Iran Update, February 5, 2024 Annika Ganzeveld, Andie Parry, Alexandra Braverman, and Brian Carter

Information Cutoff: 2:00pm ET

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. For more on developments in Iran and the region, see our interactive map of Iran and the Middle East.

Note: CTP and ISW have refocused the update to cover the Israel-Hamas war. The new sections address developments in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as noteworthy activity from Iran's Axis of Resistance. 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.

Click here to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report. Click here to subscribe to the Iran Update.

Iranian-backed Iraqi officials are using recent US airstrikes targeting Iranian-backed Iraqi militias to retroactively justify their political pressure on the Iraqi federal government to expel US forces from Iraq. The United States has the right to respond and defend itself against these attacks from Iranian-backed groups in Iraq are themselves violating Iraqi sovereignty by launching attacks from Iraqi territory targeting US forces, who are in Iraq at the invitation of the Iraqi government, and American assets elsewhere in the region. Acting parliament speaker Mohsen al Mandalawi called on the Iraqi federal government to implement the January 2020 parliamentary resolution to expel "all foreign forces" from Iraq while touring the sites of the US strikes in al Qaim and Akashat in western Anbar Province on February 5.[1] Popular Mobilization Forces Chief of Staff and Kataib Hezbollah official Abu Fadak al Muhammadawi and Iranian-backed Badr Organization member and Parliamentary Security and Defense Committee Chairman Abbas Zamili accompanied Mandalawi to al Qaim and Akashat.[2] The Parliamentary Security and Defense Committee announced in December 2023 a draft resolution in December 2023 that would expel US forces from Iraq.[3]

Mandalawi is a Shia politician who is close to the Shia Coordination Framework, a loose coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi political parties. Mandalawi became acting parliament speaker in November 2023, when the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court unconstitutionally dismissed former speaker Mohammad al Halbousi.[4] The Shia Coordination Framework has sought to postpone the election of a new parliament speaker to replace Mandalawi by invalidating the candidacies of parliament speaker hopefuls.[5] Iranian-backed Iraqi actors filed a lawsuit on January 23 that includes a clause preventing Parliament from resuming the vote for a parliament speaker until the Federal Supreme Court issues a ruling on the eligibility of Halbousi-backed candidate Shaalan al Karim.[6]

Other Iranian-backed politicians in Iraq also issued statements to increase pressure on Iraqi officials. Popular Mobilization Commission Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh said that the US airstrikes went "too far" because they targeted a Popular Mobilization Forces facility, adding that the Iraqi people, government, and political forces must end the foreign presence in Iraq.[7] Fayyadh said that targeting the Popular Mobilization Forces was a "red line" and that US strikes will not go "unnoticed."[8] Key Iranian proxy Hadi Ameri and the Shia Coordination Framework—a loose coalition of Shia parties—called for the expulsion of US forces immediately.[9] Iran backs some Shia Coordination Framework parties.

Iran's surrogates in Iraq co-opted and lead the Popular Mobilization Forces. Fayyadh, who leads the PMF, has closely cooperated with Quds Forces operatives to implement Iranian directives in Iraq, including by killing Iraqi citizens during peaceful protests in 2019.[10] The PMF contains many Iranian proxy groups. The US strikes targeted two such groups on February 2.[11]

Iranian Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Akbar Ahmadian met with senior Iraqi officials in Baghdad on February 5.[12] The Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson stated on January 29 that Ahmadian would discuss border security and terrorism with Iraqi officials.[13] Ahmadian emphasized Iran's willingness to cooperate with Iraq during a meeting with the Iraqi prime minister, citing the March 2023 security agreement between the two countries.[14] The March 2023 agreement requires Iraqi authorities to disarm and relocate members of Iranian Kurdish opposition groups away from Iran's borders.[15] Ahmadian's visit to Iraq follows the IRGC's drone and missile strikes

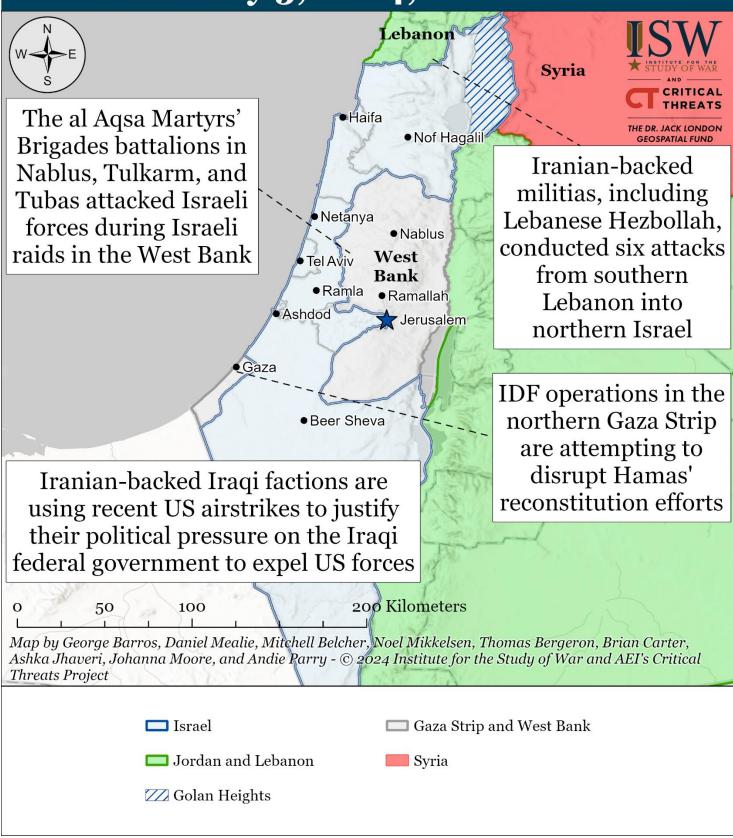
targeting alleged Mossad-affiliated facilities and individuals in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan on January 15.[16] Iran claims frequently that anti-regime Kurdish groups and Israel use Iraqi Kurdistan to conduct operations in Iran.[17]

Ahmadian also likely discussed the recent US strikes targeting IRGC Quds Force and Iranian-backed Iraqi militia targets in Iraq during his meetings with Iraqi officials. Sudani stated that Iraq opposes "any unilateral actions" that violate the principle of "respect for sovereignty" during his meeting with Ahmadian.[18] Sudani was likely referring to both the IRGC's January 15 strikes in Erbil and the February 2 US strikes, which the Sudani administration described as a violation of Iraq's sovereignty on February 3.[19]

Key Takeaways:

- **Iraq and Syria:** Iranian-backed Iraqi officials are using recent US airstrikes targeting Iranian-backed Iraqi militias to retroactively justify their political pressure on the Iraqi federal government to expel US forces from Iraq.
- The United States has the right to respond and defend itself against these attacks from Iranian-backed groups in Iraq. Iranian-backed groups in Iraq are themselves violating Iraqi sovereignty by launching attacks from Iraqi territory targeting US forces in Iraq at the invitation of the Iraqi government and American assets elsewhere in the region.
- Iranian Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Akbar Ahmadian met with senior Iraqi officials in Baghdad on February 5.
- Northern Gaza Strip: The Israel Defense Force 162nd Division launched a new, division-size clearing operation in central and northern Gaza City in the past week. CTP-ISW assessed on February 3 that Palestinian fighters infiltrated southwestern Gaza City
- The IDF is conducting operations in the northern Gaza Strip to disrupt Hamas' attempts to reconstitute its governing authority.
- **Southern Gaza Strip:** Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant reiterated that the IDF plans to clear Hamas fighters and military infrastructure from Rafah and the central Gaza Strip on February 5.
- **Yemen:** US Central Command conducted preemptive strikes targeting four Houthi anti-ship cruise missiles and a land-attack cruise missile on February 4.

Israel-Hamas War as of February 5, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



<u>Gaza Strip</u>

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

- Erode the will of the Israeli political establishment and public to launch and sustain a major ground operation into the Gaza Strip
- Degrade IDF material and morale around the Gaza Strip.

The Israel Defense Force (IDF) 162nd Division launched a new, division-size clearing operation in central and northern Gaza City in the past week.[20] The IDF withdrew a large number of forces from the northern Gaza Strip on December 31 after months of fighting there.[21] CTP-ISW assessed on February 3 that Palestinian fighters infiltrated southwestern Gaza City.[22] The IDF 162nd Division commander said on February 5 that the Nahal Brigade and 401st Brigade began conducting new clearing operations to reduce Hamas fighters and infrastructure in al Shati camp and Rimal neighborhood in western Gaza City. An Israeli Army Radio correspondent said on February 4 that the 162nd Division's operation aims to target Hamas underground infrastructure over two weeks.[23] Palestinian militias continued attacks targeting IDF forces during these operations in western Gaza City.[24]

An Israeli Army Radio correspondent said that Palestinian fighters are hiding among civilians in humanitarian shelters to evade capture and facilitate infiltration in the northern Gaza Strip.[25] The IDF is evacuating the entire population from the shelters in the northern Strip to find and detain the fighters.[26] The correspondent said that the IDF captured over 70 "high-level" Hamas and PIJ fighters over the last week using this method.[27] The IDF estimates there are 200,000 Gazans in the northern strip, mostly concentrated within humanitarian shelters.[28] The IDF is continuing to search for Hamas Gaza City Brigade commander Izz al Din al Hadad, who has evaded capture and is responsible for Hamas' reconstitution efforts in the Gaza Strip, according to the IDF.[29] Hadad's capture would slow but not stop Hamas' reconstitution and infiltration in the Gaza City area.

The IDF is conducting operations in the northern Gaza Strip to disrupt Hamas' attempts to reconstitute its governing authority.[30] Israeli operations are targeting Hamas' police and internal security apparatus.[31] The Civil Police and the Hamas-controlled Interior Ministry's Internal Security Forces in Gaza both employ fighters from the Hamas military wing.[32] An Israeli Army Radio correspondent estimated that half of Hamas' police officers are also fighters in the group's military wing, the al Qassem Brigades.[33]

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant stressed on February 5 that establishing a political alternative to Hamas is crucial to the success of Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip.[34] Gallant's statement about establishing a civil alternative echoes the four-pronged security and governance plan he articulated for the Gaza Strip on January 4.[35] The lack of a suitable political alternative has enabled Hamas to begin rebuilding its governance system in the northern Gaza Strip as it infiltrates into areas where Israeli forces previously conducted clearing operations.[36]

Israeli forces and Palestinian militias clashed three times in the central Gaza Strip. The al Quds Brigades claimed mortar attacks on Israeli infantry and armor east of Maghazi and east of Deir al Balah.[37] Israeli forces struck a five-man Hamas cell operating near Israeli forces in the Central Gaza Strip.[38]

Israeli forces continued clearing operations in western Khan Younis on February 5. The 646th Paratrooper Brigade (assigned to the 99th Division) cleared militia sites, captured weapons, killed at least 10 Palestinian fighters, and directed airstrikes targeting Palestinian fighters in Khan Younis.[39] The Givati Brigade (assigned to the 162nd Division) cleared Hamas infrastructure and killed dozens of Palestinian fighters in western Khan Younis.[40]

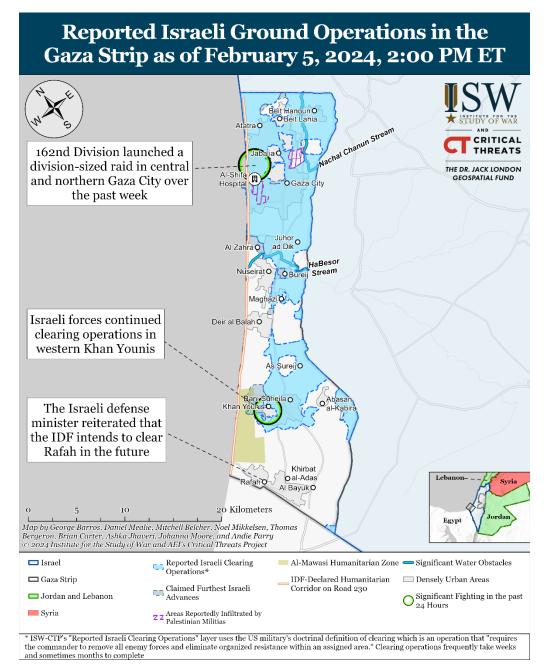
Palestinian militias continued to attempt to defend against Israeli operations in the Khan Younis. Militia groups claimed 11 attacks on Israeli forces in Khan Younis on February 5.[41] Hamas' militant wing conducted a complex attack on Israeli armor using improvised explosive devices and rocket-propelled grenades in the al Amal area in Khan Younis.[42] Hamas and PIJ's militant wings conducted a combined attack on an Israeli tank in the same area of western Khan Younis.[43]

The IDF is increasing its focus on degrading Hamas and PIJ rocket capabilities. The IDF concentrated on other tactical objectives during earlier phases of the ground operation. An Israeli Army Radio correspondent said that the IDF estimates Hamas has about 1,000 rockets left in its arsenal.[44] These rockets are mostly in small, relatively simple underground launch silos, which enable Hamas and its allies to disguise and protect their rocket infrastructure. Hamas fighters launched a rocket salvo targeting Tel Aviv from disguised, buried launch silos only 20 to 30 meters from Israeli troops, which illustrates the challenges involved in detecting and destroying similar sites.[45] Unspecified senior IDF officials told the correspondent that it will take up to two years to completely wipe out Hamas' rocket launch capability in the Gaza Strip.[46] The IDF also added that a Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) cell operating in Zaytoun, southern Gaza City, is responsible for most rocket attacks into Israel from the Gaza Strip in recent weeks.[47]

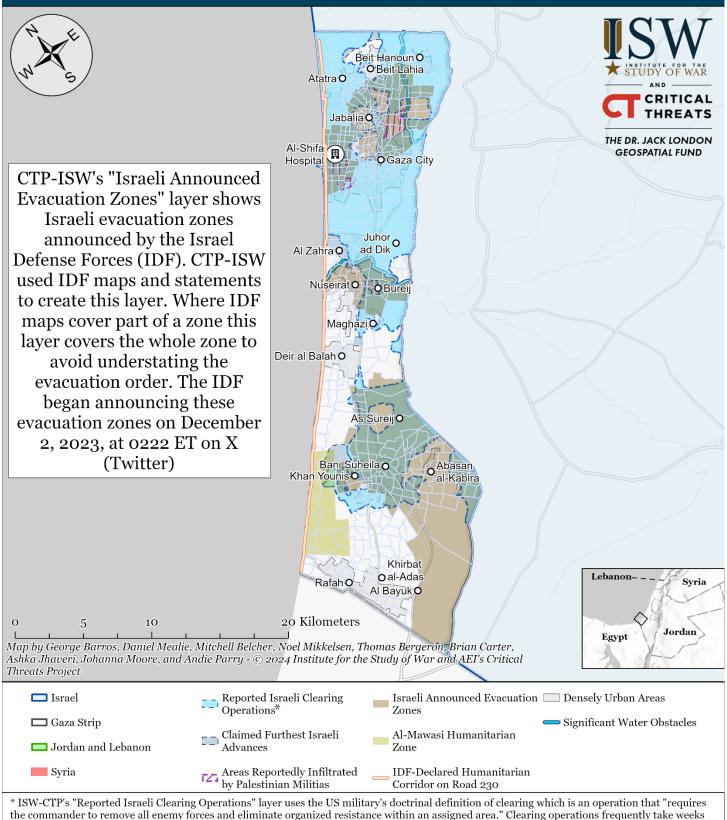
Palestinian militias did not conduct indirect fire attacks from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel on February 5.

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant reiterated that the IDF plans to clear Hamas fighters and military infrastructure from Rafah and the central Gaza Strip on February 5.[48] The IDF said on February 2 that the 99th Division's operations in the central Gaza Strip aim to prevent Hamas fighters from infiltrating Gaza City from the southern Gaza Strip.[49] Gallant did not specify a timeline for the operation, nor did he address where the Gazan civilians sheltering in Rafah would be moved during an operation in Rafah. An unspecified senior Israeli official said on February 4 that Israel would work with Egypt to evacuate Gazans northward before any ground offensive begins in Rafah.[50]

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu blamed Hamas for impeding hostage negotiations by making demands Israel "will not agree to."[51] Netanyahu said that defeating Hamas will take "months, not years" in a Likud party meeting on February 5.[52] Netanyahu reiterated that Israel seeks to completely defeat Hamas and that the IDF will need to operate in all areas of the Gaza Strip to defeat Hamas. Israel's public broadcaster reported on January 31 that Hamas was demanding the release of all elite Nukhba unit fighters currently held in Israeli jails.[53] The Nukhba unit is an elite Hamas unit that participated in the October 7 attack on Israel. Egyptian officials reported that Hamas political leadership demanded the release of 3,000 Palestinian prisoners, including two top Palestinian leaders.[54]



Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip as of February 5, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



and sometimes months to complete

West Bank

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

• Draw IDF assets and resources toward the West Bank and fix them there

The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades battalions in Nablus, Tulkarm, and Tubas attacked Israeli forces during Israeli raids in the West Bank on February 5.[55] The IDF said that it conducted raids in Nablus, Hebron, and Tulkarm arresting 33 "wanted persons."[56] Unspecified Palestinian militia fighters fired small arms targeting Israeli forces in Hebron on February 5.[57]



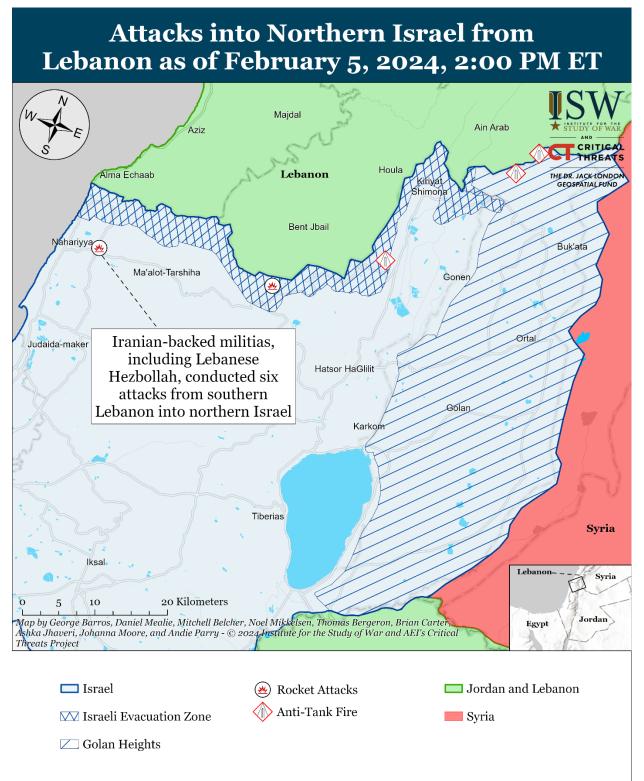
This map is not an exhaustive depiction of clashes and demonstrations in the West Bank.

Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

- Draw IDF assets and resources toward northern Israel and fix them there
- Set conditions for successive campaigns into northern Israel

Iranian-backed militias, including Lebanese Hezbollah, conducted six attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel on February 5.[58] Hezbollah claimed four attacks.[59]



Recorded reports of attacks; CTP-ISW cannot independently verify impact.

Iran and Axis of Resistance

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

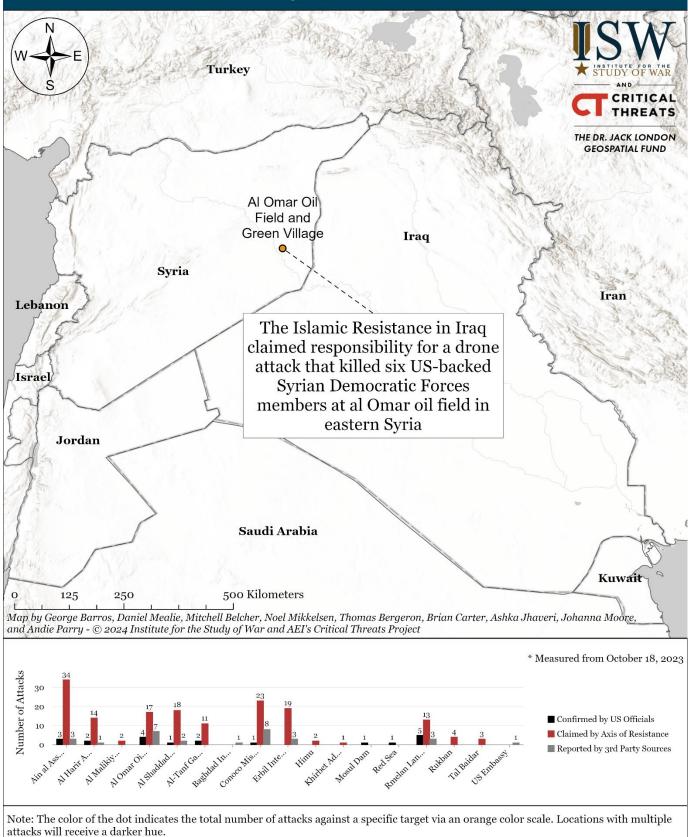
- Demonstrate the capability and willingness of Iran and the Axis of Resistance to escalate against the United States and Israel on multiple fronts
- Set conditions to fight a regional war on multiple fronts

Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada announced on February 4 that it will continue conducting attacks targeting US forces.[60] Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah announced on January 30 that it suspended its "military and security operations" targeting US forces.[61] Kataib Hezbollah's announcement followed a visit by IRGC-QF commander Esmail Qaani in the wake of the January 28 attack that killed three US servicemembers in northeastern Jordan.[62] Western media reported that Kataib Hezbollah, which is part of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, launched the one-way drone attack from western Iraq.[63] The Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada spokesperson stated on February 4 that the February 2 US airstrikes on IRGC Quds Force and Iranian-backed militia targets in Iraq and Syria will not deter Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada's "resistance operations" targeting US forces.[64] The United States conducted the airstrikes on February 2 in response to the January 28 attack. Several other Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, including Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba, also announced between January 31 and February 2 that they will continue attacking US forces.[65]

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—claimed responsibility for a drone attack that killed six US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) members at the al Omar oil field in eastern Syria on February 4.[66] The SDF said that "Iran-backed militias" targeted a training ground at al Omar, killing the SDF members.[67] US forces are stationed at al Omar but the attack did not injure any.[68] The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed responsibility for the attack on a backup Telegram channel that it created in October 2023. The group started using the backup on February 2.[69]

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed separate drone attacks targeting US forces at Harir Airbase in Erbil Province, Iraq, and Rumaylan Landing Zone in Syria on February 3.[70] CTP-ISW previously reported that IRGC-controlled and local Syrian media claimed that the Islamic Resistance in Iraq conducted these attacks.[71] Three "security sources" told Reuters on February 3 that there was no attack targeting the al Harir airbase.[72] US Department of Defense Press Secretary Major General Patrick Ryder confirmed on February 5 that there have been two attacks targeting US forces in the Middle East since February 2. Ryder did not specify where the attacks occurred and stated that no US forces were injured in the attacks.[73]

Attacks against US Bases in the Middle East as of February 5, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



Unspecified gunmen shot and killed senior Asaib Ahl al Haq official Naji al Kaabi (Abu Ali) in Maysan Province on February 4.[74] Kaabi was responsible for Asaib Ahl al Haq relations in Maysan Province.[75] The deputy commander of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces 43rd Brigade blamed Kaabi's death on "unruly militias."[76] The 43rd Brigade is part of Asaib Ahl al Haq, an Iranian-backed militia.

Followers of Iraqi nationalist Shia cleric Moqtada al Sadr may have assassinated Kaabi. Sadr's followers, known as Sadrists, have significant influence in Maysan, which is a Sadrist stronghold. Sadrist militiamen have previously assassinated local Asaib Ahl al Haq-affiliated officials.[77] Asaib Ahl al Haq Secretary General Qais al Khazali issued a de-escalatory statement calling on Asaib Ahl al Haq members to avoid actions "contrary to Sharia, the law, or tribal customs" following Kaabi's death.[78] This suggests that Khazali is attempting to avoid an outright confrontation with other groups in the province.

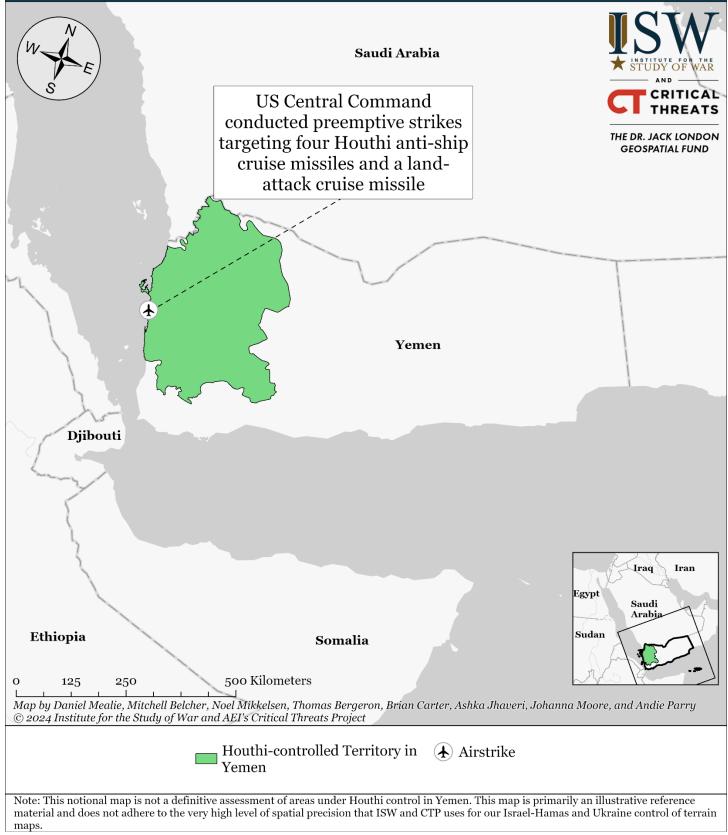
Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani met with Russian Ambassador to Iraq Elbrus Kutrashev on February 5, likely to discuss the recent US strikes targeting IRGC Quds Force and Iranian-backed Iraqi militia targets in Iraq.[79] The United States conducted strikes targeting Iranian-backed Iraqi militias in Anbar Province and Jurf al Sakhr, Babil Province, on February 2 in response to the January 28 drone attack that killed three US servicemembers in Jordan.[80] Iraqi state media reported that Sudani and Kutrashev discussed "efforts to prevent further escalation" in the region.[81] Kutrashev emphasized Russia's support for "stability and security" in Iraq.[82] Russian state media has not published an official readout of the meeting at the time of writing. Kutrashev has held a series of meetings with senior Iraqi officials, including Popular Mobilization Commission Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh, Iraqi President Abdul Latif al Rashid, and Iraqi Shia cleric and politician Ammar al Hakim, since January 23.[83] Kutrashev told Russian media on January 25 that Russia seeks to expand its "presence" in Iraq and "invest additional resources in areas related to security."[84]

Sudani also met with Chinese Ambassador to Iraq Cui Wei on February 5.[85] Sudani and Cui Wei discussed Sino-Iraqi economic cooperation, including Chinese companies' participation in the Development Road project. Iraq launched the Development Road project in March 2023 to connect the Grand Faw Port in southern Iraq to Turkey by road and rail.[86] Sudani said that major powers should help end the Israel-Hamas War.

A pro-Syrian Arab Army source reported that the Jordanian Army fired anti-aircraft guns across the Syria-Jordan border targeting an agricultural area near Daraa City.[87] The source did not specify what the Jordanian Army targeted. The Jordanian military has conducted three airstrikes targeting Iranian-backed drug-smuggling networks in southwestern Syria since December 2023.[88] Jordanian forces have also clashed with Iranian-backed drug smugglers along the border twice since December 2023.[89]

US Central Command (CENTCOM) conducted preemptive strikes targeting four Houthi anti-ship cruise missiles and a land-attack cruise missile on February 4.[90] CENTCOM said that the missiles were "an imminent threat to US Navy ships" and commercial shipping in the Red Sea-Gulf of Aden region.[91]

Houthi-controlled Territory in Yemen as of February 5, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force Commander Esmail Ghaani and Deputy Commander Mohammad Reza Fallahzadeh attended the funeral of an IRGC Quds Force officer on February 4.[92] Anti-Iranian regime media reported that an Israeli airstrike in Syria killed IRGC Quds Force officer Saeid Alidadi on February 2.[93] Alidadi served as an IRGC Quds Force military "advisor" in Syria.[94] Iran uses the title of "advisor" to describe IRGC Quds Force operatives deployed to Syria in support of the Bashar al Assad regime since 2011.[95] Iran did not announce his rank.

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei criticized unspecified Islamic countries for continuing economic relations with Israel during a gathering with Artesh Air Force and Air Defense Force commanders and servicemembers on February 5.[96] Khamenei stated that Muslim nations must deliver a "decisive blow" to Israel by cutting off economic relations. Khamenei criticized unspecified Islamic countries for providing economic aid and "weapons" to Israel. Khamenei also called on Islamic states to cut economic and political ties with Israel prior to the Israel-Hamas war.[97]



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