



Iran Update, March 13, 2023

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The Iranian regime is preparing to deploy its security services to deter and likely crack down on the planned demonstrations during the upcoming Iranian holidays. Several judicial and security authorities have in recent days discussed announced deployments and threatened citizens who protest during the upcoming Chahar Shanbeh Souri holiday on March 15, during which Iranians commonly gather in public and use fireworks.¹ Iranian leaders likely fear that the holiday celebrations could catalyze anti-regime demonstrations. Tehran Provincial Law Enforcement Commander Brigadier General Abbas Ali Mohammadian reiterated the regime’s plans to securitize on March 13, stating that security forces will be deployed throughout Tehran starting on March 14 to confront “those who disturb the peace.”² An Esfahan provincial prosecutor threatened draconian measures against potential protesters during the upcoming holiday, including a prison sentence of up to one year as well as 74 lashes.³ South Khorasan Law Enforcement Commander Colonel Alireza Abbasi stated that “police surveillance cameras [and] patrols will closely monitor” and confront reckless drivers during Chahar Shanbeh Souri, threatening to seize vehicles in the event of traffic violations.⁴ That the Law Enforcement Command (LEC) can so readily deploy the surveillance equipment to confront traffic violations which was apparently failing during the recent nationwide campaign to poison schoolchildren, indicates that the regime tolerated the campaign, as CTP previously reported.⁵ IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* furthermore published two articles on March 13 outlining the potential dangers and growing cultural insignificance of Chahar Shanbeh Souri, likely as part of the regime effort to dissuade citizens from celebrating the holiday.⁶

Student poisonings occurred on March 11, 12, and 13 in Iranian provinces that saw significant protest activity during the Mahsa Amini protest movement. Iranian media reported poisoning incidents in Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Kohgiluyeh and Boyer Ahmad provinces

on March 11-13—the first reported incidents since March 7.⁷ Iranian media reported that some students affected remain under medical care, which suggests that the students were exposed to chemical agents rather than experiencing psychosomatic symptoms.⁸ The regime will likely use these attacks to justify continued securitization ahead of Chahar Shanbeh Souri and Nowrouz holidays. Most student poisonings on March 11-13 took place in Khuzestan and Kurdistan Provinces—two provinces that saw significant protest activity during the Mahsa Amini movement.

Iranian public figures continue to suggest that the regime or regime-adjacent actors are in some way responsible for the poisoning campaign primarily targeting schoolgirls in recent months. Former reformist President Mohammad Khatami criticized the regime for “acting as if nothing had happened” rather than immediately confronting the “crime.”⁹ The regime waited four months before it began deploying security forces to schools to protect schoolchildren on March 6, as CTP previously reported.¹⁰ One could interpret Khatami’s statement as criticizing the slow regime response to the poisonings. On the other hand, Khatami could be indirectly questioning whether the regime tolerated the group responsible for the attacks. Khatami’s comments follow similar criticisms from prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid on March 3 and 10. Abdol Hamid stated that the poisoning campaign was meant to suppress protests and prevent girls from pursuing an education.¹¹ These comments from Khatami and Abdol Hamid may be spreading in the domestic Iranian information space the narrative that the regime is responsible for the attacks.

Khatami’s focus on the regime’s negligence may evoke among some Iranians memories of the regime response to two similar events during Khatami’s presidency. Possible hardline elements in the Iranian state security services conducted an assassination campaign against political dissidents in the 1990s in response to Khatami’s pursuit of political reform.¹² The regime first blamed these “chain murders” on foreign enemies in the same way officials have blamed the recent poisonings on foreign actors, as CTP previously reported.¹³ Pro-regime paramilitary organizations, namely the Basij and Ansar-e Hezbollah, similarly violently suppressed student supporters of Khatami’s reforms who were protesting the assassination campaign in 1999.¹⁴ Khatami’s comments thus could have the effect of relating the regime’s toleration of nefarious activities by regime-affiliated actors in the 1990s to its unusual response to the recent student poisonings, especially for Iranians who remember his presidency. Several prominent Iranians have referenced the “chain murders” of the 1990s when considering which actors might be behind the recent attacks.¹⁵ These comparisons inject into Iran’s public discourse the questions about whether the regime or regime-affiliated actors are responsible for the poisoning campaign. And the regime certainly appears to have at least tolerated this campaign, as CTP previously assessed.¹⁶

Regime efforts to suppress and silence political dissent may inadvertently intensify anti-regime sentiment among the Iranian public. Iranian authorities reportedly arrested and forced a group of girls from Tehran who posted a video of themselves dancing without hijab on International Women’s Day to “confess” on camera on March 13.¹⁷ The regime seemingly views such forceful responses as the most effective way to prevent further public displays of anti-regime sentiment. These

actions, however, not only give more attention to the very anti-regime activities the regime seeks to suppress but also exacerbates citizens' frustrations with the regime. Following reports that Iranian authorities were tracking down the "Ekbatan Girls," many individuals across Iran posted videos of themselves performing this group's dance.¹⁸ This indicates that the regime's strategy of forcefully cracking down on political dissent—instead of curbing anti-regime activity—may have the unintended consequence of spreading and solidifying anti-regime sentiment among the Iranian people. Some Iranian men are similarly wearing the hijab to ridicule the regime. Iranian social media users recently circulated photos of male pharmacists in Iran wearing the hijab in response to the regime's closure of several pharmacies where Iranian authorities discovered unveiled women.¹⁹ By publicly mocking the regime, these men are demonstrating that they are not intimidated by the regime's threats and violence.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko met with Iranian officials in Tehran on March 13 to expand bilateral cooperation and bolster sanctions mitigations. Iranian state media reported that Lukashenko met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber.²⁰ Raisi and Lukashenko signed eight cooperation agreements in the spheres of comprehensive cooperation, trade, transportation, agriculture, and culture and noted that Belarus and Iran tripled bilateral trade in 2022 compared to 2021.²¹ Raisi notably stated that cooperation with Belarus could be a way for both nations to counter sanctions.²² Lukashenko has frequently acted as a Kremlin vassal in recent trips to foreign countries, and his visit to Tehran is likely a component of the Kremlin's wider effort to secure continued Iranian support in the face of international sanctions.²³ Iranian state media notably announced on March 11 that Iran has finalized a deal to buy Su-35 combat aircraft from Russia, indicating that military, political, and economic agreements between Tehran and Moscow are continuing to prove mutually beneficial for both parties.²⁴ The Kremlin will likely continue to leverage Lukashenko's influence to deepen cooperation with Tehran.

Key Takeaways

- **The Iranian regime is preparing to deploy its security services to deter and likely crack down on the planned demonstrations during the upcoming Iranian holidays.**
- **Student poisonings occurred in Iranian provinces that saw significant protest activity during the Mahsa Amini protest movement.**
- **Iranian public figures continue to suggest that the regime or regime-adjacent actors are in some way responsible for the poisoning campaign primarily targeting schoolgirls in recent months.**
- **Regime efforts to suppress and silence political dissent may inadvertently intensify anti-regime sentiment among the Iranian public.**
- **Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko met with Iranian officials in Tehran on March 13 to expand bilateral cooperation and bolster sanctions mitigations.**
- **At least three protests occurred on March 11, ten protests on March 12, and 17 protests on March 13.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least three protests occurred in three cities across three provinces on March 11. CTP assesses with high confidence that protests occurred in the following cities:

Ilam City, Ilam Province²⁵

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Ilam University of Medical Sciences staff and employees

Tehran City, Tehran Province²⁶

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Hospital workers

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

Haft Tappeh, Khuzestan Province²⁷

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Company employees



At least ten protests occurred in eight cities across five provinces on March 12. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following cities:

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province²⁸

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Steel industry retirees

Kermanshah City, Kermanshah Province²⁹

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

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province³⁰

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

Shoush, Khuzestan Kerman Province³¹

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

Haft Tappeh, Khuzestan Province³²

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Company employees

Tehran City, Tehran Province³³

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Steel industry retirees

Tehran City, Tehran Province³⁴

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Individuals who lost money in the Azerbaijan Vehicle Industry Company

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

Kerman City, Kerman Province³⁵

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

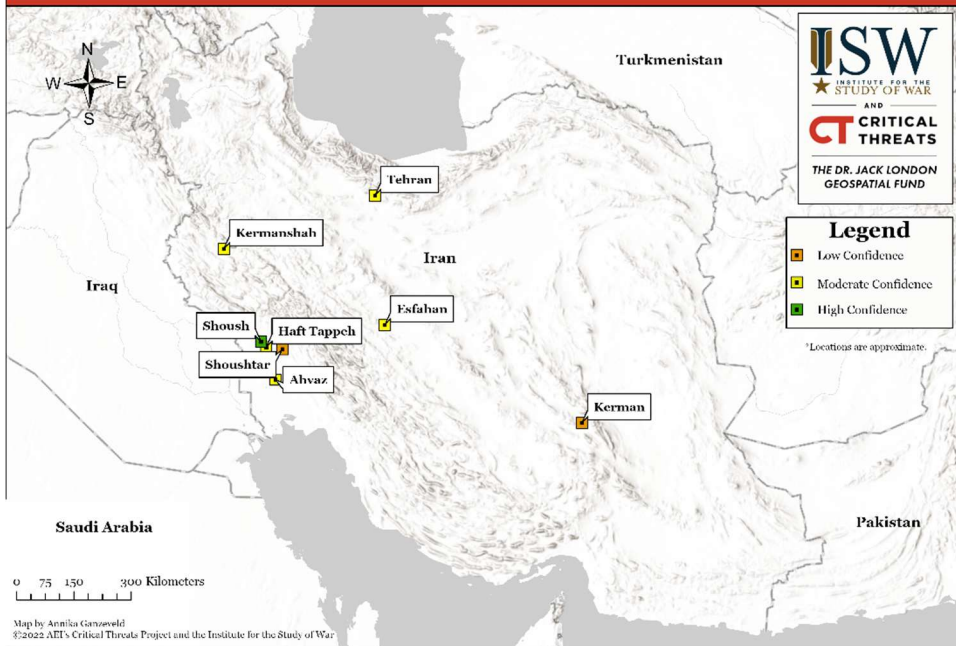
Shoushtar, Khuzestan Province³⁶

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

Tehran City, Tehran Province³⁷

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Government employees

Protest Activity in Iran as of March 12, 6:00 PM



At least 17 protests occurred in 11 cities across 11 provinces on March 13. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following cities:

Karaj, Alborz Province³⁸

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Part of protests planned for Chahar Shanbeh Souri

Khorramabad, Lorestan Province³⁹

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi Province⁴⁰

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Part of protests planned for Chahar Shanbeh Souri

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province⁴¹

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Part of protests planned for Chahar Shanbeh Souri

Tehran City, Tehran Province⁴²

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Tehran City, Tehran Province⁴³

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Part of protests planned for Chahar Shanbeh Souri

Tehran City, Tehran Province⁴⁴

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Part of protests planned for Chahar Shanbeh Souri

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

Karaj, Alborz Province⁴⁵

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Ardabil City, Ardabil Province⁴⁶

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Ardabil City, Ardabil Province⁴⁷

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Moghan Sugar Factory workers

Ghazvin City, Ghazvin Province⁴⁸

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Part of protests planned for Chahar Shanbeh Souri

Ilam City, Ilam Province⁴⁹

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Ilam cement workers

Kermanshah City, Kermanshah Province⁵⁰

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi Province⁵¹

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Yasouj, Kohgilouyeh and Boyer Ahmed Province⁵²

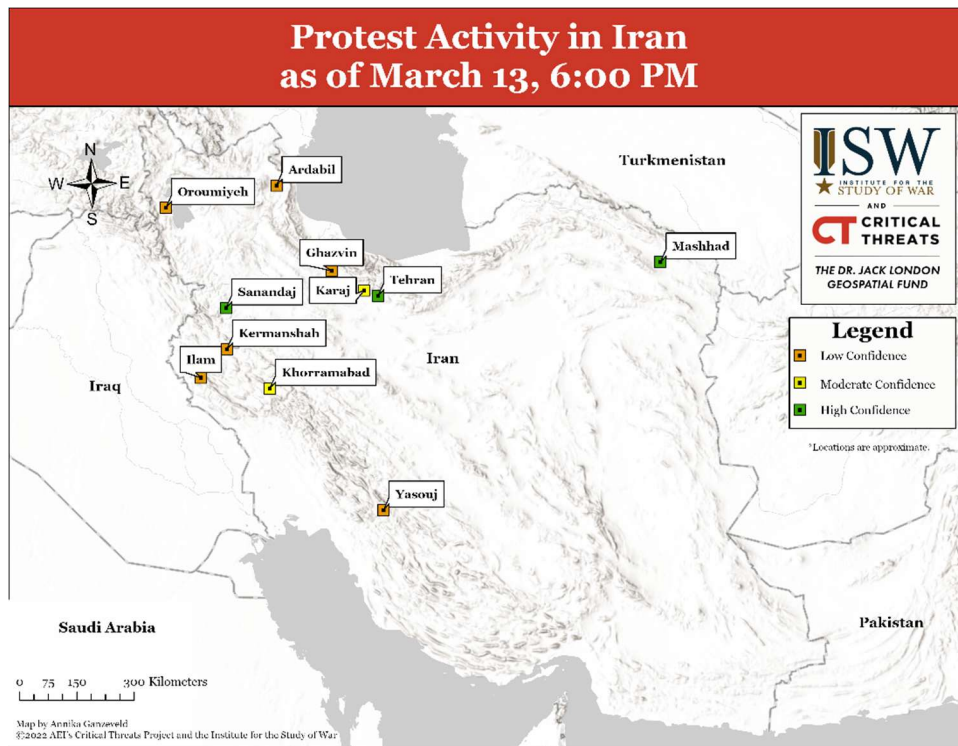
- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Tehran City, Tehran Province⁵³

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Metro passengers

Oroumiyeh, West Azerbaijan Province⁵⁴

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers



The Interior Ministry announced the arrest of over 100 individuals in connection with the recent student poisonings on March 11. The ministry accused the arrested of trying to “create skepticism toward the regime” and cooperating with anti-regime group Mohajedin-e Khalq (MEK).

President Ebrahim Raisi met with Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei on March 11.⁵⁵ The three discussed Parliament’s review of the budget for the upcoming Persian calendar year (March 2023-March 2024), the preparation of the seventh five-year development plan, social issues, and preparations for the Nowrouz holiday.

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

***The Wall Street Journal* reported on March 12 that Iran had agreed to cease encouraging cross-border Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia in exchange for the Saudis restraining anti-regime outlet *Iran International* from continuing its critical coverage of the regime.**⁵⁶ Iran and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement on March 10 to reestablish bilateral relations, as CTP previously reported.⁵⁷

External Security and Military Affairs

Local and international press widely reported that Israeli combat aircraft conducted four airstrikes against Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and IRGC military assets in Hama and Tartous provinces, Syria on March 12. State-run *Syrian Arab News Agency* claimed that the attacks injured three SAA personnel, including a senior SAA air defense official.⁵⁸ Israel-based *I24 News* claimed that airstrikes also killed an additional two “pro-Iran fighters.”⁵⁹ Local media and open-source intelligence Twitter accounts geolocated the strikes to two IRGC missile and precision-guided munitions (PGM) manufacturing and storage depots in Masyaf, Hama province and possibly a separate depot or an Iranian PGM convoy near a backroad outside Masyaf.⁶⁰ A fourth airstrike targeted the Tal Termos missile production facility in Tartous province.⁶¹

Israel may be responding to reports that Iran is increasing efforts to smuggle into or manufacture precision-guided munitions in Syria. Israeli media has reported in recent months increased Iranian efforts to establish missile and precision-guided munition factories in western Syria.⁶² The IRGC has converted Syrian military research facilities near Masyaf, Hama province into production and storage facilities for mid- and long-range missiles, according to the *Jerusalem Post*.⁶³ Iranian rhetoric and recent activity in western Syria suggest that Iran is attempting establish the area as a forward-positioned launch site for missiles capable of reaching Israel. In addition to concerns over missile production, Israel may also be responding to reports that Iran is trying to bring air defense assets into Syria. Iranian senior military officials have also recently made public comments about deploying Iranian-made Khordad-15 or Bavar-373 air defense systems to unspecified locations within Syria.⁶⁴

Iran likely ordered proxy forces in eastern Syria to conduct a rocket attack on US forces in retaliation for recent Israeli airstrikes. Likely Iranian-backed militants launched two rockets at US forces at an unspecified location in eastern Deir ez Zor province on March 13.⁶⁵ US Special Operations Levant Joint Task Force confirmed that the attack did not harm any US personnel or property. The official press release did not specify Iranian-backed militants perpetrated the attack, but the attack pattern suggests they are responsible. Iranian-backed militants last attacked US forces in eastern Syria on February 18⁶⁶ As CTP has previously assessed, Iranian-backed militants occasionally attack US forces in eastern Syria to retaliate for Israeli airstrikes and other regional developments that Iran perceives as hostile and perpetrated by the US.⁶⁷

The Assad regime likely postponed an Ankara-Damascus diplomatic normalization summit scheduled for later this week in Moscow. Regime-aligned *Al Watan* reported on March 13 that Syrian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Ayman Sosan has not confirmed he plans to attend the summit.⁶⁸ *Al Watan* claimed that the Assad regime indefinitely postponed the meeting until Turkey announces a date for the withdrawal of Turkish forces from northwest Syria.⁶⁹ This demand amounts to an outright rejection from the Assad regime over attending the summit in the present circumstances given that Turkey is highly unlikely to withdraw forces at this time. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu announced the meetings would occur during a joint press conference with Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian on March 8, as CTP previously reported.⁷⁰

Hadi al Ameri—the leader of the Iranian proxy Badr Organization—warned Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani against removing Badr-affiliated officials from security posts in Diyala Province on March 12, likely to maintain control over counterterrorism and security operations there. Hadi al Ameri hosted a weekly Shia Coordination Framework meeting with Sudani on March 12.⁷¹ The Shia Coordination Framework is a loosely aligned political coalition of pro-Iranian Iraqi political parties. Ameri warned Sudani during the meeting that the Badr Organization will not accept any decision to dismiss its militants from security leadership roles in Diyala province. He argued that, instead, Sudani should rely on the Badr Organization to oversee security in Diyala. Ameri may have used the meeting to coerce Sudani into accepting the continued influence of Badr in Diyala Province.

The Ameri-Sudani meeting follows recent tensions surrounding a massacre likely perpetrated by Iranian-backed Shia militias in Diyala province on February 20.⁷² Local tribes blamed Iranian-backed militias for the massacre of Sunni civilians in Al Jayalah, Khalis district, Diyala province and demanded Sudani prosecute the militants connected to the crime. Sudani met with local non-Badr Organization officials and tribal leadership on March 8 in response to the massacre.⁷³ Iraqi Special Forces later arrested a Badr Organization commander on March 10 in connection with the targeted killings that took place in Diyala but released him after a Badr Organization official threatened the governor of Diyala.⁷⁴ The Badr Organization-backed 1st Emergency Response Division conducted sweeping operations in Diyala province independent of Iraqi Special Forces.⁷⁵ Diyala province's ethnic and sectarian diversity allowed al Qaeda in Iraq and Iranian-backed Shia militants to establish strongholds and conduct targeted attacks between 2006-2007.⁷⁶ Sectarian conflict in Diyala province presents an opportunity for ISIS to establish itself as a security guarantor for Sunnis in the province.

¹ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-7-2023> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-8-2023> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-9-2023> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-10-2023>

² <https://jamejamonline.ir/fa/news/1401074/در-پایتخت-۴-میلیون-قطعه-مواد-محرقة-در-پایتخت> ; <https://www.iribnews.ir/fa/news/3786911/توقیف-۸۰-تن-مواد-اولیه-ساخت-موادمحرقة-پرخطر>

³ https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1635182661143605249?cxt=HHwWgsC9xe_9qrEtAAAA

- ⁴ <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/12/22/2867066/> -توقیف خودروهایی -خطرآفرین -در چهارشنبه -آخر سال -تا پایان تعطیلات -
نوروزی
- ⁵ https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-5-2023#_ednbd0cd8eefc7c2cbd5945945310f70593ref3
- ⁶ <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/12/22/2866822/> -چهارشنبه -سوزی -یا میدان -جنگ -جشن -هایی -که -دیگر -رنگ -و -بویی -از آیین -
مراقب -چهارشنبه -سوزی -باشیم -شبی -که -شاید -/ <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/12/22/2866131/> -کهن -ایرانی -ها -ندارد -فیلم
یک -عمر -پشیمانی -را -به -همراه -بیاورد -فیلم
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<https://www.hra-news.org/2023/hranews/a-40192/> ;
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https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1635240126656954369?cxt=HHwWgoDS_eaOxbEtAAAA
- ⁸ <https://www.entekhab.com/ir/fa/news/718526/%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2-%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%85-%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%85%D9%88%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4-%D8%A2%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%B1-%D8%A2%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86>
- ⁹ <https://www.sharghdaily.com/-/حادثه -از -کنار -امنیت -است -از -جان -نگاهبانی -از -مسئولیت -شان -نگاهبانی -از -جان -امنیت -است -از -کنار -حادثه ->
مسمومیت -دانش -آموزان -چنان -گذشتند -که -گویی -اتفاقی -نیافتاده -است
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- ¹¹ https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-10-2023#_edn056144637cca3a88773c304baee2b0aeref6
- ¹² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46356725>
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- ¹⁵ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/amp/world/iran-says-suspected-schoolgirl-poisonings-occurred-in-more-than-50-schools>
- ¹⁶ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-1-2023> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-2-2023> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-5-2023> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-6-2023>
- ¹⁷ <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/dancers-of-ekbatan-complex-go-through-forced-confession-by-iran-s-judiciary/32315886.html>
- ¹⁸ <https://twitter.com/RadioFarda/status/1635306995791060993?cxt=HHwWgoCz7YzD47EtAAAA> ;
<https://twitter.com/RadioFarda/status/1635000567708672000?cxt=HHwWgiCz3dGW2LAtAAAA>
- ¹⁹ <https://ir.voanews.com/a/iran-drag-stores-men-scarf-/6993983.html>
- ²⁰ <https://www.isna.ir/news/1401122215997/%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%B5%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%DA%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%B4-%D9%87%D9%85%D9%87-%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B7-%D8%A8%DB%8C%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-%D9%85%DB%8C%D9%86%D8%B3%DA%A9-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%AF> ; <http://www.leader.ir/fa/content/26368> ; <http://www.president.ir/fa/142935>
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ir/news/85056217/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%B1%D8%A6%DB%8C%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D9%88-
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%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%85%D9%86%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%88-
%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C; [https://www.farsnews](https://www.farsnews.ir/media/14011222000481/) dot
ir/media/14011222000481/%D9%81%DB%8C%D9%84%D9%85%7C-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-
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%DA%A9%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D8%AF;

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%D9%86%D9%82%D8%B4%D9%87-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87-%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B9-
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