



Iran Update, February 9, 2023

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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.

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 Province¹⁷

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

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

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province¹⁸

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



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 Link to shapefile: <https://criticalthreats.imeetcentral.com/ctp-iswresearch/folder/WzlwLDE1NzcxNDQxXQ/WzlsODQxMzlyNTVd/>

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=mMbAjVvkOGyIPmwkffl1NA;
https://twitter.com/javanane_g/status/1622310853109219328?s=20&t=cHiat5CMwWJ4_Cy_HsEUMQ;
<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=abb38d5d5dfe919544e0fc8626c5d02e7ed720e1b62d1ba3134574f1b2fc8f3d>
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%20Officer%20Guide%20ISW%20May%2011%202022.pdf>
¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/stephanekenech/status/1612454481592983552?t=ElbSfpcvFnmUK8YpRvDnhw&s=19>
¹⁶ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-8-2023>
¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1623633185450893314?cxt=HHwWhICxhfTxpogtAAAA>;
<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1623562106023866368?cxt=HHwWgMCzhcXlhogtAAAA>;
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https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1623689610076332034?cxt=HHwWhIC9oaDGWlgtAAAA
¹⁸ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1623633865246924801?cxt=HHwWgoCz9byZp4gtAAAA>;
https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1623643443388903426?cxt=HHwWhMCzOf_Gq4gtAAAA
¹⁹ https://twitter.com/UYI_fa/status/1622544042734104576?s=20&t=Ex4C157bDrs_LMI5ofDOxg;
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https://twitter.com/javanane_g/status/1622310853109219328?s=20&t=cHiat5CMwWJ4_Cy_HsEUMQ
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-minister-about-anti-government-protests-and-global-relati>
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>