Iran Update, January 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 <u>interactive map of Iran and the Middle East</u>.

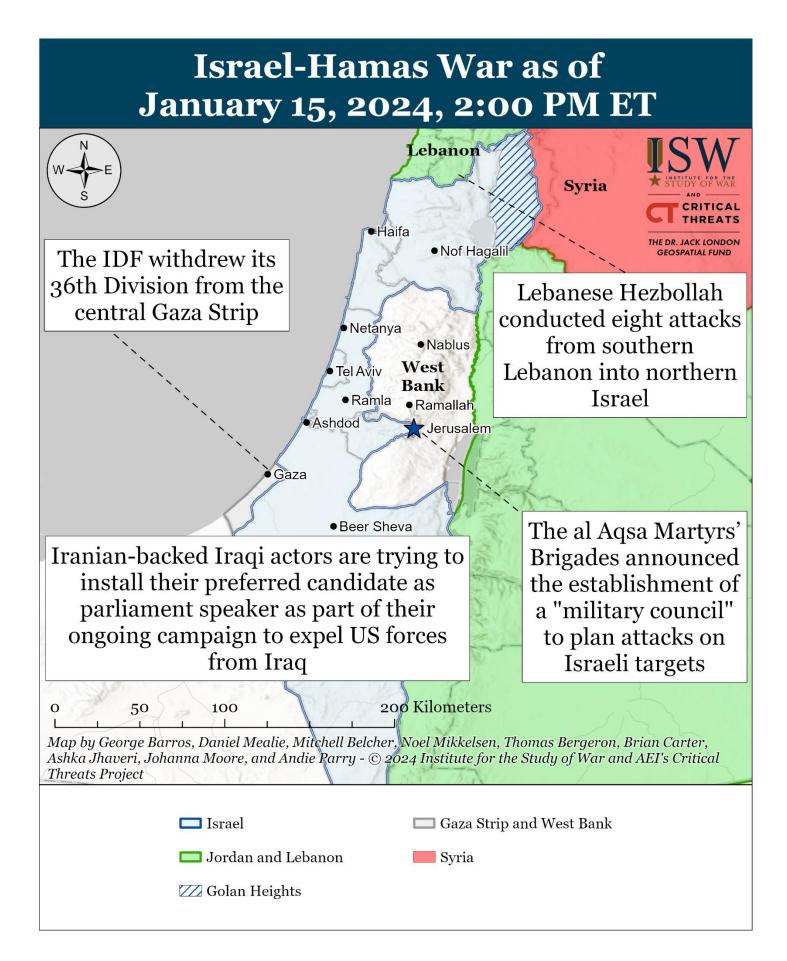
Note: CTP and ISW have refocused the update to cover the Israel-Hamas war. The new sections address developments in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as noteworthy activity from Iran's Axis of Resistance. We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are well-covered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

- Iranian-backed Iraqi actors are trying to install their preferred candidate as Iraqi parliament speaker as part of their ongoing campaign to expel US forces from Iraq.
- Israeli forces have continued targeting the remaining Palestinian fighters and militia infrastructure in the northern Gaza Strip.
- The IDF announced that it withdrew the 36th Division from the Central Governorate of the Gaza Strip.
- The IDF 646th Paratroopers Brigade Combat Team (assigned to the 99th Division) continued to conduct clearing operations in Nuseirat in the Central Governorate of the Gaza Strip.
- The IDF 98th Division continued clearing operations in the southern Gaza Strip.
- Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said that Hamas' "Khan Younis Brigade is gradually disintegrating as a fighting force."
- The Gaza Strip is experiencing the longest, large-scale internet blackout since the Israel-Hamas war began.
- The al Quds Brigades fired rockets from the Gaza Strip targeting Sderot in southern Israel.
- The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades announced the establishment of a "military council" to plan attacks on Israeli targets "in every corner of the Earth."
- Two West Bank residents conducted a car-ramming attack in Raanana, killing one civilian and wounding 17 others.

- Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters five times across the West Bank, compared to the weekly average of nine attacks per day.
- Lebanese Hezbollah conducted eight attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel.
- Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah gave a speech detailing the state of the Israel-Hamas war and ongoing Iranian-backed escalation against the United States throughout the region.
- The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—claimed four attacks on three US positions in Iraq and Syria.
- The Houthis continued attacking and harassing US naval forces and commercial shipping in the Red Sea.



Iranian-backed Iraqi actors are trying to install their preferred candidate as Iraqi parliament speaker as part of their ongoing campaign to expel US forces from Iraq.

Iraqi parliamentarians voted for a new speaker on January 13, but no candidate won the 165 votes required.[1] Parliament has had an acting speaker since the Federal Supreme Court dismissed Mohammad al Halbousi in November 2023.[2] The following candidates won the highest number of votes:

- National Progress Alliance (headed by Mohammad al Halbousi) candidate Shaalan al Karim: 152 out of 165 votes;
- Sovereignty Alliance (headed by Khamis al Khanjar) candidate **Salem al Issawi**: 97 out of 165 votes;
- Azm Alliance (headed by Muthanna al Samarrai) candidate **Mahmoud al Mashhadani**: 48 out of 165 votes.[3]

The Shia Coordination Framework—a loose coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi political parties—is maneuvering to prevent Karim from becoming parliament speaker. Iranian-backed Badr Organization member and Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) spokesperson Yousef al Kalabi and Fatah Alliance member Faleh al Khazali filed a lawsuit to the Federal Supreme Court on January 13 to invalidate Karim's candidacy for parliament speaker.[4] Several representatives, including a member of Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Asaib Ahl al Haq's (AAH) political wing, separately called for Karim to be referred to the Accountability and Justice Commission for "promoting and glorifying Saddam Hossein's regime."[5] The Accountability and Justice Commission was formed in 2008 to prevent "the return of the Baath's ideology, power, or practices."[6] Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani promised Sunni politicians in October 2022 that he would dissolve the commission when he came to power because Sunni politicians had accused Shia political actors of using the commission to sideline them from decision making.[7] The Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission recently prevented former Ninewa Governor Najm al Jubouri from running in the provincial council elections due to corruption charges brought up against him by the Accountability and Justice Commission.[8]

The Shia Coordination Framework likely views blocking Karim as necessary to expel US forces. AAHcontrolled outlet Al Ahad interviewed a "political analyst" on January 13 who implied that the election of Karim as parliament speaker would impede efforts to expel US forces from Iraq.[9] An independent Iraqi outlet reported on January 13 that former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki and AAH Secretary General Qais al Khazali want Mashhadani to become parliament speaker.[10] Maliki and Khazali may regard Mashhadani as more amenable to pursuing the expulsion of US forces than Karim. The Iranian-backed Badr Organization announced on January 13 the submission of a draft law that requires the removal of US forces from Iraq, which CTP-ISW assessed was meant to increase pressure on Sudani to facilitate a US exit.

The Shia Coordination Framework also appears to be maneuvering to consolidate its control over the Iraqi Parliament. Unspecified members of the Shia Coordination Framework submitted a request to interim Parliament Speaker Mohsen al Mandalawi on January 13 to "limit" the parliament speaker's powers.[11] It is unclear exactly what these proposed limitations involve. Mandalawi is affiliated with the Shia Coordination Framework. Iraq has an informal sectarian power-sharing system, in which the

parliament speaker is always Sunni, the prime minister is always Shia, and the president is always Kurdish.[12] Iranian-backed actors already control large parts of Iraq's executive, judiciary, and legislative branches and security services.[13] Diluting the authorities of the parliament speaker may further facilitate Iranian encroachment into Iraq.

Gaza Strip

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

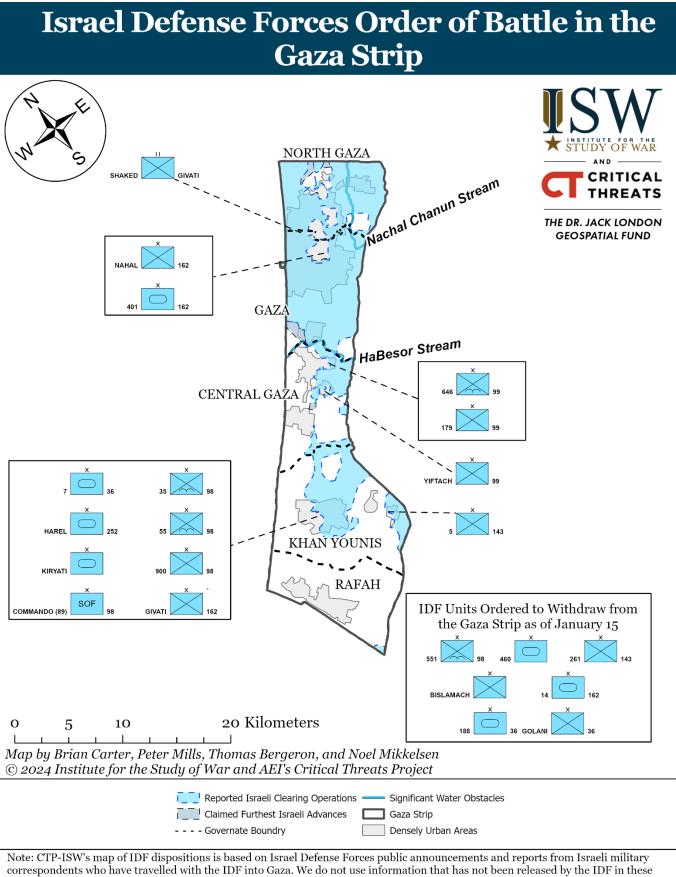
- Erode the will of the Israeli political establishment and public to launch and sustain a major ground operation into the Gaza Strip
- Degrade IDF material and morale around the Gaza Strip.

Israeli forces have continued targeting the remaining Palestinian fighters and militia infrastructure in the northern Gaza Strip. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) reported on January 13 that it activated its joint special operations multidimensional unit in the northern Gaza Strip.[14] The unit uses advanced drones and a combination of technological capabilities to identify targets and direct fire. It has destroyed dozens of anti-tank positions, observation posts, and weapons warehouses, and killed Hamas fighters. Israeli forces directed an airstrike targeting Palestinian fighters in the northern Gaza Strip on January 15.[15]

Palestinian militias, including Hamas' al Qassem Brigades, are not destroyed in the northern Gaza Strip and maintain a presence there, however. The military wing of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the National Resistance Brigades, claimed six attacks on Israeli forces around Gaza City on January 15, using a man-portable air-defense system, mortars, and an unspecified explosive.[16] The military wing of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the al Quds Brigades, fired rockets at Israeli positions in the northern Gaza Strip.[17]

The IDF announced on January 15 that it withdrew the 36th Division from the Central Governorate of the Gaza Strip.[18] Israeli media began reporting in December 2023 that the IDF would transition to a third phase of operations that includes securing a buffer zone in the northern Gaza Strip and transitioning to targeted raids.[19] Israeli media reported that the IDF will decide where the 36th Division will deploy after a period of rest and training.[20] The 36th Division, which includes the Golani Infantry Brigade and 188th Armored Brigade, operated in several neighborhoods of Gaza City and the central Gaza Strip for over 80 days.[21] The 36th Division is normally assigned to the IDF Northern Command, which oversees Israel's northern borders. The withdrawal follows the IDF's confirmation on December 31 that it withdrew five brigades from the northern Gaza Strip.[22] Three IDF divisions remain in the Gaza Strip.

CTP-ISW warned on January 2 that the third phase of Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip, as described, will very likely enable Hamas to reconstitute itself militarily.[23] Israeli forces have degraded several Hamas units in the Gaza Strip. But Hamas' military forces are neither defeated nor destroyed at this time. Palestinian militias continue to operate across the Gaza Strip and have targeted Israeli forces in areas where Israel has degraded the local Hamas units.



maps. The unit locations on this map are notional, and the map does not attempt to depict any unit's precise location.

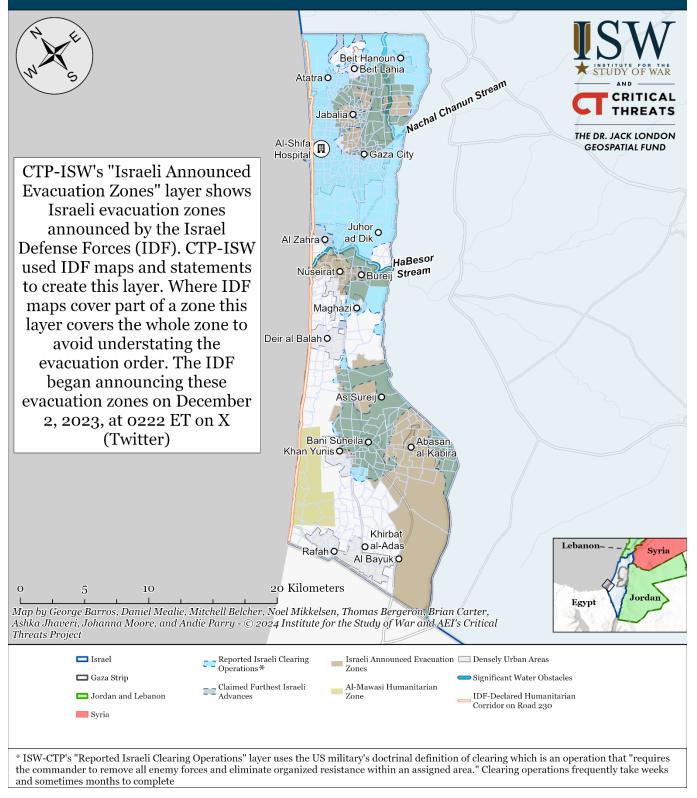
The IDF 646th Paratroopers Brigade Combat Team (assigned to the 99th Division) continued to conduct clearing operations in Nuseirat in the Central Governorate of the Gaza Strip on January 15.[24] Israeli forces located facilities for constructing mortar shells and rockets. The IDF also located eight Hamas fighters hiding in a school area and a nearby weapons storage facility. The al Qassem Brigades mortared Israeli forces east of Bureij.[25] The National Resistance Brigades fired a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) at an advancing Israeli vehicle northeast of Nuseirat and mortared Israeli armor and dismounted infantry elsewhere in the central Gaza Strip.[26]

The IDF 98th Division continued clearing operations in the southern Gaza Strip on January 15. The 7th Armored Brigade raided a Hamas operational headquarters and confiscated small arms, grenades, RPGs, and diving equipment belonging to Hamas' naval force.[27] Fighters of the 98th Division directed an airstrike on two Hamas operatives loading ammunition onto a truck in Khan Younis.[28] Israeli forces also destroyed two weapons depots and attacked Hamas military buildings in Khan Younis.[29] Four Palestinian militias claimed to attack Israeli forces with RPGs, mortars, small arms, and anti-personnel shells on January 15, which is consistent with the weaponry Israeli forces have located during clearing operations in the southern Gaza Strip.[30]

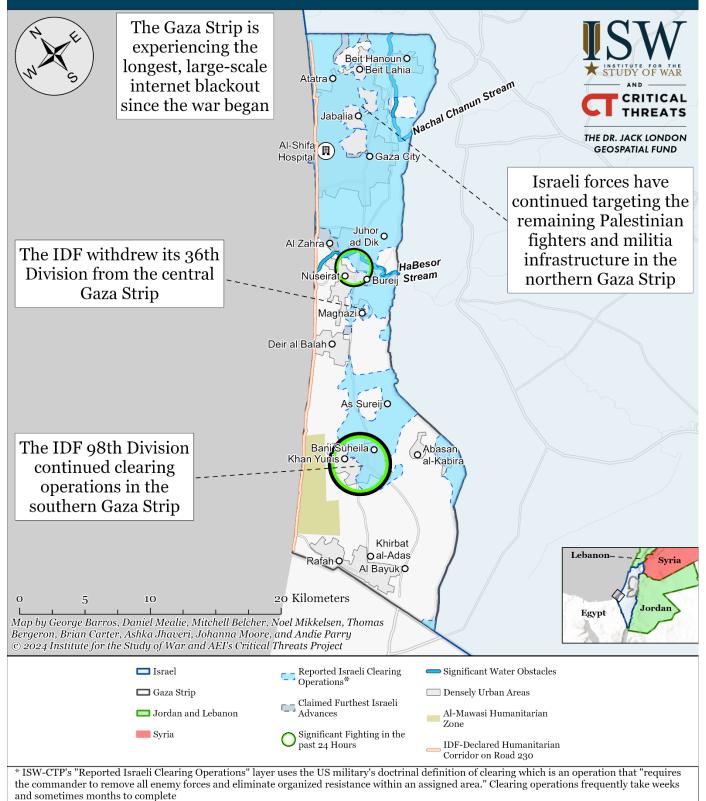
Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said on January 15 that Hamas' "Khan Younis Brigade is gradually disintegrating as a fighting force."[31] Gallant added that the IDF's "intensive phase" in the southern Gaza Strip will end soon and that the IDF is focused on targeting Hamas leadership there.[32] The al Qassem Brigades claimed five attacks on Israeli forces operating in Khan Younis.[33] Hamas and other Palestinian militias are conducting a deliberate defense in Khan Younis, conducting daily attacks on Israeli armor and dismounted infantry since December 3.[34]

Current and former Israeli and Egyptian officials told the *Wall Street Journal* **that Israel informed Egypt that it is planning a military operation to secure the Egypt-Gaza Strip border.[35]** The IDF refers to the 14-kilometer stretch of land between Egypt and the Gaza Strip as the "Philadelphi Corridor."[36] The operation would involve replacing Palestinian border authorities with Israeli ones. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that the timing of the Israeli operation will depend on negotiations with Egypt regarding Israeli hostages in the Gaza Strip and a ceasefire.[37] Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said that Israel must control the border area to block Hamas from smuggling weapons into the Gaza Strip.[38] Unspecified Egyptian sources told Reuters on January 9 that Egypt rejected an Israeli proposal for greater Israeli oversight over the buffer zone on the Egypt-Gaza Strip border.[39]

Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip as of January 15, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip as of January 15, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



Hamas resumed issuing Israeli hostage propaganda on January 14 and 15. The al Qassem Brigades published a series of videos of three Israeli hostages that raise questions about whether the hostages are alive.[40] The final video revealed that two of the hostages had died from what Hamas claimed were Israeli airstrikes on the Gaza Strip, while the third sustained a head injury. The remaining hostage, Noa Argamani, narrated how she purportedly survived two Israeli airstrikes with help from al Qassem Brigades fighters and appealed to the Israeli government to "stop this madness and bring us home to our families."[41] IDF spokesperson Daniel Hagari said Hamas' claim that the IDF targeted a building where three Israeli hostages were being held is a lie.[42] Al Qassem Brigades military spokesperson Abu Obeida similarly spread hostage propaganda on January 14, claiming that the al Qassem Brigades had lost track of many of its hostages in tunnels in the Gaza Strip due to Israeli airstrikes.[43] Hamas last issued these types of videos and other hostage related propaganda during hostage negotiation talks in mid-December 2023.[44]

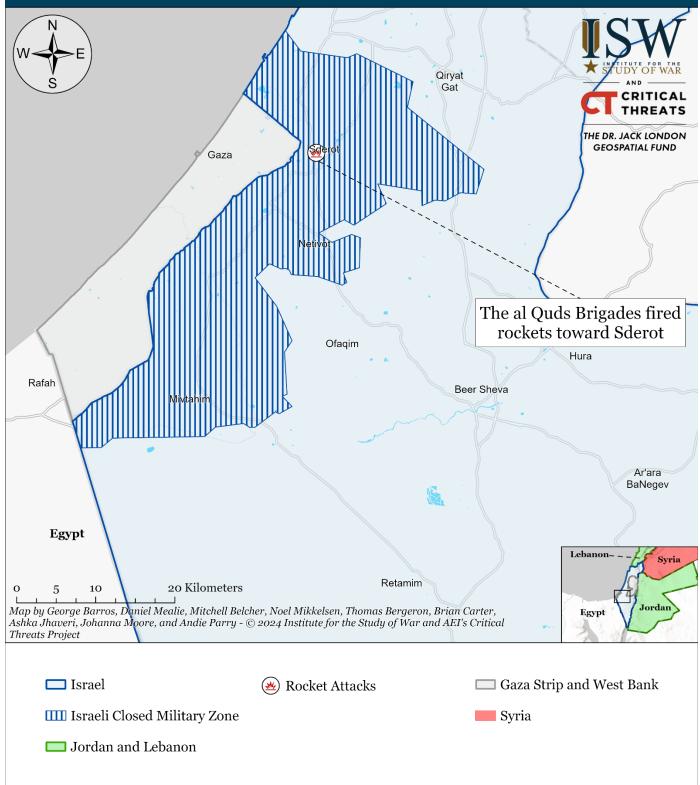
Hamas' video campaign is likely intended to generate public pressure on the Israeli government to stop operations in the Gaza Strip and agree to a hostage/prisoner swap. Palestinian militias' demands for a renewed hostage-for-prisoner deal include the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip and an end to the war, neither of which are compatible with stated Israeli war aims.[45] The newly issued propaganda is consistent with CTP-ISW's assessment that both Hamas' political leader in the Gaza Strip, Yahya Sinwar, and Hamas' external political leaders seek to use their Israeli hostages as leverage to maintain their influence in negotiations.[46] Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said on January 15 that only military pressure will enable Israel to free the hostages held by Hamas.[47]

The IDF published on January 15 a data set summarizing its operations in the Gaza Strip, West Bank, and Lebanon since the war began.[48] Israeli forces have killed over 9,000 Palestinian fighters in the Gaza Strip. Hamas' military force is approximately 40,000.[49] The data shows that Israeli forces have killed two Hamas brigade commanders, 19 battalion commanders, and over 50 company commanders as part of its effort to destroy Hamas' command-control network in the Gaza Strip. 188 Israeli troops have died in the ground offensive and 1,113 sustained injuries.[50]

The Gaza Strip is experiencing the longest, large-scale internet blackout since the Israel-Hamas war began. NetBlocks reported on January 15 that telecommunications have been offline in the Gaza Strip for over 72 hours.[51]

The al Quds Brigades fired rockets from the Gaza Strip targeting Sderot in southern Israel on January 15.[52]

Attacks into Israel from Gaza as of January 15, 2024, 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

The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades announced the establishment of a "military council" on January 14 to plan attacks on Israeli targets "in every corner of the Earth."[53] The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades claimed that it would exact a severe cost on Israelis and that the United States would not be able to intervene. The militia also warned that its fighters would target Israeli civilians living in settlements until they all leave or are killed. The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades reaffirmed its coordination with all other Palestinian militias and called on Palestinian political factions to unite against Israel.

Two West Bank residents conducted a car-ramming attack in Raanana on January 15, killing one civilian and wounding 17 others.[54] The driver of the vehicle stabbed one woman and hijacked her vehicle before conducting the ramming attack. The driver crashed the vehicle, hijacked a second vehicle, and continued to target civilians. No Palestinian militia has claimed responsibility for the attack. Hamas celebrated the attack and framed it as a "natural response" to Israeli activity in the West Bank.[55] Hamas frequently characterizes similar acts of violence as a consequence of Israeli activity in the West Bank.

Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian fighters five times across the West Bank, compared to the weekly average of nine attacks per day.[56] Palestinian militias in the West Bank did not claim any of the attacks.

Clashes in the West Bank as of January 15, 2024, 2:00 PM ET Bet She'An Hadera Ajloun THE DR. JACK LONDON **GEOSPATIAL FUND** Nablus RaAnana Jordan Salfit Tel Aviv As Salt Israeli forces clashed with Palestinian Ramaliah fighters five times across the West Bank shdod Jerusalem Madaba Bethlehem shkelon Gaza Hebron Lebanon Svria Netivot 40 Kilometers 10 20 Ó Jordan Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Brian Carter, Egypt Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Andie Parry - © 2024 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project Clash (Small Arms Combat) 🔲 Gaza Strip and West Bank **I**srael IED Detonated Jordan and Lebanon Syria

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

Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

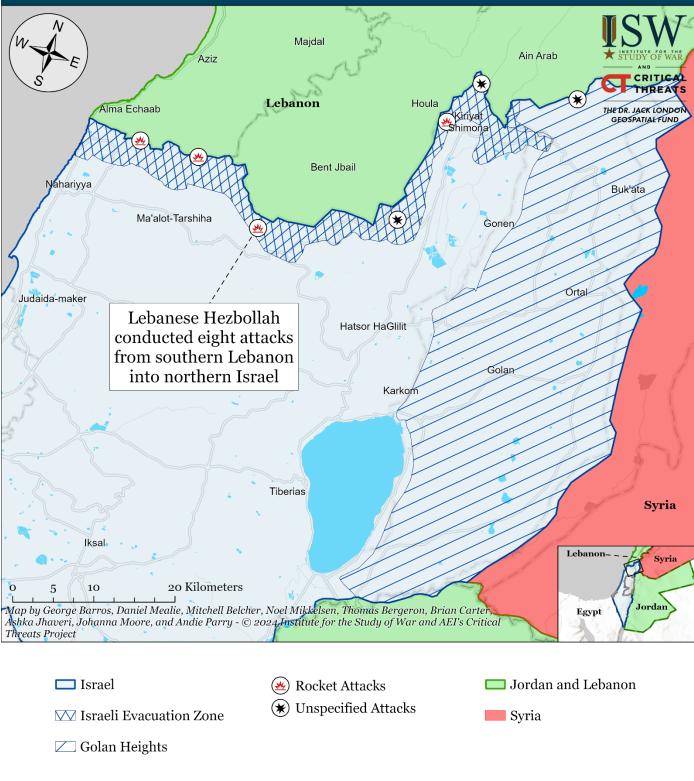
Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

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

Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) conducted eight attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel.[57] LH targeted Israeli forces and military infrastructure along the Israel-Lebanon border.

LH Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah gave a speech on January 14 detailing the state of the Israel-Hamas war and ongoing Iranian-backed escalation against the United States throughout the region.[58] Nasrallah claimed that Israel has failed to achieve any of its objectives in the Gaza Strip. Nasrallah added that Palestinian militias are still present in the Gaza Strip and that Hamas continues to administer the northern Gaza Strip as a governing body.[59] The United States reportedly warned Lebanon that Israel will launch a war if attacks into northern Israel do not stop according to Nasrallah.[60] He stated that LH attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel will continue. Nasrallah claimed the Houthi anti-shipping attack campaign in the Red Sea has dealt a severe blow to the Israeli economy.[61] He argued that the US and UK strikes on Houthi targets on January 11 will not deter this campaign.[62] Nasrallah reiterated the false, Houthi claim that the United States is threatening freedom of navigation in the Red Sea, not the Houthis.[63] US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the Houthis have conducted "hundreds" of attacks targeting international shipping in the Red Sea with Iranian military and intelligence assistance.[64]

Attacks into Northern Israel from Lebanon as of January 15, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



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

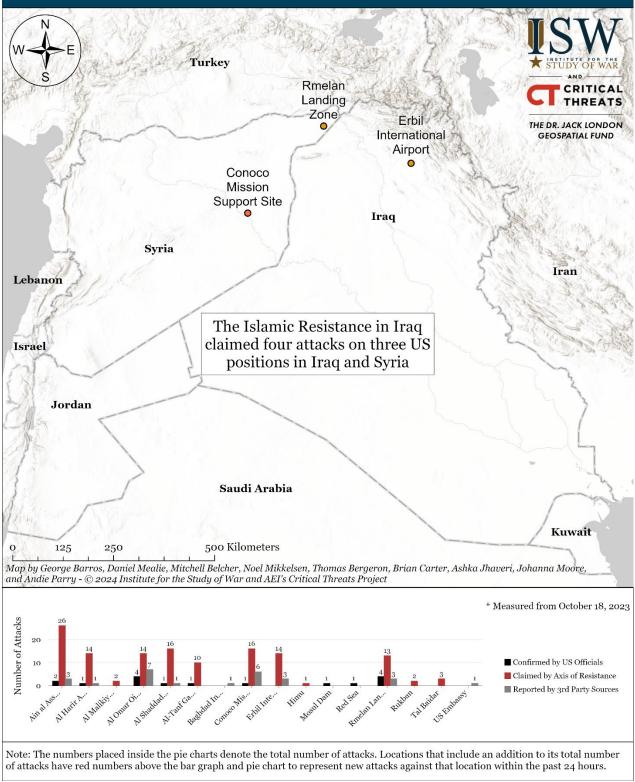
The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—claimed four attacks on three US positions in Iraq and Syria on January 14 and 15.[65] The militia claimed that its fighters fired drones and rockets targeting Erbil International Airport in Iraq and Rmelan Landing Zone Conoco Mission Support Site in Syria on January 14.[66] The Islamic Resistance in Iraq conducted a second attack targeting the Conoco Mission Support Site in eastern Syria on January 15.[67]

The Houthis continued attacking and harassing US naval forces and commercial shipping in the Red Sea on January 14 and 15. US fighter aircraft shot down an anti-ship cruise missile (ASCM) fired from Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen toward the USS Laboon in the southern Red Sea on January 14.[68] The ASCM did not cause any injuries or damage. Houthi militants also fired an anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) toward the Marshall Islands-flagged, US-owned and operated *Gibraltar Eagle* on January 15.[69] This attack marks the first time the Houthis have successfully attacked a US-owned or operated commercial vessel since the Israel-Hamas war began.[70] The ASBM struck the port side of the vessel but did not cause significant damage.[71] US forces detected a separate anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) fired toward commercial shipping lanes in the southern Red Sea on January 15.[72] The ASBM failed in flight and did not cause any injuries or damage.

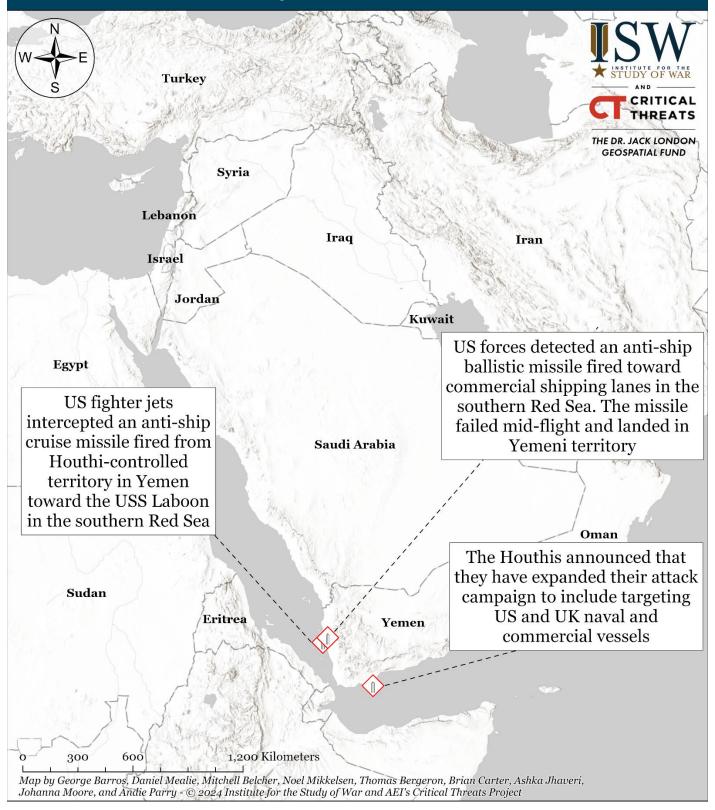
These attacks followed the US and UK combined airstrikes on Houthi military facilities on January 11, which destroyed 20-30 percent of the Houthis' offensive capability.[73] Houthi officials have vowed to continue attacking Israeli-owned and Israel-bound vessels following the airstrikes. Houthi spokesperson Mohammad Abdul Salem stated on January 15, for example, that US "threats and attacks" will not deter the Houthis from targeting Israel-linked ships.[74]

Two US Navy SEALs went missing on January 11 due to a mishap while searching for smuggled Iranian weapons intended for the Houthis in Yemen, according to two US officials familiar with the incident.[75] The two service members were preparing to board a ship off the coast of Somalia when one of them slipped from a ladder and another jumped into the water to help.[76] Two current and two former Pentagon officials told the *New York Times* on January 15 that the whereabouts of the two service members are still unknown.[77] US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby told CBS News on January 14 that the United States is working to disrupt Iran's shipment of weapons to the Houthis.[78] Iran has provided technology, equipment, intelligence, and information to the Houthis for attacks targeting shipping in the Red Sea.[79] CTP-ISW assessed on December 31 that this Houthi campaign is part of a wider regional escalation by Iran and its so-called Axis of Resistance, which is intended to support Iranian strategic objectives in the region.[80]

Attacks against US Bases in the Middle East as of January 15, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



Iranian-sponsored Attacks in the Middle East as of January 15, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



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https://www.iraqhorizons dot com/p/vote-on-new-speaker-exacerbates-divisions

[2] https://www.iraqfsc dot iq/news.5066/;

https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-november-25-2023#_edn041204752957b8029bfdb446e6491b2832

[3] https://www.kurdistan24 dot net/ar/story/45505-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%A4%D8%AC%D9%91%D9%84-%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8D-%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AC%D9%84%D9%8D-%D8%BA%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%85%D9%91%D9%89

[4] https://www.shafaq dot

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[5] https://www.shafaq dot

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https://alahad dot iq/?page=article&itemId=184274

[6] https://www.understandingwar.org/publications/commentaries/iraqi-parliament-passes-accountability-and-justice-law

[7] https://shafaq dot com/en/Iraq-News/Al-Sudani-promised-the-Sunni-blocs-to-abolish-the-Accountability-and-Justice-Commission-source

[8] https://www.shafaq dot

com/ar/%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B2%D9%87%D9% 85-%D9%86%D8%AC%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A7-%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-125-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%B4%D8%AD%D8%A7-%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%AB%D8%A7-%D9%82

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