

Iran Update, March 7, 2023

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CTP assesses with moderate confidence that the Iranian regime is using the recent chemical attacks throughout Iran to set conditions to securitize the country ahead of major national holidays. A coordinated, countrywide campaign to poison primarily schoolgirls has been ongoing since November 2022, as CTP previously reported.¹ Regardless of whether the regime had any involvement in or knowledge of the attacks, it appears to be using these attacks to justify an increased security presence throughout Iran. There are signs that the Law Enforcement Command (LEC) has already deployed to areas around schools across Iran. LEC spokesperson Brigadier General Saeed Montazer al Mahdi announced on March 6 that the LEC has increased its patrols near schools and universities.² Social media users circulated footage on March 7 showing LEC patrol vehicles near one girls' school in Kowsar County, Ardabil Province.³ Both Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Ebrahim Raisi called on intelligence and law enforcement organizations to identify and apprehend the perpetrators of the recent attacks on March 7.⁴ Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Commander Major General Hossein Salami noted on March 7 that the IRGC is prepared to “guarantee the security of the country” and “deal seriously with the agents causing psychological insecurity among Iranian families.”⁵ Several LEC officials indicated that the LEC will mobilize to address the “threats” posed by the upcoming holiday celebrations to “public peace” and the “environment” and that they will be prepared to make arrests.⁶ Iranians will be participating in the *Chahar Shanbeh Souri* holiday on March 15, which involves the symbolic act of jumping over fires in celebration of the upcoming new year. Iranians will also celebrate *Nourouz* (the Persian new year celebration) on March 20, which commonly involves gathering their families around a Haft Sin table and sharing gifts with one another.

The regime could be addressing a multitude of concerns if it decides to securitize. The combination of ongoing protests and the widespread domestic travel common during the holidays could pose major challenges for the regime's security services. Using the recent student poisonings to heavily securitize the country at this time could allow the regime to manage those challenges more easily. The regime might also be concerned that extra leisure time during the holidays could free people up to protest and might be trying to deter further protest activity. The regime might also be pursuing a securitized response to the poisonings at this time in order to arrest known protesters and protest organizers. IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* published an article on March 7 claiming that the countrywide poisoning campaign is meant to incite further “riots,” indicating the poisoning campaign might be used as a pretext to crack down on protest groups.⁷ The Interior Ministry published a statement on March 7 claiming that several individuals had been arrested in connection with the poisonings in Lorestan Province and that “three of them had participated in the recent riots.”⁸

CTP has observed that the regime's failure to deploy law enforcement to protect schools during the previous months of poisonings was noteworthy, since such a step would have been part of a normal response to such incidents. The deployment of some security and the promise of more deployments now would be less remarkable but for the timing. Having waited this long to start securing possible targets the regime appears to be leaning into securitizing schools just in time for a holiday period that might otherwise have challenged it. The securitization also coincides with an expansion of poisoning-related protests. These connections are too tenuous to prompt CTP to conclude that the regime conducted the attacks for this purpose or any other. CTP continues to withhold judgment on who was responsible. We assess with moderate confidence, however, that the regime will use the poisonings to justify securitization of the country in the coming days and weeks.

Security forces have responded more violently to recent poisoning-related unrest than they have to recent economically motivated protests and strikes. Security forces reportedly beat individuals protesting student poisonings in Esfahan, Esfahan Province on March 7.⁹ Iranian media users also claimed that security forces used tear gas against protesters in Rasht, Gilan Province on March 7, although CTP is unable to verify these reports.¹⁰ A plainclothes officer separately grabbed a mother by her hair as she inquired about her child's condition in front of the Sizdeh Aban High School in Tehransar, Tehran on March 1, as CTP previously reported.¹¹ These actions resemble previous violent regime responses to the Mahsa Amini protest movement, suggesting that the regime regards unrest fueled by student poisonings as more threatening than the more recent protests centered on economic problems. Security forces have arrested some economic protesters in recent weeks but have largely refrained from using the level of force against economic protesters that they are currently using against poisoning protesters.¹²

Sistan and Baluchistan Province recorded its first case of student poisonings on March 7. Zahedan University of Medical Sciences Crisis Secretary Ali Abdol Rezagh Nejad announced that 41 students experiencing nausea and abdominal pain were transferred to medical centers in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province on March 7.¹³ It is noteworthy, given the persistence of weekly Friday protests in Zahedan, that whatever actor is conducting these attacks had not yet conducted one in Zahedan until this point. Prominent Sunni cleric Abdol Hamid responded to the poisonings in Zahedan by explicitly blaming the regime. He stated that "agents [of the poisonings] are likely in the system" and called on government officials to close schools until the cause of the poisonings is uncovered.¹⁴ Abdol Hamid's rhetoric may spread the narrative domestically that the regime has been complicit in the chemical attacks.

There were 27 reported incidents of poisoning on March 7, significantly below the numbers reported on previous days.

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - March 7



Note: A previous version of our March 6 map of student poisonings in Iran mistakenly shaded South Khorasan and Sistan and Baluchistan provinces. No poisonings were reported in those provinces on March 6. The revised map is here.

Correction: Iran Student Poisonings by Province - March 6



Iranian Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Gharai Ashtiani claimed on March 6 that countries are seeking to acquire the Iranian-made Bavar-373 air defense system, possibly referring to Syria. Ashtiani previously met with Syrian Defense Minister Lieutenant General Ali Mahmoud on March 5.¹⁵ CTP previously reported that Ashtiani and Mahmoud may have discussed air defense equipment sales during their meeting.¹⁶ Iranian leaders may be considering selling the Bavar-373 to the Syrian regime in addition to or in place of the Khordad-15 that Iranian state media

previously reported that Iran will likely send to Syria.¹⁷ Iranian state media claimed that the Bavar-373 can detect fifth generation fighter jets commonly used by Israeli forces to target Iranian-backed weapons shipments into Syria.¹⁸ It is unclear how Syria would pay Iran for the Bavar-373 or Khordad-15, however. Iran could seek economic, military, and political benefits in Syria in exchange for air defense systems.

Key Takeaways

- **CTP assesses with moderate confidence that the Iranian regime is using the recent chemical attacks throughout Iran to set conditions to securitize the country ahead of major national holidays.**
- **Security forces have responded more violently to recent poisoning-related unrest than they have to recent economically motivated protests and strikes.**
- **Sistan and Baluchistan Province recorded its first case of student poisonings.**
- **Iranian Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Gharaei Ashtiani claimed on March 6 that countries are seeking to acquire the Iranian-made Bavar-373 air defense system, possibly referring to Syria.**
- **At least 20 protests occurred in 17 cities across 13 provinces.**

Internal Security

At least 20 protests occurred in 17 cities across 13 provinces on March 7. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Karaj, Alborz Province¹⁹

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Teachers protesting student poisonings

Tabriz, East Azerbaijan Province²⁰

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Tabriz University of Medical Sciences students protesting poisonings

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province²¹

- **Size:** Undetermined
- **Demographic:** Protesting student poisonings
- **Regime Repression:** Internet restrictions. Security personnel reportedly violently suppressed protests.

Shiraz, Fars Province²²

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Protesting student poisonings
- **Regime Repression:** Security personnel reportedly arrested protesters and attempted to disperse the crowds

Rasht, Gilan Province²³

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Teachers and parents protesting student poisonings
- **Regime Repression:** Security personnel reportedly used tear gas to disperse protests

Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi Province²⁴

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Protesting student poisonings
- **Regime Repression:** Security personnel reportedly attacked protestors

Neyshabour, Khorasan Razavi Province²⁵

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Protesting student poisonings

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province²⁶

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

Saghez, Kurdistan Province²⁷

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Teachers protesting student poisonings

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province²⁸

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Protesting student poisonings
- **Regime Repression:** Security personnel using tear gas

Babol, Mazandaran Province²⁹

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Protesting student poisonings
- **Regime Repression:** Security personnel reportedly violently suppressed protests

Sari, Mazandaran Province³⁰

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Teachers protesting student poisonings

Tehran City, Tehran Province³¹

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Allameh Tabataba'i University students protesting poisonings
- **Regime Repression:** Security personnel reportedly violently suppressed protests

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

Ardabil City, Ardabil Province³²

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Protesting student poisonings

Karaj, Alborz Province³³

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Families of prisoners facing death sentences for drug-related crimes

Bandar-e Abbas, Hormozgan Province³⁴

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Protesting student poisonings

Kerman City, Kerman Province³⁵

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Protesting student poisonings

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province³⁶

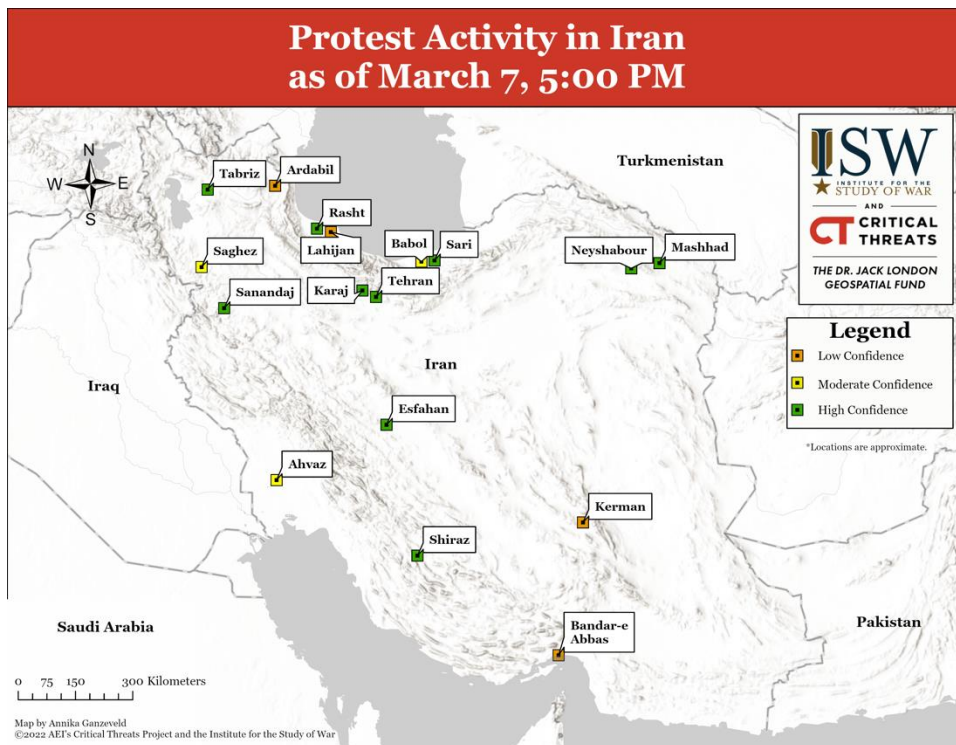
- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Teachers and others protesting student poisonings

Lahijan, Gilan Province³⁷

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Teachers and other families protesting poisonings

Sari, Mazandaran Province³⁸

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Educators protesting the imprisonment of teachers and calling for officials to meet their livelihood demands



Foreign Affairs

President Ebrahim Raisi met with Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Secretary General Zhang Ming in Tehran on March 7. Raisi and Ming discussed Iran's desire to join the SCO, and Raisi emphasized the importance of the SCO in countering unilateralism.³⁹

External Security and Military Affairs

Israel likely conducted an airstrike on Aleppo International Airport on March 6, possibly targeting an Iranian drone facility.⁴⁰ A Thiqa report cited unidentified sources as claiming Iranian militias redeployed from al-Jarrah Military Airport, Aleppo Province to Nairab Military Airport at Aleppo International Airport on March 1.⁴¹ Open-source Twitter accounts reported that the airstrike hit an IRGC weapons stockpile located at Aleppo International Airport and damaged the airport runway on March 6.⁴² The last reported Israeli airstrike on Aleppo International Airport took place on September 6, 2022.⁴³ Israeli forces have previously preemptively blocked suspected Iranian weapons shipments into Syria via Aleppo International Airport and Damascus International Airport by bombing airport runways to prevent aircraft from landing.

- 1 <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-5-2023>
- 2 <https://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/717882/%D8%B3%D8%AE%D9%86%DA%AF%D9%88%DB%8C-%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%DA%AF%D8%B4%D8%AA%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%88%DB%8C%DA%98%D9%87-%D9%88-%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%B5%D8%B5%DB%8C-%D8%AB%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%AA-%D9%88-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%81-%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B3> ;
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- 4 <https://www.leader.ir/fa/content/26361/طبیعی-منابع-هفته-درختکاری-روز-درخت-به-مناسبت-روز-درختکاری-و-هفته-منابع-طبیعی>
<https://president.ir/fa/142858>
- 5 <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/14011216000971/> - سرلشکر-سلامی-سپاه-آماده-همکاری-برای-تسریع-در-تعقیب-ماجرای-ساز% E2%80%8C مسوم
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- 7 <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/12/16/2863397/> - مجرای-بدحالی-برخی-دانش-آموزان-در-مدارس-و-شایعات
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- 8 <https://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/718101/> - های-دستگیر-شده-در-لارستان-سه-نفر-شان-در- E2%80%8C در-یکی-از-تیم
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- 10 <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1633045067630878720?s=20> ;
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- 11 <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-1-2023>
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²⁶ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1633179170921406466?s=20> ;
<https://twitter.com/RadioFarda/status/1633129754558644234>
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²⁹ <https://twitter.com/1500tasvir/status/1633020558756442114?s=20>
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³¹ <https://twitter.com/1500tasvir/status/1633084144828796930?s=20> ;
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³² <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1633042655654322177?s=20> ;
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³³ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1633176072824012801?s=20>
³⁴ <https://twitter.com/RadioFarda/status/1633086203384811520?s=20>
³⁵ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1633080736319143936?s=20>
³⁶ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1633018962555330560?s=20> ;
https://twitter.com/H_kiakojouri/status/1633087140073488384?s=20
³⁷ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1633018523319431169?s=20> ;
<https://twitter.com/VOAfarsi/status/1633107563154661376>
³⁸ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1633184522907811840?s=20> ;
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³⁹ <https://www.dotisna.ir/news/1401121612050/چرا-علی-باقری-در-مذاکرات-با-گروسی-حضور-نداشت>
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⁴² <https://twitter.com/BabakTaghvaei/status/1632887029322194949>
https://t.me/mod_gov_sy/32244
⁴³ <https://www.reuters.com/breakingviews/israel-targets-aleppo-airport-syrian-state-media-2022-09-06/>
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