



Iran Crisis Update, February 3, 2023

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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 Province⁸

- **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 Province⁹

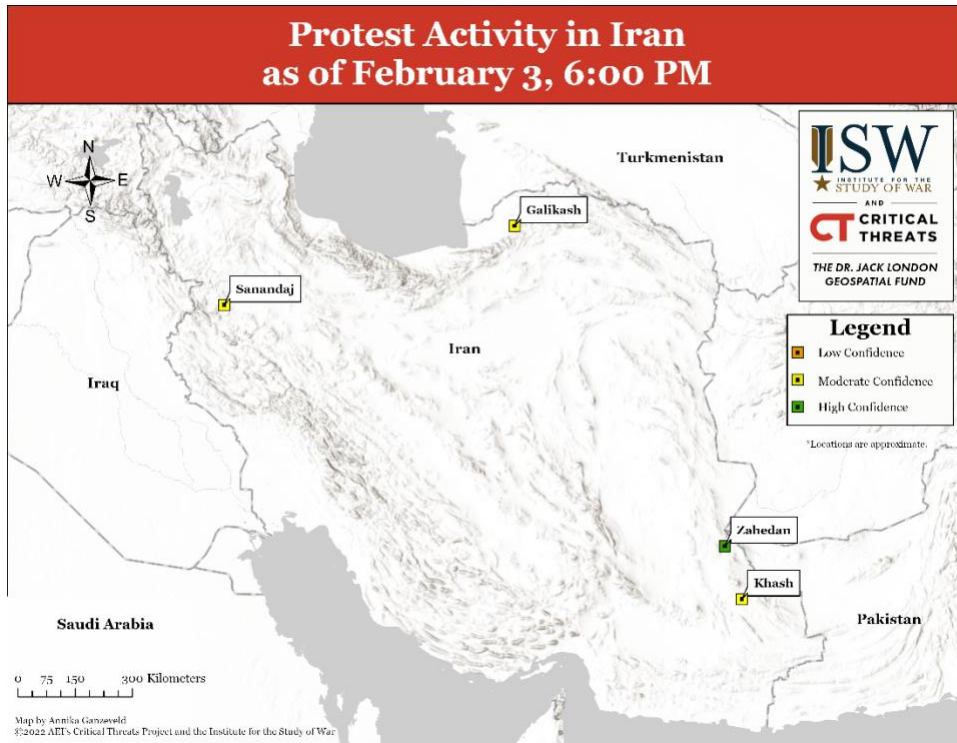
- **Size:** Small
- **Notes:** Protesters gathered to express support for Sunni cleric Moulana Gargij.

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province¹⁰

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

Khash, Sistan and Baluchistan Province¹¹

- **Size:** Small



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>

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- ² <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-sunni-cleric-discrediting-leaked-document/32157807.html>;
<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-30-2023>; <https://iranwire.com/fa/news-1/113220-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D9%88-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%AC/>
- ⁷ <https://t.co/oc7WUYDFfn>; <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1621453192612515845>
- ⁸ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1621485628209635331?cxt=HHwWhoCx3c-l1oAtAAAA>;
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https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1621503830021271557?cxt=HHwWisDT5Y3J3oAtAAAA;
- ⁹ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1621538933615087618?cxt=HHwWhMC--bPE7oAtAAAA>
- ¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1621459430469517313?cxt=HHwWgoC-rduwyoAtAAAA>;
https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1621487682550374402?cxt=HHwWhICx4Zmd14AtAAAA;
<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1621458879044255745?cxt=HHwWgoCw9c6QyoAtAAAA>;
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- ¹¹ https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1621497924667457541?cxt=HHwWioCyva_x24AtAAAA;
https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1621517558540279811?cxt=HHwWhoDRnZvo5IAtAAAA;
https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1621503930508390403?cxt=HHwWhsDRvfr03oAtAAAA
- ¹² https://twitter.com/no_itsmyturn/status/1621251733211987971
- ¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/29/drone-attack-hits-iran-ammunition-factory-reports>
- 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-attack.html>
- ¹⁶ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-february-1-2023>
- ¹⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iaea-report-chides-iran-undeclared-change-fordow-uranium-enrichment-set-up-2023-02-01/>
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[http://www sharqdaily com/section-news-3/845627](http://www.sharqdaily.com/section-news-3/845627)
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