

## Iran Update, November 21, 2023

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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](#).*

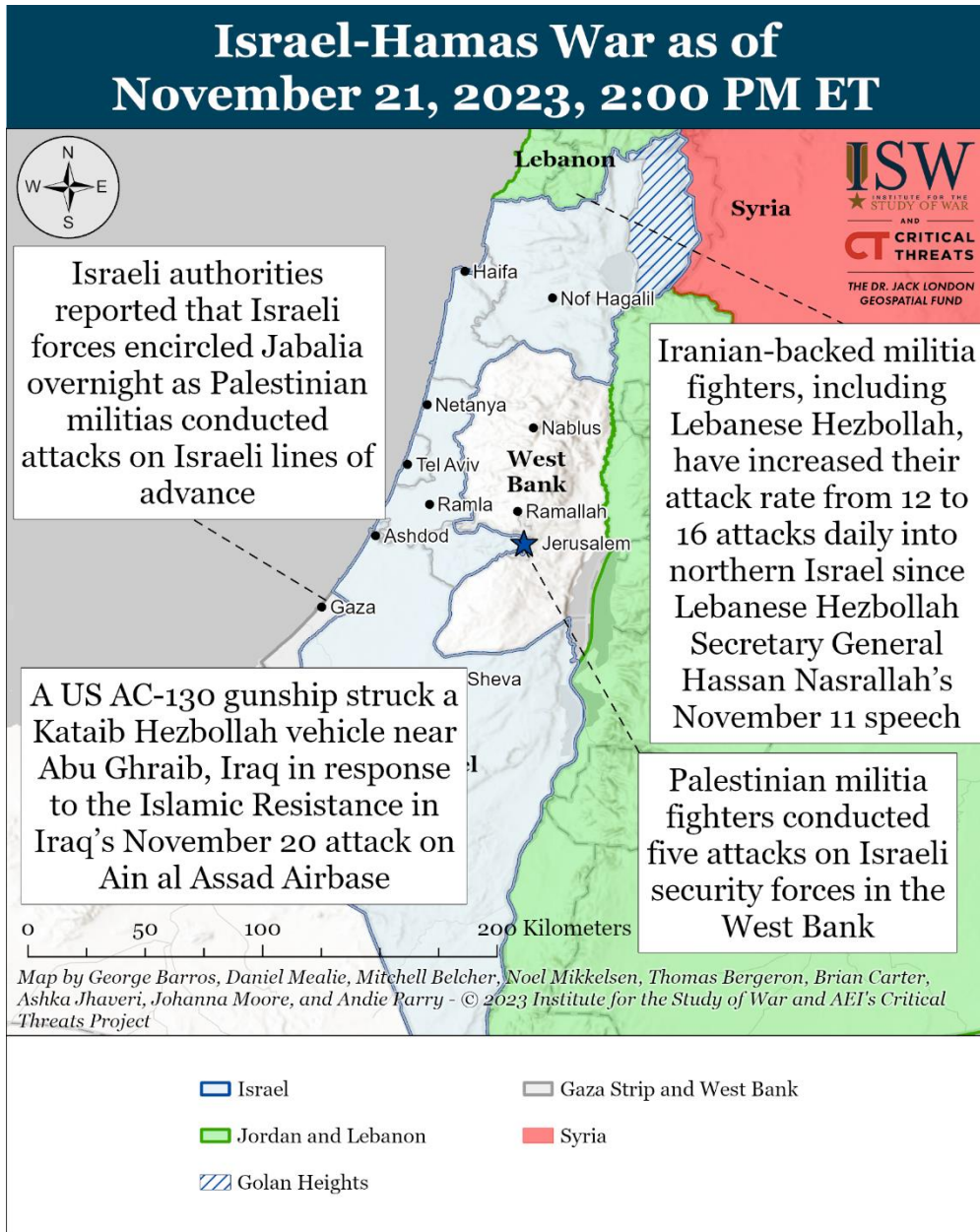
*Note: CTP and ISW have refocused the update to cover the Israel-Hamas war. The new sections address developments in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as noteworthy activity from Iran's Axis of Resistance. We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are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

1. Israel said its forces encircled Jabalia as Palestinian militias conducted attacks on the Israeli lines of advance. Israeli forces continued to expand offensive operations into Zaytoun neighborhood south of Gaza city. Israeli forces continued clearing operations in al Shati refugee camp.
2. Israel and Hamas negotiated the terms of a draft agreement for limited pauses in fighting and to exchange 50 Israeli prisoners for approximately 150 Palestinian prisoners.
3. Palestinian militias conducted five indirect fire attacks from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory.
4. Palestinian militia fighters conducted five attacks on Israeli forces in the West Bank. CTP-ISW recorded four demonstrations in the West Bank.
5. Iranian-backed militia fighters, including Lebanese Hezbollah, have increased their attack rate from 12 to 16 attacks daily into northern Israel since Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's November 11 speech.
6. A US military AC-130 gunship struck a Kataib Hezbollah vehicle near Abu Ghraib, Iraq, in response to the Islamic Resistance in Iraq's November 20 attack on Ain al Assad Airbase. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—conducted four attacks targeting US positions in Iraq and Syria.
7. US officials warned that Iran may be preparing to supply advanced short-range ballistic missiles to Russia. Iranian First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber discussed the Israel-

Hamas war with Russian presidential aide Igor Levitin in Tehran.



## 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

**Israel said its forces encircled Jabalia on the night of November 20-21 as Palestinian militias conducted attacks on the Israeli lines of advance.** The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) reported on November 21 that the Israeli Air Force and artillery forces bombarded the Jabalia area north of Gaza city to “prepare” the battlefield.[1] Israeli forces continued to engage Palestinian fighters on the northern outskirts of Jabalia near the Indonesian Hospital. Palestinian militias also resisted the IDF advance southwest of Jabalia near al Saftawi roundabout.[2] The IDF said Hamas’ northern brigade maintains a command-and-control center and critical strongholds in Jabalia.[3] The IDF released a map on November 13 showing elements of four Hamas battalions in Jabalia.[4] The Israeli Army Radio reported that only two of the four Hamas battalions operating in Jabalia are “still functioning,” implying that the other two are combat ineffective.[5] The IDF told residents to evacuate from Jabalia, al Daraj, al Tuffah, and Shujaia neighborhoods on November 21.[6]

The al Quds Brigades—the militant wing of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)—said its forces targeted Israeli forces against Israeli lines of advance in Beit Hanoun, Beit Lahiya, and Jabalia.[7] The al Quds Brigade also targeted three military vehicles in the Sheikh Radwan and al Nasr neighborhoods southwest of Jabalia.[8] The militia fighters used tandem charge anti-tank rockets and rocket propelled grenades (RPG) to attack Israeli tanks and personnel carriers. An IDF tank division commander said on November 21 that more than 70 percent of damaged IDF vehicles have returned to the battlefield.[9]

**Israeli forces continued to expand offensive operations into Zaytoun neighborhood south of Gaza city.** Israeli forces have taken over several key targets of Hamas’ Zaytoun battalion, including a command center and central headquarters.[10] The al Quds Brigades and the al Qassem Brigades—the militant wing of Hamas—conducted a combined operation that they claimed destroyed an Israeli armored personnel carrier west of Zaytoun on November 20.[11]

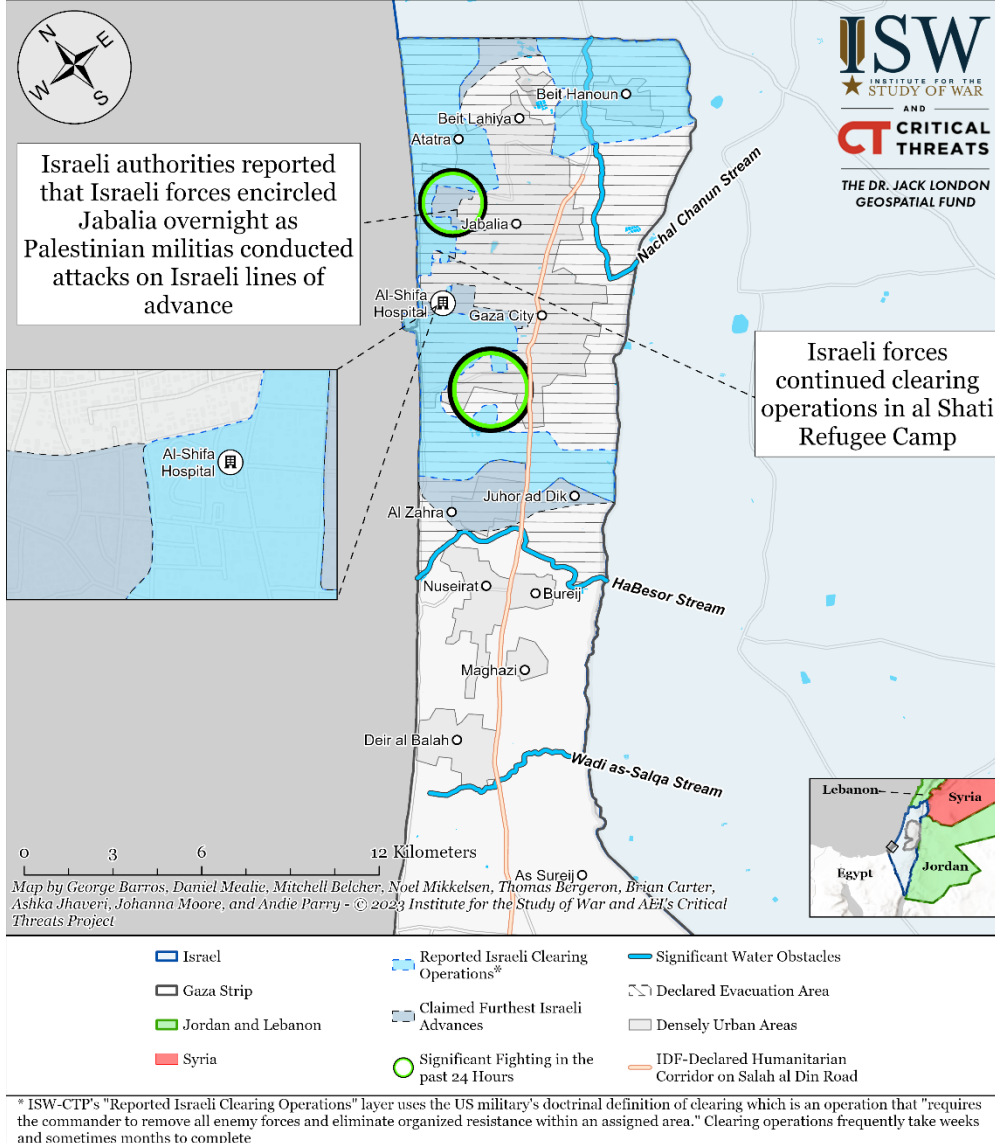
**Israeli forces continued clearing operations in al Shati refugee camp.** Israeli special operations forces located and destroyed over 70 militant targets in al Shati refugee camp in cooperation with Israeli air, naval, and ground forces.[12] The forces destroyed anti-tank launchers and anti-tank squads and discovered underground tunnel shafts.[13]

**Palestinian militia fighters continued attacks targeting Israeli forces behind the Israeli forward line of advance, which is consistent with the nature of clearing operations.** PIJ- and Hamas-affiliated media reported violent clashes in the Rimal neighborhood on November 21.[14] The IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi told Israeli forces operating in Beti Hanoun that IDF operations there caused very serious damage to Hamas’ Beit Hanoun battalion.[15]

The al Qassem Brigades published footage on November 21 of forces using small arms, RPGs, and IEDs to target Israeli forces operating in the Juhor ad Dik area. Israeli forces crossed into the central Gaza Strip from near Juhor ad Dik at the beginning of the ground operation.

**Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak said Israel has known for many years that Hamas uses al Shifa Hospital as a junction for several tunnel systems.**[16] Barak told CNN on November 20 that Israel helped create bunkers underneath hospitals in the Gaza Strip “decades ago” to increase the capacity of the hospitals and that Hamas has since used these bunkers as a command post.[17] Israel said it breached a blast door in a tunnel system underneath al Shifa Hospital on November 21, which is consistent with Israel’s repeated assertions that Hamas uses humanitarian infrastructure for military activities.[18]

# Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip as of November 21, 2023, 2:00 PM ET



**Israel and Hamas negotiated the terms of a draft agreement for limited pauses in fighting and to exchange 50 Israeli prisoners for approximately 150 Palestinian prisoners.[19]** The draft agreement stipulates a pause in fighting for six hours per day for four days to allow for Hamas to transfer prisoners and for humanitarian aid to enter the Gaza Strip, including fuel.[20] Israeli officials have previously accused Hamas of utilizing fuel meant for humanitarian purposes to support militant activity, including operating its underground tunnel networks.[21] Israel will also suspend unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) surveillance over the Gaza Strip during the pauses in fighting following a demand from Yahya Sinwar, who is the leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip.[22] An unidentified Israeli official stated that Israel will have intelligence capabilities to

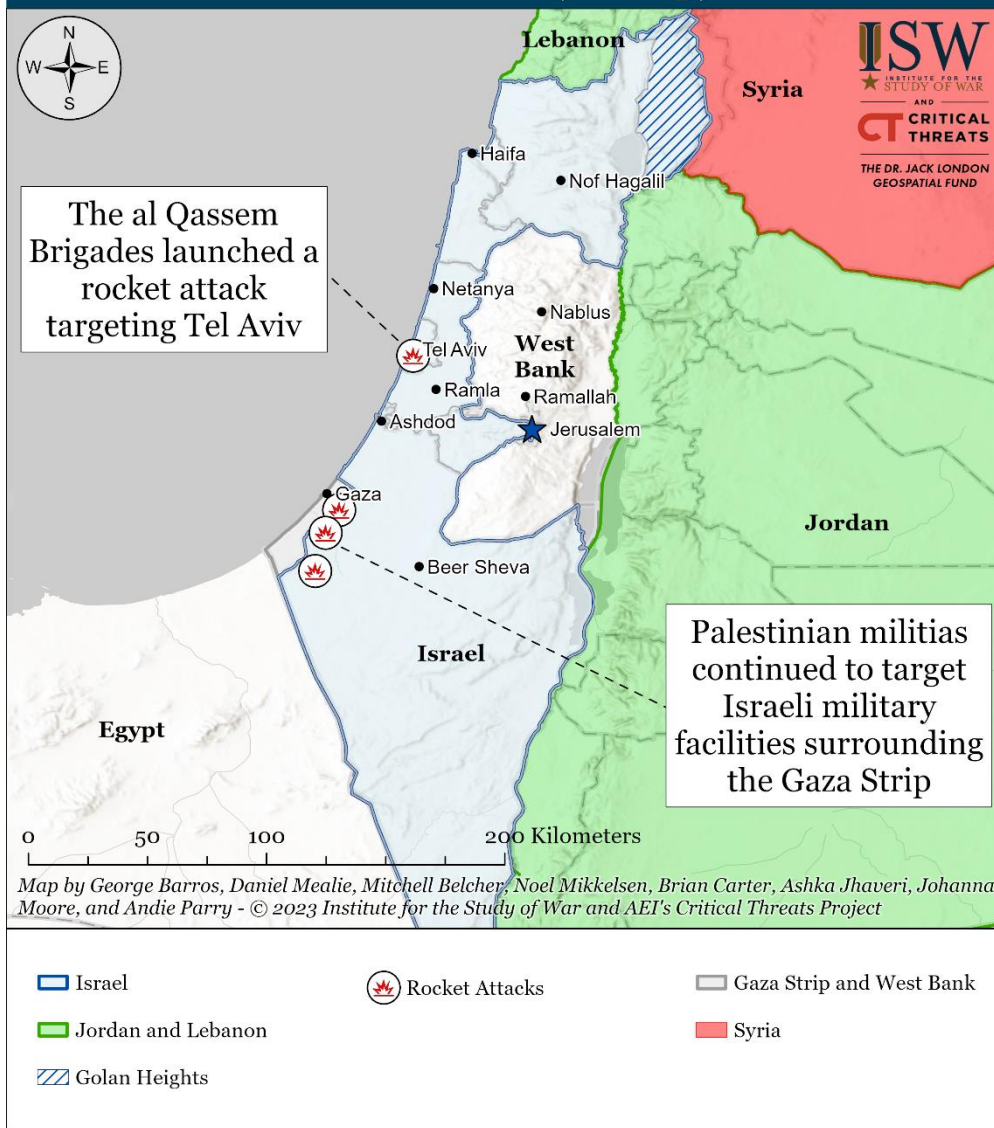
monitor developments in the Gaza Strip during the pauses in fighting even without the UAV surveillance flights.[23] Hamas may release additional hostages in a second phase of negotiations, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. [24]

Hamas' military and political leadership in the Gaza Strip—including Hamas hardliners Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Deif—will have the deciding vote on whether Hamas will accept the draft agreement, given that they keep control over Hamas' hostages. Sinwar leads Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Deif is Hamas' military commander.[25] Sinwar is also close to Hamas' military wing, having served as a liaison between the military and political wings after being released from prison in 2011.[26] Israeli officials have identified both men as key figures in the planning and execution of the October 7 attacks, and Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip retains control over some of the hostages.[27] The *Wall Street Journal* reported that, as of afternoon local time on November 21, Sinwar had not yet approved the agreement.[28] However, Israeli media reported on the evening of November 21 that Sinwar had insisted upon suspending UAV surveillance over the Gaza Strip during the pauses in fighting.[29]

**Senior Hamas official Moussa Abu Marzouk claimed that Hamas cannot account for the location and condition of Israeli hostages in the Gaza Strip in public comments on the potential prisoner swap agreement.**[30] Marzouk claimed that Israeli airstrikes in the Gaza Strip killed “maybe around 60” Israeli hostages. Marzouk also said that other hostages may be held by other Palestinian militias or that the hostages may be in unspecified Palestinian homes.[31] Al Qassem Brigades military spokesperson Abu Ubaida claimed on November 5 that 60 Israeli hostages had died in Israeli airstrikes, which CTP-ISW reported was consistent with a Hamas information campaign that seeks to shape the information environment to blame Israel for the possible deaths of hostages.[32] Marzouk's statements concerning Israeli hostages may also be a possible negotiation tactic to gain additional concessions from Israel.

**Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's media office reported that Netanyahu will convene three separate cabinet meetings on November 21 to discuss and approve the terms of the draft prisoner exchange agreement.**[33] Netanyahu will first convene a War Council meeting, which will be followed by a Security Cabinet meeting and finally a full cabinet meeting.[34] Israeli and Hamas officials have not approved the prisoner exchange draft agreement at the time of publication.

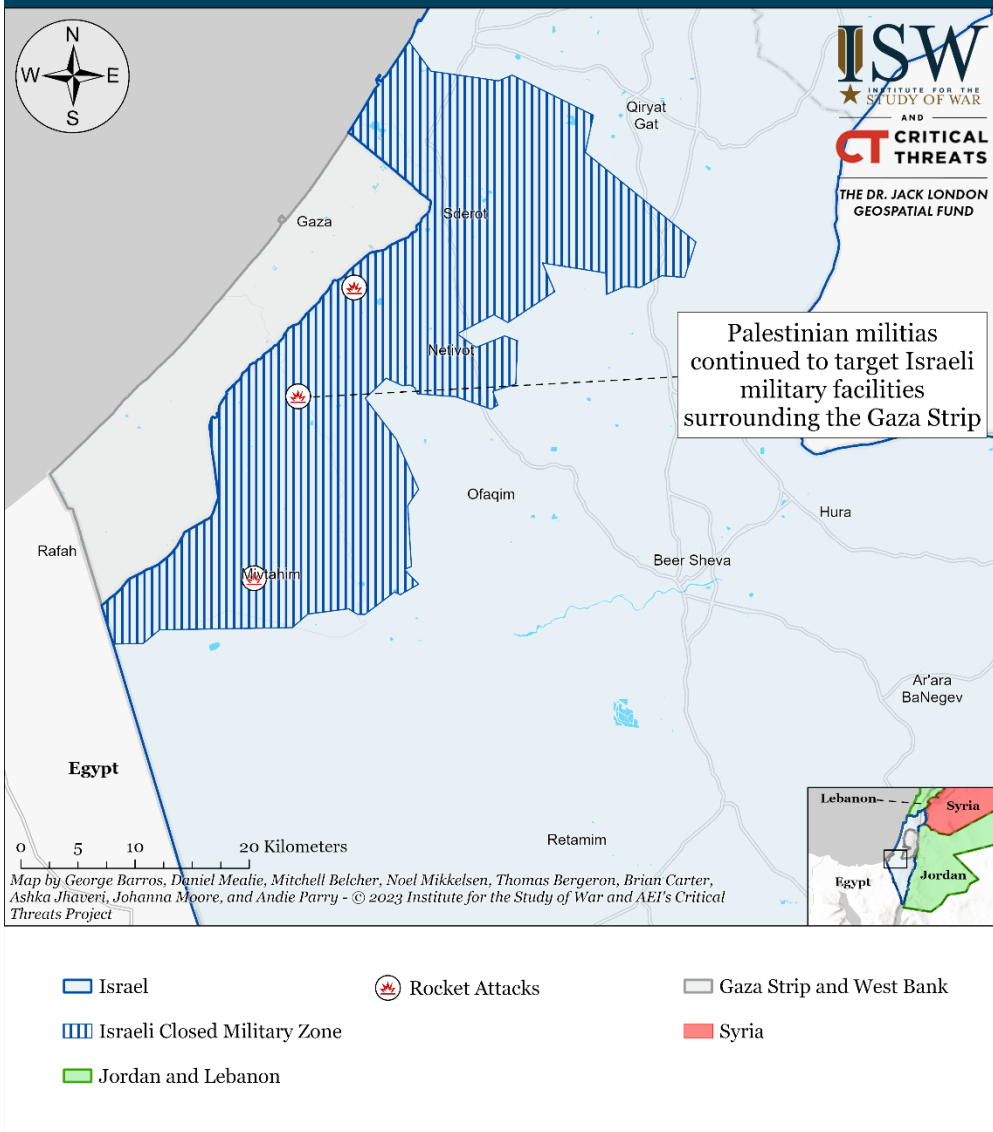
## Indirect Fire Attacks into Israel from Gaza as of November 21, 2023, 2:00 PM ET



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

**Palestinian militias conducted five indirect fire attacks from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory on November 21.** This rate of attacks is consistent with the weekly average of five attacks per day.[35] The al Quds Brigades claimed three attacks on Israeli military facilities surrounding the Gaza Strip.[36] The al Qassem Brigades claimed two attacks targeting an Israeli military facility and Tel Aviv.[37] Israeli forces are targeting rocket launchers during clearing operations in the Gaza Strip, which Palestinian militias are using to target areas in southern Israel and areas further north, including Tel Aviv.[38]

# Attacks into Israel from Gaza as of November 21, 2023, 2:00 PM ET



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

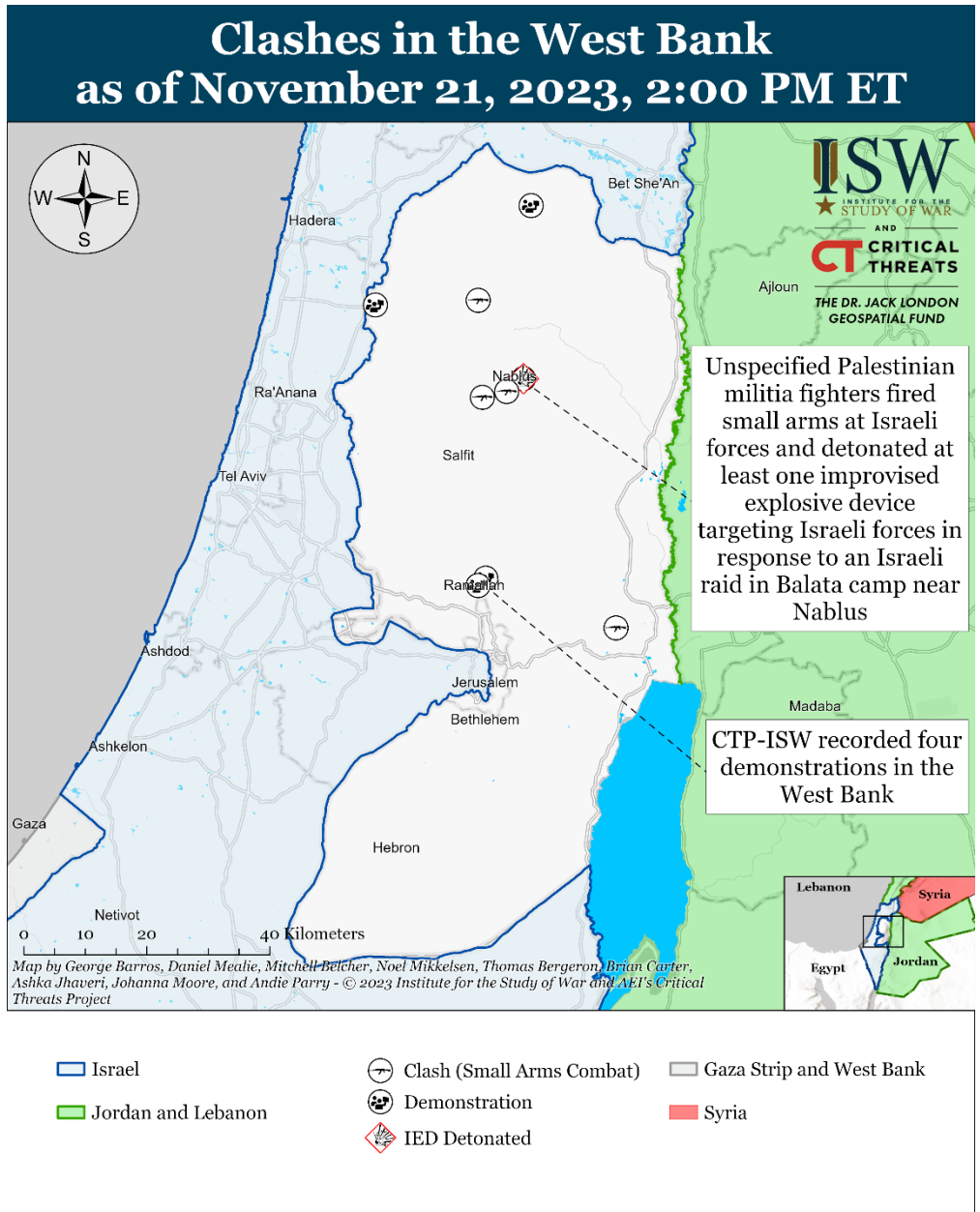
## West Bank

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

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

**Palestinian militia fighters conducted five attacks on Israeli forces in the West Bank on November 21.[39]** Unspecified Palestinian militia fighters fired small arms at Israeli forces and detonated at least one improvised explosive device (IED) targeting them on November 21 in response to an Israeli raid in the Balata refugee camp near Nablus.[40]

CTP-ISW recorded four demonstrations in the West Bank on November 21. Three demonstrations—around Jenin, Tulkarm, and Ramallah—occurred in support of imprisoned Palestinians.[41] Civilians at the fourth demonstration, which also occurred in Ramallah, protested in support of the Gaza Strip.[42]



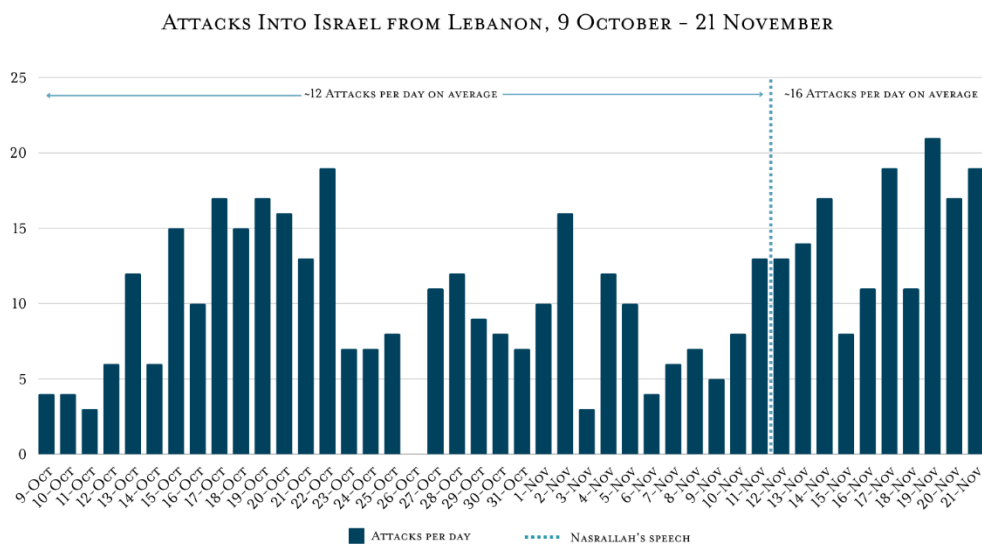
*This map is not an exhaustive depiction of clashes and demonstrations in the West Bank.*

**Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights**  
**Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:**

- Draw IDF assets and resources toward northern Israel and fix them there



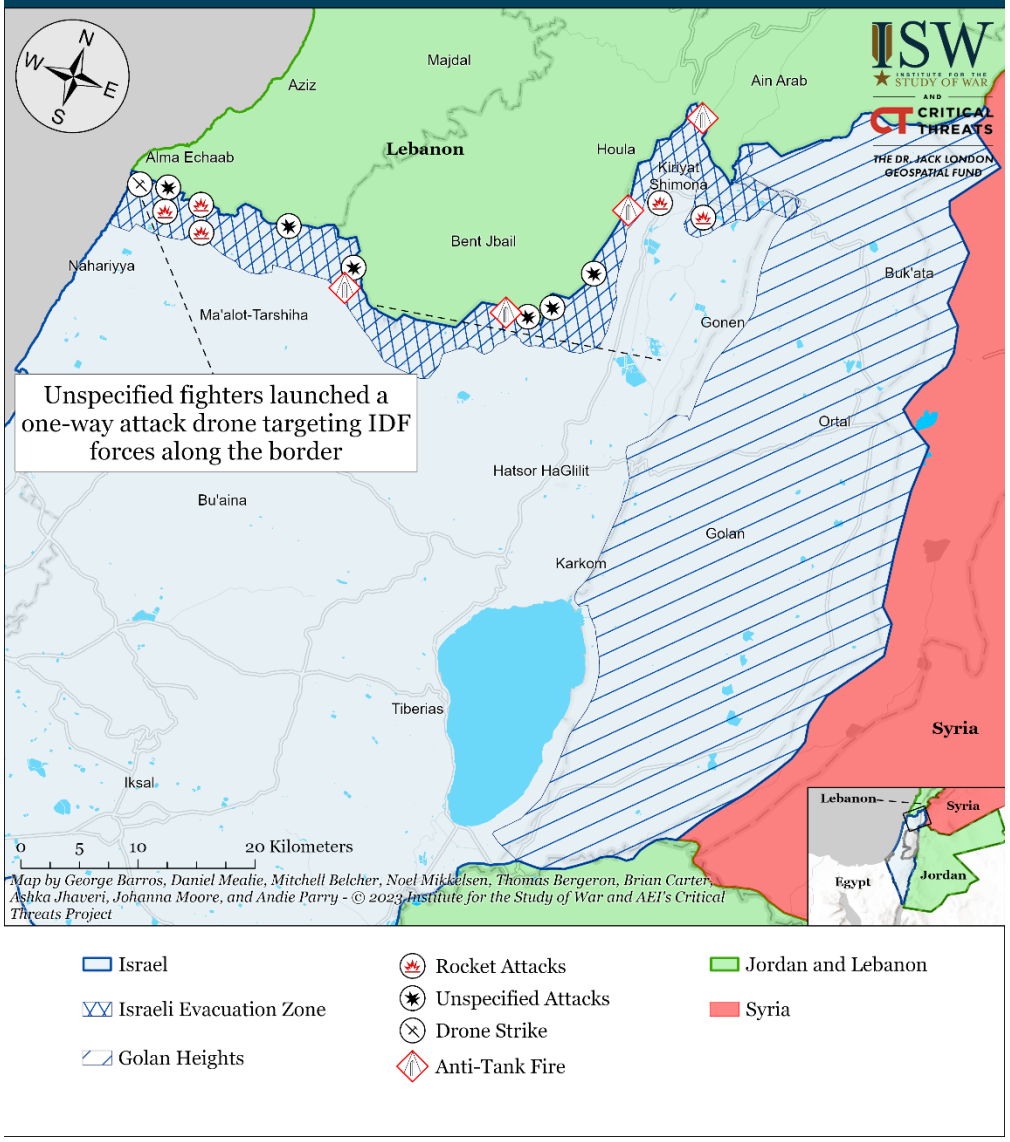
- Set conditions for successive campaigns into northern Israel



**Iranian-backed militia fighters, including Lebanese Hezbollah (LH), have increased their attack rate from 12 to 16 attacks daily into northern Israel since LH Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah’s November 11 speech.** CTP-ISW recorded 17 attacks on November 21 into Israeli territory from Lebanon. LH specifically claimed 12 of those attacks on Israeli border positions.[43] Unspecified fighters separately launched three rocket salvos, one ATGM, and a one-way attack drone into northern Israel.[44] CTP-ISW recorded a daily average of 12 attacks from October 10 to November 10 and an average of 16 attacks daily from November 11 to 21.[45] The first time period saw 12 days of an above average rate of attacks and the second time period saw four days above the daily average of 17 attacks. This increase is consistent with Nasrallah saying on November 11 that LH had increased the rate of its cross-border operations and begun using more lethal weapons systems, such as the “Burkan” rocket, which carries a 300-500kg warhead.[46] LH fired Burkan rockets at IDF bases on November 20 and November 21.[47]

IDF airstrikes targeted LH ATGM units and command and control centers in southern Lebanon in response to the LH cross-border attacks.[48] The IDF separately carried out two airstrikes on November 21 that killed the al Qassam Brigades deputy commander in Lebanon, Khalil Kharaz, and two al Mayadeen journalists. Al Mayadeen is a media outlet affiliated with LH.[49] LH condemned the killing of the journalists and claimed that three of its attacks on November 21 were in revenge for their deaths.[50]

# Attacks into Northern Israel from Lebanon as of November 21, 2023, 2:00 PM ET



Note: CTP-ISW refined its data layer in northern Israel to account for unspecified attack types. Lebanese Hezbollah regularly claims attacks with “appropriate weapons.” This data is insufficient to determine the method of attack. Attack claims citing “appropriate weapons” will be tracked as “unspecified” until CTP-ISW can verify the type of attack.

## 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

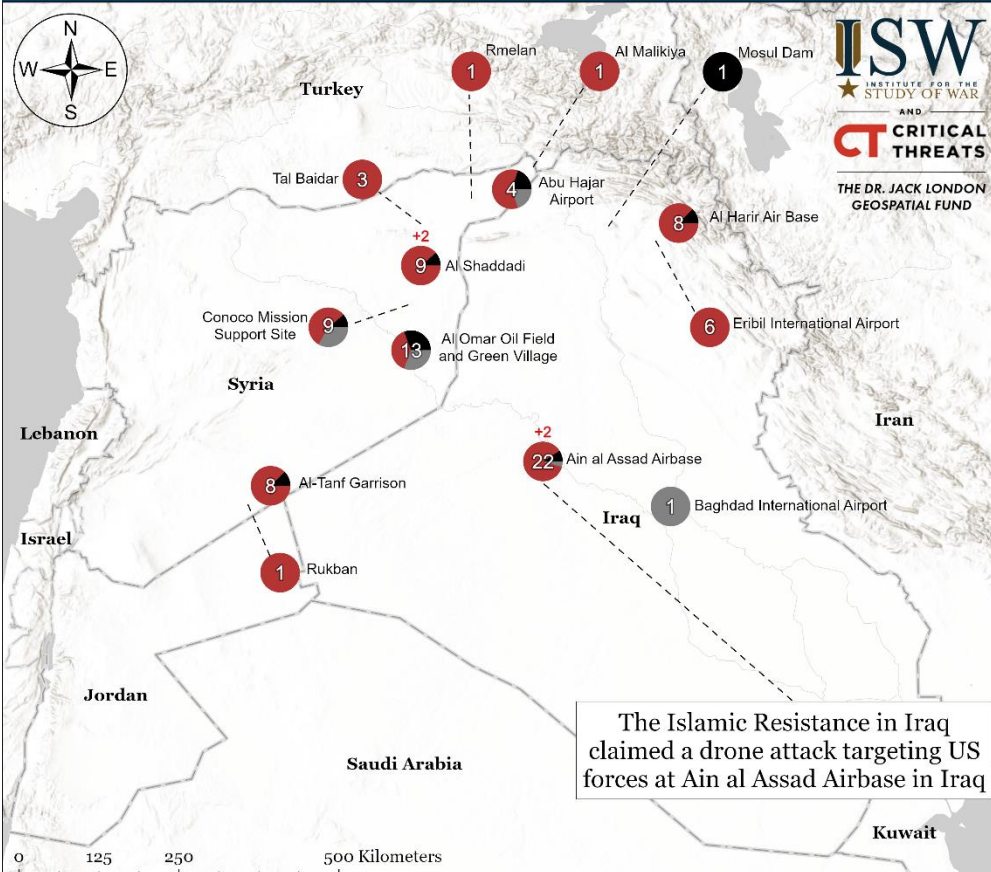
**A US military AC-130 gunship struck a Kataib Hezbollah (KH) vehicle near Abu Ghraib, Iraq, on November 21 in response to the Islamic Resistance in Iraq’s November 20 attack on Ain al Assad Airbase.**[51] Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh confirmed on November 21 that the Islamic Resistance in Iraq attacked Ain al Assad Airbase using a close-range ballistic missile on November 20.[52] The attack resulted in “several non-serious injuries and some minor damage to infrastructure.” The US self-defense strike on November 21 marked the first US retaliatory airstrike in Iraq since the start of the Israel-Hamas war on October 7. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq additionally released a statement on November 21 announcing the death of KH fighter Fadel al Maksousi in the airstrike.[53] The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed that Maksousi died “in the battle of truth against falsehood embodied by the American occupation forces in Iraq.” Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba confirmed that Maksousi was a member of KH in an announcement on November 21.[54]

KH is a member of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, which has attacked US forces in Iraq and Syria almost daily since October 18.[55] KH has repeatedly threatened attacks on US forces in the Middle East since October 7. It most recently warned on November 16, for example, that the United States will receive the “harshes blows and slaps wherever Kataib Hezbollah’s hands reach.”[56] The United States Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated six individuals belonging to KH as Specially Designated Nationals on November 17.[57] KH is already a US-designated foreign terrorist organization. OFAC reported that KH has been involved in recent attacks against the United States and its partners in Iraq and Syria since October 7.

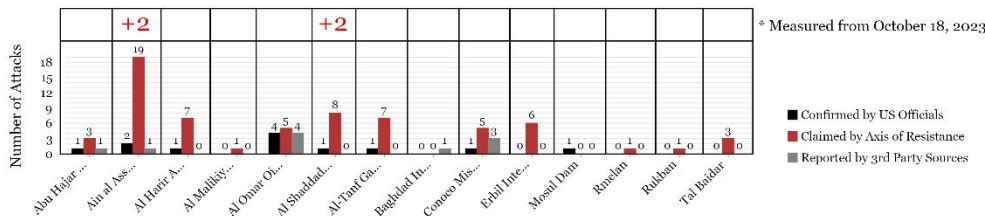
**The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—conducted four attacks targeting US positions in Iraq and Syria on November 21.** This group has claimed 68 attacks on US forces stationed in Iraq and Syria since October 18.

- The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed a drone attack targeting US forces at Ain al Assad Airbase in Iraq.[58]
- The al Dhaferin Group of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed a mortar attack targeting US forces at Ain al Assad Airbase in Iraq in response to the United States’ killing of KH fighter Fadel al Maksousi on November 21.[59] The al Dhaferin group claimed to have fired two 120 mm and one 81 mm mortar rounds at the US forces stationed at the base. The al Dhaferin group vowed “more operations and gradual escalation” against the United States until the last US soldier left Iraq.[60] The al Dhaferin group last attacked US forces in Iraq on November 8.[61]
- The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed two rocket attacks targeting a US position in al Shadaddi, Hasakah Province, Syria on November 21.[62]

# Attacks against US Bases in the Middle East as of November 21, 2023, 2:00 PM ET



Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Brian Carter, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Andie Parry - © 2023 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project



Note: The numbers placed inside the pie charts denote the total number of attacks. Locations that include an addition to its total number of attacks have red numbers above the bar graph and pie chart to represent new attacks against that location within the past 24 hours.

**US officials warned on November 21 that Iran may be preparing to supply advanced short-range ballistic missiles to Russia.[63]** An unnamed US National Security Council spokesperson said that American officials became concerned about potential Iranian missile sales to Russia after Iran showcased the *Ababil* and *Fateh-110* missiles for Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu during his visit to Tehran in September 2023. The IRGC Aerospace Force commander gave Shoigu a tour of Iran’s drone, missile, and air defense arsenal at the IRGC Aerospace Force headquarters in Tehran on September 20.[64] CTP-ISW previously assessed that Iran and Russia may conclude a drone and missile sale agreement following the expiration of UN missile restrictions on October 18.[65] The expiration of UNSCR 2231’s missile restrictions in October has empowered Iran

to export missiles and missile-related technology without international oversight, providing an opportunity for Iran to sell missiles to Moscow. American, British, and Ukrainian officials have previously warned that Iran would transfer ballistic missiles to Russia due to the latter’s depleted stockpiles.[66]

The table below shows specifications for some of the short-range ballistic missile systems Iranian officials have discussed with or showcased to Russian officials since fall 2022:[67]

Name	Type	Maximum Range	Payload	Accuracy
<i>Ababil</i>	CRBM	86 km	45 kg	Optical seeker guidance system; CEP unknown <sup>68</sup>
<i>Zolfaghar*</i>	SRBM	700 km	350-500 kg	GNSS guidance system; 10-100 m CEP <sup>69</sup>
<i>Raad-500 (aka Zuhair or Zohair)*</i>	SRBM	500 km	350 kg	GNSS and INS guidance; 30-100 m CEP <sup>70</sup>
<i>Fateh-110*</i>	SRBM	200-350 km	450-650 kg	GPS and INS guidance; 100 m CEP <sup>71</sup>

\*Russia would violate its Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) obligations were it to acquire these missile systems. Iran would violate UNSCR 2231 were it to export these systems prior to the October 18 expiration. Iran is not an MTCR member-state even though UNSCR 2231 references the MTCR’s banned Category I “complete delivery systems,” systems with a 300 or more-kilometer range and a 500 or more-kilogram payload.[72]

Key: CEP: Circular error probable; SRBM: Short-range ballistic missile; CRBM: Close-range ballistic missile; MaRV: Maneuverable re-entry vehicle; INS: Inertial Navigation System; GNSS: Global Navigation Satellite System; GPS: Global Positioning System

**Iranian First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber discussed the Israel-Hamas war with Russian presidential aide Igor Levitin in Tehran on November 21.[73]** The two officials called for an immediate end to Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip. Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian previously discussed a ceasefire in the war during a phone call with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov on November 19.[74] Iranian and Russian officials have engaged in political coordination vis-a-vis the Israel-Hamas war since at least October 26, as CTP-ISW previously reported.[75]

**The IRGC Ground Forces conducted its second “routine” military exercise of 2023 in Kerman Province on November 21.[76]** The IRGC Ground Forces previously conducted a military exercise on July 19.[77] Iranian Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri presided over the more recent exercise alongside other senior Iranian military officials.

Bagheri condemned Israeli actions in the Gaza Strip and emphasized the need for maintaining military readiness.[78] The IRGC's 41<sup>st</sup> Sarallah Division, 2<sup>nd</sup> Saheb ol Zaman Independent Infantry Brigade, and 38<sup>th</sup> Zolfaghar Independent Armored Brigade participated in the exercise. All of these units are headquartered in Kerman Province. The 38<sup>th</sup> Brigade previously deployed to Syria at the height of the Syrian civil war and incurred casualties fighting to preserve the Bashar al Assad regime.[79]

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[1] <https://twitter.com/idfonline/status/1726858164962988521>

[2] [https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/gaza-fighting-intensifies-as-deal-for-hostagestakes-shape-3ad7679d?mod=middle-east\\_news\\_article\\_pos1](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/gaza-fighting-intensifies-as-deal-for-hostagestakes-shape-3ad7679d?mod=middle-east_news_article_pos1); <https://twitter.com/ytirawi/status/1726936298429304834>;  
<https://t.me/QudsN/332648>

[3] <https://twitter.com/AvichayAdraee/status/1725890537520091244>

[4] <https://idf dot il/150310>

[5] [https://twitter.com/Doron\\_Kadosh/status/1725899894806782336](https://twitter.com/Doron_Kadosh/status/1725899894806782336)

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[10] <https://www.idf dot il/153880>

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