



Iran Crisis Update, November 19

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Unverified reporting and social media footage suggests that the regime deployed the IRGC Ground Forces to violently suppress protests in Mahabad, West Azerbaijan Province on November 19. An Iranian Kurdish human rights organization reported that Iranian officials had deployed a significant number of armed troops from the IRGC Ground Forces Hamzeh Third Special Forces Division in Ourmia, West Azerbaijan Province amidst reports of widespread unrest.¹ Footage circulating on social media shows numerous armored vehicles within and in the vicinity of Mahabad on November 19.² Other footage has audible sounds of artillery being fired.³ Iranian social media users are reporting heavy gunfire, the indiscriminate use of violence--including shooting into residents' homes--and electricity cuts throughout the city.⁴

This is seemingly the first time that the regime has deployed the IRGC Ground Forces as combat units to suppress unrest since protests commenced on September 16, marking a significant escalation in the regime's protest response. IRGC Ground Forces personnel have been reportedly killed in previous incidents suggesting that elements of the IRGC Ground Forces have been involved in protest suppression, but this is likely the first time an IRGC Ground Forces unit has deployed with combat kit.⁵ This deployment signals the extent to which the regime views ongoing protests as a threat.

The commitment of IRGC combat units to unrest suppression could be related in part to uncorroborated reports about the formation of a new anti-regime Kurdish militia in Mahabad. The militia referred to itself as the "Guerrillas of Ishtar" and claimed responsibility for killing three regime security personnel.⁶ CTP cannot independently verify the veracity of this claim. The regime may have decided to escalate its violent suppression partly for fear that more organized violent resistance could emerge.

An IRGC Ground Forces deployment may also signal bandwidth constraints within Iranian security services; the IRGC Ground Forces historically participate in protest crackdowns when the Iranian Law

Enforcement Command has failed to contain upheaval.⁷ The IRGC Ground Forces' reported deployment may additionally make the possibility of an Iranian incursion into Iraqi Kurdistan less likely, as the regime may struggle to balance the commitment of IRGC Ground Forces combat units to internal unrest suppression at the same time as it attempts a ground incursion, depending on the scale of both possible operations. IRGC Quds Force Commander Esmail Ghaani reportedly warned that the IRGC will conduct ground operations against anti-regime militant positions in Iraqi Kurdistan unless the Iraqi army fortifies the Iran-Iraq Kurdistan border and disarms all anti-regime Kurdish militias operating within Iraqi Kurdistan on November 18.⁸

The regime's violent escalation in Mahabad may backfire and instead intensify anti-regime demonstrations. Iranian social media users quickly called for nation-wide demonstrations on November 20 to condemn the regime's protest suppression tactics in Mahabad on November 19.⁹

The number and scale of ongoing, anti-regime protests have already intensified in recent days. Protest organizations have successfully extended protest activity beyond the Bloody Aban demonstrations planned for November 15, 16, and 17 and sustained momentum on November 18 and November 19.¹⁰ Protest activity may continue at its current level for the next two days as protest organization groups are calling for further unrest until November 21, the final day of the Iranian calendar month of Aban.¹¹ This level of sustained protest activity marks an inflection in the pattern established by protesters in recent weeks, wherein high protest activity was followed by decreased demonstrations in the days thereafter. The scale of protests has also maintained its momentum in recent days. Footage shows that larger crowds have participated in anti-regime demonstrations on November 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19 compared to prior days. The number and scale of protests in the past several days is similar to those at the beginning of the Mahsa Amini protest movement in mid-September 2022.

Protests have also become increasingly violent—for protesters and security personnel alike—in recent days. An Iran-focused human rights organization increased its estimate of killed protesters from 342 on November 16 to 378 on November 19, indicating that roughly nine percent of all Iranians killed while participating in the Mahsa Amini protest movement died within that three-day period.¹² Footage documenting funerals for killed protesters have also increased in number in recent days, further corroborating reports of increased violence. Estimates suggest that recent deaths have still not surpassed the death toll recorded in mid-to-late September, however. Iranian security personnel have sustained relatively significant casualties since November 15 as well, a change from protest activity in prior weeks. At least six security personnel died on November 17, two on November 16, and possibly three on November 15.¹³

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei continued to blame anti-regime demonstrations on Western actors in a speech in Esfahan City, Esfahan Province on November 19. Khamenei framed popular protests as an extension of America's so-called soft power war waged against the Islamic Republic targeting Iranian youth. Khamenei noted that Iranian officials were also susceptible to and propagating Western soft power tactics, possibly corroborating reports of

fissures within senior members of the regime as CTP reported on November 18.¹⁴ The Supreme Leader drew a rhetorical distinction between peaceful protesters and “rioters.”¹⁵

Key Takeaways

- **Unverified reporting suggests that the regime deployed the IRGC Ground Forces to violently suppress protests in Mahabad, West Azerbaijan Province on November 19, marking a violent escalation in the regime’s response to protests.**
- **The number and scale of ongoing, anti-regime protests have intensified and become increasingly violent in recent days.**
- **Protests occurred in at least 20 cities in 10 provinces. 14 protests with 100 or more estimated participants took place in nine cities across six provinces on November 19.**
- **Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei continued to blame anti-regime demonstrations on Western actors on November 19.**
- **Israeli combat aircraft conducted airstrikes against multiple Syria Arab Army and IRGC or Iranian proxy militia positions in western Syria on November 19.**

Anti-Regime Protests

Protests occurred in at least 20 cities in 10 provinces. At least 14 protests with 100 or more estimated participants took place in nine cities across six provinces on November 19. CTP is using asterisks to denote protests that included mourners commemorating killed protesters.

Note: CTP is only providing protest characterizations for demonstrations with over 100 estimated participants to prioritize reporting on developments in Mahabad, West Azerbaijan Province. The associated map contains all the demonstrations recorded by CTP.

Ardabil, Ardabil Province (population: approximately 588,000)

- *Over a hundred protestors chanted “shameless” on a city street. LEC special units attempted to disperse many of the protestors from a city square with tear gas.¹⁶*

Tabriz, East Azerbaijan Province (population: approximately 1,559,000)

- *Hundreds of Tabriz University of Medical Sciences students marched on campus.¹⁷*

***Shiraz, Fars Province (population: approximately 1,566,000)**

- *Hundreds of mourners attending Sajjad Ghaemi's funeral ran from security personnel in the vicinity of a Shiraz highway. Footage from social media features audible gunshots and shows security personnel seemingly firing tear gas at protesters.¹⁸*

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province (population: approximately 461,000)

- *Hundreds of student protesters chanted anti-regime slogans on campus. Security personnel purportedly shot at Kurdistan University student protesters.¹⁹*

***Tehran City, Tehran Province (population: approximately 8,700,000)**

- Roughly 100 K.N. University of Technology students chanted anti-regime slogans on campus. Security personnel reportedly threw tear gas at protesters.²⁰
- Hundreds of mourners gathered to commemorate Hamid Reza Rouhi, whom security personnel killed for participating in anti-regime protests.²¹
- Hundreds of Shahid Beheshti University students chanted anti-regime slogans on campus.²²

Qods, Tehran Province (population: approximately 316,636)

- Over 100 student protesters gathered on campus. Footage shows security personnel violently arresting student protesters.²³

Khoy, West Azerbaijan Province (population: approximately 198,845)

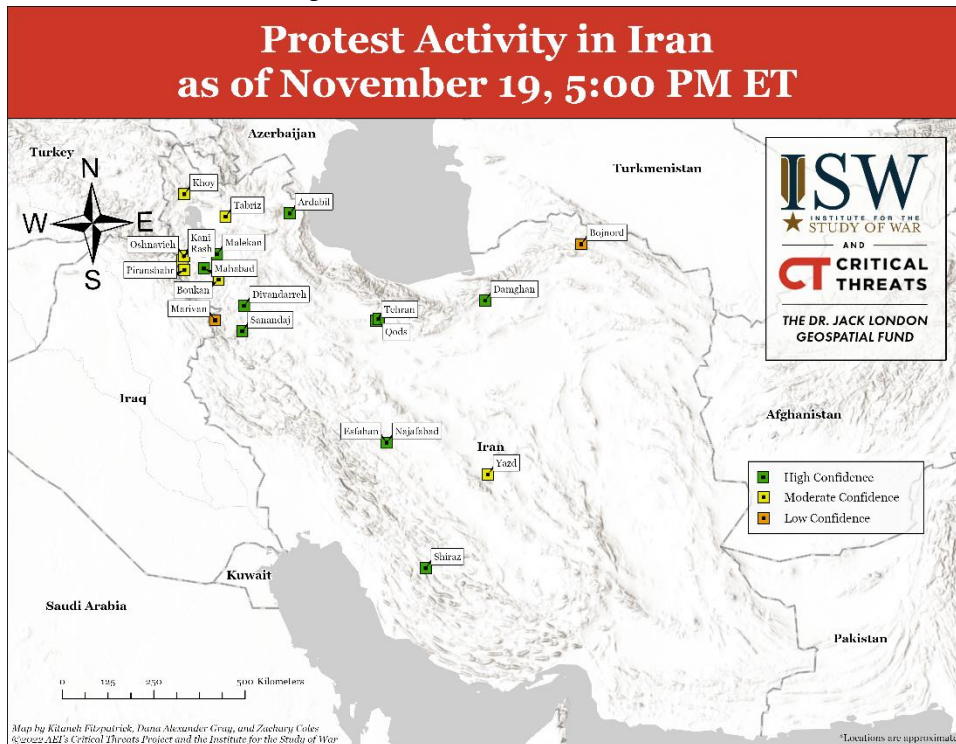
- Roughly 100--possibly more--protesters marched on a city street.²⁴

***Mahabad, West Azerbaijan Province (population: approximately 168,393)**

- Hundreds of mourners gathered to commemorate Kamal Ahmadpour, whom security personnel killed in on November 18 for participating in anti-regime protests. Mourners chanted "Martyr's don't die."²⁵
- Hundreds of protesters gathered on a Mahabad city street and sat in support of anti-regime protests. Footage shows a fire lit on the same street. Iranian social media accounts reported that regime security forces cut electricity to the city and began shooting into large crowds of protesters during evening protests.²⁶

Piranshahr, West Azerbaijan Province (population: approximately 91,515)

- Roughly 70-100 protesters--possibly more-- chanted anti-regime slogans and lit a fire on a Piranshahr city street.²⁷



The Islamic Azad University’s daily newspaper *Farhikhegan* published an editorial which claimed street protests had become urban war. The editorial urged security forces to take decisive action and to use combat units against protestors.²⁸

Expediency Council Member Gholam Ali Hadadadel warned that the Islamic Revolution was in a “sensitive position” despite boasting of advances under the Islamic Republic.²⁹ Hadadadel’s statement contradicts Supreme Leader Khamenei’s November 19 comments that protests had not damaged and could not damage the regime.³⁰ Hadadadel is the father-in-law of the Supreme Leader’s son Mojtaba Khamenei, who wields considerable influence within the regime.³¹

Axis of Resistance and Regional Developments

Israeli combat aircraft conducted airstrikes against multiple Syria Arab Army (SAA) and IRGC or Iranian proxy militia positions in western Syria on November 19. The airstrikes targeted likely IRGC command and control centers and precision-guided munition (PGM) production and storage facilities located in Homs and Hama Provinces.³² Israeli combat aircraft also targeted and destroyed an SAA air defense system in Jableh, Latakia Province that the Syrian Ministry of Defense claimed was attempting to shoot down the Israeli aircraft.³³ The operation reportedly wounded one and killed four SAA soldiers.³⁴ The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claimed some of the airstrikes targeted military sites near Masyaf, Hama Province.³⁵ The IRGC operates a well-known PGM storage and production facility in Masyaf, which Israeli combat aircraft have targeted repeatedly and as recently as August 25.³⁶

The Masyaf facility’s short distance from a critical Russian military logistics node makes it a plausible channel for Iranian arms transfers to Russia. Masyaf is approximately 50 kilometers from Hmeimem airbase, one of the Russian military’s most important logistics hubs for the Syrian theater.³⁷ Russian National Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev met with Iranian President Raisi and Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani likely to discuss the sale of Iranian ballistic missiles and other PGMs – such as the Iranian Shahed-136 loitering munition that Russia has used on the battlefield in Ukraine – on November 9, as ISW previously reported.³⁸ The Washington Post claimed on November 19 that Iran and Russia had finalized an agreement on the transaction.³⁹ Iran could be using the Maysaf facility to expedite PGM production and shipments to Russia via Hmeimem airbase. Israel may have targeted the PGM production facilities in part to obstruct Iranian efforts to deliver the weapons to Russia.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hossein and US officials discussed the continued presence of US forces in Iraq to support the fight against ISIS. Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hossein met with a US delegation headed by US Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl on November 19 in Manama, Bahrain on the sidelines of the annual IISS Manama Conference.⁴⁰ Kahl’s office published a press release after the meeting reaffirming that the US is committed to its strategic partnership with Iraq and to maintaining US forces in Iraq to support the fight against ISIS.⁴¹

¹ <https://twitter.com/HengawO/status/1594074721444069376?s=20&t=naMNHecc8pCx8l-SXoROhA>

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- ² <https://twitter.com/mamadporii/status/1594076402763984898/video/1> ;
- ³ <https://twitter.com/HengawO/status/1594074721444069376?s=20&t=naMNHecc8pCx8l-SXoROhA> ;
<https://twitter.com/HengawO/status/1594074721444069376?s=20&t=naMNHecc8pCx8l-SXoROhA> ;
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- ⁴ <https://twitter.com/1500tasvir/status/1594093135994437632?s=20&t=naMNHecc8pCx8l-SXoROhA> ;
<https://twitter.com/truskesadeghi/status/1594092266209132546?s=20&t=naMNHecc8pCx8l-SXoROhA>
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<https://twitter.com/Sadafbanooo/status/1594112846815952896?s=20&t=naMNHecc8pCx8l-SXoROhA>
- ¹⁰ https://twitter.com/javanane_k/status/1593284968595263489?s=20&t=DD8uLl9gOg4Z9Zed93qQ6g
- ¹¹ https://twitter.com/iran_javanan/status/1593000512961777666
- ¹² <https://www.iranhr.net/en/articles/5589/> ; <https://www.iranhr.net/en/articles/5594/>
- ¹³ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-15> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-16> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-17>
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- ²² https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1593971049489743872?s=20&t=2-Vtc1Sy0KzmJcv1ZOyMtA
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https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1594014169619202053?s=20&t=2-Vtc1Sy0KzmJcv1ZOyMtA
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<https://twitter.com/SamRasoulpour/status/1593881403200098304?s=20&t=9U7SN0dlgBlgbzFkFRlbgw> ;
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³⁴ <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/2022-11-19/ty-article/.premium/four-reported-dead-in-alleged-israeli-airstrike-in-syria/00000184-8e54-d53f-a5fe-aed6dfea0000>

³⁵ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/276664/>

³⁶ <https://israel-alma.org/2022/10/24/if-you-defend-a-target-you-become-a-target/>

³⁷ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/russia-expands-syrian-air-base-boost-regional-presence>; <https://www.mei.edu/publications/how-russia-made-hemeimeem-air-base-its-african-hub>; <https://www.voanews.com/a/middle-east-russia-expands-military-facilities-syria/6205742.html>

³⁸ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-november-9>

³⁹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/11/19/russia-iran-drones-secret-deal/>

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⁴¹ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3224037/readout-of-under-secretary-of-defense-for-policy-dr-colin-kahls-meeting-with-ir/>