

CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

Iran After a Powerful Supreme Leader: Collapse Pathways, Power Redistribution, and Strategic Implications

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1. **Subject:** Iran after a powerful Supreme Leader: Collapse Pathways, Power Redistribution, and Strategic Implications.
2. **Purpose:** This paper examines post-collapse dynamics in Iran, assessing how authority would be redistributed following the removal of the Supreme Leader (SL)-through death, assassination, incapacitation, or elite fragmentation, or revolutionary overthrow-and analyzing the resulting internal, regional, and international implications for U.S. interests. Detailed scenario timelines and pathway-specific implications are provided in **Appendix A**, while the main body focuses on cross-cutting structural dynamics, strategic risks, strategic opportunities, and policy-relevant consequences. Orderly succession to a new SL, while certainly feasible, would be akin to status quo, and is therefore outside the scope of this analysis.
3. **Introduction:** For more than four decades, the Islamic Republic of Iran has centralized political authority in the office of the SL, combining clerical legitimacy, coercive power, and elite arbitration within a single institutional apex capable of managing sustained economic pressure and social unrest. The recent 12-day war constituted a strategic shock rather than a regime-ending event. While the system survived, the conflict accelerated the erosion of clerical primacy and reinforced the dominance of coercive institutions, above all, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The post-war environment exposed vulnerabilities in succession management, elite cohesion, and escalation control, rendering regime stability more brittle despite outward resilience.
4. **Defining Iran's Ruling Elite (Center of power):** The elite refers to the ruling coalition that controls coercive force, strategic economic assets, and regime decision-making. This coalition is dominated by senior IRGC leadership and supported by aligned clerical figures, political managers, technocrats, and regime-linked economic actors. Clerical institutions, including the Guardian Council, remain part of this elite as sources of constitutional and ideological legitimacy but lack independent coercive capacity and operate within an IRGC-dominated power structure. Regime stability depends on coordination within this group; elite fragmentation occurs when that coordination breaks down.¹
5. **Post-12-Day War Power Architecture in Iran:** Post-war Iran is best understood as an **IRGC-dominated system rather than a clerical one**. Although the SL retains formal authority, effective power has shifted decisively to the IRGC², which now functions as the regime's central power broker controlling internal security, strategic weapons, external operations, intelligence collection, and large segments of the political economy. Civilian institutions operate primarily as administrative instruments. Clerical bodies retain symbolic legitimacy but lack independent coercive capacity. Informal networks linking IRGC

commanders, senior clerics, political officials, and regime-aligned economic actors now serve as the regime's primary decision-making layer. The 12-day war reinforced a core structural reality: regime survival increasingly depends on IRGC-led coercive coordination, information control, and economic gatekeeping rather than ideological mobilization, ³fundamentally shaping the trajectory of any future collapse. ⁴

6. Pathways to the Breakdown: Three broad pathways might define the future:

- a. **Leadership Decapitation**, including death, assassination, incapacitation, or institutional fragmentation. ⁵
- b. **Mass revolutionary overthrow**, driven by sustained popular mobilization combined with elite defections. ⁶
- c. **Managed Hybrid Rupture with Regime Adaptation**, combining elite fragmentation with sustained public unrest.

Each pathway produces distinct timelines of power redistribution, institutional continuity, and strategic risk. ⁷ Detailed scenario-based assessments are provided in **Appendix A**. Among these pathways, the hybrid scenario is assessed as the most plausible post-war outcome, consistent with recent patterns of regime adaptation and elite behavior.

7. Strategic Implications Across Collapse Pathways:

- a. **Internal Governance Implications:** Where the IRGC remains cohesive, elite-driven and hybrid outcomes favor regime adaptation rather than state failure. ⁸ Revolutionary collapse presents the highest risk of governance paralysis, economic breakdown, and security fragmentation due to the simultaneous collapse of legitimacy and coercive command authority. ⁹
- b. **Regional and Proxy Implications:** Iran's proxy network is unlikely to disappear under any scenario but will likely undergo functional degradation as centralized control weakens. ¹⁰ IRGC-managed continuity favors proxy rationalization, while revolutionary collapse creates the greatest risk of uncontrolled proxy behavior and escalation involving Israel, Gulf partners, and U.S. forces. ¹¹
- c. **International and Nuclear Implications:** Leadership rupture increases nuclear opacity across all scenarios. Under IRGC-dominated continuity or hybrid outcomes, centralized control over the nuclear program persists but transparency declines and verification become increasingly intelligence-dependent. Revolutionary collapse presents the most severe risks related to nuclear insecurity, weapons proliferation, and the absence of credible negotiating authority. ¹²

8. Comparative Fragmentation Risk (Iraq and Syria as Cautionary Analogies): Iran is unlikely to experience full territorial fragmentation similar to Iraq or Syria. Deep institutional penetration by the IRGC, national integration, and centralized coercive capacity reduce the likelihood of state dissolution. However, functional fragmentation, uneven sovereignty, degraded command-and-control, and localized instability is plausible, particularly under revolutionary or hybrid scenarios.

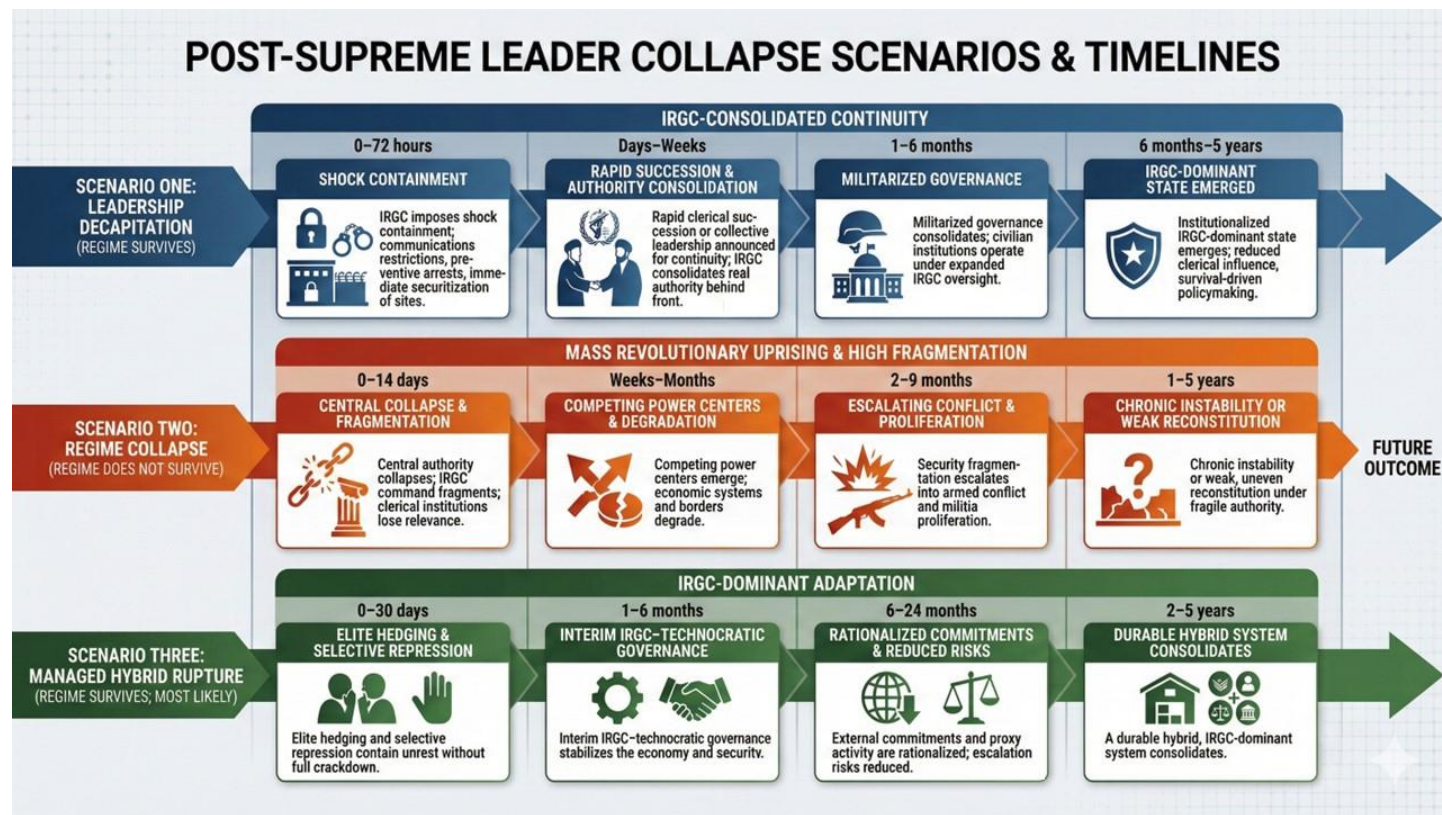


Figure 1- Supreme Leader Collapse Scenarios and Timelines

9. U.S. Risks.

- Escalation and Proxy Autonomy:** Leadership rupture increases the likelihood of proxy retaliation cycles. Even when the IRGC seeks restraint, weakened command-and-control and increased proxy autonomy heighten miscalculation risks and the potential for unintended conflict.
- Degradation of Centralized Control Over Strategic Capabilities:** Governance rupture may weaken centralized IRGC authority over missile forces, internal security units, and sensitive stockpiles—particularly under revolutionary or hybrid conditions.
- Nuclear Governance and Monitoring Uncertainty:** Nuclear risk rises not necessarily through deliberate threshold crossing, but through reduced transparency, weakened oversight, and “insurance behaviors” during elite uncertainty. Verification becomes increasingly intelligence-dependent.
- Regional Spillover and Systemic Disruption:** Iranian instability may generate maritime disruption, illicit trafficking, refugee flows, and economic shocks, straining regional partners and U.S. crisis-response capacity.
- Great Power Opportunism:** Russia and China may exploit Iranian transition periods to expand strategic leverage under the guise of stabilization and continuity support, complicating sanctions enforcement and diluting U.S. influence.

10. U.S. Opportunities:

Despite elevated risks, post-SL collapse scenarios also generate **strategic opportunities**, particularly where regime survival pressures incentivize pragmatism over ideology.

- Reduced ideological expansionism:** IRGC-led survival governance is likely to deprioritize ideological adventurism in favor of regime preservation.
- Proxy rationalization and cost containment:** Economic strain and leadership uncertainty may compel Tehran to tighten control, downsize, or selectively disengage from costly proxy commitments.

- c. **Informal de-escalation mechanisms:** Transitional periods may open space for informal risk-reduction arrangements, including maritime rules of the road, escalation thresholds, and crisis communication channels.
- d. **Strengthened regional defense integration:** Iranian instability may accelerate regional partners' willingness to deepen integrated air, missile, and maritime defense cooperation, enhancing deterrence without expanding U.S. offensive presence.
- e. **Conditional nuclear risk-reduction pathways:** Under hybrid or stabilized elite-driven outcomes, limited nuclear risk-reduction measures may become feasible if tied to sanctions relief and verifiable constraints.

11. Conclusion: Strategic Imperatives for the United States:

- a. The collapse of the SL system-whether through assassination, revolution, or hybrid rupture-would constitute the most consequential transformation of Iranian governance since 1979. Rather than enabling democratic transition, Iran's post-collapse trajectory is far more likely to be shaped by IRGC dominance, elite bargaining, and chronic instability.
- b. Elite-driven and hybrid pathways point toward regime adaptation rather than regime disappearance, with the IRGC consolidating its role as the central governing authority behind a weakened clerical front. Revolutionary collapse, while less probable, presents the highest risks of fragmentation, nuclear insecurity, and uncontrolled regional escalation.
- c. The central challenge for the United States, is not shaping Iran's internal political outcome, but preventing instability inside Iran from cascading into regional long-lasting instability. This demand sustained escalation management, enhanced intelligence and early warning, strengthened regional defense integration, calibrated sanctions signaling aligned with risk reduction, and conditional diplomacy tied to verifiable constraints.
- d. Managing risk, not engineering outcomes, should define U.S. strategy in any post-SL environment.

Sources:

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- ¹² **Eric Brewer and Scott Roecker**, “Iran’s Collapse Could Cause a Nuclear Security Nightmare,” *Foreign Policy*, July 9, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/07/09/iran-collapse-nuclear-proliferation-threat/> (accessed January 2026).

ANNEX A

Iran After a Powerful Supreme Leader

1. Scenario One: Leadership Decapitation with Regime Survival (IRGC-Consolidated Continuity):

- a. **Structural Logic:** This scenario assumes the removal of the SL without simultaneous elite rupture. Regime survival is enabled by the preexisting dominance, organizational cohesion, and coercive reach of the IRGC, which already functions as the regime's effective executive authority. Formal succession mechanisms are used to preserve legitimacy, while real power consolidates within IRGC command networks. Stability depends primarily on IRGC cohesion rather than clerical authority or popular consent.
- b. **Indicative Timeline:**
 - 1) **Phase 1 (0–72 hours):** IRGC imposes shock containment: communications restrictions, preventive arrests, and immediate securitization of nuclear, missile, energy, and leadership sites.
 - 2) **Phase 2 (Days–Weeks):** Rapid clerical succession or collective leadership is announced to project continuity; IRGC consolidates real authority behind the front.
 - 3) **Phase 3 (1–6 months):** Militarized governance consolidates; civilian institutions operate under expanded IRGC oversight.
 - 4) **Phase 4 (6 months–5 years):** An institutionalized IRGC-dominant state emerges with reduced clerical influence and survival-driven policymaking.
- c. **Implications:**
 - 1) **Internal Governance and Society:** State collapse is avoided. Governance becomes more coercive, centralized, and security-driven, with shrinking political space and limited tolerance for dissent. Economic management prioritizes stability and regime preservation over reform. Public order is maintained, but legitimacy increasingly rests on coercive predictability rather than ideology.
 - 2) **IRGC Position:** The IRGC becomes the uncontested center of power—no longer merely a guardian of the system, but its primary governing authority. Regime durability depends on IRGC elite cohesion; instability, if it emerges, manifests as internal elite rivalry rather than mass uprising.
 - 3) **Regional / Proxies:** Iran's proxy network survives but is recalibrated. Strategic control remains centralized, while tactical discipline may weaken during transition, raising miscalculation risks. The IRGC favors deterrence maintenance over ideological expansion to avoid provoking a destabilizing regional war.
 - 4) **Nuclear Dynamics:** Centralized control over the nuclear program persists, but transparency declines. Nuclear opacity increases as a hedge against uncertainty. Verification becomes intelligence-dependent, and crisis stability weakens despite the absence of deliberate escalation intent.
 - 5) **International Environment:** Russia and China prioritize continuity and expand influence through political and economic engagement. Western leverage narrows, as coercive consolidation reduces responsiveness to pressure.
 - 6) **U.S. Strategic Bottom Line:** The United States confronts a more militarized, opaque, and resilient adversary. Policy leverage lies primarily in escalation management, intelligence dominance, partner defense integration, and calibrated economic signaling—not regime transformation.

2. Scenario Two: Regime Collapse Through Mass Revolutionary Uprising (High Fragmentation Risk- Regime Does Not Survive):

a. **Structural Logic:** This scenario requires the simultaneous collapse of legitimacy and coercive cohesion. Sustained mass mobilization combines with elite defections, causing the IRGC to fragment rather than consolidate. No actor retains nationwide coercive dominance, producing an authority vacuum. The decisive driver of instability is not popular protest alone, but the loss of unified IRGC command.

b. **Indicative Timeline:**

- 1) **Phase 1(0–14 days):** Central authority collapses; IRGC command fragments; clerical institutions lose relevance.
- 2) **Phase 2 (Weeks–Months):** Competing power centers emerge; economic systems and borders degrade.
- 3) **Phase 3 (2–9 months):** Security fragmentation escalates into armed conflict and militia proliferation.
- 4) **Phase 4 (1–5 years):** Chronic instability or weak, uneven reconstitution under fragile authority.

c. **Implications:**

- 1) **Internal Governance and Society:** This is the highest-risk scenario for state failure. Public services collapse, economic shock escalates into humanitarian crisis, and governance fragments geographically. Even successful regime overthrow does not imply democratic consolidation; prolonged instability and violence are more likely.
- 2) **IRGC Position:** The IRGC does not disappear—it fractures. Some units defect, others become local power brokers, and others fight to preserve assets. This fragmentation is the core driver of prolonged instability and prevents rapid restoration of centralized authority.
- 3) **Regional / Proxies:** Centralized proxy control collapses. Some proxies degrade; others act autonomously, increasing the likelihood of uncontrolled escalation involving Israel, Gulf states, and U.S. forces. Deterrence erodes; unpredictability rises.
- 4) **Nuclear Dynamics:** This is the most dangerous nuclear scenario. Oversight degrades, command authority weakens, and risks of proliferation, diversion, or external intervention increase sharply. Diplomatic containment options are limited by the absence of credible negotiating authority.
- 5) **International Environment:** Major powers prioritize containment and damage control over engagement. External actors may back rival factions, intensifying internal conflict and regional spillovers.
- 6) **U.S. Strategic Bottom Line:** U.S. objectives shift to emergency containment: preventing regional war, supporting allies under spillover pressure, and securing nuclear materials. Outcome-shaping is unrealistic; crisis responses dominate.

3. **Scenario Three: Managed Hybrid Rupture with Regime Adaptation (IRGC-Dominant Adaptation - Regime Survives; Most Likely)**

a. **Structural Logic:** This scenario reflects partial elite fracture without systemic collapse. The IRGC remains sufficiently cohesive to prevent an authority vacuum but adapts governance to stabilize the system. Selective repression, elite bargaining, and technocratic delegation allow the regime to survive while evolving away from clerical primacy toward pragmatic, security-centric rule.

b. **Indicative Timeline:**

- 1) **Phase 1(0–30 days):** Elite hedging and selective repression contain unrest without full crackdown.
- 2) **Phase 2(1–6 months):** Interim IRGC–technocratic governance stabilizes the economy and security.

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- 3) **Phase III (6–24 months)**: External commitments and proxy activity are rationalized; escalation risks reduced.
 - 4) **Phase IV (2–5 years)**: A durable hybrid, IRGC-dominant system consolidates.

c. **Implications:**

- 1) **Internal Governance and Society**: State failure is avoided. Governance remains authoritarian but becomes more pragmatic, with limited economic stabilization and controlled repression. Ideology recedes as survival and governability take priority.
- 2) **IRGC Position**: The IRGC remains the dominant authority but governs more strategically—delegating economic management while retaining coercive control. Elite competition is managed internally rather than spilling into open conflict.
- 3) **Regional / Proxies**: Proxy networks are streamlined rather than abandoned. Activity becomes more selective and lower-tempo, preserving deterrence while reducing escalation probability.
- 4) **Nuclear Dynamics**: Command-and-control remains intact, making nuclear risk more manageable. This scenario offers the best conditions for limited, verifiable risk-reduction measures if tied to sanctions relief and credible constraints.
- 5) **International Environment**: Crisis diplomacy and informal de-escalation mechanisms become feasible. While Russia and China still expand leverage, Western actors retain limited but meaningful influence at the margins.
- 6) **U.S. Strategic Bottom Line**: This is the most policy-tractable scenario. The United States can focus on de-escalation, intelligence-driven monitoring, partner defense integration, and conditional diplomacy—without expecting political liberalization.