

Iran Update, January 9, 2025

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Information Cutoff: 2:00pm ET

Fighting reportedly erupted along parts of the frontline between the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) in northern Syria amid indications of an upcoming SNA offensive against the SDF. Local, anti-SDF media reported on January 9 that the SDF and SNA exchanged artillery fire and “clashed” near the Balikh River, north of SDF-controlled Ain Issa.[1] Three SNA-affiliated fighters were reportedly injured in the fighting.[2] Local media reported artillery shelling and fighting along the M4 highway, west of Tal Tamr as well.[3] The SNA has reportedly sent units to the frontlines in recent days, indicating that the SNA is preparing to attack the SDF.[4] Such an attack would be part of the Turkish and SNA effort to coerce the SDF into disarming and disbanding. CTP-ISW cannot verify the local reporting about fighting along the frontline. Although it is unclear which side initiated the reported fighting, the SNA may nevertheless exploit the recent shelling to set conditions for further attacks on the SDF.

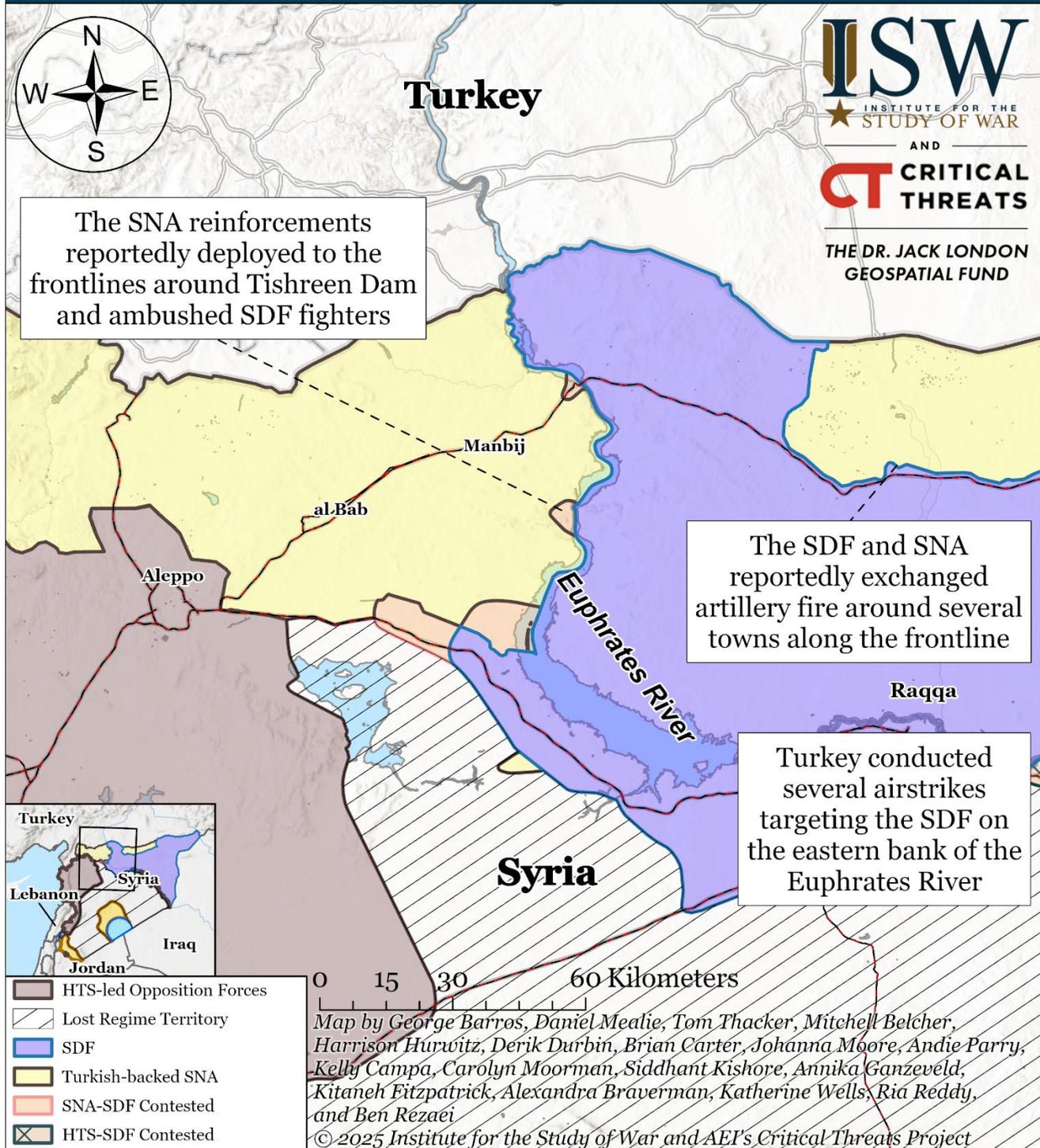
The SNA continued offensive operations against the SDF around Tishreen Dam on January 8, possibly in order to fix the SDF units there and prevent them from reinforcing other positions along the frontline. The SNA launched a “large-scale” attack against the SDF about five kilometers northwest of the dam.[5] The SNA also ambushed SDF fighters around Tal al Zamalah, south of the dam.[6] The SDF accused Turkey of providing air support to the SNA attacks.[7] A Kurdish journalist reported that the SNA launched the attacks after receiving reinforcements from al Bab, Mare, and Jarabulus.[8] The journalist previously reported that the SNA had sent “significant” reinforcements to Jarabulus.[9] SNA forces likely advanced within three kilometers of Tishreen Dam, given that geolocated footage posted on January 8 showed the SDF conducting drone strikes on SNA fighters in Khirbet Tueni, which is 2.8 kilometers northwest of the dam.[10] It is unclear whether the SNA has retained any territorial gains from its attacks, however. The SNA has continued to conduct artillery and drone strikes targeting the SDF around Tishreen Dam and Qara Qozak Bridge.[11] Fixing the SDF to these locations could impede any SDF effort to reinforce its positions elsewhere along the frontline.

Turkey conducted several airstrikes targeting SDF positions on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River near the SDF-SNA frontline on January 9. Local media reported that Turkey struck an SDF rocket launcher near al Jarniyah, which is along an SDF supply line.[12] Turkish artillery and aircraft also struck SDF positions near Qara Qozak Bridge and north of the bridge.[13] CTP-ISW has noted that

Turkey is conducting airstrikes targeting SDF in support of SNA offensive operations but that these efforts could also be a precursor to a wider Turkish or Turkish-backed operation.

Control of Terrain in North Syria

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SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi told Agence France-Presse that the SDF came to an unspecified agreement on Syrian unity with the Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)-led interim government on December 30, 2024.[14] HTS and Turkey have coordinated in recent weeks to coerce the SDF into disarming and integrating into the HTS-led defense apparatus. Turkish officials have called for destroying the SDF as well—a step farther than HTS leaders have gone.[15] The report of an agreement between the SDF and HTS raises the question of whether HTS may accept a lesser objective, such as the integration of coherent SDF units into the new Syrian armed forces, which would presumably fall short of the desired Turkish end state in Syria. The SDF may seek to integrate into the larger Syrian Defense Ministry apparatus by simply reflagging as opposed to fully dismantling its command structures. This type of absorption and reflagging often results in armed group leaders failing to observe the actual chain of command, however.

Abdi separately said that the interim government has the responsibility to intervene and achieve a ceasefire throughout Syria, likely as an implicit call for HTS to negotiate with Turkey and the Turkish-backed SNA to cease offensive operations against the SDF.[16] Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Hakan Fidan has threatened that both the HTS-led interim government and Turkish armed forces could begin “military operations” against the SDF if the organization fails to disarm.[17]

Behrouz Esbati, one of the seniormost Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in Syria, discussed in a leaked video Iranian plans to rebuild proxy and partner militia networks in Syria that would oppose the HTS-led interim government.[18] **These remarks are consistent with CTP-ISW's ongoing assessment that Iran is trying to stoke sectarian tension in Syria and exploit it to rebuild the Axis of Resistance there.** Esbati claimed to command over 10,000 Syrian fighters before the fall of Bashar al Assad.[19] Esbati said that Iran can “activate all the networks” that it has developed over the years in Syria and use social media to “form resistance cells.”[20] Esbati made these comments during a speech to military members at the Vali-ye Asr mosque in Tehran. An unspecified IRGC official—likely a member of the IRGC Quds Force—told the *New York Times* that Esbati’s comments about recruiting militia fighters were aspirational rather than reflective of discrete IRGC plans.[21] This denial is likely meant to suppress the narrative that the IRGC is trying to subvert the new Syrian government. The unspecified IRGC official also said that Iran would have a better chance at securing its interests in the Middle East if Syria descended into chaos, which is consistent with CTP-ISW’s assessment that Iran is trying to stoke sectarian tension in Iran.

Esbati also notably said candidly that Iran “was defeated very badly, [and] took a very big blow and it's been very difficult.”[22] Esbati’s statements are a stark contrast from the formal Iranian regime line that has aimed to downplay the fact that the fall of Assad marks a strategic defeat for Tehran.[23] CTP-ISW previously assessed that the fall of Assad marks the end of the greater Iranian project in the Levant for the foreseeable future and will make it extremely difficult for Iran to transfer the resources needed to recuperate other actors within its Axis of Resistance namely Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah.[24]

The Iraqi federal government is considering integrating Iranian-backed Iraqi militias into the Iraqi armed forces, which would facilitate Iranian capture the Iraqi security sector. Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba has reportedly agreed to such integration, according to an informed source speaking to Iraqi media on January 9.[25] The source added that the Iraqi federal

government seeks to integrate Kataib Hezbollah and Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada into the armed forces as well.[26] This report comes after Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani and Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei reportedly agreed to preserve the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).[27] The PMF is an Iraqi state security service that includes many Iranian-backed Iraqi militias. Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba, Kataib Hezbollah, and Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada all control brigades in the PMF.[28] Khamenei opposes dissolving the PMF outright but may support the integration of the PMF into the Iraqi armed forces. The Iraqi federal government could reflag PMF brigades as new units, which would largely retain the units' composition and structure. Integrating the PMF and Iranian-backed Iraqi militias into the Iraqi security establishment would more entrench the militias into the Iraqi security sector more thoroughly, which would enable deeper Iranian infiltration.

The Anbar Province Police Command will reportedly assume responsibility for security in Anbar Province, Iraq, from Iranian-backed Iraqi militias.[29] The Anbar Police Command, which is headed by Adel Hamid al Alwani, will reportedly control border areas and checkpoints that Iranian-backed Iraqi militias previously controlled.[30] This report comes after the Kataib Hezbollah-affiliated Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) 13th Brigade (Liwa al Tafuf) withdrew from security checkpoints in al Qaim, along the Iraq-Syria border, on January 5.[31] The Iraqi Federal Police operates under the Iraqi Interior Ministry, which is headed by Abdul Amir al Shammari.[32] Shammari is a Shia whom Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani's al Furatain Movement nominated as interior minister in late 2022.[33] Major General Saleh Nasser al Ameri has commanded the Iraqi Federal Police since January 2021.[34]

Prominent Iraqi Sunni politician and former Ninewa Province Governor Atheel al Nujaifi said that the newly formed "United Sunni Leadership Coalition" will likely oppose former Iraqi Parliament Speaker Mohammad al Halbousi.[35] Five prominent Iraqi Sunni politicians, including current Parliament Speaker Mahmoud al Mashhadani, established the "United Sunni Leadership Coalition" on January 7.[36] The establishment of the coalition came after Mashhadani and five other Sunni politicians called for a "comprehensive national dialogue" in mid-December 2024.[37] Halbousi notably did not sign the statement calling for a national dialogue and has not joined the "United Sunni Leadership Coalition." Iraqi media reported on January 9 that Halbousi has recently formed an "alliance" with Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Asaib Ahl al Haq leader Qais al Khazali.[38] Halbousi reportedly contacted Khazali in March 2024 to try to secure the victory of his preferred candidate in the Iraqi parliament speaker elections.[39] An Iraqi researcher separately observed in October 2024 that an Asaib Ahl al Haq-affiliated Iraqi media outlet had begun "present[ing] [Halbousi] in a beautiful light." [40]

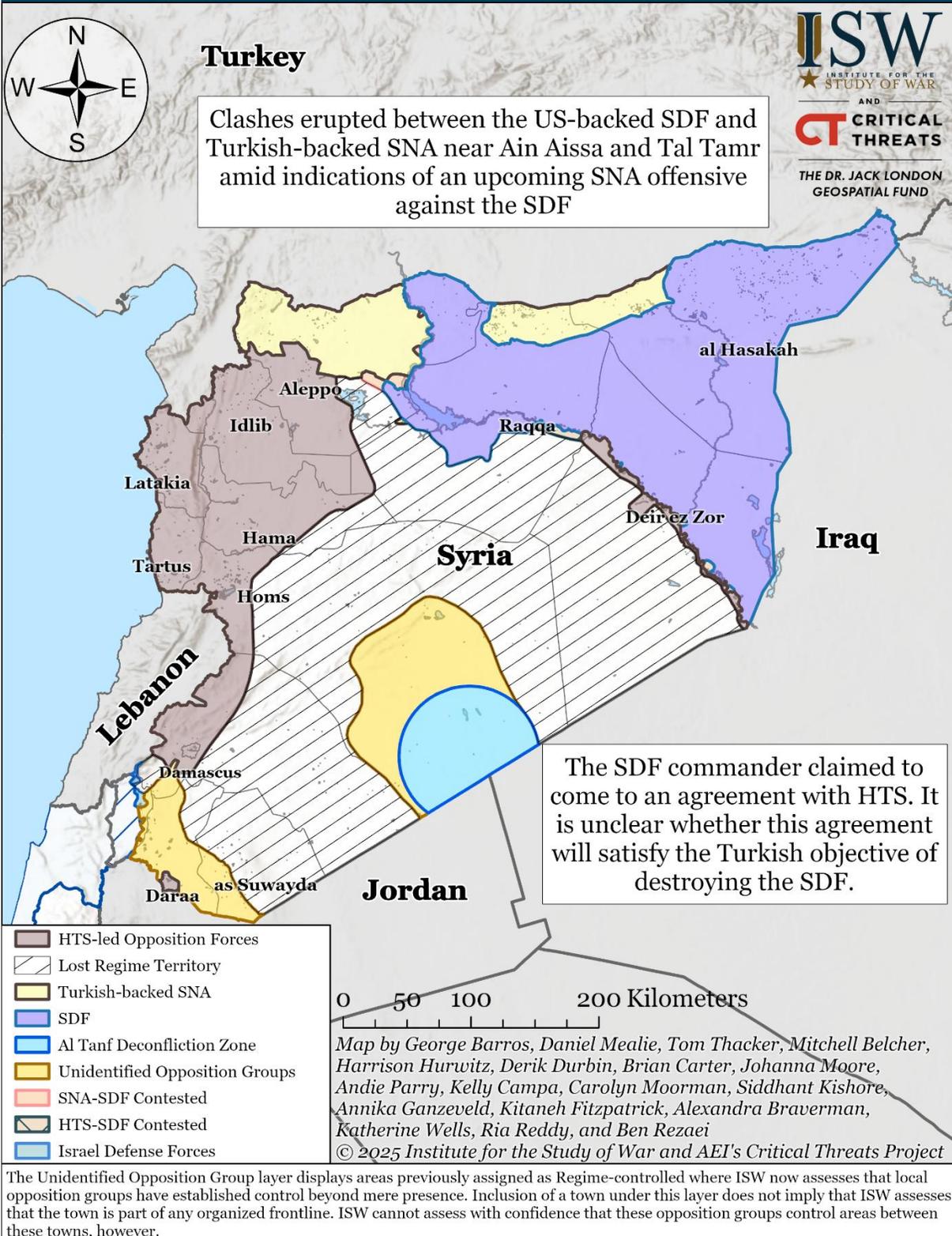
Key Takeaways:

- Fighting reportedly erupted along parts of the frontline between the US-backed SDF and Turkish-backed SNA in northern Syria amid indications of an upcoming SNA offensive against the SDF.
- The SNA continued offensive operations against the SDF around Tishreen Dam in northern Syria, possibly in order to fix SDF units there and prevent them from reinforcing other positions along the frontline.

- SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi said that the SDF came to an unspecified agreement on Syrian unity with HTS, raising the question of whether HTS would accept a lesser objective than the Turkish one of destroying the SDF outright.
- One of the most senior IRGC commanders in Syria discussed in a leaked video plans to rebuild Iranian-backed proxy and partner militia networks in Syria that would oppose the HTS-led interim government.
- The Iraqi federal government is considering integrating Iranian-backed militias into the Iraqi armed forces, which would facilitate Iranian infiltration and capture of the Iraqi security sector.

Reported Control of Terrain in Syria

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Syria

Axis of Resistance objectives:

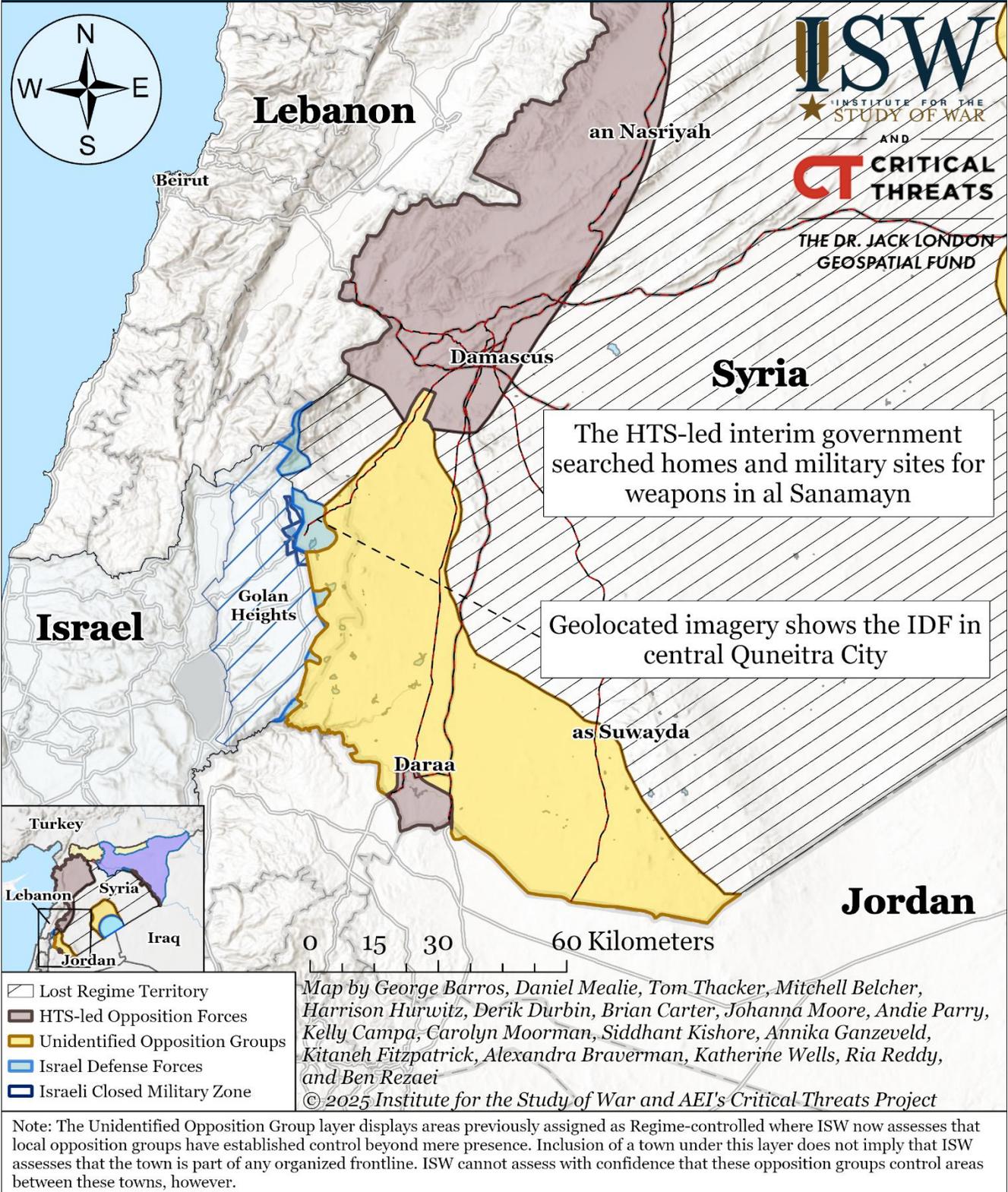
- Reestablish ground lines of communication through Syria to Lebanon
- Reestablish Iranian influence in Syria

The HTS-led interim government began searching homes and military sites for weapons in al Sanamayn City, northern Daraa Province.[41] The interim government ordered all city residents on January 8 to bring weapons to a designated building within 24 hours or face “harsh measures.”[42] HTS-led forces collected light and medium weapons during the searches in al Sanamayn.[43] Local sources reported that fighters affiliated with the Mohsen al Hamid group illegally kept some of their weapons, including those seized from the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 9th Division during the fall of Assad.[44] The interim government collected weapons from other towns in Daraa Province as well.[45]

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) continued operations in Quneitra Province, southwestern Syria, on January 9. The IDF 474th Brigade (210th Division) located and destroyed former SAA infrastructure, including an armored personnel carrier that contained weapons, anti-tank missiles, and improvised explosive devices (IED).[46] Geolocated imagery posted on January 9 shows the IDF in a building in central Quneitra City.[47]

Opposition Advances in Southwest Syria

As of January 9, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



The HTS-led Defense Ministry appointed HTS commander Ali Nour al Din al Nassan to chief of staff of the Syrian armed forces on January 9.[48] HTS promoted Nassan to the position of major general on December 29.[49] The appointment of HTS loyalists within the interim government allows HTS to further consolidate its rule. Nassan and other Defense Ministry officials met with Syrian militia leaders on January 9 to continue discussions on HTS leader and interim head of state Ahmed al Shara’s plan to disarm and dissolve armed groups into the new Syrian armed forces.[50]

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 Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani met with US-sanctioned Astan Quds Razavi Custodian Ahmad Marvi at the Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad in northeastern Iran on January 9.[51] Astan Quds Razavi is a parastatal economic conglomerate that has ties to the IRGC and controls a vast network of commercial interests active in agriculture, energy, financial services, information technology, and manufacturing.[52] Marvi is a close associate of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and has headed Astan Quds Razavi since March 2019.[53] Marvi said that Iran, Iraq, and the Middle East are in a “sensitive situation” but expressed certainty that Iran and Iraq can turn “threats into opportunities.”[54] Sudani and Marvi also discussed the role of Astan Quds Razavi in facilitating the passage of Iraqi religious pilgrims to Iran.[55] Sudani previously met with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, President Masoud Pezeshkian, and Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf in Tehran on January 8 to discuss the role of the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces and Iranian energy transfers to Iraq among other items.[56]

Arabian Peninsula

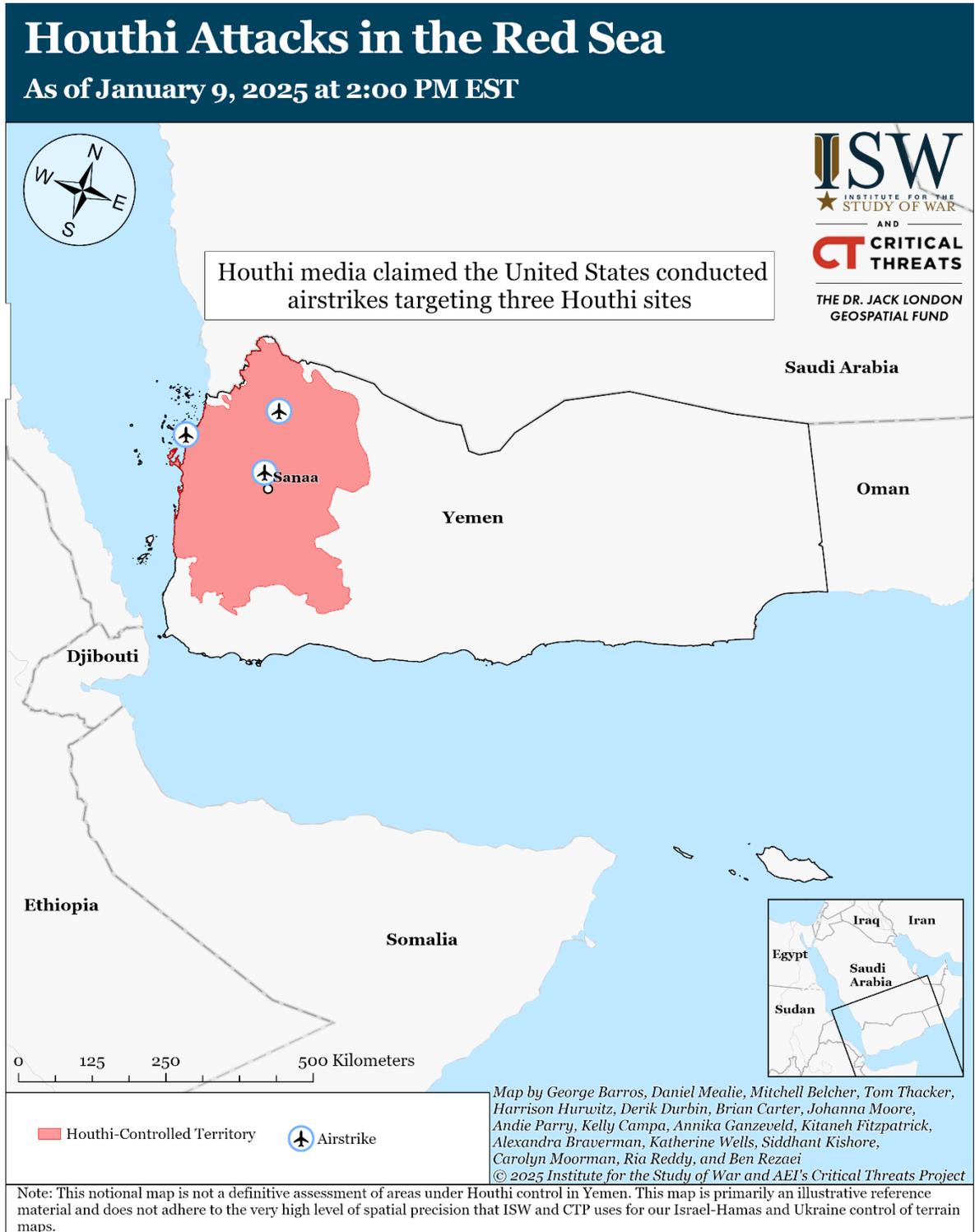
Axis of Resistance objectives:

- 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

The IDF intercepted a drone that was approaching Israeli airspace from the east and another two drones over the Mediterranean Sea on January 9.[57] The Houthis have not claimed responsibility for these attacks at the time of this writing.

Houthi media reported that the United States and United Kingdom conducted further airstrikes in Yemen after CTP-ISW’s last data cut off on January 8. Houthi media reported two airstrikes around Jarban in Sanaa Province, three airstrikes around Harf Sufyan, Amran Province, and an airstrike around Luhayyah, Hudaydah Province.[58] These reports came after US Central Command (CENTCOM) conducted multiple airstrikes targeting two underground Houthi weapons storage facilities in Jabran and Harf Sufyan earlier on January 8.[59] CENTCOM airstrikes aim to degrade Houthi efforts to threaten US regional partners and commercial and naval traffic around

Yemen.[60] Houthi Foreign Affairs Minister Jamal Amer told UN Special Envoy to Yemen Hans Grundberg on January 9 that the Houthis will deescalate tensions in the Red Sea only after Houthi Supreme Leader Abdulmalik al Houthi commands it.[61] Abdulmalik said on January 9 that the Houthis would continue to fight and that they would continue their attacks in the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea.[62]



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

Commercially available satellite imagery showed the IDF increased clearing operations in Beit Hanoun in recent days.

Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) claimed that it fired a sniper rifle targeting an IDF soldier east of Gaza City on January 9.[63]

A Palestinian militia conducted a mortar attack targeting the IDF south of the Netzarim Corridor on January 9.[64]

The IDF Air Force announced on January 9 that it has killed four Hamas fighters, including the Hamas "Sabra" Battalion commander under the Gaza City Brigade, in airstrikes in unspecified locations of the Gaza Strip in recent days.[65]

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

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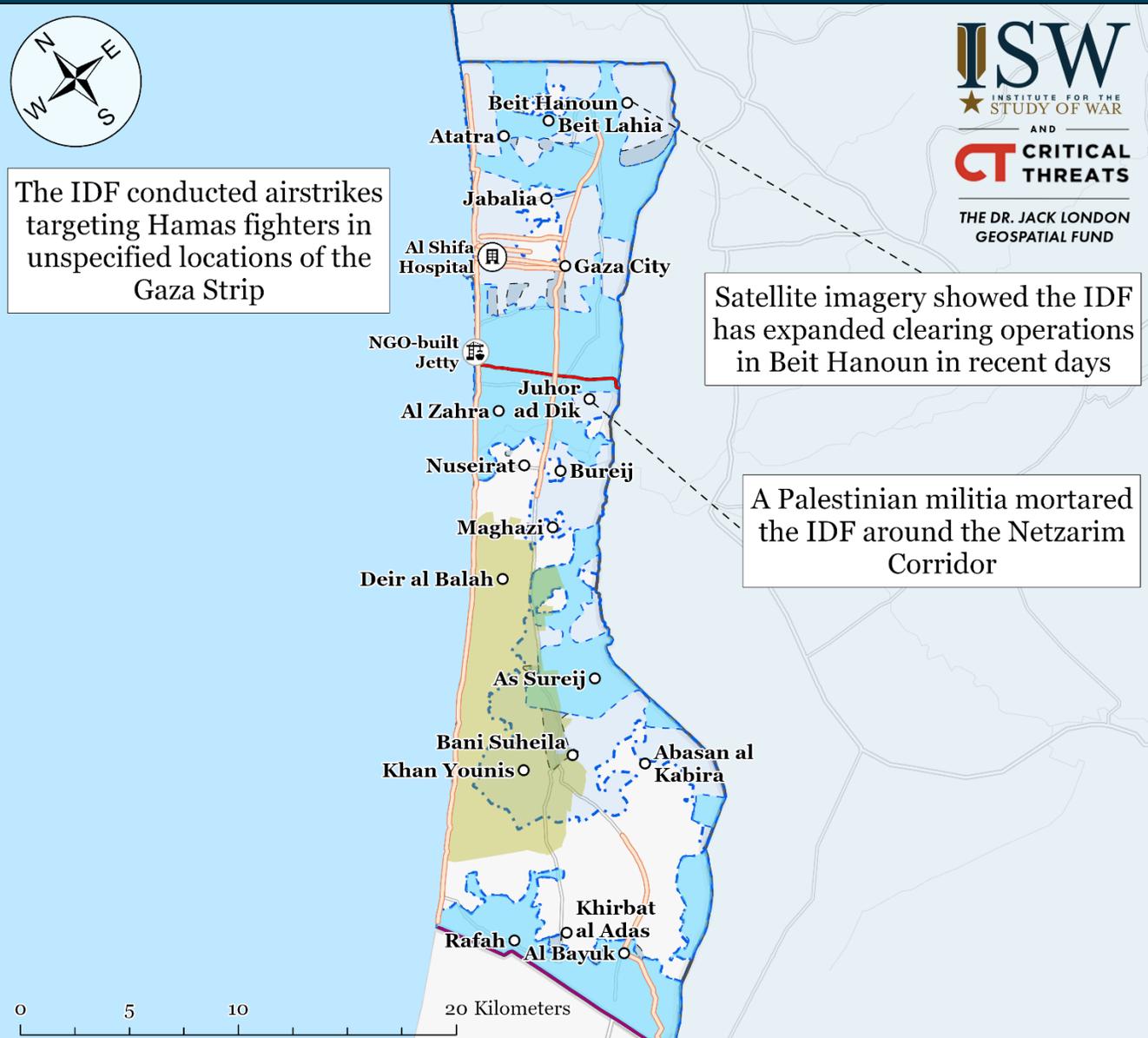
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The IDF conducted airstrikes targeting Hamas fighters in unspecified locations of the Gaza Strip

Satellite imagery showed the IDF has expanded clearing operations in Beit Hanoun in recent days

A Palestinian militia mortared the IDF around the Netzarim Corridor



Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Tom Thacker, Harrison Hurwitz, Derik Durbin, Brian Carter, Johanna Moore, Andie Parry, Kelly Campa, Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Alexandra Braverman, Katherine Wells, Siddhant Kishore, Carolyn Moorman, Ria Reddy, and Ben Rezaei - © 2025 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

Reported Israeli Clearing Operations*	IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridors in Gaza	Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours	
Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances	Netzarim Corridor	Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone	
Assessed Furthest Extent of Israeli Clearing Operations	Philadelphi Corridor		

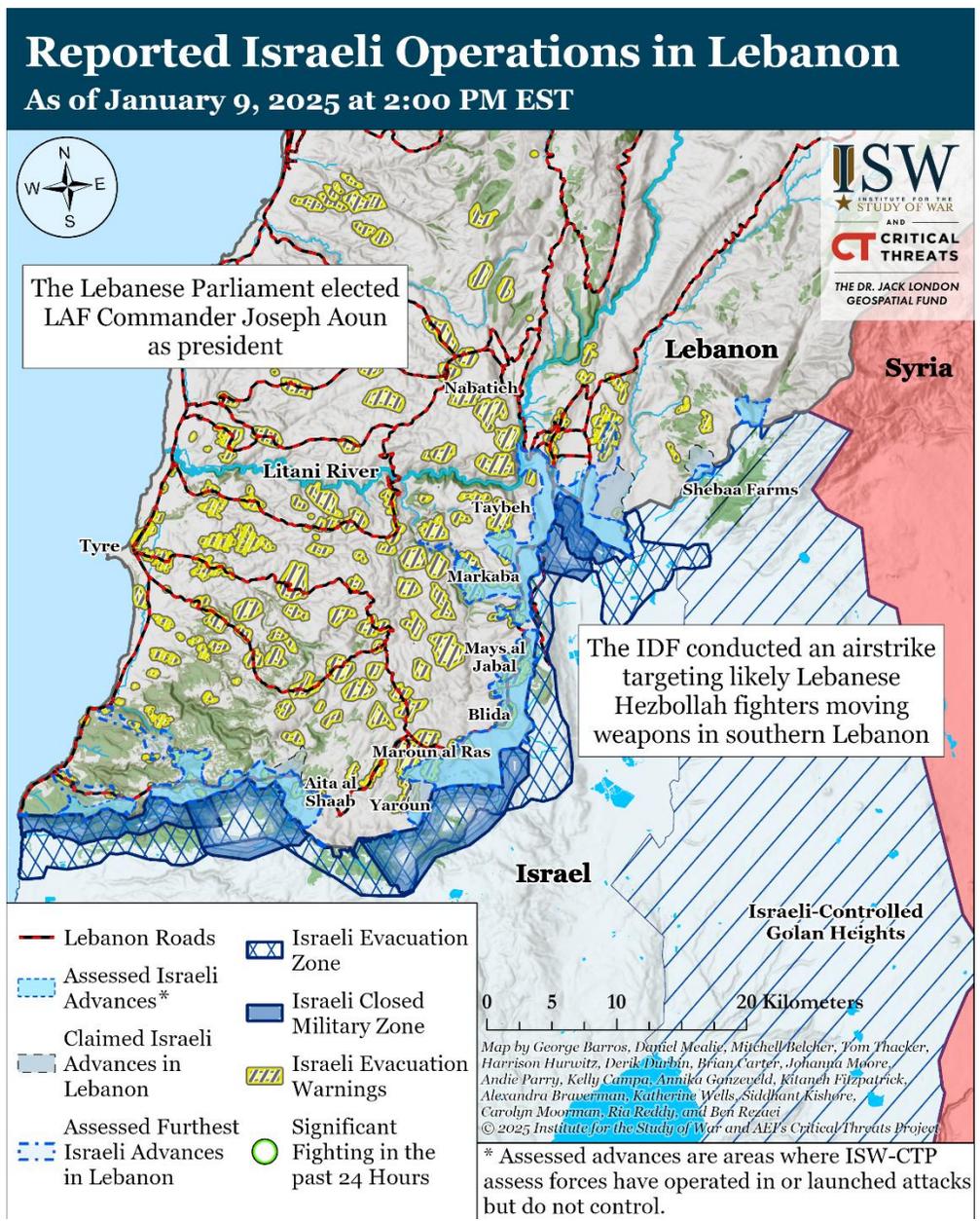
* ISW-CTP's "Reported Israeli Clearing Operations" layer uses the US military's doctrinal definition of clearing which is an operation that "requires the commander to remove all enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance within an assigned area." Clearing operations frequently take weeks and sometimes months to complete

Lebanon

Lebanese media reported that the IDF continued advancing northeastward from Aita al Shaab toward Debel, Nabatieh Province, on January 8.[66] Lebanese and Lebanese Hezbollah-affiliated media reported that the IDF detonated explosives and demolished homes in Aita al Shaab.[67]

The IDF Air Force conducted an airstrike targeting likely Hezbollah fighters who were loading weapons from Hezbollah military sites onto vehicles in southern Lebanon on January 9.[68]

Lebanese media reported that the IDF advanced from Maroun al Ras to outside Bint Jbeil City, Nabatieh Province, on January 9.[69]



The Lebanese Parliament elected Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Joseph Aoun as president on January 9.^[70] Hezbollah’s preferred candidate Suleiman Franjeh withdrew in support of Aoun on January 8.^[71] Aoun promised in his acceptance speech that the Lebanese state will have a “monopoly” over weapons, implying that Aoun will work to disarm Hezbollah and enforce the ceasefire agreement with Israel.^[72] Aoun further promised that the Lebanese state—and therefore not Hezbollah—will end the IDF presence in Lebanon.^[73]

West Bank

The Palestinian Authority (PA) recently handed over a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) to the IDF that PA security forces reportedly seized during their ongoing operation against militias in Jenin in the West Bank.^[74] The handoff occurred after local social media footage posted on December 23 showed PA security forces holding an RPG in Jenin.^[75] The PA claimed that it seized the RPG from Palestinian militias operating in Jenin refugee camp.^[76] CTP-ISW has not previously observed militias in the West Bank using RPGs.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

The IRGC Ground Forces' Mirza Kuchek Khan Special Forces Brigade and Saber Special Forces Brigade concluded part of the annual Great Prophet exercise in Kermanshah Province on January 9.^[77] The IRGC Ground Forces revealed a new loitering munition drone named “Rezvan,” which reportedly has a range of 20 kilometers and 20 minutes of flight endurance.^[78] Iranian state media claimed that the Rezvan multi-role Mohajer-6 drones with Ghaem guided glide bombs and used laser- and infrared-guided anti-tank Almas and Dehlaviyeh missiles to destroy mock vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices.^[79]

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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- [1] <https://t.me/nahermedia/43830>; <https://t.me/sohebb1993/21020>
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