

Iran Update



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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.

NOTE: *CTP-ISW is adjusting its Middle Eastern coverage to focus more closely on Iran and the Axis of Resistance in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. CTP-ISW is also reducing its coverage of the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and Lebanon. This refocusing is in response to the continued expansion of the Iranian nuclear program and the risk of an escalation in the coming months, as well as the Israeli defeats of Hamas and Hezbollah. We will cover and assess Axis of Resistance activities in the Palestinian territories and Lebanon at a less granular level moving forward. We will continue to publish analysis on other key US interests in the region, such as the defeat of ISIS and Syrian stability. We will also continue to adjust our Middle Eastern coverage and make those adjustments clear in response to regional dynamics and priorities, just as we did immediately after Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel and the fall of the Assad Regime.*

A Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) commander stated that the SDF and the governing body in northeast Syria agreed to merge their forces into the Syrian Defense Ministry on February 17.[1] A commander within the Northern Democratic Brigade—a faction of the SDF—said that the SDF, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), and the Syrian Democratic Council (SDF) agreed to merge SDF and AANES-affiliated security forces into the Syrian army after discussion on February 17 about negotiations with Damascus.[2] The SDF reportedly agreed to several conditions, including to remove non-Syrian fighters from the SDF's ranks.[3] SDF commander Mazloum Abdi said in a February 18 interview with Kurdish media that the Syrian government also requested that the SDF transfer certain security issues to the Syrian state, including control over ISIS prisons.[4] Abdi said that the SDF was "open to cooperation" in these fields but did not explicitly specify whether the SDF had agreed to the conditions.[5] Non-Syrian fighters within the

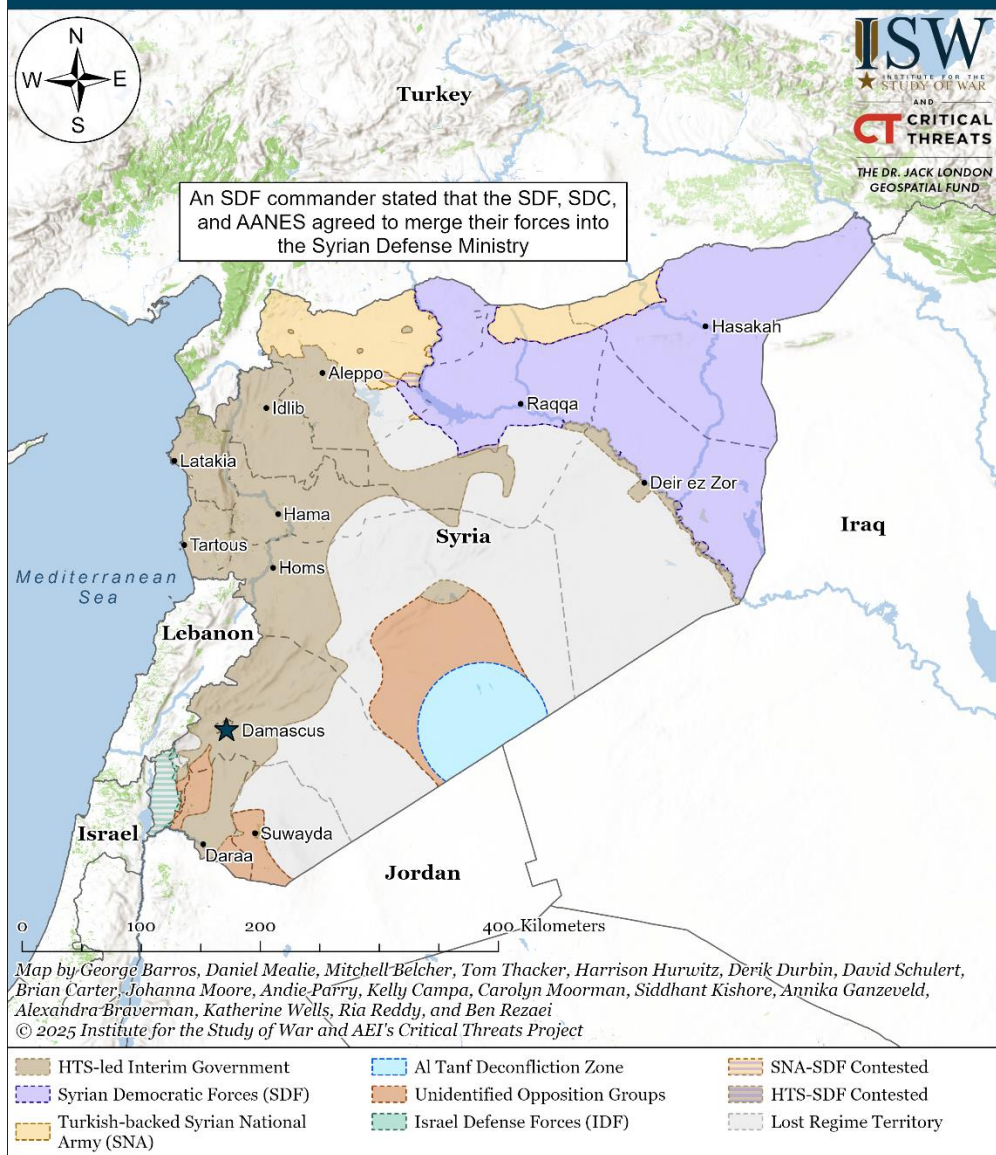
SDF likely primarily refer to foreign Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) fighters operating within northern Syria. Abdi recently confirmed that these fighters had come to Syria to support the SDF's fight against ISIS and reportedly agreed to expel non-Syrian Kurds from Syria if the SDF, Turkey, and Turkish-backed forces reached a ceasefire in northern Syria.[6] Turkey, which has worked with the Syrian government to pressure the SDF to disarm, has long demanded that the SDF expel PKK members from its ranks, although it has often conflated the two and has also, in effect called for the SDF's destruction.[7]

There still appear to be several outstanding issues in negotiations between the SDF and the Syrian interim government, but both parties appear to be engaging with one another constructively. Abdi said that there are still disagreements between Damascus and the SDF, though the two parties have continued to prepare suitable preconditions for negotiations.[8] Abdi or the Syrian government have not yet publicly agreed on the specific mechanisms of the SDF's integration into the Defense Ministry. Abdi's demand that the SDF integrate as a "bloc" was one of the main sticking points of negotiations in the past two months, and it is unclear if either side has relaxed their views on this issue.[9] Abdi's public congratulations to Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara on assuming the presidency and invitation for Shara to visit northeastern Syria suggests that the SDF continues to be willing to engage positively with the Syrian government.[10]

SDF Commander Mazloun Abdi is under tremendous pressure from internal SDF rivals, external Kurdish rivals, longtime enemies, and his allies to integrate with the Damascus government. This pressure appears to be pushing the SDF to gradually moderate its demands. The reported SDF decision to merge itself into the Syrian army comes after weeks of SDF insistence that it would only integrate as a "bloc," indicating that either Damascus, Abdi, or both parties moderated their demands.[11] Senior Syrian officials have maintained that the state was considering the use of military action against the SDF if it continued to refuse to disarm.[12] Turkey, which has continued to cultivate a significant strategic relationship with Damascus since the fall of Assad, has combined military threats with political persuasion through the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) to compel Abdi to moderate his demands.[13] The KDP could calculate that cooperation with Abdi would provide an opportunity to re-establish the position of its Syrian wing, which has long had little influence due to the supremacy of the SDF and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), of which Abdi is a member. The United States—the SDF's key supporter—also supports negotiations between the SDF and Damascus.[14]

Abdi probably sees an opportunity to avoid a major conflict with Damascus and solidify his own position, though he presumably recognizes that integration with the Syrian army is fraught with risk given the outstanding issues outlined above. Abdi's rivals in the SDF, who include hardliners like Alder Khalil, oppose a deal with Damascus.[15] Abdi could believe that by allying his wing of the SDF with other Kurdish elements and Damascus, he may be able to sideline the hardliners and force them from Syria. Alder Khalil, who is reportedly the leader of the PYD, would likely be one of the PKK members expelled from Syria under a deal.[16] It is unclear how Damascus or the SDF would actually expel the PKK, however, and whether the PKK would fight the decision without a call from PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan to disarm.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria February 18, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



The Iraqi Central Bank reportedly banned five local banks from US dollar transactions to combat money laundering and smuggling.[17] The Iraqi Central Bank may have banned these banks under US pressure. Unidentified sources told Reuters on February 16 that the bans followed a recent meeting between Central Bank officials and US Treasury and Federal Reserve officials, suggesting the Iraqi officials may be reacting to US pressure. The Iraqi Central Bank denied on February 16 that any Iraqi banks are subject to "international sanctions." [18] Iraqi banks have historically facilitated money transfers that support Axis of Resistance operations, including attacks on US forces and allies. [19]

Key Takeaways:

- **Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-Damascus Negotiations:** A Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) commander stated that the SDF and the governing body in northeast Syria agreed to merge their forces into the Syrian Defense Ministry on February 17. There still appear to be several outstanding issues in negotiations between the SDF and the Syrian interim government, but both parties appear to be engaging with one another constructively.
- **SDF Negotiating Position:** SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi is under tremendous pressure from internal SDF rivals, external Kurdish rivals, longtime enemies, and his allies to integrate with the Damascus government. This pressure appears to be pushing the SDF to gradually moderate its demands. Abdi probably sees an opportunity to avoid a major conflict with Damascus and solidify his own position, though he presumably recognizes that integration with the Syrian army is fraught with risk given the outstanding issues regarding integration.
- **Iraqi Financial System and Iranian-backed Militias:** The Iraqi Central Bank reportedly banned five local banks from US dollar transactions to combat money laundering and smuggling. The Iraqi Central Bank may have banned these banks under US pressure.

Syria

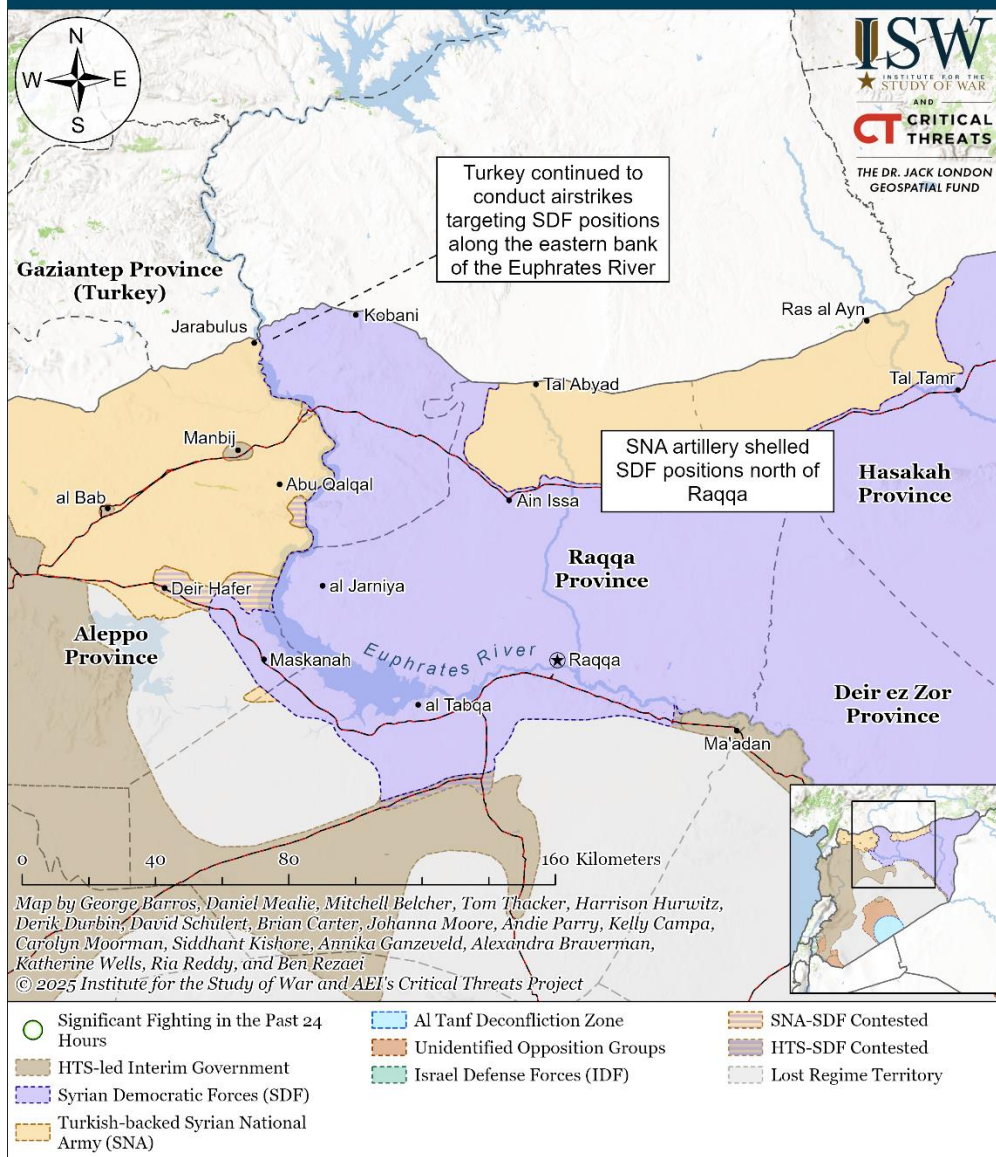
Turkish aircraft targeted the SDF along the eastern bank of the Euphrates River on February 18. Turkish aircraft struck several SDF positions, including rocket launch pads and tunnels, east of Jarabulus on February 18.[20]

The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) continued to target SDF positions along the Peace Spring frontlines on February 18. Anti-SDF media reported that SNA artillery struck SDF positions near Makhlat, north of Raqqa.[21]

Turkey and the SNA continued to target SDF positions near the Qara Qozak Bridge on February 18. Anti-SDF media claimed that Turkish aircraft struck an SDF drone unit headquarters near Kharous and killed eighteen SDF fighters.[22] Turkey and the SNA also targeted SDF positions near Sarrin with airstrikes and artillery, likely to isolate SDF units operating at the bridgehead.[23]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Northern Syria

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A Druze leader in Suwayda, Sheikh Hikmat al Hijri, expressed his openness to collaboration with the HTS-led Syrian interim government on February 17.^[24] Hijri emphasized that the Druze in southern Syria would cooperate with the interim government since the government has promised to observe international laws.^[25] Hijri continued to advocate for a technocratic administration “not driven by any ethnic or religious or political affiliations.”^[26] Hijri also warned armed groups from taking revenge outside of the legal system.^[27] The Syrian interim government has not maintained a significant 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.^[28] Druze militias based in Suwayda have not disarmed, which is a crucial

requirement set out by the interim government for attending the National Dialogue Conference that will draft a new Syrian constitution.[29]

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) remains at seven semi-permanent positions in Quneitra and Daraa provinces in southern Syria.[30] Israeli media reported on February 18 that the IDF has seven outposts that serve as “operational hubs” in Syria.[31] Syrian media reported that Israeli forces entered al Asbah and al Asha in Quneitra Province on February 17.[32]

Syrian Interim Foreign Affairs Minister Asaad al Shaibani advocated for other countries to lift financial sanctions on Syria at the al Ula Conference on Emerging Market Economies in Saudi Arabia on February 16.[33] The conference explored possible technical assistance from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to integrate Syria’s central bank back into the international financial system.[34] The IMF’s Managing Director said that the IMF began communicating with Syrian officials to understand how to rebuild Syria’s connection to international finance at the al Ula conference.[35] Shaibani met with Saudi Minister of Finance Mohammed bin Abdullah al Jadaan on the sidelines of the conference.[36]

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

Shia Coordination Framework party members discussed the proposed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) law at Badr Organization Secretary General Hadi al Ameri’s home on February 17.[37] The attendees agreed to add an amendment to the proposed legislation that enables the Prime Minister to extend the retirement age for “commanders and officials” until a replacement can be found. This amendment would likely enable the prime minister to extend the retirement age indefinitely if the prime minister chose to draw out the replacement process. This stipulation would apply to the current Popular Mobilization Chairman, Faleh al Fayyadh, who would be asked to retire under the new legislation.[38] Al Sadiqoun MP Rafiq al Salihi reported on February 17 that political blocs agreed to vote on the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) law in the next Parliamentary session.[39] The amendment would also reportedly force 4,000 PMF members into retirement, including senior PMF officials, many of whom have ties to Iran. These individuals may retain significant influence over their respective organizations without a formal position, however. Many militias could also lobby the prime minister to slow down the process of finding a replacement. Former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki’s State of Law bloc and Asaib Ahl al Haq’s Sadiqoun bloc announced they will boycott Parliament sessions until the PMF law is included on the agenda.[40]

Senior Shia Coordination Framework member Rahman al Jazairi claimed that Sadrist cleric Hazem al Araji told him that Iraqi nationalist Shia cleric Moqtada al Sadr “may” announce his return to politics after Ramadan, which ends on March 29.[41] A source close to nationalist Iraqi Shia cleric Muqtada al Sadr separately claimed on January 13 that Sadr opposes the return of his political bloc to politics.[42] Sadr’s Iraqi Shiite National Movement withdrew from Parliament in 2021 amidst political deadlock in protest against “corrupt” politicians.[43] Sadr is a major

Shia politician who has significant support among Shia Iraqis. Sadr has opposed the Shia Coordination Framework in recent years and would likely present a serious threat to the Shia Coordination Framework's control of the Shia parties in parliament.

Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh met with Iranian Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Akbar Ahmadian in Tehran on February 18.[44] Ahmadian reaffirmed Iranian support for Iraq to combat Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) remnants. The Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) continue to fight ISIS in Iraq, though the PMF remains far less capable than the Iraqi Army or Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service.[45]

Turkey struck Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) positions in northern Iraq on February 18 and killed two PKK fighters.[46]

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

Houthi spokesperson and chief negotiator Mohammed Abdulsalam and Political Bureau negotiator Abdulmalik al Ajri discussed the Israel-Hamas ceasefire with Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi in Muscat, Oman, on February 17.[47] Abdulsalam stated that the Houthis are ready to confront any "aggressive moves" by the United States and Israel.[48] Araghchi emphasized Iran's support for the Houthis and unifying Yemen.

The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon

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

The Gaza Strip

Hamas will release the six Israeli hostages on February 22 and the bodies of four Israeli hostages on February 20.[49] Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar announced on February 18 that Israel will begin negotiations for the second phase of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire this week.[50]

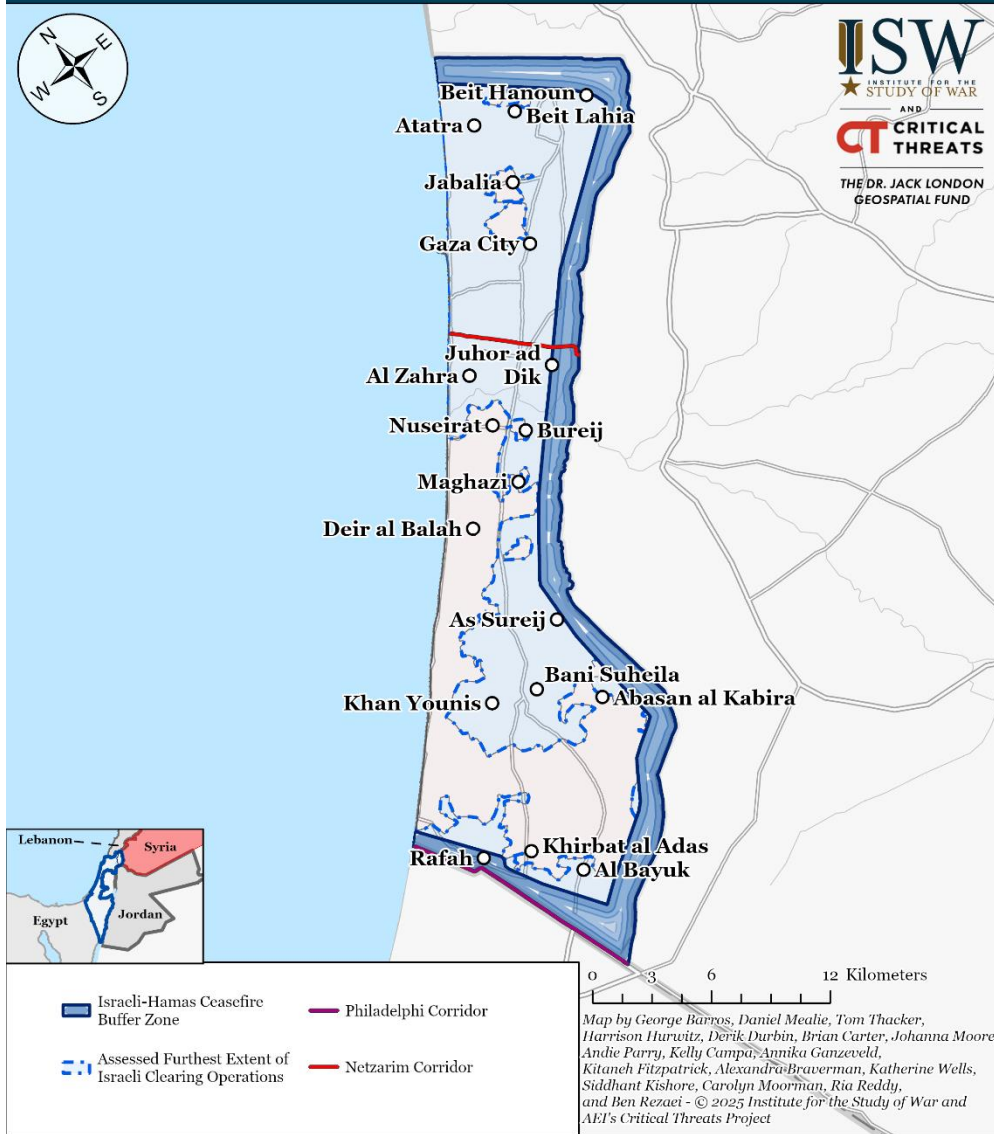
The Egyptian post-war reconstruction plan for the Gaza Strip reportedly includes the formation of a Palestinian administration that is not aligned with Hamas or the

Palestinian authority.[51] CTP-ISW has previously assessed that Hamas will almost certainly attempt to infiltrate or subvert whatever civilian government emerges to manage the post-war Gaza Strip unless Hamas is prevented from doing so by force.[52]

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip As of February 18, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Israel-Hamas Ceasefire Lines As of February 18, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST

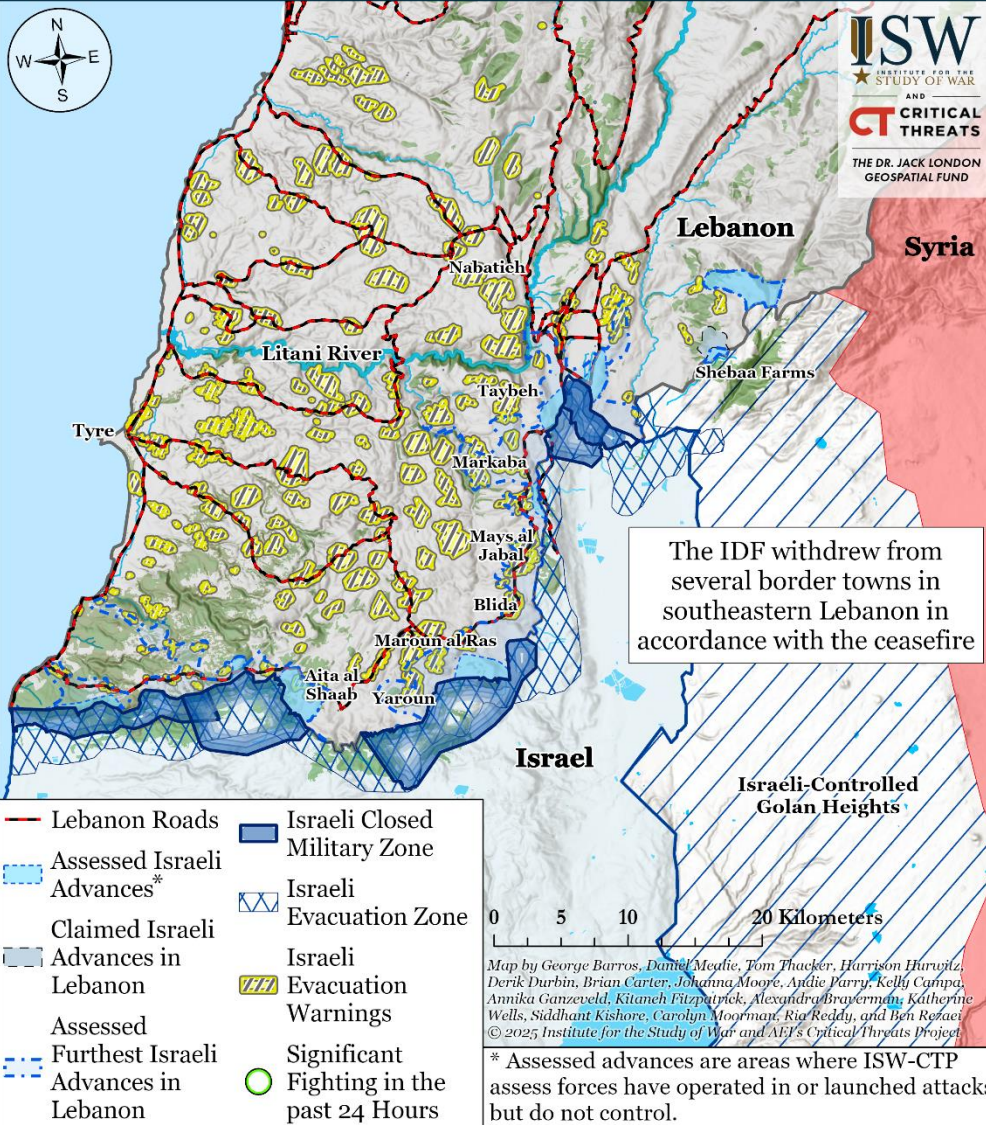


Lebanon

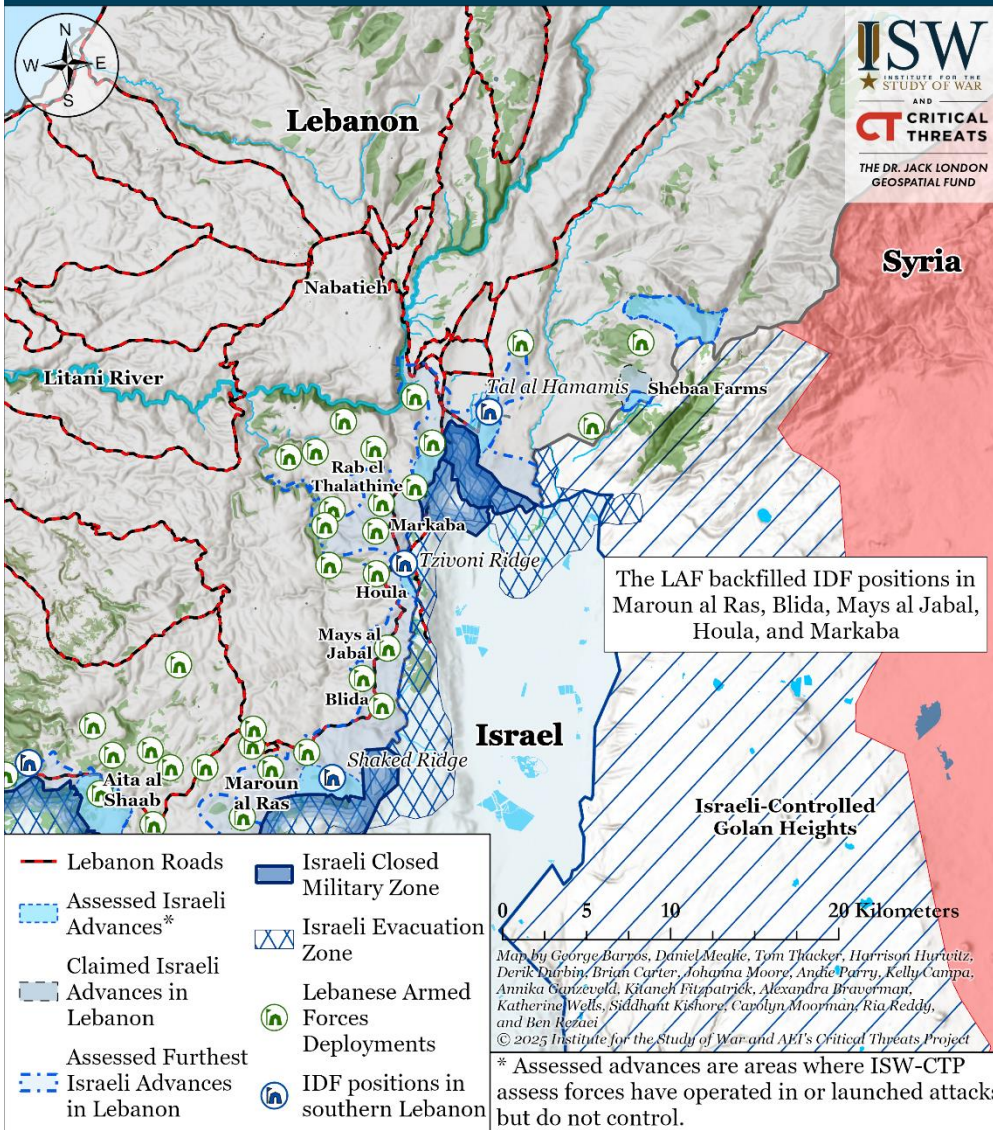
The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) backfilled the IDF in numerous positions along the southeastern Lebanese border on February 18, in accordance with the ceasefire deadline. The IDF withdrew from at least ten southeastern Lebanese towns on February 18. Lebanese and Israeli media reported that the IDF withdrew from Yaroun, Maroun al Ras, Mhaibib, Blida, Mays al Jabal, Houla, Markaba, Odaisseh, and Kfar Kila.[53] The LAF backfilled the IDF in all of these towns.[54] The IDF recently announced it would withdraw most of its forces from southern Lebanon on February 18 but keep Israeli troops stationed on five strategically significant hills.[55] This includes Shaked Ridge, south of Blida, and Tzivoni Ridge, near Houla, in southeastern Lebanon.[56]

Reported Israeli Operations in Lebanon

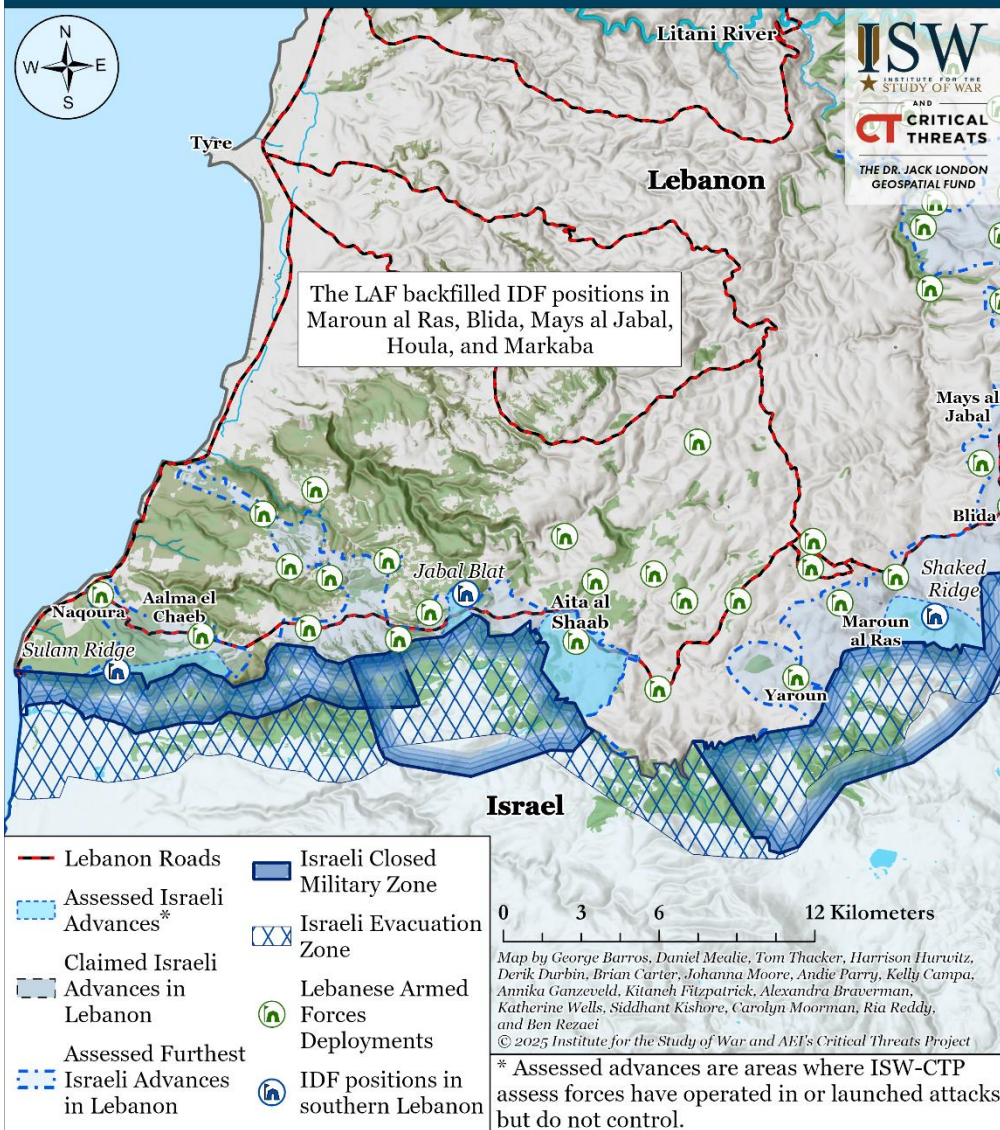
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Reported Israeli Operations in the Eastern Sector As of February 18, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Reported Israeli Operations in the Western Sector As of February 18, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



West Bank

Nothing Significant to Report.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

Tehran Law Enforcement Command (LEC) officials arrested suspects who killed a Tehran University student on February 12.[57] The incident led to student protests and clashes with security forces over the lack of safety and heavy security presence on campus.[58]

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Ground Forces conducted the second phase of the "Great Prophet 19" military exercise in southwestern Iran on February 18.[59] The exercise reportedly focused on defending against extra-regional threats. The Saber in

Special Forces Brigades carried out a nighttime airborne deployment with IRGC Aerospace Force Ilyushin-76 aircraft and conducted specialized aerial supply drops and rapid helicopter deployments.[60] Iranian officials unveiled and tested new First Person View (FPV) drones and missile systems, including upgraded Fajr-5 ballistic missiles, reportedly capable of penetrating one-meter thick concrete.[61]

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei met with Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) Secretary General Ziad al Nakhalah in Tehran on February 18.[62] Khamenei congratulated PIJ on its “victory” and praised the “unity” of Palestinian resistance groups. Al Nakhalah thanked Khamenei and former Lebanese Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah for their support.

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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