

Iran Update



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Information Cutoff: May 23, 2024, 2:00 pm ET

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. 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.

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.

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.

An Israel Defense Forces (IDF) officer described particularly intense fighting between the IDF and Hamas in Jabalia in the northern Gaza Strip in recent days.[1] This fighting highlights that Hamas remains active and combat-effective in Jabalia, despite the IDF killing Hamas' Jabalia Refugee Camp Battalion commander in October 2023.[2] The IDF officer said that Palestinian fighters are bolder in Jabalia than in other parts of the Gaza Strip and that Palestinian fighters have established “fighting compounds” that enable them to rapidly traverse through buildings rather than exposing themselves in the streets to Israeli forces. Israeli officers have said in recent days that the fighting in Jabalia has been some of the “most violent” in the war.[3] Palestinian militias have sustained an unusually high rate of attacks there since IDF sent units to Jabalia on May 11 to clear the area.[4] The fighting since then indicates that Hamas is conducting a deliberate defense of the area against the IDF.[5]

The fighting in Jabalia indicates that Hamas could remain combat-effective in other parts of the Gaza Strip even after the IDF kills local Hamas commanders. Hamas has organized its military wing like a conventional military and has developed a deep bench of experienced military commanders to run it. Hamas therefore has junior commanders that can and are ready to assume command of units after their senior commanders are killed. Hamas uses this conventional military structure to continue fighting, despite intense Israeli military pressure.

Israeli negotiators and international mediators will reportedly convene in Paris to restart negotiations over a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. US Central Intelligence Agency Director Bill Burns will meet Mossad Chief David Barnea and Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al Thani in Paris, according to anonymous US and Israeli officials speaking to Axios.[6] An Israeli official speaking to CNN similarly said that an Israeli delegation would soon travel to Paris.[7] A US official said that Egypt remains heavily involved in the negotiations, although it is unclear whether any Egyptian officials will participate in the meetings in Paris.[8]

Egypt has dismissed Western reports that an Egyptian intelligence official secretly modified the most recent ceasefire deal before sending it to Hamas.[9] Israel had approved the deal before the Egyptian intelligence official, Ahmed Abdel Khaleq, altered the text and sent it to Hamas. Khaleq currently leads the Egyptian mediation efforts in the ceasefire talks.[10] Khaleq was the first individual in his position to participate in a Hamas-organized event in Khan Younis in July 2018, during which he met Hamas' leader in the Gaza Strip, Yahya Sinwar.[11] Khaleq also participated in the 2011 deal that involved Israel releasing over 1,000 Palestinian prisoners, including Sinwar.[12]

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered Israel to halt its clearing operation into Rafah on May 24.[13] The Israeli Foreign Affairs Ministry and National Security Council responded with a joint statement saying that Israel will continue its efforts to bring humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip and that Israel has and will continue to avoid conducting military operations that harm Gazan civilians.[14]

Iran's political factions have begun to maneuver and prepare for the Iranian presidential election in June 2024 to replace Ebrahim Raisi. Iranian reformist politicians, including former President Mohammad Khatami, have argued in recent days that the election needs political diversity to encourage voter turnout.[15] These reformists are responding to how Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has allowed hardliners to marginalize moderates and reformists to an unprecedented level in recent years. Moderate and reformist figures argued that Khamenei allowing them to compete in elections would drive electoral participation, which has dropped to record lows in recent years. Reform Front spokesperson Javad Emam stated that reformist politicians will convene on May 26 to discuss the upcoming election.[16] Social media accounts have suggested that former Parliament Speaker and prominent moderate Ali Larijani plans to run as a candidate in the election.[17]

Iranian hardliners appear to be similarly organizing themselves ahead of the election. Social media accounts reported on May 24 that prominent hardliner Saeed Jalili plans to register as a candidate.[18] This rumor comes after an Iranian opposition outlet reported that elements in the regime have tried to convince Khamenei to prevent Jalili from running.[19] These elements include some moderates, such as Ali Larijani. They also include several hardliners, such as Expediency Discernment Council Chairman Sadegh Amoli Larijani, Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, and adviser to the supreme leader Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani.

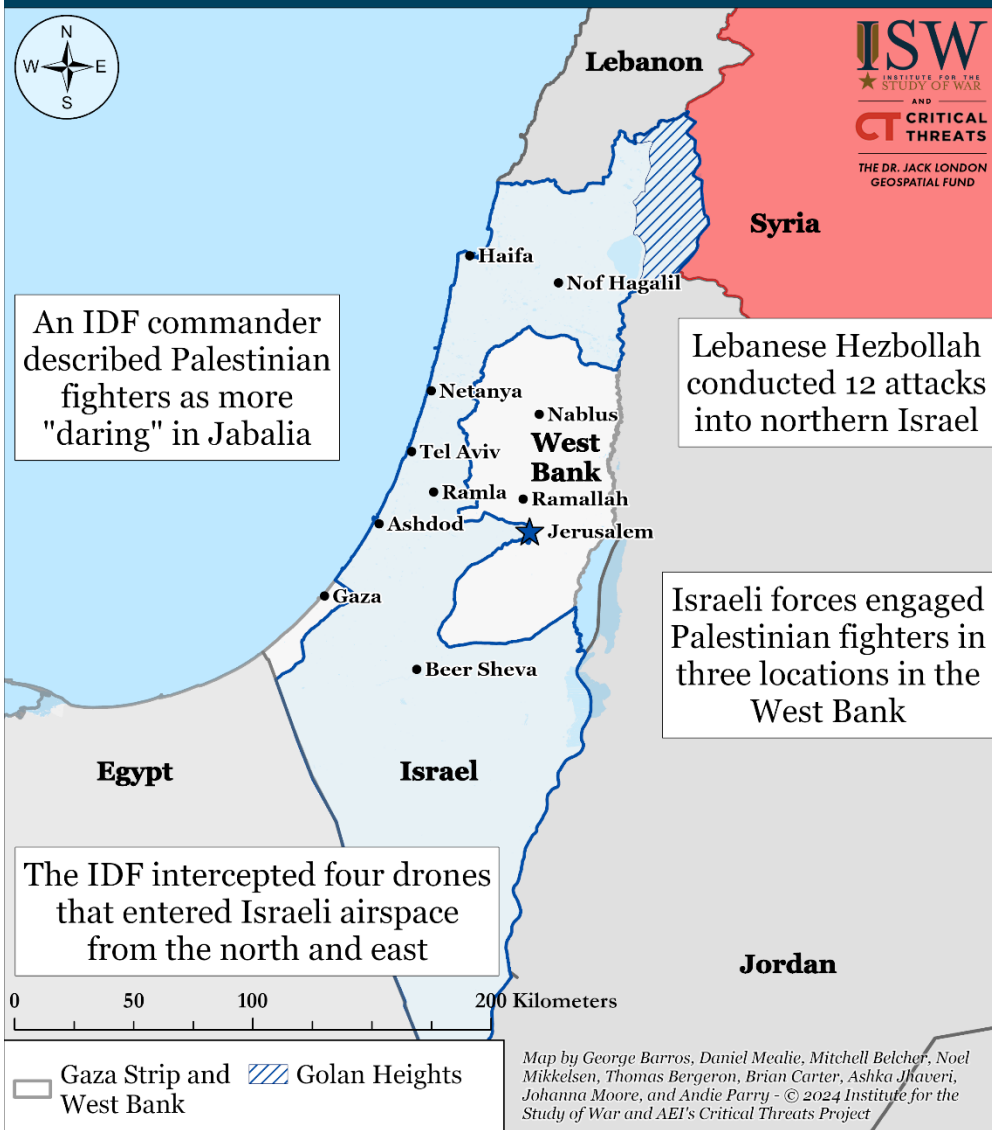
Members of the Iranian-led Axis of Resistance are continuing to coordinate their actions vis-a-vis the Israel-Hamas war. Abu Hussein al Hamidawi, who is the secretary general of the Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah (KH), held a phone call with Houthi supreme leader Abdulmalik al Houthi on May 24 to discuss the war.[20] The two discussed coordination and force readiness, according to the KH readout. Hamidawi and Abdulmalik may have discussed efforts to impose an unofficial economic blockade on Israel, given that Abdulmalik gave a speech on May 16 calling on Iranian-backed Iraqi militias to join the Houthis in attacking international shipping around the Mediterranean Sea.[21] The call also comes after CTP-ISW observed on May 23 that Iran is capitalizing on the presence of senior Axis of Resistance officials in Tehran for Ebrahim Raisi's funeral to coordinate and cohere their approaches to the war.[22]

Key Takeaways:

- **Gaza Strip:** There is particularly intense fighting between the IDF and Hamas in Jabalia in the northern Gaza Strip, despite the IDF killing the local Hamas commander there in October 2023.
- **Iran:** Iran's political factions have begun to maneuver and prepare for the presidential election in June 2024 to replace Ebrahim Raisi.
- **Yemen:** The Houthis are coordinating their actions vis-a-vis the Israel-Hamas war with Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah.
- **West Bank:** Israeli forces engaged Palestinian militias in at least three locations across the West Bank.
- **Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights:** Lebanese Hezbollah conducted at least 12 attacks into northern Israel.

Key Takeaways in the Israel-Hamas War

As of May 24, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



Gaza Strip

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

Israeli forces recovered the bodies of three hostages in Jabalia refugee camp on May 23.[23] Hamas fighters killed the hostages during the October 7, 2023, attack before taking the bodies into the Gaza Strip.[24] The IDF 75th Battalion (7th Armored Brigade) killed Hamas lookouts and then located the tunnel shaft, where Hamas fighters kept the bodies.[25] An Israeli Army Radio correspondent reported that the tunnel shaft is close to a Hamas tunnel where Israeli forces recovered

four other hostages' bodies on May 16 and May 18.[26] Israel estimates that Hamas is holding around 125 hostages in the Gaza Strip.[27]

The IDF 99th Division continued operations along the Netzarim corridor in southern Gaza City on May 24. Israeli forces directed airstrikes and tank fire targeting nearby Palestinian fighters.[28] Hamas fighters mortared Israeli forces along the Netzarim corridor.[29]

The IDF killed the deputy commander of Hamas' National Security Forces in the Gaza Strip, Diaa al Din al Sharafa, in the central Gaza Strip on May 23.[30] The IDF said that he was responsible for "managing the mechanism that secures the borders of the Gaza Strip" and prevented Gazans from evacuating combat zones. The Gazan Interior Ministry confirmed that an Israeli airstrike killed Sharafa.[31]

Israeli forces engaged Palestinian fighters in eastern Rafah on May 24.[32] Israeli forces destroyed weapons depots and tunnel shafts in the area. Palestinian militias conducted improvised explosive device (IED), mortar, and small arms attacks in northeastern Rafah and at the Salah al Din gate.[33]

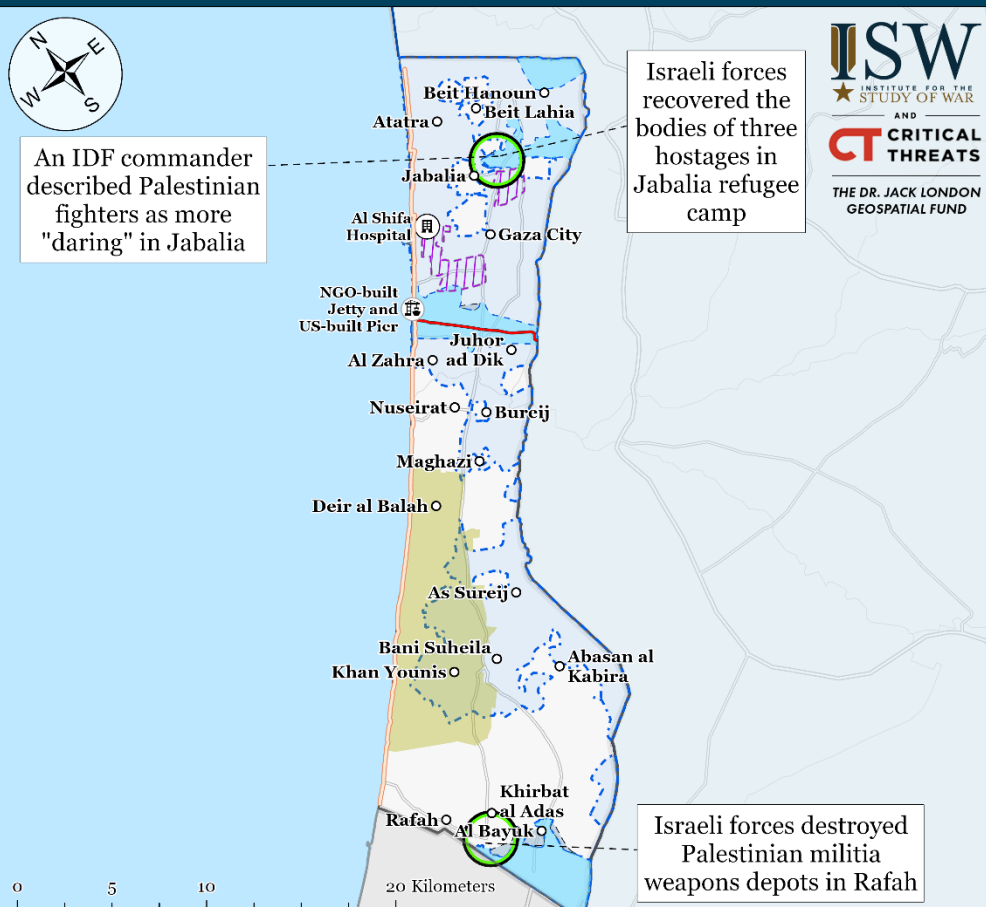
Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

As of May 24, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



An IDF commander described Palestinian fighters as more "daring" in Jabalia

Israeli forces recovered the bodies of three hostages in Jabalia refugee camp



Israeli forces destroyed Palestinian militia weapons depots in Rafah

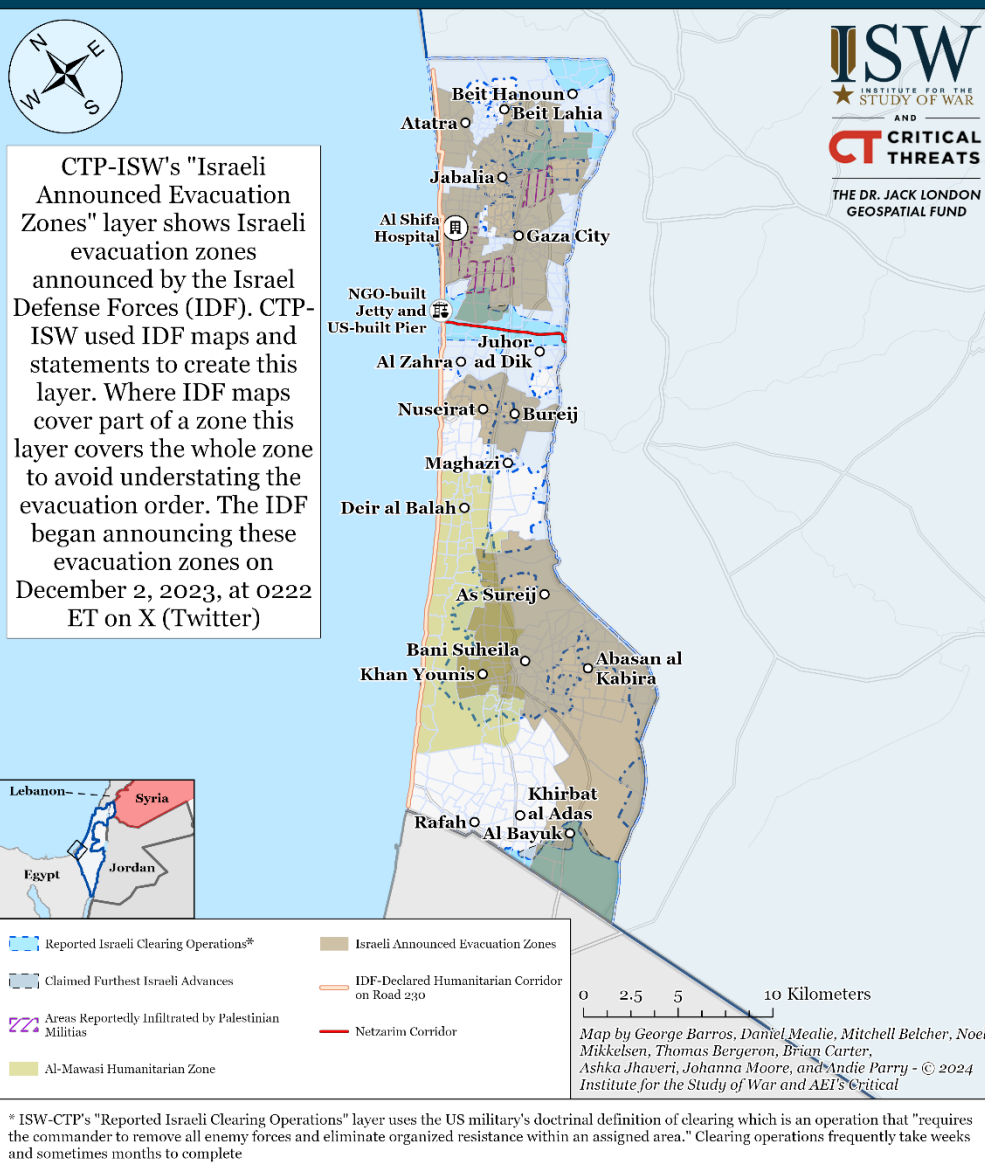
Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Brian Carter, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Andie Parry © 2024 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

Reported Israeli Clearing Operations	Areas Reportedly Infiltrated by Palestinian Militias	Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours	
Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances	IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridor on Road 230	Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone	
Assessed Furthest Extent of Israeli Clearing Operations	Netzarim Corridor		

* 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

Israeli-Announced Evacuation Zones in the Gaza Strip

As of May 24, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



US CENTCOM has continued cooperating with the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United Nations to deliver aid to Gazans via the temporary pier.[34] CENTCOM has delivered 820.5 metric tons of aid to the beach, 506 metric tons of which has been transferred to the UN distribution warehouse in the central Gaza Strip as of May 22. The director of USAID's Levant Response Management Team, Daniel Dieckhaus, said that 506 metric tons of aid is enough food to “feed tens of thousands of people for a month.”[35] He also said that the quantity of aid brought through the maritime corridor will continue to grow. The United Nations resumed transportation and distribution of humanitarian aid arriving through the US-built pier after a two-day pause on May 23. The United Nations implemented the pause after an incident in which Palestinians intercepted aid trucks.[36]

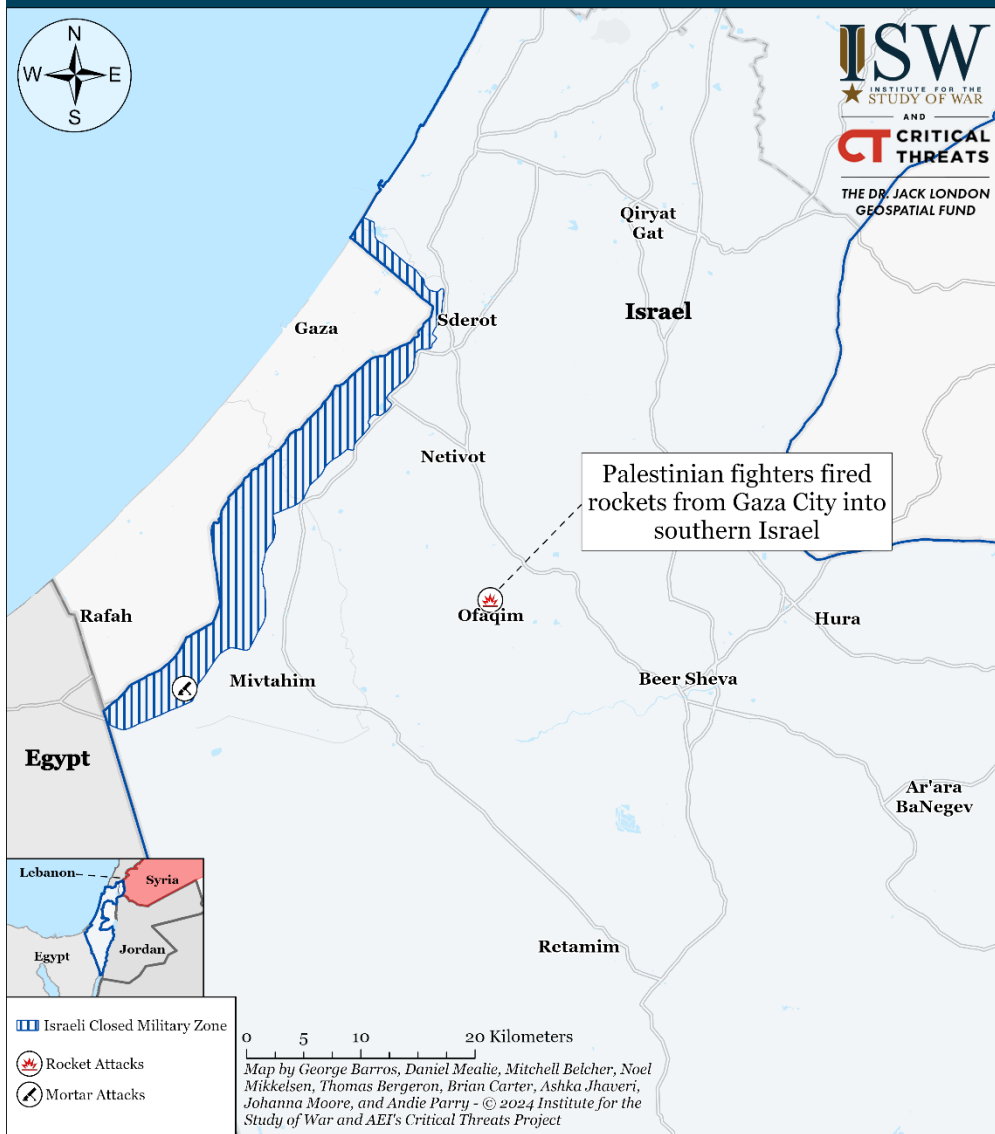
Three US soldiers sustained non-combat-related injuries while supporting the US-constructed pier operation.[37] CENTCOM Deputy Commander Admiral Brad Cooper said that two of the injuries were minor.[38] The third soldier is undergoing care at an Israeli hospital after sustaining an injury on a ship at sea.[39]

The United States is considering appointing a US official to serve as the top civilian adviser to a primarily Palestinian force in the Gaza Strip after the war ends.[40] Four anonymous US officials told *Politico* that the adviser would be based in the Middle East but would never enter the Gaza Strip.[41] The adviser would be of Arab and/or Palestinian descent and work closely with the commanding officer of the local force. The White House, Department of Defense, and Department of State are continuing private discussions about the adviser's potential role. The anonymous US officials said that this adviser is one of many ideas that US officials are considering for a post-war scenario in the Gaza Strip. One of the US officials said that recent conversations between the United States, Israel, and other unspecified Middle Eastern partners are focused on transitioning to “a more political phase and stabilization phase.” US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan recently met with senior officials in Israel and Saudi Arabia.[42]

Palestinian militias have conducted two indirect fire attacks into Israel since CTP-ISW's information cutoff on May 23.[43] Israeli Army Radio reported that Palestinian fighters fired two rockets from Gaza City, which landed in open areas in Israel.[44] Alarms sounded in Ofakim for the first time since January 2024.[45] The IDF Air Force struck the area in Gaza City, from which Palestinian fighters had fired the rockets.[46]

Attacks into Israel from Gaza

As of May 24, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



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

West Bank

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

Israeli forces have engaged Palestinian fighters in at least three locations in the West Bank since CTP-ISW's data cut off on May 23.[47] The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades fired small arms and detonated IEDs targeting Israeli forces in Balata refugee camp in Nablus.[48]

Significant Activity in the West Bank

As of May 24, 2024 at 2:00 PM ET



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

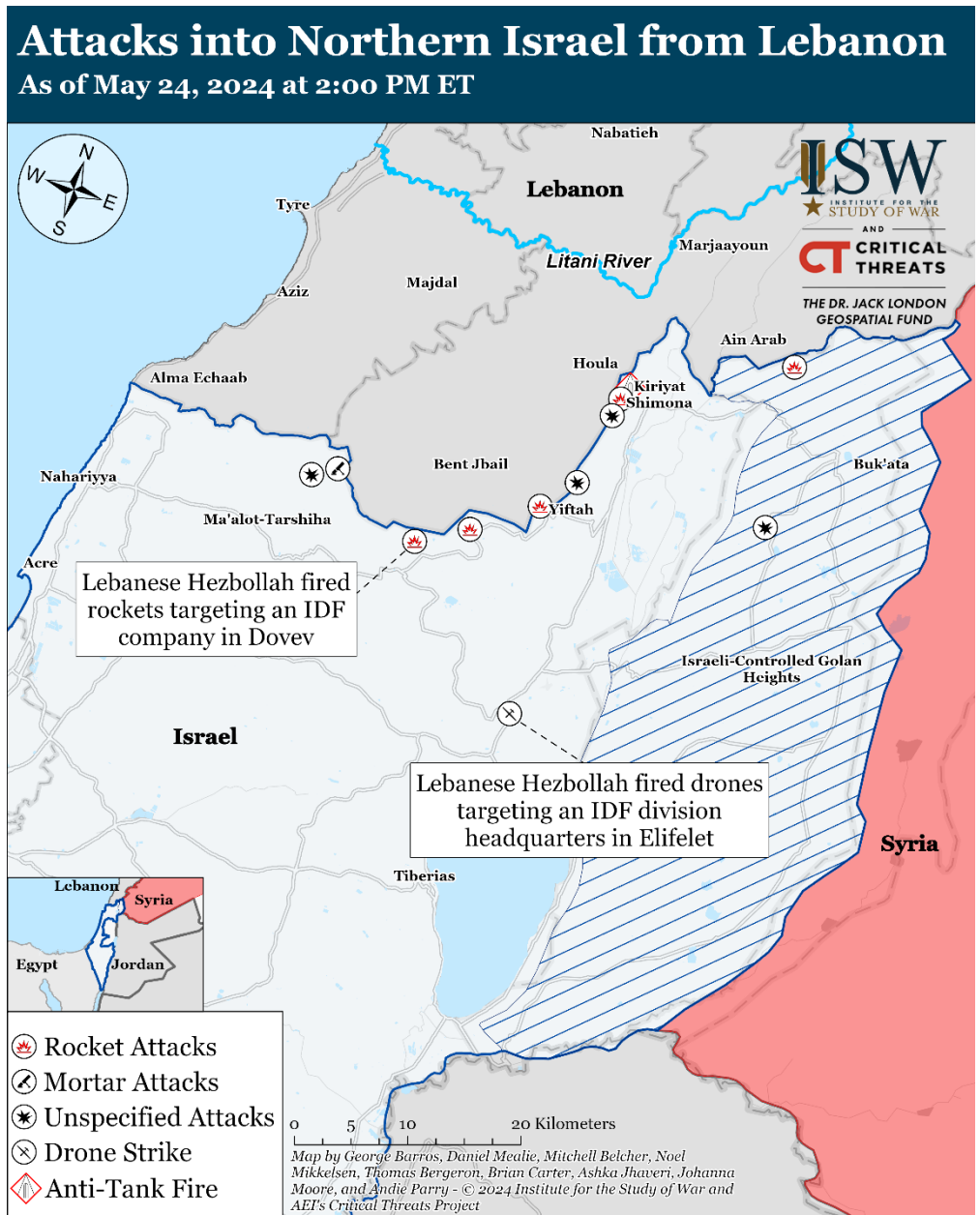
Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Deter Israel from conducting a ground operation into Lebanon
- Prepare for an expanded and protracted conflict with Israel in the near term
- Expel the United States from Syria

Lebanese Hezbollah has conducted at least 12 attacks into northern Israel since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on May 23.[49] Hezbollah claimed that three of the attacks were in retaliation for recent Israeli airstrikes into southern Lebanon.[50]

Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah gave a televised speech during a memorial ceremony for late Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on May 24.[51] Nasrallah said that Raisi and his late foreign affairs minister, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, were committed to supporting the Axis of Resistance with arms, training, and funding.[52] Nasrallah also boasted that the Israel-Hamas war has driven Israel into international isolation, citing Ireland's, Norway's, and Spain's recognition of Palestinian statehood and the International Criminal Court requesting arrest warrants for Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant.[53] Nasrallah added that Netanyahu should "expect surprises from our resistance," presumably referring to Hezbollah.[54]



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

Iran and Axis of Resistance

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—conducted two drone attacks targeting Eilat and Haifa port since CTP-ISW's last data cut off on May 23.[55] The IDF reported that Israeli fighter jets intercepted four drones in total.[56]

The Houthis claimed three separate attacks targeting vessels in the Red Sea, Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean Sea.[57] The Houthis targeted the Panamanian-flagged MSC Alexandria with a surface-to-surface missile off the coast of Yemen. The Houthis also claimed that they conducted a complex attack targeting the Panamanian-flagged YANNIS in the Red Sea with a one-way attack drone and surface-to-surface missiles. CENTCOM reported that Houthi fighters launched two anti-ship ballistic missiles into the Red Sea on May 23.[58] No damage or injuries were reported from the attack. The Houthis also claimed a surface-to-surface missile attack targeting the Liberian-flagged ESSEX in the Mediterranean Sea, although.[59]

Iranian-sponsored Attacks in the Middle East

As of May 24, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



An unnamed senior European diplomat expressed concern to Reuters regarding the Iranian nuclear program.[60] The diplomat stated that Iran has not slowed down its nuclear program nor has it demonstrated “goodwill” to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). A separate European official stated that unspecified countries have prepared a resolution against Iran to be presented in the next IAEA Board of Governors meeting on July 3.[61]

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