

Iran Update



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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.

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.

The Israeli cabinet will vote on the ceasefire-hostage agreement on January 17 after it postponed its vote due to delays in Hamas approving an unresolved issue.[1] Both sides resolved the issue. Hamas reportedly renegotiated the names of the Palestinian prisoners it expects Israel to release as part of the agreement.[2] An Israeli official confirmed that both sides resolved the issue, and the Israeli cabinet will vote on the ceasefire-hostage agreement on January 17. The ceasefire will take effect on January 19, if approved.[3]

A senior Israeli official confirmed that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) will remain in the Philadelphi Corridor during the first 42-day phase of the ceasefire.[4] The withdrawal of the IDF from the Philadelphi Corridor, an operationally and strategically significant IDF-held area in the southern Gaza Strip, was a major point of contention between Israel and Hamas during the ceasefire talks.[5] The official stated that Israel will stay in the Philadelphi Corridor beyond the first phase of the ceasefire until Israel achieves its war aims.[6] These aims include the release of all hostages. The IDF will gradually withdraw from the remaining parts of the Gaza Strip to a 700-meter-deep buffer zone along the Gaza Strip's eastern and northern boundaries, however.[7] Israel will also temporarily halt air reconnaissance over the Gaza Strip during the first phase.[8]

Hamas will likely use the first phase to reorganize its forces and move cells around the Gaza Strip without Israeli aerial observation. Hamas can only achieve limited reorganization and will be unable to regenerate itself during this period, however. Reconstitution is a very time- and resource-intensive task even under ideal conditions when the reconstituting force is out of contact with the opposing force. It includes restoring degraded units to combat effectiveness and increase their survivability.[9] IDF operations have destroyed Hamas' military organization in the Gaza Strip by damaging the organization so badly that it cannot be made usable without being completely rebuilt. Israel has also depleted Hamas' weapons stockpile. Hamas can execute limited reorganization tasks, perhaps even including efforts to organize isolated cells under

some semblance of a military hierarchy. The regenerative tasks that would create true, cohesive military units within a fighting organization would take months free of Israeli interference to complete. Regenerating the weapons stockpile is similarly impossible in the 42-day window.[10]

Regeneration of Hamas' military force is not possible in this 42-day window. Regeneration requires large-scale replacement of personnel, equipment, and supplies.[11] The replacement of personnel to a capable level requires training, which is not possible without sanctuary and a period longer than 42 days. Hamas may be able to undertake some minimal training, but these newly trained fighters will be unable to seriously impede Israeli forces if the IDF chooses to resume combat operations. Recent reports indicate that Hamas has intensified recruitment efforts, but these recruits are inexperienced and untrained.[12]

The IDF will be able to rapidly re-seize areas it withdraws from if the ceasefire deal collapses after the first phase. The limited and inadequate regeneration and reorganization Hamas may be able to undertake will almost certainly be wholly insufficient to seriously impede the IDF from achieving any tactical mission it must complete, such as reoccupying the Netzarim Corridor, if the ceasefire collapses.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) appears to be trying to pressure the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to avoid a full-scale conflict with Turkey and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA). A representative of KDP leader Masoud Barzani met with SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi in Hasakah, northeastern Syria, on January 13.[13] Unspecified sources told Iraqi media that Barzani likely seeks to pressure the SDF to conclude an agreement with Turkey and the SNA to “prevent the destruction” of Kurdish areas in Syria. Turkey and the SNA continue to threaten the SDF positions in northeastern Syria.[14] The KDP has steadily improved its relationship with Turkey in recent years, primarily due to the KDP's hostility to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).[15] Turkey often conflates the SDF and the PKK-linked Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) with the PKK and uses “PKK” as a euphemism for the entire SDF.[16]

The KDP is also pressuring the SDF to cooperate with minority Syrian Kurdish political parties in negotiations with the HTS-led interim government. Masoud Barzani met with Abdi in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan, on January 16.[17] A senior KDP member told Western media that Barzani and Abdi focused on unifying Kurdish political efforts in Syria.[18] The KDP has historically aligned itself with the Kurdish National Council, a coalition of Syrian Kurdish political parties.[19] The SDF's political body is led by the Kurdish National Council's political rival.[20] Barzani's representative also met with Kurdish National Council officials on January 13 to attempt to dissolve tensions between the Syrian Kurdish political parties.[21]

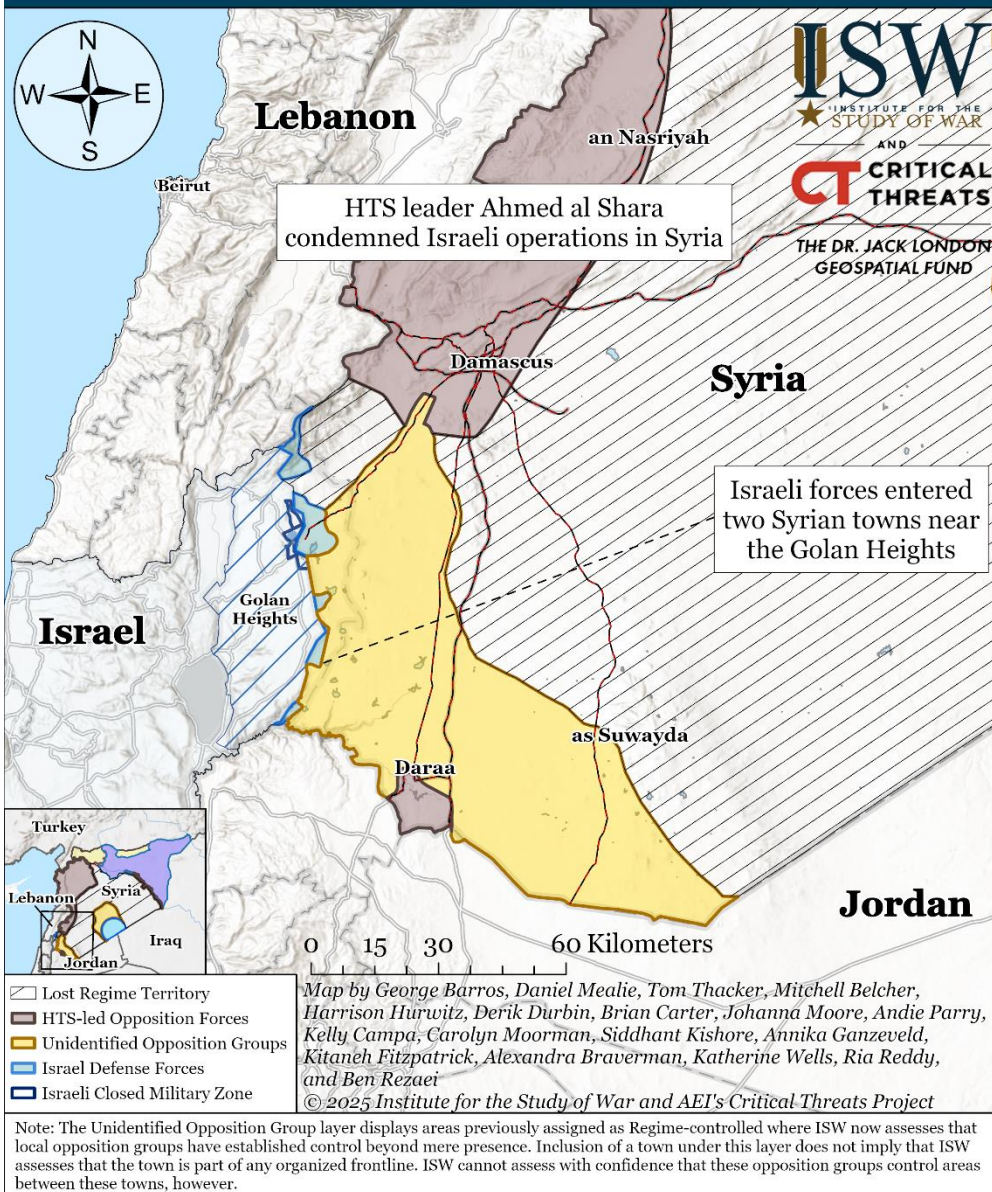
Barzani and Abdi also reportedly discussed ways to distance the SDF from the PKK in their meeting on January 16.[22] A PKK official separately told Reuters that PKK forces would withdraw from Syria if the SDF had joint or solo control of northeastern Syria.[23] Abdi similarly said that the PKK would withdraw from Syria if Turkey agreed to a ceasefire.[24] The difference in how the SDF and Turkey define the PKK and its role in the SDF makes a ceasefire difficult to obtain. Turkey may define SDF leader Mazloum Abdi, a Syrian and former PKK member, as an active member of the PKK, for example, due to his role within the YPG and SDF. Abdi and the SDF are unlikely to hold the same view. Turkey has also explicitly called for the destruction of the YPG/PKK and views the SDF and YPG and PKK as undistinguishable.[25]

Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) leader and interim head of state Ahmed al Shara addressed Israeli military activity in southern Syria on January 16 during a meeting with the Qatari foreign minister.[26] Shara said that Israel’s advance into Syria was “due to the presence of Iranian militias and Hezbollah” but that such a “pretext” no longer exists with HTS in power.[27] He emphasized that Israeli forces must return to the 1974 disengagement line in the Golan Heights and that UN forces should deploy to the buffer zone.[28] Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on December 8 that he considers the 1974 disengagement agreement on the Golan Heights to have “collapsed” with the fall of the Syrian regime.[29] Interim Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al Shaibani reportedly went further than Shara and said that Syria must “defend our country and our people.”[30]

Shara and Shaibani’s statements were very likely spurred by an IDF Air Force strike on an HTS-affiliated convoy near the Syria-Golan Heights border on January 15 that killed two Public Security Department members as they collected surrendered weapons.[31] The Israeli strike also killed the mayor of Ghadir al Bustan.[32] The January 15 strike appears to be the first IDF strike that has directly targeted HTS-led government forces.[33] It remains unclear at this time how much effort Shara will devote to the restoration of the 1974 disengagement line with Israel and whether this statement is predominantly due to public pressure after the January 15 attack.

Opposition Advances in Southwest Syria

As of January 16, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Key Takeaways:

- **Gaza Strip Ceasefire Deal:** The Israeli cabinet will vote on the ceasefire-hostage agreement on January 17 after it postponed its vote due to delays in Hamas approving an unresolved issue. Both sides resolved the issue.
- **Military Implications for Ceasefire:** Hamas will likely use the first phase to reorganize its forces and move cells around the Gaza Strip without Israeli aerial observation. Hamas can only achieve limited reorganization and will be unable to regenerate itself during this period,

however. The limited and inadequate regeneration and reorganization Hamas may be able to undertake will almost certainly be wholly insufficient to seriously impede the IDF from achieving any tactical mission it must complete, such as reoccupying the Netzarim Corridor, if the ceasefire collapses.

- **Kurdish Coordination:** The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) appears to be trying to pressure the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to avoid a full-scale conflict with Turkey and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA). Barzani and Abdi also reportedly discussed ways to distance the SDF from the PKK in their meeting on January 16.
- **Kurdistan Workers' Party and the SDF:** A PKK official told Reuters that PKK forces would withdraw from Syria if the SDF had joint or solo control of northeastern Syria. The difference in how the SDF and Turkey define the PKK and its role in the SDF makes a ceasefire in northern Syria difficult to obtain. Turkey may define SDF leader Mazloum Abdi, a Syrian and former PKK member, as an active member of the PKK, for example, due to his role within the YPG and SDF. Abdi and the SDF are unlikely to hold the same view.
- **Hayat Tahrir al Sham and Israel:** Shara said that Israel's advance into Syria was "due to the presence of Iranian militias and Hezbollah" but that such a "pretext" no longer exists with HTS in power. Interim Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al Shaibani reportedly went further than Shara and said that Syria must "defend our country and our people." Shara and Shaibani's statements were very likely spurred by an IDF Air Force strike on an HTS-affiliated convoy near the Syria-Golan Heights border on January 15 that killed two Public Security Department members as they collected surrendered weapons.

Syria

Axis of Resistance objectives:

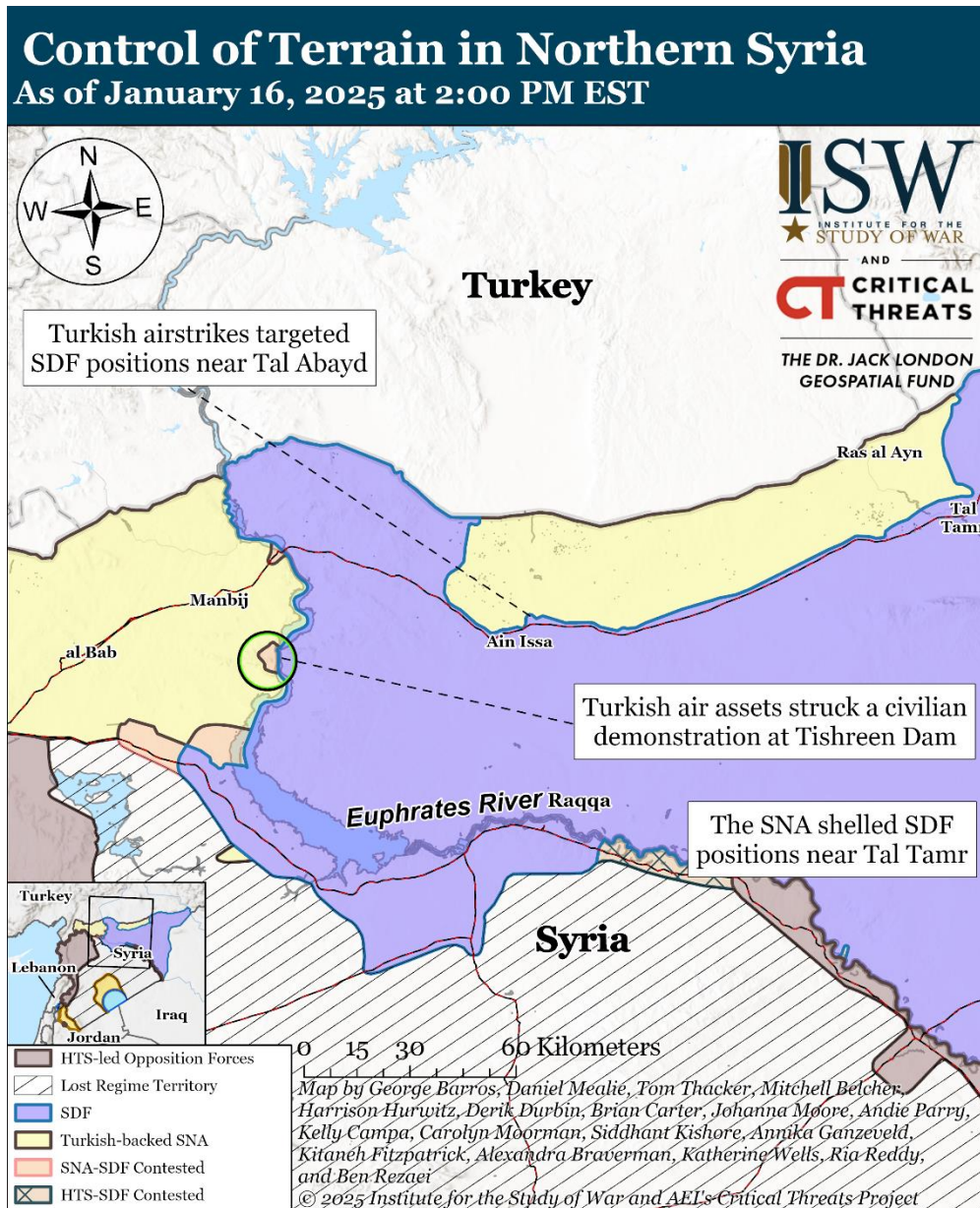
- Reestablish ground lines of communication from Syria to Lebanon
- Reestablish Iranian influence in Syria

Turkish air assets struck an Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (AANES)-organized demonstration near Tishreen Dam, east of Aleppo, on January 16.[34] Turkish or Turkish-backed SNA air assets also struck civilian gatherings near the dam on January 15 and 8.[35] AANES, which is the governing authority in northeast Syria affiliated with the SDF, called on January 7 for civilians to travel to the Tishreen Dam and protest Turkish-backed military operations there.[36] An SDF spokesperson condemned the strike targeting "peaceful sit-ins" and said that over 20 civilians were killed or wounded by the strikes on the dam area.[37] Anti-SDF media claimed that the SDF has forced government employees to participate in the demonstrations to support SDF forces.[38] The SDF and SNA have fought near the Tishreen Dam since mid-December 2024. The prior strikes targeted civilian convoys that traveled on an SDF supply line to the SDF bridgehead at Tishreen Dam.[39] Turkey and the SNA are attempting to isolate SDF forces by striking supply lines and key nodes behind the front while pressuring the SDF bridgeheads with ground attacks.

The SNA and Turkey continued to pressure the SDF bridgehead west of Tishreen Dam. Anti-SDF media reported that the SNA and the SDF exchanged artillery fire west of the

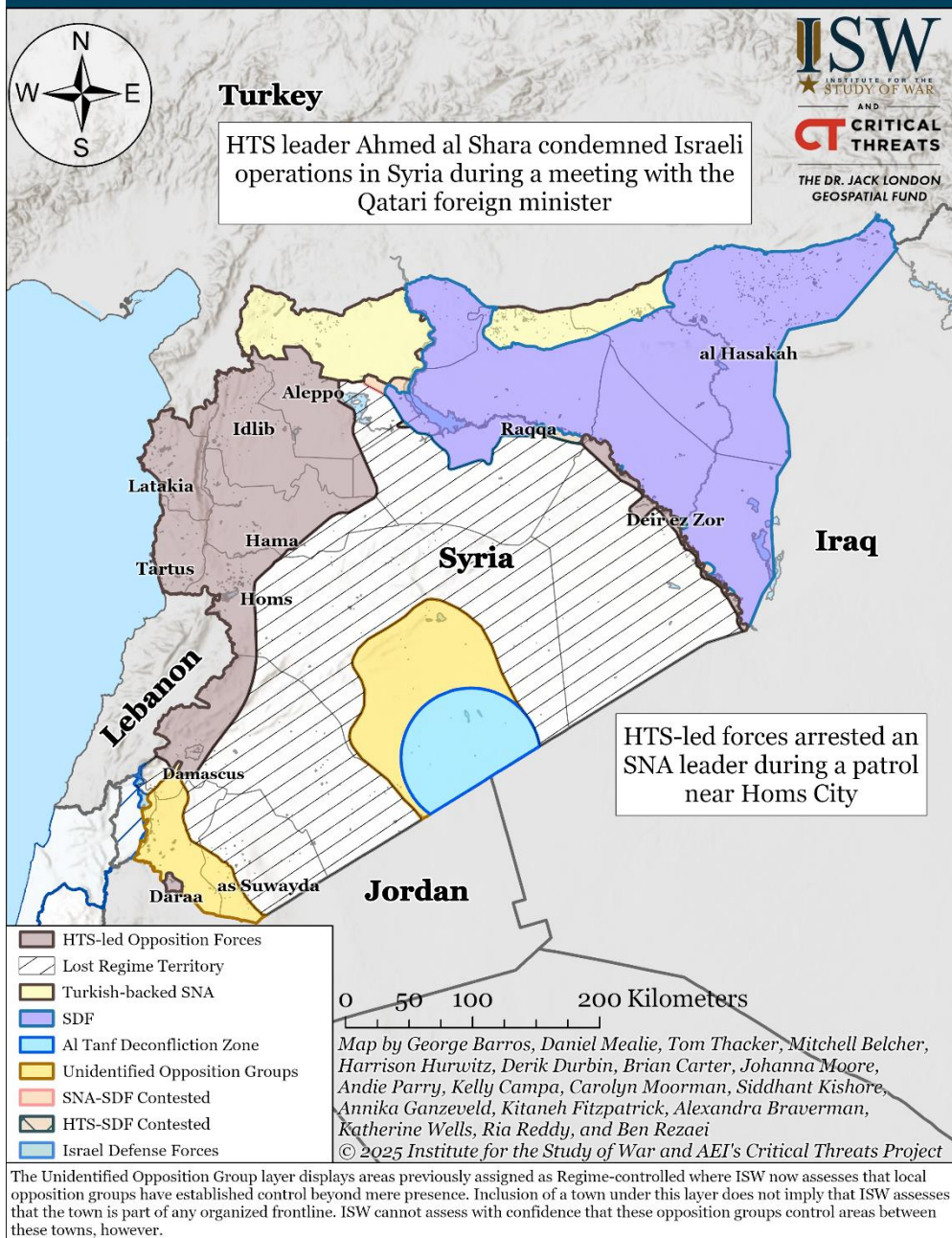
dam.[40] An SDF spokesperson said that Kurdish forces destroyed an SNA weapons and ammunition warehouse north of the Tishreen Dam near Abu Qalal village.[41]

The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) continued to attack US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) positions along the line of control near Tal Tamr on January 16. Anti-SDF media reported that the SNA shelled SDF positions near the line of control near Tal Tamr.[42] The SNA has reportedly deployed forces to the line of control near Tal Tamr since January 8.[43] A Turkish airstrike separately targeted an SDF position south of Tal Abyad on the opposite side of the SNA-controlled Peace Spring area.[44]



Reported Control of Terrain in Syria

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HTS-led security forces conducted security operations in three locations on January 15 and 16. HTS-led forces confiscated weapons including MANPADS, rockets, artillery shells, and mines found in warehouses and underground caches in Sanamayn, northern Daraa Province.[45] HTS-led forces confiscated weapons and arrested a number of fighters in operations targeting former Assad regime members in Hafir Fawqa, north of Damascus.[46]

HTS-led forces separately reportedly arrested a leader in an unspecified SNA group, Bilal Awda, during a patrol near Homs City.[47] Syrian media reported the forces arrested Awda due to his "formation of a military faction outside the administration of the interim government." [48] Awda reportedly has previously been involved in organized crime in Talat Rakan, Homs Province.[49] A Syria-focused analyst reported that locals in Homs Province blame local crime on Sultan Murad Division commanders who are now serving in local security positions, suggesting that Awda may be part of the Sultan Murad Division.[50] The Sultan Murad Division is a Turkmen militia that is part of the SNA.[51] The Syria analyst noted that two former Farouq Battalion members, Nasser Nahar, and Ahmed Faisal Khalouf, assumed security control for Baba Amr, Homs City.[52] The Farouq Battalion is an Islamist Homs Province-based rebel group that joined the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front in 2012.[53] The Farouq Battalion fought against the regime in the Baba Amr neighborhood, Homs City, in 2011 during the regime's siege there.[54] Nasser al Nahar reportedly led the "Free Men of Baba Amr brigade" in the Free Syrian Army, a loose coalition of armed groups opposed to the Assad regime during the early stages of the Syrian Civil War.[55] The analyst also noted that former Talkalakh Martyrs Battalion member Hamoudi al Layli also assumed control of Baba Amr.[56] Layli reportedly fled to Lebanon following the fall of the Assad regime.[57]

US Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General Michael Kurilla also discussed regional security and US-Jordan defense coordination with the Chairman of the Jordanian Joint Chiefs of Staff Major General Yousef al Hnaity and other Jordanian military commanders in Jordan on January 15.[58] Kurilla highlighted Jordanian border security and Jordanian support to the US-led anti-ISIS mission in the meetings.

Iraq

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Strengthen Iranian and Axis of Resistance influence over the Iraqi state and society
- Harden the Iraqi government against internal dissent

Iraqi Foreign Minister Faud Hussein told Reuters on January 16 that the Iraqi government is attempting to convince Iranian-backed Iraqi militias to either surrender their weapons or join the official Iraqi security apparatus.[59] Many Iranian-backed Iraqi militias incorporated portions of their militias into the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an Iraqi state security service, in the mid-2010s. An Iranian-backed Shia Coordination Framework member of Parliament similarly told Iraqi media on January 16 that the Iraqi government is currently attempting to contain the militias and place weapons "in Baghdad's hands," rather than trying to seize militia headquarters or weapons.[60] A militia source separately told Iraqi media on January 16 that Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba (HHN) Secretary-General Akram al Kaabi rejected Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani's suggestion to integrate members of HHN, Kataib Hezbollah, and Kataib Sayyad al Shuhada into the PMF.[61] Many Iranian-backed Iraqi militias include brigades that are part of the PMF and additional forces that are not part of the PMF.[62] Neither the official brigades within the PMF nor the non-official forces outside of the PMF answer to the Iraqi prime minister in practice, however.[63]

US Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General Michael Kurilla discussed the US-led anti-ISIS mission and recent developments in Syria with senior US and Iraqi military leaders in Baghdad on January 15.[64] Kurilla held meetings with Iraqi Army Chief of Staff Abdul Amir Rashid Yarallah, Iraqi Joint Operations Deputy Commander General Qais al Muhammadawi, and Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) Commander Major General Kevin Leahy.

Arabian Peninsula

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Harden the Houthi regime against internal dissent in Houthi-controlled areas
- Destroy the anti-Houthi opposition in order to control all of Yemen
- Erode Israeli will to continue the war in the Gaza Strip

Nothing significant to report.

The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Erode the will of the Israeli political establishment and the public to sustain clearing operations in the Gaza Strip
- Reestablish Hamas as the governing authority in the Gaza Strip
- Rebuild and reestablish Hezbollah in southern Lebanon
- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

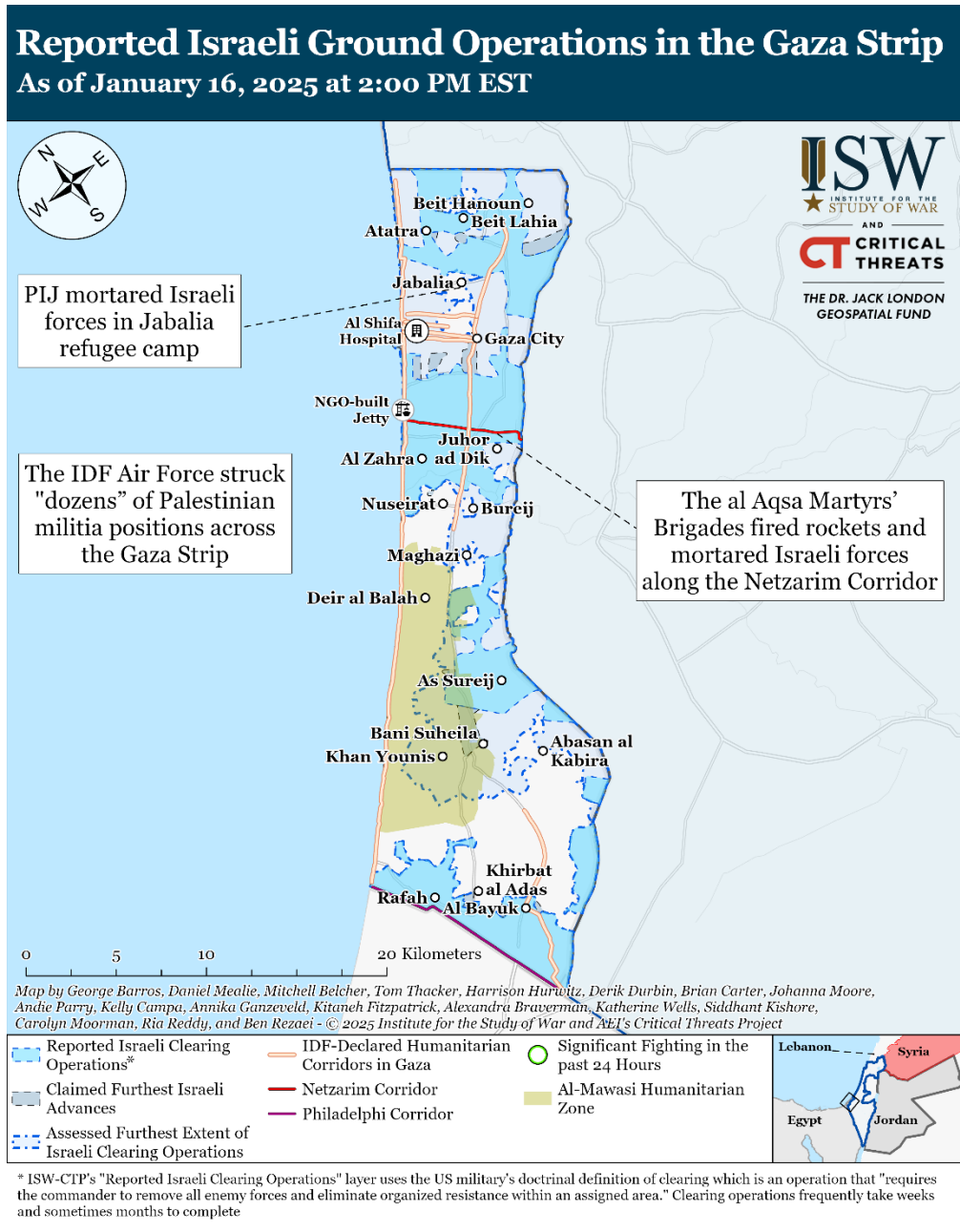
The Gaza Strip

The IDF Air Force struck "dozens" of Palestinian militia positions across the Gaza Strip on January 15 and 16.[65] Hamas claimed that an IDF airstrike targeted a location where Hamas held a female Israeli hostage.[66] Hamas said the ceasefire deal stipulated that the hostage would be released during the first phase.[67] Hamas did not provide any information about the hostage's status, however. This statement is likely part of a Hamas information effort aimed at pressuring the Israeli cabinet and swaying Israeli public opinion to support the ceasefire-hostage agreement.

IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi discussed operations in Beit Hanoun with IDF 933rd Infantry Brigade (162nd Division) officers on January 16.[68] Halevi briefed the Israeli soldiers on IDF operations in the Gaza Strip ahead of the ceasefire.

Geolocated footage posted on January 15 showed Israeli forces demolishing infrastructure in the northeastern Jabalia refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip.[69] PIJ mortared Israeli forces in Jabalia refugee camp on January 16.[70]

The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades fired rockets and mortared Israeli forces along the Netzarim Corridor on January 16.[71]



Lebanon

Hezbollah-affiliated and Lebanese media reported on January 16 that Israeli forces moved toward two towns in southeastern Lebanon where the IDF had previously operated in or near. Hezbollah-affiliated media reported on January 16 that the IDF advanced towards the outskirts of Deir Siryan, approximately five kilometers northwest of Israel.[72] Lebanese

media reported that Israeli tanks entered the northern neighborhood of Maroun al Ras.[73] The IDF has operated in and around Maroun al Ras since early November 2024.[74]

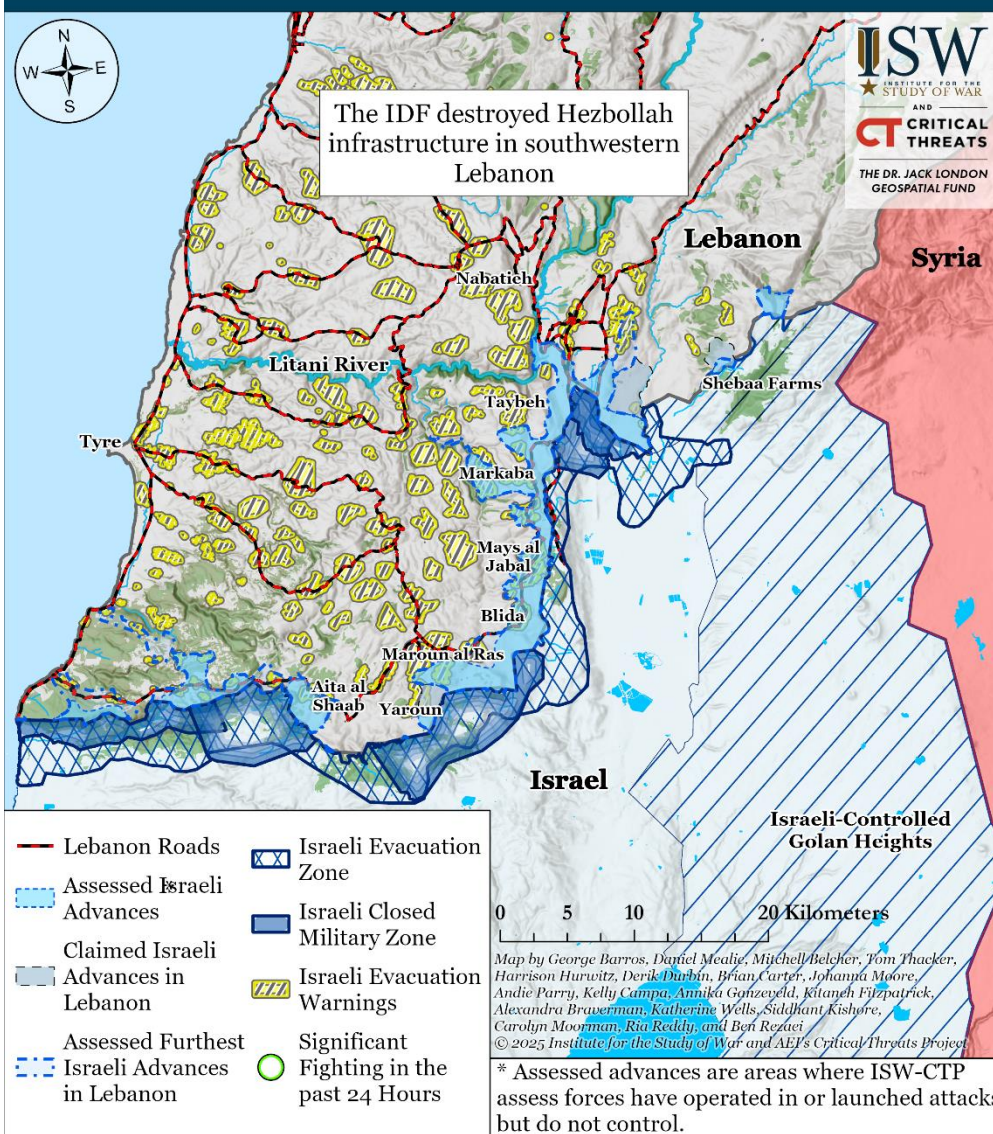
Hezbollah-affiliated and Lebanese media reported on January 16 that Israeli forces advanced into Taybeh and Houla, southeastern Lebanon.[75]

Lebanese media reported on January 16 that the IDF detonated unspecified infrastructure in five towns on or near the Israel-Lebanon border. The towns included Qouzah and Aita al Shaab, southwestern Lebanon, and Yaroun, Mays al Jabal, and Taybeh.[76]

The IDF 11th Territorial Brigade (146th Division) destroyed “dozens” of above and below-ground Hezbollah infrastructure in southwestern Lebanon on January 16.[77] This included weapons depots that contained rocket launchers, small arms, and other military equipment.[78] The IDF separately destroyed a weapons cache in a civilian building near a UN base without causing damage to the base. Israeli forces also destroyed an armed launcher in southwestern Lebanon aimed at Israeli territory.

Reported Israeli Operations in Lebanon

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West

Bank

Israeli forces killed ten Palestinian militia fighters and arrested fifty more fighters during operations in the West Bank since January 12.[79] Palestinian Islamic Jihad's (PIJ) Jenin Battalion mourned the death of one of its commanders and three fighters on January 16, both of whom the IDF killed in Jenin refugee camp.[80] The IDF also seized weapons and “terrorist funds” during their operation.[81]

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian said that Iran would be willing to engage in direct nuclear talks with the United States if Iran got "assurances" that the US would maintain its commitments during an interview with NBC on January 15.[82] Pezeshkian's statement likely aims to signal to the West that Iran maintains open to nuclear negotiations and prevent the West from triggering further sanctions—including snapback sanctions—against Iran. Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei ultimately will decide Iran's official policy on negotiations, however. Khamenei has previously delivered intentionally vague statements on Iran's official position about negotiations with the West. He has expressed openness to negotiations to relieve sanctions pressure on Iran but he maintains that Iranian officials should not "trust" Iranian adversaries and focus on Iranian interests.[83] Iranian hardliners continue to express unwillingness to negotiate with the West and have encouraged Khamenei to revoke his 2003 fatwa banning the production and use of nuclear weapons.[84]

Pezeshkian met with senior Tajik officials in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, on January 16 to discuss opportunities to expand bilateral trade and investment ties. Pezeshkian and Tajik President Emomali Rahmon signed 23 cooperation agreements across various sectors including border cooperation, customs services, and information technology.[85] Pezeshkian also met with Tajik Prime Minister Kokhir Rasulzoda, Speaker of the Tajik House of Representatives Mohammad Tahir Zakirzadeh, and Speaker of the National Assembly of Tajikistan Rustam Emomali.[86] These meetings appear to be a continuation of Iran's "neighborhood policy" centered on building relations with regional and other states to undermine and mitigate the impact of international sanctions.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Operational Base Forces and the Intelligence Ministry arrested 15 likely Jaish al Adl—a Baloch Salafi-jihadi group—fighters in Sistan and Baluchistan Province, near the Pakistani border, on January 16.[87] The IRGC Quds Operational Base Forces seized weapons and ammunition.[88]

The Iranian Artesh Navy established the 2nd Naval Zone in Jask, Hormozgan Province, on January 16.[89] Iranian Artesh Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Irani stated that the zone has received surface, subsurface, and aerial systems, including cruise missiles, air defense weapons, and electronic and cyber warfare systems.[90] The 2nd Naval Zone reportedly includes repair facilities and supports operational and defensive units, including commando brigades, electronic warfare teams, and cyber units.

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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