



Iran Update, January 19, 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.

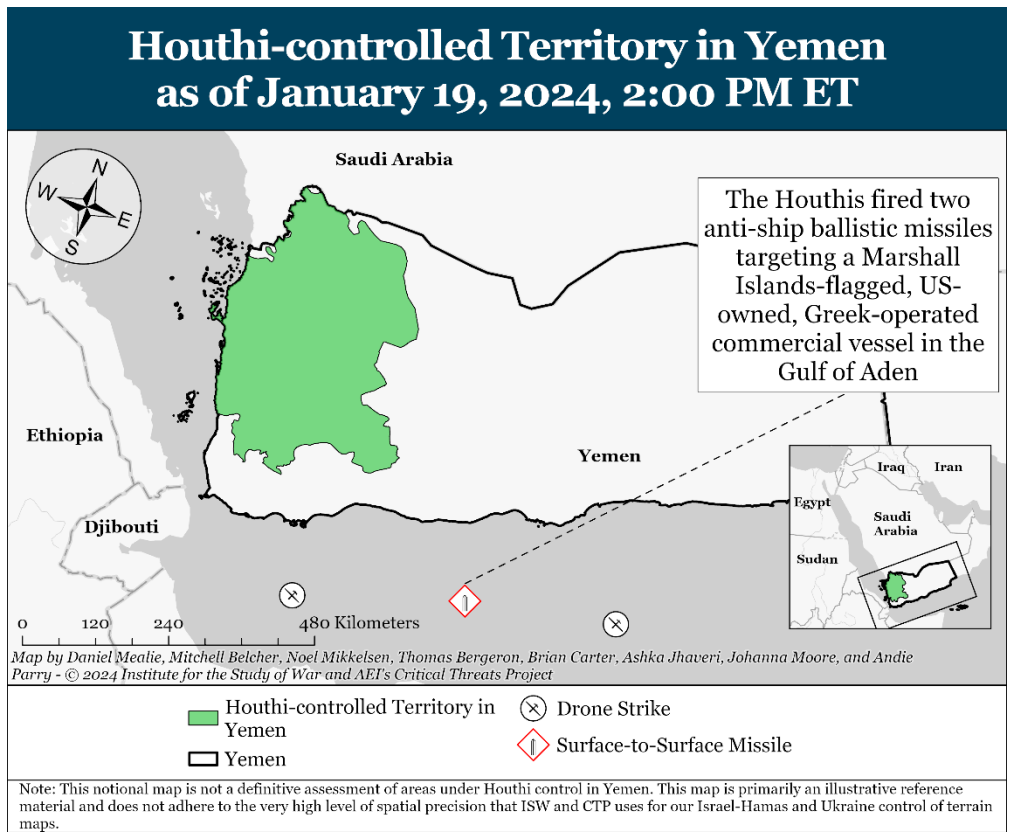
Click [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Key Takeaways:

- The Houthis fired two anti-ship ballistic missiles targeting the Marshall Islands-flagged, US-owned, Greek-operated Chem Ranger commercial vessel in the Gulf of Aden on January 18.
- The Houthis continued to frame US airstrikes in Yemen as part of a US regional “escalation” on January 19. The Houthis and their allies throughout the region—including Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq—threatened on January 17 and 18 to expand the war in the Middle East by targeting other US and UK interests outside of the Red Sea region.
- Iranian officials explicitly stated on January 19 that the January 15 IRGC missile strikes in Idlib Province, Syria, were meant to signal Iran's ability to attack Israel directly.

- Iranian-backed political actors are continuing to try to pressure the Iraqi federal government to expel US forces from Iraq.
- Iranian-backed Iraqi actors are continuing to try to install their preferred candidate as Iraqi parliament speaker.
- Palestinian fighters continued to attack Israeli forces in three areas of the northern Gaza Strip where Israeli forces previously conducted clearing operations.
- Israeli forces under the command of the Menashe Brigade concluded a 45-hour counter-terrorism operation in Tulkarm on January 19.
- The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—claimed that it shot down a US Air Force (USAF) MQ-9 Reaper drone in Diyala Province, Iraq, on January 18.
- Iran and Pakistan continued to de-escalate tensions following the exchange of strikes on each other’s territory in recent days.

The Houthis fired two anti-ship ballistic missiles targeting the Marshall Islands-flagged, US-owned, Greek-operated *Chem Ranger* commercial vessel in the Gulf of Aden on January 18.[1] The missiles landed in the water near the ship but did not damage the ship or its crew.[2] This attack marks the third Houthi attack on a US-owned ship this week.[3] The Houthis have conducted 30 attacks targeting international shipping in the Red Sea and surrounding waters since October 17.[4]



The Houthis continued to frame US airstrikes in Yemen as part of a US regional “escalation” on January 19. The Houthis and their allies throughout the region—including Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq—threatened on January 17 and 18 to expand the war in the Middle East by targeting

other US and UK interests outside of the Red Sea region.[5] Houthi spokesperson Mohammad Abdulsalam said that the United States is protecting Israel by conducting airstrikes in Yemen.[6] US airstrikes seek to degrade the Houthis' ability to conduct piratical and terrorist attacks on global shipping in the Red Sea.[7] The United States conducted preemptive strikes on January 17 targeting 14 missiles that the Houthis had prepared to fire on commercial vessels in the Red Sea.[8] Abdulsalam said that the Houthis do not want the conflict to expand but that the Houthis will continue targeting Israeli ships.[9] Abdulsalam also said that the Houthis do not intend to target Saudi Arabia or the UAE and added that the Houthis' truce process with Saudi Arabia is ongoing.[10] Abdulsalam acknowledged that the Houthis have benefitted from Iranian military support but that the Iranians do not control Houthi decision-making.[11]

A senior Houthi official claimed that the Houthis will provide safe passage to Chinese and Russian ships in the Red Sea.[12] Houthi official Mohammed al Bukhaiti told Russian media that the Houthis would only target ships linked to Israel and its allies. The Houthis launched an anti-ship ballistic missile targeting a Russian tanker south of Yemen on January 12, however.[13]

Iranian officials stated on January 19 that the January 15 IRGC missile strikes in Idlib Province, Syria, were meant to signal Iran's ability to attack Israel directly. Armed Forces General Staff-affiliated media said that IRGC missile strikes in Idlib targeted the Islamic State (IS), "Jabhat al Nusra," and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP).[14] Jabhat al Nusra rebranded as Hayat Tahrir al Sham in 2017.[15] Tehran Interim Friday Prayer Leader Kazem Sedighi said during his sermon on January 19 that the IRGC launched the missiles from Khuzestan Province in southwestern Iran—rather than Kermanshah Province in western Iran—to demonstrate that IRGC missiles can reach Israeli territory.[16] Western media noted on January 17 that the range at which the IRGC fired the Kheibar Shekan missile toward Idlib is nearly the range required for Iran to target Tel Aviv, Israel.[17] Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf warned on January 19 that the IRGC will "change the angle" of its missiles to target Israel if Israel "makes a mistake." [18] Ghalibaf was implying that Iran has the capability to strike Israel directly but has thus far chosen not to.

Iranian-backed political actors are continuing to try to pressure the Iraqi federal government to expel US forces from Iraq. Labor and Social Affairs Minister Ahmed al Asadi claimed that US forces have committed "repeated crimes" in Iraq during an interview with Asaib Ahl al Haq-controlled Al Ahed on January 18.[19] Asadi also stated that Iraqi sovereignty is "a red line." Iranian-backed Iraqi actors frequently frame US self-defense strikes against Iranian-backed Iraqi militias as crimes and violations of Iraqi sovereignty to pressure the Iraqi federal government to order the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq.[20] Asadi is a member of the We Build Coalition, a political party headed by Iranian-backed Badr Organization Secretary General Hadi al Ameri.[21] Asadi previously served as the spokesperson for the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, an Iraqi security service containing several Iranian-backed Shia militias.[22] He also leads the 6th PMF Brigade (Kataib Jund al Imam).[23] The Fatah Alliance, which is also headed by Ameri, appointed Asadi as its spokesperson in 2018.[24]

State of Law Coalition member Adnan al Sayadi claimed that the presence of US forces in Iraq is "absolutely unjustified" and that Iraq can solve its "crises and problems" without foreign support during an interview with Al Ahed on January 18.[25] Iranian-backed Iraqi actors frequently argue that the presence of US-led coalition forces is no longer justified because the Iraqi Security Forces can independently protect Iraq from threats such as ISIS. The Iraqi Security Forces still face significant

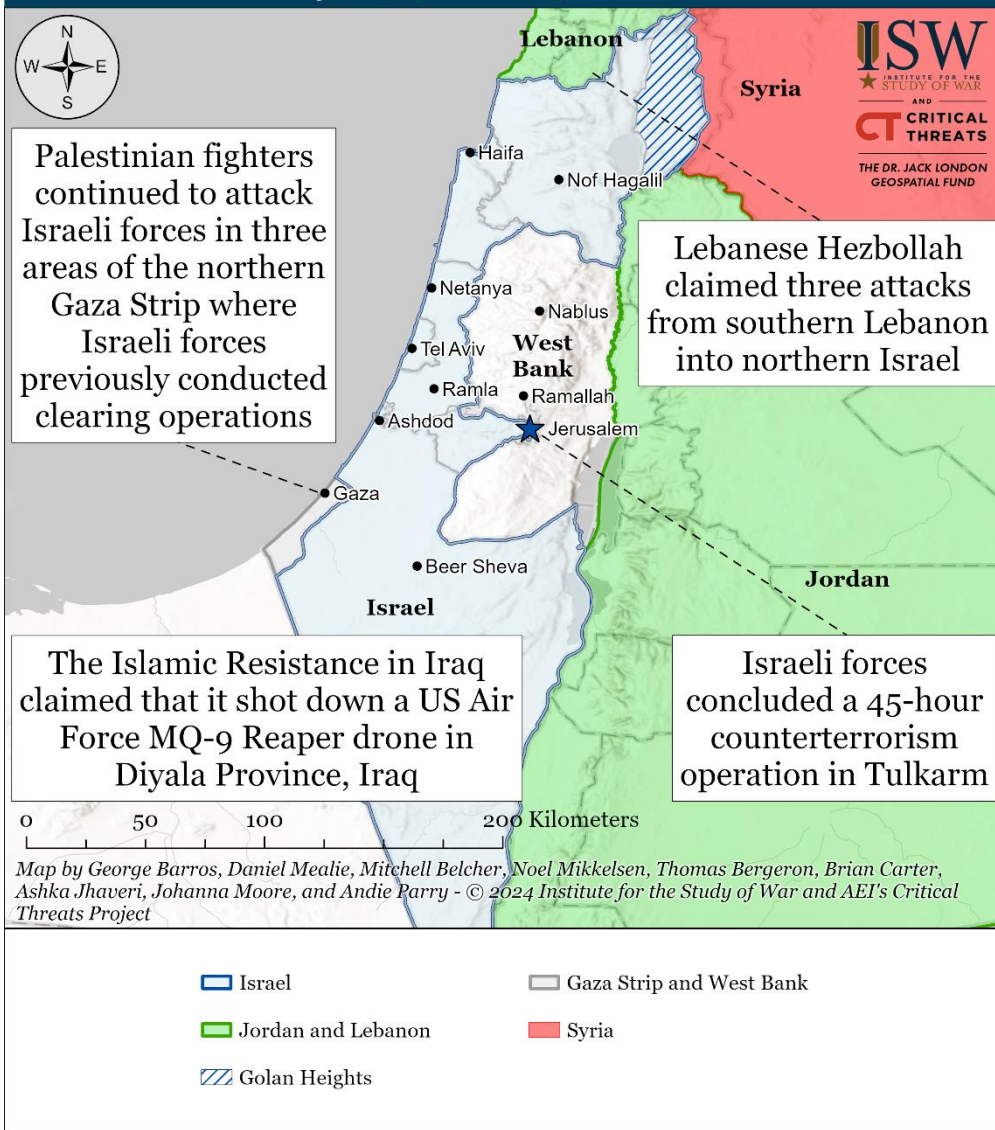
deficiencies in fire support, intelligence, and logistics that will impede their ability to defeat ISIS alone.[26]

Iranian-backed Iraqi actors are continuing to try to install their preferred candidate as Iraqi parliament speaker. Iraqi parliamentarians voted for a new speaker on January 13, but no candidate won the 165-vote majority required.[27] The National Progress Alliance candidate, Shaalan al Karim, was 13 votes short of winning the speakership.[28] The National Progress Alliance is headed by former Parliament Speaker Mohammad al Halbousi, whom the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court dismissed in November 2023.[29] Iraqi media previously reported that members of the Shia Coordination Framework—a loose coalition of Iranian-backed political parties—are trying to prevent Karim from becoming parliament speaker and instead install their preferred candidate, Mahmoud al Mashhadani.[30] Mashhadani is a member of the Azm Alliance, which is headed by Muthanna al Samarrai.

Iranian-backed Badr Organization member Yousef al Kalabi accused Karim of “glorifying” Saddam Hussein’s regime during an interview with Asaib Ahl al Haq (AAH)-controlled Al Ahed on January 18.[31] Iranian-backed politicians in Iraq frequently use accusations of “terrorism” or “support for Saddam Hussein” to enflame anti-Sunni sectarian sentiment.[32] Several representatives, including a member of AAH’s political wing, similarly called for referring Karim to the Accountability and Justice Commission for “promoting and glorifying Saddam Hussein’s regime” on January 14.[33] Kalabi also claimed that two representatives supporting Karim offered bribes to other representatives to sway the election results in favor of Karim.[34]

Iranian-backed Badr Organization Secretary General Hadi al Ameri claimed on January 18 that a new parliament speaker will soon be elected “within the [Shia Coordination] Framework.”[35] Ameri’s statement is noteworthy given that the Shia Coordination Framework is not responsible for and does not have the authority to choose the parliament speaker. Iraqi parliament speakers are elected by the Council of Representatives and must win an absolute majority of 165 votes to win the speakership.[36]

Israel-Hamas War as of January 19, 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.

Palestinian fighters continued to attack Israeli forces in three areas of the northern Gaza Strip where Israeli forces previously conducted clearing operations. CTP-ISW previously assessed on January 16 that Hamas is likely reinfiltrating some of these areas.[37] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) 5th Infantry Brigade (assigned to the 143rd Division) clashed with several armed Palestinian fighters on January 19 in unspecified areas of the northern Gaza Strip.[38] The IDF used air support and tank fire to assist its forces during the clashes.[39] A Palestinian activist reported on

January 19 that Israeli vehicles reentered several towns and neighborhoods of the northern Gaza Strip and engaged Palestinian fighters.[40]

The military wing of Hamas, the al Qassem Brigades, claimed that it detonated an explosively formed penetrator (EFP) and anti-personnel improvised explosive device (IED) targeting Israeli forces east of Jabalia.[41] Palestinian militias have sustained daily attacks on Israeli forces around Jabalia since January 16.[42] The last time Palestinian militias claimed attacks in the Jabalia area for four consecutive days was between December 24 and 27, 2023.[43] The al Qassem Brigades detonated an anti-personnel IED and fired small arms at Israeli soldiers inside and around a building in Sheikh Radwan neighborhood of Gaza City on January 19.[44]

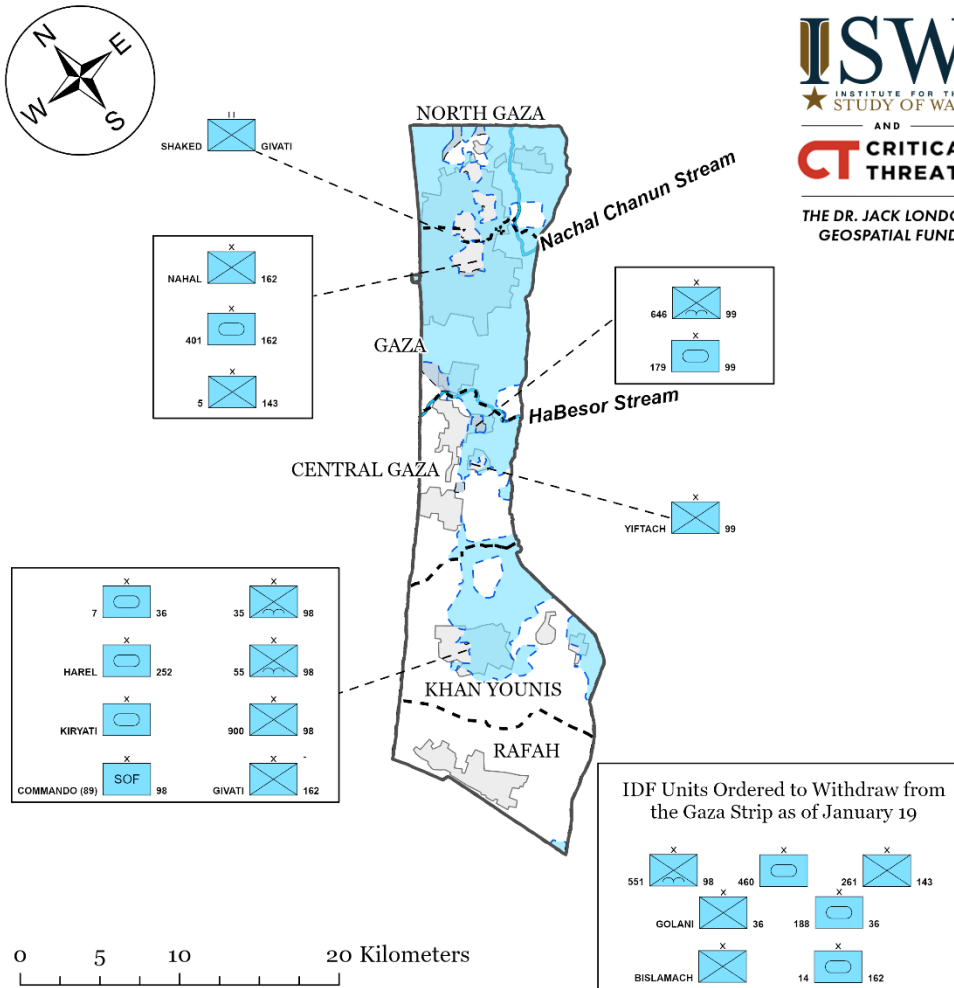
Palestinian militias are also attacking Israeli forces in southwestern Gaza City, namely in Zaytoun and Sheikh Ijlin neighborhoods. The al Qassem Brigades conducted multiple attacks targeting Israeli forces and armor in southern Gaza City on January 19.[45] The military wing of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the al Quds Brigades, mortared an IDF position in Zaytoun.[46] A Palestinian activist noted on January 19 that Israeli forces had advanced into Sheikh Ijlin and that IDF "snipers" remained in Zaytoun.[47]

The IDF 179th Armored Brigade (assigned to the 99th Division) continued to conduct clearing operations in the Central Governorate of the Gaza Strip on January 19.[48] Palestinian fighters fired rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) targeting the 179th Armored Brigade during its operations, according to the IDF. Israeli forces captured small arms, RPGs, and other unspecified military equipment in the building that the Palestinian fighters fired from.[49]

The IDF 7th Armored Brigade (assigned to the 36th Division) continued to conduct clearing operations in Khan Younis on January 19.[50] Israeli forces raided a training camp of Hamas' Khan Younis Brigade and located tunnels, weapons, and life-size models of Israeli tanks and military vehicles.[51] The IDF reported that the camp served as a meeting place for senior Hamas officials.

Palestinian fighters continued their attempt to defend against Israeli clearing operations in several sectors of Khan Younis. The al Qassem Brigades reported on January 19 that its fighters returned from the front lines in eastern Khan Younis City and reported that they fired an anti-tank guided RPG at an Israeli tank.[52] The militia also claimed that it detonated a Shawaz EFP targeting three Israeli tanks. Al Qassem Brigades fighters also fired a sniper rifle targeting Israeli ground forces in the same sector.[53] The self-proclaimed military wing of Fatah, the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, and the military wing of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the National Resistance Brigades claimed separate attacks on Israeli forces and armor south of Khan Younis City.[54]

Israel Defense Forces Order of Battle as of January 19



Map by Brian Carter, Peter Mills, Thomas Bergeron, Noel Mikkelsen, and Daniel Mealie
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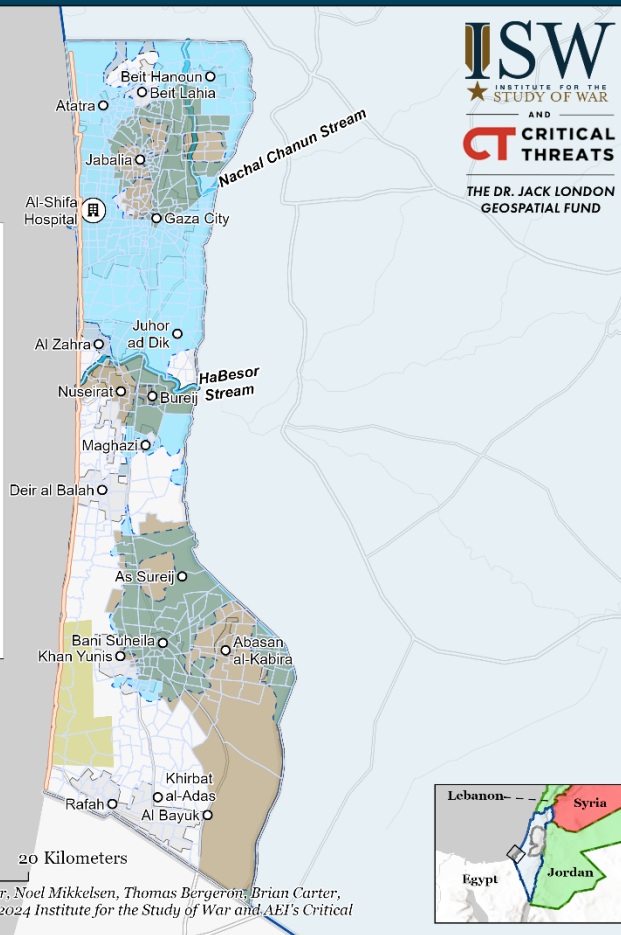
- Reported Israeli Clearing Operations
- Significant Water Obstacles
- Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances
- Gaza Strip
- Governate Boundry
- Densely Urban Areas

Note: CTP-ISW's map of IDF dispositions is based on Israel Defense Forces public announcements and reports from Israeli military correspondents who have travelled 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.

Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip as of January 19, 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)

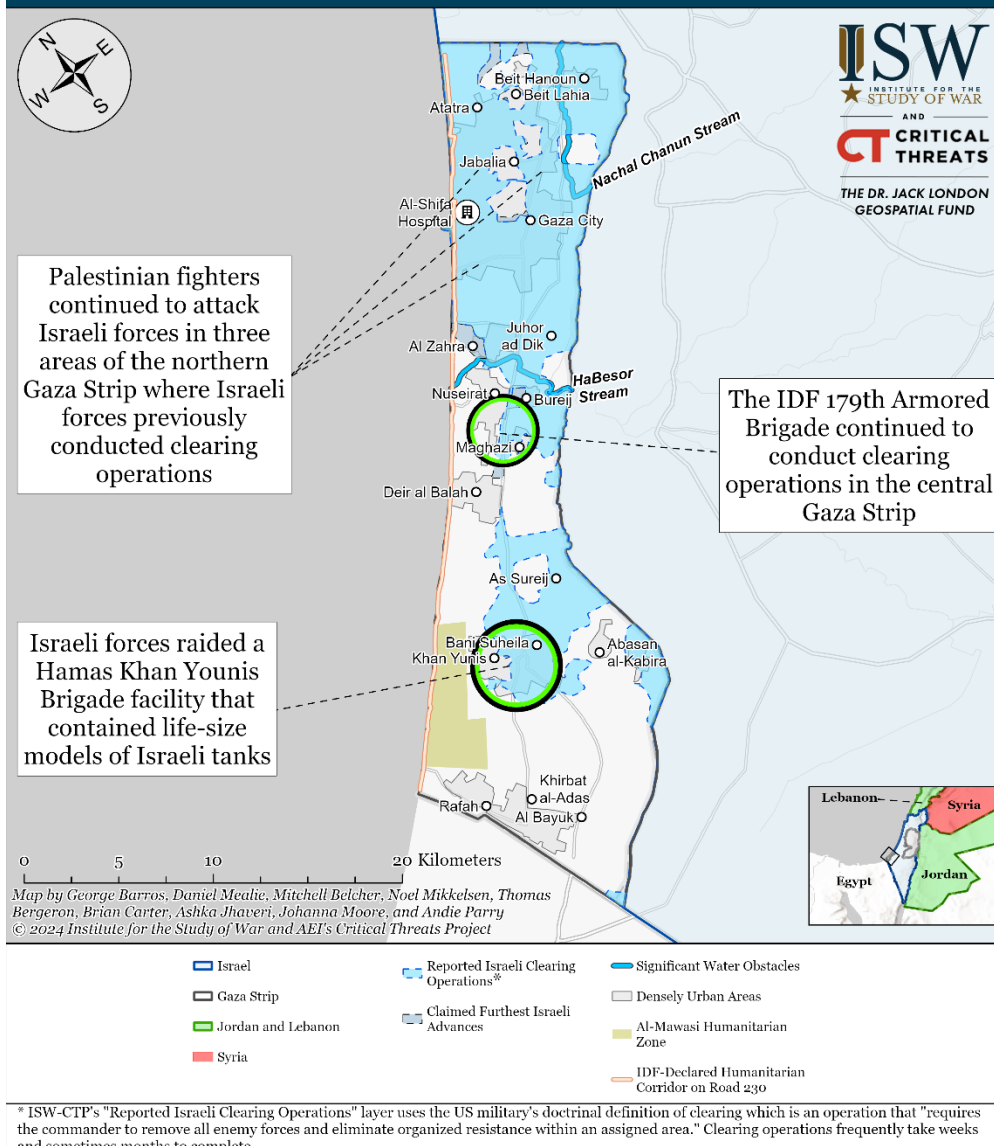


Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Brian Carter, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Andie Parry - © 2024 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

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

* 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 19, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



Palestinian fighters continued to attack Israeli forces in three areas of the northern Gaza Strip where Israeli forces previously conducted clearing operations

The IDF 179th Armored Brigade continued to conduct clearing operations in the central Gaza Strip

Israeli forces raided a Hamas Khan Yunis Brigade facility that contained life-size models of Israeli tanks

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin discussed regional security Israel's shift to "low-intensity operations" in the Gaza Strip in a phone call with Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant on January 18.[55] The pair also discussed humanitarian aid distribution in the Gaza Strip and "instability in the West Bank." Austin "emphasized" the importance of humanitarian aid in the Gaza Strip and "acknowledged" Israeli security "concerns" on the Israel-Lebanon border.

Hamas International Relations head Musa Abu Marzouk met with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov on January 19 to discuss "achieving a ceasefire." [56] Bassem Naim, a member of Hamas' Political Bureau in the Gaza Strip, accompanied the Hamas delegation.[57] Russian officials "stressed the need for the speedy release of civilians,

including three Russian citizens,” held hostage by Hamas since October 7, according to the Russian Foreign Ministry.[58] Bogdanov added that Russia “supports the rights of the Palestinian people.”[59]

The Gaza Strip continues to experience the longest, largest-scale internet blackout since the Israel-Hamas war began. NetBlocks reported on January 19 that the Gaza Strip entered the eighth day of the telecommunications blackout.[60] The director of a Palestinian telecommunication provider told CNN on January 19 that Israeli military activity has severed the underground fiber optic line connecting internet and cellphone towers in the Gaza Strip to Israel and the West Bank.[61]

The al Quds Brigades launched one rocket salvo from the Gaza Strip targeting an unspecified location in southern Israel on January 18 after CTP-ISW's data cutoff.[62] CTP-ISW previously reported that only the al Qassem Brigades launched a rocket salvo into southern Israel on January 18.[63]

West Bank

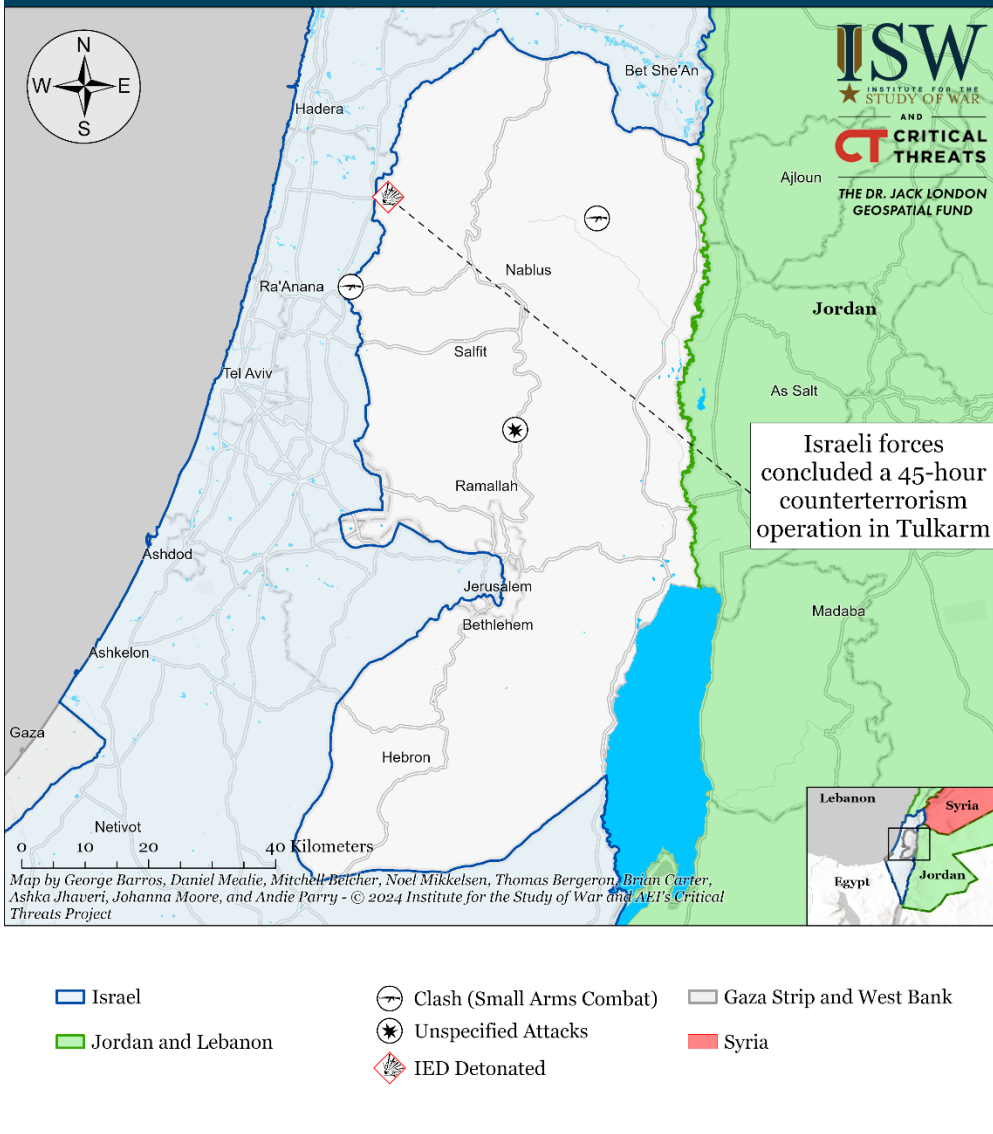
Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

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

Israeli forces under the command of the Menashe Brigade concluded a 45-hour counter-terrorism operation in Tulkarm on January 19. Israeli forces “searched” approximately 1,000 buildings and arrested over 37 wanted individuals, including several unidentified senior militia members.[64] IDF engineering forces identified “dozens” of IEDs buried under roads in Tulkarm.[65] Unspecified Palestinian fighters detonated multiple IEDs targeting Israeli vehicles in Tulkarm. Palestine media claimed that one IED disabled an Israeli armored vehicle.[66] Israeli forces destroyed five weapons manufacturing facilities, four militia observation posts, and over 400 charges, and seized various small arms and military equipment.[67] Israeli forces also directed an airstrike that targeted Palestinian fighters who had targeted Israeli forces with IEDs.

Palestinian fighters clashed with Israeli forces three times across the West Bank.[68] The al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades claimed that its fighters attacked an Israeli vehicle outside Ramallah.[69] Unidentified Palestinian fighters set fire to tires in the street in an attempt to restrict the movement of Israeli forces operating in Tammoun, Tubas.[70]

Clashes in the West Bank as of January 19, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



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

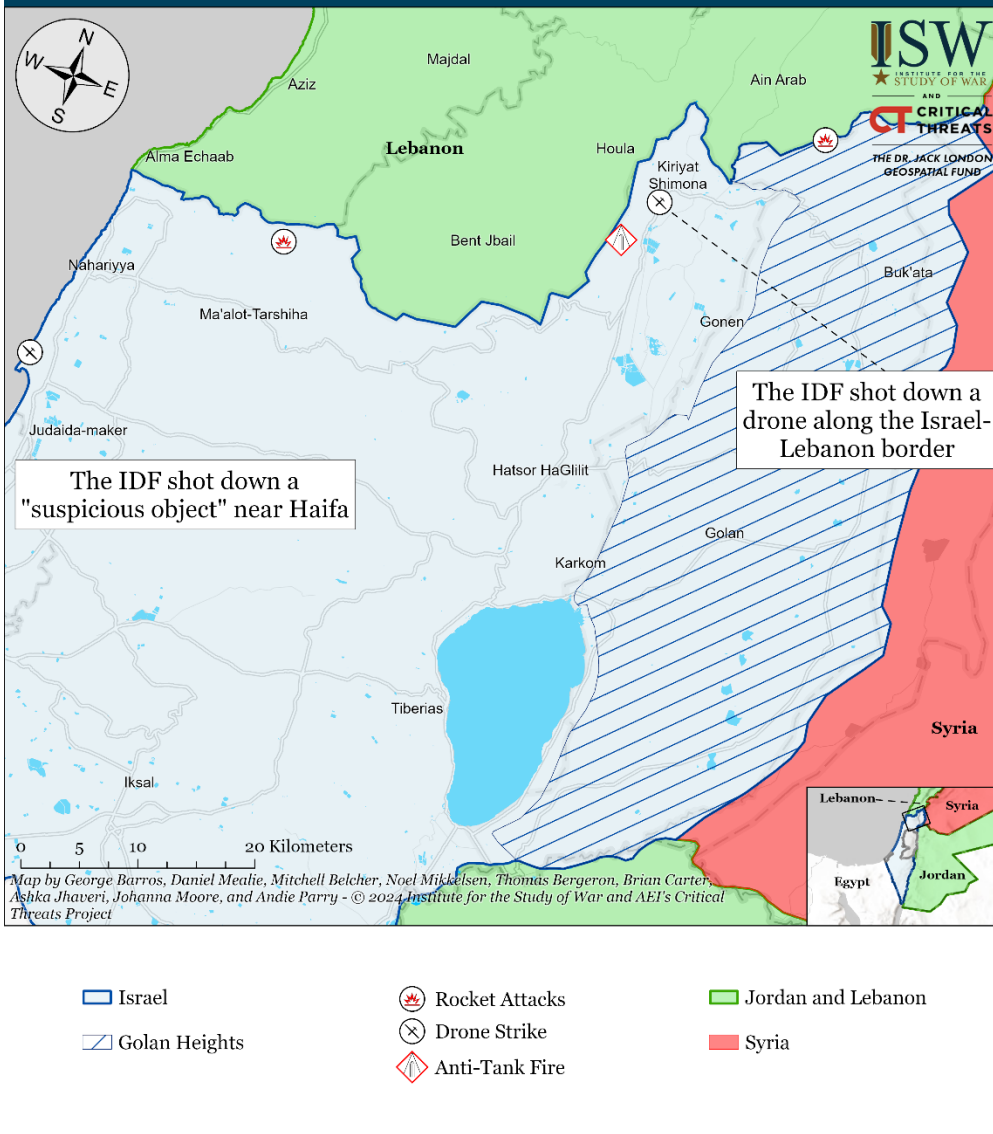
Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

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) claimed three attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel on January 19.[71] LH continued to target Israeli military positions along the Israel-Lebanon border. The IDF Air Force struck LH military infrastructure, including rocket launch sites, in multiple locations in southern Lebanon.[72]

Attacks into Northern Israel from Lebanon as of January 19, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



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

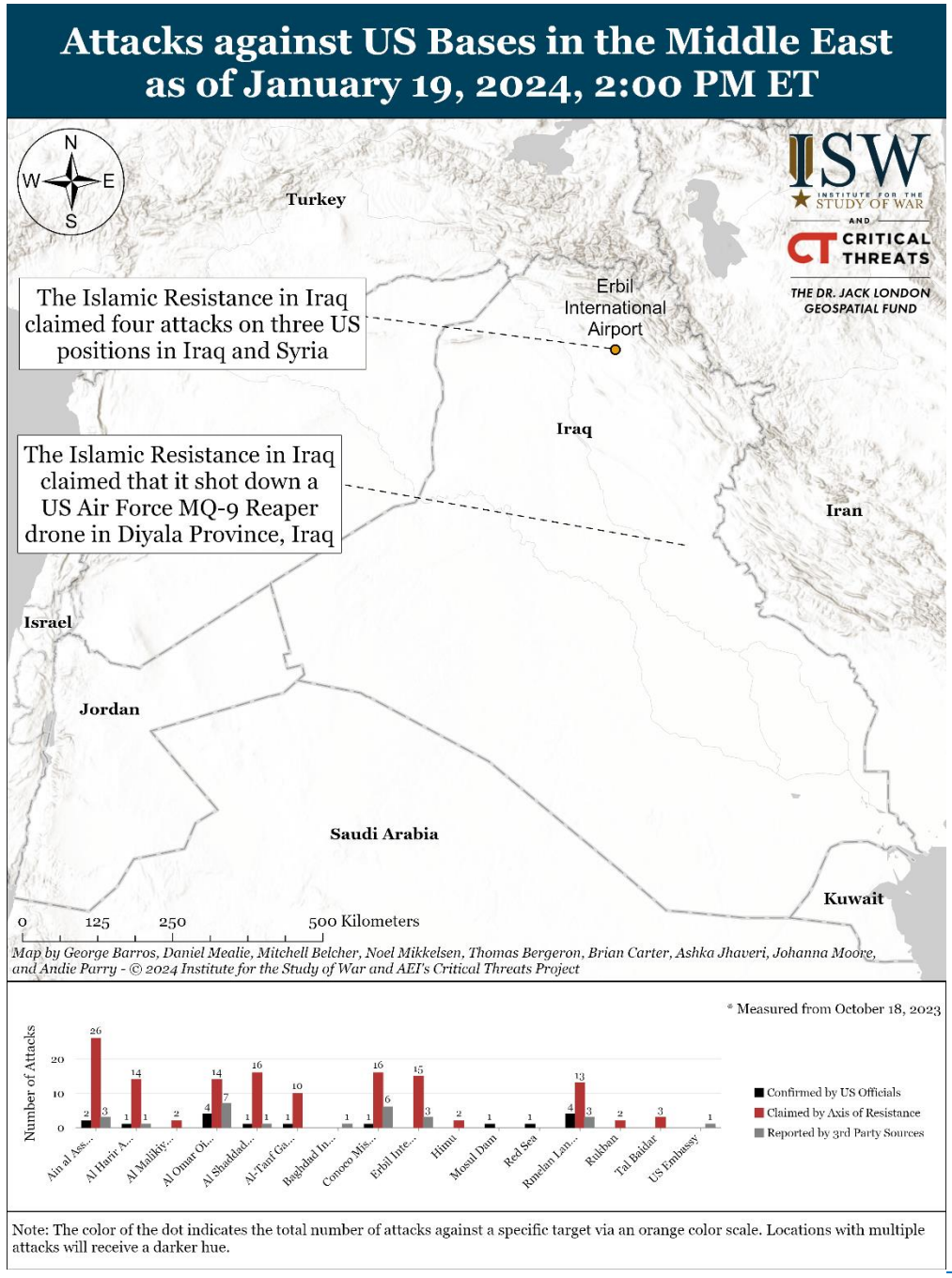
Iran and Axis of Resistance

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

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—claimed that it shot down a US Air Force (USAF) MQ-9 Reaper drone in Diyala Province, Iraq, on January 18.[73] The group claimed that the USAF launched the drone from Ali al Salem Airbase in Kuwait. An unspecified Pentagon official confirmed to Kurdish media that a US drone “crashed” in Diyala Province.[74] IRGC-affiliated media published videos of the MQ-9 crashing in Diyala Province.[75]

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq also claimed responsibility for a drone attack targeting US forces at Erbil International Airport in Erbil Province, Iraq, on January 18.[76]



Iran and Pakistan continued to de-escalate tensions following the exchange of strikes on each other's territory in recent days. The IRGC conducted drone and missile strikes on two Jaish al Adl headquarters in Koh Sabz, Baluchistan Province, Pakistan on January 16.[77] The Pakistani armed forces responded with cross-border strikes targeting Baloch separatists in three locations near Saravan, Iran, on January 17.[78] Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian reiterated Iran's respect for Pakistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity and emphasized that Pakistan is Iran's "friend, brother, and neighbor" during a phone call with his Pakistani counterpart Jalil Abbas Jilani on January 19.[79] Iranian state media reported that Abdollahian and Jilani "agreed to reduce tensions." [80] The Pakistani Foreign Ministry similarly reported that Jilani underscored the "close brotherly relations" between Iran and Pakistan and called for cooperation between the two countries based on the "spirit of mutual trust and cooperation." [81]

The Sistan and Baluchistan Province Law Enforcement commander announced the arrest of four individuals who shot at an unspecified "military headquarters" in Saravan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province on January 19. The commander said that Law Enforcement Command officers found handguns and a Kalashnikov rifle.[82] The shooting follows a rise in insecurity and terrorist activity in southeastern Iran since mid-December. The Baloch Salafi Jihadi group Jaish al Adl has conducted three attacks in Sistan and Baluchistan since December 15.[83] The Afghan branch of the Islamic State—named the Islamic State Khorasan Province—conducted a suicide attack on January 3 during a ceremony commemorating the anniversary of the United States killing Qassem Soleimani in Kerman Province.[84]

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[1] <https://twitter.com/CENTCOM/status/1748143745567010833>;
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[3] https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-01-19-24/h_8e15f68badcb83cfoa7cef76e17d528f

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- [9] <https://twitter.com/abdusalamsalah/status/1748336573840601535>
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[28] <https://www.kurdistan24 dot net/ar/story/45505-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%A4%D8%AC%D9%91%D9%84-%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8D-%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AC%D9%84%D9%8D-%D8%BA%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%85%D9%91%D9%89>

[29] <https://www.iraqfsc dot iq/news.5066/>

[30] <https://almadapaper dot net/view.php?cat=304671>

[31] <http://www.alahad dot iq/?page=article&itemId=184700>

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