



Spotlight on Iran and the Shiite Axis

February 12 – 19, 2025

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Highlights¹

- ▶ The Lebanese authorities' decision to suspend Iranian flights to Beirut for fear that they are carrying funds for Hezbollah was the focus of diplomatic contacts between the two countries. Israel's Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar revealed in a meeting with a delegation of American senators that Iran is also trying to smuggle money for Hezbollah through Turkey and in cooperation with it.
- ▶ Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei and Foreign Minister Araghchi met in Tehran with the leadership of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), headed by the organization's secretary-general, Ziad al-Nakhalah. The two condemned Trump's plan to evacuate the residents of the Gaza Strip.
- ▶ The Iranian foreign minister's special representative for the Middle East claimed that Iran and the new regime in Syria were exchanging messages. Sources in Syria denied this.
- ▶ The Iranian deputy foreign minister visited Baghdad and met with senior Iraqi government officials. At the same time, the chairman of the umbrella organization of the pro-Iranian Shiite militias came to Tehran for a visit.
- ▶ The Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman denied reports of Iranian military assistance to the Houthis after it was reported that the "legitimate" Yemeni army had thwarted an attempt to smuggle Iranian-made weapons, including cruise missiles and drones.

Iran's involvement in Lebanon

- ▶ On February 13 and 14, 2025, the Lebanese authorities prevented the landing of two passenger planes of the Iranian airline Mahan Air in Beirut. It was reported that the decision was made out of concern that Israel would attack the Beirut International Airport due to

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

information that the planes were being used to transfer funds to Hezbollah.² The following are Iranian comments on the affair:

- ◆ Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei condemned Israel's threats to take military action in the event of Iranian planes landing in Beirut. This was amid attempts by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and Hezbollah to exploit the airport in Beirut to smuggle funds for Hezbollah through civilian flights. Baghaei noted that Israel's threats against civilian planes carrying Lebanese citizens are a flagrant violation of international law and a violation of Lebanese sovereignty. He called on international organizations, including the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), to take measures against Israel (Iranian Foreign Ministry website, February 14, 2025).
- ◆ Mojtaba Amani, Iran's ambassador to Beirut, announced that allowing flights from Beirut to Tehran, which were suspended following the incident at the Beirut airport, depends on the Lebanese authorities not preventing Iranian flights from landing in Beirut. He noted that Iran is holding talks to resolve the problem of banning Iranian flights to Beirut. He added that Iran welcomes flights by the Lebanese airlines to Iran, but not at the expense of Iranian airlines (Tasnim, February 14, 2025).
- ◆ Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi spoke for the first time with the incoming Lebanese Foreign Minister, Youssef Raji. Araghchi congratulated Raji on his appointment and wished him and the Lebanese government success. The two discussed ways to solve the problem of passenger flights between the countries and expressed their willingness to hold constructive talks on this issue. They also discussed bilateral relations on the political, economic, commercial, and cultural levels, and developments in the region (Iranian Foreign Ministry website, February 15, 2025). At his weekly press conference, the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman referred to the conversation between the foreign ministers, saying that it stressed that the best decision regarding the ban on Iranian flights landing in Beirut should be made without allowing any other party, which is not interested in the good of the two countries and the region, to influence it. He said he

² For further information on the events at the Beirut airport, see the ITIC's weekly bulletin, "[Spotlight on Terrorism: Hezbollah and Lebanon \(February 10-17, 2025\)](#)"

hoped it would be possible to reach a reasonable solution that would serve the interests of Lebanon and Iran (Iranian Foreign Ministry website, February 17, 2025).

◆ It was reported that a possible solution to the flight crisis between the two countries is being examined by inspecting the Iranian planes en route to Beirut at the Baghdad airport, which is under the control of an American security company (Al-Akhbar, February 17, 2025). It was also reported that the contacts between Lebanon and Iran regarding the suspension of flights did not lead to an agreement and that Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam rejects any proposal for a solution and insists on adhering to the position of the United States, which demands an extension of the ban on Iranian flights and threatens to withhold any aid to Lebanon if its demands are not met. According to the report, the US Embassy in Beirut is pressuring the government to prevent Iranian and other foreign delegations from attending the funeral of former Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah on February 23, 2025, for fear that the flights will be used to transfer funds to the organization (Al-Akhbar, February 18, 2025).

► Israel's Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar said at a meeting with a bipartisan delegation of US senators that Iran is trying to smuggle funds for Hezbollah to rehabilitate its power and status in Lebanon. He said that the Iranian effort was carried out, among other things, through Turkey and in cooperation with it (Israeli daily Israel Hayom, February 17, 2025).

Iran and the militias in light of the developments in the Palestinian arena

Iran

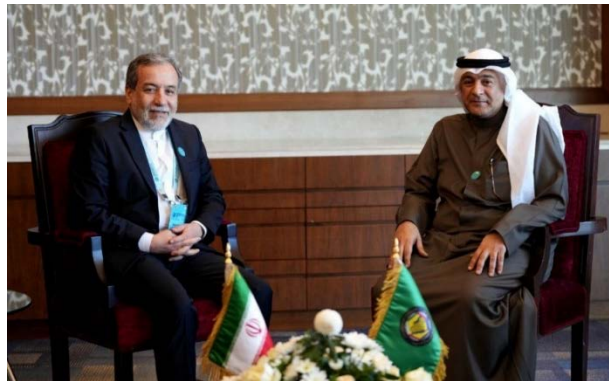
► Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei met in Tehran with the leadership of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), headed by the organization's secretary-general, Ziyad al-Nakhalah, and his deputy, Mohammad al-Hindi. Khamenei congratulated the delegation on "the victory of the resistance in Gaza over the Zionist and American enemies" and said that this victory set a new standard in the struggles of the "resistance." Referring to President Trump's proposal to transfer the Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, Khamenei said that "these stupid American plans" will lead nowhere and that no plan will be carried out without the consent of the "resistance" and the residents of the Gaza Strip. He added that those who claimed a year and a half ago that they would eliminate the "resistance" in a short time are now receiving their "captives" from the "resistance" fighters in small groups in exchange for a large number of Palestinian prisoners (Iranian Supreme Leader's website, February 18, 2025). The PIJ delegation also met with

Foreign Minister Araghchi, who stressed Iran’s support for the Palestinians and the “resistance” and described Trump’s proposal as “a sinister plot to destroy Palestine” (Iranian Foreign Ministry website, February 18, 2025).



**The Supreme Leader meets with the PIJ delegation
(Iranian Supreme Leader’s website, February 18, 2025)**

► Foreign Minister Araghchi met in Oman with the secretary-general of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Jassim Mohammed al-Badawi. Araghchi praised the position of the Arab countries, especially the Gulf states, in condemning President Trump’s proposal to transfer the residents of the Gaza Strip. He also condemned the Israeli prime minister’s remarks regarding the establishment of a Palestinian state in Saudi Arabia. He stressed the need for a unified and unequivocal position on the part of the Muslim world in support of the rights of the Palestinian people (Iranian Foreign Ministry website, February 16, 2025).



**The Iranian foreign minister meets with the secretary-general of the Gulf Cooperation Council
(IRNA, February 16, 2025)**

The Houthis

► Abd al-Malik al-Houthi, the leader of the Houthi Movement, once again threatened that if Israel violated the ceasefire agreement with Hamas, the Houthis would resume military activity against Israel. He also warned that if the United States and Israel acted to implement the Trump plan to transfer residents of the Gaza Strip, the Houthi forces would intervene with the

military force at their disposal, using missiles, drones, and other means (Houthi Media Center X account, February 13, 2025).

► Nasr al-Din Amer, deputy chairman of the Houthis' media organization, referred to the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and said that the Yemeni role was to pressure for the implementation of the ceasefire because if there was any violation, they would intervene "in all aspects, including the military and national aspects" (Nasr al-Din Amer's X account, February 14, 2025).

► Muhammad al-Bukhaiti, a member of the Houthis' political bureau, issued a statement saying that if US President Trump adhered to the immigration plan of the residents of the Gaza Strip, they would stand in his way with the weapons in their possession and that "our response will shake the earth" (Muhammad al-Bukhaiti's X account, February 15, 2025).

The militias in Iraq

► Abd al-Qader al-Karbala'i, the military aide of the Nujaba Movement, attacked Trump's plan to "exile" the residents of the Gaza Strip. In a statement, he wrote, "This fool tried our courage four years ago and we are ready to turn the ball back once again and the gates of hell will be opened. We will not accept such humiliation in any way!" (Nujaba Movement X account, February 13, 2025).

Iran in the face of events in Syria

► Iran's representative to the UN, Amir Saeed Iravani, speaking at the Security Council, stressed Iran's support for preserving Syria's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity without foreign interference, and expressed his country's readiness to help establish peace and stability in Syria and the region. He condemned Israel's activity in Syrian territory, stressed that it was a clear violation of Security Council resolutions, and demanded the withdrawal of IDF forces from the country. He also warned against the renewal of ISIS's activity in Syria and stressed the need to protect the rights of the country's religious minorities, especially the Alawites and Shiites, and the country's religious sites (Tasnim, February 12, 2025).

► The Foreign Minister's Special Representative for West Asia, Mohammad Reza Raouf Sheibani, met in Moscow with the Russian President's Special Representative for the Middle East, Alexander Lavrentiev, and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov to discuss developments in the region, particularly in Syria. The two sides stressed their commitment to Syria's unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity and the importance of international efforts to establish stability in the country. They also emphasized their position that the internal issues

in Syria should be resolved by the Syrian parties through a dialogue with the participation of all political, ethnic, and religious factions in the country (ISNA, February 14, 2025).

► At the end of his visit to Moscow, Sheibani said that Iran and Syria are exchanging messages and that Iran is in indirect contact with senior Syrian officials. He noted that Iran is monitoring developments in Syria and would make a decision on this issue at the appropriate time. Sheibani stressed that all political factions in Syria should participate in determining Syria's fate and that Iran opposes any foreign interference in the country's affairs. He added that Iran and Russia share their positions on the situation in Syria (Tasnim, February 15, 2025). "Syrian diplomatic sources" denied the claims of dialogue with Iran, saying that they had only sent requests to Russia to exert pressure on Tehran to stop its attempts to destabilize Syria (Syria TV, February 19, 2025).



**The Iranian foreign minister's representative meets with senior Russian officials
(ISNA, February 14, 2025)**

► Ahmad Reza Pourdastan, the head of the Iranian Army's Center for Strategic Studies and former commander of the Iranian Army's Ground Forces, dismissed claims that developments in Syria reflect Iran's weakness. He noted that Syria is not part of Iranian territory and that Iranian military advisors operated there at the official request of the Syrian authorities. According to him, Iranian intelligence and security officials identified the operational readiness of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) before the organization's attack against the Assad regime and even reported it to the Syrian president, but the Syrian authorities ignored this and even dismantled the National Defense Forces, which allowed "a terrorist group supported by the United States and some countries in the region" to reach Damascus easily and without resistance and overthrow the regime. He stressed that this rapid military occupation does not herald the end of Syria and the ruling regime, but rather serves as the basis for the beginning of major and comprehensive changes in the region and the world, which will benefit the "front of truth" (ISNA, February 15, 2025).



Ahmad Reza Pourdastan (ISNA, February 15, 2025)

Iran's involvement in Iraq

► Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Majid Takht-Ravanchi visited Baghdad. He met with senior Iraqi government officials, including National Security Advisor Qassem al-Araji, Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Bahr al-Uloom, and Deputy Speaker of Parliament Mohsen al-Mandalawi, and discussed cooperation between the two countries (ISNA, February 17, 2025).



The Iranian deputy foreign minister meets with Iraq's national security advisor (IRNA, February 16, 2025)

► Meanwhile, an “Iraqi politician” reported that senior Iranian officials had secretly visited Baghdad in recent days and discussed security challenges in the region, especially in light of developments in the Syrian arena. The politician noted that the senior Iranian officials expressed concern about the “support” of the United States and Israel for armed groups in several Arab countries and stressed that Iran views Iraq as a strategic ally. According to the report, the visits were intended to coordinate positions in a way that would ensure the security of the two countries against threats (Al-Akhbar, February 17, 2025).

► Falih al-Fayyad, chairman of the Popular Mobilization Forces, the umbrella organization of the pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Iraq, visited Tehran and met with Ali Akbar Ahmadian,

secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. The two discussed the latest developments in the region and the relations between the countries (ISNA, February 18, 2025). During his visit, Al-Fayyad also met with Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi, who stressed to him the need to continue consultations between senior Iranian and Iraqi officials on developments in the region. Araghchi praised the Shiite militias and the “resistance” for their role in ensuring Iraq’s security and stability, especially during the struggle against ISIS, and stressed Iran’s support for the “resistance” in Iraq and the entire region (Iranian Foreign Ministry website, February 18, 2025).



Meeting of the chairman of the Popular Mobilization Forces with the secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council (ISNA, February 18, 2025)

► The Iraqi government reportedly demanded that Iran evacuate the armed militias that entered Iraq after the revolution in Syria, including the Al-Fatemiyoun and Al-Zainabiyoun, who came with their weapons. According to the report, about 1,000 to 1,500 Al-Fatemiyoun fighters and 1,000 to 1,200 Al-Zainabiyoun fighters are now staying in Iraq after crossing from Syria. According to a “senior source” in the Al-Nasr faction, Iraqi Prime Minister Muhammad Shia’ al-Sudani, Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein, and National Security Advisor Qassem al-Araji presented the problem to senior Iranian officials several times, but the Iranians ignored it using political or technical excuses. According to the source, the US also demanded that the Iraqis act quickly to remove the foreign militias from the country because of information that they possess advanced drones and missiles that pose a threat to the American forces in Iraq (Al-Siyasa, February 16, 2025).

Iran’s involvement in Yemen

► During his visit to Oman, Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi met with the official spokesman of the Houthi Movement and the head of the Houthi negotiating delegation, Muhammad Abd al-Salam. Araghchi praised the support of the Yemeni government and people for the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, noting that this support played an important role in “the victory

of the people and the resistance in Palestine and the imposition of a ceasefire on the Zionist regime.” The Iranian foreign minister also stressed his country’s support for Yemen’s sovereignty and territorial integrity (Tasnim, February 17, 2025). Abd al-Salam expressed the willingness of the Houthi forces to respond forcefully to any “aggressive step by the enemy.” He also thanked Iran for the moral and political support it provides to Houthi Yemen (Al-Masirah, February 17, 2025).



**The Iranian foreign minister meets with the Houthi spokesman
(Iranian Foreign Ministry website, February 17, 2025)**

► “Security sources” reported that the Houthis had established a station in Muscat, the capital of Oman, to coordinate operations for smuggling weapons by sea and land. According to the report, the weapons transfer station is located near the Houthi political office established several years ago in the city and is operated by the Houthis’ special intelligence apparatus under the command of senior Houthi commander Hilal al-Nafish, under the guise of political and commercial activity. The sources also claimed that the station maintains ties with Iran’s security and intelligence apparatuses as well as with elements affiliated with the IRGC and the Qods Force (Defense Line, February 14, 2025).

► The US Central Command (CENTCOM) congratulated the Coast Guard forces of the “legitimate” Yemeni government (the one recognized by the UN) for thwarting the smuggling of advanced Iranian-made weapons intended for the Houthi forces. According to the statement, the foiling took place on February 12, 2025, when Yemeni forces stopped a boat in the southern Red Sea that was destined to reach the port of Hudaydah after it was suspected of setting sail from Iran. It was also reported that advanced weapons were seized on the boat, such as cruise missiles, jet engines for cruise missiles and drones, surveillance drones, radar devices, and advanced systems for communication and signal jamming (CENTCOM X account, February 16, 2025). In response, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei denied reports of Iranian assistance to the Houthis. He noted that these reports are baseless and

intended to create a negative atmosphere against Iran. Baghaei emphasized that Iran has no military presence in Yemen and that the weapons in Yemen have no connection to Iran (IRNA, February 17, 2025).