

# Iran Update



**Johanna Moore, Carolyn Moorman, Annika Ganzeveld, Ben Rezaei, and Brian Carter**

**December 28, 2024, 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.*

*Click [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations, and [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of the ongoing opposition offensive in Syria. These maps are updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.*

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

**Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) and its allies are contending with locally-organized cells of fighters in western Syria. HTS's response to the current violence is fueling accusations of sectarianism and arbitrary targeting, which could in turn trigger further violence.** HTS has launched a series of raids targeting former Assad regime members in northwestern Syria but has faced resistance in former Assad strongholds.[1] Unspecified Syrian opposition fighters continue to target the Alawite community fueling distrust and accusations that arrests conducted by the HTS-led security forces are driven by sectarianism and not in pursuit of justice for crimes committed under the former regime.[2] CTP-ISW cannot verify the vast majority of these attacks, but the informational effect generated by the rumors of ethnically- or sectarian-motivated attacks could still drive a cycle of violence between minority communities and the HTS-led coalition, which is predominantly but not solely Sunni Arab. The HTS-led government has attempted to assuage concerns and reassure the Alawite community that it intends to protect the rights of minorities but has taken few concrete steps to do so.[3]

**HTS-led forces launched large-scale clearing operations on December 28 in northwestern Syria targeting former Assad regime members.** Clearing operations imply that HTS is operating against at least a locally organized force, even if independent cells of former regime members are not communicating with one another at this time. Military or internal security efforts against unorganized opposition would constitute policing actions, which these clearing operations are not. Clearing operations imply the existence of an at least minimally organized enemy. Syrian and Syrian state media reported that HTS-led forces deployed to Baniyas, about halfway between the Russian-controlled Hmeimim Air Base and Tartous Naval Port, and Sett Markho, approximately 20 kilometers north of Hmeimim Air Base.[4] HTS-led forces arrested an unspecified number of former

Assad regime military members and seized weapons and ammunition in Sett Markho.[5] Syrian journalists reported that HTS-led forces have also launched air support from Istamo Air Base approximately 6.5 kilometers north of Hmeimim to support clearing operations targeting former Assad regime officials in the area.[6] A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger posted imagery and video on December 28 reportedly showing HTS-led forces present on the perimeter of the Hmeimim air base.[7]

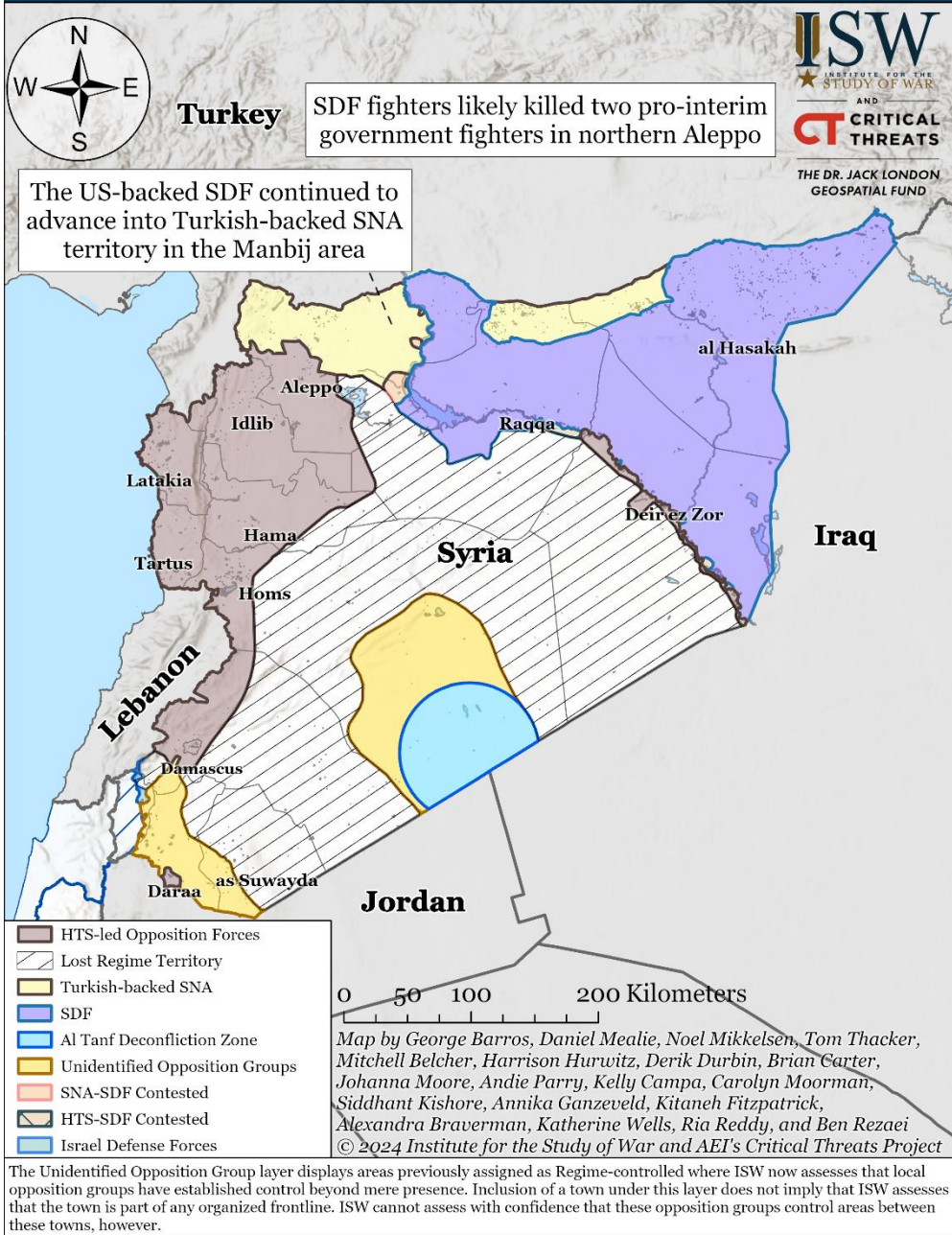
**Assad-regime loyalists reportedly ambushed HTS-led forces on December 26 attempting to arrest the former Director of Military Justice and “Butcher of Saydnaya” Mohammed Kanjo al Hassan in Tartous.[8]** This ambush, even if organized along familial lines, implies a level of military sophistication that demonstrates a level of organization that goes beyond criminal activity or mere reactive, unplanned self-defense against a raid. Unverified reports claim that HTS-led forces arrested Hassan.[9] The Syrian interim government has not confirmed Hassan’s arrest at the time of this writing.[10] The interim Syrian Foreign Minister Mohammed Abdel Rahman reported that 14 HTS-led fighters were killed fighting with Assad loyalists.[11] HTS-led security forces also engaged alleged former regime fighters in several villages west of Homs on December 26.[12]

**The HTS-led interim government has thus far failed to prevent individual opposition fighters from targeting members of the Alawite community.** Unspecified opposition fighters attacked and arrested Alawite individuals present at a cafe in Latakia after demanding if an individual was Sunni or Alawite according to the cafe owner interviewed by PBS.[13] The individuals were questioned at an unknown facility before being released. A representative of HTS arrived at the cafe the following day and claimed that those individuals were not members of HTS and encouraged individuals to report similar instances to HTS. Unspecified opposition fighters allegedly affiliated with HTS have targeted the Alawite community in revenge killings, arbitrary arrests, and theft, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.[14] These Alawite community members have framed these events as sectarian-motivated, underscoring the mistrust and fear that is permeating Alawite communities at this time. These instances of sectarian violence have caused some Alawites to refuse to hand in their weapons to the interim government, highlighting how the Alawite community currently distrusts the interim government to guarantee their security.[15] The existence of these reports in the information space, even if they are false or exaggerated, threatens to trigger escalating cycles of violence between different communities. CTP-ISW has not observed any violent retaliation that appears ethnically- or sect-motivated by any minority community against HTS-led forces or other communities at this time.

**Unchecked attacks on the Alawite community appear to be driving sectarian accusations against the HTS-led interim government.** Syrian-based media outlets have accused HTS of targeting low-level regime officials or supporters while granting amnesty to senior Assad regime members.[16] Social media reports have alleged that individuals affiliated with Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) have killed and kidnapped Alawites and other Syrians accused of being Assad regime officials.[17]

# Reported Control of Terrain in Syria

As of December 28, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



**The US-backed, Kurdish-controlled Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) reportedly continued to advance into Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA)-controlled territory east of Manbij, northern Syria, on December 28.** The SDF reportedly claimed that it seized the towns of Tal al Arsh and Halawla west of the Tishreen Dam.[18] The SDF has engaged the SNA west of the Tishreen Dam in recent days and appears to have solidified control over the dam.[19] The SDF claimed on December 28 that it killed 17 SNA fighters in clashes near the dam.[20] Geolocated

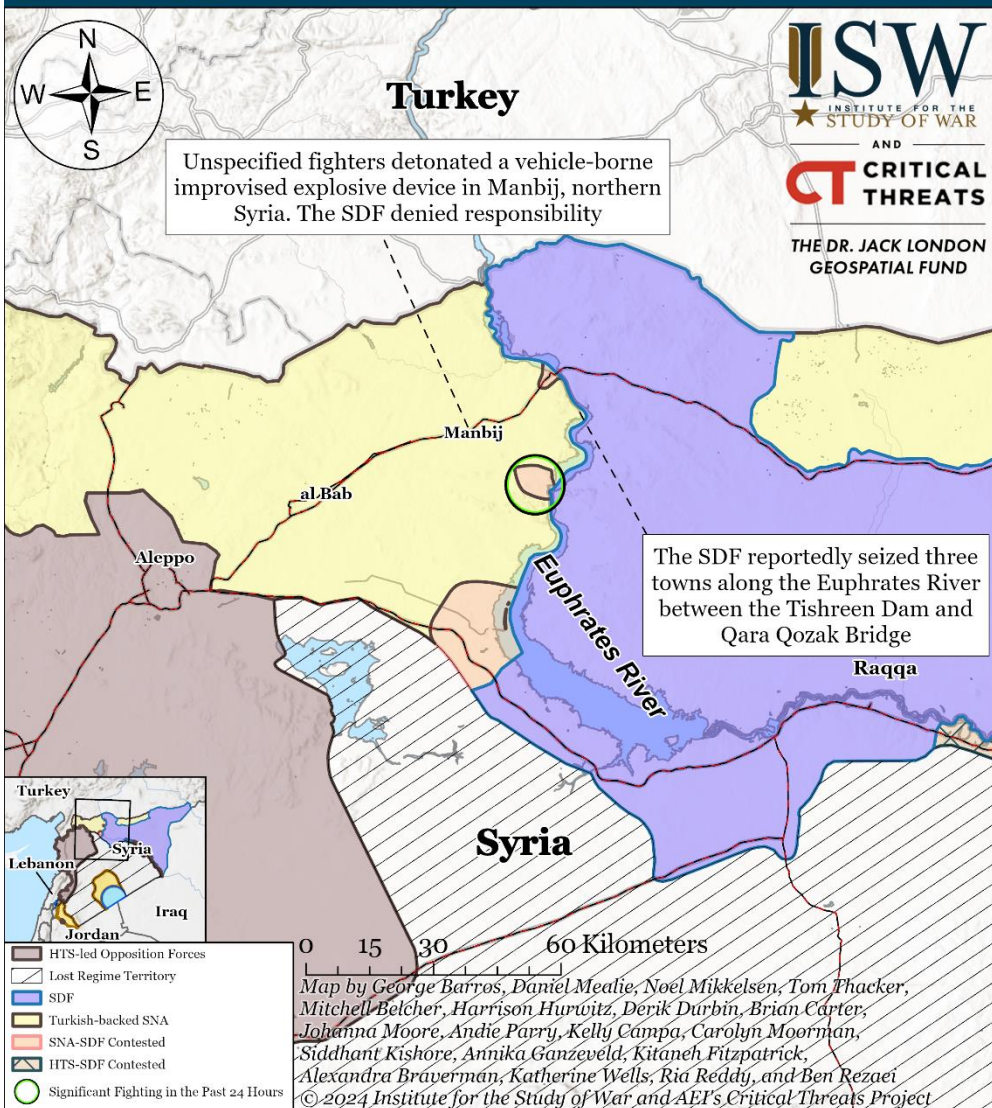
imagery posted on December 27 showed the SDF conducting a drone strike targeting SNA fighters and vehicles near Abu Qalqal, northwest of the Tishreen Dam.[21]

**The SDF reportedly claimed on December 28 that it seized three towns along the Euphrates River between the Tishreen Dam and the Qara Qozak Bridge.**[22] CTP-ISW cannot independently verify this claim. The SDF likely intends to threaten the SNA's rear in the Qara Qozak area by expanding the bridgehead, if these advances are accurate. Geolocated imagery posted on December 28 showed the SDF conducting a drone strike targeting SNA excavators west of the Qara Qozak Bridge.[23]

Geolocated imagery posted on December 28 showed the SDF conducting drone strikes targeting SNA positions at the Khafsah water treatment plant south of the Tishreen Dam.[24] The SDF and SNA have fought near the plant in recent days, which has limited the plant's ability to operate.[25] The Khafsah water treatment plant is critical for providing water to residents in Aleppo City.[26]

# Control of Terrain in North Syria

As of December 28, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



**Unspecified fighters detonated a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) in front of a mosque in Manbij, northern Syria, on December 27.[27]** The SDF denied responsibility for the attack and blamed the attack on the SNA.[28] This attack marks the second VBIED attack in Manbij since December 24.[29]

**Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Hakan Fidan reiterated that Turkey seeks to “eliminate” the SDF during a phone call with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on December 28.[30]** Fidan emphasized that Turkey “will not allow PKK/YPG to take shelter” in Syria. Turkey equates the SDF in its entirety to the PKK and YPG. Fidan added that Turkey supports the HTS-led interim government’s efforts to ensure Syrian territorial integrity.[31] This phone call comes as Turkey continues to signal a possible Turkish incursion into Syria or a Turkish-backed operation in

northern Syria to “eliminate” the SDF.[32] The Turkish desire to eliminate the SDF stands in contrast with the US desire to preserve the SDF, which plays a key role in the US counter-ISIS mission.[33]

**Arab media and pro-Kurdish social media accounts amplified competing narratives after likely SDF-affiliated Kurdish fighters in northern Aleppo City killed two pro-interim government fighters.** An Arab analyst and at least one Salafi pro-HTS social media account claimed that the SDF killed two “government” fighters in Ashrafiyah neighborhood, Aleppo City, on December 27.[34] Arab media reported that HTS-affiliated forces then isolated Sheikh Maqoud and Ashrafiyah neighborhoods, in Aleppo City.[35] These media platforms also accused the SDF of using Sheikh Maqoud residents as human shields to prevent an HTS assault into Sheikh Maqoud and Ashrafiyah.[36]

Kurdish sources said that People’s Defense Units (YPG)—one Kurdish formation that is part of the SDF—killed two SNA fighters in Ashrafiyah neighborhood.[37] These sources also reported that the HTS deployment around the perimeter of Sheikh Maqoud and Ashrafiyah sought to prevent SNA forces from entering Sheikh Maqoud and Ashrafiyah.[38]

These competing claims between anti-SDF and pro-Kurdish media come as the SDF attempts to negotiate with HTS to confirm the status of the SDF and Kurdish minority in the future Syrian state. CTP-ISW cannot adjudicate these competing claims, but it is noteworthy that these narratives are being injected into the information space as the SDF attempts to negotiate with the interim Syrian government. Such negotiations could prevent the SDF’s ultimate destruction, which is the objective of Turkey and its proxies in Syria. The decision to inject this information into the media space may not be a deliberate choice to undermine the SDF’s negotiating position, but the very fact that these rumors are in the media space could undermine the SDF.

**Iraqi Defense Minister Thabet al Abasi inspected Iraqi army units and border police at Rabia border crossing, along the Syria-Iraq border, on December 28.[39]** Abbasi met with combat units, including the 71st Infantry Brigade (15th Iraqi Army Division). Abasi visited Rabia two days after Iranian-backed Badr Organization Secretary-General Hadi al Ameri inspected combat units at Rabia border crossing.[40] Abasi’s visit also follows Iraqi Prime Minister Shia al Sudani’s implicit threat that Iraq would intervene in Syria if the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) resurges and threatens Iraq.

**The Iranian defense minister emphasized the Iranian armed forces’ preparedness for “hard war” and accused the United States and Israel of exacerbating regional instability, particularly in Syria.[41]** Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Aziz Nasir Zadeh announced the commencement of armed forces exercises on December 28, stressing Iran’s readiness and determination to confront any external threats.[42] Nasir Zadeh stated that Iran has “no issues on the frontlines of hard war” and will persist in enhancing its power at all costs. The Iranian regime asserts that it faces three types of threats: soft, semi-hard, and hard threats. Hard threats, which Nasir Zadeh is referring to, involve conventional warfare.[43] Nasir Zadeh is a military aviator and former commander of the Iranian Artesh Air Force and Deputy Chief of the Armed Forces General Staff.[44]

The Iranian Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS) separately stated on December 28 accusing the United States and Israel of orchestrating the ongoing crisis in Syria, framing the situation as part of a broader

geopolitical confrontation.[45] The AFGS emphasized Iran’s readiness, bolstered by public support, to decisively counter any aggression while reiterating its commitment to defending sovereignty and asserting regional power.[46]

### **Key Takeaways:**

- **Conflict in Syria:** Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) and its allies are contending with locally-organized cells of fighters in western Syria. HTS’s response to the current violence is fueling accusations of sectarianism and arbitrary targeting, which could in turn trigger further violence. CTP-ISW cannot verify the vast majority of these attacks, but the informational effect generated by the rumors of ethnically- or sectarian-motivated attacks could still drive a cycle of violence between minority communities and the HTS-led coalition, which is predominantly but not solely Sunni Arab.
- **SDF Operations Along the Euphrates:** The SDF reportedly claimed on December 28 that it seized three towns along the Euphrates River between the Tishreen Dam and the Qara Qozak Bridge. CTP-ISW cannot independently verify this claim. The SDF likely intends to threaten the SNA’s rear in the Qara Qozak area by expanding the bridgehead, if these advances are accurate.
- **SDF-Government Clashes in Aleppo:** Arab media and pro-Kurdish social media accounts amplified competing narratives after likely SDF-affiliated Kurdish fighters in northern Aleppo City killed two pro-interim government fighters. These competing claims between anti-SDF and pro-Kurdish media come as the SDF attempts to negotiate with HTS to confirm the status of the SDF and Kurdish minority in the future Syrian state. CTP-ISW cannot adjudicate these competing claims, but it is noteworthy that these narratives are being injected into the information space as the SDF attempts to negotiate with the interim Syrian government.
- **Iraq:** Iraqi Defense Minister Thabet al Abasi inspected Iraqi army units and border police at Rabia border crossing, along the Syria-Iraq border, on December 28.

### **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 933rd Infantry Brigade deployed to Beit Hanoun, northern Gaza Strip, on November 28 to operate against Palestinian fighters and militia infrastructure.[47]** The 933rd Infantry Brigade had been deployed in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip, for the past seven months.[48] The IDF Air Force struck many militia targets in the Beit Hanoun, including Hamas infrastructure, before the start of the operation.[49] The IDF last conducted clearing operations in Beit Hanoun in late July 2024 but began operating west of Beit Hanoun on December 22.[50] The IDF Arabic-language spokesperson issued evacuation orders for Beit Hanoun on December 28.[51] An Israeli Army Radio correspondent reported that Palestinian militias fired rockets that the IDF intercepted over Jerusalem on December 28 from Beit Hanoun.[52]

**The IDF 401st Armored Brigade (162nd Division) concluded operations targeting a Hamas headquarters inside Kamal Adwan Hospital in Jabalia, northern Gaza Strip, on December 28.[53]** Israeli forces began the operation on December 27. Israeli forces located grenades, small arms, ammunition, and other military equipment inside the hospital.[54] Israeli forces arrested more than 240 suspected fighters from Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and other militias. The IDF said that some fighters attempted to impersonate patients and medical personnel or to escape via ambulances. An Israeli Army Radio correspondent reported that half of the people inside the hospital were Hamas and PIJ fighters.[55] The IDF interrogated the hospital's director, who the IDF believes is in Hamas, Hamas anti-tank and engineering unit fighters, and about 15 fighters who participated in the October 7 attacks.[56] Militia fighters fired anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) targeting Israeli forces. Israeli forces killed those fighters and the IDF Air Force struck and killed additional fighters attempting to leave the area. The IDF said it evacuated patients and staff members to other hospitals in the areas before and during the operation.

**Hamas fired small arms targeting an Israeli soldier east of Jabalia, northern Gaza Strip on December 28.[57]**

**The Mujahideen Brigades fired rockets targeting Israeli forces along the Netzarim Corridor on December 28.[58]**

**PIJ and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades separately mortared Israeli forces and vehicles west of Rafah City on December 28. [59]** Commercially available Satellite imagery posted on December 28 shows changes to terrain consistent with Israeli operations northwest of Rafah city, supporting militia claims.



# Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

As of December 28, 2024, 2:00 PM ET

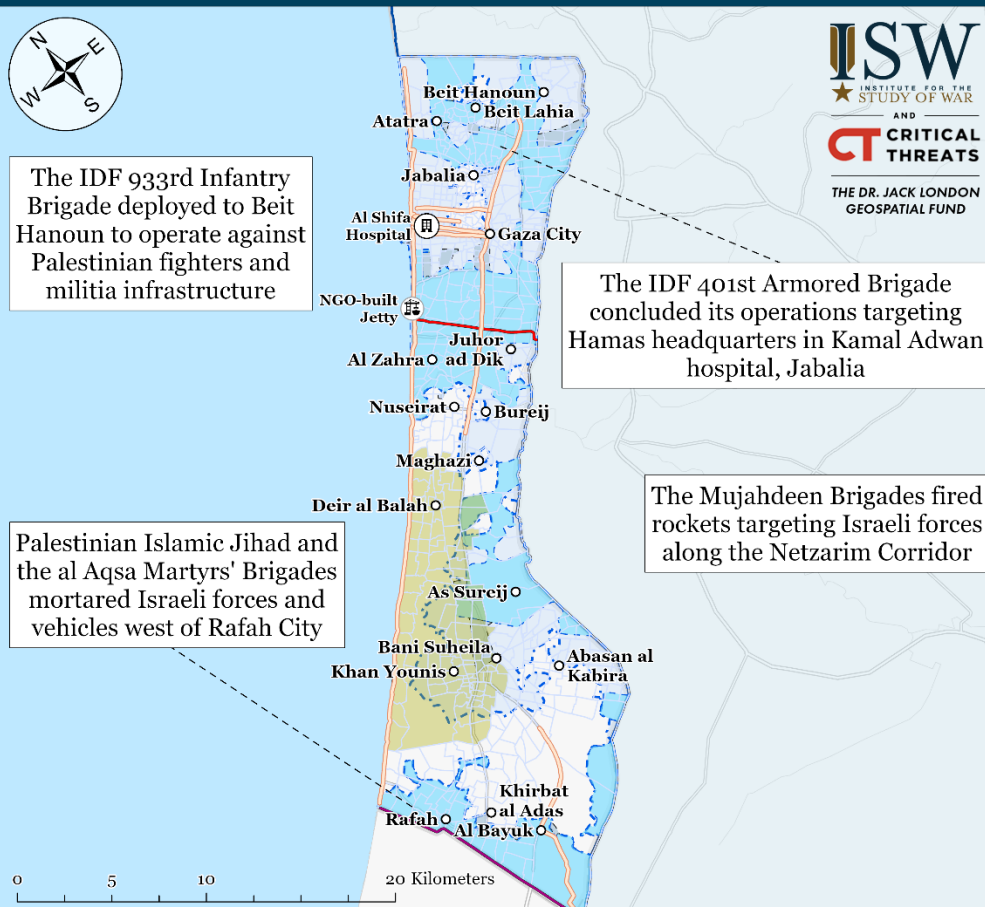


The IDF 933rd Infantry Brigade deployed to Beit Hanoun to operate against Palestinian fighters and militia infrastructure

The IDF 401st Armored Brigade concluded its operations targeting Hamas headquarters in Kamal Adwan hospital, Jabalia

Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades mortared Israeli forces and vehicles west of Rafah City

The Mujahdeen Brigades fired rockets targeting Israeli forces along the Netzarim Corridor

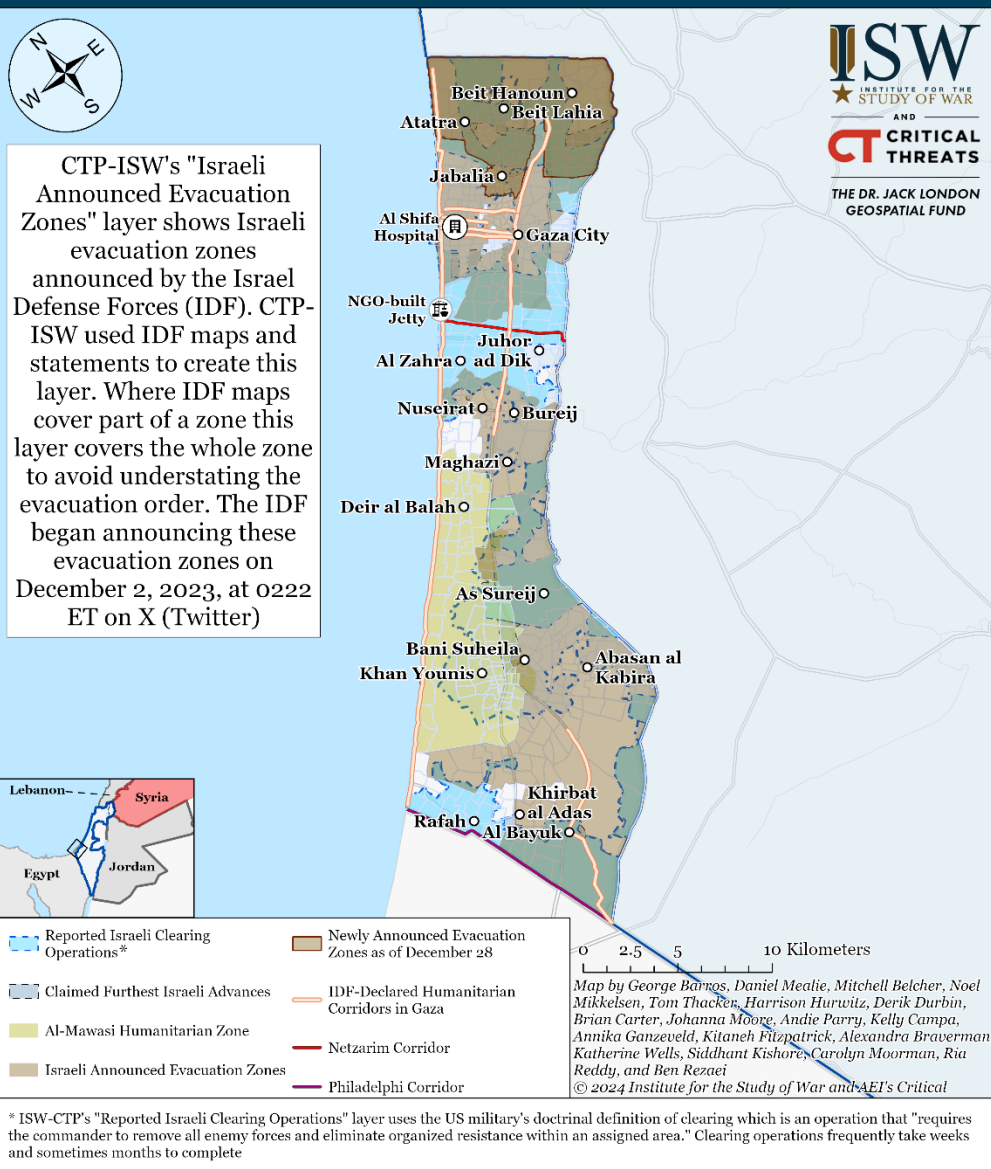


Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Tom Thacker, Harrison Hurwitz, Derik Durbin, Brian Carter, Johanna Moore, Andie Parry, Kelly Campa, Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Alexandra Braverman, Katherine Wells, Siddhant Kishore, Carolyn Moorman, Ria Reddy, and Ben Rezaei - © 2024 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

Reported Israeli Clearing Operations*	IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridors in Gaza	Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours	
Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances	Netzarim Corridor	Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone	
Assessed Furthest Extent of Israeli Clearing Operations	Philadelphi Corridor		

\* ISW-CTP's "Reported Israeli Clearing Operations" layer uses the US military's doctrinal definition of clearing which is an operation that "requires the commander to remove all enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance within an assigned area." Clearing operations frequently take weeks and sometimes months to complete

## Israeli-Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip As of December 28, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



**Unidentified Palestinian militias conducted an indirect fire attack on December 27 that the IDF intercepted near Jerusalem.**[60] No militia has claimed the attack as of the time of this writing. An Israeli Army Radio correspondent reported that Palestinian fighters fired the rockets from Beit Hanoun, northern Gaza Strip.[61] The IDF launched a new clearing operation in Beit Hanoun on December 28 to target Palestinian fighters and militia infrastructure.[62]

### West Bank

#### Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

Nothing significant to report.

## **Northern Israel and Lebanon**

### **Lebanese Hezbollah objectives:**

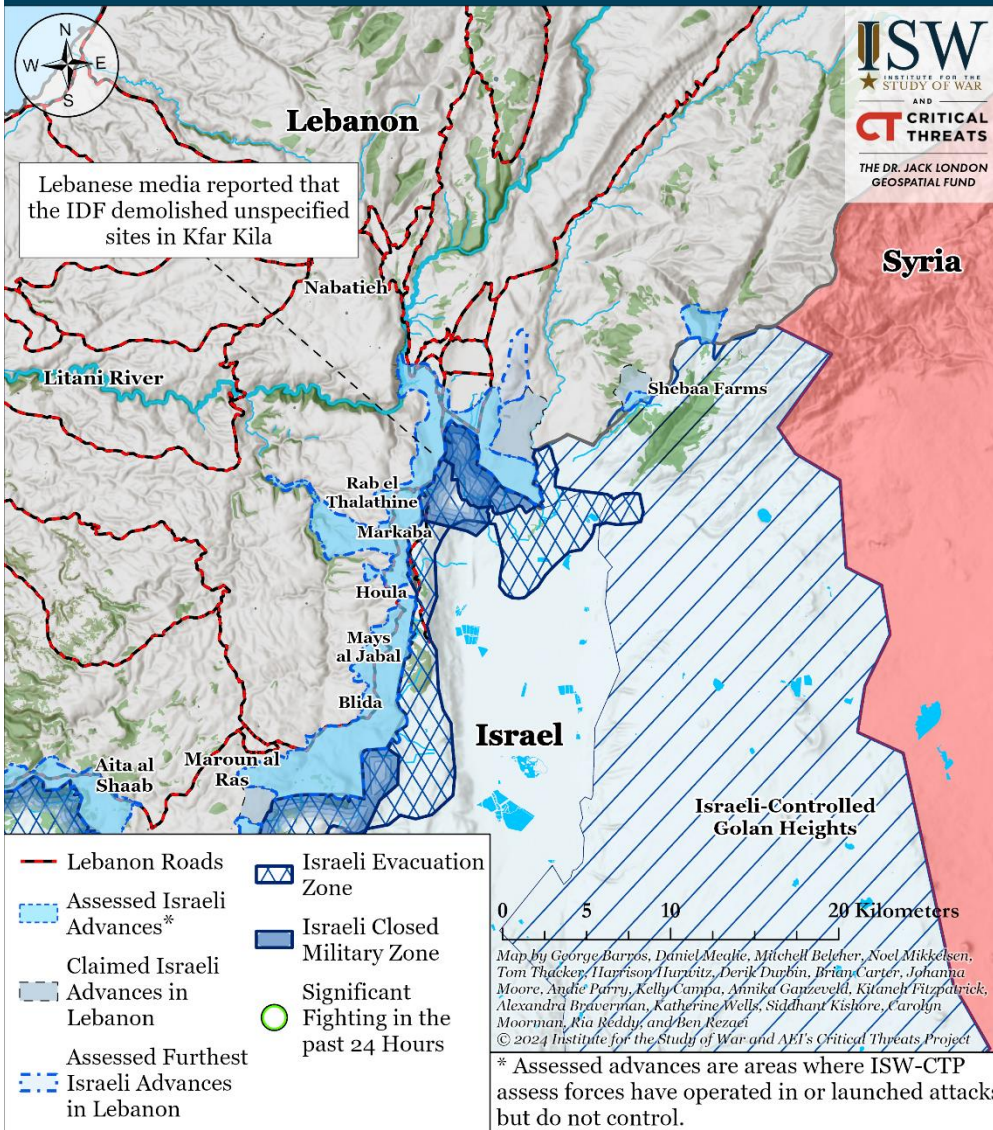
- End Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip
- Survive the October 7 War as a capable political and military organization with control over Lebanon

**The IDF 300th Territorial Brigade (91st Division) destroyed a 100-meter-long underground tunnel in southern Lebanon on December 28.[63]** The tunnel contained various weapons, including small arms, anti-tank missiles, surveillance systems, and other military equipment. The tunnel led to Radwan unit positions that included rocket launchers and IEDs. Israeli forces located a cache of anti-tank missiles and small arms aimed at IDF positions near the tunnel.

**Lebanese media reported on December 28 that Israeli forces demolished unspecified sites in Kfar Kila, southeastern Lebanon.[64]**

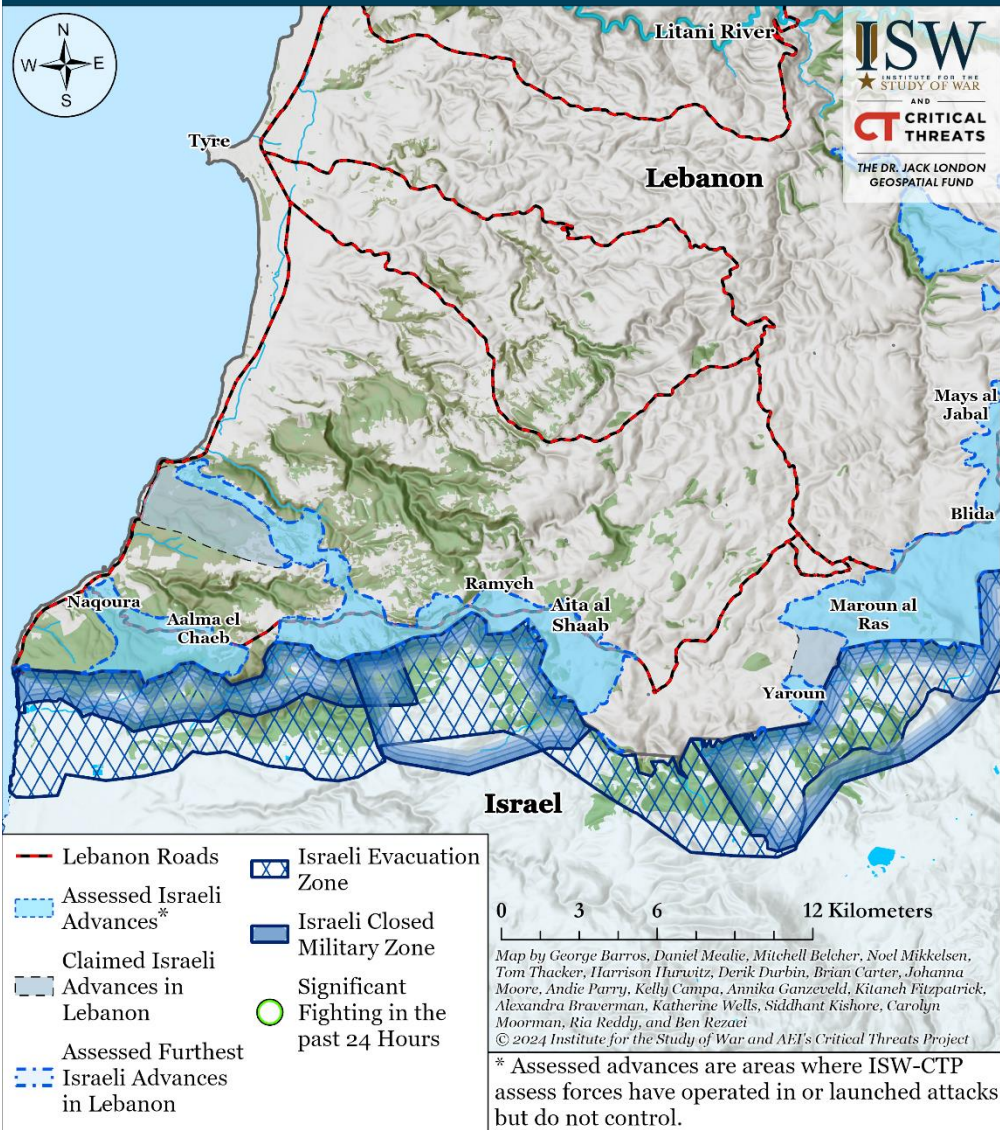
**The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) reported on December 28 that Israeli forces withdrew from Qantara and Taybeh, southeastern Lebanon, following a joint LAF-UNIFIL deployment to the area.[65]** The LAF and Lebanese media, including Hezbollah media, reported on December 28 that Israeli forces set fire to homes on the outskirts of Taybeh and Qantara.[66] Israeli forces last advanced into Qantara on December 26, before withdrawing south from the area hours later. [67]

# Reported Israeli Operations in the Eastern Sector As of December 28, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



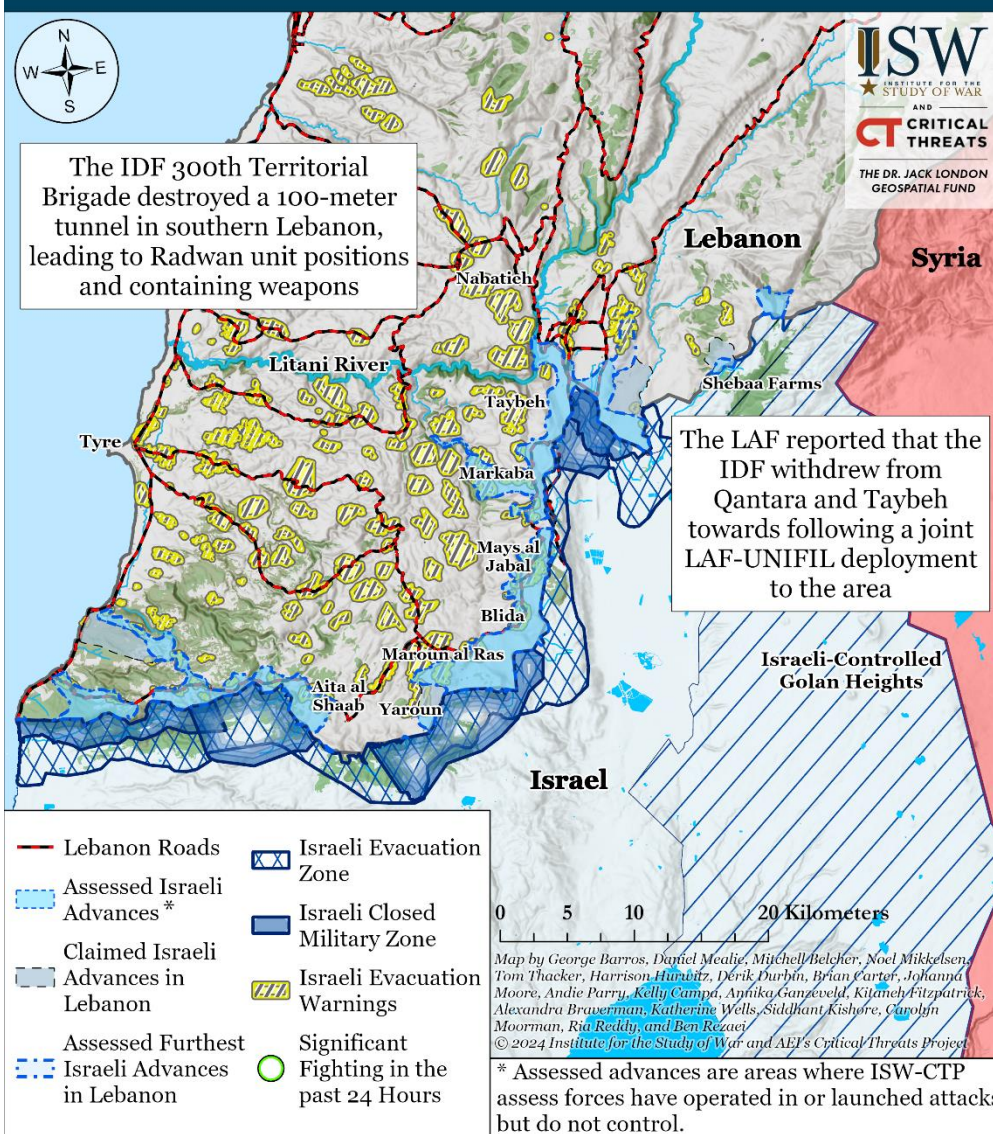
# Reported Israeli Operations in the Western Sector

## As of December 28, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



# Reported Israeli Operations in Lebanon

As of December 28, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET

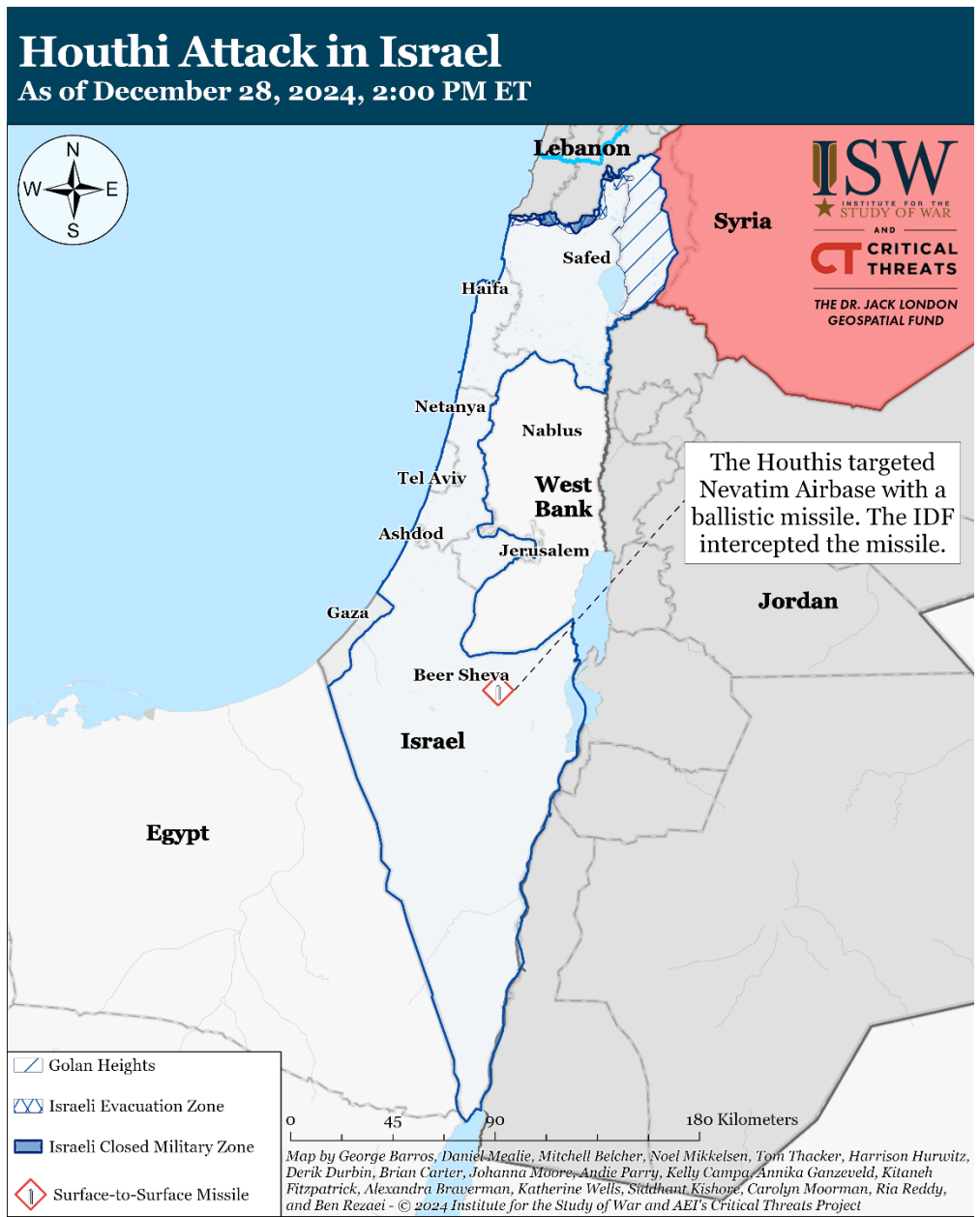


## Iran and the Axis of Resistance

The Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) held a procession on December 28 commemorating the fifth anniversary of the December 2019 US airstrikes that targeted the Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah.[68] The December 2019 US airstrikes targeted the PMF 45th and 46th Brigades, which are Kataib Hezbollah formations.[69]

IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami emphasized Houthis' growing role in the October 7 War during an interview with Houthi-controlled outlet al Masirah on December 28.[70] Salami highlighted Yemen's resistance, including strikes on Tel Aviv and a maritime blockade on Israeli ports and praised Houthis for their unwavering solidarity and rallies backing the Palestinian cause.[71]

**The Houthis launched a ballistic missile targeting Nevatim Airbase.**[72] The IDF intercepted the Houthi ballistic missile outside Israeli borders.[73]



*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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- [1] <https://t.me/SyrianArabNewsAgency/119949> ; <https://t.me/SyrianArabNewsAgency/119956>
- [2] <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/28/world/middleeast/syria-government-arrests-human-rights.html> ; <https://x.com/thesyrianlions/status/1871326986381225989>
- [3] [https://t.me/Alatikya\\_city/247](https://t.me/Alatikya_city/247) ; <https://x.com/DeirEzzore/status/1872255534898016617> ; <https://x.com/SanaAjel/status/1872006233638801640>
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- [5] <https://x.com/thiqanewsagency/status/1872924549186240637> ; <https://t.me/SyrianArabNewsAgency/119963>
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- [7] <https://t.me/rybar/66733>
- [8] <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/28/world/middleeast/syria-government-arrests-human-rights.html> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEjt7Tr9HOY>
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