

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.

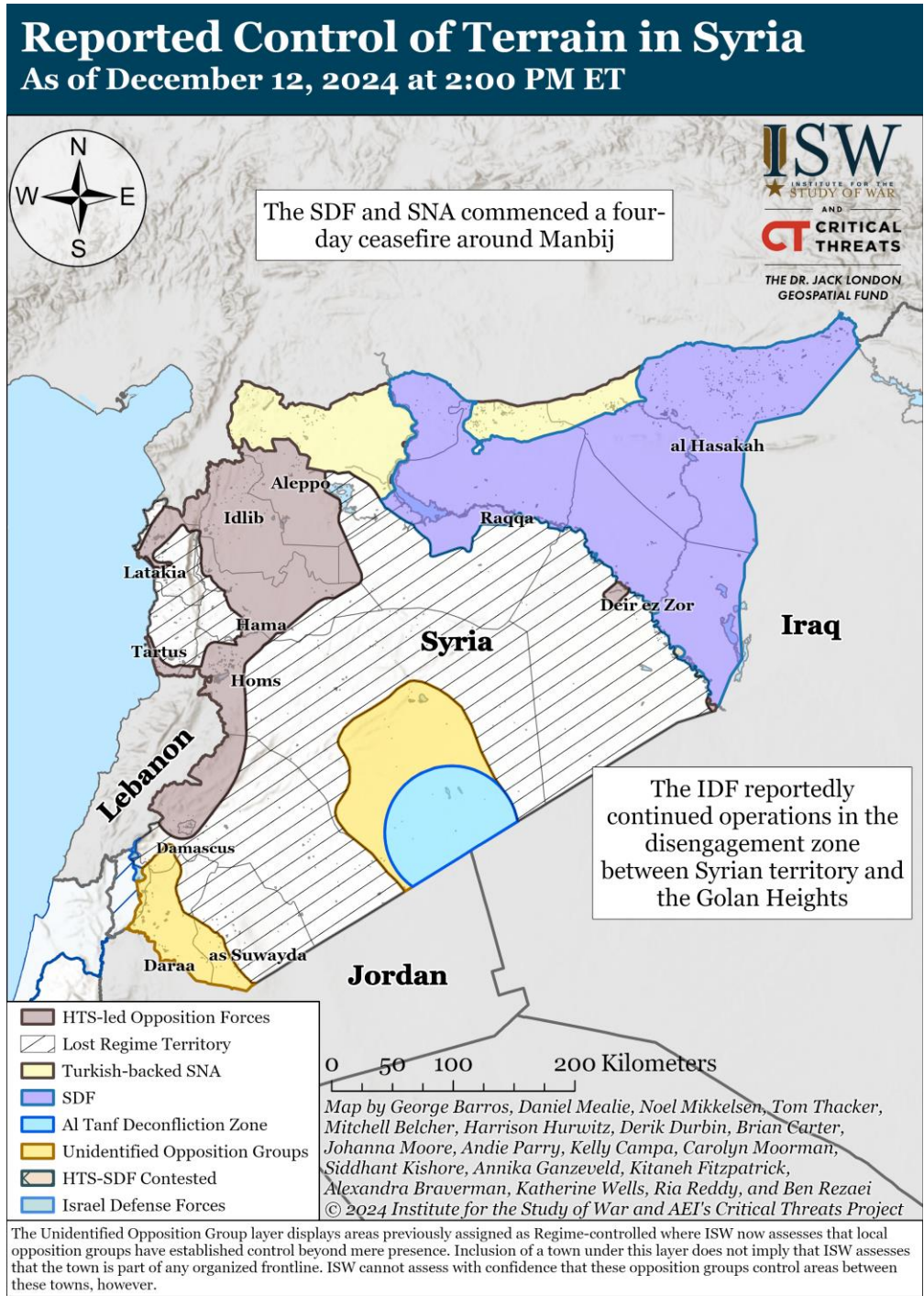
We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We utterly condemn violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity even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

Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) is trying to retain control over the forces that it leads to maintain its moderate image and prevent sectarian conflict. HTS stated on December 12 that it would hold accountable any fighters who fail to comply with orders.[1] HTS also stated that any individuals violating orders do not represent HTS-led forces or the transitional government.[2] This statement comes after HTS announced that interfering in women's choice of clothing or demanding that women dress modestly is "strictly forbidden." [3] HTS has also ordered its fighters to protect public and private property, respect public institutions, and treat former Syrian Arab Army (SAA) soldiers well.[4] HTS is trying to present itself as a moderate force with these orders.

The most recent statement threatening to punish fighters is likely in response to reports of HTS-led fighters conducting religion-based harassment and revenge killings.[5] Some reports, for instance, claimed that HTS-led fighters "forcefully" entered the Sayyidah Zeynab shrine in Damascus, which is a holy Shia shrine.[6] The reports claimed that the fighters chanted "provocative slogans" while in the shrine.[7] Several reports claimed that the fighters were affiliated with HTS, which reportedly made an informal agreement with Iran to protect Shia sites and minorities in Syria.[8] CTP-ISW cannot verify the details of the event or the accuracy of the reports. But their prevalence in the information space could nevertheless stoke sectarian tensions. CTP-ISW similarly reported on December 11 that an HTS-led fighter questioned a Christian journalist about her religious background, asking specifically whether she was "Christian, Alawi, Shiite, or Druze." [9]

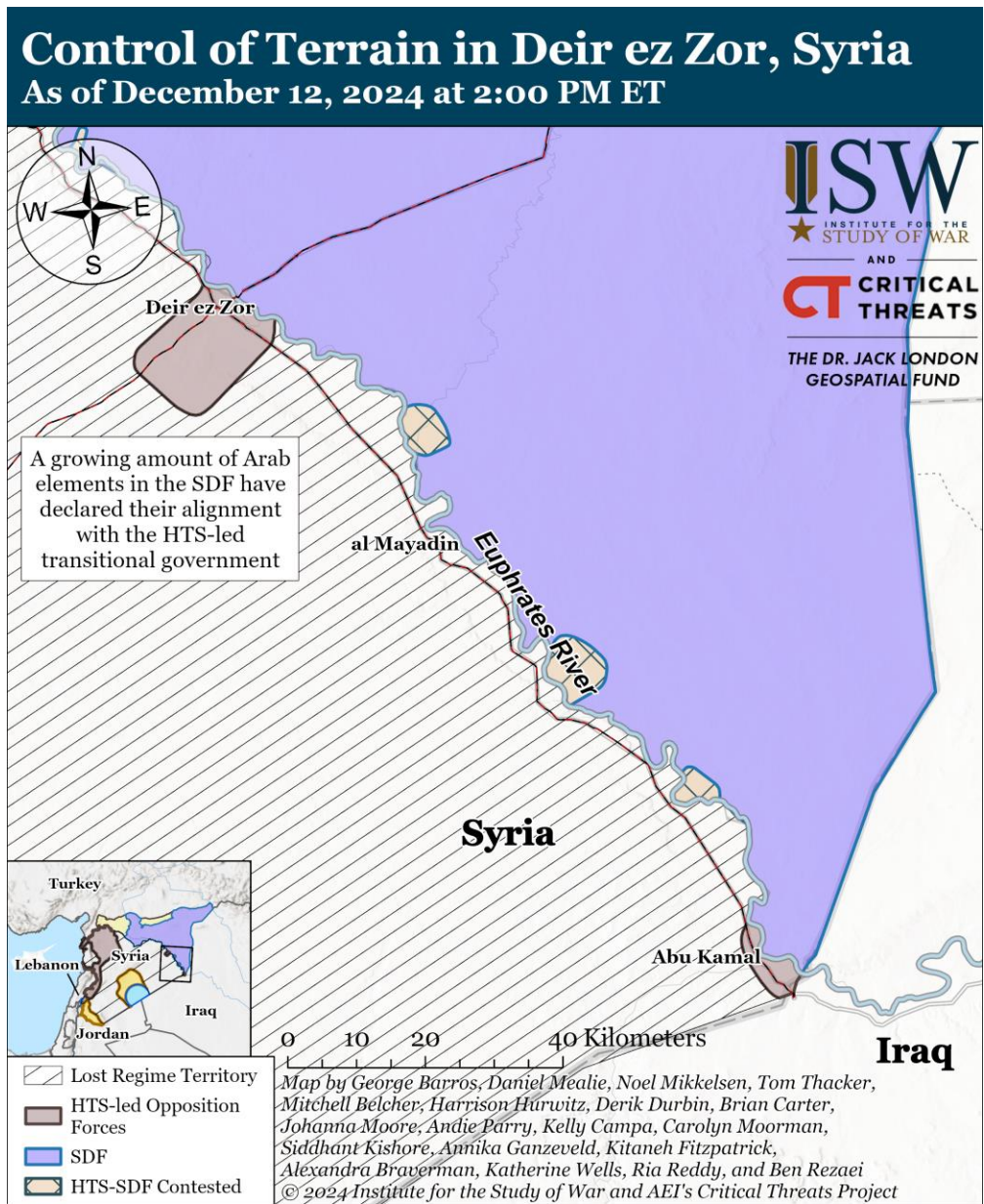
These incidents and the traction they gain in the information space create opportunities for extreme and sectarian groups to incite further religious-based violence and destabilize the government formation process in Syria. These incidents remain isolated and relatively independent of each other at

this time. HTS is comprised of numerous Islamist groups formed with varying degrees of representation in the broader HTS leadership structure.[10] It is unclear which factions of HTS are involved in these instances of sectarian tensions or whether they are coordinated activities amongst several factions. CTP-ISW will continue to report revenge killings and religion-based incidents and violence due to the risk that these events can rapidly destabilize the situation in Syria.



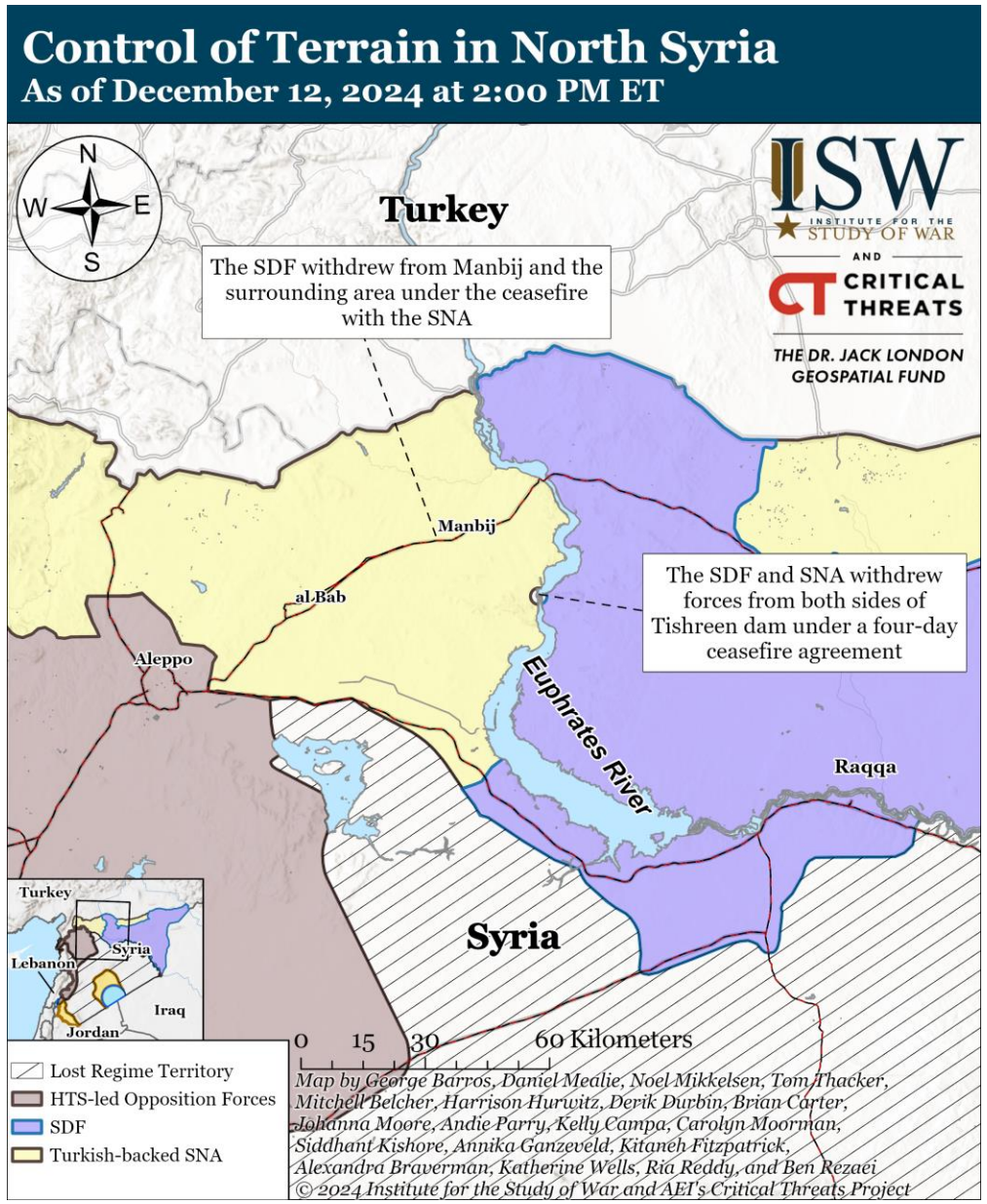
The SDF is factionalizing under internal and external pressure. Local footage posted on December 12 showed the SDF attempt to suppress demonstrators in Raqqa who demanded that the city

be brought under the HTS-led transitional government.[11] Citizens have longstanding grievances against the SDF in Raqqa, which include limited reconstruction in Arab areas, repeated SDF abuses of the local populations, and a lack of representative Arab leadership.[12] The head of the al Kasra Military Council--a member of the SDF-- defected from the SDF, citing SDF “violations” against civilians in Deir ez Zor and Raqqa.[13] Arab contingents of the SDF have rapidly begun to defect in recent days.[14] A Syrian journalist reported that approximately 220 members of the Deir ez Zor Military Council have defected from the SDF over the past 48 hours.[15]



The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) confirmed on December 12 that it reached a ceasefire agreement with the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Manbij, northern Syria.[16] The four-day ceasefire will last from December 12 to 16 in order to allow humanitarian aid to enter and unspecified security agreements. Under the agreement, the SNA

will transfer control of the Sultan Suleiman Tomb and its surrounding hills to the SDF. In exchange, the SDF and SDF families will also withdraw from Manbij and the surrounding countryside. The ceasefire agreement also established the Tishreen Dam as a demilitarized zone to permit the electrical plant to continue its regular functions. SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi confirmed on December 11 that his forces withdrew from Manbij after reaching a settlement with the SNA.[17] The SDF disputed territorial control over Manbij after the SNA seized control on December 8.[18]



The HTS-led interim government is trying to portray itself as the legitimate Syrian state. The transitional government posted a statement on December 12, thanking Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Oman, and Saudi Arabia for resuming their diplomatic missions in Damascus.[19] The statement also noted that Qatar and Turkey would reopen their respective embassies.[20] HTS leader Abu Mohammed al Jolani and caretaker Prime Minister Mohammad al Bashir separately met with the

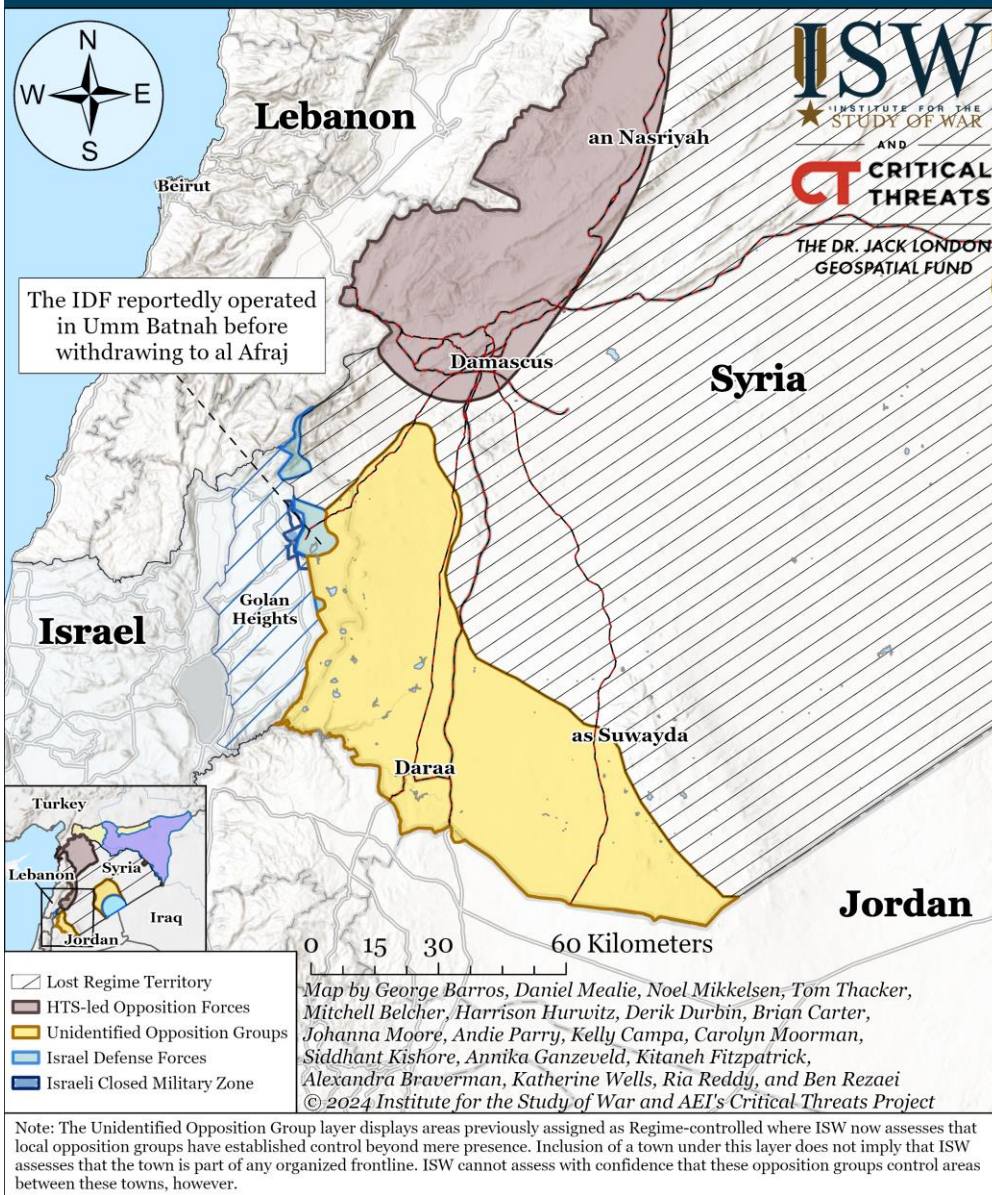
Turkish foreign affairs minister and intelligence chief as well as the Qatari State Security Agency chief in Damascus on December 12.[21] The publication of these events portrays the HTS-led transitional government as the legitimate Syrian state despite no countries having yet formally recognized it as such.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has continued to operate on the ground in southwestern Syria, according to Syrian sources. One outlet reported that the IDF entered towns in and around the disengagement zone in Quneitra Province and seized arms from residents on December 12.[22] Another source reported that the IDF detonated explosives at a former SAA site around Umm Batnah.[23]

Syrian media separately reported that the IDF plans to enter Marbah in western Daraa Province in order to disrupt the movement of arms there. The IDF previously paved a road leading from the disengagement zone to Marbah on December 11.[24] Syrian media stated that the IDF announced on December 12 via loudspeaker to residents that it plans to enter the town.[25] IDF officers met with tribal leaders at a nearby military site to discuss these plans as well. Marbah residents have requested that the HTS-led opposition forces intervene against the IDF.

Opposition Advances in Southwest Syria

As of December 12, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



The IDF has likely conducted three airstrikes in Syria since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on December 11. Local Syrian media reported two IDF airstrikes targeting Latakia port on December 11.[26] The outlet also reported an IDF airstrike on the outskirts of Damascus on December 12.[27] The IDF air campaign into Syria on December 9 and 10 destroyed approximately 70-80 percent of the Bashar al Assad regime's military capabilities to prevent "terrorist elements" from seizing weapons, including dozens of anti-ship missiles at al Bayda and Latakia ports.[28] The IDF has given no comment on the latest reported airstrikes at the time of this writing.

The E3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom) sent a letter to the UN Security Council on December 6, announcing its readiness to impose international "snapback"

sanctions on Iran.[29] The E3 would invoke the snapback mechanism of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action if Iran continues to expand its nuclear program and decline to cooperate fully with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The E3 letter comes after Iran dramatically increased its enrichment of uranium to 60 percent.[30] Iran announced on November 27 that it had activated “thousands of advanced centrifuges.”[31] Iran was retaliating for an earlier censure resolution passed by the IAEA Board of Governors, criticizing the lack of Iranian cooperation with the IAEA.

Reuters reported on December 12 that Iran agreed with the IAEA to increase the “frequency and intensity” of international monitoring of activities at the Fordow nuclear site.[32] Iran is likely responding to the threat from the E3 to impose snapback sanctions. It is notable, however, that greater international monitoring has no effect on Iran’s accelerated rate of uranium enrichment.

Key Takeaways:

- **Syria:** HTS is trying to retain control over the forces that it leads to maintain its moderate image and prevent sectarian conflict. HTS likely recognizes the risk of revenge killings and sectarian violence, which could destabilize Syria further.
- **Syria:** The US-backed SDF is facing intense external and internal pressure. The SDF did, however, reach a four-day ceasefire agreement with the Turkish-backed SNA around Manbij in northern Syria.
- **Syria:** The HTS-led transitional government is trying to portray itself as the legitimate Syrian state by publicizing its engagement with foreign actors. No foreign countries have yet recognized the transitional government as the legitimate state, however.
- **Iran:** The E3 sent a letter to the UN Security Council, threatening to impose “snapback” sanctions on Iran. The E3 is responding to the dramatic expansion of the Iranian nuclear program and Iranian non-cooperation with the IAEA.

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

A Palestinian journalist reported on December 12 that the IDF demolished civilian infrastructure in Beit Lahia.[33] The IDF expanded clearing operations in Beit Lahia on November 6.[34] The IDF evacuated approximately 600,000 Palestinians from the northern Gaza Strip due to clearing operations, and approximately 1,000-1,300 Palestinians remain in Beit Lahia.[35]

The IDF Air Force has conducted strikes in recent days targeting eight Hamas fighters in a command-and-control site in the former al Kheriya school, Gaza City.[36] The IDF reported that it killed a company commander in the Hamas Zeitoun Battalion and other low-level Hamas fighters.

Palestinian militias claimed two mortar attacks targeting IDF sites around the Netzarim Corridor on December 12.[37] The IDF Arabic-language spokesperson re-issued evacuation orders for residents in al Rimal and al Sabra neighborhoods in the central Gaza Strip.[38] The spokesperson stated that fighters in these areas launched rockets and that the IDF would target these fighters shortly.

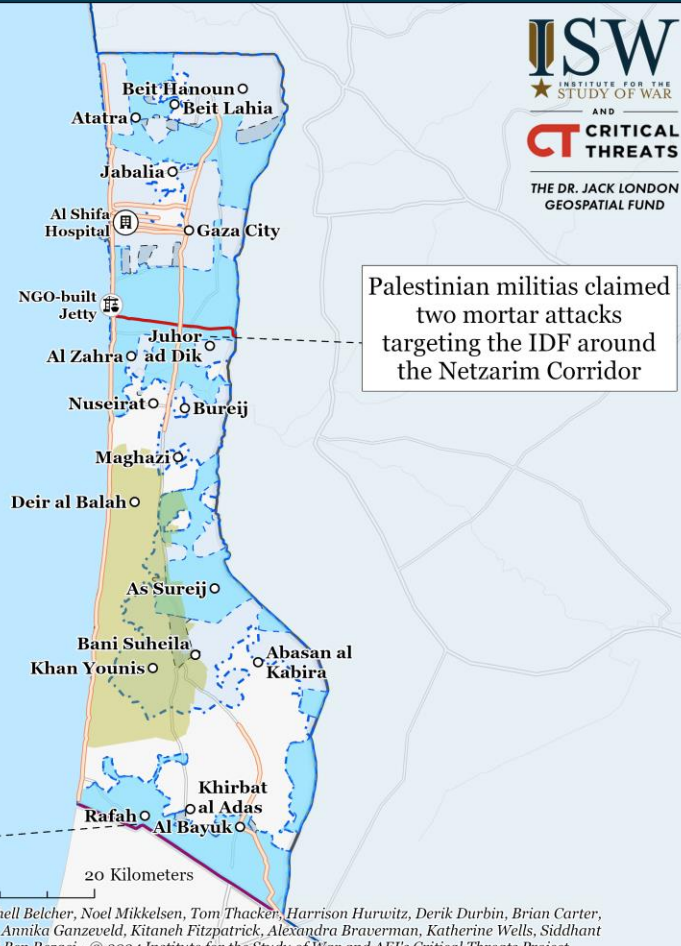
Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) mortared the IDF in al Geneina neighborhood, east of Rafah city, on December 12.[39]

The IDF Air Force conducted a strike targeting Hamas fighters in two locations in the southern Gaza Strip on December 12.[40]The IDF reported that the fighters were near humanitarian aid transfer sites.[41] The IDF stated that it struck the fighters to facilitate the safe passage of aid to residents in the Gaza Strip.[42] The IDF emphasized that it did not attack the aid trucks and only killed Hamas fighters.[43]

Senior US and Israeli officials are pushing to secure a hostage-ceasefire deal with Hamas in the coming weeks following reports that Hamas has shown flexibility on two previously long-held demands. Hamas told international mediators that it would agree to a deal that would allow the IDF to remain in the Gaza Strip temporarily after the fighting stops and provided mediators a list of hostages to release in the first phase of the ceasefire.[44] Mossad Director David Barnea discussed the hostage-ceasefire deal with Qatari Prime Minister Mohammad al Thani on December 11.[45] Two Israeli officials told Axios that Hamas has shown more "willingness to be flexible" and begin implementing "even a partial deal." Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan that he is ready to implement the hostage-ceasefire deal immediately if Hamas "green lights" it, according to a senior Israeli official.[46] Sullivan stated that Hamas demonstrated a changed position in negotiations following the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire in November 2024 and that the United States wants to secure this deal before the end of December.

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

As of December 12, 2024, 2:00 PM ET

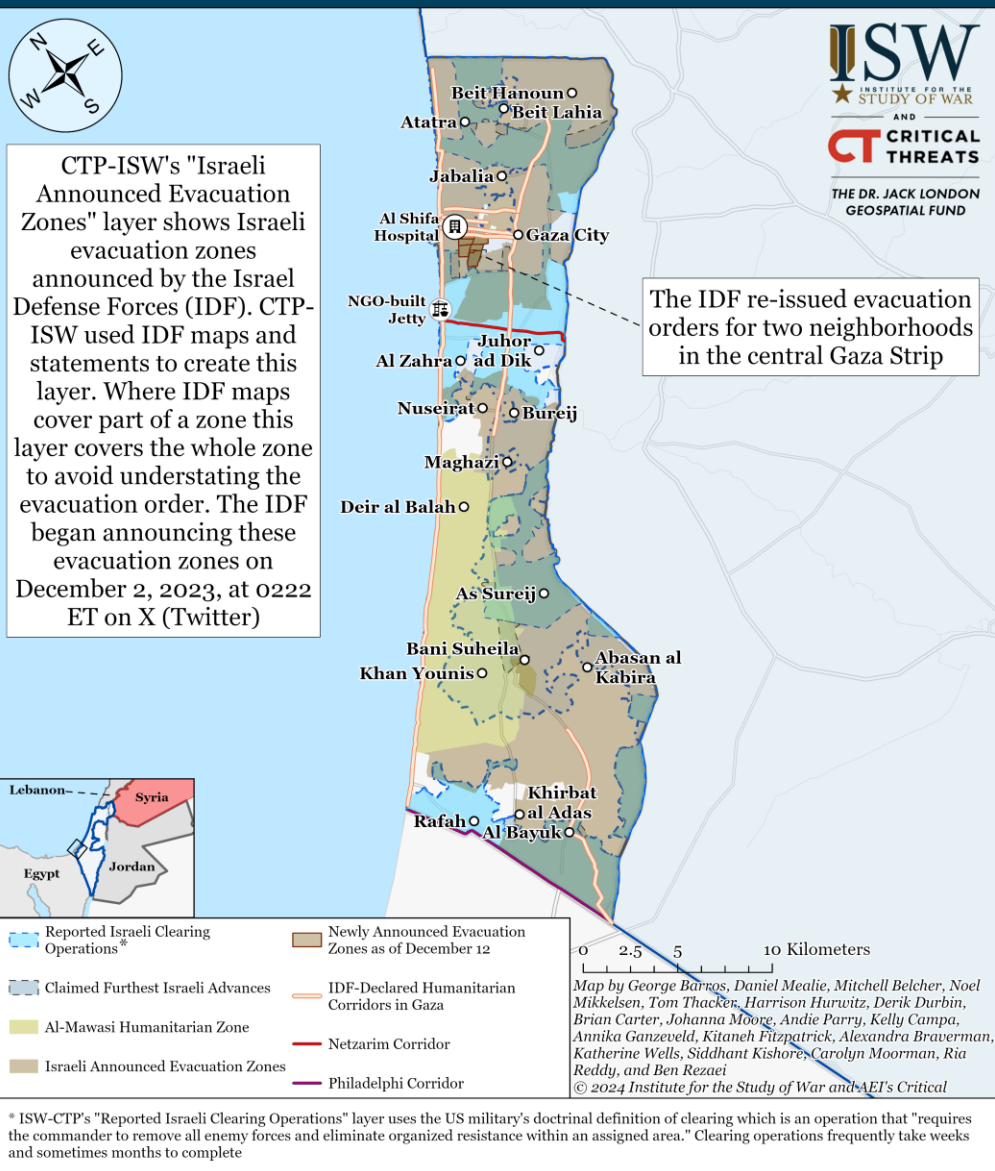


Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Tom Thacker, Harrison Hurwitz, Derik Durbin, Brian Carter, Johanna Moore, Andie Parry, Kelly Campa, Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Alexandra Braverman, Katherine Wells, Siddhant Kishore, Carolyn Moorman, Ria Reddy, and Ben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

Israeli-Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip As of December 12, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



West Bank

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

A Palestinian fighter fired a small arm at an Israeli civilian bus in al Khader near Bethlehem in the West Bank on December 11.[47] Israeli media reported one civilian death and several injuries from the attack.[48] The fighter later surrendered to Israeli forces.[49] Palestinian militias praised the attack, but none have claimed responsibility at the time of this writing.[50]

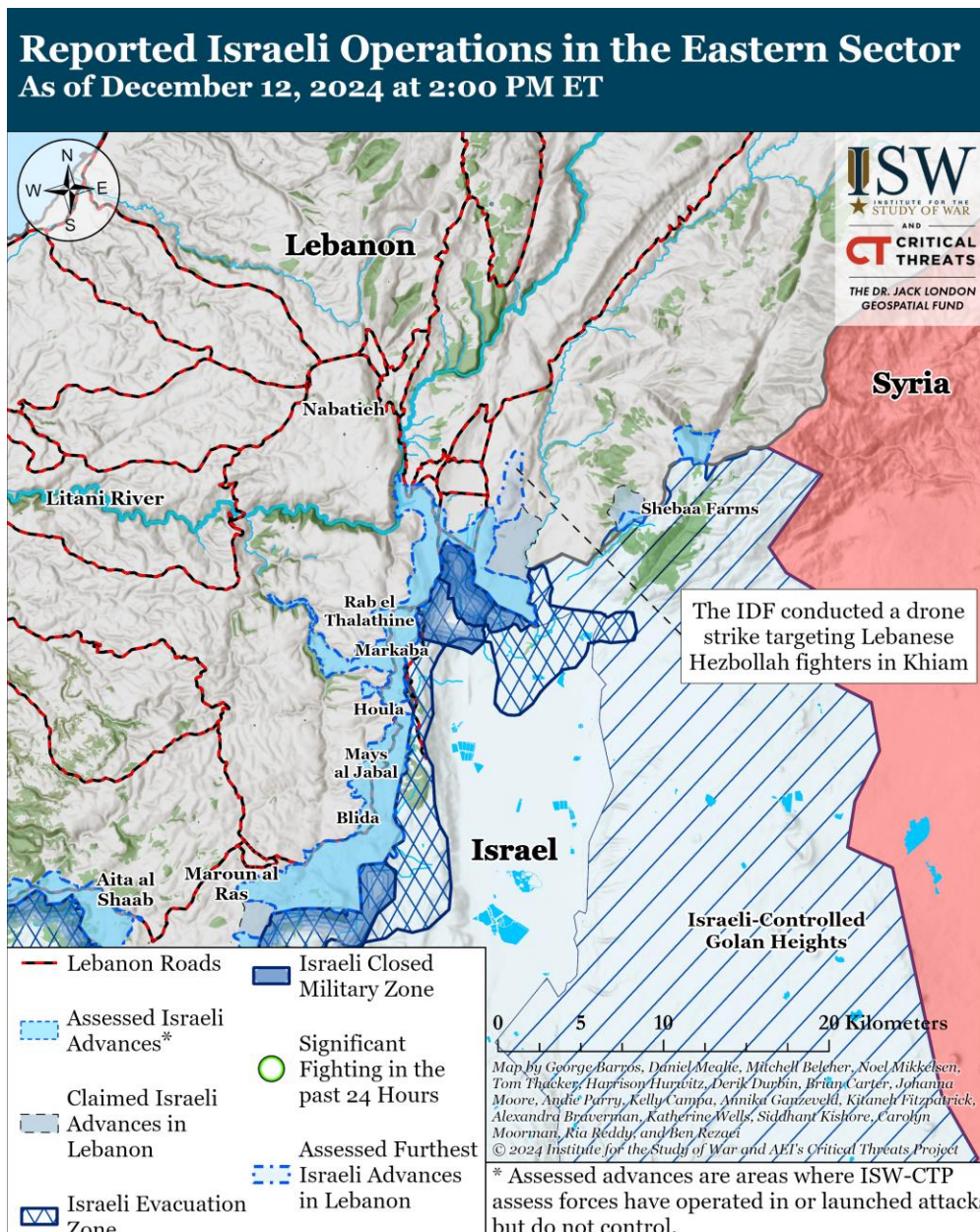
Northern Israel and Lebanon

Lebanese Hezbollah objectives:

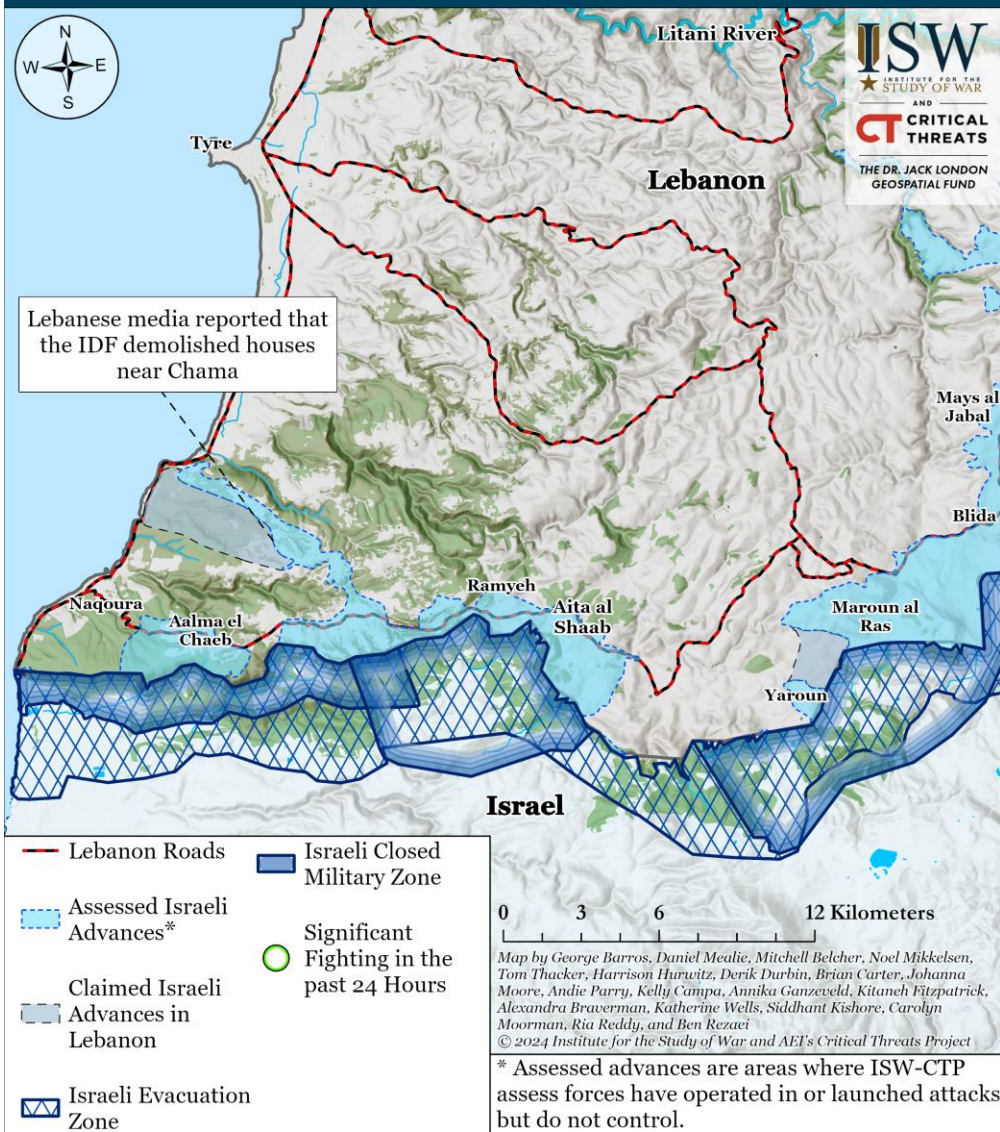
- End Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip
- Survive the October 7 War as a capable political and military organization with control over Lebanon

The IDF conducted a drone strike targeting Hezbollah fighters in Khiam, southeastern Lebanon, on December 12.[51] The IDF reported that the Hezbollah fighters posed a threat to Israeli civilians. The IDF also reiterated its commitment to the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire agreement.[52]

Lebanese media reported on December 12 that the IDF demolished houses between Chama and Tayr Harfa, southwestern Lebanon.[53]



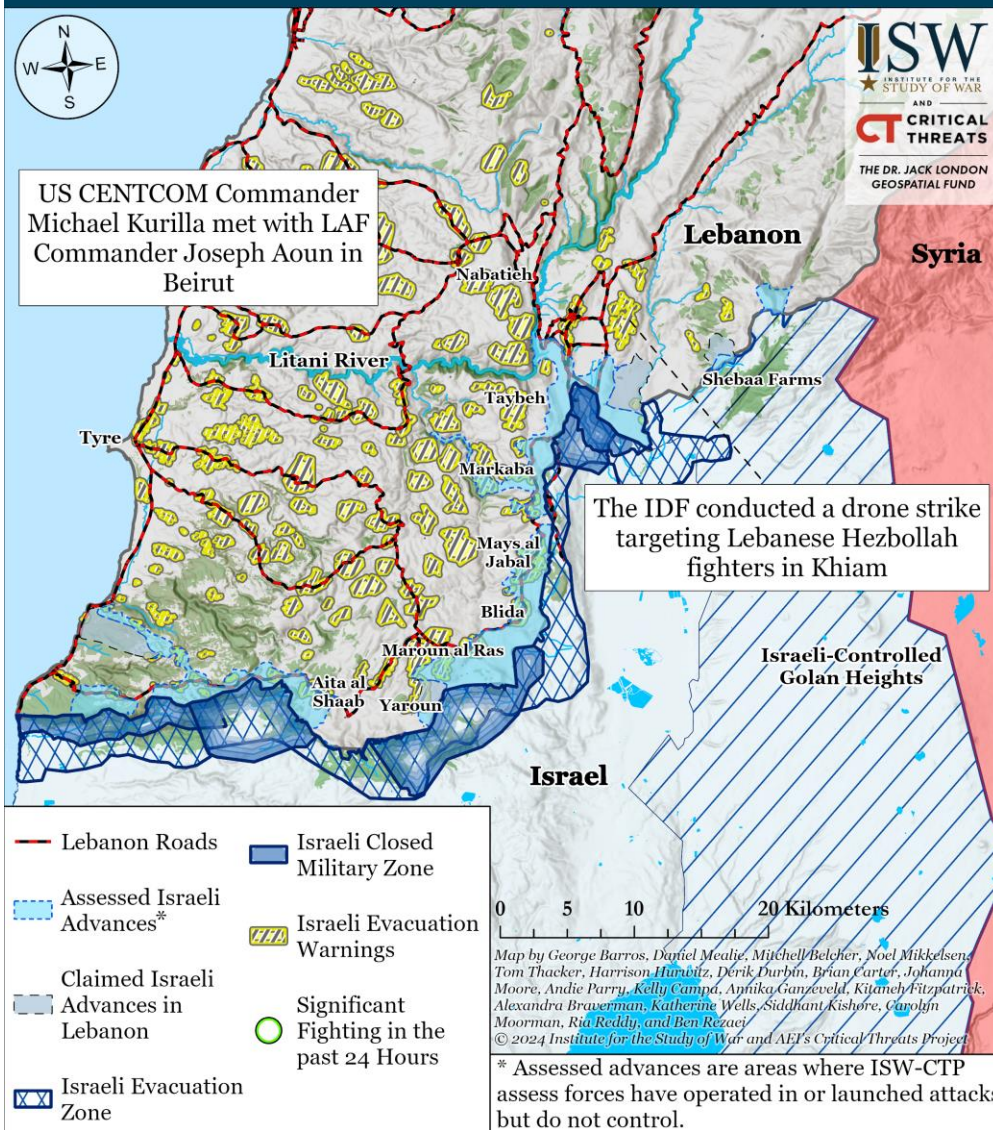
Reported Israeli Operations in the Western Sector As of December 12, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



US Central Command Commander General Michael Kurilla met with Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander General Joseph Aoun in Beirut on December 11.[54] Kurilla observed the first IDF withdrawals from Lebanon and the subsequent LAF backfill of Khiam.[55] Kurilla and Aoun discussed efforts to reach a permanent end to hostilities between Israel and Lebanon via the US-chaired implementation and monitoring mechanism.[56]

Reported Israeli Operations in Lebanon

As of December 12, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Iran and the Axis of Resistance

The IDF announced that it intercepted a drone reportedly from Yemen headed toward Eilat on December 12.[57] The IDF reported no casualties from the incident. The Houthis have yet to claim responsibility for the Houthi attack.

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

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

[1] https://t.me/aleamaliaat_aleaskaria/337

[2] https://t.me/aleamaliaat_aleaskaria/337

[3] <https://t.me/damascusv011/25913>

[4] <https://x.com/hasanabdalwany/status/1865602607680553428> ; <https://x.com/hasanabdalwany/status/1865157696485212203> ; https://t.me/aleamaliaat_aleaskaria/316 ; https://t.me/aleamaliaat_aleaskaria/312 ; https://t.me/aleamaliaat_aleaskaria/309 ; https://t.me/aleamaliaat_aleaskaria/116 ; https://t.me/aleamaliaat_aleaskaria/91

[5] <https://x.com/RamiJarrah/status/1866618302673379597> ; npasyria.com/200041

[6] <https://x.com/jamejamCPI/status/1866836711738921140> ; <https://x.com/EngineerYM87/status/1866875439131623468>

[7] <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/1670200/>

[8] <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/07/world/middleeast/iran-syria-rebels.html> ; <https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1995693> ;

[9] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-december-11-2024>

[10] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-rebels-idUSKBN15CoMV>; www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-831390

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[12] <https://shaam.org/reports/battleground-reports/hsad-alahdath-almydanyh-lywm-alarbaaa-06-09-2023>

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- [15] <https://x.com/DeirEzzore/status/1867140171336172025>
- [16] https://t.me/Dawn_of_Freedom1/271
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- [19] <https://x.com/SanaAjel/status/1867136085303943501>
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- [30] <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-dramatically-increasing-enrichment-near-bomb-grade-iaea-chief-2024-12-06/>

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[57] <https://x.com/idfonline/status/1867116969331413440>