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## Is a new Iranian revolution brewing?

By Rami G. Khouri

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The ongoing street protests and other political events in Iran have generated massive amounts of speculation in the Middle East and abroad about the real nature and significance of what is taking place. Learned scholars, experienced diplomats, and others with little knowledge of Iran or the region have made their views known, usually on the basis of assumptions rather than clear facts reflecting access to Iranians who are driving the events on the ground. Never mind, historic developments are large political barns, accommodating a wide range of beasts.

What is happening in Iran today is profoundly important, if still imprecise in its outcome. This is uncharted territory to a great extent in the context of Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution that overthrew Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. It is perfectly routine behavior, though, in the wider context of human beings who do not like being treated like idiots by their own government, and will resist that when it takes place. Over and over, in lands around the world, human beings who are grossly mistreated by their own government eventually stand up and refuse to take it any more.

The phenomenon of hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets in defiance of their government's orders has occurred in many places in recent decades, like Iran, the Philippines, Indonesia, Ukraine and other lands where dictators were forced to leave office by popular demand. The latest manifestation of this in Iran is linked to the widely contested results of the presidential election. But that is incidental, just the trigger that shoots us into a wider world of political action. Everyone knows that the Iranian president is not the seat of power, and whoever wins the election for president is of little real consequence in Iran's controlled system.

The protests are not primarily about the election results per se, but rather about the indignities that ordinary men and women feel at the hands of their own government. The Iranians who are protesting are mostly younger people who were born after the 1979 revolution, so they do not

always share the reverence for the revolutionary elite that continues to dominate the centers of power in the country.

Younger Iranians are the latest generation of Middle Easterners who are demanding that they be treated as citizens who have rights and as human beings with a sense of dignity. They do not particularly care what the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, says, and so they will likely keep protesting what they believe was government heavy-handedness in announcing the results of the presidential election in a manner that treated them like simpletons and chattel. They were made to feel that they participated in a farce, and normal human beings generally do not like to be humiliated like that.

The levers of economic, military, ideological, bureaucratic, and police power are very tightly controlled by the existing elite in Iran, which makes the protests all the more remarkable. The potential for significant ramifications in Iran and the wider Middle East is great, given the role that Iran plays throughout the region. Of the two most significant events that impacted on the entire Middle East in the last two generations - the Arab loss in the June 1967 war and the Iranian revolution - the latter has probably had wider and greater impact in the long run. Iran impacts on many parts of the region, because of its ideological influence and logistical support to Islamist movements in the Arab world, combined with its leadership of the "resistance front" of regional forces that defy and challenge the United States, Israel and conservative Arab regimes.

If Iran once again sets the standard for mass political protest or even revolutionary change, the impact throughout the Middle East is likely to be enormous. Arabs will not feel comfortable seeing the Iranian people twice in 30 years fearlessly challenging their own autocratic regimes, while the people of the Arab world meekly acquiesce in equally non-democratic and top-heavy political systems that treat their own people as unthinking fools who can be perpetually abused with sham elections and other forms of abuse of power.

The particulars of the Iranian situation these days are specific to Iran's political culture, where a secretive ruling elite seems to suffer serious ideological rifts, and a major generation gap is also coming into play. The spontaneous mass defiance of the ruling power structure, though, is not Iran-specific. If this turns out to be a serious challenge to the very legitimacy of the Islamic Republic's system of government, rather than a narrow protest about the presidential election, we should not be surprised to see the Iranian precedent spilling over into other, Arab, parts of the Middle East, in a way that the 1979 revolution did not.