

Iran Update



Iran Update, May 23, 2024

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Information Cutoff: 2:00pm ET

Iran is capitalizing on the presence of senior Axis of Resistance officials in Tehran for Ebrahim Raisi's funeral to coordinate and cohere their approaches to the Israel-Hamas war. Iranian leaders held two meetings with senior Axis of Resistance officials in Tehran on May 23.[1] The first meeting included senior IRGC officers and representatives from several Palestinian militias, Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Houthis.[2] The participants discussed the "continuation of the jihad and struggle until the complete victory of the Palestinian resistance in the Gaza Strip." Photos published by Iranian state media indicate that the following individuals were in that meeting:

- IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami
- IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani
- Hamas Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh
- Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) Deputy Secretary General Mohammad al Hindi
- Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) Deputy Secretary General Jamil Mezher
- Hezbollah Deputy Secretary General Naim Qassem
- Houthi spokesperson Mohammad Abdul Salam

The second meeting involved the following individuals based on photos published by Iranian state media:

- Acting Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Bagheri Kani
- Hamas Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh
- Hamas founder Mousa Abu Marzouk
- Hamas Deputy Leader in the West Bank Zaher Jabarin
- PIJ Deputy Secretary General Mohammad al Hindi
- PIJ Leader in Lebanon Ihsan Ataya
- PFLP Deputy Secretary General Jamil Mezher

The publication of this information is especially noteworthy given that Iranian state media does not typically report on such meetings in such detail. Iran likely published the information to signal the close alignment and cooperation between Tehran and its regional partners and proxies.

The IDF found tunnels used by Palestinian militias during a two-day operation into Jenin City in the West Bank.[3] The IDF announced that hundreds of Israeli personnel participated in the operation to destroy militia infrastructure, including tunnels, and kill Palestinian fighters. The IDF engaged fighters from Hamas and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades during the operation.[4]

The IDF targeted tunnels in Jenin City as part of an Israeli effort to destroy militia capabilities and infrastructure, especially tunnels, in the West Bank before Palestinian militias can use them to attack Israel. IDF Chief of Staff Major General Herzi Halevi framed the operation into Jenin City in such terms on May 22.[5] The IDF seeks to prevent Palestinian militias from building tunnels around the Israel–West Bank border that would support offensive cross-border attacks like what Hamas did in October 2023. The IDF has targeted other tunnels around the Israel–West Bank border in recent months to this end. The IDF discovered and destroyed a tunnel that was dozens of meters long in the Jenin refugee camp in July 2023, for instance.[6] Israeli media separately reported in March 2024 that the IDF has found tunnel shafts in the Nour Shams refugee camp in Tulkarm, which like Jenin is close to the border with Israel.[7]

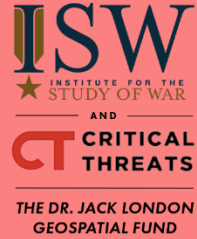
Palestinian militias building offensive tunnels in the West Bank could be at least partly based on how Iranian leaders are planning to destroy Israel in the long term. Senior Iranian military officers are arguing that their Axis of Resistance should launch surprise ground attacks into Israel from Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank.[8] Their thinking proceeds from the theory that protracted ground campaigns into Israel would disrupt the Israeli political and social order and compel Jewish citizens to flee Israel. Major General Gholam Ali Rashid, who is a senior Iranian military decisionmaker responsible for joint operations, asserted on May 4 that a force of 10,000 fighters from Lebanon, 10,000 fighters from the Gaza Strip, and 2,000–3,000 from the West Bank would be enough to destabilize Israel in this manner.[9] The tunnels that the IDF is targeting could facilitate attacks along the lines that Iranian leaders have described by helping Palestinian fighters move into Israel and stage follow-on ground attacks.

Key Takeaways:

- **Iran:** Iran is capitalizing on the presence of senior Axis of Resistance officials in Tehran for Ebrahim Raisi's funeral to coordinate and cohere their approaches to the Israel–Hamas war.
- **West Bank:** The IDF found militia tunnels in Jenin as part of an Israeli effort to destroy militia capabilities and tunnels in the West Bank before they can be used to attack Israel.
- **Gaza Strip:** Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant announced that Israel would deploy additional military assets to Rafah.
- **Yemen:** The Houthi supreme leader announced that the Houthis attacked international shipping in the Mediterranean Sea in recent days. There is no evidence to support this claim.

Key Takeaways in the Israel-Hamas War

As of May 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 IDF announced on May 23 that its Netzah Yehuda Battalion (900th Kfir Brigade) conducted a raid into Beit Hanoun in recent days.[10] Israeli forces have conducted several operations into Beit Hanoun since beginning ground operations in the Gaza Strip in late October 2023.[11] The Netzah Yehuda Battalion last operated in Beit Hanoun in late April 2024.[12] The IDF reported that the battalion killed Palestinian fighters and destroyed militia infrastructure above and below ground in Beit Hanoun during the most recent operation.[13] Three IDF soldiers were killed in two separate incidents during the operation.[14] Hamas fighters engaged Israeli forces using small arms, anti-personnel mines, grenades, and an explosively formed penetrator (EFP).[15] Hamas also claimed that it conducted a complex, multi-stage attack targeting Israeli forces.[16] The repeated IDF raids into Beit Hanoun and the complex attack indicate that Palestinian militias remain active and combat effective there.

The IDF 98th Division killed Hamas Beit Hanoun Battalion Commander Hussein Fayyad in Jabalia on May 23.[17] Israeli forces engaged Fayyad in an “underground compound.” The 98th Division is currently operating in uncleared parts of Jabalia. The IDF said that Fayyad directed mortar and anti-tank missile launches into Israel from the northern Gaza Strip.

Israeli forces continued to conduct clearing operations in Jabalia on May 23. The IDF 98th Division directed an airstrike on an ammunition storage building in the “heart of Jabalia” and killed several Hamas fighters.[18] The IDF 7th Brigade seized small arms, explosive charges, grenades, and combat equipment.[19] An Israeli Army Radio correspondent said that the 98th Division “has gained operational control over most of the area” after two weeks of operations in Jabalia.[20] Palestinian fighters targeted Israeli forces with mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, and small arms fire in Jabalia refugee camp and eastern Jabalia on May 23.[21]

The IDF 99th Division continued operations along the Netzarim corridor in southern Gaza City on May 23. The 99th Division directed airstrikes targeting Palestinian fighters that had fired at Israeli forces and another fighter that had entered Israeli territory on October 7.[22] The IDF 679th Reservist Armored Brigade directed strikes targeting several Palestinian militia cells, including a cell moving military equipment.[23]

The IDF engaged Palestinian fighters in eastern Rafah on May 23. The IDF Nahal, Givati, and 401st brigades conducted operations in the Brazil and Shabura neighborhoods in Rafah.[24] The Brazil neighborhood borders the Philadelphi corridor, of which Israeli forces control at least half.[25] The Nahal and Givati brigades identified and destroyed tunnel shafts and rocket launchers and engaged Palestinian militias in close-range encounters.[26] The IDF 401st Brigade located a loaded rocket launcher.[27] The Israeli Air Force killed three Palestinian mortar squad fighters, who had fired rockets at IDF units in Rafah.[28] Palestinian fighters engaged Israeli forces in Rafah using mortars and improvised explosive devices (IED) on May 23.[29]

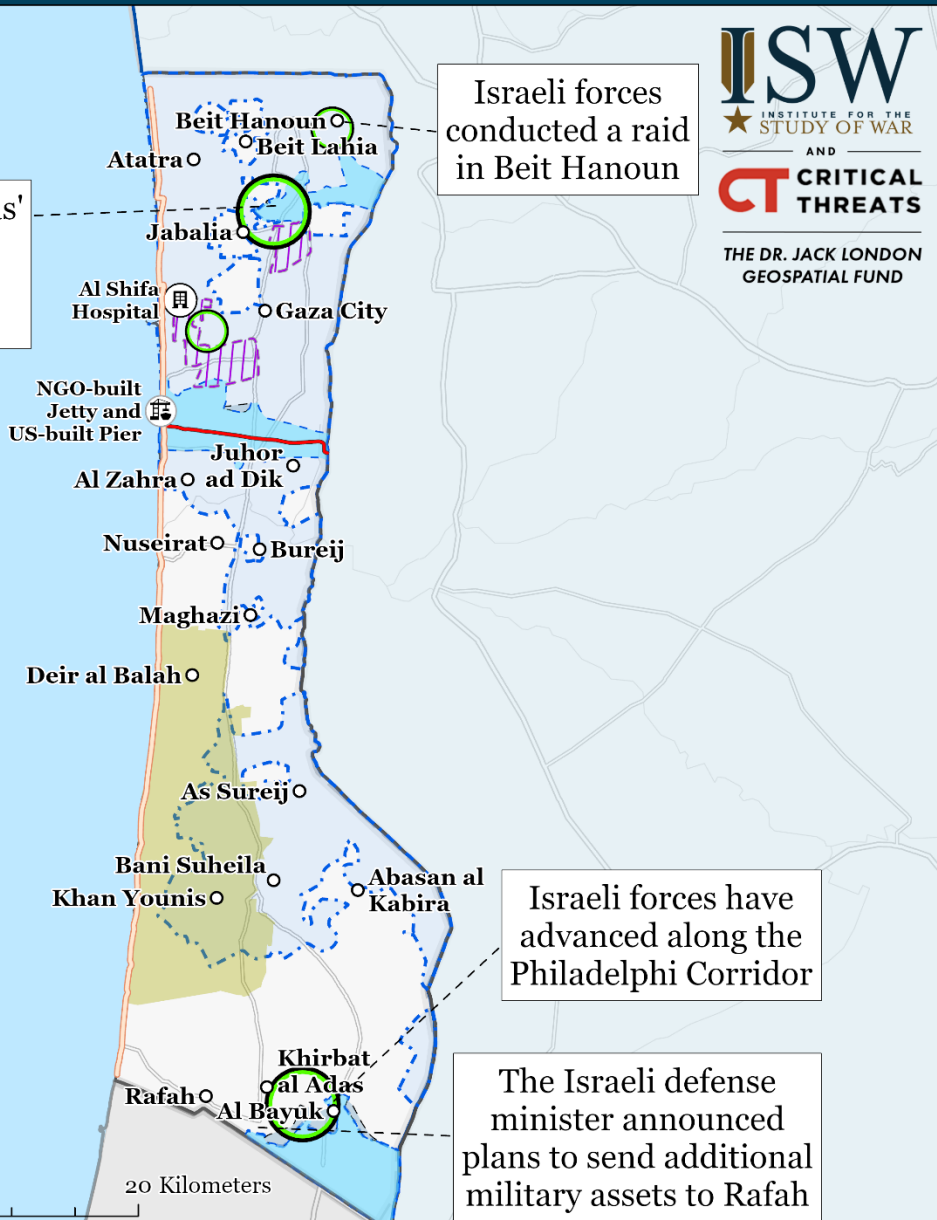
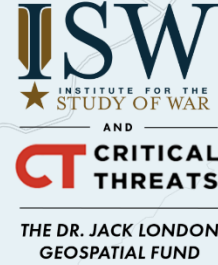
Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

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



Israeli forces killed Hamas' Beit Hanoun Battalion commander in a tunnel beneath Jabalia

Israeli forces conducted a raid in Beit Hanoun



Israeli forces have advanced along the Philadelphi Corridor

The Israeli defense minister announced plans to send additional military assets to Rafah

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

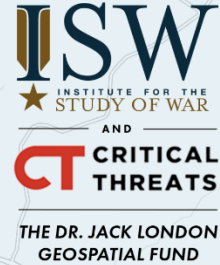
Reported Israeli Clearing Operations	Areas Reportedly Infiltrated by Palestinian Militias	Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances	IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridor on Road 230	Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone
Assessed Furthest Extent of Israeli Clearing Operations	Netzarim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



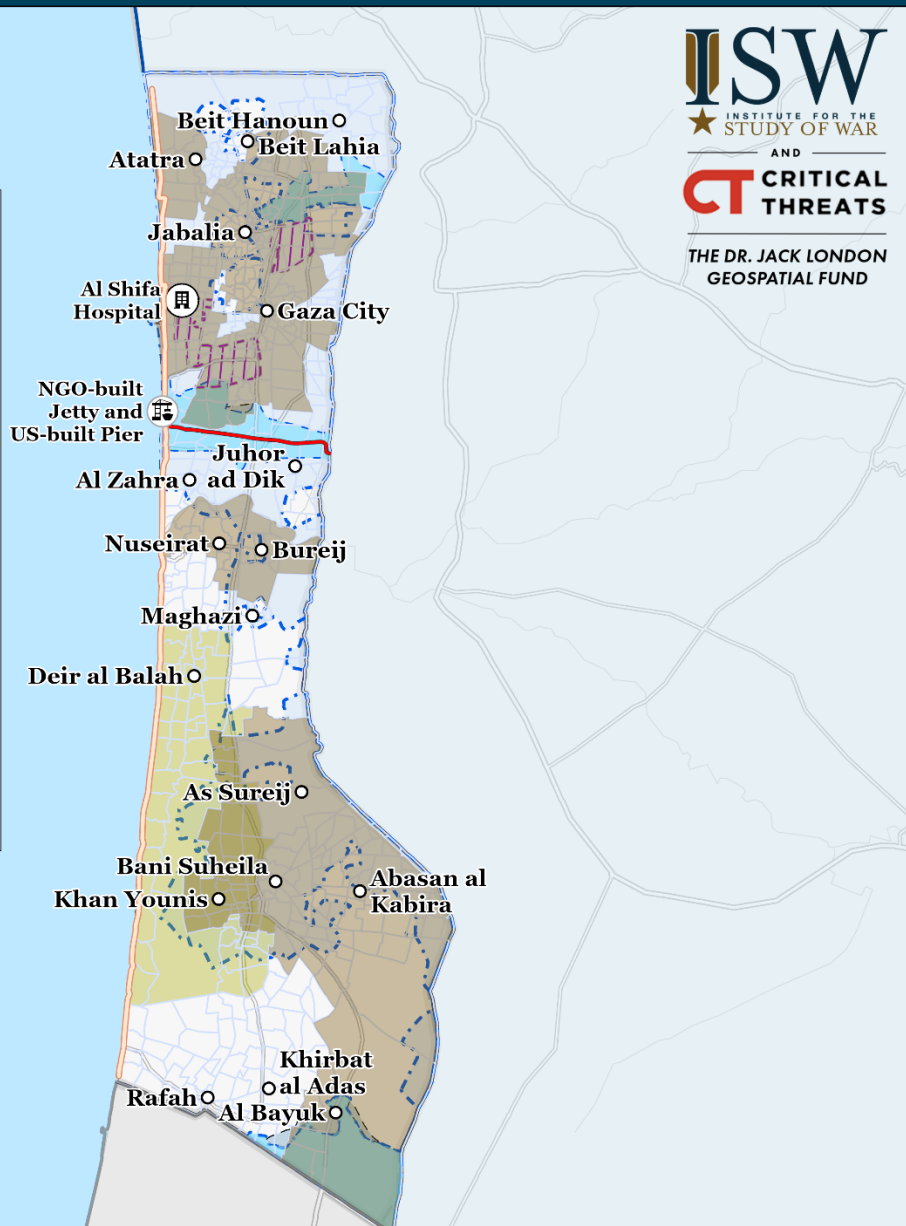
* ISW-CTP's "Reported Israeli Clearing Operations" layer uses the US military's doctrinal definition of clearing which is an operation that "requires the commander to remove all enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance within an assigned area." Clearing operations frequently take weeks and sometimes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

Israeli-Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip

As of May 23, 2024 at 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)



Reported Israeli Clearing Operations*	Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones
Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances	IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridor on Road 230
Areas Reportedly Infiltrated by Palestinian Militias	Netzarim Corridor
Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone	

0 2.5 5 10 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

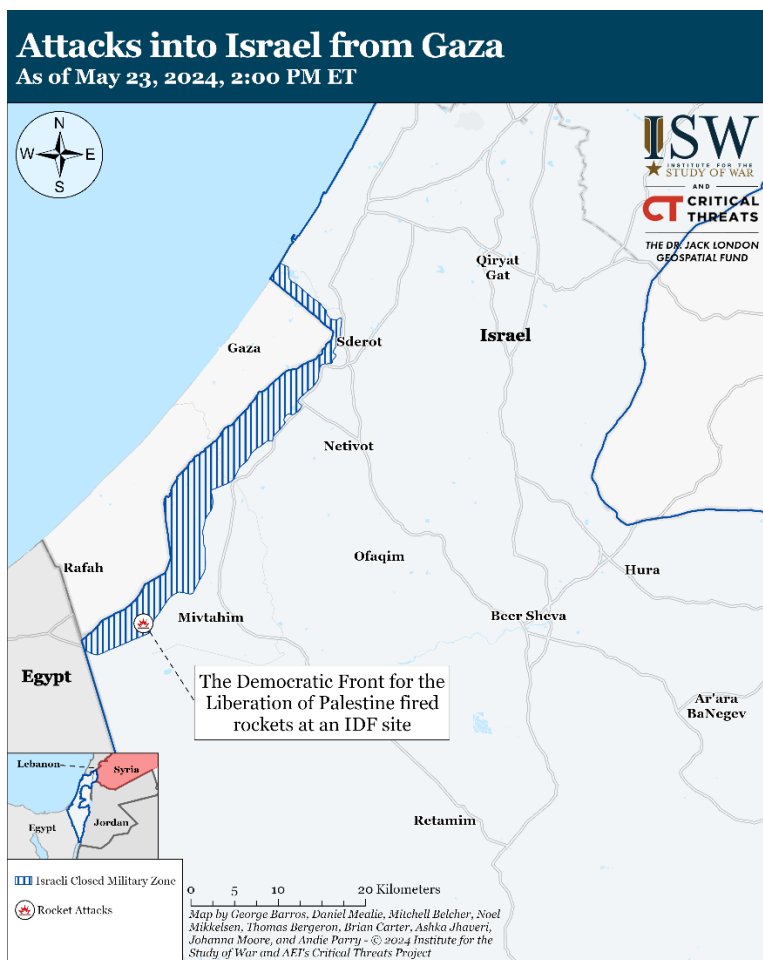
* ISW-CTP's "Reported Israeli Clearing Operations" layer uses the US military's doctrinal definition of clearing which is an operation that "requires the commander to remove all enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance within an assigned area." Clearing operations frequently take weeks and sometimes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

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said on May 23 that Israel would deploy additional military assets to Rafah.[30] Gallant said that additional air and ground forces in Rafah would “create the conditions for the hostages to return home” and “cause a very hard blow to Hamas.”[31] There are currently five IDF brigades in eastern Rafah.[32]

The Israeli War Cabinet directed its negotiating team on May 22 to continue ceasefire and hostage talks, according to Israeli media.[33] Unspecified Arab sources reported that Egyptian officials are attempting to renew indirect talks between Israel and Hamas.[34]

An IDF spokesperson said that Israel has temporarily evacuated about one million civilians from Rafah.[35] The IDF estimated earlier this week that between 800,000 and 950,000 civilians had evacuated from Rafah.[36] Commercially available satellite imagery shows that make-shift camps in Rafah have been dismantled and moved to Khan Younis, Deir al Balah, and the al Mawasi humanitarian zone.

Palestinian militias conducted at least one indirect fire attack from the Gaza Strip into Israel on May 23.[37] The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) fired rockets at an IDF site near the Gaza Strip border.[38]



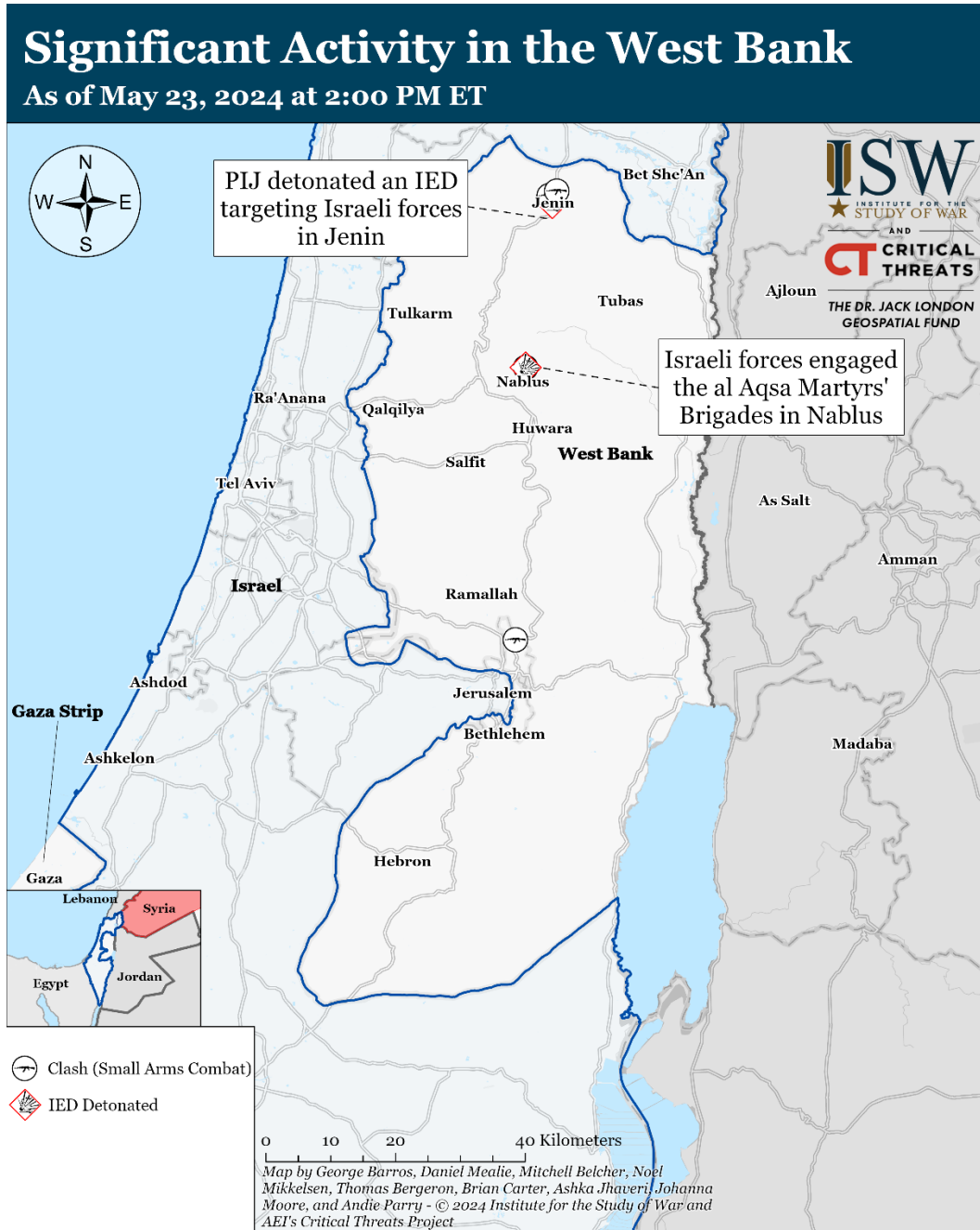
Recorded reports of attacks; CTP-ISW cannot independently verify impact.

West Bank

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

Israeli forces have engaged Palestinian fighters in at least five locations in the West Bank since CTP-ISW's data cut off on May 22.[39] The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades fired small arms and detonated IEDs targeting Israeli forces in Nablus.[40] PIJ detonated an IED targeting Israeli forces in Jenin.[41]



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

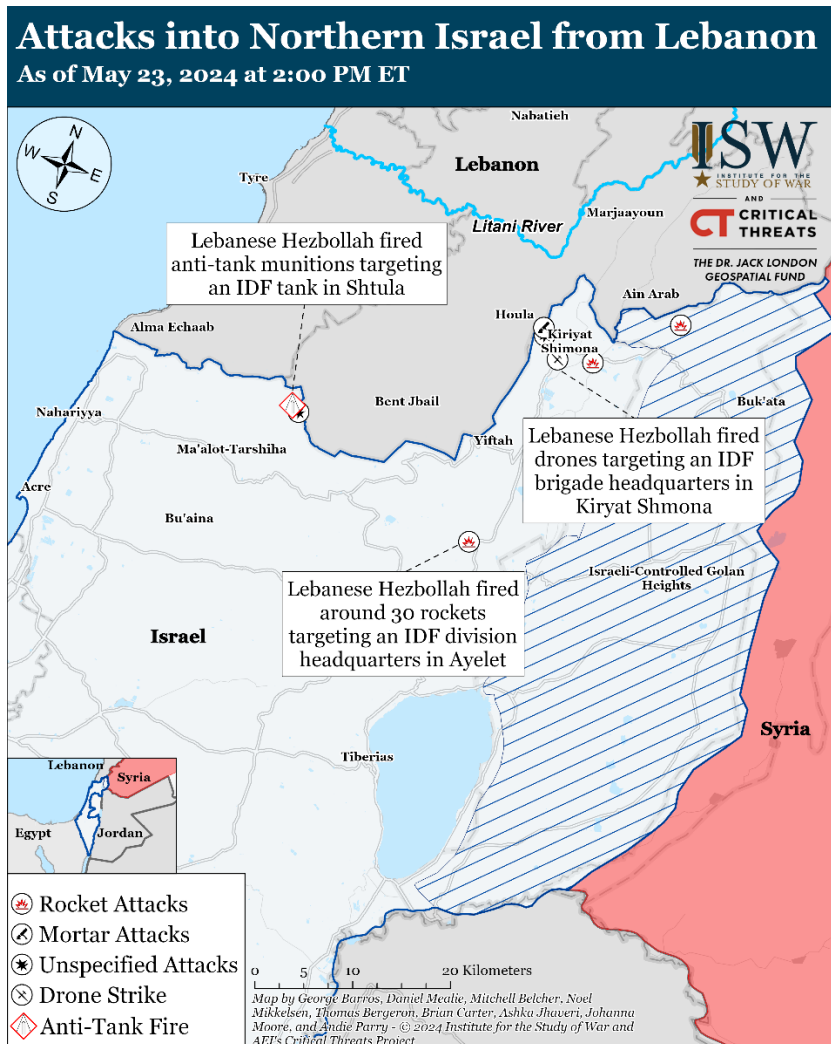
Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

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

Iranian-backed militias, including Lebanese Hezbollah, have conducted at least ten attacks into northern Israel since CTP-ISW's data cut off on May 22.[42]

The IDF killed a Hezbollah weapons expert in an airstrike in Nabatieh, southern Lebanon, on May 23.[43] The IDF said that Mohammad Ali Nasser Farran was responsible for weapons manufacturing and created “strategic and unique weapons” for Hezbollah.[44] The IDF added that Israeli forces have targeted Farran’s manufacturing infrastructure in southern Lebanon in recent months. Hezbollah mourned Farran’s death on May 23.[45] The IDF detained two individuals attempting to cross into the Golan Heights from Syria on May 23.[46]



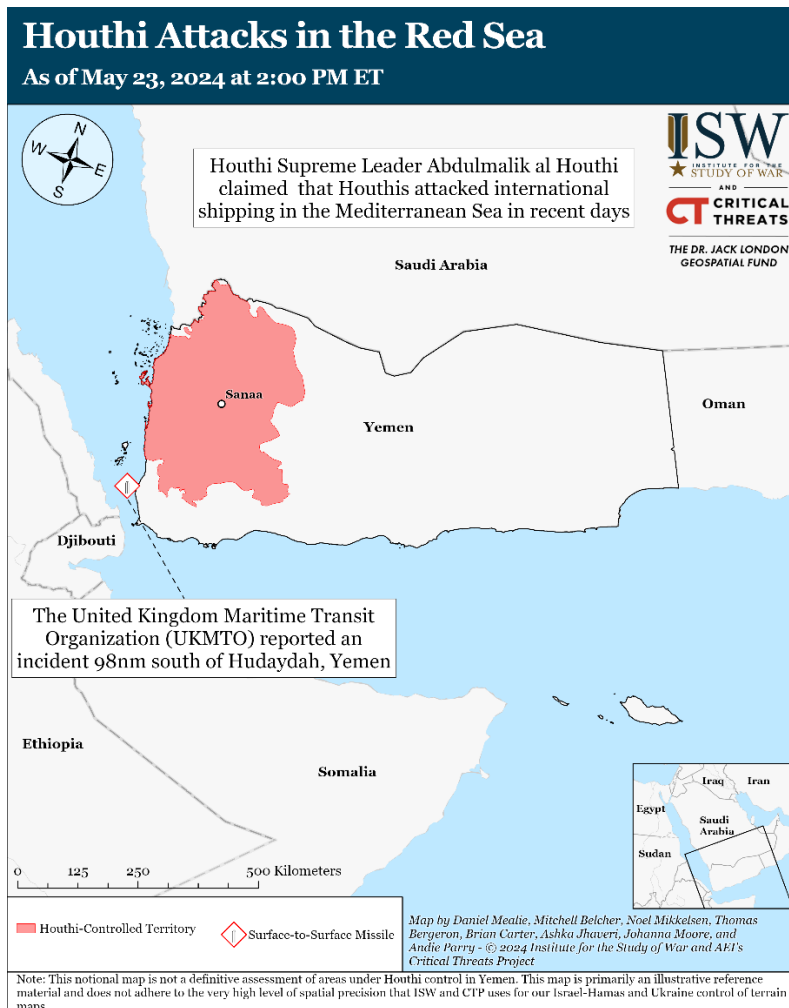
Recorded reports of attacks; CTP-ISW cannot independently verify impact.

Iran and Axis of Resistance

Houthi Supreme Leader Abdul Malik al Houthi claimed on May 23 that Houthis have attacked international shipping in the Mediterranean Sea in recent days.[47] Abdul Malik's claim comes after the Houthis announced on May 3 that they began a "fourth phase" of escalation by targeting international shipping bound for Israel in the Mediterranean Sea.[48] An unnamed senior defense official told *Bloomberg* on May 22 that the Houthis have weapons that can reach the Mediterranean Sea.[49] The unnamed official added that they have not detected any Houthi strikes in the Mediterranean Sea to this point.

The Houthi rhetoric about the Mediterranean Sea reflects the larger intent of Iran and its Axis of Resistance to extend their military reach into the Mediterranean Sea. Senior Iranian and Houthi officials have discussed repeatedly in recent months the need to project force into the Mediterranean Sea as part of their effort to impose an unofficial blockade on Israel.[50] Tehran and its allies appear to be operating on the theory that severe economic disruption would coerce Israel to accept defeat in the Gaza Strip.

The United Kingdom Maritime Transit Organization (UKMTO) reported an incident 98 nautical miles south of Hudaydah, Yemen, on May 23.[51] UKMTO stated that a missile impacted the water "in close proximity" to a merchant vessel. UKMTO reported that all members of the crew are safe.



The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—has claimed three attacks targeting Israel since CTP-ISW’s last data cut off on May 22.[52] The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed two separate drone attacks targeting the Golan Heights and an unspecified “vital target” in Eilat.[53] The Islamic Resistance in Iraq also claimed an al Arqab cruise missile attack targeting Haifa port.[54] CTP-ISW cannot verify whether any of these attacks actually occurred.

Iranian Interim President Mohammad Mokhber emphasized that Iranian foreign policy will remain unchanged while meeting foreign leaders visiting Tehran for Ebrahim Raisi’s funeral on May 22. Mokhber met with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, Egyptian Foreign Affairs Minister Sameh Shoukry, and Tajikistani President Emomali Rahmon.[55] Mokhber emphasized that Iran will continue its policy of “expanding relations and cooperation” with neighboring countries during his meeting with Pashinyan.[56] Mokhber added that Iran will continue to adhere to its “commitments and agreements” with Armenia. Pashinyan also met with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on May 22.[57] It is notable that Khamenei and Mokhber met with Pashinyan amid his deteriorating relations with Russia. Pashinyan met with Khamenei and Mokhber shortly after he indirectly accused Russia of helping Azerbaijan to prepare for the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War.[58]

It is also notable that the Azerbaijani prime minister and foreign affairs minister, who both traveled to Iran to attend Ebrahim Raisi’s funeral, have not yet met with senior Iranian officials, such as Khamenei and Mokhber, on the sidelines of the funeral.[59] Raisi inaugurated a dam on the Iran-Azerbaijan border with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev shortly before his death on May 19.[60] Iranian media highlighted on May 22 that Aliyev, along with the presidents of Russia, Syria, Turkey, and Venezuela, did not attend Raisi’s funeral.[61]

Former Iranian reformist President Mohammad Khatami called on the Iranian regime to hold competitive presidential elections, warning that a lack of competition will lead to low voter turnout.[62] Khatami suggested that Iranian elections have become meaningless and stated that people lose their desire to vote when their preferred candidate does not compete. Khatami was referring to the fact that the range of acceptable political discourse in Iran has continued to narrow, as Khamenei and his underlings have marginalized relative moderate and reformist factions in recent years. Iranian officials have touted the historically high voter turnout in Iran as demonstrating the regime’s legitimacy and public backing.[63] Voter participation in presidential and parliamentary elections has declined precipitously in recent years, however, as significant swaths of the population have become increasingly disillusioned with the regime.[64] Khatami also stated that the Iranian constitution must be revised but did not specify how. Reformist media outlet Jamaran published Khatami’s remarks, which is noteworthy given that the Iranian judiciary banned outlets from mentioning Khatami in 2015.[65]

Iran held two additional funeral services for Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in Birjand, South Khorasan Province, and Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi Province, on May 23.[66] Iranian state media reported that three million people gathered in the streets outside the funeral in Mashhad.[67] Raisi was buried in Mashhad, where he was born.[68]

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