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Why the Iran Protests Have Russia on Edge (Op-ed)

For the Kremlin, instability in Iran carries a widening range of existential threats

By Vladimir Frolov

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Francois Lenoir / Reuters

The trajectory of protests that have engulfed Iran since late December is still unclear. While these mass demonstrations appear different from those in 2009 over a stolen presidential election, who knows where they will lead?

They may be suppressed by authorities, which, after at least 20 confirmed deaths, seems likely. They may degenerate into a bloody rebellion and a Syria-style civil war, or they could end in the toppling of the ayatollahs' repressive regime.

One thing is certain though — all major geopolitical players are watching developments closely.

An overhaul in Iran would impact the politics of the Middle East, the wars in Syria and Yemen, oil markets and relations between Russia and the United States. Tough words are already flying between Moscow and Washington over charges of foreign interference in Iran's domestic troubles, with Russia accusing the United States of fostering "regime change."

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For Russia, instability in Iran, an important neighbor and regional ally, carries all sorts of risks.

Given that protesters demand a halt to Iran's spending on foreign adventures in the region, Moscow might start to worry about its own nation-building project in Syria. Moscow brags about its military victory there but neglects to mention that it was Iranian "boots on the ground" that made victory possible.

Without tens of thousands of Iranian backed fighters, the Syrian Army could not be counted on taking or holding ground. Iran buys the loyalty of these forces and were the payments reduced or stopped, Moscow would have to pick up the tab or deploy more Russian ground troops to Syria, which would be risky and politically embarrassing.

What's more, the upheaval in Iran undermines Russia's global narrative that only stable autocratic regimes can bring stability and prosperity to the Middle East, while Western efforts at fostering political change — culturally alien to the region — are recipes for instability and war.

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For Russia, armed rebellions and popular uprisings exist only as instruments of Western subversion. Russia went to war in Syria under this very banner, under the pretext of fighting terrorism, to put down a popular revolt against Moscow's geopolitical ally — Bashar Assad's regime, and, as Defense Minister Shoigu put it bluntly, "to draw a line under U.S. sponsored color revolutions."

The Iran protests upend this narrative. Iran is a stable and tough autocracy. It is largely isolated from the West and — as Russia would say — its corrupt influences.

In Iran, people took to the streets because of the faltering economy and its skewed structure that gives most of the spoils to the clerics and their cronies, as well as to senior leaders within the security services.

The burden of sanctions has been disproportionately borne by the people, whose incomes plummeted or stagnated. Meanwhile, regime cronies were profiting from sanctions arbitrage while trying to deflect people's discontent towards foreign enemies.

This has unnerving parallels with Russia today, where the costs of Western sanctions and

Russian counter-sanctions are also largely borne by the people, while those close to the Kremlin are winning government contracts and special tax regimes to compensate for their losses in the West.

This glaring injustice is unsustainable in terms of social stability unless efforts are made to get the sanctions lifted.

Moreover, Moscow should be worried about Iranian instability spreading to neighboring Azerbaijan where another corrupt and autocratic regime faces presidential elections next fall. An uprising in Iran and in Azerbaijan would strain Russia's security efforts to a degree unseen before.

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Russia's military doctrine views these kinds of domestic disturbances in Russia's neighborhood as foreign military threats that need to be countered through military means.

Would Moscow be tempted to intervene militarily as it did in Syria to save their allied regimes and block the revolution from spreading further north or east? This would be a hard call and a nightmarish scenario as both contingencies make the Syria war look like a "cakewalk."

This explains why Moscow is flustered by U.S. President Donald Trump's tweets and White House statements in support of the protesters with calls for ending the regime's oppression.

What Russia sees in them is a confirmation that "regime change" and "democracy promotion" remain viable tools of U.S. foreign policy. This fuels Russia's growing disenchantment with the Trump administration.

Moscow was heartened when Trump declared in his inaugural address that America does not seek "to impose our way of life on anyone." Now, Trump is sounding decisively Clintonesque in statements that border on incitement.

For Russian leaders, this adds to the uncertainty and unpredictability that Trump generates with his every international move. Moscow can never be sure where Trump will direct his anger next. Any nation that crosses him may wind up part of the next axis of evil.

This is why Moscow would harp at Washington at the margins, but stop short of challenging core U.S. interests, all the while saying only nice things about Trump personally.

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