

Iran Update, April 3, 2024

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Information Cutoff: 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. Click [here](#) to subscribe to the Iran Update.

The Axis of Resistance is 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 with one another 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 militias 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.

Several Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have signaled their desire to disrupt the “land bridge” connecting Israel to the Persian Gulf. Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba Secretary General Akram al Kaabi criticized the “land bridge,” which passes through the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, in a speech on April 3.[1] Kataib Hezbollah military spokesperson Hussein Moanes similarly declared on April 1 that the group is prepared to arm Iranian-backed militants in Jordan and “cut off” land routes that reach Israel.[2]

The Iranian-backed Iraqi militias’ desire to disrupt the “land bridge” is likely part of a larger Axis of Resistance effort to economically isolate Israel. These threats come as Iranian leaders, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, have repeatedly called for Muslim countries to institute a blockade on Israel.[3] Iranian state media similarly has criticized countries that have allowed Israel to conduct trade through their territory.[4] Iranian state media has further argued that the “land bridge” renders Houthi attacks targeting Israeli-linked vessels in the Red Sea “ineffective.”[5] Israel has increasingly relied on the Israeli-UAE overland trade route to compensate for reduced trade activity at the Port of

Eilat due to the Houthis' anti-shipping campaign.[6] The Houthis have conducted over 40 attacks targeting commercial vessels in the Red Sea since November 2023.[7] Vessel traffic through the Red Sea has declined by approximately 50 percent since January 2024 due to Houthi attacks.[8]

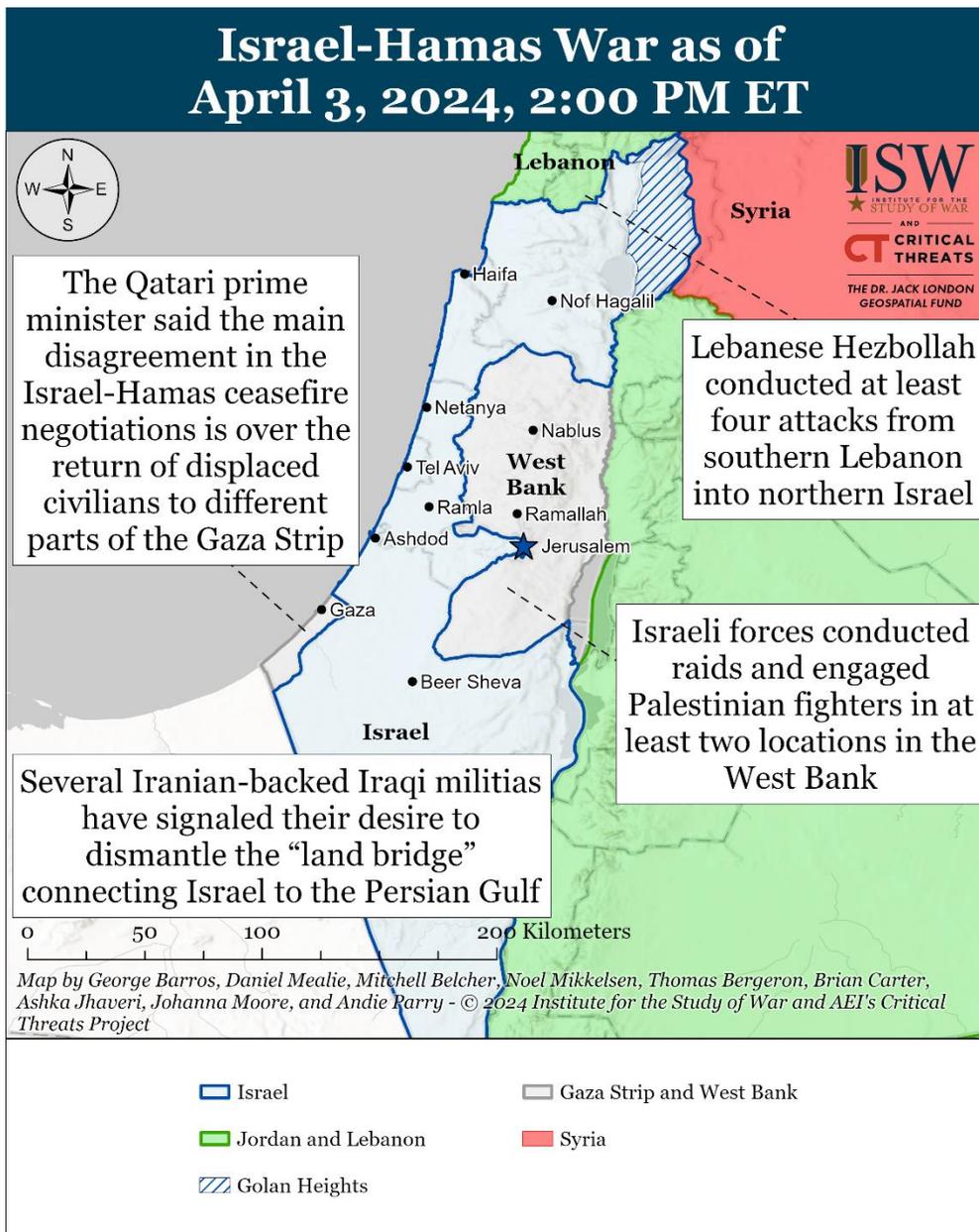
Kaabi separately discussed the West Bank, Israeli settlers, and Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba operations in his April 3 speech. Kaabi claimed that Israel is “confused” by the “emerging Palestinian resistance” in Jerusalem and Bethlehem.[9] Kaabi also claimed that Israeli settlers are “returning to their countries of origin” because they feel unsafe in Israel.[10] This claim is consistent with CTP-ISW’s assessment that Iranian leaders seek to stoke economic, political, and security turmoil in Israel to facilitate Israeli citizens’ emigration [11] Kaabi lastly claimed that Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba will “expand” its attacks if the IDF continues operating in the Gaza Strip and reiterated the militia’s commitment to removing US forces from Iraq.[12]

Social media users have alleged that Lebanese Hezbollah’s representative to Iraq, Mohammad Hossein al Kawtharani, traveled to Najaf, Iraq, possibly to coordinate the Axis of Resistance’s response to Israel killing IRGC Brig Gen. Mohammad Reza Zahedi on April 1.[13] CTP-ISW cannot verify these rumors at this time. Iran and Hezbollah have long relied on Kawtharani to manage and unify the often-fractious Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, especially since the United States killed Qassem Soleimani in 2020. A UK-based, Middle East-focused outlet previously reported in January 2024 that Kawtharani had traveled to Baghdad to “coordinate an escalation in operations” against US forces in Iraq.[14] Kawtharani’s January 2024 visit to Baghdad marked his first trip to Iraq in two years.[15] The US Treasury Department sanctioned Kawtharani in August 2013 for promoting Lebanese Hezbollah’s interests in Iraq, including providing “training, funding, political, and logistical support to Iraqi sectarian armed groups.”[16] The US State Department announced in April 2020 that Kawtharani “facilitates the actions of groups operating outside the control of the Government of Iraq that have violently suppressed protests, attacked foreign diplomatic missions, and engaged in widespread organized criminal activity.”[17]

Key Takeaways:

- **Iraq:** Several Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have signaled their desire to disrupt the “land bridge” connecting Israel to the Persian Gulf.
- Social media users have alleged that Lebanese Hezbollah’s representative to Iraq, Mohammad Hossein al Kawtharani, traveled to Najaf, Iraq, possibly to coordinate the Axis of Resistance’s response to Israel killing IRGC Brig Gen. Mohammad Reza Zahedi on April 1
- **Northern Gaza Strip:** Palestinian militias continued to conduct attacks targeting Israeli forces around Gaza City.
- **Central Gaza Strip:** Israeli forces have engaged Palestinian fighters around Deir al Balah in the central Gaza Strip in recent days, suggesting that Israeli forces are advancing into the area.
- **Southern Gaza Strip:** Israeli forces continued to conduct clearing operations in western and northern Khan Younis.
- **Political Negotiations:** The Qatari prime minister said that the main point of dispute in Israel-Hamas ceasefire negotiations is over the return of displaced people to different parts of the Gaza Strip.
- **West Bank:** Israeli forces conducted raids in the West Bank and engaged Palestinian fighters in at least two locations.

- **Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights:** Lebanese Hezbollah conducted at least four attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel.
- **Syria:** The Russian Defense Ministry announced that Russian forces have deployed to a new observation post along Syria-Golan Heights border.
- Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah gave a speech emphasizing Syria's role in Iran's Axis of Resistance.
- **Iran:** Iranian leaders are continuing to hold Israel and the United States responsible for the April 1 airstrike targeting Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) officials in Syria and vowing to exact revenge.
- **Yemen:** US Special Envoy to Yemen Tim Lenderking said that the United States is trying to negotiate a diplomatic solution to stop Houthi attacks in the Red Sea.



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

Palestinian militias continued to conduct attacks targeting Israeli forces around Gaza City on April 3. Hamas fired mortars targeting Israeli forces in Tuffah, northeast of Gaza City.[18] Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, which is the self-proclaimed military wing of Fatah, separately conducted a combined mortar attack targeting Israeli forces south of Gaza City.[19]

Israeli forces have engaged Palestinian fighters around Deir al Balah in the central Gaza Strip in recent days, suggesting that Israeli forces are advancing into the area.[20] Hamas fired a thermobaric rocket targeting Israeli forces east of Deir al Balah on April 3.[21]

Israeli forces continued to conduct clearing operations in western and northern Khan Younis on April 3. The IDF 89th Commando Brigade (98th Division) and IDF Givati Brigade are operating in al Amal neighborhood, western Khan Younis. Israeli forces detained and killed Palestinian fighters.[22] The IDF 7th Brigade (36th Division) located unspecified weapons in Khan Younis.[23] Israeli engineering forces and the IDF Air Force destroyed weapons depots and militia infrastructure in the area.[24] The IDF reported on April 3 that its 7th Brigade has been operating in Qarara in northern Khan Younis.[25] Israeli forces located and destroyed a rocket launcher in an olive grove and engaged Palestinian fighters in the area.

Palestinian militias continued trying to defend against Israeli clearing operations in Khan Younis on April 3. The al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades fired anti-tank shells targeting Israeli forces in al Amal neighborhood.[26] The group also mortared Israeli forces in an unspecified area in western Khan Younis.[27]

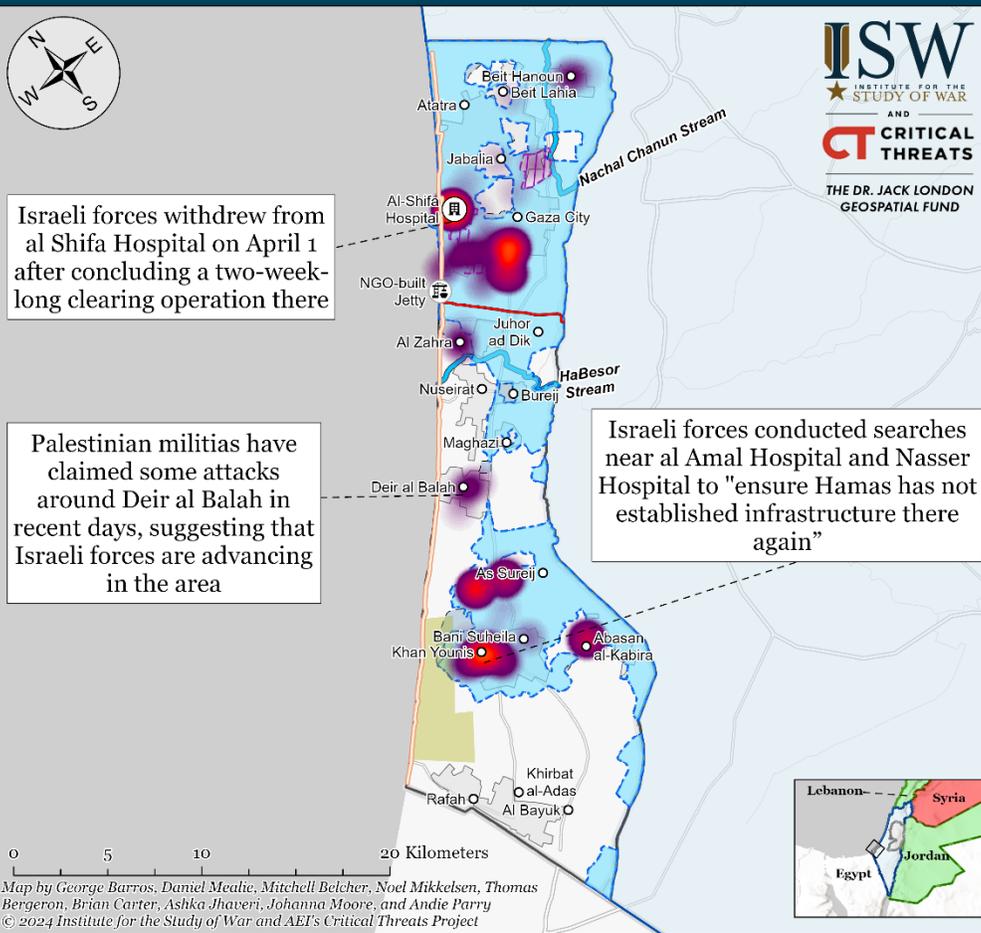
Palestinian Militia Attacks in the Gaza Strip between February 22 and April 3, 2024



Israeli forces withdrew from al Shifa Hospital on April 1 after concluding a two-week-long clearing operation there

Palestinian militias have claimed some attacks around Deir al Balah in recent days, suggesting that Israeli forces are advancing in the area

Israeli forces conducted searches near al Amal Hospital and Nasser Hospital to "ensure Hamas has not established infrastructure there again"



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

- Israel
- Gaza Strip
- Jordan and Lebanon
- Syria
- Reported Israeli Clearing Operations
- Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances
- Areas Reportedly Infiltrated by Palestinian Militias
- Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone
- IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridor on Road 230
- Israeli-Built Highway Route 749
- Significant Water Obstacles
- Densely Urban Areas
- Low Concentration of Attacks
- High Concentration of Attacks

Note: The Palestinian militia attacks heat map shows the concentration of Palestinian militia attacks in the northern Gaza Strip since January 18. This heat map illustrates notionally the areas where Palestinian militias are attacking. Our data points correspond to both notional locations (a major neighborhood) and precise locations (a specific building).

This map displays engagements between Israeli and Palestinian ground forces across the Gaza Strip. The locations depicted are not exact.

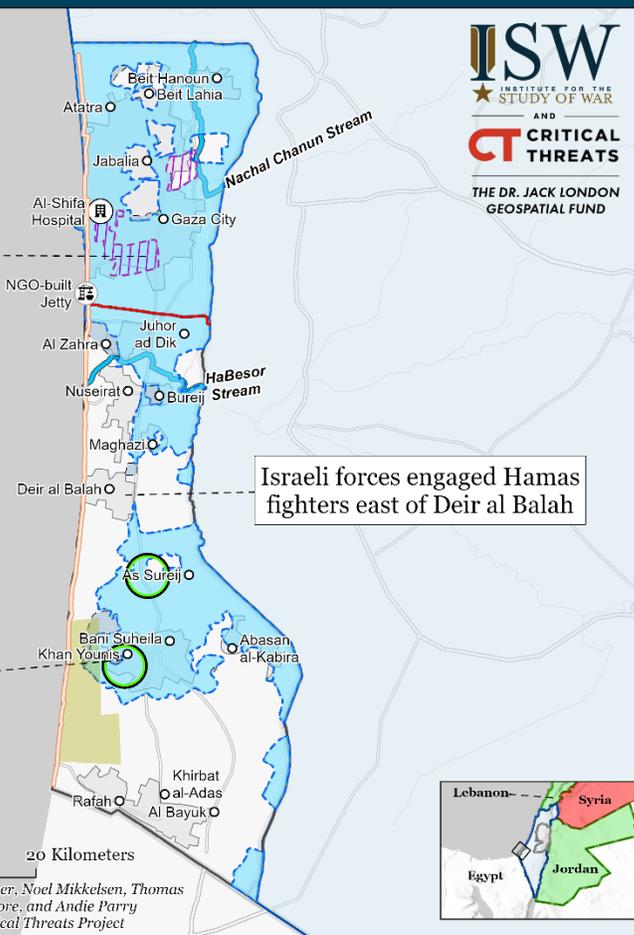
Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip as of April 3, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



Palestinian militias conducted a combined mortar attack targeting Israeli forces south of Gaza City

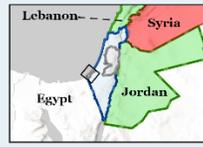
Israeli forces engaged Hamas fighters east of Deir al Balah

Israeli forces detained and killed Palestinian fighters while re-clearing al Amal neighborhood in western Khan Yunis



0 5 10 20 Kilometers

Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Brian Carter, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Andie Parry
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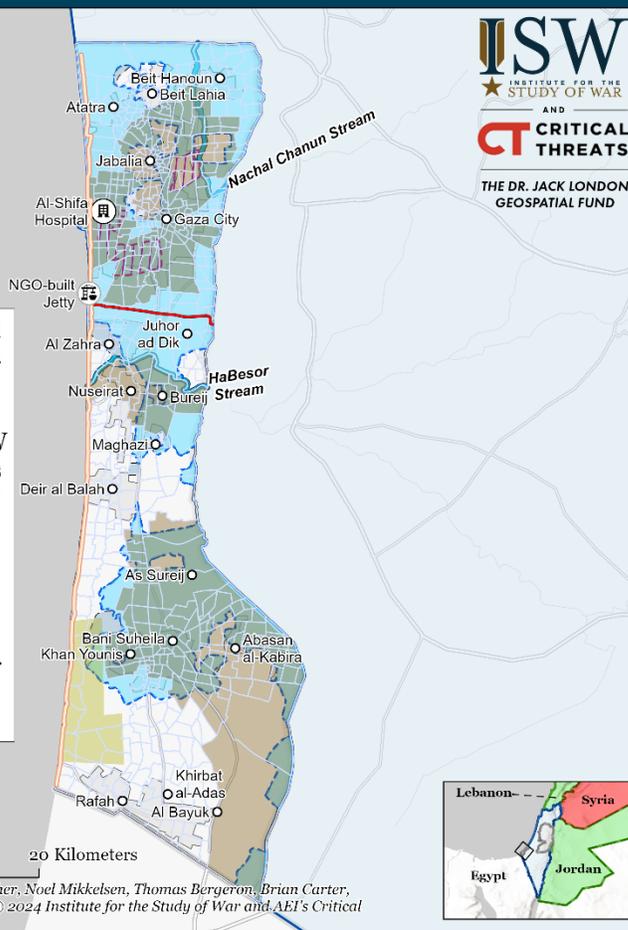
- Israel
- Reported Israeli Clearing Operations*
- Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone
- Significant Water Obstacles
- Gaza Strip
- IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridor on Road 230
- Densely Urban Areas
- Jordan and Lebanon
- Syria
- Areas Reportedly Infiltrated by Palestinian Militias
- Israeli-Built Highway Route 749
- Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances
- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours

* 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 April 3, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



CTP-ISW's "Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones" layer shows Israeli evacuation zones announced by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). CTP-ISW used IDF maps and statements to create this layer. Where IDF maps cover part of a zone this layer covers the whole zone to avoid understating the evacuation order. The IDF began announcing these evacuation zones on December 2, 2023, at 0222 ET on X (Twitter)



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

- Israel
- Gaza Strip
- Jordan and Lebanon
- Syria
- Reported Israeli Clearing Operations*
- Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances
- Areas Reportedly Infiltrated by Palestinian Militias
- Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone
- IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridor on Road 230
- Israeli-Built Highway Route 749
- Israeli Announced Evacuation Zones
- Densely Urban Areas
- Significant Water Obstacles

* 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

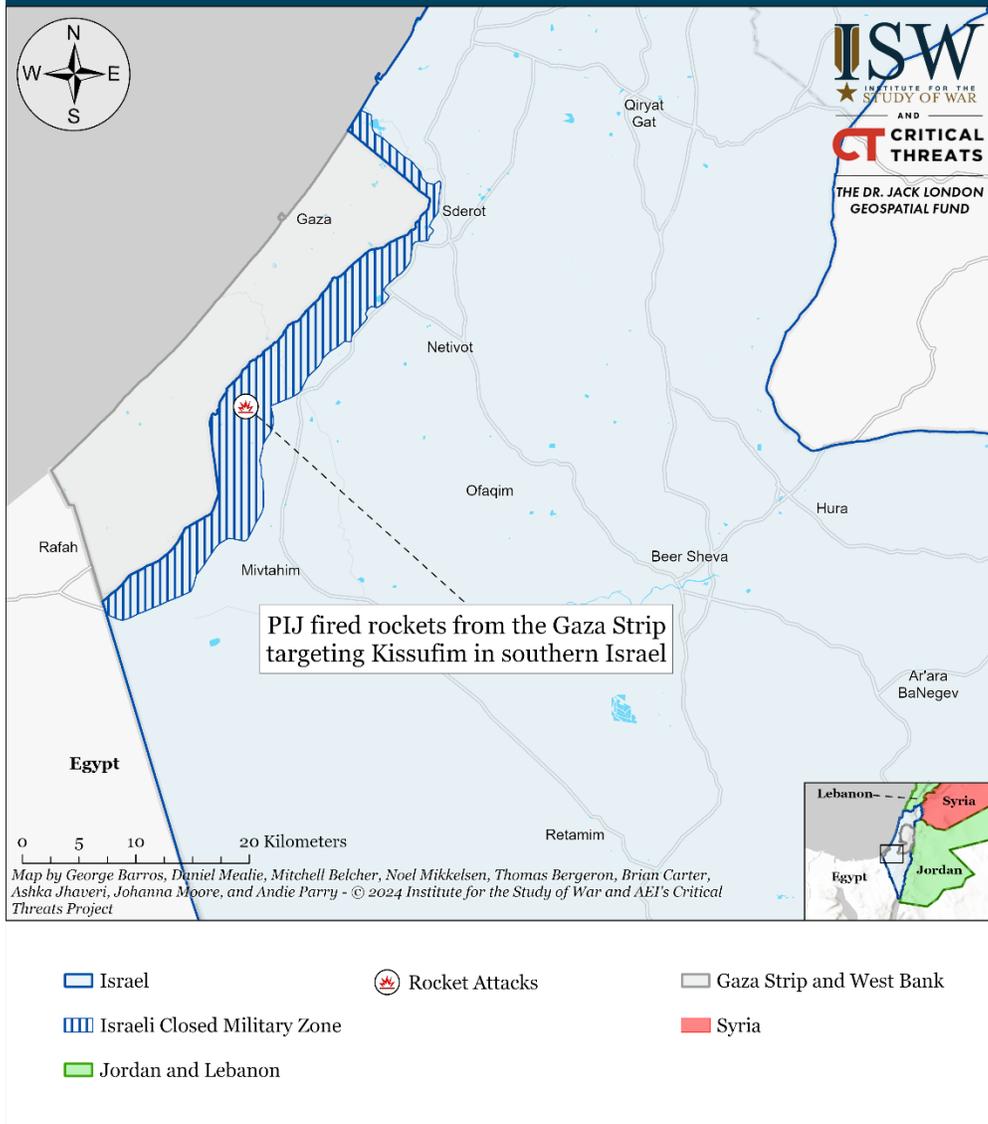
Axios reported new details of a virtual meeting between senior US and Israeli officials to discuss a possible Israeli clearing operation into Rafah.[28] US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Secretary of State Antony Blinken met virtually with Israeli National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi and Israeli Minister for Strategic Affairs Ron Dermer on April 1.[29] Unspecified sources with direct knowledge of the meeting said that the Israeli delegation presented a plan to evacuate over one million people from Rafah over at least four weeks.[30] The US side responded saying that the timeline was an unrealistic estimate and that the current humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip did not create confidence in Israel's ability to conduct an orderly evacuation. Israel rejected a US claim that an evacuation ought to take four months. The sources said that the US message to the Israelis was that the IDF needs to operate more slowly and with lower intensity than it did in Gaza City and in Khan Younis.

The Qatari prime minister said on April 3 that the main point of dispute in Israel-Hamas ceasefire negotiations is over the return of displaced people to different parts of the Gaza Strip.[31] Hamas has made the return of all displaced Palestinians to the northern Gaza Strip a major point in its negotiation demands, along with a comprehensive permanent ceasefire, the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip, and adequate humanitarian relief.[32] Al Jazeera reported on April 1 that the Israeli negotiators in Cairo amended their stance on the return of displaced Palestinians to the northern Gaza Strip to a gradual return of 60,000 people into the northern Gaza Strip.[33] The Israeli Prime Minister’s Office reported on April 2 that Israel has created an “updated” ceasefire proposal for Hamas to review.[34]

Israeli Army Radio reported that the IDF Nahal Brigade (162nd Division) was responsible for mistakenly directing the airstrike that killed seven aid workers from the World Central Kitchen (WCK) in the Gaza Strip on April 1.[35] The report noted that the Nahal Brigade has killed over two dozen Hamas fighters in the same area over the past few weeks. It also said that Hamas often tries to take control of humanitarian aid convoys. Unspecified senior IDF officials reportedly warned IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi in recent days that their coordination mechanism with international aid organizations in the Gaza Strip was not functioning properly. The IDF inaugurated a joint command between the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT)—a department within the Israeli Defense Ministry—and the IDF Southern Command on April 3 to improve the coordination between Israeli military headquarters and the management of humanitarian aid.[36] US President Joe Biden said following the attack that the Israeli government “has not done enough to protect aid workers.”[37]

PIJ launched rockets from the Gaza Strip targeting Kissufim in southern Israel on March 3.[38]

Attacks into Israel from Gaza as of April 3, 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 conducted raids in the West Bank and engaged Palestinian fighters in at least two locations since CTP-ISW's last data cut off on April 2.[39] The IDF conducted a “divisional operation” in al Faraa camp, south of Tubas.[40] Hamas, PIJ, and al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades claimed separate shooting attacks targeting Israeli forces there.[41] The al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades also targeted Israeli forces with unspecified IEDs.[42]

Palestinian media cited local sources claiming that Palestinian fighters targeted the Qalandia checkpoint north of Jerusalem with an IED.[43]

A 26-year-old Arab Israeli conducted separate car ramming and stabbing attacks in central Israel on April 3.[44] The individual targeted four Israeli police officers at a temporary checkpoint in Kochav Yair, which borders the West Bank.[45] He then drove south to the Eliyahu crossing, where he attempted to stab security guards stationed there.[46] Israeli security forces at the Eliyahu crossing shot and killed him. Israeli police identified the attacker as a resident of Tira in central Israel.[47]



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

Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights

Axis of Resistance objectives:

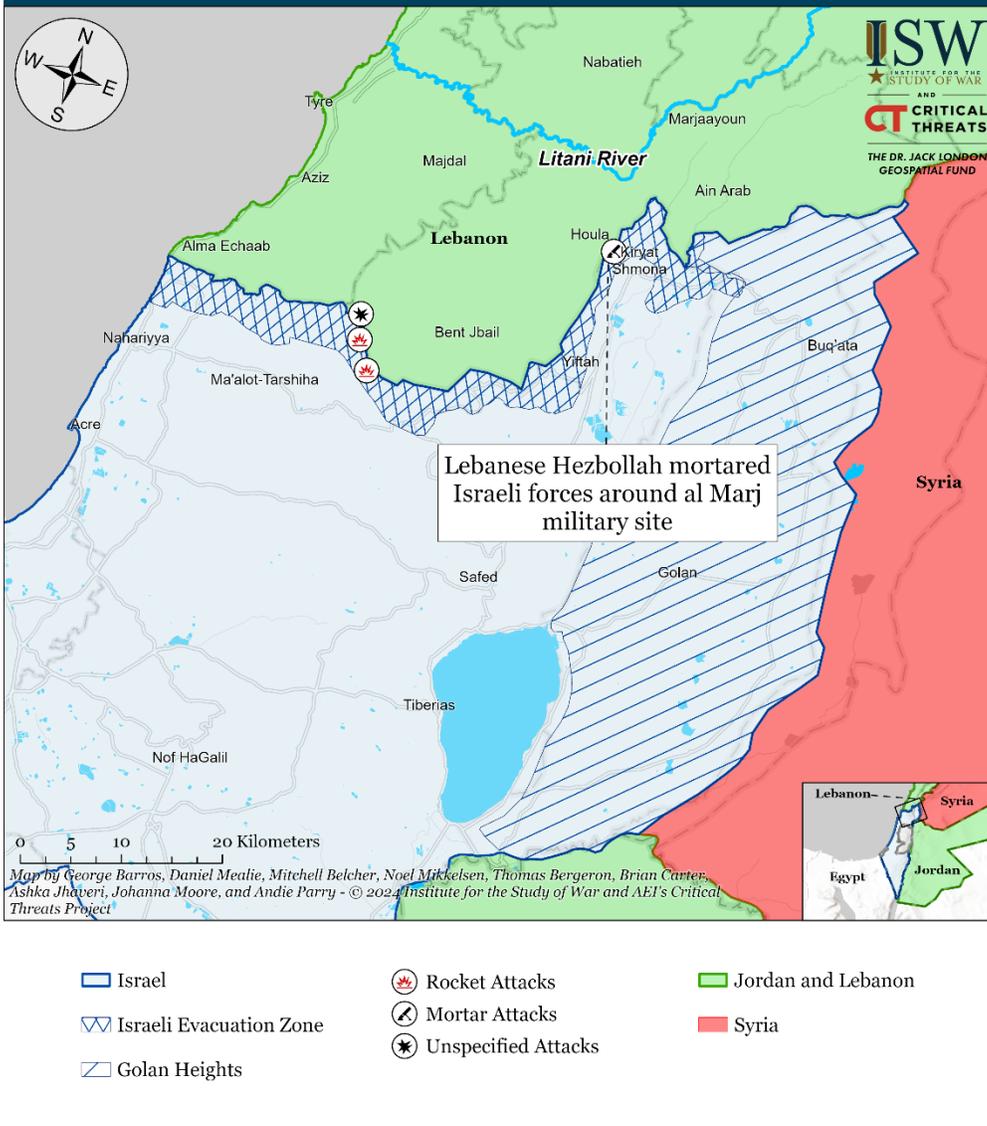
- Deter Israel from conducting a ground operation into Lebanon
- Prepare for an expanded and protracted conflict with Israel in the near term
- Expel the United States from Syria

Lebanese Hezbollah has conducted at least four attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on April 2.[48]

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias—claimed on April 2 to have conducted a drone attack targeting Haifa Airport in Israel.[49] Israeli officials and media have not confirmed the attack at the time of this writing. CTP-ISW cannot verify the Islamic Resistance in Iraq claim.

Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah gave a speech on April 3 emphasizing Syria's role in Iran's Axis of Resistance.[50] Nasrallah's comments follow an Israeli airstrike in Syria that killed a senior Iranian military commander and some of his top subordinates on April 1.[51] The speech was for a "Quds Platform" event, which included speeches from Hamas Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh, PIJ Secretary General Ziyad al Nakhalah, and Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba Secretary General Akram al Kaabi.[52] Nasrallah singled out Syria in the speech and said that Syria has not "modified or changed its position" despite the "daily aggression" that it faces.[53] Israel has been conducting an air campaign to disrupt the Iranian transfer of military material to its proxies and partners in Lebanon and Syria throughout the current war. Nasrallah added that Syria is the "incubator and supporter of all resistance movements" in the region. Nasrallah also praised militia operations in the Gaza Strip, Iraq, Lebanon, the West Bank, and Yemen.[54]

Attacks into Northern Israel from Lebanon as of April 3, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



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

Iran and Axis of Resistance

US Special Envoy to Yemen Tim Lenderking said that the United States is trying to negotiate a diplomatic solution to stop Houthi attacks in the Red Sea.[55] Lenderking said that the Biden administration would consider—but not guarantee—revoking the Houthi’s terrorist designation if the Houthis stopped attacks into the Red Sea.[56] He also said that the Houthis could demonstrate a “show of good faith” and “intent to deescalate” by releasing the crew of the *Galaxy Leader*, which the Houthis hijacked in November 2023.[57]

Iranian leaders are continuing to hold Israel and the United States responsible for the April 1 airstrike targeting Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) officials in Syria

and vowing to exact revenge. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei called Israel's airstrike in Syria "desperate" and claimed that it is not enough to save Israel from failure in the Israel-Hamas war. Khamenei made these remarks during a pre-scheduled meeting for Ramadan.[58] IRGC spokesperson Brig. Gen. Ramazan Sharif announced that the funeral ceremony for the IRGC officials killed in Damascus will take place simultaneously with the World Quds Day march in Tehran on April 5.[59] Quds Day is an annual anti-Israel holiday established by Iran that occurs on the last Friday of Ramadan.[60] Sharif further stated that the killing of IRGC officers increases the IRGC's and Iranian people's motivation to confront Israel. Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi stated that the Israeli airstrike would not go unanswered.[61]

UK-based Amwaj media, citing an unspecified political source in Iran, outlined three potential Iranian responses to the April 1 Israeli airstrike targeting IRGC officials in Syria.[62] The source stated that Iran will not likely target Israel directly but may target an Israeli diplomatic target abroad. Iranian officials and state media similarly suggested on April 2 that Iran may attack Israeli diplomatic facilities in response.[63] The source alternatively said that Iran may respond in a way that is unclear to others but clear to Iran and Israel. This approach could include targeting a Mossad center, such as those the regime alleges are in Azerbaijan and Iraqi Kurdistan.[64] The source lastly said that Iran may avoid a quick response for the time being.

The Russian Defense Ministry announced on April 3 that Russian forces have deployed to a new observation post along Syria-Golan Heights border.[65] The Russian Defense Ministry claimed that the purpose of the observation post is to "maintain order and peace in Syria" and that the post was established in mutual agreement with the Syrian regime. Russian forces have previously bolstered their position in southern Syria during the Israel-Hamas War, reportedly to "monitor the ceasefire" between Israel and Syria.[66] Russian forces most recently established a joint observation post with the Syrian Arab Army on the border with the Golan Heights on March 13.[67]

The Iranian rial depreciated to a record low of 634,000 rials to the US dollar on April 3.[68] A member of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce claimed that the recent rial exchange rate fluctuations were a "temporary" response to the Israeli airstrike targeting IRGC officers in Syria on April 1. The value of the rial was 32,000 rials to one US dollar when the United States and Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015.[69]

Iranian Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian attended the 19th Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) security council secretaries meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan, on April 2 and 3.[70] This event marked Ahmadian's first time attending an SCO meeting since becoming SNSC secretary in May 2023 and since Iran became a full member state in July 2023.[71] The meeting participants discussed items related to the SCO's stated mission as a collective security organization, including combating terrorism, drug trafficking, transnational organized crime, and confidence-building-and-security-measures.[72] Ahmadian also held separate bilateral meetings with his SCO counterparts on the sidelines of the wider meeting to discuss the implementation of bilateral economic, defense, and security cooperation agreements.[73] CTP-ISW previously assessed in July 2023 that Iran likely seeks to use its membership in the SCO to circumvent sanctions through non-US dollar financial transactions with other SCO countries, accelerate the construction of various regional transit corridors which will confer new sources of revenue, and reap military benefits from participating in the SCO's combined counterterrorism and naval exercises.[74]

The Iranian Intelligence and Security Ministry arrested two alleged members of the Afghan branch of the Islamic State—named Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)—in Qom on April 2.[75] Iranian state media reported that the two suspected ISKP members were attempting to conduct an unspecified attack on the Fatima Masumeh Shrine in Qom, which is considered the second holiest site in Iran for Shias.[76] These arrests follow an uptick in Salafji-jihadi activity across several Iranian provinces in recent months and years.[77] Two ISKP members detonated suicide vests during a ceremony commemorating the anniversary of the United States killing Qassem Soleimani, killing at least 84 civilians and wounding dozens of others, on January 3.[78] ISKP similarly conducted two attacks on the Shah Cheragh Shrine in Shiraz, Fars Province, in August 2023 and October 2022.[79]

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