



Spotlight on Iran

March 20, 2024 – March 27, 2024

Editor: Dr. Raz Zimmt

Highlights¹

- ▶ In recent months, the smuggling of advanced weapons from Iran to Judea and Samaria was thwarted by the Israeli security forces. The Special Operations Directorate of the IRGC's intelligence organization and the Qods Force Special Operations Unit in Syria were responsible for those smuggling attempts. Those attempts provide further evidence of the increasing efforts by Iran, led by the IRGC, to expand its activity and support for terrorism in Judea and Samaria.
- ▶ Ismail Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau, arrived in Tehran and met with the Iranian supreme leader, the Iranian president, and the foreign minister. This is Haniyeh's second visit to Tehran since the beginning of the war in the Gaza Strip. Concurrently with his visit, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) secretary-general Ziad al-Nakhalah arrived in Iran as well.
- ▶ The spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry referred to the Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip as "a positive but insufficient step." He called for practical and effective steps to implement the resolution and stop the Israeli attacks.
- ▶ The IRGC announced the death of an IRGC's Qods Force "military advisor" in an Israeli airstrike in the Deir ez-Zor area in eastern Syria on the night of March 26, 2024. The attack targeted IRGC targets in eastern Syria used to smuggle weapons into Israel.
- ▶ A Syrian news channel reported the transfer of weapons by the IRGC from Iraq to Syria through the Albukamal border crossing to Deir ez-Zor in eastern Syria. This joins other recent reports of unusual activity by the IRGC and pro-Iranian militias in the Albukamal area in eastern Syria.

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

- ▶ The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed responsibility for carrying out several attacks against strategic sites in Israel. In practice, no such attacks were detected.
- ▶ The Houthis in Yemen continued to carry out daily attacks against vessels in the Red Sea area using missiles and UAVs. According to the IDF spokesperson, a “suspicious aerial target” was intercepted by the IDF. The Houthis reported attacking several Israeli targets in the Umm Rashrash (Eilat) area.

Iranian involvement in the Palestinian arena

- ▶ On March 25, 2024, the Israel Security Agency (ISA) spokesperson’s unit and the IDF spokesperson authorized the issuing of a statement that in recent months, the smuggling of advanced weapons originating in Iran to Judea and Samaria had been thwarted. The weapons were intended to be used in terrorist attacks against Israeli targets. Among the weapons seized by the Israeli security forces were fragmentation bombs, Iranian anti-tank mines, anti-tank missiles, 25 hand grenades, 16 RPG rockets, and 50 handguns.



Iranian weapons seized by the Israeli security forces (ISA spokesman’s unit, March 25, 2024)

- ▶ According to the statement, the Iranian security forces responsible for carrying out the operation in recent months were Directorate 4000; the Special Operations Directorate of the IRGC’s intelligence organization, headed by Javad Ghafari; and the Qods Force Special Operations Unit in Syria, which is subordinate to Asghar Bagheri, head of Unit 840. Investigations also revealed information on the activity of Mounir al-Maqdah, a Palestinian resident of the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp in Lebanon, who promoted the smuggling of Iranian weapons and financed squads he recruited in Judea and Samaria.
- ▶ **Ali Khamenei, Iran’s supreme leader**, speaking on the occasion of Nowruz, the Iranian New Year, said the events in the Gaza Strip had proven the vitality of the “resistance” in the region and that it had to be strengthened day by day. He noted that in recent months, the resistance

front in Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Palestine had revealed its capabilities and that now the Americans, Western countries, and regional countries had realized its strength and capabilities. He added that the success of the resistance had disrupted the erroneous calculations of the United States, which sought to gain control over developments in the region. The resistance proved that it was impossible and that the Americans could not remain in the region and had to withdraw. According to Khamenei, the United States has been increasingly despised globally. He emphasized that the “Zionist regime” was in crisis and incapable of finding its way out: it has been trapped in a swamp from which it could not escape, and it would be defeated whether it remained in the Gaza Strip or withdrew from it. The supreme leader also affirmed Iran's support for the resistance within its capabilities, while emphasizing that the resistance made its own decisions and acted independently (Tasnim, March 20, 2024).



Khamenei's speech (Tasnim, March 20, 2024)

► **Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian** spoke separately by phone with **Ismail Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau, and Ziad al-Nakhalah, PIJ secretary-general**, to discuss the latest developments in the Gaza Strip. In his conversation with Haniyeh, Abdollahian said Netanyahu had reached the end of his political path and was fighting for his own survival, and that Israel had sunk into the “swamp of war in Gaza.” He criticized the UN Security Council and stressed the need for immediate action by international institutions to end the war. Haniyeh said the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, especially in the northern Gaza Strip, was critical and required immediate action by the international community. He also discussed the political and regional efforts to stop the fighting and facilitate a prisoner exchange (Fars, March 21, 2024).

◄ In his conversation with al-Nakhalah, Abdollahian commended the “steadfast resistance of the Palestinian people against the occupation,” stressing that the international community

had to act immediately to stop the “killing of innocent people in Gaza and the West Bank” and to deliver humanitarian aid. Al-Nakhalah said unity among the Palestinian resistance groups was the secret of the success and victory of the Palestinian people against the “killing machine of the Zionist enemy.” He expressed his gratitude to Iran and its President Ebrahim Raisi for their unwavering support of the Palestinians (ISNA, March 21, 2024).

► On March 26, 2024, Ismail Haniyeh visited Tehran and held meetings with Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, President Ebrahim Raisi, and Foreign Minister Abdollahian. At a joint press conference held with the Iranian foreign minister, Haniyeh said that despite the heavy toll endured by the Palestinian people, Israel had failed to achieve its political and military goals and that the Security Council resolution on the ceasefire demonstrated Israel’s unprecedented isolation. He said Iran was at the forefront of supporting the Palestinian people. Meeting with Haniyeh, Khamenei lauded the continued “steadfastness of the resistance forces in Palestine” against the “crimes of the Zionist regime.” He said the residents of the Gaza Strip and the resistance would not allow the enemy to achieve its goals, and that their historic strength was unprecedented. The supreme leader reaffirmed Iran's support for Palestine and the Gaza Strip, underscoring the importance of global public opinion, especially in the Muslim and Arab world, in backing the residents of the Gaza Strip. Haniyeh, for his part, expressed his appreciation and gratitude for Iran’s support for the Palestinians and the residents of the Gaza Strip and reviewed the latest political and military developments in the war in the Gaza Strip (Tasnim, March 26, 2024). Iranian President Raisi said in his meeting with Haniyeh that the defeats suffered by the “Zionist regime” following the al-Aqsa Flood were irreversible (Tasnim, March 27, 2024).



Right: Hamas delegation headed by Ismail Haniyeh meets with the supreme leader of Iran (website of the supreme leader of Iran, March 26, 2024). Left: Press conference (SNN, March 26, 2024)

► At the same time as Haniyeh’s visit to Tehran, PIJ secretary-general, Ziad al-Nakhalah, also visited Iran. Al-Nakhalah spoke at a religious ceremony at Tehran’s Azadi Stadium, declaring that with the help of the Quran and Iran, the Palestinians would defeat Israel (Tasnim, March 26, 2024).



Al-Nakhalah’s speech in Tehran (Iranian TV website, March 26, 2024)

► **Nasser Kanani, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry**, called for an international investigation into Israel’s “war crimes” at al-Shifaa Hospital in the Gaza Strip. He said reports of “torture, rape, and killing of Palestinian women” at the hospital required urgent action by the international community, including the formation of an international investigation team. He added that the “crimes” committed by Israel underscored more than ever the Palestinian people’s right to resist the occupation (ISNA, March 24, 2024).² Referring to the Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, he said the resolution was “a positive but insufficient step.” Kanani noted that effective steps had to be taken to implement the resolution and to completely stop the “attacks of the Zionist regime against the Gaza Strip and the West Bank,” lift the siege on the Gaza Strip, open the crossings to deliver humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip and provide assistance and resources for the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip (Mehr, March 25, 2024).

► **Hojjat-ul-Eslam Mohammad Javad Haj Ali Akbari**, the Friday prayer leader in Tehran, said the enemies of Palestine had to brace themselves for a second, third, and fourth al-Aqsa Flood operations until the “Zionist regime” was wiped off the map of Palestine, and the land of Palestine and Jerusalem was fully liberated. On March 22, 2024, during his Friday sermon,

² The IDF spokesperson in Arabic denied the reports of rape of women at al-Shifaa Hospital, saying they were false and constituted incitement (account X of the IDF spokesperson in Arabic, March 24, 2024). Al-Jazeera TV, where the report was first published, removed it without explanation.

Akbari emphasized that this year, the Islamic nation should prepare for a different “Jerusalem Day”, traditionally marked on the last Friday of Ramadan, and that this year's Jerusalem Day should become a political earthquake against “the Zionist beasts and their despicable supporters” (Khabar Online, March 22, 2024).



Iranian cleric Haj Ali Akbari (Khabar Online, March 22, 2024)

► On March 24, 2024, Abdollahian held a phone call with Omani Foreign Minister Badr bin Hamad Albusaidi to discuss the latest developments in the Gaza Strip. According to a statement by the Iranian foreign ministry, the two ministers condemned the continuation of the “crimes of the Zionist regime in the Gaza Strip,” especially the “inhumane measures” at al-Shifaa Hospital and called for rapid international intervention to prevent the “continuation of crimes” against the Palestinian people (Iranian foreign ministry website, March 24, 2024).

Iranian involvement in Syria and Lebanon

► The IRGC announced the death of Behrouz Vahedi of the IRGC’s Qods Force in an Israeli airstrike in the Deir ez-Zor area in eastern Syria on the night of March 26, 2024 (Tasnim, March 26, 2024). Israeli security sources confirmed that the Israeli Air Force had targeted “significant targets” of the IRGC in eastern Syria, which were used to smuggle weapons into Israel. These targets, situated inside Syrian army bases, were used by the Qods Force’s Special Operations Unit in Syria and the Special Operations Directorate of the IRGC’s intelligence organization (Ynet, March 26, 2024). On March 26, 2024, the director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that shortly before the airstrike in eastern Syria, an Iranian cargo plane landed at the military airport in Deir ez-Zor. He said the plane had taken off from Damascus International Airport and landed in Deir ez-Zor, carrying IRGC personnel and logistic equipment (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights website, March 26, 2024).



Right: The destruction caused by the airstrike (Sputnik, March 26, 2024). Left: Behrouz Vahedi, an IRGC member killed in Syria (Tasnim, March 26, 2024)

► The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that more than 15 people had been killed in the airstrike (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and al-Iraq Press, March 26, 2024). According to another report, nine Iraqi militia fighters were killed in the attack (al-Iraq Press, March 26, 2024)



Nine Iraqis killed (al-Iraq Press, March 26, 2024)

► **Abu Alaa al-Wala'i, secretary-general of the Iraqi pro-Iranian militia Kataeb Sayyid al-Shuhada**, referred to the airstrikes in eastern Syria, saying that Israeli (“the Zionist enemy”) attacks on the Syrian-Iraqi border were conclusive proof of the effectiveness of the Islamic Resistance attacks in Iraq against targets deep inside Israel (Abu Alaa al-Wala'i's X account, March 27, 2024).

► The Syrian news channel Ayn al-Furat reported (March 21, 2024) that on March 20, 2024, three trucks carrying weapons belonging to the IRGC entered from Iraq through the Albukamal crossing to Deir ez-Zor in eastern Syria. They were escorted by a military vehicle equipped with

anti-aircraft weapons. According to the report, a few days earlier, the pro-Iranian militias had sent about 25 buses and 20 trucks from Iraq through the Albukamal border crossing. About 50 militia members got off at Albukamal, and the rest of the buses continued towards Deir ez-Zor.



**IRGC trucks moving along the Albukamal – Deir ez-Zor route
(Ayn al-Furat, March 21, 2024)**

► On March 24, 2024, a spokesman for the Druze Syrian Flag Party from Suwayda in southern Syria reported on his Facebook page that the al-Thala airbase in Suwayda had become an IRGC base, with the presence of Hezbollah and Houthi forces. According to the report, the airbase is under complete control of the IRGC, in accordance with the agreement between Syria and Iran. In recent months, it has been manned by IRGC officers, along with Hezbollah operatives. The report, whose reliability is unclear, further mentions that a Houthi delegation recently arrived at the airbase to carry out military operations.

► **Amir Saeed Iravani, Iran’s ambassador to the UN**, addressing a UN Security Council meeting on Syria, said foreign forces, especially American forces, had to withdraw from Syria immediately. He condemned the attacks attributed to Israel in Syria, deeming them illegal and exacerbating tensions. He also called for the lifting of economic sanctions on Syria and expressed support for continued international settlement efforts in the country (Fars, March 21, 2024).

► Ali Asghar Zebardast, vice chairman of the Iran-Syria Joint Chamber of Commerce, said that Syrian exports to Iran in 2023 amounted to only \$250 million out of the total Syrian exports value of \$5 billion. He noted that in the first ten months of the outgoing Iranian year (March 2023-January 2024), Iranian exports to Syria dropped to only \$120 million, compared to average annual export value of \$250 million to \$280 million in recent years. Zebardast emphasized that despite the agreements signed during Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi’s visit to Syria in May 2023, Syria had not taken the necessary steps to fulfill its commitments to

expand Iranian exports, including the establishment of branches of Iranian banks in Syria. He said the growing tension between Syria and Israel had also contributed to the decline in Syrians' willingness to import goods from Iran (ILNA, March 23, 2024). This is not the first time that senior Iranian officials have complained that Syria is not encouraging the expansion of trade between the two countries, despite a series of economic cooperation agreements signed between them in recent years.

Shiite militia activity in Syria and Iraq

Iraq

Activity on the ground

► The Islamic Resistance in Iraq continued to issue statements claiming responsibility for carrying out UAV attacks against strategic targets in Israeli territory. In practice, no such incidents have been detected. Among the targets mentioned (the Islamic Resistance Telegram channel):

- ◆ March 21, 2024, a power plant in Tel Aviv.
- ◆ March 23, 2024, Israeli Ministry of Defense structure – probably referring to the Kirya building (i.e., military complex) in Tel Aviv.
- ◆ March 25, 2024, attack on Sapir Airfield.
- ◆ March 26, 2024, Ovda Air Force Base.



Launch of one of the UAVs at a target in Israel Islamic Resistance in Iraq Telegram channel, March 23, 2024)

► **Abu Alaa al-Wala'i, secretary-general of Kataeb Sayyid al-Shuhada**, said that the Islamic Resistance in Iraq was only one element in the resistance axis and that as part of its commitment to support the Palestinian people, the Iraqi Resistance would attack the

“entity’s” (i.e., Israel’s) seaports and facilities in the Mediterranean, including refineries, army bases, airports and electricity stations (Abu Alaa al-Wala’i’s X account, March 24, 2024).

► Kataeb Hezbollah (Hezbollah Brigades), the pro-Iranian Iraqi militia, issued a statement calling on Muslims to unite against the United States and Israel and contribute to the campaign against the “arrogant elements” headed by the United States and Israel and the Arab regimes that work alongside them and betray Islamic principles and issues related to the Islamic nation (Kaf Telegram channel, March 22, 2024).

► The Wall Street Journal reported that the European Union had rejected an attempt by eight European countries, including France and Germany, to impose sanctions on “Iranian actors which arm, fund, advise and instruct” pro-Iran regional militias. According to the report, senior EU officials refused, claiming that doing so could hamper diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis Tehran (The Wall Street Journal, March 19, 2024).

Syria

► On March 24, 2024, an American base near Abu Hajar Airport in the Kharab al-Jir region in northeastern Syria was attacked with two rockets and a UAV (Sky News in Arabic, March 24, 2024). The attack may have been carried out by pro-Iranian militias.

Yemen

Houthi activity

► On March 21, 2024, the IDF spokesperson stated that a “suspicious aerial target” had been intercepted by the IDF before it entered Israeli territory (IDF spokesperson’s X account, March 21, 2024). On March 26, 2024, **Yahya Saria, spokesman for the Houthi armed forces**, announced that in the past 72 hours, Houthi forces had carried out several operations, including attacks on American and British vessels and on “several Israeli targets in the Umm Rashrash [Eilat] area” (Yahya Saria’s X account, March 26, 2024). This is likely a claim of responsibility for the attack carried out on March 21, 2024.

► During the past week, the Houthis continued to carry out daily missile and UAV attacks against vessels in the Red Sea area. Most of the launches were intercepted by US-led coalition forces. No damage or casualties were reported.

► In a speech, **Houthi leader Abd al-Malik al-Houthi** said that since the beginning of the activity in the Red Sea (in the Swords of Iron War), they had launched 479 missiles and UAVs. He claimed Israel was showing signs of weakness following the disruptions at the Port of Eilat. He also said the United States was deceiving by flying the flags of other countries on its ships

and providing false information about them, and that it was a pretense. He blamed the Arab states which, he said, categorically refused to open land corridors for the passage of their fighters working for the Palestinian people, saying that every Muslim had to take steps for the Palestinian cause (Houthi Movement Telegram channel, March 21, 2024).



Abd al-Malik al-Houthi (Houthi Movement Telegram channel, March 21, 2024)

Military activity against the Houthis

- ▶ Coalition forces continued to attack Houthi targets in Yemen. The airstrikes mainly hit missile and UAV sites, which, according to the coalition forces, posed an “immediate threat” to merchant ships and military ships sailing near the Yemeni coast. For example, on March 22, 2024, US forces intercepted four UAVs launched by the Houthis towards the Red Sea. US forces attacked three underground storage structures on Yemeni soil used by the Houthis in their operations (US Central Command (CENTCOM) X account, March 23, 2024).
- ▶ At the same time, the European Union Task Force (EUNAVFOR Aspides) continued to operate in the Red Sea area. On March 21, 2024, a French ship intercepted three ballistic missiles that posed a danger to vessels in the area (EU Task Force X account, March 21, 2024).
- ▶ **Mohammad Ali al-Houthi, a member of the Houthi political bureau**, said those were “irresponsible terrorist attacks by the Americans and the British” against Yemen, attacks primarily intended to break the naval blockade of ships linked to “an entity besieging the Gaza Strip.” He noted that the continuation of the airstrikes underscored the continued support of the United States and Britain for the massacre, extermination, and use of starvation as weapons against the people of the Gaza Strip (Ali al-Houthi’s Telegram channel, March 23, 2024). In another statement, he said they had sent a message to Saudi Arabia threatening that it would become a target if it allowed American planes to use its land or airspace in aggression against Yemen (al-Masirah, March 25, 2024).

Political developments

- ▶ **The United States** continued to claim, as it had since the beginning of the campaign, that Iran was behind the Houthi actions. **US Secretary of State Antony Blinken** made a statement in this spirit in an interview with the al-Hadath newspaper. The interview was also published on the official website of the US Department of State, a fact that emphasizes its importance. Referring to the Red Sea campaign, Blinken said there was no justification for Houthi attacks on international shipping lanes, regardless of differing views on the war in the Gaza Strip, and that he would like Iran to employ its influence on the Houthis so that they would cease their attacks. He also claimed that, in his opinion, Iran had no interest in continuing to support the Houthi attacks considering the many international condemnations of these attacks (US Department of State website, March 20, 2024).
- ▶ A development in Houthi relations **with Russia and China** was recorded on March 21, 2024, when Bloomberg News Agency, citing “sources,” reported that the Houthis had told China and Russia that their ships could sail through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden without being attacked. The “sources” added that China and Russia had reached an understanding following talks between their diplomats in Oman and Houthi spokesman Mohammad Abdeslam. The “sources” argued that in return, the two countries could provide political support to the Houthis in several forums, such as the UN Security Council. It was also noted that it was not entirely clear what the support would consist of, but it could include vetoing additional resolutions against the Houthis (Bloomberg, March 21, 2024). It should be noted that no Houthi or Russian and Chinese officials have confirmed this report. Moreover, on March 24, 2024, the Houthis fired five missiles at a Chinese-owned ship sailing in the Red Sea. The vessel was lightly damaged, and a fire broke out, which was quickly extinguished. No casualties were reported (CENTCOM X account, March 24, 2024).
- ▶ Sky News in Arabic reported (March 24, 2024), citing two sources in Yemen, that Houthi commanders in Yemen had secretly met with IRGC experts in al-Hudaydah Governorate to discuss a plan for military escalation that Tehran was planning to implement in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The report has not been verified by other sources.
- ▶ The US Treasury Department imposed sanctions on six entities that assisted in sending goods and conducting financial transactions for the IRGC’s Qods Force, including the Houthis in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon. It was also reported that the United States would continue

to act to disrupt the misuse of international energy markets by hostile elements to assist terrorist activity (US Department of the Treasury website, March 26, 2024).