



Iran Crisis Update, December 28

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Iranian security officials and entities attempted to declare an end to protest activity on December 28 despite ongoing acts of anti-regime defiance documented throughout the country. The Artesh praised Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Iranian security forces for quelling protests in a December 28 statement commemorating regime-organized counter-protests to the 2009 Green Movement.¹ The Armed Forces General Staff—the most senior military body in Iran—also issued a statement commemorating the 2009 pro-regime counter-protests and claimed that the regime had neutralized the threat of recent anti-regime demonstrations. IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami similarly gave a speech claiming that the regime had decisively defeated unrest and accusing the US and Israel of fomenting dissent. Salami acknowledged that protest activity may resume at a later date.²

These declarations of victory appear premature. The regime has not deterred Iranians from continuing to participate in anti-regime protests and strikes, particularly in historically restive provinces. Social media users have documented regular protest activity in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province since late September, for example.³ Protest activity has additionally increased in cities throughout Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan Provinces in recent days. CTP is currently hypothesizing that the regime may have pulled back some of the IRGC deployments in these areas, facilitating an uptick in anti-regime demonstrations.⁴

Iran's deteriorating economic conditions have the potential to further inflame anti-regime demonstrations throughout the country. The Iranian rial has depreciated by approximately 25 percent against the US dollar since protests began on September 16, hitting another historic low on December 28 at 422,000 rials per dollar on the black market.⁵ Half of the currency's losses have occurred in the last three weeks, indicating the downward trend is accelerating.⁶

Iranian officials have blamed the protest movement for the rial's decline and corresponding economic maladies, but the regime's foreign policy adventures likely play a significant role.⁷ A December 28 *New York Times* report stated that the Biden Administration is attempting to prevent Iran from acquiring

the Western-made components necessary to manufacture suicide drones for Russian use in Ukraine.⁸ Part of the Biden Administration's strategy involves aggressively applying export controls and sanctioning private actors linked to the drone supply chain.⁹ The US and other Western countries pursuing a similar course of action have consequently restricted Iran's overall import and export activity. Heavy scrutiny from US compliance officials and the Iranian regime's resultant irregular payment arrangements have likely dissuaded some international vendors from doing business in Iran, regardless of the businesses' connection to drone supply chains. A December 21 *Reuters* report, for example, stated that the regime's "complex and erratic" sanctions-evasion tactics recently created a massive backlog of merchant ships containing sanctions-exempt cargo outside Iranian ports.¹⁰ These unfavorable business conditions are likely discouraging private actors from engaging with the Iranian economy, driving the rial's exchange rate down further.

The US and other Western countries pursuing a similar course of action have likely dissuaded international vendors from doing business in Iran – regardless of the businesses' connection to drone supply chains – and driven down the rial's exchange rate, according to the *Times*. A December 21 *Reuters* report, for example, stated that the regime's "complex and erratic" sanction-evading payment methods have recently created a massive backlog of merchant ships containing sanctions-exempt cargo outside Iranian ports.¹¹

The regime may increase the likelihood of a surge in protest activity by exacerbating economic conditions. Western responses to Iran's enabling the brutal Russian targeting of Ukrainian civilians and an increasingly worthless currency are aggravating issues in Iran's already ailing economy and may prevent the country from importing sufficient quantities of foodstuffs, refined petroleum products, and other resources necessary for stable economic conditions.

Natural gas shortages may reinvigorate anti-regime grievances as Iran's economic situation worsens. Iranian officials previously endorsed leveraging the European energy crisis imposed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine to increase Iranian natural gas exports.¹² Iran is, however, now suffering from the same energy shortages that it sought to capitalize on. The Raisi administration has expressed concern about the need to conserve gas in recent weeks.¹³ A Gilan Province official additionally declared December 22 a local holiday for conserving energy, as CTP previously reported.¹⁴

Key Takeaways

- **Iranian security officials and entities attempted to declare an end to protest activity on December 28 despite ongoing acts of anti-regime defiance documented throughout the country.**
- **Iran's deteriorating economic and energy conditions have the potential to further inflame anti-regime demonstrations.**
- **At least four protests occurred in four cities across four provinces.**
- **Protest coordinators reiterated calls for anti-regime protests and strikes on December 29 and January 6-8.**
- **President Ebrahim Raisi and his cabinet appointed Hossein Mehrab as Khuzestan provincial governor on December 28.**

- **Former reformist President Hassan Rouhani discussed solutions to anti-regime activity with former governors from his administration on December 26.**
- **Social media users reported that petrochemical workers in Abadan, Khuzestan Province participated in anti-regime strikes for a third consecutive day.**
- **The Turkish, Russia, and Syrian Defense Ministers held a trilateral meeting on December 28 in Moscow.**

Anti-Regime Protests

At least four protests occurred in four cities across four provinces on December 28. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Behmai, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province¹⁵

- Size: Medium
- Note: Local banks reportedly closed out of fear of a large gathering of protesters

Ghaloui Zendan, West Azerbaijan Province¹⁶

- Size: Small
- Demographic: Mourners
- Protester Activity: 40-day commemoration march for Mehran Rahmani

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

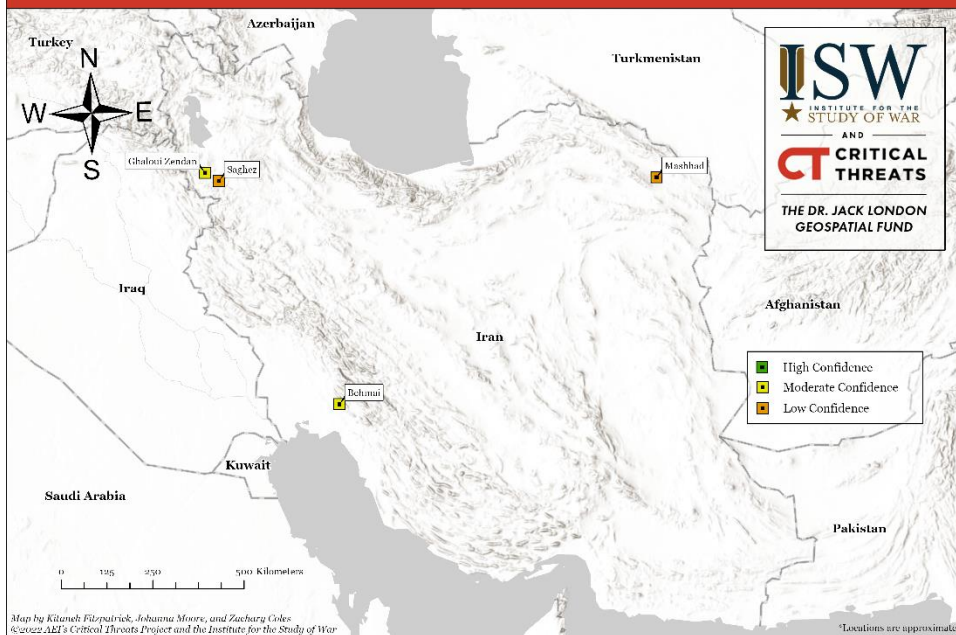
Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi Province¹⁷

- Size: Small
- Protester Activity: Blocked traffic

Saghez, Kurdistan Province¹⁸

- Size: Small
- Protester Activity: Set fire to tires in the street; blocked traffic

Protest Activity in Iran as of December 28, 5:00 PM ET



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 circulated calls for anti-regime protests and strikes on the following dates:

December 29¹⁹

- Type: Protest, 40-day commemoration ceremonies for killed protesters
- Locations: Esfahan City, Esfahan Province; Marvdasht, Fars Province; Shiraz, Fars Province; Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province; Izeh, Khuzestan Province; Tehran City, Tehran Province

January 6-8²⁰

- Type: Protest and strike
- Location: Country-wide

The Interior Ministry continued to shuffle around provincial governors to improve internal security.

President Ebrahim Raisi and his cabinet approved the appointment of Hossein Mehrab as Khuzestan provincial governor on December 28. Mehrab previously served in the Ministry of Intelligence and Security and IRGC Intelligence Organization and has held roles relating to economic policy within the Ahmadinejad administration and the Supreme National Security Council.²¹ The Raisi administration previously appointed Mohammad Tabib Sahraei as Kermanshah provincial governor on December 21 and IRGC Brigadier General Mohammad Karami as Sistan and Baluchistan provincial governor on December 25.²²

Former reformist President Hassan Rouhani discussed solutions to anti-regime activity with former governors from his administration on December 26. Rouhani encouraged the former governors to share their recommendations for resolving the Iranian population's grievances and claimed that he had offered suggestions to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and other senior regime officials. Rouhani stressed the importance of reviving the regime and claimed that the loss of the Islamic Republic would damage the credibility of the Islamic faith. Rouhani cited economic and diplomatic isolation, ethnic and religious divisions, and the marginalization of reformist and moderate actors as reasons for ongoing sociopolitical issues.²³ Rouhani's meeting marks the first time that he has publicly commented on anti-regime activity since the Mahsa Amini protest movement began on September 16.

Social media users reported that petrochemical workers in Abadan, Khuzestan Province participated in anti-regime strikes for a third consecutive day.²⁴ Iranian authorities have allegedly warned Abadan petrochemical workers against continuing strike activity in recent days.²⁵

A Europe-based Iranian human rights organization reported that over 100 arrested Iranians risk execution or death penalty charges for participating in anti-regime protest activity.²⁶

Axis of Resistance and Regional Developments

The Turkish, Russia, and Syrian Defense Ministers held a trilateral meeting on December 28 in Moscow. Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar and Syrian Defense Minister Ali Mahmoud Abbas, along with their governments' respective intelligence chiefs, spoke with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu about humanitarian and security issues in Syria.²⁷ The participants agreed to hold additional trilateral meetings in the future.²⁸ The December 28 meeting marks the first time that the Syrian and Turkish Defense Ministers have met in over a decade, although Syrian and Turkish intelligence officials participated in bilateral talks as recently as September 2022.²⁹

The December 28 meeting follows Turkish President Recep Erdogan's proposal for a series of graduated trilateral meetings between Syrian, Russian, and Turkish officials to rehabilitate diplomatic ties between the Assad Regime and Turkey.³⁰ Akar, Abbas, and Shoigu also likely discussed the potential Turkish military incursion into northern Syria, which Erdogan has repeatedly threatened to pursue.³¹

¹ <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/564123/%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%B4-%D8%A8%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%AA-%DB%B9-%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2-%D8%A8%D8%B5%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%AA>

² <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/564123/%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%B4-%D8%A8%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%AA-%DB%B9-%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2-%D8%A8%D8%B5%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%AA>

³ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-1> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-october-27>

⁴ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-27>

⁵ [bonbast dot com/graph/usd/2022-11-01/2022-12-28](https://bonbast.com/graph/usd/2022-11-01/2022-12-28)

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