

Iran Update, February 18, 2024

Andie Parry, Brian Carter, Kathryn Tyson, Peter Mills, and Annika Ganzeveld

Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm EST

CTP-ISW will publish abbreviated updates on February 17 and 18, 2024. Detailed coverage will resume Monday, February 19, 2024.

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. For more on developments in Iran and the region, see our [interactive map of Iran and the Middle East](#).

Note: CTP and ISW have refocused the update to cover the Israel-Hamas war. The new sections address developments in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as noteworthy activity from Iran's Axis of Resistance. 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.

Click [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report. Click [here](#) to subscribe to the Iran Update.

Reuters reported on February 18 that Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force commander Esmail Ghaani directed Iranian-backed Iraqi groups to “pause” attacks on US forces during a January 29 meeting in Baghdad.[1] Ghaani met with the leaders of Iranian-backed Iraqi militia groups less than 48 hours after the Iranian-backed drone attack on January 28 that killed three US servicemembers in Jordan. Kataib Hezbollah responded to Iranian directives from Ghaani by announcing that it would “suspend attacks” on January 30.[2] Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba did not “initially agree” to Ghaani’s directive.[3] The group said that it would continue attacks targeting US forces on February 2, after Ghaani’s visit.[4] The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed three attacks targeting US forces after Ghaani’s visit.[5] It has not claimed any attacks after February 4.[6]

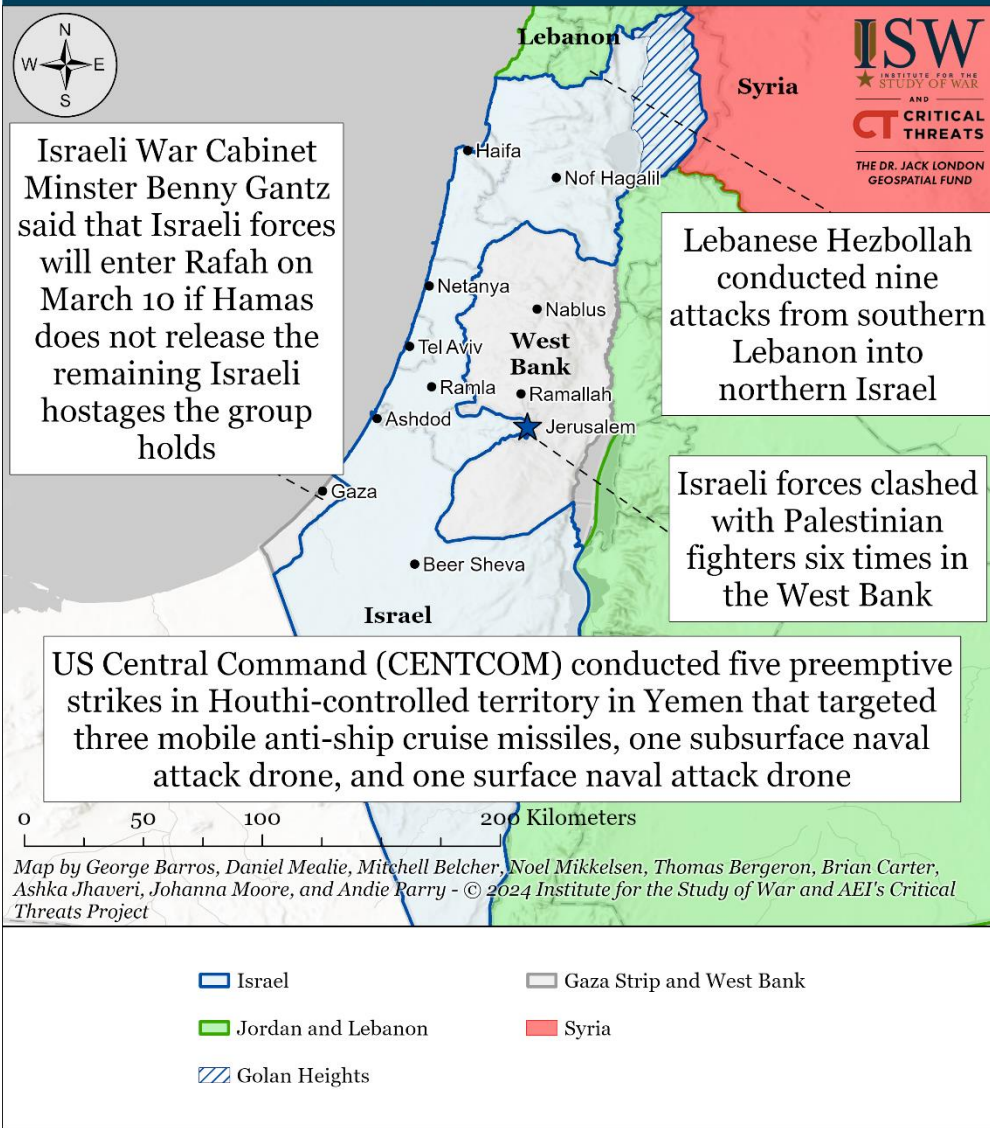
Ghaani’s visit illustrates the degree to which Iran controls its proxy network across the Middle East. Most of Iran’s proxies and partners in Iraq immediately ceased attacks following Ghaani’s order. Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba initially did not agree but Iranian-backed Iraqi groups have not resumed attacks targeting US forces since February 4.[7] Ghaani and Iran can pressure their partners and proxies to pause or resume attacks as needed, however. Nine Iranian and Iraqi sources told Reuters that Ghaani chose to pause attacks to “avoid a similar escalation” to the 2020 escalation cycle that resulted in the US airstrike that killed former IRGC Quds Force commander Qassem

Soleimani.[8] Ghaani could resume attacks in pursuit of Iranian objectives—namely, expelling US forces from Iraq—as needed when or if Iran calculates that the risk of “similar escalation” decreases.

Key Takeaways:

- **Iraq:** Reuters reported on February 18 that Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force commander Esmail Ghaani directed Iranian-backed Iraqi groups to “pause” attacks on US forces during a January 29 meeting in Baghdad. Ghaani’s visit illustrates the degree to which Iran controls its proxy network across the Middle East.
- **Khan Younis:** The Israeli Defense Minister stated on February 18 that Hamas’ Khan Younis Brigade has been “defeated and does not function as a military entity in any way.”
- **Rafah:** Israeli War Cabinet Minister Benny Gantz said Israeli forces will enter Rafah at the start of Ramadan if Hamas does not release the remaining Israeli hostages the group holds.
- Gantz’s statement reflects a possible change in the Rafah operation’s timeline. Channel 12 reported on February 10 that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a War Cabinet meeting that the IDF would need to complete the operation into Rafah by March 10 due to international pressure.
- **Yemen:** US Central Command conducted five preemptive strikes in Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen on February 17 that targeted three mobile anti-ship cruise missiles, one subsurface naval attack drone, and one surface naval attack drone.

Israel-Hamas War as of February 18, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



Gaza Strip

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

- Erode the will of the Israeli political establishment and public to launch and sustain a major ground operation into the Gaza Strip
- Degrade IDF material and morale around the Gaza Strip.

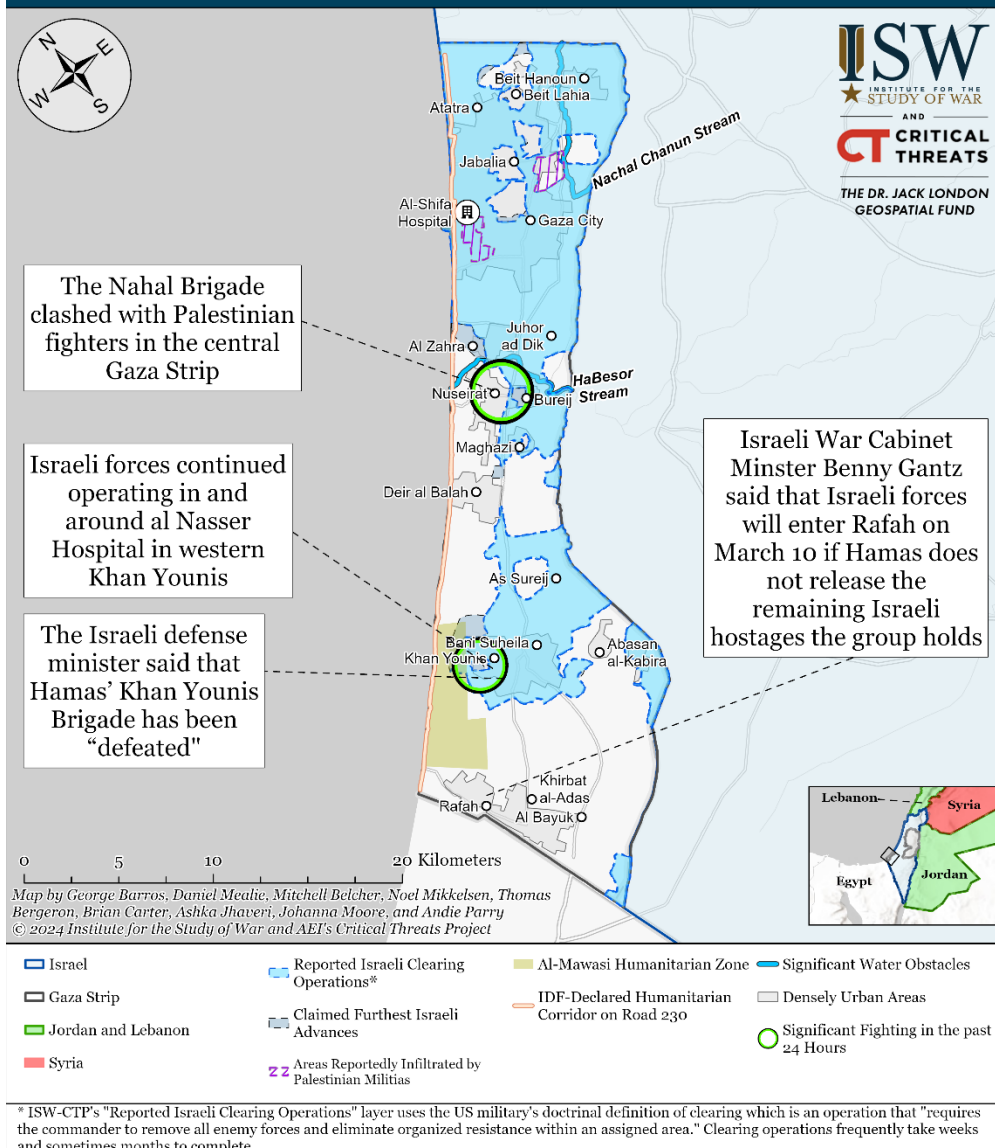
The Israeli Defense Minister stated on February 18 that Hamas' Khan Younis Brigade has been "defeated and does not function as a military entity in any way."^[9] Hamas has not claimed attacks against Israeli forces in Khan Younis since February 13.^[10] Other Palestinian militias aligned with Hamas have continued attacks targeting Israeli forces in Khan Younis, however.^[11]

Israeli special operations forces continued clearing operations in and around Nasser Hospital in western Khan Younis on February 18. Israeli special operations forces (assigned to the 98th Division) began operating in Nasser Hospital on February 15 after receiving “credible intelligence” that Hamas-held hostages were in the hospital.^[12] The special operations forces captured Israeli cars that Palestinian fighters stole on October 7 and seized weapons near Nasser Hospital.^[13] The 35th Paratrooper Brigade killed Palestinian fighters and confiscated military equipment.^[14] Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said on February 18 that over 200 suspected fighters had surrendered to Israeli forces at Nasser Hospital. Gallant added that the surrender of suspected fighters indicates Hamas' loss of “fighting spirit.”^[15] The IDF said many of the suspected fighters who surrendered participated in the October 7 attack and have links to the hostages held by Hamas.^[16]

Israeli forces continued clearing operations in additional areas of Khan Younis City. The 7th Brigade raided Palestinian militia weapons caches and killed over 20 fighters in Khan Younis City.^[17] The IDF 98th Division directed airstrikes targeting Palestinian fighters and a weapons warehouse.^[18]

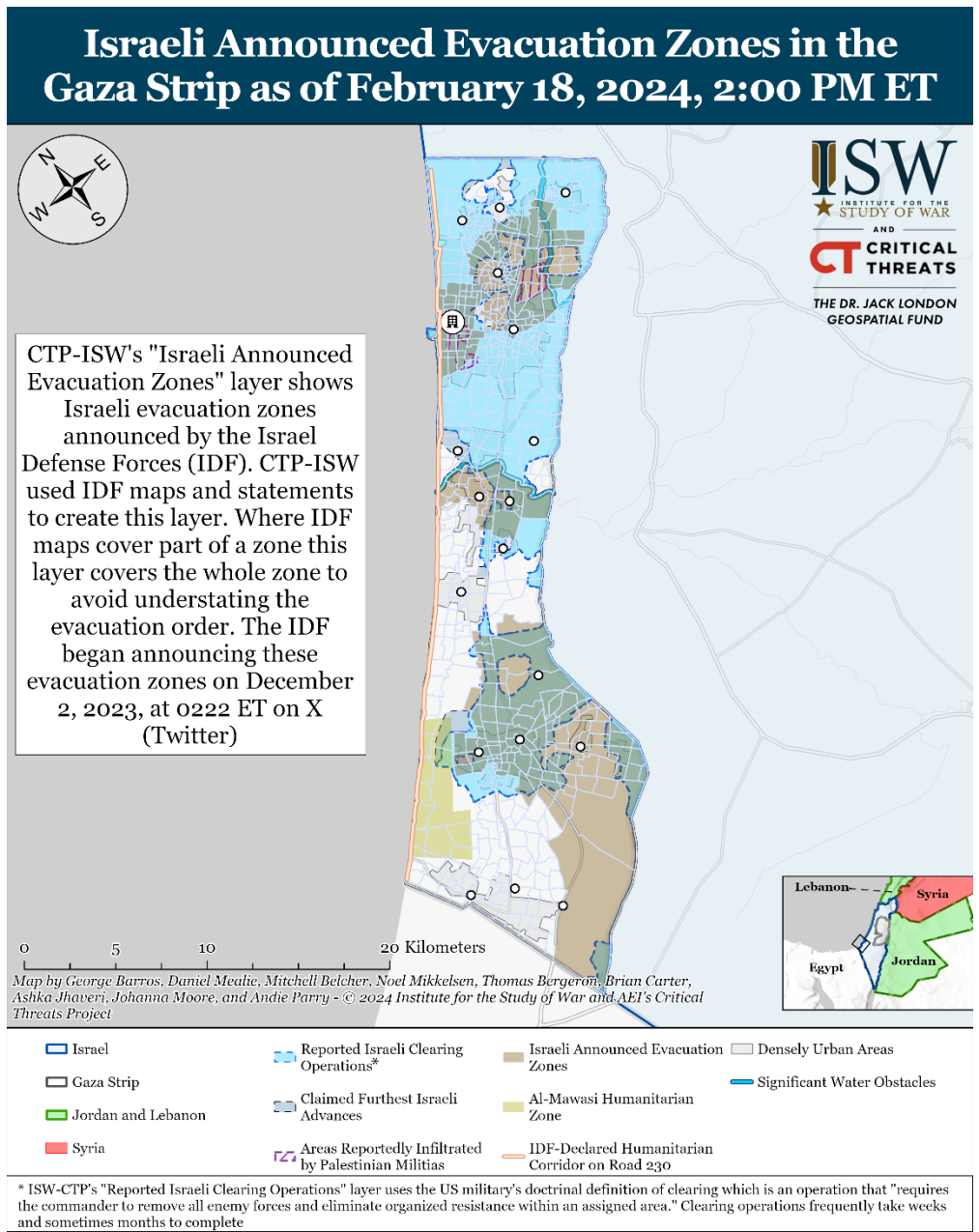
Israeli forces continued clearing operations in the central Gaza Strip. The Nahal Brigade (assigned to the 162nd Division) killed a Palestinian militia cell transporting weapons near Israeli forces.^[19] Israeli aircraft conducted airstrikes targeting a Hamas operational headquarters and additional targets in Nuseirat and Deir al Balah on February 17.^[20] The Israeli Defense Minister said on February 18 that the IDF would continue its operations to dismantle Hamas’s remaining six battalions in the central Gaza Strip and Rafah.^[21] Hamas did not claim any attacks in the central Gaza Strip on February 18.

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip as of February 18, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



Israeli War Cabinet Minister Benny Gantz said Israeli forces will enter Rafah at the start of Ramadan if Hamas does not release the remaining Israeli hostages the group holds.^[22] Ramadan is expected to begin on March 10, 2024. Gantz's statement reflects a possible change in the Rafah operation's timeline. Channel 12 reported on February 10 that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a War Cabinet meeting that the IDF would need to complete the operation into Rafah by March 10 due to international pressure.^[23] Israeli officials have committed to minimize civilian casualties in operations in Rafah, but they have not publicly outlined a plan for how the IDF would evacuate civilians from Rafah.^[24] Israel's partners and allies, including the United States, have refused to support a Rafah operation without a plan in place to protect civilians. The IDF Chief of Staff stated on February 13 that Rafah contains an estimated 10,000 Hamas fighters and over a million displaced Palestinian civilians.^[25] Netanyahu said on February 17 that the IDF

would enter Rafah to destroy the remaining Hamas battalions even if a hostage deal is achieved.[26] The Israeli Defense Minister said on February 16 that Israel would not evacuate Rafah's civilian population into Egypt.[27]



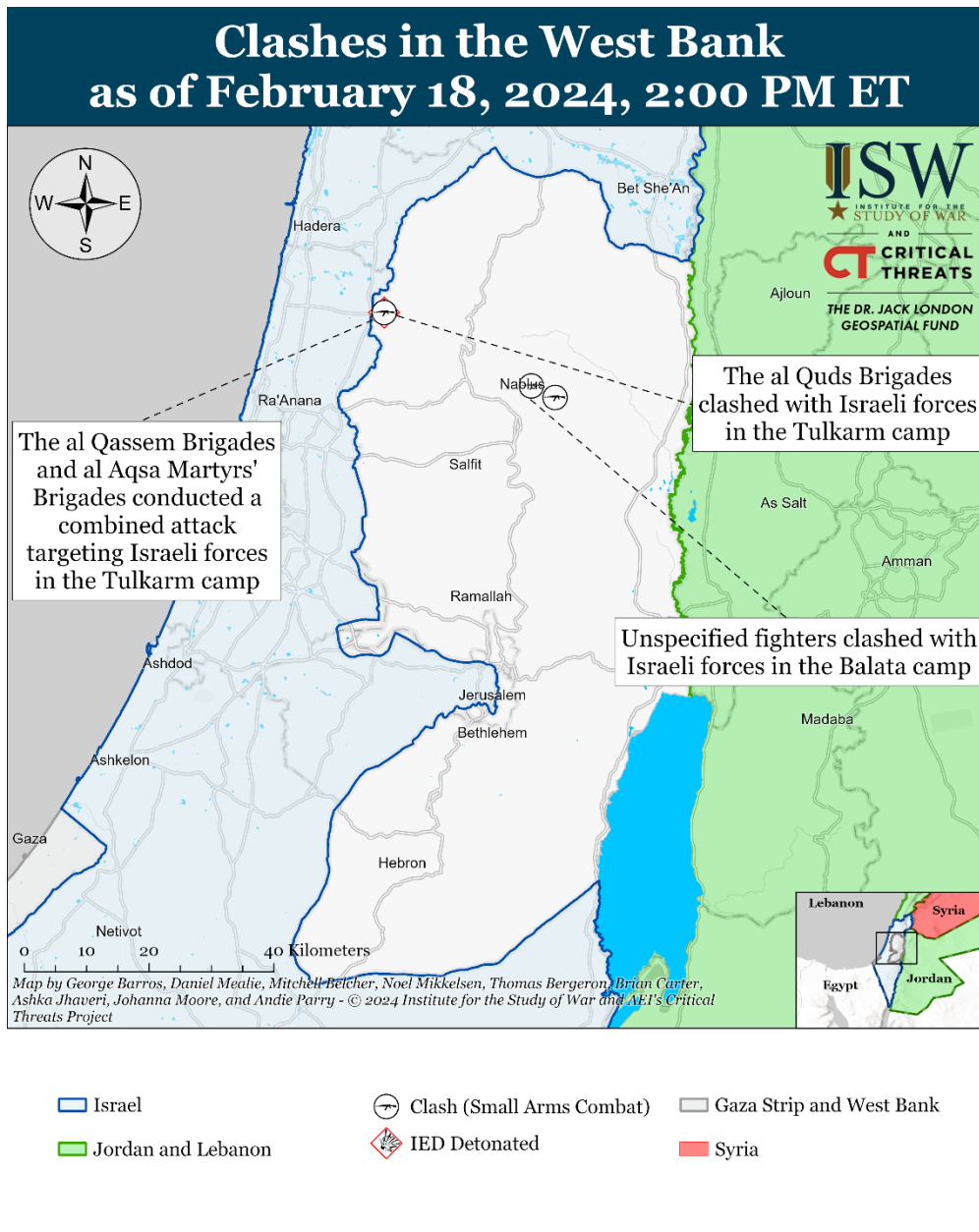
Palestinian militias did not conduct indirect fire attacks into southern Israel from the Gaza Strip on February 18.

West Bank

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

- Draw IDF assets and resources toward the West Bank and fix them there

Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters six times in the West Bank on February 18.[28] Israeli forces killed an al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade commander during an IDF raid in Tulkarm refugee camp.[29]



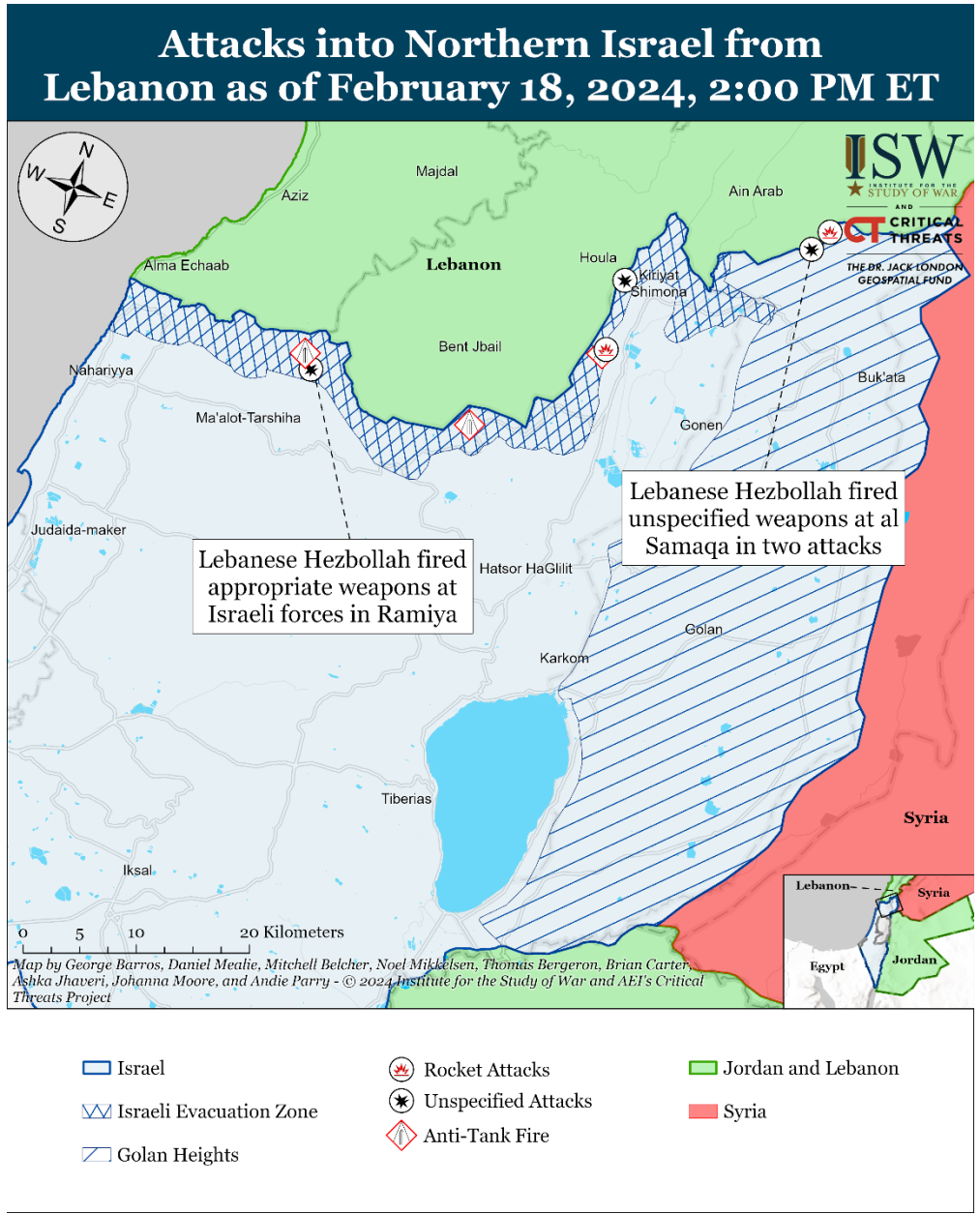
This map is not an exhaustive depiction of clashes and demonstrations in the West Bank.

Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

- Draw IDF assets and resources toward northern Israel and fix them there
- Set conditions for successive campaigns into northern Israel

Lebanese Hezbollah conducted nine attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel on February 18.[30]



Recorded reports of attacks; CTP-ISW cannot independently verify impact.

Iran and Axis of Resistance

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

- Demonstrate the capability and willingness of Iran and the Axis of Resistance to escalate against the United States and Israel on multiple fronts
- Set conditions to fight a regional war on multiple fronts

US Central Command (CENTCOM) conducted five preemptive strikes in Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen on February 17 that targeted three mobile anti-ship cruise missiles, one subsurface naval attack drone, and one surface naval attack drone.[31]

CENTCOM reported that the Houthis used a subsurface naval attack drone on February 17 for the first time since the Houthis launched their attack campaign targeting international shipping in October 2023.[32] CENTCOM conducted the strikes after determining that the cruise missiles and naval drones were an “imminent threat” to merchant vessels and US Navy ships in the Red Sea.[33]

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BABEL STREET

[1] <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraqi-armed-groups-dial-down-us-attacks-request-iran-commander-2024-02-18/>

[2] <https://t.me/centerkaf/4214>

[3] <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraqi-armed-groups-dial-down-us-attacks-request-iran-commander-2024-02-18/>

[4] https://twitter.com/Akram_Alkabee/status/1753337265772736687

[5] <https://t.me/ElamAlmoqawama/954>; <https://t.me/ElamAlmoqawama/952>;
<https://t.me/ElamAlmoqawama/950>

[6] <https://t.me/ElamAlmoqawama/954>

[7] <https://t.me/ElamAlmoqawama/954>

[8] <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraqi-armed-groups-dial-down-us-attacks-request-iran-commander-2024-02-18/>

[9] <https://twitter.com/manniefabian/status/1759247993973223588>

[10] <https://t.me/qassam1brigades/1608> ; <https://t.me/qassam1brigades/1607>

[11] <https://t.me/AymanGouda/6051>

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[12] <https://twitter.com/IDF/status/1758071158946038180>

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- [26] <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-those-telling-us-not-to-enter-rafah-are-essentially-saying-lose-the-war/>
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