Iran Update, March 28, 2024

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Information Cutoff: 2:00pm ET

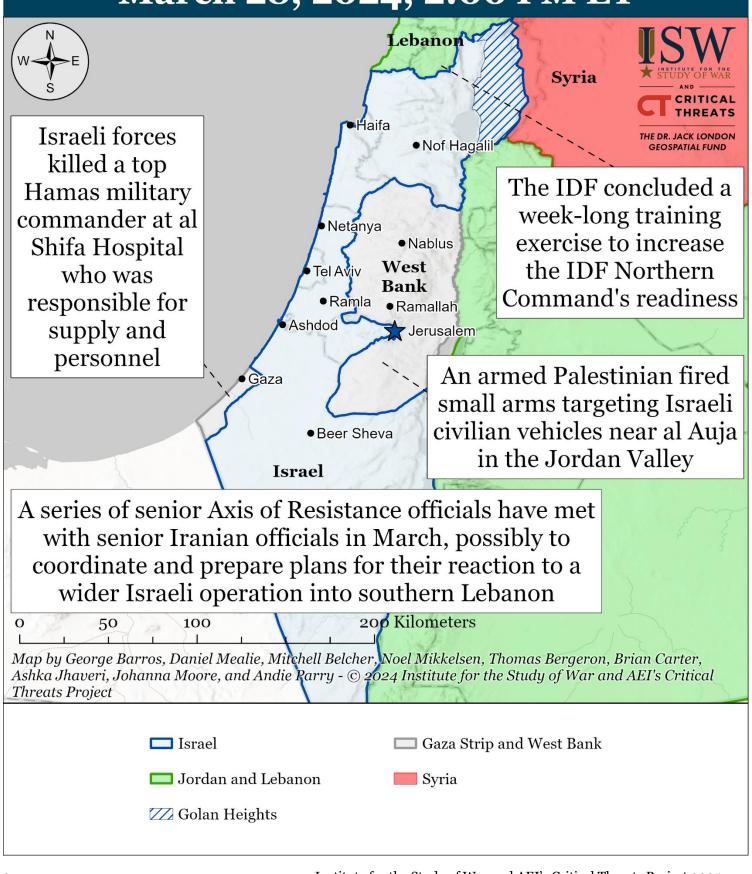
A series of senior Axis of Resistance officials have met with senior Iranian officials—including the supreme leader—in March, likely to coordinate and prepare plans for their reaction to a wider Israeli operation into southern Lebanon. Iran and the Axis of Resistance use periodic meetings between senior officials to coordinate responses to new developments in the region. Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force Commander Esmail Ghaani spent much of October 2023 in Beirut for meetings with Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah to help coordinate "a possible broader confrontation with Israel," for example.[1] The Syrian defense minister, Kataib Hezbollah secretary general, Palestinian Islamic Jihad secretary general, and Hamas Political Bureau chairman each met with senior Iranian leaders, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, in Tehran between March 17 and 28.[2]

This string of meetings comes after IRGC Quds Force Commander Ghaani visited Beirut in February 2024 to discuss the possibility of an Israeli offensive against Hezbollah with Nasrallah. One Iranian source told Reuters that during the meeting Nasrallah told Ghaani that Hezbollah did not want Iran to become involved in a Hezbollah-Israel war.[3] Iran could use the remainder of its proxy network—including actors based in Syria, Iraq, and in the West Bank—against Israel in a Hezbollah-Israel war to support Hezbollah and increase the threat to Israel. PIJ Secretary General Ziyad Nakhalah highlighted the importance of the West Bank in his meeting with Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf in Tehran on March 28, noting that "the resistance is not only in Gaza, but [also] in the West Bank."[4] Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said that Iran is seeking to promote major terror attacks by smuggling "high-quality" weapons into the West Bank.[5]

Key Takeaways:

- **Iran in the Region:** A series of senior Axis of Resistance officials have met with senior Iranian officials—including the supreme leader—in March, likely to coordinate and prepare plans for their reaction to a wider Israeli operation into southern Lebanon.
- The Syrian defense minister, Kataib Hezbollah secretary general, Palestinian Islamic Jihad secretary general, and Hamas Political Bureau chairman each met with senior Iranian leaders, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, in Tehran between March 17 and 28.
- This string of meetings comes after IRGC Quds Force Commander Ghaani visited Beirut in February 2024 to discuss the possibility of an Israeli offensive against Hezbollah with Nasrallah.
- Gaza Strip: Israeli forces continued operating in and around al Shifa Hospital in Gaza City on March 28. Israeli special operations forces (SOF) killed senior Hamas commander Raad Thabet there on March 28.
- **West Bank:** An armed Palestinian fired small arms targeting Israeli civilian vehicles near al Auja in the Jordan Valley on March 28, wounding three Israeli civilians.
- **Lebanon:** The IDF concluded a week-long training exercise on March 27 aimed at increasing IDF Northern Command readiness in northern Israel.
- **Iraq:** The Iraqi Foreign Minister said that the recent Islamic State attack in Moscow shows that ISIS is "resurging and stronger than ever" on March 28. Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein's comments are notable given their contrast with the statements of Iranian-backed Iraqi officials, who have claimed that ISIS is no longer a threat to Iraq.

Israel-Hamas War as of March 28, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



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 continued operating in and around al Shifa Hospital in Gaza City on March 28. Israeli forces have killed about 200 Palestinian fighters around the hospital complex since the start of operations there on March 18.[6] Palestinian fighters continued to fire at Israeli forces from inside al Shifa hospital, including from the emergency room.[7]

Israeli special operations forces (SOF) killed senior Hamas commander Raad Thabet at al Shifa Hospital on March 28.[8] Thabet was responsible for Hamas' "supply and personnel unit," according to the IDF. The IDF spokesperson said Israel considered Thabet among the top 10 senior-most Hamas military commanders in the Gaza Strip.[9] Israeli forces killed Thabet and two other Hamas fighters as they entered the hospital area.[10]

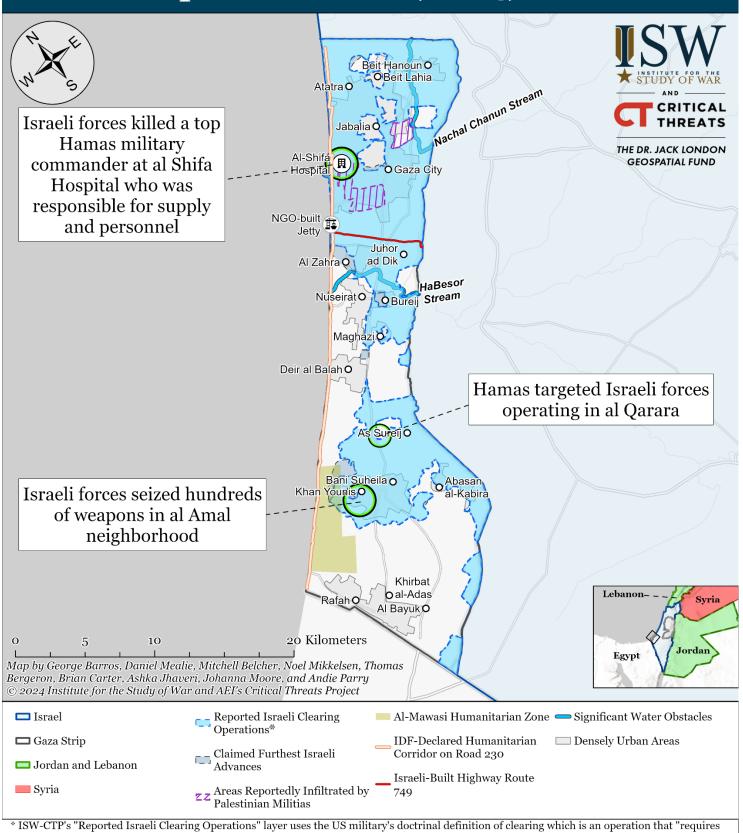
Most of the Palestinian militia attacks on March 28 targeted Israeli forces in and around al Shifa Hospital.[11] Palestinian fighters targeted Israeli forces with mortar fire and rocket-propelled grenades.[12] Palestinian militias have conducted over 75 attacks targeting Israeli forces in and around the hospital since Israeli forces returned to the area on March 18. This high rate of attack indicates that Palestinian militia elements in the area remain combat effective, despite continued Israeli clearing efforts in Gaza City. At least six Palestinian militias have participated in the recent attacks targeting Israeli forces in and around al Shifa Hospital.

The IDF Nahal Brigade (162nd Division) continued clearing operations in the central Gaza Strip on March 28. Israeli aircraft conducted a strike targeting a cell of Palestinian fighters approaching the Nahal Brigade in the central Gaza Strip.[13] The IDF said that it destroyed a 2.5-kilometer-long tunnel used by Hamas to connect the northern and southern Gaza Strip on March 28.[14] Israeli forces used over 30 tons of explosives to destroy the tunnel.

Israeli forces continued clearing operations in al Amal neighborhood, western Khan Younis on March 28. The IDF launched a second clearing operation in al Amal on March 24.[15] The IDF 98th Division has killed dozens of Palestinian fighters in al Amal during this operation.[16] The IDF Egoz SOF unit detained dozens of Palestinians in al Amal.[17] The Givati Brigade engaged two Palestinian fighters approaching Israeli forces in al Amal. Israeli forces seized hundreds of weapons in al Amal, including grenades, explosively-formed penetrators, small arms.[18]

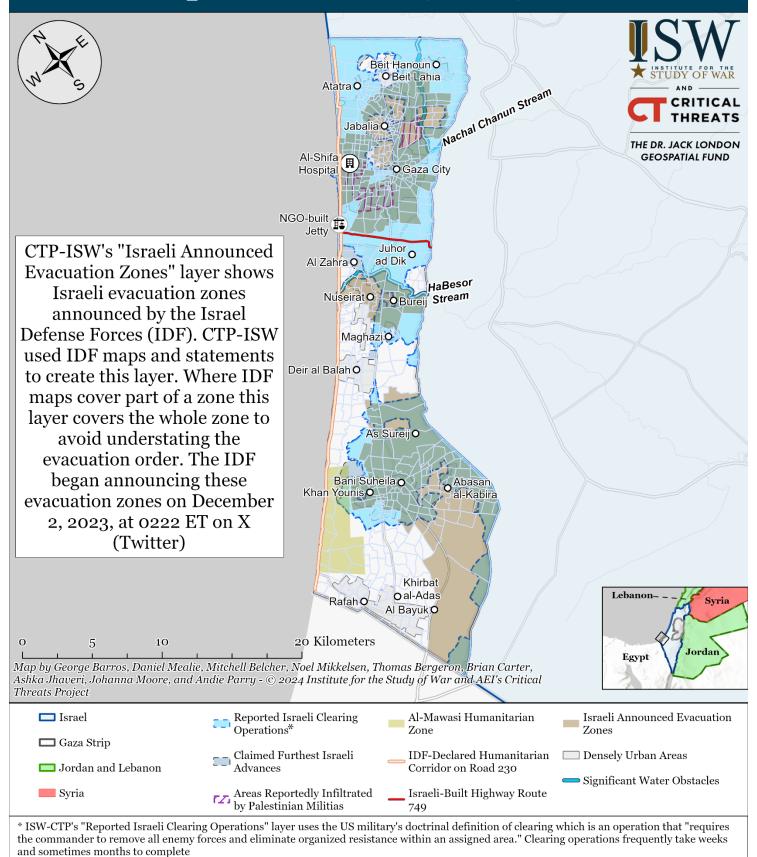
Hamas engaged Israeli forces during IDF clearing operations in northern Khan Younis on March 28. Hamas fighters detonated explosives that Israeli forces had planted to destroy a building in Qarara. It is not clear how Hamas detonated the explosives. Hamas claimed that the house explosion killed and wounded Israeli forces, but the IDF has not acknowledged casualties from the attack at the time of writing. This attack bears similarity to a Hamas attack in January 2024 that killed 21 Israeli soldiers after the soldiers rigged a building to detonate in the central Gaza Strip. Hamas fighters also separately targeted Israeli armor operating in Qarara with rocket-propelled grenades.[19]

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip as of March 28, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



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 March 28, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



The Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), a department within the Israeli Defense Ministry, said that 205 aid trucks entered the Gaza Strip on March 28.[20] COGAT said that 19 private sector "food" aid trucks reached the northern Gaza Strip without incident.

The US Defense Department is considering funding a private peacekeeping force in the Gaza Strip, according to Politico.[21] The options under consideration will not include the deployment of US servicemembers to the Gaza Strip but could consist of a multinational force or a Palestinian peacekeeping team. Biden administration officials said these talks are part of planning for the "day after" in the Gaza Strip with Israeli officials and other partners. One of Israel's stated war objectives is the destruction of Hamas' governance apparatus in the Gaza Strip and the IDF has warned that all members of "the Hamas apparatus," including Hamas police officers, are legitimate targets.[22]

West Bank

Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

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

Israeli forces have engaged Palestinian fighters in at least four locations in the West Bank since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on March 27.[23]

An armed Palestinian fired small arms targeting Israeli civilian vehicles near al Auja in the Jordan Valley on March 28, wounding three Israeli civilians. [24] Israeli media reported that the armed man was a security officer for the Palestinian Authority. The armed Palestinian is originally from Jenin. [25] Palestinian channels posted photos of the shooter and identified him as Mohammed Saadia. [26] IDF Central Command Commander Yehuda Fox and other IDF personnel held an "assessment" of the attack. Fox reported that the IDF is still searching for the attacker at the time of writing. [27]

Clashes in the West Bank as of March 28, 2024, 2:00 PM ET Bet She'An Jenin Hadera Ajloun Tubas The al Aqsa Martyrs' THE DR. JACK LONDON **GEOSPATIAL FUND** Brigades engaged Israeli forces in Qalqilya Nablus Qalqilya Ra'Anana Jordan Huwara Salfit Tel Aviv As Salt Amman Ramallah An armed Palestinian fired small arms targeting Israeli shdod civilian vehicles near Jerusalem al Auja Bethlehem shkelon 7 Gaza Hebron Lebanon Netivot 40 Kilometers Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Brian Carter, Egypt Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Andie Parry - \odot 2024 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project Israel Clash (Small Arms Combat) Gaza Strip and West Bank **IED** Detonated Jordan and Lebanon Syria

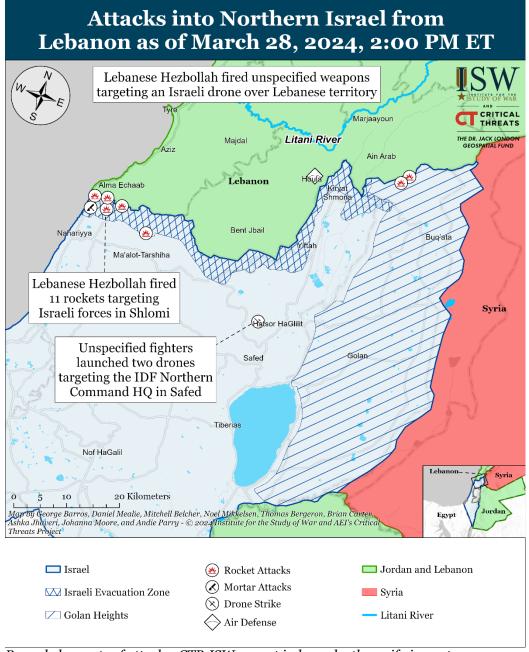
Southern Lebanon and Golan Heights Axis of Resistance campaign objectives:

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

Lebanese Hezbollah has conducted at least 11 attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on March 27.[28]

The IDF concluded a week-long training exercise on March 27 aimed at increasing IDF Northern Command readiness in northern Israel.[29] The IDF held briefings with Northern Command division, brigade, and battalion commanders to discuss "operational and strategic plans" for a conflict in northern Israel.[30] IDF Northern Command Commander Major General Ori Gordin said that the IDF will continue to take an "offensive approach" against Hezbollah and that the IDF is "determined" to change the security situation in the north so that residents may return to the area.[31] The IDF Air Force conducted an airstrike in Ras Naqoura in southern Lebanon on March 27, killing two Amal Movement fighters.[32]

The Amal Movement released statements mourning the fighters on the same day.[33]



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

Israel likely conducted a series of airstrikes targeting Iran-backed militia and Lebanese Hezbollah positions near Sayyida Zainab, Syria on March 28.[34] Syrian, Israeli, and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-affiliated media reported that the IDF air force struck several buildings near Sayyida Zainab, southeast of Damascus, Syria.[35] Syrian and Israeli media noted that Iran-backed militias and Lebanese Hezbollah were using the targeted buildings.[36] Israeli media reported that the strikes possibly killed an unspecified IRGC member.[37] Iranian-backed militia groups and the IRGC maintain a headquarters in Sayyida Zainab and use it to facilitate Iranian efforts throughout Syria.[38]

Israel has conducted at least six other strikes targeting Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah-affiliated targets inside Syria in March 2024, a notable increase from an average of 1.6 strikes per month between December 2023 and February 2024.[39] The IDF said in February 2024 that it had conducted a series of airstrikes in Syria since the start of the Israel-Hamas war to interdict Iranian weapons shipments to Hezbollah via Syria.[40]

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian discussed the implementation of gas, electricity, and water supply agreements with senior Turkmen officials in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan on March 28, possibly to preempt electricity and water shortages in the summer that could fuel internal unrest.[41] Abdollahian called for the implementation of these and other trade and transit agreements during separate meetings with the Turkmen president, foreign affairs minister, and the Turkmenistan People's Council chairman. Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkmenistan previously signed a gas swap agreement in November 2021.[42] Senior Iranian officials called for the expeditious implementation of these agreements during their meetings with senior Turkmen officials in May and June 2023.[43] These agreements would allow Iran to use some of the gas it imports from Turkmenistan to supply electricity and heating to its northern provinces. Iranians previously protested power outages in Tehran, Fars, and Mazandaran Provinces in July 2021.[44] The Raisi administration has similarly expressed concern that water shortages could precipitate unrest inside Iran and sought to increase water cooperation with Turkmenistan to address these concerns in May 2023.[45]

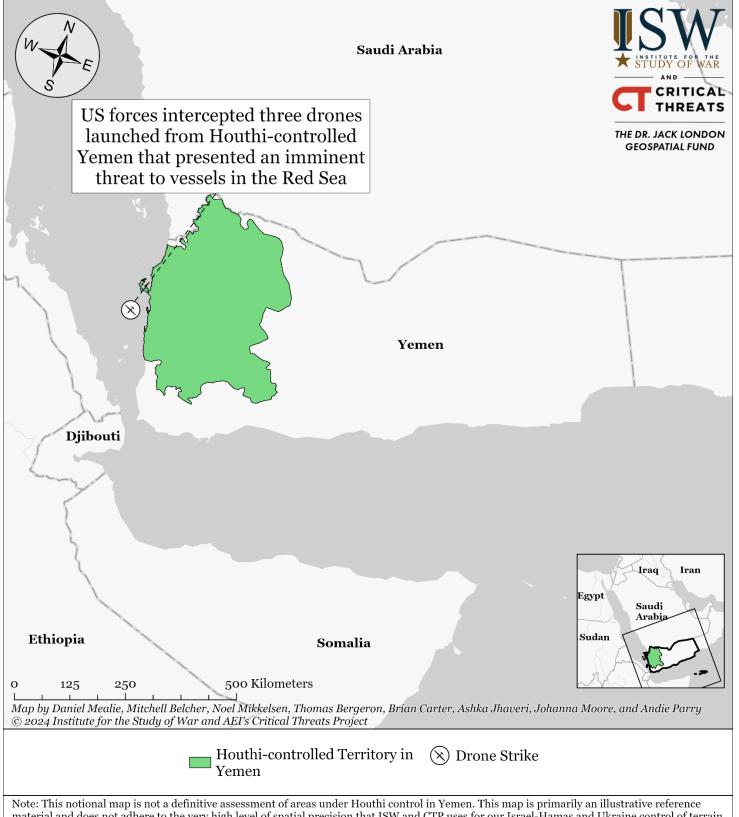
The Iraqi Foreign Minister said that the recent Islamic State attack in Moscow shows that ISIS is "resurging and stronger than ever" on March 28.[46] Iranian-backed Iraqi officials have claimed repeatedly that ISIS in Iraq is defeated to publicly justify their efforts to expel US forces from Iraq. The Iranian-backed head of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) claimed on March 3, for example, that ISIS is no longer a threat due to the PMF's capabilities.[47] Iraqi Prime Minister Shia al Sudani, who is supported by Iranian-backed groups in Iraq, claimed on February 7 and 25 that the international coalition is no longer necessary because ISIS has been defeated.[48] Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein's comments are notable given their contrast with the statements of Iranian-backed Iraqi officials. Hussein is a Kurdish official and member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, which Iranian-backed militias undermined during government formation in 2021 and 2022.[49]

CTP-ISW continues to assess that the United States and its partners in Syria have successfully contained but not defeated ISIS and that a US withdrawal from Syria would very likely cause a rapid ISIS resurgence there within 12 to 24 months.[50] A resurgent ISIS could then threaten Iraq. Iraqi security forces still face significant deficiencies in fire support, intelligence, and logistics that will impede their ability to defeat ISIS alone.[51]

Hussein separately questioned the Islamic Resistance in Iraq's claimed attacks on Israel on March 28 by stating that he did not know if the attacks were true or for internal propaganda purposes.[52] The IDF has not acknowledged any of the claimed Islamic Resistance in Iraq attacks targeting Israel. Hussein emphasized that only the commander-in-chief of the Iraqi Armed Forces—the Iraqi prime minister—could legitimately authorize the use of weapons inside Iraq. Hussein further said that the only entity with the legal power to declare war in Iraq is the Iraqi Council of Representatives.

US CENTCOM reported that it intercepted four Houthi drones in the Red on March 27 that were "aimed at a US warship." [53]

Houthi-controlled Territory in Yemen as of March 28, 2024, 2:00 PM ET



material and does not adhere to the very high level of spatial precision that ISW and CTP uses for our Israel-Hamas and Ukraine control of terrain maps.

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