

Iran Update



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Information Cutoff: August 15, 2024, 2:00pm ET

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. Click [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

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.

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.

Iran is likely trying to build operational surprise ahead of its expected attack on Israel.

Iranian officials and state media have suggested repeatedly in recent weeks that an attack is imminent.[1] They have likewise suggested that they are imminently delaying the attack to create uncertainty about the timing of the attack and thus stoke anxiety and fear among Israelis.[2] An IRGC-affiliated outlet published a graphic on August 15, for instance, boasting that the ambiguity surrounding the timing of the attack is just as harmful as the strike itself will be.[3] Iran has tried to build this operational surprise while forgoing having any strategic surprise. Iranian officials have been clear in their plans to attack likely in order to reduce the risk of miscalculation, keep the escalation relatively contained, and to avoid an all-out war.

The operational surprise that Iran is trying to build is meant to increase the likelihood that an Iranian drone and missile attack on Israel would inflict serious damage. John Kirby—the US White House National Security communications advisor—warned on August 15 that Iran could launch a strike with

“little or no warning.”^[4] US officials speaking to Western media have indicated that there is no consensus about when exactly an Iranian attack will occur.^[5] Iran likely seeks to exploit this lack of warning to help its drones and missiles penetrate Israeli air defenses and strike some of their intended targets within Israel. Iran has taken similar approaches in previous attacks, such as the large-scale Iranian drone and missile attack on Israel in April 2024 and the Iranian missile attack on US forces in Iraq in January 2020.^[6] Iran in both instances had forgone strategic surprise but cultivated operational surprise by threatening to attack and sending conflicting messages and statements about when exactly it would occur.

CTP-ISW continues to assess that the most likely course of action is that Iran and its Axis of Resistance will conduct a coordinated drone and missile attack on Israel. Senior Iranian officials have been consistent in their statements saying that they will respond “forcefully” to Israel killing Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran.^[7] Western intelligence services have moreover observed Iranian preparations for an attack.^[8]

CTP-ISW continues to evaluate the likelihood of other courses of action in which Iran does not launch a major, coordinated strike on Israel. Three anonymous Iranian officials speaking to Reuters on August 13 claimed that Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah would refrain from attacking Israel if it reached a ceasefire-hostage agreement with Hamas.^[9] US President Joe Biden similarly said that he “expects” that a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip achieved in the next few days would lead Iran to refrain from attacking.^[10] CTP-ISW assesses that this course of action is unlikely at the moment in part because the Iranian regime has not suggested this possibility publicly and has instead maintained that it will attack. Hamas also refused to participate in the latest round of negotiations in Qatar on August 15, making this course of action even less likely.

The US, Egyptian, Israeli, and Qatari officials met in Doha for the latest round of ceasefire-hostage negotiations on August 15.^[11] President Biden, Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al Sisi called on both Israel and Hamas on August 8 to resume “urgent discussion” to close remaining gaps in an agreement based on the US-backed, UN Security Council-endorsed proposal.^[12] Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar expanded Hamas’ negotiating demands leading up to the talks by insisting that Israel accept an earlier Hamas-proposed ceasefire from July 2024.^[13] Hamas refused to attend ceasefire talks in Doha on August 15 on the grounds that Israel is “deceiving and evading. . . to prolong the war and even expand it at a regional level.”^[14] An unspecified source “with knowledge of the issue” cited by Axios claimed that Hamas officials were present in Doha during the negotiations to participate in indirect talks.^[15]

Hamas met with three other Palestinian militias in the Gaza Strip on August 14 to discuss ceasefire-hostage negotiation and post-war governance.^[16] These militias included the Palestinian Mujahideen Movement, the Popular Resistance Committees, and the Palestinian Freedom Movement. The four Palestinian militias emphasized their unanimous support for Hamas’ public August 11 demand that international mediators “oblige” Israel to work to implement a previous ceasefire proposal that Hamas submitted in July 2024 instead of conducting further negotiations.^[17] The statement reiterated the groups’ support for the July 2024 proposal, which they claimed would implement a ceasefire, a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, the entry of humanitarian

aid, the reconstruction of the strip, and a “serious deal” to exchange Palestinian prisoners for Israeli hostages.[18] The statement added that the “so-called day after the war” is a Palestinian national affair to be only decided by Palestinians.[19] The statement denounced US, Israeli, and other international attempts to create alternative governance plans for the Gaza Strip.[20] The groups may be referencing recent attempts by US, Israeli, and Arab nations to advance plans that would reportedly install vetted Palestinian or multinational forces to temporarily provide security and stability in the Gaza Strip.[21] The statement also called for reforming the Palestinian Authority and Palestine Liberation Organization to include “all national components,” likely referring to Hamas’ intent to maintain influence over the Palestinian unity government formed with Fatah in July 2024.[22]

It is notable that the Hamas meeting in the Gaza Strip did not include several prominent Palestinian militias. Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) were not present at the meeting nor included in the joint statement. These Palestinian militias have actively supported Hamas operations in the Gaza Strip since October 2023.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) announced on August 15 the death of an IRGC Aerospace Force colonel from injuries sustained in an airstrike in Syria.[23] IRGC Commander Major Hossein Salami stated that the colonel, Ahmad Reza Afshari, was transferred to Iran between July 22 and August 5 for medical treatment before he died.[24] Iranian state media reported that the US-led International Coalition was responsible for the airstrike that ultimately killed Afshari but did not provide further details.[25]

The killing of Ashari reflects the increasingly prominent role that the IRGC Aerospace Force has adopted in Iranian extraterritorial operations in recent years.[26] The IRGC Aerospace Force is the principal operator of the Iranian drone and missile arsenal and has had traditionally little involvement in operations alongside the Axis of Resistance. But the IRGC Aerospace Force has adopted some responsibility—in cooperation with the IRGC Quds Force—for transferring drones and missiles to and through Syria.[27] This expanding role of the IRGC Aerospace Force appears to have accelerated since the United States killed Qassem Soleimani in 2020.[28]

Key Takeaways:

- **Iran:** Iran is likely trying to build operational surprise ahead of its expected attack on Israel. CTP-ISW continues to assess that the most likely course of action is that Iran and its Axis of Resistance will conduct a coordinated drone and missile attack on Israel.
- **Hostage-ceasefire negotiations:** The US, Egyptian, Israeli, and Qatari officials met in Doha for the latest round of ceasefire-hostage negotiations. Hamas refused to attend but sent officials to engage in indirect talks.

- **Gaza Strip:** Hamas met with three other Palestinian militias in the Gaza Strip to discuss ceasefire-hostage negotiation and post-war governance. It is notable that the Hamas meeting in the Gaza Strip did not include several prominent Palestinian militias.
- **Syria:** The IRGC announced the death of an IRGC Aerospace Force colonel from injuries sustained in an airstrike in Syria. The death reflects the increasingly prominent role that the IRGC Aerospace Force has adopted in Iranian extraterritorial operations in recent years.



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 252nd Division continued to operate around the Netzarim Corridor on August 15. Israeli forces, including the IDF Air Force, killed a cell of Palestinian fighters and destroyed a weapons depot in the area.[29] PIJ, the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, and the Martyr Abdul Qader al Husseini Brigades—a splinter group of the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades—fired rockets targeted Israeli forces there as well.[30]

The IDF 98th Division continued clearing operations in Khan Younis on August 15. The 98th Division forces and IDF Air Force killed several Palestinian fighters in a Hamas weapons depot.[31] The IDF Air Force also struck and killed a PIJ fighter who fired unspecified projectiles at Israeli forces and into southern Israel.[32] PIJ mortared Israeli forces near al Maari School in al Qarara.[33] Hamas said that it launched a drone targeting Israeli forces east of Khan Younis.[34]

The IDF issued evacuation orders for al Qarara, north of Khan Younis, on August 15.[35] The IDF said that it would forcefully act against militia elements there due to Hamas and other militias' continuous rocket fire from the area.[36] The IDF ordered evacuations from these zones of al Qarara on August 8 before starting its re-clearing operation in Khan Younis.[37]

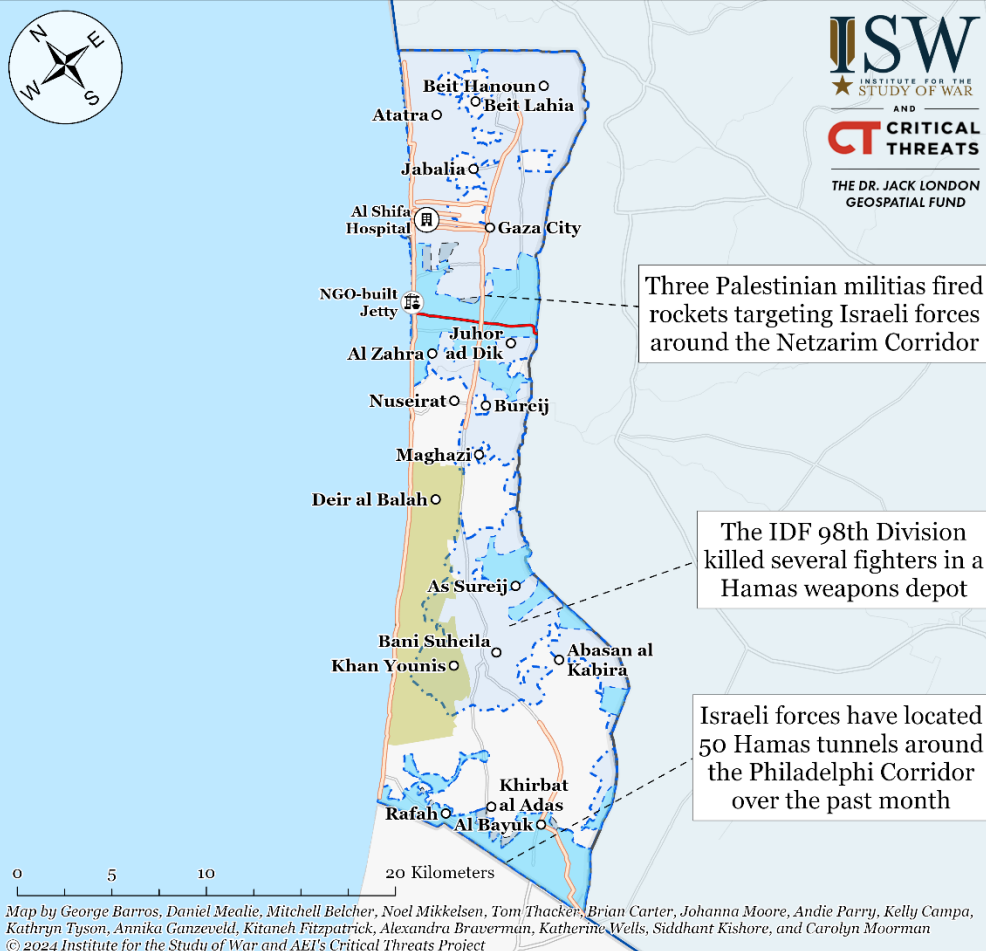
The IDF 162nd Division continued to operate in Rafah on August 15. The IDF Givati and Nahal brigades directed airstrikes that killed 20 fighters who posed a threat to Israeli forces in the area.[38] Israeli forces also destroyed a building where a tunnel shaft was being constructed.[39]

The IDF Yahalom Engineering Corps and 605th Battalion have operated along the Philadelphi Corridor in Rafah over the past month to identify and destroy underground militia infrastructure.[40] Israeli forces located about 50 Hamas tunnels and underground routes along the corridor in this time.[41] The IDF did not specify how many of these tunnels were cross-border routes connecting Egypt and the Gaza Strip.

The IDF Air Force have struck over 30 Hamas infrastructure targets over the past day, including rigged buildings, underground infrastructures, and weapons depots.[42]

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

As of August 15, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



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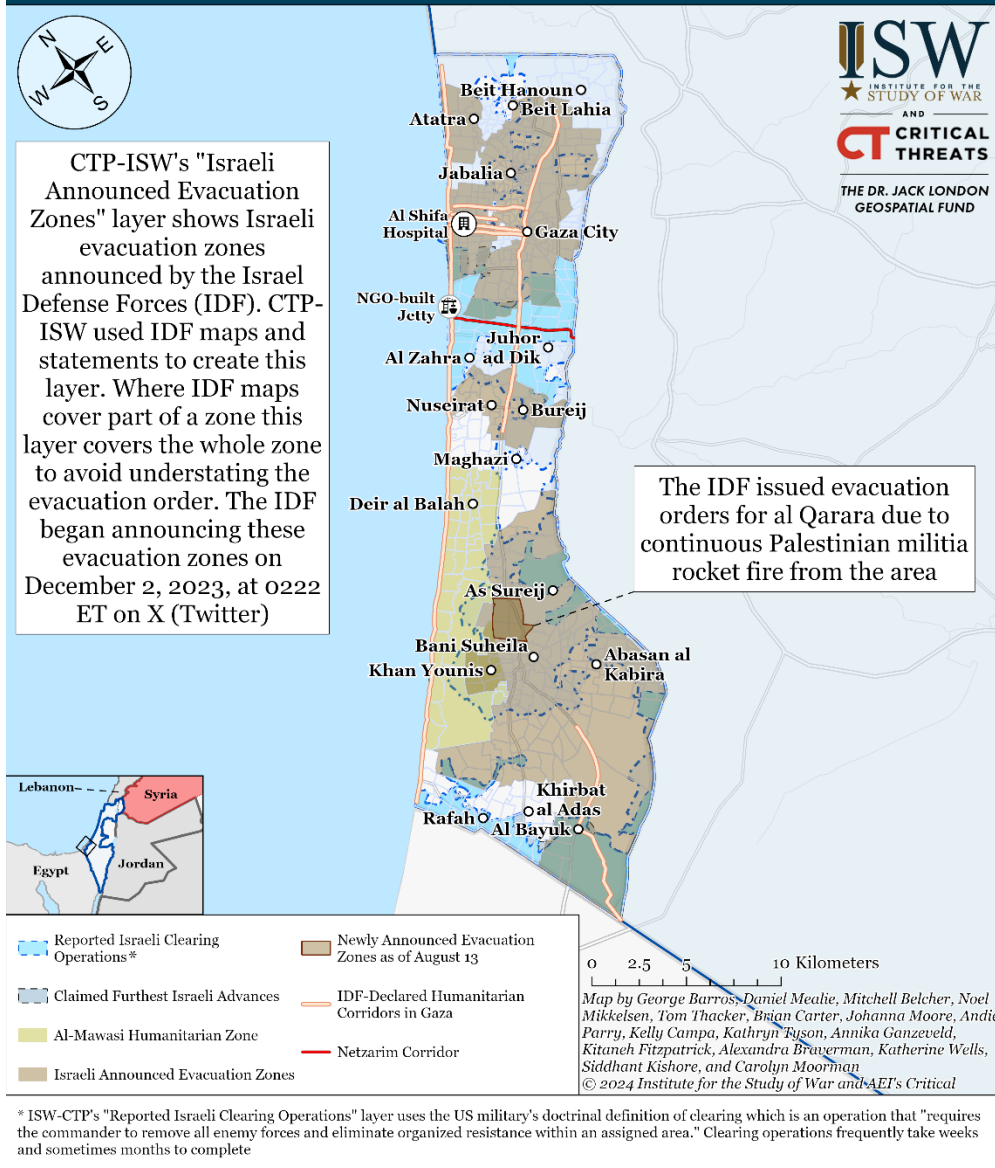
Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Tom Thacker, Brian Carter, Johanna Moore, Andie Parry, Kelly Campa, Kathryn Tyson, Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Alexandra Braverman, Katherine Wells, Siddhant Kishore, and Carolyn Moorman
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Reported 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			

* 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

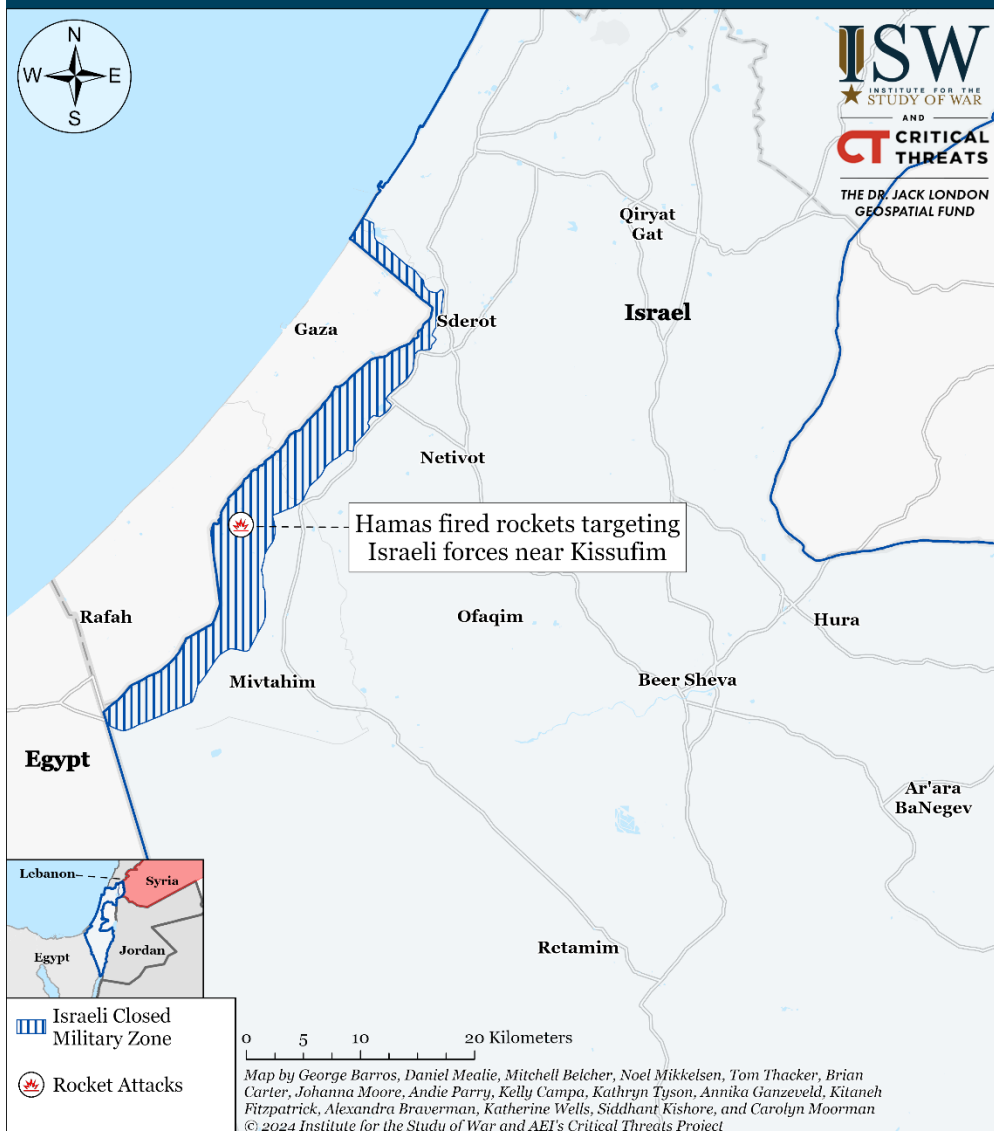
As of August 15, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Hamis fired rockets from the Khan Younis area targeting Israeli forces in southern Israel on August 15.[43] The IDF said that two rockets fell in open areas near Kissufim.[44]

Attacks into Israel from the Gaza Strip

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Recorded reports of attacks; CTP-ISW cannot independently verify impact.

West Bank

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

The IDF conducted a “counterterrorism” operation in Nablus overnight on August 14.[45] The al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades fired small arms and detonated improvised explosive devices (IED) targeting the IDF in three locations in Nablus during the operation.[46] The IDF conducted a drone strike killing one Hamas fighter and one fighter from the al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades in the Balata refugee camp in Nablus.[47] Hamas and the al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades acknowledged the deaths of the two fighters.[48]

Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich said on August 14 that Israel published plans for a new Israeli settlement in the West Bank.[49] Smotrich said that the new settlement, Nachal Heletz, will comprise part of the Gush Etzion settlement and connect the area with Jerusalem. Smotrich said in June 2024 that Israel agreed to legalize five new settlements in the West Bank and approved plans to build thousands of new settlement homes there.[50]



This map is not an exhaustive depiction of clashes and demonstrations in the West Bank.

Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

Axis of Resistance objectives:

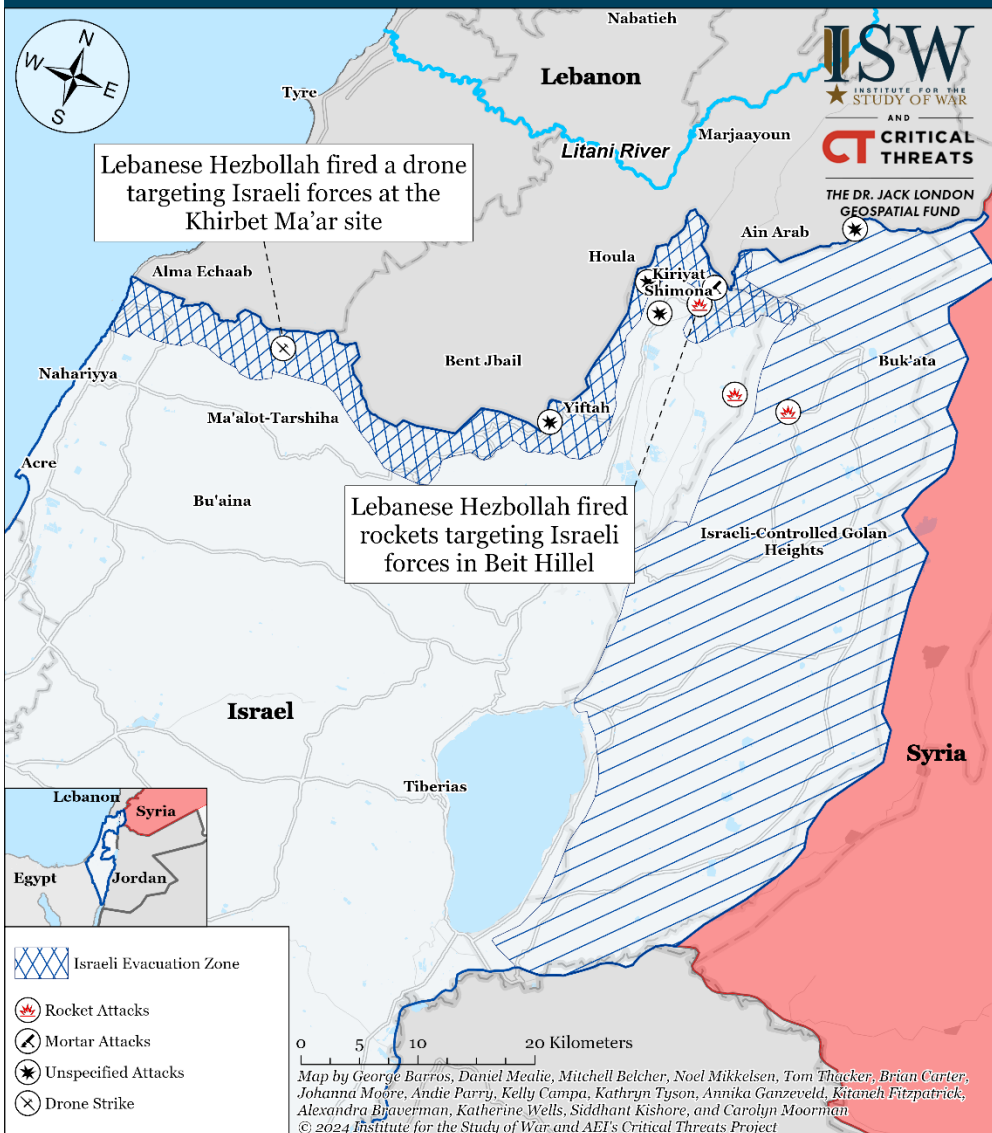
- Deter Israel from conducting a ground operation into Lebanon
- Prepare for an expanded and protracted conflict with Israel in the near term
- Expel the United States from Syria

Iranian-backed militias, including Lebanese Hezbollah, have conducted at least nine attacks into northern Israel since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on August 14.[51] Iranian-backed militias fired at least one drone and two rocket barrages into northern Israel and the Golan Heights on August 15.[52] The IDF intercepted the drone and some of the rockets, and the rest of the rockets fell in open areas.[53]

Israeli forces have conducted exercises over the past week at the Haifa Naval Base to increase military readiness in northern Israel.[54] The IDF 146th Division, 9th Brigade, Home Front Command's Search and Rescue Brigade, and Israeli police participated in the drills. The IDF said that the exercises simulated "defense and attack scenarios in the northern maritime space."

Attacks into Northern Israel from Lebanon

As of August 15, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Iran and the Axis of Resistance

The Iraqi Foreign Affairs Ministry released a statement claiming that the announcement of the end of the US-led coalition's mission to defeat ISIS has been postponed due to "recent developments."^[55] The statement confirmed that the US-Iraqi Higher Military Committee's recent focus has been to assess the danger of ISIS in Iraq so that coalition advisers of "all nationalities" would leave Iraq and coalition's mission would end.^[56] The statement added that the date of the announcement and other logistical elements must still be determined, but an Iraqi foreign ministry official told Reuters that the announcement on the end of the "coalition's presence" will likely occur in early September 2024.^[57] The ministry's statement was a direct response to an "inaccurate answer" given by US State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel to a journalist's question about the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq during an August 12 press briefing.^[58] Patel clarified that the United States is in discussion regarding a "bilateral security partnership" with the Iraqi federal

government but denied discussions about a US withdrawal. The Iraqi Foreign Affairs Ministry clarified that US forces are only present in Iraq as military advisers within the coalition.[59]

The US Treasury Department sanctioned on August 15 several entities for their involvement in shipping Iranian commodities.[60] These commodities include oil and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) to Yemen and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on behalf of IRGC Quds Force and the Houthis. The United States has also designated Hong Kong-based Kai Heng Long Global Energy Limited for its role in shipping tens of millions of US dollars worth of Iranian LPG to Lebanese Hezbollah through the Hezbollah-controlled Talaqi Group.

The US-sanctioned entities are the following:

Houthi Shipping:

- IRGC Quds Force-backed Houthi financier **Saeid Jamal**
- Indian national **Arif Ibrahim Khot** (captain of the RAHA GAS)
- Marshall Islands-registered **KDS Shipping Limited**
- Marshall Islands-registered **Arafat Shipping Company**
- Houthi-affiliated and United Arab Emirates-based **ONX Trading FZE**
- Marshall Islands-registered **DP Shipping Limited**
- Malaysia-based **Transmarine Navigation (M) SDN BHD**
- United Arab Emirates-based **K F D General Trading LLC**
- Palauan-flagged LPG tanker **LPG OM**
- Palauan-flagged LPG tanker **RAHA GAS**
- Palauan-flagged products tanker **DIVINE POWER**
- Hong Kong-based and operated **ARTURA[61]** (renamed to **OHAR**)

Hezbollah LPG Shipments:

- Hong Kong-based **Kai Heng Long Global Energy Limited**
- Swati-flagged LPG tanker **FENGSHUN** (formerly known as VENUS 7)
- Sao Tomean-flagged LPG tanker **VICTORIA**
- Sao Tomean-flagged LPG tanker **LADY LIBERTY**
- Panamanian-flagged LPG tanker **PARVATI**

Chinese Ambassador to Iran Cong Pei Wu discussed Sino-Iranian relations in an interview with Iranian state media on August 14.[62] The ambassador stated that Iran and China are “important strategic partners” and highlighted that China is Iran’s biggest trading partner. The ambassador hailed efforts to expand Sino-Iranian cooperation through multilateral institutions,

such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The ambassador also called on Israel to “avoid escalating tensions” in the Middle East. These comments echo Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi’s remarks about the strategic value of Sino-Iranian relations during a phone call with Iranian Acting Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Bagheri Kani on August 12. Wang Yi stated that China supports Iran’s right to defend its “sovereignty, security, and national dignity” and claimed that Israel killing Hamas Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran “undermined regional peace and stability.”[63]

Iranian Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi visited Saravan city, Sistan and Baluchistan Province, on August 15.[64] Vahidi noted significant improvements in migration and transportation at the Mirjaveh crossing on the Iran-Pakistan border. The Artesh and Law Enforcement Command Border Guard are continuing efforts to secure the southeastern border region amid an uptick in anti-regime militancy there since December 2023.[65] These security initiatives include Law Enforcement Commander Brigadier General Ahmed Reza Radan's announcement on August 7 that Iran plans to deport all illegal migrants by the end of the current Persian calendar year, which ends in March 2025.[66]

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian appointed Kamel Taghavi Nejad as the secretary of his cabinet of ministers on August 12.[67] Taghavi Nejad previously served as the CEO of Sepah Bank and headed the Iranian National Tax Administration.[68] Ali Bahadori Jahromi previously held this role under President Ebrahim Raisi.[69]

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BABEL STREET

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