

# Iran Update, February 20, 2024

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**Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm ET**

*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.*

## **Russia may be setting conditions to supplant the United States as a security partner in Iraq in anticipation of the United States possibly reducing its military presence there.**

Russian Ambassador to Iraq Elbrus Kutrashv has met with several senior Iraqi political and military officials to discuss security cooperation since late January 2024. Kutrashv met with:

- Iraqi Shia cleric and politician Ammar al Hakim on January 31;
- Iraqi Popular Mobilization Committee Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh on February 1;
- Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani on February 5; and
- Asaib Ahl al Haq Secretary General Qais al Khazali on February 20.

Kutrashv's meetings notably included discussing deepening security cooperation with prominent Iranian-backed security figures. Kutrashv and Fayyadh discussed "exchanging experiences" between Russia and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which is an Iraqi security service that contains several Iranian-backed Shia militias.<sup>[1]</sup> Kutrashv also discussed Russian support for the Iraqi armed forces when meeting with Khazali.<sup>[2]</sup> Iraqi state media reported that Kutrashv and Khazali discussed Russia's role in "arming and developing the capabilities of Iraqi security and military forces."<sup>[3]</sup> Engaging Khazali on this subject is especially noteworthy, given that he heads Iranian-backed militia Asaib Ahl al Haq, which is part of the PMF. Kutrashv and Khazali also discussed counterterrorism cooperation. Kutrashv previously told Russian media in January 2024 that Russia seeks to expand its

“presence” in Iraq and “invest additional resources in areas related to security.”[4]

Iran and its Iraqi proxy and partner militias have intensified their campaign to expel the United States from Iraq since October 2023 and have accordingly launched regular attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria within this timeframe.[5] These attacks aim to erode US willingness to maintain a military presence in the Middle East.[6] The United States and Iraqi federal government began negotiations over the status of the US-led international coalition in Iraq in late January 2024, which is around the same time that Kutrashev’s meetings began.[7] The United States and international coalition forces are deployed in Iraq at the invitation of the Iraqi federal government to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

Russia may seek to replace the United States as the main provider of military equipment and training to the Iraqi armed forces. An Iraqi Parliamentary Security and Defense Committee member claimed on February 20 that the United States has threatened to stop providing military equipment and training to Iraq to pressure the Iraqi federal government to keep US forces.[8] CTP-ISW cannot verify this claim. Russia could exploit a potential vacuum in US military support to Iraq by providing Iraqi forces with small arms and spare parts in the short-term. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine would likely prevent it from being able to supply Iraqi forces with high-end systems, such as tanks, helicopters, and aircraft, however. The US Defense Department reported in February 2023 that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has hindered Iraq’s ability to access spare parts for its Russian-designed Mi-17 helicopters.[9] The United States began replacing Iraq’s Mi-17 helicopters with US-made helicopters around February 2023.[10]

### **Key Takeaways:**

- **Iraq:** Russia may be setting conditions to supplant the United States as a security partner in Iraq in anticipation of the United States possibly reducing its military presence there.
- **Northern Gaza Strip:** The Israel Defense Forces launched a new, “division-wide” clearing operation in the Zaytoun and Shujaiya neighborhoods in eastern Gaza City.
- **Southern Gaza Strip:** The Israel Defense Forces assessed that it will complete ground operations in Khan Younis in the next few days, according to an Israeli Army Radio correspondent.
- **Political Negotiations:** Hamas Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh arrived in Cairo to discuss a ceasefire in Gaza with Egyptian officials.
- **West Bank:** Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters nine times.
- **Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights:** Lebanese Hezbollah conducted at least six attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel.
- **Yemen:** The Houthis claimed three drone attacks targeting US and Israeli targets.
- **Iran:** International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Rafael Grossi said that Iran is continuing to produce highly enriched uranium at an elevated rate.

# Israel-Hamas War as of February 20, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



## Gaza Strip

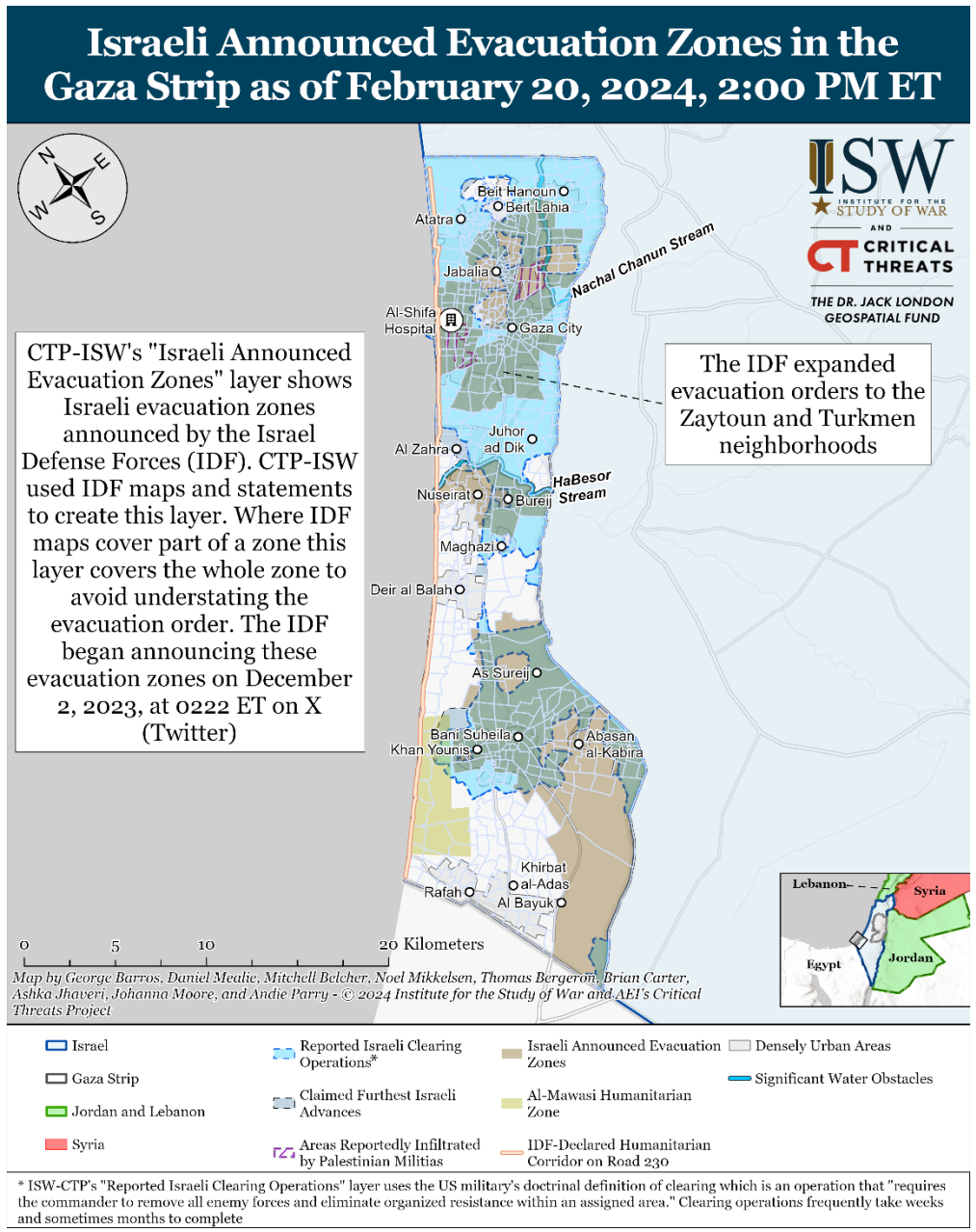
### Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

- 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 Israel Defense Forces (IDF) launched a new, “division-wide” clearing operation in the Zaytoun and Shujaiya neighborhoods in eastern Gaza City on February 20.**<sup>[11]</sup> An Israeli Army Radio correspondent said that two brigades will clear the remaining Hamas infrastructure in eastern Gaza City over the next several weeks.<sup>[12]</sup> Local Palestinian sources reported Israeli armor operated on Road 8 and near the Dawla Roundabout in southern Zaytoun on February 20. Israeli ground forces have not operated in these areas at a large scale since late December 2023.<sup>[13]</sup> Israeli

forces concluded a similar division-wide clearing operation in western Gaza City on February 15.[14] The IDF disclosed through an Israeli Army Radio correspondent on February 5 that it identified a Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) cell in Zaytoun neighborhood as responsible for most of the rocket attacks into Israel in recent weeks.[15]

**The IDF Arabic-language spokesperson issued evacuation orders for parts of Jabalia and Turkmen neighborhood south of Gaza City on February 20.[16]** The order requested residents immediately evacuate to the al Mawasi humanitarian zone in the southwest Gaza Strip. Palestinian journalists reported Israeli ground forces operated within the evacuation zone on February 20.[17]



**The IDF assessed that it will complete ground operations in Khan Younis in the next few days, according to an Israeli Army Radio correspondent.[18]** Israeli forces operating under the 36th Division, 98th Division, and 162nd Division continued to clear Khan Younis of Palestinian

militia infrastructure, weapons, and fighters.[19] Israeli forces are killing about half the Palestinian fighters per day than they did at the start of the operation in Khan Younis, according to unspecified IDF sources.[20] The IDF estimated that it has killed about 2,900 Palestinian fighters in Khan Younis since beginning operations there.[21] The 98th Division, the division leading clearing operations in Khan Younis, will deploy to Rafah or the central Gaza Strip in the coming days.[22]

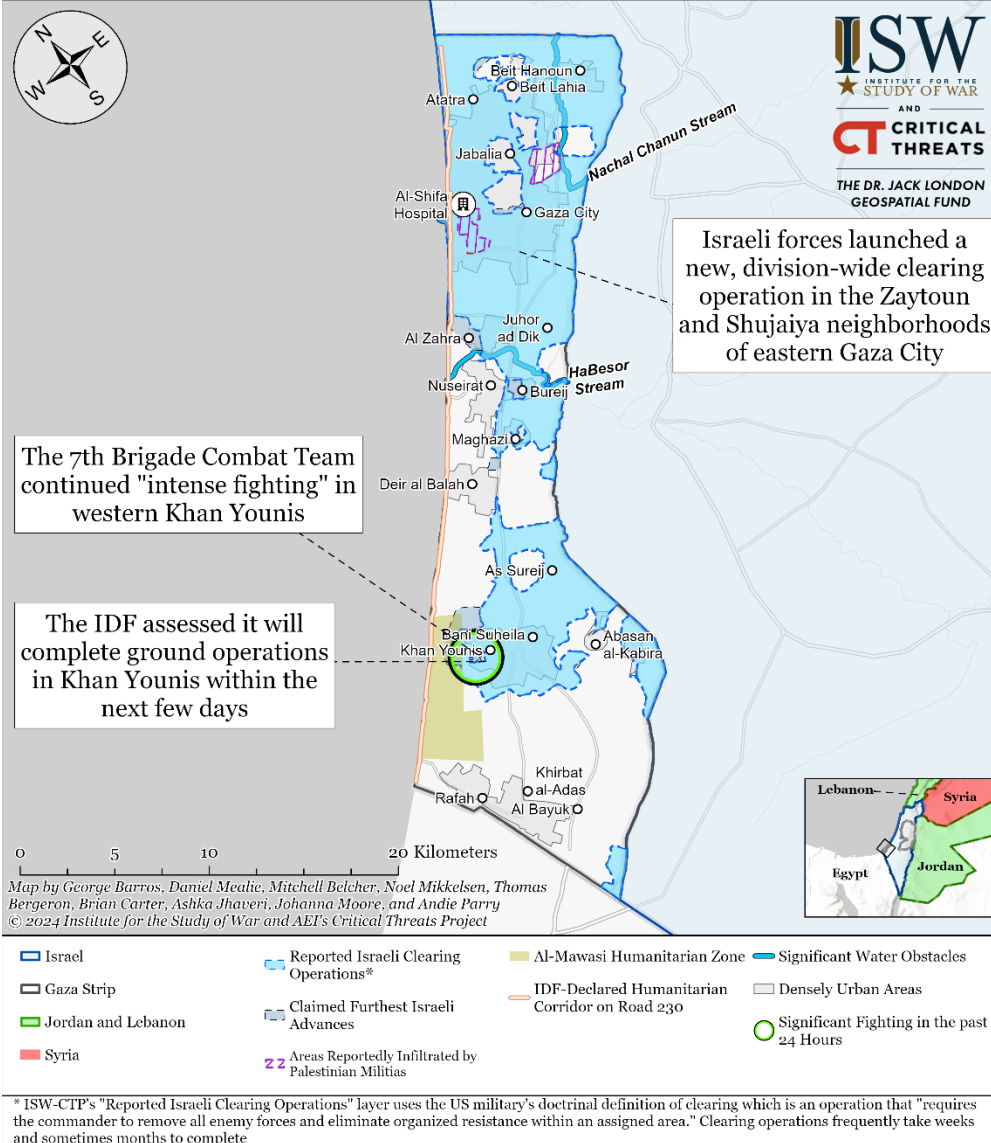
Palestinian militias continued to attack Israeli forces in Khan Younis on February 20. PIJ fighters targeted six Israeli infantrymen who were operating in a building with a thermobaric rocket in western Khan Younis refugee camp.[23] Hamas fighters targeted another six Israeli infantrymen with an explosive device in western Khan Younis City.[24] Both groups claimed the attacks killed and wounded Israeli forces.

**US and Israeli officials quoted in Axios disclosed that the IDF may not advance into Rafah until mid-April, despite Israeli officials' public announcements about an earlier timeline.**[25] Israeli War Cabinet Minister Benny Gantz said on February 18 that Israeli forces will enter Rafah at the start of Ramadan around March 10 if Hamas does not release the remaining Israeli hostages the group holds.[26] The IDF is expected to present an operational plan for a Rafah ground operation and civilian evacuation to the Israeli security cabinet in the coming days.[27]

**The Israeli Chief of Staff Major General Herzi Halevi issued a letter to Israeli commanders stressing the standard conduct of war on February 20.**[28] Halevi wrote, “we are not on a killing spree, revenge, or genocide” and issued orders to “not to use force where it is not required, to distinguish between a terrorist and [not] a terrorist, not to take anything that is not ours a souvenir or a military item and not to shoot revenge videos.”[29] He also noted that the IDF would begin to pursue absentee soldiers.

**Hamas Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh arrived in Cairo to discuss a ceasefire in Gaza with Egyptian officials on February 20.**[30] US National Security Council Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk will hold talks with Egyptian officials on February 21 before meeting with top Israeli officials the next day.[31] The Qatari Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson confirmed that all parties are participating in ongoing hostage exchange deal talks.[32] Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declined to send an Israeli delegation to Cairo for follow-up talks on February 14.[33]

# Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip as of February 20, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



**Palestinian militias did not conduct indirect fire attacks from the Gaza Strip into Israel on February 20.**

## West Bank

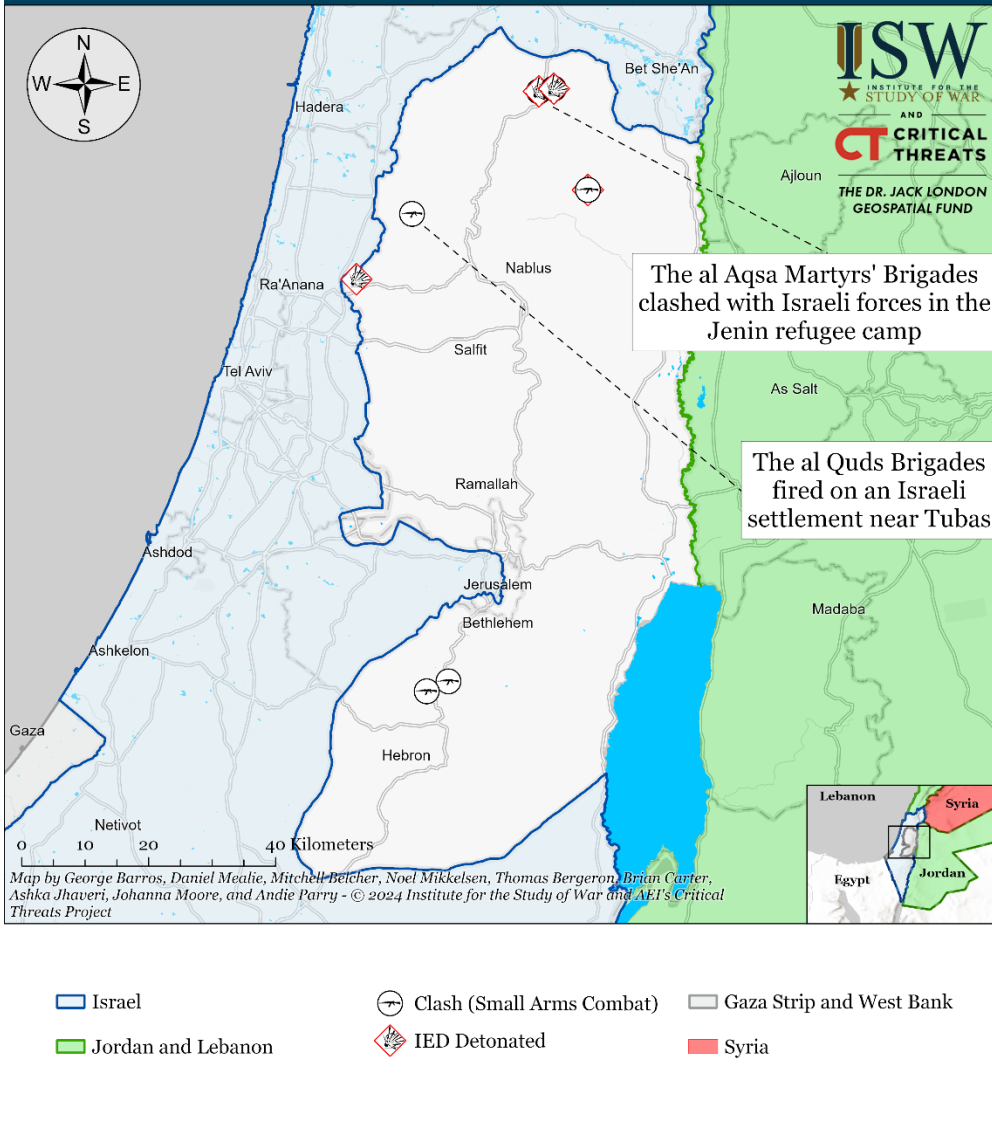
### Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

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

**Israeli forces have clashed with Palestinian fighters nine times in the West Bank since the CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on February 19[34]**



# Clashes in the West Bank as of February 20, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



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

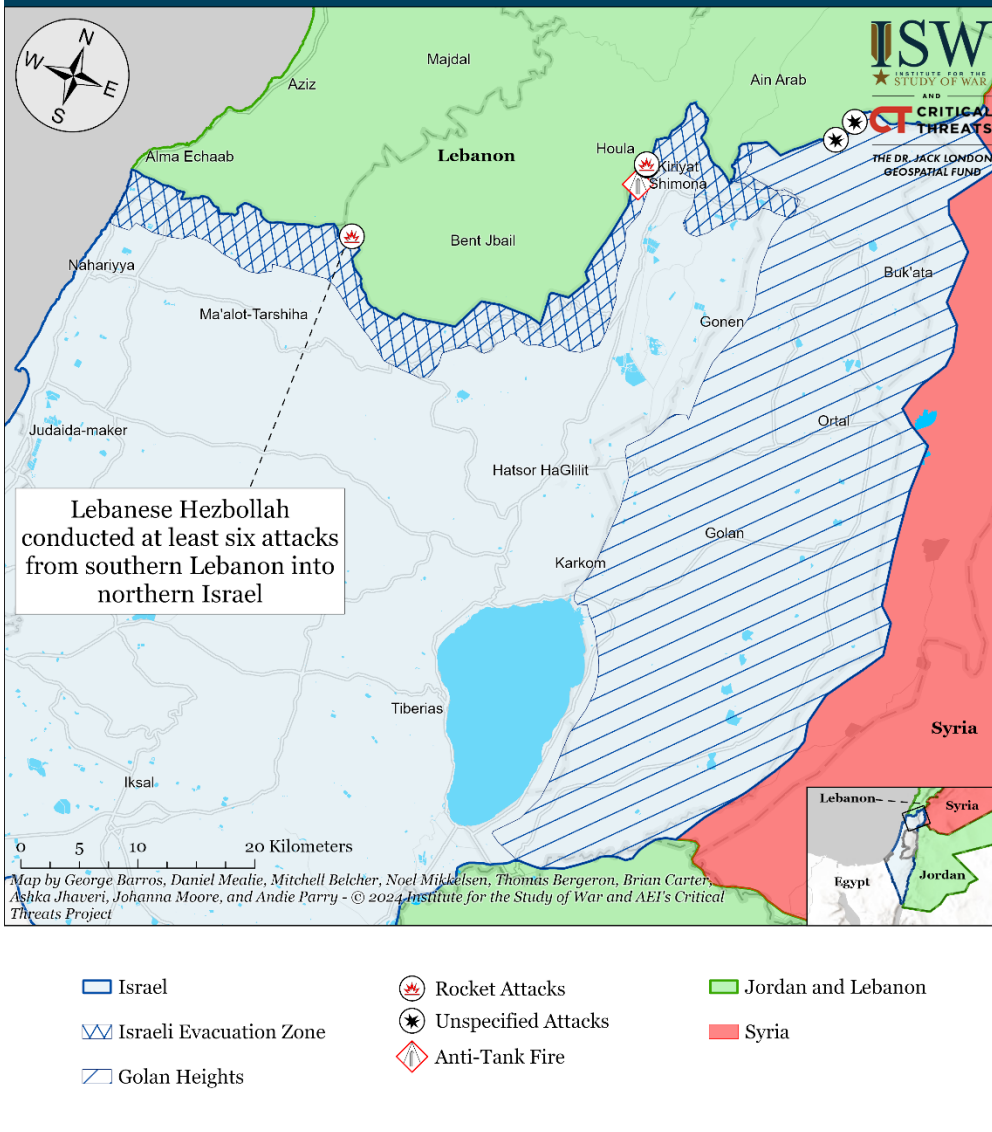
## Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

### 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 has conducted at least six attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on February 19.[35]** Hezbollah claimed six attacks using rockets and unspecified guided munitions targeting Israeli forces and military infrastructure north of Margaliot.[36] The IDF confirmed that Hezbollah fired an anti-tank guided missile that detonated near Margaliot.[37]

# Attacks into Northern Israel from Lebanon as of February 20, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



*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

**The United States and Iranian-backed Iraqi militias reached an “undeclared truce” during a meeting at Baghdad International Airport on January 29, according to an**



**independent Iraqi outlet.[38]** The truce followed the one-way drone attack that killed three US service members in northeastern Jordan on January 28.[39] Western media has attributed the attack to Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah.[40] The US delegation’s meetings with Iranian-backed Iraqi militia leaders and Iraqi officials coincided with IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani’s visit to Baghdad on January 29.[41] Reuters reported that Ghaani directed the militias to “pause” their attacks targeting US forces during his visit to Baghdad.[42] Kataib Hezbollah subsequently announced the suspension of its “military and security operations” targeting US forces on January 30.[43] An independent Iraqi outlet claimed that another Iranian-backed Iraqi militia, Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba, initially vowed to continue its attacks targeting US forces before suspending its attacks “without an official announcement.”[44] The US Defense Department deputy press secretary stated on February 14 that Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria had not attacked US forces since February 4.[45] The Islamic Resistance in Iraq has not claimed an attack targeting US forces in this time.[46] An unspecified security source told Reuters on February 10 that US air defense systems intercepted one-way attack drones targeting Conoco Mission Support Site in eastern Syria, however.[47]

### **The rate of intra-Shia assassinations in Iraq has increased in February 2024, highlighting schisms among between the Shia factions.**

- Unspecified gunmen shot and killed a senior Asaib Ahl al Haq official in Maysan Province on February 4.[48] CTP-ISW previously assessed that followers of Iraqi nationalist Shia cleric Moqtada al Sadr may have been responsible.[49] Sadr’s followers, known as Sadrists, have significant influence in Maysan Province, and Sadrist militiamen have previously assassinated local Asaib Ahl al Haq-affiliated officials.[50]
- Unspecified gunmen shot and killed two of Hadi al Ameri’s relatives in northern Baghdad on February 18.[51] Ameri is the secretary general of the Iranian-backed Badr Organization. The Iraqi Interior Ministry claimed that the gunman assassinated Ameri’s relatives due to a “land dispute.”[52]
- Unspecified gunmen kidnapped and killed a Sadrist named Ayser al Khafaji in Babil Province on February 19.[53] Sadrist social media accounts blamed Khafaji’s death on Asaib Ahl al Haq.[54] Sadrists and members of the Khafaji clan—a major Shia clan in southern Iraq—gathered in Hillah, Babil Province, on February 20 to protest Khafaji’s death.[55]

**The Houthis claimed three drone attacks targeting US and Israeli targets on February 20.[56]** Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Saree said that Houthi fighters launched an unspecified number of drones targeting US Navy ships in the Red Sea and Eilat on February 20.[57] He added that Houthi fighters fired anti-ship missiles at the Israeli *MSC Silver* in the Gulf of Aden on the same date.[58]

**An unspecified merchant vessel transiting through the Red Sea reported that two drones followed it for approximately 30 minutes on February 19.[59]**

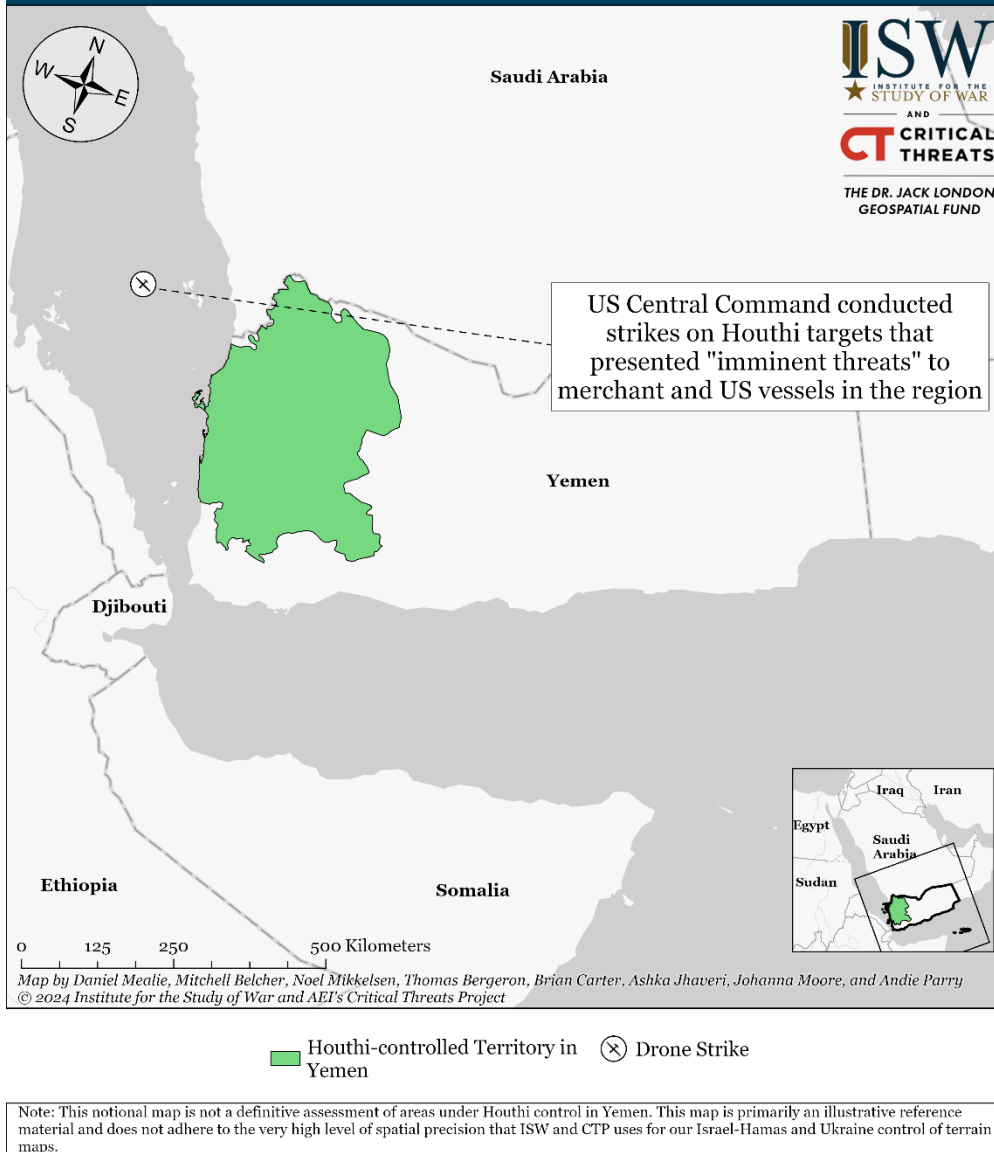
**US Central Command (CENTCOM) conducted strikes on Houthi targets on February 19 and 20 that presented “imminent threats” to merchant and US naval vessels in the region.[60]** US forces destroyed a one-way attack drone prepared to launch from western Yemen.[61] US and coalition forces separately intercepted 10 one-way attack drones over the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.[62] The USS Laboon intercepted a likely Houthi anti-ship cruise missile “headed in its direction.”[63]

**The French Ministry of Defense reported on February 20 that a French frigate intercepted two Houthi one-way attack drones over the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.[64]** The French Ministry of Defense said the drone originated from Yemen.[65]

## Iranian-sponsored Attacks in the Middle East as of February 20, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



## Houthi-controlled Territory in Yemen as of February 20, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



**International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi said on February 19 that Iran is continuing to produce highly enriched uranium at an elevated rate.**<sup>[66]</sup> Grossi told Reuters that Iran is currently producing 60 percent highly enriched uranium (HEU) at a rate of seven kilograms per month. This rate is higher than its three kilogram per month enrichment rate between June and November 2023. Grossi added that he will travel to Tehran on an unspecified date in the coming weeks. Grossi last visited Tehran in March 2024.<sup>[67]</sup>

Iran has stockpiled at least five nuclear bombs worth of HEU, given its stockpile of 128.3 kilograms of 60 percent HEU as of October 28, 2023.<sup>[68]</sup> The IAEA defines 25 kilograms of 20 percent or more enriched HEU as a "significant quantity" for "which the possibility of manufacturing a nuclear explosive

cannot be excluded.”[69] Iran has no plausible civilian use for 60 percent HEU but can use it in a compact nuclear explosive or further enrich it to 90 percent weapons-grade uranium.

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[2] <https://www.ina.iq/203516--.html>

[3] <https://www.ina.iq/203516--.html>

[4] <https://tass.com/politics/1737141>

[5] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-january-28-2024>;

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[6] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-december-7-2023>

[7] <https://apnews.com/article/iraq-us-talks-to-end-coalition-mission-f782db4c6550ab31ef02ef3c1793ee7b>

[8] <https://alghadeertv.iq/archives/260128>

[9] <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Feb/07/2003157209/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OIR.PDF>

[10] <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Feb/07/2003157209/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OIR.PDF>

[11] <https://t.me/hamza20300/215544> ; <https://t.me/hamza20300/215517> ; <https://twitter.com/GLZRadio/status/1759939842937385257>

[12] <https://twitter.com/GLZRadio/status/1759939842937385257>

[13] <https://twitter.com/ytirawi/status/1759944234965070030> ; <https://twitter.com/ytirawi/status/1759858948176257054> ; <https://twitter.com/manniefabian/status/1741509504842273078>

[14] <https://www.idf.il/180657>

[15] [https://twitter.com/Doron\\_Kadosh/status/1754408235539288189](https://twitter.com/Doron_Kadosh/status/1754408235539288189)

[16] <https://twitter.com/AvichayAdraee/status/1759825957697774049>

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- [34] <https://t.me/QudsN/373053>; <https://t.me/QudsN/373066>; <https://t.me/jeninqassamm/4428>; <https://t.me/QudsN/373123>; [https://t.me/elaqsa\\_1965/5752](https://t.me/elaqsa_1965/5752); <https://t.me/jeninqassamm/4432>; [https://t.me/elaqsa\\_1965/5765](https://t.me/elaqsa_1965/5765); [https://t.me/elaqsa\\_1965/5766](https://t.me/elaqsa_1965/5766); [https://t.me/elaqsa\\_1965/5772](https://t.me/elaqsa_1965/5772)
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- [48] <https://shafaq dot com/en/Iraq-News/Assassination-of-senior-Asaib-Ahl-al-Haq-leader-in-Maysan>
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