

Iran Update, January 16, 2024

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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:

- Palestinian militias are likely re-infiltrating into areas of the northern Gaza Strip where Israeli forces previously conducted clearing operations.
- The IDF 646th Paratroopers Brigade (assigned to the 99th Division) continued to conduct clearing operations in the Central Governorate of the Gaza Strip.
- The *New York Times* reported that the IDF now believes that there are more tunnels underneath the Gaza Strip than previously thought.
- The 98th Division conducted clearing operations focused on locating Hamas leadership and degrading Hamas' Khan Younis Battalion in the southern Gaza Strip.
- The IDF announced Special Forces Unit 217 (Duvdevan) operating under the 89th Commando Brigade withdrew from the southern Gaza Strip.
- A low-level Palestinian Islamic Jihad commander told Israeli intelligence he received military training in Iran before Hamas' October 7 attack.
- Hamas and Israel reached a deal to supply medicine to Israeli hostages in exchange for additional humanitarian aid inflows to the Gaza Strip.
- The al Qassem Brigades fired rockets from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel.
- Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters four times across the West Bank.
- Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) conducted six attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel.
- Iran conducted three drone and missile strikes abroad.

- The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—claimed that it conducted a long-range cruise missile attack targeting Israel.

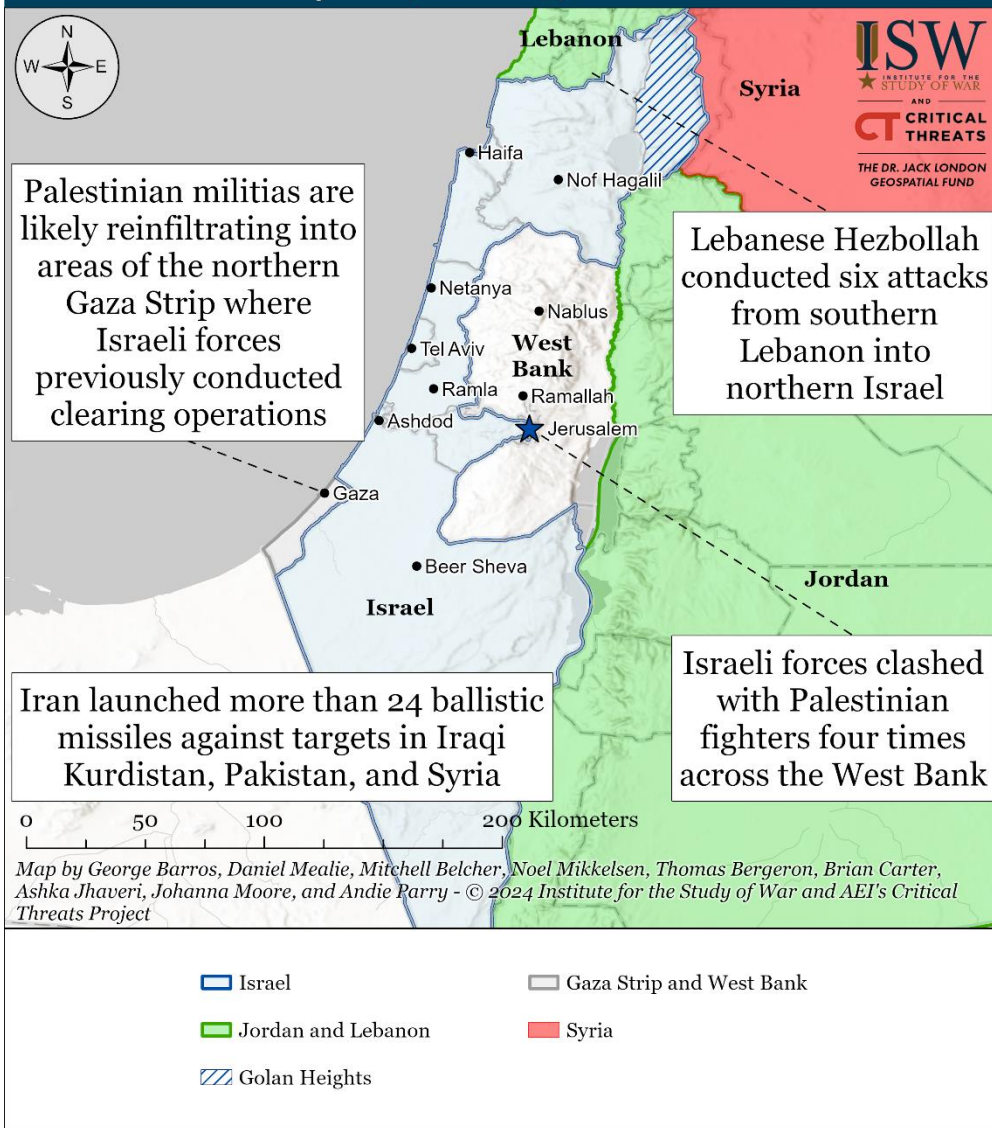
Palestinian militias are likely re-infiltrating into areas of the northern Gaza Strip where Israeli forces previously conducted clearing operations. CTP-ISW has observed renewed militant activity in several neighborhoods across the northern part of the strip in recent weeks, as Israeli forces have transitioned to less intense fighting there. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) confirmed on December 31, 2023, that it withdrew five brigades from the northern Gaza Strip and said that it would transition to targeted raids with its remaining forces.[1] CTP-ISW assessed on January 2 that the IDF transitioning to this new phase of operations will very likely enable Hamas to reconstitute itself militarily.[2]

Palestinian militias have renewed attacks particularly around Jabalia, Sheikh Radwan, and southern Gaza City.[3] Palestinian militias have claimed several attacks on Israeli forces in Jabalia, despite the IDF reporting on December 19, 2023, that it “dismantled” Hamas’ three battalions there.[4] There are similar reports of militant activity around Sheikh Radwan after there has been no major activity there since December 30, 2023.[5] A Palestinian journalist reported on January 9 clashes between Israeli forces and Palestinian fighters in Sheikh Radwan.[6] The military wing of Hamas, the al Qassem Brigades, claimed to have conducted an explosively formed penetrator (EFP) attack on January 16 targeting an Israeli armored personnel carrier in Sheikh Radwan. CTP-ISW previously reported that the al Qassem Brigades and other Palestinian militias are not destroyed around southern Gaza City, where Palestinian militias have continued to attack Israeli forces.[7]

There is a similar but more limited renewal of Palestinian activity in other locations that Israeli forces previously conducted clearing operations around the northern Gaza Strip as well. The militant wing of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the al Quds Brigades, fired a rocket salvo from Beit Hanoun toward Sderot in southern Israel on January 15.[8] The IDF separately engaged Palestinian fighters in Shaati refugee camp and Beit Lahia on January 16.[9] Israeli Army Radio furthermore reported on January 16 that the Israeli military establishment believes that Hamas is trying to restore its control over the civilian population in the northern Gaza Strip, in part, by rehabilitating local police there.[10]

Israeli forces are returning to areas that they had recently left, according to Reuters, which is consistent with the likely re-infiltration of Palestinian militants.[11] A Palestinian journalist similarly reported on January 9 and 16 that Israeli forces have “repositioned” themselves in Gaza City after they had withdrawn earlier.[12]

Israel-Hamas War as of January 16, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



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 IDF 646th Paratroopers Brigade (assigned to the 99th Division) continued to conduct clearing operations in the Central Governorate of the Gaza Strip on January 16. The Israeli forces, including Yalam forces and engineering elements from the 99th Division, destroyed a Hamas underground tunnel route beneath Salah al Din Road.[13] The IDF reported that the tunnel is about nine meters deep and used to transport fighters between the northern and

southern Gaza Strip. The al Qassem Brigades mortared Israeli forces as they advanced into Nuseirat on January 16.[14]

The *New York Times* reported on January 16 that the IDF now believes that there are more tunnels underneath the Gaza Strip than previously thought. Anonymous senior Israeli defense officials speaking to the *New York Times* increased their estimate of the tunnel network's length to between 350 and 450 miles from 250 miles in December 2023.[15] The defense officials assessed there are close to 5,700 separate tunnel entrance shafts in the Gaza Strip.[16] Israeli forces have discovered many of the tunnels through documents uncovered during their ground operations in the Gaza Strip.[17]

The 98th Division conducted clearing operations focused on locating Hamas leadership and degrading Hamas' Khan Younis Battalion in the southern Gaza Strip on January 16. IDF commando forces raided the offices of senior Hamas commanders in the South Khan Younis Battalion and found weapons, ammunition, grenades, and surveillance cameras[18]. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant stated on January 15 that IDF operations in the southern Gaza Strip are "focused on the head of the snake, the Hamas leadership." [19][20] Israeli artillery shelled a PIJ headquarters in Khan Younis.[21] The IDF 7th Brigade Combat Team directed several airstrikes on Palestinian fighters in Khan Younis, and the IDF 35th Paratroopers Brigade Combat Team killed Palestinian fighters with tank fire.[22]

Palestinian militias continued to attack Israeli forces operating in the Khan Younis area on January 16. Palestinian militias claimed seven mortar attacks on Israeli armor and dismounted infantry in eastern, southern, and central Khan Younis.[23] The National Resistance Brigades was the only group to claim close-range small arms clashes and IED attacks on Israeli forces in Khan Younis on January 16.[24] The militias' high proportion of mortar attacks compared to other weapons systems in Khan Younis is anomalous. The IDF published documentation that Palestinian fighters launched rockets from the premises of Nasser Hospital at Israeli forces conducting clearing operations in northern Khan Younis at some point in the last week.[25]

The IDF announced Special Forces Unit 217 (Duvdevan) operating under the 89th Commando Brigade withdrew from the southern Gaza Strip on January 16.[26] The Duvdevan Unit will conduct operations in the West Bank. The unit raided Palestinian militant infrastructure in southern Khan Younis and clashed with a militia squad before withdrawing from the strip. The IDF withdrew the 36th Division from the Central Governorate of the Gaza Strip a day prior on January 15.[27]

A low-level Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) commander told Israeli intelligence he received military training in Iran before Hamas' October 7 attack. The platoon-level commander from Sheikh Radwan was detained by Israeli forces on December 20, 2023, and made the statements during recorded questioning by Israeli intelligence service Shin Bet.[28] The PIJ fighter stated that he and 15 to 20 other PIJ members from the Gaza Strip, Syria, and Lebanon were sent to a 15-day sniper training course at an Iranian base.[29] He alleged that other PIJ fighters received artillery and officer command courses at unspecified military bases in Iran. The US State Department and Treasury Department said in November 2023 that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps enables PIJ's operations through the transfer of funds and the provision of both weapons and operational training.[30]

Several drug smugglers exchanged fire with Israeli forces on the Egypt-Israel border on January 15.[31] The IDF reported the clash along the Nitzana border area lightly injured one soldier as about 20 people approached the border.[32] The Egyptian army spokesperson said Egyptian authorities thwarted the smuggling attempt after the cross-border fire.[33] The Nitzana border area is about 40 kilometers from the Gaza Strip.

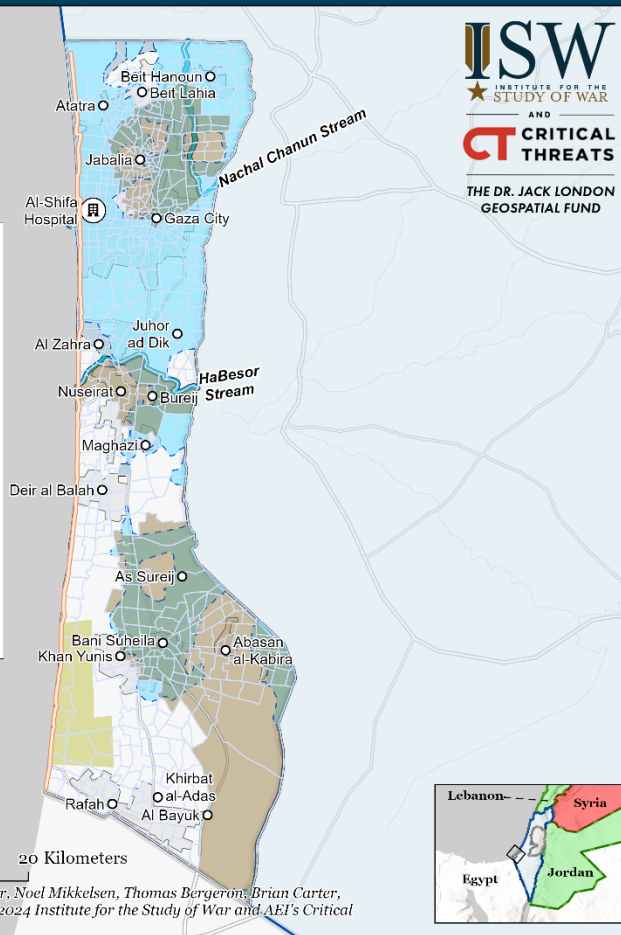
Hamas and Israel reached a deal to supply medicine to Israeli hostages in exchange for additional humanitarian aid inflows to the Gaza Strip on January 15.[34] The Qatari Foreign Ministry announced Israel will permit higher levels of medicine and humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip in exchange for Qatari representatives delivering medicine to Israeli hostages under the agreement.[35] Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's office said two Qatari Air Force planes are expected to arrive in Egypt on January 17, after which Qatari representatives will transfer the medicine to the hostages inside the Gaza Strip.[36] The agreement comes as Hamas heightened its effort to spread hostage propaganda.[37] CTP-ISW assessed on January 15 that Hamas' increased hostage propaganda was likely intended to generate public pressure on the Israeli government to stop operations in the Gaza Strip and agree to a hostage/prisoner swap.[38]

The Gaza Strip is experiencing the longest, large-scale internet blackout since the Israel-Hamas war began. NetBlocks reported on January 16 that telecommunications have been offline in the Gaza Strip for over 96 hours.[39]

Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip as of January 16, 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)

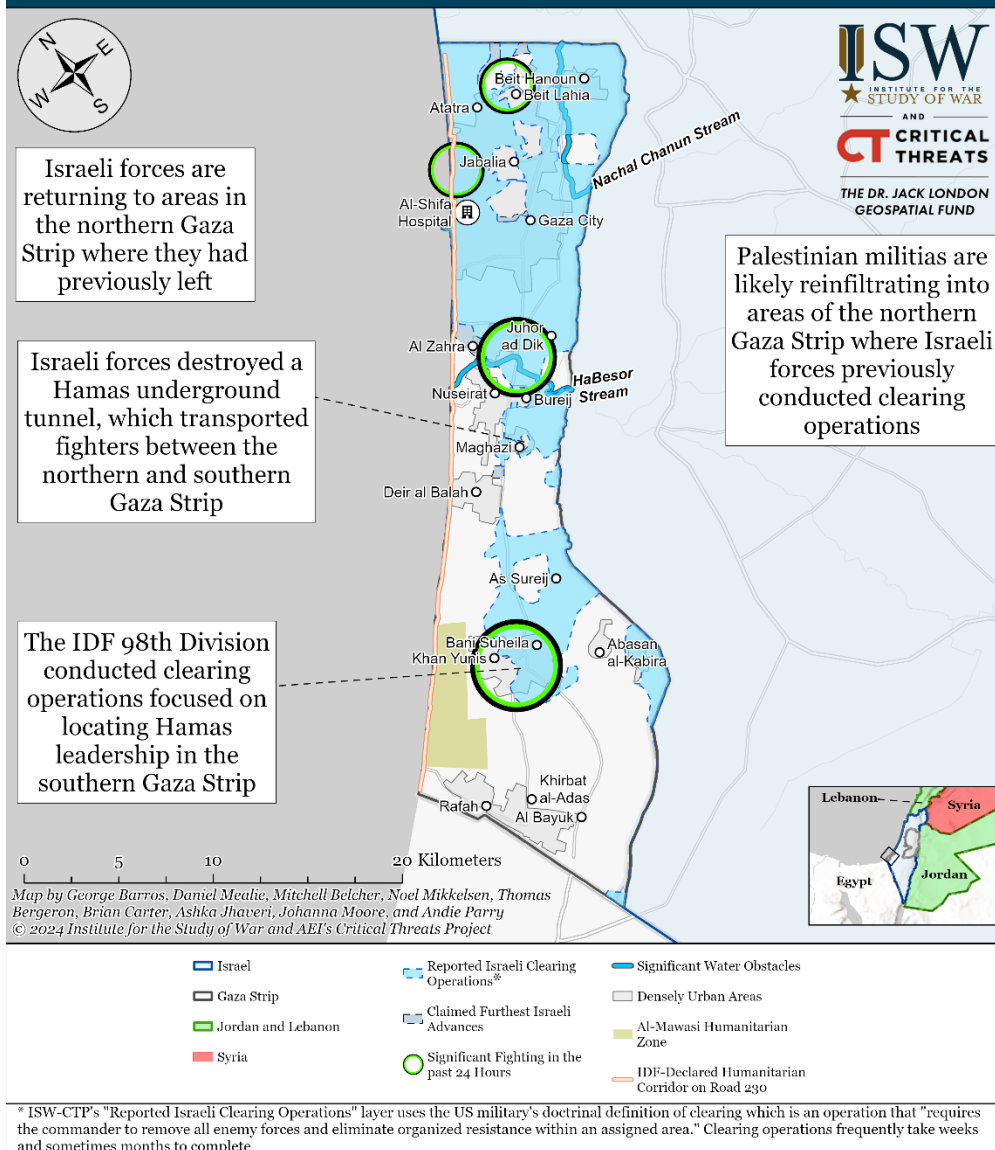


Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Brian Carter, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Andie Parry - © 2024 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

- 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

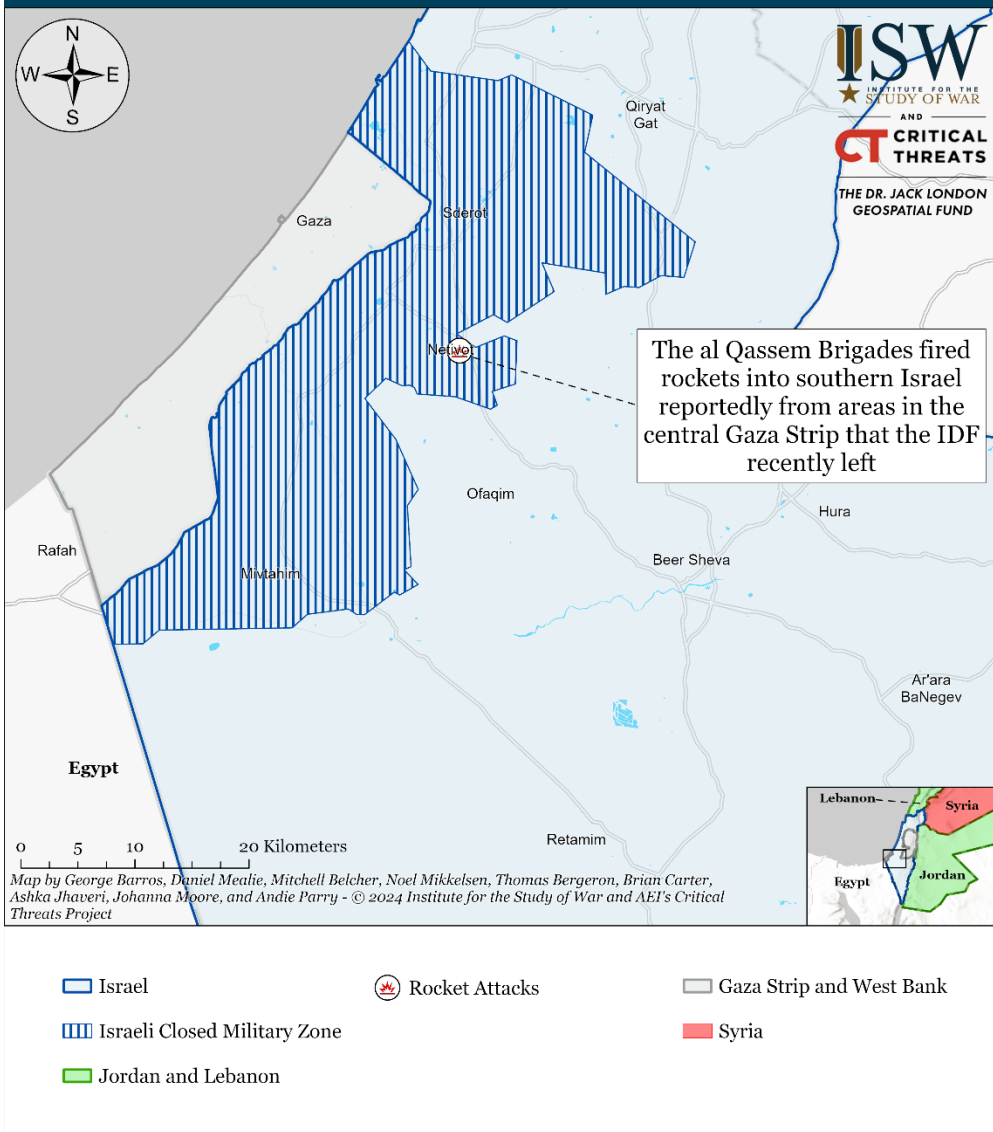
* ISW-CTP's "Reported Israeli Clearing Operations" layer uses the US military's doctrinal definition of clearing which is an operation that "requires the commander to remove all enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance within an assigned area." Clearing operations frequently take weeks and sometimes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

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip as of January 17, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



The al Qassem Brigades fired rockets from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel on January 16.[40] Israeli media reported that the militia fired a rocket salvo into southern Israel from areas in the central Gaza Strip where Israeli forces recently withdrew.[41] The IDF withdrew the 36th Division from the Central Governorate of the Gaza Strip on January 15.[42]

Attacks into Israel from Gaza as of January 16, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



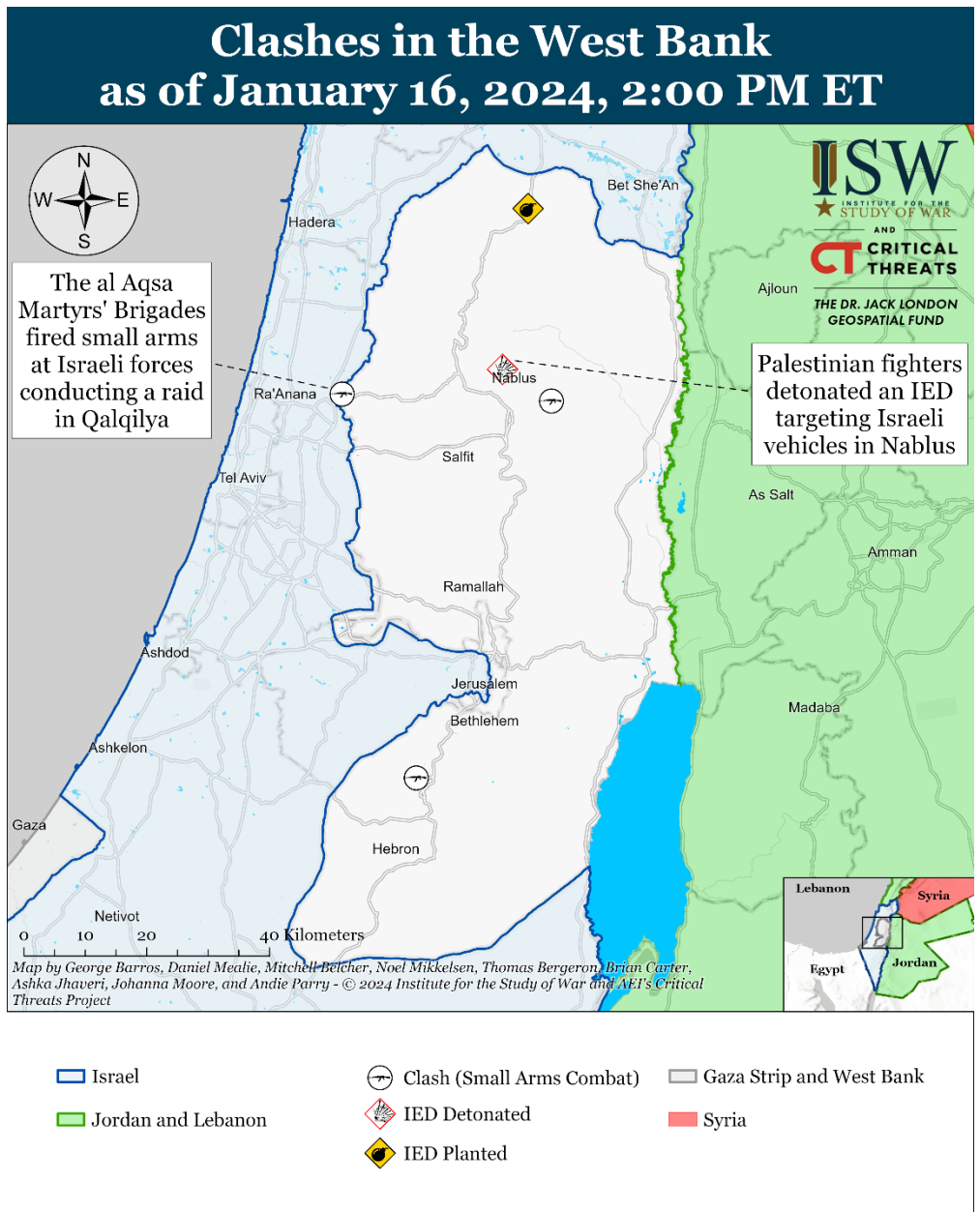
West Bank

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

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

Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters four times across the West Bank on January 16.[43] This rate of kinetic activity is a decrease from the average, as Israeli forces and Palestinian fighters have clashed around nine times per day over the past week.[44] The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades engaged Israeli forces in small arms clashes in three locations.[45] Palestinian fighters separately detonated an IED targeting Israeli vehicles, including a bulldozer, in Nablus.[46]

The IDF arrested over 20 wanted individuals across the West Bank on January 16.[47] The IDF said that it questioned dozens of suspects in Bnei Naim in relation to a car-ramming attack in Ranaana, Israel, on January 15.[48]



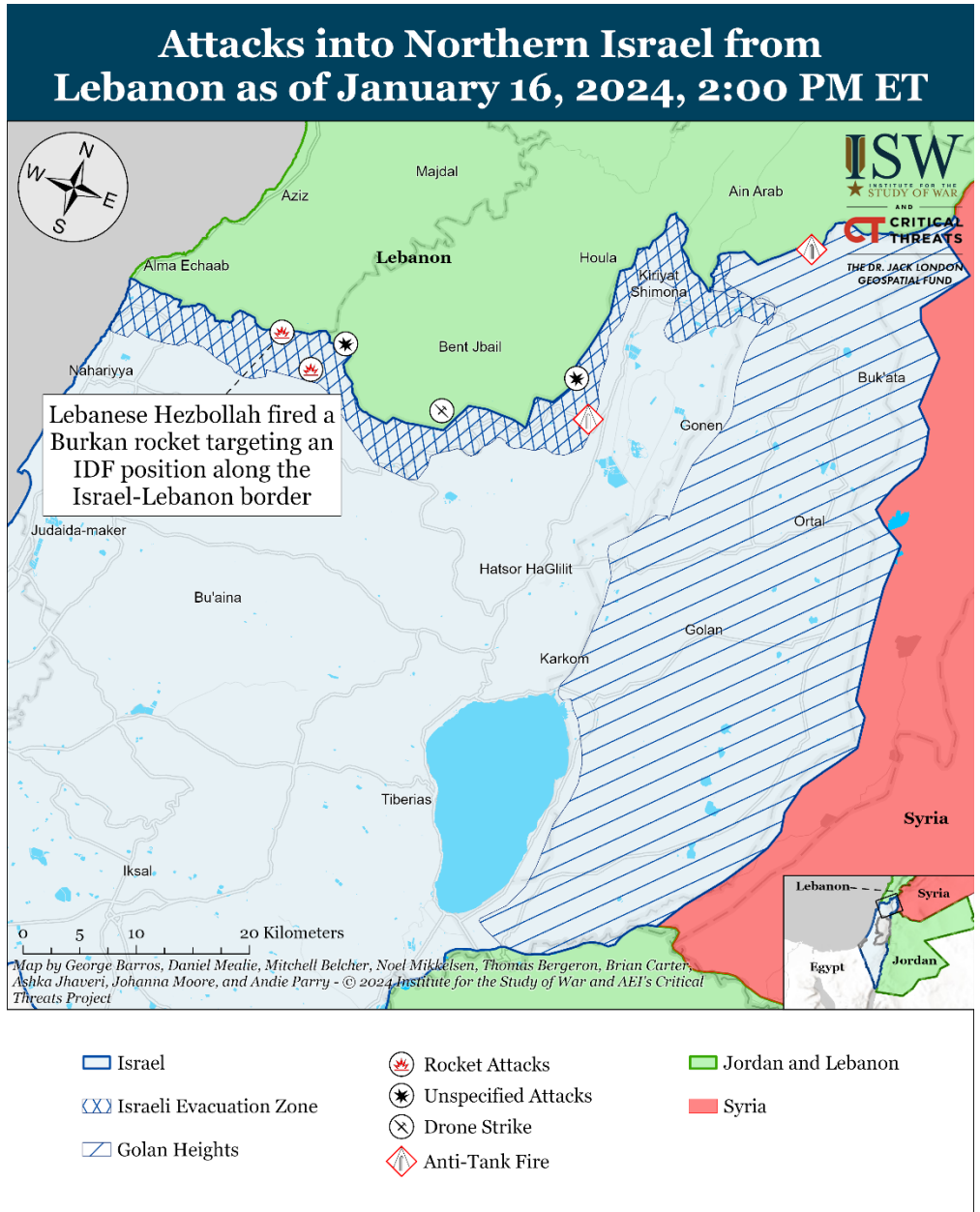
This map is not an exhaustive depiction of clashes and demonstrations in the West Bank.

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) conducted six attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel.[49] LH targeted Israeli forces and military infrastructure. Israeli forces struck LH positions, including munitions storage facilities in Wadi Saluki, southern Lebanon.[50] Israeli aircraft targeted LH anti-tank guided missile teams in Kafr Kila as well.[51]



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

Iran conducted three drone and missile strikes abroad on January 15-16. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) struck actors in Iraq, Syria, and Pakistan that Iranian leaders have accused of trying to destabilize and undermine the regime. Iranian officials and media have portrayed these groups as agents and/or accomplices of Israeli intelligence services.

- The IRGC conducted drone and missiles strikes targeting what it claimed to be Israeli Mossad-affiliated facilities and individuals in Erbil, Iraq on January 15.[52] The IRGC stated that the attacks were meant to retaliate for recent terror attacks inside Iran and for Israel killing senior IRGC commanders in Syria.[53] Iranian officials and state media have accused Israel of supporting the December 15 and January 3 terror attacks in Rask and Kerman. IRGC-affiliated media also claimed that the strikes around Erbil targeted an Iraqi Kurdish businessman whom the IRGC accused of protecting Mossad agents, providing unspecified logistical support for Mossad operations inside Iran, and transferring Iraqi oil to Israel.[54] Iran similarly targeted an Iraqi Kurdish businessman whom it had accused of cooperating with Israel when it conducted missile strikes around Erbil in March 2022.[55] Iran has historically accused anti-regime Kurdish militant groups and Israel of jointly using Iraqi Kurdistan to facilitate operations into Iran.[56] Iran has previously attacked Iraqi Kurdistan to counter these perceived threats.[57]
- The IRGC similarly claimed that it conducted missile strikes targeting the Islamic State (IS), the al Nusra Front, and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in Haram, Idlib Governorate, Syria, on January 15.[58] The IRGC justified its strikes on the basis that the above groups use their facilities to train IS fighters before transporting them to Afghanistan to then conduct attacks into Iran.[59] CTP-ISW previously reported that the Afghan branch of IS, named the IS Khorasan Province (ISKP), has command and control over IS cells composed of Uzbek and Tajik nationals in Idlib.[60] ISKP fighters, including two Tajik nationals, have conducted three terrorist attacks inside Iran since October 2022.[61] Iranian officials accused Israeli intelligence services of directing ISKP to conduct these attacks.[62] Iran also accuses Israel and the United States of having created IS and affiliated organizations to undermine Iran’s stability and create divisions between Muslims in the region.[63]
- The IRGC conducted drone and missile strikes on two Jaish al Adl headquarters in Koh Sabz, Baluchistan Province, Pakistan on January 16.[64] The strikes follow an uptick in terrorist activity in southeastern Iran in recent weeks. Jaish al Adl—a Balochi, Salafi-jihadi group operating on the Iranian border with Pakistan—conducted at least four attacks targeting Iranian security personnel inside Iran between December 15, 2023, and January 16.[65] Iranian officials blamed Israel for the attack on December 15.[66]

It is noteworthy that the IRGC used the *Kheibar Shekan* ballistic missile for the first time since it entered production in 2022 in Syria on January 15.[67] The name of the missile, translatable as “Fortress Breaker,” notably references a Jewish fortress conquered by Muslim armies during the Battle of Kheibar in 628.[68]2 Israeli media noted and Iranian officials and media emphasized that the IRGC ballistic missile attacks on Syria constituted the greatest distance that Iran has ever fired a missile.[69] The *Kheibar Shekan* missile is also the progenitor model of the Houthi *Hatem* ballistic missile.[70] The Houthis have used missiles of Iranian origin in their ongoing attacks on commercial and naval vessels in the Red Sea.[71]

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—claimed that it conducted a long-range cruise missile attack targeting Israel on January 16.[72] The Islamic Resistance in Iraq did not specify where exactly in Israel the attack targeted. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq stated that it used an “Arqab” cruise missile in the attack. The group last claimed that it used an “Arqab” missile in an attack targeting Haifa, Israel, on January 7.[73]

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi praised the Houthis for supporting Palestinians during a phone call with Houthi President Mehdi al Mashat on January 14.[74] Raisi stated that the US-UK combined strikes on Houthi facilities revealed the “aggressive” nature of the United States.

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian warned the United States and the United Kingdom “to stop the war” against the Houthis during a press conference with his Indian counterpart, Subramaniam Jaishankar, in Tehran on January 15.[75] Abdollahian reiterated the false Houthi narrative that the Houthis only target Israeli ships. Abdollahian added that the Houthis will stop their anti-shipping attack campaign when the Israel-Hamas war ends. Jaishankar also met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian during his visit to Tehran.[76]

US naval forces seized an illegal shipment of Iranian missiles sailing to Yemen on January 1.[77] US forces seized Iranian-made ballistic and cruise missile components, including warheads for Houthi medium-range ballistic missiles. Iran providing these kinds of weapons to the Houthis continually enables their attacks on international shipping around the Red Sea.

IRGC advisers and officers are operating on the ground in Yemen to directly facilitate Houthi attacks targeting international shipping and Israel, according to US outlet Semafor.[78] The IRGC placed drone and missile trainers and operators in Houthi-controlled Yemen, according to unspecified US and Middle Eastern officials. IRGC personnel on the ground are providing tactical intelligence support to the Houthis. Semafor reported that the IRGC Quds Force has overseen the transfer of the drones and missiles that the Houthis have used in their attacks targeting maritime shipping in the Red Sea and targets in Israel in recent weeks.

The Houthis continued their attack campaign targeting international shipping on January 16. The Houthis launched anti-ship ballistic missiles into international shipping lanes in the southern Red Sea.[79] A missile launched from the Houthi-controlled area of Yemen separately hit a Maltese-flagged bulk carrier in the Red Sea.[80]

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei praised the Houthis during a speech to Friday prayer leaders in Tehran on January 16.[81] Khamenei stated the Houthi attacks against shipping done on behalf of the Palestinian people deserve admiration and appreciation.[82] Khamenei claimed the Houthis struck an “existential blow” to Israel. Khamenei voiced his support for the Houthis continuing their destabilizing regional activities against maritime shipping in the Red Sea.

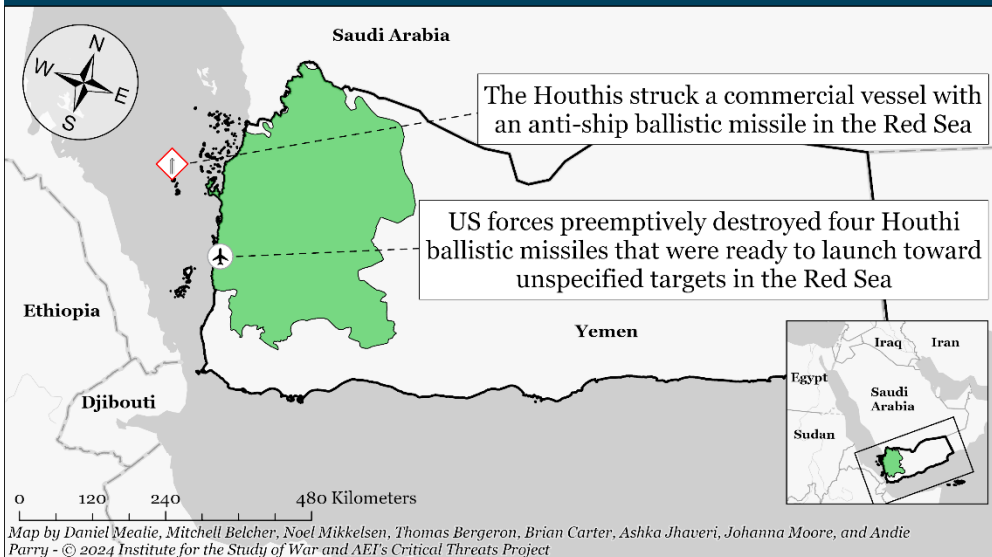
Several international companies halted operations in the Red Sea on January 16. Japanese shipping company Nippon Yusen announced its suspension of shipping through the Red Sea.[83] British energy company Shell similarly halted all shipping operations through the Red Sea

indefinitely.[84] The US Department of Transportation renewed its warning to American merchant ships to avoid the southern part of the Red Sea until further notice.[85]

The United States conducted a strike targeting four Houthi anti-ship ballistic missiles in Yemen on January 16.[86] An unnamed US official told Reuters that the Houthis were preparing the missiles to target ships.



Houthi-controlled Territory in Yemen as of January 16, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



Map by 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

- Houthi-controlled Territory in Yemen
- Yemen
- Surface-to-Surface Missile
- Airstrike

Note: This notional map is not a definitive assessment of areas under Houthi control in Yemen. This map is primarily an illustrative reference material and does not adhere to the very high level of spatial precision that ISW and CTP uses for our Israel-Hamas and Ukraine control of terrain maps.

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[1] <https://twitter.com/GLZRadio/status/1741503980427944111>; https://twitter.com/Doron_Kadosh/status/1743717767386222615; <https://twitter.com/manniefabian/status/1742960424864108997>; <https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-2024-begins-idf-releases-5-brigades-from-gaza-but-says-fighting-likely-all-year/>

[2] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/iran-update-january-2-2024>

[3] <https://t.me/sarayaps/17191>; <https://t.me/sarayaps/17196> ; <https://t.me/qassam1brigades/1351>

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[5] <https://t.me/qassam1brigades/1130>; <https://t.me/qassam1brigades/1131>

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<https://twitter.com/idfonline/status/1747147999224963580>
- [10] Israeli Army Radio furthermore reported on January 16 that the Israeli military establishment believes that Hamas is trying to restore its control over the civilian population in the northern Gaza Strip, in part, by rehabilitating local police there.
- [11] <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-tanks-storm-back-into-north-gaza-areas-where-they-had-withdrawn-2024-01-16/>
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