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Israel's Operation Swords of Iron Update December 19, 2023

JINSA's Israel at War webpage is a dedicated resource for analysis, commentary, webinars, and media coverage about the 10/7 attacks and the ensuing Israel-Hamas conflict. An update with the latest information and analysis about the war is below.

Analysis

- The announcement of a new multinational maritime partnership for Red Sea security, Operation Prosperity Guardian, is an important step toward countering the escalation of maritime aggression by the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen. Yet, the creation of a new task force is insufficient to deter further maritime aggression. The task force or individual nations must be willing to exert military force against the Houthi fighters responsible for launching the attacks, as noted during a JINSA webinar by former Deputy Commander U.S. Central Command VADM Mark Fox, USN (ret.) and former Commander U.S. Naval Forces Central Command VADM John Miller, USN (ret.).
 - Operation Prosperity Guardian will operate under the already existing 39-nation member Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) maritime partnership and the leadership of the CMF's Task Force 153 for Red Sea security.
 - It is not yet clear how Operation Prosperity Guardian will differ from Task Force 153, since they are both responsible for protecting the Red Sea. The limited membership in Operation Prosperity Guardian likely indicates that those who chose to join it are more willing to exert pressure on the Iranian regime and the Houthis.
- A New York Times/Siena College poll indicated that a majority of Americans do not favor President Biden's handling of the Israel-Hamas war and a slight plurality want Israel to terminate its operations in Gaza. Public dissatisfaction with the president's policies and Israel's continued efforts to retrieve the hostages in Gaza and eliminate Hamas could lead the Biden administration to exert increasing pressure on Israel to terminate the war before it has achieved its objectives.

Last 24 Hours

Attacks Against Israel

At least 12,500 rockets, mortars, drones, and other projectiles have been fired at Israel during the war.

Gaza

- Sirens sounded in Tel Aviv, Bat Yam, Jaffa, Rishon LeTziyon, Ramat Gan, and dozens of other towns across central and southern Israel.
- On December 18, a rocket barrage was fired at Tel Aviv. No injuries were reported. Hamas claimed responsibility for the rocket launches.
- On December 19, the IDF released a video of Ahmed Kahlot, the director of the Kamal Adwan Hospital in the Jabaliya area of northern Gaza, saying that Hamas uses hospitals to hide its operatives, conduct military activity, and transport hostages.
 - Kahlot said, "they hide in hospitals because for them a hospital is a safe place. They won't be targeted when they are inside a hospital."
 - » Kahlot added that he personally knows "16 employees in the hospital doctor, nurse. paramedic, or clerks," who are in Hamas.
 - » Kahlot further stated, "there are offices where the Hamas leader and two of the senior officials were. There's a place where the soldier was in (the kidnapped soldier). There's a place for the interrogators, internal security, and special security. All of them have private telephone lines inside the hospital. They [Hamas] have a private ambulance."

Lebanon

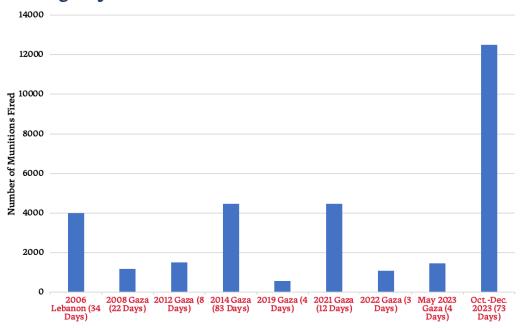
- Sirens sounded in the northern Israeli communities of Ayelet HaShachar, Mishmar HaYarden, and Sde Eliezer.
- On December 18, one rocket fired from Lebanon landed in an open area near Metula. Later that day, an anti-tank missile was fired at the Israeli town of Avivim and IDF air defenses intercepted an aerial target, likely a drone, that entered Israeli airspace from Lebanon. No injuries were reported.

Syria

On December 18, several rockets were fired from a Syrian Army outpost in southern Syria, three of which fell in the Golan Heights.

Projectiles Fired Against Israel During Major Conflicts





IDF Operations

Gaza

- On December 19, troops from the 261st Brigade's 6651st Reconnaissance Battalion <u>carried</u> <u>out</u> raids on Hamas in northern Gaza's Jabaliya and Atara areas.
 - » The unit raided the homes of Hamas operatives, Hamas weapons depots, and Hamas weapons manufacturing plants, and uncovered weapons including firearms, rockets, and explosives.
 - » The unit also found pictures of young children in Hamas uniforms posing with weapons.
- On December 19, the IDF and Shin Bet <u>announced</u> that a Gazan man, Subhi Farwanah, and his brother, responsible for transferring tens of millions of dollars in financing to Hamas's military wing, were killed in an airstrike in southern Gaza.
- The IDF <u>announced</u> on December 18 that it broke through Hamas's lines of defense in Khan Younis in an operation led largely by the IDF's elite Duvdevan unit. The unit eliminated Hamas infrastructure, terrorist operatives, and uncovered a number of tunnels.
- Troops from the Golani Brigade <u>engaged</u> in intense fighting with Hamas's Sheijaya battalion in the Shejaiya neighborhood of Gaza City, raiding the homes of Hamas operatives and seizing weapons and intelligence materials.
 - » In the past two weeks, the IDF estimates that approximately 600 Hamas operatives have been killed in Shejaiya, including roughly 200 killed by soldiers from the Golani Brigade.
 - » The Golani Brigade has also uncovered and destroyed over 10 terror tunnel shafts and dozens of rocket launching posts, including several near cemeteries or schools.
 - » Unit commander Col. Yair Palai said, "This neighborhood was and still is an established stronghold of the Hamas terror organization, and this is a problem that needs to be uprooted."

- The IDF said it captured a member of Hamas's elite Nukhba forces and an operative who participated in the October 7 massacre, as well as several other Hamas members, at a school in Gaza City's Rimal neighborhood on October 18.
- While speaking at a joint press conference with U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on December 18, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant stated that Israel is not bound by a timetable in its operations, saying, "there is not a clock that is running and we have to obey a certain day," but rather "we need to get to different performances on the ground before we move to the next phase."
 - Speaking about IDF operations, Gallant noted that the IDF "will continue to operate on different levels of intensity according to the situation in the region. Soon we will be able to distinguish between different areas in Gaza," and that "in every area where we achieve our mission, we will be able to transition gradually to the next phase and start working on bringing back local population."
 - Gallant added, "I'm not defining any region, and this is an ongoing discussion."
 - Gallant said that Israel and the United States have "transparent and frank discussions" about the war and that "we share everything."

Lebanon

On December 18, the IDF shelled sites in southern Lebanon with artillery in response to rocket fire. Later that day, the IDF conducted shelling and carried out an airstrike on a target in southern Lebanon in response to an earlier missile launch.

Syria

On December 18, the IDF struck a Syrian Army outpost in southern Syria with artillery and tanks in response to rocket fire that targeted northern Israel.

Humanitarian Efforts

- On December 18, U.S. State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller noted that for the first time since October 7, Israel permitted commercial goods, mostly food, to enter Gaza through Egypt's crossing at Rafah on December 16.
 - Miller said, "we hope to see this [commercial goods] channel solidified and expanded over the coming days," and "it is a critical step toward improving the lives of the Palestinian people in Gaza that we see not just humanitarian aid delivered, but also commercial goods that can be sold in stores and markets."
 - He added, "while this weekend's breakthroughs [regarding aid] are important, they are by themselves not sufficient. We will continue to work closely with the governments of Israel, Egypt, and partner countries in the region to further increase the humanitarian assistance flowing into Gaza to address the needs of the Palestinian people."
- On December 17, nearly 200 trucks of humanitarian aid entered Gaza, according to White House National Security Council Spokesperson, a large increase, due in part to Israel's decision to reopen the Kerem Shalom border crossing, 80 trucks entered Gaza via Kerem Shalom, while the other 120 or so entered via Egypt's Rafah Crossing.

Post-War Gaza Planning

- Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas told Reuters in a December 18 interview that he is prepared to reform the PA, but only in the context of a broader two-state solution initiative, and that he supports democratic elections in a Palestinian state including both Gaza and the West Bank.
 - Abbas argued, "the problem is not changing (Palestinian) politicians and forming a new government; the problem is the policies of the Israeli government." He added, "I am for negotiations based on an international peace conference and under international auspices that would lead to a solution that will be protected by world powers to establish a sovereign Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem."
 - » Speaking about the future of Gaza, Abbas said that he would want democratic elections to be held and their results honored, adding that "when we return, we'll need resources."
- Israel's Channel 12 reported on December 18 that an Israeli Foreign Ministry team formed by Foreign Minister Eli Cohen has been formulating a framework for Gaza's governance after the war to be presented to the cabinet.
 - Its guiding principle is, "Israel is working to bring about a future in which the Palestinians will govern themselves with no capacity to threaten Israel."
 - » It does not assign a role to the PA but does hint at a position for Gaza-based officials from the PA's Fatah party.
 - It endorses "complete freedom of action for the IDF" in Gaza, "enforcement of full demilitarization," "buffer zones," anti-smuggling mechanisms, monitoring of the Philadelphi Corridor adjacent to the Egyptian border, and a "maritime security force."
 - The document calls for "an international mechanism to handle humanitarian services," as well as Egyptian, Saudi, and Emirati Gaza-based international organizations, and local non-Hamas administration of Gazan civilian life.
 - In addition, it calls for a revamped school curriculum administered by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

Casualties and Hostages

- Over 1,245 people in Israel have been killed and another 6,900 have been injured in the war.
 - 463 Israeli soldiers have been killed.
 - 131 IDF soldiers have been killed during ground combat in Gaza so far.
 - The IDF announced the deaths of Cpt. Yarin Gahali, 22, from Rehovot; Cpt. (res.) Netanel Silberg, 33, from Na'ama; Master Sgt. (res.) Daniel Yacov Ben Harosh, 31, from Alon; and Rotem Yosef Levy, 24, from Oranit.
 - Numerous foreign nationals have been killed in the war, including at least 31 American nationals, 34 Thai nationals, 39 French nationals, 19 Russian nationals, 12 British nationals, 10 Nepalese nationals, 9 Argentinian nationals, 6 Canadian nationals, 4 Philippines nationals, 4 Austrian nationals, 4 Romanian nationals, 4 Portuguese nationals, 4 Chinese nationals, 3 Brazilian nationals, 3 Belarusian nationals, 3 Italian nationals, 3 Peruvian nationals, a Cambodian national, a Chilean national, an Irish national, a Spanish national, an Australian national, an Azeri national, a Honduran national, a Swiss national, a Tanzanian national and a Turkish national.

- According to unverified figures from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Health Ministry, 19,453 people have been killed in Gaza and 52,286 have been injured during the war.
 - On December 4, Associated Press and AFP reported, citing an IDF official, that roughly 15,000 Palestinians have died since the war began and that roughly 5,000 of those killed were terrorists.
 - » On October 25, President Biden cautioned against trusting Gaza Health Ministry casualty figures, stating: "I have no notion that the Palestinians are telling the truth about how many people are killed ... I have no confidence in the number that the Palestinians are using."
- According to the Palestinian Authority-run Palestinian Ministry of Health, 301 people have been killed and an additional 3,692 have been wounded in the West Bank.
- The IDF claims that it has killed at least 1,500 infiltrators from Gaza since the start of the
- So far, 105 hostages in Gaza have been released, one has been rescued by the IDF, seven have been found dead, and three were mistakenly killed by the IDF.
 - » 81 Israeli hostages have been released.
 - 46 hostages with foreign nationalities—some also holding Israeli citizenship—have been released.
 - Thus far, 23 Thai nationals, 6 Argentinian nationals, 5 German nationals, 3 French nationals, 4 Russian nationals, 1 Dutch national, 1 Filipino national, 1 Mexican national, 1 Uruguayan national, and 1 American national have been released.
 - Hamas has released 36 children and still holds two as hostages.
- Terrorists in Gaza currently hold 134 hostages, including 111 men, 20 women, and two children. 10 hostages are 75 and older, 124 are Israeli, and 11 are foreign nationals, including eight from Thailand.
 - Many of the hostages are foreign or dual nationals, including up to 9 American nationals, 6 German nationals, 13 Thai nationals, 4 Portuguese nationals, 3 British nationals, 2 Italian nationals, 4 Romanian nationals, and 2 Mexican nationals.
- Following the release of a Hamas propaganda video depicting three Israeli hostages, IDF Spokesperson Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari <u>called</u> the video "atrocious terror" that "shows the cruelty of Hamas against elderly civilians, innocents, who require medical attention. The world must work to allow medical aid and to verify their conditions."
 - » Hagari added, "our hearts are with the hostages and their families at every moment," and "Haim, Yoram, and Amiram, I hope you can hear me this evening. You should know that we are doing everything to return you home safely. We will not rest until you return."
- On December 18, Hamas released an undated video of three Israeli hostages speaking while held in its captivity. The hostages were Chaim Peri, 79; Amiram Cooper, 84; and Yoram Metzger: 80, all of Nir Oz.
 - IDF Spokesperson Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari responded to the video by saying, the video represents "atrocious terror" and "shows the cruelty of Hamas against elderly civilians. innocents, who require medical attention. The world must work to allow medical aid and to verify their conditions. Our hearts are with the hostages and their families at every moment."

Iranian Involvement and Response

- On December 18 at roughly 9:00 am local time, the Iran-backed Houthis launched two attacks on commercial shipping vessels.
 - The MV Swan Atlantic, a Cayman Islands-flagged chemical and oil products tanker, was targeted with projectiles in the Red Sea.
 - The Houthis also attacked the Panama-flagged MSC Clara in the Red Sea.
 - Houthi spokesperson Yahya Saree claimed the ship was attacked with naval drones after it refused to respond to Houthi radio transmissions. No further details were reported.
- On December 18, Houthi official Mohammed al-Bukhaiti posted on X that the Iran-backed terrorist group will continue to attack shipping in the Red Sea despite the announcement of a U.S.-led multinational maritime coalition for Red Sea security.

U.S. and International Response

- A New York Times/Siena College poll published on December 19 found that a majority of Americans disapprove of President Biden's handling of the Israel-Hamas war, with 57% of Americans disapproving, 33% approving, and 10% unsure.
 - » When asked who they believed would handle the Israel-Palestinian conflict better, 46% chose Republicans, 38% believed Democrats, and 16% were unsure.
 - Nearly three-quarters of Americans ages 18-29 years old disapproved of President Biden's handling of the Israel-Hamas war.
 - » A narrow plurality in the poll of 44% believed that Israel should stop its military campaign, with 39% believing that Israel should continue it.
 - The responses in the poll were nearly identical, irrespective of whether Israel's objective was described to participants as securing the release of all of the Hostages or eliminating Hamas.
- On December 18, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin announced the creation of a new multinational task force, Operation Prosperity Guardian, "with the goal of ensuring freedom of navigation for all countries and bolstering regional security and prosperity."
 - The task force will operate under the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), an existing 39member maritime security partnership, and the leadership of the CMF's Task Force 153 for Red Sea security.
 - In addition to the United States, the members of Operation Prosperity Guardian will include the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles, and Spain.
- At a press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said that the Houthi attacks "must stop." He also noted that the United States will keep providing Israel with the equipment "that you need to defend your country," including "critical munitions, tactical vehicles and air defense systems ... We'll continue to support Israel's mission to find and free all of the hostages. And I'm also here to discuss how we can best support Israel on a path to lasting security — and that means tackling urgent needs first," such as humanitarian aid for Gaza.
- On December 18, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said at a joint press conference in Israel with Defense Minister Yoav Gallant that the United States and Israel have a shared interest in eliminating Hamas as a threat, and that the United States is not dictating how Israel wages its war against Hamas.

- Austin noted that Hamas "has clearly and loudly spelled out its vision of the future, and it is to repeat October 7th over and over and over again. No country should tolerate such a danger, and Israel has every right to defend itself against a fanatical terrorist group whose stated purpose is to murder Jews and eradicate the Jewish state."
- Austin added, "Hamas should never again be able to project terror from Gaza into the sovereign state of Israel" and that "it's critical, as I said earlier, that Hamas not be able to threaten Israel from Gaza or even threaten Gaza anymore. And, you know, that's an interest that we all share and it's a common interest with all of us."
- Austin noted that the United States is actively encouraging Israel to crack down on settler violence in the West Bank, stating that in his meetings with Israel officials he discussed "the need to take urgent action to stabilize the West Bank, Attacks by extremist settlers against the Palestinians in the West Bank must stop," adding that perpetrators must be held accountable.
- Speaking about Israel's timetable for operations, Austin said, "we all know that any military operation, any large-scale military operation, will have phases to its campaign. And as you go from one phase to the next, you know, your stance shifts a little bit, your activity shifts a little bit because you begin to focus on -- on different things, and what those things they'll be defined by the Israelis."
- However, Austin cautioned that "as you transition from one phase to another, it doesn't mean that -- I mean, that doesn't signal an end to the operation. It sometimes means that you're being more -- more precise, you're being -- more focused on a specific target set. You're doing different things during that campaign."
- Asked by a reporter about the U.S. role in Israel's operational timetable, Austin said, "regarding the timeline, this is Israel's operation and I'm not here to dictate timelines or terms. Our support to (sic) Israel's right to defend itself is ironclad, as you've heard me say a number of times, and that's not going to change."
- After a meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu on December 18, Austin said, speaking about the recent spate of Houthi attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, that the United States is "leading a multinational maritime task force to uphold the bedrock principle of freedom of navigation. Iran's support for Houthi attacks on commercial vessels must stop."
- On December 18, Axios reported that CIA Director William Burns met in Warsaw with Israeli and Qatari officials to discuss a potential new hostage deal, including Mossad chief David Barnea and Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani.
 - According to the report, Israeli officials believe the terms of a deal will be more difficult this time to agree upon. In recent days, Hamas officials have said they will only restart negotiations under the condition that Israel cease its operations in the Gaza Strip.
- On December 18, U.S. State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said that the United States is "deeply concerned" by footage from December 15 of Israeli Border Police officers beating Mustafa Haruf, a Palestinian photojournalist in East Jerusalem. Haruf was hospitalized after the attack, and the police officers involved were suspended.
 - Miller said the video showed "disturbing images," and "we think it's appropriate that ... the video be investigated, and if the facts support it, that the people involved be held accountable."
- In response to the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem's recent <u>allegation</u>, which the IDF refuted, that an IDF sniper killed an elderly woman and her daughter on the grounds of a Gaza City Catholic church, U.S. National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on December 18, "we have raised our concerns about this particular incident with the Israeli government

about the need for those who have injuries or who have been wounded to be able to be safely evacuated so that they can receive appropriate medical treatment."

- Kirby called the allegations "alarming" and said "more can be done" by Israel to protect civilians and permit aid to flow amid fighting.
- He clarified that "we haven't seen any evidence that the Israelis are making it an aim of war ... to go out and slaughter innocent people. It is happening, and people are being killed, people are being wounded, and we recognize that. But that's a far cry from saying it's part of the war aims, as it is for Putin and as it is for Hamas."
- » An IDF statement issued on December 17 said that "representatives of the church contacted the IDF regarding explosions that were heard near the church. During the dialogue between the IDF and representatives of the community, no reports of a hit on the church, nor civilians being injured or killed, were raised," and that "a review of the IDF's operational findings support this."
- On December 18, John Kirby said, "the [Israeli] attacks that have occurred on the Lebanese Armed Forces [LAF] are deeply concerning since [they] are not part and parcel of this conflict." According to a CNN report, the IDF has struck the LAF over 34 times since the war began.
- John Kirby said on December 18 that while a hostage release deal and concomitant fighting pause are not "imminent," the United States is pursuing them daily.
- As negotiations over the wording continue, the UN Security Council's planned vote on a resolution calling for a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas war, introduced by the United Arab Emirates, was postponed until December 19.
- On December 18, South Africa's foreign affairs ministry issued a statement stating that any South African nationals who join the IDF are "liable for prosecution in South Africa" due to potential violations of international law. The statement added that in some cases, citizens who join the IDF or have already joined may lose their South African citizenship.
- Taglit-Birthright Israel announced that it will resume trips to Israel next month. The program is a free ten-day trip to Israel for Jewish adults aged 18-26.

Rising Antisemitism. Protests, and Attacks

- On December 18, anti-Israel protests took place across New York City, including at Grand Central Terminal, Port Authority Bus Terminal, and Penn Station, disrupting transit service and leading to several arrests.
 - Actor Alec Baldwin got caught up in the protests as they marched across the city. He was asked, "you work in Hollywood, so do you condemn Israel?" When he answered no. that he supports peace, protestors told him, "shut your f-king mouth, you have no f-king shame," and, "Go f-k yourself," before police had to escort him out of the crowd.
- On December 18, the trial of Algerian soccer player Youcef Atal began in France. Atal is charged by French authorities with inciting hatred after he shared a video on social media that threatened Israel with a "black day."
- Following a protest last month during which demonstrators brandished signs saying, "Biden: Ceasefire Now." "Free Free Palestine." and "Drop the Charges!" while blocking every lane to San Francisco on the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, prosecutors have begun charging 80 protesters. The protesters demonstrated during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, which President Biden and other world leaders attended.

- 17 defendants appeared in court on December 18 facing charges including false imprisonment, refusing to comply with a peace officer, unlawful public assembly, refusing to disperse, and obstruction of street, sidewalk or other public place.
- According to a poll by the Campaign Against Antisemitism, 48% of Jews in the United Kingdom have considered leaving the country due to antisemitism, including 17% who strongly agreed.
- On December 15, Kanye West went on an antisemitic tirade at a hotel in Las Vegas, laced with profanities, during which he said, "Who got the hospitals? These zionists, ni**as. Jesus Christ, Hitler, Ye. Third party. Sponsor that. ... Bring your sponsorships to that."

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- VADM John Bird, USN (ret.), Jacob Olidort, and Ari Cicurel, "Deterrence Is More Than Deployments: The Effects, and Limitations, of the Administration's Naval Movements in the Middle East." RealClearDefense, December 14, 2023
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- LTG H. Steven Blum, ARNG (ret.) and Jacob Olidort, "Communication of intent and the importance of language to deterrence," Military Times, December 7, 2023
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- Webinar: Gaza War Update, with IDF Major General (ret.) and JINSA Distinguished Fellow Yaakov Amidror and JINSA Senior Vice President for Israeli Affairs IDF Major General (ret.) Yaacov Avish, December 7, 2023
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- Webinar: Britain's Reaction to Israel-Hamas War, with JINSA President and CEO Michael Makovsky, Editorial Board Member and Opinion Columnist at The Wall Street Journal Joseph Sternberg, and former president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews Jonathan Arkush, November 27, 2023
- Michael Makovsky, "What Israel Needs," The National Interest, November 24, 2023