

Khamenei Continues Playing Hardball in Nowruz Speech

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Brief Analysis

Far from compromising his nuclear position, the Supreme Leader keeps asserting that Iran can neutralize sanctions and solve its economic challenges on its own, both by leveraging domestic capabilities and demonstrating the people's supposed electoral support for the regime.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's annual Nowruz address is usually an indicator of his thinking on domestic and foreign affairs. In contrast to [last year's grim, unusual speech \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khameneis-nowruz-speech-time-coronavirus\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khameneis-nowruz-speech-time-coronavirus)—which focused on the pandemic with no reference to foreign policy issues—this year's address provided many signals to foreign and domestic audiences.

On the eve of Nowruz, the Supreme Leader often prepares the ground for his main speech by summarizing the past year and declaring a slogan to mark the start of a new year. These messages tend to focus on Iran's successes and endurance in the face of pressures and hardships—though last time around the ayatollah spent more than a few words describing the “tumultuous” and “difficult” year and comparing the country to a ship in stormy waters fighting to reach the coast. This year, he used the eve of his March 21 main speech to reassure listeners that the seas are calming down and the ship is within reach of the shore.

Increasing Production to Neutralize Sanctions

Khamenei believes that a country's power is a function of not only its military might, but also its economic growth and other factors (e.g., social stability, political cohesion, scientific progress, and ideology). Thus, in nine of the past ten years, the Nowruz slogans that he selected to guide official efforts in the coming year were all tied to Iran's “resistance economy” in the face of sanctions. This year's slogan—“Production, Support, and Removal of Obstacles”—is no different, calling on officials to promote domestic production and consumption while fighting corruption.

Khamenei also likes to emphasize that hardships can lead to new opportunities, so his Nowruz speech offered an

optimistic picture of Iran's economic capacities. Turning the country into a prosperous economy “does not require a miracle,” he said, but “can be solved through diligence and hard work.” Specifically, he argued that Iran could become the twelfth largest economy in the world by following his formula, thereby giving other nations greater incentive to interact with the Islamic Republic and, in turn, rendering sanctions ineffective.

Khamenei then explained why compromise is not the proper approach to confronting sanctions. In his view, by asking Washington to lift its restrictions, Iranian officials would inevitably be met with a list of humiliating demands in return. He also argued that officials “should not leave the country's economy in limbo while awaiting decisions to be made by others.” Instead, he praised the nation's shift to self-reliance in response to international pressure and recommended that the current and next government continue planning as if sanctions will remain in place indefinitely.

Patience and Mistrust

In a February 7 speech, Khamenei refuted proposals for a sequencing mechanism in which the United States and Iran would make incremental moves back to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in keeping with his narrative that the regime **is not in a hurry to return to the nuclear deal**

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-new-narrative-regime-not-hurry-washington-should-be>). His Nowruz speech reiterated this maximalist stance, emphasizing that U.S. promises cannot be trusted and that this problem extends to all administrations. For instance, he argued that after Tehran fulfilled its commitments under the 2015 nuclear deal, the Obama administration did not truly reciprocate, lifting sanctions only “on paper” while still intimidating companies away from engaging with Iran.

Khamenei then repeated his demand that Washington must first lift all sanctions and allow Iran time to verify that this has been done in good faith—only then will the regime roll back its **accumulating nuclear violations** **(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/deciphering-irans-latest-nuclear-messaging>)** and return to full compliance with the JCPOA. He also warned Iranian officials that all of their actions need to align with this policy, sending a clear signal to President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.

Perhaps his most telling statement was a reference to the recent confirmation hearing for Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, who noted that when it comes to the nuclear deal, “2021 is not 2015...The facts on the ground have changed.” Khamenei agreed with this phrasing but used it to argue that things have changed “in Iran's favor,” and that “there is nothing wrong” with continuing what he sees as an acceptable status quo if Washington rejects his precondition. In his view, such patience is preferable to hastily accepting an ultimately unfavorable deal like the JCPOA, since “being in a rush may have more serious consequences than losing the opportunity.”

Looking Ahead to the Election

Iran will choose **its next president** **(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/2021-iranian-presidential-election-preliminary-assessment>)** on June 18, so Khamenei used his Nowruz speech as an opportunity to explain why the Iranian people should put aside their differences and participate in the election. According to him, high voter turnout highlights the country's dignity, strength, and “national power”—a portrayal of voting as a sign of Iranian nationalism, not just support for the Islamic regime.

Another notable point was his description of the president as the highest government authority, especially compared to other branches such as the judiciary. This may be seen as a signal to judiciary chief Ebrahim Raisi, who ran for president in 2017 and is often portrayed as a prominent candidate to succeed Khamenei as Supreme Leader. It is unclear if Raisi is interested in running for president again, so Khamenei's remark may have been a nudge for him to do so. The Nowruz speech also included a list of desirable characteristics for the next president—“competent,” “faithful,” “justice seeker,” “jihadi and revolutionary”—all of which match Raisi's well-known resume.

If the Supreme Leader is publicly stumping for a particular candidate, this would not be the first time. In the 2005 election, he hinted that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was his favorite presidential contender by referencing the politician's defining traits in his sermons.

Given that his ideal candidate is a sharp contrast to President Rouhani's pragmatic approach, one can understand why Khamenei would be less inclined to compromise his hardline posture toward the United States before the election. In his view, perhaps, rushing too hastily toward a nuclear compromise could have additional consequences besides playing into a potential American trap—it might also encourage voters to support another “moderate” presidential candidate. Thus, a strategy of playing hardball and preserving the stalemate makes foreign and domestic sense for the regime, at least until after the June vote.

Omer Carmi, a former visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, previously led IDF analytical and research efforts pertaining to the Middle East. ❖

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