

Iran Update, May 20, 2024

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Information Cutoff: 2:00pm ET

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi died in a helicopter crash in northwestern Iran on May 19.[1] His death upends Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's multi-year project of grooming Raisi to become the next supreme leader. Khamenei has invested tremendous energy and time in preparing Raisi in recent years, appointing him to key positions and engineering the presidential election in 2021 to ensure that he won.[2] Raisi's death is a shock to both the day-to-day management of the Iranian government as well as to Khamenei's long-term vision for the regime.

There is no obvious top contender to become the next supreme leader since Raisi died. One of Khamenei's sons, Mojtaba Khamenei, is widely considered a leading candidate. Mojtaba has significant influence in the regime, especially in the internal security apparatus. Though Mojtaba certainly could replace his father, it is premature to say that he is the most likely option. Khamenei and other powerful factions that have supported Raisi for years must now reconsider who they would like to become the next supreme leader. They will not necessarily support Mojtaba. A member of the Assembly of Experts stated in February 2024 that Khamenei opposes hereditary succession, in fact.[3]

The regime must fill several key positions in the coming days and weeks, which could provide insight into how Khamenei and other factions are considering succession since Raisi died. The Assembly of Experts, which is the regime body responsible for monitoring and selecting the supreme leader, is scheduled to elect its leadership board on May 21.[4] That board includes the chairman and deputy chairman, which are both currently vacant. Raisi was the previous deputy chairman. Parliament is similarly scheduled to elect a new speaker on May 27.[5] Iran will also hold a presidential election on June 28.[6]

Khamenei will need to decide whether to interfere in any of these elections' outcomes to prepare for succession. Any prominent cleric in one of these positions would become a natural contender for supreme leadership even though there is no legal requirement for the supreme leader to hold such offices beforehand. Khamenei could, on the other hand, refrain from making an immediate decision on who he would like to succeed him.

An indicator that Khamenei is positioning an individual to succeed him would be Khamenei allowing a cleric to become the next president or parliament speaker. This indicator would be especially strong if that cleric is in their 60s or 70s. Khamenei would probably avoid supporting a cleric much older, given that they would have a higher risk of dying and triggering another succession crisis sooner.

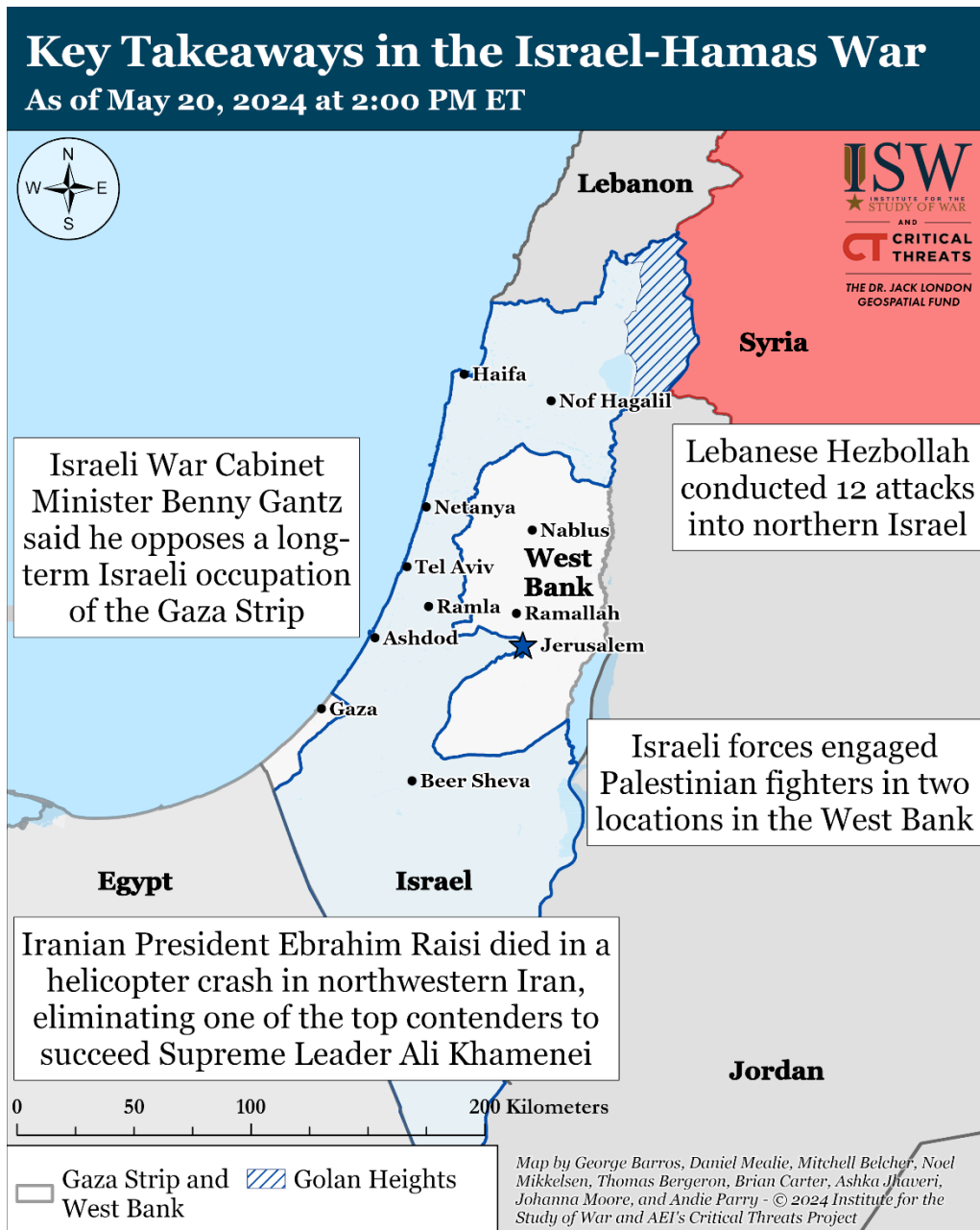
Iranian Interim President Mohammad Mokhber appointed Ali Bagheri Kani as head of the administration's Foreign Relations Council, making Bagheri Kani the de-facto acting foreign affairs minister, on May 20.[7] Bagheri Kani replaces Hossein Amir Abdollahian, who died alongside Ebrahim Raisi in the helicopter crash in northwestern Iran on May 19.[8] Bagheri Kani will serve in his new position until the next Iranian president enters office. Bagheri Kani has held several key roles in the Iranian regime. He had been most recently the deputy foreign affairs minister for policy and lead negotiator in the nuclear talks since 2021.[9] Bagheri Kani also served as the deputy secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) from 2008 to 2013.[10] The SNSC is comprised of senior military and political officials and responsible for advising the supreme leader on foreign policy and national security.

The Chief Prosecutor at the International Criminal Court, Karim Khan, has submitted an application to the court to obtain arrest warrants for Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip Yahya Sinwar, Hamas military wing commander Mohammed Deif, and Hamas Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh on May 20 for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity involving extermination, murder, torture, and sexual violence.[11]

The Chief Prosecutor at the International Criminal Court has submitted an application to the court to obtain arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant on May 20 for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity involving the starvation of civilians.[12]

Key Takeaways:

- **Iran:** Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi died in a helicopter crash in northwestern Iran. His death upends Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s multi-year project grooming Raisi to become the next supreme leader.
- **Israel:** The Chief Prosecutor at the International Criminal Court has submitted an application to the court to obtain arrest warrants for several Hamas and Israeli officials.
- **Gaza Strip:** Israeli forces have continued to expand the extent of their clearing operation in eastern Rafah.
- **Syria:** Israel was likely responsible for two airstrikes targeting pro-Syrian regime targets in Syria in recent days.
- **Yemen:** The Houthis fired an anti-ship ballistic missile into the Gulf of Aden.



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 Israel Defense Forces (IDF) 98th Division continued to conduct clearing operations in Jabalia on May 20. The IDF 7th, 36th, and 460th brigades engaged Palestinian fighters, raided militia sites, and located weapons in a UNRWA compound in Jabalia.[13] The brigades directed strikes on Palestinian cells that were approaching Israeli forces in Jabalia with rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) and anti-tank munitions.[14] Israeli forces have killed over 200 fighters in Jabalia since beginning operations there on May 14.[15] A local Palestinian journalist reported that Israeli snipers were operating in several buildings in Beit Lahia, north of Jabalia refugee camp.[16] Several Palestinian militias defended against Israeli advances into Jabalia using RPGs, small arms fire, rockets, and mortars.[17]

An Israeli military correspondent publicized further details of the recent recovery of four Israeli hostages' remains in Jabalia refugee camp.[18] The IDF 202nd Paratrooper Battalion found the remains in a Hamas command-and-control center located in tunnel complex under Jabalia refugee camp on May 17. Hamas had brought command and communications equipment to the complex from other destroyed Hamas centers. The correspondent said that the IDF had not previously cleared this area in Jabalia refugee camp, which is consistent with CTP-ISW's assessed clearing extent. Hamas planted an explosively formed penetrator inside the tunnel where the hostages' bodies were found. The 202nd Paratrooper Battalion led the operation and sustained six casualties, one of which was a company commander. The IDF 679th Brigade began an operation to clear militia infrastructure, such as tunnels, in Sabra just north of the Netzarim corridor.[19] The IDF 99th Division continued operations along the Netzarim corridor in the central Gaza Strip on May 20.[20] Two IDF brigades are defending the Netzarim corridor and the US-built humanitarian aid pier in the central Gaza Strip while conducting targeted raids on militia infrastructure.[21] The IDF 679th Brigade shelled Palestinian fighters and weapons caches in the central Gaza Strip.[22] Palestinian militias did not claim attacks targeting Israeli forces in the central Gaza Strip on May 20.

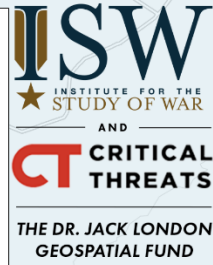
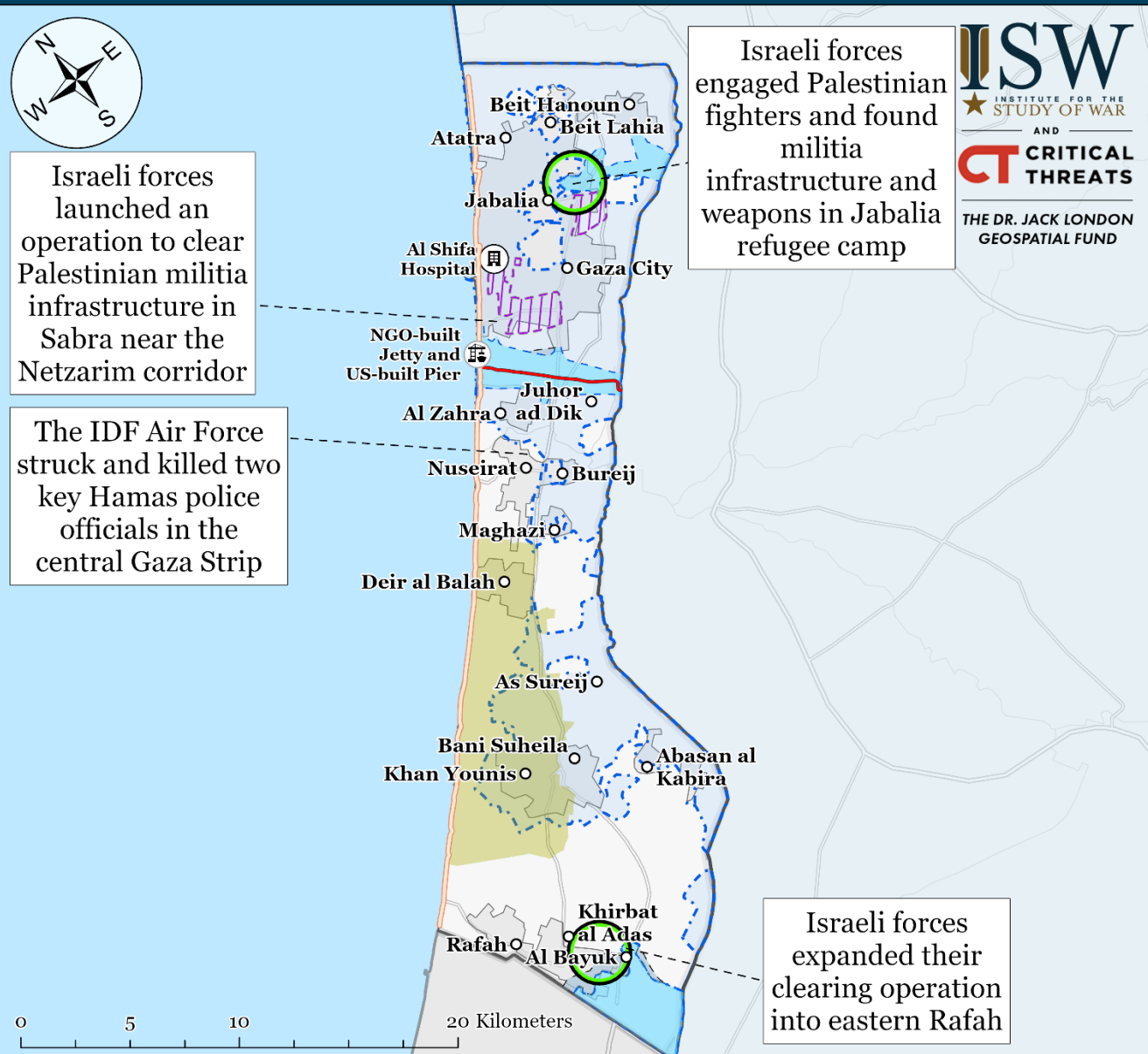
The IDF Air Force has struck and killed two key Hamas police officials in the central Gaza Strip in recent days. The IDF cooperated with Shin Bet to target Zahar Khouli, who was a senior member of the Hamas police in the central refugee camps, on May 19.[23] The IDF said that Khouli maintained contacts with other militia members and supported attacks against Israel. The IDF and Shin Bet targeted Rami Khalil Faki, who was a prominent Hamas police official responsible for Nuseirat, on May 18.[24] The strike on Faki killed his deputy and four other Hamas fighters as well.[25] The IDF said that Faki commanded a Hamas squad that attacked Israeli forces.[26] The IDF Air Force has struck over the past day 80 targets throughout the Gaza Strip, including weapon depots, rocket launchers, Palestinian fighters, and buildings used to attack Israeli forces.[27]

The IDF 162nd Division announced that it “deepened” its clearing operation into eastern Rafah on May 20.[28] Israeli forces located dozens of tunnel shafts, raided militias sites, and engaged Palestinian fighters in eastern Rafah.[29] An IDF Maglan drone team directed a strike on a Palestinian fighter exiting a tunnel shaft to target Israeli forces in eastern Rafah.[30] Israeli forces have killed over 130 Palestinian fighters in eastern Rafah since beginning operations there.[31] The IDF Air Force struck and killed a Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) field commander and three other PIJ fighters in Rafah.[32] Three Palestinian militias targeted Israeli forces in Rafah on May 20.[33]

US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan met separately with the three members of the Israeli War Cabinet to discuss Israeli operations in Rafah and other items on May 19 and 20.[34] Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant told Sullivan that Israel is “committed” to expanding a ground operation into Rafah.[35] Several Israeli military correspondents reported that the IDF estimates 950,000 Palestinians have left Rafah in “only two weeks” and that 60 to 70 percent of Rafah is totally evacuated.[36] The remaining 300,000 to 400,000 civilians remain in Tel Sultan, western Rafah.

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

As of May 20, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



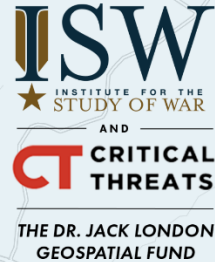
Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Brian Carter, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Andie Parry © 2024 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

Reported Israeli Clearing Operations	Areas Reportedly Infiltrated by Palestinian Militias	Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances	IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridor on Road 230	Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone
Assessed Furthest Extent of Israeli Clearing Operations	Netzarim Corridor	

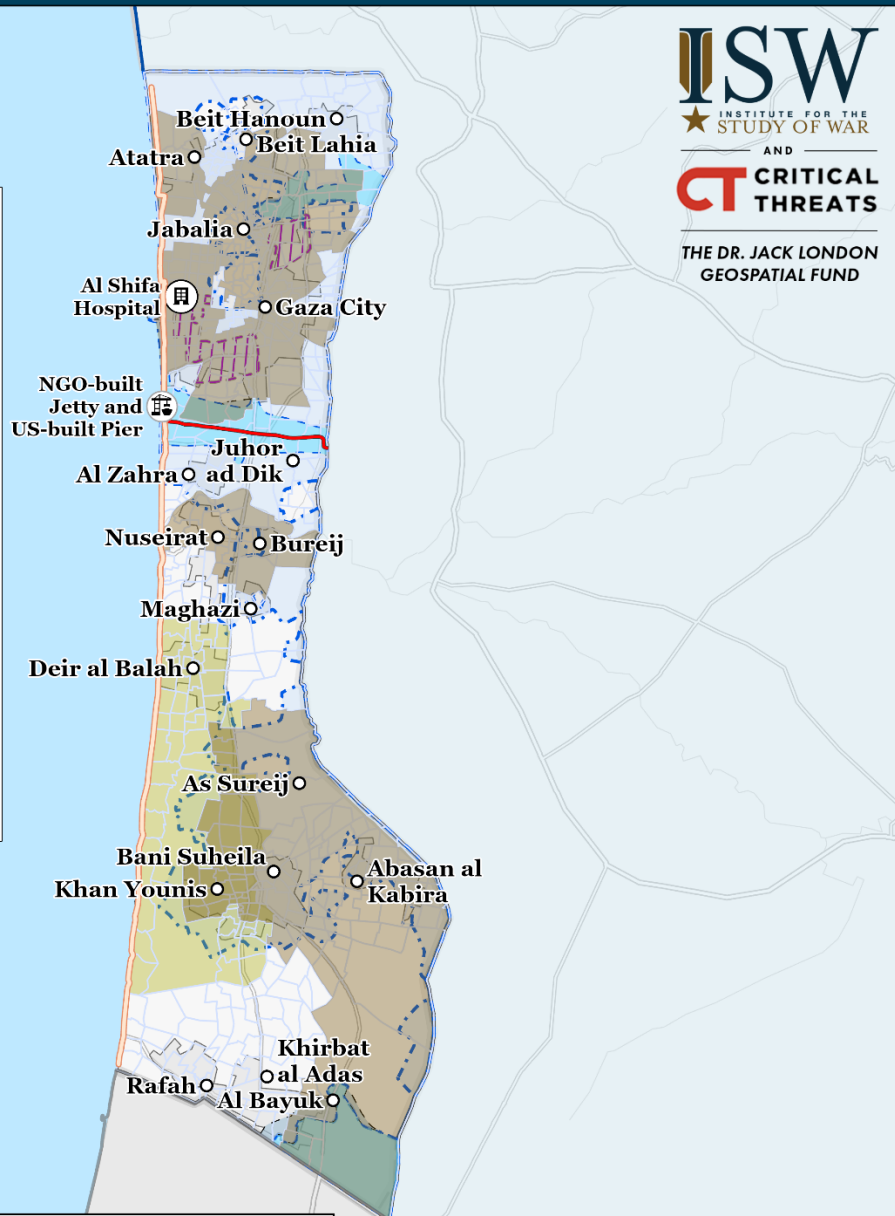
* ISW-CTP's "Reported Israeli Clearing Operations" layer uses the US military's doctrinal definition of clearing which is an operation that "requires the commander to remove all enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance within an assigned area." Clearing operations frequently take weeks and sometimes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

Israeli-Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip

As of May 20, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



CTP-ISW's "Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones" layer shows Israeli evacuation zones announced by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). CTP-ISW used IDF maps and statements to create this layer. Where IDF maps cover part of a zone this layer covers the whole zone to avoid understating the evacuation order. The IDF began announcing these evacuation zones on December 2, 2023, at 0222 ET on X (Twitter)



- - - Reported Israeli Clearing Operations*
- Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones
- Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances
- IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridor on Road 230
- Areas Reportedly Infiltrated by Palestinian Militias
- Netzarim Corridor
- Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone

0 2.5 5 10 Kilometers

Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Brian Carter, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Andie Parry - © 2024 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical

* 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

Israeli War Cabinet Minister Benny Gantz told Likud Knesset members on May 20 that he opposes extended Israeli military control of the Gaza Strip.[37] Gallant estimated that an occupation of the Gaza Strip would require Israel to extend mandatory military service from 32 months to 48 months.[38] He clarified that he is “against a Palestinian state, neither Hamas nor Israel” should rule the Gaza Strip.[39] Gantz’s statement echoes his May 18 ultimatum to Netanyahu to approve a new strategy for the war in the Gaza Strip by June 8.[40] An Israeli government document obtained by Israeli media assessed that an Israeli military occupation of the Gaza Strip would need a dramatic increase in the number of reserve soldiers and cost roughly 5 billion dollars.[41]

Palestinian militias conducted at least one indirect fire attacks from the Gaza Strip into Israel on May 20. PIJ and the Ansar Brigades launched a barrage of rockets at unspecified Israeli towns near the Gaza Strip.[42] Israeli red alerts indicate that the militias targeted Mefalsim near Sderot.[43]



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

West Bank

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

Israeli forces have engaged Palestinian fighters in at least two locations in the West Bank since CTP-ISW's data cut off on May 19.[44] PIJ's al Quds Brigades fired small arms targeting an IDF checkpoint near Jenin.[45] The al Quds Brigades separately fired small arms targeting an Israeli settlement across the Israel-West Bank border.[46]

The IDF detained 14 wanted individuals and confiscated cash and weapons during operations in the West Bank on May 20.[47]



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

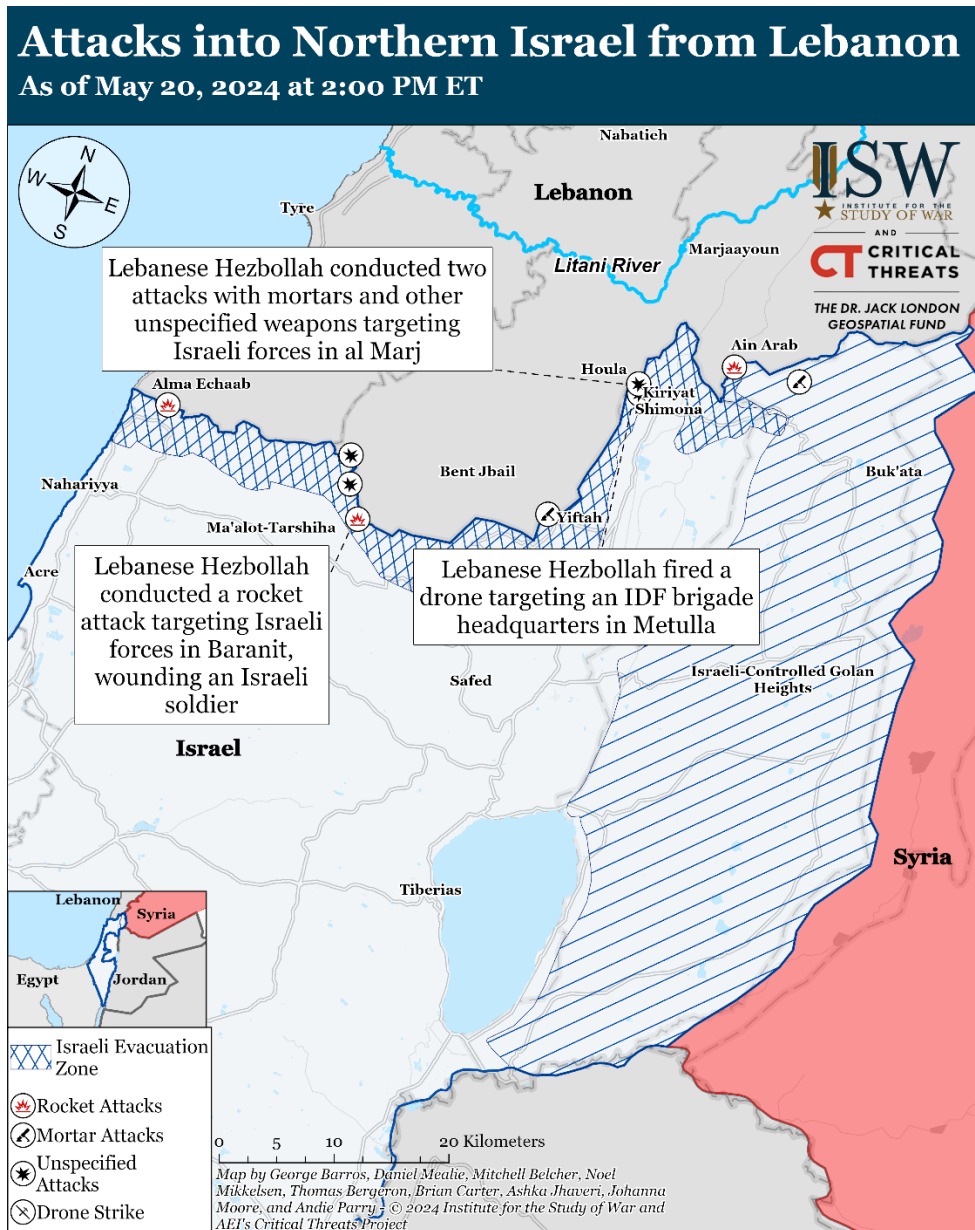
Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Deter Israel from conducting a ground operation into Lebanon
- Prepare for an expanded and protracted conflict with Israel in the near term
- Expel the United States from Syria

Lebanese Hezbollah has conducted at least 12 attacks into northern Israel since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on May 19.[48]

The IDF conducted airstrikes in southern Lebanon, killing at least two Hezbollah fighters, on May 20.[49] The IDF said that it targeted a weapons depot in al Naqoura.[50] An Israeli Army Radio correspondent said that the strikes killed four Hezbollah fighters.[51] Hezbollah, however, mourned the deaths of only two of its fighters in al Naqoura on May 20.[52]



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

Iran and Axis of Resistance

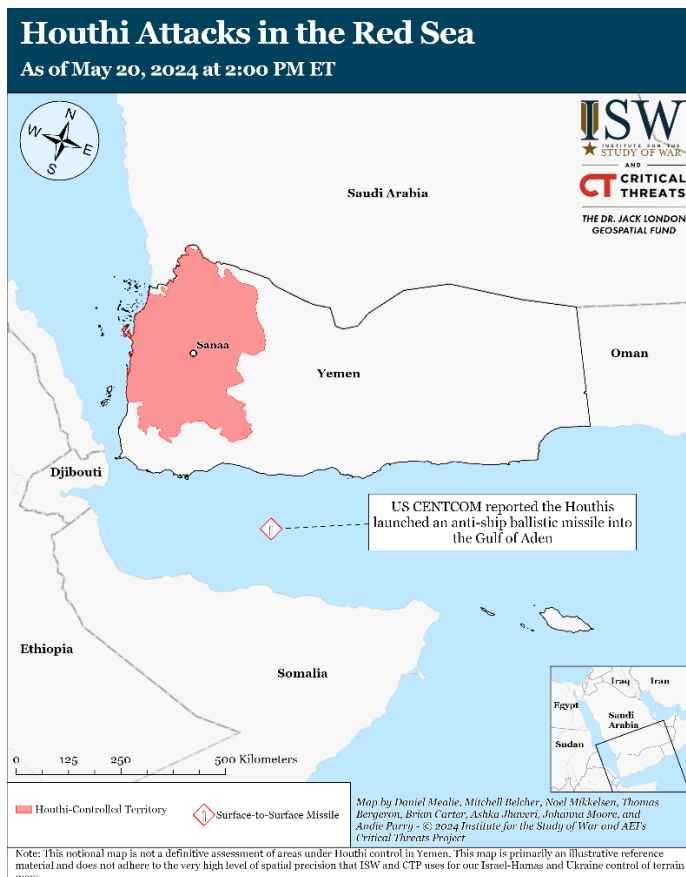
The IDF Air Force was likely responsible for an airstrike targeting a vehicle near Lebanon-Syria border on May 18.[53] Syrian media reported that the attack took place near a Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 4th Division checkpoint around the al Masnaa border crossing.[54] There were no reported casualties.[55]

The IDF Air Force was likely responsible for airstrikes targeting two pro-Syrian regime positions outside Homs City, Homs Province, on May 20.[56] Syrian media reported that one of the targets was a Lebanese Hezbollah-affiliated truck in Qusayr near the Lebanon-Syria border.[57] Local sources reported that another target was an unspecified site outside Homs City.[58] Israeli and Syrian media reported that there were four casualties, one of which was an SAA soldier.[59] CTP-ISW cannot verify the local reporting.

The IDF Air Force has previously targeted vehicles suspected of transporting Hezbollah military cargo in Qusayr.[60] A Syria analyst noted that Hezbollah maintains a heavy presence in the area.[61] The IDF has increased its strikes into Syria since December 2023 to disrupt the IRGC Quds Force and Hezbollah's efforts to bring personnel and weapons into Lebanon from Syria.[62]

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—claimed a drone attack targeting Eilat, Israel, on May 19.[63] Israeli officials and media have not commented on the claimed attack at the time of this writing.

US Central Command (CENTCOM) reported that the Houthis launched an anti-ship ballistic missile from Yemen into the Gulf of Aden on May 18.[64] No damage or injuries were reported.



- [1] <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iranian-president-brahim-raisi-killed-helicopter-crash/>
- [2] <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-sole-moderate-presidential-candidate-congratulates-raisi-his-victory-state-2021-06-19/>
- [3] <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/iran-update-february-29-2024>
- [4] <https://www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1403/02/30/3088517>
- [5] <https://www.tasnimnews dotcom/fa/news/1403/02/25/3085563>
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[47] <https://x.com/idfonline/status/1792524237565042799>; <https://x.com/idfonline/status/1792524249300705285>
[48] <https://t.me/mmirleb/4035>; <https://t.me/mmirleb/4044>; <https://t.me/mmirleb/4045>; <https://t.me/mmirleb/4047>; <https://t.me/mmirleb/4050>; <https://t.me/mmirleb/4055>; <https://t.me/mmirleb/4059>; <https://t.me/mmirleb/4061>; <https://t.me/mmirleb/4063>; <https://t.me/mmirleb/4066>; <https://t.me/mmirleb/4068>; <https://t.me/mmirleb/4070>
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