

Iran Update



**Carolyn Moorman, Siddhant Kishore, Kelly Campa, Johanna Moore, Ria Reddy,
Ben Rezaei, Katherine Wells, Avery Borens, and Brian Carter**

January 21, 2025, Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm ET

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.

CTP-ISW did not record verifiable reports of ceasefire violations in the Gaza Strip since the last data cut off on January 20.

Hamas coordinated the distribution of aid and facilitated the movement of Gazans to the northern Gaza Strip, which demonstrates that Hamas retains some degree of governing authority after 15 months of war. The Associated Press reported that Hamas has patrolled aid convoy routes, coordinated the distribution of humanitarian aid, and monitored the return of Gazans to Jabalia in the northern Gaza Strip after the ceasefire went into effect.[1] Some Gazans began to return from IDF-designated humanitarian zones to the northern Gaza Strip on January 19, and the IDF announced on January 21 that it would soon allow Gazans to return from the southern Gaza Strip to the northern Gaza Strip.[2]

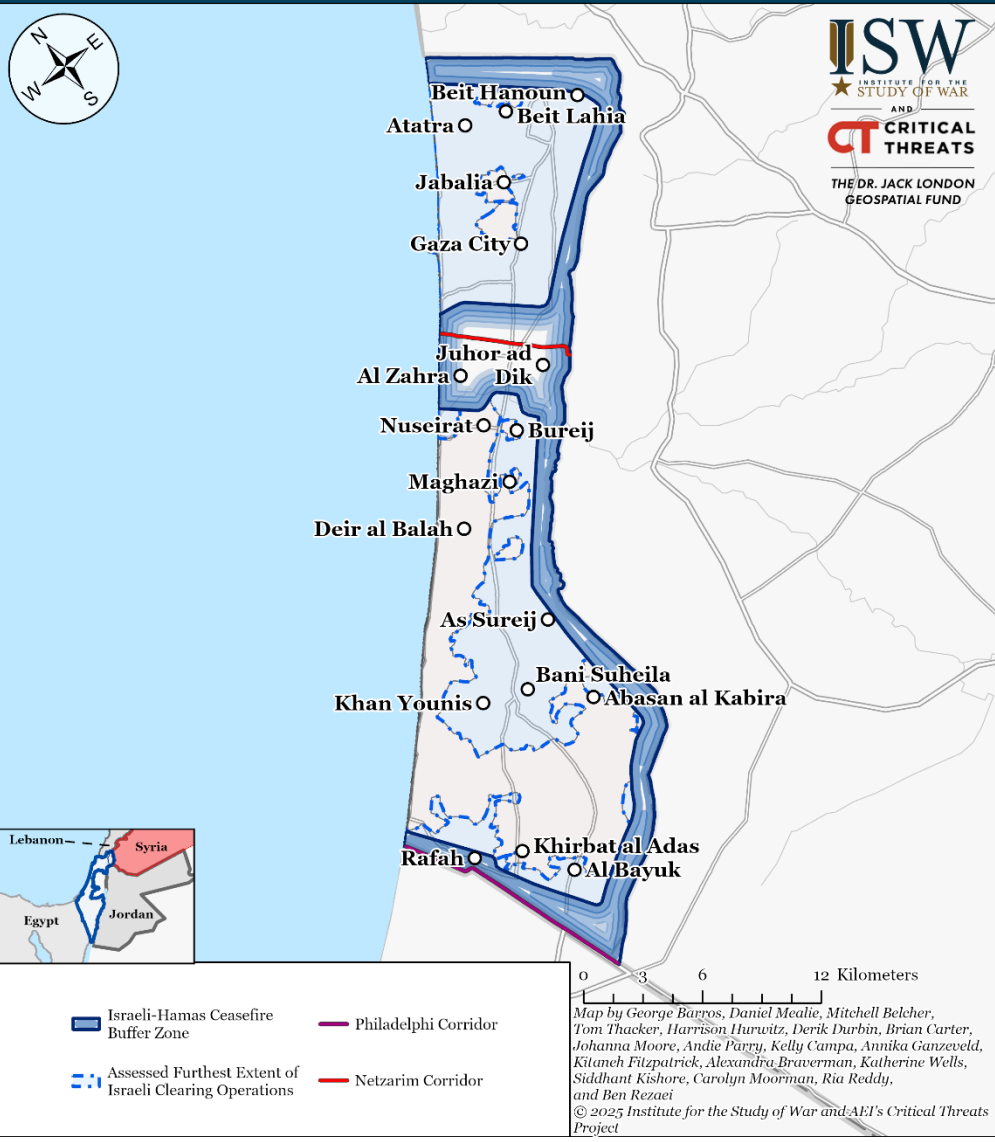
These tasks make Hamas the de facto governing body in the Gaza Strip, at least in certain areas. The activities listed above—distribution and protection of aid and “monitoring” returnees—do not indicate that Hamas runs a Gazan government like it did prior to October 7. Hamas does appear to function as a proto-government that can provide and distribute basic services and goods while controlling the population, which would be consistent with an insurgent organization that seeks to re-exert control over the Gaza Strip. It is notable in this context that Hamas is the sole actor in the Gaza Strip capable and willing to undertake this relatively broad spectrum of tasks. Hamas therefore appears to be prepared to reemerge as the sole authority in the Gaza Strip, even though the IDF destroyed its government structure. Hamas will likely begin to use its small, insurgent-like cells of fighters to reimpose its control over the population and other armed groups, including criminal elements.

Hamas announced that it will release four female Israeli hostages on January 25.[3] Hamas previously announced that it would release the next group of hostages on January 26.[4] The ceasefire agreement requires Hamas to release three hostages every Saturday during the first phase of the ceasefire-hostage deal and 14 hostages on the last day of the first phase.[5] Hamas released three Israeli hostages on the first day of the ceasefire on January 19.[6]

The IDF chief of staff and Southern Command commander both resigned on January 21. Both officers said that they took responsibility for failing to prevent Hamas' October 7 attack into Israel.[7] Herzi Halevi will officially leave as chief of staff on March 6, four days after the first phase of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire agreement ends.[8] Halevi stated that the IDF has not fully destroyed Hamas' governance and military capabilities or returned Israeli hostages held in the Gaza Strip.[9] Halevi called for an external committee to investigate the IDF's failure on October 7.[10] IDF Southern Command Commander Major General Yaron Finkelman also resigned on January 21. Finkelman cited his failure to protect Israel on October 7.[11] The IDF Southern Command is responsible for areas of southern Israel, including the area along the Israel-Gaza Strip border.[12]

Israeli-Hamas Ceasefire Lines

As of January 21, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



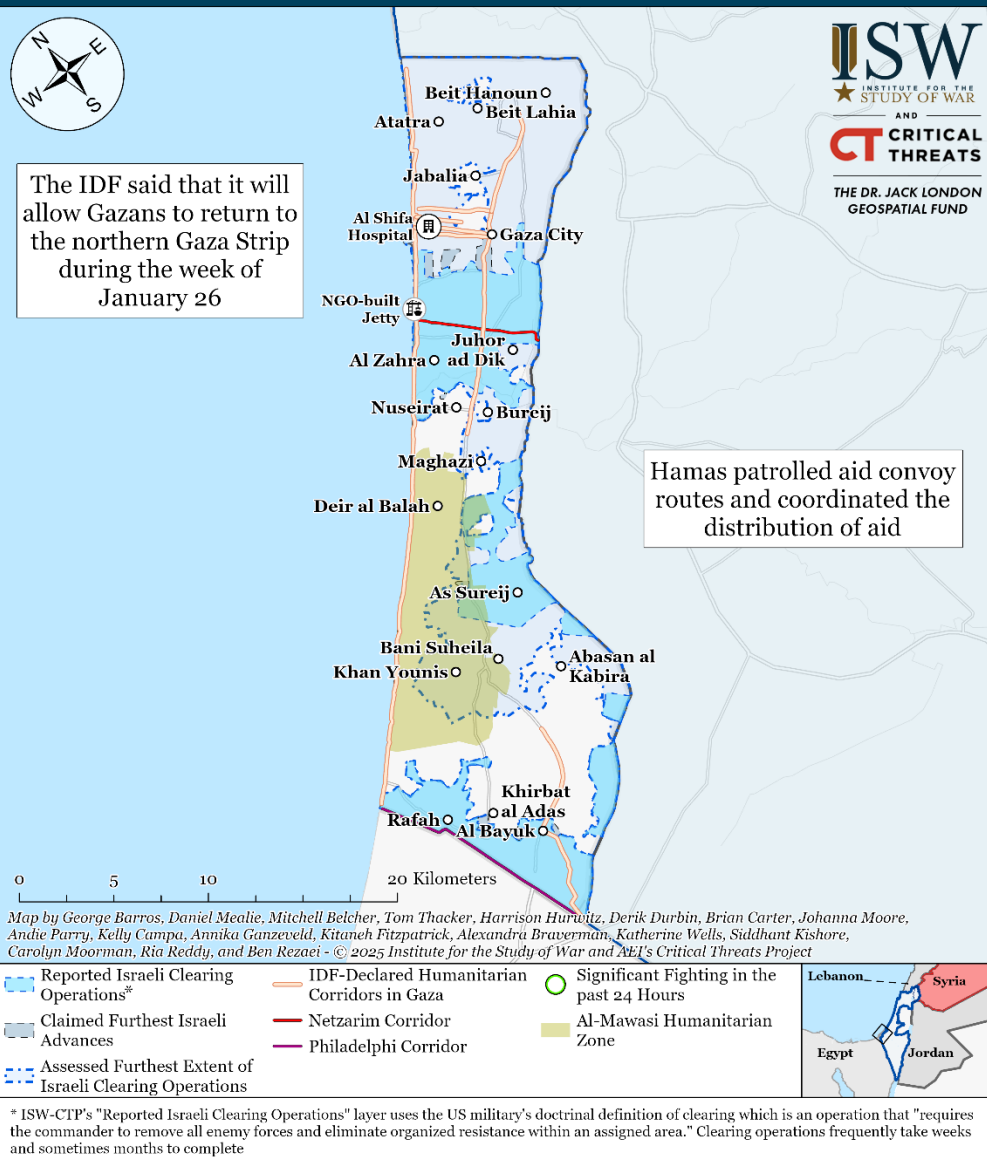
Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

As of January 21, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



The IDF said that it will allow Gazans to return to the northern Gaza Strip during the week of January 26

Hamas patrolled aid convoy routes and coordinated the distribution of aid



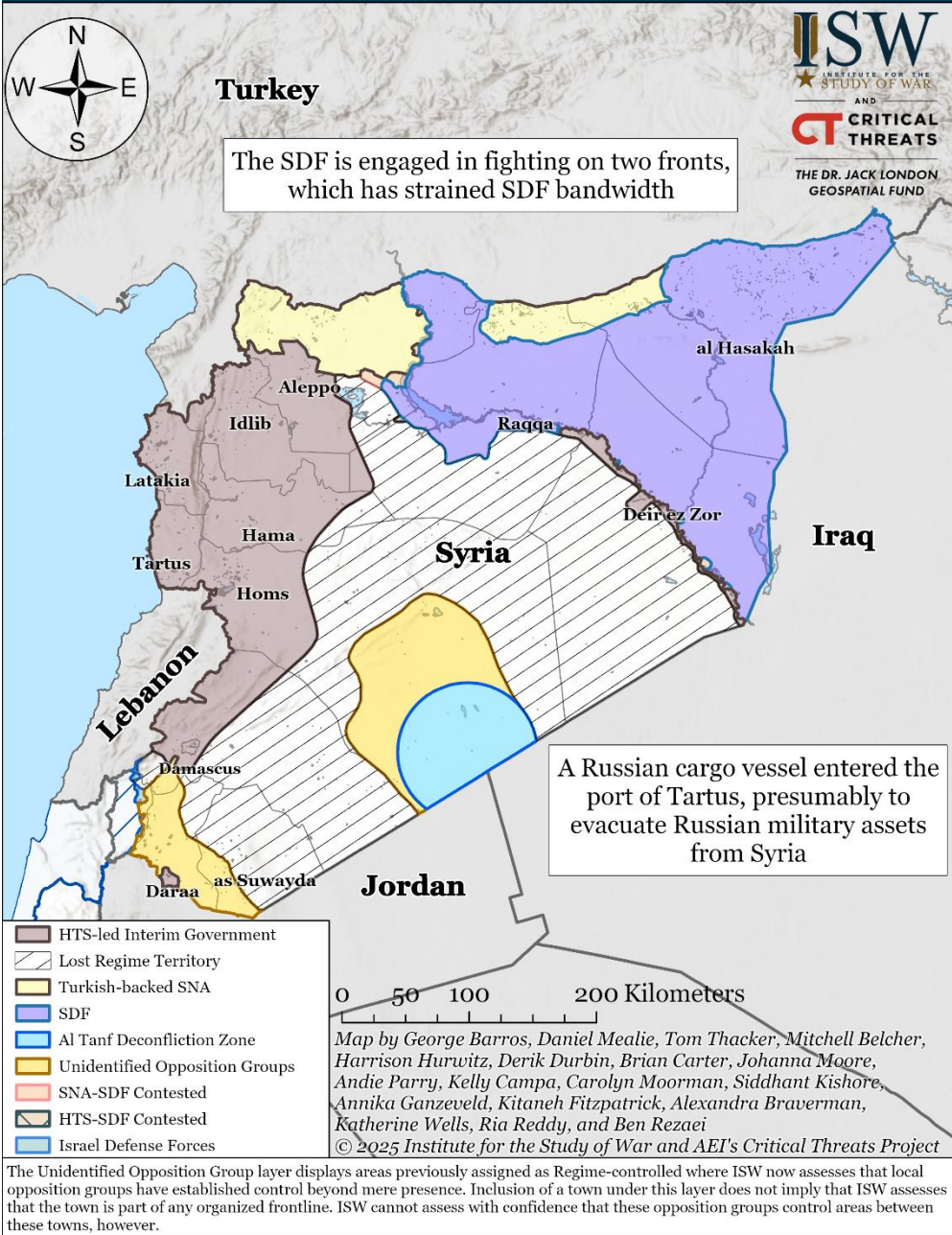
The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) faces resource and bandwidth constraints as it contends with separate possibly existential fights with Arab tribal forces and a potential Turkish. The SDF is currently engaged against the SNA on the western bank of the Euphrates River and Arab tribal forces under the command of Sheikh Ibrahim al Hifl in Deir ez Zor.[13] The SNA has deployed to the lines of control at Kobani, Ain Issa, and Tal Tamr, which CTP-ISW assessed may be in preparation for a three-pronged assault to collapse SDF defenses along the eastern bank of the Euphrates River.[14] The SNA and Turkey have continued to attack SDF positions along key ground lines of communication to interdict supplies and reinforcements from the east, which would isolate SDF forces along the river.[15]

The Arab tribal attacks against the SDF may imperil the SDF's ability to defend against a Turkish or Turkish-backed offensive. The SDF deployed reinforcements from Hasakah to Deir ez Zor on January 21, which could leave SDF defenses in Tal Tamr, Hasakah Province, vulnerable to a Turkish or SNA attack if the SDF weakened any reserve or frontline positions near Tal Tamr.[16] The SDF's decision to withdraw forces from Hasakah leaves this front relatively more vulnerable to Turkish or SNA capture, depending on the strength of the forces that the SDF has redeployed. CTP-ISW cannot ascertain from where in Hasakah Province the SDF redeployed forces. The requirement on the SDF to deploy forces to Deir ez Zor nonetheless further strains SDF bandwidth. A Deir ez Zor-based journalist reported that the SDF deployed forces to Dhiban, Tayyana, Kasra, and Hajin in Deir ez Zor Province.[17] The SDF has fought Arab tribal forces that are likely under the guidance of Sheikh Ibrahim al Hifl in Deir ez Zor since December 20.[18] The SNA has deployed forces toward Tal Tamr in recent weeks, possibly in preparation for a Turkish or Turkish-backed offensive.[19]

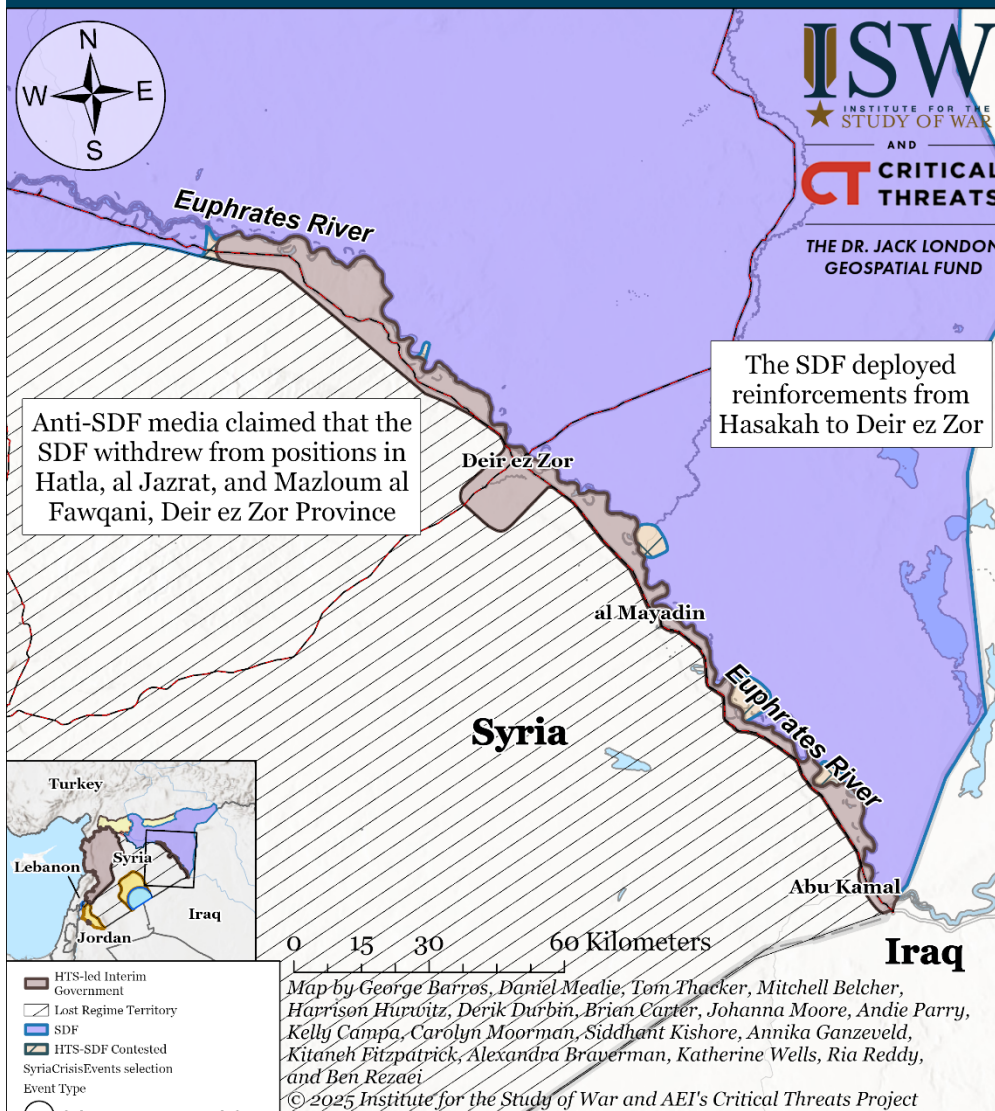
Turkey and the SNA have concentrated air and artillery strikes on SDF positions around the Tishreen Dam since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on January 20.[20] The SNA has deployed forces to the lines of control at Ain Issa and Kobani. CTP-ISW assessed that these forces could launch two lines of advance to collapse SDF defenses along the eastern bank of the Euphrates.[21] Turkish and SNA strikes on SDF positions could set conditions for an SNA assault. The SNA and Turkey have conducted strikes on SDF positions along a key ground line of communication in northern Syria that would isolate the SDF at Qara Qozak Bridge.[22]

Reported Control of Terrain in Syria

As of January 21, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST

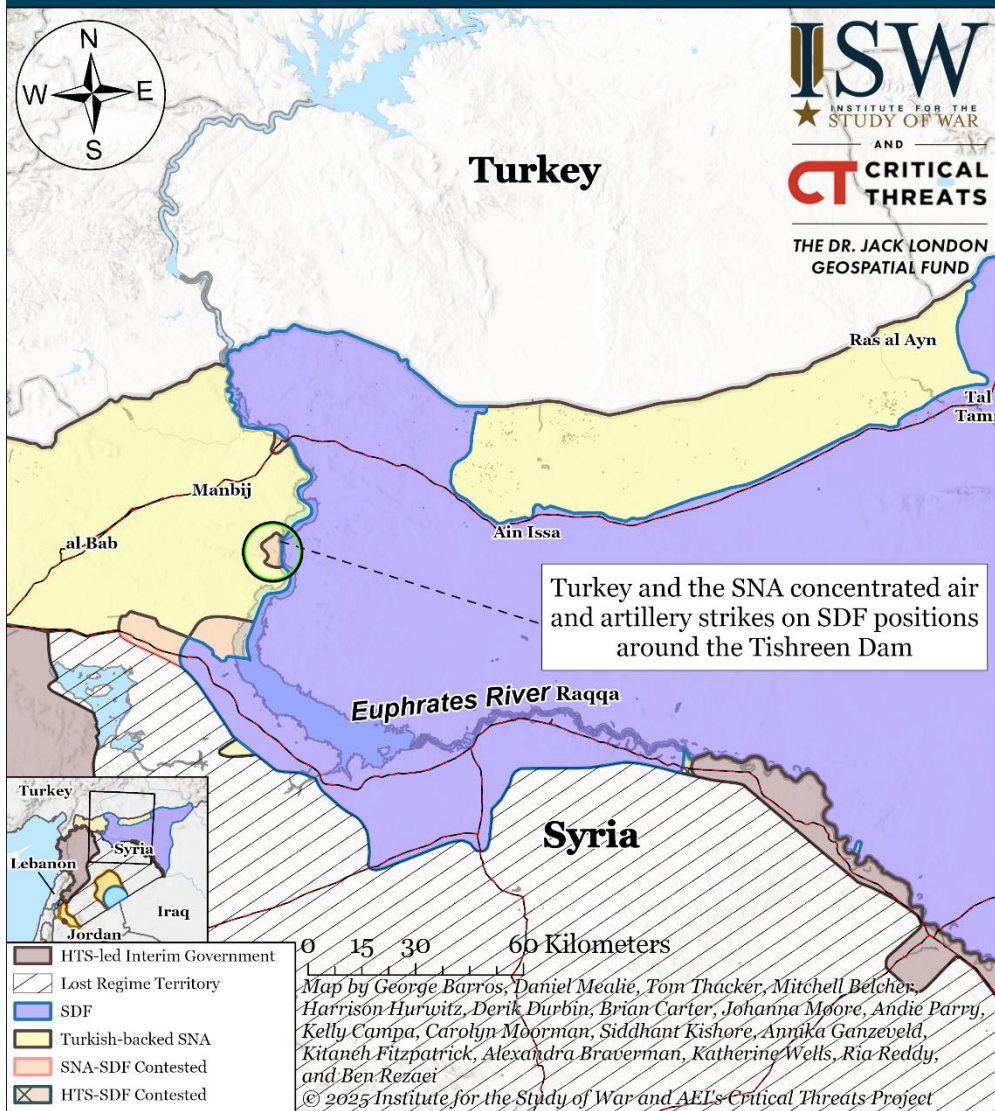


Control of Terrain in Deir ez Zor and Raqqa Provinces As of January 21, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Control of Terrain in Northern Syria

As of January 21, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



The head of Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba’s political bureau claimed on January 19 that the group would disarm only if Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani “frankly or directly” requested its disarmament.[23] Sistani is the highest Shia religious authority in Iraq. Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba Political Bureau head Ali al Asadi likely made this comment in response to Iraqi federal government efforts to convince Iranian-backed Iraqi militias to either surrender their weapons or join the official Iraqi security apparatus.[24] Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba leader Akram al Kaabi has previously said that this militia takes its political and religious direction from Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei instead of Sistani. Kaabi’s previous statement that Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba takes direction from Khamenei is inconsistent with Asadi’s invocation of Sistani’s authority.[25] Sistani said in November 2024 that arms should be confined to the Iraqi state.[26] Some Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, including Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada, denied that Sistani’s call was directed at the militias.[27] It is unclear if other Iranian-backed militias besides

Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba would agree to disarm if Sistani directly requested that they disarm. Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba is also implicitly bypassing and rejecting the authority of the Iraqi federal government by the invocation of Sistani's authority. Sistani does not hold an official position in the Iraqi government.

Victory Coalition spokesperson Salam al Zubaidi separately claimed on January 21 that the Iraqi federal government will be able to force Iranian-backed Iraqi militias to surrender their weapons and integrate "rehabilitated elements" into the Iraqi military establishment or the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).[28] The Victory Coalition is a Shia political party that is led by former Prime Minister Haider al Abadi. It is part of the Iranian-backed Shia Coordination Framework, but Abadi attempted to form a political party with Ammar al Hakim in 2020 that would have supported then-Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhim and opposed Iranian-backed groups.[29] Zubaidi claimed that a "large portion" of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias could surrender their weapons and integrate into the Iraqi military establishment and the PMF "in the coming days." [30]

The Iraqi parliament passed three controversial laws on January 21. Some parliamentarians have claimed that parliament lacked a legal quorum when it passed the laws.[31] Parliament passed the Personal Status Law, General Amnesty Law, and Property Restitution Law on January 21. The Personal Status Law, which gives Islamic courts increased authority over matters like marriage, is mainly supported by Shia political parties.[32] Iraqi law previously set the minimum age for marriage at 18, but the Personal Status Law allows Shia and Sunni clerics to permit marriages at younger ages based on different interpretations of Islamic law.[33] The General Amnesty Law grants amnesty to many Iraqis whom Iraqi courts wrongfully convicted. Sunni political parties have long demanded the implementation of this law.[34] Some parliamentarians claimed that parliament passed these laws without a quorum. They also accused Parliament Speaker Mahmoud al Mashhadani and his deputies of adding amendments to the laws without discussion and leading a vote on all three laws as a package.[35] Independent parliamentarian Zuhair Fatlawi told Iraqi media that over 180 parliamentarians left parliament before the vote. Over 50 parliamentarians started a petition to remove Mashhadani.[36]

The Iraqi parliament did not vote on an amendment that would benefit Kurdish political parties during its session on January 21, despite the amendment appearing on the parliamentary agenda.[37] This amendment would increase the Iraqi federal government's compensation for oil production in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) from \$6 to \$16 and in return, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) would resume oil exports.[38] Some Shia political parties walked out of parliament on January 19 in protest against the amendment.[39] A Shia Coordination Framework-aligned parliamentarian told Iraqi media on January 21 that parliament delayed the vote on the amendment due to the addition of a new amendment to the budget.[40]

An "official source" told Iraqi media that the Shia Coordination Framework supports legislation that would replace the Accountability and Justice Commission with a judicial body that would vet political candidates.[41] The Iraqi government established the Accountability and Justice Commission in 2008 to rid Iraq of Baathist ideology, but it was weaponized by Shia politicians to target Sunnis and secular Iraqis to prevent Sunnis and secular Iraqis from winning elections.[42] Any government body created to replace the commission and scrutinize political

candidates is liable to abuse. It remains unclear what responsibilities the proposed judicial body would have. This report comes after the United Sunni Leadership Coalition called for the dissolution of the Accountability and Justice Commission, among other demands, on January 18.[43]

Russia may have reached an agreement with the HTS-led interim government to evacuate Russian military assets from Syria. Marine Traffic, a shipping tracking website shows that the Russian cargo ship *Sparta II* entered the port of Tartus on January 21. The *Sparta II* is likely transferring Russian military equipment to Libya, given that the Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that Russia intended to use the *Sparta II* to transport equipment from Syria to Libya.[44] Commercially available satellite imagery shows that columns of Russian military equipment and cargo have remained lined up for evacuation at the port since at least December 17. *Sparta II*'s entry into the port suggests that Russia and the HTS-led interim government recently reached an agreement that allows Russian vessels to enter the port. The GUR reported as recently as January 12 that the HTS-led government had not granted permission for Russian ships to enter the port.[45] The GUR also reported that Russian Rear Admiral Valery Varfolomeyev failed to negotiate Russian entry to the port on January 9.[46] At least three other Russian vessels, including two landing ships and a cargo ship, have remained off the coast of Tartus since January 6.[47]

The HTS-led interim government also suspended Russian investment and financial involvement in the port of Tartus. The Tartus customs director told Syrian media on January 20 that the interim government suspended a previous agreement that allowed an unspecified Russian company to invest in the port of Tartus.[48] The director claimed that the interim government would receive all the revenue that the Russian company accrued.[49] The Assad regime leased control of the port of Tartus to the Russian oil and gas company Stroytransgaz in 2019 for 49 years.[50] It is unclear if Russia and the HTS-led interim government have reached a definitive agreement on the future of Russian basing rights in Syria. HTS's decision to end Russian financial involvement in Tartus suggests that HTS intends to reassert Syrian control over the port, which makes it unlikely that Russia will maintain a military presence there.

Key Takeaways:

- **Gaza Strip:** Hamas coordinated the distribution of aid and facilitated the movement of Gazans to the northern Gaza Strip, which demonstrates that Hamas retains some degree of governing authority after 15 months of war. These tasks make Hamas the de facto governing body in the Gaza Strip, at least in certain areas. The activities listed above—distribution and protection of aid and “monitoring” returnees—do not indicate that Hamas runs a Gazan government like it did prior to October 7, however.
- **IDF Resignations:** The IDF chief of staff and Southern Command commander both resigned on January 21. Both officers said that they took responsibility for failing to prevent Hamas' October 7 attack into Israel.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces:** The US-backed SDF faces resource and bandwidth constraints as it contends with separate and possibly existential fights with Arab tribal forces and a potential Turkish. The Arab tribal attacks against the SDF may imperil the SDF's ability to defend against a Turkish or Turkish-backed offensive.

- **Iraqi Militia Disarmament:** The head of Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba’s political bureau claimed on January 19 that the group would disarm only if Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani “frankly or directly” requested its disarmament. Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba leader Akram al Kaabi has previously said that this militia takes its political and religious direction from Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei instead of Sistani. Kaabi’s previous statement that Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba takes direction from Khamenei is inconsistent with Asadi’s invocation of Sistani’s authority.
- **Iraqi Politics:** An “official source” told Iraqi media that the Shia Coordination Framework supports legislation that would replace the Accountability and Justice Commission with a judicial body that would vet political candidates.
- **Russia in Syria:** Russia may have reached an agreement with the HTS-led interim government to evacuate Russian military assets from Syria. The HTS-led interim government also suspended Russian investment and financial involvement in the port of Tartus.

Syria

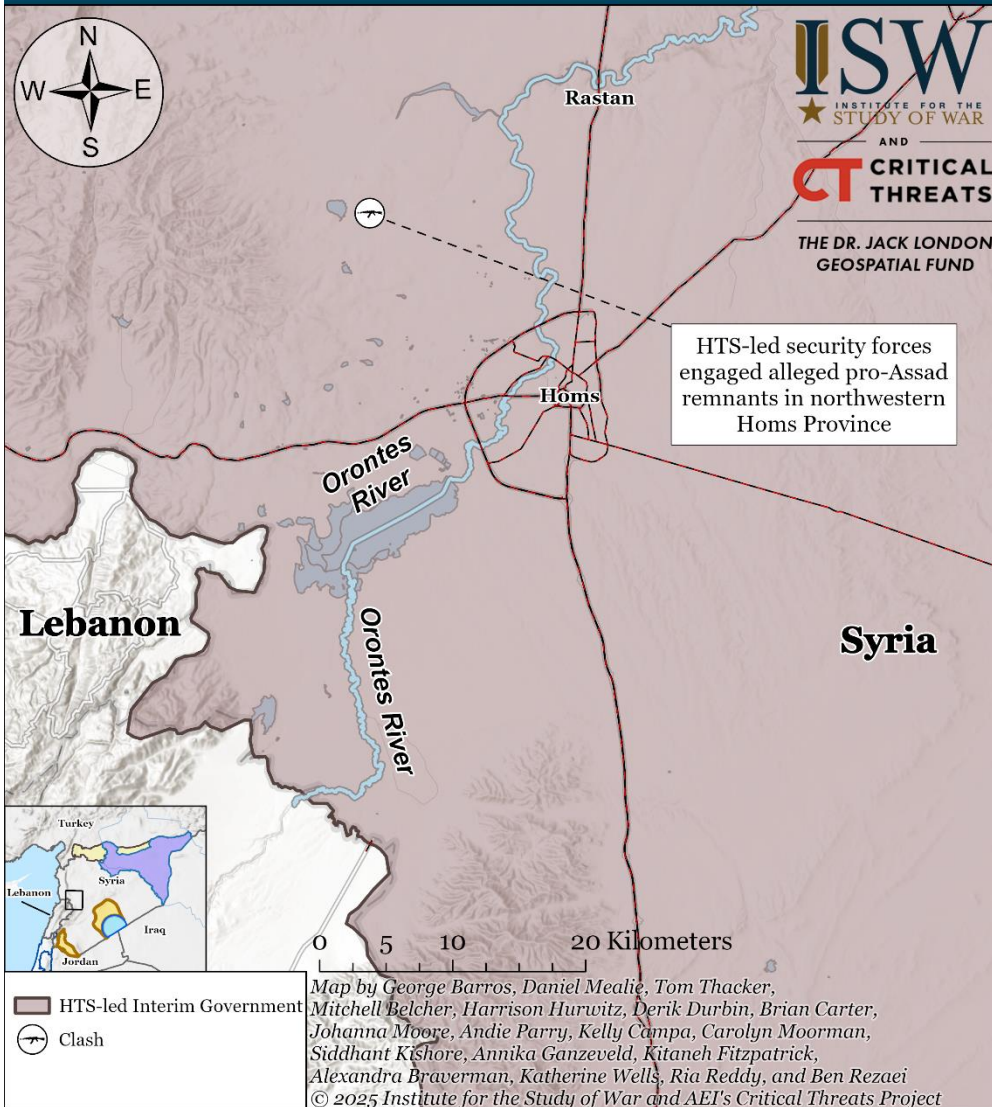
Axis of Resistance objectives:

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

HTS-led security forces engaged alleged pro-Assad remnants in western Homs Province on January 21, according to Syrian state media.^[51] Security forces targeted former regime members and drug and weapons smugglers in al Ghor al Gharbiya, western Homs Province, on January 21.^[52] Syrian media reported that security forces arrested several people, including a former Syrian Arab Army (SAA) general, and seized weapons.^[53] Syrian security forces have engaged several small pockets of locally organized resistance in western Homs Province in recent weeks.^[54]

Control of Terrain near Homs

As of January 21, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader Masoud Barzani called for the unification of Kurdish political parties in Syria during a meeting with Kurdish National Council leadership in Erbil, Iraq, on January 21.[55] Barzani has pressured SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi to work with minority Syrian Kurdish political parties, including the Kurdish National Council, in negotiations with the HTS-led interim government.[56] The Kurdish National Council is a coalition of Syrian Kurdish political parties that has historically aligned itself with the KDP.

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 in order to control all of Yemen
- Erode Israeli will to continue the war in the Gaza Strip

Houthi Foreign Affairs Minister Jamal Amer met with Hamas Representative to Yemen Moaz Abu Shamala at the Houthi Defense Ministry in Sanaa, Yemen, on January 20.[57]

Shamala thanked the Houthis for their support of Hamas in the October 7 War. The Hamas office in Yemen director, political relations officer, and media officer also attended the meeting.

The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Erode the will of the Israeli political establishment and 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

See topline section

Lebanon

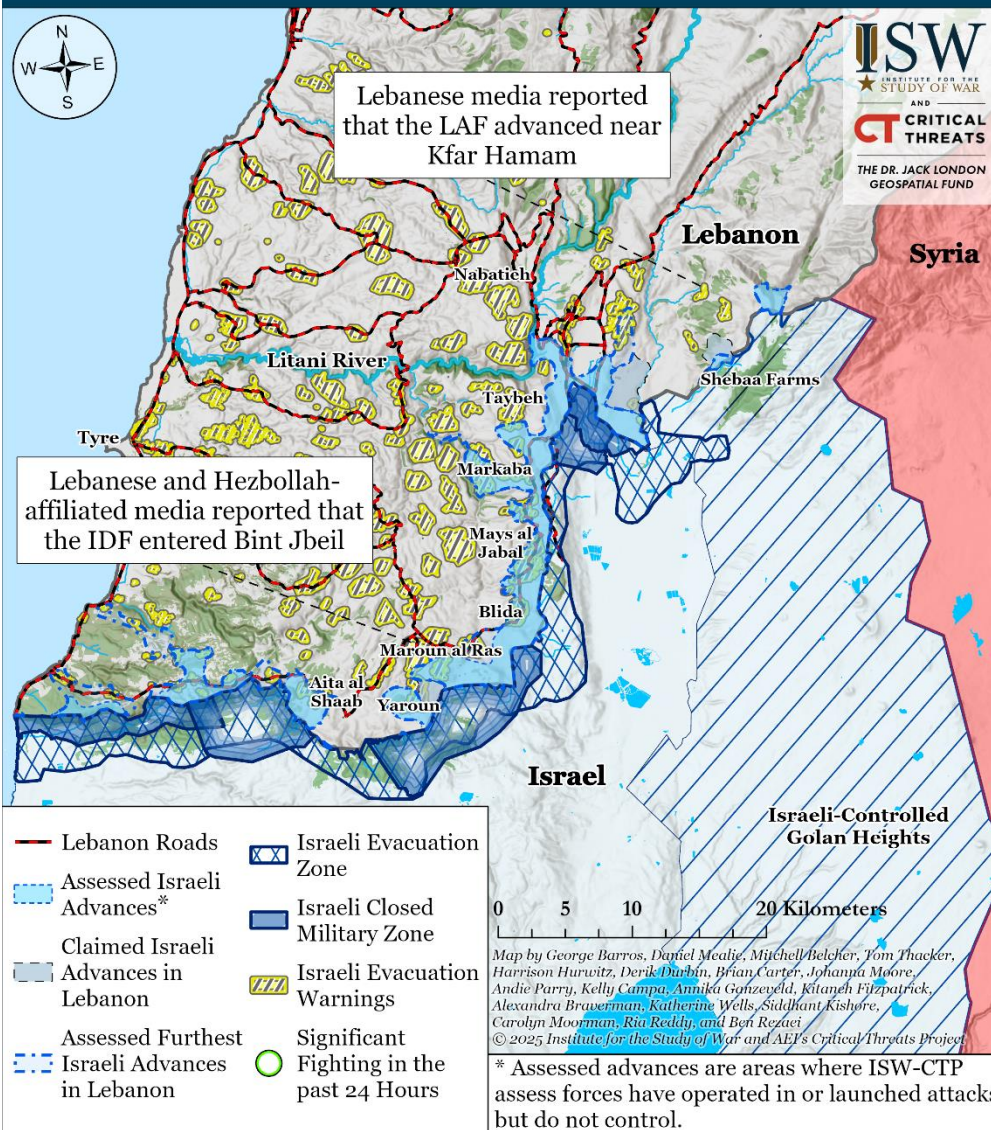
Lebanese and Hezbollah-affiliated media reported on January 21 that the IDF moved from Maroun al Ras into the outskirts of Bint Jbeil.[58]

Hezbollah-affiliated media reported on January 20 that the IDF moved into al Dabash neighborhood, Mays al Jabal.[59] Pro-Hezbollah media reported on January 21 that Israeli forces detonated explosives in unspecified areas of Mays al Jabal.[60]

Lebanese media reported on January 21 that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), in cooperation with UNIFIL, moved to the outskirts of Kfar Hamam, southeastern Lebanon.[61] Kfar Hamam is approximately 5 kilometers north of the Israel-Lebanon border. The LAF has not confirmed its deployment to this area at the time of this writing.

Reported Israeli Operations in Lebanon

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West Bank

Israeli forces launched a counterterrorism operation in Jenin City on January 21 to target militia fighters and infrastructure.[62] Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that Israel seeks to "systematically and resolutely act against the Iranian axis wherever it extends its reach." [63] The operation is expected to last at least several days, according to an unspecified Israeli military source. [64] The IDF Central Command previously announced the deployment of additional forces to the West Bank to dissuade and prevent Palestinian militia attacks. [65] The IDF reportedly conducted airstrikes in Jenin on January 21. [66] The Al Qqsa Martyrs' Brigades and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) fighters claimed that they targeted Israeli forces in Jenin with small arms and improvised explosive devices (IED) on January 21. [67]

The IDF said that Hamas will likely try to conduct attacks in the West Bank despite the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.[68] PIJ stated on January 16 that PIJ fighters will "continue to resist" Israeli forces in the West Bank.[69] This operation also comes as Israel is set to release hundreds of Palestinian prisoners into the West Bank as part of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire-hostage deal.[70] Unspecified IDF officials said that Israel coordinated its plans with the Palestinian Authority (PA).[71] PA security forces began operations in Jenin Governorate in early December 2024 to degrade Palestinian militia networks there.[72] PA forces reportedly withdrew from the Jenin refugee camp area before the IDF began its operation.[73]

Israeli settlers set fire to cars and damaged homes in al Funduq, Qalqilya Governorate, northern West Bank, on January 20.[74] Israeli media reported that Israeli security officers fired at and severely injured two Israeli settlers who threw stones at security forces who arrived at the scene.[75] The settlers reportedly organized the attack after Israel released 90 Palestinian prisoners into the West Bank on January 19.[76]

US President Donald Trump signed an executive order on January 20 to lift sanctions on Israeli settlers accused of committing violence against Palestinians in the West Bank.[77] Former US President Joe Biden signed an executive order in February 2024 that enabled the United States to place financial and visa sanctions on foreign nationals involved in attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank.[78]

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi met with Armenian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Vahan Kostanyan in Tehran on January 20.[79] Araghchi and Kostanyan emphasized Iran and Armenia's mutual interest in retaining good bilateral relations to ensure stability in the South Caucasus. Iran has a vested interest in promoting peace in the South Caucasus because the region is important for Iranian trade and transport through Iran's northwestern border. Iranian Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian recently met with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in Yerevan on January 9 to discuss Iranian-Armenian economic cooperation and infrastructure projects.[80]

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei emphasized the need to support private businesses during a visit to an economic exhibition in Tehran on January 21.[81] The exhibition displayed the Iranian private sector's "achievements" in the fields of satellite manufacturing, artificial intelligence, and aircraft repair, among others. Khamenei urged government officials to address structural challenges in the energy sector to resolve Iran's energy crisis. Iran has experienced severe electricity and natural gas shortages in recent weeks, causing blackouts, economic losses, and business closures.[82] The Iran Chamber of Commerce estimated that power outages have cost the Iranian economy around 250 million US dollars per day during the crisis.[83] CTP-ISW previously assessed that the energy crisis and dire economic conditions could trigger internal unrest. Iranian Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei ordered Iranian security forces to prepare for potential unrest in late December 2024.[84]

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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