

Iran Update



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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 in the Gaza Strip, 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.

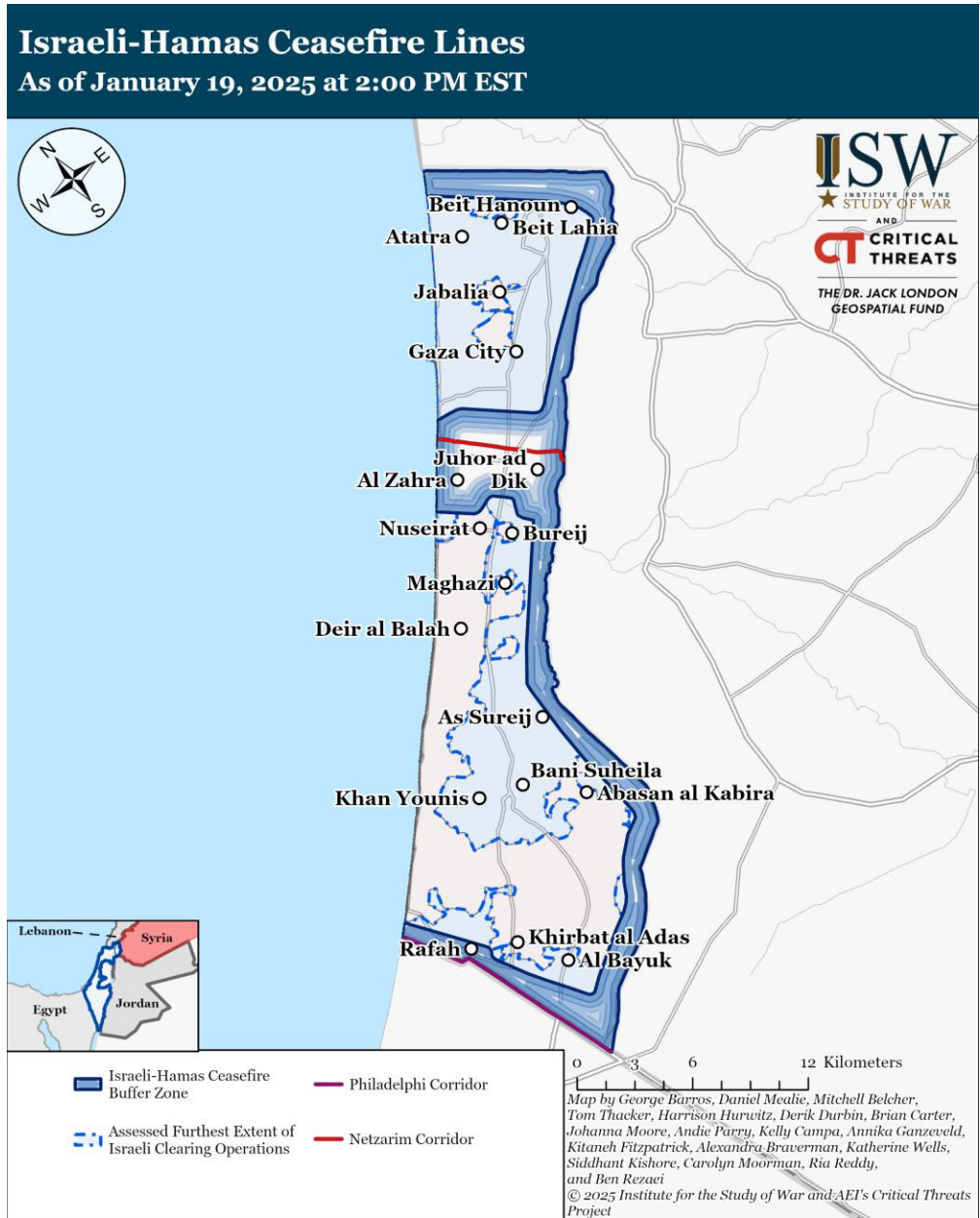
We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We utterly condemn violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity even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

Hamas released three female Israeli hostages after the ceasefire went into effect.[1] Hamas handed over the three hostages to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Gaza City. The ICRC confirmed that the hostages were in “good condition” before the ICRC transferred them to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in the southern Gaza Strip.[2] The IDF then transported the hostages to a medical facility in southern Israel for further examination.[3] Israel released 90 Palestinian prisoners as part of the ceasefire-hostage agreement on January 19.[4] Israel is expected to release 1,904 Palestinian prisoners during the first phase of the ceasefire.[5] An Israeli Army Radio correspondent published a list of 67 Palestinian prisoners included among the 1,904 prisoners scheduled for release.[6] Most of these prisoners were members of Palestinian militia groups, including Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and Fatah, and participated in attacks that targeted Israeli civilians and soldiers.[7]

The IDF withdrew from areas in the northern and southern Gaza Strip on January 19. The IDF 84th and 933rd Infantry Brigades (162nd Division) withdrew from Jabalia and Beit Hanoun in the northern Gaza Strip.[8] Geolocated footage obtained on January 19 showed that the IDF withdrew from the northern Gaza Strip and deployed in the IDF-designated buffer zone along the Gaza Strip's northeastern boundary.[9] Israeli forces simultaneously withdrew from some areas of Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, according to footage posted by a Palestinian journalist.[10] The IDF remains in other, designated areas of the Gaza Strip, including the Philadelphi corridor.[11]

Gazans began to return to the northern Gaza Strip from IDF-designated humanitarian zones in the southern and central Gaza Strip amid IDF withdrawal from these areas on January 19.[12] Part of the ceasefire agreement requires the IDF to facilitate the return of Palestinian civilians to their homes in the northern Gaza Strip.[13] The IDF Arabic-language spokesperson issued instructions to Gazans that

warned Gazan civilians not to approach Israeli forces near the Netzarim Corridor, the Philadelphi Corridor, and the Rafah border crossing.[14] The IDF spokesperson added that movement around these areas remains “dangerous” due to “IDF activities” there. The IDF spokesperson also instructed Gazans to not approach the IDF-designated buffer zone along the Gaza Strip’s northern and eastern boundaries.



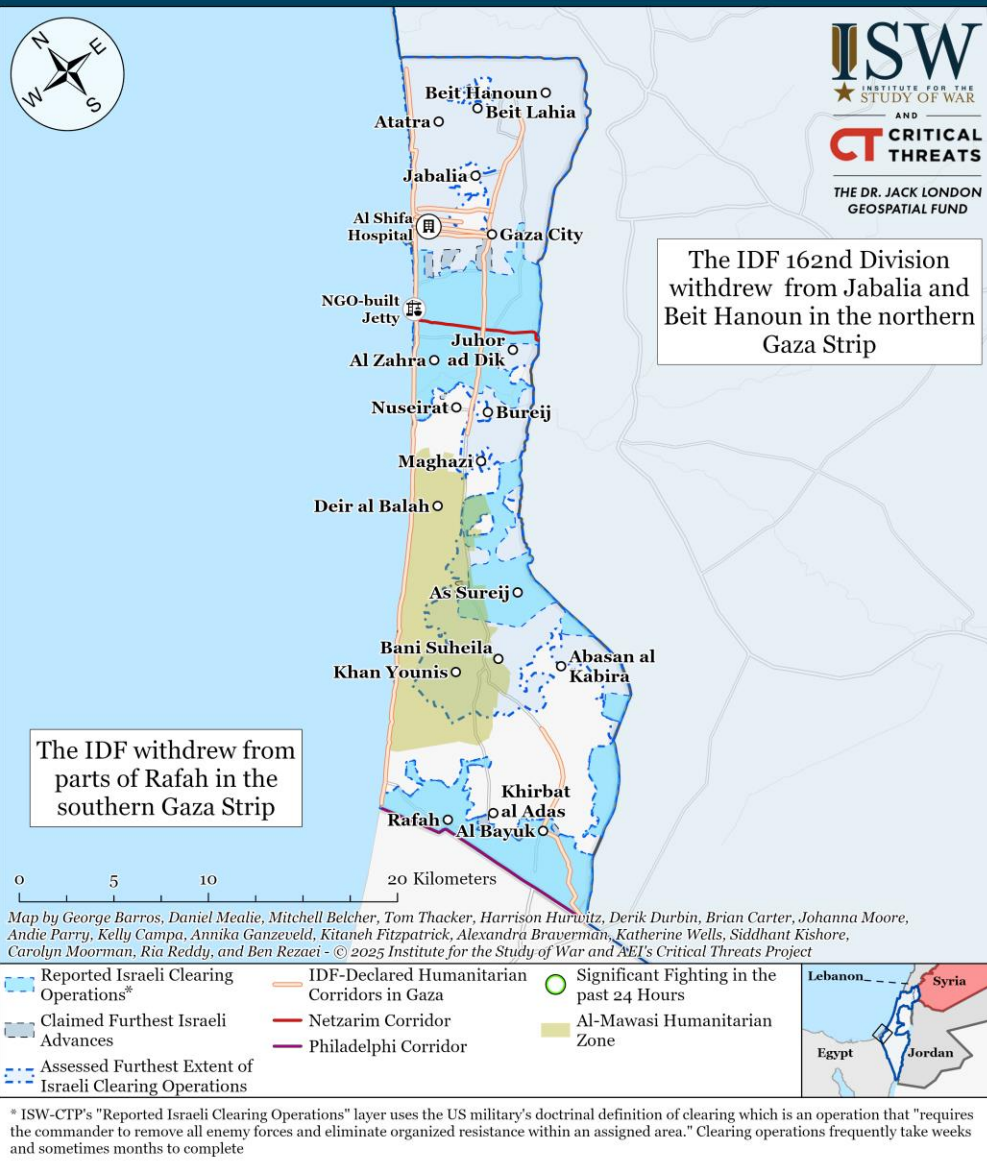
The Hamas-run government media office reported that Hamas deployed “thousands” of fighters to “preserve security and order” in the Gaza Strip on January 19.[15] Hamas began to deploy its police personnel across the Gaza Strip.[16] Videos posted on social media showed armed Hamas fighters in a pickup truck in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip.[17] The presence of Hamas fighters in small numbers in several parts of the Gaza Strip does not indicate that Hamas has reconstituted itself as a military organization in the Gaza Strip. The IDF does not need to kill every

single Hamas fighter to destroy Hamas' military organization.[18] The existence of these groups of fighters does not inherently imply that these fighters are part of an organized military force with a clear chain of command. This is consistent with the CTP-ISW assessment that Hamas fighters are now operating as small fighting cells and not organized military units that Hamas had in the early days of the war.[19]

Hamas met with several Palestinian political and militant groups in Doha, Qatar to discuss post-war governance in the Gaza Strip on January 18.[20] Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) Secretary General Ziad al Nakhalah, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) Deputy Secretary General Jamil Mazhar, and representatives from other Palestinian factions attended the meeting. The Palestinian factions emphasized managing the Gaza Strip “nationally” by the July 2024 Beijing declaration, which calls for a “temporary national unity government” responsible for governing the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.[21] No Fatah representative attended the meeting.[22]

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

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Iran and its partners in Iraq are continuing to try to gain control over the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS). The Iraqi parliament passed the National Intelligence Service Law on January 19.[23] This law reportedly grants oversight of the INIS to the Parliamentary Security and Defense Committee, which is headed by a member of the Iranian-backed Badr Organization.[24] The passage of this law comes after Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani appointed Hamid al Shatri as head of the INIS in December 2024.[25] Shatri previously served as an administrative assistant to Popular Mobilization Committee Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh and supported Fayyadh during the Iranian-backed crackdown on the Tishreen protest movement that began in October 2019.[26] Shatri is also reportedly affiliated with the Badr Organization.[27] Iranian-backed figures have increasingly infiltrated the INIS since Sudani came to power in late 2022.[28]

The IDF Central Command said it will deploy new forces to the West Bank to dissuade and prevent Palestinian militia attacks.[29] Israel will release 1,000 Palestinian prisoners into the West Bank as part of the ceasefire-hostage deal, which informed the IDF decision to deploy new forces.[30] Hamas spokesperson Abu Obeida stated on January 19 that the “responsibility on our people in the West Bank is growing,” particularly in Jenin.[31] The IDF Central Command said on January 19 that it assesses Hamas will try to conduct attacks in the West Bank despite the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.[32] The IDF said that it will also increase the number of checkpoints on the road.[33] The IDF’s 89th Commando Brigade will reinforce Central Command and conduct offensive operations in the West Bank.[34] The Egoz Unit (89th Commando Brigade), the 90th Infantry Battalion (900th Infantry Brigade), and seven other companies will be deployed throughout the area.[35] The 90th Infantry Battalion is specialized in urban warfare. The 900th Infantry Brigade is normally assigned to IDF Central Command. The IDF offensive plans in the West Bank are being coordinated with the Palestinian Authority (PA).[36]

PIJ’s Jenin Battalion signaled that it may resume attacks targeting PA security forces in the Jenin refugee camp.[37] The Jenin Battalion claimed that it had agreed to “stop shedding blood“ in Jenin on January 14.[38] An unspecified Palestinian official cited by Times of Israel on January 18 claimed that the Palestinian Authority (PA) has reached an agreement with the Jenin Battalion.[39] The Jenin Battalion blamed the PA for violating their agreement in a statement on January 19.[40] The Jenin Battalion had reportedly demanded that the PA withdraw all its security forces, including snipers, from the Jenin camp. The Jenin Battalion stated the PA opened fire on fighters in Jenin camp after the Israeli Air Force conducted airstrikes on the camp a few days ago.[41]

Syrian Interim Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra rejected Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Commander Mazloum Abdi’s proposal that the SDF join the Syrian Defense Ministry as a “military bloc.”[42] Abdi has repeatedly advocated for a “decentralized” administration and said on January 14 that he wants the SDF to integrate into the Defense Ministry as a “bloc.”[43] Qasra told Reuters on January 19 that it is not “right” for the SDF to remain as a separate entity within the Syrian armed forces and accused the SDF of procrastinating in negotiations.[44] Abdi later said in a January 19 interview with Saudi media that the SDF has not yet decided to hand over its weapons to the Syrian interim government.[45]

The SDF is very unlikely to disarm itself while engaged in defensive operations against Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) attacks by groups that have repeatedly committed atrocities against Kurdish populations elsewhere in Syria. The SDF has continued to engage SNA fighters on multiple fronts, including at the bridgeheads of Tishreen Dam and Qara Qozak, southern frontlines in Deir Hafer and Maskanah, and mutual shelling along eastern frontlines near Ain Issa and Tal Tamr.[46] The Hamza Division and the Suleiman Shah Brigade are both active near the Tishreen Dam and Qara Qozak bridgeheads.

Turkey and the Turkish-backed SNA also appear to be deploying and reinforcing elements along SDF frontlines on the Euphrates River and near Ain Issa. Syrian media posted footage that purportedly shows Turkish tank transporters and other vehicles that entered Tal Abyad from Turkey on January 19.[47] These deployments would presumably reinforce existing SNA troop concentrations near Ain Issa.[48] Syrian media also circulated footage on January 19 that shows

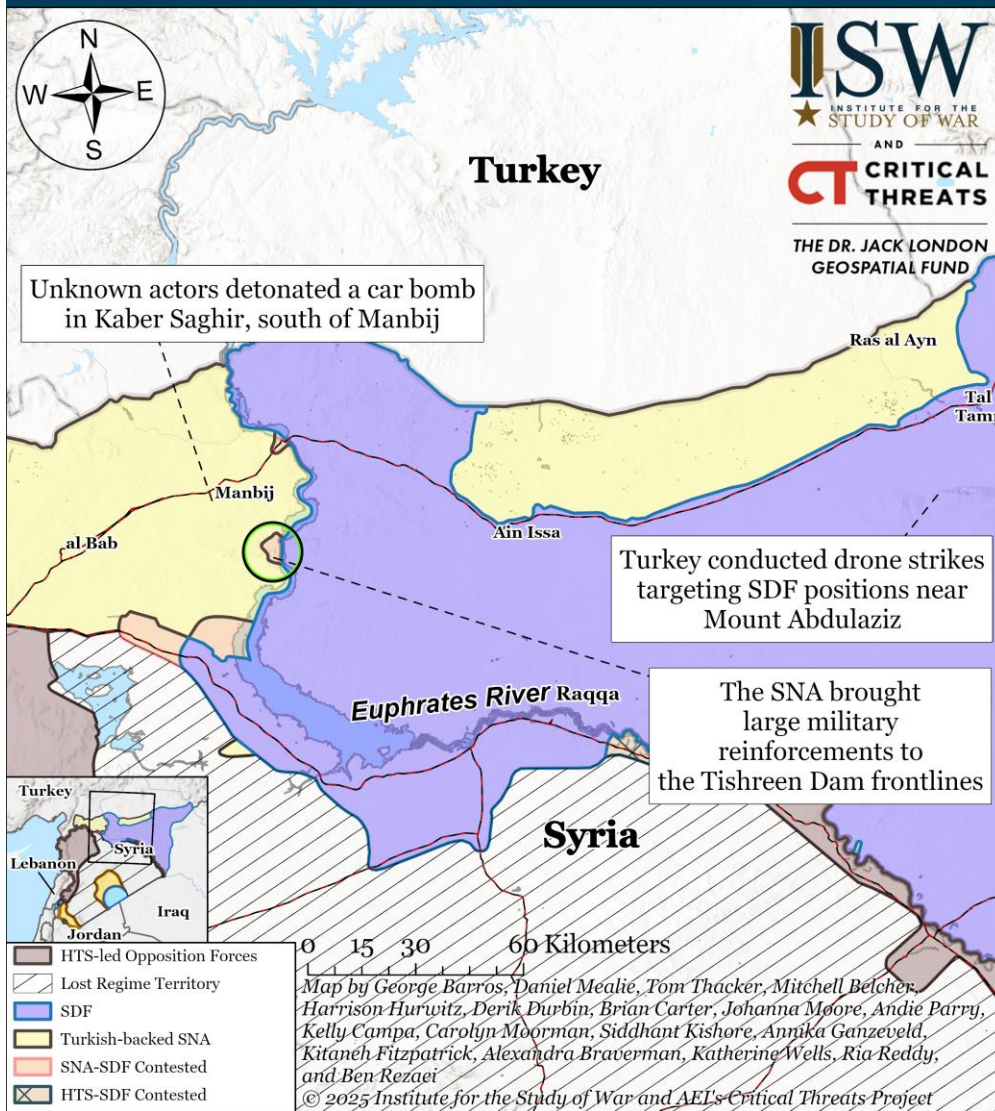
the arrival of reinforcements, including armor, from Aleppo to join the SNA frontlines near Manbij.[49] A Deir ez Zor-based source stated that most of the reinforcements are from the Hamza Division, which is a member of the SNA's Joint Force.[50] The Joint Force includes the Hamza Division and the Suleiman Shah Brigade. The US Treasury Department has sanctioned both the Hamza Division and the Suleiman Shah Brigade for human rights abuses against Kurds.[51] Anti-SDF media claimed that a Turkish army convoy entered Jarabulus, north of Manbij, from Turkey and headed towards the Manbij countryside.[52] The reported SNA and Turkish reinforcements would support SNA efforts to fix the SDF units at Tishreen Dam and prevent them from reinforcing other positions along the frontline.

Several Syrian outlets reported on January 19 that the HTS-controlled Department of Military Operations, which is affiliated with the Syrian interim government, deployed forces to the SNA-SDF frontlines.[53] CTP-ISW cannot confirm local reporting, and the Syrian government has not acknowledged any deployment in Aleppo.

Negotiations will likely continue between the Syrian interim government and the SDF, despite Qasra's rejection of the SDF proposal. The HTS-led interim government and the SNA are likely collaborating by using military force to coerce the SDF to agree to disarm. Abdi reportedly asked Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader Masoud Barzani to intervene to stop Turkish attacks on the SDF in a recent meeting, even as Barzani appears to be trying to pressure the SDF to conclude an agreement with the SNA and Turkey.[54] Five sources directly involved in negotiations between the United States, Turkey, the SDF, and the HTS-led Syrian government told Reuters that all actors are showing more "flexibility" and "patience" than their hardline public statements might suggest.[55] Several of the sources said that these talks could set the stage for an agreement in the "coming months" for some Kurdish fighters to leave the northeast and other Kurdish fighters integrated into the Defense Ministry.[56] The Kurdish fighters that would exist in northeast Syria likely refer the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Abdi recently said that the PKK would withdraw from Syria if Turkey agreed to a ceasefire.[57]

Control of Terrain in Northern Syria

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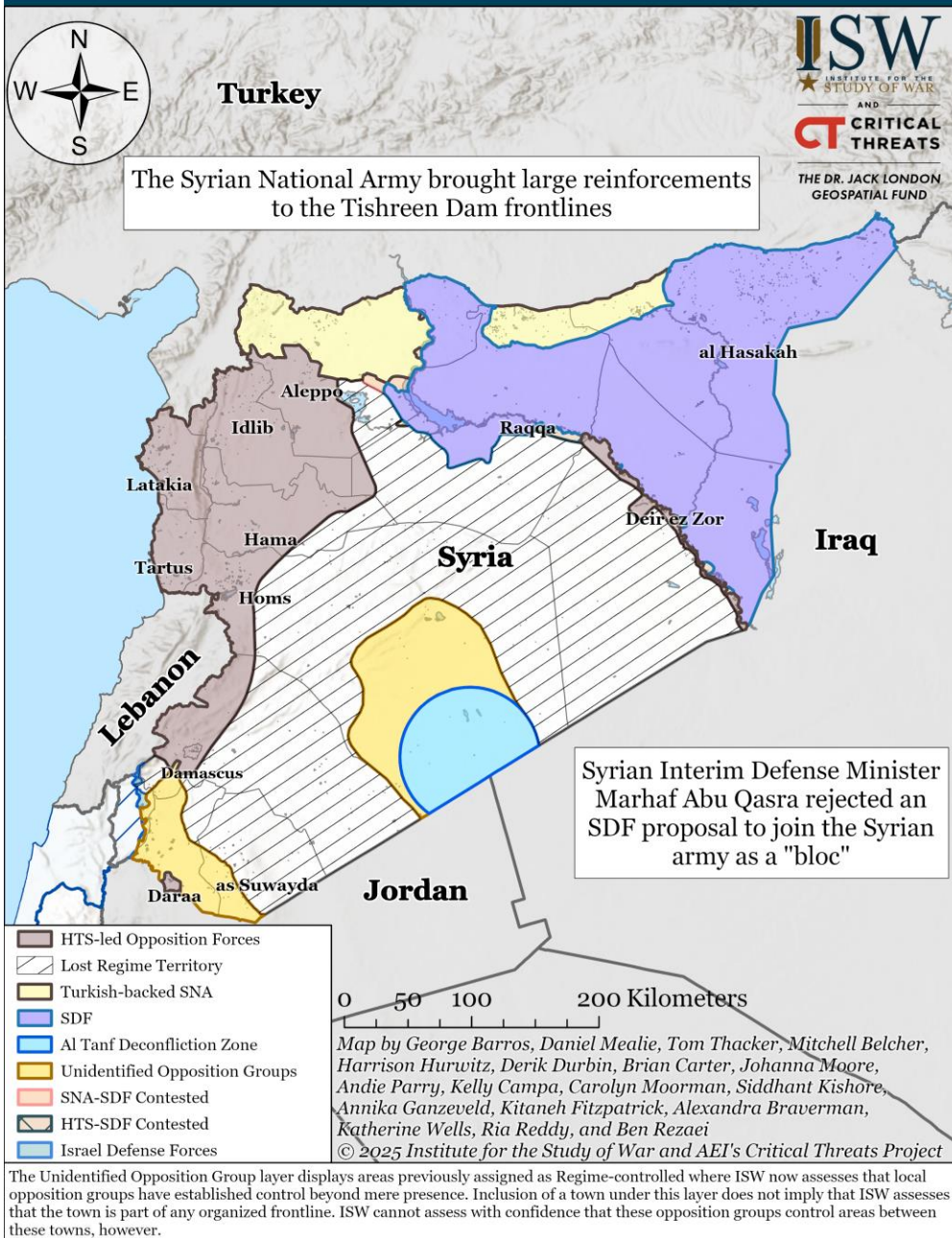
The Syrian Interim Defense Ministry announced that over 60 military factions agreed to join the new Syrian armed forces.[58] The HTS-led government has not yet announced how it intends to integrate these factions under the Defense Ministry. The Defense Ministry said on January 19 that it had met with over 60 military factions and that “all” had agreed to join Syria’s new military formation.[59] The Syrian interim government may decide to absorb HTS-aligned factions and functionally re-flag them as new Syrian army units, even as the Syrian government prevents the SDF from doing so. This would allow the HTS-led government to consolidate control over Syria’s defense and security apparatus and ameliorate concerns from its close allies about losing power. The Southern Operations Room (SOR), which had previously indicated that it sought to integrate into the army as a “pre-organized entity,” reached an “initial” agreement and has begun “extensive” preparations to integrate into the Defense Ministry, according to sources close to the “Eighth Brigade.”[60] The “Eighth Brigade” refers to former opposition fighters who reconciled with the Assad

regime and reorganized themselves as the "Eighth Brigade." Ahmed al Awda, the current SOR commander, led the Eighth Brigade. The details of this "initial agreement" are unclear, but HTS could decide to re-flag SOR-affiliated factions. Awda and his deputy Ali Bash reportedly recently visited Turkey to hold unspecified meetings about the "next stage."^[61]

The Defense Ministry announced that it will next work to compile data on military assets and human resources of armed factions.^[62] The Eighth Brigade reportedly has issued orders to all affiliated groups to prepare lists of fighters and assets to provide to the Defense Ministry.^[63] The Defense Ministry will hold new sessions to establish the army's structure and appoint leaders after the SOR and other factions send the data to the ministry.^[64] A committee will be formed to draft the Ministry's internal regulations.^[65] The Defense Ministry has not yet announced who will comprise this committee, but the committee would presumably have significant influence over the internal structure of the Defense Ministry and of Syria's armed forces. Syrian Interim Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra told Reuters on January 19 that he hopes to finish the integration process by the transitional government's expiration date on March 1.^[66]

Reported Control of Terrain in Syria

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Key Takeaways:

- **Gaza Strip Ceasefire:** The IDF withdrew from areas in the northern and southern Gaza Strip on January 19.
- **Iraqi Intelligence Community:** Iran and its partners in Iraq are continuing to try to gain control over the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS).

- **West Bank:** The IDF Central Command said it will deploy new forces to the West Bank to dissuade and prevent Palestinian militia attacks. Israel will release 1,000 Palestinian prisoners into the West Bank as part of the ceasefire-hostage deal, which informed the IDF decision to deploy new forces.
- **Syrian Defense Ministry Negotiations:** Syrian Interim Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra rejected Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Commander Mazloun Abdi’s proposal that the SDF join the Syrian Defense Ministry as a “military bloc.” The SDF is very unlikely to disarm itself while engaged in defensive operations against Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) attacks by groups that have repeatedly committed atrocities against Kurdish populations elsewhere in Syria.
- **Northern Syria:** Turkey and the Turkish-backed SNA also appear to be deploying and reinforcing elements along SDF frontlines on the Euphrates River and near Ain Issa.

Syria

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Reestablish ground lines of communication through Syria to Lebanon
- Reestablish Iranian influence in Syria

The SNA has continued to attempt to reduce the SDF bridgehead south of Tishreen Dam since CTP-ISW's last data cut-off on January 18. Anti-SDF media reported that the SNA engaged SDF fighters along the frontlines near Khirbet Zamala and Shosh al Bubna, south of Tishreen Dam, on January 19.[67] The SNA also reportedly launched an attack on the SDF from Tal Syriatel, west of Tishreen Dam.[68] Geolocated footage posted by the SDF on January 19 showed SDF strikes on an SNA-occupied building near Tal Syriatel.[69]

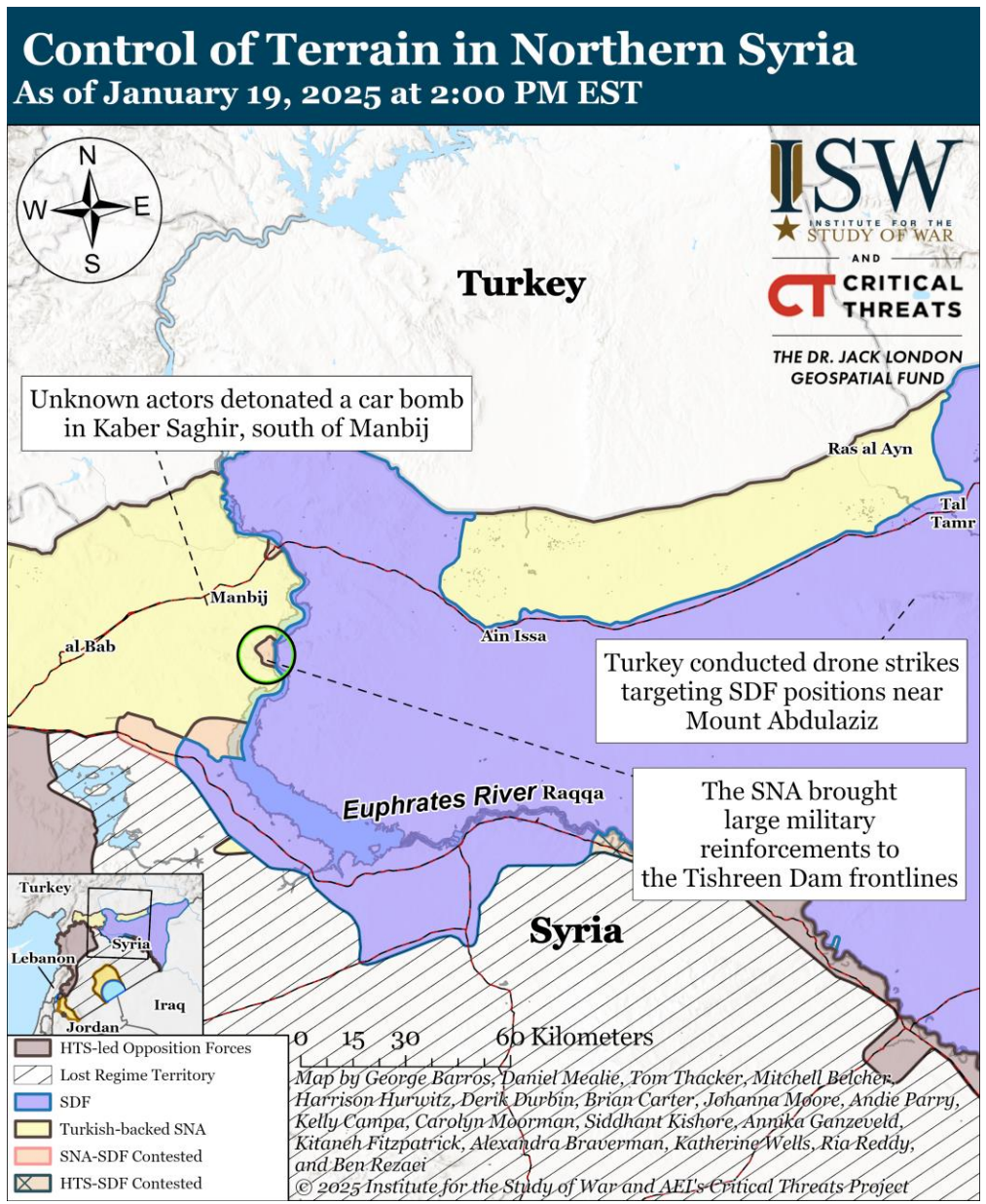
Turkey and the SNA continued to target SDF positions along eastern SDF-SNA lines of control since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on January 19. Anti-SDF media reported that the SNA shelled two SDF positions east of Ras al Ain.[70] Turkey reportedly conducted two drone strikes targeting SDF positions on Mount Abdulaziz, south of Tal Tamr.[71] The SNA also reportedly shelled SDF positions near Ain Issa.[72] The SNA has reportedly deployed reinforcements and mobilized along these lines of control, which suggests that the SNA is preparing to launch a potential offensive against the SDF from the east.[73]

Unknown fighters detonated a car bomb in SNA-controlled territory on January 19.[74] Syrian media reported that the car detonated while parked on the side of the road in Kaber Saghir, south of Manbij.[75] Syrian Civil Defense reported that three civilians were injured.[76] Unknown actors have detonated five other car bombs or VBIEDs in SNA-controlled territory since December 24.[77]

The HTS-led interim government is continuing to appoint HTS loyalists to senior political positions. The interim government appointed Ali Keda as the new Syrian interior minister on January 19.[78] Keda served as the prime minister of the HTS Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) in northwestern Syria from 2019 to 2024.[79] Keda also previously served as the deputy interior

minister for administrative affairs and public relations in the SSG.[80] Keda has attended many meetings alongside HTS leader Ahmed al Shara, Interim Foreign Minister Asaad al Shaibani, and Interim Intelligence chief Anas Khattab during the formation of the interim government.[81] Keda replaced Mohammad Abdul Rahman, whom the HTS-led interim government appointed as the new governor of Idlib.[82]

Iraqi National Security Advisor Qassem al Araji met with a group of pilgrims who recently returned from their pilgrimage to Shia Sayyida Zainab shrine in Damascus.[83] The pilgrims told Araji that they did not encounter any obstacles or problems during their pilgrimage and that the interim Syrian government fulfilled their duty to protect the shrine.



Iraq

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Strengthen Iranian and Axis of Resistance influence over the Iraqi state and society
- Harden the Iraqi government against internal dissent

Shia political parties walked out of parliament on January 19 in protest against an amendment to the Federal Budget Law that would benefit Kurdish parties.[84] The amendment would increase compensation for oil production and transportation costs in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region from around \$6 to \$16 per barrel of oil in return for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) resuming oil exports.[85] The KRG ceased oil exports to the Ceyhan Port in Turkey in March 2023 and has since then largely relied on the Iraqi federal government to pay public sector salaries.[86] The resumption of oil exports from the Iraqi Kurdistan Region would likely improve salary disbursements to public sector employees. The dispute over the budget amendment comes amid increased alignment between Sunni and Kurdish parties in recent weeks. Sunni politician Khamis al Khanjar, who helped found the United Sunni Leadership Coalition and is one of several major Sunni politicians in Iraq, stated on January 13 after meeting with KRG President Nechirvan Barzani that the Iraqi federal government must not withhold salaries from public sector employees in Iraqi Kurdistan, for example.[87]

Arabian Peninsula

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Harden the Houthi regime against internal dissent in Houthi-controlled areas
- Destroy the anti-Houthi opposition in order to control all of Yemen
- Erode Israeli will to continue the war in the Gaza Strip

The Houthis claimed that they conducted a cruise missile and drone attack that targeted the USS Harry S. Truman aircraft carrier in the northern Red Sea on January 18.[88] The Houthis claimed that they targeted the carrier and its accompanying naval vessels.

Houthi media reported that the United States conducted four airstrikes that targeted the al Azraqeen area, north of Sanaa city in Sanaa Governorate on January 18.[89] US Central Command did not confirm US airstrikes that targeted Houthi sites in Yemen at the time of this writing.

The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon

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
- Rebuild and reestablish Hezbollah in southern Lebanon
- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

The Gaza Strip

The IDF Air Force conducted airstrikes targeting several Palestinian militia positions across the Gaza Strip before the ceasefire went into effect on January 19.[90] The IDF Air Force targeted vehicles carrying Hamas fighters in the southern Gaza Strip on January 19.[91] IDF artillery also shelled militia infrastructure in the Gaza Strip prior to the start of the ceasefire.[92]

The IDF declared closed military zones around Nitzana and Karem Shalom border crossings and Yad Mordechai in southern Israel until January 24.[93] The IDF stated these announcements are part of the IDF's preparations for the implementation of the ceasefire.



Lebanon

The Washington Post reported on January 19 that the IDF has advanced into “dozens” of new positions in southern Lebanon since the ceasefire was enacted on November 27.[94] Israeli forces have destroyed “hundreds of buildings” as forces searched for weapons and other infrastructure in these towns.[95] The IDF said in a statement to the Post that it is “operating in accordance” with the ceasefire.[96] UNIFIL reported that Israeli forces have so far withdrawn from six positions in southern Lebanon.[97]

Commercially available satellite imagery captured on January 19 showed flattened terrain and cleared vegetation in the Yaroun Natural Reserve northwest of Yaroun, which indicates that Israeli tanks or bulldozers operated in the area. Israeli forces have not operated in this part of Yaroun since the beginning of Lebanon operations.

The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) reinforced positions in Ain Ebel, Dibal, Rmeish, Bint Jbeil, and Ainata on January 19 after Israeli forces withdrew from these areas.[98] Local media reported that the LAF positioned forces at ten points along roads leading from Bint Jbeil to Yaroun, Maroun al Ras, and Aitaroun.[99]

The LAF confirmed that unknown gunmen on the Syrian side opened fire on an LAF patrol on the Lebanese-Syrian border in the Qasr-Hermel area.[100] The LAF is following up on the incident.

assessed that the energy crisis, compounded by the dire economic conditions, could trigger internal unrest.[102]

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.

POWERED BY:



BABEL STREET

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