

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.

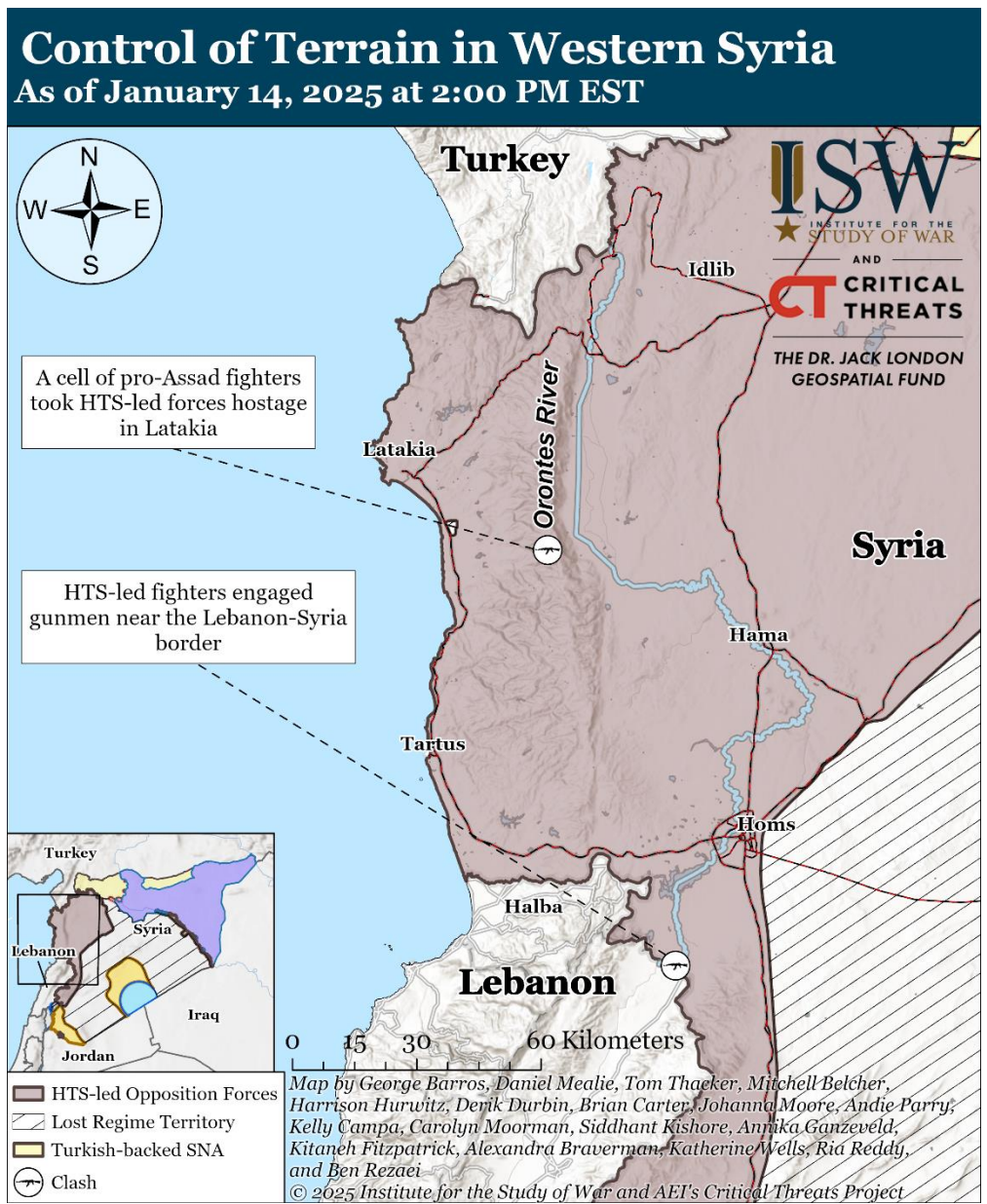
Click [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations, and [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of the ongoing opposition offensive in Syria. These maps are updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

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.

Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) is confronting small pockets of locally organized fighter cells in areas under its control. Some of these groups are led by known Assad regime officials who have military experience and control pre-existing militias.[1] HTS-led forces have successfully confronted and suppressed these isolated incidents of resistance in a way that mirrors the Assad regime's counter-revolutionary approach at the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011-2012.[2] The HTS-led forces have deployed tanks and used attack helicopters and drones to target pro-regime forces in coastal Syria.[3] These deployments have enabled HTS-led forces to swiftly confront small groups of regime remnants.[4] The organization, coordination, size, and spread of these opposition groups do not currently appear to strain HTS-led forces' bandwidth. An increase in pro-Assad activity coupled with an ISIS resurgence in HTS-held areas would very likely present HTS with a bandwidth problem, however, and thus impede future efforts to suppress dissent.[5]

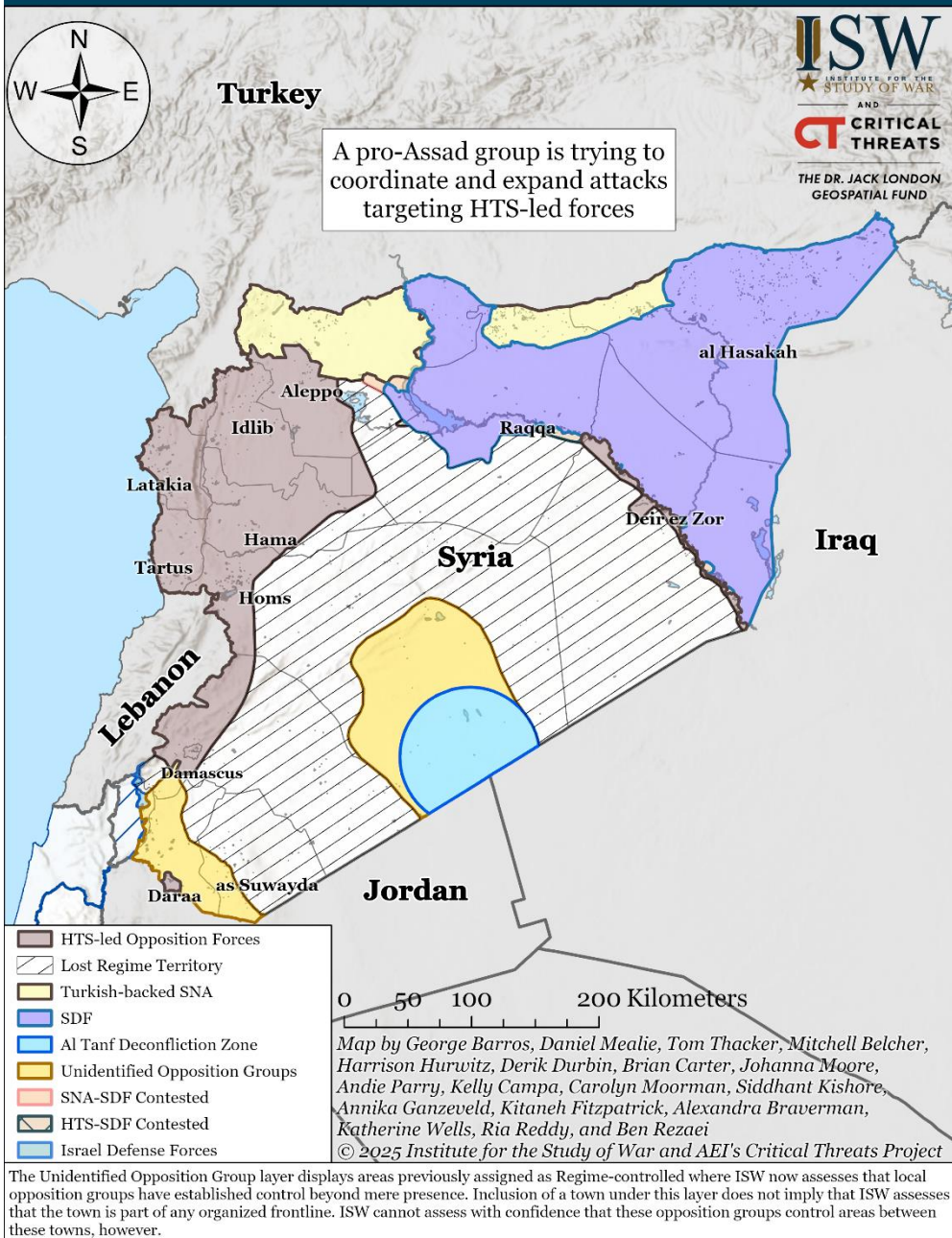
A pro-Assad group is attempting to coordinate and expand attacks targeting HTS-led forces but has yet to demonstrate any ability to do so. The "Syrian Popular Resistance" announced in late December 2024 the launch of armed resistance against the HTS-led interim government.[6] The group has since claimed on multiple occasions that its fighters have attacked and killed interim government forces. It remains unclear whether the group has had any real involvement in these attacks, however.[7] The "Syrian Popular Resistance" claimed on January 13 that it killed over 35 HTS-led forces in western Homs near the Lebanon-Syria border in coordination with fighters from Hermel, Lebanon.[8] Some security analysts attributed the clashes to Lebanese Hezbollah or

smugglers, omitting mention of the "Syrian Popular Resistance." [9] The interim government gave no comment on the clashes, which would be surprising if opposition fighters had indeed killed 35 HTS-led fighters. The "Syrian Popular Resistance" also claimed to be affiliated with a former Syrian regime officer who led an attack taking interim government forces hostage in Latakia on January 14. [10] The militia leader did not mention the "Syrian Popular Resistance" in a video he posted shortly after the attack. [11] That the perpetrators of these attacks do not independently acknowledge any affiliation with the "Syrian Popular Resistance" suggests that this coordinating body is largely aspirational at this time. The formation of an opposition group that operates under the Syrian Popular Resistance would likely strain the interim government's bandwidth and make them less effective in responding to anti-HTS resistance.



Reported Control of Terrain in Syria

As of January 14, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



A likely Islamist HTS splinter group announced its opposition to the HTS-led interim government on January 11. The group, which calls itself the “Sayf al Bahr Battalion,” reportedly formed on January 3 after defecting from HTS.[12] The group’s spokesperson, Abu Khaled al Shami, accused HTS leader Ahmed al Shara of stripping HTS of its “Islamic character and working to dissolve it in the name of the secular civil state.”[13] Shami announced the “start of the fighting” against HTS-led forces in a statement on January 11.[14] Shami called on Syrians to prevent their sons from joining the new Syrian army and to reject nationalism and secularism.[15] The Sayf al Bahr Battalion claimed

to fire on HTS military vehicles at an unspecified town in Rif Dimashq on January 11.[16] CTP-ISW cannot confirm that this attack took place or verify the exact nature and origin of the group. CTP-ISW has observed the formation of nascent opposition against HTS, particularly along the Syrian coast.[17] The Sayf al Bahr Battalion appears to be the first organized opposition faction that has defected from HTS. Armed opposition from this group could encourage more extreme jihadist elements in HTS's coalition to revolt against its rule.

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Nechirvan Barzani met with prominent Iraqi Sunni politicians in Baghdad on January 13, which is consistent with previous indications that some Iraqi Sunni and Kurdish politicians are trying to build an alliance ahead of the October 2025 Iraqi Parliamentary elections.[18] Barzani held separate meetings with Iraqi Parliament Speaker Mahmoud al Mashhadani, Sovereignty Alliance leader Khamis al Khanjar, and Azm Alliance leader Muthanna al Samarrai. Barzani emphasized the role of Parliament in “strengthening national dialogue” in his meeting with Mashhadani.[19] Mashhadani and five other Sunni politicians recently called in mid-December 2024 for a “comprehensive national dialogue” to address political and economic grievances.[20] It is unclear where Barzani was referring to these politicians’ call when he mentioned “national dialogue.”

Barzani also discussed the 2025 Iraqi budget with Iraqi political officials on January 13. Barzani called on the Iraqi judiciary to “guarantee the [KRG’s] financial rights” during a meeting with Iraqi Supreme Judicial Council President Faiq Zaidan. Barzani and former interim Parliament Speaker Mohsen al Mandalawi reportedly agreed to amend the 2025 budget to guarantee the salaries of [KRG] employees.”[21] The KRG recently threatened on January 8 to withdraw from the Iraqi government if the latter failed to regularly pay public sector salaries.[22]

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—the Shia National Movement—to politics. The Sadrist political bloc withdrew from Parliament in 2022, enabling the Iranian-backed Shia Coordination Framework to gain a majority in parliament. Sadr’s reported opposition to his political bloc reentering politics is noteworthy given that some Sunni politicians have recently aligned with Sadr on some issues. CTP-ISW previously noted that the alignment of Sadr’s and Sunni positions could provide a foundation for political collaboration in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Israel and Hamas have reportedly made progress toward a ceasefire-hostage agreement but have yet to solve a key outstanding issue.[23] An unspecified Palestinian official told the BBC on January 14 that the final draft of the ceasefire agreement allows Israel to maintain an 800-meter-long buffer zone along the Gaza Strip’s eastern and northern boundaries.[24] Israel’s ability to establish such a buffer zone was reportedly a significant point of disagreement between Israel and Hamas.[25] Israel and Hamas have yet to solve another key outstanding issue--the withdrawal of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) from the Netzarim and Philadelphi corridors--however.[26]

Unspecified Arab officials told the *Wall Street Journal* on January 14 that senior Hamas military commander in the Gaza Strip, Mohammad Sinwar, has “agreed in principle” to the terms of the final ceasefire draft.[27] Sinwar may be making autonomous decisions about the ceasefire agreement without consulting Hamas central leadership.[28] The *Wall Street Journal* reported on January 13 that Sinwar has begun operating autonomously and ignoring the Hamas decision to make decisions through

a leadership council. It is unclear how Sinwar would implement the terms of a ceasefire agreement given that he lacks sufficient command-and-control across the northern and southern halves of the Gaza Strip.[29]

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned Israel on January 14 that Hamas has recruited “almost as many new militants as it has lost.”[30] Blinken stated that Hamas’ new recruitment effort is a “recipe for an enduring insurgency and perpetual war.” The *Wall Street Journal* similarly reported on January 13 that senior Hamas military commander in the Gaza Strip Mohammad Sinwar has begun recruiting Gazans by targeting funerals and prayer gatherings and offering food, aid, and medical assistance in return for service.[31] These new recruits are not capable of successfully operating in organized military units given that Hamas has lost adequate safe areas to train new recruits.[32] Current Israeli military operations are designed to prevent the regeneration of Hamas by denying Hamas the sanctuary to conduct training programs, particularly in the northern Gaza Strip. The IDF is preventing the reconstitution of Hamas units by isolating Hamas’ forces in the north and denying them safe areas there by conducting repeated raids.[33] These raids gradually attrit Hamas fighters and make it impossible for Hamas to train new recruits in a way that would make them competent and capable of fighting against the IDF.

The IDF has successfully achieved two key operational-level objectives: the isolation of Hamas military forces in the northern Strip and the destruction of Hamas’ military organization.[34] Hamas fighters are now operating as small fighting cells and not organized military units that Hamas had in the early days of the war. The IDF’s operational success in the Gaza Strip obscures the strategic insufficiency of IDF operations if the Israeli government desires to destroy Hamas fully. Sinwar and his close commanders will almost certainly begin to rebuild Hamas after any IDF withdrawal, though such an effort will take years of patient reconstitution.[35]

Key Takeaways:

- **Syria:** Small pockets of locally organized, armed resistance against HTS have emerged in Syria. The expansion of such resistance would strain the bandwidth of HTS-led forces and impede any efforts to suppress this resistance.
- **Iraq:** KRG President Nechirvan Barzani met with prominent Sunni politicians in Baghdad, which is consistent with early indications that Kurdish and Sunni parties are trying to build a political coalition ahead of the Iraqi parliamentary elections in October 2025.
- **Gaza Strip:** Israel and Hamas made significant progress toward a ceasefire-hostage agreement. They appear to have yet to resolve disagreement over whether the IDF would withdraw from the Netzarim and Philadelphi corridors, however.

Syria

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Reestablish ground lines of communication through Syria to Lebanon
- Reestablish Iranian influence in Syria

The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) continued to shell US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) positions along the line of control deep in SDF-held territory on January 14. Anti-SDF media reported that the SNA shelled SDF positions in Abu Raseen, near the line of control north of Tal Tamr.[36] Recent SNA and Turkish shelling on SDF positions around Tal Tamr have coincided with reported SNA deployments to the line of control near Tal Tamr since at least January 8.[37] Turkish and SNA shelling and airstrikes have so far mainly targeted SDF positions west of Tal Tamr.[38] The SDF is unlikely to leave Tal Tamr unprotected on multiple flanks. SNA shelling on positions north of Tal Tamr could cause the SDF to deploy forces along lines of control both west and north of Tal Tamr to protect against any possible Turkish-SNA offensive. Deploying forces along lines of control in both directions would further stretch the SDF's bandwidth and would likely make Turkish or SNA operations near Kobani and or along the Euphrates River much easier.

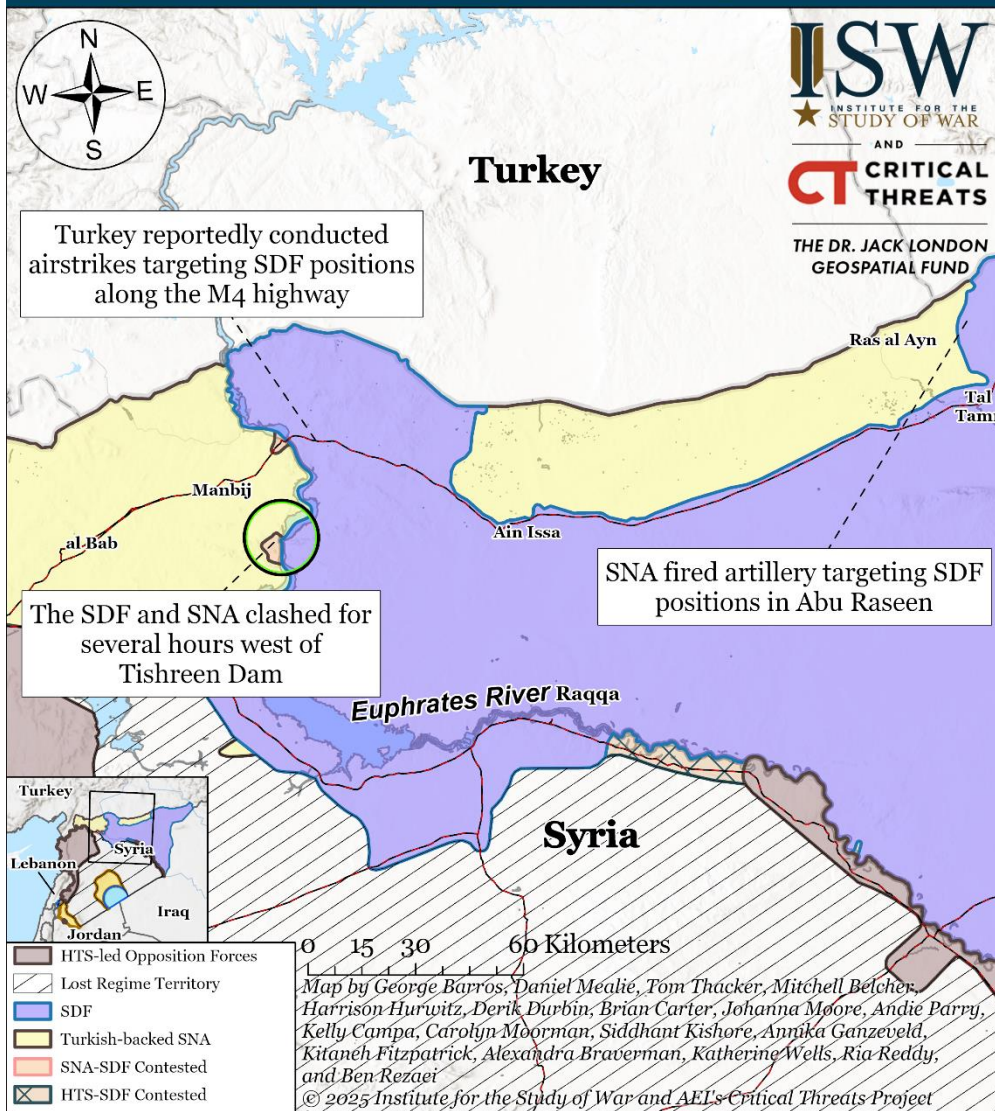
Turkey has continued to support SNA efforts to isolate and destroy SDF elements along the Euphrates River since January 13. Turkish aircraft reportedly struck SDF positions in several villages along the M4 highway east of Qara Qozak Bridge, including the Sarrin Airport.[39] Turkey has repeatedly struck the SDF base in Sarrin, which likely serves as an SDF rear base that could be used to sustain the SDF bridgeheads on the western bank of the Euphrates River. Geolocated footage posted by the SDF on January 13 showed an attempted Turkish or SNA drone strike targeting a vehicle along the supply line between the Tishreen Dam and al Jarniyah.[40] Turkey and the SNA are attempting to isolate SDF forces by striking along supply lines and key nodes behind the front while pressuring the SDF bridgeheads with ground attacks.

The SNA continued to pressure the SDF bridgehead west of Tishreen Dam from multiple axes. An SDF spokesperson said that the SNA and SDF clashed for several hours after the former attacked the latter west of Tishreen Dam.[41] Geolocated footage showed the SDF conducting numerous drone strikes on SNA fighters about four kilometers northwest of the dam. Syrian media also reported that the SNA engaged the SDF with artillery south of the dam along the western bank of the Euphrates.[42] An Aleppo-based outlet reported fighting near the dam has caused a power outage in Manbij for 10 days..[43]

The SNA and SDF continued engagements along lines of control south of Lake Assad on January 14. The SDF retains a salient south of Lake Assad about 20 miles from Tishreen Dam. SNA forces previously advanced on January 5 near Maskanah in an attempt to outflank the SDF along the Aleppo-Raqqa highway.[44] Turkey or SNA air assets struck SDF elements along the lines of control south of Maskanah in assessed SNA-controlled territory, suggesting that the SDF successfully advanced south to push back against the SNA attempt to outflank them.[45] The SDF also reportedly targeted SNA positions further south with artillery and drones.[46] Retaining SDF control over Maskanah and towns along the Aleppo-Raqqa highway is critical for the SDF as it allows the SDF to protect one of the only land crossings between SNA-controlled territory in Aleppo and the Kurdish heartland. Both the SDF and the SNA conducted drone strikes targeting each other's forces near Deir Hafer, which is currently the SDF's westernmost advance.[47] Anti-SDF media reported that the SDF shelled the al Khafsah water station along the western bank of the Euphrates River.[48] It is unclear if the SDF controls the station, which has been the site of repeated SDF-SNA clashes since late December 2024.[49]

Control of Terrain in Northern Syria

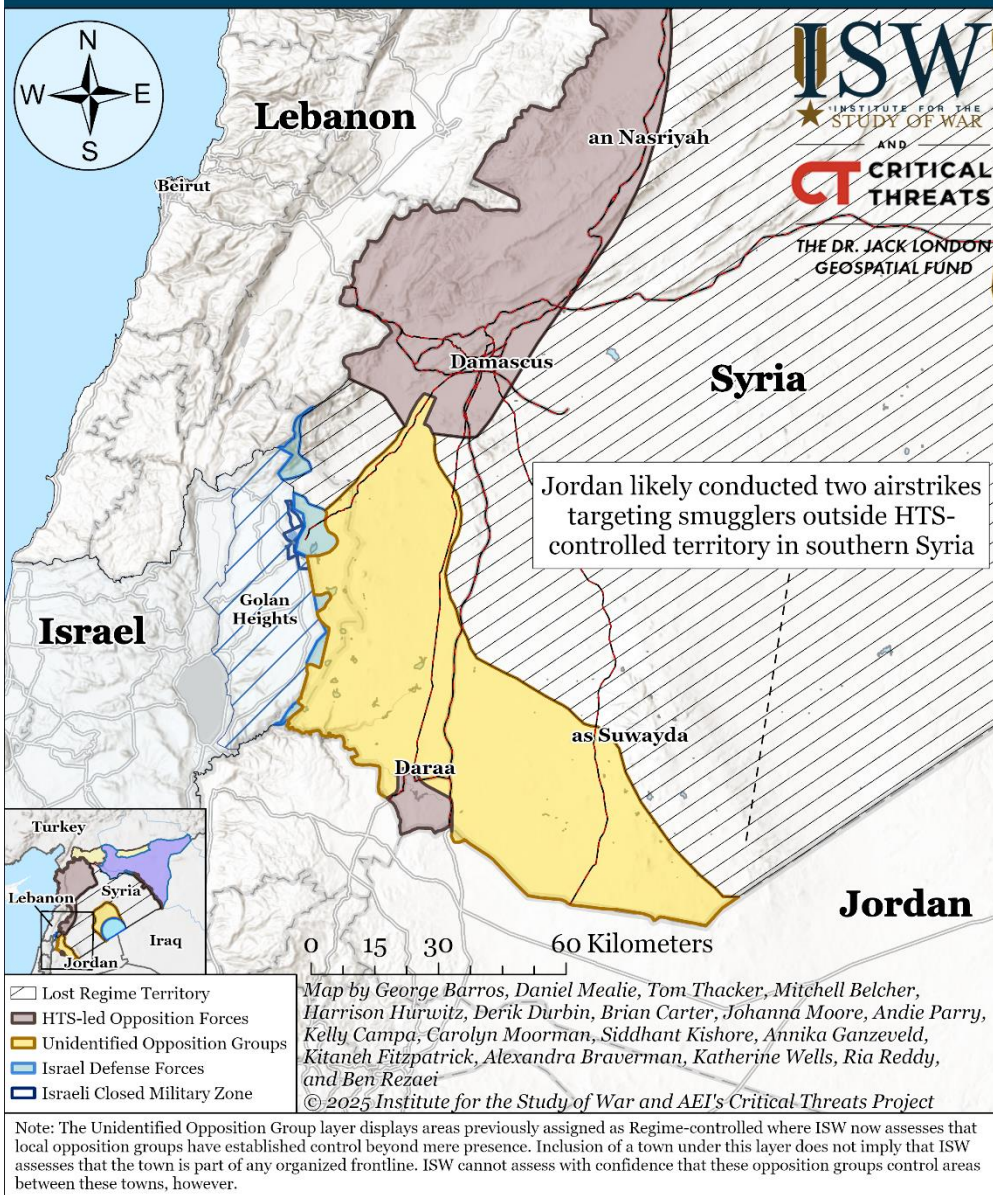
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The Jordanian Air Force likely conducted two airstrikes targeting drug and arms smuggling networks in al Shaab, Suwayda Province, Syria, on January 13.^[50] Syrian media reported that the airstrikes targeted the homes of two prominent smugglers, Jihad al Saeed and Ayman al Ramthan.^[51] Both men have a long history of operating drug and arms smuggling networks on the Syria-Jordan border. Al Shaab has historically been a stronghold for drug cartels, and Jordan has previously conducted airstrikes targeting the Ramthan tribe, of which Ayman al Ramthan is presumably a member.^[52] HTS has not established control over the al Shaab border area, which could enable smuggling groups to continue operating there.^[53] The airstrikes follow two incidents since the fall of the Assad regime in which Jordanian forces have targeted smugglers attempting to cross the border from Syria into Jordan.^[54] Jordan and the HTS-led interim government agreed on January 7 to form a joint security committee to combat drug and weapons smuggling on the border.^[55]

Opposition Advances in Southwest Syria

As of January 14, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



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

Iraqi Border Forces and an unidentified Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) brigade reportedly seized a border post controlled by SDF-affiliated tribal militias along the Iraq-Syria border on January 13.[56] Syrian media claimed that the 17th Iraqi Border Forces Brigade

and the PMF may have expelled the Sanadid or Humat al Jazeera tribal militias from the post, which is around 17 kilometers from the Rabia border crossing. The Sanadid militia is affiliated with the Shammari tribe, which is a Sunni tribe in northeastern Iraq and northwestern Syria. The Iraqi Border Forces claimed that it removed "SDF elements" in Iraqi territory while constructing a section of the Iraq-Syria border wall.[57]

Iraqi media reported on January 14 that some members of the Iranian-backed Shia Coordination Framework are in disagreement about the future of the PMF.[58] A Coordination Framework source told Iraqi media that unspecified Coordination Framework members oppose "unifying" the PMF, including Iranian-backed Iraqi militias in the PMF, because doing so would generate "broader US demands." The United States reportedly has recently pressured the Iraqi federal government to dissolve the PMF.[59] The Iraqi federal government is considering integrating Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, including Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba, Kataib Hezbollah, and Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada, into the Iraqi security establishment.[60] Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba, Kataib Hezbollah, and Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada all control militias in the PMF.

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

The Houthis have conducted three separate drone and missile attacks targeting Israel since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on January 13. The Houthis conducted a ballistic missile attack targeting the Israeli Defense Ministry in Tel Aviv on January 13.[61] The IDF intercepted the missile and reported that shrapnel from the missile significantly damaged a house near Jerusalem.[62] The Houthis also claimed that they launched several drones at the Tel Aviv-Jaffa area and a cruise missile targeting a power station in Eilat on January 14.[63]

Houthi map

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

The IDF 162nd Division renewed clearing operations in Beit Hanoun in the northern Gaza Strip on January 14.[64] The IDF 933rd Infantry Brigade killed a Palestinian fighter who attempted to rig a building with explosives in Beit Hanoun. Israeli forces also destroyed cameras that Hamas had installed to monitor IDF movements in Beit Hanoun.[65] The 162nd Division replaced the IDF 143rd Division in the northern Gaza Strip on January 13.[66]

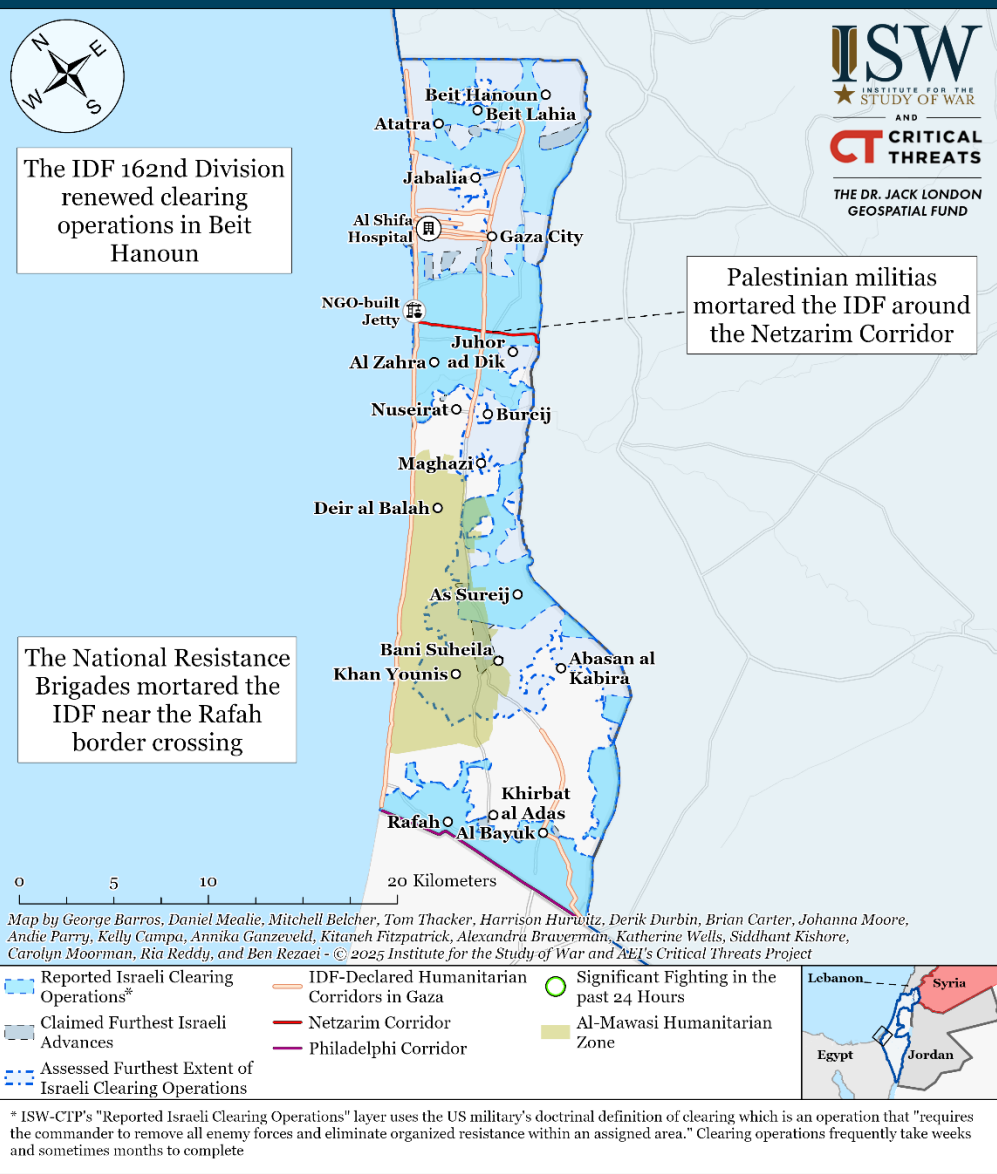
A preliminary investigation revealed that an “operational accident” killed five Israeli soldiers from the IDF 933rd Infantry Brigade (162nd Division) in Beit Hanoun on January 13.[67] Israeli forces accidentally detonated explosives while attempting to demolish a building, causing the building to collapse.[68]

Palestinian militias claimed a mortar attack targeting the IDF around the Netzarim Corridor on January 14.[69]

The National Resistance Brigades mortared Israeli forces near the Rafah border crossing in the southern Gaza Strip on January 14.[70]

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

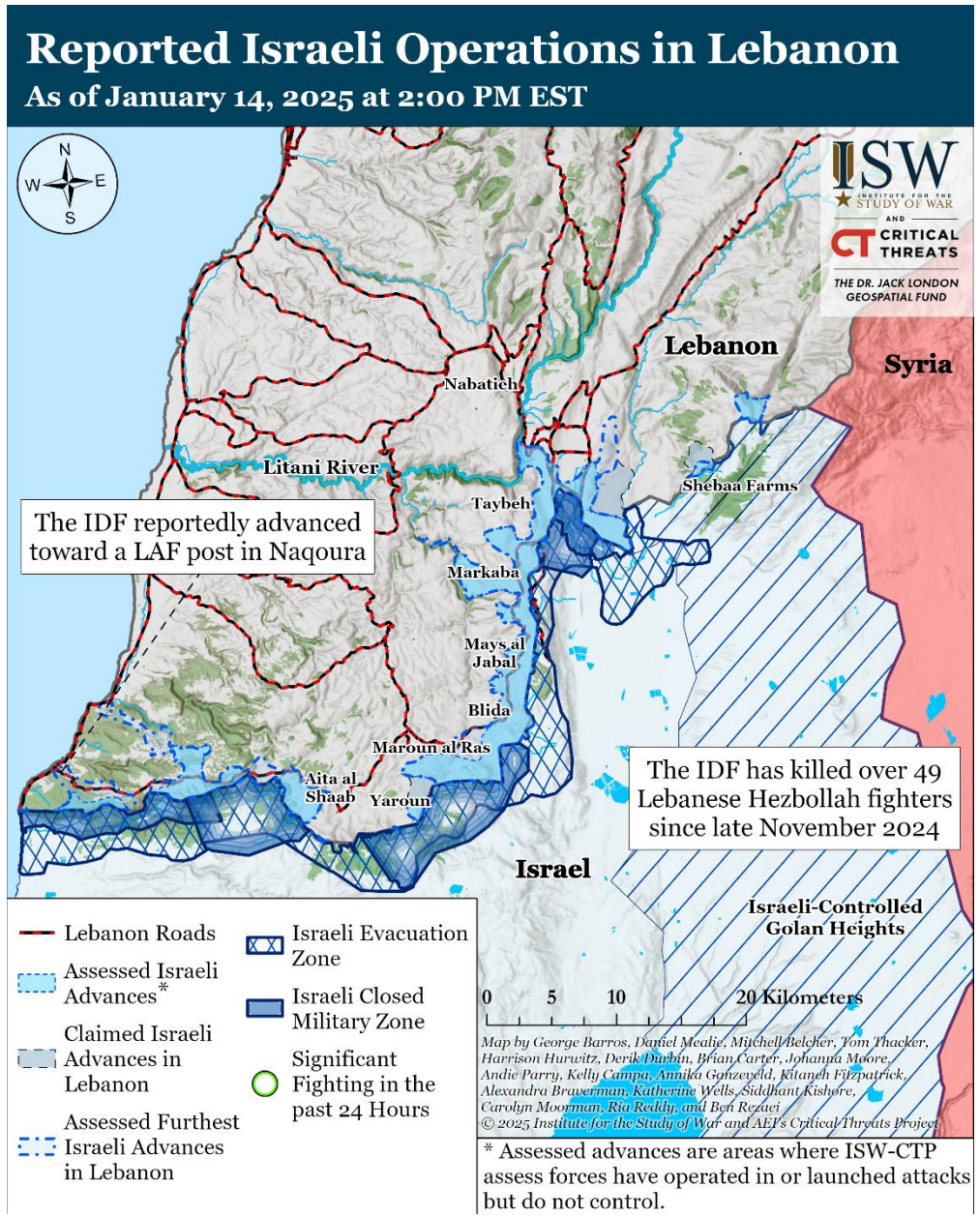
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Lebanon

Hezbollah-affiliated and Lebanese media reported on January 14 that Israeli forces advanced toward three towns in southeastern Lebanon. Hezbollah-affiliated media reported that Israeli forces advanced toward Mays al Jabal, Marjaayoun District.[71] Lebanese media separately reported that Israeli forces and vehicles advanced into Houla, Marjaayoun District, and raided homes.[72] Lebanese media also reported that Israeli forces, including, tanks advanced into Aitaroun, southcentral Lebanon, and detonated explosives there.[73] The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) previously deployed to Aitaroun on January 11.[74]

Lebanese media reported on January 14 that Israeli forces advanced toward an LAF post in Naqoura, southwestern Lebanon.[75] The LAF previously deployed to Naqoura and Aitaroun, among other towns in southwestern Lebanon, on January 11.[76]



IDF Northern Command Commander Major General Ori Gordin stated on January 12 that the IDF has killed more than 49 Hezbollah members since the start of the Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire in November 2024.[77] Gordin vowed that the IDF will not allow Hezbollah to acquire weapons, conduct operations, or build infrastructure near the Israel-Lebanon border.[78] The IDF estimated in December 2024 that residents of northern Israel would be able to return to their homes in March 2025.[79]

Newly elected Lebanese President Joseph Aoun met with US Central Command Commander General Michael Kurilla and the chairman of the Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire monitoring committee, US Army Major General Jasper Jeffers, in Beirut on January 13.[80] The officials discussed LAF capabilities, regional security challenges, and the implementation of the ceasefire in Lebanon. Kurilla reiterated his support for a continued US military partnership with the LAF.[81] Aoun previously served as the commander of the LAF before being elected president on January 9, 2024.

The LAF announced on January 14 that it has recruited the “first group” of trained soldiers to reinforce LAF units deployed in southern Lebanon.[82] The LAF did not specify how many soldiers comprise the first group. The LAF plans to recruit 6,000 forces as part of the first phase of the ceasefire agreement.

West Bank

Unspecified Palestinian fighters threw Molotov cocktails at Israeli civilian vehicles near Ariel in the West Bank on January 14.[83] Unspecified Palestinian fighters recently injured an Israeli civilian after throwing stones at passing vehicles near Ariel on January 12.[84]

The Israeli Police arrested a Palestinian man disguised as an Israeli border guard at the al Zaim checkpoint near Jerusalem on January 14.[85] The Israeli Police arrested the man while he was driving through the checkpoint.

Palestinian Islamic Jihad’s (PIJ) Jenin Battalion claimed that it agreed to an initiative to stop “shedding Palestinian blood” in Jenin.[86] PIJ claimed that a group of “reform men” involved in civil society and local institutions presented PIJ with an initiative entitled “The National Position for the Unity of Blood and Destiny.” The initiative aims to “stop shedding Palestinian blood” while continuing to conduct operations against Israeli forces and civilians. Palestinian Authority (PA) forces have been operating in Jenin Governorate, northern West Bank, since early December 2024 to degrade Palestinian militia networks there.[87] Reuters reported on January 9 that at least 13 Palestinians have died in clashes between the PA and Palestinian militias in Jenin.[88] PA forces spokesperson Brigadier General Anwar Rajab stated in December 2024 that the PA aims to restore “control” of the Jenin refugee camp.[89]

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

Iranian chief nuclear negotiator Kazem Gharib Abadi announced on January 13 that Iran and the E3 (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) reached a “consensus” to continue talks about sanctions relief and the Iranian nuclear program.[90] Gharib Abadi and Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Majid Takht Ravanchi met with EU Deputy Secretary General Enrique Mora in Geneva on January 14 to discuss nuclear-related issues and sanctions.[91]

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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