



Iran Crisis Update, December 23
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The Iranian regime is likely in a mounting confrontation with citizens in Izeh, Khuzestan Province. Izeh has seen weeks of violence since November 2022. Unidentified gunmen shot and killed at least six people and injured another 15 at a shopping center in Izeh on November 16.¹ Iranian state media attributed the attack to the Islamic State, although the group has not claimed responsibility. Security forces conducted a direct-action raid in Izeh on December 20 targeting individuals for their alleged roles in the terror attack.² Unconfirmed social media accounts have claimed that security forces have begun killing and mass arresting citizens in Izeh since the raid.³ Others have claimed that the regime has imposed a total internet blackout there and established checkpoints on the major roads leading into and out of the city. This most recent reported escalation suggests that citizens may have protested and reacted angrily to the raid. The information space remains incredibly murky, and obtaining reliable and verifiable information is thus difficult.

The ongoing situation in Izeh underscores the credibility crisis that the regime faces. Several conflicting rumors are circulating in the Persian-language information space. Some, including the mother of one of the victims, have claimed that the regime conducted the November 16 terror attack—not the Islamic State.⁴ Protest organizations and other social media accounts are separately claiming that the individuals killed and arrested in the December 20 raid were innocent.⁵ CTP cannot assess the veracity of any of these rumors. The prevalence of such rumors highlights the mistrust of the population toward the political establishment, however, as the regime's abuse of its people continues to undermine its credibility.

Unidentified individuals detonated explosives at a Basij base in Ghahdrijan, Esfahan Province on December 23, marking a possible inflection in protester tactics.⁶ Protesters have regularly thrown Molotov cocktails at security forces' facilities throughout this protest wave, but CTP has not previously observed the use of explosives like the ones used in this attack. The attackers may have produced improvised explosives themselves or accessed materials from industrial or military sources.

Vice News published on December 17 a video indicating dissent among the state security services.⁷ Vice News interviewed an alleged former employee of the Intelligence and Security Ministry who defected during the crackdown. The individual claimed that some Law Enforcement Command (LEC) members have opposed the crackdown and that the IRGC Intelligence Organization has arrested them. The Vice News video also interviewed a reported Basij member who similarly expressed frustration over the brutality of the crackdown. CTP cannot verify the authenticity of this report, but it is consistent with previously observed trends. The regime has long struggled with dissent among the security services during violent crackdowns.⁸ Iranian security personnel, especially the less ideological, have sometimes refused to use extreme force against their fellow citizens. The arrest of these dissenting security officers could spread frustration among their families and security units.

These defections highlight one of the many challenges that the protests pose to regime longevity. The ongoing protests—even at low levels—continue to strain the bandwidth, energy, and morale of security forces, increasing the likelihood of further dissent. Protesters can likely sustain varying levels of demonstrations and strikes longer than the regime can sustain its crackdown.

The recent behavior of the regime demonstrates that it will likely keep the mandatory hijab law but look for new, and perhaps more effective, ways to enforce it rather than using the morality patrol. The regime has not yet released an opinion on the hijab requirement even though it pledged to do so by December 16.⁹ The continued silence suggests that Iranian leaders have decided to maintain the law but want to avoid enflaming protests with a public announcement. CTP has previously argued that the idea that the regime will relax its hijab law is fundamentally incompatible with the vision that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has for the future of the country.¹⁰

Some Iranian officials have described alternatives to using the morality patrol to enforce the hijab requirement. Former IRGC Intelligence Organization Chief Hossein Taeb stated that the morality patrols do not work, and that the regime needs to evaluate different methods on December 23.¹¹ Parliamentarian Hossin Jalali similarly stated that the regime is enforcing the hijab requirement “through smart methods,” implying the use of advanced technologies such as facial recognition and surveillance cameras.¹² CTP has

previously suggested that the regime could adopt such an approach.¹³ This emphasis on alternative enforcement methods underscores that the potential abolition of the morality patrol, which is not yet confirmed, does not mean that the regime will relax its mandatory hijab policies. The regime might instead continue to expand an Orwellian surveillance-punishment model relying on collective punishment through shutting down non-compliant businesses and remote punishments such as seizing financial assets in state banks as alternatives to physical confrontation.

Key Takeaways

- **The Iranian regime is in a mounting confrontation with citizens in Izeh, Khuzestan Province. The ongoing situation in Izeh underscores the credibility crisis that the regime faces.**
- **Unidentified individuals detonated explosives at a Basij base in Ghahdrijan, Esfahan Province, marking a possible inflection in protester tactics.**
- **Vice News published a video indicating dissent among the state security services.**
- **The recent behavior of the regime demonstrates that it will likely keep the mandatory hijab law but look for new, and perhaps more effective, ways to enforce it rather than using the morality patrol.**
- **At least four protests occurred in four cities across three provinces. Citizens frustrated by the regime's suppression of Sunnis played a prominent role in the protests**
- **Protest activity may increase on December 24 to commemorate 100 consecutive days of demonstrations.**

Anti-Regime Protests

At least four protests occurred in four cities across three provinces on December 23. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Galikash, Golestan Province¹⁴

- Size: Small
- Demographic: Sunni worshippers
- Notes: Protesters expressed support for Rask, Sistan and Baluchistan Sunni Friday Prayer Leader Malouvi Abdol Ghafar Naghsbandi, who reportedly cannot be reached after being summoned to a special clerical court in Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi Province. Protesters also demanded the return of Azadshahr, Golestan Province Sunni Friday Prayer Leader Mohammad Hossein Garij after Garij was dismissed in December 2021.

Rask, Sistan and Baluchistan Province¹⁵

- Size: Small
- Notes: Protesters expressed support for Rask, Sistan and Baluchistan Sunni Friday Prayer Leader Malouvi Abdol Ghafar Naghsbandi, who reportedly cannot be reached after being summoned to a special clerical court in Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi Province.

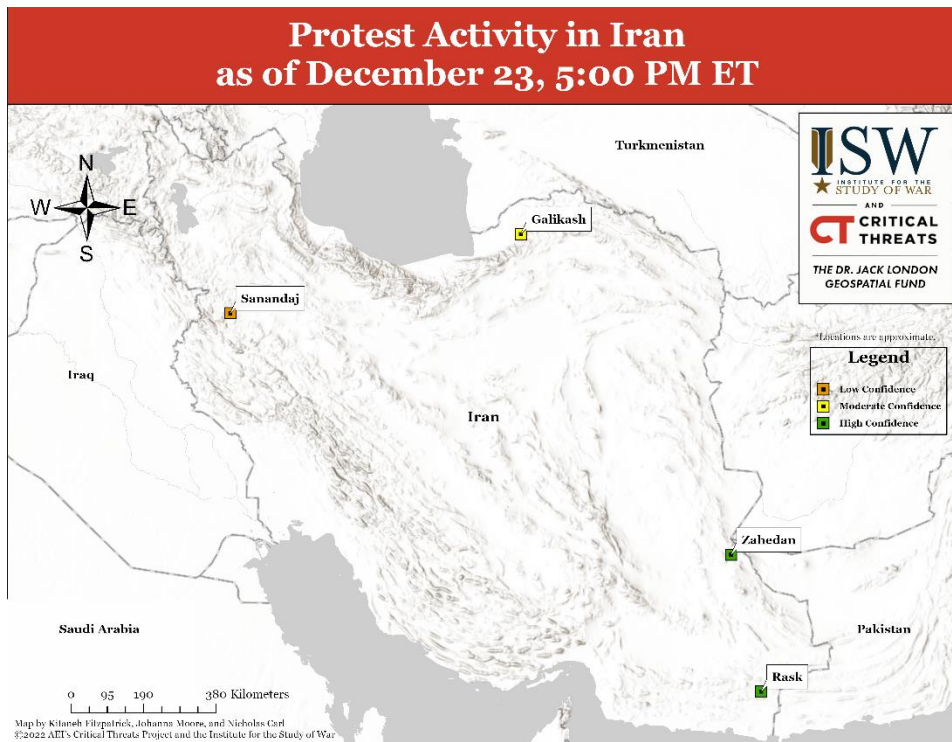
Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province ¹⁶

- Size: Medium
- Notable observed chants: “Death to the execution republic”
- Notes: Protests followed Moulana Abdol Hamid’s Friday prayer sermon

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

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province¹⁷

- Size: Small
- Demographic: Mourners, Isa Bigleri’s 40-day commemoration ceremony
- Notes: Footage may be from December 22. Weather conditions and chants similar to commemoration ceremony footage circulated on this date.



Prominent Sunni Cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid criticized the regime’s use of force in recent weeks in his weekly Friday sermon in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province on December 23. Abdol Hamid warned that “the regime

cannot be maintained with weapons and militarism” and condemned authorities for prioritizing power over religious principles. Abdol Hamid suggested that Iranian leadership was executing decisions “above the decree of God.” Abdol Hamid also warned that Islamic governance was “only good so as long as the majority of people want it” and stressed the importance of listening to the will of the people.¹⁸

Citizens frustrated by the regime’s suppression of Sunnis played a prominent role in fueling the protests on December 23. Three of the four recorded protests were related to Sunni grievances. The regime does not appear to be conducting a targeted campaign against Sunnis but rather trying to suppress dissenting voices in different locations. The regime, for instance, summoned Sunni cleric Maulvi Abdol Ghafar Naghshbandi to Mashhad after he confirmed the rape of a 15-year-old girl by an LEC commander in Chabahar, Sistan and Baluchistan Province.¹⁹ Naghshbandi has been missing since his summons, driving protests in two different cities on December 23. The regime’s efforts to silence critics like Naghshbandi and Moulana Abdol Hamid may generate backlash from the Sunni community in Iran.

Education Minister Yousef Nouri announced the establishment of an entity to “diagnose the ways teenagers deal with political issues” on December 23.²⁰ Nouri’s announcement is the latest part of the Iranian effort to reeducate and treat dissenting minors. Nouri stated on October 11 that the regime sent arrested high school students to “psychological centers” to educate and reform them, as CTP previously reported.²¹ *The New York Times* reported on November 14 that the regime forced underage protesters to complete behavioral therapy under the supervision of a cleric and psychologist. Iranian authorities reportedly forced detainees who refused treatment to take psychiatric drugs.²² These events highlight how some Iranian authorities are seemingly conflating political dissent with psychiatric issues.

Protest activity may increase on December 24 to commemorate 100 consecutive days of demonstrations. Protest coordinators and organizations repeated their calls for countrywide demonstrations and strikes on this day.²³ Many major cities are forecasted to receive cold weather and precipitation on December 24, which may depress protest turnout but also encourage strikes.

Axis of Resistance and Regional Developments

There was nothing significant to report today.

¹ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-16>

² <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/5660415>

³ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-22>

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- ⁴ <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-seven-killed-terrorist-attack-izeh-protests/32135345.html>;
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/11/18/iran-protests-izeh-kian-pirfalak/>
- ⁵ https://twitter.com/javanan_Kh/status/1606284749160398848;
<https://twitter.com/izehTirak/status/1605849203598557184>
- ⁶ <https://twitter.com/indypersian/status/1606344511260692498?s=20&t=NIXt0EOxccKe7nNFj9UPIg>;
<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1606315681871544320>
- ⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTFhAVB4R64>
- ⁸ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Whatever-it-takes-to-end-it.pdf>
- ⁹ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-16>
- ¹⁰ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-4>
- ¹¹ <http://www.defapress dot ir/fa/news/562991>
- ¹² https://twitter.com/fresh_sadegh/status/1605894015236247552
- ¹³ https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-5#_edn06ec5afb4c12c669490891df0b7306667
- ¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/VOAfarsi/status/1606298026531622912?s=20&t=Cnp91JGJ2cKjd56aEC9XJg> ;
<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1606255156298817536> ;
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- ¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/farzinkadkhodae/status/1606230170121035776?s=20&t=eGmCsRYLkLmnrY7O1Hua8w> ;
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<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1606238303430352896?s=20&t=0HfUxibu9e2MHI7Y3hBOmiA>
- ¹⁶ https://twitter.com/farzinkadkhodae/status/1606247703393882112?s=20&t=vJFbY_TBpAILZzk-mN5QYQ ;
https://twitter.com/SamRasoulpour/status/1606238515716554752?s=20&t=vJFbY_TBpAILZzk-mN5QYQ ;
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https://twitter.com/pouriazeraati/status/1606235079205715969?s=20&t=vJFbY_TBpAILZzk-mN5QYQ
- ¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1606242796083580928?s=20&t=wgGgxB3QN7x0gowD4G6Spg> ;
<https://twitter.com/IHRights/status/1606264718150320130?s=20&t=TPBJncNc-FTzq6Lz9vWwuw>
- ¹⁸ <https://t.co/eNdVWEEZLw>
- ¹⁹ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-16>
- ²⁰ <https://www.imna dot ir/news/628574>
- ²¹ <https://www.sharghdaily dot com/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA-6/858207-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4-%D8%A2%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B2%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D9%86%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%85-%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D9%82%DB%8C%D9%82%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D9%87%D9%85-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4-%D8%A2%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B3-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%85%DB%8C-%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D8%AF>
- ²² <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/14/world/middleeast/iran-protests-children.html>
- ²³ https://t.me/UYI_fa/26; https://t.me/javanane_ka/403; https://twitter.com/ba_njf/status/1606167660613357570