

Iran Update



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May 21, 2024, 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. 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.

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.

The Iranian Assembly of Experts elected its leadership board on May 21, marking a new era for the body responsible for selecting the next supreme leader.[1] The Assembly of Experts is an Iranian regime entity constitutionally responsible for monitoring the supreme leader and selecting his successor. Assembly of Experts leadership board members serve two-year terms. This is the first time since 2016 that the Assembly of Experts has not been led by influential cleric Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati.

This Assembly of Experts leadership board election is particularly significant given Khamenei's old age and Raisi's recent death. Khamenei is 84 years old and will be 92 by the time of the next Assembly of Experts election in 2032.[2] The 88 representatives elected to the Assembly of Experts in March 2024 will at least formally choose Khamenei's successor if he dies or otherwise leaves

his post before then.[3] Other powerbrokers within the regime—such as the IRGC—will undoubtedly informally influence supreme leader succession as well. It is also possible, but not certain, that one of the newly chosen Assembly of Experts leaders could succeed Khamenei as supreme leader. All of the chairmen and secretaries hold the rank of Ayatollah—a prerequisite to become supreme leader—and all of them, besides Kermani, are in their 60s.

The Assembly of Experts elected the following individuals to leadership positions:

- **Chairman: Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Movahedi Kermani.**[4] Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appointed Kermani as an interim Tehran Friday prayer leader in December 2012.[5] Kermani also served as Khamenei’s representative to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) for 14 years between February 1992 and January 2006.[6] Kermani previously served as the second deputy chairman of the Assembly of Experts until February 2023.[7] 55 out of 83 Assembly of Experts members voted for Kermani to become chairman.[8] Kermani is 93 years old.[9]
- **First Deputy Chairman: Ayatollah Hashem Hosseini Bushehri.**[10] Bushehri is the Qom Friday prayer leader and the head of the Society of Seminary Teachers of Qom.[11] The Assembly of Experts elected Bushehri to replace Kermani as the second deputy chairman in February 2023.[12] Bushehri’s tenure as second deputy chairman overlapped with former President Ebrahim Raisi’s tenure as first deputy chairman.[13] Bushehri is 68 years old.
- **Second Deputy Chairman: Ayatollah Ali Reza Araf.**[14] Khamenei appointed Araf as the director of all seminaries across Iran in 2016.[15] Khamenei later appointed Araf as a member of the Guardian Council—a 12-member regime body responsible for supervising elections, vetting candidates, and approving legislation—in 2019.[16] Araf has not previously held a leadership position in the Assembly of Experts. Araf is 68 years old.
- **Secretary: Ayatollah Mohsen Araki.**[17] Khamenei appointed Araki as a member of the Expediency Discernment Council in 2022.[18] He has served as a member of the Assembly of Experts since 1998.[19] The Assembly of Experts elected Araki as a cultural manager in February 2023.[20] Araki replaced Guardian Council member and Tehran interim Friday prayer leader Ahmad Khatami as one of the Assembly of Experts secretaries.[21] Araki is 68 years old.
- **Secretary: Ayatollah Abbas Kaabi.**[22] Kaabi is continuing his role as a Secretary of the Assembly of Experts.[23] Kaabi is 62 years old

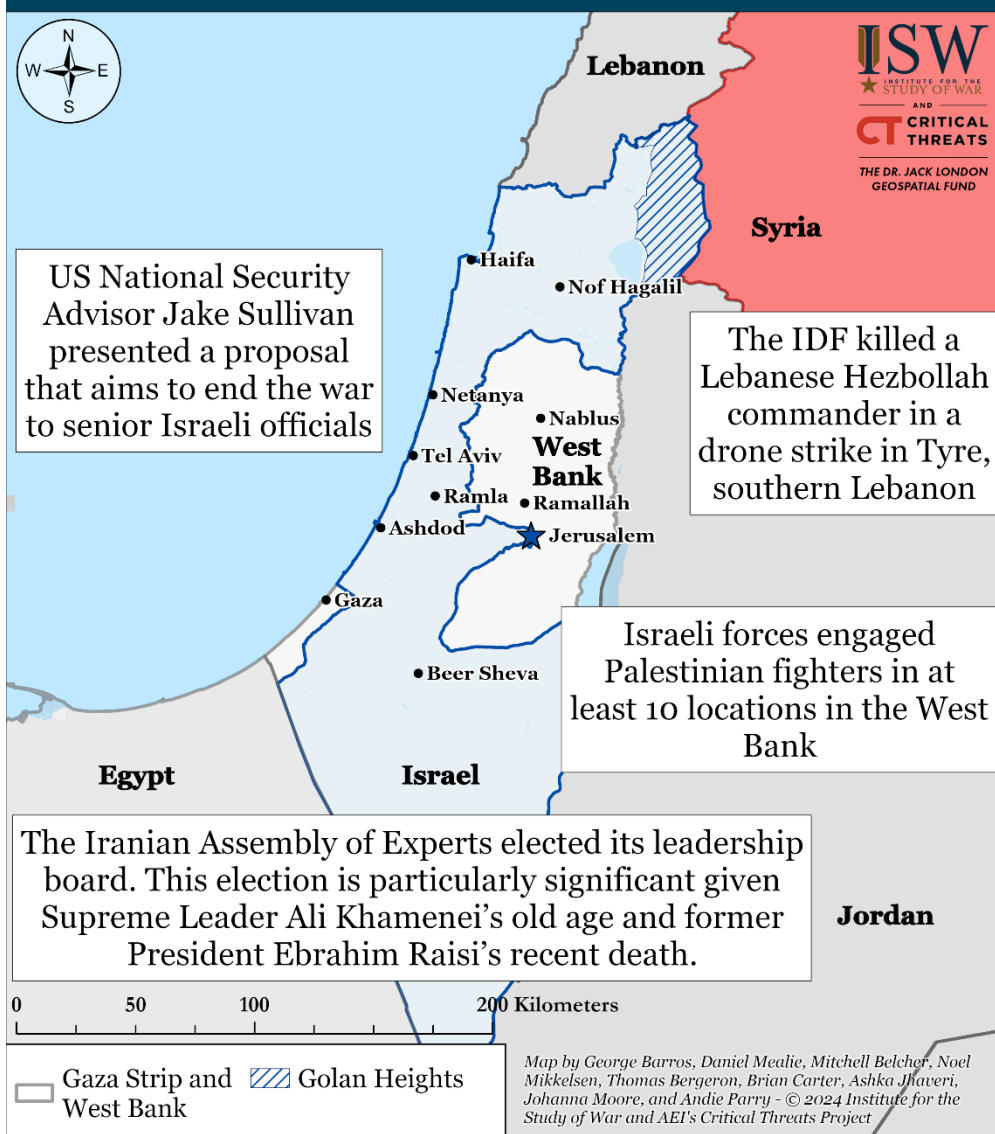
Two anonymous sources told Reuters on May 21 that the Assembly of Experts removed former President Ebrahim Raisi from the list of potential supreme leader successors in November 2023 due to his declining popularity.[24] There is reportedly a three-member committee in the Assembly of Experts that is responsible for preparing a list of potential candidates to succeed Khamenei.[25] Raisi was reportedly a member of this committee, so it is unclear how the Assembly of Experts could have removed his name from the list.[26] One of the sources told Reuters that clerics who supported Raisi lobbied “intensively” to have his name added back to the list.[27] CTP-ISW cannot independently verify these claims. It is notable that the sources told Reuters Raisi was no longer in the running to become supreme leader at a time when it is convenient for the Iranian regime to assure its people and those within the regime that Raisi’s death did not disrupt the supreme leader succession process.

Key Takeaways:

- **Iran:** The Iranian Assembly of Experts elected its leadership board on May 21, marking a new era for the body responsible for selecting the next supreme leader. This election is particularly important given the supreme leader's age (84) and the recent death of the Iranian president. The assembly formally chooses the supreme leader and informally influences supreme leader succession.
- **Gaza Strip:** The US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said that the IDF's failure to hold territory after clearing it is allowing Hamas to return to previously cleared areas.
- **Humanitarian Aid:** The United States said that no humanitarian aid from the US-constructed temporary pier in the central Gaza Strip has reached the broader Palestinian population.
- **West Bank:** The IDF intentionally detonated a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device on May 20 in Tubas.
- **Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights:** The IDF intercepted a "suspicious aerial target" over Syria before it entered Israeli territory.

Key Takeaways in the Israel-Hamas War

As of May 21, 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

Israeli forces continued clearing operations in Jabalia on May 21. Three IDF brigades are operating in Jabalia.[28] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) 7th Armored Brigade directed an airstrike targeting a Palestinian cell that fired at Israeli forces. Israeli forces found hand grenades, explosives, and other weapons while raiding Palestinian militia infrastructure.[29] Palestinian fighters engaged

Israeli forces in Jabalia refugee camp and east of the city using mortars, small arms, and improvised explosive devices (IED).[30]

The IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi visited Israeli forces in Jabalia on May 21.[31] Halevi met with commanders whose units recovered the bodies of four Israeli hostages in Jabalia refugee camp.[32] Halevi said that the IDF seeks to kill as many Palestinian militia commanders and fighters as possible, destroy military infrastructure, and return dead and living hostages to Israel.

The IDF 99th Division continued operations along the Netzarim corridor in southern Gaza City on May 21.[33] The IDF 679th Reservist Armored Brigade (attached to the 99th Division) directed an airstrike targeting Palestinian fighters in the area.[34] The brigade began an operation on May 20 to destroy militia infrastructure, such as tunnels, in Gaza City's Sabra neighborhood.[35] The 99th Division was previously operating in Zaytoun neighborhood, south of Sabra.[36]

US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Charles Brown Jr. said on May 20 that Israel's strategy in the northern Gaza Strip is making "achieving lasting stability more difficult."[37] Brown said that Israel has not been holding territory after conducting clearing operations, which allows Hamas to return to those areas. Israeli officials, including the IDF chief of staff, have criticized Israel's current operational concept because it lacks a clear post-war plan'.[38] CTP-ISW has previously observed that Hamas has exploited Israeli withdrawals from the northern Gaza Strip to begin reconstituting there.[39]

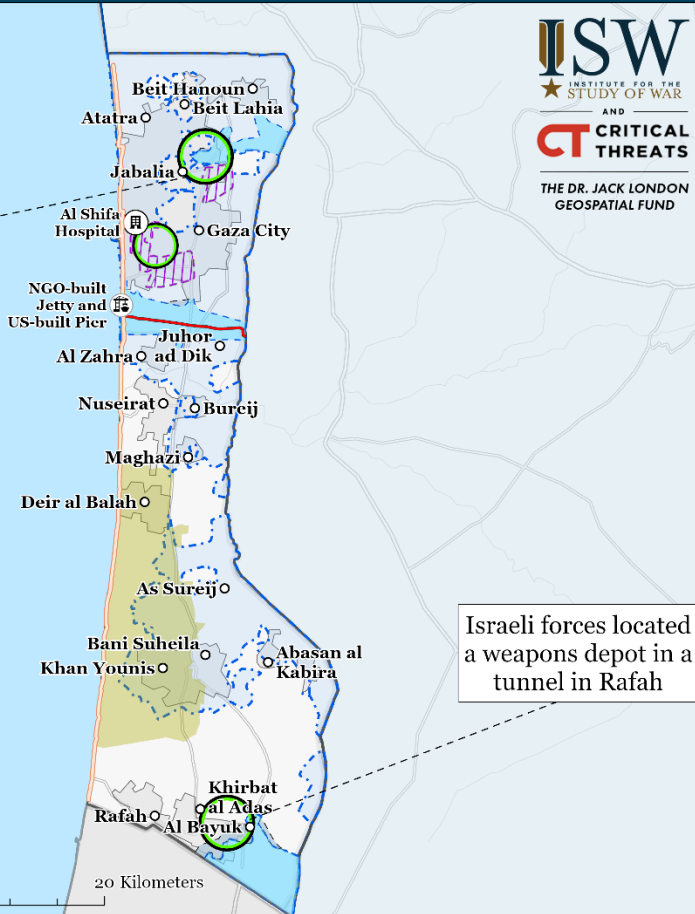
The IDF engaged Palestinian fighters in eastern Rafah on May 21. The IDF Givati Brigade detained three Palestinian fighters who emerged from a tunnel in the area.[40] The IDF also confirmed that the Nahal Brigade is operating in Rafah. The Nahal Brigade captured a tunnel shaft where Palestinian militias had stored RPGs, grenades, and other explosive devices.[41] The IDF currently has five brigades operating in Rafah.[42] A Palestinian journalist reported on May 21 that Israeli forces have not made any advances into urban areas of Rafah but are advancing along the Philadelphi Corridor.[43] Two Palestinian militias mortared Israeli forces operating in eastern Rafah.[44]

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

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The IDF chief of staff visited Israeli forces in Jabalia and reiterated that the IDF aims to kill Palestinian fighters, destroy military infrastructure, and rescue hostages



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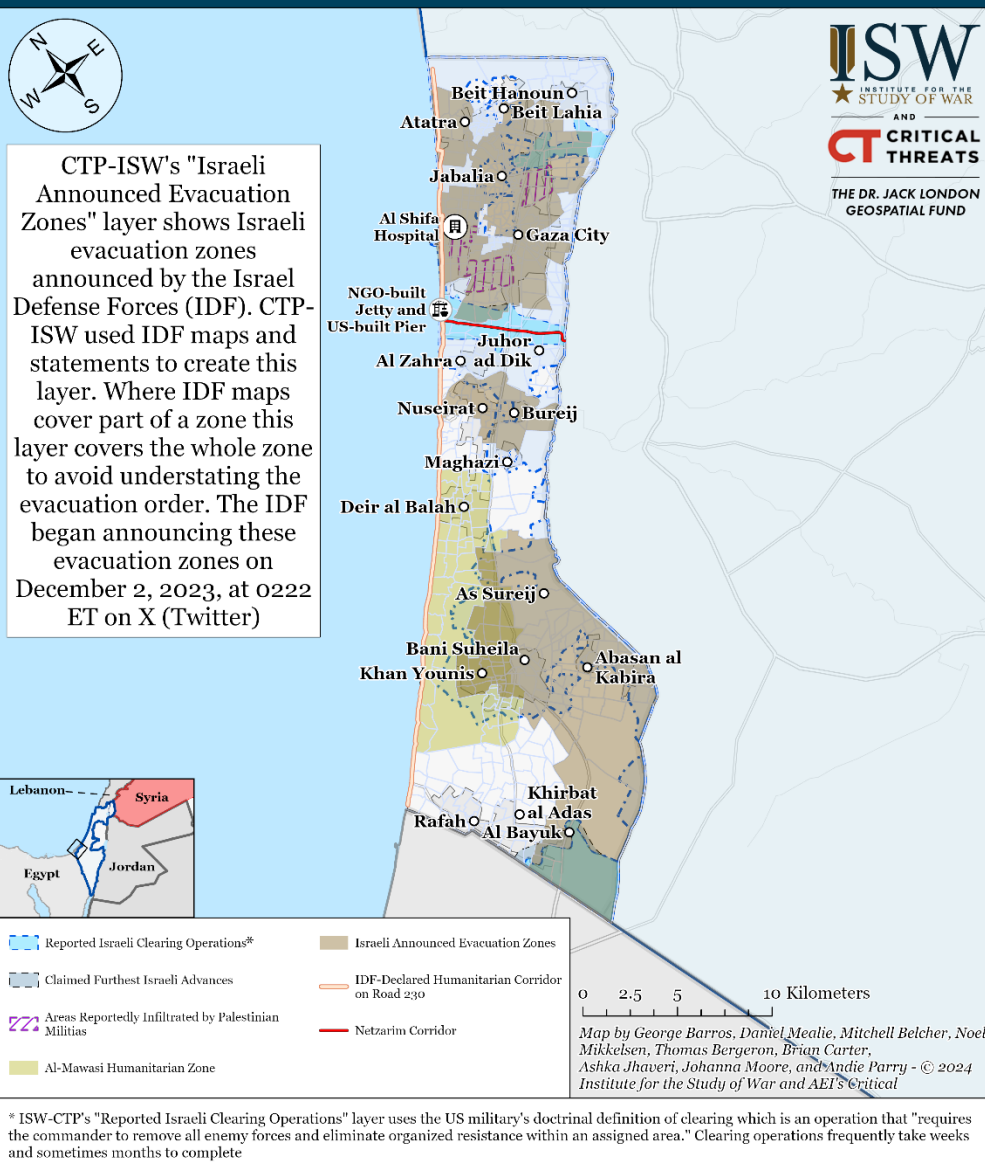
Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Brian Carter, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Andie Parry © 2024 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

Reported Israeli Clearing Operations	Areas Reportedly Infiltrated by Palestinian Militias	Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours	
Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances	IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridor on Road 230	Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone	
Assessed Furthest Extent of Israeli Clearing Operations	Netzarim 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

Israeli-Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip

As of May 21, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



The Washington Post reported on May 20 that Israel is planning a limited attack targeting Hamas in Rafah.[45] Unspecified officials said that US officials believe that the plan will result in fewer civilian casualties. The IDF was previously planning on sending two divisions into Rafah to destroy Hamas' four remaining battalions there.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan presented a proposal for ending the war to senior Israeli officials during his visit to Israel on May 19.[46] An Israeli journalist cited unspecified officials who said that the proposal includes a path to normalization with Saudi Arabia, an expanded regional security architecture to counter Iran that includes regional countries and the United States, funds to invest in the Gaza Strip, a deal for the release of hostages, and the promotion of a political agreement with Lebanese Hezbollah on Israel's northern border.[47] Israel would be required

to end the war, declare plans to pursue a political solution for Palestine, and agree on a mechanism for managing the Gaza Strip that does not involve Hamas or a military government.[48] The sources said Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did not say “no” to the proposal, but the two sides did not agree on unspecified details.[49] The US proposal states that Hamas cannot govern the Gaza Strip but fails to explain how the United States or Israel could ensure that outcome. Hamas has already attempted to reassert its governing authority during the war, especially in the northern Gaza Strip.

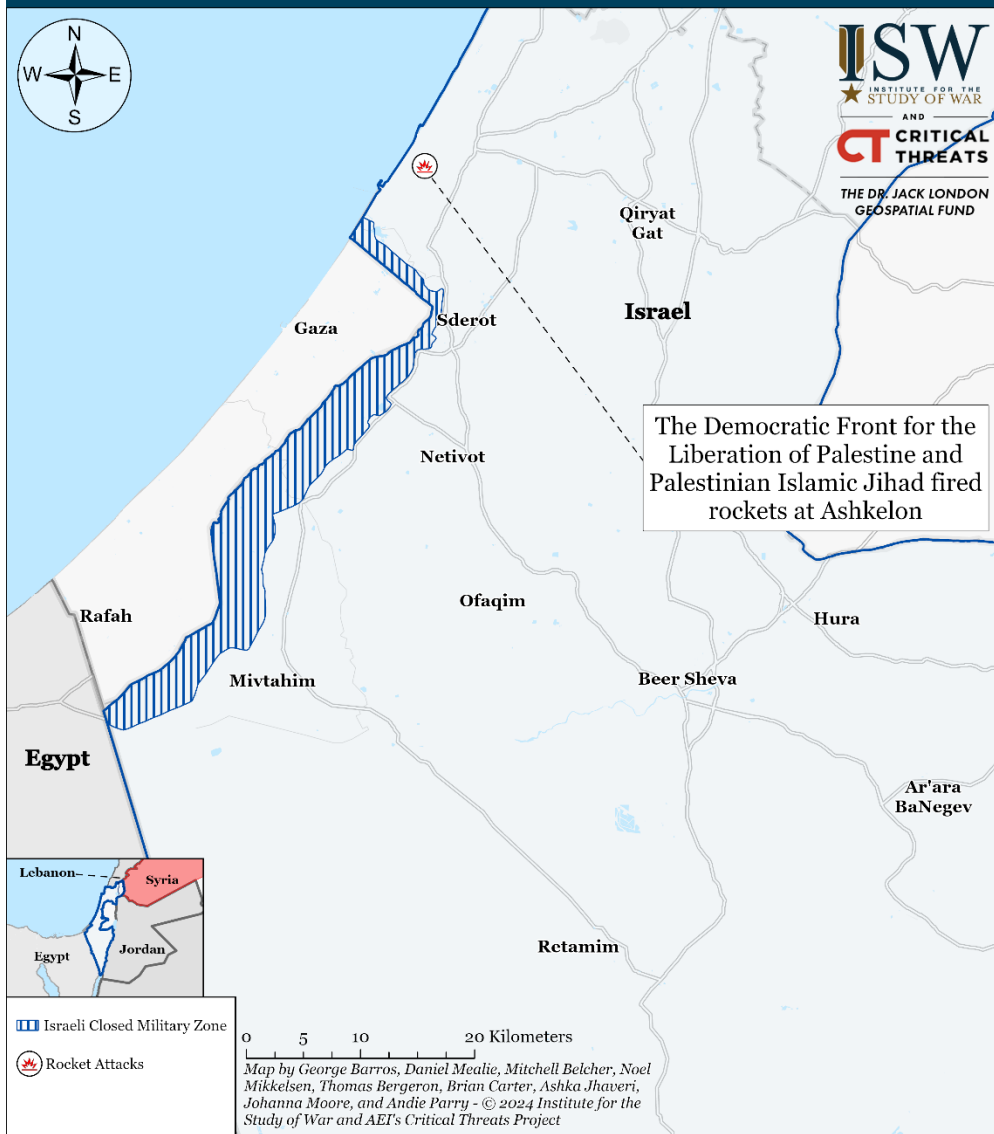
US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on May 21 that Israel will need to decide if it will agree to end the war in the Gaza Strip and take part in a “credible pathway to a Palestinian state” to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia.[50] Saudi Arabia has conditioned normalization with Israel on a path to Palestinian statehood.[51] Blinken said that bilateral agreements between the United States and Saudi Arabia would be worked out “relatively quick given all the work that’s been done.”

The United States said that no humanitarian aid from the US-constructed temporary pier in the central Gaza Strip has reached the broader Palestinian population.[52] US Pentagon spokesperson Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said on May 21 that the pier has facilitated the delivery of 569 metric tons of humanitarian aid. The United States, United Kingdom, United Arab Emirates, European Union, and other unspecified US partners have donated the aid. Ryder said that unspecified people or agencies still need to distribute the aid, which has so far only been delivered to the shore. Palestinians intercepted trucks delivering aid from the pier over the weekend which led the UN to suspend delivery operations.[53] Ryder said that the United States and the UN are working to establish “alternative routes” for the safe delivery of the aid. US officials previously hoped that the pier would process about 90 trucks of aid per day, later raising the number to 150.[54]

Palestinian militias conducted one indirect fire attack from the Gaza Strip into Israel on May 21.[55] The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Palestinian Islamic Jihad conducted a combined rocket attack targeting Ashkelon.[56]

Attacks into Israel from Gaza

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

West Bank

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

The IDF launched an operation in Jenin on May 21 targeting Hamas and PIJ personnel and Palestinian militia infrastructure in Jenin.[57] Israeli forces engaged Palestinian fighters in at least six locations in Jenin during the operation.[58] PIJ and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades targeted Israeli forces with small arms fire and improvised explosive devices (IED).[59] Palestinian media claimed that Palestinian fighters detonated at least 14 IEDs targeting Israeli forces in Jenin.[60] The IDF later deployed reinforcements to Jenin to support the IDF units already there

engaging Palestinian militias.[61] The IDF reported that it is investigating claims that seven civilians were killed during fighting between Israeli forces and Palestinian fighters.[62]

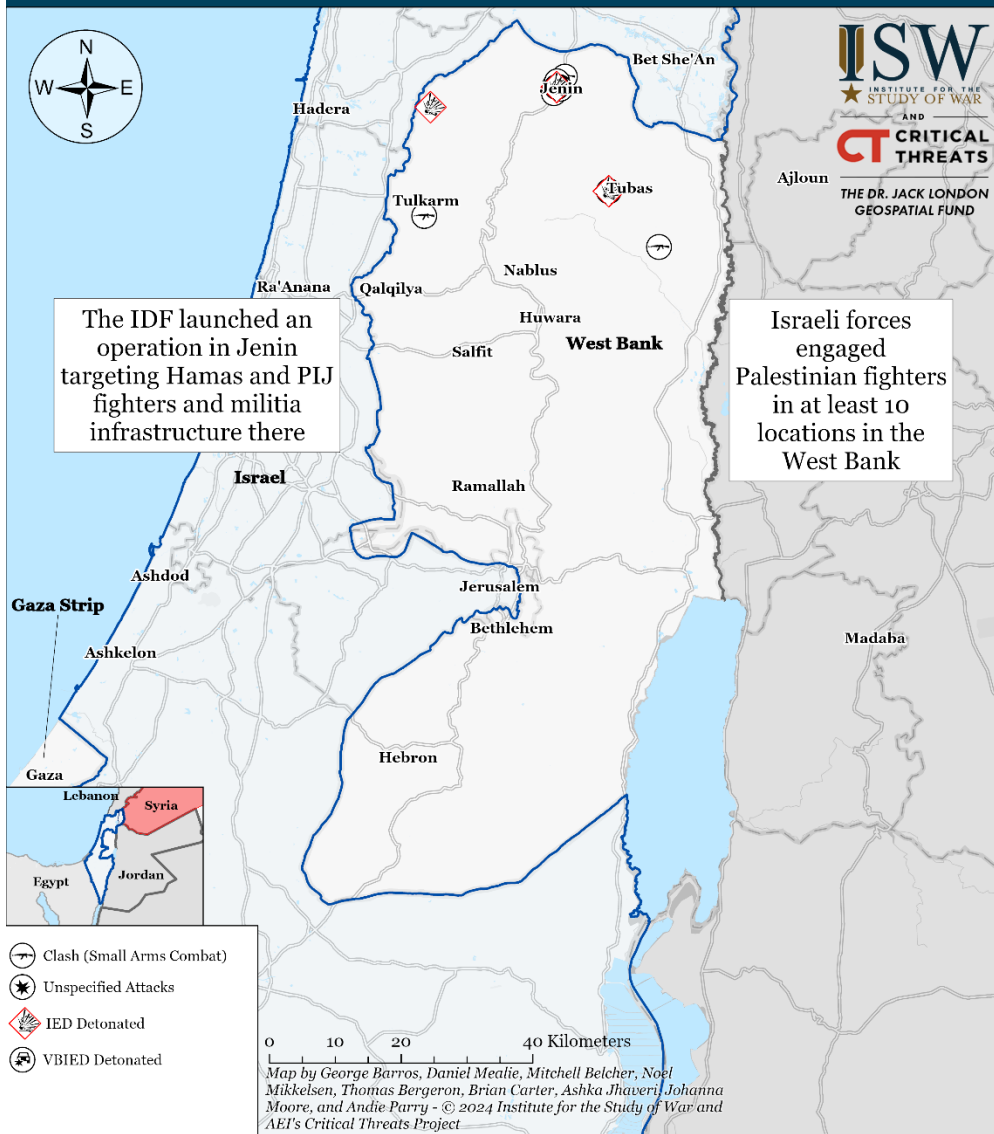
Israeli forces destroyed a home in Jenin that belonged to a Palestinian fighter who had conducted two shooting attacks, one of which killed Israeli economist Meir Tamari.[63] The IDF killed the Palestinian fighter in an airstrike in March 2024.

Israeli forces have engaged Palestinian fighters in at least 10 locations in the West Bank including Jenin since CTP-ISW's data cut off on May 20.[64] Unidentified Palestinian fighters shot at an unspecified vehicle near the Bekaot settlement in the Jordan Valley.[65] No casualties were reported from the attack. The IDF established checkpoints in the Jordan Valley following the incident.

The IDF intentionally detonated a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device on May 20 in Tubas.[66] This is the second VBIED that the IDF has discovered in Tubas since the Israel-Hamas war began in October 2023.[67] It is unclear how sophisticated this VBIED was. An Israeli military correspondent reported that Palestinian militias have started using larger and higher quality explosives to target Israeli forces “in recent months.”[68] Jordan has thwarted numerous attempts in recent months by Iran and its partners to smuggle weapons—including Claymore mines, C4, Semtex, Kalashnikovs, and 107mm Katyusha rockets—into the West Bank and Jordan.[69]

Significant Activity in the West Bank

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

Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

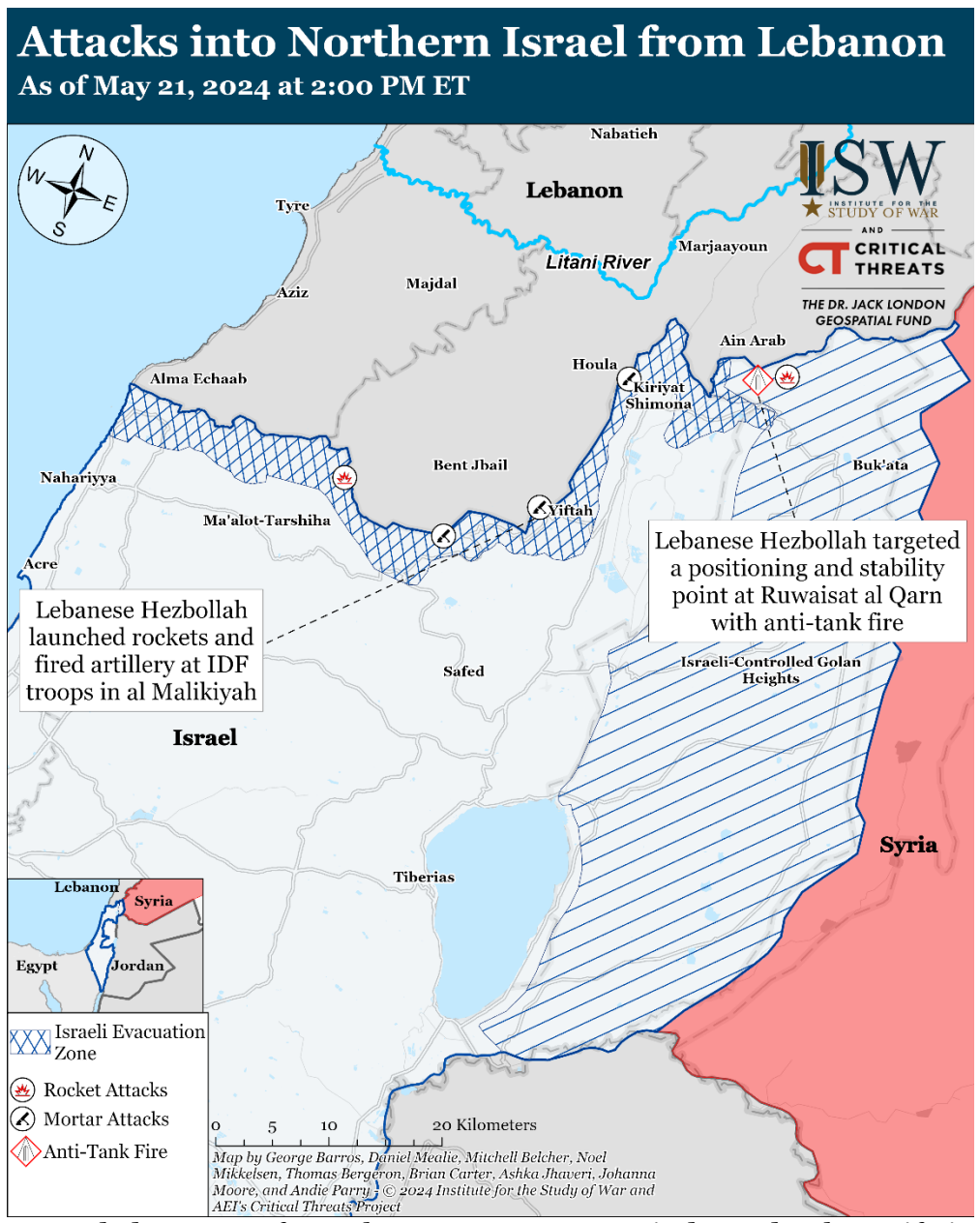
Axis of Resistance objectives:

- 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 has conducted at least 9 attacks into northern Israel since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on May 20.[70]

The IDF killed Lebanese Hezbollah commander Qassem Saqlawi in a drone strike in Tyre, southern Lebanon on May 20.[71] The IDF stated that Saqlawi commanded rocket and missile units in Hezbollah’s Coastal Sector and had conducted numerous rocket and anti-tank guided missile attacks targeting Israel. Hezbollah mourned Saqlawi’s death on May 20.[72]

The IDF intercepted a “suspicious aerial target” over Syria before it entered Israeli territory on May 20.[73] The Islamic Resistance of Iraq—an umbrella group of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—launched a drone attack targeting an IDF military base in the Golan Heights on May 20.[74] A southern Syrian journalist reported that the IDF shot down drones over the Yarmouk Basin, Daraa, towards the Golan Heights.[75]



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

Iran and Axis of Resistance

The Iranian government announced new details about the upcoming June 28 presidential election to replace recently deceased President Ebrahim Raisi. Raisi's term would have ended in August 2025.[76] The newly elected president will serve a full four-year presidential term rather than the remainder of Raisi's term, however. Iranian Election Headquarters Spokesperson Mohsen Eslami announced the timeline for the June 28 presidential election on May 21.[77] Eslami stated that presidential candidates can register between May 30 and June 3. The Guardian Council will then review the presidential candidates between June 4 and June 10. The Interior Ministry will announce the list of presidential candidates on June 11. The approved presidential candidates will campaign from June 12 to June 26. Campaigning will end on June 27 and the election will be held on June 28. The second round of elections will be held on July 5, if required. A runoff election is required if a presidential candidate does not win an absolute majority of votes in the first round, according to the Iranian constitution.[78] Eslami stated that officials are preparing for citizens to be able to vote electronically in Tehran and other major cities.[79]

United Kingdom-based Iranian opposition media reported on May 21 that various Iranian politicians are lobbying the Office of the Supreme Leader to prevent hardliner Saeed Jalali from entering the upcoming presidential election.[80] Key officials including Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, Expediency Council member Ali Larijani, and political advisor to the Supreme Leader Ali Shamkhani are lobbying against Jalali's candidacy. Jalali is one of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's representatives to the Supreme National Security Council. He is also an Expediency Council member. Jalali is likely to run for election. He previously ran for president in 2021 but withdrew in favor of Ebrahim Raisi.[81]

Houthi military spokesperson Brig. Gen. Yahya Sarea claimed that the Houthis shot down a US MQ-9 Reaper drone over a Houthi-controlled area of al Bayda Governorate, Yemen, on May 21.[82] Sarea claimed the Houthis used a "locally made" surface-to-air missile to shoot down the drone. Sarea previously claimed that the Houthis shot down a US MQ-9 Reaper drone over a Houthi-controlled area of Ma'rib Governorate, Yemen, on May 16.[83] CENTCOM has not acknowledged either incident. CTP-ISW cannot verify that the Houthis shot down either MQ-9.

The Islamic Resistance of Iraq—an umbrella group of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—launched two drones on May 20 targeting an unspecified "vital target" in Eilat.[84] Israeli fighter jets and an IDF Navy missile boat intercepted two aerial targets approaching Israeli territory from the east on May 20.[85] Locals in Eilat said that they saw the IDF intercept at least one drone off the coast of Eilat.[86] The IDF reported that the drones did not enter Israeli territory.

Iranian-sponsored Attacks in the Middle East

As of May 21, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



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