

# Iran Update, February 14, 2023, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Zachary Coles, Annika Ganzeveld, Johnathan Baumel, and Frederick W. Kagan February 14, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

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Former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani is positioning himself to reenter the political arena after a period of relative absence. Rouhani promoted his administration's economic, foreign, defense, and health policies in a standing meeting with his former cabinet members on February 13 that he publicized.¹ Rouhani stressed the need to "restore the people's trust," implicitly acknowledging deepening divides between the regime and the Iranian public following the Mahsa Amini protest movement, and called on Iranian officials to consider criticisms of the regime seriously. Rouhani framed ongoing unrest as economically-motivated, and endorsed less government involvement in the Iranian economy, a return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and democratically-held elections. Rouhani separately urged his former cabinet to provide policy recommendations to the Raisi administration, stating that "it is (their) national and religious duty to convey every opinion and thought (they) have to the government. Regardless of whether we think it'll work or not." It is noteworthy that Rouhani publicized his meeting with former moderate reformist officials, although such meetings are not new. Iranian media previously reported that Rouhani was cooperating with other moderate and reformists in attempt to regain political influence in early 2022.³

Rouhani is playing an increasingly prominent role in discussing the future of the regime following the Mahsa Amini protest movement. Rouhani criticized the regime for marginalizing moderate and reformist actors in the political sphere in an interview on February 1, after a period of relative silence.<sup>4</sup> Rouhani separately described deepening divides between Iranian leadership and its population as an urgent threat and suggested that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei had failed to sufficiently address such divides on February 7.<sup>5</sup> His rhetoric in the meeting he publicized on February 14 is relatively milder and more focused on economic problems than his previous statements. Rouhani may be tempering his rhetoric in response to Khamenei's drawing of boundaries of acceptable discourse. CTP previously

assessed that Khamenei's February 8 speech indicated that he will tolerate limited debates on reform, but will not sanction discussions in line with reformist politician Mir Hossein Mousavi's calls for "foundational" change in Iran.<sup>6</sup>

Rouhani has additionally launched a new website and Twitter account in recent months, possibly signaling his attempt to return to the public arena. Rouhani is eligible to run in the 2025 Iranian Presidential elections, although it is unclear whether he intends to do so. Khamenei is seemingly continuing to permit Rouhani to publicly discuss how the regime should respond to recent protests. Khamenei could see allowing Rouhani and other moderate and reformist actor to reenter the political arena could serve as a pressure relief valve to address mounting grievances without having to fundamentally alter the regime.

Iranian officials from across the political spectrum are echoing Rouhani's February 13 suggestion that ongoing, anti-regime sentiments are rooted in economic grievances. Hardline Parliamentarian Yahya Ebrahimi stated that recent protests were economically motivated on February 14.9 Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei separately stressed the importance of economic discipline and transparency in a meeting with judiciary officials. <sup>10</sup> Reformist Islamic Republic of Iran Party General Secretary Hojjat ol Eslam Rasoul Montajabnia previously suggested that new foreign and economic policies could address protester grievances on February 8. <sup>11</sup> Recent statements from Iranian officials framing the Mahsa Amini protest movement as economically-motivated could suggest that these officials are also responding to Khamenei's red lines and modifying their diagnoses of Iran's challenges.

**Iran-backed militias have recently withdrawn from military positions in Deir ez-Zour Province and may redeploy to Aleppo Province.** Local Syrian media reported that Iran-backed militants began withdrawing from several locations near al Mayadin, Deir ez-Zour Province, Syria as early as February 6.12 The *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights* reported that Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) militants departed facilities in Makhan and al Quriyah near al Mayadin on February 13.13 The militants departed once Assad-regime-aligned National Defense Force and Deir ez-Zour Military Security personnel arrived to relieve them.14 The outlet also reported on February 14 that unspecified Iran-backed militants similarly evacuated positions in eastern Deir ez-Zour City and a Shia religious shrine near al Mayadin.15 The unspecified Iran-backed militants could be from the Fatemiyoun Brigade forces that have previously occupied positions near the shrine.16 Local media did not report Iran-backed militants crossing into Iraq from Deir ez-Zour, suggesting the withdrawing militants likely traveled westward further into Syria.

CTP has observed multiple instances of LH, Iran-backed Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, and IRGC Quds Force personnel surging reinforcements and materiel into northern Syria since the February 5 earthquake that devastated Turkey and northwestern Syria.<sup>17</sup> The timing of Iran-backed militia withdrawals from Deir ez-Zour Province and recent pattern of Iran-backed military resources flowing into Aleppo Province suggest that the Hezbollahi and Fatemiyoun militants withdrawing from Deir ez-Zour are likely also headed to Aleppo. CTP will continue to update this observation as more information becomes available.

President Ebrahim Raisi's February 13 op-ed in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee's *People's Daily* likely signals high-level Chinese support for increased Sino-Iranian cooperation. The *People's Daily* is the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the CCP, and its content often reflects the viewpoint of senior party officials. Articles in the *People's Daily* typically appear under a pen name and directly communicate the party line or express the party-sanctioned view of a named reporter, making Raisi's op-ed particularly noteworthy. Raisi's op-ed contains multiple Chinese idiomatic, historical, and political expressions (such as the Chinese President Xi Jinping's catchphrase "community of common destiny"), suggesting Chinese co-authorship or significant post-translation augmentation. Other Chinese media reporting on Raisi's visit mirrors phrases from the *People's Daily* op-ed, further indicating Sino-Iranian message coordination. Xi's continued backing of Putin since the Ukraine invasion has been controversial within China, and Xi's opponents have voiced criticism of his support for revisionist regimes like Russia and Iran. It is possible that Raisi's *People's Daily* op-ed targets internal critics of Xi's foreign policy and signals his full commitment to the Iran-China relationship.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani is positioning himself to reenter the public arena after a period of relative absence.
- Iran-backed militias have recently withdrawn from military positions in Deir ez-Zour Province and may redeploy to Aleppo Province.
- President Ebrahim Raisi's February 13 op-ed in the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee's official *People's Daily* likely signals high-level Chinese support for increased Sino-Iranian cooperation.
- At least six protests occurred in six cities across six provinces on February 14.
- The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) may be setting rhetorical conditions to escalate against Sunni protesters.
- The regime is likely purging dissenting academics from the Iranian educational sphere.
- Former IRGC Intelligence Organization Chief Hossein Taeb defended ongoing, regime-imposed internet restrictions on February 13.
- Iranian media outlets recirculated Parliamentarian Shahryar Heydari's January 15 announcement that Iran will soon receive an unspecified number of Su-35 fighter jets.
- President Ebrahim Raisi signed 20 agreements on Sino-Iranian in Beijing on February 14.

### **Internal Security and Protest Activity**

At least six protests occurred in six cities across six provinces on February 14. CTP assesses with high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

# Ghazvin City, Ghazvin Province<sup>22</sup>

• Size: Small

• **Demographic:** Retirees

#### Qom City, Qom Province<sup>23</sup>

• Size: Small

• **Demographic:** Parents protesting recent poisonings in Qom.

• **Notes:** Numerous students have received medical treatment for poisoning in Qom Province since December 2022. Poisoned students reported experiencing lethargy, dizziness, strange smells, and severe coughs, among other symptoms.<sup>24</sup> Iranian authorities have not determined the cause of the poisonings and have assigned security officials to conduct investigations of the incidents. <sup>25</sup>

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

#### Karaj, Alborz Province<sup>26</sup>

• Size: Small

• **Demographic:** Retirees

#### Tabriz, East Azerbaijan Province<sup>27</sup>

• Size: Small

• **Demographic:** Green space contractors

## Hamedan City, Hamedan Province<sup>28</sup>

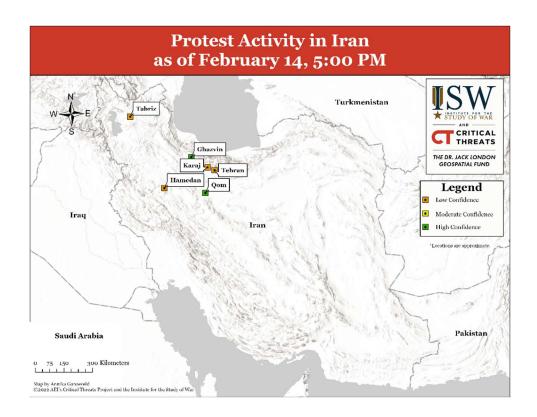
• Size: Small

• **Demographic:** Retirees

## Tehran City, Tehran Province<sup>29</sup>

• Size: Small

• **Demographic:** Defrauded investors of Ramek Khodro



The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) may be setting rhetorical conditions to escalate against Sunni protesters. IRGC Spokesperson Ramadan Sharif stated on February 14 that "separatist groups have reawakened" and were planning to take control of cities in Kurdistan and Sistan and Baluchistan Provinces. Other regime officials have emphasized national unity and cohesion in recent days, making Sharif's acknowledgement of internal divisions a divergence from this narrative.<sup>30</sup>

Sharif is likely using the regime's official discourse of national unity to present Sunni citizens who participate in weekly Friday anti-regime protests in Kurdistan, Sistan and Baluchistan, and Golestan Provinces as "separatists" who imminently threaten Iran's national security and territorial integrity. Sharif's statements could signal that the IRGC is setting rhetorical conditions to crack down on Sunni communities that continue to challenge the regime. It is unclear, however, whether non-IRGC segments of the regime support such an escalation since Sharif's rhetoric is anomalous in the current regime discourse.

# The regime is likely purging dissenting academics from the Iranian educational sphere.

The *Times Higher Education* reported on February 13 that Iranian authorities had dismissed and forced a large number of academics who had criticized the regime into early retirement, echoing similar reports of mass firings within the past several weeks.<sup>31</sup> Senior regime officials have previously framed indoctrination efforts within the Iranian education system as a solution to divides between Iranian leadership and its youth, as CTP previously reported.<sup>32</sup>

Former IRGC Intelligence Organization Chief Hossein Taeb defended ongoing, regime-imposed internet restrictions on February 13. Taeb claimed that Iran's enemies had taken control of the internet, thereby justifying the regime's ongoing internet restrictions. <sup>33</sup> Information and Communications Technology Minister Issa Zahreh Pour separately stated on February 14 that the regime will provide unfiltered internet access to a list of qualifying university faculty members. Zahreh Pour added that Iranian authorities had already provided some reporters with unfiltered internet access without providing further details. <sup>34</sup>

Iranian media outlets recirculated Parliamentarian Shahryar Heydari's January 15 announcement that Iran will receive an unspecified number of Su-35 fighter jets from Russia early in the next Persian calendar year (March 2023—March 2024).<sup>35</sup> Heydari's original statement noted that Iran is also purchasing air defense systems, helicopters, and missiles from Russia, as CTP previously reported.<sup>36</sup> Heydari is a lawmaker on the Parliamentary National Security and Foreign Policy Committee. Acquiring Su-35s would advance Iranian leaders' efforts to field an increasingly modern air force that is capable of conducting "offensive" operations and projecting strength abroad. The February 14 media reports do not include any new information, and it is unclear why these reports from a month ago were recirculated at this time when Raisi is in Beijing and the foreign policy focus should have been on China.

#### **Foreign Affairs and Diplomacy**

President Ebrahim Raisi signed 20 agreements on Sino-Iranian crisis management, tourism, communication and information technology, environment, international trade, intellectual property, agriculture, exports, health and medical treatment, sports, and cultural heritage cooperation in Beijing on February 14. <sup>37</sup> Chinese President Xi Jinping stated that China aimed to implement the Belt and Road Initiative with Iran and import more Iranian agricultural products while meeting Raisi in Beijing. <sup>38</sup> Ebrahim Raisi also met with the President of the National People's Congress of China, Li Zhanshu. Raisi stressed the importance of Iran-China parliamentary cooperation and expressed gratitude for Zhanshu's support in advancing Sino-Iranian relations. Raisi discussed the National People's Congress of China's role in advancing the 25-year Iran-China strategic cooperation agreement. <sup>39</sup> IRGC-affiliated media outlets praised Raisi's visit to Beijing on February 14 and framed increased Sino-Iranian cooperations as a solution to Iran's deteriorating economy. <sup>40</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> https://t.co/jjZ9SHF1vn

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> https://t.co/jjZ9SHF1vn

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> <a href="https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/iran-file/can-iranian-moderates-and-reformists-threaten-raisis-chances-of-becoming-supreme-leader">https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/iran-file/can-iranian-moderates-and-reformists-threaten-raisis-chances-of-becoming-supreme-leader</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> https://t.co/VZXk4EXzxT

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> https://t.co/e9JtASZFHW; https://www.isna.ir/news/1401111814214/%D8%B1%D8%A6%DB%8C%D8%B3-%D9%82%D9%88-%D9%82-%D8%B6%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B2%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D9%81%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD-

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<sup>12</sup> https://www.dot.syriahr.dot.com/%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-
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%D8%AD%D9%81%D8%B8
39 https://president.ir/fa/142437
<sup>40</sup> https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/11/25/2853281/%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B9-
%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%AF-%D9%87%D9%85%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-25%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87-
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%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA;
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