



Why the Iranian regime did not collapse after Khamenei's assassination

The Iranian regime is designed to survive power vacuums. That, however, does not mean it will survive the war unscathed.



Iranians take part in a protest marking the annual al-Quds Day in Tehran, Iran, on March 13, 2026 [Majid Asgaripour/WANA via Reuters]



By **Abdullah Fahad Al-Nafisi**

Published On 17 March 2026

It is not true that the killing of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei necessarily means the immediate collapse of the regime.

This is a hasty reading, reflecting more wishful thinking than sober analysis. Yes, we are witnessing a seismic blow, the most dangerous to hit the Islamic Republic since its establishment in 1979. But the more important political question is no: “is the blow bad?” but rather: “was the system built in a way that allows it to absorb a blow of this magnitude?”

The available evidence so far indicates that the system was designed from the outset not to be merely the shadow of a single man, no matter how elevated his position.

The Islamic Republic is not an autocratic regime like in the familiar Arab context, where the entire structure collapses when its head disappears. It is a complex ideological and securitised system, with a religious head, beneath whom there is a network of solid institutions—some constitutional, some security-related, some bureaucratic and economic—all working to preserve the entity itself, not merely to serve the individual.

For this reason, the killing of the supreme leader does not automatically erase the state, nor topple the regime simply by virtue of the event; rather, it shifts the crisis from the question of “the survival of the head” to the question of “internal cohesion”. The struggle to maintain it is where the real danger lies.

The Iranian constitution itself was drafted with the spectre of a power vacuum in mind. Article 111 stipulates that a temporary council assumes the powers of leadership when the position becomes vacant, until the Assembly of Experts chooses a new leader as soon as possible.

After the announcement of the Leader’s killing, powers were transferred temporarily to a three-man council comprising President Masoud Pezeshkian, the head of the judiciary Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eje’i, and Guardian Council member Alireza Arafii.

Meanwhile, the choice of the new supreme leader was in the hands of the Assembly of Experts, which is made up of 88 members.

We can describe this clarity in how to deal with the vacancy of the Leader’s position as a “survival protocol” designed to give the system the capacity to continue even at a moment of maximum shock.

But the bigger mistake would be to be deceived by the constitutional form alone. Yes, the text matters, but the balance of power matters more. Here we must distinguish between three layers from which the system draws its strength.

The first layer is religious legitimacy, represented by the office of the Supreme Leader, the Assembly of Experts, and the Guardian Council. This layer grants the system its doctrinal legitimacy and determines who holds the “seal of legitimacy”. Therefore, the battle over succession is not merely administrative but theological and political at the same time.

The second layer is the security-military sector, headed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which is in fact the backbone of the system, not just one of its institutions.

The third layer is the political bureaucracy, meaning the government, the presidency, the judiciary, and the administrative and economic apparatuses that keep the state’s daily functions running and prevent a scene of general collapse.

Among all these layers, the truly decisive one is the IRGC.

Recent reports indicate that, after Khamenei’s killing, the main question is no longer: “Is there a constitutional mechanism?” but rather: “Will the IRGC remain cohesive?” This is because this body is not subordinate to the president, nor is it a conventional army. It is the actual guardian of the revolution, possessing the upper hand in internal security, in regional decision-making, and in economic and influence networks.

Because of the war and the killing of senior commanders, the IRGC has tightened its grip on decision-making in the country, and has come to rely on a degree of operational decentralisation that allows mid-level leadership to continue working quickly.

This means that the blow may have struck the head, but it has not paralysed the limbs.

Based on current indications, it is difficult to assert that the Iranian regime will fall as a result of this war alone. Some signs in fact point to the opposite: ideological regimes, when faced with an external existential threat, may harden rather than collapse, and the targeting of the supreme leader may in the short-term lead to greater hard-line stances and defensive cohesion, not rapid disintegration.

Even some elements of the Iranian opposition abroad have said explicitly that bombing alone does not topple the regime, and that any real change, if it happens, requires an internal dynamic broader than mere military strikes.

However, the absence of immediate collapse does not mean safety. The regime may not fall, but it could emerge from this war exhausted, wary, and more closed in on itself—especially after the selection of Mojtaba Khamenei, the late supreme leader's son. This, in my view, is the most likely scenario so far: the regime remains, but in a harsher, less self-confident form.

War tests not only deterrent capacity, but also reveals the extent of internal frailty and reshapes centres of power. When a regime emerges from such a war bloodied by losses and with its very head under threat, it tends to choose the security option: it turns inward, expands suspicion, narrows the political sphere, and treats opponents and dissidents as “potential breaches” in the wall of survival.

This tendency has already begun to appear. Reports has spoken of internal fissures that surfaced under the pressure of war—between hardliners close to the IRGC and a relatively less hardline current associated with President Pezeshkian's positions, especially after the controversy following his remarks about halting attacks on Gulf states.

Some hardline clerics within the system pushed for expediting the choice of a new supreme leader, suggesting unease with having actual power temporarily distributed among a three-man council in the midst of an open war. These are not yet signs of collapse, but they are signs of anxiety within the structure itself.

The dilemma, then, is not the absence of a mechanism, but the environment in which this mechanism is being tested: war, assassination, external pressure, military losses, divisions within the elite, and fear of defection.

In sum, the Iranian regime, up to this moment, does not appear headed for a rapid fall, but it also does not seem capable of emerging from this war unscathed, as it was before. The most likely outcome is that it will endure, but at a high price: greater reliance on the IRGC, less space for politics, heightened sensitivity toward opposition, and a stronger inclination toward internal security contraction.

To put it more plainly: this war may not end the regime, but it may end what remains of its flexibility. When regimes lose flexibility, they may prolong their life by force, but at the same time they begin a slow internal drain. That is the current Iranian paradox: a regime that has not fallen, but is entering a new phase of anxious rigidity—rigidity that may protect it today, and weaken it tomorrow.

The Arabic version of this article was first published by [Al Jazeera Arabic](#).

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By **Abdullah Fahad Al-Nafisi**

Abdullah Fahad Al-Nafisi is a Kuwaiti academic and a former member of the Kuwaiti parliament.

Article printed from Aljazeera.com: <https://www.aljazeera.com>
URL to article: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2026/3/17/why-the-iranian-regime-did-not-collapse-after-khameneis-assassination>