

# What Happens When Iran's Supreme Leader Dies?



Featuring Nicholas Heras and Nicolas Carl

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*The struggle to succeed Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is growing intense. Its outcome will have significant consequences for Iran, the Middle East, and the US. Khamenei's health has been failing for years, and his retirement or passing seems increasingly imminent. Current indicators suggest that his successor will be more hardline and less willing or able to rein in the aggressive instincts of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. In this episode of Overwatch, Nicholas Heras, Director of Government Relations at ISW, and Nicolas Carl, the Iran Team Lead at the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, discuss the leading candidates to succeed Khamenei, their policy views on engaging with the United States and the West, and how the process of picking the next Supreme Leader could affect US policy on Iran.*

## **Jacob Taylor:**

This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by The Institute for the Study of War. This is the third episode in our mini-series focusing on US policy on Iran. Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei has been battling poor health for several years, and many observers inside and outside the Islamic Republic believe that his tenure as the most powerful person in the Iranian regime will soon be drawing to a close. When Khamenei passes away or relinquishes power, the contest within the Iranian regime to succeed him is expected to be intense, and it will have significant consequences for the future of Iran and the Middle East. In this episode of Overwatch, Nicholas Heras, the Director of Government Relations at ISW, and Nicolas Carl, the Iran Team Lead at the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, discuss the leading candidates to succeed Khamenei, their policy views on engaging with the United States and the West, and some of the events that could emerge from the process of picking the next Supreme Leader and have major implications for US policy on Iran.

## **Nick Heras:**

Hi, this is Nick Heras, Director of Government Relations at ISW.

## **Nicolas Carl:**

My name is Nicolas Carl and I am an Analyst and the Iran Team Lead at the Critical Threats Project of the American Enterprise Institute.

## **Nick Heras:**

Nick, thank you for being here with us to discuss the potential succession to Iran Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. So, I wanted to start us off by asking you, what do we know about the leading candidates to replace Khamenei, and what type of notable info do we have about them, about how they view the world, engagement with the United States, engagement with rising powers like China and Russia, and who might support them within the Iranian system?

## **Nicolas Carl:**

Thanks, Nick. So, I think that there are a variety of candidates that we can call out in particular in this discussion of who is most likely to succeed the current Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The list is relatively short and well-known, but before we dive into this conversation, I just want to offer, I think, a very important caveat, which is that the Supreme Leader succession process is very opaque. It could change unexpectedly at any given moment, at least from our perspective. There's not much precedent for this, it's only happened once before and that was over 30 years ago. It's, of course, unclear exactly how this process may have changed now that Ali Khamenei has consolidated his grip on power over the Islamic Republic over the past three decades. And so, this could be a process that is actually very different from the one that we had seen back when the Islamic Republic's founder and first Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini died so long ago.

So, that's the first important point I want to make. Of course, with that said, we can still have a discussion about who we think specifically is most likely to succeed Khamenei. This could include a variety of regime leaders like Ebrahim Raisi, Mojtaba Khamenei, Sadeq Amoli Larijani, and there's also a potentially fourth succession candidate that we can at the very least entertain the idea of, which is Hassan Rouhani. I don't in particular think that he and in of himself is a likely candidate to become Supreme Leader, but he is nonetheless a very important and influential cleric within the regime. And so, I think it's worth considering the possibility that he may someday aim for a higher political authority.

So, to provide a little bit more information on these four individuals I've listed thus far, Ebrahim Raisi, firstly is a career prosecutor and judge who currently heads the Iranian Judiciary. He's also the first Deputy Chairman on the Assembly of Experts, which is the body that selects and theoretically could dismiss the Iranian Supreme Leader. He also ran against and lost to Hassan Rouhani in the 2017 presidential election. And he reportedly was Khamenei's preferred candidate, which suggests Khamenei may have been seeking to groom Raisi to someday succeed him. Mojtaba Khamenei is Ali Khamenei's second son and he wields a tremendous amount of authority and influence behind the scenes. Mojtaba generally stays out of the public spotlight, but plays a series of powerful roles in the office of the Supreme Leader, which is the shadowy entity through which the Supreme Leader is able to basically control Iran and the regime. Mojtaba was involved in interfering into the 2009 presidential election to advantage his preferred candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Mojtaba thereafter reportedly took control of Iran's besiege militia to stage a very brutal crackdown on the ensuing reformist protests.

Sadeq Amoli Larijani is another prosecutor and judge who was the previous Judiciary Chief before Raisi. Larijani is a brother to Ali Larijani, the Iranian Parliament Speaker from 2008 to 2020, and both brothers are political titans in Iran, and ruled the former government structure for many years together. Sadeq is more conservative than his brother Ali, and he too has a long history of abetting very brutal oppression in Iran. And then finally, Hassan Rouhani, as many of the listeners will already know, is the current president and another close advisor to the Supreme Leader. Rouhani furnishes a career of overseeing important institutions and policy priorities like the Supreme National Security Council, as well as Iran's nuclear negotiations with the West.

One point I want to make about all of these candidates overall, is that each of them domestically has a very long history of supporting brutal oppression and suppressing reform-minded groups within Iran. Ebrahim Raisi abetted the mistreatment, torture and killing of thousands during the mass executions that took place in Iran in 1988. Mojtaba, as I noted previously, took control of the besiege when cracking down on the 2009 Green Movement. Sadeq Amoli Larijani, similarly, in his capacity as Judiciary Chief, oversaw the prosecution and execution of many. And, finally, Rouhani himself, actually, in his capacity as the Supreme National Security Council Chairman, oversaw the crackdown that occurred during the November 2019 gasoline protests, which reportedly resulted in a wide death count ranging from 300 by some reports, to as many as 1500 Iranians killed. The point I'm making is that all of these individuals, at least in the context of their domestic policy, have pursued very brutal and intolerant approaches toward any kind of serious opposition within the Islamic Republic.

And I think it's realistic to expect very similar mistreatment toward the population if any of these candidates were to someday succeed Khamenei. There are, of course, other individuals outside the four that I have mentioned who could be considered for Supreme Leader successorship one day, this is to include, for example, Ahmad Jannati, the aging secretary of the Iranian Guardian Council. But one of the reasons why clerics like Jannati and other very senior officials in the regime like him are unlikely to at least be very long-term Supreme Leaders, is just the plain and simple fact that they are very old. Jannati is currently in his 90s, and so, any kind of power struggle that results in Ahmad Jannati succeeding Ali Khamenei as the Supreme Leader, is likely one that will be very short-lived. So, this is one of the reasons why individuals like Raisi, Mojtaba, and Sadeq are some of the more serious contenders to succeed Khamenei.

And that is because these guys are in their late 50s, early 60s, as I said. They are ones who will likely be the Supreme Leader for many decades to come if they were to get selected for the position. And so, these are the individuals that I think we need to be most conscious of, in this discussion, because, of course, we could see an anomaly like Jannati for a brief period of time, but it's one that, as I said, will be short lived and we'll ultimately have to have this conversation again when we're considering the next Supreme Leader.

**Nick Heras:**

Thank you Nick. Just to follow on, you've given us a really interesting perspective on who these leading candidates could be for the next Supreme Leader. What do we know about how they feel about engagement with the United States and Europe, or if they represent a different viewpoint that Iran has to engage with other rising powers like China and Russia. Is there this type of discussion that's happening among these individuals or the camps that support them?

**Nicolas Carl:**

Yeah. So, I'll start with their general positions toward the United States and Europe. Across the board, an important point to acknowledge is that none of these individuals appear particularly inclined to engage and negotiate with the West on important matters like the Iranian missile program or their regional activities. Rouhani is an outlier in some respects because, he of the four of them, is the most eager to pursue an economic policy approach that involves integration into the global economy and attracting a lot of foreign investment, particularly from Europe into the Iranian economy. And so, naturally Rouhani is going to be a lot more eager to engage the West, but even so, it's not clear at all that any of these individuals would make serious compromises on a lot of the things that most concern the US at the moment. Raisi and Mojtaba in particular will take a very hard line and be quite aggressive toward the United States and Europe.

They are the more far right candidates in this discussion. Raisi, in particular, often uses very aggressive rhetoric toward the United States, and he actually had gone so far as to suggest that the regime will target the American officials directly responsible for killing Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. So, these guys are not likely to engage United States in the same way that Rouhani would, they are far more inclined to adopt a sort of autarkic and protectionist economic approach and, by extension, would not see the same impetus to engage the West in negotiations over things like their nuclear program.

When it comes to China and Russia, this is a bit different of a conversation. The hard-line camps in Iran tend to hold a little bit more of a favorable view toward these other revisionist states. There are still a lot of inherent skepticism within the Iranian policy discussion toward these outside powers, but nonetheless, the Iranian environment very frequently promotes China and Russia as great power counterbalances to the United States, and promotes engagement with them. And so, it is realistic to expect that we will see some efforts to enhance economic and technological cooperation, maybe strike some kind of defense procurement agreements with these countries in the coming years, regardless of who becomes Supreme Leader, honestly.

**Nick Heras:**

Thank you, Nick. That's really fascinating how there seems to be a developing approach from among these candidates and within the Iranian system itself on how to engage geopolitically. I want to pivot a little bit to a point that I think comes out of this discussion, which is the role that Khamenei can play in handpicking a successor or stacking the playing field in favor of someone he would prefer. You've mentioned Raisi and Mojtaba as two leading candidates. Now, it would seem that there may be a favorite from within other elements of the system. What role would the IRGC play in selecting the new Supreme Leader? And is there any daylight between some of these other power centers in the regime and Khamenei?

**Nicolas Carl:**

Yeah, so, the role that the IRGC and other power factions in Iran are going to play in Supreme Leader succession is a very interesting one. As we know, it is the constitutional responsibility of Iran's Assembly of Experts to select the next Supreme Leader. And it is, of course, possible that Khamenei is still communicating his preferences privately, doing things like grooming candidates like Raisi through a series of preferential treatment and appointments, which could explain some of the interactions between the Supreme Leader's office and Raisi over the past couple of years. But, of course, there's other factors we must bear in mind when it comes to how other power factions are going to respond to individuals that appear likely to replace Khamenei. And so, of course we need to acknowledge the vast wealth power and influence that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, that is the IRGC, has cultivated under Khamenei. The Guards now comprise one of the most, if not the most powerful block in Iran, and their leadership will assuredly play an outsized role in deciding who is next in line for succession.

So, it seems to me that the IRGC is very likely to play an important and serious role here. I think the important thing to acknowledge here is that whatever contender tries to next become Supreme Leader, will enter what would probably resemble a negotiation with the regime power blocks to garner political buy-in from all of the powerful factions. So, we obviously can not dismiss the Guards in this context. Khamenei has built up and made the IRGC what it is today, but they will, to some extent, influence who the Supreme Leader will be tomorrow. And this is naturally concerning. The IRGC has provided political backing and support for candidates like Raisi, and they have done what they can to bolster his image domestically. So, it is clear that very important factions within the IRGC support Raisi, and this raises questions about what the relationship will be like if someone like Raisi were to become Supreme Leader? I do think Khamenei still retains control over the Guards and, on occasion, rejects some of their worst and most aggressive tendencies.

I think that there's a very serious conversation to be had, whether the next Supreme Leader can control the IRGC as Khamenei does when the next Supreme Leader may find themselves beholden to the Guards for political support and buy-in. Although Khamenei has historically taken a very aggressive stance toward the United States, he still is, naturally, a very cautious individual. And so, he has worked as a keel on some of the more aggressive impulses and tendencies within a lot more far right elements, particularly within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. And so, with Khamenei gone, that potential stop on a lot of the more aggressive policies is going to be gone, and it's just conceivable that people like Raisi or Mojtaba may not be able to prevent some of those aggressive policies in the same way that Ali Khamenei could.

There's obviously other important factions we need to consider in this conversation, like, for example, the clergy. But it's admittedly unclear to what extent the clerical establishment in Iran is going to seriously impact this process when it's become so dominated by those that are very loyal to Khamenei within Iran. Of course, there are some oppositionists and some that do not to strike the line that the Khamenei-led regime would want. But I don't necessarily think that these clerics have been able to garner sufficient political capital and power in Khamenei's Iran to now meaningfully affect this process in a way that even closely resembles the extent to which the IRGC will.

**Nick Heras:**

Thank you, Nick, very much. It's a very interesting way that you've unpacked what can be a complicated system of succession. Now, I want to ask, what is Khamenei's involvement going to be and, take this question straight on, the IRGC, of course, doesn't have a formal role to play in picking Khamenei's successor. How does Khamenei work this process in which he gets an outcome that he wants, considering that, at his passing, he can't control what follows?

**Nicolas Carl:**

Yeah. So, as I began to describe, I think that Khamenei is going to do everything that he can to basically set con-

ditions for his preferred candidates, put them in as favorable of a position as possible to ensure that they have the necessary political support, influence, and power when he ultimately dies, to ensure that they are able to carry forward the regime in a way that he would want. The problem though, is, of course, Khamenei's ability to control this process is basically zero once he dies.

So, to what extent he's able to influence this process now is going to be very different from the extent to which he's going to once he ultimately passes. He's going to, naturally, as I said, do things like support Raisi in his bid to crack down on corruption, which is a very politicized thing that Raisi has pursued over the past couple of years. He's effectively using an anti-corruption campaign to really politically damage a lot of his rivals, and so, Khamenei can support things like that. Khamenei can appoint these guys to senior positions, but at the end of the day, that and, communicating his intentions privately, are about as much as he can do at this time.

**Nick Heras:**

To follow on that, when you talk about Raisi's campaign against corruption, how does that interact with the autarkic system that has developed inside the Islamic Republic? And does that potentially mean that there will be a movement against Raisi by other power centers?

**Nicolas Carl:**

Yeah, that's a great question. When it comes to Raisi's anti-corruption campaign, as I said, he is using it very politically to basically target those individuals that are close to people like Hassan Rouhani, and Sadeq Larijani. So, this is very clearly a political operation to do what he can to continue to bolster his own image for the Supreme Leader race, or potentially other things, like Raisi may ultimately want to become president, and so, this could be something to help gear him up for that. When it comes to how this interacts with this whole autarkic approach, I'm not necessarily sure that there's any real contradiction here, because hardliners like Raisi very much argue that Iran needs to drive economic growth through its internal capacities and domestic production.

And so, naturally, targeting the factors that contribute to economic inefficiency, like nepotism and corruption, it's very natural that one could justify an anti-corruption campaign in any context, but, specifically this one too. Naturally, a lot of other factions that find themselves in the crosshair of this anti-corruption campaign are going to push back against Raisi, and do what they can in the political struggle to try and damage his own image. The key problem here though, is that Raisi at least appears to have the support of the most important commanders in the IRGC, and so, when you have the capacity to mobilize a lot of the IRGC's electoral foot soldiers to support candidates that you would want in elected offices, and to voice your narratives through all of their state owned media, and in all the other important functions that the Guards play, to include all of their economic involvement, it's very easy to leverage these things in ways that look favorable for Raisi for Supreme Leadership.

And so, it's difficult to really push back against such a powerful alliance between the Raisi and the Guards. I'm not saying that this tie between Raisi and the IRGC is concrete. This is more or so something that just appears to be the case as we observe how a lot of most senior IRGC commanders interact with Raisi, they seem to lend him political support. A lot of Iranian media tends to, for example, laud Raisi's clerical credentials, particularly the outlets controlled by the Guard. A good example is that it was a huge controversy during the 2017 presidential election over exactly what Raisi's clerical rank was. He claimed it to be an Ayatollah, which is the clerical rank that one needs to have, constitutionally, in order to become Supreme Leader.

However, others had suggested that he was a clerical rank lower, being a Hujjat al-Islam. And so, this was a point of controversy, and he ultimately reverted from calling himself Ayatollah, and for a while, called himself a Hujjat al-Islam. But IRGC media frequently calls him an Ayatollah. And so, this is just one indicator that we could potentially read as the IRGC trying to say to Iran's internal audience, "Hey, this guy has the religious credentials, we

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support him, we believe that he would be a fit successor to Ali Khamenei.”

**Nick Heras:**

Nick, this is fascinating because you really helped us pass through these nuances and how these different potential Supreme Leader candidates could either be elevated into the role of Supreme Leader or may face opposition. So, I want to build on this excellent point that you've made, when you talk about the dynamic of Raisi and the IRGC. There seems to be a relatively strong bond between Raisi and IRGC. And, I'm interested to know, how does Mojtaba relate to the IRGC and, related to that, if Mojtaba was selected to be Supreme Leader, wouldn't that make it a dynastic succession where you'd have the son of the most immediate Supreme Leader elevated? How would that play within the Iranian system and also among the Iranian society at large, considering the Islamic Republic had overthrown the Pahlavi dynasty?

**Nicolas Carl:**

That's an absolutely great question and I'm glad you asked it. An important point to draw out here is that Raisi is not the only candidate to succeed Khamenei that has some degree of IRGC backing. Mojtaba, in particular, has an expansive network within the IRGC, particularly some of its highest echelons. Mojtaba served in the Iran-Iraq war and forged very close bonds with individuals who are now some of the most senior IRGC commanders, particularly those within the IRGC intelligence organization. But even outside of that, he has connections to, for example, the IRGC Deputy Chief of Staff, Ali Fazli. So, it's not just exclusively individuals within the intelligence network. And, the point I'm drawing out here is that it seems as though a lot of senior commanders within the IRGC seem to, at least, have some close ties with both Raisi and Mojtaba. So, the question about how exactly this is going to play out in the Supreme Leader succession struggle is an important one.

And there is some potentiality that we could see an agreement and, of course, this is conjecture, but we could consider a scenario wherein we see a Supreme Leader, like Mojtaba Khamenei and a president like Ebrahim Raisi. There are ways in which they can have shared power in a dynamic relationship. Both positions like the president and the Supreme Leader are a little bit amorphous and they transform over time. And so, there is some capacity for these to shape to whatever particular dynamic emerges, be it one where Mojtaba and Ebrahim Raisi both find themselves in positions of leadership.

**Nick Heras:**

Nick, so this leads me to a question that I'm very interested in, which is, is it possible that as a result of splits within the IRGC over who to support in a succession battle, that another candidate could potentially come through as a consensus candidate or, potentially, can we see, as some analysts have put on the table, that the actual role of the Supreme Leader itself may be weakened after Khamenei in order to keep the system from falling apart?

**Nicolas Carl:**

You're absolutely right to call out the fact that the hardliner camp, writ large, is historically very fractious in Iran. And so, yeah, naturally there's going to be a lot of political infighting over exactly who each faction is going to support, who each subfaction is going to support, for Supreme Leadership. But, it's important to remember that this is a very important decision that all of these power factions are going to make. If you select someone like Mojtaba or Ebrahim Raisi, or Larijani or Rouhani or whoever, that's a very long-term decision. These guys could theoretically be the Supreme Leader for many, many decades to come if they were to succeed Khamenei within the next couple of years. And so, this is a huge decision they are going to have to make and, once you make it, it's difficult to backtrack. So, there's going to be a lot of very deliberate efforts to get exactly who each actor wants during this struggle.

**Nick Heras:**

Let's give you the chance to reflect back on the dynastic question.

**Nicolas Carl:**

One huge vulnerability of Mojtaba's is that, yeah, he is the son of Ali Khamenei. Iran has a history of pushing back against dynastic rule, particularly under the old government under the Iranian Shah. And so, there is going to, naturally, be a contingent of regime elite that are going to be skeptical of someone like Mojtaba naturally succeeding his father, the nepotism there could be potentially problematic long-term. And so, this is one of the key issues that Mojtaba is probably going to have to attack, and he'll encounter this when he makes any kind of serious bid for leadership in a more overt sense. As I said before, Mojtaba is very shadowy, he really stays out of the public spotlight. And so, if he's going to take a more center stage role, that's going to be, naturally, one of the biggest criticisms that he may face.

The Iranian Constitution does specify that the Supreme Leader should be a leading Islamic Scholar and Jurist. And, this could be read as a mechanism to, not explicitly reject, but work against any kind of dynastic rule emerging within the Islamic Republic. And so, this is a position that is meant for a leading individual within the clerical establishment. Naturally, that's not going to be any child to the current Supreme Leader. Nonetheless, we have seen indications that Mojtaba himself is trying to bolster his own clerical credentials and begin to assert himself as a leading voice within the Iranian clergy. And so although the Iranian Constitution does not explicitly prohibit things like dynastic rule, it's important to consider that Mojtaba succeeding his father might be a little bit counter to what the Iranian Constitution had initially intended.

**Nick Heras:**

Because, for me, that's really interesting, because if you go Khamenei to his son, that really does smack very much of a dynasty. And there's part of what the Islamic Republic did, the Islamic Revolution did, or the revolution in general did, was it uprooted this dynasty and the dynastic system that has ruled over Iran for centuries. So, it'd be interesting if you could get at that, really just take it and say, okay, is it conceivable that they would do this, that they would go for this, that they would actually say, it's cool? We're going to have the son of the last Supreme Leader takeover. And, by the way, he could live for another three, four decades at which point you'd have what, almost 70 years of Khamenei rule?

**Nicolas Carl:**

It is absolutely conceivable that we could see some kind of dynasty emerge with some kind of Supreme Leader, like Mojtaba Khamenei. One very interesting series of reports that we've seen emerge over the past couple of years are those that indicate that Ali Khamenei has actually delegated a great deal of responsibility and some of his duties, in his capacity as Supreme leader, to his son Mojtaba. So, it seems as though, to an extent, Mojtaba is already playing a very significant role in controlling the country internally, through a lot of dealings that are very opaque to us, in the Supreme Leader's office. So, now we know that he's got a lot of additional responsibilities, we know that he has controlled the siege at times. We know that he probably interfered in the 2009 presidential elections. So, it's clear that Mojtaba under his father has consolidated an immense amount of power.

And so, the prospect of him having to give all that up when his father dies, it seems very unlikely. Mojtaba seems far more likely to do everything he can and to retain his grip on power because he, of course, sees what has happened to the Khomeini family under Khamenei's rule. A lot of Khomeini's grandsons and children have been somewhat politically sidelined within the Iranian domestic space. And you can be sure that Mojtaba fears a similar fate for himself, if not something worse. And so, there's going to absolutely be a real will within Mojtaba to, if he doesn't succeed his father, do something he can to ensure that someone like Ebrahim Raisi, someone he's close with or some other political ally, is able to grant him the necessary place in the regime to continue to exert a fair

deal of influence, assert his principles, and maybe he eventually will try to rise up. I think that's still a very real trajectory.

**Nick Heras:**

Nick, thank you. This is fascinating, because, what you're getting at, in my mind, this is important when we look over the horizon at what could develop in the process to succeed Khamenei, and then, in the aftermath of it, is a real inflection point, potentially, not only in the history of Islamic Republic, not only in the history of Iran, but also in the history of the region and, therefore, more broadly on global events. When you think about it, is it possible that the Islamic Republic system, as we know it, could be transformed in this process? And, what are some of the black swans that you think about that could emerge from this process?

**Nicolas Carl:**

You're absolutely right to note the immense impact that the succession is going to have on the Islamic Republic's governing system. The post-revolutionary state, as it is today, is a complete reflection of Khamenei's rule over the past three decades. And so, naturally the succession process is going to inherently change how the Islamic Republic works in extremely important ways. And so, it's important to, of course, also consider the black swans, as you say, that could emerge in this context. There's a variety, it's difficult to forecast exactly how this is going to play out, but we should be locked to the possibility that we could see things like immense internal instability in the immediate aftermath of Khamenei's death. Additionally, we could see a different governing structure emerge. There have been conversations in the past of something akin to a Supreme Leadership Council emerging, which would, naturally, host a lot of the very important actors like the president, judiciary chief, parliament speaker, as well as other very important figures.

And so, we could see a Iran move toward something that is a little bit more similar to consensus rule in the days after Khamenei's death. And then, lastly, we need to consider the possibility that there is going to be a Supreme Leader that is unexpected. This could be someone like Hassan Rouhani, or it could be someone that we are not even discussing in the context of this podcast. And so, these are just some of the courses of action we need to consider. And these are going to be some of the most immediate questions that I imagine a lot of Iran watchers in the community are going to have after we see Khamenei ultimately die.

**Nick Heras:**

Thank you very much. I'd like to ask you if you had the opportunity to go into the Oval Office and to brief President Biden and his team what to expect, potentially, in the succession of Ali Khamenei, one question that I have, based on this discussion is it seems that the next Supreme Leader might not be able to control the IRGC in the same way that Khamenei has been able to. And, in fact, Khamenei has been incredibly aggressive in his rhetoric and his actions towards the United States and its allies in the West. So, I'd like to ask you, how could it get worse after his death? Is it possible that a more aggressive policy towards the United States and the West could emerge from his successor or successors in some sort of deal that would be struck among the power centers in Iran? And, what does that then mean for how the US should think about its approach to that type of Islamic Republic?

**Nicolas Carl:**

Yeah, that is a great question and you're absolutely right. We could see a Supreme Leader that is more hard-line and aggressive than Khamenei. These guys that we're talking about, Ebrahim Raisi, Mojtaba, even Larijani and Rouhani to a much lesser extent. These are guys who are old enough to remember the old Iranian governments under the Shah, the days before the 1979 Islamic revolution. And they have now made the sacrifices and done everything they can to build up Iran as it is today. They're very committed ideologically. They consciously chose this worldview. And so, they were brought up in their very formative years in the context of war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq and a variety of other pressures, they're going to naturally have a very aggressive view toward promoting their

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ideologies. And, when we consider people like Raisi and Mojtaba, yeah, these guys based on their rhetoric, seem very inclined to pursue a very aggressive series of policies toward the United States.

And so, we shouldn't expect that we're going to see any serious change, or at least any good one, when it comes to things like Iran's involvement in proxies abroad or its missile development. And then, lastly, we have the question about what kind of role the IRGC is going to play? The Guards have really been built up and they've become what they are today under Khamenei, but it's not clear to me that, when they invest all of their political capital in supporting someone like Raisi, that they're not going to push back a little bit on him if, ultimately, he is the Supreme Leader. The next Supreme Leader could have a lot of problems trying to control the IRGC, and based on the trends that have seemed to have emerged within the guard over the past couple of years, they seem to be getting increasingly aggressive. A lot more of the hot-headed and aggressive individuals are rising to the top.

And so, so long as these guys are in power, we're going to see a very naturally aggressive IRGC, and one that could increasingly assert its aggressive policies in the Iranian political conversation. And so, these are the things that the Biden administration needs to be very, very conscious of. Some of the most dangerous courses of action include a just as aggressive, if not more aggressive Iran, when we see the next Supreme Leader.

***Nick Heras:***

Nick, thank you very much for that strong policy approach to this fascinating, but also dangerous puzzle in the Middle East. I want to thank you again for a great discussion.

***Nicolas Carl:***

Thanks so much, Nick.

***Kim Kagan:***

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Overwatch*. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit [www.understandingwar.org](http://www.understandingwar.org) to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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