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Israel's Operation Swords of Iron Update February 21, 2024

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. This week, JINSA will release the Swords of Iron Update on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday. An update with the latest information and analysis about the war is below.

Analysis

- The Houthis in Yemen have continued their attacks against ships in nearby waters in recent days despite reports that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Quds Force (IRGC-QF) Commander Esmail Qaani [met](#) with Tehran's proxies to convince them to lie low following a deadly January 28 Iran-backed strike on U.S. troops in Jordan.
 - » This suggests that Tehran may not want the Houthis to decrease their attacks in the Red Sea. It may also indicate the Houthis are operating more independently than Iran's other proxies.
 - » This may also point to growing fissures between Iran and its proxies as regional escalation continues.
 - The Kuwaiti news outlet *al-Jarida* [reported](#) on February 18, based on sources close to the IRGC-QF, that Iran sought further details from Hezbollah over its use of certain sensitive weapons against Israel that were intended for another time. The same report also noted that Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah warned Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian about the latter's guidance to exercise "strategic patience," saying Israel could perceive it as a sign of weakness and fear.

Last 24 Hours

Attacks Against Israel

- At least 13,000 rockets, mortars, drones, and other projectiles have been [fired](#) at Israel during the war.

Gaza

- On February 20, Israel's *Kan* network [released](#) extensive Israeli data documenting the close ties between the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and Hamas.

- » The data demonstrated that around 9,500 of UNRWA’s 12,000 employees in Gaza—roughly 4 out of 5 UNRWA employees—have ties to Hamas. This figure includes 440 UNRWA employees actively participating in terrorist activity.
- » The data further revealed that approximately 2,000 UNRWA staffers are registered as members of Hamas’s political wing, and another roughly 7,000 UNRWA employees have a close relative who is a Hamas terrorist.
- » The report stated that Iranian technology, reportedly manufactured in China, was located in the Hamas operations facility that was recently [uncovered](#) under UNRWA’s headquarters in the Gaza neighborhood of Rimal.
 - According to the report, “the IDF revealed that they had found many servers and drives located under the UNRWA headquarters that served Hamas and showed the connection between the two organizations. Now, the recent findings prove a direct connection to Iran.”
- According to a February 20 report from Israel’s *Channel 12* citing Arab officials, Hamas’s leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, is ill with pneumonia. The report [stated](#), “Arab officials reported that they had heard from the top of Hamas” that Sinwar was “suffering from complications from pneumonia.”

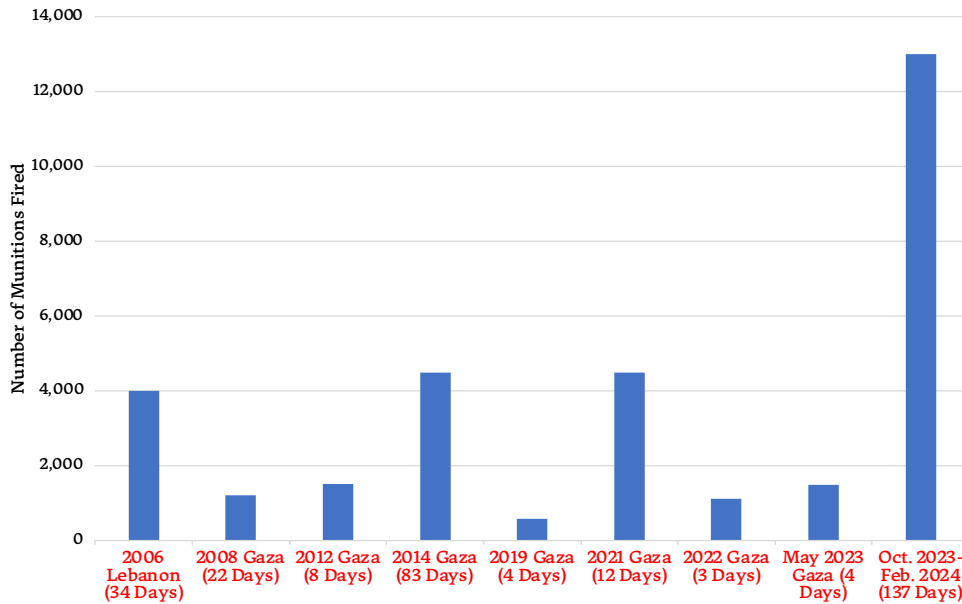
Lebanon

- On February 21, the IDF [located](#) documents in the southern Gazan city of Khan Younis showing that Hamas’s leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, believed Hezbollah would attack Israel in tandem with Hamas’s attack on Israel from Gaza on October 7.
 - » According to documents, Sinwar wrote that he received a pledge from Hezbollah that it would launch a parallel operation to infiltrate Israel and attack northern Israeli towns in the Galilee region. Sinwar wrote in one of the documents that “we have received a commitment that the axis will take part in the great freedom project, due to the nature of the connection we are working on.”
- On February 21, an anti-tank missile fired toward Metula [hit](#) an agricultural building, causing no injuries.
- An IDF spokesperson confirmed on February 20 that two drones entered Israeli airspace from Lebanon [undetected](#), including one that landed in the yard of a residential home in the Israeli city of Acre.
 - » That day, a Hezbollah drone [struck](#) the backyard of a home near the northern Israeli city of Acre. No damage or injuries were reported, and no warning sirens sounded in the incident.
 - » According to a report from Israel’s *Maariv* network, the IDF transferred a number of advanced technologies to the northern border to help shore up its defense and early warning systems.
 - » The *Maariv* report quoted an Israeli defense official as saying, “we understand that a process is taking place here by Hezbollah with Iranian assistance to throw weapons into the limited campaign using different methods, and we are having a war of minds here.”

Red Sea

- On February 20, the Houthis claimed to have used drones to [strike](#) “sensitive” sites in the southern Israeli city of Eilat. Israeli press outlets did not report that such an incident took place, and the IDF did not comment on the alleged attack.

Projectiles Fired Against Israel During Major Conflicts



IDF Operations

- On February 19, the office of Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [stated](#) that although Israel will permit prayers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem during Ramadan, there will be limits dictated by security needs. His office also said that Netanyahu “made a balanced decision to allow freedom of worship within the security needs determined by professionals.”

Gaza

- On February 21, the IDF’s military advocate general Maj. Gen. Yifat Tomer-Yerushalmi [wrote](#) to military commanders that “we have encountered unacceptable cases of conduct that deviate from IDF values and protocols.”
 - Tomer-Yerushalmi cited “inappropriate statements which encourage unacceptable phenomena; unjustified use of force, including against detainees; looting, which include the use or removal of private property for non-operational purposes; and destruction of civilian property contrary to protocols.”
 - She added, “some incidents go beyond the disciplinary domain, and cross the criminal threshold,” and “these acts and statements, on the part of individuals who do not represent the whole, are contrary to the IDF being a professional, moral, and dignified army, and they have no place in the IDF.”
 - She warned that this “[causes] the State of Israel and the IDF strategic damage in the international arena, the seriousness of which is difficult to overstate.”
- On February 21, the IDF [launched](#) a large-scale raid on Hamas targets throughout the Zeitoun neighborhood of Gaza City.

- » The Israeli Air Force and the 215th Artillery Regiment conducted strikes against dozens of Hamas targets, including observation posts, weapons depots, and terror tunnels, and the 401st Armored Brigade raided suspicious buildings throughout Zeitoun.
- » Dozens of Hamas operatives have been killed in the raid thus far.
- The IDF said on February 21 that it was “[deepening](#)” its operations in the southern Gazan city of Khan Younis, including a new offensive led by the Givati Brigade in eastern Khan Younis that has killed several Hamas operatives.
 - » The IDF’s Commando Brigade and Paratroopers Brigade expanded operations in western Khan Younis, and the 7th Armored Brigade called in airstrikes to eliminate two Hamas operatives.
- *The Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) on February 20, citing defense officials, that the IDF is building a new gravel road that bisects the Gaza Strip from east to west in order to quickly move troops and logistical support. The road would be used and patrolled until Israel finishes its operations, per Israeli officials cited in the report.
 - » According to footage aired on Israel’s *Channel 14*, Israeli combat engineers plan to destroy houses and other structures at the side of the road to widen the corridor for the road.
- On February 20, the IDF [published](#) a video documenting a weapons cache in a building next to a UN school in Khan Younis. The Paratroopers Brigade discovered the weapons. The IDF also said that it located additional weapons in another building close by.
 - » The IDF said further that the Paratroopers Brigade raided the home of the leader of the anti-tank unit of Hamas’s Khan Younis Brigade. The IDF Paratroopers Brigade confiscated weapons and intelligence information while helping Palestinian civilians escape the fighting. They also detained approximately 60 combatants hiding in a school with civilians, according to the IDF.

Lebanon

- On February 21, the IDF [said](#) that it launched strikes in southern Lebanon against three Hezbollah command centers and that it fired artillery against threats in Alma ash-Shab and Dhayra.
 - » The military added that on February 20, the 869th Combat Intelligence Collection Unit requested an airstrike against a building in Yaroun, Lebanon after Hezbollah members entered it.

Syria

- On February 21, Syria’s state-run *SANA* news agency [reported](#) that an Israeli airstrike killed two people and injured another person in the Damascus suburb of Kafar Sousah.
 - » Israel’s *Ynet* [reported](#) that day that three precision-guided missiles struck a building used “as headquarters for Iranian militias,” killing three people.
 - » That day, Syria’s *Sham FM* [reported](#) that Syrian air defenses intercepted a number of Israeli missiles to the south and southwest of Damascus.

West Bank

- On February 21, the IDF [said](#) that 40 suspects were arrested in overnight raids.
 - » The raids also uncovered weapons and explosives that had been planted to injure IDF troops, as well as over NIS 10,000 in terrorist funds.

- On February 21, the IDF [said](#) that the Duvdevan unit, Haruv reconnaissance unit, and Border Police operated overnight in the city of Jenin in the West Bank, killing three gunmen, detaining 14 suspects, launching an airstrike against combatants firing at troops, and confiscating weapons.
- On February 20, Palestinian media outlets [reported](#) that IDF troops clashed with terror suspects in the Jenin refugee camp, including an airstrike on a building in the area. According to local reports, three people were killed in the strikes and another three people were injured.

Humanitarian Efforts

- The U.K.-based *Asharq al-Awsat* [reported](#) on February 21 that a delegation from Israel will travel to Cairo, Egypt that day for further hostage negotiations. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh arrived in Cairo on February 20 for negotiations.
 - » According to the report, “there is progress in Egypt’s discussions with Hamas regarding the deal. Hamas has softened its positions and Egypt is working to achieve similar flexibility with the Israeli delegation as well.”
- According to February 20 [reports](#), citing Arab officials, Hamas’s backers are increasingly pressuring the terror group to halt hostilities and agree to a ceasefire in light of its lack of military success.
 - » Israel’s *i24 News* reported, citing Arab sources, that “senior officials from a country closely aligned with Hamas have urged the militant organization to cease fire, questioning the efficacy of its military actions.”
 - » The report quotes an Arab official in the country as saying, “you have achieved nothing, what kind of victory are you talking about?” Hamas reportedly responded that it was running low on ammunition and also blamed unspecified “disruptions” to its warfighting operations.
- Qatar’s Foreign Ministry said in a statement on February 20 that Qatar has received confirmation from Hamas that the terror organization [received](#) medicine intended for hostages as part of a deal brokered in mid-January.
 - » According to the [statement](#), Hamas confirmed “the commencement of [the medications] delivery to beneficiaries among the hostages.”
 - » The office of Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu released a statement later that day noting that “Israel will [examine](#) the credibility of the report.”

Casualties and Hostages

- Over 1,200 people were [killed](#) in Israel, and 13,000 Israelis have been [injured](#) in the war.
 - » 576 Israeli soldiers have been [killed](#).
 - 238 IDF soldiers have been [killed](#) during ground combat in Gaza so far.
 - The IDF [announced](#) the death of Staff Sgt. Avraham Wovagen, 21, from Netanya.
 - » Numerous foreign nationals have been killed in the war, including at least 33 [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 29,313 people have been [killed](#) in Gaza, and 69,333 have been injured during the war.
 - » On October 25, 2023, 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.”
 - » The IDF [said](#) on February 19 that it has killed approximately 12,000 Hamas operatives over the course of the war.
- According to the Palestinian Authority-run Palestinian Ministry of Health, 393 people have been [killed](#), and an additional 4,522 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, [three](#) have been rescued by the IDF, [seven](#) have been [found](#) dead, three have been [mistakenly](#) killed by the IDF, and one was [killed](#) during an IDF attempt to rescue him.
 - » 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.
- Israel has said that terrorists in Gaza currently [hold](#) 134 hostages, and according to IDF spokesman Rear Adm Daniel Hagari, the IDF has [notified](#) the families of 31 of the 136 hostages that their loved ones died, including two who were abducted prior to October 7.
 - » Many of the hostages are foreign or dual nationals, including up to 8 [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

- On February 20, Pentagon spokesperson Sabrina Singh [told](#) reporters that the Department of Defense believes the Houthis were responsible for shooting down the U.S. MQ-9 Reaper drone that Department of Defense officials previously [said](#) had fallen out of the sky on February 19.
 - » Singh [said](#) that “initial indications are that it was shot down by a Houthi surface-to-air missile” above the Red Sea off the coast of Yemen.
 - » She also [stated](#) that she does not “believe [the drone] has been recovered at this time” by the Houthis.

- On February 20, the Houthis [claimed](#) that they launched a number of missiles at the *MSC Silver*, which the terrorist group characterized as an Israeli cargo ship, as it transited through the Gulf of Aden.
 - » That day, the British maritime security firm Ambrey said that a Liberian-flagged cargo ship was targeted by the Houthis as it traveled towards Somalia in the Gulf of Aden.
 - Ambrey noted that the ship has ties to an Israeli shipping company, ZIM, and also regularly made port calls at Israeli ports.
- On February 20 at approximately 12:30 a.m. local time, the Houthis [fired](#) an anti-ship cruise missile toward the USS *Laboon* in the Red Sea. The warship intercepted the missile, and no damage or injuries were reported.
- Between 8 p.m. local time on February 19 and 12:30 a.m. local time on February 20, the Houthis [launched](#) at least 10 one-way-attack drones toward the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. U.S. and coalition aircraft and warships intercepted 10 drones, and no injuries were reported.
- On February 19 at approximately 7:20 p.m. local time, the Houthis [launched](#) a one-way-attack drone that struck the MV *Navis Fortuna*, a Marshall Islands-flagged, U.S.-owned operated commercial vessel, off the coast of Yemen. The drone strike caused minor damage to the ship and no reported injuries, and the ship continued to its scheduled destination in Italy.
- On February 19 at around 6:40 p.m. local time, the Houthis [fired](#) an anti-ship ballistic missile toward the Red Sea which did not impact any naval vessels.
- On February 19 between 12:30 p.m. and 1:50 p.m. local time, the Houthis [launched](#) two anti-ship ballistic missiles from Yemen toward the MV *Sea Champion*, a Greek-flagged and U.S.-owned commercial vessel, in the Gulf of Aden. CENTCOM said in a statement that “one of the missiles detonated near the ship causing minor damage. Nevertheless, her crew proceeded on course to their ultimate destination: delivering grain to Aden, Yemen.”

U.S. and International Response

- On February 21, the United States [called](#) on the International Court of Justice (ICJ) not to issue an advisory opinion that Israel is legally required to withdraw from the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The United Nations General Assembly had requested the advisory opinion, and the ICJ is conducting a week of hearings with an unprecedented 52 nations offering their opinions before the court.
 - » Acting Legal Advisor at the U.S. State Department Richard Visek, representing the United States at the ICJ, argued, “the established framework for achieving a comprehensive and enduring peace is anchored in UNSC resolutions 242 and 338. At their core these and subsequent resolutions call for the application of two interdependent and inseparable requirements for a just and lasting peace.”
 - Visek continued, “one is the withdrawal of all forces from occupied territory, the other is peace and security for states in the Middle East, through the acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence of every state in the area ... In identifying these interdependent requirements, the Security Council decided that the withdrawal from Israeli forces relies on and is bound together with the termination of belligerency.”

- Visek also argued that the court “should not find that Israel is legally obligated to immediately and unconditionally withdraw from occupied territory” and said the court can instead deal with the questions before it “within the established framework based on the land for peace principle.”
- On February 20, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby [stated](#) that an IDF operation in Rafah “would be a disaster” if Israel does not sufficiently account for the safety of Palestinians sheltering there.
- On February 20, U.S. State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller [told](#) reporters that “just calling for a temporary ceasefire that Hamas has not agreed to is not going to do anything to get the hostages out.”
- According to an *Axios* report citing U.S. and Israeli officials, U.S. National Security Council Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk [traveled](#) to Cairo, Egypt on February 20 to discuss hostage negotiations and a potential IDF operation in Rafah. McGurk reportedly will travel to Israel on February 21 to meet with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant as well as other senior Israeli officials.
- On February 19 at approximately 5 p.m. local time, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) [eliminated](#) a Houthi surface-to-air missile launcher in Yemen.
 - » That day, at roughly 8:15 p.m. local time, CENTCOM destroyed a Houthi one-way-attack drone in western Yemen that was “prepared to launch at ships in the Red Sea,” according to CENTCOM.
- On February 21, Colombia’s President Gustavo Petro and Bolivia’s President Luis Arce [defended](#) Brazil’s President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva’s comments comparing Israel’s campaign in Gaza to the Holocaust.
 - » Petro posted on X that “in Gaza there is a genocide and thousands of children, women and elderly civilians are cowardly murdered. Lula has only spoken the truth and truth must be defended or barbarism will annihilate us.”
 - » Arce posted on X that Lula was “telling the truth about the genocide that is committed against the brave Palestinian people.”

Rising Antisemitism, Islamophobia, Protests, and Attacks

- A group of pro-Palestinian faculty members at Harvard University, the Harvard Faculty and Staff for Justice in Palestine, [posted](#) an antisemitic image on social media on February 20. The image depicted a hand with a dollar sign inside a Star of David on it that was holding a noose around the necks of two Black men.
 - » Harvard University’s Harvard College Administrative Board initiated a review of the incident, and the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, which is currently investigating Harvard, made note of the incident as well.
- On February 20, Brazil’s First Lady Rosangela Lula da Silva wrote on social media that her husband, Brazil’s President Lula da Silva, was right to compare Israel’s war against Hamas to Nazi Germany’s genocidal campaign against Jews in World War II, [posting](#) on X that her husband’s remarks “referred to the genocidal [Israeli] government and not to the Jewish people.”
 - » President Lula da Silva had [commented](#) that “what’s happening in the Gaza Strip with the Palestinian people hasn’t happened at any other moment in history. Actually, it has

happened: when Hitler decided to kill the Jews,” and “it’s not a war of soldiers against soldiers. It’s a war between a highly prepared army and women and children.”

- On February 20, a politician in the United Kingdom, Liberal Democrat councilor and former Harrogate mayor Pat Marsh, was [arrested](#) for her antisemitic posts on X. In those posts, among many other statements, she called Jewish people “vile,” “horrendous,” and wrote, “this is atrocious and is a war crime, no wonder people are becoming anti Jewish.”
- On February 19, Holocaust memorial stumbling stones in Vienna, Austria, which memorialize the Jews murdered or expelled during the Holocaust, were [vandalized](#) with yellow paint.

Recent and Relevant JINSA Products About Israel at War

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