

Iran on the brink of revolution and war

Krzysztof Strachota

Since 28 December 2025, Iran has witnessed nationwide, violent protests driven by social and political grievances. The unrest intensified on 8 January, when large-scale demonstrations were held in Tehran and other major cities, including Mashhad and Isfahan. On the same day, the regime cut internet access and imposed a nationwide communications blackout. So far, around 45 people have been killed during the protests, more than 2,000 individuals have been arrested, and approximately 1,000 law enforcement personnel have been injured. At this stage, anti-regime slogans are dominating the protests, with some demonstrators calling for the restoration of the monarchy.

The domestic crisis has coincided with a sharp escalation of pressure from Israel and the United States. A meeting between US President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on 28 December was marked by explicit threats of military action against Iran, amid accusations that it has been rapidly expanding its missile arsenal, posing a direct threat to Israel's security. On 2 January, Trump warned of potential intervention should the Iranian regime move to violently suppress the protests – a threat he reiterated on 8 January. Israel has consistently and openly called for the overthrow of the regime, backing Reza Pahlavi, the son of the last Shah and a claimant to the Iranian throne.

Although the ongoing demonstrations have not yet reached the scale of those seen in 2022, they pose a very serious threat to the stability and survival of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The risk of direct US-Israeli attacks against Iran, and retaliatory action by Tehran, remains extremely high.

Commentary

- **Iran's political and social situation has remained tense for years. It has deteriorated further following the Twelve-Day War in June 2025**, when Israel and the United States launched strikes against Iran. For decades, the country's economy has operated under international sanctions, which were tightened by the United Nations last September in response to Iran's violations of nuclear agreements. It has also suffered from opaque and corrupt power networks, as well as a persistent prioritisation of broad national security concerns. In 2025, official inflation reached 42%, and the rial lost approximately 75% of its value against the US dollar. Both society and the economy are grappling with severe shortages of electricity (blackouts) and water, resulting from a prolonged drought, degraded infrastructure, and mismanagement. Under current political conditions, both domestic and international, there is no prospect of any significant improvement.

- **The current wave of protests was sparked by growing discontent over the dire economic situation** – specifically, a strike at Tehran’s central bazaar in response to the catastrophic state of local businesses, which have traditionally supported the government. As the economic environment continues to deteriorate, public frustration is mounting, fuelling demands for a radical liberalisation of the system – in effect, its dismantling – and greater openness towards the West. This underlying tension has been the root cause of recurring and intensifying protests over the past decades, which have been suppressed with increasing brutality: more than 550 people were killed in 2022 alone. In the absence of a legal opposition, this role has been assumed by reformist circles within the elite and exiled opposition groups, including monarchists linked to the Pahlavi family and radicals from the People’s Mojahedin Organisation of Iran (MEK/MKO). Both exile movements have wielded limited influence inside the country. The MEK, which has Marxist roots, carried out a brutal terrorist campaign in the 1980s and fought alongside Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. Against this backdrop, the heir to the throne remains an outsider; the prospect of his return under the protection of foreign forces evokes memories of the US-orchestrated 1953 Iranian coup d’état, which reinstated the last Shah (see: *‘Iran in crisis: the landscape after the Twelve-Day War’*).
- **There is a serious risk that the crisis could escalate rapidly, leading to paralysis and, in an extreme scenario, even state collapse.** The current protests differ significantly from previous waves of unrest, including those in 2022 and 2009. Demonstrations – including poorly documented, one-off and small-scale incidents – have erupted in around 400 locations across the country; initially, the strongest protest activity, marked by an explicitly political and monarchist tone, was concentrated in provincial towns and cities, particularly in the Kurdish province of Ilam. Large-scale, violent protests involving tens of thousands of people (rather than hundreds of thousands as seen in 2022) took place in Tehran and other major cities only on 8 January. In the early days of the unrest, the government’s response was relatively effective, combining restrained rhetoric, measures to isolate politically charged demonstrations, and warnings of the alleged threat of foreign intervention. However, these efforts failed to prevent further escalation. Given the current trajectory, a sharp intensification of repression appears likely.
- **The crisis within Iran has sharply escalated regional tensions.** Both Israel and the United States have openly threatened to launch military action against the Islamic Republic, citing its expanding missile arsenal aimed at Israel and the regime’s violent crackdown on protesters. Eliminating Iran’s military capabilities – both its nuclear and missile programmes – and effecting regime change were explicit objectives of past Israeli attacks against the country, including the Twelve-Day War, in which the United States also took part. That conflict left Iran significantly weakened; however, Israel failed to achieve its core objectives.
- **The risk of direct military strikes by Israel and the United States should be considered high.** Israel is likely helping to organise the ongoing protests, particularly those that are overtly political. Last June, it conducted an extensive hybrid campaign that included sabotage operations, targeted assassinations of key figures, and disinformation efforts. The current unrest presents it with an opportunity to advance its long-standing strategic objectives. At the same time, the threat of full-scale Iranian retaliatory strikes against

Israel and US bases and interests is growing. Iran can still leverage its substantial missile arsenal, a regional network of armed and terrorist proxy forces, and its capacity to disrupt maritime traffic in the Persian Gulf.