

Iran Update



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Information Cutoff: December 29, 2024 2:00 pm ET

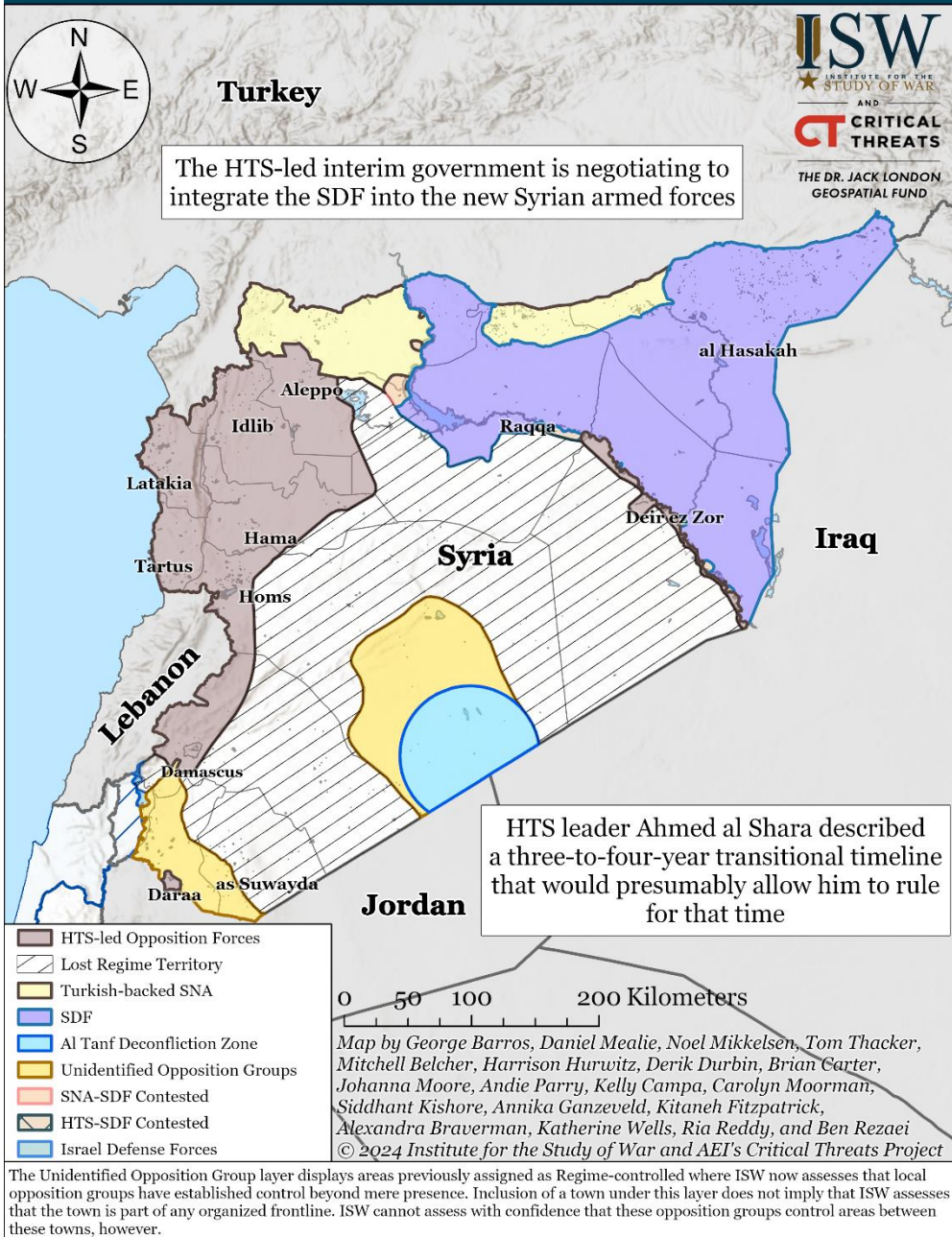
The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) publish the Iran Update, which provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests.

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.

Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) leader Ahmed al Shara detailed a three-to-four-year timeline for building new Syrian state, during which he presumably would rule and could heavily influence the allocation of political power.^[1] Shara articulated this vision, marking his most detailed articulation of the state formation process yet, in an interview with Saudi-owned al Arabiya.^[2] He said that he expects writing a constitution will take three years and organizing elections will take four years.^[3] Shara justified the long election timeline by emphasizing the need to conduct a “comprehensive population census” for election results to be “valid.”^[4] Shara acknowledged that he has appointed HTS members to most major ministries as a “necessity” but that the “National Dialogue Conference” will fully represent Syria’s diversity and be empowered to vote to rebuild the Syrian legal code.^[5] This interview is the latest in Shara’s effort to portray himself to international audiences as a moderate leader and distance himself from his extremist al Qaeda in Iraq and al Nusra Front background.^[6] Shara and his HTS-led interim government have yet to enact the tangible and irreversible steps toward implementing the type of representative democracy described in his interview at this time.

Reported Control of Terrain in Syria

As of December 29, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



The HTS-led interim government is negotiating with the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to integrate it politically and militarily into the future Syrian state.[7] Shara said that these negotiations are meant to resolve the “crisis” in northeastern Syria.[8] Turkey and HTS have tried in recent weeks to disarm and integrate the SDF into the HTS-led government by threatening the SDF with a full-scale assault.[9] Shara reiterated that, under a potential agreement, there will be no federalism in Syria and noted that the SDF would be integrated into the new Syrian Defense Ministry.[10] It is unclear whether Shara intends to re-flag SDF units and thus retain them as cohesive units or disperse individual SDF members across the Syrian armed forces. Shara and other Syrian

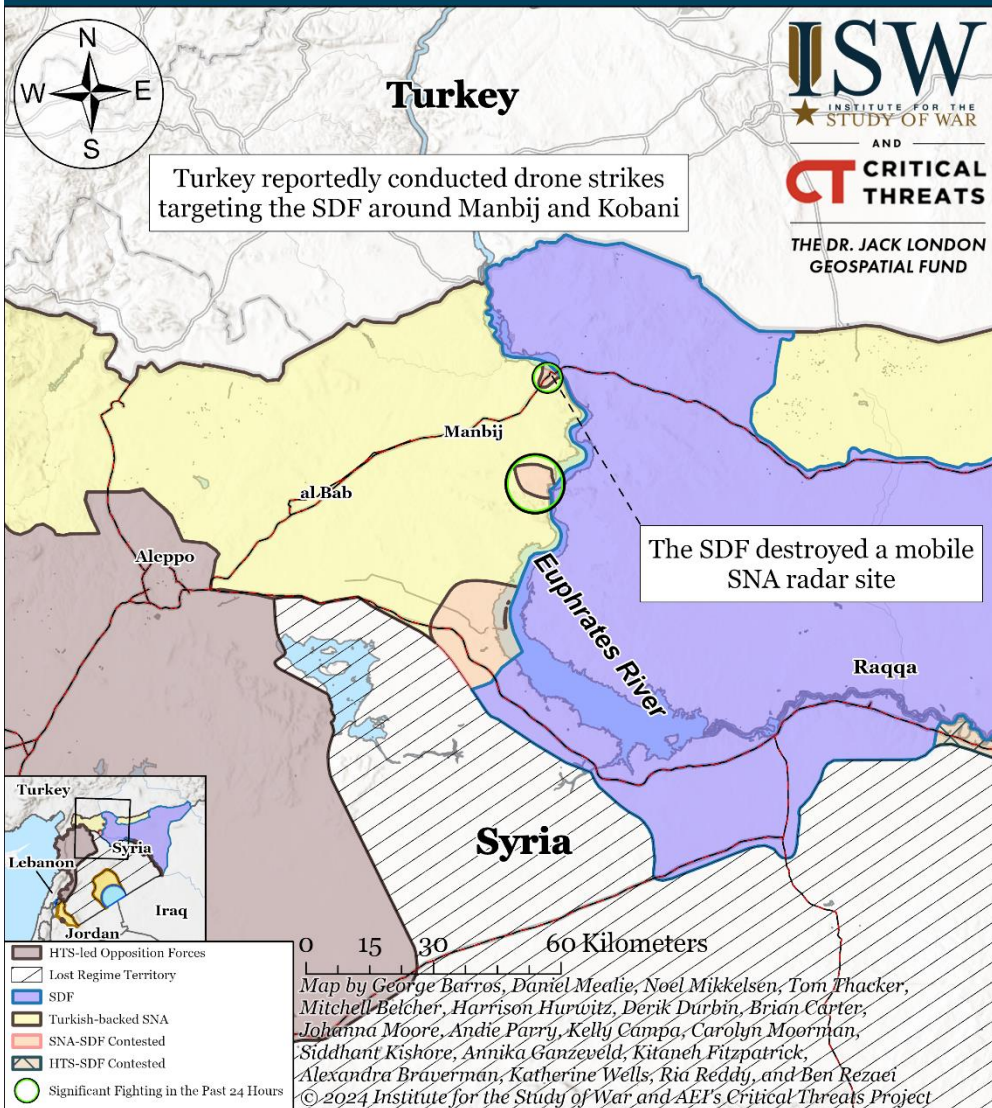
former opposition leaders met on December 24 and agreed to dissolve and “merge” their armed factions under the Syrian Defense Ministry.^[11]

Shara continues to meet with the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) while engaging in negotiations with the SDF. Shara met with SNA leaders, including Turkish ultranationalist and Grey Wolves member Fahim Issa, on December 29.^[12] Shara has heavily favored the SNA and is pursuing “strategic relations” with Turkey, both of which have stated their intent to “eliminate” the SDF.^[13]

The SDF and SNA have continued to clash in northern and northeastern Syria since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff. The SDF posted footage showing its forces destroying a mobile SNA radar south of Manbij.^[14] The SNA shelled at least 16 SDF positions around Kobani and in northeastern Syria.^[15] Anti-SDF media claimed that Turkey conducted drone strikes targeting the SDF around Manbij and Kobani.^[16]

Control of Terrain in North Syria

As of December 29, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



The HTS-led interim Syrian government promoted HTS commanders and Shara loyalists to senior military ranks on December 29.^[17] Interim Defense Minister Marhaf Ahmed Abu Qasra and Armed Forces Chief of Staff Ali Nour al Din were promoted to major general. The interim government also promoted five individuals to brigadier general and 41 individuals to colonel. Former opposition groups who have agreed to merge under the new Syrian Defense Ministry would be subordinating their fighters to this HTS-dominated command structure.^[18]

Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Chief of Staff Abdul Aziz al Muhammadawi inspected combat units in Anbar Province along the Iraq-Syria border on December 29. Muhammadawi visited the PMF 17th Brigade, which is under the PMF Anbar Operations Command.^[19] The PMF 17th Brigade reportedly operates in Akashat along the Iraq-Syria border.^[20]

Muhammadawi also visited the Second Region Border Command, which is under the Iraqi Interior Ministry.[21] The Second Region Border Command is located in al Waleed, west of Rutba, Anbar Province.[22] Second Region Border Commander Khairallah Issa, Army Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Abdul Amir Rashid Yarallah, and PMF Anbar Operations Commander Qasim Musleh al Khafaji accompanied Muhammadawi.[23] Khafaji simultaneously commands the 13th PMF Brigade (Liwa al Tafuf) and Anbar Operations Command.[24] Liwa al Tafuf is closely aligned with Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah.[25] Muhammadawi previously served as the secretary general of Kataib Hezbollah.[26]

Baloch Salafi-jihadi militia Ansar al Furqan claimed a suicide bombing targeting the head of police intelligence in Bandar Lengeh in southern Iran on December 28.[27] The attack killed the local head of police intelligence and injured another police officer.[28] The attack is notably deep into Iran given that most Baloch militancy in Iran occurs immediately around the border with Pakistan. Ansar al Furqan previously claimed a suicide bombing attack in Chabahar, Sistan and Baluchistan Province, in December 2018.[29]

Key Takeaways:

- **Syria:** HTS leader Ahmed al Shara detailed a three-to-four-year timeline for building a new Syrian state, during which he presumably would rule and could heavily influence the allocation of political power.
- **Syria:** The HTS-led interim government is negotiating with the US-backed SDF to integrate it politically and militarily into the future Syrian state. It is unclear whether such integration would involve re-flagging SDF units or dispersing SDF members across the new Syrian armed forces.
- **Iran:** Baloch Salafi-jihadi militia Ansar al Furqan claimed a suicide bombing targeting the head of political intelligence in Bandar Lengeh in southern Iran. The attack is notably deep into Iran given that most Baloch militancy in Iran occurs around the border with Pakistan.

Gaza Strip:

Axis of Resistance objectives:

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

The IDF continued to operate in the northern Gaza Strip on December 29. Palestinian fighters killed a soldier in the IDF 401st Armored Brigade (162nd Division) in the northern Gaza Strip.[30] A soldier in the IDF 933rd Infantry Brigade (143rd Division) was seriously injured while fighting Hamas in Beit Hanoun as well.[31] The IDF 933rd Infantry Brigade started operating in Beit Hanoun on December 28.[32] Commercially available satellite imagery from December 29 showed the IDF conducting clearing operations in Beit Lahia. Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) claimed that it attacked the IDF west of Beit Hanoun.[33] Several Palestinian militias, including Hamas, attacked the

The IDF 933rd Brigade (143rd Division) directed airstrikes targeting rocket launchers in Beit Hanoun in the northern Gaza Strip on December 29.[35] Palestinian fighters launched two long-range rockets from the area toward Jerusalem on December 28.[36] The IDF reportedly conducted the airstrikes because Hamas was trying to deplete its rocket stockpile before the IDF could destroy it.[37] The IDF Arabic-language spokesperson issued evacuation orders for Beit Hanoun on December 28.[38]

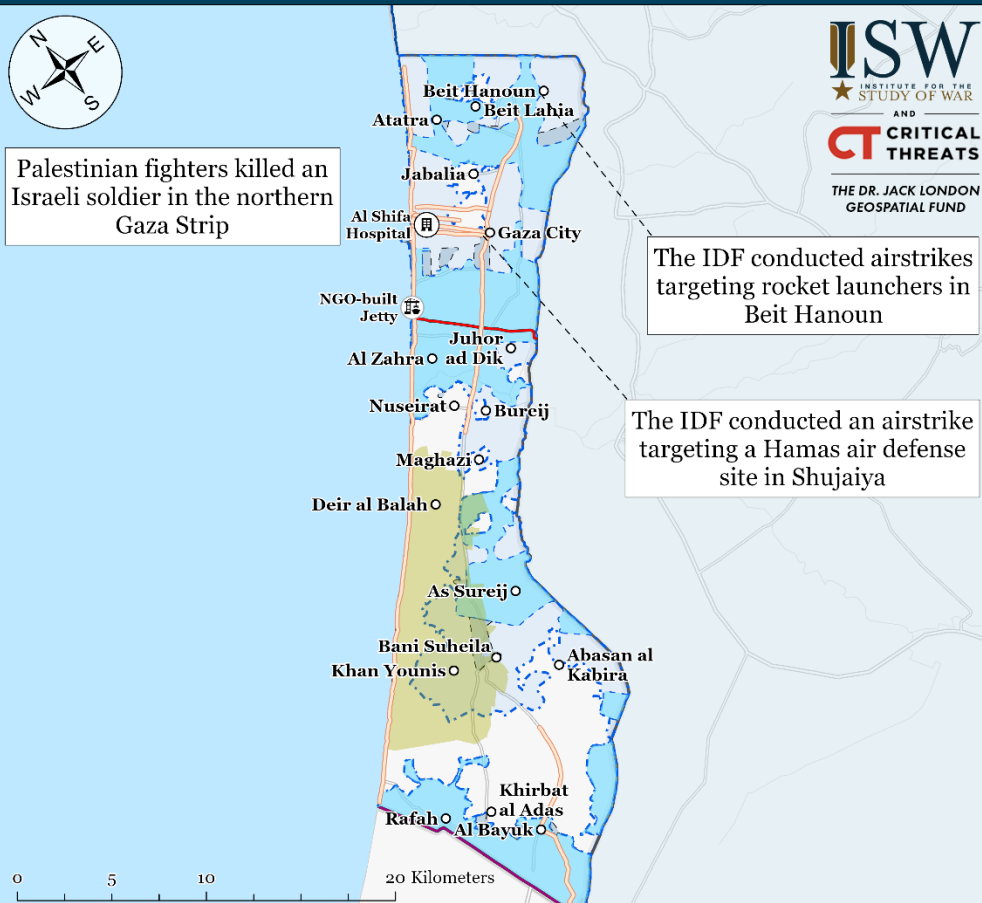
Unspecified IDF sources said that the IDF is close to completing its operations in Jabalia in the northern Gaza Strip after the IDF cleared a Hamas headquarters at the Kamal Adwan Hospital on December 28.[39] The IDF detained 240 Palestinian fighters and killed 20 others during the operation.[40] The sources described the hospital as Hamas' "last stronghold" in Jabalia.[41]

The IDF Arabic-language spokesperson issued evacuation orders for neighborhoods west of Gaza City on December 29 after Palestinian fighters launched rockets from the area toward southern Israel.[42] The IDF intercepted three rockets that Palestinian fighters fired from the northern Gaza Strip at Sderot on December 29.[43] Two other rockets fell in open areas.[44]

The IDF conducted an airstrike targeting a Hamas air defense unit in Shujaiya in Gaza City on December 29.[45] The IDF reported that the unit was operating in the former al Wafa hospital.[46] The IDF added that Hamas was using the site to plan attacks in the "immediate term." The Palestinian civil defense reported that the strike killed seven individuals.[47]

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

As of December 29, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



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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 Ganzveld, 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

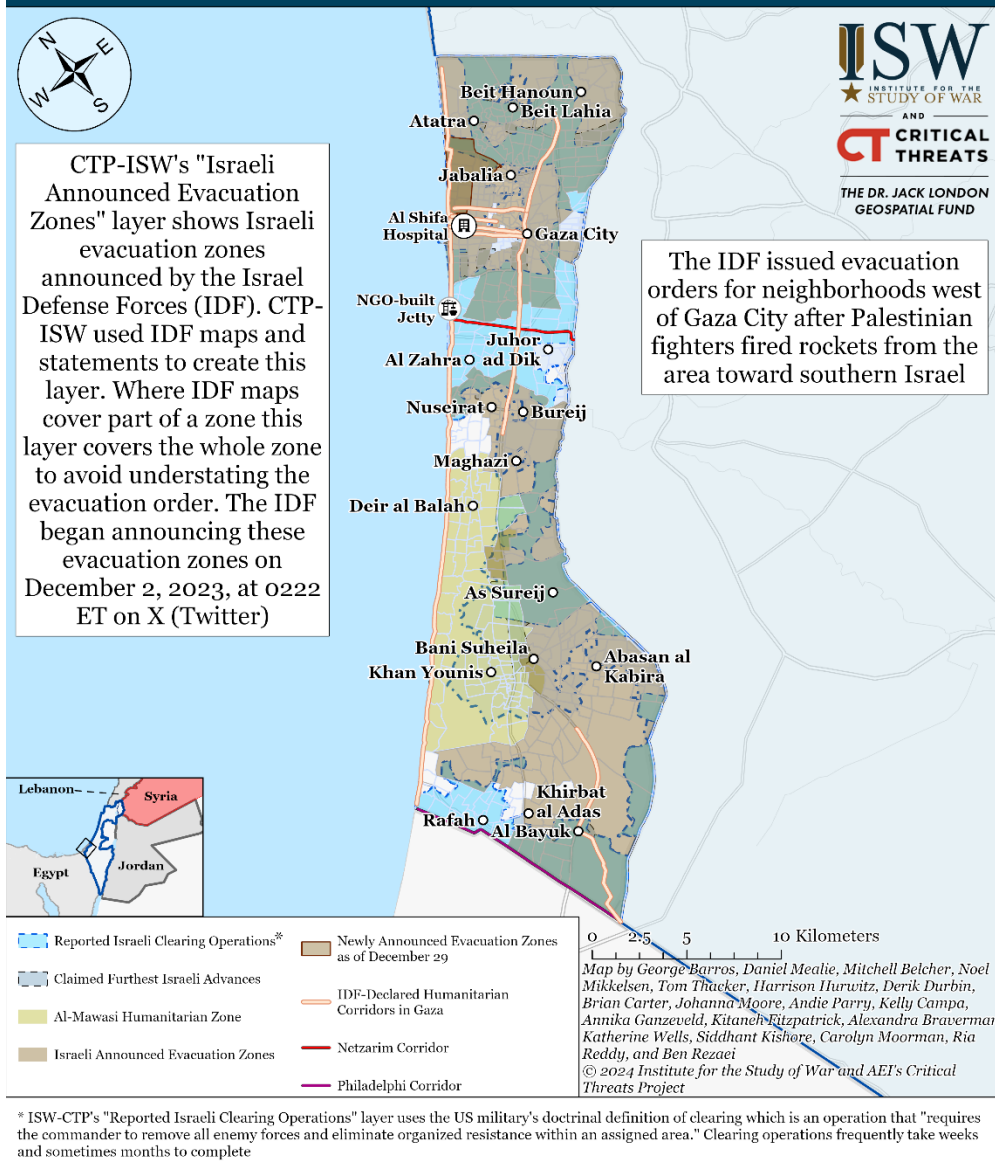
	Reported Israeli Clearing Operations*		IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridors in Gaza		Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
	Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances		Netzarim Corridor		Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone
	Assessed Furthest Extent of Israeli Clearing Operations		Philadelphi Corridor		



* 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 29, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



West Bank

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

A Palestinian Authority (PA) spokesperson reported that Palestinian fighters killed a journalist in Jenin refugee camp on December 29.[\[48\]](#) Palestinian militias, including Hamas, blamed the PA for “directly targeting” the journalist in Jenin refugee camp.[\[49\]](#) The PA stated that its forces were not present in the area at the time of the journalist’s death.[\[50\]](#) CTP-ISW has not observed PA activity in Jenin refugee camp since December 26.[\[51\]](#)

Two PIJ Jenin Battalion fighters surrendered to the IDF in northern West Bank in recent days.[52] The two fighters approached an IDF checkpoint in the Jordan Valley and surrendered themselves to the Israeli soldiers there. An Israeli Army Radio correspondent reported that the fighters surrendered to the IDF out of “fearing arrest” by the PA.[53] There is no record of Palestinian fighters opting for self-extradition to Israel due to fear of arrest by the PA in recent years, according to the correspondent. PA forces have detained over 150 Palestinians in Jenin refugee camp who are directly or indirectly affiliated with the Jenin Battalion.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu denied a US request to transfer American military equipment to PA forces in order to support PA counterterrorism efforts in the West Bank.[54] The United States requested that Israel transfer US-made firearms, ammunition, and armored personnel carriers to the PA.[55] The IDF Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Herzi Halevi rejected the US requests.[56] PA forces began a large-scale counterterrorism operation in the northern West Bank on December 14 to destroy Palestinian militia infrastructure there.[57]

Northern Israel and Lebanon

Lebanese Hezbollah objectives:

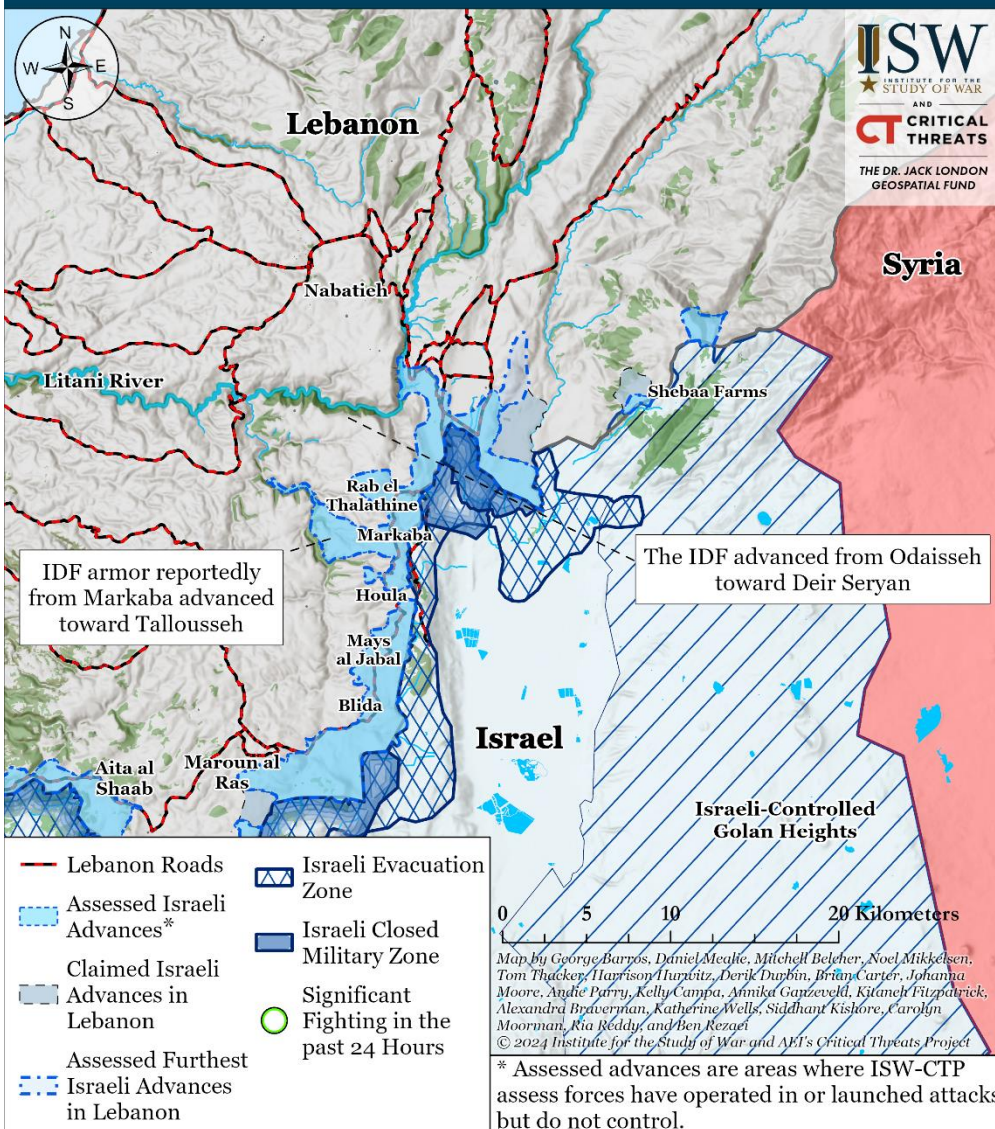
- End Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip
- Survive the October 7 War as a capable political and military organization with control over Lebanon

Lebanese media reported that the IDF advanced from Odaisseh toward Deir Seryan in southeastern Lebanon on December 29.[58] Three IDF tanks and a bulldozer reportedly advanced toward Deir Seryan via Taybeh and blocked the road connecting the two towns.[59] The IDF warned UNFIL to avoid the area, while the IDF operated there.[60]

The IDF demolished infrastructure in several locations in southeastern Lebanon on December 29. Lebanese media reported that the IDF demolished infrastructure in Mays al Jabal, Maroun al Ras and Kfar Kila.[61]

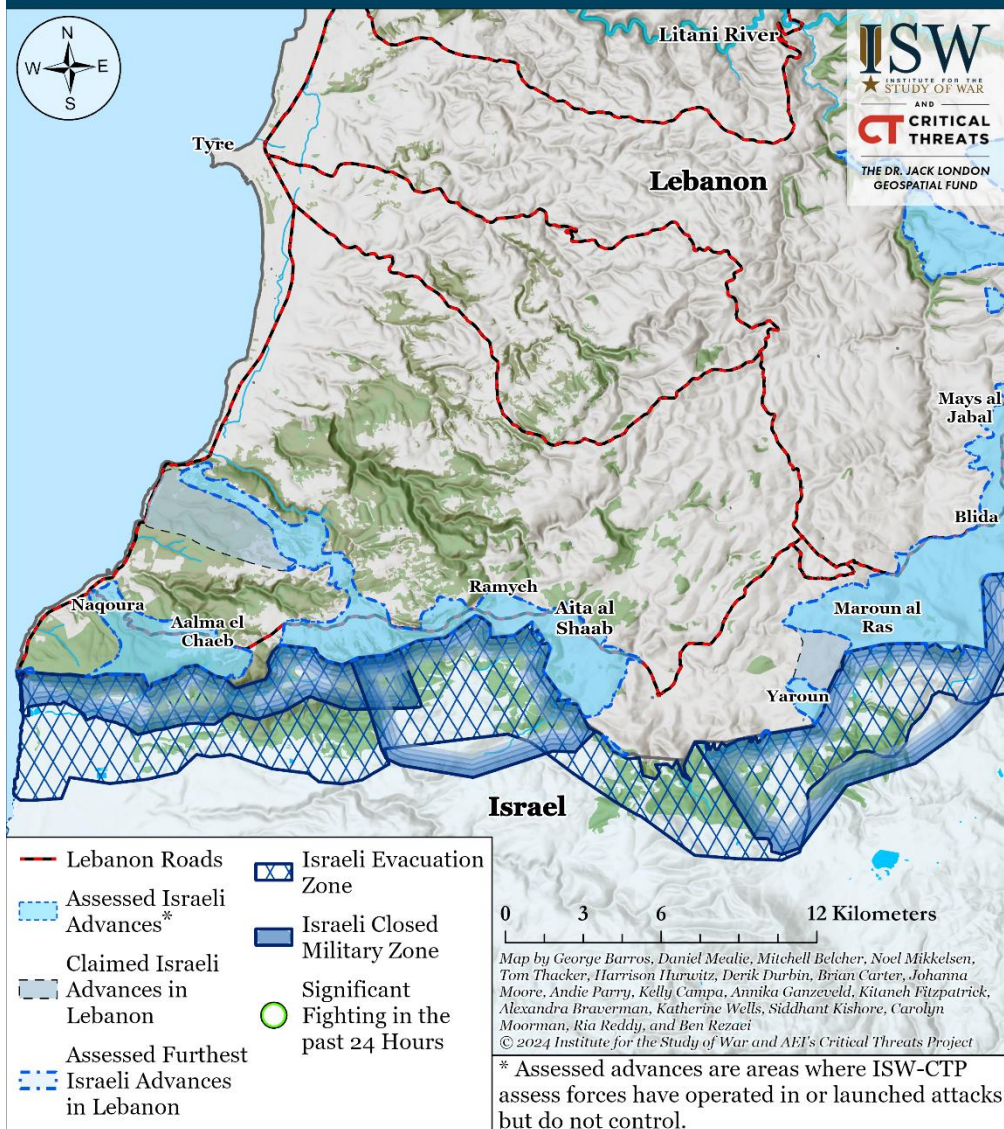
Lebanese media reported five IDF tanks advanced from Markaba toward Tallousseh in southeastern Lebanon on December 29.[62]

Reported Israeli Operations in the Eastern Sector As of December 29, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



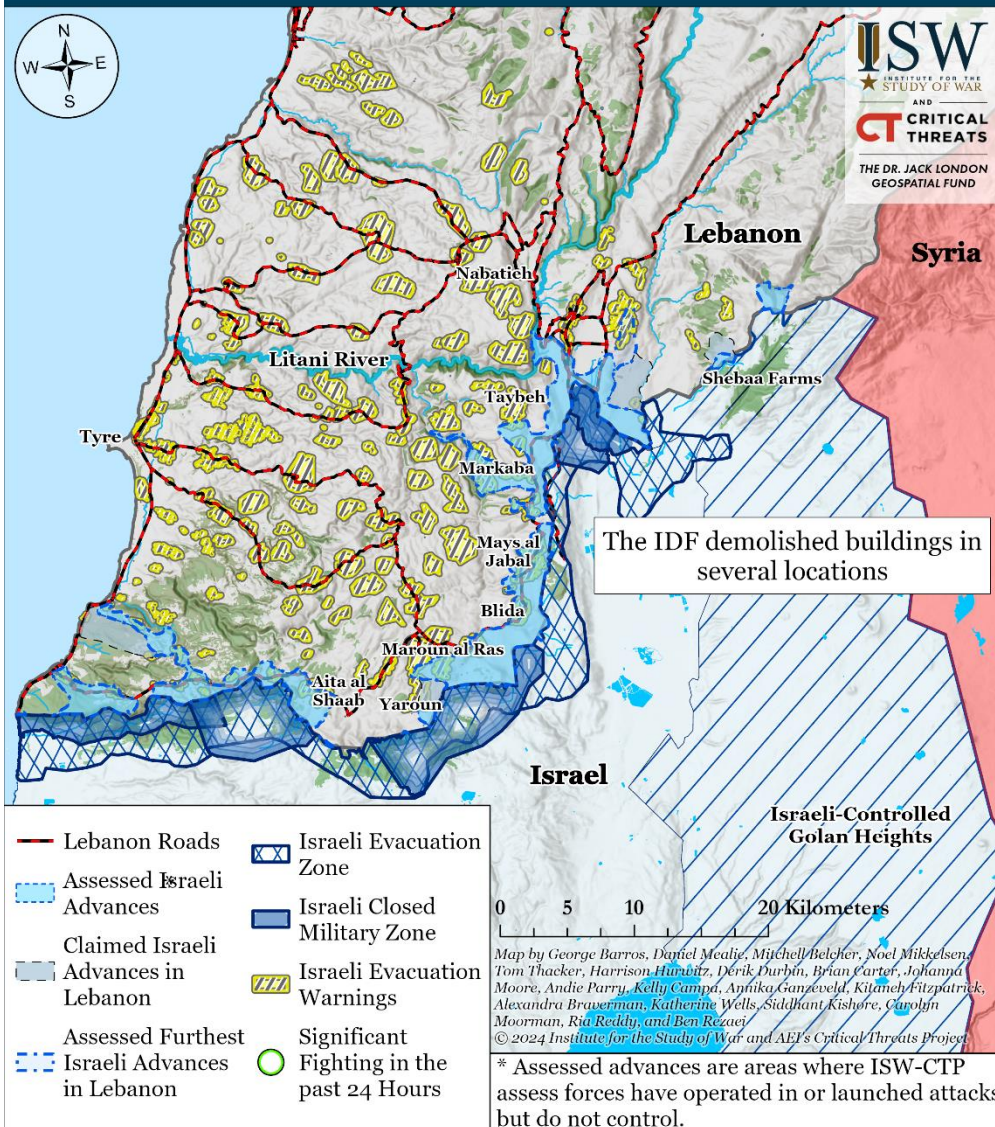
Reported Israeli Operations in the Western Sector

As of December 29, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Reported Israeli Operations in Lebanon

As of December 29, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Iran and the Axis of Resistance

The Houthis claimed on December 28 that they intercepted a US MQ-9 Reaper drone over al Bayda Governorate, Yemen.[63] Houthi military spokesperson Brigadier General Yahya Sarea claimed that the Houthis have intercepted thirteen US MQ-9 Reaper drones since the start of the October 7 war. CTP-ISW cannot verify the Houthi claim.

Footage circulating on social media showed protests at the Grand Bazaar in Tehran on December 29 in response to the worsening state of the Iranian economy.[64] Iran continues to face a severe energy crisis that has significantly limited Iran's manufacturing capacity and shut down large parts of Iranian society.[65] CTP-ISW previously assessed that this crisis and the

declining value of the Iranian rial could present a serious threat to regime stability by fueling anti-regime sentiment and generating internal unrest in Iran.[66] Iranian Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei recently ordered Iranian security forces to prepare for potential unrest.[67]

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.



[1] <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/syria/2024/12/29/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%82%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%BA%D8%B1%D9%82-4-%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA->

[2] <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/syria/2024/12/29/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%82%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%BA%D8%B1%D9%82-4-%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA->

[3] <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/syria/2024/12/29/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%82%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%BA%D8%B1%D9%82-4-%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA->

[4] [https://www.alarabiya dot net/arab-and-world/syria/2024/12/29/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%82%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%BA%D8%B1%D9%82-4-%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-](https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/syria/2024/12/29/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%82%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%BA%D8%B1%D9%82-4-%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-)

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[6] <https://www.cnn.com/2024/12/06/middleeast/syria-rebel-forces-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-jolani-intl-latam/index.html> ; <https://isw.pub/IranUpdate122424> ; <https://isw.pub/IranUpdate122124>

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