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Israel's Operation Swords of Iron Update December 21, 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

- A column by Israeli National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi indicated that Israel is committed to post-war reconstruction in Gaza but also appeared to show a [softening](#) of the Israeli government's previous hard stance against the involvement of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in governing post-war Gaza, provided that the PA makes reforms, including ending incitement to violence against Israel. This shift in position comes amid [reporting](#) that senior PA and Hamas leaders have discussed cooperating together to govern Gaza and the West Bank.
 - » Hanegbi's comments seem to mark a shift toward the Biden administration's stance, which it has been pushing heavily, that the PA must be included in post-war governance in Gaza.

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

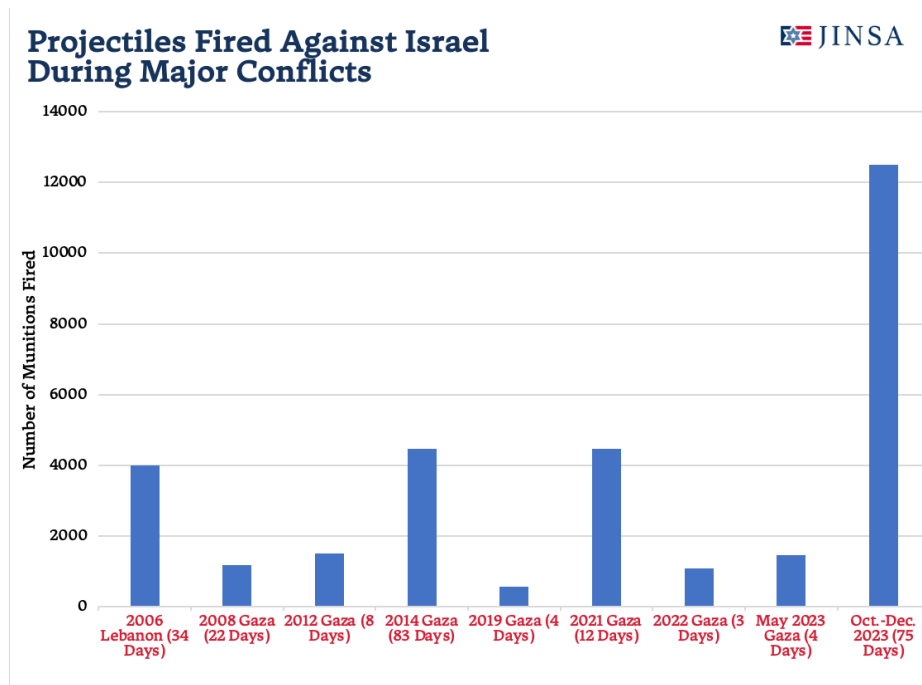
- [Sirens sounded](#) in Ashkelon, Ashdod, Magen, [Nirim](#), and Nir Oz.
- On December 21, a barrage of at least 30 rockets was [fired](#) from Gaza at towns across central and southern Israel.
 - » Shrapnel from one rocket [landed](#) on a school in Tel Aviv and shrapnel from another landed in a park in Kiryat Ono, causing property damage and no reported injuries.
 - » Hamas later [claimed](#) responsibility for the rocket attacks, which it said targeted Tel Aviv.
- The sirens in Nirim on December 21 [marked](#) the first projectile attack against Israel from Gaza after a 40-hour respite, the longest since Hamas's October 7 massacre, other than the temporary fighting pause in November.

Lebanon

- Rockets [struck](#) Kiryat Shmona, and [sirens sounded](#) in Arab al-Aramshe, Goren, [Misgav Am](#), [Ma'alot-Tarshiha](#), [Shomera](#), [Abirim](#), [Kfar Vradim](#), and Menara.
- On December 21, Hezbollah [fired](#) a barrage of at least eight rockets at the city of Kiryat Shmona, two of which landed in the city. The rockets struck a home and a preschool, causing property damage and no reported injuries.
- Two civilians, a man and a woman, were lightly [injured](#) on December 21 by an anti-tank missile attack targeting Dovev in Israel's north as a [simultaneous](#) missile attack struck a car in Avivim. The two victims were transported to Ziv Medical Center in Safed.
- On December 21, Israeli media outlets [reported](#) that an interceptor missile was fired at an aerial target near the city of Safed after a drone infiltration alert sounded nearby.
- On December 20, terrorists in southern Lebanon [launched](#) two surface-to-air missiles at an Israeli aircraft, which missed the aircraft. The IDF said that several other rockets were fired in the incident and that it used an interceptor missile.

Syria

- Sirens [sounded](#) in Ein Quiniyye and Mas'ade.
- On December 20, terrorists in Syria [fired](#) four rockets at the Golan Heights. No injuries were reported.



IDF Operations

Gaza

- On December 21, the IDF [said](#) that it struck approximately 230 Hamas targets during the past day. It also said that the army's 551st Brigade uncovered Hamas weapons in a Jabaliya school in which civilians were sheltering.

- » The IDF's 14th Brigade requested an airstrike against a Hamas cell in Shati on Gaza's northern coast, and the 7th Armored Brigade requested an airstrike against a building containing Hamas operatives in Khan Younis in southern Gaza.
- » The IDF said that it destroyed a rocket launching post where attacks on Israel were being readied, and that the Israeli Navy struck Hamas naval vessels overnight.
- On December 21, Hamas [claimed](#) that Bassam Ghaben, the Hamas-appointed director of the Kerem Shalom crossing on the Israeli-Gaza border, and three other Palestinians were killed in an Israeli strike near the Rafah crossing on the Egyptian-Gaza border.
- According to [reports](#) from December 20, the IDF released information about a vast tunnel network masked by Palestine Square in Gaza City. Hamas officials including military leader Muhammad Deif and the group's head Yahya Sinwar utilized the network.
 - » Commander of the IDF's 401st Armored Brigade Col. Benny Aharon noted that "this was a bustling area, there are buildings here of wealthy people," and "there are other squares in Gaza City, but this is the main one."
 - He also said that Hamas officials such as Deif, Sinwar, and Ismail Haniyeh kept offices or homes as well as personal tunnel access points close to the square. The IDF thinks that Hamas leaders hid in the massive tunnel network during the group's October 7 massacre.
 - » Aharon also noted the presence of "regular homes of civilians, that people seemingly live in the day-to-day, but in reality, they are either a hideout apartment for terrorists, or directly underneath the building, they have meeting rooms, where all of Hamas's officials met." He also pointed out that Hamas "built the underground [infrastructure] over decades, which is aimed at protecting themselves, the seniors, not the civilians, not even the soldiers in this case — their terrorists — but their officials."
 - » The IDF said that the tunnels had blast doors and living areas and contained food and water.
 - » The IDF called the network an "underground terror city" containing a "strategic tunnel route connected to other significant underground infrastructure in the Gaza Strip."
 - » The IDF found a wheelchair in a building near a tunnel entrance thought to have been used by Deif, despite earlier reports that he is more physically functional than previous reports that he was paralyzed indicated.
- On December 20, IDF Spokesperson Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said that the IDF has [expanded](#) its operations into the Gaza City neighborhoods of Daraj and Tuffah, which are adjacent to Shejaiya, as the IDF nears the conclusion of its ground offensive in northern Gaza.

Lebanon

- On December 21, the IDF [struck](#) Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon, including a launching post, with airstrikes and artillery in response to earlier projectile attacks.
- On December 21, the IDF reportedly [launched](#) strikes in southern Lebanon in response to an earlier anti-tank missile attack targeting Avivim.
- On December 21, Hezbollah's *Al-Manar* news outlet reported that three Israeli missiles [struck](#) an empty home in the Lebanese town of Kafr Kila, near the border.
- Overnight on December 21, the IDF [struck](#) several sites in Lebanon after an attack against Kiryat Shmona.

- The IDF [struck](#) Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon on December 20 in response to earlier projectile attacks, including military infrastructure, rocket launching posts, a command center, and a weapons depot. The IDF also conducted artillery shelling at other targets along the Lebanese-Israeli border.
- On December 20, IDF troops [opened](#) fire on an unspecified number of terrorists who approached the Lebanese-Israeli border.

Syria

- The IDF [shelled](#) targets in Syria, including a Syrian Army position, on December 20 in response to earlier rocket fire.

Red Sea

- In response to Houthi aggression, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant [announced](#) on December 20, during a tour of an Israel Navy Sa'ar 6-class corvette at the Eilat port, that Israel “will not tolerate threats and attempts to attack Eilat.”

Humanitarian Efforts

- On December 20, Palestinian media sources [reported](#) that Egyptian officials have said they will put pressure on both Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) to accept proposals for a humanitarian pause. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh is in Cairo to discuss a potential pause, and PIJ leader Ziad al-Nakhala is expected to be visiting Cairo in the coming days.
- Lebanese media outlet *Al Akhbar*, which is thought to have ties to Hezbollah, reported on December 20 that a [deal](#) for the exchange of 10 prisoners in Israeli custody for every hostage is being considered. However, it would be contingent on Israel receiving a status update on the 40 hostages that Israel wants released first, including women, the elderly, and those in poor health.
- Reporting in *The Wall Street Journal* on December 20 indicated that Hamas had [rejected](#) an Israeli proposal for a pause in combat for one week in exchange for the release of 40 hostages.

Post-War Gaza Planning

- A column by Israeli National Security Adviser Tzachi Hanegbi in the Saudi-owned *Elaph* news site [argued](#) that Israel is committed to working with Palestinians and the international community to rebuild Gaza. He argued that “[b]eyond ensuring the security of our citizens, which we will not compromise on, Israel has no interest in controlling civil affairs in Gaza, and there will need to be a moderate Palestinian governing body that enjoys broad support and legitimacy ... it’s not for us to decide who this will be.”
 - » Hanegbi also noted that the international community has pushed for the PA to take over governing Gaza but that this would be impossible to do without reforms, including ending incitement to violence against Israelis. He argued, “[i]n its current form, the PA finds this difficult to do, and it will require much work and the assistance of the international community and regional neighbors. We are ready for this effort.”

Casualties and Hostages

- Over 1,245 people in Israel have been [killed](#), and another 6,900 have been injured in the war.
 - » 469 Israeli soldiers have been [killed](#).
 - 137 IDF soldiers have been [killed](#) during ground combat in Gaza so far.
 - The IDF [announced](#) the deaths of Sgt. Lavi Ghasi, 19, from Hashmonaim; Lt. Yaacov Elian, 20, from Ramat Gan; and Lt. Omri Shwartz, 21, from Shadmot Dvora.
 - » 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, at least 20,000 people have been [killed](#) in Gaza, and at least 52,600 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, 302 people have been [killed](#), and an additional 3,753 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 war.
- So far, [105](#) hostages in Gaza have been released, [one](#) has been rescued by the IDF, and [seven](#) have been [found](#) dead.
 - » 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.

Iranian Involvement and Response

- response to the announcement of Operation Prosperity Guardian, the new U.S.-led multinational task force to protect shipping in the Red Sea, Houthi leader Abdel-Malek al-Houthi [announced](#) on December 20 on the terrorist group's *Al-Masirah* television, "if the Americans intend to escalate further, get more involved and commit foolishness by targeting our country ... we will target them ... we will make American battleships, American interests and American navigation a target for our missiles and drones."

U.S. and International Response

- On U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [said](#) on December 20 that bringing the Israel-Hamas war to an end "as quickly as possible" is a top priority for the Biden administration.
 - » Blinken added, "it's clear that this conflict needs to move — will move — to a lower intensity phase. We expect to see, and want to see, a shift to more targeted operations, with a smaller number of forces that are really focused on dealing with the leadership of Hamas, the tunnel network and a few other different things. As that happens, you'll see the harm done to civilians decrease significantly."
 - » Blinken further stated that the United States wants to "ensure that what happened on October 7 can never happen again" while also focusing on "minimizing loss of life and the suffering of civilians, getting the remaining hostages back home to their families, preventing the conflict from spreading, and breaking the devastating cycle of violence and moving toward durable, lasting peace."
- On December 21, Greece announced that it would [join](#) Operation Prosperity Guardian, the new U.S.-led maritime coalition to protect shipping in the Red Sea.
 - » With Greece's inclusion, there are 11 members who have publicly committed to participate. At the time of the announcement, [reporting](#) indicated that 19 nations had agreed to join with the majority not wanting to publicize their involvement.
- An expected United Nations Security Council vote on a resolution [calling](#) for a pause to the Israel-Hamas war was postponed again on December 20th. The vote had previously been postponed until the next day on December 18th, then again on December 19th.
 - » On December 20, President Joe Biden said regarding the resolution that "we're negotiating right now at the U.N. the contours of a resolution that we may be able to agree to."
 - » Ecuador's Ambassador to the United Nations, Jose Javier De La Gasca Lopez-Dominguez, said on December 20, "the Security Council has agreed to continue negotiations today to allow for additional time for diplomacy. And the presidency will reschedule the adoption for tomorrow morning." Ecuador currently holds the council's rotating presidency.
- On December 19, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) [passed](#) two resolutions condemning Israel in its final legislative session of 2023.

- » One resolution condemned Israel for alleged environmental damage during its 2006 war with Lebanon, while a second condemned Israel for allegedly exploiting the natural resources of the Palestinians.
- » A third resolution passed that day called for “the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination.”
- » Of UNGA resolutions in 2023, 13 resolutions criticized Israel, compared to seven criticizing other individual countries.
 - Two resolutions have criticized Russia in all of 2023.
 - The plenary passed resolutions in 2023 that condemned Iran, Myanmar, North Korea, and Syria. A resolution condemning the United States also passed.
- The office of Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim [announced](#) on December 20 that Malaysia would be banning all Israeli-owned or Israeli-flagged vessels from docking in its ports.

Rising Antisemitism, Islamophobia, Protests, and Attacks

- On December 20, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* [reported](#) that the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights had opened an investigation into Drexel University in Pennsylvania for alleged discrimination against, and harassment of, Jewish students.
 - » According to the report, on October 10, a Jewish student’s dormitory room at the school was targeted in an arson attack.
- On December 20, the Los Altos School District in Los Altos, California, [announced](#) that it was investigating an incident in which several swastikas were drawn on lockers in a boys locker room, including a locker belonging to a Jewish student.

Recent and Relevant JINSA Products About Israel at War

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- Yoni Tobin, [Red Cross Violates Mission of Impartial Humanitarian Assistance](#), December 18, 2023
- Mathew Kenney, [Key Middle East Provisions in the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act](#), December 15, 2023