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 <u>here</u> to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations, and <u>here</u> 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.

Six notable Iraqi Sunni politicians issued a statement on December 14 calling for a "comprehensive national dialogue" to address political and economic grievances.[1] The officials included:

- Parliament Speaker Mahmoud al Mashhadani,
- Former Parliament Speaker Osama al Nujaifi,
- Former Parliament Speaker Salim al Jabouri,
- Former Parliament Speaker Ayad al Samarrai,
- Former Iraqi National Assembly Speaker Hajim al Hassani, and
- Former Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al Mutlag.[2]

The officials emphasized the need to address issues that have caused "widespread public discontent and anger," including corruption and "injustices in prisons."[3] The officials also emphasized that Iraq should be an independent country void of external influence. The officials rejected the use of violence to achieve political transformation and reforms. The Baghdad-based Center for Political Thought interpreted the statement as a warning to the Shia Coordination Framework that the Iraqi federal government could face a major "restructuring" if it does not address these grievances.[4]

Mashhadani separately called on unspecified Iraqi political actors to implement the "Political Settlement" document in a speech on January 4.[5] The Iraqi Forces Alliance, which was a coalition of Sunni political parties, introduced the "Political Settlement" document in March 2017 as a framework

for "resolving political and security differences in the post-ISIS period."[6] Mohammad al Halbousi, who served as the Iraqi parliament speaker until late 2023, previously led the Iraqi Forces Alliance.[7] Mashhadani highlighted that the "Political Settlement" document requires signatories to "reconsider the constitution."[8] Mashhadani was likely referring to the article in the "Political settlement document" that requires signatories to "make real and fundamental constitutional amendments that address the gaps" in the implementation of the constitution in recent years.[9] Mashhadani stated that the Syrian regime may not have collapsed if it had reconciled with opposition groups.[10]

Senior Iraqi political and security officials appear to have rejected the recent calls for political reform and national dialogue. Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani criticized those who have called for reforming the Iraqi political system following the fall of the Bashar al Assad regime in Syria during a speech on January 4.[11] Sudani added that changing the Iraqi political system is "not up for discussion."[12] Popular Mobilization Commission Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh separately emphasized on January 2 that Iraq has experienced a "greater degree of political calm, harmony, and coexistence between societal components" during the past two years.[13] Fayyadh added that relations between Shias, Sunnis, and Kurds in Iraq are better than they were in the past. These statements suggest that Fayyadh opposes the calls for a "national dialogue" to address grievances from various elements of Iraqi society.

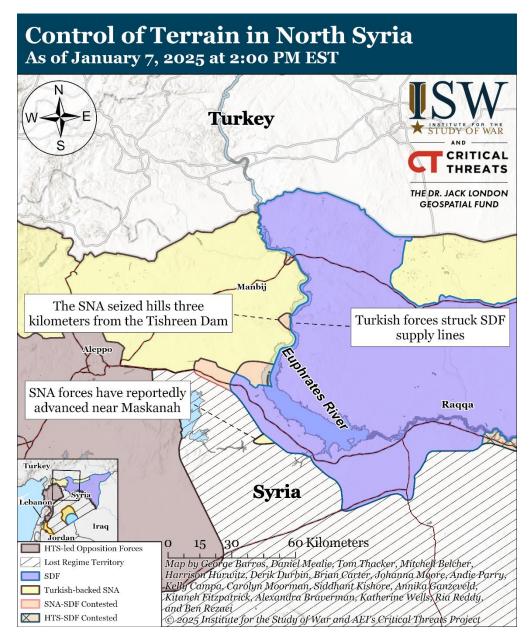
Iraqi media reported that the United States has pressured the Iraqi federal government to dissolve the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).[14] The PMF is an Iraqi state security service that includes a large number of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias. The PMF reports directly to Sudani on paper, but many of the militias that comprise the PMF answer to Iran in reality. The Iraqi media reports coincide with calls from prominent Shia figures, including Iraqi Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani, nationalist Iraqi Shia cleric Moqtada al Sadr, and National Wisdom Movement head Ammar al Hakim, to confine the possession of weapons to the Iraqi state.[15]

Turkish forces are likely attempting to isolate the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) by interdicting SDF supply lines to the Tishreen Dam on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River.[16] Anti-SDF media reported that Turkish drone strikes have prevented the SDF from accessing a main road that leads to the Dam in Aleppo Province. This would isolate the SDF forces that are holding the Dam and terrain on the western side of the river.[17] The isolation effect generated by these Turkish strikes may be temporary in nature, however, unless Turkey can maintain around-the-clock air superiority over SDF lines of communication. The SDF has shot down some Turkish drones, which would make maintaining around-the-clock air superiority more difficult for Turkey.[18] SDF supply lines currently flow across the Dam itself. Turkish airstrikes reportedly killed four SDF fighters on the supply line road on January 6.[19]

The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) advanced against several SDF positions on the western bank of the Euphrates River. The SNA seized hilly terrain overlooking the village of Mahshiyyat al Sheikh about three miles from Tishreen Dam.[20] The SNA continued to conduct drone strikes targeting SDF positions on the western bank of the Euphrates River near the dam.[21] The Turkish air campaign to cut off SDF resupply lines to the dam could weaken the SDF's ability to defend against SNA attacks on the western bank. The SDF retains a salient south of Lake Assad about 20 miles from Tishreen Dam, but SNA forces have reportedly advanced near Maskanah to outflank the SDF along the

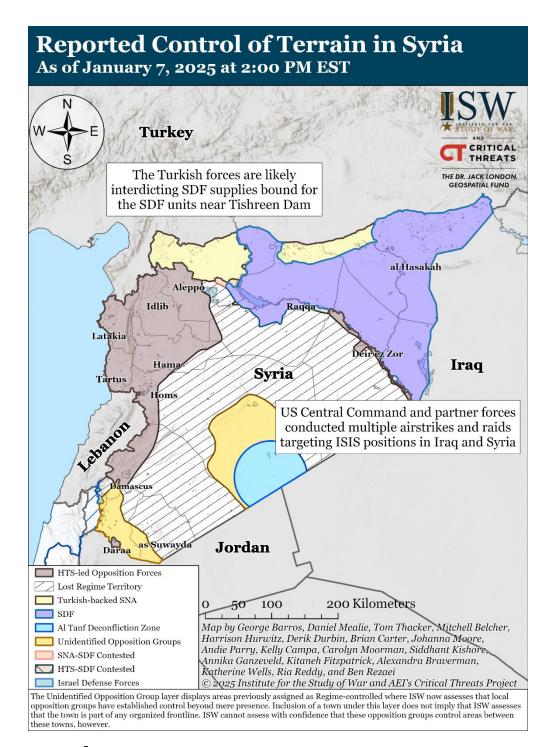
Aleppo-Raqqa highway.[22] Turkish drone strikes targeted an SDF vehicle along the Aleppo-Raqqa highway east of Maskanah, suggesting that Turkey is also attempting to interdict SDF supplies and reinforcements for the SDF's southern flank.[23] The SDF may seek to link its forces around Tishreen Dam with the forces moving northwards from Highway Route 4 on the southern salient.

Turkish efforts to interdict SDF supplies may be a precursor to a wider operation, especially if these interdiction strikes attempt to strike deeper behind the front line. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said on January 7 that Turkey would carry out a "military operation" against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria if the YPG does not disband and join the new integrated Syrian Ministry of Defense.[24] Turkey frequently fails to differentiate between the YPG and the SDF and uses the "YPG" as a euphemism for the entire SDF. Fidan said on January 6 that the "eradication" of the "Kurdish YPG militia" is "imminent."[25] Fidan, the Turkish defense minister, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan have made several similar statements threatening to SDF to disarm and disband but have not up until this point explicitly threatened a military operation into northeastern Syria.[26] Turkish forces have limited their military action to air support for the SNA but have reportedly brought a significant number of ground forces to the border with Syria.[27] Turkey and HTS have coordinated their efforts to coerce the SDF into disarming and integrating into the HTS-led defense apparatus since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024.



ISIS fighters killed one non-US soldier of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition and wounded two other non-US coalition soldiers during a ground operation in the Hamrin Mountains, Iraq.[28] CENTCOM and Iraqi forces conducted a series of airstrikes and ground operations in the Hamrin Mountains between December 30 and January 6. ISIS engaged non-US coalition forces on the ground during these operations, triggering coalition airstrikes. ISIS forces killed one non-US coalition soldier and wounded two other non-US coalition soldiers, however. No US personnel were killed or wounded.

CENTCOM-supported SDF personnel separately captured an ISIS attack cell leader during a raid near Deir ez Zor, Syria, on the evening of January 2 to 3. [29]



Key Takeaways:

• **Iraqi Politics:** Six notable Iraqi Sunni politicians called on December 14 for a "comprehensive national dialogue" to address political and economic grievances. The officials emphasized the need to address issues that have caused "widespread public discontent and anger," including corruption and "injustices in prisons." Senior Iraqi political and security officials appear to have rejected the recent calls for political reform and national dialogue.

- **Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces:** Iraqi media reported that the United States has pressured the Iraqi federal government to dissolve the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).
- **Northern Syria:** Turkish forces are likely attempting to isolate the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) by interdicting SDF supply lines to the Tishreen Dam on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River. Turkish efforts to interdict SDF supplies may be a precursor to a wider operation, especially if these interdiction strikes attempt to strike deeper behind the front line.
- **Counter-ISIS Mission:** ISIS fighters killed one non-US soldier of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition and wounded two other non-US coalition soldiers during a ground operation in the Hamrin Mountains, Iraq. CENTCOM-supported SDF personnel separately captured an ISIS attack cell leader during a raid near Deir ez Zor, Syria, on the evening of January 2 to 3.

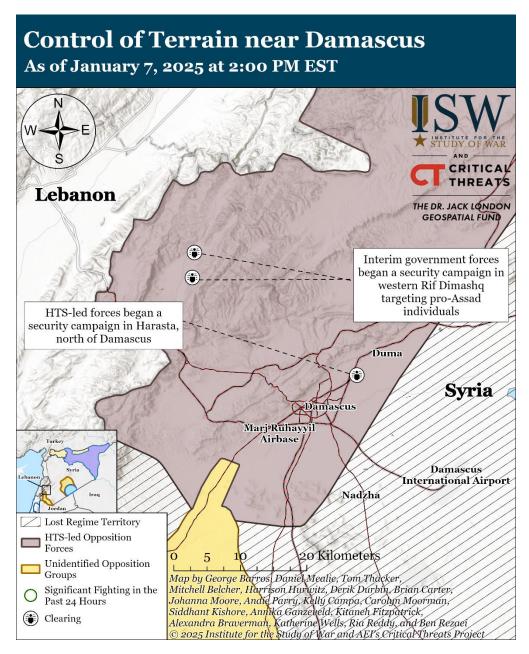
Syria

Axis of Resistance objectives:

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

Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al Shaibani announced on January 7 that the HTS-led interim government delayed the Syrian National Dialogue Conference.[30] Shaibani said that the government is first working to expand the preparatory committee for the conference to include representatives from all segments of society and geographic areas.[31] A Lebanese news outlet previously reported that the Syrian National Dialogue Conference would be delayed until the interim government has extended invitations to all relevant groups.[32] The interim Syrian government has begun to implement changes to the Syrian government without the consensus of a representative Syrian national dialogue conference. HTS will have more chances to implement changes to the government the longer the conference is delayed.[33] HTS leader and interim head of state Ahmed al Shara has said that he expects writing a constitution will take three years and organizing elections will take four years.[34]

HTS-led forces launched a security operation in western Rif Dimashq targeting former Assad regime members on January 7. A security source in Damascus told state-run media that interim government forces deployed to Zabadani and Mayada, western Rif Dimashq, to target pro-Assad individuals and weapons caches.[35] Local media also reported that HTS-led forces deployed to Harasta, a northeastern suburb of Damascus.[36] These new operations follow the interim government's completion of a four-day-long operation in Homs on January 6.[37]

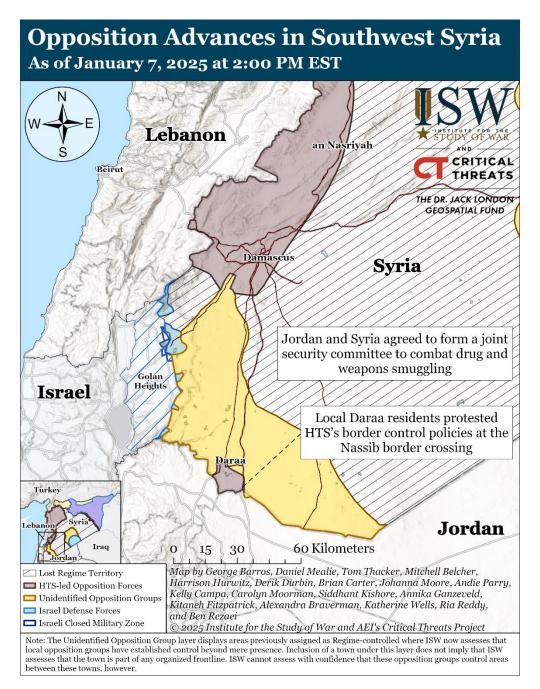


Two prominent Druze armed groups in Suwayda Province formally announced their readiness to integrate into the HTS-led Defense Ministry on January 6.[38] The two largest Druze armed groups in Suwayda Province, the Men of Dignity Movement and the Mountain Brigade, announced their readiness to merge into a military body that would "form the nucleus of a new national army." [39] The Men of Dignity and other Suwayda-based groups have cooperated with HTS since the fall of the regime. [40] The two groups emphasized that military factions should not interfere in governance or political affairs. [41] HTS has announced its intent to dissolve all armed groups within Syria into the HTS-led Defense Ministry. [42]

Jordan and Syria agreed to form a joint security committee to combat drug and weapons smuggling on their border. [43] Syrian Interim Foreign Affairs Minister Asaad al Shaibani, Interim Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra, and Interim Intelligence head Anas Khattab met with Jordanian

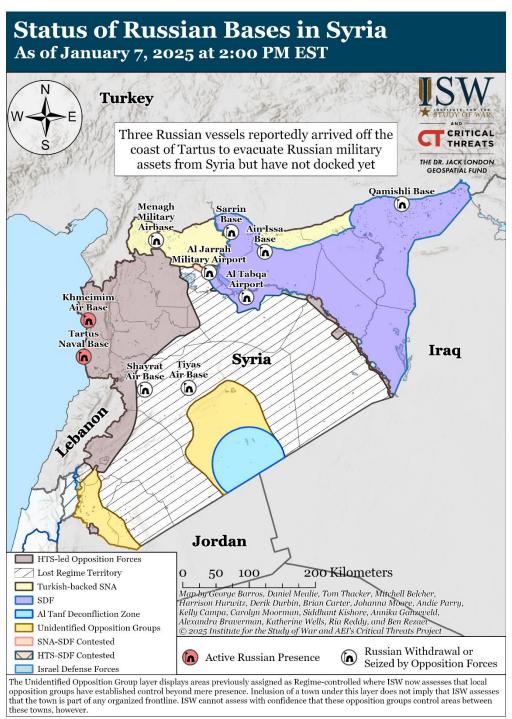
Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi in Amman on January 7.[44] Shaibani and Safadi announced in a joint press conference that Jordan and Syria have agreed to cooperate through several committees on security, defense, energy, and trade, with a particular emphasis on border security and combatting drug and weapon smuggling efforts along the Syria-Jordan border.[45] The Jordanian Armed Forces have conducted several airstrikes since May 2023 targeting Iranian-backed attempts to smuggle drugs and weapons into Jordan and often accused the former Assad regime of failing to stem Iranian-run smuggling networks.[46] Jordanian coordination with the HTS-led interim government may enable the two parties to more firmly crack down on remaining former regime-sponsored smuggling networks than Jordan could on its own.

Local Daraa residents protested HTS's border control policies at the Nassib border crossing between Daraa Province and Jordan on January 7. A small group of local protestors blocked off the entrance to the crossing in protest of the interim governments' prevention of certain "irregular" vehicles from crossing.[47] The Nassib crossing had been formerly controlled for years by Imad Abu Zurayq. Zurayq, like many commanders in the Southern Operations Room, was a Syrian opposition commander who later reconciled with the regime and then—as Assad fell—joined the Southern Operations Room.[48] Iranian-backed militias and smuggling rings have historically used this crossing and the areas surrounding it to smuggle weapons into Jordan and then into the West Bank to arm Palestinian militias.[49] Regime-affiliated groups—including Zurayq himself—also used the crossing to smuggle drugs.[50] HTS security forces formally took over the Nassib crossing on December 14, 2024.[51] The local protests against the HTS-led management of the crossing may represent local backlash against HTS control as the previous owners of the Nassib crossing lose access to rents there.



Three Russian vessels reportedly arrived off the coast of Tartus to evacuate Russian military assets from Syria, but the vessels have not docked yet. Commercially available satellite imagery captured on January 6 reportedly showed three Russian vessels off the coast of Tartus, Syria.[52] This imagery is consistent with Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate's (GUR) January 3 report that an *Ivan Gren*-class large landing ship, an *Alexander Otrakovsky* Ropucha-class landing ship, and the *Sparta* cargo ship were scheduled to arrive on January 5 at the port of Tartus to transfer Russian military assets to an unspecified location in Libya.[53] A Russian opposition outlet stated on January 6 that the Russian cargo ship *Sparta* has been floating off the coast of Syria for over 34 hours since its arrival.[54] It is unclear why the Russian vessels have not begun evacuation processes at the port in the days since their arrival in Syria. Russia may be in the process of negotiating security

guarantees from HTS for the safety of its vessels in Tartus. Russia may also decide to hold off on completing its full withdrawal from Tartus and Hmeimim to strengthen its negotiating position with HTS to maintain Russian basing rights.



The US Treasury Department issued a general license for energy sales and personal remittances to Syria on January 6.[55] The general license will last for six months and does not lift existing sanctions on Syria. The general license includes transactions related to the "sale, supply, storage, or donation of energy, including petroleum, petroleum products, natural gas, and electricity,

to or within Syria."[56] Qatar and Turkey sent two vessels capable of generating 800 megawatts of electricity to Syria on January 7.[57] The director general of the Syrian General Establishment for Electricity Transmission and Distribution said that these ships will increase Syria's total electricity generation capacity by 50 percent.[58]

<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

See the topline section.

Arabian Peninsula

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Harden the Houthi regime against internal dissent in Houthi-controlled areas
- Destroy the anti-Houthi opposition 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

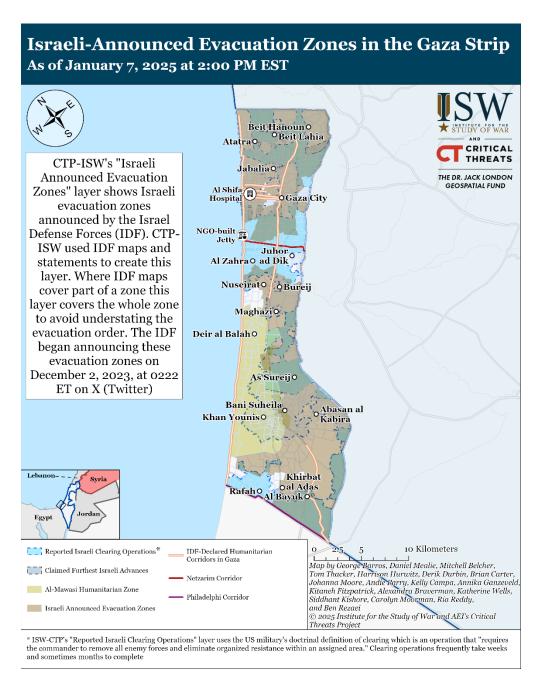
The Gaza Strip

The IDF 162nd Division continued clearing operations in the northern Gaza Strip on January 7. Unspecified Palestinian fighters conducted an anti-tank guided missile attack that killed two Israeli soldiers and seriously wounded two others in Beit Hanoun on January 6.[59] Unspecified Palestinian fighters separately shot and killed an Israeli soldier in Beit Hanoun on January 7.[60] No Palestinian militia has claimed responsibility for either of the attacks at the time of this writing. The IDF said on January 7 that Israeli forces are operating differently in the northern Gaza Strip than they did at the beginning of the October 7 War, including by "thoroughly clearing...entire area[s]" so that the IDF does not have to reclear those areas.[61]

The IDF 900th Infantry Brigade (99th Division) has killed over 300 Palestinian fighters during clearing operations in the northern Gaza Strip during its deployments. [62] The

brigade concluded its deployment in the northern Gaza Strip on January 5 after operating in Beit Hanoun, Beit Lahia, and Jabalia refugee camp.[63] Israeli forces located weapons and destroyed Hamas infrastructure.[64] Israeli forces destroyed a Hamas position that housed anti-tank firing positions, booby traps, tunnels, and rocket launchers aimed at Israeli territory.[65] Israeli forces also located 7.5 kilometers of underground tunnels in Beit Lahia.[66] The IDF estimated on January 7 that Beit Lahia is "completely destroyed and cleansed."[67]





Western media reported on January 7 that Emirati officials discussed an Emirati postwar plan for the Gaza Strip with US and Israeli officials. [68] The Emirati plan, which the United Arab Emirates (UAE) initially proposed in July 2024, would include the deployment of a temporary international mission to the Gaza Strip that would "deliver humanitarian aid, establish law and order, and lay the groundwork for governance" in the Gaza Strip. [69] Western media reported in mid-October 2024 that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken was considering the Emirati plan after concluding that there was "no deal in sight" for a ceasefire-hostage deal between Hamas and Israel. [70]

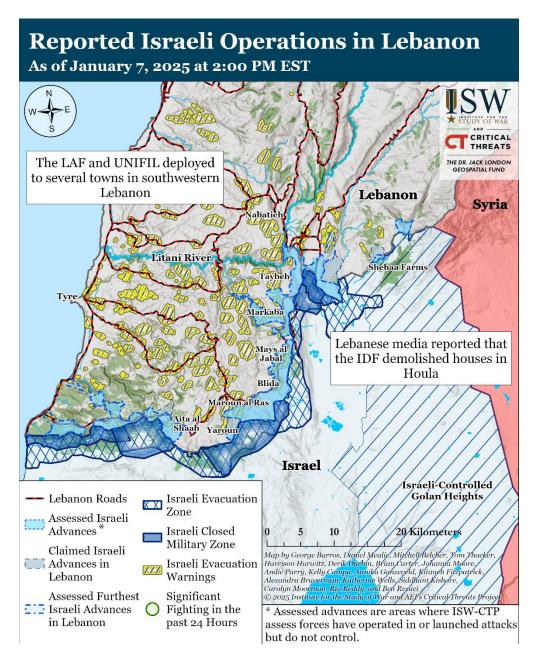
Israeli forces opened fire on a UN World Food Program convoy in the central Gaza Strip on January 6, causing no injuries.[71] The World Food Program said that Israel had granted "all necessary clearances" to the convoy.[72] The IDF is investigating the incident.[73]

The IDF announced on January 7 that 338 ultra-Orthodox Israelis joined the IDF in the past week.[74]

<u>Lebanon</u>

The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) deployed in new areas of southwestern Lebanon on January 7. The LAF positioned themselves in Naqoura, Alma al Shaab, Tayr Harfa, and Beit Lif in coordination with UNIFIL.[75] Lebanese media reported that Lebanese Civil Defense Members withdrew from Aalma el Chaeb when trying to retrieve bodes after the IDF fired flares in the area.[76] UK-based media reported on January 7 that the LAF entered the village of Labbouneh.[77] Lebanese media reported that the IDF demolished infrastructure in several southwestern Lebanese villages on January 7, including Ramyeh, Qouzeh, and Aita al Shaab.[78] The IDF likely demolished infrastructure prior to its withdrawal from these villages.

Lebanese media reported on January 7 that the IDF demolished infrastructure in Houla and Mays al Jabal, southeastern Lebanon.[79]



The US Embassy in Beirut reported on January 7 that the ceasefire monitoring committee inspected LAF 5th Brigade operations in Naqoura, southwestern Lebanon.[80] The LAF and UNIFIL began backfilling IDF positions in Naqoura on January 6.[81]

Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati told the ceasefire monitoring committee on January 7 that Israel must end its violation of the ceasefire and withdraw from Lebanon.[82] Mikati is presumably responding to Israeli and Lebanese media reports on January 4 that suggested that the IDF may extend its deployment in southern Lebanon by an additional 30 days.[83] US envoy Amos Hochstein reassured Lebanese officials on January 6 that the IDF would withdraw from all Lebanese territory.[84] Lebanese officials, organizations, and media have consistently claimed that the IDF has violated the ceasefire since its implementation on November 27.[85]

Reuters reported on January 7 that the United States will provide \$95 million in military aid to the LAF to maintain the Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire.[86] A State Department document clarified that the funds are to be used for multiple purposes, including for Lebanese security issues caused by the collapse of the Assad regime.

West Bank

The IDF conducted counterterrorism operations in several cities in the West Bank overnight on January 6 and 7. The IDF 417th Territorial Brigade killed two Palestinian fighters, detained several suspects, and confiscated weapons near Tammun in the Jordan Valley.[87] The IDF also killed a Hamas fighter in Talluza, Nablus Governorate, after he fired at and seriously injured an Israeli reservist from the 442nd Territorial Brigade.[88] The IDF separately detained several suspects and confiscated weapons in Rafidia, Hebron, Bethlehem, Qalqilya, and Ramallah.[89] These operations follow a shooting attack in Qalqilya Governorate on January 6, after which Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu approved new, unspecified "offensive and defensive" security measures in the West Bank.[90]

Israeli settlers set fire to cars and damaged homes in Hajjah and Immatain, Qalqilya Governorate, on January 6.[91] Three unspecified Palestinian fighters killed three Israelis and wounded eight others in a shooting attack targeting vehicles on Route 55 in Qalqilya Governorate on January 6, which may have incited the settler violence in Hajjah and Immatain.[92]

Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces reportedly conducted operations in Tulkarm Governorate on January 7. Hamas condemned the PA for opening fire on a vehicle carrying Palestinian fighters near Attil.[93] The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades separately claimed that PA security forces blocked the road to Attil and injured unidentified men from Nour Shams Refugee Camp and Shuweika near Tulkarm.[94]

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

Iran is attempting to support Lebanese Hezbollah despite losing access to the land bridge that connects Iran to Lebanon via Syria. Iran previously transferred funds and weapons to Hezbollah through Syria before the fall of the Bashar al Assad regime. The HTS-led interim government will likely block any Iranian attempts to use Syrian territory to fund and arm Hezbollah. Unspecified Western officials told the *Wall Street Journal* on January 7 that Iran has recently attempted to increase direct cash deliveries from Iran to Hezbollah.[95] Iran may attempt to do so by air. Lebanese airport security forces searched an Iranian Mahan Air flight in Beirut on suspicion of transporting funds to Hezbollah on January 2.[96] The Israel-Lebanon ceasefire agreement requires the Lebanese government to "monitor and enforce" the entry of arms and related materials to prevent the rearming of Hezbollah. Iran may struggle to financially and militarily support Hezbollah if its avenues to do so, including the land bridge and air transportation, are cut off.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Force conducted a military exercise near the Natanz nuclear facility in Esfahan Province, Iran, on January 7.[97] The IRGC Aerospace Force tested the "9-Dey" air defense system during the exercise.[98] The IRGC claimed without any evidence that this system could intercept a bunker-buster bomb within 15 seconds from a distance of 17 kilometers.[99] The IRGC Aerospace Force also tested 358 surface-to-air missiles and

short-range Dezful and Tor-M1 systems.[100] This exercise reflects Iranian concerns over a potential attack on its nuclear facilities, especially after Israel destroyed the bulk of its advanced air defense batteries.

Iranian Parliamentary National Security and Foreign Policy Committee member Ahmad Bakhshayesh Ardestani claimed during an interview on January 5 that 130,000 Iranian-backed fighters are "ready to be activated" and could confront the new Syrian administration if necessary.[101] Ardestani's statement echoes rhetoric from other Iranian officials, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who repeatedly emphasized the role of Syrian youth in resisting "foreign occupation" in Syria.[102]

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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