

# **The Middle East**

## **Is There a Pathway to Peace?**

January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2026

Jon R. Olson, MA, MPA  
Commander, US Navy (Ret.)

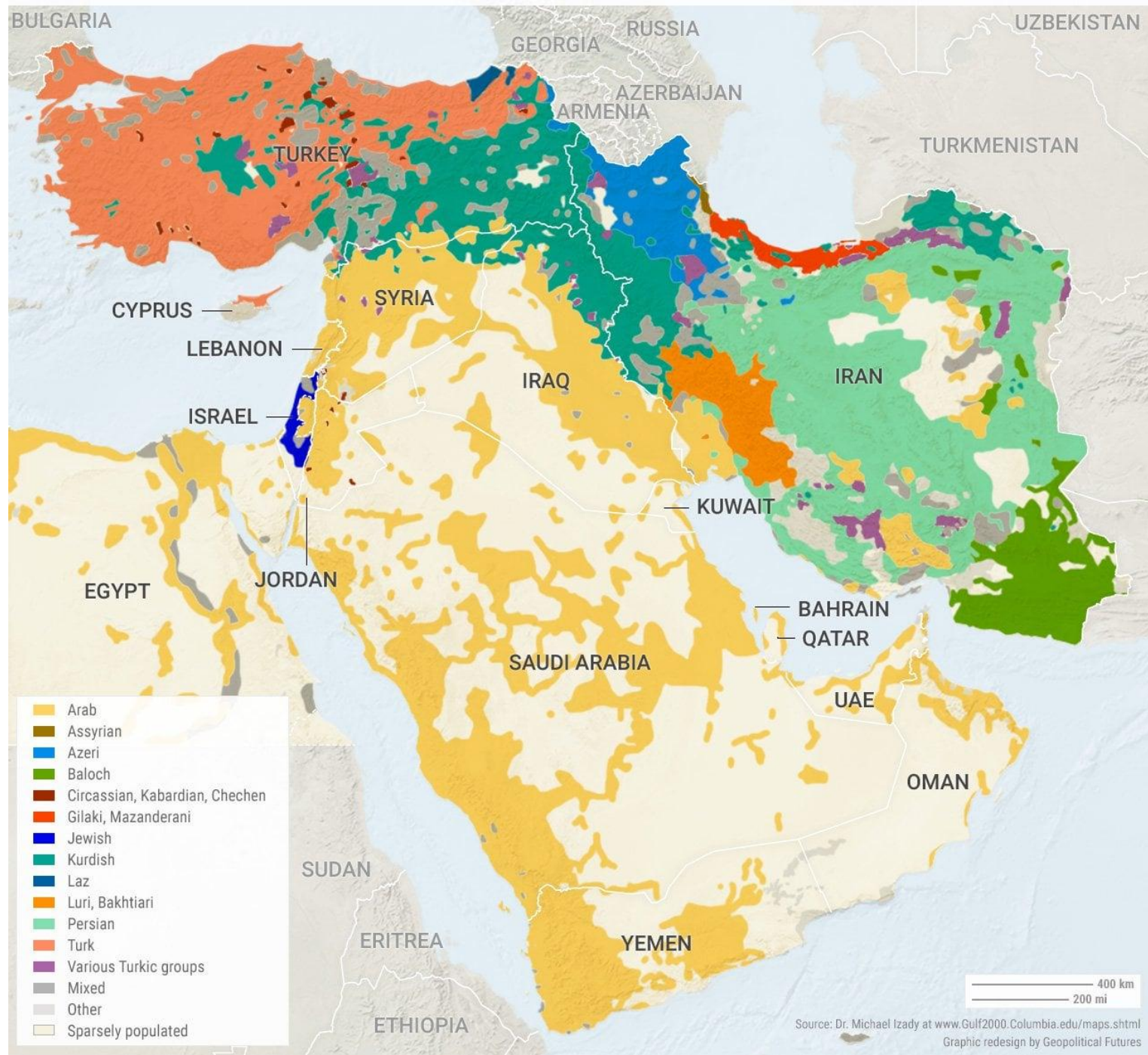
# Agenda

- The making of the modern Middle East
- Current Israeli-Palestinian conflict
- ~~Trump's 20-Point Peace Plan~~
- Conflicts ahead / Discussion on a path to actual peace?



# The Making of the Modern Middle East

# MIDDLE EAST ETHNIC GROUPS



400 km  
200 mi

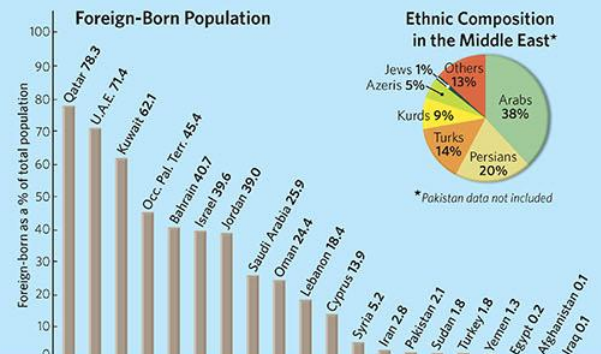
Source: Dr. Michael Izady at [www.Gulf2000.Columbia.edu/maps.shtml](http://www.Gulf2000.Columbia.edu/maps.shtml)  
Graphic redesign by Geopolitical Futures

# Languages in the Middle East



## LANGUAGES OF THE MIDDLE EAST

- Indo-European**
    - Iranic
      - Baluchi
      - Gilaki
      - Kurdish (various dialects)
      - Mazandarani
      - Pashtu
      - Persian (various dialects)
      - Raji
      - Talishi
      - Tati
      - Wakhi
      - Yidgha
    - Indic
      - Baghri
      - Hindko
      - Jati
      - Kachhi
      - Ketrani
      - Marwari
      - Pahari
      - Parkari
      - Potwari
      - Punjabi
      - Siraiki
      - Sensi
      - Sindhi
      - Yaghri
  - Other Indo-European**
    - Albanian
    - Armenian
    - Bulgarian, Bosniak
    - Greek
    - Nuri
    - Pashai
  - Semitic**
    - Arabic
    - Aramaic, Assyrian, Syriac
    - Hebrew
    - Soqotri
  - Turkic**
    - Azeri
    - Karapapaqi
    - Qashqa'i
    - Turkish
    - Turkmen
    - Uzbek
  - Caucasic**
    - Circassian
    - Georgian
    - Lazi
  - Tibetan**
    - Balti
  - Dardic**
    - Burushi
    - Kalasha
    - Khovar
    - Kohistani
    - Shina
    - Torwali
  - Dravidian**
    - Brahui
    - Dehwari
  - Hamitic**
    - Berber
    - Coptic
  - Kushitic Group**
    - Beja
    - Somali
  - Mande**
    - Ijo Group**
      - Azande
      - Bagirmi
      - Bande, Mbres
      - Berta
      - Dago
    - Kordofan Group**
      - Karongo, Bergid
      - Koalib Tagoi
      - Temaini, Katla, Niyamang
  - Nilotic**
    - Acholi, Lango
    - Bari
    - Dinka
    - Lotuko
    - Nubian
    - Nuer
    - Shilluk, Anwak, Lvo
    - Turkana (Teso)
  - Kanuri Group**
    - Zaghawa
  - Mixed languages**
  - Sparsely populated**
- Ethnic groups are labeled on the map.*



PRIMARY SOURCE: M.R. Izady

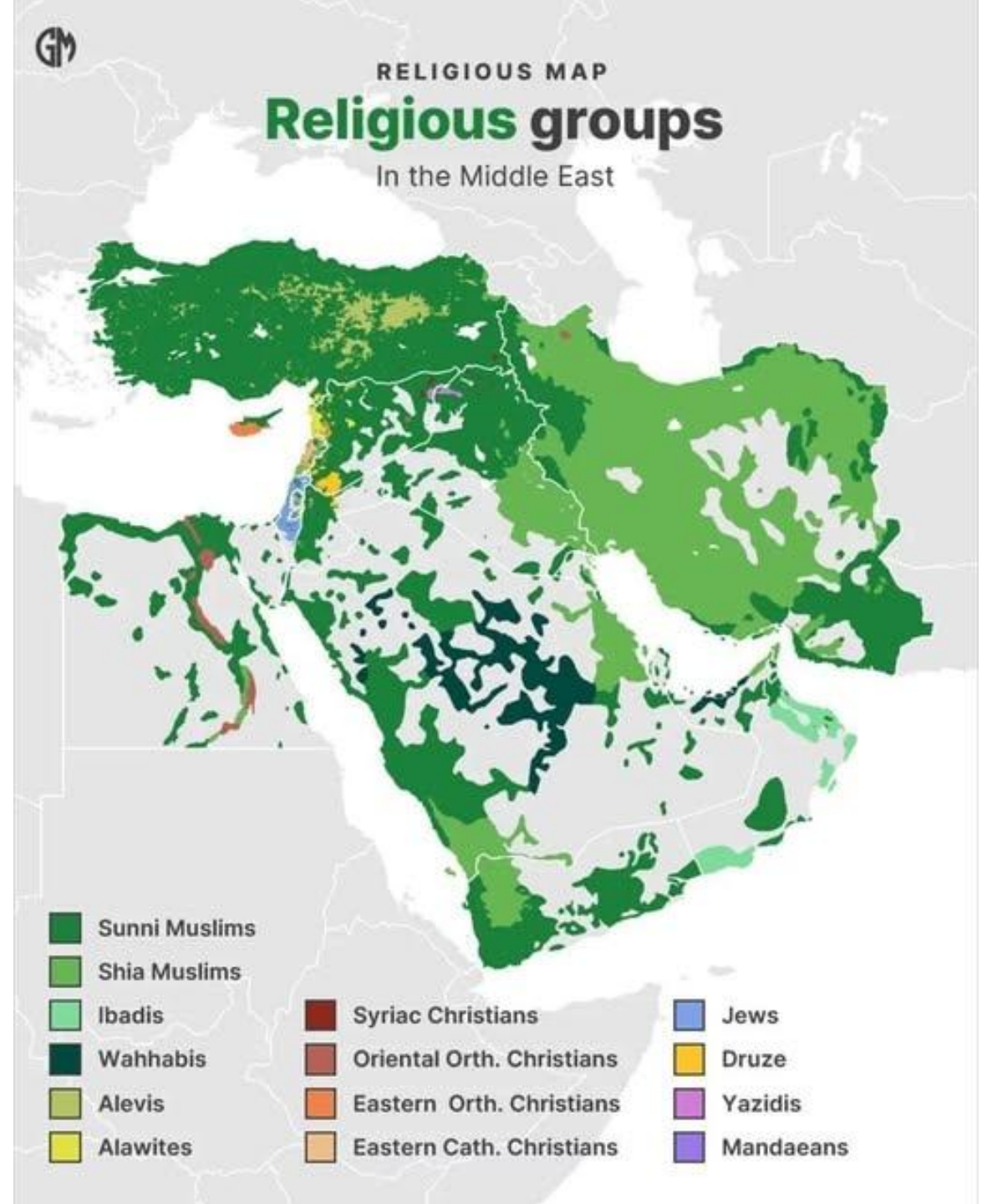
# Religious Differences in the Middle East

## Among Muslims

Sunnis: ~85%

Shia: ~10%

Core difference between Sunnis  
and Shias is the interpretation of  
the rightful successor to  
The Prophet, Muhammad

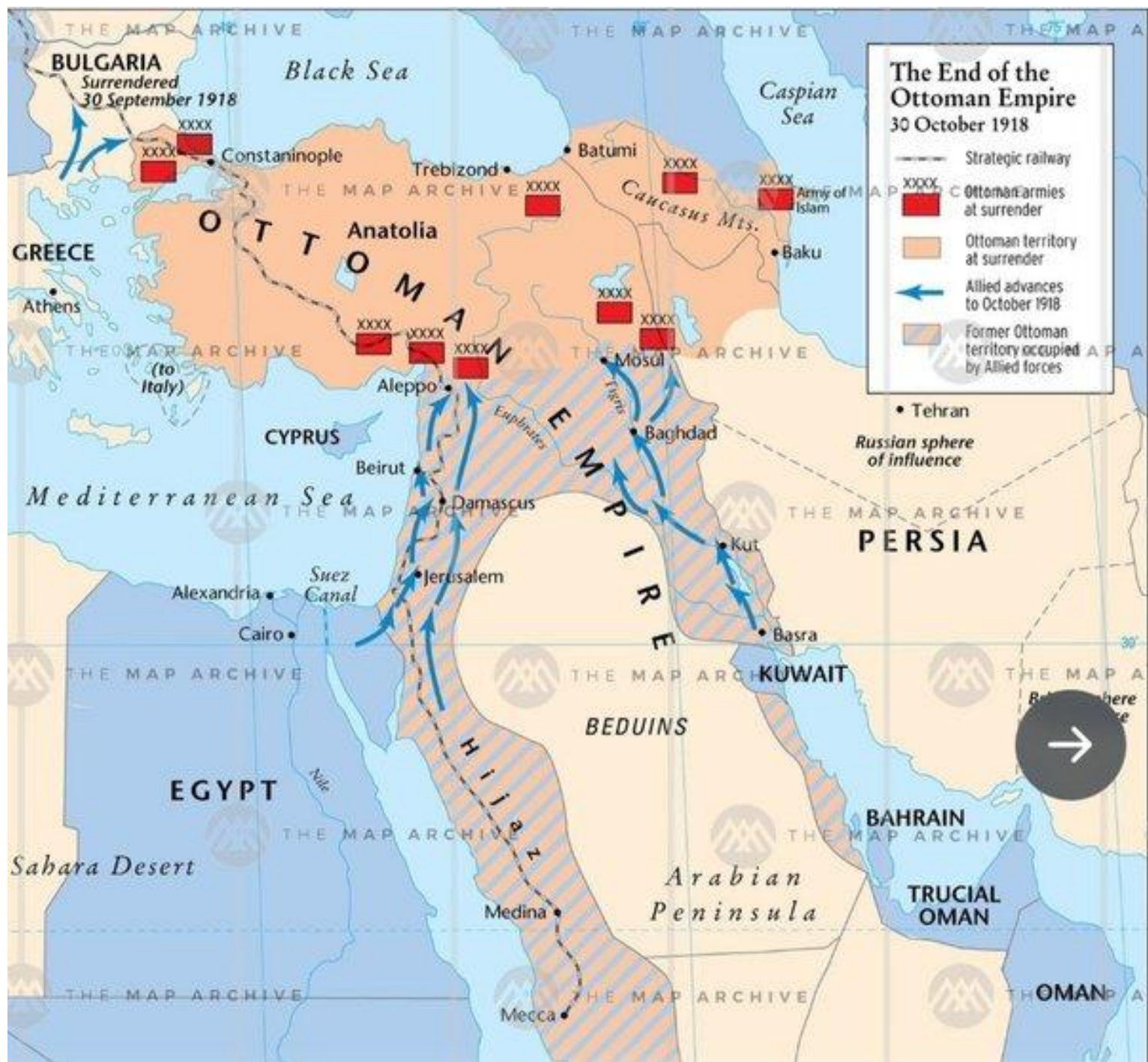




# World War I in the Middle East

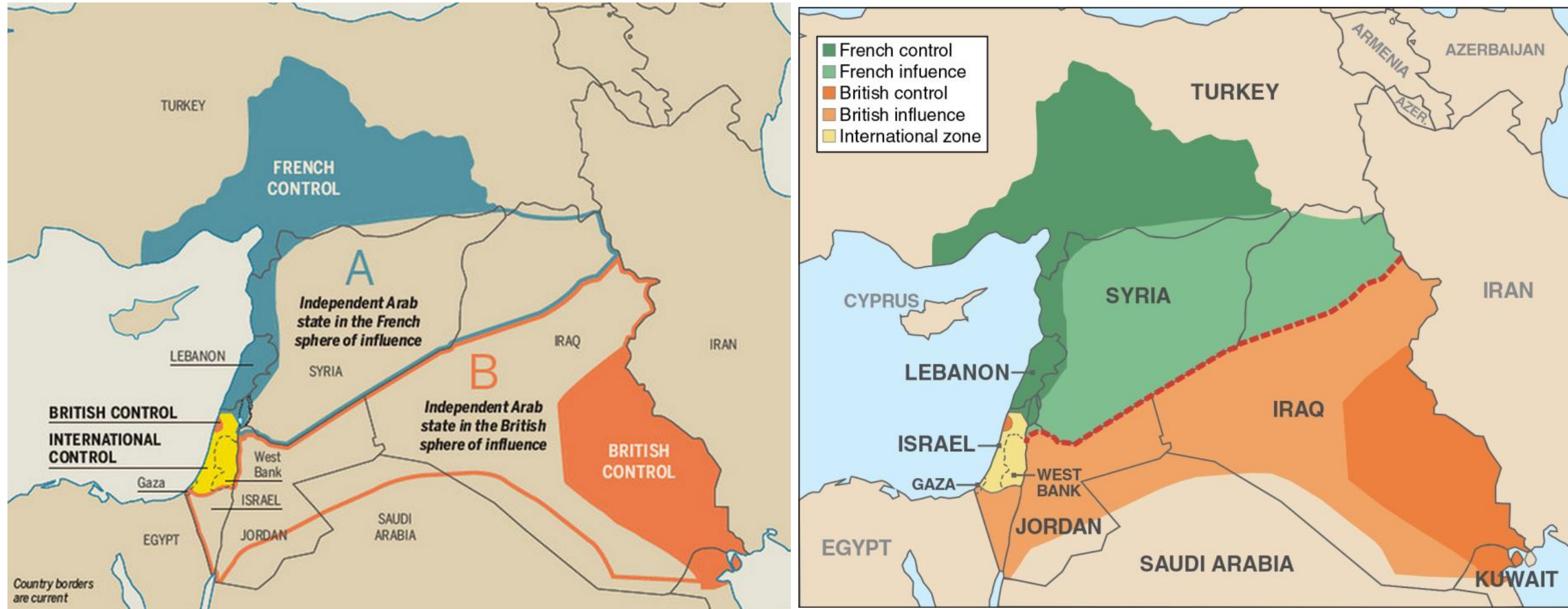
## Ottoman Empire – “Sick Man of Europe”





# Transition to the Modern Middle East

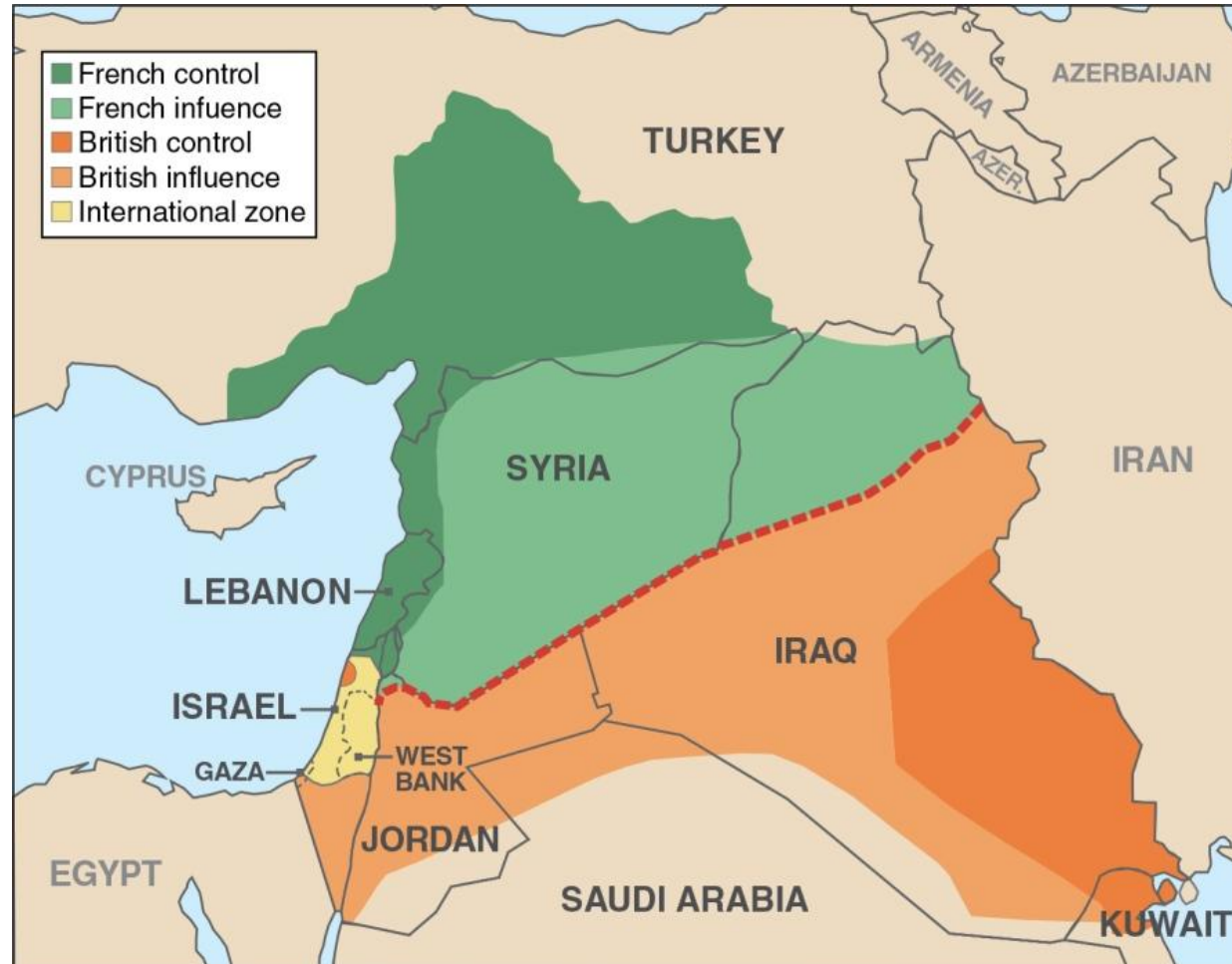
## Sykes-Picot Treaty



Region is split between British and French interests.

# Transition to the Modern Middle East

## Sykes-Picot Treaty



Region is split between British and French interests, with ***no consideration for tribes/ethnic groups/religions***

# Transition to the Modern Middle East

## Balfour Declaration

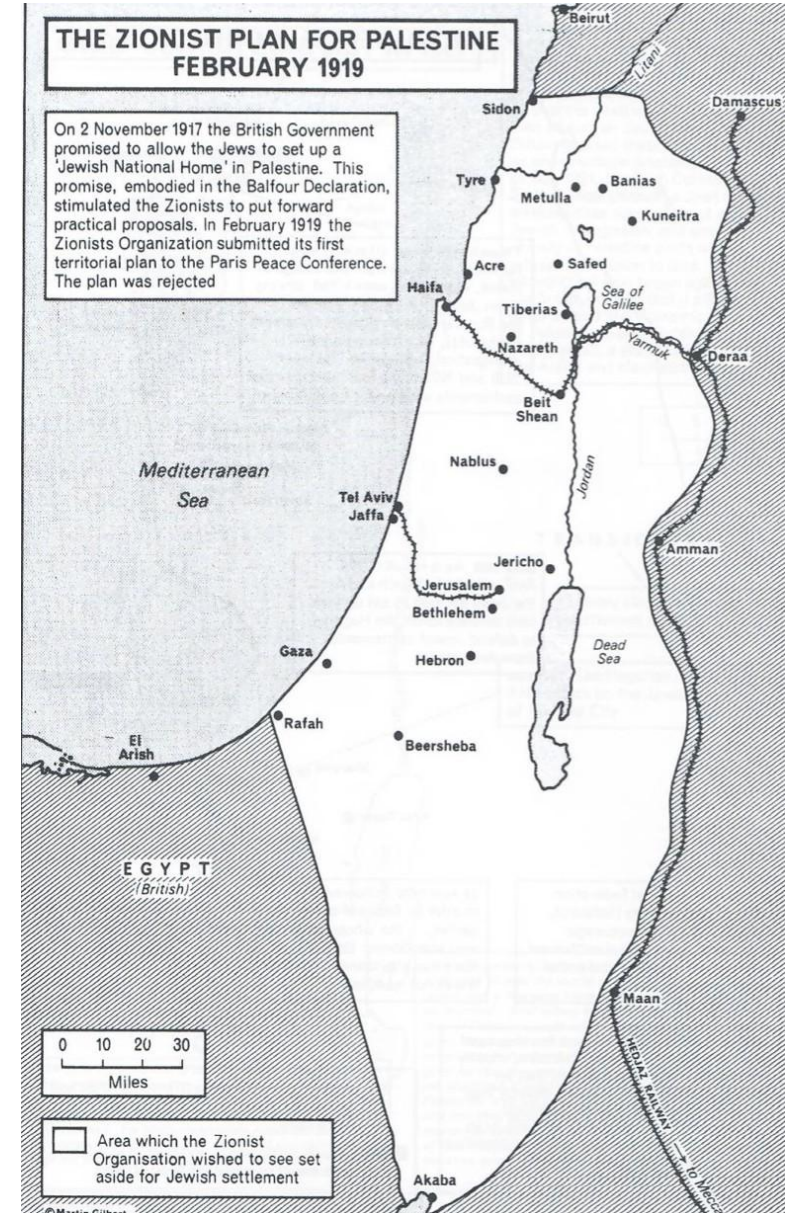
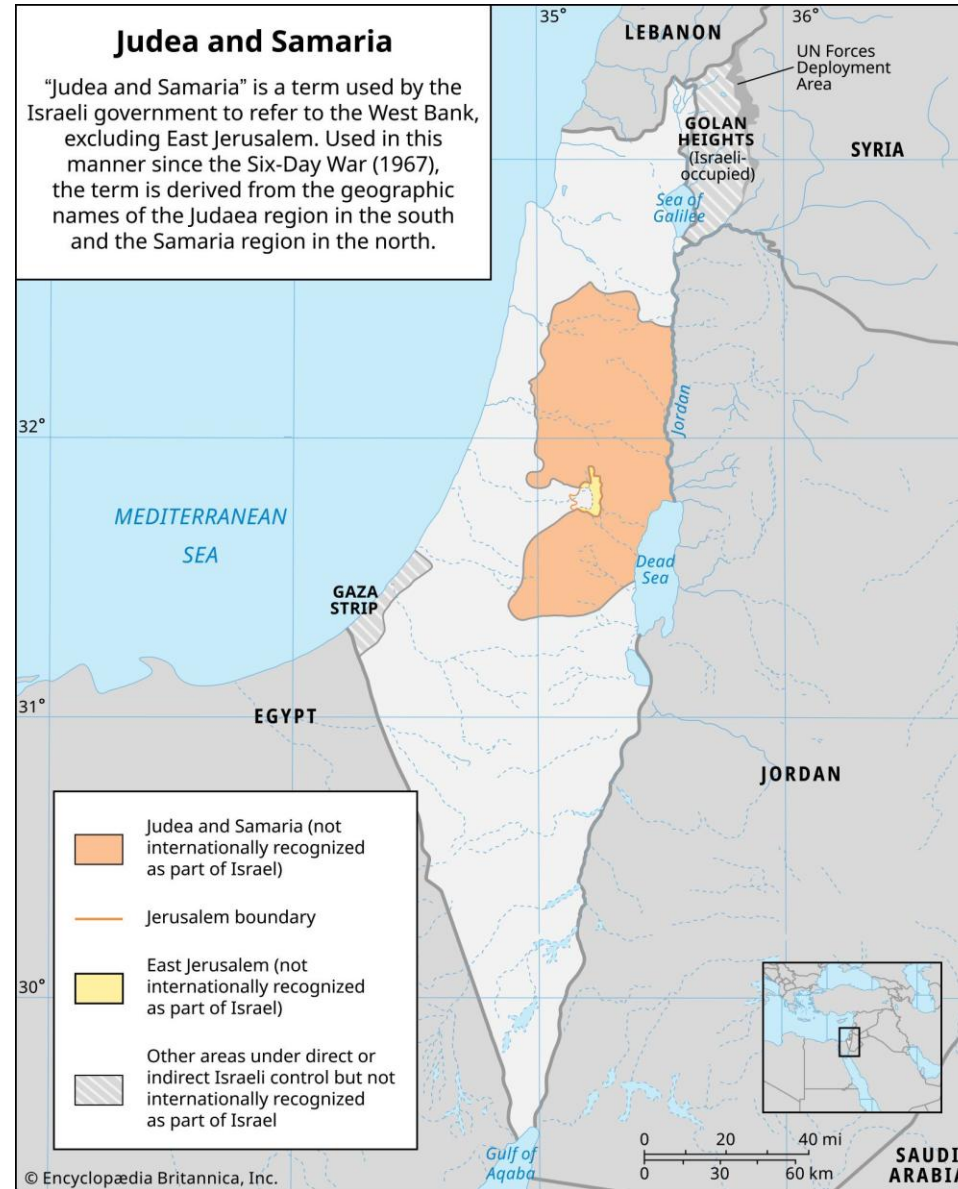
Foreign Office,  
November 2nd, 1917.

Dear Lord Rothschild,

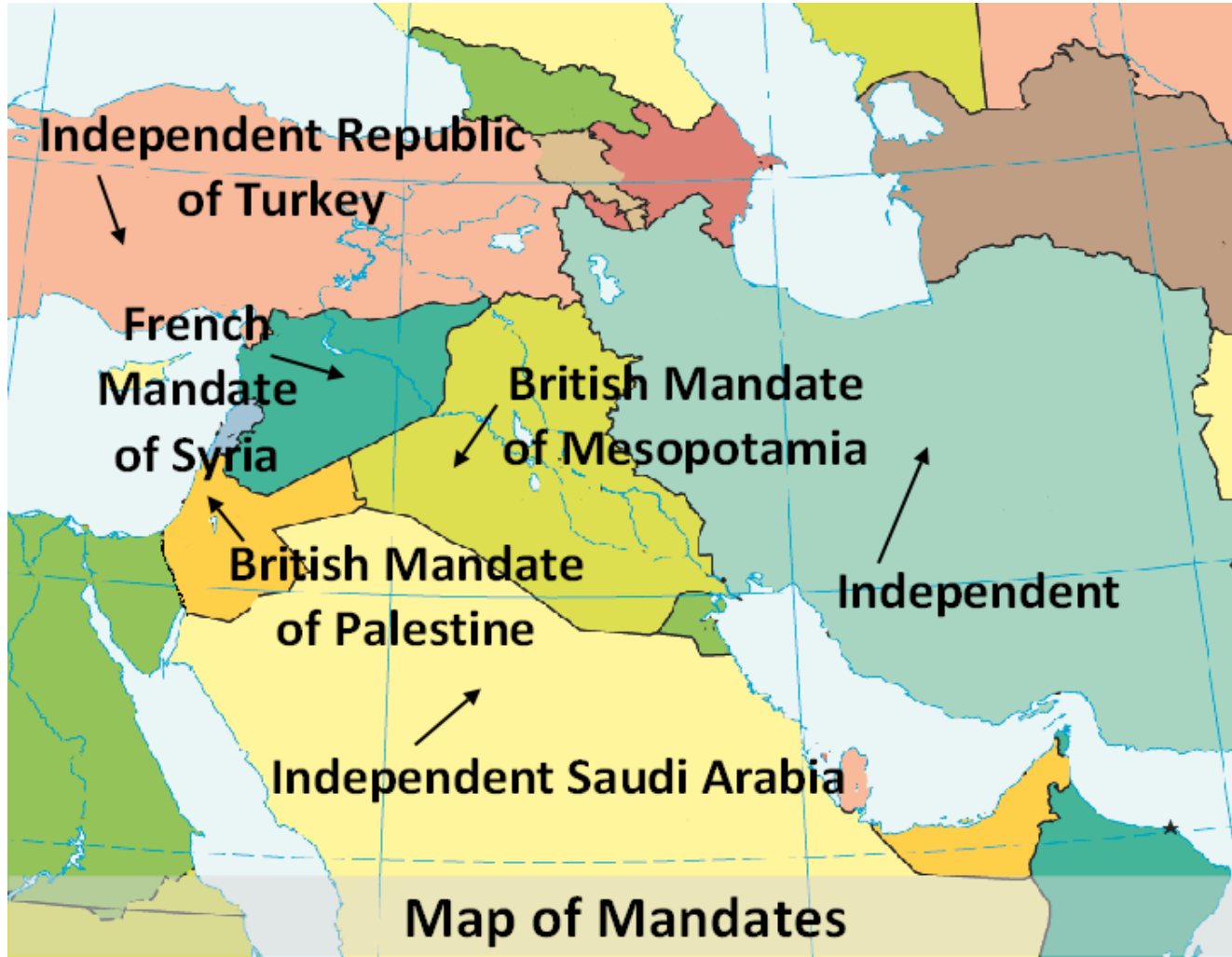
I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet

"His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country"

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

# Middle East by 1923



Modern boundary lines form by 1923 – and remain quite similar today

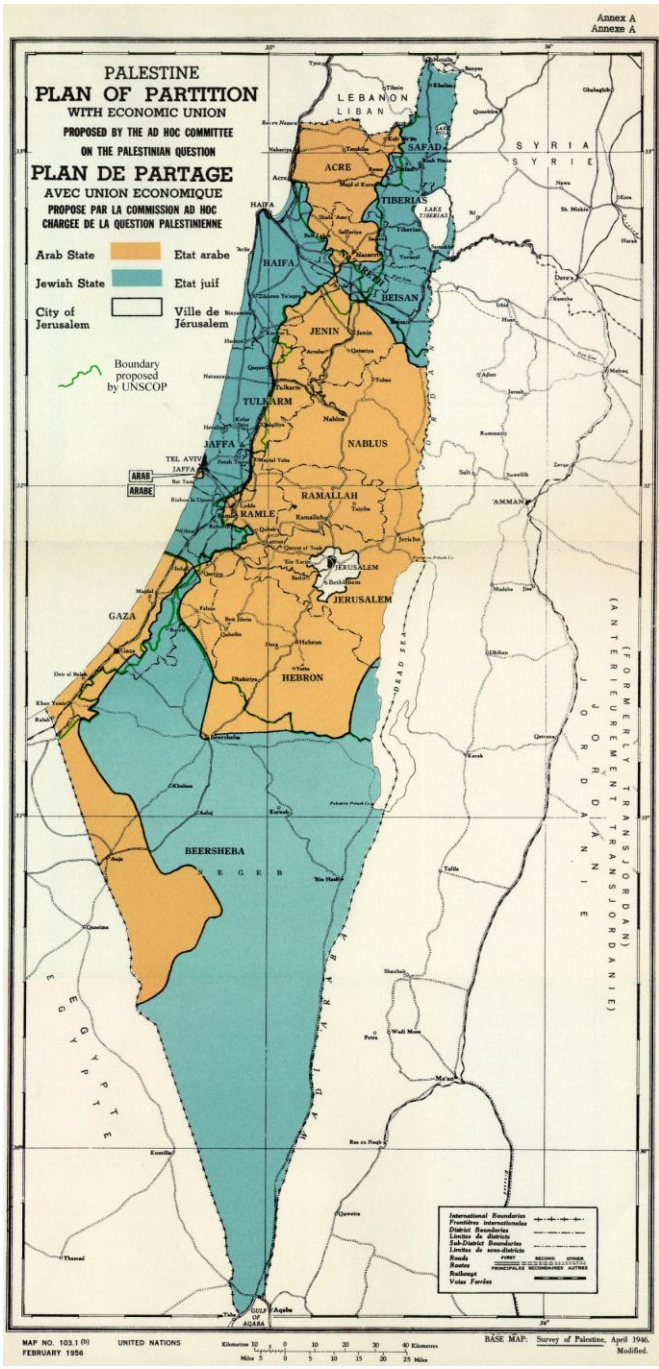
# BRITISH MANDATE OF PALESTINE



- British administration until 1948
- Transjordan emirate

Following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, the Allied powers established the British mandate of Palestine over the southern Levant region. In 1923 Great Britain allowed the Hashemite dynasty to administer the portion of the mandate east of the Jordan River, called Transjordan, and granted it full independence in 1946. The land west of the Jordan River remained under direct mandatory administration until 1948, when the British mandate of Palestine was terminated.

# Jordan from 1948-1967

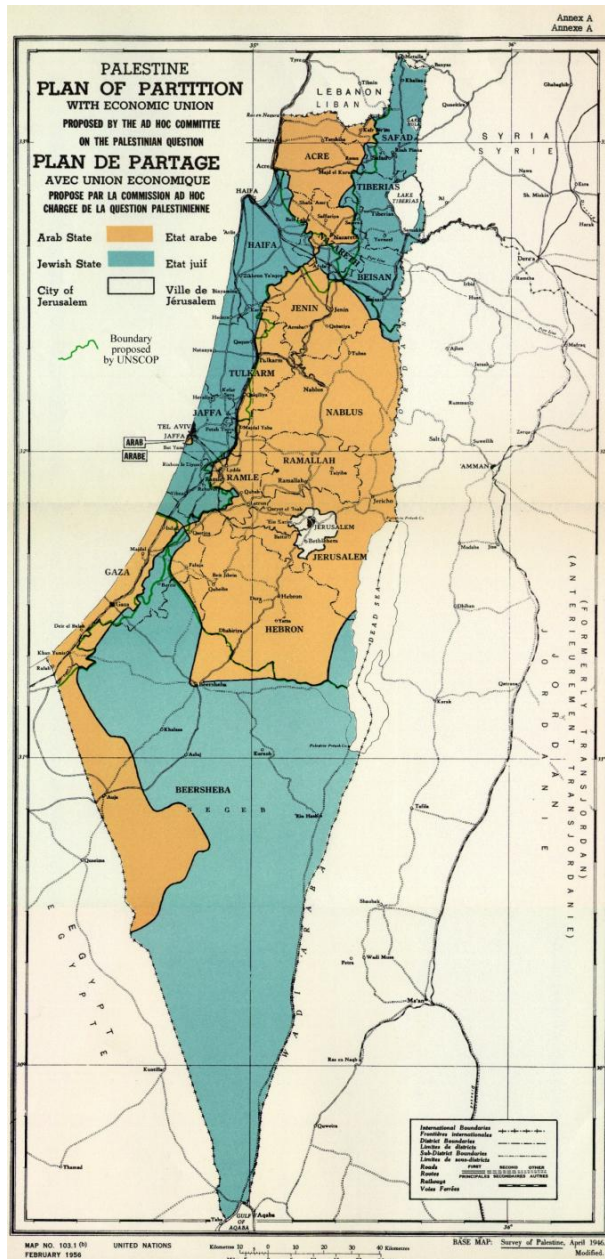


# Israel Declares Independence



May 14, 1948

# Creating the State of Israel



1947: United Nations Partition Plan



June 1948: Arab armies invade



July 1948: Israeli army counterattacks



# Palestinian refugees

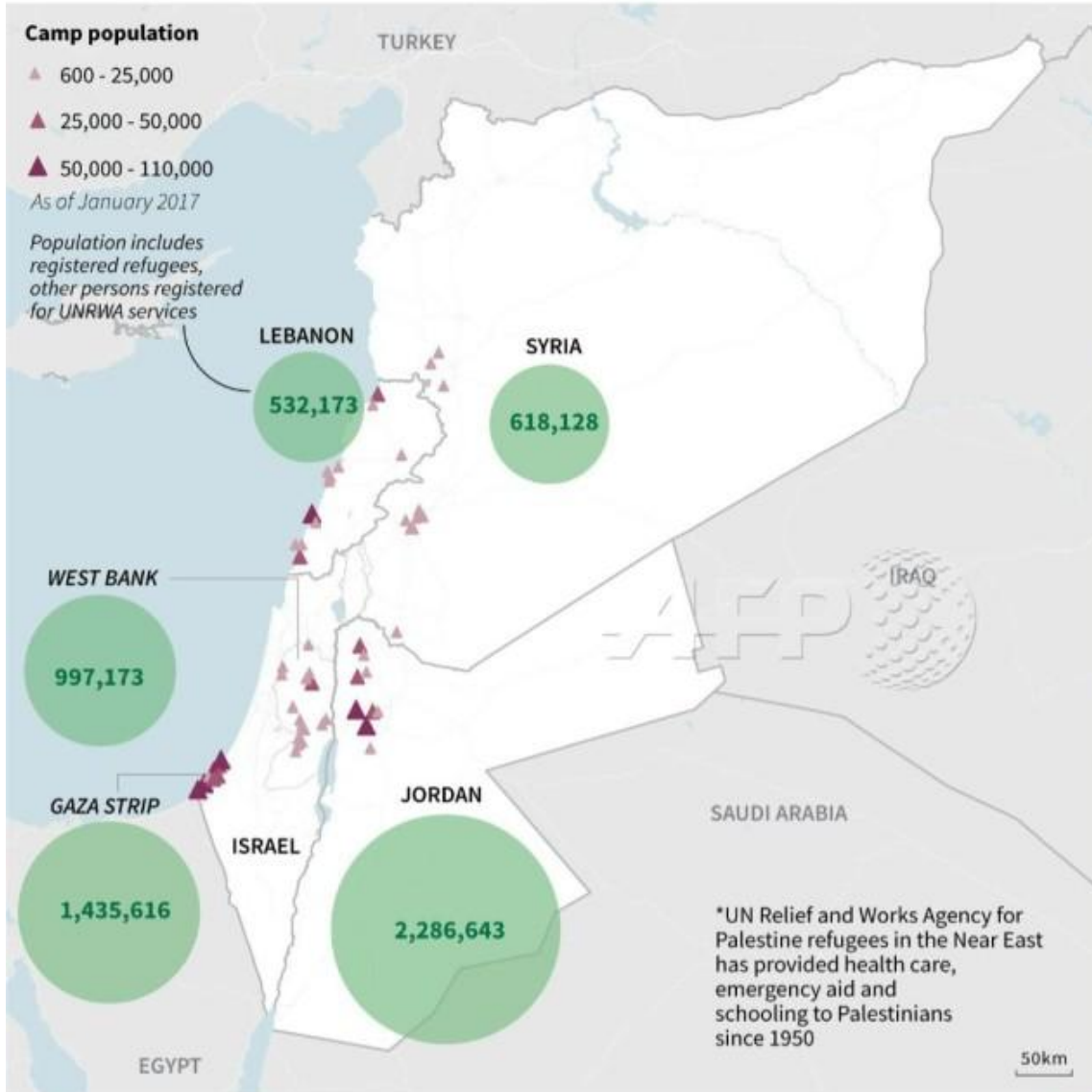
Main camps with registered Palestinian refugees, based on UNRWA\* data

## Camp population

- ▲ 600 - 25,000
- ▲ 25,000 - 50,000
- ▲ 50,000 - 110,000

As of January 2017

Population includes registered refugees, other persons registered for UNRWA services

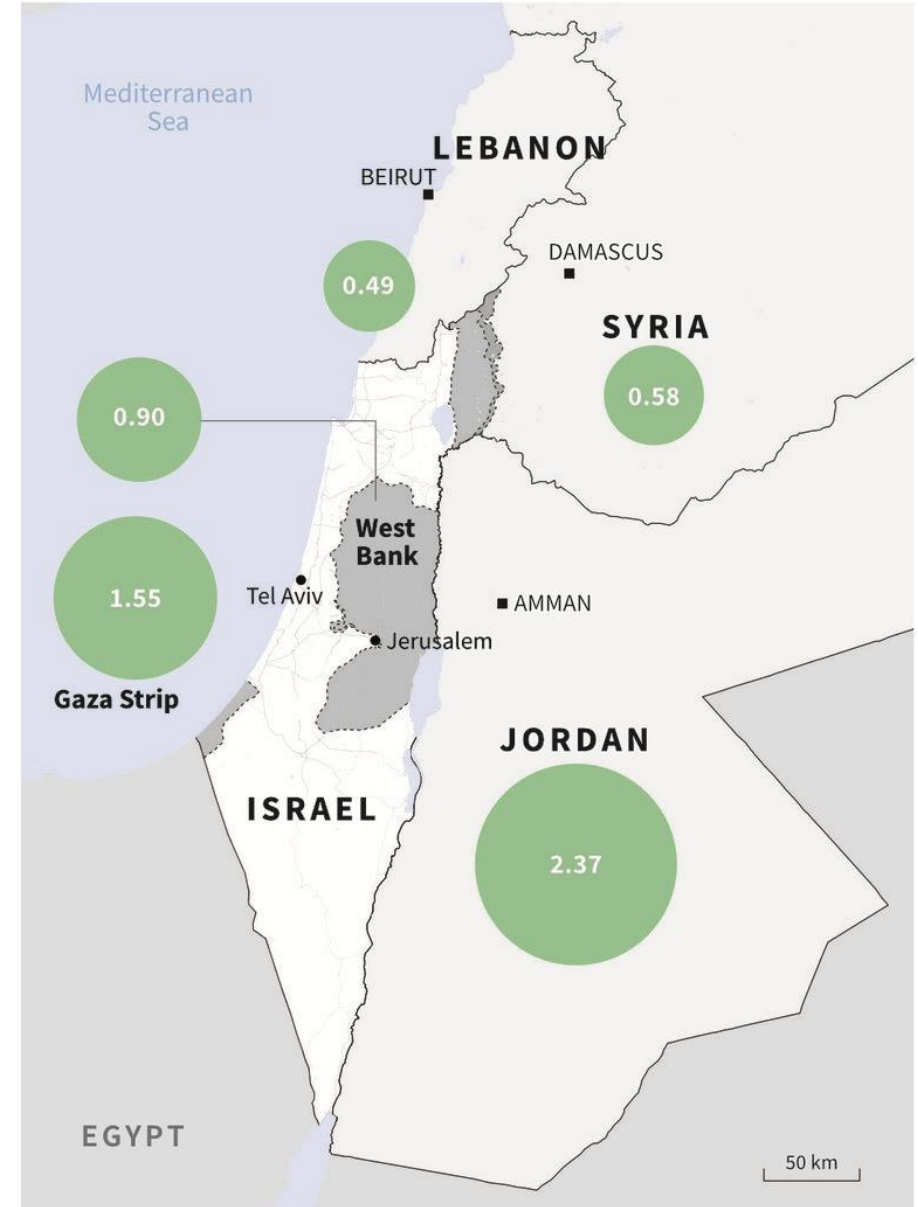


Source : UNRWA/maps4news.org



# Palestinian refugees

Registered by UNRWA\* in 2022, in millions

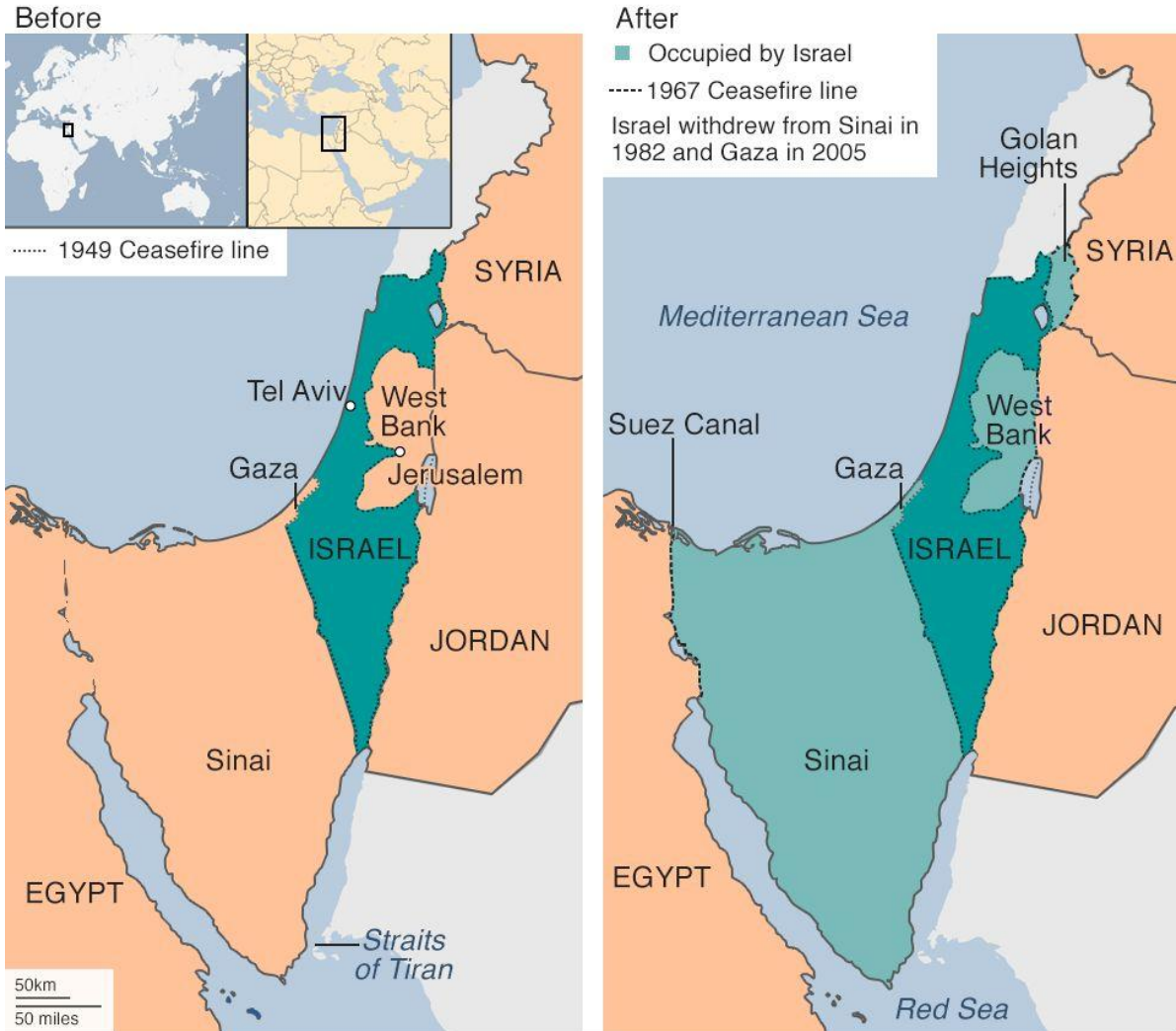


Source: \*United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East Map data: OSM



# Situational Awareness

## Before and after the Six Day War, 1967



## MIDDLE EAST

## The October Arab-Israeli War of 1973

On October 6, 1973, Egypt and Syria jointly launched a surprise attack against Israel on the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur in order to regain the territory they lost in 1967.



### October 6, 1973

Egyptian and Syrian armies launch a two-front offensive attacking Israeli military positions in the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights.

### October 14, 1973

The United States launches a massive airlift of military supplies to Israel to help bolster its defences

### October 17, 1973

OPEC, led by Arab countries, imposes an oil embargo on the US and other nations for supplying weapons to Israel, prompting an energy crisis. The embargo lasted until March 1974.

### October 22, 1973

The United Nations passes Resolution 338, calling for an immediate ceasefire and negotiations to end the conflict, which does not hold.

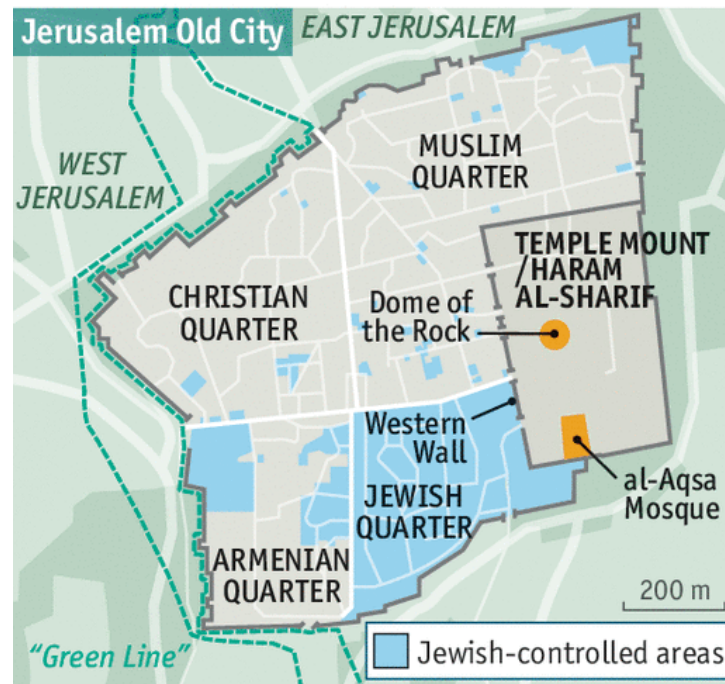
### October 25, 1973

A second ceasefire is secured, officially ending the war.

### March 26, 1979

Egypt signs a peace treaty with Israel following the 1978 Camp David Accords. According to the agreement, Israel would relinquish the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt in exchange for Egypt's full recognition of Israel.

# Oslo Peace Accords



Economist.com

### WEST BANK

- A** Palestinians run security and civil affairs
- B** Israel runs security; Palestinians run civil affairs
- C** Israel runs security and civil affairs

**Jewish:**

- built-up settlements
- settler-run municipalities
- outposts

**Separation barrier:**

- built or under construction
- - - planned

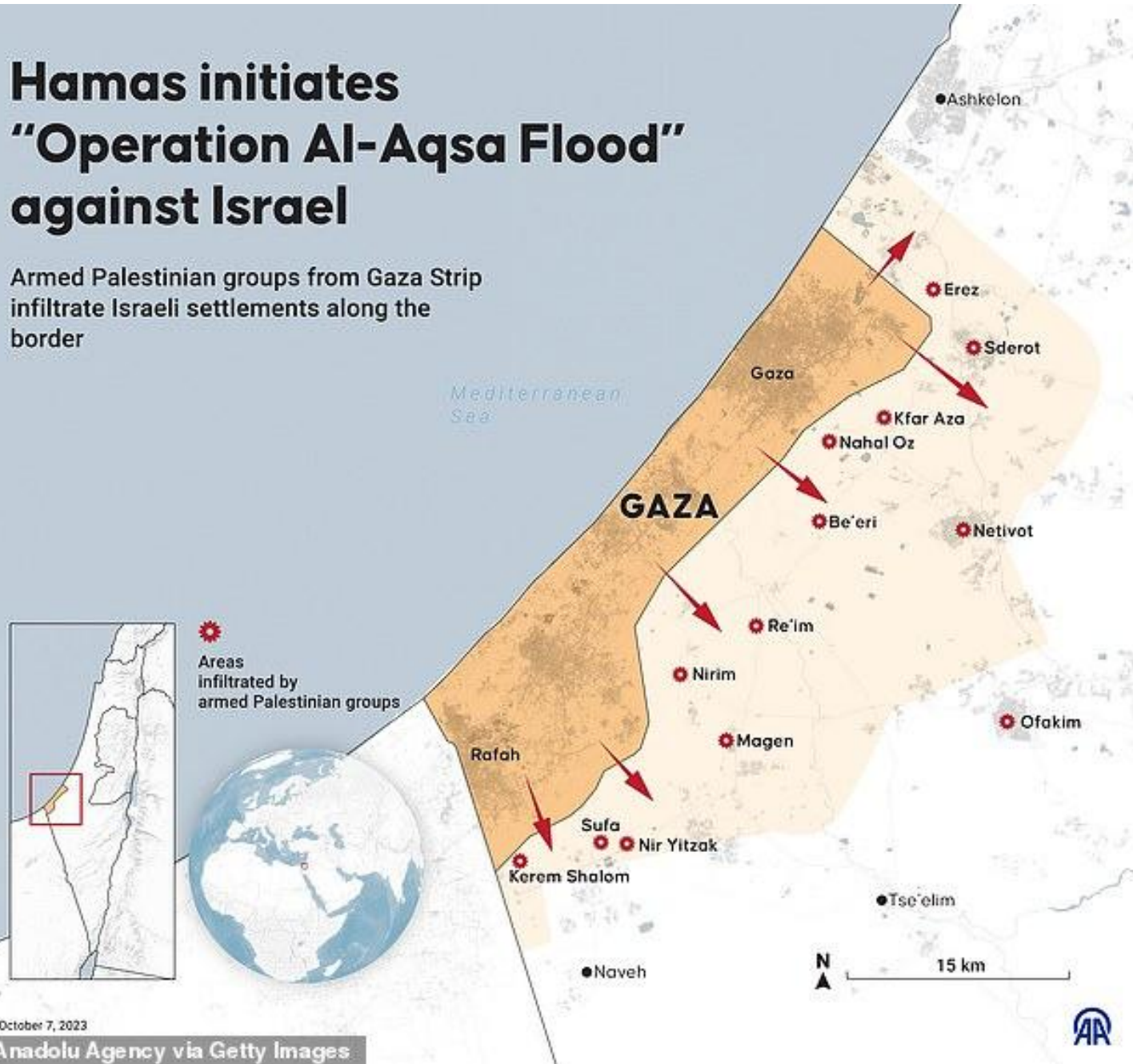
Source: B'Tselem



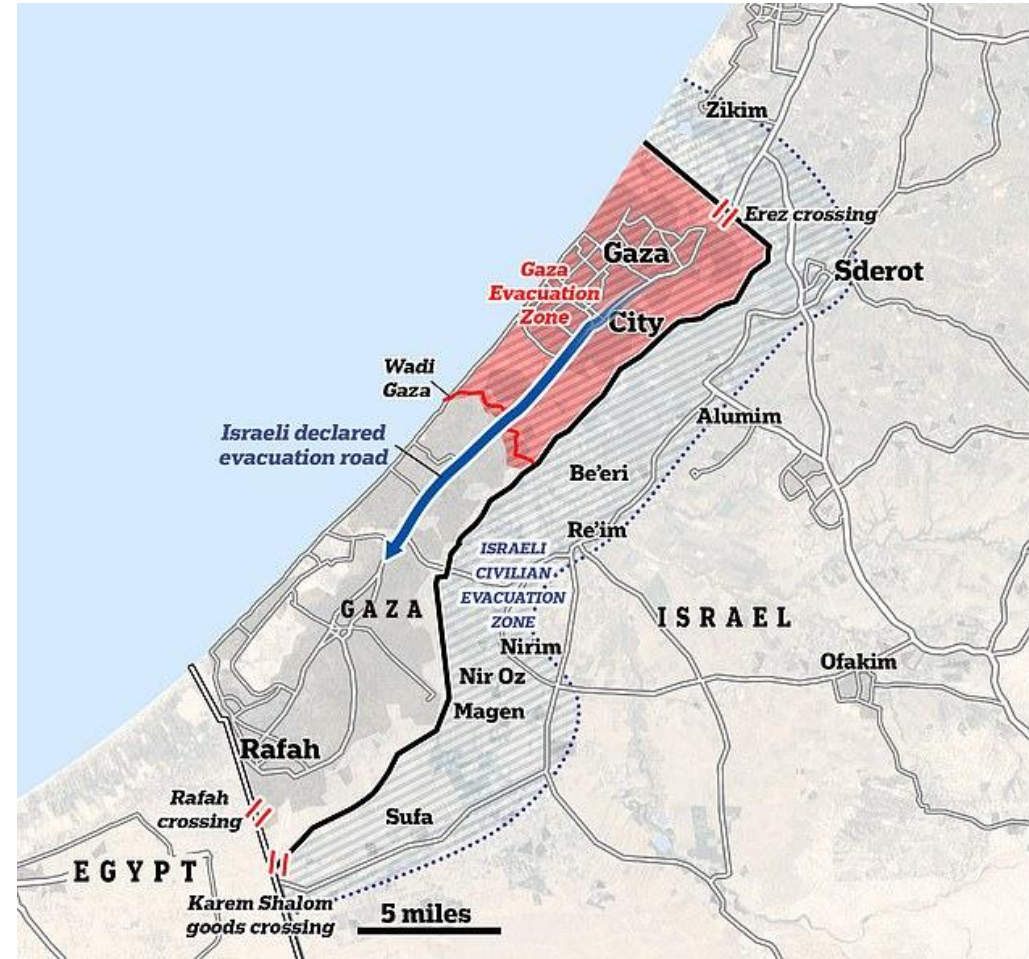
# The Current Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

# Hamas initiates "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood" against Israel

Armed Palestinian groups from Gaza Strip infiltrate Israeli settlements along the border



# IDF Offensive into Gaza



October 7, 2023

© Anadolu Agency via Getty Images



# Gaza

140 Square Miles

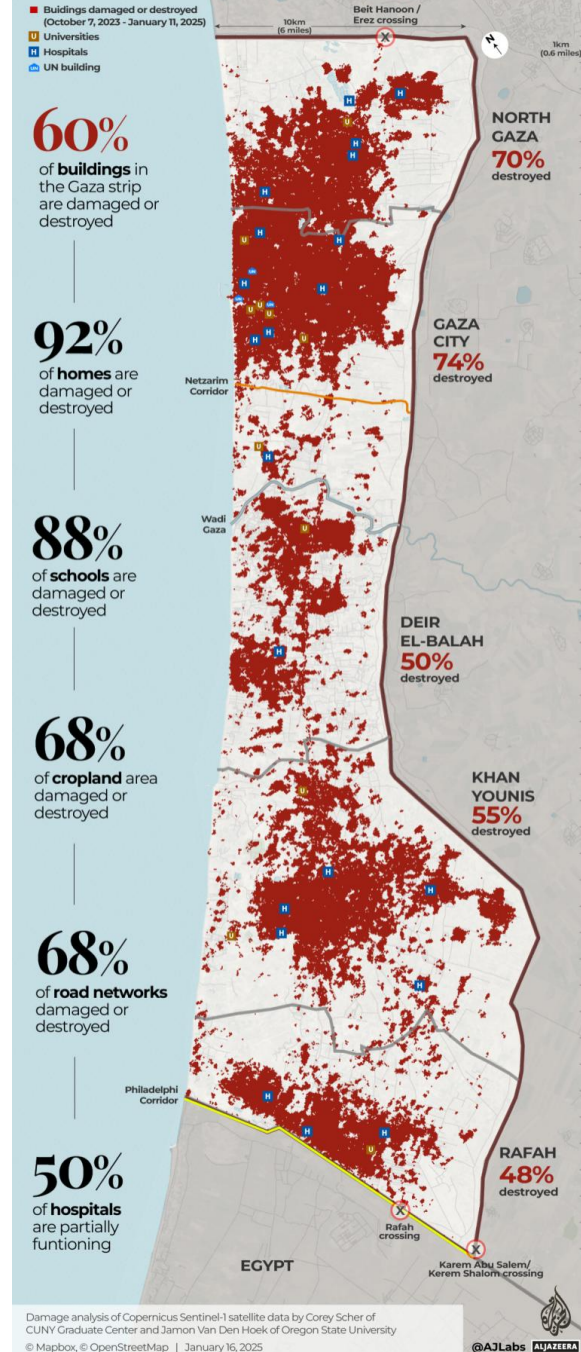
2.2 Million People

Reporting indicates ~71,000 dead and ~170,000 wounded inside Gaza.  
(-Multiple Sources)

There are conflicting reports about total casualties.

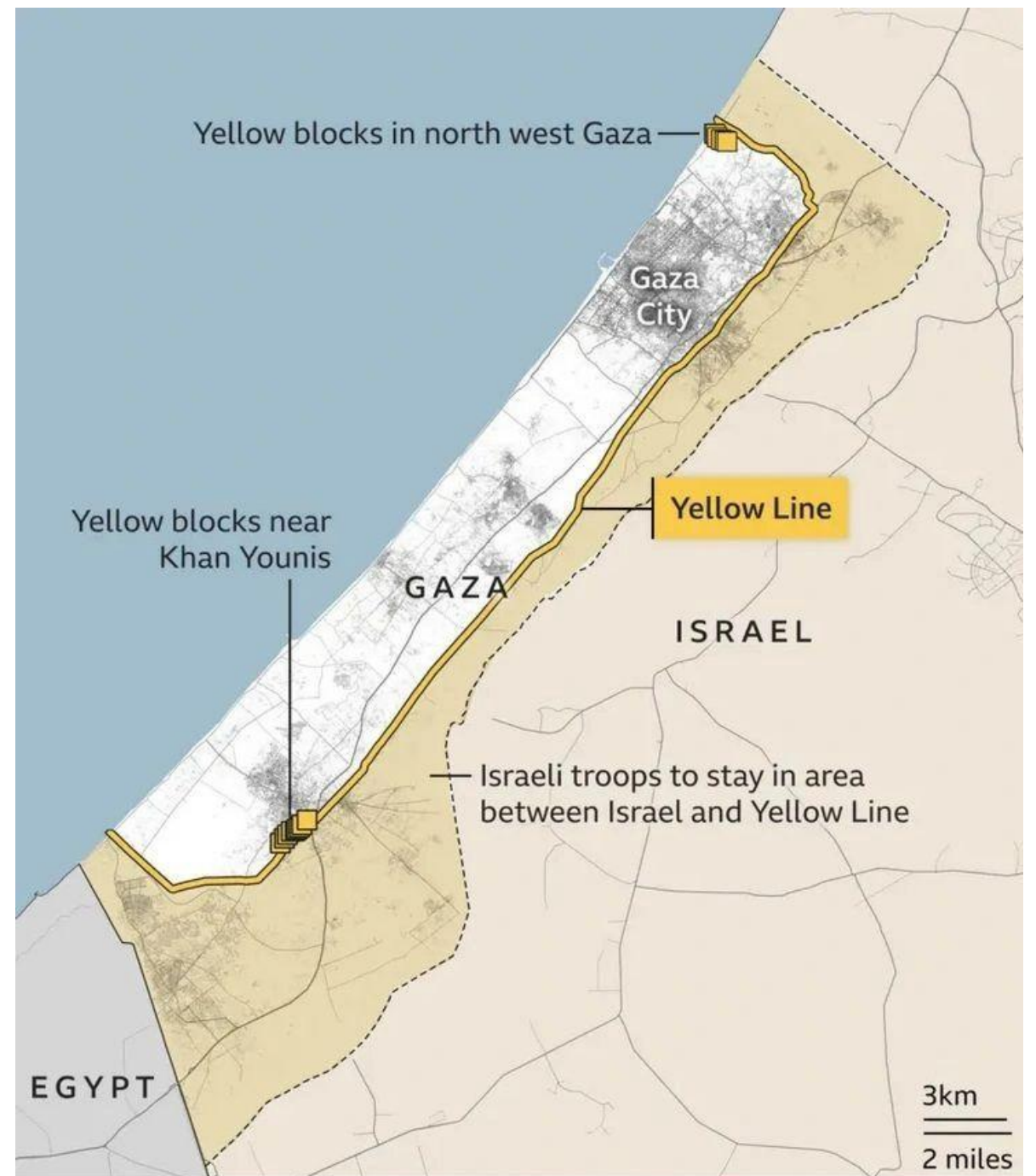
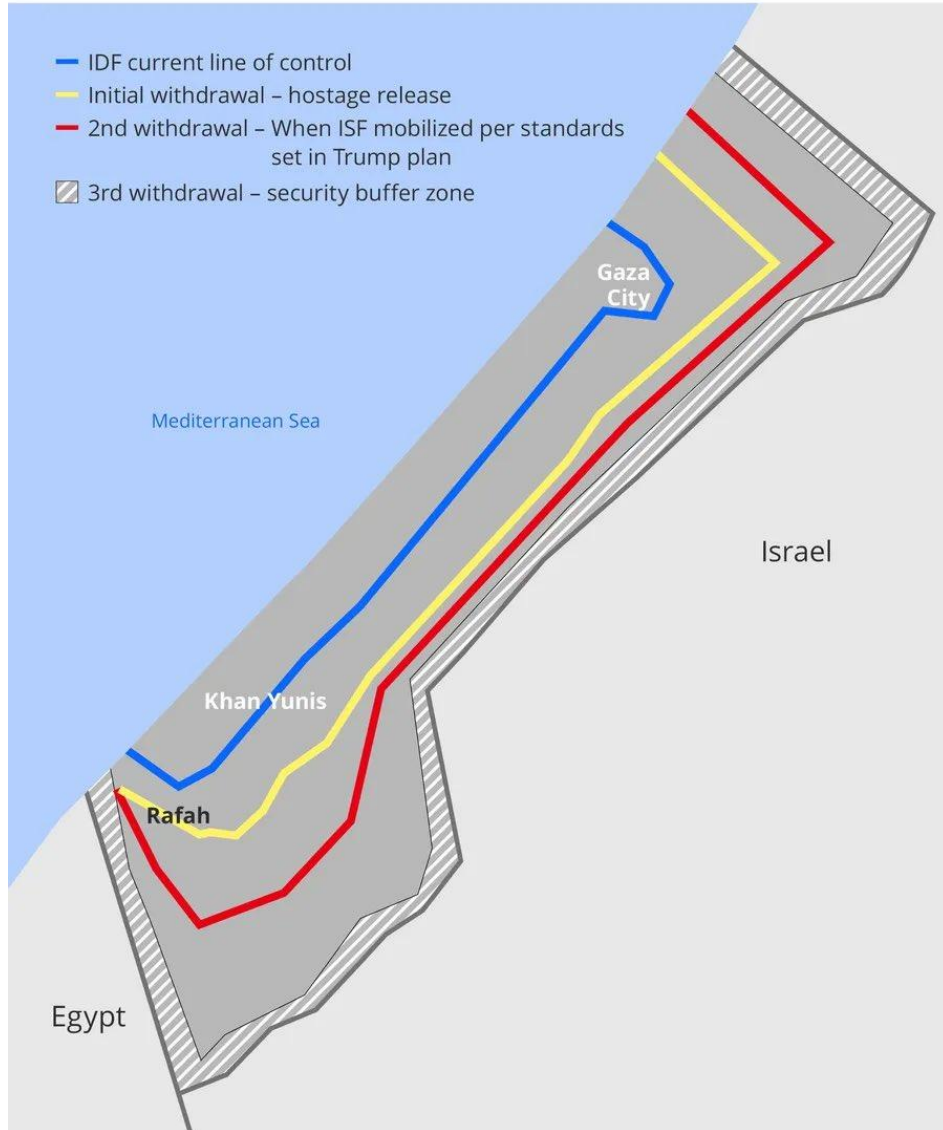


## What is left of Gaza?



# Israeli Control of Gaza

## Trump: End of Gaza War



Source: IDF, OpenStreetMap



# Conflicts Ahead and the Path to Peace?

1. Gaza will be a deradicalised terror-free zone that does not pose a threat to its neighbours.
2. Gaza will be redeveloped for the benefit of the people of Gaza, who have suffered more than enough.
3. If both sides agree to this proposal, the war will immediately end. Israeli forces will withdraw to the agreed upon line to prepare for a hostage release. During this time, all military operations, including aerial and artillery bombardment, will be suspended, and battle lines will remain frozen until conditions are met for the complete staged withdrawal.
4. Within 72 hours of Israel publicly accepting this agreement, all hostages, alive and deceased, will be returned.
5. Once all hostages are released, Israel will release 250 life sentence prisoners plus 1,700 Gazans who were detained after 7 October 2023, including all women and children detained in that context. For every Israeli hostage whose remains are released, Israel will release the remains of 15 deceased Gazans.
6. Once all hostages are returned, Hamas members who commit to peaceful co-existence and to decommission their weapons will be given amnesty. Members of Hamas who wish to leave Gaza will be provided safe passage to receiving countries.
7. Upon acceptance of this agreement, full aid will be immediately sent into the Gaza Strip. At a minimum, aid quantities will be consistent with what was included in the 19 January 2025 agreement regarding humanitarian aid, including rehabilitation of infrastructure (water, electricity, sewage), rehabilitation of hospitals and bakeries, and entry of necessary equipment to remove rubble and open roads.
8. Entry of distribution and aid in the Gaza Strip will proceed without interference from the two parties through the United Nations and its agencies, and the Red Crescent, in addition to other international institutions not associated in any manner with either party. Opening the Rafah crossing in both directions will be subject to the same mechanism implemented under 19 January 2025 agreement.

**9.** Gaza will be governed under the temporary transitional governance of a technocratic, apolitical Palestinian committee, responsible for delivering the day-to-day running of public services and municipalities for the people in Gaza. This committee will be made up of qualified Palestinians and international experts, with oversight and supervision by a new international transitional body, the "Board of Peace," which will be headed and chaired by President Donald J. Trump, with other members and heads of state to be announced, including Former Prime Minister Tony Blair. This body will set the framework and handle the funding for the redevelopment of Gaza until such time as the Palestinian Authority has completed its reform programme, as outlined in various proposals, including President Trump's peace plan in 2020 and the Saudi-French proposal, and can securely and effectively take back control of Gaza. This body will call on best international standards to create modern and efficient governance that serves the people of Gaza and is conducive to attracting investment.

**10.** A Trump economic development plan to rebuild and energise Gaza will be created by convening a panel of experts who have helped birth some of the thriving modern miracle cities in the Middle East. Many thoughtful investment proposals and exciting development ideas have been crafted by well-meaning international groups, and will be considered to synthesize the security and governance frameworks to attract and facilitate these investments that will create jobs, opportunity, and hope for future Gaza.

**11.** A special economic zone will be established with preferred tariff and access rates to be negotiated with participating countries.

**12.** No one will be forced to leave Gaza, and those who wish to leave will be free to do so and free to return. We will encourage people to stay and offer them the opportunity to build a better Gaza.

**13.** Hamas and other factions agree to not have any role in the governance of Gaza, directly, indirectly, or in any form. All military, terror, and offensive infrastructure, including tunnels and weapon production facilities, will be destroyed and not rebuilt. There will be a process of demilitarisation of Gaza under the supervision of independent monitors, which will include placing weapons permanently beyond use through an agreed process of decommissioning, and supported by an internationally funded buy back and reintegration programme all verified by the independent monitors. New Gaza will be fully committed to building a prosperous economy and to peaceful coexistence with their neighbours.

- 14.** A guarantee will be provided by regional partners to ensure that Hamas, and the factions, comply with their obligations and that New Gaza poses no threat to its neighbours or its people.
- 15.** The United States will work with Arab and international partners to develop a temporary International Stabilisation Force (ISF) to immediately deploy in Gaza. The ISF will train and provide support to vetted Palestinian police forces in Gaza, and will consult with Jordan and Egypt who have extensive experience in this field. This force will be the long-term internal security solution. The ISF will work with Israel and Egypt to help secure border areas, along with newly trained Palestinian police forces. It is critical to prevent munitions from entering Gaza and to facilitate the rapid and secure flow of goods to rebuild and revitalize Gaza. A deconfliction mechanism will be agreed upon by the parties.
- 16.** Israel will not occupy or annex Gaza. As the ISF establishes control and stability, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) will withdraw based on standards, milestones, and timeframes linked to demilitarization that will be agreed upon between the IDF, ISF, the guarantors, and the United States, with the objective of a secure Gaza that no longer poses a threat to Israel, Egypt, or its citizens. Practically, the IDF will progressively hand over the Gaza territory it occupies to the ISF according to an agreement they will make with the transitional authority until they are withdrawn completely from Gaza, save for a security perimeter presence that will remain until Gaza is properly secure from any resurgent terror threat.
- 17.** In the event Hamas delays or rejects this proposal, the above, including the scaled-up aid operation, will proceed in the terror-free areas handed over from the IDF to the ISF.
- 18.** An interfaith dialogue process will be established based on the values of tolerance and peaceful co-existence to try and change mindsets and narratives of Palestinians and Israelis by emphasizing the benefits that can be derived from peace.
- 19.** While Gaza re-development advances and when the PA reform programme is faithfully carried out, the conditions may finally be in place for a credible pathway to Palestinian self-determination and statehood, which we recognise as the aspiration of the Palestinian people.

20. The United States will establish a dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians to agree on a political horizon for peaceful and prosperous co-existence.

# Gaza Board of Peace

Isa bin Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, Minister of the Prime Minister's Court, Bahrain

Minister of Foreign Affairs Nasser Bourita, Morocco

President Javier Milei, Argentina

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, Armenia

President Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan

Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov, Bulgaria

Prime Minister Viktor Orban, Hungary

President Prabowo Subianto, Indonesia

Minister of Foreign Affairs Ayman Al Safadi, Jordan

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Kazakhstan

President Vjosa Osmani-Sadriu, Kosovo

Prime Minister Mian Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif, Pakistan

President Santiago Peña, Paraguay

President Mohammed Bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, Qatar

Minister of Foreign Affairs Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, Saudi Arabia

Minister of Foreign Affairs Hakan Fidan, Turkey

Special Envoy to the US Khaldoon Khalifa Al Mubarak, UAE

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan

Prime Minister Gombojavyn Zandanshatar, Mongolia



## Who is on the Gaza Executive Board?



**Steve Witkoff**  
US Special Envoy



**Jared Kushner**  
White House adviser  
and Trump's son-in-law



**Tony Blair**  
Former UK Prime  
Minister



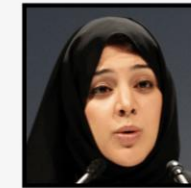
**Hassan Rashad**  
Egyptian intelligence  
chief



**Marc Rowan**  
CEO of private equity  
firm Apollo Global  
Management



**Hakan Fidan**  
Turkey's foreign  
minister



**Reem Al-Hashimy**  
UAE minister of state  
for international  
co-operation



**Nickolay Mladenov**  
Bulgarian politician  
and former UN  
Middle East envoy



**Sigrid Kaag**  
UN special co-ordinator  
for the Middle East  
peace process

**Ali Al-Thawadi**  
Qatari strategic affairs  
minister

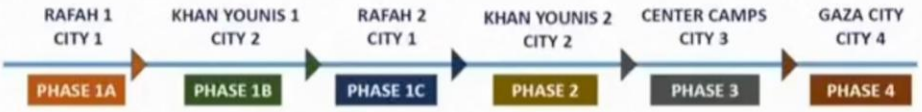
**Yakir Gabay**  
Billionaire Israeli real  
estate developer

Source: White House. Images: Getty

# The Gaza Master Plan



BOARD of PEACE



# Land and Maritime Friction Points

## Israel-Lebanon maritime border dispute

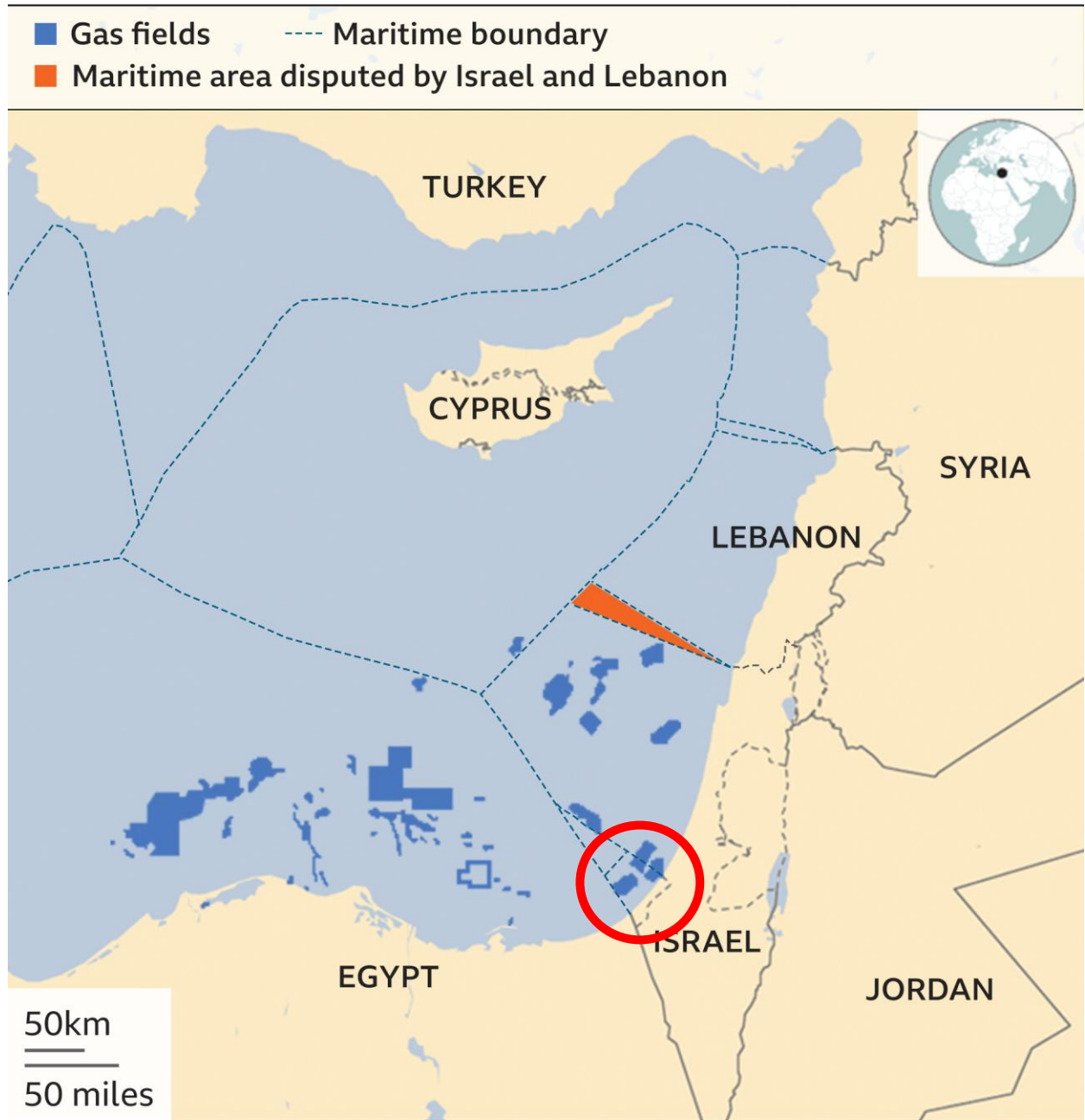


Figure 1 - Mountain and coastal aquifers



Data source: [United Nations Environment Programme \(UNEP\), DEWA/GRID-Geneva, 2015.](#)

# Other Friction Points

## Israel's water wars

Every year the water supply to Palestinian towns and villages in the West Bank is cut off for days - if not weeks.

Here is how much water each person in the West Bank has access to per day



In Area C, under Israeli administrative and military control **180 Palestinian communities** are not connected to the water network

Vulnerable Palestinian households spend up to **one fifth** of their salary on water

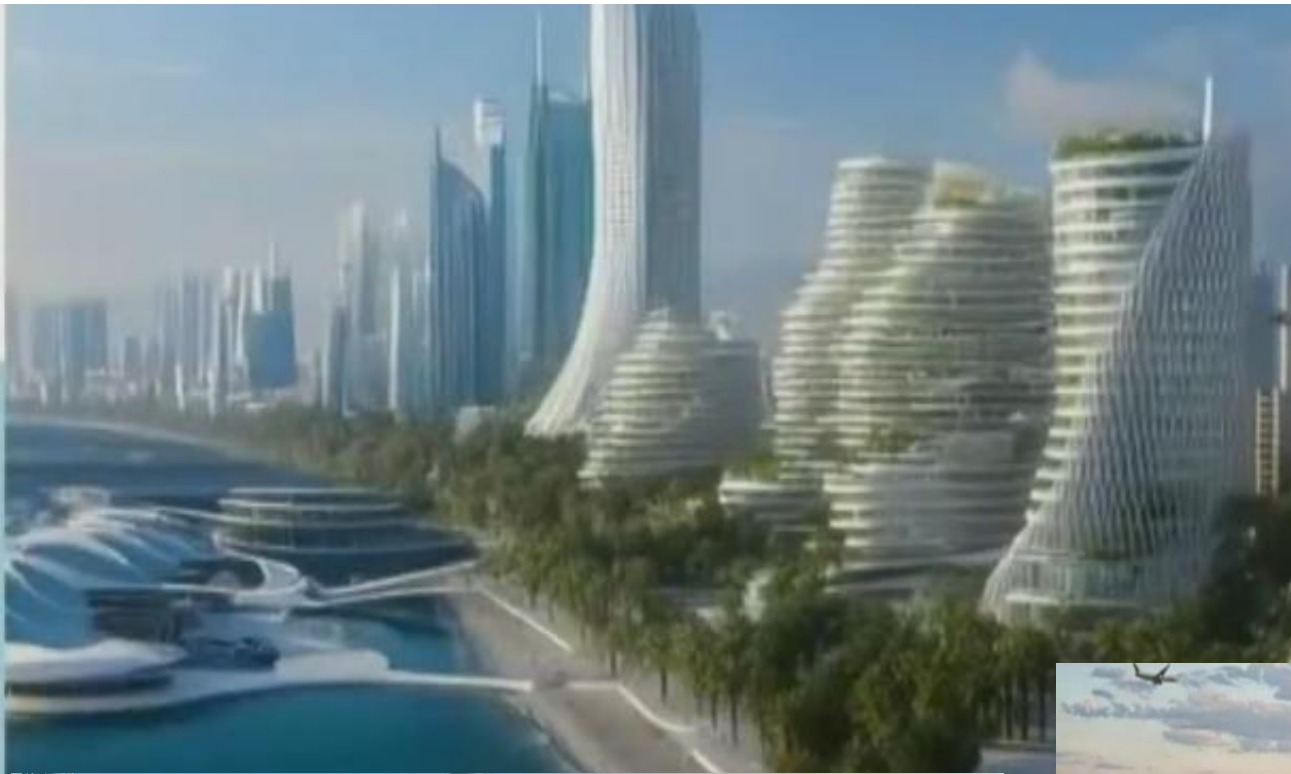


Sources: EWASH | United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)



ALJAZEERA

# The Gaza Master Plan





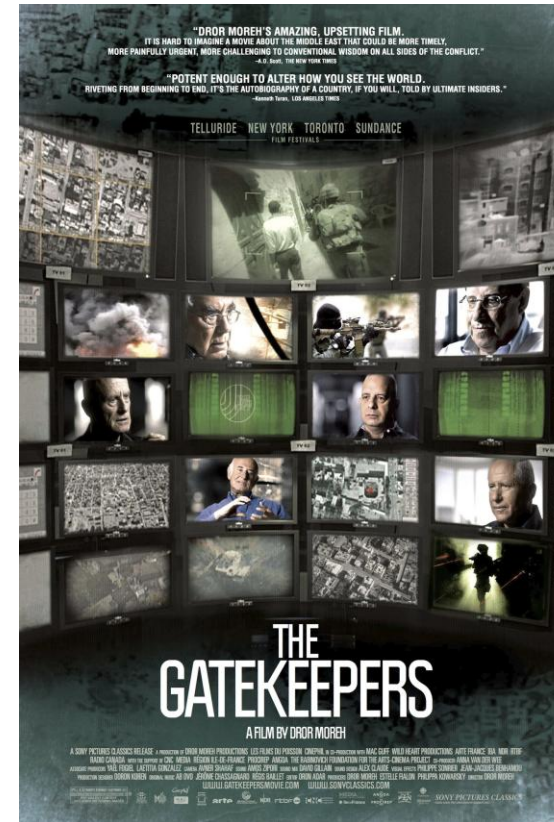
# Additional Resources

Detailed maps on Gaza and Israel

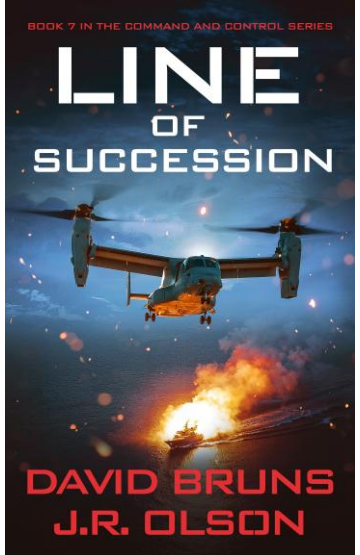
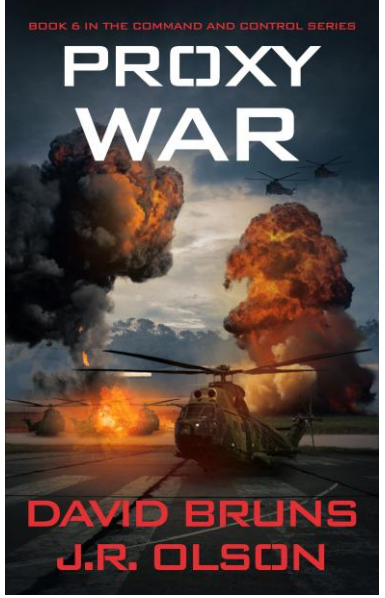
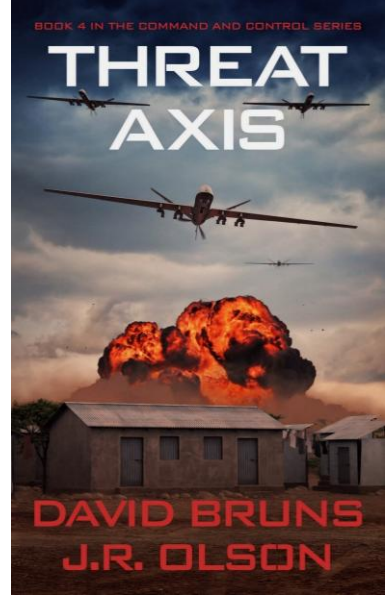
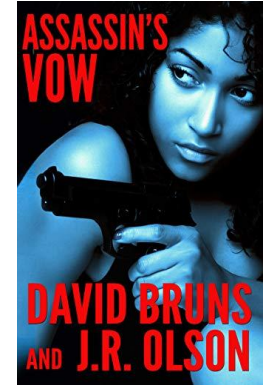
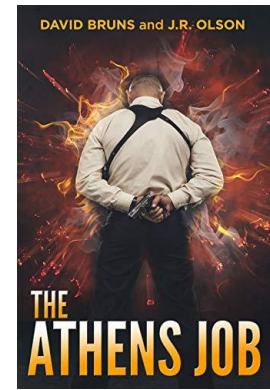
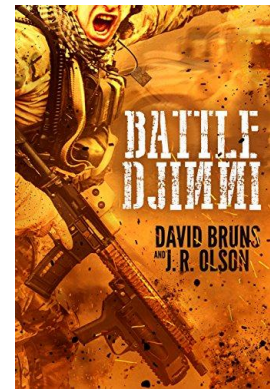
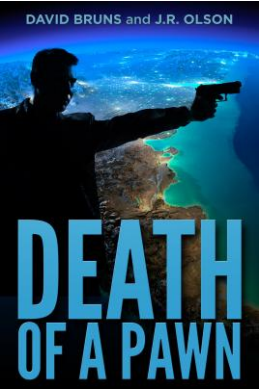
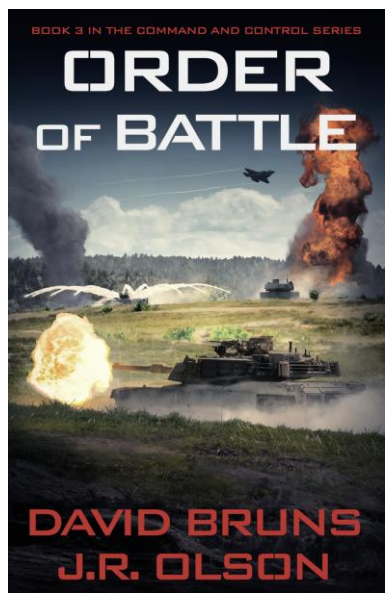
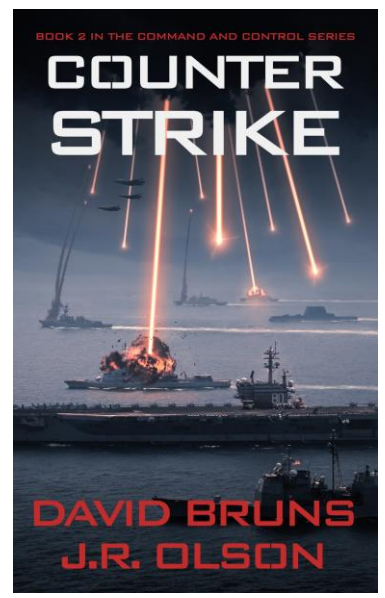
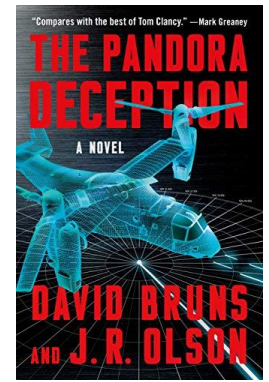
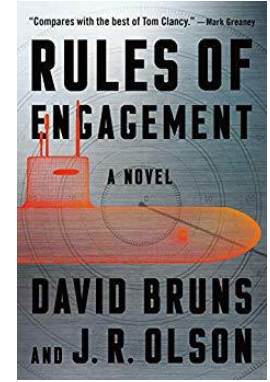
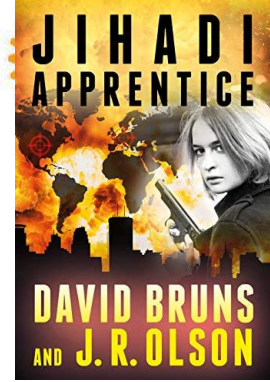
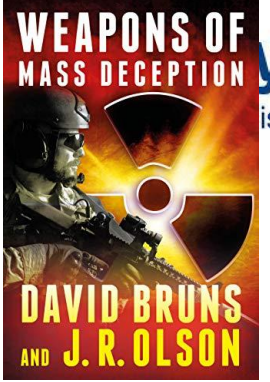
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/graphics/2023/10/11/gaza-strip-map-size-history-israel-conflict/71128174007/>



2009



2012



Launched on  
September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2025

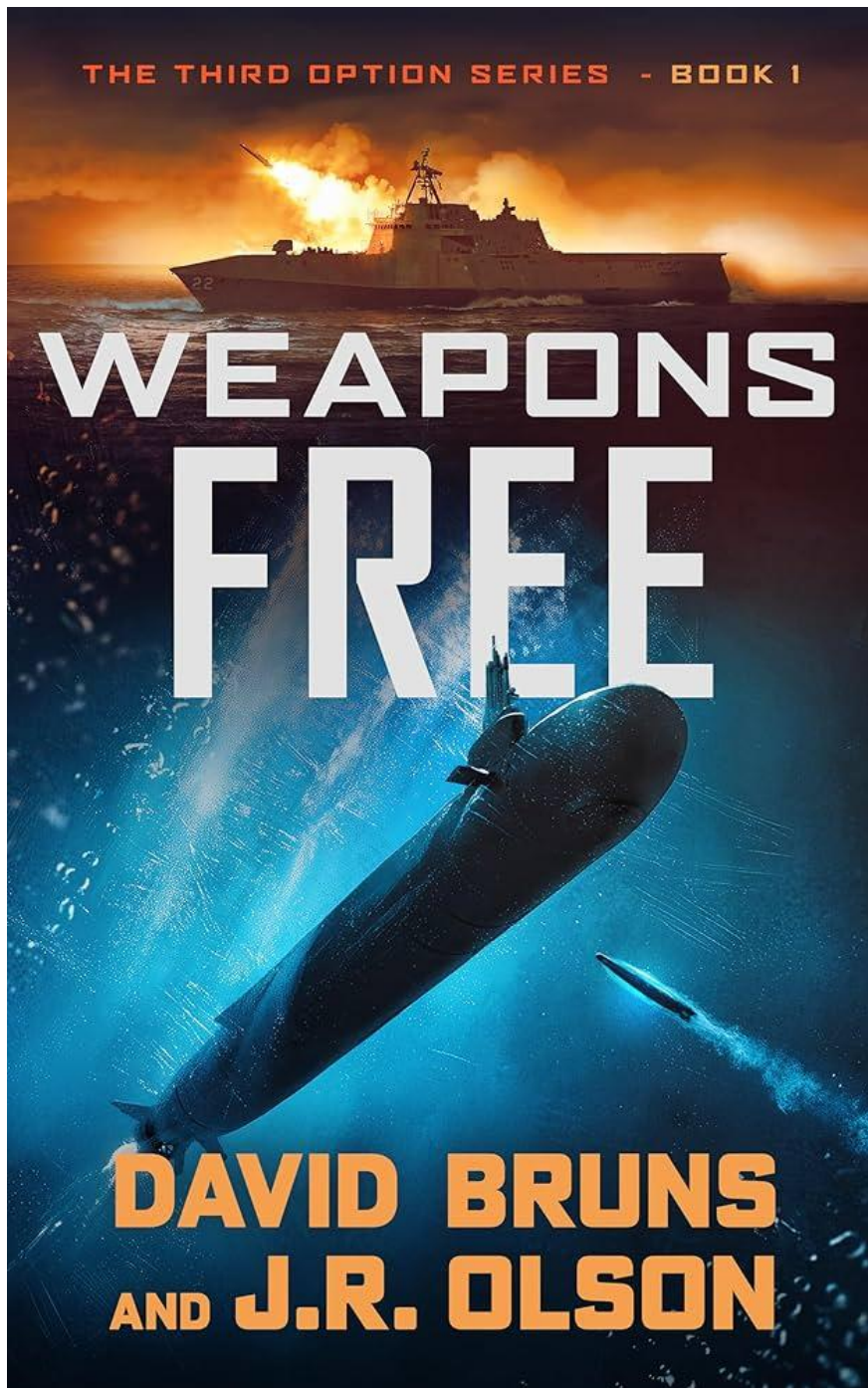
Everything is available on Amazon.com

THE THIRD OPTION SERIES - BOOK 1

# WEAPONS FREE

DAVID BRUNS  
AND J.R. OLSON

Launched  
on  
Tuesday!

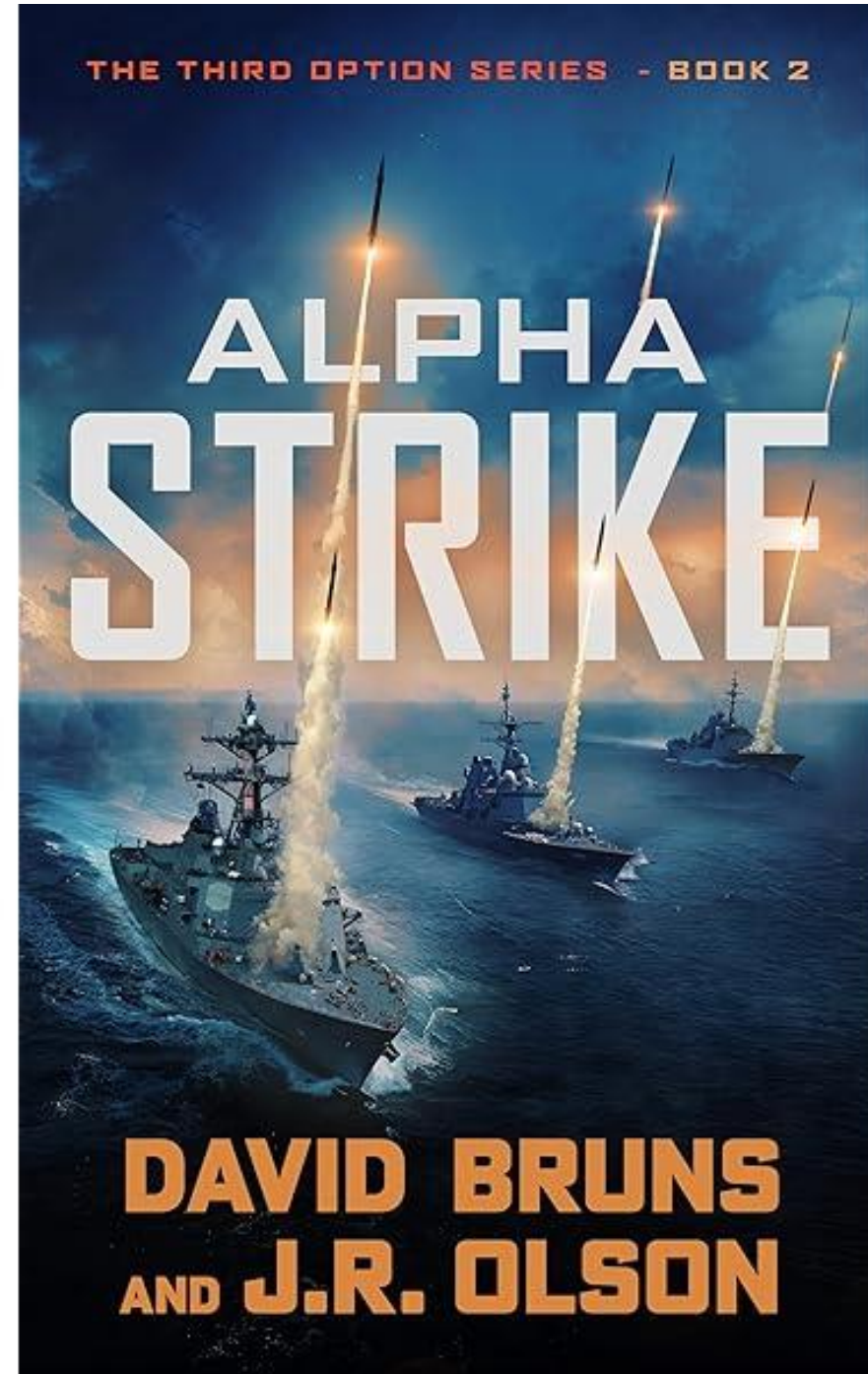


THE THIRD OPTION SERIES - BOOK 2

# ALPHA STRIKE

DAVID BRUNS  
AND J.R. OLSON

Launches  
July 21<sup>st</sup>!



# Discussion

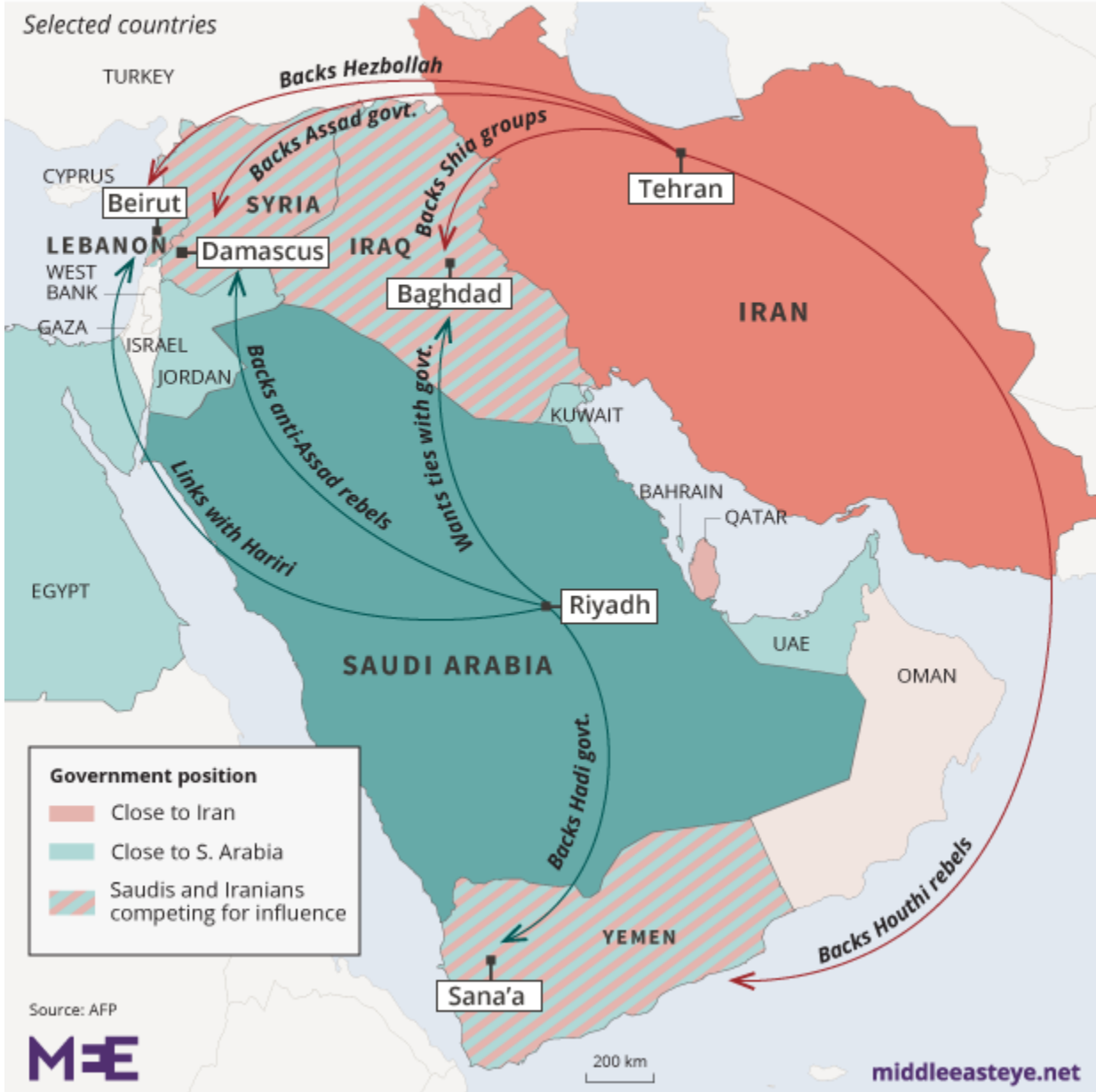
**Back-up Slides**

# Regional Hegemonic Competition



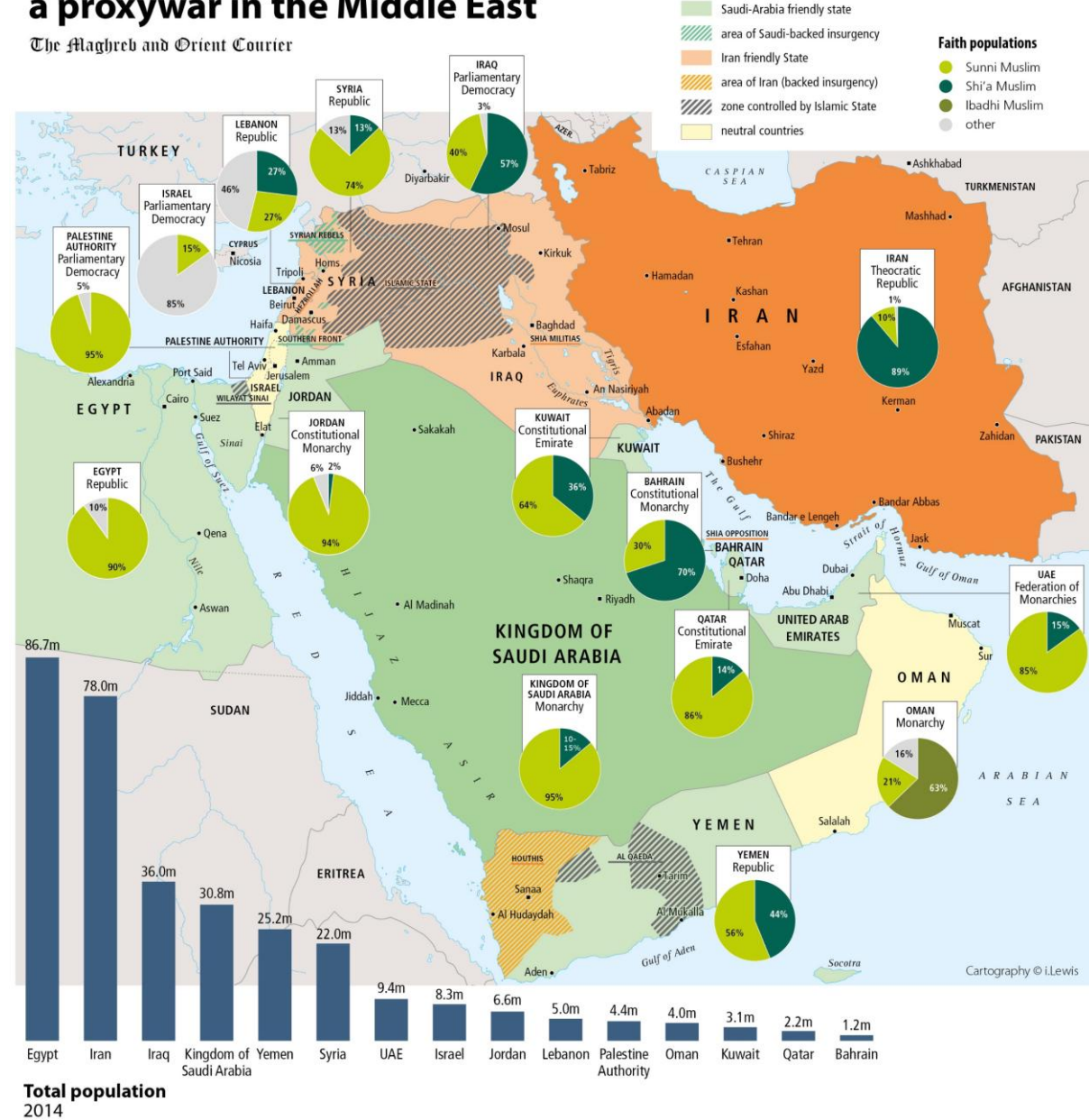


# Saudi Arabia and Iran: Rivals in the Middle East



# Kingdom of Saudi Arabia vs Islamic Republic of Iran : a proxywar in the Middle East

The Maghreb and Orient Courier



# Regional competition driven by three competing blocs



Source: EIU.

500 km

# Iranian Armed Forces

The IRGC operates parallel to the conventional military.

## CONVENTIONAL MILITARY



## ISLAMIC REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS

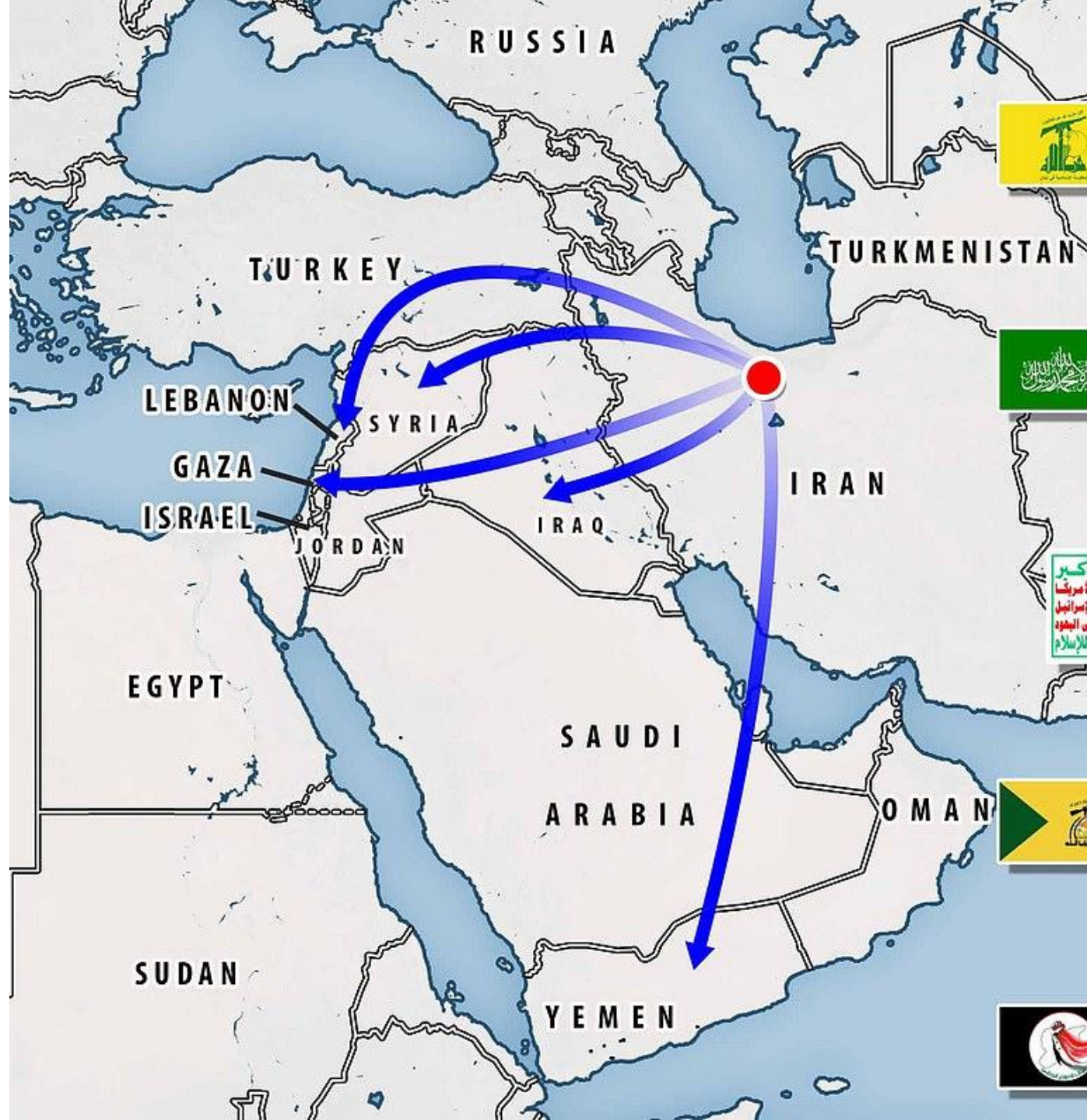


Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies.

# Iranian Influence – Quds Force Operations

- West Bank and Gaza Strip
  - ① Hamas
  - ② Palestine Islamic Jihad
- LEBANON
  - ③ Hezbollah
- SYRIA
  - ④ Fatemiyoun Brigade
  - ⑤ Zaynabiyoun Brigade
- IRAQ
  - ⑥ Kata'ib Hezbollah
  - ⑦ Asa'ib Ahl al Haq
  - ⑧ Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba
  - ⑨ Badr Organization
  - ⑩ Kata'ib Sayyid al Shuhada
- BAHRAIN
  - ⑪ Al Ashtar Brigades
  - ⑫ Saraya al Mukhtar
- YEMEN
  - ⑬ Ansar Allah (Houthis)





**HEZBOLLAH  
LEBANON**



**HAMAS  
PALESTINE/GAZA**



**HOUTHİ REBELS  
YEMEN**



**KATA'IB  
HEZBOLLAH  
IRAQ**



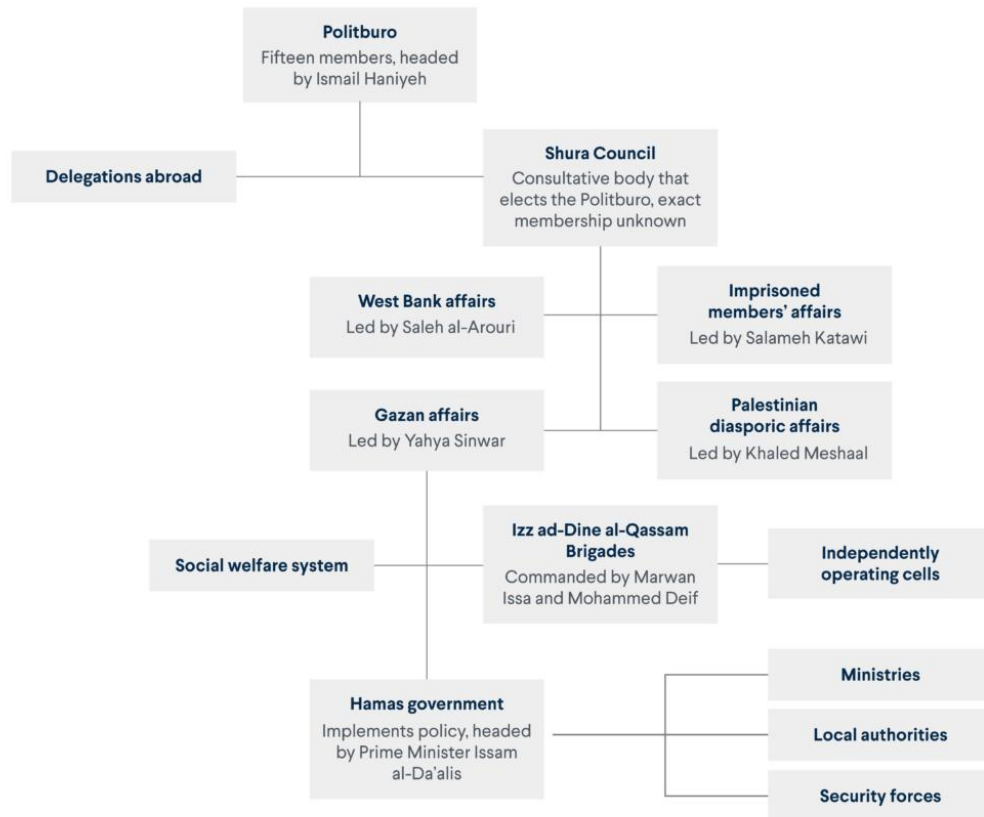
**NATIONAL  
DEFENCE FORCE  
SYRIA**



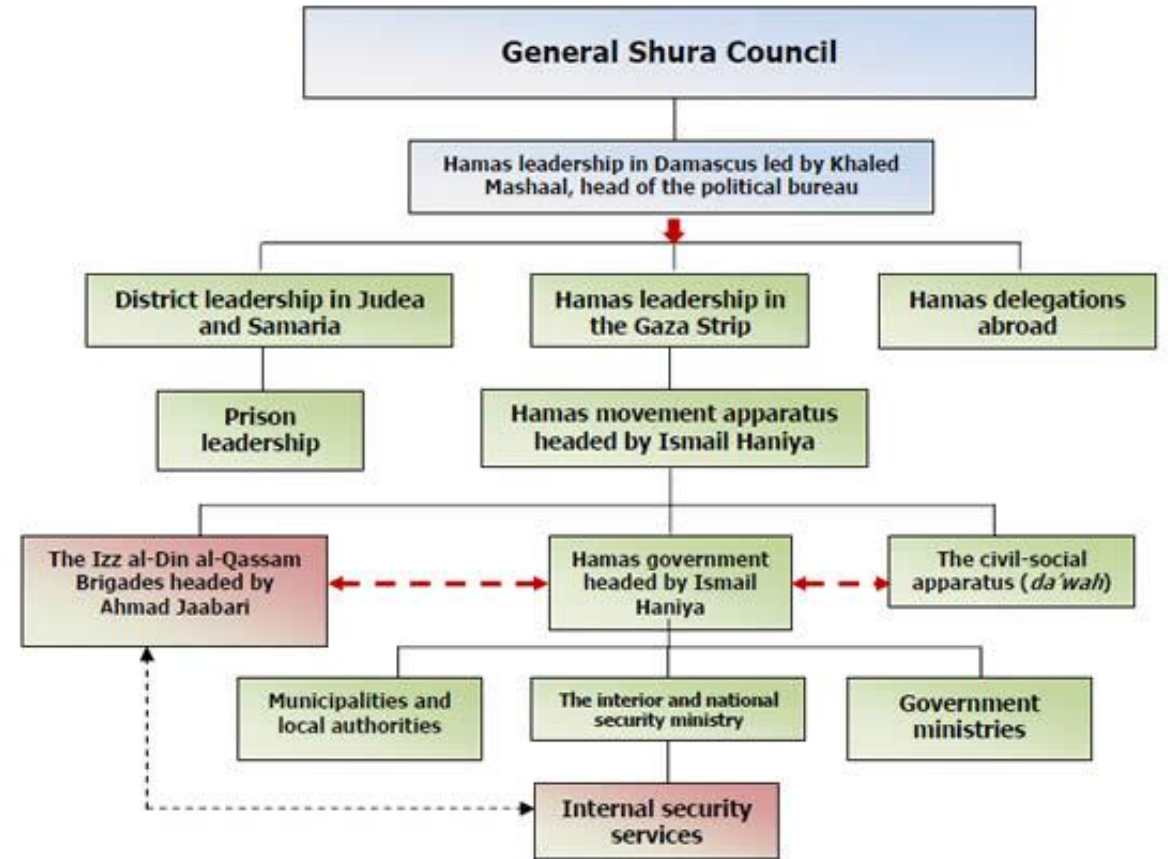


# Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya (Islamic Resistance Movement)

## Hamas's Governing Structure

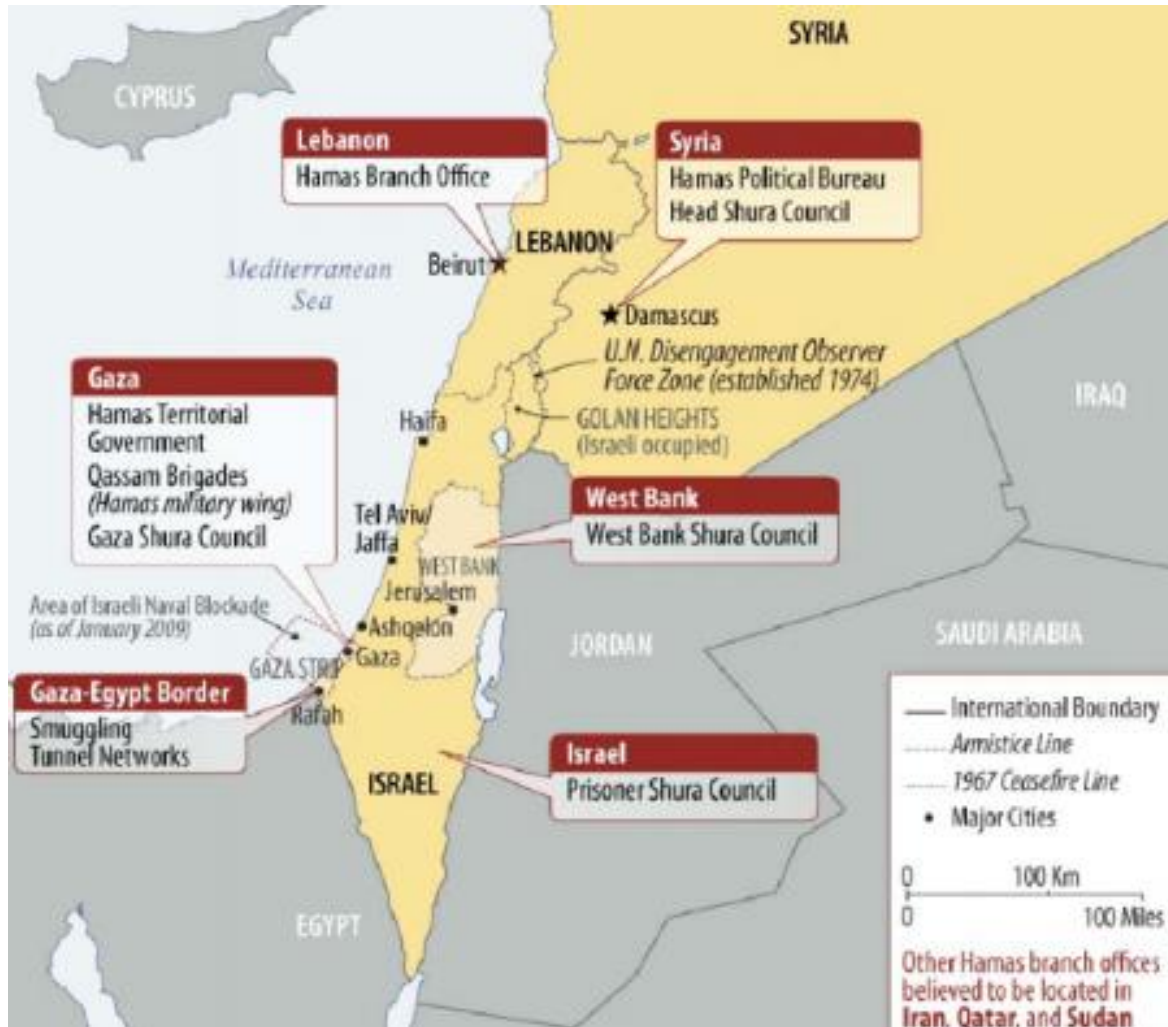


## Structure of the Hamas Movement



Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center

# Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya (HAMAS) (Islamic Resistance Movement)



## How Iran Is Bankrolling Regional Instability

Estimated annual funding Iran provides to foreign states and militant groups it supports\*



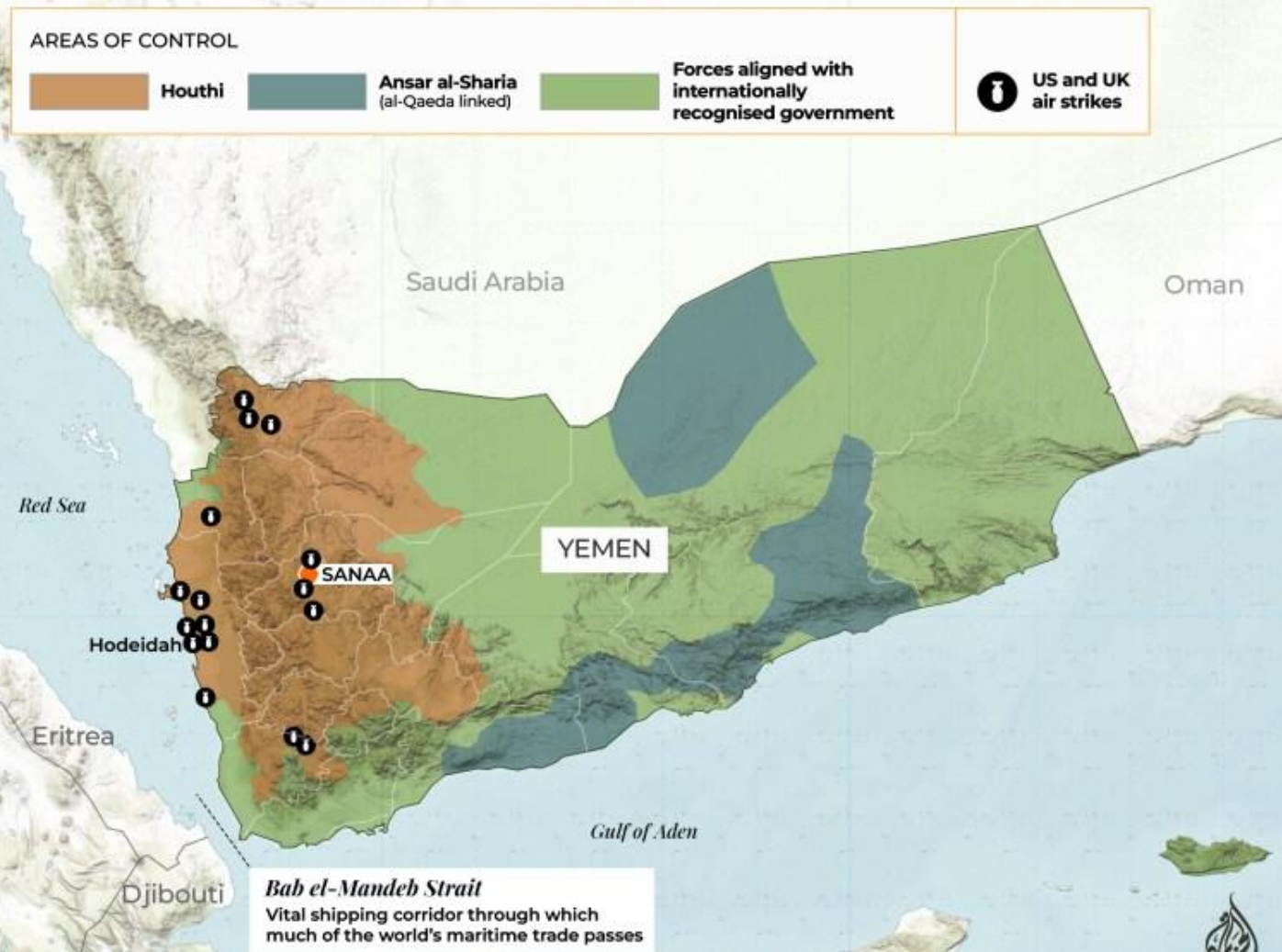
\* 2019 upper estimate based on recent years. Spending such as infrastructural projects, building mosques and direct support of militant groups  
Source: Soufan Center



## ISRAEL'S WAR ON GAZA

# US and UK strikes on Yemen

The US and the UK have launched a series of strikes against Yemen's Houthi rebels who have been targeting Israeli-linked ships in the Red Sea amid the war on Gaza.



Source: Al Jazeera, Sana'a Centre for Strategic Studies, Liveuamap | January 17, 2024

@AJLabs ALJAZEERA

## Triple Frontier: Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay

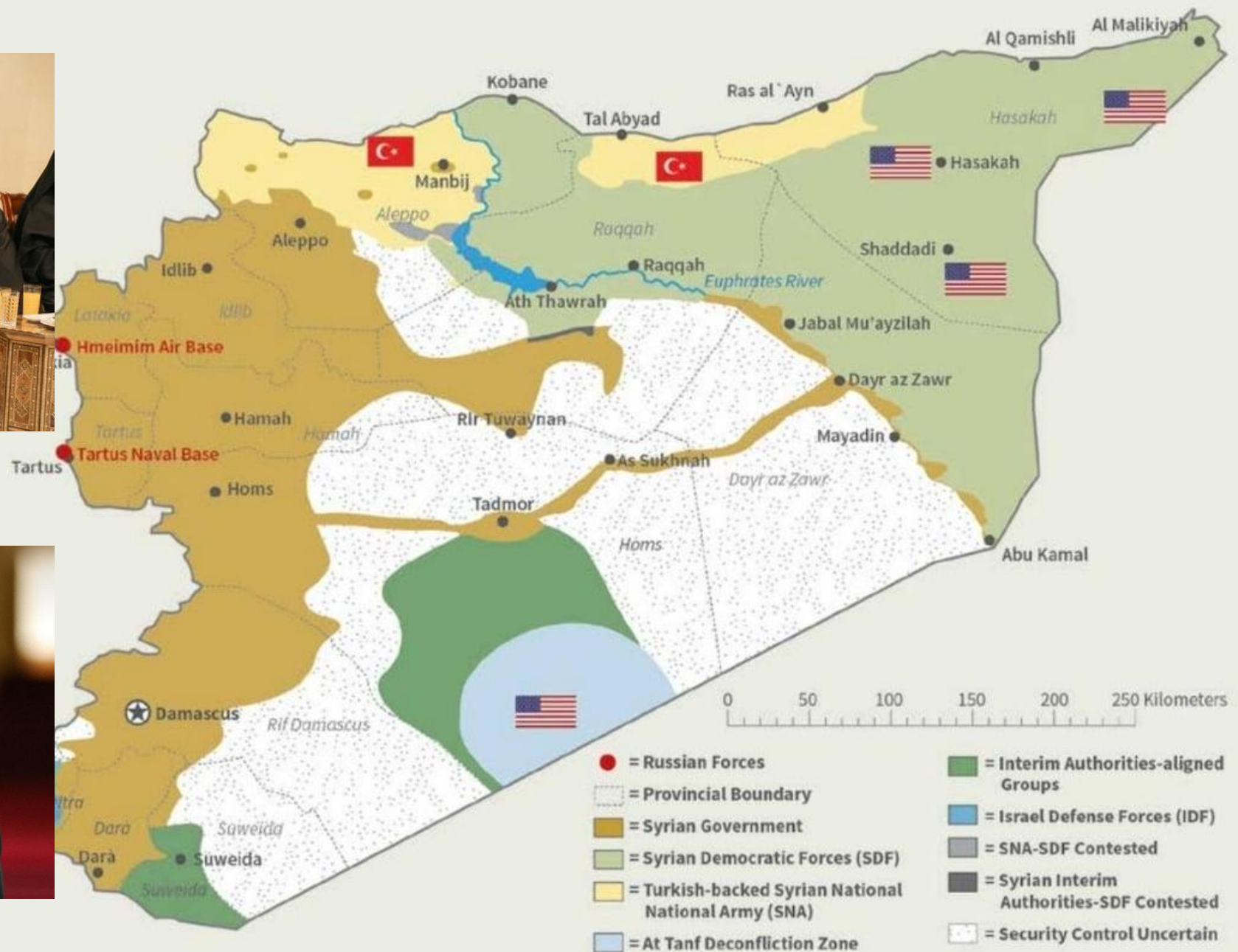
The tri-border area is known for its dark economy, mainly comprising money laundering and drug trafficking, and as a hotbed for Hezbollah and Iranian operatives since the 1980s





Former rebel leader is Syria's new interim president

Ahmed al-Sharaa



# Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa

Both the Syrian President and Foreign Minister were founding members of the Al-Nusrah Front under al-Qaeda before transitioning the group into Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).



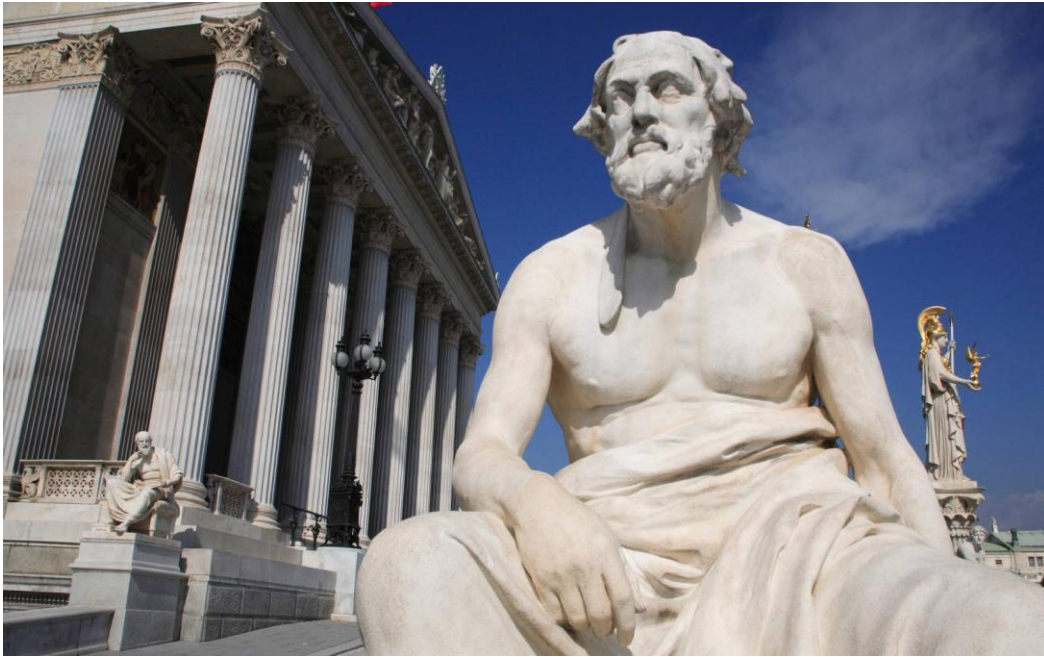
<https://x.com/vvanwilgenburg/status/1987435524093550725?s=20>

ISRAEL-GAZA WAR

# Red Sea patrol force to counter Houthi attacks

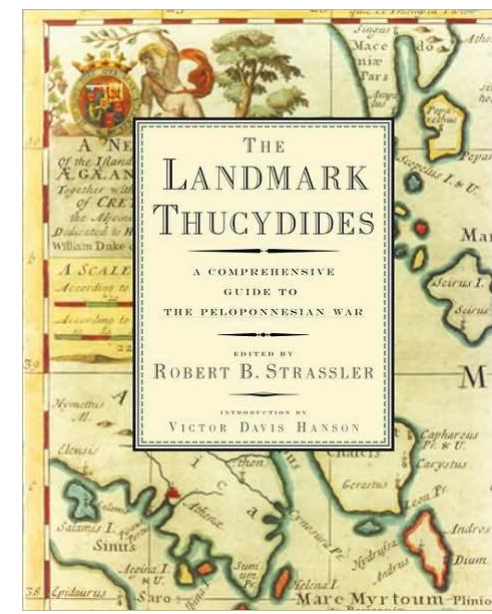
The United States has announced a 10-nation force to protect trade in the Red Sea after attacks by Yemen's Houthi rebels forced shipping companies to halt operations.





*Austria, Vienna - Statue of Greek historian Thucydides in front of the Parliament building.*

**Remember  
Thucydides!**



## Lessons from the Peloponnesian Wars

- Allies matter
- Logistics matter
- Concentration of forces

