

Iran's Supreme Leader Putting 'Heroic Flexibility' Aside

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Brief Analysis

Khamenei's latest high-profile speech may indicate his growing confidence that Iran can cope with U.S. pressure and set a high bar for resuming talks.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's annual speech at the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps leadership gathering is closely analyzed by Iran watchers for good reason. As with his [yearly Nowruz speech](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-most-important-speech-of-the-year-in-iran-hostile-to-the-west-no-conces) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-most-important-speech-of-the-year-in-iran-hostile-to-the-west-no-conces>), he often uses the IRGC event as an occasion to signal domestic and foreign audiences about his approach to international affairs. Most famously, his 2013 speech—delivered just weeks before Tehran reached an interim nuclear agreement with the P5+1—noted that he was not against “proper and reasonable moves in diplomacy,” declaring that this type of “heroic flexibility” is “necessary and good in certain circumstances.” After months of inconsistent messages from the Supreme Leader, many in Iran and abroad saw this as his implicit thumbs-up for the government to negotiate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Six years have passed since that compromise, and the Supreme Leader had a more aggressive message to deliver this time around. Most of his October 2 speech focused on recounting the IRGC's achievements and offering old and new ideas for increasing its potential—an ominous subject given the degree to which IRGC elements and their proxies have helped destabilize the Middle East so far. And when talking about the ongoing crisis with the United States and the prospects for new talks, Khamenei reiterated the view he has expressed in recent months—namely, that Washington's “maximum pressure” policy is destined to fail. Far from bringing Iran to its knees, he argued, U.S. policy is only inflicting “problems” on America.

SCUTTLING ROUHANI AND MACRON'S UN INITIATIVE

The night before the Supreme Leader's IRGC address, *Politico* reported that French president Emmanuel Macron had nearly brokered a compromise agreement between President Trump and Iranian president Hassan Rouhani during the recent UN General Assembly meetings, only for Tehran to pull out and refuse the offer. Rouhani referred to Macron's plan in a cabinet meeting held shortly before Khamenei's speech, explaining that the French proposal—

which allegedly included the removal of all U.S. sanctions imposed since 2017—“was based on our principles,” which he described as eliminating U.S. sanctions and allowing “Iran’s commercial activities to happen freely.” He blamed Washington for the proposal’s failure, saying it fell apart because of inconsistencies in U.S. positions. He then promised he would be ready for “any kind of self-sacrifice” in order to preserve the nation’s rights—his version of Khamenei’s “heroic flexibility.”

During his own speech a few hours later, Khamenei claimed that Europe’s attempts to arrange a meeting between the presidents were part of a U.S. plot to create a “symbolic image of an Iranian surrender.” Indeed, despite their mutual criticism of Washington, it is not clear if Khamenei and Rouhani are on the same page regarding the timetable or terms for new talks. Ever since the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA last year, the Supreme Leader has repeatedly lashed out at Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, accusing them of being fooled by the Americans during the original nuclear talks and arguing that Iran should not have negotiated with the Obama administration in the first place. If Khamenei did order the government to reject Macron’s proposal, it would hardly be the first time—for example, witness his scuttling of a deal that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad bargained with the United States, France, and Russia in 2009, which would have shipped out most of Iran’s low-enriched uranium in exchange for reactor fuel.

RESISTANCE AS A NEGOTIATION STRATEGY

One thing Rouhani and Khamenei do seem to agree on is that Iranian “resistance” against the United States and Europe has improved the country’s leverage in [negotiating the framework of future negotiations](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/is-iran-negotiating-its-way-to-negotiations) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/is-iran-negotiating-its-way-to-negotiations>). As Rouhani recently put it, “nobody would have come to meet us in New York” if Iran had not taken confrontational measures such as shooting down a U.S. drone earlier this year and [advancing the nuclear program](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/moving-the-goal-posts-irans-uranium-enrichment-program) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/moving-the-goal-posts-irans-uranium-enrichment-program>).

Likewise, recent editorials in the weekly magazine published by Khamenei’s office have highlighted the need to further improve Tehran’s position before recommencing talks, explaining that it must not negotiate from a position of weakness. Accordingly, they argue, “today is not the time” to go back to the table.

Following this line of thought, Khamenei addressed the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran during his October 2 speech, ordering AEOI officials to continue reducing the country’s commitment to the nuclear deal until “we reach the desired results.” Iran has already taken [three steps](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-six-potential-nuclear-steps) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-six-potential-nuclear-steps>) that either threaten or violate the JCPOA: exceeding the amount of low-enriched uranium it is permitted to store; increasing its level of enrichment beyond 3.67 percent; and restarting some of its advanced centrifuge R&D. According to the AEOI, the regime will take a fourth step in early November, which may include resuming enrichment at the heavily protected Fordow mountain facility.

A similar mindset has been evident in the regime’s rhetoric about regional “resistance.” Earlier this week, Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani appeared on Khamenei’s website for his first-ever one-on-one video interview, where he glorified the “victories” Iran and its allies have achieved against Israel and the United States over the years. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah was interviewed as well, and expounded the same themes. For their part, IRGC leaders used their annual gathering to emphasize the power of resistance and warn that any attack on Iran would be met with a fierce response, with no limit in magnitude or targets. Khamenei then urged them to carry resistance beyond the boundaries of the Middle East. “Sometimes the country’s strategic depth is even more important than the most urgent needs,” he said, lashing out at Iranians who chant “no to Gaza, no to Lebanon” when criticizing the regime’s foreign interventions.

A “NORMAL” COUNTRY OR A REVOLUTIONARY ONE?

As in the past, Khamenei’s greatest concern about engaging with the United States seems to lie in the implications that such outreach might hold for Iran’s identity and the nature of “the revolution.” According to his IRGC speech, Washington is adamant that Iran give up its revolutionary character and become a “normal state” that conforms with the American global order.

Perhaps aware of what it may take to keep resisting such change, Khamenei finished his speech on an optimistic note, seemingly hoping to convince the public that all will be well if they can just keep enduring U.S. pressure for a while longer. After claiming the economy is growing in a way that “will gradually impact the people’s lives,” he stated that Washington’s current policy is only a short-term tactical problem. He even argued that U.S. pressure will strategically help Iran in the end by breaking the country’s reliance on oil revenues—a goal that the government has never been able to meet on its own.

Tehran’s biggest source for optimism may be its belief that Washington and Europe are eager to resume negotiations. Rouhani highlighted this point in his cabinet speech, and Khamenei’s website has emphasized how President Trump keeps asking to open talks only to be rejected again and again by the Supreme Leader. This perception may lead Tehran to set a higher bar for reentering talks, and further convince it that the **resistance strategy is working** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-push-for-regime-change-in-saudi-arabia-and-washington>).

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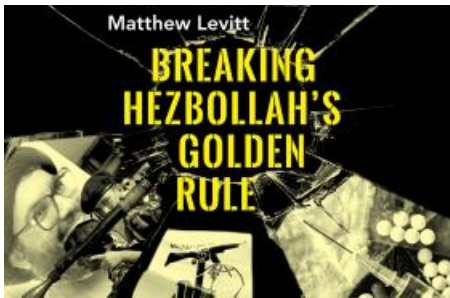
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