

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.

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.

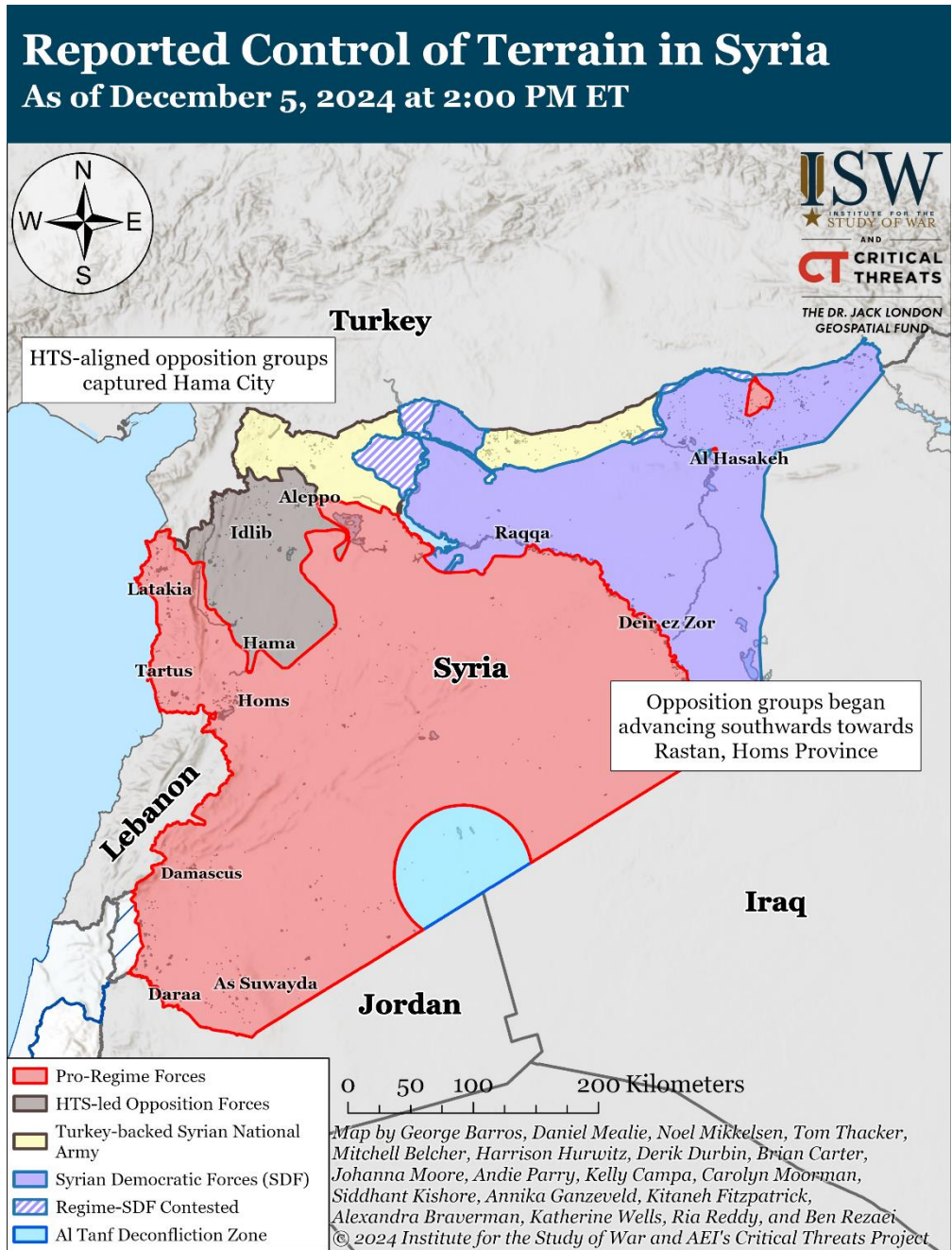
We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We utterly condemn violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity even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

Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)-aligned opposition groups have begun a campaign to capture Homs after capturing Hama City on December 5. HTS-aligned forces seized control of Hama City and Hama military airport from Syrian Arab Army (SAA) forces on December 5.[1] Fateh Mubin—a joint operations room led by HTS— announced after it secured Hama that its forces would advance south to secure Homs.[2] Syrian opposition media posted footage reportedly showing a convoy of HTS-aligned fighters prepared to advance south along the M5 highway to Homs.[3] Unverified reports claim that locals in Talbiseh, approximately 8 kilometers north of Homs, have started their own localized effort to liberate the town ahead of the opposition advance.[4]

Syrian opposition groups are using negotiated settlements with localities to rapidly seize territory without fighting. Locals in two Christian-majority towns north of Hama reportedly negotiated surrender with advancing opposition forces, avoiding any large-scale fighting in the towns.[5] Ismaili Shia officials in Salamiyah, southeast of Hama, also reportedly came to an agreement with opposition forces to avoid fighting.[6] Regime forces reportedly withdrew from Salamiyah on December 5 after opposition forces advanced to the town's outskirts on December 4.[7] The decision by towns to abandon the regime appears to be a trend across Hama countryside. This trend may help HTS-aligned forces approach Homs within the next day without being slowed down by fighting through country villages.

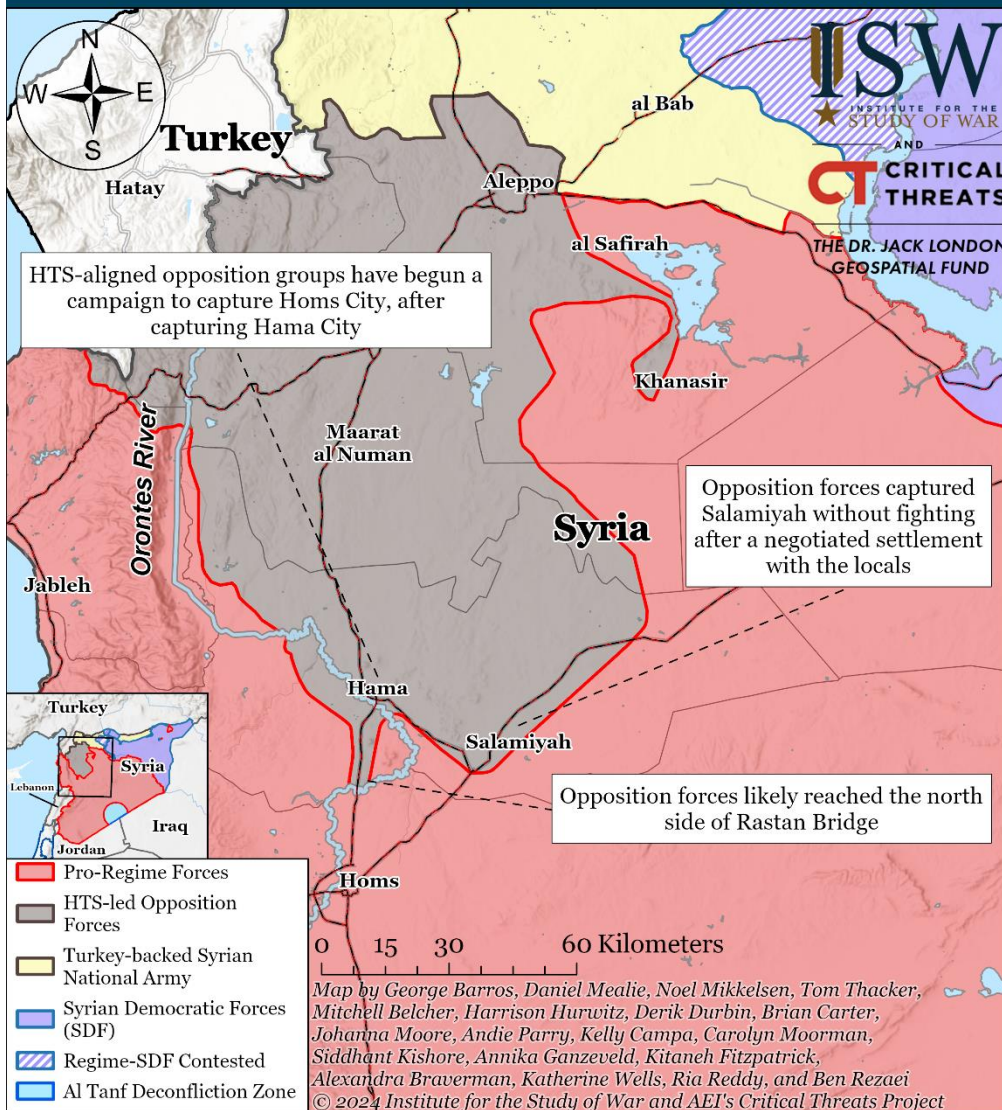
Opposition groups may also advance rapidly towards Homs due to the rapid collapse of regime forces. The regime does not appear to have established any defensive line between Hama City and the Orontes River. Regime forces appear to be collapsing between Hama City and Homs City. A pro-regime aircraft bombed the Rastan Bridge over the Orontes River after Opposition forces seized

the left, north bank of the Orontes.[8] A force retreating in good order and not under significant pressure would have presumably blown the bridge themselves, rather than relying on aircraft. Airstrikes will usually fail to damage a bridge sufficiently to prevent a crossing, making ground-based detonation preferable unless a force is unable to detonate the bridge. The reported low casualties among Regime forces during the collapse around Hama suggest that Regime forces were not under significant pressure.[9] It is also possible that the regime was forced to rely on aircraft due to a lack of combat engineers to detonate the bridge. The regime similarly failed to set up strong defensive lines until well into Hama Governorate after opposition forces seized Aleppo on November 30.[10] There are other intact bridges and likely fords east and west of the Rastan Bridge that opposition forces could use to cross the Orontes, however.



Opposition Advances in Northwest Syria

As of December 5, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



HTS is establishing alternative political and security institutions in Aleppo City, consolidating control and support of the local population and former regime elements. Fateh Mubin, HTS' joint operations room, has ordered all Syrian regime army, security, and police defectors to report to one of two designated processing centers in the city.[11] HTS has presumably designed this effort to reintegrate former combatants into civilian life, which in theory ensures stability and security during the post-conflict transition period.[12] Fateh Mubin has also sought to prevent its fighters from harassing civilians or coming into conflict with locals by restricting the activity of fighters in the city.[13] Fateh Mubin ordered the fighters to report to the front lines and continue their advance to secure regime-held towns. The group has also mobilized local quasi-police forces to backfill these military units.[14] Fateh Mubin released the names and contact information for new opposition government ministers, effectively establishing HTS and the HTS-led Syrian Salvation Government as the de facto governing authority of Aleppo.[15] HTS has pursued similar successful

government-building approaches in northwestern Syria by incorporating local religious and political figures into the governing body to eliminate rivalry.[16]

HTS is attempting to use diplomacy to prevent Iranian-backed Iraqi militias from bolstering Syrian regime forces after regime forces retreated south. HTS leader Abu Mohammad al Jolani asked Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani on December 5 to prevent the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) from intervening in the Syrian conflict.[17] The PMF is an Iraqi state security service that includes a large number of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias.[18] The PMF reports directly to Sudani on paper, but many of the militias that comprise the PMF answer to Iran in reality.[19] Dozens of PMF fighters have reportedly entered Syria in recent days to help defend the Syrian regime against opposition forces.[20] Sudani is likely unable to prevent militias that answer to Iran from intervening in Syria.

Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Naim Qassem said on December 5 that Hezbollah is committed to “sheltering and rebuilding” in Lebanon and abiding by the ceasefire deal with Israel.[21] Qassem acknowledged that Hezbollah fighters will withdraw north of the Litani River in exchange for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon, in accordance with the ceasefire deal.[22] Qassem claimed that Israel violated the ceasefire deal “at least 60 ” times since it went into place on November 26. Qassem stated that it is the responsibility of the Lebanese government—and not Hezbollah—to address these violations. Qassem stated that Hezbollah will provide financial assistance, mainly through Iranian donations, to Lebanese civilians in Beirut to rebuild. Qassem also stated that Hezbollah “stands by” the Syrian regime amidst the ongoing Syrian opposition offensive.

The IDF conducted an airstrike on December 5 targeting a weapons stockpile southeast of Aleppo, Syria.[23] An Israeli Army Radio correspondent noted that the SAA previously held the targeted area, but that Syrian opposition forces had recently seized the area.[24]

Egypt presented an Israeli-proposed ceasefire-hostage deal to Hamas on December 2.[25] Israel desires to capitalize on Hamas’ “willingness to be flexible” on implementing a partial deal due to the ceasefire in Lebanon, former Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar’s death, and the incoming Trump Presidency, according to two Israeli officials speaking to Axios. Israel’s updated proposal includes a ceasefire between 42-60 days and the release of all surviving female hostages, men over the age of 50, and hostages in a serious medical condition.[26] Hamas has not commented on this proposal as of the time of this writing. An Israeli official told Ynet on December 2 that Hamas may be willing to compromise on an IDF presence on the Philadelphi Corridor.[27] Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu’s insistence on an Israeli military presence on the Philadelphi Corridor has been one of the most significant sticking points in the negotiations.[28] Netanyahu has said that retaining a presence in the corridor is required to achieve Israeli war aims.[29]

Israeli officials also told Axios that Egypt is now the “main channel” for negotiations with Hamas after Qatar announced on November 9 that it would cease its efforts to mediate a ceasefire-hostage deal until Israel and Hamas showed a “willingness” to resume negotiations.[30] Reuters reported on December 4 that Qatar has resumed its role as a mediator.[31] This news follows reports that Qatari officials had ordered Hamas’ political leadership to relocate from Qatar. [32] Hamas denied on November 18 that it had departed Qatar.[33]

Hamas confirmed that it approved an Egyptian proposal to form a post-war governance committee in the Gaza Strip on December 5.[34] Hamas added in a statement that the committee should help implement the “comprehensive agreements” to “achieve national unity.” This is

possibly about the joint declaration Hamas, Fatah, and other unspecified Palestinian political factions signed in July 2024 to form a “temporary national unity government” responsible for governing the Gaza Strip and the West Bank after the war.[35] Hamas said it met with several Palestinian figures during post-war governance and ceasefire-hostage negotiations in Cairo, including the leadership of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).[36] Israeli media reported that Hamas and Fatah agreed to form an independent civilian committee to manage post-war governance on November 3.[37] Hamas will almost certainly attempt to infiltrate or subvert whatever civilian government emerges to manage the post-war Gaza Strip unless Hamas is prevented from doing so by force.

Key Takeaways:

- **Hama City-Homs City Axis:** Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)-aligned opposition groups have begun a campaign to capture Homs after capturing Hama City on December 5. Syrian opposition groups are using negotiated settlements with localities to rapidly seize territory without fighting.
- **State of Regime Forces:** Opposition groups may also advance rapidly towards Homs due to the rapid collapse of regime forces. Regime forces appear to be collapsing between Hama City and Homs City. The regime similarly failed to set up strong defensive lines until well into Hama Governorate after opposition forces seized Aleppo on November 30.
- **Aleppo:** HTS is establishing alternative political and security institutions in Aleppo City, consolidating control and support of the local population and former regime elements.
- **HTS Diplomacy:** HTS is attempting to use diplomacy to prevent Iranian-backed Iraqi militias from bolstering Syrian regime forces after regime forces retreated south. HTS leader Abu Mohammad al Jolani asked Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani on December 5 to prevent the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) from intervening in the Syrian conflict.
- **Lebanese Hezbollah:** Secretary General Naim Qassem said on December 5 that Hezbollah is committed to “sheltering and rebuilding” in Lebanon and abiding by the ceasefire deal with Israel.
- **Gaza Ceasefire-Hostage Negotiations:** Egypt presented an Israeli-proposed ceasefire-hostage deal to Hamas on December 2. Israel desires to capitalize on Hamas’ ”willingness to be flexible” on implementing a partial deal due to the ceasefire in Lebanon, former Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar’s death, and the incoming Trump Presidency, according to two Israeli officials speaking to Axios.

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 continued clearing operations in the northern Gaza Strip on December 5. Commercially available satellite imagery captured on December 5 shows that Israeli forces recently cleared areas north of Beit Lahia. An Israeli Army Radio correspondent reported on December 5 that 18,000 Palestinians evacuated Beit Lahia in the past day.[38] The correspondent reported that the IDF

has killed around 20 Palestinian fighters in the past day and noted that the IDF has killed fewer Palestinian fighters in Beit Lahia in recent days.[39] The correspondent added that Israeli forces have not engaged in close-quarter combat with Palestinian fighters in Beit Lahia in recent days, which he assessed might indicate “the strengthening of IDF operational control” in the area.[40] This statement is consistent with recent comments from IDF officials that the IDF will conclude its clearing operations in Jabalia in the coming weeks.[41] The al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) conducted attacks targeting Israeli forces and armor in Jabalia refugee camp.[42]

Israeli forces have continued operations near Tal al Hawa, southwest of Gaza City, since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on December 4. A local Palestinian journalist reported gunfire from Israeli vehicles south of Tal al Hawa on December 4.[43] PIJ and Hamas detonated improved explosive devices (IED) targeting Israeli forces and armor in Tal al Hawa on December 5.[44]

Israeli forces continued operations in the central Gaza Strip on December 5. Commercially available satellite imagery captured on December 5 shows that Israeli forces recently cleared areas southeast of the Maghazi refugee camp. A local Palestinian journalist reported gunfire from Israeli vehicles north of the Nuseirat refugee camp on December 5.[45]

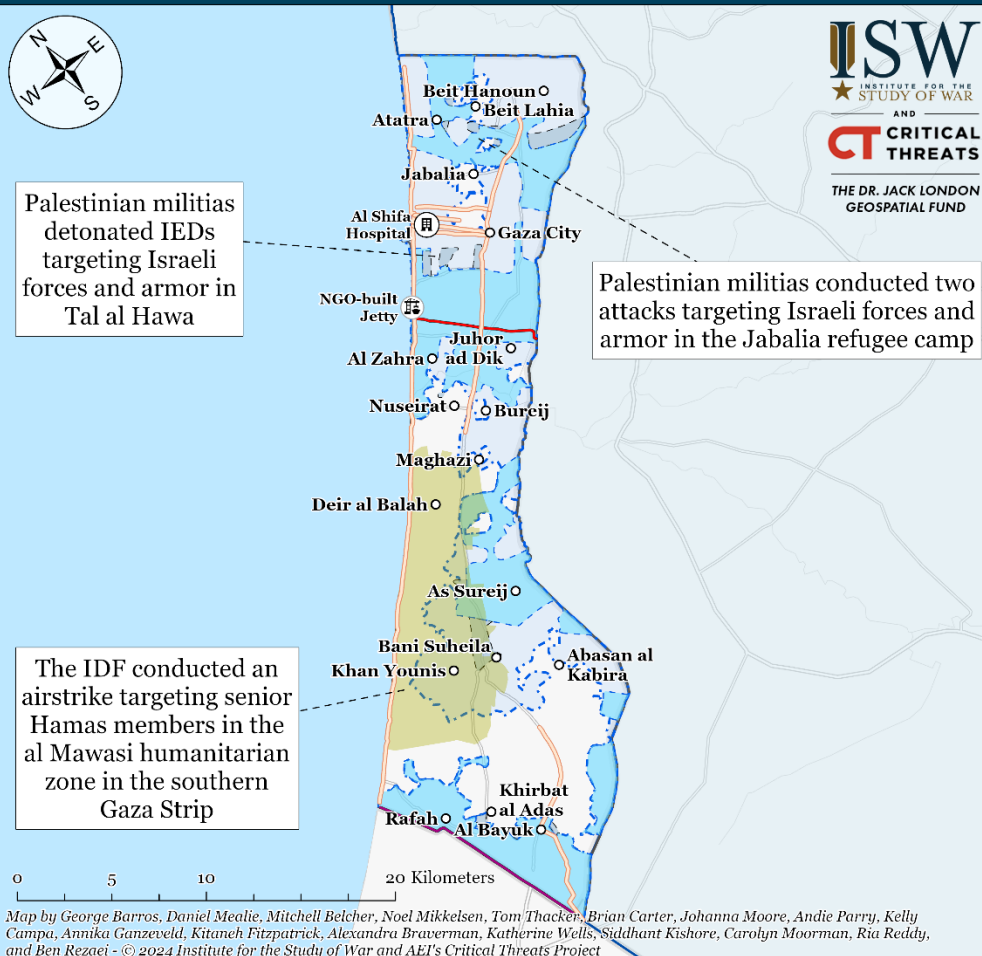
The IDF Air Force conducted an airstrike targeting senior Hamas members in the al Mawasi humanitarian zone near Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip on December 4.[46] The IDF detected secondary explosions following the airstrike, indicating the presence of weapons in the targeted area. The airstrike killed a senior member of Hamas’ internal security apparatus, Osama Ghanim.[47] The IDF reported that Ghanim had committed several human rights violations and “suppressed” Hamas opponents.[48] The strike sparked a fire and killed 21 people, according to the head of a nearby hospital.[49]

The National Resistance Brigades mortared Israeli forces and armor east of Rafah City on December 5.[50]

The IDF announced multiple efforts to increase the size and effectiveness of the IDF on December 5.[51] An Israeli Army Radio Correspondent reported that these efforts include expanding the IDF’s engineering capabilities, regular and reserve officer courses, the reserve system as a whole, and pilot programs for recruiting female soldiers to new IDF units. These announced efforts follow the IDF publishing data on November 14 showing that it only has 83 percent of the combat manpower that it requires.[52]

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

As of December 5, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



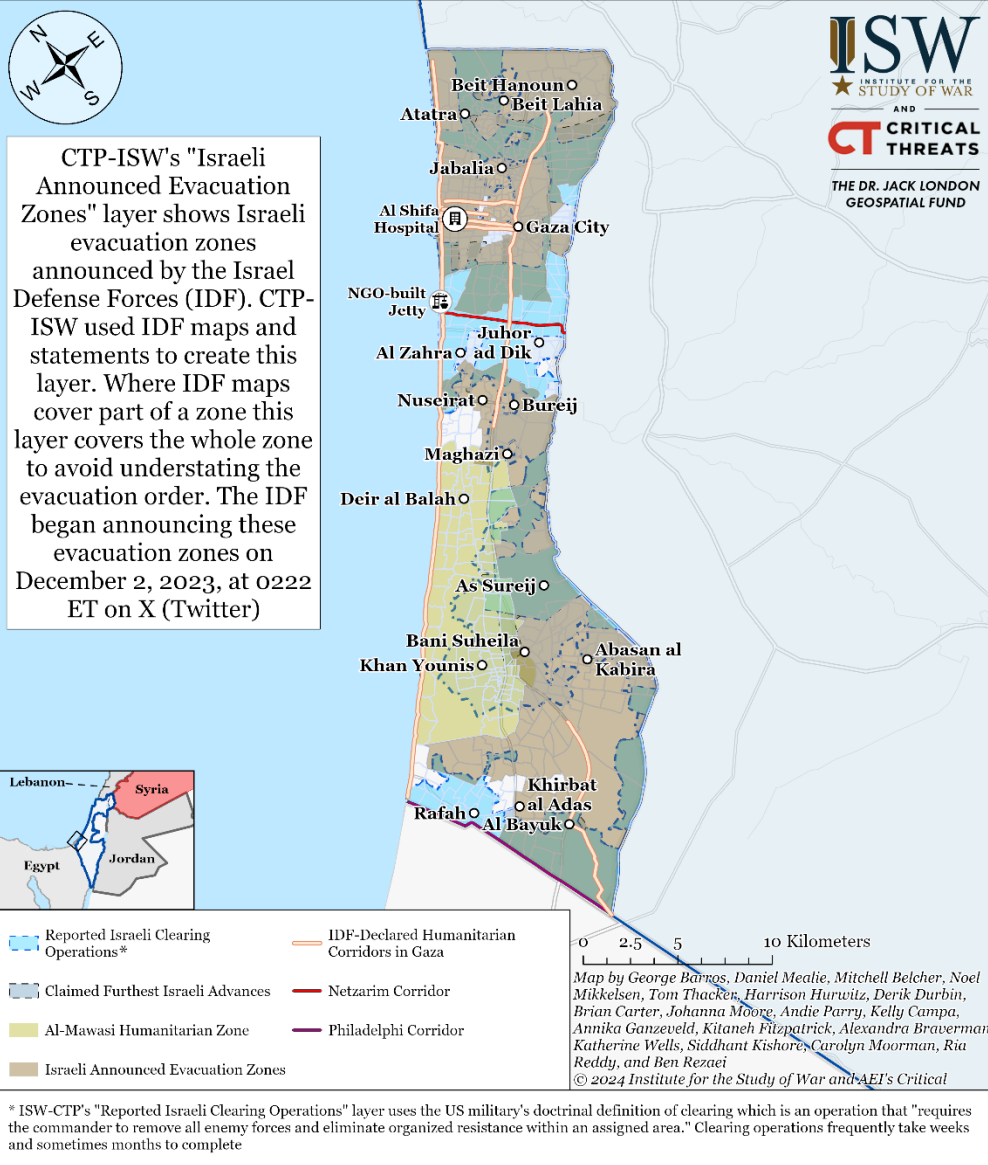
Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Tom Thacker, Brian Carter, Johanna Moore, Andie Parry, Kelly Campa, Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Alexandra Braverman, Katherine Wells, Siddhant Kishore, Carolyn Moorman, Ria Reddy, and Ben Rezaei - © 2024 Institute for the 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 5, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



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 769th Territorial Brigade (91st Division) continued activity in southeastern Lebanon over the past week.[53] IDF forces located Hezbollah weapons and killed numerous Hezbollah fighters in the area. The IDF reiterated that it is operating in southern Lebanon to ensure the safety of the Israeli towns in the upper Galilee region. The Israel-Lebanon ceasefire permits IDF forces to operate in southern Lebanon until January 25, 2025.[54]

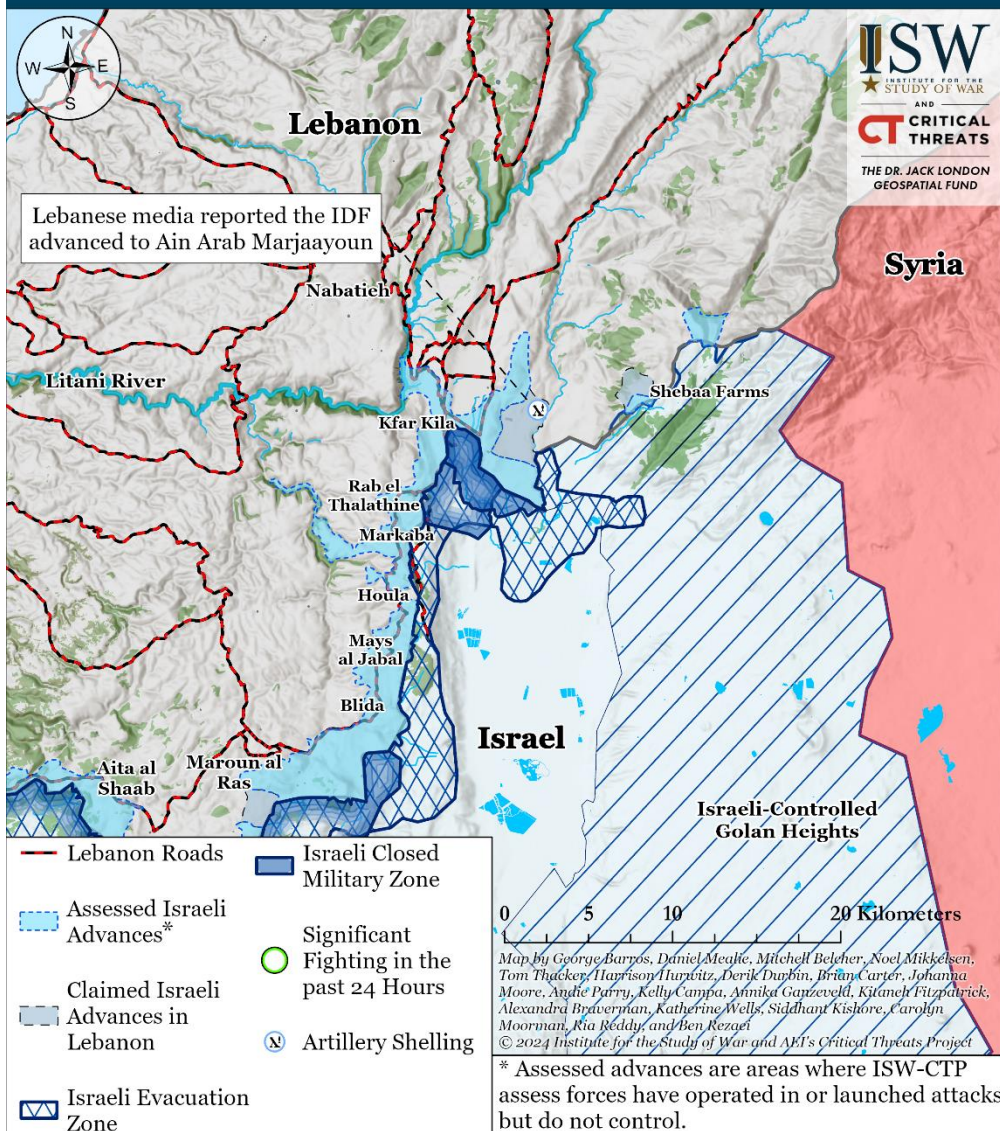
Lebanese media reported that the IDF destroyed a road linking Chebaa and Birket al Naqqar, south of Chebaa.[55] It is not clear why the IDF destroyed the road, and certain military activities allowed under the ceasefire--such as the controlled detonation-in-place of improvised explosive devices--could destroy a road, depending on the size of the IED. The IDF has operated in Chebaa to destroy Hezbollah's infrastructure in recent days.[56]

Syrian media reported that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) sent reinforcements to an unspecified area on the Lebanon-Syria border following the Syrian opposition offensive.[57]

Lebanese media reported on December 5 that the IDF advanced into Ain Arab Marjayoun, approximately 3 kilometers north of the Israel-Lebanon border. Lebanese media reported IDF artillery fire and clearing operations in Ain Arab Marjayoun.[58] Lebanese media reported IDF troops advancing to the “center” of the town on December 5.[59]

Lebanese media reported that the IDF conducted an airstrike along the Litani River, adjacent to the towns of Yohmor and Zawtar, Nabatieh Governorate, on December 4.[60] The IDF briefly operated along the Litani River on November 26.[61]

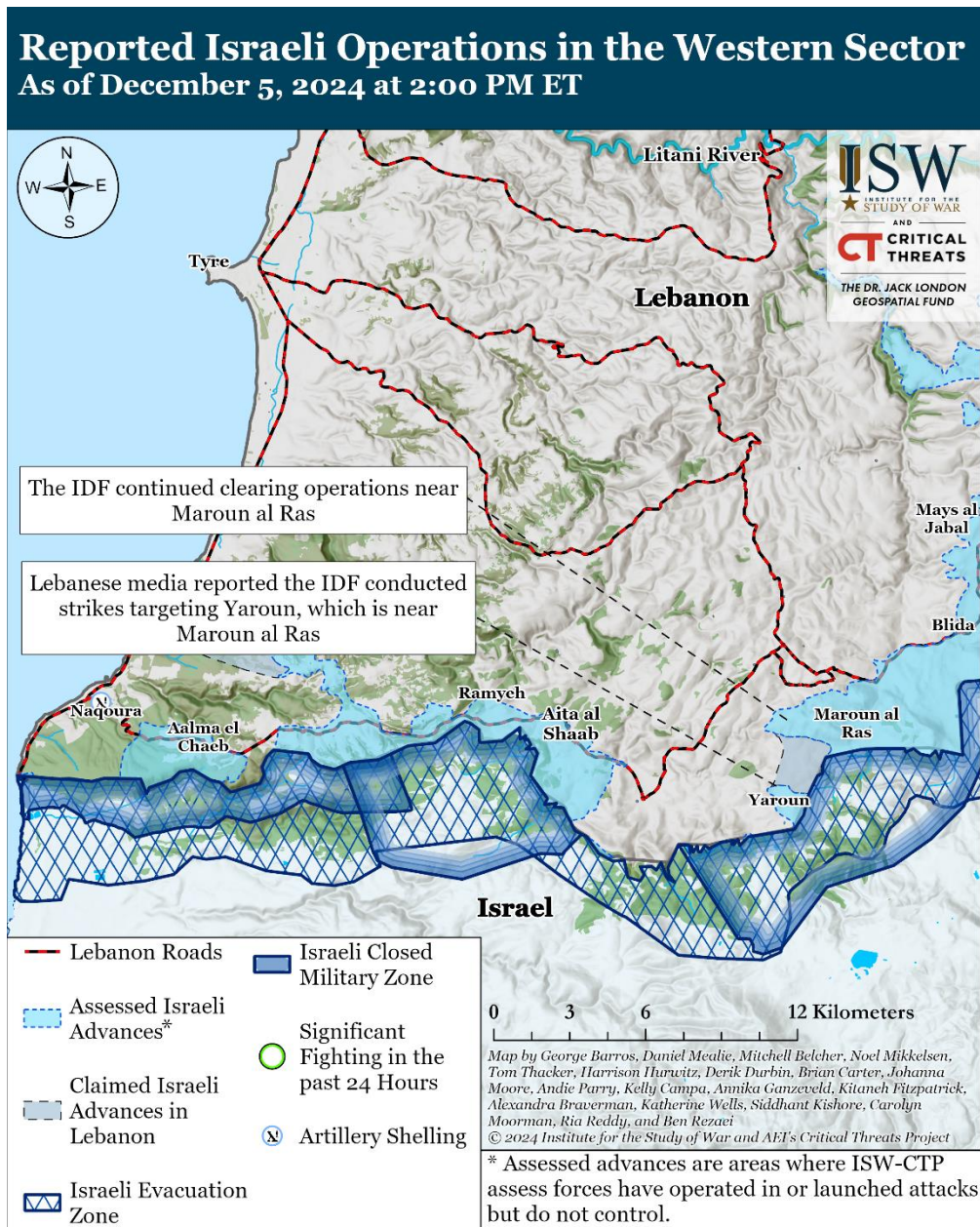
Reported Israeli Operations in the Eastern Sector As of December 5, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



The IDF reported on December 5 that the 188th Armored Brigade (36th Division) located and destroyed Hezbollah tunnel infrastructure in southern Lebanon over the past week.[62] The tunnel infrastructure was “tens” of meters long, according to the IDF. The IDF said that one of the exits of the tunnel network led to a rocket launcher that was aimed at Israeli civilian and military sites in northern Israel. The IDF also located several weapons, including rockets and mortars, inside the tunnel system.[63]

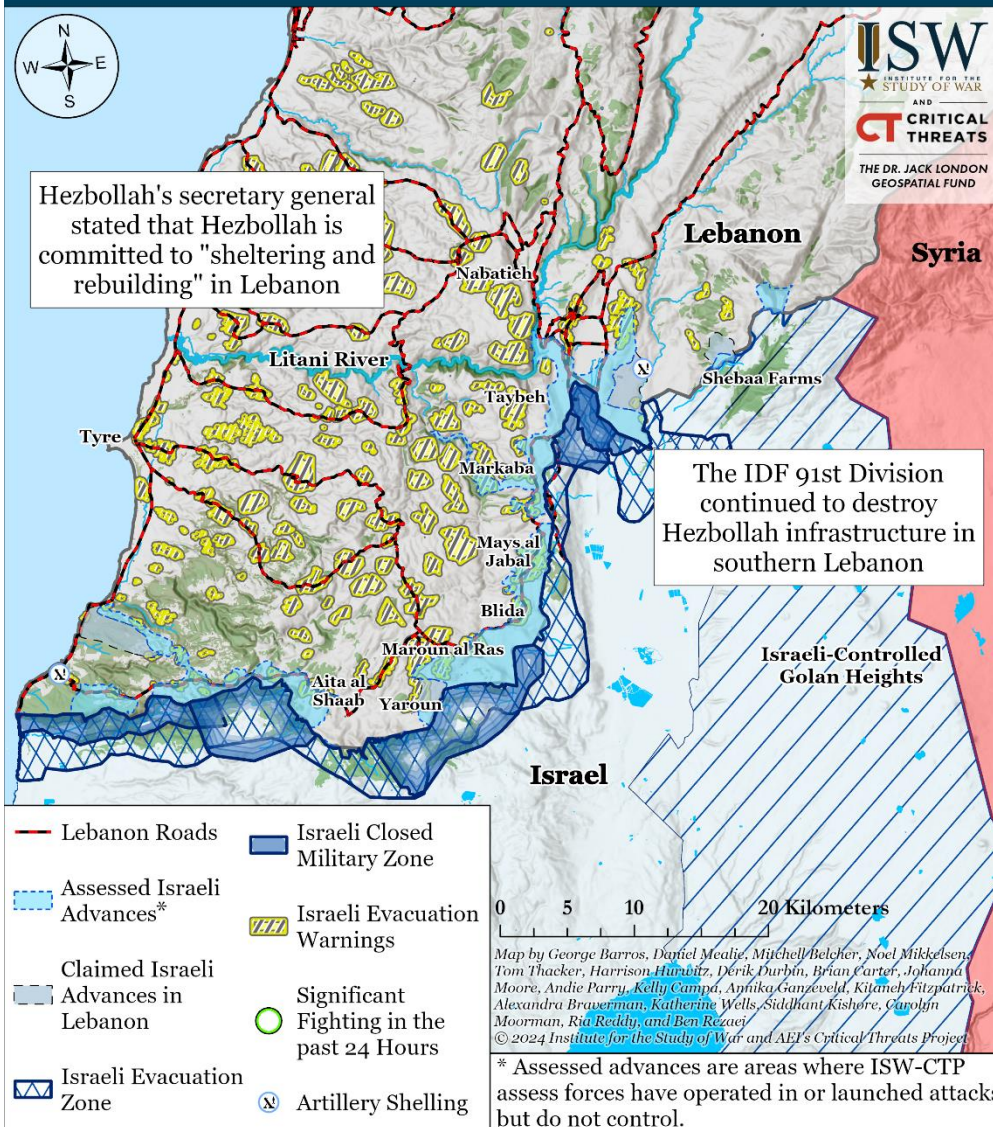
The IDF continued to operate near Maroun al Ras in southwestern Lebanon since CTP-ISW's last data cut-off on December 4. Lebanese media reported that Israeli forces conducted controlled demolition of civilian infrastructure in Yaroun, near Maroun al Ras.[64] Lebanese media reported that Israeli soldiers stationed in Maroun al Ras fired small arms toward Bint Jbeil.[65] Israeli forces also conducted artillery shelling in Naqoura, according to Lebanese media.[66]

Lebanese media reported that the IDF Air Force struck unspecified sites in Yaroun, in southwestern Lebanon.[67] The IDF also struck Majdal Zoun and Aitaroun, according to local media reports.[68] The IDF has not commented on these airstrikes at the time of this writing.



Reported Israeli Operations in Lebanon

As of December 5, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Hezbollah has not claimed any attacks into Israel since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on December 4.

Hezbollah-affiliated sources reported on December 5 that a drone exploded in Kibbutz Shoal, near Beersheba.[69] The Lebanese sources did not specify if it was an attack and who launched the drone. Israeli media have yet to acknowledge the incident.

Iran and the Axis of Resistance

Iraqi nationalist Shia cleric Muqtada al Sadr called on Iraqi forces and Iranian-backed Iraqi militias not to intervene in the Syrian conflict on December 5.[70] Sadr emphasized that only the Syrian people can “determine their destiny.”

The Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, Army, Border Guards, and Emergency Response Division conducted a joint operation in Anbar Province on December 5 to increase security along the Iraq-Syria border.[71] The Iraqi Army has deployed armored units to the al Qaim-Albu Kamal border area in Anbar Province in recent days.[72]

An Iranian parliamentarian focused on Syria, Abbas Golrou, was intentionally vague about how it will support Syria in a December 4 interview. Golrou stated that Iran will not reveal what it is pursuing in Syria but Iran has previously “responded to the Syrian government's request and will enter,” Syria if needed in an interview with Iranian media on December 4.[73] Golrou is a member of Parliament's National Security Committee, the head of Parliament's Foreign Relations Committee, and the deputy head of the Iran-Syria parliamentary friendship group. Golrou claimed that Iran focused its support for Syria on “counterterrorism,” which is a euphemism for Iranian support for Syria against opposition groups as well as ISIS. Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi also met with his Egyptian counterpart Badr Abdelatty and Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry Senior Adviser for Policy Ali Asghar Khaji separately spoke with UN special envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen on December 4.[74]

Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs Kazem Gharibabadi met with Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu in Beijing on December 5 to discuss nuclear negotiations and sanctions.[75] Gharibabadi emphasized his recent discussions with the E3 (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) in Geneva on “resuming sanctions lifting and nuclear talks.”[76] The officials probably discussed the impact of the incoming Trump Administration's “maximum pressure” sanctions on Iranian oil exports, although this was not explicitly stated in the meeting summary.[77] Iranian oil exports to China are extremely important to the Iranian economy, and sanctions would increase the cost of China's imports.[78]

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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