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Iran Crisis Update, February 1, 2023

Iran Crisis Update, February 1, 2023

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

February 1, 2023, 5:30 pm ET

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

Iranian officials across the political spectrum are cohering around different lessons the regime should draw from the protest movement and how to best respond. Former reformist president Hassan Rouhani criticized the regime for marginalizing moderate and reformist actors in the political sphere in an interview on February 1. Rouhani implied that Iranian leadership had lost the support of the Iranian population and acknowledged the existence of deep societal fissures following the Mahsa Amini protest movement. Rouhani urged Iranian officials to address protester grievances by enforcing corresponding cultural and political changes, although he did not specify the nature or content of these changes. Rouhani framed deepening divides between Iranian leadership and its population as a serious threat to the legitimacy and preservation of the regime, stating: “we have no choice but to preserve and fix the regime [...] we must bring the people who have turned away from us back into the fold.”[1] Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf—a hardline Iranian official and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Brigadier General—echoed Rouhani’s warnings of schisms between the regime and its people on February 1. Ghalibaf stressed the importance of Iranian leadership maintaining a dialogue with the population and stated that “the Islamic Revolution has no meaning without the participation of the people [...] the people are the foundation of the revolution.”[2]

Moderates and reformists have previously called for greater plurality and participation within the Iranian political establishment; they have sought to regain their influence following the regime-backed election of President Ebrahim Raisi in 2021.[3] Rouhani’s criticisms of the regime coincide with a ten-day holiday commemorating the 1979 return to Iran of Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini—the founder of the Islamic Republic—however, making his comments particularly noteworthy. It is also significant that Ghalibaf—a prominent hardliner—has echoed moderate and reformist talking points in recent months. Ghalibaf endorsed limited economic and sociopolitical reforms in a parliamentary address on November 5, 2022 and described changes made within the parameters of the Islamic Republic as “legitimate and necessary.”[4] Officials affiliated with Ghalibaf have separately blamed other hardliners’ uncompromising and inflexible views for stoking the Mahsa Amini protest movement.[5] Rouhani and Ghalibaf constitute part of an increasingly broad swath of pro-regime actors adopting a pragmatist approach to anti-regime sentiments and are seeking to gain the support of disillusioned Iranian youth.[6] This camp likely seeks to strengthen the regime through pragmatic measures like increased dialogue with alienated Iranians and limited sociopolitical concessions. It is unclear how and to what extent this camp seeks to execute such measures, although it is clear that it does not seek to overthrow or significantly alter the regime.

Ultra-hardline individuals offered a contrasting solution to addressing anti-regime sentiments and advocated for greater indoctrination and paternalistic social control measures on February 1. IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami dismissed recent unrest as a foreign conspiracy aimed at minimizing the regime’s regional influence in a speech.[7] Tehran Province IRGC Commander Ahmad Zolghadr called on Iranian officials to “better explain” the

Islamic Republic's ideology to Iranian youth on February 1 and described the regime's protest suppression response to the Mahsa Amini movement as "tolerant" and restrained.[8] Human rights organizations estimate that Iranian security personnel have killed at least 522 protesters since September 16.[9] Iranian officials separately promoted initiatives that would enforce mandatory veiling laws on February 1.[10] Calls for exerting increased control over the Iranian population are likely to exacerbate tensions between the regime and its people, however, and are based a fundamental misdiagnosis of the root causes of anti-regime sentiments.

Key Takeaways

- **Iranian officials across the political spectrum are cohering around different lessons the regime should draw from the protest movement and how to best respond.**
- **IRGC-affiliated and ultra-hardline individuals advocated for exerting greater control over Iranian youth and women on February 1.**
- **At least one protest occurred in one city across one province on February 1.**
- **Protest organizations called for individual and sustainable acts of anti-regime defiance from February 1-11.**
- **Iranian officials close to President Ebrahim Raisi are attempting to downplay recent criticisms of the Raisi administration.**
- **President Ebrahim Raisi ordered First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber to form a working group to implement Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's economic recommendations.**
- **Anti-regime outlet *Iran International* published a report claiming that the officials working at the Iranian embassy in Baghdad are involved in an IRGC Quds Force money laundering operation.**
- **A credible, open-source intelligence Twitter account claimed unspecified IRGC forces are preparing to conduct cross-border attacks on anti-regime Kurdish groups along the Iran-Iraqi Kurdistan border.**
- **A possibly Iran-backed militia launched at least eight rockets at the Zilkan Turkish military base near Bashiqa, Nineveh Province, Iraq.**

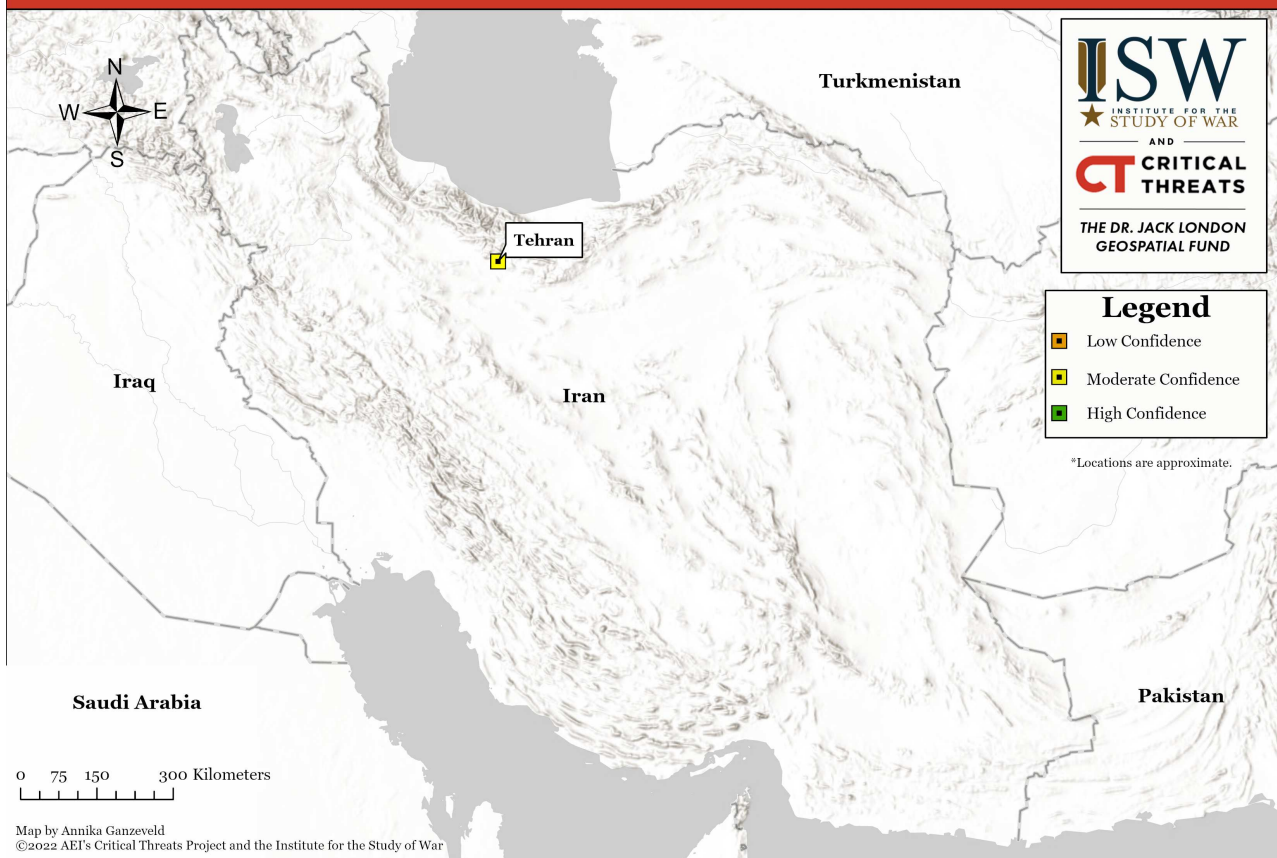
Protest Activity

At least one protest occurred in one city across one province on February 1. CTP assesses with moderate confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Tehran City, Tehran Province[11]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Families of prisoners sentenced to death
- **Notes:** It is unclear if participating families are connected to arrested protesters

Protest Activity in Iran as of February 1, 5:30 PM



Protest organizations called for individual and sustainable acts of anti-regime defiance from February 1-11. Protest coordinators encouraged their followers to participate in non-protest, anti-regime activity for the “Farj Decade,” a ten-day regime holiday that commemorates former Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini’s return to Iran and the subsequent Islamic Revolution in 1979. The Tehran Neighborhood Youth called on Tehran residents to chant “I swear on the blood of my comrades, we will stand together until the end” every night at 21:00 local time throughout this ten-day period.[12] CTP did not observe footage documenting this chant on February 1 as of 5:30 pm ET. The group emphasized that new protest techniques are necessary to reduce the costs incurred by protesters. The United Youth of Iran separately called on its followers to destroy all public symbols, including banners, flyers, and streamers, that commemorate Khomeini’s return. [13]

Reuters obtained a confidential report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on February 1 addressed to member states on the subject of Iran’s uranium enrichment activity at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant.[14] The report stated that Iran has altered the interconnection between two cascades of IR-6 centrifuges at Fordow without notifying the IAEA in violation of article 45 of its Safeguards Agreement. IAEA inspectors discovered the alteration during an unannounced inspection of the facility on January 21. Iran has been using the IR-6 centrifuge cascades at Fordow to enrich uranium to 60 percent purity since November 22, 2022. [15] The alteration could increase Iran’s ability to produce a greater volume of 60 percent enriched uranium at a faster rate. Iran’s present stockpile of 60 percent enriched uranium is enough to meet the IAEA’s standard for the approximate level needed for a compact nuclear explosive. [16]

Iranian officials close to President Ebrahim Raisi are attempting to downplay recent criticisms of the Raisi administration. Vice President for Parliamentary Affairs Mohammad Hosseini denied rumors that unspecified parliamentarians are gathering signatures to bring President Ebrahim Raisi to parliament for questioning on February 1.[17] Hosseini also dismissed claims about a dispute between parliament and the Raisi administration.[18] Information and

Communications Technology Minister Issa Zareh Pour separately stated that the Raisi administration was not involved in the Supreme National Security Council's (SNSC) decision to filter Instagram and Telegram, likely another effort to evade criticisms directed at Raisi for ongoing internet restrictions.[19]

President Ebrahim Raisi ordered First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber to form a working group to implement Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's economic recommendations on February 1.[20] Khamenei gave a speech on January 30 in which he appeared to blame Mokhber for the Raisi administration's economic mismanagement, as CTP previously reported.[21] Raisi is likely capitalizing on Khamenei's comments to establish Mokhber as a scapegoat for his administration's failing economic policies.

Anti-regime outlet *Iran International* published a report claiming that the officials working at the Iranian embassy in Baghdad are involved in an IRGC Quds Force money laundering operation.[22] The report stated embassy employees are coordinating with Quds Force Unit 400 financial manager Mohammad Tajan-Jari to circumvent Western sanctions and launder revenue from oil and natural gas exports back into Iran.[23] Iranian oil and gas companies reportedly transferred approximately \$40 million of export revenues to the Iranian embassy in Baghdad in 2021. The funds were earmarked for embassy expenses, but embassy officials allegedly transferred the funds to the IRGC.[24]

Axis of Resistance and Regional Developments

A credible, open-source intelligence Twitter account claimed unspecified IRGC forces are preparing to conduct cross-border attacks on anti-regime Kurdish groups along the Iran-Iraqi Kurdistan border.[25] The account claimed to have observed significant IRGC movement along the northern part of Iran's border with Iraqi Kurdistan.[26] CTP cannot independently verify this claim. Iranian state-affiliated media outlets *Mehr News* and *Nour News* published reports that accused Kurdish opposition groups of supplying and smuggling into Iran the drone components and explosive material used in the January 28 drone attack on the Esfahan Ministry of Defense facility.[27] Iranian state media may be focusing on the role of anti-regime Kurdish groups to set conditions for renewed cross-border attacks against alleged Kurdish militia positions in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Iraqi government and Assad Regime agreed to remove restrictions on cross-border commerce traveling through the al-Qa'im border crossing near Abu Kamal, Deir ez-Zour Province, Syria.[28] The *Middle East Monitor* reported on February 1 that Iraqi and Syrian truck drivers with multiple-entry visas can now travel through the border crossing without unloading their goods for inspection and subsequently transferring them to another truck on the other side of the border.[29] The IRGC frequently attempts to smuggle munitions and military equipment into Syria on trucks allegedly transporting perishable foodstuffs. Israeli airstrikes have increasingly targeted these likely IRGC military shipments after they cross into Syria through the al-Qa'im crossing, as CTP previously reported.[30] The loosened border restrictions may facilitate the IRGC's attempts to obscure its shipments amongst regular commerce flowing through the border crossing.

The Syrian Transportation Ministry also announced that biweekly passenger flights between Damascus and Baghdad will resume on February 2 after a two-year hiatus.[31] The IRGC may use the flights to transport Quds Force personnel or Iran-backed militants into Syria to avoid casualties associated with Israeli airstrikes on IRGC shipments through the al-Qa'im border crossing.

A possibly Iran-backed militia launched at least eight rockets at the Zilkan Turkish military base near Bashiqa, Nineveh Province, Iraq on February 1. The Kurdistan Regional Security Council reported that two rockets impacted within the base without harming any Turkish military personnel or damaging property and that the other six landed without incident outside the base.[32] Liwa Ahrar al-Iraq (LAI) published a statement claiming responsibility for the attack.[33] LAI first began claiming responsibility for attacks against Turkish military positions in northern Iraq in June 2022.[34] LAI likely is at least loosely affiliated with Iran-backed militias operating in

northern Iraq, although it is uncertain the degree to which the group is integrated into Iran's Iraqi proxy command structure.[35]

Unidentified Palestinian militants launched a single rocket at Sderot, Israel on February 1.

[36] The militants conducted the attack from an unspecified location in North Gaza Province, Gaza Strip. Israeli air defenses intercepted the rocket without incident.[37] The *Jerusalem Post* claimed without direct evidence that the Palestinian Islamic Jihad declared responsibility for the attack.[38]

[1] <https://t.co/VZXk4EXzxT>

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Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Annika Ganzeveld, Johanna Moore, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 2, 2023, 4:30 pm ET

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

Contributors: Anya Caraiani and James Motamed

A group of pragmatic hardliners is continuing to cohere around calls for the regime to reconcile with its alienated population in the wake of the Mahsa Amini protests. Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf—a hardline Iranian official and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Brigadier General—urged the regime to examine its weaknesses on February 2, expounding on his February 1 comments about schisms between the Islamic Republic and its population. Ghalibaf warned that Iran’s enemies would exploit its weaknesses if the regime failed to probe them.[1] Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei separately urged Iranian officials to rectify economic, livelihood, and social justice issues and stated that Iran’s adversaries would “seize this weakness,” rhetorically mirroring Ghalibaf’s warning on the same date.[2] Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi additionally stated that the regime must engage in constructive dialogue with activists who operate within the ideological framework of the Islamic Republic and stressed the importance of political participation on February 2.[3] Vahidi is an IRGC Brigadier General and former Quds Force Commander and was the Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister under former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Vahidi is currently an elected official of the ultra-hardline Raisi administration and oversees the Iranian Law Enforcement Command—which the regime mobilizes to violently suppress anti-regime demonstrations—making Vahidi’s calls for improving political engagement with the Iranian population particularly noteworthy. Vahidi previously acknowledged that the Mahsa Amini protest movement had created deep sociopolitical fissures between the regime and Iranian youth on January 26.[4] Ghalibaf’s, Ejei’s, and Vahidi’s comments follow former President Hassan Rouhani’s February 1 statement implying that Iranian leadership had lost the support of its population.[5]

Anti-regime outlet *Iran International* reported that former Rouhani officials discussed limiting Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s authority on January 30, citing exclusive access to an audio file of the meeting. Former President Hassan Rouhani’s Deputy for Logistics and former North Khorasan Provincial Governor Mohammad Reza Salehi allegedly criticized the regime’s response to the Mahsa Amini protest movement and its economic policies in a meeting with other unspecified former Rouhani administration provincial governors and former First Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri. *Iran International* claimed that Salehi framed anti-regime sentiments as an urgent threat to the Islamic Republic and stated that structural reforms were the only solution to this threat. Salehi allegedly criticized recent privatization initiatives and legislation proposals aimed at curtailing freedom of speech and likened sham trials for arrested protesters to “a systemic massacre.” The former Rouhani administration official also alleged that former Law Enforcement Command (LEC) Chief Brigadier General Hossein Ashtari offered to issue a televised apology for Mahsa Amini’s death but was instructed to violently suppress unrest, presumably by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Khamenei dismissed Ashtari as law enforcement commander on January 7, likely due to Khamenei’s dissatisfaction with the performance of the LEC in responding to the protests.[6] *Iran International* also claimed that Salehi advocated for convincing Khamenei to hold referenda to reduce the Supreme Leader’s executive powers and suggested that the next Supreme

Leader might oppose such a referendum. These comments, if true, corroborate other indicators that supreme leader succession is coloring how the Iranian political establishment is conceptualizing and responding to the Mahsa Amini protest movement.[7]

CTP cannot verify the claims made in *Iran International*'s February 1 article. Still, this reporting is consistent with prior CTP assessments about internal regime divisions caused by recent unrest and by increasing regime focus on supreme leader succession. CTP previously wrote that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's refusal to concede on the mandatory hijab law was likely driving fissures among the political elite on October 18.[8] *Iran International*'s February 1 article additionally coheres with multiple CTP assessments that hardline officials were pursuing sociopolitical reforms in hopes of preempting further unrest. Such officials include Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani, Vice President for Economic Affairs Mohsen Rezaei, and Ghalibaf.[9]

Recent reporting and comments from Iranian officials on February 1 and 2 suggest the coherence of a group of pragmatic hardliners who acknowledge the disconnect between the regime and its population and are struggling with hardline ideologues who are either unable or unwilling to recognize the grievances that led to the Mahsa Amini protest movement. The pragmatic hardliners ultimately seek to preserve and strengthen the regime through limited concessions and should not be seen as seeking or supporting any fundamental changes in the nature of the regime. Recent statements and reports suggest a certain degree of urgency with which this faction seeks to bridge societal divides as the regime continues to enforce policies that led to recent unrest. CTP assessed on January 20 that the Mahsa Amini protest movement had largely culminated but that the conditions for the resumption of significant anti-regime activity remained intact.[10] It is possible that individuals within the pragmatic hardline camp have reached a similar assessment.

Key Takeaways

- **A group of pragmatic hardliners are continuing to cohere around calls for the regime to reconcile with its alienated population in the wake of the Mahsa Amini protests.**
- **At least one protest occurred in one city across one province.**
- **Iranian regime-affiliated news outlets confirmed reports that one hundred protesters chanted anti-regime slogans and damaged pro-regime symbols in Abadan, Ilam Province on February 1.**
- **Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri called for expanding ties with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)**
- **A senior Iranian diplomat explicitly blamed Israel for the January 28 drone attack on a military munitions factory in Esfahan City, Esfahan Province for the first time and warned of Iran's right to retaliation.**
- **Information and Communications Technology Minister Issa Zahreh Pour announced on February 2 that unknown actors conducted a cyberattack that significantly impacted Iranian internet infrastructure on January 24.**
- **President Ebrahim Raisi defended his administration's economic policies amidst growing criticism.**
- **The Israeli Air Force conducted an airstrike on two Hamas weapons manufacturing facilities in the Gaza Strip.**
- **Turkish forces have likely withdrawn from a military checkpoint located in Qastoun, Syria.**
- **The Iraqi and Saudi governments signed a memorandum of understanding to link Iraq's electrical grid to the Saudi electrical grid on February 2**

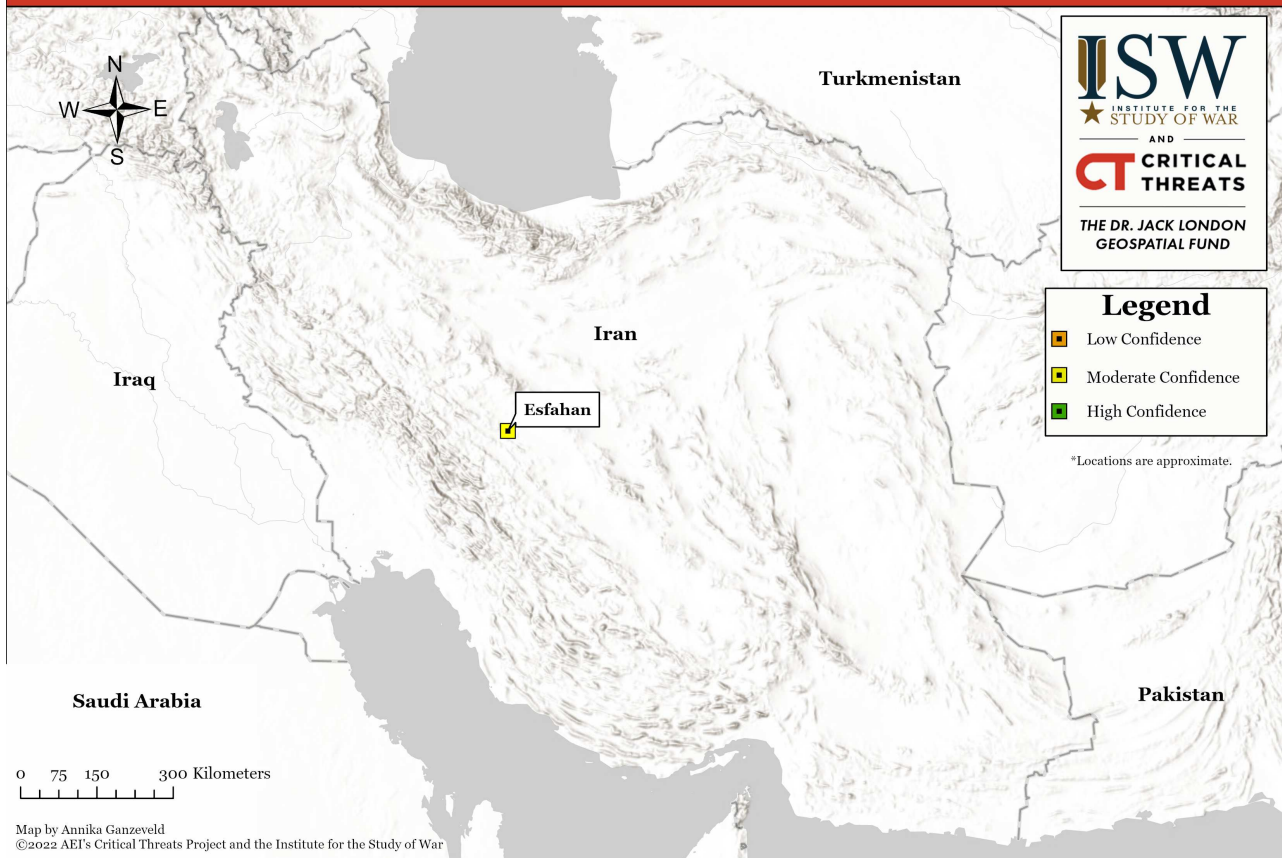
Protest Activity

At least one protest occurred in one city across one province on February 2. CTP assesses with moderate confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

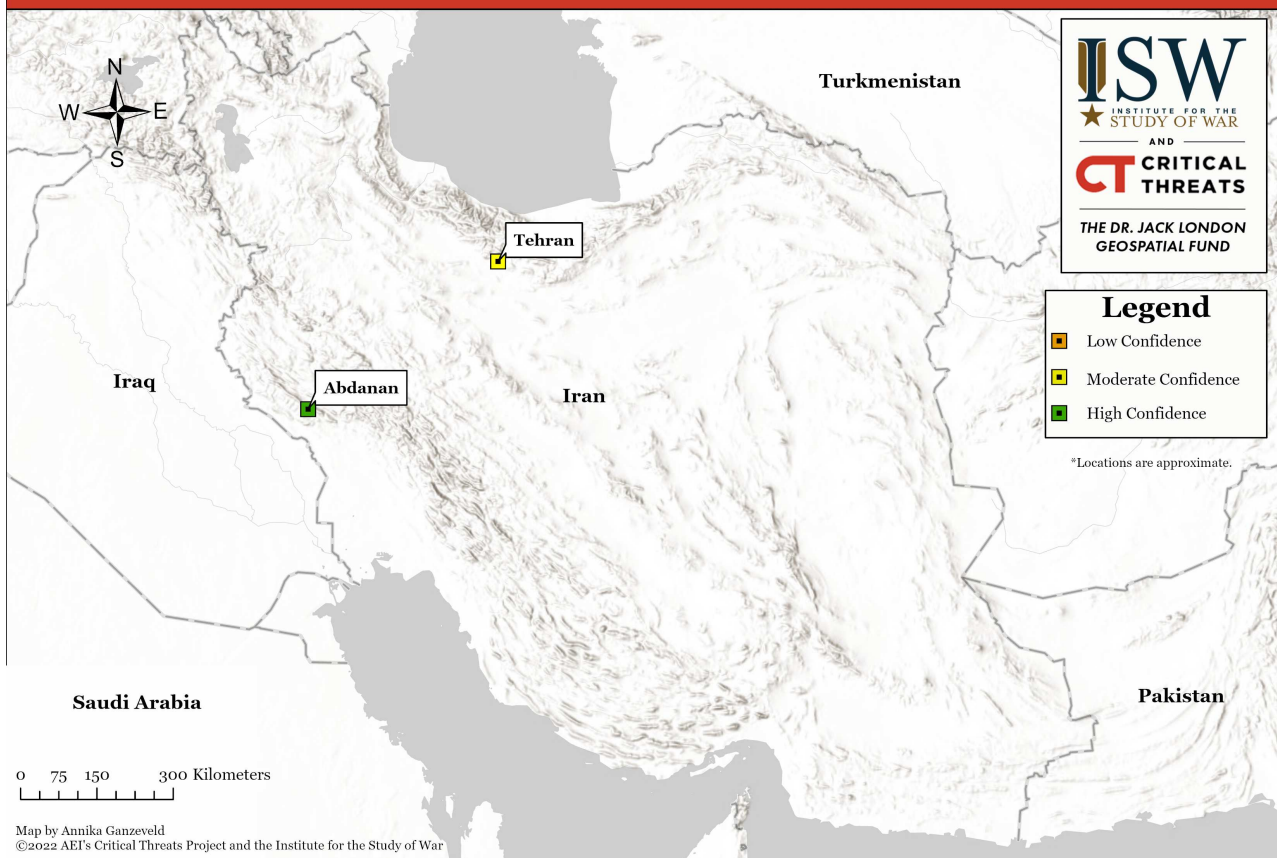
Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[11]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Farmers
- **Notes:** This activity is not related to and predates the Mahsa Amini protest movement

Protest Activity in Iran as of February 2, 4:30 PM



Update - Protest Activity in Iran on February 1



Iranian regime-affiliated news outlets confirmed reports that 100 protesters chanted anti-regime slogans and damaged pro-regime symbols in Abadan, Ilam Province on February 1. [12] Protesters destroyed a Basij statue and the store of an alleged regime informant in response to the arrest of local protest leader Sajjad Moradi Vand. [13] Ilam Province Prosecutor Abdol Wahab Bakhshandeh announced that Iranian authorities arrested 10 individuals for participating in the protest. [14] Iranian officials have historically denied reports of internal unrest, making the relatively expeditious acknowledgment of the Abadan protest noteworthy. CTP did not include the Abadan, Ilam Province protest in its February 1 update because it could not initially verify whether the activity was an anti-regime protest or an isolated act of vandalism. **CTP has updated its map for February 1 following the publication of new footage and regime-affiliated reporting confirming the demonstration on February 2.**

A senior Iranian diplomat explicitly blamed Israel for the January 28 drone attack on a military munitions factory in Esfahan City, Esfahan Province for the first time and warned of Iran's right to retaliation. Iranian Representative to the UN Amir Saeed Iravani wrote a letter to the UN Security Council Secretary General and Interim Chairperson on February 2 stating that Iranian internal investigations identified Israel as the perpetrator of the January 28 attack. [15] Iravani's letter marks the first time an Iranian official has officially attributed the attack to Israel. Iranian and Iranian-backed militants have previously discussed attacking US forces at the al Omar oil field or Koniko gas fields eastern Syria in retaliation for the Israeli drone attack, as CTP previously reported. [16] Iravani separately reiterated the regime's policy of "active neutrality" in the Ukraine conflict and criticized Ukrainian Presidential Adviser Mykhailo Podolyak's January 30 tweet suggesting that the Israeli strike was retaliation for Iranian military support to Russia. [17]

Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri called for expanding ties with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) on February 1. Iranian media circulated a message that Bagheri sent to newly appointed DPRK Army General Staff Department Chief Pak Su-Il. Bagheri advocated for greater Iranian-North Korean cooperation in confronting

unilateralism and deterring threats to global security.[18] Tehran may seek to expand military cooperation efforts with Pyongyang, particularly as it relates to Iran's ballistic missile development and nuclear program. Bagheri's calls for increased ties with the DPRK may additionally encompass a broader effort among revisionist states like Iran, Russia, and North Korea to circumvent US economic sanctions.

Information and Communications Technology Minister Issa Zahreh Pour announced on February 2 that unknown actors conducted a cyberattack that significantly impacted Iranian internet infrastructure on January 24. Zahreh Pour described the attack as "serious" and stated that it had resulted in a 10-minute internet disruption in Tehran Province.[19] Internet watchdog organizations and social media users additionally recorded significant internet disruptions in Kurdistan, Mazandaran, and Sistan and Baluchistan Provinces on January 29, possibly suggesting that the effects of the January 24 attack were long-lasting and significant. Internet disruptions recorded on January 29 could alternatively indicate that Iran was subjected to a separate and additional cyber-attack on its internet infrastructure[20]

President Ebrahim Raisi defended his administration's economic policies amidst mounting domestic criticism. Raisi toured numerous construction projects when visiting Ray, Tehran Province on February 2, ostensibly demonstrating his administration's commitment to Iran's economic development.[21] Raisi also defended the Iranian rial's depreciation, stating that "real economic activists should know that we don't have a currency problem, enemies want to sow doubts and worries into the hearts of the people." [22] Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare Minister Solat Mortazavi—a Raisi appointee—separately claimed that Raisi had fulfilled his promise of creating one million new jobs within his first year in office. Mortazavi dismissed critics of the Raisi administration's economic policies as uninformed.[23]

Axis of Resistance and Regional Developments

The Israeli Air Force conducted an airstrike on two Hamas weapons manufacturing facilities in the Gaza Strip on February 2.[24] Hamas released footage of militants launching anti-aircraft missiles at an Israeli fighter jet over Gaza in response to the airstrikes.[25] The Israel Defense Force (IDF) reported that unspecified militants fired 12 projectiles from Gaza.[26] The IDF airstrikes were likely in retaliation for an unclaimed rocket attack into Sderot on February 1.[27]

Turkish forces have likely withdrawn from a military checkpoint located in Qastoun, Syria. Turkish forces were seen removing cement barriers from the checkpoint south of the M4 Aleppo-Latakia highway on February 2.[28] The Assad regime previously set demands that the M4 highway be reopened as a condition for engaging in rapprochement talks with Turkey.[29]

The Iraqi and Saudi governments signed a memorandum of understanding to link Iraq's electrical grid to the Saudi electrical grid on February 2.[30] Iraq and Gulf Cooperation Council countries had previously agreed to integrate Iraq into its power grid in 2019.[31] Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz Salman stated that this memorandum was a component of Saudi Arabia's broader goal of bringing the "Arab world" onto the Saudi electrical grid. Iraq's Parliamentary Oil and Gas Committee announced that Iraq plans to phase out its gas imports from Iran by 2025.[32]

[1] <https://t.co/usmor0NhYr>

[2] <https://t.co/Ue8TSjMDTl>

[3] <https://www.irna.ir/news/85017739/%D9%88%D8%B2%DB%8C%D8%B1%DA%A9%D8%B4%D...>

[4] <https://diyarmirza.ir/1401/11/%D9%85%D8%B4%DA%A9%D9%84-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B...>

- [5] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-february-1-2023>
- [6] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-9-2023>
- [7] <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202302013708> ; <https://www.iranintl.com/202302015431>
- [8] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-october-18>
- [9] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-29>
- [10] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-20?m...>
- [11] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1621091543309488131?s=20&t=m63Ean...>
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https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1621228520939601920
- [12] https://twitter.com/Entekhab_News/status/1621117650746347524?s=20&t=b7F5...
- [13] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1621070355048841218?s=20&t=m63Ean...>
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- [14] https://twitter.com/Entekhab_News/status/1621117650746347524?s=20&t=b7F5...
- [15] <https://t.co/KKLI9snCHe>
- [16] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-31-2023>
- [17] https://twitter.com/Podolyak_M/status/1619647615016251392?s=20&t=OkcNyGI...
- [18] <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/570507/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%87-%D9%8...> ; <http://en.isna.ir/news/140111209779/Iranian-Chief-of-Staff-Tehran-Pyong...>
- [19] <https://t.co/qBd48Wrs02>
- [20] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1619588294999949316?s=20&t=TFkT97...>
; https://twitter.com/filterbaan/status/1619989599299969024?s=20&t=A1MtdW_... ; <https://twitter.com/netblocks/status/1619650088149880834?s=20&t=Ycw409Cx...> ; <https://haalvsh dot org/2023/01/30/11701/>
- [21] <https://president dot ir/fa/142184>;
<https://president dot ir/fa/142185>;
<https://president dot ir/fa/142193>;
<https://president dot ir/fa/142198>;
<https://president dot ir/fa/142201>;
<https://president dot ir/fa/142204>;
<https://president dot ir/fa/142205>

[32] <https://shafaq.com/ar/%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%B5%D9%80%D8%A7%D8%AF/%D8%A8%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%81%D8%B7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82->

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%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%AA-
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%D8%A8%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%88%D9%84-2025

Iran Crisis Update, February 3, 2023

Nicholas Carl, Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, Zachary Coles, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 3, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

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

The Iranian regime is in a steady pattern of escalation with prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid, which risks stoking sectarian tensions in Iran. Abdol Hamid is an outspoken regime critic who has used his Friday sermons in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province to inspire weekly demonstrations criticizing regime mistreatment of Iranian Baloch and mistreatment of protesters. Abdol Hamid began facilitating these demonstrations initially in response to the Bloody Friday event in Zahedan on September 30, in which security forces attacked protesters and killed around 100 individuals.[1] Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei responded by trying to organize an effort to discredit Abdol Hamid, according to a leaked Fars News Agency bulletin, and dispatching a personal delegation to meet with him in November 2022.[2] Both efforts failed to silence Abdol Hamid and his supporters.

Both sides have escalated further in recent weeks. The regime has sent security reinforcements to Zahedan since early January 2022 to deter and intimidate Abdol Hamid and his supporters. [3] These deployments began around the same time that Khamenei appointed Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan as law enforcement commander, although it is unclear if these events are related.[4] Regime security forces have reportedly blocked roads leading into Zahedan, conducted mass arrests, and established checkpoints throughout the city.[5] Security forces also arrested a Sunni cleric tied to Abdol Hamid in Zahedan and two other local Sunni leaders in Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province on January 30.[6] Although the regime has allowed the Friday demonstrations to continue each week with minimal security interference, likely to avoid repeating the Bloody Friday incident and further fueling anti-regime frustrations. Abdol Hamid has responded by framing himself as a grassroots leader for disenfranchised Sunni communities across Iran. He criticized the heightened security presence in Zahedan, expressed support for similar Sunni-led demonstrations in Golestan and Kurdistan provinces, and spoke to protesters directly on a street in Zahedan, during which demonstrators shouted anti-regime chants.[7]

This ongoing escalation pattern between the regime and Abdol Hamid could stoke further tensions between the regime and its Sunni population. Abdol Hamid remains capable and willing to organize protests each Friday even though the rest of the protest movement has culminated, as CTP previously assessed. The regime seeks to avoid this trajectory but has inadvertently facilitated it through its heavy handed and uncompromising response to Abdol Hamid and his supporters.

Key Takeaways

- **The Iranian regime is in a steady pattern of escalation with prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid, which risks stoking sectarian tensions in Iran.**
- **At least four protests occurred in four cities across three provinces.**
- **An Israeli open-source Twitter account tweeted a claim that the recent Israeli kamikaze drone strike in Esfahan targeted a centrifuge assembly facility.**
- **Several protest groups, including the Iranian Neighborhood Youth Union, circulated posts calling on “Turks” to publicly condemn the regime oppression of**

Iranian Baloch.

- **The Iranian-backed Fatemiyoun Division delivered a shipment of drones and rockets to the Mahin military storage facility near al Qaryatayn, Homs Province in Syria, according to anti-regime outlet Qasioun News.**

Protest Activity

At least four protests occurred in four cities across three provinces on February 3. CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province[8]

- **Size:** Medium to Large
- **Notes:** Anti-regime protesters gathered near the Makki Grand Mosque following prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid's Friday prayer sermon.

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

Galikash, Golestan Province[9]

- **Size:** Small
- **Notes:** Protesters gathered to express support for Sunni cleric Moulana Gargij.

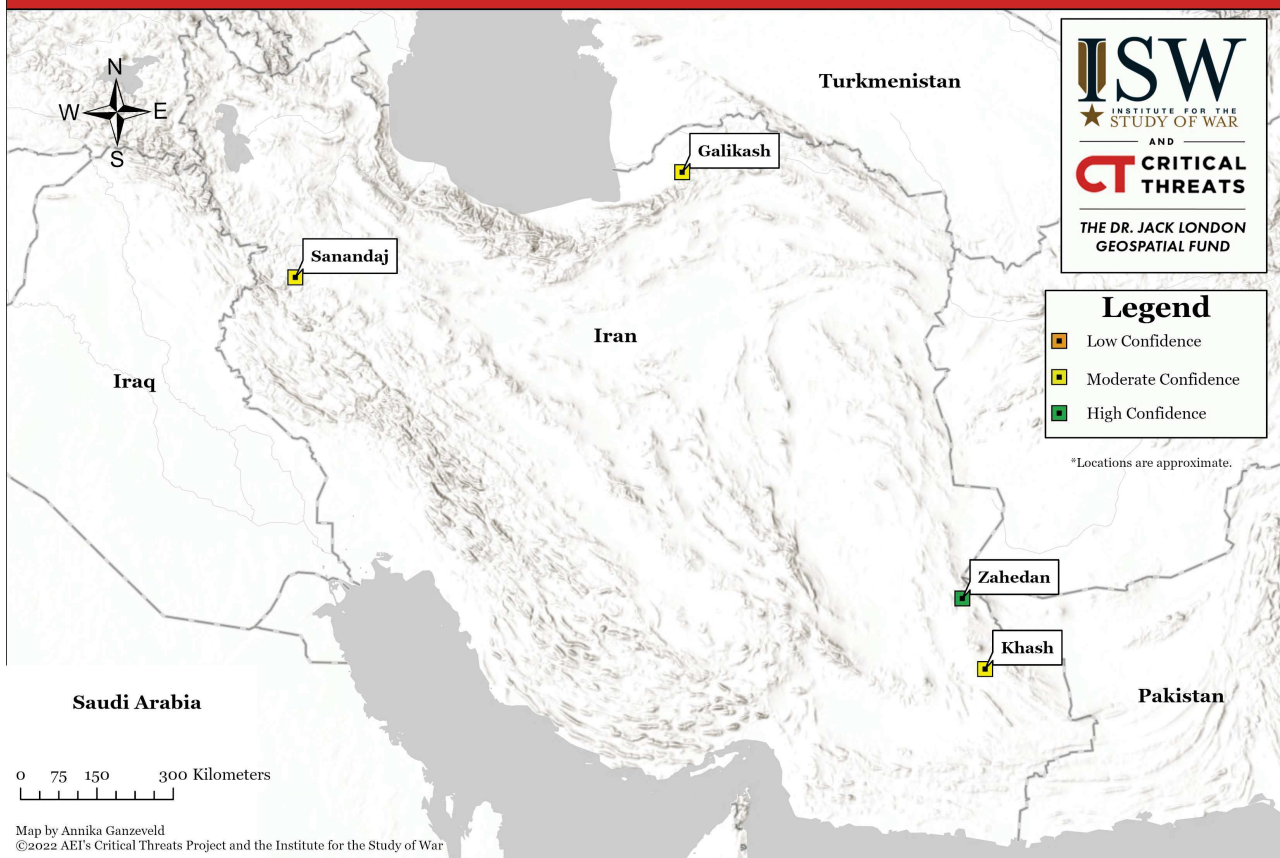
Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province[10]

- **Size:** Small
- **Notes:** Protesters were responding to the arrest of two local clerics, Ibrahim Karimi and Luqman Amini.

Khash, Sistan and Baluchistan Province[11]

- **Size:** Small

Protest Activity in Iran as of February 3, 6:00 PM



An Israeli open-source Twitter account tweeted on February 2 a claim that the recent Israeli kamikaze drone strike in Esfahan targeted a centrifuge assembly facility.[12] The social media account cited an unidentified source in the Iranian Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Ministry. CTP cannot verify these claims. Western media contrastingly reported that the targeted location was a drone and missile factory.[13] If the targeted location was a centrifuge assembly site, it would explain Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian's statement that the attack will not affect Iran's nuclear program.[14] Mossad previously conducted a kamikaze drone attack on a centrifuge manufacturing facility near Karaj, Alborz Province in June 2021.[15]

Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) Director Mohammad Eslami denied on February 2 that Iran had altered the interconnection between two cascades of IR-6 centrifuges at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant. Reuters obtained a confidential report of the International Atomic Energy Organization (IAEA) on February 1 stating that Iran had made these alterations without notifying the IAEA in violation of its Safeguards Agreement.[16] IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi made a series of public statements condemning Iran's disregard for its safeguards obligations.[17] Eslami characterized Grossi's comments as "outdated," "incorrect," and "regrettable." [18] AEOI spokesperson Behrouz Kamalvandi stated that the AEOI and IAEA resolved the issue after further coordination and dialogue, although the IAEA has made no such confirmation.[19]

Several protest groups, including the Iranian Neighborhood Youth Union, circulated posts on February 3 calling on "Turks" to publicly condemn the regime oppression of Iranian Baloch. [20] It is unclear whether these protest groups were referring to all Turkic peoples in Iran and elsewhere or a particular subgroup.

IRGC Baghiyatollah Socio-Cultural Headquarters Commander Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari discussed promoting an "Islamic lifestyle" in Iran rather than a Western one on February 3.[21] Jafari also discussed the use of traditional medicines to treat illnesses. Jafari

served as IRGC commander from 2007 to 2019 until Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appointed him to oversee soft war efforts at the Baghiyatollah headquarters. Soft war is an Iranian doctrinal term that refers to the enemy use of nonmilitary means, such as economic and psychological pressure and information operations, to erode regime legitimacy, cultivate domestic opposition, and propagate Western values in Iran. Jafari has rarely made public statements since 2019. His decision to issue one of little substance at this time is noteworthy because it coincides with the intra-regime discussion over how to manage the ongoing popular frustrations, on which CTP has reported previously.[22]

Axis of Resistance and Regional Developments

The Iranian-backed Fatemiyoun Division delivered a shipment of drones and rockets to the Mahin military storage facility near al Qaryatayn, Homs Province in Syria on February 2, according to anti-regime outlet Qasioun News.[23] The Fatemiyoun Division is an IRGC Quds Force-controlled Afghan Shia militia that has fought extensively throughout the Syrian civil war to advance Iranian interests and defend the Assad regime. The Fatemiyoun Division reportedly used three vehicles bearing a UN Relief and Works Agency logo to transport the drones and rockets. The IRGC may have instructed the Fatemiyoun Division to relocate these munitions to Mahin to store in underground facilities and thus try to secure them from Israeli airstrikes.

The Syrian Arab Army 4th Division redeployed to Daraa Province in January 2023 after previously withdrawing in 2021, according to an Amman-based outlet Syria Direct.[24] The 4th Division is reportedly concentrating its forces around Darra City and multiple villages surrounding the Syria-Jordan border. Maher al Assad—brother of Bashar al Assad—leads the 4th Division, which serves as an elite element within the Syrian security services. The Assad regime likely redeployed the 4th Division to Daraa Province to expand its control over local narcotics smuggling and possibly for counterterrorism operations, as ISIS activity has increased significantly in the area in recent months.[25]

Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian met with senior Nicaraguan economic and energy officials during a visit to the “Supreme Dream of Bolivar” project near Managua, Nicaragua on January 23.[26] This initiative reportedly includes a refinery, interoceanic oil pipeline, facilities for reception, storage, and distribution of hydrocarbons, power plants for LPG, and a petrochemical plant. Raisi administration officials have previously expressed interest in investing in the energy project.[27]

[1] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-september-30>

[2] <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-sunni-cleric-discrediting-leaked-document/3...>
<https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-13>

[3] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-6-2023>

[4] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-7-2023>

[5] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-5-2023>

[6] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-30-2...>
<https://iranwire.com/fa/news-1/113220-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%...>

[7] <https://t.co/oc7WUYDFFn>; <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1621453192612515845>

[8] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1621485628209635331?cxt=HHwWhoCx3...>

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1621475540048773122?cxt=HHwWhIC8i...>

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1621457976241397761?cxt=HHwWgoC9w...>

https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1621483107000918016?cxt=HHwWgICxoe-S...

https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1621503830021271557?cxt=HHwWisDT5...

[9] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1621538933615087618?cxt=HHwWhMC--...>

[10] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1621459430469517313?cxt=HHwWgoC-r...>

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<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1621458879044255745?cxt=HHwWgoCw9...>

https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1621483469627965440?cxt=HHwWgIC-h...

[11] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1621497924667457541?cxt=HHwWioCyv...>

https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1621517558540279811?cxt=HHwWhoDRnZvo...

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[13] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/29/drone-attack-hits-iran-amm...>

[14] [www.entekhab dot ir/fa/news/712829](http://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/712829)

[15] <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/23/world/middleeast/iran-atomic-agency-a...>

[16] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-february-1-2023>

[17] <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iaea-report-chides-iran-undecl...>

[19] <https://ir.voanews.com/a/iran-and-iaea-conflict-on-uranim-enrichment-sit...>

[20] https://twitter.com/UYI_fa/status/1621473767154241536

[21] [http://www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1401/11/13/2847277](http://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/11/13/2847277)

[22] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-february-2-2023>

[23] [www.qasioun-news dot com/ar/articles/260183](http://www.qasioun-news.com/ar/articles/260183)

[24] [www.syriadirect dot org/4th-division-redeploys-in-syrias-south-in-the-wake-of-the-us-captagon-act-and-arab-normalization](http://www.syriadirect.org/4th-division-redeploys-in-syrias-south-in-the-wake-of-the-us-captagon-act-and-arab-normalization)

[25] <https://www.mei.edu/publications/isis-back-open-southern-syria>; [https://www.newarab dot com/news/unknown-attackers-kill-syrian-regime-troops-daraa](https://www.newarab.com/news/unknown-attackers-kill-syrian-regime-troops-daraa);

[26] [http://www dot tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1401/11/14/2847523](http://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/11/14/2847523)

[http://www sharqdaily com/section-news-3/845627](http://www.sharqdaily.com/section-news-3/845627)

[27] [https://en dot mehrnews dot com/news/186523/Iran-considering-investing-in-refinery-in-Nicaragua](https://en.mehrnews.com/news/186523/Iran-considering-investing-in-refinery-in-Nicaragua)

Iran Update, February 6, 2023

Nicholas Carl, Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, Johanna Moore,
Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 6, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

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

Contributor: Ashka Jhaveri

CTP is rescoping these updates to provide more comprehensive coverage of Iran and its Axis of Resistance in addition to our usual coverage of the Mahsa Amini protest movement and supreme leader succession. We will publish these updates Monday through Friday moving forward.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has taken several public-facing measures in recent days likely to alleviate public frustrations toward the regime. Khamenei met with a group of schoolgirls on February 3, during which he celebrated the role of women of Iranian history and society.[1] Iranian state-run media widely promoted images from the event, showcasing a particularly ham-fisted regime propaganda effort. Khamenei was likely responding in part to the public criticisms of the regime mistreatment of women during the Mahsa Amini protests. Khamenei separately granted amnesty to and commuted the sentences of “tens of thousands” of protesters on January 6.[2] The regime will require eligible detainees to “express remorse,” essentially pleading guilty, according to some reports.[3] It is unclear on what charges and legal grounds the regime had detained these protesters to this point. The

Iranian constitution requires that law enforcement agencies submit to judicial authorities an explanation of the charges for each individual no more than 24 hours after their arrest, but it is unclear whether the regime has followed such standards in its detention of thousands of protesters.[4]

Khamenei may have decided to conduct this public outreach and supposed amnesty in response to senior officials urging the regime to reconcile with its people in recent days. Several pragmatic hardline officials have voiced concern over the alienation of the population and emphasized the need to maintain a constructive dialogue with them, as CTP previously reported.[5] These officials include Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei, and Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi. Ultra-hardline figures, such as various IRGC commanders, have contrastingly adopted a harsh and uncompromising position vis-a-vis the protests, framing the unrest exclusively as a foreign conspiracy and manifestation of Western hybrid warfare against the regime.[6]

The pragmatic hardliners may have succeeded in conveying to Khamenei the urgency with which the regime must address popular grievances but may have failed to convince him to take any meaningful action to address protester demands. Khamenei is likely continuing to misdiagnose the core issues driving the protests. He has indicated in recent months that he defines the unrest as a sociocultural and religious issue and seems to believe that the solution is trying to further ideologize the population.[7]

Recent rhetoric from senior reformist figures reflects the divisions within this faction. Mir Hossein Mousavi, who partly led the 2009 Green Movement, called for “foundational” change in Iran in a statement on February 4.[8] Mousavi adopted a largely revolutionary tone, discussing the need for a referendum on whether to maintain the Islamic Republic and suggested drafting a new constitution. Former reformist President Mohammad Khatami adopted a critical but slightly more tempered tone toward the regime in a statement on February 5.

[9] Khatami called for reforming various regime institutions, such as the Assembly of Experts and Guardian Council, but did not suggest any referendum on continuing the Islamic Republic. These statements thus show that there are at least four different categories into which regime officials fall regarding how to respond to the protest movement: uncompromising hardliners, pragmatic hardliners, reformists seeking to reform the political system, and reformists seeking a fundamentally new political system.

These reformist statements, especially Khatami's, may create space for regime officials to discuss possible reforms in response to the recent protests. Iranian state media, including outlets affiliated with the IRGC, reported on Khatami's argument and will thus likely draw some attention to it.[10] CTP has seen no indication that Khamenei is prepared to accept any meaningful reforms, however.

Failures of Western sanctions efforts against the provision of arms components to Iran have likely contributed to Russia's ability to bypass Western sanctions to acquire components for combat drones through military cooperation with Iran. US officials stated on February 5 that Russia and Iran are moving ahead with plans to build an Iranian drone factory on Russian soil, the second such international Iranian drone factory.[11] Iran opened a drone production factory in Tajikistan - a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member state and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) candidate - in May 2022. [12] Russia may leverage its significant economic ties to Tajikistan through the CSTO and EAEU to launder drone components or procure manufactured drones for use in Ukraine in an effort to bypass international sanctions.[13]

UK investigative group Conflict Armament Research (CAR) reported in November 2022 that 82% of Iranian Shahed-131, Shahed 136, and Mohajer-6 drones downed in Ukraine had chips, semiconductors, and other components that came from the US despite high import and export control restrictions on such components to Iran.[14] CAR also noted that the downed drones contained higher-end technological capabilities and

have a "significant jump in capabilities" compared to other systems previously observed in the Middle East.[15] Most Western-manufactured components in the downed Iranian drones were produced between 2020 and 2021, following the expiration of United Nations Security Council heavy arms sanctions against Iran in 2020.[16] Most Western companies whose components were found in downed Iranian drones in Ukraine denied directly selling components to Russia, Iran, or Belarus since the start of the war.[17] However, the representative of a Swiss manufacturing company noted that it is impossible to be completely sure that distributors of arms components do not sell components to sanctioned entities, implying that Russia, Iran, or other sanctioned states can exploit loopholes allowing them to acquire Western-produced arms components via proxy actors.[18]

Regime-affiliated social media accounts have claimed that the Artesh—Iran's conventional military—will make a major announcement, possibly related to the acquisition of Su-35 fighter jets from Russia, on February 8.[19] The regime recognizes this date as Artesh Air Force Day and has historically used the occasion and other similar ones to announce and celebrate recent technological achievements. Parliamentarian Shahryar Heydari previously stated that Iran will receive an unspecified number of Su-35s from Russia early in the next Persian calendar year (March 2023-March 2024), as CTP previously reported.[20] Tehran likely seeks these aircraft and other advanced military platforms in exchange for it militarily supporting the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Key Takeaways

- **Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has taken several public-facing measures in recent days likely to alleviate public frustrations toward the regime.**
- **Recent rhetoric from senior reformist figures reflects the divisions within this faction.**
- **Regime-affiliated social media accounts have claimed that the Artesh—Iran's conventional military—will make a major**

announcement, possibly related to the acquisition of Su-35 fighter jets from Russia, on February 8.

- CTP recorded no protest activity on February 4. CTP recorded at least one protest on February 5 and at least three protests on February 6.
- Parliamentarian Hassan Nowrouzi announced that a specialized parliamentary committee approved a controversial internet censorship bill, known as the Cyberspace Protection Bill, and will soon send it to the Guardian Council for final approval.
- Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani will travel to Moscow at some point in the next week, according to the Foreign Affairs Ministry.

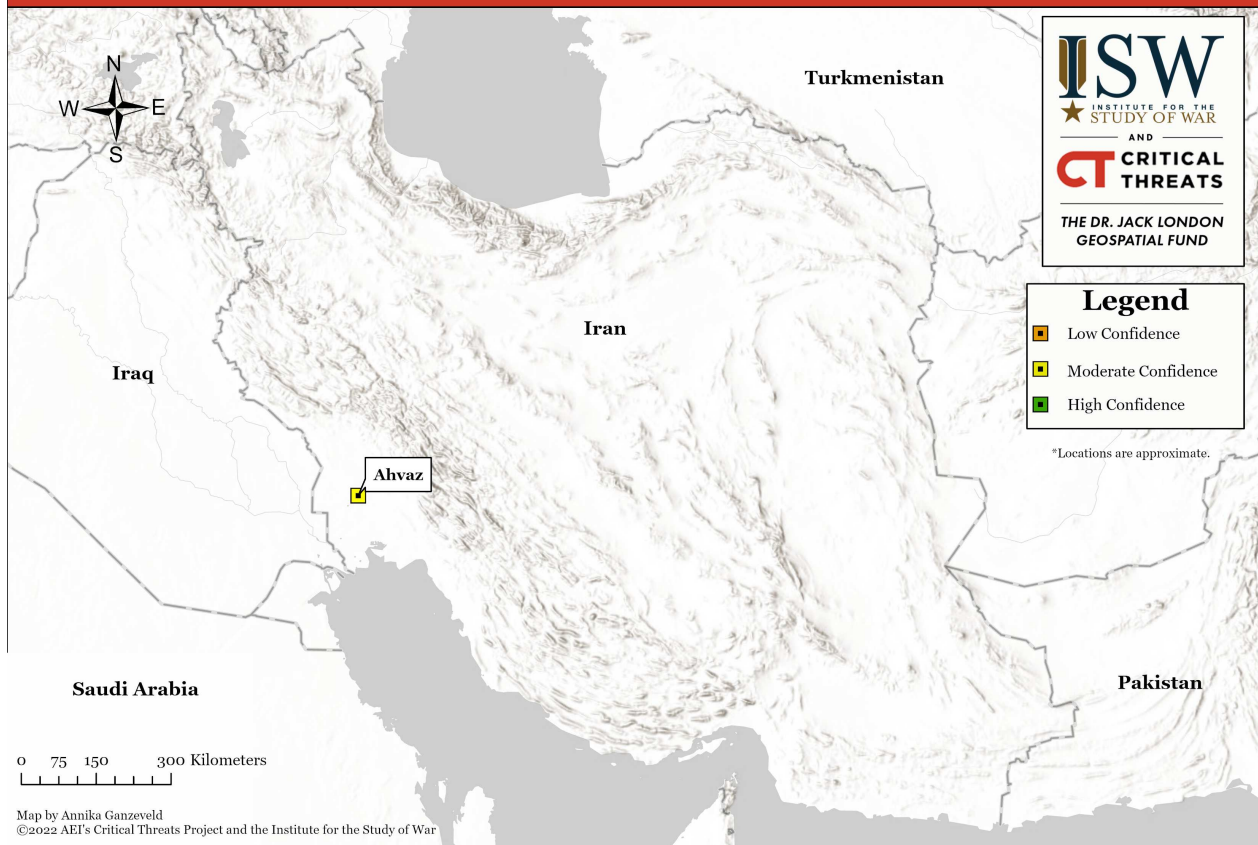
Internal Security and Protest Activity

CTP recorded no protest activity on February 4 and at least one protest on February 5. CTP assesses with moderate confidence that the one protest occurred in the following location:

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[21]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Kavian Steel Company workers on strike

Protest Activity in Iran as of February 5, 6:00 PM



At least three protests occurred in three cities across three provinces on February 6. CTP assesses with moderate confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[22]

- **Size:** Small to Medium
- **Demographic:** Farmers
- **Notes:** The farmers were reportedly trying to go to Tehran before the LEC Special Units tried to stop them.

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

Khash, Sistan and Baluchistan Province[23]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Women protesting the arrest of Sunni cleric Moulavi Abdol Majid—a close associate of Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[24]

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



Parliamentarian Hassan Nowrouzi announced on February 6 that a specialized parliamentary committee approved a controversial internet censorship bill, known as the Cyberspace Protection Bill, and will soon send it to the Guardian Council for final approval.

[25] The bill would criminalize the use of virtual private networks in Iran and transfer certain authorities to the Iranian armed forces.

[26] Nowrouzi is the vice chairman of the specialized committee that reportedly approved it. Hardline parliamentarian Jalal Rashidi—another committee member—denied Nowrouzi's claim.[27] Rashidi had previously endorsed a plan to increase regime oversight of messaging platforms and limit foreign messaging applications in August 2020.

[28] Rashidi may be trying to appease public opinion by denying the approval of the Cyberspace Protection Bill.

The Kashan Neighborhood Youth tweeted on February 6 stating that it is trying to “strengthen its field units” to attack and kill security officers.[29] The Kashan group added that protesters should contact the group to assist in organizing these units.

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani will travel to Moscow at some point in the next week, according to the Foreign Affairs Ministry.[30] Shamkhani ostensibly plans to discuss Afghanistan with senior Russian officials, although they will also likely discuss Iranian military support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine and other possible forms of military cooperation.

The Iran-Russia Media Cooperation Working Group held its fourth session in Tehran on February 6.[31] Deputy Culture and Islamic Guidance Minister for Press and Information Affairs Farshad Mehdi Pour chaired the meeting and called for joint efforts to “neutralize Western media attacks.”

Foreign Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanani stated on February 6 that the Afghan Taliban has provided Iran some of but not all its water rights to the Helmand River.[32] Parliamentarian Mohammad Sargazi claimed on January 29 that the Raisi administration threatened to expel Afghan nationals from Sistan and Baluchistan Province if the Afghan Taliban do not provide Iran water rights, as CTP previously reported.[33]

Military and Security Affairs

The IRGC replaced its local commander in Abu Kamal, Deir ez Zour Province, Syria on February 2, according to Syrian media.[34] The IRGC reportedly appointed an officer with the pseudonym Hajj Abbas to replace an officer with the pseudonym Hajj Askar. Hajj Abbas previously commanded security forces around al Quriyah, Deir Ez Zour Province. Former Syrian officer Ahmed Rahal claimed that the IRGC dismissed Hajj

Askar over his failure to protect Iranian convoys crossing the Iraq-Syria border from Israeli airstrikes.[35]

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Iran Update, February 7, 2023

Iran Update, February 7, 2023

Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Annika Ganzeveld, Johanna Moore, and Frederick W. Kagan

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CTP is rescoping these updates to provide more comprehensive coverage of Iran and its Axis of Resistance in addition to our usual coverage of the Mahsa Amini protest movement and supreme leader succession. We will publish these updates Monday through Friday moving forward.

Multiple Iranian political factions, including hardliners, are coalescing around the assessment that the regime has lost touch with its people. Former moderate President Hassan Rouhani continued to frame the deepening divides between Iranian leadership and its population as an urgent threat and suggested that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has failed to sufficiently address such divides on February 7. Rouhani described Khamenei's efforts to grant amnesty to and commute the sentences of "tens of thousands" of prisoners and arrested protesters as "a starting point." Rouhani called on the regime to pursue policies aimed at addressing protester grievances, including reviving the Joint Comprehensive Joint of Action and easing ongoing internet restrictions. Rouhani also stated that actions that damage "human dignity. . . go against national security and public interests," inverting the regime's narrative that anti-regime dissidents and critics threaten Iranian internal security.[1] Rouhani previously criticized the regime for marginalizing moderate and reformist actors in the Iranian political sphere in an interview on February 1, as CTP previously reported.[2]

It is noteworthy that Rouhani did not comment on Mir Hossein Mousavi's calls for "foundational" change in Iran. Mousavi, who partly led the 2009 Green Movement, adopted a largely revolutionary tone in his February 4 statement and discussed the need for a referendum on whether to maintain the Islamic Republic.[3] Rouhani had the opportunity to but did not reject or distance himself from Mousavi's statement. CTP has not presently observed other prominent moderate and reformist politicians dismiss Mousavi's calls for significant structural changes to the regime, which could signal implicit support for Mousavi's proposals. Mousavi's comments may alternatively embolden some moderates and reformists to continue to promote targeted reforms.

Some hardline figures, including officials close to Khamenei, have also acknowledged the deep societal divides in recent days. Hardline politician and Expediency Discernment Council member Mohammad Reza Bahonar described the Mahsa Amini protest movement as "unprecedented" in a televised interview on February 4. Bahonar warned that the regime had failed to listen to or address protester grievances and that anti-regime activity would eventually resume. [4] Supreme Leader Military Adviser IRGC Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi similarly admitted that the regime "had problems" while commemorating the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution on February 6.[5] Hardline Islamic Coalition Party Secretary General Asadollah Badamchian separately stated that the regime faced a "crisis of the republic" and called for increased political participation on February 7.[6] The explicitly revolutionary tone of the Mahsa Amini movement, during which demonstrators from across the socioeconomic spectrum protested the founding

ideology of regime, may have facilitated these hardliner acknowledgments of fissures between Iranian leadership and their people.[7]

Hardline factions are continuing to misdiagnose the root problems that have driven the recent protests, however. Badamchian proposed increased social control and indoctrination measures to bridge societal divides on February 7.[8] Health Minister Bahram Eynollahi additionally warned that the regime would close health care and medical facilities if they failed to comply with regime-imposed veiling laws.[9] CTP previously assessed that Khamenei will not offer meaningful sociopolitical concessions to protesters and has instead empowered hardline security figures to enforce mandatory veiling standards in recent months.[10]

Senior Iranian officials offered to provide humanitarian aid to Syria and Turkey following a 7.8-magnitude earthquake on February 6 amidst criticisms of the regime's poor handling of a recent domestic earthquake.[11] President Ebrahim Raisi expressed readiness to do “whatever it takes” to help Syria recover from the earthquake in a phone call with Syrian President Bashar al Assad on February 7.[12] Senior Iranian military officials additionally offered to provide humanitarian support to Syria and Turkey. State-affiliated news outlets reported that the regime sent 45 tons of medical, food, and humanitarian aid to the Damascus International Airport on February 7.[13] The Iranian Neighborhood Youth Union posted images juxtaposing Iran's humanitarian aid to Syria and Turkey with its emergency response to a recent earthquake in northwestern Iran on January 28. Citizens in Khoy, West Azerbaijan Province, where the earthquake struck, reportedly lack access to basic goods and shelter.[14] Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei sent Red Crescent Organization Supreme Leader Representative Hojjat ol Eslam Abdol Hossein Moazi to Khoy to deliver his message "of love, sincerity, and greetings" on February 7, although it is unclear what tangible aid, if any, Moazi brought.[15]

Key Takeaways

- **Multiple Iranian political factions, including hardliners, are coalescing around the assessment that the regime has lost touch with its people.**
- **Senior Iranian officials offered to provide humanitarian aid to Syria and Turkey following a 7.8-magnitude earthquake on February 6 amidst criticisms of the regime's poor handling of a recent domestic earthquake.**
- **At least two protests occurred in two cities across one province.**
- **The Artesh Air Defense Force unveiled a new underground air base and cruise missile on February 7.**
- **Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani met with Russian Presidential Assistant Igor Levitin in Moscow.**
- **The *Financial Times* reported that Tehran has substantially increased its efforts to help Moscow evade oil sanctions in recent months.**
- **Iranian leadership may seek to use unspecified debts and infrastructure projects in Iraq to circumvent sanctions.**
- **Iranian-backed Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) have deployed to Syria to provide humanitarian aid to earthquake victims**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least two protests occurred in one city across one province on February 7. CTP assesses with moderate confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Tehran City, Tehran Province[16]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Kian Tire Company workers

Tehran City, Tehran Province[17]

- **Size:** Small

- **Demographic:** Poultry workers



Protest coordinators and organizations called for demonstrations on the following date:

February 16:[18]

- **Type:** Countrywide anti-regime protests, and 40-day commemoration ceremony of executed protesters in Tehran
- **Location:** Countrywide

The Artesh Air Defense Force unveiled a new underground air base and cruise missile on February 7. Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri and Artesh Commander Major General Abdol Rahim Mousavi inaugurated the Eagle 44 Underground Artesh Air Defense Force Base, which operates fighter jets, bombers, and UAVs. Iranian media reported that the base was designed to sustain a nuclear bomb and ballistic missile attack and contains a protected radar installation, control center, and security communications facility. The Artesh Air Defense Force additionally revealed the Asef air-launched, long-range cruise missile on February 7, which can be installed on Su-24 tactical bombers. The Asef can also, presumably, operate on Su-30 and Su-35 aircraft.[19] Parliamentarian Shahryar Heydari previously stated that Iran will receive an unspecified number of Su-35s from Russia early in the next Persian calendar year (March 2023-March 2024), as CTP previously reported.[20]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani met with Russian Presidential Assistant Igor Levitin in Moscow on February 7. Shamkhani and Levitin discussed expanding Russo-Iranian economic ties and evading US sanctions during the meeting. Levitin stressed the importance of improving energy and transportation cooperation between Moscow and Tehran. Levitin also discussed completing the Rasht-Astara railway, a transportation corridor that

operates within the framework of the International North–South Transport Corridor and will connect existing Azerbaijani, Iranian, and Russian railways.[21] Shamkhani praised economic, defense, security, scientific and commercial ties Russia and Iran upon his arrival to Moscow and claimed that Russo-Iranian ties had "fundamentally" expanded.[22]

Shamkhani will also attend in the fifth session of the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan on February 8 with Russian, Chinese, Indian, and Pakistani special envoys, representatives, and national security organization chiefs.[23] Russia spearheaded the Moscow Format Consultations in 2017 to facilitate political reconciliation between the former Afghan republic and the Taliban.[24] The meeting will not include Taliban representation.

Shamkhani will separately meet with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev to discuss the implementation of Russo-Iranian economic, technological and trade projects on an unspecified date.[25] Iranian media reported that Shamkhani will discuss "issues of mutual interests" with a number of additional unspecified Russian government officials during his visit as well.[26]

The *Financial Times* reported that Tehran has substantially increased its efforts to help Moscow evade oil sanctions in recent months. Iran has reportedly used at least 16 vessels to illicitly ship Russian crude oil since December 2022, a significant uptick from the nine reported vessels that Tehran had switched to Russian transportation routes before December. The *Financial Times* added that the volume of Russian crude oil shipped on Iranian-identified vessels had surged from less than three million barrels in November 2022 to over nine million barrels in January 2023. [27]

Iranian leadership may seek to use unspecified debts and infrastructure projects in Iraq to circumvent sanctions. Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid and Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani reportedly promised to repay Iraqi debts to Iranian firms during a meeting with Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy Mehdi Safari on February 7.[28] Safari also announced that Iraq will fund construction of a new railway and highway traveling into Iraq from Iran. An unidentified source close to the US Embassy in Iraq claimed that the US Treasury's Assistant for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence presented the Iraqi Central Bank head Ali al Alaqi with evidence of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias smuggling US dollars into Iran.[29] The New York Federal Reserve placed new restrictions on several private Iraqi banks in December 2022 intended to target individuals laundering US dollars into Iran.[30]

Military and Security Affairs

Iranian-backed Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) have deployed to Syria to provide humanitarian aid to earthquake victims.[31] Iranian proxy Telegram channels heavily circulated reporting of multiple PMF convoys crossing into Syria with the aid.[32] Iranian-backed militias may have greater freedom of movement across Syria due to the earthquake and may use this freedom to consolidate their positions in locations throughout Syria, particularly northwestern Syria, that they cannot easily access ordinarily under the guise of humanitarian relief efforts.

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<https://t.me/sabreenS1/70141>

<https://t.me/sabreenS1/70137>

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Iran Update, February 8, 2023

Annika Ganzeveld, Zachary Coles, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick and Frederick W. Kagan

February 8, 2023, 5:30 pm ET

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

Contributors: Anya Caraiani and James Motamed

CTP is rescoping these updates to provide more comprehensive coverage of Iran and its Axis of Resistance in addition to our usual coverage of the Mahsa Amini protest movement and supreme leader succession. We will publish these updates Monday through Friday moving forward.

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani traveled to Aleppo City, Syria on February 8. Iranian state media reported on Ghaani's visit and published a video of him overseeing humanitarian operations in response to the February 6 earthquake that has devastated southern Turkey and northwest Syria.[1] A pro-regime social media account also posted images of Ghaani meeting with an unspecified Iranian field commander.[2]

Iranian state media does not typically acknowledge when Ghaani or other senior Quds Force officials travel to Syria. Ghaani's presence in Aleppo—and Iranian state media's anomalous coverage of the visit—suggests the Iranian regime is conducting an information operation. Iran may intend to signal its commitment to maintaining and further entrenching its military presence in northwest Syria and throughout the rest of the country. Turkish and Russia officials could interpret Ghaani's trip, and the related February 7 Popular Mobilization Forces deployment to Aleppo that CTP previously reported, as Iran's response to its past exclusion from Moscow-facilitated reconciliation talks between Turkey and the Assad Regime.[3] Turkey and Russia may also read Ghaani's highly conspicuous public appearance as an attempt to gain additional negotiating leverage for subsequent reconciliation talks. Assad Regime officials could similarly interpret Iranian actions as a message that they must consider Iranian interests before entering into any diplomatic agreement with Turkey.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei set rhetorical conditions for how regime officials should discuss divides between Iranian leadership and its people, suggesting that he may tolerate limited debates on the future of the regime. Khamenei implicitly acknowledged divisions between the regime and the Iranian people and called for national unity in a speech commemorating the Artesh Air Defense Force's pledge of allegiance to Islamic Republic Founder Ruhollah Khomeini on February 8. Khamenei stated that disagreements regarding women, religion, and generational differences were inevitable, but such disagreements should not become "faults" within the regime. The supreme leader added that the Iranian people must not permit Iran's enemies to capitalize on its internal divisions.[4]

Although Khamenei has periodically chastised regime infighting and discussed divisions within Iran's political establishment, his reference to internal fissures is noteworthy as hardline figures have increasingly acknowledged deep societal divides in recent days.[5] Hardline President Ebrahim Raisi stressed the importance of repairing schisms with arrested protesters on the sidelines of a religious meeting on February 7. Raisi reiterated Khamenei's rhetorical distinction between protesters and "rioters" and urged regime entities to facilitate the return of lawful protesters to the

fold.[6] The president of Imam Hossein University—an institution closely affiliated with the IRGC and Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics—suggested that Iranian leadership had lost touch with its people on February 8.[7] IRGC Basij Commander Brigadier General Gholam Reza Soleimani separately acknowledged “current problems” and emphasized the country-wide need to expeditiously solve such problems.[8] Supreme Leader Military Adviser IRGC Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi made a similarly oblique reference to the “problems” the regime faced on February 6, as CTP previously reported.[9]

Khamenei did not prohibit ongoing debates on how the regime should respond to the grievances that led to the Mahsa Amini protest movement in his February 8 address, but appeared to set rhetorical limits to the debates by warning that political disputes must not lead to fighting and slander. He additionally stated that “some who become revolutionaries do not remain revolutionaries,” possibly referencing Mir Hossein Mousavi’s calls for “foundational” change in Iran.[10] Mousavi, who partly led the 2009 Green Movement, adopted a largely revolutionary tone in his February 4 statement and discussed the need for a referendum on whether to maintain the Islamic Republic, as CTP previously reported.[11] Khamenei’s implicit references to and rejection of Mousavi’s statement may signal that he will not tolerate calls for significant structural or ideological changes to the regime.

Key Takeaways

- **Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani traveled to Aleppo City, Syria on February 8.**
- **Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei set rhetorical conditions for how officials should discuss responding to divides between Iranian leadership and its people, suggesting that he may tolerate limited debates on the future of the regime.**
- **At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces.**
- **The Iranian Judiciary announced on February 8 that it began releasing prisoners in Alborz, Ghazvin, Semnan, Sistan and Baluchistan, Tehran, and West Azerbaijan Provinces.**
- **Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani met with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev in Moscow.**
- **Vice President for Parliamentary Affairs Mohammad Hosseini announced that President Ebrahim Raisi will travel to China at an unspecified time in the near future.**
- **The IRGC Aerospace Force displayed a Shahab-3 missile featuring “Death to Israel” during a military exhibition in Esfahan City, Esfahan Province.**
- **Iranian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Bagheri Kani and Iranian Ambassador to Lebanon Mojtaba Amani met with Lebanese Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri in Beirut.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces on February 8. CTP assesses with moderate confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[12]

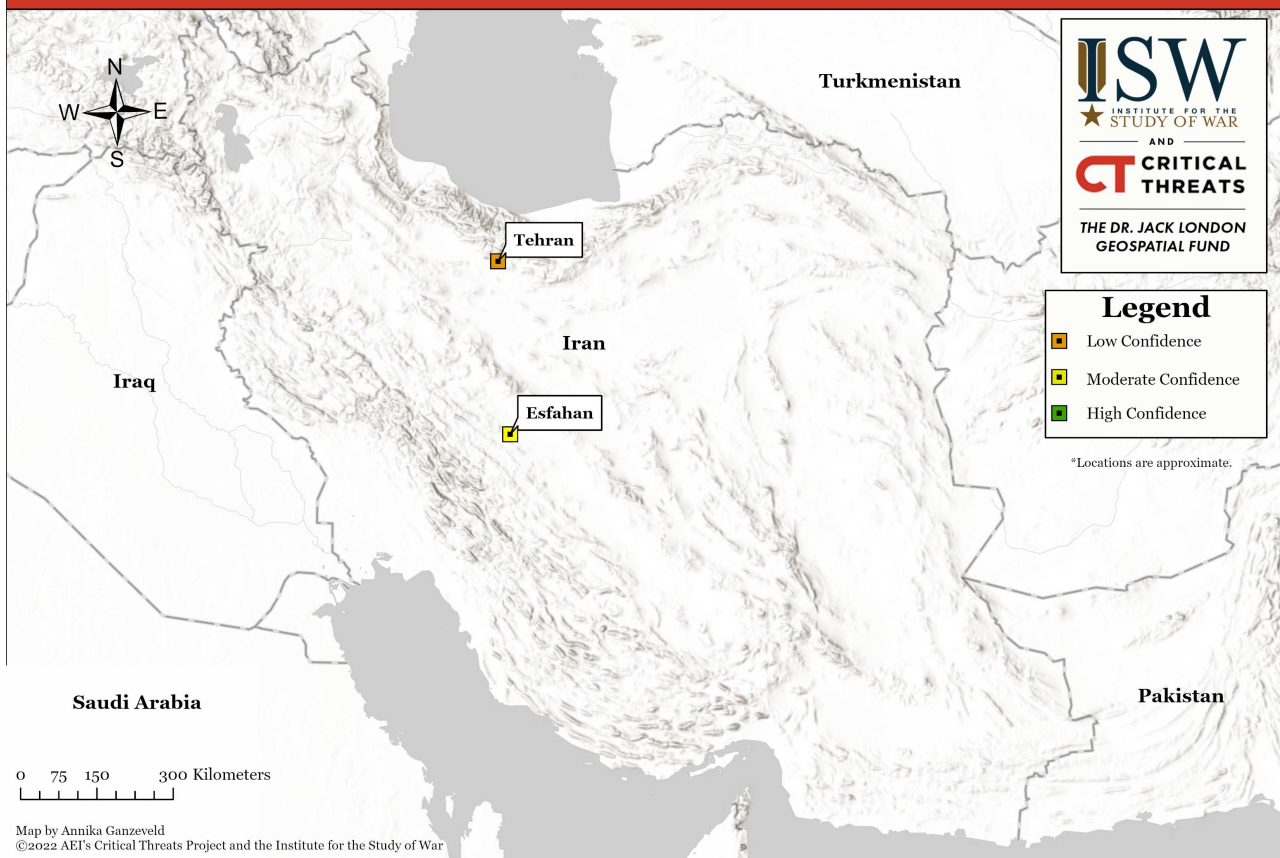
- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Farmers

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

Tehran City, Tehran Province[13]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Investors who lost money in Cryptoland, one of Iran’s largest cryptocurrency exchange platforms

Protest Activity in Iran as of February 8, 5:30 PM



Protest coordinators and organizations called for demonstrations on the following date:

February 16:[14]

- **Type:** Countrywide anti-regime protests, and 40-day commemoration ceremony of executed protesters in Tehran
- **Location:** Countrywide

The Iranian Judiciary announced on February 8 that it began releasing prisoners in Alborz, Ghazvin, Semnan, Sistan and Baluchistan, Tehran, and West Azerbaijan Provinces.[15] The announcement follows Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's decision to grant amnesty to and commute the sentences of "tens of thousands" of prisoners, including arrested protesters, on February 6. [16] Social media users and Iranian outlets confirmed that Iranian authorities had released several prominent arrested protesters and individuals who participated in or supported the Mahsa Amini protest movement on February 8.[17]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani met with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev in Moscow on February 8.[18] Shamkhani and Patrushev discussed implementing joint energy and transit agreements. Shamkhani also emphasized the importance of increasing Russo-Iranian cooperation in multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS.

Shamkhani also attended the fifth round of the Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan in Moscow on February 8.[19] Shamkhani condemned the United States' prior presence in Afghanistan and stated that Iran wants a peaceful and secure neighbor. Shamkhani also called on

the Taliban regime to actively counter terrorism and form an inclusive government that does not discriminate against individuals based on race or ethnicity.

Vice President for Parliamentary Affairs Mohammad Hosseini announced that President Ebrahim Raisi will travel to China at an unspecified time in the near future.[20] Hosseini added that Iran and China are taking steps to implement their bilateral twenty-year agreement.

The IRGC Aerospace Force displayed a Shahab-3 missile featuring “Death to Israel” during a military exhibition in Esfahan City, Esfahan Province on February 8.[21] The explicit anti-Israel messaging and the exhibition's location near the site of the January 28 munitions factory drone attack are likely warnings to Israel that the IRGC is willing to retaliate for the attack.

Iranian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Bagheri Kani and Iranian Ambassador to Lebanon Mojtaba Amani met with Lebanese Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri in Beirut on February 8.[22] Lebanese state media reported that Kani, Amani, and Berri discussed bilateral relations and regional developments. Kani emphasized to Lebanese press after the meeting that Iran stands with the Lebanese government against “[Western and Arab governments’] unjust blockade.”[23] Western and Arab governments have economically isolated Lebanon in response to Hezbollah infiltration of the Lebanese state.[24]

Military and Security Affairs

See topline section.

[1] <https://www.iribnews.ir/fa/news/3747666/%C2%A0%D8%AD%D8%B6%D9%88%D8%B1-%D9%86%D9%85%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A2%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%82-%D8%B2%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%B2%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87>; <https://twitter.com/IrnaEnglish/status/1623369899140648972?s=20&t=qCr4mm...>

[2] <https://twitter.com/MehdiRizvi123/status/1623303644136493056?s=20&t=-i1R...>

[3] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-february-7-2023>

[4] <https://www.leader.ir/fa/content/26303/%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1%DA%A9%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%88%DB%8C-%D9%87%D9%88%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D9%88-%D9%BE%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%86%D8%AF-%D9%87%D9%88%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%B4>

[5] <https://www.ft.com/content/d2796678-33d6-11e2-9ce7-00144feabdc0>

[6] <https://www.leader.ir/fa/content/26144/> ; <https://president.ir/fa/142330>

[9] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-february-7-2023>

[10] <https://www.leader.ir/fa/content/26303/%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1%DA%A9%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%88%DB%8C-%D9%87%D9%88%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D9%88-%D9%BE%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%86%D8%AF-%D9%87%D9%88%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%B4>

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[11] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-february-7-2023>

[12] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1623287654358949888?cxt=HHwWgIC95...>

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https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1623310587794010112?cxt=HHwWgMC9m...

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1623410438141579266?cxt=HHwWhMC4o...>

[13] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1623330319867731968?cxt=HHwWgICzz...>

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1623329889758679042?cxt=HHwWhMC4h...>

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[14] https://twitter.com/UYI_fa/status/1622544042734104576?s=20&t=Ex4C157bDrs... ; https://twitter.com/UYI_fa/status/1622263923046027275?s=20&t=Ex4C157bDrs... ; https://twitter.com/Javanan_mashhad/status/1622111843182313474?s=20&t=Np... ; https://twitter.com/javanane_A/status/1622578243424632838?s=20&t=ZEqS5QU... ; https://twitter.com/javanane_t/status/1622522667386474496?s=20&t=viBUIHw... ; https://twitter.com/javanane_Esf_/status/1622293548069527554?s=20&t=mMbA... ; https://twitter.com/Javanan_gilan/status/1622570915492945924?s=20&t=mMbA... ; https://twitter.com/javanane_g/status/1622310853109219328?s=20&t=cHiat5C...

[15] <https://www.sharghdaily.com/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B9%...>

[16] [www.leader dot ir/fa/content/26298](http://www.leader.ir/fa/content/26298)

[17] <https://t.co/zmxtFIW5Ph> ; https://twitter.com/javanane_Esf_/status/1623082278069862413?s=20&t=t916... ; <https://twitter.com/SharghDaily/status/1623302766167830528?s=20&t=s69OTM...>

[18] [https://www.irna dot ir/news/85024159/%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%88-%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B2%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D9%88-%D9%86%DB%8C%DA%A9%D9%84%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%BE%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B4%D9%81;](https://www.irna.ir/news/85024159/%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%88-%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B2%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D9%88-%D9%86%DB%8C%DA%A9%D9%84%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%BE%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B4%D9%81;)

[https://nournews dot ir/Fa/News/127729/%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%AA%D8%B1%DA%A9-%D8%AF%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%87](https://nournews.ir/Fa/News/127729/%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%AA%D8%B1%DA%A9-%D8%AF%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%87)

[19] <https://www.irna.ir/news/85024167/%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%B1%DB%8C%DA%A9%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%88-%D8%AE%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AC-%D8%BA%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A6%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%B4%DA%A9%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86;>

<https://nournews.ir/Fa/News/127707/%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AE%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%8C-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%A8-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%87-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D9%87-%D9%85%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%AF>

[20] <https://www.irna.ir/news/85023877/%D8%AD%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%86%DB%8C-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%82-%D8%A8%D9%84%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%AA-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-%DA%86%DB%8C%D9%86-%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%85-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA>

[21] [https://twitter.com/JasonMBrotsky/status/1623306832461586435;](https://twitter.com/JasonMBrotsky/status/1623306832461586435)

<https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/media/2023/02/08/2850243/irgc-aerospace-force-stages-exhibition-in-isfahan>

[22] <https://www.nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/593365>

[23] <https://www.nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/593365>

[24] <https://www.iswresearch.org/2021/12/irans-axis-of-resistance-in-review.html>

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Nicholas Carl, Annika Ganzeveld, Johanna Moore, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 9, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

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Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid escalated rhetorically against the regime on February 9, expressing support for reformist calls for “fundamental” change in Iran. Abdol Hamid tweeted criticizing the regime for placing reformist politicians Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi under house arrest for leading the 2009 Green Movement.[1] Abdol Hamid added that Mousavi has demonstrated that he “understands the realities of society” and urged regime officials to do so as well. Abdol Hamid was referring to the statement from Mousavi on February 4, in which he adopted a revolutionary (or counter-revolutionary in the context of the Islamic Republic) tone, calling for a referendum on whether to maintain the Islamic Republic and for the drafting of a new constitution if that referendum fails.[2]

Abdol Hamid’s statement crossed the rhetorical boundaries that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has appeared to set for internal regime discourse. Khamenei indicated on February 8 that he will tolerate limited debates on reform and how to address protester grievances but warned officials against infighting and slander.[3] Khamenei added that “some who become revolutionaries do not remain revolutionaries,” likely referring to Mousavi and indicating that he would not tolerate support for Mousavi or his positions.

Abdol Hamid may seek to gain support from a wider range of protesters, particularly those who support Mousavi and other reformists. Abdol Hamid has largely spoken to the Iranian Sunni minority to this point. But Abdol Hamid could increasingly appeal to reformist supporters and certain Shia throughout Iran by aligning with the leaders of the Green Movement. Abdol Hamid may seek to expand his support base to further pressure the regime and raise the cost the regime would likely incur if the security forces arrest Abdol Hamid or continue arresting clerics close to him.

The regime may respond by escalating against Abdol Hamid during his weekly Friday sermon in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province on February 10. The regime has sent security reinforcements to Zahedan since early January 2022 to deter and intimidate Abdol Hamid and his supporters but has refrained from interfering with the weekly demonstrations thus far.[4] Iranian political and security leaders find themselves now in a difficult position. Abdol Hamid has so clearly crossed Khamenei’s red line that the regime will appear weak if it takes no action against him. But the regime clearly fears taking action that could inflame not only Zahedan and Sistan and Baluchistan Province but also the larger Iranian Sunni minority.

Hardline officials may be inadvertently facilitating and amplifying the calls from Mousavi and other reformists for serious change. Several pragmatic hardline officials initiated the regime

conversation over how to respond to the Mahsa Amini protests and address popular grievances days before Mousavi issued his statement.[5] These officials are all close advisers to Khamenei: Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei, and Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi. These officials expressing concern over the alienation of the population opened the way to a large discussion about fundamental problems facing the regime after a number of regime officials had labored to present the protest movement as over. The dialogue these pragmatic hardliners initiated may have encouraged Mousavi to issue his statement going much further.

Iranian state media has attacked Mousavi and his statement in recent days, likely drawing further attention to his rhetoric inadvertently. Outlets affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and judiciary have attacked and tried to discredit him.[6] These attacks have included presentations of some of Mousavi's extreme views and have thereby injected those views into the hardline information space even as they seek to discredit them.

Some protest groups are attempting to generate significant protest activity throughout Iran for the first time since late January 2022, indicating that they believe they have regained the ability to do so. The Iranian Neighborhood Youth Union (INYU) and affiliated groups have called for countrywide demonstrations on February 16 to mark 40 days since the judiciary executed Mohammad Hosseini and Mohammad Mehdi Karami.[7]

CTP previously assessed that the protest movement likely culminated in January 2022 after protest groups repeatedly failed to generate turnout for planned demonstrations.[8] At least four factors likely contributed to the culmination at that time:

- Extremely cold weather and severe pollution
- Heavy securitization of some Iranian cities and towns
- Protester exhaustion and need to return to work and normal life
- Regime imprisonment of many thousands of protesters

These factors have likely subsided to varying degrees, which may have encouraged protest organizers to try to again generate significant turnout. Iran is getting marginally warmer after an unusually cold winter.[9] The regime has redeployed security forces, especially to northwestern Iran to assist with earthquake relief efforts and preempt unrest following the earthquake. [10] Protesters have had time to recuperate. And Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei granted amnesty to and commuted the sentences of “tens of thousands” of protesters on January 6, freeing many from prison.[11] The regime has begun releasing detained protesters, some of whom promptly began chanting protest slogans.[12] Protest groups may hope that the release of detained protesters will translate into much larger groups in the streets on February 16.

The protest groups calling for renewed countrywide demonstrations risk undermining themselves within the protest movement if they fail to generate turnout. The INYU statement calling for protest activity on February 16 included signatures from 50 different protest groups, suggesting that the INYU has expanded its organizational network. It is unclear to what extent these signatures reflect meaningful cooperation, however.

The recently appointed commander of Russian forces in Syria, Colonel General Andrey Serdyukov, traveled to Aleppo, Syria on February 8 and may have met with IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani.[13] Syrian media reported that Serdyukov discussed disaster relief for earthquake victims during his visit. Serdyukov previously commanded Russian forces in Syria from April to September 2019.[14] Russian military leadership reappointed Serdyukov to this position in January 2023 as part of a larger reshuffling of senior Russian military command positions prior to the initiation of the Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine.[15] Ghaani traveled to Aleppo on the same date as Serdyukov, as CTP previously reported.[16]

Key Takeaways

- **Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid escalated rhetorically against the regime, expressing support for reformist calls for “fundamental” change in Iran.**
- **Hardline officials may be inadvertently facilitating and amplifying the calls from Mousavi and other reformists for serious change.**
- **Some protest groups are attempting to generate significant protest activity throughout Iran for the first time since late January 2022, indicating that they believe they have regained the ability to do so.**
- **The newly appointed commander of Russian forces in Syria, Colonel General Andrey Serdyukov, traveled to Aleppo, Syria and may have met with IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani.**
- **At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces.**
- **Prosecutor General Mohammad Jafar Montazeri stated that over 90 security officers have died in the Mahsa Amini protest movement.**
- **President Ebrahim Raisi and Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian have tried to defend the regime’s protest crackdown and treatment of women to an international audience in recent days.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces on February 9. CTP assesses with moderate confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Yazd City, Yazd Province[17]

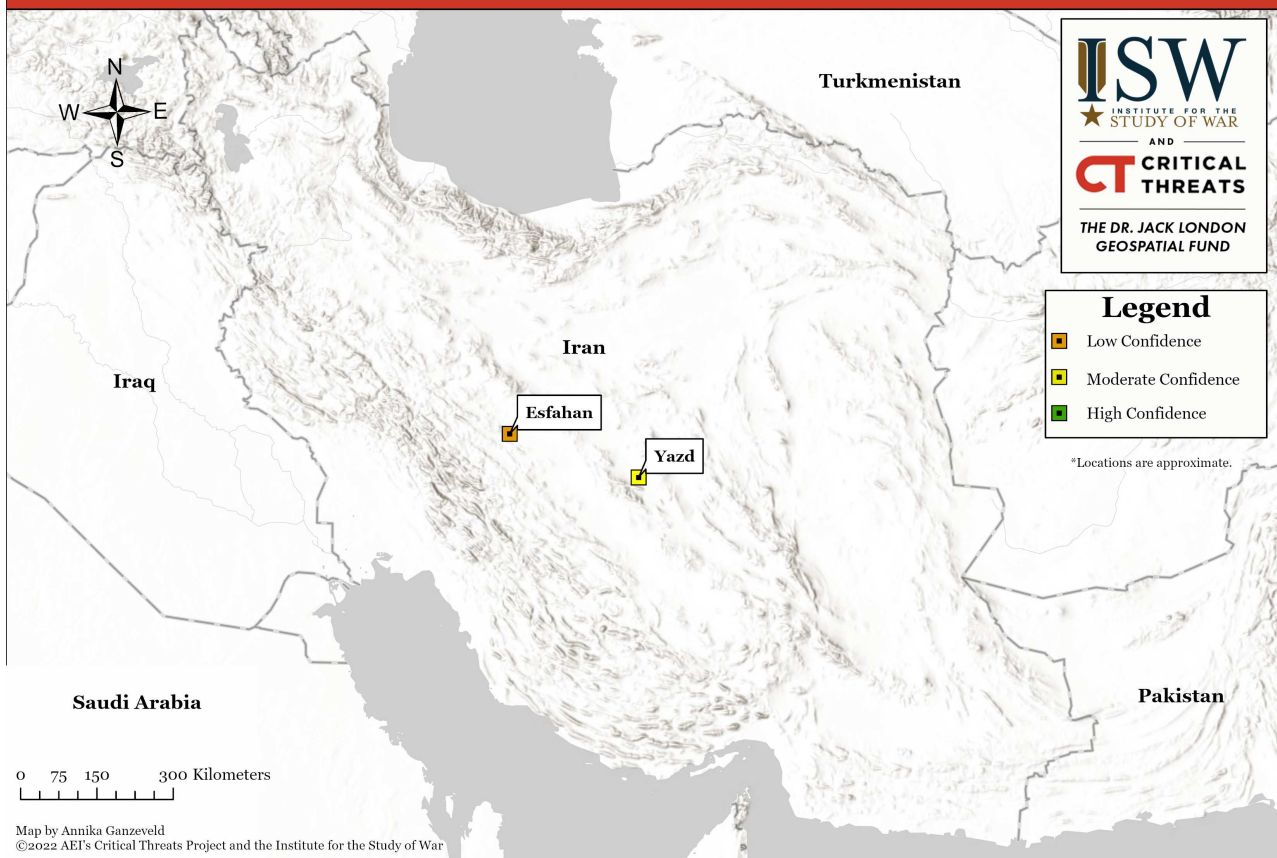
- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Yazd Tire Company workers

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

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[18]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Street vendors

Protest Activity in Iran as of February 9, 4:30 PM



Protest coordinators and organizations called for demonstrations on the following date:

February 16:[19]

- **Type:** Demonstrations, and 40-day commemoration ceremony of executed protesters in Tehran
- **Location:** Countrywide

Prosecutor General Mohammad Jafar Montazeri stated on February 8 that over 90 security officers have died in the Mahsa Amini protest movement.[20] This number is significantly greater than what Iranian media has reported to this point. Independent analysts estimated previously that around 73 security officers have died.[21]

President Ebrahim Raisi and Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian have tried to defend the regime's protest crackdown and treatment of women to an international audience in recent days. Abdollahian conducted an interview with NPR on February 8 during which he denied that security forces carried firearms while managing the recent protests. [22] Abdollahian also claimed that human rights organizations have exaggerated how many protesters died and denied that the regime has arrested journalists. Raisi separately gave a speech to a group of foreign ambassadors on February 9 to commemorate the anniversary of the Iranian Revolution.[23] Raisi used his speech to defend the regime and its treatment of women. The Raisi administration is trying to frame itself and its protest response positively to the international community, and especially Europe, likely to prevent the EU from imposing further sanctions for human rights abuses.

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

An unnamed senior advisor to Intelligence and Security Ministry Esmail Khatib stated on February 8 that “China is in line to receive 15,000 [Iranian] drones.”[24] The adviser made these remarks while discussing at a public event the interest of other countries in purchasing Iranian drones. Iranian media identified the adviser as the president of the political studies think tank in the Intelligence and Security Ministry but provided no other identifying information.

This claim is unverifiable and unreliable. CTP has seen no indications of Chinese interest in acquiring Iranian drones. There is no reason for this official to have such information in any case. The Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Ministry—not the Intelligence and Security Ministry and certainly not its think tank—is responsible for arms sales and military acquisitions.

Military and Security Affairs

Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Information Headquarters Director Muhanad al Aqabi warned on February 9 that the US may conduct airstrikes on PMF aid shipments to earthquake-affected areas in Syria.[25] Aqabi may be setting conditions in the information space to accuse the US of destroying humanitarian aid if the US or Israel conducts an airstrike on Iranian-backed arms shipments in Syria in the days and weeks ahead. CTP previously assessed that Iranian-backed militias may have greater freedom of movement across Syria due to the earthquake and may use this freedom to consolidate their positions that they cannot easily access ordinarily in northwestern Syria.[26]

[1] <https://twitter.com/AbdolhamidNet/status/1623599317771509761>

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

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

[4] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-february-3-2023>

[5] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-february-2-2023>

[6] <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/11/16/2848705>; <https://www.javanonline dot ir/fa/news/1136273>; <https://www.mizan dot news/4630157>

[7] https://t.me/fa_UYI/173; https://twitter.com/Javanan_gilan/status/1622570915492945924?s=20&t=mMbA... https://twitter.com/javanane_g/status/1622310853109219328?s=20&t=cHiat5C... <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-7-2023>

[8] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-20>

[9] <https://weather.com/weather/tenday/l/Hor+Tehran+Iran?canonicalCityId=abb...>

[10] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-31-2023>

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

[12] <https://twitter.com/IranWireEnglish/status/1623722878347665410>

[13] <https://www.sana dot sy/?p=1835047>

[14] <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20General%20...>

[15] <https://twitter.com/stephanekenech/status/1612454481592983552?t=ElbSfpvc...>

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

[17] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1623633185450893314?cxt=HHwWhICxh...>

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1623562106023866368?cxt=HHwWgMCzh...>

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https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1623630118739488769?cxt=HHwWgsC9obO_...

https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1623689610076332034?cxt=HHwWhIC9o...

[18] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1623633865246924801?cxt=HHwWgoCz9...>

https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1623643443388903426?cxt=HHwWhMCz0f_G...

[19] https://twitter.com/UYI_fa/status/1622544042734104576?s=20&t=Ex4C157bDrs...

https://twitter.com/UYI_fa/status/1622263923046027275?s=20&t=Ex4C157bDrs...

https://twitter.com/Javanan_mashhad/status/1622111843182313474?s=20&t=Np...

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https://twitter.com/Javanan_gilan/status/1622570915492945924?s=20&t=mMbA...

https://twitter.com/javanane_g/status/1622310853109219328?s=20&t=cHiat5C...

[20] www.irna dot ir/news/85023470

[21] <https://twitter.com/Alfoneh/status/1615714956070260741>

[22] <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/08/1155519326/npr-asks-irans-foreign-ministe...>

[23] <http://www.president dot ir/fa/142356>

[24] <http://www.entekhab dot ir/fa/news/714272>

[25] <http://www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1401/11/20/2850860>

[26] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-february-7-2023>

Iran Update, February 10, 2023

Iran Update, February 10, 2023

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

February 10, 2023, 4:30 pm ET

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

Contributors: Ashka Jhaveri

CTP has rescoped these updates to provide more comprehensive coverage of Iran and its Axis of Resistance in addition to our usual coverage of the Mahsa Amini protest movement and supreme leader succession. We publish these updates Monday through Friday.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force is probably reinforcing its military presence in northern Syria under the guise of providing humanitarian relief following the earthquake on February 6. IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani arrived in northern Syria on February 9—as CTP previously reported—with Quds Force official Mohammed Reza Zahedi—who formerly was a liaison to Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) and Syrian military intelligence for weapons shipments.[1] The Quds Force’s mission—covert lethal activities outside of Iran, including asymmetric warfare and special operations—is ill-suited for disaster relief operations. Their arrival of under the pretext of disaster relief suggests Iran is attempting to exploit the humanitarian crisis to entrench and expand its military presence in northern Syria, as CTP previously reported.[2]

Ghaani and Zahedi’s appearance in northern Syria follows deployments around Aleppo that also indicate the IRGC Quds Force is reinforcing its presence in the province. Syrian Arab Army (SAA) personnel replaced LH militants “distributed within the front lines of western” Aleppo on January 10.[3] Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) also formed a joint operations center with the Syrian Arab Army to facilitate engineering, medical, and logistics support in Aleppo Province, which demonstrates greater coordination between the two in northern Syria. [4] Iran-backed Fatemiyoun militants—which the IRGC-QF or LH typically oversee—also established positions in northeast Aleppo on February 3.[5] CTP has not observed LH activity since January 10 in Aleppo Province, where it has held positions since at least 2013.

Iran possibly coordinated the movement of Iranian-backed forces in Aleppo Province with Russia and Syria. The newly appointed commander of Russian forces in Syria, Colonel General Andrey Serdyukov, was in Aleppo when Ghaani and Zahedi arrived on February 9. CTP and ISW cannot confirm Serdyukov met with either of the IRGC Quds Force officials.[6] Syrian President Bashar al-Assad met with Iraqi PMF Chairman and Kata’ib Hezbollah leader Abu Fadak on February 10 in Aleppo.[7]

The senior IRGC Quds Force and PMF officials’ highly publicized appearance in northern Syria probably also is part of an information operation aimed at Israel and Turkey. Iran may aim to demonstrate to Israel its ability to operate and remain in northern Syria. Israel acknowledged the implications of this development on February 8, when an unidentified Israeli military official asserted Iran will take advantage of the February 6 earthquake to move in weapons.[8] Iran also

possibly intends to signal its presence to deter a future Turkish ground incursion by occupying tactically advantageous points near the border.

Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid implicitly called for revolutionary change to the Iranian regime and sought to broaden his appeal beyond Sunni Iranians on February 10. Abdol Hamid stated in his weekly Friday prayer sermon in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province that the Iranian population had lost hope in the regime's ability to manage ongoing economic issues and characterized recent protests as economically motivated. He criticized military officials for their overinvolvement in governance, stating "military persons should only be active in the military arena" whereas "politicians and political experts" should be engaged in the political administration of the country. Abdol Hamid also stated that "political experts" residing outside of the country should return to the country and govern Iran.[9] Although his comments echo regular calls to reverse "brain drain" within Iran, singling out the need for "political" experts to return suggests applying Western theories of governance to Iran and subverting the anti-Western ideological core of the Islamic Republic. Combating "Westoxification"—a perceived loss of Iranian and Islamic identity due to the spread of Western ideas and practices—has been a rhetorical touchstone of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his predecessor.[10] Abdol Hamid's comment conveys undermining the revolutionary nature of the regime.

Abdol Hamid likely sought to extend his influence beyond Sunni-Iranian communities during his Friday prayer sermon. Abdol Hamid downplayed religious divisions in Iran, stating that "there is no such thing as Shia or Sunni" and that the Iranian people "are one," adding "officials should not worry about a dispute between Shias and Sunnis." [11] Abdol Hamid stated in a separate part of his sermon that women became second-class citizens and Sunnis became third-class citizens following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, possibly to signal that his movement seeks to address the grievances of various oppressed groups in Iran beyond the Sunni community.

Abdol Hamid's Friday sermon was a rhetorical de-escalation from his Tweet on February 9 in which he declared explicit support for Mir Hossein Mousavi's revolutionary call for "foundational" change in Iran.[12] Abdol Hamid did not reference Mousavi in his February 10 sermon, possibly to avoid alienating segments of his congregation who oppose the controversial figure or the Green Movement he led in 2009. He may have also been preempting the possibility of protesters cohering around Mousavi, which would contain Abdol Hamid within his own movement. Abdol Hamid's ability to strategically escalate and de-escalate against the regime—and the consistent protest turnout that he generates in Zahedan—underscores the skill with which he leads anti-regime activity within his community.

Key Takeaways

- **The IRGC Quds Force is likely reinforcing its military presence in northern Syria under the guise of providing humanitarian relief following the earthquake on February 6.**
- **The senior IRGC Quds Force and PMF officials' highly publicized appearance in northern Syria probably also is part of an information operation aimed at Israel and Turkey.**
- **Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid implicitly called for revolutionary change to the Iranian regime and sought to broaden his appeal beyond Sunni Iranians on February 10.**
- **At least five protests occurred in four cities across four provinces.**
- **Several senior regime officials called on the Iranian population to participate in pro-regime demonstrations commemorating the anniversary of the Islamic Republic on February 11.**
- ***The Sunday Times* reported on February 10 that IRGC personnel were experiencing "doubt and confusion" following the Mahsa Amini protest movement, citing inside sources.**
- **Russian Ambassador to Tehran Alexey Dedov announced on February 10 that the National Iranian Oil Company and Russian state-owned Gazprom were engaged in consultations on developing of gas fields inside Iran.**

- **The Ministry of Intelligence and Security and the IRGC Intelligence Organization published a joint statement announcing the arrest of perpetrators behind the drone attack on a military munitions factory near Esfahan City, Esfahan Province on January 28.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least five protests occurred in four cities across four provinces on February 10. CTP assesses with high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province[13]

- **Size:** Medium to Large
- **Demographic:** Anti-regime protesters gathered near the Makki Grand Mosque following prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid's Friday prayer sermon.

Yazd City, Yazd Province[14]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Yazd Tire Company workers

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

Galikash, Golestan Province[15]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Protesters gathered to express support for Sunni cleric Moulana Gargij.

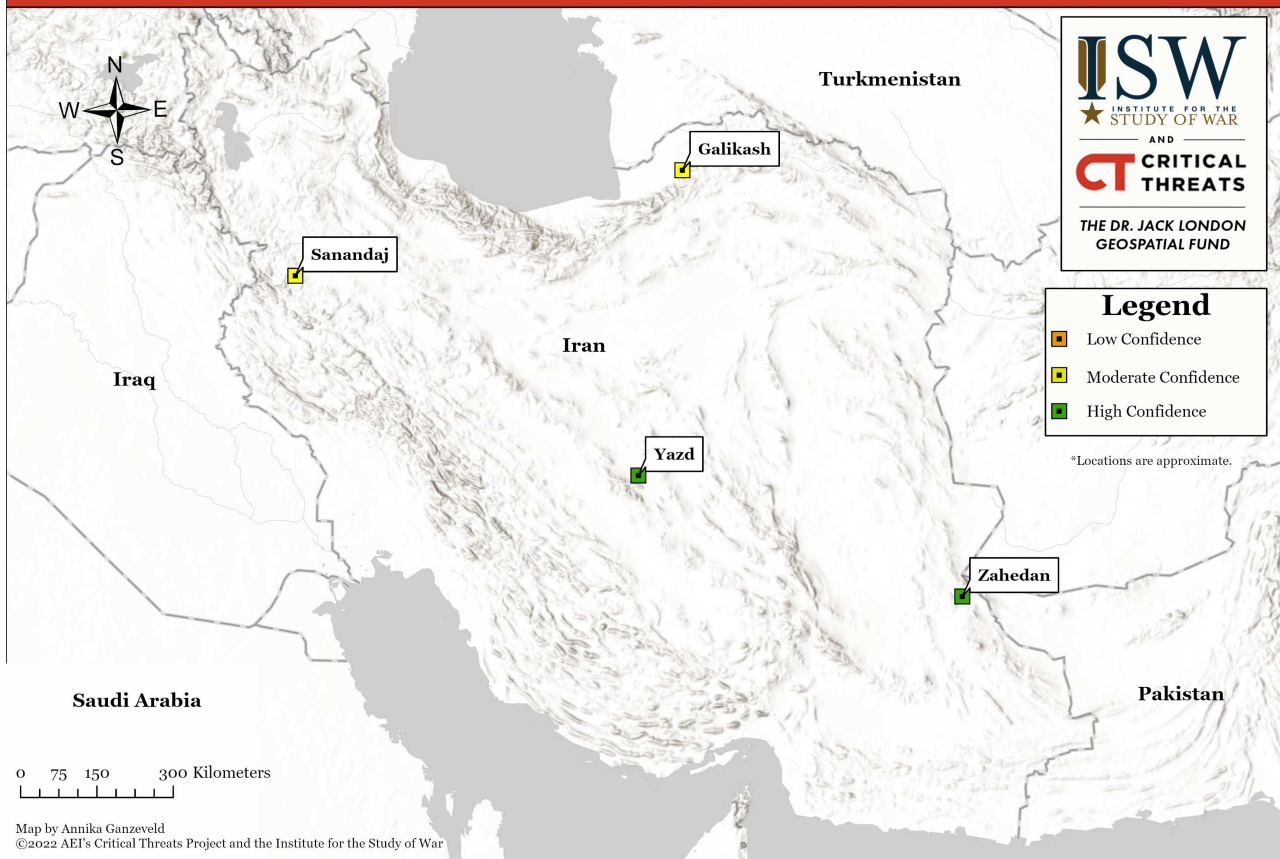
Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province[16]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Protesters gathered to express support for two recently arrested local Sunni clerics, Ibrahim Karimi, and Luqman Amini.

Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province[17]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** A group of women protested the recent arrest of Sunni cleric Moulavi Abdol Majid Mouradzahi.

Protest Activity in Iran as of February 10, 4:30 PM



Protest coordinators and organizations called for demonstrations on the following date:

February 16:[18]

- **Type:** Demonstrations, and 40-day commemoration ceremony of executed protesters in Tehran
- **Location:** Countrywide

Several senior regime officials called on the Iranian population to participate in pro-regime demonstrations commemorating the anniversary of the Islamic Republic on February 11. Ahvaz, Ghazvin, Mashhad, Qom, and Tehran Friday Prayer Leaders—clerics who are selected by and receive their messaging from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—stressed that the Iranian people need to participate in pro-regime rallies, citing Khamenei’s February 8 speech calling for “national unity.”[19] Other senior Iranian officials framed February 11 as a repudiation of the Mahsa Amini protest movement and claimed significant crowds would partake in the event.[20] A protest organization group based in Najaf Abad, Esfahan Province claimed the regime had transported nearly 8,000 Afghan nationals into Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi Province to participate in pro-regime demonstrations. It is unclear whether the group is suggesting that Afghan nationals had traveled to Mashhad from Afghanistan or from within the country.[21] Social media reports additionally claimed education officials in West Azerbaijan Province sent a letter mandating student participation in pro-regime demonstrations.[22] CTP and ISW cannot corroborate these reports, and such claims should be treated with skepticism.

Large crowds are likely to participate in pro-regime marches on February 11, which will not definitively indicate the regime has reclaimed the support it lost during and since the Mahsa Amini protest movement. Regime officials largely described February 11 rallies as a manifestation of the regime’s legitimacy, which could signal confidence in their ability to generate significant turnout. The regime’s celebrations commemorating the anniversary of the Islamic Republic remain

particularly tone-deaf following the Mahsa Amini protest movement, however, especially since the regime has yet to meaningfully address protester grievances. Ghazvin Friday Prayer Leader Ayatollah Abdol Karim Abedini stated on February 10 that individuals released on Khamenei's order to pardon prisoners should participate in pro-regime rallies to demonstrate "that they truly deserve (Khamenei's) grace." [23] Such statements from regime officials may fuel preexisting anti-regime sentiments ahead of country-wide, anti-regime demonstrations organized for February 16.

***The Sunday Times* reported on February 10 that IRGC personnel were experiencing "doubt and confusion" following the Mahsa Amini protest movement, citing inside sources. *The Times* stated that Iranian authorities had paid proxy forces like Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) significantly more than IRGC personnel, compounding low morale within the Guard. *The Times'* sources stated pay gaps between the IRGC and Iranian proxies had "become a painful difference for the IRGC forces who have been on the front line for all these months. They feel undervalued and underpaid."** [24]

Russian Ambassador to Tehran Alexev Dedov announced on February 10 that the National Iranian Oil Company and Russian state-owned Gazprom were engaged in consultations on developing of gas fields inside Iran. Dedov added that other Russian companies were interested in cooperating with Iran, particularly the South Pars gas field in the Persian Gulf. [25]

The Ministry of Intelligence and Security and the IRGC Intelligence Organization published a joint statement announcing the arrest of unspecified perpetrators behind the drone attack on a military munitions factory near Esfahan City, Esfahan Province on January 28. [26] The statement added that the arrest proved Israel's involvement without providing details or explanation and warned of a response for the attack, although IRGC spokesperson Ramezan Sharif claimed on February 9 that the regime had already retaliated. [27]

[1] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-9-2023>;
<https://twitter.com/JasonMBrodsky/status/1624117361035837443?s=20&t=f2Uk...>

[2] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-8-2023>; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-9-2023>

[3] <https://thiqa-agency.com/%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D9%8F%D8%AC%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D8%BA%D9%8A%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%AC%D8%A8/>

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[6] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-9-2023>

[7] <https://t.me/Tura313/38302>

[8] <https://elaph.com/Web/News/2023/02/1500531.html>

[9] <https://abdolhamid.net/persian/2023/02/10/13389/>

[10] <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/beyond-westoxification-...>

[11] <https://abdolhamid.net/persian/2023/02/10/13389/>

[12] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-february-7-2023> ; <https://twitter.com/AbdolhamidNet/status/1623599317771509761>

[13] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1624000397009473538?cxt=HHwWhMC-r...>;
<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1623999701656772613?cxt=HHwWioC9y...>;
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[14] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1624021542416924672?cxt=HHwWgIC-9...>;
<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1624021044460675074?cxt=HHwWhICz7...>;
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[15] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1624066615816904704?cxt=HHwWgICz9...>;
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[16] https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1623997854204264448?cxt=HHwWgIC8_...;
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https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1623992681268449282?cxt=HHwWhMC4z...

[17] https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1624065949165924353?cxt=HHwWgsC9_...;
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https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1624074027315695620?cxt=HHwWiMC48...

[18] https://twitter.com/UYI_fa/status/1622544042734104576?s=20&t=Ex4C157bDrs...

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https://twitter.com/Javanan_gilan/status/1622570915492945924?s=20&t=mMbA...

https://twitter.com/javanane_g/status/1622310853109219328?s=20&t=cHiat5C...

[19] <https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%B3%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AA-...> ;

<https://aftabnews.ir/fa/news/823736/%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AC%D9%8...> ;

<https://www.jamaran.news/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%...> ;

<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/11/21/2851434/%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7...> ;

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Iran Update, February 13, 2023

Zachary Coles, Annika Ganzeveld, Nicholas Carl, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 13, 2023, 6:00 pm ET

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The IRGC Quds Force is likely coordinating a large-scale effort to consolidate its control and influence over critical transportation routes and nodes through Syria. Kataib Hezbollah (KH)—an Iranian-backed Iraqi militia—assumed control of a key logistics chokepoint on the Iraqi side of the al Qaim border crossing on February 11 likely to facilitate Iranian weapons shipments into Syria.[1] A Syrian Twitter account reported that KH has begun expediting the transfer of such shipments across the border, likely to mitigate the possibility of an Israeli airstrike interdicting and destroying them. The Quds Force and Iranian-backed militias have expanded their presence on the Syrian side of the border in recent years.[2] Iranian control over both sides of the crossing has consolidated Iranian control of an important node on the ground line of communication that connects Iran to western Syria and Lebanon. CTP previously assessed that the Quds Force is exploiting the recent earthquake in Syria and Turkey to justify these changes in border personnel.[3]

The Quds Force is similarly attempting to expand its presence over an important transportation corridor that runs from Damascus to northern Syria. Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani traveled to Aleppo Province on February 8 and likely met with the commander of Russian forces in Syria, Colonel General Andrey Serdyukov, as CTP previously reported.[4] He later traveled to Latakia Province and met with its governor, Amer Ismail Hilal, on February 12.[5] Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) officials likely accompanied Ghaani during his time in Aleppo based on available imagery, shortly before LH sent a 23-truck humanitarian aid convoy to northern Syria on February 12.[6] Ghaani may have coordinated with Serdyukov and Hilal on the Quds Force expanding control over critical transportation routes connecting northern Syria to central Syria along the M4 and M5 highways.

Iran has long sought to consolidate control of these key transportation nodes to deepen its control and influence in Syria. Iran has secured positions along major land routes throughout the country and heavily participated in the battle to retake Aleppo from the Syrian opposition in 2016.[7] Northern Syria—especially Aleppo—is a location of significance to most major actors in Syria, including Russian forces, the Assad regime, Syrian Democratic Forces, Hayat Tahrir al Sham, and Turkey and its affiliated Syrian militias. Expanding Iranian influence in northern Syria could grant Tehran greater leverage over the Assad regime by increasing Iranian control over one of the most important economic hubs and transit corridors in Syria. Expanding Iranian influence could also facilitate military cooperation with Russia. Moscow controls the Hmeimim airport in nearby Latakia Province and uses it for various military operations and possibly arms transfers. Tehran, finally, likely seeks to expand its military presence in northern Syria to improve its defensive posture to deter or if necessary resist a Turkish ground incursion nearby.

The Quds Force is using humanitarian aid as cover for its efforts to expand its presence in key areas likely to obstruct Israeli efforts to interdict and destroy Iranian weapons shipments into and around Syria. Expanding Iranian control over multiple supply routes into and through Syria, such as the al Qaim border crossing, Aleppo airport, and Latakia port, will likely complicate Israeli efforts to identify and strike weapons shipments. Increasing the number and types of possible means of

transportation and the number of potential targets—officially claimed to be humanitarian aid convoys by Iran—can impede Israeli target selection.

Iranian leaders and state-run media promoted the narrative that the regime has popular support surrounding the anniversary of the founding of the Islamic Republic on February 11.

Iranian officials organized pro-regime rallies throughout Iran and issued statements celebrating them on February 11. Some officials claimed that turnout was significantly greater than in previous years, although images and videos of the rallies do not suggest a significant difference if any at all. [8] Regime officials separately focused heavily on the amnesty and commutation of sentences that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei granted arrested protesters on February 6. [9] Officials and state-run media framed the amnesty as a step toward reinforcing popular support for the regime. [10]

President Ebrahim Raisi announced on February 13 that he obtained permission from Khamenei to extend the amnesty and commutation of sentences to university students and celebrities. [11] It is not clear that these groups were previously excluded from Khamenei's decree or that Raisi's statement represents any meaningful change in the policy that Khamenei had already announced. Raisi may have made the statement to positively frame himself to the public as being involved in the amnesty and commutation of sentences and able to secure boons from the supreme leader on behalf of the people.

Some Iranian officials focused on discussing economic grievances rather than publicly continuing the conversation they have had in recent days about the growing alienation of the population. Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, who has previously called for limited economic and sociopolitical reforms, discussed economic frustrations with parliamentarians on February 11. [12] Raisi stated that his administration is actively working to solve the country's economic problems during a pro-regime rally in Tehran February 11. [13] The IRGC separately published a statement on February 11 in which it wrote that the regime must make effective and serious plans to alleviate economic and livelihood difficulties. [14] These regime officials are correctly acknowledging protesters' economic frustrations but ignoring at least publicly the other issues driving discontent, such as the social oppression of women, human rights abuses, and expanding censorship.

The regime meanwhile continued to crack down aggressively on violations of the mandatory hijab law, further highlighting the regime's eagerness to return to what it perceives to be normalcy. Raisi stated on February 12 that cultural and media organizations must "persuasively explain" the importance of hijab to the public. [15] Iranian media separately reported on February 13 that an LEC officer received "educational vindication" after failing to confront an unveiled women in Kermanshah Province. [16]

Former President Hassan Rouhani acknowledged on February 11 that the Islamic Republic has not returned to a normal state of affairs despite hardliner officials' efforts to return to business as relatively usual. Rouhani emphasized that the Islamic Revolution belongs to "the people" and that the revolution will end if a "power-hungry minority" pushes the majority aside. [17] Rouhani's statement is noteworthy in that he has continued to call for broader change to the regime rather than discussing economic issues as Raisi and Ghalibaf did.

Key Takeaways

- **The IRGC Quds Force is likely coordinating a large-scale effort to consolidate its control and influence over critical transportation routes and nodes through Syria. Iran has long sought to consolidate control of these key transportation nodes to deepen its control and influence in Syria.**
- **Iranian leaders and state-run media promoted the narrative that the regime has popular support surrounding the anniversary of the founding of the Islamic Republic.**
- **Some Iranian officials focused on discussing economic grievances rather than publicly continuing the conversation they have had in recent days about the growing alienation of the population.**

- CTP recorded one protest on February 11, three protests on February 12, and ten protests on February 13.
- Over 300 Iranian activists, journalists, and reformist politicians signed an open letter expressing support for Mir Hossein Mousavi and his calls for “foundational” change in Iran.
- Amwaj Media—a UK-based, anti-regime site—reported on February 12 that Iranian officials have renewed internal discussions over whether to establish a parliamentary system, citing an unidentified hardline source.
- President Ebrahim Raisi is conducting an official visit to China from February 13 to 16.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least one protest occurred in one city across one province on February 11. CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Sirjan, Kerman Province[18]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Copper miners on strike



At least three protests occurred in three cities across two provinces on February 12. CTP assesses with moderate confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Shush, Khuzestan Province[19]

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

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

Kerman, Kerman Province[20]

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

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[21]

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



At least ten protests occurred in nine cities across nine provinces on February 13. CTP assesses with moderate confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Karaj, Alborz Province[22]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Families of prisoners sentenced to death
- **Notes:** It is unclear whether these prisoners are related to the Mahsa Amini protest movement.

Ilam, Ilam Province[23]

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

Sirjan, Khuzestan Province[24]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Copper miners on strike

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

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[25]

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

Rasht, Gilan Province[26]

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

Kermanshah, Kermanshah Province[27]

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

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[28]

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

Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi Province[29]

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

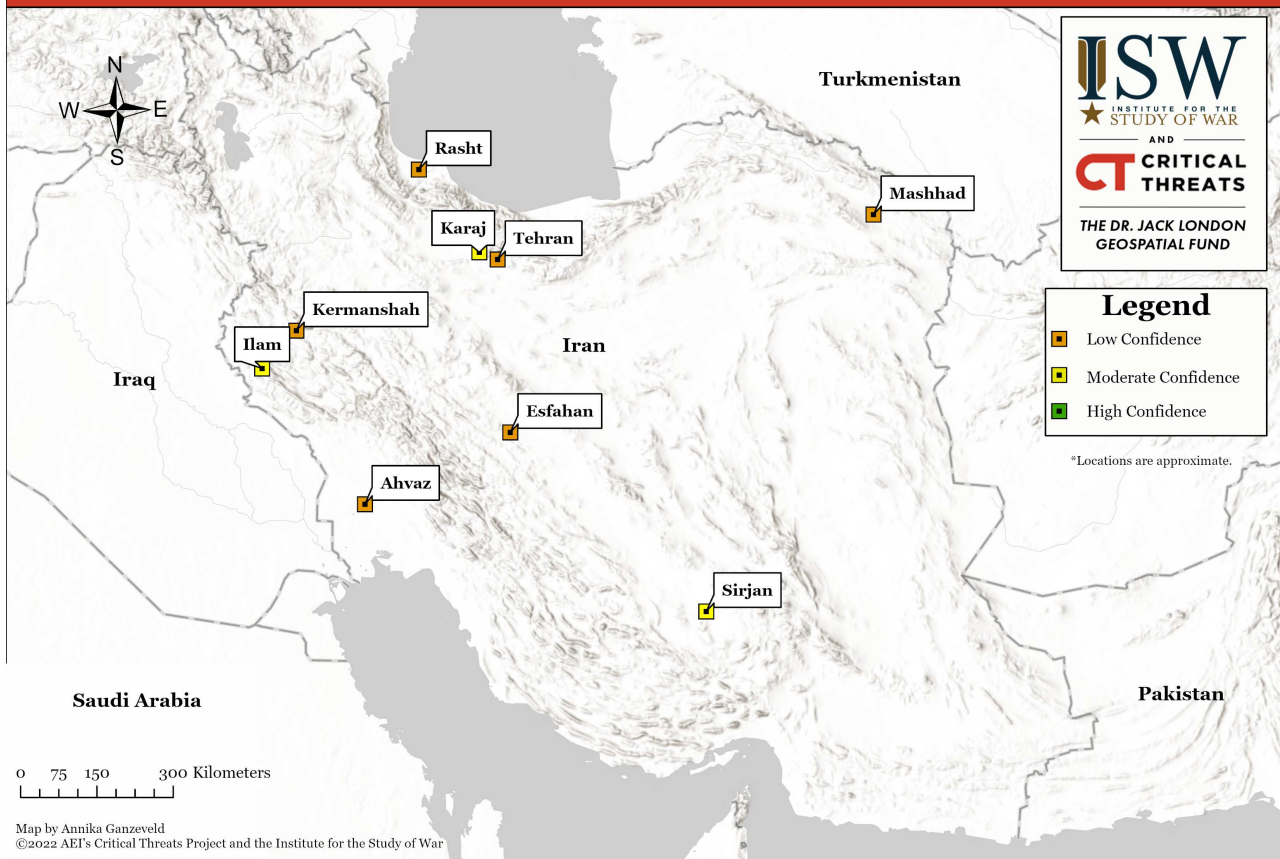
Tehran City, Tehran Province[30]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Contract workers for an oil company

Tehran City, Tehran Province[31]

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

Protest Activity in Iran as of February 13, 6:00 PM



Protest coordinators and organizations called for demonstrations on the following date:

February 16:[32]

- **Type:** Demonstrations, and 40-day commemoration ceremony of executed protesters in Tehran
- **Location:** Countrywide

Over 300 Iranian activists, journalists, and reformist politicians signed an open letter expressing support for Mir Hossein Mousavi and his calls for “foundational” change in Iran. [33] Mousavi published a statement on February 4, in which he adopted a revolutionary (or counter-revolutionary in the context of the Islamic Republic) tone, calling for a referendum on whether to maintain the Islamic Republic and for drafting a new constitution if that referendum fails.[34]

Amwaj Media—a UK-based, anti-regime site—reported on February 12 that Iranian officials have renewed internal discussions over whether to establish a parliamentary system, citing an unidentified hardline source.[35] The source claimed that senior officials have considered trying to implement such reform in the coming months but have not finalized any decision, suggesting that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has not yet approved or rejected this possibility. This internal regime discussion is not new; Iranian officials have discussed this possible reform for years. But they may have renewed this discussion in response to the Mahsa Amini protests.

The regime would need to reform the constitution to establish a parliamentary system. The constitution enshrines the president as the most senior Iranian official below the supreme leader and has no provision for a prime minister.[36] The regime amended the constitution in 1989 to abolish the position of prime minister. The supreme leader is responsible for proposing and approving constitutional changes, which then go to a national referendum for final ratification.

Agricultural Jihad Minister Javad Sadati Nejad announced on February 12 that President Ebrahim Raisi ordered grocery store chains to issue 10-to-25-percent discounts for 32 basic goods for the next three months.[37] These goods include common grocery items, such as beans, rice, and meats. The grocery stores will forgo profiting from the sale of these items, according to Sadati Nejad. The Raisi administration likely seeks to shift the economic burden of inflation onto large companies, some of which may be parastatal entities, to alleviate pressure on ordinary citizens.

Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid criticized unspecified universities in a tweet in response to reports that they fired and suspended professors for political reasons.[38] Abdol Hamid described the dismissal and suspension of professors as an attack on the scientific foundations of the country.

IRGC-affiliated Fars News Agency published articles on February 13 trying to counter Abdol Hamid's repeated criticisms of the regime and discredit him among the public. Fars News Agency published an article celebrating how the regime has empowered Iranian Sunnis since the revolution.[39] The outlet published a second article associating Abdol Hamid with the Afghan Taliban.[40] Tehran does not recognize the Taliban as a terrorist organization and has sought to cooperate with them since the fall of Kabul in 2021. Fars News Agency nevertheless intends to frame Abdol Hamid negatively to the Iranian public by portraying him as a Taliban associate and supporter.

An unidentified individual killed an LEC officer around Khoy, West Azerbaijan Province on February 13.[41] Iranian state media reported that the LEC officer deployed from Oroumیه to Khoy to support earthquake-relief efforts and promote security. Iranian state media also described the perpetrator as robber whom the LEC officer tried to arrest.

An unidentified individual stabbed a cleric and fled on a motorcycle in Tehran on February 13.[42] The cleric was hospitalized after the attack. Attacks against clerics have become increasingly frequent throughout Iran in recent months. Unidentified individuals stabbed and wounded four clerics in Qom on December 18, as CTP previously reported.[43]

Foreign Affairs and Diplomacy

President Ebrahim Raisi is conducting an official visit to China from February 13 to 16. [44] Raisi stated that he will discuss economic and energy cooperation and sign 20 agreements during the visit.[45] Raisi called for expanding strategic cooperation with China in an op-ed in the People's Daily before leaving Tehran on February 13.[46] The People's Daily is the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Raisi also met with and reported to Khamenei on his plans for the visit before leaving Tehran.[47] The following Iranian officials are accompanying Raisi to China: Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian; Economic Affairs and Finance Minister Ehsan Khandouzi; Roads and Urban Development Minister Mehrdad Bazarpash; Oil Minister Javad Owji; Agricultural Jihad Minister Javad Sadati Nejad; Industry, Mining, and Trade Minister Reza Fatemi Amin; Central Bank Governor Mohammad Reza Farzin; and Presidential Chief of Staff Gholam Hossein Esmaeili.

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Iran Update, February 14, 2023

Iran Update, February 14, 2023,

Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Zachary Coles, Annika Ganzeveld, Jonathan Baumel, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 14, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

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

Former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani is positioning himself to reenter the political arena after a period of relative absence. Rouhani promoted his administration's economic, foreign, defense, and health policies in a standing meeting with his former cabinet members on February 13 that he publicized.[1] Rouhani stressed the need to "restore the people's trust," implicitly acknowledging deepening divides between the regime and the Iranian public following the Mahsa Amini protest movement, and called on Iranian officials to consider criticisms of the regime seriously. Rouhani framed ongoing unrest as economically-motivated, and endorsed less government involvement in the Iranian economy, a return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and democratically-held elections. Rouhani separately urged his former cabinet to provide policy recommendations to the Raisi administration, stating that "it is (their) national and religious duty to convey every opinion and thought (they) have to the government. Regardless of whether we think it'll work or not." [2] It is noteworthy that Rouhani publicized his meeting with former moderate reformist officials, although such meetings are not new. Iranian media previously reported that Rouhani was cooperating with other moderate and reformists in attempt to regain political influence in early 2022.[3]

Rouhani is playing an increasingly prominent role in discussing the future of the regime following the Mahsa Amini protest movement. Rouhani criticized the regime for marginalizing moderate and reformist actors in the political sphere in an interview on February 1, after a period of relative silence.[4] Rouhani separately described deepening divides between Iranian leadership and its population as an urgent threat and suggested that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei had failed to sufficiently address such divides on February 7.[5] His rhetoric in the meeting he publicized on February 14 is relatively milder and more focused on economic problems than his previous statements. Rouhani may be tempering his rhetoric in response to Khamenei's drawing of boundaries of acceptable discourse. CTP previously assessed that Khamenei's February 8 speech indicated that he will tolerate limited debates on reform, but will not sanction discussions in line with reformist politician Mir Hossein Mousavi's calls for "foundational" change in Iran.[6]

Rouhani has additionally launched a new website and Twitter account in recent months, possibly signaling his attempt to return to the public arena.[7] Rouhani is eligible to run in the 2025 Iranian Presidential elections, although it is unclear whether he intends to do so.[8] Khamenei is seemingly continuing to permit Rouhani to publicly discuss how the regime should respond to recent protests. Khamenei could see allowing Rouhani and other moderate and reformist actor to reenter the political arena could serve as a pressure relief valve to address mounting grievances without having to fundamentally alter the regime.

Iranian officials from across the political spectrum are echoing Rouhani's February 13 suggestion that ongoing, anti-regime sentiments are rooted in economic grievances. Hardline Parliamentarian Yahya Ebrahimi stated that recent protests were economically motivated on February 14.[9] Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei separately stressed the importance

of economic discipline and transparency in a meeting with judiciary officials.[10] Reformist Islamic Republic of Iran Party General Secretary Hojjat ol Eslam Rasoul Montajabnia previously suggested that new foreign and economic policies could address protester grievances on February 8.[11] Recent statements from Iranian officials framing the Mahsa Amini protest movement as economically-motivated could suggest that these officials are also responding to Khamenei's red lines and modifying their diagnoses of Iran's challenges.

Iran-backed militias have recently withdrawn from military positions in Deir ez-Zour Province and may redeploy to Aleppo Province. Local Syrian media reported that Iran-backed militants began withdrawing from several locations near al Mayadin, Deir ez-Zour Province, Syria as early as February 6.[12] The *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights* reported that Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) militants departed facilities in Makhan and al Quriyah near al Mayadin on February 13.[13] The militants departed once Assad-regime-aligned National Defense Force and Deir ez-Zour Military Security personnel arrived to relieve them.[14] The outlet also reported on February 14 that unspecified Iran-backed militants similarly evacuated positions in eastern Deir ez-Zour City and a Shia religious shrine near al Mayadin.[15] The unspecified Iran-backed militants could be from the Fatemiyoun Brigade forces that have previously occupied positions near the shrine.[16] Local media did not report Iran-backed militants crossing into Iraq from Deir ez-Zour, suggesting the withdrawing militants likely traveled westward further into Syria.

CTP has observed multiple instances of LH, Iran-backed Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, and IRGC Quds Force personnel surging reinforcements and materiel into northern Syria since the February 5 earthquake that devastated Turkey and northwestern Syria.[17] The timing of Iran-backed militia withdrawals from Deir ez-Zour Province and recent pattern of Iran-backed military resources flowing into Aleppo Province suggest that the Hezbollahi and Fatemiyoun militants withdrawing from Deir ez-Zour are likely also headed to Aleppo. CTP will continue to update this observation as more information becomes available.

President Ebrahim Raisi's February 13 op-ed in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee's *People's Daily* likely signals high-level Chinese support for increased Sino-Iranian cooperation. The *People's Daily* is the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the CCP, and its content often reflects the viewpoint of senior party officials.[18] Articles in the *People's Daily* typically appear under a pen name and directly communicate the party line or express the party-sanctioned view of a named reporter, making Raisi's op-ed particularly noteworthy.[19] Raisi's op-ed contains multiple Chinese idiomatic, historical, and political expressions (such as the Chinese President Xi Jinping's catchphrase "community of common destiny"), suggesting Chinese co-authorship or significant post-translation augmentation. Other Chinese media reporting on Raisi's visit mirrors phrases from the *People's Daily* op-ed, further indicating Sino-Iranian message coordination.[20] Xi's continued backing of Putin since the Ukraine invasion has been controversial within China, and Xi's opponents have voiced criticism of his support for revisionist regimes like Russia and Iran.[21] It is possible that Raisi's *People's Daily* op-ed targets internal critics of Xi's foreign policy and signals his full commitment to the Iran-China relationship.

Key Takeaways

- **Former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani is positioning himself to reenter the public arena after a period of relative absence.**
- **Iran-backed militias have recently withdrawn from military positions in Deir ez-Zour Province and may redeploy to Aleppo Province.**
- **President Ebrahim Raisi's February 13 op-ed in the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee's official *People's Daily* likely signals high-level Chinese support for increased Sino-Iranian cooperation.**
- **At least six protests occurred in six cities across six provinces on February 14.**
- **The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) may be setting rhetorical conditions to escalate against Sunni protesters.**
- **The regime is likely purging dissenting academics from the Iranian educational sphere.**

- **Former IRGC Intelligence Organization Chief Hossein Taeb defended ongoing, regime-imposed internet restrictions on February 13.**
- **Iranian media outlets recirculated Parliamentarian Shahryar Heydari's January 15 announcement that Iran will soon receive an unspecified number of Su-35 fighter jets.**
- **President Ebrahim Raisi signed 20 agreements on Sino-Iranian in Beijing on February 14.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least six protests occurred in six cities across six provinces on February 14. CTP assesses with high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Ghazvin City, Ghazvin Province[22]

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

Qom City, Qom Province[23]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Parents protesting recent poisonings in Qom.
- **Notes:** Numerous students have received medical treatment for poisoning in Qom Province since December 2022. Poisoned students reported experiencing lethargy, dizziness, strange smells, and severe coughs, among other symptoms.[24] Iranian authorities have not determined the cause of the poisonings and have assigned security officials to conduct investigations of the incidents. [25]

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

Karaj, Alborz Province[26]

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

Tabriz, East Azerbaijan Province[27]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Green space contractors

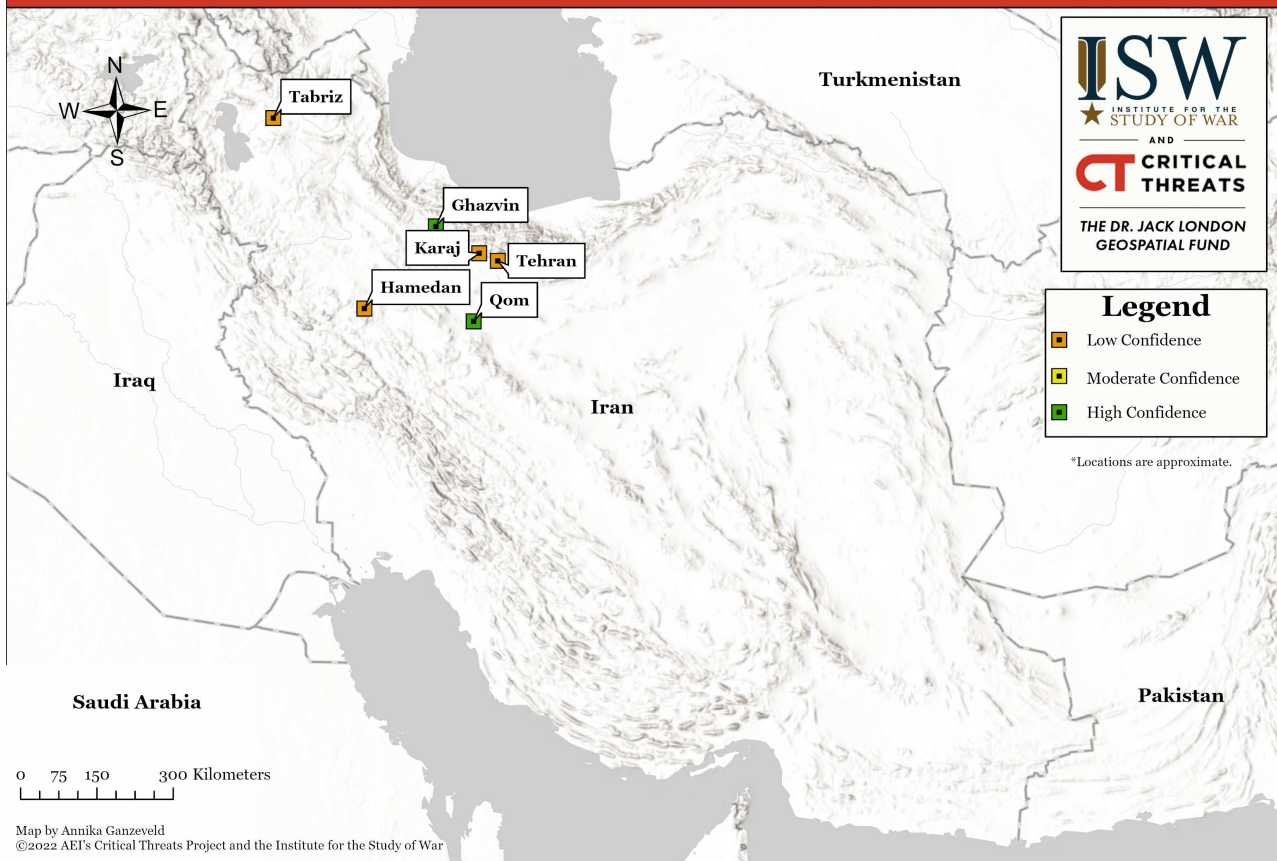
Hamedan City, Hamedan Province[28]

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

Tehran City, Tehran Province[29]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Defrauded investors of Ramek Khodro

Protest Activity in Iran as of February 14, 5:00 PM



The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) may be setting rhetorical conditions to escalate against Sunni protesters. IRGC Spokesperson Ramadan Sharif stated on February 14 that “separatist groups have reawakened” and were planning to take control of cities in Kurdistan and Sistan and Baluchistan Provinces. Other regime officials have emphasized national unity and cohesion in recent days, making Sharif’s acknowledgement of internal divisions a divergence from this narrative.[30]

Sharif is likely using the regime’s official discourse of national unity to present Sunni citizens who participate in weekly Friday anti-regime protests in Kurdistan, Sistan and Baluchistan, and Golestan Provinces as “separatists” who imminently threaten Iran’s national security and territorial integrity. Sharif’s statements could signal that the IRGC is setting rhetorical conditions to crack down on Sunni communities that continue to challenge the regime. It is unclear, however, whether non-IRGC segments of the regime support such an escalation since Sharif’s rhetoric is anomalous in the current regime discourse.

The regime is likely purging dissenting academics from the Iranian educational sphere. The *Times Higher Education* reported on February 13 that Iranian authorities had dismissed and forced a large number of academics who had criticized the regime into early retirement, echoing similar reports of mass firings within the past several weeks.[31] Senior regime officials have previously framed indoctrination efforts within the Iranian education system as a solution to divides between Iranian leadership and its youth, as CTP previously reported.[32]

Former IRGC Intelligence Organization Chief Hossein Taeb defended ongoing, regime-imposed internet restrictions on February 13. Taeb claimed that Iran’s enemies had taken control of the internet, thereby justifying the regime’s ongoing internet restrictions.[33] Information and Communications Technology Minister Issa Zahreh Pour separately stated on February 14 that the regime will provide unfiltered internet access to a list of qualifying university faculty members.

Zahreh Pour added that Iranian authorities had already provided some reporters with unfiltered internet access without providing further details.[34]

Iranian media outlets recirculated Parliamentarian Shahryar Heydari's January 15 announcement that Iran will receive an unspecified number of Su-35 fighter jets from Russia early in the next Persian calendar year (March 2023—March 2024).[35] Heydari's original statement noted that Iran is also purchasing air defense systems, helicopters, and missiles from Russia, as CTP previously reported.[36] Heydari is a lawmaker on the Parliamentary National Security and Foreign Policy Committee. Acquiring Su-35s would advance Iranian leaders' efforts to field an increasingly modern air force that is capable of conducting "offensive" operations and projecting strength abroad. The February 14 media reports do not include any new information, and it is unclear why these reports from a month ago were recirculated at this time when Raisi is in Beijing and the foreign policy focus should have been on China.

Foreign Affairs and Diplomacy

President Ebrahim Raisi signed 20 agreements on Sino-Iranian crisis management, tourism, communication and information technology, environment, international trade, intellectual property, agriculture, exports, health and medical treatment, sports, and cultural heritage cooperation in Beijing on February 14. [37] Chinese President Xi Jinping stated that China aimed to implement the Belt and Road Initiative with Iran and import more Iranian agricultural products while meeting Raisi in Beijing.[38] Ebrahim Raisi also met with the President of the National People's Congress of China, Li Zhanshu. Raisi stressed the importance of Iran-China parliamentary cooperation and expressed gratitude for Zhanshu's support in advancing Sino-Iranian relations. Raisi discussed the National People's Congress of China's role in advancing the 25-year Iran-China strategic cooperation agreement.[39] IRGC-affiliated media outlets praised Raisi's visit to Beijing on February 14 and framed increased Sino-Iranian cooperations as a solution to Iran's deteriorating economy.[40]

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Iran Update, February 15, 2023

Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, Nicole Wolkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 15, 2023, 4:30 pm ET

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Contributors: Anya Caraiani and James Motamed

Protest coordinators have likely strengthened their organizational capabilities and internal infrastructure ahead of calls for anti-regime demonstrations on February 16. It is possible that unfavorable conditions such as air pollution and inclement weather will depress protest turnout, although low participation would not necessarily indicate that these organizations will be unable to organize mass unrest in the coming months. Youth group umbrella organization Iranian Neighborhood Youth Union (INYU) has continued to circumvent ongoing internet restrictions to promote the February 16 anti-regime demonstrations.[1] The INYU has additionally employed coordinated shifts in communications tactics to combat the regime's attempts to disrupt their ability to call for protests.

The Hamedan Neighborhood Youth—an INYU-affiliated group—announced on February 14 that its members were advertising February 16 anti-regime demonstrations on Iranian banknotes, explaining that “there’s no way to stop the exchange of money.”[2] The INYU tweeted a graphic containing the bona fide social media handles of its 20 member organizations on February 15, complicating regime attempts to impersonate the groups using fake handles.[3] The INYU stated on February 15 that unknown actors had compromised the Kashan and Zahedan Youth Twitter accounts and disavowed posts the Twitter accounts had made endorsing Reza Pahlavi and claiming that the Mojahedin-e Khalgh (MEK) militant group had helped organize protests planned for February 16.[4] The Iranian regime may have hacked and released statement on the Kashan and Zahedan accounts in an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the anti-regime protest network. There is no direct evidence to support this hypothesis, which would suggest that regime or pro-regime hackers assess that pro-Pahlavi statements and affiliations with the MEK will alienate some supporters of the protest movement.

Iranian leadership is setting rhetorical conditions for reinforcing further censorship and indoctrination measures. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei implicitly endorsed limiting criticisms of the regime in a superficially conciliatory speech in Tabriz, East Azerbaijan Province on February 15. Khamenei stated that “even during the Islamic Revolution, there were some who deviated from the straight path of the revolution,” possibly a reference to Iranians who participated in the Mahsa Amini protest movement. Khamenei additionally suggested that the regime is willing to welcome protesters back into the fold of the Islamic Republic and endorsed political plurality. The Supreme Leader also stated that the Iranian public should hold the Raisi administration accountable for its shortcomings. Khamenei distinguished between “revolutionary” and “reactionary” responses to the regime’s weaknesses, however, further delineating the rhetorical limits to debates surrounding the regime’s future. Khamenei stated that “some who become revolutionaries do not remain revolutionaries,” in a February 8 address, possibly referencing Mir Hossein Mousavi’s calls for “foundational” change in Iran on February 4.[5] Khamenei also warned Iranians against “exaggerating” the regime’s shortcomings online and framed internal issues as economic in nature, suggesting that he is only willing to tolerate public criticisms of the regime if they primarily focus on the Iranian economy.[6] CTP assessed on February 14 that recent statements from Iranian

officials framing the Mahsa Amini protest movement as economically-motivated could suggest that these officials are responding to Khamenei's red lines and modifying their diagnoses of Iran's challenges.[7]

The speech commemorated the Tabriz uprising in which Tabriz residents gathered to honor individuals killed by the Shah in 1978. Khamenei travels to Tabriz annually to commemorate this incident, and his making an address there on this occasion is not inherently anomalous. The Supreme Leader's emphasis on national unity—and the prominent role that Tabriz played in the Islamic Revolution-- is noteworthy, however, given the recent explicitly anti-regime (and, hence, anti-Iranian Revolution) unrest in northwestern Iranian provinces. Khamenei's speech additionally coincides with indications that the regime is reinforcing its censorship and ideology infrastructure, reaffirming CTP's assessment that Iranian leadership views increased indoctrination as the long-term solution to anti-regime sentiments.[8] Basij Commander Brigadier General Gholam Reza Soleimani stated that the Basij would establish "over 30,000 Quranic units in Basij bases" targeting Iranian youth on February 15.[9] Supreme Leader Office Head Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani also described Friday prayer sermons and religious holidays as antidotes for the ideological risks posed by the internet on the same day.[10] Supreme Leader Military Advisor Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi similarly urged the regime to defend itself against algorithms that target Iranian citizens who are susceptible to anti-regime rhetoric on February 15.[11] Other Iranian officials have endorsed "explanation jihad"-- the practice in which pro-regime actors are obliged to explain the accomplishments of the Islamic Republic to their anti-regime counterparts-- in recent weeks.[12]

Key Takeaways

- **Protest coordinators have likely strengthened their organizational capabilities and internal infrastructure ahead of calls for anti-regime demonstrations on February 16.**
- **Iranian leadership is setting rhetorical conditions for reinforcing further censorship and indoctrination measures.**
- **At least three protests occurred in three cities across three provinces.**
- **UK-based *Amwaj Media* reported on February 14 that Iranian and Ukrainian civil and military officials have held a series of "expert and technical" meetings in Oman since November 2022.**
- **Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger Rybar claimed on February 15 that Iran and Russia were creating and sharing technology on high-precision bombs, missiles for UAVs and attack aircraft.**
- **President Ebrahim Raisi gave a speech to Chinese academics in Beijing on February 15.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least three protests occurred in three cities across three provinces on February 15. CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Bandar Abbas, Hormozgan Province[13]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Iran Shipbuilding and Offshore Industries Complex workers
- **Notes:** Workers participated in a strike, not a protest.

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

Tehran City, Tehran Province[14]

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

Tehran City, Tehran Province[15]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Disabled citizens protesting decreased funding in the budget for this segment of the population.



Hardline Politician and Expediency Discernment Council Member Mohammad Reza Bahonar expressed support for the reemergence of moderate and reformist actors within the Iranian political arena in an interview on February 15. Bahonar endorsed political activity from “benign reformists” and welcomed the prospect of former President Hassan Rouhani reentering politics.[16] CTP assessed that Rouhani is positioning himself to reenter the political arena after a period of relative absence on February 14.[17]

Foreign Affairs and Diplomacy

UK-based *Amwaj Media* reported on February 14 that Iranian and Ukrainian civil and military officials have held a series of “expert and technical” meetings in Oman since November 2022, citing informed sources.[18] *Amwaj* stated that meetings were tied to Russia’s use of Iranian-made drones in Ukraine. One source claimed that Iran’s decision to hold talks with Ukraine reflects Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s wish to resume nuclear negotiations, aligning with *Amwaj*’s previous reporting that Iranian arms sales to Russia had partially stalled talks. Iranian officials reportedly rejected evidence that Iran has provided drones to Russia in recent months, claiming that such sales predated Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. [19]

Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger Rybar claimed on February 15 that Iran and Russia were creating and sharing technology on high-precision bombs, missiles for UAVs and attack aircraft. Rybar implicitly confirmed reports of Iranian drone sales to Russia and alleged that that Russia has also agreed to purchase over 100,000 artillery and mortar rounds--especially 152 mm rounds--from Iran. Rybar stated that Iran possesses large stocks of 122mm shells for D-30

howitzers and BM-21 Grad Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS). Rybar suggested that Russia could employ Iranian proxies and partners in Iran, Iraq, and Syria and other unnamed countries to fight in Ukraine.[20] Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister Brig. Gen. Mohammad Reza Ashtiani separately confirmed a significant uptick in the production and exportation of indigenous Iranian defense products on February 15. Ashtiani claimed that Iran had tripled the number of defense items that it had produced—and quintupled the amount of defense-related exports—since March 2022.[21]

President Ebrahim Raisi gave a speech to Chinese academics in Beijing on February 15. Raisi praised China's Belt and Road Initiative and claimed that Iranian defense capabilities only aimed to confront the dominant powers.[22] Economic Affairs and Finance Minister Ehsan Khandouzi separately expressed the hope that Raisi's visit would increase Sino-Iranian economic cooperation on February 15.[23] IRGC-affiliated media outlets framed Raisi's visit to Beijing as a solution to Iran's deteriorating economic conditions on February 14, as CTP previously reported.[24]

[1] https://twitter.com/UYI_fa/status/1625861993922953216?s=20 ; https://twitter.com/Javanan_gilan/status/1625606004355244032?s=20 ; https://twitter.com/javanane_Esf_/status/1624476519333605378

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[6] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-14-2023>

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[18] <https://amwaj.media/article/inside-story-the-emerging-iran-ukraine-dialo...>

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[20] <https://t.me/rybar/43630>

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Iran Update, February 16, 2023

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Iran and its proxies may be preparing for a major effort with military elements in northern Syria. Senior officers from the IRGC Quds Force, its Iraqi proxies, the Assad regime, and possibly Russian forces have participated in a flurry of meetings throughout Syria in recent days. These meetings are noteworthy given their frequency and the seniority of their participants. Local media has framed many but not all of these meetings as ostensibly related to earthquake relief.[1] That explanation is improbable considering that most participants lead or represent military and paramilitary groups but do not include the officials who would normally be involved in delivering humanitarian assistance and because of reports that Iran is moving fighters and weapons in ostensibly humanitarian convoys. The order of the recent meetings is as follows:

- **February 8:** IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani and senior IRGC officer Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi traveled to Aleppo, Syria.[2]
- **February 9:** The commander of Russian forces in Syria, Colonel General Andrey Serdyukov, traveled to Aleppo and may have met with Ghaani and other Iranian officers.[3]
- **February 10:** Syrian President Bashar al Assad traveled to Aleppo and met with Iraqi proxy leader Abu Fadak al Mohammedawi. Mohammedawi is currently the chief of staff of the Popular Mobilization Forces and was previously the secretary general of Iraqi proxy Kataib Hezbollah.[4]
- **February 12:** Ghaani met with Latakia Provincial Governor Amer Ismail Hilal. Officials from Lebanese Hezbollah may have accompanied Ghaani.[5]
- **February 13:** Ghaani and Mohammedawi met with Assad at the Aleppo International Airport.[6]
- **February 16:** Assad met with chairman of the Popular Mobilization Forces Falih al Fayyadh in Damascus.[7]

These meetings notably did not include representatives of the Syrian or Iranian foreign ministries or of the organizations normally responsible for emergency responses, healthcare, finances, or economic activities.

CTP previously assessed that the Quds Force may be reinforcing its military presence in northern Syria under the guise of providing humanitarian relief following the earthquake.[8] Iranian-backed militants have been smuggling likely weaponry and military equipment disguised as humanitarian aid convoys through eastern Syria since the earthquake on February 5.[9] Pro-Syrian-opposition *Thiqa News* reported that five trucks with disaster relief markings arrived at a military storage warehouse in Hama Province on February 16.[10] *Thiqa News* also reported that Iranian-backed forces in more than 150 vehicles—many likely transporting military equipment and weapons—had arrived in Aleppo by February 13.[11]

It is difficult to assess at this time what these officials have discussed in their recent meetings, and CTP is considering several hypotheses. Iran and its proxies may be discussing supporting a pro-Assad-regime offensive into Idlib Province—currently held by former al Qaeda affiliate and currently Turkish-backed Islamist militant group Hayat Tahrir al Sham—amidst the Turkish government’s distraction and disrupted operations. The February 5 earthquake caused widespread destruction in Gaziantep and other areas along the Turkey-Syria border.[12] The Turkish military (and possibly Erdogan’s government altogether) may be too preoccupied with disaster relief operations to mobilize to deter a pro-Assad-regime offensive before it begins--or at least Iran and its partners may hope so. Iran may not intend to execute this potential offensive into Idlib, on the other hand, but could instead intend to use its threat to improve its own and the Assad regime’s bargaining positions with Turkey. Iran and its proxies may be alternatively discussing efforts to entrench themselves further in northern Syria, and around Aleppo specifically, to repel any future Turkish ground incursion in the months and years ahead. CTP will continue to monitor the situation for indicators of which course of action the Iranians and their proxies and partners might take.

Protest organizers successfully generated significant turnout for the planned countrywide protests on February 16. CTP recorded 15 protests in 13 cities across 12 provinces on February 16, the most significant uptick in anti-regime protest activity since CTP assessed the Mahsa Amini protest movement culminated in January 2023.

This success suggests that the factors that initially drove the protests to culminate have subsided to varying extents. These factors included extremely cold weather and severe pollution, the heavy securitization of some Iranian cities and towns, protester exhaustion and the need to return to work and normal life, and the imprisonment of many thousands of protesters. CTP previously argued that these factors were temporary and would subside with time. Weather conditions in Iran have improved marginally in recent weeks. The regime has deployed security forces, especially to northwestern Iran to assist with earthquake relief efforts and preempt unrest following the earthquake, possibly reducing the securitization of some Iranian cities and towns. Protesters have had time to recuperate. And the recent amnesty of “tens of thousands” of protesters has released many from prison, although CTP cannot verify how many protesters on February 16 were part of this amnesty. Protest groups may have realized that they could take advantage of these changing factors to drive increased turnout when planning the demonstrations on February 16. The groups have also been saying that they have been actively reorganizing themselves and did post clear and unambiguous calls for the February 16 protests in contrast with the disorganization and confusion that had marked some of their earlier failed attempts to bring demonstrators into the streets.[13]

This latest uptick in protest activity demonstrates once again that the choice to engage in anti-regime protests and acts of political defiance lies with the Iranian people. Neither the regime nor the protest groups are able to decide when protests do or do not occur. It is uncertain whether the Iranian people will choose to sustain this increased protest activity. It is clear, however, that anti-regime sentiments remain strongly entrenched among certain segments of the population.

Hardline Iranian media is continuing to give increased public attention to prominent moderates and reformists who have criticized the regime. Tasnim News Agency, which is affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), published an article on February 16 criticizing former moderate President Hassan Rouhani and the performance of his administration.[14] The article claimed that Rouhani had the lowest approval rating of any Iranian president after the revolution. Tasnim News Agency was responding to Rouhani’s recent criticisms of the regime and efforts to reenter the political space, which CTP reported previously. [15] Hardline media has similarly focused on attacking former reformist President Mohammad Khatami and reformist politician Mir Hossein Mousavi in recent days, further drawing attention to their criticisms of the regime.[16] These attacks are injecting the arguments and views of these moderate and reformist leaders into the hardline information space even as hardliners try to discredit them.

Hardliners may be intentionally giving air to moderate and reformist individuals and their views in an attempt to lure some alienated segments of the population back toward the regime. Hardliners have consolidated control over the three branches of the formal Iranian government—the

presidency, parliament, and judiciary—since 2019, locking many prominent moderates and reformists out of government and out of political discourse more generally. These actions likely antagonized many moderate and reformist supporters. Highlighting the presence of diversity across the Iranian political spectrum and the public debate among officials may be intended to reduce moderate and reformist supporters’ disillusionment with the Islamic Republic. Expediency Discernment Council Mohammad Reza Bahonar may have been articulating this theory when he endorsed political activity from “benign reformists” on February 15.[17]

Senior Iranian officials promoted the slogan “Woman, Chastity, Security” on February 14, capturing much of the regime response to the Mahsa Amini protests. Vice President for Women’s and Family Affairs Ensieh Khazali and Intelligence and Security Minister Esmail Khatib attended a conference titled “Woman, Chastity, Security”—an alternative to the popular “Woman, Life, Freedom” chant that has pervaded recent protests.[18] This alternative slogan is not entirely new and has circulated on social media to a limited extent in recent months. The use of the slogan nevertheless captures how Iranian political and security leaders have largely responded to the protests by calling for greater ideologization and using extreme force rather than addressing core protester grievances. The continued emphasis on this rhetoric suggests that the Raisi administration remains committed to this approach.

Key Takeaways

- **Iran and its proxies may be preparing for a major effort with military elements in northern Syria.**
- **Protest organizers successfully generated significant turnout for the planned countrywide protests on February 16. At least 15 protests occurred in 13 cities across 12 provinces.**
- **Hardline Iranian media is continuing to give increased public attention to prominent moderates and reformists who have criticized the regime.**
- **Senior Iranian officials promoted the slogan “Woman, Chastity, Security” on February 14, capturing much of the regime response to the Mahsa Amini protests.**
- **An unidentified individual threw homemade hand grenades at a Basij base in Mohammad Shahr, Alborz Province.**
- **The UN released a report detailing that unidentified member states assess that the de facto leader of al Qaeda, Saif al Adel, is currently living in Iran.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least 15 protests occurred in 13 cities across 12 provinces on February 16. CTP assesses with high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Karaj, Alborz Province[19]

- **Size:** Small
- **Area:** Golshahr

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[20]

- **Small:** Small

Rasht, Gilan Province[21]

- **Size:** Small

Rouydar, Hormozgan Province[22]

- **Size:** Small

Izeh, Khuzestan Province[23]

- **Size:** Small

Arak, Markazi Province[24]

- **Size:** Small

Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi Province[25]

- **Size:** Small

Tehran City, Tehran Province[26]

- **Size:** Medium
- **Area:** District 8
- **Notes:** It is unclear if protest activity reported from Haft Hoz and Tehran Pars are separate protests or represent one protest within this district. It is possible that two distinctive protests occurred.

Tehran City, Tehran Province[27]

- **Size:** Small
- **Area:** Districts 2 and 5
- **Notes:** It is unclear if protest activity reported from Sattar Khan, Sadeghiyeh and Ferdows are separate protests or represent one protest within these districts. It is possible that three distinctive protests occurred.

Tehran City, Tehran Province[28]

- **Size:** Small
- **Area:** Naft Town

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

Ghazvin City, Ghazvin Province[29]

- **Size:** Small

Javanroud, Kermanshah Province[30]

- **Size:** Small
- **Notes:** Footage shows fires lit in city street, suggesting that protests occurred on this date

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[31]

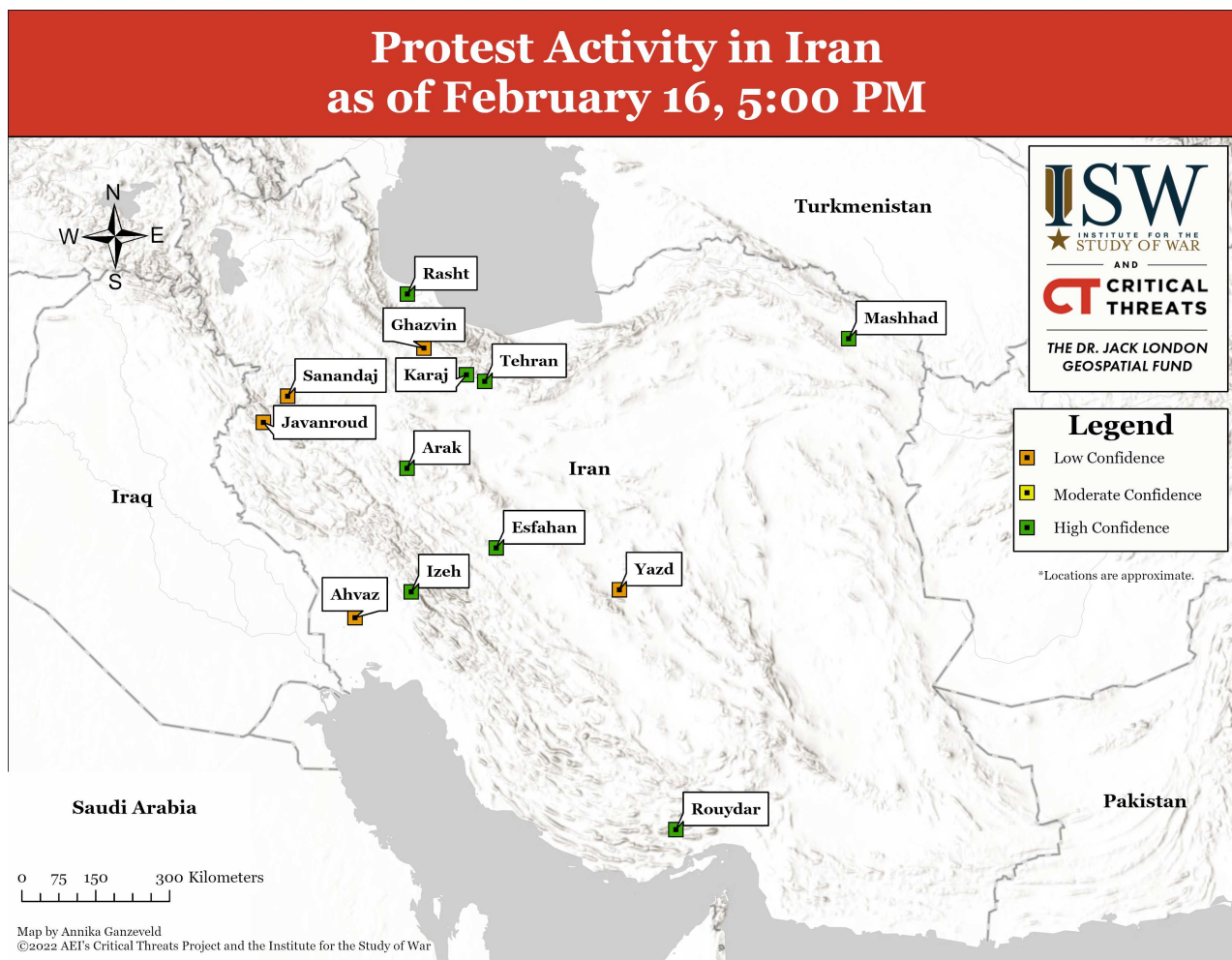
- **Size:** Small

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province[32]

- **Size:** Small
- **Notes:** Footage shows fires lit in city street, suggesting that protests occurred on this date

Yazd City, Yazd Province[33]

- **Size:** Small



NOTE: CTP defines small protests as fewer than 100 individuals, medium protests as between 100 and 1,000, and large protests as over 1,000.

An unidentified individual threw homemade hand grenades at a Basij base in Mohammad Shahr, Alborz Province on February 15.[34]

Supreme Leader Representative to Sistan and Baluchistan Province Mostafa Mahami urged locals to end their weekly protests every Friday.[35] Mahami called for calmness and security in the province and argued that the protests only worsen domestic conditions. Mahami added that the anti-revolutionary path is a “dead end” and that those who have strayed “will return to the Islamic Revolution.” This statement echoes Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s speech on February 15 in which Khamenei suggested that the regime will welcome protesters in Iran’s restive northwest region back into the fold of the Islamic Republic.[36] It is noteworthy in the context of IRGC Spokesman Ramazan Sharif’s February 14 warning that separatists in Kurdistan and Sistan and Baluchistan Province threatened the Islamic Republic, suggesting that the regime may be preparing to crack down on those areas again.[37]

Foreign Affairs and Diplomacy

The UN released a report detailing that unidentified member states assess that the de facto leader of al Qaeda, Saif al Adel, is currently living in Iran.[38] The US State Department expressed support for this assessment on February 15.[39] Adel is a former Egyptian lieutenant colonel and has been a senior officer in al Qaeda for decades. He became al Qaeda leader after the US killed his predecessor, Ayman al Zawahiri, in Kabul, Afghanistan in July 2022. Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian denied that Adel is living in Iran in response to the UN report. [40]

Likely Iranian-backed militants flew a reconnaissance drone over the Conoco Mission Support Site on February 14 near Deir ez Zor City, Deir ez Zor Province.[41] An unspecified Iranian military advisor in Syria said the Iranian-backed militants piloted the drone over the Conoco Mission Support Site to test the US air defense systems, according to IRGC-affiliated news *Tabnak Online*. [42] US forces downed the drone without incident. [43] The drone was likely a Yazdan short-range intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) drone and did not carry a payload. [44] CTP has not observed any additional indicators of Iran preparing to attack US forces. The last recorded Iranian ISR drone flight over US positions in eastern Syria occurred on September 28. [45] Iranian-backed militants did not conduct an attack on US positions in eastern Syria in the days or weeks immediately following the September 28 ISR flight. Iran may have sought to update its intelligence on US positions with the ISR flight on February 14. Iranian-backed forces have intensively smuggled likely weaponry and military equipment through Deir ez Zor Province under the guise of humanitarian aid since the February 5 earthquake.

Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah delivered a speech in commemoration of Hezbollahi “resistance martyrs” on February 16. Nasrallah announced that LH will continue humanitarian aid shipments to areas in northwestern Syria affected by the February 5 earthquake. LH dispatched a 23-truck convoy on February 12 to allegedly deliver humanitarian aid to disaster-stricken areas in Latakia Province, Syria. [46] Nasrallah also expressed solidarity with Bahraini dissidents on the 12th anniversary of the anti-government protest wave that began on February 14, 2011.

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[26] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1626252917480079361?cxt=HHwWgoC-1...>

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[27] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1626249675870199814?cxt=HHwWjICz5...>

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[31] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1626322625336057857?cxt=HHwWgoCx1...>

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[32] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1626322222624169984?cxt=HHwWgICzn...>

[33] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1626330298588725252?cxt=HHwWiCw7...>

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Iran Update, February 17, 2023

Iran Update, February 17, 2023,

Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Johanna Moore, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 17, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

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

Contributors: Anya Caraiani, James Motamed, and Amin Soltani

Note: CTP will not publish an Iran Update on February 20, 2023, for Presidents' Day. CTP will resume publishing on February 21.

Actors from across the Iranian political spectrum are publicly acknowledging Mir Hossein Mousavi's February 4 call for "foundational change" in the Islamic Republic. Mousavi discussed holding a referendum on whether to maintain the Islamic Republic and suggested drafting a new constitution on February 4, as CTP previously reported. Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid expressed support for a referendum on the "regime and system" during his weekly Friday prayer sermon in Zahedan, Sistan, and Baluchistan Province on February 17. [1] Abdol Hamid did not explicitly reference Mousavi, but his use of the term "referendum" demonstrates that he is likely seeking to keep Mousavi's idea of "foundational change" at the forefront of Iran's internal political debate.

Mousavi's political opponents have also publicly discussed his February 4 statement in recent days. Ardabil Friday Prayer Leader Seyyed Hassan Amali stated on February 17 that pro-regime marches on February 11 symbolized a "national referendum," suggesting that the regime is attempting to appropriate Mousavi's message in order to increase its own legitimacy.[2] The Reformist Front Coordination Council separately released a statement on February 16 endorsing Khatami's February 5 statement but rejecting Mousavi's "approach of amending the constitution after obtaining the opinion of the people through a referendum." [3] By publicly discussing Mousavi's revolutionary statement, these opponents are inadvertently legitimizing the very ideas they seek to undermine. This may have the unintended consequence of increasing support and traction among the Iranian people and various government officials for Mousavi's call for fundamental change.

Iran is reportedly taking advantage of humanitarian aid convoys to move rockets or missiles into eastern Syria. *The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR)* reported that Iran-backed militants deposited two weapons shipments at a warehouse in Abu Kamal and a third at a warehouse in Deir Ezzour, Syria.[4] Shipments to Abu Kamal and Deir Ezzour allegedly included munitions and unspecified logistical equipment according to SOHR.[5] Iran-backed militias transported weapons shipments in humanitarian aid convoys for earthquake victims as CTP previously reported.[6]

CTP is currently considering three possible courses of action that Iranian-backed proxies may take. Weapon shipments containing short-range munitions may be used to target US and Coalition targets in the vicinity of Deir Ezzor. CTP previously reported that likely Iran-backed militants flew a reconnaissance drone over the Conoco Mission Support Site as a test of US air defense systems, according to an unspecified Iranian military advisor on February 16.[7] Short-range rockets would also be capable of reaching this site. However, Iranian weapons shipments to Syria containing mid to long-range munitions would likely be used to hit Israeli targets. Alternatively, Iran-backed

militants may not be planning an imminent strike and instead may be taking advantage of humanitarian aid convoys to stockpile weapons for future attacks. CTP will continue to monitor developments and refine its assessment.

Iran targeted an Israeli-owned oil tanker in the Arabian Sea on February 10, according to Western reports. A BBC journalist announced on February 17 that Iranian drones had targeted the commercial *Campo Square* ship but caused no serious damage or casualties, citing a US military official.[8] The source stated that the attack involved several Iranian ships and likely a Shahed-136 drone, one of the UAVs Russia has been using in its invasion of Ukraine.[9] The February 10 attack on the *Campo Square* may be a retaliation to the Israeli drone strike on a military munitions factory near Esfahan City, Esfahan Province on January 28.

Key Takeaways

- **Actors from across the Iranian political spectrum are publicly acknowledging Mir Hossein Mousavi's February 4 call for "foundational change" in the Islamic Republic.**
- **Iran is reportedly taking advantage of humanitarian aid convoys to move rockets or missiles into eastern Syria.**
- **Iran targeted an Israeli-owned oil tanker in the Arabian Sea on February 10, according to Western reports.**
- **At least four protests occurred in four cities across three provinces.**
- **The Ministry of Intelligence and Security Deputy Hossein Hojjati stated on February 17 that approximately 30,000 security personnel participated in suppressing the Mahsa Amini protest movement.**
- **Iranian officials continued to frame increased Sino-Iranian cooperation as a partial solution to Iran's deteriorating economic conditions.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least four protests occurred in four cities across three provinces on February 17. CTP assesses with high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Galikash, Golestan Province[10]

- **Size:** Small

Khash, Sistan and Baluchistan Province[11]

- **Size:** Small

Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province[12]

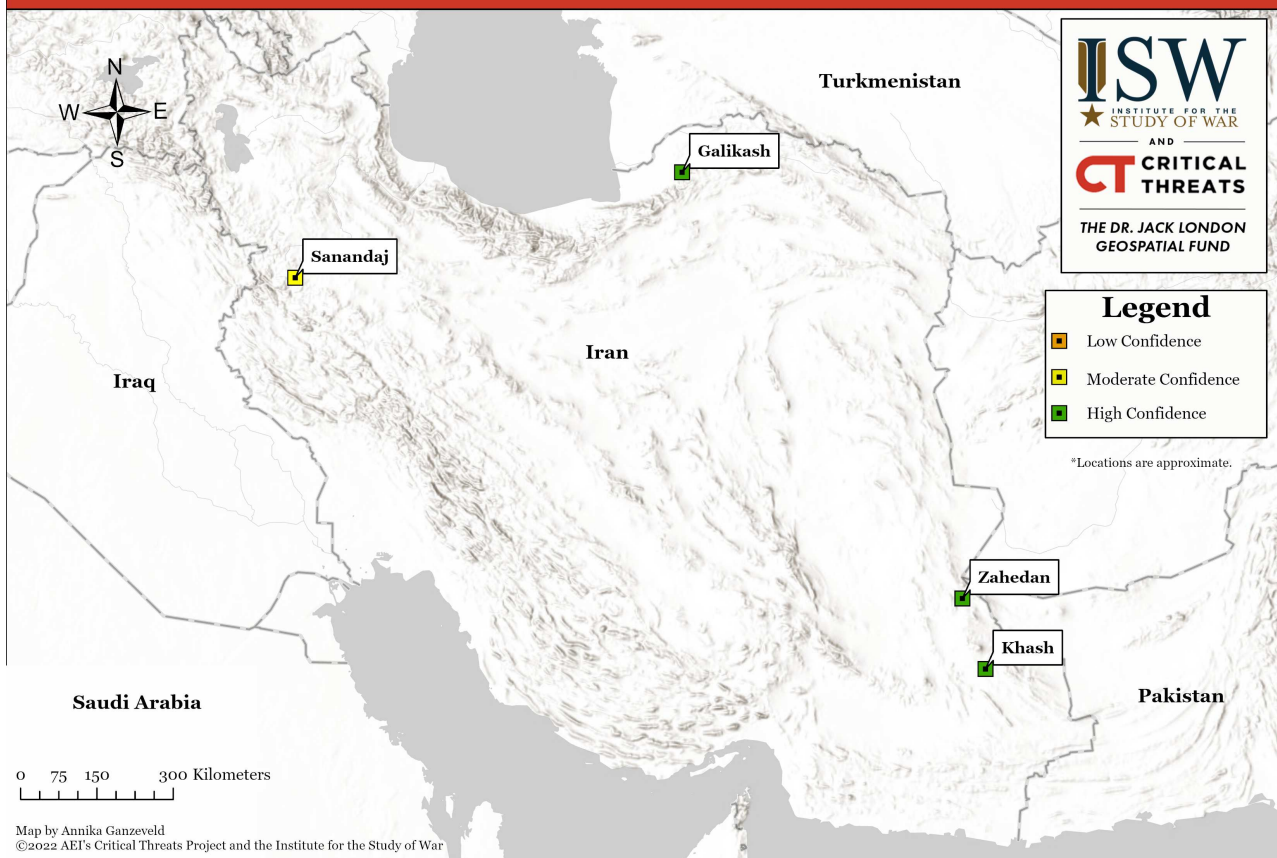
- **Size:** Medium
- **Notes:** Protests follow Prominent Sunni Cleric Abdol Hamid's weekly Friday prayer sermon

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

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province[13]

- **Size:** Small

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



Senior military officials highlighted Iranian naval and air defense capabilities on February 17. Artesh Air Defense Force Commander Brigadier General Alireza Sabahi Fard assessed the combat readiness of air defense units in the vicinity of the Persian Gulf. Sabahi Fard stated that the Artesh Air Defense Force had adopted a strategy to confront threats to Iranian security without providing further details.[14] Artesh Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Irani separately warned that Iran would not tolerate “the slightest damage” to Iranian ships and discussed advances in Iranian naval capabilities.[15] Law Enforcement Command Border Guard Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Ali Goudarzi additionally noted that Iran was continuing to strengthen its drone and naval capabilities.[16]

The Ministry of Intelligence and Security Deputy Hossein Hojjati stated on February 17 that approximately 30,000 security personnel participated in suppressing the Mahsa Amini protest movement.[17] Prosecutor General Mohammad Jafar Montazeri previously stated on February 9 that over 90 security officers had died as a result of recent unrest, as CTP previously reported.[18]

An Iranian military court sentenced former Chabahar, Sistan, and Baluchistan Province Law Enforcement Commander Ebrahim Kochak Zai to 15 months in prison for “creating an atmosphere of skepticism towards the police” on February 17.[19] The court permanently discharged Zai from his duties. Protests erupted in Chabahar, Sistan, and Baluchistan Province in late September 2022 following reports that Zai had raped a 15-year-old female resident.[20]

Foreign Affairs and Diplomacy

Iranian officials continued to frame increased Sino-Iranian cooperation as a partial solution to Iran’s deteriorating economic conditions on February 17. Foreign Affairs Ministry Economic Diplomacy Deputy Mehdi Safari and Trade Development Organization Head Alireza Peyman Pak announced that President Ebrahim Raisi had signed 19 additional agreements and contracts on Sino-Chinese economic cooperation in recent days. Safari and Peyman Pak noted that the 19

agreements and contracts amounted to 3.5 billion US dollars and were separate from the 20 agreements that Raisi signed in Beijing on February 14.[21] Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian separately described the agreements as “a new horizon” on the same date.[22]

External Security and Military Affairs

US and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) targeted and killed ISIS leader Hamza al-Homsi in a helicopter raid in Al-Hajna village, Deir Ezzor on February 16. The mission resulted in the injury of four US service members and one working dog. The US and SDF did not kill or capture other ISIS members.[23]

[1] <https://abdolhamid dot net/persian/2023/02/17/13425/>

[2] <https://www dot entekhab dot ir/fa/news/715451/%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A8%DB%8C%D9%84-%D9%87%D8%B1%DA%86%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%DB%8C%D9%84-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86-%DA%A9%D9%85%DA%A9-%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%AB%D9%87-%D8%B2%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%AA%D8%B1%DA%A9%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A2%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%87-%D9%87%D9%85%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%AF%D8%B2%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%84%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%B1%DA%A9%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A2%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D9%86%D8%B2%D9%86%D9%86%D8%AF-%D9%88-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%81-%D8%A2%D9%86-%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%DA%A9%D9%86%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%DB%8C%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%B5%D9%85%DB%8C%D9%85-%DA%AF%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%87%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A7%DB%8C%DA%AF%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%A7-%DB%8C%DA%A9-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%B4-%DB%B5-%D9%87%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B2%DB%8C-%DA%A9%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%86-%D9%87%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%88%DB%8C-%D8%AE%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%85%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D8%A2%DB%8C%D8%AF>

[3] <http://www dot ensafnews dot com/397648/%D9%88%D8%A7%DA%A9%D9%86%D8%B4-%D8%AC%D8%A8%D9%87%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C%D9%87-%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%B1/>

[4] <https://www dot syriahr.com/en/288858/>

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[5] [https://www dot syriahr.com/en/288858/](https://www.dot.syriahr.com/en/288858/)

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[9] <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-owned-tanker-attacked-by-iranian-d...>

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[14] <https://t.co/qdToDsxxg26>

[15] <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/11/28/2852323/>- در یادار-ایرانی-اجازه-نمی-دهیم-کوچک-ترین-خدشه-ای-به-امنیت-کشتی-هایمان-وارد-شود

[16] <https://www.irna.ir/news/85033101/%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%AA%...>

[23] <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/...> ; <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-leader-killed-us-troops-wounded-in-ne-...> ; <https://www.newsweek.com/us-partners-kill-isis-leader-syria-raid-4-soldi...>

Iran Update, February 21, 2023

Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Nicholas Carl, Annika Ganzeveld, Zachary Coles, Johanna Moore, and

Frederick W. Kagan

February 21, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

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

Contributors: Anya Caraiani and James Motamed

The Mahsa Amini protest movement has likely entered a new phase, although it is unclear what pattern of anti-regime activity will characterize this new phase. Protest activity has increased substantially in recent days, including at least 15 protests on February 16, 12 protests on February 19, 14 on February 20, and seven on February 21.[1] This increased turnout is the most that CTP has recorded since assessing that the Mahsa Amini movement culminated in January 2023. This renewed protest activity could indicate that the movement has regained momentum after what was in effect an operational pause. It is unclear if protest activity in this new phase will resemble the patterns that CTP first observed in the Mahsa Amini movement or what form acts of anti-regime defiance will take. It is also unclear how long this uptick in protest activity will last.

Western media outlets have reported lingering discontent throughout the Iranian population, corroborating CTP's prior assessment that conditions remain present for the resumption of significant anti-regime activity.[2] The *Washington Post* reported on February 19 that protesters in Saghez, Kurdistan Province—the birthplace of Mahsa Amini and site of significant anti-regime activity in recent months—are preparing for further unrest. Protesters reportedly stated that the regime has failed to address their grievances and that they have begun stockpiling materials to fight security forces, including Molotov cocktails. Protesters added: "we're ready for the next clash. All it needs is a spark." [3] The *Associated Press* separately reported enduring sociopolitical and economic grievances among several pro-regime individuals in the conservative city of Qom. One cleric told the outlet that he strongly disapproved of the regime's brutal protest crackdown and felt increasingly strained by Iran's deteriorating economic conditions.[4]

Moderate and reformist politicians are urgently renewing their calls for the regime to address protester grievances. Former Rouhani administration First Vice President Eshagh Jahangiri insinuated that Iranian leadership had lost touch with its people and urged the regime to apologize for its shortcomings in an interview on February 21. Jahangiri stated that "Iran is in danger, and [the Mahsa Amini protests] were reaching a point where they could and still can endanger Iran." Jahangiri called on regime loyalists and supporters to "show their credibility" and address protester grievances. Jahangiri additionally asserted that the regime suffered from fundamental and structural flaws, stating that "our structure is such that stable solutions do not come from it. . . we usually erase problems instead of solving them." [5] Two former politicians affiliated with former reformist President Mohammad Khatami separately discussed the deepening divide between Iranian leadership and its population. Mohammad Ali Abtahi—a reformist politician and associate of Khatami—urged the regime to reframe its approach to Iranian youth participating in recent unrest on February 19.[6] A former Khatami cabinet official also claimed that Iranian officials' disinterest in communicating with the public would only increase anger with the regime on February 19. Khatami called for reforming various regime institutions, such as the Assembly of Experts and Guardian Council, but did not suggest a referendum on the Islamic Republic as did Mir Hossein Mousavi, on February 5.[7]

Iran continues to face severe economic issues, which may fuel increased political attacks against President Ebrahim Raisi and his administration. The Iranian rial hit a new all-time low, valuing at around 500,000 for one US dollar on February 21.[8] The regime responded by imposing new restrictions on how many Euros air passengers may withdraw in Iran, likely to prevent any significant reduction in the regime's foreign currency reserves.[9] UK-based anti-regime outlet *Iran International* reported that regime officials are concerned about severe shortages in basic grocery items, although CTP cannot verify this reporting.[10] Numerous regime officials have expressed growing alarm over the economic situation in recent days as well. These officials include Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, Raisi administration spokesperson Ali Bahadori Jahromi, and IRGC Aerospace Force Commander Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajji Zadeh.[11]

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has long used the presidency as a relief valve for popular economic discontent and may similarly allow the regime to direct blame unto the Raisi administration. Raisi pledged to stabilize the national currency during a meeting with Khamenei and other Iranian leaders on February 18, affirming his responsibility for the matter.[12] Parliamentarians, such as hardliner Javad Nik Beyn, have suggested summoning Raisi and his ministers to Parliament for questioning.[13] Such summonses are common in Iran but can conclude with Parliament impeaching the president or members of his cabinet if enough lawmakers approve (although no Iranian president has been removed from office by parliament). Nik Beyn previously attacked the Raisi administration for failing to designate a single individual to manage economic policy, as CTP previously reported.[14] There are numerous officials involved in shaping the Raisi administration's economic policy. Many of these officials have ties to other regime power centers, such as the IRGC, judiciary, or various parastatal economic giants.[15] These interpersonal connections will likely introduce an additional political dynamic to any parliamentary efforts to summon and/or remove officials from the Raisi administration. This parliamentary activity, which was the norm under previous presidents, shows that Raisi's hardliner credentials and cabinet and rumors that Khamenei has selected him to be the next supreme leader are no longer shielding him personally or his cabinet from political attacks and possibly even impeachment proceedings. It is likely an indication that parliamentarians are very concerned about the threat the regime faces in the form of popular discontent.

The worsening economic conditions in Iran are facilitating solidarity and possibly cooperation between protest organizers and some domestic economic actors. Twenty Iranian civil society and economic organizations published a political manifesto on February 14, criticizing the regime protest crackdown and expressing support for the Mahsa Amini protests.[16] The signatories included organizations representing industrial and petrochemical workers, retirees, students, and various activist groups. Eighteen protest groups, including the United Youth of Iran, issued a joint statement expressing solidarity with the signatories on February 18. [17] Economically driven protests have become increasingly common in recent weeks, and CTP hypothesized that labor groups are coordinating some of this protest activity.[18] The civil society and economic organizations that signed the manifesto may have facilitated these recent demonstrations and strikes, although CTP cannot verify that hypothesis at this time.

Protest organizers may leverage popular economic frustrations to generate further political unrest against the regime. Making economic frustrations into a political issue would essentially invert the narrative that Iranian leaders have asserted in recent weeks. Many regime officials have focused on the role that poor economic conditions have played in driving the Mahsa Amini protests, as CTP previously reported, rather than addressing the core political and sociocultural factors that triggered the movement.[19]

The efforts of regime officials and protest groups to associate the protest movement with economic issues will complicate any regime effort to de-escalate with the population. The regime cannot easily control macroeconomic trends in Iran but could have made meaningful concessions on the core political and sociocultural issues that sparked the Mahsa Amini movement. Iranian leaders have instead doubled down on their commitment to ideologizing the population and continuing to enforce the mandatory hijab law, while rhetorically tying the protests to the economy that they are struggling to improve.

Bloomberg reported on February 19 that International Atomic Energy Organization (IAEA) monitors had detected 84-percent-enriched uranium—the highest level of enrichment in Iran reported to date—at an unspecified nuclear facility, citing two senior diplomats.[20] It is unclear how much uranium Iran has produced at this level of enrichment. Weapons-grade uranium purity is enriched to around 90 percent.[21] The IAEA had previously condemned Iran on February 1 for failing to inform it of “substantial” changes and enriching uranium of up to 60 percent at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant.[22]

Key Takeaways

- The Mahsa Amini protest movement has likely entered a new phase, although it is unclear what the pattern and nature of anti-regime activity will characterize this new phase.
- Western media outlets have reported lingering discontent throughout the Iranian population, corroborating CTP’s prior assessment that conditions remain present for the resumption of significant anti-regime activity.
- Moderate and reformist politicians are urgently renewing their calls for the regime to address protester grievances.
- Iran continues to face severe economic issues, which may fuel increased political attacks against President Ebrahim Raisi and his administration.
- The worsening economic conditions in Iran are facilitating solidarity and possibly cooperation between protest organizers and some domestic economic actors.
- The efforts of regime officials and protest groups to associate the protest movement with economic issues will complicate any regime effort to de-escalate with the population.
- **Bloomberg** reported on February 19 that International Atomic Energy Organization (IAEA) monitors had detected 84-percent-enriched uranium—the highest level of enrichment in Iran reported to date—at an unspecified nuclear facility, citing two senior diplomats.
- At least 12 protests occurred in 10 cities across eight provinces on February 19, 14 protests occurred in 14 cities across 13 provinces on February 20, and seven protests occurred in six cities across five provinces on February 21. CTP did not record protest activity on February 18.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least 12 protests occurred in 10 cities across eight provinces on February 19. CTP assesses with moderate confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Shoushtar, Khuzestan Province[23]

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

Tehran City, Tehran Province[24]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Families of prisoners sentenced to death on drug-related charges.

Tehran City, Tehran Province[25]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Bakers
- **Notes:** Bakers went on strike in response to reduced flour quotas and low bread prices.

CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations on February 19:

Tabriz, East Azerbaijan Province[26]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Cultural actors

Yazd City, Yazd Province[27]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Yazdbaf Factory workers on strike

Rasht, Gilan Province[28]

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

Kerman City, Kerman Province[29]

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

Kermanshah City, Kermanshah Province[30]

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

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[31]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Kayson Company workers

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[32]

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

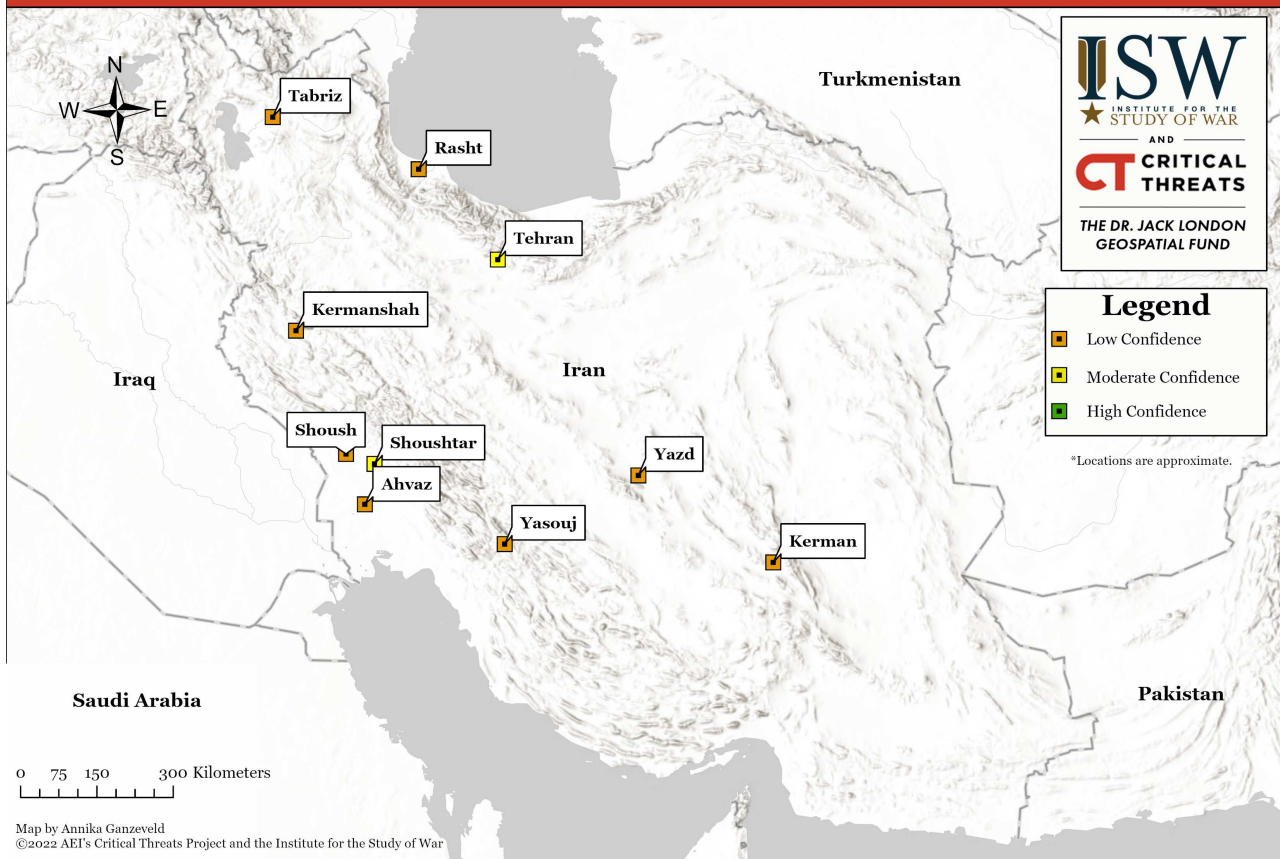
Shoush, Khuzestan Province[33]

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

Yasouj, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer Ahmad Province[34]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Municipal workers

Protest Activity in Iran as of February 19, 5:00 PM



At least 14 protests occurred in 14 cities across 13 provinces on February 20. CTP assesses with moderate confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[35]

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

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[36]

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

Khorramabad, Lorestan Province[37]

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

Saveh, Markazi Province[38]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** National housing applicants

Chabahar, Sistan and Baluchistan Province[39]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Kanroud Sazeh Petrochemical Company workers

Tehran City, Tehran Province[40]

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

CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations on February 20:

Asalouyeh, Bushehr Province[41]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** South Pars Refinery contract workers

Yazd, Fars Province[42]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Lead and Zinc Company workers on strike

Ilam City, Ilam Province[43]

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

Kermanshah City, Kermanshah Province[44]

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

Yasouj, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer Ahmad Province[45]

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

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province[46]

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

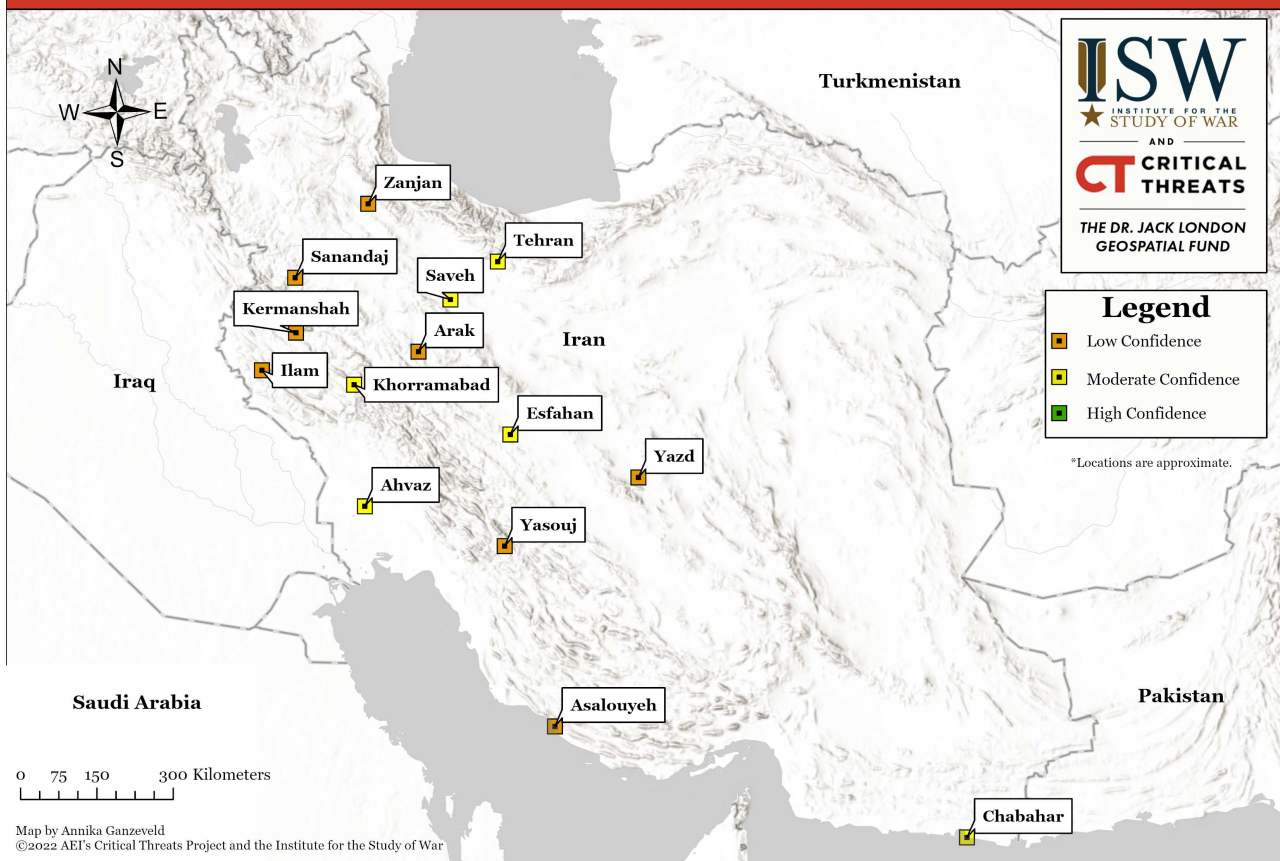
Arak, Markazi Province[47]

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

Zanjan City, Zanjan Province[48]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Iran National Lead and Zinc Company workers on strike

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



At least seven protests occurred in six cities across five provinces on February 21. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Baneh, Kurdistan Province[49]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Shopkeepers

Tehran City, Tehran Province[50]

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

Tehran City, Tehran Province[51]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Education workers

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

Tabriz, East Azerbaijan Province[52]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Green space contractors

Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi Province[53]

- **Size:** Small

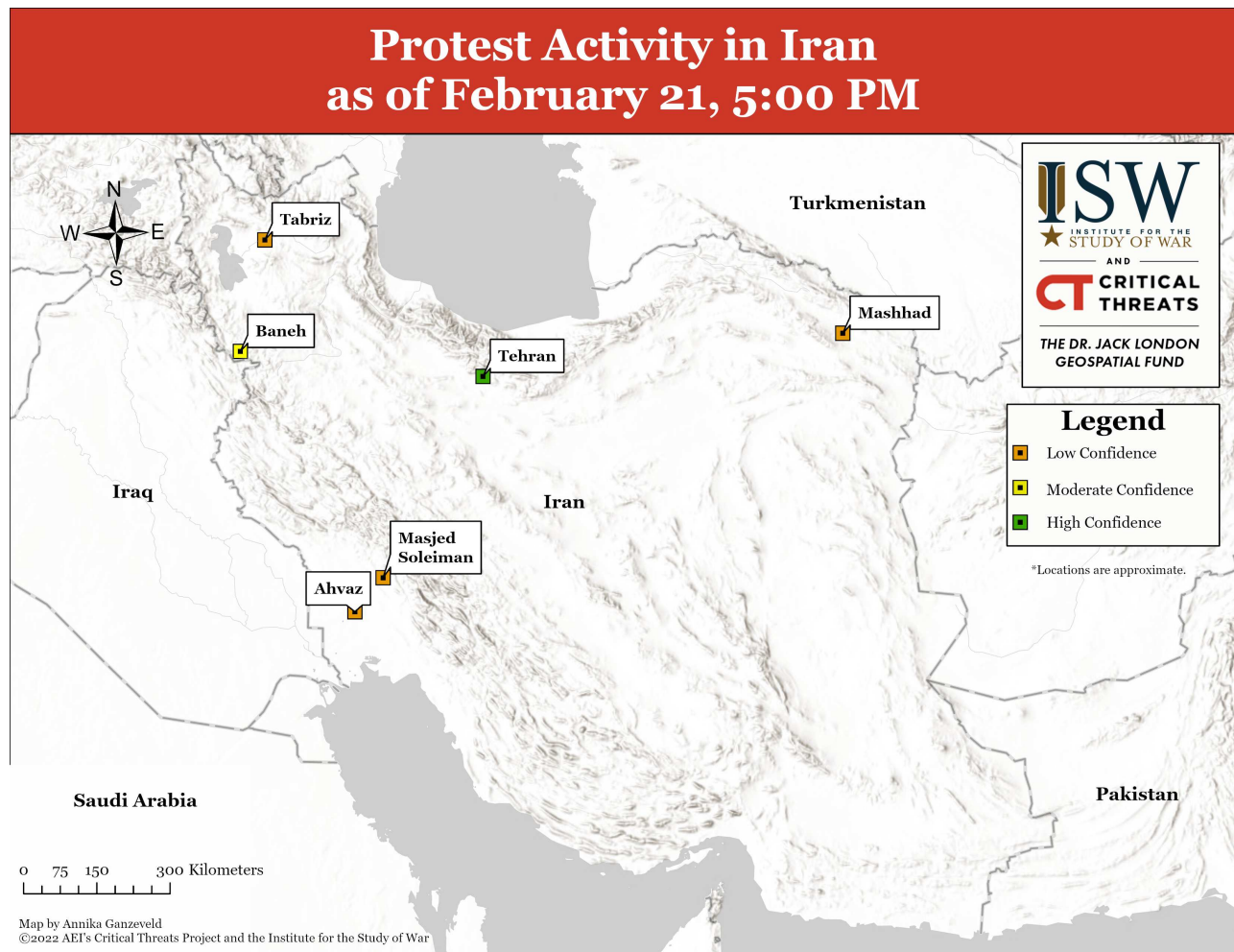
- **Demographic:** Welfare recipients

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[54]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Municipal workers

Masjed Soleiman, Khuzestan Province[55]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Petrochemical workers



Protest coordinators and organizations called for anti-regime demonstrations on the following date:

February 22[56]

- **Location:** Bazaars throughout Iran

Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid tweeted on February 19, condemning security officers who have raped arrested citizens.[57] Abdol Hamid was likely responding to the recent sentencing of a local LEC commander who raped a 15-year-old girl in Chabahar, Sistan and Baluchistan Province. An Iranian military court sentenced the commander to 15 months in prison for "creating an atmosphere of skepticism toward the police," rather than rape.[58]

An unidentified gunman shot and killed an LEC officer in Chahar Bagh, Alborz Province on February 20.[59] Iranian state media described the gunman as a drug dealer.

The Central Bank of Iran (CBI) announced new measures aimed at controlling exchange rates on February 21. CBI Governor Mohammad Reza Farzin announced that the CBI had created a new currency and gold exchange center to “replace the free market” and stabilize foreign exchange rates.[60] Iranian media separately reported that the CBI will no longer provide dollars to currency exchange bureaus for distribution.[61]

CNN worked with arrested protesters to locate a number of detention sites that the regime used to brutally torture anti-regime dissidents. CNN reported on February 21 that several of the sites were makeshift and cropped up near popular protest areas. Some of such sites were located in the Basij centers of local mosques. CNN confirmed the existence of three dozen detention facilities total, including six sites in Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province; five in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province; and eight in Tehran City, Tehran Province. Arrested protesters stated that the regime had tortured medical professionals who had treated injured protesters, confirming prior reports of an anti-regime medical network established to allow protesters to circumvent hospital treatment. [62] CNN’s sources stated that the regime had been more willing to use brutal tactics against protesters participating in recent unrest compared to protesters from anti-regime demonstration waves, which they attributed to the regime’s fear of the Mahsa Amini movement. One source assessed that: “the regime felt that it would be overthrown this time. They needed to stop the protests at any cost.”[63]

The regime continues to crack down on businesses providing goods and services to women who do not fully adhere to the mandatory hijab law. Iranian authorities closed a pharmacy in Tehran and a café in Shiraz on February 21 over their reported failures to enforce the hijab requirement.[64] The regime has refocused on enforcing widespread adherence to the hijab law in recent weeks after briefly and informally relaxing such restrictions in late 2022, as CTP previously reported.[65]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev accused parts of the Iranian regime on February 18 of participating in the recent attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran.[66] An armed individual shot and killed a security officer and injured two other guards at the embassy on January 27, as CTP previously reported.[67] Baku recalled the embassy staff in the following days. Aliyev stated that ties between Azerbaijan and Iran will normalize once regime officials investigate the incident transparently and punish the perpetrators of the attack. Tensions between Azerbaijan and Iran have increased in recent months as Iranian officials regularly accuse Azerbaijan of hosting Israeli intelligence services.[68]

President Ebrahim Raisi gave an interview with Chinese state-owned media outlet *Xinwen Lianbo*. China Central Television broadcasts *Xinwen Lianbo*, which is one of the oldest and most viewed television programs in mainland China.[69] Raisi emphasized Sino-Iranian strategic cooperation and framed his visit to Beijing as a turning point in relations between the two countries.[70] Raisi previously published an op-ed in the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee’s *People’s Daily*, which CTP assessed likely signals high-level Chinese support for increased Sino-Iranian cooperation.[71]

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko confirmed that he will travel to Tehran in mid-March 2023 in a meeting with Iranian Ambassador to Belarus Saeed Yari on February 21. Yari stated that Belarus-Iran ties were at their peak and would continue to improve following Lukashenko’s Tehran visit.[72]

External Security and Military Affairs

Artesh Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Erani paid an official visit to Oman on February 18 and met with Omani Navy Commander Seyf bin Nasser al Rahbi, among other Omani officials.[73] Iranian state media has not provided additional details on Erani’s visit.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) conducted airstrikes on multiple likely IRGC and Iranian-backed militia positions in Damascus Province, Syria on February 18.[74] An Israeli OSINT Twitter account claimed that the IDF struck an IRGC Quds Force facility in the Kfar Sousa suburb of Damascus.[75] The account claimed the Quds Force facility is directly across the street from the local headquarters for the Quds Force's Unit 840.[76] This unit is reportedly responsible for planning kidnappings, abductions, assassinations, and other external operations.[77]

The IDF separately targeted positions in Sayyida Zainab, Damascus Province, where the IRGC and Iranian-backed militias maintain a significant military presence.[78] The IDF also struck two likely Syrian Arab Army (SAA) air defense positions in Damascus and As Suwayda Provinces.[79] Assad Regime-run *SANA* reported that the airstrikes killed five and wounded 15 people.[80] Damascus Police Command issued told reporters that SAA Brigadier General Amjad Ahmed Ali died during the airstrikes but did not identify any of the other casualties.[81] Independent analysts have suggested that Ali may have been involved in Iranian efforts to smuggle precision-guided munitions into Syria.[82]

Likely Iranian-backed militants launched two rockets at US-led International Coalition forces stationed at the Green Village base, Deir ez Zor Province, Syria on February 18.

[83] US Central Command announced that the attack did not harm any personnel or base property. [84] The militants conducted the attack several hours prior to the February 18 Israeli airstrikes around Damascus.[85] US forces downed an Iranian-made intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) drone on February 16 approximately 30 kilometers north of the Green Village at the nearby Conoco Mission Support site, as CTP previously reported.[86] The timing of the ISR flight suggests Iranian-backed militants likely intended to gather intelligence on US positions prior to the February 18 attack. Iranian-backed militants occasionally conduct low-intensity attacks—such as launching two unguided rockets—against US forces in eastern Syria to retaliate for regional developments that Iran perceives as hostile and perpetrated by the US. CTP previously reported the IDF conducted a series of airstrikes on January 29 and 30 against Iranian-backed militia convoys likely smuggling weaponry and materiel into eastern Syria through the al-Qaim Iraq-Syria border crossing.[87] Iran may have ordered the attack in retaliation for the January 29 and 30 airstrikes. Iran also may have ordered the attack as part of its response to the January 28 kamikaze drone attack on an IRGC facility in Esfahan City, Esfahan Province, Iran.[88]

Iranian-backed militants deployed additional units into Syria ostensibly to provide earthquake relief.[89] Asaib Ahl al Haq's (AAH) 43rd brigade led a convoy into Syria as part of an operation AAH termed "People of Goodness." [90] Lebanese Hezbollah delivered a 20-truck convoy to Aleppo City on February 21, reportedly carrying 600 tons of food and medical supplies. [91] CTP previously reported that Iranian-backed proxies have used earthquake relief convoys to transport weaponry and materiel into Syria.[92]

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Iran Update, February 22, 2023

Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Annika Ganzeveld, Zachary Coles, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 22, 2023, 6:00 pm ET

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

Growing elements of the regime are publicly recognizing that the Islamic Republic has lost the confidence of its people as Iran faces a period of severe economic disruption that risks further popular discontent. CTP has previously assessed that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei will tolerate limited criticisms of the regime, particularly those that pertain to Iran's deteriorating economic conditions.[1] Actors from across the political spectrum have subsequently acknowledged such issues and discussed the economy with urgency in recent days, suggesting that the regime must improve Iran's economic conditions to regain the trust of an increasingly disillusioned populous. They have become increasingly vocal as the Iranian rial hit a new all-time low on February 21--valuing at around 500,000 for one US dollar--and as inflation rates hold at roughly 50 percent.[2] The regime must implement significant economic reforms in order to meaningfully address Iran's economic conditions, although it is presently unclear if Iranian officials have articulated and cohered around such a solution.

Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf framed anti-regime sentiments as economic in nature and called for a change in governance in an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-affiliated conference on February 22. Ghalibaf identified economic conditions as the primary issue facing the regime. Ghalibaf claimed that foreign actors were capitalizing on the regime's shortcomings to foment dissent, a prevalent talking point among hardliners, but noted that they would not have shortcomings to seize upon if the regime had been functioning efficiently. Ghalibaf also stated that "if we don't pay attention to [the foundations and principles of the revolution], they will be stripped of their meaning," insinuating that the regime had deviated from its ideological core. Ghalibaf specifically called on the IRGC to improve economic conditions and reexamine its role within Iranian society, using the collective "we" throughout his address. Ghalibaf stated that the IRGC must play an active role in "unraveling the knots" within the Iranian economic system and stressed the importance of having "a people's economy," suggesting that the economy no longer belonged to the people. Ghalibaf reminded his audience of the IRGC's role within Iranian society, stating that "we must preserve our spirituality and know that we are not solely a military institution" and claimed that "we can solve the country's economic problems, but we have to change our perspective and the way we govern." [3] It is unclear to which changes Ghalibaf was referencing, although the IRGC plays a dominant role within the Iranian economy and is an obstacle in allowing it to operate efficiently.[4] Ghalibaf has previously endorsed economic and sociopolitical reforms in response to the Mahsa Amini protest movement, as CTP previously reported.[5]

Parliamentarians are explicitly blaming the Raisi administration for Iran's economic shortcomings. Hardline Parliamentarian Ahmad Naderi publicly announced on February 22 that a planned meeting among Raisi administration officials to discuss currency fluctuations had been postponed until February 25. Naderi emphasized that First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber and Central Bank of Iran (CBI) Governor Mohammad Reza Farzin could not attend the original meeting. Naderi may have been trying to portray these Raisi administration officials as apathetic towards and responsible for Iran's worsening economic situation.[6]

Hardline Parliamentarian Lotfollah Siah Kali separately called for the impeachment of unspecified Raisi administration officials during a public parliamentary address on February 22.[7] This follows Iranian media reports on February 21 that parliamentarians held a closed-door meeting demanding the impeachment of “at least two to three” Raisi administration officials. [8] Parliamentarians may follow through on impeachment threats to convey that they are actively working to confront Iran’s deteriorating economic conditions.

Raisi officials have presented several superficial economic policies in recent days to confront growing criticisms of their administration. First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber headed a meeting on February 22 in which several Raisi administration officials approved a plan on sustainable food supplies. This plan likely seeks to lower Iran’s dependence on foreign food imports and may be an indicator that the Iranian rial’s depreciation is hampering the regime’s ability to purchase basic goods from abroad. Mokhber’s plan follows reports on February 21 that Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Ali Shamkhani wrote a letter to President Ebrahim Raisi warning of an impending basic goods shortage.[9] The time required to establish new domestic food sources and current unfavorable environmental conditions make it is highly unlikely that Iran will become agriculturally self-sufficient in the near future. This plan is likely intended to alleviate public frustrations in the short-term rather than providing long-term solutions to Iran’s economic problems.

Ideological hardliners are blaming inflation and the depreciation of the Iranian rial on foreign actors, signaling that they may be unwilling to pursue meaningful reforms to improve Iran’s economy. Raisi Administration Spokesperson Ali Bahadori Jahromi stated on February 21 that Iran’s enemies had recently prioritized the economic dimension of their purported “hybrid war” aimed at overthrowing the regime.[10] Central Bank of Iran (CBI) Legal Council Chairperson and Expediency Discernment Council and Assembly of Experts Member Gholam Reza Mesbahi Moghaddam separately blamed the depreciation of the Iranian rial on “the US’ currency war against Iran” on February 21.[11] Such statements underscore that some hardline officials are cognizant of Iran’s dire economic conditions, but are reluctant to take responsibility for alleviating them. The regime can—and did not—make meaningful concessions on the core political and sociocultural issues that sparked the Mahsa Amini movement, which will likely exacerbate public grievances with the regime if it fails to resolve ongoing economic issues.

Key Takeaways

- **Growing elements of the regime are publicly recognizing that the Islamic Republic has lost the confidence of its people as Iran faces a period of severe economic disruption that risks further popular discontent.**
- **Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf framed anti-regime sentiments as economic in nature and called for a change in governance in an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-affiliated conference.**
- **Parliamentarians are explicitly blaming the Raisi administration for Iran’s economic shortcomings.**
- **Raisi officials have presented several superficial economic policies in recent days to confront growing criticisms of their administration.**
- **Ideological hardliners are blaming inflation and the depreciation of the Iranian rial on foreign actors, signaling that they may be unwilling to pursue meaningful reforms to improve Iran’s economy.**
- **At least eight protests occurred in four cities across four provinces on February 22.**
- **An Iranian official confirmed on February 22 that International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) officials were currently in Iran to investigate reports of 84 percent enriched uranium at an unspecified nuclear facility.**
- **Axios reported that Iranian officials are currently deprioritizing ballistic missile exports to Russia, citing a senior Israeli official.**
- **The IDF carried out a daytime raid to apprehend suspected Palestinian militants operating in Nablus, the West Bank.**
- **Kataib Hezbollah spokesperson Mohammed Mohie met with Aleppo Province Governor Ahmad Hussein Diab.**

- **Between 250-300 Syrian Arab Army (SAA) Republican Guard personnel deployed to positions along the right bank of the Euphrates River near Mayadin, Deir ez Zor Province.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least eight protests occurred in four cities across four provinces on February 22. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Shiraz, Fars Province[12]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Educators
- **Notes:** Demanded release of imprisoned teachers

Bandar Abbas, Hormozgan Province[13]

- **Size:** Small
- **Protester Activity:** Fires lit on city street, anti-regime slogans

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[14]

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

Tehran City, Tehran Province[15]

- **Size:** Small
- **Notes:** Protested lack of permission to build on land

Tehran City, Tehran Province[16]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Bazaar workers, Alladin passage
- **Notes:** Protested inflation and foreign exchange rates. Unclear if this protest encompassed another bazaar protest CTP recorded on February 22.

Tehran City, Tehran Province[17]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Tehran Grand Bazaar workers
- **Notes:** Protested inflation and foreign exchange rates. Unclear if this protest encompassed another bazaar protest CTP recorded on February 22.

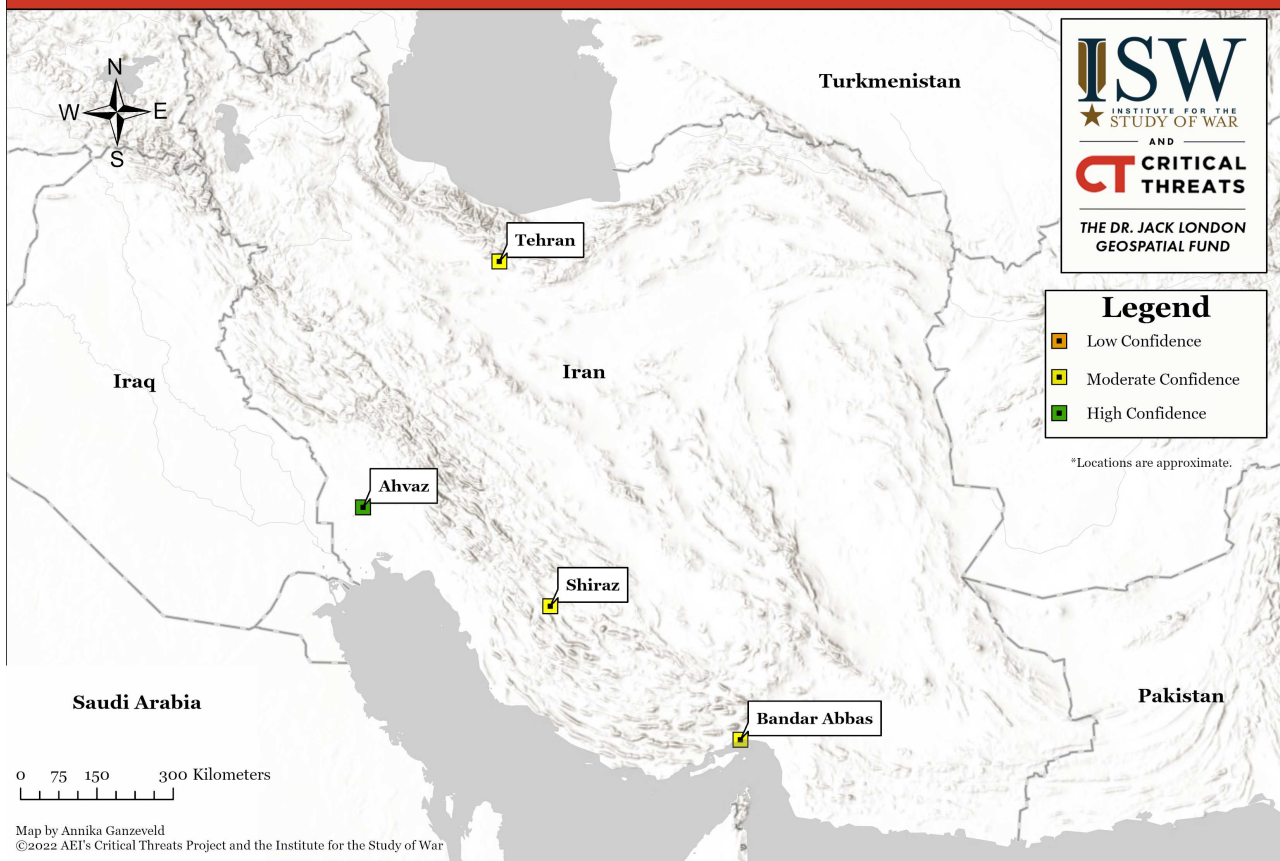
Tehran City, Tehran Province[18]

- **Size:** Small
- **Location:** Unspecified metro stop

Tehran City, Tehran Province[19]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Special housing residents

Protest Activity in Iran as of February 22, 6:00 PM



Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

An Iranian official confirmed on February 22 that International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) officials were currently in Iran to investigate reports of 84-percent enriched uranium at an unspecified nuclear facility. *Bloomberg* reported on February 19 that IAEA monitors had detected 84-percent-enriched uranium—the highest level of enrichment in Iran reported to date—in Iran, citing two senior diplomats.[20] Atomic Energy Organization of Iran Head Mohammad Eslami announced that IAEA officials had been investigating and “negotiating” in Iran since February 21 and stated that Iranian officials were working to “resolve ambiguities.”[21] Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian separately stated on February 22 that an IAEA delegation would soon visit Tehran. Amir Abdollahian expressed hope that IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi would reach a consensus with the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran on “a technical point.”[22]

Axios reported that Iranian officials are currently deprioritizing ballistic missile exports to Russia, citing a senior Israeli official. The source added that Iranian missile deliveries to Russia could eventually materialize “at some point.”[23]

External Security and Military Affairs

The IDF carried out a daytime raid to apprehend suspected Palestinian militants operating in Nablus, the West Bank on February 22.[24] IDF personnel engaged in an extended firefight with multiple Palestinian militias during the raid.[25] IDF personnel killed 10 Palestinian militants and civilians and injured approximately 100 more during the raid. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), an Iranian proxy militia, claimed two PIJ militants died during the raid.[26] The Lions’ Den (TLD), a West Bank militia that *Israel Hayom* claims is receiving funding from Hamas, reported six of its militants died during the raid.[27] Hamas Izz ad Din al Qassam Brigades spokesperson Abu Obeida warned that Hamas’ “patience is running out,” and PIJ issued a statement vowing to

retaliate.”[28] The IDF declared a state of alert for Israeli settlements near the Gaza Strip and West Bank in preparation for retaliatory rocket barrages and small arms fire from multiple Palestinian militias.[29] The February 22 operation marks one of the deadliest raids since 2021.[30] Rhetoric from TLD, PIJ, and Hamas and the magnitude of casualties from the February 22 raid suggests Palestinian militia factions intend to retaliate. Hamas militants may fire rockets from the Gaza Strip into Israel in the coming days, and PIJ and TLD militants may pursue urban guerrilla-style attacks on IDF checkpoints near the West Bank.

Kataib Hezbollah spokesperson Mohammed Mohie met with Aleppo Province Governor Ahmad Hussein Diab on February 19.[31] A KH Telegram channel claimed Mohie and Diab discussed developments related to humanitarian relief for the February 6 earthquake.[32] CTP cannot independently verify the details of Diab and Mohie’s conversation.

Between 250-300 Syrian Arab Army (SAA) Republican Guard personnel deployed to positions along the west bank of the Euphrates River near Mayadin, Deir ez Zor Province on February 22. *Naher Media* claimed the Republican Guard personnel deployed from their headquarters in eastern Deir ez Zor City, Deir ez Zor Province.[33] *Al Araby* reported that unnamed sources said the Assad regime deployed the Republican Guard unit as oversight for Iran-aligned SAA Fourth Division personnel.[34] Fourth Division personnel stationed in Deir ez Zor Province along border crossings into SDF territory have clashed with SAA Air Force Intelligence personnel about control over narcotics smuggling routes in recent weeks.[35]

CTP reported on February 14 that Iranian-backed militants departed from Deir ez Zor Province to possibly head to Aleppo Province where Quds Force and Iranian-backed militants have amassed personnel and materiel since the February 6 earthquake.[36] The Assad regime may have deployed the Republican Guard unit to Deir ez Zor Province to backfill for the militia departures, rather than to solely consolidate control over narcotics smuggling routes.

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February 23, 2023, 6:00 pm ET

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Senior regime officials are increasingly acknowledging that the Islamic Republic risks permanently alienating itself from its people and that the problem is urgent, but have seemingly drawn different conclusions about how to mitigate this risk. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei implicitly warned of increased rifts between Iranian leadership and its youth in a speech addressed to the Assembly of Experts on February 23. Khamenei described the assembly—a body of 88 clerics responsible for supervising, dismissing, and selecting Iran’s Supreme Leader—as a paragon of democracy. All elected assembly members must secure approval from a separate supervisory council, vetted by Khamenei, before running for office.[1] Khamenei stressed the importance of “preserving”—possibly implying that the regime risks losing—the Islamic Republic’s social capital and called on the assembly to increase political participation among Iranian youth, echoing similar calls from actors across the Iranian political spectrum in recent weeks. [2] Khamenei added that measures to increase social capital must occur within the ideological boundaries of the regime, and tasked the Assembly of Experts with “monitor(ing) and maintain(ing) the overall movement and important parts of the regime (so that) the revolution does not digress like other revolutions.” Khamenei also seemingly warned against public criticisms of the regime’s core ideology, stating: “no one should say online or elsewhere that the Islamic Republic has created an enemy for itself” and advised officials against “talking loosely and illogically.” Khamenei seemed to frame connecting with Iranian youth as an uphill battle and told his audience that “one should not be offended by doubt ... one should be prepared to face doubt.” Khamenei additionally urged officials to “perform (their) duties seriously and without fatigue or weakness of action,” possibly an exhortation to President Ebrahim Raisi, who attended the meeting.[3] It is noteworthy that Khamenei did not signal his desire to end calls for the impeachment of Raisi administration officials, which parliamentarians have made in recent days as Iran faces significant economic challenges.[4] The Supreme Leader previously instructed parliament against impeaching former President Hassan Rouhani in 2020, making his silence in this context conspicuous.[5]

Khamenei’s comments are not necessarily anomalous; he has previously acknowledged the regime’s shortcomings following recent protests.[6] Khamenei’s solution to these shortcomings is not new, either. The Supreme Leader instructed the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to further ideologize Iranian youth instead of granting sociocultural concessions, asking the Guard to “redouble its efforts to attract, nurture, and train talented youth ... to strengthen the Guards’ spiritual, revolutionary, and military foundations” in a statement celebrating a regime holiday on February 23.[7] The frequency with which and the context wherein Khamenei is discussing the deepening divide between the Islamic Republic and its youth, however, indicates that Khamenei feels and wishes to express an increased sense of urgency even as other regime officials express urgency and alarm more openly.

Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf separately made an urgent appeal for a governmental change in a parliamentary meeting on February 23. Ghalibaf warned that the regime risked delegitimization if it failed to reform, stating “if we do not reform governance...the sacred institution of the Islamic Republic will be harmed.” Ghalibaf added that “the survival of the Islamic Revolution without the people is questionable.” CTP has previously assessed that Ghalibaf

is a pragmatic hardliner and that such calls for reform are made with the aim of strengthening the Islamic Republic rather than altering it fundamentally, as Ghalibaf appears sincere in his devotion to the ideals and preservation of the revolution.[8] Ghalibaf stated that Iranian officials “must make the governance of the regime efficient” and that “the people like the revolution but criticize officials,” signaling his support for the ideological core of the regime but recognizing that the regime must introduce meaningful governmental reforms in order to avoid losing the people’s trust. [9]

Ghalibaf delivered his comments at a meeting about the function of the Article 90 Committee. Article 90 of the Iranian Constitution and the Article 90 Committee relate to complaints against parliament, the executive, and the judiciary.[10] Article 90 also specifies the procedures for interpellating, impeaching, and removing officials of those bodies, including ministers and the president. Ghalibaf may have made this speech in response to recent calls among parliamentarians for the impeachment of Raisi administration officials.[11] Ghalibaf may be aiming to discourage a frenzy of impeachment proceedings, as such actions risk exacerbating Iran’s internal issues and distracting officials from rectifying the economy. There is currently no direct evidence to support this hypothesis, however.

Ghalibaf explicitly called for parastatal organizations to decrease their involvement in the Iranian economy.[12] Ghalibaf stated that a significant part of Iran’s economy is “khasoulati,” a term of opprobrium referring to the disproportionate role played by government-controlled organizations in the economy.[13] Ghalibaf added that former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had warned the government against interfering in affairs that the Iranian people can handle themselves (although Khomeini himself established a number of such organizations). These statements follow Ghalibaf’s speech on February 22 in which he implied that the IRGC is an obstacle to allowing the Iranian economy to operate efficiently. Ghalibaf may be suggesting that Iran’s economic issues can only be addressed through fundamental change.[14] Ghalibaf’s observations are accurate that parastatal organizations including, but not limited to, the IRGC and those it controls badly distort Iran’s economy and have interfered with efforts to increase Iran’s economic health and efficiency for decades. His focus on criticizing such organizations in a speech ostensibly about the constitutional article related to impeachment supports the hypothesis that he seeks to redirect parliamentary focus away from fruitless impeachment proceedings that cannot lead to economic improvement and toward addressing some of the root causes of the Iranian economy’s struggles.

An Israeli OSINT Twitter account circulated uncorroborated claims that unknown actors targeted two IRGC-affiliated complexes in the vicinity of Karaj, Alborz Province on February 23, citing inside sources.[15] Local residents reported hearing blasts and anti-aircraft activity roughly 13 miles away from Karaj, Alborz Province.[16] One resident observed that that anti-aircraft activity “seemed like it was targeting a drone,” consistent with footage that allegedly captured the event.[17] The Israeli OSINT Twitter account stated that the purported attack resulted in one casualty.[18] CTP cannot independently verify this report. IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* acknowledged reports of explosions in Karaj, but claimed that such blasts resulted from “Basij training exercises.”[19] The footage allegedly capturing the event features two explosions on or near ground level. Israel previously conducted a kamikaze drone attack on a military munitions factory near Esfahan City, Esfahan Province on January 28, as CTP previously reported. [20]

Key Takeaways

- Senior regime officials are increasingly acknowledging that the Islamic Republic risks permanently alienating itself from its people and that the problem is urgent, but have seemingly drawn different conclusions about how to mitigate this risk.
- An Israeli OSINT Twitter account circulated uncorroborated claims that unknown actors targeted two IRGC-affiliated complexes in the vicinity of Karaj, Alborz Province, citing inside sources.
- At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces.

- **Sports and Youth Minister Hamid Sajjadi** has sustained serious injuries following a helicopter crash in Baft, Kerman Province.
- Iranian social media users continued to report symptoms of chemical poisoning among some high school students.
- An unnamed senior Iranian official told *Al Monitor* on February 23 that Iran would support reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or establishing a separate nuclear agreement with the United States.
- The Iranian rial continued to plummet on February 23, reaching approximately 526,500 rials to one US dollar.
- Former Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi met with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian in Tehran on February 21.
- Independent Iraqi political parties boycotted a session of Parliament.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces on February 23. CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province[21]

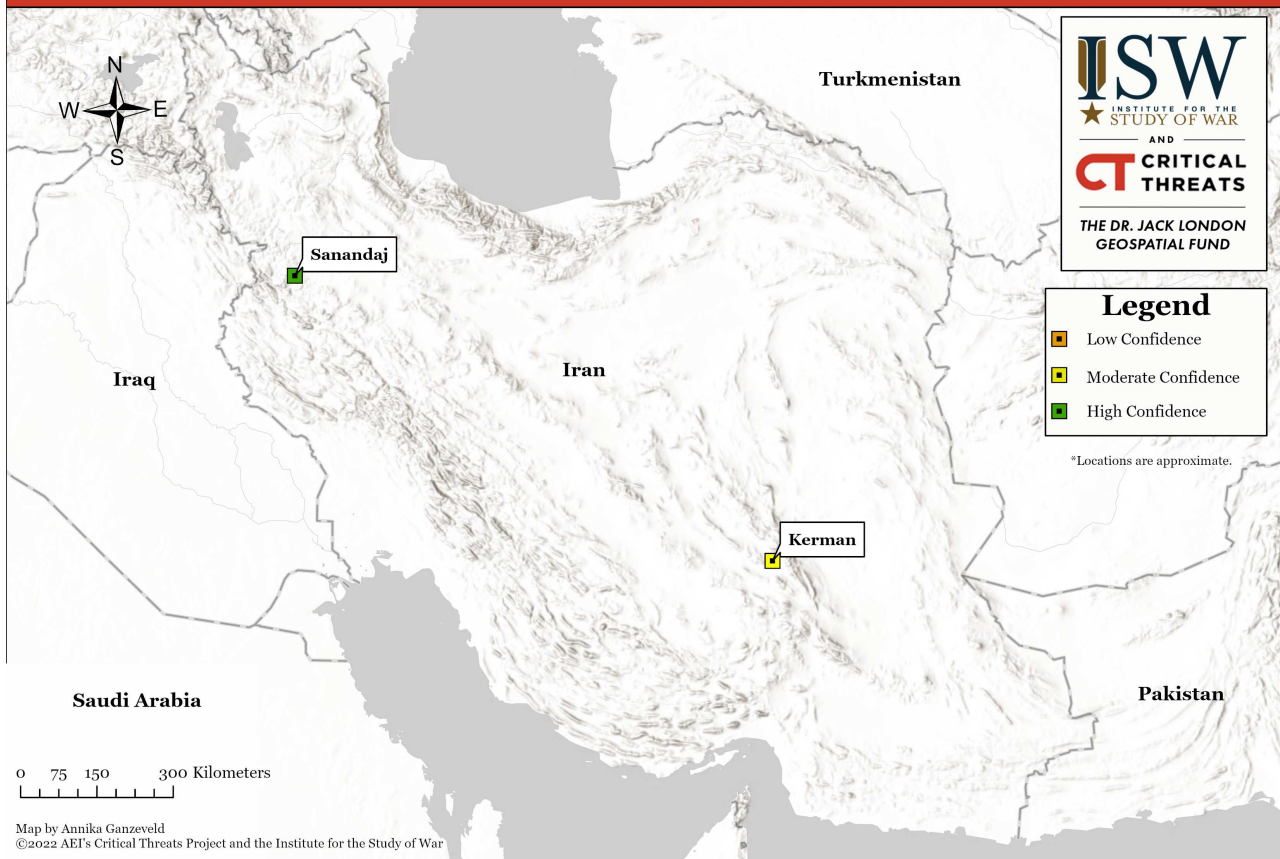
- **Size:** Small
- **Notes:** Individuals gathered at the Behesht Mohammadi Cemetery in Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province. Some individuals chanted anti-regime slogans, although it is unclear whether most mourners participated in such chants.

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

Kerman City, Kerman Province[22]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Esfandagheh Chromite Mine workers

Protest Activity in Iran as of February 23, 6:00 PM



Sports and Youth Minister Hamid Sajjadi has sustained serious injuries following a helicopter crash in Baft, Kerman Province on February 23. Iranian media reported that the crash killed Sajjadi's advisor and injured two others, excluding Sajjadi.[23] Sajjai suffered brain hemorrhaging and is currently in a local intensive care unit in Baft.[24]

Iranian citizens reportedly received a text message from the Ministry of Intelligence and Security stating that the Mossad was exploiting their "lack of information and awareness" on February 22. The text claimed that the Mossad was offering citizens cash in exchange for parking a vehicle in a designated place.[25]

Iranian social media users continued to report symptoms of chemical poisoning among some high school students. Students in Boroujerd, Lorestan Province and Qom City, Qom Province allegedly experienced "poisoning" on February 22, resulting in the hospitalization of dozens of students.[26] Affected students reported symptoms such as numbness, abdominal pain, headaches and shortness of breath.[27]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

An unnamed senior Iranian official told *Al Monitor* on February 23 that Iran would support reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or establishing a separate nuclear agreement with the United States. The official stated that Iran would "prefer a normal relationship with the West—with the JCPOA" and claimed that the US and Iran were indirectly negotiating and prepared for a prisoner swap. The official stated that Iran would adhere to the Non-Proliferation Treaty even if the P5+1 and Iran failed to revitalize the JCPOA. *Al Monitor* added that the Iranian official viewed increased engagement with foreign actors as imperative to stabilizing Iran's internal environment, stating that "protests have died down, but we have no choice but to pursue reforms. This is a domestic, not foreign, imperative ... normalization with regional states is

our priority.” The official added that Iran is seeking to prevent an escalation between the US and Iraq.[28]

Supreme National Security Council-affiliated *Nour News Agency* denied reports that Iran had enriched uranium to 84 percent purity on February 23.[29] *Bloomberg* previously reported on February 19 that International Atomic Energy Organization (IAEA) monitors had detected 84-percent-enriched uranium—the highest level of enrichment in Iran reported to date—at an unspecified nuclear facility, citing two senior diplomats.[30]

Former Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi met with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian in Tehran on February 21.[31] Kadhimi released a statement claiming that the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs invited him to Tehran reportedly to discuss regional and domestic Iraqi issues.[32] Kadhimi also met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf on February 22 and 23.[33] An unidentified source from the Iraqi Shia Coordination Framework reported that the Coordination Framework is attempting to deescalate tensions with the US.[34]

In December 2022, the US Federal Reserve restricted dollar transactions through five major Iraqi banks aimed at limiting transfers to Iranian institutions. The restrictions cut off Iraqi debt payments to Iran and have compounded the economic crisis in Iran. Mustafa al-Khadimi may be acting as an interlocutor between Iran and the United States to lift restrictions and allow Iraq to pay its debts. Alternatively, Kadhimi may be acting as a liaison between Iran and the US following renewed interest in reviving a nuclear deal.

Independent Iraqi political parties boycotted a session of Parliament on February 23.

[35] Iraq’s State of Law Coalition called for a snap vote in Parliament on a new election law on February 22. Parliament agendas are released 48 hours ahead of parliament sessions and the snap vote was a break from procedure. Iraq’s parliament rescheduled the vote for February 27.[36] The proposed election law is backed by the Coordination Framework and opposed by independent and minority political parties in Iraq.[37]

Economic Affairs

The Iranian rial continued to plummet on February 23, reaching approximately 526,500 rials to one US dollar.[38] The rial was valued at around 500,000 for one US dollar on February 21, a then-all-time low.[39] The regime must implement significant economic reforms in order to meaningfully address Iran’s economic conditions, although it is presently unclear if Iranian officials have articulated and cohered around such a solution.

President Ebrahim Raisi was notably absent from ongoing public discussions about deteriorating economic conditions on February 23. Information and Communications Technology Minister Issa Zahreh Pour stated that foreign actors had targeted the Iranian rial and claimed that the Raisi administration had plans to stimulate economic growth on February 23, although Zahreh Pour does not oversee the administration’s economic policies.[40] An Iranian parliamentarian previously announced on February 22 that Raisi administration officials had been unable to attend a scheduled meeting on currency fluctuations, resulting in the meeting’s postponement until February 25.[41]

External Security and Military Affairs

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian met with Iraqi officials to discuss Iranian security concerns in Iraq on February 22 and 23. Amir Abdollahian argued that armed separatist groups operating in Iraqi Kurdistan present a threat to Iran’s national security and that their presence in Iraqi Kurdistan is unacceptable to the Iranian regime.[42] Amir Abdollahian and Iraqi Foreign Minister Fouad Hussein released a joint statement announcing that Iran and Iraq have established a joint counter-terrorism committee to counter Kurdish militias in Iraqi Kurdistan.[43] Amir Abdollahian also met with Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid and Popular Mobilization Forces head Faleh al-Fayyad to discuss counterterrorism operations in Iraq.[44]

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Iran Update, February 24, 2023

Annika Ganzeveld, Johanna Moore, Nicholas Carl, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 24, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

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

Iranian regime security forces escalated against prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid on February 24 after months of relative restraint. Security forces surrounded Zahedan's Grand Makki Mosque, where Abdol Hamid gives his weekly Friday sermons, assaulted some nearby worshippers, and reportedly attempted to enter the mosque.[1] The regime reportedly stationed snipers around Zahedan and disrupted local internet services as well.[2] Abdol Hamid lamented on social media that he could not livestream his Friday sermon due to the severity of these restrictions.[3] The regime has significantly increased its security presence in Zahedan since January 2023 to deter Abdol Hamid from criticizing the regime. However, these security forces have largely refrained from interfering with Abdol Hamid's weekly sermon and the ensuing protests until this point, likely to avoid enflaming domestic unrest further. Security forces conducted a brutal crackdown against citizens in Zahedan on September 30, 2022, which was the initial driver of the weekly Friday protests during the last five months.[4]

Multiple factors may have driven the regime to escalate today. Iranian leaders may feel more confident in their capability to quell internal unrest following weeks of relatively low protest activity throughout Iran. They may also perceive a renewed sense of urgency to confront Abdol Hamid, who continues to challenge the regime's legitimacy and criticize its performance as the country faces significant problems, such as economic mismanagement, that resonate with large segments of the Iranian population.

Abdol Hamid scaled back his criticism of the regime in his Friday sermon, possibly in response to the regime's more aggressive security approach. Abdol Hamid attacked the Ebrahim Raisi administration specifically rather than condemning the whole Islamic Republic as in previous sermons. He stated: "Around the world, sometimes presidents, prime ministers, and other high-ranking officials resign, and problems are solved. In our country, unfortunately, they do not know how to step aside." [5] This criticism is noteworthy in that he targeted the president without suggesting that the Islamic Republic should be replaced. That framing is acceptable within the regime's official discourse and comparatively tempered to some of his past rhetoric. Abdol Hamid previously expressed support for reformist leader Mir Hossein Mousavi, who issued a statement on February 4 calling for a referendum on the Islamic Republic and the drafting of a new constitution if that referendum fails.[6] Abdol Hamid may have called on Raisi to resign to maintain his popularity among his congregation while simultaneously not overstepping the regime's boundaries and risking a violent crackdown in Zahedan. He may also have intended for his sermon to resonate with other elements of Iranian society that are blaming the Raisi administration for Iran's economic troubles.

Abdol Hamid called on worshippers to "return home in complete calm" following his sermon. [7] Abdol Hamid's congregation has typically conducted large-scale protests directly after his sermons since September 2022. Abdol Hamid's call for calm suggests that he wanted to avoid provoking security forces.

Some clerics within Abdol Hamid's circle adopted a more aggressive position regarding the regime escalation in Zahedan. The Office of Rask Sunni Friday Prayer Leader Moulana Abdol

Ghaffar Naghshbandi published a statement calling for mass protests in response to security forces' "siege" of the Grand Makki Mosque. Naghshbandi warned that he will issue a "historic fatwa" if security forces continue this "brutal action." [8] Naghshbandi did not specify what this fatwa would include but clearly meant it as a threat to the regime. The contrast in messages between Abdol Hamid and Abdol Ghaffar suggests some misalignment between them. It is unclear whether they will overcome this misalignment or face further friction.

Iranian state media reported that Tehran will likely sell air defense equipment, such as radars and surface-to-air missiles, to Syria on February 24. [9] Iranian Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Gharaei Ashtiani met with the Commander of the Syrian Air Defense Forces Salahuddin Kaser al Ghanem in Tehran on February 22 to discuss these sales. [10] The sale to the Bashar al Assad regime will reportedly include munitions for the Iranian-made 15-Khordad air defense system, which Iran unveiled in 2019. [11] It is unclear how the Assad regime plans to compensate Iran for this equipment. Some anti-regime outlets have reported that Iran sent 15-Khordad systems to Syria as early as 2020, although CTP cannot verify these reports. [12]

These potential sales would be part of the Iranian effort to expand and strengthen the regime's air defense capabilities in Syria to repel Israeli airstrikes. Iranian and Syrian officials have discussed such cooperation since 2020. Iranian state media outlet *PressTV*, which communicates regime messages to Western audiences in English, noted that the 15-Khordad system is capable of detecting fighter jets and combat drones. [13] Issuing the news through the state-run, English-language *PressTV* indicates that the regime wants to highlight the sale to the United States, Israel, and possibly European countries. Iranian leaders may calculate that Israel is less willing to target a weapons shipment entering Syria that is part of an official state-to-state arms sale. Iran may be trying to introduce its own air defense systems to Syria to replace the S-300 systems that the Russians reportedly withdrew from Syria in 2022. [14]

Key Takeaways

- **Iranian regime security forces escalated against prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid after months of relative restraint while concentrating forces in Zahedan. Abdol Hamid deescalated slightly in his Friday sermon, possibly in response to the regime's more aggressive security approach. Some clerics within Abdol Hamid's circle adopted a more aggressive position regarding the regime escalation in Zahedan.**
- **Iranian state media reported that Tehran will sell air defense equipment, such as radars and surface-to-air missiles, to Syria.**
- **At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces.**
- **The Iranian rial fell to a new record low, valuing at around 540,000 rials to the US dollar.**
- **Supreme Cultural Revolution Council Secretary Abdol Hossein Khosrou Panah called for establishing a cohesive state-run media apparatus to quickly and efficiently promote regime narratives publicly.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces on February 24. CTP assesses with high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

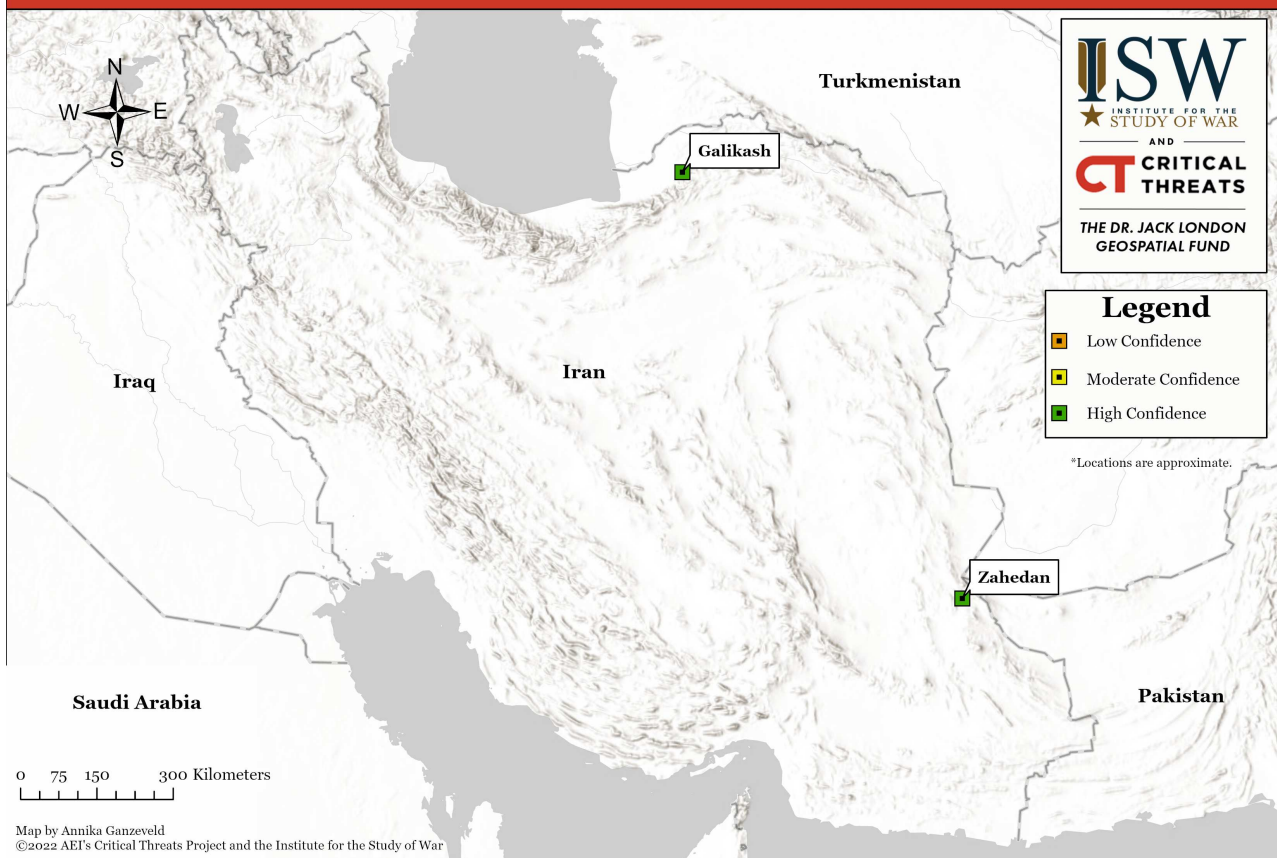
Galikash, Golestan Province [15]

- **Size:** Small

Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province [16]

- **Size:** Medium to Large

Protest Activity in Iran as of February 24, 5:00 PM



The Iranian rial fell to a new record low on February 24, valuing at around 540,000 rials to the US dollar.[17] This depreciation marks a 2.5 percent drop from February 23, when one dollar sold for around 526,000 rials.

Supreme Cultural Revolution Council Secretary Abdol Hossein Khosrou Panah called for establishing a cohesive state-run media apparatus to quickly and efficiently promote regime narratives publicly on February 24.[18] Khosrou Panah argued that doing so would enhance coordination over messaging across Iranian outlets. Khosrou added that this coordination is necessary to counter Western hybrid war, which involves using media and online platforms to stoke popular discontent in Iran, according to regime officials. The Supreme Cultural Revolution Council is a regime policy body responsible for preparing resolutions on cultural, religious, and social affairs and then submitting these proposals to Parliament for approval.

External Security and Military Affairs

Iranian and Iranian-backed forces concentrated at three airports along the M5 highway in Syria possibly to support weapons supply lines through Syria. These forces relocated a weapons stockpile from a warehouse in the Aqraba neighborhood of Damascus city to Damascus International Airport on February 21.[19] The warehouse reportedly contained Iranian surface-to-surface missiles, among other arms and ammunition.[20] An IRGC delegation reportedly met with the Hama airport commander Brigadier General Youssef Ramadan and other Syrian regime officials at Hama military airport on February 22 to discuss Iranian militia operations in Hama Province.[21] Unspecified Iranian-backed militias arrived at the Hama military airport after the meeting. A convoy of Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces personnel finally arrived at Aleppo International Airport on February 22.[22] The convoy reportedly consisted of 60 military vehicles. Aleppo International Airport, Hama military airport, and Damascus International Airport are all located along the Syrian M5 highway, which Iranian-backed militias can use to smuggle weapons along this north-south axis.

IRGC Commander Hossein Salami met with the 4th Vahdati Airbase Commander Brigadier General Javad Valadi on February 24.[23] The Artesh Air Force operates this airbase, which is in Dezful, Khuzestan Province. Valadi briefed Salami on “performance and military power” of the airbase.

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[https://www dot farsnews.ir/news/14011203000960/%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D8%A2%D8%B4%D8%AA%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%82-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D9%86%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C](https://www.farsnews.ir/news/14011203000960/%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D8%A2%D8%B4%D8%AA%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%82-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D9%86%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C)

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%D9%84%D9%85/

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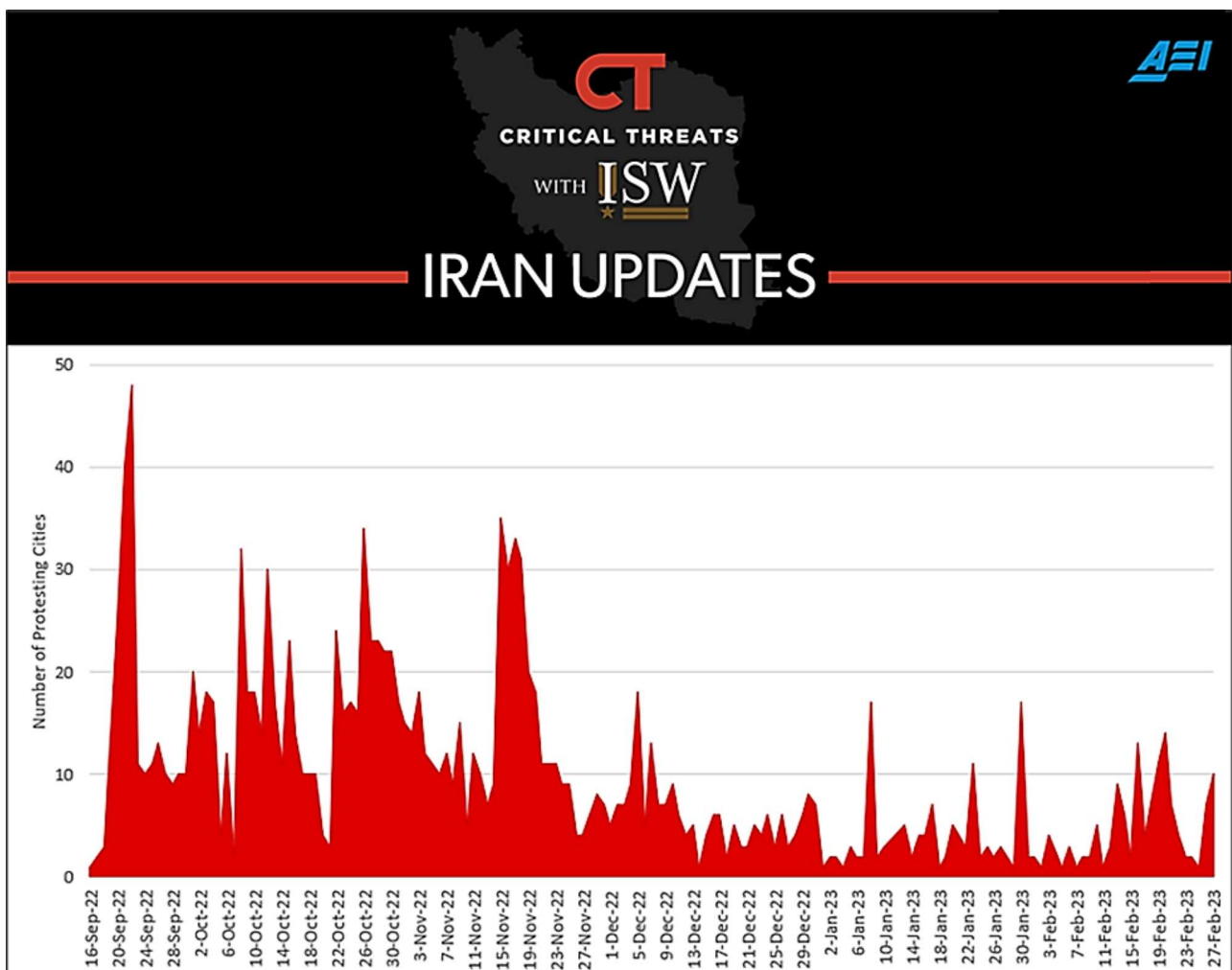
Iran Update, February 27, 2023

Nicholas Carl, Zachary Coles, Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, and Frederick W. Kagan

February 27, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

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

Protest activity in Iran is rising and returning to levels not seen since the end of 2022. CTP has recorded an uptick in demonstrations in recent weeks, most of which have focused on the worsening economic conditions in Iran. Costs of goods and services have risen over 53 percent since February 2022, and the Iranian rial continues to depreciate dramatically.[1] The rial fell to a record low on February 26, valuing at around 600,000 to the US dollar.[2] CTP previously reported that the rial fell to 500,000 for one dollar on February 21.[3] The economic nature of these protests diverges slightly from the rest of the Mahsa Amini movement, which focused primarily (but not exclusively) on socio-cultural and political grievances. These economically motivated protests may nevertheless add momentum to and build on the Mahsa Amini movement, as CTP previously suggested.[4]



Different regime power centers are arguing with one another over how to address economic issues and trying to deflect blame away from themselves. President Ebrahim Raisi emphasized

the role of foreign enemies in driving the worsening currency crisis and lauded the economic performance of his administration on February 27.[5] Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and IRGC-affiliated outlets have contrastingly blamed the Raisi administration in recent days for the poor performance of the economy.[6] Ghalibaf stated on February 27 that Parliament predicted the current crisis weeks ago and made policy recommendations to Raisi that he did not implement. Ghalibaf has regularly warned that the regime must reform to address popular grievances and indicated that he lacks faith in Raisi to resolve these issues in recent months. [7] Regime actors close to Parliament may have organized protests or at least chants against the Raisi administration on February 26 as well. Retired workers gathered in Esfahan and chanted “the [Raisi administration] betrays, Parliament supports.” CTP has not previously observed such chants among protesters.

Ghalibaf may be additionally clashing with IRGC leadership over the role of parastatal organizations in the economy. Ghalibaf explicitly called for state-run economic conglomerates to decrease their involvement in the economy on February 22, correctly diagnosing that these entities have impeded economic efficiency.[8] IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami appeared to respond on February 27, publishing a statement praising the Khatam ol Anbia Construction Headquarters for cooperating with the Raisi administration to complete a water transfer project to Lake Oroumiyeh.[9] The Khatam ol Anbia Construction Headquarters is an IRGC-controlled civil engineering and construction firm that dominates broad swaths of the economy. It is difficult to interpret Salami’s statement as anything other than a response to Ghalibaf given the context in which Salami issued it and the fact that the Khatam ol Anbia Construction Headquarters is one of the parastatal entities to which Ghalibaf was likely referring.

The Raisi administration may replace some of its economic managers with figures closely tied to the IRGC financial network to address the economic crisis. Online rumors have suggested in recent days that Raisi may replace First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber with IRGC financier Parviz Fattah.[10] Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei designated Mokhber as particularly responsible for economic policy during a speech on January 30.[11] The rial has lost about 25 percent of its value since then.[12] Fattah is long-retired IRGC officer and a hardline industrialist who has held leadership positions in several prominent parastatal organizations, including some closely affiliated with the IRGC. If the online rumors are true, Raisi may seek to bring into his administration economic managers who appear capable and could draw on their connections in the parastatal network to try to address the currency crisis. The broader IRGC economic network likely has access to capital and the ability to generate and smuggle hard currency into Iran. That network would likely insist on securing a return on any such investment, however, whether in the form of increased control over portions of the Iranian economy or in the form of greater control over Islamic Republic policy or both. Installing Fattah as a senior economic policy official would likely expand hardliner and possibly IRGC influence in the Raisi administration and over the economy regardless of the possibility of the Guards infusing their own cash into the budget. Doing so would also likely fuel tensions with Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf given his apparent opposition to the dominance of parastatal entities in Iran.

The Raisi administration may be trying to revitalize the nuclear negotiations with the West. Online rumors have claimed in recent days that former Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister for Political Affairs Abbas Araghchi has joined the nuclear negotiating team and traveled to Geneva with Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian.[13] Araghchi is a career Iranian diplomat who played a prominent role in the nuclear negotiations with the West under the Hassan Rouhani administration. CTP cannot confirm these rumors. Raisi may seek to add diplomatic momentum to the negotiations, which could increase confidence in the Iranian economy in the short-term and obtain sanctions relief for Tehran in the event of a deal.

Iran could need months if not longer to secure significant, long-term economic improvement if it reached a nuclear deal with the West. Iran has slowly abrogated its commitments to the nuclear deal since 2019.[14] Resuming compliance to achieve sanctions relief would require that Iran reestablish significant monitoring and verification cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency and resume compliance with the centrifuge requirements and uranium and heavy water enrichment and stockpile limits set by the nuclear deal, among other possible measures. Such

measures would take time to complete and time to verify. Even if an agreement to return to the deal were announced instantly, therefore, Iran could not expect to receive significant economic relief for some time unless the Biden Administration front-loaded the execution of US commitments without waiting for Iran to execute its own.

Iran is likely continuing to reinforce its military presence in Syria. Forces from the Fatemiyoun Division—Iran’s Afghan Shia proxy—arrived at the Imam Ali base in Deir ez Zor Province, Syria from Iraq on February 25 to replace local elements of the Iranian-backed Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 47th Hashemiyoun Brigade stationed at the base.[15] The Imam Ali base is a prominent Iranian military base near the Iraq-Syria border that the IRGC constructed in 2018 and uses to host drones, missiles, and fighters. It is unclear where the 47th Brigade elements went after the Fatemiyoun forces replaced them. They may have returned to their local headquarters in Deir ez Zour City. The Quds Force maintains a much tighter degree of control over the Fatemiyoun militants than it does over SAA forces, suggesting that the Quds Force is trying to strengthen its control over local militia elements at the Imam Ali base and nearby military positions in Deir ez Zor Province.

This activity is part of a larger trend of Iran increasing its paramilitary forces in Syria in recent weeks. CTP has repeatedly observed Iranian-backed militants entering eastern Syria from Iraq via the al Qaim border crossing and dispersing throughout the country under the guise of humanitarian aid convoys since the February 6 earthquake.[16] Lebanese Hezbollah units have also used the same justification to deploy forces from Lebanon likely to Hama and Aleppo Provinces.[17] Some Iranian-backed Iraqi militants have traveled to Aleppo, Homs, and Hama Provinces from other positions in Syria as well, sometimes leaving SAA or Fatemiyoun forces to backfill their positions. [18] CTP has yet to observe indications that Iranian-backed forces are conversely traveling back into Iraq or Lebanon from Syria.

Key Takeaways

- **Protest activity in Iran is rising and returning to levels not seen since the end of 2022.**
- **Different regime power centers are arguing with one another over how to address economic issues and trying to deflect blame away from themselves.**
- **The Raisi administration may replace some of its economic managers with figures closely tied to the IRGC financial network to address the economic crisis.**
- **The Raisi administration may be trying to revitalize the nuclear negotiations with the West.**
- **Iran is likely continuing to reinforce its military presence in Syria.**
- **At least one protest occurred on February 25, eight protests on February 26, and 13 protests on February 27.**

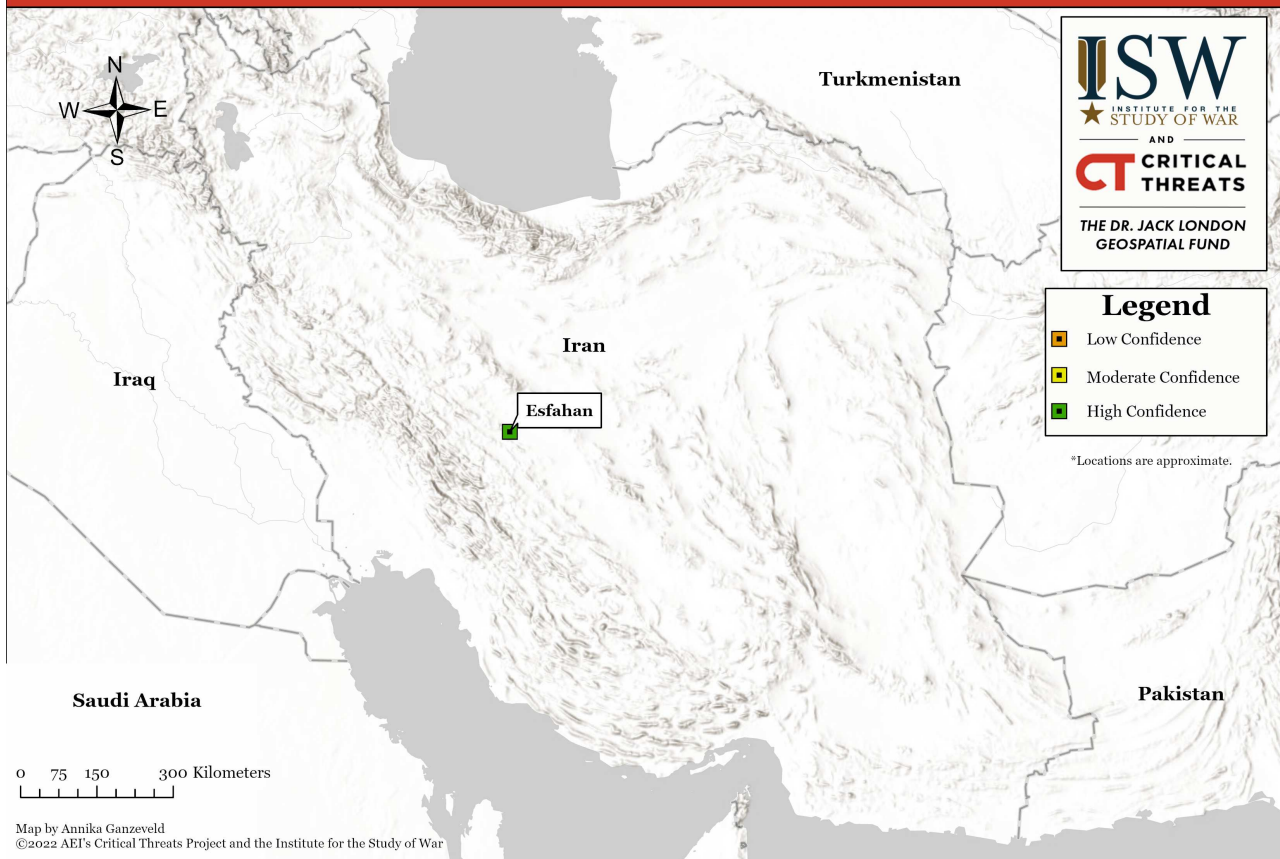
Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least one protest occurred in one city across one province on February 25. CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[19]

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

Protest Activity in Iran as of February 25, 6:00 PM



At least eight protests occurred in seven cities across five provinces on February 26. CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[20]

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

CTP assesses with moderate confidence that protests occurred in the following locations on February 26:

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[21]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Steel industry retirees

Shoush, Khuzestan Province[22]

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

Shoushtar, Khuzestan Province[23]

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

Yasouj, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer Ahmad Province[24]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Municipal workers

Yazd City, Yazd Province[25]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Steel workers

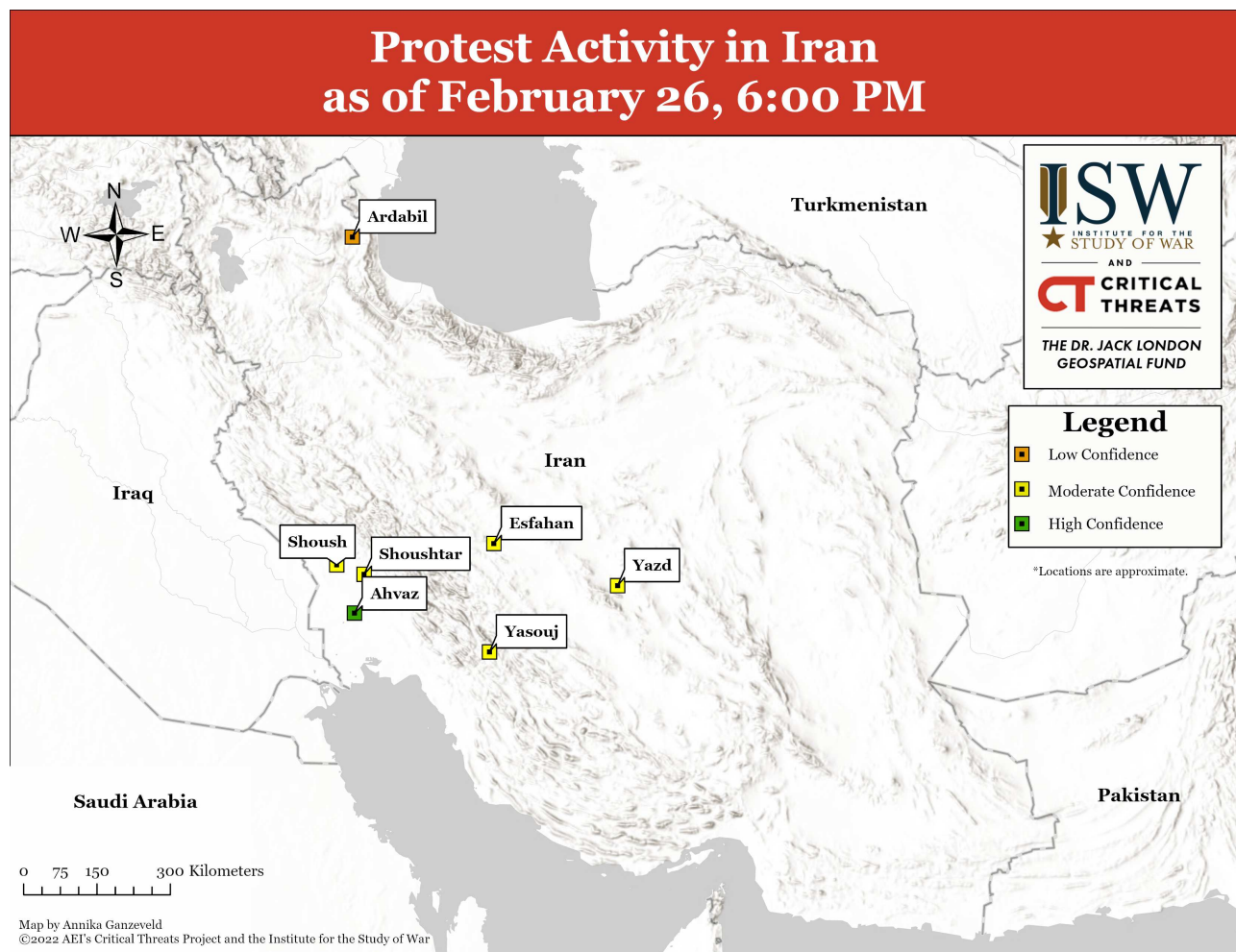
CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Ardabil City, Ardabil Province[26]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Sablan Power Plant workers on strike

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[27]

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



At least thirteen protests occurred in ten cities across ten provinces on February 27. CTP assesses with high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[28]

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

Bandar Abbas, Hormozgan Province[29]

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

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province[30]

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

Arak, Markazi Province[31]

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

Mashhad, Razavi Khorasan Province[32]

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

Tehran City, Tehran Province[33]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** University of Tehran Students
- **Notes:** Students protested the decision to move all classes to virtual learning after Nowruz

Tehran City, Tehran Province[34]

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

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

Hamedan City, Hamedan Province[35]

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

Sirjan, Kerman[36]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Gol-e Gohar Mine workers on strike

Kermanshah City, Kermanshah Province[37]

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

Tehran City, Tehran Province[38]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Ayandeh Bank shareholders

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

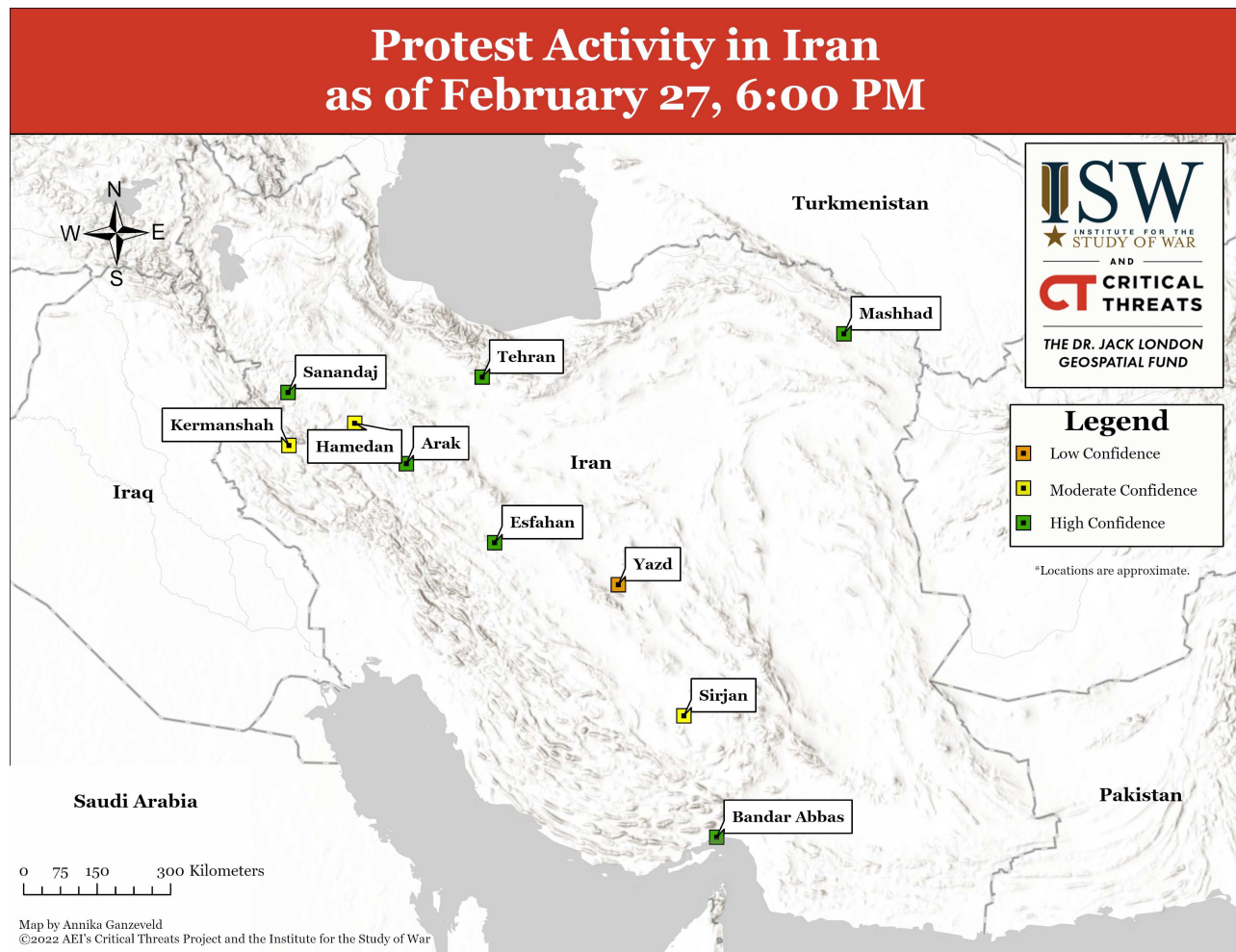
Tehran City, Tehran Province[39]

- **Size:** Small

- **Demographic:** Veterans wounded during the Iran-Iraq war

Yazd City, Yazd Province[40]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Steel workers



Protest coordinators and organizations called for anti-regime demonstrations on the following dates:

March 8 [41]

- **Location:** Countrywide, city centers at 18:00 local time
- **Notes:** Commemorating International Women's Day

March 13-15[42]

- **Location:** Countrywide
- **Notes:** Coincides with a Zoroastrian fire festival—Chahar Shanbeh Souri—on March 15

IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami approved a plan to establish “Ali Akbar battalions” in the IRGC in the next Persian calendar year (March 2023—March 2024). [43] The IRGC operates several different kinds of battalions and tasks them with different missions and responsibilities. The Imam Ali battalions, for instance, are highly trained, anti-riot forces trained to rapidly traverse urban environments, and the Imam Hossein battalions are light infantry designed to fight insurgencies domestically and abroad.[44] It is unclear what function the Ali Akbar battalions would serve. IRGC Coordination Deputy Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Naghdi stated on February 25 that personnel in these battalions will take courses to promote

“growth and excellence.”[45] The coordination deputy position is equivalent to a chief of staff in the US military.

President Ebrahim Raisi appointed Mohammad Amin Aghamiri as Supreme Cyberspace Council secretary on February 25. Aghamiri replaced Abol Hassan Firouzabadi, who held this post since September 2015.[46] Aghamiri previously worked as head of the Radio Communications Regulatory Organization, deputy information and communications technology minister for innovation, and head of a Basij branch at Sharif University.[47] The Supreme Cyberspace Council is a regime policy body responsible for enforcing state censorship. Raisi called on Aghamiri to develop the national intranet and review censorship policies “with an emphasis on religious and revolutionary values.”[48] Raisi also ordered Aghamiri to “effectively deal with the enemy’s intellectual-cultural invasion,” highlighting Raisi’s emphasis on trying to indoctrinate the Iranian population.[49]

Law Enforcement Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan is continuing to try to reassert regime control in Sistan and Baluchistan Province. Radan appointed Doust Ali Jalilian as Sistan and Baluchistan Provincial LEC Commander on February 26—two days after security personnel escalated against protesters in Zahedan.[50] Jalilian previously served as a local LEC commander in Tehran and replaced Brigadier General Mohammad Ghanbari, who served less than four months in the role.[51] Radan likely sought to replace Ghanbari, whom Radan’s predecessor appointed, with his own trusted officer. Radan warned that the regime would not permit individuals to “cross [its] red lines” and framed anti-regime protests as an obstacle to national development. [52] Radan separately stressed the importance of religious unity and cooperation with local provincial tribe leaders on February 27.[53]

External Security and Military Affairs

Iraqi Defense Minister Thabet Mohammad Saeed al Abbasi paid an official visit to Iran on February 25-27, possibly to discuss arms deals and training assistance.[54] Iranian political and security officials expressed their readiness support the Iraqi defense industry and military training. Abbasi met with the following individuals:

- President Ebrahim Raisi
- Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Gharaei Ashtiani
- Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri
- IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami
- Artesh Commander Major General Abdol Rahim Mousavi.

Ali Akbar Velayati—a senior international affairs adviser to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—held a phone call with Hamas Political Bureau Chief Ismail Haniyeh on February 26.

[55] Hamas-run media reported that Velayati and Haniyeh discussed political and military developments related to the recent uptick in violence in Palestine.[56] Khamenei commonly uses Velayati as his personal envoy abroad and especially to members of the Axis of Resistance and Palestinian groups.

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[2] <https://www.reuters.com/markets/currencies/iran-rial-plunges-new-lows-am...>

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

[5] <https://president.ir/fa/142604>

[6] www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/716838; <http://sahebkhavar.ir/news/58979484>; <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/12/07/2859289>

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Iran Update, February 28, 2023

Iran Update, February 28, 2023

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

February 28, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

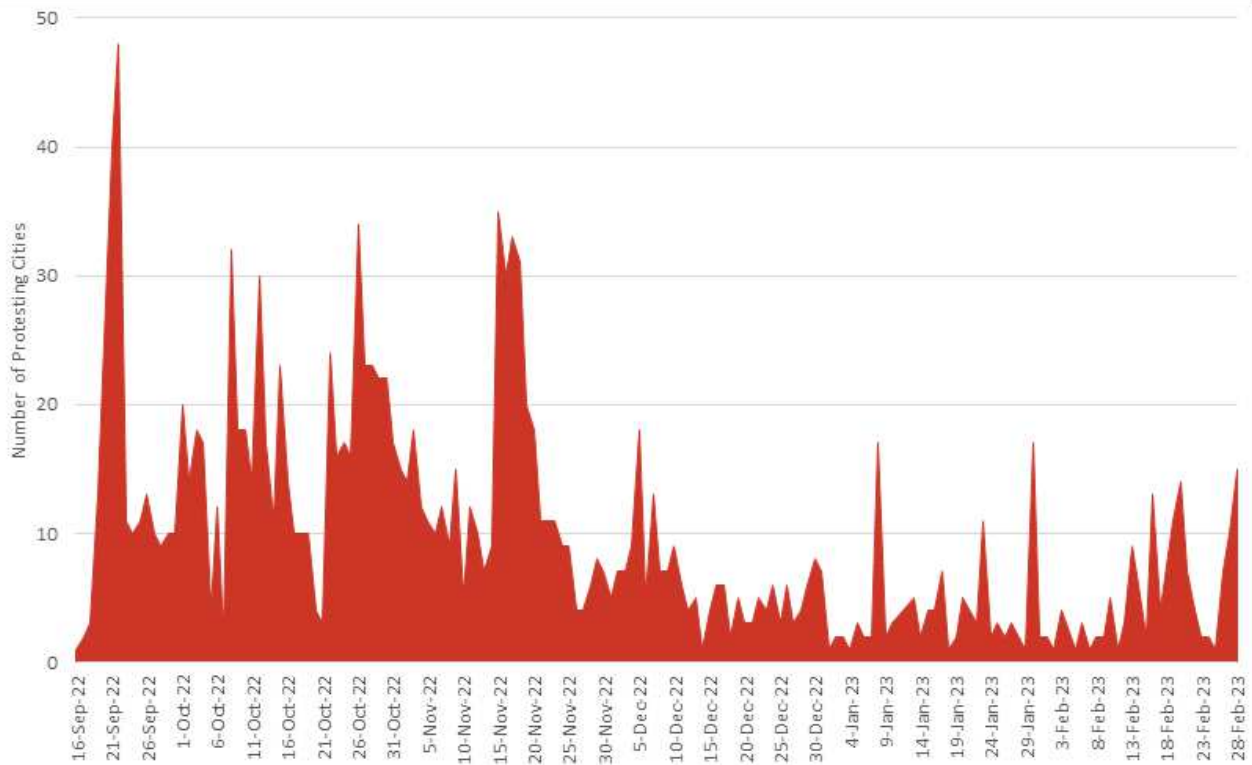
The Iran Updates are produced by the Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute with support from the Institute for the Study of War (ISW). To receive Iran Updates via email, please subscribe [here](#).

Contributors: Anya Caraiani and James Motamed

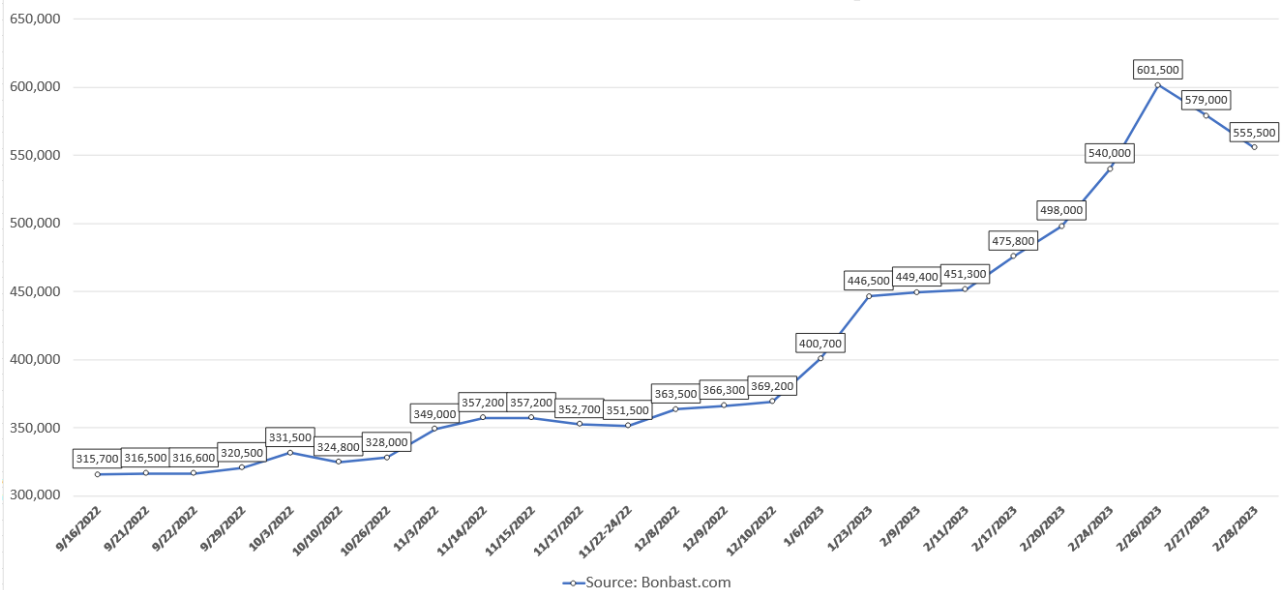
Regime incompetence and mismanagement is driving further protest activity and popular frustration toward the regime and may unite citizens with disparate grievances. The regime is facing several concurrent crises over its mishandling of economic, ecological, and security issues. The regime is continuing to victimize its people with a range of different problems, stoking anti-regime frustration across many different demographics.

CTP recorded 20 protests across 14 provinces on February 28, 18 of which focused on Iran's deteriorating economic conditions. The extent and scale of these demonstrations supports CTP's previous assessment that protest activity in Iran is rising and returning to levels not seen since the end of 2022, and economic frustrations are driving much of this unrest.[1] The value of the Iranian rial appreciated slightly to 556,500 against the US dollar on February 28—an improvement from a record low of roughly 600,000 on February 26—following the reported intervention of the Central Bank of Iran to stabilize the currency, although the Raisi administration has not yet articulated a clear policy to meaningfully improve the economy.[2] An Iranian parliamentarian characterized Raisi's economic strategy as “emotional—not a plan based on science and decisive decisions” on February 28, echoing previous criticisms of Raisi's cabinet in recent days.[3]

IRAN UPDATES



Rials to US Dollar - Unofficial Exchange Rates



Iranian social media users are framing Iran's ecological issues as another consequence of regime incompetence in response to the death of a critically endangered 10-month-old Asiatic cheetah cub named Pirouz on February 28.[4] Pirouz, whose name means "victory," was a symbol of hope among many Iranian dissidents and featured in Shervin Hajipour's popular protest song "Baraye"—the unofficial anthem of the Mahsa Amini protest movement.[5] A senior official at Iran's Environmental Protection Organization previously stated in late 2022 that the regime did not have "the time nor money" to care for Pirouz.[6] Iranian leaders have long suppressed and silenced environmental activists due to these leaders' paranoia and fear of their own population. The regime arrested wildlife conservationists who were monitoring endangered species, including Asiatic cheetah, in January 2018.[7] The regime also reportedly excluded these environmental activists from the mass amnesty that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei issued on February 5.[8]

The regime has furthermore failed to protect hundreds of Iranian women going to school in recent months. Hundreds of schoolgirls in at least 10 Iranian cities have experienced poisoning symptoms since late 2022.[9] Victims experience symptoms such as coughing, smelling a "tangerine-like smell," lethargy, numbness, and shaking.[10] Some victims have been hospitalized.[11] Law Enforcement Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan announced on February 28 that the Law Enforcement Command (LEC) is investigating these countrywide incidents of chemical poisoning but noted that it had not yet arrested suspected perpetrators.[12] Some social media users have suggested that religious extremists have perpetrated the attack to dissuade Iranian females from obtaining an education.[13] Victims' parents protested in Qom and criticized the government response on February 14, as CTP previously reported.[14] The pro-Pahlavi Iranian Neighborhood United Front called for countrywide demonstrations in response to the poisonings.[15]

Iran has intensified efforts to expand its influence over the Iraqi state security services in recent days. Iraqi Defense Minister Thabet Mohammad Saeed al Abbasi paid an official visit to Tehran on February 25-27, as CTP previously reported, likely to discuss Iran providing arms and military training to Iraq.[16] Iranian leaders may seek to sell basic ground forces equipment that the regime produces domestically, such as ammunition, artillery, and small arms, and provide training to generate much-needed revenue and increase Iranian influence over the Iraqi security forces. Iranian and Russian officials have discussed in recent weeks cooperating to manufacture helicopters, which Iran could also eventually sell to Iraq.[17] Social media rumors have furthermore reported in recent days that the Iraqi Parliament may soon consider legislation that would further institutionalize the Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in the Iraqi security structure.[18] The PMF is a loose umbrella of Shia militias—many of whom Iran directs and materially supports—that operate independently of the Iraqi central government. The draft legislation reportedly permits the PMF to independently pursue arms deals with foreign sellers, although CTP cannot confirm these rumors presently. The parliamentary committee preparing the draft legislation reportedly has ties to the Iran-backed Badr Organization, which Iranian proxy Hadi al Ameri leads.[19] These efforts may be part of a larger Iranian strategy to build a cohesive coalition of proxy and partner militias throughout the region to project strength and pursue strategic objectives. CTP will explore this assessment in greater detail in an upcoming report.

Key Takeaways

- **Regime incompetence and mismanagement is driving further protest activity and popular frustration toward the regime and may unite citizens with disparate grievances.**
- **Iran has intensified efforts to expand its influence over the Iraqi state security services in recent days.**
- **At least 20 protests occurred in 15 cities across 14 provinces on February 28.**
- **The *Wall Street Journal* reported on February 28 that the International Atomic Energy Organization (IAEA) confirmed the discovery of traces of 84-percent enriched uranium--near weapons-grade--at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant in a confidential report circulated among member states.**
- **The IRGC Aerospace Force and Artesh Air Defense Force conducted an annual "Velayat Sky Defenders" joint air defense exercises on February 28.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least 20 protests occurred in 15 cities across 14 provinces on February 28. CTP assesses with high to moderate confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Karaj, Alborz Province[20]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Civil servant retirees

Shahr-e Kord, Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari[21]

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

Tabriz, East Azerbaijan[22]

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

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[23]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Civil servant retirees
- **Chants:** “Inept Raisi, go back to the seminary”

Kermanshah City, Kermanshah Province[24]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Civil servant retirees
- **Chants:** “Raisi, feel ashamed, leave the country”

Arak, Markazi Province[25]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Civil servant retirees

Tehran City, Tehran Province[26]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Individuals who are owed remittances by Azerbaijan Khodro automobile company
- **Notes:** Strike and protests

Tehran City, Tehran Province[27]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** University of Tehran students
- **Notes:** Students protested the decision to move all classes to virtual learning after Nowruz

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

Ardabil City, Ardabil Province[28]

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

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[29]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Esfahan Art University students

Ghazvin City, Ghazvin Province[30]

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

Rasht, Gilan Province[31]

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

Ilam City, Ilam Province[32]

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

Marivan, Kurdistan Province[33]

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

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province[34]

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

Babol, Mazandaran Province[35]

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

Tehran City, Tehran Province[36]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Moradabad landowners

Tehran City, Tehran Province[37]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Waste workers
- **Notes:** Strike and protest. Pro-Khamenei and Khomeini banners

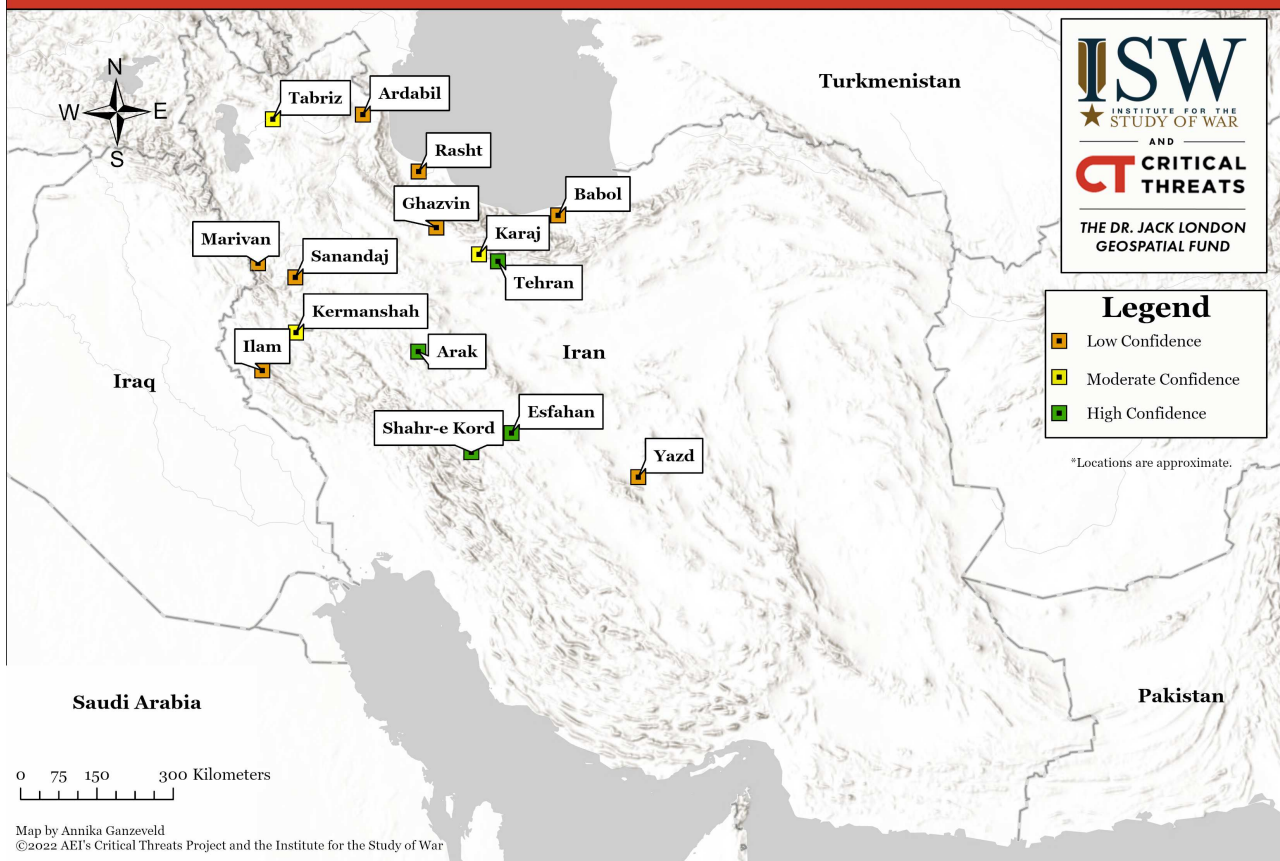
Yazd City, Yazd Province[38]

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

Yazd City, Yazd Province[39]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Steel workers

Protest Activity in Iran as of February 28, 5:00 PM



Protest coordinators and organizations called for anti-regime demonstrations on the following dates:

March 1[40]

- **Notes:** Protests against student chemical poisonings, environmental mismanagement, economic corruption, and protester arrests

March 8[41]

- **Location:** Countrywide, city centers at 18:00 local time
- **Notes:** Commemorating International Women's Day

March 13-15[42]

- **Location:** Countrywide
- **Notes:** Coincides with a Zoroastrian fire festival—Chahar Shanbeh Souri—on March 15

Social media accounts reported on February 28 that an individual set themselves aflame in public in Kashmar, Khorasan Razavi Province.[43] The individual was reportedly protesting against the poor economic conditions.

Economic Affairs

The Supreme Economic Coordination Council met to discuss Iran's economic problems on February 26. The council, which is chaired by President Ebrahim Raisi, Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, and Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei, emphasized the

importance of cross-branch cooperation between the judiciary, parliament, and the Raisi administration to control exchange rates and provide currency for the import of goods. [44] Economic Affairs and Finance Minister Ehsan Khandouzi characterized exchange rates as “inaccurate” in the Forex Management Integrated System.[45]

Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf publicly denounced Program and Budgeting Organization Head Massoud Mir Kazemi’s allegation that Parliament had increased the yearly fiscal budget by roughly four quadrillion rials (7.142 billion US dollars). Ghalibaf added that “if the budget ceiling goes up, inflation will increase, and disharmony will arise.”[46] It is possible that Iranian leadership is renegotiating the fiscal budget as inflation rates and the depreciation of the rial have reduced Iranian purchasing power. Simply adding to the budget, however, risks fueling inflation and further devaluing the rial, worsening the vicious economic circle.

Nuclear Program

The *Wall Street Journal* reported on February 28 that the International Atomic Energy Organization (IAEA) confirmed the discovery of traces of 84-percent enriched uranium--near weapons-grade--at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant in a confidential report circulated among member states.[47] The IAEA report stated that the regime experimented with producing weapons-grade uranium at the same time as it had altered the connections between cascades of IR-6 centrifuges at Fordow. An unidentified individual connected to the IAEA stated that the amount of 84-percent enriched uranium produced thus far is likely very small. Iran’s stockpile of 60-percent enriched uranium has increased to 87.5 kilograms; more than triple the amount the IAEA considers a “significant quantity” of highly enriched uranium (even if not weapons-grade) needed to produce a single compact nuclear explosive.[48] US Under Secretary of Defense Colin Kahl estimated on February 28 that the Iran could produce enough fissile material for a single traditional nuclear weapon in 12 days.[49]

External Security and Military Affairs

The IRGC Quds Force and Syrian Arab Army (SAA) reportedly cooperated to arrest the commander of the Iranian-backed SAA 47th Hashemiyoun Brigade in Deir ez Zour Province on February 25, ostensibly on drug trafficking and smuggling charges.[50] Syrian media suggested that the newly appointed local Quds Force commander in the province—known by the pseudonym “Hajj Abbas”—had personal disputes with the 47th Brigade commander, who is close to Hajj Abbas’ predecessor, Hajj Askar. The IRGC appointed Hajj Abbas to replace Hajj Askar on February 2, as CTP previously reported.[51] Former Syrian officer Ahmed Rahal claimed that the IRGC dismissed Hajj Askar over his failure to protect Iranian convoys crossing the Iraq-Syria border from Israeli airstrikes. These explanations do not explain the reported redeployment of the 47th Brigade and its replacement by elements of Iran’s Afghan Fatemiyoun units that CTP reported on February 27th.[52]

The LEC Border Guard sent a delegation to the UAE on February 28.[53] Iranian state media reported that the delegation will discuss security cooperation, such as combatting organized crime and smuggling, with its Emirati counterparts.

The IRGC Aerospace Force and Artesh Air Defense Force conducted an annual “Velayat Sky Defenders” joint air defense exercises on February 28. Iranian media circulated images of the Khordad 3 and 15 air defense systems targeting cruise missiles and detecting and intercepting drones.[54] Brigadier General Abbas Faraj Pour, the exercises’ spokesperson, added that the IRGC Aerospace Force and Artesh Air Defense Force additionally participated in cyber warfare training on this date.[55]

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