



## Iran Update, March 19, 2024

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Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm ET

*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.*

**Iran is likely concerned that Armenia's deteriorating relations with Russia and outreach to the West could increase NATO's presence along its northern border.** Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi discussed the security situation in the Caucasus with Russian President Vladimir Putin in a phone call on March 19.[1] Raisi told Putin that Iran is "ready to maintain stability" and protect Iran's strategic interests in the Caucasus.[2] Iran's interests in the Caucasus include keeping overland trade routes open, preventing Israel from using Azerbaijan's territory to operate against Iran, and preempting the spread of separatist sentiments among Iran's Azeri minority.[3] Russian readouts of Raisi and Putin's phone call notably did not mention that the pair discussed the Caucasus.[4]

Iranian leaders previously expressed concern that the United States and NATO would exploit the Russian focus on Ukraine to increase Western influence in the Caucasus. Iranian Supreme Leader Foreign Policy Advisor Ali Akbar Velayati, for example, warned Russia in July 2023 to not "neglect" the Caucasus because "ill-intending parties...would attack the interests of Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran." [5] Velayati also claimed that Turkey aspires to create a "pan-Turkic" belt stretching from Istanbul to Xinjiang that would "surround Iran from the north and Russia from the south" and "spread NATO's influence in the region." [6]

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's government has pursued closer ties with NATO and Western countries in recent months. The Armenian and French defense ministers signed an arms contract in late February 2024.[7] Armenia's foreign minister discussed normalizing ties with Turkey during a meeting with Turkey's foreign minister in Antalya, Turkey, on March 1.[8] Pashinyan separately stated that Armenia seeks to "continue and develop the existing political dialogue and expand our partnership with [NATO] and some of its members" during a meeting with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Yerevan on March 19.[9]

Raisi and Putin’s phone call on March 19 comes amid a deterioration in Russo-Armenian relations after Russia failed to support Armenia during Azerbaijan’s two-day offensive targeting Nagorno Karabakh in September 2023. Azerbaijan seized Nagorno Karabakh—an enclave in Azerbaijan previously home to a large Armenian population—during a two-day military offensive in September 2023.[10] Armenia began seeking external security assistance from parties other than Russia—Armenia’s traditional security partner—after the offensive, claiming that Russia had failed to help Armenia defend Nagorno Karabakh against Azerbaijan.[11] Armenia’s relations with Russia have further worsened in recent weeks. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan announced in late February 2024 that Armenia “froze” its participation in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).[12] The CSTO is a Russian-led security organization that, like NATO, requires member states to come to one another’s assistance if a member state is attacked.[13] Pashinyan later stated that the CSTO “creates a threat” to Armenia’s “security and territorial integrity.”[14] Pashinyan also called on Russia to remove its border guards from Armenia’s international airport in Yerevan in early March 2024.[15]

**The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) continued its raid at al Shifa Hospital on March 19.**[16] The IDF reported on March 18 that it had intelligence that senior Hamas officials were using the area to conduct and direct attacks in the Gaza Strip.[17] The IDF 162nd Division and Shin Bet led the raid targeting al Shifa Hospital and killed over 50 Palestinian fighters and detained 300 suspects during the operation.[18] The IDF detained Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas rocketry and intelligence personnel. Israeli forces also seized ammunition near the hospital. Palestinian militias, including Hamas, targeted Israeli forces operating at al Shifa Hospital at least six times.[19]

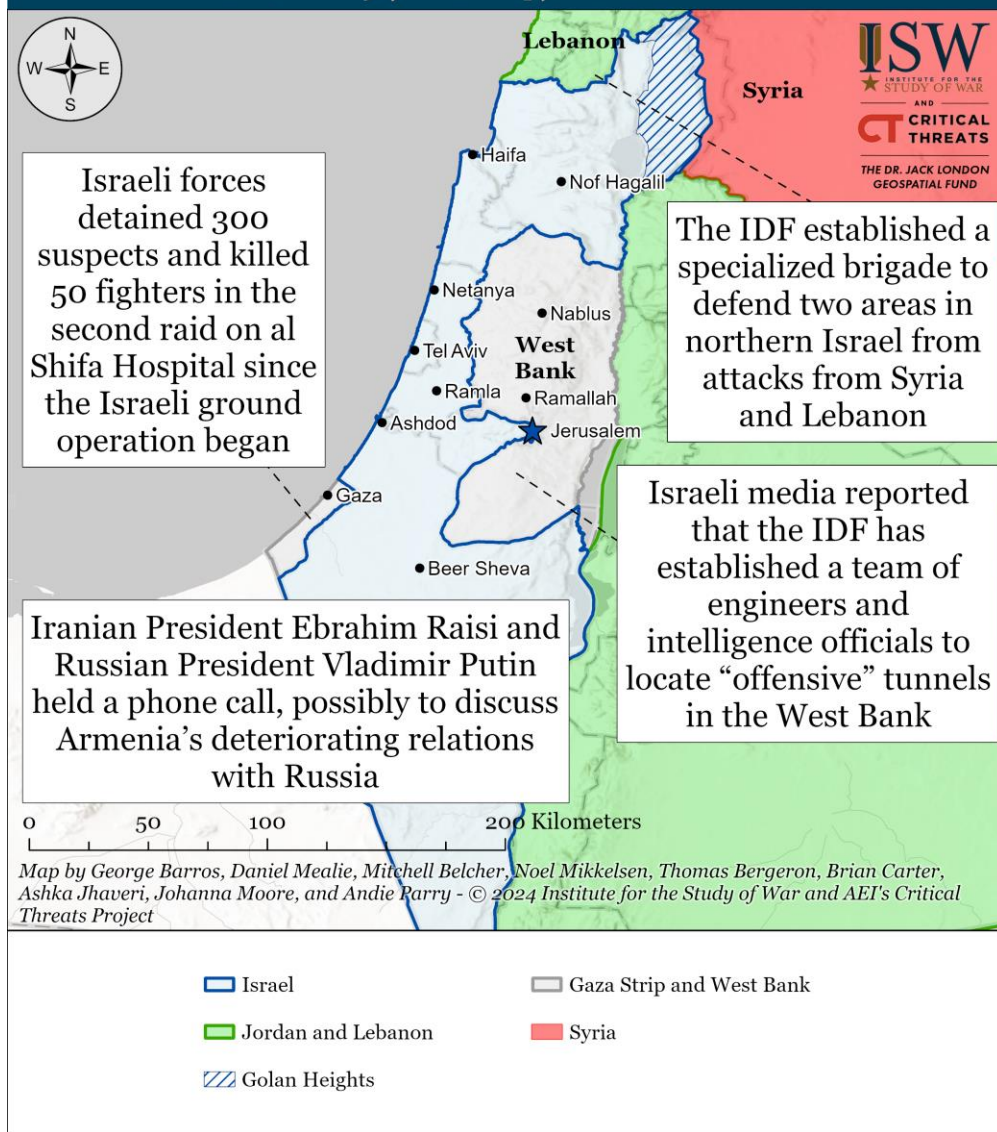
Hamas’ infiltration into the al Shifa Hospital area after Israel’s initial clearing operation highlights Hamas’ efforts to reestablish itself in the northern Gaza Strip. Hamas fighters conducted at least four attacks targeting Israeli forces in the al Shifa area on March 18 and 19, indicating Hamas retains some fighting forces near the hospital.[20] The large number of suspects that Israeli forces detained at al Shifa hospital also indicates the success of Hamas and its allies in rebuilding their fighting strength in the north.[21] Israeli forces initially expanded clearing operations to al Shifa Hospital in November 2023, targeting a Hamas tunnel network underneath the hospital.[22] Israeli forces began to decrease their presence in the northern Gaza Strip in December 2023, citing the degradation of Hamas forces in the area.[23] Hamas has sought to reconstitute militarily and rebuild its governing authority in the northern Gaza Strip after the Israeli drawdown. Israeli Army Radio reported in January 2024 that the Israeli military establishment assesses that Hamas is trying to restore its control over the civilian population in the northern Gaza Strip partly by rehabilitating local, Hamas-controlled police there.[24]

### **Key Takeaways:**

- **The Caucasus:** Iran is likely concerned that Armenia’s deteriorating relations with Russia and outreach to the West could increase NATO’s presence along its northern border. Iranian leaders previously expressed concern that the United States and NATO would exploit Russia’s focus on its invasion of Ukraine to increase their influence in the Caucasus.
- Iranian Supreme Leader Foreign Policy Advisor Ali Akbar Velayati, for example, warned Russia in July 2023 to not “neglect” the Caucasus because “ill-intending parties...would attack the interests of Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran.”
- Velayati also claimed that Turkey aspires to create a “pan-Turkic” belt that would “surround Iran from the north” and “spread NATO’s influence in the region.”

- **Northern Gaza Strip:** The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) continued its raid at al Shifa Hospital on March 19. Hamas' infiltration into the al Shifa Hospital area after Israel's initial clearing operation highlights Hamas' efforts to reestablish itself in the northern Gaza Strip.
- **Southern Gaza Strip:** IDF Egoz and Maglan special operations forces concluded clearing operations in Hamad, northern Khan Younis, on March 19.
- **West Bank:** Israeli media said on March 19 that the IDF has established a unit of engineers and intelligence personnel to locate "offensive" tunnels in the West Bank. The unit has not discovered any offensive tunnels in the West Bank at the time of this writing, according to Israeli media.
- **Lebanese Hezbollah in Syria:** Israel likely conducted multiple airstrikes targeting Hezbollah facilities in southern Syria.
- **Lebanese Hezbollah in the Region:** Senior Hezbollah official Wafiq Safa traveled to the UAE on March 19 to negotiate the release of Lebanese detainees suspected of having ties to Hezbollah, according to Lebanese media.

# Israel-Hamas War as of March 19, 2024, 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.

**See topline text for additional details on the al Shifa Hospital raid.**

**The IDF Nahal Brigade (162nd Division) continued clearing operations in the central Gaza Strip on March 19.**[25] Nahal Brigade forces killed several Palestinian fighters

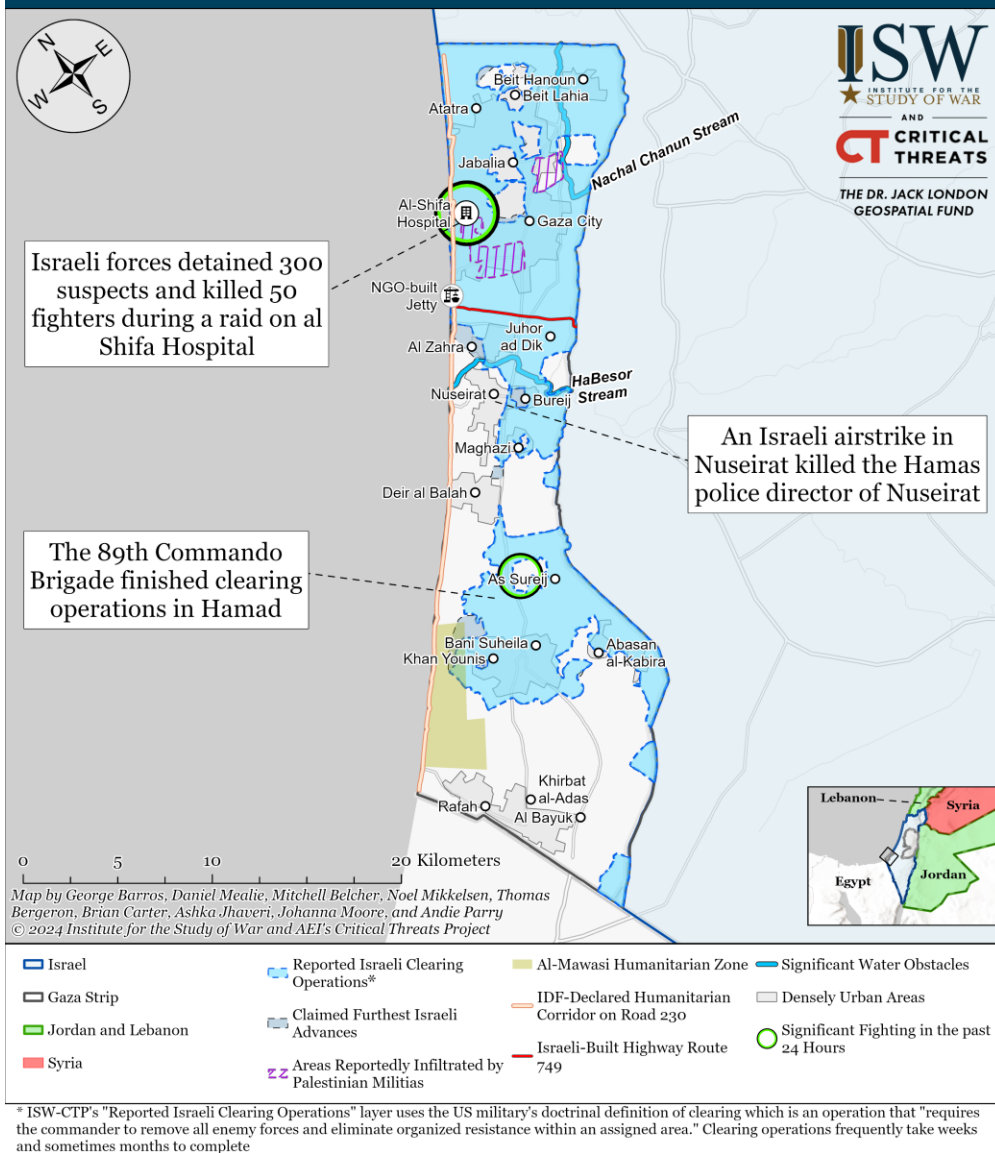
in the central Gaza Strip.[26] The IDF Nahal Brigade has been operating in the area between the northern and central Gaza Strip for two weeks.[27] The IDF has been constructing a highway in this area, which the IDF has dubbed the “Netzarim corridor.”[28] Palestinian militias continued to target Israeli forces in the Netzarim area with rocket and mortar fire.[29] Palestinian groups also fired rockets at Israeli armor and infantry in the eastern Central Governorate.[30]

**The IDF Egoz and Maglan special operations forces (SOF) concluded clearing operations in Hamad, northern Khan Younis, on March 19.**[31] Hamas-affiliated media said that Israeli forces departed Hamad on March 19.[32] Israeli forces expanded clearing operations into Hamad on March 3.[33] Israeli SOF raided a building used by a Hamas battalion deputy commander and killed over 100 Palestinian fighters during the two-week operation in Hamad.[34]

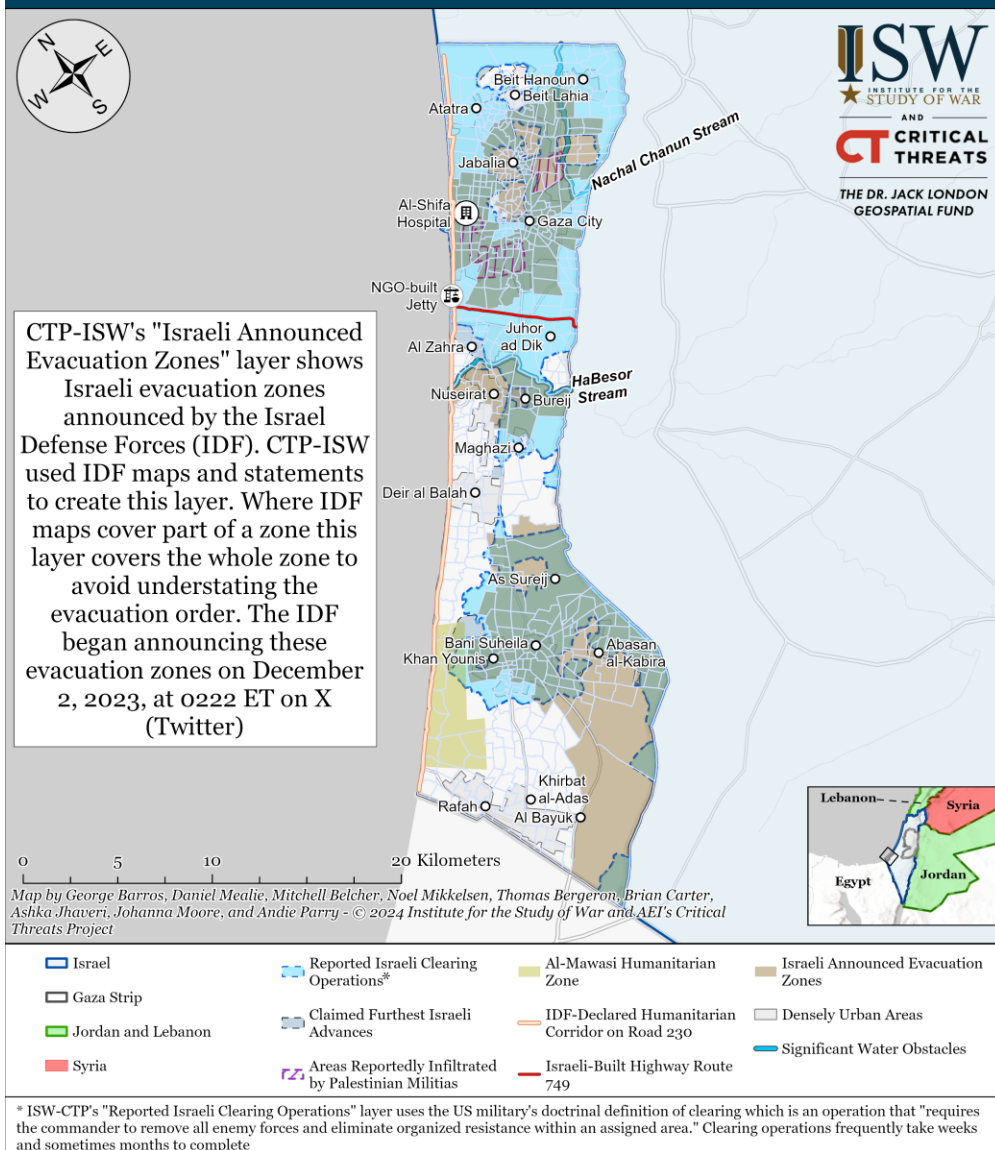
The IDF 7th Brigade (36th Division) continued clearing operations in Qarara, northern Khan Younis, on March 19.[35] The 7th Brigade targeted Palestinian fighters and militia infrastructure in Qarara on March 19, including a building that Palestinian fighters used to fire anti-tank guided missiles at Israeli forces on March 17.[36]

**Israeli forces are continuing to target Hamas police officers in the Gaza Strip.** The IDF has warned that all members of “the Hamas apparatus,” including Hamas police officers, are legitimate targets.[37] Hamas controls several internal security forces, including the Civil Police.[38] The Israeli Air Force killed the Hamas police director in the Nuseirat camp, Mahmoud al Bayoumi, on March 19.[39] An airstrike targeted his police vehicle.[40] An Israeli airstrike also killed a Hamas police lieutenant colonel in Jabalia on March 19.[41] Hamas-affiliated media said that the police officer facilitated aid deliveries to Jabalia Camp.[42] Hamas police officers, as well as Gazan clans and political factions, have provided escorts for aid convoys through the Gaza Strip.[43] Israel has sought to organize alternative security escorts for the shipments, including by using international private security contractors.[44] Israeli forces killed Faiq al Mabhouh, who is a senior official in the Hamas-run Interior Ministry, during their operation in al Shifa Hospital on March 18.[45]

# Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip as of March 19, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



# Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip as of March 19, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



Mossad Director David Barnea, who is the lead Israeli official responsible for ceasefire and hostage negotiations, departed Qatar after one day of indirect ceasefire talks in Qatar, according to the Qatari Foreign Ministry spokesperson.[46] Lower-level negotiating teams remain in Qatar.[47]

**Palestinian fighters did not conduct any indirect fire attacks from the Gaza Strip into Israel on March 19.**

## **West Bank**

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

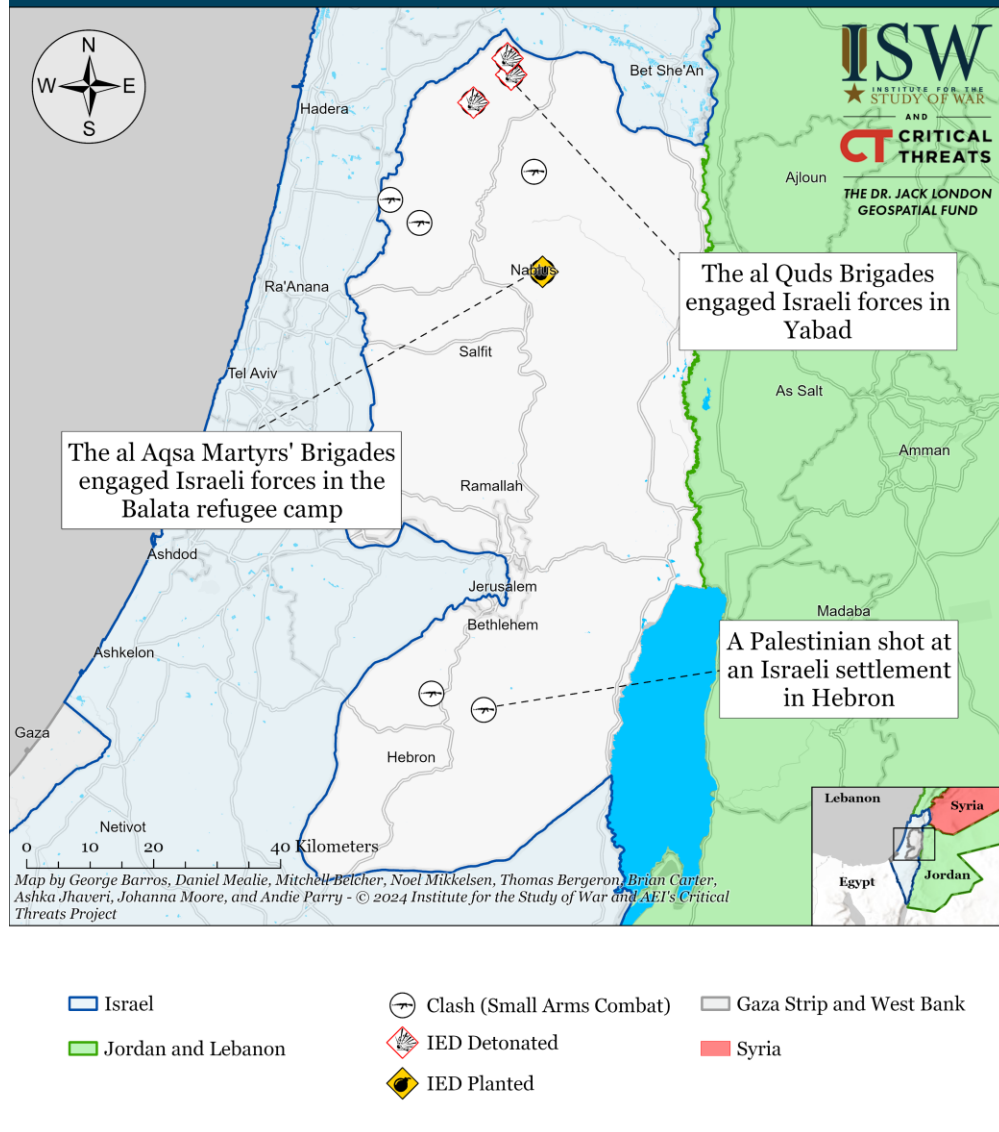
- Draw IDF assets and resources toward the West Bank and fix them there

**Israeli forces have engaged Palestinian fighters at least nine times in the West Bank since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on March 18.[48]** An al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades fighter fired small arms targeting Israeli forces in Gush Etzion, south of Bethlehem.[49] The fighter injured two Israeli Shin Bet officers before Israeli security forces killed him.[50] Israeli media reported that the fighter was from Jenin.[51]

**Israeli media said on March 19 that the IDF has established a unit of engineers and intelligence personnel to locate "offensive" tunnels in the West Bank.[52]** The IDF reportedly established the unit after residents in Bat Hefer, which is across the Israel-West Bank border from Tulkarm, heard digging noises near their homes. The unit has not discovered any offensive tunnels in the West Bank at the time of writing, according to Israeli media. An unspecified security official said that the unit is aware that "terrorist organizations [in the West Bank] are trying to mimic some of the combat methods in Gaza" and that these organizations use underground facilities for weapons storage.[53] The unit has located approximately five shafts in the Jenin refugee camp and Nour Shams refugee camp, but Israeli media said that the shafts did not lead to tunnels without elaborating further upon the nature of the shafts.[54] The IDF discovered one tunnel dozens of meters long in Jenin refugee camp in July 2023 that connected an apartment to a mosque, however.[55]



# Clashes in the West Bank as of March 19, 2024, 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

**Lebanese Hezbollah has conducted at least five attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on March 18.[56]**

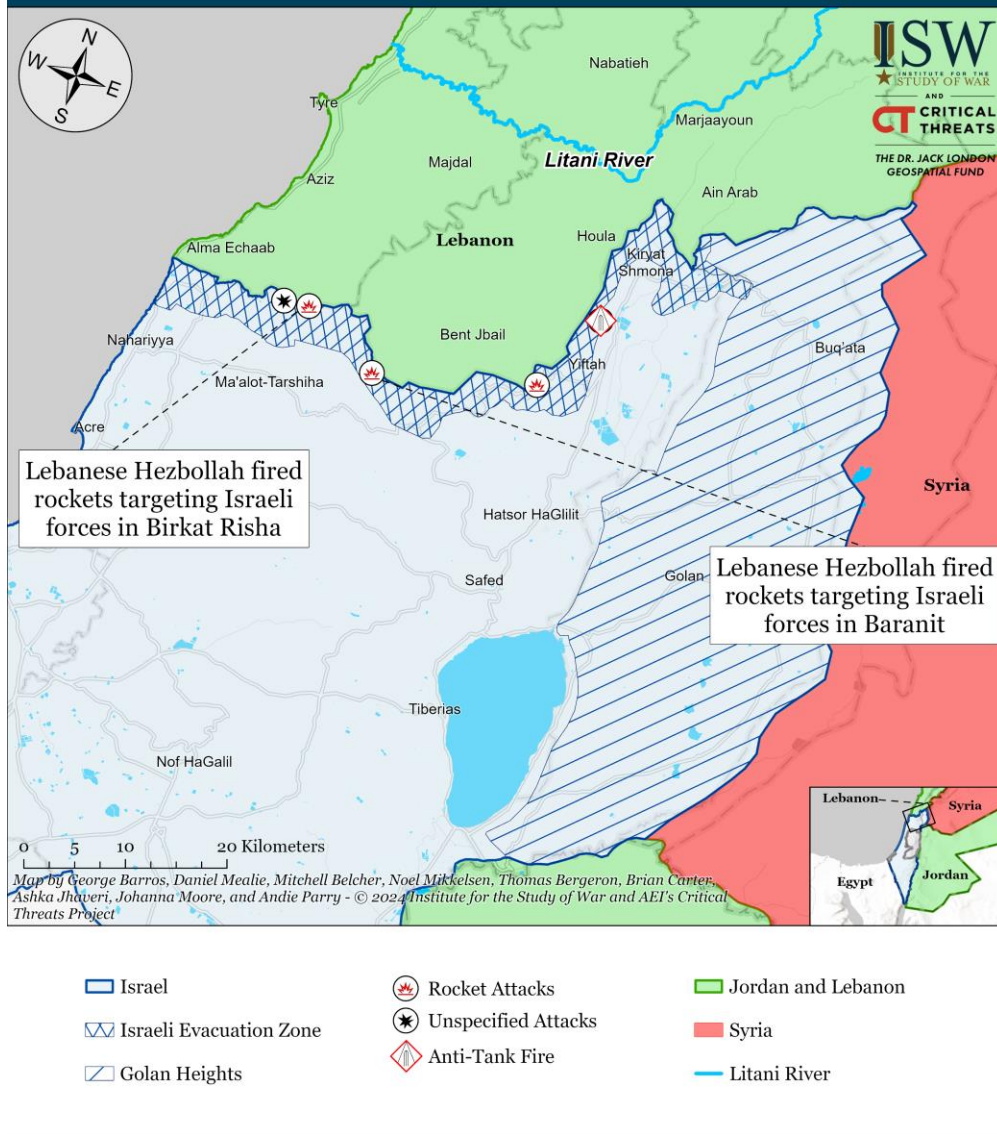
**The IDF established a specialized brigade on March 19 to defend two areas in northern Israel from attacks from Syria and Lebanon.[57]** The IDF created the new Mountain Brigade to “defend the Mount Dov and Mount Hermon sectors.” The brigade will replace the Hermon Brigade, which presumably operated in the same area. The IDF did not

explain whether the Hermon Brigade would relocate or merge with the Mountain Brigade. The new Mountain Brigade will specialize in combat in mountainous terrain and will begin operating in the next several weeks.

**Senior Hezbollah official Wafiq Safa traveled to the UAE on March 19 to negotiate the release of Lebanese detainees suspected of having ties to Hezbollah, according to Lebanese media.**[58] The UAE has previously detained dozens of Lebanese nationals over suspected ties to Hezbollah.[59] Safa is the head of Hezbollah’s Liaison and Coordination Unit.[60] This unit is responsible for coordination with Lebanese state entities, including political parties, Lebanese armed forces elements, and other state institutions. The unit is also responsible for bribing Lebanese officials to secure their assistance in covering up and enabling Hezbollah’s criminal activity.[61] The United States sanctioned Safa in July 2019 for serving as the head of Hezbollah’s security apparatus and using Lebanese ports and border crossings to smuggle weapons and transfer funds for Hezbollah.[62] Safa is also the Hezbollah official responsible for engaging the international community and Lebanon’s security forces, according to the US Treasury Department.[63]

**Israel likely conducted multiple airstrikes targeting Lebanese Hezbollah facilities in southern Syria on March 18.** The Syrian Defense Ministry said on March 19 that Syrian air defense systems intercepted at least one Israeli missile and that several other missiles struck unspecified military targets in the Damascus countryside.[64] Unspecified Syrian sources told Reuters that the strikes targeted Hezbollah ammunition depots near Yabroud in the Qalamoun Mountains north of Damascus.[65] An unspecified Western intelligence source said that the airstrike on March 18 also targeted “Hezbollah infrastructure” in Qutayfah, which is also north of Damascus.[66] Unspecified Syrian sources and “regional intelligence” claimed that Israel has increased its rate of strikes targeting Hezbollah infrastructure in southern Syria.[67] Yabroud and Qutayfah are located on main roads used by Iran and Iranian-affiliated militias to transport weapons and personnel through southern Syria and into Lebanon.

## Attacks into Northern Israel from Lebanon as of March 19, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



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

### 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

**International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi met with Syrian President Bashar al Assad and Syrian Foreign Affairs Minister Faisal Mekdad in Damascus on March 19.[68]** Grossi and Mekdad discussed “the factors that hinder cooperation” between the IAEA and Syria.[69] Emirati media previously reported that Grossi would likely discuss the suspected nuclear reactor in eastern Syria that Israel destroyed in

an airstrike in 2007.[70] The Syrian regime has denied that the site Israel struck in 2007 was a secret nuclear facility.[71] The IAEA concluded in 2011 that the site was “very likely” a nuclear reactor. Grossi said on March 19 that he visited Syria to “reignite high-level dialogue between the IAEA and Syria.”[72]

**IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri warned that Iran would retaliate if “foreigners” seize Iranian oil tankers anywhere in the world during a speech for the anniversary of the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry on March 18.[73]** Tangsiri is probably implicitly warning the United States. Iran has previously seized US commercial vessels in response to US seizures of Iranian vessels.[74] These US seizures aim to enforce sanctions on Iran.

**Iranian Oil Minister Javad Owji discussed bilateral cooperation and the oil market in a telephone call with Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak on March 19.[75]** The ministers discussed the development of unspecified oil and gas field projects. Iran previously signed memoranda of understanding (MoU) with Russian oil companies to develop oil and gas fields, invest in the energy sector, and construct liquefied natural gas plants.[76] The two sides have not moved forward with these MoUs by converting them into contracts.

**Former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki and Badr Organization Secretary General Hadi al Ameri reached an agreement to secure gubernatorial positions for their respective political parties.[77]** Maliki will nominate State of Law Coalition member Wadah al Tamimi as governor of Diyala Province and Ameri will nominate Fatah Alliance member Abbas al Zamili as governor of Qadisiyyah Province.[78] Zamili served as a member of the Qadisiyyah provincial council and as the head of the Badr Organization’s Shura Council in Qadisiyyah between 2016 and 2017.[79]

**The Houthis claimed a missile attack targeting the Marshall Islands–flagged, Greek-operated *MADO* tanker in an unspecified area of the Red Sea.[80]** The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations has not confirmed this attack on the *MADO* at the time of writing. The UKMTO previously reported two attacks on the *MADO* on March 15 and March 16, respectively.[81]

**The Houthis claimed a missile attack targeting Eilat, southern Israel, on March 19.** The IDF said on March 18 that a “suspicious aerial target” crossed into Israeli territory from the Red Sea and fell into an open area north of Eilat.[82]

**US CENTCOM conducted multiple preemptive strikes targeting Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen on March 18.[83]** CENTCOM said that it destroyed seven anti-ship missiles, three Houthi attack drones, and three weapons storage containers. Houthi-affiliated media previously reported on March 18 that the United States and the United Kingdom conducted 10 airstrikes targeting two Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen.[84]

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