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# Why Iran doesn't want a war

## At the heart of Iran's aversion to a major conflict are the domestic issues that have been preoccupying the regime

The war in Gaza has now gone where many feared it would, expanding into conflict in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and the Red Sea. With America's repeated strikes against the Houthis in Yemen this month, fears of a larger regional conflagration are steadily growing.

Present in each of those arenas is Iran — and the question of whether Tehran and its powerful military will enter a wider war.

For years, Iran has provided funding, arms or training to Hamas and Hezbollah, which are fighting Israel, and to the Houthis, who have been attacking ships in the Red Sea. Iran has also launched its own strikes in recent days in retaliation for a deadly bombing earlier this month, claiming to target Israeli spy headquarters in Iraq and the Islamic State in Syria. It has also exchanged strikes with Pakistan across their shared border.

While Iran is clearly asserting its military strength amid the widening regional turmoil, that doesn't mean its leaders want to be drawn into a wider war. They have said as much publicly, and perhaps more importantly, they have meticulously avoided taking direct military action against either Israel or the United States. The regime appears to be content for now to lean into its long-time strategy of proxy warfare: the groups they back are fighting Iran's foes and so far, neither Israel nor the United States have signalled any interest in retaliating directly.

## The delicate task of succession

At the heart of Iran's aversion to a major conflict are the domestic issues that have been preoccupying the regime. The elderly supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is seeking to secure his legacy – by overcoming political headwinds to install a like-minded successor, pursuing a nuclear weapon and ensuring the survival of the regime as an Islamist paladin dominating the Middle East – and that means not getting dragged into a

wider war.

Ayatollah Khamenei's government has been trying to keep his political opposition in check since 2022, when the Islamic Republic faced perhaps its most serious uprising since the revolution. The death of Mahsa Amini in the custody of the morality police tapped into widespread frustration with the country's leaders and triggered a national movement explicitly intent on toppling the theocracy. Using brutal methods, the mullahs' security forces regained the streets and schools, well aware that even unorganised protests can become a threat to the regime. Iran is also facing an economic crisis because of corruption, chronic fiscal mismanagement and sanctions imposed because of its nuclear infractions.

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Even under less fraught circumstances, succession would be a delicate task in Iran. The only other time the Islamic Republic has had to choose a new supreme leader since its founding in 1979 was in 1989, when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the father of the revolution, died. At the time, Ayatollah Khamenei worried that unless the regime got the process right, its Western and domestic enemies would use the vacuum at the top to overthrow the young theocracy.

Today, Iran's Assembly of Experts, a body of 88 elderly clerics, is constitutionally empowered to select the next supreme leader. Much about that process is veiled in secrecy, but recent reports in Iranian media indicate that a three-man commission that includes President Ebrahim Raisi and the Assembly members Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami and Ayatollah Rahim Tavakol is vetting candidates under Ayatollah Khamenei's supervision. While the process may be intended to look like an open search in the fractured political environment, it is almost certainly just staging for the installation of another revolutionary conservative into the job.

## The 'axis of resistance'

To Ayatollah Khamenei, a fellow religious hard-liner would be the only candidate fit to continue Iran's quest for regional dominance, or to lock in another key part of his legacy: the pursuit of a nuclear weapon. As the world has been focused on wars in Ukraine and Gaza, Tehran has been inching closer to the bomb — enriching uranium at higher levels, constructing more advanced centrifuges and improving the range and payload of ballistic missiles. At a time when the bomb seems tantalisingly

close, Ayatollah Khamenei is unlikely to jeopardise that progress by conduct that might invite a strike on those facilities.

As he oversees the succession search and Iran's nuclear ambitions, Ayatollah Khamenei appears to be content, for now, to let the Arab militias across the Middle East do what Tehran has been paying and training them to do. Iran's so-called 'axis of resistance,' which includes Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis, is at the core of the Islamic Republic's grand strategy against Israel, the United States and Sunni Arab leaders, allowing the regime to strike out at its adversaries without using its own forces or endangering its territory. The various militias and terrorist groups that Tehran nurtures have allowed it to indirectly evict America from Iraq, sustain the Assad family in Syria and, on 7 October, help inflict a deeply traumatising attack on the Jewish state.

As its proxy fighters inflame Israel's northern front through sporadic Hezbollah missile strikes, instigate attacks on US bases in Iraq and impede maritime shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, Iran is likely hoping to pressure the international community to restrain Israel. And the imperative of not expanding the Israel-Gaza war, which has thus far guided American and Israeli policy, means that neither is likely to retaliate against the Islamic Republic — only against its proxies.

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Of course, Hamas, which Israel has vowed to eliminate, is valuable to Iran. The regime has invested time and money into the group, and unlike most Islamic Republic proxies and allies, Hamas is Sunni, which helps the Shiite theocracy transcend sectarianism in the region. Liberating Palestinians, whom Iranian revolutionaries have been fond of since the Palestine Liberation Organization aided them against the Shah in 1979, is also at the core of the clerical regime's anti-imperialist, Islamist mission.

But for Ayatollah Khamenei, the home front will always prevail over problems in the neighbourhood. In the end, in the event Israel succeeds in its goal of eliminating Hamas, the clerical state would most likely concede to the group's demise, however grudgingly.

Of course, the more conflict Iran engages in – directly or indirectly – also increases the chance that a rogue or poorly judged strike could send the violence spinning out of control — in a direction Iran does not favour. History is riddled with miscalculations, and there is a real possibility that

Iran could find itself pulled into the larger conflict that it has sought to avoid.

But Iran's supreme leader is the longest-serving ruler in the Middle East precisely because of his uncanny ability to blend militancy with caution. He understands the weaknesses and strengths of his homeland when he seeks to advance the Islamic revolution beyond its borders.

In other words, Ayatollah Khamenei knows his limits — and he knows the legacy he needs to secure for the revolution to survive his passing.

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**Reuel Marc Gerecht**

Reuel Marc Gerecht was a former Iranian-targets officer in the Central Intelligence Agency. He currently is a resident scholar at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.



**Ray Takeyh**

Ray Takeyh is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.