



Spotlight on Iran and the Shiite Axis

January 1-8, 2025

Editor: Dr. Raz Zimmt



Highlights¹

- ▶ Senior Iranian figures continued to express confidence in the ability of the “resistance front” to overcome the challenges it faces amid the recent developments in the region, which have undermined its capabilities, and to emphasize Iran’s determination to continue its support for the “resistance.” **These statements may indicate Iran’s intention to try to maintain some of its influence in Syria by strengthening and encouraging trends of destabilizing the country over time.**
- ▶ An Iranian plane was detained at the Beirut airport on suspicion of transferring funds intended for Hezbollah. The incident drew criticism in Tehran, although the Iranian diplomats on the plane were eventually allowed to bring in the bags containing the money.
- ▶ The commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force visited Baghdad and met with senior Iraqi government officials and commanders of the pro-Iranian Shiite militias. He reportedly made it clear that Tehran would not interfere in any decision by the Iraqi government regarding the future of the militias considering the pressure to disarm them.
- ▶ The Houthis claimed responsibility for six attacks against Israel using ballistic missiles and drones. The IDF Spokesperson reported the interception of two missiles and a drone, and senior Houthi regime officials claimed that the defense systems deployed in Israel were unable to cope with the missile launches.
- ▶ The Houthis claimed responsibility for an attack on an American aircraft carrier in the Red Sea. The claim has not been verified. The US Central Command reported attacks against underground facilities for storing Houthi weapons.

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

The impact of regional developments on the “resistance front”

► Senior Iranian regime figures took advantage of the events of the fifth anniversary of the killing of Qassem Soleimani, the former commander of the Qods Force, in an American attack, emphasizing that the **“resistance front” is still strong, even amid the recent developments in the region, especially the overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria and Israel’s attack on Hezbollah and Hamas**. The following are prominent statements:

◆ **Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei** said at a ceremony marking the fifth anniversary of Soleimani’s death that the victory of the “resistance front” is certain and that Lebanon and Yemen are the symbols of the “resistance” and would ultimately win. Regarding the situation in Syria, the Iranian leader said Syria belongs to the Syrian people. According to him, there is no doubt that anyone who attacks Syria’s territory will be forced to retreat in light of the strength of the Syrian youth, and the American bases will be crushed under their feet (Supreme Leader’s website, January 1, 2025).



The Supreme Leader of Iran (Supreme Leader’s website, January 1, 2025)

◆ Mohammad Reza Naqdi, the IRGC deputy commander for coordination, said at a ceremony marking the anniversary of Soleimani’s death that the decision to have Iran’s presence in Syria was very logical because it was essential to the fight against ISIS. According to Naqdi, despite the recent events in the region, Iran and the “resistance front” have not been defeated because the “enemy” has not achieved any success and the young people of the Gaza Strip are inflicting losses on the “Zionist regime” even after about a year. He claimed that the “Zionists” are at the end of their lives and that they themselves estimate that they will not reach their eightieth year (ISNA, January 1, 2025).



Mohammad Reza Naqdi (ISNA, January 1, 2025)

◆ Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said that it must be admitted that the “resistance” has been hit recently. However, the “enemy” has not succeeded in achieving its goals. It has not succeeded in destroying Hamas in the Gaza Strip or Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the “resistance” will continue on its path and compensate for the blows it suffered. According to him, the “resistance” has learned very important lessons in recent months, which will help it improve its path in the future and become stronger (Tasnim, January 1, 2025). In a speech at a memorial ceremony for Soleimani, Araghchi said the “resistance” cannot be eliminated through weapons and bombings, and that the “resistance” has weapons but does not depend on them. He noted that the enemies should not think that hitting the “axis of resistance” would lead to their victory and that it would be the beginning of a greater defeat for them. He added that every flag that falls from one commander is raised by another commander (snn.ir, January 5, 2025).

◆ Esmail Kowsari, a Majles member and a former senior member of the IRGC, said that some mistakenly believe that the “resistance front” has reached an end following the developments in Syria. He noted that all military operations and wars have ups and downs and that not only has the “resistance front” not weakened, but it continues on the path of Qassem Soleimani and the path of the “resistance.” He claimed that Israel had failed against both Hezbollah and the Gaza Strip and that the “resistance” would ultimately win (Khabar Online, January 1, 2025).

◆ Ali-Mohammadi Sirat, the Supreme Leader’s representative in the IRGC’s Qods Force, said that the strength of the “resistance front” has not weakened and that the more the enemies continue their crimes, the more the power of the “resistance front” will only increase. He noted that throughout Muslim history there have been ups and downs, as

well as during the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. However, in the end, the Muslim nation will win and the “resistance front” will realize its goals and achieve its final victory through a combination of diplomatic and political planning and military measures. Sirat added that Israel has not been able to achieve its goals in the war, including the elimination of Hamas and the release of the hostages, and that Hezbollah is still alive. He noted that Yemen plays an important and central role in the region and that Ansarallah (i.e., the Houthis) has become very strong and has achieved significant military capabilities that harm Israel (Jamaran, January 4, 2025).



The Supreme Leader’s representative in the Qods Force (Jamaran, January 4, 2025)

► **Senior members of the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq** also used the anniversary of the deaths of Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy chairman of the Popular Mobilization Forces and commander of Kata’ib Hezbollah, to express support for the continued activity of the “axis of resistance:”

◆ According to an official announcement by Kata’ib Hezbollah, the US “betrayal” of jihad commanders and fighters in Iraq and the region continues, and it is an illusion that this will weaken the spirit of the “resistance” and divert the jihad fighters from continuing on the path of “justice” (Kaf Telegram channel, January 2, 2025).

◆ The cover militia of the Nujaba Movement, Kata’ib Sarkhat al-Quds (the Jerusalem Cry Brigades), issued a statement in which it appealed to “the American occupier and the passing tyrannical entity” and to anyone who dares to harm the line of “resistance” and warned that its members are on the ground and that all bases, outposts, and “espionage dens” are in the bank of targets and within the range of fire. The militia also expressed its continued support for the Gaza Strip with its drones and missiles (Ashab al-Kahf Telegram channel, January 2, 2025). It should be noted that the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq have not claimed responsibility for attacks against Israel since November 24, 2024.

Iran in the face of the overthrow of the regime in Syria

► Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said in an interview with the Chinese CCTV network that Iran expects to see what the new Syrian government's policy will be regarding the region and the other countries and will make a decision accordingly. He stressed that Iran is interested in establishing stability, establishing a government composed of all groups and sects in the country, and preserving Syria's territorial integrity, adding that Syria must not become a base for terrorists and a threat to its neighbors. Referring to the developments in Gaza, Araghchi said Israel did not achieve its goals in the war, first and foremost the elimination of Hamas. He said Iran would support any ceasefire Hamas agreed to (Tasnim, January 3, 2025).

► According to Basij deputy commander Qassem Qureshi, Syria, which should have been completely peaceful, is now in the hands of more than five separatist and terrorist groups and under the occupation of three foreign countries (Israel, Turkey, and the United States). He added that the Syrian people are facing a "tragic fate" (snn.ir, January 5, 2025).

► Bakhshayesh Ardestani, a member of the Majles National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, estimated that the armed conflicts in Syria would continue and even intensify because the new government in Syria is not committed to democracy and the rights of minorities, and because the various groups operating in Syria, including the Kurds, Druze, Alawites, secular groups, and even Sunni Salafi groups, would not easily surrender their weapons. He also noted that struggles and disagreements are expected between the foreign actors operating in Syria, including Turkey, the United States, Russia, and the Gulf states. He added that there are still 130,000 Syrians, most of them Shiites and Alawites, who fought alongside the Assad regime as part of the "resistance" during the civil war and they can take action against the new government if it acts against them by force or discriminates against them. He stressed that the Supreme Leader's remarks about the Syrian youth [who will liberate the territories occupied by Israel in Syria] do not mean that Iran intends to support the "resistance" groups in Syria, but that the new Syrian government cannot deal with the many challenges it faces and that it will face significant security and economic problems in the future, which will lead to young Syrians acting on their own and establishing organizations to fight against the new government (Didehban, January 5, 2025).

Iran's involvement in Lebanon

- ▶ On January 2, 2025, “Lebanese security sources” reported that an Iranian Mahan Air aircraft was inspected at Rafic Hariri International Airport in Beirut on suspicion of carrying funds intended for Hezbollah. According to the report, the Iranian delegation on the plane attempted to prevent a search of their luggage, claiming they were a diplomatic delegation. Airport security services were called to conduct the search, during which nothing was found. In an update from the Iranian embassy in Beirut to the Lebanese Foreign Ministry, it was reported that two small diplomatic pouches carried by an Iranian diplomat on the flight contained documents and banknotes for covering the embassy’s operational expenses. Following this clarification, the two pouches were allowed entry (al-Nahar, January 2, 2025).
- ▶ Following the incident at Beirut Airport, Ebrahim Rezaei, spokesman for the Majles National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, announced that the committee will discuss this matter soon. He noted that the Foreign Ministry needs to address the issue quickly and ensure such an incident does not recur. He added that Iran has always stood by Lebanon and that the Lebanese government should avoid conduct that might be influenced by Western countries (IRNA, January 3, 2025). Iran’s Ambassador to Beirut, Mojtaba Amani, clarified that the airport authorities’ actions stemmed from lack of knowledge, which was resolved following the intervention of the Lebanese Foreign Ministry, and that Iran protested the incident (Tasnim, January 3, 2025)
- ▶ During a visit to Beirut’s Dahiyeh, Ambassador Amani stressed Iran’s continued support for the “resistance.” He noted that if Iran wanted to withdraw its support for the “resistance,” it would not have continued to do so for 45 years (ISNA, January 3, 2025).



The Iranian ambassador to Beirut (ISNA, January 3, 2025)

Iran's involvement in Iraq

- ▶ According to a “knowledgeable source,” **Qods Force commander Esmail Qaani** paid a secret visit to Baghdad, during which he met with several Iraqi militia commanders. The visit took place ahead of the expected visit of Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia’ al-Sudani to Tehran on January 8, 2025 (Shafaq News, January 5, 2025).
- ▶ “A well-informed source” said that in his meeting with al-Sudani, Qaani stressed that Iran is not interested in being part of the war in the region and does not want Iraq to be dragged into it. He also noted that Iran would not interfere in any decision of the Iraqi government regarding the future of the militias. The source added that Qaani also met with the militia leaders to discuss regional developments, especially the impact of the events in Syria on the “axis of resistance” (Shafaq News, January 6, 2025).
- ▶ “Iraqi political sources” reported that Qaani arrived in Iraq with a plan to assess the state of Shiite militias in light of international pressure on Iraq to resolve the issue. According to the report, Iran is seeking to implement a preemptive plan to resolve the future of Shiite militias before the Iraqi army is forced to resolve this issue under pressure. It was noted that Qaani’s plan is based on the Iraqi prime minister’s decision regarding the merger of Popular Mobilization forces into the Iraqi armed forces, while subordinating the organization to Iraqi forces administratively and in terms of command. The plan aims to prevent the public appearance of Iraqi Shiite militia members while armed and to ensure their security against possible attacks by the US or Israel. The presentation of the plan is intended to reduce American pressure on the Iraqi government regarding pro-Iranian Shiite militias (al-Arab, January 7, 2025).

Operations of the Shiite militias

Yemen

Military activity against Israel

- ▶ Last week, the Houthis’ military spokesman, Yahya Saria, claimed responsibility for six attacks against Israel – four by drones and two by a Palestine-2 hypersonic ballistic missile. According to Saria, all the attacks achieved their objectives (Yahya Saria’s Telegram channel, January 1-8, 2025). The IDF Spokesperson reported that two ballistic missiles and a drone had

been intercepted before they penetrated Israeli territory (IDF Spokesperson, January 1-8, 2025).

► Senior Houthi regime officials praised the continued attacks against Israel and claimed that Israel’s defense systems were unable to cope with the missiles launched from Yemen. The following are prominent statements:

◆ In his weekly speech, Houthi leader Abd al-Malik al-Houthi boasted about the Houthi forces’ attacks on Ben Gurion Airport, Jaffa and the Nevatim base, saying that the “enemy” recognizes the impact of the Houthis’ actions because they caused millions of Israelis to “get out of bed and go to bomb shelters every night.” Al-Houthi added that the “enemy” describes Yemen as a very complex adversary, which he said is a positive thing because it officially means that Yemen is a “cohesive and strong state.” He stressed that they were not deterred by the Israeli attacks and that they would continue the struggle against the “enemy” (al-Masirah, January 2, 2025).

◆ Nasr al-Din Amer, the deputy chairman of the media arm of the Houthi Movement, claimed that the missile launch at Israel on the night of January 3, 2025, challenged the world’s most advanced air defense systems that were recently deployed in Israel and caused them to “fail” in the face of the speed of Yemeni missiles. He added that every new day in which the “aggression” against the Gaza Strip continues will lead to the development of more missiles and that the “enemy” must understand that it will not be able to defend itself (Nasr al-Din Amer’s Telegram channel, January 3, 2025).

◆ Hezam al-Asad, a member of the Houthis’ political bureau, issued a statement in Hebrew following the claim that a ballistic missile had been fired at the Orot Rabin power plant. It reads as follows: “The Hadera area is located north of Gush Dan, “Greater Jaffa,” and south of Haifa, and it is not in the southern Negev, as the enemy lies by claiming that it was intercepted outside the borders. In addition, alarms were activated after the missile reached its destination, which indicates its high speed exceeding Mach 16, its high maneuverability, and the failure of the various air defense systems. Stop killing our children in the Gaza Strip” (Hezam al-Asad’s X account, January 5, 2025).

The confrontation with the United States

► On January 6, 2025, Houthi forces spokesman Yahya Saria claimed responsibility for an attack on the US aircraft carrier Harry S. Truman north of the Red Sea using two cruise missiles and four drones. According to him, the Houthi attack thwarted the Americans’ preparations for an

airstrike against Yemen (Yahya Saria's Telegram channel, January 6, 2025). The claims have not been verified.

► During the past week, there were reports of airstrikes in Yemen attributed to the US-led coalition. Military targets were reportedly attacked in the Saada Governorate and in mountainous areas in Houthi territory in Yemen (Saba News Agency, al-Masirah, and al-Mayadeen, January 1-8, 2025). The US Central Command (CENTCOM) reported that its forces carried out precision strikes against two underground facilities for storing advanced conventional weapons in the area controlled by the Houthis in Yemen. According to the announcement, the weapons were used in attacks against US military vessels and merchant ships in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (CENTCOM X account, January 8, 2025).

► "Informed sources" reported that the Houthis had transferred heavy weapons, including tanks and missiles, from bases in the Sana'a area to the mountainous areas between Sana'a and Amran, due to concerns of possible airstrikes by Israel or the international coalition (al-Mashhad al-Yamani, January 7, 2025).

► "Sources close to the Houthi government" said the United States had once again offered to reduce its attacks in Yemen in exchange for a halt in launching missiles at Israel. According to the sources, the proposal was made out of a desire to give another chance to the international mediators trying to stop the war in the Gaza Strip. A "Houthi political source" stressed that they have no intention of compromising on the issue of support for the Gaza Strip. It was also reported that the Houthis are preparing extensively to enter a new and larger phase of "unprecedented" escalation (al-Akhbar, January 3, 2025).

Houthi military buildup

► "American intelligence sources" said that China is supplying the Houthis with Chinese-made weapons, which the Houthis use in their attacks against vessels, in exchange for the Houthis refraining from attacking Chinese vessels. According to the report, senior Houthi officials visited China and established a supply network that allows the Houthis to obtain "advanced components and equipment with guided capabilities" to improve their missiles. It was also reported that using Chinese components, the Houthis plan to produce hundreds of cruise missiles capable of striking the Persian Gulf states. According to the report, the United States has contacted China several times since September 2024 and provided it with information about Chinese companies involved in the transfer of the weapons in question (i24NEWS, January 2, 2025).