Iran Update, December 4, 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. Israel continued conducting clearing operations in the northern Gaza Strip to encircle Hamas in Shujaiya neighborhood and Jabalia city.
- 2. Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian militias in the central and southern Gaza Strip along the Salah al Din Road.
- 3. Israel continued clearing operations in Beit Hanoun to destroy Palestinian militia infrastructure.
- 4. Palestinian fighters conducted ten attacks targeting Israeli forces across the West Bank. Lebanese Hezbollah claimed 11 attacks into northern Israel targeting Israeli forces and civilians.
- 5. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—claimed responsibility for two attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria on December 3.
- 6. US Central Command confirmed that the US military conducted a self-defense strike against five Iraqi militants planning a one-way drone attack on US forces near Kirkuk, Iraq, on December 3.
- 7. Iranian Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri discussed expanding intelligence cooperation with the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) during a meeting with PMF Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh in Baghdad on December 4.



<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.

Israel continued to conduct clearing operations in the northern Gaza Strip to encircle Hamas in Shujaiya neighborhood and Jabalia city. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant observed Israeli forces in Shujaiya and Jabalia on December 4 and noted that the forces have returned there to "close the circle."[1] The *Wall Street Journal* reported that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have cornered Hamas fighters in the last two strongholds in the northern Gaza Strip.[2] An IDF spokesperson issued a warning to Hamas commanders in Shujaiya that they are targets and that Israel will use extreme force in the neighborhood to dismantle Hamas military infrastructure on December 3.[3]

Palestinian militias claimed several attacks along Israeli lines of advance along the al Fallujah Road in Jabalia. The al Qassem Brigades—the militant wing of Hamas—targeted Israeli forces and military vehicles near the al Fallujah Road with rocket propelled grenades (RPGs), including tandem-charged RPGs and small arms.[4] The al Quds Brigades—the militant wing of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)—fired tandem-charged RPGs and an anti-armor grenade.[5] Hamas- and PIJ-affiliated media reported that the al Nasser Salah al Din Brigades—the militant wing of the Palestinian Resistance Committees (PRC)—engaged in clashes with Israeli forces in the Sheikh Radwan neighborhood southwest of Jabalia.[6] The PRC is a loose grouping of armed factions in the Gaza Strip that is strong allies with Hamas and PIJ.[7]

Hamas and PIJ-affiliated media reported clashes between Palestinian fighters and Israeli forces in Shujaiya neighborhood.[8] A Palestinian journalist noted that Israeli forces are advancing into Shujaiya neighborhood from several axes.[9]

Israel forces clashed with Palestinian militias in the central and southern Gaza Strip along the Salah al Din Road. Israel announced on December 2 that it is resuming and expanding ground operations gains Hamas' strongholds across the whole Gaza Strip and confirmed that ground forces are operating north of Khan Younis.[10] Witnesses told AFP that dozens of Israeli tanks entered the southern part of the Gaza Strip and are operating on the Salah al Din Road.[11] The IDF Arab media spokesperson announced on December 2 civilians cannot use the Salah al Din Road north and east of Khan Younis due to Israeli military operations in the area.[12]

A Palestinian journalist said local rescue teams advised residents to avoid windows, balconies, and exterior building walls in Deir al Balah where Israeli forces are present.[13] Hamas- and PIJ-affiliated media reported that Palestinian fighters clashed with Israeli forces in Deir al Balah on December 4, which is the second consecutive day of fighting in the area.[14] The al Quds Brigades mortared groups of Israeli soldiers in Deir al Balah.[15] The National Resistance Brigades—the militant wing of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP)—clashed with Israeli forces in al Qarar northeast of Khan Younis.[16] CTP-ISW is not expanding map layers given that the Israeli direction of advance is unspecified, as is the extent of their advance.

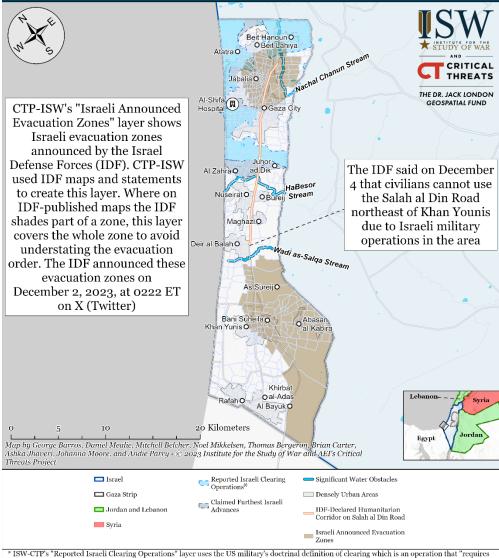
Israel continued clearing operations in Beit Hanoun to destroy Palestinian militia

infrastructure. Israeli forces found two tunnel shafts in a school including a booby-trapped one as well as an IED and weapons in Beit Hanoun.[17] The IDF attacked 200 Hamas-affiliated targets across the Gaza Strip on December 4, including anti-tank weapons, tunnels, and personnel.[18] Israeli ground forces directed airstrikes to destroy infrastructure used for anti-tank ambushes and a weapons depot.[19] The al Qassem Brigades targeted Israeli forces behind the Israeli forward line of advance in Beit Hanoun, which is consistent with the nature of clearing operations. The militants used tunnels to ambush Israeli forces and used anti-personnel munitions and small arms in four separate

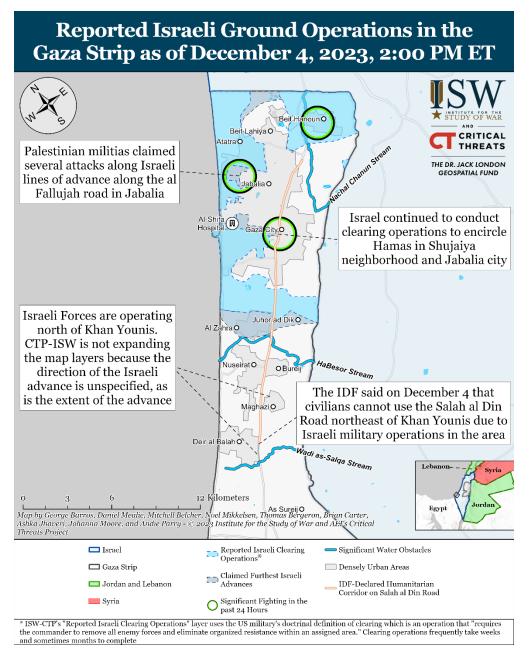
attacks.[20] The al Qassem Brigades also claimed to use a Shawaz explosively formed penetrators (EFP) to target an IDF tank.[21] Hamas and other Palestinian militias have used EFPs six times since December 1.[22] This is consistent with Hamas' use of increasingly sophisticated tactics against Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip after the end of the humanitarian pause.[23] The al Qassem Brigades claimed four attacks on Israeli forces and vehicles east of Beit Lahiya using RPGs and anti-personnel munitions.[24]

The IDF Arabic-language spokesperson did not post any new specific evacuation orders in the Gaza Strip on December 4. The IDF Arab media spokesperson repeated evacuation orders covering areas of the northern Gaza Strip including al Mahatta, al Katiba, Hamad, al Satar, Bani Suheila, and Maan.[25] The spokesperson directed residents in the Khan Younis area to use the coastal road to avoid Israeli military operations.[26] The IDF temporarily suspended military activity in the Rafah camp area for humanitarian purposes.[27]





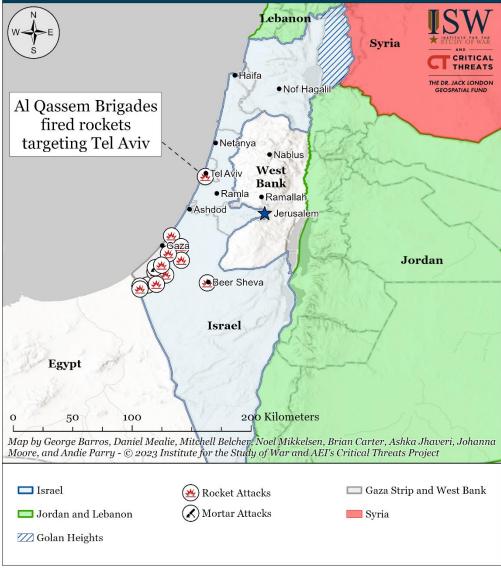
* ISW-CIT's 'Reported Israel Clearing Operations' layer uses the US military's doctrinal definition of clearing which is an operation that 'requires the commander to remove all enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance within an assigned area." Clearing operations frequently take weeks and sometimes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



The entire Gaza Strip is experiencing a near-total internet blackout. Palestine-based communications companies announced a blackout of services in Gaza City and the Northern Gaza Strip on December 4.[28] NetBlocks later confirmed that most residents will experience a total loss of communications.[29] The Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) said it has lost contact with its teams in the Gaza Strip due to the blackout.[30]

Palestinian militias in the Gaza Strip conducted 18 rocket and mortar attacks into Israel on December 4. The al Qassem Brigades claimed responsibility for 10 rocket attacks.[31] The al Quds Brigades claimed responsibility for six rocket attacks.[32] The National Resistance Brigades claimed one rocket attack into southern Israel.[33] The al Nasser Salah al Din Brigades fired mortars at Kissufim.[34]

Indirect Fire Attacks into Israel from Gaza as of December 4, 2023, 2:00 PM ET



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

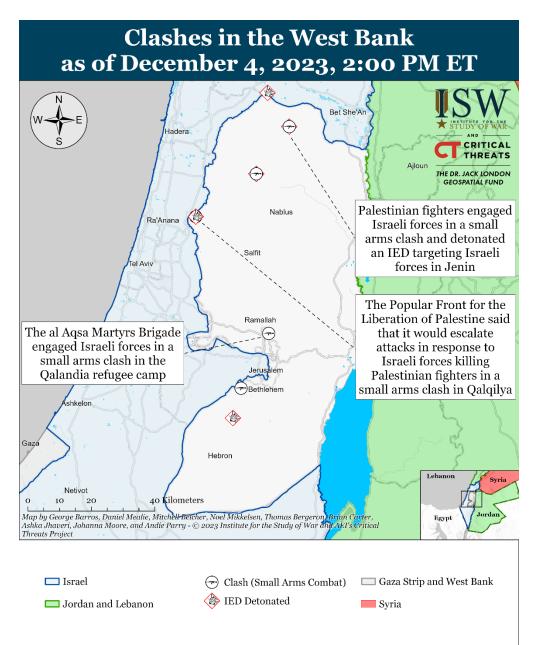
West Bank

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

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

Palestinian fighters conducted ten attacks targeting Israeli forces across the West Bank on December 4. Palestinian fighters engaged Israeli forces in five small arms clashes and detonated five IEDs targeting Israeli forces.[35] The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) said on December 4 that it would escalate attacks in response to Israeli forces killing Palestinian fighters in Qalqilya on the same day.[36] The PFLP has repeatedly incited attacks and demonstrations in response to Israeli actions in the West Bank in recent weeks, but these calls have not generated increased attacks or demonstrations.[37]

Iranian state media claimed on December 4 that Palestinian fighters "control" part of a town in the West Bank, which is an information operation. Iranian state media outlets al Alam and IRIB News said that a new Palestinian militia group called the Biddya Brigades have "taken control" over Biddya in northern West Bank.[38] Al Alam said that the Biddya Brigades recently announced its establishment and seeks to "repel the attacks of the Israeli occupation." Pro-Hamas and Iranian social media pages said that the Biddya Brigades reshared a video of an alleged Biddya Brigades fighter "roaming the streets" in Biddya.[39] LH-affiliated outlet al Mayadeen said on December 3 that the Biddya Brigades or the groups' presence in Biddya. CTP-ISW has not observed evidence that support the Iranian claims that the Biddya Brigades "control" the town.



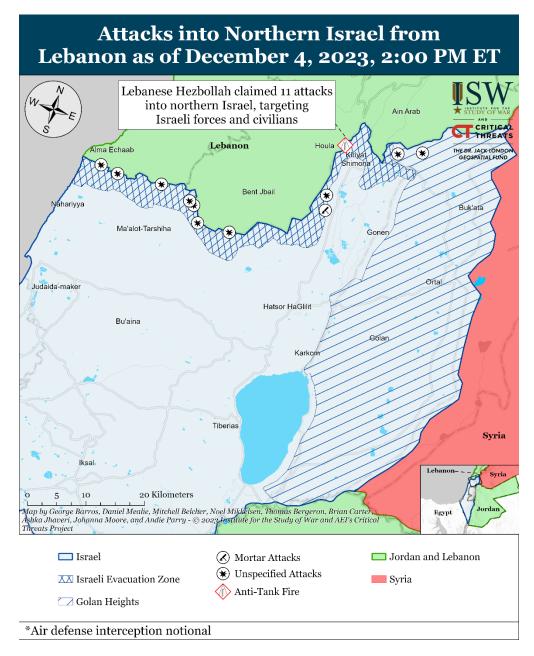
This map is not an exhaustive depiction of clashes and demonstrations in the West Bank.

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) claimed 11 attacks into northern Israel on December 4, targeting Israeli forces and civilians.[41] Unspecified fighters conducted three other attacks into northern Israel.[42] The IDF acknowledged two of these attacks.[43]



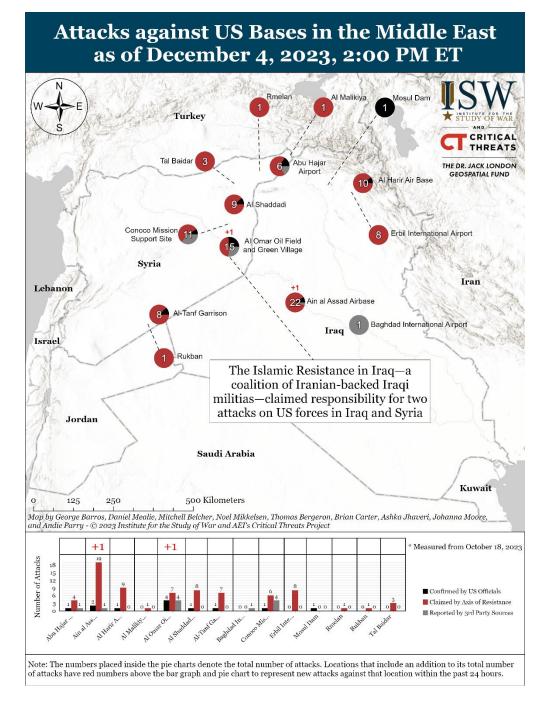
Iran and Axis of Resistance

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

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—claimed responsibility for two attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria on December 3. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq resumed its attacks on US forces on December 3, two days after the humanitarian pause in the Gaza Strip ended on December 1.[44] The Islamic Resistance in Iraq and its affiliated groups have claimed 78 attacks against US forces in the Middle East since October 18.

- The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed a single one-way drone attack targeting US forces at Green Village in northeastern Syria on December 3.[45] The group has claimed eight attacks on Green Village since October 18.
- The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed a single one-way drone attack targeting US forces at Ain Asad Airbase on December 3.[46] The group has claimed 22 attacks on Ain Asad Airbase since October 18.



Unspecified actors are conducting an information operation to obfuscate Russian assistance to Iran and its proxies in an effort to prevent Israel from escalating in

Syria. Anonymous unspecified diplomatic sources told Syrian-regime opposition media that Russia is attempting to avoid any escalation with Israel inside Syria by attempting to limit Iranian influence in southwestern Syria and by limiting Russian weapons transfers to Iran and Iranian-backed groups. These sources claimed that Russia, the Assad regime, and the United Arab Emirates seek to remove Iranian-backed militias from the Syrian border with the Golan Heights.[47] The anonymous sources also said that Russia decided not to transfer military equipment to Iran and Iranian-backed groups.

Russia has provided support to Iran and Iranian-backed forces in Syria during the Israel-Hamas War, however. An IRGC-linked Mahan Air flight purportedly transporting shoulder-mounted anti-aircraft missiles landed at the Russian Hmeimim military airport in northern Syria from Tehran on November 2.[48] Multiple US officials told Western media on November 3 that the Wagner Group planned to transfer air defense systems to Lebanese Hezbollah.[49] The White House declassified intelligence on November 21 that corroborated these reports.[50]

Russia and Israel have a complex relationship in Syria, as Israel has historically relied on Russia to curb Iranian activities in Syria.[51] Israel has stopped giving Russian forces advanced warning of its strikes into Israel, however.[52]

US Central Command confirmed on December 4 that the US military conducted a selfdefense strike against five Iraqi militants planning a one-way drone attack on US forces near Kirkuk, Iraq, on December 3.[53] The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranianbacked militias—announced that five of its fighters died in battle on December 3. Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba (HHN), which is a member of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, said specifically that the fighters were HHN members.[54] HHN Secretary General Akram al Kaabi threatened on December 4 to retaliate against US forces for the airstrike.[55] Kaabi stated that the deaths of the fighters "kindles the flame of revenge in our hearts" and warned the United States that it "will pay a heavy price for [its] crime."

Iranian officials warned that Israeli attacks on Iranian interests in Syria "will not go unanswered" on December 4.[56] Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanani stated that Iran will respond to any attacks on its interests, particularly its "advisory forces" in Syria during one of his regular press conferences on December 4. Strategic Foreign Relations Council Chairman Kamal Kharrazi echoed Kanani, saying that Israeli attacks on Iranian bases in Syria will "never remain unanswered" during an interview with Al Jazeera. Kharrazi is a foreign policy advisor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Both officials were referring to a purported Israeli airstrike on Iranian positions in Syria that killed two IRGC general officers on December 2.[57]

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei discussed the Israel-Hamas war with Cuban President Miguel Diaz Ganel on December 4 in Tehran.[58] Khamenei emphasized the need for a united global front against Western and Israeli oppression of Palestinians. President Ebrahim Raisi and Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf echoed Khamenei's remarks during their separate meetings with Canel.[59]

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian met with his Omani counterpart Sayyid Badr al Busaidi on December 4 in Tehran to discuss the Israel-Hamas war.[60] The two officials emphasized the need for ending Israeli action in the Gaza Strip. Abdollahian previously discussed the Israel-Hamas war with al Busaidi on December 1.[61]

Iranian Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri discussed expanding intelligence cooperation with the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) during a meeting with PMF Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh in Baghdad on December 4.[62] The PMF is an umbrella security organization largely composed of Shia militias.[63] The US Department of the Treasury sanctioned Fayyadh in January 2021 for serious human rights abuses.[64] Greater intelligence cooperation between Iran and the PMF would likely grant Iran increased access to intelligence on US forces on Iraq, which would increase threats to US forces in Iraq. Bagheri and Fayyadh also discussed combatting terrorism and strengthening bilateral security cooperation. Former Kataib Hezbollah Secretary General and PMF Chief of Staff Abdul Aziz al Mohammadawi (also known as Abu Fadak) also attended the meeting. Iranian Law Enforcement Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan recently met with Fayyadh in Baghdad on November 13.[65] Bagheri separately met with Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid on December 4.[66]

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian and First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber discussed the Israel-Hamas war with Iraqi interim Parliamentary Speaker Mohsen al Mandalawi in Tehran on December 4.[67] Abdollahian called for greater cooperation between Iran and Iraq to facilitate "peace and stability" in the region. Mokhber praised the Iraqi government for approving a law that "criminalizes relations with Israel."

- Mandalawi is a member of the Shia Coordination Framework—a loosely aligned coalition of pro-Iranian political parties—and was appointed as deputy parliamentary speaker in September 2022.[68] He has been serving as acting parliament speaker since the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court issued a ruling to remove former Parliamentary Speaker Mohammed al Halbousi from parliament on November 14.[69] Mandalawi is a Feyli Shia Kurd from Diyala Province in northeastern Iraq.[70] Mandalawi is a member of the Independent Iraq Alliance, which is headed by Iraqi MP Abdul Hadi al Hasnawi.[71] Mandalawi has previously met with Axis of Resistance officials such as former Kataib Hezbollah Secretary General and PMF Chief of Staff Abdul Aziz al Muhammadawi and Asaib Ahl al Haq Secretary General Qais Khazali.[72]
- Halbousi, an important Sunni politician and the leader of the Taqqadum Movement, claimed that the Federal Supreme Court's November 14 ruling was unconstitutional and that the ruling was a move by unspecified parties to create political divisions within society.[73] CTP-ISW previously hypothesized that Halbousi was removed from his post as part of political efforts to reduce the US presence in Iraq.[74]

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