



Spotlight on Iran and the Shiite Axis

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Highlights¹

- ▶ Senior Iranian officials claimed that the fall of the Assad regime in Syria would not affect the “axis of resistance” and that Tehran would continue to support Hezbollah and the Palestinians. Iran explained that it did not help the Syrian army against the rebels because the Syrian regime did not want to fight.
- ▶ Iran and the militias condemned the IDF’s activity in Syria following the fall of the Assad regime and called for regional and international intervention.
- ▶ Iran is preparing to reopen its embassy in Damascus if the appropriate security conditions are guaranteed.
- ▶ The Houthis claimed responsibility for an attack with the Islamic Resistance in Iraq using drones against targets in southern Israel. In addition, they claimed responsibility for independent attacks using drones and a ballistic missile. The IDF Spokesperson confirmed that two drones and a ballistic missile were intercepted before they penetrated Israeli territory.
- ▶ The US attacked a Houthi command and control facility in the Defense Ministry building in Sana’a.
- ▶ The US secretary of state urged the Iraqi prime minister to take advantage of Iran’s weakness and act to disarm the militias.

Iran and the Shiite militias after the revolution in Syria

- ▶ Senior Iranian figures continued to downplay the significance of the implications of the revolution in Syria for the future of the “axis of resistance” and made it clear that Tehran would

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

continue to support Hezbollah and the Palestinians. They also implicitly blamed Bashar al-Assad, who they claimed had ignored the warnings he had received from Tehran about the rebel offensive. The main statements were the following:

◆ **Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei** said in a meeting with women that the “enemies” imagined that the issue of “resistance” had come to an end through the operation carried out in Syria and the “crimes of the Zionist regime” and the United States with the support of others, but they were wrong. He noted that the “Zionist regime” had deluded itself that it would be able to besiege Hezbollah through Syria and eliminate the organization, but Israel would be uprooted. He added that the spirit of Hassan Nasrallah and Yahya al-Sinwar is alive and that their path continues. According to him, the Gaza Strip faces daily attacks from the Zionists, but it continues to stand firm and resist, and so does Lebanon. Khamenei stressed Iran's support for “the Palestinian fighters and Hezbollah fighters” and its continued support for them (Supreme Leader's website, December 17, 2024).

◆ **IRGC commander Hossein Salami**, speaking at an IRGC meeting, praised Syria's conduct under the Assad family's rule vis-à-vis Israel and the United States and its support for Iran in the Iran-Iraq War. However, he noted that it is unreasonable to expect Iran to fight in place of the Syrian army and to deploy the IRGC and Basij forces to battle in another country while that country's army stands idly by. In addition, he mentioned that all the roads [that could have been used to transfer Iranian forces to Syria] had been closed. He noted that the last to leave Syria were IRGC personnel. Salami also said that Iran had been aware of the rebel movements in Syria for several months and had passed this intelligence on to the Syrian authorities, but there was no willingness there to respond or fight. Referring to Hezbollah following the collapse of the regime in Syria, Salami said that the “resistance front” had become independent and is not dependent on Iran. He stressed that Iran has not lost its regional arms and has a strong political logic to fight, a strong legitimacy to defend itself, a strong nation, a great leader who provides guidance and inspiration, and a strong army. He stressed that there are still ways to support the “resistance front” that are not dependent on Syria and that things might change in Syria as well (ISNA, December 12, 2024).



The IRGC commander (ISNA, December 12, 2024)

◆ **Majles speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf** acknowledged that the fall of the Assad regime poses obstacles to the “resistance,” but noted that the groups of the “axis of resistance,” especially Hezbollah, had proven that they could adapt to the new conditions and even become stronger than in the past. He added that the current situation could have been avoided if the Syrian government had heeded the warnings conveyed to it by Iran. According to Qalibaf, Iran is waiting to see how the armed opponents in Syria and their supporters will act, how they will behave toward ISIS, and the extent of their cooperation with the “Zionist regime,” and it will make decisions accordingly (IRNA, December 12, 2024).

◆ **Hossein Akbari, Iran’s ambassador to Syria**, noted that the groups in Syria are facing several serious problems, including the American presence in eastern Syria, internal divisions, and Israel’s opposition to the establishment of a strong government in Syria. Akbari said that within 72 hours of Assad’s fall, Israel had destroyed all his military capabilities in its efforts to achieve victory, noting that the group interested in forming a government in Syria would have to provide a response to the “aggression of the Zionist regime.” He added that whoever controls Syria must decide between two options: to secure the interests of the United States or to stand against it, and if they choose the second option, they need an ally and cannot stand alone (Iranian TV, December 15, 2024).

▶ “A source close to the Iraqi militias” said that all the headquarters of the Iraqi militias in Syria have been evacuated and that there is no presence of the militias in Syrian territory. He also noted that the decision to evacuate all headquarters and bases from Syria was a strategic decision of the Iraqi “Resistance” Coordination Committee, which unanimously made the strategic decision on the overall evacuation. He added that Syria would remain part of the

“axis of resistance” and would “fight against the ‘occupiers’ and the ‘plots’ of the West in the region,” and that “the ‘axis’ of the West will fail in all its plans in Syria” (baghdadtoday.news, December 11, 2024).

▶ Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdulsalam said that the declarations by the armed groups in Syria about confronting Iran and Hezbollah are very provocative. He questioned the stance of these groups regarding the Islamic nation and the Palestinian cause, asking whether Syria is “turning toward the Israeli enemy or whether it will align with the issues of the Islamic nation.” He also called on the armed groups in Syria to act against the “invasion of the Israeli enemy” into Syrian territory (al-Thawra, December 12, 2024).

Condemnation of Israel’s activity in Syria

▶ Iran and the pro-Iranian militias condemned the continued Israeli attacks against military capabilities in Syria and the entry of IDF forces into the buffer zone in the Golan Heights and called on Arab and Muslim countries to intervene. The following are the most prominent statements:

◆ **Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi** accused the “Israeli regime” of focusing on destroying all of Syria’s defense and civilian infrastructures and occupying additional territories in violation of the 1974 separation of forces agreement between Israel and Syria. He added that Syria’s neighbors, the Arab and Muslim world, and the UN member states could not remain indifferent, and called on the countries of the region to join forces to stop Israel’s “aggression” and the destruction of Syria (Abbas Araghchi’s X account, December 11, 2024).

◆ Araghchi held separate talks with Qatari Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani and UAE Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan to discuss the latest developments in Syria and throughout the region. It was reported that during the talks, the ministers stressed the need to preserve Syria’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and to take serious action to stop the “Zionist regime’s” attacks on infrastructure in Syria and the occupation of additional areas in the country (Iranian Foreign Ministry website, December 12).

◆ **IRGC commander Hossein Salami** said that the situation in which “the Zionists” can observe the homes of Damascus with the naked eye is intolerable, warning that they will pay a heavy price and be buried in Syrian soil. He described the foreign powers as descending upon Syria like hungry wolves tearing apart the body of a gazelle

in the desert: the Zionists in the south, others in the north and east, while the Syrian people stand alone in the middle, facing an uncertain future. He emphasized that today it is clear how critical the presence of “resistance” forces in Syria is. According to Salami, Iran did not come to Syria to annex parts of its territory or to pursue its ambitious interests but to protect the dignity of Muslims (Tasnim, December 15, 2024).

◆ According to a statement issued by the IRGC, the United States and the “Zionist regime” are taking advantage of the instability in Syria to attack infrastructure and vital centers in the country. The IRGC stressed the need to preserve Syria’s sovereignty and unity, noting that the recent developments will only strengthen the “resistance front” and increase its motivation to remove the United States from the region, liberate Jerusalem, and eliminate the “Zionist regime.” It also noted that the world is at a historic turning point, after which Islam – led by Iran – will be one of the axes of the new world order (Tasnim, December 12).

◆ **Houthi leader Abd al-Malik al-Houthi** stated that the Israeli airstrikes against Syria’s military capabilities were “the largest aerial aggression since the establishment of the usurping entity.” In his weekly speech, al-Houthi asserted that the destruction of the Syrian army’s capabilities was an act of “bullying and arrogance,” and that Israel is working with American support to impose an equation in which the military capabilities of the Muslim nations are kept under a certain ceiling. He stressed that they would continue to support Syria, regardless of the identity of the regime because when “the aggression is directed at an Arab country and a Muslim people, we will stand by it” (al-Masirah, December 13, 2024).

◆ Al-Houthi went on to refer to the Israeli-American vision for the future of the Middle East, saying, “It is very unfortunate and very sad that the Americans and Israelis are making progress in implementing the ‘New Middle East’ or in changing the characteristics of the Middle East to activate Islamic and Arab regimes, groups, and movements. The enemy’s plan in the first stage includes creating a situation of what they call normalization and destroying the obstacles to the elimination of the Palestinian cause, while the second stage includes the tearing of the Islamic nation into many scattered entities.

◆ The Houthis’ government of change and construction condemned “the expansion of the Israeli enemy’s settlement in the Syrian Golan.” The government said

in a statement that they express solidarity with the Syrian people in their struggle against the “Israeli enemy” and in liberating their lands from the “Zionist occupier.” It was also claimed that the goal of the Israeli “aggression” was to establish a new equation of the occupation and to desecrate the dignity of the Arab peoples. The Houthi government called on the Syrian people and the Arab countries to courageously take a clear and decisive stand against Israeli “aggression” (al-Masirah, December 15, 2024).

◆ **Muhammad Ali al-Houthi, a member of the Houthi Supreme Political Council**, claimed that the attacks by the “temporary entity” against Syria’s military resources and the occupation of new areas are intended to implement the “plan for the new Middle East” that Israel is working on. He called on the Arab countries to act against “the Zionist entity before it grows bolder and continues its scheme to seize the remaining territories around it, leading to the establishment of the ‘Greater Israel’ they dream of” (Muhammad Ali al-Houthi’s X account, December 11, 2024).



A map purportedly depicting the vision of the “Greater Israel” with the inscription: “When the territory of the Israeli enemy includes the entire Levant (al-Sham) and parts of Egypt, Iraq, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the countries will be divided into small states and small cantons (X account of the media arm of the Houthi forces, December 13, 2024)

Activity of the Iranian ambassador to Syria

► Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi met with the Iranian ambassador to Syria, Hossein Akbari, who submitted a report on the latest developments in Syria and the steps taken to ensure the safety of the employees of the Iranian embassy and missions in the country. Araghchi said that developments in Syria must continue to be closely monitored to protect Iran’s interests and national security (Mehr, December 15, 2024).



The Iranian foreign minister meets with the Iranian ambassador to Syria (Mehr, December 15, 2024)

▶ Akbari said in an interview that the embassy in Damascus would soon resume its operations after its security had been assured (Iranian TV, December 15, 2024). On the other hand, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei said that the reopening of the Iranian embassy in Damascus depends on ensuring the security of the embassy and its employees and that it will only be opened if the necessary security and political conditions are met (Iranian Foreign Ministry website, December 17).



The Iranian ambassador in Damascus (Tasnim, December 15, 2024)

▶ Meanwhile, Akbari denied media reports that terrorists who attacked the Iranian embassy building in Damascus after the collapse of the Assad regime stole \$43 billion from the embassy's finance department, money which was sent as aid from the Iranian people to Syria. He noted that these were lies spread by the Iranian opposition and the "Zionists" (Fars, December 11, 2024).

Iran's involvement in Iraq

▶ "Iraqi sources" reported that Esmail Qaani, the commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, had arrived in Baghdad to discuss the latest developments in Syria and the fall of the Assad

regime. According to the report, Qaani met with several of the commanders of the pro-Iranian Shiite militias in the country to discuss the situation in Syria. It was also reported that the militia commanders told Qaani that Iraq is committed to neutrality considering the situation, and that they do not want to enter war on new fronts (al-Araby al-Jadeed, December 12, 2024).

Operations of the Shiite militias

Joint attacks by the Iraqi militias and the Houthis

▶ On December 13, 2024, the Houthis' military spokesman, Yahya Saria, claimed responsibility for a joint attack with the Islamic Resistance in Iraq against "vital targets" in southern Israel using several drones (Yahya Saria's Telegram channel, December 13, 2024). The IDF Spokesperson said that a drone launched from Yemen was intercepted in the Eilat area before it crossed into Israeli territory (IDF Spokesperson, December 12, 2024).

▶ "Informed sources" said that the United States demanded that the Iraqi government close the Houthi office in Baghdad, which is responsible, among other things, for coordinating the relationship between the Houthis and the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq. According to the report, the Iraqi government has updated the Houthis and Iran on the request, but it is not interested in taking action against the Houthi office due to pressure from the militias (al-Mashhad al-Yamani, December 17, 2024).

Yemen

Houthi attacks against Israel

▶ Houthis' military spokesman Yahya Saria claimed responsibility for attacks against Israeli territory:

◆ December 13, 2024: Against a "military target" in Ashkelon using a drone and against a target in "occupied Jaffa" using a drone (Yahya Saria's Telegram channel, December 13, 2024). The claims have not been confirmed.

◆ December 16, 2024: Against a "military target in occupied Jaffa" using a "hypersonic" Palestine 2 ballistic missile (Yahya Saria's Telegram channel, December 16, 2024). The IDF Spokesperson said that a missile launched from Yemen had been intercepted before it penetrated Israeli territory (IDF Spokesperson, December 16, 2024).

▶ On December 16, 2024, the IDF Spokesperson reported that an Israeli Navy missile ship in the Mediterranean had intercepted a drone launched from Yemen before it penetrated

Israeli territory (IDF Spokesperson, December 16, 2024). No claim of responsibility was issued by the Houthis.

American attack against the Houthis

▶ On the night of December 16-17, 2024, it was reported that a US-British attack targeted the Houthi Ministry of Defense building in the al-Ordi Complex in central Sana'a (al-Mayadeen, December 17, 2024). Muhammad Ali al-Houthi, a member of the Houthis' Supreme Political Council, visited the site of the attack, stressing that it would increase the determination of the Yemeni people. He made it clear that Yemen would continue to support the Gaza Strip despite the threats and that they are prepared to confront any new aggression (al-Massa Press, December 17, 2024).

▶ The US Central Command (CENTCOM) confirmed that its forces had carried out a precision airstrike against a significant Houthi command and control facility in Sana'a. According to the announcement, the facility was used to coordinate Houthi operations, including attacks against US warships and merchant ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (CENTCOM X account, December 17, 2024).



The scene of the attack in Sana'a (Revolutionary Media Center X account, December 17, 2024)

Iraq

The militias are preparing for an attack against them

▶ According to an "Iraqi security source," the militias in Iraq have reorganized their deployment in western and southern Iraq and they have moved to new locations, farther away from the security surveillance areas. They have also tightened the intelligence procedures among their personnel out of fear that they will be exposed and be the target of attacks. The source added that several militias had been instructed to reduce their public activities and refrain from using their heavy weapons in civilian areas (eremnews.com, December 13, 2024).

► Abu Murtaja al-Husseini, media spokesman for the façade militia of the Nujaba Movement, Kata'ib Sarkhat al-Quds (formerly known as Ashab al-Kahf), said the weapons of the “resistance” are at the highest level of readiness, with an extensive target bank and coordination across all fronts. He threatened that the “resistance” has a reach that extends everywhere and warned, “the enemy will see something from us that will surprise them.” Al-Husseini added that the decision to go to war rests solely with the supreme religious authority, Ali al-Sistani (aishab_alkahf Telegram channel, December 16, 2024).

The issue of dismantling the militias

► A “senior American official” reported that during Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s visit to Baghdad on December 13, 2024, he urged Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia’ al-Sudani to take firm and decisive measures against the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq. According to the “source,” Blinken stressed that Iran is currently in its weakest position in years and that this is an opportunity to reduce its influence on Iraq. It was also reported that Blinken warned that the Trump administration will act with all its might to destroy Iranian influence on its proxies in Iraq and that Iraq is the one that will bear responsibility for any activity against the Americans (1news-iq.com, December 15, 2024).

► Ibrahim al-Sumaidai, advisor to the Iraqi prime minister, warned that the refusal of the armed militias to disarm and integrate into the political system could lead to foreign intervention that would force them to do so. According to him, there is pressure from the United States and Western countries, and if there is no compliance, the response could involve strikes on critical targets within Iraq (al-Sa’ah Channel, December 18, 2024).