



Iran Update, March 29, 2024

Andie Parry, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Annika Ganzeveld, Kathryn Tyson and Nicholas Carl
Information Cutoff: 2:00 pm ET

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. 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.

The Axis of Resistance is the unconventional alliance that Iran has cultivated in the Middle East since the Islamic Republic came to power in 1979. This transnational coalition is comprised of state, semi-state, and non-state actors that cooperate with one another to secure their collective interests. Tehran considers itself to be both part of the alliance and its leader. Iran furnishes these groups with varying levels of financial, military, and political support in exchange for some degree of influence or control over their actions. Some are traditional proxies that are highly responsive to Iranian direction while others are militias over which Iran exerts more limited influence. Members of the Axis of Resistance are united by their grand strategic objectives, which include eroding and eventually expelling American influence from the Middle East, destroying the Israeli state, or both. Pursuing these objectives and supporting the Axis of Resistance to those ends have become cornerstones of Iranian regional strategy.

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.

Iranian Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS) Chief Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri met with Hamas Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran on March 29. Bagheri praised Hamas' October 7 attack and reemphasized the Iranian regime's commitment to supporting the Palestinian cause, describing the latter as one of Tehran's "main objectives." Bagheri separately claimed that Israel would have already "collapsed" without support from the United States.[1] Haniyeh

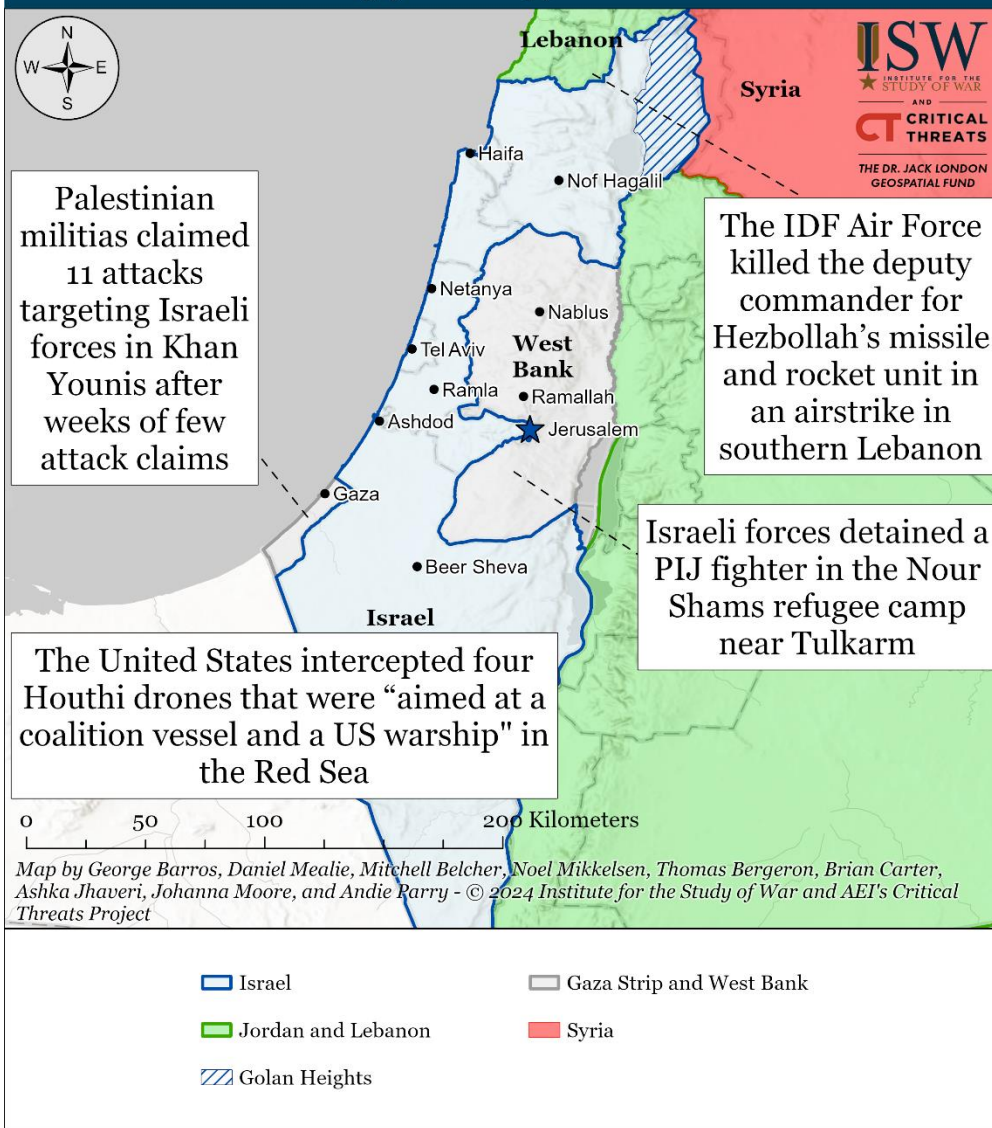
separately met with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian on March 26, President Ebrahim Raisi on March 27, and Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf on March 28.[2]

The meeting between Bagheri and Haniyeh is particularly noteworthy considering Bagheri's role within the regime. Bagheri holds the most senior military role in Iran and is responsible for military policy and strategic guidance to the Iranian armed forces. CTP-ISW assessed on March 28 that several senior Axis of Resistance officials have traveled to Tehran in recent weeks likely in part to coordinate their reaction to a possible, major Israeli operation into southern Lebanon.[3]

Key Takeaways:

- **Iran:** Iranian Armed Forces General Staff Chief Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri met with Hamas Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran.
- **Northern Gaza Strip:** Israeli forces continued operating in and around al Shifa Hospital in Gaza City.
- **Southern Gaza Strip:** Palestinian militias claimed 11 attacks targeting Israeli forces in al Amal and al Qarara after several weeks of only a few claimed attacks around Khan Younis.
- **West Bank:** Israeli forces detained a PIJ fighter in the Nour Shams refugee camp near Tulkarm.
- **Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights:** The IDF Air Force killed the deputy commander of Hezbollah's missile and rocket unit in an airstrike in al Bazouriyeh in southern Lebanon.
- **Iraq:** Iraqi Parliamentary Security and Defense Committee member Yasser Iskandar suggested that Iraq should acquire Russian military aircraft instead of US aircraft.
- **Syria:** Israel was likely responsible for a series of airstrikes targeting Iranian-backed positions in Aleppo Province, Syria.
- **Yemen:** US Central Command intercepted four Houthi drones that were "aimed at a coalition vessel and a US warship" in the Red Sea.

Israel-Hamas War as of March 29, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



Gaza Strip

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Erode the will of the Israeli political establishment and public to sustain clearing operations in the Gaza Strip
- Reestablish Hamas as the governing authority in the Gaza Strip

Israeli forces continued operating in and around al Shifa Hospital in Gaza City on March 29.[4] The IDF 162nd Division located militia infrastructure and unspecified weapons near the hospital.[5] Israeli forces also engaged Palestinian fighters in the area.[6]

Palestinian fighters continued their usual rate of attacks targeting Israeli forces in southern Gaza City. Palestinian fighters have conducted over 80 attacks targeting Israeli forces in and around al Shifa Hospital since Israeli forces returned to the area on March 18. Hamas fighters targeted an Israeli tank with an explosively formed penetrator (EFP) in Tal al Hawa, south of al Shifa Hospital, on March 29.[7] Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades mortared Israeli forces operating near al Shifa Hospital in separate and combined attacks on March 29.[8] The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, which is the self-proclaimed military wing of Fatah and aligned with Hamas in the war, also claimed that its fighters targeted Israeli armor with rocket-propelled grenades near al Shifa Hospital on March 28.[9]

The IDF Nahal Brigade (162nd Division) continued to conduct clearing operations in the central Gaza Strip on March 29. Israeli aircraft struck a cell of Palestinian fighters near the Nahal Brigade.[10] The Nahal Brigade separately destroyed rockets aimed at Israel.[11]

Israeli forces continued to conduct clearing operations in al Amal and al Qarara neighborhoods of Khan Younis on March 29. The IDF 98th Division targeted Palestinian fighters and militia infrastructure in al Qarara, northern Khan Younis, on March 29.[12] The IDF 89th Commando Brigade killed a Palestinian fighter in a house during a raid and located military equipment in al Amal.[13] The IDF 7th Brigade destroyed militia infrastructure, located weapons, including grenades and explosives, and targeted a cell of Palestinian fighters with tank fire in al Amal. The Givati Brigade separately destroyed a weapons warehouse in al Amal. The IDF launched a second clearing operation in al Amal on March [14][15]

Palestinian militias claimed 11 attacks targeting Israeli forces in al Amal and al Qarara since CTP-ISW's last data cut off on March 28 after several weeks of only a few claimed attacks around Khan Younis.[16] Palestinian militia attack claims in the southern Gaza Strip outnumbered attacks in the northern Gaza Strip on March 29 for the first time since March 14. Several Palestinian militias prefaced their attack claims on March 29 by reporting that their fighters returned from the front lines to give accounts of clashes.[17] This preface suggests that Palestinian fighters may have been regularly targeting Israeli forces in Khan Younis over the past weeks but were unable to communicate attacks to their media arms and/or higher headquarters. CTP-ISW has previously reported on a similar phenomenon with Palestinian fighters in the northern Gaza Strip. Israeli forces operating in Khan Younis have consistently reported clashes with Palestinian fighters in al Amal over the past week, despite the low level of Palestinian claims, further suggesting that the Palestinian attack claims in Khan Younis are delayed and that the militias retain some degree of combat effectiveness around Khan Younis.[18]

Palestinian militias claimed a series of high-impact attacks in Khan Younis on March 29. Hamas fighters fired a thermobaric rocket at Israeli forces inside a multi-story building near Nasser Hospital, leading to a large explosion captured on video.[19] The IDF and Israeli media indicated that an Egoz special operations forces (SOF) soldier died and that 16 other Israeli soldiers were injured—some seriously—by the Hamas attack.[20] PIJ said that its fighters ambushed six Israeli SOF members in the Qarara area on March 29, claiming to kill and wound the entire squad.[21] The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), which is a leftist Palestinian militia aligned with Hamas in the war, separately claimed that its fighters detonated an improvised explosive device targeting an Israeli personnel carrier in Qarara.[22]

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip as of March 29, 2024, 2:00 PM ET

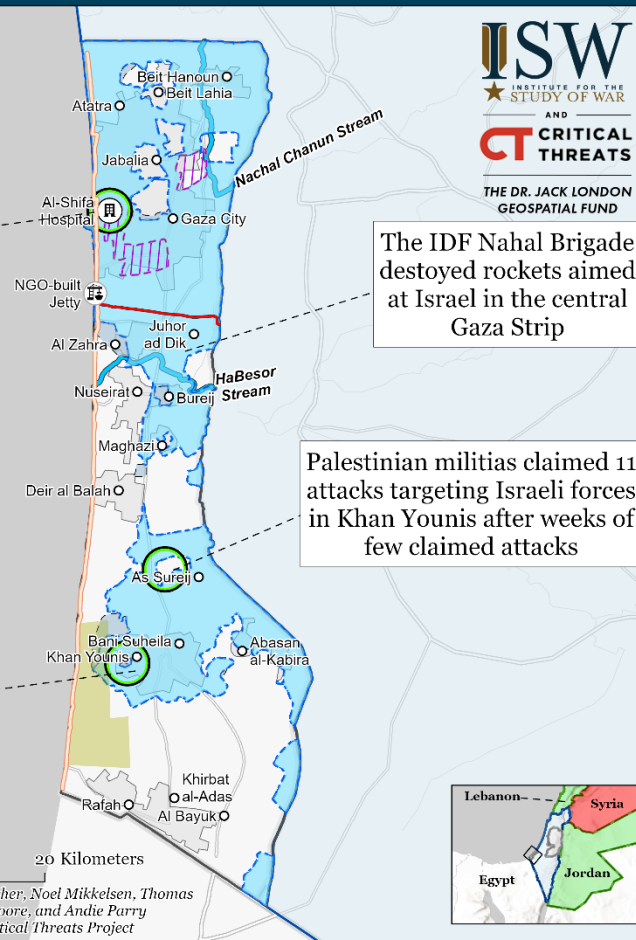


Israeli forces continued clearing operations in and around al Shifa Hospital in western Gaza City

The IDF Nahal Brigade destroyed rockets aimed at Israel in the central Gaza Strip

Palestinian militias claimed 11 attacks targeting Israeli forces in Khan Younis after weeks of few claimed attacks

Israeli forces destroyed militia infrastructure around al Amal in western Khan Younis

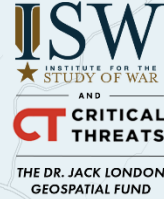


Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Brian Carter, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Andie Parry
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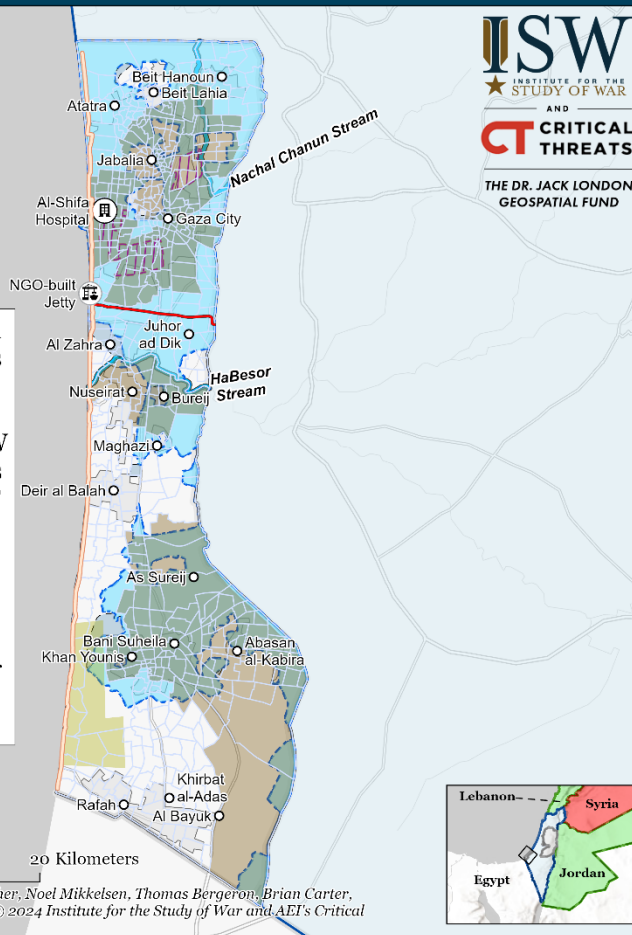
- Israel
- Reported Israeli Clearing Operations*
- Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone
- Significant Water Obstacles
- Gaza Strip
- Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances
- IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridor on Road 230
- Densely Urban Areas
- Jordan and Lebanon
- Areas Reportedly Infiltrated by Palestinian Militias
- Israeli-Built Highway Route 749
- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Syria

* 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

Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip as of March 29, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



CTP-ISW's "Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones" layer shows Israeli evacuation zones announced by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). CTP-ISW used IDF maps and statements to create this layer. Where IDF maps cover part of a zone this layer covers the whole zone to avoid understating the evacuation order. The IDF began announcing these evacuation zones on December 2, 2023, at 0222 ET on X (Twitter)



Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Brian Carter, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Andie Parry - © 2024 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

- Israel
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- Densely Urban Areas
- Significant Water Obstacles

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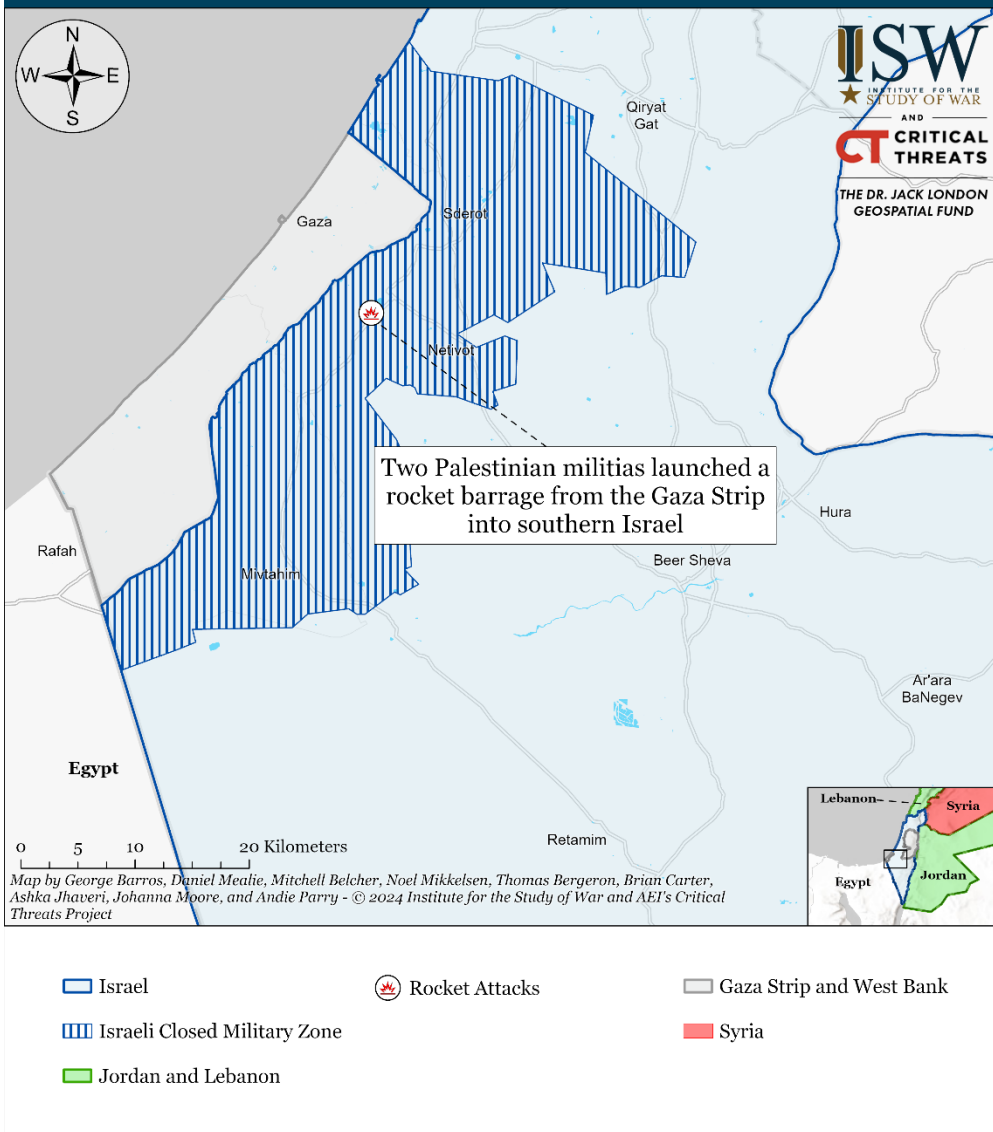
US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Charles Brown Jr. said on March 28 that Israel has committed to help protect US troops who are traveling to the eastern Mediterranean Sea to build and operate a temporary pier meant to transport humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip.[23] Brown added that the United States has its own "capability and capacity to protect" its forces. The US Department of Defense (DOD) confirmed that "there will be no US boots on the ground" when it announced the project on March 8.[24] US service members could be in range of some Palestinian weapons systems even if stationed offshore, however. A DOD spokesperson confirmed on March 26 that six US ships are "on their way" to the eastern Mediterranean Sea as part of the effort to construct a temporary pier.[25]

The Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT)—a department within the Israeli Defense Ministry—said that nine aid trucks entered the northern Gaza Strip on March 29.[26] The trucks entered through the Gate 96 crossing, which Israel reportedly opened in early March 2024.[27] COGAT said that 47 aid trucks have entered Gate 96 since early March.[28]

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu purchased 40,000 tents to house displaced Palestinians in the Gaza Strip in preparation for Israel’s clearing operation into Rafah, according to Israeli media.[29] These reports did not specify where the 40,000 tents will be erected in the Gaza Strip beyond “clear places.”[30] Netanyahu approved plans for a clearing operation into Rafah on March 15.[31]

PIJ and the DLFP fired a rocket barrage from the Gaza Strip targeting a southern Israeli town on March 29.[32]

Attacks into Israel from Gaza as of March 29, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



West Bank

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

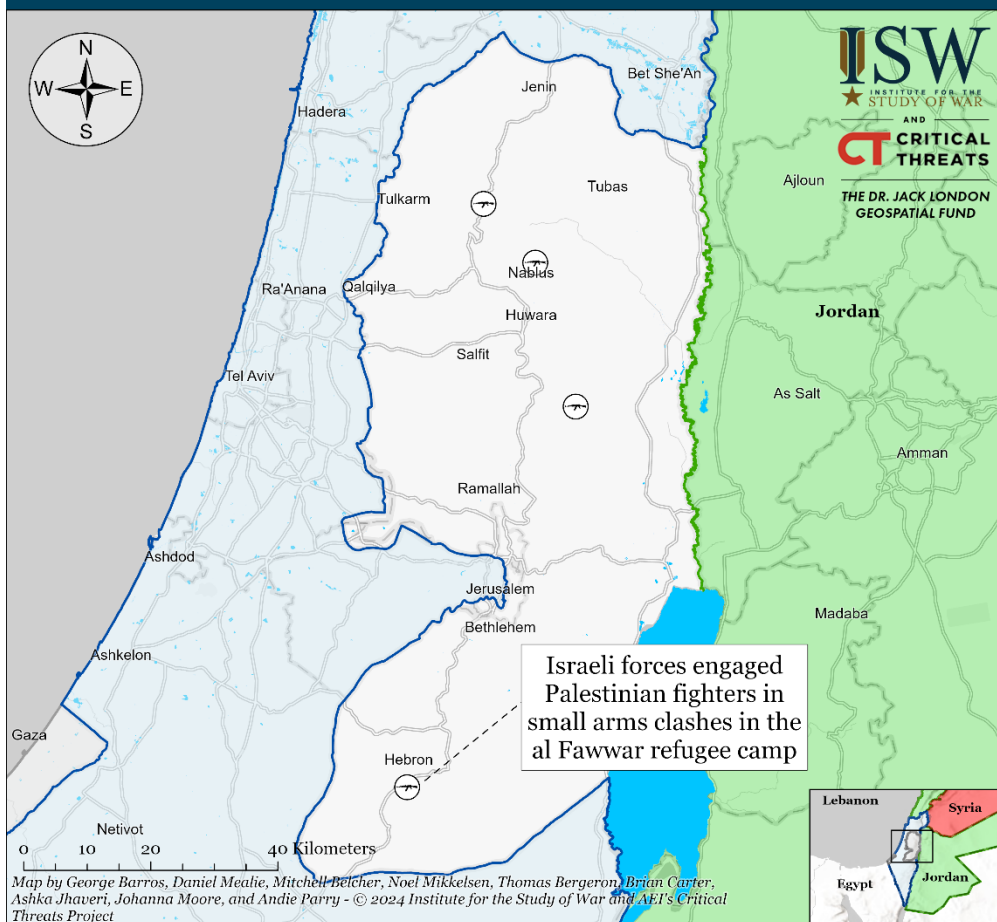
Israeli forces have engaged Palestinian fighters in at least four locations in the West Bank since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on March 28.[33]

Israeli forces detained a PIJ fighter in the Nour Shams refugee camp near Tulkarm on March 29. The IDF said that the fighter planned small arms attacks against Israeli forces and prepared explosive devices to be used to target the IDF and Israeli civilians.[34]

Israeli forces detained five other wanted individuals and confiscated weapons in operations across the West Bank on March 29.[35]

Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Mustafa formed a new cabinet on March 28 amid calls for the Palestinian Authority (PA) to reform itself.[36] PA President Mahmoud Abbas appointed Mohammad Mustafa as prime minister on March 14.[37] US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said that the presence of ministers in the cabinet who were born in the Gaza Strip demonstrates that the cabinet intends to be “fully representative of the Palestinian people.”[38] The United States has pushed for the PA to contribute to rebuilding the Gaza Strip after the Israel-Hamas war. An unspecified US government official told Reuters in December 2023 that aides to US President Joe Biden have urged Israeli leaders to drop their opposition to the PA so that it can take a leading role in the post-war Gaza Strip.[39]

Clashes in the West Bank as of March 29, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



- ▬ Israel
- ▬ Jordan and Lebanon
- ⊕ Clash (Small Arms Combat)
- Gaza Strip and West Bank
- Syria

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

Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

Axis of Resistance objectives:

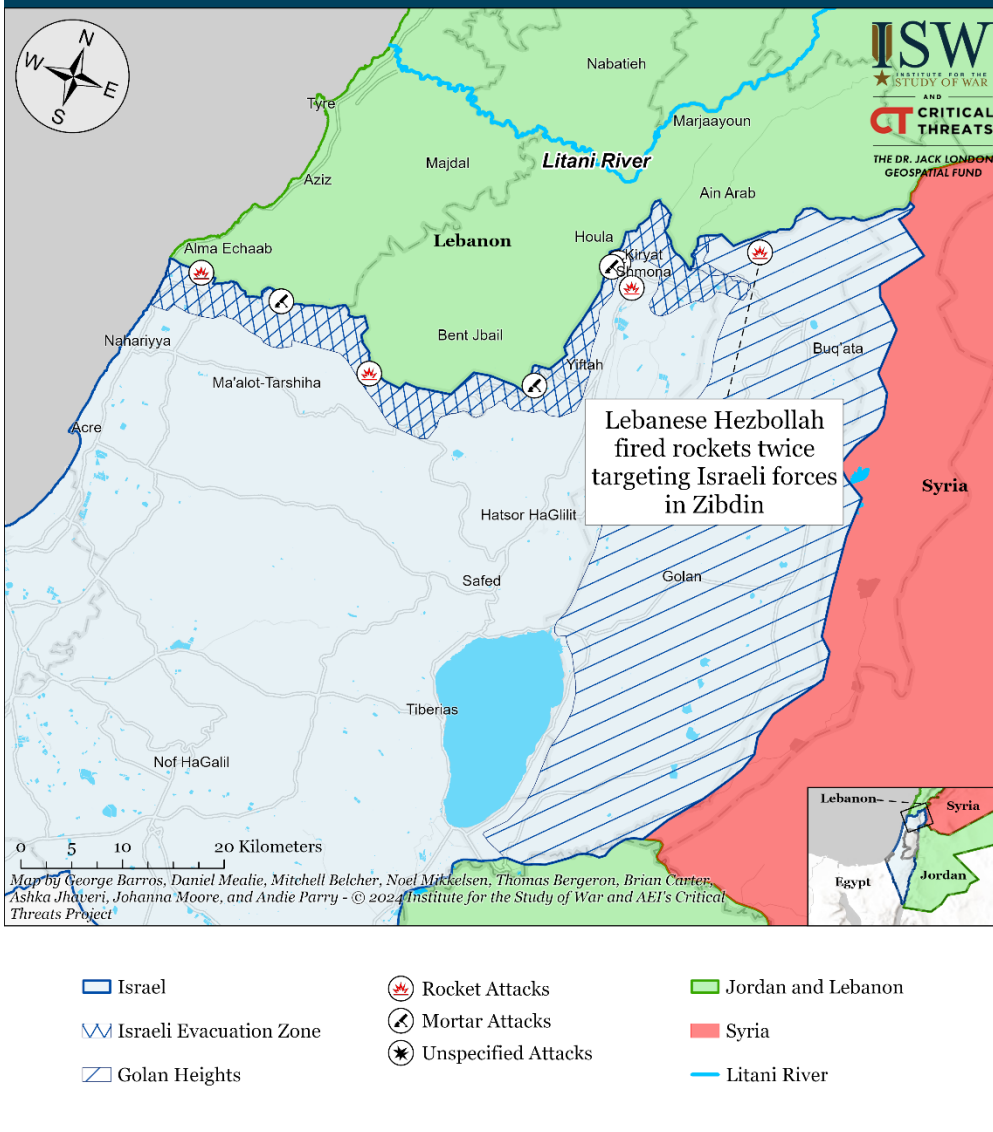
- Deter Israel from conducting a ground operation into Lebanon
- Prepare for an expanded and protracted conflict with Israel in the near term
- Expel the United States from Syria

Lebanese Hezbollah has conducted at least nine attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on March 28.[40]

The IDF Air Force killed the deputy commander of Hezbollah’s missile and rocket unit in an airstrike in al Bazouriyeh in southern Lebanon on March 29.[41] The IDF said that Ali Abdel Hassam Naim was a “senior expert” and a “leader in the field of rockets.”[42] The IDF added that Naim specialized in “heavy rockets” and had planned rocket attacks into Israel.[43] Hezbollah acknowledged Naim’s death on March 29.[44] Israeli Defense Minister Gallant said that the IDF will increase attacks targeting Hezbollah following the airstrike.[45] Gallant said that Israel is becoming “offensive rather than defensive” and said that Israel will strike “any place” where Hezbollah is present.

IDF Northern Command Commander Maj. Gen. Ori Gordin met with local Israeli government authorities on March 29 to discuss the IDF’s readiness in northern Israel.[46] Gordin said that the IDF will continue to strike Hezbollah and that the recent IDF Northern Command training exercises will increase readiness in the region.[47]

Attacks into Northern Israel from Lebanon as of March 29, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



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

Iran and Axis of Resistance

Iraqi Parliamentary Security and Defense Committee member Yasser Iskandar suggested that Iraq should acquire Russian military aircraft instead of US aircraft during an interview with Iraqi state media on March 29.[48] Iskandar claimed that the Iraqi Air Force spends 200 million dollars annually to maintain its F-16 fighter jets and that the cost of maintaining Russian aircraft would be “much less.”[49] Iskandar stated that Western sanctions on Moscow makes it difficult for Iraq to pay for Russian aircraft but that Iraq is open to developing “air power and air defense” capabilities with “many friends and allies.”[50] Iskandar previously claimed in early March 2024 that the United States has prevented Iraq from developing its air defense capabilities.[51]

Russian Ambassador to Iraq Elbrus Kutrashv has similarly advertised the affordability of Russian military equipment in recent years. Kutrashv claimed that “the main things our Iraqi friends do not like are the price and maintenance costs of American weapons, which are four times more expensive than Russian weapons,” during an interview with Russian state media in December 2022.[52] Kutrashv further claimed that “the Iraqis like Russian and Soviet weapons” but that the West is trying to “hinder the expansion of military-technical cooperation between Moscow and Baghdad.”[53]

CTP-ISW previously assessed that Russia may be setting conditions to try to supplant the United States in anticipation of the United States reducing its military presence there.[54] Kutrashv has met with at least six Iraqi officials, including senior security leaders, since January 2024.[55] Kutrashv has served as Russia’s ambassador to Iraq since April 2021 and has also worked in the Russian embassy in Syria.[56]

The Iraqi electricity minister and the head of the National Iranian Gas Company extended Iran and Iraq’s gas export contract by five years on March 27.[57] The contract stipulates that Iran will export up to 50 million cubic meters of natural gas to Iraq per day.[58] Iraq started importing Iranian natural gas in 2017 to fuel power plants near Baghdad and Basra and has since then relied on Iranian natural gas and electricity exports to produce approximately a quarter of its electricity.[59]

Israel was likely responsible for a series of airstrikes targeting Iranian-backed positions in Aleppo Province, Syria, on March 28. Syrian media claimed that the strikes targeted air defense facilities in Safira and a Lebanese Hezbollah weapons warehouse in Jabreen, which is near the Aleppo International Airport.[60] Reuters reported that strikes killed 33 Syrians and five Hezbollah fighters, including one local field commander, citing unspecified security sources, marking the highest death toll of such a strike in Syria since the Israel-Hamas war began.[61] The Syrian Defense Ministry confirmed the airstrikes and claimed that they resulted in civilian casualties, although CTP-ISW cannot corroborate this assertion.[62]

These airstrikes are part of an Israeli air campaign to disrupt the transfer of Iranian military materiel to its proxies and partners in the Levant, especially Hezbollah. Israel has conducted at least seven other strikes targeting Iranian- and Hezbollah-affiliated targets in Syria in March 2024, which marks a notable increase from an average of 1.6 Israeli strikes per month between December 2023 and February 2024.[63] The IDF said in February 2024 that it had conducted a series of airstrikes in Syria since the start of the Israel-Hamas war to interdict Iranian weapons shipments to Hezbollah via Syria.[64] Israel has previously targeted Safira—a location linked to missile and chemical weapons development—in May 2023 and 2020 respectively.[65]

The Iranian regime held a funeral ceremony for killed IRGC Quds Force and Basij Member Behrouz Vahedi in Karaj, Alborz Province, on March 29. Vahedi died in a likely Israeli airstrike in Deir Ez Zor Province, Syria, on March 25.[66] Israeli and Syrian media claimed that the strikes caused around 30 casualties, including among members of the IRGC Quds Force, Lebanese Hezbollah, and unspecified Iranian-backed militia commanders in eastern Syria.[67] IRGC Quds Force Commander Brig. Gen. Esmail Ghaani and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s representative to Alborz Province attended the funeral procession.[68]

US Central Command (CENTCOM) intercepted four Houthi drones that were “aimed at a coalition vessel and a US warship” in the Red Sea on March 28.[69]



The Iranian Embassy in Moscow hosted on March 28 a discussion on the anti-Israel Quds Day holiday that the Iranian regime promotes annually.[70] The Iranian regime uses Quds Day, which is on April 5 this year, to broadcast the strength and unity of its Axis of Resistance.[71] Iranian state media reported that Russian Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East and Africa Mikhail Bogdanov attended the event.[72] Afghan, Algerian, Azerbaijani, Bangladeshi, Iraqi, Lebanese, Palestinian, Sudanese, and Syrian diplomats also attended.[73] The event—and the regime’s promotion of the Quds holiday in recent days—is consistent with CTP-ISW’s

longstanding assessment that Iran is trying to exploit the Israel-Hamas war to try to isolate Israel internationally.[74]

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BABEL STREET

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[9] https://t.me/elaqsa_1965/6160

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[10] <https://twitter.com/idfonline/status/1773592136119693573>

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