

# Iran Update, December 18, 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 appears to be nearing the final stages of its clearing operation in the northern Gaza Strip.
2. The IDF reported on December 18 that Israeli forces destroyed Hamas' Beit Hanoun Battalion.
3. The al Qassem Brigades still has two units that are not committed to combat in the Rafah and the Central governorates that it could draw on to defend Khan Younis.
4. Palestinian militias conducted three indirect fire attacks into Israel from the Gaza Strip.
5. Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters nine times across the West Bank.
6. Iranian-backed fighters, including Lebanese Hezbollah, conducted nine attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel.
7. The Houthis claimed to have conducted two drone attacks targeting the Norwegian-owned, Cayman Islands-flagged Swan Atlantic tanker and Swiss-owned, Panama-flagged MSC Clara container ship in the Red Sea.
8. Israel conducted airstrikes targeting the IRGC headquarters at Sayyida Zainab, Damascus.

# Israel-Hamas War as of December 18, 2023, 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.

**Israel appears to be nearing the final stages of its clearing operation in the northern Gaza Strip.** Israeli ground forces advanced into the northern Gaza Strip on October 27.[1] Israeli clearing operations have relied on ground, air, and naval forces to destroy Hamas' military infrastructure, namely its tunnel system and command structure.[2] Palestinian militia fighters have clashed with Israeli forces in virtually all neighborhoods of the northern Gaza Strip since October

27.[3] The Israeli Army Radio reported that the IDF has killed between 6,000 and 7,000 Palestinian militia fighters since the war began. Operations in the northern Gaza Strip likely resulted in most of the deaths.[4] CTP-ISW defines “degrade” as a temporary effect whereby a unit’s losses seriously impede its ability to continue executing assigned missions while the unit remains able to operate.[5]

Israeli forces are engaged in intense fighting against Hamas’ Shujaiya Battalion in the Shujaiya neighborhood of Gaza city.[6] A commander in the IDF noted that Shujaiya “was and still is an established stronghold” of Hamas. Palestinian militia fighters have attacked Israeli forces throughout clearing operations in Shujaiya using a variety of munitions, such as explosively formed penetrators and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) to resist Israeli advances.[7] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) reported on December 18 that its forces had captured and destroyed a central square in Shujaiya.[8] CTP-ISW has reported that the Shujaiya Battalion is also facing active and intense IDF pressure as Israel takes out its infrastructure and command structure.[9]

Commercially available satellite imagery captured on December 18 shows flattened terrain throughout Shujaiya neighborhood and Jabalia city, which indicates that Israeli tanks or bulldozers have been actively operating there since early December. Israel identified Jabalia and Shujaiya as targets for Israeli clearing operations.[10] Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said on December 11 that Hamas’ Jabalia and Shujaiya Battalions are “on the verge of being dismantled.”[11]

**The IDF reported on December 18 that Israeli forces destroyed Hamas’ Beit Hanoun Battalion.**[12] Israeli forces took control of the battalions’ command and control centers including its underground headquarters and other militant infrastructure.[13] The IDF 252<sup>nd</sup> Reserve Division completed its operations in the area and handed over responsibility to the Gaza Division.[14] An Israeli war correspondent noted that the announcement indicates the military has firm control over the sector.[15] Israeli ground forces began operating in Beit Hanoun on October 27 and have faced almost daily Palestinian militia attacks on and behind the forward line of advance, with various munitions, including explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) and rocket-propelled grenades (RPG).[16] The IDF Chief of Staff told forces in the Gaza Strip on November 21 that it had caused very serious damage to the Beit Hanoun Battalion.[17]

**Palestinian militias in the northern Gaza Strip will likely continue to target Israeli forces on and behind the Israeli forward line of advance.** The al Qassem Brigades—the militant wing of Hamas—claimed two complex attacks on Israeli forces in Beit Lahiya.[18] Militia fighters detonated IEDs and fired a thermobaric rocket at Israeli forces in one of the attacks.[19] The militia posted a video of an attack and claimed to fire a Kornet anti-tank guided missile at an Israeli jeep operating behind the Israeli line of advance.[20] The al Quds Brigades—the militant wing of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)—claimed sniper attacks against Israeli forces in Shujaiya and mortar Israeli forces in Juhor ad Dik on December 18.[21] Fighting behind the Israeli forward line of advance is consistent with the doctrinal definition of “clear,” which is a tactical task that “requires the commander to remove all enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance within an assigned area.”

**Israeli forces detained Hamas and PIJ fighters in Rimal neighborhood of Gaza City last week.** The IDF reported on December 18 that its forces detained several fighters belonging to Hamas and PIJ after intense clashes in Rimal last Friday.[22] Israel said it detained a member of the al Qassem Brigades’ naval commandos, the Nukhba forces, as well as a fighter who participated in the October 7 attacks.[23]

**Palestinian fighters continued their attempts to resist Israeli forces as the IDF continued its advance in Khan Younis on December 18.** The al Quds Brigades mortared Israeli soldiers in central and eastern Khan Younis and took control of an IDF quadcopter surveillance drone in eastern Khan Younis.[24] The al Qassem Brigades fired mortars, RPGs, and anti-personnel shells at Israeli forces and tanks in eastern and northern Khan Younis.[25] The IDF said its Special Forces Unit 217 has been fighting in the heart of Khan Younis for two weeks, raided a tactical tunnel system, and destroyed a drone manufacturing site.[26] Israeli aircraft struck Hamas fighters and infrastructure with direction from ground forces in Khan Younis on December 17 and 18.[27] These Israeli operations degrade Hamas' ability to resist IDF advances in the southern Gaza Strip.

**The al Qassem Brigades still has two units that are not committed to combat in the Rafah and the Central governorates that it could draw on to defend Khan Younis.** The al Qassem Brigades maintain five geographic brigades in the Gaza Strip.[28] Israeli forces have not yet expanded clearing operations to the areas of responsibility of the Central Brigade in the Central governorate or the Rafah Brigade in Rafah governorate. An Israeli defense correspondent reported on December 18 that Hamas is transferring forces from the rest of the Gaza Strip to support its Khan Younis Brigade.[29] The same correspondent noted that the IDF assesses that it will take several months to defeat the Khan Younis Brigade.[30]

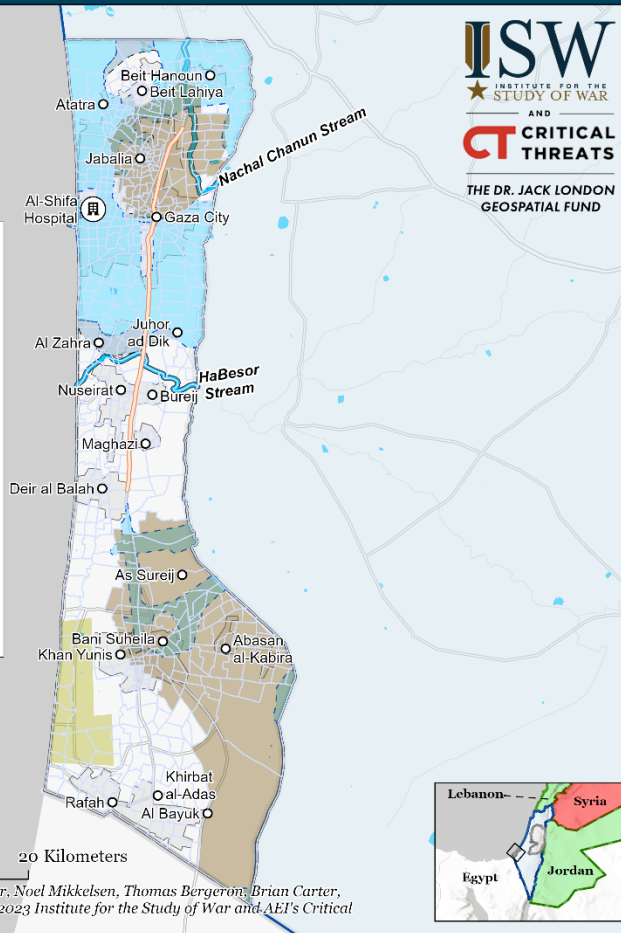
**The Israeli defense minister expressed a vision for the next stage of operations in the Gaza Strip during a press conference with US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin on December 18.** Israeli Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant said that some regions of the Gaza Strip are close to being able to transition to a "day after" the war and Israel can start working on bringing back the local population.[31] Gallant stated that this transition will be possible even while other parts of the Gaza Strip remain in active conflict.[32] Gallant also noted that Israel will not control Gaza in any civilian way.[33] Austin said that he spoke with Gallant about the military campaign's objectives, phasing, and protecting civilians.[34]

**Hamas has continued to issue hostage propaganda since Israeli forces mistakenly killed three Israeli hostages in Shujaiya on December 15 and as hostage exchange negotiations resume.** The al Qassem Brigades posted a video of three elderly male hostages calling on Israel to agree to a hostage/prisoner swap with no conditions and to not let them "grow old" in the Gaza Strip.[35] Hamas translated a hostage's statement as "we do not want to be casualties as a direct result of IDF airstrikes," echoing a repeated and false information operation that Israeli airstrikes are killing the hostages.[36] PIJ claimed an Israeli airstrike killed an elderly Israeli hostage a day before the group released her through the temporary pause deal in late November.[37] Hamas Gaza leadership member Ghazi Hamad claimed that Israel is purposely killing the Hamas-held hostages in airstrikes and in the December 15 incident so that it doesn't have to complete a hostage/prisoner swap.[38] Hamas has continued to message in recent days that it will not enter hostage negotiations until Israel stops its ground operation in the Gaza Strip.[39] CIA Director Bill Burns, Israeli Mossad head David Barnea, and the Qatari prime minister met to restart hostage negotiations on December 18, however.[40]

# Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip as of December 18, 2023, 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)



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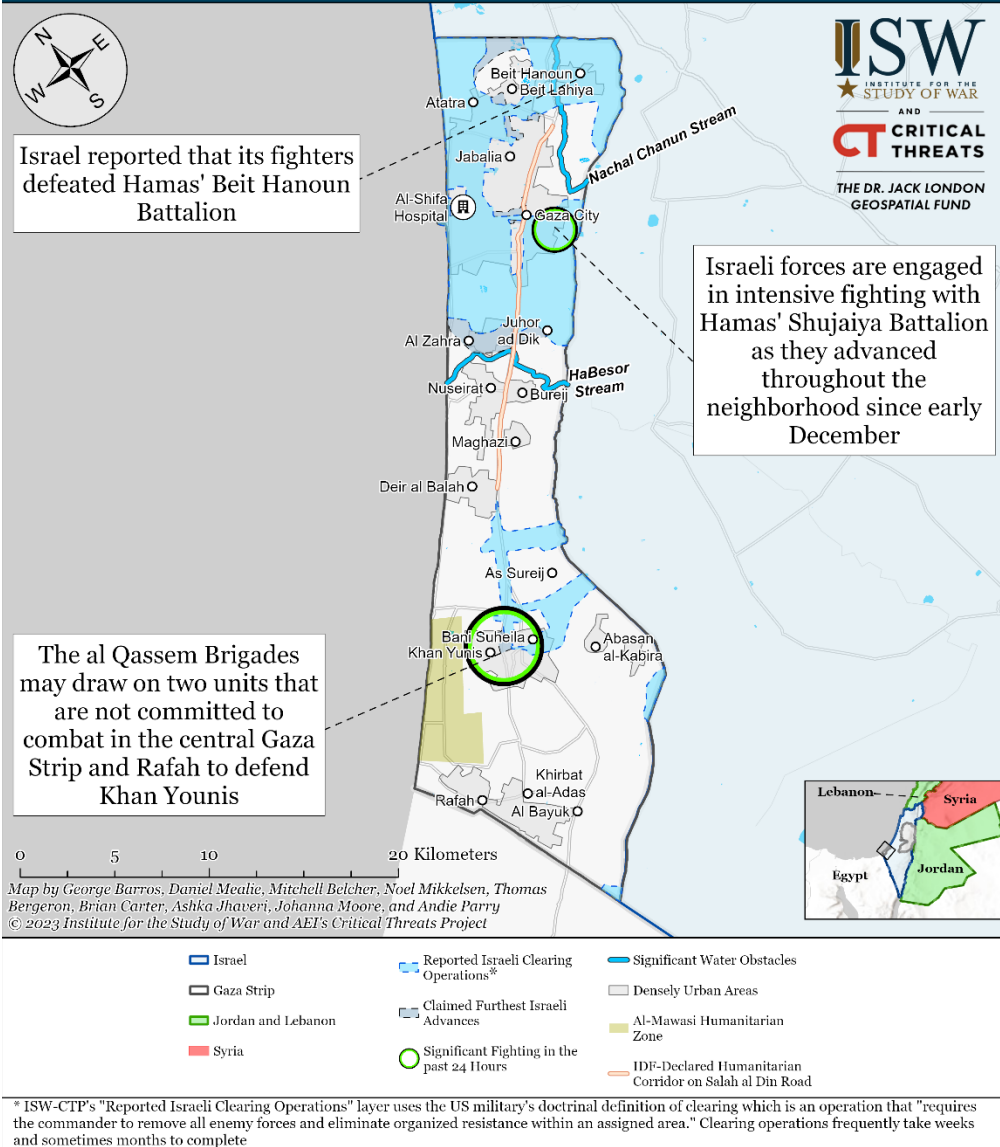
Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Brian Carter, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Andie Parry - © 2023 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project



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

\* 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

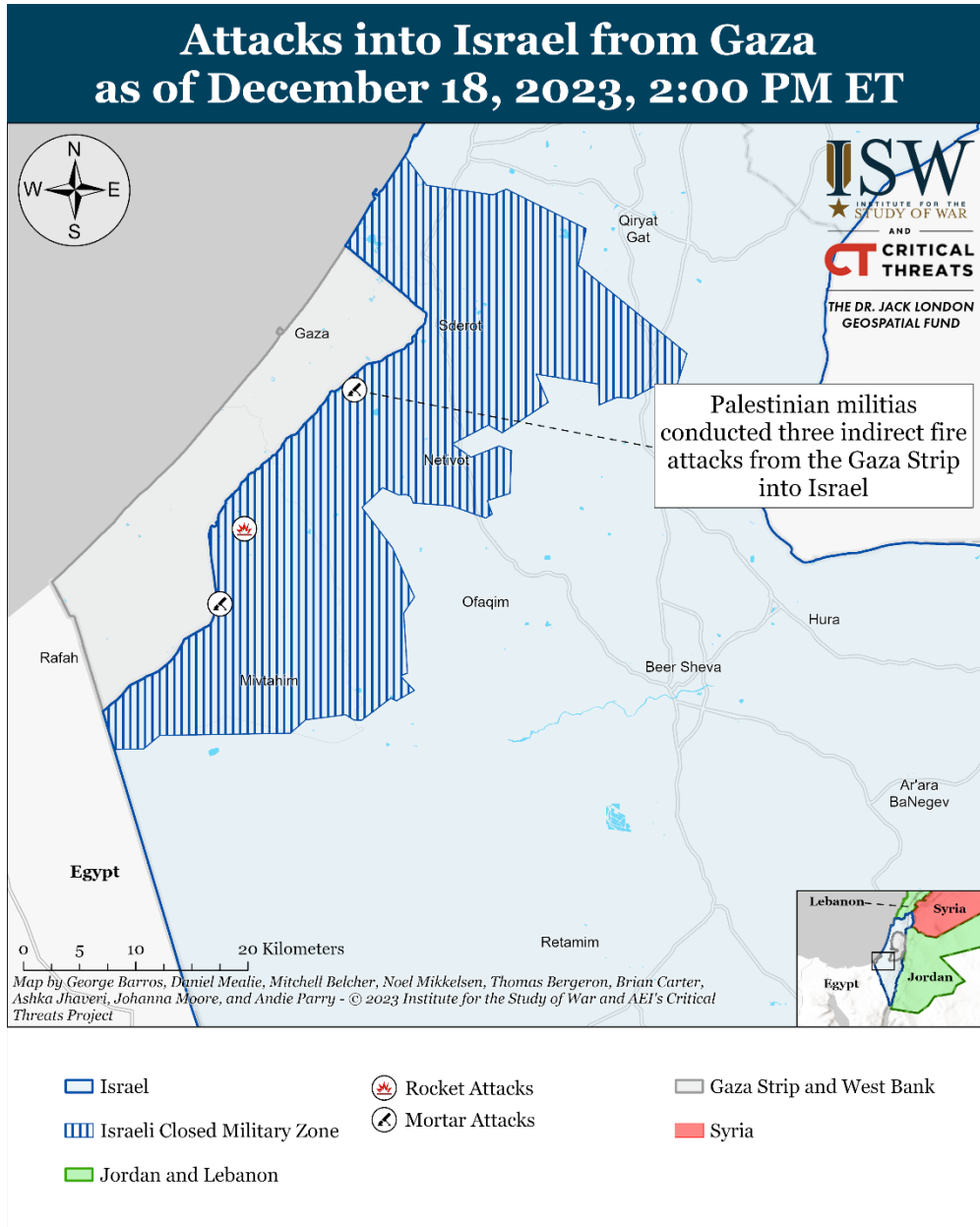
# Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip as of December 18, 2023, 2:00 PM ET



**Palestinian militias conducted three indirect fire attacks into Israel from the Gaza Strip on December 18.** The al Quds Brigades fired rockets and mortars at Nahal Oz in southern Israel.[41] The militia separately claimed to fire rockets east of Rafah along the border with Israel.[42] The al Qassem Brigades fired rockets at Kissufim, where Israeli forces used a border crossing to enter the southern Gaza Strip.[43]

Israeli forces operating in Khan Yunis reported on December 18 that they destroyed rocket launchers aimed at Israeli territory.[44] IDF Home Front Command lifted workplace and educational restrictions in Ashkelon in southern Israel after a situational assessment regarding the threat of rocket fire from the Gaza Strip.[45] The IDF evacuated and designated the periphery of the Gaza Strip as a military zone on October 11.[46] Israeli clearing operations and lifted restrictions in southern

Israel are consistent with CTP-ISW's assessment that Israeli forces are likely degrading Hamas' capacity to conduct indirect fire attacks from the Gaza Strip into Israel.[47]



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

## **West Bank**

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

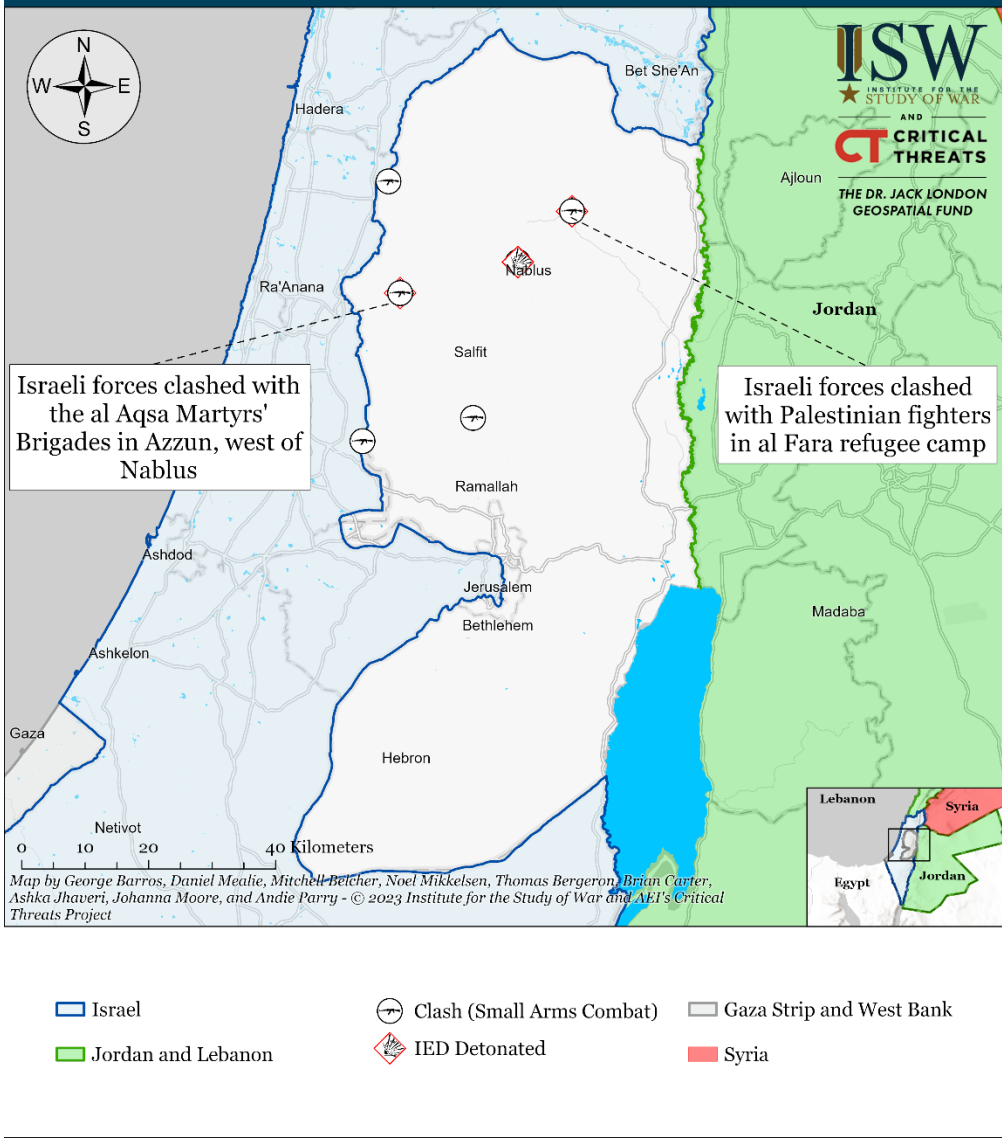
- Draw IDF assets and resources toward the West Bank and fix them there

**Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters nine times across the West Bank on December 18.[48]** The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades engaged Israeli forces in small arms clashes and detonated IEDs targeting these forces in Azzun, west of Nablus.[49] The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades separately fired on an Israeli civilian vehicle near Ramallah.[50] Palestinian fighters clashed with Israeli forces and detonated IEDs targeting these forces in the al Fara refugee camp near Tubas.[51] Hamas' West Bank branch said that Israeli forces killed four fighters during the clashes.[52]

The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades said that Israeli forces killed five fighters during clashes in the Noor Shams refugee camp in Tulkarm on December 17.[53] The Noor Shams Camp branch of the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades said that Israeli "crimes will not go unnoticed" and called on fighters across the West Bank to unite against Israeli forces.[54] The Qalqilya branch of the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades called for further attacks on Israeli forces in revenge for the killing of Palestinian fighters in Tulkarm and Jenin.[55] A Palestinian journalist said that members of the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, Hamas, and the al Quds Brigades participated in a memorial service for fighters killed in Tulkarm.[56]



# Clashes in the West Bank as of December 18, 2023, 2:00 PM ET



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

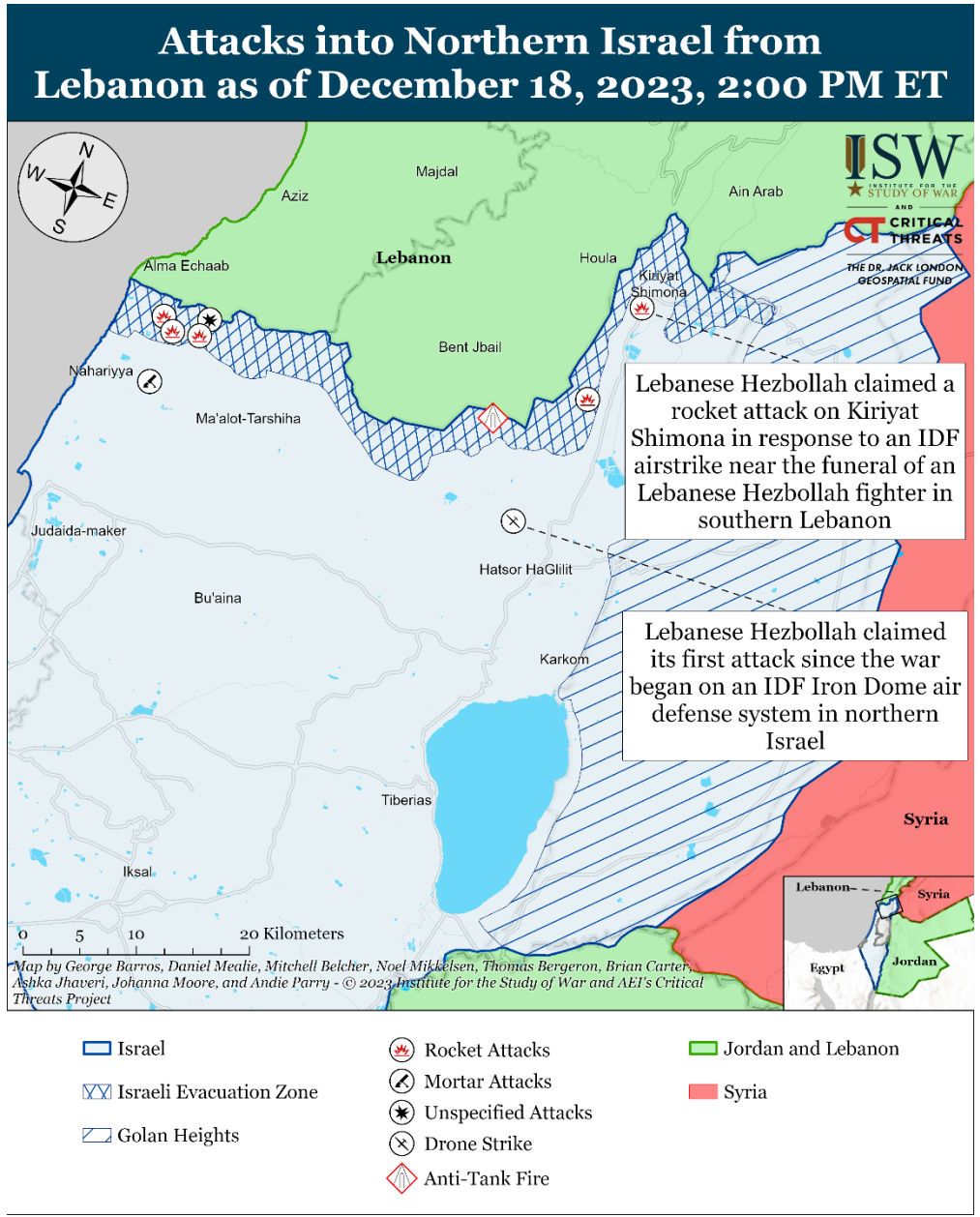
## Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

### **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

**Iranian-backed fighters, including Lebanese Hezbollah (LH), conducted nine attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel on December 18.** LH claimed an attack on an IDF Iron Dome air defense system for the first time since the Hamas-Israel war began on October 7.[57] The IDF has not acknowledged the attack on the Iron Dome system. LH attacked Israeli forces near Hanita and fired rockets targeting Kiryat Shmona in retaliation for an IDF airstrike in Lebanon

near the funeral of an LH fighter.[58] Unspecified fighters carried out four rocket attacks, one anti-tank guided missile attack, and launched one drone into northern Israel on December 18.[59] The IDF reported that it responded to LH attacks with artillery fire and airstrikes targeting LH rocket launchers and other unspecified military infrastructure in Lebanon on December 18.[60]



## 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

**Iraq held provincial council elections on December 18 for the first time since 2013.**[61] Iraqi provincial councils are authorized to appoint and remove governors, approve provincial director-general positions, and approve provincial security plans.[62] The Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) announced midday on December 18 that only 17 percent of registered voters had cast votes.[63] Iraqi media claimed after the closing of the polls that voter participation had reached 38 percent and that voter participation was highest in the northern province of Kirkuk.[64] IHEC announced that it will release the results of the election on December 19.[65]

Iraqi media reported several instances of voter intimidation and violence at voting centers on December 18. Unidentified individuals threw IEDs at two voting stations in Kufah, Najaf Province.[66] Iraqi Joint Operations Deputy Commander Lieutenant General Qais al Muhammadawi separately announced that unspecified individuals hurled a stun grenade toward a voting center in Najaf.[67] Supporters of an unspecified political alliance stormed a voting center in Baghdad and demanded that voters vote for a member of their alliance.[68] Iraqi officials emphasized that the elections passed smoothly and without any major security incidents.

**The Houthis claimed to have conducted two drone attacks targeting the Norwegian-owned, Cayman Islands-flagged *Swan Atlantic* tanker and Swiss-owned, Panama-flagged *MSC Clara* container ship in the Red Sea on December 18.**[69] The Houthi Navy initially deployed unspecified “craft” with armed personnel to direct the ships to alter course before attacking them.[70] The Houthi military spokesperson claimed that the group conducted drone attacks on the two ships.[71] US officials stated, on the other hand, that multiple unspecified “projectiles” had been launched from Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen.[72] It is unclear what munitions the Houthis used to conduct the attacks at the time of writing. The *USS Carney* responded to the Atlantic’s distress call.[73] Western media reported that the Atlantic was damaged in the attack.[74] The UK Maritime Trade Operations reported an explosion in the water near a vessel south of the port of Mokha in Yemen.[75] The Houthis have expanded their attacks on maritime traffic around the Red Sea to include all vessels traveling to Israel after having threatened to do so on December 9 and 12.[76]

**The Houthi anti-shipping attack campaign continues to achieve one of its desired effects of disrupting Red Sea maritime traffic headed to Israel.** The British petroleum company BP, Taiwanese shipping company Evergreen Line, and Belgian oil tanker company Euronav announced on December 18 that they will suspend shipping operations in the Red Sea.[77] Norwegian energy group Equinor similarly stated that it had rerouted an unspecified number of ships away from the Red Sea.[78] The above companies cited the “deteriorating security situation” in the area and concern for the “safety of ships and crew.” The Hong Kong-based shipping company Orient Overseas Container Line (OOCL) similarly announced on December 17 that it would immediately stop shipping goods to and from Israel.[79] Global shipping giants, such as Mediterranean Shipping Company, CMA CGM, Maersk, and Hapag-Lloyd, previously announced that they would pause operations around the Red Sea but did not specify how it would affect their services to Israel.[80]

**Israel conducted airstrikes targeting the IRGC headquarters at Sayyida Zainab, Damascus on December 17.**[81] The Syrian Defense Ministry stated that Israel conducted

airstrikes near Damascus which injured two Syrian Arab Army soldiers.[82] Iranian-backed militia groups and the IRGC maintain their main headquarters in Sayyida Zainab and use it to facilitate Iranian lines of effort elsewhere in Syria.[83] Syrian opposition news outlet Eye of Euphrates reported on October 30 that the senior-most IRGC commander in Syria has coordinated all attacks on US forces in Syria through a joint operations room based in Sayyida Zainab.[84] Israel has regularly conducted airstrikes on the headquarters and recently killed general officers in IRGC Quds Force Unit 340, which is responsible for providing technical military support and training to members of the Axis of Resistance.[85] There is no reason to believe that Israel has targeted the same unit or capabilities as it is not clear what area of the Sayyida Zainab headquarters was targeted and the headquarters is a sprawling facility.

**The Jordanian armed forces clashed with Iran-backed militias attempting to smuggle weapons and drugs through the Jordan-Syria border on December 18.[86]** Jordanian state media stated that this was the largest armed cross-border weapons and drug smuggling operation in recent years.[87] Several Jordanian army personnel and smugglers were injured or killed during the clash. The Jordanian army similarly announced that it had neutralized an unspecified number of drug smugglers attempting to smuggle Captagon into the country on December 12.[88] The Syrian regime and Iran-backed militias mass produce the drug in Syria and smuggle it through Jordan to the Gulf Arab states, generating billions of dollars of revenue for the malign actors.[89] Jordanian and Western officials have stated that Iran and LH have been behind the surge in drug and weapons smuggling from southern Syria into Jordan.[90] The Jordanian armed forces conducted air strikes on Iran-linked drug factories in southern Syria in May 2023.[91]

Jordanian officials have been concerned about Iranian threats to their security beyond drug and weapons smuggling.[92] The Jordanian Armed Forces shot down three drones that traveled into their airspace from Syria in August 2023, which Jordanian officials linked to Iran-backed militias in Syria.[93] Jordan also borders Iraq and the West Bank whose local governments and security institutions are infiltrated by Iran-backed militias that can then infiltrate Jordan from all directions. Some Western analysts have noted that Jordan is home to millions of displaced refugees from Iraq, Syria, and the West Bank which Iran can recruit for its militant groups.[94] Many of the Palestinian civil society organizations in Jordan are reportedly linked to Iran-sponsored groups.[95]

**An Israel-affiliated hacktivist group “Predatory Sparrow” conducted a large-scale cyberattack against gas pumps throughout Iran on December 18.[96]** The cyberattack disabled between 60-70% of the gas stations around the country.[97] President Ebrahim Raisi confirmed the fuel stations were experiencing a disruption and ordered the Ministry of Oil to investigate this.[98] Iranian media outlets and Oil Minister Javad Owji stated that the oil disruption was a result of a cyberattack by Israel and the United States.[99] Iran also recently blamed Israel for the December 15 Jaish al Adl attack in Sistan and Baluchistan province.[100]

The “Predatory Sparrow” group claimed responsibility on X for the attack and warned this was only a small part of their capabilities.[101] They further stated that they were acting in response to Iranian provocations in the region and warned Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei directly that “playing with fire has a price.” According to Israel Army Radio correspondent Doron Kadosh, Israel claimed responsibility for the attack.[102] Israel warned Iranian emergency services before the attack in a

form of cyber “roof-knocking”.[103] The “Predatory Sparrow” group has targeted IRGC-affiliated industries in the past and attributed responsibility to Israel. [104]

**Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian discussed the recent attack on an LEC Headquarters in Rask, Sistan and Baluchistan Province, during a phone call with his Pakistani counterpart Jalil Abbas Jilani on December 18.[105]** The two foreign ministers discussed the Israel-Hamas war. Jilani emphasized Pakistan’s commitment to cooperating with Iran to counter terrorism.





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- [1] <https://twitter.com/IDF/status/1718293784725762312>
- [2] <https://www.idf dot il/163182>
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- [5] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/the-order-of-battle-of-hamas-izz-al-din-al-qassem-brigades-part-1-north-and-central-gaza>
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