Iran Update, November 28, 2023

Brian Carter, Andie Parry, Amin Soltani, Johanna Moore, Kathryn Tyson, and Nicholas Carl

Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm EST

Contributor: James Cary

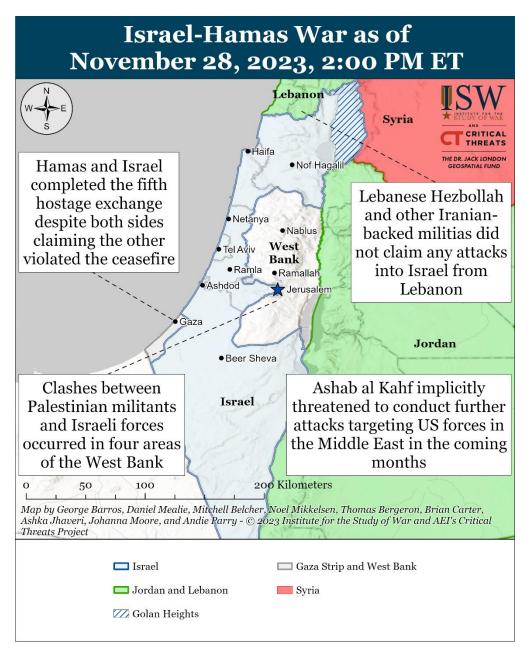
The Iran Update provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities abroad that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests. It also covers events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making of the Iranian regime. The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the 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. Israel and Hamas both reported at least one violation of the temporary truce agreement in the Gaza Strip, but neither side escalated the situation to more general fighting across the strip. Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Israel completed the fifth swap of hostages in the Gaza Strip for Israeli-held Palestinian prisoners in accordance with their humanitarian pause agreement.
- 2. Hamas' governance capacity appears to be breaking down in the Gaza Strip, even in the southern part, which will complexify Israeli clearing operations.
- 3. The Wall Street Journal reported that Egypt and Qatar are trying to negotiate a "long-term ceasefire" in the Gaza Strip.
- 4. Hamas fighters clashed with Israeli forces in Tubas and assisted a Hamas member to evade Israeli arrest. Clashes continued between Israeli forces and Palestinian fighters in at least three other locations in the West Bank.
- 5. LH and other Iranian-backed militias did not conduct any attacks into northern Israel.
- 6. Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Ashab al Kahf implicitly threatened to conduct further drone and rocket attacks targeting US forces in the Middle East in the coming months.
- 7. Russo-Iranian military cooperation has continued to deepen, especially in recent weeks.



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.

Israel and Hamas both reported at least one violation of the temporary truce agreement in the Gaza Strip on November 28, but neither side escalated the situation to more general fighting across the strip. Both parties claimed that the other bore responsibility for the violations. Neither side indicated an intention to resume hostilities as a result of the violations, however. Israeli Army Radio reported that Palestinian fighters detonated three improvised explosive devices (IED) targeting Israeli forces in two separate attacks.[1] Palestinian fighters detonated two remotely detonated IEDs targeting IDF soldiers boarding armored vehicles near Rantisi Hospital, which is along the agreed truce line, in one attack.[2] Palestinian fighters also detonated one IED and fired small arms at Israeli forces in an unspecified location, according to Israeli Army Radio.[3] Israel said the two attacks "slightly" wounded five Israeli soldiers.[4] Hamas' military spokesperson said that there was "field friction" in the northern Gaza Strip that was part of a "clear violation by [the IDF] of the truce agreement."[5] The spokesperson said Hamas remains committed to the pause in fighting.[6]

Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and Israel completed the fifth swap of hostages in the Gaza Strip for Israeli-held Palestinian prisoners on November 28 in accordance with their humanitarian pause agreement.[7] Hamas released 10 Israeli hostages and two Thai nationals.[8] Israel released 30 Palestinian women and minors in exchange.[9] PIJ fighters accompanied the hostages through the Gaza Strip as they were released, marking the first time that PIJ has publicly engaged with the hostage release protocol.[10] The reported violations of the pause agreement did not disrupt the hostage-prisoner swap, as the exchange occurred after the attacks in the Gaza Strip and Israel and Hamas accused one another of violations.

Confrontations erupted between Israeli forces and Palestinians waiting for the release of the fourth round of Palestinian prisoners outside Ofer Prison on November 27. Israeli forces shot and killed one Palestinian and fired tear gas near the prison.[11] Confrontations also broke out the night of the first prisoner release, injuring several Palestinians.[12] Hamas called for Palestinians to gather in front of Ofer Prison ahead of the fifth prisoner release on November 28.[13] Palestinian media reported that Israeli security forces have forbidden the families of released Palestinian prisoners from celebrating.[14]

Hamas' governance capacity appears to be breaking down in the Gaza Strip, even in the southern part, which may complexify Israeli clearing operations. The policy lead at Oxfam—an anti-poverty non-profit—called the situation in the Gaza Strip "absolute chaos" and without the "rule of law."[15] These claims are consistent with previous reports about the status of Hamas governance in the southern Gaza Strip.[16] The Associated Press reported on November 12 that Palestinians in the southern Gaza Strip are "openly challenging" Hamas' authority, for instance. A UN spokesperson similarly said that the Gaza Strip's social fabric was "fraying" amid widespread violence among local civilians.[17] These reports suggest that the Hamas local governance structure in the Gaza Strip is breaking down, which may complexify Israeli clearing operations by making it more difficult for Israel to coordinate temporary population evacuations ahead of military operations, although it is not clear that Hamas would have cooperated with such Israeli activities.[18]

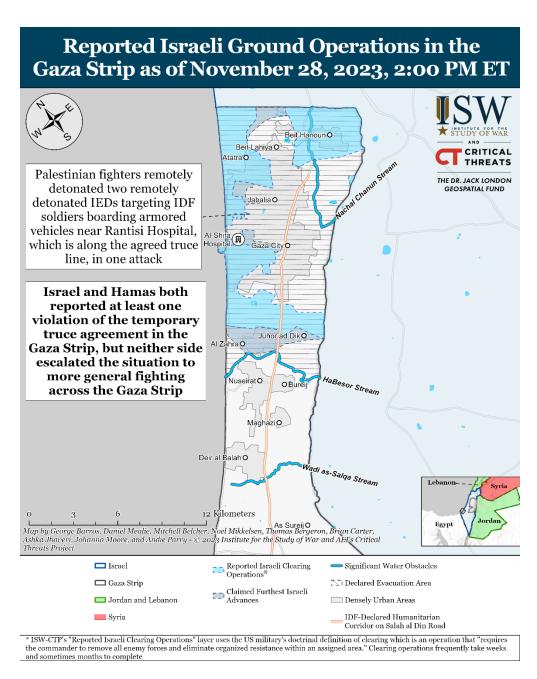
The Wall Street Journal reported on November 28 that Egypt and Qatar are trying to negotiate a "long-term ceasefire" in the Gaza Strip.[19] Egyptian and Qatari officials told the *Wall Street Journal* that the long-term ceasefire "would likely require" major concessions, such as Hamas demilitarizing and releasing all IDF soldiers held hostage in return for Israel ending military

operations in the Gaza Strip and releasing thousands of Palestinian prisoners. This reporting indicates that negotiations over the release of IDF soldiers could be more fraught than negotiations over civilians. The Egyptian and Qatari officials offered no explanation of or detailed system for how Hamas' demilitarization would take place. Hamas seeks the total destruction of the Israeli state, which Hamas has historically pursued through military means. Hamas furthermore has military capabilities and infrastructure outside of the Gaza Strip, such as in the West Bank and southern Lebanon. Hamas Political Bureau member Ghazi Hamed said on November 1 that Hamas will repeat its brutal October 7 attack "a second, a third, [and] a fourth" time and that "anything [Hamas does] is justified."[20] The deal outlined by Egyptian and Qatari officials furthermore includes no measure to remove Hamas from power in the Gaza Strip, according to the Wall Street Journal report. The United States, European Union, and Israel have all demanded and continue to seek the removal of Hamas as the governing authority responsible for the Gaza Strip.[21]

The *Wall Street Journal* also said that CIA Director William Burns and Israeli Mossad chief David Barnea met with Qatari officials in Doha on November 28 to "build on the progress" of the current truce and "initiate discussions about. . . a potential longer-term ceasefire deal."[22]

Several Palestinian sources reported that fuel imported during the humanitarian pause is not reaching the northern Gaza Strip. The Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS) claimed that Israeli forces prevented a fuel truck from entering the northern Gaza Strip on November 28.[23] The fuel was intended for PRCS ambulances in the northern Gaza Strip. The PRCS did confirm that 31 humanitarian aid trucks entered the northern Gaza Strip.[24] Lebanese Hezbollah outlet al Manar claimed that Israeli forces are actively preventing fuel from reaching hospitals in the northern Gaza Strip, citing the Hamas-run Gazan Health Ministry.[25]

The director of the Government Media Office in Gaza similarly claimed that Israel is obstructing the delivery of fuel, especially to the Gaza and North Gaza governorates, which have not had fuel deliveries for 50 days. [26] The director of the Government Media Office in Gaza is on the board of directors for two Hamas-affiliated news outlets and attended the Islamic University of Gaza, which Hamas controls and from which many senior Hamas leaders graduated. [27] The Qatari Foreign Affairs Ministry also called for a nonstop line of humanitarian aid to reach the northern Gaza Strip on November 28 The ministry clarified that the amount of aid reaching the Gaza Strip, "especially the northern region," is increasing, however. [28]



NOTE: The IDF has said that its forces are stationed along ceasefire lines across the Gaza Strip during the pause in fighting. CTP-ISW's map of Israeli clearing operations shows reported Israeli clearing operations and the claimed furthest Israeli advances. CTP-ISW will not be mapping the shift in Israeli operating areas during the humanitarian pause.

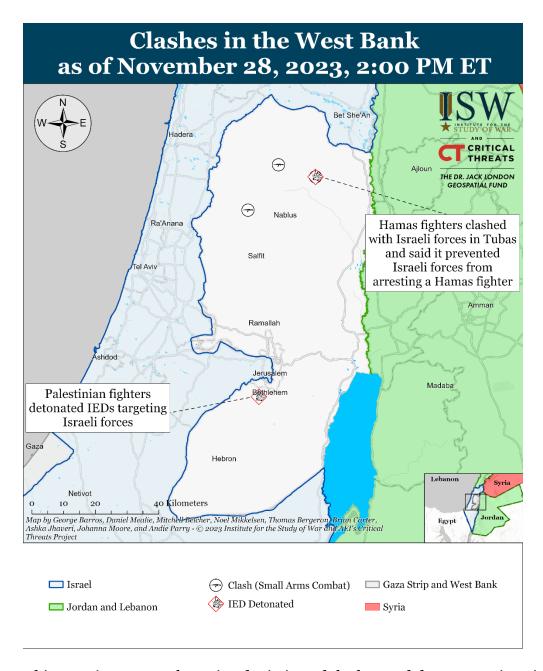
West Bank

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

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

Hamas fighters clashed with Israeli forces in Tubas and assisted a Hamas member to evade Israeli arrest on November 28.[29] Hamas fighters used IEDs and small arms fire against Israeli soldiers.[30] Israeli forces assaulted a building in which a Hamas member was barricaded before escaping.[31] The al Qassem Brigades Tubas wing said that it is continuing to resist Israel and that the confrontation will be a long fight.[32]

Clashes continued between Israeli forces and Palestinian fighters in at least three other locations in the West Bank on November 28. Unidentified Palestinian fighters separately targeted Israeli forces with IEDs in Dheisheh refugee camp near Bethlehem and fired small arms at Israeli forces in three other towns.[33] The IDF furthermore said on November 28 that Israeli forces conducted overnight raids and arrested 13 individuals throughout the West Bank.[34] The IDF stated that its forces confiscated small arms, knives, incendiary materials, and military equipment in Hebron.[35]



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

LH and other Iranian-backed militias did not conduct any attacks into northern Israel on November 28.

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

Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Ashab al Kahf (AK) implicitly threatened to conduct further drone and rocket attacks targeting US forces in the Middle East in the coming months.[36] This statement comes as other Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have similarly messaged that they will resume attacks on US forces after the humanitarian pause in the Israel-Hamas war ends. Abu Alaa al Walai—the secretary general of Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada—indicated that the Islamic Resistance in Iraq would stop its attacks during the pause.[37] The secretary general of Kataib Hezbollah (KH), Abu Hussein al Hamidawi, similarly announced on November 25 that KH would reduce the pace of attacks against US forces in the Middle East and Israel for the duration of the humanitarian pause in the Gaza Strip.[38] Neither the Islamic Resistance in Iraq nor any of its affiliated militias, such as AK, KSS, and KH, have claimed any attacks on US forces since the humanitarian pause took effect in the Gaza Strip on November 24.[39]

Russo-Iranian military cooperation is continuing to deepen and seemingly at an accelerated rate in recent weeks. Iran's deputy defense minister, Mehdi Farhi, announced on November 28 that Moscow has agreed to sell Su-35 fighter jets, Mi-28 attack helicopters, and Yak-130 combat trainer jets to Iran. [40] Iranian leaders have long sought to acquire advanced aircraft from Russia and have appeared to face repeated delays throughout the process. [41] Russian officials have not yet confirmed the deal at this time.

Iran's announcement is the latest indication of several in recent weeks that Iran and Russia are further expanding their military cooperation. US officials warned on November 21 that Iran may be preparing to supply advanced short-range ballistic missiles to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine. [42] This warning is consistent with CTP-ISW's previous assessment that Iran and Russia could conclude a drone and/or missile agreement after UN restrictions on Iran expired in October 2023. [43] US officials separately warned on November 2 that Russian Wagner forces plan to transfer air defense systems to Lebanese Hezbollah. [44]

The transfer of Russian advanced aircraft to Iran could still take months or even longer to complete. Iranian leaders have repeatedly indicated since late 2022 that they would soon receive advanced aircraft from Russia without receiving anything yet. [45] Russia similarly agreed to sell S-300 air defense systems in 2007 but did not complete the delivery until 2016. [46]

Russia's military support to Iran and the Axis of Resistance comes as Moscow and Tehran have tried to coordinate politically vis-à-vis the Israel-Hamas war. [47] Iranian and Russian officials have engaged one another repeatedly in recent weeks to discuss the war and cooperate in advocating for a ceasefire.

Iran is continuing to pressure the United States and Israel into extending the pause in fighting by warning that failing to extend it will precipitate an escalation of the war.

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian warned that the United States and Israel will face "harsh consequences" if they fail to establish a permanent ceasefire during an interview with al Jazeera on November 28.[48] This statement is consistent with prior Iranian talking points surrounding the pause in fighting, as CTP-ISW previously reported.[49]

Abdollahian discussed the Israel-Hamas war during a phone call with his Swiss counterpart on November 28. [50] The two officials discussed efforts to extend the pause in fighting between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan discussed the Israel-Hamas war during a phone call on November 26.[51] They emphasized the need for maximal cooperation between their countries vis-a-vis the war. Raisi's planned visit to Ankara on November 28 was canceled due to unspecified reasons. IRGC-affiliated media reported that Raisi is now scheduled to visit Ankara at the beginning of December.[52]

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei met with senior Artesh Navy commanders on National Artesh Navy Day on November 28.[53]



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