Iran Update



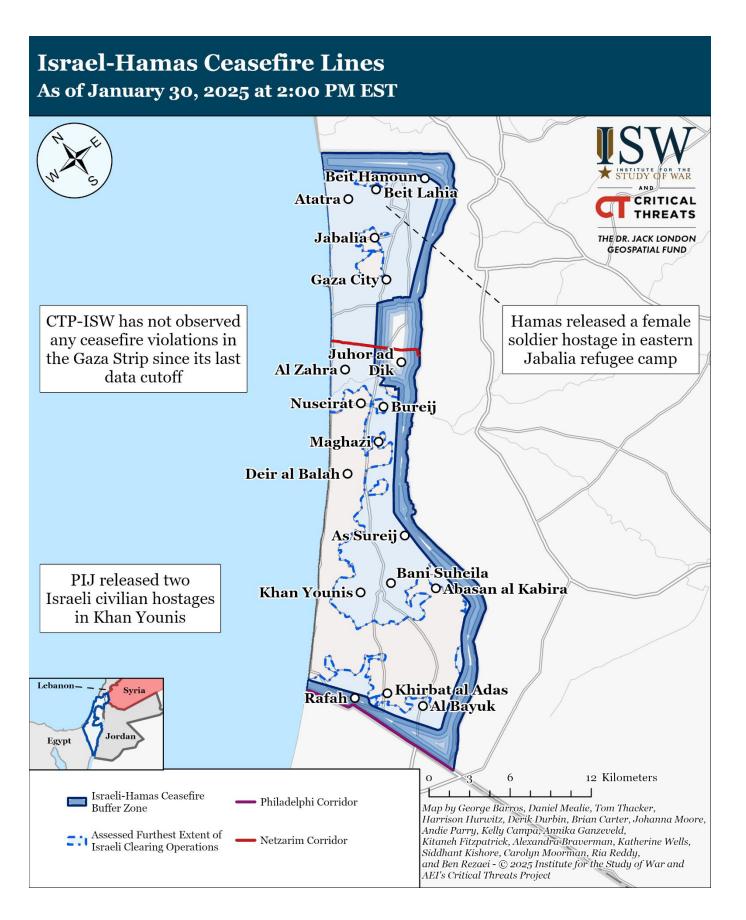
Iran Update, January 30, 2025

Kelly Campa, Siddhant Kishore, Carolyn Moorman, Ria Reddy, Ben Rezaei, Katherine Wells, Johanna Moore, Avery Borens, Victoria Penza, and Brian Carter

Information Cutoff: 2:00pm ET

Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) released three Israeli hostages during the third hostage release on January 30.[1] Hamas released a female soldier hostage in the northern Gaza Strip. Hamas transferred her to the International Committee of the Red Cross in the eastern Jabalia refugee camp.[2] PIJ released two Israeli civilian hostages in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip.[3] Hamas also released five Thai hostages on January 30.[4] Israel released 110 Palestinian prisoners in exchange.[5] The ceasefire agreement requires Hamas to release an additional three Israeli hostages on February 1.[6]

Hamas attempted to signal that it retains the ability to coordinate and communicate with other Palestinian militias in the Gaza Strip. Several Palestinian militias, including Hamas, the Palestinian Resistance Committee, and the Palestinian Mujahideen Movement accompanied PIJ as it released two Israeli hostages in Khan Younis on January 30.[7] Hamas claimed that the presence of these militias "confirms the unity" among these groups.[8] The release of the two hostages comes after PIJ failed to release an Israeli hostage on January 25. CTP-ISW assessed on January 27 that PIJ's failure to release the hostage on January 25 is unlikely to be the result of a rift between Hamas and PIJ.[9] The militias could face challenges due to weakened institutional coordination mechanisms between the militias after months of IDF operations.



CTP-ISW has recorded no verifiable reports of kinetic activity in the Gaza Strip or attacks from the Gaza Strip into Israel since the last data cutoff on January 28.

The presence of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias in the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) will likely not reduce the threat that these militias pose to the United States and its partners in the Middle East. Some Iranian-backed Iraqi militias and their political wings have reportedly considered a negotiated settlement in which the militias would integrate into the PMF in return for political appointments.[10] These militias, which reportedly include Kataib Hezbollah, Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba, and Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada, seek key positions in the Iraqi federal government, including the chairmanship of the Popular Mobilization Committee (PMC).[11] The PMC is responsible for ensuring that militias in the PMF answer to the Iraqi Federal government.[12] Some members of the Iranian-backed Shia Coordination Framework seek to remove current PMC Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh, in part due to disputes between Fayyadh and PMF Chief of Staff Abu Fadak al Muhammadawi.[13] The replacement of Fayyadh with another Iranian-backed figure would not make the PMF any less beholden to Iran than it currently is, nor would it result in the PMC fulfilling its duty to ensure the PMF answers to the Iraqi government. Kataib Hezbollah, Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba, and Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada all control brigades in the PMF that answer to the militias and Iran rather than the Iraqi prime minister. The integration of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias into the PMF would therefore fail to reduce the threat that these militias pose to the United States and its partners.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) intercepted an unarmed reconnaissance drone in Lebanon as it flew toward Israel on January 30.[14] Lebanese Hezbollah has not mentioned the drone or claimed it as a Hezbollah drone at the time of this writing. The drone may have moved south to monitor Israeli forces in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah last launched a drone towards Israel on November 26, before the ceasefire went into effect.[15] This incident comes after the United States announced on January 26 that Israel and Lebanon extended the ceasefire until February 18, when Israel will presumably withdraw from Lebanon.[16]

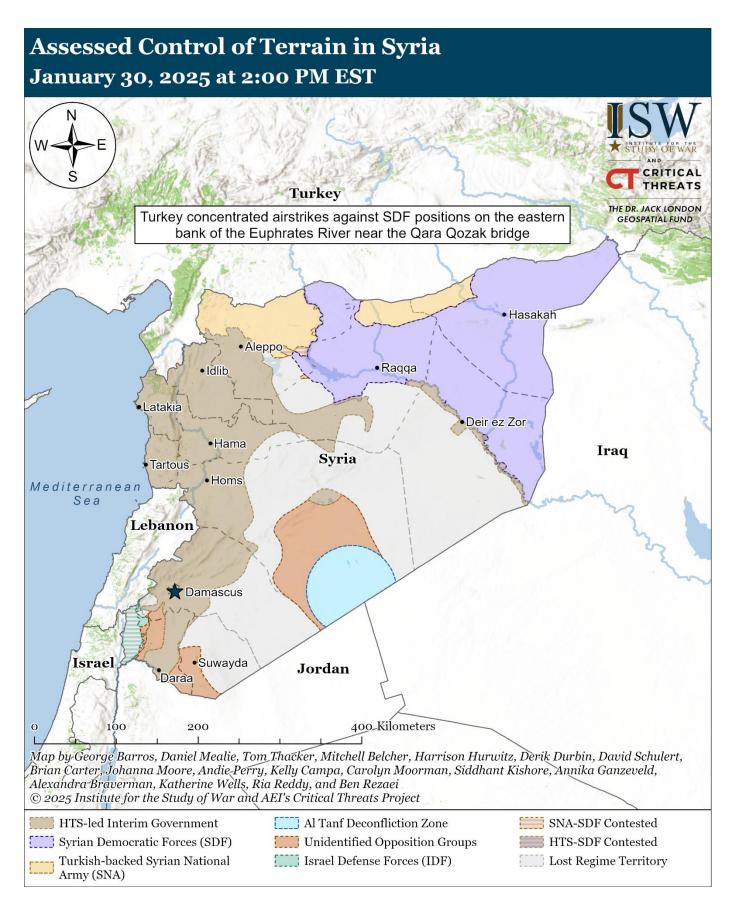
Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara said that Syrian sovereignty "under one authority and on one land" is a priority of the HTS-led interim government on January 30.[17] Shara officially became the Syrian interim president on January 29.[18] Shara said that he consulted with "legal experts" before he assumed the role of president and will work to form a transitional government that represents "the diversity of Syria."[19] Shara also stated that he would build state institutions and an economy free of corruption, prosecute former regime elements accused of crimes against the Syrian people, and impose Syrian "sovereignty under one authority and on one land."[20] Shara and other former HTS interim government officials have maintained that they will not allow any "federal" entities in Syria.[21] This demand has complicated negotiations with the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which has so far rejected every HTS proposal that limits its political and security autonomy.[22] Shara notably did not invite SDF representatives to the "Victory Conference" on January 29.[23]

Shara promised to appoint an interim legislative council until a new constitution is drafted and announced the formation of a preparatory committee for the National Dialogue Conference, which will reportedly represent "different points of view."[24] Shara said that, once these steps are complete, the government will release a "Constitutional Declaration" that will serve as the legal basis for the

transitional period.[25] Shara did not specify who or which groups will write the "declaration" and if the National Dialogue Conference will impact the contents of the declaration.

Key Takeaways:

- **Gaza Strip:** Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) released three Israeli hostages during the third hostage release on January 30. Hamas attempted to signal that it retains the ability to coordinate and communicate with other Palestinian militias in the Gaza Strip.
- **Iraq:** The presence of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias in the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) will likely not reduce the threat that these militias pose to the United States and its partners in the Middle East. Some Iranian-backed Iraqi militias and their political wings have reportedly considered a negotiated settlement in which the militias would integrate into the PMF in return for political appointments.
- **Lebanon:** The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) intercepted an unarmed reconnaissance drone in Lebanon as it flew toward Israel on January 30. Lebanese Hezbollah has not mentioned the drone or claimed it as a Hezbollah drone at the time of this writing.
- **Syria:** Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara said that Syrian sovereignty "under one authority and on one land" is a priority of the HTS-led interim government on January 30. Shara promised to appoint an interim legislative council until a new constitution is drafted and announced the formation of a preparatory committee for the National Dialogue Conference, which will reportedly represent "different points of view."



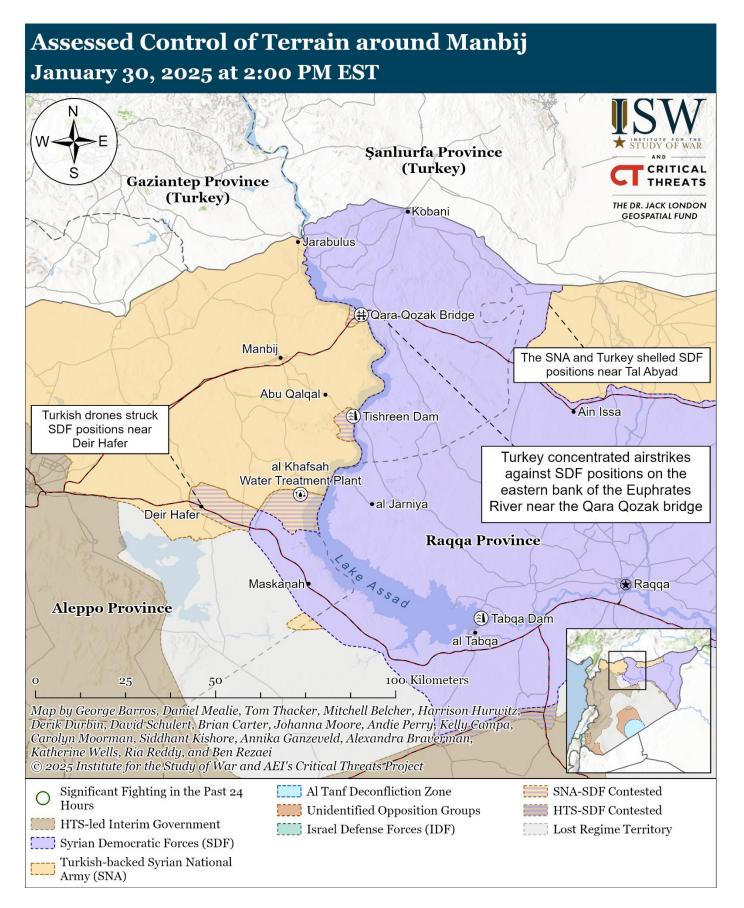
Syria

A senior Turkish Defense Ministry delegation met with Syrian Interim Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra and Syrian Armed Forces Chief of Staff Major General Ali al Nassan in Syria on January 29, likely to discuss military coordination. [26] The Turkish Defense Ministry said that the Turkish delegation held "technical talks" with Syrian officials and that Turkey will continue to closely cooperate with the new Syrian administration to enhance Syrian defense and security capabilities. [27] The Turkish and Syrian officials likely discussed military coordination in northern Syria, where Turkish aircraft and drones are supporting the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) against the SDF. The Turkish Defense Ministry said that Turkey will continue to take "preventative and destructive" measures against all "terrorist organizations." [28] Qasra recently warned that the Syrian interim government is "ready" to use force against the SDF if needed to integrate the SDF into the new Syrian armed forces. [29] Syrian military leaders would likely coordinate any potential future military operation against the SDF with Turkey and the SNA. CTP-ISW assesses that an HTS-led military operation against the SDF is not imminent, given that the HTS-led interim government appears to still be engaged in negotiations with the SDF as of this writing.

Turkey has concentrated airstrikes targeting SDF positions along the eastern bank of the Euphrates River near the Qara Qozak bridge in recent days. Turkey has conducted numerous airstrikes targeting the villages of Ghasq, Malha, Dukan, and Bir Hasso, near Sarrin, since January 25, according to the SDF and anti-SDF media.[30] Anti-SDF media reported that Turkey also struck an SDF position containing a tunnel and mobile rocket launch platform in the al Shuyukh area, across the Euphrates River from Jarabulus, on January 30.[31] These strikes likely intend to isolate the SDF at the Qara Qozak bridgehead and along the western bank of the Euphrates River.[32] Turkey has recently decreased its air activity targeting SDF supply lines and logistics routes leading to Tishreen Dam while increasing air activity east of Qara Qozak.[33]

Turkish aircraft and drones struck several SDF positions near Deir Hafer and the Tishreen Dam on January 30.[34]

The SNA and Turkey shelled SDF positions near Tal Abyad near the SDF-SNA frontline in Raqqa Province on January 30.[35] The SNA has repeatedly shelled SDF positions north of Raqqa, which CTP-ISW previously assessed may be in preparation for a three-pronged assault to collapse SDF defenses along the eastern bank of the Euphrates River.[36]



Russia likely continued to evacuate military assets from the Port of Tartus on January 30. Commercially available satellite imagery captured on January 30 showed a cargo vessel and likely Russian military assets at the Port of Tartus in northwestern Syria, which suggests that Russia is continuing to withdraw from the port and that some Russian forces remain at the port. Russia and the HTS-led interim Syrian government failed to reach an agreement on the future of Russian basing in Syria on January 28.[37]

Syrian Foreign Affairs Minister Asaad al Shaibani discussed the recent European Union (EU) decision to lift some sanctions on Syria during a meeting with an EU delegation on January 29.[38] EU Managing Director for the Middle East and North Africa Helene Le Gal headed the delegation. The EU announced on January 27 that it will lift sanctions on the Syrian energy, financial, and transportation sectors for one year if the interim Syrian government ensures an "inclusive political transition."[39] EU Foreign Policy Chief Kaja Kallas noted that the EU could reverse its decision to lift some sanctions on Syria if the HTS-led interim government takes "wrong steps."[40]

HTS-led interim government officials met with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani and his accompanying delegation in Damascus on January 30.[41] Thani met with Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara, Prime Minister Mohammad al Bashir, Foreign Affairs Minister Asaad al Shaibani, and Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra. Shara and Thani discussed strengthening bilateral relations and strategic cooperation between Qatar and Syria.[42] Thani emphasized the need to form a Syrian government with equal representation. Shaibani separately discussed a "comprehensive" reconstruction framework in a meeting with Qatari Foreign Affairs Minister Mohammed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh al Khulaifi.[43] These meetings come after the Qatari Foreign Affairs Ministry released a statement on January 29 that emphasized Qatar's full support for Syria in "all fields" and called for all weapons to be confined to a single Syrian army.[44]

<u>Iraq</u>

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Strengthen Iranian and Axis of Resistance influence over the Iraqi state and society
- Harden the Iraqi government against internal dissent

The Iraqi parliament is scheduled to vote on an amendment to the Federal Budget Law on February 2.[45] Parliament was previously scheduled to vote on a budget amendment on January 19 that would have increased Iraqi federal government compensation for oil production in Iraqi Kurdistan in return for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) resuming oil exports.[46] Parliament did not vote on the amendment because some Shia political parties walked out of parliament in protest against the amendment.[47] The Iraqi federal government reportedly submitted a new amendment proposal to parliament without KRG approval on January 23.[48] It is unclear whether parliament will vote on the new version of the amendment or the one previously approved by the KRG.[49]

Iraqi media reported on January 30 that Turkey struck Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) sites in Amedi District, Duhok Province, near the Turkey-Iraqi Kurdistan border.[50]

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

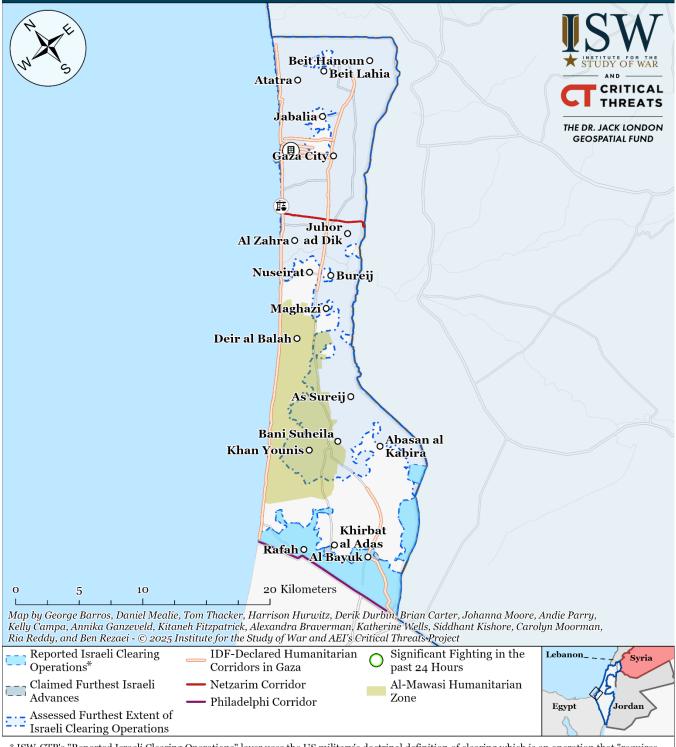
Axis of Resistance objectives:

- 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

IDF Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Herzi Halevi met with IDF commanders in the Netzarim Corridor in the Gaza Strip on January 29.[51] Israeli Army Radio reported on January 27 that the IDF withdrew from the Netzarim Corridor to allow Gazan civilians to return to the northern Gaza Strip.[52]

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip As of January 30, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



^{*} 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

Hamas Shura Council head Mohammad Darwish discussed the implementation of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire deal with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara on January 30.[53] Hamas claimed that Erdogan supported Palestinians "at all levels" during the war. Other senior Hamas members, including Hamas Deputy Political Bureau Chairman Khalil al Hayya, as well as Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and Turkish intelligence Chief Ibrahim Kalin attended the meeting.

Darwish separately met with Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi in Doha, Qatar, on January 30.[54] Araghchi and Darwish discussed the latest developments in the Gaza Strip and Araghchi praised Hamas for its "resistance" during the October 7 War.[55] Araghchi reaffirmed Iran's support for Palestinian militias and Lebanese Hezbollah. Araghchi also met with Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al Thani to discuss bilateral ties and developments in the Gaza Strip and Syria.

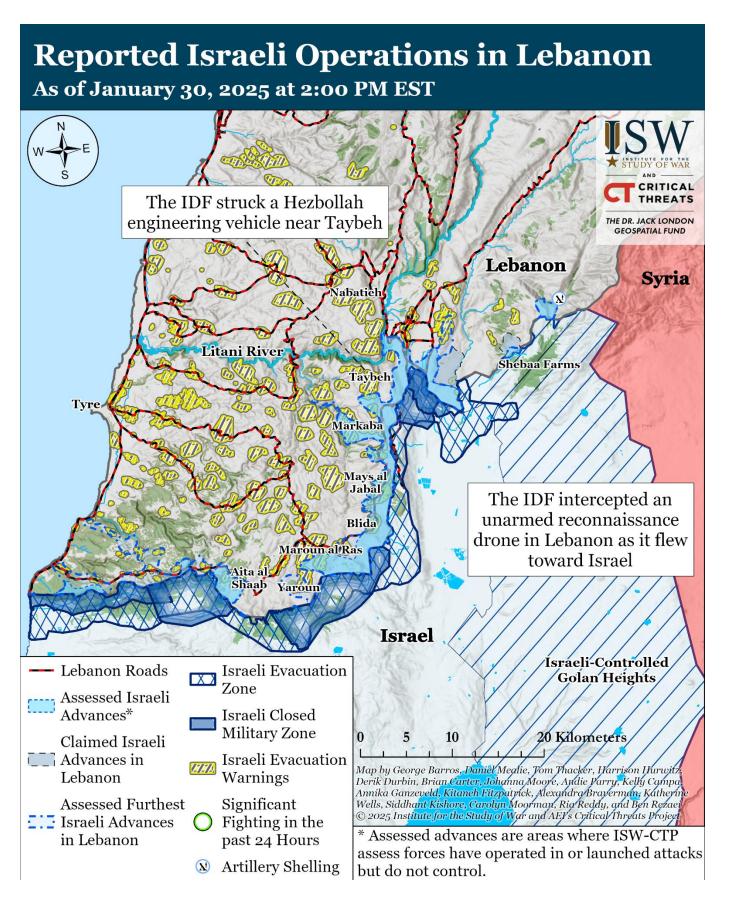
Lebanon

The IDF Air Force struck a likely Lebanese Hezbollah vehicle near Taybeh, southeastern Lebanon on January 29.[56] The IDF said that unspecified individuals used the vehicle to restore Hezbollah infrastructure in southern Lebanon. Lebanese media reported additional IDF airstrikes targeting an excavator and a motorcycle in Yarine and Tallousseh, respectively, on January 30.[57]

Lebanese media reported that the IDF shelled a neighborhood in Shebaa, southeastern Lebanon, on January 30.[58]

Lebanese media reported IDF activity in Kfar Kila, Markaba, Tallousseh, and Mays al Jabal, southeastern Lebanon, on January 30. The IDF reportedly detonated explosives near Tallousseh, Markaba, and Kfar Kila.[59] The IDF also reportedly operated in Markaba and Mays al Jabal.[60] Lebanese media reported on January 29 that the IDF moved northwestward from Houla toward Tallousseh.[61]

Lebanese media reported that the IDF detonated explosives and fired small arms in Aitaroun, southcentral Lebanon, on January 30.[62]



West Bank

The IDF continued its counterterrorism operation in the West Bank on January 29 and 30. The IDF Air Force conducted an airstrike targeting Palestinian militia fighters in Tammun, Tubas Governorate, on January 29.**[63]** The IDF killed 10 fighters, including fighters who killed an IDF soldier in Tubas on January 20.**[64]** Hamas mourned the death of five fighters killed in the strike.**[65]** The Israeli Police also killed a PIJ fighter who planned and conduced attacks against Israeli forces in Nablus.**[66]**

Palestinian militia fighters killed an IDF 900th Infantry Brigade soldier and injured five other soldiers during an engagement with Israeli forces in Jenin refugee camp on January 30.[67] PIJ and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades attacked Israeli forces in Jenin and Tulkarm with improvised explosive devices (IED) and small arms on January 30.[68]

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi held a phone call with his British counterpart David Lammy on January 29 to discuss nuclear negotiations.[69] Araghchi emphasized Iran's willingness to engage in negotiations "in line with [Iran's] national interests." Araghchi and Lammy likely discussed the possibility of the E3 (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) triggering snapback sanctions on Iran.[70] The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) snapback mechanism allows JCPOA signatories to reimpose UN Security Council sanctions on Iran in the event of "significant non-performance by Iran of JCPOA commitments." [71] Araghchi separately held a phone call with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Raphael Grossi to discuss technical cooperation between Iran and the IAEA.[72] These calls come after Araghchi implicitly threatened on January 28 that Iran could decide to pursue a nuclear weapon if the E3 triggers snapback sanctions on Iran before October 2025.[73]

Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali met with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov on January 29 to discuss developments in Syria.[74] Jalali and Bogdanov likely discussed Bogdanov's recent visit to Syria on January 28. Bogdanov and Russian Presidential Special Representative to Syria Alexander Lavrentyev met with HTS-led interim government officials in Damascus to discuss Russia's continued access to its military bases in Syria.[75]

Iranian First Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref attended a Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) meeting in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on January 30.[76] This marks the first time a senior Iranian official has attended an EAEU meeting since Iran became an EAEU observer member in October 2024.[77] The Iranian Parliament recently approved a free trade agreement between Iran and the EAEU on December 21, which will reportedly boost trade by removing 87 percent of tariffs on trade items between Iran and EAEU member states.[78] Aref stated that Iran seeks to increase cooperation across various sectors with Caspian Sea states, which is consistent with Iran's "neighborhood policy."[79] This policy seeks to increase Iranian economic ties with regional and extra-regional states to undermine and mitigate the impact of international sanctions on the Iranian economy.[80] Aref discussed cultural, economic, and technological cooperation with Kazakh Prime Minister Oljas Bektenov.[81] Aref also discussed Iranian-Belarusian private sector and economic cooperation with Belarusian Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko.[82]

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