



# Operation Iron Swords Updated to 1 p.m., December 19, 2023

### Northern Arena

- 477 attacks
- 111 Hezbollah operatives killed
- 17 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

## Overview<sup>1</sup>

► **The combat arena:** The IDF forces continued the integrated ground maneuver in the Gaza Strip, with fighting in Jabalia, Shejaiya and Beit Hanoun in the northern Gaza Strip; there was also activity in Gaza City. In the southern Gaza Strip IDF forces continued taking control of Khan Yunis. Palestinian sources reported escalating intensity and accused Israel of attacking hospitals throughout the Strip.

► **According to an unofficial estimate, since October 7 approximately 1,200 Israeli civilians and security personnel have been killed, 463 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.**

► **The issue of the hostages:** Senior Hamas terrorists reiterated that no negotiations were currently taking place and that any deal would be conditioned on a comprehensive ceasefire. Regarding the publication of the video in which three hostages were seen, Hamas claimed it

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

was message sent to the Israeli public because "the Israeli leadership was indifferent and misleading the public" [sic].

► **The Gaza Strip:** There were reports of aid trucks entering the Gaza Strip through the Rafah crossing and the Kerem Shalom crossing.

► **The northern arena:** Hezbollah claimed responsibility for three attacks, one of which was a rocket barrage attacking Kiryat Shmona in response to an IDF attack during the funeral of a Hezbollah terrorist operative.

► **Judea and Samaria:** The Israeli security forces continued counterterrorism activities.

► Houthi sources, responding to the United States plan to establish a multinational force in the Red Sea, claimed they would be able to deal with such a force and reiterated that they only operated against Israeli ships or those whose destination was Israel.

## The Combat Arena

► **The northern Gaza Strip:** The IDF forces continued the integrated ground maneuver in the **Shejaiya** region, mainly conducting face-to-face combat against the terrorist operatives of the Shejaiya Battalion of the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades, Hamas' military-terrorist wing. Since the beginning of the fighting they have clashed with a large number of terrorists in the area, located and destroyed more than ten tunnels, cleared the area and confiscated weapons and intelligence materials located in operatives' houses. The forces also located dozens of rocket launchers, some of which were positioned near schools and cemeteries (IDF statement, December 18, 2023).

► In Beit Hanoun, after prolonged fighting IDF, forces defeated the Beit Hanoun Battalion. They took control of its command and control centers and posts, some of which were located in schools and residential buildings. They located the battalion's main terrorist tunnel, situated in the heart of a residential area, which passed under the municipality building, a mosque, the soccer field and a kindergarten. In the same area they exposed a training complex which included laser shooting equipment (IDF spokesperson, December 18, 2023).

► **Islam Bader, an al-Arabi TV correspondent in Jabaliya,** reported that exchanges of fire in Jabaliya had lasted throughout the night and intensified in the morning. He said fighting was taking place in the al-Tawam and al-Saftawi areas in western Jabalia and the Jabalia refugee camp in the Tel al-Za'atar area to the east. He reported IDF forces and APCs on the ground, and snipers deployed on the roofs of buildings. He said the Tel al-Za'atar area was relatively

high ground and therefore the IDF focused its fighting there (al-Arabi YouTube channel, December 19, 2023). An al-Arabi correspondent reported IDF tanks to the east and west of the refugee camp (al-Arabi YouTube channel, December 18, 2023).

► **Dr. Ashraf al-Qidra, spokesman for Hamas-controlled the ministry of health in the Gaza Strip**, reported that the IDF forces had turned al-Awda Hospital in the Jabaliya refugee camp [Tel al-Za'atar area] into a military camp, detaining 240 people, 80 of them medical personnel, including **hospital director Dr. Ahmed Muhanna**, 40 patients and 120 displaced persons (Shehab X account, December 19, 2023).



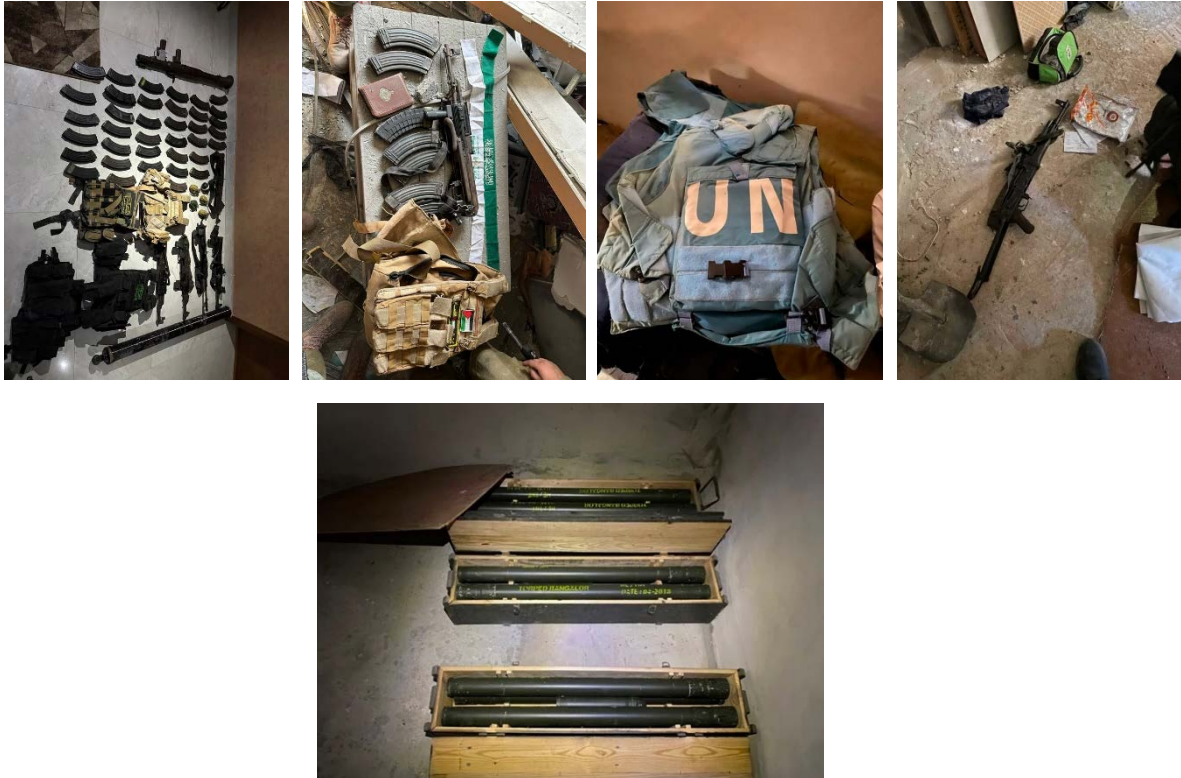
**Al-Arabi TV reports on the IDF's combat moves in the Jabalia refugee camp (al-Arabi YouTube channel, December 18, 2023)**

► **Gaza City**: IDF forces destroyed a tunnel shaft near the beach in the southern part of the city. After the explosion a large number of terrorists were seen fleeing into a structure located on the coastline. An Israeli Air Force fighter jet destroyed the structure (IDF spokesperson, December 19, 2023).

► After the attack on Shifa Hospital, the **Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)** claimed "the Nazi-Zionists [sic]" had turned large areas of the Gaza Strip into "genocide camps [sic]" where innocents were killed, adding that the [alleged] "massacres" were carried out under the supervision and direction of the United States government. The PIJ shifted responsibility for the war to the entire world and strongly condemned the inability of the Arab and Islamic governments to exert genuine, serious pressure to end the fighting (PIJ media information bureau Telegram channel, December 18, 2023).

► **The southern Gaza Strip**: In the Khan Yunis area, the IDF forces breached the defense lines of the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades' Khan Yunis Brigade, the regional governmental and military center, and began maneuvers in the area. They conducted face-to-face battles, eliminating a large number of terrorist squads, and with aerial support, attacked terrorist facilities. A system of shafts and tactical tunnels was exposed at the site, from which terrorists emerged and

attacked the fighters. The forces also located and destroyed a facility for the production of UAVs and a number of rocket launchers aimed at Israel (IDF spokesperson, December 18, 2023). On the night of December 18, 2023, the forces carried out integrated raids on terrorist facilities in Khan Yunis, locating a munitions warehouse containing IEDs, weapons and grenades (IDF spokesperson, December 19, 2023).



**The weapons found in Shejaiya and Khan Yunis (IDF spokesperson, December 19, 2023)**

► **Ibrahim Qanan, a correspondent for al-Ghad TV in Khan Yunis**, reported intense exchanges of fire in northern and central Khan Yunis and noted tank fire as well. He claimed "resistance fighters" [terrorist operatives] were preventing the IDF forces from advancing toward the southwest of the city. He also reported extensive destruction in the city center, adding that commercial activity had ceased due to the fighting (al-Ghad TV December 19, 2023). Al-Ghad TV also reported exchanges fire between IDF forces and Hamas' military-terrorist wing to the east of the al-Bureij refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip (al-Ghad TV, December 19, 2023).



**An al-Arabi TV presenter describes the IDF fighting in the Khan Yunis area (al-Arabi YouTube channel, December 18, 2023)**

►Palestinian media reported 29 dead in an attack on three buildings in Rafah. The casualties were evacuated to Abu Yusuf al-Najar Hospital and the Kuwaiti Hospital (al-Quds, al-Arabi TV, December 19, 2023).



**The results of a night attack in Rafah (Shehab X account, December 19, 2023)**

►**Aerial activity:** Israeli Air Force aircraft attacked terrorist targets throughout the Gaza Strip and assisted the fighting forces on the ground.



**Israeli Air Force attacks in the Gaza Strip (IDF website, December 19, 2023)**

► **Naval activity:** Israeli Navy forces attacked buildings where operatives of Hamas' military-terrorist wing were located and boats used for terrorist purposes. At the same time, the forces continued assisting the ground forces' maneuvers (IDF website, December 19, 2023).

## Palestinian reactions to the events

► **Senior Hamas terrorist Osama Hamdan held a press conference in Beirut** where he claimed that during the past two days Israel has escalated its activities "against the civilians, the displaced, the wounded and the hospitals with the backing and help of American weapons," with specific reference to IDF activity in the Kamal Adwan Hospital compound. He added that IDF forces had [allegedly] "massacred defenseless civilians and families" in Jabaliya and attacked Shifa Hospital again. In addition, he claimed the IDF continued to attack, destroy and encircle schools in the northern and southern Gaza Strip where hundreds of thousands of displaced persons had found shelter. He also claimed Israel had destroyed "all the hospitals in the Gaza Strip" and detained their medical teams for questioning.

► Hamdan also noted the publication of the exposure of the large Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades tunnel had come later, 72 days after the start of the war, after they had "successfully carried out their mission [sic]" and was only intended to whitewash Israel's [alleged] failure. He claimed the IDF had heavy losses which would increase the longer the "aggression" continued. He added that the "resistance," led by Hamas' military[-terrorist] wing, was conducting the campaign "wisely, efficiently and responsibly," fought the IDF forces face to face, inflicted casualties, and its rockets continued attacking deep into Israeli territory (al-Jazeera Mubasher YouTube channel, December 18, 2023).

## Israeli casualties

► **According to an unofficial estimate, since October 7 approximately 1,200 Israeli people have been killed. According to the IDF spokesperson, 463 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 Mahmoud al-Mardawi** said there were contacts between the mediators and the Hamas delegation responsible for managing the negotiations, headed by

**[senior terrorist] Khalil al-Haya, deputy chairman of the Hamas political bureau in the Gaza Strip and responsible for Arab and Islamic relations** [incorrectly reported in the original as Osama Hamdan]. However, al-Haya's position, regularly relayed to the mediators, was firm and irreversible: the killing of Palestinians had to stop, then there would be negotiations where, under the auspices of the mediators, conditions would be agreed on. Hamas would commit to them on the condition that Israel did the same (Algerian online newspaper al-Balad website, December 17, 2023).

►At his press conference in Beirut, **senior Hamas terrorist Osama Hamdan** reiterated that there would be no negotiations for a prisoner deal until the "aggression" stopped completely, and claimed they were open to any Qatari or Egyptian initiative to stop the "aggression." He said that how they related to the initiative would be consistent with the Palestinians' victims, firm stand and "national plan," as well as the "resistance's" worldview (al-Jazeera Mubasher YouTube channel, December 18, 2023).

►**Senior Hamas terrorist Taher al-Nunu, media advisor to Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau**, claimed the American administration and the Israeli leadership were misleading the Israeli public by reporting that negotiations were taking place, which was "not true" (Egyptian Veto portal, December 18 2023). On another occasion, regarding the publication of the video in which three hostages were seen, he claimed it was message sent to the Israeli public because "the Israeli leadership was indifferent and misleading the public" [sic]. He claimed Hamas was open to negotiations but not before a comprehensive ceasefire, the end of the war and the introduction of urgent aid to the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip (al-Jazeera Mubasher TV website, December 19, 2023).

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## The Gaza Strip

### Palestinian casualties

►**The Hamas-controlled ministry of health in Gaza** reported that as of 2:15 p.m., December 19, 2023, the number of dead since the beginning of the war stood at more than 19,667 and the number of wounded at more than 52,586 (Shehab X account, November 27, 2023).

►On the morning December 19, 2023, an Israeli Air Force fighter jet carried out a targeted strike in Rafah on Subhi Farwana, who, with his brother, had been involved in the transfer of tens of

millions of dollars to finance the activities of Hamas' military-terrorist wing through their currency-exchange business (IDF website, December 19, 2023).<sup>2</sup>



**Subhi Farwana (IDF spokesperson, December 19, 2023)**

## The situation in the Gaza Strip

►The Wafa YouTube channel published pictures of a tent camp erected in west Rafah for displaced persons from the Gaza Strip. The tents were donated by Qatar (Wafa YouTube channel, December 19, 2023).



**The tent camp erected in western Rafah (Wafa YouTube channel, December 19, 2023)**

## Aid to the Gaza Strip

►According to reports, humanitarian aid was delivered to the Gaza Strip through the Rafah and the Kerem Shalom Crossings (Wafa YouTube channel, December 18, 2023). The Red Crescent in the northern Sinai Peninsula reported the passage of 40 trucks carrying humanitarian aid and medical equipment into the Gaza Strip through the Kerem Shalom

<sup>2</sup> For further information, see the November 2023 ITIC report, "[Financing Terrorism: Currency Exchange in the Service of Hamas.](#)"



Crossing and the passage of four diesel tankers and two gas tankers through the Rafah Crossing (al-Quds, December 18, 2023).



**Right: Delivering humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip through the Rafah Crossing. Left: Delivering humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip through the Kerem Shalom Crossing (Wafa YouTube channel, December 18, 2023)**

►The Bank of Palestine reported that in the last two days it had distributed thousands of food parcels to displaced persons in the shelters throughout the Gaza Strip to alleviate their hardships (Ma'an, December 18, 2023).



**Distribution of food financed by the Bank of Palestine to displaced persons in the shelters (Ma'an, December 18, 2023)**

## Hamas

►On December 15, 2023, events to commemorate the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of the engineer Mohammed al-Zawari<sup>3</sup> were held in the Tunisian city of Sfax. **Senior terrorist Khaled Mashaal, Hamas leader "abroad,"** gave a videoed speech during the activities in which he said that Mohammed al-Zawari had been present in the Operation al-Aqsa Storm from its first day because they used the UAVs he had developed. Mashaal added that after 70 days of fighting "the resistance was winning, stood firm and was inflicting many defeats on

<sup>3</sup> A Tunisian aerospace engineer who developed UAVs for Hamas' military-terrorist wing. He was killed in Tunisia on December 15, 2016.

Israel." He claimed that Palestine was not only the Palestinian epic but the epic of the entire Islamic nation, and the aftermath would be greater than the "victory." He called on the Tunisians to take measures against the Israelis in all the international forums to reveal the circumstances of al-Zawari's "assassination" and to take revenge on the Mossad, which was believed to be behind it, and on everyone who had a hand in the operation (Palinfo, December 18, 2023).

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## The Northern Arena

### Hezbollah attacks

- ▶ Hezbollah continued attacking IDF posts, concentrations of forces on the northern border and civilian targets. During the past day, Hezbollah claimed responsibility for three attacks. Hezbollah claimed that despite the relatively small number, one attack targeted Iron Dome aerial defense systems north of Kibbutz Kabri, and one was a barrage of rockets targeting Kiryat Shmona. Hezbollah claimed that the rockets had been launched in response to an IDF attack during the funeral of a Hezbollah operative in Aita al-Sha'ab and said any attack on civilians would be met with a similar response (Hezbollah combat information Telegram channel, December 18, 2023).
- ▶ The IDF responded with artillery fire and an aerial attack on Hezbollah military targets and squads in Lebanese territory (IDF spokesperson, December 17, 2023).



**Attack on a rocket launcher used to attack Israel (IDF spokesperson, December 18, 2023)**



**IDF attacks on Hezbollah terrorist facilities (IDF spokesperson, December 18, 2023)**

## Other organizations

► **Rabih Banet, chairman of the Syrian Social National Party (SSNP)** in Lebanon, met with **senior Hamas terrorist Osama Hamdan**. Banet said his party continued to confront Israel alongside the various "resistance" [terrorist] organizations, and said its operatives and all its mechanisms were fully prepared to continue operating anywhere necessary. Hamdan said Hamas adhered to its position that the "aggression" had to stop before any hostage deal, and claimed it would not be conducted according to Israel's agenda. He also claimed that Hamas has prepared for long months of war and was ready (Lebanese al-Watania News Agency, December 18, 2023).

► On December 15, 2023, the SSNP's military wing, the Eagles of the Whirlwind, announced the death of operative Wisam Muhammad Salim while "performing his national duty in southern Lebanon on the way to Palestine." According to the announcement he was born in the town of al-Sarafand in 1996, joined the ranks of SSNP in March 2013, and its military wing in 2021 (SSNP X account, December 15, 2023).



**Wisam Muhammad Salim, aka Haydar (SSNP X account, December 15, 2023)**

## UNIFIL

► **Catherine Colonna, the French foreign minister**, who is visiting Lebanon, met with **Aroldo Lazaro, the UNIFIL commander**. She said she had been briefed on the "alarming situation in south Lebanon," adding that France supported UNIFIL's activities for the sake of peace and stability in the region (Catherine Colonna's X account, December 18, 2023).

## The Lebanese government

► **Najib Mikati, the Lebanese interim prime minister of Lebanon**, also met with Catherine Colonna. He said that stopping Israeli "aggression" against Lebanon and implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1701 were their top priorities, provided that Israel complied with it [sic]. Colonna said that the level of escalation on both sides of the border should be reduced and a mechanism should be created for a solution as a prelude to permanent stability in the region (Lebanese government X account, December 18, 2023).

## Syria

► On December 18, 2023 around 10 p.m. several rockets were launched at Israel from Syria; they fell in open areas. In response, IDF forces attacked the sources of the launches, and IDF tanks attacked a military position of the Syrian army (IDF spokesperson, December 18, 2023).



**IDF attack on a Syrian army position (IDF spokesperson, December 18, 2023)**

## Jordan

► A "senior military source" at the Jordanian armed forces' general headquarters said Jordanian border guard forces were confronting "armed groups" on the Syrian border and had prevented the smuggling of a large quantity of drugs, automatic weapons and missiles. According to the source, the "armed groups" had been deported to Syria. It was later reported

that Jordan had carried out several airstrikes in Syrian territory against the hideouts of Iranian-supported drug smugglers (Reuters, December 18, 2023).

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## Judea and Samaria

### Counterterrorism activities

- ▶ The Israeli security forces continued their counterterrorism activities in Judea and Samaria detaining ten wanted Palestinians, four of them Hamas terrorist operatives (IDF spokesperson's X account, December 19, 2023).
- ▶ The following were the main events:
  - ◆ In the early morning hours of December 19, 2023, Israeli security forces operated in the village of Aqraba, southeast of Nablus. They demolished the house of Osama Bani Fadl, who had carried out the shooting attack in Hawwara (August 19, 2023), killing two Israelis, a father and son, (IDF spokesperson's X account, December 19, 2023). The Palestinians reported extensive security activity in the area, during which the forces closed the area to residents. Clashes were reported between Palestinians and the Israeli security forces (al-Arabi TV, December 19, 2023).



**Demolition of Osama Bani Fadl's house in Aqraba**  
(Correspondent Hisham Abu Shaqra's X account, December 19, 2023)

- ◆ In the village of Surif (north of Hebron), Israeli security forces seized 40 illegal vehicles, and in Beit Ummar (north of Hebron) an M-16 rifle. In the village of Qarawat Bani Hassan

(northeast of Salfit), Israeli security forces seized NIS 100,000 [a little over \$27,300], funds intended to finance terrorist activities (IDF spokesperson's X account, December 19, 2023).

## Solidarity with the Gaza Strip

► The Palestinian network of NGOs held a demonstration in front of the UN headquarters in Ramallah, demanding an end to the war in the Gaza Strip (Wafa, December 18, 2023).



**Demonstration in front of UN headquarters (Wafa, December 18, 2023)**

## Palestinian Authority (PA)

► **PA Prime Minister Muhammad Shtayyeh** said that the renewed Authority that Israel and its allies were talking about was not their Authority. He said what Israel wanted was an administrative security authority, while the Palestinians wanted a national authority fighting for independence and an end to the "occupation." Israel wanted an authority with a school curriculum parallel to the "occupation's", but the Palestinians' national curriculum referred to Jerusalem as their capital and to the right of return (Wafa, December 18, 2023).

► **Jibril al-Rajoub, secretary of Fatah's Central Committee**, who is visiting Algeria, called on Hamas and the PIJ to hold a national reconciliation meeting in Algeria to end the schism, pave the way for elections and agree on a joint Palestinian "struggle" plan. He said stopping the "aggression" against the Gaza Strip was a prelude to building a national Palestinian government for all Palestinians in all the Palestinian territories as one unit (al-Arabi, December 18, 2023).

► **Mahmoud al-Habbash, Mahmoud Abbas' advisor on religious affairs**, responded to the quarterly Palestinian opinion poll conducted by Khalil Shikaki, published on December 13, 2023, claiming they did not act according to "fabricated polls with a destructive agenda," nor did they act according to external forces or pressures. He said Hamas was not the only factor

deciding on behalf of the Palestinians, there were those who represented the Palestinians, the PLO and Mahmoud Abbas, and no one had the authority to tell them what to do or what not to do except for the Palestinians (TRT, December 18, 2023).<sup>4</sup>

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## Iran

► **Ali Bagheri, Iranian deputy foreign minister**, who is visiting Yemen, said at a press conference that the "crimes" committed against the residents of the Gaza Strip were a threat to international peace and security, and that international actors had to use all the means at their disposal to end the "genocide" in the Gaza Strip. He said the Palestinian people could and should decide their own fate. Referring to the relationship between Iran and the Houthis, Bagheri said the Yemeni government, which had announced its intention to prevent the transfer of aid to Israel as long as the "Zionist crimes against the residents of Gaza" continued, was an independent actor in the international arena and acted at its own discretion, and therefore it was wrong to link its actions to others (Fars, December 18, 2023).

► **Amir-Ali Hajizadeh, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Force**, said that the United States was conducting the campaign in the Gaza Strip and that Israel, which had defeated three large Arab armies in 1967, had been halted for more than 70 days by Hamas, "a small Palestinian guerrilla group." He said the "Zionist regime" presented the war against Hamas as an existential war, proving that its existence was in danger, adding that Operation al-Aqsa Storm was the beginning of major global and regional events, and the defeat would not only be Israel's but the United States' as well. He claimed the power of the Muslims and the "axis of resistance"<sup>5</sup> was no longer allowing the United States to overthrow rulers and conquer territories as it had done in the past. Continuing such actions would lead to its collapse and it would not be able to continue supporting the Zionists or starting wars in the region (Tasnim, December 19, 2023).

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<sup>4</sup>For further details on the poll, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from December 15, 2023, "[Public opinion poll finds Palestinians in the West Bank more satisfied about Hamas' activity than Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.](#)"

<sup>5</sup>Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, the Palestinian terrorist organizations, the Shi'ite Houthis in Yemen and the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq.

## Pro-Iranian militias

### Yemen

► **Yahya Saria, spokesman for the Houthi armed forces**, reported that they had carried out a "high-quality" military operation using a UAV against two ships linked to Israel, the Swan Atlantic, which transported oil, and MSC CLARA, which transported containers. He noted that they reiterated their promise to all ships heading to ports around the world, except for Israeli ports, that they would not be harmed, and that they had to keep their identification systems switched on (Yahya Saria's Telegram channel, December 18, 2023).

► Following the attacks on the ships, eight more international shipping companies announced that they would stop sailing in the Red Sea. The British marine insurance market has widened the area in the Red Sea it deems as high risk after a surge in attacks on commercial ships, which will have direct implications for shipping insurance prices (Reuters, December 18, 2023).

► **American Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin** announced Operation Prosperity Guardian to protect trade routes in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The announcement stated that participating countries would be Britain, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the Seychelles and Spain, and that it was a multinational force designed to jointly deal with security challenges in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to ensure freedom of navigation for all countries and strengthen regional security and prosperity (Department of Defense website, December 18, 2023). Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE will not take part in the force, apparently to avoid a confrontation with Iran.

The Secretary of Defense's announcement provoked reactions from the Houthis:

◆ **Mohammad Nasser al-Atefi, minister of defense in the Houthi government**, said they had all the means to sink their ships, submarines and aircraft carriers, and threatened that the Red Sea would be a cemetery for them (Tasnim, December 19, 2023).

◆ **Houthi spokesman Mohamed Abdel-Salam** said they reiterated that the shipping lanes in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea were safe and that there was no danger to ships belonging to any country except ships belonging to Israel or those sailing to it. He also said that threatening them was biased and unrealistic American propaganda seeking to build an international wall to protect Israel at sea after its concrete walls had



collapsed in the face of Operation al-Aqsa Storm (Houthi spokesman's X account, December 18, 2023). In another statement, he said that the Houthis would not change their position on the war in the Gaza Strip following the establishment of the multinational naval force by the United States, adding that the force was unnecessary because all the waters near Yemen were safe except for Israeli ships or ships sailing to Israel (Reuters, December 19, 2023).

◆ **Mohammed al-Bukhaiti, a member of the Houthi political bureau**, said they could confront any coalition formed by the United States in the Red Sea, and that their armed forces had painful and unexpected options to respond to any aggression. He added that if the United States carried out any aggression against Yemen, it would lose militarily and morally [sic] (Aljazeera, December 18, 2023).

◆ **Hizam al-Assad, a member of the Houthi political bureau**, said no force would prevent them from supporting the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and punishing Israel (Hizam al-Assad's X account, December 19, 2023).

## The Arab Arena

### Egypt

► In his victory speech given after winning the presidential elections, **Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi** noted he was speaking during the war in the Gaza Strip, which required Egyptian efforts end it because it threatened the Palestinian issue in general and Egypt's national security in particular. He added that the rallying of Egyptians in the elections was also a message to the entire world that they opposed the war (Egyptian presidential website, December 18, 2023).

### The Arab League

► **Ahmed Abu al-Gheit, secretary general of the Arab League**, said the objective of Israel's war was not the destruction of Hamas but the destruction of the territory of the Gaza Strip and the possibility of living there for a long time. According to him, Israeli leaders did not hide that objective and declared that in the future there would be no Palestinian state and the Palestinians would not be sovereign in their land (Ahmed Abu al-Gheit's X account, December 18, 2023).

## Syria

► **Syrian President Bashar Assad** declared at a pre-election Ba'ath Party meeting that the war in the Gaza Strip and the "resistance" had proved that technology was more important than weapons, ideology was stronger than the "cruelty of terrorism and crime," the best means of defense was attack and that groveling before enemies was not an option but suicide. He claimed that today the Gaza Strip defended Palestine, Palestine defended Syria and all Arab countries, and the Lebanese "resistance" [Hezbollah] defended south Lebanon, all of Lebanon, Syria and the Arabs. He added that losses or victories were determined by the belligerent side itself. The Israeli army was one of the strongest armies in the world, at least technically and in terms of destruction, and "resistance fighters" [terrorist operatives] who had numbered no more than a few Israeli army brigades attacked it, which in itself was an unparalleled humiliation for the Israeli army (SANA, December 18, 2023).

## The International Arena

### International Criminal Court

► French lawyer Gilles Devers<sup>6</sup> said the International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation into Israel's "crimes" in Gaza was "moving in the right direction," and that the team set up by the chief prosecutor was continuing its work and had already met twice with representatives of a team representing Palestinian victims, who had filed the complaint against Israel on November 9, 2023. He noted that for the first time in the ICC's history, the complaint was handled only a few days after the establishment of the investigative commission. He said the commission was making every effort to collect as much evidence and testimonies as possible related to "genocidal crimes against Palestinian civilians." In response to a question about the slow proceedings while Israel continued its "massacres," Devers said the ICC conducted long-term investigations, especially in times of war. He took issue with the fact that there was still not enough support for the complaint filed against Israel, noting that Western countries

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<sup>6</sup> Lawyer Gilles Devers has been a member of the Lyon Bar Association since 1985 and a Doctor of Law. On November 9, 2023, he petitioned the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court to include the "crime of genocide" committed in Gaza in the Palestine investigation carried out by the ICC.

refused to support the complaint, while the leaders of the Arab and Islamic world were satisfied so far with minimal activity (website of the Algerian newspaper El Massa, December 18, 2023).

## The European Union

► **Josep Borrell, EU foreign policy chief**, noted that too many civilians were being killed in the Gaza Strip and that they had witnessed a "horrific lack of distinction" in Israel's military operation after a church, monastery and shelters for displaced persons had been attacked and hundreds of displaced persons had died. He said it had to stop and a humanitarian temporary ceasefire was urgently needed (Josep Borrell's X account, December 18, 2023).