

If at First You Don't Succeed, Die, Die Again

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The killing of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was a shock, but the more revealing strike came days later. When the Israeli air force struck the building in Qom associated with Iran's Assembly of Experts, reportedly while clerics were gathered to choose Khamenei's successor, the target was the regime's succession mechanism itself. Killing a leader is decapitation. Striking the institution that replaces him is strategy. For decades, analysts described Israel's shadow war with Iran as a campaign of delay: sabotage nuclear facilities, intercept weapons shipments, remove key people. What unfolded this week suggests something more ambitious. The target isn't simply leaders or weapons; it is the regime's repair continuity. Regimes endure by ensuring that shock is immediately followed by restoration. What happens when succession itself becomes dangerous?

Consider the pattern emerging across the Iranian axis. Last year, Israel killed Hezbollah's longtime leader, Hassan Nasrallah. In most terrorist organizations, such a blow would be absorbed quickly. A deputy steps forward; the chain of command stabilizes. But the deputies kept dying. Successive figures attempting to assume leadership were targeted in turn. The hierarchy that had once defined Hezbollah became provisional. This week another Hezbollah leader was reportedly killed in Lebanon. Whether by coincidence or design, the pattern has been unmistakable: Promotion itself carries risk. Now the same logic reaches Tehran. Khamenei is killed. The council responsible for choosing his successor is struck while deliberating. The system's reset mechanism becomes a vulnerability rather than a safeguard. This isn't attrition warfare; it is succession denial.

The logic is straightforward. Authoritarian systems recover from shocks by quickly re-establishing hierarchy. If that re-establishment becomes dangerous, decision-makers hesitate. Hesitation spreads uncertainty through the entire structure. A regime can survive sanctions. It can survive airstrikes. It can even survive the death of a supreme leader. What it struggles to survive is doubt about who holds authority next. That doubt ripples outward. Commanders delay orders until legitimacy is confirmed. Rival factions position themselves cautiously. Security services turn inward, searching for infiltration. Decision cycles lengthen. Under pressure, elongated decision cycles become fragility. This strategy depends on intelligence rather than brute force. In the days after the leadership strike, accounts surfaced indicating that Israeli intelligence had achieved sustained visibility into parts of Tehran's surveillance ecosystem, allowing analysts to track Iranian leaders' movements. The strike in Qom demonstrates that the ritual of continuity itself is

vulnerable to intervention. Once regimes understand that their most guarded moment—the moment after power breaks—can be observed and interrupted, they govern more cautiously, more suspiciously, more slowly. Wars used to be fought over territory. Increasingly they are fought over time—over who can see the hinge moment and move inside it.

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