



Iran Crisis Update, December 27

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December 27, 5:00 pm ET**

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Some elements of the Iranian regime are increasingly framing the protest movement as an insurgency. Mohsen Heydari—a representative of Khuzestan Province in the Assembly of Experts—stated that the judiciary should convict protesters of *baghi* (armed insurrection) rather than *moharebeh* (waging war against God) on December 27.¹ The Assembly of Experts is the regime body constitutionally responsible for selecting the supreme leader. *Baghi* is a relatively new legal concept that Parliament introduced to the Iranian penal code in 2013.²

There is some evidence indicating that components of this protest movement have indeed crossed the threshold to be considered an insurgency, as CTP has previously noted.³ Protesters have continually demonstrated varying levels of coordination and cohesion and used limited militant tactics against the regime on some occasions.⁴ Over 70 security personnel have died in this protest movement—significantly more than in any other protest wave in the history of the Islamic Republic.⁵ Protesters have furthermore likely developed the networks and infrastructure necessary to conduct a protracted struggle against the regime.

Heydari argued that some protesters deserved more severe punishments, likely referring to the death sentence, and should therefore be convicted of insurrection. Regime officials have regularly accused protesters of sedition since the beginning of the ongoing movement in September 2022, but labeling protesters as insurrectionists would justify even harsher legal penalties. *Baghi* is supposed to carry the death sentence, whereas *moharebeh* can but does not always lead to execution.

Senior officials have not yet indicated that they will adopt this harsher legal approach, but their recent rhetoric suggests that it is possible. Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei has repeatedly defended the execution of arrested protesters and instructed judicial authorities to ignore critics in recent weeks.⁶ President Ebrahim Raisi stated on December 27 that the regime will forgive protesters "deceived" by foreign actors but will show no mercy to domestic enemies to the Islamic Republic.⁷

The external messaging of different protest organizations may indicate divergent focuses. The Karaj Neighborhood Youth continues to appear focused primarily on interacting with a domestic Iranian audience. The Karaj group has begun conducting increasingly regular polls in Persian to identify and understand protesters' preferences in approach.⁸ It also extensively interacts with Persian-language users in Twitter.⁹ This approach is almost certainly one of the best ways to increase engagement with the group's target audience. Other groups, such as the Tehran Neighborhood Youth and Mashhad Neighborhood Youth, appear focused at least partially on a Western audience. Both groups announced their alignment and solidarity with a Brussels-based protest organization on December 22, as CTP previously reported.¹⁰ The Tehran and Mashhad groups have seemingly struggled to generate protest turnout more than the Karaj group, raising the question whether their external focuses have hindered any efforts to build credibility among actual Iranians.

The Mashhad Neighborhood Youth claimed on December 27 that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has ordered the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC) to give 1 trillion Iranian rials (approximately \$24 million) to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) over the past three months, likely to support protest suppression.¹¹ The IKRC is a parastatal "charitable foundation" that Khamenei controls and uses to expand regime influence domestically and abroad.¹² The IKRC wrote a letter to Khamenei on December 21 stating that it has no financial resources left to meet its regular payments, according to the Mashhad group. CTP cannot independently substantiate this rumor. The Mashhad group posted these claims in Persian, but they may still reflect the group's partially external focus. The Mashhad group may hope to inspire Western, especially European, sanctions on the IKRC for any role it might have in the protest crackdown.

Protest coordinators and organizations called for demonstrations on December 29 to commemorate several different killed protesters. The Tehran Neighborhood Youth called for demonstrations in Tehran and Izeh to commemorate Hamid Reza Rouhi and Sepehr Maghsoudi, respectively.¹³ The Khuzestan Neighborhood Youth called for demonstrations in Ahvaz to remember Ataneh Noami.¹⁴ The family of a protester killed during the 2009 Green Movement tweeted on December 27 encouraging citizens to attend the funerals and commemoration ceremonies for protesters the regime has killed since September 2022.¹⁵ The United Neighborhood Youth has separately called for countrywide protests and strikes on January 6-8 to commemorate the three-year anniversary of the IRGC shooting down a Ukrainian civilian airplane.¹⁶

Key Takeaways

- **Some elements of the Iranian regime are increasingly framing the protest movement as an insurgency. No senior officials have yet indicated that they will adopt this harsher legal approach, but their recent rhetoric suggests it is possible. There is some evidence indicating that components of this protest movement have indeed crossed the threshold to be considered an insurgency.**
- **The external messaging of different protest organizations may indicate divergent focuses.**

- **Protest coordinators and organizations called for demonstrations on December 29 to commemorate several different killed protesters.**
- **At least five protests occurred in three cities across two provinces.**
- **Security forces are likely trying to contain commemoration ceremonies for the protesters killed when the IRGC Ground Forces deployed to West Azerbaijan Province in late-November 2022.**
- **Social media users documented children participating in various kinds of protest activity in Mahabad, West Azerbaijan Province.**
- **Supreme Human Rights Council Secretary Kazem Gharib Abadi denied reports of sexual abuse of female prisoners.**
- **Iranian proxies in Iraq may attack US positions there to commemorate the three-year anniversary of the US killing Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mehdi al Muhandis.**

Anti-Regime Protests

At least five protests occurred in three cities across two provinces on December 27. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Tabriz, East Azerbaijan Province¹⁷

Size: Medium

Demographic: Mourners

Regime Repression: Heavy security presence reported, reports of several arrests and that security personnel violently arrested the killed protester's father

Notes: 40-day commemoration ceremony Aylar Haghi

Boukan, West Azerbaijan Province¹⁸

Size: Small

Demographic: Mourners

Notes: 40-day commemoration ceremony for killed protester

Mahabad, West Azerbaijan Province¹⁹

Size: Small

Protester Activity: Lit fires on street

Notes: Footage shows protesters lighting fires in the street during daytime and after sunset. It is unclear if these are different protests or capture the same anti-regime demonstration.

Mahabad, West Azerbaijan Province²⁰

Size: Medium

Demographic: Mourners

Notes: 40-day commemoration ceremony for three killed protesters

CTP assesses with low confidence that protesters occurred in the following location:

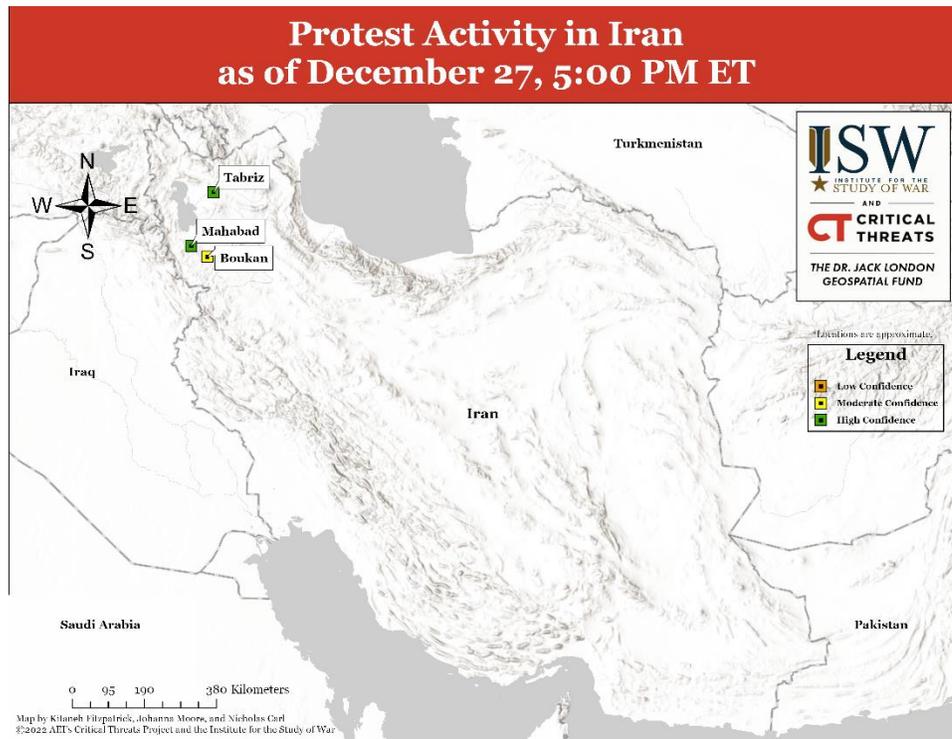
Tabriz, East Azerbaijan Province²¹

Size: Small to medium

Demographic: Industrial workers

Notes: Protest and strike

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



Security forces are likely trying to contain commemoration ceremonies for the protesters killed when the IRGC Ground Forces deployed to West Azerbaijan Province in late-November 2022.²² Iranian Kurdish human rights organization Hengaw reported that security forces deployed to a cemetery in Boukan, West Azerbaijan Province on December 27.²³ December 29 marks around 40 days since the IRGC Ground Forces began deploying around the province, and 40-day commemoration ceremonies may thus occur in the days ahead.

CTP is currently hypothesizing that the regime has pulled back some of the IRGC military deployments in West Azerbaijan in recent weeks. Iranian authorities and state-run media outlets seem eager to frame the protests as over and promote that perception. But the coming 40-day commemorations around West Azerbaijan Province may have persuaded IRGC leadership to revert to a heavy security presence there.

Social media users documented children participating in various kinds of protest activity in Mahabad, West Azerbaijan Province on December 27. One child chanted anti-regime

slogans at a 40-day commemoration ceremony.²⁴ Other children carried tires along a street, purportedly to set them aflame and thereby block the road.²⁵ CTP has regularly documented the participation of minors in the protests since September 2022. Their participation highlights the long-term challenge that the regime will face in finding support among the younger generations. It also suggests that their parents are allowing or even encouraging these acts of political defiance.

Supreme Human Rights Council Secretary Kazem Gharib Abadi denied reports of sexual abuse of female prisoners on December 27.²⁶ Iranian human rights activist Narges Mohammadi wrote a letter detailing horrific acts of physical abuse and sexual violence against detained female protesters in Evin prison on December 24.²⁷ Gharib Abadi rejected Mohammadi's account, citing a recent visit to Gharchak prison in Tehran Province during which "no mention or complaints about sexual abuse were raised."²⁸ Other Western reports of sexual assault and violence toward arrested protesters corroborate Mohammadi's claims, and CTP does not assess Gharib Abadi's denials to be credible.²⁹

Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid criticized the regime for suppressing protests rather than listening to them on December 27.³⁰ Abdol Hamid asked how the responsible Iranian authorities will justify their actions to God.

Axis of Resistance and Regional Developments

Iranian proxies in Iraq may attack US positions there to commemorate the three-year anniversary of the US killing Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mehdi al Muhandis.³¹ An Iranian proxy Telegram channel posted an image on December 27 depicting a hypothetical Iranian attack on the Ain al Assad airbase with the caption "happy Christmas American army in Iraq." Iranian military and proxy leaders have commemorated the death of Soleimani and Muhandis and escalated against the US every year since 2020.

¹ <http://www.didbaniran.ir/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%AD%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%AB-5/146334-%D8%B9%D8%B6%D9%88-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%82%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%AD%DA%A9%D9%85-%D8%A8%D8%BA%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%AC%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%DA%A9%D9%85%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%BA%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B4%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%87-%DA%A9%D9%86%D9%86%D8%AF>

² www.iranhr.net/en/articles/4725

³ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-17>

⁴ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-23>

⁵ <https://twitter.com/Alfoneh/status/1605184629501304833>

⁶ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-12>

⁷ www.president.ir/fa/141636

⁸ https://t.me/javanane_ka/438

⁹ https://twitter.com/javanane_k/with_replies

¹⁰ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-22>

¹¹ https://t.me/mashhad_protests/2635

¹² <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/ideological-expansion/imam-khomeini-relief-committee>

¹³ https://twitter.com/javanane_t/status/1607778166545825793; https://twitter.com/javanane_t/status/1607695943180386306

¹⁴ https://t.me/javanan_Khuzestan/57

¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/karimbeigimo/status/1607728217632169985?s=20&t=UxAlqhbvw8aT4QvzN9AABQ>

¹⁶ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-26>

¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/1500tasvir/status/1607685531134984194?s=20&t=rixksoexlL1c2nF-Ezipmg> ;

<https://twitter.com/FSeifikaran/status/1607695387455897600?s=20&t=rixksoexlL1c2nF-Ezipmg> ;

https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607709937055981573?s=20&t=c_8RWslb9YRkohZClk5nOw ;

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607683588803231744?s=20&t=UxAlqhbvw8aT4QvzN9AABQ>

;<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607681815493459970?s=20&t=UxAlqhbvw8aT4QvzN9AABQ> ;

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607681031343153153?s=20&t=UxAlqhbvw8aT4QvzN9AABQ> ;

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607678180508438532?s=20&t=5sTVCvKOeg09zNx-ZBK3bw> ;

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607673318471266306?s=20&t=UxAlqhbvw8aT4QvzN9AABQ>

¹⁸ https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607750120577331200?s=20&t=7veBX9edpz1l_PwaazVN3Q ;

https://twitter.com/KurdistanHRN/status/1607730267933868033?s=20&t=7veBX9edpz1l_PwaazVN3Q ;

https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1607788696329232384?s=20&t=7veBX9edpz1l_PwaazVN3Q

¹⁹ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607792264822263808?s=20&t=WRcKTTd38Xdh5xIORKYVQ> ;

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607760696628109314?s=20&t=UxAlqhbvw8aT4QvzN9AABQ> ;

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607760351407349761?s=20&t=UxAlqhbvw8aT4QvzN9AABQ> ;

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607760215293792256?s=20&t=Vt7eISk8u-TOug1eTxQ7tA> ;

<https://twitter.com/kayvanrassooli/status/1607747402127007744?s=20&t=pxkCiNonGAS7j92TdUhHWQ> ;

<https://twitter.com/indypersian/status/1607793129427550212?s=20&t=4sKPyeeUufiEe3ZRg9GX3g>

²⁰ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607785058949021698?s=20&t=UxAlqhbvw8aT4QvzN9AABQ> ;

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607726656042434560?s=20&t=xrViKZusyJjaRq2kVL6dew> ;

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607725915529969664?s=20&t=kQPBU2mEqIvZKd9MgvBZg> ;

https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1607789125599481857?s=20&t=Km7P5WR9HgjRUmM1kMlyCA ;

https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607712026582818817?s=20&t=pzxLONGc4NuN-oMyJ_JYaw ;

https://twitter.com/RadioFarda/status/1607717507229532161?s=20&t=pzxLONGc4NuN-oMyJ_JYaw

²¹ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607649954834841602?s=20&t=L23DqPwe5UC7B95luNC6IA>

²² <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-21>

²³ <https://twitter.com/HengawO/status/1607722640424472576?s=20&t=UxAlqhbvw8aT4QvzN9AABQ>

²⁴ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607726656042434560?s=20&t=UxAlqhbvw8aT4QvzN9AABQ>

²⁵ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607760696628109314?s=20&t=UxAlqhbvw8aT4QvzN9AABQ>

²⁶ <https://www.mizan dot news/4570689/%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81/>

²⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-64084709>

²⁸ <https://www.mizan.news/4570689/%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81/>

²⁹ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-25>

³⁰ <https://twitter.com/AbdolhamidNet/status/1607660879595671554>

³¹ <https://t.me/sabreenS1/66662>