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3.3. Iran and pro-Iranian militias

Since the killing of high-ranking members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Israeli strikes in Damascus in 2023 and 2024525 and the elimination of Hezbollah's top leadership and the bulk of its infrastructure in Israel's invasion and aerial strikes in Lebanon, the influence of Iran and its Lebanese Hezbollah allies in Syria has waned significantly.526 For more information regarding the involvement of Iran and pro-Iranian militias in Syria prior to November 2024, see section 1.3.1. of the EUAA COI Report Syria – Security Situation (October 2024).

Iran, like Russia, was reportedly caught off-guard by the advance of armed opposition forces that led to the collapse of Assad's rule.527 Initially, Iran expressed firm support for Assad's forces and government.528 Dozens of Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) crossed into Syria near Deir Ez-Zor's Al-Bukamal in early December 2024 to reinforce beleaguered SAA troops at the frontlines in northern Syria.529 Iran-backed forces eventually gave up control of the strategic Qa'im border crossing in Al-Bukamal, with IRGC and Iran-backed Iraqi fighters pulling out of the Deir Ez-Zor before Kurdish forces captured the crossing.530 Most members of the Fatemiyoun and Zainebiyoun Brigades, pro-Iranian Syria-based militias created to defend the Assad government, were reported to have abandoned their positions and fled. Some members were possibly evacuated to Iran along with IRGC personnel, while others may have crossed into Iraq or moved to Lebanon, alongside fleeing Lebanese Hezbollah.531 Thousands of Iranian troops and Iran-backed militia fighters were reported to have fled Syria after Assad's downfall,532 with the US Department of Defense (USDOD) concluding that Iran had withdrawn all its forces from the country within ten days.533 On 14 December 2024, HTS leader Al-Sharaa declared the end of Iran's presence in Syria.534

Sources noted that the demise of Assad's rule represented a significant loss for Iran,535 which saw its ability to maintain military and logistical supply lines to Hezbollah in Lebanon and other groups of its so-called 'Axis of Resistance' significantly compromised.536

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