

# Iran Update



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**December 24, 2024, Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm ET**

CTP-ISW will not publish the Iran Update on December 25, 2025, in observance of Christmas. We will resume publication of the Iran Update on December 26, 2025, and cover all events between 2:00 pm ET on December 24 to 2:00 pm ET on December 26.

*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.*

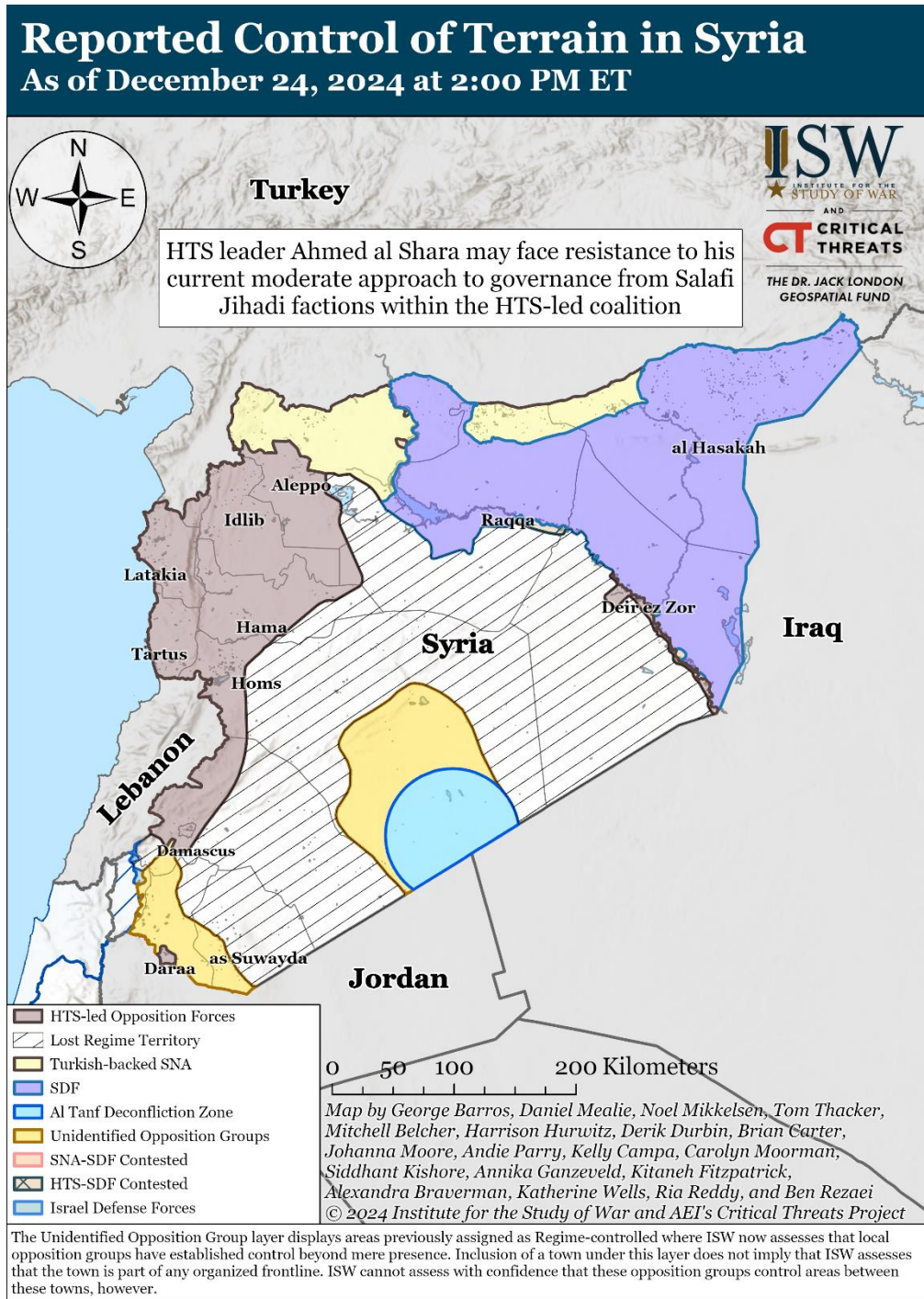
*We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We utterly condemn violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity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

**The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) defended against Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) attempts to recapture SDF-held ground on the west bank of the Euphrates River near the Tishreen Dam and Qere Qozak Bridge.** The SDF reported its forces defended against SNA assaults in Mahshiyet al Tawahin and Khirbet Tueni, approximately 5 kilometers west of the Tishreen Dam.[1] The SDF conducted three separate FPV drone strikes targeting SNA vehicles west of the Tishreen Dam.[2] The SDF reported that its fighters killed “dozens” of SNA fighters, seized two SNA tanks, and destroyed SNA equipment.[3] The Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) reported that the SNA killed 16 of its fighters during the fighting.[4]

SDF forces also defended against an SNA attack on Qabr Imo, approximately 4.3 kilometers west of the Qere Qozak Bridge.[5] SDF fighters conducted an FPV drone strike targeting an SNA military vehicle less than a kilometer away from the Qere Qozak Bridge.[6] The SDF reported that it also destroyed an SNA tank near the Qere Qozak Bridge.[7]

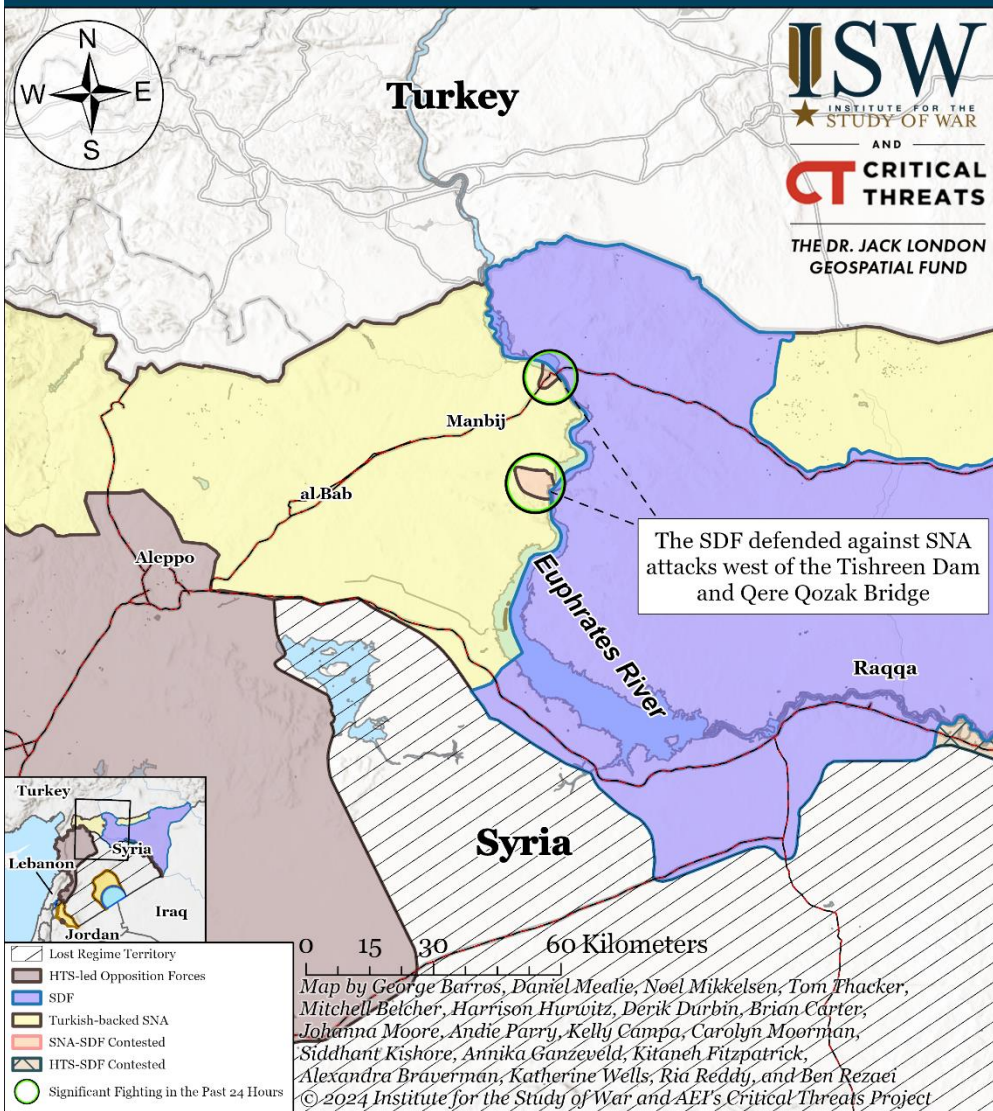
**Unspecified sources reportedly told Syria-based al Khabour News that the YPG threatened to cut off bread supplies to Hasakah if the people did not demonstrate in support of the group.[8]** CTP-ISW cannot independently verify this claim. Arab communities have defected from the SDF in recent weeks and called for an end to SDF rule in the Arab areas in

Hasakah.[9] Kurdish media outlets circulated imagery appearing to show Hasakah locals demonstrating in support of the SDF.[10]



# Control of Terrain in North Syria

As of December 24, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



**HTS leader Ahmed al Shara may face resistance to the current moderate approach to governance from Salafi-Jihadi factions within the HTS-led coalition.** Members of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in Syria, a member of the HTS-led military coalition with links to al Qaeda, set fire to a Christmas tree in Suqaylabiyah, Hama Governorate, on December 23.[11] TIP in Syria is the local affiliate of the main TIP branch in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Al Qaeda appointed the overall TIP leader, Abdul Haq al Turkistani, to its Shura Council in 2005.[12] Local footage posted after the incident showed a local HTS government official attempting to reassure locals that government security forces would pursue the perpetrators and that the government would repair the tree.[13] TIP's religiously motivated attack is an example of the inherent friction between the ideology and objectives of Salafi-Jihadi elements within the HTS-led coalition and HTS's stated approach to respect and preserve the rights of Syrian minorities. Six Al Qaeda-affiliated groups TIP, Harakat al Islam, Jaysh al Muharijeen wal Ansar, Katibat al Tawhis wal Jihad, Katibat al Alban, and Maldivian Mujahideen have



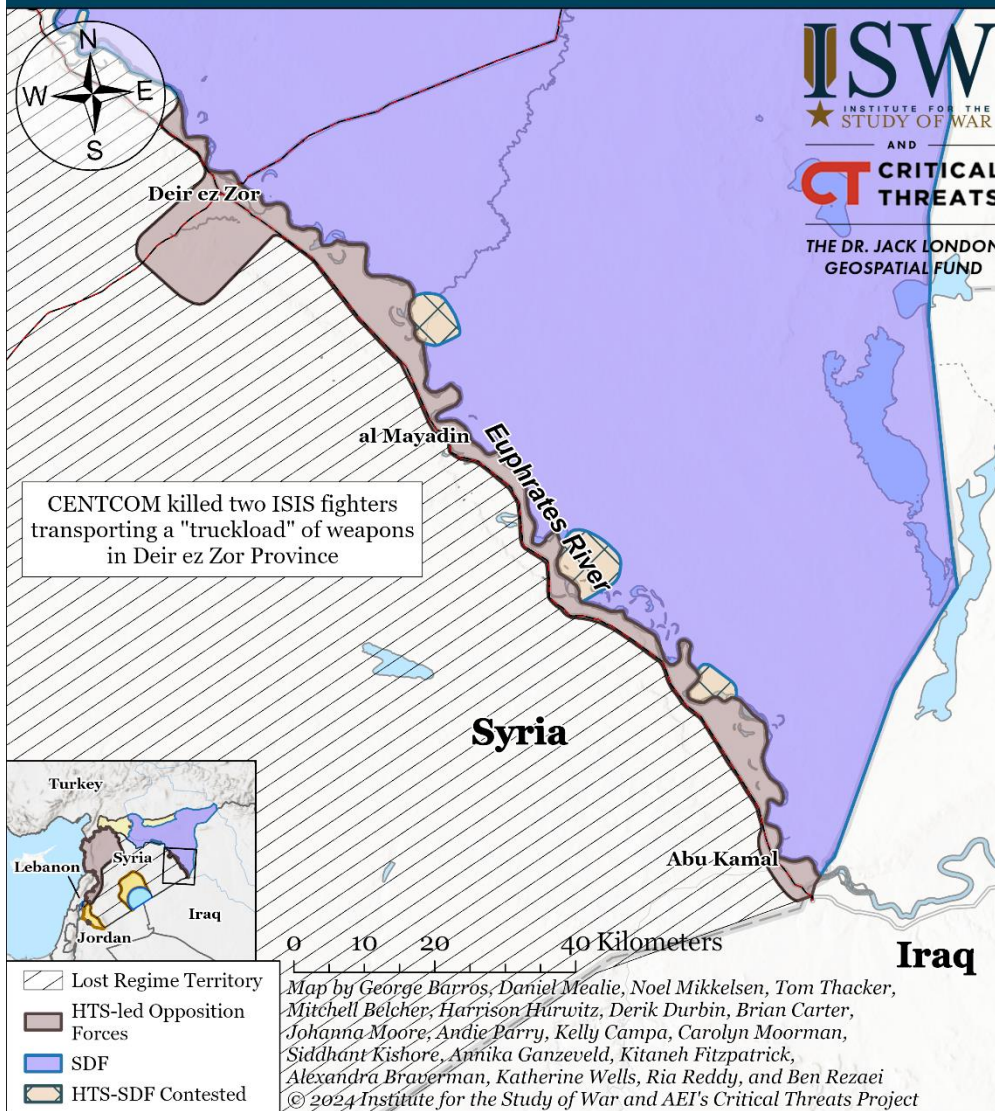
publicly supported HTS in the past.[14] TIP itself has fought alongside HTS and its predecessor organizations since the mid-2010s.

**The friction between the Salafi-jihadi ideologues and Shara’s relatively moderate governance could force Shara to compel Salafi-jihadists to adhere to his vision or take a more Salafi approach to preserve Shara’s coalition.** Both al Qaeda-linked ideologues and ISIS have denounced HTS’s protection of religious minorities and engagement with the West. A “prominent” al Qaeda supporter publicly “advised” HTS to avoid the mistakes of the Taliban by adhering to “Islamic principles” and avoid “pleasing the West.” He added that Shara must adhere to Islamic principles because the West and “Jews and Christians” would not be pleased with moderate measures until Shara converted to Judaism or Christianity.[15] ISIS similarly argued that HTS’s protection of religious minorities and engagement with “infidel” states is unacceptable. Other ISIS supporters are criticizing Shara’s Western dress — including suits and ties — and implying these make him unIslamic.[16] These arguments may attract some Salafi-jihadists who are resistant to Shara’s approach.[17] Shara has previously suppressed similar Salafi-jihadist opposition by force of arms.[18] He will likely attempt to do so again if he believes he has the bandwidth to do so.

**ISIS may be attempting to resupply its forces with weapons captured from regime, Russian, and Iranian stocks in the central Syrian desert.** US Central Command (CENTCOM) conducted an airstrike targeting ISIS operatives moving a “truckload of weapons” in Deir ez Zor Province, Syria, on December 23.[19] CENTCOM confirmed that it killed two ISIS fighters and wounded one fighter in an area of Deir Ez Zor formerly controlled by the Assad regime and Russia. ISIS fighters—who have long fought under threat of airstrikes — would presumably avoid transporting large amounts of weapons from existing ISIS stocks, given the risk that US airstrikes would destroy much-needed weapons stockpiles. The decision to transport these weapons in a “truckload” suggests that ISIS had captured a new stock of weapons and attempted to transport them to a safe location when CENTCOM struck the vehicle. There are many positions throughout the desert in Syria formerly occupied by Russian, Iranian, or Assad regime forces that are currently unoccupied and could contain weapons that ISIS needs to reconstitute itself. ISIS seeks to exploit the hasty withdrawal of Russian and Syrian regime forces by capturing these stocks.

# Control of Terrain in Deir ez Zor, Syria

As of December 24, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



**Syrian armed groups agreed to “dissolve” themselves and merge under the HTS-led Defense Ministry, but this does not mean that Syrian opposition forces will answer to the Defense Ministry in practice.** The leaders of Syrian armed groups allied with HTS agreed to “dissolve and merge” their armed groups under the HTS-led Ministry of Defense in a meeting with HTS leader Ahmed al Shara on December 24.[20] It is not immediately clear what groups outside of HTS-led and SNA-led structures participated in the meeting, nor is it clear what concrete steps the groups agreed to as part of dissolving themselves and merging under the HTS-led Defense Ministry. HTS will likely absorb the various armed groups and functionally reflag them as new Syrian army units as a way to ameliorate concerns about losing power among various leaders. Dissolving and integrating therefore does not necessarily mean that these armed groups will cease to exist entirely, but rather they could be absorbed into a new command and control structure in which the armed groups may retain their current leaders and fighters but nominally answer to a higher headquarters. This type of absorption

and reflagging often results in armed group leaders failing to observe the actual chain of command, however. The Iranian-backed Badr Corps reflagged some of its formations as part of the Iraqi Interior Ministry in 2005, for example, and these units did not answer to the Iraqi chain of command, but instead to the Badr Organization and Iran.[21]

Most of the militia groups at the meeting have also fought against or are fighting against the SDF, making it notable that the US-backed SDF led by Mazloum Abdi did not attend the meeting.[22] The HTS-led interim government has recently called for the SDF to disarm amid the threat of a Turkish-led assault to “eliminate” the SDF and ongoing fighting between the SDF and SNA.[23] Disarming the SDF would leave it vulnerable to Turkey and Turkish-backed forces which have previously committed atrocities against the Kurdish population and its fighters, as CTP-ISW has previously noted.[24] Leaders of militia groups that have previously fought against the SDF or are currently part of the SNA did attend the meeting.[25] Shara has met extensively in recent days with SNA elements to negotiate the absorption of these factions into the new Syrian armed forces.[26] Shara has also appointed several SNA commanders as governors in Syria since the fall of the Assad regime on December 8.

**Israeli forces launched an unusual "brigade-wide" counterterrorism operation in Tulkarm, in the northern West Bank, on December 23.[27]** Israeli forces killed one Palestinian fighter in close-quarters combat, confiscated weapons, and arrested two individuals in Tulkarm.[28] The IDF conducted a drone strike targeting armed Palestinian fighters in Nour Shams refugee camp, which is close to Tulkarm, as part of the operation.[29] The IDF clashed with Palestinian militias, including PIJ and the al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades, in at least four locations in Tulkarm Governorate on December 24.[30] Most of these engagements included Palestinian militias detonating IEDs targeting IDF forces.

The IDF simultaneously conducted an operation in Nablus, approximately 32 kilometers southeast of Tulkarm, overnight on December 23.[31] The IDF killed one fighter in Nablus.[32] The IDF arrested 18 wanted individuals in several areas across the West Bank between December 23 and December 24.[33]

**The IDF is executing its operation at the same time Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces are operating against Palestinian militias to regain security control of Jenin from the militias.** Israeli media reported that armed Palestinian fighters killed a second PA police officer in the Jenin refugee camp on December 23.[34] PA forces killed three fighters in recent days who were likely in the combined Hamas-PIJ “Jenin Battalion.”[35] Israeli media reported on December 24 that PA forces used rocket-propelled grenades against armed fighters in the camp for the first time. Israeli media, citing an unspecified Israeli security official, reported that the PA imposed a “closed” the Jenin refugee camp. It is unclear what “closing” the camp implies, though it could be a PA effort to isolate the camp before renewed operations there. Unverified videos circulated on social media showing four men wearing white robes threatening to conduct suicide bombings if the PA entered Jenin refugee camp, suggesting PA security forces are on the outside of the camp at this time.[36] The decision to don white robes for the video is probably meant to signal the participants’ willingness to become martyrs, given that the dead are often shrouded in white for burial in Islamic societies.[37] Armed fighters seized control of an UNRWA health center in Jenin refugee camp on December 17 and it is unclear at this time if the PA has regained control of this center.[38]

### **Key Takeaways:**

- **Syrian Democratic Forces:** The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) defended against Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) attempts to recapture SDF-held ground on the west bank of the Euphrates River near the Tishreen Dam and Qere Qozak Bridge.
- **HTS Governance:** HTS leader Ahmed al Shara may face resistance to the current moderate approach to governance from Salafi-Jihadi factions within the HTS-led coalition. Members of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in Syria, a member of the HTS-led military coalition with links to al Qaeda, set fire to a Christmas tree in Suqaylabiyah, Hama Governorate, on December 23. The friction between the Salafi-jihadi ideologues and Shara over his relatively moderate governance could force Shara to compel Salafi-jihadists to adhere to his vision or take a more Salafi approach to preserve Shara’s coalition.
- **ISIS Activity:** ISIS may be attempting to resupply its forces with weapons captured from regime, Russian, and Iranian stocks in the central Syrian desert. CENTCOM targeted a “truckload of ISIS weapons” in Deir ez Zor. ISIS fighters—who have long fought under threat of airstrikes—would presumably avoid transporting large amounts of weapons from existing ISIS stocks, given the risk that US airstrikes would destroy much-needed weapons stockpiles. The decision to transport these weapons in a “truckload“ suggests that ISIS had captured a new stock of weapons and attempted to transport them to a safe location when CENTCOM struck the vehicle.
- **Building Syria’s Army:** Syrian armed groups agreed to “dissolve” themselves and merge under the HTS-led Defense Ministry, but this does not mean that Syrian opposition forces will answer to the Defense Ministry in practice. HTS will likely absorb the various armed groups and functionally reflag them as new Syrian army units as a way to ameliorate concerns about losing power among various leaders. Dissolving and integrating therefore does not necessarily mean that these armed groups will cease to exist entirely. This type of absorption and reflagging often results in armed group leaders failing to observe the actual chain of command.
- **West Bank:** The IDF is executing its operation at the same time Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces are operating against Palestinian militias to regain security control of Jenin from the militias. Israeli forces launched an unusual "brigade-wide" counterterrorism operation in Tulkarm, in the northern West Bank, on December 23. It also conducted a separate operation in Nablus.

### **Gaza Strip:**

#### **Axis of Resistance objectives:**

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

**The IDF 84th Infantry Brigade (162nd Division) killed five Palestinian fighters during overnight raids in and near the Indonesian Hospital complex in the Jabalia refugee camp on December 23 and 24.**[39] One of the five fighters participated in the October 7 attacks, according to the IDF. The IDF stated that Palestinian fighters used the hospital complex to fire anti-tank

munitions targeting Israeli forces.[40] The IDF further stated that the militias planted improvised explosive devices (IED) around the hospital and rigged buildings close to the hospital with explosives.[41] The IDF facilitated the evacuation of hospital staff and patients via established routes before raiding the hospital complex.[42] The IDF warned the Hamas-run Gaza Health Ministry "numerous times" regarding militia activities in the hospital complex before conducting raids there.[43]

**The IDF Air Force struck a Hamas rocket launcher located near a UN building in al Shati refugee camp, northern Gaza Strip, on December 24.[44]** The IDF issued evacuation orders for the area before conducting the airstrike.

**Palestinian militias claimed three attacks targeting the IDF in the northern Gaza Strip since CTP-ISW's last data cut off on December 23.[45]**

**Palestinian Mujahideen Movement and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades fired rockets targeting Israeli forces along the Netzarim Corridor on December 24.[46]**

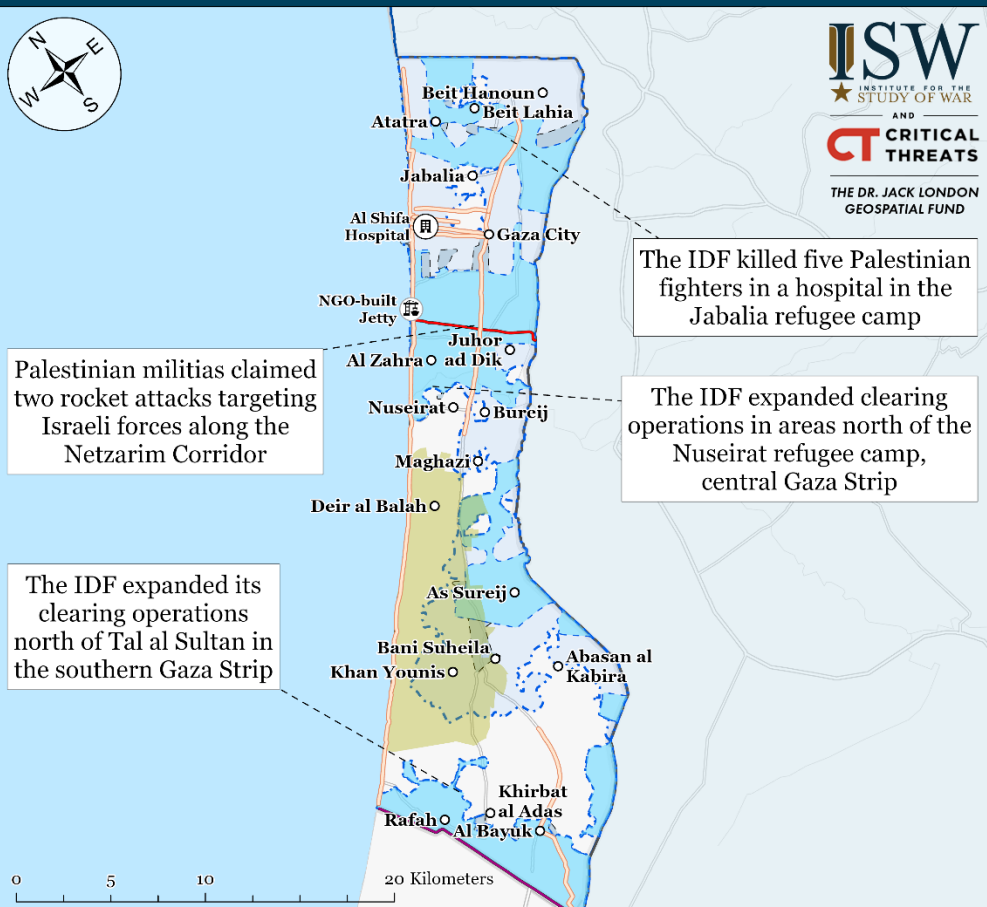
**The IDF conducted clearing operations in the Nuseirat refugee camp, central Gaza Strip, on December 24.** Commercially available satellite imagery obtained on December 24 showed that the IDF expanded clearing operations in areas north of the Nuseirat refugee camp. Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) detonated an IED targeting an Israeli vehicle in the northern part of the Nuseirat refugee camp.[47]

**Commercially available satellite imagery captured on December 24 showed that the IDF expanded its clearing operations in areas north of Tel al Sultan in the southern Gaza Strip.**



# Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

As of December 24, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



The IDF killed five Palestinian fighters in a hospital in the Jabalia refugee camp

The IDF expanded clearing operations in areas north of the Nuseirat refugee camp, central Gaza Strip

Palestinian militias claimed two rocket attacks targeting Israeli forces along the Netzarim Corridor

The IDF expanded its clearing operations north of Tal al Sultan in the southern Gaza Strip

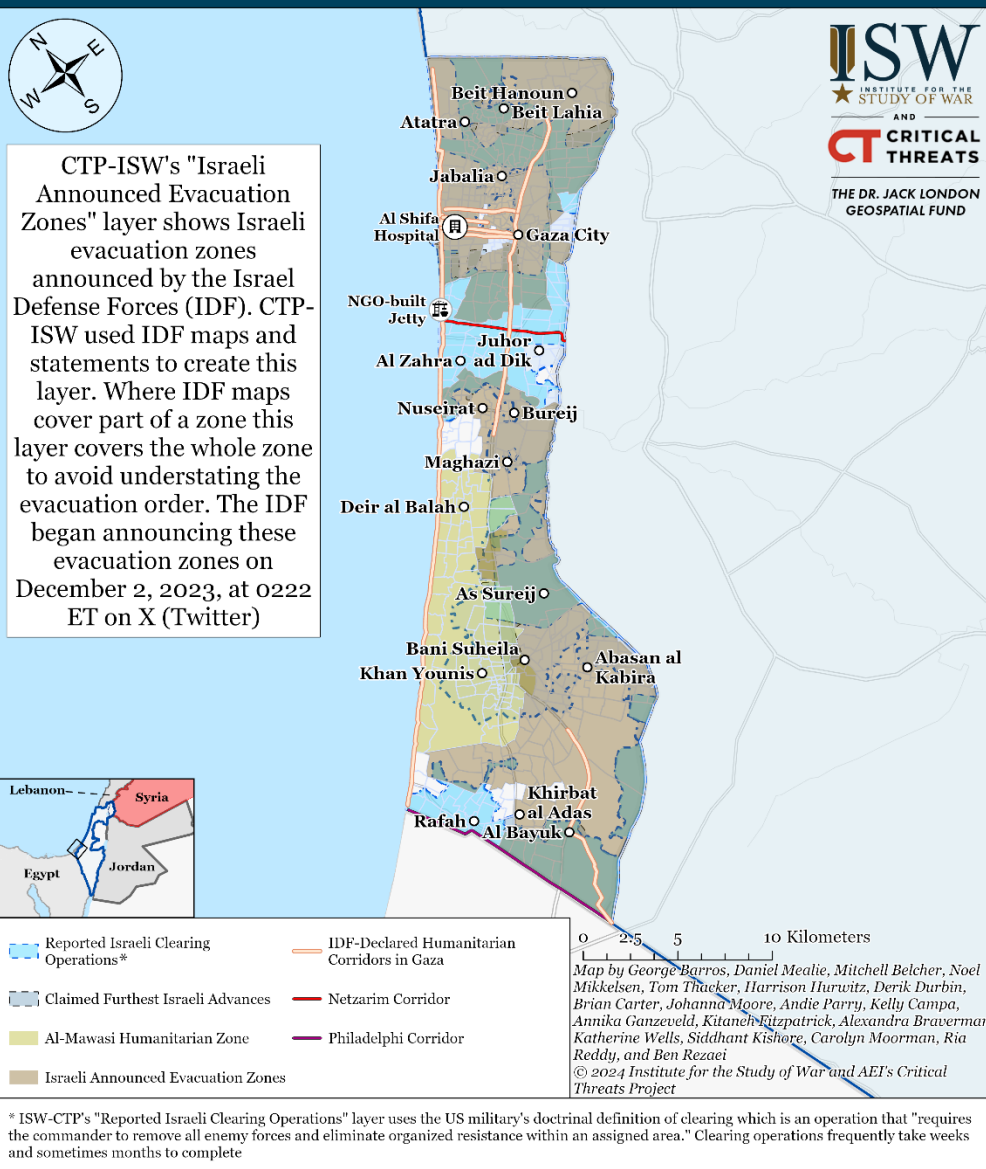
Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Tom Thacker, Harrison Hurwitz, Derik Durbin, Brian Carter, Johanna Moore, Andie Parry, Kelly Campa, Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Alexandra Braverman, Katherine Wells, Siddhant Kishore, Carolyn Moorman, Ria Reddy, and Ben 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 24, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



## West Bank

### **Axis of Resistance objectives:**

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

*See the topline section.*

## Northern Israel and Lebanon

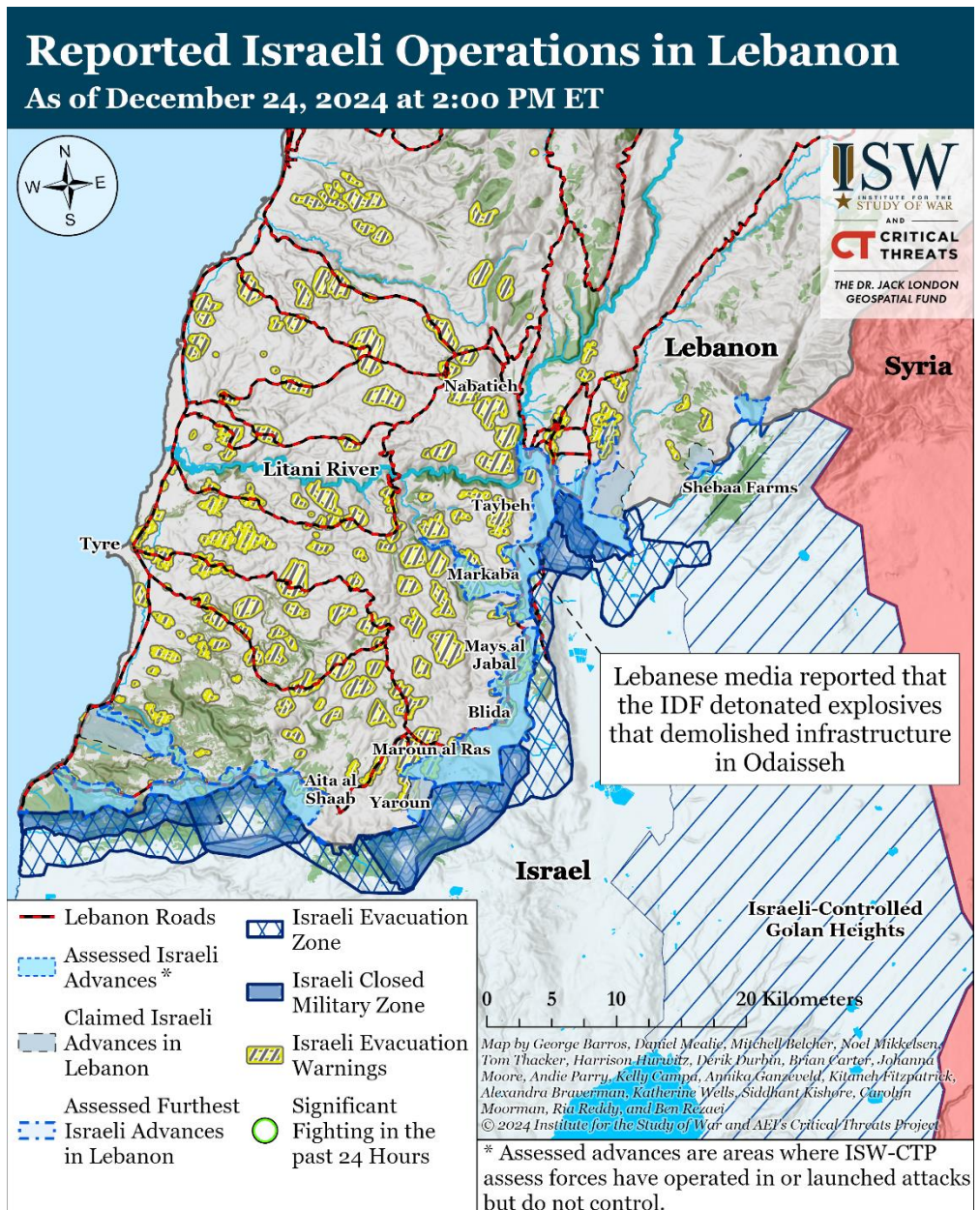
### **Lebanese Hezbollah objectives:**

- 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 the IDF detonated explosives that demolished buildings in Odaisseh, southeastern Lebanon, on December 24.[48] The IDF is permitted to operate in southern Lebanon until the end of January 2025 according to the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire.[49]

The IDF Arabic-language spokesperson reported on December 24 that the IDF has seized more than 84,000 Hezbollah weapons in southern Lebanon since it began ground operations there in early October 2024.[50] These weapons include rocket-propelled grenades (RPG), Burkan rockets, advanced anti-tank missiles, and other weapons. The IDF located most of these weapons in civilian areas.





## Iran and the Axis of Resistance

**Iranian government spokesperson Fatemeh Mohajerani announced on December 24 that Iran and Syria are prepared to reopen their embassies.**[51] Mohajerani emphasized ongoing diplomatic consultations between the two countries and the significance of stability and counterterrorism in the region.[52]

**The Iranian Supreme Council of Cyberspace lifted bans on WhatsApp and Google Play on December 24.**[53] Iranian Minister of Information and Communications Technology, Sattar Hashemi, emphasized that lifting the bans is the first step toward reducing internet restrictions.[54]

**Houthi Military spokesperson Brigadier General Yahya Sarea announced on December 24 that the Houthis launched a ballistic missile targeting an unspecified military base in the Tel Aviv-Jaffa area.**[55] This attack is the eighth Houthi attack this month, demonstrating that both Israeli and US airstrikes have so far failed to render the Houthis unwilling or unable to conduct attacks targeting Israel or international shipping.[56] Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz vowed to target Houthi leaders in Yemen after visiting an Arrow battery that intercepted a missile fired from Yemen on December 24.[57]

*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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[1] [https://x.com/farhad\\_shami/status/1871530227253314041](https://x.com/farhad_shami/status/1871530227253314041) ;  
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- [6] <https://x.com/ScharoMaroof/status/1871255859818611126> ;  
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- [7] [https://x.com/farhad\\_shami/status/1871530227253314041](https://x.com/farhad_shami/status/1871530227253314041)
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