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Why Iran's crisis is Russia's problem

For Russia, what happens in Iran is no longer a peripheral concern. It is directly tied to Europe's power balance and the course of the war in Ukraine

Iran's ongoing political unrest is no longer just a domestic crisis. It is becoming a strategic problem for Moscow, directly affecting Russia's energy position, its ability to manage sanctions pressure and, ultimately, its capacity to finance a prolonged war in Ukraine.

For Russia, Iran has long functioned as a sanctioned but stable partner, politically isolated, strategically aligned and economically constrained in ways that limited Tehran's ability to pivot towards the West. That stability is now in question. Prolonged unrest threatens to turn a useful partner into a source of uncertainty at a moment when the Kremlin can least afford it.

A period of prolonged uncertainty

The protests, which began in late December, have continued despite severe repression. Human rights organisations and independent monitoring groups estimate that more than 5 000 people have been killed and tens of thousands detained. Internet access, satellite connections and even basic telephone services were repeatedly shut down for days at a time. Inside Iran, there is widespread belief that Russian technical and security assistance helped enable these nationwide communication blackouts, drawing on Moscow's own experience with digital control, repression and surveillance.

Whether every element of this assistance can be independently verified matters less than its political effect. Protesters who oppose the Islamic Republic's political system increasingly view Russia as an enabler of repression and a long-standing partner of the regime. This links Moscow directly to a deeply unpopular political order and raises the stakes of any future change in Tehran for Russian interests.

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rooted in inflation, currency collapse and declining living standards, has rapidly taken on a political character. Over the past decade, repeated waves of protest have transformed Iranian society into a movement-oriented one in which protest is no longer exceptional but increasingly expected. Today, most political groups and protest movements believe that meaningful change requires structural transformation, either through fundamental reform or a reconfiguration of power that makes genuine economic and political reform possible.

External pressure has sharpened this dynamic. Donald Trump's return to the White House brought renewed sanctions and ended any remaining hope of near-term diplomatic relief. At the same time, Iran's regional position weakened. The twelve-day war with Israel, including the killing of senior commanders, marked a turning point. Combined with the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's rule in Syria and the arrest of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, these developments pushed Iran's political system into a period of heightened tension and structural fragility.

The result is not imminent collapse, but prolonged uncertainty. If the US refrains from direct military action and no major external shock intervenes, Iran is likely to enter a period of internal adjustment and elite tension. That uncertainty is precisely what alarms Moscow.

Loss of leverage

Since the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has relied on Iran as part of its sanctions-era survival strategy. The relationship has been pragmatic rather than ideological, built on military cooperation, diplomatic alignment and coordination under Western pressure. Iran mattered to Moscow precisely because it was predictable — a partner with few alternatives and a willingness to cooperate politically, economically and on security. That leverage will erode once Iran is no longer cut off from the world.

From the Kremlin's perspective, almost every plausible future political trajectory in Iran is problematic. A sudden leadership change or systemic transformation would likely push Tehran, over time, toward repairing relations with Europe and re-entering global markets. Even a controlled survival of the current system would probably empower more pragmatic actors focused on economic stabilisation rather than geopolitical confrontation. In both scenarios, Russia loses leverage.

The energy implications are central. Iran holds some of the world's largest oil and gas reserves, but sanctions and isolation have kept much of that potential offline. This has indirectly benefited Russia by limiting competition in already tight global markets, particularly since the war in Ukraine has reshaped Europe's energy flows.

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If a future Iranian leadership opens the door, even gradually, to Western and European energy companies, regional supply dynamics would shift. Increased Iranian exports would push prices down and reduce Russia's ability to use energy scarcity as leverage over Europe. For Moscow, this is not just about market share. It is about control.

Russia's war financing depends heavily on energy revenues. Any development that increases supply, reduces prices or diversifies Europe's long-term energy options directly undermines the Kremlin's fiscal base. A reintegrated Iran would do all three.

Even short of full reintegration, a less isolated Iran would complicate Russia's informal sanctions-evasion networks and reduce the value of Tehran as a strategic economic partner.

There is another structural problem for Moscow. Russia's closest relationships in Iran are not with civil society or economic technocrats, but with security institutions and hardline political networks, many linked to the Revolutionary Guard or the Supreme Leader's office. These are precisely the actors most directly challenged by the current unrest. If their influence weakens through political reform, elite reshuffling or generational change, Russia's access and leverage will weaken with them. And Moscow has few meaningful ties to the social or political forces likely to shape Iran's future.

This is why reports and rumours of Russian assistance in surveillance, internet shutdowns and crowd control matter strategically. They may help preserve short-term stability, but they deepen long-term hostility. Repression may buy time, but it does not buy loyalty.

Unlike the situation in Venezuela in early 2026, where the United States' detention of President Nicolás Maduro highlighted the limits of Russian leverage, Moscow has taken care not to abandon Tehran amid the ongoing crisis. On 15 January 2026, during an emergency United Nations Security Council meeting convened at the request of the United States to discuss Iran's deadly protests and 'possible military strikes', the

Russian delegation firmly rejected what it described as foreign interference in Iran's internal affairs and criticised the US for using the situation for political ends.

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For Europe, the implications are significant. Iran's unrest intersects with debates over sanctions, energy security and the sustainability of Russia's war economy. From a European perspective, political change in Iran would ease pressure on energy markets and further constrain Russia's war economy. This helps explain why Moscow has intensified its intelligence, security and informational support for the Islamic Republic in recent weeks, from assistance in repression and surveillance to full backing in propaganda and information warfare, including in international forums.

Iran's protests are often framed as a test of the Islamic Republic's political system. They are also a test of Russia's assumptions about how much control sanctioned partnerships can really provide. They directly affect Russia's energy calculations, its capacity to sustain war financing, and its ability to withstand Western pressure. Iran's unrest, therefore, reveals a vulnerability in Moscow's broader strategic posture that Russia is unlikely to contain or manage easily.

If Iran's political trajectory shifts in the coming months or years, the outcome is unlikely to favour Moscow. Such a shift would weaken Russia's position not only in the Middle East but also in the context of the war in Ukraine, by undermining one of its few remaining strategic partnerships formed under sanctions and isolation. This is also why Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has publicly urged the international community to support Iranian protesters and political change in Iran.

For Russia, what happens in Iran is no longer a peripheral concern. It is directly tied to the future balance of power in Europe and the trajectory of the war in Ukraine.



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