

# 'No War, No Negotiation' Is Iran's Stance

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Brief Analysis

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**By holding fast to his defiant approach while stopping just short of war, Khamenei may be hoping to stall until the next U.S. and Iranian election cycles.**

**D**uring nationally televised remarks on May 14, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei called the idea of negotiations with the United States "poison," yet simultaneously reassured viewers that "neither we nor they are seeking war, they know that it is not to their benefit." This "no war, no negotiation" formula is part and parcel of Khamenei's "prudent resistance" strategy: namely, do not provoke military confrontation, but simultaneously reject any compromise. In his eyes, resistance is the key to the Islamic Republic's forty years of survival because the United States has been unwilling to recognize the existence of an ideological Islamic state from the start; instead, he contends, Washington and its allies have made every effort to overthrow the state or at least transform it into a government completely devoid of its defiant ideology.

As a semi-totalitarian regime, the Islamic Republic is by definition expansionist and dismissive toward many of the traditional geopolitical calculations that bound other nation-states. The regime's religious underpinnings amplify these traits, making the Islamic Republic even more intent on "exporting the revolution," wiping out ideological enemies like Israel, and granting the Supreme Leader transcendent titles like "leader of the Muslim world." Tehran's main military doctrine of asymmetric warfare is in service of this expansionist posture, as are its nuclear and missile programs.

Yet Khamenei also understands the practical benefits of this strategy in terms of keeping the regime afloat. In addition to helping the leadership reap domestic credit for extending Iran's strategic depth as far as Israel's borders and Mediterranean shores, he firmly believes that the resistance policy has given Iran mounting influence throughout the Middle East and global status as the best hope for anti-Western countries and currents. From this perspective, giving up on Tehran's defiant regional policy would be fatal to the regime's very nature.

At the same time, Khamenei is sincere when he declares that Iran is not interested in military escalation. The unspoken reason behind such declarations is that Iran cannot afford—militarily or politically—a direct, conventional armed confrontation with any state, especially the United States or Israel. That is why the regime relies so much on asymmetric warfare, terrorism, proxy warfare, and other tactics that can be carried out with at least some degree of plausible deniability. The idea is to remain a frightening threat while avoiding direct conventional war.

But every resistance **has a breaking point** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/khameneis-breaking-point-how-to-get-iran-back-to-the-negotiating-table>). The regime's top priority is preservation of the system put in place after the Islamic Revolution, and Tehran has shown itself capable of remarkable reversals when that system faces existential jeopardy. In the 1980s, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini welcomed the Iran-Iraq War at first and called it the “beginning of solving the Middle East problem,” repeatedly emphasizing that “we will stand until the end” and “we will fight even if the war takes twenty years.” Eight years and hundreds of thousands of casualties later, however, he accepted a UN ceasefire resolution, saying he did so “in the interest of the Islamic Republic” while melodramatically characterizing the decision as “more deadly than drinking hemlock.”

Similarly, his successor long described negotiations with America as taboo—right up until U.S.-led pressure led him to open nuclear negotiations with the Obama administration. After giving in, Khamenei noted the “heroic flexibility” he showed in allowing the talks to proceed. Today, the initial cracks of another breaking point could become visible if he deems the U.S. military threat to be credible and unaffordably costly—and, more important, if he believes it is coming to bear at a time when the economic hardship caused by U.S. sanctions and other factors is no longer bearable.

This possibility depends in part on two political factors. First, despite President Trump's covert and overt offers to negotiate, Khamenei likely does not want to open talks with a leader who withdrew from the nuclear deal, ruined Iran's diplomatic efforts, continues to impose new sanctions, and uses humiliating rhetoric against the regime. Second, Khamenei has greatly weakened Iran's own president, blaming Hassan Rouhani for the government's economic inefficiency and diplomatic failures. Rouhani's second term ends in 2021, and he cannot run for a third, making him look increasingly like a lame duck. Therefore, Khamenei has little incentive to send discredited negotiators like Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to a new round of talks; his ideal scenario is for both countries to have different presidents in place by 2021.

If Khamenei decides to negotiate before 2021, he would probably need to change the fabric of the negotiating team and take other steps to restructure Iran's approach. This could mean transferring responsibility for the talks from the Foreign Ministry to the Supreme National Security Council, as well as designating new negotiators who represent the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps more than the president. Such changes are especially likely if the scope of negotiations expands to encompass Iran's missile program and regional policy, since neither the president nor the Foreign Ministry have enough authority to make such decisions on behalf of Khamenei and the top military echelon.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

**D**espite the Supreme Leader's relative pragmatism and stated desire to avoid war, the United States needs to be prepared for every possible scenario in the coming weeks. Tehran may yet be planning to sabotage and threaten more allied and U.S. targets in the region while seeking to escape responsibility for these operations. The regime has been known to take risks that seem highly disproportionate to the potential benefits; witness its string of attempted terrorist attacks in Europe this year, which led to the arrest of various Iranian agents.

At the same time, Washington should not rule out the possibility of Khamenei reluctantly agreeing to negotiate in the near term due to tremendous economic pressure and international isolation. Simply stating a general willingness to

negotiate and providing a U.S. “phone number” is insufficient—rather, the Trump administration should urgently seek international mediators who can help it communicate with Iranian officials, with the goal of better understanding which issues the regime can afford to compromise on in return for realistic U.S. concessions. Without reliable communication channels, the prospect of war grows nearer, and the prospect of a deal moves further away.

Finally, if the Trump administration prefers negotiation over confrontation, it needs to adjust its rhetoric from hostility and belittlement to a more respectable and diplomatic tone. The only narrative that can increase the possibility of negotiations is one that allows Khamenei to portray the drastic change in his posture not as a shameful defeat for the regime, but as a wise compromise taken in his country’s best interest. Otherwise, he will have no incentive to set aside his “resistance” approach.

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