

# Khamenei's Domestic and Foreign Response Options to the Protests

by [Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



Brief Analysis

## The Supreme Leader faces tough choices about who to blame for the protests, and what impact they should have on policy toward the United States.

**A**s Tehran attempts to contain ongoing demonstrations sparked by its November 15 decision to [raise gasoline prices \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-gasoline-protests-regime-unpopular-but-resilient\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-gasoline-protests-regime-unpopular-but-resilient), many of its options pose dilemmas for the regime and run the risk of backfiring. On the tactical side, for instance, shutting down the Internet makes it more difficult for protestors to organize, but also leaves people with more time on their hands, likely spurring at least some of them to go out into the street—a phenomenon seen in Egypt in 2011, when demonstrations grew significantly after Internet restrictions were imposed. This PolicyWatch focuses on two other sets of choices that have come before Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and other hardliners since the unrest began: who to blame for the protests, and which options to pursue toward the United States.

## WHO TO BLAME?

In order to spin the protests in his favor and safeguard the regime's interests, Khamenei has three main choices for where to lay blame. Hardliners have already begun aiming at these targets, though each option carries political risks:

**The United States and other outside powers.** Brig. Gen. Gholamreza Soleimani, commander of Iran's Basij militia forces, has described the protests as "America's plot." This fits with Khamenei's longstanding preoccupations about supposed U.S. sponsorship of color revolutions abroad. For example, the Supreme Leader has previously criticized demonstrations in Venezuela, Hong Kong, Iraq, and Lebanon, claiming that protestors there are doing Washington's

bidding.

The risk of pursuing this line of reasoning is that it suggests Iranians are susceptible to being misled by Washington. Although Khamenei's followers have long argued this is the case in other contexts—such as warning the public about interacting with Americans or other foreigners—doing so now could anger the many Iranians who are furious about the price increases and see protests as a legitimate response. The regime can ill afford to stoke even broader public cynicism and distaste toward its revolutionary rhetoric.

**Delegitimized opposition groups.** This is the target Khamenei took aim at in his November 17 speech, stating, “All malicious centers in the world, which work against us, have encouraged these actions. These centers, ranging from the sinister and malicious Pahlavi household to the evil and criminal *monafeqeen* cult [i.e., the Mujahedin-e Khalq, or MEK], are constantly encouraging such actions in social networks.” This statement was remarkable because Khamenei's camp had previously dismissed these groups for years and argued that they are utterly without influence. As a result of the speech, the MEK can now crow about how it is a factor in Iranian politics—a claim few analysts would accept. Indeed, Khamenei may be counting on his perception that the group is not widely supported at home or abroad as a way of delegitimizing the protests.

**The Rouhani government.** Judiciary chief Ebrahim Raisi, often described as a leading candidate to succeed Khamenei, has criticized President Hassan Rouhani's camp for not adequately explaining the case for increasing fuel prices. “One of the prerequisites for this project,” he stated recently, “is the persuasion of public opinion and elite consensus...There is an urgent need today for the media, economists, ministries, and informed public officials to explain the policies to the people.” Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi, a member of the Majlis leadership board, added, “The way this policy was implemented was not correct, and the matter should have been clarified for the public beforehand.”

In fact, the possibility of fuel rationing has been widely discussed at least since August, when the government mandated the use of a “gasoline smart card.” At the time, Oil Minister Bijan Zanganeh noted on state television that no one would take the requirement seriously unless rationing was introduced. Furthermore, if the government acknowledges that the ground was not properly prepared, the public's most likely rejoinder would be, “Okay, then rescind the increases and let's discuss them.” Such reversals are a frequent practice in countries that experience these kinds of protests. Yet Khamenei has already put his personal prestige behind the price increases by backing them publicly, so he would be loath to admit he was wrong.

Tehran's most likely path is to blame all three of these camps. In practice, this probably means different regime figures offering various takes on how much blame to assign to each one.

## POLICY OPTIONS TOWARD THE UNITED STATES

**R**egarding potential actions—or inaction—toward U.S. interests, the protests could steer Tehran toward one of three paths:

**After suppressing the protests, agree to talks.** This was the regime's approach after the mass unrest that followed the rigged presidential election of 2009. While those protests were still active, the Ahmadinejad government agreed to send 1,200 kilograms of low-enriched uranium abroad, where Russia and France would fabricate it into fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor. The deal had been worked out in great detail, in part to meet the U.S. and allied interest of lengthening the time Iran would need to develop a nuclear weapon were it so minded. Although Khamenei later rejected the agreement—presumably from some combination of general suspicions about the United States and greater confidence as the protests faded away—the general principle remains in force today, namely, that Iran does not give in to pressure, it gives in to great pressure.

**Slap back harder.** If Iran decides to resume its recent string of regional military provocations

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/operating-in-the-gray-zone-to-counter-iran>), it may do so as a way of changing the conversation from domestic problems to foreign policy. To the extent that Khamenei sees the United States as responsible for the demonstrations, however, he may also feel the need to show Washington that it will pay a price for stirring up trouble in Iran. On November 20, *Kayhan* newspaper's editor-in-chief Hossein Shariatmadari—a close advisor to Khamenei who often expresses opinions that are even more hardline than the Supreme Leader's—wrote that Iran had a legitimate right to retaliate against the United States, Israel, France, and Saudi Arabia for what he saw as their stirring up the protests: “The enemies have lived in a glass house, and their sensitive and strategic military and economy centers are easily accessible. It is possible to bring them to their knees through imposing heavy financial and military damage.”

Since as early as May, Khamenei and Rouhani have both emphasized the need to gain leverage against the United States. This imperative was apparently the reason behind this summer's attacks on foreign ships in the Persian Gulf and major oil facilities in Saudi Arabia. Those attacks were so well executed that regional powers and the United States gained a newfound respect for Iran's capabilities. If Tehran orders further attacks, however, they would be measured against this new, higher standard, raising a dilemma for the regime: if new attacks are not as successful as previous ones, Iran would be seen as less of a threat. For the time being, then, Tehran may decide to keep trumpeting its capabilities in public without actually using them.

**Wait it out.** Various domestic factors may convince the regime that it has enough time to ride out the unrest without taking drastic action at home or abroad. The economy is in bad shape but seems to have bottomed out, with GDP no longer falling. More important, job creation is remarkably robust, and unemployment—a major driver of discontent—is on its way down. Addressing unemployment is not as difficult as it used to be because Iran's “baby bust” is the cohort currently entering the labor force. That is, the number of citizens turning age twenty this year is around half the figure seen during the mass protests of 2009, so even modest job creation could make a big dent in the number of disaffected young people taking to the streets.

Foreign factors might convince the regime to stand pat as well. For instance, Khamenei may believe that President Trump and his “maximum pressure” policy will no longer be in place after next year's U.S. election.

Khamenei's track record strongly suggests his preference is to slap back. Yet on numerous occasions he has instead chosen to be cautious when persuaded that bold action could bring a firm response.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WASHINGTON

**U.** S. policymakers should be ready for any of these eventualities. This means adopting a dual approach of heightened vigilance against potential attacks and detailed planning for diplomatic initiatives.

To be sure, resuming talks on nuclear issues or other matters would have many pitfalls. Iran's practice has been to treat any past concession that the United States or other parties mention publicly as carved in stone—in other words, it insists that such concessions constitute the starting point for all further talks, without Iran making any quid pro quo. For example, the Iranian interpretation of the letter that French president Emmanuel Macron urged Trump to sign in order to schedule a telephone conversation with Rouhani during the UN General Assembly is that the White House was offering to lift all of the sanctions it had imposed. Budging Tehran from that view may be difficult.

Also well worth debating is how U.S. officials should characterize any expressed Iranian willingness to talk. The Trump administration's likely instinct would be to paint such outreach as vindication of its maximum pressure policy. Yet this reaction could complicate efforts to forge a broad international consensus in talks about a revised nuclear agreement, since other powers may be reluctant to characterize “maximum pressure” as a success. Consensus matters because the best way to get Iran to accept terms it dislikes is to show it that international and regional powers have taken a united stance. Even if talks are limited to bilateral discussions between the United

States and Iran, the leverage created by international consensus is a powerful argument for Washington to consult widely with other governments and take their views into account.

*Patrick Clawson is the Morningstar Senior Fellow and director of research at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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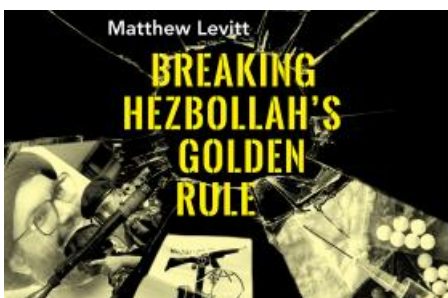
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