

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.

An Alawite organization accused the Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)-led interim Syrian government of failing to address instances of sectarian violence. The Alawite Islamic Forum in Syria released a statement on January 3 expressing its support for the interim Syrian government but argued that the interim government, though it has stated it seeks to respect all Syrians, has so far failed to back words with action.[1] The group cited instances of sectarian-motivated attacks and killings in Homs, Hama, Latakia, Tartous, Damascus, and Daraa. HTS-led security forces have been conducting clearing operations targeting former regime members in these areas since December 28.[2] The Alawite Islamic Forum in Syria rejected the interim government's claims that acts of violence were perpetrated by individuals and argued that the prevalence of this violence suggested that the violence was a planned revenge campaign.[3] The group added that the government must protect all Syrians by holding the perpetrators accountable, regardless of whether the perpetrators are loyal to the HTS-led interim government or engaging in individual actions against orders.

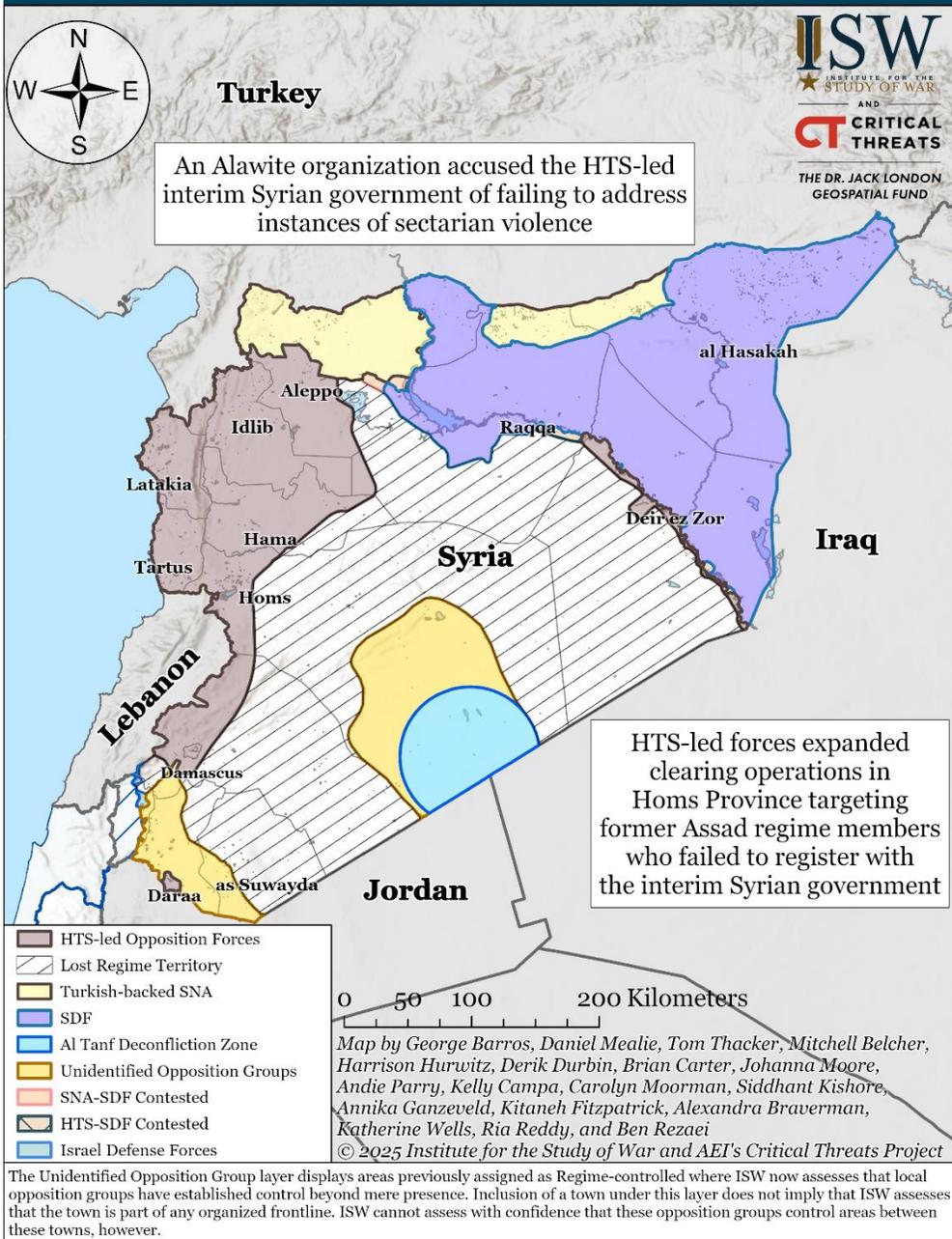
The HTS leader and interim government head of state Ahmed al Shara has attempted to assuage the Alawite's fears by highlighting the ways HTS and the interim government aim to protect minorities, but he has made only limited concrete, unambiguous steps.[4] The HTS-led interim government has also thus far failed to prevent individual opposition fighters from targeting members of the Alawite community.[5] Accusations of sectarian-motivated attacks can create a dangerous cycle of groups refusing to disarm because they fear for their safety, which then causes HTS-affiliated forces to target those groups that don't disarm, thereby causing the groups to continue to accuse HTS of sectarianism. This dynamic could easily spiral out of control into larger armed conflict if left unchecked. The HTS-led

government has a requirement to assuage the concerns of former regime loyalists and minorities, part of which requires controlling these sectarian narratives as and if they spread.

The interim Syrian government has begun to implement changes to the Syrian government without the consensus of a representative Syrian national dialogue conference. The interim Syrian Education Minister Nazir Mohammed al Qadri released a 12-page document on January 1 detailing changes to the Syrian education curriculum.[6] Qadir held several administrative educational positions under the HTS Syrian Salvation Government in Idlib before being appointed by HTS as the interim Syrian Education Minister.[7] The changes eliminated references to the Assad regime and family and altered several religious phrasings.[8] *The Wall Street Journal* cited several examples of changes in religious textbooks including “sacrifice one’s life in defense of his homeland” changed to “sacrifice one’s life for the sake of Allah,” “path of goodness” changed to “Islamic path,” and “those who have gone astray” changed to “Jews and Christians.”[9] *The Wall Street Journal* cited unspecified Syrians who expressed concern that the changes to the education curriculum were made without input from the rest of Syrian society.[10] Shara detailed a three-to-four-year timeline for building a new Syrian state, during which CTP-ISW assessed he would presumably rule and exert heavy influence over the allocation of political power.[11] This timeline would effectively enable Shara to shape a Syrian government into one compatible with HTS’s ideology prior to any referendum.

Reported Control of Terrain in Syria

As of January 4, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) has advanced southeastward towards the Tishreen Dam since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on January 3. Anti-SDF media reported that the SNA advanced through Saideen and Khirbet Tueni, approximately 4 kilometers northwest of the Tishreen Dam, after engaging the SDF near Saideen.[12] Anti-SDF media reported that the SNA continued its advance southward from these two villages towards al Mustafa al Hamada and Mahshiyet al Sheikh to cut off the SDF supply route connecting the Tishreen Dam to areas to the west.[13] The SDF claimed that the SNA forces failed to advance.[14] Turkey provided air and artillery support to

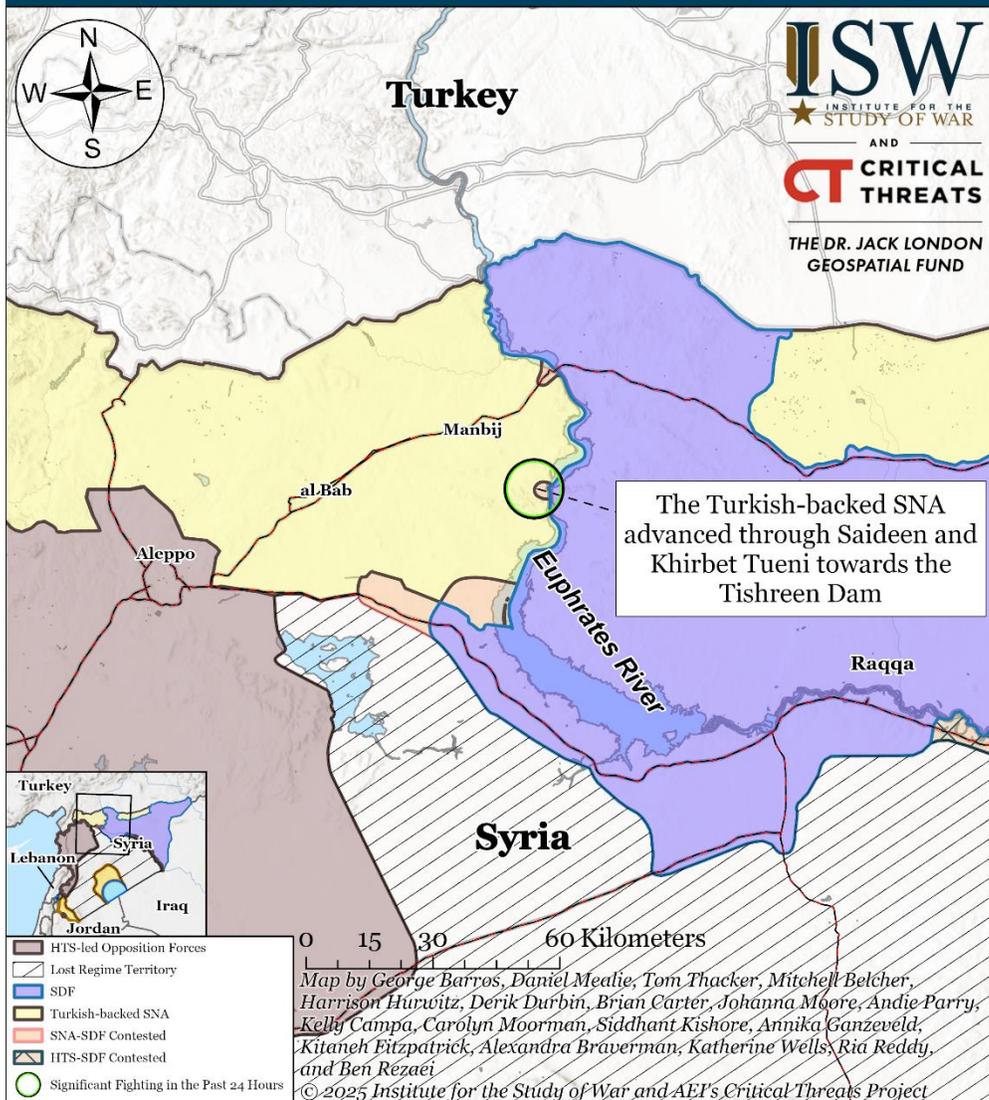
SNA forces that targeted SDF positions in and around the Tishreen Dam.[15] Syrian media reported that Turkey launched additional airstrikes that targeted SDF positions in al Jarniyah and al Mazyouna, Raqqa province, and southwest of Tishreen Dam in Deir Hafer City, Aleppo Province.[16] Anti-Kurdish media reported that the SNA launched artillery at SDF positions in al Fatisah, Raqqa province.[17]

Iran is signaling its readiness to resume nuclear talks, probably in an attempt to prevent the E3 (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) from triggering "snapback sanctions" later in 2025. Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi emphasized Iran's readiness to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiations during an interview with Chinese CCTV on January 4.[18] Araghchi stressed trust-building and sanctions relief as key pillars of the negotiations.[19] The statement likely reflects Iran's concerns over potential snapback sanctions, which could go into effect in October 2025 and, would reimpose all pre-2015 UN sanctions on Iran. The E3 previously said it is prepared to impose international "snapback" sanctions on Iran. The E3 announcement has likely prompted this diplomatic signal from Iran.[20]

Araghchi also reaffirmed Iran's commitment to a unified Syrian government and emphasized cooperation with regional countries to ensure Syria's territorial integrity, which appears to be at odds with statements by other Iranian government officials, including the supreme leader.[21] Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has promoted a hardline approach centered on mobilizing Syrian youth against foreign occupiers.[22] Araghchi framed Iran's approach as a constructive effort to ensure stability and reject external interference. Araghchi stressed that Iran supports an inclusive political process in Syria.[23]

Control of Terrain in North Syria

As of January 4, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



An Israeli media and a Lebanese media report suggested that the IDF may extend its deployment in southern Lebanon by an additional 30 days due to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) failure to dismantle Hezbollah infrastructure there. The Israeli Broadcasting Authority (KAN) reported on January 3 that the LAF is not complying with the ceasefire agreement by failing to disrupt Hezbollah reconstitution efforts in southern Lebanon, which KAN suggested could cause the IDF to extend its deployment in Lebanon.[24] The Israel-Lebanon ceasefire agreement requires the LAF to deploy in areas south of the Litani River and destroy Hezbollah infrastructure within 60 days of the ceasefire implementation.[25] Pro-Hezbollah Lebanese newspaper *al Akhbar* also claimed that Chairman of the Ceasefire Implementation Mechanism US Army Major General Jasper Jeffers sent “serious signals” to the LAF that Israel may extend its presence in south Lebanon for an additional 30 days.[26] Jeffers added that Israel should “take its time” to implement its goals in southern Lebanon due to the LAF’s failure to prevent Hezbollah reconstitution.

Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Naim Qassem threatened to break the ceasefire agreement and attack Israeli forces in response to Israeli “violations” of the agreement during a televised speech on January 4.[27] Qassem said that Hezbollah’s patience “may run out” before the 60-day period ends.

Key Takeaways:

- **Sectarian Tension in Syria:** An Alawite organization accused the Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)-led interim Syrian government of failing to address instances of sectarian violence. The HTS leader and interim government head of state Ahmed al Shara has attempted to assuage the Alawite's fears by highlighting the ways HTS and the interim government aim to protect minorities, but he has made only limited concrete, unambiguous steps.
- **Changes to Education in Syria:** The interim Syrian government has begun to implement changes to the Syrian government without the consensus of a representative Syrian National Dialogue Conference.
- **Syrian National Army-Syrian Democratic Forces Fighting:** The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) has advanced southeastward towards the Tishreen Dam since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on January 3.
- **Iranian Nuclear Negotiations:** Iran is signaling its readiness to resume nuclear talks, probably in an attempt to prevent the E3 (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) from triggering "snapback sanctions" later in 2025.
- **Iranian-Syrian Relations:** Araghchi also reaffirmed Iran's commitment to a unified Syrian government and emphasized cooperation with regional countries to ensure Syria's territorial integrity, which appears to be at odds with statements by other Iranian government officials, including the supreme leader.
- **IDF in Lebanon:** An Israeli media and a Lebanese media report suggested that the IDF may extend its deployment in southern Lebanon by an additional 30 days due to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) failure to dismantle Hezbollah infrastructure there. Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Naim Qassem threatened to break the ceasefire agreement in a January 4 speech.

Syria

Axis of Resistance objectives:

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

Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)-led forces have expanded clearing operations in Homs Province since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on January 3 to capture Assad regime members who failed to register with the interim Syrian government. HTS-led forces expanded clearing operations to al Mushrifah, al Mukhram, al Fawqani, and al Tahtani in the Homs countryside.[28] A video posted to X (Twitter) showed HTS-led forces shooting a quad-barrel anti-aircraft gun mounted on the back of a truck into an alleyway on January 4.[29] The use of this type of weapon suggests that the HTS-led forces are either prepared to use excessive force against former Assad regime members or

the former Assad regime members are sufficiently capable that the HTS-led forces require larger, more destructive weapon systems to reduce buildings and other positions occupied by former regime members. HTS-led forces separately seized an ammunition depot containing rocket launchers, anti-tank ordnances, and heavy guns in al Zahraa neighborhood, Homs city, on January 4.[30] The al Zahraa neighborhood is reportedly a stronghold for former pro-regime militias recruited and armed by the Assad regime (also known as Shabiha) that targeted demonstrators and conducted sectarian attacks.[31] HTS-led security forces began clearing operations in Homs City on January 2.[32]

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

Nothing significant to report.

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

Yemeni sources told UK-based the *Telegraph* on January 4 that Iran has significantly increased its support for the Houthis, providing weapons and expertise to sustain missile strikes on Israel and attacks on global shipping.[33] Yemeni military spokesman Abdul Basit al Baher stated that Iran's assistance includes parts of advanced missiles and drones that are assembled in Yemen.[34] Weapons smuggling has almost certainly persisted throughout the US naval action in the Red Sea, especially due to at least one breakdown in UN inspection mechanisms at Hudaydah that enabled several cargo vessels to enter uninspected.[35] The Houthis more often rely upon overland transport and small dhows that are difficult to intercept, however.

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 900th Infantry Brigade (162nd Division) destroyed a major Hamas position in Beit Hanoun in the northern Gaza Strip on January 4.[36] Hamas had established a headquarters in the area and positioned rocket launchers on high-rise buildings overlooking Sderot, a city in southern Israel.[37] The IDF also located Hamas' anti-tank firing positions and tunnel shafts rigged with explosives in the neighborhood. The IDF labeled this Hamas position a "central terror complex." [38] The IDF is presumably referring to the suite of capabilities in this area, including the tunnel shafts, anti-tank firing positions, headquarters, and rocket launchers, as a "complex" rather than a single physical base or other piece of infrastructure.

Palestinian militias claimed three rocket and mortar attacks targeting the IDF along the Netzarim Corridor on January 4.[39]

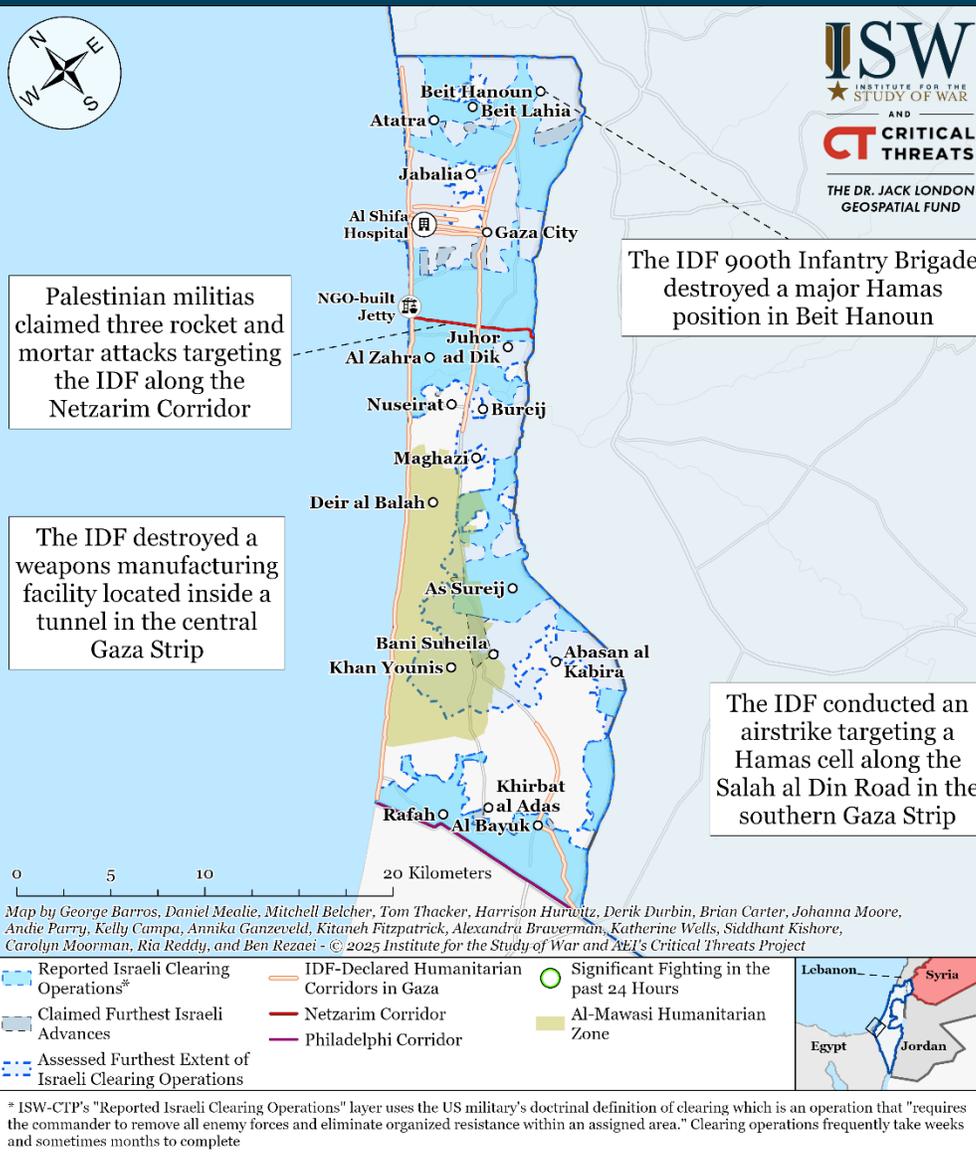
The IDF 99th Division destroyed a weapons manufacturing facility located inside a tunnel in the central Gaza Strip on January 4.[40] The IDF located a weapons manufacturing facility with several lathes, documents, computers, and other military equipment inside the tunnel. The IDF separately conducted an airstrike targeting a vehicle. The strike killed four Hamas fighters in Deir al Balah, central Gaza Strip.[41]

The IDF conducted an airstrike targeting a Hamas cell along the Salah al Din Road in the southern Gaza Strip on January 4.[42] The IDF stated that the Hamas cell was involved in conducting "terrorist activity" and "exploited" the routes used by humanitarian aid trucks. The IDF clarified that the airstrike did not affect the entry of aid trucks into the Gaza Strip.[43]

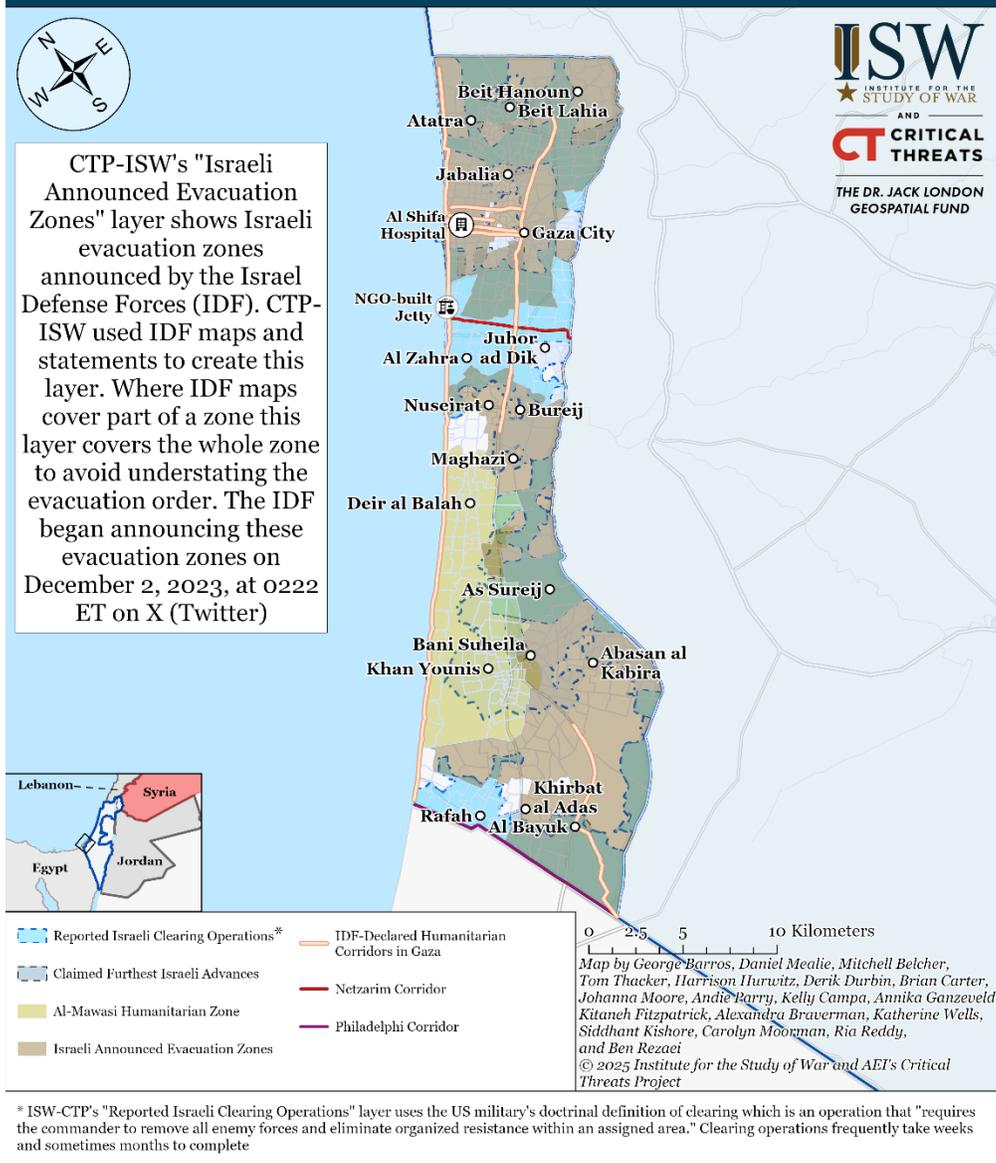
The IDF detected an unspecified projectile that crossed into Israel from the northern Gaza Strip and fell near the Erez border crossing on January 4.[44] No militia has claimed responsibility for this attack at the time of this writing. Hamas has fired 20 rockets toward southern Israel in the last nine days, according to an Israeli Army Radio correspondent.[45] It is not clear if that count of 20 rockets includes the unspecified projectile referenced by the IDF.

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

As of January 4, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Israeli-Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip As of January 4, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



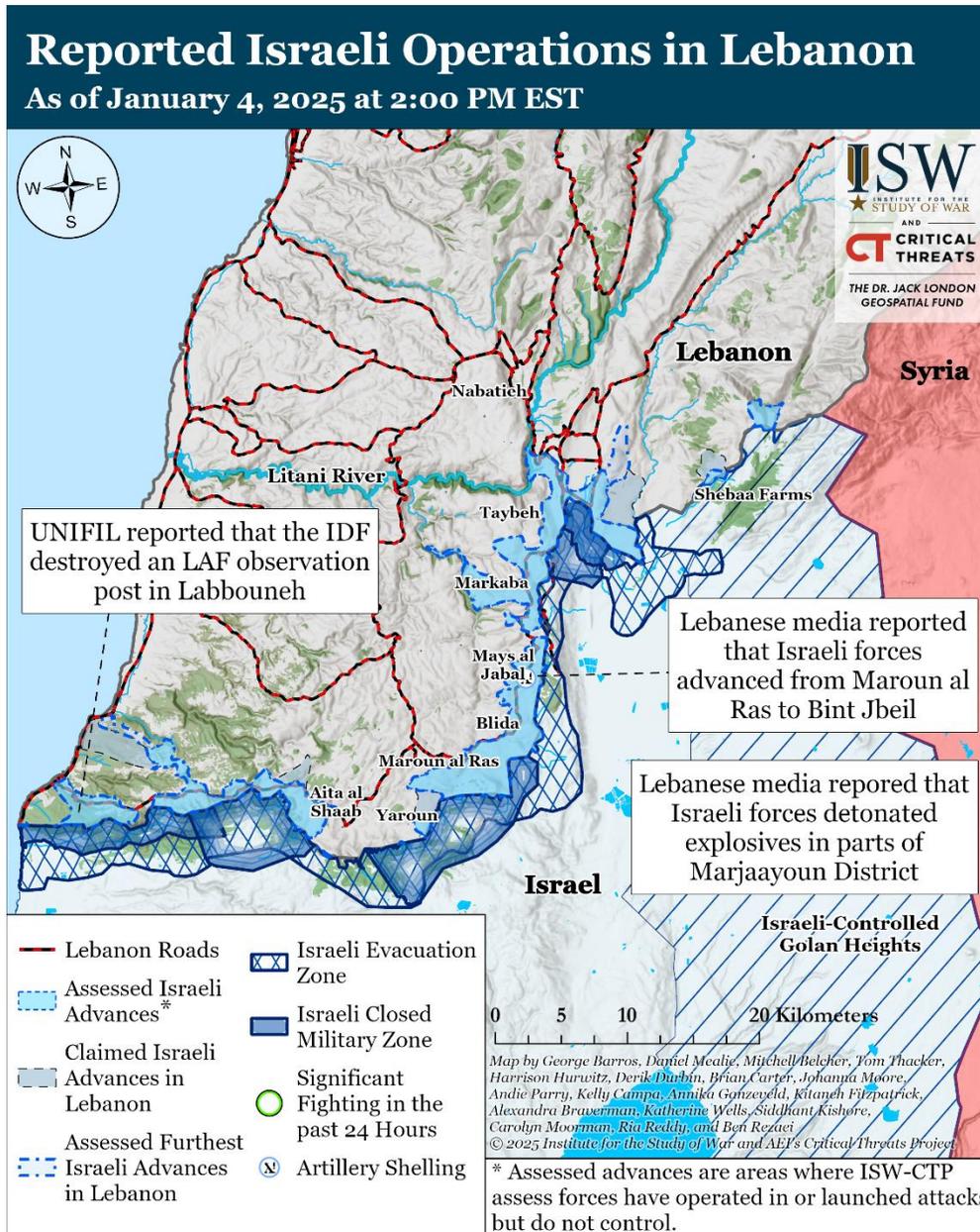
Lebanon

Lebanese media reported that Israeli forces advanced from Maroun al Ras to Bint Jbeil, southeastern Lebanon, on January 4.[46] Geolocated footage obtained on January 4 showed Israeli armored personnel carriers and tanks advancing towards the outskirts of Bint Jbeil.[47] Lebanese media reported that Israeli gunfire injured a Lebanese civilian in Bint Jbeil.[48]

Israeli forces continued clearing operations in parts of southeastern Lebanon on January 4. Israeli forces detonated explosives in an unspecified area in Marjaayoun District.[49] Lebanese media separately reported that an IDF mechanized infantry unit operated on the outskirts of Kfarchouba, Hasbaya district.[50]

Lebanese media reported that Israeli forces detonated explosives to destroy infrastructure in parts of Tyre district in southwestern Lebanon on January 4.[51]

The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) reported that an IDF bulldozer destroyed a blue line marker between Lebanon and Israel in Labbouneh, southwestern Lebanon on January 4.[52] The blue line markers delineate the border between Lebanon and Israel. IDF also destroyed a Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) observation post near a UNIFIL position in Labbouneh. UNIFIL said that these Israeli actions violate UNSC Resolution 1701.[53]



West Bank

The IDF conducted a “counterterrorism” operation in the Balata refugee camp, Nablus, on January 3.[54] The al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades—the self-proclaimed militant wing of Fatah—

targeted Israeli forces with small arms and IEDs near the Balata refugee camp on January 3.[55] The IDF killed one al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades fighter during the operation.[56]

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

The Gilan Province-based Mirza Kouчек Khan Special Forces Brigade began a military exercise in Kermanshah Province in western Iran on January 4.[57] This unit is part of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Ground Forces. The "Great Prophet 19" military exercise involved the Mirza Kouчек Khan Special Forces Brigade, which relocated from Langaroud, Gilan Province, for the drill.[58] The IRGC used air transport to deploy the Special Forces to Kermanshah Province. Kermanshah is home to several other IRGC units, including the 29th IRGC Nabi Akram Operational Division. The 29th Nabi Akram Operational Division operates under the Najaf-e-Ashraf Operational Base.[59] Najaf-e-Ashraf Operational Base Commander Mohammad Nazar Azimi highlighted the aim of the exercise in the strategic border area where Iranian forces have previously conducted significant operations during the Iran-Iraq War and more recently confronted “hostile groups“ that aimed to create instability.[60] Iranian Artesh Ground Forces deployed several brigades to the western and southeastern border on January 3.[61] The drill in Kermanshah and the recent deployment of Iranian Artesh brigades reflects Iran's heightened concerns over external threats, particularly from ISIS infiltration following the fall of Assad in Syria.

The Iranian Parliament began impeachment proceedings against Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad and Economic Minister Abdol Nasser Hemmati.[62] The impeachment motion for the Oil Minister proceeded with 23 signatures, while the motion for the Economic Minister had over 70 signatures out of the total 290 members of the Parliament.[63] The Iranian Parliament previously impeached former President Ebrahim Raisi's Industry, Mine, and Trade Minister Seyyed Reza Fatemi Amin, in September 2021.[64] The Iranian rial free market exchange rate has depreciated from approximately 60,000 tomans per USD in September 2024 to 81,000 tomans per USD in January 2025.[65]

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.



[1]

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