



Spotlight on Iran and the Shiite Axis

March 18-25, 2026

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Highlights¹

- ▶ The Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared Iran's ambassador in Beirut persona non grata and demanded that he leave Lebanon, while clarifying that this does not constitute a severance of relations between the two countries. Hezbollah condemned the decision, calling it a "sin" contrary to Lebanon's interests.
- ▶ It was reported that approximately one hundred IRGC officers arrived in Lebanon following the elimination of Hassan Nasrallah, with the aim of restoring Hezbollah's capabilities. They reportedly assumed direct command of the organization's military wing in order to prepare it for the current campaign against Israel.
- ▶ Qods Force commander Esmail Qaani, who had not been seen since the beginning of the campaign in Iran, stressed in his first statement the importance of the "Resistance Front" in the campaign against the United States and Israel and warned of additional surprises from Iran's regional proxies.
- ▶ Senior Houthi officials continued to express support for Iran and emphasized their readiness to join the campaign, though without committing to timing.
- ▶ Pro-Iranian militias in Iraq continued attacks using missiles, rockets, and drones against US bases and facilities in Iraq, Jordan, and Gulf states, concurrently with continued attacks attributed to the United States against bases of the Popular Mobilization Forces and the targeting of militia leaders.

Iranian Involvement in Lebanon

- ▶ Lebanese Foreign Minister Youssef Rajji announced that he had instructed the director-general of the Foreign Ministry to summon Iran's chargé d'affaires in Beirut, Toufik Samadi Khoshkhoo, and inform him that Lebanon had decided to revoke the accreditation of Iran's designated ambassador, Mohammad Reza Shibani, declare him persona non grata, and require him to leave the country no later than Sunday, March 29, 2026 (Youssef Rajji's X account, March 24, 2026). At the same time, the Lebanese Foreign Ministry summoned Lebanon's ambassador to Tehran, Ahmad Sweidan, for consultations over what it described as "violations of diplomatic norms and principles governing

¹ The weekly study includes the activities of Iran, the Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen.

relations between the two countries by Iran” (Fars, March 24, 2026). The Lebanese Foreign Ministry later clarified that this does not constitute a severance of diplomatic relations but rather a step taken due to violations of diplomatic norms after the Iranian ambassador made statements interfering in Lebanon’s internal politics and met with unofficial parties without informing the ministry. It emphasized that Lebanon seeks the most amicable relations with Iran, based on equality, mutual respect, and non-interference in internal affairs (Lebanese Foreign Ministry X account, March 24, 2026). “Sources close to the Lebanese presidential palace” claimed that the understanding between President Joseph Aoun and Foreign Minister Rajji was to summon the ambassador as a warning, not to inform him of his expulsion (Al-Akhbar, March 25, 2026).



Iran’s ambassador-designate to Lebanon, Mohammad Reza Shibani (Fars, March 24, 2026)

- ▶ It was reported that following the Lebanese announcement, the Iranian ambassador appealed to Hezbollah and Amal to intervene against the decision to expel him (Al-Hadath, March 24, 2026). Hezbollah condemned the decision, calling it “an irresponsible and condemnable move that does not serve Lebanon’s national interests” and “a surrender to external pressure.” It added that this constitutes a “national and strategic sin that opens the door to internal division, deepens national rifts, and leads the country down a dangerous path of dependency, weakness, and vulnerability” (Hezbollah Military Media Telegram channel, March 24, 2026). It was also reported that Lebanese Parliament Speaker and Amal leader Nabih Berri told the Iranian ambassador that he must not leave Lebanon and conveyed to President Aoun that the decision to expel him would not pass (journalist Hassan Illaik’s X account, March 24, 2026). However, another report indicated that Berri had been aware of the intention to expel the Iranian diplomat following a meeting with President Aoun the evening before the announcement (Nidaa al-Watan, March 24, 2026).
- ▶ It was reported that approximately 100 IRGC officers arrived in Lebanon following the elimination of former Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, with the aim of restoring the organization’s capabilities and rebuilding its military command, which was severely damaged during the war with

Israel in summer 2024. According to the report, the IRGC officers assumed direct command of Hezbollah's military wing, retrained its fighters, assisted in managing its military affairs, supervised its rearmament, prepared it for the current campaign, and developed plans for coordinated missile attacks between Hezbollah and Iran. The restructuring reportedly included shifting from a hierarchical command structure to a decentralized one composed of small units with limited knowledge of each other's activities to improve operational compartmentalization. A "senior Lebanese security source" stated that the Iranians are helping Hezbollah determine the pace of the current fighting but are not involved in the precise selection of targets (Reuters, March 21, 2026).

► Lebanese MP Camille Chamoun claimed that more than 400 Iranians were operating Hezbollah, adding that Hezbollah received instructions from Iran to open the front and was merely executing decisions rather than initiating them (RED TV, March 23, 2026).

► "Sources" reported that IRGC elements operating in Lebanon have recently begun funding politicians and media figures to promote pro-Iran campaigns and Hezbollah's continued possession of weapons. The campaign reportedly aims to influence public opinion amid indications of growing dissatisfaction among the Lebanese public with Hezbollah's continued possession of weapons and declining support for Iran. It was noted that key recipients of funding include politicians associated with the "March 8 camp" (Hezbollah and its allies) (Al-Hadath, March 22, 2026).

Qods Force Commander's Message of Support for the "Resistance Front"

► Qods Force commander Esmail Qaani, who had not been seen since the start of the campaign in Iran, issued a statement marking Eid al-Fitr addressed to the "commanders and leaders of the Resistance Front." Qaani wrote that the determined and militant actions of the front against the United States and "criminal Israel" have generated admiration and joy among believers and freedom-seekers worldwide, while causing anger, shock, and fear among enemies. He added that it is now clear that the "Resistance Front" possesses significant capabilities and operates independently based on sound judgment, having entered the fight against the United States and Israel while defending the Islamic Republic. He noted that impactful operations have already been carried out and that further surprises are expected. Qaani emphasized that the unity of arenas constitutes a source of strength for the Islamic nation and a nightmare for "global arrogance and international Zionism." He thanked the "fighters of the Islamic nation" and stressed that although the "martyred leaders of the Resistance Front" are no longer present, the path of the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini, and Khamenei will continue with strength and determination under Mojtaba

Khamenei’s leadership. According to Qaani, thanks to the blood of the shaheeds, the army of justice will continue to fight the enemies of Islam and humanity, and “their humiliating defeat” will soon be witnessed (ISNA, March 20, 2026).



The commander of the Qods Force in an archive photo (ISNA, March 20, 2026)

Iran's Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf responded to a claim aired on Palestinian television that Israeli soldiers “tortured” a one-year-old child in central Gaza to pressure his father during interrogation. Qalibaf wrote that Iran fights for humanity and that the world must choose between standing with Gaza against the “colonial terrorist regime” or with “Epstein’s group and child abusers” (Qalibaf’s X account, March 23, 2026).

The Militias and the Campaign in Iran

The Houthis

► “US sources” reported that Saudi Arabia is conducting diplomatic efforts to prevent the Houthis from joining the campaign in support of Iran, while Israel and the United States are cautious about taking “provocative” actions that could draw them into the conflict. It was also reported that, unlike pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, the Houthis are not a direct Iranian operational arm. Their considerations include avoiding harm to regional Arab states and concerns over the consequences of entering another confrontation with the United States and Israel after suffering damage in last year’s campaign. However, it was noted that Iran may be reserving the “Houthi card” for the appropriate moment as a game-changing move or leverage in negotiations to end the fighting (Wall Street Journal, March 21, 2026).

► Senior Houthi leaders continued to express support for Iran against US and Israeli “aggression” and readiness to join the campaign alongside Iran, without committing to timing or method:

- ◆ Houthi leader Abd al-Malik al-Houthi stated in an Eid al-Fitr speech that the “American-Israeli aggression” against Iran stems from viewing Iran as the main obstacle to the “Zionist

domination project.” He accused the US leadership, headed by President Trump and Secretary of Defense Hegseth, of serving the “Zionist plan” and being hostile to Islam. He also attacked Arab states cooperating with the United States and Israel, accusing them of assisting the war against Iran, hosting US bases, and allowing their airspace to be used by the United States and Israel. He expressed support for Iran, Lebanon, and “Palestine” and readiness to respond to developments, with “all options on the table” (Al-Masirah, March 19, 2026).

- ◆ Chairman of the Houthi Supreme Political Council (SPC) Mahdi al-Mashat expressed solidarity with “our brothers and sisters in Gaza, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, and with all those facing injustice and American-Zionist aggression.” He called on Arab and Islamic states to condemn the “brutal aggression” against Iran and prevent the use of their territories and airspace by “the enemies of the nation.” He warned that the “American-Zionist enemy” seeks to impose a subjugation equation on the region, enabling it to attack any country or people at will, and stressed that confronting this “aggressive project” is a collective responsibility of the entire Islamic nation (Telegram channel of al-Mashat’s office, March 19, 2026).

- ◆ Houthi Defense Minister Mohammad al-Atifi and Chief of Staff Yusuf al-Madani confirmed in a message to the armed forces their readiness to join the confrontation, stressing continued efforts to improve combat readiness between the “forces of truth and falsehood” (Houthi Military Media Telegram channel, March 19, 2026).

- ◆ The Houthi political bureau congratulated Iran on its recent “successful” attacks against Israel, which it said caused “a large number of casualties.” The political bureau also expressed support for Iran in light of the “collapse of the enemy’s defense systems.” It further stated that Iran is waging a “just war” to defend the region, the Islamic nation, and the holy sites against the “Israeli and American enemy,” which understands only force and seeks to exert complete control over the entire region. The political bureau also praised Hezbollah’s activity against the “Israeli aggression” and the activity of the resistance in Iraq against the American bases in the country (Al-Mayadeen, March 22, 2026).

The pro-Iranian militias in Iraq

► The militias' attacks against American targets in Iraq and other countries continued:

- ◆ Over the past week (March 18–25, 2026), the Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed responsibility for at least 100 attacks using missiles, rockets, and drones against “enemy headquarters” in Iraq and the region. Since the start of the campaign in Iran on February 28, 2026, these militias have claimed responsibility for more than 550 attacks, primarily targeting

US facilities in Baghdad, the Kurdish region in northern Iraq, neighboring countries, and Jordan (Islamic Resistance in Iraq Telegram channel, March 18–25, 2026).



**Launching drones at “enemy headquarters”
(Islamic Resistance in Iraq Telegram channel, March 21, 2026)**

- ◆ Saraya Awliya al-Dam, a front group linked to Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, which is also affiliated with the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, claimed responsibility for more than 21 attacks during the same period against US targets in Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Kuwait, totaling more than 136 operations since the start of the campaign (Saraya Awliya al-Dam Telegram channel, March 18–25, 2026).
 - ◆ The Kata’ib Sarkhat al-Quds militia, a front group of Harakat al-Nujaba, also announced drone attacks against US targets in Baghdad, northern Iraq, and Jordan (Kata’ib Sarkhat al-Quds Telegram channel, March 11–18, 2026).
 - ◆ It was reported that Iraq's National Intelligence Headquarters in Baghdad was attacked by a drone, as a result of which one person was killed in the compound. The Coordination Framework, which unites the Shiite organizations in Iraq, condemned the attack as a “heinous terrorist act” and called for an immediate investigation (Shafaq News, March 21, 2026). Kata’ib Hezbollah denied involvement but warned the intelligence apparatus against cooperating with US, Jordanian, and Emirati intelligence (Kata'ib Hezbollah Telegram channel, March 22, 2026).
- Over the past week, attacks continued – for which no actor has officially claimed responsibility, although they are assessed to have been carried out by the Americans – against bases and assets of the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq in various areas across the country, including headquarters of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, the umbrella organization of the militias). It was reported that since the beginning of the campaign, at least 135 attacks have been carried out against PMF targets, leaving dozens of dead and wounded (Al-Akhbar, March 25, 2026). The PMF reported more than thirty

fatalities in its ranks in attacks this week. One of the attacks targeted a PMF headquarters in Al-Anbar Province, where at least 15 of the organization’s fighters were killed, including the head of the province’s operations directorate, Saad Dawi al-Baiji (PMF Telegram channel and Iraqi media, March 18–25, 2026). It was also reported that an airstrike in the city of Mosul targeted a residence of PMF chairman Faleh al-Fayyad, although he was not in the building at the time (Reuters and Shafaq News, March 24, 2026).



Right: Attack on the PMF headquarters in Al-Anbar (Sabereen News, March 25, 2026). Left: Funerals of those killed in the PMF (Sabereen News, March 25, 2026)

► Kata'ib Hezbollah stated that its secretary-general, Ahmad Mohsen Faraj al-Hamidawi, had ordered a halt to attacks against the US Embassy in Baghdad for five days, starting March 19, 2026, subject to several conditions. These include a cessation of activity by the “Zionist entity” in Beirut's Dahiyeh; a commitment to refrain from attacks in residential areas in Iraq; and the withdrawal of US intelligence personnel from all their operating locations in Iraq, restricting them to the embassy compound in Baghdad, except in the Kurdish region. According to the statement, if the United States does not meet these conditions, “the response will be direct, and the frequency of attacks will be higher.” The organization also stated that it supports the protection of diplomatic missions in Iraq of all countries, as long as they are not participating in the war against Iran, but that Israel and the United States do not enjoy such protection (Kata'ib Hezbollah Telegram channel, March 18, 2026). Subsequently, the militia issued another statement extending the suspension of activity against the US Embassy for an additional five days (Kata'ib Hezbollah Telegram channel, March 22, 2026).

► Conversely, a “senior militia leader” stressed that there is no ceasefire with the “enemy” and that they are in a state of “open war.” He warned that attacks on leaders and headquarters would not go unanswered and that operations would focus on “occupation soldiers.” He added that the militias possess hundreds of ready-to-use suicide drones and that the next phase would constitute a “qualitative escalation” (Al-Akhbar, March 25, 2026).

► Kata'ib Hezbollah Secretary-General Ahmad Mohsen Faraj al-Hamidawi accused the United States of initiating the war against Iran and criticized Saudi Arabia and the UAE for their support. He stated that although Iran did not request support from the Iraqi militias or Hezbollah, they felt obligated to act. He called on jihadists in East Asia, the Caucasus, the Gulf, and elsewhere to turn the war into a “comprehensive confrontation against all forces of arrogance,” warning of serious future consequences otherwise (Kata'ib Hezbollah Telegram channel, March 23, 2026).