

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.

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.

The newly-formed Iraqi United Sunni Leadership Coalition (USLC) called on the Mohammad Shia al Sudani administration to implement nine long-standing Sunni demands on January 18.[1] It is uncommon after the counter-ISIS war for Sunni political parties in Iraq to assert their demands so boldly. The demands include:

1. Amending the General Amnesty Law to free innocent Iraqis who were arrested based on false statements made by “secret informants;”
2. Returning displaced individuals to Jurf al Sakhr and al Awja;
3. Revealing the fate of missing individuals and compensating the families of these individuals,
4. Dissolving the Accountability and Justice Commission and transferring its responsibilities to the Independent High Electoral Commission and the Federal Service Council;
5. Ending the “militarization” of cities, removing the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) from cities, and transferring security responsibilities to the Interior Ministry;
6. Closing economic offices affiliated with the PMF in provinces that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) once controlled;
7. Creating a “balance” between political and military institutions affiliated with the Iraqi federal government;
8. Closing security checkpoints in provinces that were previously taken over by ISIS;

9. Compensating individuals who were harmed during military operations against ISIS.[2]

Iraqi Sunnis have held many of these demands since before the US withdrawal in 2011. Iraqi Sunnis have demanded the dissolution of the Accountability and Justice Committee since before December 2011, for example.[3] The Accountability and Justice Committee replaced the De-Baathification Committee in 2008 and is ostensibly responsible for preventing “the return of the Baath’s ideology, power, or practices.”[4] In reality, however, the Shia Coordination Framework--a coalition of Iranian-backed Shia political parties--has weaponized the Accountability and Justice Commission to sideline political opposition.[5]

Other demands, such as the demand to return displaced individuals to Jurf al Sakhr and al Awja, stem from after the defeat of ISIS. Jurf al Sakhr is a former Sunni town that Iranian-backed Shia forces recaptured from ISIS in October 2014.[6] Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah subsequently occupied the town and prevented the residents from returning, which was an act of sectarian cleansing.[7] Kataib Hezbollah does not allow the Iraqi federal government access to Jurf al Sakhr, which means that the Iraqi government does not have control over the town.[8]

Al Awja is a town located south of Tikrit, Salah al Din Province, and is the hometown of Saddam Hussein.[9] The Popular Mobilization Forces, which includes a large number of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, has prevented residents who fled from al Awja during the fight against ISIS from returning home.[10] A member of Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Imam Ali claimed in an interview in March 2023 that “residents of al Awja joined the Islamic State and committed massacres in the area. They are loyalists of Saddam who joined the terrorists to avenge his death, so their return is not possible.”[11] This, too, is an act of sectarian cleansing.

It is unlikely that the United Sunni Leadership Coalition (USLC) will be able to achieve most or all of these demands. The coalition therefore likely published these demands to rally support from Iraqi Sunnis ahead of the October 2025 parliamentary elections. The Iranian-backed Shia Coordination Framework currently controls the Iraqi parliament, and it is therefore unlikely that the USLC will be able to achieve these demands through the political process. Iranian-backed Iraqi militias will also almost certainly resist concession on the demands, particularly the demands that call on them to reduce their military presence in Sunni and urban areas.

The Iraqi parliamentary leadership placed an amendment that appears to benefit Kurdish political parties on the parliamentary agenda for January 19, likely to try to ensure that Kurdish political parties attend parliament on January 19. The participation of Kurdish parties in parliament on January 19 would make it more difficult for Sunni parties to prevent a quorum. The Sunni parties previously prevented quorum on January 15, possibly to avoid a vote on the Intelligence Service Law. Parliament is scheduled to vote on the first amendment of the Federal Budget Law on January 19.[12] This amendment would increase the Iraqi federal government’s compensation for oil production in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) from \$6 to \$16 in return for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) resuming oil exports.[13] The Iraqi federal government seeks to resume oil exports from the Iraqi Kurdistan Region in order to increase federal revenue.[14] The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) ceased oil exports to the Ceyhan Port in Turkey in March 2023.[15] Iranian-backed Shia Coordination Framework leaders agreed to move forward with the amendment after Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Nechirvan

Barzani visited Baghdad on January 13.[16] The KRG spokesperson stated on January 16 that the KRG is “ready to hand over internal revenues” and export oil through the Iraqi State Organization for Marketing of Oil if the government pays the KRG’s full share of the federal budget, including public sector salaries.[17]

The Israeli government approved the Israel-Hamas ceasefire-hostage deal on January 18. The ceasefire will go into effect at 1:30AM ET on January 19 and the release of Israeli hostages will start at 9:30AM ET on January 19.[18] Unspecified security sources cited by Israeli Army Radio stated that Israel estimates that 25 out of the 33 hostages Hamas will release in the first phase of the deal are alive.[19] Hamas is expected to release three hostages on January 19 and release the other 30 hostages every subsequent Saturday until March 1.[20] An unspecified Israeli official said that Hamas has not provided the names of the three hostages to Israel for the January 19 exchange as stipulated under the agreement.[21] The official warned that Israel would not move forward with the prisoner-hostage exchange if Hamas fails to provide the list prior to the deadline. Israeli media said that Israel will release 1,904 Palestinian prisoners in the first phase of the ceasefire deal.[22] The IDF has begun to withdraw some forces from the Gaza Strip and redeploy others to the buffer zone ahead of the ceasefire implementation.[23] The BBC cited an unspecified senior Palestinian official who claimed that Hamas will be permitted to operate its police force in the Gaza Strip under the ceasefire agreement.[24] CTP-ISW cannot independently verify this claim.

Israeli National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir resigned on January 18 after the Israeli government approved the ceasefire deal.[25] Ben Gvir voted against the ceasefire-hostage agreement during the Israeli cabinet vote on January 17.[26] Ben Gvir stated that he would return to his position if the war eventually resumes.[27] Gvir also called on Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich to resign.[28]

The Palestinian Authority (PA) seeks to lead post-war governance in the Gaza Strip, but assuming governing authority will almost certainly require a military confrontation with Hamas. PA President Mahmoud Abbas’s office stated on January 17 that the PA holds legal and political jurisdiction over the Gaza Strip as the recognized governing authority of the Palestinian territories and is prepared to deploy administrative and security teams to the Gaza Strip.[29] The ceasefire agreement does not task the PA with governing the Strip, nor does the ceasefire discuss post-war governance in any capacity.[30] PA Prime Minister Mohammed Mustafa separately stated on January 18 that the PA has a “hundred-day plan” for after the ceasefire goes into effect.[31]

IDF operations have destroyed Hamas as a military organization, but small Hamas cells will remain capable of resisting a PA takeover after the IDF leaves. These cells are presumably organized on personal, and social ties and not institutionalized in a quasi-military structure like existed immediately after October 7, 2023. The PA and Hamas have repeatedly discussed post-war governance since the October 7 war began, including the formation of an independent civilian committee to manage civilian affairs.[32] Hamas would almost certainly attempt to resist or subvert any PA takeover in the Gaza Strip unless Hamas is prevented by force from doing so.[33] Hamas’ cells cannot defeat PA security forces in battles at this time, but the PA would need to seek out and destroy these Hamas cells to prevent Hamas from gradually rebuilding and overthrowing the PA’s new authority. It is unclear if the PA is willing to fight Hamas in a long guerrilla campaign to cement PA rule

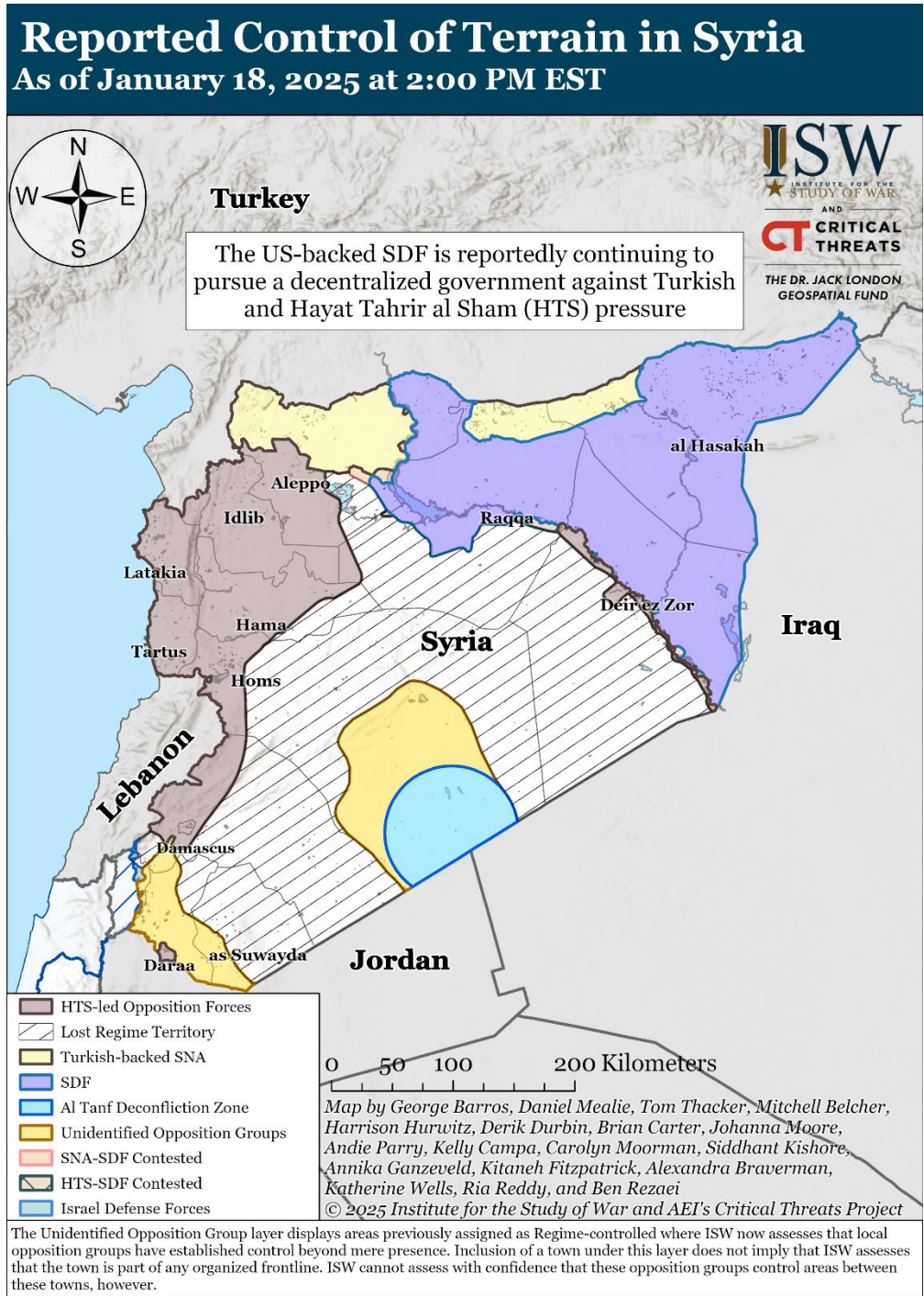
in the Strip. A senior Palestinian official told BBC on January 18 that uniformed, mostly unarmed Hamas police will operate within designated areas in the Strip to manage the movement of displaced civilians after the ceasefire begins while avoiding areas of IDF presence.[34] This BBC report indicates that some elements of Hamas' authority remain in the Gaza Strip. CTP-ISW is unable to certify the validity of this report, but Hamas police activity throughout the Strip could create more opportunities for friction between Hamas and PA forces.

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) is reportedly continuing to pursue a decentralized government against Turkish and Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) pressure.[35] A Deir ez Zor-based journalist reported that SDF leadership met with representatives from Raqqa in an attempt to secure their support for a decentralized government in exchange for increased governing authorities. Turkey has threatened to launch a full-scale military operation against the SDF since December 2024 as part of an effort to coerce the SDF to disarm.[36] HTS has supported this Turkish effort. SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi has maintained that he seeks a “decentralized” administration and wants the SDF to integrate into the Syrian Defense Ministry as a “military bloc” rather than on an “individual” level.”[37] A decentralized government would enable SDF to continue operating in its current capacity, which directly contradicts Turkish demands.

The SDF’s outreach to Raqqa may be an attempt to secure local Arab support ahead of a potential Turkish and Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) attack into SDF territory. The Raqqa representatives present rejected the SDF’s offer and emphasized the unity and sovereignty of Syrian territory.[38] The representatives called for a conference with other groups in SDF-controlled territory to address popular demands. Arab communities under SDF control in Raqqa, Hasakah, and Deir ez Zor have “defected” from the SDF and called for an end to SDF rule since the fall of the Assad regime on December 8.[39] CTP-ISW has not observed other Syrian reports about this meeting, which suggests that this source may have unique access.

An unidentified individual, likely an Iranian Judicial office service employee, killed two senior Iranian Supreme Court judges, Mohammad Moghiseh and Ali Razini, at the Iranian Supreme Court in Tehran on January 18.[40] The suspect reportedly fled the scene and later committed suicide.[41] Iranian Judiciary spokesperson Asghar Jahangir described the attacker as an “infiltrator” who entered the offices of the two judges and carried out the attack using “a handgun.”[42] Jahangir rejected claims that the gunman injured another judge, but Jahangir confirmed that a judicial security guard also suffered injuries.[43] Both judges had long histories of handling political and security cases, including high-profile prosecutions and issuing harsh sentences against dissidents, minorities, and political prisoners.[44] Mohammad Moghiseh, known as “Naserian,” oversaw trials against Baha’i leaders, 2009 Green Movement protesters, and political prisoners in the 1980s and 1990s [45] The US Treasury sanctioned Moghiseh in December 2019 for his role in issuing harsh sentences against journalists, internet users, and Baha’is.[46] Ali Razini held multiple key positions in Iran’s judiciary, including Head of Tehran’s Department of Justice and Legal deputy of the Judiciary chief under former head of Judiciary Sadegh Amoli Larijani.[47] Anti-regime media called both Razini and Moghiseh “hanging judges” for their direct involvement in the late 90s mass executions of political prisoners.[48]

The official Iranian response to this attack has not yet materialized, but incidents like this often trigger paranoia about infiltration and foreign plots. The way Iran responds to the incident will indicate whether it perceives a broader security threat. Iranian authorities could frame the attack as an operation by the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK) or foreign intelligence rather than an isolated act, for example.



Key Takeaways:

- **Iraqi Sunni Coalition:** The newly-formed Iraqi United Sunni Leadership Coalition (USLC) called on the Mohammad Shia al Sudani administration to implement nine long-standing Sunni demands on January 18. It is unlikely that the United Sunni Leadership Coalition (USLC) will be able to achieve most or all of these demands. The coalition therefore likely published these demands to rally support from Iraqi Sunnis ahead of the October 2025 parliamentary elections.
- **Iraqi Parliamentary Politics:** The Iraqi parliamentary leadership placed an amendment that appears to benefit Kurdish political parties on the parliamentary agenda for January 19, likely to try to ensure that Kurdish political parties attend parliament on January 19. The participation of Kurdish parties in parliament on January 19 would make it more difficult for Sunni parties to prevent a quorum.
- **Ceasefire-Hostage Deal:** The Israeli government approved the Israel-Hamas ceasefire-hostage deal on January 18. It will enter into effect at 0130 ET on January 19. Israeli National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir resigned on January 18 after the Israeli government approved the ceasefire deal.
- **Palestinian Authority in the Gaza Strip:** The Palestinian Authority (PA) seeks to lead post-war governance in the Gaza Strip, but assuming governing authority will almost certainly require a military confrontation with Hamas. IDF operations have destroyed Hamas as a military organization, but small Hamas cells will remain capable of resisting a PA takeover after the IDF leaves. Hamas' cells cannot defeat PA security forces in battles at this time, but the PA would need to seek out and destroy these Hamas cells to prevent Hamas from gradually rebuilding and overthrowing the PA's new authority.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces:** The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) is reportedly continuing to pursue a decentralized government against Turkish and Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) pressure. The SDF's outreach to Raqqa may be an attempt to secure local Arab support ahead of a potential Turkish and Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) attack into SDF territory.
- **Assassination in Iran:** An unidentified individual, likely an Iranian Judicial office service employee, killed two senior Iranian Supreme Court judges, Mohammad Moghiseh and Ali Razini, at the Iranian Supreme Court in Tehran on January 18. The official Iranian response to this attack has not yet materialized, but incidents like this often trigger paranoia about infiltration and foreign plots. The way Iran responds to the incident will indicate whether it perceives a broader security threat.

Syria

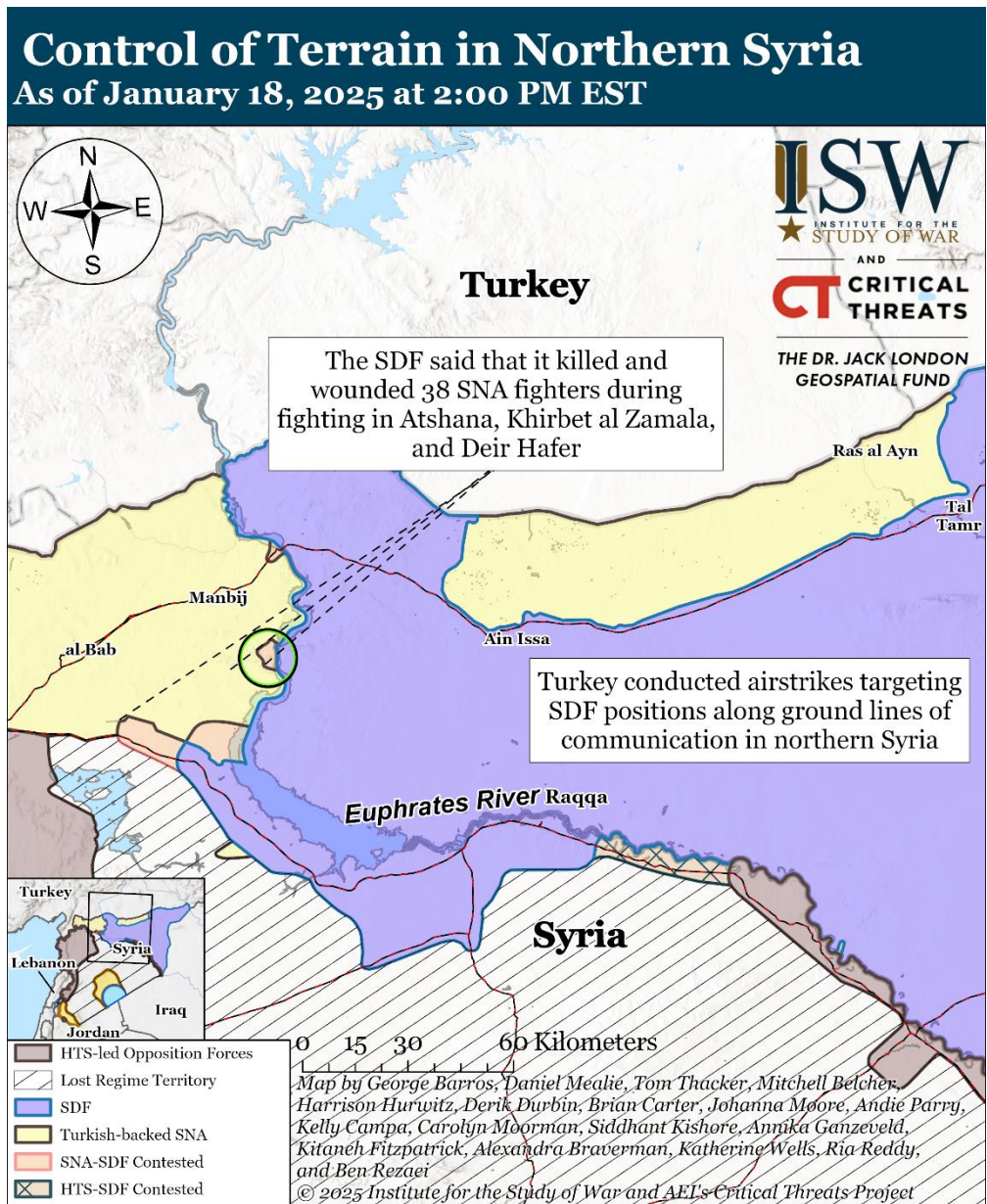
Axis of Resistance objectives:

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

The SNA has continued to attempt to reduce the SDF bridgehead west of the Tishreen Dam since CTP-ISW's last data cut-off on January 17. The SDF reported that its fighters killed

17 and wounded 21 SNA fighters and destroyed three SNA armored vehicles during fighting in Atshana, Khirbet al Zamala, and Deir Hafer on January 17.[49] Atshana and Khirbet Zamala are on the southern side of the SDF salient, but Deir Hafer is on Highway Route 4 and not part of the SDF bridgehead. Geolocated footage posted on January 17 showed the US-sanctioned Turkmen Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade of the SNA shell SDF positions in Khirbet al Zamala.[50]

Turkey has continued to conduct airstrikes targeting SDF positions along key transportation routes in northern Syria since CTP-ISW's last data cut-off on January 17. Anti-SDF media reported that Turkey struck an SDF position in Sarrin, 4 kilometers south of the M4 highway.[51] Syrian media reported that Turkey also struck an SDF position in Kobani, on the Turkey-Syria border.[52]



Syrian media reported on January 18 that armed groups affiliated with unidentified, local armed factions have recently increased weapons smuggling operations into Suwayda Province from nearby towns in Daraa Province.[53] This report of increased smuggling follows recent skirmishes in southern Syria on January 5 and further indicates HTS' lack of full control in the area.[54]

The IDF continued operations in Quneitra province on January 18. Syrian media reported that Israeli forces are still near al Baath and the western edges of the Mantara Dam.[55] The IDF also reportedly cleared forests within the province. Clearing forests would enable better visibility for a military unit in a static, defensive position. Local Syria media posted a video on January 17 of an IDF convoy driving near Mantara Dam.[56]

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

See the topline section.

Arabian Peninsula

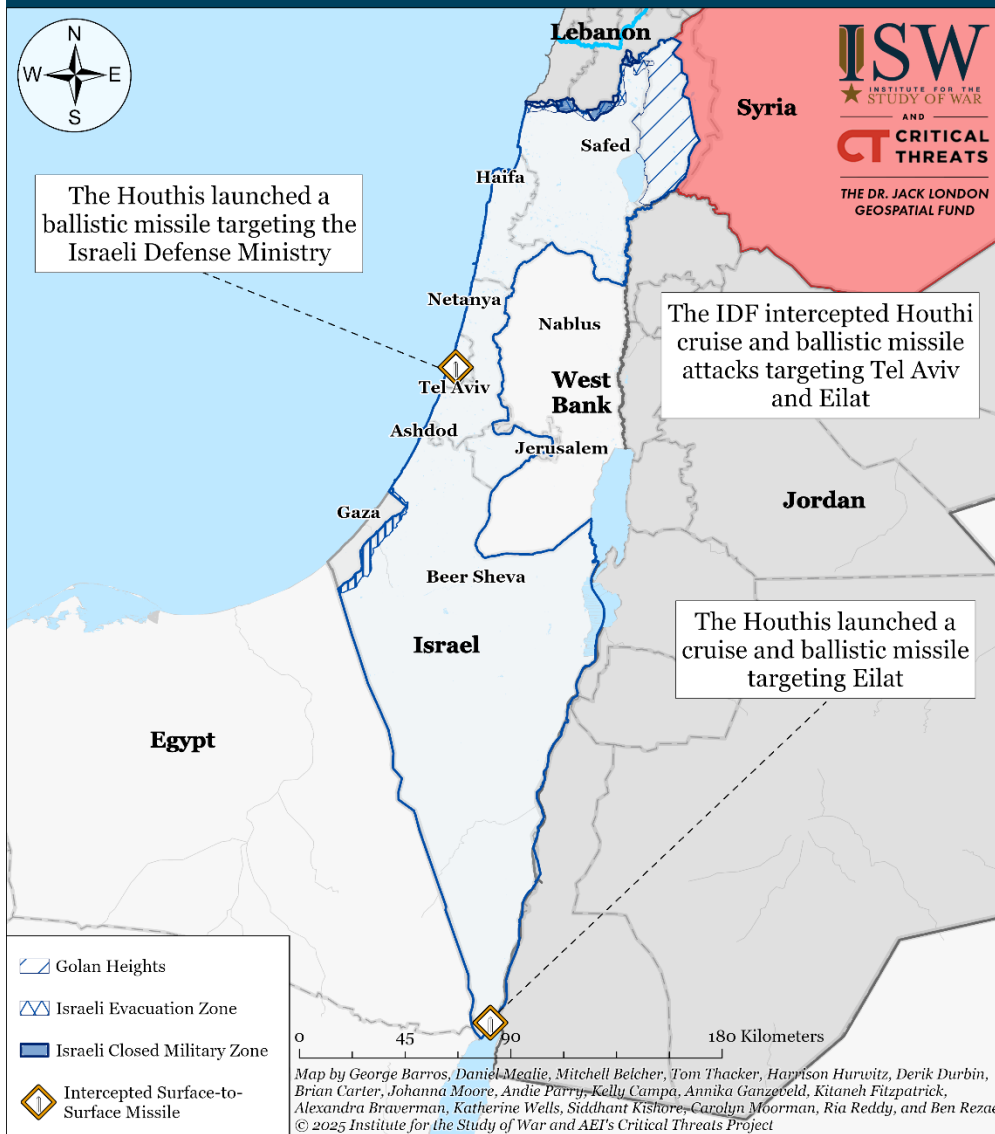
Axis of Resistance objectives:

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

The Houthis conducted a ballistic missile attack that targeted the Israeli Defense Ministry in Tel Aviv and separately conducted a cruise and ballistic missile attack that targeted Eilat on January 18.[57] The IDF intercepted the missiles.[58] The Houthi Supreme Leader Abdulmalik al Houthi vowed on January 16 to halt attacks that target Israel if the Israel-Hamas ceasefire is upheld but stated that the Houthis would continue to attack Israel before the agreement is “implemented.”[59] The ceasefire will go into effect at 0130 ET on January 19.[60]

Houthi Attacks in Israel

As of January 18, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



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

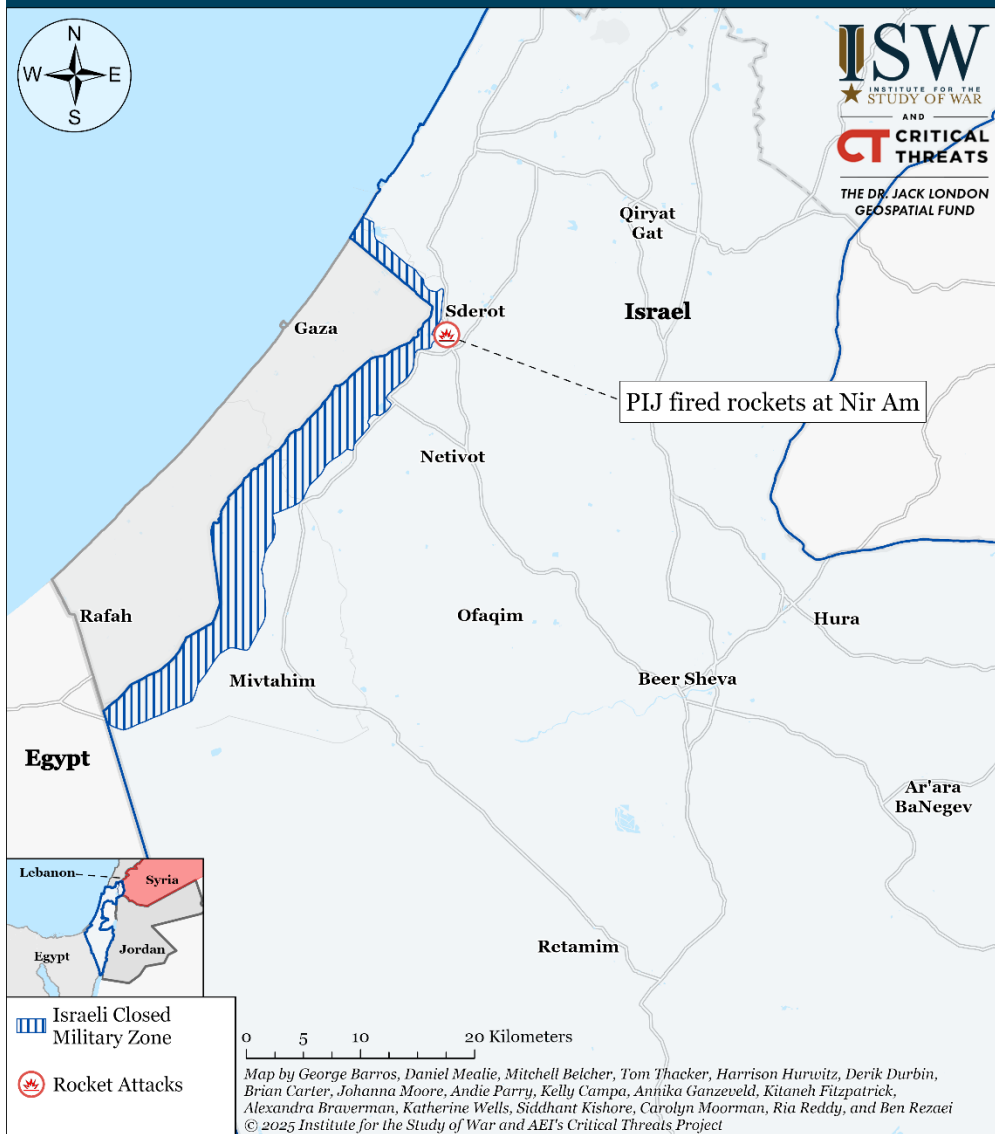
Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) fired small arms targeting an Israeli soldier east of Gaza City on January 18.[61]



PIJ fired rockets targeting a town in southern Israel on January 18.[62]

Attacks into Israel from the Gaza Strip

As of January 18, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST

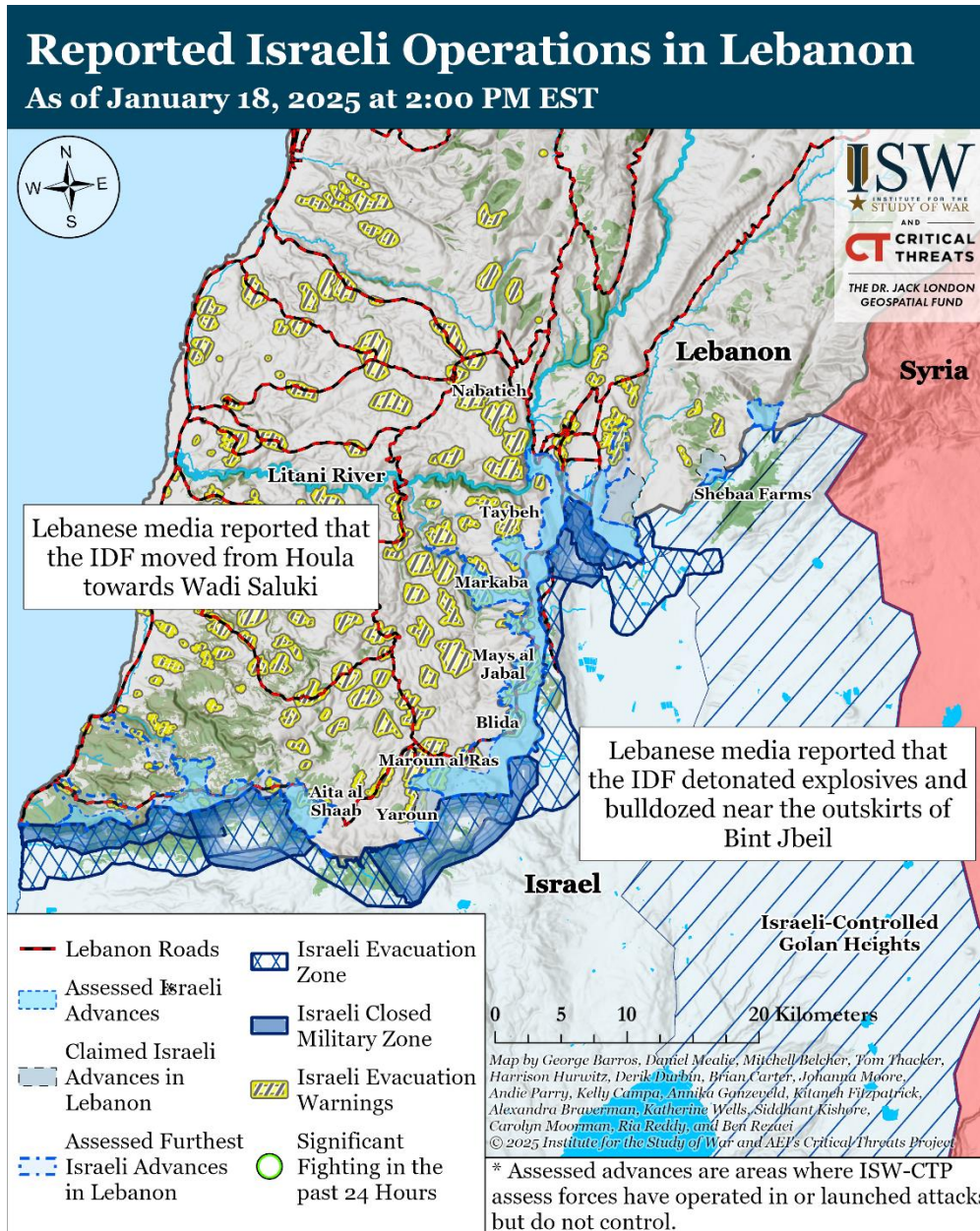


Lebanon

Lebanese media reported on January 18 that the IDF conducted clearing operations while moving from Houla towards Wadi al Saluki, southeastern Lebanon.[63] Hezbollah media reported Israeli armor inside of Houla on January 16.[64]

Lebanese media reported that the IDF detonated explosives in Aitaroun, southeastern Lebanon, on January 18.[65] Lebanese media reported on January 15 that Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) forces and armor advanced to Aitaroun after IDF activity in the area on January 14.[66] It is possible that LAF detonated the explosives on January 18, and that Lebanese media is misidentifying the forces involved.

Lebanese media, including Hezbollah media, reported IDF activity on the outskirts of Bint Jbeil, southeastern Lebanon, on January 18.[67] Israeli armor reportedly advanced to the outskirts of Bint Jbeil from nearby Yaroun and bulldozed the area.[68] Israeli forces also reportedly detonated explosives near Maroun al Ras, which overlooks Bint Jbeil.[69]



West Bank

An unspecified Palestinian official cited by Times of Israel claimed that the Palestinian Authority (PA) has reached an agreement with the Jenin Battalion, which consists of both Hamas and PIJ fighters, to end fighting in Jenin and Jenin refugee camp.[70] The PA has been conducting a “counterterrorism” operation targeting the Jenin Battalion since December 2024.[71] Times of Israel reported that the PA sought to “maintain stability” in the West Bank. The PA

likely aimed to reassert control over the area after it had lost control in the Jenin refugee camp over the past several years.[72]

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

See the topline section.

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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