Iran Update, March 8, 2023

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The Iranian regime has validated CTP's previous assessment that it is using the recent chemical attacks to set conditions to securitize the country ahead of major national holidays. Law Enforcement Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan announced the establishment of a headquarters to manage the upcoming Iranian New Years' celebration with the slogan "a different [new year] with a powerful and professional police" on March 7.[1] Although the Law Enforcement Command (LEC) organizes headquarters such as this one annually, the rhetoric Radan used in discussing this years' celebrations placed heavy emphasis on security and confronting protesters. Radan stated on March 7 that the LEC will not permit citizens to celebrate Chahar Shanbeh Souri—a festival that precedes Nowrouz—the Iranian New Years' holiday—on the last Wednesday of the Persian calendar—in "city squares." He added that celebrations must remain confined to "neighborhoods and alleys."[2] This indicates the regime seeks to keep the holiday celebrations out of city centers where antiregime protesters typically gather for large demonstrations. Iranian officials also have repeatedly described the youth who comprised a core demographic in the recent Mahsa Amini protests as easily excitable. Radan also implicitly warned parents to control their children, stating that "families must remain near their children" during the holidays and "keep an eye on [their children's] enthusiasm."[3] This suggests the regime seeks to convince parents to restrain their children from protesting.

The regime's threatening posture has not yet deterred protest activity nor silenced the population into compliance, though it could have either effect by the holidays. Protest activity continued on March 8, although not to the same widespread extent as the demonstrations on March 7. Protest groups have furthermore called for countrywide demonstrations on March 15. Protest groups have already called for countrywide demonstrations during the upcoming holidays.[4] Both protest groups and individual protesters will have to be much more cautious in the coming days and weeks as they plan and participate in demonstrations. They otherwise risk being identified and captured in a heavily securitized environment, where a mobilized security force could disrupt their networks to such an extent that they would no longer be able to function as organized groups. Despite these risks and the heavy costs they entail, both protesters and the population at large appear undeterred. This could change, however, as the people digest the threatening rhetoric, LEC presence increases, and IRGC operations continue. Protest groups might refrain from publishing further calls for protests and the rest of the population might not respond, cognizant of the risks involved. CTP will continue to monitor these developments in the coming days and weeks and will report any changes if they occur.

The regime also is trying to promote the narrative that protesters and foreign enemies were responsible for the chemical attacks and is censoring individuals who challenge this narrative. Kurdistan Province Chief Justice Hossein Hosseini announced the arrest of three individuals for spreading rumors about student poisonings in Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province on March 8.[5] Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei previously called for the creation of provincial "branches" to confront individuals spreading rumors on March 6.[6] Deputy Interior Minister for Security and Law Enforcement Majid Mir Ahmadi stated on March 8 that an individual recently arrested in Larestan County, Fars Province for their involvement in student poisonings had shared anti-regime content online and had been imprisoned during "the fall riots."[7] The Interior Ministry previously accused this individual of participating in "recent riots" on March 7.[8] IRGC-affiliated Tasnim separately published an article on March 8 in which it described the poisoning campaign as the "latest counter-revolutionary excuse to create a crisis inside the country."[9] This news agency previously published an article on March 7 accusing "counter-revolutionaries" of trying to incite riots by "vandalizing schools and creating an atmosphere of anxiety."[10] The publication of these articles one day after each other highlights regime efforts to sow public doubt toward the protest groups that have appeared in recent months.

The regime may struggle to sustain the narrative and public buy-in to the argument that the chemical attacks justify an increased security presence throughout the country through till the end of the upcoming holidays. Chahar Shanbeh Souri is on March 14—six days away—and Nowrouz is on March 20—twelve days away. CTP did not observe any poisonings on March 8, moreover. The absence of poisonings may make some Iranians question why the regime continues to increase security and thus undermine the regime's narrative that it is securitizing the country for the Iranian people's benefit.

Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) began constructing 500 prefabricated residential units near Aleppo International Airport on March 6, which the PMF may use to establish long-term housing for its troops.[11] PMF-affiliated *Al Mayadeen* claimed the "Al Muhandis Complex" residencies will house local families displaced by the February 6 earthquake.[12] This claim is likely a false narrative the PMF is using to counter recent accusations from Aleppo City residents that the PMF is harassing local women and reappropriating aid to exclusively Shia areas, as CTP reported on March 3.[13] The construction of military encampments and housing in and around Aleppo City supports CTP's assessment that Iran intends to secure and strengthen positions along the Aleppo-Deir ez Zor transportation route, which is critical for moving military personnel and equipment into and across Syria.

CTP previously assessed that Iran is similarly consolidating its military presence along the Deir ez Zor-Aleppo transportation route with deployments from the Fatemiyoun Division—its Afghan Shia proxy—in southern Deir ez Zor Province. This would enable Iran to secure an important stretch of the M4 highway that leads deeper into the country toward Aleppo. Iran appears to be assigning control over certain sectors of the Deir ez Zor-Aleppo transportation route to specific elements of its proxy network. Fatemiyoun militants are stationed in Deir ez Zor Province in the vicinity of the security zone around the M4 where ISIS has concentrated many of its attacks at least since August of 2022. PMF units are concentrated in and around Aleppo City.

Key Takeaways

- **The Iranian regime has validated CTP's previous assessment that it is using the recent chemical attacks to set conditions to securitize the country ahead of major national holidays.**

- **The regime's threatening posture has not yet deterred protest activity nor silenced the population into compliance.**
- **Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) began constructing 500 prefabricated residential units near Aleppo International Airport on March 6, which the PMF may use to establish long-term housing for its troops.**
- **At least six protests occurred in three cities across three provinces on March 8.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least six protests occurred in three cities across three provinces on March 8. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Rasht, Gilan Province[14]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Commemorating International Women's Day

Tehran City, Tehran Province[15]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Commemorating International Women's Day
- **Notes:** Chanting "Freedom, Freedom, Freedom."

Tehran City, Tehran Province[16]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Women holding banners commemorating International Women's Day

Tehran City, Tehran Province[17]

- **Size:** Small
- **Area:** District 8
- **Demographic:** Commemorating International Women's Day
- **Notes:** Protest occurred in the evening

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

Khash, Sistan and Baluchistan Province[18]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Women demanding the release of Sunni cleric Moulavi Abdol Majid Moroudzahi

Tehran City, Tehran Province[19]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Commemorating International Women's Day
- **Notes:** Singing the "Song of Equality"

Western media has reported in recent days on regime efforts to silence victims of the recent chemical attacks, including parents, teachers, and medical professionals.[20] CNN interviewed four medical professionals, all of whom claimed that unidentified regime forces had pressured them not to reveal any information about the poisonings. Sky News separately reported that regime security forces ordered school personnel, teachers, and students to not discuss poisoning attacks or else report false information.[21] One medical professional Iran reported that the regime was monitoring their phone. Security forces have cracked down on individuals protesting the school poisonings as well, as CTP previously reported.[22]

Prominent reformist politician Mohammad Ali Abtahi stated on March 8 that the present conflicts in Iranian society will eventually lead to necessary but "smooth" and "peaceful" changes to which the regime will accommodate itself.[23] Abtahi's belief that the regime will easily accept social and political change aligns well with statements made by former reformist President Mohammad Khatami. Khatami has similarly called for reforms premised on the belief that the regime would be willing and able to implement such reforms.[24] Abtahi is a close associate of Khatami, having served in his administration in several different roles, including as his vice president for parliamentary affairs and chief of staff.

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian met with Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu in Ankara to discuss Israeli involvement in the Caucasus, among other issues, on March 8.[25] Iranian officials have repeatedly expressed concern about an alleged Israeli intelligence presence in Azerbaijan and called for Azerbaijan to reject any cooperation with Israel in recent months.[26] Iranian officials may seek to persuade Turkey to address their concerns vis-a-vis Azerbaijan after the regime has failed to resolve these issues with Baku directly. The two ministers also discussed economic cooperation and common security threats emanating from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq,

Economic Affairs

The Iranian rial depreciated slightly from 502,500 rials to one US dollar on March 7 to 513,000 rials to one US dollar on March 8.[27]

President Ebrahim Raisi chaired a meeting of the Government Economic Coordination Headquarters on March 8.[28] The headquarters approved a banking reform resolution meant to "increase the access of households and economic actors to banking facilities and credit and direct liquidity toward productive and job-creating activities."

External Security and Military Affairs

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin met with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani and Defense Minister Thabet Mohammad Saeed al Abbasi in Baghdad on March 7. Austin discussed continued bilateral counterterrorism cooperation against ISIS in his meetings.[29] Sudani's office released a statement reaffirming his government's "keenness to strengthen and consolidate relations with the US."[30] Iranian-backed Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba leader Akram al Kaabi and Kataib Hezbollah leader Abu Ali al Askari denounced Austin's visit as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty and called for Iraqi political parties to reconsider government policy related to the US military presence in Iraq.[31] Iranian-backed Asaib Ahl al Haq military spokesperson Jawad al Talibawi released a statement directly calling upon Sudani to expel foreign forces from Iraq, referencing a 2020 non-binding parliamentary resolution to remove all US forces from the country.[32] Expelling American influence from the Middle East is one of Tehran's highest strategic objectives.

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani met with tribal and security leadership in Diyala Province on March 8 to discuss the February 20 massacre that locals blamed on Iranian-backed militias.[33] Sudani reassured local leadership that his administration intends to pursue legal measures against perpetrators of the recent violence. Sudani also partially acknowledged requests from Iraqi MPs in Diyala that he replace Iraqi security forces stationed in the province with new units and remove the Shia militias allegedly involved in the massacre.[34] He announced that he would deploy unspecified military reinforcements to the area within the next two weeks but made no mention of the Shia militias present in Diyala.[35] CTP previously reported that Sudani formed a committee to investigate the role of security forces' potential negligence in facilitating the February 20 massacre.[36]

Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) began constructing 500 prefabricated residential units near Aleppo International Airport on March 6.[37] PMF-affiliated *Al Mayadeen* claimed the "Al Muhandis Complex" residencies will house local families displaced by the February 6 earthquake.[38] CTP is considering the hypothesis that the PMF will use the residences to house its troops. The construction of military encampments and housing in and around Aleppo City would support CTP's assessment that Iran intends to secure and strengthen positions along the Aleppo-Deir ez Zor transportation route, which is critical for moving military personnel and equipment into and across Syria.

CTP previously assessed that Iran is similarly consolidating its military presence along the Deir ez Zor-Aleppo transportation route with deployments from the Fatemiyoun Division—its Afghan Shia proxy—in southern Deir ez Zor Province. This would enable Iran to secure an important stretch of the M4 highway that leads deeper into the country toward Aleppo. Iran appears to be assigning control over certain sectors of the Deir ez Zor-Aleppo transportation route to specific elements of its proxy network. Fatemiyoun militants are stationed in Deir ez Zor Province in the vicinity of the security

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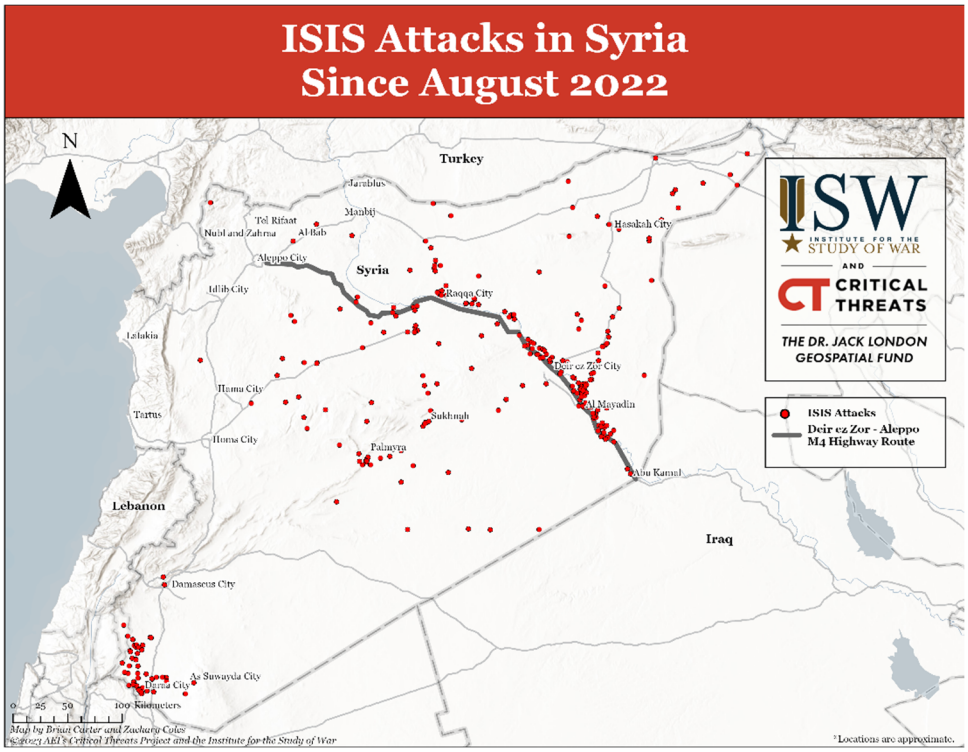

Israel likely conducted a drone strike a truck likely smuggling Iranian military equipment and personnel in Deir ez Zor City, Deir ez Zor Province on March 8. Imagery from social media shows a charred truck parked next to a destroyed building after the attack.[39] *Deir Ezzor 24* and *Sada al Sharqieh* claimed that the destroyed building served as a munitions storage facility and headquarters for the IRGC Quds Force and local Iranian-backed militia officials.[40] Syrian state media attributed the attack without evidence to an ISIS IED attack.[41] Local Syrian media reported that the drone strike wounded 15 people and killed at least seven more, including three Fatemiyoun personnel and a Quds Force official.[42]

Syrian opposition media reported that ISIS militants assassinated the IRGC Quds Force Commander for Deir ez Zor and Eastern Homs provinces—Hajj Mehdi—on March 4.[43] CTP cannot corroborate these reports. The Quds Force relies on eastern Syria as a critical node in its logical routes into Syria and will likely give priority to designating a new commander for the provinces. Such an effort may involve Quds Force officials meeting in Deir ez Zor City—an important command-and-control hub for coordinating with Quds Force leadership elsewhere in Syria—to address any disruption to regular operations.

[1] https://www dot entekhab dot ir/fa/news/718103/%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%86%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87-%DA%86%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B4%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A2%D8%AE%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%85-%D9%87%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%87-%D9%86%D9%85%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D8%AF%D9%87%DB%8C%D9%85-%DA%A9%D9%87-%D9%87%DB%8C%DA%86-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D9%88-%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%DA%86%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B4%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A2%D8%AE%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AF

[2] https://www dot entekhab dot ir/fa/news/718103/%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%86%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87-%DA%86%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B4%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A2%D8%AE%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%85-%D9%87%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%87-%D9%86%D9%85%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D8%AF%D9%87%DB%8C%D9%85-%DA%A9%D9%87-%D9%87%DB%8C%DA%86-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D9%88-%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%DA%86%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B4%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A2%D8%AE%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AF

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