

Iran Update



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December 30, 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.

Iran appears increasingly as though it seeks to foment sectarian conflict in Syria, which it could then exploit to establish proxy and partner militias there. Outlets affiliated with the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Armed Forces General Staff published reports on December 30 to this end. One outlet reported on HTS-affiliated elements committing violence against Syrian Alawites.[1] Another outlet reported that armed “resistance” has formed against the HTS-led interim government in response to its offenses against the Syrian people.[2] CTP-ISW has independently observed anti-HTS elements appearing in predominantly Alawite areas in recent days. That the Iranian outlet framed these elements as “resistance” is noteworthy given that the term has an overwhelmingly positive connotation in Iranian regime discourse.[3] Other Iranian outlets that have no obvious affiliation with the Iranian security establishment have published reports emphasizing sectarian tensions in recent days as well. For instance, one outlet reported on purported HTS efforts to achieve the “de-Shia-ization of Syria.”[4] A Middle Eastern source separately told a Western analyst that regional countries have shared intelligence with HTS in recent days that the IRGC is planning to “foster, direct, and support an insurgency” in Syria, presumably by exploiting the sectarian tension that Iran is currently trying to stoke.[5] Another source told the Western analyst that HTS-led forces detained two former Syrian regime operatives with IRGC identification cards and at least three Lebanese nationals.[6] CTP-ISW cannot verify these reports, but it is consistent with senior Iranian officials, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, suggesting in recent days that Syrian youth should arm and mobilize against the interim government.[7]

Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) leader Ahmed al Shara promoted loyalists to the senior levels of the new Syrian security establishment that he is currently forming. Shara

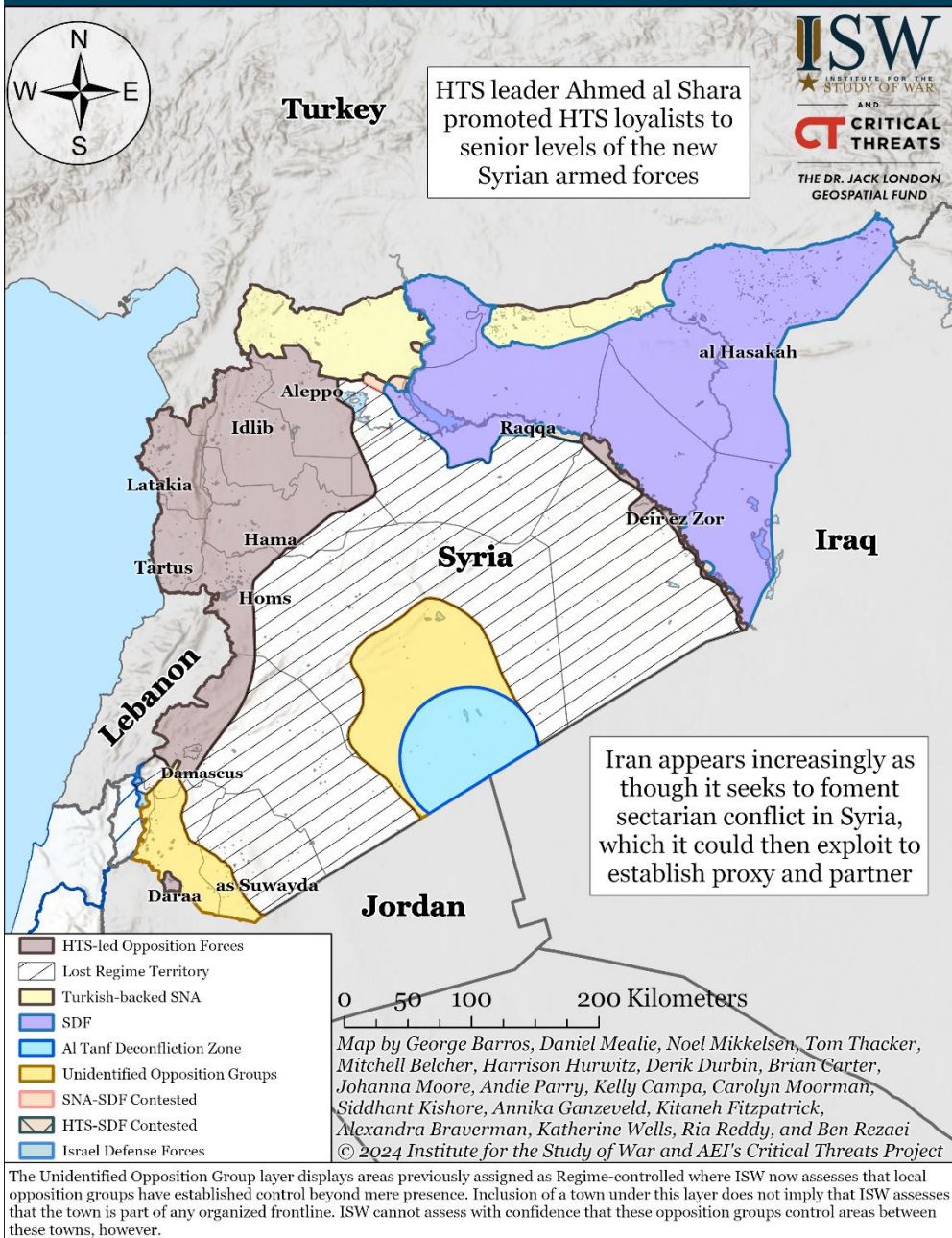
promoted these individuals even though the exact organization and structure of the new Syrian armed forces remains unclear. Shara promoted two individuals to major general, five individuals to brigadier general, and over forty individuals to colonel, as CTP-ISW previously reported.[8] The two major generals—Marhaf Ahmed Abu Qasra and Ali Nour al Din—are the interim defense minister and armed forces chief of staff, respectively. The individuals whom Shara promoted to brigadier general all appear to have close ties to HTS, and in some cases, personal relations with Shara. These individuals include:

- **Mohammad Khair Hassan Shuaib (also known as Abu al Khair Taftanaz).** Shuaib is a military leader in HTS.[9] Shuaib previously headed a military council that was comprised of HTS and the National Liberation Front.[10] Shuaib also reportedly founded the Syrian Salvation Government Military College.[11]
- **Abdul Rahman Hussein al Khatib (also known as Abu Hussein al Urduni).** Khatib is a Jordanian citizen of Palestinian origin.[12] Khatib went to Syria in late 2013 and is deeply loyal to HTS leader Ahmed al Shara.[13] Khatib is reportedly a member of the HTS Shura Council.[14] Jordanian media reported that Khatib is known for his “Salafi-jihadi approach.”[15]
- **Abdul Aziz Dawoud Khodaberdi (also known as Abu Muhammad Turkistan).** Khodaberdi commands the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) forces in Syria. The TIP is an al Qaeda-affiliated Uyghur jihadist group.[16] China has labeled the TIP as a terrorist organization and accused it of “gravely threaten[ing]” Chinese interests.[17] The TIP announced that Shara promoted two other Uyghur fighters to the rank of colonel.[18]
- **Abdo Mohammad Sarhan.** Sarhan previously commanded Jabhat al Nusra in the Eastern Ghouta.[19]
- **Omar Mohammad Ciftci (also known as Mukhtar al Turki).** Ciftci is a Turkish citizen who previously commander a unit called the Omar Brigade.[20] Ciftci reportedly led the “Deterrence of Aggression” operation room to overthrow the Bashar al Assad regime.[21]

HTS-led interim government officials are continuing to meet with military commanders affiliated with the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA). Interim Defense Minister Marhaf Ahmed Abu Qasra met with the leaders of the SNA-affiliated Hamza Division and Suleiman Shah Brigade on December 30.[22] HTS leader Ahmed al Shara previously met with these commanders on December 16.[23] The United States sanctioned the Hamza Division and Suleiman Shah Brigade in August 2023 for committing “serious human rights abuses against those residing in the Afrin region of northern Syria.”[24] The HTS-led interim government’s frequent and publicized meetings with SNA-affiliated commanders signals that HTS is continuing to heavily favor the SNA and pursuing “strategic relations” with Turkey, both of which have stated their intent to “eliminate” the SDF.[25]

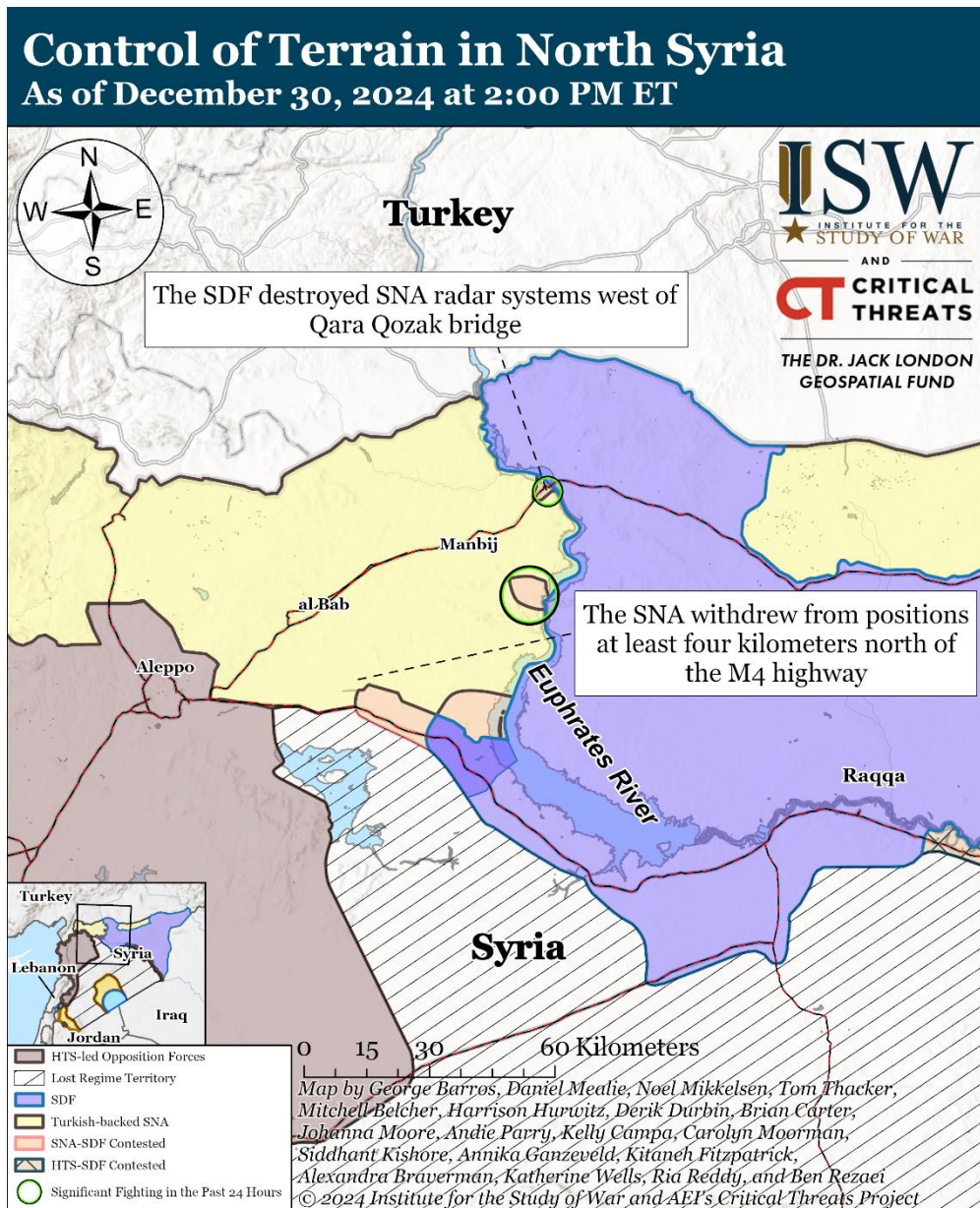
Reported Control of Terrain in Syria

As of December 30, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



The SDF and SNA have continued to clash in northern and northeastern Syria since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff. The SDF published footage showing its forces destroying SNA portable radar systems, a radar-jamming system, and an armored vehicle at SNA positions west of Qara Qozak bridge.[26] Anti-SDF media claimed that the SDF and SNA continued to clash west of Tishreen Dam in the Manbij countryside.[27] Anti-SDF media also claimed that Turkey conducted drone strikes targeting SDF positions near the Tishreen Dam in Aleppo Province and at a security point in Raqqa Province on December 30.[28]

The SDF likely advanced north of Deir Hafer, east of Aleppo City, and led SNA forces to withdraw at least four kilometers from the M4 highway. An SNA field commander told a local outlet on December 29 that the SNA had withdrawn from towns near Deir Hafer north to Rasm al Harmal al Imam, a town seven kilometers north of the M4 highway.[29] The field commander said that the SDF controlled all territory south of an east-west water canal that connects Lake Assad to Aleppo City.[30] The SNA field commander’s statement is consistent with recent local reports about SDF operations in Deir Hafer and nearby towns.[31] The SDF does not appear to have advanced further west than Deir Hafer as of this writing.



HTS leader Ahmed al Shara met with senior Ukrainian officials in Damascus on December 30.[32] A delegation led by Ukrainian Foreign Affairs Minister Andrii Sybiha met with Syrian Foreign Affairs Minister Assad al Shaibani and Intelligence Chief Anas Khattab.[33] Shaibani

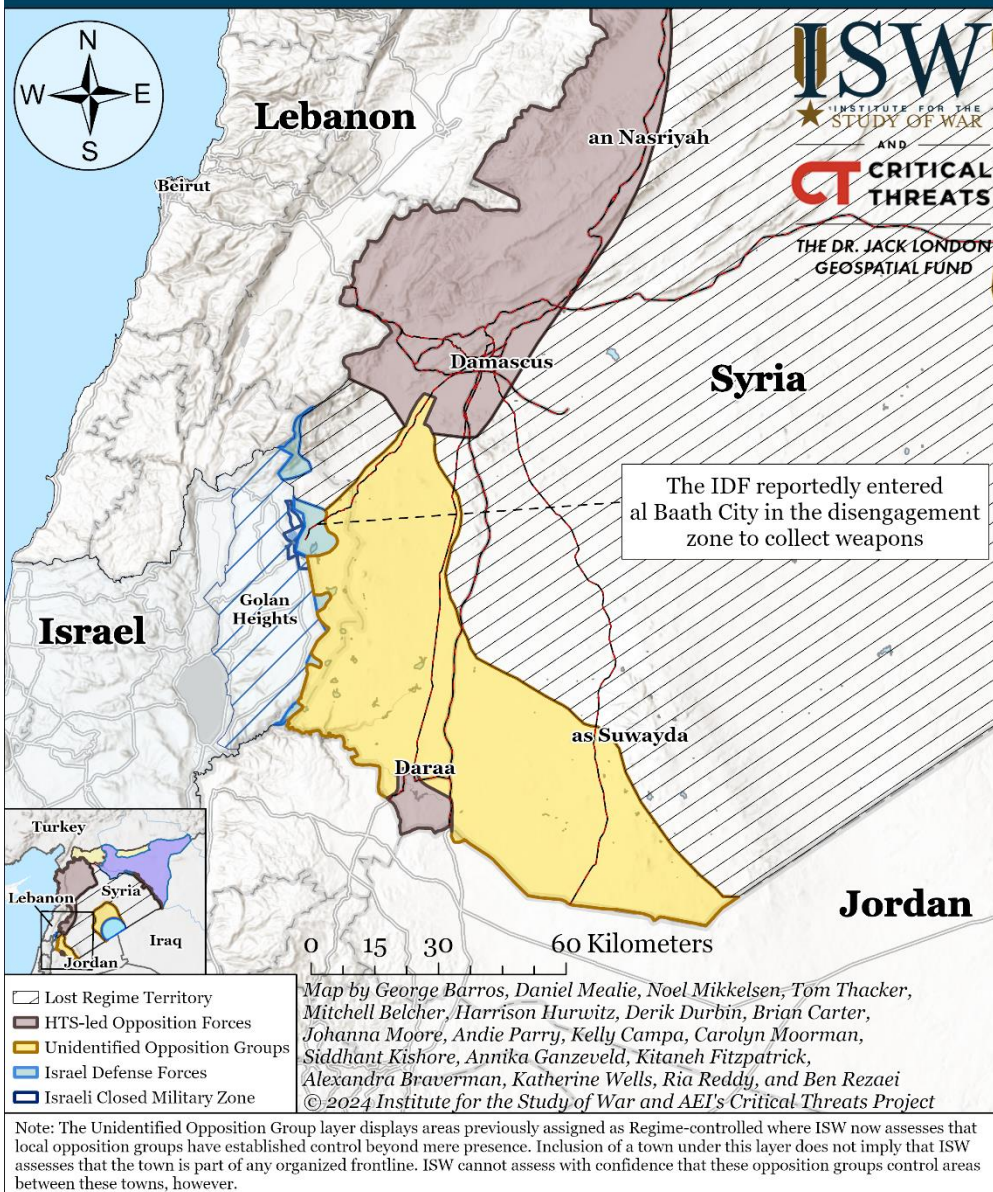
said that there will be a “strategic partnership” between Ukraine and Syria during a press conference after the meeting.[34]

HTS leader Ahmed al Shara met with Kuwaiti Foreign Affairs Minister Abdullah Ali al Yahya and Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council Jassam Mohammed al Badawi in Damascus on December 30.[35] Syrian Foreign Affairs Minister Assad al Shaibani and Syrian Intelligence Chief Anas Khattab attended the meeting as well.[36] Shaibani said that Kuwait and Syria will establish political, economic, and humanitarian cooperation during a press conference after the meeting.[37]

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) continued operations within the Israel-Syria disengagement zone on December 30.[38] Syrian media reported that the IDF advanced into al Baath and entered government buildings to search for weapons.[39] The IDF previously entered al Baath and met with local officials to negotiate weapons collection efforts in the area on December 22.[40] Local media reported on December 30 that the IDF remain near Maariyah and Jamleh villages, Daraa Province.[41] The IDF first began operations within the disengagement zone on December 8.[42]

Opposition Advances in Southwest Syria

As of December 30, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Palestinian fighters conducted a relatively large attack targeting the IDF in the northern Gaza Strip.[43]

The fighters conducted a multi-wave attack targeting the IDF around Jabalia refugee camp with small arms and in groups that ranged from six to 30 fighters. The IDF has been clearing the area since October 2024.[44] The IDF engaged the attacking Palestinian fighters with drone strikes and tank fire and killed around 106 fighters. This attack is noteworthy given it was significantly larger than most other militia operations in the Gaza Strip in recent months; fighters have typically operated in small squads rather than as a small company. The IDF assesses that around 100-200 fighters remain around Jabalia at this

time.[45] The IDF stated on December 3 that it would conclude its clearing operation in Jabalia “in the coming weeks.”[46]

Key Takeaways:

- **Iran:** Iran appears increasingly as though it seeks to foment sectarian conflict in Syria, which it could then exploit to establish proxy and partner militias there.
- **Syria:** HTS leader Ahmed al Shara appointed loyalists to the senior levels of the new Syrian security establishment that he is currently forming.
- **Syria:** HTS-interim government officials have continued to meet with military commanders affiliated with the Turkish-backed SNA.
- **Gaza Strip:** Palestinian fighters conducted a relatively large attack targeting the IDF in the northern Gaza Strip.

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

Unidentified Palestinian militias fired an anti-tank guided missile at a building in Beit Hanoun, northern Gaza Strip, on December 30, killing a reservist in the IDF 900th Brigade (162nd Division).[47] The IDF began a brigade-sized clearing operation in Beit Hanoun on December 28.[48]

The IDF 162nd Division continued to conduct clearing operations in Jabalia, northern Gaza Strip, on December 30. The IDF has operated around Indonesian Hospital in recent days, detaining and killing Palestinian fighters and destroying booby-trapped areas nearby.[49] The IDF also located footage of Hamas fighters planting improvised explosive devices (IEDs) about 45 meters from the hospital. Hamas and the Popular Resistance Committees conducted a combined mortar attack targeting the IDF west of Jabalia refugee camp on December 30.[50]

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades conducted separate rocket attacks targeting the IDF around the Netzarim Corridor on December 30.[51]

The National Resistance Brigades mortared the IDF south of Rafah City on December 30.[52]

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

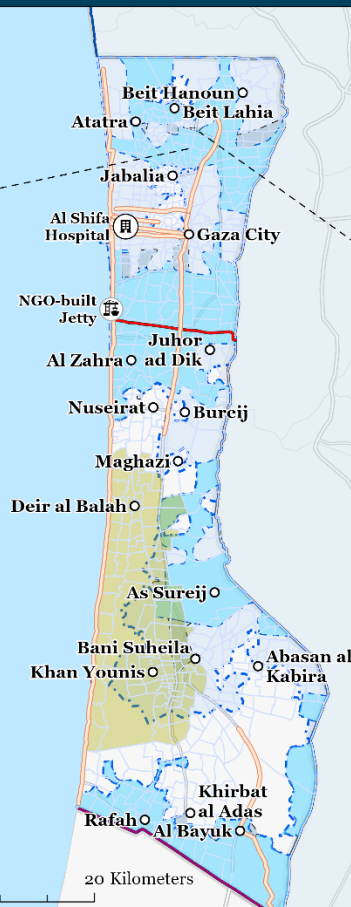
As of December 30, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



The IDF 16nd Division killed 106 Palestinian fighters near Jabalia refugee camp

The IDF 16nd Division recently conducted a clearing operation targeting Palestinian fighters and militia infrastructure near Indonesian Hospital

Palestinian militias conducted two rocket attacks targeting IDF sites around the Netzarim Corridor



0 5 10 20 Kilometers

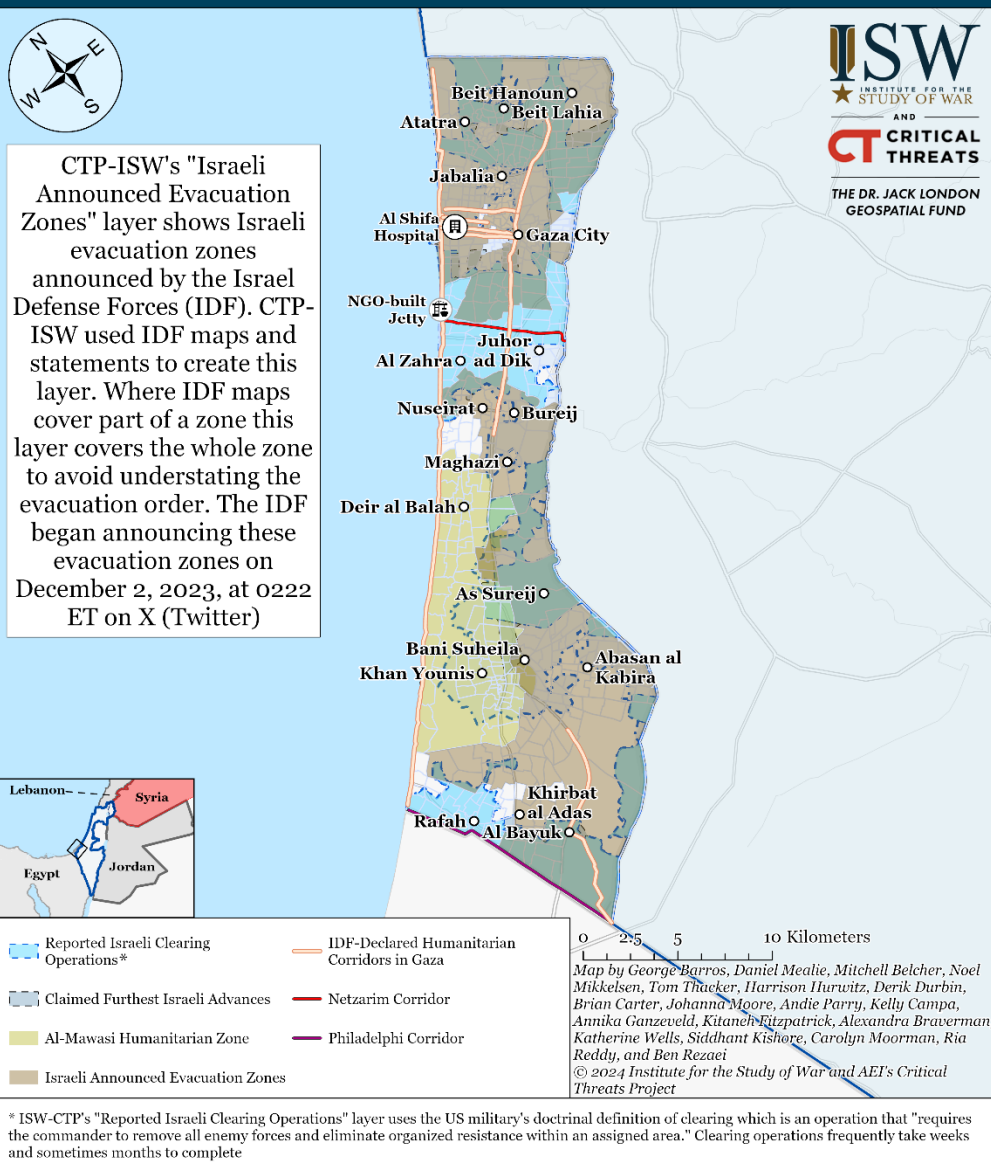
Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Tom Thacker, Harrison Hurwitz, Derik Durbin, Brian Carter, Johanna Moore, Andie Parry, Kelly Campa, Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Alexandra Braverman, Katherine Wells, Siddhant Kishore, Carolyn Moorman, Ria Reddy, and Ben 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

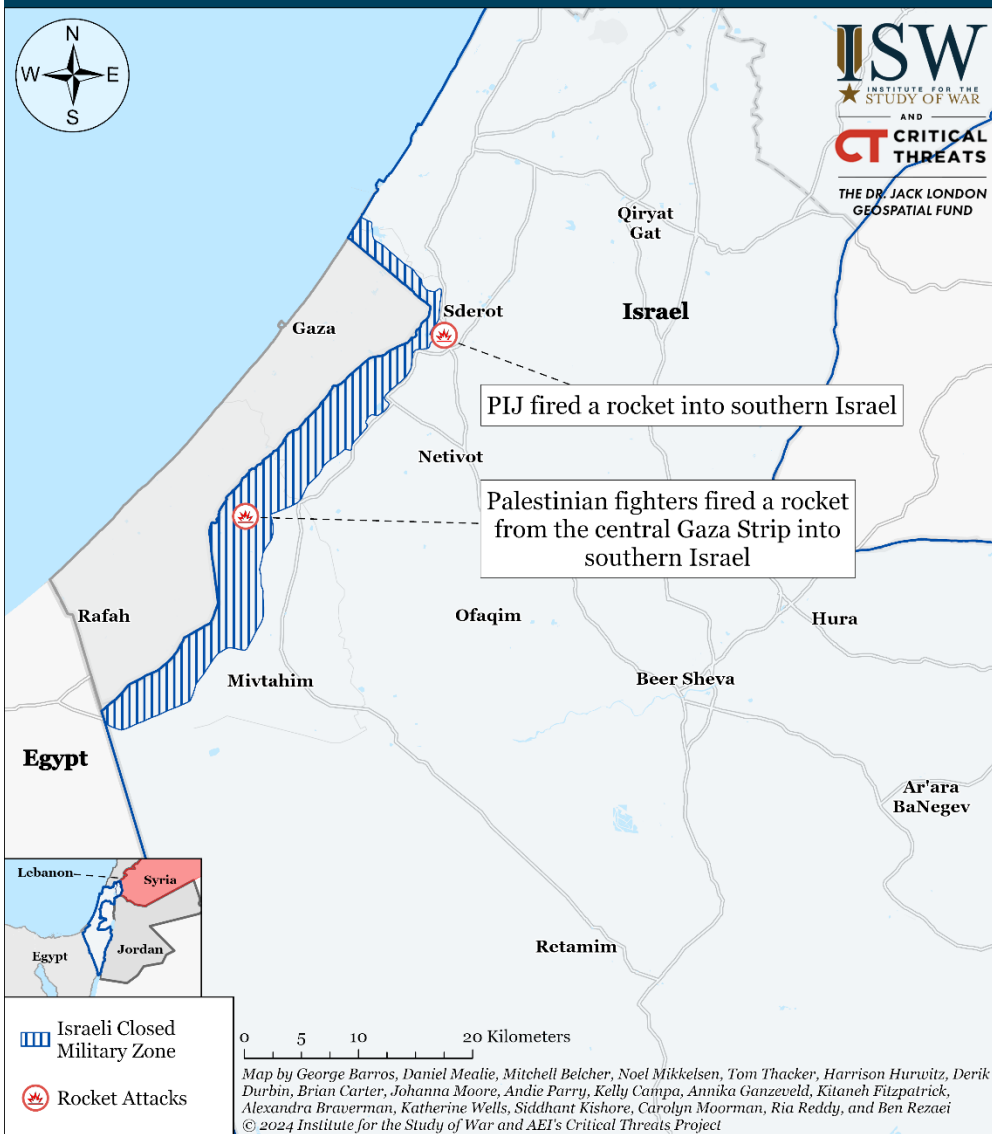
Israeli-Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip As of December 30, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Palestinian militias conducted two rocket attacks into southern Israel on December 30.[53] Palestinian militias launched a rocket from the central Gaza Strip that landed in an open area in southern Israel.[54] No militia has claimed the attack at the time of this writing. Palestinian Islamic Jihad separately fired rockets from the northern Gaza Strip at a town in southern Israel.[55] The IDF intercepted the rockets.[56]

Attacks into Israel from the Gaza Strip

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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:

1. End Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip

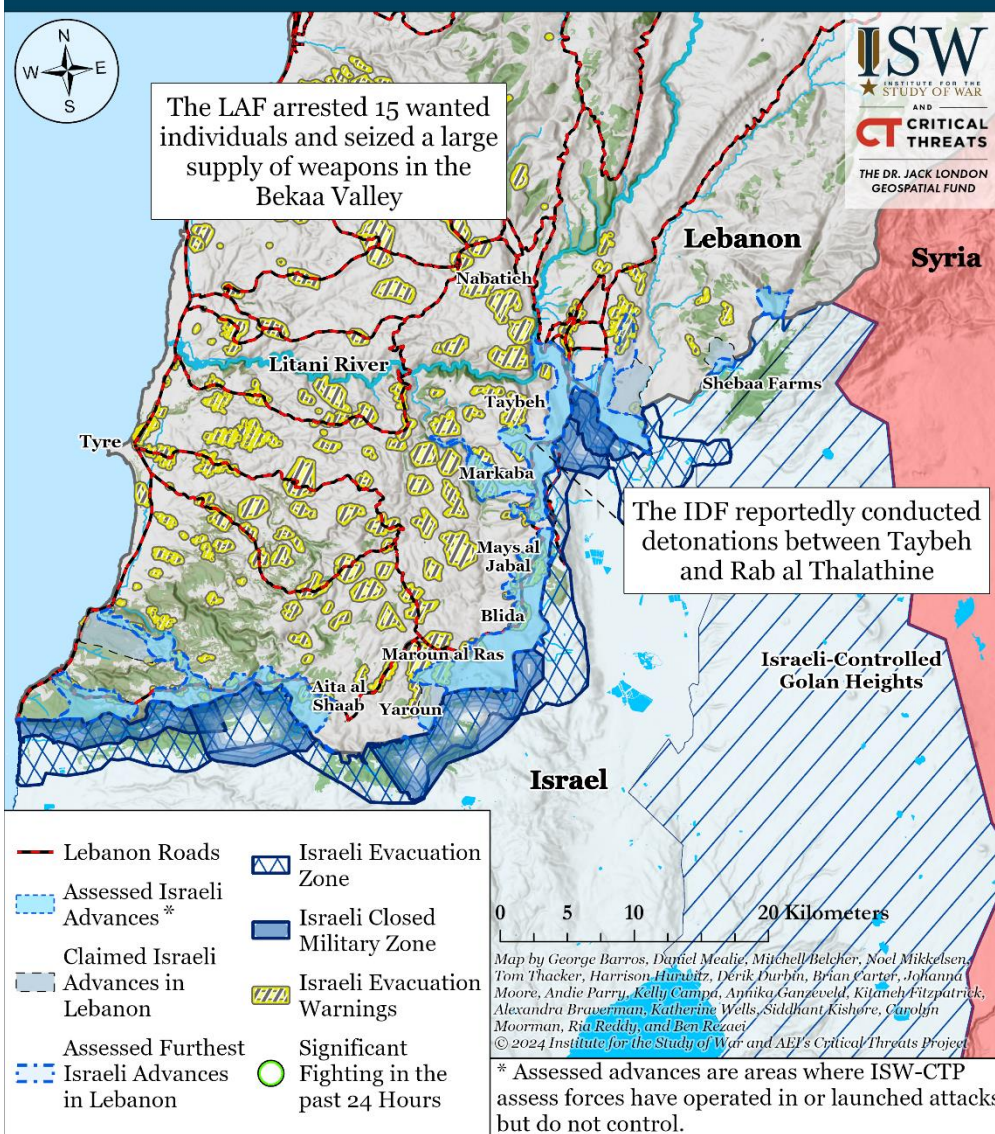
2. Survive the October 7 War as a capable political and military organization with control over Lebanon

The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) reported on December 30 that it raided the homes of wanted individuals throughout the Bekaa Valley, arresting 15 citizens for weapons trading and firing guns.[57] The LAF seized a large number of weapons, ammunition, and military equipment during the raids.[58] The LAF also reported that it arrested four Lebanese citizens and three Palestinians near Beirut for firing their weapons.[59] The LAF seized the individuals' weapons, ammunition, and military equipment.[60]

Lebanese and Lebanese Hezbollah media reported on December 30 that the IDF detonated explosives between Taybeh and Rab el Thalathine, southeastern Lebanon.[61] Lebanese media previously reported that the IDF detonated explosives to demolish homes in Taybeh on December 28.[62]

Reported Israeli Operations in Lebanon

As of December 30, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Hezbollah Political Council Deputy Chairman Hajj Mahmoud Qamati said on December 30 that Hezbollah will “deal” with any remaining Israeli forces in Lebanon following the 60-day period that Israel has to withdrawal under the ceasefire deal.[63] Qamati added that Hezbollah is strong and prepared and that its capabilities and missile stockpile are “still there.”[64] Qamati’s comments follow multiple accusations of Israel violating the ceasefire by Hezbollah and Lebanese officials.[65] The IDF said on December 25 that it has destroyed 80 percent of Hezbollah’s rocket capabilities, seized over 85,000 weapons in Lebanon, and killed a total of 3,800 Hezbollah fighters since the October 7 war began.[66]

Hezbollah Executive Council Deputy Chairman Sheikh Ali Damosh announced Hezbollah’s plan for reconstructing Lebanon.[67] Damosh said that Secretary General Naim Qassem formed a committee to supervise reconstruction. Damosh said that specialized technical bodies

are surveying the damage in Beirut, the Bekaa Valley, and southern Lebanon. Damosh added that Hezbollah has secured funding from Iran [for reconstruction] and that every person in need will soon receive aid. Damosh's comments follow UK-based media reporting on December 24 that delayed war compensation to non-Hezbollah members and those injured in Israeli operations in Lebanon has caused growing unrest among Hezbollah's support base.[68]

Iran and the Axis of Resistance

Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Chief of Staff Abdul Aziz al Muhammadawi inspected combat units in Anbar Province along the Iraq-Syria border for the second day in a row on December 30.[69] Muhammadawi emphasized the need to enhance cooperation among Iraqi security forces and to increase intelligence efforts, patrols, and border fortification maintenance.[70]

Iraqi Army Commander Major General Hassan Jawad al Silawi was appointed as the Iraqi military intelligence director on December 30.[71] Silawi replaced Major General Zaid Hoshi, who had served in the position since December 2022.[72] Silawi previously served as the commander of the Iraqi Army 7th Infantry Division in al Qaim, Anbar Province.[73] His appointment notably comes after Iranian-backed Badr Organization Secretary General Hadi al Ameri visited the 7th Infantry Division on December 27.[74] Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani appointed Hoshi as the Iraqi military intelligence operations director on December 30.[75] It is unclear why Hoshi was removed from his post as the director of Iraqi military intelligence.

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi highlighted the need for closer consultations with China to address Iran's nuclear program and sanctions relief during his visit to Beijing on December 27.[76] Iranian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister for Legal and International Affairs Kazem Gharibabadi previously met with Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu in Beijing on December 5 to discuss similar matters.[77] Araghchi's visit comes as Iranian oil tankers watchers observed a significant decline in Iranian oil exports to China as result of US Treasury sanctions on vessels since October 2024.[78]

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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