

Iran Update



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December 15, 2024 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.

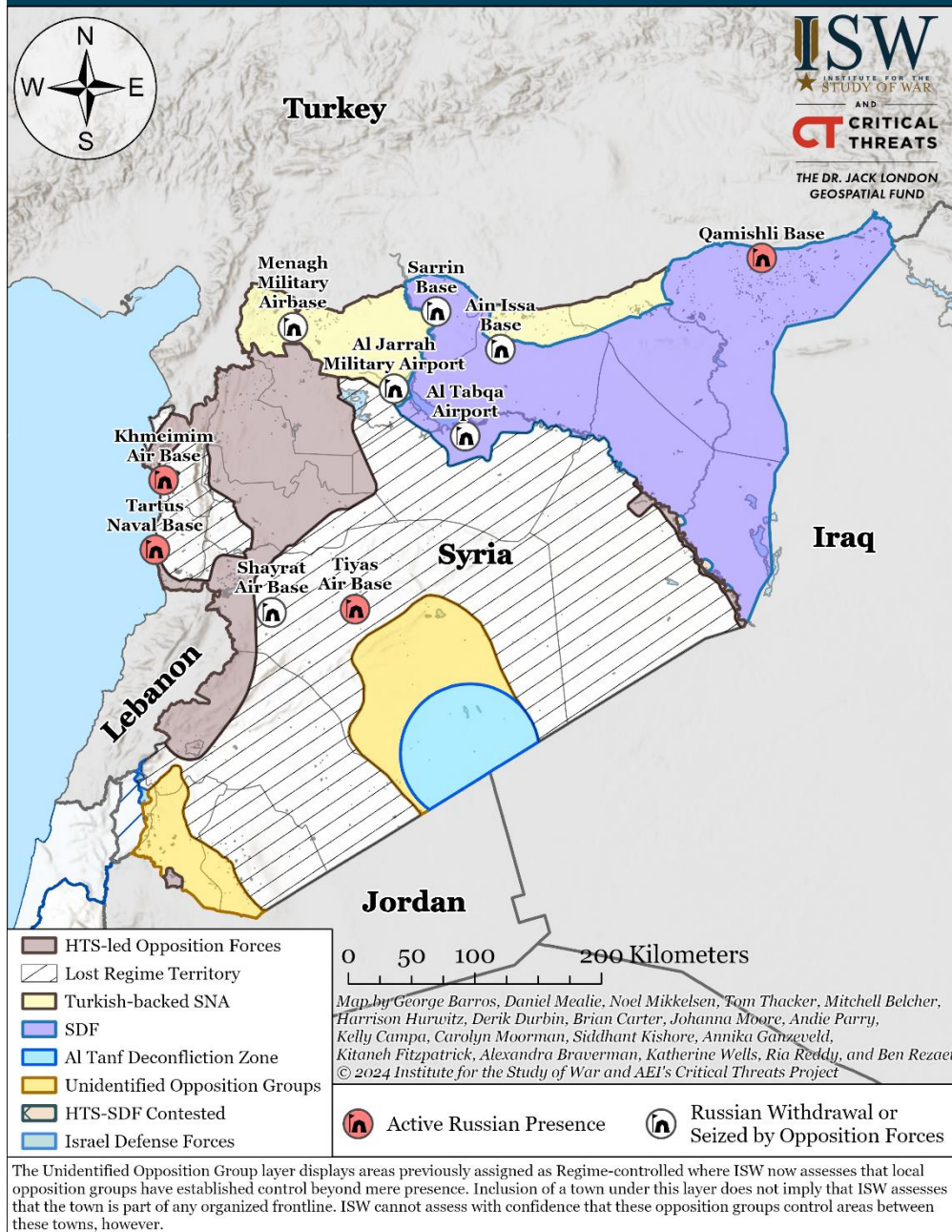
Russia's withdrawal from bases in northern Syria and its loss of influence in Syria will likely expose the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to continued Turkish attacks in northern Syria. Russia has withdrawn from a series of bases in the Manbij and Kobani areas in northern Syria amid the ongoing Turkish-backed offensive against the SDF.[1] Russia will probably withdraw from its last sizeable base in northern Syria, Qamishli, because Turkey and the groups on the ground in Syria—including HTS and the Syrian National Army (SNA)—do not appear to be prepared to allow Russia to remain there. Unspecified actors reportedly agreed to allow Russia to remain in Tartus and Hmeimim but did not mention Qamishli.[2] The Turkish defense minister also offered to "support" Russia's consolidation at Hmeimim and Tartus, suggesting Turkey would not support other Russian bases.[3] Russia's presence across northern Syria had previously enabled Russia to oppose and block Turkish-backed offensives in Tel Rifaat and Manbij, two areas that Turkish-backed forces have captured in recent days.[4] The loss of Russia's physical presence and influence in northern Syria means that the primary barrier against a Turkish or Turkish-backed operation to seize even more SDF-controlled areas—or a Turkish attempt to destroy the SDF outright—no longer exists.

Turkey will likely continue to back the SNA's ground operation against the SDF to destroy the SDF. The Turkish foreign minister said on December 13 that Turkey's strategic objective in Syria is to "destroy" the SDF, meaning that any ceasefire between the SDF and Turkish-backed groups is presumably temporary.[5] It is unclear when large-scale operations will resume, however. Turkish-backed fighters have also executed injured SDF fighters at hospitals in northern Syria and reportedly looted civilian areas in Manbij.[6] These crimes risk triggering ethnically motivated violence and upsetting Syria's current relative stability, especially if Turkish-backed fighters enter Kurdish areas and begin killing Kurdish civilians.

The SDF's fight against Turkey and its proxies will render it unable to support US policy objectives in Syria. The SDF is the key US partner in Syria against ISIS. Only the SDF is capable of conducting competent counter-ISIS operations in the areas it controls, given that HTS and other groups are currently preoccupied with securing newly controlled areas. The SDF also controls al Hol IDP camp and a network of prisons that contain thousands of ISIS supporters and fighters. Turkish violence—including the threat of ethnically motivated killing—would almost certainly cause the SDF to mobilize its forces against Turkish-backed groups. The SDF cannot conduct offensive operations against ISIS while contending with the threat from Turkey and its allies in Syria. It is unclear if the SDF would be able to secure these key facilities if it faces a severe threat from Turkish-backed forces to Kurdish civilian areas.

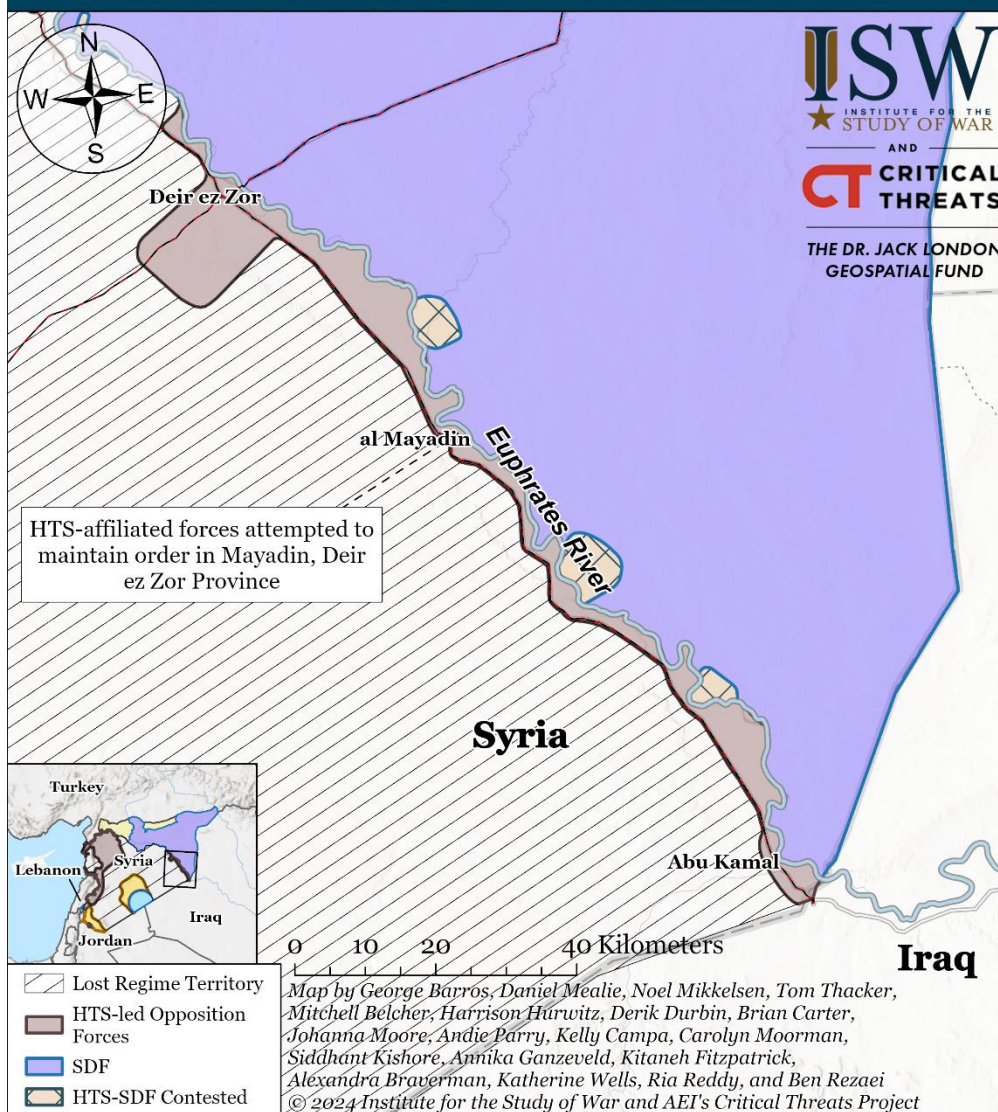
Status of Russian Bases in Syria

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



Control of Terrain in Deir ez Zor, Syria

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



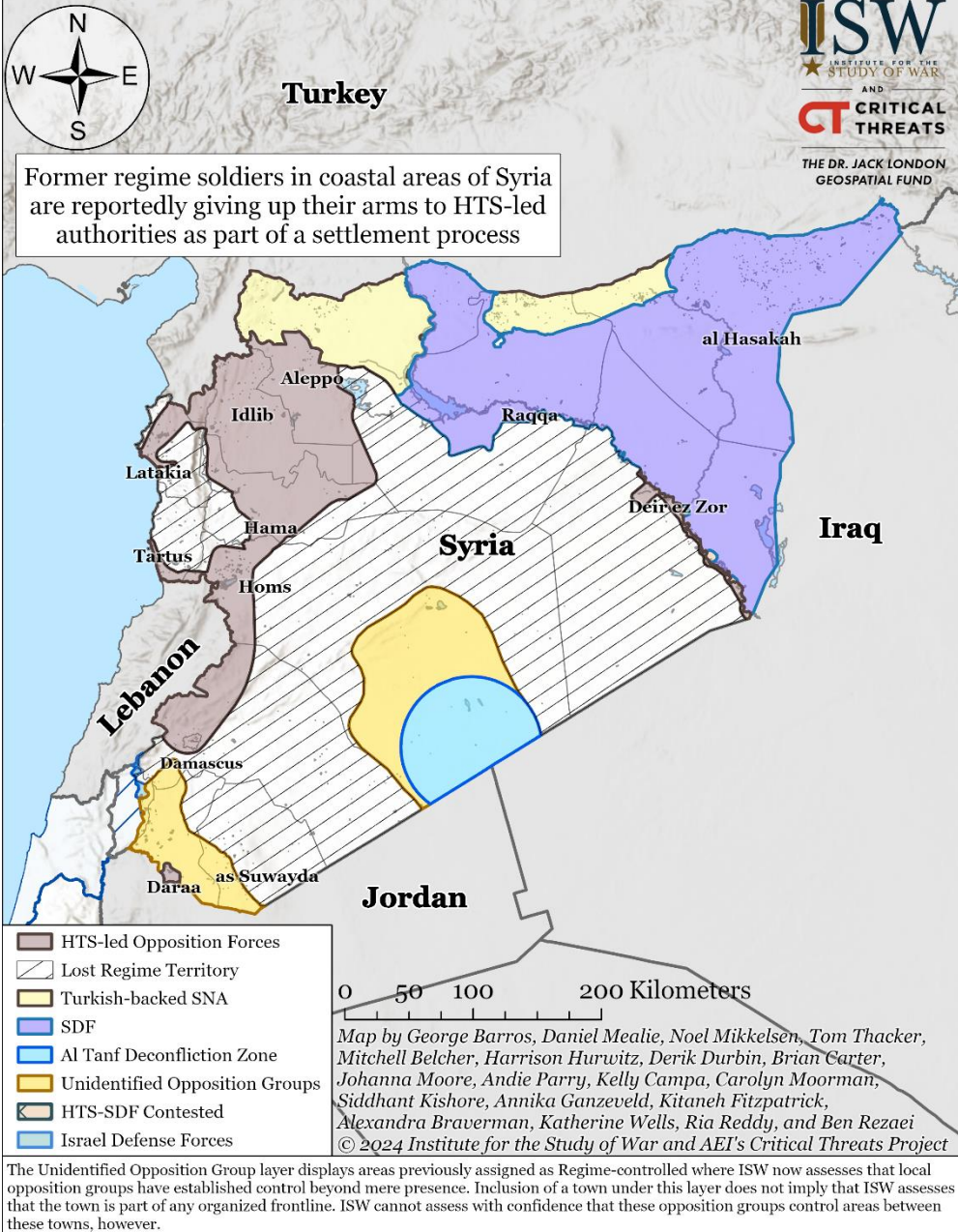
Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) continues to consolidate security control over disparate armed groups in Syria. The Men of Dignity—a Druze militia that was instrumental in seizing southern Syria from the Assad regime—set up checkpoints in Rif Dimashq Province on December 15.^[7] A fighter in the militia confirmed on December 15 that the Men of Dignity are "coordinating completely" with the HTS-led Military Operations Department, which operates in all "newly liberated Syrian territories."^[8] HTS military commander Abu Hassan al Hamwi confirmed on December 13 that the Idlib-based fighters created a "unified war room" with about 25 opposition groups in southern Syria with the strategy of surrounding Damascus from both sides.^[9] This pre-offensive coordination started over a year ago and suggests the groups have developed pragmatic working relationships at least around military operations against the Assad regime.^[10] The groups' cooperation to overthrow Assad does not immediately indicate that they will collaborate on governance. Opposition groups throughout Syria have historically coordinated militarily with HTS's predecessor Jabhat al Nusra, but often came into conflict with the group over governance and control.^[11]

Former regime soldiers in coastal areas of Syria are reportedly giving up their arms to HTS-led authorities as part of a settlement process.^[12] HTS announced the opening of settlement offices in Latakia on December 14.^[13] Social media users posted images of men lined up outside these offices on December 15.^[14] The HTS-led operations room carried out an identical process in other major cities, but it was unclear if soldiers in the former regime stronghold of Latakia would cooperate with the order or opt to keep their weapons in fear of sectarian reprisals from the HTS-led government.^[15] HTS announced on December 9 a general amnesty for all Syrian regime military personnel, whom the regime conscripted under compulsory service.^[16]

HTS leader Abu Mohammed al Jolani also reached out to Kurdish Syrians on December 14.^[17] Jolani said the Kurds are part of the homeland and partners in the coming Syria.^[18] Members of the Syria Democratic Forces (SDF) leadership acknowledged Jolani's sentiments and called for negotiations including the Kurds for a "joint action plan"^[19] The Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is the political wing of the YPG, also called for an end to attacks on Kurdish-controlled territory in eastern and northern Syria.^[20] SDF Commander General Mazloum Abdi echoed the PYD statement on December 15 and called for a "constructive dialogue" to build a new Syria and halt to all military operations in Syria.^[21] CTP-ISW assessed on December 13 that Abdi intends to negotiate a role for the SDF in a future Syrian government, likely to prevent further unrest within Arab populations and militias living under its control.^[22] Unrest, defections, and Turkey's stated intent to "eliminate" the SDF pose existential threats that are likely encouraging the Kurdish groups to negotiate with Jolani.^[23]

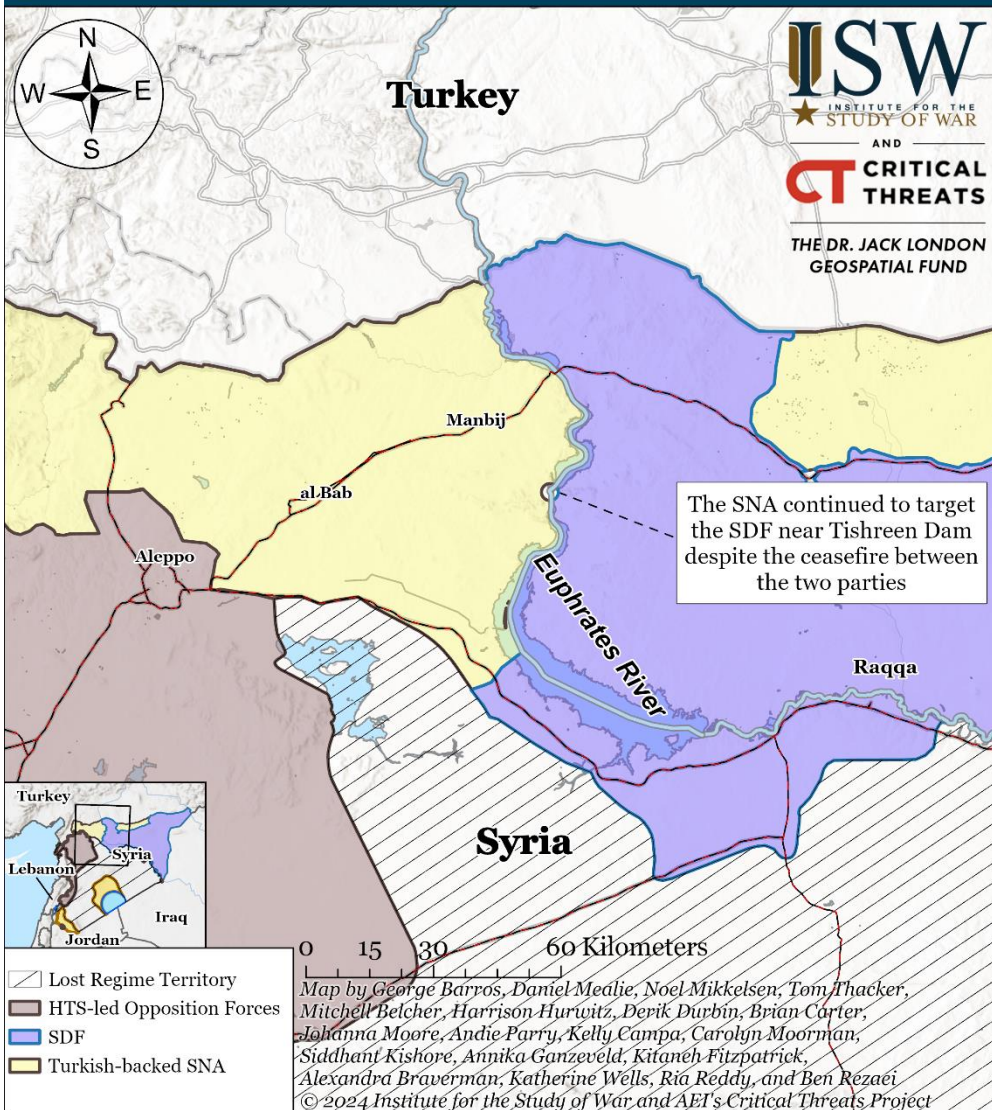
Reported Control of Terrain in Syria

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



Control of Terrain in North Syria

As of December 14, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



US Central Command (CENTCOM) announced that the USS *Harry S. Truman* Carrier Strike Group arrived in the Middle East on December 14.^[24] CENTCOM stated that the strike group moved into CENTCOM’s area of responsibility to ensure regional stability and security, but did not specify the exact location of the strike group. The strike group includes the flagship USS *Harry S Truman*, Carrier Air Wing 1 with nine embarked aviation squadrons, Destroyer Squadron 28, Ticonderoga-class guided missiles cruiser, USS *Gettysburg* with two Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyers, USS *Stout*, and USS *Jason Dunham*.

Israeli military officials approved plans for operations further into Syria but have not implemented them. The IDF has advanced up to 10 kilometers into southern Syria, according to an IDF soldier and CTP-ISW control-of-terrain assessments.^[25] Israeli Army Radio reported on December 15 that the IDF is not advancing into new areas “at this stage.”^[26] IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi and Defense Minister Israel Katz have approved plans to capture a “deeper line” of Syrian

villages if it becomes necessary to do so, however.[27] Katz said on December 15 that recent developments in Syria are increasing threats to Israel despite the HTS-led interim government's "moderate appearance." [28] Katz did not elaborate on which developments in Syria are increasingly threatening to Israel.[29] Halevi said on December 14 that the IDF is only operating in Syria to ensure Israel's security.[30]

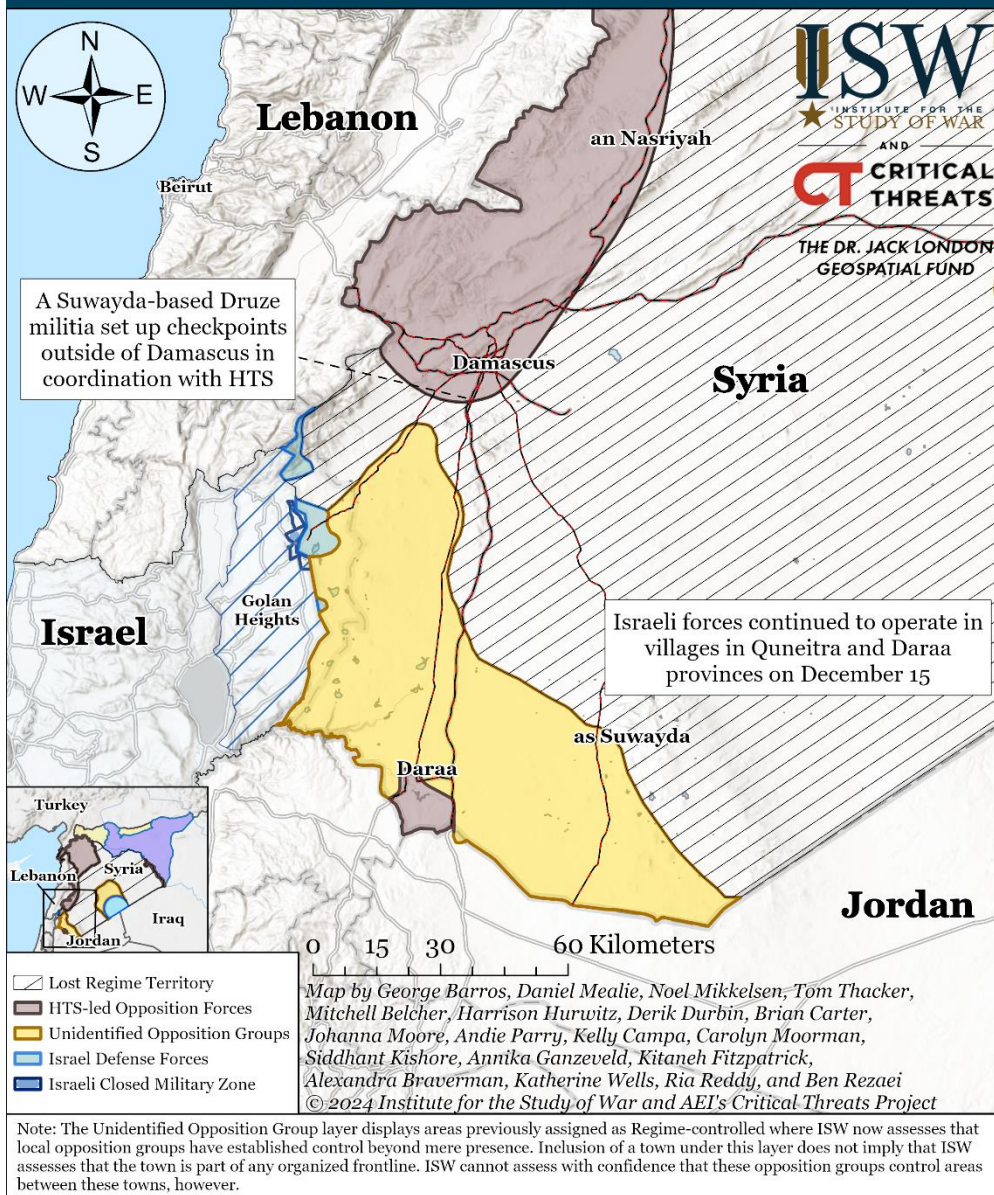
Israeli forces continued to operate in villages in Quneitra and Daraa provinces on December 15. The IDF has coordinated with local village officials to confiscate weapons in Maariyah, Jamleh, Koya, and other towns in the western Daraa countryside, according to Israeli Army Radio and local Syrian media.[31] Syrian Druze officials agreed to collect weapons in their towns and bring them to a predetermined point for Israeli forces to collect. Syrian media reported that Israeli forces are stationed in positions around these villages.[32]

Israel and Jordan reportedly held secret talks on December 13 to discuss the situation in Syria and the threat of Iranian weapons smuggling to Palestinian militias in the West Bank. Three unspecified Israeli sources told Axios that Israeli and Jordanian officials discussed the growing threat of Iranian-backed groups smuggling weapons into the West Bank via Jordan.[33] Two Israeli officials stated that the talks covered Israel and Jordan's "engagement" with the HTS-led transitional government in Syria. One official added that Jordan is acting as a "mediator" between Israel and the Syrian rebel groups. HTS seized control of the Nassib border crossing into Jordan on December 14.[34] Iranian-backed elements have historically used this crossing and the areas surrounding it to smuggle weapons into Jordan and then into the West Bank to arm Palestinian militias.[35] Iran will almost certainly attempt to find new ways to smuggle weapons into Jordan, however.

Syrian media reported that the IDF struck former SAA positions across Syria on December 14. Syrian media reported that the IDF targeted former SAA positions and weapons depots in Daraa, Suwayda, Homs, and Hama provinces.[36] An Israeli Army Radio correspondent reported that the IDF additionally struck at least 20 former Syrian Arab Army (SAA) targets, including weapons warehouses and communications sites, across Syria earlier on December 14.[37] Local Syrian media also reported that the IDF conducted a strike targeting Deir ez Zor Military Airport in HTS-controlled territory in Deir ez Zor Province.[38]

Opposition Advances in Southwest Syria

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



Iranian-backed Badr Organization Secretary General Hadi al Ameri stated on December 12 that “what happened in Syria is a stain of shame on the foreheads of the Turks.” [39] Senior Iranian officials, including the international affairs adviser to the Supreme Leader, Ali Akbar Velayati, have similarly criticized Turkey for supporting the Syrian opposition offensive.[40] Ameri was one of the most vocal Iranian-backed Iraqi militia leaders who called on Iranian-backed fighters to defend the Assad regime.[41]

The Iraqi Army and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) are continuing to bolster security along the Iraq-Syria Border. Iraqi Army Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Abdul Amir

Rashid Yarallah visited the 21st Brigade (15th Infantry Division) and the 15th Infantry Division Headquarters on December 15.[42] The 15th Infantry Division is part of the Western Ninewa Operations Command.[43] Yarallah also visited the 72nd Brigade, 60th Infantry Brigade, and 101st Infantry Brigade, which all operate under the 20th Infantry Division.[44] The 15th and 20th infantry divisions redeployed to areas between Rabia and Sinjar in Ninewa Province on December 7.[45]

The PMF separately reported on December 14 that the PMF 33rd Brigade “intensified” patrols along the Iraq-Syria border.[46] The PMF 33rd Brigade is affiliated with the Islamic Virtue (Fadhila) Party and operates under the PMF Ninewa Operations Command.[47] The PMF also reported that the PMF 60th Brigade “continued to perform security duties” along the Iraq-Syria border on December 14.[48] This brigade typically operates around the al Baaj Desert in Ninewa Province.[49]

Key Takeaways:

- **Russia in Syria:** Russia’s withdrawal from bases in northern Syria and its loss of influence in Syria will likely expose the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to continued Turkish attacks in northern Syria. Russia had previously opposed several prior Turkish attempts to capture SDF-controlled areas and prevented Turkish operations. The loss of Russia’s physical presence and influence in northern Syria means that the primary barrier against a Turkish or Turkish-backed operation to seize even more SDF-controlled areas—or a Turkish attempt to destroy the SDF outright—no longer exists.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces:** Turkey will likely continue to back the SNA’s ground operation against the SDF to destroy the SDF. The SDF’s fight against Turkey and its proxies will render it unable to support US policy objectives in Syria. The SDF cannot conduct offensive operations against ISIS while contending with the threat from Turkey and its allies in Syria. It is unclear if the SDF would be able to secure key facilities like al Hol camp if it faces a severe threat from Turkish-backed forces to Kurdish civilian areas.
- **Expanding HTS Control in Syria:** Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) continues to consolidate security control over disparate armed groups in Syria.
- **US Carrier Deployment:** Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) continues to consolidate security control over disparate armed groups in Syria.
- **Israel in Syria:** Israeli military officials approved plans for operations further into Syria but have not implemented them. Israeli forces continued to operate in villages in Quneitra and Daraa provinces on December 15.
- **Iraqi Reactions to Syria:** Iranian-backed Badr Organization Secretary General Hadi al Ameri stated on December 12 that “what happened in Syria is a stain of shame on the foreheads of the Turks.” The Iraqi Army and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) are continuing to bolster security along the Iraq-Syria Border.

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 162nd Division has continued clearing operations in the northern Gaza Strip since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on December 14. The IDF Air Force attacked a Palestinian militia cell in three locations in Gaza City on December 14.^[50] The IDF reported that the militia cell was planning to conduct attacks targeting Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip “in the immediate future.”^[51] The IDF 84th Infantry Brigade raided a Palestinian militia meeting point in Beit Hanoun on December 15.^[52] Israeli ground forces, in cooperation with the IDF Air Force, killed several Palestinian fighters. Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) claimed that it destroyed an Israeli vehicle with an explosively formed penetrator (EFP) in Beit Hanoun.^[53] The IDF 900th Infantry Brigade located and destroyed weapons, including dozens of cluster grenades, in Beit Lahia on December 15.^[54]

The Israeli Air Force separately struck a Hamas command-and-control site at the Abu Shabak Clinic in Jabalia on December 15.^[55] The IDF reported that Hamas used the site to plan and conduct attacks targeting Israel and Israeli forces. Hamas claimed that it targeted 84th Infantry Brigade soldiers with unspecified weapons west of Jabalia refugee camp on December 14.^[56] Hamas also claimed that it sniped an Israeli soldier east of Jabalia on December 15.^[57] PIJ separately claimed that it detonated improvised explosive devices (IED) targeting IDF vehicles in three locations south of Shujaiya.^[58]

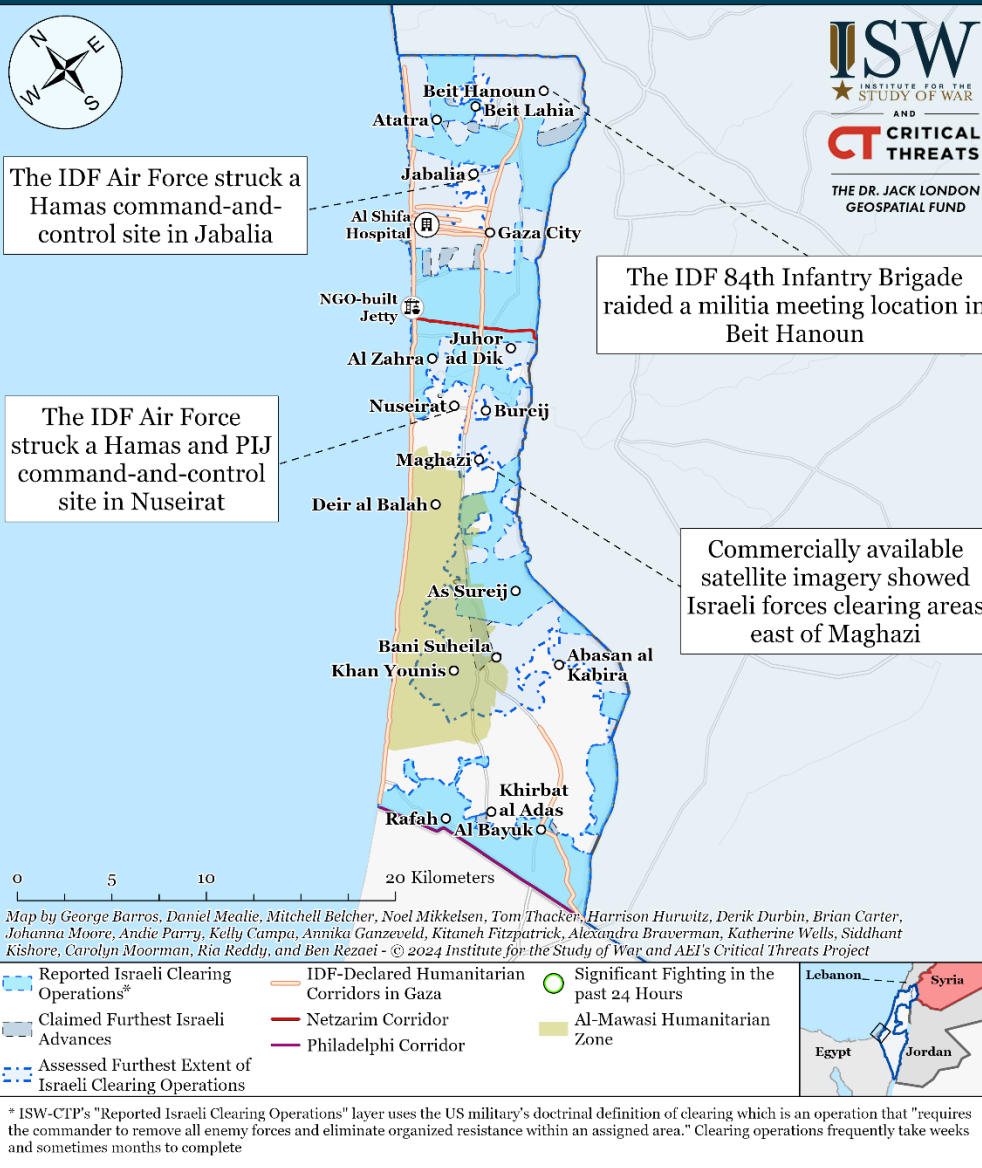
Israeli forces continued clearing operations in the central Gaza Strip on December 15. Commercially available satellite imagery captured on December 15 showed Israeli forces clearing areas east of Maghazi. A Palestinian journalist reported gunfire from Israeli vehicles east of the Maghazi refugee camp on December 14.^[59] The Mujahideen Brigades fired rockets targeting Israeli forces along the Netzarim Corridor on December 15.^[60]

The IDF Air Force conducted an airstrike targeting Hamas and PIJ fighters at a command-and-control site in Nuseirat in the central Gaza Strip on December 15.^[61] The site was located at a Civil Defense Organization complex in Nuseirat.^[62] The strike killed a PIJ member, Ahmed Bakr al Louh, who previously served as a platoon commander in PIJ’s Central Camps Brigade.^[63] Al Jazeera reported that Louh worked as a cameraman for Al Jazeera.^[64]

The National Resistance Brigades and PIJ mortared Israeli forces in the al Janina neighborhood, east of Rafah City, on December 15.^[65]

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

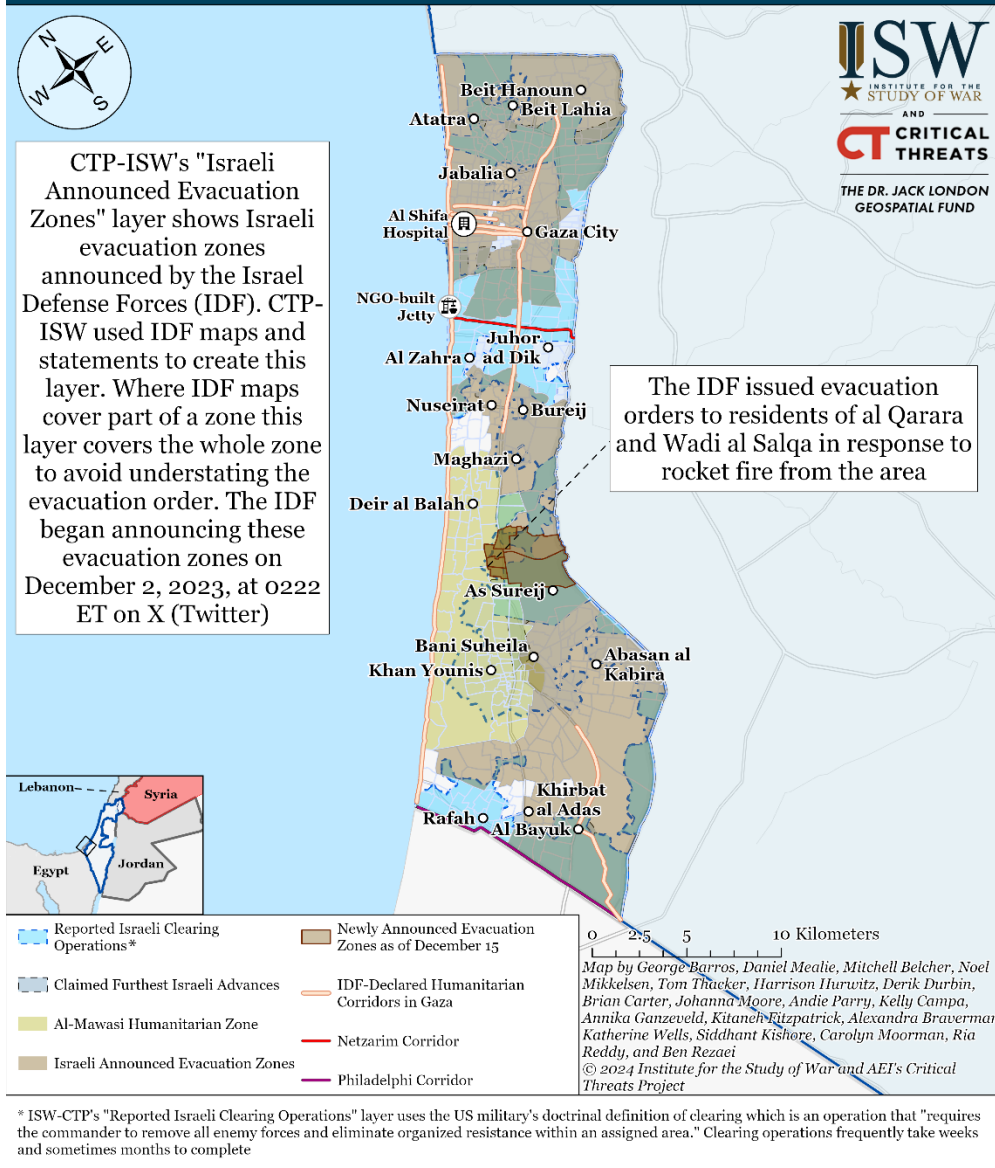
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The IDF issued evacuation orders on December 15 for residents in al Qarara and Wadi al Salqa south of Deir al Balah in the central Gaza Strip.^[66] Part of the evacuation zone overlaps with the al Mawasi humanitarian zone.^[67] The IDF Arabic-language spokesperson said that Palestinian militias continue to fire rockets from the area.^[68] The IDF intercepted two rockets launched from the central Gaza Strip on December 14.^[69]

Israeli-Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke with US President-elect Donald Trump about a ceasefire-hostage deal with Hamas on December 14.^[70] Israeli media reported that Netanyahu asked Trump to pressure Egypt and Qatar to compel Hamas to release more hostages.^[71] An Israeli political correspondent reported that the number of hostages released in the deal remains the primary dispute in the negotiations.^[72] Hamas has reportedly agreed to release a significantly lower number than Israel is willing to agree to, according to the correspondent.^[73]

West Bank

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

The IDF plans to deploy unmanned machine gun posts in the West Bank to prevent militant infiltration and attacks on Israeli civilians. An Israeli Army Radio Correspondent reported on December 15 that the system will be placed at key locations, including command posts and community entrances.[74] The Roa-Yora system includes an observation tower and a remote-controlled machine gun. Hamas disabled these systems when it breached the Gaza Strip-Israel border fence on October 7, 2023.

Unspecified US, Israeli, and Palestinian officials told Axios that the Biden administration asked Israel to approve US military assistance to Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces to support the PA’s operation against Palestinian militias in the West Bank.[75] Palestinian and Israeli officials stated that the PA operation is primarily targeting a local armed group composed of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas militants. PA security forces have detained several fighters, dismantled IEDs along major roads, and seized militia weapons in the northern West Bank in recent months.[76] Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas briefed the Biden administration before the operation and provided a list of equipment and ammunition that PA security forces needed, according to US and Palestinian officials.[77] The Israeli security cabinet convened on December 15 to discuss the security situation in the West Bank, though no additional details are available at the time of this writing.

Northern Israel and Lebanon

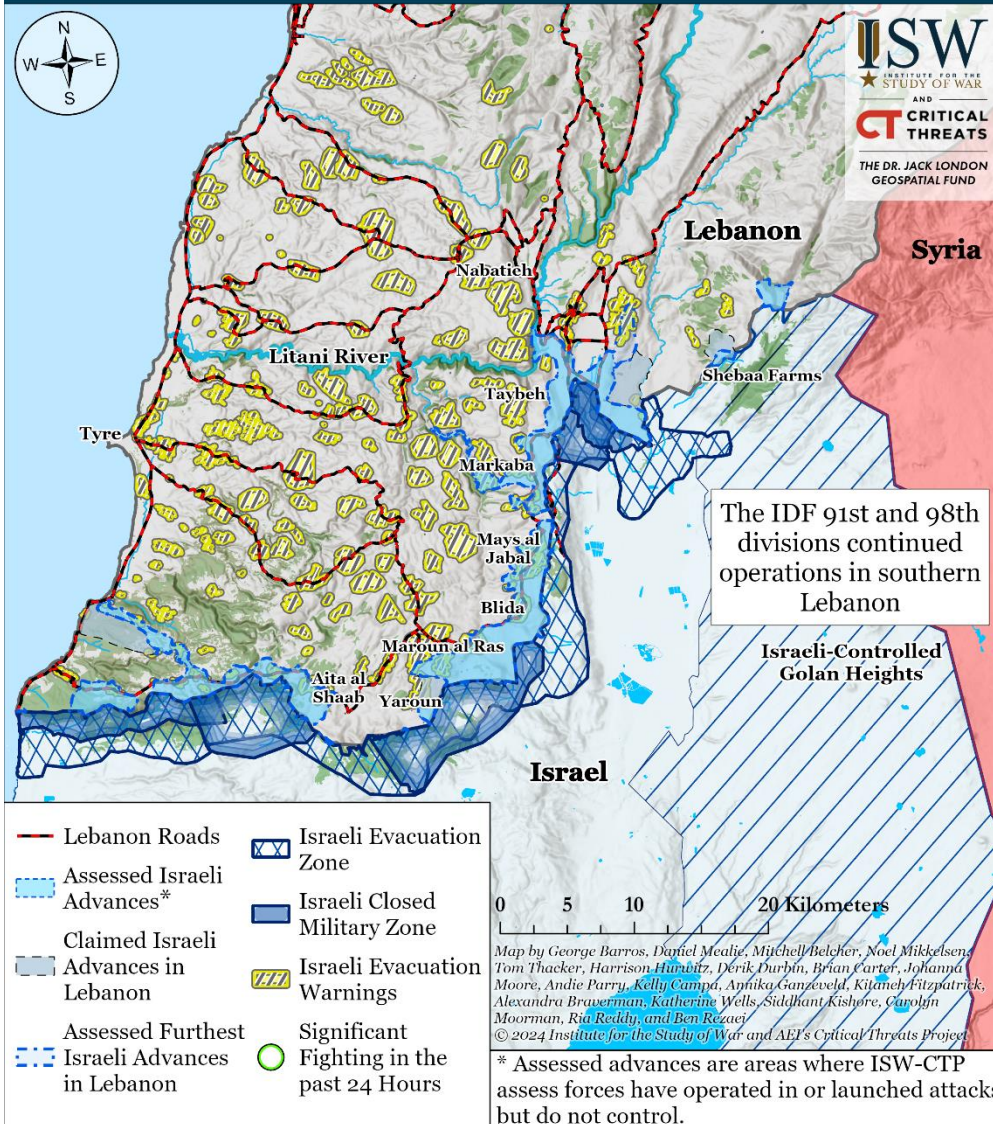
Lebanese Hezbollah objectives:

- 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 91st and 98th Divisions continued to operate in southern Lebanon on December 15.[78] The IDF said that Israeli forces currently operating in southern Lebanon are taking action against threats to Israel and its citizens through reconnaissance, artillery, and other capabilities.[79] Lebanese media reported that the IDF conducted an airstrike between Jebbayn and Shihine.[80] Lebanese media also reported that Israeli forces conducted operations in Markaba, Rab al Thalatheen, and Mays al Jabal.[81]

Reported Israeli Operations in Lebanon

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Iran and the Axis of Resistance

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Commander Major General Hossein Salami echoed Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s recent remarks about Syria, emphasizing that **"Syria will be liberated...at the hands of its prosperous and experienced youth."**[82] Salami stated that Israel "will pay a heavy price and will be buried in [Syria]." CTP-ISW previously assessed that Iran may support militias in Syria to combat opposition forces and US-Israeli “interference” while undermining any new government in Syria.[83]

The Custodian of the holy Shia Sayyida Zeinab shrine announced that the shrine is safe, and the HTS-controlled interim government in Syria took over the security of the shrine on December 15.^[84] The custodian added that no weapons are allowed in the shrine. This announcement comes after videos circulated on social media of alleged armed Syrian opposition forces entering the shrine on December 11, reportedly chanting “provocative slogans.”^[85] HTS had reportedly made an informal agreement with Iran to protect Shia sites and minorities in Syria.^[86]

Houthi media reported a US-UK airstrike in the al Tuhayta District, south of Hudaydah in southwestern Yemen on December 15.^[87] CENTCOM has not confirmed the airstrike claim.

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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