



Iran Crisis Update, January 31, 2023

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Iranian officials have threatened Ukraine and unnamed regional states for allegedly cooperating with Israel in response to the reported Israeli drone strike on a military munitions factory in Esfahan on January 28.¹ An unidentified source told Nour News Agency, which is affiliated with the Supreme National Security Council, on January 31 that Tehran may reevaluate its relationship with Kiev and changes its ostensibly neutral policy toward the Russian invasion of Ukraine.² The source was responding to Ukrainian Presidential Adviser Mykhailo Podolyak suggesting that the Israeli strike was retaliation for Iranian military support to Russia.³ Nour News Agency characterized Podolyak's statements as tantamount to an admission of responsibility for the attack. There is no evidence that Ukraine was informed of or complicit in the attack. CTP does not assess that Tehran will escalate against Ukraine for Podolyak's comments but rather that Iran will continue to provide military support to Russia.

Iranian policy toward the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been characterized by unequivocal military material support in the form of hundreds of kamikaze drones that Tehran has blithely denied providing. The Iranian regime could use the Israeli strike and Podolyak's comments to bring its public position closer to its actual policy, attempting to justify ex post facto the provision of weapons Russia has used to target Ukrainian civilian infrastructure in a manner widely regarded as contravening international law.⁴ It is unclear why Iran has been vainly attempting to obfuscate its involvement in Russia's war against Ukraine to this point, however, and it is possible that Tehran will simply continue to do so.

Intelligence and Security Minister Esmail Khatib separately on January 30 warned unnamed neighboring states to avoid cooperation with Israel "to maintain their own security"—likely referencing Iranian allegations that Israeli intelligence services use Azerbaijan and Iraqi Kurdistan to organize and support covert operations in Iran.⁵

Iranian officials are securitizing their disaster response to the 5.9-magnitude earthquake that occurred in Khoy, West Azerbaijan Province on January 28. West Azerbaijan Provincial Law Enforcement Commander Brigadier General Rahim Jahan Bakhsh announced on January 31 the deployment of three units of the LEC Special Units to Khoy to "provide security and prevent theft."⁶ The LEC Special Units are a highly trained, anti-riot force that the regime uses heavily in its protest crackdowns. The Gilan Neighborhood Youth separately reported on January 30 that Basij members attacked and dispersed crowds seeking earthquake aid in Khoy.⁷ The regime is especially sensitive to unrest in northwestern Iran because much

of the recent protest activity concentrated there and resonated among Iranian Kurds. Anti-regime Kurdish militant groups, such as the Kurdistan Free Life Party, have historically operated in the region as well.

President Ebrahim Raisi continues to misdiagnose the root problems that have driven the recent protests. Iranian officials in recent months have defined the unrest as a sociocultural and religious issue and seem to believe that the solution is trying to further ideologize the population. Raisi reiterated on January 31 the need to pursue “explanation jihad”—the regime theory that indoctrinating and ideologizing the population, especially Iranian youth, will increase public support for the political establishment and reduce anti-regime sentiment.⁸ Raisi participated in a ceremony unveiling a digital encyclopedia about Ruhollah Khomeini and his writings. Raisi lauded the initiative, which he claimed will help spread Khomeinist ideology to future generations.⁹ Iranian leaders viewing the protests through this lens will impede—if not prevent entirely—any serious effort to address many popular grievances.

Key Takeaways

- Iranian officials have threatened Ukraine and unnamed regional states for allegedly cooperating with Israel in response to the reported Israeli drone strike on a military munition factory in Esfahan.
- Iranian officials are securitizing their disaster response to the 5.9-magnitude earthquake that occurred in Khoy, West Azerbaijan Province.
- President Ebrahim Raisi continues to misdiagnose the root problems that have driven the recent protests.
- At least three protests occurred in two cities across two provinces.
- Several parliamentarians criticized the Raisi administration for its handling of the economy.
- The Central Bank raised the three-year maximum interest rate on bank deposits from 18 percent to 22.5 percent.
- Iranian and Iranian-backed militants in Deir ez Zour Province ordered their forces to prepare to attack US forces at the al Omar oil field or Koniko gas fields in eastern Syria, according to local Syria outlets.
- Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov announced that Russia will include Iran in future rapprochement discussions between Syria and Turkey.
- Parliamentarian Mohammad Sargazi described plans to expel Afghan nationals from Sistan and Baluchistan Province if the Afghan Taliban does not provide Iran water rights to the Helmand River.

Protest Activity

At least three protests occurred in two cities across two provinces on January 31. CTP assesses with moderate confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Tehran City, Tehran Province¹⁰

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

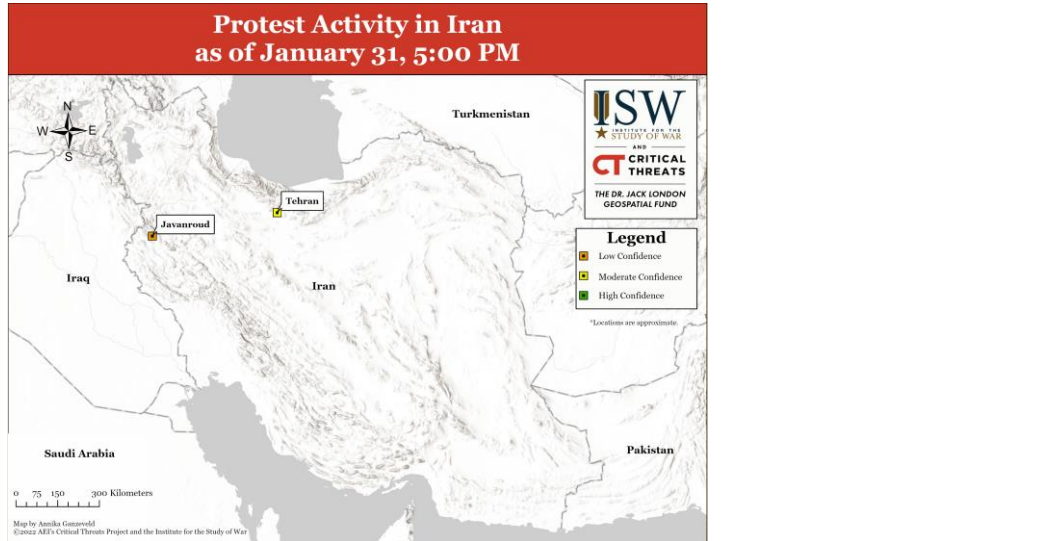
CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Javanroud, Kermanshah Province¹¹

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Female students

Javanroud, Kermanshah Province¹²

- Size: Small



Several parliamentarians criticized the Raisi administration for its handling of the economy on January 31. These lawmakers include Jalal Mahmoud Zadeh, Javad Nik Beyn, Mohammad Safari Melak Miyan, and Rouhollah Izadkhah.¹³ Malek Miyan and Mahmoud Zadeh have supported various hardliner policies and attacks on the Rouhani administration previously.¹⁴ Nik Beyn specifically attacked the Raisi administration for failing to designate a single individual to manage economic policy, citing the overlapping responsibilities between First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber, Vice President for Economic Affairs Mohsen Rezaei, and Economy and Finance Minister Ehsan Khandouzi. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei designated Mokhber as responsible for economic policy on January 30, as CTP previously reported, possibly to begin clarifying this confusion in the regime.¹⁵ It would be particularly noteworthy if Khamenei did indeed engage personally to resolve this issue since it may suggest Khamenei's frustration with President Ebrahim Raisi for failing to cohere his administration.

Parliamentary attacks against an Iranian president for his handling of the economy (among other things) are common; lawmakers regularly criticized former President Hassan Rouhani in the same way.¹⁶ Previous hardline Iranian presidents, including Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, also came in for harsh attacks.¹⁷ These criticisms are noteworthy, however, given that Raisi is a top contender to succeed Khamenei as supreme leader. These parliamentarians are treating Raisi like any other Iranian president rather than the supreme-leader-to-be. If Raisi's presidency follows the normal trajectory of his predecessors he will face increasingly acrimonious attacks in Parliament and may find himself alienated from the supreme leader as well, as almost all his predecessors did.

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The Central Bank raised the three-year maximum interest rate on bank deposits from 18 percent to 22.5 percent on January 31.¹⁸ Economy and Finance Minister Ehsan Khandouzi explained that the increased interest rate is meant to promote macroeconomic stability.¹⁹

Axis of Resistance and Regional Developments

Iranian and Iranian-backed militants in Deir ez Zour Province ordered their forces on January 31 to prepare to attack US forces at the al Omar oil field or Koniko gas fields in eastern Syria, according to local Syria outlets.²⁰ The Iranian and Iranian-backed commanders met at a local security office to discuss retaliation for Israeli strikes on Iranian convoys on January 29 and 30. Coalition forces are reportedly on high alert at the potential target locations.²¹ Senior Iranian military commanders have warned in recent years that they will attack "all centers, bases, routes, and spaces used as sources or paths for [Israeli] aggression," holding the US accountable for potential Israeli strikes.²² Iranian willingness to attack the US as part of its escalation cycle with Israel highlights the fact that Tehran likely considers American forces a safer target than Israeli targets, presumably because the Iranians see the risk of Israeli military escalation as being higher than the risk of American military escalation.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov announced on January 31 that Russia will include Iran in future rapprochement discussions between Syria and Turkey.²³ Moscow has mediated meetings between Syrian and Turkish officials since December 2022 and have thus far excluded Iranian representatives.²⁴ Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian held back-to-back meetings with the Syrian and Turkish foreign ministers and Syrian defense officials from January 14 to January 23, likely to reassert Iranian influence in the rapprochement discussions.²⁵

Parliamentarian Mohammad Sargazi described on January 29 plans to expel Afghan nationals from Sistan and Baluchistan Province if the Afghan Taliban does not provide Iran water rights to the Helmand River.²⁶ The Raisi administration instructed Special Presidential Representative for Afghan Affairs Hassan Kazemi Ghomi to issue this threat to the Afghan Taliban, according to Sargazi, although it is unclear whether he has yet done so. Sargazi represents the city of Zabol, which relies heavily on water from the river. The regime has conducted mass deportations of Afghans on several occasions previously, such as when it expelled tens of thousands of Afghans in 2007.²⁷

¹ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-29-2023>

² <http://www.nournews.ir/fa/news/127189>

³ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-30-2023>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/iran-could-be-contributing-war-crimes-by-sending-drones-russia-white-house-2023-01-09/>

⁵ <http://www.defapress.ir/fa/news/570198>

⁶ <https://www.irna.ir/news/85015150>

⁷ https://twitter.com/Javanan_gilan/status/1620091286895353856?s=20&t=0p-R1o3iEEwQhQtPyQ87A

⁸ <https://president.ir/fa/142144>

⁹ <https://president.ir/fa/142145>

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1620385093666865152?cxt=HHwWgIDQtYrq4fwsAAAA>

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1620361107704791041?cxt=HHwWgoDSifX11vwsAAAA>

https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1620392664272359425?cxt=HHwWgsDS6d-i5fwsAAAA

https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1620362262643884032?cxt=HHwWgICyhZK51_wsAAAA

¹¹ https://twitter.com/IranIntl/status/1620442821944639488?cxt=HHwWgIC8zaeK_PwsAAAA

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1620470376575946752?cxt=HHwWgMDSzZnOiP0sAAAA>

¹² <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1620495641691721728?cxt=HHwWgMDUsemMIP0sAAAA>

https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1620518576825286667

¹³ <https://isna.ir/xdNfVX>; <https://isna.ir/xdNfT3>; <https://isna.ir/xdNfSP>; <https://isna.ir/xdNfTw>

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- ¹⁴ <https://www.alef dot ir/news/3990728011.html>; <https://aftabnews dot ir/fa/news/668258>
- ¹⁵ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-30-2023>
- ¹⁶ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/irans-hardliners-are-going-after-the-entire-rouhani-administration>
- ¹⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-ahmadinejad-parliament/ahmadinejad-grilled-by-hostile-iran-parliament-idUSBRE82D0NK20120314>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1401/11/11/2845747>
- ¹⁹ <https://isna dot ir/xdNffz>
- ²⁰ <https://www dot qasioun-news.com/ar/articles/260080>
<https://eyeofeuphrates dot com/ar/news/2023/01/30/7607>
- ²¹ <https://www.alaraby dot co.uk/politics/سورية-تقصد-تشن-حملة-مداهمات-واستنفاذ-في-قواعد-التحالف-بدير-الزور>
https://twitter.com/Tammuz_Intel/status/1620175140997971974?s=20&t=RfqFye5ApBtoc23RGRMJSQ
- ²² <http://www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1400/09/29/2629184/>
- ²³ <https://almanar dot com.lb/10320818>
- ²⁴ <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20221228-russian-syrian-turkish-defence-ministers-meet-in-moscow-for-first-talks-since-2011>
<https://www dot sana.sy/en/?p=296645>
<https://twitter.com/SteeleSyAA/status/1615252032482586624>
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- ²⁵ https://t.me/mod_gov_sy/31981
<https://www dot tasnimnews.com/fa/rss/feed/0/7/1/%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C>
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<https://twitter.com/SteeleSyAA/status/1615252032482586624>
- ²⁶ www.asriran dot com/fa/news/876419
- ²⁷ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2007/06/19/iran-halt-mass-deportation-afghans>