Iran Update



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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.

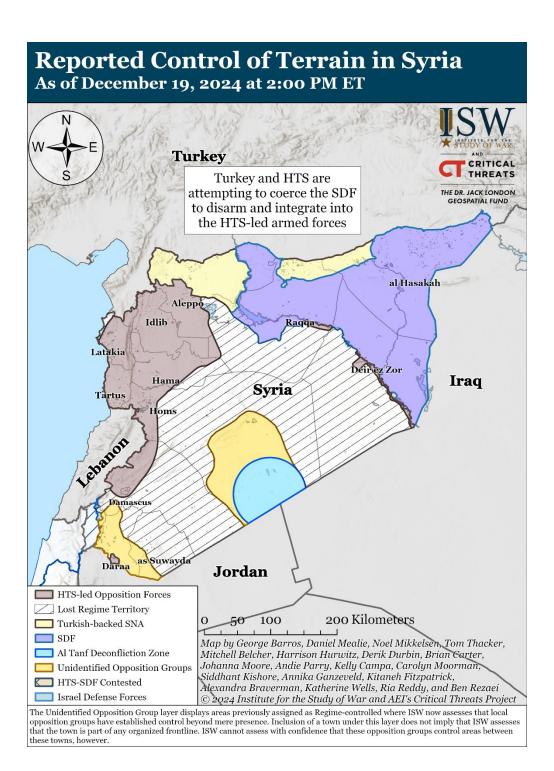
Click <u>here</u> to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations, and <u>here</u> to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of the ongoing opposition offensive in Syria. These maps are updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

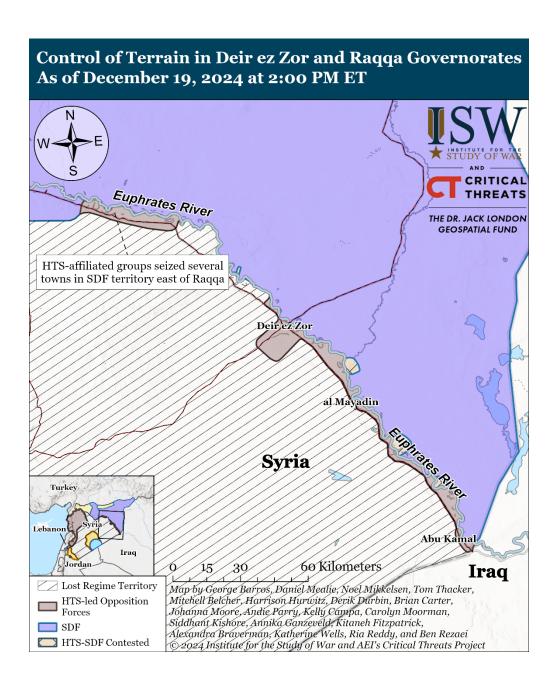
We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We utterly condemn violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity even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

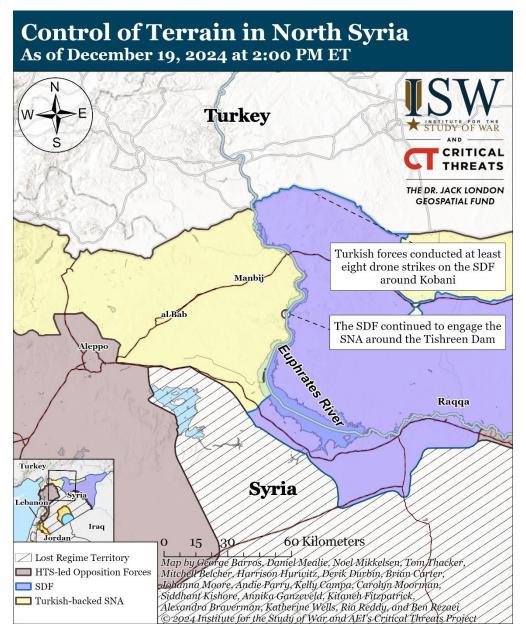
Turkey and Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) are attempting to coerce the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to disarm and integrate into the HTS-led armed forces by threatening the SDF with a full-scale assault against SDF-held areas. Turkey massed forces on the Turkey-Syria border, dismantled the Kobani-Turkey border wall, and increased drone attacks in the Manbij countryside ahead of a potential Turkish invasion into Syria.[1] Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan stated that Turkey will not need to intervene in Syria if HTS addresses its concerns with the SDF "properly."[2] Fidan added on December 13 that Turkey's strategic objective is to "eliminate" the SDF.[3] HTS has called for a unified Syrian state without federal regions, which is an implicit demand for the SDF to disarm and cease to exist as an autonomous organization, consistent with Turkish demands.[4] Unrest, defections, and Turkey's potential assault pose existential threats to the SDF.[5] Turkey's offer nominally presents the opportunity for the SDF to avoid a full-scale war but would ultimately still result in the elimination of the SDF.

The SDF is unlikely to accept Turkish maximalist demands, which would result in the SDF's complete destruction, without suffering a military defeat. Incorporating SDF-held territory into the new Syrian government would require the SDF to disarm and disband its security forces, given HTS's demand for a unitary state ruled from Damascus.[6] Elements of these forces would be reintegrated into the Syrian army alongside other militia groups, some of which have worked to kill and displace Kurdish communities. The SDF's Kurdish leaders will almost certainly resist such a step, given their previous experience with the abuse of Kurdish civilians in northern Syria by the very forces that would integrate into the Syrian army alongside former SDF fighters.

Turkey and HTS's coercive effort presents a limited window of opportunity to engage with Turkish and Kurdish parties to avoid a full-scale war which could result in ethnic cleansing. Fighting in northeastern Syria risks ethnically motivated harassment and violence against Kurds there given that Turkish-backed fighters have previously committed atrocities against the Kurdish population and fighters.[7] Turkey's decision to defer to HTS's efforts to integrate the SDF into the interim government suggests that Turkey may prefer a negotiated settlement to a politically and militarily costly full-scale assault into Syria by Turkish or Turkish-backed forces.[8] SDF Commander General Mazloum Abdi has similarly called for a dialogue and has reportedly agreed to a Turkish demand to expel non-Syrian Kurds from Syria if the SDF and Turkey and Turkish-backed forces reached a ceasefire in northern Syria.[9] The apparent willingness of Turkey to temporarily forgo direct military action to compel the SDF to dissolve may be exploited to moderate Turkey and its Syrian allies' maximalist demands.







It is unclear if HTS leader Ahmad al Shara's (aka Abu Mohammad al Jolani) vision of appointing a committee of legal experts to write the Syrian constitution will include multi-sectarian and religious representation. Shara told the BBC on December 18 that a "Syrian committee of legal experts" will assemble to write a constitution and will "decide" on a number of unspecified legal issues, including alcohol consumption.[10] It is unclear which "legal experts" Shara is referring to and if these experts would be representative of Syria's multi-ethnic, sectarian, and religious population or would be HTS-affiliated Sunni scholars. HTS-affiliated scholars writing Syria's constitution would allow HTS to decide what type of legal code it would adopt and how it would delegate power across Syria. Shara has indicated that he is committed to "respect[ing] all sects" and holding "national dialogue" with them, but it is not yet clear if this dialogue will involve the discussion of constitutional issues and he has not yet taken concrete steps to include Syrian minorities in the government.[11] Shara and the interim prime minister have, however, appointed loyalists as governors

in several provinces and ministers in the transitional government. Syria's diverse population may not be satisfied with an HTS-written constitution. The spiritual leader of the Druze sect, Sheikh Hikmat al Hijri, issued a call to the Syrian people on December 18 to convene a constitutional convention with representatives from all Syrian provinces to elect working constitution committees.[12] Hijri said that the constitution should adopt an administrative decentralized system and ensure the separation of powers to safeguard the institutions of governance.[13] Hijri's vision of a "decentralized system" directly conflicts with HTS's previous calls for a unified Syria under one central government and rejection of federal entities. Shara has yet to clarify his plans for the establishment of constitutional committees.[14] Shara previously noted that the establishment of these committees would be unlikely to occur in the near term.[15]

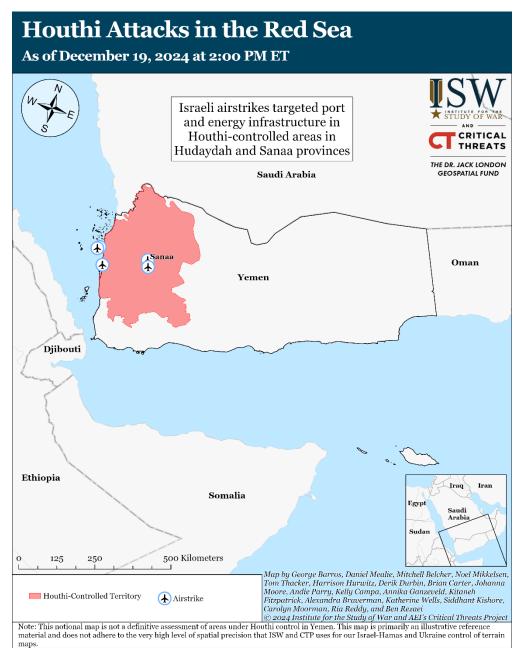
At least hundreds of Syrians also demonstrated in support a secular, representative government in Damascus on December 19.[16] The Civil Youth Gathering organized the protest. CTP-ISW will continue to monitor reports of demonstrations in the coming days and weeks.

Syrian residents of Tartus demonstrated in front of the police headquarters in Tartus City on December 18 to protest the slow interim government response to theft and violent crime in the area.[17] This is the first documented protest against the HTS-led government since the fall of the Assad regime.[18] Syrian media has reported numerous incidents of violent crime and threat in the Tartus area in recent days.[19] It is not immediately clear that this protest was organized by members of a certain sect or affiliation. The HTS-led interim government recently announced that it was recruiting police and security forces in Tartus.[20]

Syrian media reported that the Southern Operations Room is attempting to unite disparate southern armed factions under the HTS-led interim government, likely in order to increase the relative strength of the Southern Operations Room vis-a-vis the HTS-led Fateh Mubin.[21] Local media reported on December 19 that a convoy of vehicles affiliated with the Southern Operations Room—an opposition coalition that now controls most of southwestern Syria and coordinates with the HTS-led interim government—toured several towns in the northern Daraa countryside.[22] Local media reported that the Southern Operations Room met with officials and local leaders in these towns to convince them to unite all armed factions in southern Syria within one operations room in coordination with the HTS-led interim government.[23] The interim government recently announced it would dissolve all former opposition forces and integrate them under the new Defense Ministry.[24] The Southern Operations Room may seek to strengthen its own organization ahead of a merger into the new Syrian army in order to retain their relative strength visa-vis HTS-led elements.

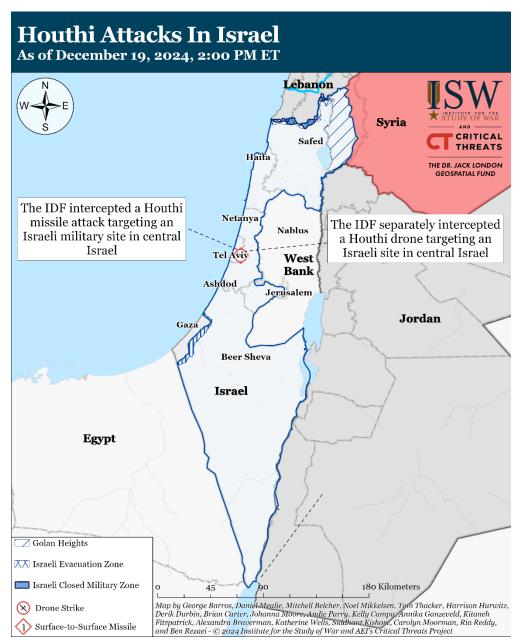
The IDF conducted two waves of airstrikes targeting port and energy infrastructure in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen on December 18.[25] Fourteen IDF Air Force aircraft conducted the strikes in Hudaydah and Sanaa provinces as part of a plan that the IDF made several weeks ago in response to persistent Houthi drone and missile attacks on Israel.[26] The IDF targeted six tugboats in the Hudaydah and Salif ports, and the Ras Issa Oil Refinery, on the western coast of Yemen.[27] The IDF also targeted the Dhabhan and Heyzaz power stations in Sanaa.[28] The power stations sustained minimal damage, and the Houthis have reportedly restored power to Sanaa.[29] The IDF previously attacked infrastructure in Hudaydah Port in July 2024 to disrupt Iranian weapons

shipments to the Houthis.[30] The Houthis will likely continue to conduct drone and missile attacks targeting Israel given that these strikes do not appear to have disrupted the Houthis' ability to do so.



The Houthis have conducted two attacks targeting Israel since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on December 18. The Houthis conducted a ballistic missile attack targeting two "specific and sensitive" Israeli military targets in the Tel Aviv-Jaffa area in central Israel on December 18.[31] The Houthis conducted this attack at the same time that the IDF conducted airstrikes targeting infrastructure in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen..[32] Houthi Supreme Leader Abdulmalik al Houthi claimed on December 19 that one of the missile attacks targeted the Israeli Defense Ministry.[33] The IDF intercepted a Houthi missile before it entered Israeli territory on December 18.[34] Shrapnel from a Houthi missile damaged a school building near Tel Aviv.[35] The Houthis separately claimed a drone

attack targeting the Tel Aviv-Jaffa area on December 19.[36] The IDF intercepted "a suspicious aerial target" over the Mediterranean Sea before it entered Israeli territory on December 19.[37]



Key Takeaways:

- HTS, Turkey, and the Syrian Democratic Forces: Turkey and Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) are attempting to coerce the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to disarm and integrate into the HTS-led armed forces by threatening the SDF with a full-scale assault against SDF-held areas. The SDF is unlikely to accept Turkish maximalist demands, which would result in the SDF's complete destruction, without suffering a military defeat.
- HTS Consolidation: It is unclear if HTS leader Ahmad al Shara's (aka Abu Mohammad al Jolani) vision of appointing a committee of legal experts to write the Syrian constitution will

include multi-sectarian and religious representation. Shara and the interim prime minister have, however, appointed loyalists as governors in several provinces and ministers in the transitional government.

- **Protests in Syria:** Syrian residents of Tartus demonstrated in front of the police headquarters in Tartus City on December 18 to protest the slow interim government response to theft and violent crime in the area. At least hundreds of Syrians also demonstrated in support of a secular, representative government in Damascus on December 19.
- **Southern Operations Room in Syria:** Syrian media reported that the Southern Operations Room is attempting to unite disparate southern armed factions under the HTS-led interim government, likely in order to increase the relative strength of the Southern Operations Room vis-a-vis the HTS-led Fateh Mubin.
- **Israeli Strikes in Yemen:** The IDF conducted two waves of airstrikes targeting port and energy infrastructure in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen on December 18.
- Houthi Strikes in Israel: The Houthis have conducted two attacks targeting Israel since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on December 18.

Gaza Strip:

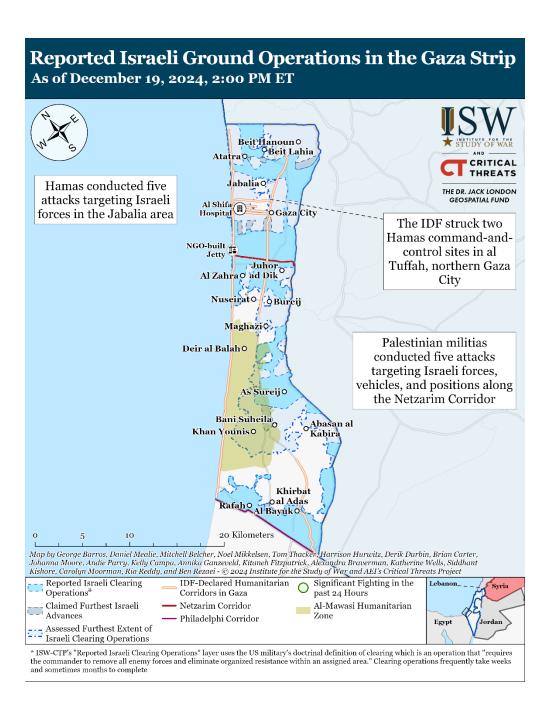
Axis of Resistance objectives:

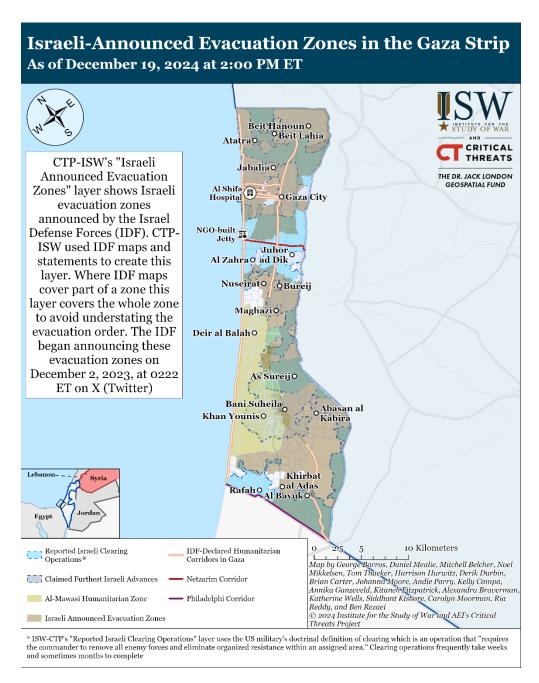
- Erode the will of the Israeli political establishment and public to sustain clearing operations in the Gaza Strip
- Reestablish Hamas as the governing authority in the Gaza Strip

Hamas has conducted five attacks targeting Israeli forces in Jabalia in the northern Gaza Strip since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on December 18.[38] Hamas claimed that one of its fighters stabbed an IDF officer and three soldiers in the Jabalia refugee camp on December 19.[39] The IDF has not corroborated the Hamas claim at the time of writing.

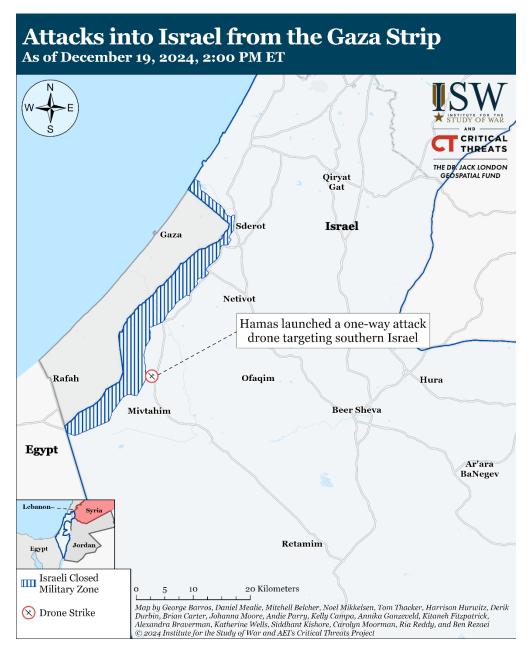
The IDF Air Force struck two Hamas command-and-control sites near Gaza City on December 19.[40] The IDF said that Hamas fighters used the former Karamah and Shaban schools in Tuffah, northern Gaza City, to conduct attacks targeting Israeli forces and territory.[41] The IDF added that it took steps to minimize civilian casualties.[42] The strikes killed 15 Palestinians, according to local medics. [43]

Palestinian militias have conducted five attacks targeting Israeli forces, vehicles, and command-and-control sites along the Netzarim Corridor since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on December 18.[44]





Hamas conducted a drone attack targeting an IDF site in southern Israel on December 19.[45] The IDF intercepted the drone.[46] Palestinian militias typically use rockets to conduct indirect fire attacks targeting southern Israel.



The IDF presented a plan for recruiting ultra-Orthodox Israelis into the IDF to Defense Minister Israel Katz on December 19. [47] Katz said that the IDF will be able to recruit all eligible ultra-Orthodox Israelis beginning in summer 2026.

West Bank

Axis of Resistance objectives:

• Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

The IDF Air Force struck and killed an al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades commander in Tulkarm on December 19.[48] The IDF struck a car containing Tariq al Dosh and three other AAMB fighters.[49] An Israeli media correspondent reported that Dosh recruited fighters to conduct attacks

in the West Bank.[50] The correspondent added that Dosh received Iranian funding from the Lebanon-based Maqdah family, which is affiliated with the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades.[51] Israel has previously accused the Maqdah family of logistically and financially supporting attacks in the West Bank.[52]

The IDF said on December 19 that Palestinian militias conducted 70 percent fewer attacks in the West Bank in 2024 compared to 2023.[53] Senior Israeli Central Command officials told an Israeli Army Radio correspondent on December 19 that Iran's efforts to direct attacks, smuggle weapons, and funnel money into the West Bank may increase due to the weakening of Iran's allies in the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, and Syria.[54] Israel thwarted multiple Iranian attempts to smuggle weapons and money through Jordan into the West Bank in 2024.[55]

Israeli media highlighted on December 19 that the Palestinian Authority's (PA) recent operations targeting Palestinian militias in the northern West Bank have occurred within a few days of IDF operations against the militias there. [56] Israeli media reported that, in the past, PA forces would not enter northern West Bank refugee camps after the IDF had operated there. Palestinian militias clashed with PA security forces in Jenin for the 14th consecutive day on December 18.[57]

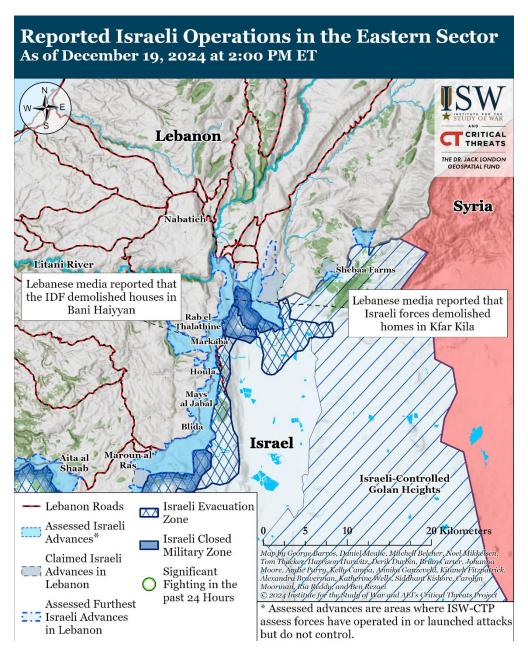
Northern Israel and Lebanon

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

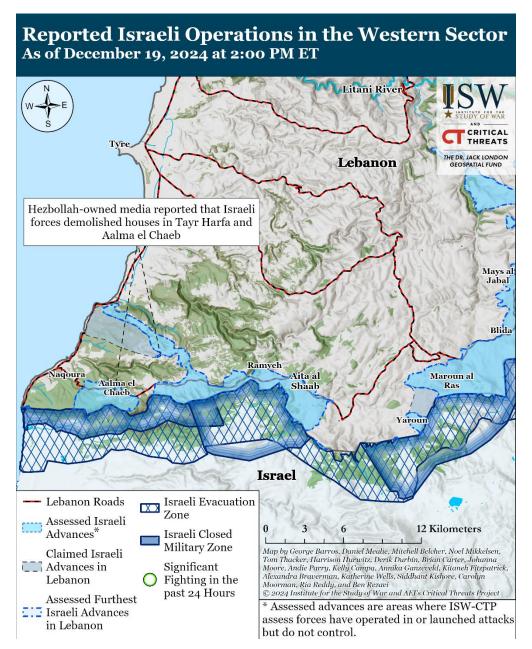
Lebanese media reported that Israeli forces continued to demolish houses and detonate unspecified infrastructure in Bani Haiyyan, southeastern Lebanon, on December 19.[58] Lebanese media reported that Israeli tanks and bulldozers advanced further into Bani Haiyyan.[59] Geolocated footage posted on December 18 showed IDF bulldozers operating near a mosque in Bani Haiyyan.[60]

Lebanese media reported that Israeli forces detonated infrastructure in four towns in southeastern Lebanon.[61] Lebanese media claimed that Israeli forces conducted "large-scale" detonations in Kfar Kila.[62]

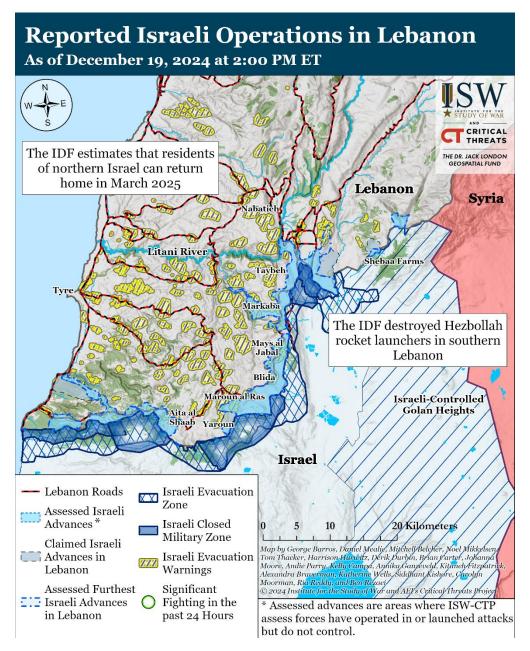


Hezbollah-controlled media reported that the IDF conducted a series of airstrikes targeting unspecified targets in Naqoura, southwestern Lebanon, on December 19.[63]

Hezbollah-controlled media reported that Israeli forces demolished multiple houses in Tayr Harfa and Aalma el Chaeb, southwestern Lebanon, on December 19.[64]



The IDF 300th Territorial Brigade (146th Division) continued to operate in southern Lebanon on December 19.[65] Israeli forces destroyed several Hezbollah rocket launchers aimed at Israeli territory.[66] Israeli forces also destroyed a weapons depot, anti-tank missiles, and an artillery cannon.[67] The IDF reiterated its commitment to the Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire, which permits the IDF to operate in southern Lebanon until the end of January 2025.[68]



Israeli media reported on December 19 that the IDF estimates that residents of evacuated northern Israeli towns can return home in March 2025.[69] The IDF originally intended to allow residents to return to northern Israel in February 2025. Around 60,000 residents evacuated from northern Israel in October 2023.

Israeli forces detained four Israeli civilians who illegally entered southern Lebanon from Israel to pray at a tomb on December 19.[70]

Iran and the Axis of Resistance

Former Syrian Arab Army (SAA) soldiers and officers began returning from Iraq to Syria on December 19. The Iraqi Security Media Cell reported on December 19 that Iraq transferred 1,905 former SAA soldiers and officers to a "protection force" in Albu Kamal, Deir ez Zor Province.[71] Syrian

media reported on December 19 that the HTS-led Military Operations Department in Deir ez Zor was preparing to receive over 2,000 former SAA members from Iraq.[72] The Iraqi Security Media Cell called on the HTS-led interim government to grant amnesty to the SAA members.[73]

The United States sanctioned several entities, individuals, and vessels involved in facilitating illicit Iranian and Houthi activities on December 19. The US Treasury Department sanctioned four entities and three vessels involved in the trade of Iranian oil and petrochemicals.[74] This trade helps fund Iran's proxy network, ballistic missile production, and nuclear program. The US Treasury Department also sanctioned a dozen individuals and entities involved in arms trafficking, money laundering, and illicit Iranian oil shipments in support of the Houthis.[75]

Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed on December 19 that Russia evacuated 4,000 Iranian fighters from Hmeimim Air Base in Syria during the Syrian opposition offensive.[76] Khatam ol Anbia Central Headquarters Inspection Deputy Brigadier General Mohammad Jafar Asadi refuted Putin's claim and claimed that Russia only evacuated Iranian civilians from Syria.[77] Asadi stated that Iran "independently" withdrew Iranian military forces and advisers from Syria.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian attended the D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation summit in Cairo, Egypt, on December 19.[78] Pezeshkian's trip to Egypt marked the first visit by an Iranian president to Egypt since 2013. The D-8 is comprised of Iran, Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Turkey. Pezeshkian called for accelerating trade among D-8 nations by activating trade systems and improving transit networks.[79] Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan emphasized Syria's territorial integrity and called for enhancing Iranian-Turkish economic cooperation in a meeting with Pezeshkian on the sidelines of the summit.[80] Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi separately met with his Egyptian and Turkish counterparts on the sidelines of the summit to discuss Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip and the situation in Syria.[81]

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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