



Spotlight on Iran

August 14-21, 2024

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Highlights¹

- ▶ Senior Iranian officials continued to warn of Iran's intention to retaliate for the killing of Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, stressing that there was no direct connection between the negotiations for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and the right of Iran to retaliate against Israel. However, it is evident that the Iranian threats of direct military attack against Israel have decreased and that Iran is also examining other response options.
- ▶ A senior officer in the IRGC's aerospace arm, who served as an Iranian military advisor in Syria, died of his wounds after apparently being wounded in an airstrike by US-led coalition forces in Syria at the end of July 2024.
- ▶ The Iranian embassy in Lebanon referred to a video released by Hezbollah documenting an underground facility for storing precision missiles and heavy rockets and threatened that Iran also had the ability to attack its enemies from any point in its territory.
- ▶ Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant issued seizure orders for 18 oil tankers linked to Iran, used to finance the Qods Force and Hezbollah.
- ▶ The Islamic Resistance in Iraq announced two drone attacks against targets in the Golan Heights and Eilat for the first time since July 24, 2024. The claims have not been verified.
- ▶ A source in the Iraqi resistance assessed that Iraq could be used as one of the arenas in the Iranian response against Israel following the killing of Ismail Haniyeh.
- ▶ Gunmen attacked an oil tanker in the Red Sea. There were reportedly no casualties, but fire broke out and the crew lost control of the tanker.
- ▶ The Houthi leader threatened that the "axis of resistance" would inevitably retaliate against Israel, despite the delays.

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

Iranian involvement in the Palestinian arena

- ▶ Acting Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri-Kani spoke with Qatar's prime minister and foreign minister, Mohammad Abdulrahman, discussing the latest developments in the region and the Gaza Strip and the efforts to end the war (Tasnim, August 15, 2024). Two diplomats familiar with Qatar's negotiations for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip reported that the Qatari prime minister had urged the Iranian leadership to suspend the attack on Israel to avoid hindering the progress of the talks. One diplomat noted that Abdulrahman had warned Iran to consider the serious consequences of an attack at a time when signs of diplomatic progress were emerging (The Washington Post, August 16, 2024). At the end of the first day of talks in Doha, another phone call was held between Bagheri-Kani and Abdulrahman (Iranian Foreign Ministry Telegram channel, August 16, 2024).
- ▶ On August 17, 2024, Bagheri spoke with Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty to discuss the latest developments in the region and the negotiations for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. Bagheri said that by publicly supporting the "crimes of the Zionists," the US had proven that it was complicit in the "crime" and could not serve as an impartial mediator. He said Iran reserved the legitimate right to retaliate for the killing of Ismail Haniyeh, the head of Hamas' political bureau (ISNA, August 17, 2024).
- ▶ Mohammad-Hossein Soltani-Fard, head of the interest section of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Cairo, referred to the negotiations for a ceasefire in Gaza, noting that, as might have been expected, the negotiations in Doha ended without result. He claimed that the "Zionist regime" was stalling to delay Iran's legitimate response to Israel's violation of its sovereignty through the killing of Haniyeh in Tehran. He added that if the Israeli prime minister agreed to a ceasefire on reasonable terms, it would spell the end of his rule (snn.ir, August 17, 2024).
- ▶ Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani said at his weekly press conference that while Iran is one of the biggest supporters of efforts to achieve a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, it does not believe that the United States has good intentions, as it supports Israel and its "crimes." He added that Israel had so far proven that it was not interested in a ceasefire and that the United States had to prove that it was interested in it. Kanani also said that there was no direct connection between Iran's support for the ceasefire efforts in the Gaza Strip and its legal right to avenge Haniyeh's death in Tehran and that these were two separate issues (ISNA, August 19, 2024).

► Esmail Kowsari, a member of the Majles National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, said Iran would retaliate for Haniyeh’s killing even in the event of a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. Kowsari, a former senior IRGC official, said the Supreme Leader had ordered to avenge Haniyeh’s blood and therefore there was no doubt that Iran would retaliate. He added that Iran should not rush its response, but rather respond in a calculated manner at the time, place, and manner it chose. According to him, Iran can retaliate today, tomorrow, or any other time it sees fit according to its interests (didbaniran.ir, August 18, 2024).



Esmail Kowsari (didbaniran.ir, August 18, 2024)

► Ali Fadavi, deputy commander of the IRGC, said there was no doubt that the “Zionist regime” would be punished for killing Haniyeh “at the appropriate time and place.” He noted that the “Zionist regime” had committed a great crime by assassinating Haniyeh, and that Iran would determine the time and manner of revenge and carry it out with certainty. He claimed Israel was waiting day and night for Iran’s response (IRNA, August 19, 2024).



The IRGC deputy commander (IRNA, August 19, 2024)

► IRGC spokesman Ali-Mohammad Naeini said Iran was determined to respond to the “aggression” by the “Zionist regime,” but that time was at its disposal and the waiting period for an Iranian response could be long. He noted that the commanders of the Iranian armed forces had the experience and ability to punish the “enemy” effectively without acting hastily. According to him, all conditions must be carefully examined to make a precise, calculated

decision that will alter the enemy's set of considerations. He added that Iran's retaliation might not mirror past actions and stressed that no attack on Iranian targets had gone unanswered, warning that the enemy should expect calculated and precise strikes. The IRGC spokesman also said Iran did not believe that the United States was interested in peace or a ceasefire, accusing it of playing a political game (Tasnim, August 20, 2024).



The IRGC spokesman (Tasnim, August 20, 2024)

► Iran's incoming defense minister, Aziz Nasirzadeh, said during a Majles discussion prior to the confirmation of his appointment as defense minister that after the al-Aqsa Flood, the "Zionist regime" with the help of the United States crossed all red lines by committing "war crimes" against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip and engaging in "cowardly assassinations." He added that Iran had successfully strengthened its international position, particularly in West Asia, and reinforced the foundations of the "resistance" under the influence of strategic conditions. According to Nasirzadeh, the "resistance front" is not separate from Iran and is part of its armed forces. He added that Iran's strategic depth had changed greatly compared to the past two decades and that the power it had developed enabled it to play a central role in the region and beyond (ISNA, August 19, 2024).



Incoming Defense Minister Aziz Nasirzadeh (ISNA, August 19, 2024)

Iranian involvement in Lebanon and Syria

► On August 15, 2024, IRGC commander Hossein Salami announced the death of Ahmad Reza Afshari, a senior officer in the IRGC's aerospace arm who served as a military advisor in Syria. Salami reported that Afshari had been wounded in a coalition airstrike in Syria at the end of July 2024, transferred to Iran for medical treatment, and died of his wounds (Fars, August 15, 2024).



Ahmad Reza Afshari (Fars, August 15, 2024)

► In recent days, several IRGC and Hezbollah officers reportedly moved their residences from the al-Sayyida Zaynab quarter in southern Damascus to the rural area of Damascus as a precaution against a possible Israeli attack. According to the report, seven Iranian officers, including Haj Ali Jamal, who is in charge of the IRGC's security portfolio in the region, and Haj Fawzi, who is in charge of armaments in the organization, moved to the town of Jdeidat Artouz, in rented or bought apartments (Political Keys, August 17, 2024).

► The Iranian embassy in Lebanon referred to a video released by Hezbollah entitled "Amad-4," in which it showed the huge tunnels in Lebanon through which trucks with long-range missiles pass. According to the embassy, the missile facilities located underground and inside the rocks and mountains are referred to in Persian as "missile cities," and such cities are located all over Iran and instill terror in the hearts of Iran's enemies. The embassy threatened that, if necessary, the Islamic Republic had the ability to attack the enemy from any point in its territory (Iran's embassy in Lebanon X account, August 16, 2024).

► Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant signed seizure orders for 18 oil tankers linked to the IRGC's Qods Force "ghost fleet" which are used to finance the Qods Force, Hezbollah, and Hamas. These tankers operate covertly by either turning off their transmitters or transmitting fake locations to avoid tracking. They transport oil belonging to the Qods Force, circumventing international sanctions, with the profits funding the terrorist activities of the Qods Force and

its proxies. The tankers are owned by various companies worldwide, mostly front companies, and sail under various flags, including Panama, Tanzania, Palau, and the Cook Islands. According to the National Economic Counterterrorism Headquarters in the Israeli Defense Ministry, senior Hezbollah operatives, including Muhammad Ja'far Qasir—who has a \$10 million US bounty on his head—are involved in transporting and selling the oil (Israel's National Economic Counterterrorism Headquarters website, August 13, 2024; Haaretz, August 15, 2024).

Activity of the Shiite militias

Iraq

Claims of responsibility of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq

- ▶ On August 18, 2024, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed responsibility for an attack against a “military target” in the Golan Heights using UAVs. Contrary to previous announcements, it was reported that the attack was carried out “last week,” without specifying an exact date (Islamic Resistance in Iraq Telegram channel, August 18, 2024). The claim has not been verified, and there has been no report by the IDF Spokesperson regarding a drone launched at the Golan Heights. This is the first claim of responsibility by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq for an attack against Israel since July 24, 2024.
- ▶ On August 20, 2024, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed responsibility for a drone attack against a “vital target” in Eilat (Islamic Resistance in Iraq Telegram channel, August 20, 2024). The claim has not been verified.

Preparing for an all-out war against Israel

- ▶ A “source in the Iraqi resistance” said that he did not rule out the possibility that Iraq would be one of the arenas from which Iran’s expected response to the killing of Ismail Haniyeh, head of Hamas’ political bureau, would be carried out. According to him, Iraq has geographical, religious, and social depth alongside Iran and is therefore expected to participate in the response against Israel “in any way, separate from the neutral position of the government.” In this context, Ali al-Karawi, a senior figure in the Iraqi resistance, said that he believed all the organizations were ready for a comprehensive war. He noted that Iraq played a central role in supporting and strengthening the “resistance” due to its proximity to Iran and that the “media intimidation” about the need for the international coalition forces to remain in Iraq served Israel’s interests (al-Akhbar, August 17, 2024).

Militias’ support for the Palestinians

►Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada militia secretary-general Abu Alaa al-Wala'i wondered how one could believe that the United States, which he said supplied Israel with “bombs that kill innocents” in the Gaza Strip on a daily basis, was concerned with a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. He said that “defending the innocent in Palestine will overcome the American bombs and the crimes of the Zionists” (Abu Alaa al-Wala'i's X account, August 19, 2024).

The presence of US forces in Iraq

►Iraqi Foreign Minister Fouad Hussein said that diplomatic efforts by the Iraqi government had successfully prevented a US response following the attack on the Ain al-Assad base on August 5, 2024, in which five American soldiers and two defense contractors were wounded. He added that discussions with the American administration about the withdrawal of the international coalition forces were ongoing. However, he cautioned that the current circumstances in the region and the danger of regional war had created different conditions than those of a year ago (al-Arabiya, August 20, 2024).

►Haidar al-Lami, a member of the political bureau of the Nujaba Movement, said that the militias in Iraq had ended the ceasefire intended to allow the government to complete negotiations on the withdrawal of American forces from the country, and therefore “all options are open” for them in dealing with the American bases in the country. Al-Lami also referred to an attack attributed to the United States against a Popular Mobilization base on July 30, 2024, in which four Kata'ib Hezbollah operatives and a Houthi coordination officer were killed, and threatened a response in the coming days. According to him, the response may be against more than one site and will not necessarily be in Iraq, Syria, or the “Zionist entity” (The National, August 20, 2024).

►The Ashab al-Kahf (“the Cave Owners”) militia announced that it was changing its name to Kata'ib Sarkhat al-Quds (“Jerusalem Scream Brigades”) to emphasize that its operations would not be limited only to the “unjust Sykes-Picot borders.”² In addition, the militia announced that it was suspending its military operations against the “Zionist entity and the American occupation” until the end of the Arbaeen³ ceremonies (on August 25, 2024) in light of

² The agreement between the United Kingdom and France of 1916, which divided the spheres of influence in the Middle East between them after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and later formed the basis for determining state borders.

³ Arbaeen: A day of mourning for the Shiites to mark forty days since the death of Imam Hussein bin Ali and many other members of Ali bin Abi Talib's family in the Battle of Karbala in 61 Hijra (680 CE). On this day, it is customary to make a pilgrimage to the tomb of Imam Hussein in Karbala.

the “treachery of the enemy,” which it claimed might try to harm the pilgrims. According to the announcement, military activity will resume immediately thereafter, and the militia is monitoring all American bases in Iraq, Syria, and the Gulf around the clock (Abu abdaallah’s X account, August 20, 2024).

►Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq secretary-general Qais al-Khazali said that American forces would not leave the country through negotiations and diplomacy alone. He stressed that military “resistance” operations were necessary to force the American forces to withdraw and restore Iraqi sovereignty (Shafaq News, August 16, 2024).

Yemen

Houthi military activity

►On August 21, 2024, the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) agency said that the crew of a merchant ship in the Red Sea, about 140 kilometers west of the port of al-Hudaydah in Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen, reported that two small boats were approaching the ship. There were three to five people on one of the boats and ten people on the other. A brief exchange of fire ensued, and the boats moved away slightly. Roughly two hours later, the crew reported that the ship was struck by two “unidentified missiles,” followed by a third missile. Although there were no casualties, the crew lost control of the ship (UKMTO X account, August 21, 2024). A fire reportedly broke out in the Greece-flagged tanker Sounion after apparently being hit by an RPG on its right side, but all 25 crew members were unharmed (Reporter.gr, August 21, 2024).

►The US Central Command (CENTCOM) reported that during the past week, its forces had destroyed a Houthi unmanned surface vehicle (USV) in the Red Sea. In addition, the forces destroyed a drone and a ground control station in Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen (CENTCOM X account, August 14-21, 2024).

►Dmitry Polyanskiy, deputy Russian ambassador to the United Nations, argued at a meeting of the UN Security Council that the international coalition’s attacks in the Red Sea violated international law and would cause escalation and unforeseen consequences. He added that the Houthis’ actions “do not come out of nowhere” but reflect the levels of frustration in the region over the policy of the “Israeli occupation, which is working to erase” the Gaza Strip. He added that the Security Council’s conduct and inactivity regarding the Gaza Strip increased frustration among public opinion on the Arab street, and as a result, there was support for the

Houthi position (al-Masirah TV X account and the Russian mission to the UN X account, August 15, 2024).

Houthi threatening video

► On August 18, 2024, the Houthis released a 1:01-minute video titled “The response will come.” The video included an excerpt translated into Hebrew from Houthi leader Abd al-Malik al-Houthi’s last speech on August 15, 2024, in which he threatened that the response of the “axis of resistance” to the Israeli actions would surely come. The video includes excerpts from Hezbollah’s video about the underground Imad-4 facility for storing long-range missiles and rockets, as well as launches of surface-to-surface missiles from Iran (the Houthis’ combat media arm Telegram channel, August 18, 2024).



Abd al-Malik al-Houthi in a threatening message from the video (the Houthis’ combat media arm Telegram channel, August 18, 2024)

Statements by senior Houthi officials

► On August 15, 2024, Abd al-Malik al-Houthi, the leader of the Houthi movement in Yemen, delivered his weekly speech, stating that support for the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip continued on all fronts. He addressed the delayed responses from Iran and Hezbollah following the killing of Ismail Haniyeh and Fuad Shukr, emphasizing that these responses would inevitably occur despite the deployment of American forces and military assets in the region. Referring to the Houthi response following Israel’s attack on the port of al-Hudaydah, al-Houthi stressed that it would definitely take place, utilizing their unique routes, equipment, tactics, and special capabilities. He said that during the week, the Houthis had fired 15 cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and drones at vessels and that they would continue their operations until the “aggression” in the Gaza Strip stopped. According to him, there is pressure from Israel, the United States, and Britain to stop the Houthis’ activities, but their operatives are not afraid and are doing everything in their power to support the Palestinians (al-Masirah, August 15, 2024).

► During the past week, Hezam al-Asad, a member of the Houthi political council, issued several posts in Hebrew referring to the threats of the “axis of resistance” to retaliate against Israel. Following is an English translation of some of the Hebrew posts: “Where will the response come from? From the air, from the ground, underground, or from the depth of the sea;” “Any agreement to end the aggression, lift the siege of Gaza, and release Palestinian prisoners from the prisons of the Israeli occupation is welcome, but it will not prevent the response from Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran against Israel. The response is coming... coming... coming and will be decisive, Allah willing;” “Shelters are no longer a safe place. Repatriation is a solution before disaster strikes” (Hezam al-Asad’s X account, August 14-20, 2024).

US sanctions against Houthi smuggling network

► The US Department of the Treasury imposed sanctions on five companies based in the Marshall Islands, the UAE, and Malaysia, as well as two gas tankers and an Indian national who serves as the captain of one of the tankers. These entities were sanctioned for their involvement in the transfer of Iranian goods to Yemen and the UAE as part of a network run by Saeed al-Jamal, a Houthi financier operating from Iran. Al-Jamal manages communications companies and vessels used for illegal smuggling, with the profits intended to fund the Houthis (US Treasury Department website, August 15, 2024).