



**Iran Update, February 15, 2023**

**Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, Nicole Wolkov, and Frederick W. Kagan**

**February 15, 2023, 4:30 pm ET**

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*Contributors: Anya Caraiani and James Motamed*

**Protest coordinators have likely strengthened their organizational capabilities and internal infrastructure ahead of calls for anti-regime demonstrations on February 16.** It is possible that unfavorable conditions such as air pollution and inclement weather will depress protest turnout, although low participation would not necessarily indicate that these organizations will be unable to organize mass unrest in the coming months. Youth group umbrella organization Iranian Neighborhood Youth Union (INYU) has continued to circumvent ongoing internet restrictions to promote the February 16 anti-regime demonstrations.<sup>1</sup> The INYU has additionally employed coordinated shifts in communications tactics to combat the regime’s attempts to disrupt their ability to call for protests.

The Hamedan Neighborhood Youth—an INYU-affiliated group—announced on February 14 that its members were advertising February 16 anti-regime demonstrations on Iranian banknotes, explaining that “there’s no way to stop the exchange of money.”<sup>2</sup> The INYU tweeted a graphic containing the bona fide social media handles of its 20 member organizations on February 15, complicating regime attempts to impersonate the groups using fake handles.<sup>3</sup> The INYU stated on February 15 that unknown actors had compromised the Kashan and Zahedan Youth Twitter accounts and disavowed posts the Twitter accounts had made endorsing Reza Pahlavi and claiming that the Mojahedin-e Khalgh (MEK) militant group had helped organize protests planned for February 16.<sup>4</sup> The Iranian regime may have hacked and released statement on the Kashan and Zahedan accounts in an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the anti-regime protest network. There is no direct evidence to support this hypothesis, which would suggest that regime or pro-regime hackers assess that pro-Pahlavi statements and affiliations with the MEK will alienate some supporters of the protest movement.

**Iranian leadership is setting rhetorical conditions for reinforcing further censorship and indoctrination measures.** Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei implicitly endorsed limiting criticisms of the regime in a superficially conciliatory speech in Tabriz, East Azerbaijan Province on February 15. Khamenei stated that “even during the Islamic Revolution, there were some who deviated from the straight path of the revolution,” possibly a reference to Iranians who participated in the Mahsa Amini protest movement. Khamenei additionally suggested that the regime is willing to welcome protesters back into the fold of the Islamic Republic and endorsed political plurality. The Supreme Leader also stated that the Iranian public should hold the Raisi administration accountable for its shortcomings. Khamenei distinguished between “revolutionary” and “reactionary” responses to the regime’s weaknesses, however, further delineating the rhetorical limits to debates surrounding the regime’s future. Khamenei stated that “some who become revolutionaries do not remain revolutionaries,” in a February 8 address, possibly referencing Mir Hossein Mousavi’s calls for “foundational” change in Iran on February 4.<sup>5</sup> Khamenei also warned Iranians against “exaggerating” the regime’s shortcomings online and framed internal issues as economic in nature, suggesting that he is only willing to tolerate public criticisms of the regime if they primarily focus on the Iranian economy.<sup>6</sup> CTP assessed on February 14 that recent statements from Iranian officials framing the Mahsa Amini protest movement as economically-motivated could suggest that these officials are responding to Khamenei’s red lines and modifying their diagnoses of Iran’s challenges.<sup>7</sup>

The speech commemorated the Tabriz uprising in which Tabriz residents gathered to honor individuals killed by the Shah in 1978. Khamenei travels to Tabriz annually to commemorate this incident, and his making an address there on this occasion is not inherently anomalous. The Supreme Leader’s emphasis on national unity—and the prominent role that Tabriz played in the Islamic Revolution-- is noteworthy, however, given the recent explicitly anti-regime (and, hence, anti-Iranian Revolution) unrest in northwestern Iranian provinces. Khamenei’s speech additionally coincides with indications that the regime is reinforcing its censorship and ideology infrastructure, reaffirming CTP’s assessment that Iranian leadership views increased indoctrination as the long-term solution to anti-regime sentiments.<sup>8</sup> Basij Commander Brigadier General Gholam Reza Soleimani stated that the Basij would establish “over 30,000 Quranic units in Basij bases” targeting Iranian youth on February 15.<sup>9</sup> Supreme Leader Office Head Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani also described Friday prayer sermons and religious holidays as antidotes for the ideological risks posed by the internet on the same day.<sup>10</sup> Supreme Leader Military Advisor Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi similarly urged the regime to defend itself against algorithms that target Iranian citizens who are susceptible to anti-regime rhetoric on February 15.<sup>11</sup> Other Iranian officials have endorsed “explanation jihad”-- the practice in which pro-regime actors are obliged to explain the accomplishments of the Islamic Republic to their anti-regime counterparts--in recent weeks.<sup>12</sup>

### **Key Takeaways**

- **Protest coordinators have likely strengthened their organizational capabilities and internal infrastructure ahead of calls for anti-regime demonstrations on February 16.**

- Iranian leadership is setting rhetorical conditions for reinforcing further censorship and indoctrination measures.
- At least three protests occurred in three cities across three provinces.
- UK-based *Amwaj Media* reported on February 14 that Iranian and Ukrainian civil and military officials have held a series of “expert and technical” meetings in Oman since November 2022.
- Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger Rybar claimed on February 15 that Iran and Russia were creating and sharing technology on high-precision bombs, missiles for UAVs and attack aircraft.
- President Ebrahim Raisi gave a speech to Chinese academics in Beijing on February 15.

### Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least three protests occurred in three cities across three provinces on February 15. CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

#### **Bandar Abbas, Hormozgan Province<sup>13</sup>**

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Iran Shipbuilding and Offshore Industries Complex workers
- **Notes:** Workers participated in a strike, not a protest.

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

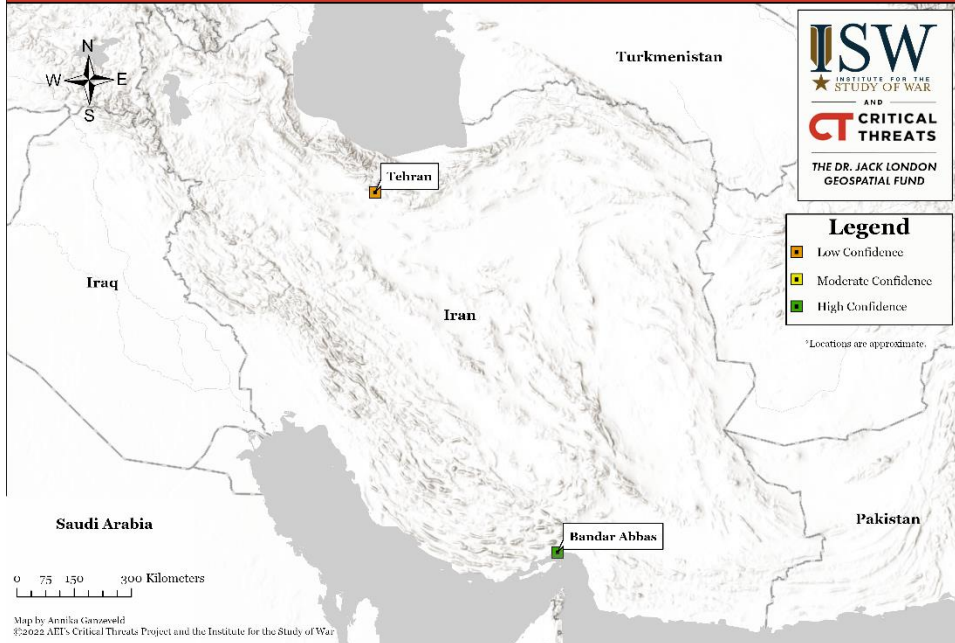
#### **Tehran City, Tehran Province<sup>14</sup>**

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

#### **Tehran City, Tehran Province<sup>15</sup>**

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Disabled citizens protesting decreased funding in the budget for this segment of the population.

## Protest Activity in Iran as of February 15, 4:30 PM



**Hardline Politician and Expediency Discernment Council Member Mohammad Reza Bahonar expressed support for the reemergence of moderate and reformist actors within the Iranian political arena in an interview on February 15.** Bahonar endorsed political activity from “benign reformists” and welcomed the prospect of former President Hassan Rouhani reentering politics.<sup>16</sup> CTP assessed that Rouhani is positioning himself to reenter the political arena after a period of relative absence on February 14.<sup>17</sup>

### Foreign Affairs and Diplomacy

**UK-based *Amwaj Media* reported on February 14 that Iranian and Ukrainian civil and military officials have held a series of “expert and technical” meetings in Oman since November 2022, citing informed sources.**<sup>18</sup> *Amwaj* stated that meetings were tied to Russia’s use of Iranian-made drones in Ukraine. One source claimed that Iran’s decision to hold talks with Ukraine reflects Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s wish to resume nuclear negotiations, aligning with *Amwaj*’s previous reporting that Iranian arms sales to Russia had partially stalled talks. Iranian officials reportedly rejected evidence that Iran has provided drones to Russia in recent months, claiming that such sales predated Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.<sup>19</sup>

**Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger Rybar claimed on February 15 that Iran and Russia were creating and sharing technology on high-precision bombs, missiles for UAVs and attack aircraft.** Rybar implicitly confirmed reports of Iranian drone sales to Russia and alleged that that Russia has also agreed to purchase over 100,000 artillery and mortar rounds--

especially 152 mm rounds--from Iran. Rybar stated that Iran possesses large stocks of 122mm shells for D-30 howitzers and BM-21 Grad Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS). Rybar suggested that Russia could employ Iranian proxies and partners in Iran, Iraq, and Syria and other unnamed countries to fight in Ukraine.<sup>20</sup> Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister Brig. Gen. Mohammad Reza Ashtiani separately confirmed a significant uptick in the production and exportation of indigenous Iranian defense products on February 15. Ashtiani claimed that Iran had tripled the number of defense items that it had produced—and quintupled the amount of defense-related exports—since March 2022.<sup>21</sup>

**President Ebrahim Raisi gave a speech to Chinese academics in Beijing on February 15.** Raisi praised China's Belt and Road Initiative and claimed that Iranian defense capabilities only aimed to confront the dominant powers.<sup>22</sup> Economic Affairs and Finance Minister Ehsan Khandouzi separately expressed the hope that Raisi's visit would increase Sino-Iranian economic cooperation on February 15.<sup>23</sup> IRGC-affiliated media outlets framed Raisi's visit to Beijing as a solution to Iran's deteriorating economic conditions on February 14, as CTP previously reported.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://twitter.com/UYI\\_fa/status/1625861993922953216?s=20](https://twitter.com/UYI_fa/status/1625861993922953216?s=20) ;  
[https://twitter.com/Javanan\\_gilan/status/1625606004355244032?s=20](https://twitter.com/Javanan_gilan/status/1625606004355244032?s=20) ;  
[https://twitter.com/javanane\\_Esf\\_/status/1624476519333605378](https://twitter.com/javanane_Esf_/status/1624476519333605378)

<sup>2</sup> [https://twitter.com/javanane\\_hmd/status/1625495598345650179](https://twitter.com/javanane_hmd/status/1625495598345650179)

<sup>3</sup> [https://twitter.com/UYI\\_fa/status/1625853972052590593?s=20](https://twitter.com/UYI_fa/status/1625853972052590593?s=20)

<sup>4</sup> [https://twitter.com/javanane\\_zhdn/status/1625810154674352130](https://twitter.com/javanane_zhdn/status/1625810154674352130)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-8-2023>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-14-2023>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-14-2023>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-31-2023>

<sup>9</sup> <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/573662/%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-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%AA-%DB%B1%DB%B0-%D9%85%DB%8C%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A8%DB%8C-%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A2%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7-%D8%A8%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%AC-%DB%B3%DB%B0-%D9%87%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AF-%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A2%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%BE%D8%A7%DB%8C%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%AC-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B2%DB%8C-%D9%85%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%AF>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.qudsonline.ir/news/850307/%D8%AD%D8%AC%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%DA%AF%D9%84%D9%BE%D8%A7%DB%8C%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%85-%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%B2%D8%AF%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C>

<sup>11</sup> <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/573729/%D8%B3%D8%B1%D9%84%D8%B4%DA%A9%D8%B1-%D8%B5%D9%81%D9%88%DB%8C-%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%88%D9%85-%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AC%D9%86%DA%AF-%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%A8%D9%87%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D9%87%D8%AF%D9%81-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B2%DB%8C-%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%87%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%B4%DA%A9%D9%84-%DA%AF%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA>

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- <sup>12</sup> <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/573711/%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%A8%D9%87-%D8%B3%D9%85%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%B4%DA%A9%DB%8C%D9%84-%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%86-%D9%86%D9%88%DB%8C%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%D9%BE%DB%8C%D8%B4-%D9%85%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AF> ;  
[https://www.google.com/search?q=explanation+jihad+critical+threats+iran&client=firefox-b-1-d&ei=bojtY86eEsat5NoP9rmBmAM&ved=0ahUKewjOjZS485j9AhXGFikFhfZcADMQ4dUDCA4&uact=5&oq=explanation+jihad+critical+threats+iran&gs\\_lcp=Cgxnd3Mtd2l6LXNlcnAQzIFCCeQoAE6CAgAEIYDELADogUIIRCrAkoECEEYAVDXA1iLB2DtCGgBcAB4AIABnwGIAe0DkgEDNC4xmAEAoAEBwAEB&scient=gws-wiz-serp](https://www.google.com/search?q=explanation+jihad+critical+threats+iran&client=firefox-b-1-d&ei=bojtY86eEsat5NoP9rmBmAM&ved=0ahUKewjOjZS485j9AhXGFikFhfZcADMQ4dUDCA4&uact=5&oq=explanation+jihad+critical+threats+iran&gs_lcp=Cgxnd3Mtd2l6LXNlcnAQzIFCCeQoAE6CAgAEIYDELADogUIIRCrAkoECEEYAVDXA1iLB2DtCGgBcAB4AIABnwGIAe0DkgEDNC4xmAEAoAEBwAEB&scient=gws-wiz-serp)
- <sup>13</sup> [https://twitter.com/RadioFarda\\_/status/1625833630579798022?cxt=HHwWjMC96dxEj5AtAAAA](https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1625833630579798022?cxt=HHwWjMC96dxEj5AtAAAA);  
[https://twitter.com/hra\\_news/status/1625794508863553537?cxt=HHwWgoC-qb7f\\_Y8tAAAA](https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1625794508863553537?cxt=HHwWgoC-qb7f_Y8tAAAA);  
<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1625768086702809089?cxt=HHwWgoCz8cHd8Y8tAAAA>;  
<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1625772424418451456?cxt=HHwWglCzsYDa848tAAAA>
- <sup>14</sup> <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1625894972351283201?cxt=HHwWgoC80Z23q5AtAAAA>
- <sup>15</sup> [https://twitter.com/RadioFarda\\_/status/1625853603545247744?cxt=HHwWgMDTgaDPmJAtAAAA](https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1625853603545247744?cxt=HHwWgMDTgaDPmJAtAAAA);  
<https://twitter.com/indypersian/status/1625918825156730880>
- <sup>16</sup> <https://fararu.com/fa/news/610193/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%86%D8%B1-%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%AA%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%AD%D8%B6%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B5%D8%AD%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA>
- <sup>17</sup> <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-14-2023>
- <sup>18</sup> <https://amwaj.media/article/inside-story-the-emerging-iran-ukraine-dialogue-in-oman>
- <sup>19</sup> <https://amwaj.media/article/inside-story-the-emerging-iran-ukraine-dialogue-in-oman>
- <sup>20</sup> <https://t.me/rybar/43630>
- <sup>21</sup> <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/573662/%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-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%AA-%DB%B1%DB%B0-%D9%85%DB%8C%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A8%DB%8C-%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A2%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7-%D8%A8%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%AC-%DB%B3%DB%B0-%D9%87%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AF-%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A2%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%BE%D8%A7%DB%8C%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%AC-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B2%DB%8C-%D9%85%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%AF>
- <sup>22</sup> <https://ar.mehrnews.com/news/1930695/%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B6%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B8-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A2%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B1%DA%A9%D8%B2%D8%A7-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%BA%D9%8A%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA>
- <sup>23</sup> <https://dolat.ir/detail/406392>
- <sup>24</sup> <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-14-2023>