



Spotlight on Iran

March 27, 2024 – April 3, 2024

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Highlights¹

- ▶ The commander of the IRGC's Qods Force in Syria and Lebanon, Mohammad Reza Zahedi (Hassan Mahdavi), along with his deputy and five other Iranians, were killed in an airstrike on a building adjacent to the Iranian embassy in Damascus. Following the attack, senior Iranian officials, foremost among them the Supreme Leader of Iran, threatened a harsh response against Israel. The Supreme National Security Council convened a few hours after the attack to discuss Iran's response.
- ▶ In late March 2024, delegations headed by the head of Hamas' political bureau and the secretary-general of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) held meetings with senior Iranian government officials, led by the Supreme Leader of Iran, who stressed Iran's continued support for the Palestinians and the continued struggle against Israel.
- ▶ Senior Iranian government officials continued political contacts regarding the war in Gaza. The Iranian president spoke by phone with his Turkish counterpart and called for severing ties between Muslim countries and Israel. Concurrently, the Iranian foreign minister spoke with his Egyptian counterpart to discuss the situation in the Gaza Strip and the possibility of an Israeli operation in Rafah.
- ▶ The IRGC continues to transfer weapons to pro-Iranian militias in eastern Syria.
- ▶ The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed responsibility for several attacks against targets in Israel in response to Israel's continued activity in the Gaza Strip. The main incident involved the launching of a UAV at the Gulf of Aqaba, which struck an IDF base in Eilat. Iraqi Foreign Minister Fouad Hussein stressed that any decision to attack from Iraqi soil required the

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

approval of the Iraqi Council of Deputies and the commander of the armed forces. Pro-Iranian militias reportedly intend to arm a military force in Jordan against Israel.

►The Houthis continued to carry out attacks against ships in the Red Sea. According to the commander of the US flotilla in the Red Sea, US forces have reduced some of the Houthi forces' capabilities and caused a shift from attacks with cruise missiles to employing less-dangerous drones for their attacks.

Senior IRGC commander killed in Syria

►On April 1, 2024, Mohammad Reza Zahedi (Hassan Mahdavi), commander of the IRGC's Qods Force in Syria and Lebanon, was killed in an airstrike attributed to Israel on a building adjacent to the Iranian embassy in Damascus. Reza Zahedi, 64 years old, formerly served as commander of the IRGC's ground forces and deputy IRGC commander for operations.



Mohammad Reza Zahedi (Fars, April 1, 2024)

►His deputy, Mohammad Hadi Haji Rahimi, as well as Hossein Amanollahi, chief of staff of the IRGC's Qods Force in Syria and Lebanon, were also killed in the attack. According to an official IRGC announcement, four other Iranians were killed as well: Seyyed Mehdi Jalalati, Mohsen Sedaghat, Ali Agha Babaei, and Ali Salehi Rozbahani. The announcement stated that the "crime" was carried out following "the defeats of the Zionist regime against the Palestinian resistance and the resistance of the people of Gaza" (Tasnim, April 1, 2024).



The seven Iranians killed in Damascus (Tasnim, April 1, 2024)

► Hossein Akbari, Iranian ambassador to Syria, met with Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad shortly after the attack. Akbari stated that the Israeli attack demonstrated “the essence of the Zionist regime”, which does not recognize international law, and threatened a harsh response (Mehr, April 1, 2024). While at the embassy, Mekdad spoke with his Iranian counterpart, Abdollahian, who said Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had completely lost his mental balance following Israel’s defeat in the Gaza Strip. He stressed the need for a strong response from the international community against Israel (ISNA, April 1, 2024). In a tweet on his X account, Abdollahian wrote that following the Israeli attack, Iran had conveyed a message to the United States through the Swiss embassy in Tehran, stressing its responsibility for the “terrorist attack and the crimes of the Israeli regime” due to its support for Israel (Abdollahian’s X account, April 2, 2024). Abdollahian also engaged in a phone conversation with UN Secretary-General António Guterres, saying that the Security Council had to respond decisively to the “recent crime of the Zionist regime” in Damascus (IRNA, April 2, 2024).



The building attacked near the Iranian embassy in Damascus, marked on the left side of the picture (Mehr, April 1, 2024)

- ▶ Iran’s Supreme National Security Council convened urgently on the evening of April 1, 2024, to discuss the attack in Damascus and formulate a response. According to a statement issued by the council secretariat, “appropriate decisions” were made at a meeting, which was chaired by the president of Iran (Nour News, April 2, 2024).
- ▶ Many Iranian officials commented on the attack:
 - ◆ Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei issued an unusual statement following the attack, stressing that “the evil regime will be punished by our brave people” and asserting that Iran would make it regret that crime (IRNA, April 2, 2024).
 - ◆ Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi issued a statement saying that “this crime will not go unanswered.” He asserted that Israel (the “Zionists”) should know that “such inhumane actions will never achieve their goal and that the ‘resistance front’ is getting stronger every day” (Fars, April 2, 2024). President Raisi also spoke with Syrian President Bashar Assad, affirming that there was no doubt that Israel and its supporters would be punished for “this terrorist act” and for the “crimes in the Gaza Strip.” He emphasized the need to enhance regional and international cooperation between the two countries in the fight against Israel, noting that the indifference and weak position of some Arab countries prevented the Muslim world from adopting a unified position against the “Zionist regime”, thus emboldening it in committing its crimes. President Assad expressed condolences over the deaths of the Iranian “military advisors,” saying that the attack was not surprising and highlighted Israel’s cruelty (Iranian president’s website, April 2, 2024).
 - ◆ Nasser Kanani, spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry, strongly condemned the attack in Damascus, saying Iran reserved the right to take retaliatory measures and

would decide regarding “the nature of the response and the type of punishment of the attacker” (Tasnim, April 1, 2024).

► Hossein Shariatmadari, editor of the newspaper Keyhan affiliated with the Iranian Supreme Leader, asserted that the Israeli attack violated international law, thus giving Iran the absolute right to attack Israeli embassies and consulates around the world in response (Khabar Online, April 2, 2024).

Iranian involvement in the Palestinian arena

► Ismail Haniyeh, the head of Hamas’ political bureau, who arrived in Tehran on March 26, 2024, met with Majles speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf and Ali-Akbar Ahmadian, the secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council. Also participating in the meeting with Ahmadian was PIJ secretary-general Ziad al-Nakhalah (IRNA, March 28, 2024). On March 29, 2024, Haniyeh met with Mohammad Bagheri, the chief of staff of the Iranian Armed Forces. Bagheri said the Palestinian aspirations had been a fundamental part of Iran’s strategy and goals since the beginning of the revolution. He emphasized that the al-Aqsa Flood had shattered the myth of Israel’s invincibility and turned the Palestinian issue into a global priority. He added that Israel would have already collapsed without American support. Haniyeh said the support of the Iranian armed forces for Palestine strengthened the “jihad forces” in realizing the goals of the al-Aqsa Flood and that the Palestinians would never forget the efforts of former Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani to listen to the voices of the oppressed worldwide (Tasnim, March 29, 2024).

► On March 28, 2024, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei met with a delegation headed by PIJ secretary-general Ziad al-Nakhalah and his deputy, Mohammad al-Hindi. At the meeting, Khamenei said the “resistance” forces and the residents of the Gaza Strip were the victors so far in the war arena. He claimed the fact that the “Zionist regime” was killing women and children showed that it was unable to contend with the “resistance forces” despite its military capabilities and the support of the world powers. Al-Nakhalah thanked Iran for supporting the Palestinians, saying that the residents of the Gaza Strip and the “resistance forces” had managed to defeat the plan of the United States and Israel to destroy the resistance. He stressed that the residents of the Gaza Strip were determined to continue their steadfastness until the final victory (ISNA, March 28, 2024).



The Iranian Supreme Leader meets with senior PIJ figures (IRNA, March 28, 2024)

► Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, meeting with al-Nakhalah, said that the indifference and inaction of some of the leaders of Muslim countries regarding their duty to the Palestinian people aroused sorrow. He noted that the residents of the Gaza Strip had challenged the unjust world order, and he stated that anyone who rejected the “Palestinian resistance” was, in fact, rejecting Palestine’s right to life (Iranian president’s website, March 28, 2024). Al-Nakhalah also held discussions with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian. He thanked Iran for its support of the Palestinians and said the Palestinian people would not have been able to stand firm without its political, military, and security support. He added that Iran had paid a price and had endured significant sanctions for defending Palestine (Tasnim, March 30, 2024).



**The Iranian president meets with Ziad al-Nakhalah
(Iranian president’s website, March 28, 2024)**

► Rear Admiral Ali Reza Tangsiri, commander of the IRGC Navy, announced that on April 4, 2024, vessels belonging to the IRGC and the countries of the “resistance front” would hold simultaneous naval parades in their territorial waters to mark World Jerusalem Day.² He said

²**World Jerusalem Day has been marked since 1979 on the last Friday of Ramadan**, in accordance with the decision of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The event was intended to express Iranian and Muslim support for the Palestinian cause and the liberation

more than 3,000 light and heavy vessels of the IRGC Navy, as well as vessels from Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, would fly Palestinian flags (Khabar Online, March 29, 2024).

► Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi spoke by phone with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to discuss relations between the two countries and the situation in the Gaza Strip. Raisi said the Muslim countries had to take decisive and deterrent measures to stop the “genocide and crimes of the Zionists in Palestine,” provide humanitarian aid to the residents of the Gaza Strip, and sever their political and economic ties with Israel (ISNA, March 31, 2024). At the same time, Iranian Foreign Minister Abdollahian spoke by phone with his Egyptian counterpart, Sameh Shoukry, to discuss bilateral relations and the situation in the Gaza Strip. They stressed the need for a ceasefire and the implementation of the Security Council resolution by Israel, as well as their opposition to any military operation in Rafah (Mehr, March 31, 2024).

Iranian involvement in Syria

► Nasser Kanani, spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry, strongly condemned the attack attributed to Israel in the Aleppo area on the night of March 29, 2024. Kanani said the airstrikes were a clear violation of international law and Syria’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. He called on the UN Security Council to take the necessary steps to deter Israel. He added that the airstrikes in Syria were a desperate attempt by Israel to expand the regional crisis in order to rehabilitate its failed image vis-à-vis the Palestinian people and the “resistance groups” (Iranian Foreign Ministry website, March 29, 2024).

► The Syrian news channel Ayn al-Furat reported the ongoing transfer of weapons by the IRGC to Deir ez-Zor in eastern Syria, as well as excavation work and the installation of communications infrastructure around the IRGC headquarters in the city, which had been attacked from the air in the past. According to the report, a truck loaded with military and logistical equipment and weapons, including short-range missiles, arrived at the IRGC’s manpower headquarters in the al-Ummal neighborhood in eastern Deir ez-Zor in early March 2024. According to the news channel, the IRGC’s activity in Deir ez-Zor, despite the repeated airstrikes in the area, attests to the determination of the pro-Iranian militias in eastern Syria to

of Jerusalem. Events marking this day are held in Arab and Islamic countries and even in some Western countries. The events are exploited to defame Israel and call for its elimination. This year, World Jerusalem Day will be marked on April 5, 2024.

maintain their only land crossing for the transfer of weapons in Syria and Lebanon (Ayn al-Furat, March 28, 2024).

Iranian involvement in Iraq

► Mohammad Kazem Al-e Sadeq, the Iranian ambassador to Baghdad, met with Falih al-Fayyad, the chairman of the Popular Mobilization (the umbrella organization of the Shiite pro-Iranian militias in Iraq). They discussed the security situation in the region and explored ways to enhance bilateral cooperation between the countries to promote security and stability. The Iranian ambassador expressed his appreciation to the Shiite militias in Iraq for their role in fighting terrorism and ensuring security at the borders and stressed Tehran’s desire to strengthen ties between the two countries in various fields. Al-Fayyad expressed his appreciation for Iran’s continued support for bolstering stability along the borders and in the region, stressing the need to maintain security cooperation between the Iraqi government and Iran (al-Alam, March 27, 2024).



The Iranian ambassador to Baghdad meets with the chairman of the Popular Mobilization (al-Alam, March 27, 2024)

► On the occasion of Ramadan and the Iranian New Year (Nowruz), Alaa Hassan, director of the Iraqi Nujaba Movement’s bureau in Lebanon, met with Mojtaba Amani, the Iranian ambassador to Beirut, to discuss developments in Lebanon and the region. The Iranian ambassador expressed his appreciation for the “resistance” in Iraq for its role in supporting the Palestinians, saying the United States could not carry out its threats (Nujaba Telegram channel, March 27, 2024).



The Iranian ambassador to Beirut meets with the director of the Iraqi Nujaba militia's bureau (Nujaba Telegram channel, March 27, 2024)

Shiite militia activity in Syria and Iraq

Iraq

Activities on the ground

- ▶ The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed responsibility for carrying out several attacks against targets in Israel in response to Israel's continued activity in the Gaza Strip.
- ▶ The main incident was the launch of a UAV from Iraq on March 31, 2024, towards the Gulf of Aqaba area. The aircraft managed to penetrate Israel's air defense systems without being intercepted or neutralized, hitting an IDF base in Eilat. There were no casualties, and only minor damage was caused to the building. The IDF is investigating the incident (IDF Spokesperson, April 1, 2024).
- ▶ The Islamic Resistance reported a UAV attack on Eilat (Telegram channel of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, April 2, 2024). According to a report on the al-Arabiya network, the Iraqi al-Nujaba militia issued a statement saying it had attacked targets in Eilat using three UAVs "that reached a predefined target" (al-Arabiya, April 1, 2024). The statement was not published on the militia's official platforms.



The UAV being launched at Eilat (Telegram channel of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, April 2, 2024)

►The Islamic Resistance also claimed responsibility for several additional attacks (Telegram channel of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq). In most cases, the actual attacks were not detected:

- ◆ UAV attack on a military target in the “occupied Golan” (March 29, 2024).
- ◆ UAV attack on a “vital target” in the “Eilabun area of the occupied Golan” (March 31, 2024). The IDF Spokesperson said that on the night of March 31, 2024, a fighter jet intercepted a suspicious aerial target en route to Israel from Syria (IDF website, March 31, 2024).



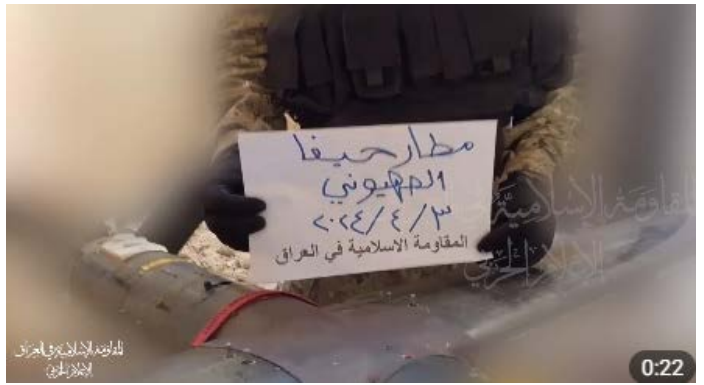
**The UAV being launched at the Eilabun area
(Telegram channel of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, March 31, 2024)**

- ◆ Attack on “a vital target in our occupied territories” with “appropriate weapons” (April 1, 2024).
- ◆ UAV attack on the Tel Nof Airbase (Telegram channel of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, April 2, 2024).



**The launch of a UAV at the Tel Nof Airbase
(Telegram channel of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, April 2, 2024)**

- ◆ UAV attack on Haifa Airport (April 3, 2024).



Right: The aircraft before being launched at Haifa Airport, with the inscription of the destination and the time of launch. Left: The launch of the aircraft (Telegram channel of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, April 3, 2024)

► Regarding the attacks by pro-Iranian militias in Iraq against targets in Israel, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fouad Hussein said in an interview with Voice of America Radio that he had read the militias' announcements about these attacks, but "the other side" did not say that they were true, so he did not know whether the statements were true or intended for internal purposes. He stressed that no one in Iraq could decide to wage war against one side or another since the decision to go to war was solely in the hands of the members of the Iraqi Council of Deputies and was not a personal decision. The use of weapons, he said, required a decision by the commander of the armed forces (Voice of America Radio, March 27, 2024).

Pro-Iranian militias intend to arm a military force in Jordan against Israel

► Abu Ali al-Askari, spokesman for the Kataib Hezbollah (the Hezbollah Brigades) militia, announced that the Islamic Resistance in Iraq had completed its preparations to supply the

“brothers in the Islamic resistance” in Jordan with enough equipment for 12,000 fighters, including light and medium weapons, anti-tank launchers, tactical missiles, munitions and tons of explosives so that they would join the defense of the Palestinians and as revenge for offending the honor of Muslims “by the sons of apes and pigs” (an anti-Semitic term for Jews). Al-Askari also conveyed condolences to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on the death of senior Qods Force commander Mohammad Reza Zahedi “following a Zionist-American attack on Iran’s consulate in Damascus” (Abu Ali al-Askari’s Telegram channel, April 1, 2024).

►The Nujaba Movement Iraqi pro-Iranian militia issued a statement strongly condemning the “cruel terrorist attack of the Zionist entity on the Iranian embassy building in Damascus,” saying they considered it a challenge to international norms and agreements. According to them, the attack was equivalent to declaring war on Iran. The militia reiterated its support for Iran’s right to self-defense and its right to respond to those violations. They also said they were prepared to take any retaliatory step against the violations of “the occupation” (i.e., Israel) (Nujaba Telegram channel, March 2, 2024).

Syria

►A UAV was launched at the US-led international coalition base in the Tanf enclave, near the tri-border area of Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. According to US officials, the aircraft was intercepted, and no casualties or damage were caused (al-Hadath, April 2, 2024). This is the first attack on American bases attributed to pro-Iranian militias in Iraq and Syria since early February 2024.

Yemen

►The US Central Command (CENTCOM) reported that during the past week, Houthi forces had carried out three UAV attacks against vessels in the Red Sea and another attack using an unmanned vessel. The launches were intercepted by US-led coalition forces, and no damage or casualties were reported (CENTCOM X account, March 27 – April 3, 2024). Since the beginning of the war, the Houthis have increased their use of unmanned vessels to attack vessels in the Red Sea. It is likely that these weapons will continue to be an important component in the Houthi arsenal and will be employed even more.

►In a speech delivered on March 28, 2024, Abdul Malik al-Houthi, leader of the Houthi movement, claimed that during the past week, the Houthi forces had carried out ten “operations” using 37 missiles and UAVs against nine vessels. Al-Houthi said that since the beginning of the war, the Houthis had attacked 86 vessels “linked to Israel, the United States, and Britain.” According to him, these attacks inflicted damage on the enemy, forcing them to

conceal their movements at sea and disseminate misleading information to the media. Referring to Israel, al-Houthi confirmed the attack carried out a few days earlier in Eilat, adding that Houthi actions had significantly disrupted port activity in the city. He also claimed that the United States had carried out 13 airstrikes this past week, but these, like their predecessors, were unsuccessful in diminishing Houthi capabilities (Yemeni Press, March 29, 2024). However, the figures provided by al-Houthi regarding the number of airstrikes and their targets are not supported by reports from Western naval forces operating in the Red Sea.

► In an article published by Bloomberg News Agency, Admiral Marc Miguez, commander of the US flotilla in the Red Sea, noted that US forces had degraded some of the Houthi forces' capabilities, prompting them to shift from using cruise missiles to less dangerous drones. However, senior American officials interviewed for the article conceded that the Houthis would probably continue their attacks as long as Iran continued to support them (Bloomberg, March 27, 2024).