

Iran Update, March 5, 2024

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Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm 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. For more on developments in Iran and the region, see our [interactive map of Iran and the Middle East](#).

Note: CTP and ISW have refocused the update to cover the Israel-Hamas war. The new sections address developments in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as noteworthy activity from Iran's Axis of Resistance. 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.

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. Click [here](#) to subscribe to the Iran Update.

Iranian hardline factions are expected to retain their majority in parliament.[1] The majority of Tehran province's 14 confirmed candidates were hardliners.[2] Incumbent hardline Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf was re-elected to parliament for Tehran province.[3] Parliamentarians will vote for the next parliament speaker after run-off elections conclude in late April or early May.[4] Forty-five candidates will compete in the run-off election.[5]

Iran's March 1 Parliament elections had the lowest voter turnout of any election in the history of the Islamic Republic.[6] Approximately 25 million Iranians out of 61 million eligible voters voted for 290 candidates for Parliament and 88 candidates for the Assembly of Experts.[7] The Assembly of Experts is the body responsible for choosing the supreme leader's successor. Iranian Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi reported an official voter turnout of 41%.[8] This figure is likely inflated, given the Iranian regime's historical tendency to exaggerate voter turnout.[9] Iran reported a 43% voter turnout in its 2020 parliamentary election.[10]

US President Joe Biden warned on March 5 that without a ceasefire “the situation in Jerusalem will become very dangerous during Ramadan.”[11] Biden said that Hamas is the impediment to a ceasefire deal, not Israel.

Hamas' senior representative to Lebanon Osama Hamdan confirmed that Hamas negotiators gave Qatari and Egyptian officials a response to the Paris ceasefire proposal

“over the past two days” but that the group is prepared to continue fighting.[12] Hamdan stated that Hamas affirmed its conditions for a ceasefire, which are the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip, the return of the displaced civilians to the northern Gaza Strip, and the supply of adequate aid, relief, and reconstruction of the Gaza Strip. Hamdan continued to blame the Israeli prime minister for the lack of a ceasefire. A Hamas Telegram channel posted on March 5 an undated quote from another senior Hamas leader that reiterated that the group would not discuss a hostage-for-prisoner exchange before a ceasefire, the total Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, reconstruction of the Strip, and the return of displaced persons to their homes.[13] Israeli media reported on March 4 that Hamas recently asked for Israel to release more of its high-level prisoners as part of the ceasefire agreement.[14] Western and Israeli media previously reported during the week of January 31 that Hamas demanded the release of its elite Nukhba special forces and Palestinian political faction leaders.[15] The Nukhba forces took part in the October 7 attacks.

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant met US envoy Amos Hochstein on March 5 and warned that Hezbollah attacks are pushing Israel towards “a decision point regarding military action in Lebanon.”[16] Gallant reiterated that Israel is committed to political efforts to reach an agreement to resolve the ongoing hostilities along the Israel-Lebanon border. Gallant issued a similar warning on February 7 that the Israeli government could invade Lebanon in response to continuing Hezbollah attacks.[17]

Key Takeaways:

- **Iranian Elections:** Iranian hardline factions are expected to retain their majority in parliament. Iran’s March 1 Parliament elections had the lowest voter turnout of any election in the history of the Islamic Republic.
- **Ceasefire Negotiations:** US President Joe Biden warned on March 5 that without a ceasefire “the situation in Jerusalem will become very dangerous during Ramadan.” Biden said that Hamas is the impediment to a ceasefire deal, not Israel.
- Senior Hamas official Osama Hamdan stated that Hamas affirmed its conditions for a ceasefire, which are the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip, the return of the displaced civilians to the northern Gaza Strip, and the supply of adequate aid, relief, and reconstruction of the Gaza Strip.
- **Lebanon:** Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant met US envoy Amos Hochstein on March 5 and warned that Hezbollah attacks are pushing Israel towards “a decision point regarding military action in Lebanon.” Gallant reiterated that Israel is committed to political efforts to reach an agreement to resolve the ongoing hostilities along the Israel-Lebanon border.
- **Gaza Strip:** Palestinian militias claimed an anomalously low number of attacks targeting Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip on March 5. CTP-ISW is considering two factors to explain the sharp decrease in attack claims.
- The Israel Defense Forces (IDF)’s transition to the third phase of its ground operation has decreased the number of targets Hamas and its allies can attack during a given period. There are currently fewer Israeli forces deep in northern Gaza and thus fewer targets for the militias to attack.
- Palestinian militias may be experiencing communications difficulties.

Israel-Hamas War as of March 5, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



Gaza Strip

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

- Erode the will of the Israeli political establishment and public to launch and sustain a major ground operation into the Gaza Strip
- Degrade IDF material and morale around the Gaza Strip.

Palestinian militias claimed an anomalously low number of attacks targeting Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip on March 5. Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and three other Palestinian militias that have been active in the Gaza Strip did not claim attacks targeting Israeli forces on March 5. The Palestinian Mujahideen Movement and the al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades claimed a total of two attacks on Israeli forces south of Gaza City and zero attacks in Khan Younis.[18]

This drop in claims represents a sharp decrease in Palestinian militia activity across the Gaza Strip, but it does not indicate that Israeli action has destroyed or defeated Hamas. Palestinian militias claimed at least fifteen attacks on Israeli forces operating in the Gaza Strip on March 4.[19] Israeli forces continued operations throughout the Gaza Strip on March 5 and no negotiation parties announced a ceasefire deal.[20] CTP-ISW is considering two factors to explain the sharp decrease in claims:

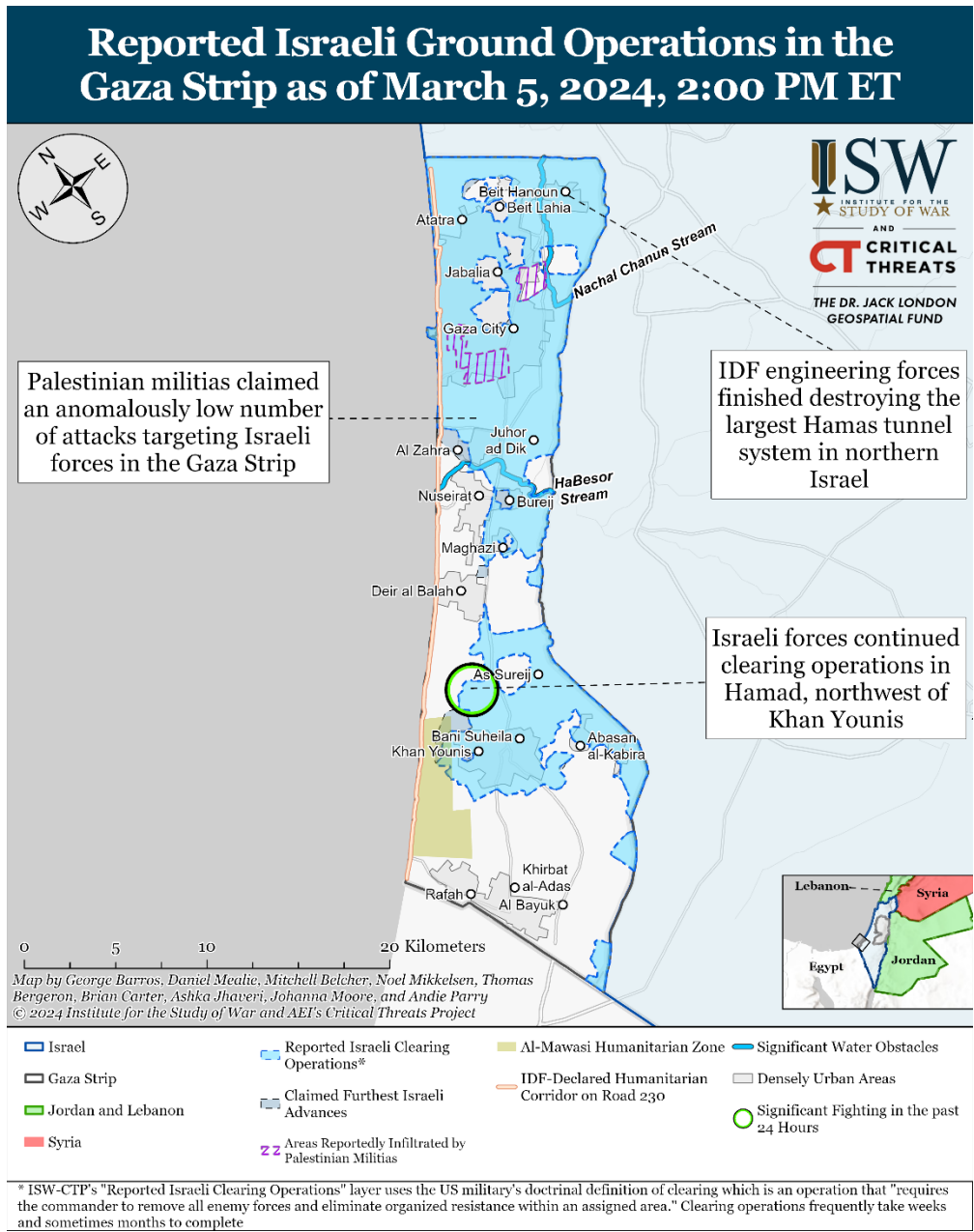
- **The Israel Defense Forces (IDF)’s transition to the third phase of its ground operation has decreased the number of targets Hamas and its allies can attack during a given period.** Israeli forces began the third phase of their military operation in the Gaza Strip in January, which consists of “targeted raids,” a decrease in the number of forces in the Strip, and the movement of many units to the buffer zone along the Israeli border.[21] Both Palestinian and Israeli sources reported in early January that Israeli forces in the northern Gaza Strip moved to the Israeli-Gaza buffer zone.[22] These sources reported that Israeli units are no longer permanently present in the Gaza City, and now conduct multi-week “targeted raids” from the border buffer zone.[23] IDF concluded a two-week-long operation to reclear Zaytoun neighborhood in southeastern Gaza City of Hamas fighters on March 3 and has not announced a new clearing operation in the north.[24] This means that there are fewer Israeli forces deep in northern Gaza and thus fewer targets for the militias to attack. Palestinian militias appear to conduct a spirited defense when Israeli forces do present themselves as targets deep in the Gaza Strip. Palestinian fighters attacked Israeli forces 92 times in 11 days during the Israeli clearing operation in Zaytoun, for example.[25]
- **Palestinian militias may be experiencing communications difficulties.** CTP-ISW has previously hypothesized that communication problems can decrease the number of claims from a single militia group, but not five groups at once.[26] Israeli action in Khan Younis may be preventing militia forces there from rapidly reporting attacks to higher echelons that can distribute information about the attacks.

The IDF said that its engineering units finished destroying “the largest tunnel network discovered in the northern Gaza Strip” on March 5.[27] The IDF first disclosed the network’s existence in Beit Hanoun near the Erez Crossing in December 2023.[28] The IDF said the tunnel was dug toward Israel but did not extend out of the Gaza Strip. Israeli troops from the 98th Division conducted an airstrike targeting a Palestinian militia cell operating a drone near Israeli forces in Beit Hanoun on March 5.[29] The Palestinian fighters may have targeted the engineering units present in Beit Hanoun.

The IDF Nahal Brigade (162nd Division) killed over 20 Palestinian fighters using aerial, sniper, and tank fire in the central Gaza Strip on March 5.[30]

Israeli forces continued conducting clearing operations around northern Khan Younis on March 5. The IDF 89th Commando Brigade cleared militia infrastructure, including weapons caches, in Hamad neighborhood in northwestern Khan Younis.[31] The IDF 7th Brigade evacuated civilians from Hamad and detained dozens of Hamas and PIJ fighters who tried to hide among evacuating civilians to escape the area.[32] The IDF began operating in Hamad on March 3.[33] The IDF LOTAR counterterrorism unit (attached to the 7th Brigade) cleared two weapons storage sites in

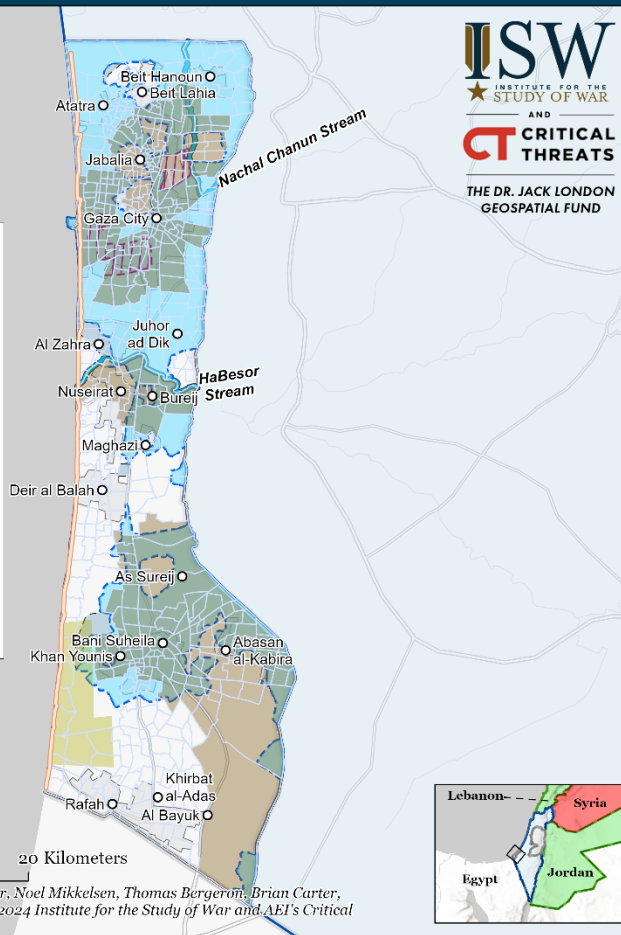
civilian areas of Khan Younis.[34] The IDF said that one of the sites was adjacent to a school in Khan Younis formerly used as a shelter for displaced Gazans.[35]



Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip as of March 5, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



CTP-ISW's "Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones" layer shows Israeli evacuation zones announced by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). CTP-ISW used IDF maps and statements to create this layer. Where IDF maps cover part of a zone this layer covers the whole zone to avoid understating the evacuation order. The IDF began announcing these evacuation zones on December 2, 2023, at 0222 ET on X (Twitter)



0 5 10 20 Kilometers

Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Brian Carter, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Andie Parry - © 2024 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

Israel	Reported Israeli Clearing Operations*	Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones	Densely Urban Areas
Gaza Strip	Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances	Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone	Significant Water Obstacles
Jordan and Lebanon	Areas Reportedly Infiltrated by Palestinian Militias	IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridor on Road 230	
Syria			

* 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

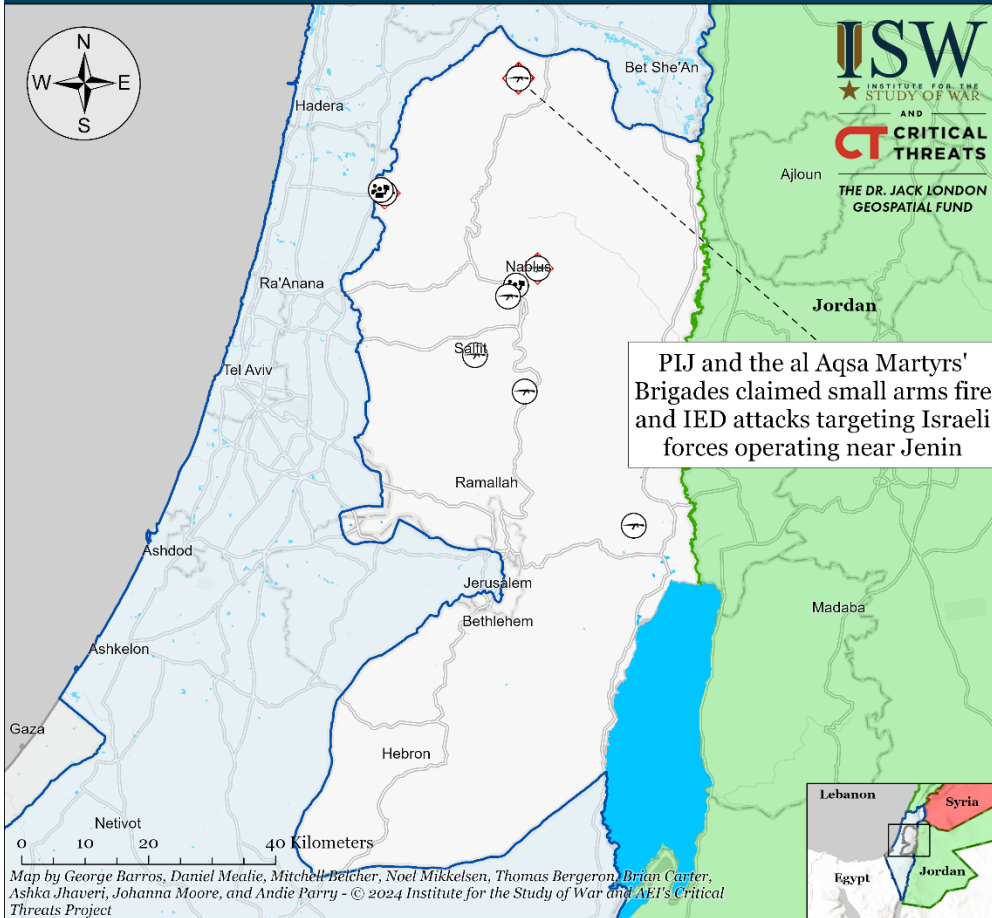
West Bank

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

- Draw IDF assets and resources toward the West Bank and fix them there

Israeli forces have clashed with Palestinian fighters in six locations across the West Bank since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on March 4.[36] The IDF reported that Israeli forces arrested 21 wanted persons across the West Bank, including the commander of an unspecified Palestinian militia's Balata Battalion, Mohammed Tanji.[37] The IDF stated that Tanji was planning to conduct an "imminent attack".[38]

Clashes in the West Bank as of March 5, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



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

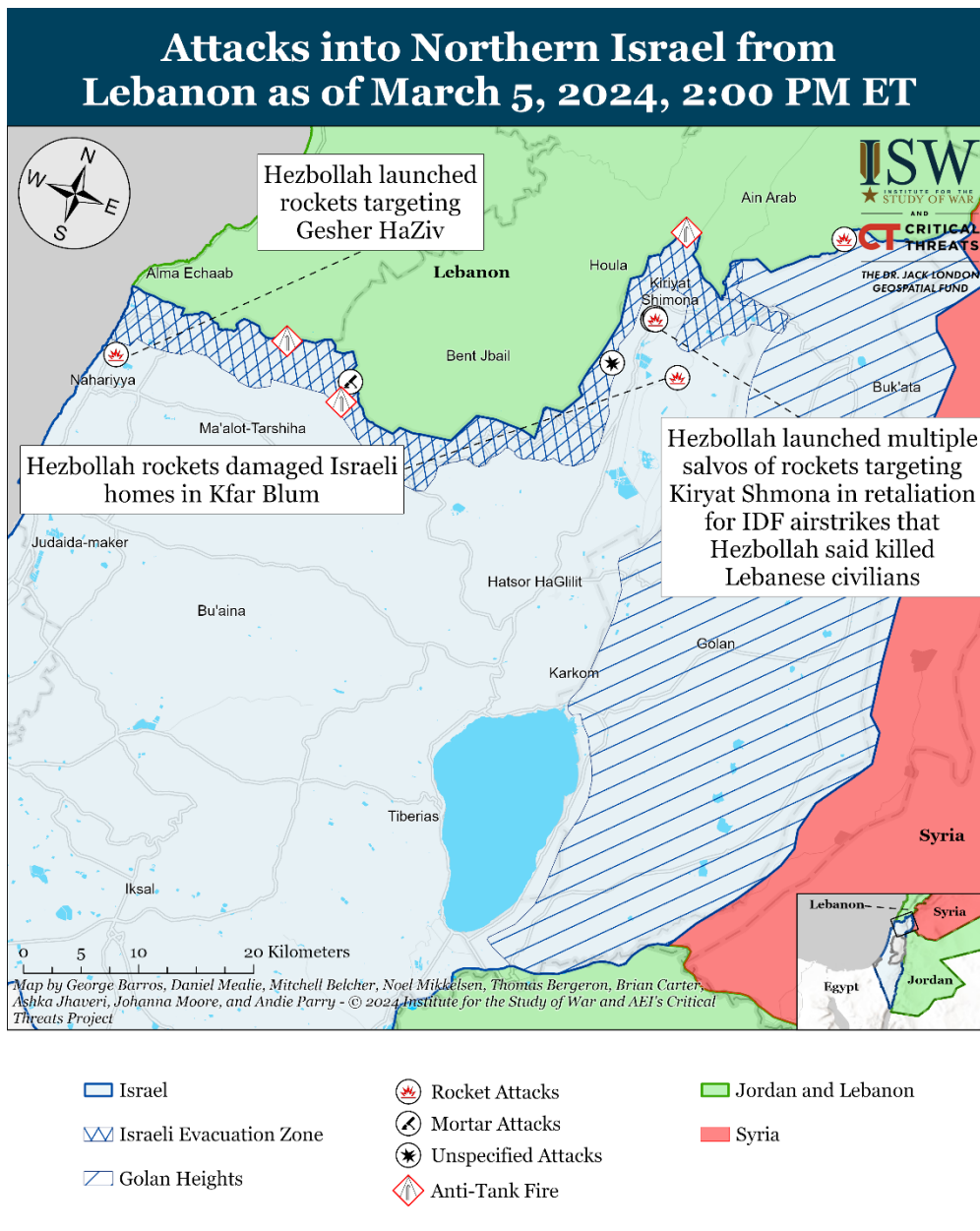
Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

- Draw IDF assets and resources toward northern Israel and fix them there
- Set conditions for successive campaigns into northern Israel

Lebanese Hezbollah has conducted at least 13 attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on March 4.[39] Hezbollah launched at least three salvos of “dozens of rockets” targeting Gesher HaZiv, Kiryat Shmona, and Kfar Blum, in northern Israel.[40] Israeli media reported that multiple civilians' homes were damaged in the rocket attacks targeting Israel.[41] Hezbollah claimed that the attacks were in response to IDF airstrikes that killed Hezbollah-affiliated paramedics in Adissa on March 4 and Lebanese civilians in Hula, southern Lebanon, on March 5.[42]

The Israeli Air Force intercepted a drone over the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights that an unspecified actor launched from Syrian territory on March 5.[43]



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

Iran and Axis of Resistance

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

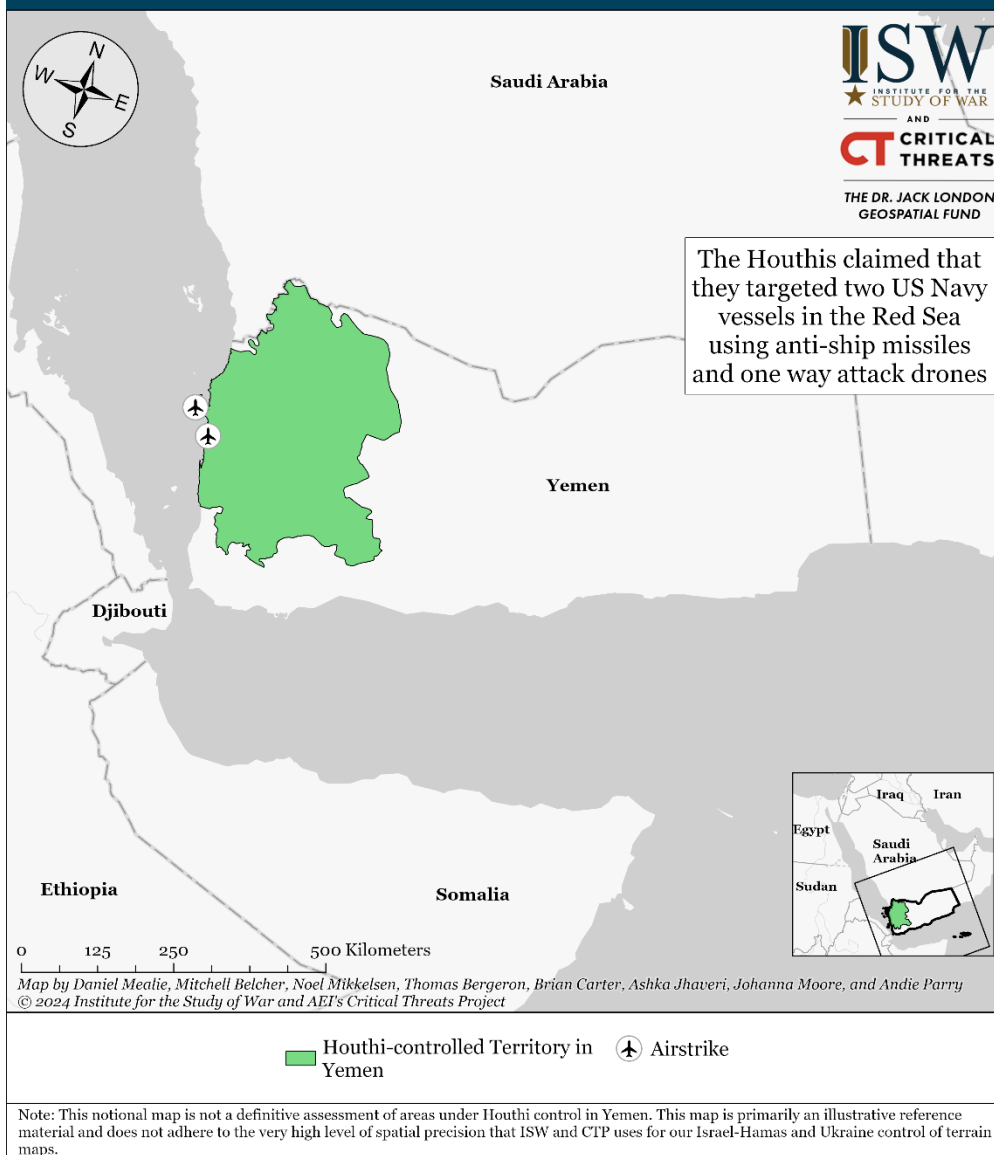
- Demonstrate the capability and willingness of Iran and the Axis of Resistance to escalate against the United States and Israel on multiple fronts
- Set conditions to fight a regional war on multiple fronts

Iraqi National Security Advisor and Badr Organization member Qasim al Araji stated on March 5 that Iraq is open to regional and international cooperation to combat drug trafficking in Iraq.[44] Araji claimed that drug trafficking is now the primary threat to Iraqi stability “[after] the defeat of [ISIS].” He clarified that Iraq should work with its partners to share intelligence to combat remaining ISIS fighters, however. The OIR quarterly report at the end of 2023 said that the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) still faces deficiencies in fire support, intelligence, logistics, and planning that prevent it from defeating ISIS alone.[45]

The Houthis claimed that they targeted two US Navy vessels in the Red Sea using anti-ship missiles and one way attack drones on March 5.[46] Houthi military spokesperson Brig. Gen. Yahya Sarea said that the Houthis “will not hesitate to expand their operations against all hostile targets” in support of Palestinians in Gaza.[47]

Houthi-controlled media claimed that the United States and United Kingdom conducted strikes against unspecified targets in Ras Issa, Salif Province, and al Jabanah, Hudaydah province, in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen.[48]

Houthi-controlled Territory in Yemen as of March 5, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



The United Kingdom Defense Secretary Grant Shapps said on March 5 that he possesses unspecified information on Iran providing ballistic missiles to Russia.^[49] The British magazine *The House* asked Shapps whether he had any information on Iran providing ballistic missiles to Russia and Shapps said that he did have information but declined to elaborate. Shapps added that “whether it’s ballistic missiles or the Shahed drones that they supplied Russia with, we’ve seen that if there’s struggle in the world,” Iran often exacerbates it. Shapps called Iran a “bad influence” not only in the Middle East but also to Europe as well, citing Iran’s provision of weapons to Russia to support its war in Ukraine.

Iranian sources told Reuters on February 21 that Iran provided hundreds of short-range ballistic missiles to Russia in early January.[50] This is consistent with CTP-ISW's assessment in September 2023 that Iran and Russia would conclude a drone and missile sale agreement after UNSC Resolution 2231's missile restrictions expired in October 2023.[51] UNSC Resolution 2231 suspended nuclear-related UN sanctions and established sunset dates for missile and other arms-related sanctions on Iran.

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian discussed the Israel-Hamas war with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Secretary General Hussein Ibrahim Taha on March 5 in Jeddah.[52] Abdollahian called on the OIC and other Islamic countries to pressure Israel into ending the Israel-Hamas war.

Abdollahian and Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan separately discussed the Israel-Hamas war and strengthening bilateral trade on March 5 in Jeddah.[53] Abdollahian called on Muslim countries to take a more “coherent and strong” position in support of Palestine.[54] Iran and Saudi Arabia normalized diplomatic relations in March 2023 after severing ties in 2016.[55]

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