

Khamenei's Nowruz Speech in a Time of Coronavirus

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



Brief Analysis

His remarks focused on inspiring the nation to stay strong in the face of the crisis while refusing to trust U.S. aid, though without mentioning his normal laundry list of foreign policy issues.

Every year, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei delivers a speech on the first day of the new Persian year. Normally held before masses of worshippers in the holy city of Mashhad, the Nowruz address has become a litmus test for his thoughts on both foreign policy and domestic affairs.

This year, however, the speech was somewhat grim rather than festive given [the country's ongoing coronavirus outbreak \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-coronavirus-in-iran-part-1-clerical-factors\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-coronavirus-in-iran-part-1-clerical-factors). Instead of addressing a huge crowd at the Imam Reza Shrine, Khamenei gave his remarks by television, in a secluded room with no live audience (presumably from Tehran, where his office and residence are located). The speech was also delivered on March 22, a day later than normal, and framed as a commemoration of Eid al-Mabas, the anniversary of the day Muhammad was chosen as a prophet—seemingly another regime attempt to downplay the non-Islamic holiday of Nowruz.

More important, unlike past speeches—which emphasized Iran's problems with the West, glorified its economic progress in spite of U.S. sanctions, and so forth—this year's edition focused on the pandemic, with no reference to foreign policy issues such as [the nuclear program \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iaea-reports-renew-questions-about-irans-nuclear-ambitions\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iaea-reports-renew-questions-about-irans-nuclear-ambitions), developments in [Iraq \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/giving-iraqs-next-prime-minister-space-to-succeed\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/giving-iraqs-next-prime-minister-space-to-succeed) and [Syria \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-crisis-in-idlib\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-crisis-in-idlib), or "resistance" against Israel (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-campaign-between-wars-how-israel-rethought-its-strategy-to-counter-iran>). In an effort to bolster the people's morale and dissuade them from accepting repeated American offers of help, Khamenei was clear—one can only find comfort in God, and in developing the nation's self-sufficiency.

A SHIP IN STORMY WATERS

On the eve of Nowruz, the Supreme Leader usually prepares the ground for his main speech by issuing a message summarizing the past year and marking the start of a new year. In the past, these messages focused on Iran's successes and its endurance in the face of pressures and hardships.

Yet Khamenei's tone was different this time around. He noted that the past year was a "tumultuous" and "difficult" one, saying it "began with the floods and ended with the coronavirus." Indeed, Iran's challenges were legion: massive floods struck almost every province in 2019, resulting in dozens of casualties and billions of dollars in damage; U.S. economic pressure on the regime escalated, including formal designation of both the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Khamenei himself; widespread **protests broke out (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/khameneis-domestic-and-foreign-response-options-to-the-protests>)** following an increase in gasoline prices, and then again after the IRGC attempted to cover up its shutdown of a Ukrainian passenger plane, with both episodes spurring the regime to kill hundreds of protestors and shut down Internet services; and lastly, Tehran **lost its most prominent engine (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-irgc-post-soleimani-political-and-security-implications-at-home-and-abr>)** for regional intervention and influence, Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani.

In addition to his Nowruz messaging, Khamenei's office published a poster illustrating Iran as a ship in stormy seas fighting to reach the coast. Khamenei explained that the "captain" of this ship is the "Imam of the Age," who will guide the nation to the shore of salvation and help its people overcome the crisis.

PATIENCE—AND RESISTANCE

Although Khamenei's Nowruz speech emphasized a traditional line of thought—that patience is key to overcoming hardships—he clarified that Iran should not sit and wait for events to happen, but rather stand up, resist the enemy, and correct its course along the way. Continuing this logic, he explained that reaching out to Washington for aid is not the appropriate answer to the coronavirus. In response to the Trump administration's stated willingness to send Iran medicine for fighting the pandemic, he questioned Washington's ability to help even if it truly wanted to: "Based on the words of your own officials, you have [medical] shortages, so use what you have for your own patients." He then peddled absurd conspiracy theories about U.S. biological/genetic warfare against Iran, warning his listeners that any medicines sent by Washington cannot be trusted because they might spread the virus further or cause it to remain.

In place of foreign aid, Khamenei called on the nation to rely on its enormous local capabilities. He also reminded the public to observe strict guidelines such as the cancelation of all religious gatherings, noting that these measures are unprecedented but "unavoidable." These sentiments echoed his Nowruz eve message, where he spent a great deal of time praising the nation's solidarity and glorifying the work of Iranian medical personnel, calling them "Jihadists" and noting that those who died have achieved a "high rank of death and martyrdom in the way of God." Likewise, his office published a poster earlier this month comparing medical staff fighting the epidemic to soldiers who faced biochemical warfare in the Iran-Iraq War.

SURGE IN PRODUCTION

Whenever Khamenei speaks about hardships, he usually instructs his audience to create an opportunity out of a challenge. His Nowruz messages followed suit, reiterating that a nation becomes powerful by overcoming difficulties, not through "self-indulgence and simply seeking comfort." Per his worldview, power is not just a manifestation of a nation's military might, but also a combination of economic growth, social stability, political cohesion, scientific progress, and ideology.

To bolster Iran’s quest for such power, Khamenei sets the focus for each year through annual slogans announced during Nowruz. Unsurprisingly, almost every slogan of the past decade has related to Iran’s “resistance economy” in the face of sanctions. Last year’s was “Boosting Production,” an effort that increased the country’s production capabilities and outputs, according to Khamenei. Yet he also noted that this spike in productivity was less than one-tenth of what the country needed, and hence did not have major effects on the lives of most citizens.

Accordingly, he declared that this year will focus on a further “Surge in Production,” ordering officials to ensure that this one creates “tangible change” in the lives of the people. After admitting that harsh sanctions have inflicted “some damage” on the country, he said they also made Iran think about relying on its domestic resources. He then promised that if production moves forward, Iran’s domestic market will help bring an end to the economic problems and increase the country’s self-sufficiency. Such remarks are no surprise given Tehran’s current predicament—Khamenei no doubt realizes that after the pandemic crisis fades away, the regime **will still have to cope with a failed economy (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-new-budget-is-tight-but-not-tight-enough>)** at a time when popular support is hitting record lows.

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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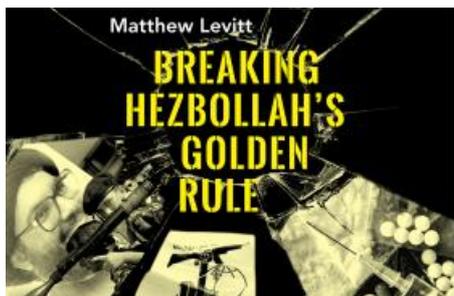
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