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PolicyWatch 3217

Rouhani's Shifting Argument for Preserving the JCPOA

by [Mehdi Khalaji](#)

Nov 14, 2019

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Brief Analysis

Facing grim prospects in Iran's upcoming elections, the president's camp is trying to convince hardliners that they need to keep the nuclear deal alive in order to continue expanding their military arsenal and intervening abroad.

In a speech on November 11, President Hassan Rouhani took a new tack in the continual defense of his government's signature foreign policy achievement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. "It has been years since the UN banned Iran from purchasing weapons, and we cannot sell our weapons," he noted. "But if we hold to the JCPOA, the weapons sanction will be lifted next year, and we can easily purchase and sell weapons"—an accurate description of Security Council Resolution 2231. He also refuted the hardliners who have been pushing Tehran to withdraw from the JCPOA: "We can leave the nuclear agreement, but UN Security Council sanctions against Iran will return. Our interests are in remaining in the JCPOA. We hold on to the JCPOA, but meanwhile reduce our commitments step by step."

With such comments, Rouhani is no longer presenting the deal as Iran's route to prosperity, but rather as a means to achieve the security objectives that are so dear to the regime's most radical elements—not to mention the growing number of voters who share their views on those matters. Although the president has discussed this idea in other remarks over the past year, it now appears to be his main line of defense ahead of upcoming elections in 2020-21.

IRAN'S BIGGEST POLITICAL FOOTBALL?

When Rouhani mentions "hardliner" critics of the JCPOA, he is referring to those who opposed not only the deal

While it is not the very idea of negotiating such an agreement in the first place. These critics did not want the government to pursue a deal that would gradually lift sanctions on Iran, not even the major sanctions. Although Rouhani's rivals are as frustrated as he is about the extent to which sanctions are hurting the economy, they believe that seeking relief within the JCPOA framework would go against their interests in two ways: by gifting the president with a strong social power base for the remainder of his presidency, and by boosting all the factions who have supported him, including reformists.

The hardliners and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei himself have made enormous efforts to push these factions out of the political loop over the past few years, at great cost to their own domestic legitimacy. If Rouhani and his allies are able to score significant economic and military gains by staying within the JCPOA, reformist leaders and technocrats may be able to win elections, return to key political and economic posts in force, and sideline conservatives once again.

Khamenei's approach to this challenge has been twofold. On one hand, he has continuously criticized the JCPOA, warning about the untrustworthiness of Westerners and castigating "naive" Iranian officials who believe that negotiating or normalizing relations with America would ease the pressure on Tehran. On the other hand, he played the definitive role in Iran's decision to move forward with the JCPOA in 2015 and remain party to the agreement after the U.S. withdrawal last year, despite what hardliners saw as a weak European response to the Trump administration's actions. He does not publicly acknowledge this role—his official position is that he neither supports nor calls for formally leaving the JCPOA. Yet his unspoken assent was necessary all the same.

Khamenei's devoted hardline supporters have long believed that due to his unique domestic position and great responsibilities, he is not always able to reveal what he really thinks about a given policy issue or make direct orders according to those principles. Consequently, these followers tend to express more radical views than he does, serving as an unofficial mouthpiece of sorts that can say what he would say if his hands were not tied by "regime expediency."

For example, Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor-in-chief of *Kayhan* newspaper, is among those who say they are loyal to Khamenei but always take a more radical public stance than him—and are never reproached by the Supreme Leader for doing so. Shariatmadari's major media outlets have unconditionally attacked Rouhani's nuclear policy and explicitly called for withdrawal from the JCPOA since the U.S. departure.

Most recently, Shariatmadari's November 12 editorial in *Kayhan* reacted to Rouhani's speech by calling him "the loser" of nuclear diplomacy, not the "hero" and "expert" he makes himself out to be. According to this argument, putting hope in the JCPOA has marginalized Iran's "[resistance economy](#)," which many hardliners see as the only realistic option for resolving the country's economic problems. The editorial also excoriated the JCPOA's devastating ramifications for Iran's nuclear program, despite Rouhani's pledge that the agreement would save both the program and the economy at the same time. In Shariatmadari's view, the president's speech was a desperate effort to recover his lost popularity, which has supposedly plummeted "from 24 million votes" to "less than 240,000" if elections were held today.

ROUHANI REACHING OUT TO THE IRGC

Although Shariatmadari's vote projections are laughably exaggerated, Rouhani's popularity and power have indeed been in freefall. The president has been unable to reverse the systematic corruption in government and state-related networks, allowing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to assume even greater control over the economy. He has also failed to fulfill the campaign promises he made about establishing a more politically and culturally open society. Meanwhile, Tehran has continued the defiant regional policy that is largely responsible for the country's heavy financial costs and international isolation. Last but not least, the JCPOA has failed to ease

sanctions, particularly since the U.S. withdrawal.

In light of these problems, Iran watchers generally believe that neither the so-called “moderates” represented by Rouhani nor the so-called “reformists” represented by former president Mohammad Khatami have the slightest chance to win next year’s parliamentary election or the 2021 presidential vote. Some opposition voices seem to agree with this assessment—in an August interview, top reformist strategist Saeed Hajjarian argued that the elections would be a chance for hardliners to compete with each other, not with moderates.

Whether Rouhani feels betrayed by his constituency or is simply recognizing who really holds the levers of power, he has recently focused on reaching out to the hardliner power circles that have pressured him since the day he took office, in particular by appealing to their emphasis on security issues. He knows that state propaganda and related efforts by Khamenei have made security a major concern for the majority of Iranians, who have observed regional developments such as the Islamic State’s emergence with worried eyes. Stoking such concerns helps the regime justify its defiant policies in the Middle East, rationalize its expanding missile program, and rehabilitate the IRGC’s domestic image as the main guardian of Iran’s public safety and territorial integrity.

Rouhani has been playing the same card after failing to meet voters’ economic expectations, attempting to shift the discourse by addressing their other major concern, security. Specifically, he is emphasizing the JCPOA’s role in enabling Iran to resume purchasing arms soon—his way of tacitly warning people that dissolving the agreement may weaken the country’s military capabilities and jeopardize its security.

He is sending a similar message to his many critics within the IRGC: that they should avoid any real attempts at pulling Iran out of the JCPOA, since the resultant UN snapback sanctions would harm them more than they imagine. His speech implicitly warned the Guards that if they want to continue their regional military adventurism, they need money and weapons, and acquiring both would be even more difficult without the nuclear deal.

In this sense, the JCPOA has become the palpating heart of the Rouhani government amid the dysfunction of its other organs. It is not just a key foreign policy issue, but the main source of political survival for his faction—one whose failure would force him and his allies to say adieu to power for years to come.

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