

### Iran Update, December 8, 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.

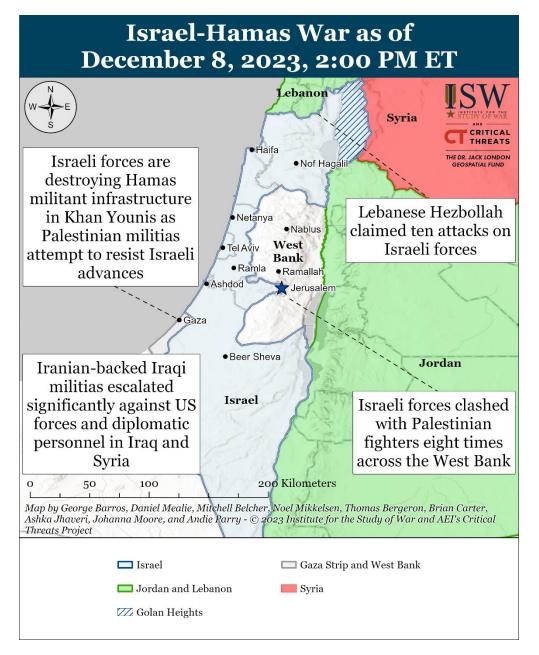
Note: CTP and ISW have refocused the update to cover the Israel-Hamas war. The new sections address developments in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as noteworthy activity from Iran's Axis of Resistance. We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are well-covered 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. Iranian-backed Iraqi militias conducted an indirect fire attack targeting the US Embassy in Baghdad on December 8 for the first time since 2021, marking a notable escalation in Iranian efforts to expel US forces from Iraq.
- 2. Iranian-backed Iraqi actors' current campaign to remove US forces draws remarkable similarities to the 2021 campaign to force a US troop withdrawal from Iraq.
- 3. Israeli forces are destroying Hamas infrastructure in Khan Younis as Palestinian militias attempt to resist their advances.
- 4. Israeli forces are operating to dismantle Hamas in Deir al Balah in the central Gaza Strip. Israeli forces also clashed with Palestinian fighters eight times across the West Bank.

- 5. Palestinian militias in the Gaza Strip conducted 10 indirect fire attacks into Israel.
- 6. Lebanese Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed militias claimed 13 attacks into northern Israel.
- 7. The IDF conducted multiple strikes on unspecified Iranian-backed targets in southern Syria on December 8 in retaliation for rocket strikes into the Golan Heights the day prior.
- 8. Unspecified militants conducted 9 attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria, according to a US journalist.



**Iranian-backed Iraqi militias conducted an indirect fire attack targeting the US Embassy in Baghdad on December 8 for the first time since 2021, marking a notable escalation in Iranian efforts to expel US forces from Iraq.** An unidentified US military official reported that unidentified militants fired multiple rockets at the US Embassy in Baghdad and Forward Operating Base (FOB) Union III, landing near the embassy's gates and in the river nearby.[1] An unidentified US embassy spokesperson confirmed that the perpetrators launched two salvos of rockets toward the US Embassy compound at approximately 0415 local time.[2] An anonymous US military official separately told Western media that seven mortar rounds landed in the US Embassy compound, causing minor damage but no casualties.[3] An anonymous Iraqi security official claimed that three Katyusha rockets were fired at the embassy but fell in the vicinity of the Green Zone.[4] No group has claimed responsibility for the attack at the time of writing.

**Iraqi Supreme Judicial Council President Faiq Zaidan met with US Ambassador Alina Romanowski on December 8, likely to discuss Iranian-backed Iraqi actors' efforts to use legal and political pressure to try to expel the United States from Iraq.** Iraqi media reported that Zaidan and Romanowski discussed the constitutional and legal foundations "for addressing all the problems that Iraq and the region are going through."[5] Zaidan and Romanowski's meeting follows the Iraqi Parliamentary Security and Defense Committee's December 6 announcement that is has drafted a resolution to expel US forces from Iraq.[6] Zaidan is a close political ally of Tehran.[7] He recently met with Romanowski on November 17 to discuss the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court's decision to remove former Iraqi Parliamentary Speaker Mohammed Halbousi from office and the necessity of an independent judiciary.[8] CTP-ISW previously hypothesized that Halbousi was removed from his post as part of political efforts to reduce the US presence in Iraq.[9]

**Iranian-backed Iraqi actors' current campaign to remove US forces draws remarkable similarities to the 2021 campaign to force a US troop withdrawal from Iraq.** Iranian-backed Iraqi actors are pursuing political and military means to force US forces to withdraw from Iraq. The Iraqi Parliamentary Security and Defense Committee presented a draft resolution to expel US forces, arguing that the United States' recent strikes in Iraq were a violation of Iraqi sovereignty.[10] CTP-ISW previously assessed that the current attack campaign is meant to impose a cost on the United States for supporting Israel while also eroding American willingness to remain militarily in Iraq and Syria.[11] Iraq's Council of Representatives similarly passed a non-binding resolution in January 2020 to remove US forces from Iraq following IRGC-QF Commander Qasem Soleimani's death.[12] Iranianbacked Iraqi proxies intensified their attack campaign on US forces in frequency and expanded geographically in from 2020 to 2021 to pressure former Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhimi to force US forces to withdraw from Iraq.[13] Kadhimi and US President Joe Biden signed an agreement in July 2021 agreeing to a troop drawdown that allowed for 2,500 military advisors to remain in Iraq to support Iraqi Security Forces under Operation Inherent Resolve.[14]

#### <u>Gaza Strip</u>

#### 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 destroying Hamas infrastructure in Khan Younis as Palestinian militias attempt to resist their advances.** The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) reported on December 8 that its ground, air, and naval forces continued the offensive in Khan Younis, which it claims is a main stronghold for Hamas.[15] Israeli forces are clashing with Hamas' Khan Younis Brigade in targeted raids while seizing various weapon systems and intelligence materials.[16] The IDF 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade engaged

in a multi-hour complex attack on Palestinian militias, some of whom were preparing to fire rockets at Israel.[17] Commercially available satellite imagery captured on December 8 shows recently flattened terrain in areas between the two Israeli advances toward Khan Younis, which suggests that the IDF have linked up. The al Qassem Brigades—the militant wing of Hamas—claimed to target Israeli forces with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) at a school in between the two Israeli advances.[18]

The al Qassem Brigades claimed that its fighters detonated a house-borne improvised explosive device (HBIED) targeting Israeli forces east of Khan Younis on December 8.[19] The use of more sophisticated tactics, such as rigging a house to explode, is consistent with Hamas' shift from less sophisticated to more sophisticated tactics after the end of the humanitarian pause.[20] The al Qassem Brigades claimed seven attacks on Israeli forces and vehicles in the southern Gaza Strip using RPGs, including anti-tank RPGs, mortars, and small arms.[21] Other Palestinian militias allied with Hamas also attacked the IDF near Khan Younis. The al Quds Brigades—the militant wing of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)—mortared Israeli forces on the Israeli line of advance east of Khan Younis.[22] The National Resistance Brigades—the militant wing of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP)—claimed that its militia fighters fired mortars at Israeli vehicles and clashed with Israeli forces northeast of Khan Younis.[23] The Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades—the militant wing of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)—fired mortars and anti-tank munitions at Israeli forces on the eastern Israeli line of advance into Khan Younis.[24]

**Israeli forces are attempting to dismantle Hamas in Deir al Balah in the central Gaza Strip.** The 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade began an offensive to break through Hamas' defensive lines in the central and southern Gaza Strip, which included raiding a Deir al Balah Battalion position.[25] Israeli naval forces struck Hamas observation posts and weapons storage facilities in the central Gaza Strip.[26] The Deir al Balah Battalion, which is part of Hamas' Central Brigade, released a training video prior to October 7 of its militia fighters practicing close-quarters combat in urban environments.[27] The al Quds Brigades claimed that its militia fighters clashed with Israeli forces using anti-tank RPGs and small arms on the axes of Israeli advances east of Deir al Balah.[28] Palestinian militias have claimed attacks on Israeli forces in Deir al Balah since December 3.[29]

Israeli forces initially advanced into the southern Gaza Strip along the intersection of two of Hamas' battalions'—the Central and Khan Younis Battalions—area of operations.[30] The IDF declared the Salah al Din Road between southern Deir al Balah and Khan Younis a combat zone on December 2 and moved eastward to secure the Salah al Din Road south of Deir al Balah on or before December 3.[31] The Israeli presence along the seam of two Hamas battalions could create operational challenges for Hamas to coordinate a defense of Khan Younis.

**Israeli media reported that Hamas is defending Shujaiya neighborhood in Gaza city.** A Lebanese Hezbollah telegram channel reposted Israeli news site Yedioth Ahronoth's claim that Hamas members have not fled and are fighting fiercely in the Shujaiya neighborhood.[32] An Israeli commander operating in Shujaiya noted that Hamas military infrastructure, such as tunnel shafts, is in most homes and schoosl in the neighborhood.[33] Shujaiya is one of the most densely populated areas of the Gaza Strip.[34] Hamas militia fighters and Israeli forces engaged in a multi-day battle in Shujaiya in 2014 where the IDF took 16 casualties.[35]

The IDF continued clearing operations in Shujaiya neighborhood on December 8 as Palestinian militias claimed attacks on Israeli forces and vehicles. The IDF said on December 8 that the 188th Brigade and Counter-Terrorism Unit forces operated at the heart of Shujaiya and defended against an attempted al

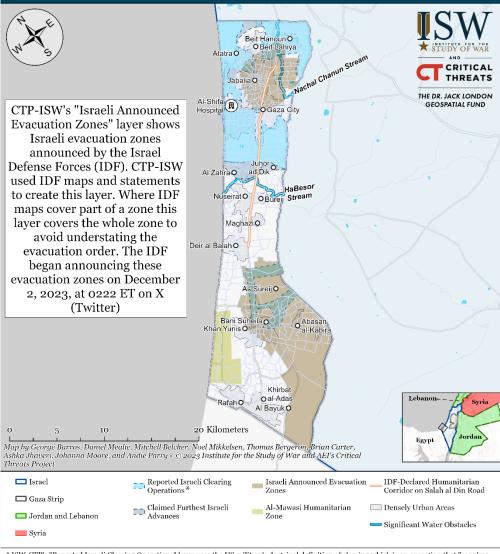
Qassem Brigades ambush.[36] The al Qassem Brigades used anti-tank RPGs on six Israeli military vehicles in Sheikh Radwan and al Zaytoun neighborhoods in Gaza city.[37] The al Quds Brigades fighters claimed two tandem-charged RPG and grenade attacks on Israeli forces on advancing axes in the Shujaiya and Zaytoun neighborhoods.[38] An unspecified Israeli source quoted by Palestinian media said that the al Qassem Brigades are continuing to launch rockets targeting Tel Aviv from Shujaiya and Jabalia neighborhoods.[39]

**The IDF acknowledged its forces failed to extract a hostage from Hamas custody in the Gaza Strip on December 8.** The IDF said that two of its soldiers were injured during the operation and no hostages were rescued.[40] The IDF did not say if the hostage was killed and accused Hamas of attempting psychological warfare against Israel.[41] The al Qassem Brigades said hostage Sa'ar Baruch died during a clash with Israeli forces on December 8 as fighters thwarted the attempt to rescue Baruch.[42] The al Qassem Brigades also claimed an unspecified number of hostages died in Israeli airstrikes.[43]

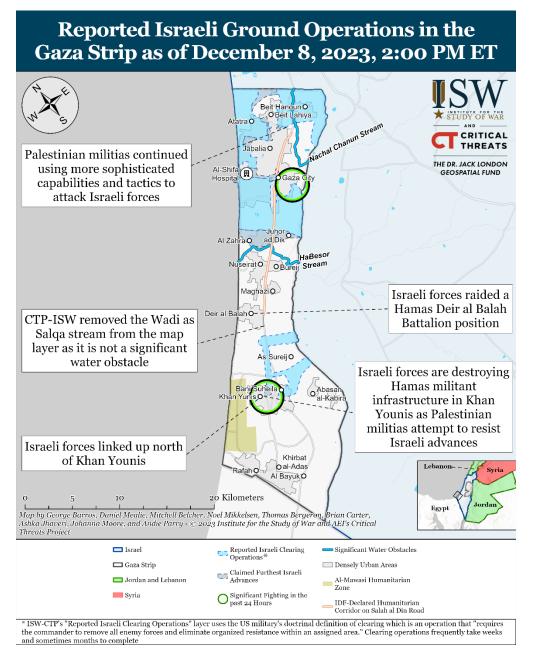
**Palestinian militias are using more sophisticated tactics to confront the IDF's advance into Jabalia and have had some success.** The IDF confirmed that Israeli war cabinet minister Gadi Eizenkot's son died while fighting in the northern Gaza Strip on December 7.[44] The al Qassem Brigades claimed that its fighters killed the soldier when they detonated an IED on a tunnel door on the eastward line of advance into Jabalia.[45] The al Quds Brigades claimed an explosively formed penetrator (EFP) attack on the western Israeli line of advance into Jabalia on December 8.[46] This is consistent with Palestinian militias' use of increasingly sophisticated tactics against Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip after the end of the humanitarian pause.[47] Hamas and other Palestinian militias have used EFPs six times since December 1 and are increasingly rigging houses and tunnel infrastructure with explosives.[48]

**Israeli forces continued to uncover Hamas military infrastructure in cleared areas on December 8.** The IDF 749<sup>th</sup> Reserve Engineering Battalion destroyed Hamas military infrastructure, located kilometer-long tunnel routes, and seized EPFs, rocket parts, and launchers at al Azhar University in northern Gaza city's Rimal neighborhood.[49] The IDF 14<sup>th</sup> Brigade raided a Hamas observation room containing hundreds of radios, dozens of cameras, magazines, a combat shaft, grenades, and other unspecified military equipment around the al Shati medical center.[50]

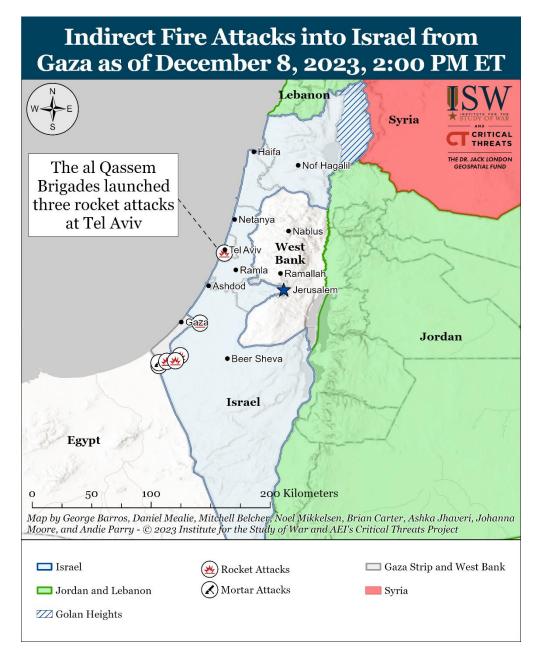
# Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip as of December 8, 2023, 2:00 PM ET



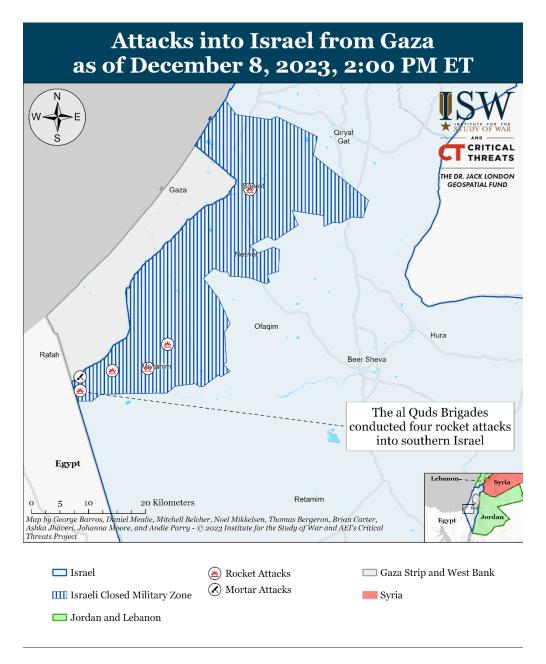
\* ISW-CTP's "Reported Israeli Clearing Operations" layer uses the US military's doctrinal definition of clearing which is an operation that "requires the commander to remove all enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance within an assigned area." Clearing operations frequently take weeks and sometimes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



**Palestinian militias in the Gaza Strip conducted 10 indirect fire attacks into Israel on December 8**. This is consistent with the weekly average after a decline on December 7.[51] The al Qassem Brigades conducted five rocket attacks, including three salvos targeting Tel Aviv.[52] The al Qassem Brigades published a video of their forces using long-range M-90 rockets to target Tel Aviv.[53] The al Quds Brigades conducted four rocket attacks.[54] One rocket attack went unclaimed.[55]



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



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#### West Bank

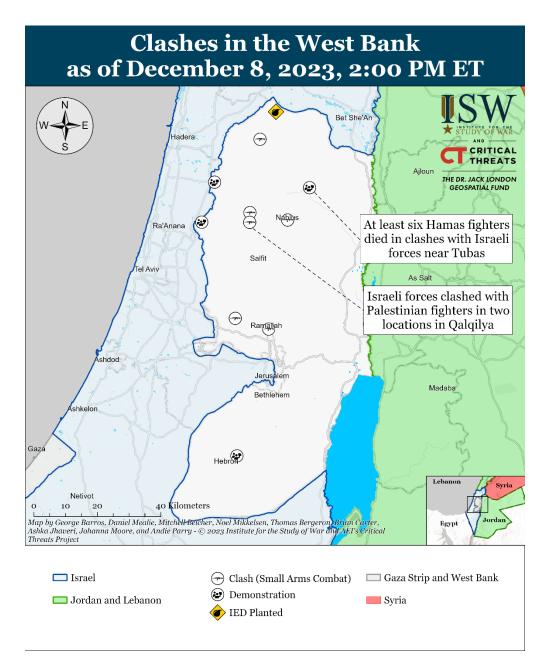
#### Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

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

**Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters eight times across the West Bank on December 8.[56]** Palestinian fighters engaged Israeli forces in small arms clashes eight times near major cities in the West Bank, including Hebron and Ramallah. Palestinian militants clashed with Israeli forces during Israeli raids in the Fara refugee camp in the northern West Bank.[57] Hamas announced that six of its fighters died during raids in the Fara camp on December 8.[58] West Bank residents held four anti-Israel demonstrations in the West Bank on December 8.[59]

**Palestinian militias called for an escalation in attacks and demonstrations in the West Bank on December 8.** Hamas called on fighters in the West Bank to avenge the deaths of fighters killed in the West Bank "by all possible means."[60] The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine said that Israeli forces plan to increase operations in the West Bank and that "a response will inevitably come."[61] The Lions' Den—a West Bank-based Palestinian militia—claimed that it conducted 14 attacks across the West Bank during an unspecified period and called for further attacks.[62] The Lion's Den last called for mobilization against Israeli forces in the West Bank on November 9.[63]

**The Lions' Den continued to emphasize its alignment with Hamas.** The Lions' Den said that the West Bank will be "nothing but a sword and a shield" for Mohammed Deif and Saleh al Arouri.[64] Mohammed Deif is the commander of Hamas' al Qassem Brigades and Saleh al Arouri is the Hamas Political Bureau deputy chairman. This statement marks a change from previous Lions' Den claims that the group has no affiliation with other Palestinian militias.[65]



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

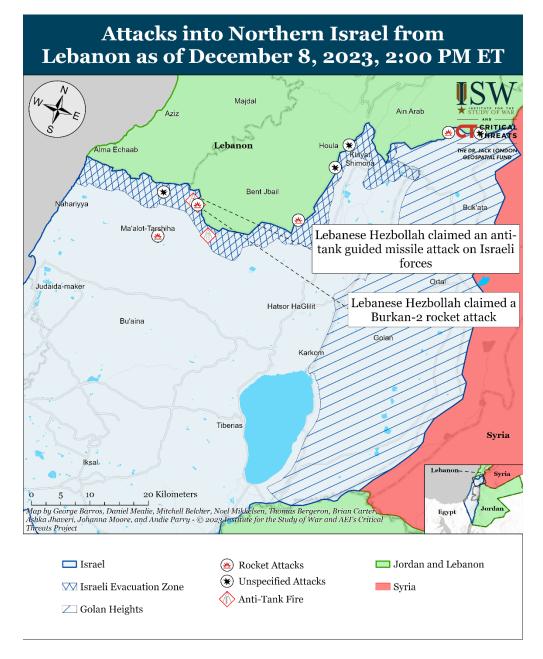
#### Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

#### 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 (LH) and other Iranian-backed militias claimed 13 attacks into northern Israel on December 8. LH claimed ten attacks, all of which targeted Israeli military facilities along the Lebanese border.[66] IDF Spokesperson Daniel Hagari reported that Israel's air defense system intercepted a "suspicious aerial target" that entered Israeli airspace from Lebanon.[67] Unidentified militants launched two separate rocket attacks on Israeli forces at Shtula and Maalot Tarshiha injuring two IDF soldiers.[68]

**The IDF conducted multiple strikes on unspecified Iranian-backed targets in southern Syria on December 8 in retaliation for rocket strikes into the Golan Heights the day prior.[69]** LH-affiliated al Mayadeen claimed that the Israeli strike killed four Iranian-backed militants near al Baath and al Hamidiya, Quneitra Province.[70] Iran and Iranian-backed militias have deployed militants to Quneitra Province since October 9 to support Axis of Resistance efforts to threaten Israel on multiple fronts, as CTP-ISW previously reported.[71]



#### 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

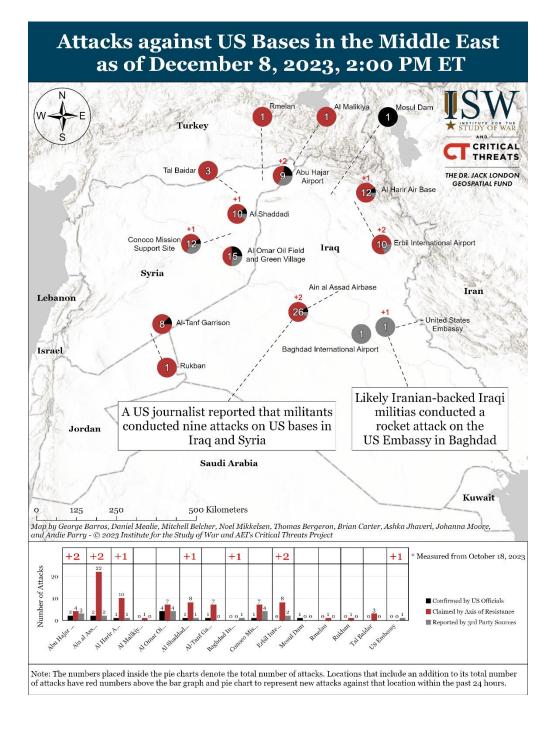
**Unspecified militants conducted 5 attacks on US forces in Iraq on December 8, according to a US journalist.[72]** Unspecified militants conducted two attacks on Ain al Asad Airbase in Anbar Province, Iraq. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—claimed responsibility for one of the attacks, which it conducted using rockets.[73] An Iraqi OSINT X (Twitter) account claimed that the second attack was also a rocket attack.[74] CTP-ISW cannot verify this claim. Unspecified militants conducted two attacks on Erbil Airport in northern Iraq and one attack on al Harir Airbase in Erbil Province, Iraq.

Unspecified militants conducted 4 attacks on US forces in Syria on December 8, according to the same US journalist.[75] Unspecified militants conducted two attacks on the Rumalyn Landing Zone in Hasakah Province, Syria. Unspecified militants conducted an attack on the US base Conoco Mission Support Site in northeastern Syria. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed responsibility for this attack, which it carried out using rockets.[76] Unspecified militants conducted an attack targeting US forces stationed at al Shaddadi, Hasakah Province, Syria.

**Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian discussed the Israel-Hamas war in a phone call with PIJ Secretary General Ziyad al Nakhalah on December 8.**[77] Abdollahian described Iranian diplomatic efforts to support Palestinians, including President Ebrahim Raisi's meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on December 7. Nakhalah presented a report on the most recent developments in the war and on Palestinian resistance groups' "complete readiness" to confront Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip and to defend Gazans.

**Syrian Prime Minister Hussein Arnous traveled to Tehran on December 8 to attend a meeting on bilateral economic cooperation.[78]** Arnous will meet with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Akbar Ahmadian, and Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf during his three-day visit to Iran.[79]

**US Deputy National Security Adviser John Finer stated that the IRGC is involved in planning and executing the Houthis' drone and missile attacks on Israel and ships in the Red Sea.**[80] The *New York Times* reported that Iran operates an intelligence gathering ship in the Red Sea, which helps the Houthis identify Israeli-owned vessels to attack.[81] Unspecified IRGC-affiliated Iranian sources stated that Iran's so-called Axis of Resistance plans to increase attacks on US and Israeli facilities in the Middle East, including Houthi attacks on American-owned vessels operating in the Red Sea.[82] The US Treasury sanctioned an IRGC-QF financier Sa'id al Jamal on December 7 for facilitating tens of millions of dollars in Iranian financial support for the Houthi movement.[83] US officials linked this continued Iranian financial support to Houthi attacks on commercial shipping and international trade.[84]



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