

Iran Crisis Update, December 19

Nicholas Carl, Zachary Coles, Dana Alexander Gray, and Frederick W. Kagan
December 19, 6:30 pm ET

The Iran Crisis Updates are produced by the Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute with support from the Institute for the Study of War (ISW). To receive Iran Crisis Updates via email, please subscribe [here](#).

Some protest coordinators and organizations are trying to reclaim religion from the regime, essentially arguing that one can be devoutly religious and still oppose the Islamic Republic. The Mashhad Neighborhood Youth published a statement from “a group of Iranian Muslim and Shia youth” that accused Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei of using religion to control and manipulate.[1] The statement argued that Khamenei does not represent true Islamic values but is rather undermining religion. The framing of the group as representing “Muslims and Shia” is noteworthy and may suggest outreach to the Sunni community in Iran. The Mashhad group separately asserted that the regime has not upheld some of the founding principles in the constitution.[2] CTP has previously reported how protesters have tried to reclaim ideas of revolution, Iranian nationalism, and secular martyrdom from the regime for their own movement.[3] The regime has long labored to appropriate many of these ideas for its own purposes.

The fact that Mashhad youth may spearhead this effort to reclaim religion is notable given the significance of the city to the Iranian clerical and religious community. Mashhad is the home of the Imam Reza shrine—one of the most significant religious locations in Iran. The Mashhad Friday prayer leader, Ahmad Alam ol Hoda, is an outspoken hardliner and the father-in-law of President Ebrahim Raisi, who himself was born in Mashhad.

The Mashhad Neighborhood Youth explained part of its protest doctrine on December 19, promoting the idea of decentralized, “neighborhood-based” protests.[4] Protest coordinators and organizations frequently use this term, neighborhood-based protests, when planning demonstrations. The Mashhad group explained that neighborhood-based protests involve small groups of protesters shuffling to different nearby neighborhoods where they know the environment but will not be recognized by other locals. Protester lookouts warn the small crowds to disperse into nearby alleyways to avoid incoming security forces, and these crowds reconstitute once the security forces leave. The Mashhad group argued that simultaneous, neighborhood-based protests throughout a city exhaust and strain the bandwidth of security forces, creating a “cat-and-mouse game.” This theory is consistent with CTP’s assessment that security forces have faced bandwidth constraints, exhaustion, and low morale since September 2022.[5]

The regime is reportedly torturing arrested protesters to extract forced confessions. The lawyer of an arrested protester on death row claimed that state security services blindfolded, beat, and subjected his client to electric shocks until he falsely confessed to killing a security officer.[6] Another arrested protester similarly told his father that state security services tortured him until he falsely confessed to killing a Basij member.[7] The regime has almost certainly tortured many others in recent months in addition to the horrific acts of sexual assault and violence that the regime is committing against arrested protesters.[8]

Key Takeaways

- **Some protest coordinators and organizations are trying to reclaim religion from the regime, essentially arguing that one can be devoutly religious and still oppose the Islamic Republic.**
- **The Mashhad Neighborhood Youth explained part of its protest doctrine, promoting the idea of decentralized, “neighborhood-based” protests.**
- **The regime is torturing arrested protesters to extract forced confessions.**
- **At least 10 protests took place in five cities across four provinces.**
- **Anti-regime militancy has increased in Sistan and Baluchistan Province since December 18.**
- **The *Guardian* reported that dozens to possibly a few hundred protesters have fled Iran into Iraqi Kurdistan since the protests began in September 2022.**

Anti-Regime Protests

At least 10 protests took place in five cities across four provinces on December 19. Protest coordinators and organizations have called for countrywide protests and strikes on December 19-21, likely driving the increased protest turnout. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Karaj, Alborz Province[9]

- Size: Small
- Notes: Protest chants and slogans focused on economic grievances and denouncing the regime’s decision to execute Majid Reza Rahnavaard.

Rasht, Gilan Province[10]

- Size: Small
- Protest Activity: Protesters set fires on Rasht streets during night demonstrations.

Tehran City, Tehran Province[11]

- Size: Small
- Notes: Demonstrations occurred in the vicinity of the Islamic Revolution Square metro station.

Tehran City, Tehran Province[12]

- Size: Small
- Protest Activity: Protesters set fires on Tehran streets during night demonstrations.
- Notes: Demonstrations occurred in the vicinity of the Naft Ponk neighborhood.

Tehran City, Tehran Province[13]

- Size: Undetermined
- Notes: Demonstrations occurred in the vicinity of the Ekbatan neighborhood

Boukan, West Azerbaijan Province[14]

- Size: Medium
- Demographic: Mourners
- Protest Activity: Funeral ceremony for protest martyr Mohammad Hajji Rasoul Poor

Mahabad, West Azerbaijan Province[15]

- Size: Small
- Protest Activity: 40-day commemoration ceremony for protest martyr Faiq Mam Ghadri

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

Tehran City, Tehran Province[16]

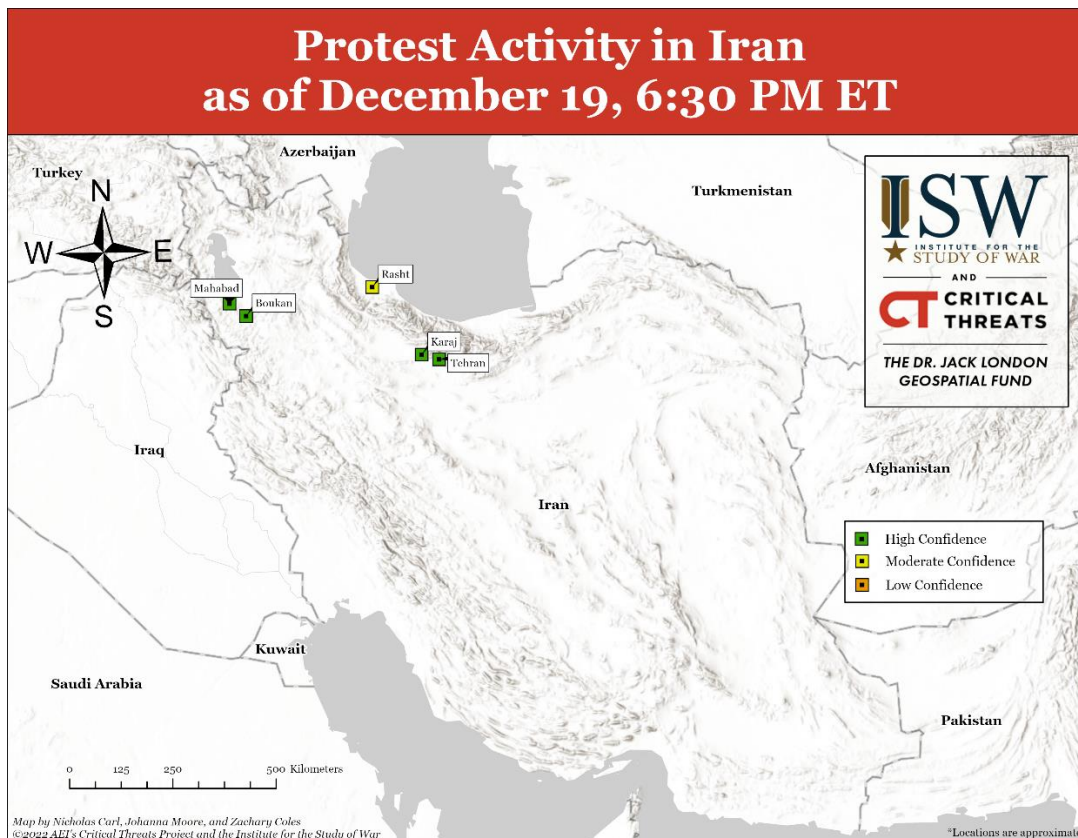
- Size: Undetermined
- Notes: Demonstrations occurred in the vicinity of the Jamal Zadeh Neighborhood.

Tehran City, Tehran Province[17]

- Size: Small
- Demographic: Rasoul-e Akram Hospital residency students
- Protest Activity: Protest and strike

Tehran City, Tehran Province[18]

- Size: Undetermined
- Notes: Demonstrations occurred in the vicinity of the Towhid Metro Station.



Anti-regime militancy has increased in Sistan and Baluchistan Province since December 18. CTP has recorded three clashes between regime security forces and unidentified militants in the past 48 hours. The LEC clashed with militants near Esfandak on December 18, as CTP previously reported.[19] Militants separately attacked an LEC patrol near Rask, injuring three, on December 19.[20] Militants also clashed with elements of the IRGC Ground Forces 44th Ghamar Bani Hashem Brigade near Saravan, killing one IRGC member and three Basij members, on December 19.[21] Iranian state media reported that the militants crossed the border into Pakistan after some of these clashes.

Anti-regime militancy is common in these areas and not necessarily related to the protests. Salafi-jihadi militant groups, such as Jaish al Adl, operate around the Iran-Pakistan border and regularly attack regime security forces. Jaish al Adl has called for armed resistance against the regime and claimed that recruitment has increased in recent months.[22] The IRGC may have sent elements of the 44th Brigade to Sistan and Baluchistan Province to reinforce its military footprint there. The brigade is based in Shahr-e Kurd, Chahar Mahal and Bakhtiari Province—a considerable distance from the southeastern borders. The IRGC has a relatively small presence in Sistan and Baluchistan Province, maintaining one only the 110th Salman Farsi Independent Special Forces Brigade in Zahedan.[23] The IRGC may be trying to increase its presence in Sistan and Baluchistan Province to counter anti-regime militancy and protests without diverting elements of the 110th Brigade away from Zahedan or using Artesh forces in such operations.

The *Guardian* reported on December 19 that dozens to possibly a few hundred protesters have fled Iran into Iraqi Kurdistan since the protests began in September 2022.[24] State security services, such as the IRGC Intelligence Organization, have historically targeted dissidents abroad and may pursue these protesters if the *Guardian* article is true. An unidentified Iraqi central government official denied the reporting in remarks to Iraqi Kurdish outlet *Shafaq*. [25]

An unidentified source told IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* on December 19 that the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) may soon increase bank deposit interest rates, likely to discourage citizens from withdrawing their savings from the banks.[26] Anti-regime outlet *Iran International* reported that Iranian banks are experiencing a shortage in hard currencies according to unidentified Iranian banking sources.[27] CTP has previously reported calls from protester coordinators and organizations urging citizens to withdraw their money.[28] CTP cannot, however, verify the reporting from *Iran International* claiming that this bank run has produced a currency shortage. The fact that this uncorroborated reporting is consistent with other uncorroborated social media reports does not validate it.

Hardline Parliamentarian Esmail Kowsari stated on December 19 that Parliament is considering legislation to downgrade diplomatic ties with the UK for its alleged role in stoking protests.[29] Kowsari added that Parliament is reevaluating diplomatic ties with France and Germany as well. Kowsari is a retired IRGC brigadier general who is close to IRGC leadership but does not hold much formal authority outside his regular duties as a lawmaker.[30] His rhetoric does not necessarily indicate whether Parliament will implement measures to downgrade diplomatic ties with the UK, France, and Germany.

Judiciary Chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei reiterated his hard line on the protests on December 19.[31] Ejei ordered judges to implement finalized sentences, including death sentences, without delay. Ejei also advised judges to ignore related social dynamics, likely referring to some political and religious figures criticizing the death penalty in recent weeks.[32] Ejei's comments reaffirm his commitment to these brutal punishments against protesters. His comments may indicate that the regime will carry out the execution of Mohammad Mehdi Karami, whose parents issued an emotional video appeal for the commutation of his death sentence on December 18.[33]

Axis of Resistance and Regional Developments

Israeli combat aircraft conducted airstrikes on Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and Iranian-backed militia positions around Damascus International Airport on December 19. Israeli combat aircraft targeted an SAA air defense battery recently deployed to the airport and a military warehouse used by Iranian proxies in the Sayyeda Zeynab suburb of Damascus.[34] *Breaking Defense* reported on December 16 that Iran had resumed regular shipments of weaponry and munitions through Damascus International Airport. The resumption followed an intensive Israeli air campaign in eastern Syria that disrupted ground-based shipments.[35] Israeli combat aircraft targeted the main runway at Damascus International Airport several times in 2022, temporarily disrupting Iranian shipments into Damascus International Airport.[36] The resumption of Iranian cargo flights also coincides with an *Al Sharq Al Awsat* report that claimed Israeli officials threatened to bomb Beirut airport if they confirmed Iran was flying military equipment directly into Lebanon and with the statement by Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati on December 19 that Iran is not, in fact, using Beirut International Airport for weapons shipments.[37]

[1] https://t.me/mashhad_protests/2127

[2] https://t.me/mashhad_protests/2131

[3] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-4>

[4] https://t.me/mashhad_protests/2147

[5] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-october-13;%20https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-september-28>

[6] https://twitter.com/Al_Sharifzadeh/status/1604573147050774529

[7] <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-protester-death-sentence-karami-executions/32174898.html>

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

[9] <https://twitter.com/1500tasvir/status/1604898223012839424?s=20&t=xPRR8HUS5NInZgXmZdtpzw>; <https://twitter.com/RadioFarda/status/1604888310102560769?s=20&t=xPRR8HUS5NInZgXmZdtpzw>; <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1604904584627245058?s=20&t=tIswQS1DfQXHXCh5Dssedw>

[10] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1604902940434698254?s=20&t=tIswQS1DfQXHXCh5Dssedw>; <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1604903284506267650?s=20&t=tIswQS1DfQXHXCh5Dssedw>; <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1604904184138108930?s=20&t=tIswQS1DfQXHXCh5Dssedw>

[11] https://twitter.com/RadioFarda/status/1604890411457208322?s=20&t=6qaNiVi7pkkFl_OASIB-yw; <https://twitter.com/bbcpersian/status/1604890779977412608?s=20&t=uSnPBHsQ33uhbv7ayDTt6w>; <https://twitter.com/1500tasvir/status/1604897557934575616?s=20&t=UykoBTj3WJ2lD13LJ9jtbw>

[12] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1604911945924345856?s=20&t=o7KD8l3952HIRwOlG1bd5A>; <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1604921772863897600?s=20&t=nxAJkWuquUMQV7r8UVVYTO>; <https://twitter.com/RadioFarda/status/1604925020886761496?s=20&t=PtYqEe-2FIdKYpeU8mm23A>

[13] https://twitter.com/bbcpersian/status/1604928790626541568?s=20&t=a_wAxPoBLmta4sJYQbwcBA

[14] <https://twitter.com/HengawO/status/1604839159717597184?s=20&t=swfy2eEQp4rrP-NvukMyYQ>; <https://twitter.com/HengawO/status/1604787442170707968?s=20&t=YhldtMGAHbdrnLvfNm9HrA>; <https://twitter.com/bbcpersian/status/1604827108932550656?s=20&t=dhT2ydFcqv5AtxbWRUpq7Q>

[15] <https://twitter.com/bbcpersian/status/1604856724678410240?s=20&t=w-F7-7E9QHL4cs61b8Dpdw>; <https://twitter.com/RadioFarda/status/1604848791580016646?s=20&t=1zDPXTn1LGkjtHL28JfCCA>

[16] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1604934607857942530?s=20&t=VblPsepAp7BtJyQcSqXlNw>

[17] https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1604862358249246720?s=20&t=jVME3DrJuib5rnmB_R2cNQ

[18] https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1604928001841537024?s=20&t=PkiP4LEBxvfn_4KmiKkHtA

[19] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-18>

[20] <https://defapress dot ir/562441>

[21] <https://isna dot ir/xdMYdC>

[22] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-8>

[23] <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Irans-Reserve-of-Last-Resort.pdf>

[24] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/19/escape-from-iran-protesters-regroup-in-iraq-after-perilous-journey>

[25] <https://shafaq dot com/ar/%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%A7-%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86>

[26] <https://www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1401/09/28/2823985>

[27] <https://www.iranintl.com/202212193053>

[28] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-18>

[29] <https://www.mashreghnews dot ir/news/1447187>

[30] https://www.criticalthreats.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/pdf_uploadanalysisThe_IRGC_Command_Network-1.pdf

[31] <https://www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1401/09/28/2823809/>

[32] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-11>

[33] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-18>

[34] [https://www dot jpost dot com/breaking-news/article-725327](https://www dot timesofisrael dot com/syria-says-israel-carrying-out-strikes-near-damascus/); <https://www dot breakingdefense.com/2022/12/israel-eyeing-kinetic-non-kinetic-options-to-disrupt-iran-syria-cargo-flights/>

[35] <https://www dot reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-attacks-vicinity-syrias-damascus-syrian-state-media-2022-09-16/>

[36] <https://english dot aawsat dot com/home/article/4035341/israel-threatens-bomb-beirut-airport-if-used-deliver-iranian-weapons>; <https://www dot haaretz dot com/middle-east-news/iran/2022-12-15/ty-article/.premium/the-new-axis-of-hezbollahs-intensification-the-international-airport-in-beirut/00000185-11fo-dd6a-abcf-b3fd2dd50000>; <https://www dot alahednews dot com dot lb/article.php?id=48801&cid=113>