

Iran's Leader at the Crossroads: Between Fundamental Principles and Pragmatism

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On February 13, 2019, Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, published¹ an "important and strategic message" to mark the 40th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution. In the message, Khamenei listed the achievements of the revolution and presented a roadmap for the implementation of the "second stage" of the revolution's path. Regarding foreign policy, Khamenei noted that the international arena is facing an "Islamic awakening" that is based on the model of resistance to American and Zionist dominance, and that the United States and its allies have failed while Iran has expanded its presence in the region. He emphasized that no problem with the US can be solved and that negotiations with it will not bear any fruit, except for material and moral damage. To a certain extent, one can see this roadmap as the political last will of the 82-year-old Khamenei, who is nearing the end of his tenure, and it indicates his determination to uphold the values of the revolution given the significant internal and external challenges that the Islamic Republic is facing.

Joe Biden's victory in the US presidential elections and the possibility of renewing the negotiations between Tehran and Washington raise anew the question of the Iranian leader's willingness to adapt the revolutionary ideology to the changing reality and adopt a compromising approach towards the US and the implementation of his country's overarching objectives. In the Iranian political system, a serious debate is already taking place regarding Iran's return to negotiations with the US. The pragmatic circles, led by President Hassan Rouhani, support in principle the renewal of dialogue with Washington. Following Biden's victory, Rouhani declared² that he would

do everything necessary to remove the sanctions imposed on Iran and to improve the condition of the Iranian people. In contrast, the hardliners, who objected to the agreement and to the president's willingness for compromise with the West in the first place, reject a return to negotiations, arguing that the US cannot be trusted.

This debate will be settled, ultimately, by Iran's leader, who will need to decide whether to permit the president to return to the negotiating table or to persist with his recalcitrant approach and insist on his demand to remove the sanctions, and even American compensation, as a precondition for renewing talks. His decision will, to a great extent, be derived from the sense of urgency given the severe economic crisis, especially against the backdrop of the COVID-19 crisis, as well as the Biden administration's willingness to agree to lift the sanctions should Iran return to its commitments in the nuclear deal. In the short term, Khamenei will also face political considerations, centered on the dilemma of whether to allow President Rouhani to advance negotiations at the current stage based on the presumption that his chances of success are greater than those of a new president, or to reject Rouhani's desire to renew the talks in order not to strengthen the standing of his supporters in the pragmatic camp in the lead-up to the presidential elections slated for June 2021.

At the base of the Iranian leader's decision on whether to renew negotiations with the US and agree to additional concessions on its nuclear program is his fundamental conception of the nuclear strategy and his basic distrust towards the US. Khamenei has never changed his view that a military nuclear threshold capability will provide Iran with effective deterrence against its enemies and consequently constitutes an indispensable "insurance policy" for the regime's continued survival. The Iranian nuclear program, which was frozen following the Islamic Revolution by order of the founder of the revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, was renewed in the 1980s in light of Iraq's efforts to develop unconventional weapons and as a lesson from Iran's failure to achieve victory in the war against Iraq.

Nor has Khamenei backed down from his stance that the nuclear program is just an excuse for the West to pressure, isolate, and weaken Iran in order to prepare the ground for the implementation of the central strategic objective: replacing the Islamic regime. In a speech that he gave to mark the 35th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution,³ Khamenei claimed that the US is

continuing its efforts to advance regime change in Iran. “American politicians claim to Iranian officials that they do not intend to change the regime in Iran,” Khamenei said, “but they are lying. They will not hesitate even for one minute if they are able to destroy the basis of the Islamic Republic.” On several occasions, Khamenei has reiterated his position that the nuclear issue is just an excuse⁴ for the US to prevent Iran’s technological advancement. On one occasion he emphasized that the West’s efforts to amplify the Iranian nuclear threat are based on a lie, as the West is afraid of an Islamic Iran, not a nuclear Iran.⁵

In the midst of the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the West, the official website of the supreme leader published an infographic titled, “The nuclear program is an excuse.”⁶ The infographic depicts nine matchsticks that symbolize claims raised by the West against Iran on various issues, such as its attitude towards Israel, its support for the “resistance front” in the region, the Iranian missile program, and human rights in Iran. These claims will, in the view of the Iranian regime, be used by the Western countries to justify their hostile policy toward the Islamic Republic even if the nuclear issue is resolved. Former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi’s agreement to dismantle his country’s nuclear program in 2003, which did not ultimately prevent his overthrow with the assistance of the Western countries, is provided by Khamenei as evidence of Iran being right in refusing to give in to the West’s demands in return for Western benefits, which are likened to a “a lollipop for children.”⁷

While the entire leadership of the Iranian regime shares basic conceptions on the nuclear issue, Khamenei and Rouhani have different views on the preferred strategy towards the US. Unlike the president, who sees in direct dialogue with the US potential for adopting a more open policy towards the West, the supreme leader maintains his fundamental position that rejects any possibility of normalizing relations between the countries. For Khamenei, the US is the source of all of the world’s evils and is responsible for the anti-Iranian policy in the region and the world. Even after approving dialogue with the US, Khamenei repeatedly demonstrated a strict approach that does not leave much room for compromise and ensures that his country will continue to stand against US President Donald Trump’s withdrawal from the nuclear deal in May 2018; that move was seen by Khamenei as proof of his basic belief that it is impossible to trust the US and agreements signed with

it, and that the nuclear program was just an excuse for the US to pressure, isolate, and weaken Iran to prepare the ground for regime change in Iran.

The differences in approach between the supreme leader and the president are also expressed in their attitudes to the benefits of lifting the sanctions. The latter recognizes that extricating the Iranian economy from the deep crisis that it has been subject to in recent years requires the removal of the sanctions, even at the cost of compromises on the nuclear issue. This recognition was expressed in Rouhani's declaration during the 2013 presidential elections that the centrifuges need to spin, as long as the lives of citizens and the economy continue to move forward.⁸ In contrast, Khamenei rejects the notion that the economic problems stem from the international sanctions, and that Iran should surrender to the West's dictates in order to remove them. Khamenei is aware of the economic distress, but adheres to his position that the solution to the crisis lies in a resistance economy⁹ that focuses on reducing Iran's dependence on external factors and on self-reliance. On several occasions, he has emphasized the need to reduce economic dependence on oil and to develop local industries as a means of achieving economic growth, and has said that a resistance economy would provide Iran with immunity to external threats and sanctions.

Khamenei's position regarding the uselessness of the attempt to remove the sanctions stood out in his declarations¹⁰ before members of the Supreme Council of Economic Cooperation, which convened on November 24, 2020. In his remarks, Khamenei said that the only way to cope with the sanctions is to neutralize them. He noted that Iran has tried for years to have them lifted through negotiations, but this has not borne fruit. Even prior to the US' withdrawal from the nuclear deal, Khamenei claimed that the removal of the sanctions on Iran following the agreement was only on paper,¹¹ and that in practice the Western countries have not demonstrated a willingness to renew their economic activity in Iran.

Despite these positions in principle, Khamenei agreed to conduct negotiations with the US and even agreed to concessions, which temporarily kept Iran away from the military nuclear threshold. His decision to permit President Rouhani to conduct negotiations on a nuclear settlement that would enable the removal of the economic sanctions expressed well his willingness to be flexible in his positions and to reach a compromise. The leader referred to his support for diplomacy as "heroic flexibility," a term

connected to the peace agreement that the second Shia Imam, Hasan ibn Ali, signed with the Umayyad Caliph Muawiyah ibn Abu Sufyan in 661 CE. In his speech¹² in September 2013 before the commanders of the Revolutionary Guard, Khamenei expressed flexibility in his stance in saying that he does not oppose correct diplomatic steps as long as Iran remains committed to its principles.

The sanctions played a significant role in Khamenei's decision to allow the negotiations, but it also stemmed from developments in the political arena in Iran and from the achievements that Iran reached in its nuclear program. Even though secret talks between Iran and the US had already begun at the end of the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the election of Rouhani as president in the summer of 2013 created an opportunity for change in Iran's policy, with backing from the leader. In the nuclear sphere, in 2012 Iran achieved significant progress that enabled it to temporarily suspend some of its nuclear activities without giving up on the strategic objective of developing a military nuclear option. In addition, the Obama administration's willingness to recognize for the first time Iran's right to enrich uranium was essential to paving the way to a diplomatic agreement.

Against the backdrop of Khamenei's conceptions, we can understand his positions regarding the possibility of renewing nuclear negotiations after Biden's victory in the US elections: a demand for the complete removal of the sanctions that were imposed by the Trump administration as a precondition for returning to the nuclear agreement and emphasizing that the nuclear deal is a *fait accompli* and is not subject to negotiation. From Khamenei's perspective, a willingness for additional concessions on the part of Iran in order to bring about the removal of the sanctions at the present time would be an admission that the "maximum pressure" policy has succeeded. Khamenei presumes that a willingness for renewed discussion on the conditions of the nuclear deal would be interpreted as an expression of weakness domestically and externally, and as surrendering to the unjust demands of the US after it unilaterally violated the agreement. Furthermore, he sees significant concessions regarding the nuclear program and the long-range missile program, which he calls an insurance policy for the survival of the regime, as a significant risk to the regime, including in relation to the challenges that it faces following the deepening of the economic crisis and the increase in popular protest.

Furthermore, Khamenei believes that the American administration's policy has proven that Iran cannot be provided with guarantees that even if the sanctions are lifted, they will not be restored in the future each time the American administration seeks to achieve additional Iranian concessions. Because it is not possible to trust the US to abide by its commitments, the only path that allows Iran to cope with the economic challenges over time is by neutralizing the sanctions and not through their removal by surrendering its principles.

This does not mean that Khamenei will not be willing in the future, as he was in the past, to engage in tactical compromises in accordance with the changing circumstances. Since the beginning of the revolution, Iranian policy has indicated a large degree of pragmatism, especially when there is a conflict between the revolutionary ideology and national interests. However, his willingness to compromise, which would mean a significant retreat from his country's overarching strategic objectives, is highly unlikely, especially considering his desire to ensure his legacy towards the end of his tenure.

Notes

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- 4 Ayatollah Khomeini's Opinion on Nuclear Issue. <https://english.khamenei.ir/Opinions/tuclear>
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- 8 Mostaghim, R., Sandals, A., & McDonnell, P.J. (2013 August 3). President-elect Hassan Rouhani may be Iran's hope for moderation. *LA Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-xpm-2013-aug-03-la-fg-iran-rouhani-20130803-story.html>

- 9 Iran's Supreme Leader Emphasizes Practical – Not Political – Economic Aims. *Bourse & Bazaar* <https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/articles/2019/5/28/iran-khamenei-emphasizes-practical-not-political-aims-for-economy>
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- 11 Eqbali, A., & Stancati, M. (2016, March 20). Iran's Supreme Leader Says Sanctions Still Affecting Country's Economy. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-supreme-leader-says-sanctions-still-affecting-countrys-economy-1458502695>
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