



Spotlight on Iran and the Shiite Axis

December 18 – 25, 2024

Editor: Dr. Raz Zimmt

Highlights¹

- ▶ Senior Iranian figures continued to express recognition of the damage to the “axis of resistance” due to the revolution in Syria and the overthrow of the Assad regime, while demonstrating confidence in the ability of the axis to continue operating amid the new circumstances, especially due to the ability of Hezbollah and the other organizations to produce weapons on their own. Iran is reportedly considering smuggling weapons to Hezbollah via flights to Lebanon.
- ▶ The Iranian government spokeswoman said that consultations are underway on reopening the embassy in Damascus. The new Syrian regime denied having ties with Iran and announced its intention to sue Tehran for its damage to Syria. An Iranian cleric employed by the Iranian embassy in Syria was killed by gunfire at his car in Damascus.
- ▶ The Iranian president and foreign minister met with their counterparts from Egypt and Turkey and called for exerting pressure on Israel to stop the war in the Gaza Strip and the attacks in Lebanon and Syria.
- ▶ A commander of the armed factions in Jenin admitted that they were receiving assistance from Iran. A terrorist operative in Tulkarm who operated with Iranian funding was eliminated.
- ▶ The Houthis claimed responsibility for nine attacks against Israel using drones and ballistic missiles, including a joint attack with the Islamic Resistance in Iraq. Two missiles caused damage in central Israel, injuring 16 people. The Israeli Air Force attacked Houthi targets in Yemen, for the first time in the Sana’a area.

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

► Senior members of the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq confirmed that an agreement had been reached with the Iraqi government to stop attacks against Israel. However, the militias have expressed resistance to American pressure to disarm them.

The impact of regional events on the “axis of resistance”

► Senior Iranian regime officials have acknowledged that the revolution in Syria has impacted Tehran’s ability to support the members of the “axis of resistance.” However, they claimed that these members are capable of independently producing their own weapons and are not reliant on Iran. The officials also justified the Iranian presence in Syria under the Assad regime, claiming that it was only intended to prevent terrorism from reaching Iranian territory. The following are prominent statements:

◆ **Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei** said in a speech at a meeting with religious preachers that the claim that Iran has lost its proxies in the region is baseless. He noted that Iran does not have “proxies,” and that Yemen, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) fight on their own behalf and through the strength of their faith, not on behalf of Iran. He further said that the “Zionist regime” had achieved none of its goals in the war, that the “resistance” in the region remains alive, including Hezbollah, Hamas, and the PIJ, and that the peoples of the region would uproot it. Referring to the situation in Syria, Khamenei said that the US has a plan to rule the countries of the region in two ways: through tyrannical regimes or by creating chaos, and that in Syria it has created chaos, and now the US, the “Zionist regime,” and their partners have a sense of victory. He noted that the progress of the “Zionists” in Syria and the occupation of parts of it were made possible due to the absence of any soldiers confronting them. According to him, this is not a victory and there is no doubt that the brave young Syrians will get them out of Syria (Supreme Leader’s website, December 22, 2024).

◆ **IRGC commander Hossein Salami** said at a conference in Bandar Abbas that Iran supports the “resistance front,” however, the latter produces weapons on its own. He noted that the Iranians have the same beliefs as the Lebanese and Yemenis and that they have common enemies, but that each of them acts in its own country following its own interests, fights with its own capabilities, and is not dependent on the other.

According to Salami, the “Zionists” thought they could succeed by killing women, children, and innocent people in the Gaza Strip, but they are now living in greater fear than in the past and are at a dead end. He added that the occupation of territories in Syria by the “Zionist enemy” does not solve any of its problems (Tasnim, December 23, 2024).



The IRGC commander (Tasnim, December 23, 2024)

◆ In an extensive interview, **Ali-Akbar Ahmadian, secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council**, spoke about the recent developments in the region, especially the fall of the Assad regime. He claimed that Iran’s involvement in Syria over the past decade was justified and was intended to protect its national interests. He stressed that Iran does not regret its intervention in Syria because its presence was essential for the war against ISIS, as otherwise, it would have had to fight it inside Iran itself, at a much higher cost. He noted that Iran had succeeded in strengthening “Palestine” and Hezbollah in such a way that they would no longer be dependent on it. Ahmadian clarified that Iran was not supposed to fight instead of the Syrian army and was unable to quickly reinforce its forces in the face of the rebels’ advance, while the Syrian army showed no resistance. He acknowledged that support for the “resistance” had become more difficult following the fall of the Assad regime, but stressed that Hezbollah, Hamas, and the PIJ are no longer dependent on Iran and had achieved the ability to produce weapons on their own. He added that Iran also has no direct land connection with the Gaza Strip and Yemen, but the Palestinians and Yemenis can nevertheless develop advanced missiles. He emphasized that in any case, Iran’s

connection with the “resistance” and Hezbollah would not be severed (Supreme Leader’s website, December 20, 2024).



Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council
(Supreme Leader’s website, December 20, 2024)

◆ In a meeting with the UN Secretary-General’s representative for Iraq, Mohammad al-Hassan, **head of Iran’s Strategic Council on Foreign Relations, Kamal Kharrazi**, warned of the spread of insecurity from Syria to Iraq, and of the danger of dividing Syria due to the multiplicity of external interests. He accused the “Zionist regime” of exploiting the governmental vacuum in Syria to violate its sovereignty and territorial integrity and to attack the country’s military and civilian infrastructure. He added that the grand plan to reduce the ability of the countries of the region against the “aggression of the Zionist regime,” including the elimination of Syria as a country that supports the “resistance,” has always been on the agenda of the United States and the “Zionist regime” (ISNA, December 18, 2024). In another interview, Kharrazi noted that it is still too early to assess the situation in Syria because there is a reasonable possibility of clashes between the various groups in the country and the division of the country. He noted that the main reason for the fall of the Assad regime was that the Syrian army did not fight at all (al-Mayadeen, December 23, 2024).

◆ **Ebrahim Rezaei, spokesman for the Majles National Security and Foreign Policy Committee**, said that Iran had acted correctly in Syria and that had it not been for the “resistance,” the Assad regime would have fallen much earlier. He emphasized that Iran’s goal was not to protect Assad personally, but to strengthen the “resistance front” and prevent terrorism from reaching Iran. He said Iran had to wait patiently and see how the new leadership in Syria would conduct itself (Entekhab, December 20, 2024).

Relations between Iran and the new regime in Syria

▶ According to Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei, Iran does not currently maintain direct contact with the dominant faction in Syria. He noted that in the past, Iran had ties with various factions in Syria and that its presence in Syria was intended to fight terrorism and promote the political process (Tasnim, December 23, 2024).

▶ Subsequently, Iranian government spokeswoman Fatemeh Mohajerani said that Iran was holding diplomatic consultations aimed at the reopening of the Iranian embassy in Damascus (snn.ir, December 24, 2024). In response, a “source close to the new Syrian administration” said that there are no contacts between Damascus and Tehran, including diplomatic discussions regarding the opening of embassies in the capitals of the two countries, and that there are no active channels of communication. He stressed that Syria has no plans to begin contact with Iran soon and that the new regime is preparing a memorandum to be submitted to international courts, which will include a demand that Iran pay \$300 billion in compensation to the Syrian people and the Syrian state “for its criminal policy in the country, the damage to the infrastructure, and its support for al-Assad” (al-Modon, December 24, 2024).

▶ Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Baghaei said that Seyyed Davoud Bitraf, a local employee of the Iranian embassy in Damascus, died after being wounded by “terrorists” shooting at his car on December 15, 2024. He noted that Iran considers the transitional government in Syria responsible for locating and prosecuting the perpetrators of the attack and that it will continue to monitor this issue through diplomatic and international channels (ISNA, December 21, 2024).



Seyyed Davoud Bitraf (Tasnim, December 21, 2024)

Iran's involvement in Lebanon

▶ **Iran is reportedly considering smuggling weapons to Hezbollah via flights to Lebanon.** According to the report, Iran is likely to turn Beirut into a new shipping center following the fall of the Assad regime in Syria and the disruption of the land routes through which weapons were transferred to Hezbollah. It was also reported that other options under consideration were the land transfer of weapons from Iran through Iraq, and from there to Jordan and Judea and Samaria, as well as maritime transfers (The Times, December 22, 2024).

▶ Iran's ambassador to Beirut, Mojtaba Amani, met with members of Hassan Nasrallah's family, including his father, Abd al-Karim Nasrallah. After the meeting, Amani said that "criminal Israel" knew very well that it would not achieve anything and would not succeed in defeating Hezbollah or conquering Lebanon through its "barbaric attacks" and the elimination of senior leaders and commanders of Hezbollah and the "resistance front" (Mojtaba Amani's X account, December 19, 2024).



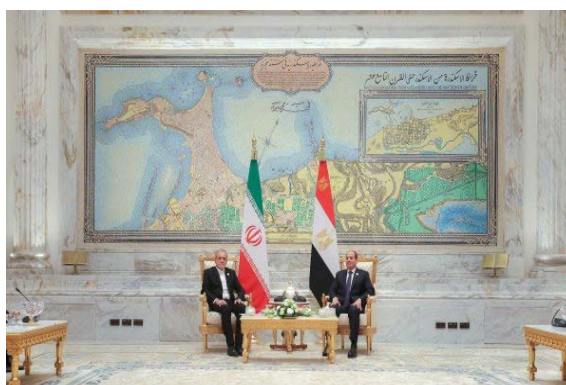
**The Iranian ambassador meets with the Nasrallah family in Beirut
(the ambassador's X account, December 19, 2024)**

Iranian diplomatic activity in the region

▶ Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian said in a speech at the conference of the Economic Cooperation Organization of Eight Islamic Countries (D8) in Cairo that the scale of the killing of civilians, women, and children in the war has exposed the "illegitimate goals" of the "Zionist regime" to undermine security in the region. In a discussion held within the framework of the conference to review the situation in Gaza and Lebanon, the Iranian president called for pressure on Israel to agree to a ceasefire in Gaza and to halt attacks in Lebanon and Syria. He emphasized that this issue should be a top priority for the countries in the region and the D8 member states. Additionally, he called for the swift withdrawal of Israel

from Gaza and the West Bank, the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza, the return of residents to their homes in Gaza, and the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip (Iranian president's website, December 19, 2024).

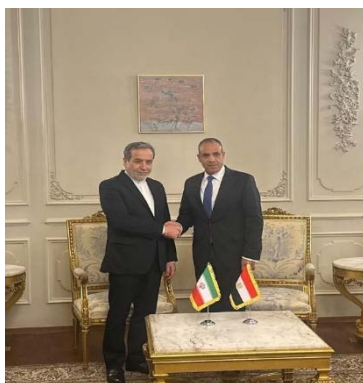
► During his visit to Cairo, the Iranian president held diplomatic meetings. In his meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the two discussed developments in the region. Pezeshkian stressed the need to preserve Syria's territorial integrity and to stop Israeli attacks in the region. In his meeting with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the two discussed developments in the region and relations between the two countries. Pezeshkian stressed the need to strengthen solidarity among the Islamic countries (Iranian president's website, December 19, 2024).



Meeting of the presidents of Iran and Egypt (Iranian president's website, December 19, 2024)

► Speaking at the D8 conference in Cairo, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi called for an end to Israel's "acts of aggression" in the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, and Syria, for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, and for the withdrawal of all Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, and Syria. He accused the international community of failing to stop "the acts of aggression, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide by the Zionist regime" (Iranian Foreign Ministry website, December 18, 2024).

► On the sidelines of the conference, Araghchi met with his colleagues, Badr Abdelatty of Egypt and Hakan Fidan of Turkey, to discuss the latest developments in the region. The ministers stressed the need to stop Israel's "acts of aggression" and to continue efforts to "stop the genocide of the Palestinians" and to provide immediate humanitarian aid to the residents of the Gaza Strip (Iranian Foreign Ministry website, December 18-19, 2024).



Meeting of the foreign ministers of Iran and Egypt (Mehr, December 18, 2024)

Iran's involvement in the Palestinian arena

▶ One of the commanders of the armed factions in Jenin, Qais al-Saadi, admitted that they receive support from Iran, but claimed that they do not belong to Tehran or any other external party. On the other hand, Anwar Rajab, spokesman for the Palestinian Authority's security services, accused Iran of trying to spread "chaos and corruption" and weaken the Palestinian Authority by funding the militants to promote its interests in the region (CNN, December 23, 2024).

▶ On December 19, 2024, the Israeli security forces eliminated four terrorist operatives in an airstrike in Tulkarm, among them Tareq al-Dosh, one of the heads of the local terrorist network who operated with Iranian funding and was in contact with terrorist operatives in Lebanon. The al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades confirmed that al-Dosh was one of their senior commanders in Tulkarm (al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades Telegram channel, December 20, 2024).

Iran's involvement with the Houthis in Yemen

▶ Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei condemned Israel's attacks in Yemen on December 19, 2024. He said that these actions violate international law, noting that the "crimes of the Zionist regime" are carried out with full support of the United States. He called on the international community and the Muslim world to stop the "aggression of the Zionist regime" and prosecute it for war crimes (Tasnim, December 19, 2024). Baghaei also condemned the American attacks in Yemen, claiming they constitute a war crime and are contrary to international law. He praised Yemen's support for the Palestinian people and called on the Muslim world, the countries of the region, and the UN to take steps against the

“aggression” against Yemen by the United States, Britain, and Israel (Tasnim, December 22, 2024).

▶ Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi spoke with his Yemeni counterpart, Jamal Ahmad Ali Amer, and expressed his appreciation for Yemen’s support for the Palestinian people. He condemned the Israeli and American attacks on Yemen, saying that the “Zionist regime” was incapable of realizing its goals despite its “crimes” and the support of the United States and Western countries (Tasnim, December 22, 2024).

Operations of the Shiite militias

Cooperation between the Houthis and the Iraqi militias

▶ On December 20, 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 20, 2024). No parallel announcement was issued by the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, and there has been no further confirmation of the claim.

▶ A “source in the Iraqi Foreign Ministry” said Iraq has recently received American messages calling on it to stop Houthi activity in its territory, with a particular emphasis on the Houthi office operating in Baghdad. He added that the Iraqi government is taking the messages seriously to distance Iraq from the consequences that the countries of the region have been experiencing in recent times due to the activity of pro-Iranian elements in their territories. The source also noted that the US had told the Iraqi government that the continued Houthi presence in the country and their “uncivilized” activities could lead to regional problems spreading into Iraq. He added that the Houthis’ activity may stop, even though he claimed that most of their activity is media-based (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, December 24, 2024).

▶ Ali al-Fatlawi, a senior Ansar Allah al-Awfiya official, said the request to close the Houthi office in Baghdad was a “blatant and ugly interference” by the United States, and that the Iraqi government must firmly oppose any American interference in Iraq’s internal affairs. Al-Fatlawi claimed that the opening of the Houthis’ office in Iraq came after official government agreements and that the office’s activity deals exclusively with the political sphere and has nothing to do with any military or security activity inside Iraq (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, December 24, 2024).

Yemen²

Military activity against Israel

► In the passing week (until December 25, 2024, as of 2:00 p.m.), the Houthis' military spokesman, Yahya Saria, claimed responsibility for eight attacks against "military targets" in Israeli territory using drones and "Filastin 2" hypersonic ballistic missiles (Yahya Saria's Telegram channel, December 18-25, 2024). The IDF Spokesperson reported four interceptions of two drones and two missiles before they penetrated Israeli territory. Another missile was intercepted, and its warhead hit a building in Ramat Gan. Another missile was not intercepted and hit the Jaffa region, with 16 people having suffered light injuries (IDF Spokesperson and Israeli media, December 18-25, 2024).

Israeli attack in Yemen

► In the early morning hours of December 19, 2024, the Israeli Air Force attacked Houthi military targets in the coastal area and deep in Yemen. Among other things, power plants and fuel and oil tanks in the Sana'a area were attacked, in addition to facilities and vessels in the ports of Ras Issa, al-Hudaydah, and al-Salif (IDF Spokesperson and Israeli media, December 19, 2024).³

► Several airstrikes were reportedly carried out against the Haziz and Dhahaban central power plants in the Sana'a area, the ports of al-Hudaydah and al-Salif, and the oil facility in Ras Issa, killing nine people and wounding others (al-Masirah, December 19, 2024). The Houthi government claimed that thousands of families had been cut off from electricity and called on Arab and Muslim countries to condemn the "Zionist crime" (Telegram channel of the Houthi movement's media arm, December 19, 2024).

The confrontation with the United States

► On December 21, 2024, the Houthis' military spokesman, Yahya Saria, claimed responsibility for an attack on the aircraft carrier Harry S. Truman and several destroyers using eight cruise missiles and 17 drones. Saria claimed the Houthi attack thwarted an attempted attack against Yemeni territory and that an American F-18 fighter jet was shot down and the

² For further details on developments over the past week, see the ITIC's study from December 25, 2024, "[Houthi-Israel-United States Escalation, December 2024](#)".

³ This is the third Israeli attack against the Houthis since the beginning of the war in the Gaza Strip in October 2023. The previous attacks were carried out on July 20, 2024, and September 29, 2024.

aircraft carrier withdrew to the northern Red Sea (Yahya Saria's Telegram channel, December 21, 2024).

► The US Central Command (CENTCOM) announced that precision airstrikes were carried out against a missile storage site and a command and control facility in Sana'a using fighter jets and naval vessels. It was also reported that several drones and an anti-ship cruise missile were shot down over the Red Sea. An F-18 fighter jet was accidentally shot down by a US warship. The two pilots were rescued safely (CENTCOM X account, December 21, 2024; USNI News, December 21, 2024).

Iraq

Militias activity against Israel

► A senior member of the Nujaba Movement confirmed that an agreement had been reached between the pro-Iranian militias and Iraqi Prime Minister Muhammad Shia' al-Sudani, according to which the "resistance" would stop its military operations against the "Israeli enemy" as part of its support for the Gaza Strip (al-Akhbar, December 23, 2024).

► "A key member of the Shiite Coordination Framework" noted that the resumption of attacks by pro-Iranian militias in Iraq "is unreasonable at present." According to him, the situation in the region is currently dangerous and subject to surprises, and any attack by the militias, whether against Israel or American targets, will put them in danger of an American or Israeli response and could expose Iraq to an attack as well (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, December 23, 2024).

► Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada spokesman Kadhim al-Fartousi said the militias' position on the principle of "unity of the arenas" was firm and that they would not give it up at any cost, but that the conditions would determine their positions. He emphasized that the principle of "unity of the arenas" was not contingent on a temporary agreement between the factions of the "axis of resistance," but rather a matter of principle and ideology. Al-Fartousi also said that the activities of the Iraqi militias against Israel were related to Hezbollah's activities and that when the ceasefire in Lebanon was agreed, the militias' activities were stopped. He added that there are elements in Iraq who have reservations about the actions of the factions. He said they had to be listened to and not ignored, especially because they are part of the "resistance" (Shafaq News, December 23, 2024).

The militias are preparing for an attack against them

► “Knowledgeable sources” reported that most secretaries-general of the pro-Iranian militias had left Iraq for a European country that is an ally of Russia and located nearby, fearing they may become targets for assassinations (al-aalem.com, December 21, 2024). Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada spokesman Kadhim al-Fartousi denied the reports but stressed that there is security significance to the non-appearance of the militia leaders in public and that the experience of others in taking precautionary measures should be learned. According to him, the “Zionist entity” has a border with Lebanon, and it has succeeded in infiltrating Hezbollah’s telephone networks and eliminating senior members of the organization. He added that although the situation in Iraq is completely different, it was decided to take precautionary measures (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, December 22, 2024).

► In this context, Sheikh Nazem al-Saeedi, chairman of the planning council of the Nujaba Movement, noted that the “enemy” was trying to distract the militias so that it could attack easily, but that the militias had military power. He stressed that the most important objective of the “resistance” was to stand against the United States and Israel. He added that the Nujaba Movement was committed to bringing about the end of the “Zionist entity” and that the “resistance” was fully prepared to face any scenario (al-Amid Telegram channel, December 20, 2024).

The issue of dismantling the militias

► Abu Alaa al-Wala’i, secretary-general of Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, said that “it is important to emphasize that the Popular Mobilization [the umbrella organization to which the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq belong] has an important contribution to Iraq’s security and is irreplaceable.” He added that “sending messages of calm to the enemy, whether by declaration or action, is forbidden by Islamic law,” implying that the discourse on dismantling the militias is beneficial to Israel (Abu Alaa al-Wala’i’s official Twitter account, December 22, 2024).

► “A source close to the militias” claimed that no demand was received from either side to disarm the militias. He stressed that although the US is pressuring the Iraqi government to dismantle the militias, this will not happen (baghdadtoday.news, December 20, 2024).

► Ali al-Fatlawi, a senior member of Ansar Allah al-Awfiya, said that the militias should not be disarmed due to the demands of the “American and Turkish occupation” in Iraq. According to him, if the “occupations” are fully ended, the militias will be able to lay down their

arms and focus on political action. However, he claimed that this is not possible now (baghdadtoday.news, December 20, 2024).