

Khamenei Sets Conditions for Iran to Resume Its Nuclear Commitments

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Brief Analysis

By stating initial terms that he knows Washington will not meet right now, the Supreme Leader is once again signaling his lack of interest in returning to full JCPOA compliance—at least not before President Rouhani leaves office in August.

In one of his few in-person speeches since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei stated on February 7 that Iran would not pull its nuclear program back into compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action until “America lifts all sanctions.” [Addressing an audience of air force commanders \(https://www.irna.ir/news/84220715/%D8%A7%DA%AF%D8%B1-%D9%87%D9%85%D9%87-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%85-%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%85%DB%8C-%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%85\)](https://www.irna.ir/news/84220715/%D8%A7%DA%AF%D8%B1-%D9%87%D9%85%D9%87-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%85-%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%85%DB%8C-%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%85), he laid out his stance in no uncertain terms: “If they want Iran to return to its JCPOA commitments, America should lift the sanctions entirely, in practice not in words. Then we verify it and see if sanctions are properly lifted before we return to the JCPOA’s commitments...This is the Islamic Republic’s irrevocable and definitive policy, and a matter of consensus between the country’s officials.” He also responded to remarks that President Biden gave to CBS News earlier in the day: “Americans and Europeans have no right to stipulate and place conditions due to their violation of their JCPOA commitments. The party that should rightfully place conditions is the Islamic Republic, because it is committed to [the JCPOA].”

The speech was delivered on the forty-second anniversary of a key moment in the 1979 revolution: the defection of

air force officers and other significant military personnel to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's side, which was central to the collapse of the shah's government. Khamenei compared this development to the current nuclear situation. Blaming the Carter administration for its "strange miscalculation at that time in evaluating the situation of the country and people," he insisted on two points: (1) that the United States has never ceased making major miscalculations about Iran in the four decades since then, and (2) that these miscalculations were not limited to Republican administrations but included Democrats as well.

Khamenei then offered historical "proof" for this continuity of supposed American blundering. Referring to the Green Movement protests that followed Iran's rigged 2009 presidential election, he stated, "One of the examples of such miscalculations was in the 2009 Sedition, when the U.S. Democratic president fancied to end [the Islamic Republic] by officially supporting the Sedition." He also belittled the "unprecedented sanctions aimed at crippling Iran" in more recent years, then mentioned a regime-change prediction that John Bolton made in July 2017 just a few months before he was appointed as President Trump's national security advisor: "One of those first-class idiots said a couple of years ago that 'We will celebrate the 2019 new year's eve in Tehran.' Now that person is confined to the dustbin of history and his boss is discharged from the White House by kicks while the Islamic Republic stands proudly due to divine grace."

In addition, the Supreme Leader counseled Iranian officials not to be intimidated by "the enemy's power," singling out "those who have unrealistic assessments about the capabilities of America" and certain other nations. In his view, "the recent scandalous developments" in the United States clearly indicate "the decline of America's credibility, power, and social order."

By firmly refusing to resume Iran's JCPOA commitments until the United States lifts sanctions "entirely," Khamenei may surprise those optimistic observers who expected him to welcome Trump's replacement by President Biden, who has previously pledged to return to the nuclear deal. The hope that Tehran would change its attitude toward Washington and **start a new round of negotiations (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/coming-iran-nuclear-talks-openings-and-obstacles>)** was also stoked by Iranian president Hassan Rouhani, particularly following his remarks on November 11: "Iran welcomes every opportunity for lifting U.S. sanctions...We believe the environment has become... more prepared for closer relations and interactions [with the United States]. The problem with the outgoing administration...was its lack of necessary knowledge about international politics. [The Trump administration] was almost executing the opinions of hardliners in America and in the Zionist regime." Rouhani also expressed his hope that the Biden administration would reduce the differences between the two countries' stances by moving closer to Iran's position.

Implications for Iranian and U.S. Policy

Khamenei's decision to state unfeasible prerequisites for Iran's return to JCPOA compliance can be explained in part by his reluctance to allow major progress in bilateral relations before Rouhani leaves office in August. This mindset aligns with his longstanding efforts to keep the country's democratic institutions weak, maintain control over elected leaders, and avoid the type of wider Western socioeconomic encroachment that he deems **the greatest threat to his regime (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-2021-presidential-vote-and-tightening-regime-control>)**. Toward that end, he has repeatedly revealed his dissatisfaction and mistrust toward Rouhani's foreign policy team in general and its nuclear negotiators in particular.

On the foreign policy front, Khamenei most recently displayed his lack of confidence in Rouhani by sending parliamentary speaker Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf to Moscow as his special envoy earlier this month to deliver a confidential message to President Vladimir Putin. Although Putin refused to meet with Qalibaf, the move still served one of Khamenei's main goals: discrediting Iran's outgoing president and its potential next president. Rouhani is ineligible for another term in the June election, and if Qalibaf runs and wins, Khamenei does not want him to emerge

as a strong executive—even if the Supreme Leader himself winds up endorsing Qalibaf’s campaign.

On the nuclear front, Khamenei has been an outspoken critic of the JCPOA since day one, heaping blame on its American and Iranian authors alike. He has also given hardliners in parliament and elsewhere a green light to continually discredit Rouhani’s nuclear record and downplay his achievements, including through state radio and television outlets.

Given all these moves, the Supreme Leader apparently plans to prevent Rouhani from playing a meaningful political role for the remainder of his term. This stance suggests that Tehran will not engage in serious negotiations with the United States until Rouhani’s successor takes office and forms a new nuclear team—one that is totally loyal to Khamenei and determined to execute his intentions and instructions

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-flexible-fatwa-how-expediency-shapes-nuclear-decisionmaking>). Accordingly, U.S. officials should not put much stock in the frequent statements by Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif that all of their past actions and recent optimistic statements were preapproved by Khamenei. In an interview with *Etemad* newspaper

<https://iranintl.com/%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86/%D8%B8%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%81-%D8%B5%D9%81%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B5%D8%AF-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AC%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AF>), for example, Zarif argued that his personal role in setting Iran’s foreign policy is “zero percent.” As he explained it, “This is the situation in all countries. The foreign ministers are executors of policies, not the ones who determine them...I played more of a role in formulating the JCPOA policies and less of a role in regional policies.” He also claimed that like any other diplomat, he sometimes executes policies despite personally disagreeing with them.

Domestic political maneuvering aside, Khamenei likely also hopes that delaying negotiations and/or JCPOA compliance with the Biden administration will increase Tehran’s leverage, make the West more frustrated and anxious about Iran’s nuclear progress (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/deciphering-irans-latest-nuclear-messaging>), and dissuade U.S. officials from trying to add other issues to the agenda for talks (e.g., the missile program (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/missile-defense-manhattan-project-middle-east>)). In other words, he seems to be patiently preparing the ground on both sides: waiting for Rouhani’s eventual successor to install a tougher negotiating team, and keeping U.S. negotiators on edge until they become less demanding and more willing to make hasty concessions.

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

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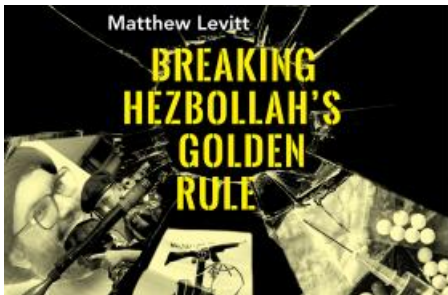
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