



Spotlight on Iran

April 17-May 1, 2024

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Highlights¹

- ▶ Amid the recent escalation between Iran and Israel, the Iranian president warned that if Israel attacked Iran again, “nothing will remain of the Zionist regime.” The chief of staff of the Iranian army threatened that Iran would respond to any further aggression with greater force than in the past.
- ▶ Iran welcomed the pro-Palestinian student demonstrations at universities across the United States and Europe and condemned the suppression of protests by the authorities in Western countries. On April 28, 2024, demonstrations were held in several cities across Iran by pro-regime students and lecturers in solidarity with pro-Palestinian students around the world.
- ▶ Agence France-Presse (AFP), citing a source close to Hezbollah, reported that Iran had reduced its military presence in southern Syria following the Israeli attacks against senior IRGC officers. The report was denied by a source in the resistance front who spoke to the Hezbollah-affiliated al-Mayadeen network.
- ▶ A Syrian news channel reported that IRGC officers had recently met with commanders of pro-Iranian militias in eastern Syria to discuss the steps necessary to deal with the infiltration of agents into the ranks of the militias given the targeted killings attributed to Israel in Syria.
- ▶ The secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council met in Russia with Iraq’s national security advisor to discuss relations between the countries, the implementation of the security agreement between them, and the continued American presence in Iraq.
- ▶ The Islamic Resistance in Iraq continued to claim responsibility for UAV attacks against what they referred to as “vital targets” in Israeli territory. In practice, none of the incidents have been detected.

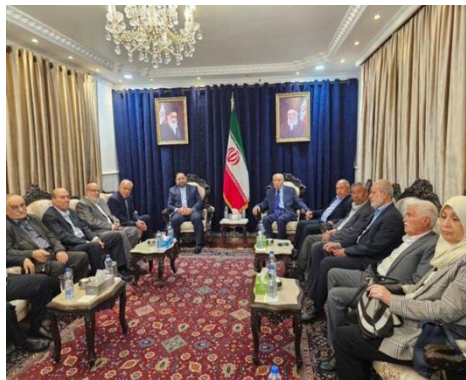
¹ The weekly study includes the activities of Iran, the Shiite militias in Syria and Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen.

►The Houthis in Yemen have resumed their attacks against vessels they regard as Israeli or linked to Israel. Most of the attacks were thwarted by American and European forces in the Red Sea.

Iranian involvement in the Palestinian arena

►Hossein Amir Abdollahian, the Iranian foreign minister, spoke with his Omani counterpart, Badr al-Busaidi, to discuss developments in the region and the Gaza Strip. They stressed the need for international efforts to “end the crimes of the Zionist regime,” an immediate ceasefire, and delivery of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip (Tasnim, April 20, 2024).

►On April 22, 2024, a delegation of representatives of Palestinian organizations arrived at the Iranian embassy in Damascus to praise the Iranian attack on Israel on the night of April 14, 2024. Hossein Akbari, the Iranian ambassador to Damascus, thanked the heads of the organizations and briefed them on the manner of the attack. Previously, the representatives of the organizations met with Mojtaba Amani, the Iranian ambassador to Beirut, and congratulated him on the attack on Israel. Amani said the Palestinians’ joy was evident when the Iranian missiles reached the skies of “occupied Palestine” (ISNA, April 22, 2024).



**Heads of the Palestinian organizations at the Iranian embassy in Syria
(ISNA, April 22, 2024)**

►Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, meeting with students and lecturers during his visit to Pakistan, said that if the “Zionist regime” made another mistake and violated Iran’s sovereignty, the situation would be different and it was unclear whether anything would remain of it. He said that this time the Iranian people had punished the “Zionist regime” for its crimes and for attacking the Iranian consulate in Damascus. Raisi added that the issue of the liberation of Jerusalem had now become not only the first and foremost issue of the Muslim world but of all humanity and that there was no doubt about the liberation of Gaza, Palestine, and Jerusalem in the hands of the Palestinian resistance (IRNA, April 23, 2024).

Abdolrahim Mousavi, the commander of the Iranian army, also threatened Israel, saying Iran was not interested in war, but would respond to any aggression more forcefully than in the past (Khabar Online, April 25, 2024).



Chief of staff of the Iranian army (Khabar Online, April 25, 2024)

►Nasser Kanani, the spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry, praised the pro-Palestinian demonstrations in the United States and Europe, saying that the calls against the occupation of Palestine and the genocide in the Gaza Strip and for the liberation of Palestine had now become a global demand and that the sound of the crushed bones of world Zionism was louder than ever. Kanani condemned the suppression of pro-Palestinian student protests at universities in the United States and Europe, saying that the collapse of the occupation pillars in Palestine could not be stopped (Kanani's X account, April 28, 2024). Meanwhile, demonstrations were held by students and lecturers throughout Iran in solidarity with the pro-Palestinian student demonstrations around the world (Mehr, April 28, 2024).



Iranian students and lecturers demonstrating in solidarity with demonstrations of pro-Palestinian students around the world (Mehr, April 28, 2024)

Iranian involvement in Syria

►According to a source close to Hezbollah, Iran is reducing its military presence in Syria following the Israeli attacks against senior IRGC officers in the country. According to the report, Iranian forces evacuated the southern part of the country, especially the rural areas of Damascus, Daraa, and Quneitra in recent weeks, but Iran maintains its presence in other parts of the country. According to a report by the director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the Iranian forces have been replaced by Hezbollah fighters and Iraqi forces (AFP, April 24, 2024). Commenting on the report, a source in the resistance front told the Hezbollah-affiliated al-Mayadeen network that it was untrue and that there were no Iranian forces in Syria, only “military advisors” operating with the consent of the Syrian authorities. The source added that the advisors were still in Syria carrying out their duties as usual in accordance with their missions (al-Mayadeen, April 24, 2024).

►Hossein Akbari, Iranian ambassador to Syria, met with Syrian Culture Minister Lubanah Mshaweh to discuss expanding cultural cooperation between the countries (IRNA, April 22, 2024). Meanwhile, on April 23, 2024, the Syrian news channel Ayn al-Furat reported on the resumption of activity of the Iranian Cultural Center in Deir ez-Zor in eastern Syria, after it was halted several months ago following the American airstrikes against pro-Iranian militias in the region. According to the report, the center has begun offering a series of courses mostly for women and children.



**The Iranian ambassador to Damascus meets with the Syrian minister of culture
(IRNA, April 22, 2024)**

►It was reported that IRGC officers had recently held a secret meeting with commanders of pro-Iranian militias in Albukamal to discuss the infiltration of agents into their ranks. During the meeting, a financial reward was offered to those who would provide information regarding the infiltration of agents and spies into the ranks of the militias. The meeting was

held amid the targeted killings attributed to Israel in Syria, which increased the concern about intelligence penetration into the ranks of the pro-Iranian militias in Syria (Ayn al-Furat, April 25, 2024).

►Ali-Asghar Khaji, deputy foreign minister of Iran, held a virtual meeting with Geir O. Pedersen, the UN secretary-general’s envoy for Syria, to discuss the latest developments in Syria and the settlement process in the country. Khaji said “the crimes of the Zionist regime against the Palestinians and the continuation of the attacks in Syria and Lebanon” were exacerbating the regional crisis (ISNA, April 30, 2024).



Virtual conversation between the Iranian deputy foreign minister and the UN secretary-general’s envoy for Syria (ISNA, April 30, 2024)

Iranian involvement in Iraq and Yemen

►Ali Akbar Ahmadian, the secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, met in Russia with Qassem al-Araji, Iraq’s national security advisor, on the sidelines of the international security conference in St. Petersburg. The two discussed relations between the two countries, the implementation of the security agreement between them, and the presence of American forces in Iraq (IRNA, April 23, 2024).



Meeting of the secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council with the Iraqi national security advisor (IRNA, April 23, 2024)

Iranian involvement in Yemen

► On April 18, 2024, Bloomberg News Agency reported that the Iranian ship Behshad, which was suspected of assisting the Houthis in their operations in the Red Sea area, had left the region and returned to Iran. The ship, which according to Iran serves as an intelligence and logistics ship, reportedly sailed from its location in the Red Sea on April 4, 2024, and reappeared in the Strait of Hormuz on April 18, 2024. According to the report, the ship may have returned to Iran to prevent the possibility of being attacked by Israel after the large-scale Iranian attack on Israel on April 13, 2024 (Bloomberg, April 18, 2024).

Activity of the Shiite militias

Iraq

Activities on the ground

► The Islamic Resistance in Iraq published a poster summarizing its activities during the 200 days of fighting, including 243 operations, attacking 90 targets in Iraq, 65 targets in Syria, and 88 targets in Israeli territory (Telegram channel of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, April 26, 2024).



**Summary of the Islamic Resistance activity
(Telegram channel of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, April 26, 2024)**

- The Islamic Resistance in Iraq continued to claim responsibility for UAV attacks against what they referred to as “vital targets” in Israeli territory. Among the targets: Ovda base (near Eilat) (April 15, 2024); “vital target” in Eilat (April 20, 2024); “vital target” in the Golan Heights (April 21, 2024); and “vital target” in Haifa (April 26, 2024). In practice, none of the above events have been detected.



Right: Aircraft launched at Haifa (Telegram channel of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, April 27, 2024). Left: Launch at Eilat (Telegram channel of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, April 20, 2024)



Launch at the Ovda base (Telegram channel of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, April 19, 2024)

Incident at the Popular Mobilization base

► On April 20, 2024, there was an explosion at a base of pro-Iranian militias in the Jarf al-Sakhr area, south of Baghdad. One person was killed and eight were wounded. Arab sources estimated that an Israeli aircraft had carried out an airstrike (al-Arabiya and Asharq al-Awsat, April 20, 2024). At the same time, the Popular Mobilization Kalsu military base was reportedly also attacked (al-Hadath Network, April 20, 2024).

◀ Abu Alaa al-Wala'i, the secretary-general of the Iraqi pro-Iranian militia Kataeb Sayyid al-Shuhada, said that after completing the necessary investigations, whoever was behind the attack would pay the price (Abu Alaa al-Wala'i's X account, April 20, 2024).

► Iraqi military and government officials speculate that the explosion was not caused by an attack. According to an "Iraqi military source," the investigative teams have no conclusive information about the cause of the explosion. He noted that sensitive missiles and ammunition belonging to the Popular Mobilization forces were stored at the Kalsu base and that an accidental explosion may have occurred (al-Araby al-Jadeed, April 21, 2024).

► Reuters reported, citing Iraqi media, that a report published by investigators of the explosion at the Kalsu base in Iraq stated that no fighter planes or UAVs had been detected above the base at the time of the explosion and that the incident had been caused by an explosion in rocket depots (Reuters, April 23, 2024).

► Karim al-Mohammadawi, chairman of the Security and Defense Committee of the Iraqi parliament, said there was doubt about the cause of the explosion and that a careful investigation was being conducted. He said that if it was confirmed that an external party had indeed carried out the attack, government measures would be taken to deter anyone responsible for it (al-Araby al-Jadeed, April 21, 2024).

► Hamas condemned the “brutal aggression” against the Popular Mobilization Kalsu base in Iraq. According to Hamas, this was an attack against Iraq’s sovereignty and security and proof of the “barbarism of the Zionist entity,” which is expanding its aggression (Hamas Telegram channel, April 20, 2024).

Syria

► According to a report from April 21, 2024, rockets were fired at the base of the US-led international coalition in Syria. The rockets were apparently launched from Iraqi territory. Iraq’s Security Information Unit announced an operation to locate the perpetrators of the attack. It was also reported that the Iraqi security forces found the vehicle from which the rockets were fired and that at least one rocket landed at the base (al-Arabiya and the Iraqi News Agency, April 21, 2024).

► The next day, an “official American source” was quoted as saying that the international coalition forces had destroyed a rocket launcher in Syria after a failed rocket launch was carried out near the coalition base in Syria, in which there were no casualties (Reuters, April 22, 2024). Pentagon spokesperson Patrick Ryder said the militia attacks against American bases put the coalition and Iraqi army soldiers at risk. He called on the Iraqi government to take all necessary measures to ensure the safety of American forces in Syria and Iraq. He also said that if the attacks continued, they would not hesitate to defend their forces, as they had done in the past (Reuters, April 23, 2024).

► A few days later, Britain’s Defence Secretary Grant Shapps reported that the British Air Force had attacked a rocket launcher in Iraq intended to operate against the international coalition forces. He also attached documentation of the attack (British Defence Secretary’s X account, April 26, 2024).

Pro-Iranian militias’ comments on the protests on US campuses

► The pro-Iranian militias in Iraq recently addressed the widespread anti-Israeli demonstrations at American universities. Naeem al-Aboudi, Iraq’s minister of higher education and a senior official in Asaib Ahl al-Haq, expressed his support for the demonstrations and even called for them to be expanded all over the world (Naeem al-Aboudi’s X account, April 30, 2024).

► Sheikh Haidar al-Gharawi, the secretary-general of the Ansar Allah al-Awfiya (AAA, “God’s Loyal Supporters”) militia, especially praised the protests at Columbia University in New York

and the protests held in Texas. He called on students at Arab universities, and Iraqi universities in particular, to take similar steps (Sheikh Haidar al-Gharawi's X account, April 29, 2024).

► SaberIn News, a Telegram channel affiliated with the pro-Iranian Iraqi militias, noted they were proud to support the freedom of expression enshrined in the US Constitution and condemned “any use of illegal violence against students protesting the war in the Gaza Strip and exercising their right [to protest] (SaberIn News Telegram channel, April 29, 2024).

Yemen

Anti-vessel activity

► After several days of relative quiet, the Houthis resumed their anti-ship attacks against “Israeli” or Israeli-affiliated civilian and military ships. The attacks were reported by Yahya Saria, spokesman for the Houthi armed forces, as follows (Yahya Saria's X account, April 24-30, 2024):

- ◆ Against the MAERSK YORKTOWN and a US Navy ship in the Gulf of Aden. In addition, the “Israeli” MSC VERACRUZ was attacked in the Indian Ocean (April 24, 2024).
- ◆ Against the “Israeli” MSC Darwin in the Gulf of Aden, using missiles and aircraft (April 25, 2024). Confirmation of the attack was received from the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO), which monitors navigation in the Red Sea and Yemeni coast. According to UKMTO, the ship's crew reported that it “heard an explosion and saw smoke billowing from the sea near the ship.” No damage or casualties were reported (UKMTO X account, April 25, 2024).
- ◆ Against the oil tanker Andromeda Star in the Red Sea (April 27, 2024). The US Central Command (CENTCOM) confirmed that an attack had been carried out against the ship, causing minor damage that did not prevent the continuation of its voyage (CENTCOM X account, April 27, 2024).
- ◆ Against two American warships. CENTCOM reported that an aircraft launched at two US Army Navy ships had been intercepted without causing any damage or casualties (CENTCOM X account, April 30, 2024).
- ◆ In addition, Houthi missile and air forces carried out a joint operation against the ship CYCLADES. CENTCOM reported the attack, noting there were no damage or casualties.



The aircraft launched at the ship (Houthi Telegram channel, April 30, 2024)

◆ A third attack was carried out against the “Israeli” MSC ORION in the Indian Ocean (April 30, 2024). The attack on that ship in the Indian Ocean has not been confirmed by any other sources. Since the beginning of the war, there have been a significant number of cases in which the Houthis claimed to have attacked ships without confirmation from other sources.

► According to CENTCOM, Houthi forces carried out four attacks against vessels in the Red Sea area using eight anti-ship missiles, 14 UAVs, and one unmanned vessel. The launches, which were treated as a threat, were intercepted by US-led coalition forces and no significant damage or casualties were reported (CENTCOM X account, April 17-30, 2024). On April 25, 2024, the European Union Red Sea Task Force reported that the Greek warship HYDRA had intercepted two aircraft launched at a vessel in the area. One aircraft was destroyed and the other changed its flight path. No damage or casualties had been reported. In another incident, taking place on April 29, 2024, ITS Fasan, an Italian warship, intercepted an aircraft near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait in the Red Sea, launched from Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen (X account of the European Union Task Force (EUNAVFOR Aspides) April 25-30, 2024).

Additional activity

► The Houthis reported launching several ballistic and cruise missiles at targets in the Eilat area (Yahya Saria’s X account, April 25, 2024). The report has not been corroborated by other sources.

► Houthi forces reportedly shot down an American MQ9 drone flying over the Saada Governorate with a missile. Saria later released a video purportedly showing the interception of the aircraft (Yahya Saria’s X account, April 27, 2024). On April 28, 2024, the Associated Press (AP) reported that a US Department of Defense official confirmed that an MQ9 drone had

indeed crashed in Yemen. The source said the incident was being investigated (AP, April 28, 2024).



**Images from a video documenting the interception of the US drone on April 26, 2024
(Account X of the Houthi forces media arm, April 27, 2024)**

Statements by senior Houthi officials

►Following the veto imposed by the United States on a proposal in the UN Security Council to grant full membership to the Palestinian Authority, Houthi spokesman Muhammad Abdeslam declared that the movement condemned the American veto despite a broad consensus to approve the proposal. According to Abdeslam, the United States vetoed the proposal to back Israel and deny the Palestinians legitimate and basic rights (Muhammad Abdeslam’s X account, April 19, 2024). In another statement, Abdeslam said the Houthi movement strongly condemned the “brutal” campaign of repression by the American regime against university student organizations demanding an end to Israeli “aggression” in the Gaza Strip. He added that the United States should be ashamed of its claims to defend human rights while trampling on them, and that it should know that the world sees it as “an absolute evil that threatens all humanity” (Mohammad Abdeslam’s X account, April 25, 2024).

►Hussein al-Azi, deputy foreign minister of the Houthis, said they were aware of the hostile plans of the United States and held it responsible for the consequences of its aggression against Yemen. He stressed that they recommended that the United States stop its aggression and plans because its assets would become permanent targets (al-Masirah, April 27, 2024).