Iran Update, November 26, 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. Neither Israel nor Hamas claimed violations of the humanitarian pause in the Gaza Strip as they completed the third swap of Hamas-held hostages for Israeli-held prisoners. CTP-ISW did not record verifiable reports of kinetic activity inside the Gaza Strip or reports of attacks from the Gaza Strip into Israel.
- 2. Israel said that Hamas established a checkpoint on the Salah al Din road to prevent aid from reaching northern Gaza Strip residents.
- 3. Israeli forces arrested 21 individuals in several raids across the West Bank. Palestinian militia fighters clashed with Israeli forces for nine hours in the Jenin refugee camp.
- 4. Lebanese Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed militias did not conduct any attacks into northern Israel.
- 5. Israeli aircraft conducted an airstrike on Damascus International Airport and possibly a second airstrike on Mezzeh Military Airport near Damascus, damaging both facilities.
- 6. Unspecified fighters attempted to seize the Israeli-owned, Liberian-flagged *Central Park* oil tanker in the Gulf of Aden and may have successfully held the tanker for some short period of time.
- 7. An IDF fighter jet intercepted a drone flying toward Israel over the Red Sea.
- 8. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—did not claim any attacks against US forces in Iraq or Syria.

- 9. Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah announced that it will reduce its rate of attacks against US forces in Iraq and Syria and halt attacks against Israel until the end of the Israel-Hamas humanitarian pause.
- 10. Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian discussed efforts to extend the Israel-Hamas pause in fighting during a phone call with his Turkish counterpart Hakan Fidan.
- 11. Iranian Artesh Commander Major General Abdol Rahim Mousavi stated that the Artesh is prepared to deploy "near" the Gaza Strip to provide medical aid to Palestinians.



<u>Gaza Strip</u>

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

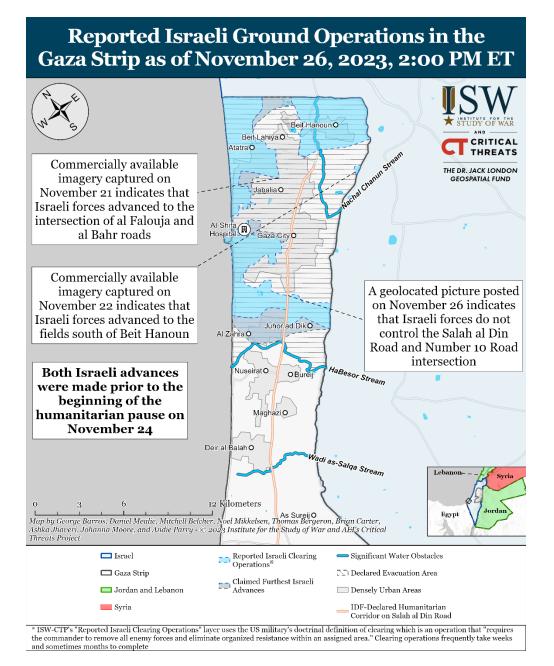
Neither Israel nor Hamas claimed violations of the humanitarian pause in the Gaza Strip as they completed the third swap of Hamas-held hostages for Israeli-held prisoners on November 26. Israel and Hamas confirmed that Hamas released 17 hostages held in the Gaza Strip in exchange for Israel releasing 39 Palestinian prisoners.[1] The hostages included the first American whom Hamas has released since the war began.[2] Hamas also released a Russian citizen whom they claimed that they released because of Russian President Vladimir Putin's support for the Palestinian cause.[3] Russia hosted Hamas leadership in Moscow on October 26.[4] Hamas separately said on November 26 that it seeks to extend the pause after the four-day period ends on November 27.[5] Israeli Army Radio reported that there are efforts to extend the pause by an additional four days in return for Hamas releasing 40 hostages.[6] This report is consistent with previous reports saying that Israel and Hamas agreed to extend the pause for 24 hours for every 10 hostages released by Hamas.[7]

An Israeli official said that Israel did not violate the terms of the humanitarian pause on November 25 after Hamas accused Israel of releasing Palestinian prisoners out of order. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on November 26 that an unidentified Israeli official denied that Israel had broken any terms of the hostage exchange and that Israel was not aware of any stipulation regarding the order of prisoners.[8] Hamas publicly released on November 22 what it claimed were the details of its agreement with Israel.[9] The agreement that Hamas released did not include stipulations covering the order in which Israel must release Palestinian prisoners.[10]

Israel said on November 26 that Hamas established a checkpoint on the Salah al Din road to prevent aid from reaching northern Gaza Strip residents.[11] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Arab media spokesperson published an image that has been geolocated in support of its assertion.[12] The location of the checkpoint—based on a geolocated image—is 1.3 kilometers from a Hamas tunnel entrance, according to a 2014 map published by the *Wall Street Journal.[13]* Hamas media adviser Taher al Nunu claimed that Israel is violating the pause agreement by failing to supply sufficient aid to the northern Gaza Strip on November 25, but the director general of the Hamas-run Gazan Health Ministry said that Israel has allowed some fuel and medical aid to enter the northern Gaza Strip.[14] Qatar similarly confirmed on November 26 that humanitarian aid is reaching the northern Gaza Strip.[15] Israel also confirmed that humanitarian aid is reaching the northern Gaza Strip.[16] The mayor of Gaza city contrastingly said on November 26 that no fuel has reached Gaza city.[17] Israel said the UN manages some of the aid flows.[18] The Hamas and Israeli statements regarding humanitarian aid flow to the northern Gaza Strip are consistent with the hypothesis that Hamas is redirecting aid before it gets to the northern Gaza Strip.

Israel said its forces killed five Hamas commanders in airstrikes in the Gaza Strip prior to the beginning of the humanitarian pause on November 24.[19] The al Qassem Brigades—the militant wing of Hamas—announced the death of several commanders responsible for Hamas' military operations in the northern Gaza Strip.[20] The commanders included the Northern Gaza Strip Brigade Commander Ahmed Ghandour, who directed all Hamas activity in the northern Gaza Strip. Ghandour also coordinated militia activity in the West Bank. The airstrikes also killed the

head of Hamas' Tulkarm Committee Farsan Khalifa. Khalifa developed cells of fighters in the Nur al Shams refugee camp near Tulkarm in the West Bank.[21] Hamas has been rebuilding ties with militia groups in the West Bank and seeking to attract support, according to a 2023 Reuters report.[22] The IDF has worked to eliminate Hamas operatives and commanders at the field and senior levels since October 7.[23]



NOTE: The IDF has said that its forces are stationed along ceasefire lines across the Gaza Strip during the pause in fighting. CTP-ISW's map of Israeli clearing operations shows reported Israeli clearing operations and the claimed furthest Israeli advances. CTP-ISW will not be mapping the shift in Israeli operating areas during the humanitarian pause.

CTP-ISW did not record verifiable reports of kinetic activity inside the Gaza Strip or reports of attacks from the Gaza Strip into Israel on November 26.

West Bank

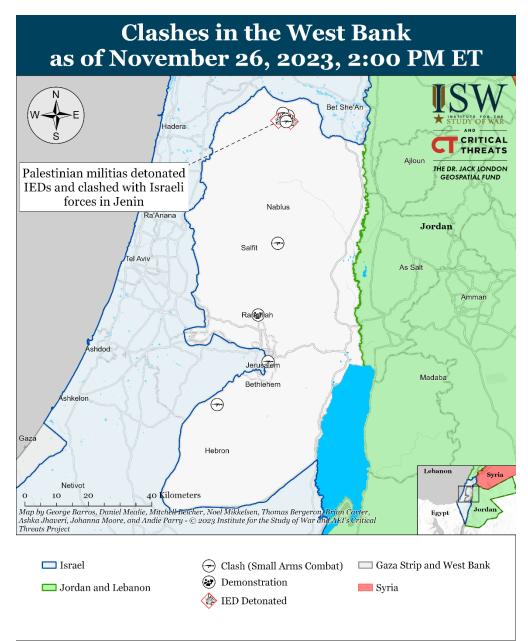
Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

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

Israeli forces arrested 21 individuals in several raids across the West Bank on November 26.[24] These individuals included a Hamas member, who killed two Israelis in a terror attack in Huwara in August 2023, according to the IDF and the co-founder of the West Bank branch of the al Qassem Brigades, Abdel Hakim Hanini.[25]

Palestinian militia fighters clashed with Israeli forces for nine hours in the Jenin refugee camp on November 26.[26] The Jenin Battalion of the al Quds Brigades claimed that its fighters ambushed and fired on Israeli forces and detonated IEDs against Israeli military vehicles in the al Damj neighborhood of Jenin during an Israeli raid.[27] The Jenin Battalion of the al Quds Brigades claimed five fighters died in the clashes with Israeli forces.[28]Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades fighters similarly used small arms and IEDs in clashes with Israeli forces in Jenin.[29] The IDF said that it destroyed a facility used for making IEDs and conducted a drone strike in Jenin.[30] Cofounder of the West Bank branch of the al Qassem Brigades Abdel Hakim Hanini threatened that Palestinian militias would conduct an "appropriate" response to the "scale of the crime" in the Jenin camp.[31] Palestinian militians separately clashed with Israeli forces in three other areas of the West Bank on November 26.[33]

CTP-ISW recorded one demonstration in the West Bank on November 26. Palestinians demonstrated in support of imprisoned and recently released Palestinians in Ramallah.[34]



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) and other Iranian-backed militias did not conduct any attacks into northern Israel on November 26.

Israeli aircraft conducted an airstrike on Damascus International Airport and possibly a second airstrike on Mezzeh Military Airport near Damascus on November 26, damaging both facilities. The Syrian Defense Ministry reported that an Israeli airstrike targeted Damascus International Airport and damaged its runway.[35] Iranian state media posted footage after the airstrike, showing smoke plumes over the runway.[36] Israel previously conducted an airstrike on Damascus International Airport on November 22.[37] The United Kingdom-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that Israeli aircraft targeted an air defense system located at Mezzeh Military Airport on November 26.[38] CTP-ISW cannot independently verify this claim from SOHR. The airstrike on Damascus International Airport disrupts a transportation node through which the IRGC has historically tried to transfer military materiel and personnel to Syria and Lebanon. Israel has conducted similar strikes at the Damascus International Airport to prevent Iranian weapons deliveries.

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

Unspecified fighters attempted to seize the Israeli-owned, Liberian-flagged *Central Park* oil tanker in the Gulf of Aden and may have successfully held the tanker for some **short period of time on November 26.[39]** The UK Maritime Trade Operations reported that "unauthorized persons" boarded a vessel southwest of Aden, Yemen, on November 26.[40] An unidentified US official confirmed the seizure to Western media.[41] A US Navy warship responded to *Central Park*'s distress signal, and unspecified US officials stated that the ship is now "safe and free," according to Reuters.[42]

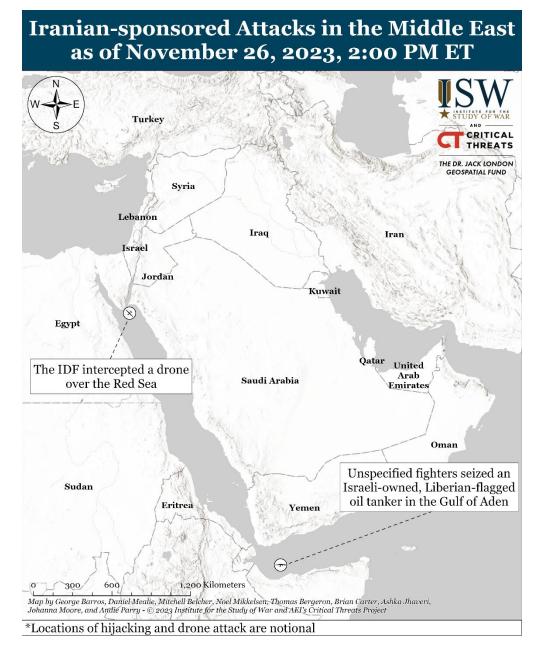
No group claimed responsibility for the attempted seizure, although the most likely perpetrators are either the Houthis or Somali pirates.

- A Yemeni journalist reported on November 26 that the fighters who boarded the ship are likely members of the Houthi movement.[43] IRGC-affiliated outlet Tasnim News Agency separately reported that the seizure would mark the fourth seizure or attack on Israeli ships by the Axis of Resistance since October 7.[44] Houthi fighters previously hijacked an Israeli-owned freighter transiting the Red Sea on November 19. CTP-ISW also assessed that the IRGC may have conducted a one-way drone attack on an Israeli-owned freighter in the Persian Gulf on November 24 and that the Houthis likely seized an Israeli-owned freighter transiting the Red Sea on November 25.[45]
- Western media noted on November 26 that Somali pirates do not typically operate in the area off the coast of northwestern Somalia where the tanker was seized.[46] Somali pirates last seized a commercial vessel on November 22, when they hijacked an Iranian fishing vessel off the coast of Somalia's autonomous Puntland region.[47] Somali pirates' most recent attempted hijacking before the November 22 incident occurred in 2018.[48]

An IDF fighter jet intercepted a drone flying toward Israel over the Red Sea on November 25.[49] The IDF reported that the drone failed to enter Israeli airspace. The Houthi movement has repeatedly attempted to conduct drone and missile attacks against Israel since October 19.[50] The Islamic Resistance in Iraq has also claimed attacks on Israeli territory since November 3.[51]

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—did not claim any attacks against US forces in Iraq or Syria on November 26. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq has not claimed any attacks since the Israel-Hamas pause in fighting went into effect. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq and its affiliated groups claimed 74 attacks against US forces in the Middle East between October 18 and November 23.[52]

Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah (KH) announced on November 25 that it will reduce its rate of attacks against US forces in Iraq and Syria and halt attacks against Israel until the end of the Israel-Hamas humanitarian pause.[53] The statement added that KH will resume attacks against US forces after the pause until they leave Iraq. KH is a member of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, which conducted attacks against US forces in Iraq and Syria almost daily between October 18 and November 23.[54] Emirati media reported on November 23 that Tehran ordered its proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen to abide by the temporary pause in fighting between Israel and Hamas.[55]



Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian discussed efforts to extend the Israel-Hamas pause in fighting during a phone call with his Turkish counterpart Hakan Fidan on November 25.[56] Abdollahian stressed the need to "completely stop Israeli crimes" against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Fidan emphasized Turkey's determination to extend the current humanitarian pause. Abdollahian called on Turkey, along with other Muslim countries, to take "stronger actions" to support Palestinians. This call is consistent with CTP-ISW's previous assessment that Iran is attempting to exploit the Israel-Hamas war to undermine Turkish-Israeli rapprochement.[57] Abdollahian met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Fidan in Ankara on November 1 as part of his second regional diplomatic tour since October 7.[58]

Thai Deputy Prime Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara thanked Iran for its efforts to facilitate the release of Thai hostages from Hamas during a meeting with Iranian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Bagheri Kani in Bangkok on November

23.[59] Hamas released 14 Thai nationals between November 24-25.[60] Bagheri Kani also met with the Thai deputy foreign affairs minister, national security council head, and parliamentary president during his visit to Bangkok. He discussed increasing Iran's economic and security ties with Thailand during his meetings with these officials.

Iranian Artesh Commander Major General Abdol Rahim Mousavi stated that the Artesh is prepared to deploy "near" the Gaza Strip to provide medical aid to

Palestinians.[61] The Artesh is Iran's conventional military. Mousavi made this statement during a meeting with nursing students from the Artesh University of Medical Sciences in Tehran on November 26. Mousavi claimed that Hamas, which he referred to as "one of the branches" of the Axis of Resistance, "defeated" Israel. Mousavi repeated previous Iranian rhetoric that Israel failed to achieve any military successes in the Gaza Strip and was therefore "forced" to accept Hamas' terms in the four-day humanitarian pause. CTP-ISW has not observed any Artesh forces deploy to or near the Gaza Strip.

BABELSTREET

POWERED BY:

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