



## Iran Update, January 5, 2024

**Brian Carter, Annika Ganzeveld, Andie Parry, and Peter Mills**

**Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm EST**

*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. For more on developments in Iran and the region, see our [interactive map of Iran and the Middle East](#).*

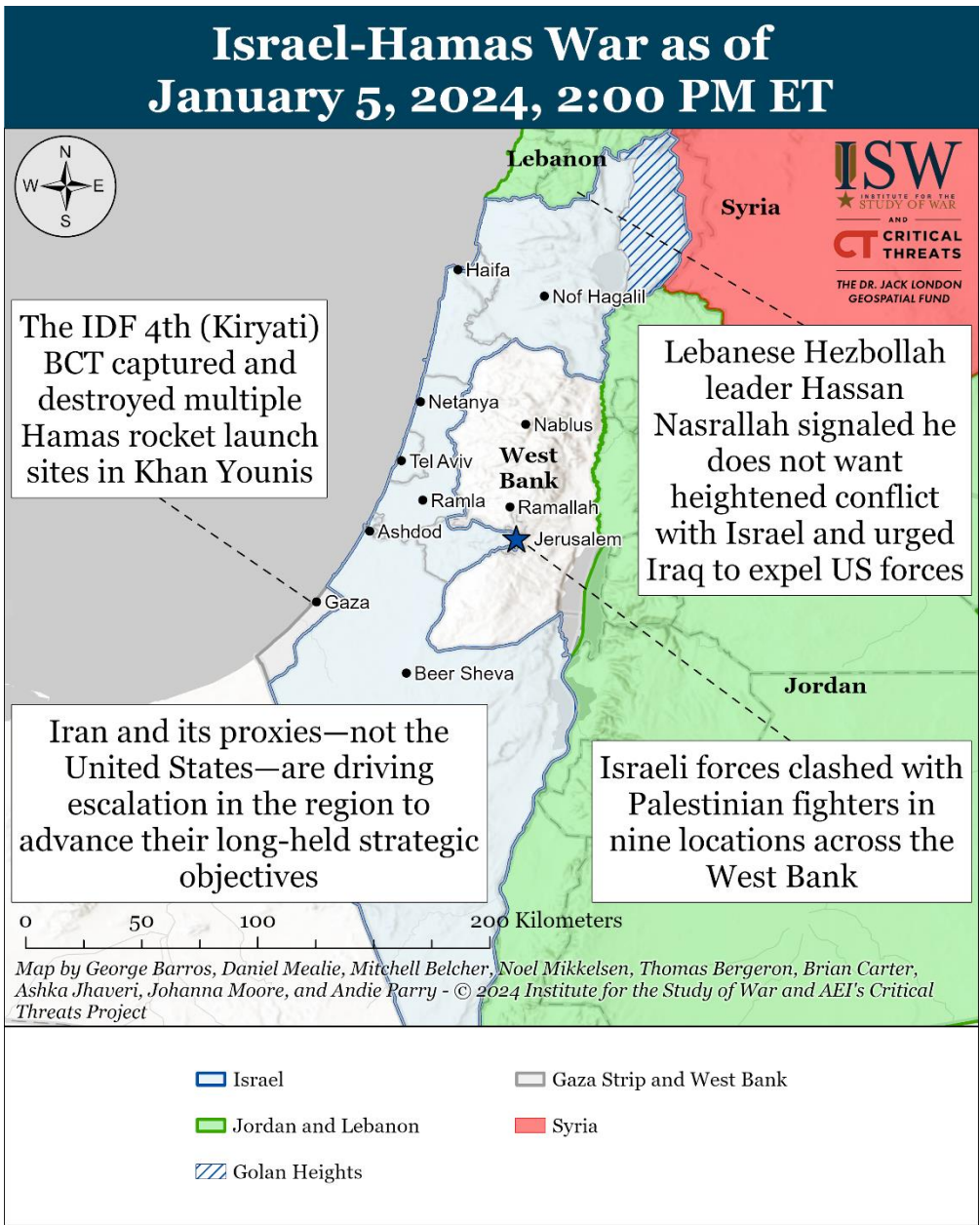
*Note: CTP and ISW have refocused the update to cover the Israel-Hamas war. The new sections address developments in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as noteworthy activity from Iran's Axis of Resistance. We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are 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.*

*Click [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.*

### **Key Takeaways:**

1. Iran and its proxies—not the United States—are driving escalation in the region to advance their long-held strategic objectives. An end to Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip will not on its own stop Iranian escalation because Iran's effort to expel the United States from the region and decrease US influence transcends the war.
2. Iran and its Iraqi proxies are advancing their campaign to expel US forces from Iraq.
3. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant released a four-pronged security and governance plan for the Gaza Strip.
4. Lebanese Hezbollah continued to signal that it does not seek escalation to a full-fledged war with Israel while Iranian-backed militias, including Lebanese Hezbollah, conducted six attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel.

5. Iranian state media is downplaying the connection between Afghanistan and the January 3 terrorist attack in Kerman City, Iran, and blaming the United States and Israel for the attack instead.
6. Iraqi police discovered an Iranian-designed land attack cruise missile in southern Iraq on January 5.



**Iran and its proxies—not the United States—are driving escalation in the region to advance their long-held strategic objectives.** The Iranian-backed Houthi movement and Iranian-backed Iraqi proxy militias are driving escalation in the region by attacking global shipping and US forces. The United States has so far not responded to Houthi attacks with military action targeting

the Houthis' ability to attack commercial shipping.[1] Iranian-backed proxies started attacking US forces in Iraq on October 22 and conducted 33 attacks without a US response. US forces first responded in Iraq to attacks against US forces after Kataib Hezbollah fired a ballistic missile targeting a US position on November 22.[2] The proxies began conducting attacks against US forces in Syria on October 19.[3] They attacked US forces 9 times before the United States first struck Iranian-backed positions in Syria on October 25. The United States conducted the October 25 strike only after Iranian-backed Iraqi militias launched a one-way, explosive-laden drone that landed inside a barracks building occupied by US forces.[4]

**An end to Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip will not on its own stop Iranian escalation because Iran's effort to expel the United States from the region and decrease US influence transcends the war.** Iran and its partners are using the Israel-Hamas War as a rhetorical cover to pursue their strategic objectives of decreasing US influence in the region by escalating against the United States politically and militarily.[5] Iran and its proxies are using a two-pronged political and military approach to evict US forces from Iraq, for example.[6] This is one step in Iran's larger goal to expel the United States from the entire Middle East.[7] The attacks in the Bab al Mandeb demonstrate that Iran and its Houthi partner could shut down both the Straits of Hormuz and Bab al Mandeb—a long-held aspiration for both parties that is independent of the Israel-Hamas War.[8]

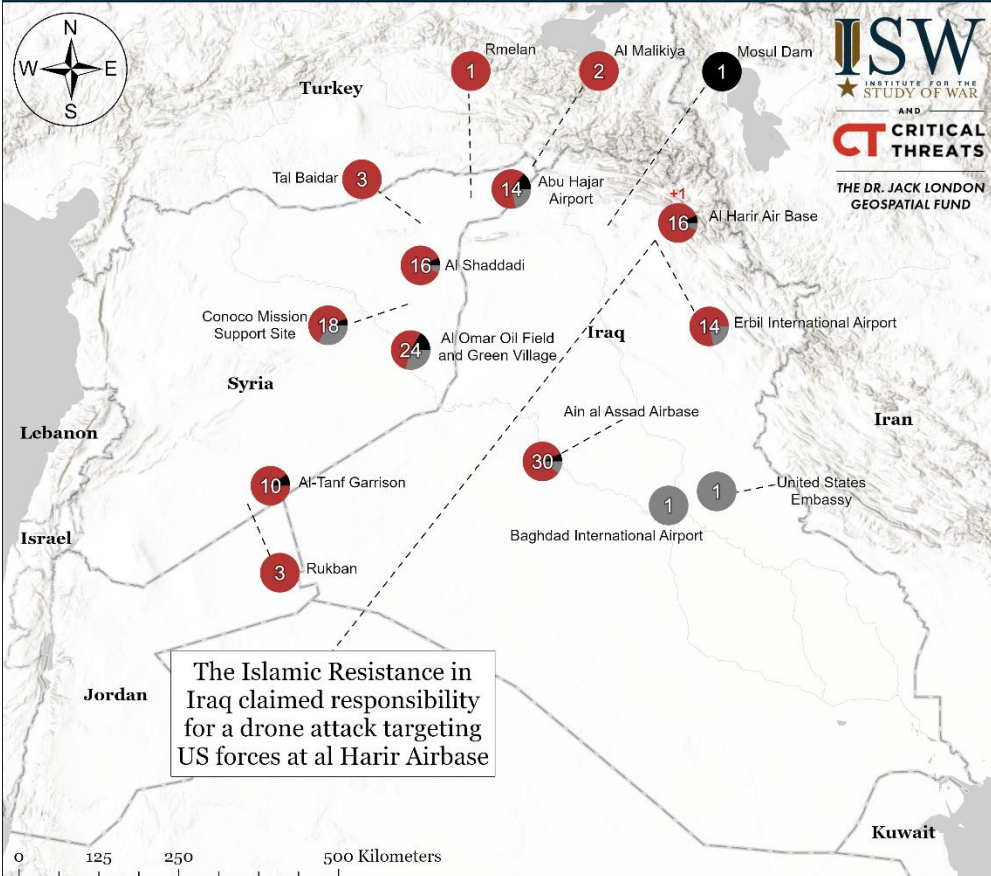
The United States cannot ignore Iranian and Iranian proxy escalations in the Middle East out of the desire to avoid being drawn into a regional “quagmire.”[9] Iranian-backed attacks in the Red Sea threaten vital shipping lanes and are already affecting global trade. The Iranian-backed Houthi movement has forced global shipping giants to divert shipping away from the Bab al Mandeb.[10] Thirty-three percent of global shipping transits the Bab al Mandeb, meaning that Houthi attacks in the Bab al Mandeb generate global effects that cannot be ignored.[11] Iran's campaign to expel US forces from Iraq would have dire implications for the defeat of ISIS, for example, an organization that remains committed to attacking the US homeland and retains considerable capability to do so. The expulsion of US forces from Iraq would benefit ISIS by preventing US support to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). The ISF still faces deficiencies in intelligence, logistics, and fire support.[12] The expulsion of US forces from Iraq would also require the US to end operations in Syria because US forces in Syria rely on Iraqi bases for their logistics and other support. CTP-ISW continues to assess that ISIS would likely resurge within 12-24 months in Syria without a US force presence and then threaten Iraq.[13]

**Iran and its Iraqi proxies are advancing their campaign to expel US forces from Iraq.** Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani formed a committee on January 5 to facilitate the withdrawal of US-led Coalition forces from Iraq.[14] Sudani made the announcement in a ceremony honoring Qassem Soleimani and his top Iraqi lieutenant, Abu Mahdi al Muhandis. Sudani said that only the Iraqi government can “impose the law” in Iraq.[15] Sudani was responding to a US self-defense strike on January 4 that killed a senior official of the Iranian-backed militia Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba.[16] Sudani also echoed Iranian-backed militia statements that claim that US self-defense strikes in Iraq violate Iraqi sovereignty.[17] The Iraqi government has failed to protect US forces in Iraq, which are deployed in Iraq for counter-ISIS operations at the invitation of the Iraqi government.[18] Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have attacked US forces in Iraq and Syria over 100 times since October 2023.[19] The Iraqi government's failure to protect US forces and prevent further attacks against them has forced the United States to respond in self-defense. Iranian-backed militias misrepresent US self-defense strikes as violations of Iraqi sovereignty. This claim ignores the fact that

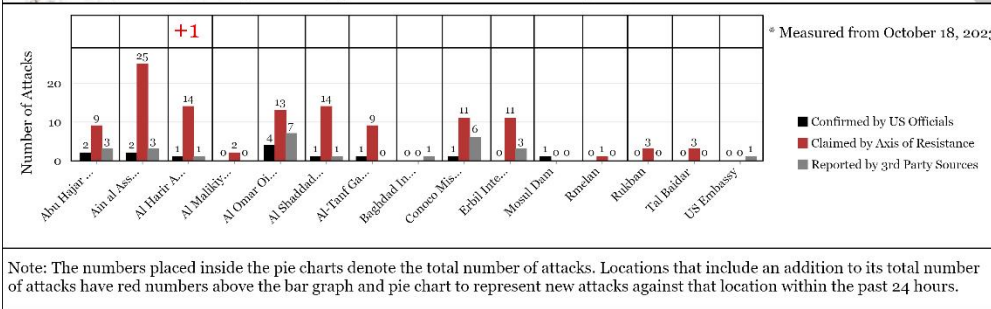
the United States has a right to self-defense and that Iran's use of proxies in Iraq to attack US forces in line with Tehran's regional agenda is itself a violation of Iraqi sovereignty.

Sudani's announcement follows weeks of military, political, and legal pressure by Iranian-backed Iraqi militias and actors to expel US forces. The Parliamentary Security and Defense Committee announced a draft resolution in December 2023 that would expel US forces from Iraq.[20] The Badr Organization, an Iranian proxy, controls the committee. The same committee called for an emergency parliamentary session following the January 4 US self-defense strike.[21] Sudani announced in late December 2023 that his administration would begin procedures to remove International Coalition forces from Iraq.[22] CTP-ISW assessed at the time that Sudani made the announcement due to pressure from Iranian-backed Iraqi militias.[23]

# Attacks against US Bases in the Middle East as of January 5, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



Map by George Barros, Daniel Meadie, 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

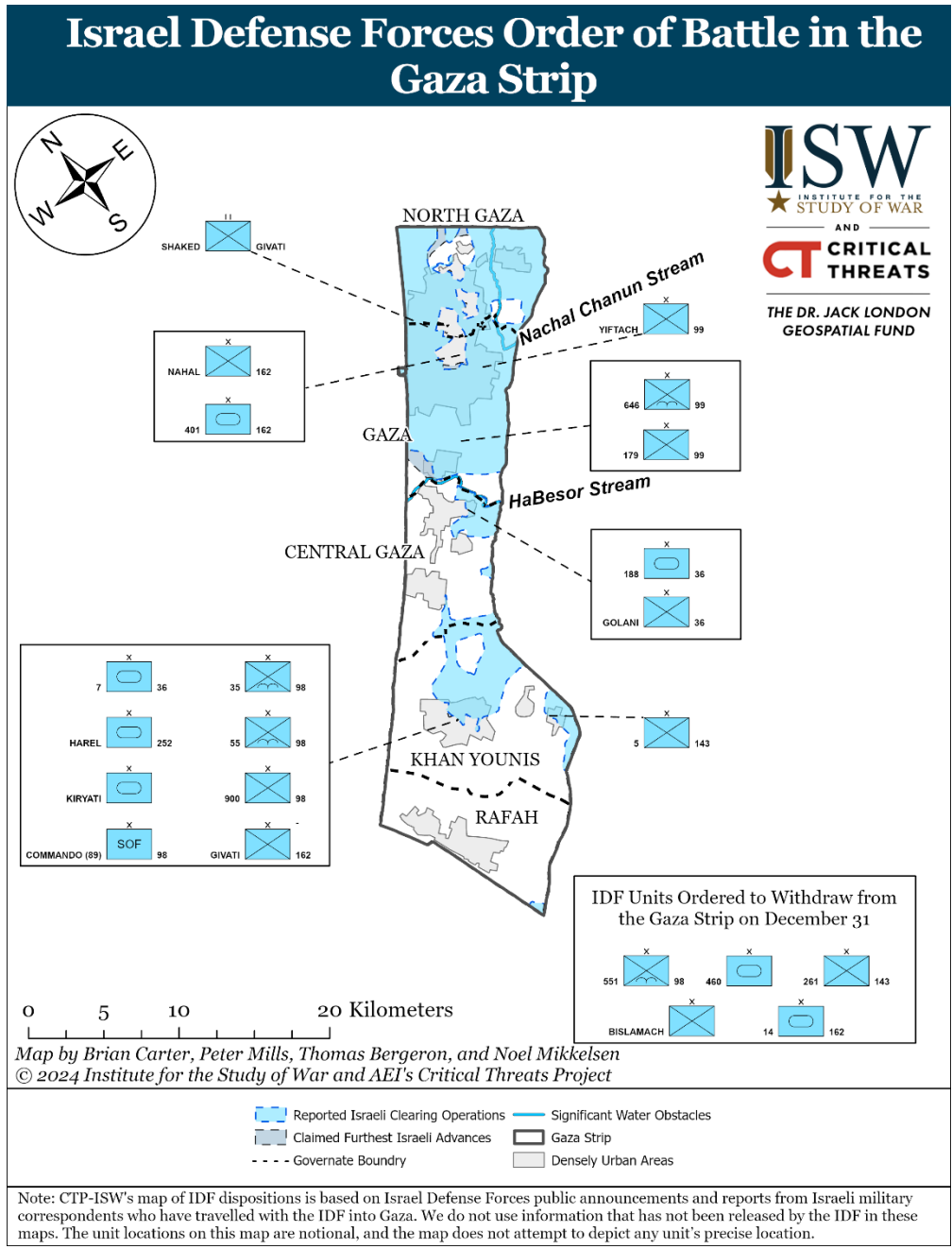


## Gaza Strip

### Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

- Erode the will of the Israeli political establishment and public to launch and sustain a major ground operation into the Gaza Strip
- Degrade IDF material and morale around the Gaza Strip.

The Israel Defense Forces reported that the 14<sup>th</sup> Brigade Combat Team (BCT, assigned to the IDF 162<sup>nd</sup> Division) discovered and destroyed Hamas tunnels under the Blue Beach Hotel in Shati Camp.[24] The Israeli Defense Minister said on December 31 that the IDF ordered the withdrawal of the 14th BCT from the Gaza Strip, but it is not clear if this order has been executed at the time of writing.[25]



CTP-ISW's map of IDF dispositions is based on public announcements from the Israel Defense Forces and reports from Israeli military correspondents who have traveled with the IDF into Gaza. We do not use information that has not been released by the IDF in these maps. The unit locations on this map are notional, and the map does not attempt to depict any unit's precise location.

**Palestinian militias attempted to defend against Israeli clearing operations in Daraj and Tuffah on January 4 and 5.** The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)'s military wing, the al Quds Brigades, fired rocket-propelled grenades at Israeli armor in Daraj and Tuffah on January 5.[26] Hamas' military wing, the al Qassem Brigades, said on January 5 that its fighters "return from Tuffah," where the fighters had engaged Israeli infantry with sniper rifles and anti-personnel mines.[27]

**The IDF 646<sup>th</sup> Paratroopers Brigade (assigned to the IDF 99<sup>th</sup> Division) and Yahalom Engineering Unit continued clearing operations in the "Towers Neighborhood" in "central Gaza" on January 5.[28]** The IDF said that Palestinian fighters used the neighborhood's buildings as fighting positions. The 646<sup>th</sup> Paratroopers Brigade engaged Hamas fighters in a military compound and destroyed several tunnel shafts. The IDF also reported that its forces discovered a facility "used to manufacture weapons." [29] Palestinian militias attempted to defend against Israeli clearing operations in central Gaza on January 5. The al Qassem Brigades mortared Israeli vehicles near Maghazi refugee camp, and unspecified Palestinian fighters engaged an IDF tank near Bureij.[30]

**The IDF 4<sup>th</sup> (Kiryati) BCT captured and destroyed multiple Hamas rocket launch sites in Khan Younis on January 5.** The IDF said that the Kiryati BCT killed "many" Palestinian fighters in the surrounding area.[31]

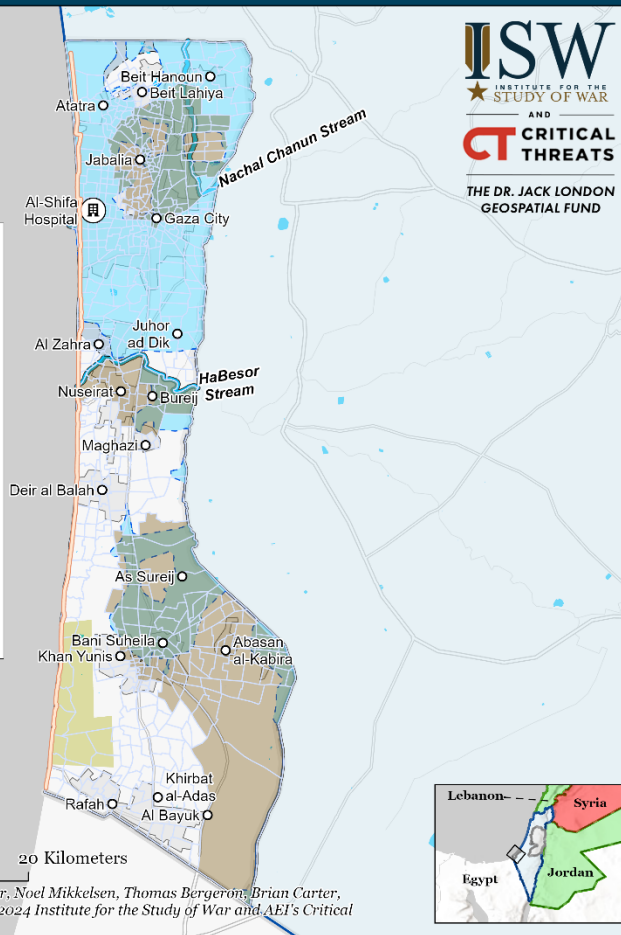
Palestinian militias attempted to defend against Israeli clearing operations in Khan Younis on January 4 and 5. The al Qassem Brigades and the al Quds Brigades conducted a combined attack targeting Israeli armor near Maan, Khan Younis, on January 5.[32] The al Qassem Brigades detonated two separate anti-personnel improvised explosive devices (IEDs) targeting Israeli forces in the al Zana area of Khan Younis on January 5.[33] Other Palestinian groups, including Hamas and PIJ, mortared Israeli forces in Khan Younis on January 4 and 5.[34]

**Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant released a four-pronged security and governance plan for the Gaza Strip on January 4.[35]** The plan is the most detailed Israeli description of Tel Aviv's postwar plan for the Gaza Strip since the ground operation began on October 27. The plan has four pillars. First, Israel will hold an "oversight" role in governance and it will be responsible for inspecting incoming goods. Next, a US-led multinational task force including European and moderate Arab nations will be responsible for "running civil affairs and the economic rehabilitation." [36] Then, Egypt will assume control of the Rafah border crossing in coordination with Israel. Finally, the plan aims to retain "Palestinian administrative mechanisms" that do not include Hamas officials.[37] It explicitly highlights the authorities responsible for sewage, electricity, water, and humanitarian aid distribution will "continue to operate, in collaboration with the multinational task force." [38] The plan does not include any confirmation that Gallant or the Israeli government discussed this plan with the United States, Europe, or other Israeli partners prior to its publication.

# Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip as of January 5, 2024, 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)



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

- Israel
- Gaza Strip
- Jordan and Lebanon
- Syria
- Reported Israeli Clearing Operations\*
- Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances
- Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones
- Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone
- Densely Urban Areas
- Significant Water Obstacles
- IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridor on Road 230

\* 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



# Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip as of January 5, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



The IDF 646th Paratroopers Brigade (assigned to the IDF 99th Division) and Yahalom Engineering Unit continued clearing operations in the “Towers Neighborhood” in “central Gaza”

Palestinian militias attempted to defend against Israeli clearing operations in Daraj and Tuffah

The IDF 4th (Kiryati) BCT captured and destroyed multiple Hamas rocket launch sites in Khan Younis

0 5 10 20 Kilometers

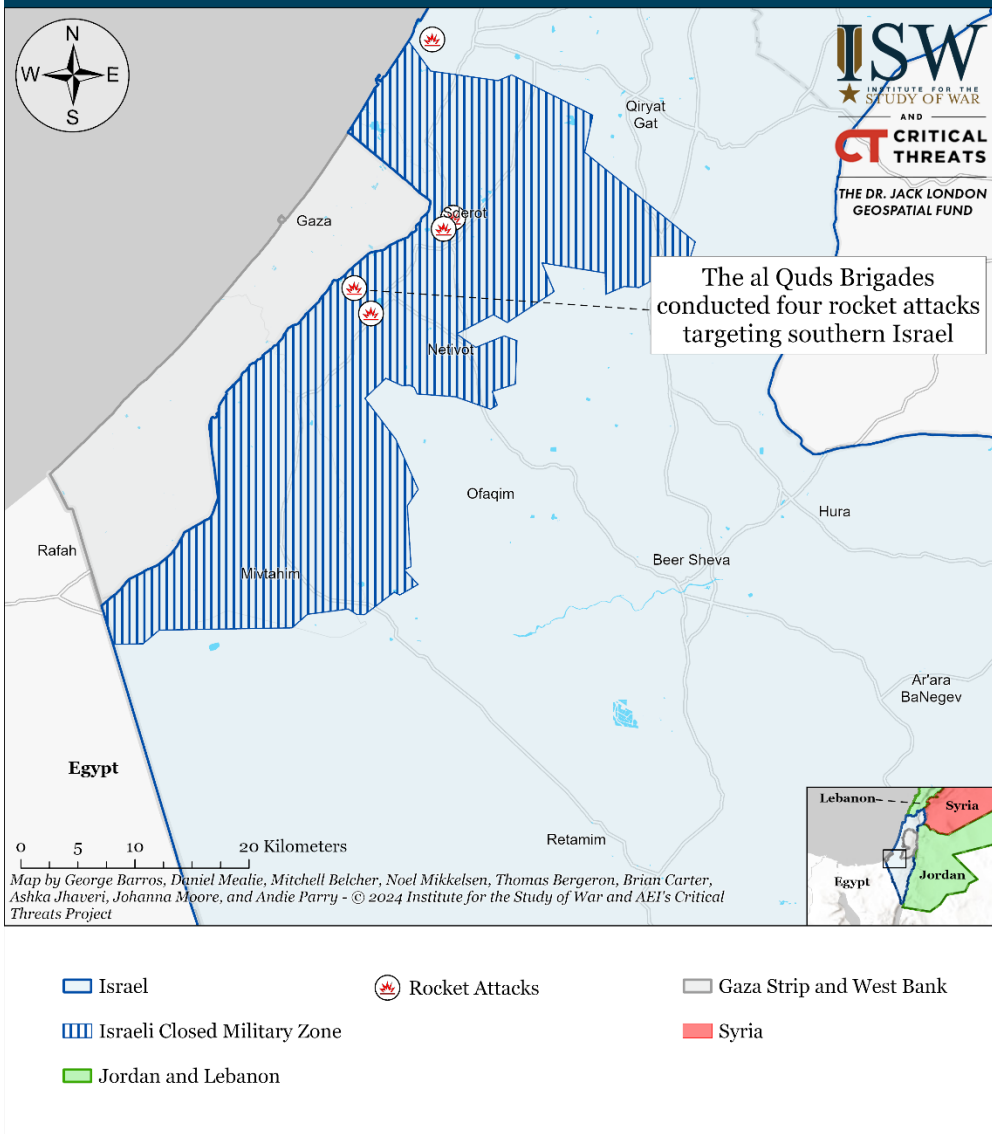
Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Brian Carter, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Andie Parry  
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- Israel
- Gaza Strip
- Jordan and Lebanon
- Syria
- Reported Israeli Clearing Operations\*
- Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances
- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Significant Water Obstacles
- Densely Urban Areas
- Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone
- IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridor on Road 230

\* 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 al Quds Brigades conducted four rocket attacks targeting southern Israel on January 5.[39] Unspecified Palestinian fighters fired one rocket salvo at Ashkelon.[40]**

# Attacks into Israel from Gaza as of January 5, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



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

## West Bank

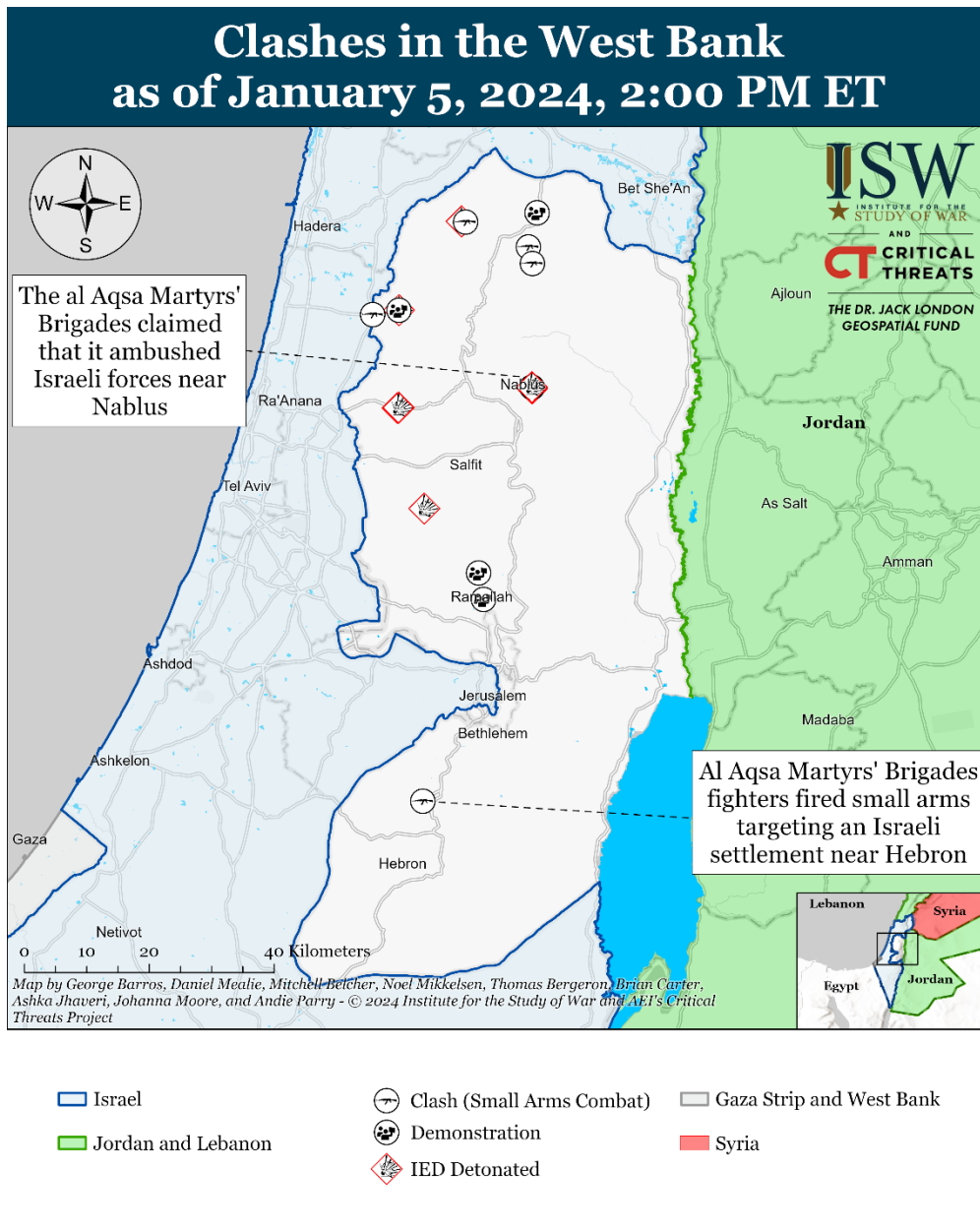
### Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

- Draw IDF assets and resources toward the West Bank and fix them there

**Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters in nine locations across the West Bank.** The al Quds Brigades detonated an IED targeting Israeli forces near Tulkarm on January 4.[41] The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades ambushed Israeli forces with small arms fire and IEDs during Israeli raids in Balata, Nablus on January 4.[42] The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades attacked Israeli forces in Masliya, Jenin, and Netsani Oz, near Tulkarm.[43] The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades fired small arms

at an Israeli settlement near Hebron.[44] The IDF said that Israeli security forces arrested five wanted men across the West Bank.[45]

**Palestinians demonstrated in four towns on January 5 following Hamas' call on January 4 for protests against Israeli operations in Gaza and the killing of Hamas Deputy Political Chairman Saleh al Arouri.**[46] Hamas supporters organized marches commemorating Arouri in Arouri's hometown of Aroura, Tulkarm, and Jenin on January 5.[47] Demonstrators also protested against Israeli operations in Gaza in Ramallah.[48]



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

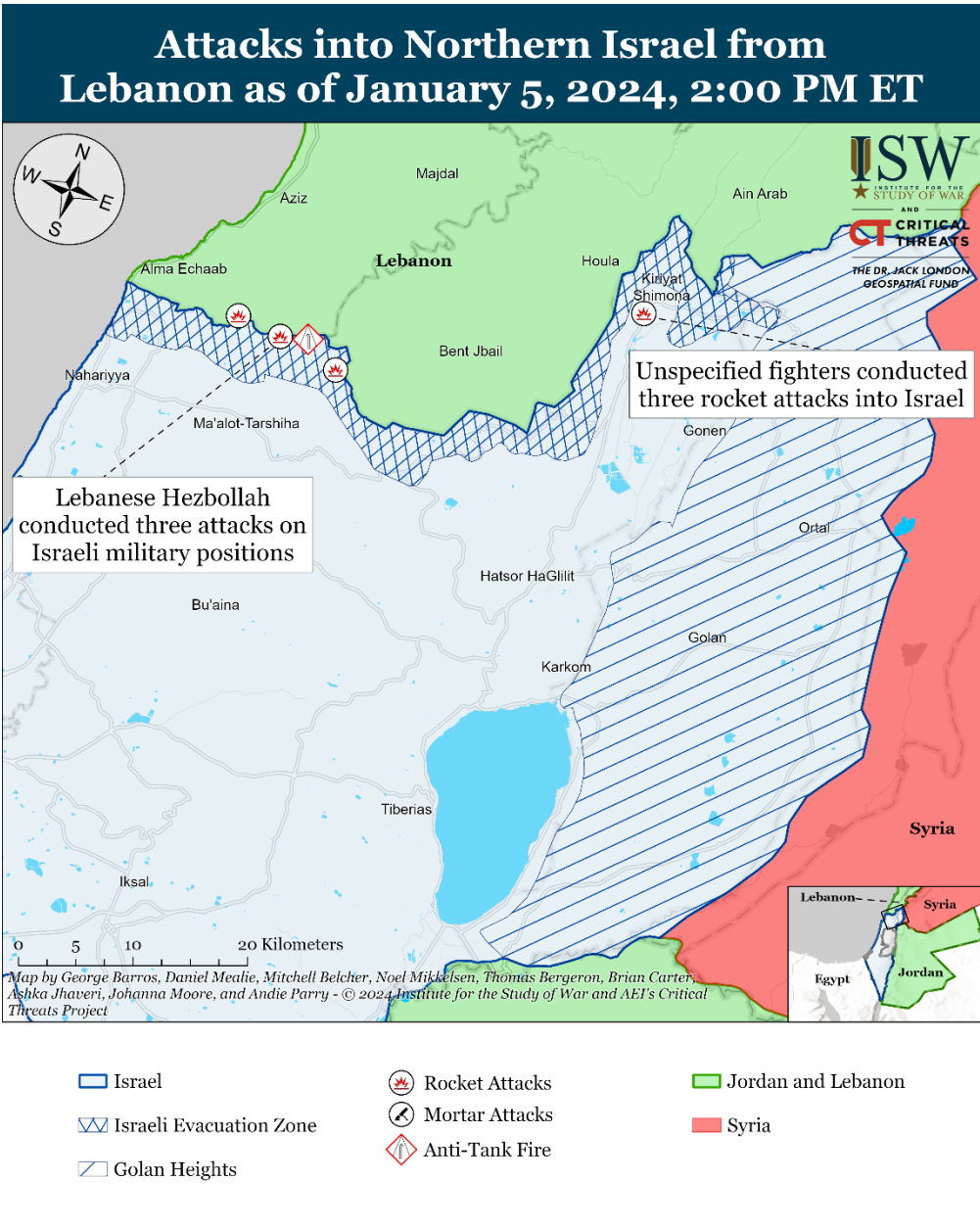
## **Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights**

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

- Draw IDF assets and resources toward northern Israel and fix them there
- Set conditions for successive campaigns into northern Israel

**Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) continued to signal that it does not seek escalation to a full-fledged war with Israel.** LH Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah detailed the groups' attacks on northern Israel since the start of the Israel-Hamas war at a memorial for an LH commander on January 5.[49] Nasrallah claimed that LH did not target civilians in its 670 attacks into northern Israel over the past three months.[50] LH has claimed some attacks on non-evacuated civilian towns, such as Kiryat Shmona, and civilian infrastructure in Avivim.[51] LH also allows Palestinian militias to launch rockets at civilian targets from LH-controlled southern Lebanon.[52] Nasrallah claimed that the only way for civilians to return to northern Israel is to stop Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip, not through war with LH.[53] Nasrallah called on Iranian-backed Iraqi proxy militias to expel US forces from Iraq and he celebrated the Houthi anti-shipping campaign.[54] He reiterated that LH reserves the right to respond to Israel's killing of Hamas leader Saleh al Arouri in Beirut "in the proper time and place" but he did not make specific threats.[55]

**Iranian-backed militias, including LH, conducted six attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel on January 5.** LH claimed three attacks targeting Israeli military positions using heavy-payload Burkan rockets and artillery shells.[56] This rate of attacks is a decrease from the 13 attacks that LH claimed on January 3 after Israel killed senior Hamas official Saleh al Arouri in Beirut on January 2.[57] Unspecified fighters separately launched three rocket barrages at towns in northern Israel on January 5.[58]



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

**Iran and Axis of Resistance**

**Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:**

- Demonstrate the capability and willingness of Iran and the Axis of Resistance to escalate against the United States and Israel on multiple fronts
- Set conditions to fight a regional war on multiple fronts

**Iranian officials and state media are emphasizing a longstanding regime narrative that the United States created ISIS to blame the United States and Israel for the January 3 terrorist attack in Kerman City, Iran.** Two members of the Afghan branch of the Islamic State—named Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)—detonated suicide vests during a ceremony on January

3, 2024, commemorating IRGC Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani's death in a US airstrike in 2020.[59] ISKP claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement on January 4.[60] IRGC-affiliated Tasnim News Agency claimed that Israel "ordered" ISKP to claim responsibility for the attack to "escape the consequences" of committing the attack.[61] Tasnim further claimed that Mossad wrote the statement that ISKP released on January 4. IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami similarly claimed that ISIS fighters can only act as "agents" of the United States and Israel during a funeral ceremony for the victims of the attack in Kerman City on January 5.[62] The Iranian regime's claim that the United States created ISIS long precedes the Kerman terrorist attack. Regime officials have claimed repeatedly in recent years that the United formed, trained, and provided funding to ISIS to sow instability in the region and harm Iran.[63]

**The Iranian Intelligence Ministry announced on January 5 that security forces arrested 11 individuals in six provinces in connection to the January 3 terrorist attack.**[64] The ministry confirmed that suicide bombers carried out the attack and revealed that one of the bombers was a Tajik national who had traveled from abroad to conduct the attack.

**Ebrahim Raisi administration officials continued to discuss the January 3 terrorist attack with their foreign counterparts on January 4 and 5.** President Raisi discussed the attack with his Turkmen and Serbian counterparts in separate phone calls on January 4.[65] Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian discussed the attack in separate phone calls with his Qatari, Sri Lankan, Syrian, and Turkish counterparts on January 4 and 5.[66] Abdollahian emphasized the need for regional countries to cooperate to combat terrorism.

**Iranian state media is downplaying the connection between Afghanistan and the January 3 terrorist attack.** IRGC-affiliated media highlighted that 12 of the victims of the terrorist attack were Afghan nationals and claimed that Iran and Afghanistan share a "blood bond" and "shared grief." [67] IRGC-affiliated media also described Iran and Afghanistan as "not two nations, but one nation." Iranian state media previously accused anti-regime outlets of trying to stoke tension between Iran and its neighbors by claiming that one of the suicide bombers in the January 3 attack was a Pakistani national who previously attempted to carry out an attack in Afghanistan.[68]

**Iraqi police discovered an Iranian-designed land attack cruise missile in southern Iraq on January 5.**[69] US CENTCOM stated that the missile failed to launch towards an unspecified target.[70] The missile is visually similar to the 351/Quds 1 land attack cruise missile, which is an Iranian-made missile that the Houthis use.[71] The International Institute for Strategic Studies estimated that the missile has a range of at least 700 kilometers.[72]

**The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—claimed responsibility for a drone attack targeting US forces at al Harir Airbase in Erbil Province, Iraq.**[73]

**The shipping company Maersk announced on January 5 that it would divert its ships around the Cape of Good Hope for the foreseeable future.**[74] Maersk cited security risks, which is a reference to Houthi attacks that have repeatedly targeted the company's ships.[75] The company paused shipping through the Red Sea on January 2 after it briefly restarted the route on December 24, when the US established Operation Prosperity Guardian to protect commercial traffic through the Red Sea.[76] Maersk alone accounts for roughly 17 percent of global shipping.[77]

**India's Defense Ministry said that it would provide protective escorts for Indian container ships in the Red Sea on January 05.**[78] An Iranian one-way drone damaged a commercial vessel off the coast of India on December 23.[79] CTP-ISW previously assessed that the attack was likely part of Iran and the Axis of Resistance's efforts to signal their capability and willingness to attack maritime targets beyond just the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.[80] Houthi drones also struck an Indian-flagged *Saibaba* in the Bab al Mandeb strait on December 23.[81]

**The Jordanian Air Force conducted counternarcotics airstrikes on two towns in southern Syria on January 4.**[82] The strikes targeted a drug warehouse near the Jordan-Syria border and an Iranian-backed militia drug smuggler's house in Shaab, Suwayda Province.[83] The Jordanian Air Force struck the house of another LH-linked drug smuggler in Shaab in May 2023.[84] Jordan last conducted strikes on Iranian-backed targets in Syria on December 18.[85] Iranian-backed militias and parts of the Syrian regime enable and profit from the drug trade in southern Syria.[86]

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