

Khamenei Uses Iraq War Anniversary to Reinforce Iranian Steadfastness

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Omer Carmi was a 2017 military fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

Rather than explicitly addressing Washington’s reactivation of sanctions, the Supreme Leader sought to convince domestic listeners that Iran can ‘resist’ external pressures and the latest COVID-19 wave on its own.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s speech at the annual Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) leadership gathering tends to be closely analyzed by Iran watchers for good reason. As with his [yearly Nowruz speeches \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/khameneis-nowruz-speech-in-a-time-of-coronavirus\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/khameneis-nowruz-speech-in-a-time-of-coronavirus), he often uses the event to signal domestic and foreign audiences about his approach to international affairs. Most famously, the emphasis on “heroic flexibility” in his 2013 speech foreshadowed Tehran’s signing of an interim nuclear agreement with the P5+1 a few weeks later and the adoption of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015. [Last year’s speech \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-supreme-leader-putting-heroic-flexibility-aside\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-supreme-leader-putting-heroic-flexibility-aside) took a different tone—Khamenei expressed confidence that the regime could cope with U.S. pressure and warned that Washington’s goal was to eliminate the Islamic Republic’s revolutionary character and force it to conform with the American global order. In doing so, he essentially previewed months of Iranian defiance on regional and nuclear issues.

This year, the setting changed once again. Iran is in the midst of a third wave of coronavirus with thousands of infections per day, and the renewed outbreak apparently convinced the regime to cancel Khamenei’s in-person speech before a large IRGC gathering. Instead, he chose to deliver a video address on September 21 as the main event of “Sacred Defense” week—the anniversary of the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War and a speech that is usually given by the president.

Typically, Khamenei’s speeches directly convey his response to [recent episodes in Iran’s relations with the United States \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/when-the-ayatollah-cried-mouse\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/when-the-ayatollah-cried-mouse) and the rest of the world. Yesterday, however, he refrained from even mentioning the most recent and glaring episode,

namely, Washington's **[September 19 declaration \(https://www.state.gov/the-return-of-un-sanctions-on-the-islamic-republic-of-iran/\)](https://www.state.gov/the-return-of-un-sanctions-on-the-islamic-republic-of-iran/)** that UN sanctions are back in force—perhaps his attempt to minimize domestic pressures that might **[compel the regime to retaliate \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-cautious-response-to-washingtons-snapback-threat\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-cautious-response-to-washingtons-snapback-threat)** for that move. Yet the manner in which he spoke of the war with Iraq four decades ago made clear that he wanted to apply its lessons to Iran's current situation and counter efforts to “distort” the past.

Reminding Iranians that the international community wants to overthrow the Islamic Republic. Khamenei explained that global superpowers orchestrated the 1980-1988 war, backing Saddam Hussein in an attempt to overthrow Iran's new revolutionary regime and create a weak and “dependent” government. According to him, there was no “Eastern” or “Western” bloc driving this objective—it was a joint effort to destabilize Iran. For example, he quoted former Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini as saying that “the U.S. was worse than the Soviet Union, the Soviet Union worse than the U.S., and England worse than both of them.” Such quotes were likely Khamenei's way of signaling that Iran's current discord is not just with Washington, perhaps implicitly criticizing European leaders for their recent statements against Iran's abuse of human rights.

Reiterating that resistance is the only way to deter the enemy. Khamenei reminded his audience that before the Iran-Iraq War, the country had suffered repetitive losses when the Qajari and Pahlavi dynasties held power. Even when Iran declared its neutrality during the Second World War, he argued, it was occupied and divided by the Allies, with Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin showing no respect for the country's sovereignty or leaders during their 1943 summit in Tehran. In contrast to those losses and humiliations, he declared, the war with Iraq showed the enemy the true “cost of aggression” and provided enduring security to Iran. “When a nation shows that it has energy and power to defend itself,” he said, the aggressor “realizes that it's not in his best interest” to attack the Islamic Republic. For him, the lesson was clear—the world interprets independence and resistance as power and respect.

Still allowing for ideological concessions. Despite this defiant tone, Khamenei also reminded listeners about his predecessor's decision to accept a ceasefire with Iraq in 1988. At the time, the late leader described this step as akin to “drinking a cup of poison,” but he nevertheless took it in the interests of “regime expediency.” By praising that decision as wise and prudent, Khamenei seemingly preserves the regime's longstanding approach of leaving at least some room for compromise on major issues if its hold on power is at stake.

Preaching caution and obedience in response to coronavirus. Acknowledging the seriousness of Iran's current outbreak, Khamenei demanded that listeners avoid processions or large gatherings during the upcoming Shia festival of Arbain, instead expressing their devotion at home. He urged them to listen to the government's guidelines on fighting the pandemic, noting that current death rates are equivalent to a situation in which planes carrying 300 passengers are crashing every other day. That analogy may have been a reference to the accidental U.S. shootdown of Iran Air Flight 655 in 1988, a disaster in which 290 people were killed—perhaps his way of taking another potshot at Washington's regional track record while simultaneously arguing that external challenges from the United States are small in comparison to the pandemic's potential domestic threat.

Noting that hardships can lead to new opportunities and innovative solutions. As he often does in major speeches, Khamenei sought to leaven all these challenges with a dash of hope. “The Iranian nation's Sacred Defense brought blessings too,” he stated, noting that the bitter war against Saddam helped Iran develop new technologies and weapons, consolidate the newborn Islamic Republic, and elevate seminal young leaders such as Qasem Soleimani, the IRGC Qods Force commander killed earlier this year. He insisted that while “some things are seemingly impossible, if we make an effort, they are possible.” This lesson—learned the hard way via eight years of existential warfare with Iraq—was probably the ayatollah's principal message at a time when pressures on Iran are

increasing by the day.

Omer Carmi, a former visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, previously led IDF analytical and research efforts pertaining to the Middle East. ❖

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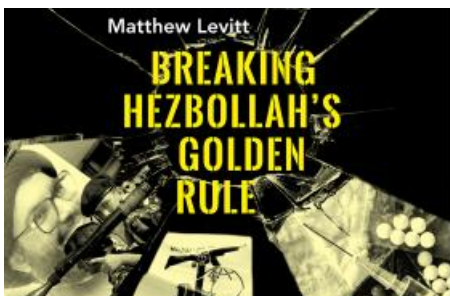
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