] Geolocated footage posted by Lebanese media showed Israeli forces raising barriers at the town's entrance near Wadi al Saluqi.[70] Lebanese media also reported that Israeli forces conducted large-scale combing operations in the area between Bani Hayyan and Tallouseh.[71] The IDF previously operated in Bani Hayyan on December 31, according to local reports.[72]

Hezbollah-owned media reported that Israeli forces advanced towards Burj al Muluk from Kfar Kila, Marjaayoun District, on January 3.[73] Lebanese and Hezbollah-owned media reported that Israeli forces and vehicles advanced towards Burj al Muluk and placed roadblocks before leaving the area.[74] Hezbollah-owned media previously reported Israeli forces operating in Burj al Muluk on December 11.[75] Lebanese media also reported, prior to reporting the advance to Burj al Muluk, that Israeli forces detonated explosives in Kfar Kila, south of Burj al Muluk.[76] The IDF Arabic-language spokesperson republished warnings to Lebanese citizens to avoid entering towns in southern Lebanon, including Kfar Kila.[77]

Reported Israeli Operations in Lebanon

As of January 3, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



West Bank

Unspecified armed individuals shot and killed two Palestinian men in Jenin refugee camp on January 3.[78] The Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces—who have been operating in the Jenin refugee camp for nearly one month to reestablish control from Palestinian militias—denied that its forces killed the two men.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

Tehran interim Friday Prayer Leader Ahmad Khatami expressed concern over Iran's worsening economic crisis by citing the soaring dollar exchange rate and the national currency's devaluation during his sermon on January 3.[79] Other Iranian Friday Prayer

Leaders echoed similar sentiments, criticizing the government inaction and emphasized "resistance economy" policies to stabilize the currency.[80] The Iranian rial free market rate, reflecting the true value of transactions, has depreciated from approximately 60,000 tomans per USD in September 2024 to 81,000 tomans in January 2025.[81]

Iranian Artesh Coordination Deputy Brigadier General Habibollah Sayyari announced on January 3 the deployment of several Artesh Ground Force brigades along Iran's western and southeastern borders.[82] Sayyari emphasized that securing borders helps maintain social stability, prevents unauthorized crossings and smuggling, and safeguards Iran's territorial integrity.[83] This deployment comes amid escalating instability and anti-regime militancy in southeastern Iran over the past year. Groups such as Jaish al Adl, a Baluch Salafi-Jihadi organization, have increased attacks targeting Iranian security forces in Sistan and Baluchistan Province since late 2023.[84]

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:



BABEL STREET

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