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Iran Update, April 3, 2023

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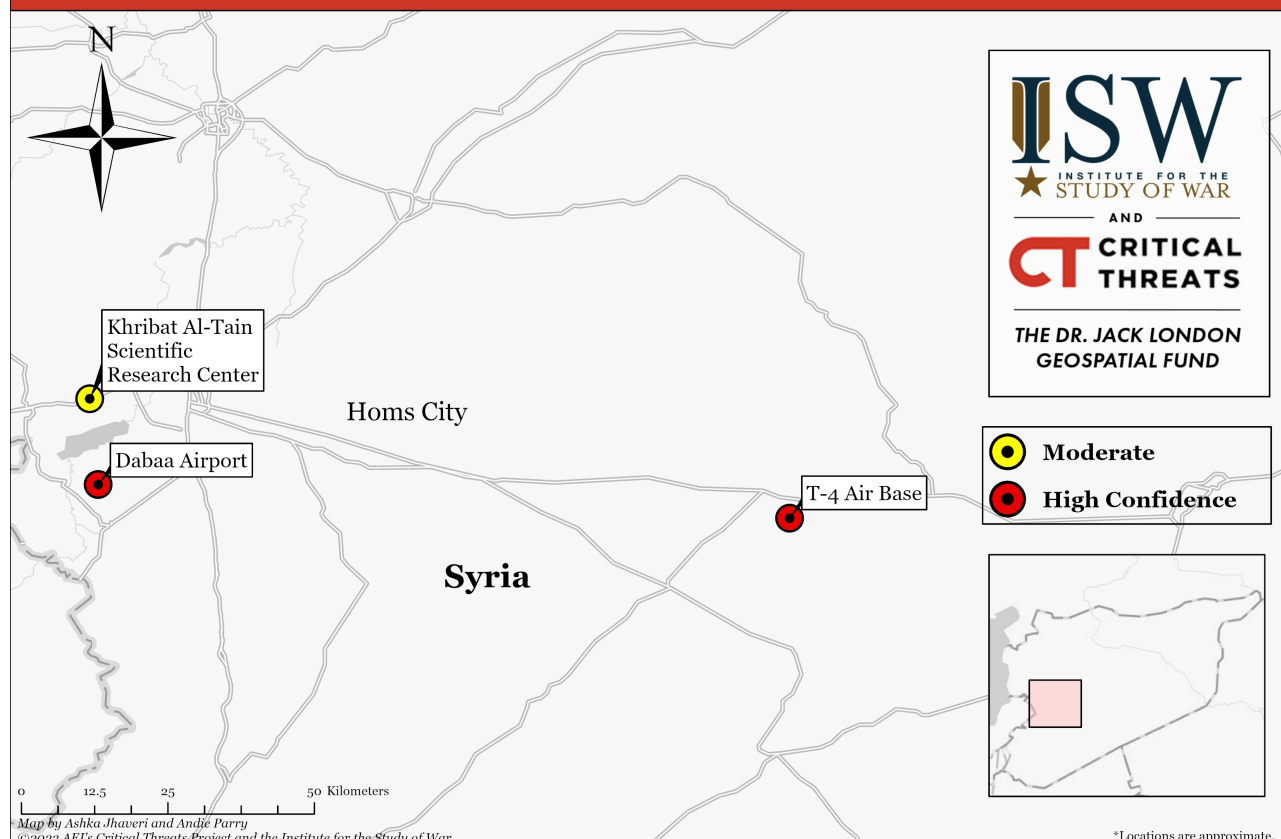
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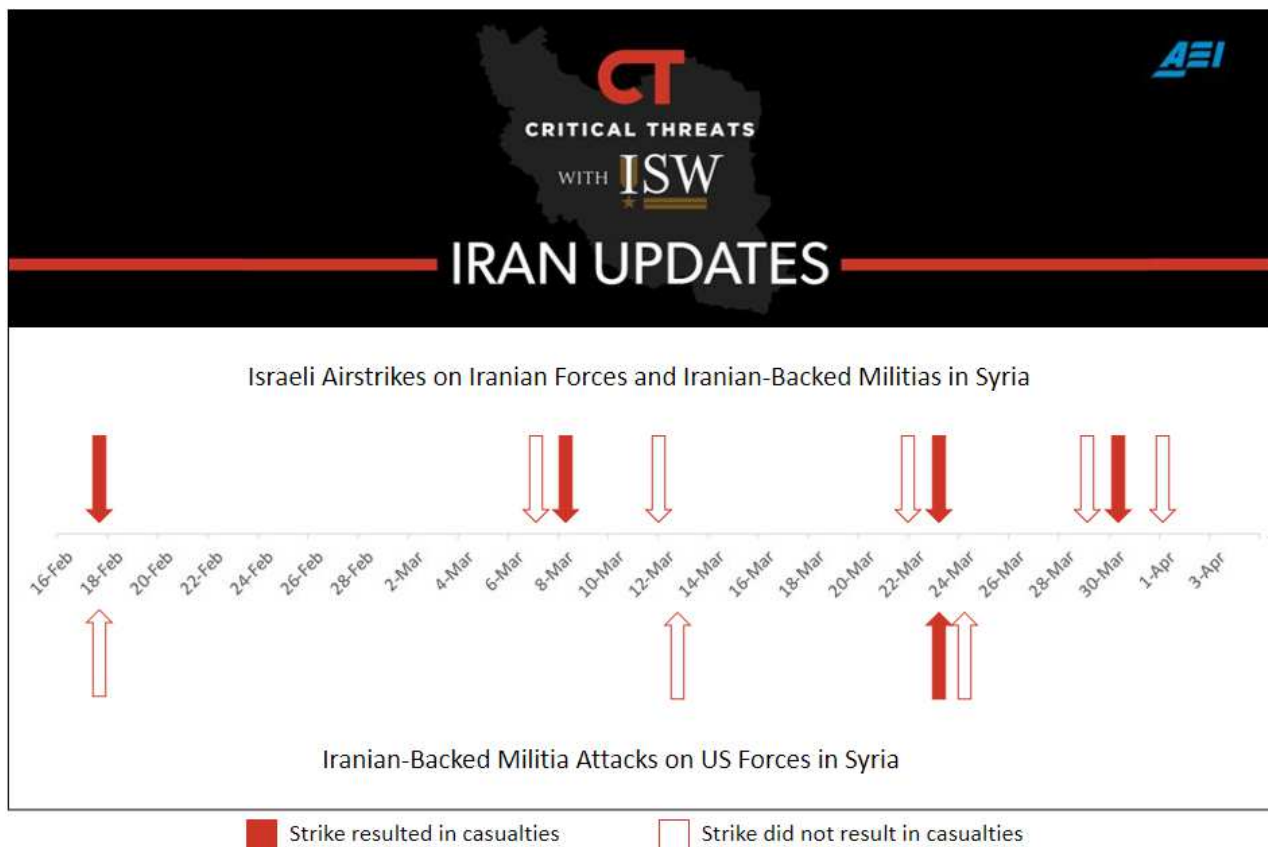
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The Israel Defense Force conducted an airstrike targeting at least two Iranian-backed militia bases in western Syria on April 1, 2023. Unidentified Western intelligence sources reported that rockets hit the al Dabaa Military Airport and T4 Tyas air base, according to a Reuters report.[1] An unidentified Syrian military source claimed to the *Syrian Arab News Agency* that Israeli forces targeted multiple military targets in Homs city and its outskirts on April 1 killing five Syrian soldiers.[2] The Syrian Ministry of Defense released a statement claiming that Syrian air defense systems shot down several Israeli missiles over Homs city and countryside.[3] The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and Crisis 24 reported that the IDF also damaged an Iranian research facility in Khirbat al Tain, western Homs.[4] An anti-Syrian regime Twitter account claimed that a Lebanese Hezbollah leader was killed in the Israeli airstrike on April 1.[5]

Israeli Airstrikes in Homs Province, Syria April 01, 2023





Iranian and Iranian-backed media outlets reported on deaths of martyrs in Israeli attacks, likely to set conditions for an attack on US or coalition forces. The IRGC Public Relations Department announced IRGC military advisor Captain Moghadd Mehghani Jafar Abadi died from injuries sustained in the Israeli airstrike in Damascus on March 30.[6] Iranian-state media previously reported that an IRGC military advisor Milad Heydari was killed in the same airstrike in a statement on March 30.[7] Raisi administration Spokesperson Bahadori Jahromi warned that Iran would retaliate for the Israeli airstrikes that reportedly killed Abadi and Heydari in a statement on April 2 reported by Iranian state-media outlet *Tasnim*. [8] Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanani also released a statement warning that Iran “reserves the right to respond [to Israeli strikes] at the right place and time” during a press conference on April 2.[9]

An unspecified Iranian-backed militia flew an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) into Israeli airspace, which highlights the risk of further escalation in Syria. The militia flew the UAV from Syria into Israeli airspace north of Lake Tiberias, Golan Heights. The IDF reported that its forces monitored the drone in flight before downing it.[10] Israeli media outlets reported that the drone was Iranian made. Iranian media outlet *Entekhab* circulated reporting on the drone entering Israeli airspace in a report on April 2.[11] Israeli air defense systems shot and destroyed a Qassem Shehab UAV Izz ad Din al Qassem Brigade of Hamas launched towards Israeli airspace on April 3. [12] CTP cannot verify if Iran directed the militias to fly the drones into Israel. Iranian-backed militants periodically conduct attacks independent of Iranian direction.

The Iranian regime has cohered around a collective approach to enforcing mandatory veiling laws that frames the laws as the will of the people, possibly to avoid igniting another round of anti-regime protests. The regime publicly signaled its agreement to strictly enforce the mandatory hijab law on March 30, as CTP previously assessed.[13] The regime’s enforcement model seeks to coopt the social collective as a complementary enforcement mechanism to its security services. The regime has encouraged pro-regime loyalists to issue “verbal warnings” to unveiled women and called on the relevant state entities to continue their enforcement albeit more cautiously.[14] The Education Ministry published a statement on April 3 outlining a guidance plan for educating the youth in the importance of veiling and “chastity.”[15] The statement also suggested that schoolchildren who do not comply with veiling standards will be excused without any detailed

explanation. The regime has also sought to expand its enforcement network beyond ordinary regime supporters to non-state social institutions such as local stores and educational centers. The regime reportedly sealed several local shops for serving unveiled women as part of an effort to expand the costs of noncompliance to those who have not directly violated veiling standards, thereby increasing the incentive for shop owners to exert pressure on their customers to observe such standards.[16]

Iranian officials have described adherence to the law as a popular demand in recent days. President Ebrahim Raisi stated on April 3 that most women and girls adhere to the law and that observance of the hijab is a “common” demand.[17] Islamic Guidance and Culture Minister Mohammad Mehdi Esmaili similarly stated that the Iranian nation—as opposed to the regime—opposes improper veiling.[18]

The regime likely instituted a temporary pause on the strict enforcement of the law and its guidance patrol following the death of Mahsa Amini. The regime has altered its approach to what has been a longstanding commitment to mandatory veiling enforcement only following the aftermath of the Mahsa Amini protest movement. President Ebrahim Raisi signed a decree on August 15, 2022, authorizing the use of facial recognition and other surveillance technology to identify those who were not complying with the veiling law, immediately prior to the Mahsa Amini protest movement in September. The regime likely instituted a temporary pause on the strict enforcement of the law and its guidance patrol following the death of Mahsa Amini.

The regime’s collective punishment approach to mandatory veiling—particularly its encouragement of pro-regime loyalists to enforce mandatory veiling—may exacerbate tensions between the Iranian public and the regime. Regime-affiliated media recirculated a 1995 video of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei condemning “attacks” against women with “bad hijab” in recent days, likely in response to a man pouring yogurt on two unveiled women in Khorasan Razavi Province on March 31.[19] Republishing the video indicates the regime is attempting to signal that it supports citizens’ involvement in hijab enforcement but disapproves of physical altercations between regime loyalists and unveiled women. The regime has no ability to control the actions of private citizens who decide to enforce the hijab law, however. Citizens who choose to enforce this law are likely the most passionate about it, and thus may use confrontational methods—such as physical harassment—to implement it. Iranian citizens may additionally accuse individuals who enforce the hijab law of being regime officials, even if they are in fact private citizens. This dynamic puts the regime in a dangerous situation because if vigilantes confront unveiled women aggressively or violently, citizens may place blame for these individuals’ actions on the regime and subsequently call for new anti-regime demonstrations.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has been conspicuously absent from ongoing intra-regime discussions about the hijab, possibly to shield himself from criticisms of the regime’s uncompromising stance on this issue. Khamenei has not explicitly mentioned the hijab in recent weeks, although he did indirectly reference Iran’s “cultural issues” in his Nowrouz message on April 21.[20] Numerous Friday prayer leaders—who receive guidance for the content of their sermons from the Office of the Supreme Leader—emphasized the issue of mandatory veiling in their sermons on March 31, however.[21] Khamenei’s relative silence on the hijab issue may indicate that he recognizes that the regime’s reinvigorated effort to enforce the hijab law is unpopular among segments of the Iranian population. He may therefore be attempting to disassociate himself from this issue to maintain public support. Khamenei’s silence is particularly noteworthy given that he publicly reiterated the mandatory hijab requirement in January 2022 as the Mahsa Amini protest movement was culminating, as CTP previously reported.[22] Khamenei may perceive that there is more resistance to the hijab law among Iranian women now than there was in January, although there is no evidence to support this hypothesis. Regime officials close to Khamenei have additionally attempted to portray the supreme leader as a fatherly and loving figure in recent days, possibly to downplay Khamenei’s role in directing the regime’s crackdown on hijab violations. Supreme Leader Office Head Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani stated on April 3 that “Khamenei is extremely kind and cannot tolerate seeing children cry.”[23] Golpayegani added that Khamenei responds to the hardships and unkindness of people with patience and forgiveness. [24]

Key Takeaways

- The Israel Defense Force conducted an airstrike targeting at least two Iranian-backed militia bases in western Syria on April 1, 2023.
- Iranian and Iranian-backed media outlets reported on deaths of martyrs in Israeli attacks, likely to set conditions for an attack on US or coalition forces.
- The Iranian regime has cohered around a collective approach to enforcing mandatory veiling laws that frames the laws as the will of the people, possibly to avoid igniting another round of anti-regime protests.
- At least four protests occurred in four cities across three provinces on April 3.
- CTP did not record protest activity that met its reporting thresholds on April 1 and 2.
- Social media users circulated footage of Iranian security personnel dispersing crowds celebrating Sizdah Behdar—an outdoor picnicking holiday marking the end of the Persian New Year—in Alborz, Gilan, and Tehran Provinces on April 2.
- A group of Iranian legal advisors claimed on April 2 that Basij members had attempted to coerce detained anti-regime protesters to join the organization upon their release.
- President Ebrahim Raisi appointed former Farhangian University President Reza Morad Sahraei as education minister on April 3 following Education Minister Yousef Nouri's April 2 resignation.
- Iranian media reported a chemical poisoning attack on Iranian school girls in Naghdeh City, West Azerbaijan Province on April 3, marking the first of such attacks since March 13.
- The Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry appointed former Ambassador to Kazakhstan Mojtaba Demirchilou as Ambassador to Azerbaijan on April 1 amid heightened tensions between Baku and Tehran.
- Iranian officials and media confirmed reports of imminent meetings between high-ranking Iranian and Saudi officials.
- UK-based *Amwaj Media* reported that Iran has asked Iraq to play a broader mediator role between Iran and the Arab world, citing a source in the Iraqi National Security Council.
- Iraqi Security Forces arrested Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) members that were reportedly planning an attack on Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in Buhriz, Diyala Province, while impersonating ISIS militants, likely to misdirect their participation in sectarian violence in Diyala.
- Iranian media circulated conflicting reports of a purported encounter between Iranian air defense networks and a US aircraft over the Sea of Oman on April 2.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least four protests occurred in four cities across three provinces on April 3. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Hamedan City, Hamedan Province[25]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Teachers

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[26]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Shoush, Khuzestan Province[27]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Firouzeh, Razavi Khorasan Province[28]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Teachers conducting a sit-in



CTP did not record protest activity that met its reporting thresholds on April 1 and 2.

Social media users circulated footage of Iranian security personnel dispersing crowds celebrating Sizdah Behdar—an outdoor picnicking holiday marking the end of the Persian New Year—in Alborz, Gilan, and Tehran Provinces on April 2.[29] Security personnel violently dispersed at least two gatherings in Karaj, Alborz Province, where they reportedly brutally arrested one individual, and Masouleh, Gilan Province, where they reportedly threatened crowds with weapons and tear gas.[30] Iranian security personnel likely targeted Sizdah Behdar--which coincided with Ramadan-- gatherings because some participants may have flouted mandatory fasting during Ramadan. Iranian officials have previously described eating in public places during Ramadan as a crime and have warned against such activity within the past several weeks.[31]

A group of Iranian legal advisors claimed on April 2 that Basij members had attempted to coerce detained anti-regime protesters to join the organization upon their release. Formerly detained protesters told *Dadban* their local Basij organization following their release.[32] CTP cannot confirm the veracity of this report.

President Ebrahim Raisi appointed former Farhangian University President Reza Morad Sahraei as education minister on April 3 following Education Minister Yousef Nouri's April 2 resignation.[33] Nouri's resignation follows First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber prior criticisms blaming the Education Ministry for a delay in teacher payments on March 30.

[34] Iranian media circulated reports on the same date that a number of contracted teachers had not received their salaries in six months.[35]

Iranian media reported a chemical poisoning attack on Iranian school girls in Naghdeh City, West Azerbaijan Province, on April 3, marking the first of such attacks since March 13.[36]

Economic Affairs

The Iranian rial appreciated from 549,500 rials to one US dollar on March 31 to 518,000 rials to one US dollar on April 3, marking 5.7 percent appreciation within this timeframe.[37]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

The Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry appointed former Ambassador to Kazakhstan Mojtaba Demirchilou as Ambassador to Azerbaijan on April 1 amidst heightened tensions between Baku and Tehran. Demirchilou replaced Abbas Mousavi, who occupied the position for three years.[38] Foreign Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanani had previously condemned Israeli Foreign Affairs Minister Eli Cohen's March 29 discussion on Iran with his Azerbaijani counterpart Jeyhun Bayramov on March 31. Kanani warned that Azerbaijan was "expected to avoid the trap of enemy relations" and added that Iran would be unable to remain indifferent to improved Israeli-Azerbaijani ties.[39] Uncorroborated reports on April 3 stated that three of the four individuals that Azerbaijani security services arrested for shooting Azerbaijani Parliamentarian Fazil Mustafa on March 28 were working on the order of Iranian security forces. Several Azerbaijani parliamentarians have additionally blamed Iran for the attack.[40]

Iranian officials and media confirmed reports of forthcoming meetings between high-ranking Iranian and Saudi officials. Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian and Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan agreed to meet "in the coming days" during a phone call on April 2.[41] First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber separately announced on April 3 that President Ebrahim Raisi has accepted Saudi King Mohammad bin Salman's invitation to visit Riyadh at an unspecified date.[42]

UK-based Amwaj Media reported that Iran has asked Iraq to play a broader mediator role between Iran and the Arab world, citing a source in the Iraqi National Security Council. Amwaj reported that Baghdad had previously hosted three rounds of talks between Jordan and Iran and prepared for talks between Iran and Egypt, which were placed on hold due to domestic political developments in Iraq. The source claimed that Iran and Bahrain also recently exchanged several messages. The article framed former Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi's February 21 visit to Tehran as a demonstration of Iraq's efforts to mediate talks between Iran and the Arab world. It also noted that Kadhimi discussed improving ties between Iran and Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE with Iranian officials on his trip.[43]

Foreign Affairs Ministry Senior Advisor Ali Asghar Khaji headed Iran's delegation in a quadrilateral meeting between Iran, Russia, Turkey, and Syria in Moscow, Russia on April 3. Kahji and his Russian, Turkish, and Syrian counterparts discussed resolving tensions between Damascus and Ankara.[44] Khaji also discussed ongoing events in Syria in a separate meeting with Special Envoy of the Russian President for Middle East and Africa Mikhail Bogdanov.[45]

External Security and Military Affairs

Iraqi Security Forces arrested Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) members that were reportedly planning an attack on Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in Buhriz, Diyala Province, while impersonating ISIS militants, likely to misdirect their participation in sectarian violence in Diyala.[46] The PMF is a loose coalition of Iranian-backed militias. Badr Organization and PMF-affiliated leadership erroneously blamed ISIS militants for a massacre of Sunni civilians on February 20 and a series of assassinations.[47] However, ISIS failed to claim the February 20 attack deviating from the group's normal behavior.[48] Al Qaeda in Iraq and Shia militias

manipulated Diyala's multi-ethnic and sectarian demographics from 2006 to 2007 by conducting targeted attacks to maintain its footprint in the province as a security guarantor.[49]

Iranian media circulated conflicting reports of a purported encounter between Iranian air defense networks and a US aircraft over the Sea of Oman on April 2. Semi-official *ISNA* reported that Iran's air defense network issued a warning to an American Lockheed EP-3 aircraft over the Sea of Oman on April 3. *ISNA* emphasized that the air defense network issued the warning "far" before the aircraft reached Iran's territorial waters.[50] IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* reported that the Artesh Navy issued a warning to the US "spy plane" after it had already approached the border of Iranian airspace.[51] Iranian reporting on the purported encounter may be a demonstration of military strength following multiple Israeli airstrikes on Iranian targets in Syria within the past several days.

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Iran Update, April 4, 2023

Iran Update, April 4, 2023

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Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei reaffirmed his commitment to enforcing the mandatory hijab law during a meeting with senior regime officials on April 4. Khamenei framed the law as both a political and religious requirement.[1] He added that the hijab issue “will definitely be solved,” but did not specify how exactly regime officials should go about enforcing mandatory veiling.[2] It is noteworthy that Khamenei provided no specific guidance on how to enforce the hijab law given that regime officials have articulated different theories on how to do so in recent days. Khamenei’s explicit endorsement of mandatory veiling on April 4 differs from his vague reference to this issue in his Nowrouz address on March 21. Khamenei previously implied that the economy should be the primary topic of intra-regime debate in his Nowrouz address, as CTP previously reported, implying that socio-cultural issues, such as the hijab requirement, are not up for discussion.[3] Khamenei contrastingly stated on April 4 that “choosing an economic slogan does not mean disregarding social and cultural issues.”[4] Khamenei may have made this clarification to explain to regime officials that they can discuss the hijab—in addition to the economy—so long as their discussions about veiling are in the context of enforcing the hijab law.

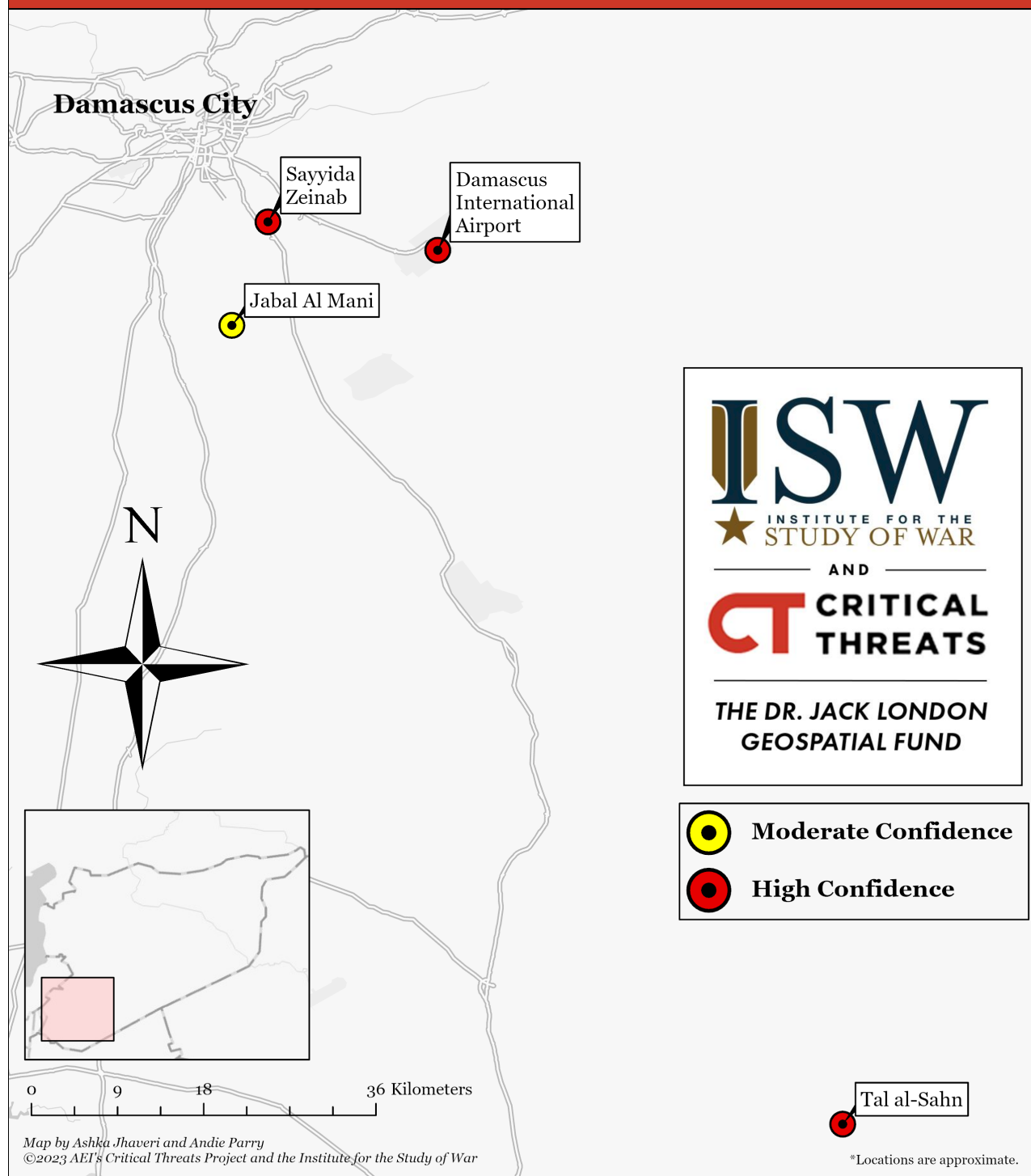
Khamenei identified solving Iran’s economic problems as critical to promoting societal cohesion and stability. Khamenei stated that “economic problems...have a negative effect on the people’s culture, thoughts, and behavior.”[5] He further stated that solving Iran’s economic problems will give the population a “feeling of comfort.”[6] These statements suggest that Khamenei may believe that the public will accept—or at least be more amenable to—various social restrictions, such as the hijab law, if the regime can meaningfully improve the economic health and trajectory of the country. Khamenei similarly stated in his March 21 Nowrouz message that addressing the people’s economic problems will largely solve Iran’s political and sociocultural issues, as CTP previously reported.[7] Khamenei separately called on “the presidential administration, Parliament, Judiciary, and all institutions” to prioritize realizing the new year’s slogan—“control inflation and increase economic production”—in his April 4 speech.[8] Khamenei may have been responding to regime officials’ overwhelming focus on the hijab in recent days and implicitly instructing them to redirect their attention to the economy.[9]

Iranian leaders have continued overtly threatening to retaliate against recent Israeli airstrikes in Syria but have not yet done so. Several senior IRGC leaders repeated on April 4 their commitment to retaliation in response to Israel killing two IRGC officers in airstrikes in Damascus on March 30.[10] These remarks follow several days of Iranian officials and state media publicly vowing to seek to revenge, as CTP has previously reported.[11] This sustained rhetoric is likely creating an expectation among domestic supporters that the regime will respond in some way, and Iranian leaders may feel pressure to meet this expectation.

Iranian leaders have several retaliation options, which they are likely weighing. Regime officials have frequently warned that they hold the US accountable for Israeli airstrikes and could attack US positions in Syria in response.[12] Iran has likely acted on this threat previously, such as when Iranian-backed militants conducted a kamikaze drone attack on a US base in northeastern Syria,

killing an American contractor, on March 23.[13] Iran could alternatively target Israeli personnel or interests abroad, as it has tried to do in the past.[14]

Israeli Airstrikes in Southern Syria April 03, 2023



Israel has likely continued its air campaign against the IRGC in Syria and especially against air defense assets. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) likely conducted four airstrikes against Iranian-affiliated military positions around Damascus and southern Syria, including two air defense sites, on April 3.[15] Iranian officials and state media have continually expressed their intent to help the Assad regime strengthen its air defense capabilities in recent months—likely on the theory that such support may deter further Israeli airstrikes. Deputy Defense Minister for International Affairs Brigadier General Hamzeh Ghalandari emphasized the readiness of the regime to support such efforts on April 4.[16] Iranian state media reported in February 2023 that Tehran will likely

sell Damascus air defense equipment, such as radars and surface-to-air missiles, as CTP previously reported.[17]

Key Takeaways

- Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei reaffirmed his commitment to enforcing the mandatory hijab law during a meeting with senior regime officials.
- Khamenei identified solving Iran's economic problems as critical to promoting societal cohesion and stability.
- Iranian leaders have continued overtly threatening to retaliate against recent Israeli airstrikes in Syria but have not yet done so.
- Israel has likely continued its air campaign against the IRGC in Syria and especially against air defense assets.
- At least one protest occurred in one city across one province.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least one protest occurred in one city across one province on April 4. CTP assesses with low confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Babol, Mazandaran Province[18]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Nurses



Iranian media reported three school poisonings in Naghdeh, West Azerbaijan Province; Tabriz, East Azerbaijan Province; and Esfahan City, Esfahan Province on April 4, marking the second consecutive day of attacks since March 13.[19] Iranian media also reported a school

poisoning attack in Naghdeh City, West Azerbaijan Province on April 3, as CTP previously reported.[20]

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - April 4



Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf began to articulate a nuanced approach to enforcing the mandatory hijab law on April 4. Ghalibaf criticized the morality patrol program, describing it as “ineffective and expensive.”[21] He instead advocated for an approach that distinguishes between women who overtly violate the law and those who only partially veil. Ghalibaf stated that the state security apparatus should respond to the former with “negative” treatment and to the latter with “positive” treatment.[22] He did not elaborate what exactly he meant by these statements, but his combined statements indicate a preference for a more tempered regime approach that does not rely at least primarily on morality police.

Former President Hassan Rouhani called for a “referendum” on the regime’s domestic, economic, and foreign policies during a meeting with former members of his administration on April 4.[23] Rouhani using the term “referendum” is noteworthy given that some dissident political figures, such as reformist leader Mir Hossein Mousavi and prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid, have used the term in recent months in the context of calling for a referendum on whether to continue the Islamic Republic. Rouhani’s rhetoric was less extreme and consistent with his previous calls for major changes in regime behavior.[24] Rouhani also called for free elections and using foreign policy as an instrument for solving Iran’s economic problems.

Economic Affairs

President Ebrahim Raisi held a meeting with Iranian entrepreneurs on April 3 to discuss his administration's economic policy.[25] Raisi announced plans to hold weekly and quarterly meetings with key domestic producers to ensure that their needs are met. He also reiterated his government's commitment to invigorating the Iranian private sector without exactly specifying how. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and other regime officials have recently expressed support for a vague idea of "privatization" without elaborating further, as CTP previously reported.[26]

The Iranian rial appreciated from 518,000 rials to one US dollar on April 3 to 506,500 rials to one US dollar on April 4.[27] Iranian state media attributed the appreciation of the rial to "the exit of excited buyers from and increase in sellers in the currency market." [28]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Foreign Affairs Ministry Political Deputy Ali Bagheri Kani announced the appointment of Reza Ameri as ambassador to the UAE on April 4—the first Iranian ambassador to the UAE in eight years.[29] Ameri was previously the director general of the Foreign Affairs Ministry's Iranians Abroad Office. Iran has recently engaged in a series of diplomatic initiatives to improve its relations with the Persian Gulf states, including Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani's March 16 visit to the UAE, which CTP previously reported.[30]

Iranian Ambassador to Oman Ali Najafi met with his Saudi, Syrian, and Iraqi counterparts in the Iraqi Embassy in Muscat on April 4.[31] Iraqi Ambassador to Oman Ghais al Amiri stated that the ambassadors discussed "the good opportunities that await the countries in the region in the shadow of peace," likely referencing the March 10 normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

UK-based outlet *Amwaj Media* reported that the Iranian and Saudi foreign affairs ministers will likely meet in Beijing on April 6.[32] Iranian and Saudi officials alternatively proposed to meet in Baghdad, Geneva, or Muscat. Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian and Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan agreed to meet "in the coming days" during a phone call on April 2, as CTP previously reported.[33]

External Security and Military Affairs

Iraqi protesters held demonstrations from April 1 through April 3 against alleged efforts by the Shia Coordination Framework to normalize Iraq's relations with Israel, possibly instigated by Shia cleric Moqtada al Sadr. Unverified reports claimed that the Iraqi government plans to normalize relations with Israel following the US-led virtual 2023 Summit for Democracy that Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attended.[34] Several hundred supporters of prominent Shia cleric Moqtada al Sadr demonstrated in Nasiriyah, Dhi Qar Province on April 1 against the reported normalization by burning Israeli flags and carrying pictures of Sadr.[35] Over 100 pro-Sadr protesters gathered on April 2 in Sadr City, Baghdad waving banners and played music in protest of the reports of normalization and were seen waving banners with Sadr's image in his support.[36] An unidentified Sadrist Brigade released a video statement showing armed militia members threatening to resist the Shia Coordination Framework's normalization with Israel.[37] Sadrist Movement followers also protested on April 3 in Basra showing support for Sadr and rejecting normalization by burning the Israeli and US flags.[38]

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Iran Update, April 5, 2023

Iran Update, April 5, 2023

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Student poisonings have resumed in Iran after approximately three weeks without reported incidents, indicating that the regime has failed to take the necessary security measures to permanently prevent these attacks. CTP recorded ten student poisoning cases on April 5, four cases on April 4, and one case on April 3.[1] The April 3 chemical poisoning attack on Iranian school girls in Naghadeh, West Azerbaijan Province marked the first of such attacks since March 13, as CTP previously reported.[2] The pause in student poisonings between March 13 and April 3 roughly corresponds to the Iranian New Year holiday between March 20 and April 2, suggesting that the recent respite from student poisonings was not due to the regime's ability to effectively crack down on the perpetrators of these attacks, but because schools were not in session. The resumption of student poisoning attacks also indicates that the network targeting Iranian school girls still exists and retains the ability to operate in Iran.

There are numerous similarities between the most recent student poisonings and the poisonings that occurred between December 2022 and March 2023. Students poisoned in recent days have reported symptoms—such as smelling a strange smell before becoming ill, dizziness, and headaches—which match the symptoms experienced by students poisoned in March.[3] Students from schools where poisoning attacks have occurred in recent days have additionally reported that school principals confiscated their cellphones to prevent the dissemination of news about the attacks.[4] School officials reportedly behaved in a similarly abnormal and unsympathetic manner during the peak of student poisonings in early March, as CTP previously reported.[5] Regime officials have largely disregarded the resumption of student poisoning attacks. Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi stated on April 5 that he “could not confirm” the poisoning of students in Tabriz, East Azerbaijan Province. Vahidi added that “further investigations should take place,” but did not exhibit any sense of urgency regarding the recent attacks.[6] The regime's lack of response suggests that it is incapable of preventing such attacks, does not want to acknowledge the existence of a network capable of instilling fear into the Iranian people, and still tolerates the poisoning of Iranian schoolgirls.

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - April 5



Map: AEI's Critical Threats Project • Source: 1500tasvir, Hengaw Organization for Human Rights, Iranworkers, BBC Persian • Created with Datawrapper

Iranian media and officials provided conflicting reports on an alleged attempted drone strike on a Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) facility in Esfahan City, Esfahan Province on April 4. IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* confirmed reports that Iran's air defenses shot down a drone targeting the MODAFL's Amir al-Momenin (AaM) complex on April 5.[7] The US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control designated the AaM complex as one of Iran's ballistic missile research and development facilities on July 28, 2017. [8] Esfahan Province Governorate Security Deputy Mohammadreza Jannashari denied the report and stated that regime security forces are prepared to "deal with any threats." [9] Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi separately stated that such reports required further investigation without confirming or denying the veracity of the report.[10] Iranian officials provided similarly ambiguous and conflicting responses to previous reports of drone attacks on military facilities.[11]

Israel previously conducted a kamikaze drone attack on a military munitions factory near Esfahan City on January 28, as CTP previously reported.[12] Israel also conducted a drone attack on two IRGC complexes in the vicinity of Karaj, Alborz Province on February 23.[13] Reports of a possible drone strike on the AaM complex coincide with recent escalations between Iran and Israel in Syria.

Key Takeaways

- Student poisonings have resumed in Iran after approximately three weeks of no reported incidents, indicating that the regime has failed to take the necessary security measures to permanently prevent these attacks.
- Iranian media and officials provided conflicting reports on an alleged attempted drone strike on a Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) facility in Esfahan City, Esfahan Province on April 4.
- At least seven protests occurred in four cities across four provinces.
- Senior regime officials publicly demonstrated their commitment to fulfilling Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's economic and socio-cultural visions articulated in his April 4 speech.
- The Iranian rial depreciated from 506,500 rials to one US dollar on April 4 to 511,500 rials to one US dollar.
- Iranian media and officials continued to engage with and promote rapprochement with Gulf states.
- 210 Iranian parliamentarians signed a statement condemning Azerbaijan's newly opened embassy in Israel.
- A Hamas delegation led by Hamas Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh arrived in Beirut.
- The *Eye of Euphrates* reported that approximately 25 IRGC missile and air defense specialists arrived in Abu Kamal, Deir ez Zor Province.
- Former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki signaled that he is prepared to use force to consolidate his and his State of Law political coalition's position in Iraqi politics.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least seven protests occurred in four cities across four provinces on April 5. CTP assesses with high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[14]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province[15]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Individuals gathered around the grave of killed protester Aram Habibi

Mashhad, Razavi Khorasan Province[16]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Khorasan Razavi Construction Engineering Organization employees

Tehran City, Tehran Province[17]

- **Size:** Medium
- **Demographic:** Anti-regime protesters commemorating the birthday of killed protester Hamid Reza Rouhi

CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Mashhad, Razavi Khorasan Province[18]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Imam Reza Hospital employees on strike

Mashhad, Razavi Khorasan Province[19]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Ghaem Hospital employees

Tehran City, Tehran Province[20]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Darugar Company employees



Senior regime officials publicly demonstrated their commitment to fulfilling Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's economic and socio-cultural visions articulated in his April 4 speech.

Khamenei emphasized the importance of resolving Iran's economic problems and reiterated his determination to enforce mandatory veiling after a period of relative silence on the issue in yesterday's speech.[21] Supreme National Security Council-affiliated *Nour News* notably framed Khamenei's address as principally focused on the economy.[22]

Regime officials expressed their readiness to execute Khamenei's plans on April 5. President Ebrahim Raisi characterized Khamenei's speech as "a beacon of light for everyone" in a cabinet meeting on April 5 and ordered executive agencies to present their plans for fulfilling Khamenei's vision within 25 days.[23] Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, denied rumors that he opposed passing a mandatory hijab bill through parliament and expressed his commitment to expediting the legislative process if such a bill was introduced, for "the statements of the leader of the revolution are clear." [24] Vice President for Women and Family Affairs Ensieh Khazali stated on April 5 that the Interior Ministry formed a "headquarters" to enforce mandatory veiling through "educational, skills training, and support aspects," though she did not specify the headquarters will operate.[25]

Economic Affairs

The Iranian rial depreciated from 506,500 rials to one US dollar on April 4 to 511,500 rials to one US dollar on April 5.[26]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Iranian media and officials continued to engage with and promote rapprochement with Gulf states. National Security and Foreign Policy Committee Member Yaghub Reza Zadeh stated on April 5 that UAE President Mohammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan will soon travel to Tehran to meet President Raisi at an unspecified date.[27] I RGC-affiliated media circulated Saudi government-owned *Ashraq al Awasat* newspaper reporting's that Iranain Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian will meet with his Saudi counterpart Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud in Beijing, China on April 6.[28] IRGC-affiliated media separately published an op-ed on April 5 promoting the formulation of a "broad Arab-Islamic Front" to counter Israeli influence and end Iranian isolation in the region.[29]

210 Iranian parliamentarians signed a statement condemning Azerbaijan's newly opened embassy in Israel. The statement threatened that the embassy opening may have many "negative political consequences" for Azerbaijan.[30] The statement follows several days of heightened tensions between Tehran and Baku. Foreign Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanani had previously condemned Israeli Foreign Affairs Minister Eli Cohen's March 29 discussion on Iran with his Azerbaijani counterpart Jeyhun Bayramov on March 31. Kanani warned that Azerbaijan was "expected to avoid the trap of enemy relations" and added that Iran would be unable to remain indifferent to improved Israeli-Azerbaijani ties. Uncorroborated reports on April 3 separately stated that three of the four individuals that Azerbaijani security services arrested for shooting Azerbaijani Parliamentarian Fazil Mustafa on March 28 were working on the order of Iranian security forces. Several Azerbaijani parliamentarians have additionally blamed Iran for the attack, as CTP previously reported.[31]

External Security and Military Affairs

A Hamas delegation led by Hamas Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh arrived in Beirut on April 5.[32] Hamas Spokesperson in Lebanon Walid Kilani said that Haniyeh intends to follow up on his previous meetings with Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) officials to "coordinate stances" against Israel. Haniyeh last traveled to Beirut on June 21, 2022, when he met with LH Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah and officials from multiple Palestinian resistance groups.[33]

Haniyeh's visit coincides with an outbreak of violence between Israel and Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and other Palestinian resistance militias. PIJ militants fired as many as 15 rockets into Israel from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip on April 4 and April 5 in response to Israeli security forces raiding the Al Aqsa Mosque and detaining approximately 350 people. [34] The Israel Defense Force launched airstrikes against targets in the Gaza Strip on April 5 in response to the rocket fire.[35]

The *Eye of Euphrates* reported that approximately 25 Iranian missile and air defense specialists arrived in Abu Kamal, Deir ez Zor Province on April 4.[36] Anonymous sources told *Eye of Euphrates* that the specialists entered Syria via the Al Qaim border crossing in a bus escorted by a security convoy. The outlet also claimed that the specialists will subsequently travel to unspecified sites in Deir ez Zor, Homs, Daraa, and As Suwayda provinces.[37] CTP cannot verify the accuracy of this report.

Former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki signaled that he is prepared to use force to consolidate his and the Coordination Framework's position in Iraqi politics. Maliki threatened to "take up arms" against those attempting to undermine the Iranian-aligned Shia Coordination Framework's political agenda on April 5.[38] Maliki also called on independent political parties to ally themselves with the Coordination Framework instead of protesting, in reference to anti-Coordination Framework protests that took place from March 20 to 28 likely with support from the

Sadrist Movement and Tishreen Movement.[39] Maliki similarly signaled a willingness to use force in the leadup to the August 2022 armed confrontations in Baghdad between his militia and that of Iraqi nationalist Shia cleric Moqtada al Sadr.[40]

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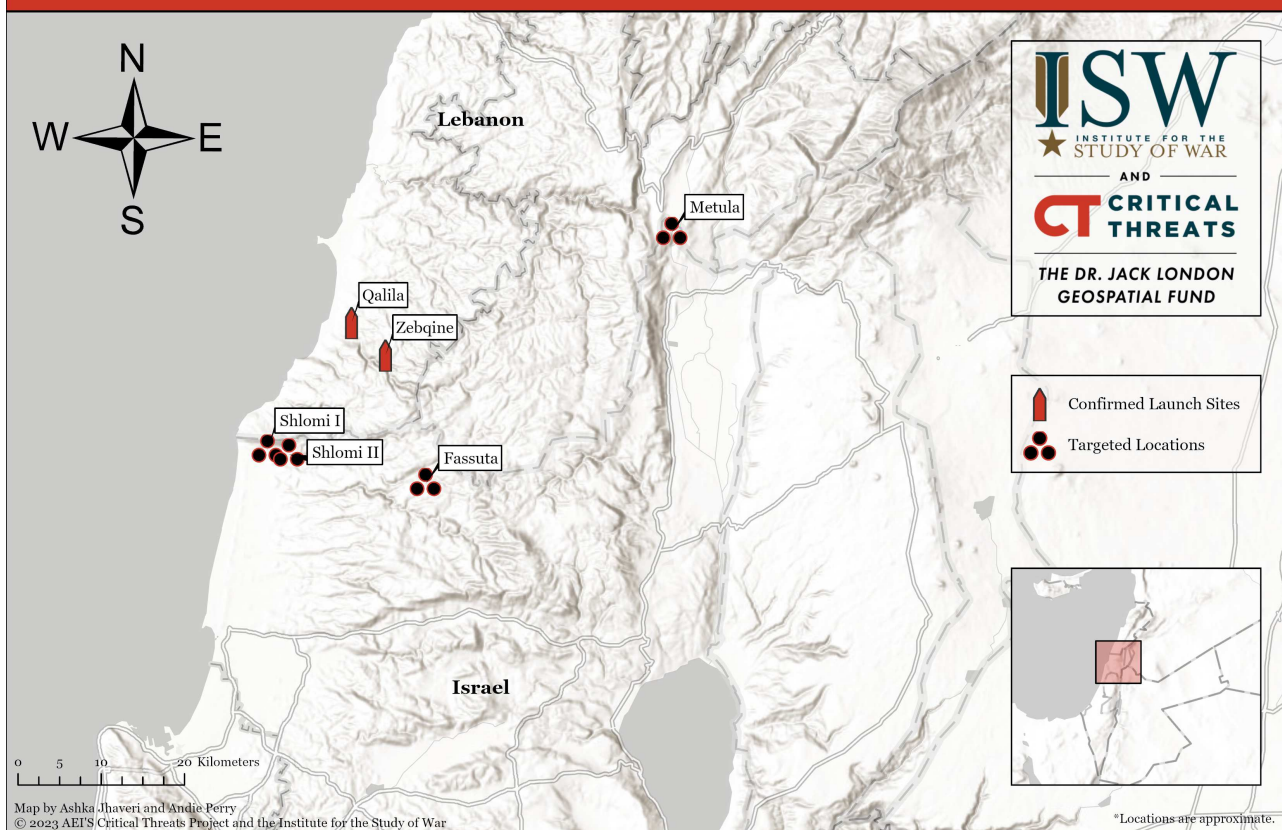
Iran Update, April 6, 2023

Zachary Coles, Amin Soltani, Annika Ganzeveld, and Nicholas Carl

The Iran Updates are produced by the Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute with support from the Institute for the Study of War (ISW). To receive Iran Updates via email, please subscribe [here](#).

Hamas conducted a large-scale rocket attack from southern Lebanon into Israel on April 6 possibly as part of the larger pattern of escalation between Iran and Israel occurring throughout 2023. Hamas and other unidentified Palestinian militants launched at least 34 rockets into northern Israel, with four landing in Israeli territory and injuring at least three people.[1] Israeli forces intercepted around 25 rockets, and several more fell short of the border. Hamas launched an additional two rockets into Israel several hours later. Hamas spokesperson Hazem Qassem framed the attacks as retaliation for Israeli raids and mass arrests inside the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem on April 4-5.[2] Palestinian Islamic Jihad militants launched as many as 15 rockets from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip on April 5 in response to the raids, as CTP previously reported.[3]

Hamas Attacks Into Northern Israel April 6, 2023, as of 5:00 PM EST



Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) likely had advance knowledge of the attacks and may have even greenlighted it. Hamas Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh traveled to Lebanon on April 5, as CTP previously reported, visiting Beirut and southern Lebanon.[4] Haniyeh reportedly met with senior LH officials, such as Hassan Nasrallah, and Hamas militants during the visits, possibly to discuss and prepare for the attacks.[5] The fact that Hamas was able to conduct a second rocket attack several hours after the first one without LH intervening to prevent it further indicates that LH may have been complicit in the operation. Iranian leaders would have been presumably aware of the planned attacks as well if Hamas did, in fact, coordinate with Nasrallah.

Iran and LH may have encouraged or tacitly approved the rocket attacks in retaliation for a series of Israeli airstrikes in Syria in recent weeks. Israel conducted airstrikes around Damascus on March 30, killing two IRGC officers.[6] Iranian leaders have acknowledged that Israel killed these officers and have vowed publicly in recent days to retaliate, as CTP previously reported.[7] Iranian leaders could portray the attacks as at least part of their retaliation regardless of whether they had any meaningful role in the planning and execution of the operation.

If Iran and LH were, in fact, involved in the attack, it signifies them expanding the geographic scope of their escalation pattern with Israel. The ongoing cycle of violence between Tehran and Tel Aviv has occurred primarily in Syria throughout 2023 thus far. Tehran may be expanding the geographic scope of the conflict to deter further Israeli action against Iranian interests in Syria. Involving Lebanon and Palestine in the escalation cycle threatens Israel with spreading the conflict further to involve additional crises. Conducting the rocket attacks from Lebanon has the added effect of raising the cost of certain Israeli responses given that retaliatory airstrikes into Lebanon would risk triggering an intensifying conflict with Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian militant groups.

Key Takeaways

- **Hamas conducted a large-scale rocket attack from southern Lebanon into Israel on April 6 likely as part of a larger pattern of escalation between Iran and Israel occurring throughout 2023.**
- **At least eight protests occurred in eight cities across six provinces.**
- **Iranian security leaders continued emphasizing the internal security threat that they face in Sistan and Baluchistan Province.**
- **Iranian officials continue to frame the mandatory hijab law as a popular demand.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least eight protests occurred in eight cities across six provinces on April 6. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Oroumiyeh, West Azerbaijan Province[8]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Teachers

Kermanshah City, Kermanshah Province[9]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Teachers
- **Notes:** Protesting the arrest of teachers union activist Mohammad Habibi[10]

Robat Karim, Tehran Province[11]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Teachers

Hamedan City, Hamedan Province[12]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Teachers

Malayer, Hamedan Province[13]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Teachers

CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Hashtgerd, Alborz Province[14]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Savojbolagh Governate employees

Neyshabour, Khorasan Razavi Province[15]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Teachers

Karaj, Alborz Province[16]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Teachers



Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei invoked Persian nationalism during a meeting with Iranian poets and Persian literature teachers on April 5. Khamenei emphasized the importance of ancient Persian poets, such as Ferdowsi, Saadi, and Hafez, in Iranian history.[17] Khamenei separately compared the Mongols who attacked Persia centuries ago to the Islamic Republic's Western enemies, trying to emphasize a line of continuity from ancient Persia to the Islamic Republic. The supreme leader's website additionally used the term *Parsi*—instead of *Farsi*—for the word "Persian." [18] *Parsi* and *Farsi* both mean "Persian," but the former is written with the Persian letter 'p' which does not exist in Arabic and is thus considered a more traditional Persian representation of the word. Khamenei has previously incorporated Persian nationalist rhetoric into his statements, but his use of such rhetoric in his April 5 speech is noteworthy given recent regime efforts to convince the population that the national Iranian identity is inextricably interwoven with the regime's religious ideology.[19] President Ebrahim Raisi previously discussed "reviving the

national Iranian-Islamic identity” during a meeting with the Board of Trustees of the Iranology Foundation on March 16.[20] Numerous regime officials have separately emphasized the compatibility of Nowrouz—the Persian New Year with Zoroastrian origins—and Ramadan—one of the most important holidays in Islam—in recent weeks, as CTP previously reported.[21]

Iranian security leaders continued emphasizing the internal security threat that they face in Sistan and Baluchistan Province on April 6. Law Enforcement Deputy Commander Brigadier General Ghassem Rezaei warned that anti-regime groups seek to undermine stability in the province during a meeting with police officials in Iranshahr, Sistan and Baluchistan Province. [22] Rezaei added that the Law Enforcement Command will increase patrols throughout the province. IRGC Ground Forces Commander Brigadier General Mohammad Pak Pour similarly warned that foreign-backed actors are trying to destabilize the province on March 28, as CTP previously reported.[23] These security leaders are likely responding to the large-scale protests led by prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid in Zahedan every Friday.

Iranian officials continue to frame the mandatory hijab law as a popular demand. Culture and Islamic Guidance Minister Mohammad Mehdi Esmaili stated on April 6 that 80 percent of Iranian women support wearing the hijab.[24] Esmaili added that citizens have a greater desire to “preserve values” now than they did at the start of the Mahsa Amini protest movement in September 2022. Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei separately stated on April 6 that the vast majority of Iranians are religious but that even those who do not hold strong religious beliefs “still have honor.”[25] President Ebrahim Raisi previously stated on April 3 that most women and girls adhere to the hijab law and that observance of the hijab is a “common” demand, as CTP previously reported.[26] Regime officials have additionally doubled down on efforts to coopt pro-regime loyalists to enforce mandatory veiling in recent days. The regime will likely frame some private citizens’ enforcement of the mandatory hijab law as evidence that the regime’s desire to create a “chaste” society is shared by the public at large.

Economic Affairs

The Iranian rial appreciated from 511,500 rials to one US dollar on April 5 to 507,000 rials to one US dollar on April 6.[27]

Senior regime officials continue to reiterate their commitment to pursuing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s economic slogan for the new year of “control inflation and increase production.” First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber presided over a meeting organized around the theme of “activating the private sector to grow production and control inflation” on April 6. [28] He stated that the economic problems of the country will not be solved without the active participation and support of the private sector. Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei similarly stated on April 6 that resolving Iran’s economic issues is the key to addressing the rest of the country’s problems and called Khamenei’s new year slogan a “beacon” for the country. [29] Other senior regime officials have expressed similar sentiments on April 5, as CTP previously reported.[30] President Ebrahim Raisi expressed support for a vague idea of privatization and called for controlling inflation and increasing production during a joint meeting between administration officials and parliamentarians.[31] Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf called for the “popularization of the economy” during the same meeting.[32] Ghalibaf has become a key advocate for minimizing the roles of state and parastatal institutions in the economy, as CTP previously reported.[33]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian met with his Saudi counterpart Faisal bin Farhan in Beijing on April 6 to coordinate resuming diplomatic relations.[34] The two ministers discussed reimplementing their 2001 security cooperation agreement, expanding economic cooperation, resuming intercountry flights, reopening their embassies and consulates, and generally pursuing security and economic prosperity throughout the region. Iran and Saudi Arabia reestablished bilateral relations on March 10 after severing diplomatic ties in 2016, as CTP previously reported.[35] Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani signed a

tripartite agreement with Saudi National Security Advisor Musaid bin Mohammad al Aiban and senior Chinese diplomat Wang Yi in Beijing on the same day.[36]

The Azerbaijani Foreign Affairs Ministry expelled four Iranian embassy employees from Azerbaijan on April 6. The ministry described these employees as “persona non grata” and condemned Iran’s “recent provocative actions against Azerbaijan.”[37] Azerbaijani authorities separately arrested six individuals accused of working with Iran’s security services to overthrow the Azerbaijani government and install a religious regime on April 6.[38] Iran’s deteriorating relations with Azerbaijan coincide with the strengthening of Israeli-Azerbaijani ties in recent weeks. 210 Iranian parliamentarians issued a statement on April 5 warning Azerbaijan that it will face “negative political consequences” for opening an embassy in Tel Aviv.[39] Foreign Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanani separately warned that Iran will not remain indifferent to improved Israeli-Azerbaijani relations on March 31, as CTP previously reported.[40] Iranian officials have repeatedly claimed that Israeli intelligence services use Azerbaijan to organize and support covert operations in Iran.[41]

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Iran Update, April 7, 2023

Iran Update, April 7, 2023

Zachary Coles, Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, Johanna Moore, and Nicholas Carl

April 7, 2023, 8:00 pm ET

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Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) have indicated that they seek to contain and deescalate their recent flareup with Israel—at least for the moment—after Hamas conducted a large-scale rocket attack from southern Lebanon into northern Israel on April 6.[1] This suggests that Hamas and LH seek to avoid the current cycle of violence from becoming a larger conflict. Israel Defense Forces (IDF) responded to the rocket attack by conducting airstrikes on three Hamas military sites in southern Lebanon and multiple sites in the Hamas-run Gaza Strip on April 6.[2] Hamas conducted a small-scale rocket attack into Israel on April 7 in response to the Israeli airstrikes.[3] This attack came from the Gaza Strip—rather than southern Lebanon—and was significantly smaller than the rocket barrage on April 6. LH officials and media separately asserted that LH had not been involved in the April 6 rocket attack.[4]

Iran, Hamas, and LH do not appear to be conflating the attacks with the larger-scale conflict that has taken place in Syria during the last few weeks. Iranian state media and its proxies have framed the recent flareup around Israel's raid on the al-Aqsa mosque.[5] The Iranian regime has not linked Israeli attacks on Hamas to Israel's campaign against Iranian and Iranian-backed militants across Syria in recent weeks.[6]



The Israel-Hamas conflict may at least temporarily decelerate the Israel-Iran escalation cycle in Syria that has progressed in recent weeks. Israel killed two IRGC officers during airstrikes in Damascus on March 30, as CTP previously reported.[7] Iranian leaders have acknowledged the deaths and publicly vowed to retaliate, which may have created an expectation among regime supporters that Iran will attack Israel in some way.[8]

The escalation pattern between Iran and Israel in Syria is very likely to resume eventually, however, given that the principal drivers of armed conflict between the two remain present. Iran still seeks to entrench itself militarily in Syria by transferring precision-guided munitions, drones, and air defense systems to the country. Iran also relies on its proxy forces to secure positions along lines of communication in Syria and is aims to increase its influence over components of the Syrian Arab Army. Israel remains opposed to Iran's military presence in Syria and views some of Iran's actions, such as efforts to establish missile and air defense capabilities in Syria, as red lines. The targets of Israeli airstrikes since early January, which are shown on the map below, reveal Israel has given priority to disrupting Iranian arms convoys to Syria, as well as degrading military production and air defense capabilities in the country.



Regime officials are trying to unite Muslim countries to condemn Israel for its recent arrests and raids around the al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, possibly to impede the warming relations between Israel and Gulf states and Turkey. President Ebrahim Raisi called for an emergency Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) meeting to discuss how “to defend the oppressed nation

of Palestine and confront the crimes of the Zionist regime” during a phone call with Indonesian President Joko Widodo on April 6.[9] Raisi separately emphasized “the need for the convergence of Islamic countries” to confront Israel during phone calls with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov on April 7.[10] Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian additionally called for an emergency meeting of the foreign ministers from OIC member states to discuss Israeli arrests and raids during a phone call with OIC Secretary General Hissein Brahim Taha on April 7.[11] Taha announced during the same phone call that an OIC meeting will be held at the executive council level to discuss the Israeli actions on April 8.[12] The regime’s appeal to the OIC suggests that it seeks to use the Al Aqsa Mosque raid as well as the Israeli Defense Forces’ (IDF) strikes on the Gaza Strip and Lebanon on April 6 to unite Muslim countries against Israel.

Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid—who has inspired weekly Friday anti-regime protests in Zahedan since September 2022—may be losing momentum. CTP assesses with low confidence that a small silent protest occurred in Zahedan on April 7—marking the first time since September 2022 that CTP has had such uncertainty that Friday protests occurred in Zahedan.[13] The regime in Zahedan on April 7, which could explain the relative absence of evidence of Friday protests.[14] Videos of Friday protests have surfaced during previous regime censorship, however. Ramadan fasting continues which could also have decreased protester turnout.

Abdol Hamid has reiterated the key points of his highly critical anti-regime rhetoric during the past few weeks, possibly normalizing his rhetoric such that it is a less persuasive call to protest. He repeated many of his familiar criticisms during his April 7 sermon, ranging from the demand to release political prisoners to calls for an inclusive political system.[15] Abdol Hamid has sustained his criticism without calling for revolution, as CTP previously assessed.[16] He may be seeking to carve out a permanent political space for himself and his movement without instigating a violent regime crackdown. However, the normalization of what was once controversial and inspiring in his criticisms reduces the impetus for protests. Furthermore, sustained criticism, however controversial, can become uninspiring if it does not lead to tangible results. Abdol Hamid also echoed some unpopular regime rhetoric during his April 7 sermon by stating that he would be in favor of “intelligently” enforcing mandatory veiling. This remark could have had an adverse impact on protest turnout today.

The regime’s muted security posture in Zahedan may reflect the regime’s calculation that Abdol Hamid’s momentum is diminishing, rendering further securitization unnecessary and perhaps even counterproductive as it could instigate a popular backlash. The regime has decreased its security presence in Zahedan in recent weeks, as CTP previously reported.[17] The regime did not noticeably increase its security presence in Zahedan on April 7. Several regime security officials recently threatened to send additional security forces to the province but none of these threats have materialized.[18]

Key Takeaways

- **Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) have indicated that they seek to contain and deescalate their recent flareup with Israel—at least for the moment—after Hamas conducted a large-scale rocket attack from southern Lebanon into northern Israel.**
- **Regime officials are trying to cohere Muslim countries together to condemn Israel for its recent arrests and raids around the al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.**
- **Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid—who has inspired weekly Friday anti-regime protests in Zahedan since September 2022—may be losing momentum.**
- **Armenian media reported on April 7 that Armenian Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan will travel to Tehran on April 9 to meet with Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Admiral Ali Shamkhani.**
- **At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces on April 7. CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Galikash, Golestan Province[19]

- **Size:** Small

Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province[20]

- **Size:** Small



Economic Affairs

The Iranian rial appreciated slightly from 507,000 rials to one US dollar on April 6 to 505,500 rials to one US dollar on April 7.[21]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian met with his French counterpart Catherine Colonna in Beijing on April 7. Iranian state media reported that Abdollahian and Colonna discussed “regional and international issues of joint interest.”[22] However, the foreign ministers likely mainly discussed nuclear negotiations. The regime has consistently sought to prevent the United Kingdom, France, and Germany (the E3) from joining calls for a hardline stance on Iran’s nuclear program, as CTP previously reported.[23] Abdollahian’s discussion with Colonna on April 7 was thus likely a continuation of this regime effort.

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian met with his Chinese counterpart Qin Gang in Beijing on April 7. Abdollahian and Gang discussed energy, banking, and commercial cooperation. Abdollahian additionally called on the Iran-China Joint Economic Cooperation Commission to hold a meeting soon.[24] Iran-China Joint Chamber of Commerce head Majid Reza Hariri separately announced on April 7 the opening of a logistics park in Sarakhs, Khorasan Razavi Province as part of the development of the East-West Corridor.[25]

Armenian media reported on April 7 that Armenian Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan will travel to Tehran on April 9 to meet with Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani.[26]

External Security and Military Affairs

An unidentified actor conducted a drone airstrike on Sulaymaniyah International Airport in Iraqi Kurdistan on April 7.[27] Unverified reports claimed that the airstrike targeted Syrian Democratic Forces Commander Mazloun Abdi.[28] An unidentified Kurdistan Democratic Party official claimed that Abdi was on a three-day trip to Sulaymaniyah, according to a report from independent Iraqi media outlet *Nas News*. [29] Iraqi Kurdistan Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani condemned the airstrike as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty in a statement to *Nas News*. [30] The Turkish Foreign Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Ambassador Tanju Bilgic announced on April 5 that Turkey closed its airspace to all flights to and from Sulaymaniyah International Airport until July 3, 2023, due to PKK infiltration of the airport.[31] Sulaymaniyah airport Director Handren Hiwa Mufti rejected these Turkish claims.[32]

Regime officials hinted that they intend to use diplomatic means to impede normalization between Israel and Azerbaijan, which is unlikely to make Azerbaijan rethink its relationship with Israel. Foreign Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanani stated on April 7 that Iran feels obliged to confront countries that seek to improve their relations with Israel and that Iran will respond to the expulsion of four of its embassy employees from Baku on April 6 with “reciprocal diplomatic actions.”[33] 210 Iranian parliamentarians similarly warned Azerbaijan on April 5 that

opening its embassy in Tel Aviv will result in “negative political consequences,” as CTP previously reported.[34] These statements suggest that Iran may use political and diplomatic pressure—as opposed to force—to try to influence Azerbaijan’s relationship with Israel.

[1] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-april-6-2023>

[2] <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-intercepts-rocket-fire...>

[3] <https://t.me/AymanGouda/4917>; https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/idf-confirms-failed-launch-at-israel-from-gaza/

[4] <https://al-akhbar.com/Palestine/361026/%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AB%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D9%88%D8%AD%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9>;
<https://www.axios.com/2023/04/07/israel-strikes-lebanon-hamas-hezbollah-...>

[5] <https://mfa.ir/portal/NewsView/716527>; [https://mfa.ir/portal/NewsView/716527](https://www.irna.ir/news/85075769/%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D8%B6%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%87%D9%85%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D8%AF); <https://www.irna.ir/news/85075769/%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D8%B6%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%87%D9%85%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D8%AF>

[6] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-31-2023>

[7] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-april-3-2023>;
<https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-31-2023>

[8] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-april-4-2023>

[9] <https://www.irna.ir/news/1402011707749/%D8%B1%D8%A6%DB%8C%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B2%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%B1%DA%98%DB%8C%D9%85-%D8%B5%D9%87%DB%8C%D9%88%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%B3%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%BA%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%BA%DB%8C%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D8%A7%DA%A9%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%AA>

[10] <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/14020118000529/%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B3-%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%81%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%B1%D8%A6%DB%8C%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D9%88-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D8%AE%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D8%B1%DA%98%DB%8C%D9%85-%D8%B5%D9%87%DB%8C%D9%88%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%B3%D8%AA%DB%8C-> ;

<https://www.irna.ir/news/85076277/%DA%AF%D9%81%D8%AA-%D9%88%DA%AF%D9%88%DB%8C-%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%81%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%A2%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87->

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%D9%BE%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%88%D9%86

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[16] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-31-2023>

[17] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-24-2023>

[18] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-28-2023> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-april-6-2023>

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[21] <https://bonbast.com/>

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Iran Update, April 10, 2023

Iran Update, April 10, 2023

Amin Soltani, Annika Ganzeveld, Zachary Coles, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, James Motamed, and Frederick W. Kagan

April 10, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

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Palestinian militants expanded rocket attacks into Israel from southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip to the Golan Heights. Palestinian militants have carried out a series of rocket attacks into Israel since April 6 in retaliation for Israeli security forces raiding the Al Aqsa Mosque on April 4, as CTP previously reported.[1] The attacks have originated from multiple countries—including the potential Sinai Peninsula attack and a series of terrorist incidents in the West Bank on April 7[2]—and have targeted different areas in Israel. Palestinian militants launched two waves of two or three rockets into Israel from positions in the Golan Heights on April 8.[3] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) intercepted several of the rockets and the rest fell on uninhabited terrain near Avnei Eitan approximately five kilometers from the Sea of Galilee.[4] Iran-aligned Lebanese outlet *Al Mayadeen* claimed the Syria-based Quds Brigade militia carried out the attack.[5] A social media account affiliated with the group denied any involvement in the attack and stated it has no presence in southern Syria.[6] The IDF also downed a Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) quadcopter surveillance drone that crossed into northern Israel on April 7.[7] Israeli open-source intelligence social media accounts widely reported on April 8 that the Egyptian army thwarted an attempt by Iranian-backed Palestinian militants to conduct a rocket attack against Eilat in southern Israel.[8]

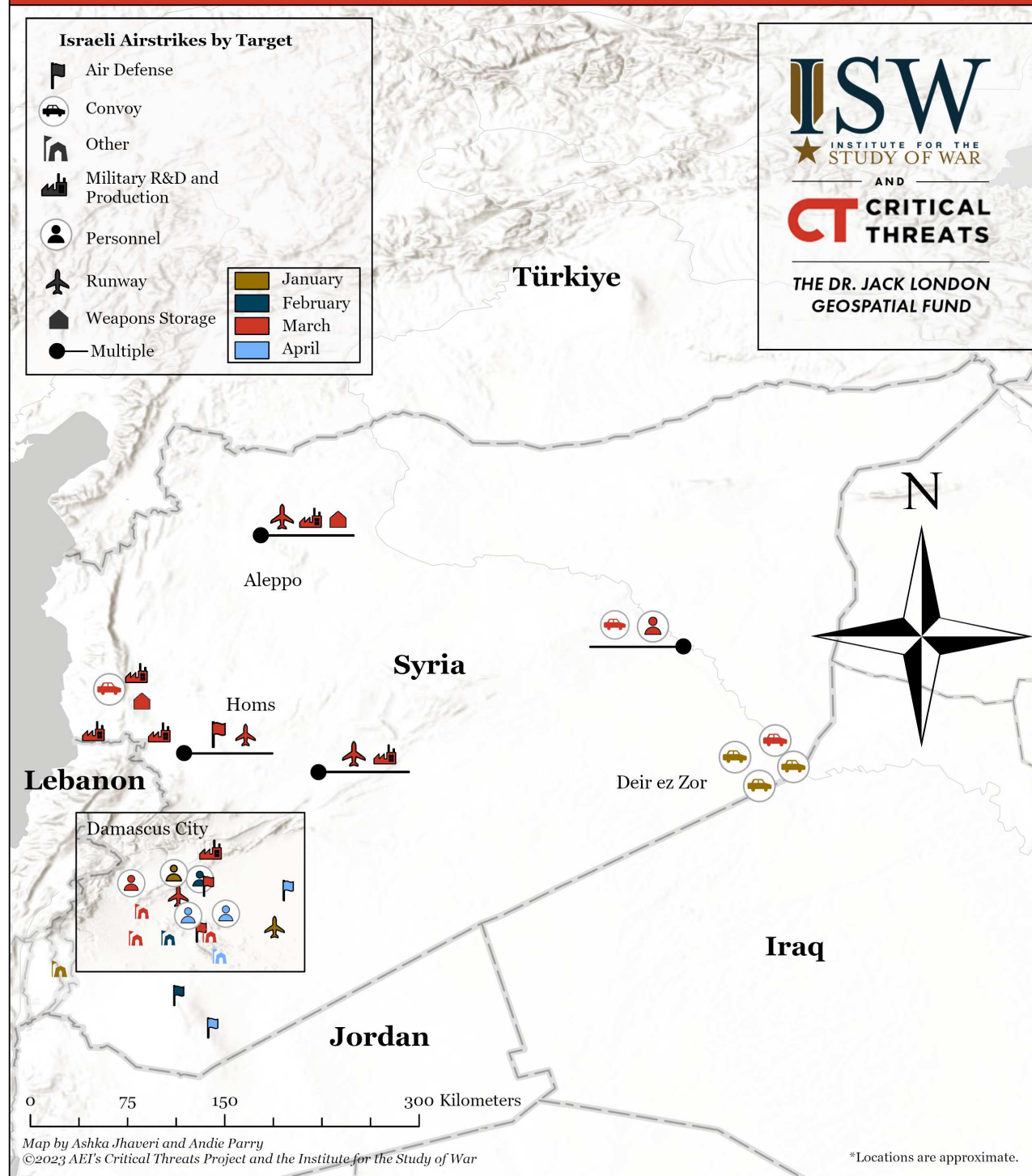
The IDF responded to the April 8 attacks by striking Syrian Arab Army (SAA) positions in southwest Syria. IDF artillery and combat drones targeted positions in the Golan Heights occupied by the SAA 90th and 52nd Brigades.[9] The IDF also conducted airstrikes on an SAA radar site, military positions occupied by the Iranian-backed SAA Fourth Division, and an unspecified target near the Yarmouk refugee camp outside Damascus.[10] One of the airstrikes destroyed a road leading to a villa located approximately five kilometers from the Syrian presidential palace and owned by Maher al Assad, the Fourth Division commander and brother of Syrian President Bashar al Assad.[11] CTP has not observed any evidence that SAA personnel were directly involved in the April 8 rocket attacks that originated from the Golan Heights.

Iran may view the Palestinian attacks into Israel as an opportunity to redouble its efforts to transfer air defense and precision-guided munitions (PGMs) into Syria. Iran has long sought to transfer air defense systems and PGMs into Syria and station the equipment at Iranian or Iranian-backed militia sites across the country.[12] CTP previously reported that the Iranian regime has also publicly expressed its intent to sell air defense systems to the Assad regime, although Iranian personnel may still operate the systems sold to the Assad regime.[13] CTP has also previously reported that Israel is conducting an intensive military campaign to disrupt Iranian transportation networks into Syria and destroy sites that house and produce advanced weapons in Syria.[14] The IDF's attacks into Syria have responded to Palestinian rocket attacks since April 6, however. The last target linked to advanced Iranian weapons that Israel struck was on March 22. Iran may perceive Israel's focus on the threat of Palestinian militia rocket attacks presents an opportunity to surge PGM and air defense assets into Syria. The maps below show the change in the targets Israel has struck in Syria since April 4, compared to the preceding three months. Israel has focused on

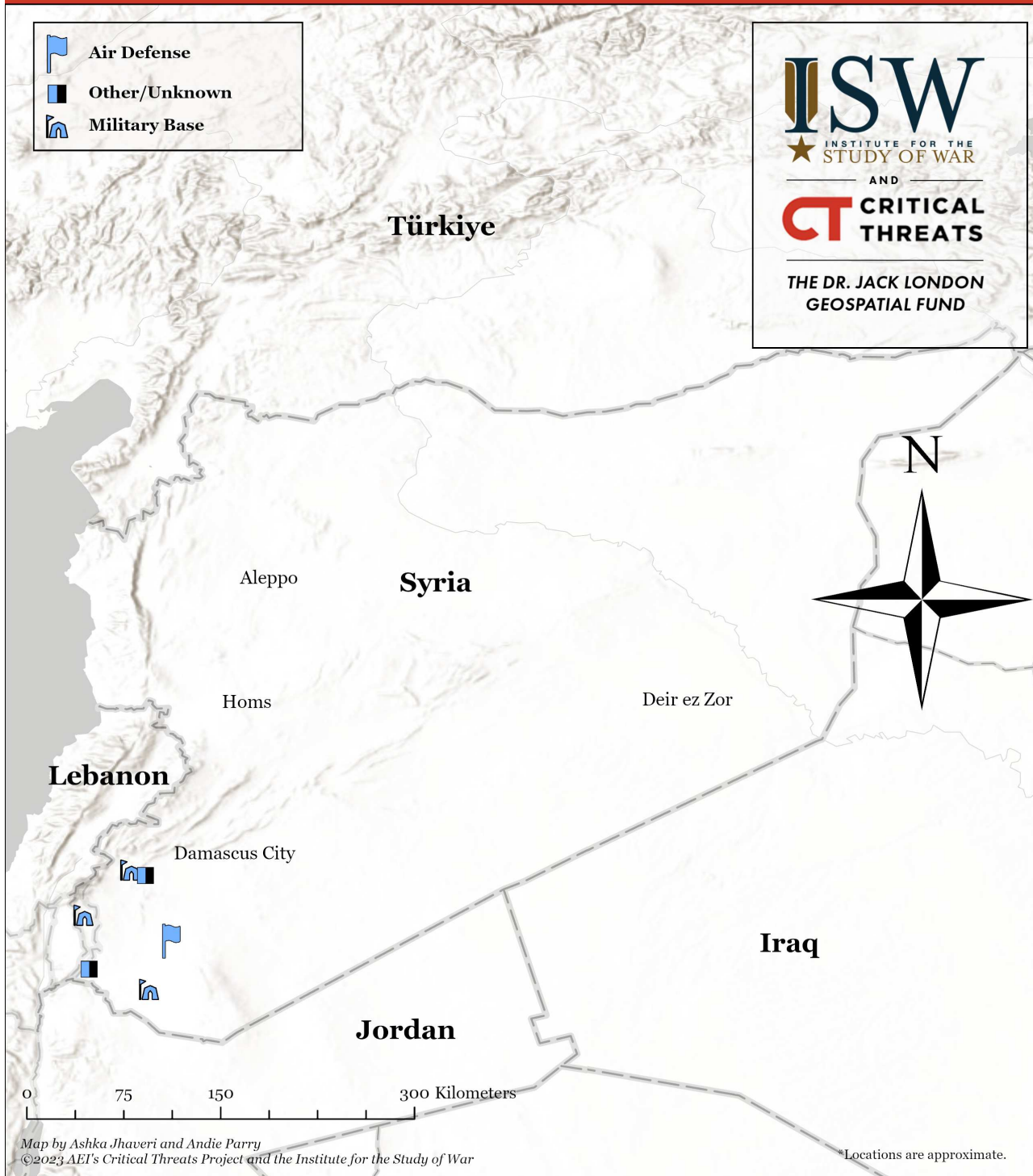
Palestinian and SAA locations in southwest Syria during the last week, rather than Iranian convoys transporting weapons, lines of communication, and military production sites.

Israeli Airstrikes in Syria

January 1-April 4, 2023



Israeli Military Activity in Syria After April 4, 2023



CTP is considering the hypothesis that Iran has facilitated the rocket attacks from Palestinian militants in part to distract Israel from the transfer of Iranian air defense and PGM systems into Syria. Hamas likely needed permission from LH to conduct the April 6 rockets from southern Lebanon, as CTP previously assessed.[15] LH often acts as an intermediary for Iranian coordination with Iranian-backed Palestinian groups. Iran may be urging Hamas to continue rocket attacks to keep Israeli military activity focused away from Iranian efforts to bring PGM and air defense systems into Syria through Damascus and Aleppo airports or via truck. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh met with LH Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah on April 9, suggesting ongoing and high-level coordination of the groups' military activities.[16] Leadership from Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other Palestinian militia groups arrived in Damascus on April 10 to

allegedly pay their respects to the outgoing Iranian ambassador to Syria.[17] Iranian regime media reported IRGC Quds Force commander Esmail Ghaani also arrived in Damascus on April 10, which suggests the reason for his visit included meeting with the Palestinian militants.[18]

The Iranian regime is trying to leverage the recent Israeli raids on al Aqsa Mosque to politically unite Muslim countries against Israel and prevent further expansion of the Abraham Accords. Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf criticized Israel's attacks on the Palestinian territories and the recent raid on al Aqsa Mosque and called on OIC countries to "outlaw normalizing relations with Israel and using Israeli goods" on April 10.[19] President Ebrahim Raisi additionally called on Muslim states to condemn the al Aqsa Mosque raids and to form a broad coalition against Israel on multiple occasions between April 6 and 9.[20] Raisi further emphasized how Iran and its Axis of Resistance is beginning to benefit from current regional dynamics.[21] Foreign Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanani separately stated that Iran is confident that Muslim countries will "rise" in support of "the oppressed Palestinian nation" on April 8.[22] IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami argued on April 8 that the pattern of Gulf normalizations with Israel will end following the al Aqsa incident.[23] Interim Tehran Friday Prayer Leader Ahmad Khatami similarly stated on April 7 that Iran had reversed attempts to create a united Arab-Israeli anti-Iran front as regional states increasingly seek to normalize ties with Iran, citing the March 10 Iran-Saudi normalization agreement.[24]

Regime attempts to unite the region against Israel coincide with heightened kinetic and rhetorical escalations between Iran and Israel. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff Herzl Halevi expressed on April 5 Israel's readiness to preemptively strike Iran without US support.[25] Artesh Commander Major General Abdul Rahim Mousavi responded to Halevi's comments on April 10, stating that "Israel is too inferior a country to be considered a threat to Iran." [26] Artesh Ground Forces Commander Brigadier General Kiomars Heydari separately warned on April 10 that Iran would provide a "toothbreaking and crushing" response to a foreign attack.[27] Iran and Israel have also been engaged in a tit-for-tat escalation cycle in Syria in recent days, as CTP previously reported.[28] The *New York Times* separately reported on April 8 that the US had warned Israeli shipping companies of a potential IRGC Aerospace Force drone attack on Israeli tankers in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea.[29]

Iranian officials participated in a series of diplomatic engagements between April 7 and 9 to preserve Iranian strategic interests in the Caucasus. The regime's interests in this region include keeping overland trade routes open, preventing Israel from operating against Iran from Azerbaijan, and preempting the spread of separatist sentiments among Iran's Azeri minority. Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani discussed the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC) in separate meetings with Armenian National Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan and Russian Presidential Aide Igor Levitin in Tehran on April 9. [30] The INSTC is a land route through the Caucasus which enables Iran to export products to Russia and Europe. Shamkhani may have discussed the INSTC with Grigoryan and Levitin in the context of Azerbaijani efforts to link mainland Azerbaijan to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Region—an Azerbaijani exclave in western Armenia.[31] Connecting the Nakhchivan Autonomous Region to mainland Azerbaijan would cut off Iran from an overland route in the Caucasus.[32] The regime regards territorial changes in the Caucasus as a threat to Iran's internal security, likely fearing that territorial changes could precipitate calls for separatism among Iran's large Azeri minority in northwestern Iran.[33] Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian separately held two phone calls with his Azerbaijani counterpart Jeyhun Bayramov on April 7 and 8. [34] Iranian state media reported that Abdollahian and Bayramov discussed "misunderstandings" between Iran and Azerbaijan, likely referring to the regime's disapproval of growing Azerbaijani-Israeli ties.[35] Regime officials have strongly criticized Azerbaijan's decision to open an embassy in Israel in recent days.[36] The regime has additionally repeatedly accused Azerbaijan of allowing Israel to use its territory as a base to organize and launch operations against Iran, as CTP previously reported.[37]

The regime has failed to prevent further poisonings as Iranian officials issue inconsistent messaging about the nature of the attacks. CTP recorded at least twenty-two student poisoning incidents between April 8 and 10 across twelve cities and eight provinces, resulting in several

hospitalizations.[38] Iranian social media users circulated uncorroborated reports that the Ministry of Guidance advised Iranian state-owned and state-affiliated media to avoid covering poisonings and poisoning-related incidents.[39] CTP did not observe Iranian state-owned and state-affiliated media coverage of poisonings following this report although more instances of poisonings did occur, which adheres to the uncorroborated reports. Impacted students' symptoms remain consistent with prior incidents of reported poisonings throughout March and early last week. [40] Deputy Health Minister Saeed Karimi stated that at least ten percent of the affected students showed respiratory symptoms, acknowledging in effect that the symptoms are not psychosomatic as regime officials have previously claimed.[41] Parliament Poisoning Fact-Finding Commission Head Hamid Reza Kazemi similarly acknowledged that poisonings occurred, but denied reports of student hospitalizations.[42] Parliamentarian Mehrdad Karami denied that poisonings were deliberate attacks, arguing that students were nauseated by "the smell of oil." [43] A reliable Kurdish human rights organization *Hengaw* separately reported that one 16-year-old male student died on April 9 due to complications from a poisoning attack last month in Tehran, directly contradicting Karami's statement.[44]

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - April 8



Iran Student Poisonings by Province - April 9



Map: AEI's Critical Threats Project • Source: Author's Research • Created with Datawrapper

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - April 10



Map: AEI's Critical Threats Project • Source: Author's Research • Created with Datawrapper

Protest activity increased sharply on April 9 in response to deteriorating economic conditions and recent student poisonings. CTP recorded 18 protests in 16 cities across 12 provinces on April 9. The majority of these protests were economically motivated, indicating that the regime's success in stabilizing the Iranian rial in recent days has not been sufficient to alleviate economic hardships among large segments of the population.[45] Various government officials and institutions have announced in recent weeks that Iran's inflation rate hovers between 40 and 50 percent, making it difficult for many Iranians—such as retirees with fixed incomes—to afford basic goods. [46] Residents in Saghez, Kurdistan Province additionally protested the poisoning of schoolgirls in this city on April 9.[47] Iranian social media users circulated videos of security forces reportedly shooting at protesters in Saghez, highlighting the regime's sensitivity to the issue of student poisonings.[48] CTP previously observed similar levels of protest activity on March 13 and 14, when Iranian citizens participated in anti-regime protests for Chahar Shanbeh Souri.[49] The Chahar Shanbeh Souri protests were primarily fueled by general anti-regime frustrations as opposed to poor economic conditions, however.

Key Takeaways

- **Palestinian militants expanded rocket attacks into Israel from southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip to the Golan Heights.**

- The IDF responded to the April 8 attacks by striking Syrian Arab Army (SAA) positions in southwest Syria.
- Iran may view the Palestinian attacks into Israel as an opportunity to redouble its efforts to transfer air defense and precision-guided munitions (PGMs) into Syria.
- CTP is considering the hypothesis that Iran has facilitated the rocket attacks from Palestinian militants in part to distract Israel from the transfer of Iranian air defense and PGM systems into Syria.
- Iranian officials participated in a series of diplomatic engagements between April 7 and 9 to preserve Iranian strategic interests in the Caucasus.
- The Iranian regime is trying to leverage the recent Israeli raids on al Aqsa Mosque to politically unite Muslim countries against Israel and prevent further expansion of the Abraham Accords.
- Protest activity increased sharply on April 9 in response to deteriorating economic conditions and recent student poisonings.
- At least five protests occurred in five cities across five provinces on April 8, 18 protests occurred in 16 cities across 12 provinces on April 9, and one protest occurred in one city across one province on April 10.
- Law Enforcement Command (LEC) Chief Ahmad Reza Radan announced that the LEC will begin using advanced surveillance capabilities to widely enforce mandatory veiling in public spaces on April 15.
- The Iranian rial remained relatively stable between April 7 and April 10, depreciating from 505,500 rials to one US dollar on April 7 to 506,000 rials to one US dollar on April 10.
- IRGC-affiliated media circulated reports of cabinet reshuffles within the Raisi administration's economic team.
- Iranian and Saudi officials continued to discuss reestablishing diplomatic relations on April 10.
- IRGC Ground Force (GF) Research and Self-Sufficiency Jihad Organization Head Ali Kouhestani announced on April 9 that the IRGC-GF had successfully tested the new Meraaj-532 kamikaze drone.
- Iranian-backed militants launched two rockets at US Conoco Mission Support Site in Deir ez Zor province, Syria on April 10.
- Iranian-backed militants deployed to Al Mayadin, Deir ez Zor province on April 10.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least five protests occurred in five cities across five provinces on April 8. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[50]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Farmers

Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi Province[51]

- **Size:** Medium
- **Demographic:** Nurses and emergency personnel

Tehran City, Tehran Province[52]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Shahid Beheshti University students protesting mandatory veiling

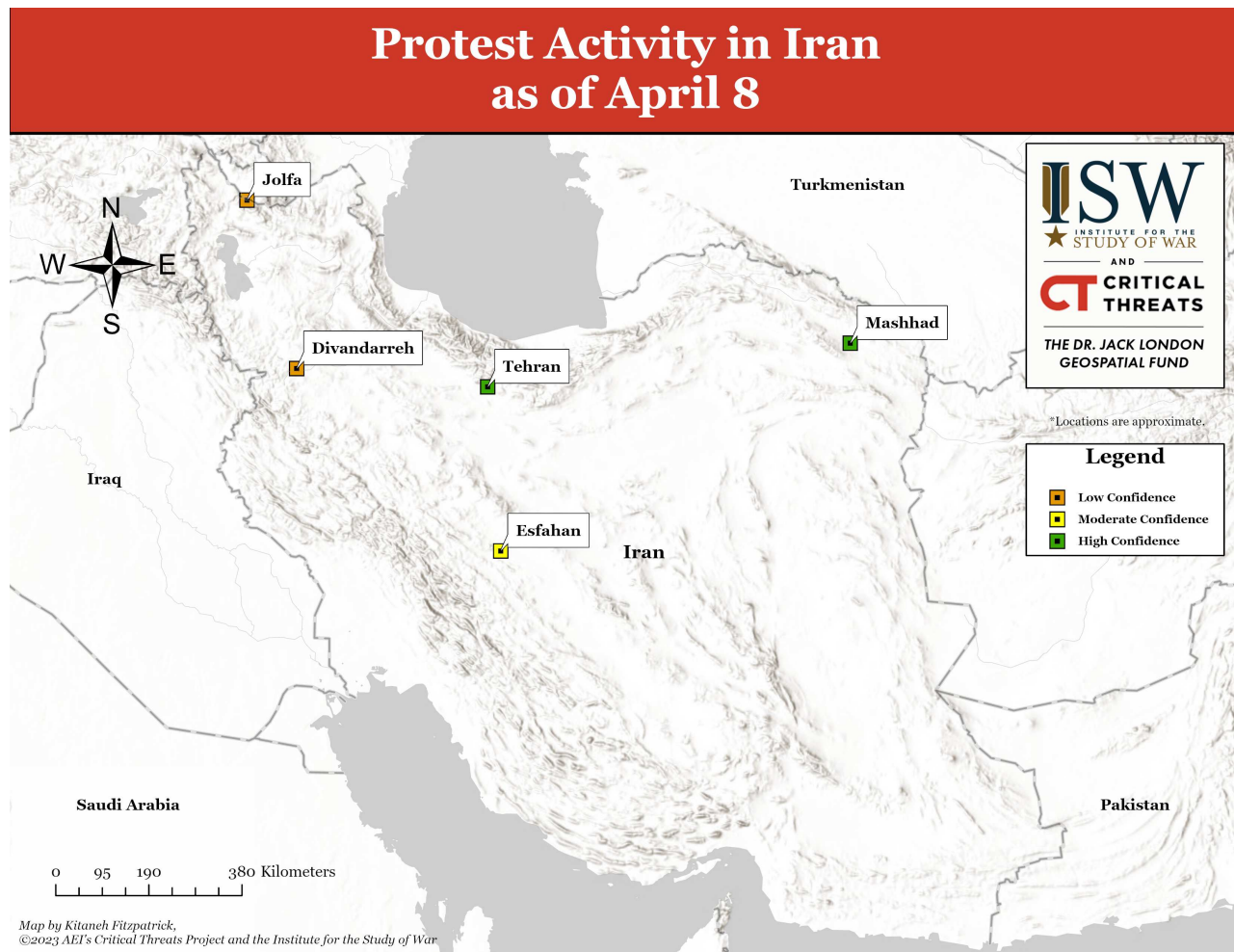
CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Jolfa, East Azerbaijan Province[53]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Jolfa Aras Paraplastic Company workers

Divandarreh, Kurdistan Province[54]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Protesting student poisonings



At least 18 protests occurred in 16 cities across 12 provinces on April 9. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[55]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Telecommunication Retirees

Ghazvin City, Ghazvin Province[56]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Family members of Javad Heydari

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[57]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Telecommunication retirees

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[58]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Shoush, Khuzestan Province[59]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Shoushtar, Khuzestan Province[60]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Saghez, Kurdistan Province[61]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Protesting student poisonings

Yazd City, Yazd Province[62]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Telecommunication Retirees

CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Ardabil, Ardabil Province[63]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Telecommunication retirees

Hamedan City, Hamedan Province[64]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Telecommunication retirees

Kermanshah City, Kermanshah Province[65]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi Province[66]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Telecommunication Retirees

Bandar Mahshahr, Khuzestan Province[67]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Fired workers

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[68]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Electricity operators

Marivan, Kurdistan Province[69]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Telecommunication Retirees

Khorramabad, Lorestan Province[70]

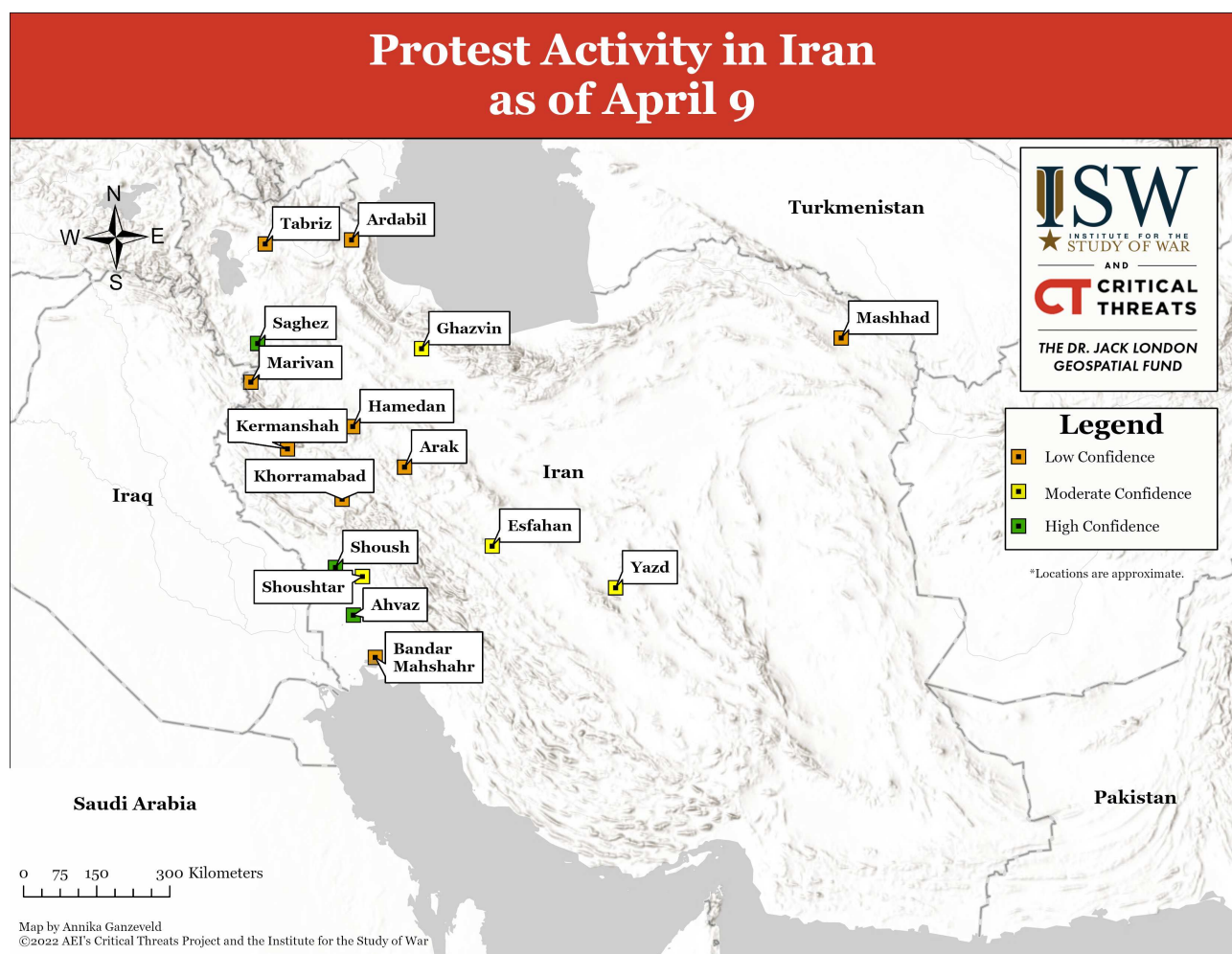
- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Telecommunication retirees

Arak, Markazi Province[71]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Telecommunication Retirees

Tabriz, East Azerbaijan Province[72]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Telecommunication Retirees



At least one protest occurred in one city across one province on April 10. CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Ghazvin City, Ghazvin Province[73]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Nurses

Protest Activity in Iran as of April 10, 5pm ET



Law Enforcement Command (LEC) Chief Ahmad Reza Radan announced that the LEC will begin using advanced surveillance capabilities to widely enforce mandatory veiling in public spaces on April 15. Radan clarified that the LEC would send identified unveiled women a “warning text” and impound the vehicles of second-time offenders. Some Iranian officials have recently suggested that repeat offenders may also face fines and other legal consequences. [74] Radan noted that mandatory veiling standards extended to shopkeepers and restaurant owners who service unveiled women and warned that the LEC would continue to seal such facilities. [75] The LEC—the entity that encompassed the Morality Patrol that led to the violent killing of Mahsa Amini on September 16 and months of anti-regime protests—is publicly resuming hijab enforcement. CTP previously assessed on December 23 that the regime would expand an Orwellian surveillance-punishment model relying on collective punishment through shutting down non-compliant businesses and remote punishments such as seizing financial assets in state banks as alternatives to physical confrontations.[76]

Economic Affairs

The Iranian rial remained relatively stable between April 7 and April 10, depreciating from 505,500 rials to one US dollar on April 7 to 506,000 rials to one US dollar on April 10.[77]

IRGC-affiliated media circulated reports of cabinet reshuffles within the Raisi administration’s economic team. IRGC-affiliated *Fars News Agency* reported that Program and Budgeting Organization Head Massoud Mir Kazemi will resign at an unspecified date and be replaced with high-ranking tax official Davoud Manzour.[78] Another IRGC-affiliated outlet, *Tasnim News Agency*, separately reported that Economic Affairs and Finance Minister Ehsan Khandouzi will resign in the coming weeks without providing further details.[79]

Foreign Affairs and Diplomacy

Iranian and Saudi officials continued to discuss reestablishing diplomatic relations on April 10. Foreign Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanani confirmed the presence of a Saudi “technical” delegation in Tehran on April 10 and announced that an Iranian delegation will travel to Saudi Arabia “in the next two to three days.” Kanani added that Iran and Saudi Arabia are in the process of appointing ambassadors.[80] The Saudi Ambassador to Oman Abdollah bin Saud Al-Anzi separately met with his Iranian counterpart Ali Najafi in Muscat on April 10.[81]

External Security and Military Affairs

IRGC Ground Force (IRGC-GF) Research and Self-Sufficiency Jihad Organization Head Ali Kouhestani announced on April 9 that the IRGC-GF had successfully tested the new Meraj-532 kamikaze drone. The Meraj drone can allegedly travel 450 km in a one-way mission, has a maximum altitude of 3.6 km, can stay aloft for three hours, and can carry a 50 kg warhead.[82]

Iranian-backed militants launched two rockets at US Conoco Mission Support Site in Deir ez Zor province, Syria on April 10. US CENTCOM stated that one rocket landed within the vicinity of the outpost and the other crashed shortly after launch.[83] The attack did not harm any US personnel or property. Iranian-backed militants last targeted US forces in eastern Syria on March 25, as CTP previously reported.[84]

Iranian-backed militants deployed to Al Mayadin, Deir ez Zor province on April 10. Two buses of militants from Fatemiyoun Division—Iran’s Afghan Shia proxy—arrived in Al Mayadin from positions in the vicinity of Palmyra, Homs province. *Eye of Euphrates* reported that local Lebanese Hezbollah and IRGC Quds Force leadership received the militants upon their arrival. [85] A separate convoy of Fatemiyoun militants crossed the Al Qaim Iraq-Syria border crossing before stopping in Al Mayadin.[86] The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights similarly reported that four buses of Syrian Arab Army Fourth Division militants similarly arrived in Al Mayadin from Homs and Hama Provinces.[87]

Unidentified militants crashed two kamikaze drones in Duhok and Erbil provinces on April 10. *Shafaq News* reported that local security officials are examining the wreckage and have not issued a statement on the likely perpetrators.[88] An Iranian proxy Telegram channel posted a video of the drone that crashed in Duhok province.[89] The drone does not appear to match any kamikaze drone models that the IRGC or Iranian-backed militants possess. Iranian Arabic media outlet *Al Ahad* claimed one of the drones targeted US forces at Erbil International Airport.[90] CTP has not observed any evidence to corroborate this claim.

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Iran Update, April 11, 2023

Iran Update, April 11, 2023

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Nicholas Carl

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Israeli media has published several articles in recent days detailing the network of IRGC officers working to establish an integrated air defense network in Syria, citing unidentified Israeli intelligence and military sources. IRGC Aerospace Force Commander Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajji Zadeh is leading this effort in cooperation with the Quds Force, according to these articles.[1] CTP cannot confirm these reports, although they are consistent with previous Israeli media claiming that the IRGC Aerospace Force is organizing air defense activities in Syria.[2] The recent Israeli articles detailed additional Iranian officers involved in this effort, including Ali Hassan Mahdavi, who replaced Javad Ghaffari as the overall IRGC commander in Syria likely sometime in late 2021.[3]

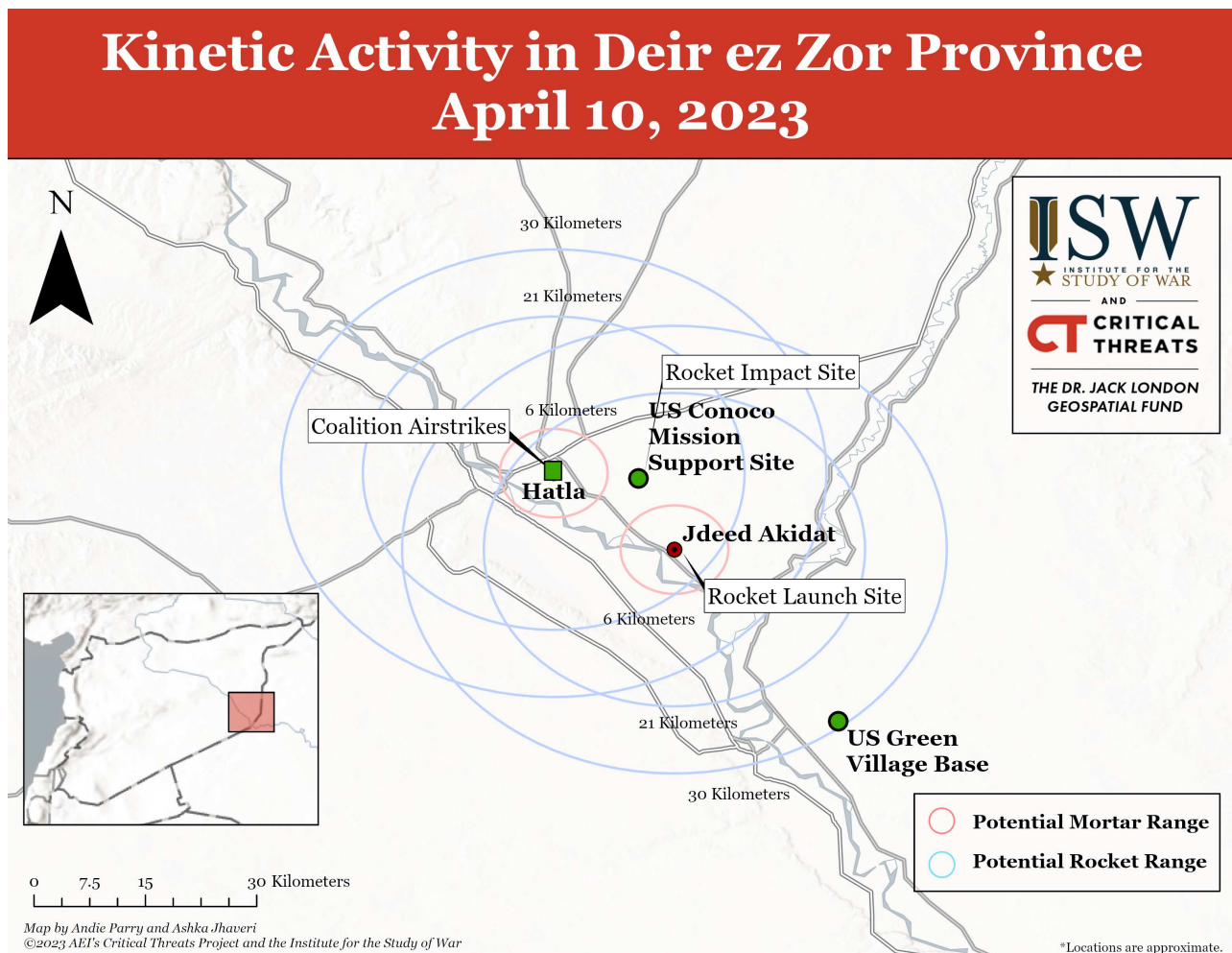
The continued Iranian efforts to transfer air defense assets into Syria, despite repeated Israeli airstrikes, underscores the priority that Tehran likely assigns to this effort. Tehran has long sought to transfer air defense systems into Syria.[4] Israel has conducted an intensive air campaign in recent months to disrupt Iranian transportation networks and destroy several air defense facilities. [5] Iran remains committed to entrenching itself militarily in Syria in the long term, nevertheless, reflecting its willingness to sacrifice personnel and resources to that end.

Tehran may be operating on the theory that establishing forward air defense positions in Syria and other nearby countries could impede a potential Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. Such systems could provide early warning to Iran-based platforms and target the refueling and support aircraft that could be involved in such a mission.

Iranian and Iranian-backed militant activity has increased around al Mayadin, Deir ez Zour Province in recent days, which may be related to IRGC efforts against Israel and/or the United States. Syria outlet *Eye of Euphrates* reported that a delegation of IRGC officials met with local IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah leadership in al Mayadin on April 11.[6] CTP cannot verify this report, although it is consistent with previous indications of a military buildup around al Mayadin. Multiple convoys of fighters from the Fatemiyoun Division—Iran’s Afghan Shia proxy—and the Iranian-backed Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 4th Division arrived in al Maydin on April 10, as CTP previously reported.[7]

This increased military activity may be part of an Iranian effort to bring air defense assets and precision-guided munitions into Syria from Iraq. CTP previously assessed that Iran may view the recent escalation cycle between Israel and Hamas as an opportunity to redouble efforts to transfer advanced systems into Syria.[8] Al Mayadin lies along a critical ground route that the IRGC uses heavily to facilitate military shipments deeper into Syria. The IRGC could use the recently deployed forces to consolidate control over this transportation route and thereby protect convoys traveling along it. Iranian and Iranian-backed militants control the al Qaim-Deir ez Zor City route but not the territory east of the Euphrates River, which is immediately adjacent to the route.

Iran may additionally seek to use its increased military presence around al Mayadin to expand the scope of its operations against the US inside Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-held territory. IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah officials met in al Mayadin on March 31 to discuss recruiting civilians in SDF to act as informants and conduct attacks on US forces, as CTP previously reported.[9] Iranian-backed militants later fired two rockets at the US Conoco Mission Support Site on April 10. [10] Syrian media reported that the rocket attack came from SDF-held territory, suggesting that the IRGC may have, indeed, succeeded in recruiting some locals.[11] Iranian and Iranian-backed militants can use launch sites in SDF-held territory to conduct more accurate and therefore more lethal attacks against US positions there. The map below illustrates recent kinetic activity around this area and relevant mortar and rocket ranges.



- Israeli media has published articles in recent days detailing the network of IRGC officers working to establish an integrated air defense network in Syria, citing unidentified Israeli intelligence and military sources.
- Iranian and Iranian-backed militant activity has increased around al Mayadin, Deir ez Zor Province in recent days, which may be related to their efforts against Israel and/or the United States.
- At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces.
- School poisonings persisted across Iran, highlighting the regime's continued failure to prevent such attacks

- **Raisi Administration spokesperson Ali Bahadori Jahromi announced the dismissal of three senior economic officials.**
- **The IRGC is planning a show of naval force in the coming days likely directed at the US and/or Israel.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces on April 11. CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Shahin Shahr, Esfahan Province[12]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Families of poisoned schoolgirls

CTP assesses with low confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Amol, Mazandaran Province[13]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Families of poisoned schoolgirls



School poisonings persisted across Iran on April 11, highlighting the regime's continued failure to prevent such attacks. At least seven poisoning incidents occurred across seven cities in six provinces on April 11. Social media users circulated footage of purported plainclothes officers leaving a girl's school in Karaj shortly after a poisoning attack.[14] It is unclear what these individuals were doing at the school.

Some regime officials continue to recognize how urgently they must address the school poisoning crisis in Iran. Parliamentarian Mohammad Hassan Asefari called on security and intelligence officials to identify the culprits on April 10.[15] Former Parliamentarian Heshmatollah Falahat Pisheh separately stated on April 11 that the regime should focus on school poisonings instead of enforcing mandatory veiling.[16] Some officials have contrastingly downplayed reports of ongoing poisonings. The Tehran Province Education Public Relations Bureau rejected that one of the first poisoning-related deaths had occurred. Kurdish human rights organization *Hengaw* reported that a 16-year-old male student died on April 9 due to complications from a poisoning attack last month in Tehran, as CTP previously reported.[17] The Tehran Education Public Relations Bureau stated that the student had instead died from “intestinal disease and kidney failure.”[18]

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - April 11



Map: AEI's Critical Threats Project • Source: Author's Research • Created with Datawrapper

Domestic Politics

Moderate *Khabar Online* hinted that hardline politician Saeed Jalili may try to replace Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf as parliament speaker in the March 2024 parliamentary elections. Jalili was Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) secretary between 2007 and 2013 and served as chief nuclear negotiator under former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. [19] *Khabar Online* reported that Saeed Jalili's brother, Vahid Jalili, who is the vice president of the state-controlled Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Organization, may help Jalili's election

prospects. *Khabar Online*'s report is consistent with prior indicators of tensions between Ghalibaf and Jalili. Ghalibaf previously accused Jalili and other members of the ultraconservative Stability Front party of stoking unrest among disaffected Iranian youth, as CTP previously reported.[20]

IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* reported on April 11 that former President Hassan Rouhani is heading a campaign to promote the election of centrist candidates in the March 2024 parliamentary elections. *Tasnim* claimed that Rouhani plans to present an electoral list of centrist candidates to the Iranian public, bolstering his political profile and influence if such candidates were elected, citing informed sources.[21] CTP previously assessed on February 14 that Rouhani was positioning himself to reenter the political arena after a period of relative absence.[22]

Economic Affairs

The Iranian rial depreciated from 506,000 rials to one US dollar on April 10 to 511,500 rials to one US dollar on April 11, marking a one percent depreciation.[23]

Raisi Administration spokesperson Ali Bahadori Jahromi announced the dismissal of three senior economic officials on April 11. President Ebrahim Raisi removed Program and Budgeting Organization Chief Massoud Mir Kazemi, Agricultural Jihad Minister Javad Sadati Nejad, and state-affiliated Innovation and Prosperity Fund President Ali Vahdat on April 11. Jahromi added that National Tax Organization Chief Davoud Manzour will replace Mir Kazemi—claiming that Mir Kazemi requested to be removed from his post due to unspecified health issues--Iran Veterinary System Head Mohammad Agha Miri will replace Sadati Nejad, and Presidential Strategic Research Center Director Mohammad Sadegh Khayatian will replace Vahdat.[24] IRGC-affiliated *Fars News Agency* accurately predicted on April 9 that Raisi would replace Mir Kazemi with Manzour, as CTP previously reported.[25] These dismissals are a continuation of cabinet reshuffles within the Raisi administration's economic team in recent months and likely reflect Raisi's growing concern with Iran's economic conditions. Raisi previously appointed Mohammad Reza Farzin as the Central Bank of Iran chief on December 29, 2022, and stressed the importance of managing exchange rates and reducing inflation at the time.[26]

Economic Affairs and Finance Minister Ehsan Khandouzi announced on April 11 that he will soon pay an official visit to Saudi Arabia to improve Iran-Saudi economic ties. Khandouzi stated that Iranian and Saudi officials are preparing a roadmap to improve bilateral trade. [27] Khandouzi also highlighted domestic economic growth, claiming that Iran had experienced 16 percent economic growth in the Iranian calendar year of 1401 (March 2022-March 2023).[28]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

The foreign ministers of Iran, China, Russia, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan will meet in Samarkand, Uzbekistan on April 13 to discuss Afghanistan. [29] Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Ali Shamkhani previously traveled to Moscow to attend the fifth session of the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan on February 8, as CTP previously reported.[30]

External Security and Military Affairs

The IRGC is planning a show of naval force in the coming days likely directed at the US and/or Israel. IRGC spokesperson Brigadier General Ramazan Sharif announced on April 11 that the IRGC will conduct a “naval parade” in the Caspian Sea, Persian Gulf, Sea of Oman, and “Axis of Resistance countries that have coasts and seas” on April 13.[31] Iranian officials use the term “Axis of Resistance countries” to refer to countries in which the Quds Force has cultivated proxy and partner militias, such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Sharif framed the parade as meant to show support for Palestine. The IRGC may be responding to the US Navy announcing on April 8 the deployment of a guided-missile submarine to the Middle East.[32] The IRGC may also seek to use the parade to signal military strength to Israel, if the parade does, in fact, involve some military activity around Syria, Lebanon, or Yemen.

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Iran Update, April 12, 2023

Iran Update, April 12, 2023

Zachary Coles, Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, Andie Parry, Ashka Jhaveri, and Nicholas Carl

April 12, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

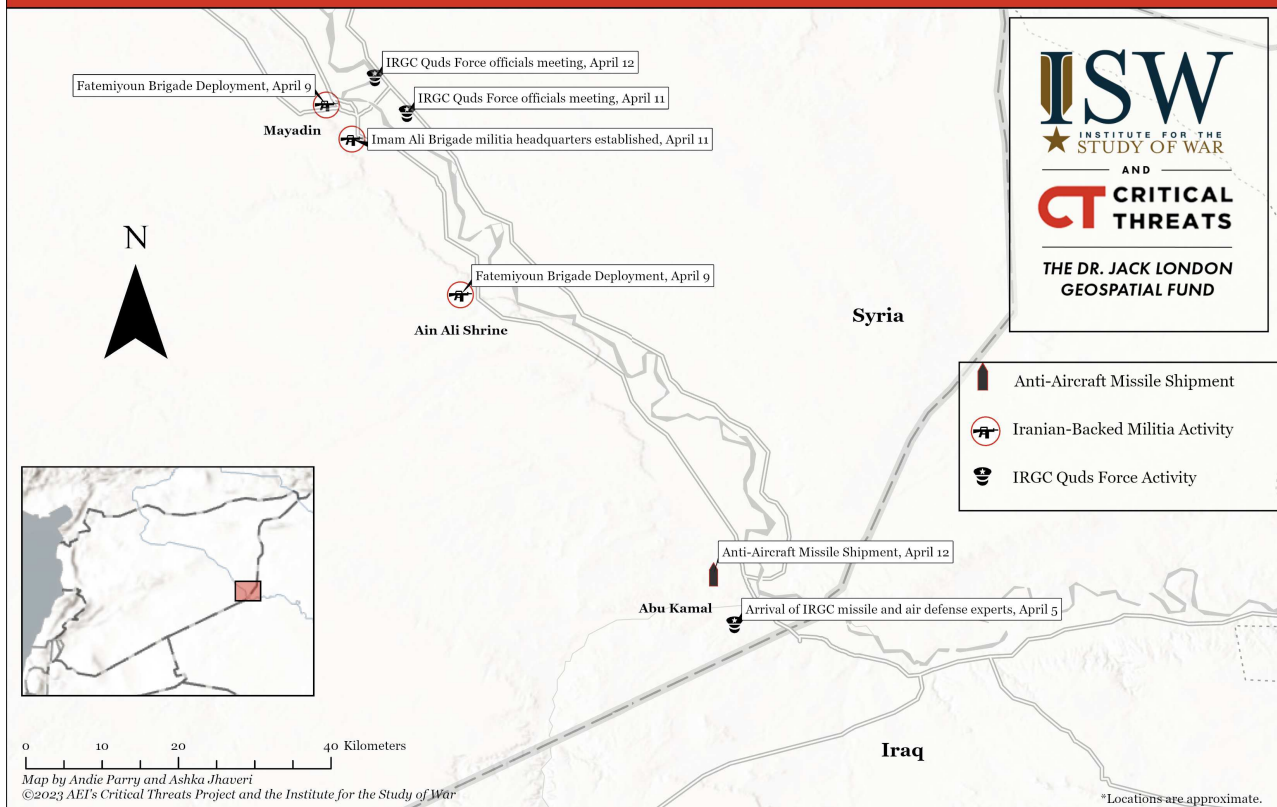
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Reuters reported that the IRGC brought weapons and military equipment into Syria under the guise of earthquake relief, confirming CTP's longstanding assessment that Iran exploited the February 6 earthquake to move advanced weaponry and military equipment into Syria. *Reuters* reported that hundreds of Iranian flights landed in Aleppo, Damascus, and Latakia airports over a seven-week period immediately after the earthquake occurred.[1] This reporting is consistent with the assessment CTP first published and has maintained since February 13 that Iran is likely surging materiel into Aleppo and elsewhere in northwest Syria.[2] Shipments included advanced communications equipment, radar batteries, and spare parts to upgrade air defenses, according to regional and Western intelligence sources.[3] *Reuters* reported that IRGC Quds Force Unit 18000, which is the Syria unit and led by IRGC commander in Syria Ali Hassan Mahdavi, oversaw the operation. [4] IRGC Quds Force Unit 190 led by Behnam Shahriari, which specializes in transporting weapons to Iranian proxies in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, coordinated ground transportation.[5]

The IRGC activities around Aleppo are part of a larger Iranian effort to establish an integrated air defense network throughout Syria. Tehran has long sought to transfer air defenses into Syria. Israel has conducted an intensive air campaign in recent months to disrupt Iranian transportation networks and destroy several air defense facilities, as CTP previously reported.[6] A Syrian army officer confirmed the recent increase in the frequency of Israeli airstrikes in Syria is due to intelligence of "something being developed quickly." [7]

Iranian-backed militants are continuing to move air defense systems into Syria via the Al Qaim Iraq-Syria border crossing, demonstrating that the repeated Israeli airstrikes have not deterred Tehran from pursuing this effort. *Euphrates Post* reported that Iranian-backed militants transferred anti-aircraft missiles to the Iranian-backed Syrian Arab Army 47th Regiment Hashemiyoun Brigade headquarters in Abu Kamal, Deir ez Zor Province on April 11. [8] The Hashemiyoun Brigade is comprised of Shia tribesmen recruited to serve as a native Iranian-backed militia element in eastern Syria.[9] *Eye of Euphrates* reported that IRGC Quds Force officials held a meeting with local Lebanese Hezbollah and Fatemiyoun Division leadership near Mayadin in Ain Ali, Deir ez Zor province on April 12.[10] The Fatemiyoun Division is Iran's Afghan Shia proxy, which the IRGC Quds Force uses extensively throughout Syria. CTP previously reported a recent series of similar meetings and Iranian-backed militia deployments into Deir ez Zor province on April 5-12, facilitate military shipments of advanced weaponry and air defense systems into Syria.[11] These activities are illustrated on the map below.

Iranian Activity in Deir ez Zor Province April 5-April 12, 2023



Iran may intend to concentrate the air defense systems along a critical transportation corridor that runs through Deir ez Zor province. *Eye of Euphrates* reported on April 2 that local IRGC leadership issued an order to militias in Deir ez Zor to properly maintain air defense systems the possessed. The order specified that the IRGC intended to test the operability of all equipment and it may imprison those responsible for faulty equipment.[12]

Bolstering air defense capabilities in Deir ez Zor province would support IRGC efforts to consolidate control over a critical ground transportation route that the IRGC uses to move shipments through Deir ez Zor province. These air defense systems would Iran's ability to protect convoys from drone attacks and airstrikes as the convoys move advanced weapons into Syria. Establishing forward air defense positions in Syria and other nearby countries could impede a potential Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear facilities, as CTP previously assessed. Such systems could provide early warning to Iran-based platforms and target the refueling and support aircraft that could be involved in such a mission.

The Iranian regime's insufficient supply of the chemical compound ammonium perchlorate (AP) may have delayed expected Iranian missile shipments to Russia.[13] *Politico*, citing informed sources, reported on April 12 that Iran is negotiating with Russia and China to replenish its supply of AP, an essential ingredient in solid-rocket fuel.[14] *Politico* additionally reported that Iran may send the missiles it produces using imported AP to Russia to aid its war effort against Ukraine.[15] This reporting follows numerous phone calls between President Ebrahim Raisi and Russian President Vladimir Putin between January and March 2023, during which these presidents likely discussed Iranian military support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[16] Iran may seek military assistance from Russia in return for any missile it provides. Iranian media reported on March 11 that Iran had finalized a deal to acquire SU-35 combat aircraft from Russia, as CTP previously reported.[17]

Key Takeaways

- **Reuters** reported that the IRGC brought weapons and military equipment into Syria under the guise of earthquake relief, confirming CTP's longstanding assessment that Iran exploited the February 6 earthquake to move advanced weaponry and military equipment into Syria.
- The Iranian regime's insufficient supply of the chemical compound ammonium perchlorate (AP) may have delayed expected Iranian missile shipments to Russia.
- Iranian Ambassador to Azerbaijan Abbas Mousavi met with Azerbaijani Presidential Assistant Hikmat Hajiyev on April 12, likely to discuss the rising tensions between Tehran and Baku during recent months.
- The Assad regime is beginning to normalize diplomatic relations with multiple Arab countries and regional organizations.
- CTP did not record protest activity that met its reporting thresholds on April 12. CTP also did not record any student poisoning incidents on April 12.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

CTP did not record protest activity that met its reporting thresholds on April 12. CTP also did not record any student poisoning incidents on April 12.

Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid met on April 11 with the families of those killed during the "Bloody Friday" massacre in Zahedan in September 2022.[18] Abdol Hamid's website and Twitter account publicized the event.[19] Abdol Hamid may be trying to invoke the memory of the crackdown to rally his supporters. This meeting comes after CTP recorded limited reporting on the weekly Friday protest that Abdol Hamid has led every week in Zahedan since September 2022. CTP assessed that Abdol Hamid may be losing momentum among his supporters.[20]

President Ebrahim Raisi stressed adherence to chastity and the mandatory hijab law and called for an expanded effort to confront all forms of "evil" on April 12. Raisi stated that "forbidding evil" should not be limited to enforcing the hijab requirement but should include combating bribery, theft, mismanagement, and economic corruption. Raisi's use of "forbidding evil" is a reference to the religious principle of enjoining good and forbidding wrong. The regime uses this principle to justify enforcing behavioral expectations on the public. Raisi also emphasized that confronting moral corruption is "everyone's duty," consistent with CTP's previous assessments that the regime seeks to coopt the social collective as a complementary enforcement mechanism to its security services.[21]

Iranian student unions called for widespread demonstrations against the mandatory hijab law on April 15.[22]

Economic Affairs

The Iranian rial remained relatively stable between April 11 and April 12, appreciating slightly from 511,500 rials to one US dollar on April 11 to 511,000 rials to one US dollar on April 12.[23]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanani announced that an Iranian technical delegation arrived in Saudi Arabia on April 12 to pursue the reopening of the Iranian embassy and consulate general in Riyadh and Jeddah, respectively.[24]

Iranian Ambassador to Azerbaijan Abbas Mousavi met with Azerbaijani Presidential Assistant Hikmat Hajiyev on April 12, likely to discuss the rising tensions between Tehran and Baku during recent months.[25] Iranian leaders have repeatedly expressed concern about growing ties between Azerbaijan and Israel. They have also criticized any attempts to undermine Armenian territorial integrity. Armenian and Azerbaijani forces exchanged fire near the Lachin Corridor on April 12.[26]

External Security and Military Affairs

The Assad regime is beginning to normalize diplomatic relations with multiple Arab countries and regional organizations. At least seven Arab states and intergovernmental organizations have either normalized ties or indicated an interest in resuming ties with the Assad regime since the February 6 earthquake. Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mikdad met with the Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud in Riyadh, marking a significant advancement in reestablishing bilateral ties.[27] Tunisia resumed diplomatic relations with Syria on April 12.[28] Officials in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia have also recently expressed openness to normalizing ties since the earthquake.[29] Syrian President Bashar Al Assad conducted his first foreign visits to Oman and the United Arab Emirates since the Arab Spring on February 20 and March 19, respectively. [30] The Gulf Cooperation Council plus Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan are expected to meet in Riyadh on April 14 to discuss Syria rejoining the Arab League.[31]

Iran is positioned to reap several economic and political advantages from a normalized Syria without sacrificing its military influence. CTP previously reported that Iran canceled two powerplant restoration contracts in Syria due to the Assad regime's attempt to pay in raw phosphate, demonstrating that the Assad regime has recently struggled to pay Iran for development projects.[32] Actors that have normalized ties with the Assad regime will generate an influx of investment into Syria, which could enable the Assad regime to pay for reconstruction contracts with Iran. Iran's existing economic and military presence in Syria may also allow it to exploit the newly opened Syrian economy for sanctions evasions and money laundering purposes.

Baghdad Today claimed that Iraqi Special Forces partially withdrew from Diyala province on April 12.[33] CTP cannot verify the accuracy of this report. Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad al Sudani deployed the unit on March 8 following a February 20 massacre of Sunni civilians that was likely perpetrated by Iranian-backed Shia Badr Organization militants, as CTP previously reported. [34] CTP also previously reported that Badr Organization militants likely murdered several members of a Sunni household in Diyala on March 29, which Iranian proxy media outlets first blamed on ISIS and then a member of the murdered family.[35] This assessment supports a pattern of Iranian-backed militants carrying out sectarian violence in Diyala province against local Sunni inhabitants. Badr Organization leader Hadi al Ameri previously argued that Sudani should allow Badr to continue overseeing security in Diyala province in a veiled threat during a Coalition Framework meeting on March 12.[36] Sudani's willingness to partially withdraw Iraqi Special Forces from Diyala province—despite evidence of continued violence—suggests he intends to allow Iranian-backed militants to conduct additional acts of sectarian violence while providing himself with political cover by claiming the Iraqi Security Forces have succeeded in stabilizing the region. As CTP has previously stated, sectarian conflict in Diyala presents an opportunity for ISIS to establish itself as a security guarantor for Sunnis in the province.[37]

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Iran Update, April 13, 2023

Iran Update, April 13, 2023

Johanna Moore, Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, Zachary Coles, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Nicholas Carl, and Frederick W. Kagan

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The Iran Updates are produced by the Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute with support from the Institute for the Study of War (ISW). To receive Iran Updates via email, please subscribe [here](#).

Contributors: James Motamed and Anya Caraiani

A senior delegation from Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)—a US-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)—traveled to Iraq on April 13, highlighting the growing Iranian influence there and potential for Baghdad to become a central node in the Iran-led Axis of Resistance.

[1] PIJ Secretary General Ziyad al Nakhalah headed the delegation—his first visit to Baghdad since becoming secretary general in 2018.[2] The US designated PIJ as an FTO in 1997 and designated Nakhalah as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in 2014.[3] Nakhalah met the following officials:[4]

- Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani
- Former Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mehdi
- Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid
- Iranian Ambassador to Iraq Mohammad Kazem Ale Sadegh

The meeting with Ale Sadegh is particularly noteworthy. He is almost certainly a key officer in the IRGC Quds Force given the longstanding pattern of Tehran assigning exclusively Quds Force members to this position.[5] Nakhalah and Ale Sadegh discussed Palestinian resistance against Israel and the growing strength of the Axis of Resistance, according to Iranian state media.[6]

The PIJ visit is the latest example of several highlighting the ascendent Iranian influence in Iraq. The Iranian-backed Badr Organization has asserted its predominance in Diyala Province, as CTP previously reported, successfully pressuring Sudani to withdraw recently deployed Iraqi Security Forces from Diyala on April 12.[7] Sudani does not have appear to have the political capital necessary to seriously contest Badr. Former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki separately pushed electoral reform laws through Parliament with the support of pro-Iran political factions on March 16.[8] These reforms will likely sideline independent and minority political parties and advantage larger political blocs, such as Maliki's State of Law coalition, in future elections.[9] Although Maliki is not necessarily working to promote Iranian influence directly, these internal dynamics are fostering the space for the IRGC to consolidate its political and security influence in Iraq.

Nakhalah's visit to Baghdad is separately likely part of an IRGC effort to demonstrate the unity of the Axis of Resistance against Israel. Nakhalah will participate in and speak at a ceremony in Baghdad to commemorate International Quds Day—an annual Iran-sponsored holiday against Israel—on April 14.[10] Iranian-backed militias are organizing holiday events in Baghdad, Karbala, Najaf, Babel, and Hilla.[11] These celebrations in Iraq appear to be at a larger scale than previous years. Iranian state media separately reported that the Axis of Resistance organized a region-wide naval parade in support of Palestine on April 13.[12] CTP has seen no evidence that this parade materialized other than a gathering of IRGC naval vessels off the Iranian coast.[13]

Key Takeaways

- A senior delegation from Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)--a US-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)--traveled to Iraq, highlighting the growing Iranian influence there and potential for Baghdad to become a central node in the Iran-led Axis of Resistance.
- IRGC-affiliated Tasnim News Agency reported that President Ebrahim Raisi may soon dismiss Industry, Mines, and Trade Minister Reza Fatemi Amin.
- Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian participated in a quadrilateral meeting on Afghanistan with his Chinese, Russian, and Pakistani counterparts in Samarkand, Uzbekistan.
- Iranian Oil Minister Javad Owji traveled to Caracas, Venezuela to visit Venezuelan state-owned oil company Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) facilities and meet with his Venezuelan counterpart Pedro Tellechea.
- CTP recorded no protests in Iran.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

Correction: CTP incorrectly reported that no protests occurred on April 12. At least one protest occurred in one city on April 12. CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location on April 12:

Bandar Abbas, Hormozgan Province[14]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Protesters chanting anti-regime slogans



CTP recorded no protests on April 13.

Protest coordinators and organizations circulated calls for demonstrations on the following days:

April 15[15]

- **Type:** Student demonstrations against the mandatory hijab law
- **Location:** Countrywide

April 16 and 18[16]

- **Type:** Demonstrations to commemorate the birthdays of three killed protesters
- **Location:** Tehran City, Tehran Province and Karaj, Alborz Province

President Ebrahim Raisi requested that Sports and Youth Minister Hamid Sajjadi permit Iranian women to enter sports stadiums. Raisi also requested safe public transportation for women attending sporting events.[17] The regime has historically banned Iranian women from attending major sporting events, although it recently permitted limited female attendance at some stadiums on August 26, 2022.[18] Raisi may be trying to boost his popularity and position himself as a defender of women's rights following reports that the regime will use surveillance technology to enforce mandatory veiling.[19]

Economic Affairs

The Iranian rial appreciated slightly from 511,000 rials to one US dollar on April 12 to 509,500 rials to one US dollar on April 13.[20]

IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* reported on April 13 that President Ebrahim Raisi may soon dismiss Industry, Mines, and Trade Minister Reza Fatemi Amin.[21] Government Information Council head Sepehr Khalaji denied the report and argued that Fatemi Amin is not responsible for recent issues in the automobile market.[22]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian participated in a quadrilateral meeting on Afghanistan with his Chinese, Russian, and Pakistani counterparts in Samarkand, Uzbekistan on April 13. Amir Abdollahian expressed concern over the spread of terrorism, girls' education and the status of women in Afghanistan, Afghan refugee migration to Iran, and drug trafficking.[23] Amir Abdollahian separately discussed the Polan-Gwadar electricity transmission line and increasing Iranian-Pakistani cooperation on Afghanistan with his Pakistani counterpart, Hina Rabbani Khar.[24] Amir Abdollahian also met with Taliban Foreign Affairs Minister Amir Khan Motaghi.[25]

Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanani responded to but did not deny *Politico's* April 12 reporting that China and Russia plan to replenish Iran's stockpile of ammonium perchlorate in exchange for an Iranian supply of ballistic missiles to Russia. Kanani claimed that Western media was attempting to distract from the West's supply of weapons to Ukraine.[26] Iran may seek military assistance from Russia in return for the missiles, as CTP previously assessed.[27]

Iranian state media, citing an unidentified Iraqi diplomat, reported on April 13 that Iraq and Oman are mediating between Iran and Egypt to restore relations. UK-based *Amwaj Media*, citing a source in the Iraqi National Security Council, separately reported on April 2 that Iran had asked Iraq to play a broader mediator role between Iran and the Arab world, as CTP previously reported.[28]

Iranian Oil Minister Javad Owji traveled to Caracas, Venezuela on April 13 to visit Venezuelan state-owned oil company Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) facilities and meet with his Venezuelan counterpart Pedro Tellechea. PDVSA and the Iranian state-owned National

Iranian Oil Refining and Distribution Company previously announced plans to upgrade the Paraguana Refinery Complex in Venezuela on February 6.[29]

External Security and Military Affairs

The Russian-backed Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 5th Corps clashed with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) near Tabiya Jazira, Deir ez Zor Province on April 13, likely due to a smuggling dispute.[30] Elements from these groups frequently clash over control of smuggling routes in the area.[31] Local pro-Assad social media accounts claimed that issues over smuggling fees triggered the clash.[32] The SDF forces may have also been present in Tabiya Jazira to secure the area after Iranian-backed militants there conducted a rocket attack on US forces, as CTP previously reported.[33] The clash was more likely due to smuggling disputes rather than related to any Russian-backed effort to facilitate Iranian-backed militant attacks against US forces, however.

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[2] <https://safa dot ps/post/351421>

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<https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-10-2023>

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[9] [https://media.shafaq dot com/media/arcella_files/1679869229506\(\)D9%A2%D9%A2.pdf](https://media.shafaq dot com/media/arcella_files/1679869229506()D9%A2%D9%A2.pdf)

[10] <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%B9%D8%A7...>

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[11] <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%B9%D8%A7...>

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[25] <https://www.isna.ir/news/1402012411939/%DA%AF%D9%81%D8%AA-%D9%88%DA%AF%D9%88%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%82%DB%8C>

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[30] <https://sdf-press.com/en/2023/04/update-our-forces-investigate-an-individual-clash-in-deir-ezzor>

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[32] <https://twitter.com/thesyrianlions/status/1646572090785517568?s=46&t=EGY...>

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Iran Update, April 14, 2023

Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, Johanna Moore, and Nicholas Carl

April 14, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

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The Iranian regime is attempting to manage rising tensions with Azerbaijan without conceding its strategic interests in the Caucasus. Iran and Azerbaijan have engaged in several rhetorical and diplomatic altercations in recent weeks, partially due to the Iranian regime's disapproval of strengthening Azerbaijani-Israeli relations.[1] Supreme Leader International Affairs Advisor Ali Akbar Velayati published a statement on April 14 signaling the regime's—and specifically Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's—aversion to continuing down a path of escalation with Azerbaijan.[2] Velayati asserted that Iran has never been and never will be the initiator of a war. He added that Iran is concerned about Azerbaijan's interests and security and titled his statement “I am also an Azeri,” likely to emphasize the cultural and historical overlaps between Iran and Azerbaijan. Artesh Commander Major General Abdol Rahim Mousavi separately discussed Azerbaijan in a Quds Day speech in Tabriz, East Azerbaijan Province on April 14. [3] Mousavi condemned Israel's activities in Azerbaijan and stated that Iran desires “constructive” relations with its northern neighbor. Although Mousavi did not overtly threaten Azerbaijan, that he gave this speech in East Azerbaijan—an Iranian province that borders Azerbaijan—signals to Baku that the regime will not sacrifice its interests in the Caucasus to end the pattern of escalation. Mousavi additionally gave this speech on Quds Day—an annual Iran-sponsored holiday against Israel—to underscore that the regime will not tolerate Azerbaijan permitting Israel to use its territory to launch operations against Iran. The contrasting tone of Velayati and Mousavi's statements reflects these officials' different positions in the regime; Velayati is a diplomat and Mousavi is a military commander. It is unclear whether Iran's approach to Azerbaijan will succeed in reducing tensions, however, given that Iran's interests in the Caucasus are largely incompatible with those of Azerbaijan.

President Ebrahim Raisi gave a televised speech for Quds Day in place of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, possibly indicating Khamenei's continued support for Raisi as Iran's next supreme leader. Palestinian television channels broadcast a Quds Day message from Raisi in the Gaza Strip on April 14.[4] CTP has not previously observed Raisi giving a televised address on Quds Day, making his address and Khamenei's absence this year particularly noteworthy. CTP has not observed any indicators that would suggest Khamenei would be unable to deliver the speech, moreover. Raisi's more pronounced role in this year's Quds Day festivities may indicate that Khamenei wants to help portray Raisi as capable of leading the Axis of Resistance. CTP has previously observed indications that Raisi is a top candidate to succeed Khamenei.[5]

Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid is calling on Iran's Shia population to consider an alternative and more moderate version of the Islamic Republic that would also limit the role of the supreme leader.[6] Abdol Hamid outlined his idea of a truly “Islamic Republic” during his April 14 sermon, consistent with his prior criticism of the Iranian regime as neither “Islamic” nor a “Republic,” which CTP previously reported.[7] Abdol Hamid characterized his ideal system as “moderately Islamic” and “close to a democracy” in which officials will be subject to the people's approval. Abdol Hamid also stated that no official would have “absolute authority” in that system, strictly limiting state authority to the traditional Quranic interpretation that “only God has absolute authority.”

Abdol Hamid is challenging the postrevolutionary foundation of the Islamic Republic even though he is calling for an Islamic system. Former Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini grounded the

current regime in the notion of the *velayat-e motlagheh-ye faqih* (Absolute Rule of the Jurisprudent).[8] The supreme leader therefore has the absolute authority to not only implement God's commandments but to legislate his own laws if necessary to preserve the Islamic nature of the regime. This interpretation departs from the traditional Shia notion of *velayat-e faqih* (Rule of the Jurisprudent), which as Abdol Hamid expressed means "only God has absolute authority" and the Shia cleric only has the authority to interpret law without legislating it.

Abdol Hamid is using the softer interpretation of *Velayat-e Faqih* to propose a more moderate version of the Islamic Republic to the Shia population. Abdol Hamid remains undeterred despite the regime's repeated threats against him and his Sunni Baloch following, as CTP previously assessed.[9] That he would risk his own and his following's safety indicates that he is not simply attempting to carve out a permanent political space for his Sunni Baloch movement, but that he seeks to appeal to a much wider audience of observers. Not only does Shia tradition offer the flexibility to accommodate Abdol Hamid's political vision, but there are moderate factions in the regime that can bring about such change. Abdol Hamid may be trying to appeal to the moderate Shia factions both within society as well as the regime to adopt his vision, especially once the regime transitions from the current supreme leader to the next.

Key Takeaways

- **The Iranian regime is attempting to manage rising tensions with Azerbaijan without conceding its strategic interests in the Caucasus.**
- **President Ebrahim Raisi gave a televised speech for Quds Day in place of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, possibly indicating Khamenei's continued support for Raisi as Iran's next supreme leader.**
- **Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid is calling on Iran's Shia population to consider an alternative and more moderate version of the Islamic Republic that would also limit the role of the supreme leader**
- **The Iranian rial appreciated slightly from 509,500 rials to one US dollar on April 13 to 508,000 rials to one US dollar on April 14.**
- **Palestinian Islamic Jihad Movement (PIJ) Secretary General Ziyad al Nakhalah and Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah gave separate speeches using the usual anti-Israel rhetoric that is common on the Iran-sponsored International Quds Day.**
- **Iraqi Shia cleric Muqtada al Sadr announced a freeze to all Sadrist Movement operations in response to a deviant faction of the Sadrist Movement named Ahl al Qadaa, the People of the Cause.**
- **Israeli news outlet Channel 11 reported that Israel has closed six kilometers of airspace along the Lebanese, Syrian, and Gaza border, likely to preempt a possible strike into Israeli territory from Iranian-backed proxies in commemoration of Quds Day.**

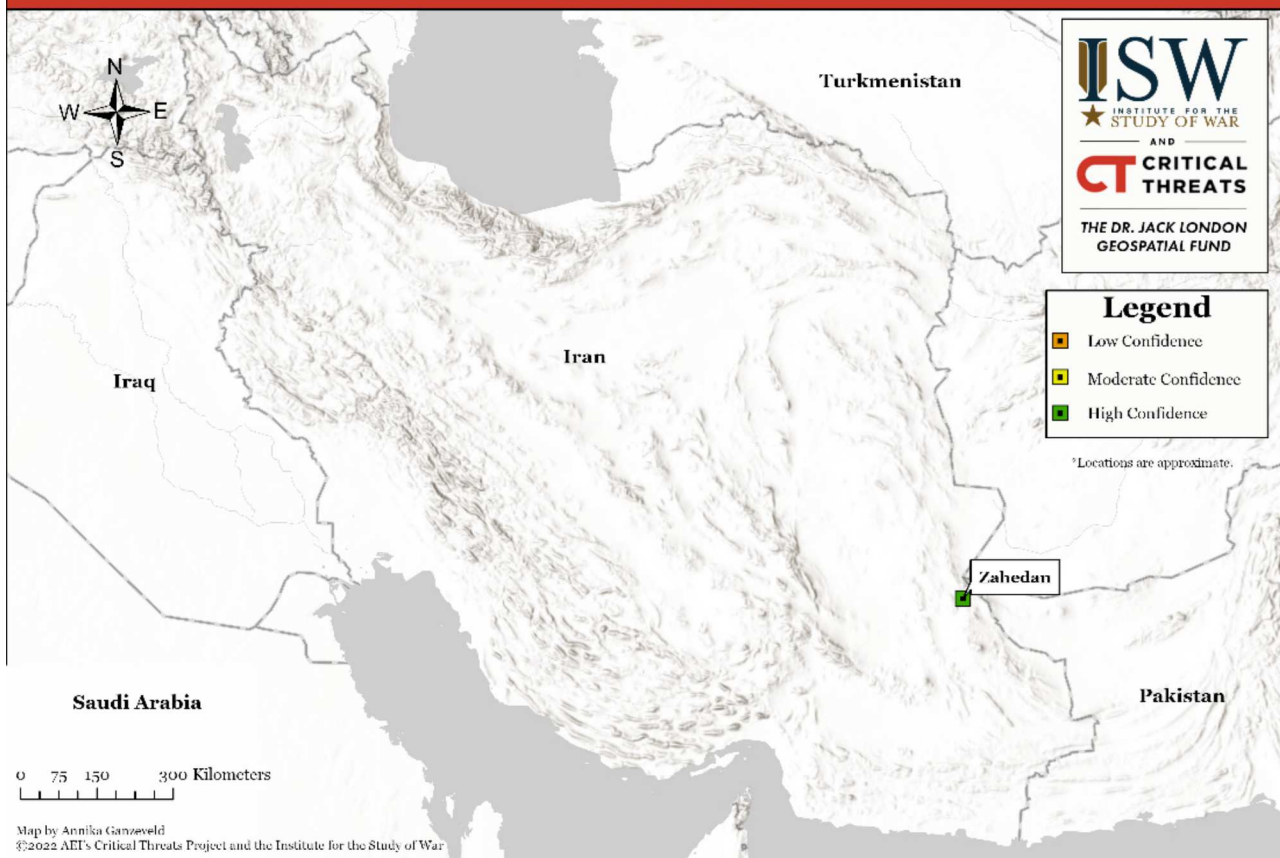
Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least one protest occurred on April 14. CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan[10]

- **Size:** Small to medium
- **Demographic:** Zahedan residents protesting after prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid's Friday sermon
- **Notes:** Protesters held a silent demonstration

Protest Activity in Iran as of April 14, 5:30 PM



Protest coordinators and organizations circulated calls for demonstrations on the following days:

April 15[11]

- **Type:** Student demonstrations against the mandatory hijab law
- **Location:** Countrywide

April 16 and 18[12]

- **Type:** Demonstrations to commemorate the birthdays of three killed protesters
- **Location:** Tehran City, Tehran Province and Karaj, Alborz Province

Sistan and Baluchistan Province Armed Forces Judicial Organization Chief Abol Fazl Mah Goli announced on April 13 indictments against the perpetrators of the September 2022 “Bloody Friday” massacre in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province.[13] Mah Goli stated that some state security personnel who shot at citizens “went to extremes.” Mahgoli’s announcement follows prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid’s meeting with the families of “Bloody Friday” victims on April 11.[14] Abdol Hamid met with these families, likely to invoke memories of the massacre and rally his supporters, as CTP previously assessed.[15]

Economic Affairs

The Iranian rial appreciated slightly from 509,500 rials to one US dollar on April 13 to 508,000 rials to one US dollar on April 14.[16]

External Security and Military Affairs

Palestinian Islamic Jihad Movement (PIJ) Secretary General Ziyad al Nakhalah and Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah gave separate speeches using the usual anti-Israel rhetoric that is common on the Iran-sponsored International Quds Day. Both speeches highlighted the strength and unity of the Axis of Resistance and vowed to support the Palestinian resistance against Israel.[17] Nasrallah discussed Hamas's rocket attacks into northern Israel on April 6 and claimed that Hezbollah's restraint and decision to remain silent while assessing the events that took place should worry Israel.[18] He also argued that Iran's recent normalization with Saudi Arabia is a deliberate move to impede regional normalization among Arab states with Israel.

Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba Secretary General Akhram Kaabi gave a speech during Quds Day celebrations in Baghdad in which he threatened US forces in Iraq. Kaabi rejected the American presence in Iraq and called on US forces to withdraw immediately or be targeted in attacks. Kaabi also claimed that the US Ambassador to Iraq conducted acts of sabotage from a US military base disguised as the embassy.[19] Kaabi's comments targeting the US Ambassador to Iraq is a notable intensification of rhetoric as compared to other speeches given by proxy leadership in Baghdad. Kaabi's statements mirror that of the 1979

Iranian Revolution that claimed the US Embassy in Tehran was a "den of spies" used to engineer the 1953 coup.[20] This designation of the US Embassy in 1979 was used as justification by protesters to storm the embassy. Iraqi protesters in 2019 similarly referred to the US Embassy in Baghdad as the "den of spies" in reference to the 1979 Embassy storming.[21]

Iranian-backed proxy media released a dramatized propaganda video showing proxies from across Iran's Axis of Resistance collaborating on plans for an attack on Israel.[22] The propaganda video follows the Axis's uniform message of solidarity with the Palestinian resistance cause and cohesion across the Axis. Iranian-backed Iraqi proxy groups additionally staged a series of marches in Baghdad, Nasiriyah, Hillah, Maysan, Kirkuk, Khadimiya, and Sanaa.[23] Iranian-backed Telegram channel *Sabreen and Tura* reported that tens of thousands of supporters had turned out to the Quds Day marches, however, footage and images from proxy-affiliated media shows that the demonstrators numbered in the low hundreds with a Quds Day event in Sanaa possibly numbering over 1,000 demonstrators.[24]

Unidentified sources told Syrian-opposition outlet SyriaTV that the IRGC Quds Force moved the primary location for covert meetings from Damascus to Beirut in response to Israeli airstrikes in Damascus targeting Quds Force leadership.[25] The Quds Force decided to move following an Israeli airstrike targeting a Quds Force meeting in Qafr Souseh on February 19. According to the source, IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani determined that Syrian officers were responsible for intelligence leaks to Israel.

Iraqi Shia cleric Muqtada al Sadr announced a freeze to all Sadrist Movement operations in response to a deviant faction of the Sadrist Movement named Ahl al Qadaa, the People of the Cause.[26] Ahl al Qadaa claimed that Sadr is the Imam Mehdi and called on its followers to attend I'tikaf, a practice of staying at a mosque for several days commonly at the end of Ramadan, with Sadr to pledge their allegiance to him.[27] Sadr rejected the claims and claimed that the faction was corrupt.[28] The Iraqi Judiciary announced that "dozens" of Ahl al Qadaa members were arrested on April 14 as gang members promoting ideas contributing to discord and civil disruption.[29]

Israeli news outlet Channel 11 reported that Israel has closed six kilometers of airspace along the Lebanese, Syrian, and Gaza border, likely to preempt a possible strike into Israeli territory from Iranian-backed proxies in commemoration of Quds Day.[30] The no-fly-zone is in effect until Sunday April 16.[31] Israel's state-owned Channel 12 news also reported that Iron Dome systems had been redeployed across Israel under heightened security.[32]

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Iran Update, April 17, 2023

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Johanna Moore, Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, and Nicholas Carl

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Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani has allowed Iran—via its proxies—to expand its military influence in Iraq, specifically Kirkuk and Sinjar provinces, in recent days. The Popular Mobilization Authority—the official governing body of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—announced on April 17 that the PMF will establish a new operational headquarters in Kirkuk Province on April 17.[1] Sudani also gave permission to Popular Mobilization Forces Chairman Faleh al Fayadh to create a new PMF-affiliated brigade in Sinjar, Ninewa province on April 17, according to UK-based *Al Araby*. [2] An unidentified PMF source cited by *Al Araby* claimed that the brigade will be comprised of Sinjar residents recommended by local officials and PMF leadership as well as members of the PMF and Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)-affiliated Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS). Sudani may have permitted these developments because his authority over the PMF has weakened in recent weeks. Sudani has suffered political losses to challenges from the Badr Organization in Diyala Province and former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki, who sponsored electoral laws that will prevent Sudani from securing another term as prime minister, as CTP has reported.[3]

The PMF possibly established the new headquarters in Kirkuk as part of a border security agreement between Iran and Iraq. Independent Iraqi news outlet *Nas News* reported that an Iranian Intelligence and Security Ministry delegation traveled to Iraqi Kurdistan late last week to follow up on the status of the border security agreement signed between Iraq and Iran.[4] Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani and Sudani signed the agreement, which reportedly involves disarming Kurdish opposition groups operating in Iraqi Kurdistan, on March 19.[5]

The PMF announced it will create the new brigade in Sinjar following a Turkish airstrike in Sulaymaniyah province on the Iranian border. The head of the Kani Miran village council reported that Turkish Armed Forces targeted and killed three PKK members traveling via car in a drone strike in Kani Miran village, Penjweb district, Sulaymaniyah province on April 15, according to *Al Araby*. [6] Sulaymaniyah Governor Haval Abu Bakr spoke with Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani to express concern regarding Turkish airstrikes in the province according to the UK based paper *Al Quds al Araby*. [7] The Turkish airstrike was uncharacteristically close to the Iranian border. A new PMF brigade in Sinjar supports Iranian

efforts to establish and secure ground lines of communication into Syria, however, the Badr brigade in Sinjar would operate within close proximity of Turkish forces. Iran and Turkey have become rapidly positioned themselves in a potentially escalatory face-off within Iraq.

The PMF's plans to increase its presence in Sinjar would facilitate another Iranian shipment route into Syria and risk conflict with Turkey in Iraqi Kurdistan. Sinjar has strategic significance to both Iran and Turkey and is located within disputed Iraqi Kurdistan territory containing a highway into northern Syria. The highway, which serves as a smuggling route into Syria through the Rabia border crossing, presents an alternative ground line of transportation to the al Qaim border crossing in Anbar province and would support an effort to expand Iranian-backed proxy presence into northern Syria that CTP previously assessed.[8] The PMF's interaction with PKK-affiliated militants in Sinjar to facilitate materiel through northern Iraq into Syria would threaten Turkey's stated objective of removing PKK militants from northern Iraq.[9] This would place a PMF brigade under risk of being targeted in Turkish airstrikes that target YBS and PKK militants.

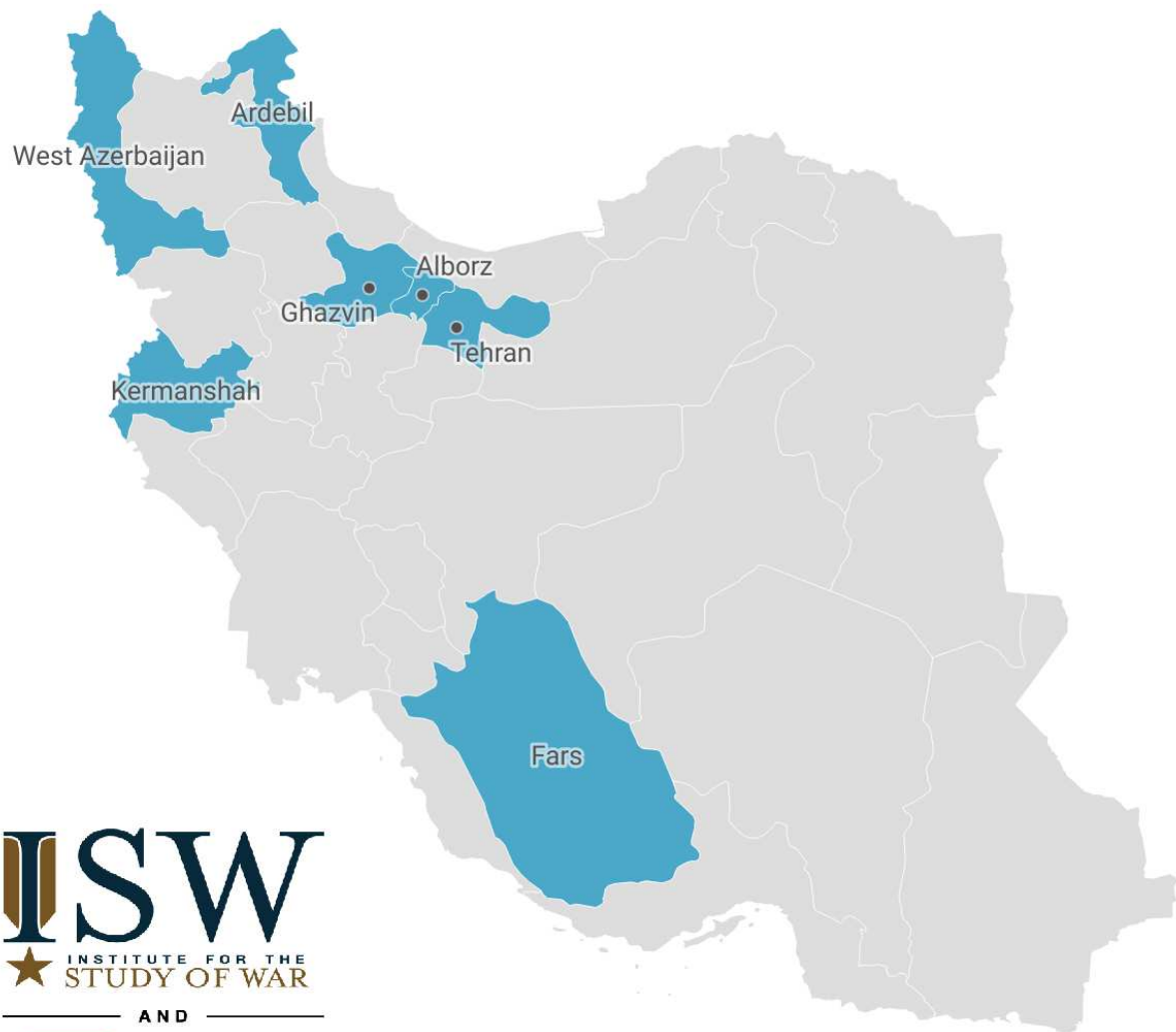
The Iranian regime's callous response to the ongoing wave of student poisonings may exacerbate the feeling of terror that these incidents are inducing among the Iranian public. CTP recorded student poisoning incidents in five cities on April 15, seven cities on April 16, and seven cities on April 17. Regime officials have conspicuously failed to reassure citizens that it prioritizes their safety despite the persistence of these incidents. Both Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Ebrahim Raisi neglected to raise the issue of student poisonings in meetings and speeches over the past three days.[10] The regime's silence on the recent student poisonings is striking given that, if these poisonings were occurring in another country, the government of that country would likely devote all of its resources and energy to ending the attacks on schoolchildren. The regime has additionally deployed security forces to confront citizens protesting the persistence of student poisonings. Security forces sprayed tear gas and attempted to disperse a crowd of protesters responding to recent student poisonings in Shahin Shahr, Esfahan Province on April 15.[11] Iranian social media users previously circulated videos of security forces reportedly shooting at citizens protesting student poisonings in Saghez, Kurdistan Province on April 9, as CTP previously reported.[12] The regime's hostile response to poisoning-related demonstrations stands in stark contrast to its general noninterference in economically motivated protests. CTP recorded 17 economic protests between April 15 and 17 but did not observe security forces interfering in any of these protests. The regime's differing responses to these two kinds of demonstrations underscore its sensitivity to accusations of the regime's involvement in the poisonings. The regime has lastly turned a blind eye to widespread reports of school officials and personnel mistreating students in poisoned schools, such as by barring them from leaving school buildings and confiscating their water bottles.[13] It is thus reasonable to conclude that the regime may be seeking to instill terror among the Iranian people, and among young female Iranians in particular.

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - April 15



Map: AEI's Critical Threats Project • Source: Author's Research • Created with Datawrapper

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - April 16



Map: AEI's Critical Threats Project • Source: Author's Research • Created with Datawrapper

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - April 17



Map: AEI's Critical Threats Project • Source: Author's Research • Created with Datawrapper

- Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani has allowed Iran—via its proxies—to expand its military influence in Iraq, specifically Kirkuk and Sinjar provinces, in recent days.
- The PMF announced it will create the new brigade in Sinjar following a Turkish airstrike in Sulaymaniyah province on the Iranian border.
- The Iranian regime's callous response to the ongoing wave of student poisonings may exacerbate the feeling of terror that these incidents are inducing among the Iranian public.
- The regime may be trying to weaken the anti-regime movement of Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid by addressing the core issues uniting protesters within the movement.
- The Iranian rial depreciated slightly from 508,000 rials to one US dollar on April 14 to 516,000 rials to one US dollar on April 17.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least four protests occurred in three cities across three provinces on April 15. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Shahin Shahr, Esfahan Province[14]

- **Size:** Small to medium
- **Demographic:** Individuals protesting recent student poisonings

Dehloran, Ilam Province[15]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Iran International General Contracting Company workers on strike

Dehloran, Ilam Province[16]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Refinery workers on strike

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province[17]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Nurses



At least eight protests occurred in eight cities across six provinces on April 16. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[18]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Kermanshah City, Kermanshah Province[19]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Shoush, Khuzestan Province[20]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[21]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Shoushtar, Khuzestan Province[22]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Babol, Mazandaran Province[23]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

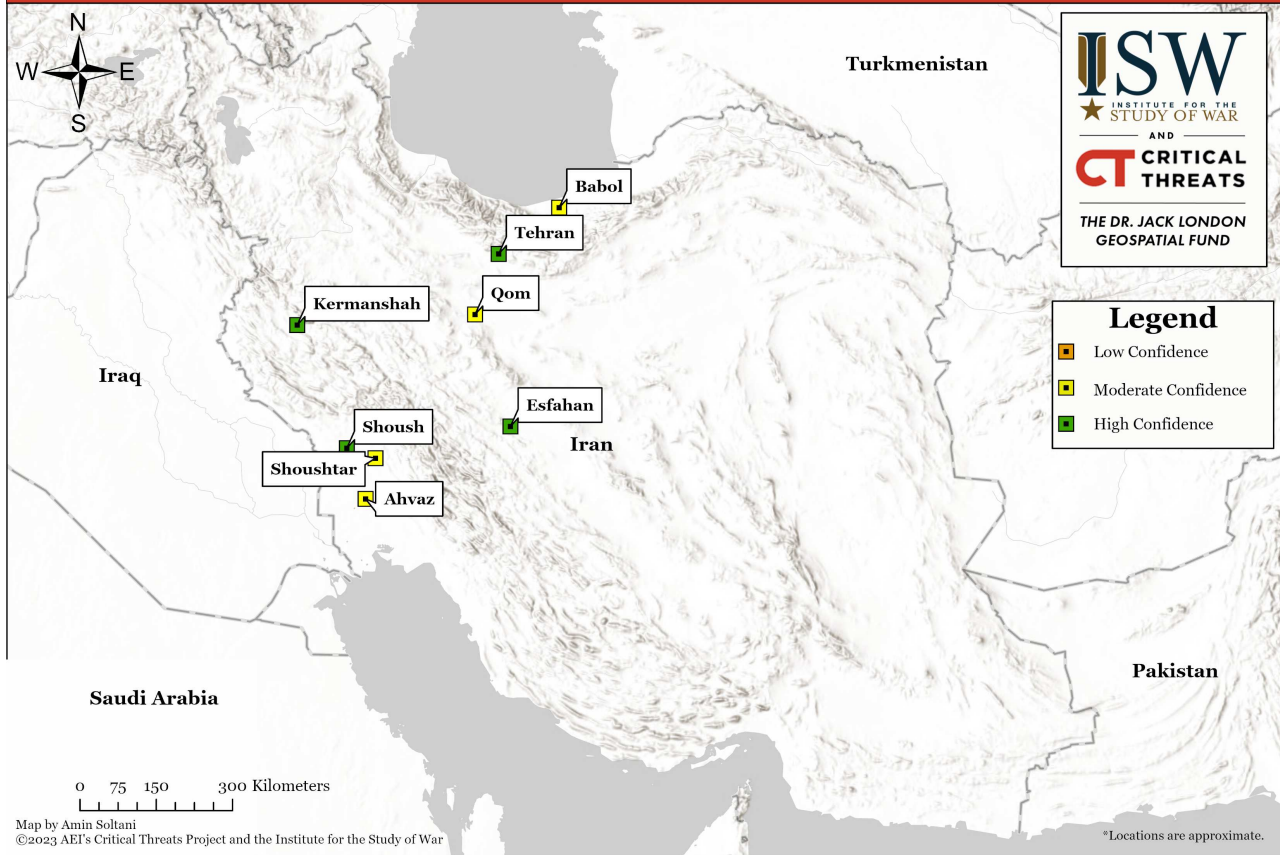
Qom City, Qom Province[24]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Nurses

Tehran City, Tehran Province[25]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Students protesting mandatory veiling

Protest Activity in Iran as of April 16, 5:00 PM



At least nine protests occurred in seven cities across seven provinces on April 16. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[26]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Farmers

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[27]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Ghazvin City, Ghazvin Province[28]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Nurses

Kermanshah City, Kermanshah Province[29]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[30]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province[31]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Individuals gathered around the grave of a killed protester

Bojnurd, North Khorasan Province[32]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

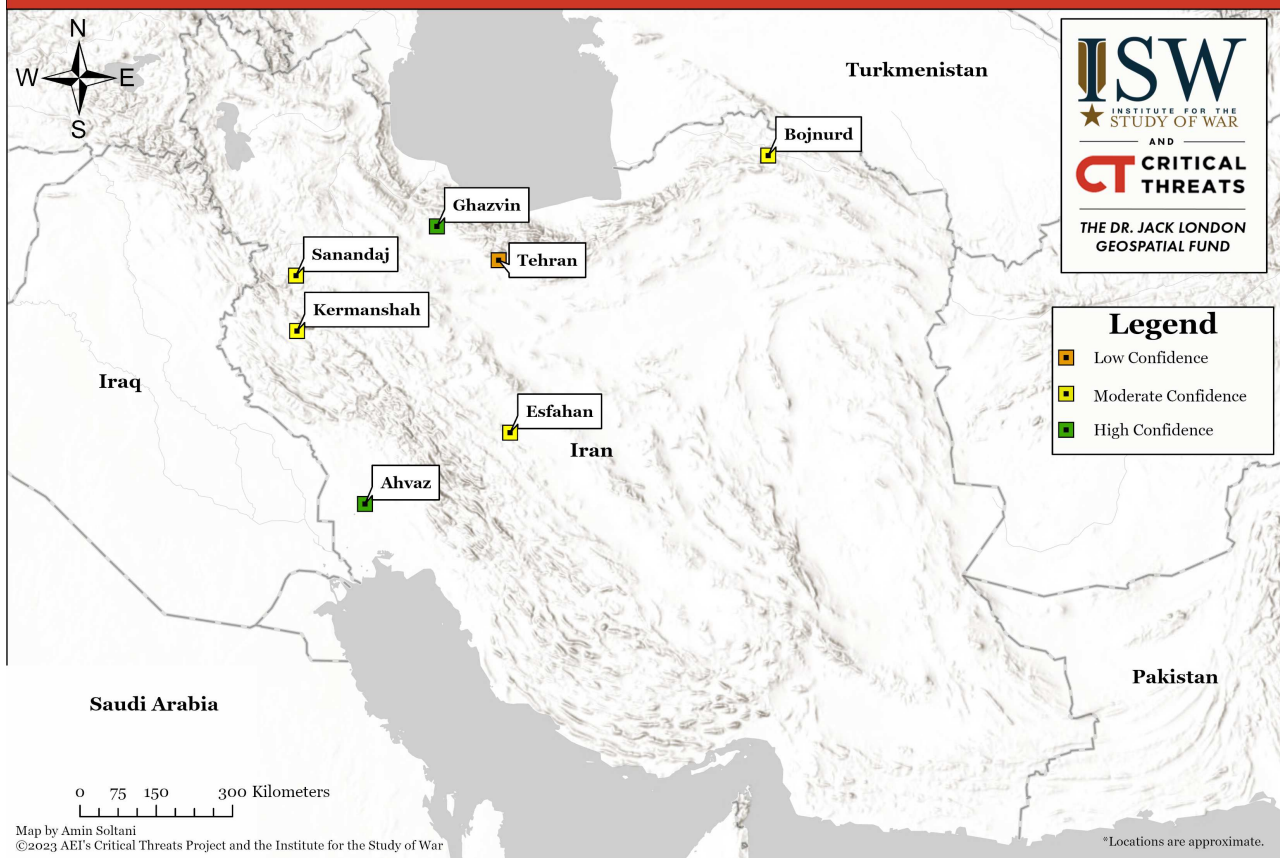
Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[33]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Individuals protesting recent student poisonings

Tehran City, Tehran Province[34]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Protest Activity in Iran as of April 17, 5:00 PM



The regime may be trying to weaken the anti-regime movement of Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid by addressing the core issues uniting protesters within the movement. Sistan and Baluchistan Security and Law Enforcement Deputy Governor Ali Reza Marhamati announced on April 17 that 38 individuals killed during the September 2022 “Bloody Friday” massacre in Zahedan have been designated as “martyrs”—an honorary designation for those who have lost their lives in the service of a just cause.[35] This announcement comes after the Sistan and Baluchistan Province Armed Forces Judicial Organization announced indictments on April 13 against the security forces who perpetrated the massacre, which CTP previously reported. [36] Iranian media additionally reported on April 17 that the Raisi administration has expanded water access to 123,000 people in the province.[37] Abdol Hamid has repeatedly referenced the above issues in his Friday prayer sermons. Abdol Hamid also met with the families of “Bloody Friday” victims on April 11, likely to rally his supporters and reverse his declining momentum, which CTP previously assessed.[38]

The Law Enforcement Command (LEC) has executed the new veiling enforcement plan it presented on April 8. Several LEC officials stated on April 16 that the LEC had sent warning messages to thousands of unveiled women.[39] Iranian media confirmed the details of the LEC enforcement plan on April 17, publishing a video that outlines how the LEC identifies and subsequently messages noncompliant individuals.[40] LEC Commander Ahmad Reza Radan announced on April 8 that the LEC will begin using advanced surveillance capabilities to identify unveiled women and issue “warning texts” on April 15, as CTP previously reported.[41]

Iranian women continued to defy the regime’s mandatory veiling standards despite its greater enforcement efforts. Social media users circulated footage of unveiled women in public spaces

throughout Iran between April 15-17.[42] LEC spokesperson Saeed Montazer al Mahdi inadvertently acknowledged that at least 16 percent of those who received messages did not comply.[43] The aforementioned statements by officials that the LEC had sent warning messages to thousands of unveiled women essentially acknowledged widespread disobedience.

Iranian officials and state media reacted to former crown prince and political dissident Reza Pahlavi's trip to Israel on April 17. Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanani stated that Pahlavi's visit "has no value." [44] Iranian media reacted harshly as well, criticizing Pahlavi's efforts to organize the Iranian diaspora against the regime and arguing that the Israelis were deceiving Pahlavi [45]

Domestic Politics

Forty parliamentarians signed a motion to interpellate Industry, Mines, and Trade Minister Reza Fatemi Amin on April 17, the fifth Raisi administration official in the last two weeks who has faced removal from government. [46] The Iranian constitution states interpellations can be tabled if they bear the signatures of at least ten parliamentarians. [47] Interpellation is a formal parliamentary request for a government minister to appear before parliament to justify government policy, which may result in a vote of no confidence against the relevant minister. This news comes after IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* reported on April 13 that President Ebrahim Raisi may soon dismiss Amin. [48] Government Information Council head Sepehr Khalaji denied the report and argued that Amin is not responsible for recent issues in the automobile market, as CTP previously reported. [49]

Hassan Rouhani's former chief of staff, Mahmoud Vaezi, rejected claims that Rouhani is planning to run in the parliamentary elections in March 2024. [50] IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* reported on April 11 that Rouhani will lead a campaign to promote the election of centrist candidates in the 2024 parliamentary elections, bolstering his political profile and influence if such candidates were elected, which CTP reported. [51] CTP assessed on February 14 that Rouhani was positioning himself to reenter the political arena after a period of relative absence. [52]

Economic Affairs

The Iranian rial depreciated slightly from 508,000 rials to one US dollar on April 14 to 516,000 rials to one US dollar on April 17. [53]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei stated that Iran's armed forces should focus on confronting "large powers" instead of engaging in menial conflicts during a meeting with senior military officials on April 16. [54] Khamenei may have been referring to the latest tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan. Regime officials have claimed in recent months that Israel is trying to harm Azerbaijani-Israeli relations. [55] Supreme Leader International Affairs Advisor Ali Akbar Velayati similarly signaled the regime's--and specifically Khamenei's--aversion to continuing down a path of escalation with Azerbaijan in a statement on April 14, as CTP previously reported. [56]

Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian held his third phone call with Azerbaijani Foreign Affairs Minister Jeyhun Bayramov on April 14, likely to discuss the recent rhetorical and diplomatic arguments between Iran and Azerbaijan.[57]

External Security and Military Affairs

IRGC Ground Forces Brigadier General Ali Kouhestani announced on April 15 the successful test of the Sadid-365 anti-tank missile.[58] The Sadid-365 is a guided missile with a range of eight kilometers.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported on April 14 that IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani coordinated the April 6 Hamas rocket attacks on Israel.[59] The report cited unidentified informed sources who claimed that Ghaani met with Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh and his deputy Saleh al-Arouri, Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, and unidentified Palestinian Islamic Jihad officials in the Iranian Embassy in Beirut in early April before the April 6 Hamas rocket attacks. CTP previously hypothesized on April 10 that Iran facilitated the rocket attacks to distract Israel from the transfer of Iranian advanced weapon systems into Syria.[60] CTP reported on Ghaani's arrival in Damascus on April 10, possibly to meet with Palestinian militants, but not a visit to Beirut for the same purpose, however.[62] CTP also reported that Hamas Political Bureau Chairman Ismail Haniyeh traveled to Beirut, Lebanon on April 5 to meet with senior Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) officials, including LH Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah.[63]

An unidentified reconnaissance drone crashed at Camp Dublin within Baghdad International Airport on April 15, according to Iraqi news outlets.[64] An unidentified security source claimed that Coalition forces remotely disabled the drone over the base. Asaib Ahl al Haq façade group Ashab al Kaf posted a statement to their website on April 16 warning of an imminent attack on various camps located at Camp Victory.[65] Ashab al Kaf threatened to shoot down US and Coalition helicopters most recently on April 13.[66]