

Iranian Commander Discusses the State of the Axis of Resistance

Nicholas Carl and Ben Rezaei

February 11, 2025

Translation with Analysis by AEI's Critical Threats Project



A recently leaked speech by a senior Iranian military officer provides a rare and candid look into how Iran is coping with its strategic defeat in Syria and what it will do next. Brigadier General Behrouz Esbati gave the speech to a private gathering of military members and families in Tehran shortly after the fall of the Bashar al Assad regime in December 2024.¹ Esbati, who was deeply involved in Iranian operations in Syria, appeared disappointed and frustrated, telling the audience, “We didn’t just take a hit. . . We lost badly.” Indeed, the fall of Assad deprived Tehran of its main entry point into the Levant and upended many of the core assumptions and ideas that have long underpinned Iranian strategy in the Middle East.² Esbati’s speech reflects the shock that Iranian leaders have thus incurred, especially as they were already reeling from other strategic blows, such as the defeats of Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Esbati’s speech is furthermore an important artifact for Western analysts and policymakers to understand how Tehran, in light of these setbacks, will revise its regional strategy and security doctrine moving forward.

Interpreting Esbati’s speech first requires an understanding of his position in the regime and specifically his role in internal messaging. Esbati is a senior Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) officer and has spent most of his military career involved in cultural and media activities. He currently commands the Cyberspace Headquarters under the Armed Forces General Staff’s department for culture and defense propaganda. Esbati, in this capacity, worked extensively in Syria, where he oversaw information operations and socio-cultural engineering. It is noteworthy in this context that Esbati was the one to deliver a message about the state of the Axis of Resistance to an audience of junior military members in Tehran. He was uniquely positioned to do so given his background managing ideology and morale among service members. It is unclear though whether Esbati gave the speech on his own initiative or at the behest of more senior Iranian leaders.

Esbati, in the speech, expressed frustration with Assad and Russia, blaming them, among others, for the collapse of the regime. Esbati lamented their passivity and came close to accusing them outright of betraying Iran. Esbati concluded that Iran must cultivate a “true” ally in Syria, who—unlike Assad—will be loyal to the

Iranian supreme leader. This comment may reflect a key lesson that Tehran has learned from its experience in Syria: that the IRGC must continuously emphasize the ideologization of Axis of Resistance members to ensure their loyalty and subordination to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Esbati suggested in his speech that Assad may still be in power had he listened to Khamenei, raising questions about how the IRGC will approach the ideologization of the remaining members of the Axis of Resistance, such as the Houthis and Iraqi militias, in the years ahead.

Esbati proclaimed that the IRGC is already rebuilding its militia networks in Syria to cultivate a true ally there. This assertion is consistent with our and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW)’s assessment that Iran is trying to stoke sectarian tensions and fuel armed resistance against the Syrian interim government led by Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS).³ Iranian state media has amplified sectarian narratives about Syria regularly in recent weeks.⁴ And senior Iranian officials, including Khamenei, have called several times for unspecified armed groups to mobilize and liberate Syria.⁵ CTP-ISW has presented this assessment and these developments in our [daily updates](#) that track Iran and its Axis of Resistance across the Middle East. An IRGC officer later downplayed Esbati’s remarks as “aspirational” to Western media, likely in order to obfuscate any Iranian effort along these lines.⁶

Esbati tried throughout his speech to project confidence about the overall state of the Axis of Resistance despite the defeat in Syria. Esbati, on one hand, broke from official regime rhetoric in discussing Syria, giving an honest assessment of Iranian losses there. His comments on Hamas and Hezbollah, on the other hand, were more consistent with popular regime narratives, which have tried to distort reality by framing the defeats in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon as victories. Esbati, for example, argued that the number of rockets that Hamas has fired is somehow a marker of military success. Though such comments are strange, especially to a military audience, they demonstrate how Esbati was willing to break from the official talking points when discussing Syria and less so when discussing subjects in which he had less personal experience. He ignored the realities that Israel has destroyed Hamas militarily, degraded Hezbollah severely, and compelled both actors to pursue ceasefires, which were

tantamount to their surrenders.⁷

Below is a complete translation of Esbati's 57-minute-long speech. We are publishing this text to boost awareness of his claims, especially given apparent IRGC efforts to downplay what he said. We are including analytical commentary in brackets and italics to provide further context and nuance.

Speech of Brigadier General Behrouz Esbati

Esbati: Praise be to God, the lord of all worlds. First, I extend my congratulations to all brothers and sisters on the beginning of the Week of Resistance.

Let us remember the martyrs of the Islamic Revolution, the martyrs of the Sacred Defense [the Iran-Iraq War], and the martyrs of the Resistance, especially the honorable martyr Haj Qassem Soleimani, Martyrs Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah, Seyyed Hashem [Kiomars Pour Hashemi], Seyyed Razi [Mousavi], Abu Mehdi al Muhandis, Martyr [Mohammad Reza] Zahedi, and other friends, whose blessed and luminous faces we had the fortune to meet in recent years. Well, they have achieved their goal, and we remain among those left behind and stranded.

I think it would be much better if I knew what questions friends have, so I could share the necessary points. With the permission of Haj Agha [the person sitting beside Esbati], if friends have any questions, please pass them along. Yes, if you could kindly provide a piece of paper, I would be grateful.

However, to start the discussion, I will raise two points for my dear brothers and sisters.

First, the day we realized that we could no longer hold Syria was a Friday night. I was on what was almost the last military flight, arriving in Tehran at about two or three in the morning with some dear Fatemi companions [members of the Iranian-backed Afghan Shia Fatemiyoun Division]. We were among the last groups of Fatemi members and a few of my colleagues from the IRGC. I thought that when I reached Tehran, I could at least turn off my phone and rest for a month.

Just before dawn, I called my superior, General Shekarchi, simply to tell him I was safe and had returned to Iran, as I knew he would be worried about

me. But he said, “No, get up and come.” I told him I wanted to rest for a bit, but he insisted, [saying] “Get up and come. Let us see what is happening.”

Esbati's superior appears to be Brigadier General Abol Fazl Shekarchi, who has been the spokesperson of the Iranian Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS) since April 2018.⁸ Shekarchi's formal title is deputy for culture and defense propaganda. Shekarchi has spent much of his career supporting information and psychological warfare and the ideological indoctrination of Iranian military members.

From the day I met with Mr. Shekarchi until now, I have been fortunate to attend many meetings and gatherings for one reason or another.

In the first session in which I participated, I felt something strange. We, who had been on the frontlines and witnessed the scenes, who were involved in the events in Syria, did not have or allowed ourselves to feel despair. But I was astonished to see such an atmosphere in Iran. Why had this happened? What had occurred? Nearly everyone had conveyed this idea over the 20 days following [the fall of Assad].

For those of us who were on the ground, the collapse of the Baathist regime was not surprising. The truth is we were working extremely hard, making extraordinary efforts to persuade the Baathist regime, the army commanders, and Bashar al Assad himself to realize that the country was falling apart and that, if reforms and changes in behavior and management were not immediately implemented, the nation would not survive. Unfortunately, after our military victories—the defeat and retreat of ISIS, insurgents, and Kurdish movements, among other regional issues—a strategic neglect prevailed across all pillars of the Syrian government.

Personally, I worked continuously with at least four or five Syrian ministers. Syria had nearly five cultural ministers, as the cultural apparatus was extensive due to its party-based structure, but, unfortunately, it was inefficient. We could not convince them to act effectively.

Over the past two years, conditions in Syria had deteriorated dramatically. In most Syrian cities, people experienced a maximum of one hour of electricity within 24 hours, except in Damascus, where electricity was available for two hours every four hours, and in

Aleppo, where electricity came for two hours every six hours. In the outskirts of Damascus, such as Qazzaz [a Damascus neighborhood], which we frequently visited due to threats in the area, residents received only about 25 minutes of electricity per day. Life was entirely paralyzed.

Meanwhile, the Baathist regime maintained an electric line called “military electricity,” supposedly designated for military centers. In truth, this line supplied the homes of Baath party officials, ministers, and generals.

Imagine being a citizen witnessing your wife and children unable to live due to unbearable heat in the summer.

One day, a Syrian colleague of mine came to me looking upset. When I asked why, he said his child had fallen ill. When I asked why the child had gotten sick, he explained that the nights were so hot that he had to fetch water to sprinkle on the ground, so his children could lay down on the damp surface to cool off. This was their summer.

During the winter, families received 50 liters of diesel every three months to heat their homes for 10 nights during the entire season. To cope, several families would gather in one room, sharing the limited fuel to warm themselves for a few hours.

If I were to describe the poor living conditions, discrimination, and overwhelming corruption in Syria, I could share countless examples till morning.

We—the IRGC members—tried to live like the Syrian people. One reason Iranians still hold a place in Syrians’ heart—not the insurgents [HTS]—is this.

Even today, we maintain connections with our Syrian brothers and sisters. For instance, in Deir ez Zor, we had a person responsible for managing our network. This individual worked with 500-600 young people. After recent events, I contacted him to ask about the public perception of Iranians post-insurgent activities. He swore by God that the perception remained positive due to the lifestyle of the IRGC members.

This claim indicates that Iranian-backed elements remained in at least some part of Syria at the time of Esbati’s speech. This network is the foundation from which the IRGC would recruit for and rebuild its militia networks in Syria.

Due to the lifestyle of the IRGC members, the conditions were very different for them. But when

others observed the situation and saw how their [Syrian] generals behaved, it was demoralizing.

Let me give you an example. You may have heard of a place that was heavily bombarded, a helicopter site called the Aqraba helicopter site. The Aqraba area housed the largest Syrian Arab Army (SAA) Air Force base. I went to meet the commander there and regularly checked in on their troops, interacting with soldiers and commanders, mainly at the colonel level.

I asked the commander, “What’s the situation? What are you doing?”

He replied, “I have no news of my family.”

I asked, “How do you not have news of them?”

He said, “My family lives in the Hissian area, 40 kilometers from Homs, about 80 kilometers from the base where I am stationed. The salary I receive from the army barely covers transportation costs to visit my family once a week. For the past three months, I have saved that money to send to my family, so they don’t starve.”

When mid-level and field commanders of the army see their generals enjoying 24-hour electricity, Iranian fuel, and high salaries, the outcome becomes predictable.

Martyr Hashem Kiomars Pour Hashemi was a close friend of ours.

Pour Hashemi is the only Iranian military casualty that Iran has acknowledged from the surprise HTS offensive against the Assad regime at this time. Pour Hashemi was a brigadier general and died on November 28, 2024, in Aleppo at the beginning of the offensive.⁹

Three days before his death, I went to Aleppo to see him. I told him, “Hashem, I have a bad feeling. Brief me on the situation. What’s going on?”

He explained the state of our forces, enemy capabilities, and other details.

I told him, “With this military setup, you can’t do anything.”

Pour Hashemi replied, “Yes, Aleppo will fall.”

Pour Hashemi then told me, “The general on the front line must pay bribes to the tune of 100 million Syrian lira [around 7,700 US dollars] per month to higher ranking generals.”

When an organization operates this way, why would an army fight?

I worked directly with about 700 personnel, and, in subsequent [subordinate] echelons, 10,000-15,000 individuals fell under my domain [command]. I arranged funds and gave them to a financial officer from Aleppo to distribute 500,000 lira [around 38 US dollars] to each person. However, I later found out that Syrians only received 200,000 lira [around 15 US dollars], because the financial officer embezzled the money. He was supposed to be punished and sent to a frontline held by ISIS. But, after some time, I discovered that he had bribed his superior and fled to live in Latakia.

This practice became customary. For example, a frontline that required 400 soldiers would only have 40 percent [manpower], as 360 had paid bribes to return home.

We saw and reported these issues, but, unfortunately, they were ignored. Corruption was pervasive.

For instance, the first checkpoint near the Sayyidah Zeynab shrine was controlled by the [SAA] 4th Division, commanded by Maher al Assad—Bashar al Assad's brother. Maher al Assad collected the most money. Every bus driver had to pay 100 dollars to pass.

The Sayyidah Zeynab shrine is a prominent religious site in Shia Islam, as it is the grave of the granddaughter of the prophet Mohammad, according to Shia tradition. The IRGC developed an extensive military network in the neighborhood surrounding the shrine, from which IRGC commanders oversaw operations across Syria and other parts of the Levant. Israel has conducted numerous airstrikes in the neighborhood, targeting the IRGC network there, over the past decade.

The SAA 4th Division, under the Assad regime, was one of the military units closest to Bashar al Assad, because the unit was under the command of his brother.¹⁰ This connection afforded the unit special privileges, such as the ability to operate the first checkpoint leading to the Sayyidah Zeynab shrine. The 4th Division was deeply tied to the Syrian drug trade as well.¹¹ Maher al Assad fled to Iraq and then Russia after the fall of the Assad regime, according to Reuters.¹²

Here, I'm only sharing social issues. I cannot disclose military matters, such as the betrayals that occurred.

One of the reasons we feared for the collapse was not military failure. In reality, the people rose up and overthrew a corrupt system, which reflects the reality of the situation.

There are other dimensions to these issues. However, I will address a particular point raised by some friends and then shift to the future of the Axis of Resistance, as I don't wish to focus much on Syria.

Many have asked me if Bashar al Assad was a traitor or if he deliberately acted as he did.

No, Mr. Bashar believed in the resistance, but his definition of resistance was very different from ours. He envisioned Syria's role in the Axis of Resistance as very limited.

What do I mean? When the al Aqsa Flood began, we immediately announced through our ambassador, commander, and even our minister, who visited the region that this was the moment for Syria to attack and reclaim some of the territories seized by Israel.

Al Aqsa Flood refers to Hamas' attack into Israel on October 7, 2023. Western and Syrian sources reported in the days following the attack that Iran began sending Iranian-backed fighters to southwestern Syria and threatened to use them to conduct ground attacks against Israel.¹³ Then-Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian paid an official visit to Syria on October 13, during which he may have discussed a possible attack on Israel.¹⁴ Unspecified fighters fired mortars at Israel periodically in the months following the October 7 attack, but Iranian-backed fighters never conducted any ground attack from Syria. Esbati's comment about reclaiming territory refers to the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights.

We said we would provide support: [Lebanese] Hezbollah was active, the Palestinians were engaged, and Israel was at its weakest.

But Bashar said, "No, my role in the resistance is only as a support platform for you. If you need to land your planes, bring weapons, and go fight, you can. But I [Bashar] will not enter into a war with Israel."

His organization had a fundamentally flawed and incomplete understanding of the Axis of Resistance.

We had to provide explanations to justify this. Many Syrians asked why Iran could strike targets thousands of kilometers away after True Promise 1 and 2, yet their own country, with all its resources, could not strike from just 200 kilometers away. The people were asking questions!

True Promise 1 and 2 refer to the large-scale missile attacks that Iran conducted against Israel in April and October 2024,

respectively. The April attack involved over 300 ballistic and cruise missiles and one-way attack drones.¹⁵ The attack inflicted very little damage though, as US and partner defenses intercepted the vast majority of the projectiles. The October attack involved around 200 ballistic missiles.¹⁶ A few dozen projectiles evaded Israeli air defenses but still failed to inflict serious damage on Iran's targets due to the inaccuracy of the Iranian systems.¹⁷

The Syrian people are fiercely anti-imperialist. The general populace in Syria is remarkable in their commitment to the resistance. And now I will explain what Agha [Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei] means by the future of the resistance and what his exact vision entails.

Bashar wanted to play the same role he had defined during the 33-day war, even though the dynamics of the region had completely changed.

The Assad regime voiced rhetorical support for Hezbollah during the war with Israel in 2006 but avoided direct conflict with Israel. Syria provided Hezbollah an avenue through which to import Iranian materiel at the time as well.

Three groups also deceived Bashar al Assad.

First, the Russians. The Russians were one of the factors behind Syria's collapse. After the al Aqsa Flood, the Russians acted entirely in line with Israeli interests. Every action they took in the Levant after al Aqsa Flood served the Israeli agenda.

For instance, when Israel targeted our major bases, such as the Sadegh intelligence base, the Russians turned off all their radar systems. I had a meeting with Sadegh at the time, and the missile struck about 500 or 600 meters from where we were. When we visited the site afterward, we found that eight of our people, three of whom were close friends of mine, had been killed.

The same happened in the case of martyr Seyyed Razi.

Seyyed Razi refers to senior IRGC Quds Force officer Razi Mousavi, whom Israel killed in an airstrike in southern Damascus in December 2023.¹⁸ Mousavi was one of the seniormost Iranian officers in Syria and played a prominent role in managing IRGC logistics across Syria and particularly the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah.

The Russians' greatest betrayal was in the deaths of

Zahedi and Rahimi, where they acted directly in Israel's interest. This group [the Russians] consistently tried to isolate Iran from its connection with Syria.

Israel killed IRGC brigadier generals Mohammad Reza Zahedi and Mohammad Hadi Haji Rahimi in an airstrike in Damascus in March 2024.¹⁹ Zahedi was the seniormost IRGC officer responsible for Quds Force activities across the Levant. Zahedi was an extraordinarily influential and well-connected figure in the Iranian security establishment. Zahedi had been particularly critical to leading Quds Force activities abroad following the death of Qassem Soleimani in January 2020. Rahimi was one of Zahedi's top deputies and had spent most of his career recruiting, organizing, training, and advising Iranian-backed fighters from across the Middle East.²⁰

My brothers, when we presented our defensive plan to Bashar al Assad, the Russians also presented their plan. While our plan relied on ground forces and human resources [manpower], the Russians emphasized air operations. They claimed their preemptive airstrikes would destroy all of Idlib and the militants' capabilities. Their assessment was completely wrong. Instead of accepting our plan, Bashar accepted the Russians' proposal.

The Russians conducted three operations—three heavy attacks over 20 days of intense bombing. But what did they target? Today, HTS says the Russians primarily bombed empty lands or civilian homes. Meanwhile, the Russians reported to us that they had struck HTS forces. Last, our intelligence team confirmed that HTS forces remained unscathed, but no one listened. The Russians played a pivotal role in Syria's downfall.

It is unclear what Russian forces meant to target in these airstrikes and what they ultimately hit at the beginning of the surprise HTS offensive against the Assad regime in November 2024.

Second, the Saudi Arabia-United Arab Emirates-Egypt Axis. This group's final move was bringing Bashar back into the Arab League. They worked tirelessly to encourage the Baathist regime to align with them.

When [then-Iranian President] Ebrahim Raisi visited Syria, we held a coordination meeting where the Syrians

assured us they had a promotional and political plan, including lining the route from the airport to the palace with flags and preparations. I sent one of my team members to assess the preparations. When he returned, he reported that nothing had been done. I called the palace's protocol officer, who avoided the question and claimed ignorance. That's when we realized there would be no official reception for Raisi. Immediately we formed an IRGC task force. Naturally, I took charge of cultural and logistical support. In five to six hours, we decorated the entire road from the airport.

But, shortly after, we saw the road from the airport to the palace covered with the UAE flags. We protested and asked, "Who is coming?" The Syrians responded that the Emirati foreign minister would arrive in the morning and leave by the evening. Such capitulation!

The reason behind this? Within the Baathist party, over the past three years, there has been a split. Some support Salafism, others align with the Russian camp, another group advocates for normalization with Israel, while Bashar and a few others support the resistance.

In essence, there are four factions. Those backing Arabism are led by Bashar's wife, Asma. Bashar worked hard to replace the Iranians with Arabs, influenced by his wife's Sunni background. She orchestrated the lack of an official reception for Raisi.

Esbati's comments reflect a challenge that Iran faces consistently in building proxy and partner networks in the Arab world. The Iranian regime is commonly considered sectarian and discriminatory toward Arabs, which naturally fuels local opposition to Iranian influence in regional countries. Esbati, later in this speech, stresses the importance of having allies who are ideologically aligned with Iran, demonstrating how some in the Iranian security establishment view that ideologization as a critical requirement for overcoming Iran's negative perception and developing the Axis of Resistance abroad.

[Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt] convinced Bashar, telling him, "You will not face financial problems. We will provide everything for you. Just limit Iran's influence." And Bashar did.

Over the past three months, Bashar and his government have exerted unprecedented pressure on Iranians. More than 80 percent of Iranian families, embassy staff, school employees, [and] engineers, were evicted from their homes along with their

belongings. Many of my friends slept in their cars at night simply for being Iranian during Bashar al Assad's administration.

The third group [who facilitated the fall of Assad] was those who colluded with the Israelis.

Bashar wanted to take action, but he had no party, no will, and no functioning army, which ultimately led to his downfall. I spoke with commanders over the eight days following the fall of Aleppo, including one who had a private meeting with Bashar.

I asked him, "What's going on?"

He said, "Man, Bashar is completely lost. I told him that [Iraqi] fighters are ready and have taken military positions to strike the front. I suggested he make a call to coordinate because, if the [Iraqis] enter, Israeli and American aircraft will massacre them. We need air cover, which is the Russians' responsibility."

He said, "We spoke with Bashar for half an hour, and, in the end, Bashar said, 'You contact the Russians yourselves.'" Such passivity!

I'll never forget when our forces in Hama took positions. We emphasized that we needed to defend Hama and Homs. We asked the Syrian government for weapons. By God, I was there, brothers and sisters.

Our logistics officer was begging, saying "We've brought a number of troops." Let me avoid specifying the number. And he was desperately trying to get 1,000 Kalashnikov magazines from the Syrian army to hold the Masyaf front.

It's ridiculous! Thirty thousand bullets? You've seen war. Are 30,000 Kalashnikov bullets even enough to hold a front line? In the end, they didn't provide them.

When Homs was encircled, a plane carrying weapons from Iraq entered Syrian airspace to deliver supplies to us, but they wouldn't let it land. It returned empty-handed. We have so much more we could share!

In any case, we didn't hold back. Iran didn't hold back. But we weren't supposed to fight in their place. When Bashar didn't want to fight, and none of the pillars of his regime—the party, the government, the people, the army, or the security apparatus—wanted to fight, what could we do? We were shocked to learn that on the night Aleppo was liberated, 50 percent of the security forces were given leave and told to go home. Such infiltration! This was the situation.

Ultimately, the collapse happened, and we gathered our forces and left.

Now, the next question arises: What about the resistance?

Brothers, I honestly don't understand where claims that "Palestine has abandoned the resistance" are coming from. Or that "Hezbollah fighters are not prepared to resist." Unfortunately, in Iran, most people get their news from social media, which is ultimately controlled by Israel.

Let's review what happened in Gaza over the past 24 hours! How many tanks were destroyed? How many Israelis were injured or killed? How many rockets were fired?

Hamas has only 8,000 fighters and has been fighting for a year and a half. Do you call this a defeat? Agha [Khamenei] said, "Some define victory as mass killings, but we see victory in resistance." These young fighters have been resisting for 15 months. They take weapons from Israel and send them back against Israel. Where is the defeat in Gaza? This is the same Gaza that fought with stones just a few years ago—remember? Now, it has paralyzed the enemy.

Where is the defeat in Gaza? Why should we be worried about the resistance? Has Gaza retreated a single step from its goals?

Every time [Benjamin] Netanyahu and his Arab collaborators create propaganda and sit at their negotiation table, they think Gaza's people are scared.

Martyr [Yahya] Sinwar—a Sunni martyr—once said, "This time we will fight you with the spirit of Ashura."

In Ashura, there is no concept of defeat or surrender. Yes, there are martyrs. Yes, we give our lives. That is the culture of Ashura: never surrender! This spirit is alive among Gaza's people.

Shia Muslims observe the annual Ashura religious holiday to commemorate the death of the third Shia imam, Hossein, at the Battle of Karbala in 680. Hossein and his men were outnumbered by the forces of the Umayyad caliphate but still fought to the death. The Iranian regime commonly cites this event to illustrate how one must resist oppressors regardless of the military costs.

In Tehran, when the electricity goes out for two hours, chaos erupts. In Gaza, for 15 to 16 months, they've had no water, no bread, and empty stomachs. Yet you won't find a single anti-resistance protest. If even four people had raised a placard saying "Death to

the resistance," the world would have crucified us.

Is this Gaza defeated? Is this resistance weak? By God, it is not!

Those who carried out the al Aqsa Flood had two defining characteristics. Without exception, every participant was the child of a martyr. They chose this path because of their father's sacrifices. They all went into battle seeking martyrdom. They weren't planning to survive or capture prisoners. They went in expecting to die.

Now with 1.8 million young men, women, and children living like this, how many thousands of resistance fighters do you think will emerge among them?

Mark my words: next time, Hamas will have 100,000 fighters—not 8,000.

And I don't just mean Hamas. I'm talking about [Palestinian] Islamic Jihad and other groups—the entire resistance. This is the reality in Palestine.

[On Lebanon], the Zionist regime's biggest strategic mistake was assassinating Hezbollah commanders. Why? Because every commander belongs to the context of their specific war. Whenever commanders from a previous war enter a new one, they fail.

I'm referring to the military commanders—not Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah himself. I've always told the youth that Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah is one thing, and Hezbollah is something else. They are very different.

Consider this: did the Baathist regime face the first-generation of Hezbollah commanders during the ground invasion of southern Lebanon or the newest commanders?

After the disastrous security breach involving paggers, a new generation emerged similar to the youth who led our command posts during the Iran-Iraq War. These individuals had neither formal training nor military schooling, as most previous commanders had been martyred.

We intercepted Israeli communications, and they revealed astonishing details. An Israeli officer said, "We've been bombing a 350-meter area non-stop for 24 hours with drones overhead, satellites above that, fighter jets, and artillery support. After 24 hours, we ordered an operational unit to advance. But three fighters stopped an entire battalion, inflicted heavy losses upon us, and forced us to retreat."

This style of warfare is unparalleled in the world! The

doctrines of such resistance are written by those same youth who were on the battlefield.

So, what exactly does Netanyahu boast about? Netanyahu was desperately reaching out to intermediaries, begging them to mediate for a ceasefire or a peace agreement with Hezbollah. In one day, Hezbollah fired 360 rockets across various classes, targeting areas from southern Tel Aviv to the border. Can you even comprehend that?

Israel is a country of about four million people. When all four million are forced into shelters for 24 hours, what kind of victory is that?

In our culture, martyrdom is an honor.

At one point, one of the youth came to me and said, “Mr. Esbati, you work in cultural affairs. Why do you announce the names of our martyrs?”

I asked, “What do you mean?”

He replied, “Look at the enemy. They never reveal their casualties.”

I told him, “Who is the source of our strength, according to the supreme leader? The martyr. Why should we hide our martyrs? Martyrdom is an honor! We all came here to be martyred.”

I continued, “We’re not like the Zionists, who fear acknowledging their losses. We proudly announce our martyrs, because they are alive and their impact is greater than when they were among us.”

So where has Israel won? How can it claim it has defeated the proxies?

If the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) even had the most basic resources, and if the Syrian government had allowed them, and if the Islamic Republic had chosen to stand firm, they would have waged a war that would have crippled HTS for years to come.

The fighters of Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Yemen—who says only Yemen is defending itself now?

This is not the case! Just look at the blows dealt in Palestine. Take Jabalia, for instance. What is Jabalia? It’s just a refugee camp! Even the Israelis admitted there are only about 300 fighters there. Yet for a year and a half, they’ve been fighting those 300 individuals. Just yesterday, Israel reported five deaths in Jabalia—a camp, mind you, which is a small area under complete surveillance with cameras and informants everywhere. Moreover, Jabalia is affiliated with Fatah [the ruling party in the Palestinian Authority]. This isn’t even

Hamas territory anymore! Now, Israeli forces have retreated, and it’s Fatah police killing these fighters.

The claim that the resistance has been defeated is utterly false.

In fact, I’m telling you, as someone who breathes the air of the Axis of Resistance and remains in contact with these fighters, that the resistance has just begun. The enemy knows this too, but, through psychological operations, they manipulate perceptions.

Unfortunately, we are disarmed in this psychological war. Our media doesn’t function properly. Our state television, our newspapers, our government spokesperson, and even our parliament are ineffective.

This is the current state of the resistance!

Syria will soon align with the resistance, but in the true sense of resistance.

First, let me say that I don’t see it as a source of pride that we lost Syria. We didn’t just take a hit. We lost, and we lost badly. It was a tough defeat, especially for people like me.

The moment I had to leave the shrine of Lady Ruqayyah without the chance to visit Lady Zaynab’s shrine was one of the hardest moments of my life as a pasdar [IRGC member].

Afterward, we spent two days defending in Homs and Latakia, but it didn’t work, and we had to leave. Those were the hardest moments of my service.

I’ve seen a lot. I was in Kurdistan in 1979 and witnessed the IRGC leaving Kurdistan. I saw the war, the fall and liberation of Khorramshahr. I’ve seen many things, but the moment I boarded the plane with six Basij members, who I had to order onto the plane because they didn’t want to leave, they cried all the way to Tehran. We were devastated.

But now, looking at the situation, let me tell you something. This is the time for true resistance, not the incomplete resistance of the Baathist party. The opportunity for “Velayat-based resistance” has emerged in Syria. Pay attention to this point.

“Velayat-based resistance” refers to Iranian-backed groups that recognize the Iranian supreme leader as their own leader and are under his command. Esbati later identifies Hezbollah as a model of velayat-based resistance, though it is far from clear that other members of the Axis of Resistance, such as the Houthis, meet this standard.

Now we can activate the networks we've connected with over the past few years. We can work with the social layers where our forces have lived and establish resistance cells. We can engage in virtual spaces and start organizing. We've begun, and unlike before, we can now work in a way that aligns with international norms. But let me say this: we've learned not to move ahead of our leader [Khamenei]. Unfortunately, we don't study the supreme leader's words carefully. The leader has spoken about the "enthusiastic Syrian youth."

Esbati is referring to Khamenei's repeated calls for Syrian youth to arm themselves and organize to fight oppressors in Syria.²¹ Khamenei has made this call several times since the fall of Assad. Esbati also states explicitly that the IRGC is already leveraging its networks to rebuild an Iranian-backed militia presence in Syria in accordance with Khamenei's calls. This is consistent with other Western reports that the IRGC seeks to revitalize the Axis of Resistance in Syria by forming new proxy and partner forces.²²

When asked about the future of Syria's government, I shared an analysis with three possible scenarios.

[On complete division], If no agreement is reached, the country may be divided. For example: Suwayda could go to the Druze. Coastal areas might be given to the Alawites. However, this is unlikely, as Turkey fears this. With two to three million Alawites in Syria and about seven million in Turkey, Ankara worries about the emergence of another Kurdish-like movement. Eastern Syria could go to the Kurds, southeastern areas to ISIS affiliates, and a central secular government might be formed under Julani [the leader of HTS], modeled after Erdogan's secular system.

[On a federal system with a central government], a federal system centered in Damascus may emerge, with different regions managed autonomously.

[On a weak central government], if a central government is formed, it will be weak. Neither the Americans, Russians, Israelis, nor Arab want a strong Ikhwani [Muslim Brotherhood] government near them, as they all fear the brotherhood's influence within their own borders.

All three scenarios pose risks for others but opportunities for us.

Q&A with Brigadier General Behrouz Esbati

[Question for Esbati] What role can the Islamic Republic play in these conditions?

Our focus is to channel the energy of Syrian youth toward resistance. Resistance, by definition, means standing against the Zionist regime.

[Question for Esbati] Can we rely on Syrian youth for the future?

Absolutely, brother! The potential among Syrian youth is unparalleled in the Arab world, except for Hezbollah.

Hezbollah is a "Shia Velayat-based" movement and unique in nature. Set aside Hezbollah and, among Arab countries, Syrian youth are the most prepared and organized to fight the false Zionist regime. They are far ahead of the youth in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, and God willing, this will happen!

[Question for Esbati] Is it true that a Syrian military officer martyred Kiomars Pour Hashemi?

Yes, it wasn't just one person; it was two. There was a tribe called the Bakara tribe, which was one of our allies. Unfortunately, their leader, Abu Khaled Hussein, was imprisoned under certain circumstances. While in prison, he established contact with the Julani faction [HTS] and pledged allegiance to them. HTS agreed on the condition that he assassinate one of the IRGC commanders.

Two Syrian intelligence officers, both members of the Bakara tribe, were assigned to carry out the mission. They falsified documents to bypass security and entered a meeting led by Kiomars Pour Hashemi. In the room were two Russian commanders, three Syrians, one Hezbollah fighter, and Kiomars Pour Hashemi. Salman Nawab Nouri, the Iranian consul in Aleppo, was also supposed to attend but arrived late.

Salman later told me, "When I arrived, I saw the Syrians shooting everyone in the room."

The Russians survived because their protocol required them to wear bulletproof vests. However, the Hezbollah fighter and one Syrian officer were martyred, and Pour Hashemi was wounded. He was taken to the hospital but succumbed to his injuries at the hospital's entrance.

[Question for Esbati] How can the resistance be

equipped in Iran's absence?

Don't worry about equipping the resistance militarily! The supreme leader [Khamenei] told Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah directly. I was present when Nasrallah explained the structure of Hezbollah to Khamenei. Seyyed Hassan said, "We're ready. Just give us the order for weapons and supplies." The supreme leader replied, "Mr. Nasrallah, go and act self-sufficiently!"

All Iranian-backed resistance units are self-sufficient in combat. It's not that we don't provide them with anything. We provide technology and occasionally sensitive components, but they produce their own weapons. Don't worry about their armaments; worry about their morale!

I've heard countless times from Syrians, Iraqis, and Lebanese, "Esbati, if anything happens to Iran, we are finished. All the hopes of the oppressed in the world rest on Iran."

[Comment on recent protests in Iran]

A Syrian officer in charge of flight control once approached me and said, "Why don't you Iranians think about us? Why don't you kill your people and shoot them all down?"

I sat with him and explained, "Our perspective on our people is different. They are our youth, our future. We don't act that way."

After I finished, he said, "It's useless. You can't kill people."

I replied, "We don't intend to kill our nation like you."

However, his perspective was that, if unrest ever arose in Iran, Syria would collapse entirely.

[Question for Esbati] On the anniversary of martyr Soleimani, why didn't Iran strike an American base in Syria with missiles?

I don't know who asked this question! War requires logic. Suppose we hit an American base. First, those bases are well-equipped, and [unclear remarks] . . . except for our strategic missiles, our conventional ones aren't highly effective against reinforced bunkers.

So, what happens after we strike? The United States would retaliate by targeting 10 of our positions, attack PMF, and launch missiles at Yemen. What would we achieve?

Military operations must fulfill strategic, operational, or tactical objectives. Right now, expanding the conflict militarily doesn't benefit the resistance because we've

already dealt significant blows to the enemy.

If we open a new phase, the enemy will restart their operational assaults. We currently have the upper hand, both on the ground and strategically, so there's no logic in escalating.

[Question for Esbati] Why was True Promise 3 not carried out?

I don't know. I wasn't involved in the decision-making process, so I can't say why it wasn't implemented or who made the decision.

Those of us in the field believe that, if True Promise 3 had been executed, our situation would have been much better. But it didn't happen, and that's that.

[Question for Esbati] Should there be accountability for True Promise 3?

No, as I said, the current situation isn't conducive to executing True Promise 3. We should wait to see how the situation evolves before entering more serious military phases.

[Question for Esbati] Did the Islamic Republic of Iran avenge Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah?

Yes, it did! What else did you expect? Iran crushed Israel.

[Question for Esbati] Khamenei said years ago that, if Israel made any mistake, Iran would level Tel Aviv and Haifa. Why hasn't the True Promise 3 been implemented?

I don't know.

The repeated questions about further Iranian strikes on Israel are noteworthy, as they suggest that some elements in the Iranian military apparatus are dissatisfied with the regime decision to refrain from attacking Israel again. Iranian officials and state media discussed regularly the possibility of a third missile attack on Israel in retaliation for Israeli airstrikes into Iran in October 2024. This messaging could have created an expectation among regime supporters, especially hardliners, that Iran would conduct further missile attacks against Israel.

[Question for Esbati] Can you explain Saeed Jalili's [a prominent Iranian hardline politician] approach and whether it aligns with the country's current situation?

I don't know. I'm not a political person. I focus on strategic analysis.

[Comment on recent HTS statements about Iran]

Many of the things said about Syria are false. We have no evidence that Julani made such statements. Some Iranian websites likely spread this as part of a psychological operation, but now, everywhere I go, people ask me about Julani's comments.

Julani hasn't said this, and he can't. If Julani showed any inclination toward the Islamic Republic, the Zionists, Turks, and Qataris who installed him would immediately discard him.

The idea that "Iran wanted to set Syria on fire, but we intervened to prevent it" is another false narrative promoted by Saudi analysts.

[Question for Esbati] This refers to a message Khamenei sent to Bashar al Assad through Mohammad-Javad Larijani during the final days of Assad's regime.

The leader [Khamenei] only told Assad, "Resist in Syria, and we will help." Assad responded, "My army is in shambles. If you and the Russians agree, I have no objections." Assad's reply wasn't aligned with the leader's message.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://shows.acast dot com/abdimedia/episodes/677c3ff3539aba773dffa650a>
- 2 <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/the-reshaping-of-irans-axis-of-resistance>
- 3 <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-december-30-2024>
- 4 <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-january-22-2025>
- 5 <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-january-22-2025>; https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-january-3-2025#_ed-nf6c65ab13081269199c5acae8cb85d9569
- 6 <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/08/world/middleeast/iran-general-syria-defeat.html>
- 7 <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/israels-operational-success-and-strategic-shortcomings-in-the-gaza-strip>
- 8 <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/israels-operational-success-and-strategic-shortcomings-in-the-gaza-strip>
- 9 <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-january-22-2025>; https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-january-3-2025#_ed-nf6c65ab13081269199c5acae8cb85d9569
- 10 <https://www.mei.edu/publications/fourth-division-syrias-parallel-army>
- 11 <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1369>
- 12 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/assads-final-hours-syria-deception-despair-flight-2024-12-13/>
- 13 <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-october-9-2023>; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-october-11-2023>
- 14 www.mfa.gov dot ir/portal/newsview/731457
- 15 <https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/13/middleeast/iran-drones-attack-israel-intl-latam/index.html>
- 16 <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/01/g-s1-25707/iran-israel-hezbollah-lebanon-attack>
- 17 https://x.com/dex_eve/status/1841986067458666640
- 18 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-air-strike-syria-kills-senior-iranian-revolutionary-guards-member-2023-12-25/>
- 19 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/02/mohammad-reza-zahedi-who-was-the-iranian-commander-killed-in-an-israeli-strike-in-syria>
- 20 www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1403/02/23/3084329
- 21 https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-january-3-2025#_ednf6c65ab13081269199c5acae8cb85d9569
- 22 <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-30>