

## Iran Update, January 2, 2025

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**Information Cutoff: 2:00pm ET**

**This update covers information for the 48-hour period between December 31, 2024, at 2:00pm ET to January 2, 2025, at 2:00pm ET.**

**A Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) delegation met with Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) leader Ahmed al Shara in Damascus on December 30.**[1] There were no specific, public reports of meaningful or tangible progress toward an agreement between Shara and the SDF, despite an unspecified official’s statement to AFP that the meeting was “positive.”[2] This is the first reported meeting between the HTS-led interim government and the SDF since the former assumed power over Damascus, though Shara acknowledged that the government was negotiating with the SDF in an al Arabiya interview on December 29.[3] Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) official Bassem Ishak told Asharq al Awsat on January 2 that the parties only discussed “military issues” at the meeting, suggesting that the two parties discussed HTS’s demands that the SDF subordinate itself to the HTS-organized military.[4] This military is—at present—dominated by HTS-affiliated commanders. It does not appear that HTS and the SDF came to an agreement on or even discussed the political requirements of integrating the Kurdish-controlled autonomous zone into HTS territory and governance. The unspecified official told AFP that this was a “preliminary meeting” that would set the stage for future HTS-SDF dialogue.[5] It remains unclear how high of a priority negotiating with the SDF is to Shara, however, as HTS continues to formalize and deepen its relations with Turkey.[6]

The SDF is almost certainly both unable and unwilling to subordinate itself to the HTS-organized Defense Ministry at this time, given the organizational tasks implicit in that effort. The Kurdish-led SDF is still actively engaging the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) and continues to face an existential threat from a potential Turkish offensive in Syria.[7] Reorganizing SDF formations under the HTS-organized Defense Ministry, regardless of whether or not the SDF formations are reflagged or reorganized, would probably require the SDF to break contact with the SNA. The SDF would presumably need to receive certain assurances that the SNA would not continue to attempt to destroy the SDF, especially given that the various SNA formations would make a large portion of the future Syrian army.

**The SDF has reportedly widened its salient on the western bank of the Euphrates River around the Tishreen Dam southwards since December 31.** The SDF claimed to engage the SNA in Khirbet Zamala, al Atshana, and several other villages between five and ten kilometers south of Tishreen Dam on January 2.[8] Anti-SDF media also reported clashes in the area.[9] Geolocated

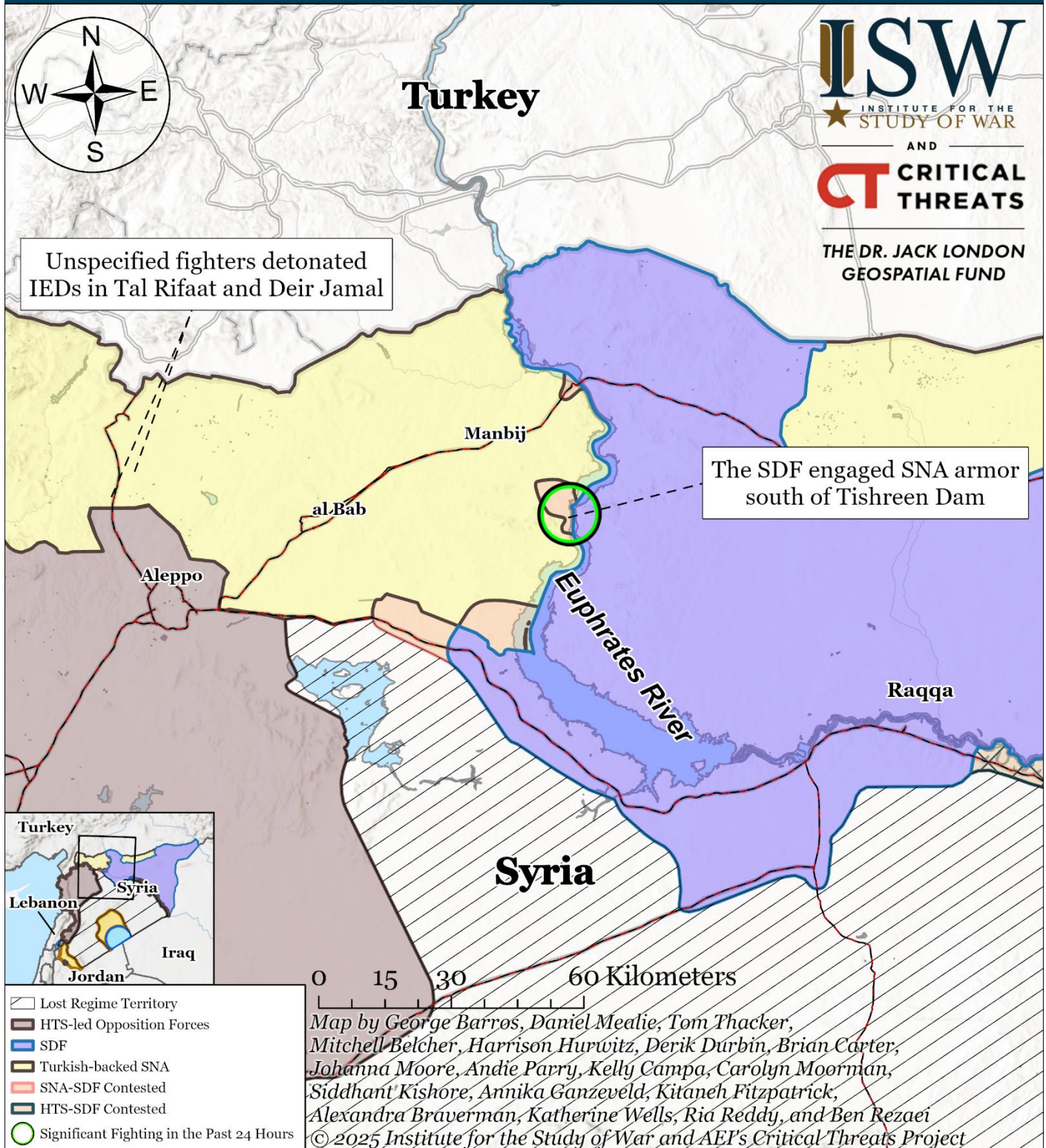
footage posted on January 1 showed the SDF conducting a drone strike on an SNA vehicle in mountainous terrain in Khirbet Zamala, south of Tishreen Dam.[10] The SDF said it destroyed six armored SNA vehicles in engagements in the area.[11] The SDF may seek to link its forces around Tishreen Dam with the forces moving northwards from Highway Route 4. A link-up between these two advances would presumably strengthen SDF supply lines around the dam, which currently flow across the dam itself and could be more easily disrupted.

The SDF and SNA forces continued fighting west of Tishreen Dam and Qara Qozak bridge since December 31. Geolocated footage posted on January 2 showed the SDF conducting drone strikes targeting SNA vehicles and an M113 armored vehicle along a highway west of Tishreen Dam.[12] The SDF also claimed that it shot down a Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drone near Qara Qozak bridge on January 1.[13] Anti-SDF media reported that the SNA sent reinforcements to the frontlines near the Tishreen Dam on January 2.[14]

**Unspecified fighters have detonated improvised explosive devices (IED) in two separate attacks in SNA-controlled territory since December 31.** An unspecified fighter detonated a possible car bomb in central Tal Rifaat, north of Aleppo, on December 31.[15] Six people were injured. The low casualty count in a popular market makes it more likely that the culprit used a relatively rudimentary car bomb and not a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED).[16] This is the third car bomb or VBIED attack in SNA-controlled territory since December 24.[17] An unspecified suspect also detonated a motorcycle in the nearby town of Deir Jamal on January 1.[18] There were no injuries.[19] The SDF condemned the recent IED attacks in Tal Rifaat, Deir Jamal, and Manbij in a statement on January 2.[20]

# Control of Terrain in North Syria

## As of January 2, 2025 at 2:00 PM ET



**The Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)-led Military Operations Department continued to conduct raids to detain former Regime members that refused to settle with the interim government and disarm on January 1 and 2.** The interim government-run media reported that the Military Operations Department detained at least 28 former regime members in Homs, including those accused of perpetrating atrocities in the early Syrian Civil War.[21] A telegram channel claiming to represent an armed group opposed to the HTS-led government spread claims that the raids targeting former regime members had sectarian motivations.[22] CTP-ISW cannot verify the exact nature and origin of this group and will not at this time report specific claims to avoid amplifying the group's attempts to foment sectarian violence in Syria. These sectarian narratives can create a dangerous cycle of groups refusing to disarm because they fear for their safety, which then causes HTS-affiliated forces to target those groups that don't disarm, thereby causing the groups to continue to accuse HTS of sectarianism. This dynamic could easily spiral out of control into larger armed conflict if left unchecked. The HTS-led government has a requirement to assuage the concerns of former regime loyalists and minorities, part of which requires controlling these sectarian narratives as and if they spread.

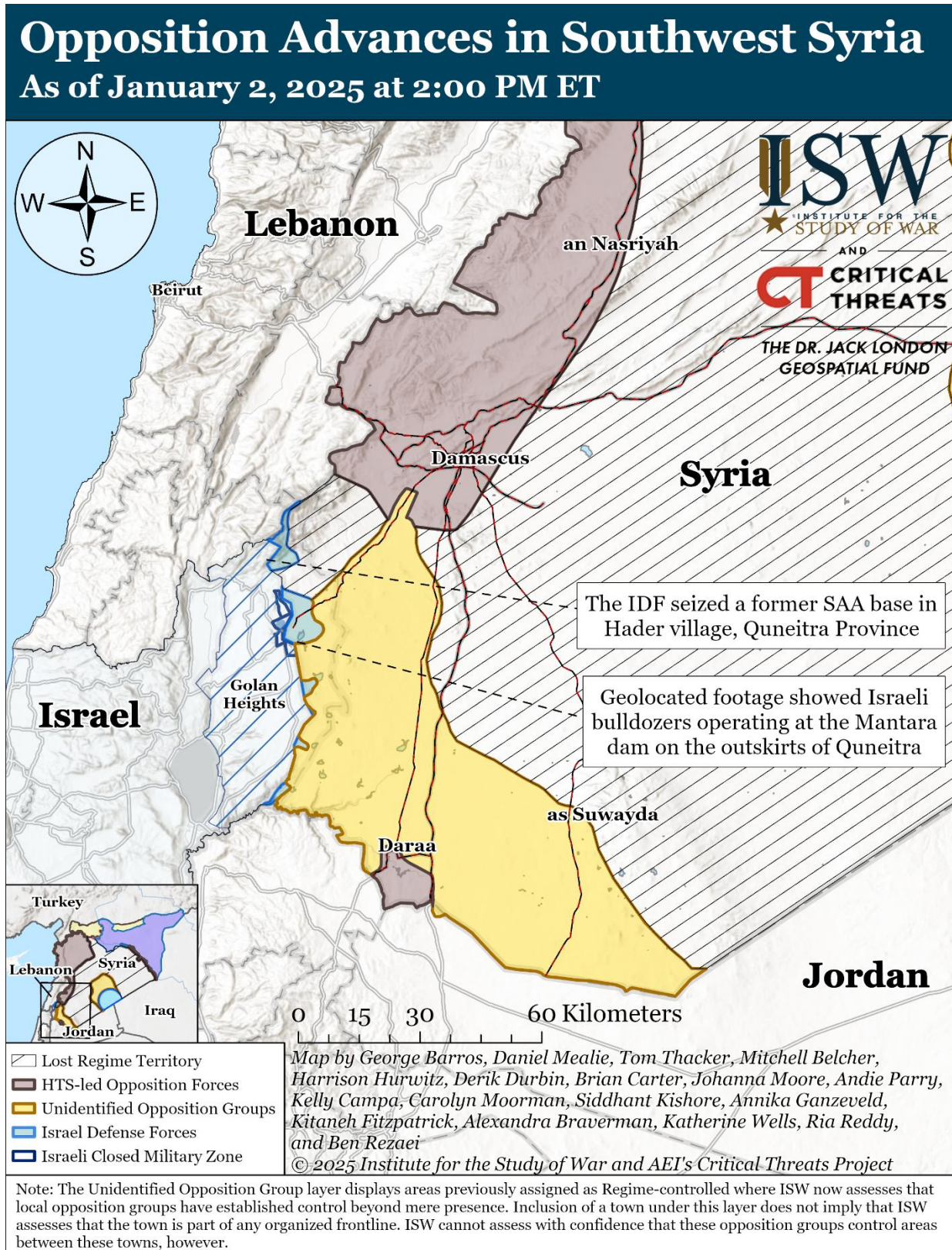
Interim government forces also engaged "remnants of an Iranian-backed militia" in Abu Kamal, Deir ez Zor Province, on January 1.[23] HTS-led authorities have targeted Iran-affiliated groups over the past several days in Deir ez Zor and Aleppo Provinces.[24] A local correspondent reported that that only a quarter of the estimated 2000 Iranian-backed fighters in Abu Kamal have completed the settlement process with the interim government.[25] Iran had deeply penetrated pro-regime militias in Deir ez Zor Province before the fall of the Assad regime, making it possible that the interim government will encounter greater challenges consolidating security control over the former militia members than in other parts of Syria.

**The HTS-led interim Syrian government appears to be taking initial steps to secure cooperation with minority religious communities ahead of the Syrian National Dialogue Conference.** A Damascus-based news outlet reported that the Syrian National Dialogue Conference has been delayed until the interim government has extended invitations to all relevant groups.[26] HTS leader Ahmed al Shara met with a Christian clergy from the Damascus area on December 31.[27] HTS leader Ahmed al Shara stated on December 29 that the National Dialogue Conference would represent the breadth of Syria's diversity.[28]

**Interim Syrian Foreign Minister Assad al Shaibani, Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra, and Head of General Intelligence Anas Khatib traveled to Saudi Arabia on January 2 and met with senior Saudi officials.**[29] The Saudi Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman reported that he discussed ways that Saudi Arabia could support the Syrian government's transitional process.[30] Shaibani held a separate meeting with Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan.[31] Shaibani also visited the Syrian Embassy in Riyadh.[32]

**The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) continued to operate in Quneitra province since CTP-ISW's last data cut-off on December 31.** Geolocated footage from January 2 showed Israeli bulldozers operating at the Mantara dam on the outskirts of Quneitra, southern Syria.[33] A Syria-focused analyst reported that the IDF seized a former Syrian Arab Army (SAA) base in Hader village, Quneitra province.[34] Syrian media reported that the IDF deployed bulldozers and excavation machinery on a nearby hilltop, likely to construct an observation post.[35] The IDF is paving a road to

connect the military base to the hilltop. The IDF separately conducted airstrikes targeting a former Assad regime military base in western Damascus.[36]



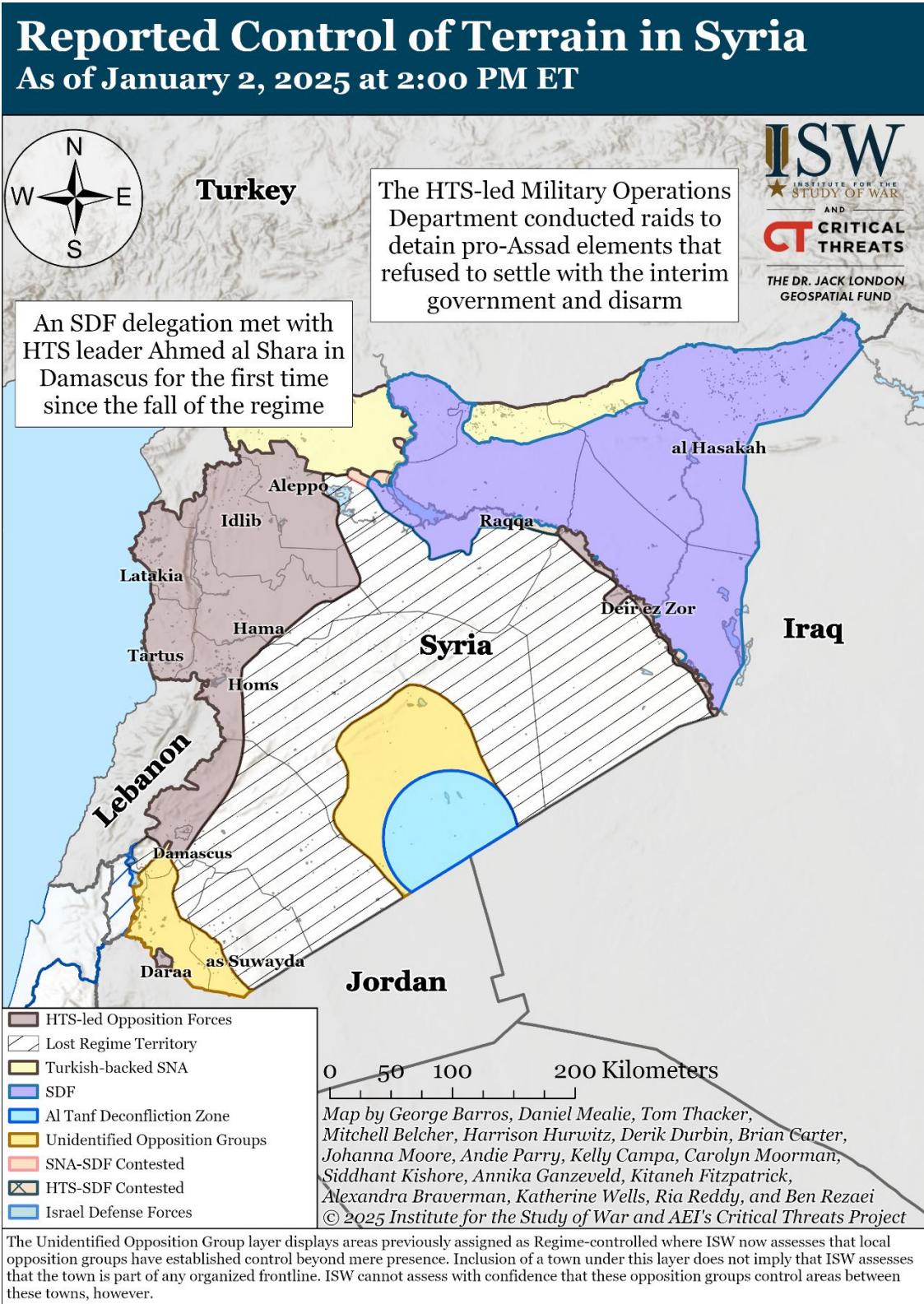
**Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's senior advisor, Ali Larijani, justified Iran's actions in Syria, reaffirmed support of the Axis of Resistance, and linked future Iran-Syria relations to the conduct of new Syrian leaders.** Larijani highlighted Soleimani's fundamental role in the Axis of Resistance.[37] Larijani dismissed claims that the resistance has been weakened and emphasized the resilience of movements such as Hezbollah, which he claimed had rebuilt itself after significant setbacks.[38] Larijani's speech takes a more defensive tone by framing recent setbacks as temporary and reaffirming Iran's commitment to its regional objectives. It is notable, however, that Larijani linked future Iran-Syria relations to the conduct of the new Syrian leaders. Other Iranian officials and ex-officials, such as former IRGC Commander Mohsen Rezaei, have advocated for Iran to support resistance movements in Syria against HTS.[39]

**Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)-affiliated media in Iran claimed that the Shia Sayyida Zeinab Shrine in southern Damascus lacked the power to turn on its lights due to fuel supply issues under HTS.[40]** The HTS-led government resumed the shrine's custodianship on 15 December.[41] Local Syrian reporting did not confirm the Iranian outlet's claim. Iranian media outlets have previously made false claims about the shrine and the security around it.[42] Iran intends to ignite unrest against the HTS-led interim government in pursuit of regaining a foothold in Syria.[43]

#### **Key Takeaways:**

- **Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) negotiations:** An SDF delegation met with HTS leader Ahmed al Shara in Damascus on December 30. A Syrian Democratic Council official said the meeting only included "military issues." The SDF is almost certainly both unable and unwilling to subordinate itself to the HTS-organized Defense Ministry at this time, given the organizational tasks implicit in that effort. The SDF continues to face an existential threat from Turkish-backed forces.
- **Fighting in Northern Syria:** The SDF has reportedly widened its salient on the western bank of the Euphrates River around the Tishreen Dam southwards since December 31. The SDF may seek to link its forces around Tishreen Dam with the forces moving northwards from Highway Route 4. A link-up between these two advances would presumably strengthen SDF supply lines around the dam, which currently flow across the dam itself and could be more easily disrupted.
- **HTS Operations Against Former Regime Members:** The Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)-led Military Operations Department continued to conduct raids to detain former Regime members that refused to settle with the interim government and disarm on January 1 and 2. Interim government forces also engaged "remnants of an Iranian-backed militia" in Albu Kamal, Deir ez Zor Province, on January 1.
- **Negotiations with Minorities in Syria:** The HTS-led interim Syrian government appears to be taking initial steps to secure cooperation with minority religious communities ahead of the Syrian National Dialogue Conference.
- **HTS-backed Officials Visit to Saudi Arabia:** Interim Syrian Foreign Minister Assad al Shaibani, Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra, and Head of General Intelligence Anas Khattab traveled to Saudi Arabia on January 2 and met with senior Saudi officials.

- Iranian-Syrian Relations:** Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's senior advisor, Ali Larijani, justified Iran's actions in Syria, reaffirmed support of the Axis of Resistance, and linked future Iran-Syria relations to the conduct of new Syrian leaders.



## **Gaza Strip:**

### **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

**The IDF conducted an airstrike targeting a Hamas sniper unit in Jabalia refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip on December 31.**[44] The airstrike killed five Gazans, according to the Palestinian Civil Defense.

**Palestinian militias claimed three mortar attacks targeting Israeli forces along the Netzarim Corridor since CTP-ISW's last data cut off on December 31.**[45] Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades mortared Israeli soldiers in eastern Gaza City on January 2.[46]

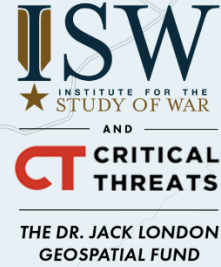
**The IDF conducted an airstrike that killed Hamas head of internal security in the southern Gaza Strip Hussam Shawan in Khan Younis on January 2.**[47] The IDF stated that Shawan was hiding among civilians in the al Mawasi humanitarian zone in Khan Younis at the time of the strike. The IDF separately struck a Hamas headquarters located in a municipality building in the Mawasi humanitarian zone.[48] The IDF stated that Hamas used this headquarters to conduct attacks targeting Israeli positions in the Gaza Strip and in Israeli territory.[49] The IDF stated that it took steps to reduce the risk of civilian casualties by using precision munitions and analyzing aerial imagery before the airstrikes.[50]

**The IDF 4th Armored Brigade (162nd Division) destroyed a rocket manufacturing facility during raids in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip, on January 1.**[51] The facility produced medium- and long-range rockets, according to the IDF. The IDF also killed an unspecified number of Hamas fighters during the raids.



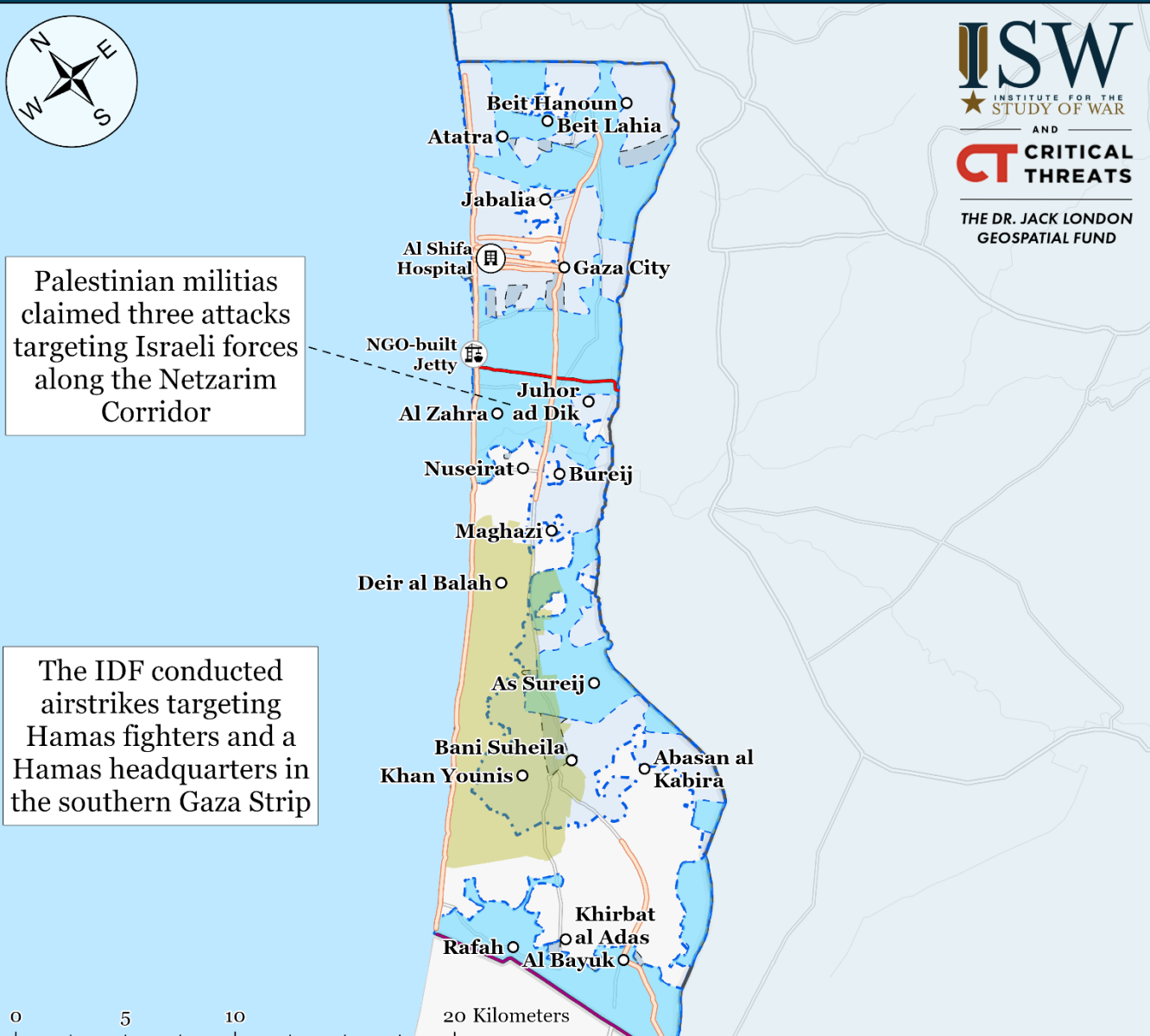
# Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

## As of January 2, 2025, 2:00 PM ET



Palestinian militias claimed three attacks targeting Israeli forces along the Netzarim Corridor

The IDF conducted airstrikes targeting Hamas fighters and a Hamas headquarters in the southern Gaza Strip



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

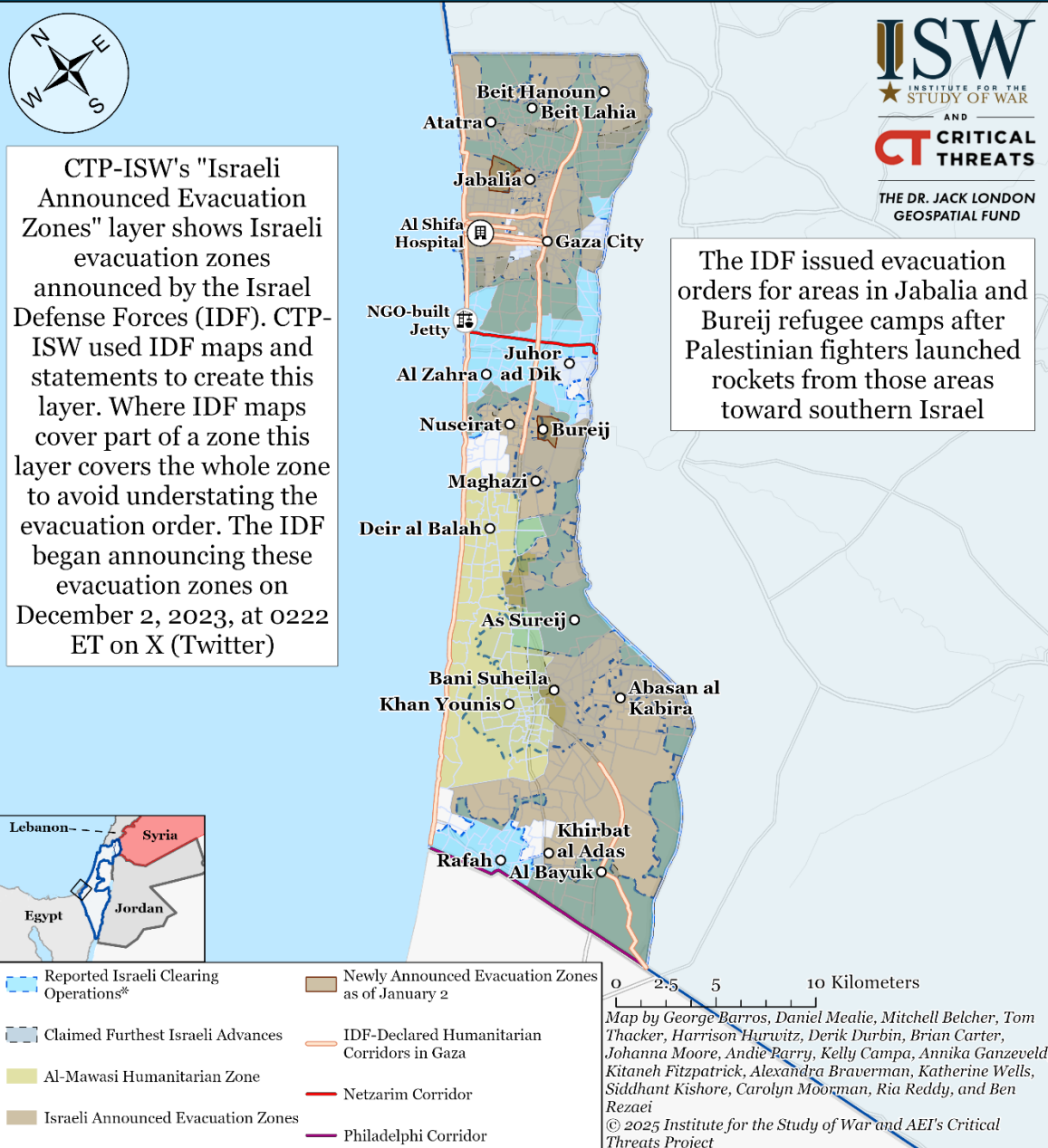
Reported Israeli Clearing Operations*	IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridors in Gaza	Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances	Netzarim Corridor	Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone
Assessed Furthest Extent of Israeli Clearing Operations	Philadelphi Corridor	



\* ISW-CTP's "Reported Israeli Clearing Operations" layer uses the US military's doctrinal definition of clearing which is an operation that "requires the commander to remove all enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance within an assigned area." Clearing operations frequently take weeks and sometimes months to complete

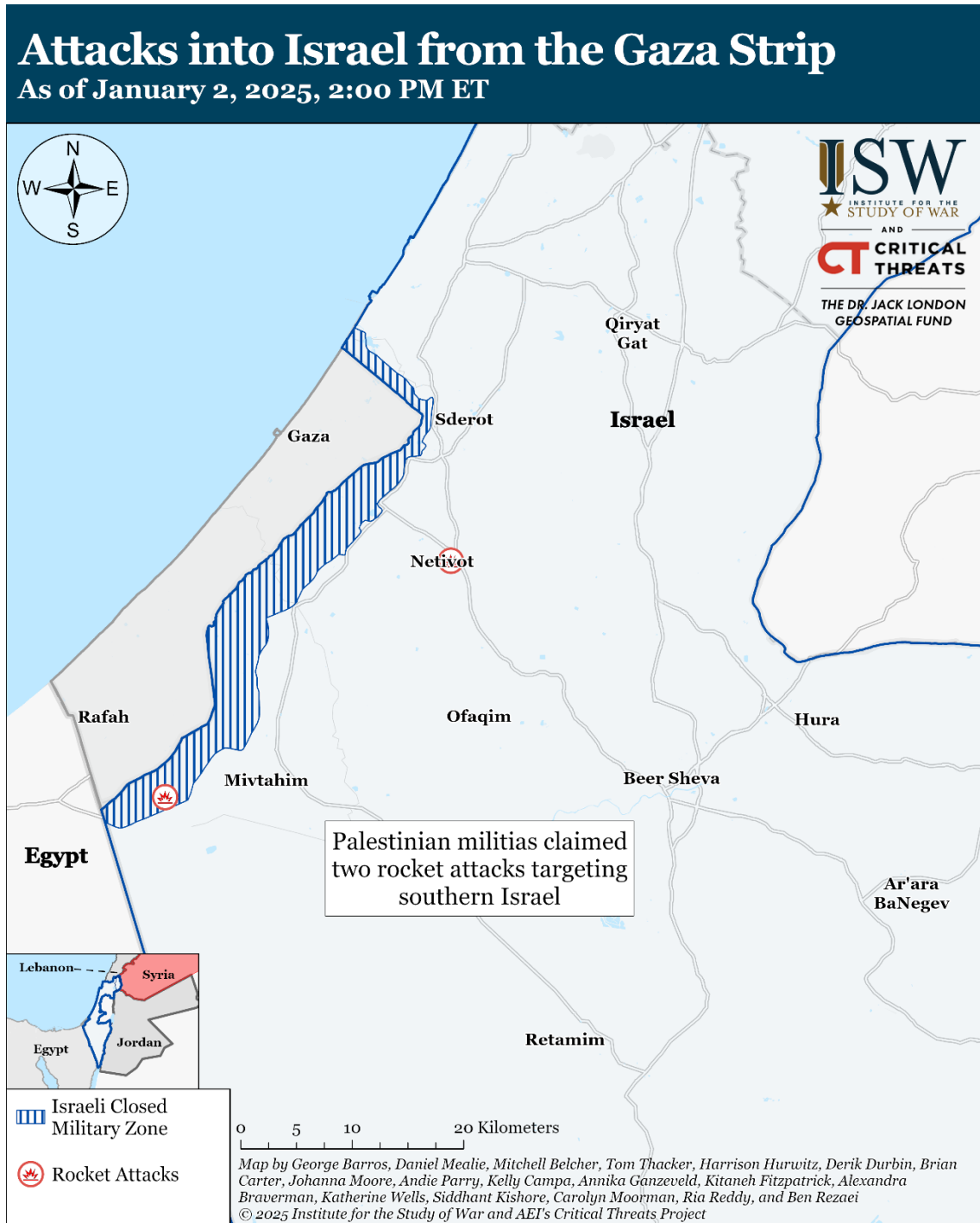
The IDF issued evacuation orders for areas in Jabalia and Bureij refugee camps in the northern and central Gaza Strip on January 1.[52] Palestinian fighters had previously launched rockets from these areas into Israel. The rocket attacks spurred the evacuation orders. The evacuation orders instructed Gazans to immediately move towards IDF-declared humanitarian zones and civilian shelters.

## Israeli-Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip As of January 2, 2025 at 2:00 PM ET



\* ISW-CTP's "Reported Israeli Clearing Operations" layer uses the US military's doctrinal definition of clearing which is an operation that "requires the commander to remove all enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance within an assigned area." Clearing operations frequently take weeks and sometimes months to complete

**Palestinian militias claimed two rocket attacks targeting southern Israel since CTP-ISW's last data cut off on December 31.[53]** Hamas fired rockets targeting Netivot in southern Israel.[54] Palestinian militias fired two rockets from the central Gaza Strip. The IDF intercepted one rocket while the other fell in an open area.[55] PIJ fired rockets targeting Holit in southern Israel on January 2.[56] The IDF Air Force intercepted one launch that crossed into Israel from the southern Gaza Strip.[57]



## West Bank

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

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

**Unspecified Palestinian fighters conducted a car-ramming attack targeting IDF soldiers operating near Deir Qaddis, near the Israeli settlement of Modin Illit, on January 1.[58]** The fighter lightly wounded one IDF soldier before the IDF "neutralized" the attacker.[59] No Palestinian militia has claimed responsibility for this attack at the time of this writing.

**Undercover Israeli Border Police officers arrested an unnamed but presumably Palestinian "senior suspect" in Kasbah, Nablus Governorate, on January 1.[60]** Palestinian fighters fired shots and threw explosive devices, Molotov cocktails, and stones at the police forces while they were withdrawing from Nablus.[61]

**The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades—the self-proclaimed militant wing of Fatah—conducted small arms attacks targeting two Israeli settlements and two IDF checkpoints in the northern West Bank since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on December 31.[62]** The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades fired small arms targeting the IDF Awarta checkpoint, south of Nablus City, and the Elon Moreh settlement, a small Orthodox Jewish settlement northeast of Nablus City.[63] The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades separately fired small arms at the IDF Dotan checkpoint, Jenin Governorate, and the Bakaot settlement, southeast of Tubas city.[64]

**The Palestinian Authority (PA) continued to operate in the Jenin refugee camp to "restore [PA] control" there since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on December 31.[65]** This operation has continued for nearly one month. PA security forces spokesperson Brigadier General Anwar Rajab stated that the PA killed at least six Palestinian militia fighters, arrested dozens more suspected fighters, and defused "dozens" of IEDs and car bombs inside the Jenin refugee camp throughout the operation.[66] The PA officially banned Al Jazeera from operating within PA-controlled areas on January 2 due to its negative coverage of the PA and the operation in Jenin.[67] Israel previously banned Al Jazeera from operating within Israeli territory in May 2024.[68] Rajab stated that the goal of the PA's operation is to "restore [PA] control of the Jenin Camp." [69] It is unclear how the PA is defining "control" at this time. There are some definitions of "control" that would be a significant military undertaking that is probably beyond the capability of the PA security forces. Palestinian militias are very strong in Jenin and the northern West Bank more broadly.

## Northern Israel and Lebanon

### **Lebanese Hezbollah objectives:**

1. End Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip
2. Survive the October 7 War as a capable political and military organization with control over Lebanon

**Israeli forces withdrew from Chama, southwestern Lebanon, on January 1.[70]** The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) 5th Brigade backfilled the IDF and returned to the 5th Brigade

headquarters in al Bayada, adjacent to Chama.[71] The IDF advanced into Chama in mid-November 2024.[72]

**Lebanese media separately reported on January 2 that the IDF withdrew from neighborhoods in Naqoura, southwestern Lebanon, towards Ras al Naqoura and Alma al Shaab.[73]**

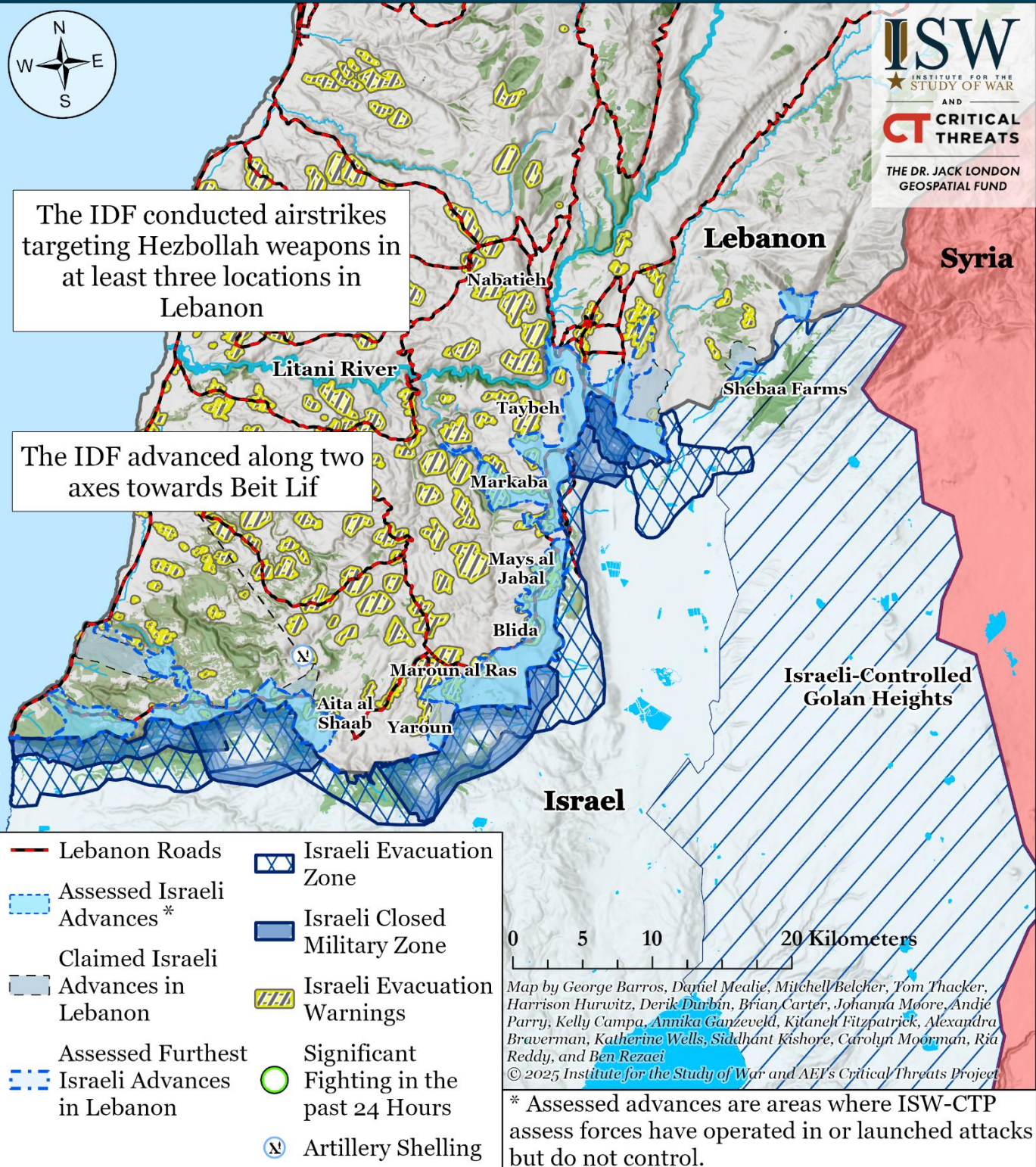
**The IDF advanced towards Beit Lif from Ramyeh, Bint Jbeil, on January 2.** Geolocated images showed IDF armored military vehicles advancing towards Beit Lif. Hezbollah-affiliated media and geolocated images posted to X (Twitter) reported that IDF military vehicles advanced from Ramyeh towards al Qawzah, southeast of Beit Lif, and Salhaneh, southwest of Beit Lif.[74]

**The IDF conducted airstrikes targeting tactical-level Hezbollah weapons transfers and rocket launchers in at least three locations in Lebanon since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on December 31.[75]** The IDF conducted a strike targeting Hezbollah operatives transferring weapons from a weapons depot in Bani Hayyan, southern Lebanon, on December 31.[76] The IDF destroyed the weapons depot and the Hezbollah vehicle transporting weapons. The IDF separately destroyed a Hezbollah medium-range rocket launcher in Mount Rihan, 15 kilometers north of Metula, Israel, on January 2.[77] The IDF destroyed Hezbollah rocket launchers near an unspecified military site in Jbaa village, Nabatieh Governorate, on January 2.[78] The IDF specified that it only targeted the Hezbollah launchers after the LAF failed to secure or destroy the launchers.[79] The IDF previously conducted airstrikes in Jbaa and Jabal al Rihan on December 2.[80]

**Hezbollah Secretary General Naim Qassem stated on January 1 that now is an opportunity for the Lebanese government to “prove itself” through political action in a video message that aired during an international conference honoring a Shia scholar in Tehran.[81]** Qassem said that Hezbollah is allowing the Lebanese state and the international community to assume the responsibility of implementing the Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire agreement.[82] Qassem stated that Hezbollah is being “patient at this stage” and allowing the Lebanese state to assume the responsibility of ceasefire implementation rather than Hezbollah itself. Qassem stated that the “resistance will continue” and Hezbollah will become stronger. Qassem stated that Hezbollah will work with its partners in Lebanon to elect a president on January 9 to rebuild the country. Leader of the Lebanese Forces Party Samir Geagea responded to his message stating that Qassem “is” the Lebanese state as Hezbollah controls a large majority of the government and urged him to “take the appropriate position.”[83]

# Reported Israeli Operations in Lebanon

As of January 2, 2025 at 2:00 PM ET



## Iran and the Axis of Resistance

**Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Anbar Operations Commander Qasim Mulih, who has links to Kataib Hezbollah, announced on January 1 that a large [number of] PMF enforcements arrived in Anbar Province to secure the Syria-Iraq border.[84]** Footage posted on January 1 purportedly shows PMF armor moving within Anbar Province.[85] This deployment follows PMF Chief of Staff Abdul Aziz Muhammadawi's inspection of combat units in Anbar Province along the Iraq-Syria border on December 29.[86]

**An Iraqi military source told UK-based media on December 29 that Iranian-backed Iraqi militias that had recently withdrawn from Syria to Iraq would soon begin moving “significant distances” from the Iraq-Syria border.[87]** The militias are reportedly currently stationed near the al Qaim-Albu Kamal border crossing in Anbar Province.[88] The source added that Iraq is under unspecified regional and international pressure to remove the Iranian-backed militias from the Syrian border and to show support to the HTS-led interim government in Syria.[89]

**The Houthis claimed on January 1 that they shot down a US MQ-9 Reaper drone over Marib Governorate, Yemen.[90]** Houthi military spokesperson Brigadier General Yahya Sarea claimed that was the second US drone the Houthis intercepted in 72 hours. This is the fourteenth time that the Houthis have claimed to have intercepted a US MQ-9 Reaper drone since the start of the October 7 war. Houthi media published footage of drone debris in Marib Governorate on January 2.[91] CTP-ISW cannot verify the Houthi claim.

**Houthi Supreme Leader Abdulmalik al Houthi stated on January 2 that the Houthis are in an “open war” with Israel and will continue to intensify attacks on Israel.[92]** Abdulmalik said that the United States and Israel have not deterred the Houthis and that the group has used the war to develop its capabilities. Abdulmalik claimed that the United States and the United Kingdom have conducted a total of 931 airstrikes and naval strikes against the Houthis over the past year, killing at least 106 Houthi fighters and wounding 314 others. Abdulmalik stressed that it is the Houthis' faith that unites them with Iran against a common enemy and condemned Israel's actions in Gaza and Syria. Abdulmalik also called out the Palestinian Authority (PA) for “shedding Palestinian blood” and questioned the PA's why the PA was fighting the Palestinian people. Abdulmalik also noted that the Israeli Knesset will not allow for the establishment of a Palestinian state.

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[1] <https://www.barrons.com/news/syria-s-de-facto-leader-holds-talks-with-kurds-official-2638ce42>

[2] <https://www.barrons.com/news/syria-s-de-facto-leader-holds-talks-with-kurds-official-2638ce42>

[3] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/iran-update-december-29-2024>

[4] <https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5097278-sharaa's-meeting-sdf-leadership-focused-solely-military-matters>

- [5] <https://www.barrons.com/news/syria-s-de-facto-leader-holds-talks-with-kurds-official-2638ce42>
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