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Data Analysis of the Mahsa Amini Protest Movement

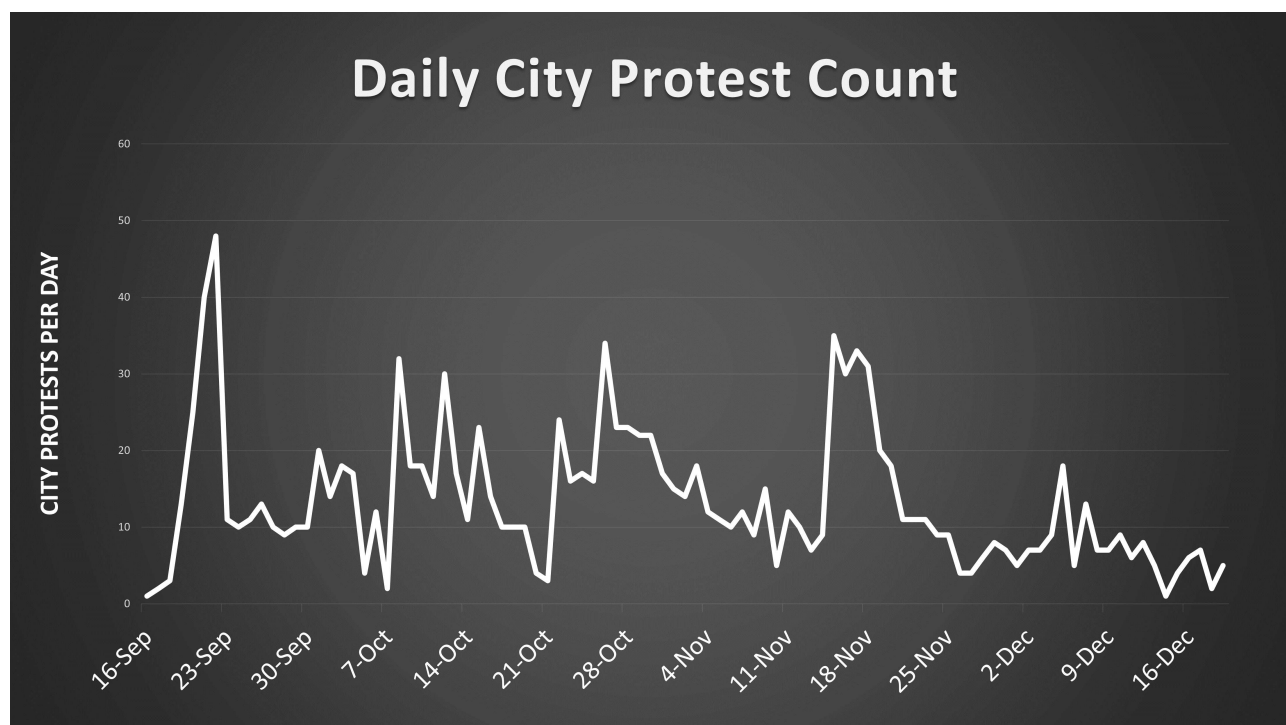
December 22, 2022

[Zachary Coles](#)

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The ongoing anti-regime protests in Iran reached their three-month anniversary on December 16. Countrywide demonstrations and strikes are continuing to shake the Iranian regime, presenting it with one of the most existential threats it has faced since the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. The continuation of this popular uprising is particularly impressive given the immense effort the Iranian regime has made to brutally suppress the movement. Its resilience is a testament to the tremendous bravery, courage, and determination of the Iranian protesters. CTP has produced daily updates on these protests and their evolution since September 2022.^[i] We present here a series of visualizations produced from the open-source data that we have gathered over the past three months to further inform the public discourse on this important moment in Iranian history.

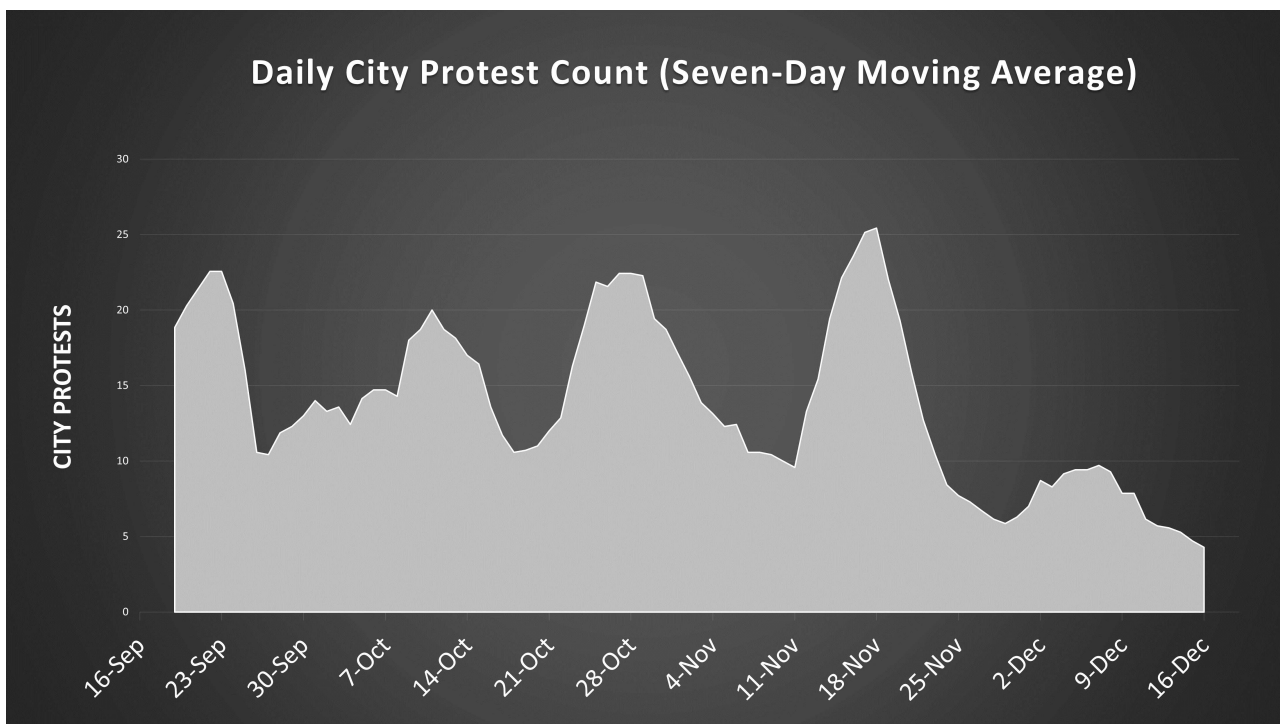
Note: The data presented below is based on the number of distinct cities in which protests occurred that met CTP's thresholds for size and evidence on a given day. There are frequently multiple distinct protests in Tehran and sometimes other cities; this data therefore does not reflect the total number of protests that met CTP's threshold on a given day, only the number of cities in which they occurred.



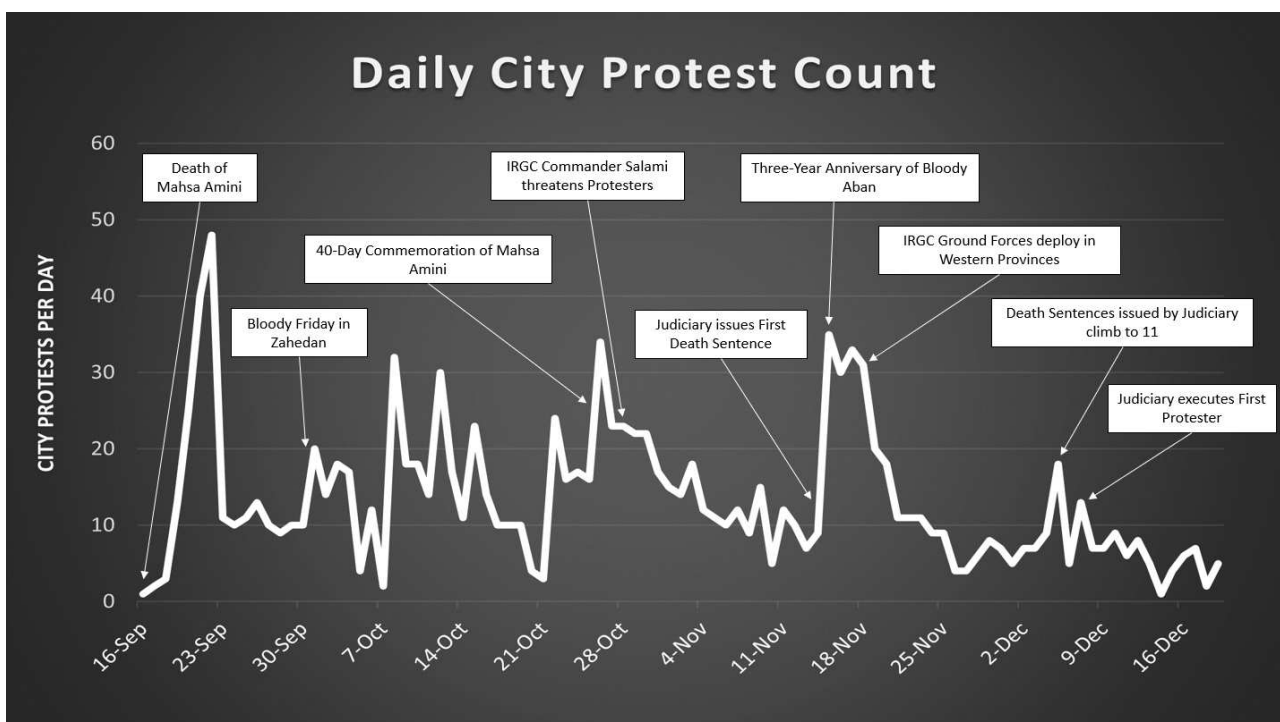
Key Takeaways

- This movement has seen several significant spikes in protest activity around preplanned dates followed by relative lulls in protest activity.
- Protest activity decreased significantly between mid-November and late December following the regime's harsh crackdown but has not yet stopped despite regime brutality and pressure.
- Tehran, Esfahan, Kurdistan, and West Azerbaijan provinces account for nearly 40 percent of observed protest activity.

- Protest activity varies significantly by day of the week and by province.



This movement has seen several significant spikes in protest activity around dates specified by protest organizers followed by relative lulls. Protest coordinators and organizations have shown an impressive ability to generate demonstrations and strikes on preplanned dates throughout this movement.^[ii] October 26—the 40th day since Mahsa Amini died—saw thousands of Iranians take to the streets to commemorate her following calls from numerous protest organizers.^[iii] Protests have continued even during the relative lulls, however. CTP has not recorded a single day with no protests since September 16.

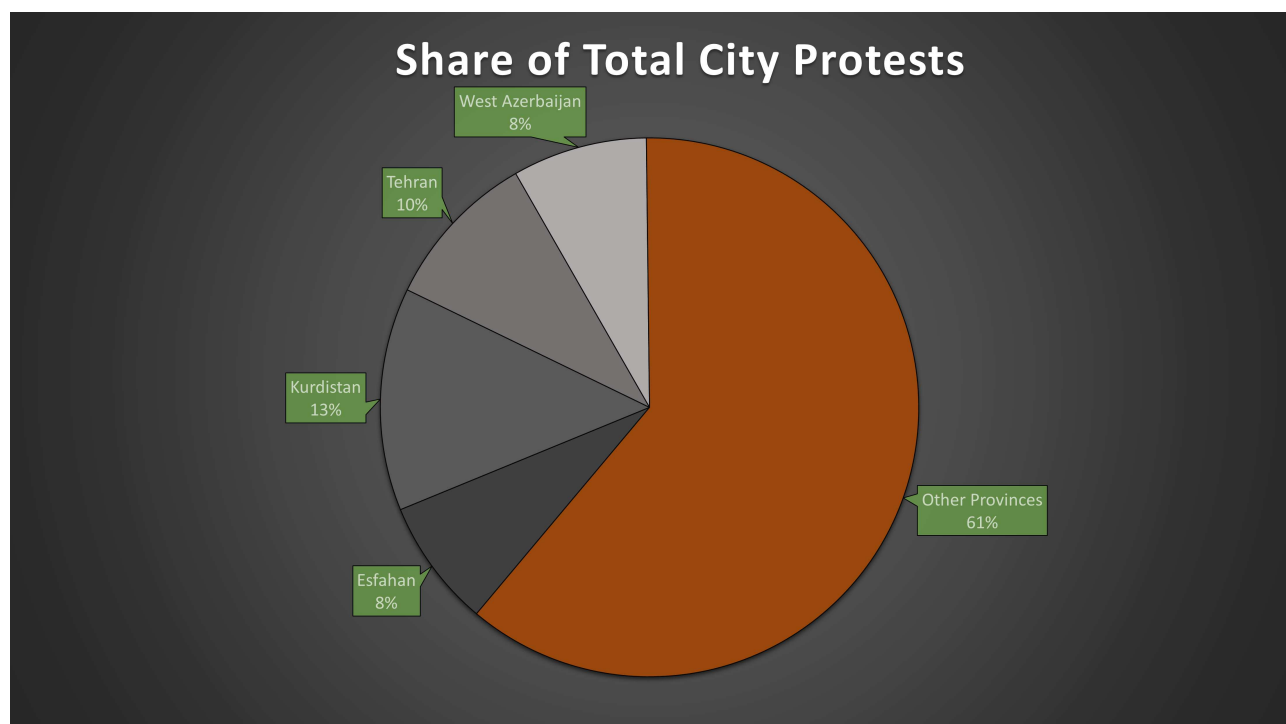


Protest activity has decreased gradually since mid-November. Protest coordinators and organizations have planned countrywide demonstrations on several occasions since then but failed to achieve previous levels of turnout.^[iv] Several factors have likely contributed to this diminishing turnout. The Iranian regime has significantly escalated its protest crackdown since mid-November. The regime issued its first death sentence on November 13 and deployed the IRGC Ground Forces

in Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan provinces beginning on November 19.^[v] These IRGC units likely used extreme levels of force to quash protests. These escalations—combined with the colder weather, executions, mass arrests, and possible disorganization among protest coordinators—have very likely contributed to the declining turnout over the past month.

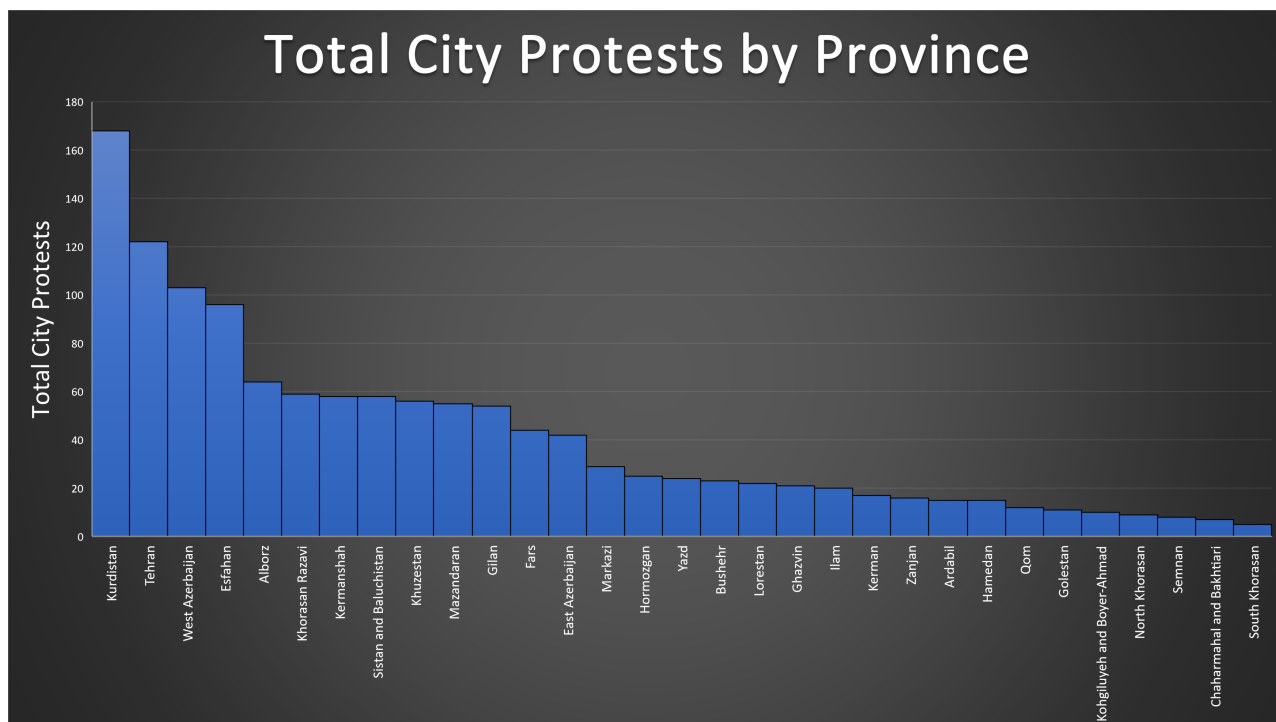
This reduced protest activity does not, however, indicate the end of the anti-regime movement. The regime may have been able to diminish protest activity through its use of intimidation, force, and expanding censorship. But the regime will struggle to sustain this level of oppression indefinitely, especially given the degree to which this crackdown has strained the state security apparatus. Protest coordinators and organizations are contrastingly exploring ways to sustain regular acts of political defiance and have been forming the requisite networks and infrastructure for months.^[vi] Observed protests may thus become a less-useful indicator for understanding the anti-regime movement in the weeks and months ahead.

A significant portion of protests have occurred in cities in four provinces: Tehran, Esfahan, Kurdistan, and West Azerbaijan. These provinces account for almost 40 percent of all locations in our overall protest city count.



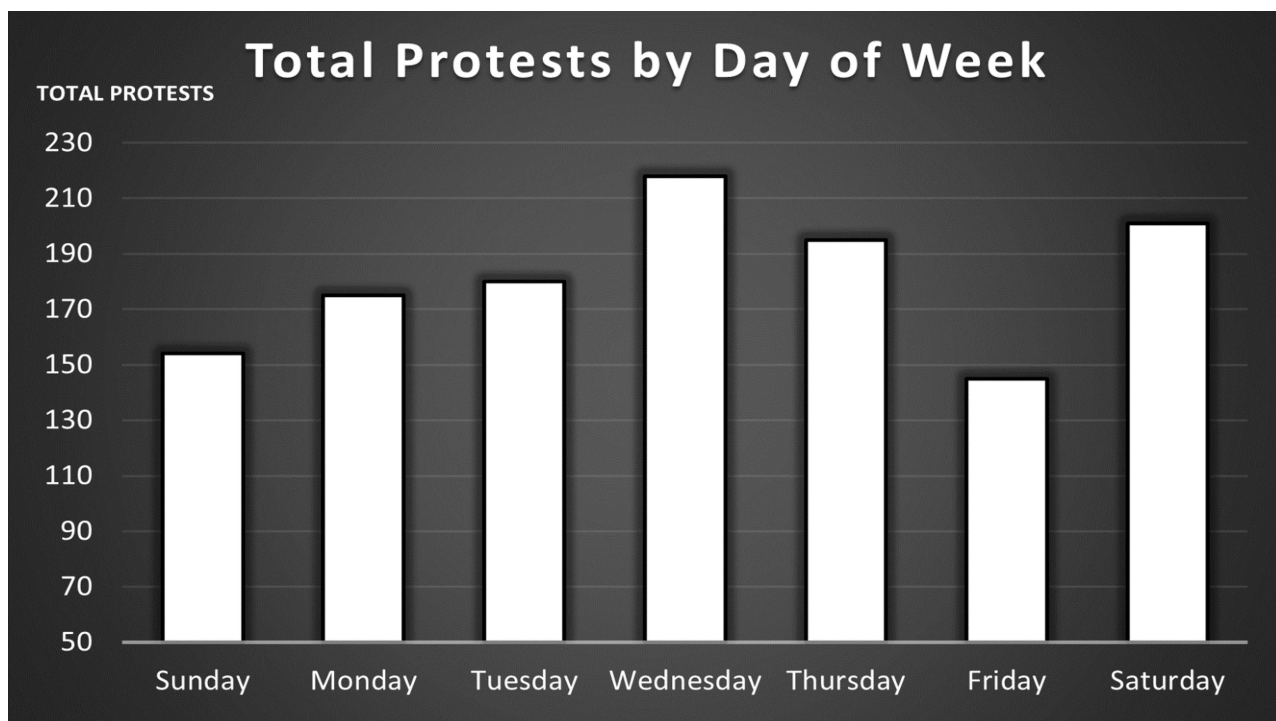
At least two factors are likely contributing to this phenomenon. Tehran and Esfahan are among Iran's most populous provinces and may thus have a greater number of protesters living there.^[vii] This protest movement has resonated particularly among the Iranian Kurdish communities in Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan provinces. Mahsa Amini herself was a Kurd born in Saghez, Kurdistan Province.

The remaining provinces fall roughly into two other tranches. The middle tranche includes other major population centers, such as Khorasan Razavi Province, and border regions, where anti-regime sentiment is high and marginalized ethnic populations are concentrated.



The number of cities protesting varies significantly by day of the week and by province.

Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays generally have the greatest protest turnout across the entire country. Mondays and Fridays generally have the lowest. There are geographic exceptions, however. Sistan and Baluchistan Province, for instance, has more protests on Fridays than any other day of the week. Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid has become an increasingly vocal critic of the regime in recent months and uses his Friday sermons in Zahedan—the provincial capital—to inspire demonstrations throughout the province.^[viii]



CTP will continue to update our assessments and data visualizations as the anti-regime movement in Iran continues to evolve. Follow the daily updates produced by CTP and the Institute for the Study of War for more analysis and information.

[i] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-updates>

[ii] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-october-26;%20https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-october-28>

[iii] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-october-26>

[iv] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-20>

[v] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-13;%20https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-19>

[vi] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-16;%20https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-17>

[vii] <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/census/census-2016>

[viii] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-29>
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December 26, 2022

Iran Crisis Update, December 26

[Nicholas Carl](#), [Kitaneh Fitzpatrick](#), [Dana Alexander Gray](#) and [Frederick W. Kagan](#)

December 26, 5:00 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](#).

Protest coordinators and organizations are encouraging citizens to demonstrate more regularly and spontaneously rather than awaiting planned protests. The United Neighborhood Youth called for decentralized demonstrations and for protesters to “break the cycle of waiting.”^[i] The Karaj Neighborhood Youth published a graphic illustrating the protest activity that preceded

the Iranian revolution in 1979 to argue that the movement must sustain itself through an extended period of spikes and lulls to gradually weaken the regime.[\[ii\]](#)

These protest coordinators and organizations are likely trying to reverse a natural consequence of the growing cohesion within the movement. Many protesters may be increasingly awaiting calls for protests and other guidance rather than acting independently as the movement has developed more obvious leadership. But these protest coordinators and organizations have demonstrated that they cannot consistently generate significant surges in protest activity themselves, possibly due to mistrust toward them among demonstrators and/or the challenges of organizing under the tremendous pressure the regime is exerting against them. The persistence of protests has been a remarkable feature of this movement and has put great strains on the regime and its security forces. If the protesters can resume more decentralized and less predictable activities, they can add to that strain even with small numbers of demonstrators in the streets at a time.

Protest coordinators and organizations are continuing their efforts to stoke a fiscal crisis and disrupt the transportation sector. The Hamedan Neighborhood Youth reiterated its calls for citizens to withdraw their savings to further encourage a run on the banks.[\[iii\]](#) The Iranian rial reached a new record low, selling for around 415,200 to the US dollar, on December 26.[\[iv\]](#) The United Neighborhood Youth 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. The group urged protests and strikes around airports, fire stations, and ports in particular. It remains unclear what net effect the fiscal crisis and strikes will have on the Iranian economy, but the continuation of this protest movement seems likely to generate some level of economic disruption.

Mounting economic issues could drive further protest activity in turn, creating a self-reinforcing cycle. Economic issues have fueled several violent protest waves in Iran in recent years, including the 2017-18 Dey protests and 2019 Aban protests.[\[v\]](#) The Gilan Neighborhood Youth called on protesters to remember the Dey protests, which began on December 28, 2017, and were focused largely on economic hardship and rising prices.[\[vi\]](#) The dollar sold for around 42,010 Iranian rial when the Dey protests began.[\[vii\]](#)

The regime is further shuffling the authorities responsible for internal security in Sistan and Baluchistan Province, likely to improve efforts to stabilize the province. President Ebrahim Raisi and his cabinet approved the appointment of IRGC Brigadier General Mohammad Karami as Sistan and Baluchistan provincial governor on December 25.[\[viii\]](#) Karami has been the commander of the IRGC Ground Forces Quds Operational Headquarters—the military entity that oversees the IRGC conventional units and internal security in Sistan and Baluchistan and Kerman provinces—since February 2020.[\[ix\]](#) Karami will chair the Sistan and Baluchistan Provincial Security Council in his capacity as governor, coordinating and overseeing security affairs in the province. He may hold even more authority and influence if he continues to command the Quds Operational Headquarters as well; IRGC leadership has yet to appoint his replacement. The Law Enforcement Command (LEC) previously installed a new commander for Sistan and Baluchistan Province on November 9 as part of this effort to improve how the regime imposes social control there.[\[x\]](#)

The Khuzestan Neighborhood Youth posted a tweet claiming that the regime escalated against Izeh, Khuzestan Province residents on December 25 and 26. The regime deployed a large number of security forces and completely disrupted local internet services, according to the Khuzestan group.[\[xi\]](#) The Khuzestan group reported the sound of gunfire and claimed that security forces blocked major roads leading into and out of the city.[\[xii\]](#) The Khuzestan group also called for unrest in other locations throughout Khuzestan Province to stretch the bandwidth of security forces and prevent them from concentrating around Izeh. CTP cannot verify any of these rumors. They are plausible, however, given that Iranian authorities likely expected unrest in Izeh on December 26—the 40th day since the Izeh terror attack on November 16.[\[xiii\]](#)

Key Takeaways

- Protest coordinators and organizations are encouraging citizens to demonstrate more regularly and spontaneously rather than awaiting planned protests. These protest coordinators and organizations are likely trying to reverse a natural consequence of the growing cohesion within the movement.
- Protest coordinators and organizations are continuing their efforts to cause a fiscal crisis for the regime and disrupt the transportation sector. Mounting economic issues could drive further protest activity in turn, creating a self-reinforcing cycle.
- The regime is further shuffling the authorities responsible for internal security in Sistan and Baluchistan Province, likely to improve efforts to stabilize the province.
- The Khuzestan Neighborhood Youth posted a tweet claiming that the regime escalated against Izeh, Khuzestan Province residents.
- At least five protests occurred in three cities across three provinces on December 25, and at least seven protests occurred in six cities across five provinces on December 26.
- Elon Musk tweeted that almost 100 Starlink devices are currently operating in Iran.

Anti-Regime Protests

At least five protests occurred in three cities across three provinces on December 25. The Iranian Meteorological Organization issued winter-storm warnings for several central and southern provinces from December 26-28, which may depress turnout during this period.[\[xiv\]](#) CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations on December 25:

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.

Chersaneh, Kurdistan Province[\[xv\]](#)

- Size: Medium
- Demographic: Mourners
- Notes: Barhan Karmi's 40-day commemoration ceremony

Boukan, West Azerbaijan Province[\[xvi\]](#)

- Size: Medium
- Regime Repression: Security forces shot at protesters
- Notes: Protest began at a cemetery, 40-day commemoration ceremonies for multiple killed protesters. Protests then resumed on Boukan city streets. Both protests at the cemetery and on the city streets occurred during daylight hours.

Boukan, West Azerbaijan Province[\[xvii\]](#)

- Size: Undetermined
- Demographic: High school students

CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations on December 25:

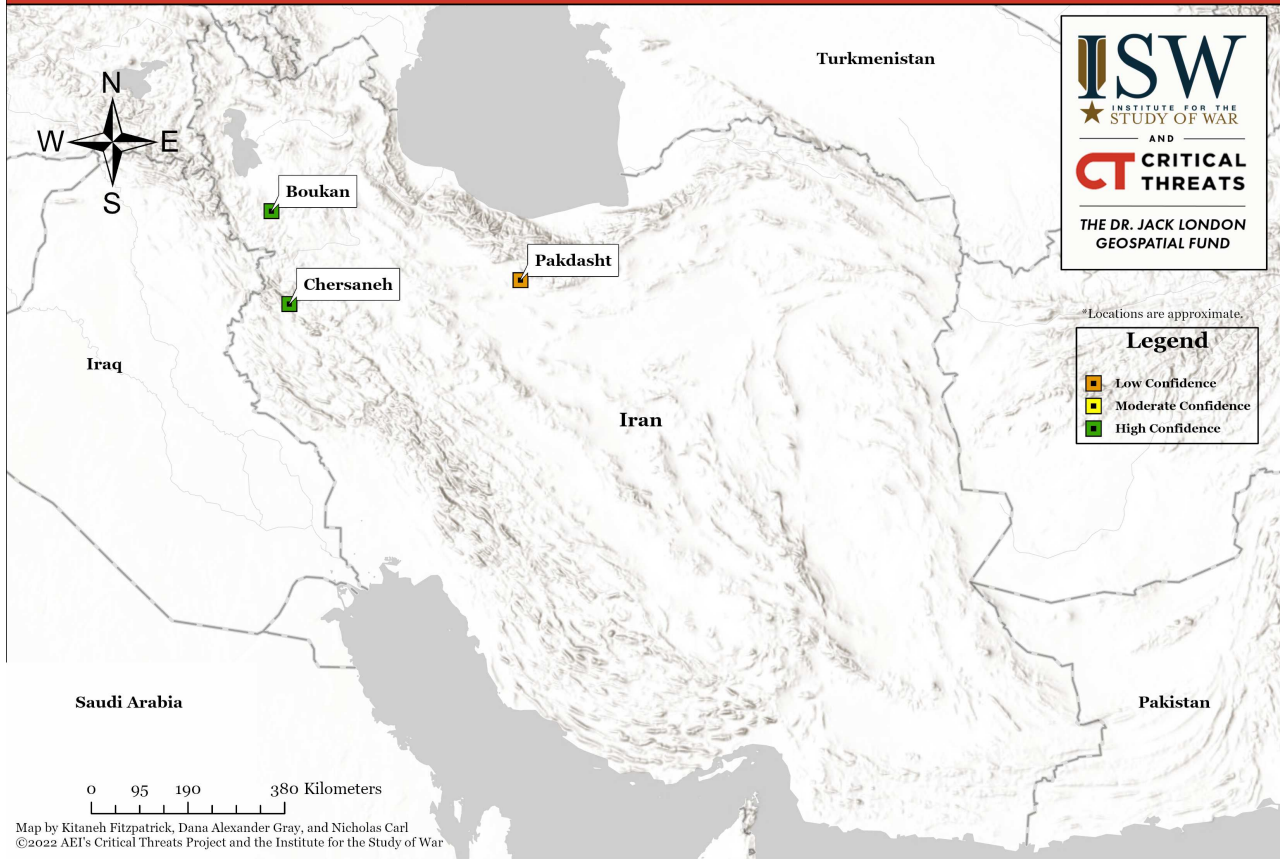
Pakdasht, Tehran Province[\[xviii\]](#)

- Size: Medium
- Demographic: Industrial workers
- Notes: Protest and strike

Boukan, West Azerbaijan Province[\[xix\]](#)

- Size: Undetermined
- Protester Activity: Fires lit in street
- Notes: Footage captures fires lit at a later time of the day than other documented protests in Boukan on December 25

Protest Activity in Iran on December 25



At least seven protests occurred in six cities across five provinces on December 26. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Dashti, Hormozgan Province[xx]

- Size: Small to medium
- Protester Activity: Fires lit in street
- Notes: Following 40-day commemoration ceremony of killed protester Hamed Melai, evening

Dashti, Hormozgan Province[xxi]

- Size: Small
- Demographic: Mourners
- Notes: 40-day commemoration ceremony of killed protester Hamed Melai, daytime

Izeh, Khuzestan Province[xxii]

- Size: Medium
- Demographic: Mourners
- Notes: 40-day commemoration ceremony of nine-year-old killed protester Kian Pirfalak

Saghez, Kurdistan Province[xxiii]

- Size: Small to medium
- Demographic: Mourners
- Notes: 40-day commemoration ceremony of seventeen-year-old killed protester Daniel Pabandi

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province[xxiv]

- Size: Small to medium
- Demographic: Mourners
- Notes: 40-day commemoration ceremony of killed protester Aram Habibi

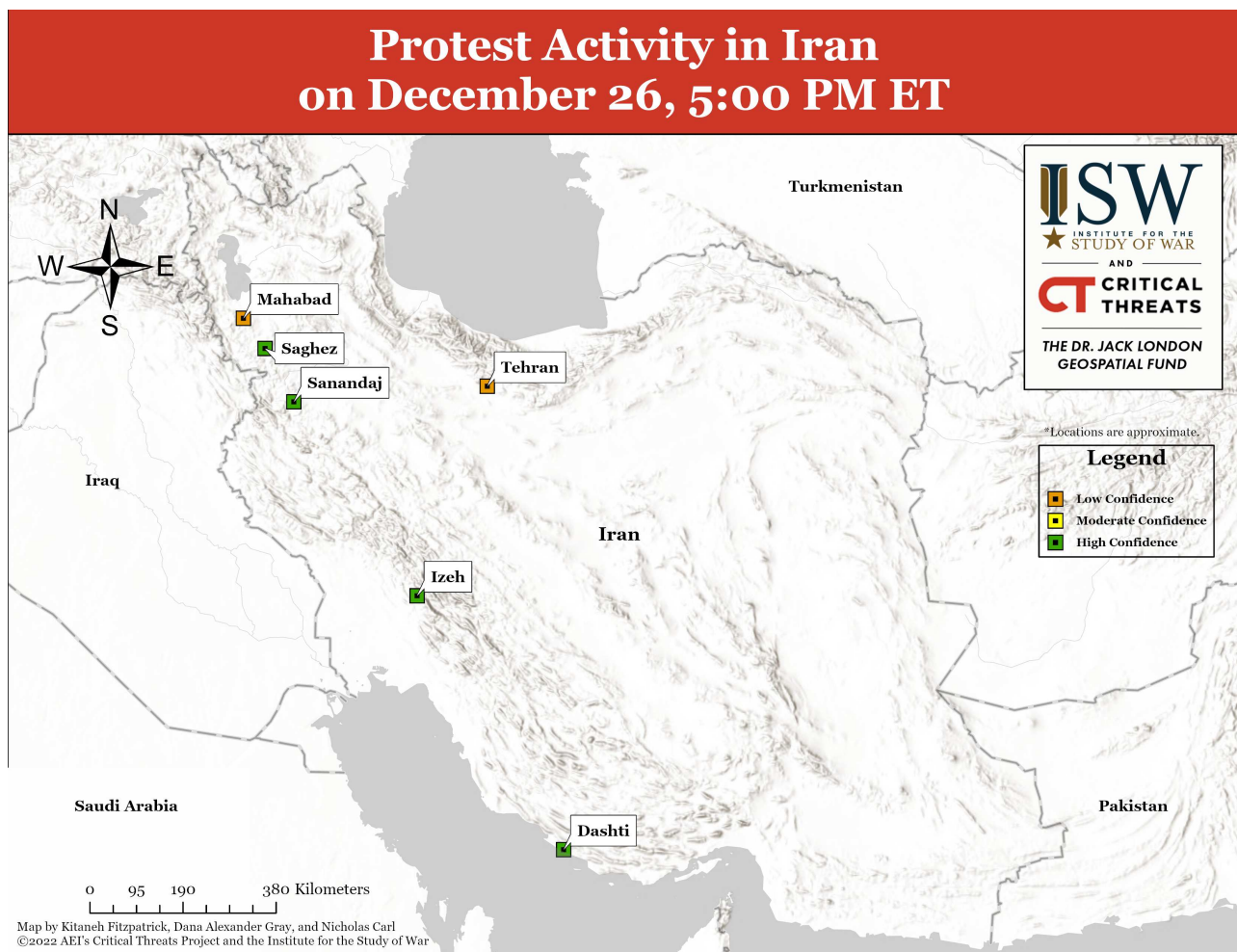
CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations on December 26:

Tehran City, Tehran Province[xxv]

- Size: Undetermined
- Notes: Gathered in front of the Roads and Urban Development Ministry to protest land dispute

Mahabad, West Azerbaijan Province[xxvi]

- Size: Undetermined
- Protester Activity: Fires lit in street



The Tehran Revolutionary Court sentenced arrested protester Mahsa Peyravi to 10 years in prison for failing to adhere to mandatory veiling laws on December 23.[xxvii] The court charged Peyravi with “promoting corruption and prostitution” for allegedly waving her headscarf during a protest in Tehran.

Elon Musk tweeted on December 26 that almost 100 Starlink devices are currently operating in Iran.[\[xxviii\]](#) The Wall Street Journal previously estimated on December 22 that smugglers have imported around 200 Starlink devices into Iran.[\[xxix\]](#) The proliferation of these terminals inside Iran allows citizens to better communicate with one another and document the brutal protest crackdown, despite the expanding regime censorship and internet disruptions.

Iranian authorities ordered a Mahan Air flight transporting the wife and daughter of Ali Daei from Tehran to Dubai to divert to Kish Island so that they could be taken for questioning on December 26.[\[xxx\]](#) Mahan Air is tied to IRGC and historically supported regime efforts to send arms and personnel to Syria. Iranian media reported that the regime banned Daei's wife from leaving the country over her alleged ties to anti-regime groups.[\[xxxi\]](#) It is unclear why she was allowed on the flight to begin with if she had been banned from traveling or why the regime decided to take the drastic step of diverting a flight to question her. Daei has publicly supported the protests in recent weeks.[\[xxxii\]](#)

A paint factory exploded and caught on fire, wounding at least 65 individuals, near Azar Shahr, East Azerbaijan Province on December 26.[\[xxxiii\]](#) Local officials claimed that a gas leak caused the explosion and fire.

The mother of Mohammad Ghobadlou—an arrested protester on death row—released a video statement calling for support to oppose his execution.[\[xxxiv\]](#) The parents of another arrested protester, Mohammad Mehi Karami, previously released a video on December 18 calling on the judiciary to lift his death sentence, as CTP previously reported.[\[xxxv\]](#)

Axis of Resistance and Regional Developments

There was nothing significant to report today.

[\[i\] https://twitter.com/UYI_fa/status/1607404781030748161?s=20&t=b7qH3IP9sevtAShnhvjCqA](#)

[\[ii\] https://twitter.com/javanane_k/status/1606860148601155584?s=20&t=Hz2Ih6MI1pL9a91N8k3rVw](#)

[\[iii\] https://twitter.com/javanane_hmd/status/1607062081420857345?s=20&t=WLBNIHICuz3xeVwS0S0fw](#)

[\[iv\] www.bonbast dot com/historical/usd/2022/12](#)

[\[v\] https://www.criticalthreats.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Whatever-it-takes-to-end-it.pdf](#)

[\[vi\] https://twitter.com/Javanan_gilan/status/1607008950712684547?s=20&t=g-3H4ru_4uIitwVqNYGrqA](#)

[\[vii\] www.bonbast dot com/historical/usd/2017/12](#)

[\[viii\] https://president dot ir/fa/141586](#)

[\[ix\] www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1398/12/04/2209360; https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Irans-Reserve-of-Last-Resort.pdf](#)

[\[x\] https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-9](#)

[\[xi\] https://twitter.com/javanan_Kh/status/1607172510117957633](#)

[\[xii\] https://twitter.com/javanan_Kh/status/1607292040001339394?s=20&t=twXsLF_feyWxqxlG1CtQxw](#)

[\[xiii\] https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-16](#)

[xiv] <https://isna dot ir/xdN2qh>

[xv] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607065170710347777?s=20&t=0RXHo5dmXBrYxa8x0ylERg> ;
<https://twitter.com/FSeifikaran/status/1606983044841226242?s=20&t=g-Ch8OVcvOAusYIeN3BD4A> ; https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1607034146454396928?s=20&t=nJwXS8Tanz0HpO7cIIVRgw

[xvi] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607010872630583297?s=20&t=0RXHo5dmXBrYxa8x0ylERg> ;
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[xviii] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607050797334036481?s=20&t=qsft2g6UQFIIZChGOKzY5A>

[xix] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607080383345991680?s=20&t=0RXHo5dmXBrYxa8x0ylERg>

[xx] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607412325354725376?s=20&t=l7Pbah8QnVoYcGhrslnzbg> ;
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[xxi] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607410243096412160?s=20&t=0RXHo5dmXBrYxa8x0ylERg> ;
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[xxii] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607408292665360386?s=20&t=0RXHo5dmXBrYxa8x0ylERg> ;
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[xxiii] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607356601341444096?s=20&t=WJ3F8dOCKU6AwfcDTpyu-Q> ;
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<https://twitter.com/kayvanrassooli/status/1607384470977662978?s=20&t=eaUhunK4C1TLmnWTDValig>

[xxiv] <https://twitter.com/HengawO/status/1607340501451120643?s=20&t=0RXHo5dmXBrYxa8x0ylERg> ;
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<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607359800178020352?s=20&t=0RXHo5dmXBrYxa8x0ylERg> ;
https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1607359342910795777?s=20&t=o4KsDlS_nkbI8pp-S370RQ

[xxv] https://twitter.com/ManotoNews/status/1607360908615094272?s=20&t=3Vx2vvLo0ZIKmdfOfE_JyA

[xxvi] <https://twitter.com/Javanmardi75/status/1607429464832475136?s=20&t=9EvWwkh9-nMUiYGRCKMRIw>

[xxvii] https://twitter.com/Limportant_fr/status/1606353284666601472?s=20&t=hLvRVATcbCHLsEE09r6WYw; <https://www.hra-news.org/2022/hranews/a-38637/>

[xxviii] <https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1607435700877815808>

[xxix] <https://www.wsj.com/articles/irans-online-crackdown-prompts-smuggling-of-starlink-kits-11671714080>

[xxx] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-64097382>

[xxxi] <https://isna.ir/xdN2t5>; <https://isna.ir/xdN2sw>

[xxxii] <https://www.dw.com/en/iran-blocks-football-stars-family-from-leaving/a-64215407>

[xxxiii] <https://www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1401/10/05/2827252>

[xxxiv] <https://twitter.com/ksadjadpour/status/1607186499875004416>

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