

# Iran Update



**Iran Update, December 27, 2024**

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**Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm ET**

*The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) publish the Iran Update, which provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests.*

*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.*

**An explosion from a former SAA position in Homs City suggests that HTS does not yet have full control on the ground and that local groups and individuals can access and repurpose unexploded ordinance.** Syrian media reported a large explosion near a former SAA barracks in Homs City on December 27, injuring nine people.[1] The Homs Police Commander Colonel Alaa Omran told state media that former regime elements rigged and detonated ordinance in a missile warehouse in the city to target a passing civilian.[2] A Syrian source contradicted the police commander's statement, however, and claimed that the explosion was the result of Syrians attempting to remove parts from old air defense missiles to sell them.[3] Taking apart and repurposing explosives inside of munitions is one way military organizations can build rudimentary improvised explosive devices. The incident demonstrates that HTS does not control all former SAA weapons stockpiles and that locals can still access some of these stockpiles. This incident also suggests that the HTS-led security forces have not fully established total control over Homs City if these positions are easily accessible.

**The HTS-led interim government has thus far failed to prevent individual opposition fighters from targeting members of the Alawite community.** Unspecified opposition fighters have looted homes and stolen vehicles belonging to Alawites in Lattakia Province—a former regime stronghold—since the fall of the Assad regime.[4] An Alawite sheikh in Damascus told Reuters on December 26 that there have been multiple instances of “[Alawites] being beaten at a checkpoint.”[5] The HTS-led interim government has established several checkpoints across Syria since the fall of the Assad regime, but it is unclear who has attacked Alawite citizens at the checkpoint in Damascus.[6] An HTS fighter in Damascus separately told Reuters that unspecified individuals offloaded a bus and beat Alawite passengers on December 26.[7] These Alawite community members are framing these events as sectarian-motivated, underscoring the mistrust and fear that is permeating Alawite communities at this time. These instances of sectarian violence have caused some Alawites to refuse to hand in their weapons to the interim government, highlighting how the Alawite community currently distrusts the interim government to guarantee their security.[8]

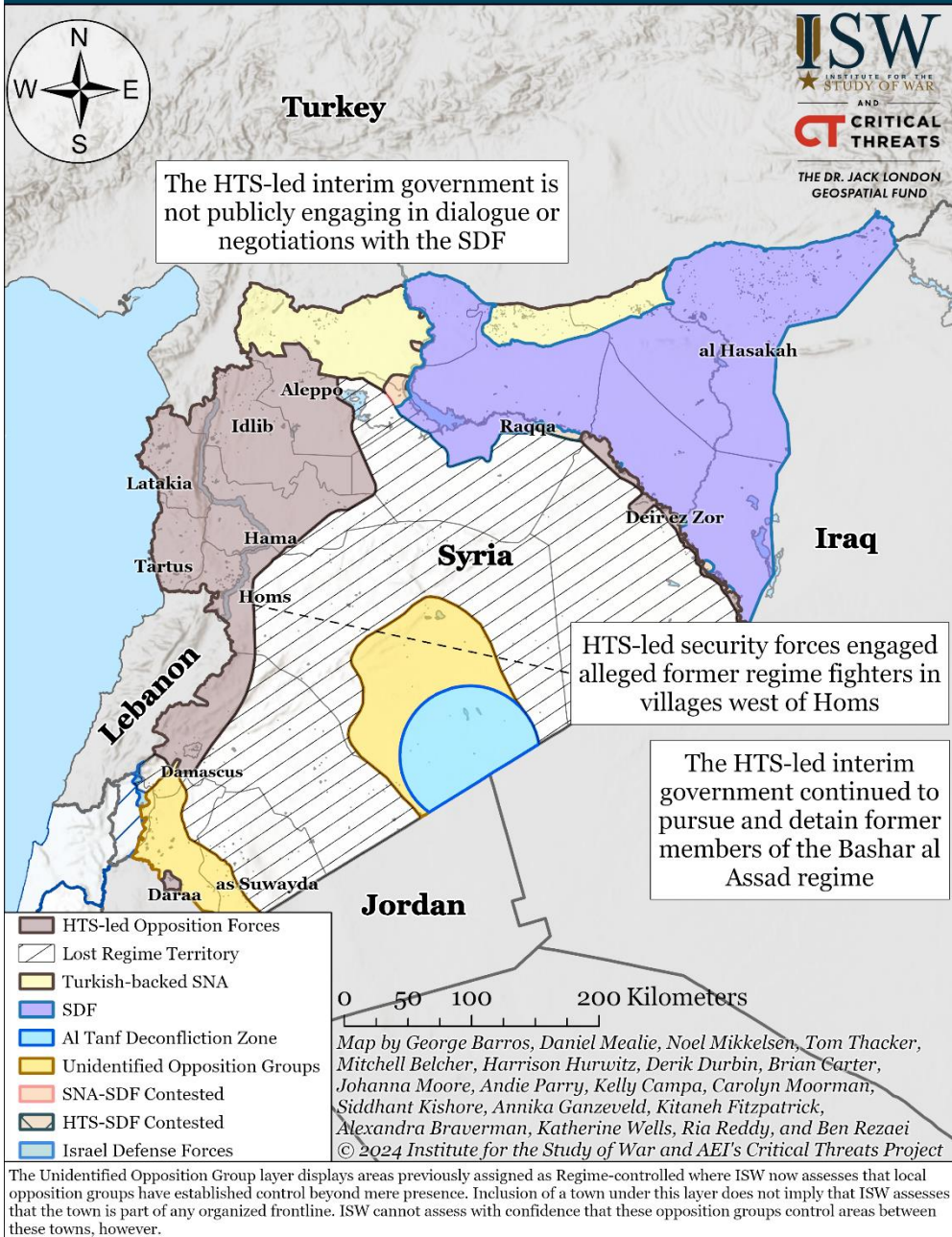
**The HTS-led interim government deployed forces to the Christian town of al Masmiyah in Daraa Province on December 27 to maintain security in the town during Christmas celebrations.**<sup>[9]</sup> The deployment of forces to al Masmiyah comes after members of the Turkistan Islamic Party in Syria, a 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.<sup>[10]</sup>

**The HTS-led interim government is continuing to pursue and detain former members of the Bashar al Assad regime.** HTS forces have pursued Assad regime remnants in areas of Hama, Homs, Lattakia Tartous, Deir ez Zor, and Damascus provinces since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on December 26.<sup>[11]</sup> HTS forces arrested a large number of former Assad regime members, including:

- **Khaled al Zubaidi.** Zubaidi is a Syrian businessman with ties to the Assad regime.<sup>[12]</sup> The United States sanctioned Zubaidi in June 2020 for supporting Assad's "corrupt reconstruction efforts."<sup>[13]</sup>
- **Fakhri Darwish:** Darwish headed the office of the pro-Assad regime Palestinian militia Liwa al Quds in Aleppo.<sup>[14]</sup>
- **Riyad Hassan.** Hassan previously served as the head of political security in Damascus under Assad.<sup>[15]</sup>

# Reported Control of Terrain in Syria

As of December 27, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



**HTS-led security forces engaged alleged former regime fighters in several villages west of Homs on December 26.** HTS-led security forces entered Balqassa village, west of Homs City, on December 26, reportedly to pursue regime-affiliated official Shuja al Ali.[16] Ali was the leader of a regime-supported armed group that operated near the Lebanese border and was accused of kidnapping and torture. [17]Syrian media reported that HTS-led security forces clashed with alleged former regime-affiliated fighters in Balqassa.[18] HTS killed Ali and former regime elements killed two HTS-led security force members in the fighting.[19] A Deir ez Zor-focused social media user stated that the HTS-led security forces used long-range rockets and drones to target former regime remnants in Balqassa

and nearby town Khirbet al Hamam.[20] CTP-ISW cannot confirm HTS-affiliated forces' use of these weapons. This would be the first reported use of indirect and deep strike fires by HTS-affiliated forces since HTS assumed control of Damascus.[21]

**The HTS-led interim government is not publicly responding to SDF overtures to negotiate the SDF's incorporation into the new Syrian army and incorporation into a Syrian state.** SDF commander Mazloun Abdi reiterated his desire for the incorporation of the SDF into a future Syria to Asharq al Awsat on December 27.[22] Abdi said that the SDF has not yet engaged in direct negotiations with HTS despite Abdi's repeated expressed interest in negotiations since the fall of the Assad regime.[23] Abdi outlined his priorities for negotiations with HTS—should such negotiations occur—and noted that the SDF would require an end to Turkish and Turkish-backed attacks on the SDF so that Syrians may discuss the future without “external interference.”[24]

It appears increasingly unlikely, however, that the HTS-led government's leadership views negotiating with the SDF as a priority as it formalizes relations with Turkey. HTS, while not a Turkish proxy or beholden to Turkey, has been quick to deepen its cooperation with Turkey since the fall of the Assad regime. HTS's intensifying alignment with Turkish interests continues to pose an existential threat to the SDF as Turkey continues to signal a possible Turkish incursion into Syria or a Turkish-backed operation in northern Syria to “eliminate” the SDF. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced on December 27 that Turkey shall ensure security “beyond its southern borders” and “eliminate terrorist threats” starting in 2025.[25] Abdi warned of a potential “catastrophe” facing Kobani from the Turkish military buildup on the border.[26] Syrian media reported on December 27 that Turkish military reinforcements arrived in the town of Suluk, which is located north of Raqqa in SNA-controlled territory.[27]

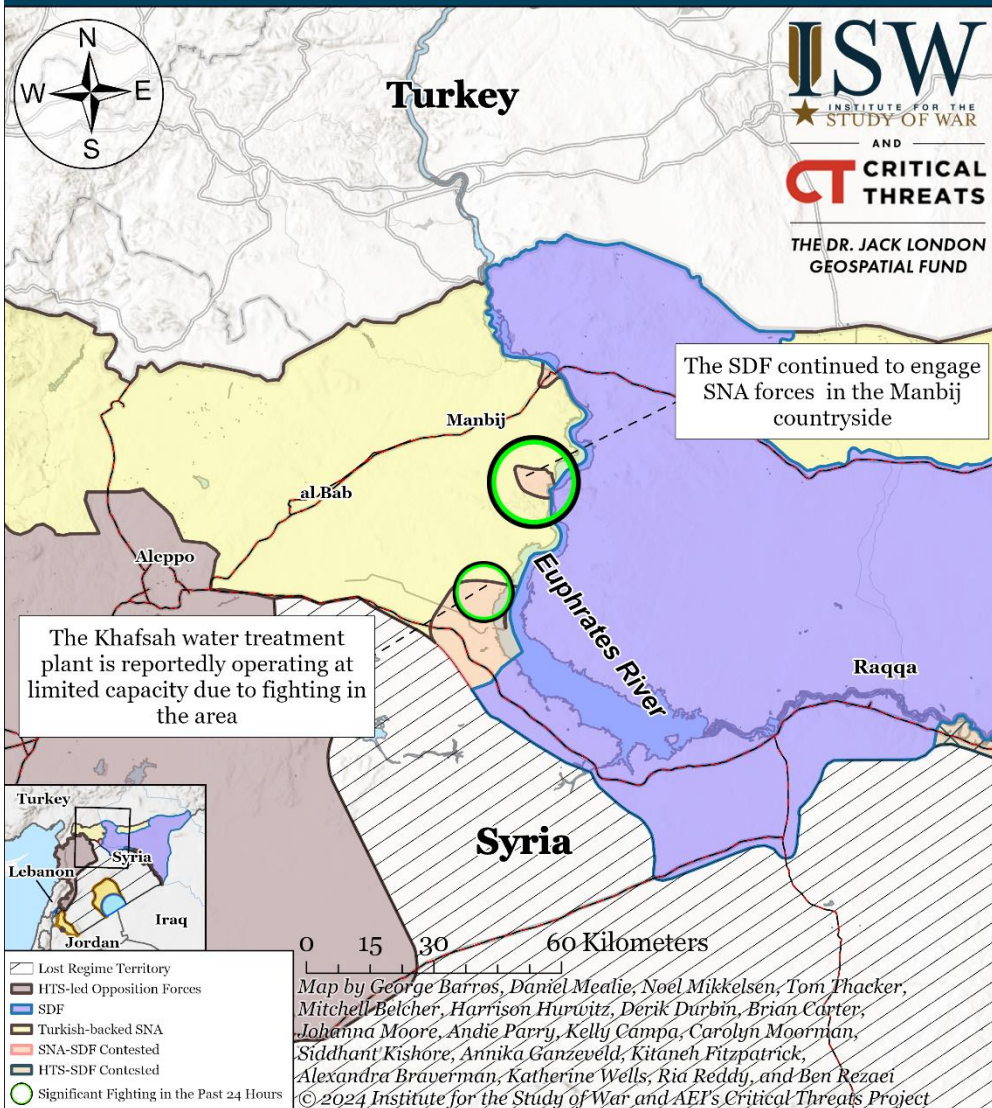
**The SNA continued to engage the SDF west of Tishreen Dam in the Manbij countryside.**[28] Local sources reported that the SNA sent reinforcements to the frontlines near the Tishreen Dam.[29] The SDF claimed on December 27 that it engaged SNA forces near Abu Qalqal in the Manbij countryside.[30]

**Local sources reported that the SDF continued to advance southwest of Lake Assad into SNA-controlled territory south of Tishreen Dam on December 27.**[31] A pro-SDF social media user posted a photo of SDF members on the “Deir Hafer and Khafsah front” and said that SDF forces are operating in the area.[32] An Aleppo-based outlet reported on December 27 that the Khafsah water treatment plant, which the SDF had reportedly taken control of on December 23, is not operating at “maximum capacity” due to nearby fighting.[33] The Khafsah water treatment plant is a critical plant services in Aleppo City. The Aleppo Water Establishment asked Aleppo citizens to ration water consumption.[34] The SDF advance in the south may intend to relieve pressure on the Tishreen Dam area by forcing the SNA to redeploy its forces to respond to a new threat.



# Control of Terrain in North Syria

As of December 27, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



**Iranian-backed Badr Organization Secretary General Hadi al Ameri inspected combat units along the Iraq-Syria border on December 26 and 27.** Ameri met with combat units at the Rabia border crossing in northern Ninewa Province on December 26.[35] Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Ninewa Operations Commander Khadir al Matrohi, who is affiliated with the Badr Organization, accompanied Ameri.[36] Ameri met with a military official named Majid Saleh Jassem, although it is unclear whether this official serves in the Iraqi Army, PMF, or Iraqi Border Guard.[37] The 15th and 20th Infantry divisions redeployed to areas between Rabia and Sinjar on December 7.[38]

Ameri separately reviewed security and intelligence plans and emphasized the need to conduct unspecified “preemptive operations” during a visit to the Iraqi Army 7th Infantry Division in al Qaim, western Anbar Province, on December 27.[39] 7th Infantry Division Commander Major General

Hassan al Silawi and unspecified PMF commanders attended the meeting. Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah controls several PMF brigades that control the al Qaim border crossing.[40] The Iraqi Army 27th Infantry Brigade, which operates under the 7th Infantry Division, oversees border security north of al Qaim across from the Syrian town of Baghouz.[41]

**Ameri’s inspections come as Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani implicitly threatened on December 27 to militarily intervene in Syria if the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) resurges and threatens Iraq.** Sudani stated that “any dysfunction” in Syrian prisons would “push [Iraq] to counter terrorism.”[42] Sudani was likely referring to the SDF-controlled al Hol camp and network of Syrian prisons that contain thousands of ISIS supporters and fighters.[43] Iraqi National Intelligence Service Director Hamid al Shatri similarly suggested on December 26 that Iraq would consider intervening or allowing Iraqi militias to intervene in Syria if unspecified Syrian armed groups threatened Iraq.[44] CTP-ISW previously assessed that the SDF cannot conduct offensive operations against ISIS while contending with threats from Turkey and its allies in Syria, namely the SNA.[45] Ongoing Turkish-backed operations against the SDF have forced the SDF to prioritize the existential threat posed by Turkey over the counter-ISIS mission.

**An Iraqi Shia Coordination Framework member said on December 26 that Iranian-backed Iraqi militias will resume attacking US forces in Iraq and Syria if US forces extend their presence in Iraq beyond the agreed–upon withdrawal date of December 2026.**[46] The United States and Iraq agreed in September 2024 that hundreds of US-led international coalition forces would withdraw from Iraq by September 2025 and that the remaining troops will withdraw by the end of 2026.[47] Mukhtar al Musawi, a Shia Coordination Framework member of parliament, denied reports that the Iraqi government is considering its request for US forces to withdraw from Iraq by the end of 2026 due to concerns that the fall of Bashar al Assad in Syria threatens Iraqi security.[48] Musawi also told Iraqi media that the Iraqi militias had stopped targeting US forces due to the withdrawal timeline but added that operations could resume if the United States extends its presence in Iraq. Iranian-backed Iraqi militias last claimed an attack targeting US forces in Iraq on August 5, 2024.[49] Likely Iranian militias also launched three rockets at Baghdad International Airport on October 1, but no militia claimed this attack.[50]

**Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)’s Jenin Battalion said that it engaged with “occupation forces” in multiple areas of Jenin on December 26.**[51] Palestinian militias, including PIJ, historically used the term “occupation forces” to refer to Israeli forces.[52] CTP-ISW has not observed any reports or indications of Israeli forces operating in Jenin at the time of this writing. The Palestinian Authority (PA), however, continued to operate against Palestinian militias in Jenin on December 26.[53] Palestinian militia fighters killed a PA security forces officer in Jenin on December 26, marking the third PA officer killed in Jenin since the operation began on December 5.[54] It would be a notable inflection if PIJ began referring to the PA as “occupation forces.” It would, conversely, also be notable if the IDF began operating in Jenin at the same time as the PA operation against Palestinian militias.

### **Key Takeaways:**

- **Explosion in Homs:** An explosion in Homs suggests that HTS does not yet have full control on the ground and that local groups and individuals can access and repurpose unexploded ordinance.
- **Sectarian Tension in Syria:** The HTS-led interim government has thus far failed to prevent individual opposition fighters from targeting members of the Alawite community.
- **HTS and Christian Communities:** The HTS-led interim government deployed forces to the Christian town of al Masmiyah in Daraa Province on December 27 to maintain security in the town during Christmas celebrations.
- **HTS Operations Against Former Regime Elements:** HTS-led security forces engaged alleged former regime fighters in several villages west of Homs on December 26. HTS-led security forces entered Balqassa village, west of Homs City, on December 26, reportedly to pursue regime-affiliated official Shuja al Ali.
- **HTS-Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Negotiations:** The HTS-led interim government is not publicly responding to SDF overtures to negotiate the SDF's incorporation into the new Syrian army and incorporation into a Syrian state. It appears increasingly unlikely that the HTS-led government's leadership views negotiating with the SDF as a priority as it formalizes relations with Turkey.
- **SDF-Syrian National Army (SNA) Fighting:** Local sources reported that the SDF continued to advance southwest of Lake Assad into SNA-controlled territory south of Tishreen Dam on December 27. The SNA also continued to engage the SDF west of Tishreen Dam in the Manbij countryside.
- **Iraq:** Iranian-backed Badr Organization Secretary General Hadi al Ameri inspected combat units along the Iraq-Syria border on December 26 and 27. Ameri also reviewed security and intelligence plans and emphasized the need to conduct unspecified "preemptive operations." Ameri's inspections come as Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani implicitly threatened on December 27 to militarily intervene in Syria if the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) resurges and threatens Iraq.
- **West Bank:** Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)'s Jenin Battalion said that it engaged with "occupation forces" in multiple areas of Jenin on December 26. Palestinian militias, including PIJ, historically used the term "occupation forces" to refer to Israeli forces, but CTP-ISW has not observed IDF operations in Jenin in recent days. It would be a notable inflection if PIJ began referring to the PA as "occupation forces."

### **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 401st Armored Brigade (162nd Division) began operations targeting a Hamas command-and-control site inside Kamal Adwan Hospital in Jabalia, northern Gaza**

**Strip, on December 27.**<sup>[55]</sup> The IDF evacuated hospital patients and staff to other hospitals in coordination with international organizations and local health officials. An Israeli media correspondent reported that the IDF last operated at the hospital in October 2024.<sup>[56]</sup> <sup>[57]</sup>

**Palestinian militias conducted four attacks in the northern Gaza Strip since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on December 26.**<sup>[58]</sup> Hamas conducted two attacks in and around Jabalia on December 26 and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) conducted one attack west of Beit Hanoun on December 27.<sup>[59]</sup>

**Hamas also claimed that a Hamas fighter detonated a suicide vest (SVEST) targeting Israeli forces while firing a gun and throwing grenades east of Jabalia camp on December 26.**<sup>[60]</sup> Hamas last claimed that it conducted an SVEST attack on December 20.<sup>[61]</sup> An Israeli Army Radio correspondent reported after the December 20 attack that the IDF struck and killed the Hamas fighter before he approached Israeli forces, however.<sup>[62]</sup> The IDF has not corroborated this SVEST attack and given Hamas' recent willingness to lie about its use of SVESTs, Hamas may not have conducted an SVEST attack on December 26.

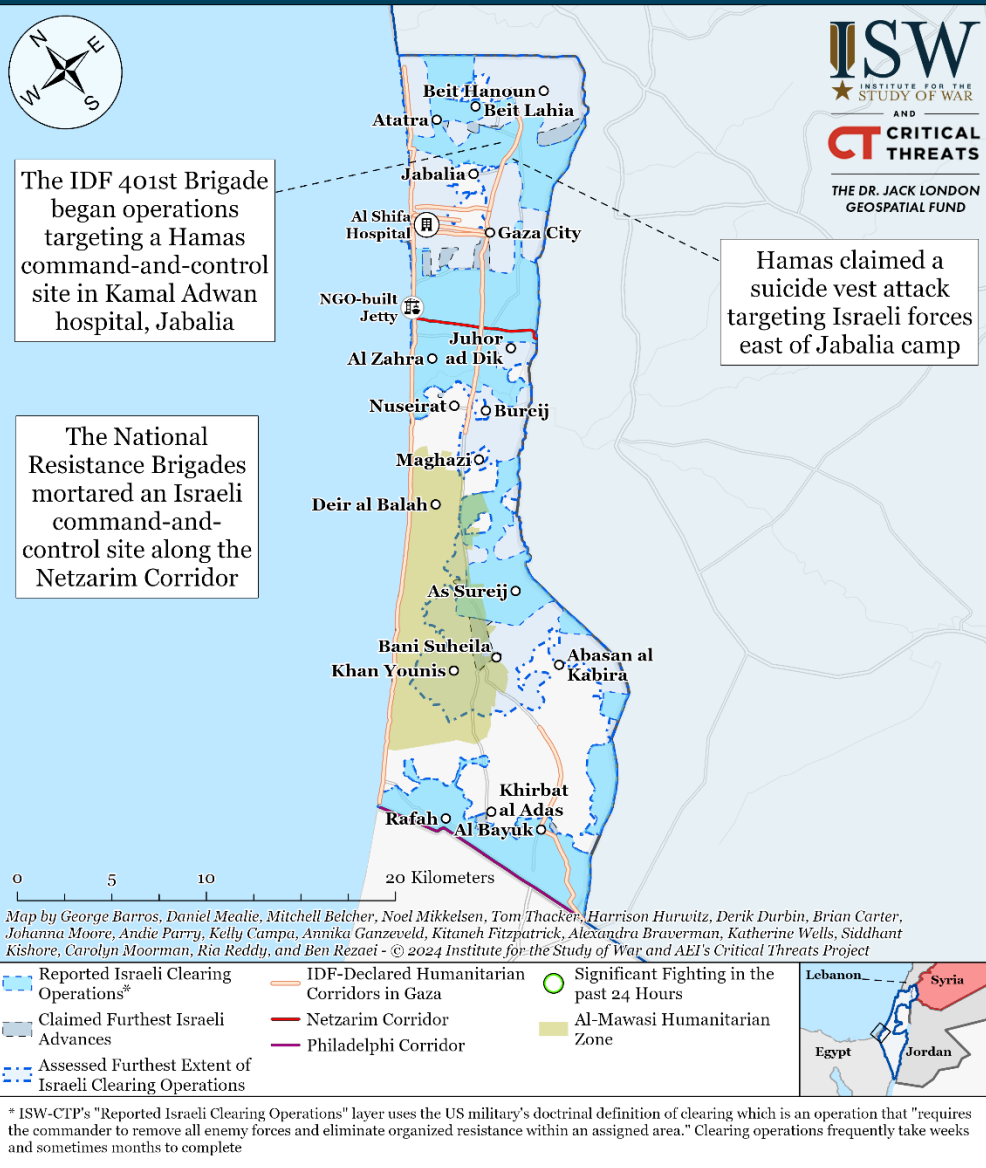
**Hamas detonated an EFP targeting Israeli armor south of the Zaytoun neighborhood, Gaza City, on December 26.**<sup>[63]</sup>

**The National Resistance Brigades mortared an Israeli command-and-control site along the Netzarim Corridor on December 27.**<sup>[64]</sup>



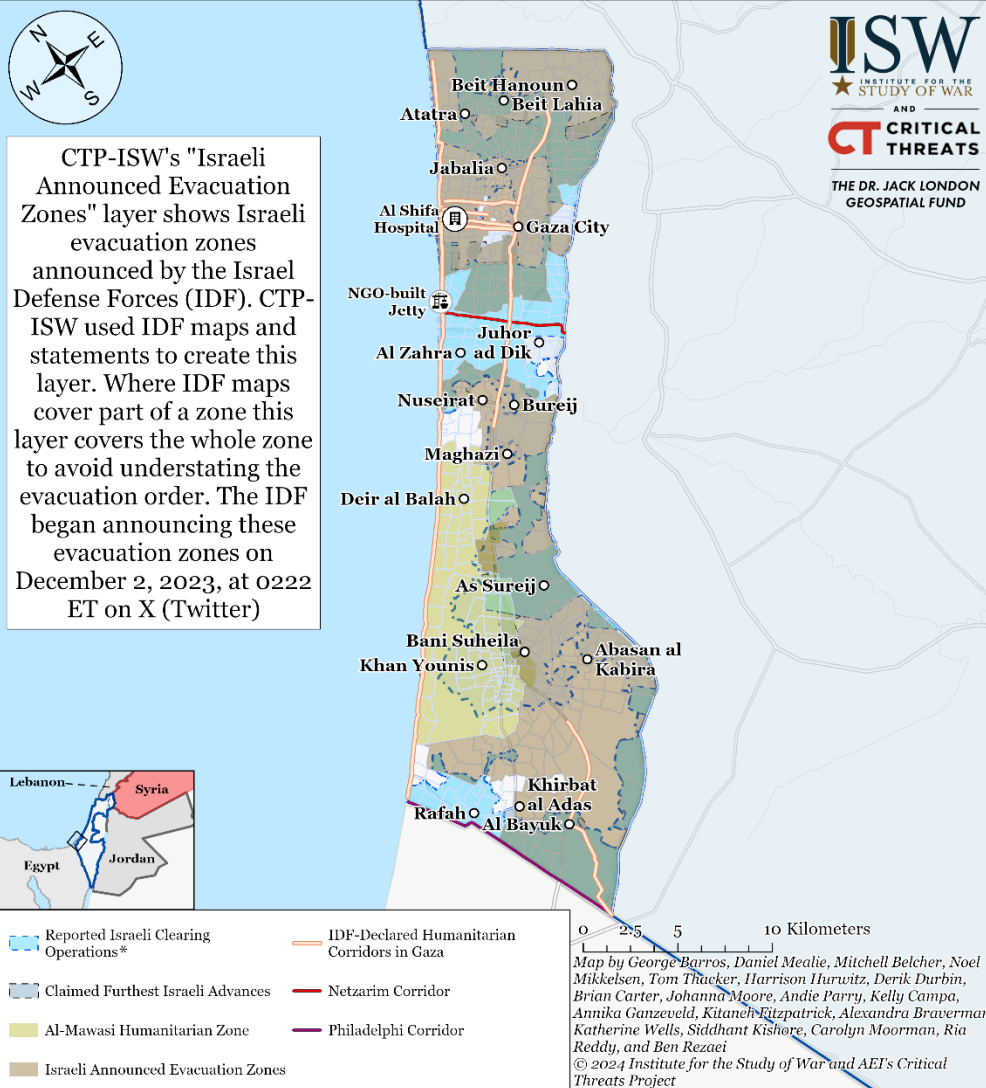
# Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

As of December 27, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



# Israeli-Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip

## As of December 27, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET

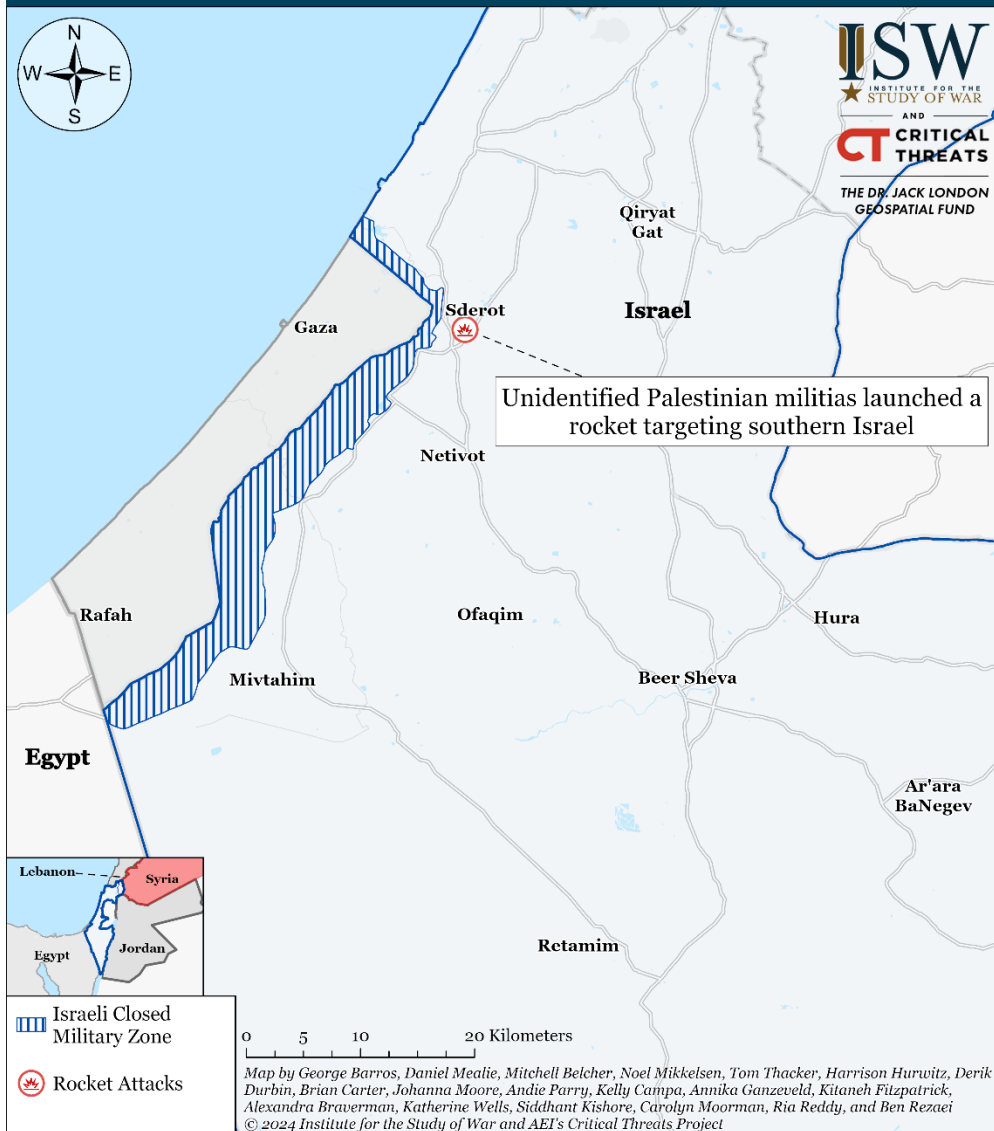


\* ISW-CTP's "Reported Israeli Clearing Operations" layer uses the US military's doctrinal definition of clearing which is an operation that "requires the commander to remove all enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance within an assigned area." Clearing operations frequently take weeks and sometimes months to complete

**An unidentified Palestinian militia conducted an indirect fire attack on December 27 that struck an open area in southern Israel.[65] No militia has claimed the attack as of the time of this writing.**

# Attacks into Israel from the Gaza Strip

As of December 27, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



## West Bank

### Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

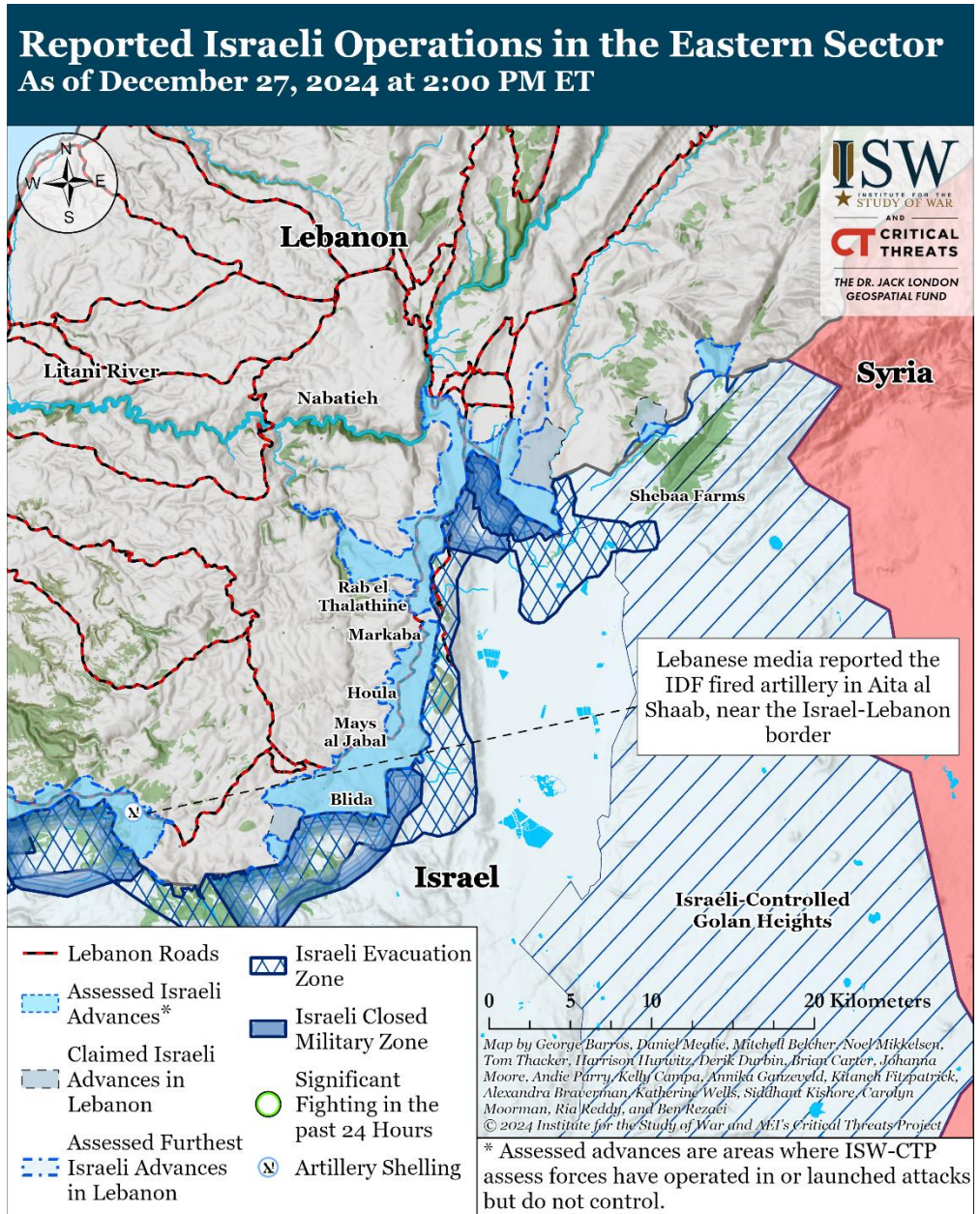
**A Palestinian man originally from Tulkarm conducted a stabbing attack targeting an elderly woman in Herzliya, central Israel, on December 27.** [66] The Shin Bet stated that the man previously worked as a Shin Bet informant in the West Bank but was relocated to Israel after his cover was blown. Security guards in Herzliya shot the attacker before the police later arrested him.

## 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

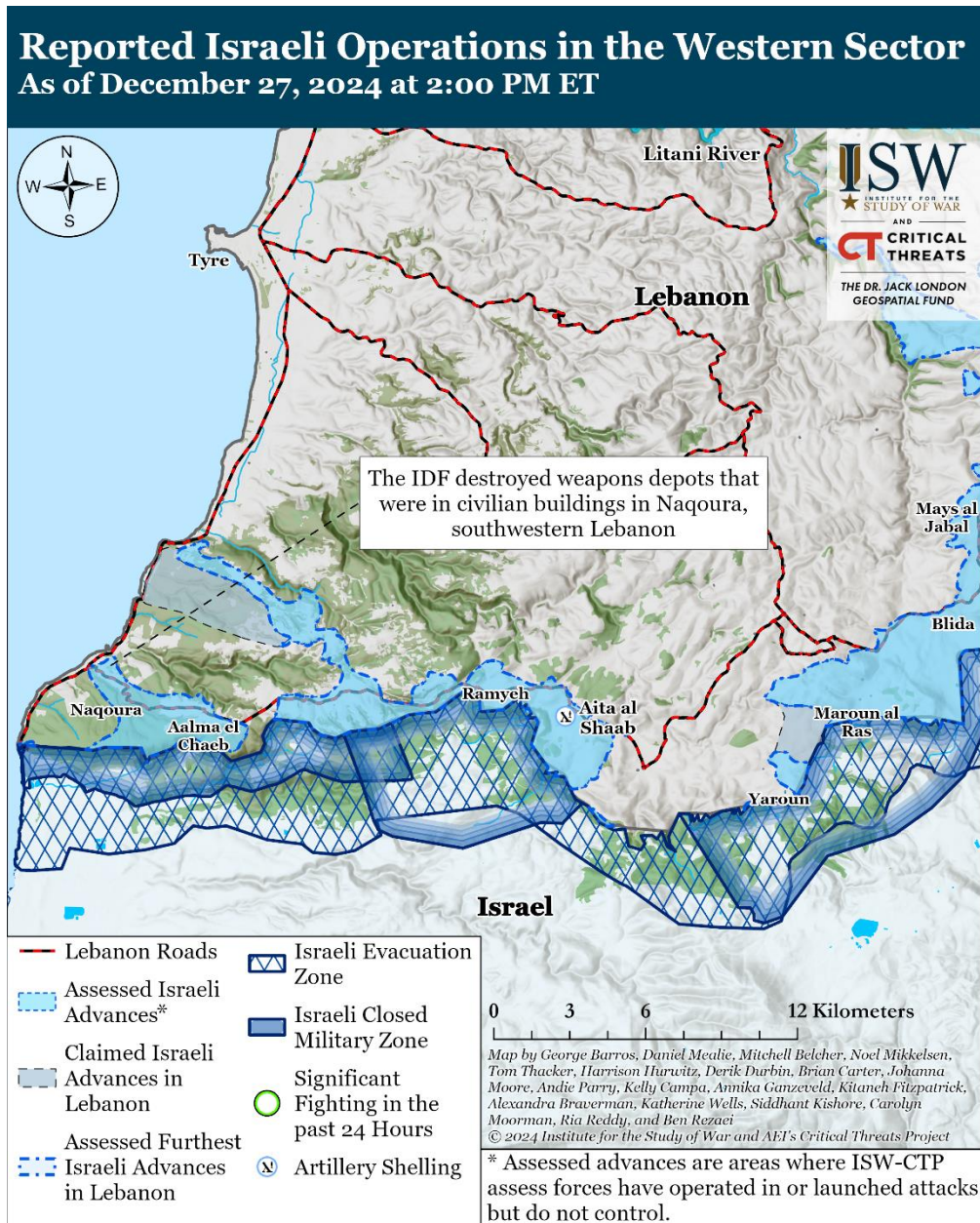
**Lebanese media reported that Israeli forces fired artillery at Aita al Shaab, on the Israel-Lebanon border, on December 27.[67]**



**The IDF 226th Paratroopers Brigade (146th Division) destroyed Hezbollah infrastructure and weapons in Naqoura, southwestern Lebanon, on December 27.[68]**  
The IDF identified and destroyed dozens of weapons depots containing rockets, IEDs, mortars, and missiles located in civilian buildings in Naqoura.[69] Hezbollah used these sites to carry out attacks



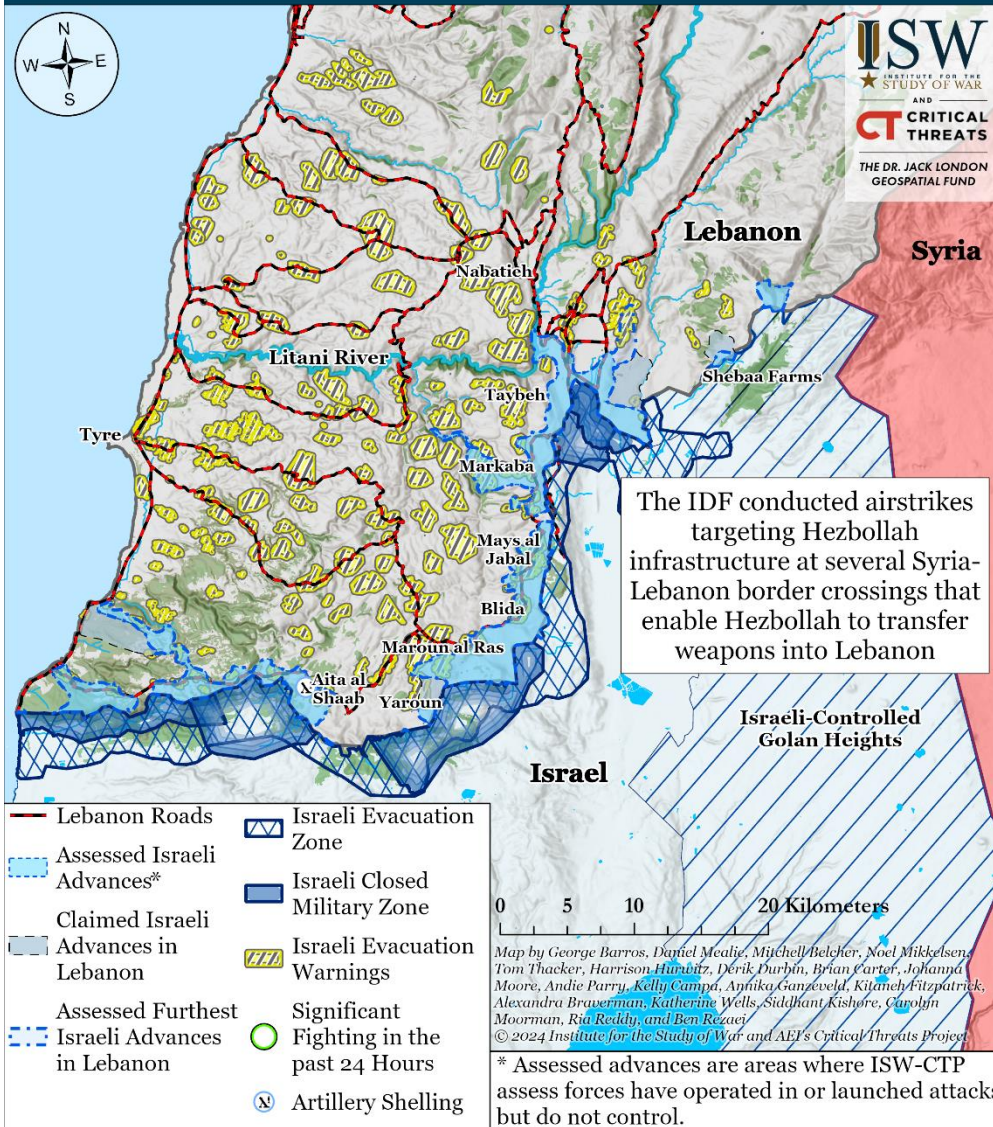
targeting Israel.[70] Israeli forces also located and destroyed an unspecified number of rocket launchers aimed at Israeli territory during a separate raid in the area.[71]



**The IDF conducted several airstrikes on December 27 targeting Hezbollah infrastructure at several border crossings that enable Hezbollah to transfer weapons from Syria to Lebanon.[72]** IDF Air Force Commander Major General Tomer Bar stated that the IDF struck seven border crossings on the Lebanon-Syria border that Hezbollah previously used to transport weapons.[73] Bar stated that Hezbollah is "once again" trying to establish weapons smuggling routes through these border crossings. The IDF reported that the IDF struck infrastructure at the Janta Border crossing, which Hezbollah has used to move weapons and fighters.[74] Geolocated images posted to X (Twitter) showed the result of two Israeli airstrikes near Qusayya village, eastern Lebanon, on December 27.[75]

# Reported Israeli Operations in Lebanon

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**Hezbollah is contending with multiple competing priorities, including reconstruction in Lebanon and reconstituting Hezbollah’s organization, which may decrease support for the group in some quarters.** UK-based media reported on December 24 that delayed war compensation to non-Hezbollah members and those injured in Israel’s operations in Lebanon has caused growing unrest among Hezbollah’s support base.[76] Hezbollah, which quickly rebuilt Lebanon and provided a social safety net for the Lebanese after the 2006 war, is facing much more difficult reconstruction and reconstitution tasks compared to 2006. The 2006 War lasted 34 days and destroyed only relatively limited areas of Lebanon. Hezbollah also suffered only 500 casualties in 2006.[77] The October 7 War in Lebanon lasted nearly 14 months, destroyed many villages in southern Lebanon, and killed thousands of Hezbollah fighters while severely damaging Hezbollah’s military command-and-



control structure.[78] An engineer affiliated with Hezbollah construction company Jihad al Bina told Hezbollah media on December 24 that Hezbollah is continuing the "restoration and reconstruction" of buildings destroyed by Israel's operations in Lebanon.[79] This construction process will take a very long time, and Jihad al Bina will need to compete with Hezbollah's other priorities--including acquiring new weapons, training new leaders, and reorganizing Hezbollah's military wing--for funding and personnel.

A Hezbollah-backed Lebanese political claimed on December 25 that Hezbollah has rebuilt its leadership, military, and security structures, but even if this is accurate, the new commanders will presumably need training before they can operate at the same level their predecessors had.[80] These commanders will also need to acquire new weapons to replace those captured and destroyed by the Israelis, further straining Hezbollah's resources.

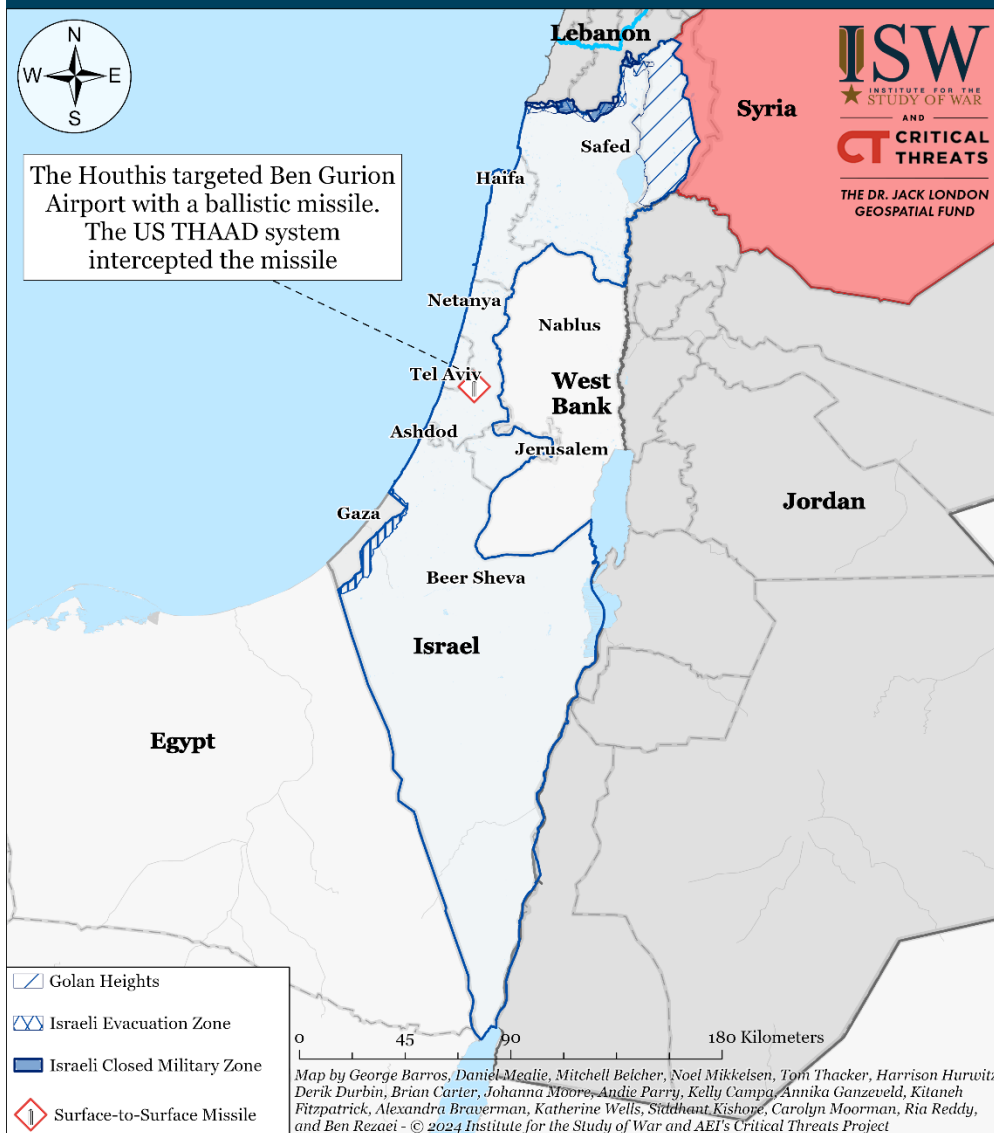
## **Iran and the Axis of Resistance**

**The Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) called on Iraqi citizens to participate in a procession on December 28 commemorating the five-year anniversary of the December 2019 US airstrikes that targeted Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah.**[81] The December 2019 US airstrikes targeted the PMF 45th and 46th Brigades, which are Kataib Hezbollah formations.[82]

**The Houthis launched a ballistic missile targeting Ben Gurion Airport and claimed a drone attack targeting the Tel Aviv-Jaffa area.**[83] The US THAAD air defense system intercepted the Houthi ballistic missile outside Israeli borders.[84] There are no reports of a drone reaching Israel, however.[85]

# Houthi Attacks in Israel

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**The Houthis conducted a drone attack targeting the Danish-flagged vessel *Santa Ursula* east of Socotra Island on December 27.[86]** The Houthis said that they targeted the shipping because it had entered an Israeli-"linked" port.[87]

**Houthi media claimed a US-UK airstrike targeted the "September 21 Park" in the Maeen neighborhood, Sanaa City, on December 27.[88]** Israel, the United States, and the United Kingdom have not commented on the strikes at this time.[89]

*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/HalabTodayTV/status/1872675491406094752>

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[18] <https://x.com/HalabTodayTV/status/1872308578851442771>;

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