Iran Update, December 28, 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. Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani announced that his administration will begin procedures to remove International Coalition forces from Iraq during a press conference on December 28, likely due to pressure from Iranian-backed Iraqi militias. An Iraqi decision to expel US forces will very likely create space for ISIS to rapidly resurge in Syria within 12 to 24 months and then threaten Iraq.
- 2. Hamas and its Palestinian allies are trying to shape peace negotiations in a way that is incompatible with the stated Israeli war aims. Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip Yahya Sinwar is likely using Israeli hostages he holds as leverage to keep Hamas' Gaza Strip leaders at the table during these negotiations—rather than delegating such negotiations exclusively to Hamas' external leadership.
- The Israel Defense Forces continued clearing operations in Daraj and Tuffah neighborhoods in the northern Gaza Strip. The IDF destroyed three tunnel shafts while searching a hospital and school.
- 4. Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad attempted to defend against Israeli advances in Bureij.
- 5. Palestinian militias continued trying to defend against Israeli clearing operations in Khan Younis.
- 6. Palestinian fighters conducted three indirect fire attacks from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel.
- 7. Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters in 11 locations across the West Bank.

- 8. Iranian-backed fighters, including Lebanese Hezbollah, conducted eight attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel.
- 9. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—claimed attacks on several new locations across the Middle East. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed responsibility for a rocket attack targeting US forces at US Conoco Mission Support Site in northeastern Syria.
- 10. Former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki met with senior Iranian-backed Iraqi actors.
- 11. The Iranian regime held a funeral ceremony for killed IRGC Brigadier General Razi Mousavi in Tehran.

Iragi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani announced that his administration will begin procedures to remove International Coalition forces from Iraq during a press conference on December 28, likely due to pressure from Iranian-backed Iraqi militias. These militias have used legal, military, and political pressure in recent weeks to expel US forces, as CTP-ISW previously assessed. This pressure, particularly the Iranian-backed attacks on US forces, creates an escalation cycle that triggers US self-defense strikes to protect US servicemembers. The Iranian-backed factions and militias then misrepresent these self-defense strikes as violations of Iraqi sovereignty, which generates domestic pressure on Sudani to remove US forces. This pressure appears to have succeeded at least partly in that Sudani repeated Iranian-backed militia talking points about the United States. Sudani said that that the self-defense strikes are violations of Iragi sovereignty and were inconsistent with the advisory role of the International Coalition.[1] These claims ignore the fact that the US forces have a right to self-defense and that the Iranian use of client militias and proxies in Iraq to attack US forces in line with Tehran's regional agenda is itself a violation of Iraqi sovereignty. US advisory forces are currently deployed in Iraq for counter-ISIS operations at the invitation of the Iraqi [2] government. Sudani did not provide a timeline for removing International Coalition forces or describe the mechanism by which they would be removed.[3]

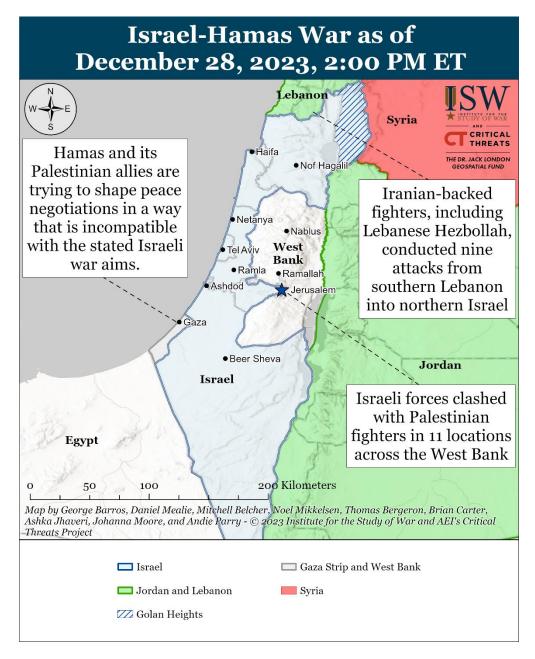
An Iraqi decision to expel US forces will very likely create space for ISIS to rapidly resurge in Syria within 12 to 24 months and then threaten Iraq. The US military mission in these countries is to enable the enduring defeat of ISIS and through cooperation with local partners. [4] The US support to its counter-ISIS partners in both Iraq and Syria is instrumental to successfully defeating ISIS. [5] US forces and infrastructure in Iraq provide the logistical support that enables the presence of US forces in Syria. The expulsion of US forces from Iraq would necessitate a withdrawal from Syria, where ISIS is reconstituting itself in Syrian regime-held territory. [6] CTP-ISW continues to assess that the United States and its partner in Syria have successfully contained but not defeated ISIS and that the US withdrawal from Syria will very likely cause a rapid resurgence in Syria within 12 to 24 months. [7] A resurgent ISIS would then be able to threaten Iraq again. The Iraqi Security Forces still face significant deficiencies in logistics, intelligence, and fire support that inhibit their ability to defeat ISIS alone. [8]

Hamas and its Palestinian allies are trying to shape peace negotiations in a way that is incompatible with the stated Israeli war aims. Hamas representatives met with other Palestinian factions in Beirut on December 27 to discuss the war and a possible ceasefire. [9] The other factions included Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the leftist Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and the PFLP-General Command (PFLP-GC). These groups called collectively for establishing a national dialogue

among all Palestinian factions, a unity government that includes all Palestinian factions, an end to the Israel-Hamas war, and free elections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.[10] The groups also called for a withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip. The groups said that the October 7 attack was a "historic turning point" and reaffirmed the importance of the Palestinian issue.[11] They blamed the Oslo Accords for the "decline" of the importance of the Palestinian cause in the Middle East.[12] These principles articulated by the Palestinian factions conflict with Israeli war aims, which Israeli officials have said are to "destroy Hamas, demilitarize Gaza, and deradicalize Palestinian society."[13] The participation of Hamas and other radical groups, such as PIJ, that seek the destruction of Israel in a future Gazan or Palestinian government is tantamount to an Israeli defeat in this war.

Hamas and its Palestinian allies are using multiple, overlapping negotiations with different external parties to embed themselves in a postwar "unity government" and thereby undermining Israel's ability to accomplish its war aims. Hamas is engaging in at least four sets of separate negotiations to counter any Israeli and Western efforts to form a governing authority that excludes Hamas. The negotiations in which Hamas representatives are involved include one with Egypt regarding the war itself, a second with its wartime allies in the Palestinian Allied Factions, a third with former Fatah and Palestinian Authority (PA) officials, and a fourth with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO).[14] Hamas political leaders met with Fatah and PA officials, including a deputy to Mohammed Dahlan and a former PA foreign affairs minister, to discuss integrating Hamas into the PLO after the war.[15] These negotiations will limit Israel's ability to build a viable postwar governing authority in the form of a "reformed PA" by associating many of a reformed PA's possible leaders with Hamas.[16]

Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip Yahya Sinwar is likely using Israeli hostages he holds as leverage to keep Hamas' Gaza Strip leaders at the table during these negotiations—rather than delegating such negotiations exclusively to Hamas' external leadership. CTP-ISW still assesses that Hamas writ large is also using the Israeli hostages as leverage to ensure its continued relevance in postwar negotiations. [17] Sinwar is opposed to negotiations with the PLO because these talks sideline Sinwar. Sinwar asked Hamas leaders outside the Gaza Strip to cease talks with the PLO and PA. [18] Sinwar's refusal to release hostages is in part to use them as leverage to maintain his influence in the negotiations. Hamas has also repeatedly refused to release its hostages prior to a comprehensive ceasefire, including in the December 28 joint statement after the meeting in Beirut. [19] Sinwar's ability to agree to or refuse a hostage exchange allows him to maintain his influence within the movement writ large.



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.

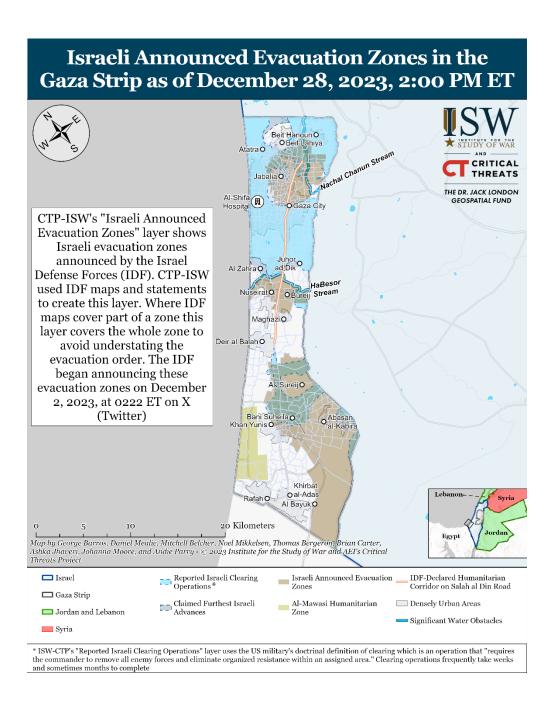
The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) continued clearing operations in Daraj and Tuffah neighborhoods in the northern Gaza Strip on December 28. The IDF said that the 401st and 460th brigade combat teams (BCT) have "eliminated" Palestinian fighters on the ground and used air support since December 26.[20] The Hamas' military wing, the al Qassem Brigades, and PIJ's military wing, the al Quds Brigades, are attempting to defend against these operations. The al Qassem

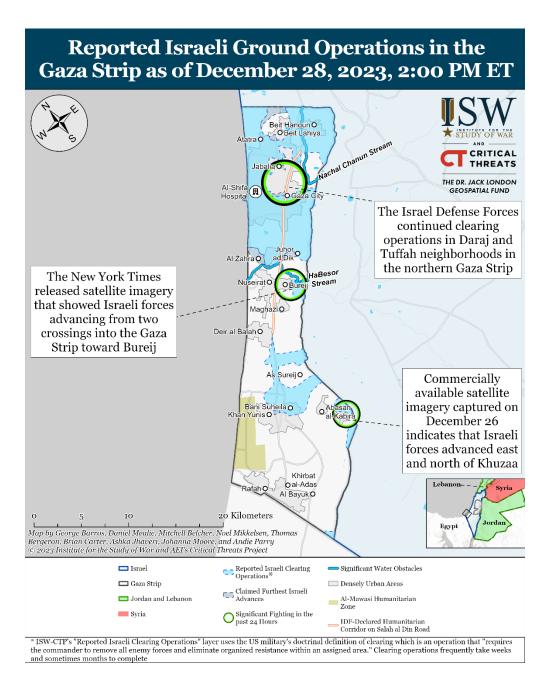
Brigades detonated an explosively formed penetrator (EFP) and fired rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) targeting IDF vehicles in Daraj and Tuffah. [21] The al Quds Brigades also fired RPGs at Israeli vehicles in the neighborhood. [22]

The IDF destroyed three tunnel shafts while searching a hospital and school in the northern Gaza Strip. The IDF said that it "investigated" three tunnels near al Rantisi hospital on December 27.[23] The IDF Yahalom Unit—a special operations engineering unit—searched the tunnel as part of the IDF effort to map the tunnel network under the strip. The IDF said that the Yahalom unit discovered that the tunnel is several kilometers long and leads deep into Gaza City. It added that the tunnel is close to a school and that the tunnel was used for military operations.

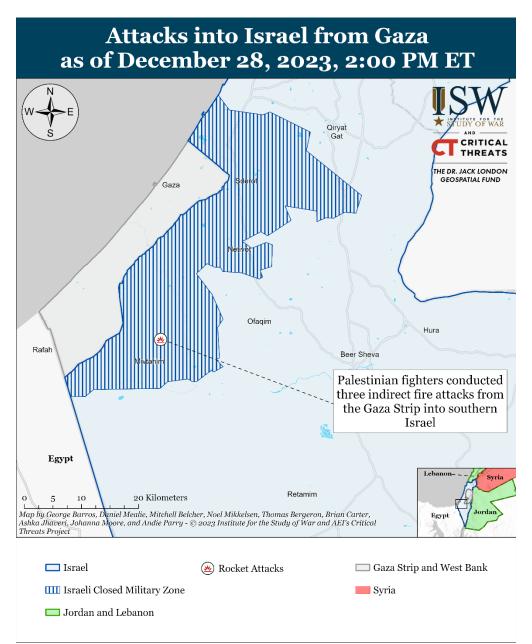
Hamas and PIJ attempted to defend against Israeli advances in Bureij in the central Gaza Srip on December 28. The *New York Times* released satellite imagery that showed Israeli forces advancing from two crossings into the Gaza Strip toward Bureij.[24] The IDF said on December 28 that its operations in Bureij were in their "final stages."[25] The al Qassem Brigades and al Quds Brigades continued their efforts to defend against Israeli operations, however. The al Qassem brigades fired multiple RPGs and detonated one EFP targeting Israeli forces east of Bureij on December 28.[26] The al Quds Brigades added that it mortared Israeli forces east of the town.[27]

Palestinian militias continued trying to defend against Israeli clearing operations in Khan Younis on December 28. The al Qassem Brigades attacked Israeli forces at least four times using anti-personnel devices and RPGs in northern and eastern Khan Younis. [28] The al Quds Brigades conducted rocket and mortar attacks on two Israeli positions north of Khan Younis. [29] The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades—the self-proclaimed military wing of Fatah—mortared a concentration of Israeli forces operating in Khan Younis City. [30] The Martyr Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades fighters and "special combat units" conducted a complex attack on Israeli forces operating near 5th Street in Khan Younis City using mortars, small arms, and RPGs. [31] The IDF confirmed that reserve forces have been destroying militia infrastructure in Bani Suheila, northeast of Khan Younis [32]





Palestinian fighters conducted three indirect fire attacks from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel on December 28.[33] The al Quds Brigades claimed one rocket attack on Ein Hashlosha.[34]



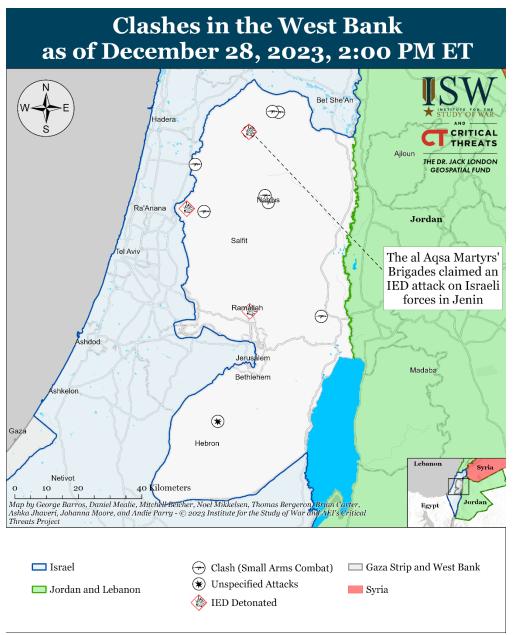
Recorded reports of rocket attacks; CTP-ISW cannot independently verify impact.

West Bank

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

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

Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters in 11 locations across the West Bank on December 28.[35] The IDF conducted raids on money transfer locations suspected of providing financial services to Hamas.[36] Palestinian fighters threw Molotov cocktails and detonated IEDs during fighting in Ramallah and Jenin.[37] Israeli forces conducted an airstrike on fighters that Israel said were throwing explosives and firing on its forces.[38]



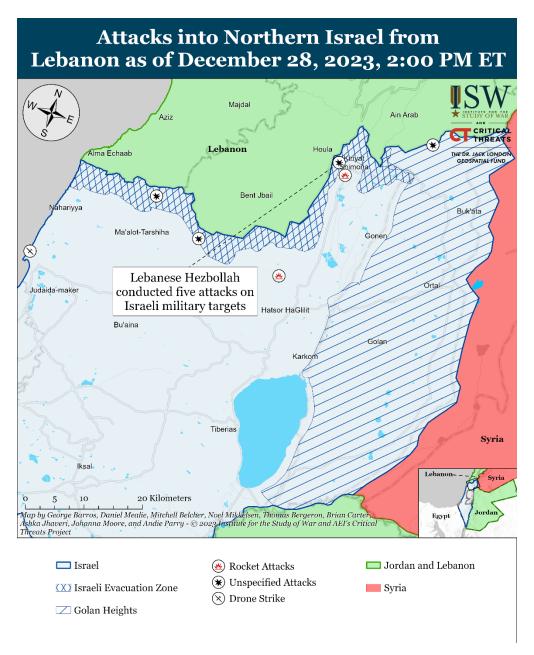
This map is not an exhaustive depiction of clashes and demonstrations in the West Bank.

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 (LH), conducted eight attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel on December 28.[39] LH claimed five attacks targeting Israeli military facilities along the border.[40] Unidentified Iranian-backed fighters fired over 50 rockets into the Galilee region.[41] Palestinian media posted footage claiming that a drone was shot down near Acre, north of Haifa.[42] Israeli air defense systems last intercepted a "suspicious target" over Acre on November 14.[43]



Iran and Axis of Resistance

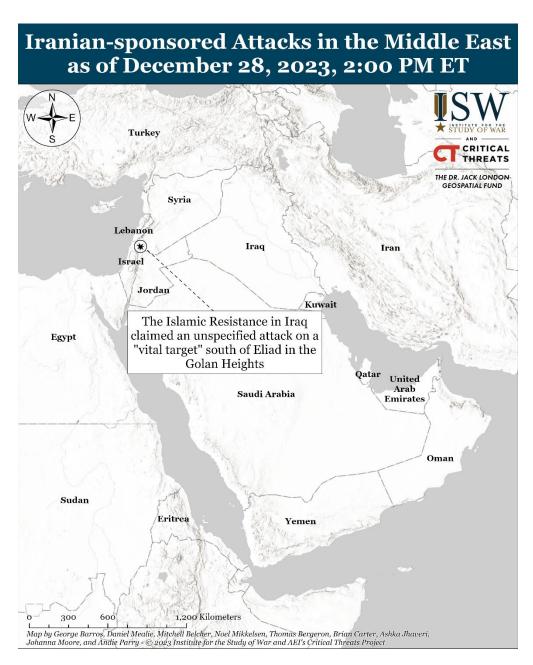
Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

• Demonstrate the capability and willingness of Iran and the Axis of Resistance to escalate against the United States and Israel on multiple fronts

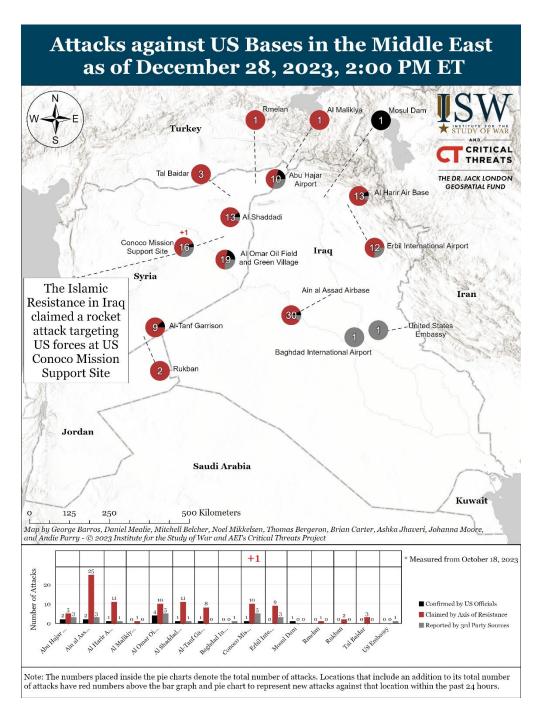
Set conditions to fight a regional war on multiple fronts

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—claimed attacks on several new locations across the Middle East on December 27.

- The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed that it conducted an unspecified attack on a "vital target" south of Eliad in the Golan Heights. [44] Israeli media reported that it was a one-way drone attack and marked the first time that such a drone landed in the Golan Heights since the start of the Israel-Hamas war. [45] Israeli media also reported that the Islamic Resistance in Iraq may have launched the drone, which caused minor damage but no injuries, from Syria. [46]
- The Islamic Resistance in Iraq also claimed that it attacked an Israeli "spy center" northeast of Erbil, Iraq.[47] Iranian state media claimed without evidence that the attack killed and injured several individuals.[48] The Iranian regime has historically accused Kurdish opposition groups and Israel of using Iraqi Kurdistan to facilitate operations into Iran. Iranian media previously claimed that the IRGC targeted an Israeli "spy den" when the IRGC conducted a missile attack on Erbil in March 2022.[49] The IRGC conducted attacks using artillery, missiles, and drones on Kurdish opposition groups, which Iran accused of supporting Mahsa Amini protesters in late 2022.[50] Iranian state media accused Kurdish opposition groups of helping Israel smuggle military equipment into Iran that Israel used in its January 2023 drone attack on a munitions factory in Esfahan.[51]



The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed responsibility for a rocket attack targeting US forces at US Conoco Mission Support Site in northeastern Syria on December 28.[52]



Former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki met with senior Iranian-backed Iraqi actors on December 27 and 28. Maliki met separately with Asaib Ahl al Haq (AAH) Secretary General Qais al Khazali and Badr Organization Secretary General Hadi al Ameri.[53] Maliki heads the State of Law coalition, and Ameri heads the We Build coalition. These political parties have respectively won the second highest and highest number of seats in the December 18 provincial council elections thus far. AAH's media office reported that Maliki and Khazali agreed that US forces in Iraq are "exceeding their advisory capacity" and threatening regional countries.[54] The media office also reported that Maliki and Khazali discussed accelerating the formation of local governments following the elections. Maliki and Ameri similarly emphasized the need for the Independent High

Electoral Commission to announce the final provincial council election results.[55] Maliki and Ameri condemned the December 25 US airstrikes on Kataib Hezbollah (KH) facilities.

KH spokesperson Mohammad Mohi emphasized on December 27 that KH's commitment to "resistance" against the United States and Israel is "irreversible." [56] Mohi vowed that KH will not allow the United States or Israel to "tamper with" Iraqi internal affairs and sovereignty.

The Iranian regime held a funeral ceremony for the killed IRGC Brigadier General Razi Mousavi in Tehran on December 28.[57] Iranian officials have accused Israel of killing Mousavi in an airstrike near Sayyidah Zeinab in Syria on December 25. Western and anti-regime media have reported that Mousavi headed IRGC Quds Force Unit 2250, which manages Iranian weapons shipments to LH and Iranian-backed militias in Syria.[58] Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei led prayers and met with Mousavi's family during the funeral.[59] Khamenei praised Mousavi for his "tireless jihad" and wished for his "companionship with the guardians of God." Many individuals at the funeral carried flags with the text "I am your opponent" written in Persian and Hebrew.[60] Some attendees carried images of Mousavi together with former IRGC Quds Force Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani.[61] Many current and former high-ranking IRGC officials attended the funeral, including:

- IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami;
- IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani;
- IRGC Quds Force Commander for the Levant Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi;
 and
- IRGC Quds Force Deputy Commander Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Fallah Zadeh.

Other notable attendees included Khamenei's son, Mostafa Khamenei, and Qassem Soleimani's daughter, Zeynab Soleimani. [62] Zeinab's husband, Reza Safieddine, is involved in weapons transfers from Iran to LH. [63] The presence of such senior Iranian political and military officials at Mousavi's funeral highlights his prominence in the regime and its regional project.

IRGC spokesperson Ramazan Sharif promised that on December 28 Iran's response for the killing of Razi Mousavi will be a combination of "direct action" and indirect action.[64] Sharif vowed that Iran or the Axis of Resistance would avenge the killing of Mousavi.

Iranian hardline Parliamentarian Mojtaba Tavangar claimed that Razi Mousavi was one of the "facilitators" of Hamas' October 7 attack against Israel. [65] IRGC Commander Hossein Salami said that Mousavi was the "central pillar" of the IRGC efforts in the Levant, especially in Lebanon and Syria. [66]

Iranian officials made statements countering the claim by IRGC spokesperson Brigadier General Ramazan Sharif that Hamas committed the October 7 attack against Israel to avenge the death of Qassem Soleimani.[67] Sharif walked back his comment on December 28 by stating that the motivations for the October 7 attack were purely related to the struggle of Palestinians rather than Iranian interests.[68] Sharif said that the efforts of Soleimani contributed to the alleged success of the attack but were not the reason for the attack. IRGC Commander Hossein Salami officially declared that October 7 was "completely a Palestinian operation" at the funeral for Razi Mousavi on December 28.[69] Salami stated that the October 7 attack was designed and implemented by Palestinians. Chief of Staff of the Office of the Supreme Leader Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani stated that the

story of the Gaza Strip is about the Palestinians—not about Iran.[70] He said that Iran was not involved in the October 7 attack but that the Axis of Resistance" has followed Iran's example in defending their rights". He further emphasized that US President Joe Biden should be held accountable for alleged Israeli war crimes in the Gaza Strip.

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- [1] https://t.me/MohamedShiaAlsudanii/2445
- [2] https://dod.defense.gov/OIR/
- [4] https://dod.defense.gov/OIR/
- [5] https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/ending-the-us-presence-in-syria-could-cause-a-rapid-isis-reconstitution-and-threaten-core-us-national-security-interests
- [6] https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-august-16-2023; https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-december-11-2023
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- [9] https://t.me/pflpgaza1/13667; https://t.me/pflpgaza1/13666
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