



Spotlight on Iran and the Shiite Axis

December 4-11, 2024

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Highlights¹

- ▶ Senior Iranian officials and the Iranian media expressed acceptance of the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria and concern about future developments in the country and Israel's exploitation of the situation. The Iranian Supreme Leader noted that it was a "joint American-Zionist plan." However, they stressed that the fall of the Syrian regime would not have a significant negative impact on the "resistance front," including Hezbollah. The pro-Iranian militias claimed that the plot was intended to undermine the support of the "axis of resistance" for the Gaza Strip.
- ▶ Reports indicate that Iran has already established channels of communication with elements among the power groups that took over Syria, to protect Iranian missions in Syria and the Shiite holy sites and prevent a deterioration between the two countries.
- ▶ Iran and the militias strongly condemned Israel's attacks in Syria and the entry of IDF forces into the buffer zone in the Golan Heights following the fall of the Assad regime.
- ▶ Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi met with senior figures in Hamas' political bureau and discussed negotiations for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.
- ▶ The Houthis claimed responsibility for a joint attack with the Islamic Resistance in Iraq using drones against a target in Israel. The IDF Spokesperson said that a missile launched from Yemen was intercepted before it penetrated Israeli territory. A drone launched by the Houthis hit a building in Yavneh. There were no casualties.
- ▶ The Houthis claimed responsibility for an attack on two American destroyers and three supply ships in the Gulf of Aden. The US Central Command confirmed that the destroyers thwarted an attack using drones and a cruise missile.

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

Iran and the Shiite militias after the revolution in Syria

► Senior Iranian officials refrained from condemning the rebels who overthrew the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, claiming that it was a plot by the “Zionist regime.” They expressed their willingness to continue their support for Syria, stressing the need to preserve Syrian sovereignty and maintain an internal dialogue that would lead to the establishment of a broad and agreed-upon government. The senior figures also tried to downplay the significance of the implications of the revolution in Syria for the future of the “axis of resistance.” The main statements were the following:

- ◆ On December 11, 2024, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei addressed for the first time the overthrow of the regime in Syria. In a speech in Tehran, he noted that there was no doubt that what happened in Syria was the result of a “joint American-Zionist plan.” According to him, the government of a neighboring country (an implicit reference to Turkey) played an overt role in this matter and continues to play it now, but the main cause of the plot and its main planner is the command room of the United States and the “Zionist regime.” Khamenei also said that the more pressure is exerted on the “resistance,” and the more you fight against it, it expands and becomes stronger. Referring to the claim that Iran is weakening as a result of the weakening of the “resistance,” Khamenei said that Iran is strong and powerful and will be even stronger (ISNA, December 11, 2024).



Supreme Leader Khamenei (SNN, December 11, 2024)

- ◆ Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian said at the cabinet meeting that it is up to the Syrian people to decide the future of the country and its political regime. He noted that a dialogue must be held between the various groups in Syrian society to reach

agreements, and expressed hope that the military conflict and violence will end as soon as possible. Pezeshkian stressed the importance of preserving Syria's unity and territorial integrity, ensuring the safety of all citizens, and protecting the country's religious sites and diplomatic missions. In addition, the Iranian president condemned Israel's violation of Syria's sovereignty and called on all elements in Syria and the countries of the region to be careful of the exploitation of the situation in Syria by the "Zionist regime" to realize its expansionist ambitions (IRNA, December 8, 2024).

◆ Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi claimed that Iran was aware of the behind-the-scenes plans of Israel and the United States to cause problems for the "axis of resistance," and that the intelligence and security services in Iran and Syria were aware of the movements in Idlib and all the information was passed on to the Syrian government and army. He admitted that the Syrian army's inability to deal with the rebels and the speed of developments surprised Iran and even President Assad himself. Araghchi praised Syria's important role in the "axis of resistance." However, he stressed that Iran's role is to help Syria and not to replace the Syrian army and that the main reason for the rapid advance of the rebels is that the Syrian army has shown no resistance. He noted that over the years, Iran has recommended that Assad act in a way that will improve the motivation of his army and his relations with the Syrian people, promote reforms in his country, and open a dialogue with the opposition. Araghchi expressed concern that Israel might exploit the situation in Syria, noting that it was natural for the "axis of resistance" to be affected by the events unfolding in the country. However, he stressed that Hezbollah and the "axis" had already overcome greater challenges and that the "axis" would continue on its path. He said that Syria had played an important role in the "resistance," but that did not mean that the "resistance" would stop without Syria. Referring to Iran's ability to continue supporting Hezbollah in view of the severance of weapons supply routes through Syria, Araghchi said that Hezbollah can take care of its own needs, as is the case in the Gaza Strip and Yemen, and it can find new ways to meet its needs. Araghchi confirmed that Iran is in contact with several groups inside Syria and that it has received several messages that the security of the Iranian missions in Syria and the security of the Shiite religious sites would be maintained. According to him, Iran's attitude toward the new Syrian rulers will depend on their behavior and Iran will adjust its behavior accordingly. He added that it was too early to

assess how things would develop in Syria and whether the situation would deteriorate as it did in Libya or Sudan (Iranian TV, December 8, 2024).



**The Iranian foreign minister in an interview
(Iranian Broadcasting Authority website, December 8, 2024)**

- ◆ The Iranian Foreign Ministry emphasized Iran’s fundamental stance on respecting Syria’s unity, national sovereignty, and territorial integrity. According to the ministry’s statement, the fate and future decisions regarding Syria should be determined solely by the Syrian people, free from destructive interventions or external coercion. The statement also highlighted the need to end military confrontations as quickly as possible, avoid acts of terrorism, and initiate a national dialogue involving all segments of Syrian society to establish a broad-based government that represents the entire Syrian population. The Iranian Foreign Ministry stressed the need to ensure the security of all Syrian citizens and citizens of other countries and to protect the holy religious sites and diplomatic compounds. It added that Iran would continue to support Syria to establish security and stability and would hold consultations with all influential parties in the region (Iranian Foreign Ministry website, December 8, 2024).
- ◆ Hossein Akbari, Iran’s ambassador to Syria, said that Bashar al-Assad’s crime was his presence in the “axis of resistance.” He noted that it was not impossible that Syria would become a battleground for some Muslim and non-Muslim countries, as well as the “Zionists,” and that the conflicts in the country would spread due to foreign intervention. Akbari added that the establishment of a strong central government in Syria is not desirable for some countries and that due to Syria’s geopolitical status and its vicinity to Israel, the involvement of foreigners in the country may be greater than in countries such

as Libya. He warned that in such a case, a good future could not be expected for Syria (ISNA, December 8, 2024).



Iran's ambassador to Damascus (ISNA, December 8, 2024)

◆ A commentary article in the Fars News Agency said that Iran's presence in the countries of the region is not only military but also moral and cultural and that it would remain even after the fall of Assad. According to the article, although Iran has maintained some of its ties with the "axis of resistance" and Hezbollah through Syria, Hezbollah is no longer a small and weak organization as in the past and can recover on its own. It was also noted that although the current situation will force Iran to deal with more problems and invest more efforts, the activity of the "resistance front" will not stop. It was stated that the Assad regime provided Iran with an opportunity to strengthen the "resistance front," but Syria is only one part of this front, and this experience should be used to continue the war in other arenas that remain in Yemen, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, and Iran (Fars News Agency, December 8, 2024).

◆ The Nour News Agency, which is affiliated with the Supreme National Security Council, also claimed that the "resistance front" would continue to exist and operate even after the collapse of the Assad regime. A commentary article states that the "axis of resistance" does not depend on a specific person or government; It was created based on deep thought and belief based on popular support, which does not disappear following changes in the leadership of governments. The article notes that Iran has already proven in the past that it can adapt to various conditions and that political and security ups and downs in the region cannot decisively affect the advancement of the goals of the "axis of resistance," which is based on the ability to turn threats into opportunities. According to the article, while the fall of the Assad regime could become a significant challenge for the "axis of resistance," it does not mean a serious blow to

Iran's regional policy or the end of the role of the "axis of resistance." Iran has shaped its policy in the region based on long-term goals and real and potential capabilities, and it will continue to play an effective role in the region, utilizing all the capabilities at its disposal and based on diverse experience and strategies. The "axis of resistance" will remain an influential force in dealing with foreign influence and defending the region's independence (Nour News, December 10, 2024).

◆ Hossein Salami, the IRGC commander, appeared at a closed-door meeting of the Iranian Majles and reviewed the latest developments in the region and in Syria. Ebrahim Rezaei, spokesman for the Majles National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, said Salami noted that Iran's power had not been harmed by the developments in Syria, that Iran controls all of the enemy's vital interests, and that "overthrowing the Zionists" was not off the agenda (snn.ir, December 10, 2024).



The IRGC commander in the Majles (snn.ir, December 10, 2024)

◆ A "senior Iranian official" said that Tehran had established direct channels of communication with several groups in the leadership of the Syrian opposition. He noted that Iran is open to direct dialogue with the new leadership in Syria to avoid a hostile path between the two countries, and that there is a need for communication with opposition leaders to stabilize relations between the countries and prevent further tension in the region. Another "Iranian source" said that the main concern in Iran is that Assad's successor will distance Syria from the Iranian axis and that it seeks to prevent such a scenario (Reuters, December 9, 2024).

► The pro-Iranian militias claimed the overthrow of the Assad regime was a "Zionist plot" intended to harm the "axis of resistance" and support for the Gaza Strip:

- ◆ Hadi al-Ameri, secretary-general of the Badr Organization, claimed that the fall of the Syrian regime was “a Turkish-Zionist plot with American support” (Shafaq News, December 7, 2024).
- ◆ Qais al-Khazali, secretary-general of Asa’ib Ahl al-Haqq, expressed concern about the situation in Syria following the overthrow of the Assad regime, particularly regarding potential harm to Shiites and their holy sites. In remarks marking the seventh anniversary of the victory over ISIS, he called for taking the necessary precautions to deal with all possible scenarios that could occur in “this sister state” (Qais al-Khazali’s X account, December 10, 2024).
- ◆ Kata’ib Hezbollah issued a statement praising the Syrian army’s activity under the Assad regime and noting that it was “an example of legendary steadfastness.” The militia assessed that the weakness of the army commanders had caused its collapse. It asserted that the al-Nusra Front and ISIS would not change, even though they are trying to present themselves as human and moral in front of the cameras, and that their “supporting countries” (i.e., Israel and the United States) bear responsibility for any attack against the Shiites or the holy sites. The statement also noted that Kata'ib Hezbollah was monitoring events in Syria and hoped that understandings could be reached on the “principles of the resistance” and the Palestinian issue (Kaf Telegram channel, December 10, 2024).
- ◆ The political council of the Nujaba Movement said that the events in Syria took place because the “axis of resistance” was busy providing aid to the Gaza Strip. According to the movement, the “destruction” in Syria was carried out through an operations room established in Turkey under British command and in an intelligence partnership between NATO and the “Zionist entity,” and the operations room now intends to destroy Iraq from within (al-Amid Telegram channel, December 10, 2024).
- ◆ Houthi leader Abd al-Malik al-Houthi said that the actions of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria should have been aimed at supporting the Palestinian people. He wondered why those who operate under the title of “liberation” (Tahrir) and those who support it are not working to liberate “Palestine,” and warned that “any conflict among members of the Islamic nation at this time and any confrontation will increase the division and dispersion, distance them from concern for the Palestinian cause, and serve the Israeli enemy” (al-Masirah, December 6, 2024).

◆ Muhammad al-Bukhaiti, a member of the Houthis' political bureau, issued several statements regarding the developments in Syria (Muhammad al-Bukhaiti's X account, December 5-8, 2024): "Today, the Muslim Brotherhood stands in line with America and Israel fighting against the axis of resistance that has dedicated itself to saving Gaza. We wonder what their position would be if our battle against the Zionist enemy had not started in Gaza, but had begun in Lebanon, Syria, or Iran. They had nothing left to expect except to volunteer to serve in the Israeli army to fight us;" "After the Muslim Brotherhood's success in coming to power in Syria, we repeat our messages. Gaza is still abandoned. You have a historic opportunity to fulfill your jihadi duty, and so does Turkey. We promise you that we in Yemen, Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon will be by your side and overcome all differences of opinion with you."

◆ Abdullah bin Amer, the Houthis' deputy military spokesman, said that the Houthis had proposed to Bashar al-Assad several times, even before the beginning of the al-Aqsa Flood on October 7, 2023, to open a front against Israel in the Golan Heights, with the active participation of Houthi fighters, but each time the ousted Syrian president rejected the idea (ALYEMENET Telegram channel, December 8, 2024).

Evacuation of the forces of the "axis of resistance" from Syria

► "Three Iranian officials" noted that in the past week, Iran asked HTS, the rebel organization leading the revolution in Syria, to allow its forces safe passage out of the country and to protect the Shiite holy sites in Syria. At the same time, HTS sent a message to Iran in which it clarified that it would protect Shiite religious sites and Shiite minorities and asked Iran not to fight the rebels (The New York Times, December 7, 2024).

► Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei condemned the break-in of the Iranian embassy in Damascus following the rebel takeover of the city. He stressed that maintaining the security of diplomatic sites and missions is a fundamental principle in international relations and must be strictly ensured in all circumstances. He noted that the embassy staff, including the ambassador, are safe and sound, and that the necessary steps have been taken to ensure their safety (Iranian Foreign Ministry website, December 8, 2024).



Vandalism of the Iranian embassy in Damascus (Jamaran, December 8, 2024)

- ▶ Iranian government spokeswoman Fatemeh Mohajerani reported that in recent days, 4,000 Iranian citizens had returned from Syria to Iran on ten flights operated by Mahan Air. She added that the evacuation of all Iranians in Syria was on the agenda and that work would continue until the last Iranian was evacuated (Mehr, December 10, 2024).
- ▶ It was reported that the Houthi representative in Syria, Abd al-Malik al-Murtadha, fled to Iraq from Syria on December 7, 2024, as part of a large-scale evacuation of pro-Iranian forces from the country. According to “sources” in Yemen, al-Murtadha, also known as Abu Talib Sufyan, represented the Houthis in recent months in the operations room of the “axis of resistance,” which connected Syria, Iraq, and Hezbollah. The sources reported that al-Murtadha was preparing to join Hezbollah forces in south Lebanon before the ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon went into effect on November 27, 2024 (al-Masdar, December 8, 2024).

Condemnation of IDF activity in Syria

- ▶ Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Baghaei condemned the Israeli attacks in Syria and the “occupation of additional parts of the Syrian Golan.” He said that the attacks were a blatant violation of the UN Charter and international law, and that “expanding the circle of occupation” was an expression of disrespect for international law. He criticized the silence and indifference of the Western countries that support Israel in the face of Israel’s actions and called on the UN Security Council to respond immediately to stop the “aggression of the Zionist regime” (Iranian Foreign Ministry website, December 9, 2024).
- ▶ The political council of the Nujaba Movement claimed that Israel’s activity in Syria was intended to establish a federation in al-Suwayda (Mount Druze) “in preparation for a referendum for disengagement and connection to Israel” (al-Amid, December 10, 2024).

►The Houthis' political bureau noted that it is following with concern the "Israeli aggression" against Syria, which includes the "occupation" of places and villages in Quneitra and Mount Hermon and the increase of attacks in Damascus. The political bureau claimed that the "aggression" was intended to create a new reality in Syria and stressed that they were on Syria's side (al-Masirah X account, December 8, 2024).

►The Houthi Foreign Ministry condemned the "Zionist occupation" of additional lands in the Syrian Golan and accused that "the Zionist entity is the real enemy threatening the region and the Arab and Islamic nations." In the official statement, the Houthis emphasized the need to preserve Syria's sovereignty, stability, unity, and territorial integrity, as well as the importance of non-interference in its internal affairs. They also expressed their support for Syria's right to respond. The statement further noted that the developments in Syria and the "Zionist aggression" against it demand that attention not be diverted from "the crimes of genocide committed by the Zionists" in the Gaza Strip (al-Masirah X account, December 9, 2024).

Iran's involvement in the Palestinian arena

►During his visit to Doha, Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi met with the head of Hamas' Shura Council, Mohammad Ismail Darwish, and with some members of the movement's political bureau. Araghchi said that Iran would continue to support the people and the "resistance" in "Palestine" and Lebanon in view of the occupation and aggression of the "Zionist regime." At the end of the meeting, Araghchi said the meeting was good and useful and that the sides discussed developments in the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, and Syria. He added that he had spoken with Hamas representatives about the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and expressed hope for progress in the negotiations, but that there were obstacles to a ceasefire (Tasnim, December 7, 2024).



The Iranian foreign minister meets with members of Hamas' political bureau (Mehr, December 7, 2024).

Operations of the Shiite militias

Joint attacks by the Iraqi militias and the Houthis

► On December 8, 2024, the Houthis' military spokesman, Yahya Saria, claimed responsibility for a joint attack with the Islamic Resistance in Iraq against a "vital target" in southern Israel using several drones. According to Saria, the attack achieved its goal successfully. He added that the Yemeni forces and the Iraqi "resistance" would continue to respond to the crimes of the "Israeli enemy" against "our people in the Gaza Strip" (Yahya Saria's Telegram channel, December 8, 2024). No parallel announcement has been issued by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq. The IDF Spokesperson said that the Israeli Air Force had intercepted a missile launched from Yemen before it crossed into Israeli territory (IDF Spokesperson, December 8, 2024).

◀ On December 5, 2024, Houthi leader Abd al-Malik al-Houthi referred to the joint activity of the Houthi forces with the Islamic Resistance in Iraq against Israel. According to him, the joint operations with Iraq "will have an important impact against the enemy and they [i.e., the enemy] are very worried" (al-Masirah, December 6, 2024).

Yemen

Houthi attacks against Israel

► On December 7, 2024, the IDF Spokesperson announced that the Israeli Air Force had intercepted a missile launched from Yemen before it penetrated Israeli territory (IDF Spokesperson, December 7, 2024). The Houthis did not claim responsibility for any attack against Israel that day.

► On December 9, 2024, the spokesman for the Houthi forces, Yahya Saria, claimed responsibility for an attack against "a sensitive target in the Yavne area in Ashdod, south of the Jaffa area" using a drone. According to Saria, the attack achieved its objective (Yahya Saria's X

account, December 9, 2024). The drone hit the upper floors of a 15-story building in Yavne, causing extensive damage, but there were no casualties (Israeli media, December 9, 2024). The IDF Spokesperson confirmed that a drone launched from Yemen hit a building in Yavne. According to the statement, the drone was not intercepted because it was not classified as a hostile aircraft (IDF Spokesperson, December 9–10, 2024).

Additional Houthi military activity

►On December 10, 2024, the Houthis' military spokesman, Yahya Saria, claimed responsibility for attacks on US naval forces: An attack on three supply ships that had left the port of Djibouti and which Saria claimed had previously participated in "aggression against Yemen"; An attack against two American destroyers in the Gulf of Aden escorting supply ships. According to Saria, the attacks were carried out using several missiles and drones, and the operation "successfully achieved its objectives" (Yahya Saria's Telegram channel, December 10, 2024). The US Central Command (CENTCOM) said the destroyers USS Stockdale and USS O'Kane repelled an attack by a variety of weapons launched by the Houthis while escorting three US-owned merchant ships flying the US flag in the Gulf of Aden on December 9–10, 2024. According to the statement, "the destroyers successfully defeated" many drones and an anti-ship cruise missile, and there were no casualties or damage among the civilian or military vessels and crew members (CENTCOM X account, December 10, 2024). The two destroyers thwarted a similar combined attack on a convoy of three US-owned ships in the Gulf of Aden on November 30–December 1, 2024, but this time it was not specified whether they were the same vessels.