



Spotlight on Iran

May 16-22, 2024

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Highlights¹

► This past week was marked by the deaths of Iranian President Raisi, Foreign Minister Abdollahian, and other senior Iranian officials in a helicopter crash in northwestern Iran on May 19, 2024.

The Shiite pro-Iranian militias in Iraq and Yemen expressed deep sorrow over the deaths of the senior Iranian officials. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri Kani was appointed as acting foreign minister following the death of Abdollahian, who played a central role in leading Iran's political campaign in the region, especially since the outbreak of the war in Gaza.

► Senior Iranian officials continued to express confidence concerning Israel's situation, especially following the Iranian attack on Israel last month. The representative of Iran's Supreme Leader in the IRGC claimed that Western powers could not prevent the Iranian attack because of the pro-Palestinian stance of world public opinion and that the slogan "Death to Israel" had become global. The IRGC commander claimed that the attack on Israel was a limited operation designed to punish Israel, implying that Iran had more significant capabilities to harm Israel.

► The IRGC has reportedly begun transferring new shipments of weapons to an underground warehouse set up in eastern Syria, near the border with Iraq.

► There was a decline in the number of attacks carried out by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq against targets in Israeli territory. They claimed responsibility for five attacks compared to 13 the week before. The IDF confirmed that it had intercepted three UAVs east of Israel.

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

►The Houthis did not claim responsibility for attacks against vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The US Central Command reported that an oil tanker had been damaged by a Houthi ballistic missile, with no casualties, and that another ballistic missile had been fired. The Houthis claimed responsibility for downing two American drones over Yemen. The Houthi Movement leader claimed they had carried out two actions against Israel in the Mediterranean. However, that has not been verified.

Iranian involvement in the Palestinian arena

►Borhan Bagheri, the Iranian Supreme Leader’s representative in the IRGC in Mashhad, said that after 75 years, during which the Western and Israeli media fed and guided world public opinion, the message of the residents of the Gaza Strip had reached the ears of the world thanks to journalists who performed their duties properly in the war. He noted that a year ago, it would have been impossible to think that students and lecturers at more than 300 universities in the United States and Europe would speak up against the oppression of the Palestinians and be expelled from universities as a result. He added that Iran had attacked Israel despite warnings from Western powers, which could do nothing because world public opinion did not support them. According to Bagheri, Iran’s efforts have eventually paid off and the United States and Europe now speak the same language, and the slogan “Death to Israel” has become global (Tasnim, May 16, 2024).

►IRGC commander Hossein Salami said in a speech in Tehran that the Iranian attack on Israel had been a limited operation against two military bases, using a limited number of missiles and UAVs to punish Israel (Mehr, May 19, 2024).



IRGC Commander Hossein Salami (SNN. IR, May 20, 2024)

►Ali Bagheri Kani, who was appointed acting Iranian foreign minister following the death of Foreign Minister Amir Hossein Abdollahian in the helicopter crash of the Iranian president's entourage on May 19, 2024, held a series of telephone conversations with his counterparts in the region and around the world. In his conversation with Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman al-Safadi, the two also discussed developments in the Palestinian arena and the Gaza Strip. Bagheri stressed the need for a joint effort by Iran, Jordan, and other Muslim countries to achieve an immediate and full ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and increase support for the Palestinians. In a conversation with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, Bagheri was invited by him to participate in the emergency meeting of the foreign ministers of the D8 countries (Organization of Developing Countries) in Turkey regarding the crisis in the Gaza Strip (Iranian Foreign Ministry website, May 21, 2024).

►In recent years, and especially since the beginning of the war in the Gaza Strip, Foreign Minister Abdollahian has played a central role in leading Iran's political campaign in the region. He has made several rounds of visits to the region, including Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Qatar, during which he met with senior government officials in those countries and with the heads of the Palestinian organizations, headed by Ismail Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau, and Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah. Also, Abdollahian held a long series of telephone conversations with his regional and international counterparts, as well as with the heads of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), during which he discussed developments in the region and the Gaza Strip and participated in conferences of Islamic countries dealing with the war in the Gaza Strip. Abdollahian's extensive involvement in regional affairs, especially compared to his predecessors, stemmed to a large extent from his professional background, his deep knowledge of the Middle East, his command of Arabic, and his good relations with the IRGC's Qods Force. Abdollahian, who previously served as deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs, ambassador to Bahrain, and member of Iran's negotiating team with the United States on Iraq, was considered very close to former Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani and an outspoken supporter of Iran's efforts to consolidate its regional influence.



Abdollahian meets with Nasrallah in Beirut (Tasnim, February 10, 2024)

Iranian involvement in Syria

- ▶A Syrian news website reported that the IRGC had begun transferring new shipments of weapons to an underground warehouse set up on the outskirts of the city of Albukamal in eastern Syria, near the border with Iraq (Deir ez-Zor 24, May 21, 2024). According to another report, the IRGC has begun digging tunnels in the town of al-Salehiya in the Albukamal region to connect the sites and headquarters of the pro-Iranian militias (Deir ez-Zor 24, May 18, 2024).
- ▶Syrian Prime Minister Hossein Arnous said four oil tankers from Iran were on their way to Syria after the supply of oil from Iran to Syria was recently halted. He said during a cabinet meeting that the first Iranian oil tanker was supposed to arrive on May 15, 2024, and that the oil was intended for agriculture, hospitals, bakeries, and public transportation (www.syria.tv, May 18, 2024).

Activities of the Shiite militias

Iraq

Activities on the ground

- ▶This past week, there was a decline in the number of attacks carried out by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq against targets in Israel. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed responsibility for carrying out five UAV attacks, compared with 13 attacks the week before (Islamic Resistance in Iraq Telegram channel, May 16-21, 2024). The targets of the attacks were as follows:

- ◆ An Israeli UAV base in the Golan Heights (May 20, 2024). According to the IDF Spokesperson, fighter jets intercepted a suspicious aerial target en route to Israel from Syria (IDF Spokesperson, May 20, 2024).
- ◆ A “vital target” in Eilat (May 20, 2024, in the evening) using two UAVs. According to the IDF Spokesperson, a missile ship and fighter planes intercepted two aerial targets en route to Israel from the east (IDF Spokesperson, May 20, 2024).
- ◆ Three attacks against what was referred to as a “vital target” in Eilat (May 17, 19, and the morning of May 20, 2024).



Right: UAV fire at a “vital target” in Eilat (Islamic Resistance in Iraq Telegram channel, May 17, 2024); Left: UAV launched at a base in the Golan Heights (Islamic Resistance in Iraq Telegram channel, May 21, 2024)

Syria

Report of an attack on an American base

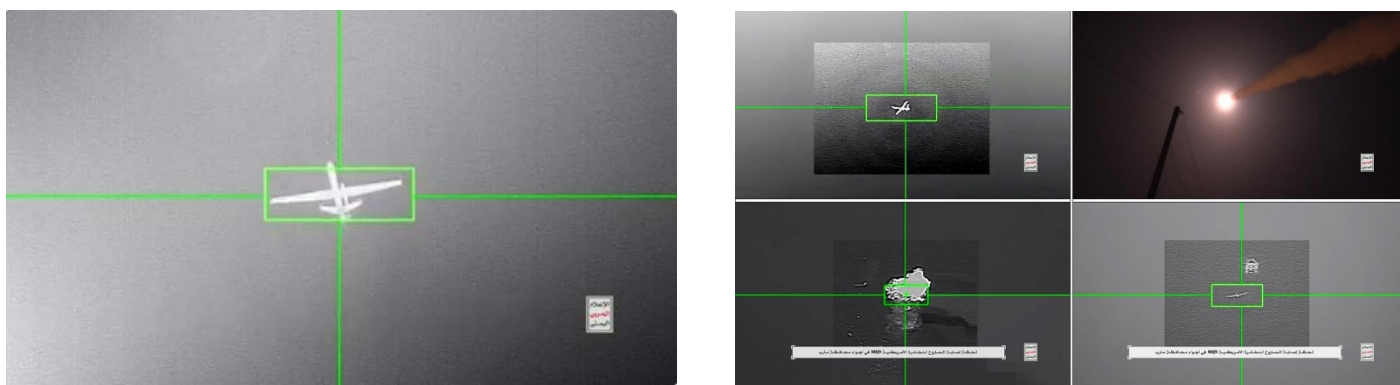
► A channel affiliated with the Syrian regime reported that the US Army base in the Omar oil field, in the Deir ez-Zor area in eastern Syria, was attacked by four rockets or missiles (Sama TV, May 21, 2024). No claim of responsibility was issued by any party, nor did the US Department of Defense confirm the report. The Iraqi pro-Iranian militias almost completely stopped their attacks on American bases in Syria and Iraq after the American attack on Kataeb Hezbollah targets in early February 2024. The cessation of the attacks against the American bases comes amid contacts being held between the Iraqi government and the American administration regarding the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq.

Yemen

► Over the past week, the Houthis did not claim responsibility for attacks against vessels. On the other hand, on May 18, 2024, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) reported that an anti-ship ballistic missile launched by the Houthis hit the Greek-owned oil tanker M/T Wind while

it was sailing in the Red Sea. The tanker was partially flooded, and the engine and steering systems were damaged. According to the report, a coalition ship arrived at the scene. However, the tanker's crew managed to repair the damage, and it continued on its way to a port in China. There were no casualties (CENTCOM X account, May 18, 2024). In another incident, the Houthis fired an anti-ship ballistic missile at the Gulf of Aden. There were no casualties, and no damage was caused to any vessels (CENTCOM X account, May 19, 2024).

► On May 17, 2024, Houthi forces spokesman Yahya Saria announced that on May 16, Houthi air defense forces had intercepted an American MQ9 drone. The interception was carried out using a Houthi-manufactured surface-to-air missile while the aircraft was over Yemeni territory. On May 21, 2024, Saria announced another interception of an American MQ9 aircraft using an identical model of surface-to-air missile (Yahya Saria's X account, May 17-21, 2024). Since the beginning of the current conflict, the Houthis have reported five interceptions of American drones. The US military has not confirmed the last two interceptions.



Right: Interception of the American MQ9 drone on May 17, 2024. Left: Interception of the American MQ9 on May 21, 2024 (Houthi Forces X account, May 17-21, 2024)

► On May 16, 2024, Houthi Movement leader Abd al-Malik al-Houthi announced that the Houthi forces had carried out two operations against Israel in the Mediterranean as part of the “fourth phase” of the conflict. In addition, al-Houthi claimed that to date, the forces had carried out 40 operations against Israel, in addition to 100 operations against ships in the Red Sea using missiles and drones (Houthi forces X account, May 16, 2024). There has been no verification of Houthi attacks in the Mediterranean.

► On May 18, 2024, Hezam al-Asad, a member of the Houthi political council, issued a statement in Hebrew saying that “the military operations of the Yemeni naval forces will continue until the aggression against our people in Gaza ceases and the siege of the besieged inside the Gaza Strip is lifted” (Hezam al-Asad's X account, May 18, 2024).



Hezam al-Asad's tweet in Hebrew (Hezam al-Asad's X account, May 18, 2024)

Reactions in the Shiite axis to the deaths of the Iranian president and foreign minister

- The pro-Iranian militias held a ceremony in front of the Iranian embassy in Baghdad in memory of the Iranian president and the other victims of the helicopter crash (Haneen Ramahi's X account, May 20, 2024). Kataeb Hezbollah members also participated in events in the city of Tabriz (Hussein @pr4313 X account, May 21, 2024).
- Akram al-Kaabi, the secretary-general of the Nujaba Movement, issued a statement thanking Raisi for his contribution to the Islamic nation, for standing by the Iraqi people against ISIS terrorism, and for his stance on the issue of the Gaza Strip (Akram al-Kaabi's X account, May 20, 2024).



Right: A ceremony held by the militias in Baghdad in memory of Raisi and the other fatalities (Haneen Ramahi's X account, May 20, 2024); Left: Flags of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq at Raisi's funeral in Tehran (Saberin News Telegram channel, May 22, 2024)

►Houthi leader Abd al-Malik al-Houthi and Houthi spokesman Mohammad Abdeslam issued condolence statements expressing condolences to Supreme Leader Khamenei and the entire Iranian people for the deaths of Raisi, the foreign minister, and the other senior figures (al-Masirah, May 20, 2024). According to a statement issued by the movement’s spokesman, President Raisi was an example of a Muslim loyal to the principles of religion and state, first and foremost the Palestinian issue. The statement added that Raisi’s death was not only a loss for Iran, but also for the entire Muslim nation, and for Palestine and the Gaza Strip (Mohammad Abdeslam’s X account, May 20, 2024).