



Spotlight on Iran

March 14, 2024 – March 20, 2024

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Highlights¹

- ▶ Continued coordination between Iran and its partners in the “axis of resistance:” The Iranian foreign minister sent letters to the leaders of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and Hezbollah on the occasion of the month of Ramadan, praising the activities of the “resistance forces and the Palestinian people.” Senior IRGC officials reportedly met in February 2024 with representatives of the “resistance front” from the region and agreed with them on the need to avoid expanding the war. Hezbollah’s secretary-general reportedly discussed with the commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force the risks involved in an all-out military confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah, including the possibility that Iran’s nuclear facilities would be attacked. That joins other reports indicating Iran’s growing concern about further regional escalation, which could drag it into an unwanted confrontation with Israel and the United States.
- ▶ The Syrian defense minister arrived in Tehran in mid-March 2024 for a visit and met with senior Iranian officials. The visit took place amid continued attacks attributed to Israel in Syria, including the targeted killings of senior IRGC commanders. Meanwhile, it was reported that the Iranian presence in Syria had declined significantly in recent months due to concerns about the continued targeted killings attributed to Israel and that thousands of family members of Qods Force operatives had returned from Syria to Iran.
- ▶ Iran is reportedly using large European ports to provide cover for arms shipments to Hezbollah.
- ▶ The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed responsibility for launching UAVs at the Golan Heights and Ben Gurion Airport.

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

- ▶ Syrian news channels recently reported unusual activity by the pro-Iranian militias in the Albukamal area in eastern Syria, including the transfer of dozens of trucks carrying weapons to positions in the area and activity to prepare an airport in the area for military purposes.
- ▶ Houthi attacks in Yemen continue on a daily basis against vessels in the Red Sea, using ballistic missiles and UAVs. At the same time, coalition forces continue their attacks against Houthi targets in Yemen. On March 19, 2024, the Houthis announced the launch of cruise missiles at targets in the Eilat area. In a statement that may indicate a possible expansion of the Houthis' naval activity's geographical location, the Houthi spokesman announced the beginning of attacks against Israeli or Israeli-linked vessels in the Indian Ocean and on the maritime routes leading to South Africa's Cape of Good Hope, which serve as alternative routes for ships avoiding sailing in the Red Sea.

Iranian involvement in the Palestinian arena

- ▶ **Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian** sent letters to Ismail Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau, PIJ secretary-general Ziad al-Nakhalah, and Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah on the occasion of Ramadan. Abdollahian praised the “heroic, proud and historic resistance of the resistance forces and the Palestinian people,” which prevented the “Zionist enemy” from realizing its declared goals in the war. Furthermore, he criticized international institutions, including the UN Security Council, for not working to stop the [alleged] “genocide” in the Gaza Strip (ISNA, March 15, 2024).



Ramadan letter from Iranian foreign minister to heads of the “resistance” (ISNA, March 15, 2024)

- ▶ **Nasser Kanani, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry**, condemned the IDF operation at al-Shifaa Hospital in the Gaza Strip, saying the operation violated international law and human rights, and calling on the UN and the Security Council to fulfill their duty and

responsibility to prevent the continuation of the “war crimes of the Israeli regime” (ISNA, March 18, 2024).

► **Kazem Jalali, Iranian ambassador to Moscow**, met with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov to discuss regional developments, including the situation in the Gaza Strip (ILNA, March 15, 2024).



The Iranian ambassador to Moscow meets with the Russian deputy foreign minister
(ILNA, March 15, 2024)

Iranian involvement in Syria and Lebanon

► Reuters reported that in February 2024, **Qods Force commander Esmail Qaani** had met with **Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah** to discuss the existing risk if Israel attacked Hezbollah. According to the report, Nasrallah told Qaani that if war broke out against Israel, Hezbollah would fight by itself and that he did not want Iran to be dragged into a war with Israel or the United States. According to Reuters, this was the third meeting between the two since October 7, 2023. The report further stated that the meeting between Qaani and Nasrallah had been preceded by a two-day meeting in Tehran attended by IRGC commander Hossein Salami, the Qods Force commander, and representatives from the “resistance front” from Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. At the end of the meeting, all the participants agreed that Israel was interested in expanding the war and that it was necessary to avoid falling into the trap because it would lead to another American presence in the region. Following the meeting, Qaani instructed the Shiite militias in Iraq to stop their attacks against the American forces in the region. Two sources told Reuters that Iran and Hezbollah were aware of the difficult implications of an all-out war in Lebanon, including the possibility that Iran’s nuclear facilities would be attacked as a consequence of the expansion of the war (Reuters, March 15, 2024).

► According to the British Telegraph, Iran uses large European ports to provide cover for arms shipments to Hezbollah. According to the report, the ships transfer weapons to the Syrian port of Latakia before continuing to ports in Belgium, Spain, and Italy. The weapons are transferred from Syria to Lebanon (The Telegraph, March 14, 2024).

► Syrian Defense Minister Ali Mahmoud Abbas visited Tehran and met with his Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Reza Ashtiani (Mehr, March 16, 2024). Ashtiani condemned Israel's attacks in Syria, saying that creating deterrence was the key to dealing with them and that immediate steps and plans were needed in that regard. He called on the Syrian government to use Iran and its capabilities to improve its defense and deterrence capabilities. In addition, the Iranian defense minister condemned the American military presence in Syria, saying it was illegal and unjustified. He warned that any mistake on the part of the United States and Israel would lead to a worsening of the situation in the region. The Syrian defense minister said that when Israel failed to achieve its goals in the Gaza Strip, it tried to increase tension in the region, including in Syria and Lebanon. He said the resistance, the increasing defense capabilities, and strengthening Iranian-Syrian cooperation were the best ways to deter their enemies (al-Alam, March 16, 2024).



**Meeting between delegations headed by the Iranian and Syrian defense ministers
(Mehr, March 16, 2024)**

► On March 17, 2024, the Syrian defense minister met with Ali Akbar Ahmadian, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, to discuss regional developments and bilateral relations. Ahmadian praised Syria's role in the "axis of resistance" vis-à-vis Israel and stressed the need to strengthen ties between the countries (Mehr, March 17, 2024). The Syrian defense minister also met with Mohammad Bagheri, chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces, to discuss regional developments, especially the war in the Gaza Strip, Israeli Air Force airstrikes in Syria

and Lebanon, and the military cooperation between the two countries (Tasnim, March 18, 2024).



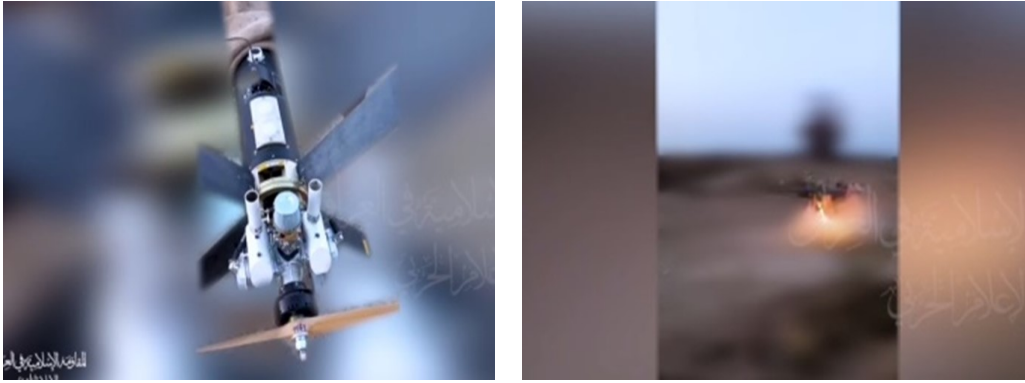
**Syrian defense minister meets with chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces
(Tasnim, March 18, 2024)**

► The Saudi al-Hadath TV reported that Iran’s presence in Syria had significantly decreased in recent months due to concerns about the continued targeted killings of IRGC officers attributed to Israel. According to the report, thousands of family members of Iranian Qods Force operatives and senior operatives have left Syria and returned to Iran, while others are blending in with Syrian civilians, for example, by staying in hotels in Damascus (al-Hadath, March 16, 2024).

Shiite militias’ activities in Syria and Iraq

Iraq

► The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed responsibility for launching a UAV in the early morning hours of March 18, 2024, at an “[Israeli] Air Force UAV base in the Golan Heights.” According to the announcement, the launch was carried out in response to the “massacres” carried out by Israel against Palestinian civilians. The Islamic Resistance said it would continue and even increase its activity in “destroying enemy strongholds” during the month of Ramadan. A video documenting the launch of the UAV was later published (Iraqi Islamic Resistance Telegram channel, March 18, 2024). No such incident was detected on the ground.



The launch of the UAV (Islamic Resistance in Iraq Telegram channel, March 18, 2024)

► On March 20, 2024, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed responsibility for a UAV attack on Ben Gurion Airport. According to the statement, the Resistance will continue “destroying enemy strongholds” as part of the second stage of the confrontation with Israel in support of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip (Islamic Resistance in Iraq Telegram channel, March 20, 2024). No such incident was detected on the ground.



**Launch of a UAV at Ben Gurion Airport
(Islamic Resistance in Iraq Telegram channel, March 18, 2024)**

► On March 17, 2024, the Jordanian army announced that its Air Force planes had been dispatched to the Syrian border following suspicious aerial movements of unknown origin in the border area (Agence France-Presse, March 17, 2024). It may have been the interception of a UAV of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq launched at Israel, but the ITIC has no information confirming that.

Kataib Hezbollah

► **Ahmed al-Hamidawi, secretary-general of the pro-Iranian Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah (Hezbollah Brigades)**, met in Tehran with leaders of the “resistance front” from Iraq and abroad. During the meeting, he said the suspension of military activity against American targets was not final and that the resistance could wage a long-term campaign. He stressed

that the support activities in the Gaza Strip had to be “effective and special” (Kataib Hezbollah Telegram channel, March 19, 2024).

► **Abu Ali al-Askari, spokesman for Kataib Hezbollah**, said the Iraqi government had to protect the Popular Mobilization forces and its leaders after all they had given the country when it was in its most dangerous moments (the campaign against ISIS). He warned the Iraqi government not to defend the American forces in the country, threatening that “the gates of hell would open” if the government granted immunity to the “American occupation forces.” Referring to the possibility of removing leaders of the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq from their posts, al-Askari said the decision on that matter had to be made by the Popular Mobilization and that any other action at the wrong time would be a big mistake (Abu Ali al-Askari’s Telegram channel, March 15, 2024).

Syria

◄ According to a Syrian news channel, pro-Iranian militias are working to re-activate the al-Hamdan airport in Albukamal in eastern Syria for military purposes. According to the report, the militias are working to reconstruct the field through the Jihad al-Bina Foundation. A delegation of Iranian and Syrian engineers visited Albukamal in recent days, secured by pro-Iranian militias, to check the situation at the airport and the steps needed to re-activate it (Deir ez-Zor 24, March 18, 2024). Meanwhile, the pro-Iranian militias reportedly transferred dozens of trucks carrying weapons and logistic equipment to the positions of the militias in Albukamal (Syrian news channel Ayn al-Furat, March 19, 2024).

► On March 19, 2024, an Israeli airstrike was reported, targeting bases of pro-Iranian militias and Hezbollah in the Dimas area of Damascus (journalist Nour Abu Hassan’s X account, March 19, 2024). It should be noted that the area was attacked from the air last month, and the attack was also attributed to Israel (al-Arabiya, February 10, 2024).

Houthi activity in Yemen

► The Houthis continue to carry out daily attacks against vessels in the Red Sea using ballistic missiles and UAVs. Most of the launches were intercepted by US-led coalition forces, with no damage or casualties reported. At the same time, coalition forces continued to attack Houthi targets in Yemen. The airstrikes mainly targeted missile and UAV sites which, according to the coalition forces, posed an “immediate threat” to merchant ships and warships sailing near the

Yemeni coast. As part of that activity, on March 14, 2024, US naval forces attacked nine anti-ship missiles and two UAVs deployed in Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen (US Central Command (CENTCOM) X account, March 15, 2024).

► According to “Yemeni sources,” 15 foreign experts, including experts from Iran and Hezbollah, were killed in American-British airstrikes in Yemen (Sky News channel in Arabic, March 18, 2024). Although the report has not been verified by another source, the presence of IRGC and Hezbollah operatives assisting the Houthis in Yemen, also in the manufacture of weapons, has been known in the past.

► On March 15, 2024, **Yahya Saria, spokesman for the Houthi military forces**, announced the expansion of Houthi activity and that they had begun attacking Israeli vessels or those linked to Israel in the Indian Ocean and on the maritime routes leading to the Cape of Good Hope in southern Africa, i.e., alternative routes for ships that choose to avoid sailing near the coast of Yemen and in the Red Sea area. Saria also claimed that the Houthi forces had carried out “three operations” against three “Israeli and American” ships in the Indian Ocean using missiles and UAVs and that they achieved their goals (Yahya Saria’s X account, March 15, 2024). Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi also made an announcement about the Houthis expanding their areas of activity on March 14, 2024.

Launching an aircraft at Eilat

► On March 18, 2024, the IDF spokesperson announced that a suspicious target had crossed into Israeli territory from the Red Sea area, falling in an open area north of Eilat. It was also reported that no damage was caused and there were no casualties (IDF spokesperson, March 18, 2024). A few hours later, Hizam al-Assad, a member of the Houthi political bureau, posted the word “Eilat” on his X account (Hizam al-Assad’s X account, March 18, 2024).

► On March 19, 2024, Houthi spokesman Yahya Saria announced that the forces had fired several cruise missiles at Israeli targets in the Eilat area and that the missiles had hit their targets successfully. He said the Houthis would continue to fulfill their duty to support the Palestinian people and that their military operations would continue “until the aggression stops and the siege on the Gaza Strip is lifted” (Yahya Saria’s Telegram channel, March 19, 2024). According to the IDF spokesperson, a cruise missile launched from the Red Sea fell in an open area north of Eilat. The IDF spokesperson also reported no casualties and no damage (IDF spokesperson, March 19, 2024).

Diplomatic activity

- ▶ Houthi representatives met in March 2024 in Lebanon with representatives from Hamas, the PIJ, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) to discuss “expanding the clashes and encircling Israel.” According to another report, the meeting dealt with the cooperation mechanism between the sides in preparation for the “next stage” of the war in the Gaza Strip (al-Arabiya, March 16, 2024).
- ▶ Ali al-Qahum, a senior Houthi political bureau official, said in an announcement that relations with Russia, China, and the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) were being developed to weaken Western countries. According to him, the development is manifested in various fields and is intended to “drown the United States, Britain, and Western countries in the waters of the Red Sea.” It should be noted that at the end of January 2024, a meeting was held in Moscow between a Houthi delegation and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, in which the sides discussed the war in the Gaza Strip and the Red Sea campaign.

UN Security Council deliberations

- ▶ On March 18, 2024, the UN Security Council held a meeting on the situation in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb, condemning the Houthi attacks on March 6, 2024, which killed three people, and the Houthi attack on the MV Rubymar on February 18, 2024. The Security Council also demanded the immediate release of the Galaxy Leader and its crew. The Council members called for comprehensive cooperation with the Yemeni government to prevent the Houthis from acquiring the weapons to carry out their attacks and stressed the importance of the Red Sea maritime route (UN website, March 18, 2024).
- ▶ In response to the Security Council call, the Houthi foreign ministry said it reflected a “dangerous surrender” to the American will and support for Israeli aggression. The foreign ministry stressed it was shameful that for nearly 200 days, the Council had failed to condemn the “Israeli massacre in the Gaza Strip” and that their activities in the Red Sea were closely linked to the events in the Gaza Strip (Houthi Telegram channel, March 18, 2024).
- ▶ In a letter to the UN Security Council, Iran’s ambassador to the UN, Amir Saeed Iravani, rejected the claims about Iran’s support for the Houthis. He noted that representatives of the United States and Britain had abused the Security Council, which condemned the Houthi attacks, and made baseless allegations against Iran. He said the accusations against Iran were

intended to advance the political agenda of the United States and Britain and legitimize their illegal activities against Yemen (ISNA, March 19, 2024).