

# Iran Update



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**August 20, 2024, Information Cutoff: 2:00pm 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. 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.*

*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.*

*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.*

**Senior Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) officials have continued signaling that Iran will attack Israel directly in response to Israel killing several senior Axis of Resistance leaders, including Hamas Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh, in recent weeks.** IRGC Deputy Commander Brigadier General Ali Fadavi warned on August 20 that Iran will “definitely” retaliate against Israel “at the suitable time and place.”<sup>[1]</sup> Fadavi also warned that Israel “will be punished more severely than before,” likely referring to the large-scale Iranian drone and missile attack on Israel in April 2024.<sup>[2]</sup> CTP-ISW previously assessed that Iran likely seeks to cause greater damage to Israel than it did in its April 2024 attack in order to restore deterrence with Israel.<sup>[3]</sup> The United States, Israel, and their allies intercepted most of the projectiles that Iran and its allies fired at Israel in April 2024, so that the Iranian attack inflicted significantly less

damage than Tehran intended.[4] IRGC spokesperson Brigadier General Ali Mohammad Naeini separately stated on August 20 that Iran is not rushing to retaliate against Israel.[5] Naeini, as the IRGC spokesperson, is the IRGC's chief media officer and responsible for external messaging. Naeini claimed that Iran's "right" to respond to Haniyeh's death is unrelated to current ceasefire-hostage negotiations between Israel and Hamas, which mirrors similar statements from senior Iranian political officials in recent days.[6] This statement notably differs from recent Western reports that Iran would refrain from attacking Israel if Israel reached a ceasefire-hostage agreement with Hamas.[7] The Western reports may reflect the views of more moderate factions, such as President Masoud Pezeshkian and his allies, within the regime, while the IRGC and Iranian security establishment more broadly still seemingly seeks to conduct a direct strike on Israel regardless of whether Israel and Hamas conclude a ceasefire-hostage agreement.[8] Naeini's remark that Iran is not rushing its retaliation is consistent with CTP-ISW's assessment that Iran is likely delaying its attack in part to stoke psychological terror among Israelis.[9]

**Disagreements between Egypt and Israel over control of the Egypt-Gaza Strip border remain an obstacle to a ceasefire-hostage agreement.** US, Egyptian, and Israeli negotiators in Cairo discussed control of the border area, known as the Philadelphi Corridor, on August 18 and 19.[10] Israeli negotiators presented a map at the talks showing Israel reducing its forces but maintaining full control of the corridor, according to unspecified Israeli officials speaking to Axios.[11] Controlling the Philadelphi Corridor will prevent Hamas and other Palestinian militias from rebuilding their capabilities quickly by interdicting smuggling into the Gaza Strip, as CTP-ISW has argued previously.[12] Axios reported that Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and the heads of the Israeli security services have concluded they can mitigate the risk of forces from the Philadelphi Corridor by building a monitoring mechanism over several months.[13] Arab media separately reported that Israel requested to introduce a written agreement that stipulates Israel's "supervision" over the Palestinian side of the Philadelphi Corridor to the Camp David Accords peace deal with Egypt.[14] Egypt had previously threatened to suspend the Camp David Accords over an Israeli presence along the corridor.[15] Egypt denied the proposal that would permit a reduced Israeli force presence along the corridor and the request to formally alter the Camp David Accords terms.[16] Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told Israeli hostages' families on August 20 that "under no circumstances" will Israeli forces leave the Philadelphi Corridor.[17] Hamas rejected the most recent US proposal for changing previously agreed upon terms, including allowing a reduced Israeli force presence along the Philadelphi Corridor.[18] Hamas has consistently demanded a full Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip under a ceasefire deal.[19]

**Israeli forces recovered the bodies of six Israeli hostages in a tunnel in Khan Younis on August 20.**[20] The IDF 35th Paratroopers Brigade, the 75th Armored Battalion (7th Brigade), Yahalom special operations engineers, and Shin Bet forces operated under the IDF 98th Division to retrieve the bodies.[21] The IDF stated that precise intelligence from Shin Bet enabled the operation.[22] Israeli forces located a 10-meter-deep tunnel shaft that led to a tunnel system where Israeli forces located the hostages' bodies.[23] The IDF added that Israeli forces searched nearby buildings and killed several Palestinian fighters in the area before the operation.[24] Palestinian fighters guarding the tunnel were killed or fled as Israeli forces approached the area.[25] An Israeli military correspondent reported that the operation was the "fastest" recovery operation conducted during the war.[26] The military correspondent reported that the Israeli forces had achieved

“operational control” in a single day over one of the neighborhoods in which the hostages’ bodies were believed to be held.[27] The IDF did not specify in which neighborhood the recovery operation occurred. The IDF 35th Paratroopers Brigade expanded operations to western Khan Younis on August 18 and advanced into Hamad neighborhood—an area formerly designated as part of the al Mawasi humanitarian zone until the IDF declassified it on August 16.[28]

**Several Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have threatened to resume attacks targeting US forces in order to expel the United States from the Middle East.** These militias may be responding to the Iraqi Foreign Affairs Ministry stating on August 15 that it has postponed its announcement of the end of the US-led International Coalition’s mission to defeat ISIS.[29] Ashab al Kahf announced on August 19 that it changed its name to Kataib Sarkhat al Quds (meaning “Screams of al Quds Brigades”) and that the militia may resume attacking US forces around August 25.[30] The group added that its renaming is meant to reflect that its objectives are not limited to Iraq. A senior member of Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba similarly told Emirati-owned media that Iraqi militias are resuming attacks targeting US forces due to US “procrastination and stalling” on withdrawing from Iraq.[31] An Iranian-backed militia leader likewise emphasized to Lebanese media the readiness of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias to attack US forces.[32]

The militia leader, named Haydar al Moussawi, separately boasted that Iraqi militias have “new strategies” for attacking US forces due to military collaboration with the Houthis.[33] This statement reflects the growing military relationship across these parties, though Moussawi did not elaborate on these strategies. CTP-ISW has reported extensively on how the military relationship has deepened particularly in recent months.[34] A US self-defense strike in Iraq in July 2024 killed a senior Houthi officer and drone expert at an Iraqi militia stronghold.[35] The Houthi officer had traveled to Iraq to train Iranian-backed Iraqi militias on drone warfare. The Houthis and Iraqi militias have separately conducted several combined attacks on Israel throughout the Israel-Hamas war. [36]

**IRGC Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian will likely keep his current position as secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) under the Masoud Pezeshkian administration, according to United Kingdom-based Amwaj Media.**[37] Ahmadian is a hardline IRGC officer with close connections across the IRGC leadership.[38] Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei advised President Pezeshkian to keep Ahmadian for at least one or two years, according to the Amwaj Media report.[39] The Iranian president is nominally responsible for appointing the SNSC secretary, although the appointment requires the backing of the supreme leader. Former President Ebrahim Raisi appointed Ahmadian as SNSC secretary in May 2023.[40] Ahmadian replaced IRGC Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani, who had held the position from 2013 to 2021.[41] Ahmadian was Shamkhani's deputy, when the latter was IRGC Navy commander from 1988 to 1997.[42]

Amwaj Media also reported that Pezeshkian had considered four other candidates to be SNSC secretary before Khamenei advised him to keep Ahmadian. The four candidates were reformist former IRGC Navy officer Hossein Alaei, Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations Saeed Iravani, former presidential candidate and justice minister Mostafa Pour Mohammadi, and former SNSC secretary and former parliament speaker Ali Larijani.[43] All the candidates have connections to varying degrees to the moderate-reformist bloc. Alaei, for instance, implicitly criticized Khamenei for his

handling of the Green Movement in 2009.[44] Alaei's criticism prompted senior IRGC officials to condemn Alaei and pressure him into issuing a public apology.[45] Pezeshkian had no obvious reason to expect Khamenei to approve these candidates, especially Alaei, suggesting that Pezeshkian considering such figures was meant to appeal to the moderate-reformist bloc and frame Pezeshkian as advocating for its platform.

### **Key Takeaways:**

- **Iranian attack on Israel:** Senior Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) officials have continued signaling that Iran will attack Israel directly in response to Israel killing several senior Axis of Resistance leaders, including Hamas Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh, in recent weeks.
- **Israel-Hamas ceasefire-hostage negotiations:** Disagreements between Egypt and Israel over control of the Egypt-Gaza Strip border remain an obstacle to a ceasefire-hostage agreement.
- **Iraq:** Several Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have threatened to resume attacks targeting US forces in order to expel the United States from the Middle East.
- **Iran:** IRGC Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian will likely keep his current position as secretary of the Iranian SNSC under the Masoud Pezeshkian administration, according to United Kingdom-based Amwaj Media.

# Key Takeaways in the Israel-Hamas War

As of August 20, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



## 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 Air Force struck a Hamas command and control site in a school in southern Rimal, western Gaza City, on August 20.[46]** The IDF said that it targeted Palestinian fighters operating at Mustafa Hafez School.[47] The IDF added that Hamas used the site to plan and conduct attacks.[48] The IDF said that it took steps to reduce civilian harm, including using certain munitions

and aerial surveillance.[49] Palestinian sources reported that 10 Palestinians were killed in the attack and that the school housed displaced Palestinians.[50]

**The IDF 252nd Division continued to operate around the Netzarim Corridor on August 20.[51]** The 252nd Division has killed Palestinian fighters near the corridor over the past day. The IDF 16th Reservist Brigade and IDF Air Force killed two Palestinian fighters who emerged from a tunnel shaft and attempted to plant an improvised explosive device (IED) near Israeli forces.[52] Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades launched mortars and rockets targeting Israeli forces around the corridor.[53]

**The IDF 98th Division continued clearing operations in Khan Younis on August 20.** Israeli forces killed Palestinian fighters and destroyed militia infrastructure in the Khan Younis area.[54] Israeli forces also destroyed launching pads from which Palestinian fighters fired rockets into Israeli territory.[55] Israeli forces conducted targeted raids in the area and located weapons and other military equipment.[56]

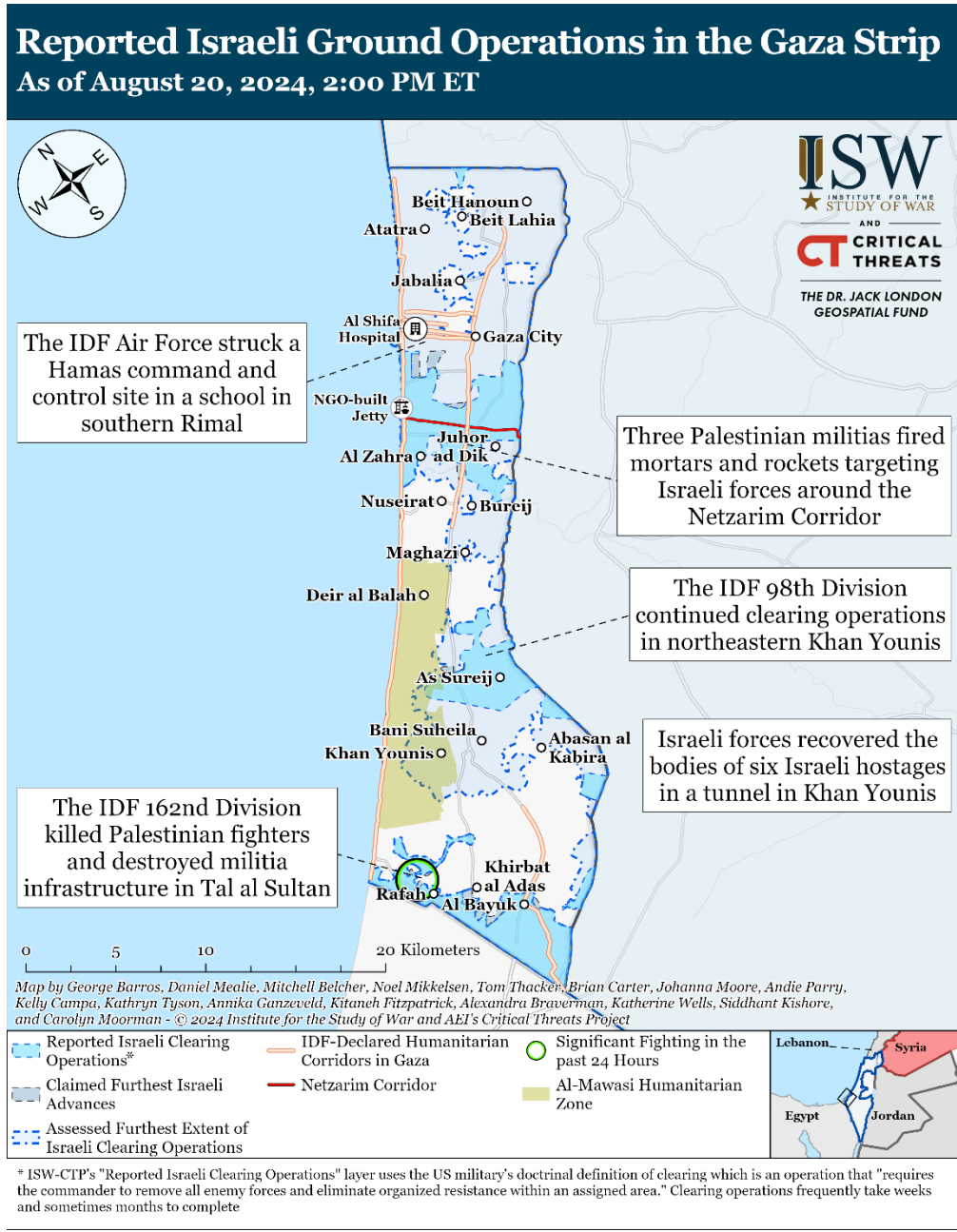
**Israeli forces have likely advanced further north towards Deir al Balah since August 18.** The IDF stated that its 7th Brigade advanced north from Khan Younis to the “outskirts of Deir al Balah” on August 18.[57] Commercially available satellite imagery captured on August 19 showed flattened terrain and destroyed buildings northeast of al Qarara and in Wadi as Salqa, indicating that Israeli tanks or bulldozers recently operated in the area. A local Palestinian source reported IDF vehicle fire in al Muhaten, north of al Qarara.[58] PIJ and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades mortared Israeli forces in al Qarara.[59]

**Palestinian sources reported that Israeli forces continued to operate in Hamad neighborhood, west of Khan Younis, on August 20.[60]** Hamas and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades mortared Israeli forces north of Hamad neighborhood.[61] A Palestinian journalist reported IDF vehicle fire in the area and claimed that Palestinians in Asdaa received an evacuation order.[62] The IDF has not confirmed any new evacuation orders for the area at the time of this writing.

**The IDF stated that Israeli aircraft munitions killed an IDF officer and wounded six Israeli soldiers in Khan Younis on August 19.[63]** An IDF probe found that Israeli fighter jets were striking multiple targets in Khan Younis when one of the aircraft missiles malfunctioned.[64] The missile struck a building where Israeli forces were stationed around 300 meters away from the intended target.[65] The malfunction killed an officer in the IDF 35th Paratroopers Brigade's reconnaissance unit and injured six others.[66] The IDF Air Force said that a malfunction occurred in the missile navigation system and called the incident an “outlier.”[67]

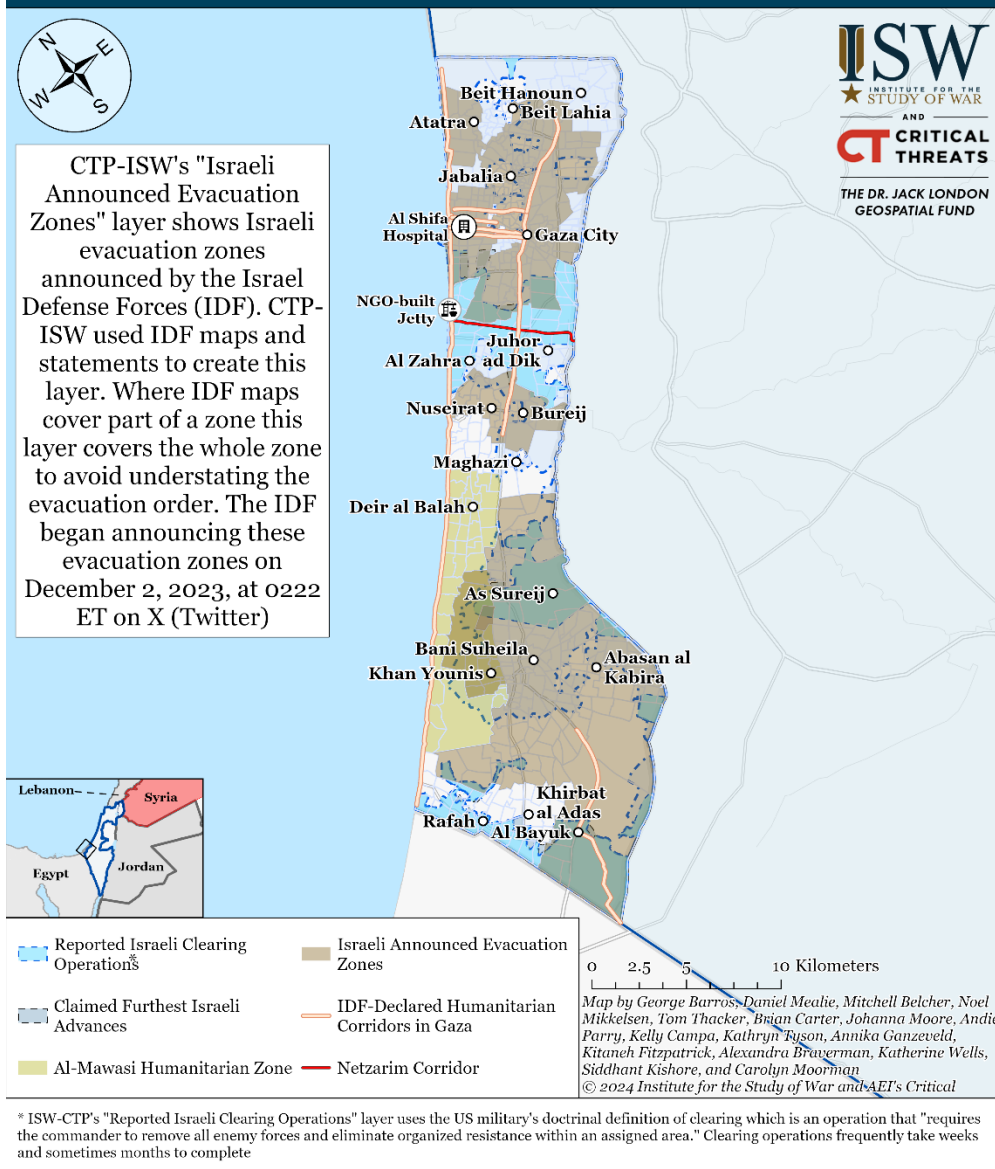
**The IDF 162nd Division continued to operate in Rafah on August 20.[68]** Israeli forces killed 40 Palestinian fighters in ground engagements and airstrikes in Tal al Sultan.[69] The IDF Nahal Brigade identified Palestinian fighters with a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) in a military building in Tal al Sultan.[70] The IDF Air Force struck the building.[71] Palestinian militias claimed seven attacks targeting Israeli forces in several sectors of Tal al Sultan.[72] Hamas fighters fired small arms, RPGs, and thermobaric rockets targeting Israeli forces and detonated an IED targeting Israeli

armor in Tal al Sultan.[73] The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades and Martyr Abdul Qader al Hussein Brigades targeted Israeli armor with anti-tank projectiles and IEDs.[74] Palestinian militias engaged Israeli forces in other sectors of Rafah as well. The DFLP detonated an IED targeting an IDF unit in al Salam, east of Rafah City.[75] The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades and Martyr Abdul Qader al Hussein Brigades targeted an IDF soldier with sniper fire in Yabna refugee camp.[76]





## Israeli-Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip As of August 20, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



**A kidnapping incident in the central Gaza Strip on August 20 indicates the break down of Hamas governance across the Gaza Strip.** A Palestinian journalist reported that unknown gunmen kidnapped a Palestinian bank manager in Nuseirat in the central Gaza Strip.[77] The incident is emblematic of Hamas' weakening hold on its governance and security presence in the Gaza Strip. Hamas police have reportedly "disappeared," and criminal groups with unclear affiliations have reportedly emerged in the resulting security vacuum.[78] Robbery and looting of humanitarian aid and other supplies has become increasingly common.[79] A previous local report on August 2 indicated that unspecified actors had looted medical equipment from Gazan hospitals across the Gaza Strip.[80] Israeli security officials said that Hamas' ability to govern has been "severely compromised"



by the war.[81] The IDF has previously targeted and killed several Hamas police officers or security officials in its effort to destroy Hamas' rule on the strip.[82]

**Israeli forces seized an anti-tank RPG launcher and two "warheads" in central Israel on August 20.[83]** Israeli police discovered the anti-tank RPG launcher and warheads during a search operation in Netanya.[84] Israeli forces suspect that the weapons belonged to Hamas. Israeli security forces separately seized small arms, including an AK-47 rifle, a shotgun, a magazine, and an unspecified quantity of ammunition in Tayibe, central Israel, on August 20.[85] It is unclear how the seized weapons reached central Israel. The weapons seizure comes after Hamas threatened to conduct more suicide attacks in Israel after claiming a suicide attack in Tel Aviv on August 19.[86]

## **West Bank**

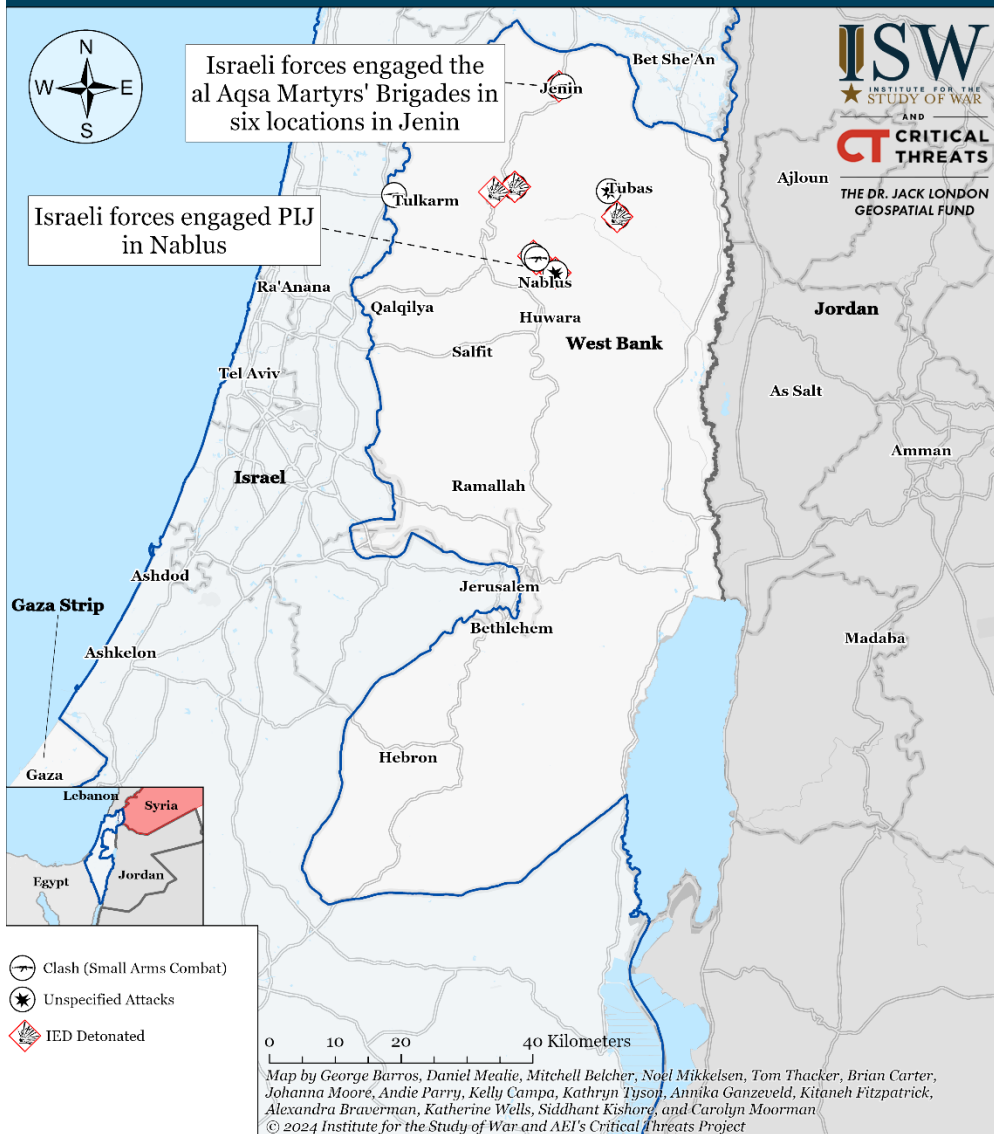
### **Axis of Resistance objectives:**

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

**Israeli forces have engaged Palestinian fighters in at least 14 locations in the West Bank since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on August 19.[87]** The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades and PIJ conducted separate small arms and improvised explosive devices (IED) attacks targeting Israeli forces in several locations in Jenin, Nablus, and Tubas.[88]

# Significant Activity in the West Bank

As of August 20, 2024 at 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 objectives:**

- Deter Israel from conducting a ground operation into Lebanon
- Prepare for an expanded and protracted conflict with Israel in the near term
- Expel the United States from Syria

**Iranian-backed militias, including Lebanese Hezbollah, have conducted at least nine attacks into northern Israel since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on August 19.[89] Hezbollah**

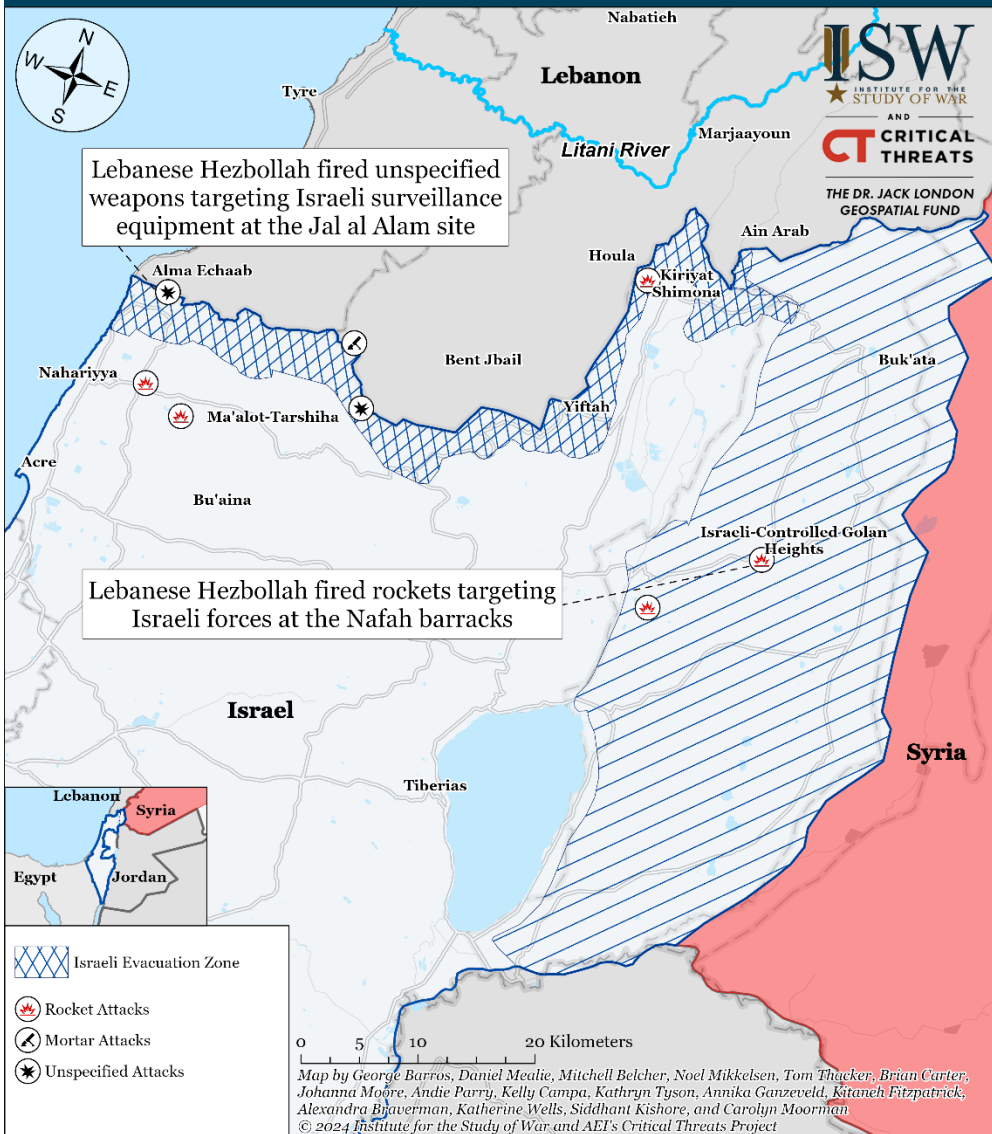
stated that it conducted some of the attacks in response to recent Israeli airstrikes in southern Lebanon.[90] The IDF stated that it detected at least 75 rockets launched from southern Lebanon into northern Israel and the Golan Heights.[91] The IDF intercepted some of the rockets, and the rest landed in open areas and caused fires.[92]

**PIJ praised Hezbollah in a statement on August 20 for supporting the Palestinian “resistance” against Israel.[93]** PIJ referenced a speech from Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, who had claimed that Israel is weaker “than a spider’s web.” PIJ also thanked the broader Axis of Resistance for supporting the Palestinian cause.

**Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said on August 20 that Israel’s “center of gravity” is shifting from the Gaza Strip to northern Israel.[94]** Gallant made this comment during a meeting with leaders from the IDF 36th Division in northern Israel. Unspecified US officials told CNN in June 2024 that Israeli officials were planning to shift resources from the Gaza Strip to northern Israel in preparation for a possible offensive against Hezbollah.[95]

# Attacks into Northern Israel from Lebanon

As of August 20, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



## Iran and Axis of Resistance

**The IRGC Quds Force may be preparing Iranian-backed forces in eastern Syria for a potential Iranian retaliatory strike on Israel.** The IRGC Quds Force commander in Damascus reportedly summoned on August 19 senior Iranian-backed militia leaders from Albu Kamal in eastern Syria for a week-long meeting.[96] Local anti-Syrian regime media reported that the leaders intend to discuss enhancing the combat capabilities of Iranian-backed forces in Deir ez Zor Province.[97] Fifty Iranian-backed militants from Albu Kamal separately attended a “commando” training course in Damascus during the same time period.[98] CTP-ISW previously assessed that Iran could in its direct attack on Israel order Iranian-backed militants in Deir ez Zor Province to attack US positions in eastern Syria while Iran simultaneously fires drones and missiles at Israel.[99] Iranian-backed militia attacks targeting US positions could, in some circumstances, pull US attention and resources away

from identifying and intercepting projectiles bound for Israel.[100] Iranian leaders may calculate that their projectiles have a higher likelihood of penetrating Israeli air defenses if the United States must focus on defending its own forces. Iran may alternatively inform Iranian-backed militia commanders in eastern Syria about the timeline or method of an Iranian attack on Israel so local commanders can enact force protection measures during and immediately after the strike.

**Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian’s interior minister nominee, Eskandar Momeni, presented his agenda to Parliament on August 20.**[101] Momeni emphasized the need for security, peace, and harmony in Iranian society. Momeni stated that he would seek to protect “Islamic values” and “repair social harms,” indicating his support for enforcing mandatory veiling. Momeni also stated that he will prioritize improving border security and preventing the entry of illegal immigrants into Iran. The Iranian Law Enforcement Command recently announced plans to deport all illegal immigrants from Iran by the end of the current Persian calendar year, which ends in March 2025.[102]

**Russian state media reported on August 20 that Iran and Belarus will conduct a combined military exercise in Iran in the near future.**[103] Iran and Belarus are still determining the date and location of the exercise. This announcement follows Belarusian Air Force and Air Defense Force Commander Major General Andrei Yulianovich Lukyanovich’s meetings with several senior Artesh officials in Tehran on August 7 and 8.[104]

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