

# Iran Update, January 26, 2024

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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.

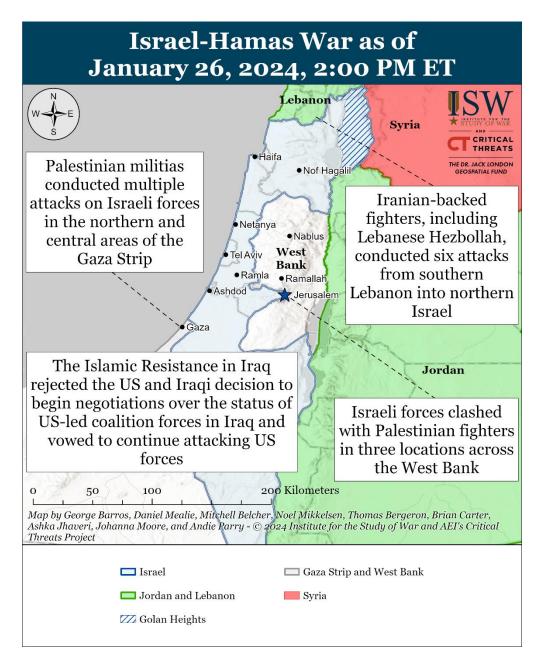
Note: CTP and ISW have refocused the update to cover the Israel-Hamas war. The new sections address developments in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as noteworthy activity from Iran's Axis of Resistance. We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are well-covered 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. Click here to subscribe to the Iran Update.

#### **Key Takeaways:**

- **Iraq:** The Islamic Resistance in Iraq released a statement rejecting the US and Iraqi decision to begin negotiations over the status of US-led coalition forces in Iraq and vowed to continue attacking US forces. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq will likely continue to attack US forces in Iraq and Syria to pressure the Mohammad Shia al Sudani administration to order the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq.
- **Yemen:** The Houthis conducted multiple attacks on a US Navy warship and two commercial vessels in the Gulf of Aden. CENTCOM reported that the Houthis fired one antiship ballistic missile targeting the USS Carney. two missiles exploded within a few hundred

- meters of the Panama-flagged commercial tanker Achilles around the same time as the attack on the USS Carney.
- **Northern Gaza Strip:** The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) destroyed military infrastructure and clashed with Palestinian fighters in the northern Gaza Strip. Hamas and other Palestinian fighters have contested Israeli raids in certain areas of the northern Gaza Strip throughout January 2024.
- **Central Gaza Strip:** Palestinian militias conducted multiple attacks on Israeli forces in the central Gaza Strip. Hamas' military wing detonated explosives in a tunnel entrance targeting Israeli infantrymen near the Maghazi refugee camp.
- **Southern Gaza Strip:** Palestinian militias conducted seven indirect fire attacks from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel.
- **West Bank:** Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters in three locations across the West Bank. The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, the self-proclaimed militant wing of Fatah, and the Tubas Battalion of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad military wing claimed that they targeted Israeli forces with explosives and small arms fire in Tubas.
- **Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights:** Iranian-backed fighters, including Lebanese Hezbollah, conducted six attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel on January 26. Hezbollah conducted three attacks targeting Israeli forces using rockets and other unspecified munitions.
- **Iran:** The Iranian regime denied a recent Wall Street Journal report that the United States secretly warned Iran that the Islamic State was preparing to conduct the January 3 terrorist attack in Kerman.



### 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.

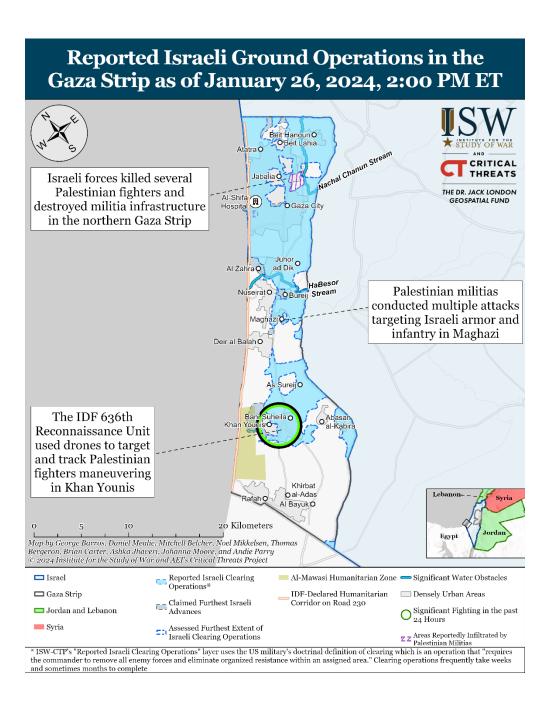
The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) destroyed military infrastructure and clashed with Palestinian fighters in the northern Gaza Strip on January 26. The IDF Navy provided fire support to the IDF Nahal Brigade (assigned to the 162nd Division), which was operating in Beit Lahia as of January 7.[1] The IDF 5th Brigade (assigned to the 143rd Division) killed six fighters and directed IDF Air Force strikes on Hamas military infrastructure in the northern Gaza Strip.[2]

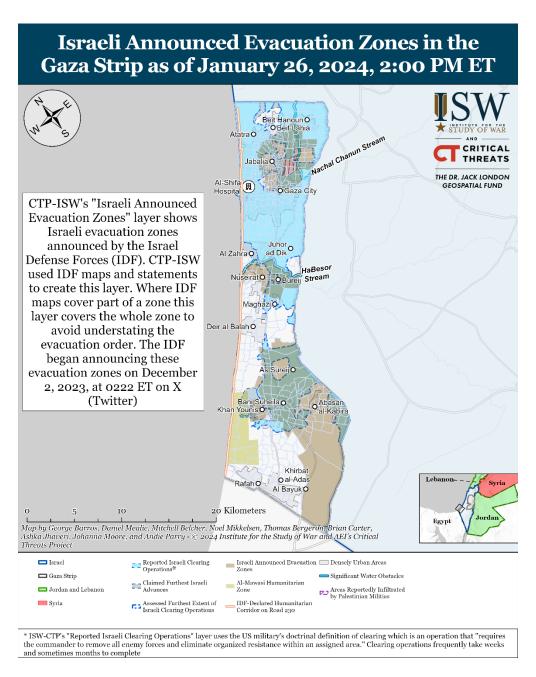
Hamas and other Palestinian fighters have contested Israeli raids in certain areas of the northern Gaza Strip throughout January 2024. Hamas' military wing clashed with the IDF in the Sheikh Ijlin neighborhood, Gaza City.[3] Palestinian Islamic Jihad's (PIJ) military wing claimed that it shot down an Israeli drone conducting intelligence activities near Shujaiya in the northern Gaza Strip.[4]

Palestinian militias conducted multiple attacks on Israeli forces in the central Gaza Strip on January 26. Hamas' military wing detonated explosives in a tunnel entrance targeting Israeli infantrymen near the Maghazi refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip.[5] The group also fired Yasin-105 anti-tank rockets and detonated an explosively-formed penetrator (EFP) targeting Israeli Merkava tanks in the same area.[6] PIJ's military wing fired a tandem-charge anti-tank rocket targeting IDF armor east of the Maghazi refugee camp.[7] PIJ mortared Israeli infantry and vehicles east of the Maghazi camp.[8] The group mortared IDF infantry near the Bureij refugee camp and al Musaddar village in the central Gaza Strip.[9]

The IDF 98th Division continued operations in Khan Younis on January 26. The IDF 636th Reconnaissance Unit is using drones to target and track Palestinian fighters in Khan Younis.[10] The unit has located about 200 tunnel shafts and destroyed 10 rocket launchers and other Palestinian militia-affiliated infrastructure. The 89th Commando Brigade (assigned to the 98th Division) directed an airstrike targeting four Palestinian fighters who fired anti-tank munitions at Israeli forces in Khan Younis.[11] The Givati Brigade (assigned to the 162nd Division) used sniper weapons and tank fire to kill six Palestinian fighters during clearing operations in Khan Younis.[12]

Several Palestinian militias including Hamas continued to execute a deliberate defense against the Israeli ground operations in Khan Younis, particularly west of the city. The 98th Division began an "expanded" ground operation in western Khan Younis on January 22.[13] Hamas, PIJ, and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) claimed several attacks targeting Israeli personnel and armor with IEDs, mortars, and rockets in western Khan Younis.[14] The DFLP is a leftist Palestinian militia aligned with Hamas in the war. The military wing of the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, which is the self-proclaimed military wing of Fatah, clashed with and fired mortars at Israeli forces in Khan Younis.[15]



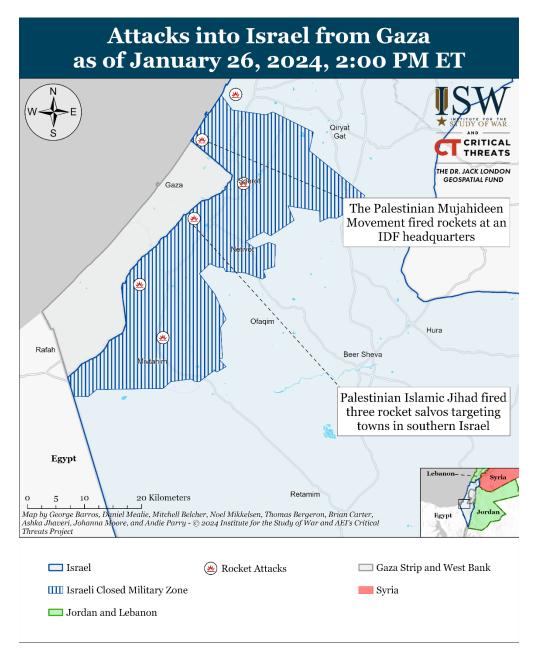


Al Jazeera reported that the Israeli military believes that Hamas has returned to providing services in areas where the IDF has reduced its presence.[16] An Israeli Army Radio journalist similarly reported on January 16 that Hamas is trying to restore its control over the civilian population in the northern Gaza Strip, in part, by rehabilitating local police there.[17] The reporting is consistent with CTP-ISW's assessment that Palestinian militias are likely infiltrating into areas of the northern Gaza Strip where Israeli forces previously conducted clearing operations.[18] Hamas' return to providing services in areas that Israeli forces previously cleared undermines Israeli efforts to destroy Hamas.

The US State Department temporarily paused funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) on January 26 following

evidence that its staff were involved in the October 7 attack.[19] Israeli authorities provided evidence to UNRWA that showed 12 staff members participated in the October 7 attack. Israel also provided evidence showing the use of the agency's vehicles and facilities during the attack.[20] UNRWA reported on January 26 that it would terminate the staff member's contracts "immediately" and launch an investigation into the allegations.[21] The United States will review the allegations and the steps that the UN is taking to address them.[22]

Palestinian militias conducted seven indirect fire attacks from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel on January 26. PIJ fired rockets targeting five locations in southern Israel, including Ashkelon, Sderot, and Nir Aam.[23] The Mujahideen Brigades fired rockets at what it claimed is an IDF headquarters for the Gaza Division's "Northern Brigade" and at Nahal Oz.[24] The Palestinian Mujahideen Movement is a Palestinian faction aligned with Hamas and has expressed close ties with Iran.[25]



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

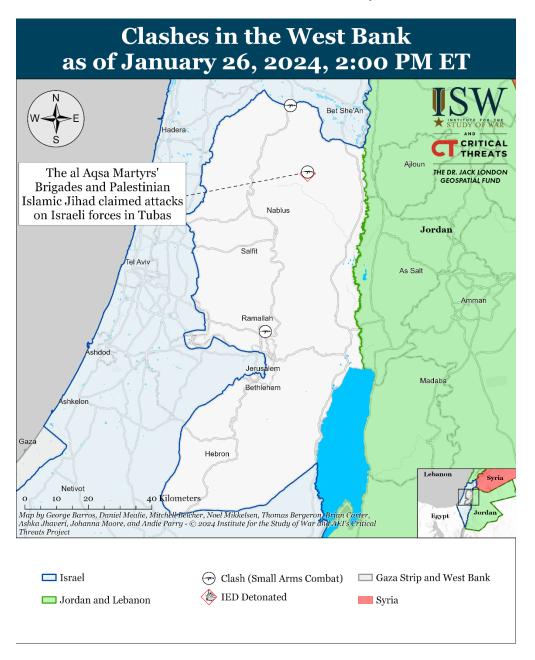
### **West Bank**

### Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

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

Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters in three locations across the West Bank on January 26. The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, the self-proclaimed militant wing of Fatah, and the Tubas Battalion of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad military wing claimed that they targeted Israeli forces with explosives and small arms fire in Tubas, on January 25 and 26.[26] Hamas' military wing and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades fired small arms targeting Israeli forces near Jenin and Qalandiya

respectively.[27] The IDF reported that Israeli forces arrested five wanted persons across the West Bank and seized small arms and ammunition on January 26.[28]



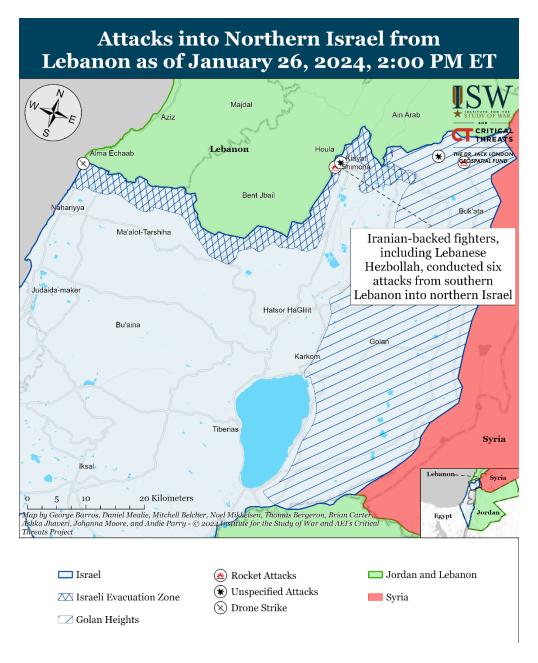
This map is not an exhaustive depiction of clashes and demonstrations in the West Bank.

# **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

Iranian-backed fighters, including Lebanese Hezbollah, conducted six attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel on January 26.[29] Hezbollah conducted three attacks targeting Israeli forces using rockets and other unspecified munitions.[30] Hezbollah targeted Israeli forces at the Gonen barracks using an Iranian-made Falaq-1 rocket system.[31] Hezbollah said that this was the first attack in which it used the Falaq-1 during this war. The IDF intercepted an unspecified aerial target over Kfar Rosh HaNikra.[32]



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

### 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 Houthis conducted multiple attacks on a US Navy warship and two commercial vessels in the Gulf of Aden on January 26. CENTCOM reported that the Houthis fired one antiship ballistic missile targeting the USS *Carney*.[33] *Carney* intercepted the missile and suffered no casualties or damage.[34] UK Maritime Trade Operations reported that two missiles exploded within a few hundred meters of the Panama-flagged commercial tanker *Achilles* around the same time as the attack on the USS *Carney*.[35] The Houthis claimed that they fired multiple anti-ship missiles that hit and set the British-owned Marshall Islands-flagged commercial oil tanker *Marlin Luanda* on fire on January 26.[36]

Reuters reported on January 25 that unspecified Iranian sources said that China asked Iran to prevent Houthi attacks in the Red Sea.[37] China warned that if Houthi attacks harmed Chinese interests, it would impact China's business with Iran. Houthi spokesperson Mohammad Abdulsalam said on January 25 that Iran has not conveyed any message from China to the Houthis regarding scaling back attacks in the Red Sea.[38]

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq launched two one-way attack drones targeting US forces stationed at Ain al Assad Airbase on January 25 and 26.[39] The Islamic Resistance in Iraq said both attacks are part of its ongoing campaign to expel US forces from Iraq.

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq released a statement on January 26 rejecting the US and Iraqi decision to begin negotiations over the status of US-led coalition forces in Iraq and vowed to continue attacking US forces.[40] The United States and the Iraqi federal government announced on January 25 that they will soon begin negotiations on Iraq's current security arrangement with US-led coalition forces.[41] These negotiations could precipitate the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. US-led coalition forces are currently deployed in Iraq at the invitation of the Iraqi government to fight ISIS.[42] The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed that the announcement of the start of negotiations is a US attempt to "buy time to carry out more crimes" against Iraq.[43] The group also vowed to continue attacking US forces in the region and claimed that the United States only understands "the language of force."[44] The Islamic Resistance in Iraq has conducted over 150 attacks targeting US forces in Iraq and Syria since the Israel-Hamas war began.[45] A senior leader of Kataib Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed proxy militia that is part of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, also described the upcoming negotiations as a US effort to "deceive" Iranian-backed Iraqi militias on January 26.[46]

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq will likely continue to attack US forces in Iraq and Syria to pressure the Mohammad Shia al Sudani administration to order the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. The Iraqi federal government has executive agreements with the United States that govern the US force presence in Iraq. This means that Prime Minister Sudani is the only individual who can order the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq.[47] Iranian-backed Iraqi militias conduct attacks targeting US forces with the expectation that the United States will respond with self-defense strikes. The militias subsequently

frame these self-defense strikes as "violations" of Iraqi sovereignty to mount pressure on the Sudani administration to order the withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraq.

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq also stated that the United States and Iraq should not hold talks until the United States proves its commitment to withdrawing US forces from Iraq, removes its military aircraft and drones from Iraq, and removes US advisers from the Joint Operations Command (JOC).[48] The Joint Operations Command coordinates the efforts of regional operations commands across Iraq and US advisers work alongside the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in an advise and assist role to help the ISF fight ISIS.[49] US advisers assist the ISF at the strategic and operational levels. Removing US advisers from the JOC would further hamper the ISF's ability to defeat ISIS. The ISF already faces deficiencies in planning, fire support, intelligence, and logistics that prevent it from defeating ISIS alone.[50]

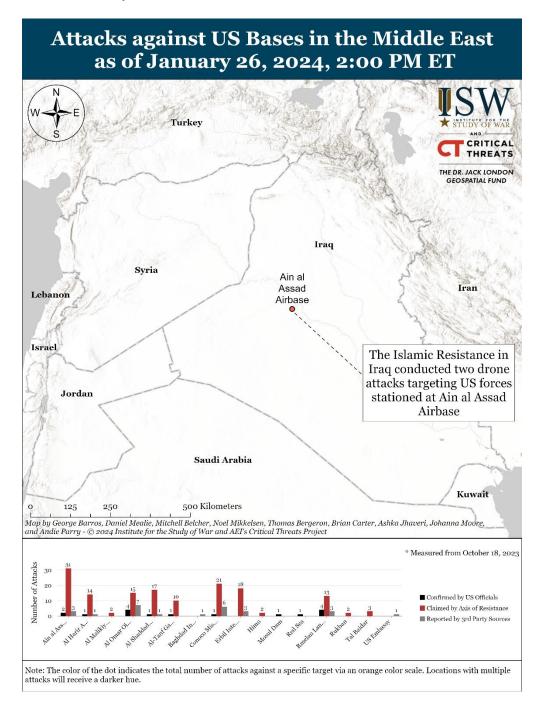
Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada Secretary General Abu Ala al Walai called on Iranian-backed Iraqi militias to launch the "second phase" of operations against the United States and Israel on January 23.[51] Walai made this call following the January 23 US airstrikes that targeted three Kataib Hezbollah facilities in Iraq.[52] Walai specified that the "second phase" of operations will block Israeli maritime activity in the Mediterranean Sea and render Israeli ports inoperable. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq conducted separate attacks targeting the Israeli port Ashdod, south of Tel Aviv, on January 23 and 25.[53] Israeli officials did not confirm the attacks. CTP-ISW cannot verify that these attacks occurred.

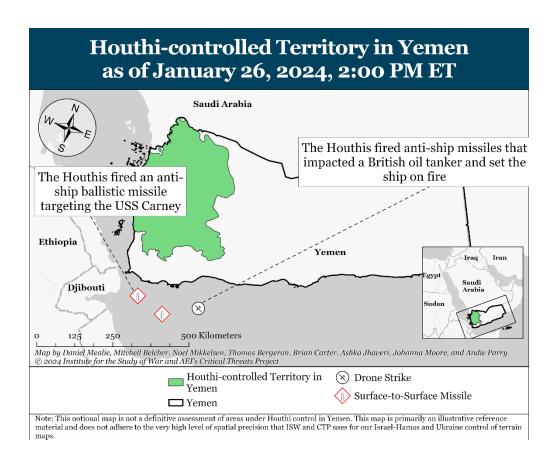
The Balochi militant group Ansar al Furqan claimed that it fired small arms targeting a police station in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province on January 25.[54] The Zahedan Law Enforcement Commander announced that two "terrorist operatives" fired small arms at the police station and subsequently fled.[55] This incident is part of a rise in terrorist activity and insecurity in southeastern Iran since December 2023. Jaish al Adl—a Balochi Salafi-Jihadist group that operates along the Iranian border with Pakistan—conducted a two-stage attack targeting a police station in Rask, Sistan, and Baluchistan Province, in December 2023.[56] Eleven police officers died in the attack. The Afghan branch of the Islamic State also conducted a terrorist attack in Kerman Province on January 3, killing over 90 individuals.[57]

The Iranian ambassador to Pakistan and the Pakistani ambassador to Iran returned to their posts following the exchange of strikes between Iran and Pakistan between January 16-18.[58] Pakistan recalled its ambassador to Iran and expelled the Iranian ambassador to Pakistan following the IRGC's drone and missile strikes on Jaish al Adl targets in Pakistan on January 17.[59] The Pakistani armed forces responded late on January 17 with strikes targeting Baloch separatists in three locations near Saravan, Iran.[60] The return of the Iranian and Pakistani ambassadors to their posts is part of Iranian and Pakistani efforts to de-escalate tensions and restore bilateral relations in the aftermath of the strikes.

The Iranian regime denied a recent Wall Street Journal (WSJ) report that the United States secretly warned Iran that the Islamic State was preparing to conduct the January 3 terrorist attack in Kerman.[61] The United States provided Iran with intelligence, including the location of the attack, that the Iranian regime could have used to thwart the attack.[62] "Informed [Iranian] sources" denied the WSJ reporting on January 26.[63] An unidentified security official also claimed that a US warning to Iran would have been meant to protect the United States from Iran's

"response [to the attack]."[64] This statement is consistent with Iranian officials' efforts to place blame for the January 3 attack on the United States and Israel.[65]







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