

Iran Update, March 3, 2023

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Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid suggested that the Iranian regime may be responsible for or complicit in the recent chemical attacks on schoolgirls across the country.

Abdol Hamid characterized the attacks as “a form of protest suppression” meant to target children who protested against the regime. Abdol Hamid also suggested that the regime has been unwilling to protect these schoolgirls due to their protest participation.¹ He furthermore suggested that the regime knows who is responsible for the attacks and has lied to the public about them. Abdol Hamid thus criticized regime leadership for engaging in the great “sin” of lying, stating that “the worst ruler is the one who lies to their nation.” CTP previously reported that the regime has failed to take appropriate measures necessary to protect these schools and assessed with moderate confidence that a network of individuals whom the regime tolerates has coordinated the attacks.²

Abdol Hamid separately criticized Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian’s CNN interview on March 1, rejecting the latter’s absurd claims about the regime’s humane treatment of protestors. Abdol Hamid stated: “we were surprised that [Amir Abdollahian] said that no one was killed in the protests, and no one was imprisoned for the protests,” citing the September 30, 2022 “Bloody Friday” massacre of protestors in Zahedan and mass arrests across the country.

Security forces sustained increased pressure against Abdol Hamid and his supporters for the second consecutive week on March 3, which could fuel further sectarian tensions.

Security forces once again reportedly attempted to enter Zahedan’s Grand Makki Mosque, violently clashed with protestors, and disrupted local internet services.³ These forces conducted a similar escalation against Abdol Hamid and his followers in Zahedan on February 24, as CTP previously reported.⁴ The regime has significantly increased its security presence in Zahedan since January 2023 to deter Abdol Hamid from criticizing the political establishment. However, these security forces had largely refrained from interfering with Abdol Hamid’s weekly sermons and the ensuing protests until February 24. Multiple factors may have driven the regime to escalate since then. Iranian leaders may feel more confident in their capability to quell internal unrest following weeks of relatively low protest activity throughout Iran. They may also perceive a renewed sense of urgency to confront Abdol Hamid, who continues to challenge regime legitimacy and criticize its handling of domestic crises.

This continued regime pressure in Zahedan violates the red line set by the Sunni Friday Prayer Leader in Rask—Moulana Abdol Ghaffar Naghshbandi. The office of Naghshbandi published a statement on February 24 calling for mass protests in response to security forces’ attempted “siege” of the Grand Makki Mosque, as CTP previously reported.⁵ Naghshbandi warned that he would issue a “historic fatwa” if the regime continued this “brutal action,” although he did not specify what such a decree might entail. Naghshbandi’s statement was a clear threat to the regime but was also ambiguous likely on purpose. Fatwas are religious orders issued by qualified senior clerics

to direct and guide Muslim behavior and are often calls to action. Such a fatwa could characterize the regime escalation around the Grand Makki Mosque as a kind of religious threat and would likely incite further tensions between the regime and its Sunni Baloch community.

The regime has likely arrested Naghshbandi, but doing so may not hinder the ability of his office to issue statements. Raisi administration-controlled *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)* reported on March 1 that Naghshbandi had fled the country out of fear of arrest and the revelation of his purported ties to foreign actors.⁶ Naghshbandi's family stated in an interview with *Radio Farda* on March 2 that they were not aware of his whereabouts and repeatedly tried to contact him when he disappeared on his way to Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi Province.⁷ A special cleric court there summoned Naghshbandi on December 12.⁸ His office reportedly released a statement on February 24, possibly after his arrest.

President Ebrahim Raisi is expanding his efforts to deflect blame for internal crises onto Iran's foreign enemies rather than taking personal accountability. Raisi accused these foreign enemies of being responsible for the increasing chemical attacks on schoolgirls during a speech on March 3.⁹ Raisi has consistently attributed the Mahsa Amini protest movement and currency crisis to foreign actors in recent months as well.¹⁰ Raisi's unwavering narrative that external actors are responsible for these internal crises highlights his unwillingness and potentially inability to seriously confront and resolve pressing domestic challenges. Raisi took four months to order the Interior Ministry to address the student poisonings after the first incidents occurred in November 2022—indicating either his incompetence or unseriousness in meaningfully addressing these issues.¹¹

President Raisi and Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf likely remain divided on how to address and publicly discuss these internal crises. Ghalibaf continues to call for some kind of political and economic reform to address worsening domestic conditions rather than continuing to blame foreign actors as Raisi has done. Ghalibaf has also publicly criticized the role of parastatal entities in the economy, appearing to come into conflict with Raisi and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) leadership. Ghalibaf stated that government intervention in the economy prevents growth and encourages corruption on March 3, doubling down on previous calls he made for parastatal organizations to reduce their role in the economy.¹² Ideological hardliners, such as Raisi and IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami, have contrastingly praised parastatal organizations for their role in developing Iran's economy in recent days. Raisi and Salami both thanked the Khatam ol Anbia Construction Headquarters—an IRGC-run construction and civil engineering firm—for completing a water transfer project to Lake Oroumiyeh on February 27.¹³ Raisi separately called on the Khatam ol Anbia Construction Headquarters to accelerate its completion of “half-finished projects” in Bushehr Province on March 3.¹⁴

Iran is trying to consolidate and increase its military presence in eastern Syria, likely as part of an effort to secure critical routes leading deeper into the country. Two local IRGC commanders in Deir ez Zor Province met with proxy militants in al Mayadin on March 2, reportedly to discuss reinforcing security in the area.¹⁵ The participants specifically discussed establishing a joint operations room for Iranian and Iranian-backed elements in al Mayadin and Abu Kamal.¹⁶ A commander from the Fatemiyoun Division--the IRGC Quds Force's Afghan Shia proxy--reportedly attended the meeting as well.¹⁷ Iranian and Iranian-backed elements have increasingly struggled with counter-ISIS operations in the desert to the west since March 2022, possibly due to Russia pulling away its combat aircraft from the central Syrian desert.¹⁸ ISIS frequently conducts IED attacks and kidnappings along the Abu Kamal-al Mayadin route as well.¹⁹ The IRGC may additionally use its growing military presence in eastern Syria to conduct counter-ISIS sweeps into the western desert.

The Fatemiyoun Division has expanded its presence in eastern Syria in recent days likely to help the IRGC secure the area. The division replaced the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 47th Brigade Hashemiyoun Brigade that was stationed in Abu Kamal on February 25, as CTP previously reported.²⁰ Additional Fatemiyoun reinforcements deployed to the area from Iran and Damascus on February 16, 25, and 27 as well.²¹ The IRGC reportedly decided on March 2 to send Fatemiyoun militants to Iran to train on drone and radar systems, possibly to support efforts to secure the Abu Kamal-al Mayadin route from the ISIS threat on the ground and prepare for the introduction of Iranian air defense equipment in Syria.

Iran may seek to use the Abu Kamal-al Mayadin route to import air defense platforms into Syria if it cannot use air transport. The Israeli Air Force has frequently targeted convoys traveling to Syria from Iraq through al Qaim that Israeli officials assert are carrying Iranian weapons.²² The Israeli Air Force has also struck Damascus and Aleppo airport runways to prevent flights with suspected weapons shipments from landing.²³ Iran is probably attempting to complicate Israeli targeting by using both transportation methods. Iranian state media reported on February 24 that Iran will likely sell air defense equipment, such as radars and surface-to-air missiles for the Iranian-made Khordad 15, to Syria.²⁴ It is unclear how effective Khordad 15 systems would be against advanced Israeli stealth aircraft. Iranian military leadership may, however, seek to use these systems to deter a potential Turkish ground incursion into northern Syria, which Turkish officials have threatened in recent months.²⁵

Key Takeaways

- **Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid suggested that the Iranian regime may be responsible for or complicit in the recent chemical attacks on schoolgirls across the country.**
- **Security forces sustained increased pressure against Abdol Hamid and his supporters for the second consecutive week, which could fuel further sectarian tensions.**
- **President Ebrahim Raisi is expanding his efforts to deflect blame for internal crises onto Iran's foreign enemies rather than taking personal accountability.**
- **President Raisi and Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf likely remain divided on how to address and publicly discuss these internal crises.**
- **Iran is trying to consolidate and increase its military presence in eastern Syria, likely as part of an effort to secure critical routes leading deeper into the country.**
- **At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces on March 3. CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province²⁶

- **Size: Medium to large**
- **Demographic: Protests following Prominent Sunni Cleric Abdol Hamid's weekly Friday prayer sermon**

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

Galikash, Golestan Province²⁷

- **Size: Small**

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

March 4²⁸

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

March 7²⁹

- **Location: Countrywide**
- **Notes: Protests against the chemical attacks on schoolgirls.**

March 8³⁰

- **Location: Countrywide, city centers at 18:00 local time**
- **Notes: Commemorating International Women's Day**

March 13-15³¹

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

Senior Iranian security officers reiterated their theories on how to effectively and violently repress protests on March 2. These regime officials discussed these ideas at a security conference that the IRGC Tehran Provincial Corps hosted.³² Brigadier General Hossein Nejat—the leader of the IRGC Sarallah Operational Headquarters—argued that security forces must preempt protests and crush them while they are still forming and small.³³ The Sarallah Headquarters is responsible for overseeing security in the capital region. Brigadier General Hassan Hassan Zadeh—the commander of the IRGC Tehran Provincial Corps—similarly discussed the need to preempt protests to avoid stretching security forces thin.³⁴ These commanders and other conference attendees emphasized their support for the brutal regime crackdown on protests, which killed at least 522 citizens, including 70 minors.³⁵

This rhetoric is consistent with how regime officials have discussed how to best impose social control after previous major protest waves. Iranian leaders have increasingly invested in recent years in building an adaptive and sophisticated police and surveillance state that will help secure the grip of the clerical establishment on power.³⁶ Iranian leaders have especially focused on using their repressive capabilities to forecast when and where protests will occur and crushing them as early as possible. The recent rhetoric suggests that some Iranian leaders continue to support this brutal model of repression.

Social media users reported on March 3 that an individual set themselves aflame in public in Khorasan Razavi Province.³⁷ It is unclear whether this individual is different from the one who set themselves aflame in Kashmar, Khorasan Razavi Province on February 28 to protest poor economic conditions.³⁸

Economic Affairs

The Iranian rial depreciated slightly from 538,000 rials to the dollar on March 2 to 542,000 rials to the dollar on March 3.³⁹

External Security and Military Affairs

A delegation from the Iranian-Syrian Parliamentary Friendship Association met multiple senior Assad regime officials in recent days. The delegation met with Syrian Foreign Affairs Minister Faisal in Damascus on March 1, Aleppo Provincial Governor Hussein Diab on March 2, and Latakia Provincial Governor Amer Hilal on March 3.⁴⁰ Syrian state media reported the delegation discussed humanitarian relief and reconstruction efforts related to the February 6 earthquake.⁴¹ The delegation may have attempted to lobby Syrian officials to award reconstruction contracts to IRGC-affiliated Iranian construction companies. An Israeli think tank claimed on February 28 that the IRGC-owned Khatam ol Anbia Construction Headquarters was trying to purchase property in eastern Aleppo City soon after the February 6 earthquake.⁴²

Iranian-backed Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) militias are continuing to consolidate their positions within and around Aleppo City. *SyriaTV* published a report on March 2 claiming that the PMF has initiated a propaganda campaign throughout Aleppo City.⁴³ The PMF likely intends to offset the negative publicity generated by distributing humanitarian aid solely to Alawite-majority communities in the eastern suburbs of Aleppo City and areas near Iranian diplomatic facilities toward the city center—locations where the PMF has established large, possibly permanent, military positions. The *SyriaTV* report claimed that as many as 1,000 PMF militants have occupied Hamdaniyah Stadium located in the center of Aleppo City near the Iranian consulate and the al Nuqatah Mosque.⁴⁴ Iranian-backed militants have utilized—or created by forcibly relocating local non-Shia residents—Shia-dominated areas around Palmyra, Deir ez Zor City, and other Syrian cities to entrench themselves.⁴⁵

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad al Sudani announced the creation of a new council to investigate “security breaches,” likely in response to the massacre of Sunni civilians on February 20. Prime Minister Sudani claimed that the council will investigate military commands whose negligence results in “security breaches.”⁴⁶ The council will reportedly conduct an investigation and recommend a replacement for the complicit officers to Sudani within 48 hours of the infraction. The council will report to either the Iraqi Joint Operations Command or Interior Minister Abdul Amir Shammari, who is affiliated with the Iranian-aligned Shia Coordination Framework.⁴⁷

Turkey’s National Intelligence Organization (MIT) assassinated the commander of PKK operations in Sinjar on March 3, risking retaliation from Iranian-backed militias. The MIT reported that an intelligence operation team killed PKK commander Saad Ali Badal in the vicinity of Sinjar, Ninewah Province, Iraq.⁴⁸ The MIT claimed Badal was preparing to carry out an attack against Turkish military personnel stationed at the Zilkan military base in Bashiqa, Ninewah Province. Unidentified militants killed former Iraqi Turkmen Front official Ahmed Taher in an IED attack in Kirkuk city on March 3.⁴⁹ The Iraqi Turkmen Front’s association with the Turkish government suggests that Iranian-backed militias may have perpetrated the attack. Iranian-backed militias may similarly retaliate or escalate for the MIT assassination of Badal.

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