



Iran Crisis Update, December 20

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Protest activity did not surge significantly outside of the Iranian capital region on December 20, despite calls from protest coordinators and organizations for countrywide demonstrations and strikes on December 19-21. CTP has observed slowly diminishing protest turnout since the regime intensified its protest crackdown in mid-November 2022. The regime issued its first death sentence on November 13 and deployed the IRGC Ground Forces in Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan provinces beginning on November 19.ⁱ These escalations combined with the colder weather, mass arrests, and possible disorganization among protester coordinators may have led to the declining turnout over the past month.

This reduced protest activity does not, however, indicate the end of the anti-regime movement. The regime may have been able diminish protest activity through its use of intimidation, force, and expanding censorship. The fact that CTP recorded at least eight separate protests on December 20 despite these factors is remarkable in and of itself. The regime will struggle to sustain this level of oppression indefinitely, especially given the degree to which this crackdown has strained the security forces. Protest coordinators and organizations are contrastingly exploring ways to sustain regular acts of political defiance and have been forming the requisite networks and infrastructure for months.ⁱⁱ

Senior regime officials discussed expanding domestic internet restrictions on December 20. President Ebrahim Raisi chaired a Supreme Cyberspace Council meeting to review a document discussing the “rules and conditions of publishing content on social media.”ⁱⁱⁱ The Supreme Cyberspace Council includes Iran’s top military and political figures and enforces state censorship. Raisi stressed the importance of establishing an Iranian intranet as soon as possible. Supreme Cyberspace Council member Reza Taghi Pour separately promoted an Iranian intranet on December 20, framing it as the solution to quelling the protests.^{iv} Taghipour added that the regime would lift some current internet restrictions once the domestic environment has stabilized.

It is unclear to what extent the regime can fully operationalize an intranet, even if it has the necessary technologies. A prominent Iranian activist and internet researcher circulated a twenty-five-page document

purportedly from the Information and Communications Technology Ministry assessing that the regime could not likely build a complete intranet.^v The ministry allegedly reported that the regime is too dependent on foreign services and social media applications to successfully transition to a national intranet. CTP cannot corroborate the veracity of this document, but regime officials have previously discussed some of the limitations they face. An Iranian parliamentarian cited in 2020 a lack of server infrastructure as a primary obstacle to developing an intranet.^{vi}

IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani threatened domestic and foreign media outlets and reporters who “do media work” against the regime on December 20.^{vii} Ghaani stated that Iranian authorities had recorded the actions of these media outlets and reporters and will “strike” them. Ghaani reiterated the accusation that the US and Saudi Arabia are inciting protests.

Key Takeaways

- **Protest activity did not surge significantly outside of the Iranian capital region, despite calls from protest coordinators and organizations for countrywide demonstrations and strikes on December 19-21.**
- **This reduced protest activity does not, however, indicate the end of the anti-regime movement.**
- **Senior regime officials discussed expanding domestic internet restrictions.**
- **IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani threatened domestic and foreign media outlets who have criticized the regime.**
- **At least eight protests took place in three cities across three provinces.**
- **An Artesh soldier reportedly expressed support for the protesters and opposition to the execution of protesters in central Tehran.**
- **Prominent Sunni Cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid warned the regime against ignoring the will of the people.**
- **Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei met with the families of the victims of the October 26 ISIS attack in Shiraz, Fars Province.**
- **IRGC Coordination Deputy Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Naghdi acknowledged that economic issues have partly fueled the protests.**
- **Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian participated in the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership in Amman.**

Anti-Regime Protests

At least eight protests took place in three cities across three provinces on December 20. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Karaj, Alborz Province^{viii}

Size: Small

Protester Activity: Fire lit in street

Area: Golshahr

Karaj, Alborz Province^{ix}

Size: Small

Area: Gohardasht

Gorgan, Golestan Province^x

Size: Medium

Demographic: Mourners

Notes: Seven-day commemoration ceremony for killed protester Aida Rostami

Tehran City, Tehran Province^{xi}

Size: Small

Tehran City, Tehran Province^{xii}

Size: Small

Demographic: Rasoul-e Akram Hospital personnel and medical university students

Notes: Second day of consecutive protests recorded from this demographic at this location

Tehran City, Tehran Province^{xiii}

Size: Small

Protester Activity: Fire lit in street

Area: Salsabil

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

Tehran City, Tehran Province^{xiv}

Size: Undetermined

Regime Repression: Sounds of gunfire in some footage in the vicinity of protest location

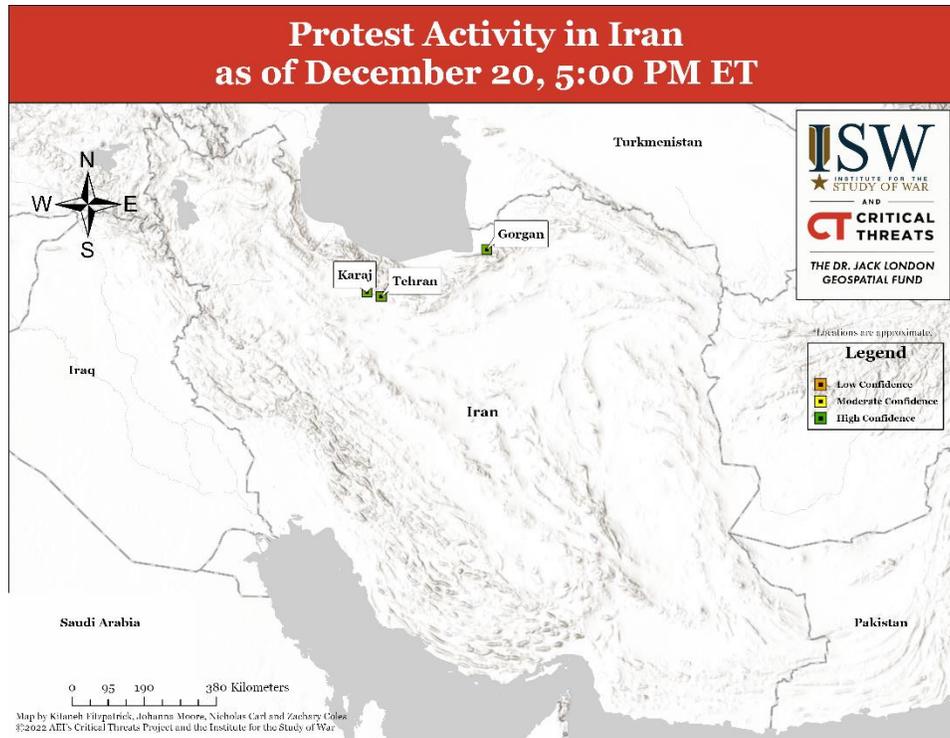
Area: Ekbatan

Tehran City, Tehran Province^{xv}

Size: Undetermined

Protester Activity: Fires lit in street

Area: Pounak



The Mashhad Neighborhood Youth issued guidance to its “operational teams” on December 20, instructing them to target regime buildings and facilities.^{xvi} CTP has not observed protests in Mashhad in recent days, despite calls from this group for protests, calling into question its capability to generate street protests.

An Artesh soldier reportedly expressed support for the protesters and opposition to the execution of protesters in central Tehran on December 20.^{xvii} The soldier walked atop the walls around the perimeter of an Artesh facility with a noose around his neck. CTP cannot verify whether the individual was an actual member of the Artesh, but this reporting is plausible, especially given that Artesh personnel are generally less committed ideologically than those in the IRGC.

Prominent Sunni Cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid warned the regime against ignoring the will of the people on December 20. Abdol Hamid tweeted that Iranians residing within and outside Iran have concluded that domestic conditions have become “unbearable” and added that “changes must be made.”^{xviii} Abdol Hamid has used increasingly critical rhetoric toward the regime in recent months, almost normalizing overt rhetorical attacks from him.^{xix}

Anti-regime outlet *Iran International* published footage on December 20 claiming that a bank in Tehran refused to dispense more than 10 million Iranian rials (approximately 240 US dollars) to customers trying to withdraw cash.^{xx} If true, this reporting suggests that the regime is, indeed, facing a hard currency shortage and may be struggling to fulfill bank withdrawal requests. Protest coordinators and organizations have called on citizens to urgently withdraw their money from banks, as CTP previously reported.^{xxi}

Judiciary Spokesperson Masoud Setayeshi defended the issuance of death sentences to and execution of protesters on December 20.^{xxii} Setayeshi argued that Sharia laws justified this capital punishment and warned that the judiciary rejects “comments without evidence that disturb public opinion.” Setayeshi’s comments mirror those from Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei, who has repeatedly defended the executions and instructed judicial authorities to ignore critics in recent days, as CTP previously reported.^{xxiii}

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei met on December 20 with the families of the victims of the October 26 ISIS attack in Shiraz, Fars Province.^{xxiv} Khamenei blamed the attack on the US, which he accused of “creating” ISIS. Khamenei called on the Iranian cultural institutions and media to continue producing propaganda to explain these claims to the youth.

IRGC Coordination Deputy Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Naghdi acknowledged that economic issues have partly fueled the protests on December 20.^{xxv} Naghdi stated that the regime must examine whether officials responsible for the economy have failed to implement the guidance and recommendations of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Naghdi then criticized former President Hassan Rouhani for prioritizing negotiations with the West rather than enhancing domestic production capacities.

A compressed natural gas station in Yasouj, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer Ahmad Province exploded on December 20, injuring a nearby worker.^{xxvi} The cause of the explosion is unclear.

Axis of Resistance and Regional Developments

Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian participated in the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership in Amman on December 20. Abdollahian discussed the nuclear negotiations during a meeting with EU officials at the conference.^{xxvii} Abdollahian’s comments coincide with the circulation of a video of President Joe Biden stating that the nuclear agreement is “dead, but [that the US will not] announce it.”^{xxviii} The video is from an election rally on November 4. Abdollahian may have been aware of the circulated video during his meetings in Amman and may have used it to frame the US as uncooperative.

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<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1605233101315215362?s=20&t=roDFSVroYsoUkoXaiwttA>
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