

# Iran Update



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**Information Cutoff: February 17, 2025, 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.*

**Unspecified sources told Bloomberg that Russia appears to be nearing a deal with the Syrian interim government to maintain a “reduced” military presence in Syria.[1]** The sources said that Russia is “close” to a deal that would keep at least some staff and equipment in Syria.[2] One of the sources said that Russia hopes to keep the same air and naval bases that it used prior to the fall of Bashar al Assad, likely referring to Hmeimim airbase and the naval base at Tartus.[3] Russia also previously held several other airbases within central and northern Syria, including a helicopter base in Qamishli, though it is unclear whether the agreement will cover these sites. Russian forces have fully evacuated all their former positions in Syria except for Hmeimim airbase and the port of Tartus.[4] Other forces, such as the Syrian interim government or US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), have taken many of these bases following Russian forces’ evacuation.[5]

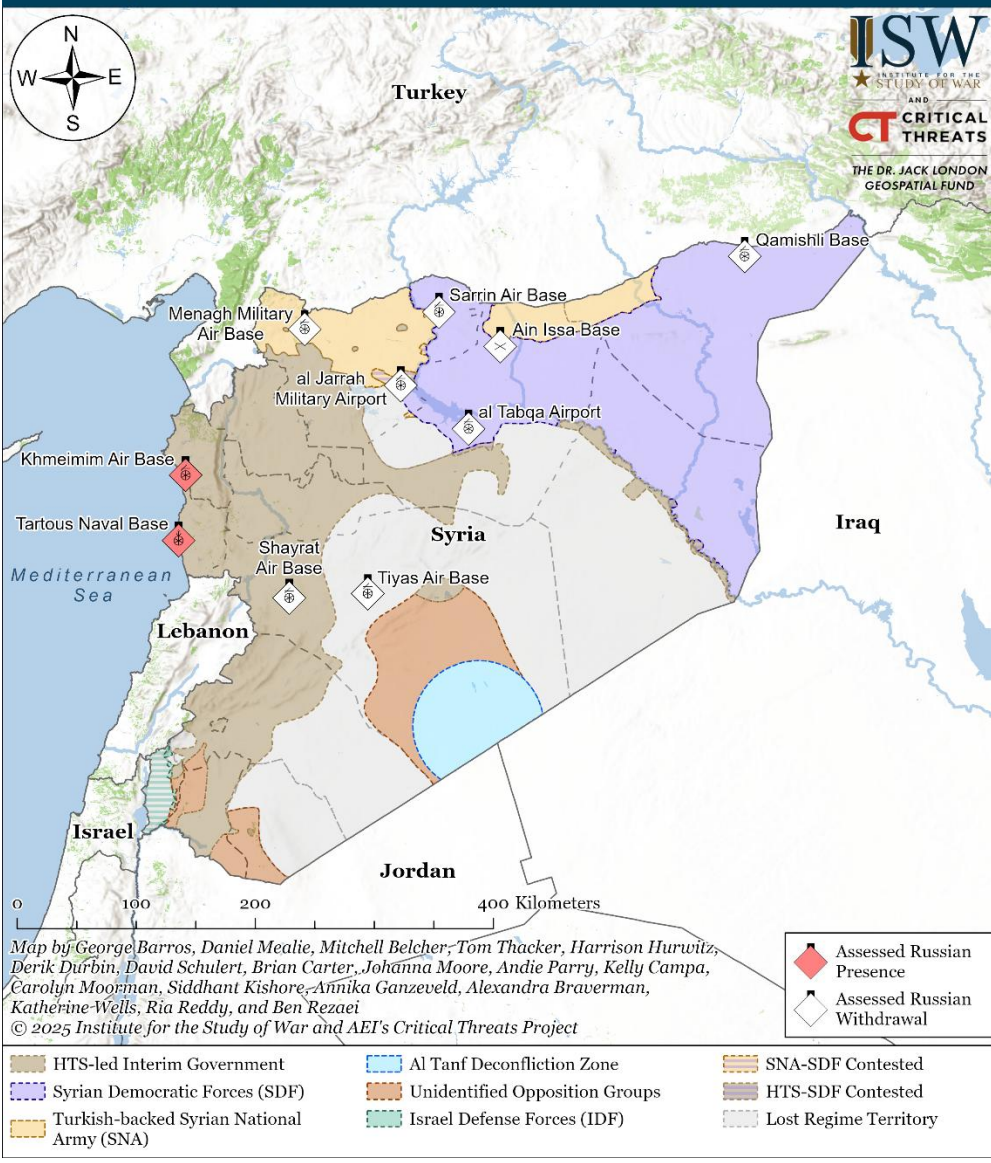
The tone of engagement between Russia and the Syrian interim government has notably become more cooperative in recent weeks, which supports the sources’ claims that Russia may be nearing an agreement with Syria. Shara emphasized Syria’s “strong strategic relationship” with Russia during a recent phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin.[6] Interim Syrian Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra recently suggested that Syria could allow Russia to retain air and naval bases in Syria if there are “benefits” for Syria.[7] It is not clear what “benefits” Russia may be offering Syria in current negotiations. Russia delivered local Syrian currency to the Syrian central bank on February 12 in a gesture that likely sought to foster goodwill with the Syrian government.[8] This gesture followed Syrian officials’ demands that Russia pay its debts to the Syrian state and Putin’s offer to Shara to assist with Syria’s economy.[9]

Unspecified sources also told Bloomberg that Russia could help with the Syrian government’s counter-ISIS efforts.[10] It is unclear based on this comment whether the Syrian interim government has

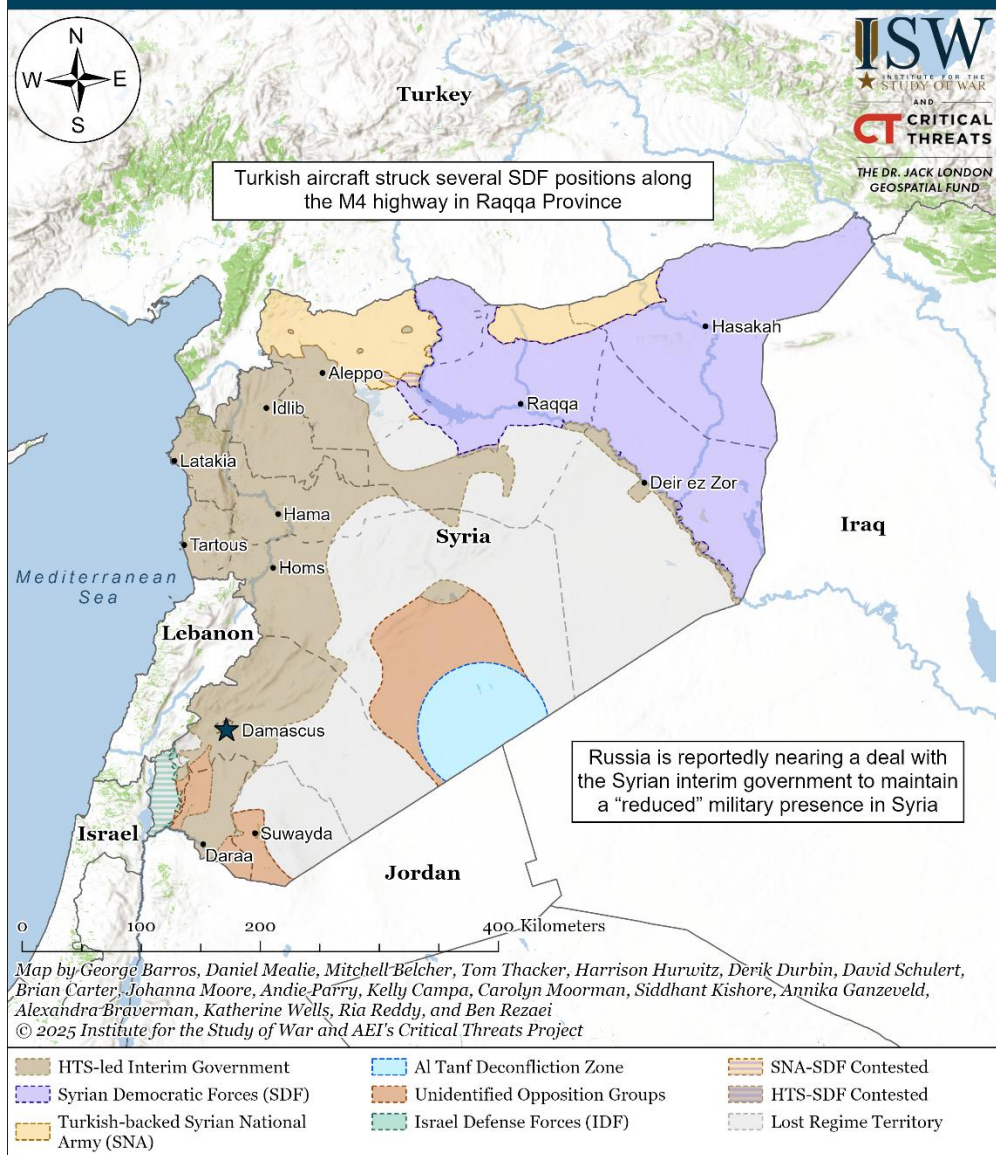
discussed Russian forces re-deploying to Syria to fight against ISIS. The Syrian interim government is likely eager to obtain manpower to assist in counter-ISIS operations as the government contends with the political and material realities of forming and training the new Syrian army. Russian participation in the Assad regime campaign against ISIS failed to effectively degrade ISIS in Syria, however. Russian aircraft proved to be far more capable in targeting Syrian opposition groups on behalf of the regime than it was targeting ISIS.<sup>[11]</sup> The scale of a future Russian deployment to Syria would impact the success of any Russian counter-ISIS operations, and it is unclear if a "reduced" military presence would be any more effective against ISIS than Russian forces were at the height of Russian deployments to Syria. US CENTCOM recently announced in July 2024 that ISIS is attempting to reconstitute in Syria following several years of decreased capability.<sup>[12]</sup> Russia would by no means provide a suitable replacement for the United States or SDF in counter-ISIS operations in the face of ISIS reconstitution efforts.

# Status of Russian Bases in Syria

February 17, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



## Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria February 17, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



**The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) confirmed that it will remain indefinitely in five strategically significant positions in southern Lebanon after withdrawing from all other positions on February 18.**<sup>[13]</sup> Israeli Army Radio reported on February 17 that the IDF has built sites at these five positions and will remain there even as the IDF leaves most other areas of southern Lebanon in accordance with the ceasefire with Lebanon.<sup>[14]</sup> The United States approved Israel to hold these positions, which are:<sup>[15]</sup>

1. Sulam Ridge, south of Labbouneh, Lebanon. Sulam Ridge overlooks the Israeli town of Shlomi.<sup>[16]</sup>
2. Jabal Blat, northwest of Ramyeh, Lebanon. Jabal Blat overlooks Shtula and Zarit.<sup>[17]</sup>

3. Shaked Ridge, south of Aitaroun, Lebanon. Shaked Ridge is north of Avivim and Malkia.[18]
4. Tzivoni Ridge, between Houla and Markaba, Lebanon. Tzivoni Ridge is west of Margaliot.[19]
5. Tal al Hamamis, south of Khiam, Lebanon. Tal al Hamamis overlooks Khiam, Kfar Kila, and Metula.[20]

Holding these positions would distribute the IDF across the border from east to west and enable the IDF to monitor territory that it previously cleared. This would in turn help prevent Lebanese Hezbollah fighters from approaching the border and reduces the threat of Hezbollah ground or short-range attacks into Israel.

The IDF stated that it is “preparing for a long stay” at these positions until Hezbollah is no longer south of the Litani River.[21] The IDF has repeatedly criticized the failure of the Lebanese Armed Forces to destroy Hezbollah infrastructure and weapons south of the Litani River and has emphasized that the IDF will continue to act against threats from Hezbollah.[22] The IDF told Israeli Army Radio that Hezbollah infrastructure has been “completely destroyed” in areas about five to eight kilometers from the border where the IDF has operated.[23] The area is also clear of a “high percentage” of weapons, according to the IDF.[24]

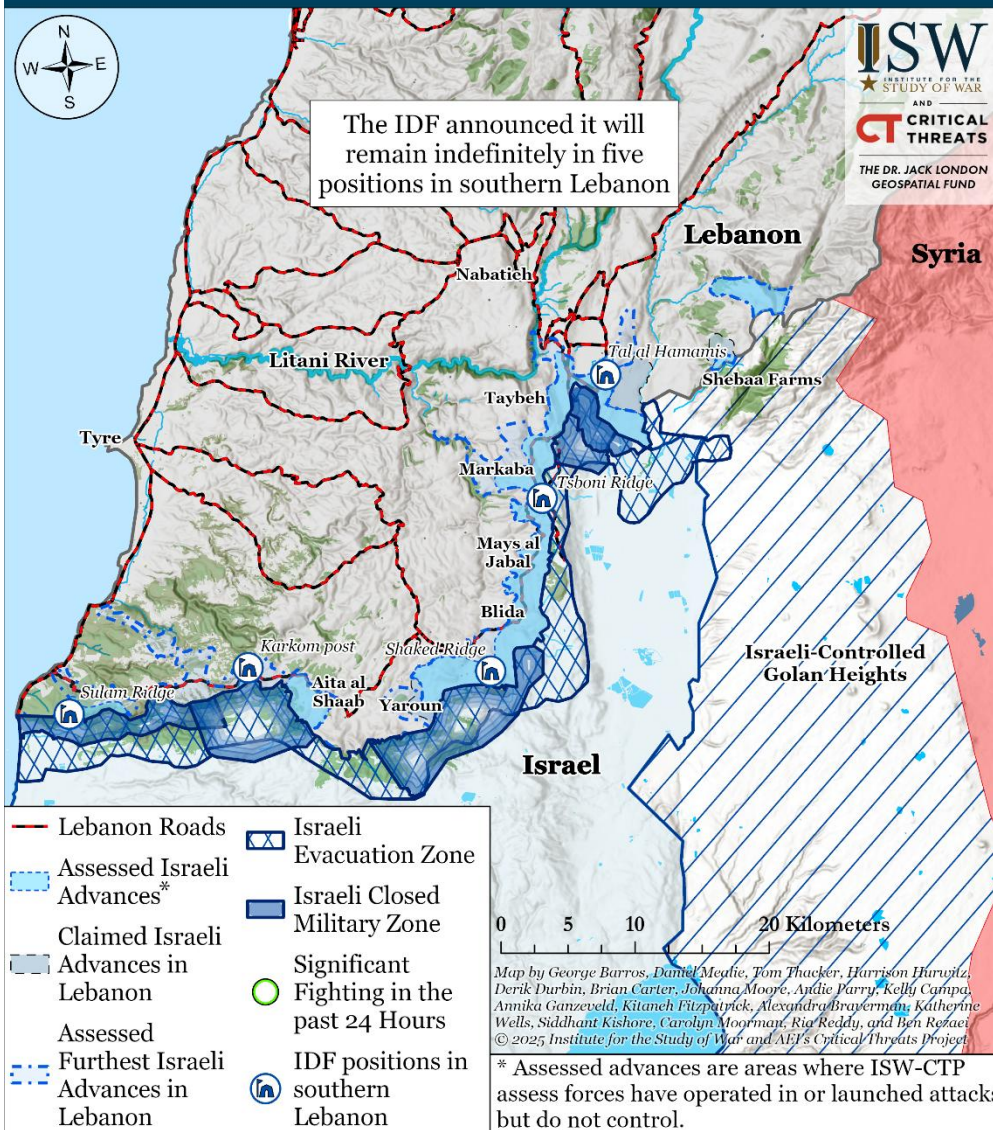
The IDF is separately building defensive positions in front of border towns in northern Israel.[25] The IDF will triple the pre-war number of troops deployed along the border.[26]

**Hezbollah appears unwilling to confront the IDF militarily in the short-term, as Hezbollah prioritizes reconstituting.** Hezbollah Secretary General Naim Qassem declared that the IDF must withdraw from Lebanon fully by the ceasefire expiration on February 18 and that the IDF had “no pretext” to maintain a military presence in southern Lebanon.[27] Qassem demanded that the Lebanese state take a “firm and decisive” position against the Israeli presence in Lebanon but notably did not threaten to resume attacks.[28] Qassem likely aims to avoid engaging Israeli forces or attacking Israel for the moment, as Hezbollah helps rebuild and reconstitute its forces. Qassem would very likely become more willing to attack the IDF, as Hezbollah regains strength.



# Reported Israeli Operations in Lebanon

As of February 17, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



## Key Takeaways:

- **Syria:** Bloomberg reported that Russia appears to be nearing a deal with the Syrian interim government to retain a reduce military presence in Syria.
- **Lebanon:** The IDF announced plans to remain indefinitely at five locations in southern Lebanon, as the IDF withdraws from most other positions.

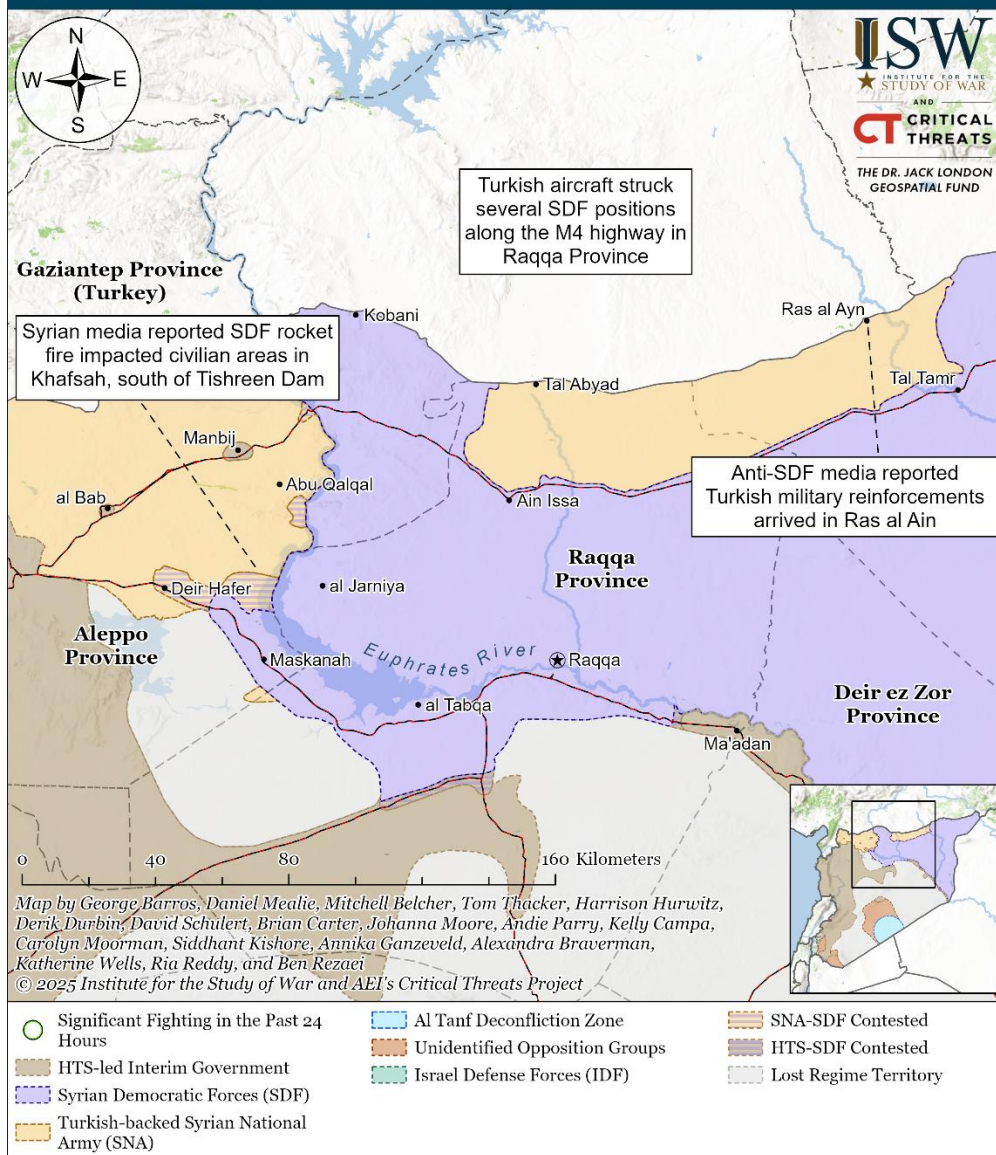
## Syria

**Anti-SDF media reported on February 17 that Turkish military reinforcements deployed to Ras al Ain, which is in SNA-controlled territory in northern Syria.[29]** Anti-SDF media posted footage of a convoy of Turkish heavy equipment transporters driving through Mardin, Turkey, and entering Ras al Ain.[30] The heavy equipment transporters reportedly carried tanks.[31]

**Turkish aircraft struck several SDF positions along the M4 highway in Raqqa Province on February 17.** Anti-SDF media reported that Turkish aircraft struck and destroyed an SDF rocket launcher in Tarwazia along the M4 highway.[32] Turkey also reportedly struck an SDF base in Saykul, near Ain Issa.[33] Anti-SDF media reported that numerous SDF members were killed or injured in the strike.[34]

**Syrian media reported that several SDF rockets struck civilian areas in Khafsah, south of Tishreen Dam, on February 17.[35]**

## Assessed Control of Terrain in Northern Syria February 17, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



**Southern military commanders affiliated with the 8th Brigade met with a Syrian interim government officer to discuss their integration into the Syrian Defense Ministry.** Southern Syrian media reported that local commanders from “Ahmed al Awda’s faction” met with Colonel Banyan Hariri in Busra al Sham on February 16.[36] Awda is the current Southern Operations Room commander, who previously led the 8th Brigade, a group comprised of former opposition fighters who reconciled with the Assad regime in 2018.[37] Hariri is a former Ahrar al Sham fighter from Daraa who joined HTS in northern Syria in 2018 instead of reconciling with the regime.[38] The Syrian Defense Ministry promoted Hariri to the rank of colonel in December 2024 and recently assigned him the command of a task force overseeing the Hauran region of southern Syria.[39] Hariri and other 8th Brigade commanders likely coordinated previous opposition efforts in Daraa and southern Syria prior

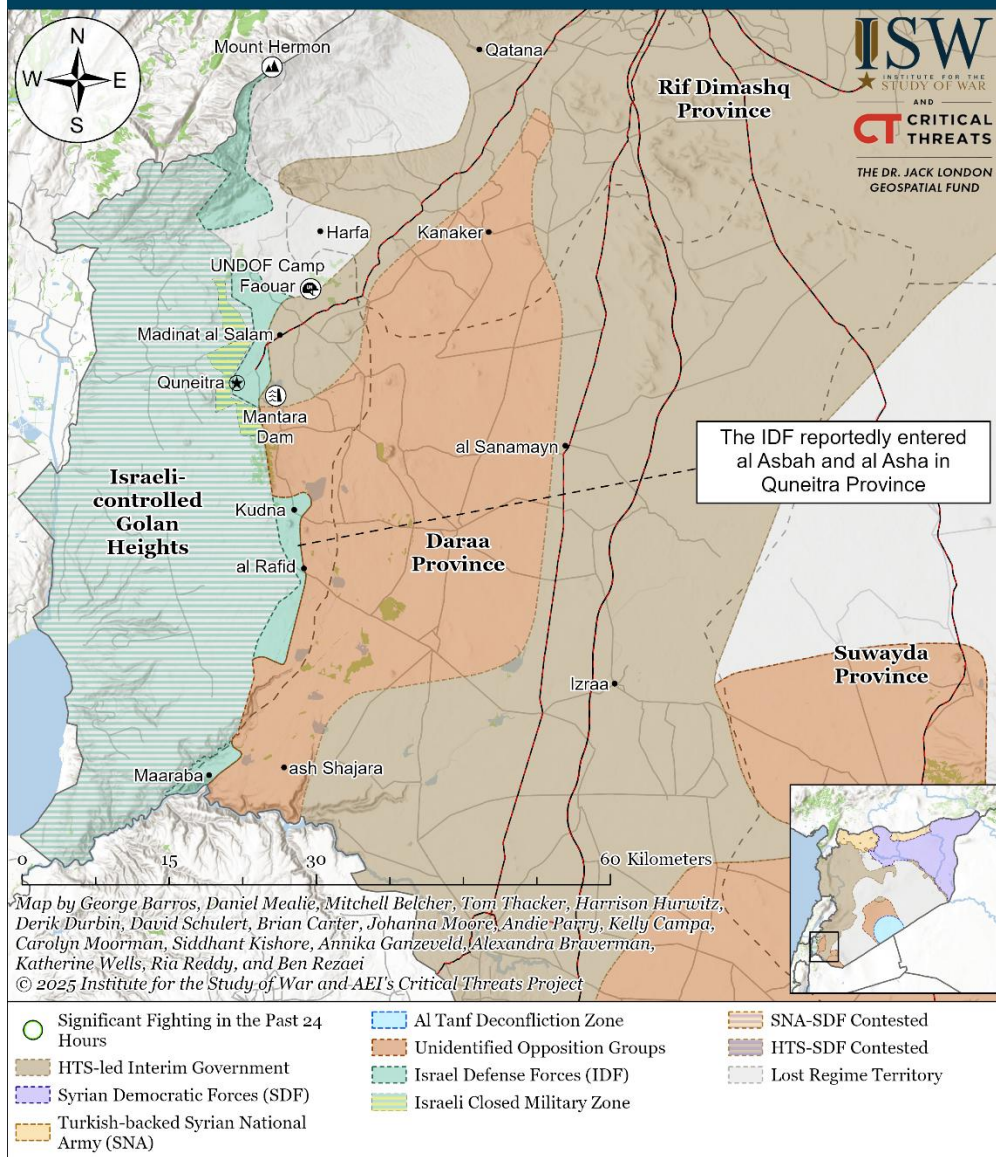


to 2018. Southern Syrian media reported 8th Brigade commanders agreed to start merging fighters, weapons, and vehicles with the Defense Ministry during their meeting with Hariri.[40] 8th Brigade-affiliated leaders recently met with Syrian Interim Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra on February 12 to discuss their integration into the Defense Ministry.[41]

**The Syrian interim government is taking steps to reform security services in Suwayda Province.** The Interior Ministry announced on February 17 the reactivation of the Suwayda Police Command and several related departments with recently settled police officers.[42] The Syrian interim government has not maintained a large security presence in Suwayda Province due to local Druze factions in the area. Western media recently reported that the Men of Dignity Movement—a prominent Druze militia based in Suwayda—prevented the entry of HTS-led forces into Suwayda Province until the HTS-led Department of Military Operations deployed for the first time to western Suwayda Province on February 12.[43] The Syrian interim government may seek to cultivate goodwill among Suwayda residents by showing its abilities to contribute to security in the Suwayda and re-establishing a police command.

**The IDF continued to operate along the Golan Heights in southern Syria.** Syrian media reported that Israeli forces entered al Asbah and al Asha in Quneitra Province on February 17.[44]

## Assessed Control of Terrain around Quneitra February 17, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



**The Interim Syrian Government’s Preparatory Committee will not invite armed groups to participate in the upcoming National Dialogue conference.[45] The SDF is the only armed faction as the SDF has not joined the Syrian Defense Ministry.** The Preparatory Committee held public meetings in Homs and Tartous on February 16 and 17 respectively.[46] Preparatory Committee Chairman Maher Alloush stated that these sessions aim to listen to Syrian citizens’ opinions on national issues in preparation for the National Dialogue Conference.[47] Preparatory Committee spokesperson Hassan al Daghim added on February 17 that Syrians will lead the conference and that they will invite “experts” inside and outside Syria to the conference.[48] Daghim clarified that Syria will not be a one-party state and that they will discuss the Israeli military presence in southern Syria at the conference.

**Syrian media reported that unknown assailants killed former Iranian-backed militia commander Yusuf Mahmoud al Hamdan after his body was found in the Albu Kamal desert in eastern Deir ez Zor Province on February 16.**<sup>[49]</sup> Hamdan, also known as Abu Issa al Mashhadani, was the commander of the Iranian-backed, Deir ez Zor-based 47th Regiment.<sup>[50]</sup> Mashhadani settled his status with the interim Syrian government in December 2024.<sup>[51]</sup>

**US Central Command (CENTCOM) confirmed on February 17 that it conducted an airstrike on February 15 that killed a senior Hurras al Din finance and logistics official in northwestern Syria.**<sup>[52]</sup> Syrian media previously reported that the airstrike occurred along the M4 highway near Orem al Jawz, Idlib Province.<sup>[53]</sup>

## **Iraq**

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

- Strengthen Iranian and Axis of Resistance influence over the Iraqi state and society
- Harden the Iraqi government against internal dissent

**Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President and senior Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader Nechirvan Barzani received a Turkish parliamentary delegation to discuss ongoing Turkish efforts to disarm the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) by coordinating with imprisoned PIKK leader Abdullah Ocalan on February 17.**<sup>[54]</sup> The Turkish delegation included pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy (DEM) Party and Democratic Regions Party (DBP) members.<sup>[55]</sup> The Turkish politicians likely discussed an expected upcoming call from Ocalan on the PKK to disarm with Barzani.<sup>[56]</sup> Turkish officials appear to believe that Ocalan's planned call would pressure the SDF into an agreement to disarm and integrate into the HTS-led interim government. A pro-government Turkish newspaper reported that Ocalan is expected to call upon the PKK to disarm "at the end of February or beginning of March."<sup>[57]</sup> Barzani expressed his "full support" for the success of the "peace process," noting that he hoped that the PKK would look at the process "strategically" and that this "opportunity should not be missed."<sup>[58]</sup> Turkish DBP politician Keskin Bayindar, who participated in the meeting, told reporters that Ocalan is working to find a process that could lead to a solution and "establish a democratic and legal process" to resolve the conflict.<sup>[59]</sup> The delegation is also expected to meet with Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) leader Bafel Talabani and KRG Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani in Sulaymaniyah.<sup>[60]</sup>

## **Arabian Peninsula**

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

- Harden the Houthi regime against internal dissent in Houthi-controlled areas
- Destroy the anti-Houthi opposition in order to control all of Yemen
- Erode Israeli will to continue the war in the Gaza Strip

*Nothing significant to report.*

## **The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon**

### **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
- Rebuild and reestablish Hezbollah in southern Lebanon
- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

*The Gaza Strip*

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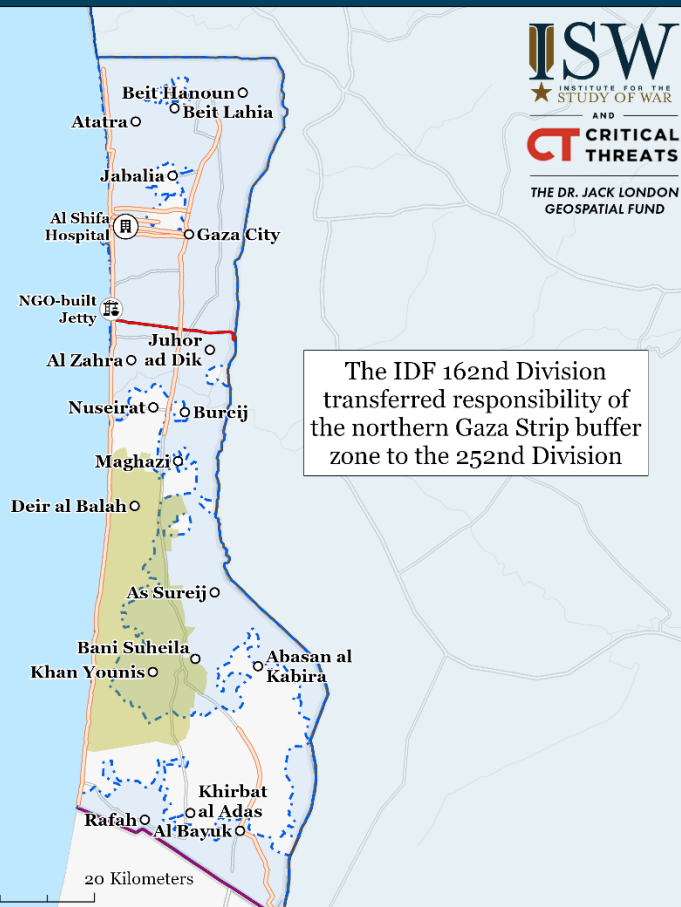
**Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected the idea that Hamas or the Palestinian Authority (PA) will govern the Gaza Strip.**<sup>[61]</sup> Netanyahu expressed his support for US President Donald Trump’s plan to “create a different Gaza.” Sky News Arabia reported on February 6 that Hamas sent a letter to the Palestinian Liberation Organization expressing the group’s willingness to hand governance of the Gaza Strip over to the PA.<sup>[62]</sup> Deputy Secretaries in Gaza under the former PA government in 2006 nominally reported to the PA in Ramallah but actually reported to Hamas.<sup>[63]</sup> Mid- to senior-level Hamas officials absorbed into a PA government within the Gaza Strip would return actual governing authority to Hamas--not the PA.

**The IDF 162nd Division transferred authority of the northern Gaza Strip buffer zone to the 252nd Division on February 17.**<sup>[64]</sup>



# Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

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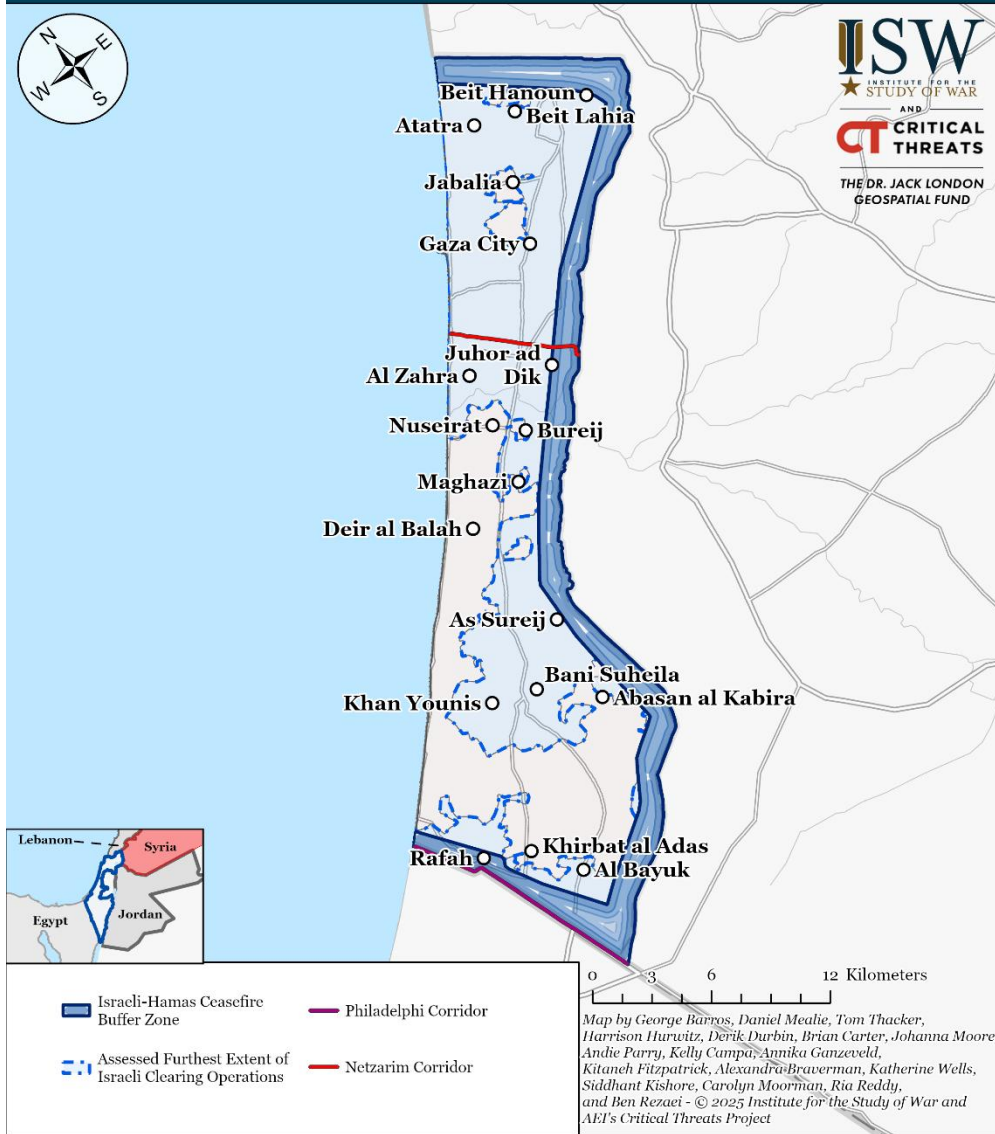
Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Tom Thacker, Harrison Hurwitz, Derik Durbin, Brian Carter, Johanna Moore, Andie Parry, Kelly Campa, Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Alexandra Braverman, Katherine Wells, Siddhant Kishore, Carolyn Moorman, Ria Reddy, and Ben Rezaei - © 2025 Institute for the 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

# Israel-Hamas Ceasefire Lines

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## Lebanon

See topline section.

## West

Bank

Nothing Significant to Report.

**Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said that Iran has an "extremely high level" ability "to counter hard warfare threats" during a speech in East Azerbaijan Province, Iran, on February 17.[65]** Khamenei said that Iran's current problem is not "the enemy's hardware threat, but rather the threat of. . . the manipulation of public opinion" and called on Iranian youth and media to counter these threats. Khamenei also said that the United States "cannot tolerate" an independent Iran. CTP-ISW previously assessed that Iranian officials increasingly fear potential unrest as the Iranian currency continues to lose value daily and energy shortages worsen public frustration.[66]

**Tehran University students protested for the fourth day on February 17 against Iranian security forces "inaction" in protecting students on campus and the "suppression" of protests on campus.[67]** Two unknown assailants killed a student on Tehran University's campus on February 12, which sparked the protests on campus.

**The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Intelligence Organization announced that unspecified security forces arrested protesters on February 13 in Dehdasht, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer Ahmad Province.[68]** Iranian Human Rights Activists News Agency confirmed on February 17 that Iranian security forces arrested 12 protesters from Dehdasht.[69]

*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.*





- [16] <https://t.me/moriahdoron/19560>; [www dot ynetnews.com/article/bj3gmcgcjg](http://www.dotynetnews.com/article/bj3gmcgcjg)
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[38] <https://www.memri.org/reports/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-hts-leader-ahmed-al-sharaa-promotes-military-officers-including-senior;> <https://www.annahar dot com/arab-world/arabian-levant/189970/%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%88%D9%82-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86>

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