

# What Will Stop the Islamic Republic of Iran



AN THE Islamic Republic of Iran—the radical theocratic regime, that is, as opposed to the nation it tyrannizes—fall by the year 2030? That would be a moonshot for the Jewish people, though it would take a bold gambler to answer yes. Let's think through the possibilities.

The supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, is 82 and has battled cancer. It's possible to imagine scenarios after his death where contending factions divide the ruling clergy and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, leading to regime collapse. It's also possible to imagine outside powers convulsing the theocracy—foreigners have often changed the course of Iranian history—leading to massive demonstrations and a successful insurrection. The two could even intertwine. Neither seems very likely, however, although the second scenario is more conceivable.

Khamenei may well be weakening the ruling elite by demanding too much personal loyalty from those who want to be in his inner circle. When diehard, accomplished revolutionaries such as former president Hassan Rouhani or former speaker of parliament Ali Larijani are treated shabbily and cast out, it becomes clear that Khamenei doesn't practice what he preaches about a big revolutionary tent encompassing diverse opinions. His decision to select (not elect) the current president, Ibrahim Raisi—Khamenei's "mini-me," ruthless but without the supreme leader's curiosity and intellectual depth—was surely dictated in part by Khamenei's desire to close ranks in preparation for his passing. The senior political clerics once angry about the *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the jurisconsult), Ruhollah Khomeini's innovation that allows one cleric to rule above others, probably don't have much influence: Khamenei has been purging the clergy since succeeding Khomeini in 1989. Ditto the Islamic Revolutionary Guards. Those who wield real power today are the supreme leader's men. They will most likely back the dispensation that Khamenei leaves them, including his selected successor.



A crucial point that optimistic outsiders need to appreciate: Future Western sanctions are unlikely to crack the regime. Donald Trump gave it his best shot. His unilateral measures, even more punishing than the Euro-American sanctions unleashed during the first term of Barack Obama's presidency, damaged the Iranian economy, depleting the regime's hard-currency reserve and further debasing the rial. The nationwide demonstrations that struck the country in 2019, in which protests sparked by a reduction in fuel subsidies accelerated into deadly clashes with security forces, were what many advocates of sanctions policy had longed to see: regime-threatening internal unrest. Even better, the protestors blamed the theocracy, not Trump and America, for their problems. But the regime hit back hard. Security forces remained loyal, killing their own countrymen with gusto.

Hundreds died within days. Thousands were arrested and tortured.

And Khamenei became noticeably cockier and more dismissive of dissent. The supreme leader had been confused and hesitant, even a bit remorseful, after he crushed the pro-democracy Green Movement back in 2009. Protestors had hit the streets, millions strong, after an obviously rigged presidential election. This time, however, the Revolutionary Guards applied the lessons learned a decade ago: They and their underlings (the well-organized, decently paid, and reliably vicious street thugs in the Basij) killed quickly. The most intense nationwide protests against theocracy since the Islamic Revolution collapsed.

Regardless of what happens with Joe Biden's efforts to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Barack Obama's nuclear deal, the president isn't likely to embrace sanctions the way his predecessor did. They are too provocative and require increasing intestinal fortitude as the Iranian regime draws ever closer to having sufficient highly enriched uranium for a bomb. Barring an incredibly stupid terrorist action (and Khamenei is capable of letting hubris get the better of him), it's inconceivable that Biden, who has been more intense and probably more sincere in his "forever wars" rhetoric than Trump ever was, would commence another conflict to stop the clerical regime's nuclear ambitions. Fear of the Iranian bomb is much more likely to cause the White House to fold and to promise significant sanctions relief in exchange for measures that don't even meet the fading requirements of Obama's accord.

A new, massive influx of cash to Tehran certainly won't solve the myriad problems that gnaw at the theocracy's base and legitimacy. It won't lessen the corruption and *étatisme* that chew up money and crush initiative. It will give relief to some Iranians, but more important, a fillip of pride to Khamenei and his men. They believe they defeated Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign (they did), and that additional money from the United States will be proof they have pushed Trump's successor into an extortionate arrange-

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ment in which Tehran gets billions in hard currency in exchange for the export of enriched uranium—which can be easily created by the ever-more-efficient centrifuges that the JCPOA allowed and that Biden won't stop.

If we continue down this path, by 2030, the clerical regime's position in the Middle East and at home will be only more secure. American retrenchment, which started under Obama and gained speed under Trump and Biden, won't reverse in the next administration, barring some terrorist event or war that forces America back into the region.

If Republicans win the White House and Congress in 2024, it's possible that new waves of sanctions could buffet the Islamic Republic. By then, however, the clerical regime will probably have had four years to recover its economic footing and intensify its ties, open and covert, to the outside world, especially with China. The theocracy may even have tested an atomic weapon. No Republican administration is going to get into a sanctions war with China over a nonnuclear—and definitely not a nuclear—Islamic Republic. China can keep Iran's oil-based economy breathing by itself, if it chooses. And the clerical regime now has considerable experience living under sanctions. Tehran advanced the nuclear program significantly under Trump, even as the economy contracted and the country reeled from COVID-19.

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The year 2030 will come quickly, probably too fast for economic hardship to generate sufficient societal pressure to once again push young Iranians onto the streets for another round with machine-gun-wielding security forces. There is no regime-change strategy that works—unless the security forces crack.

But the primary venue for putting real, bloody pressure on the Guards has been out of bounds under both Republicans and Democrats. Washington has stubbornly refused to implement a containment policy, which would entail, at minimum, a much more muscular deployment of U.S. forces to the Middle East, especially in Iraq, Syria, and the Persian Gulf. Containment is regime change: the methodical, patient application of pressure until internal contradictions sap the enemy's will and capacity. By its nature, it risks war by putting down redlines all over the map.

On the ground, Iran's position in Iraq is by no means secure. But Iraqi nationalism and democracy, which have troubled the Islamic Republic's attempt to gain predominance among the Shia, would surely block any American attempt to increase the deployment of U.S. soldiers and their use. (The White House and Congress would abort the idea even earlier.) In Syria, the United States is still blocking a strategically important highway from northern Iraq. That's something, particularly for the Israelis, who would have much more

trouble finding and destroying Iranian military equipment (especially medium-range missiles) and personnel if that road were wide open. But this action has no reverberations on Iran's internal politics, since it doesn't really challenge the axis that dominates the Levant: the clerical regime, the Assad Alawite mafia, and Vladimir Putin. Serious American containment would reactivate the Sunni rebellion against Assad. For many reasons, some of them sensible—it could flood Europe with more refugees—Washington, no matter the party in power, isn't likely to go there.

In the Persian Gulf, the United States will hold for the time being, possibly setting the stage for confrontation between the United States and Iran before 2030. Washington may no longer guarantee the unharassed movement of energy supplies through the Gulf; after Trump's failure to retaliate against Tehran for attacks in 2019 on shipping and Saudi oil facilities, which temporarily knocked off-line much of the country's refining capacity, it's no longer certain what America will do to protect shipping and Saudi oil. But Washington is unlikely in the next decade to abandon its air and naval bases in the region, which at least check any overt, conventional Iranian aggression, such as a military incursion in Bahrain. As with the Khobar Towers bombing in 1996, as long as the United States is in the region complicating Tehran's ambitions, Iran could lash out, possibly crossing an American redline.



For the clerical regime to collapse by 2030, something unexpected has to shock the Islamist system, something that might cause a chain reaction that the theocracy can't handle. If we rule out the remote possibility of American preventive strikes on Iran's nuclear sites, we are left with only one thing that hasn't been tried: Israeli military strikes against the atomic program.

Discussions about cyber warfare and possible CIA or Mossad covert action, as intriguing as they might be, don't belong in this

conversation. They just don't have the capability: Langley would take years, probably after awful mistakes, to develop a competent, big-project, covert-action team. Regardless, such action wouldn't have the required impact. Without Israeli military action, the status quo likely holds. Tehran wins.

The military option is, as it's always been, a wild card. We have no idea whether an Israeli raid would succeed in destroying the clerical regime's nuclear sites, especially the buried-beneath-a-mountain cascades at Fordow. The odds against success are likely steep, which may be one of many reasons why the Israelis, despite a lot of harsh, menacing rhetoric, haven't yet chosen to raid. But such a military operation would unavoidably upset the region's pomegranate cart, probably leading to Iranian reprisals, including another surge of Iranian-sponsored terrorism.

Escalation is key. If the Iranian regime just absorbed the hit, didn't retaliate, cried foul at the United Nations, and tried to rally anti-Israeli Europeans, then this tactic would probably flop.

On the other hand, depending on the Iranian response, they could easily find themselves in a war with both Israel and the United States. The Revolutionary Guards could get badly mauled. If any attack were made against a U.S.-flagged vessel in the Gulf, the U.S. Navy might well obliterate Iranian naval bases on the Gulf and in the Indian Ocean. If Iran successfully activated the Lebanese Hezbollah and it let loose thousands of missiles, Israel would be obliged to commence a massive air campaign, possibly even another invasion. American sanctions would intensify. The Europeans might even be obliged to join, depending on how egregious Iranian reprisals were. (Europeans also might try to sanction Israel, though Continental unanimity on that issue is unlikely.) With the West, Japan, and South Korea on alert, the Iranians would have a vastly harder time importing dual-use items to rebuild what the Israelis had destroyed — unless the Chinese decided to aid Iranian ambitions.

Internally, after an Israeli attack, the theocracy would certainly

try to rally around the flag. In the short term, that could work. In a year or two, however, the cost of the conflict would come home, especially if Israel were successful in destroying the nuclear sites and killing key personnel. The loss of face would become undeniable: Regime propaganda regularly depicts Israel as too small and weak to stop Iran's advance. And — perhaps — distaste for the theocracy, which is widespread and deep throughout society, could explode and convulse the country. If Khamenei were to die during this stressful time, the succession might become much more complicated. Indecision at the top would feed anger below. Countrywide demonstrations of sufficient size could overwhelm the security forces, which aren't numerous, given the size of the country and the population.

The beginning of the end might start with an Israeli air raid.

Barring that eventuality, with all of its uncertainties, it seems highly likely that the Islamic Republic will be with us in 2030. Since 1989, when a Tehran soccer riot went anti-regime and the Revolutionary Guards decided to create a mobile force to suppress urban malcontents, the theocracy has feared and prepared for the unexpected spark. Khamenei, who is the most accomplished Middle Eastern dictator since World War II, isn't today easily surprised by his enemies. We can only hope that his equanimity and plans founder on the unexpected and unforgiving. \*