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Iran's ailing supreme leader resorts to his only playbook as crises mount and protests erupt

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By Mostafa Salem



Hundreds of women lined up for a marathon on Iran's resort island of Kish in early December wearing matching shirts and leggings with hair tied loosely behind their backs.

In a country where ignoring dress codes could land you hefty fines and prison sentences, the runners turned their focus on the course ahead, ignoring

government directives and the complimentary headscarf placed by the race organizers in the marathon starter pack, in anticipation of violations.

In October, a band played the “Seven Nation Army” riff to a headbanging crowd on the streets of the Iranian capital Tehran in a viral moment on social media reposted by the American guitarist behind the White Stripes hit, Jack White.

This week, shopkeepers and bazaar merchants took to the streets in several Iranian cities, chanting anti-regime slogans over their inability to pay rent after the currency hit record lows. **The protests were the largest** since a 2022 nationwide uprising sparked by the death of 22-year-old **Mahsa Amini** in police custody after she was arrested for allegedly wearing her headscarf improperly.

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Despite being so far limited, the protests mark the latest chapter in growing discontent in Iran while a population quietly reclaims public spaces and personal freedoms through uncoordinated acts of defiance. The Islamic theocratic regime – long opposed to Western cultural influence – appears to be overlooking the growing civil disobedience to focus on its own survival.



People walk past a display sign at a currency exchange bureau as the value of the Iranian rial drops, in Tehran, Iran, December 20, 2025. (*Majid Asgaripour/Wana News Agency/Reuters*)

At the helm is Iran's ailing 86-year-old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who spent decades trying to fortify his regime from domestic and foreign threats, but must now contend with a failing strategy. Domestically, a frustrated youth are showing unprecedented defiance of Islamic norms, the national currency has plummeted to record lows, Iranian cities are running dry and protests are beginning to emerge. Outside its borders, its arch-enemy Israel continues lobbying the United States over further military action against the Islamic Republic.

With limited options, Khamenei is now adopting a cautious waiting game, avoiding major decisions and drastic strategies despite the mounting domestic challenges.

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"Many observers relay a sense of no one being at home; no one making any big decisions, or rather that Khamenei is not permitting any real decisions," Mohammad Ali Shabani, editor of Amwaj.media, a London-based news site focusing on Iran, Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula countries, told CNN.

"Right now, whatever decision Khamenei may make will likely feature a significant downside, so it seems as if he's sitting out any major decision," he said.

The Supreme Leader, or "*Vali-ye Faqih*" – a significant title granting its holder ultimate authority over all state and religious affairs – was reportedly incommunicado and confined to a secure underground bunker for his own safety during a 12-day war with Israel in June, a conflict that caught Tehran off guard despite decades of preparation.

Khamenei emerged after the conflict with a weakened military, a heavily damaged nuclear program, and a population rapidly losing faith in the 36-year-old policies of the once-revolutionary leader.

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In the months that followed, Iran's struggling population watched their nation grow increasingly dysfunctional with mounting crises. Persistent electricity blackouts,

record inflation and soaring unemployment have left citizens disillusioned by their powerless leadership.

Smog fills Iran's skies after the government, desperate to keep power on this winter, switched to cheaper, lower-quality fuel, that's dirtier than natural gas.



Iranian women perform a prayer for rainfall at the Saleh Shrine in Tehran on November 14, 2025, as the country suffers from severe water shortages. (AFP/Getty Images)

Twenty provinces across Iran suffered this year through the country's worst drought in more than 40 years. A mismanaged water crisis that has become so dire that President Masoud Pezeshkian has openly proposed the idea of residents **evacuating** Tehran to ease the massive strain on the capital's dwindling supplies.

Economically, the country suffers as inflation soars. The rial hit historic lows this month triggering protests by shopkeepers as basic necessities spiral out of reach. Years of heavy money printing has devalued the currency so dramatically that the government's latest budget ran into the quadrillions of rials.

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Iran's once cunning and innovative foreign policy has ground to a halt, with no diplomatic breakthrough in sight as Western powers tighten the screws through relentless sanctions. The Revolutionary Guard's network of militant proxies, long a cornerstone of Iran's regional influence and deterrence, is badly weakened amid near-daily targeting from Israel, and a key territorial advantage was lost when Syrian rebels overthrew **the Iran-aligned Assad dynasty last year.**

Weathering the pressure

The Islamic Republic of Iran has long been accustomed to crises and relentless pressure. Soon after the 1979 revolution the country became locked into an eight-year brutal war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq, but it endured that conflict with fierce determination and ultimately survived.

Inheriting a nation that was wrecked and regionally isolated by war, a younger Khamenei faced the daunting task of resurrecting his fractured economy and society. He had to manage internal dissent and rivalries within Iran's complex clerical circles, confront unyielding international economic pressures, all while preserving the revolutionary ideals of sovereignty and independence.



People wear masks on the street during daily life as air pollution continues to negatively impact life in Tehran, Iran on November 27, 2025. (*Fatemeh Bahrami/Anadolu/Getty Images*)

As Iran's current mounting crises deepen in the aftermath of yet another war and the country's political elite engage in a bitter blame game, the older Supreme Leader watches on, sticking rigidly to his familiar playbook: churning out missiles and drones, scrambling to rebuild battered regional proxies, and refusing Western preconditions for negotiations.

"Everybody in Iran wants change. The hardliners want a return to the past, the reformists a shift to the future and many moderates want any change. Nobody is happy with the status quo," said Shabani, of Amwaj.media.

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Khamenei had spent decades loyally consolidating the Islamic Revolution across all levels of Iranian society such that his inevitable end, whether by death or overthrow, will mark a monumental moment, one that could profoundly alter Iran's trajectory, depending on who comes after him.

"Undoubtedly his departure from the scene would be the most pivotal moment in the history of the Islamic Republic ... and there would be an opportunity in changing Iran's geostrategic direction, but it depends on who and what comes after Khamenei," Ali Vaez, director of the Iran Project at the International Crisis Group, said.

It remains unclear whether the establishment is set on a successor to the Supreme Leader. Analysts cite potential candidates like Mojtaba Khamenei, his son and a cleric with influence, or Hassan Khomeini, grandson of the 1979 Revolution's founder.

"The outside world has very little influence on who would come next, and it really depends on the internal dynamics and the balance of power between internal forces," Vaez said.

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"Equally important is whether the West will provide the new leadership in Iran with a way out...if the West is to be prepared to capitalize on that moment of

change in Iran it needs to start thinking about that as of now," Vaez said.



US President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hold hands during a press conference Monday after meeting at Trump's Mar-a-Lago club in Palm Beach, Florida.
(Jonathan Ernst/Reuters)

'Job unfinished'

Amid protests, civil disobedience and the simultaneous convergence of disasters, Khamenei now faces another external threat with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who flew to the US this week to press President Donald Trump on taking more aggressive action, sounding the alarm on Iran's ballistic missile program.

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Trump had repeatedly declared Iran's nuclear program destroyed, politically closing the nuclear file and removing Israel's most powerful historical justification for US support for war with Iran, Sina Toossi, a senior non-resident fellow at the Center for International policy said.

"Netanyahu's pivot to missiles should therefore be read not as the discovery of a new threat, but as an effort to manufacture a replacement *casus belli* after the nuclear argument collapsed" Toossi said.

"I hear that Iran is trying to build up again, and if they are, we're going to have to knock them down," Trump said after meeting Netanyahu, adding, "We'll knock the hell out of them."



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