



Iran Update, March 1, 2023

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CTP assesses with moderate confidence that the Iranian regime is tolerating a country-wide, coordinated campaign to poison Iranian school girls. Social media users documented incidents of chemical poisoning at 26 girls' schools throughout the country on March 1 alone.¹ Hundreds of Iranian schoolgirls have reported respiratory and neurological poisoning symptoms since November 2022, many of whom have required hospitalization.² The first reported incident occurred on November 30, 2022, in Qom City, Qom Province when 18 Shahed Razaviyeh Secondary School students reported experiencing nausea, coughing, difficulty breathing, heart palpitations, and lethargy.³ Initial poisoning cases primarily affected female high school students in Qom. In recent weeks, however, poisoning cases have spread across Iran and have also targeted elementary, middle school, and university students, as well as less frequent incidents at boys' educational facilities.⁴ CTP recorded a significant increase in poisoning cases on March 1, with students from at least 26 schools falling ill. Most poisonings on March 1 occurred in Tehran and Ardabil Provinces.⁵ It remains unclear why these cities appear to have been disproportionately targeted.

There is presently no evidence to indicate which individuals are responsible for this months-long campaign against Iranian school girls, and Iranian officials have acknowledged and are investigating such incidents.⁶ CTP nevertheless assesses with moderate confidence that a network of individuals whom the regime tolerates has coordinated this campaign and that the regime has allowed them—at least for now—to do so. CTP bases its assessment on indirect evidence that shows the regime has not sufficiently responded to the poisonings despite their severity of the harm to Iranian girls. Iran also maintains a security apparatus capable of handling such matters, as it has demonstrated in responding to larger-scale developments. Iranian officials have not articulated a coherent narrative explaining who is perpetrating these poisonings and why. Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi placed blame for the poisonings on female students, stating on March 1 that 90 percent of the reported cases can be attributed to “stress.”⁷ State-affiliated media outlets have similarly described poisoning incidents as students attempting to escape exams.⁸ Other officials, such as Qom Deputy Governor Ahmad Hajizadeh, have conversely acknowledged that the poisonings are anomalous and likely intentional.⁹ Iranian officials have seemingly failed to take concrete steps to protect students from

further poisonings, however. An Iranian social media account claimed that some school principals have ordered students not experiencing symptoms to immediately return to class following chemical poisoning incidents.¹⁰

However, the nature of ongoing chemical poisonings suggests that a country-wide network of individuals or groups are coordinating the attacks. The victims of chemical poisonings are predominately female students living in populated urban areas and describe the chemical agent and its effects in similar terms, suggesting that the perpetrators are coordinating on whom to target and which compounds to use.

Iranian security personnel have previously identified and arrested small networks of individuals with whom it has identified with the Mahsa Amini protest movement.¹¹ The regime has also taken extensive measures to securitize cities—particularly girls’ schools, which have become regular sites of anti-regime defiance—following recent unrest. Iran has previously used facial recognition technology to issue “warnings” to unveiled women drivers using an extensive and fully operational network of security cameras.¹² Security cameras are, in fact, visible in footage of at least one school targeted on March 1.¹³ One student who reported to have been poisoned twice told the *BBC* on February 28 that “They [officials] tell us: 'All is good, we've done our investigation.' But when my father asked at my school, they told him: 'Sorry, the CCTV has been down for a week and we can't investigate this.” The student added that her school principal erroneously claimed that she was hospitalized because of a heart condition when she experienced chemical poisoning on a separate and second occasion.¹⁴ Other students reported seeing plainclothes officers on school property before attacks, and claimed that school authorities restricted their ability to contact their parents.¹⁵ A prominent citizen-journalist Twitter account also reported that Iranian security personnel prohibited parents of hospitalized students from visiting their children in an emergency room in Tehran City, Tehran Province on March 1.¹⁶

The regime’s tolerance of a country-wide and months-long effort to poison schoolgirls would be consistent with its treatment of Iranian youth throughout the Mahsa Amini protest movement. Iranian security personnel killed a 16-year-old girl in a violent crackdown on a high school in Ardabil City, Ardabil Province on October 13.¹⁷ Security personnel had reportedly targeted the high school because students failed had failed to sing a pro-regime song in a regime-organized rally.¹⁸ The regime has additionally arrested, tortured and killed scores of young protesters participating in the Mahsa Amini protest movement.¹⁹ Reports of poisonings at educational facilities are not anomalous, either. Iranian university students had previously reported incidents of mass food poisonings that required medical intervention in late 2022, coinciding with the Mahsa Amini protest movement.²⁰

CTP maintains the alternative — that the Iranian intelligence and security apparatus failed to preempt the months-long campaign to poison Iranian school girls and lacks the capabilities to identify and prosecute the perpetrators of the attacks—is unlikely. It is unclear why the regime would take several months to identify a widespread network of individuals seeking to harm Iranian schoolgirls, especially when they have previously demonstrated that they possess the capabilities to do so.

The regime’s failure to protect Iranian schoolgirls from the ongoing poisoning campaign is exacerbating anti-regime sentiments. At least two protests occurred in Tehran

City, Tehran Province on March 1 in response to the regime's inaction vis-a-vis increasing student poisonings. Protesters in Tehran's Narmak and Tehransar neighborhoods chanted "Death to the child-killing government" near schools where students were poisoned on March 1, emphasizing that the regime is complicit in failing to identify the cause and perpetrators of such attacks, even if they are not directly culpable.²¹ Security forces also violently suppressed concerned parents who gathered near schools. Social media users circulated a video of a plainclothes officer grabbing a mother's hair in front of the Sizdeh Aban High School in Tehransar, Tehran as she inquired about her child's condition.²² Security forces, conversely, have not violently confronted economic protesters in recent days. Protest organizations have called for demonstrations on March 4 in response to regime officials' handling of the student poisonings, suggesting that the regime's response to poisonings could serve as a catalyst for renewed unrest.²³

Russia is possibly concerned that Iranian-backed militias will target US military positions in eastern Syria in the coming days or weeks. *Deir Ezzor 24* reported on February 28 that the Russian-backed Syrian Arab Army (SAA) Fifth Corps ordered its personnel stationed in Deir ez Zor Province to share information on Iranian-backed militia movements with Russian military police.²⁴ Local Fifth Corps military leadership specifically instructed personnel to report any indication that Iranian-backed militants are preparing to launch rockets or kamikaze drones at US-led International Coalition military positions located approximately 20 kilometers from the eastern bank of the Euphrates River near Deir ez Zor City and al Mayadin.²⁵

CTP has observed a substantial influx of IRGC Quds Force and Iranian-backed personnel and military equipment since February 6. Military personnel and materiel have primarily Syria entered via the al Qaim border crossing near Abu Kamal, Deir ez Zor Province.²⁶ Some of the incoming forces and material may have stayed in Deir ez Zor Province to reinforce existing positions, although these reinforcements do not necessarily indicate that Iranian-backed forces intend to attack US positions in the immediate future. The Iranian regime has increasingly employed rhetoric that blames ongoing economic and currency crisis on US and Western interference.²⁷ Although the regime could use this narrative to set rhetorical conditions for an attack, the narrative itself likewise does not necessarily indicate preparations for an imminent attack.

Iranian-backed militants last attacked US forces in Deir ez Zor Province on February 18, as CTP previously reported.²⁸ Iranian-backed militants occasionally conduct low-intensity attacks—such as launching unguided rockets—against US forces in eastern Syria to retaliate for regional developments that Iran perceives as hostile and perpetrated by the US.²⁹ CTP previously assessed that Iran may have ordered the February 18 attack in response to a series of Israeli airstrikes on January 29 and 30 on Iranian convoys likely attempting to smuggle weaponry and materiel into eastern Syria.³⁰

Deir Ezzor 24 additionally claimed that Russian and Iranian military officials held an "urgent meeting" after the February 18 attack.³¹ Russian MPs approaching local Fifth Corps personnel for intelligence on Iranian kinetic activities suggests that the standing military coordination mechanisms between Russia and Iran in Deir ez Zor are inactive or ineffective. The request also may reflect Russia's lack of confidence in Iranian officials to provide advanced warning of attacks on US positions.

Key Takeaways

- **The Iranian regime is tolerating a country-wide, coordinated campaign to poison Iranian school girls.**
- **The regime's failure to protect Iranian schoolgirls from the ongoing poisoning campaign is exacerbating anti-regime sentiments.**
- **Russia is possibly concerned that Iranian-backed militias will target US military positions in eastern Syria in the coming days or weeks.**
- **At least five protests occurred in three cities across two provinces on March 1.**
- **Raisi administration-controlled *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)* reported on March 1 that prominent Sunni cleric and regime critic Moulana Abdol Ghaffer Naghshbandi fled the country.**
- **The value of the Iranian rial appreciated to 546,500 against the US dollar.**
- **Head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) Mohammad Eslami denied reports that Iran has enriched uranium to 84 percent purity while acknowledging the fact that traces of 84-percent enriched uranium were discovered at one of Iran's nuclear facilities.**
- **Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov discussed normalization efforts between Turkey and the Assad regime with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu on March 1.**
- **Unidentified senior Russian military officials met with their SAA counterparts near Tel Rifaat, Aleppo Province on February 28.**
- ***Israel Alma*, an Israeli think tank focused on regional security issues, released a report claiming that as many as 1000 alleged Iranian aid convoys have entered Syria from Iraq and Lebanon since February 6.**

Internal Security

At least five protests occurred in three cities across two provinces on March 1. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Shoush, Khuzestan Province³²

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

Tehran City, Tehran Province³³

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Families of individuals sentenced to death for drug-related charges

Tehran City, Tehran Province³⁴

- **Size:** Small
- **Area:** District 21
- **Demographic:** Individuals protesting student poisonings

- **Notes:** Protesters chanted “Death to the child-killing government.”

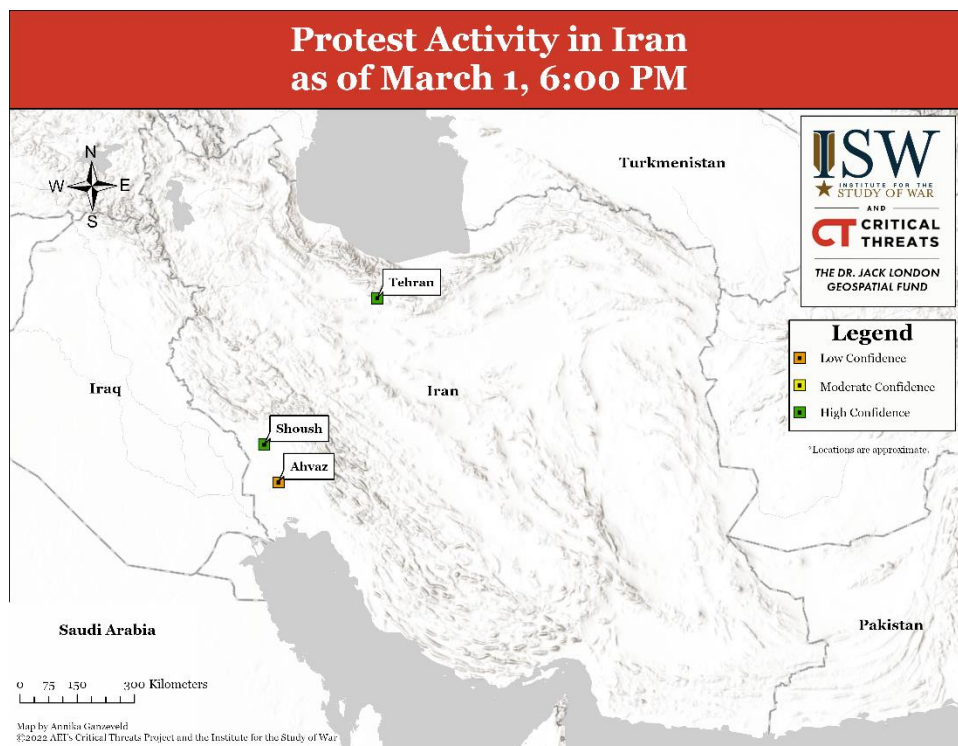
Tehran City, Tehran Province³⁵

- **Size:** Small
- **Area:** District 8
- **Demographic:** Individuals protesting student poisonings
- **Notes:** Protesters chanted “Death to the child-killing government.”

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

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province³⁶

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



Protest coordinators and organizations called for anti-regime demonstrations on the following dates:

March 4³⁷

- **Location:** Countrywide
- **Notes:** Calling on students and teachers to boycott schools and universities

March 8³⁸

- **Location:** Countrywide, city centers at 18:00 local time

- **Notes:** Commemorating International Women’s Day

March 13-15³⁹

- **Location:** Countrywide
- **Notes:** Coincides with a Zoroastrian fire festival—Chahar Shanbeh Souri—on March 15

Raisi administration-controlled *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)* reported on March 1 that prominent Sunni cleric and regime critic Moulana Abdol Ghaffer Naghshbandi fled the country.⁴⁰ The IRNA also stated that Naghshbandi fled out of fear of arrest and the revelation of his purported ties to foreign actors. Naghshbandi’s office published a statement on February 24 calling for mass protests in response to security forces’ “siege” of the Grand Makki Mosque in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province.⁴¹ Naghshbandi also warned that he would issue a “historic fatwa” if security forces continued their brutal tactics, as CTP previously reported.⁴²

Reformist Association of Combatant Clerics Member Mohammad Taghi suggested that the regime should grant “special privileges” to veiled students on March 1. Taghi stated that the Iran’s sociocultural problems require “rational reforms” that would reward veiled women and “guide” those who did not adhere to the regime’s veiling standards.⁴³

Economic Affairs

The value of the Iranian rial appreciated to 546,500 against the US dollar. The rial’s appreciation on March 1 is minor improvement from yesterday’s value at 556,500 to the US dollar and a significant improvement from the record-low of approximately 600,000 on February 26.⁴⁴

The Central Bank of Iran (CBI) published a report on Iran’s inflation rate on March 1. The price of goods and services in urban areas has increased by roughly 4.5 percent over the last month. The CBI also reported that consumer prices have increased by approximately 55 percent since February 2022.⁴⁵

Nuclear Program

Head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) Mohammad Eslami denied reports that Iran has enriched uranium to 84 percent purity while acknowledging the fact that traces of 84-percent enriched uranium were discovered at one of Iran’s nuclear facilities.⁴⁶ Eslami claimed that traces of the highly enriched uranium were so insignificant that they “could not be seen under a microscope,” instead drawing attention to the much larger stockpile of lower but still highly enriched uranium as the main indicator of the level at which the AEOI continues to enrich (namely 60 percent). 60 percent enriched uranium is not as close to weapons-grade as 84 percent, but it is still inconsistent with peaceful purposes and can be used to construct a compact nuclear explosive. Eslami concluded his remarks by reiterating the AEOI’s continued technical cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to address international concerns

about Iran's nuclear program. The IAEA has not indicated that Iran has resumed previous levels of technical cooperation with the Agency.

IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi will travel to Tehran this Friday, March 3 to participate in high level meetings with regime officials.⁴⁷

External Security and Military Affairs

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov discussed normalization efforts between Turkey and the Assad regime with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu on March 1. The Russian Foreign Ministry stated that Lavrov and Cavusoglu met on the sidelines of the G20 summit in New Delhi, India to discuss normalization and security cooperation in northern Syria.⁴⁸ Lavrov also discussed earthquake relief efforts with United Nations Special Envoy to Syria Geir Pederson in Moscow on February 27.⁴⁹

Unidentified senior Russian military officials met with their SAA counterparts near Tel Rifaat, Aleppo Province on February 28. *North Press Agency* reported that a 16-car convoy with armored transports brought Russian and SAA commanders to a military base in al Wahshiya near Tel Rifaat.⁵⁰ Two Russian combat helicopters accompanied the convoy and patrolled the area around al Wahshiya while the meeting took place.⁵¹ The high-security convoy suggests that relatively senior Russian and SAA officials participated in the meeting. The unidentified officials may have discussed Russian reposturing in northern Syria in relation to the February 6 earthquake. Tel Rifaat's proximity to the frontline between the Assad regime and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army suggests that an SNA or Turkish military official may have attended the meeting as well.

***Israel Alma*, an Israeli think tank focused on regional security issues, released a report claiming that as many as 1000 alleged Iranian aid convoys have entered Syria from Iraq and Lebanon since February 6.**⁵² The IRGC Quds Force is likely disguising shipments of weapons and military equipment amongst the aid convoys entering from Iraq, possibly complicating efforts by Israeli intelligence to identify and target shipments as they enter Syria. CTP has previously reported that some of convoys have arrived at likely Iranian military positions in Deir ez Zor, Hama, and Homs Province instead of Aleppo Province, where the ongoing humanitarian crisis is centered.⁵³ CTP will continue to monitor Quds Force efforts to smuggle weaponry and military equipment into Syria under the guise of humanitarian aid.

¹ https://twitter.com/ic_UYI/status/1631018148378865666?s=20 ;
<https://twitter.com/1500tasvir/status/1630914164498497538?s=20>

² <https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/c805j9v820zo>

<https://www.dotsharghdaily.com/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%87-220/870311-%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%85%D9%88%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4-%D8%A2%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%88%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%A7-%D8%B3%D8%AA>

³ <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202302278504> ;

<https://twitter.com/abelbalb/status/1630064638879571973>

⁴ <https://twitter.com/1500tasvir/status/1630914164498497538?s=20> ; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/03/01/iran-students-poisoning-girls-schools/>

⁵ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1630976918882320385?cxt=HHwWgoC87bm3sqtAAAA>

⁶ <https://fa.dot.shafaqna.com/news/1524603/%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%82%D9%85-%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%85/> ; <https://t.co/q9PGwVvDFW> ; <https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/c805j9v820zo> ; <https://www.irna.ir/news/85044613/%D9%85%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%B1%D8%A6%DB%8C%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D9%88%D8%AD%DB%8C%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%85%D9%88%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4-%D8%A2%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%B9%D8%AA-%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%B4%D9%87-%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%A8%DB%8C>

⁷ <https://www.dot.irna.ir/news/85044761/%D9%88%D8%B2%DB%8C%D8%B1-%DA%A9%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%DA%AF%DB%8C%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%85%D9%88%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4-%D8%A2%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B5%D8%AD%D8%AA>

⁸ <https://t.co/760XT7VrGd>

⁹ <https://fa.dot.shafaqna.com/news/1524603/%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%82%D9%85-%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%85/>
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¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1630966434435145728?cxt=HHwWglC90ZbVraItAAAA>

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¹³ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1630851985732784134?cxt=HHwWjMC-rbHP-aEtAAAA> ;

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¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/1500tasvir/status/1630954002190827520?s=20> ;

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¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/1500tasvir/status/1630961455162966018?s=20>

¹⁷ <https://t.me/kashowra/13123>

¹⁸ <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-schoolgirl-killed-refusing-song-ayatollah/32090116.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/02/19/iran-black-sites-investigation-elbagir-intl-contd-vpx.cnn>

²⁰ <https://twitter.com/RadioFarda/status/1599411619683045378?s=20&t=R3s2xAlcfyIOkzE64DqLtQ> ;

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²² https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1630967411586236428?cxt=HHwWmlCw_YaOrqItAAAA

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- ²⁴ <https://deirezzor24 dot net/en/the-russian-leadership-in-deir-ezzor-is-closely-following-the-activity-of-the-iranian-militias/>
- ²⁵ <https://deirezzor24 dot net/en/the-russian-leadership-in-deir-ezzor-is-closely-following-the-activity-of-the-iranian-militias/>
- ²⁶ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-24-2023>; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-21-2023>; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-16-2023>
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- ²⁸ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-21-2023>
- ²⁹ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-21-2023>
- ³⁰ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-21-2023>
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- ³² https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1630903711273762816?cxt=HHwWglC21ZqSkaltAAAA ;
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<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1630906989235544064?cxt=HHwWglCxsYHRkqItAAAA>
- ³³ https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1630897981414154241?cxt=HHwWgoC98dfEjqltAAAA ;
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<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1630909064841420801?cxt=HHwWgoCz7enJk6ItAAAA>
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https://twitter.com/Afra_org/status/1629859987643064322?s=20 ;
https://twitter.com/javanane_hmd/status/1629905673050812424?s=20 ;
https://twitter.com/UYI_fa/status/1629948898646138885?s=20
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- ⁴¹ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-24-2023>
- ⁴² <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-24-2023>
- ⁴³ <https://t.co/Jl9Qq0rEZA>
- ⁴⁴ <https://bonbast dot com/>
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- ⁴⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/iaeas-grossi-visit-iran-friday-2023-03-01/>
- ⁴⁸ <https://www dot almayadeen dot net/news/politics/%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%81-%D9%88%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%BA%D9%84%D9%88-%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA>

%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A3%D9%86%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%82;
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⁵⁰ [npasyria dot com/en/93870/](https://npasyria.dot.com/en/93870/)

⁵¹ [npasyria dot com/en/93870/](https://npasyria.dot.com/en/93870/); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGuXvG13Mlc&t=7s>; [https://www dot syriahr dot com/%D8%A8%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D9%81%D8%AF-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D8%B1%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%89-%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%AE%D9%84/590567/](https://www.dot.syriahr.com/%D8%A8%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D9%81%D8%AF-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D8%B1%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%89-%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%AE%D9%84/590567/)

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⁵³ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-24-2023>; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-21-2023>; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-16-2023>