



Iran Update, February 17, 2023

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

February 17, 2023

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](#).

Contributor: 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.^[i] 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.^[ii] 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."^[iii] 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.^[iv] Shipments to Abu Kamal and Deir Ezzour allegedly included munitions and unspecified logistical equipment according to SOHR.^[v] Iran-backed militias transported weapons shipments in humanitarian aid convoys for earthquake victims as CTP previously reported.^[vi]

CTP is currently considering three possible courses of action that Iranian-backed proxies may take. Weapons shipments containing short-range munitions may be used to target US and Coalition targets in the vicinity of Deir Ezzour. 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.^[vii] 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.^[viii] 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.^[ix] 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^[x]

Size: Small

Khash, Sistan and Baluchistan Province^[xi]

Size: Small

Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province^[xii]

Size: Medium

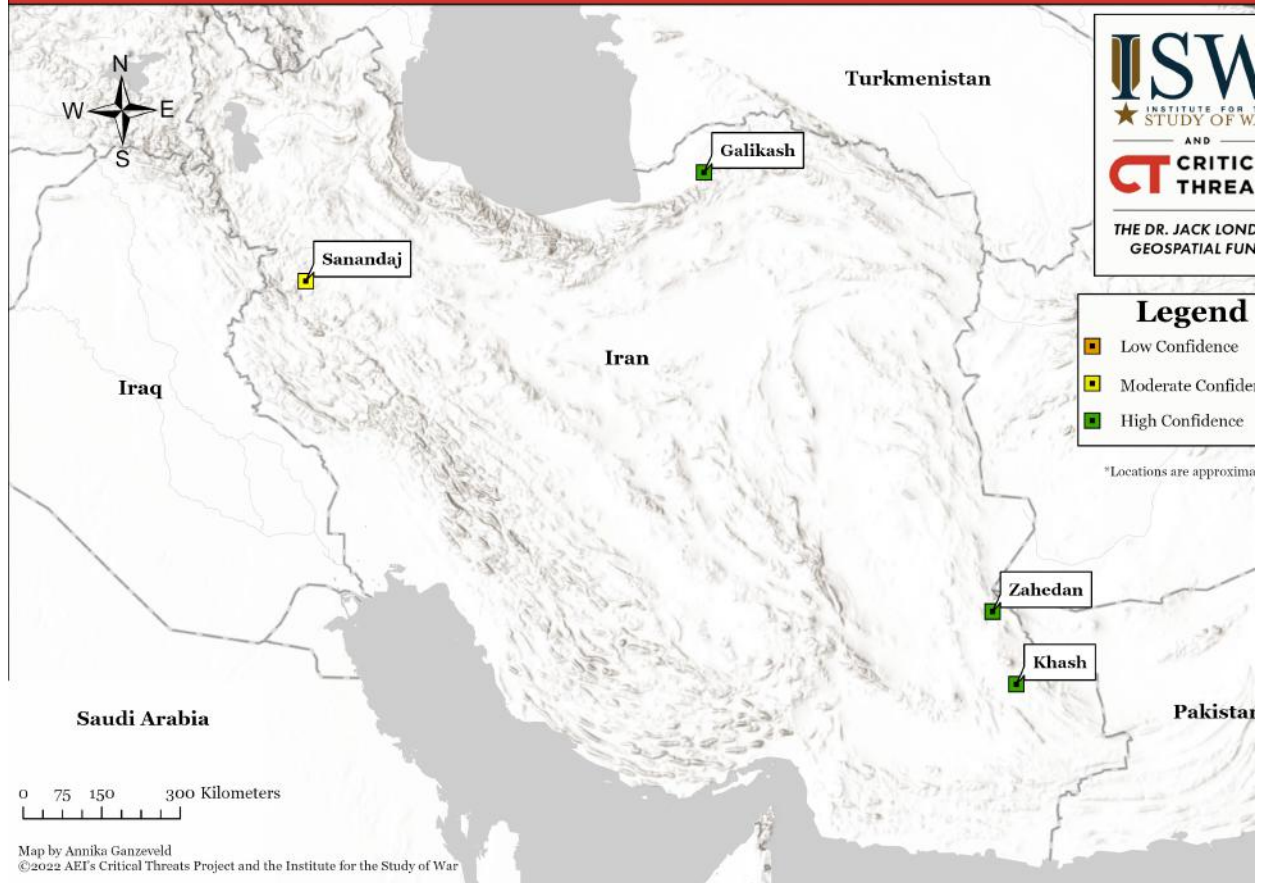
Notes: Protests follow Prominent Sunni Cleric Abdol Hamid's weekly Friday prayer sermon

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

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province^[xiii]

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.^[xiv] 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.^[xv] Law Enforcement Command Border Guard Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Ali Goudarzi additionally noted that Iran was continuing to strengthen its drone and naval capabilities.^[xvi]

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.^[xvii] 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.^[xviii]

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.^[xix] 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.^[xx]

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.^[xxi] Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian separately described the agreements as “a new horizon” on the same date.^[xxii]

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.^[xxiii]

[View Citations](#)