

Khamenei Declares His New Year's Resolutions for Iran

by [Omer Carmi \(/experts/omer-carmi\)](/experts/omer-carmi)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Omer Carmi \(/experts/omer-carmi\)](/experts/omer-carmi)

Omer Carmi was a 2017 military fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

His Nowruz speech largely sidestepped foreign policy and the nuclear negotiations, instead focusing on his vision for making the country more self-reliant via a knowledge-based economy.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's annual Nowruz speech is usually an indicator of his thinking on Iran's foreign affairs, among other trends. Last year, for example, he set the prelude for **Tehran's maximalist positions** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reading-through-irans-nuclear-demands>) in the Vienna nuclear negotiations and emphasized that U.S. promises cannot be trusted no matter who sits in the White House. This year, however, he dedicated most of his address to domestic economic policies and largely refrained from mentioning Washington directly.

Iran's Path in the Persian Year 1400

On the eve of Nowruz, the Supreme Leader often prepares the ground for his main speech the next day by summarizing the past year and declaring a slogan for the coming year. This message usually focuses on Iran's success and endurance in the face of external pressures. Khamenei referenced this inclination during his **Nowruz Eve remarks** (<https://english.khamenei.ir/news/8913/Imam-Khamenei-s-New-Year-Message>) on March 20, noting how previous speeches have highlighted his belief that production "is the key to solving the country's economic problems" because it "boosts economic growth, creates employment, reduces inflation, increases per capita income, improves public welfare, and creates a sense of dignity in the nation." Indeed, nine of his past ten Nowruz slogans have focused on Iran's "resistance" economy in the face of international sanctions, and this year's is no different: "The Year of Knowledge-Based Production and Job Creation."

The tone of his Nowruz eve message was largely optimistic. On the technological front, he touted the regime's launch of new satellites. On the political front, he commended President Ebrahim Raisi's "popular administration" for reviving the people's hopes and taking a different path from the "previous honorable administration" of Hassan Rouhani. He also praised the public for purportedly showing its support to the regime by turning out to vote in last year's presidential election, which occurred in the middle of a COVID-19 spike. Relatedly, he claimed that Iranians

had successfully combatted the pandemic and significantly decreased death rates, praising the scientific progress that enabled vaccine production. He then asserted that one of the sweetest events of the past year was when “the Americans explicitly acknowledged that they have suffered a humiliating defeat in their maximum pressure policy against Iran.”

It's the Economy, Not the Sanctions

Despite his claims of winning the fight against COVID-19, Khamenei apparently chose not to put himself at risk of infection by traveling to the mass festivities in Mashhad to deliver his Nowruz Day speech as he did in pre-pandemic times. Instead, his March 21 address was delivered by television from Tehran.

The speech's content was mostly dedicated to how Iran should develop its economy through domestic resources. Implicitly criticizing Rouhani's policies, Khamenei stated that Iran had “a number of economic challenges over the past ten years,” imploring officials to make better decisions so that the people's lives will be more comfortable. “If the economy is joined with justice,” he argued, “the country will truly progress.”

In his view, the best way to improve the situation is to shift toward a knowledge-based economy—a concept he has been emphasizing for some time now. He maintained that such a transition would not only solve many of Iran's core problems in the fields of production, agriculture, and water, but also position the country as a competitive player in the global economy. More specifically, he described how Iran could draw on its population of well-educated citizens to reduce production expenses, improve the quality of Iranian products, and create hundreds of thousands of new jobs.

To facilitate this vision, Khamenei proposed exploiting the oil price spikes that have attended recent global developments. Yet he warned officials not to waste all of this boosted oil income on simply importing more products and resources into Iran—instead, they must direct revenue to developing national infrastructure and making the economy stronger and more self-sufficient.

Khamenei's references to the nuclear talks were largely indirect, limited to reiterating his philosophy that Iran's economy needs to bolster itself in a manner that defuses U.S. sanctions. He referenced [last year's Nowruz speech](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khamenei-continues-playing-hardball-nowruz-speech) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khamenei-continues-playing-hardball-nowruz-speech>), in which he argued that instead of leaving the country's economy “in limbo while awaiting decisions to be made by others,” officials should plan as if sanctions will remain in place indefinitely. This year, he declared, “We must manage the country in such a way that sanctions cannot inflict a major blow.” To be sure, he did not say Iran will abandon its efforts to get sanctions removed; indeed, he urged “those who are active in these fields” to “follow up on that.” But he did minimize the importance of sanctions by noting that Raisi's government has been able to notch substantial gains even in the current environment, such as increasing foreign trade, signing new regional contracts, and improving the oil and natural gas sectors.

Resisting a “World of Wolves”

As usual, the Supreme Leader diagnosed current international events as a symptom of America's supposed “global arrogance,” accusing Washington and its allies of oppressing the world and creating crises in locales such as Afghanistan, Yemen, and Ukraine. When speaking on the latter conflict, he did not mention Russia, instead criticizing the West for its supposedly racist policies in response to the war (e.g., treating certain refugees in Ukraine differently depending on their ethnicity). Similarly, he argued that Western media are only covering the war intensively because it takes place on European soil, claiming “it is alright with them if wars, bloodshed, and killing take place in the Middle East.”

According to Khamenei, these latest examples of a “world of oppression” run by “wolves” serve as further proof that Iran was right all along in adopting a confrontational foreign policy. “Our nation did not choose surrendering to the

arrogant powers,” he said; rather, the people chose “resistance” and “independent and internal strength.” Going forward, he urged the people and the government to work hard in solidarity with each other, preventing internal conflicts that hinder the mobilization needed for large-scale national development.

Conclusion

Khamenei’s Nowruz speech can be seen in two ways. On one hand, it may be another attempt to **deprioritize the importance** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khamenei-breaks-his-silence-nuclear-negotiations>) of returning to the nuclear deal and minimize public expectations on that front, which in his view could hinder Iran’s economic momentum. On the other hand, the speech may be his way of signaling his expectations and guidelines regarding the kind of economic policy Tehran should pursue if a deal is struck in Vienna—namely, a policy that prioritizes self-sufficiency while simultaneously using **money reaped from the agreement** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-much-would-iran-gain-financially-returning-jcpoa>) to fix Iran’s core economic problems.

Omer Carmi is a former visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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