

# Iran Update



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**Information Cutoff: December 20, 2024, 2:00 pm ET**

*The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) publish the Iran Update, which provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests.*

*Click [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations, and [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of the ongoing opposition offensive in Syria. These maps are updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.*

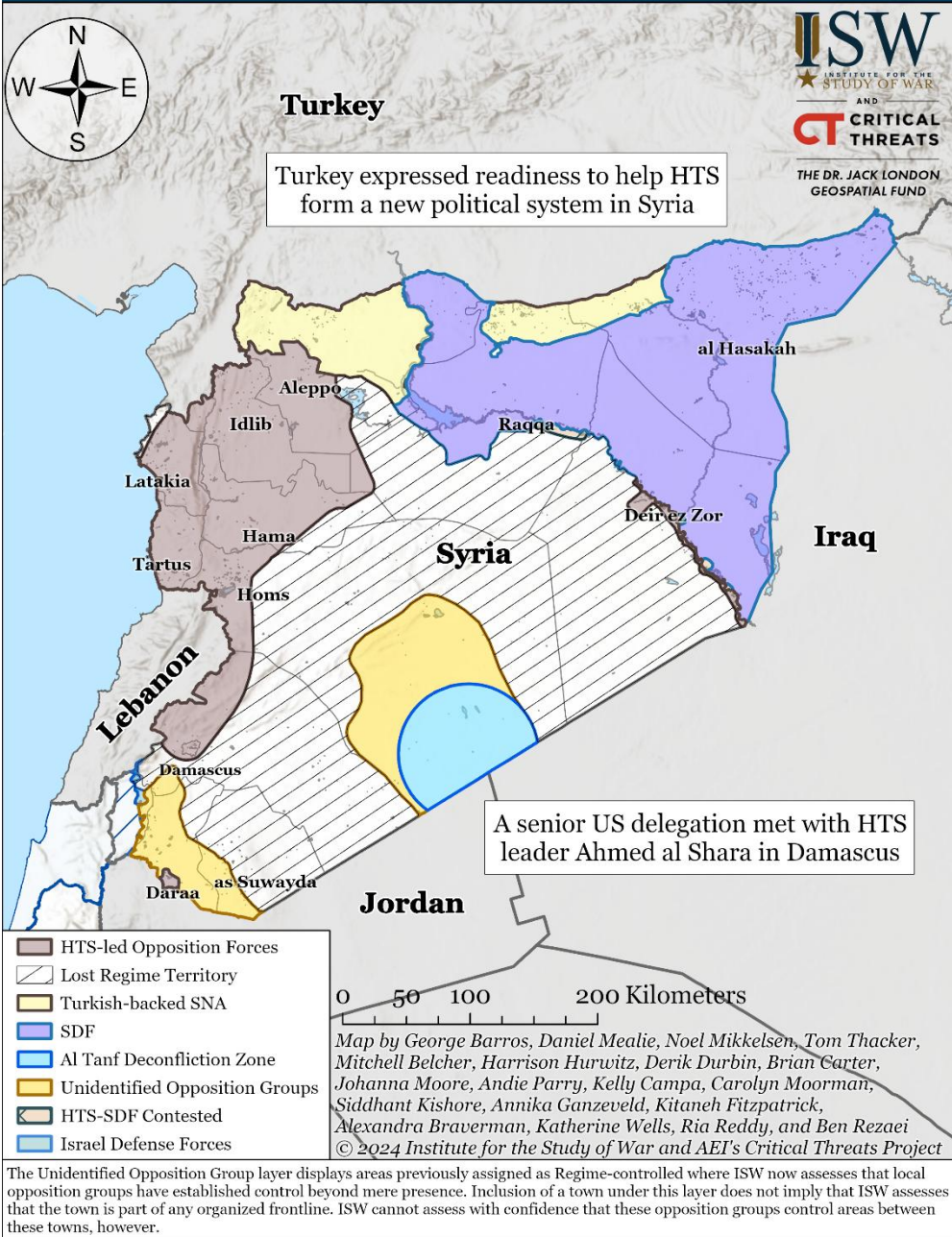
*We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We utterly condemn violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.*

**Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed readiness to help Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) form a new political system in Syria.[1]** Erdogan said that Turkey could offer expertise and guidance to this end. Erdogan also emphasized the need to draft a new Syrian constitution. Erdogan added that Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Hakan Fidan will travel to Damascus soon to discuss the formation of a new Syrian state. These comments come amid indications from HTS that it wants to establish a centralized and unitary Syrian state without autonomous or federal regions for minorities, such as Druze and Kurds.[2]

Erdogan's comments also come amid renewed Turkish aggression toward the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in recent days. Turkish officials have defined one of their objectives in Syria as "eliminat[ing]" the SDF.[3] Turkey and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) have built up their military presence immediately outside SDF-held territory and indicated that they may attack to seize territory. An SNA military commander said on December 20 that his forces were fighting against "separatist parties," referring to the SDF.[4] SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi said on December 10 that he wanted to "enter into a political process for the future of" Syria, but it is unclear what role he would play if Turkey adopts a major role in the formation of a new Syrian state.[5]

# Reported Control of Terrain in Syria

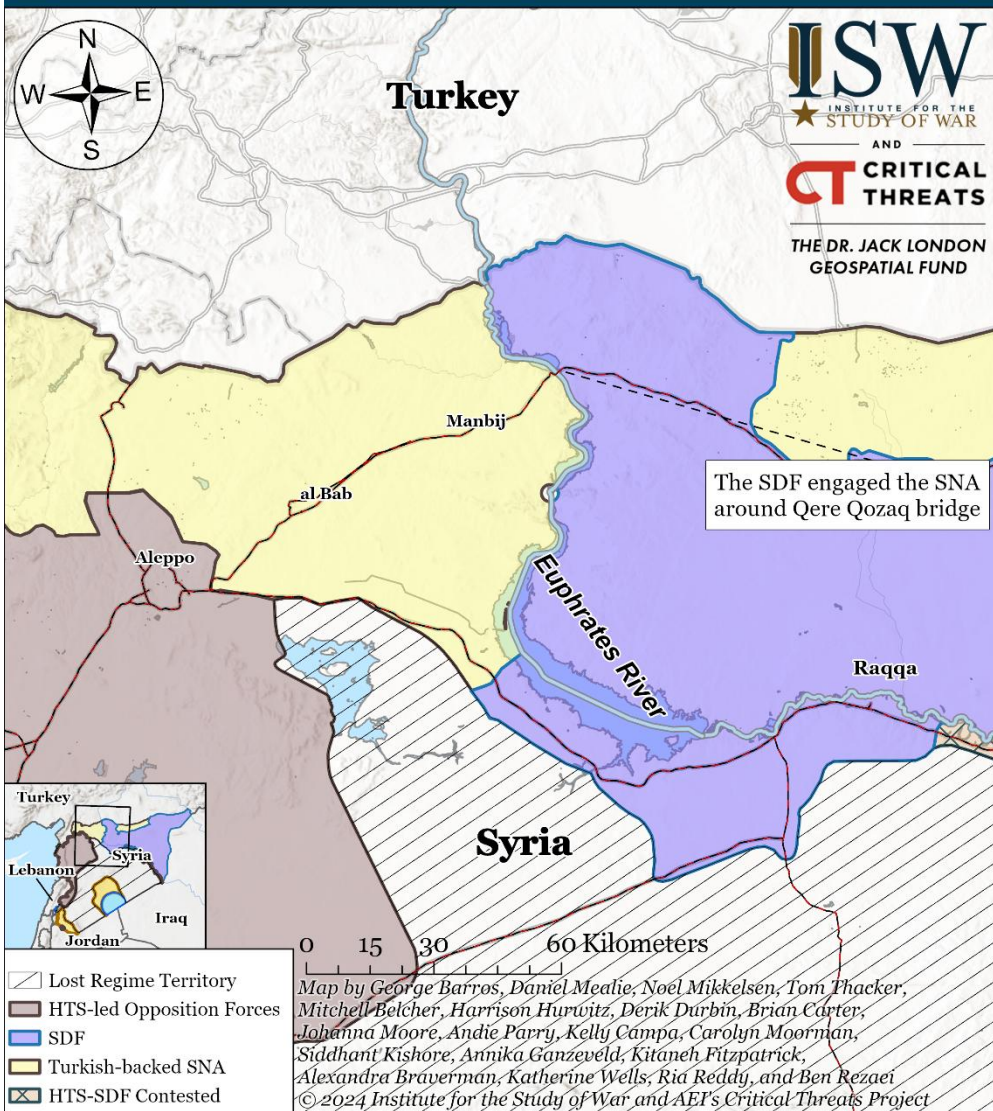
As of December 20, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



**The SDF and SNA continued to clash along the lines of control in Aleppo Province on December 20.** The head of the SDF media center reported “fierce clashes” on the Qere Qozaq bridge, which spans the Euphrates River.[6] This bridge and a downstream dam have been the site of consistent fighting between the SDF and SNA since December 9.[7]

# Control of Terrain in North Syria

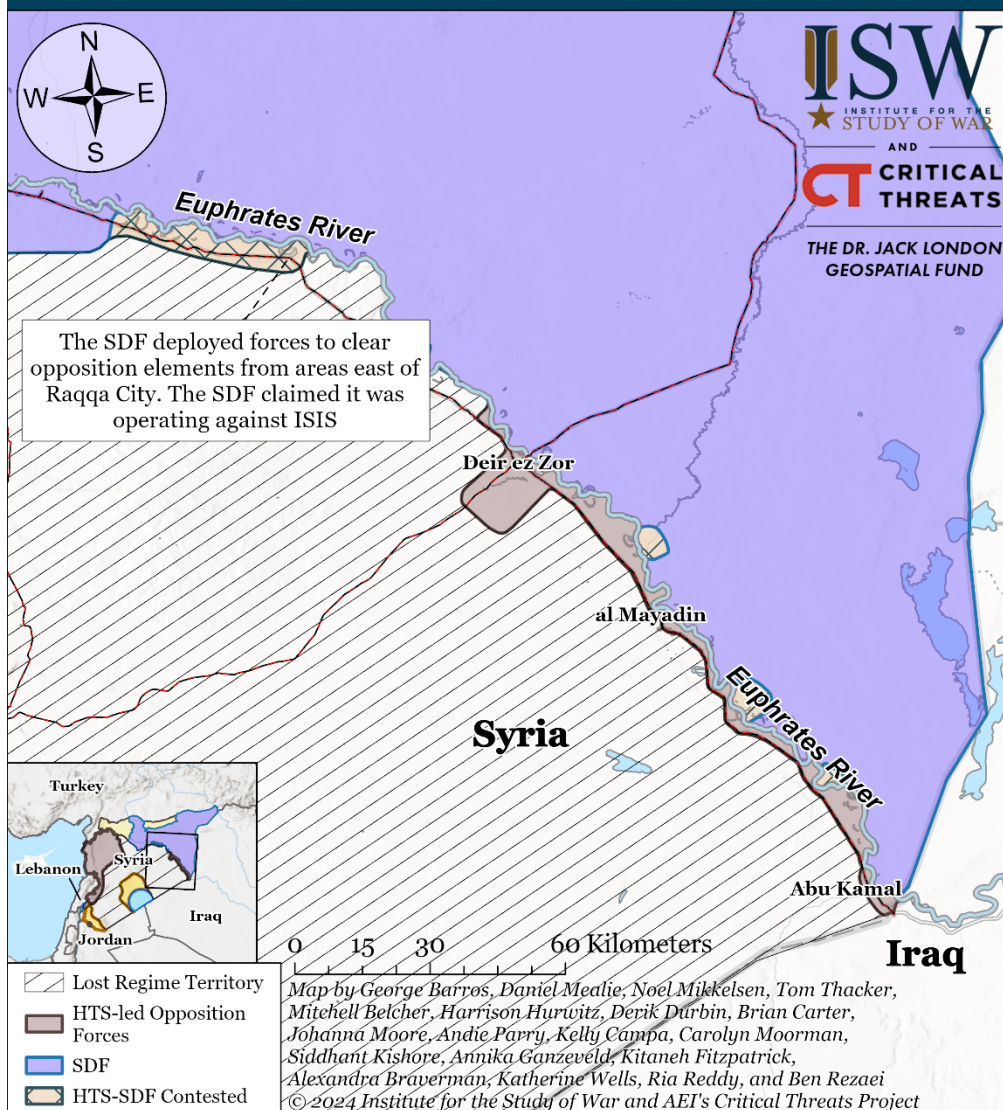
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**The SDF deployed forces to clear towns of opposition forces east of Raqqa City on December 19.[8]** Local sources reported that opposition forces took control of Madan and five other nearby towns from the SDF.[9] The SDF had seized these areas from the Assad regime on December 6.[10] The SDF stated that its forces deployed on December 19 to operate against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) elements in the towns and pushed them into the desert.[11] The SDF originally took control of these towns from the Assad regime on December 6.[12] Residents of Madan disputed the SDF claim that it was fighting ISIS and instead labeled the opposition fighters actually as "local revolutionary forces." [13] The exact identity of these anti-SDF elements is unclear at this time. These events come during an SNA-affiliated leader's visit to Madan on December 20.[14]



## Control of Terrain in Deir ez Zor and Raqqa Provinces As of December 20, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



**US Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General Michael Kurilla said that ISIS plans to exploit instability in Syria to break 8,000 of its fighters out of Syrian detention facilities.[15]** This statement comes as an ISIS outlet criticized the detention of its fighters in Syria.[16] ISIS has long sought to free its forces from detention facilities, and ISIS supporters have increasingly suggested online that the fall of Bashar al Assad presents an opportunity to exploit to this end.[17] CENTCOM separately killed two ISIS members, including an ISIS commander, in an airstrike in Deir Ez Zor Province, eastern Syria, on December 19.[18] CENTCOM specified that the airstrike was conducted in an area that was formerly controlled by the Assad regime and Russian forces.

There is precedent for Salafi-jihadi groups exploiting political instability, such as what is occurring in Syria, to rapidly reconstitute their forces. ISIS's predecessor, al Qaeda in Iraq, rapidly reconstituted itself by freeing fighters from Iraqi detention facilities after the US withdrawal from Iraq from 2011 to

2014.[19] The ISIS fighters and commanders held in Syrian detention centers represent a sizeable fighting force that would support further operations in Iraq and Syria.

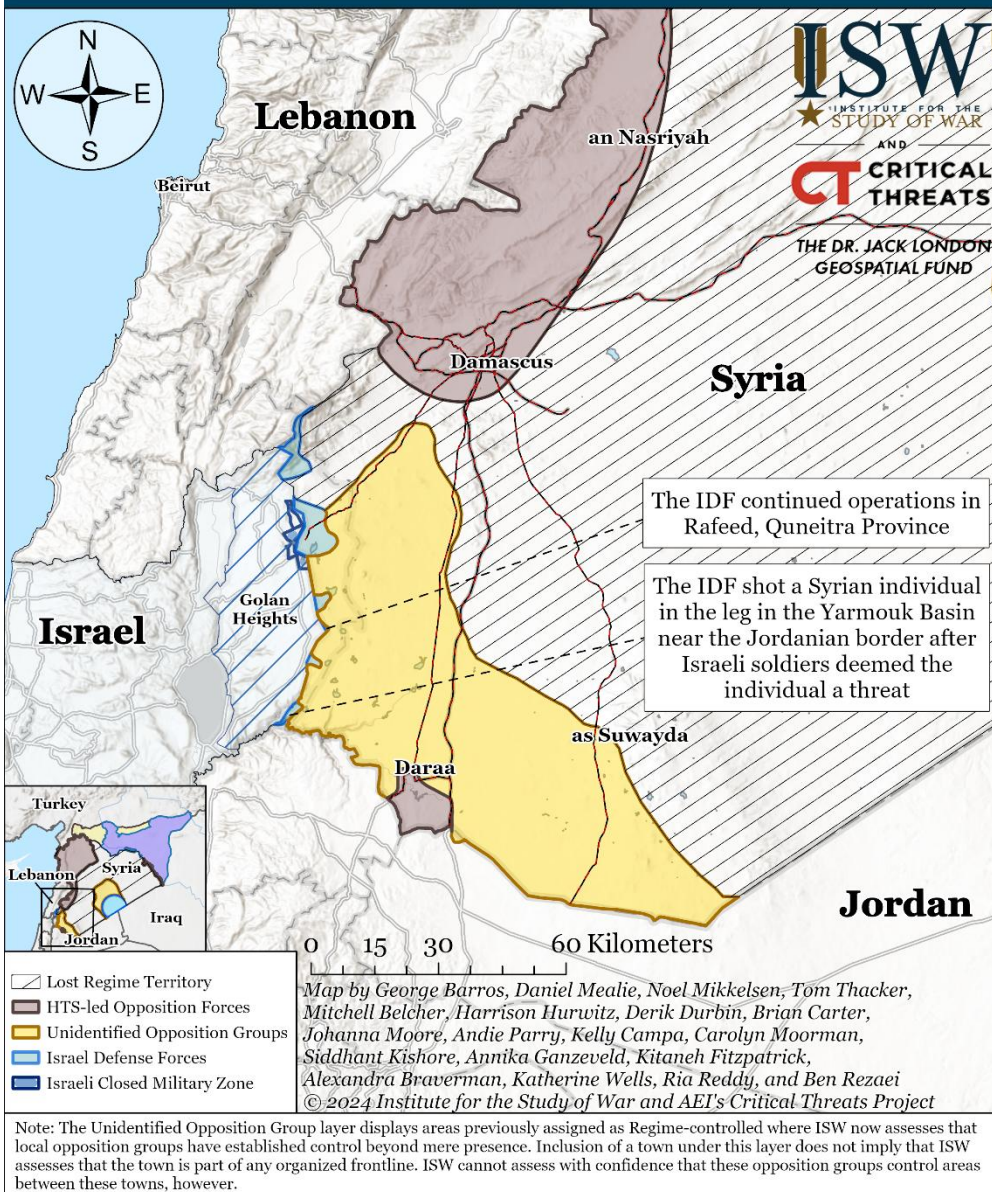
The US counter-ISIS mission relies heavily on the SDF as the leading counter-ISIS partner force in Syria.[20] The current SDF-SNA fighting, as outlined in the paragraphs above, will likely impact the SDF's ability to execute this mission. ISIS is likely aware of the current SDF-SNA dynamic and views it as a further opportunity that it could exploit. US Department of Defense Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on December 19 that the United States increased its force presence in Syria from 900 troops to approximately 2,000.[21] Ryder specified that these additional troops are “temporary rotational forces” deployed to meet changing mission needs.

**A US delegation led by Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf met HTS leader Ahmed al Shara in Damascus on December 20.**[22] Leaf had "good" and "thorough" discussions with Shara on domestic and regional issues.[23] This is the first time that US officials have visited Damascus in over a decade.[24]

**The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) continued to operate in villages in Daraa and Quneitra provinces.** Tens of Syrians protested the IDF presence in Maariya, Daraa Province, on December 20.[25] The IDF deemed one approaching protester as a “threat” to Israeli soldiers in the area.[26] The IDF shot the protester in the leg. Israeli media reported that the IDF was operating based on its open-fire procedures, which involve verbally instructing the individual to stop and firing warning shots into the air before shooting at their legs.[27] Geolocated footage posted to X (Twitter) separately showed the IDF in al Rafeed, Quneitra Governorate, for the first time on December 20.[28] Syrian media similarly reported that around 30 IDF soldiers with vehicles operated in al Rafeed to clear trees, search houses, and request a meeting with locals.[29]

# Opposition Advances in Southwest Syria

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**Senior Iranian officials are trying to justify domestically the years-long Iranian support for Bashar al Assad while downplaying the fact that the fall of Assad marks a strategic defeat for Tehran.** Iranian Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Akbar Ahmadian reiterated regime talking points along these lines in an interview with the official website of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.[30] Ahmadian said that Iran intervened in Syria to fight ISIS and at the request of Assad. This framing ignores that Iran intervened to defend Assad at the early stages of the Syrian civil war in 2011—well before ISIS surged across Iraq and Syria. This framing also ignores how senior Iranian officials have framed previously their role in Syria as part of their efforts to deter and threaten the United States and Israel. Ahmadian admitted that the fall of Assad hurts the Axis of Resistance but then proceeded to argue that Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah are self-sufficient and do

not require Iranian support to remain strong. This downplaying of the fall of Assad and its negative impact on Iranian strategy mirrors Russian efforts to frame the fall of Assad as a victory for Moscow.[31]

### **Key Takeaways:**

- Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed readiness to help HTS form a new political system in Syria. These comments come amid renewed Turkish aggression toward the US-backed SDF and fighting with the Turkish-backed SNA.
- US CENTCOM Commander Michael Kurilla stated that ISIS plans to exploit political instability in Syria in order to break 8,000 of its fighters out of detention facilities, which would help ISIS reconstitute rapidly.
- Senior Iranian officials are trying to justify domestically the years-long Iranian support for the Bashar al Assad regime while downplaying the fact that the fall of Assad marks a strategic defeat for Tehran.

### **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 IDF reported on December 20 that its 162nd Division had located and destroyed a 7.5-kilometer militia tunnel system in Beit Lahia, northern Gaza Strip, in the past week.[32]** The IDF stated that the tunnel system consisted of three tunnels that were “tens of meters” deep. The IDF also located several “hiding places” and weapons in the tunnel system. The IDF said that Palestinian fighters used these weapons during the October 7 attacks. The IDF has destroyed several underground militia sites in Beit Lahia since the IDF expanded its clearing operations there in early November 2024.[33]

**Hamas claimed that one of its fighters detonated his suicide vest (SVEST) targeting the IDF in Jabalia refugee camp on December 20.[34]** Hamas claimed that the fighter first fired small arms at an IDF sniper and his assistant from “zero distance.” The fighter then disguised himself in an IDF uniform, approached IDF soldiers, and detonated the SVEST, according to Hamas. Hamas’ use of an SVEST is notable given that CTP-ISW has observed no previous instances of Hamas using SVESTs in the Gaza Strip since the war began. The IDF has not confirmed Hamas’ claim at the time of this writing, however.

**Palestinian militias claimed four attacks targeting the IDF around the Netzarim Corridor on December 20.[35]**

**The Palestinian Mujahideen Movement mortared the IDF in eastern Bureij refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip on December 20.[36]**



# Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

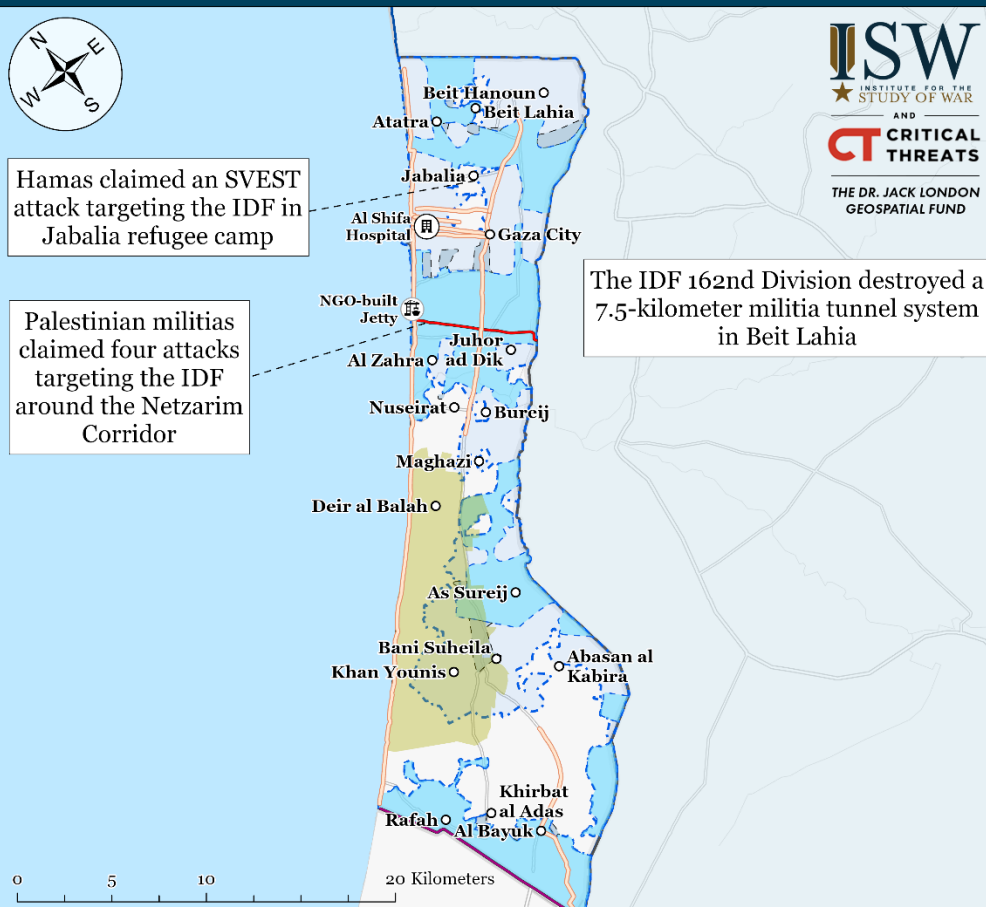
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Hamas claimed an SVEST attack targeting the IDF in Jabalia refugee camp

Palestinian militias claimed four attacks targeting the IDF around the Netzarim Corridor

The IDF 162nd Division destroyed a 7.5-kilometer militia tunnel system in Beit Lahia



Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Tom Thacker, Harrison Hurwitz, Derik Durbin, Brian Carter, Johanna Moore, Andie Parry, Kelly Campa, Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Alexandra Braverman, Katherine Wells, Siddhant Kishore, Carolyn Moorman, Ria Reddy, and Ben Rezaei - © 2024 Institute for the Study of War and AEL's Critical Threats Project

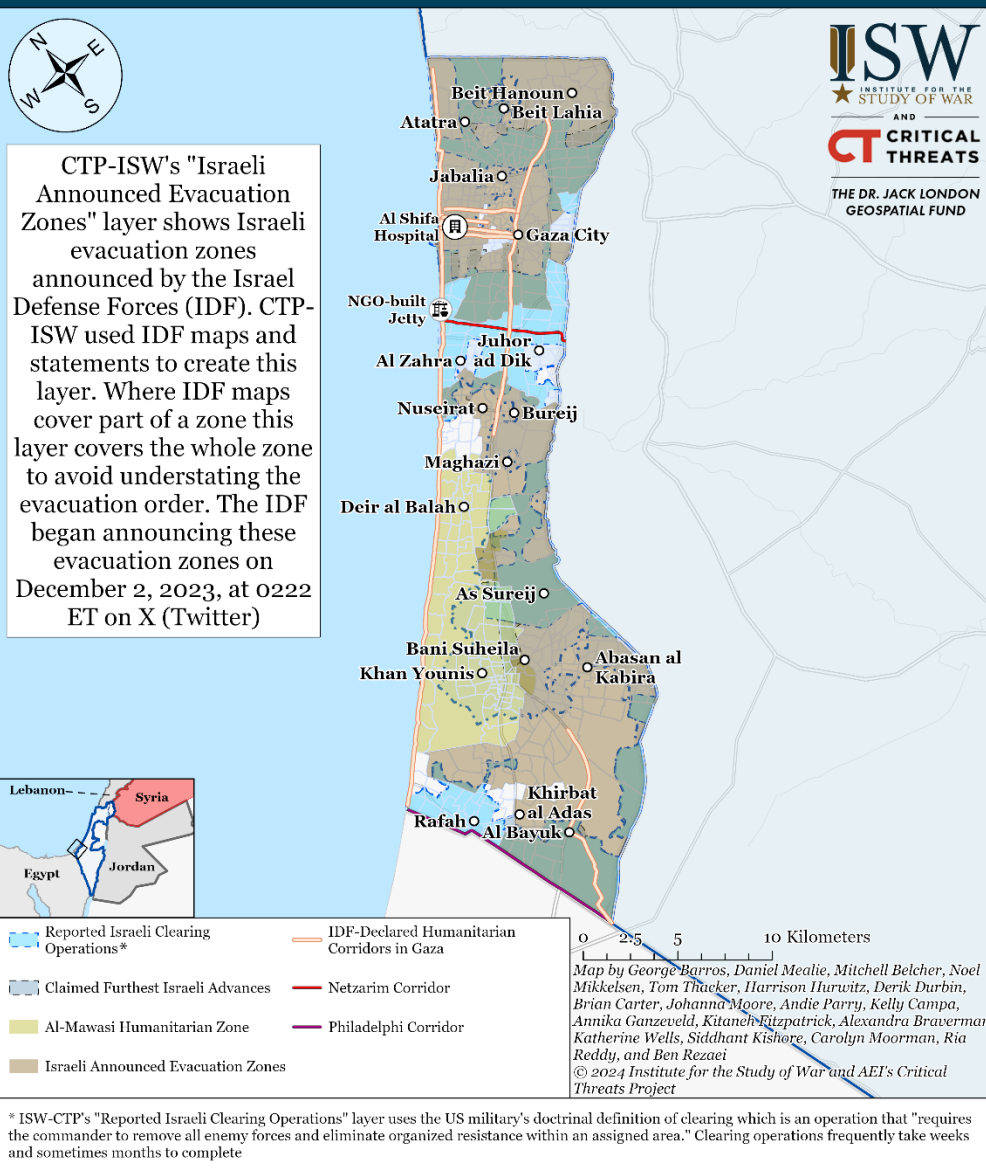
Reported Israeli Clearing Operations*	IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridors in Gaza	Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances	Netzarim Corridor	Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone
Assessed Furthest Extent of Israeli Clearing Operations	Philadelphi Corridor	



\* 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 December 20, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



## West Bank

### Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

**Israeli and Palestinian media reported on December 20 that Israeli settlers vandalized and set fire to a mosque in Madra, south of Nablus.[37] Israeli police and the Shin Bet launched an investigation into the incident.[38]**

## **Northern Israel and Lebanon**

### **Lebanese Hezbollah objectives:**

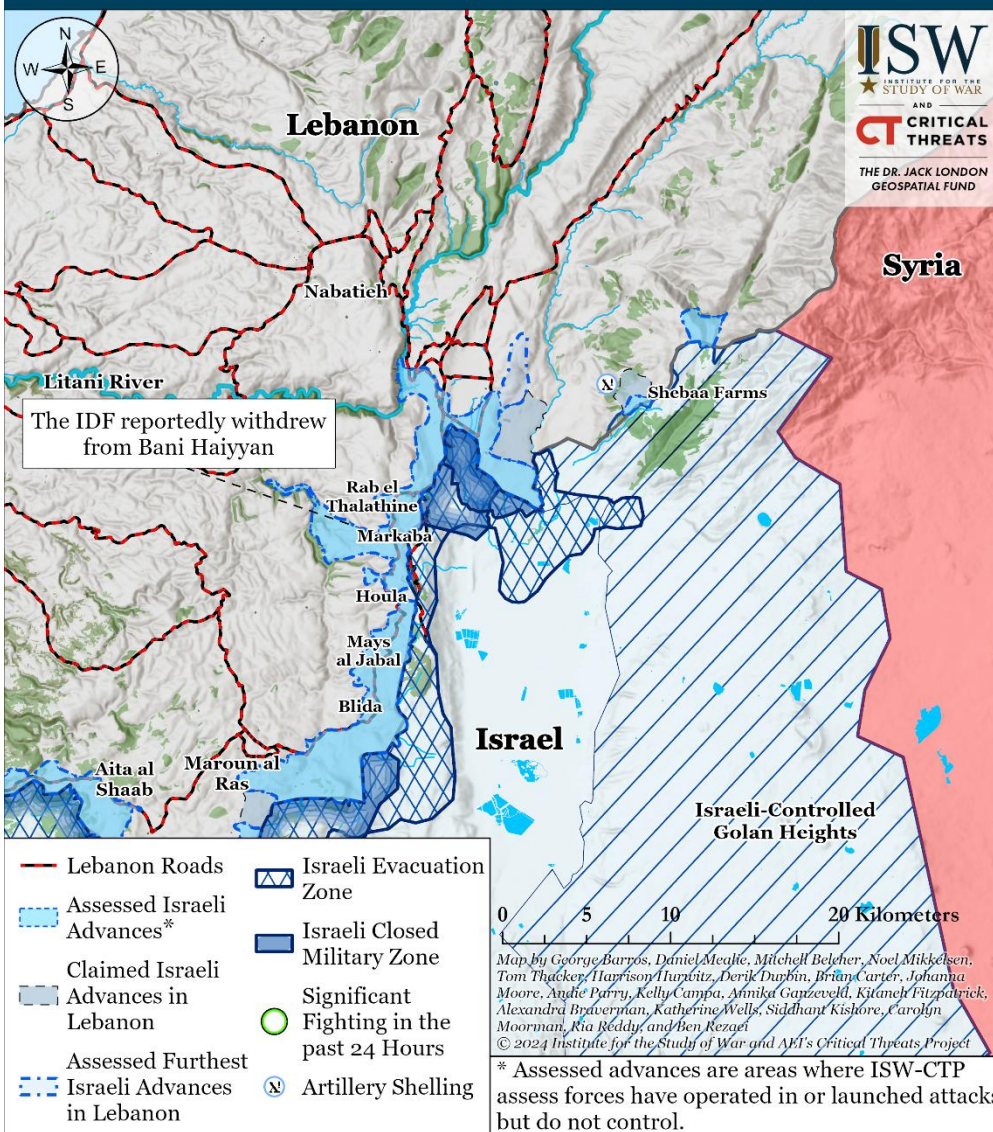
- End Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip
- Survive the October 7 War as a capable political and military organization with control over Lebanon

**Lebanese media reported that the IDF conducted unspecified “detonation operations” in two towns in southeastern Lebanon on the Israel-Lebanon border.[39]** Such operations may refer to the demolition of buildings.

**Lebanese media, citing an unspecified security source, reported that the IDF “kidnapped” three Lebanese civilians on the Wadi al Hujayr road, southeastern Lebanon, on December 20.[40]**

**Lebanese media reported that the IDF withdrew from Bani Hayyan, southeastern Lebanon, on December 20.[41]** The IDF has operated in Bani Hayyan since December 18.[42]

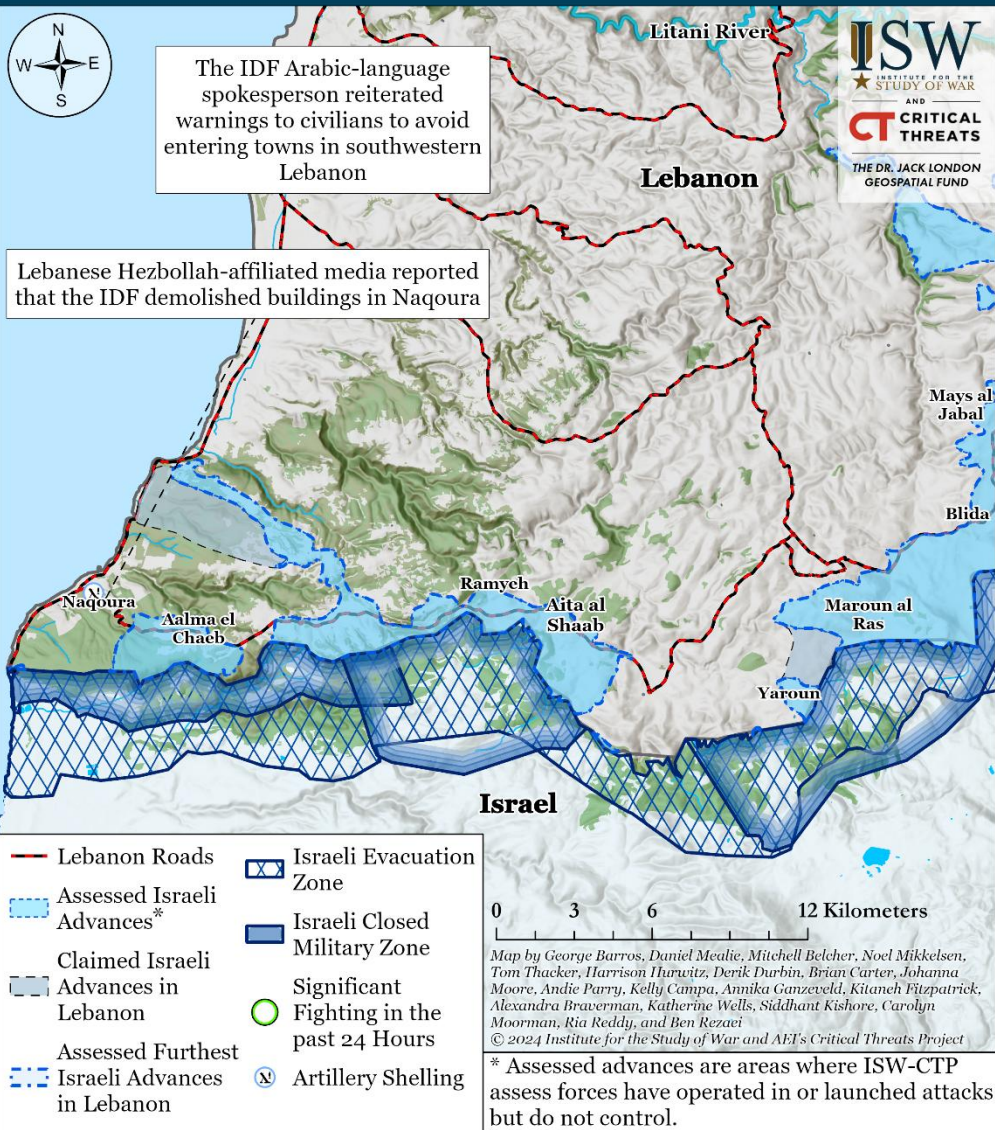
# Reported Israeli Operations in the Eastern Sector As of December 20, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Lebanese media, including Lebanese Hezbollah-affiliated sources, reported on December 20 that the IDF demolished houses and fired artillery in Naqoura, southwestern Lebanon.[43] The IDF Arabic-language spokesperson republished warnings to Lebanese citizens to avoid entering towns in southwestern Lebanon, including Naqoura.[44]

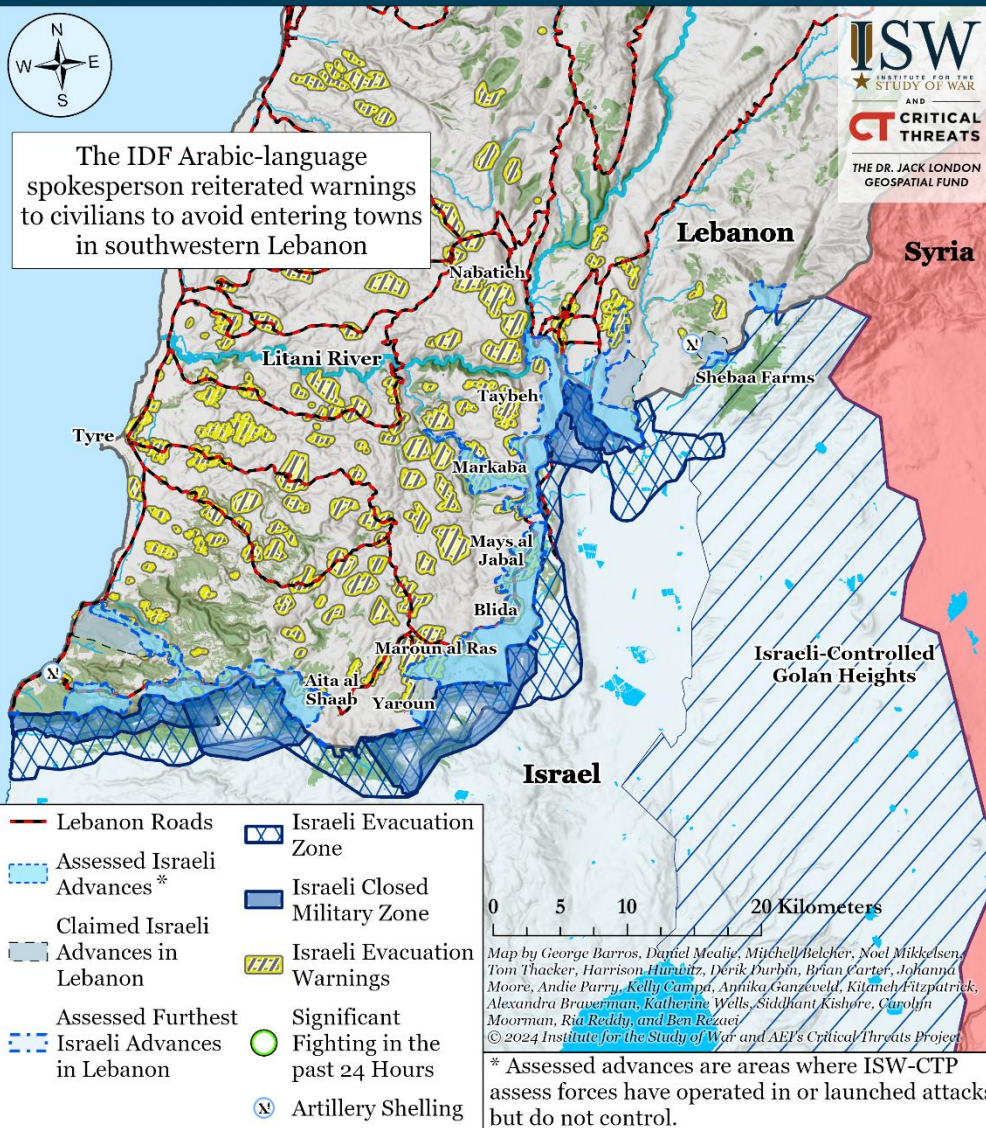


# Reported Israeli Operations in the Western Sector As of December 20, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



# Reported Israeli Operations in Lebanon

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



## Iran and the Axis of Resistance

Houthi military spokesperson Brigadier General Yahya Sarea claimed on December 20 that the Houthis and the Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—conducted two drone attacks targeting Israel. The Houthis and Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed to conduct a drone attack targeting unspecified “vital targets” in southern Israel.[45] The two claimed a separate drone attack targeting an unspecified military target in the Tel Aviv-Jaffa area.[46] The IDF has not acknowledged the incidents at the time of this writing.



*The Iran Update provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities abroad that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests. It also covers events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making of the Iranian regime. The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) provides these updates regularly based on regional events.*

*CTP-ISW defines the “Axis of Resistance” as the unconventional alliance that Iran has cultivated in the Middle East since the Islamic Republic came to power in 1979. This transnational coalition is comprised of state, semi-state, and non-state actors that cooperate to secure their collective interests. Tehran considers itself to be both part of the alliance and its leader. Iran furnishes these groups with varying levels of financial, military, and political support in exchange for some degree of influence or control over their actions. Some are traditional proxies that are highly responsive to Iranian direction, while others are partners over which Iran exerts more limited influence. Members of the Axis of Resistance are united by their grand strategic objectives, which include eroding and eventually expelling American influence from the Middle East, destroying the Israeli state, or both. Pursuing these objectives and supporting the Axis of Resistance to those ends have become cornerstones of Iranian regional strategy.*

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