



Iran Update, December 22, 2023

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Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm EST

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.

Key Takeaways:

1. Israeli forces are executing tasks consistent with holding operations in Beit Hanoun and al Shati Camp in the northern Gaza Strip.
2. Palestinian militia fighters are attempting to defend against Israeli advances in dense, urban terrain in the northwestern Gaza Strip.
3. The United Nations Security Council passed a resolution to boost humanitarian aid in the Gaza Strip, but the resolution did not call for a ceasefire.
4. Israeli forces located long-range rocket launchers which the al Qassem Brigades likely used to launch a large salvo of rockets at Tel Aviv.

5. The *New York Times* reported that the Biden administration is holding talks with Israel, Lebanon, and intermediaries for Lebanese Hezbollah to “reduce tensions” on the Israel-Lebanon border.
6. Spokesperson for Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Ashab al Kahf Abu Murtaja al Husseini said that the Islamic Resistance in Iraq will reject any discussion on stopping attacks targeting US positions in Iraq.
7. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed a drone attack targeting Eilat, Israel on December 21 in retaliation for civilian deaths in the Gaza Strip.
8. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that an Iranian spy ship is directing Houthi attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea.



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.

Israeli forces are executing tasks consistent with holding operations in Beit Hanoun and al Shati Camp in the northern Gaza Strip. Israeli forces redeployed some units responsible for clearing Beit Hanoun and al Shati Camp and backfilled them with new units in mid-December to hold the cleared areas.[1] The backfilling units are conducting raids against infrastructure and clashing with small cells of Palestinian fighters. These operations aim to secure cleared areas, which is one of the tasks executed during the hold phase. The tactical task of secure is defined by the US military as efforts to prevent a unit, facility, geographic location, or population from being destroyed or damaged.[2] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said on December 22 that Israeli forces supported by air support raided a compound in Beit Hanoun last week.[3] The IDF collected weapons, ammunition, and equipment that Palestinian militias captured previously from IDF units. Palestinian fighters also ambushed Israeli forces from a tunnel shaft in a school in Beit Hanoun the day before the unit began operations.[4] Israeli forces have been conducting raids on buildings on the outskirts of al Shati Camp in Gaza City since December 20, to uncover Hamas positions and materials such as weapons, ammunition, and maps.[5]

Israeli forces are continuing to fight Palestinian militias in Gaza City's Rimal neighborhood. [6] The IDF located and destroyed a vast underground complex in the neighborhood used by Hamas political and military leaders to manage Hamas operations.[7] Palestinian militia fighters have claimed very few attacks in Rimal since Israeli forces entered the area in mid-November.[8]

Palestinian militia fighters are attempting to defend against Israeli advances in dense, urban terrain in the northwestern Gaza Strip. The IDF released a video on December 22 showing a Palestinian fighter placing a command-wired improvised explosive device (IED) on the side of an alley as Israeli forces moved through Jabalia.[9] An IDF colonel in Jabalia reported that Israeli forces are clearing Jabalia building by building. The colonel said that Palestinian fighters are hiding inside buildings and targeting the IDF units with small arms fire and grenades as they attempt to clear buildings.[10] The al Quds Brigades—the militant wing of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)—and the al Qassem Brigades—the militant wing of Hamas—claimed a combined ambush on Israeli forces inside a house east of Jabalia.[11]

The Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades—the militant wing of Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)—claimed that its fighters fired rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) at Israeli forces as they advanced west of Jabalia in the Sheikh Radwan Neighborhood.[12] Palestinian militias have claimed nearly daily attacks in Sheikh Radwan Neighborhood since the truce ended on December 1, which suggests that it is one of the remaining areas of significant Palestinian militia defensive capabilities in the northern Gaza Strip.[13] CTP-ISW assess that Hamas' Radwan Battalion remains combat effective but under active and intense IDF pressure.[14]

The al Qassem Brigades claimed on December 22 that its fighters conducted a complex attack on five Israeli soldiers inside a house in Beit Lahia using anti-tank munitions and small arms.[15] The militia posted footage of its forces firing at Israeli soldiers from windows.[16]

The IDF Arabic-language spokesperson posted evacuation orders covering specific areas in Nuseirat and Bureij in the central Gaza Strip on X (Twitter) at 02:05 EST on December 22. The orders highlight specific blocks and neighborhoods in the al Bureij refugee camp, Badr, the northern coast, al Nuzha, al Zahra, al Buraq, al Rawda, and al Safa.[17] The spokesperson directed residents to move to shelters in Deir al Balah.[18] Israeli forces expanded clearing operations to target Hamas' Central Gaza Strip Brigade on December 21.[19]

Palestinian militia fighters south of Gaza City are defending against Israeli advances into the central Gaza Strip. Israeli forces are launching clearing operations targeting Hamas' Central Brigade into the central Gaza Strip from south of Gaza City.[20] The al Qassem Brigades published footage of its fighters firing at Israeli forces in buildings in Mughraqa.[21] The al Quds Brigades fired an RPG at an Israeli tank in Zaytoun on the Israeli line of advance.[22] Israeli forces conducted clearing operations in the southern Gaza City and Juhor ad Dik where they located weapons including a rocket launcher aimed at southern Israel.[23]

The IDF deployed additional units to support its clearing operations in Khan Younis over the past week. The IDF reported on December 22 that it added a brigade to its offensive operations in Khan Younis.[24] Israeli forces are locating tunnel shafts and intelligence materials during clearing operations in the area. The IDF located a large quantity of weapons, uniforms, IEDs, and other military equipment during a series of offensive operations in Khan Younis. The IDF found National Resistance Brigades—the militant wing of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP)—posters and flags in one of the raids.[25] There are several Palestinian militias operating in the Gaza Strip to resist Israeli clearing operations.

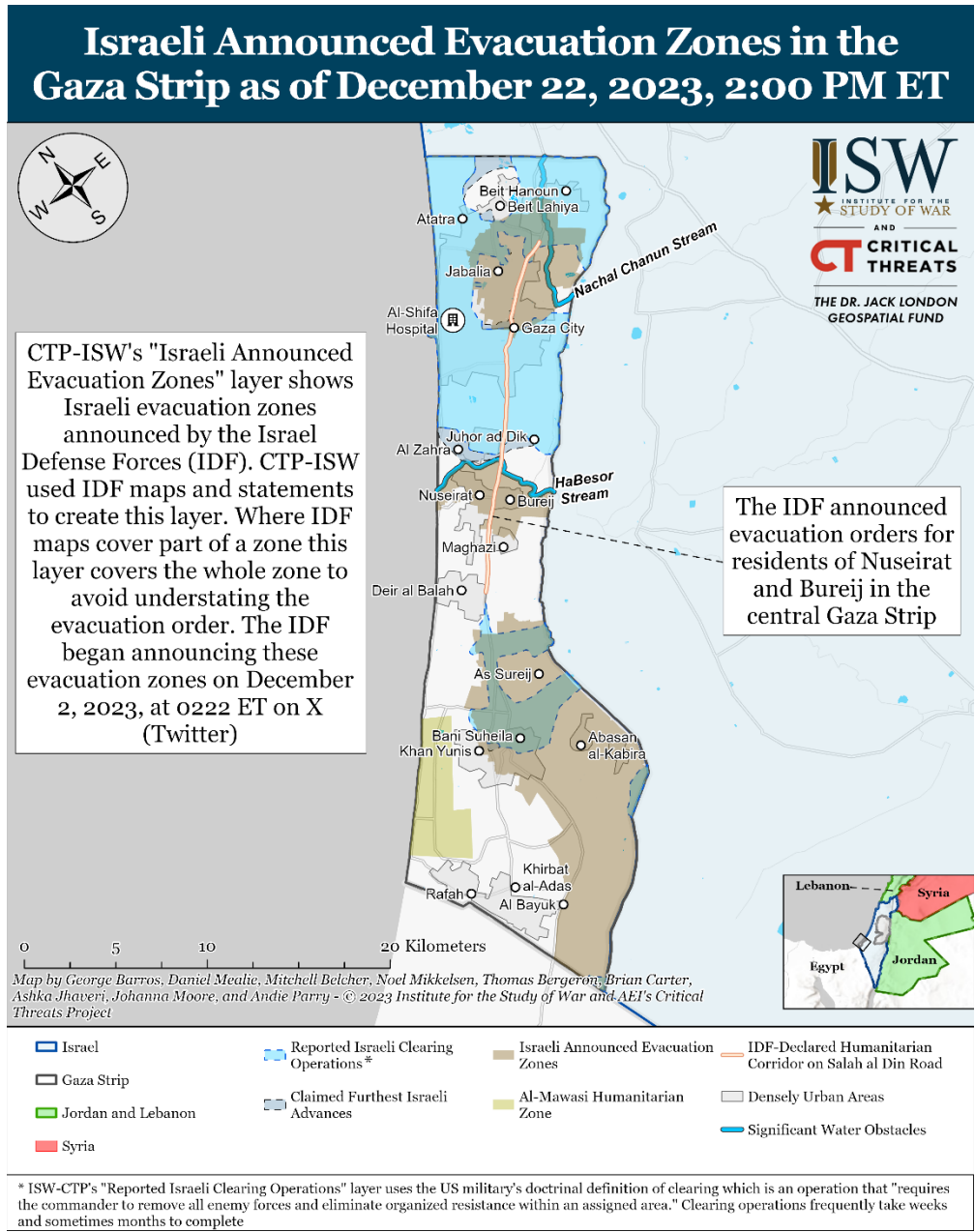
The Israeli Air Force killed several Hamas military commanders in Khan Younis including a Hamas officer in charge of drones and several field-level commanders al Qassem Brigades' naval commandos, the Nukhba forces.[26]

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said Israeli forces are close to killing Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip Yahya Sinwar.[27] Gallant attended an Israeli situational assessment with senior members of the war cabinet on December 22.[28] The IDF believes that Sinwar is hiding underground in the southern Gaza Strip.[29] Gallant noted that the IDF is achieving its operational goals in the northern Gaza Strip.[30]

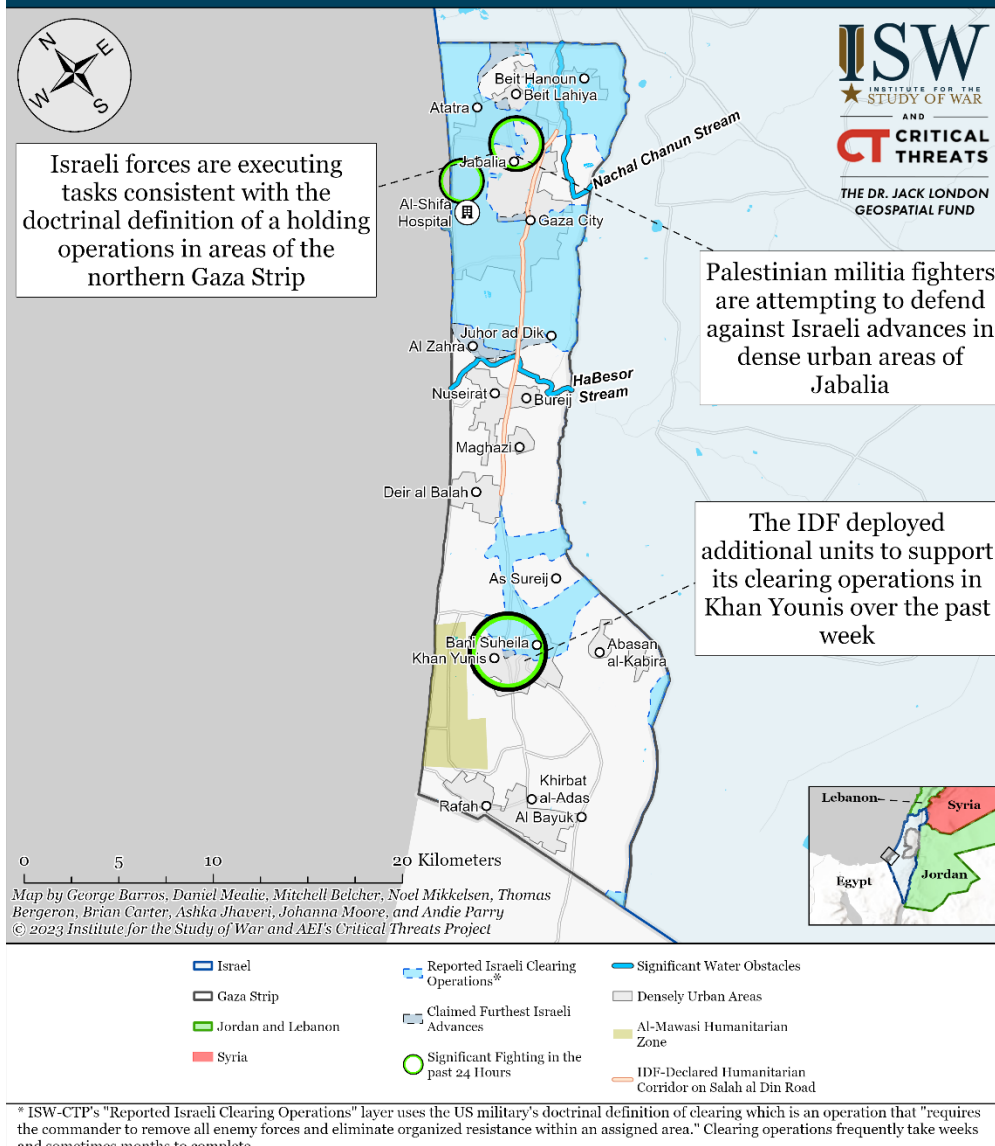
Palestinian militia fighters are defending against Israeli advances north and east of Khan Younis. The al Quds Brigades fired rockets and mortars at two Israeli combat outposts north and east of Khan Younis on December 22.[31] The al Qassem Brigades detonated anti-personnel IEDs and fired RPGs in several separate attacks on Israeli forces and vehicles, primarily in the Mahata area of Khan Younis City.[32] Israeli forces began its operation in Khan Younis on December 3.[33]

The IDF pulled the 13th Battalion of the Golani Brigade out of the Gaza Strip for a 48-hour “rest” period after the Golani Brigade reportedly accomplished its tactical task of clearing Shujaiya.[34] Palestinian militias, the Axis of Resistance, and Iranian media inaccurately framed this tactical rotation as a “defeat” for Israeli forces.[35] Defeat occurs when a force can no longer

accomplish its assigned objectives.[36] The IDF chose to pull the battalion from the Gaza Strip after the unit experienced 21 days of intense combat in Shujaiya.[37] Israeli officials said the 13th Battalion moved from Shujaiya to Israel for a "breather" after 21 days of intense combat in the Gaza Strip.[38] The unit has lost 44 soldiers since October 7 and faced a complex, multi-part ambush in Shujaiya on December 12, which left nine soldiers dead.[39]



Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip as of December 22, 2023, 2:00 PM ET

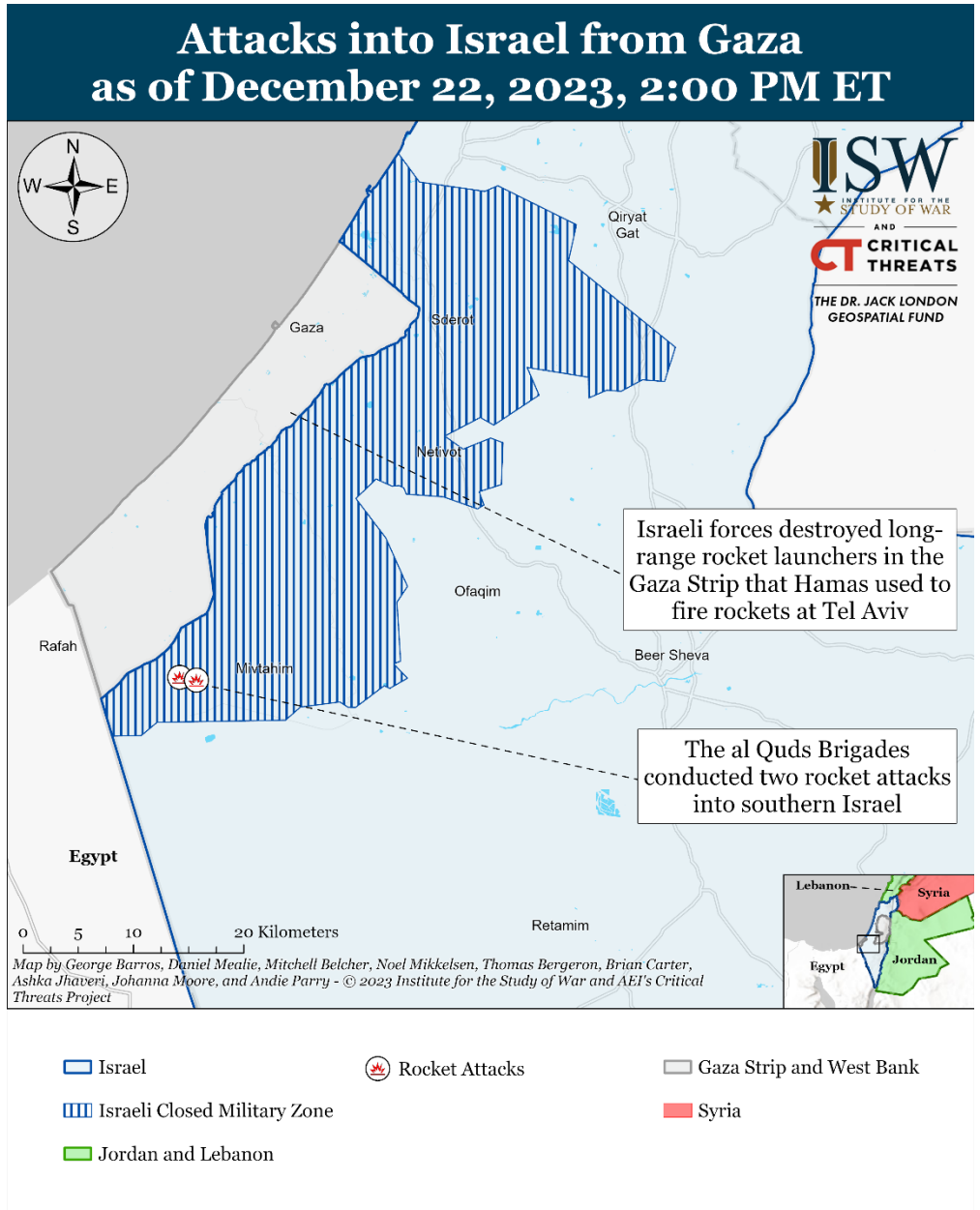


The PFLP is attempting to create “popular committees” in the Gaza Strip. The group called on “everyone” to unite in support of Palestine and claimed to be working on the committees across the Gaza Strip.[40] The PFLP called for the formation of a unified Palestinian emergency command to confront Israeli military operations on December 10.[41]

The United Nations Security Council passed a resolution to boost humanitarian aid in the Gaza Strip, but the resolution did not call for a ceasefire. The resolution asks the UN Secretary General to appoint an aid coordinator for the Gaza Strip.[42] The United States and Russia abstained from voting. The resolution calls for creating “the conditions for a sustainable cessation of hostilities.”[43] Russia proposed that the draft be amended to revert to the initial text which called for “an urgent and sustainable cessation of hostilities.” The United States vetoed the amendment.[44]

Israeli forces located long-range rocket launchers which the al Qassem Brigades likely used to launch a large salvo of rockets at Tel Aviv on December 22.[45] Israeli ground forces identified the launchers during operations in Juhor ad Dik in the northern Gaza Strip and directed an airstrike to destroy them.[46]

The al Quds Brigades conducted two rocket attacks into southern Israel from the Gaza Strip on December 22.[47]



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

West Bank

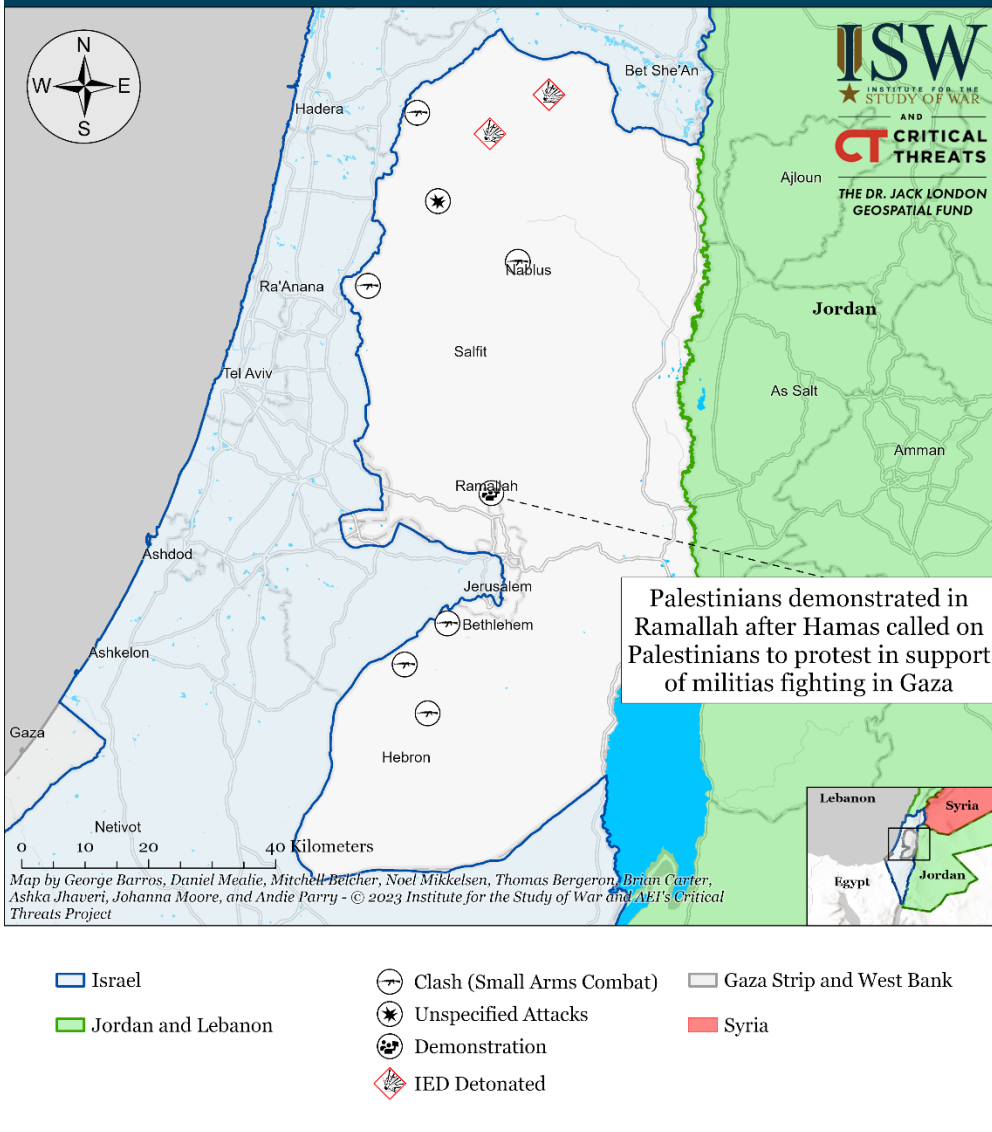
Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

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

Palestinian fighters clashed with Israeli forces in 10 different locations across the West Bank on December 22 compared to the daily average of 8.5 clashes.[48] Palestinian fighters detonated two IEDs targeting Israeli forces in Jenin.[49] The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades claimed that its fighters fired on Israeli forces stationed at a checkpoint north of Nablus.[50] Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades fighters also fired on Israeli forces attempting to enter Qalqilya from Tzufim and Kfar Saba.[51]

Palestinians demonstrated in Ramallah on December 22 in support of Palestinian militias fighting in the Gaza Strip.[52] Hamas issued a call before the demonstrations for Palestinians in the West Bank to march in support of a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and for Palestinian militias' victory against Israel.[53] Palestinians demonstrated in a local square with Hamas flags and chanting following Friday prayers.[54] This is the second consecutive Friday that Palestinians have demonstrated after Hamas called for protests.[55]

Clashes in the West Bank as of December 22, 2023, 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:

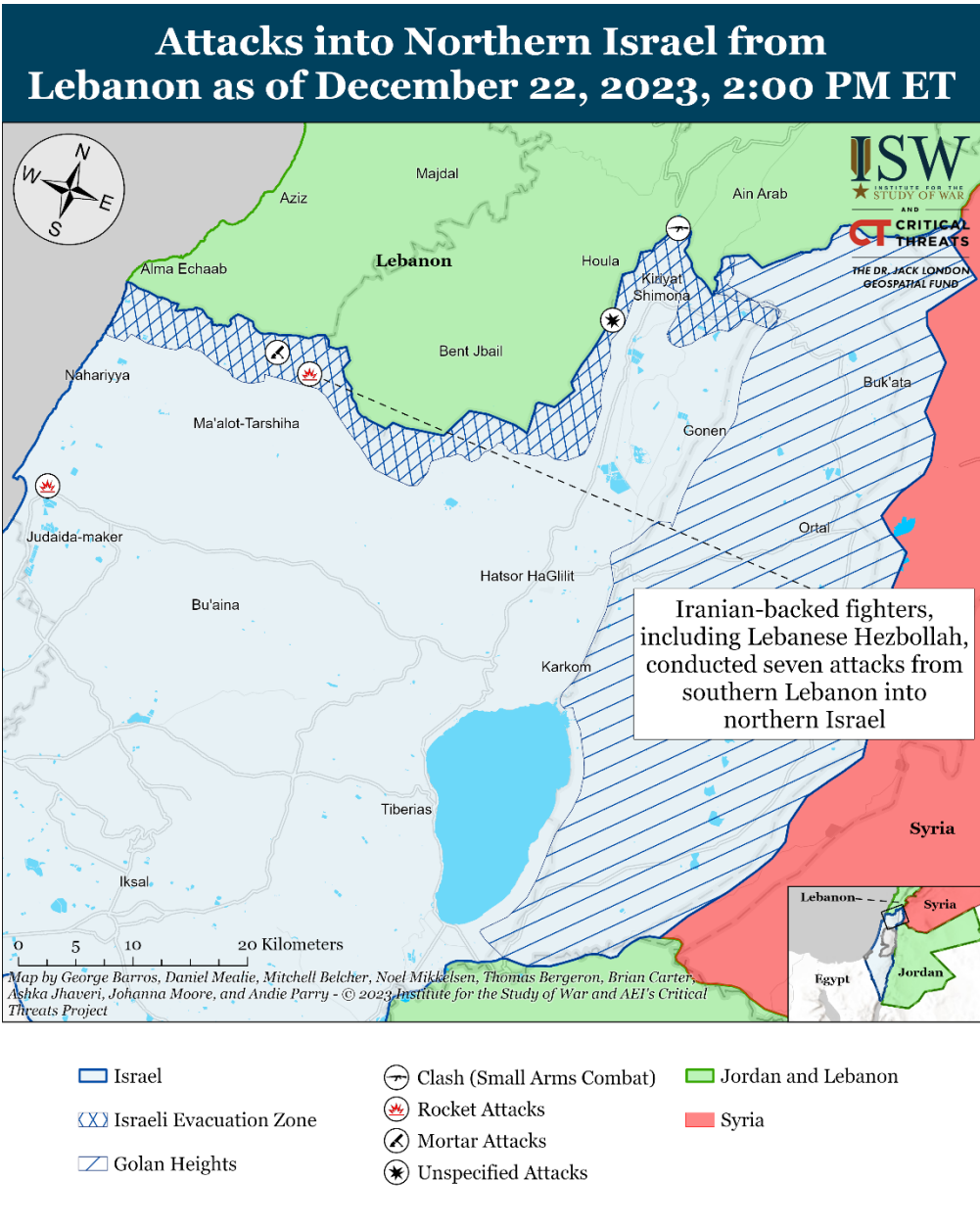
- Draw IDF assets and resources toward northern Israel and fix them there
- Set conditions for successive campaigns into northern Israel

The *New York Times* reported that the Biden administration is holding talks with Israel, Lebanon, and intermediaries for Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) to “reduce tensions” on the Israel-Lebanon border.[56] Senior White House adviser Amos Hochstein is leading the US effort that began before October 7, which seeks to adjudicate a demarcation on the Israel-Lebanon border.

“Participants in the talks” told the *New York Times* that Israeli officials proposed a five-kilometer and a ten-kilometer buffer zone between the Israeli border and LH positions. US officials believe that the buffer zone may need to be greater than five kilometers, according to the *New York Times*. US officials said that they believe LH is “sensitive to local public opinion” and will accept an agreement placing Lebanese Armed Forces along the Israeli border.

The UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) had asked the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to conduct joint patrols to visit Lebanese Hezbollah military positions in southern Lebanon as of September 2023.[57] The LAF is hesitant due to a lack of guidance from the Lebanese government on joint patrols, as well as the risk of raising tensions with LH.[58] LH also seeks to keep the LAF weak to cement LH’s power in Lebanon.[59] Agreeing to cede LH-dominated areas of southern Lebanon to the LAF would counter this long-held objective.

Iranian-backed fighters, including LH, conducted seven attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel on December 22. LH claimed six attacks targeting Israeli positions in northern Israel.[60] Unspecified fighters fired one rocket at civilian targets in Nahariya on December 22.[61] Israeli media reported on December 22 that rocket fire from southern Lebanon killed one Israeli soldier.[62]



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

Spokesperson for Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Ashab al Kahf Abu Murtaja al Hussein said that the Islamic Resistance in Iraq will reject any discussion on stopping attacks targeting US positions in Iraq.[63] The statement follows meetings between Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani and Secretary General of the Wisdom Movement Ammar al Hakim with US

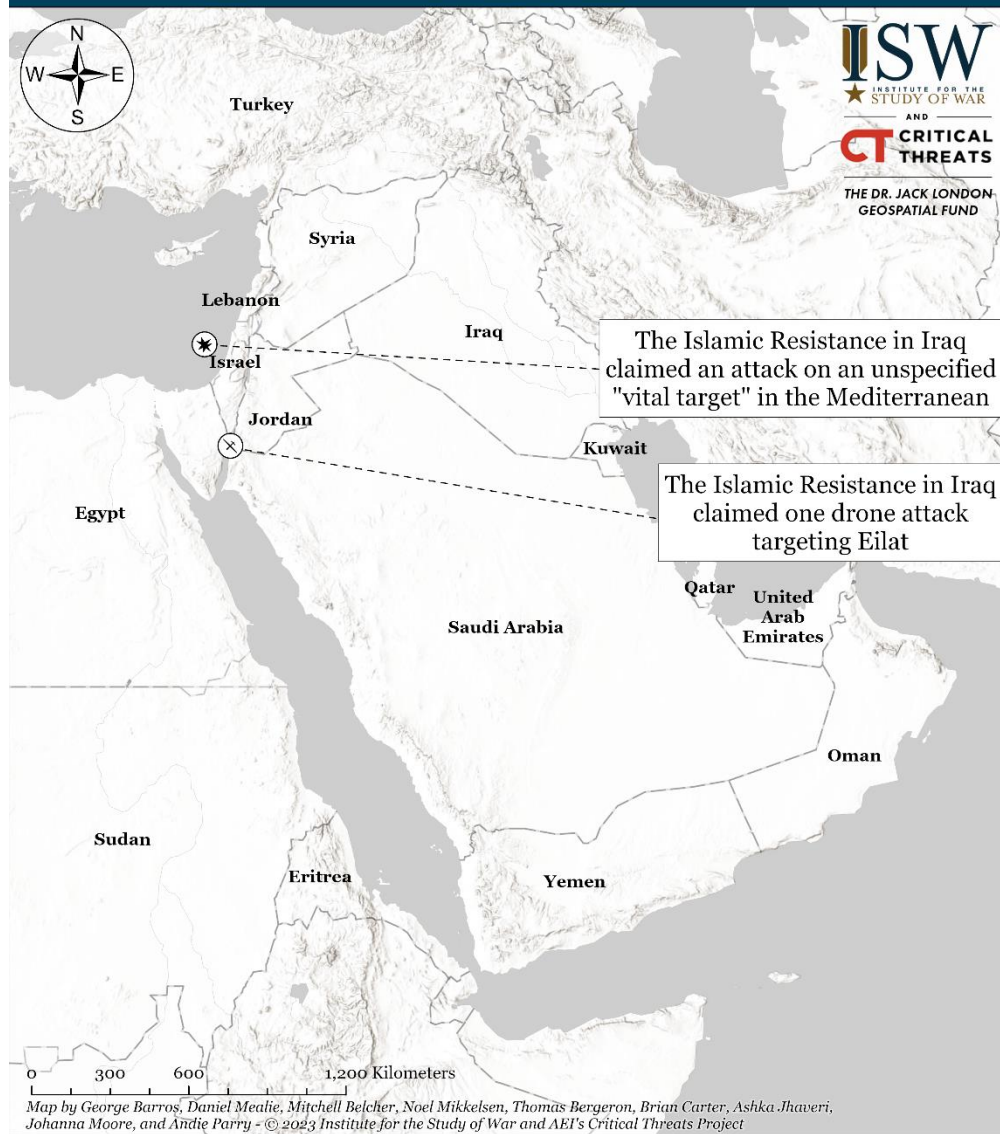
Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and US Ambassador to Iraq Alina Romanowski discussing ending attacks on US facilities in Iraq.[64] CTP-ISW previously noted that Iranian-backed Iraqi actors are pursuing political and military means to force US forces to withdraw from Iraq.[65] Senior US officials have told the Iraqi government repeatedly that the United States retains the right to respond to threats and attacks on US and Coalition personnel in Iraq.[66]

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed a drone attack targeting Eilat, Israel on December 21 in retaliation for civilian deaths in the Gaza Strip.[67] This is the second attack the Islamic Resistance in Iraq has claimed targeting Eilat since October 18.[68] The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed its first attack targeting Eilat on November 3.[69]

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq also claimed on December 22 that it had conducted an unspecified attack on a “vital target” in the Mediterranean Sea.[70] The Islamic Resistance in Iraq did not identify what its target in the Mediterranean Sea was. Neither US nor Israeli officials have commented on the claimed attack at the time of publication.

A Sinjari Yazidi activist said that the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) instructed its members in Sinjar to collect votes in favor of a militia-supported candidate.[71] The same activist said that the militia-backed candidate won the seat, thus filling the Yazidi quota on the provincial council.[72] Iranian-backed Iraqi militias within the PMF have attempted to increase their influence in Ninewa province in recent months. Mohammed Shia al Sudani appointed PMF-linked interim Governor of Ninewa Abdul Qadir al Dakhil. Kataib Hezbollah (KH)’s 47th PMF Brigade’s 2nd Regiment also deployed to Sinjar, ostensibly for election security.[73] Ninewa province locals warned that militias had begun to interfere in provincial elections in September 2023.[74]

Iranian-sponsored Attacks in the Middle East as of December 22, 2023, 2:00 PM ET



The *Wall Street Journal* reported on December 22 that an Iranian spy ship is directing Houthi attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea.[75] This spy ship is likely the *Behshad*, which is an Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp intelligence gathering ship operating off the Dahlak archipelago in the Red Sea.[76] The *Journal* reported that the Iranian spy ship provides the Houthis with real-time intelligence, which enables them to target ships that have gone silent to avoid detection. This reporting is consistent with previous Western media reporting and statements from US officials that the IRGC is involved in planning and executing the Houthis' drone and missile attacks on ships in the Red Sea.[77] The IRGC Quds Force might have used the *Behshad*, or its predecessor the *Saviz*, to provide explosive-laden drone boats to the Houthis in recent years.[78] The *Saviz* might have similarly been supporting Houthi attacks on commercial tankers in the Bab al Mandab Strait and

facilitating the smuggling of personnel and materials into Yemen via small dhows prior to the Israeli limpet mine attack on the *Saviz* in April 2021. [79]

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian discussed the Israel-Hamas war during a phone call with Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Secretary General Ibrahim Taha on December 21.[80] Abdollahian condemned Israeli action in the Gaza Strip and expressed Iran's readiness to provide humanitarian aid. Iran has regularly used the OIC in Iran's attempts to rally the Arab and Muslim world around the Palestinian cause and against Israel since October 7.[81]

Abdollahian discussed the Israel-Hamas war at the Ancient Civilizations Forum hosted in Tehran on December 21.[82] Abdollahian called on all countries with ancient cultures to work together to stop Israel's actions in the Gaza Strip. Italian, Armenian, Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, and Bolivian officials attended the forum.[83] The forum is a joint Chinese-Greek initiative that the two states started in 2017.[84]

Abdollahian discussed the Israel-Hamas war during a phone call with Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergei Lavrov on December 22.[85] The readouts for the phone call did not elaborate on Lavrov and Abdollahian's discussion. Iranian and Russian officials have discussed the provision of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip and a permanent ceasefire during their previous phone calls.[86]

The Iranian ambassador to Turkey discussed the Israel-Hamas war with a Turkish National Assembly Foreign Policy Commission member in Ankara on December 22.[87] The two discussed the provision of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip and called for an immediate ceasefire. This follows meetings between senior Iranian leaders and the Turkish Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Ahmed Yildiz on December 20 and 21.[88]

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[1] <https://www.idf dot il/163483>; <https://twitter.com/manniefabian/status/1736733003668173039>; <https://x.com/idfonline/status/1726216373922046372?s=20>

[2] <https://irp.fas.org/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf>; <https://irp.fas.org/doddir/army/fm3-90-1.pdf>

[3] <https://twitter.com/idfonline/status/1738123047964430376>

[4] <https://twitter.com/idfonline/status/1738123047964430376>

[5] <https://twitter.com/idfonline/status/1738090671242711421>

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- [15] <https://t.me/qassam1brigades/1002>
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- [23] <https://twitter.com/idfonline/status/1738090675025981525>; <https://twitter.com/idfonline/status/1738090645821026370>
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- [27] https://www.timesofisrael dot com/liveblog_entry/gallant-says-hamas-chief-sinwar-will-soon-meet-the-barrels-of-our-guns/
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- [44] <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/un-security-council-acts-boost-aid-gaza-after-us-abstains-2023-12-22/>
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[47] <https://t.me/sarayaps/17027>

[48] <https://t.me/QudsN/347261> ; https://t.me/elaqsa_1965/5372 ; https://t.me/elaqsa_1965/5374 ;
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[49] <https://t.me/QudsN/347261> ; https://t.me/elaqsa_1965/5372

[50] https://t.me/elaqsa_1965/5374

[51] https://t.me/elaqsa_1965/5375 ; https://t.me/elaqsa_1965/5376 ; <https://t.me/QudsN/347348>

[52] <https://t.me/QudsN/347576> ; <https://t.me/QudsN/347613>

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[59] <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/2021-06-30-how-hezbollah-holds-sway-over-the-lebanese-state-khatib.pdf>

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[61] https://t.me/C_Military1/42318

[62] <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-12-22/ty-article-live/u-s-to-support-delayed-un-vote-on-gaza-aid-israel-no-talks-with-hamas-taking-place/0000018c-8f88-d60e-afdf-ef8e5fo60000#1694961433>

[63] https://t.me/abu_murtaja/10

[64] <https://www.shafaq.com/ar/%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%83%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7-%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%85->

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%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B4-%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84-
%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A9-
%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82

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