



**Iran Update, February 6, 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.**

**Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has taken several public-facing measures in recent days likely to alleviate public frustrations toward the regime.** Khamenei met with a group of schoolgirls on February 3, during which he celebrated the role of women of Iranian history and society.<sup>1</sup> Iranian state-run media widely promoted images from the event, showcasing a particularly ham-fisted regime propaganda effort. Khamenei was likely responding in part to the public criticisms of the regime mistreatment of women during the Mahsa Amini protests. Khamenei separately granted amnesty to and commuted the sentences of “tens of thousands” of protesters on January 6.<sup>2</sup> The regime will require eligible detainees to “express remorse,” essentially pleading guilty, according to some reports.<sup>3</sup> It is unclear on what charges and legal grounds the regime had detained these protesters to this point. The Iranian constitution requires that law enforcement agencies submit to judicial authorities an explanation of the charges for each individual no more than 24 hours after their arrest, but it is unclear whether the regime has followed such standards in its detention of thousands of protesters.<sup>4</sup>

Khamenei may have decided to conduct this public outreach and supposed amnesty in response to senior officials urging the regime to reconcile with its people in recent days. Several pragmatic hardline officials have voiced concern over the alienation of the

population and emphasized the need to maintain a constructive dialogue with them, as CTP previously reported.<sup>5</sup> These officials include Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei, and Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi. Ultra-hardline figures, such as various IRGC commanders, have contrastingly adopted a harsh and uncompromising position vis-a-vis the protests, framing the unrest exclusively as a foreign conspiracy and manifestation of Western hybrid warfare against the regime.<sup>6</sup>

The pragmatic hardliners may have succeeded in conveying to Khamenei the urgency with which the regime must address popular grievances but may have failed to convince him to take any meaningful action to address protester demands. Khamenei is likely continuing to misdiagnose the core issues driving the protests. He has indicated in recent months that he defines the unrest as a sociocultural and religious issue and seems to believe that the solution is trying to further ideologize the population.<sup>7</sup>

**Recent rhetoric from senior reformist figures reflects the divisions within this faction.** Mir Hossein Mousavi, who partly led the 2009 Green Movement, called for “foundational” change in Iran in a statement on February 4.<sup>8</sup> Mousavi adopted a largely revolutionary tone, discussing the need for a referendum on whether to maintain the Islamic Republic and suggested drafting a new constitution. Former reformist President Mohammad Khatami adopted a critical but slightly more tempered tone toward the regime in a statement on February 5.<sup>9</sup> Khatami called for reforming various regime institutions, such as the Assembly of Experts and Guardian Council, but did not suggest any referendum on continuing the Islamic Republic. These statements thus show that there are at least four different categories into which regime officials fall regarding how to respond to the protest movement: uncompromising hardliners, pragmatic hardliners, reformists seeking to reform the political system, and reformists seeking a fundamentally new political system.

These reformist statements, especially Khatami’s, may create space for regime officials to discuss possible reforms in response to the recent protests. Iranian state media, including outlets affiliated with the IRGC, reported on Khatami’s argument and will thus likely draw some attention to it.<sup>10</sup> CTP has seen no indication that Khamenei is prepared to accept any meaningful reforms, however.

**Failures of Western sanctions efforts against the provision of arms components to Iran have likely contributed to Russia’s ability to bypass Western sanctions to acquire components for combat drones through military cooperation with Iran.** US officials stated on February 5 that Russia and Iran are moving ahead with plans to build an Iranian drone factory on Russian soil, the second such international Iranian drone factory.<sup>11</sup> Iran opened a drone production factory

in Tajikistan - a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member state and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) candidate - in May 2022.<sup>12</sup> Russia may leverage its significant economic ties to Tajikistan through the CSTO and EAEU to launder drone components or procure manufactured drones for use in Ukraine in an effort to bypass international sanctions.<sup>13</sup>

UK investigative group Conflict Armament Research (CAR) reported in November 2022 that 82% of Iranian Shahed-131, Shahed 136, and Mohajer-6 drones downed in Ukraine had chips, semiconductors, and other components that came from the US despite high import and export control restrictions on such components to Iran.<sup>14</sup> CAR also noted that the downed drones contained higher-end technological capabilities and have a "significant jump in capabilities" compared to other systems previously observed in the Middle East.<sup>15</sup> Most Western-manufactured components in the downed Iranian drones were produced between 2020 and 2021, following the expiration of United Nations Security Council heavy arms sanctions against Iran in 2020.<sup>16</sup> Most Western companies whose components were found in downed Iranian drones in Ukraine denied directly selling components to Russia, Iran, or Belarus since the start of the war.<sup>17</sup> However, the representative of a Swiss manufacturing company noted that it is impossible to be completely sure that distributors of arms components do not sell components to sanctioned entities, implying that Russia, Iran, or other sanctioned states can exploit loopholes allowing them to acquire Western-produced arms components via proxy actors.<sup>18</sup>

**Regime-affiliated social media accounts have claimed that the Artesh—Iran's conventional military—will make a major announcement, possibly related to the acquisition of Su-35 fighter jets from Russia, on February 8.**<sup>19</sup> The regime recognizes this date as Artesh Air Force Day and has historically used the occasion and other similar ones to announce and celebrate recent technological achievements. Parliamentarian Shahryar Heydari previously stated that Iran will receive an unspecified number of Su-35s from Russia early in the next Persian calendar year (March 2023-March 2024), as CTP previously reported.<sup>20</sup> Tehran likely seeks these aircraft and other advanced military platforms in exchange for its militarily supporting the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

### **Key Takeaways**

- **Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has taken several public-facing measures in recent days likely to alleviate public frustrations toward the regime.**
- **Recent rhetoric from senior reformist figures reflects the divisions within this faction.**

- **Regime-affiliated social media accounts have claimed that the Artesh—Iran's conventional military—will make a major announcement, possibly related to the acquisition of Su-35 fighter jets from Russia, on February 8.**
- **CTP recorded no protest activity on February 4. CTP recorded at least one protest on February 5 and at least three protests on February 6.**
- **Parliamentarian Hassan Nowrouzi announced that a specialized parliamentary committee approved a controversial internet censorship bill, known as the Cyberspace Protection Bill, and will soon send it to the Guardian Council for final approval.**
- **Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani will travel to Moscow at some point in the next week, according to the Foreign Affairs Ministry.**

### Internal Security and Protest Activity

**CTP recorded no protest activity on February 4 and at least one protest on February 5.** CTP assesses with moderate confidence that the one protest occurred in the following location:

#### **Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province<sup>21</sup>**

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Kavian Steel Company workers on strike



**At least three protests occurred in three cities across three provinces on February 6.** CTP assesses with moderate confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

### **Esfahan City, Esfahan Province<sup>22</sup>**

- **Size:** Small to Medium
- **Demographic:** Farmers
- **Notes:** The farmers were reportedly trying to go to Tehran before the LEC Special Units tried to stop them.

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

### **Khush, Sistan and Baluchistan Province<sup>23</sup>**

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Women protesting the arrest of Sunni cleric Moulavi Abdol Majid—a close associate of Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid

### **Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province<sup>24</sup>**

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



**Parliamentarian Hassan Nowrouzi announced on February 6 that a specialized parliamentary committee approved a controversial internet censorship bill, known as the Cyberspace Protection Bill, and will soon send it to the Guardian Council for final approval.**<sup>25</sup> The bill would criminalize the use of virtual private networks in Iran and transfer certain authorities to the Iranian armed forces.<sup>26</sup> Nowrouzi is the vice chairman of the specialized committee that reportedly approved it. Hardline parliamentarian Jalal Rashidi—another committee member—denied Nowrouzi's claim.<sup>27</sup> Rashidi had previously endorsed a plan to increase regime oversight of messaging platforms and limit foreign messaging applications in August 2020.<sup>28</sup> Rashidi may be trying to appease public opinion by denying the approval of the Cyberspace Protection Bill.

**The Kashan Neighborhood Youth tweeted on February 6 stating that it is trying to “strengthen its field units” to attack and kill security officers.**<sup>29</sup> The Kashan group added that protesters should contact the group to assist in organizing these units.

### **Foreign Policy and Diplomacy**

**Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani will travel to Moscow at some point in the next week, according to the Foreign Affairs Ministry.**<sup>30</sup> Shamkhani ostensibly plans to discuss Afghanistan with senior Russian officials, although they will also likely discuss Iranian military support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine and other possible forms of military cooperation.

**The Iran-Russia Media Cooperation Working Group held its fourth session in Tehran on February 6.**<sup>31</sup> Deputy Culture and Islamic Guidance Minister for Press and Information Affairs Farshad Mehdi Pour chaired the meeting and called for joint efforts to “neutralize Western media attacks.”

**Foreign Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanani stated on February 6 that the Afghan Taliban has provided Iran some of but not all its water rights to the Helmand River.**<sup>32</sup> Parliamentarian Mohammad Sargazi claimed on January 29 that the Raisi administration threatened to expel Afghan nationals from Sistan and Baluchistan Province if the Afghan Taliban do not provide Iran water rights, as CTP previously reported.<sup>33</sup>

### **Military and Security Affairs**

**The IRGC replaced its local commander in Abu Kamal, Deir ez Zour Province, Syria on February 2, according to Syrian media.**<sup>34</sup> The IRGC reportedly appointed an officer with the pseudonym Hajj Abbas to replace an officer with the pseudonym Hajj Askar. Hajj Abbas previously commanded security forces around al

Quriyah, Deir Ez Zour Province. Former Syrian officer Ahmed Rahal claimed that the IRGC dismissed Hajj Askar over his failure to protect Iranian convoys crossing the Iraq-Syria border from Israeli airstrikes.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.leader dot ir/fa/content/26296>

<sup>2</sup> [www.leader dot ir/fa/content/26298](http://www.leader dot ir/fa/content/26298)

<sup>3</sup> [https://twitter.com/fresh\\_sadegh/status/1622259109448876032](https://twitter.com/fresh_sadegh/status/1622259109448876032)

<sup>4</sup> <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/constitution-english-1368.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-february-2-2023>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-february-1-2023>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-18>

<sup>8</sup> <https://t.me/MirHosseinMousavi/458>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.isna dot ir/news/1401111612349>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1401/11/16/2848705>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/moscow-tehran-advance-plans-for-iranian-designed-drone-facility-in-russia-11675609087>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.al-monitor dot com/originals/2022/05/iran-opens-drone-factory-tajikistan>

<sup>13</sup> <https://asiaplustj dot info/en/news/tajikistan/economic/20220715/tajik-authorities-still-exploring-possible-accession-to-eaeu>

<sup>14</sup> <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/7a394153c87947d8a602c3927609f572>;

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/21/politics/iranian-drones-russia-biden-task-force-us-tech-ukraine/index.html>

<sup>15</sup> <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/7a394153c87947d8a602c3927609f572>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.aljazeera dot com/news/2020/10/18/arms-embargo-on-iran-expires-despite-us-opposition>;

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/7a394153c87947d8a602c3927609f572>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/21/politics/iranian-drones-russia-biden-task-force-us-tech-ukraine/index.html>;

<https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/04/politics/iranian-drone-parts-13-us-companies-ukraine-russia/index.html>;

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ukraine-war-russia-iranian-drones-us-made-technology-chips/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ukraine-war-russia-iranian-drones-us-made-technology-chips/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://twitter.com/Mahdiibakhtiari/status/1622224808246132737>;

[https://twitter.com/nournews\\_ir/status/1622584925823152130](https://twitter.com/nournews_ir/status/1622584925823152130)

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-15-2023>

<sup>21</sup> <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1622277976447393794?cxt=HHwWhICxka7OvoMtAAAA>;

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1622268168856117249?cxt=HHwWgoC98b2TuoMtAAAA>;

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[https://twitter.com/RadioFarda\\_/status/1622230036219658240?cxt=HHwWglC8ze\\_nqIMtAAAA](https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1622230036219658240?cxt=HHwWglC8ze_nqIMtAAAA)

<sup>22</sup> [https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1622607239356850178?cxt=HHwWhIC9\\_f2r1IQtAAAA](https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1622607239356850178?cxt=HHwWhIC9_f2r1IQtAAAA);

[https://twitter.com/RadioFarda\\_/status/1622608167543644162?cxt=HHwWhICxwYH1IQtAAAA](https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1622608167543644162?cxt=HHwWhICxwYH1IQtAAAA);

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1622711666633834504?cxt=HHwWkIC86bnqg4UtAAAA>

<sup>23</sup> <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1622622183322157057?cxt=HHwWgoCwmeuR24QtAAAA>;

[https://twitter.com/hra\\_news/status/1622636182113746945?cxt=HHwWgoCwqdbA4YQtAAAA](https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1622636182113746945?cxt=HHwWgoCwqdbA4YQtAAAA)

<sup>24</sup> <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1622607699446824962?cxt=HHwWhIC89eHG1IQtAAAA>;

[https://twitter.com/hra\\_news/status/1622609051082231809?cxt=HHwWgsC4sbiV1YQtAAAA](https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1622609051082231809?cxt=HHwWgsC4sbiV1YQtAAAA)

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.entekhab dot ir/fa/news/713934>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-internet-bill-controversy-secretly-implementing/32026313.html>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.isna dot ir/news/1401111713304>

<sup>28</sup> <https://aftabnews dot ir/fa/news/668258/> جزئیات طرح جدید مجلس - احتمالاً همه شبکه های اجتماعی فیلتر می شوند

<sup>29</sup> [https://twitter.com/javanane\\_ksh/status/1622491816879706116?s=20&t=p05HHva5WmbuA-RU2B6dJg](https://twitter.com/javanane_ksh/status/1622491816879706116?s=20&t=p05HHva5WmbuA-RU2B6dJg)

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.irna dot ir/news/85020971>

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.nournews dot ir/fa/news/127592>

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<sup>32</sup> <http://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/11/17/2848979>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-31-2023>

<sup>34</sup> <https://twitter.com/DeirEzzor24/status/1258138273593122819>;

<https://twitter.com/DeirEzzor24/status/1621146593759215618>; <https://www.qasioun-news.com/ar/articles/260131>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B2%D8%B2-%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%BA%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A>