

# Iran Update



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December 21, 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.*

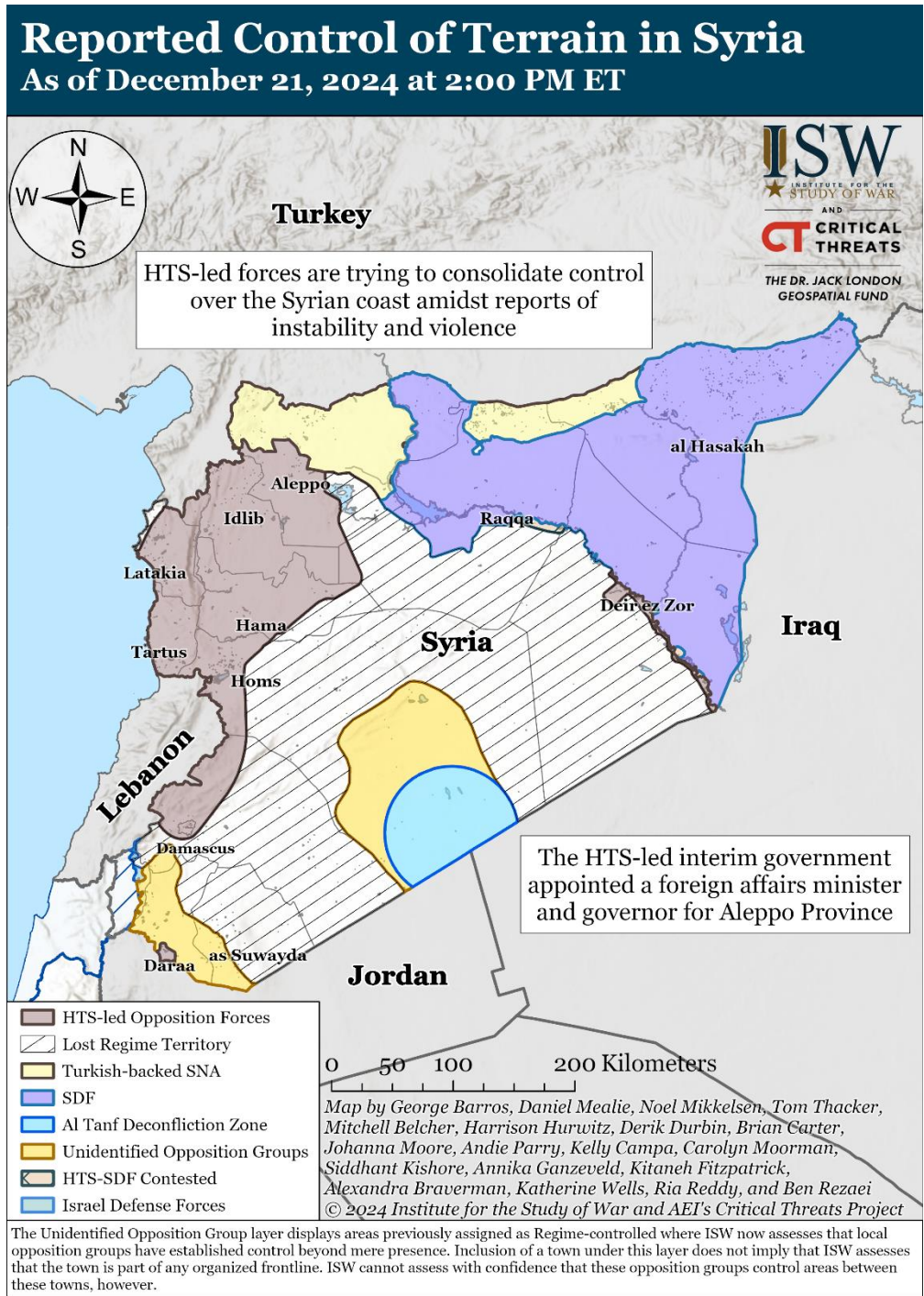
*Click [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations, and [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of the ongoing opposition offensive in Syria. These maps are updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.*

*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.*

**US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf described Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) leader Ahmed al Shara as “pragmatic” but did not specify what concrete steps Shara or the HTS-led interim government will take to combat terrorism or ensure minority rights.[1]** Leaf stated that Shara gave “moderate” statements on issues, including women's rights and protection for minorities, when they met in Damascus on December 20. Leaf confirmed that the United States will no longer pursue the 10-million-dollar Rewards for Justice bounty on Shara due to his commitment to ensuring terrorist groups inside Syria pose no threat to the United States or its regional partners. The US readout offered no details on whether Shara agreed to any binding commitments in exchange. Leaf stated the United States supports a Syrian-led political process that results in an “inclusive and representative government” and includes Syria’s “diverse ethnic and religious communities.”

The HTS-published readout of the meeting between Leaf and Shara portrayed the United States as supporting HTS efforts to consolidate control and deprive Syrian Kurds of regional autonomy, even though the US readout gave no indication of such things.[2] The HTS-published readout framed the United States as supporting a “unified Syrian army” that stands by the interim government “in confronting pending issues and major challenges such as the northeastern region.” This language implies US support for the HTS and Turkish effort to coerce the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into disbanding and forfeiting their autonomy to integrate into a new state structure under HTS.[3] Elements of the SDF would be reintegrated into the Syrian army alongside other militia groups, some of which have worked to kill and displace Kurdish communities, as CTP-ISW has previously reported.[4] The HTS-readout further claimed that the United States “affirmed its commitment to

supporting the Syrian people and the new Syrian administration,” likely to portray the United States as recognizing the HTS-led interim government as the official Syrian government, despite the United States having made no such comments. The HTS-readout — like the US one — provided no specific or binding steps that Shara or the HTS-led government will take to counter terrorist groups in Syria.



**HTS is trying to consolidate control over the Syrian coastal region amid reports of instability and violence there.** HTS launched an effort purportedly to crack down on crimes, such as drug trafficking, extortion, and theft, in Latakia.[5] Although some lawlessness is probably present

in certain parts of Syria at the moment, it appears that HTS is confronting politically motivated civil conflict beyond regular criminal activity. Unspecified individuals fired small arms at an HTS checkpoint south of Tartus, for instance.[6] Unspecified individuals have also conducted arson attacks on former Assad regime courts and police sites, possibly to destroy evidence that could be used to prosecute former regime officials.[7] These arson attacks extend to other Syrian provinces, such as Suwayda.[8] There is a risk that politically motivated civil conflict in the Syrian coastal region could develop along ethnic and sectarian lines. The coastal region is heavily populated by Alawites, who may expect retaliation or persecution from the HTS-led government since Assad is Alawite.[9] Western media has already reported some incidents of violence against Alawite civilians in recent days.[10]

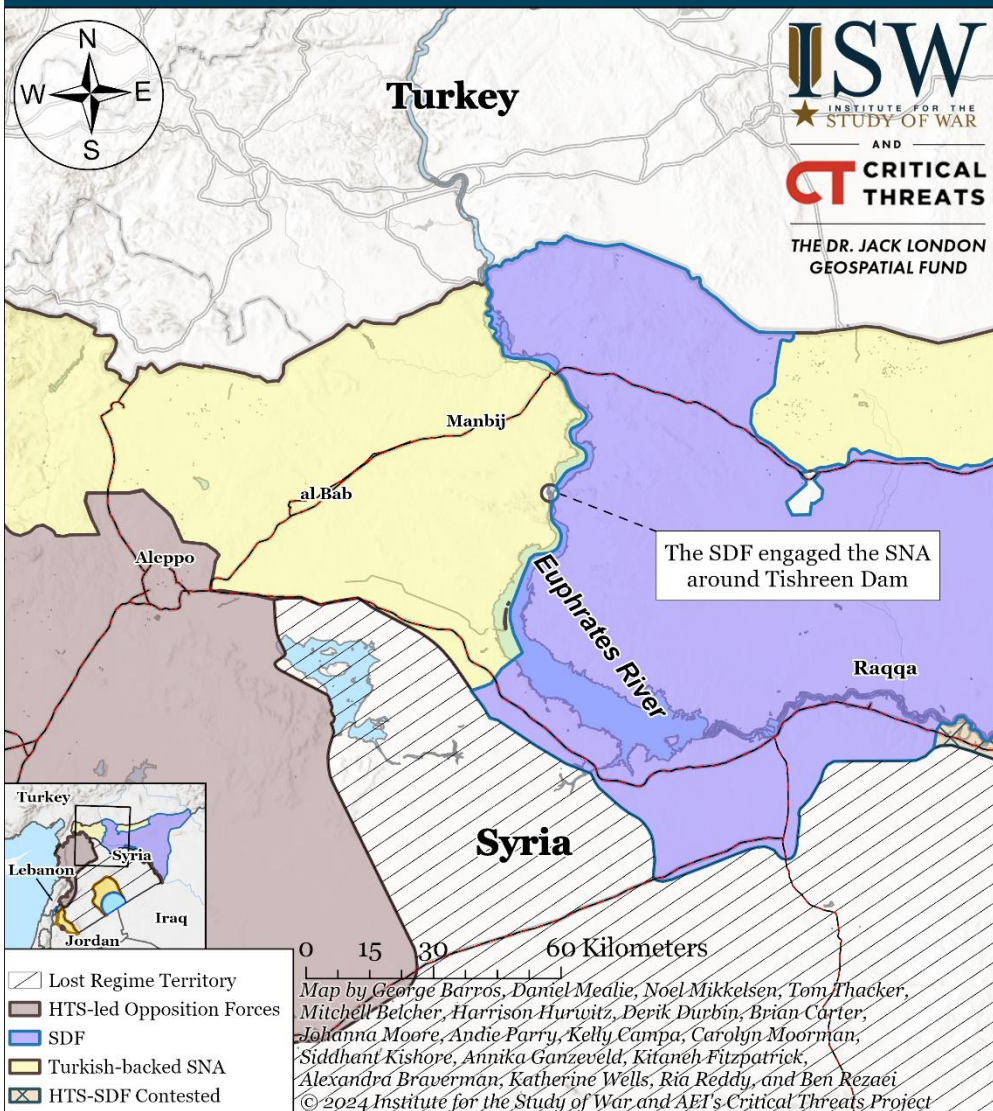
**The SDF and Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) continued to clash along the lines of control in Aleppo, Hasakah, and Raqqa provinces on December 21.** The Manbij Military Council — an element of the SDF—claimed to kill 52 SNA fighters in at least twelve hours of clashes near Tishreen Dam.[11] The SDF also claimed to destroy SNA armored vehicles and seize weapons.[12] The SDF claimed that Turkey provided air support to SNA ground forces near the dam.[13] Local sources reported that the SNA sent reinforcements to the Tishreen Dam near Manbij, east of Aleppo on December 20.[14] The dam has been the site of clashes since December 9 and was specifically named under a now-nullified ceasefire between the SDF and SNA.[15] SDF elements in Tal Othman fired artillery at SNA forces near Tishreen Dam.[16] A Turkish drone subsequently struck the SDF positions in Tal Othman.[17] The SDF engaged the SNA in several areas of Hasakah Province near the lines of control.[18] An SNA faction separately engaged the SDF south of Tal Abyad in Raqqa Province.[19]

Turkish aggression has renewed toward the SDF in recent days after the failure of a ceasefire in Manbij. Turkish officials have defined one of their objectives in Syria as “eliminat[ing]” the SDF.[20] Turkey and the SNA have built up their military presence immediately outside SDF-held territory and indicated that they may attack to seize territory.

**The HTS-led interim government appointed officials to key governing posts on December 21.** The interim government appointed Syrian Salvation Government official Asaad Hassan al Shaibani as foreign affairs minister.[21] Shaibani’s appointment is consistent with Shara’s pick for other key cabinet officials, such as Interim Prime Minister Mohammad al Bashir, who similarly had headed the Syrian Salvation Government since January 2024.[22] The interim government also appointed SNA-affiliated commander Azzam al Gharib Abu al Ezz Saraqib as governor of Aleppo Province.[23] Saraqib is the commander-in-chief of al Jabhat al Shamiya, or the Levant Front, which controls Azaz in Aleppo Province.[24] Azaz is part of the SNA-held territory, which expanded during the fall of the Bashar al Assad regime. The appointment of Saraqib as provincial governor of Aleppo reflects how HTS seeks to reconcile and distribute power across other armed factions, especially those close to HTS and the SNA.[25] The interim government appointed two Idlib Province-based leaders as provincial governors of Rif Dimashq and Latakia on December 17.[26]

# Control of Terrain in North Syria

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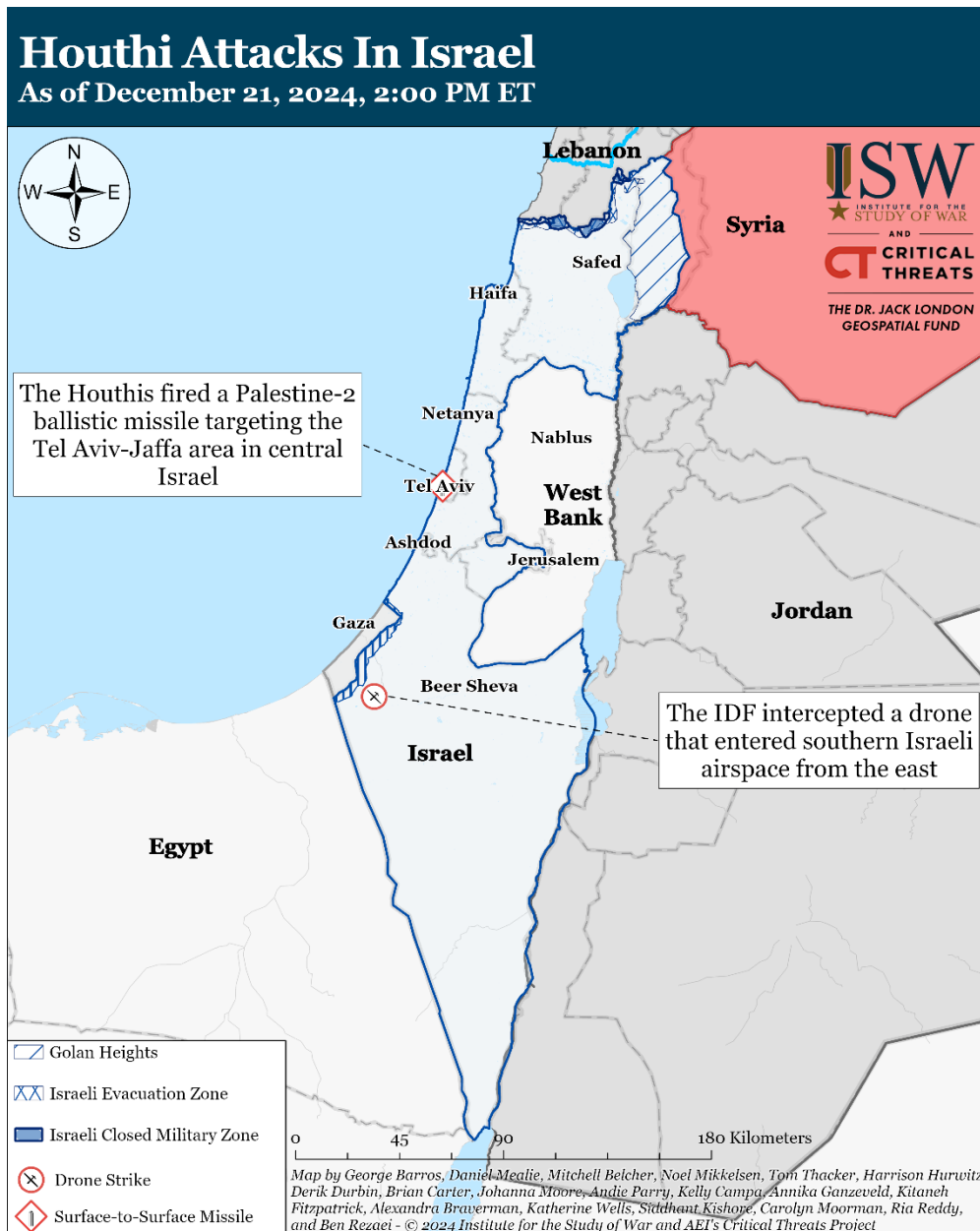


**HTS leader Ahmed al Shara is continuing to try to portray himself and HTS as pragmatic and inclusive by engaging minorities.** Shara reportedly met with Shia authorities who manage and oversee the services at the Sayyida Zeinab Shrine in Damascus on December 21.[27] Shara assured the authorities that the shrine would be protected and assigned a security unit to guard it, according to a United Kingdom-based, Egyptian-owned outlet.[28] Shara would then be assuming responsibility and accountability for the safety of the shrine. Iranian state media has previously published conflicting accounts of HTS activity at Shia sites, ranging from HTS elements "storming" the sites to agreements for their protection.[29]

**Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Esmaeil Baghaei announced the killing of an Iranian embassy staff member, Davoud Bitaraf, in Damascus.[30]** Unidentified individuals reportedly opened fire on Bitaraf's vehicle in Damascus on December 15. Baghaei urged the

interim government to find and prosecute the perpetrators.[31] Bitaraf reportedly served as a religious scholar at the Damascus seminary and Imam of the Sayyidah Ruqayya Shrine there for over two decades.[32]

**The Houthis fired a Palestine-2 ballistic missile targeting an IDF position in the Tel Aviv-Jaffa area, central Israel, injuring 16 Israelis on December 20.[33]** The IDF detected the missile but failed to intercept it.[34] A preliminary investigation revealed that the IDF air defense systems launched two interceptors that missed the missile.[35] The Houthis have used this missile variant to attack Israel several times in recent weeks, however, the IDF has successfully intercepted each of the previous attacks.[36] The IDF separately intercepted a drone that entered southern Israeli airspace from the east.[37] Israeli Army Radio stated that the drone was launched from Yemen.[38]



## **Key Takeaways:**

- **Syria:** US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf described HTS leader Ahmed al Shara as “pragmatic” but did not specify what concrete steps Shara or the HTS-led interim government will take to combat terrorism or ensure minority rights.
- **Syria:** HTS is trying to consolidate control over the Syrian coastal region amid reports of instability and violence there. HTS launched an effort purportedly to crack down on crime but appears also meant to counter politically motivated civil conflict.
- **Syria:** HTS leader Ahmed al Shara is continuing to try to portray himself as pragmatic and inclusive by engaging minorities. Shara met with religious authorities who are responsible for managing a holy Shia shrine in Damascus and committed to protect it.
- **Yemen:** The Houthis fired a Palestine-2 ballistic missile targeting the Tel Aviv-Jaffa area, injuring 16 Israelis. The IDF fired interceptors but missed the projectile. The IDF separately intercepted a likely Houthi drone that entered southern Israeli airspace.

## **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

**An Israeli Army Radio correspondent denied Hamas’ claim of conducting a suicide vest (SVEST) attack targeting Israeli soldiers in Jabalia refugee camp, northern Gaza Strip.[39]** A Hamas fighter tried approaching Israeli soldiers with grenades, however, the IDF struck and killed the fighter before he got close to Israeli soldiers. The IDF reported no casualties from this incident.[40] Hamas claimed on December 20 that one of its fighters detonated an SVEST targeting the IDF in Jabalia refugee camp.[41]

**Palestinian militias claimed three attacks targeting the IDF in Jabalia refugee camp on December 21.[42]** Hamas claimed that its fighters threw grenades at the IDF there.[43] Hamas also claimed a shooting and stabbing attack targeting Israeli soldiers. An Israeli Army Radio correspondent stated that Hamas’ claims were false and that Hamas inflicted no casualties on the IDF.[44] These false claims suggest that Hamas is conducting an information campaign to project a greater degree of combat effectiveness, particularly in the northern Gaza Strip than it actually has.

**Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) fired rockets targeting the IDF around the Netzarim Corridor on December 20.[45]**

# Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

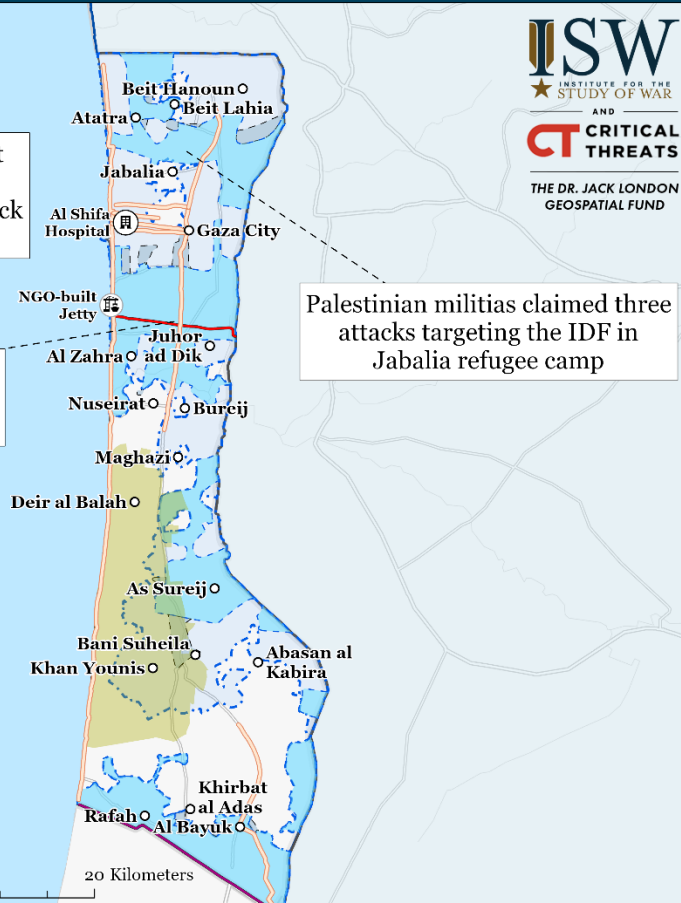
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An Israeli correspondent denied Hamas' claim of conducting an SVEST attack in Jabalia refugee camp

PIJ fired rockets targeting the IDF around the Netzarim Corridor

Palestinian militias claimed three attacks targeting the IDF in Jabalia refugee camp



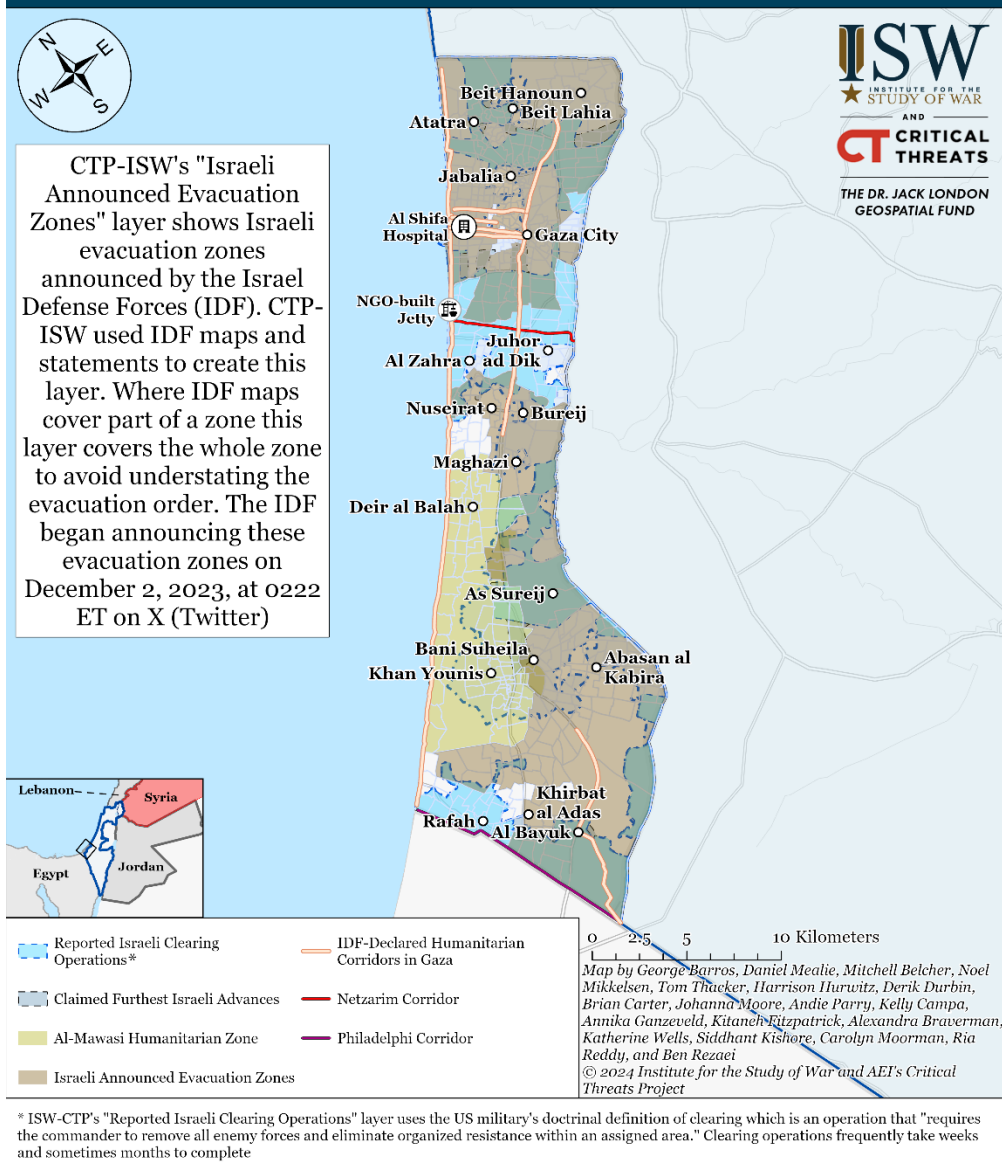
Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Tom Thacker, Harrison Hurwitz, Derik Durbin, Brian Carter, Johanna Moore, Andie Parry, Kelly Campa, Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Alexandra Braverman, Katherine Wells, Siddhant Kishore, Carolyn Moorman, Ria Reddy, and Ben 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 21, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



### West Bank

#### Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

**Palestinian militia fighters took control of a UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) health center in Jenin refugee camp during a raid by Palestinian Authority (PA) forces on the camp on December 21.[46]** UNRWA reported that it has lost access to its Jenin refugee camp health center due to the “forced entry and presence” of fighters likely from PIJ or some other militia that is fighting the PA. PA forces have killed two Palestinian fighters, injured 32, and detained



110 others in Jenin in the past week.[47] PA forces also disabled 100 improvised explosive devices and eight explosives attached to vehicles during this time. It is unclear whether these explosives attached to vehicles are car bombs or vehicle-borne IEDs. These activities are part of a PA counterterrorism operation designed to destroy Palestinian militia infrastructure in the northern West Bank and restore some PA control there.[48]

**The IDF thwarted an infiltration attempt by unspecified individuals who were trying to cross into Israel from the West Bank on December 21.[49]** Israeli Army Radio reported that 20 infiltrators tried to cross the Israel-West Bank border in Beit Shean valley, which is around three kilometers from the Israel-Jordan border. The IDF opened fire targeting the infiltrators and killed one, while the others fled back to the West Bank.

### **Northern Israel and Lebanon**

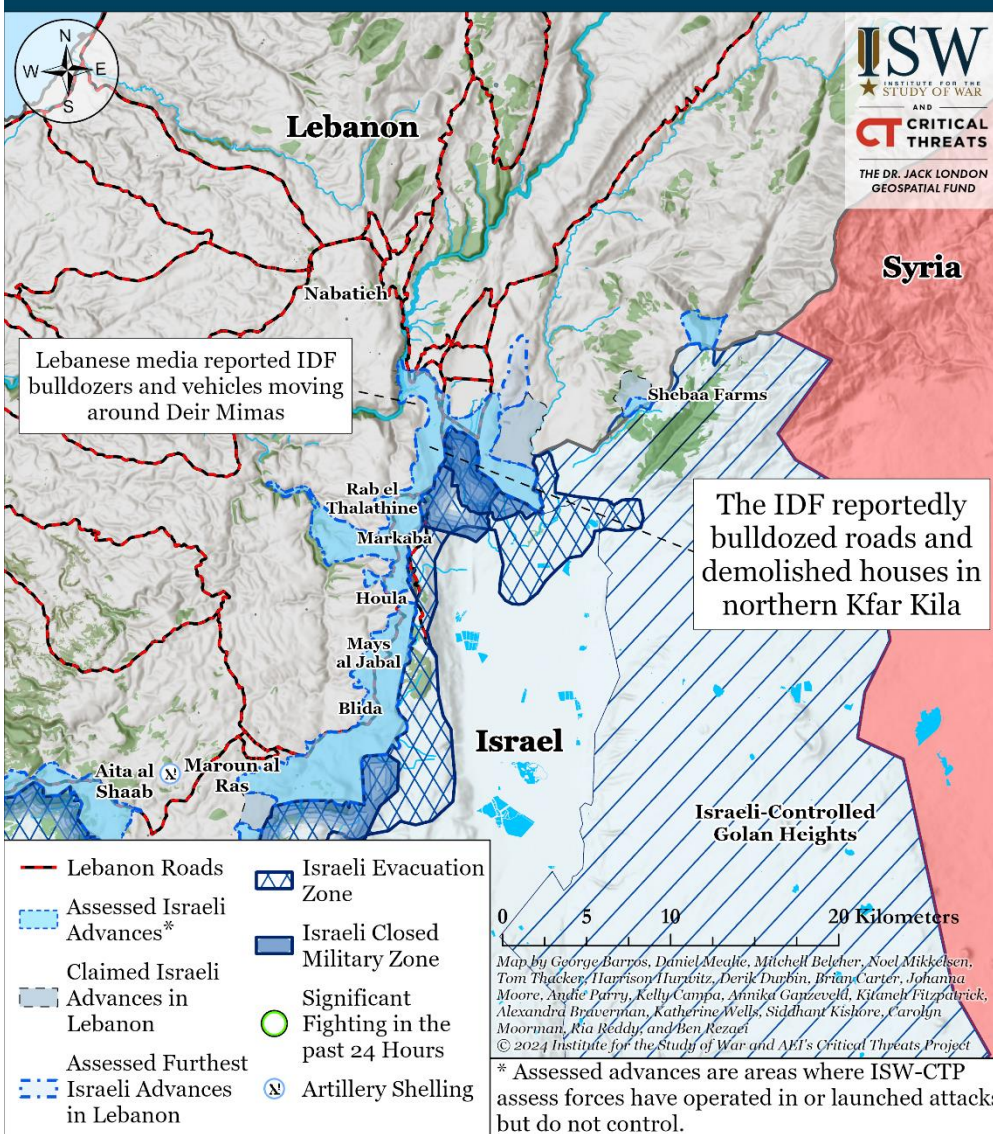
#### **Lebanese Hezbollah objectives:**

- 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, including Lebanese Hezbollah sources, reported IDF activity in Deir Mimas, southeastern Lebanon, on December 21.[50]** The IDF reportedly entered houses in Deir Mimas after IDF vehicles blocked the entrance to the town.[51] Lebanese media also reported that an IDF bulldozer damaged multiple cars in Deir Mimas.[52] IDF armor reportedly operated near Deir Mimas on November 30.[53]

**Hezbollah media reported that the IDF bulldozed roads and demolished houses in northern Kfar Kila, southeastern Lebanon, since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on December 20.[54]**

## Reported Israeli Operations in the Eastern Sector As of December 21, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET

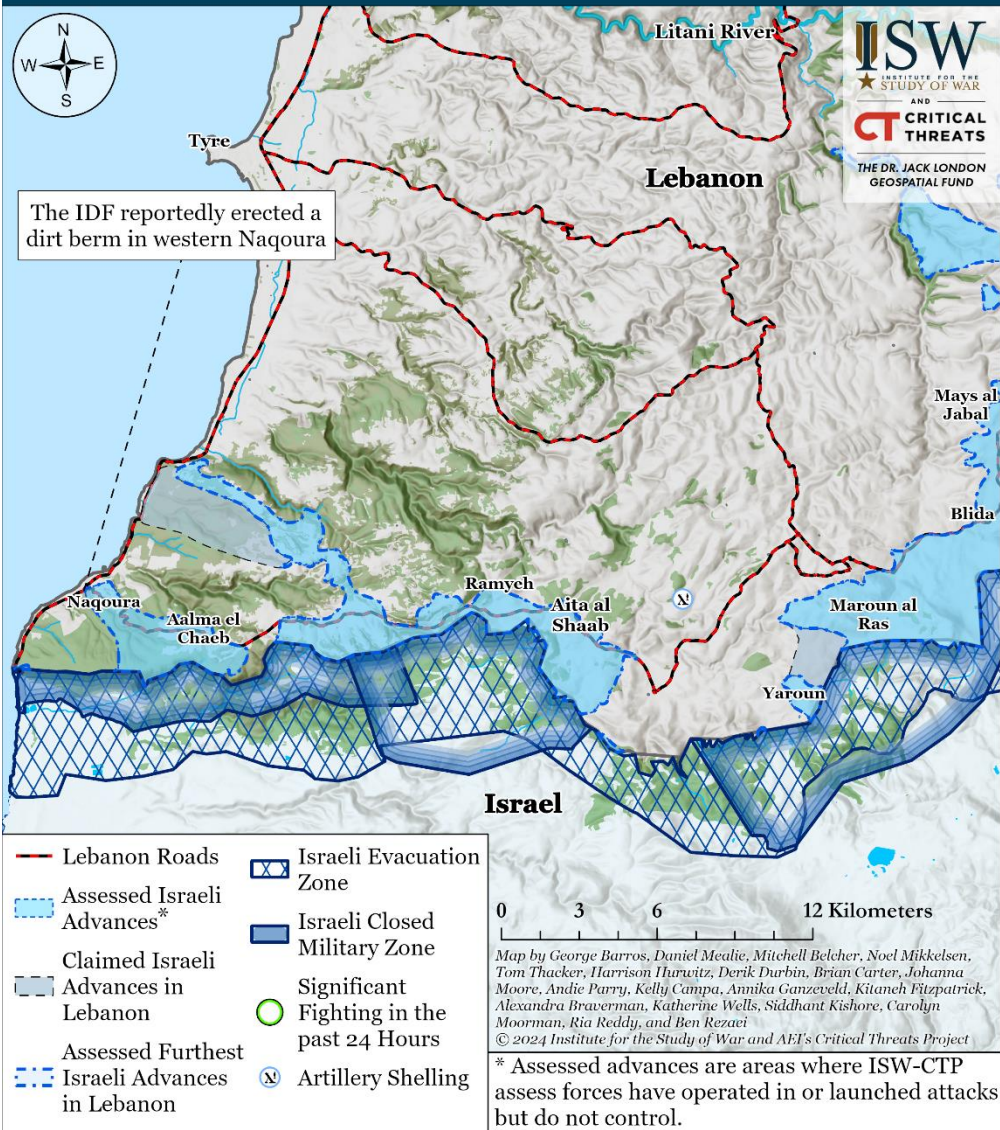


**Hezbollah media reported that the IDF shelled targets outside Hanine, southwestern Lebanon, on December 21.[55]** Lebanese media last reported IDF shelling around Hanine on November 26.[56]

**The IDF continued operations in Naqoura, southwestern Lebanon, on December 21.** Geolocated footage posted on December 20 shows an IDF bulldozer clearing orchards in northeastern Naqoura.[57] Hezbollah-affiliated media reported on December 21 that the IDF erected a dirt berm in western Naqoura and had “intensified” operations in the area.[58] Lebanese media also reported on December 21 that the IDF bulldozed a Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) checkpoint at the entrance to Naqoura and near UNIFIL headquarters in the area.[59]

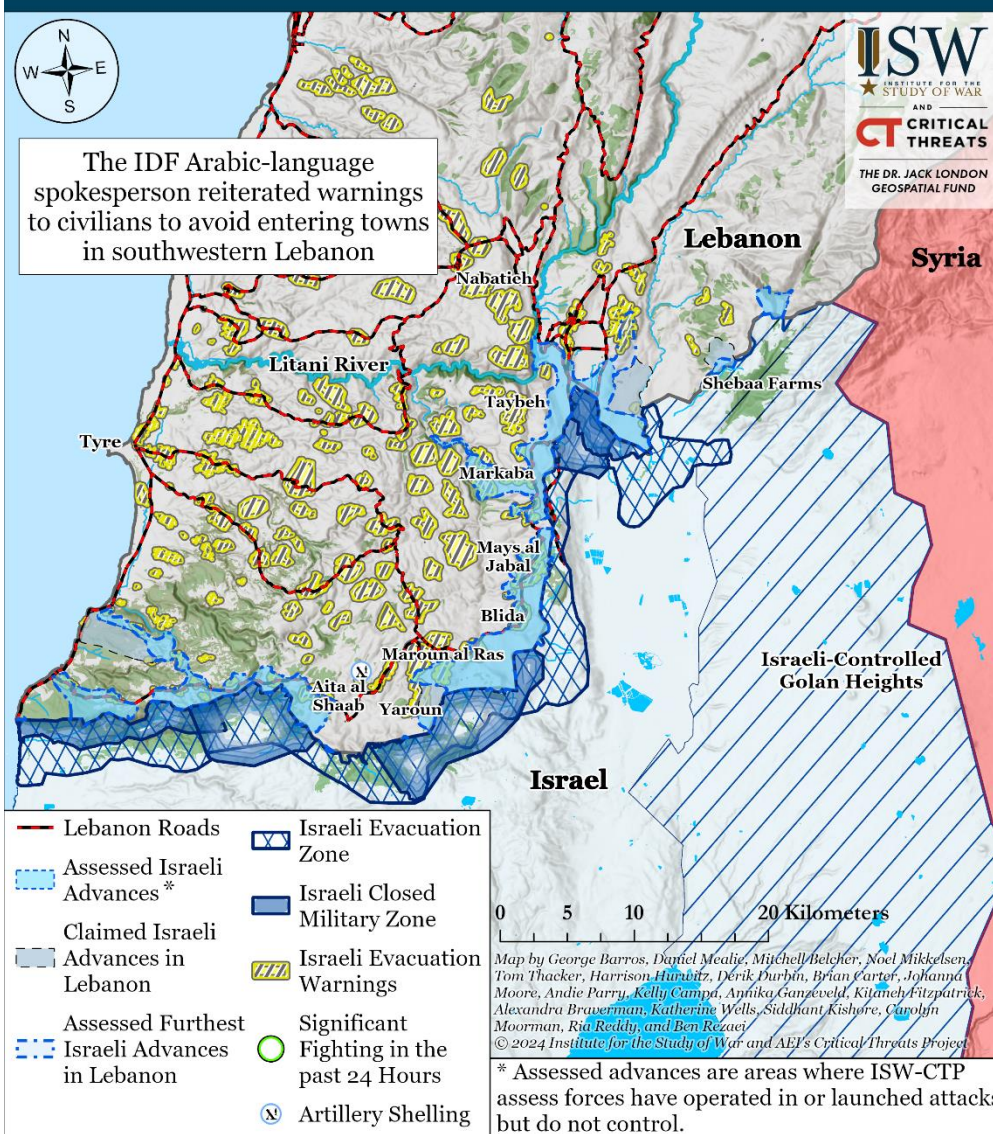
# Reported Israeli Operations in the Western Sector

## As of December 21, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



# Reported Israeli Operations in Lebanon

As of December 21, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



**The LAF announced on December 21 that it seized control of three sites in eastern Lebanon that were affiliated with Palestinian militias.[60]** The LAF took control of sites near Sultan Yaqoub and Qusaya, Bekaa Valley, from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC). PFLP-GC is primarily based in Syria.[61] Lebanese media reported that the LAF inspected the areas, including tunnels used by PFLP-GC, and deployed additional troops to the areas.[62] Lebanese media added that PFLP-GC fighters fled the Sultan Yaqoub site prior to the LAF's arrival.[63] Geolocated footage posted on December 21 shows the LAF raising the Lebanese flag over the former PFLP-GC center near Qusaya.[64] The LAF also seized control of a camp near Halwa that Fatah al Intifada had controlled.[65] The LAF confiscated weapons, ammunition, and military equipment at the site. Fatah al Intifada is a Syrian-based Palestinian militia that splintered from the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Fatah during the Lebanese civil war.[66]

**The UN Security Council unanimously approved a six-month extension of the mandate for the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) stationed in the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights.[67]**

### **Iran and the Axis of Resistance**

See topline section.

*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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