# Iran Update, February 15, 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.

Russian Republic of Tatarstan Head Rustam Minnikhanov paid an official visit to Iran, likely to discuss Russo-Iranian defense industrial and military cooperation. Minnikhanov visited unspecified "large industries and industrial towns" in Esfahan Province and met with the provincial governor on February 14.[1] Several prominent defense industrial and military sites, including some operated by the IRGC and Defense Ministry for aerospace work, are in Esfahan Province. These sites include the Kashan airfield, for instance, which Russian delegations visited in June and July 2022 to examine Iranian Shahed drones.[2] The Iranian Aircraft Manufacturing Industrial Company, which builds Ababil and Shahed drones, is also located in Esfahan Province.[3] Minnikhanov's visit is particularly noteworthy given that Iran is helping to construct a military drone manufacturing facility in Yelabuga, which is in the Republic of Tatarstan.[4] This factory is expected to produce at least 6,000 drones in the "coming years."[5]

Minnikhanov is a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin and has extensive ties to Russia's defense industry. He has served as the head of the Republic of Tatarstan since 2010 and also heads the Russian oil and gas company Tatneft.[6] Minnikhanov has separately chaired the board of directors for the Tupolev Public Joint Stock Company since September 2021.[7] Tupolev produces strategic bombers, such as the Backfire and Blackjack bombers, for the Russian armed forces.[8] The United States sanctioned Minnikhanov in January 2023 for his involvement in the "defense and related materiel and aerospace sectors of the Russian Federation economy."[9] Canada sanctioned Minnikhanov in April 2023 for supporting the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[10]

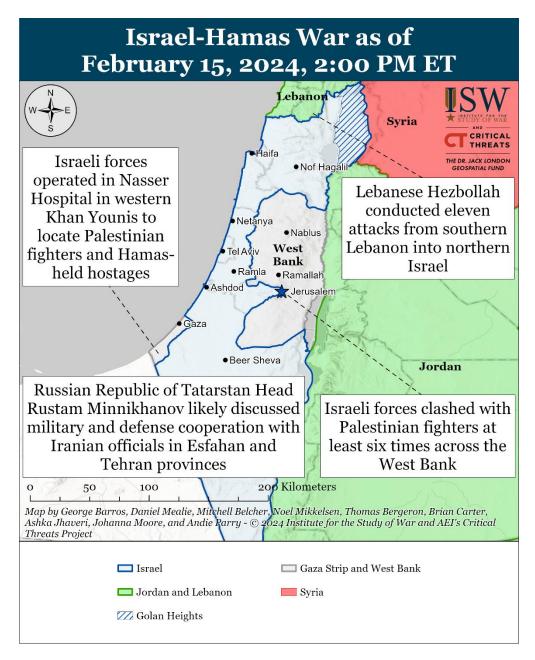
Minnikhanov separately met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to discuss "economic cooperation" in Tehran on February 13.[11] Raisi called for increasing economic, industrial, scientific, and tourism cooperation with the Republic of Tatarstan and other Russian federal subjects. Russian media reported that Raisi will travel to Kazan, Republic of Tatarstan, in October 2024 to attend a BRICS summit.[12]

Some Sunni and Shia Iraqi political factions appear divided on expelling US forces from Iraq.[13] Khaled al Dabouni, a member of the Sunni Mutahidun Alliance, stated that Sunni political parties will not support the Iranian-backed effort to remove US forces. Dabouni argued that Iraq needs US forces to confront ISIS because Iraq is currently incapable of doing so by itself. This assertion is consistent with CTP-ISW's assessment that an Iraqi decision to expel US forces would very likely create space for ISIS to resurge in Syria within 12 to 24 months and then threaten Iraq.

The Shia Coordination Framework—a loose coalition of Iranian-aligned Iraqi Shia political parties—and other Iranian-backed Iraqi actors regularly argue that Iraq no longer needs US-led coalition forces because the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) can independently protect Iraq from threats, such as ISIS.[14] These statements ignore the deficiencies that the ISF continues to face in terms of intelligence, fire support, and logistics. Iranian-backed Iraqi parliamentarians accused Sunni and Kurdish factions of "boycotting" the February 10 parliamentary session to discuss the removal of US-led International Coalition forces from Iraq, as CTP-ISW previously reported.[15]

### **Key Takeaways:**

- **Iran:** Russian Republic of Tatarstan Head Rustam Minnikhanov paid an official visit to Iran, likely to discuss Russo-Iranian defense industrial and military cooperation.
- **Iraq:** Some Sunni and Shia Iraqi political factions appear divided on expelling US forces from Iraq.
- **Northern Gaza Strip:** The Israel Defense Forces reported that it concluded a two-week long, division-sized raid in western Gaza City.
- **Southern Gaza Strip:** The Israel Defense Forces continued to conduct clearing operations in several sectors of Khan Younis.
- **West Bank:** Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters at least six times. Hamas called for three days of demonstrations in the West Bank and abroad.
- **Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights:** Iranian-backed militias, including Lebanese Hezbollah, conducted eleven attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel.
- **Yemen:** The Houthis claimed that they conducted a missile attack targeting a Barbados-flagged, Greek-owned vessel in the Gulf of Aden.



## **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) reported on February 15 that it concluded a two-week long, division-sized raid in western Gaza City.[16] Several Israeli regular units and special operations forces (SOF) advanced into Gaza City over a few hours—a short period relative to the week that it took Israeli forces to maneuver into Gaza City during the initial phase of clearing operations in November 2023.[17] Israeli forces cleared military infrastructure, located intelligence materials and

weapons, and killed around 120 Palestinian fighters during the raid.[18] The IDF previously announced that Israeli forces had "dismantled" all of Hamas' battalions in the northern Gaza Strip on January 6. Hamas exploited Israeli withdrawals in late December 2023 to infiltrate areas where Israeli forces previously cleared and reconstitute some of its militia units.[19]

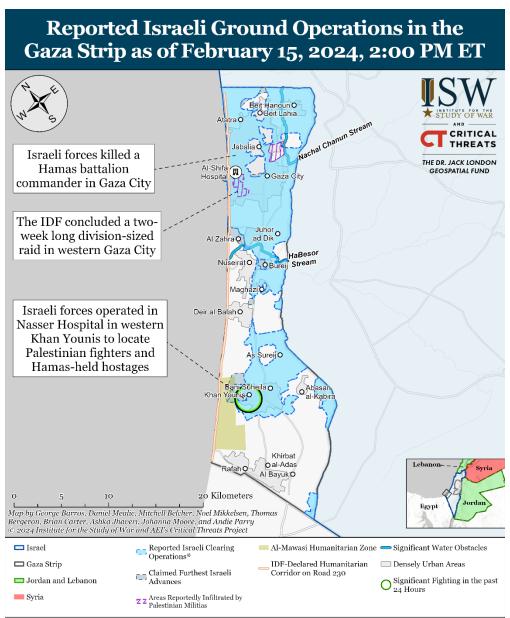
**The IDF continued targeting Hamas commanders and fighters in the northern Gaza Strip.** Israeli forces killed the al Shati Battalion commander in Hamas' Gaza Brigade on February 14.[20] The IDF 215th Artillery Brigade killed at least 15 Hamas fighters, including a security official, in Gaza City and other parts of the northern Gaza Strip on February 15.[21] The IDF is continuing to search for the Hamas Gaza Brigade commander, who is responsible for some of Hamas' reconstitution efforts.[22] Hamas will almost certainly continue to replace commanders killed and/or detained by Israel and learn from its mistakes to better protect its leadership from future Israeli operations.

**Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters in the northern and central Gaza Strip on February 15.** The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, which is the self-proclaimed military wing of Fatah, targeted an Israeli military vehicle with an unspecified explosive device in the northern Gaza Strip.[23] Palestinian militias fired mortars and rockets targeting Israeli forces in the northern Gaza Strip, although CTP-ISW cannot confirm the point of origin.[24] The IDF Nahal Brigade (assigned to the 162nd Division) clashed with Palestinian fighters and directed an airstrike to kill a Hamas commander in the central Gaza Strip.[25]

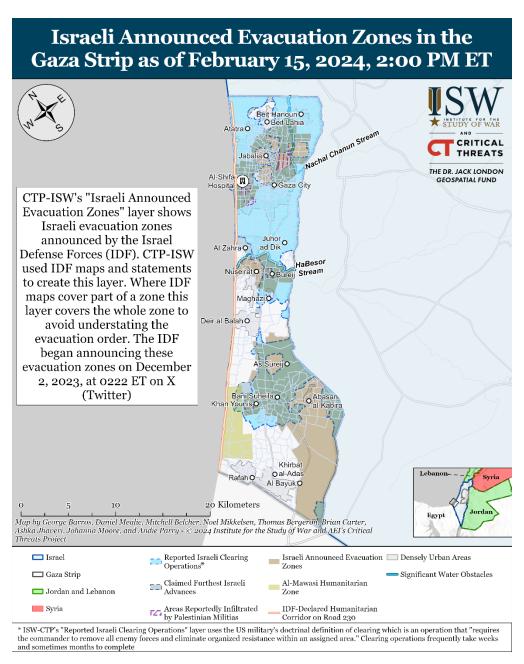
Israeli SOF operated in Nasser Hospital in western Khan Younis on February 15 to locate Palestinian fighters and Hamas-held hostages.[26] Israeli forces received "credible intelligence" that Hamas-held hostages were in the hospital and that their bodies may remain on the complex grounds.[27] Hamas rejected such claims and denied that it was operating in the hospital.[28] The IDF confirmed that its forces detained several suspects inside Nasser Hospital, including three Hamas fighters who participated in the October 7, 2023, attack.[29]

Nasser Hospital is the largest functioning hospital in the Gaza Strip. The IDF briefed its forces on the importance of preventing harm to patients, medical teams, and medical equipment prior to entering the hospital complex.[30] Doctors Without Borders staff in the hospital reported on February 15 that the situation is "chaotic" and called on Israel to stop its operations.[31] Israel assesses that Hamas has used over 85 percent of major medical facilities in the Gaza Strip for military operations.[32]

**The IDF continued to conduct clearing operations in several sectors of Khan Younis on February 15.** The 89th Commando Brigade (assigned to the 98th Division) raided the homes of senior Hamas officials' family members.[33] Hamas used these homes for military purposes, according to the IDF. Israeli forces detained Palestinian fighters, who participated in the October 7, 2023, attack, including those from Hamas' elite Nukhba unit.[34] The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades claimed on February 15 that its fighters clashed with Israeli forces in the vicinity of Nasser Hospital for the second consecutive day.[35] Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) fighters launched mortars and rockets targeting an Israeli supply line east and northeast of Khan Younis.[36]



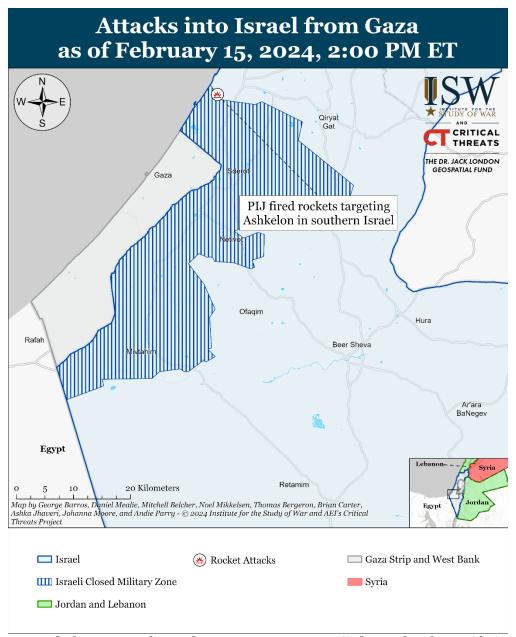
<sup>\*</sup> ISW-CTP's "Reported Israeli Clearing Operations" layer uses the US military's doctrinal definition of clearing which is an operation that "requires the commander to remove all enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance within an assigned area." Clearing operations frequently take weeks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



Egypt is constructing a walled "enclosure" in the Sinai Desert to address concerns that an Israeli operation into Rafah will cause a surge of Palestinian refugees into Egypt, according to Egyptian officials.[37] The enclosure is meant to accommodate over 100,000 people, but an Egyptian official said that Egypt would limit the number of refugees to below the enclosure's capacity. Egypt has repeatedly expressed concern in recent weeks that an Israeli operation into Rafah could create a flow of Palestinian refugees into the Sinai Peninsula.[38] Egypt has added other fortifications to the border and deployed approximately 40 tanks and infantry fighting vehicles to the Rafah border crossing over the past several weeks.[39] Israel has not publicly outlined a plan for how it would evacuate civilians from Rafah in the event of a military operation there.

The US Central Intelligence Agency director met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel on February 15 to discuss the recent hostage negotiations, according to Israeli media and two sources familiar with the meeting.[40] Netanyahu declined to send an Israeli delegation to Cairo on February 14 after the Israeli, US, and Egyptian intelligence chiefs met with the Qatari prime minister to broker a deal for hostages' releases and an extended pause in fighting in the Gaza Strip.[41]

PIJ fighters fired rockets from the Gaza Strip targeting Ashkelon in southern Israel and the periphery of the Gaza Strip on February 14.[42] These attacks occurred after CTP-ISW's data cutoff from the previous update.



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

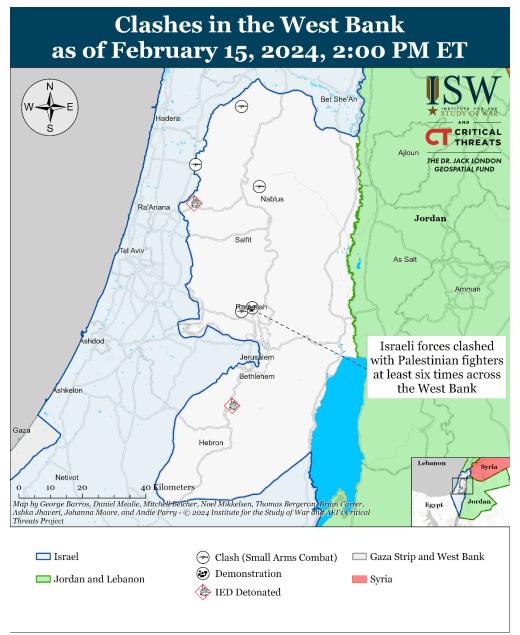
#### **West Bank**

## Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

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

Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters at least six times across the West Bank. The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades conducted three attacks targeting Israeli forces in the northern West Bank with small arms fire and explosive devices on February 14.[43] The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades conducted a separate small arms attack targeting the Shaked settlement south of Jenin.[44] Unidentified Palestinian fighters targeted Israeli forces with small arms fire and threw Molotov cocktails in Arroub refugee camp and Beitunia.[45]

Hamas called for three days of demonstrations in the West Bank and abroad from February 16 to 18. Hamas in Ramallah and al Bireh called on local Palestinians to hold demonstrations on February 16 after Friday prayers in support of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.[46] Hamas also called for demonstrations in Arab countries on February 17 and globally on February 18.[47]



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

# Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

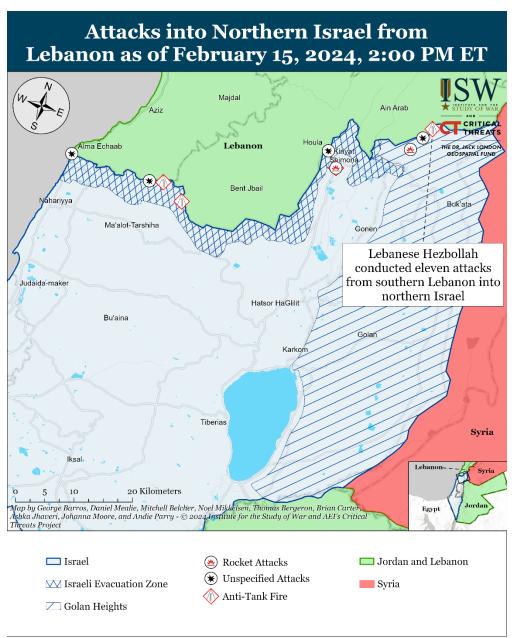
## Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

- Draw IDF assets and resources toward northern Israel and fix them there
- Set conditions for successive campaigns into northern Israel

Iranian-backed militias, including Lebanese Hezbollah, conducted eleven attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel on February 15.[48]

Israel conducted an airstrike on February 15 that killed a Hezbollah Radwan Unit commander and his deputy in Nabatiya, Lebanon.[49] One source "familiar with Hezbollah thinking" told Reuters that the Israeli airstrike was an "escalation" but "within [the] unwritten rules of engagement]" between Hezbollah and Israel."[50] The IRGC Quds Force established the Radwan Unit, which is Hezbollah's special operations forces unit focused on infiltrating Israeli territory.[51]

Israel held a military exercise to increase the national readiness to handle several scenarios in case of a "multi-arena war."[52] The exercises included scenarios involving damage to Israel's electricity sector and threats to civilians, such as mass shootings. The IDF, Ministry of Defense, and National Emergency Authority organized the exercise, which follows an Israeli assessment of the northern Israel border with Lebanon.



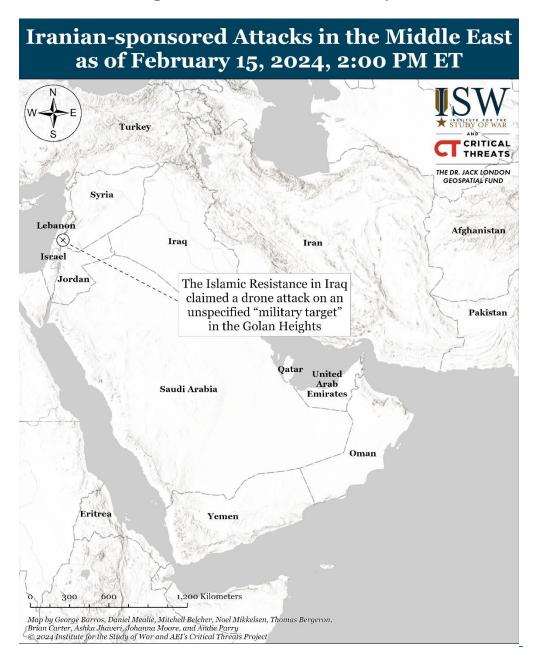
Recorded reports of attacks; CTP-ISW cannot independently verify impact.

### 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 Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—claimed on February 15 that it conducted a drone attack targeting an unspecified "military target" in the Golan Heights.[53] CTP-ISW cannot verify this claim.



The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other unspecified Arab countries are restricting US military operations out of US bases in their countries, according to a *Politico* report citing US and other Western officials "familiar with the issue."[54] An unidentified US official said that Arab countries, especially those "attempting a detente with Iran," are "increasingly restricting" US self-defense strikes. Another Western official specified that the UAE is attempting to portray itself as a neutral actor between the United States and Iran to pacify domestic popular opinion. Another official added that some countries are restricting airspace and facilities for assets

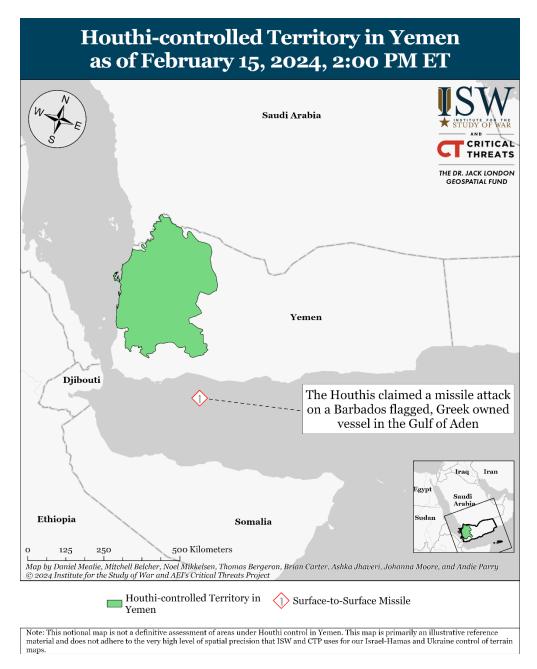
used in strikes targeting Iranian-backed actors in the region. An unidentified US Department of Defense official cited in the report rejected reports of tensions between the United States and UAE over these issues. Pentagon spokesperson Major General Pat Ryder separately said in a statement to *Politico* that the United States and US Central Command (CENTCOM) maintain "the capability. . . to defend our forces and conduct self-defense strikes at the times and places of our choosing."

The Houthis claimed that they conducted a missile attack targeting a Barbados-flagged, Greek-owned vessel in the Gulf of Aden on February 15.[55] Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Saree stated that the Houthis will continue conducting such attacks in the Red Sea until Israel and Hamas reach a ceasefire agreement.[56] The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations agency separately posted that a vessel reported an explosion approximately 85 nautical miles east of Aden.[57]

The United States conducted preemptive strikes targeting Houthi missile sites and naval attack drones in Houti-controlled areas of Yemen on February 14.[58] US forces conducted four strikes against seven mobile anti-ship cruise missiles, three drones, and one explosive mobile unmanned surface vehicle that the Houthis were "prepared to launch against ships in the Red Sea."

CENTCOM reported on February 15 that a US Coast Guard cutter intercepted a shipment of Iranian weapons bound for Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen.[59] CENTCOM said that the US Coast Guard seized medium-range ballistic missile components, explosives, one-way surface and sub-surface naval attack drone components, military-grade communication and network equipment, anti-tank guided missile launcher components, and other unspecified military equipment.[60] US and allied naval forces routinely interdict Iranian shipments to the Houthis in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.[61]

Three unspecified US officials told NBC News on February 15 that the United States recently conducted a cyberattack on the Iranian *Behshad* intelligence-gathering ship.[62] The US officials said that the cyberattack was part of the US response to the January 28 Iranian-backed attack that killed three US servicemembers in Jordan. The cyberattack was reportedly meant to hinder the *Behshad*'s ability to share targeting intelligence with the Houthis.[63] *The Wall Street Journal* reported in December 2023 that the *Behshad*, which is stationed in the Red Sea, provides the Houthi movement with real-time intelligence, enabling them to target ships that have gone silent.[64] Western media and officials said in December 2023 that the IRGC is helping Houthi forces plan and execute the Houthi drone and missile attacks on ships.[65]



Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian criticized recent Israeli operations in Rafah during separate phone calls with Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Secretary General Hissein Brahim Taha and Algerian Foreign Affairs Minister Ahmad Attaf on February 15.[66]

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