

What Does Iran's Supreme Leader Expect from the Next U.S. President?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Ayatollah Khamenei is wholly focused on preserving the political system he has so painstakingly built, but trends suggest a shaky Iranian future regardless of who wins the U.S. election.

In 2021, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei will turn eighty-two, making it plausible that the next American president will be the last in his lifetime. This possibility explains why he views the imminent U.S. election in such personal terms. The incoming administration could mark his final chance to resolve fundamental bilateral disputes to what he sees as his country's advantage. Unlike in the past, however, he has refrained from commenting on the current contest, including what each candidate has promised with regard to Iran and the broader Middle East.

KHAMENEI'S MAIN CONCERNs

The Supreme Leader's top priorities are as follows:

- The survival of the Islamic Republic as a political order in Iran and its resilience in fighting anti-regime forces at home and abroad
- The regime's resistance to any transformative ideological or political reform from within, and to any deviation from the "revolutionary" path characterized by (1) anti-Americanism, (2) anti-Israelism, and (3) gender inequality symbolized mainly by compulsory wearing of the hijab.

The last two ideological principles can be regarded as a manifestation of the first: that the United States is the "Great Satan" not because of what it does, but what it is, namely, a product and leading proponent of modern civilization, culture, and politics. As for Israel, its salient anti-Islamist sentiment and alignment with modern American values

make it a “cancerous tumor” in Tehran’s view—the most tragic consequence of Western civilization for the Muslim world. Gender equality is a hallmark of Western secular liberal culture, a pillar of citizenship and human rights, and thus the essence of supposed U.S.-led efforts against the Muslim world and Iranian society.

Ironically, though, Khamenei’s revolutionary path actually leads to America—that is, by seeking a stable, safe, and meticulously measured relationship with the United States, he believes he can guarantee the survival of both the regime and its revolutionary content and orientation. Tehran’s objective is therefore a scandalous paradox: deal with America to remain anti-American. To address this dilemma, Khamenei formulated his strategy of “neither war nor peace.” In his view, direct confrontation with the United States would end in regime change, while normalizing relations would lead to the regime’s ideological and political transformation. The first option is unaffordable and the second unacceptable, so he has sought to take a third path between the two.

ENDURING SUSPICIONS OF REGIME CHANGE

U. S. presidents have generally denied that they have a regime change policy, but Tehran has never believed these statements. The suspicions of the Islamic Republic’s leaders derive first and foremost from America’s four decades of consistently promoting democracy and human rights in Iran while seriously supporting certain opposition groups, human rights projects, and NGOs inside and outside the country. The United States is also currently enforcing a series of painful sanctions on Iranian officials, institutions, and businesses for their role in violating human rights. Last but not least, Washington has waged a soft war against the regime via efforts that include running Persian news outlets of its own and funding Persian media projects in the United States and Europe.

For Khamenei, such endeavors stand in contrast to U.S. official statements about America’s ultimate objective. He strongly believes that efforts to pressure the regime for its anti-democratic and anti-human rights record derive from no other intention than to change the regime’s Islamic structure and essential revolutionary orientation. He also fears that American culture will have a corrosive impact on the revolutionary mindset, and is convinced that the U.S. government promotes this trend. His view is that Hollywood works with Washington, as symbolized when Michelle Obama announced the film Argo as the winner of the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2013. He even believes that Washington directs the activities of famous actors through applications such as Telegram and Instagram or via other means. Similarly, Khamenei views people-to-people exchanges as efforts to spy on Iran, hence the regime’s arrest of academics. In short, he fears a U.S.-sponsored “soft overthrow” much more than he fears military action against Iran—the phrase “velvet revolution” is used often in regime sources.

Khamenei hopes that potential negotiations over the next four years will convince U.S. policymakers to limit the diplomatic battlefield to Iran’s nuclear program, missile program, and regional activities, leaving human rights and democratic issues out of their Iran policy, as they do with the majority of Arab and Muslim countries. If, however, the government continues to emphasize the latter issues, Khamenei will conclude that it is determined to seize any opportunity to change the regime through any possible means.

In the Supreme Leader’s view, the United States has not been fully honest in its support of human rights and democracy because it often exploits these issues for political purposes, economic ends, and “imperialist” interests. For instance, Iranian figures have accused Washington of employing a deplorable double standard with Saudi Arabia, where the plight of women under the monarchy is worse than in Iran’s totalitarian system. According to this logic, if U.S. promotion of democracy and human rights is not genuine, then Washington could conceivably play them down in its Iran policy in order to build trust with Khamenei and other leaders, thereby paving the way toward bilateral engagement on greater goals.

THE QUEST TO EASE SANCTIONS

When Khamenei mentions avoiding “war,” he is referring not just to potential U.S. military campaigns, but also to the “maximum pressure” policy that the Trump administration has implemented to such painful effect throughout Iran. This pressure consists of crippling economic sanctions, targeted killings of prominent military commanders such as Qasem Soleimani, and cyber sabotage in nuclear facilities (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/operating-in-the-gray-zone-countering-irans-asymmetric-way-of-war>).

Although Khamenei is a revolutionary leader, his perceptions of many major issues can be described as realistic. Among such practical understandings is the impossibility of convincing Washington to remove all sanctions in the short term without significant ideological and political setbacks to Iran’s foreign policy. Consequently, he has focused on finding ways to lift sanctions in two major sectors: the oil industry and the banking system. Of course, he would still like to see moves in other areas, such as lifting the ban on weapons transfers (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tehran-eyes-lifting-of-arms-embargo>) after the relevant UN Security Council provision expires. But what really moves him is oil revenue.

DECOUPLING WASHINGTON FROM JERUSALEM AND RIYADH

Another central goal for Khamenei is to convince Americans that Iran will stop threatening U.S. soldiers and citizens if Washington takes two steps: (1) withdraws its military forces from the Middle East, and (2) avoids getting involved in any military action or covert operations against Iran. If a de facto agreement along those lines comes into effect, then his next step would be to convince the United States to redefine its allies in the region.

Most prominently, this would mean expecting Washington to disentangle its national interests from those of Israel and Saudi Arabia—that is, to stop regarding threats to those countries as threats against the United States. Both President Obama and President Trump’s regional policies have encouraged Khamenei to invest in his ideal of a Middle East free from U.S. influence.

AN AMBIGUOUS FUTURE

Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution immediately changed the country’s relationship to the world’s then superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. But those changes played out in very different ways. Whereas the republic’s founding leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, was able to establish a modus vivendi with Moscow, Iran’s political system remained permanently poisoned by structural anti-Americanism. Khamenei has used anti-Americanism as a vital instrument for consolidating his own power, which explains the futility of attempts by “moderates” to thaw animosity with the United States.

Today, however, a new sense of urgency among Iran’s political elite is undeniable as the country faces a major crisis. The Supreme Leader is getting older, without any clear prospects for succession. Many believe that if Khamenei fails to frame a new, mutually acceptable attitude toward the United States, his successor or successors would hardly succeed in doing so, at least in the immediate term. Numerous factors have fueled this belief, including ambiguity around Khamenei’s leadership; popular discontent with the regime (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/protests-and-regime-suppression-in-post-revolutionary-iran>); lack of political parties; the weakness of civil society; the accumulation of ethnic, gender, religious, and sectarian hatred among the population; the unprecedented economic war against the country, which is exacerbating domestic poverty and unemployment; and the rise of public desperation and anger, even among the formerly loyal strata of Iranian society. The Supreme Leader’s demise could produce chaos so great as to jeopardize the stability of the political system. This would hardly mark the crowning achievement Khamenei seeks to achieve with America’s next president, but rather the failure of

his life's work.

Mehdi Khalaji is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute. ♦

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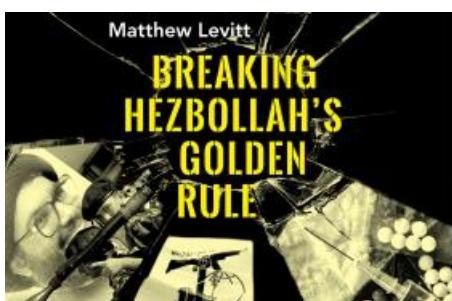
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