



Iran Update, February 8, 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.

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani traveled to Aleppo City, Syria on February 8. Iranian state media reported on Ghaani's visit and published a video of him overseeing humanitarian operations in response to the February 6 earthquake that has devastated southern Turkey and northwest Syria.¹ A pro-regime social media account also posted images of Ghaani meeting with an unspecified Iranian field commander.²

Iranian state media does not typically acknowledge when Ghaani or other senior Quds Force officials travel to Syria. Ghaani's presence in Aleppo—and Iranian state media's anomalous coverage of the visit—suggests the Iranian regime is conducting an information operation. Iran may intend to signal its commitment to maintaining and further entrenching its military presence in northwest Syria and throughout the rest of the country. Turkish and Russia officials could interpret Ghaani's trip, and the related February 7 Popular Mobilization Forces deployment to Aleppo that CTP previously reported, as Iran's response to its past exclusion from Moscow-facilitated reconciliation talks between Turkey and the Assad Regime.³ Turkey and Russia may also read Ghaani's highly conspicuous public appearance as an attempt to gain additional negotiating leverage for subsequent reconciliation talks. Assad Regime officials could similarly interpret Iranian actions as a message that they must consider Iranian interests before entering into any diplomatic agreement with Turkey.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei set rhetorical conditions for how regime officials should discuss divides between Iranian leadership and its people, suggesting that

he may tolerate limited debates on the future of the regime. Khamenei implicitly acknowledged divisions between the regime and the Iranian people and called for national unity in a speech commemorating the Artesh Air Defense Force's pledge of allegiance to Islamic Republic Founder Ruhollah Khomeini on February 8. Khamenei stated that disagreements regarding women, religion, and generational differences were inevitable, but such disagreements should not become "faults" within the regime. The supreme leader added that the Iranian people must not permit Iran's enemies to capitalize on its internal divisions.⁴

Although Khamenei has periodically chastised regime infighting and discussed divisions within Iran's political establishment, his reference to internal fissures is noteworthy as hardline figures have increasingly acknowledged deep societal divides in recent days.⁵ Hardline President Ebrahim Raisi stressed the importance of repairing schisms with arrested protesters on the sidelines of a religious meeting on February 7. Raisi reiterated Khamenei's rhetorical distinction between protesters and "rioters" and urged regime entities to facilitate the return of lawful protesters to the fold.⁶ The president of Imam Hossein University—an institution closely affiliated with the IRGC and Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics—suggested that Iranian leadership had lost touch with its people on February 8.⁷ IRGC Basij Commander Brigadier General Gholam Reza Soleimani separately acknowledged "current problems" and emphasized the country-wide need to expeditiously solve such problems.⁸ Supreme Leader Military Adviser IRGC Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi made a similarly oblique reference to the "problems" the regime faced on February 6, as CTP previously reported.⁹

Khamenei did not prohibit ongoing debates on how the regime should respond to the grievances that led to the Mahsa Amini protest movement in his February 8 address, but appeared to set rhetorical limits to the debates by warning that political disputes must not lead to fighting and slander. He additionally stated that "some who become revolutionaries do not remain revolutionaries," possibly referencing Mir Hossein Mousavi's calls for "foundational" change in Iran.¹⁰ Mousavi, who partly led the 2009 Green Movement, adopted a largely revolutionary tone in his February 4 statement and discussed the need for a referendum on whether to maintain the Islamic Republic, as CTP previously reported.¹¹ Khamenei's implicit references to and rejection of Mousavi's statement may signal that he will not tolerate calls for significant structural or ideological changes to the regime.

Key Takeaways

- **Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani traveled to Aleppo City, Syria on February 8.**
- **Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei set rhetorical conditions for how officials should discuss responding to divides between Iranian leadership and its people, suggesting that he may tolerate limited debates on the future of the regime.**
- **At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces.**

- **The Iranian Judiciary announced on February 8 that it began releasing prisoners in Alborz, Ghazvin, Semnan, Sistan and Baluchistan, Tehran, and West Azerbaijan Provinces.**
- **Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani met with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev in Moscow.**
- **Vice President for Parliamentary Affairs Mohammad Hosseini announced that President Ebrahim Raisi will travel to China at an unspecified time in the near future.**
- **The IRGC Aerospace Force displayed a Shahab-3 missile featuring “Death to Israel” during a military exhibition in Esfahan City, Esfahan Province.**
- **Iranian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Bagheri Kani and Iranian Ambassador to Lebanon Mojtaba Amani met with Lebanese Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri in Beirut.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces on February 8. CTP assesses with moderate confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province¹²

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Farmers

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

Tehran City, Tehran Province¹³

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



Protest coordinators and organizations called for demonstrations on the following date:

February 16:¹⁴

- **Type:** Countrywide anti-regime protests, and 40-day commemoration ceremony of executed protesters in Tehran
- **Location:** Countrywide

The Iranian Judiciary announced on February 8 that it began releasing prisoners in Alborz, Ghazvin, Semnan, Sistan and Baluchistan, Tehran, and West Azerbaijan Provinces.¹⁵ The announcement follows Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s decision to grant amnesty to and commute the sentences of “tens of thousands” of prisoners, including arrested protesters, on February 6.¹⁶ Social media users and Iranian outlets confirmed that Iranian authorities had released several prominent arrested protesters and individuals who participated in or supported the Mahsa Amini protest movement on February 8.¹⁷

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani met with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev in Moscow on February 8.¹⁸ Shamkhani and Patrushev discussed implementing joint energy and transit agreements. Shamkhani also emphasized the importance of increasing Russo-Iranian cooperation in multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS.

Shamkhani also attended the fifth round of the Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan in Moscow on February 8.¹⁹ Shamkhani condemned the United States' prior presence in Afghanistan and stated that Iran wants a peaceful and secure neighbor. Shamkhani also called on the Taliban regime to actively counter terrorism and form an inclusive government that does not discriminate against individuals based on race or ethnicity.

Vice President for Parliamentary Affairs Mohammad Hosseini announced that President Ebrahim Raisi will travel to China at an unspecified time in the near future.²⁰ Hosseini added that Iran and China are taking steps to implement their bilateral twenty-year agreement.

The IRGC Aerospace Force displayed a Shahab-3 missile featuring “Death to Israel” during a military exhibition in Esfahan City, Esfahan Province on February 8.²¹ The explicit anti-Israel messaging and the exhibition's location near the site of the January 28 munitions factory drone attack are likely warnings to Israel that the IRGC is willing to retaliate for the attack.

Iranian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Bagheri Kani and Iranian Ambassador to Lebanon Mojtaba Amani met with Lebanese Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri in Beirut on February 8.²² Lebanese state media reported that Kani, Amani, and Berri discussed bilateral relations and regional developments. Kani emphasized to Lebanese press after the meeting that Iran stands with the Lebanese government against “[Western and Arab governments’] unjust blockade.”²³ Western and Arab governments have economically isolated Lebanon in response to Hezbollah infiltration of the Lebanese state.²⁴

Military and Security Affairs

See topline section.

¹ <https://www.dot.ir/news/3747666/%C2%A0%D8%AD%D8%B6%D9%88%D8%B1-%D9%86%D9%85%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A2%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%82-%D8%B2%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%B2%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87;>

² <https://twitter.com/IrnaEnglish/status/1623369899140648972?s=20&t=qCr4mmeoMzX16UPDCySPDA>

³ <https://twitter.com/MehdiRizvi123/status/1623303644136493056?s=20&t=-i1Ruj45V5wKrL4YxDLvw>

⁴ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-february-7-2023>

⁵ <https://www.leader.ir/fa/content/26303/%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1%DA%A9%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%88%DB%8C-%D9%87%D9%88%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D9%88-%D9%BE%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%86%D8%AF-%D9%87%D9%88%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%B4>

⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/d2796678-33d6-11e2-9ce7-00144feabdc0>

⁷ <https://www.leader.ir/fa/content/26144/> ; <https://president.ir/fa/142330>

⁷ <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/572054/%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%87-%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AD%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%86-%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D9%84%DA%AF%D9%88%DB%8C-%DA%A9%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A2%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%AF%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%87-%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA>

⁸ <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/572113/%D8%B1%D8%A6%DB%8C%D8%B3-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%AC-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B6%D8%B9%D9%81%DB%8C%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B4%DA%A9%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%DA%A9%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%B1%D9%87%E2%80%8C%DA%AF%DB%8C%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%B8%D8%B1%D9%81%DB%8C%D8%AA%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%88-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AD%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%AD%D9%84-%D9%85%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%AF>

⁹ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-february-7-2023>

¹⁰ <https://www.dotleader.ir/fa/content/26303/%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1%DA%A9%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%88%DB%8C-%D9%87%D9%88%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D9%88-%D9%BE%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%86%D8%AF-%D9%87%D9%88%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%B4>

¹¹ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-february-7-2023>

¹² <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1623287654358949888?cxt=HHwWglC95azhiYctAAAA>;
https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1623293462949859330?cxt=HHwWhMC4lbqzjIctAAAA;
https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1623310587794010112?cxt=HHwWgMC9maCYllctAAAA;
<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1623410438141579266?cxt=HHwWhMC4oafMwYctAAAA>

¹³ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1623330319867731968?cxt=HHwWglCzeeUnYctAAAA>;
<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1623329889758679042?cxt=HHwWhMC4heP7nlctAAAA>;
https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1623331000569790465?cxt=HHwWgoC8nbe8nYctAAAA

¹⁴ https://twitter.com/UYI_fa/status/1622544042734104576?s=20&t=Ex4C157bDrs_LMI5ofDOxg ;
https://twitter.com/UYI_fa/status/1622263923046027275?s=20&t=Ex4C157bDrs_LMI5ofDOxg ;
https://twitter.com/Javanan_mashhad/status/1622111843182313474?s=20&t=NppwVNjfdmAVvbaEQWjNA ;
https://twitter.com/javanane_A/status/1622578243424632838?s=20&t=ZEqS5QUg18uDic-lk5wHfg ;
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https://twitter.com/javanane_Esf/status/1622293548069527554?s=20&t=mMBAjVvkOGylPmwkffl1NA ;
https://twitter.com/Javanan_gilan/status/1622570915492945924?s=20&t=mMBAjVvkOGylPmwkffl1NA ;
https://twitter.com/javanane_g/status/1622310853109219328?s=20&t=cHiat5CMwWJ4_Cy_HsEUMQ

¹⁵ <https://www.sharghdaily.com/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%87-220/869493-%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%A2%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%B1-%DA%A9%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A2%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%B4%D8%AF>

¹⁶ www.leader.ir/fa/content/26298

¹⁷ <https://t.co/zmxtFIW5Ph> ;
https://twitter.com/javanane_Esf/status/1623082278069862413?s=20&t=t916L2OxOdoKqbTpn738ig ;
<https://twitter.com/SharghDaily/status/1623302766167830528?s=20&t=s69OTMa5TEHs1XnstafCIA>

¹⁸ <https://www.dotirna.ir/news/85024159/%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%88-%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B2%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C>

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%D9%BE%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B4%D9%81;
<https://nournews dot ir/Fa/News/127729/%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%AA%D8%B1%DA%A9-%D8%AF%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%87>
¹⁹ <https://www dot irna dot ir/news/85024167/%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%B1%DB%8C%DA%A9%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%88-%D8%AE%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AC-%D8%BA%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A6%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%B4%DA%A9%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86;>
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²⁰ <https://www dot irna dot ir/news/85023877/%D8%AD%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%86%DB%8C-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%82-%D8%A8%D9%84%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%AA-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-%DA%86%DB%8C%D9%86-%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%85-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA>
²¹ <https://twitter.com/JasonMBrodsky/status/1623306832461586435;>
<https://www dot tasnimnews dot com/en/media/2023/02/08/2850243/irgc-aerospace-force-stages-exhibition-in-isfahan>
²² <https://www dot nna-leb dot gov dot lb/ar/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/593365>
²³ <https://www dot nna-leb dot gov dot lb/ar/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/593365>
²⁴ <https://www.iswresearch.org/2021/12/irans-axis-of-resistance-in-review.html>