

# Iran Update



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**Information Cutoff: February 3, 2025, 2:00pm 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.*

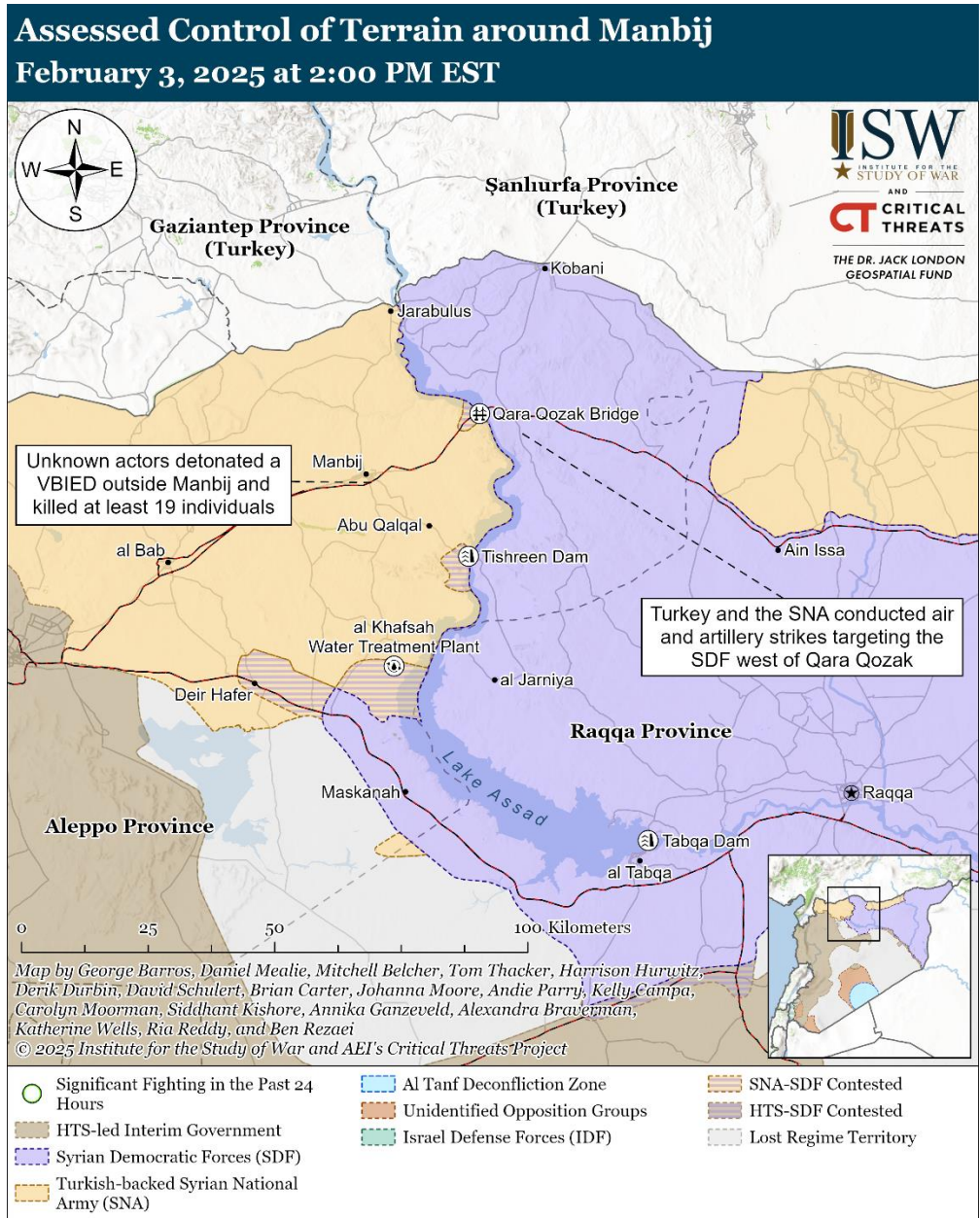
*We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We utterly condemn violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity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

**An Iraqi Sunni parliamentarian criticized State of Law Coalition head Nouri al Maliki on February 3 for promoting sectarianism.**[1] Maliki gave a speech on February 1 in which he made anti-Sunni sectarian statements and implicitly accused Sunnis of trying to overthrow the Iraqi federal government.[2] Progress Party member Shaalan al Karim described Maliki's speech as "charged with sectarianism" and criticized the Shia Coordination Framework — a loose coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi parties — for not denouncing Maliki's statements.[3] Karim added that the Iraqi parliament approved the General Amnesty Law amendment on January 21 with "broad political agreement." Karim likely made this statement in response to Maliki's claim that the amendment will release "murderers and criminals" from prison.[4] The General Amnesty Law amendment will grant amnesty to many Iraqis, including some who were arrested under Article 4 of the Anti-Terrorism Law.[5] The approval of the amendment was a long-standing Sunni demand and has long been opposed by Iraqi Shia parties. CTP-ISW has observed no other prominent Iraqi Sunni politician respond to Maliki's speech at the time of this writing.

**Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara will visit Ankara, Turkey, on February 4.**[6] The director of media for Turkish President Erdogan said that Shara will discuss the latest developments in Syria and Syrian-Turkish economic and security cooperation during meetings at the Presidential Complex.[7]

**Unknown actors detonated a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) along the M4 highway outside of Manbij and killed at least 19 people on February 3.**[8] Syrian media reported that unknown actors parked the VBIED near the Hassin station, outside of Manbij City, on February 2 and then detonated it the next day. At least 15 of the casualties were agricultural workers

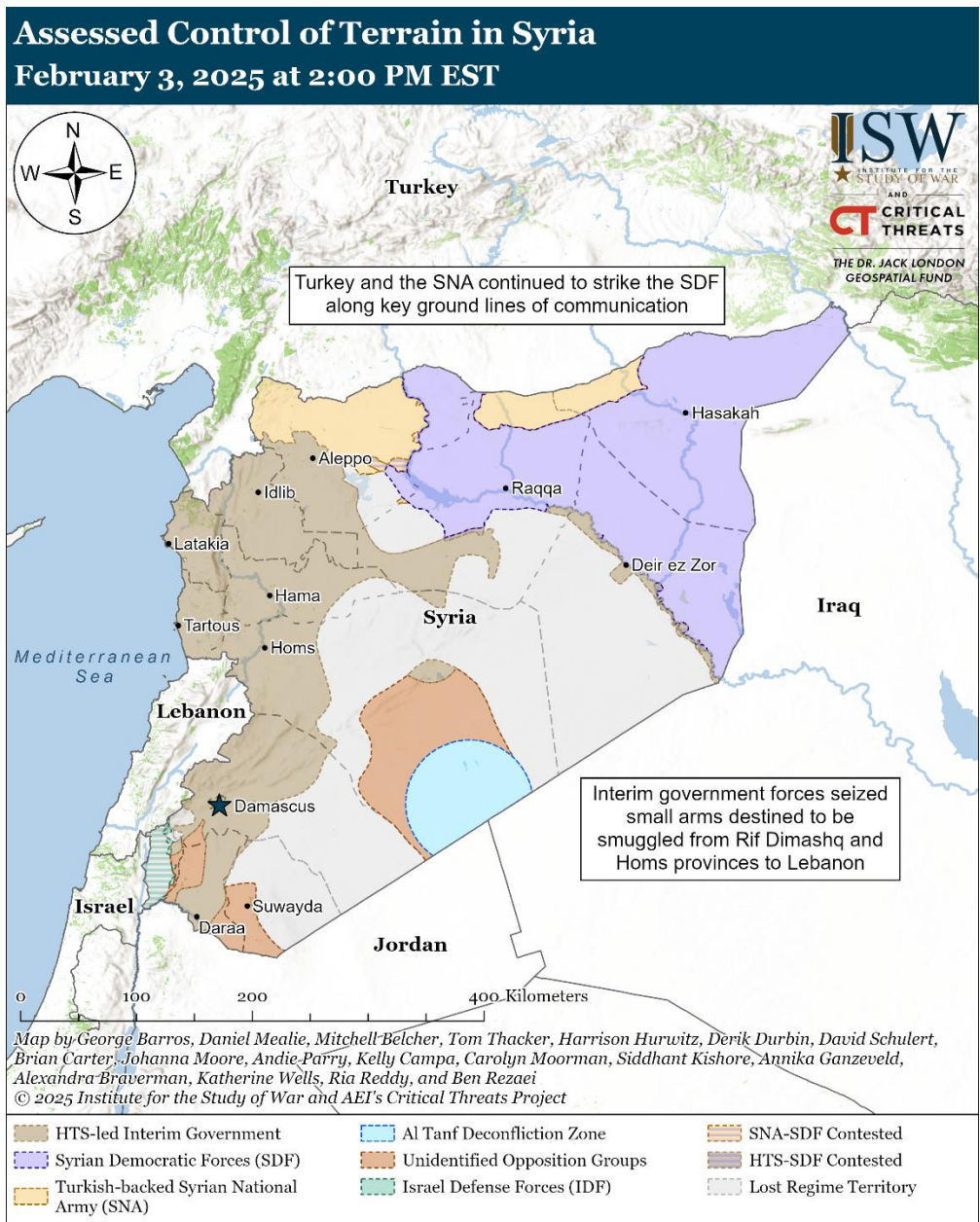
in the vehicle next to the VBIED.[9] Unknown actors have recently detonated at least seven VBIEDS in the Manbij area since December 2024, including an attack on February 1.[10] This most recent attack is the highest casualty incident yet in the series of attacks. The perpetrators and intended target(s) of the attack are unknown at this time. Syrian President Ahmed al Shara’s Office said in a statement that the Syrian state would pursue and impose “severe punishments” on the perpetrators of the attack.[11]



Turkish and anti-SDF Syrian media accused the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), the People’s Protection Units (YPG), and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) of conducting the February 3 VBIED attack.[12] Previous VBIED attacks have similarly inspired accusations against the SDF. SDF officials condemned the attack and blamed Turkish-backed factions for conducting the attack and inspiring fear among the population.[13] The SDF volunteered the help the Syrian interim government find the perpetrators.[14]

**Key Takeaways:**

- **Iraq:** An Iraqi Sunni parliamentarian criticized Nour al Maliki for stoking sectarian tensions. This comes after Maliki gave an inflammatory speech accusing Sunnis of trying to overthrow the Iraqi federal government.
- **Syria:** Interim President Ahmed al Shara will pay an official visit to Ankara to discuss bilateral cooperation and events in Syria.
- **Syria:** An unknown actor detonated a VBIED near Manbij in northern Syria, marking the seventh VBIED detonation in the area in recent months.



**Syria**



**Turkey and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) continued to strike SDF positions along key ground lines of communication in order to isolate SDF forces at Qara Qozak Bridge.** The SDF said that Turkish aircraft struck multiple villages east of Qara Qozak Bridge, including Ghasq, Melha, al Tineh, and the Sarrin airbase on February 2.[15] A Turkish airstrike reportedly damaged the al Shuyoukh Fawqani water station.[16] Turkey has concentrated airstrikes targeting SDF positions along the eastern bank of the Euphrates River near Qara Qozak Bridge in recent days.[17]

**Anti-SDF media reported that Turkey shelled SDF positions west of Tal Abyad, Raqqa Province, on February 3.**[18] The SDF and SNA recently exchanged artillery fire in the western Tal Abyad countryside on February 2.[19]

**Syrian media circulated reports on February 3 that the Syrian Defense Ministry appointed two SNA leaders as division commanders within the new Syrian armed forces.** Hamza Division Commander Saif Abu Bakr expressed congratulations on February 3 to Abu Amsha for his promotion to brigadier general and assuming command of the "25th Division" on February 3.[20] Abu Amsha currently commands the Suleiman Shah Brigades, which comprises the SNA "Joint Force" with the Hamza Division. The US Treasury Department has sanctioned both Abu Amsha and Abu Bakr for human rights abuses against Kurds.[21] The Syrian Ministry of Defense recently promoted Amsha to the rank of colonel on December 29.[22] Abu Amsha's rumored promotion and appointment also comes amid reports of another SNA leader's promotion to division commander. Anti-SDF media reported that Liberation and Construction Movement commander Raed al Arab, aka Abu Arab, was appointed commander of the "118th Armored Division." [23] The Liberation and Construction Movement currently operates within the SNA.[24] Syrian media previously identified Abu Arab in January 2024 as the commander of the new "Badia Division," who reportedly led the HTS-led Military Operations Department's seizure of Zamla oil field on January 22.[25] The Syrian Defense Ministry has notably not confirmed the appointments nor the establishment of the divisions. Both Abu Amsha and Abu Arab have met directly with senior Syrian government officials in recent weeks, supporting the suggestion that both could serve in prominent positions within the future Syrian armed forces.[26]

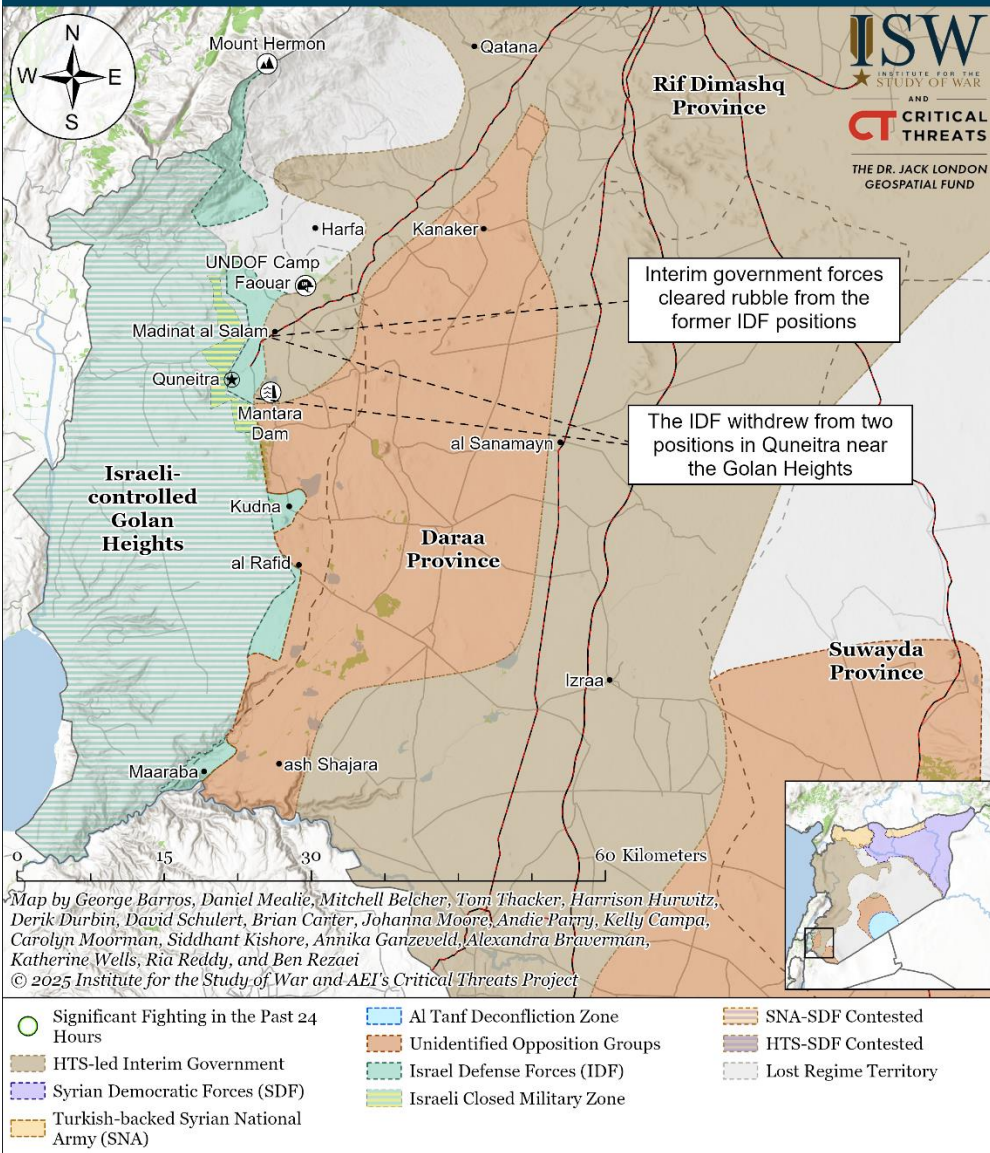
The Syrian Defense Ministry has yet to announce whether it will establish new formations or inherit legacy Syrian Arab Army (SAA) structures. The 118th Armored Division did not exist under the SAA. The 25th Division, however, is a former SAA special operations forces unit that last deployed to stop the opposition offensive in November and December 2024.[27] It is unclear if the rumored new "25th Division" will follow the previous unit's structure.

**Syrian President Ahmed al Shara told Western journalists on January 31 that he asked Turkey to halt its plans for a "full-fledged" operation into northern Syria in order to give the Syrian interim government "space to negotiate with the SDF.**[28] Turkish officials have repeatedly threatened to launch a military operation to "destroy" the SDF if it fails to disarm.[29] Shara's comments are consistent with Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Hakan Fidan's statement on January 10 that the interim Syrian government should be given the opportunity to address Kurdish militants' presence within the SDF before Turkey takes military action.[30] Fidan said that the HTS-led interim government has an "agenda" to address the "PKK/YPG" but promised that "Turkey will" take action if others — presumably HTS — fail to do so.[31]

Negotiations between the SDF and Syrian interim government have continued since January 10 without tangible results. SDF commander Mazloum Abdi said in a February 2 interview with the *Associated Press* that SDF officials will continue to visit Damascus to negotiate with the Syrian interim government.[32] Abdi said that SDF officials recently sent a proposal to the Damascus and are “waiting for the response.”[33] Syrian President Ahmed al Shara said on February 3 that the SDF has expressed its readiness to give up its weapons to the government but that the two parties still disagree over the “details.”[34] Abdi said that the SDF supports a central government based out of Damascus and does not seek northeastern Syria to set up an autonomous government and parliament like in northern Iraq but still seeks a “decentralized” state.[35] The issue of centralization has previously served as one of the primary sticking points between the SDF and the Syrian government. The commander of the SDF's Northern Democratic Brigade told Kurdish media on February 3 that the SDF will not consider disarming before it resolves issues related to civilian institutions and displaced persons with the Syrian government.[36]

**The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) withdrew from two positions in Quneitra Province near the Golan Heights in Syria on February 2.**[37] Local media reported that Israeli forces left the Quneitra Province court building and Mantara Dam area.[38] Israeli forces began establishing positions in Quneitra Province on December 8.[39] The Quneitra Provincial Council and the Syrian Civil Defense began clearing roads of rubble near the previous IDF deployment.[40]

## Assessed Control of Terrain around Quneitra February 3, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



**Interim government forces seized small arms destined to be smuggled to Lebanon from Rif Dimashq and Homs provinces on February 2 and 3.[41]** Syrian forces previously thwarted a smuggling attempt to resupply Hezbollah in Lebanon from Rif Dimashq on January 25.[42] The General Directorate specified in the previous smuggling attempt that the weapons were intended for Hezbollah.[43] It is unlikely that existing smuggling networks fully collapsed when the Assad regime fell, despite the flight of numerous Iranian-backed elements from Syria.

**Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara outlined his vision and an updated timeline for building a new Syrian government on February 3.** Shara told Syria TV that he plans for Syria to be a republican system with an executive administration and a judiciary.[44] He reiterated that Syria would first have an unelected interim parliament because of the challenges of holding an election with over half the population still in exile.[45] This appointed parliament and committee was first

announced at the “victory conference” that Hayat Tahrir al Sham held in Damascus on January 29.[46] Shara estimated in his February 3 interview that there would be a four-to-five-year period before Syria would hold elections and full transfer to the new system.[47] Shara had previously described the interim government overseeing a three-to-four-year transition period, during which he would presumably rule and exert heavy influence over the allocation of political power.[48] Shara said that he rejects a quota system that for Syria that would give government positions or power percentages to specific sectarian or ethnic groups.[49] Shara has previously indicated that he is committed to “respect[ing] all sects” and holding “national dialogue” with them, but it is not yet clear if this dialogue will involve the discussion of constitutional issues, and he has not yet taken concrete steps to include Syrian minorities in the government.[50] Shara’s Hayat Tahrir al Sham is a predominantly Sunni Arab organization, making the inclusion of religious minorities in Syria’s government through quotas not in his inherent interest.

## **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

**Unspecified individuals conducted a drone attack targeting the Emirati-operated Khor Mor gas field in Sulaymaniyah Province, Iraq, on February 2.[51]** The Iraqi Kurdistan Counterterrorism General Directorate reported that “outlawed militias” launched the attack from Bashir, Kirkuk Province.[52] Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani ordered the formation of a security committee to investigate the attack. No group has claimed responsibility for the attack at the time of this writing. Armed groups have attacked the Khor Mor gas field on multiple occasions in recent years, including in June 2022 and April 2024.[53]

**Iraqi National Security Adviser Qassem al Araji met with Accountability and Justice Commission head Bassem al Badri on February 3.[54]** The Accountability and Justice Commission replaced the De-Baathification Committee in 2008 and is ostensibly responsible for preventing “the return of the Baath’s ideology, power, or practices.”[55] In reality, however, the Shia Coordination Framework, which is a coalition of Iranian-backed Shia political parties, has weaponized the Accountability and Justice Commission to sideline political opposition.[56] Badri is a member of the Dawa Party, which is led by former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki.[57] Maliki appointed Badri as the head of the Accountability and Justice Commission in 2013.[58] Araji’s meeting with Badri comes after the newly formed United Sunni Leadership Coalition demanded the dissolution of the Accountability and Justice Commission on January 18.[59] Iraqi Sunnis have demanded the dissolution of this commission since before the United States withdrew from Iraq in December 2011.[60]

Araji separately met with Maliki on February 3.[61] Iraqi media reported that Araji and Maliki discussed the importance of “supporting security and intelligence efforts to preserve the security and stability of [Iraq].” Maliki recently emphasized on February 1 that he will not allow the dissolution of the Accountability and Justice Commission.[62]

## **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

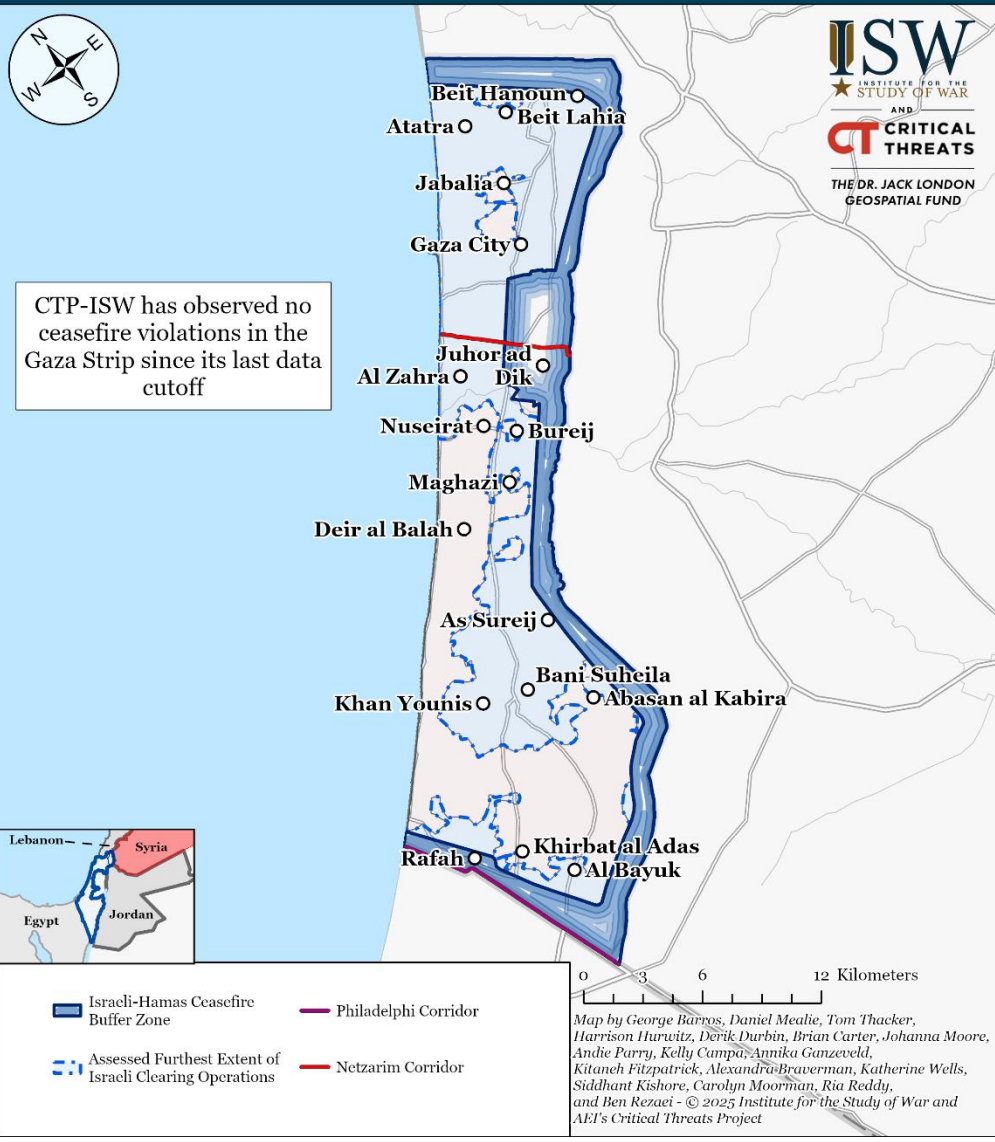
### ***The Gaza Strip***

Nothing significant to report.



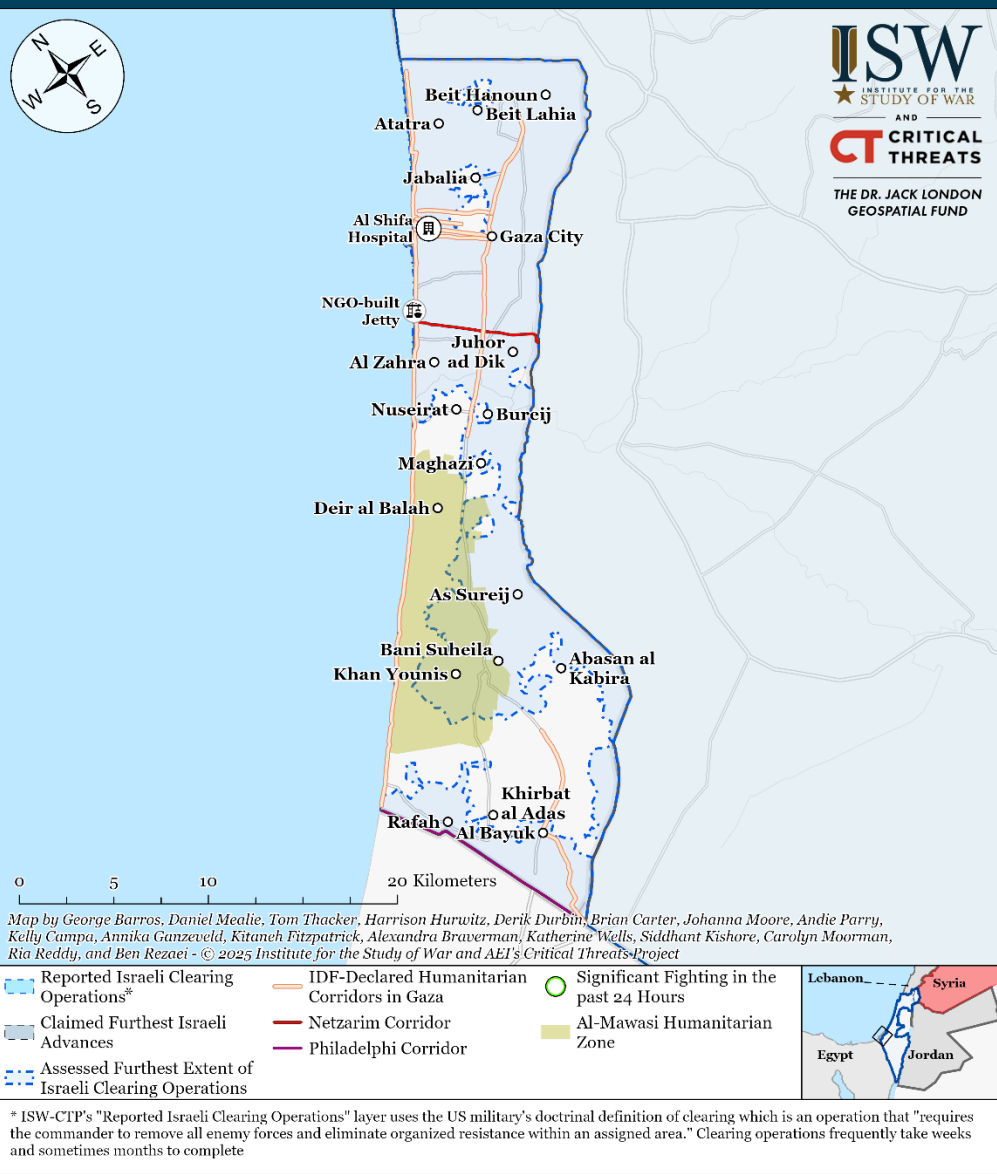
# Israel-Hamas Ceasefire Lines

As of February 3, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



# Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

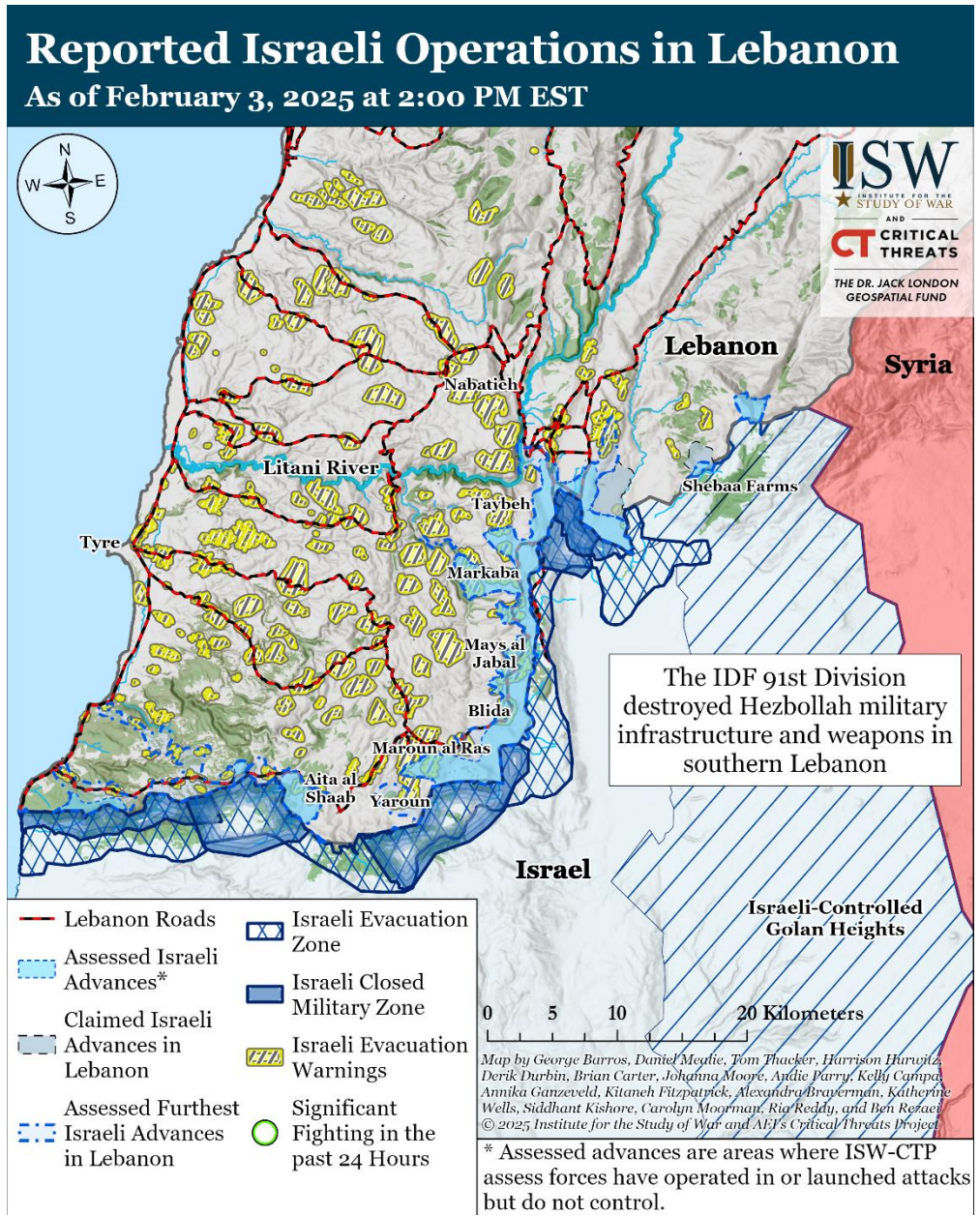
As of February 3, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



## Lebanon

**The IDF 91st Division has destroyed Hezbollah military infrastructure and weapons in southern Lebanon in recent days.[63]** The IDF 769th Territorial Brigade (91st Division) destroyed several weapons depots, which included mortars, missiles, rockets, and other military equipment. The IDF 7th Armored Brigade (36th Division) continued operations in southern Lebanon. Geolocated footage posted to X (Twitter) showed the IDF destroyed infrastructure in Kfar Kila, southern Lebanon.[64] Lebanese and Hezbollah-affiliated media reported that the IDF has detonated explosives in Kfar Kila in recent days.[65] The IDF killed Hezbollah fighters in southern Lebanon and detained suspects whom it deemed posed a threat.[66]

Geolocated footage posted to X (Twitter) on February 2 showed that the IDF moved southward from Deir Mimas, southern Lebanon.[67] The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) back filled the IDF in Deir Mimas on January 27.[68] Lebanese media reported the IDF moved eastward from Aitaroun toward this area on February 1.[69]



### West Bank

The IDF detained a Palestinian individual who had infiltrated from the West Bank into Kafr Qara, northern Israel and planned to conduct attacks.[70] The IDF detained the individual after he expressed his wish to die a “martyr” in a social media post. The detainee is a resident of Jenin, northern West Bank.

**The IDF has killed three Palestinian fighters in Tulkarm, northern West Bank, in recent days.[71]** The IDF located an improvised explosive device (IED) manufacturing facility and destroyed approximately 45 IEDs there. The IDF also detained 50 fighters in Tulkarm. These activities are part of the large-scale IDF counterterrorism operation designed to destroy militia infrastructure in the northern West Bank.[72]

**The IDF 828th Infantry Brigade began to use Eitan armored fighting vehicles (AFV) to support the counterterrorism operation in Tubas, northern West Bank, on February 2.[73]**

### **Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy**

**Iraqi Parliament Speaker Mahmoud al Mashhadani met with senior Iranian officials in Tehran on February 2 and 3.[74]** Mashhadani met with Iranian Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei, Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, and Deputy Parliament Speaker Haji Babaei. These meetings touched on Iran-Iraqi relations across several fields, including parliamentary cooperation and infrastructure projects, which Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian had discussed in his visit to Iraq in September 2024.[75]

**The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy sent the Shahid Sattar Mahmoudi flotilla to Port Khalid Sharjah in Sharjah City, the United Arab Emirates for a three-day port visit on February 3.[76]** IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Ali Reza Tangsiri stated that this is the first time the IRGC and Artesh navies have conducted a prolonged port visit to the United Arab Emirates.[77] Tangsiri added that this visit is part of several military cooperation events with Iran's neighboring countries to ensure security in the Strait of Hormuz.[78]

**Iranian officials continue to meet with Azerbaijani and Armenia officials.** Azerbaijani President's Assistant Hikmet Hajiyev met with the Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi, and Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Akbar Ahmadian separately, on the sidelines of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) Deputy Foreign Ministers summit in Tehran on February 1 and 2.[79] All Iranian officials confirmed their commitment to Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and to maintaining stability in the South Caucasus. Ahmadian, who recently met with Armenian officials in Yerevan on January 9, also encouraged Hajiyev to not let "enemies" harm Tehran and Baku's good relationship.[80] Deputy Foreign Ministers from ECO member states, including Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan also attended the ECO summit.[81]

**Iranian media recently circulated a video of a female Iranian citizen removing her clothing and climbing on top of a police car to resist arrest in Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi Province.[82]** It is unclear when the incident took place or why the police tried to arrest her. Some social media users have connected her protest to the Mahsa Amini movement.[83] This incident comes after a female Iranian student similarly removed some of her clothing in protest against being harassed and assaulted by regime security forces at the Islamic Azad University in November 2024.[84] Security forces reportedly targeted the student for improperly adhering to the mandatory hijab law. The incident in Mashhad is noteworthy given that Mashhad is one of the most conservative cities in Iran.



**Iranian security forces arrested an unspecified Salafi-jihadi cell in Javanroud, Kermanshah Province on February 3.[85]** The arrest comes after the IRGC Ground Forces and Artesh Ground Forces conducted military exercises in Kermanshah Province in January 2025.[86]

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*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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