

Iran Update



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December 22, 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.

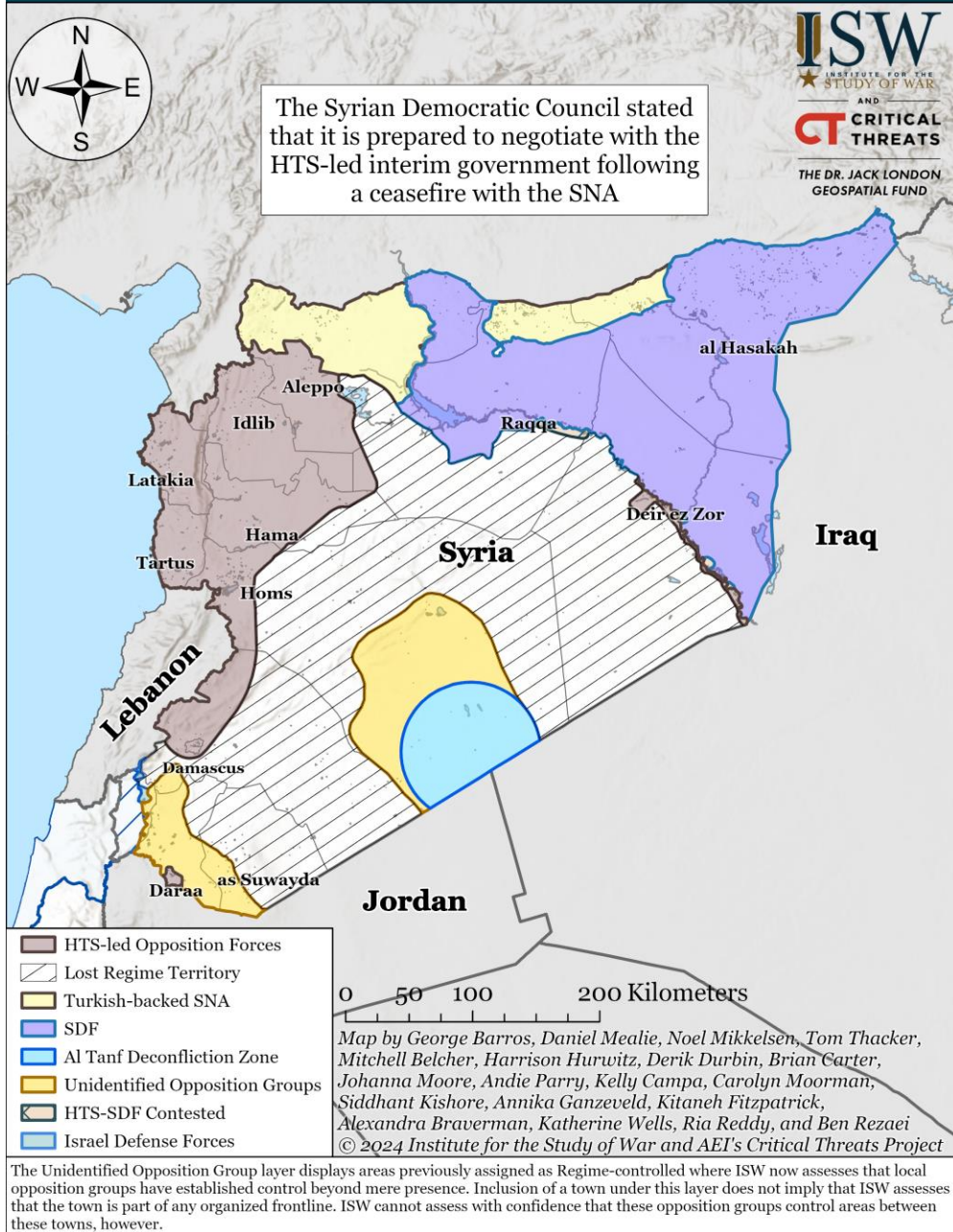
A senior official in the political wing of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) expressed the readiness to negotiate with the Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)-led interim government in order to determine the future role of the SDF.[1] The official, Riad Darar, said that the SDF would negotiate to ensure its participation in a new Syrian political structure and unify the country. Darar qualified that the SDF would negotiate only if there were a ceasefire with the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) and the establishment of a demilitarized zone around Kobani. These comments come as Turkey, the SNA, and HTS have coerced the SDF to disarm and integrate into a new Syrian security sector under HTS control, depriving it of its autonomy.[2]

Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Hakan Fidan separately said on December 21 that Turkey would only discuss the establishment of a demilitarized zone around Kobani after the SDF reaches an settlement with the HTS-led interim government.[3] This demand is incompatible with the SDF requirement for a ceasefire and the establishment of a demilitarized zone precedes negotiations with HTS.

Turkey and HTS are continuing to coordinate their efforts to coerce the SDF into disarming and integrating into the HTS-led defense apparatus. Fidan met with HTS leader Ahmed al Shara in Damascus on December 22 to discuss Turkish support for the interim government and its control over all Syrian territory.[4] Fidan previously said on December 21 that Ankara prefers for HTS to address its SDF concerns but reiterated that Turkey would do “whatever it takes” to ensure Turkish national security.[5] This remark refers to the stated Turkish strategic objective of “eliminat[ing]” the SDF. Turkish Defense Minister Yasar Guler similarly expressed support for HTS and SNA efforts to “liberate” territory from the SDF during a visit with Turkish forces on the Syria-Turkey border.[6] Turkish forces are stationed on the border near Kobani, Syria, in a fashion that resembles preparations before previous Turkish incursions into northern Syria.[7]

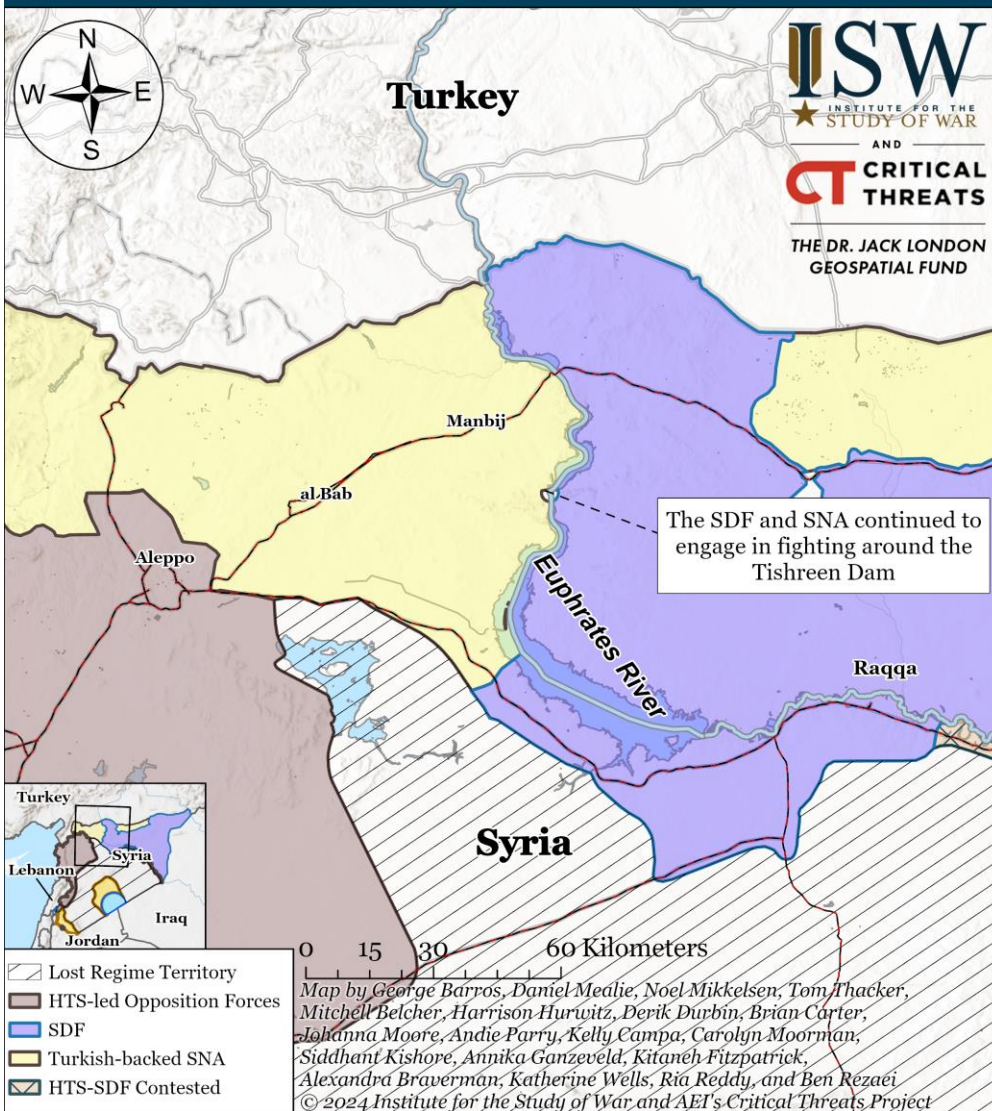
Reported Control of Terrain in Syria

As of December 22, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Control of Terrain in North Syria

As of December 22, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



The HTS-led interim government continues to signal a shift away from Iran and the Axis of Resistance. Israeli media reported that HTS leader Ahmad al Shara recently decided to prevent Iranian civilian and military flights from transiting Syrian airspace.[8] Unspecified security sources told Israeli media that this decision represents "the deepest expression of change" in Syrian policy since the fall of Assad. The sources said that this decision will significantly limit Iranian freedom of movement in the Middle East and make it difficult for Iran to help Lebanese Hezbollah reconstitute militarily. CTP-ISW previously assessed that the fall of Assad marks the end of the greater Iranian project in the Levant for the foreseeable future and will make it extremely difficult for Iran to transfer the resources needed to help Hamas and Hezbollah recuperate rapidly at scale.[9]

The HTS-led interim government reportedly appointed HTS military commander Murhaf Abu Qasra (aka Abu Hassan al Hamawi) as the new Syrian defense

minister.[10] Qasra has commanded the HTS military wing and spent years developing its drone unit.[11] Qasra also commanded the HTS offensive that toppled the Bashar al Assad regime.[12] Qasra will presumably oversee the dissolution and integration of Syria's armed factions into the new Syrian armed forces in his role as defense minister. Qasra told Western media recently that HTS planned to be "the first" to dissolve its armed wing and subordinate its forces to the new Defense Ministry.[13] Qasra, who has overseen Latakia Province since the fall of the regime, appeared with Shara to meet military faction leaders in Damascus on December 21.[14] Qasra's appointment to defense minister would be consistent with the HTS-led interim governments' appointment of key HTS allies and loyalists to ministerial positions.[15]

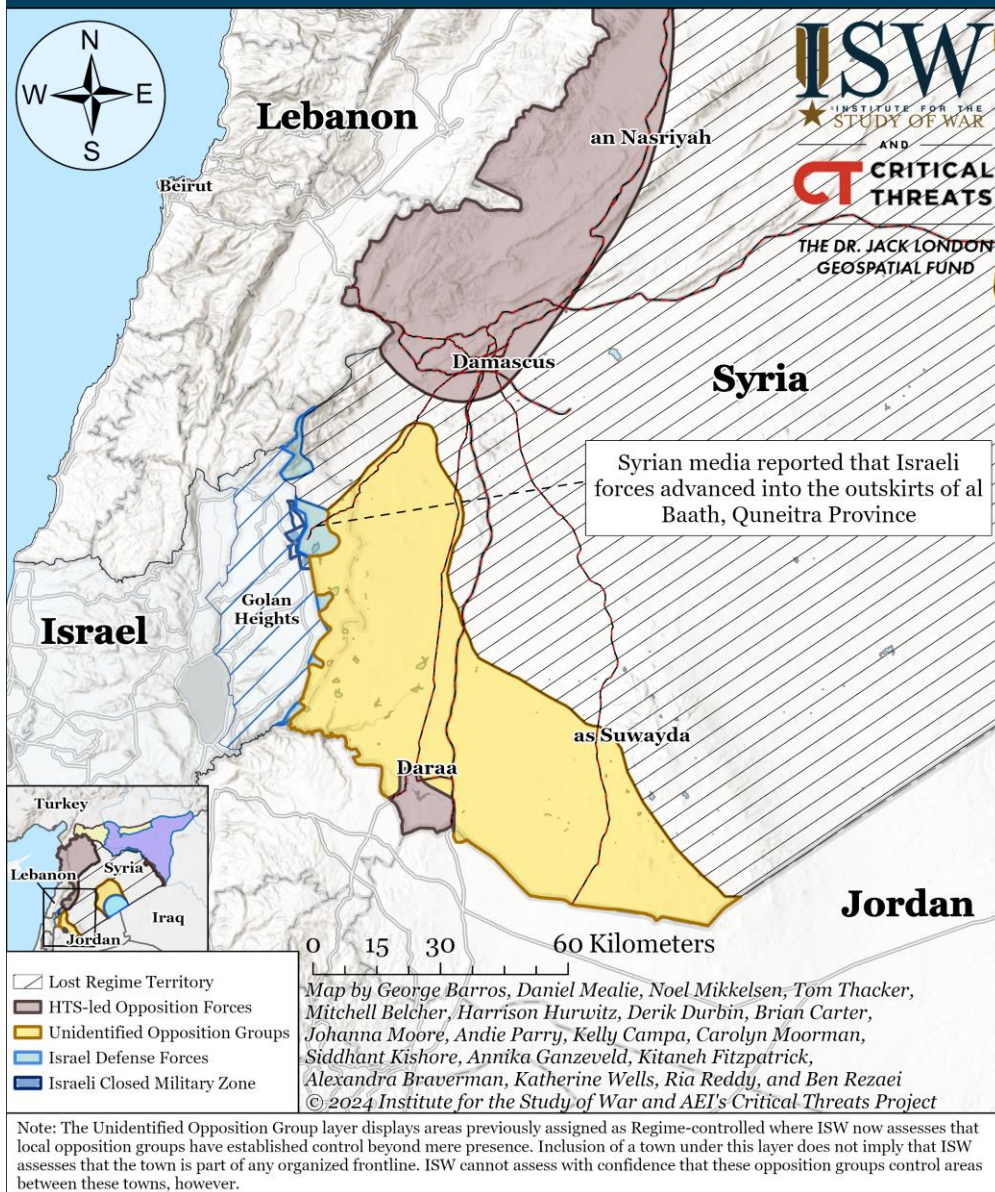
HTS leader Ahmed al Shara met with prominent Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and other Druze sheikhs in Damascus on December 22.[16] Shara said during the meeting that no sects will be excluded in Syria and that it is "our duty to protect" the many Syrian sects.[17] Shara's meeting with Jumblatt comes amid indications that HTS wants to establish a centralized and unitary Syrian state without autonomous or federal regions for minorities, such as Druze and Kurds.[18] Shara also said during the meeting that Syria seeks to build a "close" relationship with Lebanon.[19] Jumblatt, who has been historically involved in Lebanese political movements, said the meeting was a key step in restoring relations between Lebanon and Syria.[20] Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati recently ordered the re-opening of the Lebanese embassy in Damascus.[21]

Former Syrian regime elements have continued to reconcile and settle their status with the interim government.[22] Former regime military personnel, whom the regime conscripted under compulsory service, have reported to settlement centers in large numbers in the days since HTS announced general amnesty.[23] Syrian newspaper al Watan reported on December 21 that at least 34,000 former regime members have submitted applications to settle their statuses at the centers across eight provinces.[24] At least 20,000 of these applicants were from the former regime strongholds of Latakia and Tartous provinces, according to al Watan.[25]

Syrian media reported that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) continued to operate in Daraa and Quneitra provinces on December 22. Local media reported that the IDF advanced into the outskirts of al Baath, Quneitra Province, and met with local officials to negotiate weapons collection efforts in the area.[26] Local media reported that the IDF continues to maintain a presence near Maariya, western Daraa Province.[27]

Opposition Advances in Southwest Syria

As of December 22, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei discussed Syrians revolting against unspecified oppressors during a speech on December 22.[28] Khamenei said that "Syrian youth . . . must stand up to the planners and executors of insecurity [in Syria] with strong will and overcome them." It is unclear exactly whom Khamenei was referencing when he said "planners and executors." Such comments reflect the second time that Khamenei has discussed young Syrians organizing and arming themselves since the fall of Assad. Khamenei said on December 11 that "undoubtedly the occupied area[s] of Syria will be liberated by the zealous Syrian youth." [29] Khamenei in the same breath compared Syria today to Iraq in the 2003-2011 period and said that Syrian youth would free Syria in the same way that Iranian-backed Iraqi militias "freed" Iraq from the United States. CTP-ISW previously assessed that this comparison suggests that Iran may pursue efforts to support similar

militias in Syria to combat opposition forces and US-Israeli “interference” while undermining any new government in Syria, although CTP-ISW has not observed any material developments to indicate that Iran is currently pursuing these efforts.[30]

Key Takeaways:

- **Syria:** A senior SDF political official expressed the readiness to negotiate with HTS in order to determine the future role of the SDF. Turkey and HTS are continuing to coordinate their efforts to coerce the SDF into disarming and integrating into the HTS-led defense apparatus.
- **Syria:** The HTS-led interim government continues to signal a shift away from Iran and the Axis of Resistance. Israeli media reported that HTS leader Ahmad al Shara recently decided to prevent Iranian civilian and military flights from transiting Syrian airspace.
- **Syria:** Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei discussed Syrians revolting against unspecified oppressors during a speech. This marks the second time that Khamenei has discussed young Syrians mobilizing and arming themselves since Assad fell.

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 162nd Division continued operating in the northern Gaza Strip on December 22. The IDF 900th Infantry Brigade began operating west of Beit Hanoun after completing operations in Beit Lahia.[31] The IDF 215th Artillery Brigade directed airstrikes targeting Palestinian fighters and Hamas infrastructure in Beit Hanoun before the 900th Infantry Brigade began operating there.[32] Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) claimed that it destroyed an IDF vehicle with an explosively formed penetrator and detonated an improvised explosive device (IED) targeting Israeli forces in Izbat Beit Hanoun, west of Beit Hanoun, on December 22.[33] Hamas detonated IED targeting an IDF personnel carrier west of Beit Hanoun on December 22.[34]

Palestinian militias continued to attack Israeli forces operating in the northern Gaza Strip.[35] Hamas claimed that it detonated an IED targeting an IDF personnel carrier west of Beit Lahia.[36]

Reuters reported on December 22 that the IDF ordered the “evacuation and closure” of the Kamal Adwan Hospital in Beit Lahia in the northern Gaza Strip.[37] Local sources reported on December 21 and 22 that the IDF attacked the hospital with drones and tank fire.[38] An IDF spokesperson stated on December 22 that the IDF did not conduct strikes targeting Kamal Adwan overnight.[39]

The IDF Air Force conducted an airstrike targeting a Hamas command-and-control site at the former Musa bin Nusayr School in Darraj neighborhood, Gaza City, on December 22.[40] The IDF stated that Hamas used the site to plan and conduct attacks targeting Israeli forces

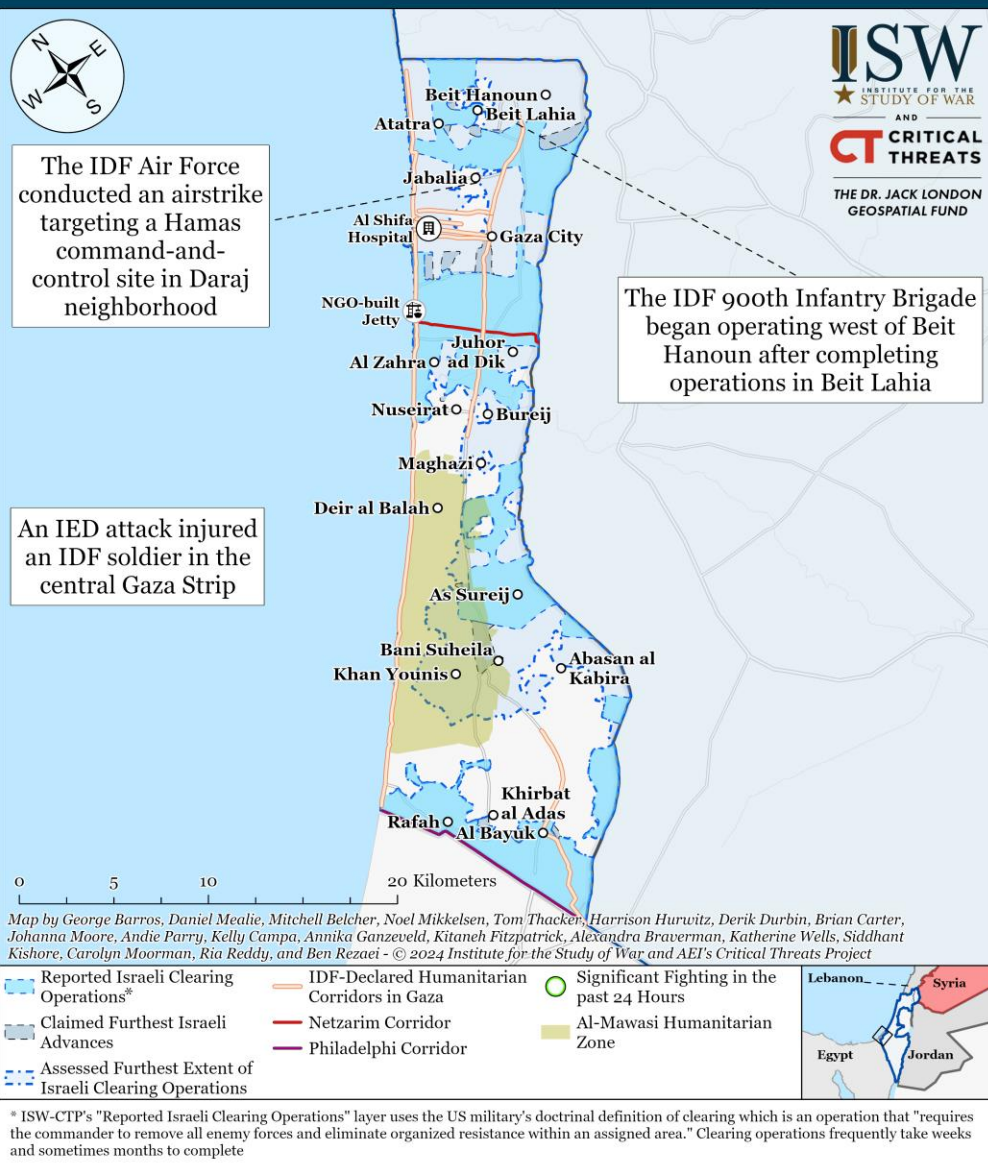
and territory.[41] Palestinian media reported that displaced Palestinians were sheltering at the school and that the airstrike killed eight individuals.[42]

Israeli forces continued operating in the central Gaza Strip on December 22. The IDF reported on December 22 that an IED attack in the central Gaza Strip seriously injured an IDF reservist in the 10th Brigade (252nd Division).[43] PIJ claimed that it conducted an IED attack north of Nuseirat refugee camp on December 22.[44] PIJ and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades claimed that they fired rockets targeting Israeli forces north of Nuseirat refugee camp.[45] Several militias, including the National Resistance Brigades and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, claimed attacks targeting IDF command-and-control sites along the Netzarim Corridor.[46]

Unspecified sources told Egyptian media that Israel requested the release of 34 hostages, including five female IDF soldiers and 11 men of fighting age, in the first phase of a ceasefire and hostage-prisoner exchange deal with Hamas.[47] An unspecified Palestinian official separately told the BBC on December 21 that Israel and Hamas are in the final stages of concluding a three-phase ceasefire and hostage-prisoner exchange agreement in which Israel would exchange 20 Palestinian prisoners for every female IDF soldier that Hamas released.[48] The official added that, in the final phase of the agreement, a "committee of technocrats" would oversee the Gaza Strip. The official claimed that the committee members would lack "previous political affiliations" and that "all Palestinian factions" would back the members. The official noted that the continued presence of Israeli forces at the Philadelphi Corridor remains an obstacle to concluding the agreement.[49] CTP-ISW has previously assessed that maintaining control over the Philadelphi Corridor by the IDF or another entity capable of preventing smuggling and the operation of tunnels would prevent Hamas and other Palestinian militias from rebuilding their capabilities quickly.[50]

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

As of December 22, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



West Bank

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

PIJ called on Palestinians to "rise up. . . to reject the siege of Jenin camp" on December 22.

[51] An Israeli Army Radio correspondent reported on December 16 that Palestinian Authority (PA) forces have "taken control" of approximately 50 percent of the Jenin refugee camp, including headquarters and buildings belonging to Palestinian militias.[52] The PA is engaged in an ongoing counterterrorism operation to destroy Palestinian militia infrastructure in the northern West Bank and

restore some PA control there.[53] Palestinian militias continue to clash with PA security forces in the West Bank.[54]

Palestinian media reported the first death of a PA security member, Sahar Farouk Juman, on December 22.[55]

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

The IDF is conducting an “extensive” operation to clear military equipment and unexploded ordinance from northern Israel towns and communities.[56] The IDF announced that Israeli forces and engineering teams deployed in over 40 northern Israel communities are clearing military equipment, cleaning waste, and removing unexploded ordinance.[57] Clearing military equipment from towns in northern Israel come amid IDF preparations to return residents to their homes following the ceasefire with Hezbollah in Lebanon.

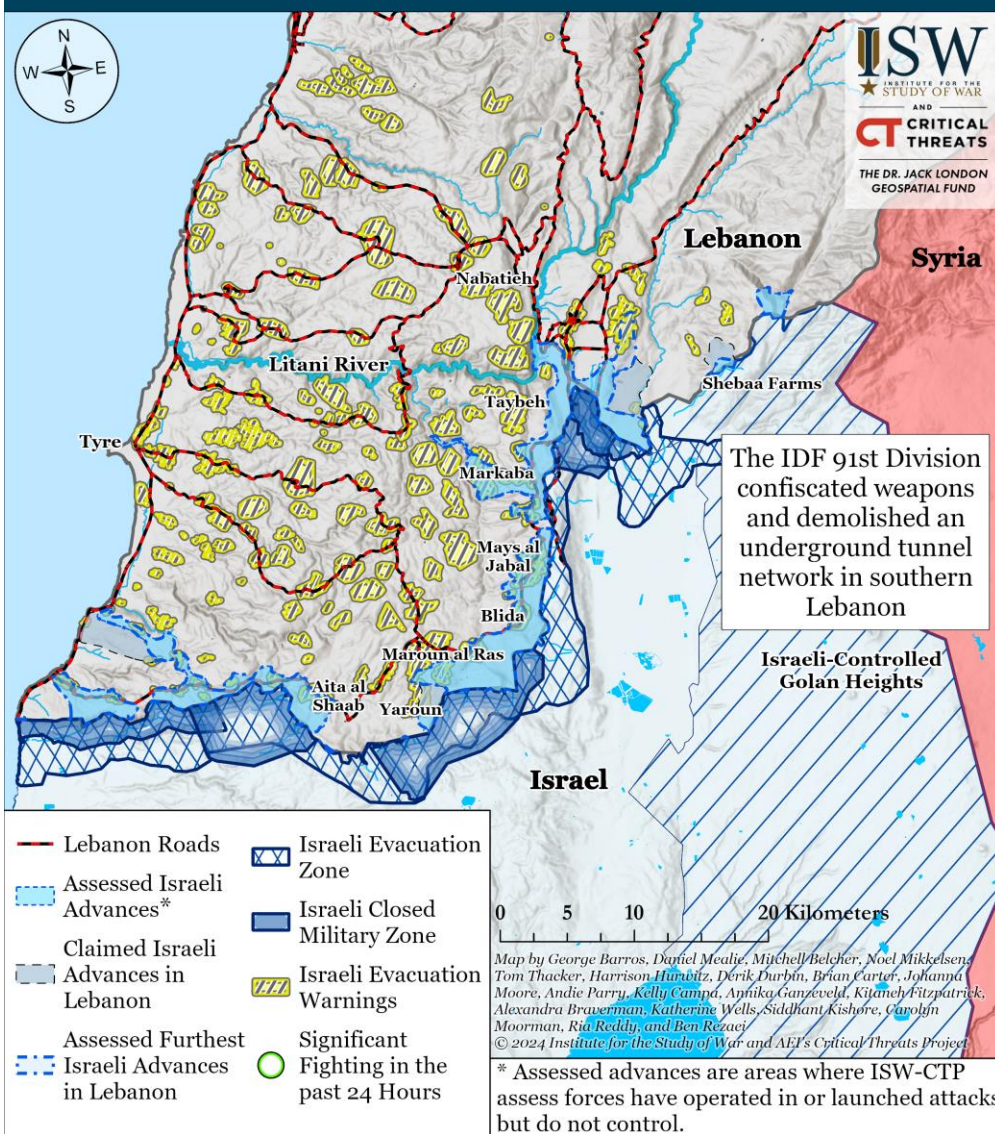
The IDF 91st Division continued operations in southern Lebanon on December 22.[58] The IDF 188th Armored Brigade identified and demolished a complex containing weapons depots and an underground tunnel network.[59] Israeli forces confiscated anti-tank guided missiles, IED, and communications devices found in the compound.[60]

Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz visited Israeli forces in southern Lebanon on December 22.[61] Katz threatened to strike at Hezbollah if Hezbollah attempted to violate the ceasefire.[62]

The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) continued to seize sites in southern Lebanon on December 22 that were previously affiliated with Palestinian militias.[63] The LAF announced it took control of a center near Kafr Zabad in the Bekaa Valley that had been affiliated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine- General Command (PFLP-GC).[64] PFLP-GC is primarily based in Syria.[65] The LAF confiscated weapons, ammunition, and military equipment from the site.[66]

Reported Israeli Operations in Lebanon

As of December 22, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Iran and the Axis of Resistance

Senior Iraqi political and military officials are continuing to emphasize the need to strengthen border security along the Iraq-Syria border in Ninewa Province. Iraqi Army Ninewa Operations Commander Major General Taha al Luhaibi met with Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Ninewa Operations Deputy Commander Salam Aziz on December 21 to discuss efforts to “sustain” security in western Ninewa Province.[67] Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani separately emphasized the need to preserve Iraqi security and not be “lenient” on security matters during a meeting with Iraqi security and military officials in Ninewa Province on December 22.[68] PMF Ninewa Operations Commander Khadhir al Matrohi, who is affiliated with the Badr Organization, attended the meeting.[69] Iraqi Border Guard Commander Lieutenant General Mohammad Abdul Wahab Sukar al Saedi lastly praised the PMF for protecting the Iraq-Syria border

during a visit to al Tarifawi, Ninewa Province, on December 22.[70] Sukar met with Musa al Janabi, who is responsible for Iraqi border security within the PMF.

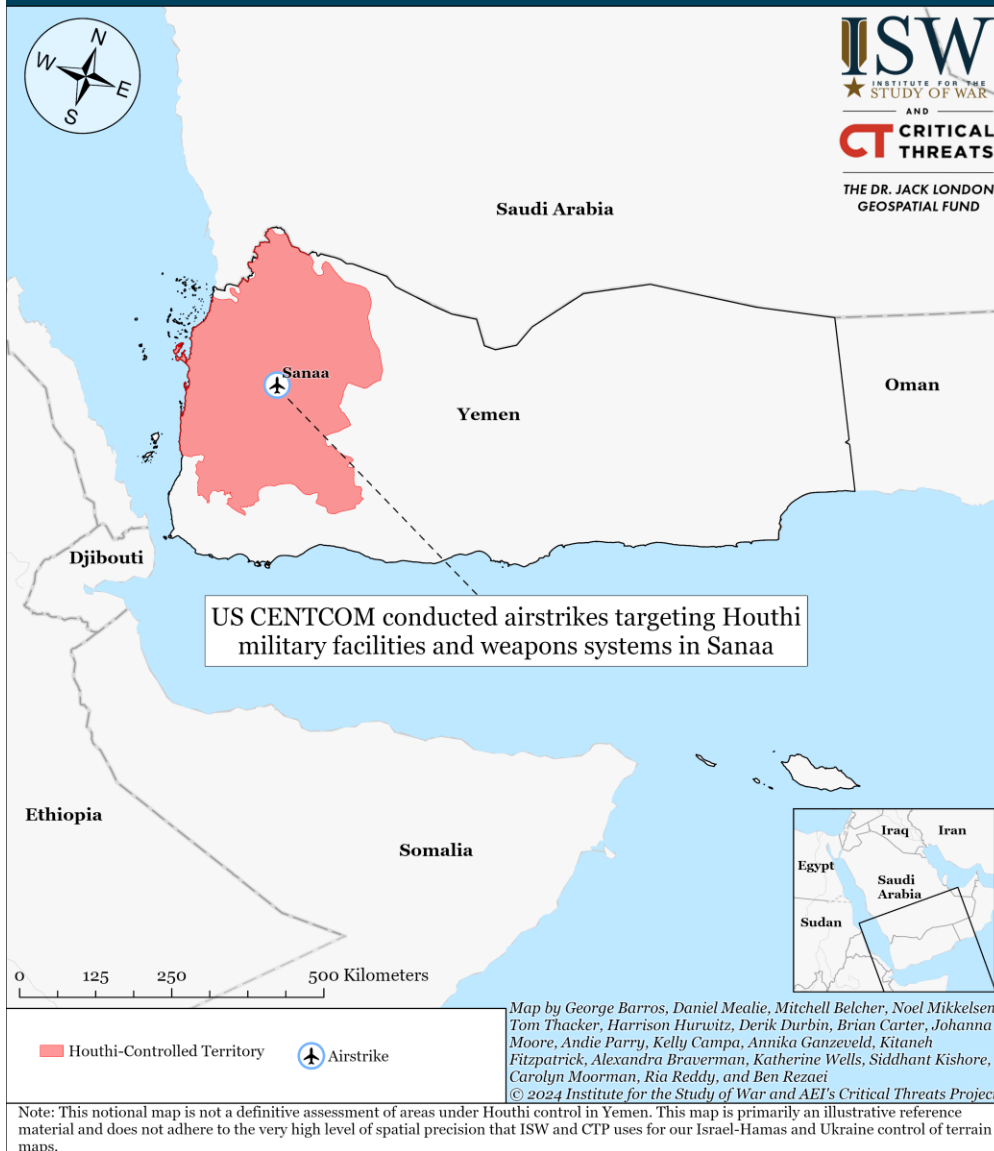
Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada spokesperson Kazem al Fartousi claimed on December 22 that the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, which is a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, stopped conducting attacks targeting Israel due to the Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire.[71] The Islamic Resistance in Iraq has not claimed an attack on Israel since late November 2024.[72] Fartousi stated that the Islamic Resistance in Iraq also stopped conducting attacks on Israel because unspecified “partners in Iraq” oppose the attacks.[73] Fartousi was likely referring to the Iraqi federal government’s efforts to pressure the Islamic Resistance in Iraq to stop attacking Israel in order to avoid an Israeli attack on Iraq.

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi held a phone call with Houthi Foreign Affairs Minister Jamal Amer on December 22 to discuss bilateral relations and regional developments.[74] Amer emphasized that Islamic countries "must use their enormous capacities" to prevent US-Israeli dominance in the region.

US Central Command (CENTCOM) conducted airstrikes targeting a Houthi missile storage facility and a command-and-control facility in Houthi-controlled territory in Sanaa, Yemen, on December 21.[75] CENTCOM reported that the strikes were intended to disrupt and degrade Houthi operations against US Navy and merchant vessels in the Southern Red Sea, Bab al Mandeb Strait, and Gulf of Aden. CENTCOM forces also shot down multiple Houthi uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs) and an anti-ship cruise missile over the Red Sea.

Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea

As of December 22, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



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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