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Hardline officials are promoting conservative reforms, which will likely generate additional calls for political change in Iran. Hardline Islamic Coalition Party Secretary General Asadollah Badamchian called for constitutional reform within the bounds of the Islamic Republic during an interview with reformist news outlet Entekhab on March 15.ⁱ Badamchian’s use of the term “constitutional reform” is the first CTP has seen from a hardline official. Badamchian did not specify which reforms he had in mind, but criticized some reformists’ calls for a “Westernized constitution.” Badamchian emphasized: “I say reforms as in reforms, not reformists. If anything is deficient, it requires corrections.”ⁱⁱ Several moderate figures within the Iranian political establishment have also called for liberalizing—as opposed to conservative reforms—in recent months. Examples of recent liberalizing reform proposals include reforming certain governmental bodies, such as the Assembly of Experts and the Guardian Council, to increase citizen participation in the political process.ⁱⁱⁱ

The government’s pursuit of conservative reforms will likely fuel anti-regime frustrations and increase calls for political changes that address the Iranian population’s ongoing economic, political, and sociocultural grievances. Iranian news outlets reported on March 15 that the Parliamentary Cultural Committee has proposed cutting internet and phone services for unveiled women who ignore SMS warnings to veil.^{iv} The Parliamentary Judicial and Legal Commission previously announced plans to block the national identification cards of unveiled women and bar them from banking services on February 3.^v Iranian officials have also emphasized the importance of indoctrinating and ideologizing the population, frequently calling on educational institutions and the media to “explain the issues related to hijab and chastity.”^{vi} These policies do not address Iranian grievances about the government’s inability to stabilize the Iranian economy, disregard for the rights of women and religious minorities, and crackdown on civil liberties such as freedom of speech.^{vii}

Key Takeaways

- **Hardline officials are promoting conservative reforms, which will likely generate additional calls for political change in Iran.**
- **Four protests occurred in four cities across three provinces.**
- **Information and Communication Technology Minister Issah Zahreh Pour confirmed reports of a country-wide, and hour-long internet disruption recorded on March 15.**
- **Supreme National Security Council-aligned *Nour News Agency* reported that Secretary Ali Shamkhani will travel to Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates to meet with Emirati National Security Advisor Tahnoon bin Zayed al Nahyan on March 16.**
- **An unidentified person crossed into Israel from Lebanon and detonated a roadside bomb outside Megido Prison, approximately five kilometers from the northern West Bank border on March 13.**
- **Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani ordered Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to conduct raids in Al Khalis, Diyala Province, Iraq on March 15.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least four protests occurred in four cities across three provinces on March 15. CTP assesses with high to moderate confidence that protests occurred in the following cities:

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province^{viii}

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

Shoush, Khuzestan Province^{ix}

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

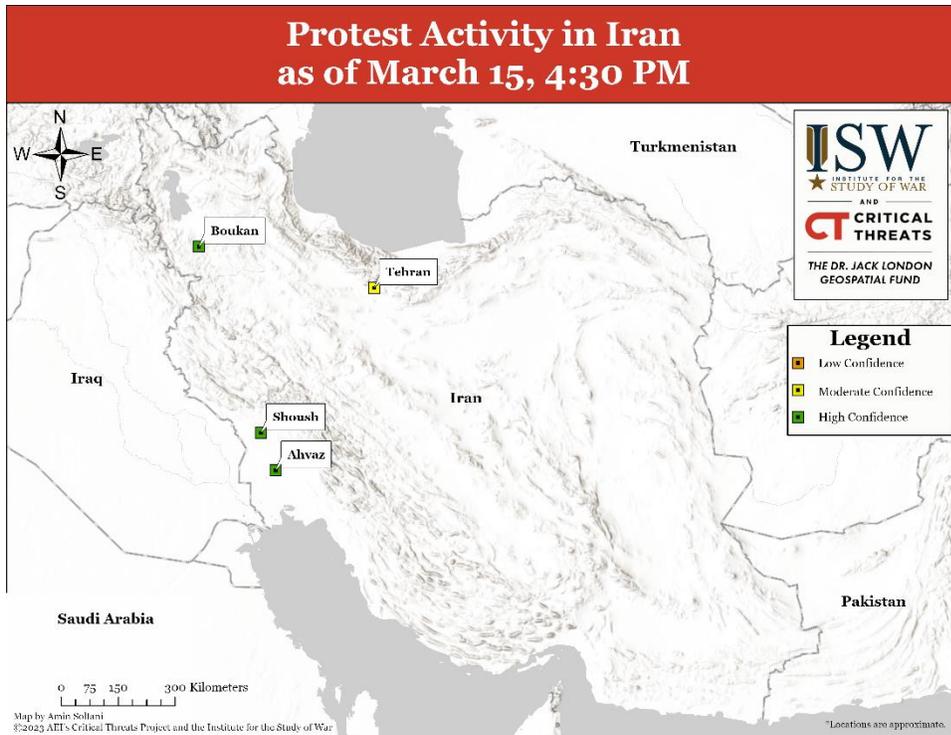
Boukan, West Azerbaijan Province^x

- **Size:** Small to medium
- **Protester Activity:** Fires lit in street
- **Regime Repression:** Sounds of gunfire audible in clip
- **Notes:** Protesting against the death/torture of Shirzad Ahmadinejad

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

Tehran City, Tehran Province^{xi}

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Veteran government workers



Protest coordinators and organizations called for demonstrations on the following date:

March 16^{xii}

- **Type:** Calls to commemorate protesters killed in the Mahsa Amini movement at their burial sites
- **Location:** Countrywide

Information and Communication Technology Minister Issah Zahreh Pour confirmed reports of a country-wide, and hour-long internet disruption recorded on March 15. Social media users and an Iranian internet watchdog organization reported widespread internet disruptions at roughly 9:56 am local time.^{xiii} Zahreh Pour denied that a cyber-attack caused the disruption, stating that authorities had encountered “a small issue that will be resolved soon.”^{xiv} Zahreh Pour announced on February 2 that unknown actors conducted a cyberattack that significantly impacted Iranian internet infrastructure on January 24, as CTP previously reported.^{xv}

Law Enforcement Command (LEC) Spokesperson Brigadier General Saeed Montazer Al-Mahdi announced on March 15 that the LEC Intelligence Organization arrested 118 individuals in connection with recent student poisonings.^{xvi} Al-Mahdi added that around 4,000 police patrols have been monitoring schools in recent days and that the majority of reported poisonings were psychogenic. Al-Mahdi assured parents and students that “the case of this sinister phenomenon will be closed soon.”^{xvii} CTP has not recorded any poisoning incidents since March 13.

Iranian news outlets reported on March 15 that Chahar Shanbeh Souri was more dangerous this year than previous years.^{xviii} Iran’s National Medical Emergency Organization Head Jafar Miadfar stated that the number of Iranians who sustained injuries due to Chahar Shanbeh Souri festivities increased by 14 percent in 2023.^{xix} Semi-official ISNA separately published graphic pictures of individuals injured on this holiday.^{xx} While Chahar Shanbeh Souri is an inherently risky tradition, Iranian media may be emphasizing the dangers of this holiday to justify the regime’s securitization of Iranian society in recent days and to deter future participation.

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Supreme National Security Council-aligned *Nour News Agency* reported that Secretary Ali Shamkhani will travel to Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates to meet with Emirati National Security Advisor Tahnoun bin Zayed al Nahyan on March 16.^{xxi} This follows Iran and Saudi Arabia’s March 10 announcement that they have normalized relations, as CTP previously reported.^{xxii} Iranian media circulated Saudi Finance Minister Mohammad al-Jadaan’s March 15 statement that Saudi investment in Iran could happen “very quickly.”^{xxiii} UK-based outlet *Amwaj Media* separately reported on March 14 that Iran and Bahrain have engaged in negotiations, also possibly to normalize relations.^{xxiv}

External Security and Military Affairs

Iranian media recirculated the Chinese Defense Ministry’s announcement that China, Russia, and Iran launched a joint, five-day naval exercise in the Sea of Oman on March 15. The Chinese Defense Ministry framed the “Maritime Security Belt 2023” exercise as a demonstration of increased naval cooperation between China, Russia, and Iran. Iranian media stated that Iranian naval forces would use “floating and flying” units in the exercise.^{xxv} China, Russia, and Iran previously held joint naval exercises in 2019 and 2022.^{xxvi}

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani ordered Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to conduct raids in Al Khalis, Diyala Province, Iraq on March 15.^{xxvii} *Shafaq* reported that ISF conducted a series of arrests in Al Khalis, the location of the February 20 massacre that locals have accused Iranian-backed Shia militias of perpetrating.^{xxviii} CTP previously reported that Hadi al Ameri—leader of the Iranian proxy Badr Organization—warned Sudani against interfering in the Badr Organization’s control over security in Diyala, likely responding to Sudani ordering a similar set of raids across Diyala Province on March 10.^{xxix} Iraqi media reporting on the raids did not confirm if the arrests included Badr Organization personnel. Sudani’s willingness to order additional raids after Ameri’s March 10 warning, however, risks miscalculation between Badr Organization militants and ISF personnel that could spark violence.

An Iraqi journalist claimed that Iranian proxy Kataib Hezbollah (KH) militants attacked Iraqi counterterrorism forces stationed at Majid al Tamimi Airbase. The journalist claimed in a Telegram post that KH militants injured two Iraqi Counterterrorism

Forces personnel with automatic weapons and set fire to three vehicles.^{xxx} CTP cannot corroborate this claim.

An unidentified person crossed into Israel from Lebanon and detonated a roadside bomb outside Megido Prison, approximately five kilometers from the northern West Bank border on March 13.^{xxxii} Israel Defense Forces (IDF) shot and killed the individual in Yaara, Northern Israel approximately five kilometers from the Lebanese border a few hours after the attack.^{xxxiii} Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) may have supported the attack. The IDF announced on Twitter that unidentified militants entered Israel from Lebanon earlier this week and that it is investigating LH involvement in the 13 March attack.^{xxxiii} Israeli defense and intelligence officials stated the bomb resembles LH roadside attacks on Israeli positions during the Israel occupation of southern Lebanon from 1982 to 2000 and noted that the bomb did not reflect Palestinian capabilities.^{xxxiv}

Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Syrian President Bashar Assad in Moscow, Russia on March 15. NOTE: A version of this text will also appear in *The Institute for the Study of War's (ISW) March 15 Ukraine Update*.

Russian news outlet *RIA Novosti* claimed that Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov said that topics for discussion included Syria-Russian relations, Syrian post-war reconstruction, and Syrian-Turkish relations.^{xxxv} According to the Kremlin readout of the meeting, Assad thanked Putin for the Russian military's "decisive contribution" in Syria.^{xxxvi} Putin likely used the meeting to foster relationships with international partner states such as Syria and maintain Russia's stake in Levantine affairs. Assad regime officials used the meeting to discuss issues surrounding the attempted and struggling Ankara-Damascus rapprochement with their Russian counterparts. State-affiliated Syrian media refuted recent Turkish claims that ministerial-level Iran-Syria-Russia-Turkey quadrilateral rapprochement talks would occur in Moscow on March 15 and 16, as CTP previously reported.^{xxxvii} Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov assured reporters that officials discussed Syrian-Turkish relations.^{xxxviii} The Assad regime's decision to discuss rapprochement issues with Russian officials after refusing to participate in the quadrilateral meetings may be part of a negotiating strategy intended to strengthen the Syrian position with intentional ambiguity.

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- ⁱ <https://t dot co/xMt3Tqoal6>
- ⁱⁱ <https://t dot co/xMt3Tqoal6>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-updates-february-2023> ;
<https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-february-1-2023>
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- ^{xiv} <https://t.co/chIC9zS8Vj>
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