

Iran Update



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Information Cutoff: 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.

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.

Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) leader Abu Mohammed al Jolani is attempting to consolidate HTS’s political and military control in a post-Assad interim Syrian government. The HTS-led military coalition has secured control over key civil and security services since the interim Syrian Salvation Government was established on December 9.[1] HTS-led opposition forces have assumed control over the Syrian state media outlet SANA and local police forces, which has enabled the HTS-led opposition to disseminate and enforce official government edicts.[2] HTS has also appointed loyal members to ministerial positions within the interim government to guarantee HTS’s role in shaping policies and the new Syrian constitution during this critical transition period.[3] HTS—and Jolani in particular—is attempting to impose a *fait accompli* in which it controls the Syrian government, thus enabling it to influence Syria for the foreseeable future.

Jolani and HTS may find it difficult to subordinate other Syrian groups to the control of the HTS-controlled interim government. Other Syrian groups, including southern opposition forces and the SDF, have not yet subordinated themselves to Jolani’s control. The leaders of the Southern Operations Room, an opposition group that now controls most of southwestern Syria, met with Jolani on December 11 to discuss coordination in military and civil affairs.[4] The meeting probably discussed the future of the Syrian government while focusing on “coordination.” These leaders did not explicitly endorse the central government, though noted the importance of a “unified effort” and “cooperation.”[5] The leaders of the Southern Operations Room previously fought against Jolani and the HTS predecessor and al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra in the mid-2010s as part of the Southern Front.[6] The SDF also appears to be preparing itself for negotiations that would create a broader-based Syrian government that is not under Jolani’s control. The SDF voiced support for a ceasefire but did not explicitly voice its support for the HTS-led government.[7] The SDF’s position may harden further as Arab contingents within the SDF defect to HTS.[8]

More extremist and sectarian groups within the HTS coalition may not adhere to HTS’s vow to respect Syria’s religious and sectarian minorities, which would likely trigger sectarian violence in Syria.[9] A Christian journalist from a formerly pro-regime radio station said

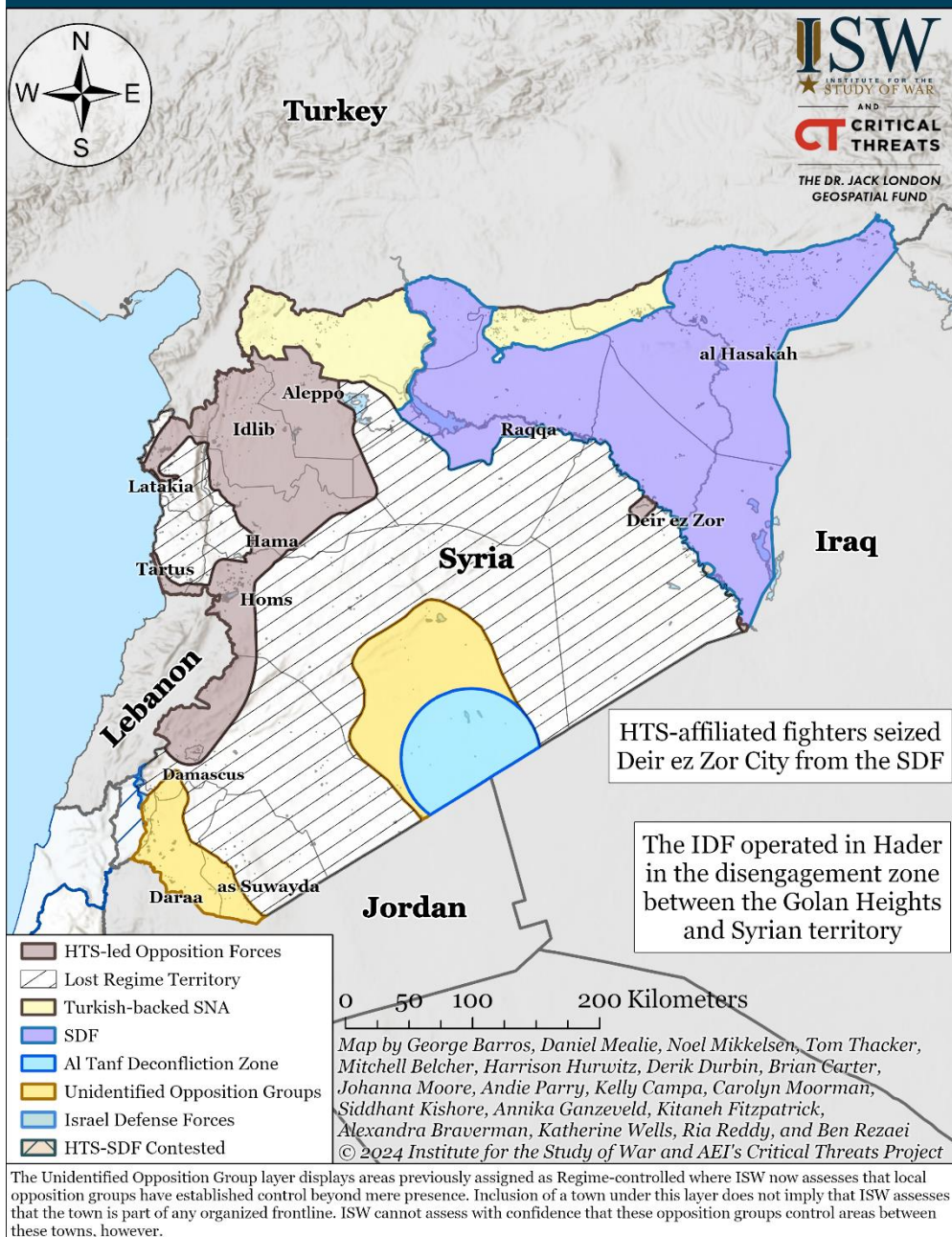
on December 10 that an HTS-led opposition member asked her about her religious and sectarian background during an encounter in Damascus and asked if she was “Christian, Alawi, Shiite, or Druze.”[10] It is unclear which specific organization in the opposition coalition controlled this member. This type of harassment could rapidly transform into a way for more extreme and sectarian organizations to identify and kill religious minorities in Syria. This particular incident is relatively minor, and CTP-ISW has not yet observed a well-organized campaign to intimidate, coerce, or kill religious and sectarian minorities. There have been other reports of individual revenge killings targeting “Alawites” and “Assad loyalists,” however.[11]

These incidents—though the incidents remain isolated and relatively independent of each other at this time—create opportunities for extreme and sectarian groups to incite further religious- or sectarian-based violence to destabilize a future Syrian government. HTS is an organization consisting of numerous Syrian Islamist opposition groups formed in 2017 with varying degrees of representation in the group’s leadership, however.[12] It is unclear which factions of HTS are involved in these instances of sectarian violence or if they are coordinated activities amongst several factions. **CTP-ISW will continue to report revenge killings and sectarian- or religious-based incidents and violence due to the risk that these events can rapidly destabilize the situation in Syria.**

Fateh Mubin fighters seized a Captagon factory at Mezzeh Military Airbase on December 11.[13] The opposition fighters claimed that they discovered “millions” of Captagon pills, raw drug materials, and production equipment within an Air Force Intelligence building on the airbase.[14] The Assad regime and its Iranian-backed partners mass-produced Captagon in Syria for years and smuggled it through Jordan to the Gulf Arab states through a smuggling and distribution cartel that has generated billions of dollars in revenue for Iran and its Axis of Resistance.[15] HTS has not explicitly stated that it will halt Captagon supply lines into Jordan.

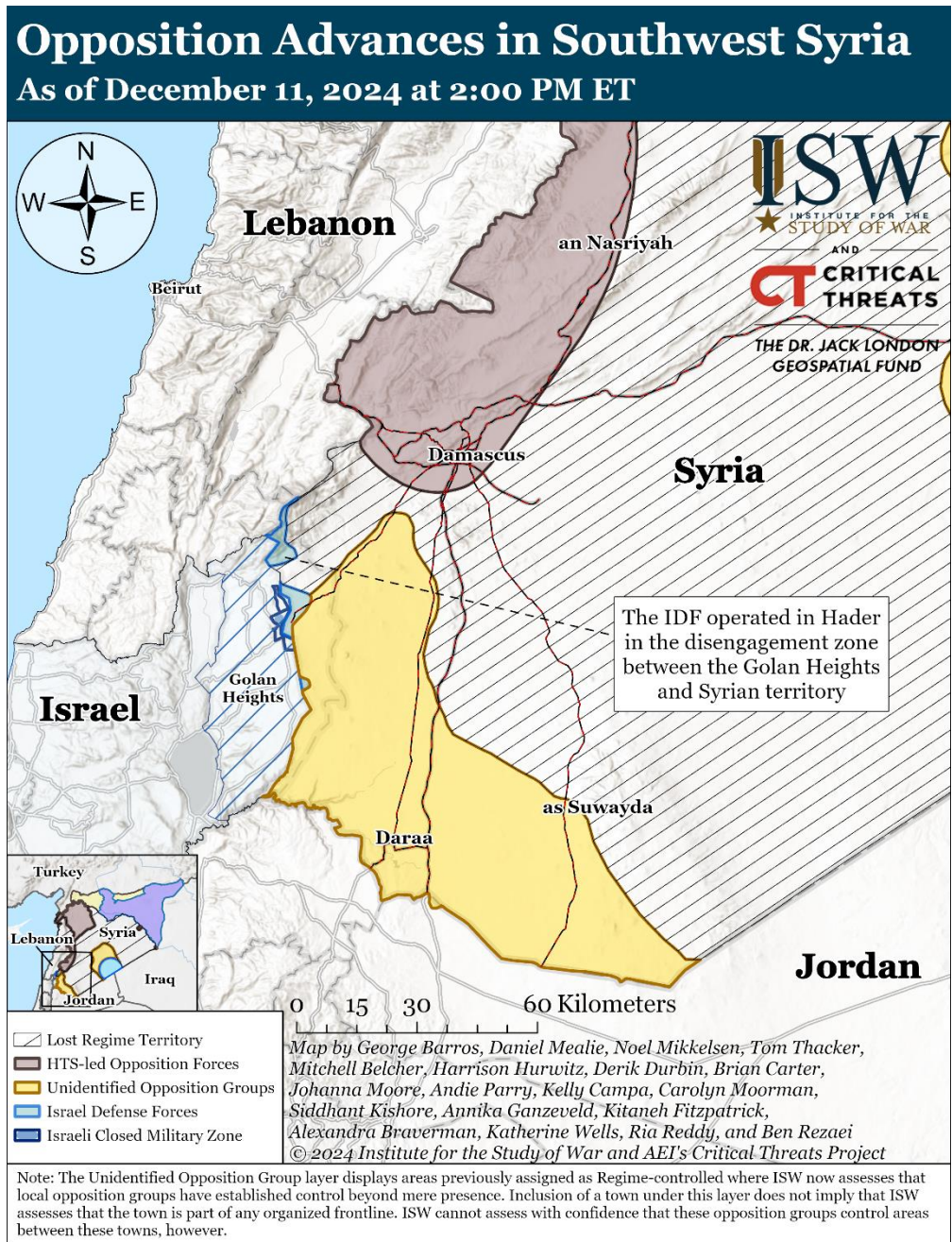
Reported Control of Terrain in Syria

As of December 11, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) did not face resistance when it seized Syrian outposts outside of the disengagement zone in Syria. An Israeli Army Radio correspondent reported on December 11 that the IDF 101st Paratrooper Battalion (35th Paratroopers Brigade) did not fire a single bullet when seizing outposts.[16] SAA soldiers abandoned their positions amid the collapse of the regime. Israeli media also noted on December 11 that the IDF is conducting defensive operations in the disengagement zone.[17] Israeli media reported that the IDF seized several former SAA tanks in the disengagement zone. Israeli media also reported that the IDF 810th Mountain Brigade recently seized a cache of former SAA weapons on Mt. Hermon. The army radio correspondent added that the IDF

forces deployed to the Syrian front are preparing for a “long stay in the field.”[18] Geolocated imagery posted on December 11 and local Syrian sources confirmed IDF presence in Hader military base and Hader town, which are both in the disengagement zone.[19] Local Syria media claimed that the IDF had also paved a road that extended out of the disengagement zone from the Golan Heights to Marbah, western Daraa Province.[20]



An anonymous senior Israeli official told an Israeli journalist that the height of the IDF campaign on the Syrian Front is over.[21] CTP-ISW has not recorded any IDF airstrikes in Syria since the last data cutoff at 2pm on December 10. The IDF’s intense air campaign on December 9 and 10 destroyed approximately 70-80 percent of the former Assad regime’s military capabilities to prevent “terrorist elements” from seizing the weapons, including dozens of anti-ship missiles at al Bayda and

Latakia ports on December 9.[22] Russian news outlet Sputnik reported that the IDF destroyed radar systems on the outskirts of Tartus, where a Russian naval base is located.[23] Satellite imagery posted on X on December 11 showed the aftermath of IDF airstrikes on December 9 and 10 on ammunition depots at Yafour Base, in Rif Dimashq Province, the air defense systems at Damascus International Airport, and an air defense site in Izraa, Daraa Province.[24]

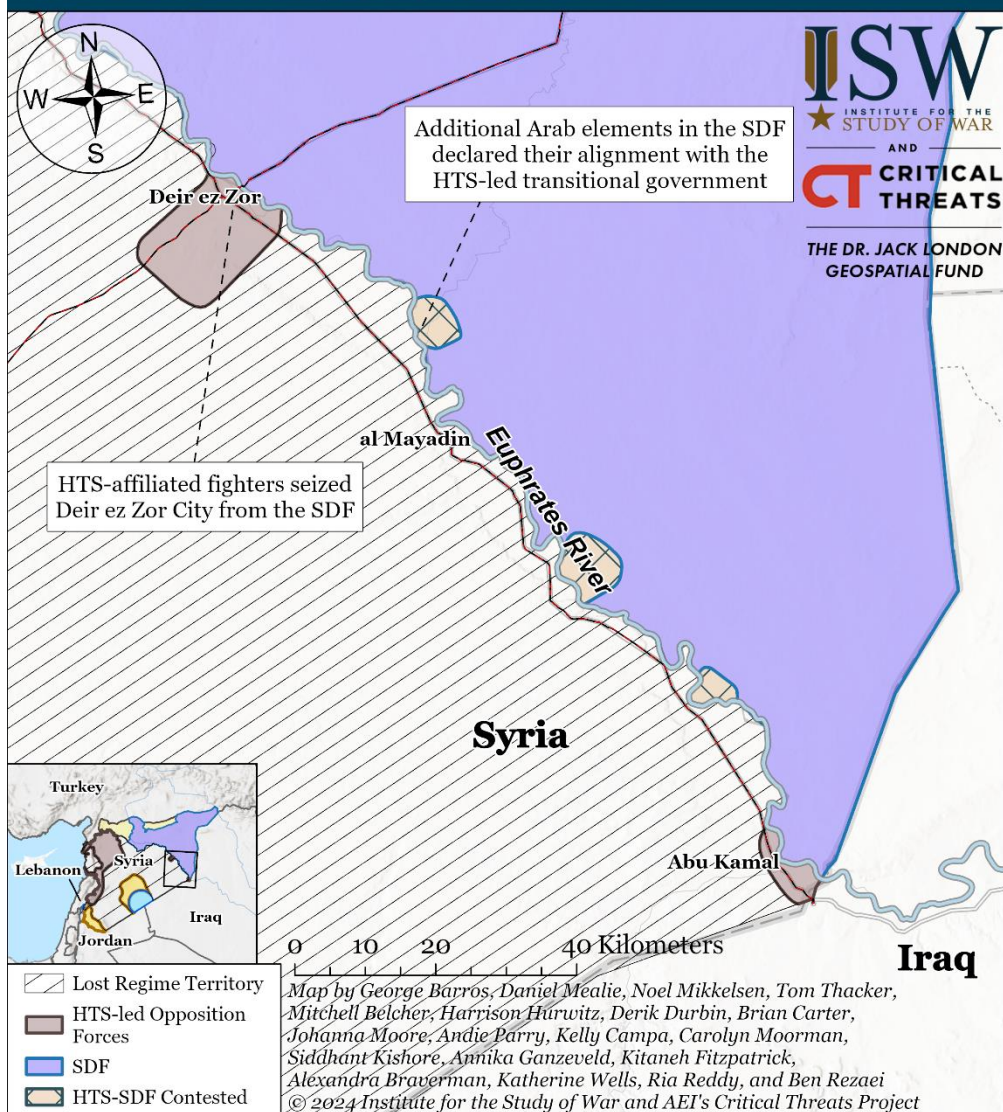
The HTS-led operations room seized full control of Deir ez Zor City from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) on December 10.[25] Local opposition groups demonstrated in Deir ez Zor City on December 9, calling for the HTS-led transitional government to take control of the city from the SDF.[26] HTS-affiliated leaders addressed locals in the street and locals came out in support of the opposition forces.[27] The fighters also seized an oil field near Deir ez Zor and the Deir ez Zor military airport.[28] The HTS-led operations room also claimed to seize Deir ez Zor's eastern and western countrysides, although it remains unclear at this time what territory the operations room is referring to.[29]

Arab forces within the SDF are also defecting to the HTS-led transitional government in Damascus as HTS-led forces seize more ground on the right bank of the Euphrates. The leader of the Busayrah Military Council, an Arab formation in the SDF, declared allegiance to the Fateh Mubin operations room on December 11.[30] Fateh Mubin is the coordinating body for HTS-led forces. Two other Arab military leaders defected on December 10.[31] These military leaders live on the left, eastern bank of the Euphrates River. The Euphrates serves as a defensive line protecting SDF-held territory from the remainder of Syria. The SDF deployed reinforcements to the areas where Arab forces had defected and reportedly retaliated against a commander by burning his home.[32]

HTS has not yet assisted Arab defectors from the SDF with additional forces. Opposition forces across Syria—except the SNA-SDF fighting—have so far attempted to resolve their issues without resorting to fighting. The SDF and the HTS-affiliated operations room have thus far avoided major armed conflict, and HTS support for the Arab groups in Deir ez Zor would likely undermine reconciliation and transition government negotiations. The emergence of the transitional government is liable to pose a serious problem for the SDF, however, because the SDF has had a difficult relationship with local Arab residents. The existence of the regime—and the risk that Arab areas in northeastern Syria could fall back under regime control—acted as a dampener against large-scale uprisings against the SDF.

Control of Terrain in Deir ez Zor, Syria

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SDF Commander Mazloun Abdi confirmed that his forces withdrew from Manbij after reaching a settlement with the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA).[33] Abdi said that the United States helped broker the deal to preserve the security of civilians in the town.[34] The SNA sent civil authorities and military police to Manbij to begin managing the city and the surrounding areas on December 9. [35]Abdi said that the SNA attempted to advance on Kobani along the Turkish border on December 10.[36]

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Commander Major General Hossein Salami claimed on December 10 that all Iranian military forces have withdrawn from Syria.[37] Iranian-backed militias reportedly withdrew from Syria as the Syrian opposition forces advanced.[38] Iranian government spokesperson Fatemeh Mohajerani stated that 4,000 Iranian civilians have also returned from Syria, with plans to continue evacuation efforts "until the departure of the last

Iranian.”[39] Iran maintained forces in Syria since shortly after the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011.[40]

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei emphasized the role of Syrian youth in reclaiming the “occupied area[s]” in Syria in a speech on December 11. Khamenei stated that “undoubtedly the occupied area[s] of Syria will be liberated by the zealous Syrian youth,” implying that some of the areas recently recaptured from the Assad Regime are now “occupied.”[41] Khamenei stated that Syrian youth “will definitely rise up and overcome the situation...just as brave Iraqi youth [after Iraq’s] occupation by the United States, were able to...with the help” of former IRGC Quds Force Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani, in reference to Iran’s support to Iraqi militias against US forces in Iraq between 2003 and 2011. 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. Khamenei’s repeated praise of Soleimani and his leadership while refraining from any mention of the role that current IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani has played in institutionalizing the Axis of Resistance in the last four years suggests Khamenei may be disenchanted with Ghaani’s approach. The Telegraph reported on December 10 that there is discontent within the IRGC with Ghaani and “calls” for Khamenei to remove him.[42]

Khamenei criticized the “obvious role” that “a neighboring government”—almost certainly a reference to Turkey—played in the developments in Syria.[43] Senior Iranian officials and state media previously criticized Turkish policy in Syria amid the ongoing Syrian opposition offensive.[44] Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan approved HTS launching its surprise offensive on November 27 and expressed support for the HTS-led drive toward Damascus from the north.[45] These statements probably suggest an increasingly hostile relationship between Iran and Turkey. Media affiliated with the IRGC suggested that Iran might refrain from supporting Erdogan during future crises--like coups against Erdogan--if the Syrian opposition weakens the Axis of Resistance.[46] CTP-ISW assessed that the fall of Assad marks the end of this phase of the greater Iranian project in the Levant for the foreseeable future.[47] The sudden loss of Assad will severely undermine future Iranian efforts to rebuild Hamas and Hezbollah, key actors within the Axis of Resistance.

Four unspecified Israeli security sources told Reuters on December 11 that Iran has intensified its effort to recruit Israelis susceptible to recruitment over the past two years.[48] Israel has recently arrested 30 individuals operating as a part of nine covert cells across Israel. The recruited assets were responsible for tasks such as sabotage, intelligence gathering on military facilities, and assassination plots against high-profile Israeli figures, such as nuclear scientists and government officials.[49] These intelligence assets have likely supported Iranian-backed efforts to target key Israeli assets.[50] The October 13, 2024, Hezbollah attack targeting an IDF training base’s dining facility would have required familiarity with pattern-of-life and habits on base to target the dining facility and cause casualties.[51]

Key Takeaways:

- **Government Consolidation in Syria:** Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) leader Abu Mohammed al Jolani is attempting to consolidate HTS’s political and military control in a post-Assad Syrian government. Jolani and HTS may find it difficult to subordinate other Syrian groups to the control of the HTS-controlled interim government. Some of these groups have previously fought against Jolani’s organization and may be reticent to see Jolani expand his influence.

- **Sectarianism in Syria:** More extremist and sectarian groups within the HTS coalition may not adhere to HTS’s vow to respect Syria’s religious and sectarian minorities, which would likely trigger sectarian violence in Syria. Reported sectarian incidents and revenge killings—though the incidents remain isolated and relatively independent of each other at this time—create opportunities for extreme and sectarian groups to incite further religious- or sectarian-based violence to destabilize a future Syrian government.
- **Israel in Syria:** An anonymous senior Israeli official told an Israeli journalist that the height of the IDF campaign on the Syrian Front is over.
- **Eastern Syria:** The HTS-led operations room seized full control of Deir ez Zor City from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) on December 10. Arab forces within the SDF are also defecting to the HTS-led transitional government in Damascus as HTS-led forces seize more ground on the right bank of the Euphrates. HTS has not yet assisted Arab defectors from the SDF with additional forces. Opposition forces across Syria—except the SNA-SDF fighting—have so far attempted to resolve their issues without resorting to fighting.
- **Iranian Response to Syria:** The Iranian supreme leader gave a speech in which he claimed that Syria was “occupied” by opposition forces. The supreme leader compared Syria today to Iraq in the 2003-2011 period and said that Syrian youth would free Syrian just like Iranian-backed Iraqi militias “freed” Iraq from the United States.
- **Iran-Turkey:** Khamenei criticized the "obvious role" that “a neighboring government”—almost certainly a reference to Turkey—played in the developments in Syria.
- **Iranian Intelligence Operations in Israel:** Four unspecified Israeli security sources told Reuters on December 11 that Iran has intensified its effort to recruit Israelis susceptible to recruitment over the past two years.

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

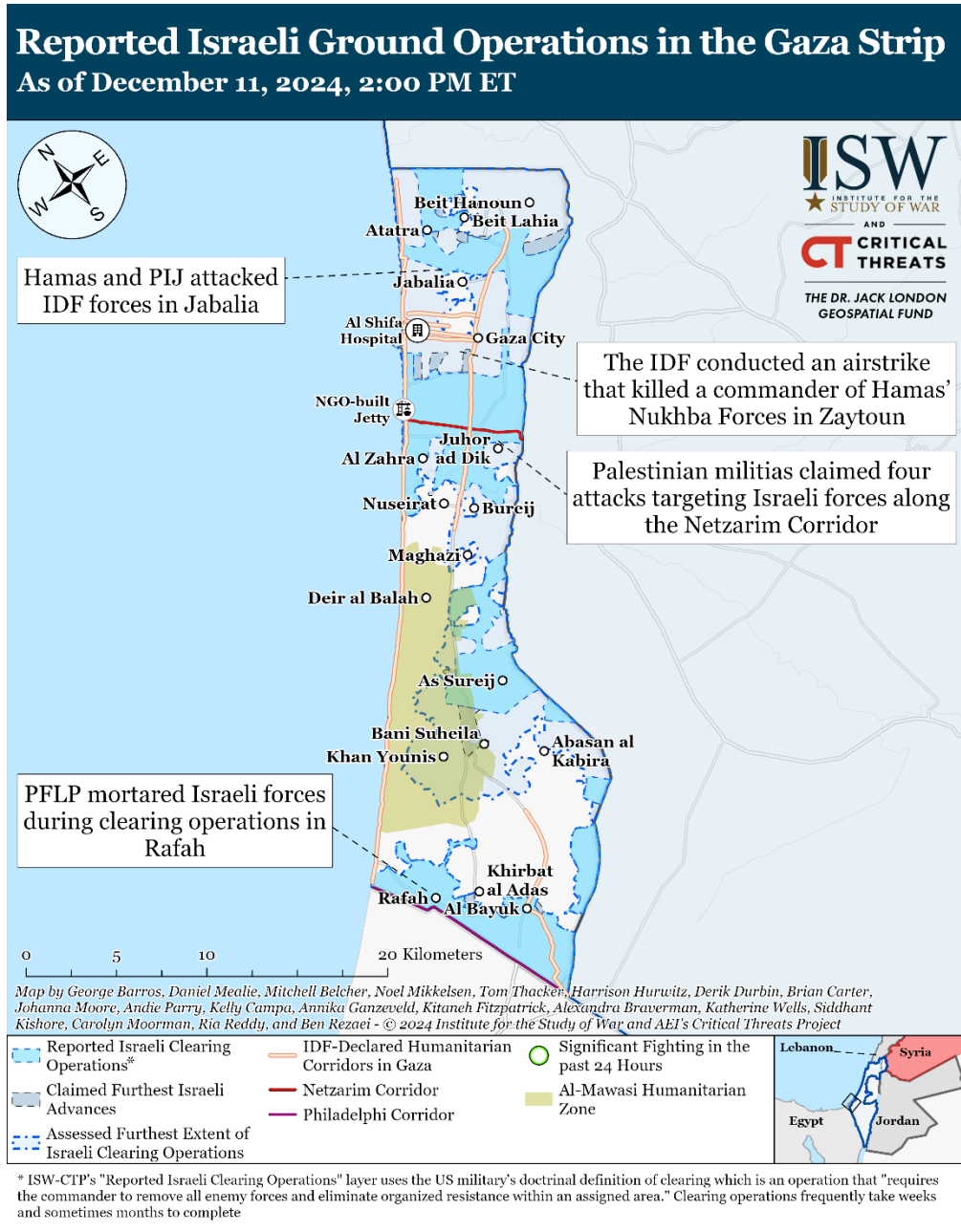
The IDF 162nd Division continued clearing operations in the northern Gaza Strip on December 11. The IDF 162nd Division directed an airstrike that killed the commander of the Hamas Paragliding unit in Jabalia last week.[52] Footage posted by Palestinian journalists showed the IDF conducting controlled demolition of infrastructure in Jabalia.[53] Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) detonated an improvised explosive device (IED) and fired mortar shells targeting Israeli forces in Jabalia refugee camp.[54]

The IDF reported on December 11 that the 143rd Division directed an airstrike that killed a commander of Hamas’ Nukhba Forces in Zaytoun, northern Gaza Strip.[55] The IDF reported that the Hamas commander was operating from a building in a school complex in Zaytoun. The Hamas commander carried out attacks on an IDF position near a kibbutz in southern Israel that killed 14 Israeli soldiers during the October 7 attack, according to the IDF.[56]

Palestinian militias claimed four attacks targeting Israeli forces along the Netzarim Corridor on December 11.[57]

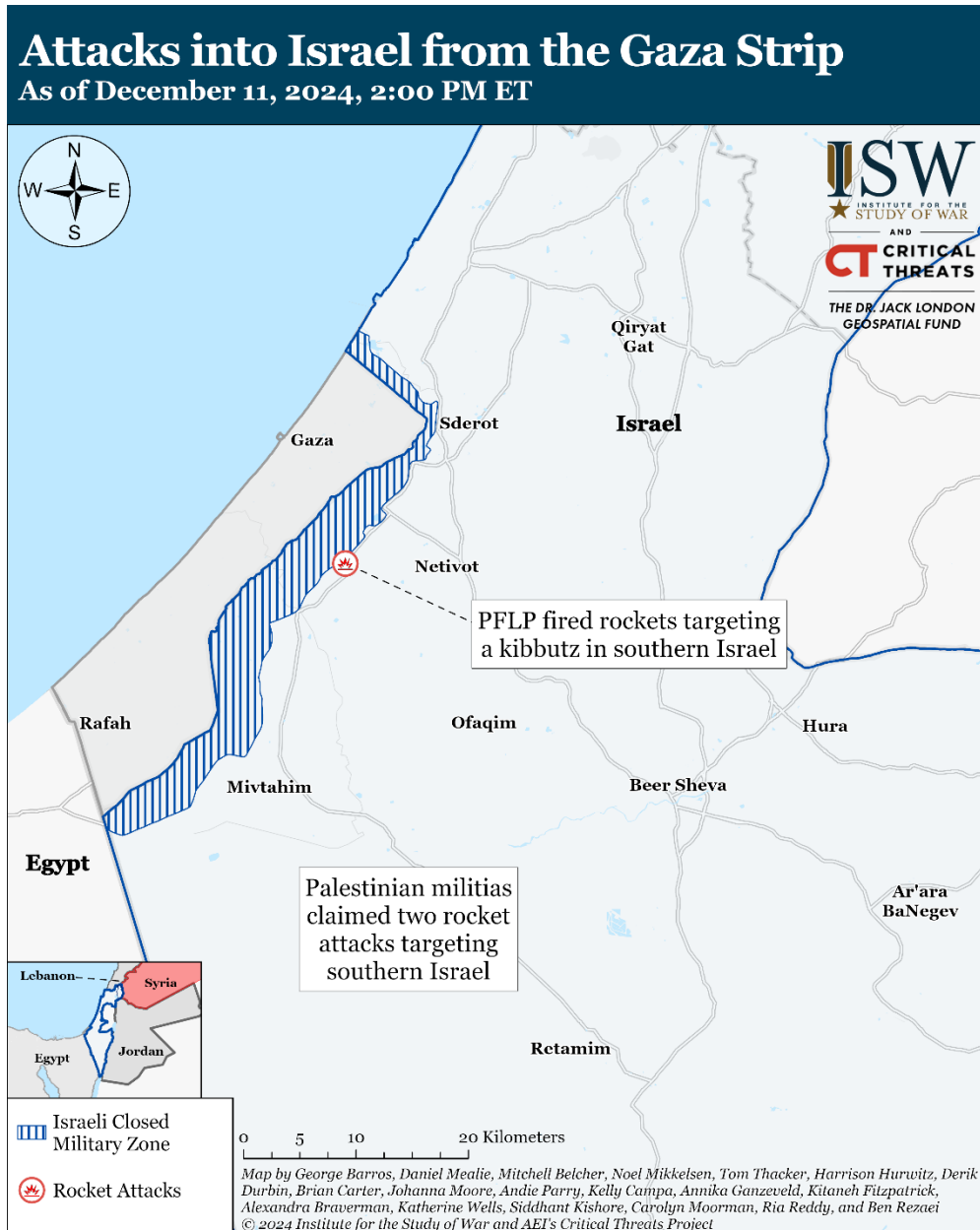
The IDF continued clearing operations in the central Gaza Strip since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on December 10. Footage posted by a Palestinian journalist showed Israeli bulldozers operating near the Nuseirat refugee camp.[58]

The IDF continued clearing operations in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip on December 11. Geolocated footage posted on December 11 showed the IDF conducting controlled demolition of infrastructure in eastern Rafah City.[59] PFLP claimed two attacks targeting Israeli forces in Rafah on December 11.[60]



Palestinian militias claimed two rocket attacks targeting southern Israel on December

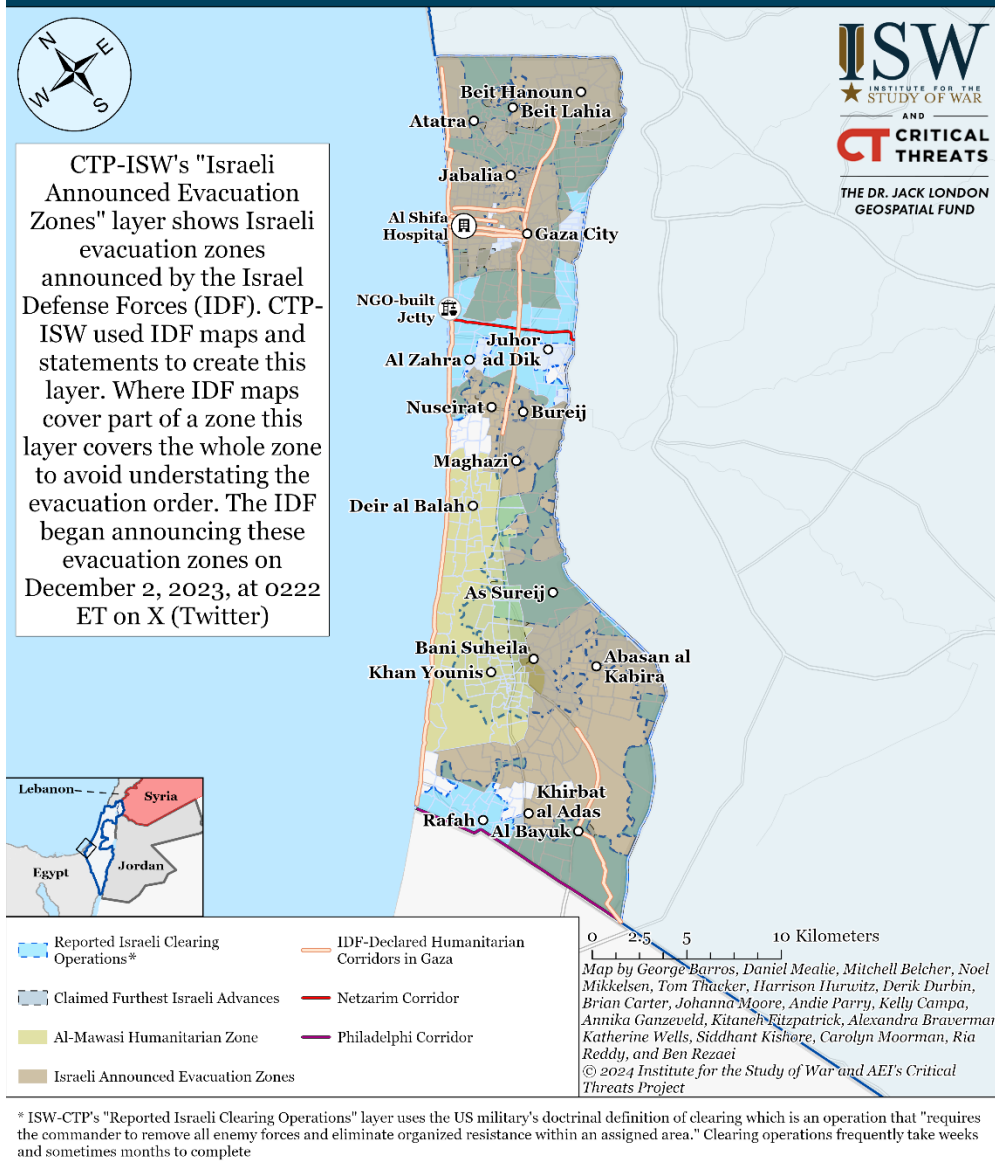
11.[61] PFLP fired rockets targeting a kibbutz in southern Israel on December 11.[62] The IDF said that it detected two rockets fired from the central Gaza Strip and that both rockets struck open areas.[63] PFLP also fired rockets targeting an unspecified location in southern Israel and the IDF reported that it intercepted two rockets fired from the central Gaza Strip.[64]



The IDF Arabic-language spokesperson issued evacuation orders for parts of the Maghazi refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip on December 11.[65] The IDF said that Palestinian militias are firing rockets from those areas towards Israel. The orders requested residents to immediately evacuate to the IDF-designated humanitarian zone.

Israeli-Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip

As of December 11, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



West Bank

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

Unspecified fighters shot at an Israeli civilian vehicle that illegally entered Joseph's Tomb in Nablus overnight between December 10 and 11.[66] The Israeli Police later detained the Israelis for questioning for entering Area A in the West Bank. Israelis are prohibited from entering Area A. No militia has claimed the attack at the time of this writing.

Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz visited an unspecified location on the "eastern front" on December 11.[67] Katz emphasized that Israel will build a border wall with Jordan to prevent

Iranian weapons smuggling to Palestinian militias in the West Bank via Jordan.[68] This border has been the site of frequent drug and weapons smuggling attempts throughout the past decade.[69] Katz announced on November 26 that the Israeli government granted the Defense Ministry approval to construct a high-tech border fence, and Israel has since begun preliminary work on the project.[70]

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

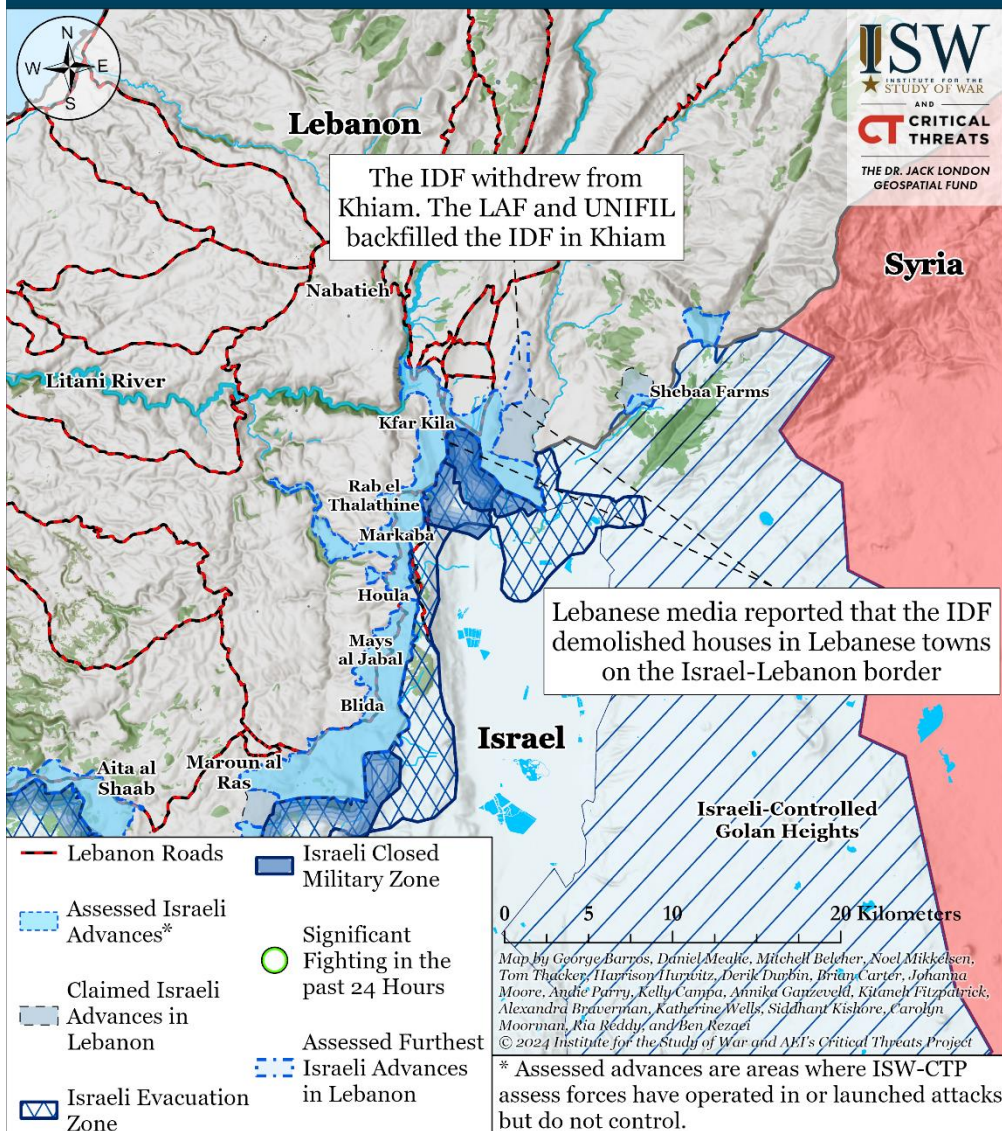
The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) backfilled the IDF 7th Armored Brigade in Khiam after the brigade withdrew on December 11. The LAF confirmed it stationed troops with UNIFIL forces in five locations in Khiam and will use special engineering forces to conduct a survey of the town to identify unexploded ordinances.[71] The LAF stated that this action followed coordination with the five-member Israel-Lebanon ceasefire enforcement committee. Lebanese media reported on December 11 that LAF military vehicles and bulldozers accompanied by UNIFIL forces moved southward and entered the town of Khiam.[72] The IDF stated that it remains deployed in southern Lebanon and will continue to operate against any threats to Israel.[73] Israeli forces can operate in southern Lebanon until the end of January 2025, according to the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire agreement.[74]

Hezbollah-affiliated media reported that the LAF began on December 11 to deploy to its former positions in Ain Arab Marajaayoun and to unnamed areas south of Khiam.[75]

Lebanese media reported on December 10 that the IDF demolished houses in multiple towns on the Israel-Lebanon border.[76] The IDF confirmed in a post on X that it conducted "controlled explosions" of unspecified targets in southwestern Lebanon as part of routine activity.[77]

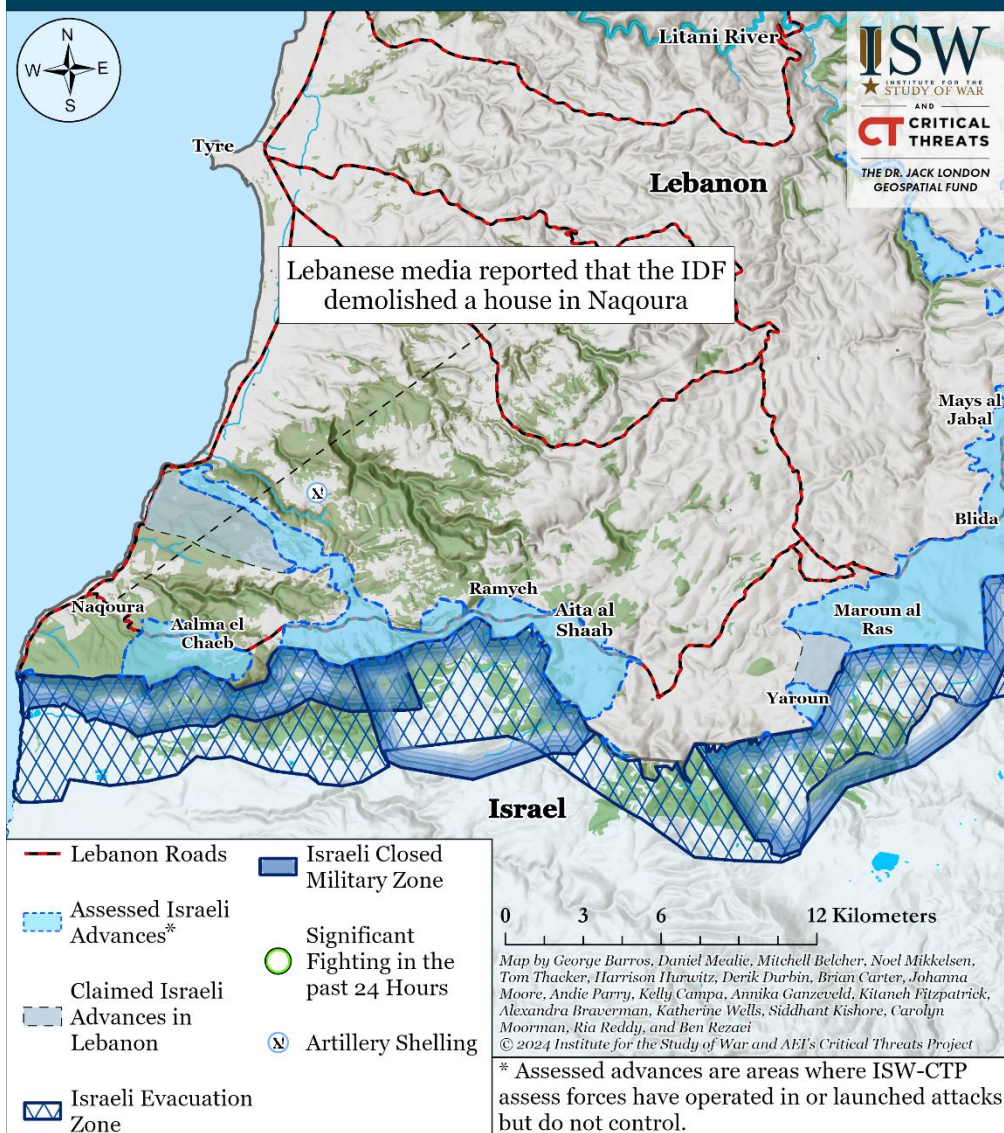
Lebanese media reported on December 11 that the IDF conducted a drone strike targeting an unspecified target in Ainata, northeastern Lebanon.[78]

Reported Israeli Operations in the Eastern Sector As of December 11, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Lebanese media reported on December 11 that Israeli forces demolished a house in Naqoura, southwestern Lebanon.[79]

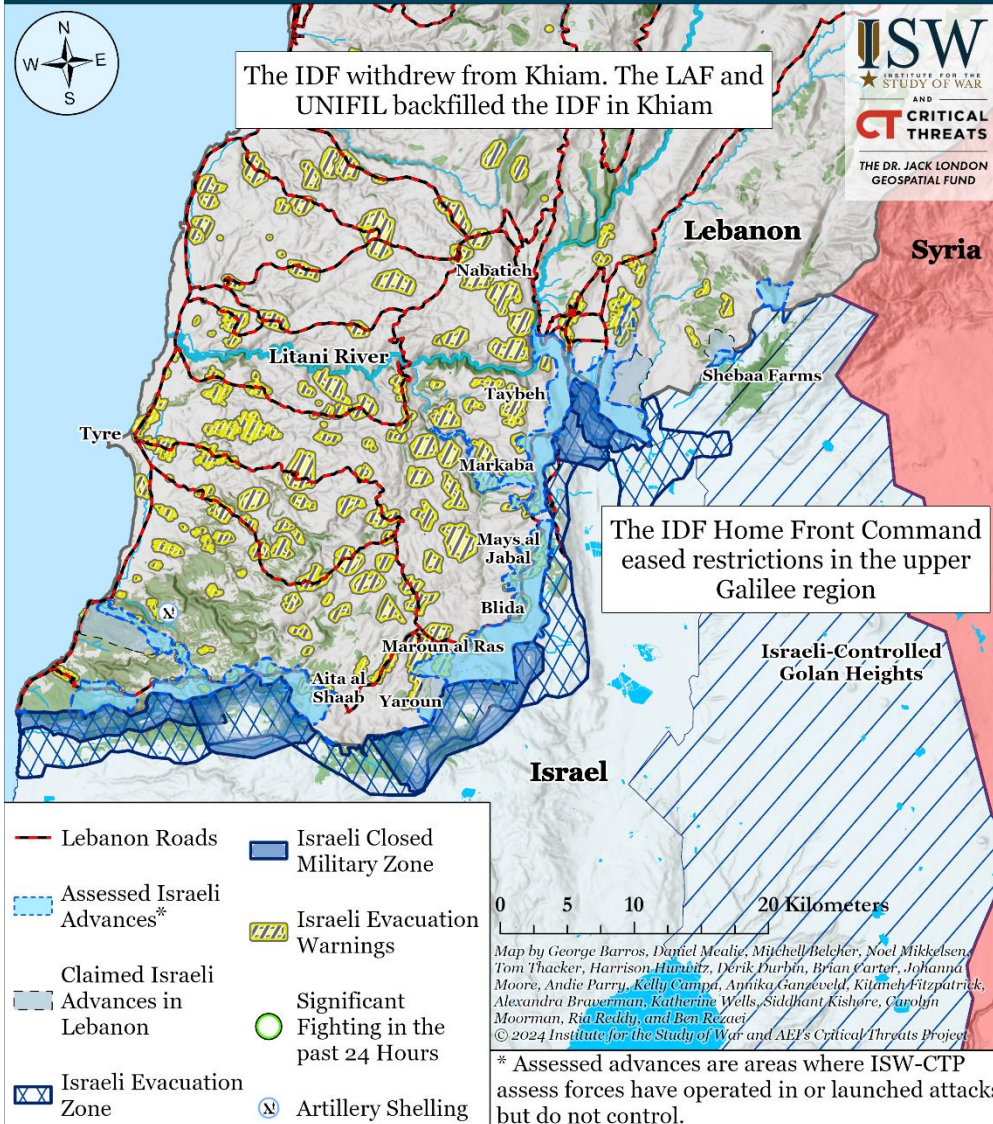
Reported Israeli Operations in the Western Sector As of December 11, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



The IDF Home Front Command eased restrictions in the Upper Galilee region, northern Israel, on December 11.[80] The IDF Home Front Command increased activity guidelines from partial to full activity permitted in this region following a situational assessment on December 11 by Northern Command Commander Major General Ori Gordin.[81]

Reported Israeli Operations in Lebanon

As of December 11, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Iran and the Axis of Resistance

US Central Command (CENTCOM) confirmed on December 10 that the Houthis attacked two US Navy destroyers that were accompanying three US-flagged commercial vessels.[82] CENTCOM stated that US Navy destroyers USS *Stockdale* and USS *O’Kane* successfully defeated an unspecified number of Houthi weapons while transiting the Gulf of Aden between December 9 and 10. CENTCOM added that the destroyers were escorting three US-owned, operated, and flagged merchant vessels. CENTCOM reported no injuries or damage to the vessels from the Houthi attack. Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Sarea claimed that the Houthis launched an unspecified number of drones and a missile targeting three merchant vessels and two US destroyers on December

10.[83] This is the second time CENTCOM confirmed that the USS *Stockdale* and USS *O’Kane* intercepted a Houthi attack on commercial vessels in the past 10 days.[84]

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.

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