

Iran Update



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July 23, 2024, 2:00pm ET

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. Click [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

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.

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.

Hamas, Fatah and other unspecified Palestinian political factions agreed on a vision for post-war governance of the Gaza Strip on July 23 during “intra-Palestinian reconciliation” talks in Beijing.[1] The factions signed a joint declaration setting out their intention to form “a temporary national unity government” responsible for governing the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.[2] The agreement stipulates that a government partly influenced by Hamas would rule the Gaza Strip and West Bank until elections could be held at an unspecified future date.[3] The declaration reportedly does not address what party maintains security control over the Gaza Strip, and Hamas has been adamant it will keep its military wing.[4] Hamas, Fatah, and China have not disclosed the full text of the declaration at the time of this writing. Senior Hamas official Hossam Badran claimed that a unity government would supervise the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, manage the affairs of the Palestinian people, and provide a “formidable barrier” against regional and international intervention in the governance of the Gaza Strip.[5] Hamas and Fatah have previously signed a series of

unimplemented reconciliation agreements.[6] The former Palestinian Authority prime minister and top Fatah official Mohammad Shtayyeh said that Hamas and Fatah must continue discussions to advance the declaration’s framework.[7] CTP-ISW will publish more in-depth analysis and coverage of this development as more details of the agreement become available.

The United States, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are separately advancing an alternative post-war governance vision for the Gaza Strip that conflicts with the Beijing meeting’s vision.[8] Israeli sources said that Emirati Foreign Minister Abdullah Bin Zayed organized a meeting with top US and Israeli officials, including Israeli defense officials responsible for “day-after plans” for the Gaza Strip, on July 18.[9] Abdullah Bin Zayed’s special envoy to the United Nations published a proposal for post-war governance of the Gaza Strip shortly before the meeting and indicated that the UAE could send armed forces to support a multinational “stabilization” mission in the Gaza Strip.[10] The UAE specified that it would only send forces if it was invited by the Palestinian Authority and the United States held a leadership role in the post-war Gaza Strip.[11] Part of the UAE’s plan involves appointing a reformed Palestinian Authority led by an independent prime minister to govern the post-war Gaza Strip.[12] The Palestinian Authority remains most influenced by Fatah, which just signed a unity government declaration with Hamas. The UAE is pushing for non-Fatah officials, such as former Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyad, to head the government, however.[13]

The US-Israeli-UAE plan could move towards accomplishing Israeli war aims by protecting nascent, non-Hamas alternatives in the Gaza Strip. The non-Israeli, non-Hamas, and UAE-supported security forces described in this plan could successfully maintain security in the Gaza Strip if Hamas were militarily defeated. This force or one with similar features is necessary to accomplish Israeli war aims because it would be able to suppress Hamas military remnants and begin the process of transitioning to a non-Hamas authority. This transition would take a considerable amount of time. This plan stands in stark contrast with the Beijing proposal, which would probably result in Hamas retaining at minimum a monopoly on violence in the Gaza Strip. A monopoly on violence would give Hamas excessive influence over governance of the Gaza Strip even if under a nominally muti-party structure. CTP-ISW previously assessed Hamas would similarly take over a technocratic government if the group retains a monopoly on violence in the Gaza Strip.[14] The Beijing proposal, if successful, would result in an Israeli defeat because it would result in at least de-facto—if not de jure—Hamas control in the Gaza Strip. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on July 19 that a ceasefire agreement without an interim governance plan for the Gaza Strip would create a void that is filled by Hamas resurgence, Israeli military presence, or “chaos.”[15]

Four unspecified Iraqi sources cited by Reuters on July 22 claimed that an Iraqi delegation in Washington, DC, has requested the United States begin withdrawing its forces from Iraq starting in September 2024.[16] The unspecified Iraqi sources claimed that the delegation has asked the coalition to begin withdrawing its forces in September 2024 in order to end the International Coalition’s mission in Iraq by September 2025. US and Iraqi officials began talks on July 22 in Washington, DC, to continue negotiations over the end of the International Coalitions mission in Iraq.[17] The United States and Iraq are evaluating a timeline to end the International Coalition’s mission in Iraq based on threats posed by ISIS in Iraq and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) capabilities to conduct independent counter-ISIS operations.

CTP-ISW continues to assess that the United States and its partners in Iraq and Syria have successfully contained but not defeated ISIS and that a US withdrawal from Syria would very likely cause a rapid ISIS resurgence there within 12 to 24 months that would then spill into Iraq.[18] Iraqi security forces still face significant deficiencies in fire support, intelligence, and logistics that would impede their ability to eliminate ISIS and other domestic threats alone.[19] The US presence in Iraq logistically sustains the presence in Syria.[20] This is consistent with CENTCOM's previous and current reporting about the state of ISIS. US Central Command commander Gen. Michael Kurilla said in March 2024 that a US withdrawal from Iraq before the Iraqi Security Forces could successfully "stand on their own" would "all but guarantee" ISIS's return.[21] Kurilla's statements echo his 2023 Congressional Testimony, when he reported that he assessed ISIS would reconstitute within 12 to 24 months without a US presence in Iraq and Syria.[22] CENTCOM reported on July 16 that ISIS attacks in Iraq and Syria are on track to double from 2023 to over 153 attacks in 2024.[23] CENTCOM noted that the rate of attacks suggests that ISIS is attempting to reconstitute itself. CENTCOM's report is consistent with CTP-ISW assessment that the United States and its partners in Syria have successfully contained but not defeated ISIS.

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei gave a speech to Parliament in which he implicitly called on Parliament not to obstruct potential efforts by President-elect Masoud Pezeshkian to resume nuclear negotiations with the West. Khamenei simultaneously encouraged Parliament to work to mitigate the effects of Western sanctions.[24] Khamenei voiced support for both "lifting and neutralizing" western sanctions targeting Iran's nuclear program while impressing upon Parliament the importance of unity within government and acting with a "united voice" with President-elect Masoud Pezeshkian. Pezeshkian voiced support for increased international engagement with Western actors and endorsed a return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) throughout his campaign.[25] Iran's Parliament will not play a direct role in negotiations, though it is responsible for approving any agreement, and Iran's recently-elected Parliament is dominated by hardline politicians who have obstructed nuclear negotiations in the past.[26] Khamenei implicitly called on hardliners to allow Pezeshkian to pursue nuclear talks by encouraging unity, but his comment about "neutralizing" sanctions simultaneously encourages hardliners to work to mitigate the effects of sanctions. Neutralizing and mitigating the effect of sanctions has been a long-held foreign policy objective for Iran. This effort includes improving relations with non-Western countries and improving Iran's own economic self-reliance.[27]

Khamenei also defended the Strategic Action Plan to Lift Sanctions and Protect Iranian Nation's Interests, but his statements on the Strategic Action Plan probably sought to placate hardliners in parliament. Khamenei said that passing the Strategic Action Law "was the right thing to do." [28] This 2020 legislation mandated that Iran increase uranium enrichment and reduce IAEA inspections if the United States did not lift sanctions.[29]

The pursuit of nuclear negotiations to lift sanctions caused by the nuclear program and an effort to mitigate the effects of sanctions in general are not mutually exclusive. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei previously urged Raisi administration officials to counter the impact of economic sanctions and simultaneously expressed approval of sanctions-lifting nuclear negotiations.[30] It does not necessarily follow that a new nuclear deal would cause the United States and its partners to lift all of the sanctions they have imposed on Iran, such as sanctions tied to Iran's drone and missile programs.[31]

The Houthis appear to have successfully coerced Saudi Arabia into stopping a Yemeni government effort to cut Houthi access to the international finance system. The Central Bank of Yemen based in Aden (CBY-Aden) had been considering a plan in early July to remove several banks from the SWIFT system.[32] CBY-Aden also suspended at least 26 money exchange companies from operating in government-controlled Yemen between late June and early July.[33] Banning the Houthis from SWIFT would disrupt the ability for these banks to send and receive money from outside Houthi-controlled areas, which could severely damage the economy in Houthi-controlled areas.[34]

The Houthis responded by threatening Saudi Arabia as part of an effort to pressure Riyadh to reverse the Yemeni government’s decision. The Yemeni government is based in Riyadh, and Saudi Arabia can exert significant amounts of pressure on the Yemeni government to secure Yemeni agreement in negotiations. The Houthis threatened to target Saudi Arabia on July 8, one week after plans to remove several banks in Houthi-controlled areas from the SWIFT system leaked.[35] The Houthis published drone footage of airports and ports in Saudi Arabia, and the Houthi leader threatened that “if [Saudi Arabia] wants good for [itself], stability [for itself] and [its] economy,” Saudi Arabia would need to stop conspiring against Yemen and cease cooperation with the United States.[36]

Saudi Arabia likely pressured the Yemeni government to cancel its decisions to prevent Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia. The United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen noted that Saudi Arabia played a “significant role” in securing a Houthi-Yemeni government agreement to “cancel all recent decisions and procedures against banks” on July 23, suggesting that Saudi Arabia pressured the Yemeni government into reversing its decisions in the banking sector.[37] Saudi Arabia has previously undermined its Yemeni allies’ position by either negotiating with the Houthis without the Yemeni government or by pressuring the Yemeni government to agree to disadvantageous deals with the Houthis.[38] The CBY-Aden governor resigned after the agreement was signed.[39]

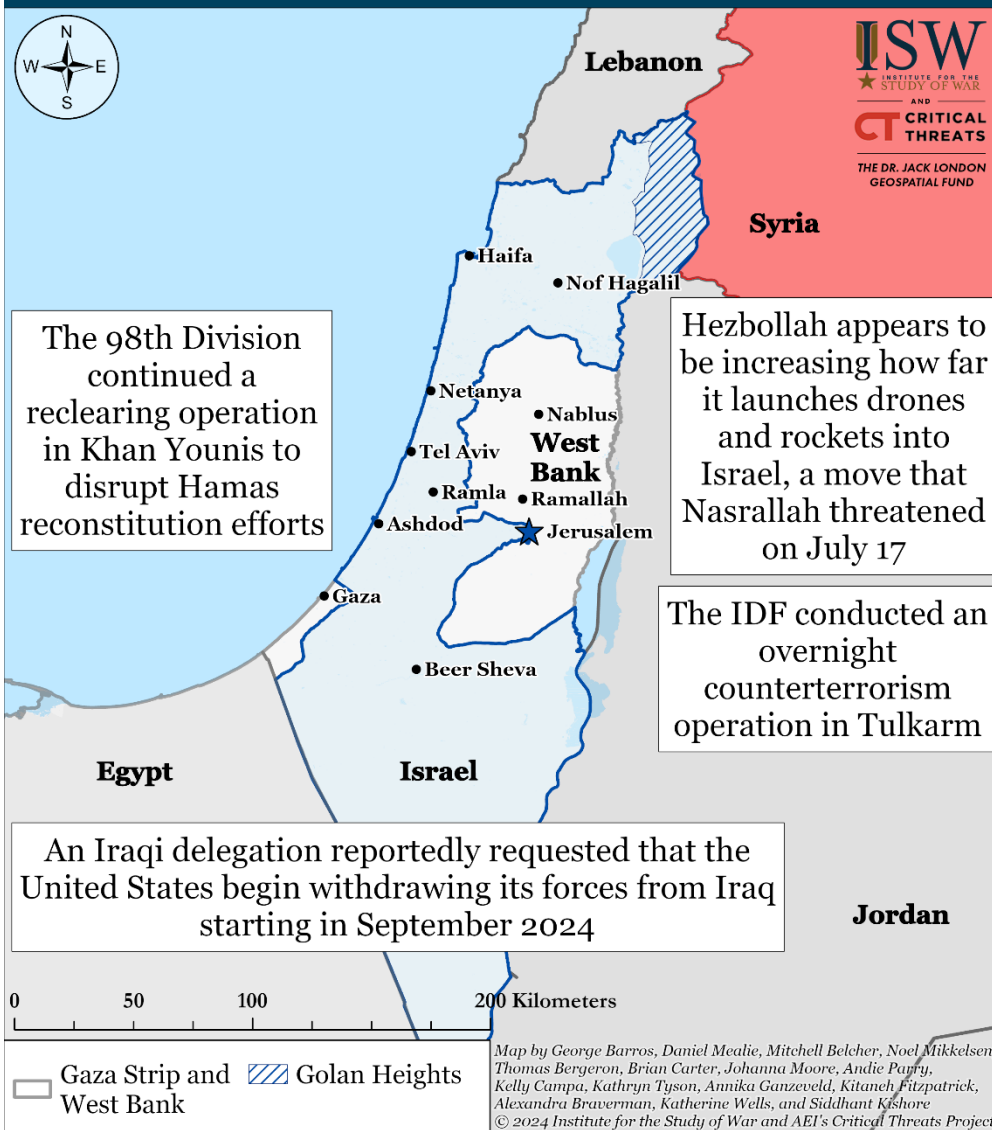
Key Takeaways:

- **Gaza Strip:** The United States, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are separately advancing an alternative post-war governance vision for the Gaza Strip that conflicts with a separate Chinese-mediated proposal for a unity government between Hamas and Fatah. The US-Israeli-UAE plan could move towards accomplishing Israeli war aims by protecting nascent, non-Hamas alternatives in the Gaza Strip. The Beijing proposal would amount to an Israeli defeat, if implemented.
- **Iraq:** Four unspecified Iraqi sources cited by Reuters on July 22 claimed that an Iraqi delegation in Washington, DC, has requested the United States begin withdrawing its forces from Iraq starting in September 2024. CTP-ISW continues to assess that the United States and its partners in Iraq and Syria have successfully contained but not defeated ISIS and that a US withdrawal from Syria would very likely cause a rapid ISIS resurgence there within 12 to 24 months that would then spill into Iraq.
- **Iran:** Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei gave a speech to Parliament in which he implicitly called on Parliament not to obstruct potential efforts by President-elect Masoud Pezeshkian to resume nuclear negotiations with the West. Khamenei simultaneously encouraged Parliament to work to mitigate the effects of Western sanctions. The pursuit of nuclear negotiations to lift sanctions caused by the nuclear program and an effort to mitigate the effects of sanctions in general are not mutually exclusive.

- **Houthi Attacks on Israel:** Unspecified military sources in Sanaa told Lebanese newspaper *Al Akhbar* on July 23 that the Houthis will target new civilian sites in Israel, which is consistent with the Houthi leader's statements on July 21.
- **Houthi Threats Against Saudi Arabia:** The Houthis appear to have successfully coerced Saudi Arabia into stopping a Yemeni government effort to cut Houthi access to the international finance system. Saudi Arabia likely pressured the Yemeni government to cancel its decisions to prevent Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia.
- **Lebanon:** Lebanese Hezbollah may be expanding the locations it targets in northern Israel. This expansion follows threats by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah to expand the group's targets on July 17.

Key Takeaways in the Israel-Hamas War

As of July 23, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Gaza Strip

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

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) 98th Division continued a new clearing operation in eastern Khan Younis on July 23.[40] The IDF reported that on July 22 that Hamas fighters had infiltrated into previously cleared areas of Khan Younis and had re-established militia infrastructure in the area, necessitating the re-clearing operation.[41] The IDF issued evacuation orders for civilians in Khan Younis on July 22.[42] Three IDF brigades concentrated their Khan Younis operations in Qarara,

Bani Suheila, and Hamad.[43] The IDF 7th, 89th (Commando), and 35th (Paratroopers) Brigades engaged Palestinian fighters and cleared infrastructure in eastern Khan Younis.[44] Local sources reported on July 23 that Israeli forces were stationed in central Bani Suhelia.[45] Hamas targeted Israeli armor with rocket propelled grenades in Bani Suheila, east of Khan Younis.[46] An Israeli Army Radio correspondent reported on July 23 that Israeli forces have not experienced "significant resistance" from Palestinian fighters on the ground and noted that there have been no IDF casualties yet.[47]

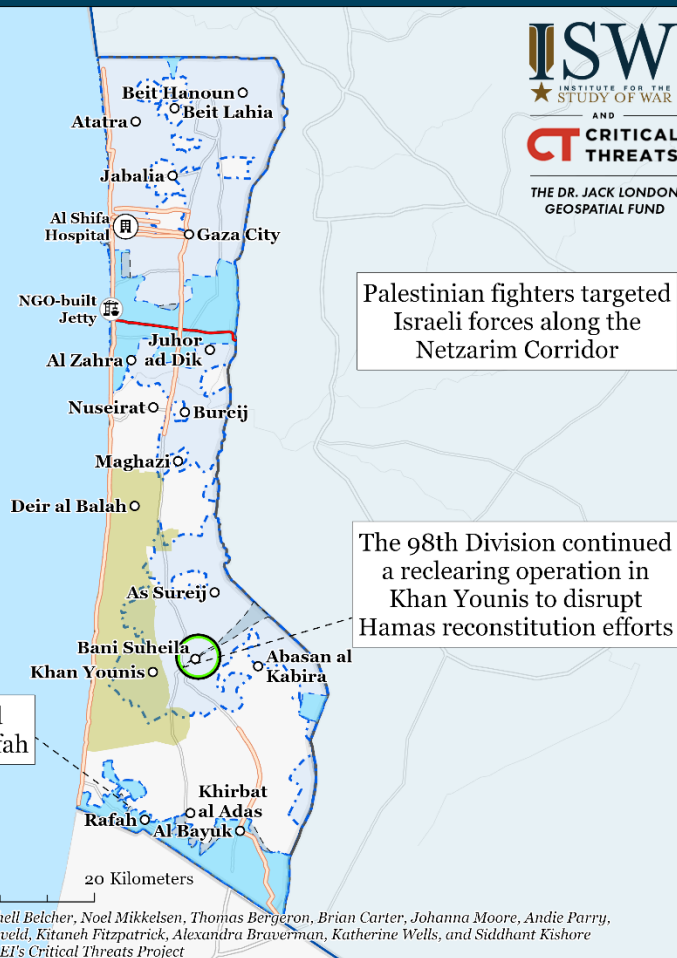
Three Palestinian militias conducted separate mortar attacks targeting Israeli forces along the Netzarim Corridor on July 23.[48] Hamas mortared Israeli forces near Juhor ad Dik, which is northeast of the Netzarim Corridor.[49]

The IDF identified several rockets that Hamas attempted to fire into Israeli territory from al Maghazi, central Gaza Strip, on July 23.[50] The IDF said the rockets fell short of crossing into Israel and struck a school in Nuseirat.[51]

The IDF 162nd Division continued clearing operations in Rafah on July 23.[52] Israeli forces killed dozens of Palestinian fighters through airstrikes and close-range engagements.[53] Palestinian fighters mortared Israeli forces in Tal al Sultan.[54]

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

As of July 23, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



Palestinian fighters targeted Israeli forces along the Netzarim Corridor

The 98th Division continued a reclearing operation in Khan Younis to disrupt Hamas reconstitution efforts

Israeli forces continued clearing operations in Rafah

Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Brian Carter, Johanna Moore, Andie Parry, Kelly Campa, Kathryn Tyson, Annika Ganzefeld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Alexandra Braverman, Katherine Wells, and Siddhant Kishore
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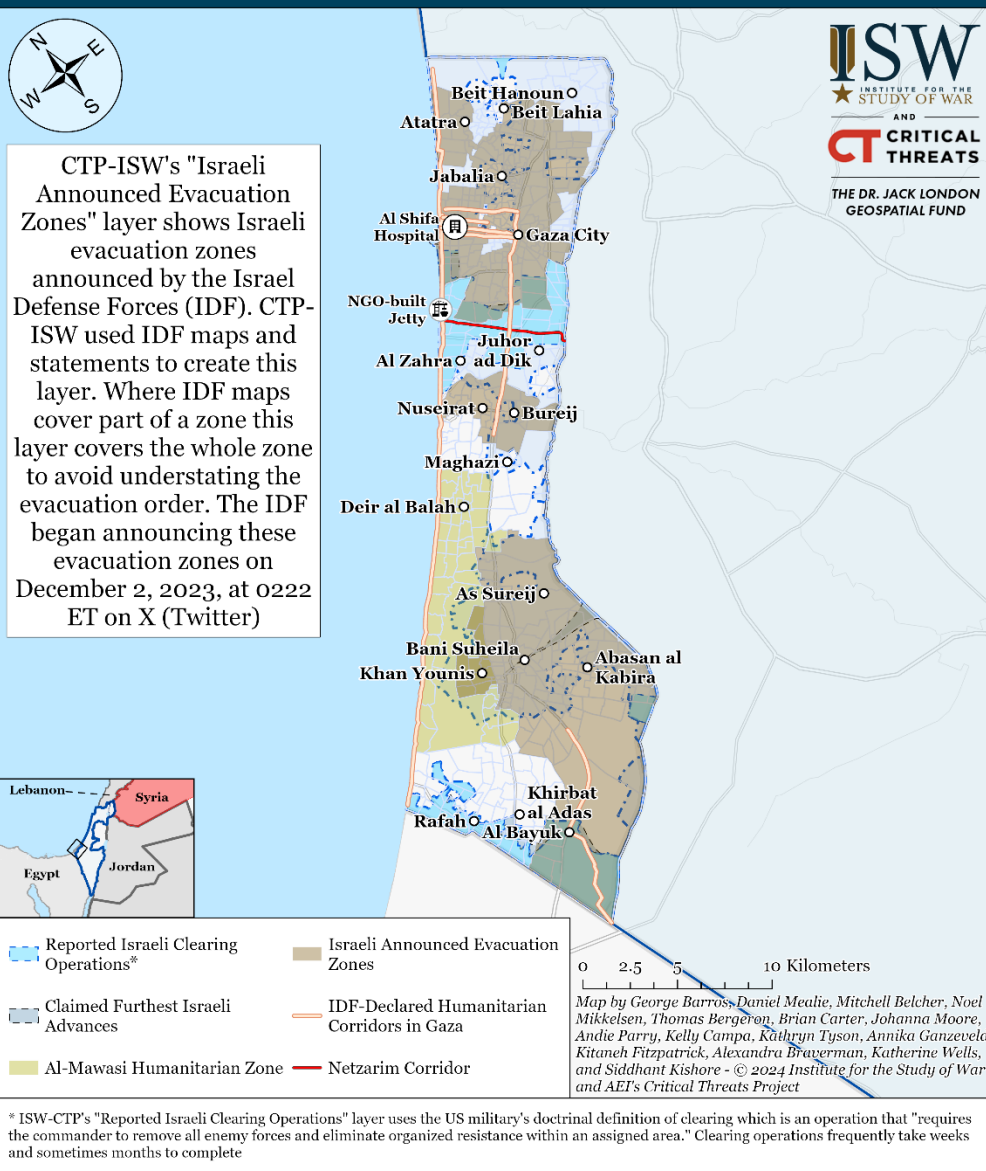
Reported Israeli Clearing Operations*	IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridors in Gaza	Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances	Netzarim Corridor	Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone
Assessed Furthest Extent of Israeli Clearing Operations		



* 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

Israeli-Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip

As of July 23, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



West Bank

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

The IDF conducted an overnight “counter-terrorism operation” in Tulkarm from July 22 to 23 in response to recent Palestinian militia shooting attacks targeting Bet Hefer.[55] Israeli forces destroyed an apartment complex that belonged to the head of Hamas in Tulkarm.[56] The IDF reported that the building was rigged with explosives and posed a threat to Israeli forces operating in the area..[57] The IDF also conducted an airstrike that killed a senior Hamas commander in Tulkarm and the al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades Tulkarm battalion commander on July

23.[58] An Israeli military correspondent assessed that the IDF is eliminating West Bank militia commanders “one by one”, prompting these militia groups to expedite the promotion of “junior-level” fighters to battalion-level commanders.[59] The IDF claimed that it has launched more than fifty “operations” in Tulkarm since October 7.[60]

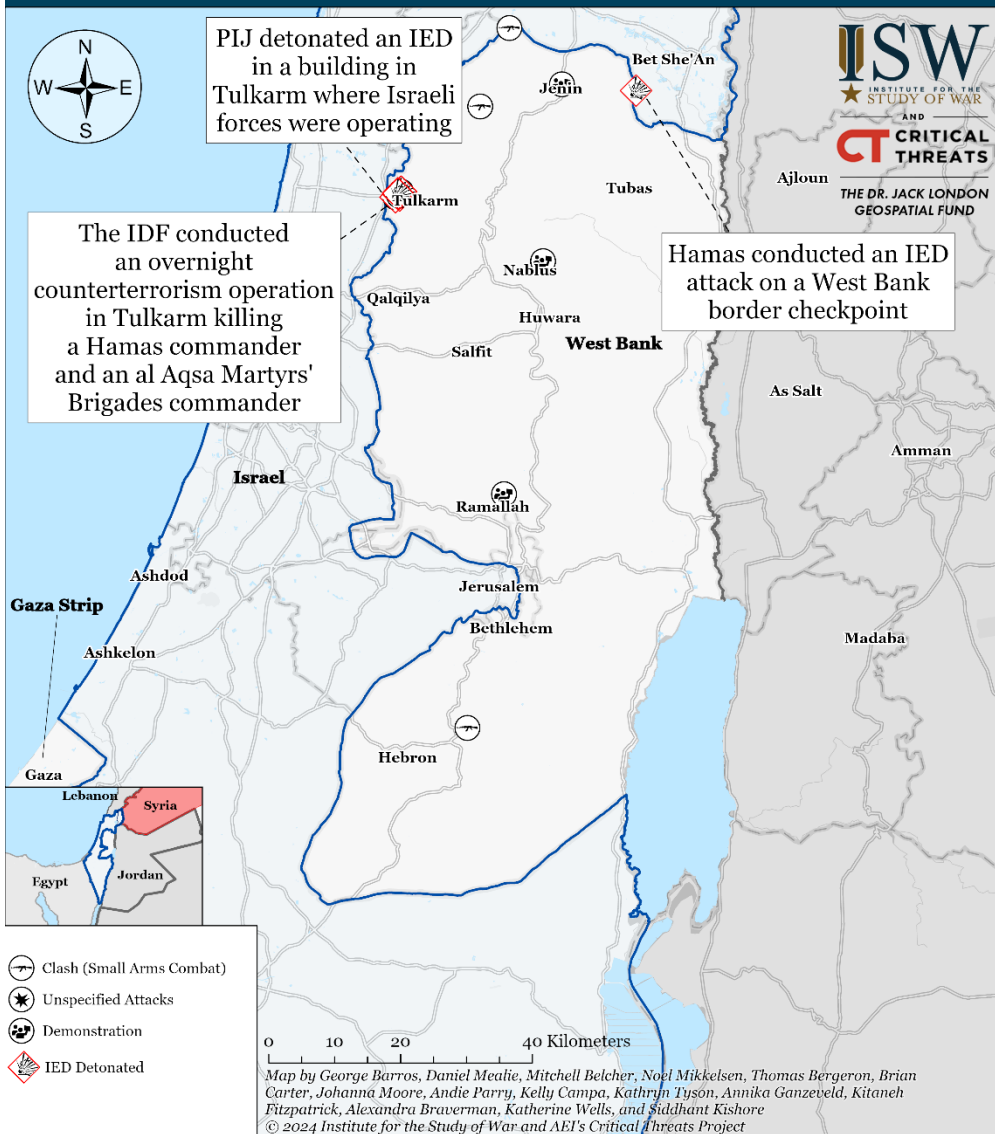
Hamas, PIJ, and the al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades targeted Israeli forces operating in Tulkarm with small arms and IEDs.[61] PIJ detonated an IED in a building on al Murabba Street, Tulkarm, as Israeli forces were operating inside.[62]

Israeli forces have engaged Palestinian fighters in at least nine locations in the West Bank since CTP-ISW's last data cut-off on July 22.[63] Hamas mourned the death of two fighters who died during clashes with Israeli forces on July 23 in Sair, Hebron.[64] Hamas fighters detonated an IED on the border fence between Jalbul, in the West Bank, and Meirav, in Israel. The fighters then waited for Israeli forces to arrive to repair the fence before detonating a second IED. Hamas then waited for an IDF medic team to arrive at the scene before detonating a third IED.[65] Israeli forces searched the area following the explosions.[66]

Palestinians held demonstrations in Nablus, Ramallah, and Jenin on July 23 to show support for Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli prisons.[67]

Significant Activity in the West Bank

As of July 23, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



This map is not an exhaustive depiction of clashes and demonstrations in the West Bank.

Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

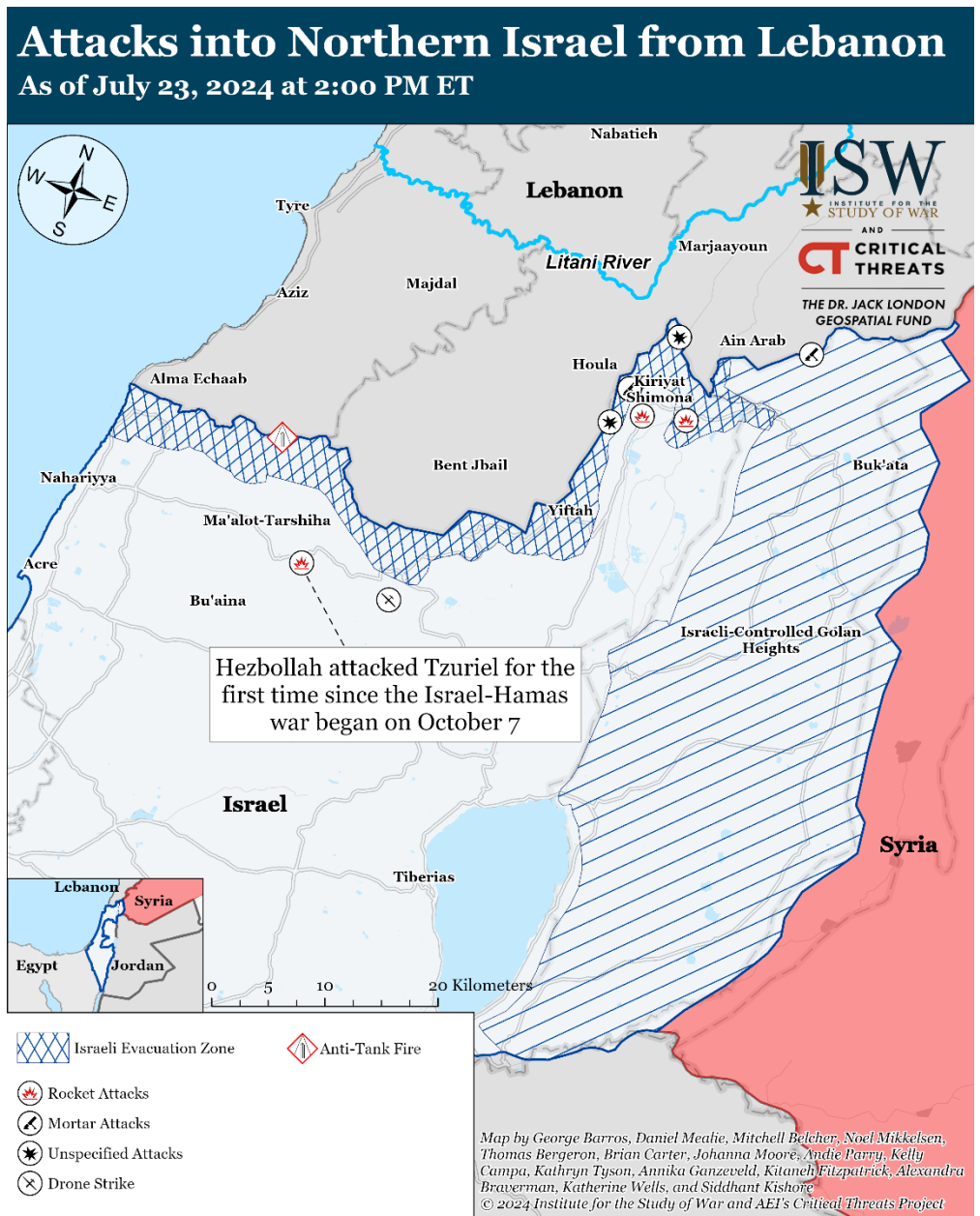
Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Deter Israel from conducting a ground operation into Lebanon
- Prepare for an expanded and protracted conflict with Israel in the near term
- Expel the United States from Syria
-

Lebanese Hezbollah may be expanding the locations it targets in northern Israel. This expansion follows threats by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah to expand the group's

targets on July 17.[68] Hezbollah launched “dozens” of rockets targeting Tzuriel, in northern Israel on July 22, injuring at least two civilians.[69] Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah threatened to strike new locations inside Israel during a speech on July 17 if Israel “continues to target civilians.” [70] Hezbollah has struck at least five new targets since issuing this threat.[71]

Lebanese Hezbollah conducted at least ten attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel since CTP-ISW's last data cut-off on July 22, including the attack on Zuriel.[72] Hezbollah claimed that it launched a large number of one-way attack drones targeting an IDF Golani Brigade battalion headquarters in Mount Neira.[73] The IDF intercepted “some” of the drones and reported that the attack resulted in no casualties.[74]



Recorded reports of attacks; CTP-ISW cannot independently verify impact.

Iran and the Axis of Resistance

Acting Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri Kani condemned the July 20 Israeli retaliatory airstrike on Hudaydah, Yemen, in separate phone calls with a senior Houthi diplomatic official and the Omani Foreign Minister on July 22.[75] Bagheri Kani reiterated Iran's solidarity with the Houthis in a phone call with senior Houthi official Mohammad Abdulsalam on July 22.[76] Abdulsalam thanked Bagheri Kani for Iran's support to the Houthis in its fight against Israel. Bagheri Kani separately claimed that Israel is the main cause of regional insecurity in his phone call with Omani Foreign Minister Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi.[77]

Iran announced on July 23 that the construction on a 300-kilometer border wall on Iran's northeastern border with Afghanistan is underway.[78] The border wall will be approximately four meters tall and one meter thick. Construction is underway in Razavi Khorasan Province, Iran. Previous reporting suggested the border wall will cost approximately \$3.2 billion.[79] The construction of this border wall likely serves to limit the flow of refugees and cross-border smuggling from Afghanistan into Iran, but it is probably also meant to help prevent Islamic State Khorasan Province fighters from entering Iran.[80] Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf promised to build a wall on Iran's eastern border to curb illegal immigration from Afghanistan and Pakistan during a presidential debate on June 20.[81]

Iranian President-elect Masoud Pezeshkian held phone calls with the Kazakh president and Japanese prime minister on July 22 and 23 respectively.[82] Pezeshkian expressed willingness to increase cooperation with Kazakhstan in the fields of energy, transit and commercial exchanges during his phone call with Kazakh President Kassym Jomart Tokayev.[83] Pezeshkian stated that Iran is ready to engage in "any dialogue" in the field of nuclear talks during his phone call with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida.[84] Pezeshkian blamed the United States for withdrawing from the JCPOA and stressed that the United States must be the one to resume nuclear talks with Iran in his phone call with Kishida. Kishida expressed readiness on behalf of Japan to help mediate nuclear talks between Iran and the United States.

A senior leader in the Iranian Assembly of Experts, Alireza Arafī, met with Russian Duma First Vice Chairman Alexander Zhukov at the Russian Duma in Moscow, Russia, on July 23.[85] Arafī stated that Iran and Russia have established a "new era" in bilateral relations. Arafī travelled to Russia on July 21 to participate in the Eurasian Scholars Summit in Kazan, Russia, scheduled to be held on July 26.[86] Arafī, who also serves as the head of a university that aims to spread the principles of the Islamic Revolution to non-Iranian students, separately visited Moscow State Library on July 23.[87] Arafī called for deepening cultural, religious and scholarly ties with Russia during this visit.[88]

Houthi media published video and images on July 23 of the Jaffa drone that the Houthis used to target Tel Aviv, Israel, on July 19.[89] An analyst focused on missile and drone systems reported that the Jaffa drone is an Iranian-designed Sammad-3 drone modified with a new engine for increased range.[90] The Jaffa drone flew at least 1,110 kilometers further than the maximum range of a standard Iranian Sammad-3 in its flight from Yemen to Israel.[91] An Israeli military correspondent previously stated that the Jaffa drone carried around 10 kilograms of explosives.[92] A standard Sammad-3 can carry up to 40 kilograms of explosives, suggesting that the Houthis may have sacrificed the explosive payload to increase the range or to accommodate a larger engine.

Unspecified military sources in Sanaa told Lebanese newspaper *Al Akhbar* on July 23 that the Houthis will target new civilian sites in Israel, which is consistent with the Houthi leader's statements on July 21.[93] The unspecified military and political sources said that the Houthis have defined their targets for the fifth phase of escalation against Israel after a major Israeli airstrike on the port of Hudaydah on July 20.[94] The Houthis reportedly intend to target power plants in Ashdod, Ashkelon, Hadera, and Haifa, and several Israeli natural gas fields in the Mediterranean Sea and Dead Sea.[95] The unspecified military sources also said that the Houthis intend to target "[Israeli] maritime supplies" in the Indian Ocean.[96] CTP-ISW cannot verify *Al Akhbar's* reporting. Houthi supreme leader Abdulmalik al Houthi announced the commencement of the fifth phase of Houthi escalations against Israel in a speech on July 21 and indicated that the Houthis would attempt to hit more Israeli civilian targets, however.[97]

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