



Iran Crisis Update, December 31

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Note: CTP will not publish a daily Iran Crisis Update on January 1, 2023, for the New Year's holiday. CTP will resume daily publishing on January 2.

Recent comments from Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) leaders reflect the ongoing divisions within the regime, and especially the IRGC, over the protests. Brigadier General Hamid Abazari stated on December 30 that some military commanders have “stood against values, the supreme leader, and the regime,” suggesting infighting over how to manage the ongoing unrest.¹ Abazari also criticized officials who have not publicly condemned the protests. Former Basij Organization Chief Brigadier General Gholam Hossein Gheyb Parvar, who is now responsible for organizing and training elite Basij units specialized in protest suppression, echoed Abazari’s criticism on December 31.² Iranian media identified Abazari as an adviser to IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami. The IRGC’s public relations wing released a statement on December 31 rejecting Abazari’s remarks and denying that he is an adviser to Salami.³ The statement said that Abazari was expressing his personal opinion but not using accurate information.

Abazari’s remarks indicate that the divisions in the IRGC are between high-ranking officers. Abazari stated that the commanders to whom he referred had served in the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and are now generals. The commanders from this generation are currently in their 50s and 60s and generally serving in the highest echelons of the armed forces.

CTP has repeatedly argued that the protests and regime crackdown have fractured the Iranian political and security establishments.⁴ The ineffectiveness and brutality of the crackdown have likely stoked these tensions.

Protests have been occurring at a lower tempo since late November, which may be partly driving the debate among regime officials.⁵ The reduced protest activity has likely prompted intra-regime discussions about whether to continue the intense crackdown or begin relaxing the suppression.

Iranian authorities have likely eased the suppression in at least some locations, possibly due to their eagerness to return to the pre-September 2022 status quo.⁶ The regime does not seem to have sustained its IRGC Ground Forces combat deployments throughout Kurdistan Province, for instance.⁷ Iranian leaders face a dilemma, however, given that the reduced suppression appears to be creating space for more protests that could in turn cause further fracturing within the regime.

The Iranian Supreme Court accepted the appeal of 26-year-old protester Sahand Nour Mohammad Zadeh on December 31, whom the Judiciary had previously sentenced to death.⁸ A court in Alborz Province had convicted Mohammad Zadeh of “waging war against God.”⁹ The IRGC Intelligence Organization arrested Mohammad Zadeh at his home on October 4 after identifying him barricading a street in CCTV footage.¹⁰

Key Takeaways

- **Recent comments from Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps leaders reflect the ongoing divisions within the regime, and especially the IRGC, over the protests. Protests have been occurring at a lower tempo late November, which may be partly driving the debate among regime officials.**
- **The Iranian Supreme Court accepted the appeal of 26-year-old protester Sahand Nour Mohammad Zadeh, who the Judiciary previously sentenced to death.**
- **At least seven protests occurred in seven cities across six provinces.**
- **Education official Hamid Nikzad stated that the Education ministry would require new teachers to attend seminary training.**

Anti-Regime Protests

At least seven protests occurred in seven cities across six provinces on December 31. Social media users documented significant protest activity and regime repression in Javanroud, Kermanshah Province. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Javanroud, Kermanshah Province¹¹

- **Size: Medium**
- **Demographic: Mourners**
- **Regime Repression: Security forces—reportedly LEC special unit officers and Basij members—allegedly shot live ammunition at protesters, killing one protester and injuring over 10 others. Social media users documented security personnel firing tear gas at crowds and into civilian cars and homes.**
- **Protester Activity: Protesters erected walls made of cinder blocks and created other road blockades throughout the city. Protesters also lit fires on Javanroud city streets. Social media users documented protesters looting an IRGC-affiliated bank and an agricultural bank. Protesters reportedly overturned a kiosk belonging to regime-affiliated actors near the cemetery.**

- Noteworthy chants: “Kurds and Balochs are brothers, angry for the blood of our leaders,” “Mother don't cry for your child, we will take revenge.”
- Notes: 40-day commemoration ceremony for several killed protesters. Protest started at local cemetery and expanded into several areas in Javanroud. Protesters gathered in front of the home of a protester whom security personnel shot and killed at the commemoration ceremony on December 31. Reports of internet outages throughout the city.

Abadan, Khuzestan Province¹²

- Size: Small
- Demographic: Oil workers
- Notes: Strike and protest

Najafabad, Esfahan Province¹³

- Size: Small
- Demographic: High school or university girls
- Noteworthy chants: “Our money is in Lebanon, our youth in prison”

Semirom, Esfahan Province¹⁴

- Small to medium
- Regime Repression: Security personnel shot at protesters
- Protester Activity: Fires lit in street
- Notes: Protesters reportedly gathered in front of the Semirom Governorship building to demonstrate against the regime destroying banners commemorating killed protesters throughout the city. Footage shows clashes and audible gunfire continue into the evening.

Tehran City, Tehran Province¹⁵

- Size: Medium
- Regime Repression: Security personnel attacked protesters
- Notes: Merchant strikes and protests and the Tehran Bazaar. Social media users reported internet disruptions throughout the city, particularly in the bazaar.

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

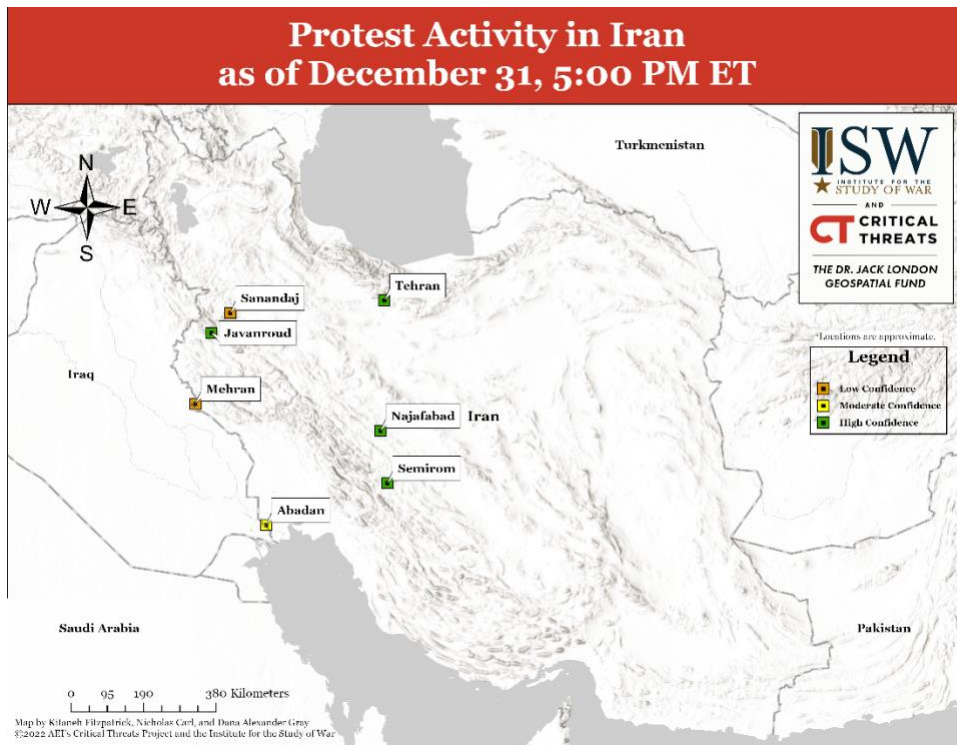
Mehran, Ilam Province¹⁶

- Size: Small
- Demographic: Oil workers
- Notes: Strike and protest

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province¹⁷

- Size: Undetermined
- Protester Activity: Fires lit on street

NOTE: CTP defines small protests as fewer than 100 individuals, medium protests as between 100 and 1,000, and large protests as over 1,000.



Protest coordinators and organizations circulated calls for demonstrations and strikes on the following dates:

January 6-8¹⁸

- Type: Demonstrations and strikes
- Location: Countrywide

Iranian journalist Saeed Aganji reported on dynamics within the office of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on December 30.¹⁹ Aganji tweeted claiming that Asghar Mir Hejazi—a senior political and security adviser to Khamenei—blocked former IRGC Intelligence Organization Chief Hossein Taeb from replacing Ali Shamkhani as Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) secretary. Aganji also alleged that security forces have arrested individuals close to Taeb in recent days, and that the declining influence of Taeb has empowered other individuals in the office of the supreme leader, such as Khamenei’s executive deputy, Vahid Haghanian. CTP cannot verify these rumors. They are consistent, however, with our previous observation that Taeb has become an increasingly public-facing figure in recent months, possibly to bolster his efforts to secure a new senior position within the Iranian security establishment, such as SNSC secretary.²⁰ Taeb is reportedly close to Khamenei’s son, Mojtaba.

Social media users documented industrial worker and merchant strikes across three provinces on December 31. Oil workers protested and went on strikes in Ilam and Khuzestan provinces, and social media accounts circulated footage of widespread store closures in Rasht, Gilan Province.²¹

The Mashhad Neighborhood Youth seemingly failed to generate snap protests on December 31. The Mashhad group called for snap protests in solidarity with other protesters throughout Iran.²² CTP did not record any protest activity in Mashhad on December 31, however.

The Hamedan Neighborhood Youth claimed on December 31 that local banks were facing a liquidity crisis. The Hamedan group reported that financial institutions had imposed withdrawal limits of 2 million Iranian rials (approximately \$48) and claimed that currency exchange offices were issuing 15-day waiting times. CTP cannot corroborate these claims, and such anecdotes should be treated with care. These rumors are plausible, however, given that the regime has faced a mounting fiscal crisis in recent weeks, and protest coordinators and organizations have encouraged a run on the banks.²³

Education official Hamid Nikzad stated on December 31 that the Education Ministry would require new teachers to attend seminary training.²⁴ Nikzad described plans requiring teachers to familiarize themselves with teaching methods from theological institutions. Nikzad presented the plan as part of the regime’s “explanatory Jihad” to increase regime popularity and support among Iranian youth. Nikzad added that the plans would encourage Iranian youth to embrace the mandatory veiling law. Nikzad is an adviser to Education Minister Yousef Nouri.

Former First Vice President Eshagh Jahangiri strongly endorsed reforms on December 1 to address the protests. Jahangiri described the protests as a “serious, real, and unprecedented challenge” and criticized the regime’s response to the unrest. He stated that the regime needs to fundamentally change its attitude, management and structure to ensure its survival. Jahangiri claimed that former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani privately expressed concern about the Islamic Republic’s treatment of women and reportedly stated: “I am worried about the day when the women of this country will take drastic action against us.”²⁵ Jahangiri is a reformist politician and served under former President Hassan Rouhani from 2013 to 2021.

The Artesh continued its annual military exercise along the southeastern Iranian coast near the Gulf of Oman on December 31. Iranian media celebrated the Artesh Navy’s use of the Ababil-5 multirole drone for the first time in the annual exercise to attack naval targets.²⁶ The regime previously unveiled the Ababil-5 in April 2022.²⁷ It has a reported range of over 480 kilometers and can use Almas guided anti-tank missiles and guided glide bombs.

A Mazandaran provincial official announced that local intelligence services were prioritizing cracking down on pet dog ownership on December 31.²⁸ Mazandaran Provincial Governor Mahmoud Hosseini Pour separately warned against normalizing the behavior of unveiled women and claimed that lenient veiling practices would result in “nudity” in the near future. Hosseini Pour is not a senior decisionmaker within the regime, but his comments likely reflect the extent to which some regime officials are removed from the demands of their constituents. This messaging is particularly tone-deaf amid the ongoing protests.

Axis of Resistance and Regional Developments

Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian expressed opposition to hostile foreign powers operating in neighboring countries during a phone call with Azerbaijani Foreign Affairs Minister Jeyhun Bayramov on December 31.²⁹

Abdollahian was likely referring to the alleged presence of Israeli intelligence in Azerbaijan. Iranian officials frequently accuse Azerbaijan of hosting Israeli agents.³⁰

¹ <https://www.etemadonline.com/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C-9/589329-%D8%AD%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%B1-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87-%DA%A9%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%BE%D8%A7%D9%87-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A8>

² <https://www.irna.ir/news/84984912/>

³ <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/10/10/2829552>

⁴ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-10;>

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⁶ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-28>

⁷ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-21>

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⁹ <https://www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-1311733>

¹⁰ <https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/سهند-نورمحمدزاده-تیراندازی-در-جوانرود/a-64252862>

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<https://twitter.com/SedayeShahrivar/status/1609144387744968704> ;
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