



Iran Update, February 24, 2023

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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

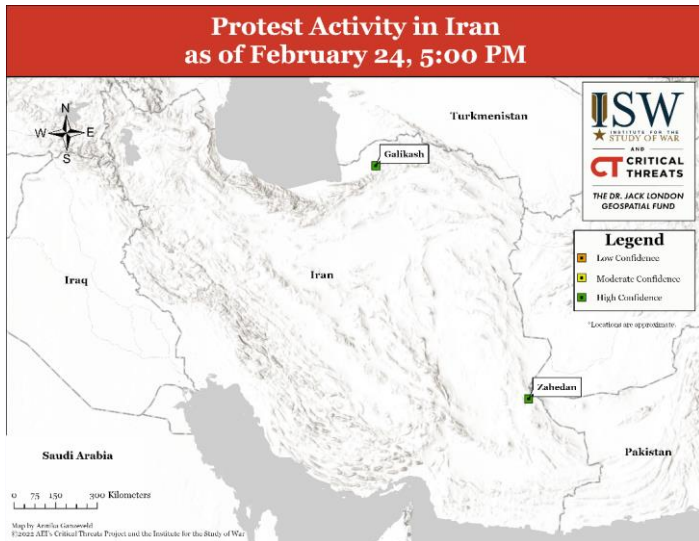
At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces on February 24. CTP assesses with high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Galikash, Golestan Province¹⁵

- **Size:** Small

Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province¹⁶

- **Size:** Medium to Large



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<https://criticalthreats.imeetcentral.com/ctp-iswresearch/folder/WzlwLDE1NzcwNDQxXQ/WzlsODQxNzQ1NzFd/>

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 Dezfoul, Khuzestan Province. Valadi briefed Salami on “performance and military power” of the airbase.

¹ https://t.me/fa_UYI/270;
https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1629020627599327232?ctx=HHwWglC8_afouJstAAAA;
https://t.me/ic_UYI/828;
https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1629037684524998662?ctx=HHwWjCz_ZPJWJstAAAA;
https://t.me/ic_UYI/826;
<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1629093442331594752?ctx=HHwWgMC-gdj22ZstAAAA>
² https://twitter.com/UYI_fa/status/1629087185621209089;
<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1629023382623715328?ctx=HHwWglC8wdalupstAAAA>
³ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1629061141870542848?ctx=HHwWglCw6caey5stAAAA>
⁴ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-september-30>
⁵ <https://abdolhamid dot net/persian/2023/02/24/13457/>
⁶ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-17-2023>
⁷ <https://abdolhamid dot net/persian/2023/02/24/13457/>
⁸ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1629038935040032770?ctx=HHwWhIC8hfmRwZstAAAA ;>
https://t.me/fa_UYI/273
⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-likely-supply-air-defence-missiles-syria-iranian-state-tv-2023-02-24/>
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<https://www dot presstv.ir/Detail/2023/02/24/698826/Iran-missile-system-Syria>
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¹⁰ <https://defapress dot ir/fa/news/574968/%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-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%AB%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D9%87-%D9%85%D9%87%D9%85-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA>
<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>

¹¹ https://www.armyrecognition.com/june_2019_global_defense_security_army_news_industry/iran_unveils_new_khordad_15_air_defense_missile_system.html

¹² <https://iranwire dot com/en/features/67672>

¹³ <https://www dot presstv.ir/Detail/2023/02/24/698826/Iran-missile-system-Syria>

¹⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/19/world/middleeast/russia-syria-israel-ukraine.html>

¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1629109178126958593?ctx=HHwWgoCw6dCK4ZstAAAA;>

https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1629115159770804225?ctx=HHwWgsC9xefm45stAAAA;

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https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1629095661223247880?cxt=HHwWklC8hez32pstAAAA
¹⁶ https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1629097076628852736?cxt=HHwWgMC40Z3K25stAAAA;
https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1629107885954179075?cxt=HHwWhoCxsbw_4JstAAAA;
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<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1629099645837185027?cxt=HHwWhsC>

¹⁷ [www.bonbast dot com/historical](http://www.bonbast.com/historical)

¹⁸ [http://www.defapress dot ir/fa/news/575149](http://www.defapress.com/ir/fa/news/575149)

¹⁹ [https://qasioun-news dot com/ar/articles/260609](https://qasioun-news.com/ar/articles/260609)

²⁰ [https://qasioun-news dot com/ar/articles/260609](https://qasioun-news.com/ar/articles/260609)

²¹ [https://thiqa-agency dot com/%D9%88%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A5/](https://thiqa-agency.com/%D9%88%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A5/)

²² [https://thiqa-agency dot com/%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AA-%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%84-%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%85/](https://thiqa-agency.com/%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AA-%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%84-%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%85/)

²³ [http://www.defapress dot ir/fa/news/575247](http://www.defapress.com/ir/fa/news/575247)