

Iran Update



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The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) publish the Iran Update, which provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests.

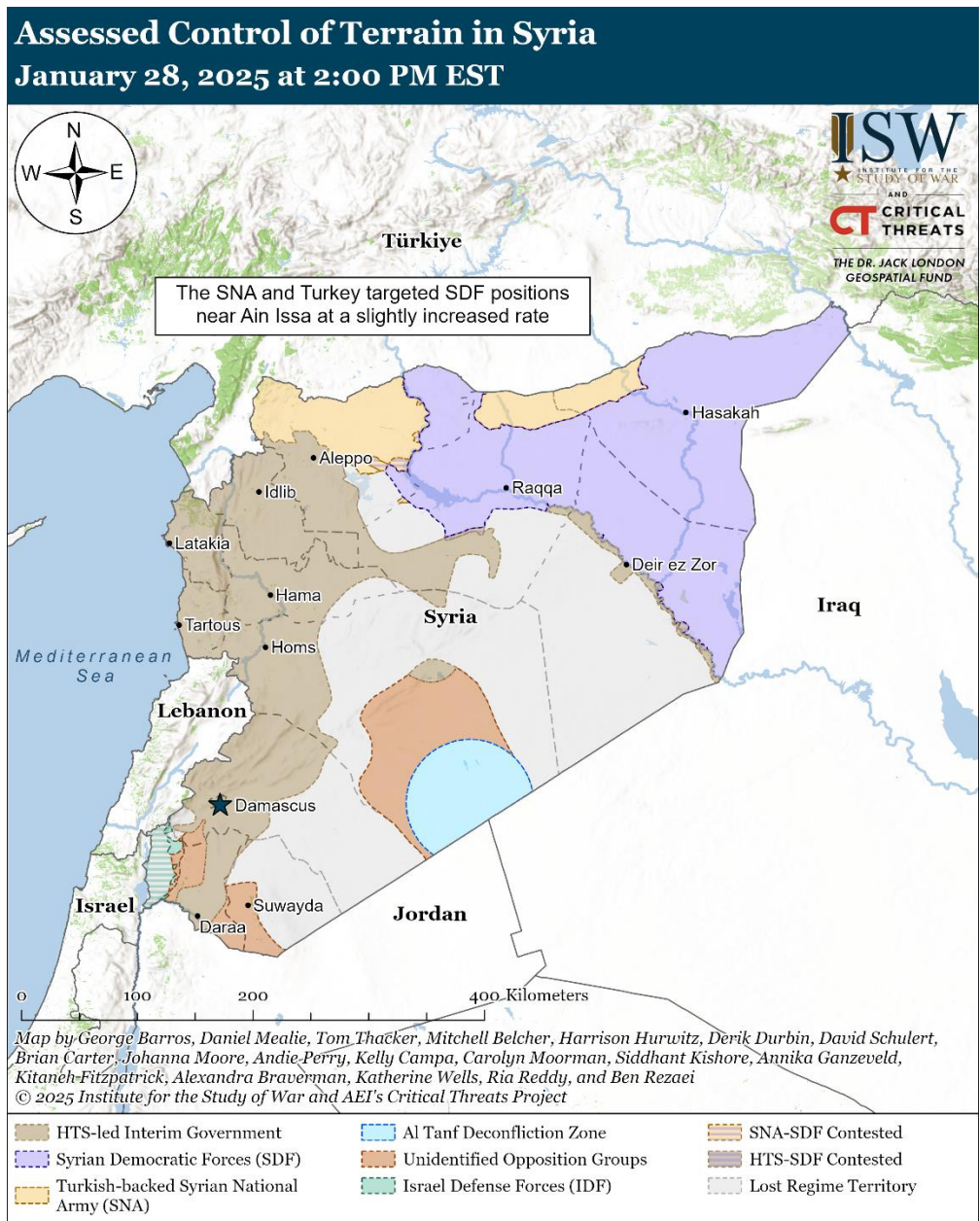
Click [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations, and [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of the ongoing opposition offensive in Syria. These maps are updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

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.

Turkish officials appear to believe that a planned call by imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to disarm would pressure the SDF into an agreement to disarm and integrate into the HTS-led interim government. Turkey and Ocalan have reportedly reached an agreement in which Ocalan will publicly call on the PKK to "lay down arms" on February 15. Unspecified Turkish officials told regional media on January 27 that Ocalan's announcement would "easily" pressure the SDF to integrate into the Syrian Defense Ministry.[1] This belief reflects misplaced Turkish thinking that the entire SDF will be responsive to PKK demands, which is unlikely. The SDF is composed of Syrian Kurds, some of whom were members of the PKK. The SDF's leadership presumably recognizes that Turkish-backed attacks pose a possibly existential threat to the SDF and Kurds, given that many Turkish-backed forces have previously committed human rights abuses against Kurdish people in northwestern Syria. The SDF is unlikely to willingly give up its ability to defend Kurdish areas against active military attacks, regardless of Ocalan's position.

The Turkish theory that the disarmament of the PKK would cause the SDF to disarm and integrate into the Syrian Defense Ministry directly conflicts with how the SDF views its future in the Syrian government and northeastern Syria. The SDF has articulated clear and specific demands since it began talks with the HTS-led government in late December 2024. These demands include joining the new Syrian army as an integrated unit, remaining deployed in northeastern Syria, and maintaining some regional autonomy in a "decentralized" system.[2] It is unlikely that the SDF would "easily" give up these demands if the PKK disarms.

An unspecified source told Middle East Eye that Turkey seeks to encourage Kurdish political parties, including the Democratic Union Party (PYD), to participate in the political system in Damascus.[3] The PYD controls the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), which governs SDF-controlled areas in northeastern Syria.[4] The SDF and PYD almost certainly hope to be involved in the political system in Damascus, but that is not mutually exclusive with SDF demands for regional autonomy. The SDF's stated demands suggest that it would not be satisfied with mere political representation in Damascus and that it seeks firmer guarantees of political and security autonomy.



Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi implicitly threatened that Iran could decide to pursue a nuclear weapon during an interview with Sky News on January 28.[5] Araghchi stated that Iran would "have to look for an alternative" if the E3 (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) triggered snapback sanctions on Iran before October 2025. The Joint Comprehensive

Plan of Action (JCPOA) snapback mechanism allows JCPOA signatories to reimpose UN Security Council sanctions on Iran in the event of “significant non-performance by Iran of JCPOA commitments.”[6] The E3 has until October 2025 to trigger snapback sanctions if it decides to do so. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) passed a censure resolution proposed by the E3 in November 2024 that requires the IAEA to produce a “comprehensive report” on Iranian nuclear activities by spring 2025.[7] The IAEA Board of Governors is next set to meet in March 2025.[8] CTP-ISW previously assessed that the report would almost certainly confirm Iranian noncompliance with the JCPOA and lay the foundation for the E3 to reimpose snapback sanctions.[9] Araghchi added that there is a “heated debate” in Iran about what an “alternative” to diplomacy would be.[10] Araghchi is likely referring to the debate among Iranian officials about whether Iran should revise its nuclear doctrine and pursue a nuclear weapon.[11] That Araghchi interviewed with British outlet Sky News in English suggests that his statements were directed at the E3.

The first official Russian delegation arrived in Syria since the fall of the Assad regime on January 28 to discuss Russia's continued use of its military bases in Syria.[12] The Russian delegation includes Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov and Presidential Special Representative to Syria Alexander Lavrentyev. *Reuters* reported that two Syrian sources stated that the delegation will meet with the new Syrian government sometime this week.[13] Bogdanov told Russian state media outlet *RT* that the visit aims to strengthen Russian-Syrian historical relations based on common interests.[14] *Bloomberg* reported that a Russian source familiar with the matter stated that Russia is struggling to retain access to the Hmeimim Air Base and Port of Tartus because negotiations with the new Syrian government are “stuck.”[15] Russian milbloggers responded to the Russian delegation's arrival, claiming that Syria is “far from” Russia's first or even second priority and cautioning against believing Russian or Syrian officials' “standard phrases” about cooperation.[16] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that there is no hope that Russian-Syrian relations can return to their previous strength and that Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) holds the upper hand in negotiations and can extract greater concessions from Russia.[17]

The Russian military continues to evacuate military assets from the Port of Tartus amid the ongoing Russian-Syrian negotiations. Commercially available satellite imagery collected by Planet Labs PBC from January 18 and 27 shows that the Russian military loaded equipment onto the Russian *Sparta* and *Sparta II* cargo ships at Tartus and that the *Sparta II* ship left the port while the *Sparta* remained.[18] OSINT analyst MT Anderson posted satellite imagery from January 23 showing the *Vyazma* Kaliningradneft-class oiler alongside the port and possibly suggesting that the Russian military was loading vehicles onto the *Sparta*. [19]*Bloomberg* reported on January 28 that a Russian source stated that two Russian transport ships - likely the *Sparta* and *Sparta II* - had been waiting for weeks off Tartus before Syrian authorities allowed them to dock.[20]

CTP-ISW has recorded no verifiable reports of kinetic activity in the Gaza Strip or attacks from the Gaza Strip into Israel since the last data cut-off on January 27.

Key Takeaways:

- **Kurds in Syria:** Turkish officials appear to believe that a planned call by imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan for the PKK to disarm would pressure the SDF into an agreement to disarm and integrate into the HTS-led interim government. The Turkish theory that the

disarmament of the PKK would cause the SDF to disarm and integrate into the Syrian Defense Ministry directly conflicts with how the SDF views its future in the Syrian government and northeastern Syria.

- **Iranian Nuclear Program:** Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi implicitly threatened that Iran could decide to pursue a nuclear weapon during an interview with Sky News on January 28.
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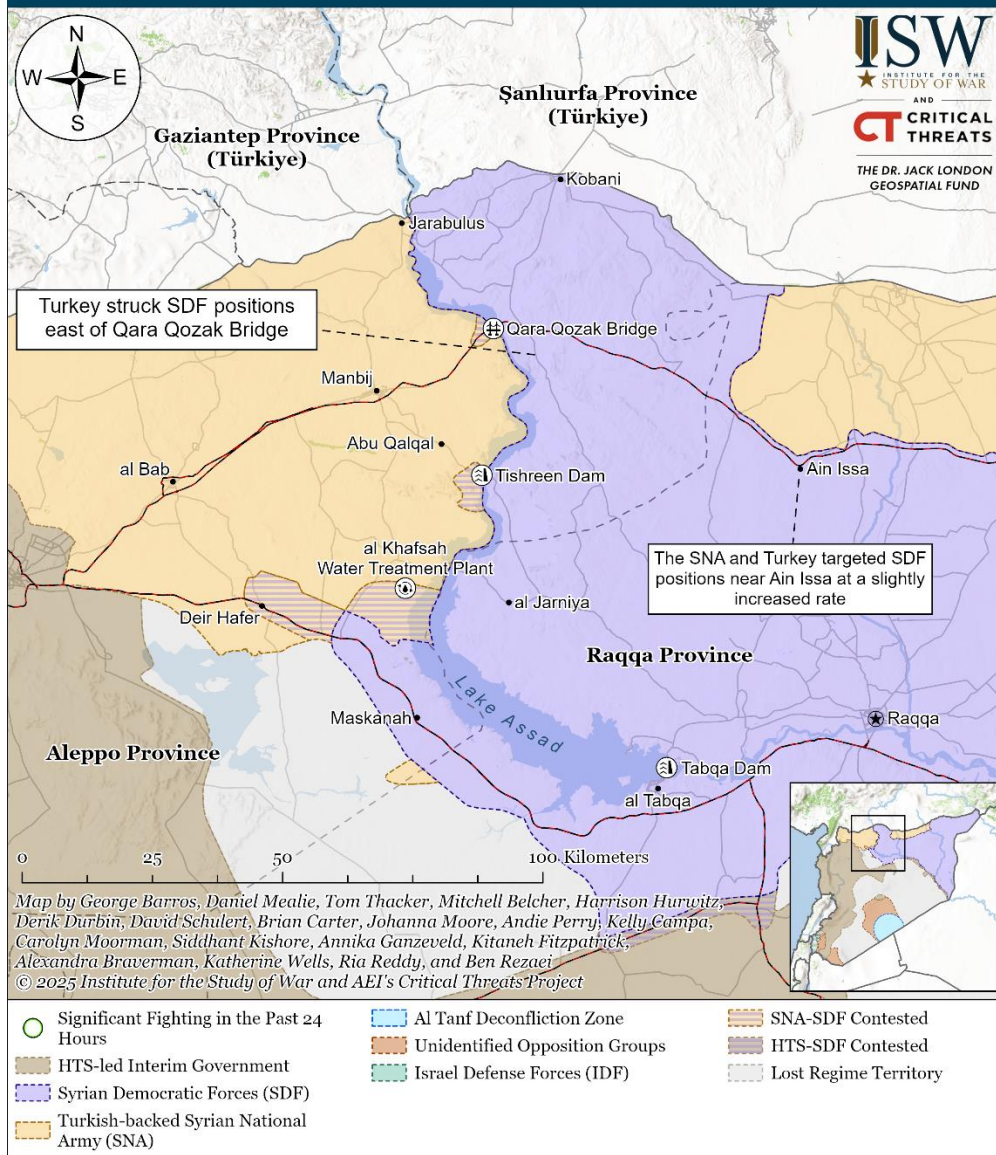
Syria

The United States issued a waiver on January 27 to continue payments for aid and wages for security personnel at Al Hol camp in northeastern Syria for two weeks.[21] The Trump administration froze these payments on January 24. A US analyst reported that security personnel at al Hol camp and other internally displaced person camps and detention centers in northeastern Syria have stopped working since January 24.[22] Al Hol camp holds tens of thousands of ISIS supporters, and the detention centers in northeastern Syria hold what top US officials have called an ISIS "army-in-waiting," including up to 10,000 fighters.[23] ISIS conducted a major prison break at Ghwaryan prison in Hasakah in January 2022, freeing hundreds of ISIS members.[24] ISIS attacks in the central Syrian desert increased in the year following the attack, which could suggest that the freed ISIS members improved the capabilities of ISIS cells in central Syria.[25] A contingent of US air and ground forces and SDF forces responded to the attack and recaptured the facility. The SDF currently faces bandwidth and resource constraints as it contends with separate, possibly existential fights with Arab tribal forces in Deir ez Zor and a potential Turkish or Turkish-backed offensive in northern Syria.[26] The SDF has likely redirected personnel and resources away from al Hol and counter-ISIS operations to confront these threats, and these personnel would not be available in the event of another prison attack.[27] The guards themselves are necessary to control these facilities and prevent security incidents inside both Al Hol camp and detention centers.

Turkey has continued to attack SDF positions east of Qara Qozak Bridge since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on January 27. Turkish aircraft struck SDF targets in at least five locations on the east bank of the Euphrates River, including a market in Sarrin.[28] Turkey also conducted strikes targeting the SDF west of Tishreen Dam on January 28.[29]

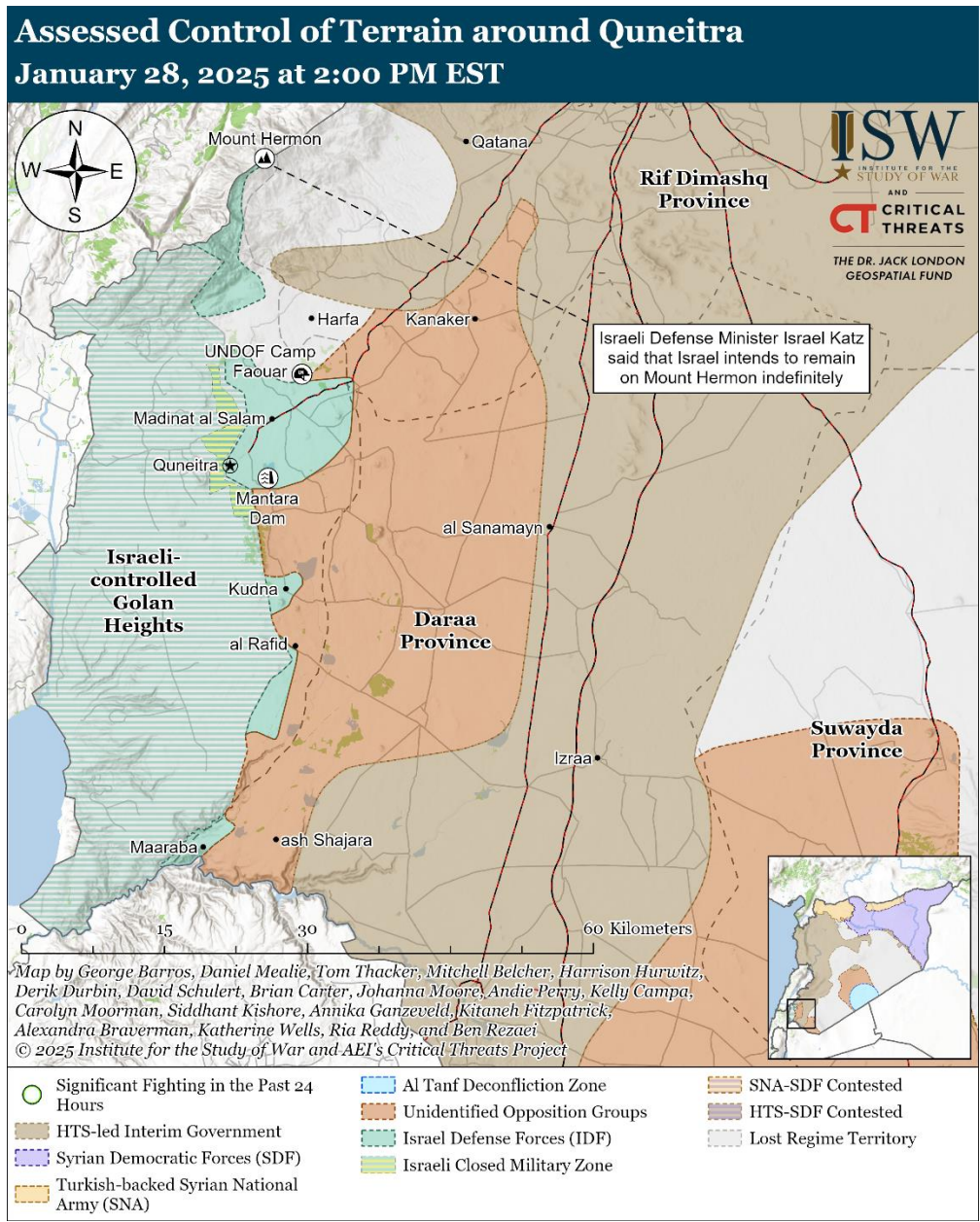
The SNA and Turkey attacked SDF positions near Ain Issa, Raqqa Province, at a slightly increased rate on January 28. Turkey conducted airstrikes on SDF positions while the SNA shelled the SDF with artillery.[30] A Turkish airstrike targeted an SDF ammunition and heavy weapons cache near Ain Issa.[31] CTP-ISW previously assessed that the SNA could launch an assault into SDF territory from Ain Issa, which makes the uptick in attacks notable. The SNA has deployed to the lines of control at Kobani, Ain Issa, and Tal Tamr, which CTP-ISW assessed may be in preparation for a three-pronged assault to collapse SDF defenses along the eastern bank of the Euphrates River.[32]

Assessed Control of Terrain around Manbij January 28, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said that Israel intends to remain on Mount Hermon in Syria “indefinitely.”[33] Katz visited the newly established IDF position on Mount Hermon on January 28.[34] The IDF has built additional infrastructure at the site, including medical buildings, kitchens, dining rooms, and sleeping buildings in recent weeks.[35] Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu previously announced in December 2024, that the IDF would remain on the Syrian side of Mount Hermon until Israel reaches “another arrangement” to ensure Israeli security.[36] Netanyahu said that the 1974 disengagement agreement on the Golan Heights “collapsed” with the fall of the Syrian regime, enabling Israel to operate in southern Syria to “take action against possible threats.”[37] HTS leader and interim head of state Ahmed al Shara has asked Israel to respect the 1974 agreement and called on UN forces to deploy to the disengagement zone.[38]

A Kurdish Syrian Democratic Council delegation met with Druze spiritual leader Sheikh Hikmat al Hijri in Suwayda Province on January 28.[39] The officials discussed creating a "new Syria that is inclusive of all." [40] The officials also agreed that armed groups must hand over their weapons to the Syrian state "after the formation of a comprehensive transitional government" and after fighting has completely stopped across Syria.[41] Hijri said in December 2024 that the new Syrian constitution should adopt an administrative decentralized system and ensure the separation of powers to safeguard the institutions of governance.[42] SDF commander Mazloum Abdi has repeatedly advocated for a "decentralized" administration and said on January 14 that he wants the SDF to integrate into the Defense Ministry as a "bloc." [43] The SDF and Druze community's vision of a "decentralized system" directly conflicts with HTS's previous calls for a unified Syria under one central government and rejection of federal entities.[44]



Iraq

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Strengthen Iranian and Axis of Resistance influence over the Iraqi state and society
- Harden the Iraqi government against internal dissent

ISIS claimed that it detonated a booby-trapped weapons cache in Tarmiyah, north of Baghdad, on January 21, killing at least three Iraqi officers.[45] The Iraqi government said that an explosion killed the three officers as they searched a weapons cache during a joint Iraqi Army and Iraqi National Intelligence Service operation in the area.[46] The Iraqi government said the trio died due to a "technical error." Tarmiyah was previously a stronghold for both al Qaeda in Iraq and ISIS, and ISIS has remained active in the area for years.[47] The presence of an ISIS ammunition cache in Tarmiyah indicates that ISIS feels secure enough to maintain logistics infrastructure in the area.

Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Ansar Allah al Awfiya leader Ali al Fatlawi told Iraqi media on January 27 that Iranian-backed Iraqi militias will not disarm or dissolve themselves so long as US forces remain in Iraq.[48] Iraqi National Security Adviser Qassem al Araj said on January 23 that the Iraqi federal government is trying to bring all weapons under government control.[49] The Iraqi government recently launched a media campaign to promote the restriction of weapons to the state.[50] Fatlawi's statement is consistent with recent reports that Iranian-backed Iraqi militias will only integrate into the Iraqi Army after US forces completely withdraw from Iraq.[51] The United States and Iraq agreed in September 2024 that hundreds of US-led international coalition forces would withdraw from Iraq by September 2025 and that the remaining troops would withdraw by the end of 2026.[52] The Iraqi federal government has reportedly reconsidered the withdrawal of US forces by 2026 because it perceives that the fall of the Assad regime in Syria poses a security threats to Iraq.[53]

Arabian Peninsula

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Harden the Houthi regime against internal dissent in Houthi-controlled areas
- Destroy the anti-Houthi opposition to control all of Yemen
- Erode Israeli will to continue the war in the Gaza Strip

Nothing significant to report.

The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon

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
- Rebuild and reestablish Hezbollah in southern Lebanon

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

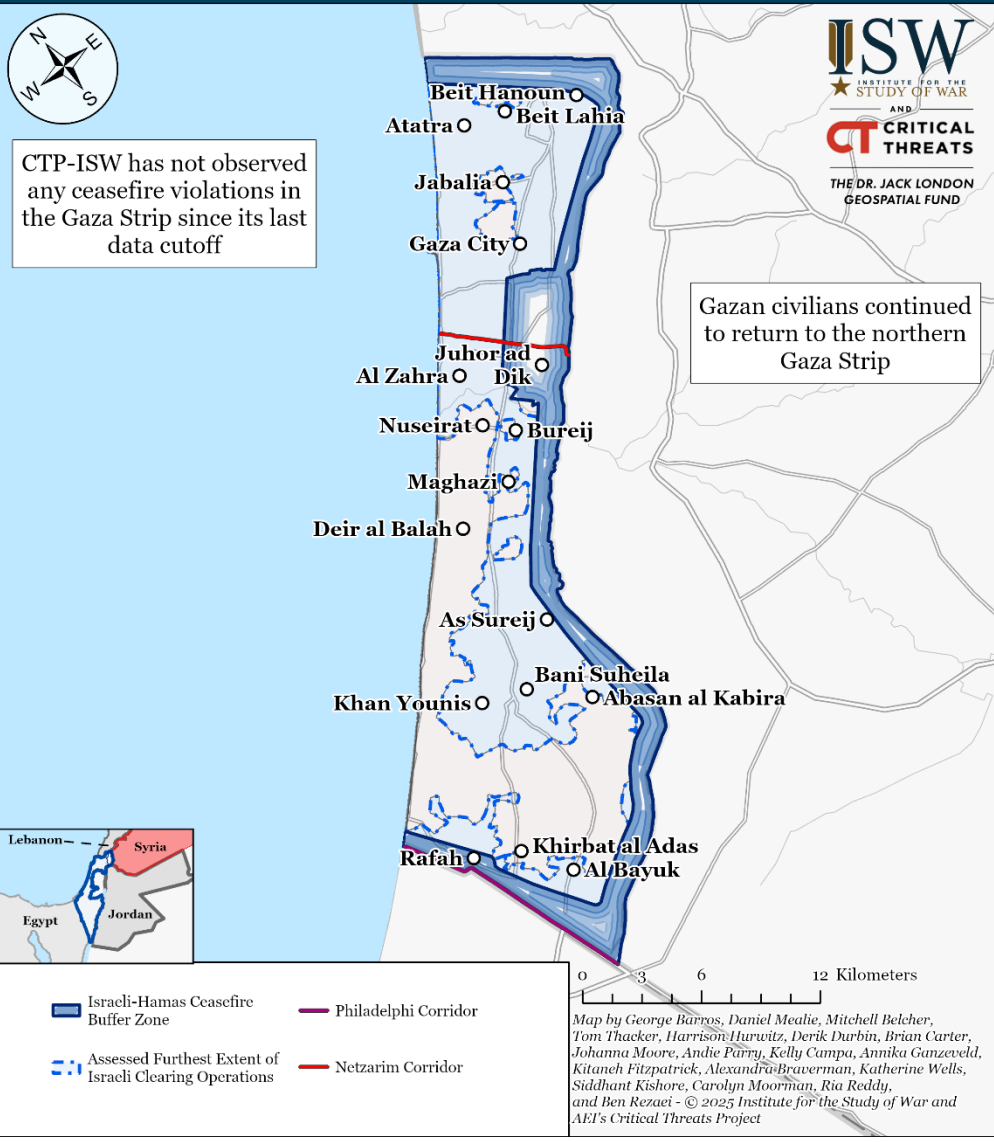
The Gaza Strip

Gazan civilians continued to return to the northern Gaza Strip on January 28. The IDF reported that “tens of thousands” of Gazans returned to the northern Gaza Strip after the IDF withdrew from the Netzarim Corridor on January 27.[54] Gazans may return to the northern Gaza Strip on foot via al Rashid Road or by vehicle on Salah al Din Road. Vehicles heading north on Salah al Din Road must undergo inspection at the Netzarim Corridor.

The IDF Air Force struck a vehicle on January 27 as it traveled toward the northern Gaza Strip on an unauthorized route.[55] The IDF Arabic-language spokesperson reiterated that vehicles can only travel to the northern Gaza Strip on the Salah al Din Road after undergoing inspection at the Netzarim Corridor.[56] US and Egyptian private security contractors started operating a checkpoint on Salah al Din Road at the Netzarim Corridor on January 27 to inspect vehicles.[57]

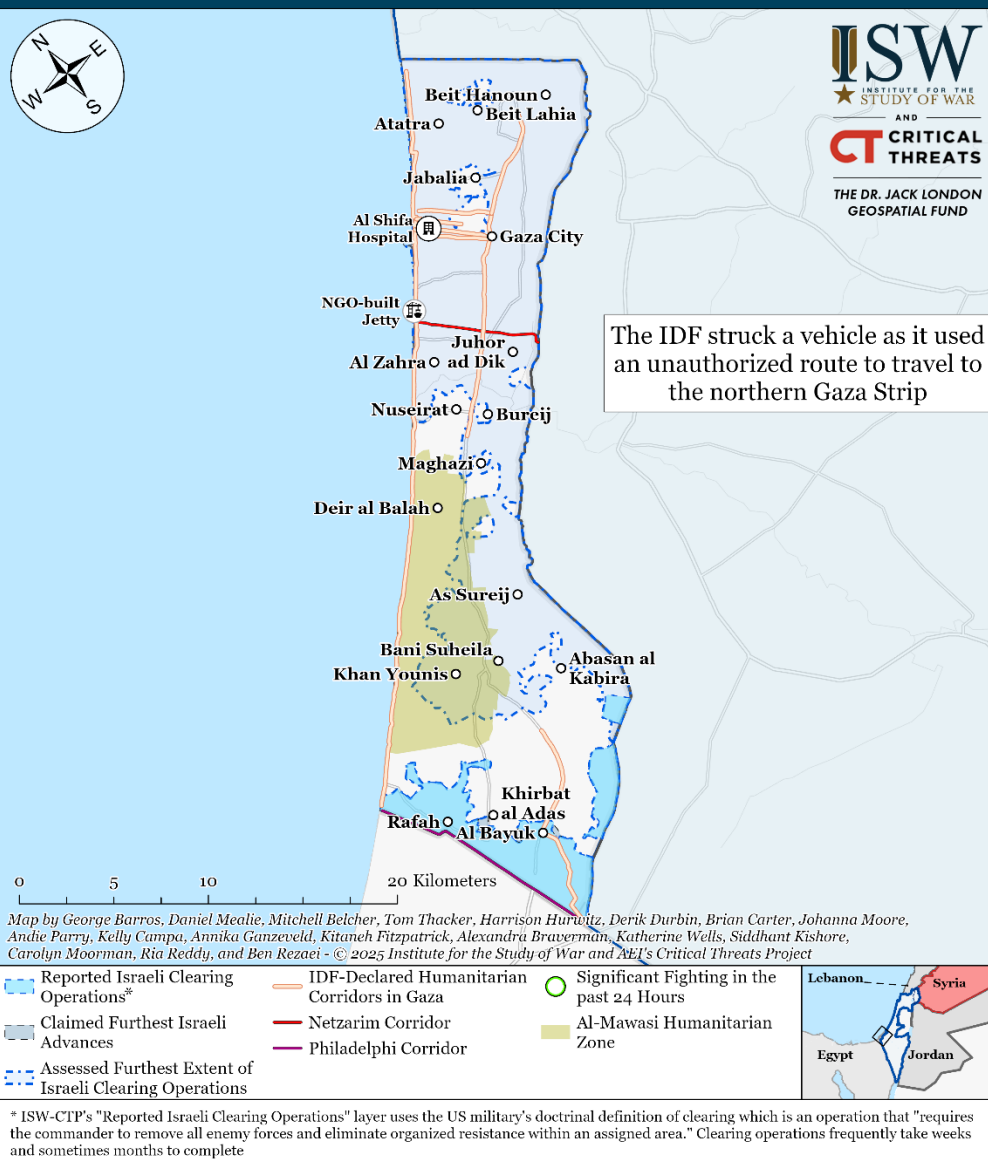
Israel-Hamas Ceasefire Lines

As of January 28, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

As of January 28, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST

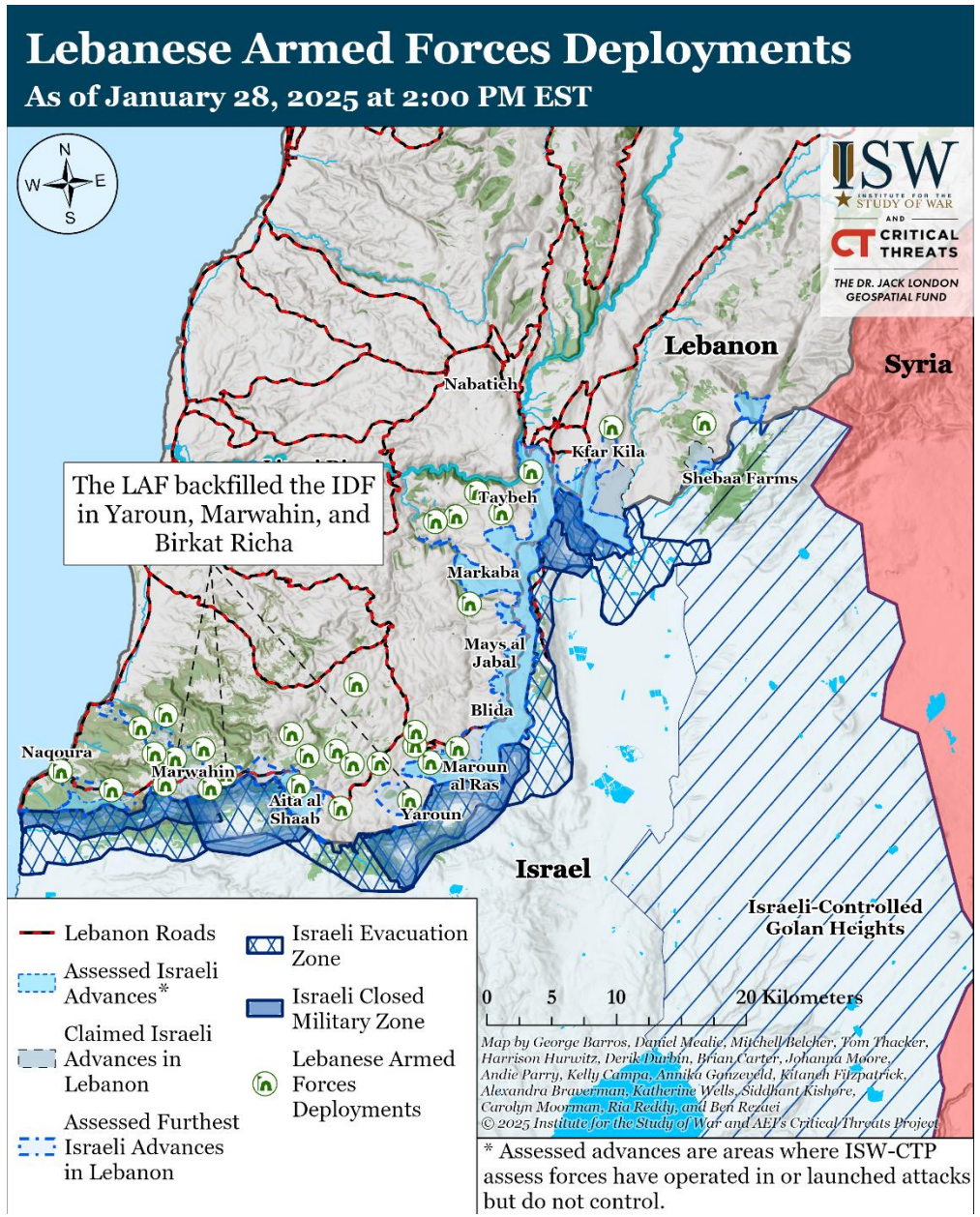


Lebanon

The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) backfired the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in Marwahin and Birkat Richa, southwestern Lebanon, and Yaroun, south-central Lebanon, on January 28.[58]

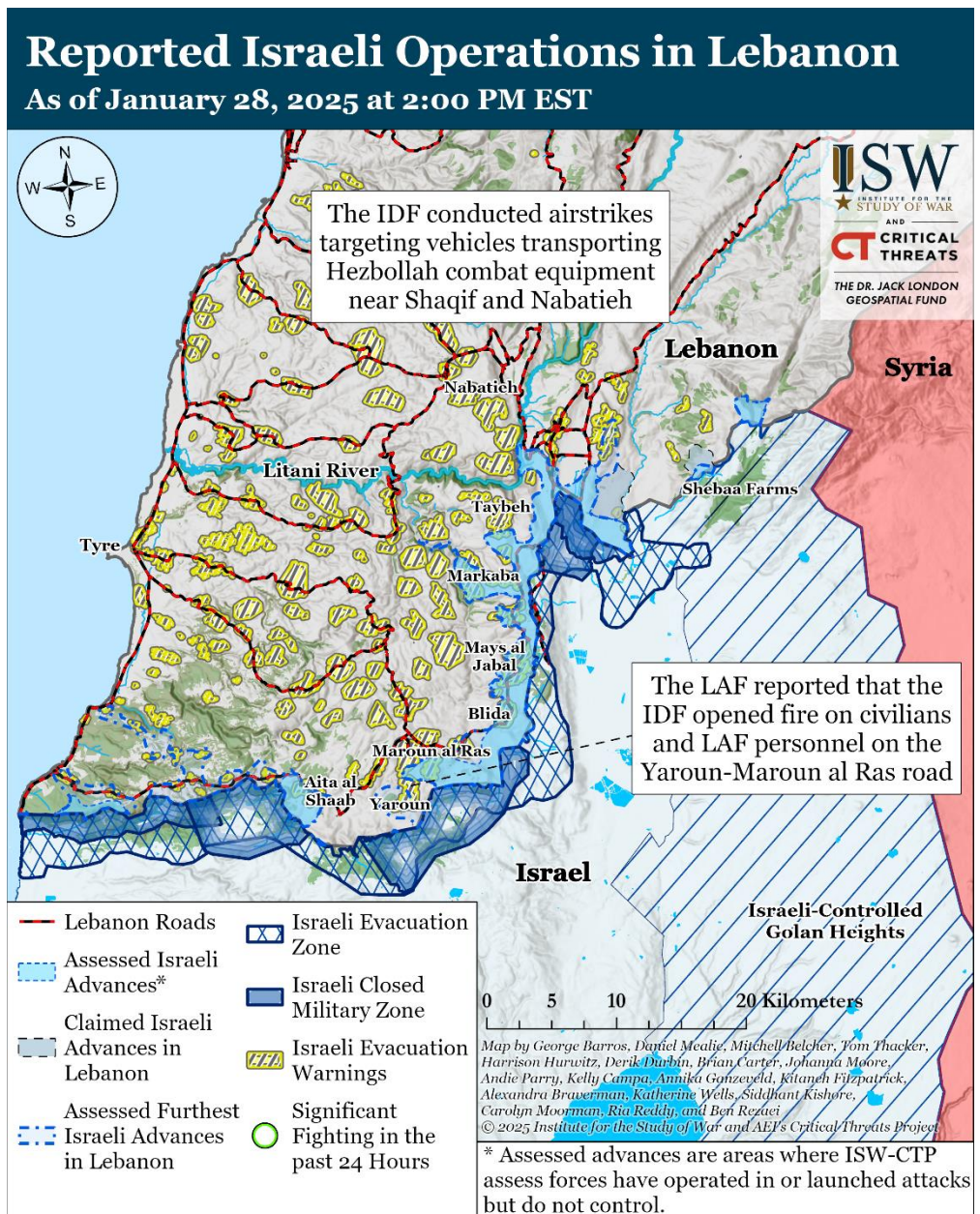
The LAF reported on January 28 that Israeli forces fired at LAF personnel and Lebanese civilians on the Yaroun-Maroun al Ras road in southeastern Lebanon.[59] The LAF was accompanying residents as they returned to border towns when the incident occurred.[60] The IDF injured at least four individuals, including one LAF soldier.[61]

Lebanese media reported on January 28 that the LAF established a military position in Boustane, south-central Lebanon.[62] Boustane is located between Yaroun and Marwahin, where the LAF backfilled the IDF on January 28.[63]



The IDF Air Force struck two Hezbollah vehicles transporting unspecified combat equipment in Shaqif and Nabatieh, southern Lebanon, on January 28.[64] Lebanese media reported that one of the airstrikes occurred in Zawtar el Charqiyeh, Nabatieh District.[65] The Lebanese Health Ministry reported that the strikes injured at least twenty individuals.[66] Hezbollah-affiliated media reported that the airstrike in Zawtar el Charqiyeh marked the first Israeli airstrike in Nabatieh since the Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire began in November 2024.[67]

Lebanese media reported on January 28 that Lebanese civilians continued to try to return to towns in southeastern Lebanon. Lebanese media reported that residents of Mays al Jabal “confronted” the IDF while the residents tried to return to their homes.[68] Lebanese media reported that the IDF built earthen barriers in Houla to prevent the return of residents there.[69] Hezbollah-affiliated and Lebanese media reported that the IDF moved from Odaisseh toward Taybeh and blocked civilians as they attempted to return to Odaisseh.[70] Lebanese media reported that the LAF and residents entered Aitaroun on January 28, though the LAF has not confirmed its deployment to Aitaroun at this time.[71] Geolocated footage posted on X (Twitter) on January 27 shows that the IDF opened fire on a vehicle in Aitaroun.[72] The IDF Arabic language spokesperson reiterated on January 28 that civilians should not return to southern Lebanon at this time.[73]



Residents of Kfar Kila, southeastern Lebanon, announced on January 28 that they closed a road and will not reopen the road until the IDF allows the LAF, Red Cross, and Lebanese Civil Defense to enter the area.[74] The IDF has operated in Kfar Kila since October 2024.[75]

Hezbollah-affiliated media reported on January 28 that Hezbollah launched a project to rebuild infrastructure destroyed during IDF operations in towns on the Israel-Lebanon border.[76] Hezbollah-affiliated media reported that the project will enable southern Lebanon residents to live in "houses, not tents." A Hezbollah-affiliated parliamentarian promised that Hezbollah-affiliated construction company Jihad al Bina will provide housing for residents."[77] Lebanese media reported in December 2024 that Hezbollah Secretary General Naim Qassem created an oversight committee to supervise reconstruction projects.[78] Qassem stated on January 5 that Iran provided funding to Hezbollah to disseminate to civilians as part of infrastructure rebuilding efforts in southern Lebanon and Beirut.[79]

West Bank

The IDF continued its counterterrorism operation in Jenin and Tulkarm governorates on January 28. An IDF soldier told Israeli media that Israeli forces have located militia infrastructure, weapons, and ammunition "in every other house." [80] The IDF has destroyed a weapons manufacturing facility and two weapons depots since the start of the operation in Jenin on January 21.[81] Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades (AAMB) targeted Israeli forces in Jenin and Tulkarm with small arms and improvised explosive devices (IED) on January 27 and 28.[82]

PIJ, Hamas, and the "Youth of Revenge and Liberation" claimed that they fired small arms and detonated IEDs in a combined operation targeting Israeli forces in Jenin and Tulkarm on January 27 and 28.[83] PIJ announced the formation of joint operation rooms with Hamas and AAMB fighters in the West Bank on January 22.[84]

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei condemned US objectives in the Middle East during a meeting with Iranian government officials and ambassadors from unspecified Muslim countries on January 28.[85] Khamenei criticized the United States for allegedly trying to change the "national and religious identity" of other nations. Khamenei called the ceasefires in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon "victories" for Hamas and Hezbollah against Israel.

The Iranian Artesh Ground Forces concluded a military exercise in Kermanshah Province, western Iran, on January 28.[86] The 35th Commando Brigade, 55th Airborne Brigade, 181st Armored Brigade, Artesh Ground Forces Aviation, and electronic warfare units participated in the exercise. Artesh Ground Forces Operations Deputy Brigadier General Karim Cheshak stated that the exercise took place near the Iran-Iraq border and aimed to confront "terrorist movements" and border threats and safeguard territorial integrity. Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri and Artesh Commander Major General Abdol Rahim Mousavi attended the final phase of the exercise.[87] The Artesh introduced the Iranian-made "Masaf-2" rifle during the exercise, which is an Iranian-made copy of the HK416.[88]

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.

CTP-ISW defines the “Axis of Resistance” as 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 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 partners 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.

POWERED BY:



BABEL STREET

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