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Iran Update, April 18, 2023

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Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf met with several key regime powerbrokers on April 18, possibly to promote a pragmatic hardliner political agenda in Iran. [1] Ghalibaf held an iftar dinner with Ali Akbar Nategh Nouri, Ali Larijani, and Gholam Ali Haddad Adel—all of whom were previously parliament speakers at various points. Nategh Nouri is a moderate politician affiliated with former President Hassan Rouhani. [2] Rouhani’s former chief of staff—Mahmoud Vaezi—described Rouhani and Nouri as having a “very good relationship” and stated that “they see each other all the time” during an interview in January 2023. [3] Ali Larijani comes from the wealthy and historically influential Larijani family, which Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has politically marginalized in recent years. [4] Larijani frequently cooperated with Rouhani when they were both in power to promote a moderate agenda. Haddad Adel is a hardline politician and the father-in-law of Mojtaba Khamenei—the son of Ali Khamenei. All the individuals in the meeting represent important factions across the Iranian political spectrum.

Ghalibaf may seek to form a political coalition with these powerbrokers to advance his pragmatic hardliner agenda. Ghalibaf has repeatedly called for political and economic reforms to address popular grievances following the Mahsa Amini protest movement. [5] He has also stated that he is trying to reach a consensus within the political establishment to “modernize regime governance” and solve economic issues. [6] The iftar dinner may be part of his consensus-building efforts.

A political coalition between these factions (formal or otherwise) could push back on more ideological, less pragmatic hardliners, such as President Ebrahim Raisi, who they may view as an obstacle to serious political and economic reforms. Ghalibaf has increasingly criticized the performance of the Raisi administration in recent months, particularly its economic policy. [7] Nategh Nouri and Larijani have historically opposed Raisi as well. It is less obvious whether Haddad Adel and his supporters would back a concerted political effort against Raisi, however. Both Raisi and Mojtaba Khamenei are considered top contenders to succeed Ali Khamenei as supreme leader. Haddad Adel could support political efforts to undermine Raisi if he seeks to bolster Mojtaba’s chances of becoming supreme leader.

Key Takeaways

- **Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf met with several key regime powerbrokers, possibly to promote a pragmatic hardliner political agenda in Iran.**
- **At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces.**
- **CTP recorded poisonings in seven cities across six provinces, primarily concentrated in the northwestern provinces of Iran.**
- **Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) Secretary General Ziyad al Nakhalah met with senior Iraqi political officials in Baghdad.**
- **The IRGC and its proxies are reportedly strengthening their intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities around al Mayadin, Deir ez Zor Province, likely as part of the Iranian effort to secure the Abu Kamal-Deir ez Zor City land route in eastern Syria.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

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

Tehran City, Tehran Province[8]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** School employees

Dehloran, Ilam Province[9]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Individuals demanding the release of four political prisoners



Iranian state media continued on April 18 to deny the significance of the ongoing student poisonings across Iran. IRGC-affiliated *Fars News Agency* attributed the cause of student poisonings to “teenage mischief” and reported that only 20 percent of poisoned students admitted to the hospital exhibited “real symptoms.”[10] The true percentage of students with poisoning symptoms is likely much higher than *Fars News Agency* reported. Given the standard wait times associated with medical triage and the ephemeral nature of the chemical substance used in the attacks, it is quite possible that the effects of the chemical wear off before poisoning victims are triaged and treated.

CTP recorded poisonings in seven cities across six provinces on April 18, primarily concentrated in the northwestern provinces of Iran.[11]

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - April 18



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

Domestic Politics

Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi expressed his openness to a diverse parliamentary election in a meeting with political party leaders on April 18.^[12] Vahidi stated that he would “welcome the viewpoints of various parties, including fundamentalists, reformists, and independents” and emphasized the importance of high participation in the March 2024 parliamentary elections. The Interior Ministry is the governmental body charged with supervising elections in Iran.

Raisi administration spokesperson Ali Bahadori Jahromi rejected rumors that President Ebrahim Raisi will dismiss Industry, Mines, and Trade Minister Reza Fatemi Amin.

^[13] Jahromi defended Amin’s record and performance, rejecting claims that he is responsible for the significant increase in car prices in Iran. Bahadori’s statement follows a parliamentary motion to interpellate Amin on April 17, which CTP previously reported.^[14] Jahromi was echoing similar remarks by Government Information Council head Sepehr Khalaji, who similarly denied rumors about Amin’s dismissal and argued that Amin is not responsible for recent issues in Iran’s automobile market.^[15] IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* reported on April 13 that President Ebrahim Raisi may soon dismiss Amin.^[16]

Economic Affairs

The Iranian rial continued to depreciate on April 18, from 516,000 rials to one US dollar on April 17 to 517,500 rials to one US dollar on April 18.[17]

Economic Affairs and Finance Minister Ehsan Khandouzi made an urgent request to President Ebrahim Raisi for further cooperation between relevant government agencies to reduce custom duties on basic goods.[18] Khandouzi emphasized the need for these relevant agencies to produce a list of medical equipment, medicines, industrial and agricultural production machinery, and raw materials that should be subject to reduced import tariffs. Khandouzi argued that delaying this action could cause major economic problems for Iran.

Parliamentary Energy Committee member Ramazan Ali Sang Davini denied rumors that the Raisi administration intends to raise fuel prices. Davini attributed the rumors to “Iran’s enemies,” who he argued are motivated by creating “despair within Iranian society.”[19] A sudden rise in fuel prices was the primary driver of the Bloody Aban protest wave that erupted throughout Iran in November 2019.[20]

External Security and Military Affairs

Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) Secretary General Ziyad al Nakhalah met with senior Iraqi political officials in Baghdad on April 15 and 16. Nakhalah met with Iranian proxy Asaib Ahl al Haq Secretary General Qais al Khazali on April 15 to discuss enhancing communication and cooperation against Israel.[21] Nakhalah also met with Iraqi Parliament Speaker Mohammad al Halbousi on April 16 to similarly discuss the Palestinian resistance against Israel and the security situation in the West Bank.[22] CTP previously reported that Nakhalah—the leader of a US-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization—met with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani and Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid on April 13.[23]

The al Sayyad Company, which is a Syrian private security company affiliated with Russian private military company Wagner Group, recruited several hundred Syrian fighters on April 16-17. Approximately 1,200-2,000 Syrians arrived in Al Sayyed, Homs Province to register to join the al Sayyad Company.[24] The al Sayyad Company reportedly offered potential recruits a monthly salary of \$700-1,000.[25] The EU sanctioned the al Sayyad Company in 2022 for its connection to the Wagner-supervised ISIS Hunters’ recruitment of Syrian mercenaries to fight in Ukraine.[26] ISW previously reported on April 10 that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin urged the Kremlin to reinvigorate Russia’s global military presence via his organization.[27] A sufficiently large recruitment drive could allow Russia to offset its force requirements in Syria and redirect military resources to Ukraine. Alternatively, the influx of new recruits could allow Russia to strengthen its military presence in Syria and regain some of the military positions and influence with the Assad regime that it partially ceded to Iran in 2022 after the invasion of Ukraine.[28]

The IRGC and its proxies are reportedly strengthening their intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities around al Mayadin, Deir ez Zor Province, likely as part of the Iranian effort to secure the Abu Kamal-Deir ez Zor City land route in eastern Syria. Local anti-Assad media sources reported that IRGC Quds Force and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) technical experts transported communications and surveillance equipment to an IRGC military depot and surveillance headquarters at al Rahba castle near al Mayadin on April 17.[29] Syrian media reported that the Quds Force personnel specialize in intelligence collection and that the LH personnel belong to Unit 217. The exact function of Unit 217 is unclear. The Syrian reporting may have meant to refer to LH’s Unit 127, which is responsible for ISR drone operations in the central Syrian desert.[30] CTP previously assessed that Iranian and Iranian-backed forces have reinforced key positions along the Abu Kamal-Deir ez Zor City route to protect Iranian military shipments from ISIS attacks.[31]

The Russian-backed Syrian Arab Army 5th Corps reinforced positions in Tabiya Jazira, Deir ez Zor Province on April 17. Local Syrian media reported that the 5th Corps increased its military presence at several checkpoints and closed a smuggling corridor that connects Tabiya Jazira to Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-controlled territory.[32] CTP previously reported that the 5th Corps and SDF clashed likely due to a smuggling-related dispute near Tabiya Jazira on April 13.

[33] The 5th Corps' focus on restraining smuggling activity in Tabiya Jazira suggests that it is reacting to the April 13 incident rather than initiating a wider confrontation with the SDF.

Saudi Foreign Affairs Minister Faisal bin Farhan discussed reestablished diplomatic ties with Syrian President Bashar al Assad in Damascus on April 18.[34] Farhan's visit marks Saudi Arabia's first high-level diplomatic engagement with the Assad regime since it severed ties in 2011.

[35] Western news outlets previously reported that Farhan would invite Assad to attend an upcoming Arab League summit in Riyadh, but official Syrian and Saudi government readouts made no mention of Assad attending the summit.[36] The Assad regime has advanced its efforts to normalize relations with Arab countries in recent weeks. Jordan proposed a plan to reincorporate Syria into the Arab League on April 14, and Tunisia formally restored diplomatic ties with the Assad regime on April 12.[37] The Assad regime will benefit from expanded investment from the Arab states that normalize relations. Russia and Iran could attempt to launder money through these new financial flows to circumvent international sanctions.

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Iran Update, April 19, 2023

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Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei shut down growing calls for a referendum on substantial political reform from within and outside the regime during a meeting with student activists on April 18. Khamenei stated that “the issues of the country are not subject to referendum,” following weeks of statements referencing referendums from prominent officials and leaders across Iran’s political spectrum.[1] 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, as CTP previously reported.[2] Rouhani’s website subsequently published a video and analysis of Rouhani’s April 4 statements on April 9 and 17, respectively.[3] Although Rouhani claims that the referendum he proposes is compatible with Iran’s current constitution, reforming Iran’s domestic, economic, and foreign policies would fundamentally alter the Islamic Republic that Khamenei has built since becoming supreme leader in 1989.[4] Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf has also issued calls for limited governmental change.[5] Ghalibaf met with Nategh Nouri, an associate of Rouhani, on April 18, as CTP previously reported, which indicates he may seek to cooperate with the former president.[6] Khamenei previously dismissed reformist politician Mir Hossein Mousavi’s calls for “foundational change” in his March 21 Nowrouz address, claiming that Iran’s enemies seek to transform Iran by “changing the constitution or the structure of the regime.”[7]

Khamenei’s explicit rejection of referenda on April 18, weeks after he shut down intra-regime debates on constitutional and structural change, indicates that Khamenei perceives that some elements of the regime continue to hold unacceptable discussions about political change. Regime news outlets echoed Khamenei’s criticisms of referenda on April 19, moreover.[8] These outlets’ recirculation of Khamenei’s statements keeps the discourse of political reform alive and may have the unintended effect of precipitating—instead of preventing—further calls among citizens and politicians for a referendum.

Key Takeaways

- **Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei shut down growing calls for a referendum on substantial political reform during a meeting with student activists.**
- **Information and Communications Technology Minister Issa Zareh Pour announced that the National Information Network (NIN) is 60 percent complete.**
- **President Ebrahim Raisi is continuing to use the recent Israeli raids on Al Aqsa Mosque to try to unite Muslim countries against Israel.**
- **CTP recorded student poisonings in four cities across four provinces.**
- **The IRGC and the Artesh are publicly demonstrating cohesion following Artesh Day.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces on April 19. CTP assesses with high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[9]

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

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[10]

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



Information and Communications Technology Minister Issa Zareh Pour announced on April 19 that the National Information Network (NIN) is 60 percent complete.[11] The NIN is a longstanding regime effort to develop a secure and stable national intranet in Iran. The regime seeks to use the intranet to impose greater control over the domestic information space and more effectively censor foreign internet influence in Iran.[12]

CTP recorded student poisonings in four cities across four provinces on April 19.



Domestic Politics

Raisi administration spokesperson Ali Bahadori Jahromi denied rumors on April 19 that state security services arrested former Agricultural Jihad Minister Javad Sadati Nejad.

[13] President Ebrahim Raisi dismissed Sadati Nejad on April 11, which CTP previously reported. [14] Sadati Nejad's removal preceded a trend over the past few days of several Raisi administration officials being fired or facing impeachment, including Program and Budgeting Organization Chief Massoud Mir Kazemi, Innovation and Prosperity Fund President Ali Vahdat, and Industry, Mines, and Trade Minister Reza Fatemi Amin.[15]

Hardline Parliamentarian Ali Asghar Ana Bastani called on Industry, Mines, and Trade Minister Reza Fatemi Amin to resign in advance of his scheduled impeachment hearings.

[16] Ana Bastani stated that Amin had failed to keep his promises as minister. Raisi administration spokesperson Ali Bahadori Jahromi rejected rumors that President Ebrahim Raisi will dismiss Amin and defended his performance on April 18, which CTP previously reported.[17] Forty parliamentarians filed a motion to interpellate Amin on April 17.[18] IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* reported on April 13 that President Ebrahim Raisi may soon dismiss Amin.[19]

Economic Affairs

The Iranian rial remained valued at 517,500 rials to one US dollar on April 19.[20]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

President Ebrahim Raisi is continuing to use the recent Israeli raids on Al Aqsa Mosque to try to unite Muslim countries against Israel, likely to prevent the further expansion of the Abraham Accords. President Ebrahim Raisi emphasized the need for Islamic countries to form a united front against Israel in a phone call with Omani Sultan Haitham bin Tariq al Said on April 19. [21] Numerous regime officials, including Raisi, called on Muslim countries to condemn the recent Israeli raids on Al Aqsa Mosque between April 6-10 and to cooperate with one another against Israel, which CTP previously reported.[22] Regime attempts to unite the region against Israel coincide with an ongoing escalation cycle between Iran and Israel, as CTP previously reported. [23]

External Security and Military Affairs

The IRGC and the Artesh are publicly demonstrating cohesion following Artesh Day on April 18. Artesh Commander Major General Abdol Rahim Mousavi announced approval of joint operational plans between the IRGC and the Artesh in the fields of defense, land, air, and sea operations on April 19.[24] Mousavi also stated that Iran's enemies have been trying to create divisions between the two branches of the armed forces. IRGC Ground Forces Commander Brigadier General Mohammad Pakpour and Artesh Ground Forces Commander Brigadier General Kiomars Heydari signed a cooperation agreement for advancements in the field of hardware and software on April 18.[25] IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami praised the Artesh for its significant achievements during the Artesh Day parade and in a separate meeting with Artesh commanders on April 18.[26] Much of this rhetoric is to be expected around Artesh Day and throughout the year to promote unity after decades of competition between the two branches.

Independent Iraqi media reported on April 19 that Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani will replace up to 10 Iraqi Cabinet ministers in coordination with the Shia Coordination Framework.[27] An unidentified source claimed that Sudani will remove:

- Oil Minister Hayyan Abdul Ghani
- Higher Education Minister Naim Abed Yasser
- Labor Minister Ahmed Jassim Sayer
- Agriculture Minister Abbas Jabr Ubadah
- Transportation Minister Razek Muhaibes Ajimi

These ministers are members of several Shia Coordination Framework parties, including former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki's State of Law Coalition, Asaib Ahl al Haq, and the Fatah bloc. An unidentified Coordination Framework-affiliated source threatened to remove Sudani from office if he tries to prevent any Framework-directed ministerial replacements. Sudani rejected claims that he will remove ministers based on directions from the Coordination Framework during a television interview on April 19.[28]

Senior Hamas and Palestinian Authority leadership traveled to Saudi Arabia on April 19.

[29] An unidentified Palestinian source cited by *Al Jazeera* claimed that a Hamas delegation will stay in Saudi Arabia for several days to discuss the Saudi-Palestinian relationship as well as issues relating to Palestinian resistance against Israel.[30] *Al Monitor* reported that a senior Hamas delegation performed Umrah in Mecca on April 19.[31] Saudi Arabia approved visas for the Hamas delegation following rumored reporting that the visas had been denied.[32] Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Slaman in Jeddah on April 19 ostensibly to discuss support for Palestinian resistance against Israel.[33] The Palestinian leaders may use this trip to highlight their ties with Riyadh and thereby discourage the expansion of bilateral ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Iran may seize on Israel's focus in southern Syria as an opportunity to increase its efforts to move air defense and precision guided munitions through northeastern Syria. Israel Defense Forces conducted an artillery strike on possible joint-Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) and Syrian Arab Army (SAA) positions in the vicinity of Tal Kudana base, Quneitra, south-eastern Syria on April 18 according to Israeli and Syrian media outlets.[34] Israel Defense Forces dropped leaflets onto the targeted territory warning that Israel will continue strikes on Tal Kudana if the SAA continues to allow LH to utilize its military facilities.[35] Iranian-backed militants attempted and failed to launch a surveillance drone from Syrian territory along the Golan Heights into Israeli territory according to anti-Assad regime media outlet *Ayn al Sham*. [36] CTP cannot verify the claim at this time. Iran has been moving air defense systems and equipment into Syria as of the February 6 earthquake in Syria, CTP previously reported.[37]

[1] [https://www dot leader.ir/fa/content/26428/%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-](https://www.dot.leader.ir/fa/content/26428/%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-)

%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%AC%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-
%D9%86%D9%85%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%86%D8%AF%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B4%DA%A9%D9%84-%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-
%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%AC%D9%88%DB%8C%DB%8C

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

[7] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-21-2023>

[8] [https://www dot tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1402/01/30/2882864/](https://www.dotasnimnews.com/fa/news/1402/01/30/2882864/) جنگ-شناختی-در-میدان-صفین-با-
; برافراشتن-پیراهن-عثمان-رفراندوم

[https://www dot tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1402/01/30/2882605/](https://www.dotasnimnews.com/fa/news/1402/01/30/2882605/) رفراندوم-از-قاعده-ی-دموکراسی-تا-قصد-
; دیکناتور-ی-یادداشت

[https://www dot tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1402/01/30/2882879/](https://www.dotasnimnews.com/fa/news/1402/01/30/2882879/) دربار-هیک-عوام-فریبی-با-کلیدواژه-ی-همه-
; پرس-آیا-کشور-ها-دائما-رفراندوم-برگزار-می-کنند

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https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1648646261547888640?cxt=HHwWgMCzvcfC... ;

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[10] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1648666030078558208?cxt=HHwWgICww...> ;

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

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The IRGC is conducting a media campaign against former President Hassan Rouhani likely to alienate him further from the political establishment. IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* published an article on April 20 asserting that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's speech on April 18 was directed at Rouhani, which is consistent with the assessment that CTP previously published on the speech.[1] Khamenei stated during the speech that "the issues of the country cannot be solved by a referendum." [2] Khamenei was responding to repeated calls from Rouhani in recent weeks for a referendum on the regime's domestic, economic, and foreign policies. [3] The *Tasnim News Agency* article emphasized Khamenei's disapproval of Rouhani and stated that audience members "made fun of Rouhani" during the speech. *Tasnim News Agency* has also published articles criticizing the idea of a referendum in recent days.[4]

The IRGC may be responding to indications that Rouhani is trying to reestablish himself and his supporters in the domestic political arena. CTP first assessed that Rouhani was positioning himself to do so on February 14.[5] *Tasnim News Agency* reported on April 11 that Rouhani will promote the election of moderate candidates in the parliamentary elections in 2024.[6] Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf separately met with Ali Akbar Nategh Nouri—a political ally of Rouhani—on April 18, as CTP previously reported.[7] The repeated attacks from *Tasnim News Agency* on Rouhani suggest that IRGC leaders may be concerned that he will succeed in reinserting himself into the political space to some degree.

The IRGC may be emphasizing Khamenei's disapproval of Rouhani to discourage some domestic political blocs from cooperating with Rouhani. The IRGC may be particularly concerned that pragmatic hardliners, such as Ghalibaf, could provide the political space for Rouhani and his supporters to reestablish themselves in the coming legislative elections. Ghalibaf and Rouhani have historically been staunch political rivals, but they appear to agree at least on limiting the role of parastatal entities in the Iranian economy.[8] That common ground could be enough to foster political cooperation, especially given the increasingly dire state of the economy.

The repeated IRGC media attacks on Rouhani are inadvertently keeping domestic discourse focused on political reform. This media attention may have the unintended effect of precipitating—instead of preventing—further calls among citizens and politicians for reform. This effect could become particularly pronounced in hardline circles, given the attention that IRGC media is dedicating to the issue.

Key Takeaways

- **The IRGC is conducting a media campaign against former President Hassan Rouhani likely to alienate him further from the political establishment.**
- **At least three protests occurred in three cities across three provinces.**
- **The Iranian regime is trying to prevent independent reporting on the ongoing student poisonings throughout Iran.**
- **Iranian-backed militias are bolstering air defense capabilities in Deir ez Zor Province, demonstrating the continued IRGC commitment to consolidating its**

position along the Abu Kamal-Deir ez Zor City land route.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least three protests occurred in three cities across three provinces on April 20. CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Tehran City, Tehran Province[9]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Individuals who lost money in the fake online trading platform “King Money”[10]

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

Bandar Abbas, Hormozgan Province[11]

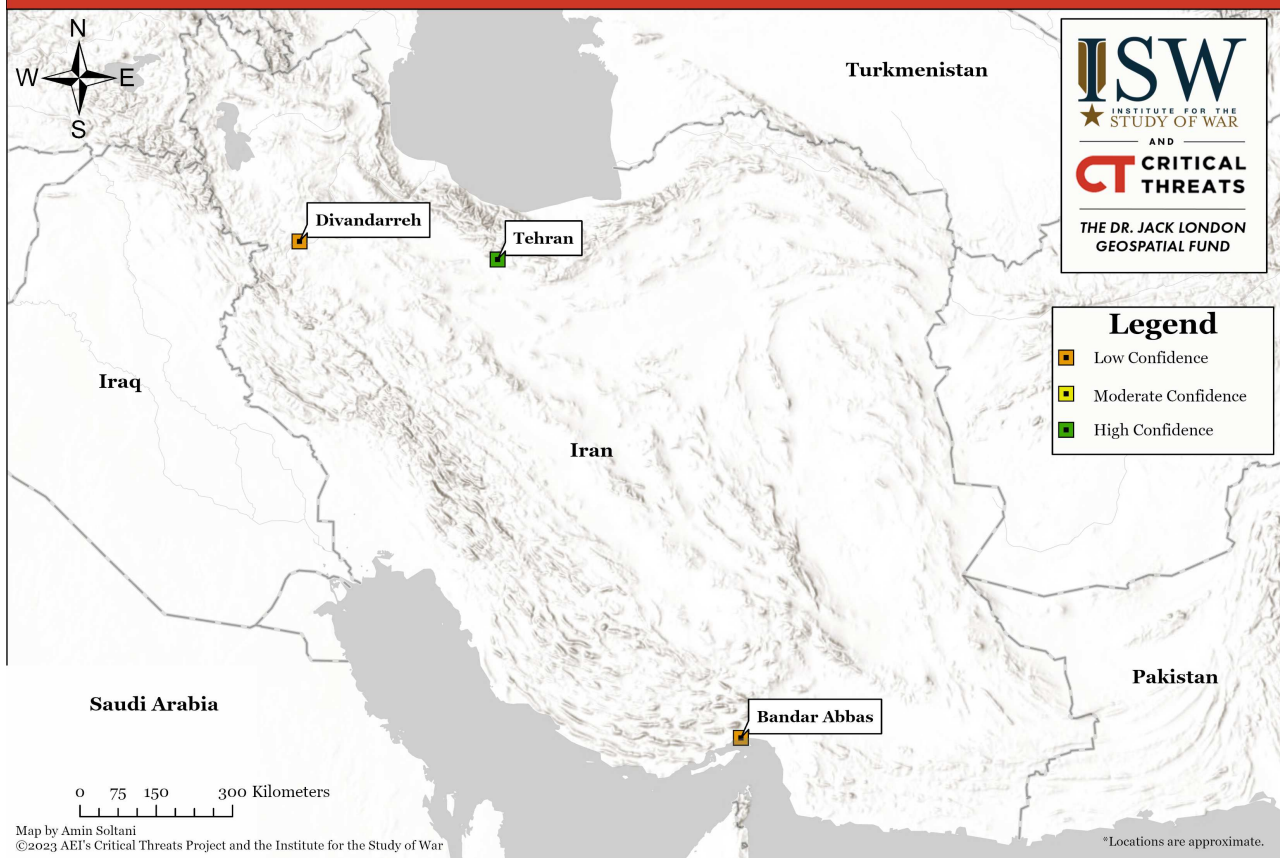
- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Truck drivers

Divandarreh, Kurdistan Province[12]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Individuals gathered by the graves of killed protesters

The Iranian regime is trying to prevent independent reporting on the ongoing student poisonings throughout Iran. Ghazvin Public Revolutionary Prosecutor Hossein Rajabi announced on April 20 the arrest of a woman for “publishing and sending pictures of student poisonings to hostile media.”[13] Rajabi stated that Iranian authorities identified the women using CCTV cameras—once again underscoring that the regime should have the surveillance equipment necessary to identify the perpetrators of the recent student poisonings. Iranian authorities appear more focused on using this equipment against individuals whom they perceive as a threat to the regime rather than against those who are a threat to its citizens. Rajabi added that the woman was officially charged with “spreading lies and propaganda against the system.” Iranian social media users previously circulated uncorroborated reports that the Culture and Islamic Guidance Ministry advised Iranian state-owned and state-affiliated media to avoid covering poisonings and poisoning-related incidents on April 10, as CTP previously reported.[14]

Protest Activity in Iran as of April 20, 5:00 PM



CTP did not record any student poisoning incidents on April 20.

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

President Ebrahim Raisi reiterated that Islamic countries must band together to confront Israel during a meeting with the ambassadors and charge d'affaires of several unidentified Muslim countries on April 20. Raisi stated that “simply condemning and expressing disgust” toward Israeli actions is insufficient and that Muslim countries must take “pragmatic action” against Israel.[15] The regime has sought to use the Israeli raids on the al Aqsa Mosque between April 6-10 to isolate Israel from Muslim countries inside and outside of the region in recent weeks, as CTP previously reported.[16]

External Security and Military Affairs

Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh defended the PMF's role in providing civil and security services for the government in a television interview on April 17. Fayyadh claimed that the PMF's Muhandis General Company was a legal entity and won its contract to plant palm trees on two million acres of land fairly.[17] The Muhandis General Company is modeled after the IRGC Khatam ol Anbia Construction Headquarters, which is a civil engineering and construction firm that dominates large swaths of the Iranian economy. [18] Fayyadh emphasized that the PMF is distinct from the IRGC during the interview, likely to preempt such comparisons between the Muhandis General Company and the Khatam ol Anbia Construction Headquarters.

Iranian-backed militias are bolstering air defense capabilities in Deir ez Zor Province, demonstrating the continued IRGC commitment to consolidating its position along the Abu Kamal-Deir ez Zor City land route. Local anti-Iran media outlet *Euphrates Post* reported on April 20 that a Lebanese Hezbollah commander trained Iranian-backed militants in operating

Misagh-1 anti-aircraft missiles in the vicinity of Al Mayadeen, Deir ez Zor Province.[19] CTP cannot confirm the accuracy of this report. CTP previously reported that Iranian-backed militias distributed over 140 Misagh-1 anti-aircraft missiles to Fatemiyoun Division and Kataib Hezbollah forces in Abu Kamal and Al Mayadeen, Deir ez Zor Province on April 11.[20]Iran relies on the Abu Kamal-Deir ez Zor City land route to transport advanced weapons from Iraq deeper into Syria and likely seeks to secure this route from potential Israeli airstrikes.[21]

The Artesh added over 200 drones—including Ababil-4, Ababil-5, Arash, Karrar, Akhgar, 10th Shahrivar, Switchblade, and Homa drones—to its inventory on April 20.[22] The Artesh received these drones from the Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Ministry. These drones are capable of conducting combat and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions. Artesh Commander Major General Abdol Rahim Mousavi lauded the Artesh's growing drone capabilities during the unveiling ceremony of this equipment on April 20.[23]

Artesh Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Irani claimed that an Iranian Fateh-class submarine forced the U.S.S. Florida to surface as it allegedly attempted to traverse the Strait of Hormuz on April 20.[24] Irani added that the U.S.S. Florida neared Iranian waters and was forced to change course after the Artesh Navy detected its presence in the strait. The US Fifth Fleet denied Irani's claims, calling them "disinformation" in a tweet on April 20.[25] This incident follows the US Navy's announcement on April 8 that it deployed a guided-missile submarine to the Middle East.[26]

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Iran Update, April 21, 2023

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

April 21, 2023, 5:30 pm ET

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Former President Hassan Rouhani has made national referenda the focus of the Iranian political discourse, forcing the regime into a complicated public discussion over acceptable versus unacceptable referenda—the latter of which would pose an existential threat to the regime. Rouhani has repeatedly called for a national referendum on the regime’s domestic, economic, and foreign policies.[1] Numerous regime officials and state news outlets have responded to Rouhani’s calls in recent days by discussing referenda, entrenching this issue in the domestic political discourse.[2] Former Parliament Speaker and hardline politician Gholam Ali Haddad Adel stated that a referendum would create sedition during a political party meeting on April 19.[3] Regime news outlets have argued that referenda are meant only to establish a new political system and not form policies and solve problems.[4] These outlets make this distinction because rejecting all referenda would delegitimize the Islamic Republic, which was founded via a referendum in 1979.[5] Many of these outlets acknowledged that the Iranian constitution allows the regime to hold referenda on “extremely important economic, political, social, and cultural matters.”[6]

These outlet’s seemingly contradictory claims--namely that the constitution permits referenda on various issues and that referenda are meant only to establish a new political system--underscore the extent to which Rouhani’s calls have placed the regime in a bind. The regime does not have a coherent response to Rouhani’s call for a referendum. Rouhani’s proposed referendum on domestic, foreign, and economic policies contrasts with reformist politician Mir Hossein Mousavi’s call for a referendum on whether to maintain the Islamic Republic, moreover.[7] While the latter unquestionably falls outside the bounds of the Iranian constitution, the former is consistent with Article 59, which states:

“In extremely important economic, political, social, and cultural matters, the functions of the legislature may be exercised through direct recourse to popular vote through a referendum. Any request for such direct recourse to public opinion must be approved by two-thirds of the members of the [Parliament].”[8]

Rouhani has sought to reenter the domestic political arena in recent months, possibly to facilitate the implementation of constitutionally sanctioned referenda. IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* reported on April 11 that Rouhani is heading a campaign to promote the election of moderate candidates in the March 2024 parliamentary elections, as CTP previously reported. [9] Rouhani may seek to establish a moderate political bloc in Parliament that could initiate such referendums on major political issues.

Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid evoked the prospect of military unrest in response to worsening domestic conditions during his Friday prayer sermon on April 21, likely to galvanize support for significant reforms.[10] Abdol Hamid stated that there are many “among the armed forces...who are dissatisfied and facing [financial] pressure.” Unrest within the armed forces threatens the security of both the state and society. Abdol Hamid contrasted this to

how regime officials, including military commanders, have pursued “personal, factional, and organizational interests” over the national interest, drawing particular attention to how “many organizations use the economy to their own benefit...leaving nothing for the rest of the country.” His comments appear to address widespread corruption, as well as how much the IRGC and its financial institutions have profited from their outsized involvement in the Iranian economy, as CTP has previously reported.[11] Abdol Hamid has called for reforms to address these issues for months but assigned greater urgency to this matter in this latest speech. He argued that “the people have lost their patience” and “major reforms are needed, small changes are not enough to address the people’s needs.”

Abdol Hamid is trying to counter regime attempts to weaken his movement by addressing the core issues uniting his following.[12] Abdol Hamid referenced recent regime “steps that have been taken” with respect to the September 2022 “Bloody Friday” massacre of protesters in Zahedan, arguing “they are insufficient.” Abdol Hamid pointed out that those who ordered the massacre have not been punished and argued they should be. He similarly posted on his social media account on April 15 “that all the perpetrators...be identified, tried and punished, and that the damages be compensated.”[13] 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.[14] Sistan and Baluchistan Security and Law Enforcement Deputy Governor Ali Reza Marhamati announced on April 17 that 38 individuals killed during the massacre have been designated as “martyrs”—an honorary designation for those who have lost their lives in the service of a just cause.[15]

Key Takeaways

- **Former President Hassan Rouhani has made national referenda the focus of the Iranian political discourse, forcing the regime into a complicated public discussion over acceptable versus unacceptable referenda.**
- **Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid evoked the prospect of military unrest in response to worsening domestic conditions during his Friday prayer sermon, likely to galvanize support for significant reforms.**
- **Abdol Hamid is trying to counter regime attempts to weaken his movement by addressing the core issues uniting his following.**
- **At least eight protests occurred in seven cities across seven provinces.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least eight protests occurred in seven cities across seven provinces on April 21. CTP assesses with medium to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Asalouyeh, Bushehr Province[16]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Petrochemical workers
- **Notes:** This event was both a protest and a strike.

Abadan, Khuzestan Province[17]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Sekaf and Abadrahan Company workers
- **Notes:** This event was both a protest and a strike.

Abadan, Khuzestan Province[18]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Elixir Company workers
- **Notes:** This event was both a protest and a strike.

Saghez, Kurdistan Province[19]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Individuals gathered by Mahsa Amini's grave
- **Notes:** Significant security force presence

Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province[20]

- **Size:** Unknown
- **Demographic:** Zahedan residents protesting after prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid's Friday sermon
- **Notes:** Protesters chanted anti-regime slogans.

Yazd City, Yazd Province[21]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Steel workers
- **Notes:** This event was both a protest and a strike.

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

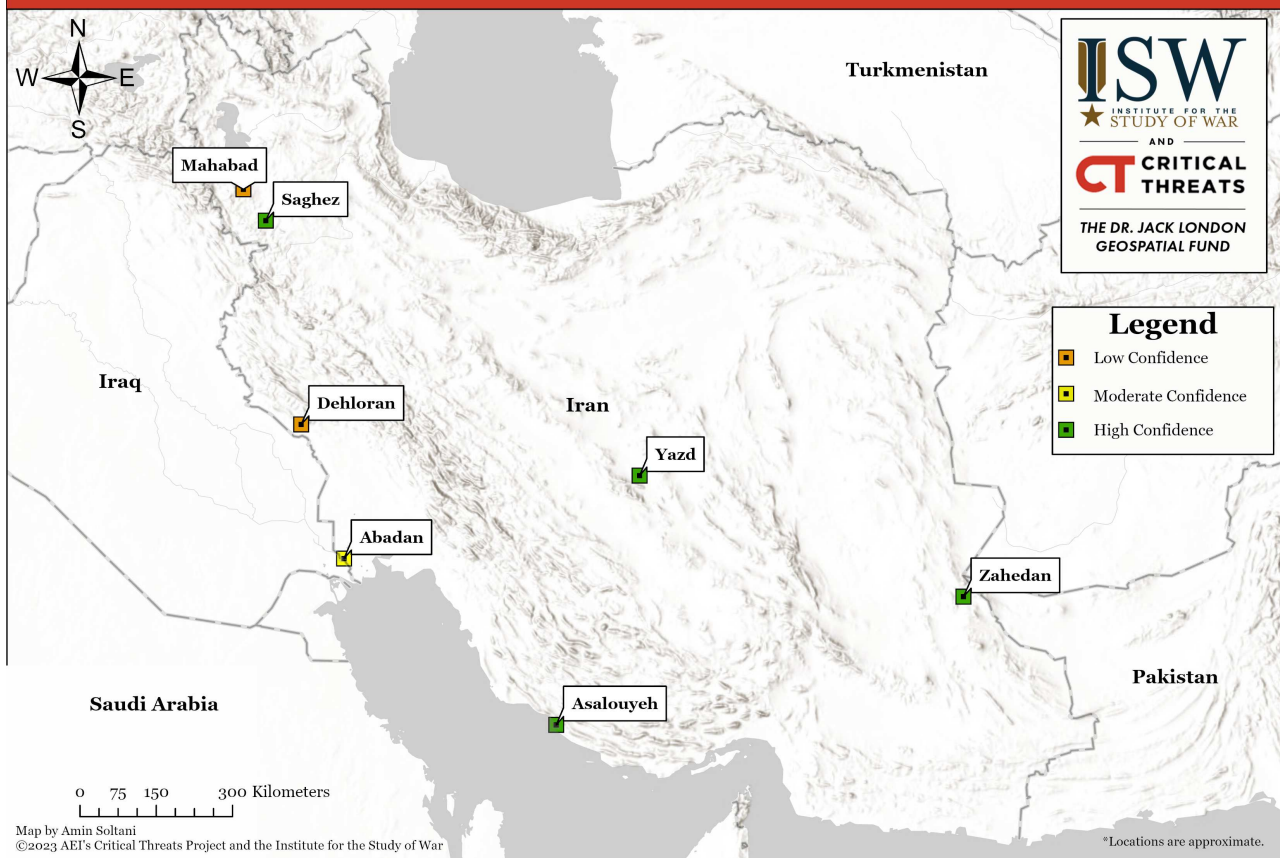
Dehloran, Ilam Province[22]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Iran International General Contracting Company workers
- **Notes:** This event was both a protest and a strike.

Mahabad, West Azerbaijan Province[23]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Individuals gathered around the graves of killed protesters

Protest Activity in Iran as of April 21, 5:00 PM



Qeshm Friday Prayer Leader Hojjat ol Eslam Gholam Reza Hajebi denied on April 21 that individuals recently set fire to his office.[24] Hajebi claimed that the fire occurred during the Mahsa Amini protests, and that Iranian authorities arrested the perpetrators at that time. Social media users have circulated videos of Hajebi personally ordering the closure of shops for not enforcing mandatory veiling in recent days.[25]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

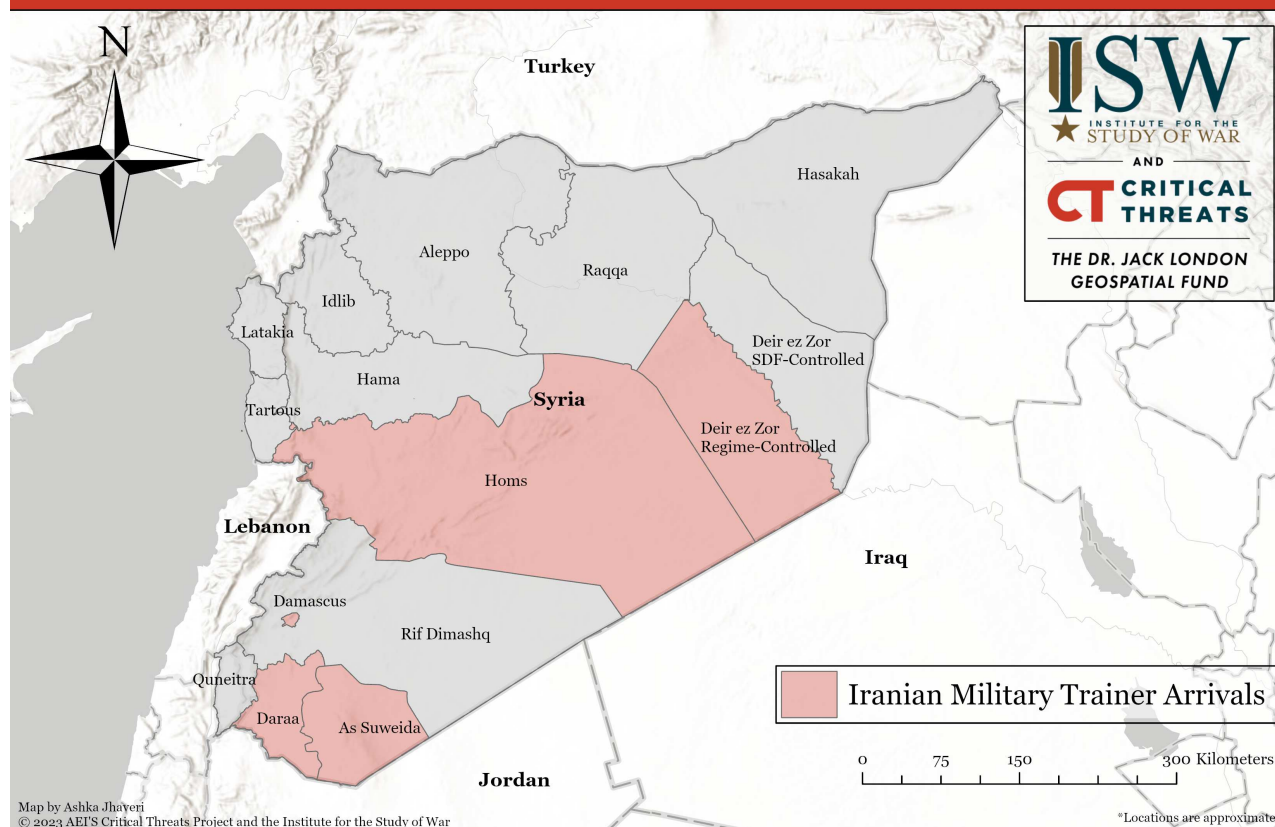
President Ebrahim Raisi reiterated that Muslim countries must unite against Israel during a phone call with Qatari President Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani on April 21.[26] Raisi conveyed a similar message during his meeting with the ambassadors and charge d'affaires of several unidentified Muslim countries on April 20, as CTP previously reported.[27] The regime has engaged in a concerted effort to create a “united front” against Israel following the Israeli raids on the al Aqsa Mosque between April 6-10.

External Security and Military Affairs

The IRGC deployed 40 Iranian “military trainers” across five Syrian provinces between April 17 and 19, possibly to support its efforts to establish an air defense network throughout Syria. Unidentified sources told local Syrian media that the 40 Iranian trainers were sent to Deir ez Zor, Homs, Daraa, Damascus, and al Suwayda provinces to support extended training exercises.[28] Israeli research center *Alma Research and Education Center* separately confirmed reports that Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) officer Hajj Mehdi trained Iranian-backed militants on Misagh-1 man-portable air defense systems smuggled by Iran to al Hajana neighborhood, Albu Kamal district, Deir ez Zor province on April 11, which CTP previously reported.[29] CTP previously assessed that the IRGC’s has consolidated air defense capabilities in Deir ez Zor Province to secure its land route through the Albu Kamal crossing from Israeli airstrikes.[30]

IRGC trainers recently deployed to Deir ez Zor and Homs may train Iranian-backed militants on man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) to counter Israeli drone strikes on Iranian convoys and weapons storage facilities. Iranian trainers that recently deployed to Deir ez Zor province may also provide Iranian-backed militants with intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance training. Local Syrian media reported that IRGC Quds Force and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) technical drone and surveillance experts deployed to al Mayadin, Deir ez Zor Province. Israel has primarily conducted air strikes in Al Suwayda, Damascus, and Dara, which suggests the IRGC trainers that recently deployed there will focus on training militants on air defense systems.

Iranian Military Trainer Arrivals in Syria April 17-19, 2023



Badr Organization and Popular Mobilization Force (PMF)-affiliated leadership met on April 21 to discuss future security operations in Diyala Province.[31] Iraqi Deputy Parliament Speaker Mohsen al Mandalawi, Badr Secretary General Hadi al Ameri, and PMF Diyala Operations Commander Talib al Musawi presented security operations to the Badr-affiliated Diyala Governor Muthanna al Mandalawi in the wake of Iraqi Special Forces withdrawal from the province. Mandalawi inaccurately attributed the recent likely Badr-led violence perpetrated against civilians in Diyala to ISIS. Badr and PMF-affiliated leadership similarly attributed the likely Badr-committed killings in Diyala province in February and March to ISIS.[32] CTP previously assessed that Badr's targeted violence may create conditions that ISIS could exploit to establish itself as a security guarantor for Sunnis in the province.[33]

Iraqi Prime Minister Muhammed Shia al-Sudani portrayed the proposed 2023-2025 state budget as impartial on April 18, likely to preempt criticisms that the budget favors the Shia Coordination Framework. Sudani claimed that the budget is meant to expand government services for the average Iraqi citizen without political interference. He rejected claims from Coordination Framework members that the Framework determines his administration's policies and fund allocations.[34] Sudani specified that some members of the State of Law coalition--the party of former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki--have asserted that they should always be consulted, but he downplayed disagreements over salaries, construction projects, and government

services. Sudani added that he has ordered oversight committees to pursue corruption cases irrespective of party affiliation or office.

Asaib Ahl al Haq Secretary General Qais al Khazali met with Badr Organization Secretary General Hadi al Ameri on April 20 ostensibly to discuss ways of improving Iraqi government services. PMF Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh gave an interview on April 17 in which he defended the PMF's role in providing government services, as CTP previously reported.[35]

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Iran Update, April 24, 2023

Iran Update, April 24, 2023

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Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei briefly lost control of his audience during a speech to Basij students on April 18, indicating the degree to which dissatisfaction has spread among parts of the Iranian regime's most loyal factions.[1] Western Persian-language outlets circulated leaked footage of the speech on April 22. The footage showed a Basij university student in the audience interrupting Khamenei's speech, shouting "[regime officials] do not listen to the people's voice." Khamenei appeared to dismiss the student, leading the other audience members to reportedly protest Khamenei's response. These audience members called on Khamenei to respond to the student's grievances, after which Khamenei abruptly ended the speech.[2] The outbursts from the audience are remarkable given that the regime likely vetted each participant thoroughly beforehand, permitting only individuals who ardently support the regime to attend the speech.

It is similarly remarkable that an actor with access to the supreme leader's office leaked the footage, indicating further frustrations among some regime elements. The circumstances of the leak suggest that someone with access to the footage sought to undermine Khamenei by publishing it. The Office of the Supreme Leader omitted the exchange in an edited recording of the speech published on Khamenei's website on April 18.[3]

Social media users have speculated that the regime or some other actor planted the Basij university student in the audience to interrupt Khamenei, but a much simpler explanation is that Iran's worsening domestic conditions are spreading frustration even among the regime's most loyal supporters. This explanation is consistent with CTP's previous assessments about widespread dissatisfaction within the regime. CTP observed on October 30, 2022, that the regime appeared concerned about the morale of its security forces during the Mahsa Amini protest wave.[4] IRGC-affiliated *Fars News Agency* reported on October 19, 2022, that two percent of detained protesters were government employees.[5]

IRGC Coordination Deputy Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Naghdi tried to downplay the possibility of dissent within the regime in a televised interview on April 23. Naghdi emphasized the respect that the security forces' personnel held for Khamenei.[6] Naghdi described Khamenei as among the "most outstanding" world leaders whose loyal soldiers always "accept his word as superior." It is noteworthy that Naghdi, in particular, made these remarks. Naghdi has held several prominent roles in which he has been responsible for the Basij Organization and the indoctrination of armed forces personnel. Naghdi was the Basij commander from 2009-16 and the IRGC deputy for cultural and social affairs from 2016-19.

Strike activity among Iranian petrochemical, copper, and steel industry workers increased significantly between April 22 and 24 in response to worsening economic conditions. Social media users reported 58 industrial worker strikes throughout central and southern Iran between April 22-24. Industrial workers are challenging the Supreme Labor Council's decision to increase the minimum wage by 27 percent on March 19, which some strike participants argue is insufficient to offset Iran's high inflation rate.[7] Central Bank of Iran Governor Mohammad Reza Farzin

previously announced on March 26 that Iran's inflation rate was 46.5 percent.[8] Some regime officials have indicated that inflation has increased further in recent weeks. Parliamentarian Jalal Mahmoud Zadeh stated on April 22 that the price of many basic goods increased by 50 percent in the first month of the current Persian calendar year (March 20-April 20).[9] He added that chicken currently costs approximately 850,000 rials or 20 US dollars. Some workers participating in the strikes have called for a 79 percent wage increase to offset inflation.[10] It is unclear, however, whether the regime has the resources or will to fulfill this demand.

CTP has not verified the reported strike activity between April 22-24. The following map illustrates all reported strike activity and its locations within this time range.



Key Takeaways

- Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei briefly lost control of his audience during a speech to Basij students, indicating the degree to which dissatisfaction has spread among parts of the Iranian regime's most loyal factions.
- Strike activity among Iranian petrochemical, copper, and steel industry workers increased significantly in response to worsening economic conditions.
- At least 14 protests occurred in 13 cities across 12 provinces.
- The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reported on April 24 that Russian ships are ferrying Iranian ammunition across the Caspian Sea to resupply Russian troops fighting in Ukraine.
- Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani is trying to remove four provincial governors from office, likely to sideline political opposition, especially Iraqi Sunnis.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least 14 protests occurred in 13 cities across 12 provinces on April 24. CTP did not record protest activity on April 22-23. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations on April 24:

Karaj, Alborz Province[11]

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

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[12]

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

Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi Province[13]

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

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[14]

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

Shoush, Khuzestan Province[15]

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

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province[16]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Nurses and medical staff

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province[17]

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

Hamoun-e Helman, Sistan and Baluchistan Province[18]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Individuals calling on the regime to pursue Iran's water rights to the Helmand River
- **Notes:** Iranian news outlets described this protest as "legal." [19]

Tehran City, Tehran Province[20]

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

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

Ardebil City, Ardebil Province[21]

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

Shahr-e Kord, Chahar Mahal and Bakhtiari Province[22]

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

Shiraz, Fars Province[23]

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

Rasht, Gilan Province[24]

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

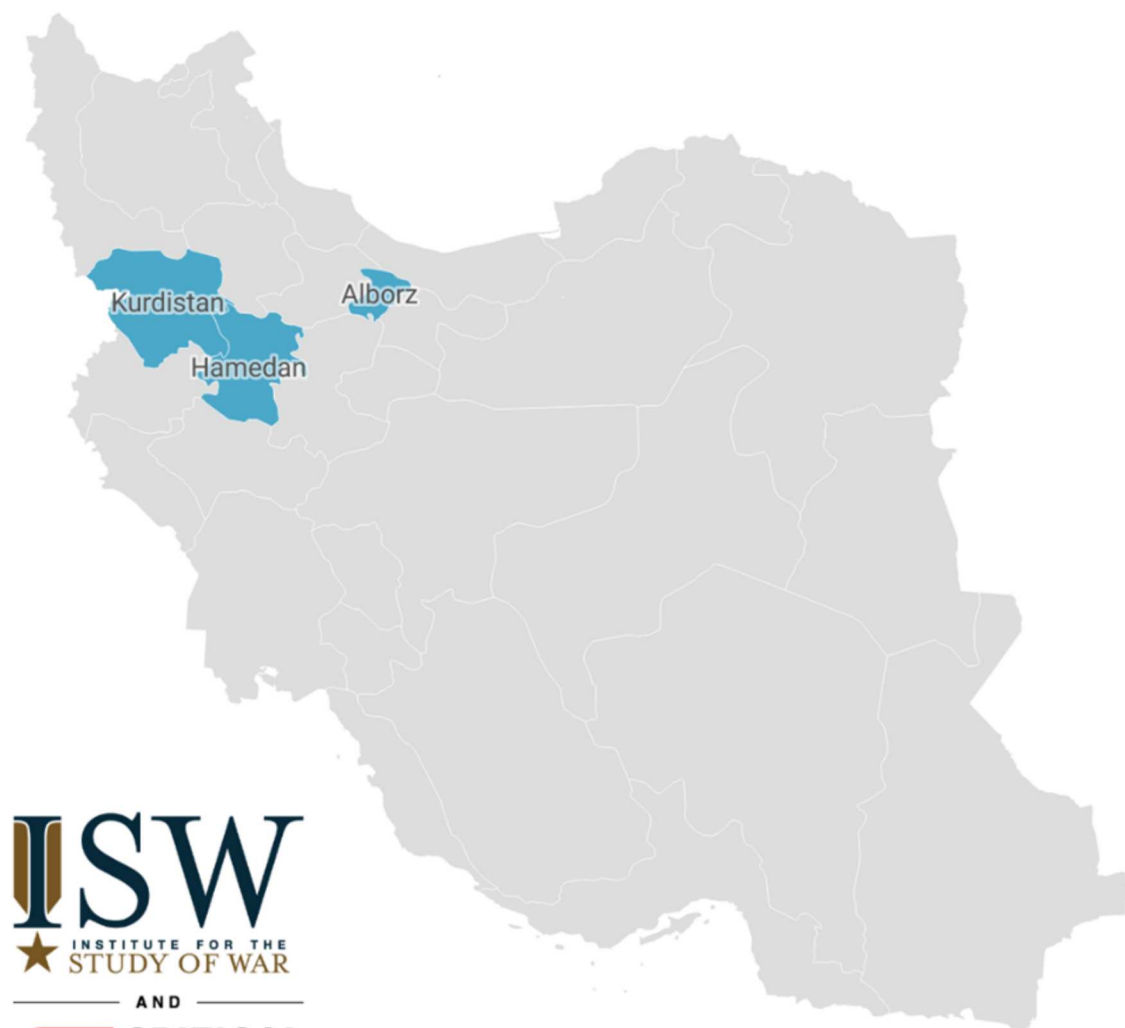
Khorramabad, Lorestan Province[25]

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



CTP recorded at least three reported poisonings in three cities in three provinces on April 24. CTP did not record reported poisonings on April 22-23.

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - April 24



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

Iranian social media users and anti-regime outlets claimed that regime loyalists engaged in a lethal physical confrontation with individuals opposed to mandatory veiling in Mahan, Kerman Province on April 23. Reports suggest that several regime loyalists warned an unspecified number of women to adhere to mandatory veiling laws, which resulted in a physical confrontation with individuals who opposed mandatory veiling enforcement.[26] Some anti-regime actors alleged that regime loyalists killed a woman in the confrontation.[27] Other outlets separately reported that the incident caused a woman to suffer and eventually die from cardiac arrest.[28] Iranian officials and IRGC-affiliated outlets confirmed the confrontation and death of the woman but did not report that mandatory veiling sparked the dispute.[29] CTP previously assessed that the regime's reinforcement of its mandatory veiling laws could exacerbate tensions between the Islamic Republic and the Iranian population.[30]

Israeli media outlets and social media accounts circulated unverified footage of purported anti-aircraft activity in the vicinity of an unspecified Artesh Ground Forces Aviation base in Esfahan Province on April 23.[31]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

NOTE: Portions of the following text are included in the Institute for the Study of War's April 24, 2023, Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reported on April 24 that Russian ships are ferrying Iranian ammunition across the Caspian Sea to resupply Russian troops fighting in

Ukraine.^{xxiv} *WSJ*, citing unnamed Middle Eastern officials, stated that cargo ships have carried over 300,000 artillery shells and a million ammunition rounds from Iran to Russia via the Caspian Sea over the past six months. The unnamed officials reportedly said that the last known shipment left Iran for Astrakhan in early March and carried 1,000 containers with 2,000 artillery shells. *WSJ* noted that the Iranian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has a contract with Russian state-owned joint stock company Rosoboronexport for the sale of 74,000 artillery shells at a price of \$1.7 million. A prominent Russian milblogger responded to the report and claimed that he has not yet seen the arrival of this ammunition on the front despite continued Russian-Iranian defense cooperation.^{xxv} Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali separately stated that Iran and Russia are entering a phase of “close cooperation” during a Persian-language and literature event in Moscow on April 24.[32] Jalali added that Russia and Iran have “similar approaches” to solving regional and international problems.

The US, UK, and EU announced sanctions on senior Iranian security officials on April 24. The US Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office announced that they had sanctioned eight senior regime officials within the Law Enforcement Command (LEC), IRGC, and Supreme Cyberspace Council—which crafts policies on Iranian internet censorship—for their role in suppressing the Mahsa Amini protest movement.[33] The EU separately announced sanctions on the same eight individuals as well as Ariantel—a regime-affiliated mobile service provider that helped suppress anti-regime activity during the Mahsa Amini movement.[34]

Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar announced on April 24 that he will meet with his Iranian, Russian, and Syrian counterparts in Moscow on April 25.[35] Akar added that these countries’ intelligence chiefs will attend the meeting in Moscow as well. It is unclear which Iranian official will represent the regime’s intelligence apparatus at the meeting, however. Foreign Affairs Ministry Senior Adviser Ali Asghar Khaji previously discussed normalizing ties between Damascus and Ankara during a quadrilateral meeting with his Russian, Turkish, and Syrian counterparts in Moscow on April 3, as CTP previously reported.[36]

External Security and Military Affairs

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani is trying to remove four provincial governors from office, likely to sideline political opposition, especially Iraqi Sunnis. An unidentified Iraqi government source claimed on April 22 that Sudani requested Parliament remove the governors for Anbar, Babil, Dhi Qar, and Ninewa from office.[37] The Dhi Qar governor—Mohammad al Ghazi—is a Shia affiliated with former Prime Minister Mostafa al Kadhimi.[38] The governors for Anbar, Babil, and Ninewa—Ali Farhan, Wissam Aslan al Jabouri, respectively—are Sunnis who support Kadhimi and current Parliament Speaker Mohammad al Halbousi.[39] The removal of these governors would provide Sudani an opportunity to replace these pro-Western governors with politicians potentially less friendly to the United States.

The potential removal of the Sunni governors would be part of the growing marginalization of Iraqi Sunnis, which could create conditions for the resurgence of ISIS in Iraq. The Sudani administration’s proposed 2023-2025 budget, if passed, will reallocate funds away from provincial governments to central government ministries.[40] Sunni political parties have contrastingly called for increases to provincial government budgets to support reconstruction projects in formerly ISIS-controlled areas.[41]

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei called for Islamic unity against Israel in a meeting with unspecified officials and ambassadors of Islamic countries on April 22.[42] Khamenei urged officials to capitalize on the “accelerated” decline of Israel and claimed that Israeli deterrence power had significantly decreased. President Ebrahim Raisi previously similarly stated that Islamic countries must band together to confront Israel during a meeting with the ambassadors and charge d’affaires of several unidentified Muslim countries on April 20.[43]

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Iran Update, April 25, 2023

Iran Update, April 25, 2023

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

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Qom Provincial Governor Mohammad Taghi Shah Cheraghi stated that the provincial government should take “negative measures” against unveiled women “in accordance with the law” during a 19 Dey Headquarters meeting on April 25.^[1] The 19 Dey Headquarters is an organization dedicated to preserving Qom’s status as Iran’s religious and revolutionary heartland.^[2] This organization met on April 25 to discuss the actions it has taken in the field of chastity and hijab.^[3] Regime officials have increasingly discussed using “positive” and “negative” measures to enforce the mandatory hijab law in recent weeks, although it is unclear what they mean exactly when using these terms.^[4]

The fact that Shah Cheraghi made this statement is noteworthy for several reasons. He has a long history serving as a senior IRGC officer. Shah Cheraghi commanded the IRGC provincial corps responsible for Mazandaran, Semnan, Tehran, and Qom provinces at different points between October 2009 and November 2021.^[5] President Ebrahim Raisi appointed Shah Cheraghi as Qom provincial governor in November 2021.^[6] Shah Cheraghi comes from an influential family with connections to the Office of the Supreme Leader. His father—Ayatollah Seyyed Mohammad Shah Cheraghi—served as Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s representative to Semnan Province between January 2003 and August 2021 and is currently a member of the Assembly of Experts—the regime body responsible for selecting the supreme leader.^[7] Shah Cheraghi’s remarks about “negative” hijab enforcement are lastly noteworthy given how significant the recent wave of student poisonings has been in Qom compared to the rest of Iran. The first reported student poisoning incidents in November and December 2022 both took place in Qom.^[8] The poisonings have primarily targeted schoolgirls, suggesting that the poisonings may be related to the issue of women’s rights and, in particular, the hijab. CTP previously assessed that the regime is tolerating the countrywide, coordinated campaign to poison schoolgirls.^[9]

Regime security forces have renewed their efforts to combat popular celebrity figures who publicly oppose the mandatory hijab law. The Law Enforcement Command (LEC) has closed at least eight “celebrity-affiliated” restaurants and commercial complexes in Tehran City since the Law Enforcement Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan announced the implementation of his veiling enforcement plan on April 15.^[10] IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* argued on April 25 that the closures are meant to demonstrate that “celebrities are not exempt from the law.”^[11] The regime arrested and charged two prominent Iranian actresses on April 25 with the crime of unveiling in public and posting pictures of themselves unveiled on their social media accounts.^[12] Western Persian-language outlets separately reported that the regime formed a secret “Celebrity Task Force” on September 22, 2022, to identify and punish Iranian celebrities who supported the Mahsa Amini protests.^[13] The Culture and Islamic Guidance Ministry reportedly led this effort.

Human Rights Watch reported on April 25 that state security services have tortured, sexually abused, and killed children since the beginning of the Mahsa Amin protests in September 2022.^[14] This reporting is consistent with CTP’s previous assessments about the regime’s brutality toward children both during and after the protest movement. CTP reported the regime’s violent arrests, clashes with, and killing of young students throughout the Mahsa Amini protests.^[15] Regime security forces killed 23 children in the first ten days of the protests alone, as CTP reported.^[16] This reporting comes as the regime has callously tolerated the countrywide poisoning campaign against schoolchildren over the past several months.^[17]

Key Takeaways

- Qom Provincial Governor Mohammad Taghi Shah Cheraghi stated that the provincial government should take “negative measures” against unveiled women “in accordance with the law” during a 19 Dey Headquarters meeting.
- Regime security forces have renewed their efforts to combat popular celebrity figures who publicly oppose the mandatory hijab law.
- Human Rights Watch reported that state security services have tortured, sexually abused, and killed children since the beginning of the Mahsa Amin protests.
- At least three protests occurred in three cities across three provinces.
- A senior Iranian military delegation paid an official visit to Moscow to meet with Russian, Syrian, and Turkish officials.
- IRGC Ground Forces Commander Brigadier General Mohammad Pak Pour appointed Brigadier General Ahmad Ali Faizollahi as the Saber Special Forces Brigade commander.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least three protests occurred in three cities across three provinces on April 25. CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Kiyan, Chahar Mahal and Bakhtiari Province^[18]

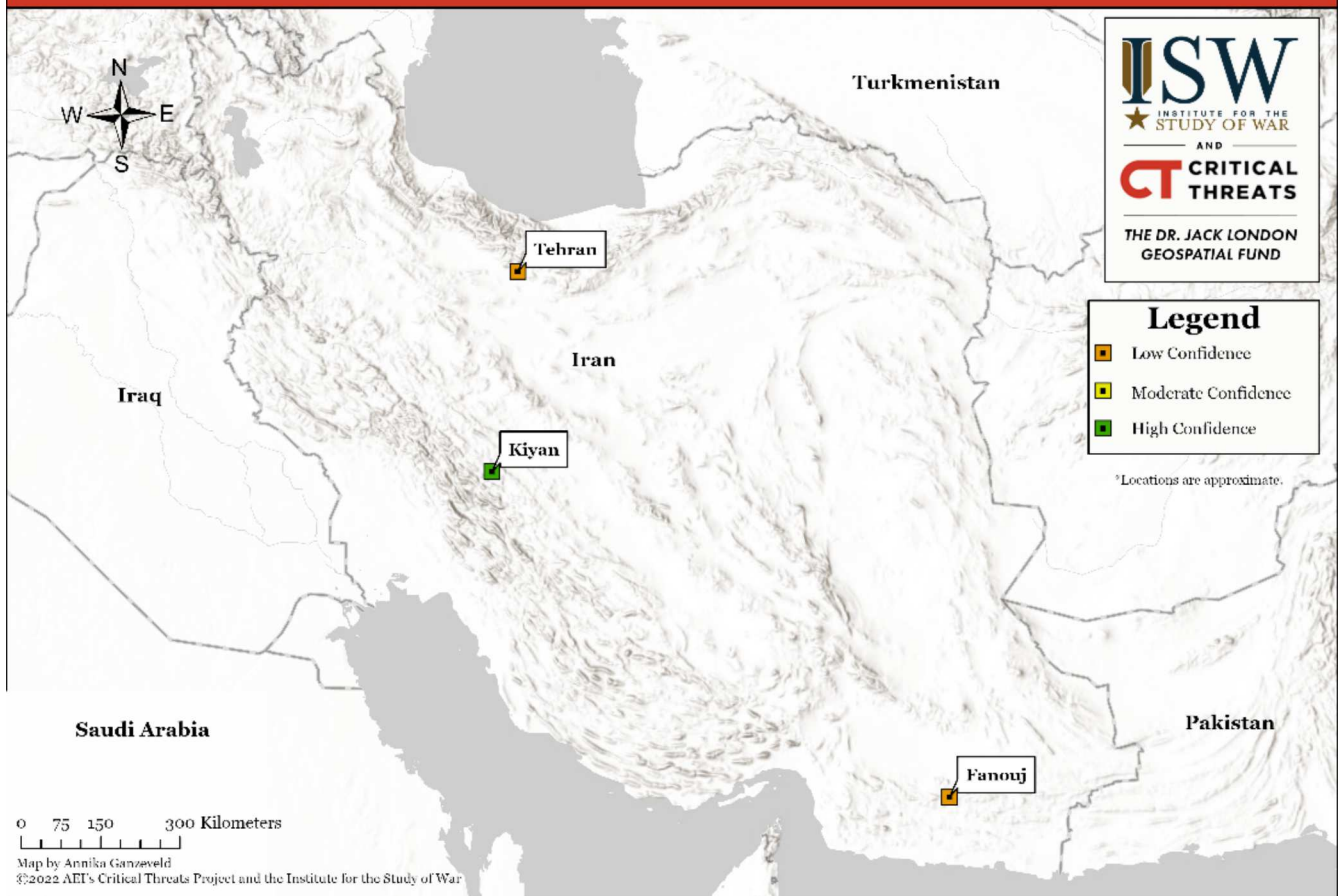
- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Individuals protesting government land grabbing
- **Notes:** Individuals lit fire in the street

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

Fanouj, Sistan and Baluchistan Province^[19]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Individuals protesting after LEC reportedly ran over four individuals

Protest Activity in Iran as of April 25, 5:00 PM



Tehran City, Tehran Province[20]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Tehran Metro employees

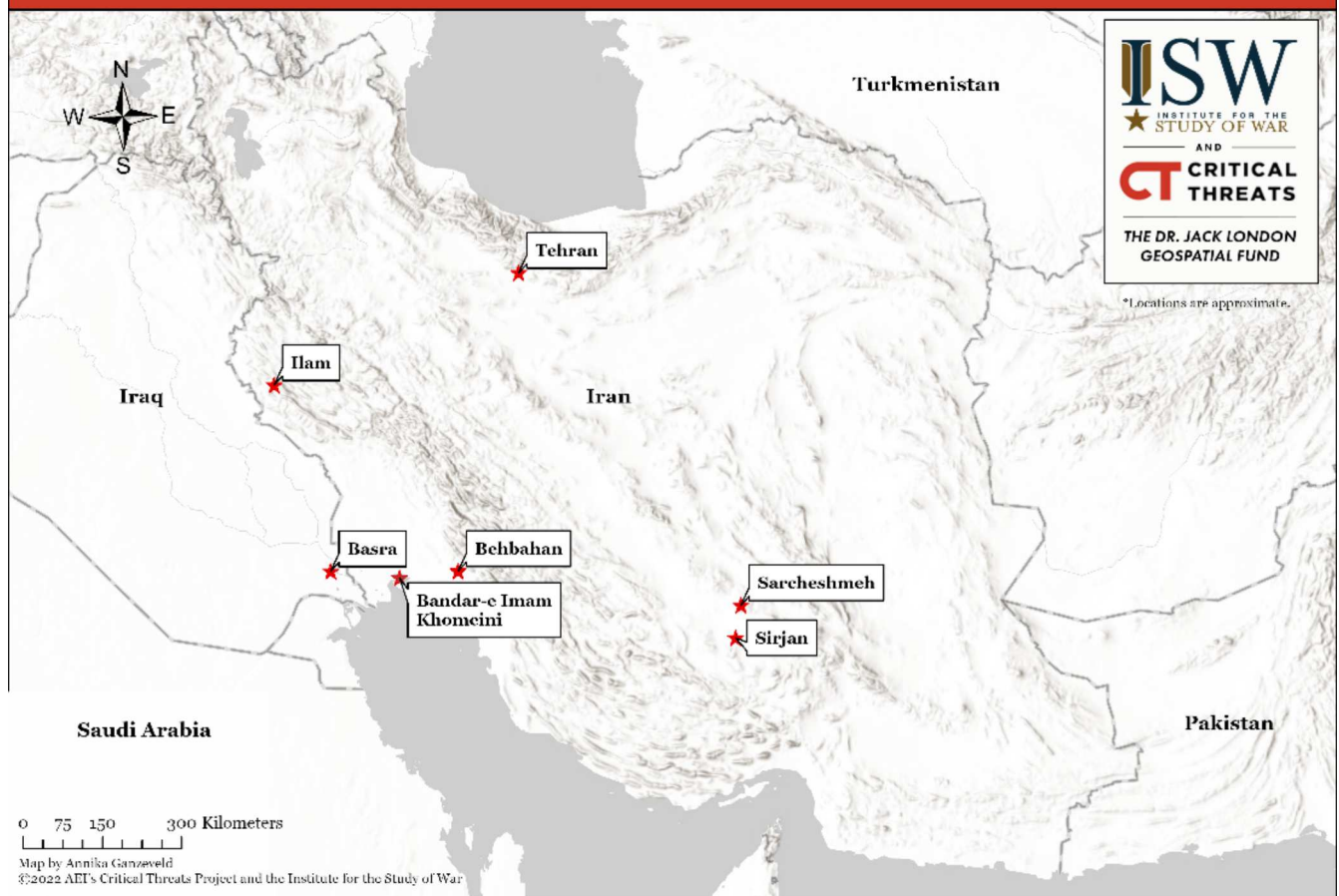
Protest coordinators and organizations circulated calls for demonstrations on the following days:

April 26[21]

- **Type:** Anti-regime demonstration
- **Location:** Bandar Abbas, Hormozgan Province

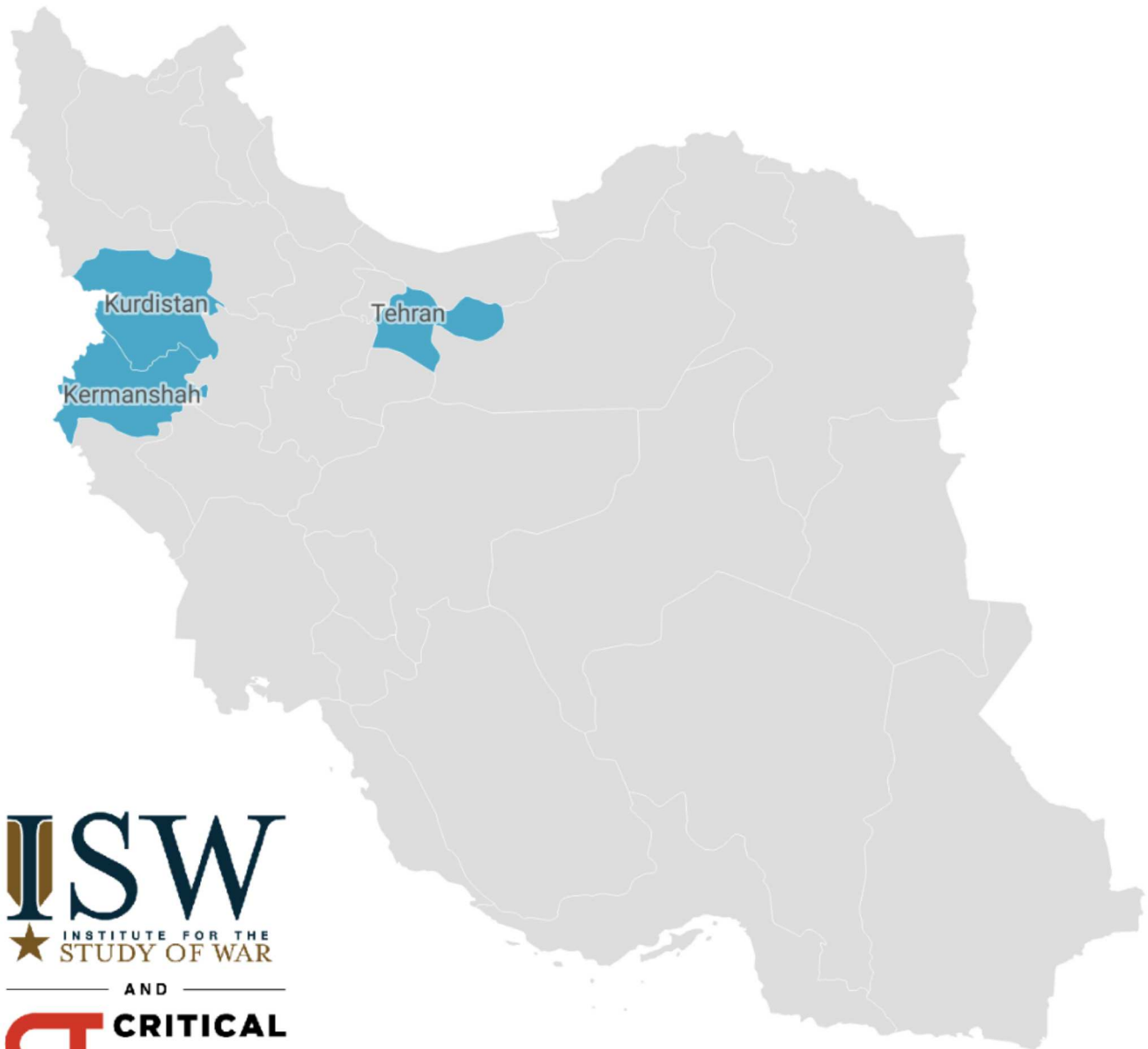
The Tehran City Council is investigating a physical altercation between morality patrols and an unveiled woman in the Tehran metro on April 24. [22] Council member Sodeh Najafi called the incident “unfortunate.” This altercation comes after regime loyalists engaged in a lethal physical confrontation with individuals opposed to the mandatory hijab law in Mahan, Kerman Province on April 23, which CTP previously reported.[23] These events support our previous assessment that the regime’s reinforcement of its mandatory hijab laws will likely exacerbate tensions between the Islamic Republic and the Iranian population.[24]

Reported Strike Activity in Iran April 25



Social media users reported six industrial worker strikes throughout central and southern Iran between on April 25. Social media users also reported that Iranian industrial contract workers went on strike near Basra, Iraq on April 25.[25] The following map illustrates all reported strike activity and its locations on April 25.

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - April 25



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

CTP recorded student poisonings in three cities across three provinces on April 25.

Economic Affairs

Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf wrote a letter to President Ebrahim Raisi on April 25, urgently requesting that his administration present a bill to establish an “Internal Commerce and Market Regulation Ministry” to Parliament.[26] Ghalibaf may have sent this letter in response to growing frustration among various segments of the Iranian economy, including industrial workers, nurses, and teachers. Ghalibaf has called for economic reforms to address popular grievances on multiple occasions in recent months.[27]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian traveled to Muscat, Oman on April 25 to meet with his Omani counterpart Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi.[28] Abdollahian’s trip follows several diplomatic engagements between Iranian and Omani officials in recent days. Iranian Ambassador to Oman Ali Najafi Khoshroudi met with Omani Royal House Minister Mohammad al Numani on April 17.[29] President Ebrahim Raisi separately held a phone call with Omani Sultan Haitham bin Tariq al Said on April 19, as CTP previously reported.[30] Abdollahian will additionally travel from Muscat to Beirut, Lebanon on April 26 to meet with Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati, Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, and Lebanese Foreign Minister Abdallah Rashid Bouhabib.[31]

Senior Adviser to the Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Asghar Khaji met with UN Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin Griffiths on April 25.[32] The two discussed the latest developments in the region, including the normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as the humanitarian crises in Syria and Yemen. Iranian state media used the meeting to highlight Iran’s humanitarian cooperation with the UN. [33] Griffiths served as the UN special envoy to Yemen from 2018 to 2021.

Industry, Mines, and Trade Minister Reza Fatemi Amin announced on April 25 the resumption of trade relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. [34] The two countries normalized relations on March 10, after which they began a series of diplomatic engagements to implement the normalization agreements, as CTP previously reported.[35]

Roads and Urban Development Minister Mehrdad Bazarpash paid an official visit to Damascus on April 25 to attend a meeting of the Iran-Syria Joint Commission, which he heads.[36] Bazarpash reported that the meeting focused on rail links between Iran and Syria through Iraq, tariff reductions, banking exchanges, and the "sea-oriented economy." Iran has long sought to connect its rail line networks to Iraq and Syria and access the Mediterranean Sea. Tehran has made little progress toward this goal thus far. The warming ties between the Assad regime and regional Arab states may, however, be encouraging Tehran to push this issue again. Iran and Assad could use the potential influx of financial resources that normalization efforts would bring to develop Syria's rail line networks.

External Security and Military Affairs

Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) technicians trained Iranian-backed militants on how to use short-range air defense equipment and drones in Ayyash, Deir ez Zor Province on April 16.[37] These technicians visited military warehouses in Ayyash that the Fatemiyoun Division—the IRGC Quds Force's Afghan Shia proxy—operates. The technicians also traveled to Iranian-backed positions around Abu Kamal and Mayadin, which is consistent with our reporting that LH technicians traveled to these locations on April 20 to train Iranian-backed forces on the Misagh-1 air defense system..[38] This pattern of activity supports CTP's previous assessment that Iran intends to strengthen security measures—including air defense systems—along a critical transportation route through Deir ez Zor Province.

Palestinian militias threatened on April 23 to retaliate if Israel attacks militia leadership in the West Bank. Israeli *Channel 12* reported Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu discussed renewing targeting operations in the West Bank following Independence Day on April 25-26 at a cabinet meeting on April 23.[39] Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) spokesmen—Hazem Qassem and Tariq Salmi, respectively—responded warning that Israeli targeting operations would lead to more violence.[40] Palestinian Legislative Council parliamentarian Hassan Khreishah stated on April 24 that increasing cooperation between Palestinian militias and the Axis of Resistance in the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria pushed Israel to threaten assassination. [41]

A senior Iranian military delegation paid an official visit to Moscow to meet with Russian, Syrian, and Turkish officials on April 25.[42] The visit was ostensibly about the possible normalization of ties between Syria and Turkey, although the Iranian delegation likely discussed other military items during the visit, such as further military cooperation with Russia. Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Gharaei Ashtiani headed the delegation, which is noteworthy given that he has no role in Iranian external activities and no authority over the Iranian armed forces. The defense minister is instead responsible for Iran's defense industries and military procurement and sales. IRGC Quds Force Deputy Commander Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Fallah Zadeh was part of the Iranian delegation as well, which is less surprising given his direct role in Iranian military activities in Syria.[43]

Fallah Zadeh was, in fact, likely discussing the possible normalization of ties between Syria and Turkey during the visit even if Ashtiani did not. But CTP has not yet observed indications that this normalization has become more likely. The upcoming Turkish general election on May 14 will emphasize border security and counterterrorism as key issues, which may deter Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan from normalizing ties with Damascus.

IRGC Ground Forces Commander Brigadier General Mohammad Pak Pour appointed Brigadier General Ahmad Ali Faizollahi as the Saberlin Special Forces Brigade commander on April 25.[44] The Saberlin unit is an elite IRGC special operations force which has fought in Syria to defend the Assad regime. This unit is highly trained in specialized operations, including airborne assault, hostage rescue, and raiding.[45] Faizollahi previously commanded the IRGC Ground Forces 4th Ansar ol Rasoul Operational Brigade in Javanroud, Kermanshah Province since October 31, 2019.[46]

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Iran Update, April 26, 2023

Iran Update, April 26, 2023

Annika Ganzeveld, Johanna Moore, Amin Soltani and Kitaneh Fitzpatrick

April 26, 2023, 4:30 pm ET

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An unidentified man shot and killed Shia cleric and Assembly of Experts member Ayatollah Abbas Ali Soleimani in a bank in Babolsar, Mazandaran Province on April 26.^[i] The assailant was a bank security guard who intentionally targeted Soleimani, although his motive remains unclear.^[ii] Soleimani most recently represented Sistan and Baluchistan in the Assembly of Experts--the regime body responsible for selecting the supreme leader.^[iii] Soleimani previously served as the Friday prayer leader of Kashan, Esfahan Province and Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province between 2001 and 2022.^[iv] Soleimani oversaw Sunni affairs during his tenure as Zahedan Friday Prayer Leader.^[v] Soleimani's connections to the historically restive Sistan and Baluchistan Province are noteworthy following heightened tensions between Iranian officials and Sistan and Baluchistan residents in recent months.

Soleimani's murder also follows a series of attacks on clerics within the past year.^[vi] An unidentified individual stabbed a cleric and fled on a motorcycle in Tehran on February 13, as CTP previously reported.^[vii] Unidentified individuals separately stabbed and wounded four clerics in Qom on December 18.^[viii] An unidentified man additionally stabbed Esfahan Friday Prayer Leader Ayatollah Yousef Tabatabai Nejad in June 2022.^[ix] It is unclear if these incidents are becoming more frequent or if they reflect heightened anti-regime sentiments. It is additionally unclear if the regime is interpreting these incidents as such.

Iranian state media and officials issued conflicting messaging on the nature of the attack. Iranian officials called for an investigation into Soleimani's death and described him as a martyr.^[x] Regime-affiliated outlets initially reported that a bank security guard used a firearm to intentionally target Soleimani, but later stated that an unidentified individual stole the weapon from the security guard.^[xi] Mazandaran Provincial Governor Mahmoud Hosseini Pour claimed that the bank security guard used his weapon to aimlessly fire at a group of individuals. Hosseini Pour added that the incident was not a terrorist attack.^[xii]

Fanouj, Sistan and Baluchistan Province residents protested the death of a 16-year-old boy in front of the city Law Enforcement Command (LEC) headquarters on April 25.^[xiii] LEC officers reportedly ran over a 16-year-old boy while he was riding a motorcycle on April 25. Iranian social media users circulated videos of LEC officers shooting at the protesters, injuring three individuals.^[xiv] The regime deployed a "large number of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) forces" from Iranshahr—a city approximately 160 kilometers away from Fanouj—to Fanouj on April 25 in response to the incident.^[xv] Sistan and Baluchistan Province LEC Social Deputy Colonel Ali Rahimi denied in an interview with IRGC-affiliated *Fars News Agency* on April 25 that the LEC was involved in the death of the 16-year-old motorist.^[xvi] Rahimi added that LEC officers "were forced to shoot in the air" after the crowd began throwing stones and glass at the headquarters. Security forces previously killed roughly 100 individuals during the "Bloody

Friday” Massacre in Zahedan in September 2022, sparking months of ongoing anti-regime activity within the province.[xvii]

Key Takeaways

- An unidentified man shot and killed Shia cleric and Assembly of Experts member Ayatollah Abbas Ali Soleimani in a bank in Babolsar, Mazandaran Province on April 26.
- Fanouj, Sistan and Baluchistan Province residents protested the death of a 16-year-old in front of the city Law Enforcement Command (LEC) headquarters on April 25. ci
- At least three protests occurred in three cities across three provinces on April 26.
- CTP recorded reported student poisonings in two cities across two provinces on April 26.
- The *Washington Post* reported on April 26 that the World Health Organization (WHO) had offered to assist the Iranian Health Ministry investigate ongoing poisoning incidents on an unspecified date.
- Iranian authorities arrested two former advisors of reformist politician Mir Hossein Mousavi on April 25.
- Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian met with Yemeni National Salvation Government Chief Negotiator Mohammad Abdol Salam in Muscat, Oman on April 25.
- The Iranian Minister of Roads and City Construction Mehrad Bazerbash announced that the Syrian-Iranian Joint Economic Forum established eight new committees focusing on Iranian investment, energy, and electricity during a meeting with Syrian President Bashar al Assad on April 26.
- A Kataib Hezbollah (KH) delegation arrived in Albu Kamal city, Deir ez Zor province on April 25 to replace Iranian militias according to a report from *Eye of Euphrates*.
- Members of the Shia Coordination Framework—via Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani—are consolidating government resources through budget allocation and office appointments.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least three protests occurred in three cities across three provinces on April 26. CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Tabriz, East Azerbaijan Province[xviii]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Engineers

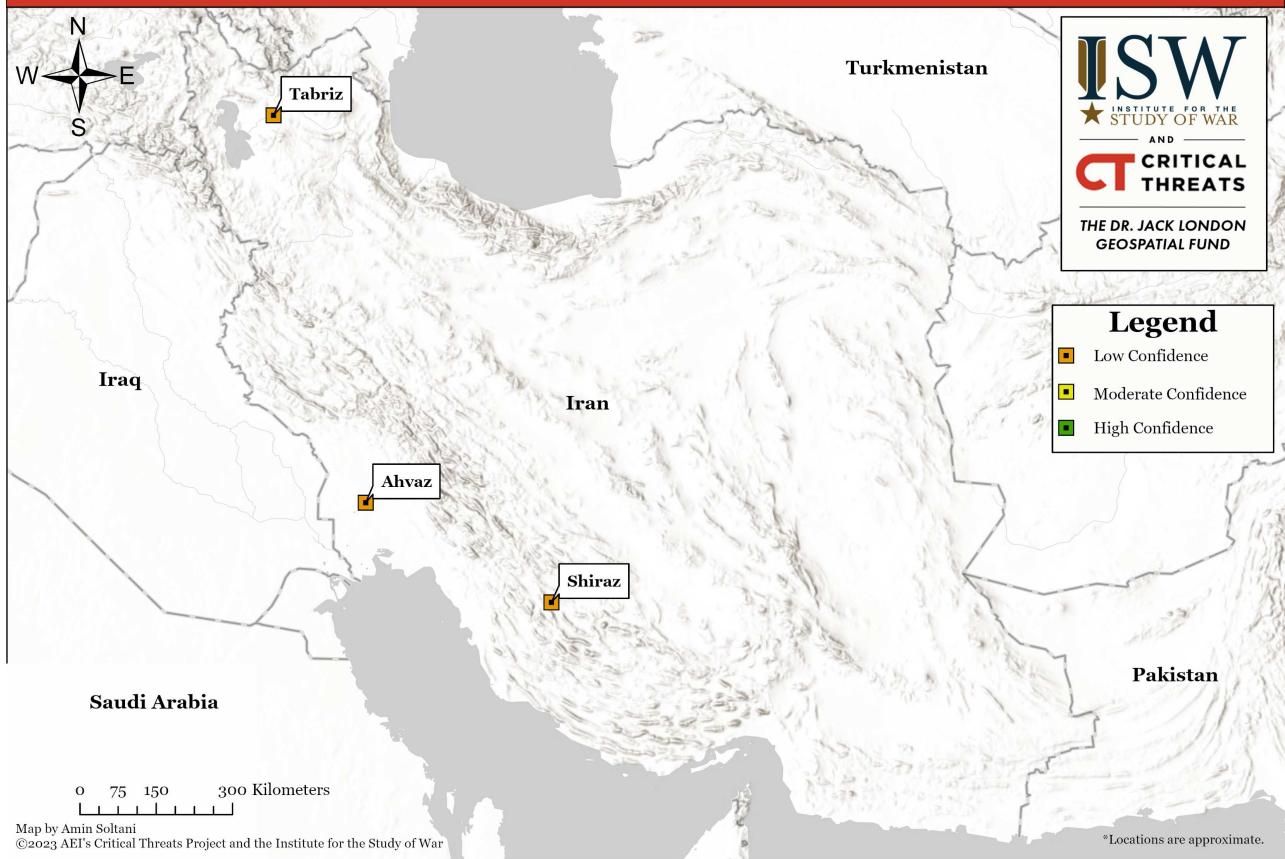
Shiraz, Fars Province[xix]

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

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[xx]

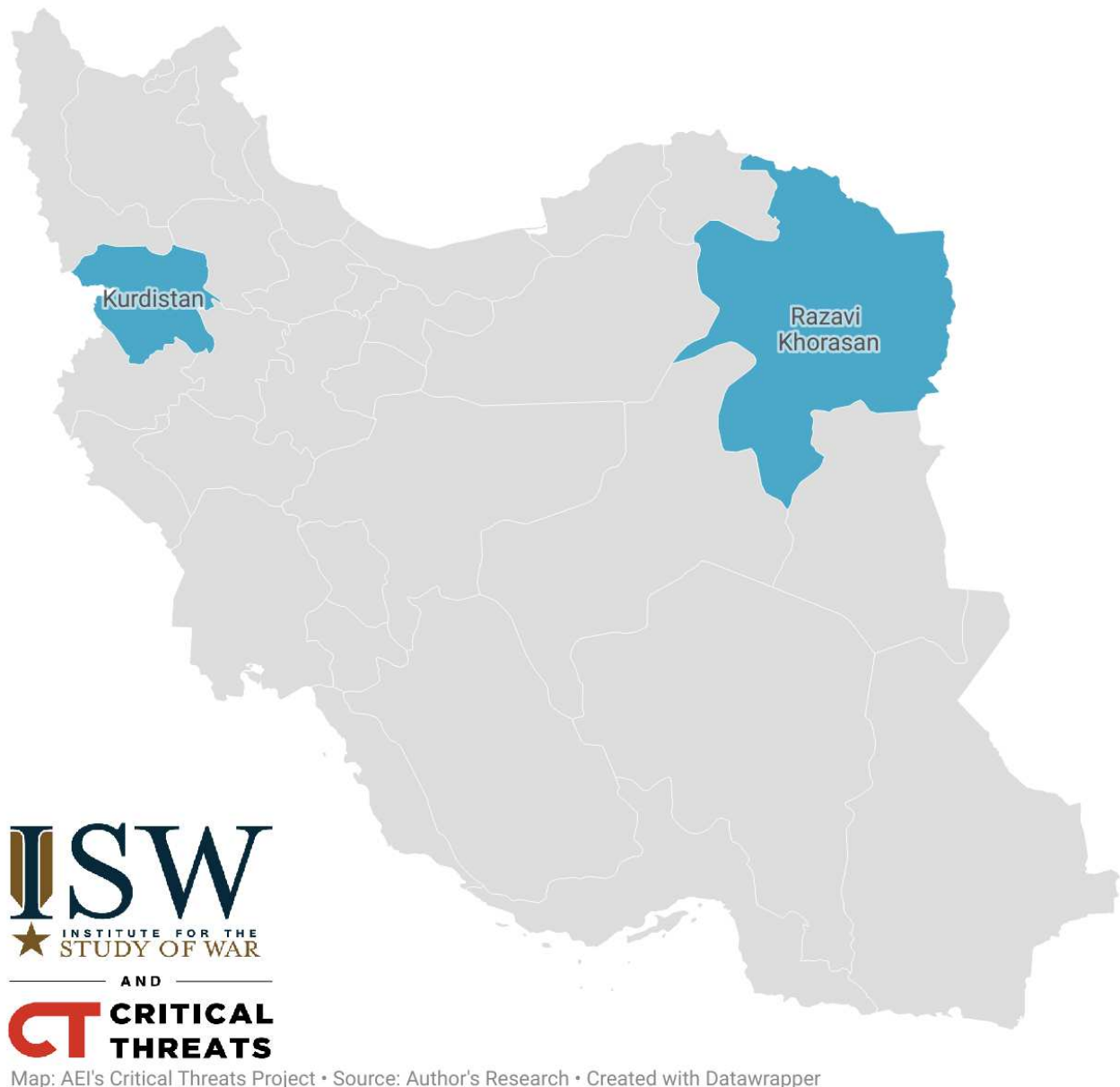
- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Protest Activity in Iran as of April 26, 4:30PM



CTP recorded student poisonings in two cities across two provinces on April 26.

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - April 26



The *Washington Post* reported on April 26 that the World Health Organization (WHO) had offered to assist the Iranian Health Ministry investigate ongoing poisoning incidents on an unspecified date. The WHO added that an expert team “is on standby for deployment should this be requested,” suggesting that Iranian officials have not yet responded to the offer. The Post interviewed Iranian doctors, who alleged that regime officials instructed them to diagnose poisoning victims with stress. An Iranian schoolteacher at an impacted school additionally told the Post that intelligence officials had returned to the school on several occasions to confiscate CCTV footage of parents chanting anti-regime slogans. The teacher noted that poisoning incidents impacted teachers as well as students, resulting in lasting side-effects in some individuals.[xxi]

Iranian authorities arrested two former advisors of reformist politician Mir Hossein Mousavi on April 25. Iranian media tied the arrest of Alireza Beheshti Shirazi, who previously advised and managed Mousavi’s public relations office, and Ghorban Behzadian Nejad, who headed Mousavi’s 2009 presidential campaign, to their participation in a virtual conference titled “Dialogue to Save Iran” on April 21.[xxii] Anti-regime outlet *Iran International* reported that the conference included the discussion of the Islamic Republic’s collapse and a new constitution.[xxiii] Mousavi had previously called for “foundational change” in Iran on February 4.[xxiv]

Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian met with Yemeni National Salvation Government Chief Negotiator Mohammad Abdol Salam in Muscat, Oman on April 26.

[xxv] Abdollahian emphasized Iran's support for reaching a comprehensive ceasefire between Yemeni political groups and lifting the blockade on Yemen.

External Security and Military Affairs

The Iranian Minister of Roads and City Construction Mehrad Bazerbash announced that the Syrian-Iranian Joint Economic Forum established eight new committees focusing on Iranian investment, energy, and electricity during a meeting with Syrian President Bashar al Assad on April 26.[xxvi] The Syrian-Iranian Joint Economic Forum established eight new committees to facilitate Iranian investment and economic activity in Syria. The Syrian Minister of Industry Dr. Abdul Qadir Jokhadar met with the Deputy Iranian Oil Minister and Director of the Iranian General Company for Petrochemical Industries Morteza Shahirazai to discuss developing industrial technology and production lines.[xxvii]

A Kataib Hezbollah (KH) delegation arrived in Albu Kamal city, Deir ez Zor province on April 25 to replace Iranian militias according to a report from *Eye of Euphrates*.

[xxviii] Unspecified sources claimed that the KH delegation will replace some of the Iranian militants currently operating in Albu Kamal. The Iranian militias will reportedly be transferred to Badia, Homs, and southern Syria.

Iranian militias test flew an unspecified drone from Boqrus to Makhan, Al Mayadeen District on April 26 as part of a training exercise.[xxix] CTP previously assessed that Iranian trainers sent to Deir ez Zor Province between April 17 and 19 may have been training Iranian-backed militants in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.[xxx]

Members of the Shia Coordination Framework—via Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani—are consolidating government resources through budget allocation and office appointments. Sudani claimed that he will replace cabinet ministers and provincial governors as a result of his six-month evaluation.[xxxi] Sudani maintained that he is the sole decision-maker to determine who is replaced; once again denying claims that the Shia Coordination Framework – a political coalition of Shia political parties – was directing the changes. State of Law Coalition member Saad al Mutalabi claimed that Sudani would replace any Shia ministers with a Shia individual from the same party but that Sudani has the authority to replace a Sunni official with a Shia one.[xxxii] Mutalabi's statement confirms CTP's previous assessment that the Sudani administration is likely sidelining Sunni opposition from office.[xxxiii]

Deputy Parliament Speaker Mohsen al Mandalawi met with framework-aligned National Wisdom Movement head Ammar al Hakim to discuss approving the 2023-2025 budget.[xxxiv] Mandalawi also met with Minister of Transportation Razzaq Muhibis al Saadawi to discuss increasing the budget for the Ministry of Transportation.[xxxv] CTP previously reported that Saadawi is expected to be replaced during Sudani's ministerial replacements. Saadawi is a member of the Shia Coordination Framework party al Fatah. According to Mutalabi, Saadawi would be replaced by a fellow al Fatah member. The 2023-2025 budget is a means by which the Shia Coordination Framework may allocate resources among its allies.

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Iran Update, April 27, 2023

Iran Update, April 27, 2023

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

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The domestic Iranian information space is currently shaped such that violence against religious figures is being viewed as part of escalating tensions between the public and Iranian regime. Iranian social media users circulated a video of an unidentified car driver seemingly trying to run over a cleric in Tehran City, Tehran Province on April 27.[1] This incident follows a bank security guard killing Assembly of Experts member Ayatollah Abbas Ali Soleimani in Babolsar, Mazandaran Province on April 26.[2] Many social media users have connected these incidents, arguing that the relationship between regime dissidents and loyalists has become more tense and sensitive in recent months.[3] The driver's motive for attempting to run over the cleric on April 27 remains unclear. It is possible that the driver deliberately attempted to harm the cleric out of frustration toward the regime. The driver's decision to attack the cleric is noteworthy regardless of the motive given the extent to which the killing of Ali Soleimani captured the national attention the day prior.

The recent violence against members of the clerical establishment corroborates CTP's previous assessment that the regime's encouragement of pro-regime loyalists to enforce mandatory veiling could exacerbate tensions between regime dissidents and supporters.[4] Khorasan Razavi Provincial Law Enforcement Commander Brigadier General Mohammad Kazem Taghavi separately announced on April 27 the arrest of two females who assaulted an individual enforcing regime morality standards in this province.[5] This incident underscores that the regime's refusal to grant sociocultural concessions to the population is fueling physical altercations between regime dissidents and loyalists. Such incidents could continue as citizens remain devoid of any other outlet to release their frustrations and grievances toward the regime.

Iranian state media published slightly differing reports on Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf's call for privatizing the economy on April 27. Ghalibaf made these comments while visiting local companies in East Azerbaijan Province. *Iranian Students' News Agency* framed Ghalibaf's remarks as an urgent call for privatizing Iran's economy to "save the country." [6] IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* similarly reported Ghalibaf's call for economic privatization but did not report "save the country," assigning less urgency to the issue.[7] Ghalibaf called for the government and parastatal organizations to decrease their involvement in the Iranian economy on February 22, as CTP previously reported.[8]

Iraqi Interior Minister Abdul Amir al Shammari announced plans to "restore the security situation" in Tarmiyah, Salah al Din Province, Iraq on April 27, which could lead to Iranian-backed Shia militias conducting sectarian cleansing against the local Sunni community under the guise of counter-ISIS operations. Shammari unveiled his plan after visiting Tarmiyah on April 17.[9] ISIS attacks Iraqi Security Forces in Tarmiyah regularly.[10] Shammari did not specify the measures included in his plan, but *Al Araby Al Jadeed* reported on April 27 that local residents are concerned he will deploy elements of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).[11] The 6th Iraqi Army Division and the Tarmiyah Regiment—a PMF unit comprised of locals—are already stationed in Tarmiyah, suggesting locals are concerned specifically about the possible deployment of non-local, Iranian-backed PMF forces.[12] Iranian-backed militias previously advocated for the sectarian cleansing of Tarmiyah after an ISIS attack in the town in February 2023.[13] Iranian-

backed PMF militants have previously massacred Sunni civilians in response to ISIS attacks targeting PMF units. Asaib Ahl al Haq killed eight Sunni civilians in Farhatiya—35 kilometers north of Tarmiyah—in October 2021, for instance.[14] The Badr Organization has similarly exploited its control over Diyala Province, which borders Tarmiyah, to force out Sunni inhabitants in sectarian cleansing efforts under the guise of counter-ISIS operations.[15] Iranian-backed militia and US-designated terrorist organization Kataib Hezbollah has separately cleansed Jurf al Sakhr of its Sunni population and turned the town into a military bastion inaccessible to federal Iraqi officials.[16]

ISIS is setting conditions to take advantage of Iranian-backed militia efforts to cleanse Tarmiyah of the Sunni population. ISIS responded to Iranian-backed militia calls to cleanse Tarmiyah of its Sunni population in February 2023, stating that the militias aim to “extend [Iranian-backed militia] influence over [Tarmiyah], steal [Tarmiyah’s] wealth, and displace [Tarmiyah’s] people.”[17] ISIS has historic support zones in Tarmiyah, which is one of the primary towns in the northern Baghdad Belts. The Baghdad Belts are a series of rural and semi-urban towns surrounding Baghdad that ISIS and its predecessors use to stage attacks into the capital.[18] ISIS’s predecessor—al Qaeda in Iraq—similarly leveraged Shia militia abuses to present itself as a security guarantor for Sunni communities in the early 2010s, allowing it to reconstitute its support structures and rapidly reconstitute its insurgency after the withdrawal of US forces.[19]

Key Takeaways

- **The domestic Iranian information space is currently shaped such that violence against religious figures is being viewed as part of escalating tensions between the public and Iranian regime.**
- **Iranian state media published slightly differing reports on Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf’s call for privatizing the economy.**
- **Iraqi Interior Minister Abdul Amir al Shammari announced plans to “restore the security situation” in Tarmiyah, Salah al Din Province, Iraq on April 27, which could lead to Iranian-backed Shia militias conducting sectarian cleansing against the local Sunni community under the guise of counter-ISIS operations.**
- **Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian met with senior Lebanese politicians during an official visit to Beirut.**
- **The Artesh Navy seized the Chinese-owned, Marshall Islands-flagged tanker Advantage Sweet in the Gulf of Oman.**
- **The Iran-aligned Shia Coordination Framework is trying to further manipulate Iraqi elections processes to consolidate its political power.**
- **IRGC Quds Force Deputy Commander for Abu Kamal Hajj Sajjad met with an unidentified Russian general in Abu Kamal, Deir ez Zor Province.**

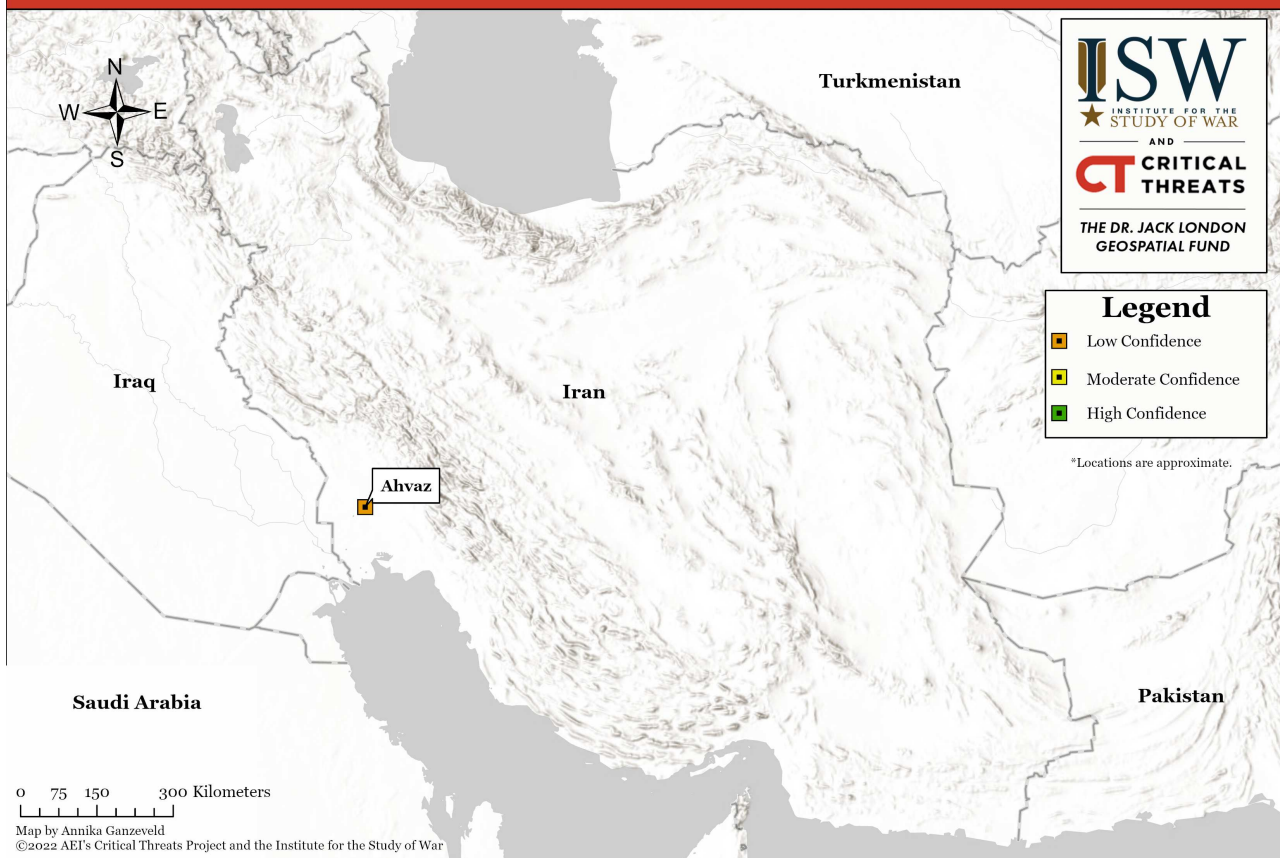
Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least one protest occurred on April 27. CTP assesses with low confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[20]

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

Protest Activity in Iran as of April 27, 5:00 PM



CTP recorded one strike in Kerman City, Kerman Province on April 27.[21]

Former reformist President Mohammad Khatami criticized the regime's social and political policies but rejected overthrowing the Islamic Republic during a meeting with Iranian politicians and journalists on April 25.[22] Khatami argued that the regime's attitude towards mandatory veiling is absurd considering its toleration of partial veiling and further argued for flexibility in the political implementation of Islamic principles, consistent with his previous rhetoric. Khatami expressed his respect for the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement but argued that overthrowing the regime would not serve Iran's interests. Khatami called for major reforms to governmental institutions on February 6, as CTP previously reported.[23]

President Ebrahim Raisi appointed Mahmoud Askari Azad as his assistant on April 26.

[24] Azad previously held senior positions in the Welfare and Social Security Ministry (dissolved in 2011), Management and Planning Organization, and Administration and Recruitment Affairs Organization. Azad additionally served as the Barakat Foundation board of directors chairman.

[25] The Barakat Foundation is a prominent Iranian bonyad, which is a parastatal foundation that the regime uses to control sections of the economy and hoard wealth.[26] Raisi headed the Astan Quds Razavi bonyad between 2016 and 2019 and has appointed many previous bonyad officials to positions in his administration.[27]

The IRGC Ground Forces 12th Ghaem ol Mohammad Independent Brigade and intelligence forces arrested unidentified actors planning to attack a military facility in Semnan City, Semnan Province on April 27.[28] The IRGC Ground Forces coordinated the arrest with both the IRGC Intelligence Organization and Intelligence and Security Ministry.

The Law Enforcement Command (LEC) closed two restaurants in Tehran on April 27 for serving unveiled women.[29] The LEC also closed at least eight "celebrity-affiliated" restaurants and commercial complexes in Tehran since the Law Enforcement Commander Brigadier General

Ahmad Reza Radan announced the implementation of his veiling enforcement plan on April 15, as CTP previously reported.[30]

The bank security guard who assassinated Assembly of Experts member Ayatollah Abbas Ali Soleimani in Babolsar, Mazandaran Province on April 26 claimed on April 27 that he mistakenly thought that Soleimani was someone else, according to Iranian state media.

[31] The security guard stated that he intended to kill the bank deputy's brother as "revenge" for an argument he previously had with the deputy. The guard added that he "lost control" due to his anger and mistook Soleimani for the bank deputy's brother.

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian met with senior Lebanese politicians during an official visit to Beirut on April 27. Abdollahian spoke with his Lebanese counterpart Abdallah Bouhabib about bilateral cooperation, expediting the Lebanese presidential selection process, and Iranian support for Lebanon's ongoing economic and energy crises.[32] Abdollahian also met with Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and Prime Minister Najib Mikati. CTP previously reported that Abdollahian met with Yemeni National Salvation Government Chief Negotiator Mohammad Abdol Salam in Muscat, Oman on April 26.[33]

External Security and Military Affairs

The Artesh Navy seized the Chinese-owned, Marshall Islands-flagged tanker Advantage Sweet in the Gulf of Oman on April 27.[34] Iranian news outlets claimed that the Artesh Navy seized the tanker, which was transporting oil from Kuwait to the US, after it collided with an Iranian vessel and tried to flee the accident scene.[35] The US 5th Fleet described the seizure as "contrary to international law and disruptive to regional security and stability." [36] Iranian leaders ordering the seizure of a Chinese-owned tanker would be surprising given that China is the largest importer of Iranian oil.[37]

The Iran-aligned Shia Coordination Framework is trying to further manipulate Iraqi elections processes to consolidate its political power. An anonymous Coordination Framework official told *Nas News* that the coalition will not support new provincial elections until Parliament agrees to restructure Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC).[38] The IHEC is an independent body comprised of nine council members chosen via lottery to oversee Iraq's elections.[39] The anonymous official falsely accused IHEC of rigging Iraq's October 2021 parliamentary elections to cost the Coordination Framework 50 seats. Independent Iraqi parliamentarian Amir Abdul Jabbar accused the Coordination Framework of pressuring IHEC Commissioner Jalil Khalaf to resign on April 24.[40] CTP previously assessed that the State of Law Coalition—one of the Coordination Framework's more powerful political blocs—pushed election law reforms through Parliament on March 26 likely to advantage itself in future elections and thereby consolidate power.[41] Iranian-backed efforts to undermine IHEC's autonomy and intimidate its commissioner provide further evidence in support of this assessment.

Shafaq News reported on April 27 that Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani intends to replace his defense and water resource ministers in the first phase of his planned cabinet reshuffle.[42] Azm Alliance member Thabet al Abbasi and Tasmim Movement member Aoun Diab Abdullah respectively serve as Iraq's current defense and water resource ministers. [43] The Sunni-dominated Azm Alliance previously attempted to exclude the Coordination Framework from a coalition government it tried to form with other Sunni blocs, both major Kurdish parties, and the Sadrist bloc in September 2022.[44] The Tasmim movement similarly aligned itself against the Coordination Framework in October 2021 when it accepted the election results that significantly reduced the Coordination Framework's seats.[45] CTP previously reported that members of the Shia Coordination Framework—via Sudani—are consolidating government resources through budget allocation and reshuffling other cabinet appointments.[46] Sudani may similarly replace Abbasi and Abdullah with allies or members of his Coordination Framework-aligned State of Law Coalition to further consolidate government resources and power.

IRGC Quds Force Deputy Commander for Abu Kamal Hajj Sajjad met with an unidentified Russian general in Abu Kamal, Deir ez Zor Province on April 27. *Eye of Euphrates* reported that the Russian general traveled from Deir ez Zor City to discuss unspecified topics with a delegation of Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian-backed militia leaders led by Sajjad. The Russian general may be the same general who arrived to lead the Russian Reconciliation Center in Hatla, Deir ez Zor Province on April 27.[47] The Russian Reconciliation Center has conducted operations, including humanitarian activities, in areas held by both the Assad regime and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Deir ez Zor Province since November 2022.[48] Russian forces deployed to Qamishli, Hasakah Province after transferring control of a military position along the western bank Euphrates River near a known smuggling route into SDF territory to Syrian Arab Army 17th Division forces on April 25.[49] The Russian general's potential connection to the Russian Reconciliation Center, which operates on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River, suggests that he may have discussed control over crossing and smuggling routes with Sajjad.

The *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights* reported on April 27 that IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) military trainers resolved a dispute that delayed a training course for new recruits several sites across Deir ez Zor Province.[50] New Syrian recruits for an unspecified Iranian-backed militia were scheduled to begin the training course on a recent but unspecified date in Deir ez Zor Province.[51] LH trainers delayed the start date for training due to allegations of IRGC personnel "treating trainees very badly." [52]

Iran Update, April 28, 2023

Iran Update, April 28, 2023

Amin Soltani, Annika Ganzeveld, Johanna Moore, and Kitaneh Fitzpatrick

April 28, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

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President Ebrahim Raisi will visit Damascus on April 3 to initiate several economic projects, possibly to reinvigorate Iran's economy by securing resources outside of Iran. *Reuters* reported on April 28 that Raisi will visit Syria on May 3 for a two-day trip, citing an informed source.[1] An Iranian president has not visited Syria since 2011, when the Syrian civil war commenced. The source stated that the recent Iran-Saudi rapprochement and dialogue between Syria and other Arab states prompted the visit. The Lebanese Hezbollah (LH)-affiliated news outlet *Al Akhbar* reported that Raisi's two-day visit would result in several economic agreements.[2] An unidentified source cited by *Al Akhbar* claimed that Raisi's visit is a part of a larger effort to broaden the Axis of Resistance's activities beyond its current military activity. Iranian Roads and Urban Development Minister Mehrdad Bazarbash announced on April 25 that Iran intends to connect trade through Iran, Iraq, and Syria via a rail link to reduce tariffs and facilitate banking exchanges during a multi-day visit to Damascus.[3] Bazarbash reported on April 26 that the Iranian-Syrian Joint Economic Forum established eight new committees focused on Iranian investment, energy, and electricity.[4] Iran has cancelled previous economic projects in Syria, including the construction of two power stations on March 13, because the Assad regime sought to pay for the project in raw phosphate.[5]

CTP previously assessed that Iranian leadership may capitalize on financial resources gained through regional normalization with the Assad regime.[6] Iranian leadership may grant construction contracts to proxies for possibly energy infrastructure projects in Syria as a means for Iran and its proxies to reap additional profits from the economic deals. Construction contracts would also open the opportunity for Iranian-backed proxies to establish or strengthen militia positions across Syria similarly to the PMF's deployment to northern Syria under the guise of earthquake humanitarian relief.[7]

Economic projects in Syria would provide Iran with sources of revenue to address the domestic economic problems it has not been able to resolve internally. Regime officials have expressed concern over the state of the Iranian economy for several months and the regime's economic policies have not restored the value of the national currency.[8] Regime officials continued to express alarm on April 28. Qom City Friday Prayer Leader Ayatollah Hosseini Boushehri stated that the Raisi administration's inconsistent monetary policies disincentivized investment and created an unpredictable market.[9] Tehran Interim Friday Prayer Leader Hojjat ol Eslam Mohammad Hasan Abou Tarabifard similarly argued that the Raisi administration and parliament had contributed.[10] Former Rouhani administration First Vice President Esghagh Jahangiri warned of the economic ramifications of closing facilities that violated the mandatory veiling laws.[11] Former Central Bank of Iran Head under President Rouhani Abdol Nasser Hemati separately warned against removing the US dollar from all Iranian business transactions and blamed the Raisi administration for the rising inflation rate.[12]

Protesters in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province called for a referendum following prominent Sunni cleric Abdol Hamid's weekly Friday prayer sermon on April 28,

underscoring the extent to which the idea of referenda has permeated the Iranian political discourse.[13] Zahedan residents chanted “referendum, referendum” following Abdol Hamid’s sermon, in which he endorsed holding a political referendum.[14] CTP has not previously observed protesters in any part of Iran using chants referencing referenda. The protesters’ call for a referendum on April 28 thus reflects how this topic has gained traction in the Iranian political sphere and among some segments of the population. Iranian news outlets and officials from across the political spectrum have increasingly discussed referenda in recent days following Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s explicit rejection of referenda during a meeting with student activists on April 18, as CTP previously reported. [15] The Zahedan protesters’ call for a referendum also highlights Abdol Hamid’s influence on his congregation. Abdol Hamid has given anti-regime sermons since the “Bloody Friday” massacre in September 2022.

The regime’s refusal to grant political or sociocultural concessions to its population may increase the appeal of a referendum among Iranian citizens. Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri’s office initially called for a referendum in November 2022 at the height of the Mahsa Amini protest movement.[16] It was not until reformist politician Mir Hossein Mousavi called for a referendum in February 2023 and Khamenei rejected referenda in April 2023 that Iranian officials and media began fervently discussing this issue, however. That Mousavi and Khamenei’s remarks—which followed the culmination of the Mahsa Amini protest movement in January 2022—have gained traction indicates some citizens are dissatisfied with the regime’s failure to grant protesters meaningful concessions.

Key Takeaways

- **President Ebrahim Raisi will visit Damascus on April 3 to initiate several economic projects, possibly to reinvigorate Iran’s economy by securing resources outside of Iran.**
- **Protesters in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province called for a referendum following prominent Sunni cleric Abdol Hamid’s weekly Friday prayer sermon on April 28, underscoring the extent to which the idea of referenda has permeated the Iranian political discourse.**
- **At least two protests occurred in two cities across one province on April 28.**
- **Western Persian-language media reported that pro-regime actors have been issuing hijab observance warnings to women across Tehran, citing eyewitness accounts.**
- **The Intelligence and Security Ministry (MOIS) downplayed ongoing poisoning attacks in Iranian schools in a report published on April 28.**
- **Pars Special Economic Energy Zone CEO Sakhavat Asadi threatened to dismiss workers who participate in strikes on April 28.**
- **Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian stated that Iran and the US concluded a prisoner exchange agreement 13 months ago during a press conference in Beirut on April 28.**
- **The US military is equipping A-10 Warthog aircraft in the Middle East with 250-pound “bunker busting” bombs to deter Iran.**
- **Several Shia Coordination Framework party leaderships held separate meetings with a Kurdistan Workers Party (PUK) delegation, likely to negotiate Kurdish support for the proposed 2023-2025 budget.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least two protests occurred in two cities across one province on April 28. CTP assesses with high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Fanouj, Sistan and Baluchistan Province[17]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Individuals protesting the death of a 16-year-old boy whom LEC officers reportedly ran over on April 25[18]

Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province[19]

- **Size:** Medium
- **Demographic:** Zahedan residents protesting after prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid's Friday sermon
- **Notes:** Protesters chanted "referendum, referendum."



CTP did not record poisoning incidents on April 28.

Western Persian-language media reported that pro-regime actors have been issuing hijab observance warnings to women across Tehran, citing eyewitness accounts.[20] Social media users circulated footage on April 27 of pro-regime actors entering shopping centers and theaters in Tehran to enforce mandatory veiling. These users reported that the pro-regime actors were plainclothes officers, contradicting the regime's prior statements committing to a nonconfrontational veiling enforcement.

The Intelligence and Security Ministry (MOIS) downplayed ongoing poisoning attacks in Iranian schools in a report published on April 28.[21] The MOIS blamed "mischievous" students using pepper spray, tear gas, stink bombs, and other non-toxic substances for the "malaise" students experienced and emphasized that reported poisoning incidents did not involve poisonous materials. The MOIS also blamed foreign outlets for spreading mass hysteria by reporting school incidents as poisonings reported poisonings on foreign actors. The regime has continuously failed to halt school poisoning attacks, demonstrating that it is either incapable of protecting students or that it is tolerating these attacks, as CTP has previously assessed.[22]

Economic Affairs

Pars Special Economic Energy Zone CEO Sakhavat Asadi threatened to dismiss workers who participate in strikes on April 28.[23] Industrial workers across central and southern Iran have

organized strikes to protest insufficient wages in recent days, as CTP previously reported.[24]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian stated during a press conference in Beirut on April 28 that Iran and the US concluded a prisoner exchange agreement 13 months ago.[25] Amir Abdollahian stated that “considerations from the American side” prevented the agreement’s implementation and emphasized that Iran considers prisoner exchanges a “fundamental issue.”

External Security and Military Affairs

The US military is equipping A-10 Warthog aircraft in the Middle East with 250-pound “bunker busting” bombs to deter Iran.[26] Unidentified American officials stated that the bombs will enable pilots to destroy ammunition bunkers and other unspecified entrenched targets in Iraq and Syria. The US military’s decision to equip A-10 Warthog aircraft with these bombs coincides with heightened tensions between Iran and the US in recent weeks. The US navy previously announced on April 7 that it had deployed a guided-missile submarine to the Middle East to deter Iran from attacking commercial ships.[27] The Artesh Navy separately seized a Chinese-owned, Marshall Islands-flagged tanker transporting oil to the US in the Gulf of Oman on April 27, as CTP previously reported.[28]

Several Shia Coordination Framework party leaderships held separate meetings with a Kurdistan Workers Party (PUK) delegation, likely to negotiate Kurdish support for the proposed 2023-2025 budget. State of Law Coalition Secretary General and former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki met with the head of the PUK Political Bureau Refaat Abdullah and his accompanying delegation to discuss points of friction between Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government that may be slowing down approving the 2023-2025 Iraqi budget.[29] National Wisdom Movement Secretary General Ammar al Hakim met separately with the delegation to discuss approving the proposed budget, counterterrorism, and farmers rights.[30] Al Fatah Secretary General Hadi al Ameri also met with the delegation to discuss allocation of funds across the provinces and to various demographics.[31] CTP previously reported that Coordination Framework parties are reallocating funds from Iraqi provinces to ministries to consolidate government resources.[32] Parties from the Shia Coordination Framework may be attempting to court the PUK’s votes in order to pass the proposed budget.

Iranian Foreign Minister Amir Abdollahian hosted 16 Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) and ostensibly LH-friendly members of Lebanese Parliament to the Iranian Embassy on April 28 to discuss breaking political deadlock within Lebanon’s parliament.[33] Abdollahian invited 25 members of parliament, however 9 boycotted the meeting. A member of parliament who attended the meeting claimed that the Iran-Saudi normalization has created conditions that are favorable for breaking the deadlock and electing a president in Lebanon.[34] Abdollahian also met with LH Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah to discuss Iran-Saudi rapprochement.[35] He also held a phone call with Hamas political leader Yahya Sinwar to discuss Iranian support for Palestinian resistance groups and invite senior Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh to Tehran.[36]

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