

Iran Update, February 26, 2024

Andie Parry, Annika Ganzeveld, Peter Mills, Alexandra Braverman, Ahmad Omid Arman, and Nicholas Carl
Information Cutoff: 2:00pm 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.

Key Takeaways:

- **Northern and Central Gaza Strip:** The Israel Defense Forces announced that its 162nd Division uncovered a Hamas tunnel network connecting the Central Gaza Governorate to the northern Gaza Strip over the past several weeks.
- **Southern Gaza Strip:** The Israel Defense Forces continued to conduct clearing operations in western Khan Younis. Palestinian militias targeted Israeli forces operating in Abasan al Kabira, east of Khan Younis.
- **Political Negotiations:** Hamas Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh met with the Qatari Emir to discuss ceasefire negotiations.
- **West Bank:** Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters at least three times in the West Bank. Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh resigned.
- **Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights:** Lebanese Hezbollah conducted at least nine attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel.
- **Iraq:** Several Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have signaled that they will resume conducting attacks targeting US forces in the Middle East.
- **Syria:** Local Syrian sources reported that the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps is trying to rebuild its military infrastructure in Deir ez Zor Province, Syria.
- **Yemen:** US CENTCOM reported that it intercepted three Houthi one-way attack drones.
- **Iran:** The International Atomic Energy Organization disclosed to UN member states that Iran has reduced its stockpile of 60 percent enriched uranium since late October 2023.

Israel-Hamas War as of February 26, 2024, 2:00 PM ET

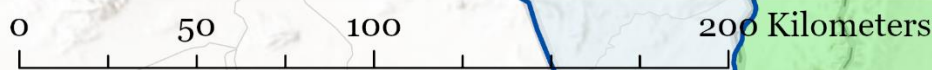


The IDF 162nd Division uncovered a Hamas tunnel network that facilitated fighter movement between the central and northern Gaza Strip

Lebanese Hezbollah conducted at least nine attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel

Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters at least three times in the West Bank

The Iraqi federal government granted Russian state-owned oil company Gazprom a contract to develop the Nasiriyah oil field in Dhi Qar Province



Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Brian Carter, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Andie Parry - © 2024 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

- Israel
- Gaza Strip and West Bank
- Jordan and Lebanon
- Syria
- Golan Heights

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) announced that its 162nd Division uncovered a Hamas tunnel network connecting the Central Gaza Governorate to the northern Gaza Strip over the past several weeks.[1] The IDF Nahal Brigade and Yahalom combat engineering unit located at least 35 entrances to the 10-kilometer-long complex equipped with plumbing, storage rooms, bedrooms, and military equipment.[2] The tunnel passed under the Turkish-Palestinian Friendship Hospital in the central Gaza Strip and extended to al Isra University in southern Gaza City.[3] The IDF said that Hamas used the tunnel system to transfer personnel between the Central Brigade and Gaza City Brigade, particularly between the Zaytoun Battalion, the Nuseirat Battalion, and Sabra Battalion.[4] CTP-ISW previously reported on the cross-governorate tunnel system on February 21 and assessed that Hamas battalions likely used the system to infiltrate previously cleared areas of the northern Gaza Strip.[5] The 162nd Division destroyed the tunnel complex after documenting the route.

The IDF 162nd Division continued clearing operations in Zaytoun neighborhood, southeastern Gaza City, on February 26. The IDF 401st Brigade (assigned to the 162nd Division) “intensified attacks” in Zaytoun and killed over 30 Palestinian fighters.[6] The IDF Nahal Brigade (assigned to the 162nd Division) targeted at least 10 Palestinian fighters as part of the division-wide clearing operations in the Gaza City and Central Gaza governorates.[7]

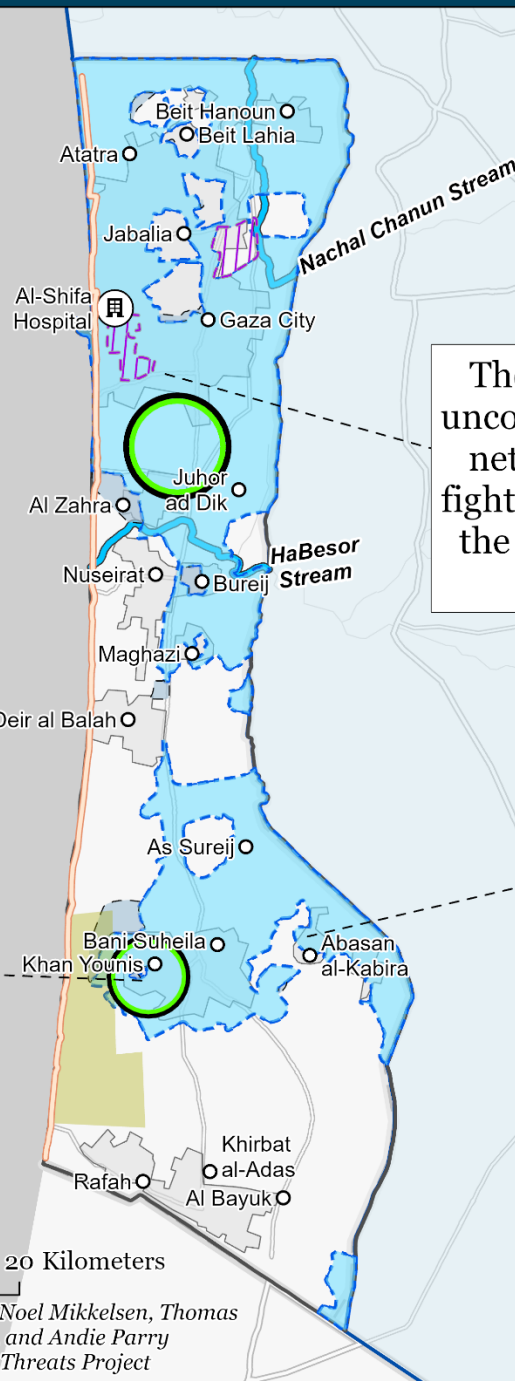
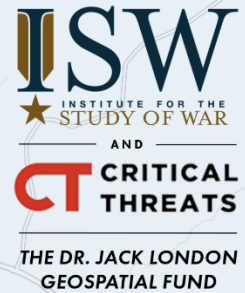
Palestinian militias claimed at least seven attacks targeting Israeli forces in their continued defense of southern Zaytoun on February 26.[8] Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades claimed several mortar attacks targeting Israeli forces south of Zaytoun.[9] The Palestinian Mujahideen Movement targeted Israeli armor with rockets and anti-tank missiles in Zaytoun.[10] Hamas, PIJ, and the National Resistance Brigades mortared Israeli armor and dismounted infantry east of Zaytoun in a combined operation on February 25.[11]

The IDF continued to conduct clearing operations in western Khan Younis on February 26. The IDF 7th Armored Brigade and Unit 414 directed airstrikes on Palestinian fighters operating in Khan Younis.[12] The IDF Givati Brigade (assigned to the 162nd Division) ambushed and clashed with fighters in western Khan Younis.[13] Israeli forces seized grenades, ammunition, and other unspecified military equipment in clearing operations in Khan Younis.[14]

Palestinian militias targeted Israeli forces operating in Abasan al Kabira, east of Khan Younis, on February 26. Hamas targeted about 20 Israeli personnel in Abasan al Kabira with anti-personnel devices.[15] Hamas fighters targeted Israeli armor in the same area.[16] PIJ and the al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades, which is the self-proclaimed military wing of Fatah and aligned with Hamas in the war, both claimed sniper attacks targeting Israeli infantry in eastern Khan Younis.[17]

Hamas Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh met with the Qatari Emir to discuss ceasefire negotiations on February 26.[18] US, Qatari, and Egyptian officials proposed a new hostage deal to Israeli negotiators during discussions in Paris on February 24.[19] Israel reportedly agreed to a framework that would release up to 400 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for 40 Israeli hostages and a six-week truce under the new proposal.[20] Haniyeh claimed Hamas had shown great “flexibility and seriousness” in its contacts with mediators about the deal on February 26 but accused the Israeli government of stalling.[21] Haniyeh stated that Hamas’ most important goal is to “stop the humanitarian catastrophe” in the northern Gaza Strip and indicated that food aid for civilians in northern Gaza should not be tied to any other negotiation issues.[22] Senior Israeli officials believe Hamas will not agree to the proposed ceasefire deal based on reports from Qatari mediators that the proposal does “not correspond with Hamas demands.”[23] An Israeli intelligence and military delegation reportedly arrived in Qatar on February 26 to set up an operational center to support negotiations.[24]

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip as of February 26, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



The IDF 162nd Divison uncovered a Hamas tunnel network that facilitated fighter movement between the central and northern Gaza Strip

Hamas targeted Israeli armor and dismounted infantry operating in Abasan al Kabira

Israeli forces continued clearing operations in western Khan Younis

0 5 10 20 Kilometers

Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Brian Carter, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Andie Parry
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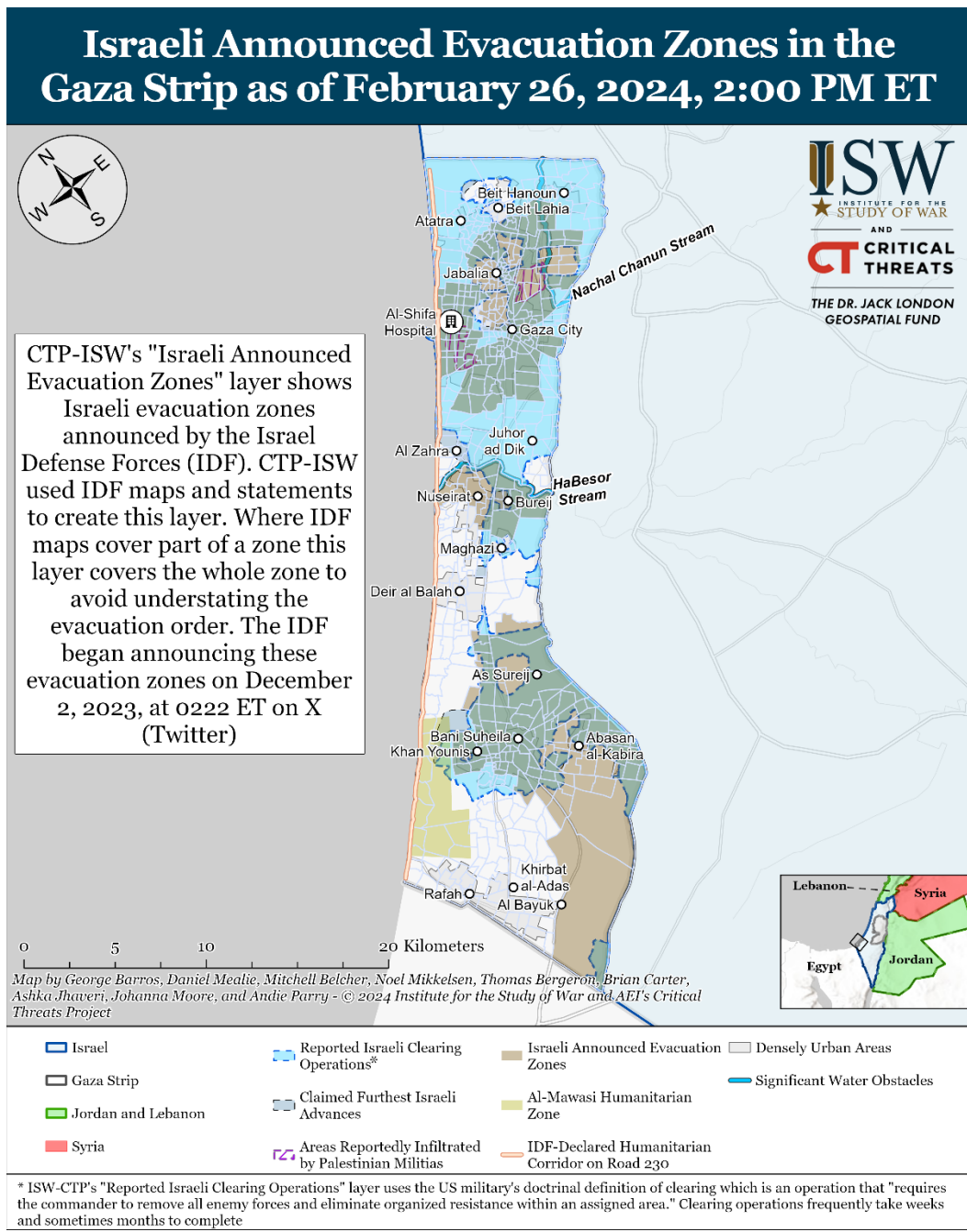


Israel	Reported Israeli Clearing Operations*	Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone	Significant Water Obstacles
Gaza Strip	Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances	IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridor on Road 230	Densely Urban Areas
Jordan and Lebanon	Areas Reportedly Infiltrated by Palestinian Militias		Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
Syria			

* 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

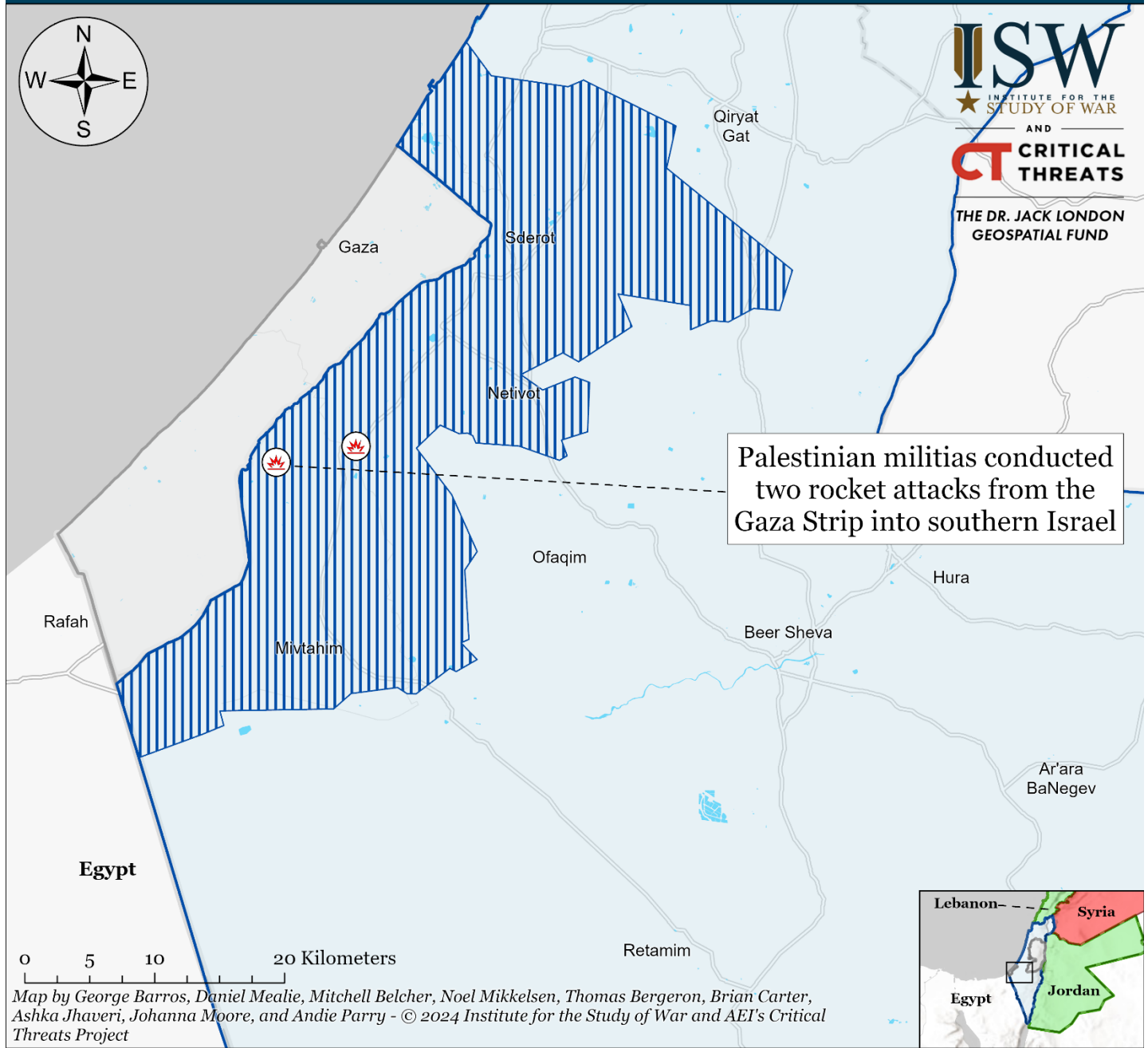
The Israeli prime minister's office said that the IDF presented the war cabinet with a plan for evacuating civilians from combat zones in the Gaza Strip on February 26.[25] The office did not specify the contents of the plan. An Israeli Army Radio correspondent reported that the IDF may allow women and children under the age of 14 to return to the northern Gaza Strip as part of Rafah evacuation plans.[26] The IDF would establish transit corridors and vet those returning to the northern Gaza Strip.[27] The same correspondent stated the IDF discussed establishing tent cities in the central Gaza Strip and Khan Younis for Gazans whose homes were destroyed.[28] Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant told the families of Israeli hostages on February 26 that Israel would not allow Gazans to return to their homes in the northern Gaza Strip until Hamas releases all the hostages to "maintain pressure." [29] Another member of the three-man war cabinet, Benny Gantz, said on February 18 that the IDF would enter Rafah on March 10 if Hamas did not release the hostages it holds.[30]

The Israeli war cabinet approved a "new" unspecified plan to distribute humanitarian assistance in the Gaza Strip.[31] The war cabinet said that the plan aims to "prevent the looting that has occurred in the northern Strip" where Israel has accused Hamas of stealing aid.[32] An unnamed Israeli official reported that the war cabinet is considering what organizations can take over the aid provision function from the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) in the Gaza Strip.[33] Humanitarian organizations have struggled to provide aid to civilians in the northern Gaza Strip over the past several weeks, citing security breakdowns.[34]



Palestinian militias conducted two rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip into Israel on February 26. PIJ fired a rocket barrage at the Kissufim military site.[35] The Palestinian Mujahideen Movement launched rockets at Reim.[36]

Attacks into Israel from Gaza as of February 26, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



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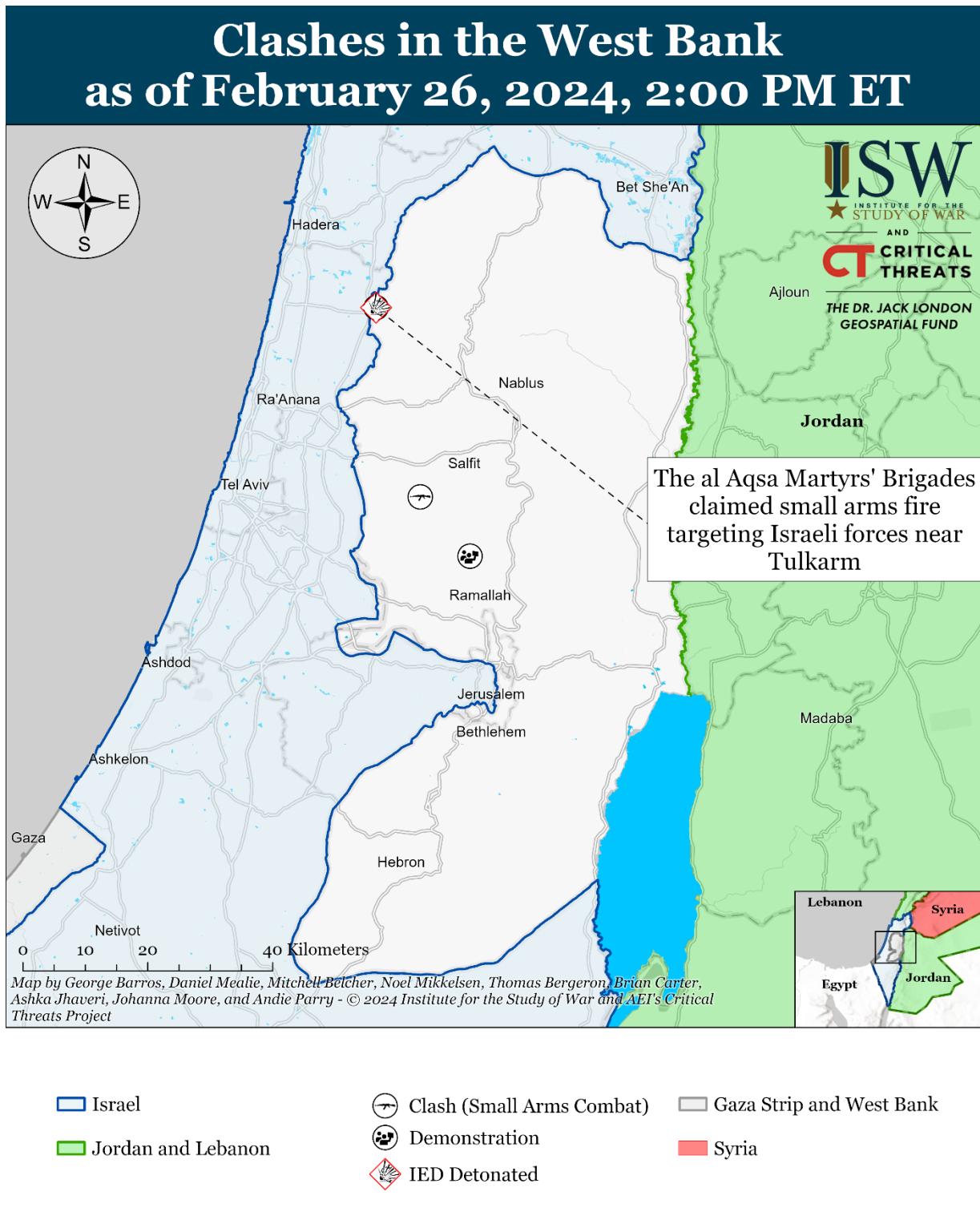
- Israel
- Israeli Closed Military Zone
- Jordan and Lebanon
- Rocket Attacks
- Gaza Strip and West Bank
- Syria

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 at least three times in the West Bank on February 26.[37] Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh resigned on February 26.[38] Shtayyeh had served as prime minister since 2019 and had participated in peace negotiations with Israel since 1991.[39] US and Palestinian officials stated that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas will likely appoint a close confidante and chairman of the Palestinian Investment Fund, Mahammad Mustafa, as the next prime minister.[40]



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

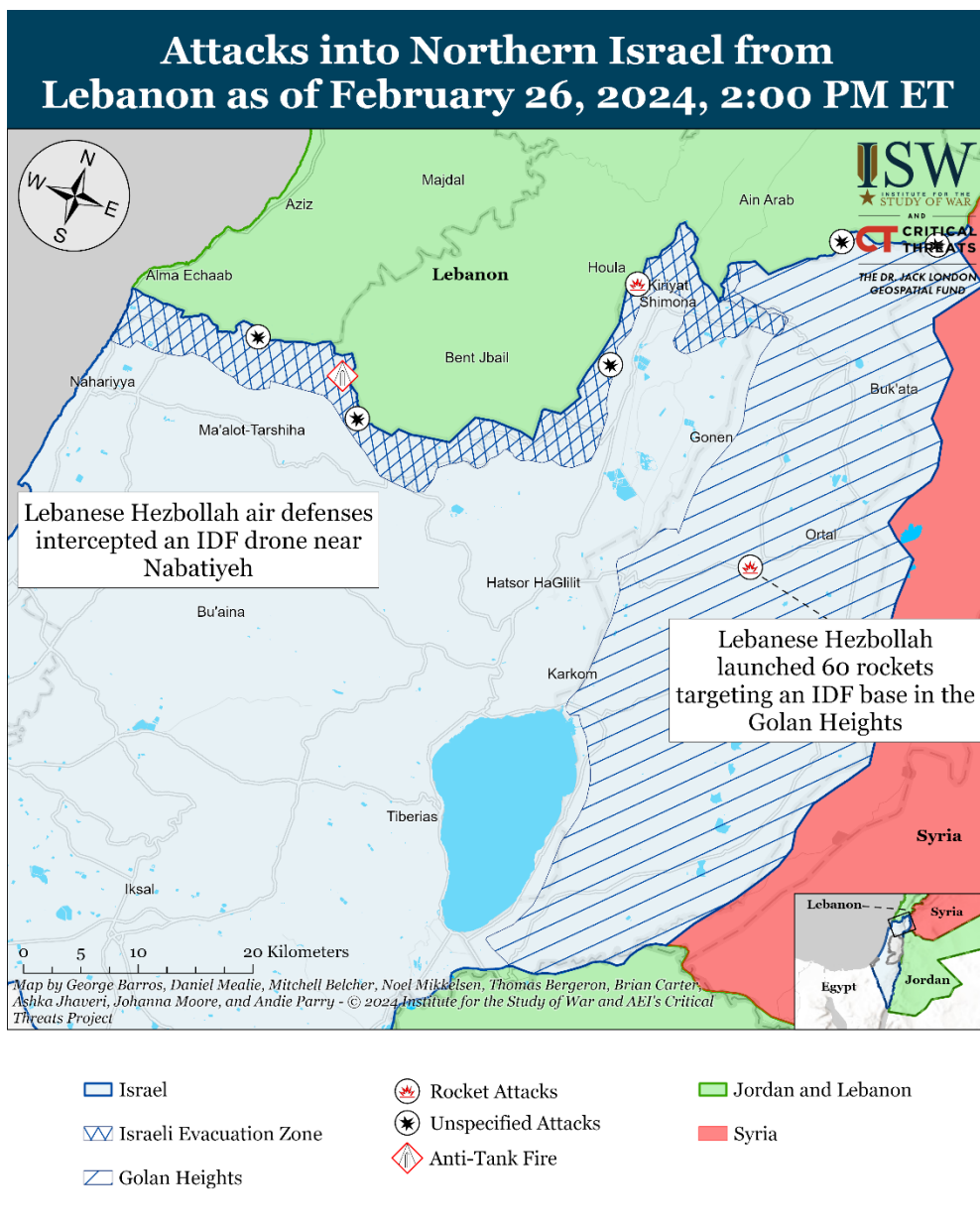
Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

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 nine attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on February 25.[41] Hezbollah claimed that it intercepted an IDF Hermes 450 drone near Nabatiyeh, southern Lebanon, on February 26.[42] The IDF stated that its David's Sling medium-range air defense system intercepted one of two surface-to-air missiles fired by Hezbollah targeting the drone.[43] The IDF conducted airstrikes targeting a Hezbollah air defense site that killed two Hezbollah fighters near Baalbek, Lebanon, following the incident.[44] This airstrike is the furthest airstrike inside Lebanon that Israel has conducted since October 7.[45] Hezbollah launched at least 60 rockets targeting an IDF site in the Golan Heights on February 26 in retaliation for the IDF airstrike near Baalbek.[46]

The IDF killed senior Hezbollah commander Hassan Hossein Salami in southern Lebanon on February 26. The IDF described Salami as “commander of the Hajir sector” under Hezbollah’s Nasser unit and stated that Salami had previously organized attacks targeting IDF bases near Kiryat Shmona.[47] Israeli journalists described Salami’s rank within Hezbollah as equivalent to a brigade commander.[48] Hezbollah’s Nasser unit is one of the primary Hezbollah military formations south of the Litani River in Lebanon.[49]



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

Several Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have signaled that they will resume conducting attacks targeting US forces in the Middle East. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—halted its attacks targeting US forces following a one-way drone attack that killed three US servicemembers in northeastern Jordan on January 28.[50] Ashab al Kahf—an Iranian-backed Iraqi militia close to Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba—released statements on February 23 and 25, respectively, vowing to continue conducting attacks targeting US forces in the Middle East as well as Israel.[51] Ashab al Kahf also recently hung posters in Baghdad with an image of Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba Secretary General Akram al Kaabi with the warning “the matter is settled, what is coming is greater.”[52]

Kaabi separately released a statement on February 25 emphasizing that the current pause in attacks is a “temporary tactic” and the “calm before the storm.”[53] Kaabi claimed that “traitors” provided the United States with information about Iranian-backed Iraqi militia positions and that the militias must therefore “reposition” and “change [their] methods and tactics.”[54] Kaabi stated that Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba does not oppose the ongoing negotiations between Washington and Baghdad about the status of the US-led international coalition in Iraq but described those who believe that the United States will leave Iraq via negotiations as “delusional.”[55] He claimed that the United States only understands “force and weapons.”[56]

Prominent Iraqi Shia cleric Ammar al Hakim discussed the ongoing negotiations between Washington and Baghdad about the status of US-led international coalition forces in Iraq during a meeting with US Ambassador to Iraq Alina Romanowski on February 26.[57] The United States and Iraq began these negotiations in late January 2024.[58] Hakim praised the Mohammad Shia al Sudani administration’s efforts to establish “bilateral relationships” with the United States and International Coalition countries.[59] Hakim separately praised the December 2023 provincial council elections for “strengthening” Iraqi democracy but condemned recent “attempts to destabilize [Iraq] by resorting to violence and the use of weapons.” Hakim may have been referring to the recent rise in intra-Shia assassinations across Iraq.[60]

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani met with Iranian Ambassador to Iraq Mohammad Kazem Al-e Sadegh on February 25.[61] Iraqi and Iranian media reported that Sudani and Sadegh discussed “bilateral relations” and Iraqi development projects but did not provide further details about what the two officials discussed.[62] Sadegh is a senior officer in the IRGC Quds Force, which is consistent with the long-standing trend of Iran appointing IRGC Quds Force members to simultaneously work as the ambassador to Iraq.[63]

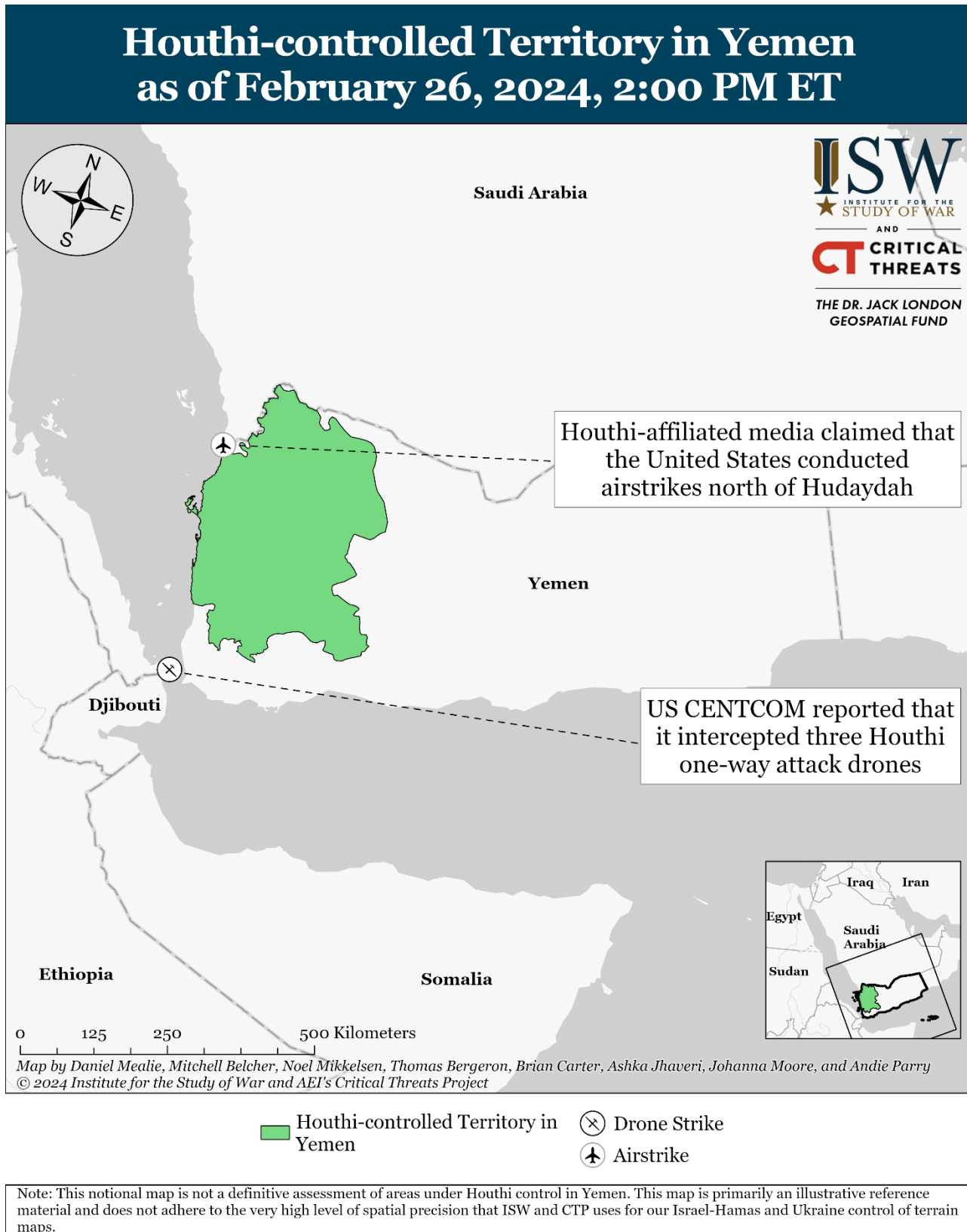
The Iraqi federal government granted Russian state-owned oil company Gazprom a contract to develop the Nasiriyah oil field in Dhi Qar Province on February 7.[64] The Iraqi state-owned Dhi Qar Oil Company, which is headed by Ali Khudair Abbas al Aboudi, previously operated the Nasiriyah oil field.[65] Aboudi is a member of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), a Shia political party formerly headed by prominent Shia cleric Ammar al Hakim.[66] The Iraqi National Security Service reportedly arrested Aboudi in March 2021 for accepting a \$250,000 bribe.[67] Ammar al Hakim currently heads the National Wisdom Movement. The Dhi Qar provincial council elected a National Wisdom Movement member named Mortada al Ebrahimi as Dhi Qar governor on February 5, two days before the Iraqi government granted Russia the development contract.[68] Hakim previously discussed “attracting foreign investments” during a meeting with Russian Ambassador to Iraq Elbrus Kutrashvili on January 31.[69]

Local Syrian sources reported that the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) is trying to rebuild its military infrastructure in Deir ez Zor Province, Syria, following the February 2 US airstrikes on Iranian and Iranian-backed positions. Four Iranian communications specialists entered Syria from Iraq and began installing advanced communications and surveillance systems on February 22.[70] The communications systems are used by IRGC-backed militias based near Deir ez Zor City. Syrian media reported these same communications systems were previously destroyed in US airstrikes.[71] Several IRGC officials returned to Deir ez Zor Province on February 23, according to other local reports.[72] The IRGC officials left Syria ahead of the February US airstrike. CTP-ISW cannot confirm the local Syrian reporting.

Lebanese Hezbollah-affiliated al Mayadeen reported that the IDF conducted a drone strike around al Qusayr, Homs Province, on the Syria-Lebanon border on February 25.[73] The strike targeted two trucks suspected of transporting Hezbollah military cargo.[74] Hezbollah-affiliated al Manar network claimed the strike killed two members of Hezbollah.[75]

US CENTCOM reported that it intercepted three Houthi one-way attack drones on February 24.[76] The Houthi military spokesperson claimed that the group launched an unspecified number of drones targeting a US warship on February 24.[77]

Houthi-affiliated media outlets reported that the United States and United Kingdom conducted airstrikes targeting Houthi positions north of Hudaydah on February 26.[78] The United States and United Kingdom has not claimed responsibility for any airstrikes in Yemen at the time of this writing.



The International Atomic Energy Organization (IAEA) disclosed to UN member states on February 26 that Iran has reduced its stockpile of 60 percent enriched uranium since late October 2023.[79] The Iranian regime has, according to an IAEA report, diluted some of this stockpile to 20 percent enriched uranium, thereby reducing its stockpile of 60 percent enriched uranium by 6.8 kilograms to 121.5 kilograms.[80] The overall Iranian stockpile of enriched uranium has continued to expand since October 2023, however.[81] Iran has also refused the entry of several weapons inspectors into the country and the inspection of undeclared nuclear material, according to the IAEA.[82]

Iranian media claimed that Iranian security forces killed a Jaish al Adl commander inside Pakistani territory on February 23.[83] Jaish al Adl is a Baloch Salafi-jihadi group that operates along the Iranian border with Pakistan. Iranian media described the commander as “the main perpetrator of recent terrorist operations in southeastern Iran.”[84] There has been an uptick in anti-regime militant activity in southeastern Iran since December 2023. Jaish al Adl conducted a two-stage attack targeting a police station in Rask, Sistan and Baluchistan Province, in December 2023.[85] The Afghan branch of the Islamic State also conducted a terrorist attack in Kerman Province in January 2024, killing over 80 individuals.[86] Pakistani media denied on February 24 that Iranian forces killed the Jaish al Adl commander.[87]

The Iranian Law Enforcement Command (LEC) arrested two men accused of being part of Sipah Sahaba in Hormozgan Province on February 25.[88] LEC spokesperson Brigadier General Saeed Montazer al Mahdi stated that the two men arrested had completed “bomb-making courses” outside of Iran and intended to travel to an unnamed southern city in Iran. Mahdi stated the two had previously been imprisoned in Pakistan from 2010-15 on charges of bombing a Pakistani city. Mahdi described Sipah Sahaba as an “anti-Shia” terrorist group.[89] Sipah Sahaba is a prominent Sunni militant organization that originated in Pakistan.[90]

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian called for a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas during separate meetings at the 55th Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, on February 26. Abdollahian discussed the Israel-Hamas war with the UN secretary general, International Committee of Red Cross president, Jordanian foreign affairs minister, and Kuwaiti foreign affairs minister on the sidelines of the meeting.[91] Abdollahian separately blamed the United States and Israel for the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip in a speech at the UN Human Rights Council meeting.[92]

The 17th annual Joint Commission for Economic Cooperation between Iran and Russia began in Tehran on February 26.[93] Russian and Iranian experts will examine bilateral cooperation in various sectors including oil, nuclear energy, gas, finance and information technology. Iranian media reported the Russian delegation will consist of 160-170 experts from various government ministries and members of the Russian private sector.[94] The 17th Commission is headed by Iranian Oil Minister Javad Owji and Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak. Iranian media reported that Owji and Novak will preside over the signing of cooperation agreements on oil, energy, and free economic zones between Iran and Russia.[95] The conference will run from February 26 to 28.

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