



Operation Iron Swords Updated to 1 p.m., December 18, 2023

Northern Arena

- 474 attacks
- 111 Hezbollah operatives killed
- 16 other terrorist-organization operatives killed
- One Lebanese army soldier killed

Israeli Casualties

- Approximately 1,200 military and civilian dead (unofficial estimate)
- 129 abducted remain in the Gaza Strip

Rocket Fire

- About 10,600 rockets and mortar shells
- About 10% failed launches

Overview¹

► **The combat arena:** The IDF integrated ground maneuver in the Gaza Strip continues, focusing on Jabalia and Shejaiya in the northern Gaza Strip and Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip. The Palestinians reported intense exchanges of fire and dozens of deaths in the combat zones. IDF forces uncovered the largest tunnel which has been revealed in the Gaza Strip so far. Its opening is located about 400 meters (about a quarter of a mile) from the Erez Crossing, which was used before the war for the passage of workers, businessmen and patients from the Gaza Strip to Israel. The tunnel has several branches and was found to contain large quantities of weapons. Senior Hamas terrorists claimed that after more than 70 days of fighting, they continued to repel the IDF forces and inflict casualties.

► **According to an unofficial estimate, since October 7 approximately 1,200 Israeli civilians and security personnel have been killed, 458 of them soldiers and officers; 129 civilian and military hostages are still being held by the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip, 16 of them women and children; 121 hostages have been returned to Israel.**

¹ Click <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en> to subscribe and receive the ITIC's daily updates as well as its other publications.

► **The issue of the hostages:** Senior Hamas terrorists emphasized once again that no negotiations would take place without the declaration of a comprehensive ceasefire.

► **The Gaza Strip:** Trucks began entering the Gaza Strip through the Kerem Shalom Crossing. A UNRWA source stated they did not have access to the northern Gaza Strip to be able to transfer aid.

► **The northern arena:** Hezbollah continued attacking military and civilian targets in the north, and a public building was damaged in Kibbutz Sasa. IDF forces responded with artillery fire and airstrikes, attacking Hezbollah terrorist targets and rocket launching squads.

► **Judea and Samaria:** A Palestinian terrorist carried out a stabbing attack in the Rantis area (northwest of Ramallah), wounding an IDF officer. The attacker was pursued and caught. Palestinians carried out a drive-by shooting, attacking a civilian vehicle in the al-Rawabi area (northeast of Ramallah), wounding a woman.

► **Yemen:** The United States is considering establishing a multinational force to deal with the Houthi threat.

The Combat Arena

► **Ground activity:** The IDF's integrated ground maneuver in the Gaza Strip continues.

► **Northern Gaza Strip:** IDF forces continued the integrated ground maneuver in the Jabalia and Shejaiya areas. They located suitcases of money in the house of a senior Hamas terrorist in the Jabalia area, which contained approximately NIS 5,000,000 (about \$1.36 million) intended for financing terrorist activities. A large quantity of weapons was also found at the site (IDF spokesperson, December 18, 2023). On the afternoon of December 17, 2023, IDF forces searching the Jabalia area located a tunnel shaft inside a children's room in the basement. The shaft had stairs built into it (IDF spokesperson, December 17, 2023). IDF forces raided an apartment in the Shejaiya area, where they found weapons and a tunnel shaft more than 15 meters (approximately 16 yards) long. A weapons warehouse was also found in the house of a Hamas terrorist operative (IDF spokesperson, December 17, 2023).



Money to finance terrorism (IDF spokesperson, December 18, 2023)

► **Southern Gaza Strip:** IDF forces broke through to the city Khan Yunis and are currently fighting in the area. The forces raided the office of the commander of the Khan Yunis Brigade, as well as terrorist facilities including tunnels. They reached Bani Suheila Square in the center of the city and took control of it. They also raided a building next to an UNRWA school, locating machines for the production of rocket parts. Three tunnel shafts were located near a school (IDF spokesperson, December 17, 2023).



A rocket launching pit and rocket launcher located in the Khan Yunis area (IDF spokesperson, December 18, 2023)



IDF forces in the southern Gaza Strip (IDF spokesperson, December 17, 2023)

►The Palestinian media reported that IDF forces were attacking the east Gaza City neighborhoods of Shejaiya, Daraj and Tufah with intense artillery fire (QudsN X account, December 18, 2023). An al-Jazeera correspondent in Gaza reported 50 dead in the IDF attack in the Sabra neighborhood of Gaza City, who were evacuated to Shifa Hospital. Considerable damage to property was reported (QudsN X account, December 18, 2023).

►A correspondent for al-Arabi TV in Deir al-Balah, broadcasting from Shuhadaa al-Aqsa hospital, reported that IDF forces continued attacks in the Jabalia and Beit Lahia areas as well as in the refugee camp. In Deir al-Balah, 15 deaths were reported and they were evacuated to the hospital (al-Arabi YouTube channel, December 18, 2023).



Property damage in the Sabra neighborhood in Gaza City caused by IDF strikes (QudsN X account, December 18, 2023)

►Muhammad al-Daour, a correspondent for al-Ghad TV in Rafah, reported massive artillery fire in eastern Khan Yunis throughout the night. He said local residents and evacuees had heard explosions caused by the IDF attacks in eastern Khan Yunis all night long (al-Ghad TV, December 18, 2023). On the morning of December 18, 2023, Palestinian media reported an exchange of fire between IDF forces and "resistance" [terrorist] operatives in Khan Yunis (QudsN account X, December 18, 2023). **Ibrahim Qanan, a correspondent for al-Ghad TV in**

Khan Yunis, reported fierce exchanges of fire in the northern area of the city in the al-Katiba and al-Mahta neighborhoods (al-Ghad TV, December 18, 2023).



Right: An al-Ghad TV correspondent reports from Rafah. Left: The IDF attacks Khan Yunis (Wafa YouTube channel, December 18, 2023)

- ▶ **Senior terrorist Musa Abu Marzouq, a member of the Hamas political bureau**, published a video showing the results of the IDF's activity in the Kamal Adwan Hospital complex, and wrote that the "holocaust" [sic] of the 21st century was being carried out in front of the world's cameras and there was no response, tanks were crushing the wounded and displaced, and they were burying them with their bandages. He called on the International Criminal Court to open an investigation into the "crime" (Musa Abu Marzouq's X account, December 17, 2023).
- ▶ The French foreign ministry announced that a French diplomat has been killed and ten other people injured in an Israeli attack on a residence in the southern Gaza Strip. The foreign ministry condemned Israel's attacks on residential areas which caused the death and injury of civilians (French foreign ministry website, December 17, 2023).

Large tunnel exposed near the Israeli border

- ▶ During recent operations, IDF forces exposed the largest tunnel found so far in the Gaza Strip. It was constructed under the direction of Muhammad al-Sinwar (former commander of the Khan Yunis Brigade and Yahya al-Sinwar's brother), by the Khan Yunis Brigade of the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades, Hamas' military-terrorist wing, at an estimated cost of millions of dollars. So far, IDF forces have uncovered a route of over four kilometers (2.5 miles) at a maximum depth of about 50 meters (about the same length as the height of a 12-story building). The route of the tunnel splits several times, creating a broad, branching network. Sewage, electricity and communication infrastructures were found in the tunnel, and the upper doors were designed to prevent the entry of IDF forces. The tunnel is wide enough for ordinary vehicles to drive through, and large quantities of weapons were found inside. At its point

closest to the Israeli border, it is about 400 meters (about a quarter of a mile) from the Erez Crossing which, until the war, was used for the passage of workers, businessmen and patients receiving medical treatment in Israel (IDF spokesperson, December 17, 2023).



The tunnel (IDF spokesperson, December 17, 2023)

►The Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades, Hamas' military-terrorist wing, published a video of the tunnel the IDF uncovered entitled called "You arrived late, mission accomplished," in Arabic, Hebrew and English. It begins with Israeli Ministry of Defense Yoav Gallant inside the tunnel, followed by scenes from the October 7 attack and massacre, in an attempt to link the tunnel to the attack (Palinfo, December 18, 2023).



The end of the video (Palinfo , December 18, 2023).

Reactions to the fighting

►**Senior terrorist Khalil al-Haya, deputy head of the political bureau of Hamas in the Gaza Strip and responsible for Hamas' bureau of Arab and Islamic relations**, was interviewed from his home in Doha, the capital of Qatar. He claimed, from afar, that after more than 70 days of fighting, the "resistance" [terrorist operatives] continued repulsing the IDF forces and inflict casualties. Israel, he claimed, was afraid to reveal the casualties to its public, proving [sic] that the "resistance" was standing firm, had capabilities, could inflict more casualties on Israel than anticipated, and could continue to "protect the Palestinians." He claimed the

"resistance" [terrorist operatives] pursued Israel from street to street and from alley to alley, and Israel had no quiet, not in Gaza City, not in Khan Yunis, not in the northern Gaza Strip, not in any area. There were fierce battles in all areas and fronts and the "resistance" stood "firm and fearless," and could continue for days, weeks and months. He claimed they were fighting for their "cause" and "freedom" and were willing to pay the full price, adding that the "resistance" was firm and in good condition, and could cause Israel, which "had not yet produced a picture of victory," more losses (al-Jazeera YouTube channel, December 17, 2023).

►According to **senior Hamas terrorist Osama Hamdan**, throughout the entire campaign Israel had failed to achieve its goal, and today it was talking about Khan Yunis. He claimed no one knew how al-Sinwar and the rest of the leadership were conducting the campaign, but the "resistance leadership" was conducting it correctly. He denied the reports in Israel that al-Sinwar might flee to Egypt, claiming that Hamas "fighters" neither fled nor surrendered. Asked if al-Sinwar was actually conducting the campaign along with the military leadership, he claimed the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades leadership was conducting the campaign in full harmony with the Hamas leadership in Gaza. He added that no one should delude himself into thinking there were disputes regarding the conduct of the campaign, there was complete harmony, and Yahya al-Sinwar was trusted by his brother as well as by Muhammad Deif and other members of the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades (al-Mayadeen YouTube channel, December 17, 2023).

►Regarding support for the fighting in the Gaza Strip, Hamdan claimed that the "resistance activity" in "support" of the Gaza Strip was being done "wisely and cleverly," and everyone saw the "escalation," which worried Israel, and the United States even more. He added that the pace of "resistance" [Hezbollah attacks] in Lebanon was clearly increasing, the "resistance" [pro-Iranian militias] in Iraq was increasing its attacks on the American bases, sending the United States the message that as long as it supported Israel's war, attacks against it would increase. He added that the "brothers in Yemen" had taken "a very big step" and all their help was appreciated. He claimed the campaign allowed an initial glimpse of what the "axis of resistance"² could do in a future conflict with Israel, that it could act harmoniously and skillfully, and its capabilities should not be underestimated (al-Mayadeen TV YouTube channel, December 17, 2023).

² Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, the Palestinian terrorist organizations, the Shi'ite Houthis in Yemen and the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq.

Rocket fire from the Gaza Strip

►The Palestinian terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip continue firing rockets at Israel, several dozen during the past day. Most of them targeted the cities, towns and villages surrounding the Gaza Strip. An exception was rockets fired at the region of Lachish, northeast of the Gaza Strip, midway between Hebron and the coast. No casualties or damage were reported.

Israeli casualties

►According to an unofficial estimate, since October 7 approximately 1,200 Israeli people have been killed. According to the IDF spokesperson, 458 of them are soldiers and officers (of whom 117 have been killed since the start of the ground maneuver on 27 October, 2023.); 129 civilian and military hostages are still being held by the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip, 16 of them women and children; 121 hostages have been returned.

The issue of the hostages

►Senior Hamas terrorist Khalil al-Haya said the "aggression," the killing and the destruction had to stop, only then would it be possible to talk about anything, and first and foremost about the exchange of hostages and aid to the Palestinians. He said they specifically noted, and he reiterated, that the topic of a prisoner exchange deal was closed until the "aggression" stopped. As soon as that happened they would be ready to begin negotiations immediately for a full exchange of prisoners and a time frame for it, at the same time as introducing all the necessary aid to the Palestinians. He said it was illogical to think they would negotiate with Israel while the war was going on and the attacks continued, and they could not close a deal for the exchange of hostages under fire. First, he reiterated, the "aggression" had to stop, and the IDF forces had to withdraw, and then it would immediately be possible to reach an agreement and set a time frame. He claimed Israel was playing with the issue and said there were initiatives to reassure the families of the hostages. However, as far as Hamas was concerned, the door to the matter closed two weeks ago and they had informed the mediators that it would open only when there was a ceasefire and the aggression stopped. He said that if Israel thought Hamas would respond under the pressure of bombings, it was delusional (al-Jazeera TV YouTube channel, December 17, 2023).

► **Senior Hamas terrorist Osama Hamdan** claimed that Israel was not talking about a positive atmosphere in the talks on the issue of hostages because there had been a development, but as an attempt to calm Israeli public opinion. He claimed Hamas' position was "consistent and clear," and the mediators were aware of it. Their position was that they would only talk about a complete ceasefire and an end to the "aggression," after which any issue could be discussed. He claimed that when the aggression ended there were many issues that had to be discussed, such as the end of the "siege," the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip and the exchange of hostages. In that regard Hamas' goal was clear: the release of all Palestinian prisoners. He said Israel had to know that this time there was no room for retreat and it faced three options: the Gilad Shalit option, that is, for Israel to stop the "aggression," conduct negotiations, secure the return of the hostages and release the Palestinian prisoners; the option of hostages who were killed by IDF fire during a rescue attempt; or the Ron Arad option, that is, that all traces of the captives would disappear in the heat of battle and they would never be heard from again (al-Mayadeen TV YouTube channel, December 17, 2023).

► **Senior terrorist Ali Abu Shahin, a member of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) political bureau**, said that regarding the exchange deal the Israeli media was talking about, some of the reports were aimed at domestic needs resulting from the pressure exerted on Netanyahu by the families of the hostages. He said that if Israel wanted to enter into a deal, there had to be a ceasefire agreement, but on December 16, 2023, Netanyahu said he did not accept the condition, therefore now it was just talk in the media. He claimed that so far there had been no talks with the organizations about any deal or proposal, and when a proposal was made they would have their say, but their position was clear and had not changed, a ceasefire was the basic condition (Sputnik website in Arabic, December 17, 2023).

► "Two Egyptian security sources" were quoted as saying that Israel and Hamas were open to renewing the ceasefire and releasing hostages, but there were still differences of opinion regarding how the deal would be accomplished. According to the "sources," Hamas insists on a complete ceasefire and the cessation of flights over the Gaza Strip as the principle conditions for agreeing to negotiations, as well as the withdrawal of Israeli forces to predetermined lines on the ground in the Gaza Strip. They claimed Hamas had agreed to complete the truce of handing over the hostages according to a list that Hamas would compose, and not a list forced on by anyone, adding that Israel was forced to agree to Hamas' list of civilian hostages, but requested a schedule and to see the list before setting a date and

duration for the ceasefire. They emphasized that Israel opposed the withdrawal of its forces (Reuters, December 17, 2023). **Senior Hamas terrorist Sami Abu Zuhri** responded to the report, saying that they were open to any effort to stop Israeli "aggression," which was the basis for a discussion about any issue (Swissinfo website, December 17, 2023) .

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The Gaza Strip

Palestinian casualties

►Al-Arabiya TV reported the number of dead since the beginning of the war stood at more than 19,000 and the number of wounded at more than 51,000 (al-Arabiya TV, December 17, 2023).

The situation in the Gaza Strip

►After communications in the Gaza Strip were cut off for many hours, the Palestinian communications company Paltel announced the gradual return of services in the central and southern Gaza Strip (Paltel X account , December 17, 2023).

Aid to the Gaza Strip

►**Karim al-Sheikh, a correspondent for al-Ghad TV in El Arish**, reported on aid trucks waiting in El Arish to enter the Gaza Strip. He said that every day between 120 and 160 trucks left El Arish and drove to Rafah, and that in the coming days the number would increase to 200 trucks per day (al-Ghad TV, December 17, 2023). Since November 1, 2023, 4,500 trucks have entered the Gaza Strip through the Rafah crossing, bringing approximately 57,000 tons of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip (al-Arabi TV, December 17, 2023).



An al-Ghad TV correspondent reports from Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis (al-Ghad TV , December 17, 2023)

► Journalist Hassan Aslih reported on the introduction of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip through the Kerem Shalom Crossing for the first time since the beginning of the war (Hassan Aslih's X account, December 18, 2023).



Delivering humanitarian aid through the Kerem Shalom Crossing (Hassan Aslih's X account, December 18, 2023)

► According to **Khazem Abu Khalaf, a spokesman for UNRWA** who was interviewed about the Gaza Strip in his office in Jerusalem, the amount of aid entering the Gaza Strip today was very small, about "100 trucks a day," compared with about 600 trucks a day that entered the Gaza Strip before the start of the war. He claimed they were risking their lives by working in the Gaza Strip. Regarding their activities in the northern Gaza Strip and the distribution of aid, he said the situation there was very difficult, they had no information about events and only knew what the media reported. He noted that during the temporary ceasefire they delivered aid to the northern Gaza Strip, but with the resumption of fighting they could not reach it at all (al-Arabi YouTube channel, December 18, 2023).



Khazem Abu Khalaf, spokesman for UNRWA, discusses the Gaza Strip during an interview in his office in Jerusalem (al-Arabi YouTube channel, December 18, 2023)

Hamas

► **Senior terrorist Ghazi Hamad, a member of the Hamas political bureau,** claimed they were ready to sit down with all the political forces and discuss a "national plan." He claimed the Palestinian Authority (PA) was delusional, did not provide anything to the Palestinian people, had been given an opportunity for 30 years and had achieved nothing (al-Jazeera Mubasher, December 17, 2023).

► **Senior terrorist Musa Abu Marzouq, a member of the Hamas political bureau,** gave a speech entitled "The Palestinian issue, from siege to victory" at a symposium on the Palestinian issue held by the Al Adl wal Ihsane Islamist association in Morocco to mark the 11th anniversary of the death of its founder. According to Abu Marzouq, Operation al-Aqsa Storm made a difference in the Palestinian cause, making the "liberation of Palestine" possible and attainable, and Israel was shown to be "as fragile as a spider's web." He claimed that "everyone" who discussed the Palestinian issue today talked about the two-state solution and the resolution of the Palestinian issue. He noted other positive aspects of the war, including the fact that it stopped the Arab "deterioration," especially regarding the issue of normalization [of relations with Israel]. It also "removed Israel's regional status" from the map, which in the past had been used here and there because it was a powerful country with a world-class, advanced army and strong intelligence [services]. The attack on October 7 destroyed all the claims, and everyone who entered into an alliance with it now knew they were allied with a "fragile entity" (Al Adl wal Ihsane Association website, December 17, 2023).



Abu Marzouq speaks at the conference
(Al Adl wal Ihsane Association website, December 17, 2023)

Statements regarding "the day after"

►According to **senior terrorist Khalil al-Haya, deputy chairman of the Hamas political bureau in the Gaza Strip**, whoever was thinking about "the day after" in the Gaza Strip was thinking about a day of victory, and whoever was thinking "the day after Hamas" was deluding himself, since the Palestinians alone would choose their leadership and the mechanism for managing their affairs, and would not agree to any intervention. Hamas, he reiterated, wanted an end to the "aggression," then reconstruction along with negotiations for the exchange of hostages. That was the path they believed in and that they had been talking about since the beginning. Regarding the future of the Gaza Strip, he said Hamas was an authentic part of the Palestinian people, its leadership led the Palestinian people, and they wanted to renew the leadership through elections [sic]. He emphasized that the future of the Gaza Strip was related to the future of Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the future of the Palestinian refugees, and Gaza was related to Palestine and Palestine was related to Gaza (al-Jazeera YouTube channel, December 17, 2023).

►**Faisal Abbas, editor-in-chief of the Saudi Arabian daily Arab News**, reviewed the latest developments in the war in the Gaza Strip and the options for the "day after." He said the preoccupation with "the day after" had to be coordinated with a permanent solution to the conflict through the establishment of a Palestinian state that would operate in peace with the State of Israel. He said no party would agree to another Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip and the displacement of its residents. He made it clear that the PA would not agree to return to control the Strip "on the backs of Israeli tanks," and noted there might be a transition period during which international peacekeeping forces would be deployed in the area, similar to Lebanon [sic]. However, he said the solution required the agreement and involvement of neutral international armies and of Arab countries which would sign peace agreements with Israel. He also stated it was likely that a situation will occur where Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip would be united under one authority. Regarding the possibility of living in one country with the Israelis, Abbas emphasized that such option would most likely be rejected by both sides due to the fact that it would put an end to Israel's existence as a Jewish state (Arab News, December 17, 2023).

The Northern Arena

Hezbollah's activity

► Hezbollah continued attacking IDF posts, concentrations of forces on the northern border and civilian targets. During the past day, Hezbollah claimed responsibility for carrying out seven attacks, mainly by launching anti-tank missiles and rockets (Hezbollah's combat information Telegram channel, December 17, 2023). A rocket that landed in Kibbutz Sasa damaged a building.

► IDF forces responded with artillery fire and airstrikes on Hezbollah military targets and squads in Lebanese territory (IDF spokesperson, December 17, 2023).



Right: Attack on Hezbollah's terrorist infrastructure (IDF spokesperson, December 18, 2023).

Left: Attack on a squad (IDF spokesperson, December 17, 2023)



Attack on Hezbollah's military facility (IDF spokesperson, December 17, 2023)

Fatalities in the incidents

► Hezbollah reported the deaths of three operatives (Hezbollah's combat information Telegram channel, December 17, 2023):

- ◆ Musa Muhammad Mustafa, aka Jihad, from Beit Lif in south Lebanon.
- ◆ Hassan Musa al-Diqa, aka Osama, from Hazin in the Beqaa Valley.

- ◆ Hassan Ma'an Srour, aka Ali Ibrahim, from Ayta al-Shaab, in south Lebanon.



Hezbollah fatalities (Hezbollah's combat information Telegram channel, December 17, 2023)

► **Hashem Safi al-Din, chairman of Hezbollah's Executive Council**, gave a speech at a memorial ceremony for two Hezbollah operatives in the town of al-Hermel (in the Beqaa Valley). He said that after Israel's attacks on the Gaza Strip, they were absolutely convinced that preserving their homeland and future in Lebanon depended on the "resistance," maintaining deterrence, rockets and missiles, weapons, and on the experience and expertise of the "resistance." He claimed Israel had failed to fulfill the mission it had planned in the Gaza Strip, having failed to win the battle after 70 days of fighting. He added that the campaign after Operation al-Aqsa Storm would belong to the entire nation, and it would determine many of the points of conflict and equations in the military and political dimensions in the region (al-Mayadeen, Lebanon, X account, December 17, 2023).

Syria

- According to a Syrian military source, at around 10 p.m. Israel attacked several sites in the Damascus area from the air. He said their air defense had shot down some of the missiles. Military personnel were wounded in the attack and property was damaged (SANA, December 17, 2023).
- According to a report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), Israeli fighter jets carried out two waves of airstrikes against Syrian army air defense targets and military positions, including a concentration of forces operating in collaboration with Hezbollah near the shrine of al-Sayyida Zaynab, south of Damascus, and the al-Dimas residential compound of military personnel in Damascus. According to the report, two people were killed in an attack on a military post near the residential compound and several fighters were wounded in an

attack on a military post in Qudsiya, northwest of Damascus (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, December 17, 2023).

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Judea and Samaria

Terrorist attacks

►A stabbing attack was carried out at a gas station near the village of Rantis (west of Ramallah). An IDF officer was wounded and opened fire at the terrorist, but the terrorist fled the scene. Other forces chased him and blocked roads. During searches in the Rantis area, the forces apprehended the stabber (IDF spokesperson, December 17, 2023). The Palestinian media reported he was Rami Hamza Ballut, 24, from Rantis (Nabad website, December 17, 2023).



Right: Documentation of the stabbing attack (al-Jazeera TV, December 17, 2023). Left: Rami Hamza Ballut (Arabs48 X account, December 17, 2023)

►On the morning of December 18, 2023, a drive-by shooting targeted two Israeli vehicles near the town of al-Rawabi (northeast of Ramallah). One of the vehicles, in which a family was traveling, was hit by about ten bullets. The driver returned fire. His wife was wounded and their children were unscathed. Israeli security forces pursued the terrorists (Israeli media, IDF spokesperson's X account, December 18, 2023).



The vehicle damaged in the shooting attack (MDA, December 18, 2023)

Counterterrorism activities

► During the past day, Israeli security forces operated in several locations in Judea and Samaria, including Nablus, the al-Dheisheh refugee camp in Bethlehem and the al-Am'ari refugee camp in Ramallah (IDF spokesperson's X account, December 18, 2023). During the forces' activity in the al-Far'a refugee camp, south of Tubas, armed Palestinians shot and threw IEDs at the forces, who responded with gunfire (IDF spokesperson's X account, December 18, 2023). The Palestinian media reported that four people had been killed during clashes and exchanges of fire with Israeli security forces in the al-Far'a refugee camp. Since the morning, the IDF has reportedly deployed many reinforcements to the site (Ma'an and al-Arabi TV, December 18, 2023).



Right: The entrance of an IDF bulldozer to the al-Far'a refugee camp. Left: An IED detonated during an Israeli security force operation (QudsN X account, December 18, 2023)

► Since the beginning of the war in the Gaza Strip, about 2,400 wanted Palestinians have reportedly been detained, of whom about 1,200 were Hamas operatives (IDF spokesperson's X account, December 18, 2023).

Palestinian Authority (PA)

► Mahmoud Abbas visited Kuwait to offer his condolences to the incoming ruler of Kuwait, Mishal al-Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah, on the death of the previous ruler (his half-brother), Nawaf al-Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah. Abbas praised Nawaf al-Jaber's support for the Palestinians and wished the incoming ruler success in carrying out his duties (Wafa, December 17, 2023).



Mahmoud Abbas visiting Kuwait (Wafa, December 17, 2023)

► **Catherine Colonna, French foreign minister**, met in Ramallah with **PA Prime Minister Muhammad Shtayyeh**. During the meeting, Shtayyeh stressed the importance of the pressure France could exert to stop Israel's activity in the Gaza Strip, Judea and Samaria and the necessity of opening all crossings to the Gaza Strip for the entry of humanitarian aid and fuel. He also called on France to take action against "settlers holding French citizenship." Referring to the day after the war, Shtayyeh made it clear that the Palestinian leadership's top priority was the need to reach a ceasefire, and that talking about the day after had to include a political solution that would include all the Palestinian territories and would lead to the two-state solution (Wafa, December 17, 2023).

► **Hussein al-Sheikh, secretary of the PLO's Executive Committee**, referred to their contacts with Hamas with the intention to have them join the PLO. He said Hamas had cut off contacts with them and at the moment there were no formal contacts. He noted that they welcomed all the organizations, but only if they adhered to PLO policy. He also said Hamas would be held accountable only after a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. He stressed that any confrontation with Israel required an agreement between all the Palestinians and that the PA recognized the need for reforms and was even prepared to implement them (al-Arabiya, December 17, 2023).

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Iran

► Israel's National Cyber Directorate announced that Iran and Hezbollah had been behind the attempted cyber-attack on Ziv Hospital in Safed last month. According to the announcement, after a joint investigation by the National Cyber Directorate, the IDF and the Israel Security

Agency, it was found that a cyber group of the Iranian ministry of intelligence, with the involvement of a group of Hezbollah hackers, had been behind the attempted cyber attack. It was halted before it could achieve its goal of disrupting the hospital's operations and damaging civilian medical care. However, it was found that the group had stolen some of the sensitive information stored in the hospital's systems (Ynet, December 18, 2023). Meanwhile, the operation of gas stations in many cities across Iran was reportedly disrupted on December 18, 2023. The Iranian Petroleum Ministry reported that the problem would be fixed by the end of the day and that in the meantime, the fuel pumps were operating manually (Tasnim, December 18, 2023). A hacker group called The Sparrow of Prey claimed to have shut down most of Iran's fuel pumps "in response to the aggression of Iran and its proxies in the region" (the group's X account, December 18, 2023).

► **Ramazan Sharif, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) spokesman**, said Israel had been defeated in the war with Hamas, could not overcome an organization like Hamas, and sought a ceasefire and prisoner exchange. He said "Palestine" would be the final winner on the battlefield and the fall of the "Zionists" was certain (Fars, December 17, 2023).

► **Hossein Amir Abdollahian, Iranian foreign minister**, wrote that 70 days had passed since the beginning of the war in Gaza, but Hamas had not been destroyed, the "resistance" had not been disarmed, the "Zionist prisoners" had not been liberated through the war, and the forced emigration program of the residents of the Gaza Strip had not borne fruit. He noted that despite the continuation of the "war crimes" against women and children, Palestine was the final winner on the unequal battlefield (Iranian foreign minister's X account, December 17, 2023).

Pro-Iranian militias

Iraq

► Iraq was relatively quiet, possibly due to provincial elections being held in the country.

Yemen

► The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operation (UKMTO) announced another explosion near a ship carrying containers in the Bab al-Mandeb Strait area, east of the Yemeni port city of Mokha (UKMTO X account, December 18, 2023). Later, a "maritime source in Yemen" was quoted as saying that the Houthis had fired a missile near the ship to warn it not to advance toward Israel (al-Jazeera, December 18, 2023).

► During his visit to the Middle East, **American Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin** is reportedly expected to announce the establishment of an expanded naval force to protect navigation from Houthi attacks in the Red Sea. The force will include several Arab countries, including Jordan, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Egypt and Bahrain (The Guardian, December 18, 2023). "American sources" reported that it was difficult for the United States to deal with the Houthi attacks due to differences of opinion between its Arab allies, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which preferred different ways to deal with them. According to the sources, the UAE is pushing the United States to carry out a military operation and designate the Houthis as a terrorist organization, while Saudi Arabia supports a more moderate approach for fear that any action will escalate the situation (Bloomberg Network, December 18, 2023).

► In view of the Houthis' attack on ships and the tension in the Red Sea, **Osama Rabia, head of Egypt's Suez Canal Authority**, said that the Suez Canal Authority was closely monitoring the situation and that navigation through the Canal was taking place as usual. He also noted that since November 19, 2023, a total of 55 ships had changed course to the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, while 2,128 ships had crossed the Canal (Reuters, December 17, 2023).

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Turkey

► **Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan** spoke with **American Secretary of State Antony Blinken**. According to a "Turkish diplomatic source," Fidan called on the United States to use its influence over Israel to stop the "aggression in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank," saying that after achieving a full ceasefire, Israel had to negotiate a two-state solution (Reuters, December 17, 2023).