

# Iran Is Preparing Its Public, But Not (Yet) for Nuclear Compromise

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Brief Analysis

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## Despite its iron grip at home, the regime generally seeks to build domestic support for its policies—so what outcome has it been prepping the public for during the nuclear talks?

Ever since Iran began engaging in nuclear negotiations with the international community, regime officials have invested heavily in trying to persuade the public to back their stance. A decade ago, former president Hassan Rouhani explained, “Whatever we do, we must have the support of the public...If the country’s political decisions conflict with public opinion, we definitely would have problems.”

In the years leading up to the nuclear deal, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei made a flurry of comments that set the stage for grudging compromise. In order to express support for Iran’s negotiating team while simultaneously laying down redlines that should not be crossed, he employed his famous “heroic flexibility” narrative: “Sometimes a wrestler shows flexibility for technical reasons, but he doesn’t forget who his opponent is and what his real goal is.” Ahead of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Khamenei again heightened the pace of his messaging, delivering public remarks on the subject at least five times in May-July before the negotiations concluded.

Yet the Supreme Leader has been largely silent about the nuclear issue in recent months, with no attempt to set public expectations for whatever agreement (if any) might emerge from the ongoing talks in Vienna. Indeed, the regime is taking a very different track this time: deprioritizing the nuclear deal.

## Khamenei and Raisi’s Recent Rhetoric

The last time the Supreme Leader spoke at length about the nuclear issue was last July, **when he blasted** (<https://english.khamenei.ir/news/8608/West-s-approach-in-negotiations-is-unjust-and-malicious>) President Hassan Rouhani's outgoing administration for focusing too much on improving relations with the West: "It became clear in this administration that trusting the West will not work as they are not going to help us, and they will strike a blow whenever they can." Since that speech, Khamenei has been more muted about nuclear issues, intermittently sprinkling them into his remarks in the context of deemphasizing the need for a deal.

In August, he made a **passing reference** (<https://english.khamenei.ir/news/8661/We-support-the-nation-of-Afghanistan-Governments-come-go>) to the fact that the United States was the party that withdrew from the JCPOA, not Iran. And last month, he **briefly mentioned** (<https://english.khamenei.ir/news/8818/The-defective-US-system-of-calculation-regarding-Iran-continues>) the acceptability of negotiating with the enemy, but also warned that "we have not and will not give in to the enemy's coercion and words." Some observers interpreted this as Khamenei's way of effectively greenlighting negotiations, and others even suggested that a deal was imminent. Yet the remark was delivered in the context of denouncing the "soft war" that enemy states are supposedly waging against the Islamic Republic; he made no specific reference to the nuclear file.

On January 30, Khamenei again made brief reference to the Vienna negotiations, **warning** (<https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2022/01/30/675809/Leader-Enemies-war-aimed-cause-Iran-economic-collapse>) Iranian manufacturers and state officials not to "condition" or "pause" the country's economic activities "over something that is not in our hands." He added, "We have successful examples in which we didn't wait for sanctions to be lifted." Khamenei also cited a U.S. State Department spokesman who proclaimed that the Trump administration's maximum pressure policy had failed, which some interpreted as a potential opening for concessions. Yet Khamenei has made such comments before, and they do not in of themselves indicate a softening in the regime's views.

The same trend has been evident in President Ebrahim Raisi's public approach to the nuclear deal. Under the previous government, President Rouhani regularly gave optimistic updates about the nuclear negotiations in his public remarks during cabinet meetings—he touted the need for "interaction with the world," asserted that "we have reached a point where no one can say the JCPOA was bad," and at one point claimed that a revived deal was just "two words and a dot" away. In contrast, the JCPOA is rarely mentioned in Raisi's cabinet readouts. When he does speak about the deal, he does so almost in passing, laced with language about asserting Iranian rights, lifting and neutralizing sanctions, and pursuing "results-oriented" engagement with world powers.

For instance, during a long state television interview in December, Raisi **made a brief mention** (<https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/blog/analysis-of-seventh-round-of-jcpoa-negotiations>) about participating in talks with world powers while warning that the system "won't link its economy to these issues." A month later, he delivered a **pointed retort** (<https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2022/01/25/675517/Iran-president-Ebrahim-Raeisi-live-television-interview>) to Rouhani's argument that negotiations are key to Iran's future, stating, "We will pursue the negotiations, but it is not like the negotiations solve everything."

## The Budget, the Pulpit, and the Negotiating Table

This message of avoiding compromise has been echoed at all levels of the regime. For instance, while Iran's 2021-22 budget was based on an assumption of exporting 2.3 million barrels of oil per day, the proposed budget for 2022-23 **assumes** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-next-budget-assumes-no-nuclear-deal>) just 1.2 million barrels—in other words, it is based on the expectation that sanctions will remain in place. In December, the hardline newspaper *Vatan Emrooz* called it "a budget independent of negotiations." Raisi's official newspaper *Iran* has gone the same route: a January 29 article boasted about increasing oil sales by 40

percent without returning to the nuclear accord, while a January 15 article highlighted a list of government achievements made “without the JCPOA and without FATF” (referring to the international financial task force that has kept Iran on its blacklist).

Similar arguments can be heard in sermons given by Iran’s senior Friday prayer leaders, who are directly appointed by the Office of the Supreme Leader and receive their marching orders from institutions under Khamenei’s control. On January 14, Tehran’s top prayer leader declared that “the enemy needs a nuclear agreement more than we do.” And on January 28, firebrand cleric Ahmad Khatami, a close associate of Khamenei’s, demanded that all sanctions—nuclear and otherwise—be permanently lifted, not merely suspended.

The regime’s nuclear negotiating team has not abandoned these uncompromising demands either. Over the past few months, Iranian diplomats have repeatedly stated that progress is being made in Vienna, but they usually emphasize that Washington should make more compromises in order to reach a deal. On February 2, regime media reported on a meeting in which Raisi’s chief negotiator informed legislators about important issues that still need to be addressed in the talks, with the readout noting that “Iran has the right to ask for the removal of all sanctions, but to date the other side has accepted to lift only some of the sanctions.”

Yet there is also some evidence of internal debate about the best way forward. Saeed Jalili, Khamenei’s representative on the Supreme National Security Council, allegedly wrote a 200-page letter to the Supreme Leader complaining about the negotiating team led by Ali Bagheri Kani and suggesting an alternative approach—namely, ending the nuclear talks, leaving the JCPOA (not necessarily with a formal declaration), and proceeding toward **90 percent enriched uranium (<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/576798-while-washington-argues-iran-makes-nuclear-advances>)**. To be sure, these radical steps are outside Khamenei’s modus operandi; the Supreme Leader prefers a carefully calibrated strategy. But that does not mean he has decided to accept a deal under the terms currently being offered—rather, his approach may just reflect a desire to stall while keeping Iran inside the negotiations instead of immediately leaving that framework.

Officials are also debating the prospect of direct negotiations with the United States. When Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and Supreme National Security Council secretary Ali Shamkhani recently proposed that Iran pursue this option under the right conditions, both faced harsh criticism from ultraconservative newspapers, and Shamkhani quickly backtracked. The secretary has made a career of surviving and thriving in reformist, pragmatic, and conservative administrations alike, so his positions are important indicators of where the Iranian system stands on a given issue.

Meanwhile, Raisi’s *Iran* newspaper published a special edition on February 2 to mark President Biden’s first year in office, arguing that his administration has failed to meet its promises and is following in Trump’s footsteps. This stance echoes the regime’s longstanding belief that all U.S. presidents are the same when it comes to Iran policy. Interestingly, the paper focused on issues other than the nuclear dossier, perhaps in an attempt to emphasize that Tehran’s grievances with Washington go beyond that file.

## What’s Next?

**A**lthough the regime has shown its willingness to alienate the Iranian people when making certain decisions, it generally tries to set the stage for major moves by preparing public opinion for them in advance. Thus, if a compromise were emerging in Vienna, one could safely assume that such preparations would already be in motion. So far, however, officials at all levels of the regime have readied the public not for compromise, but for a potentially protracted period of inconclusive negotiations. Events can change quickly, of course, so Tehran may yet strike a deal—but for now it has not publicly budged from its **maximalist terms (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reading-through-irans-nuclear-demands>)**.

The regime will be marking its forty-third anniversary this month, so one can expect its rhetoric to become even more aggressive and “revolutionary.” But if the tenor changes during the revolutionary commemorations—particularly on the February 8 anniversary of the so-called “Homafaran Allegiance,” which Khamenei has used before to speak on the JCPOA—it would be a significant indicator that Tehran is ready to compromise. At the moment, though, the system continues to signal that it is in no rush.

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