Khamenei's Breaking Point: How to Get Iran Back to the Negotiating Table

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Brief Analysis

The chances of extracting substantial concessions from the current regime are not great, but the odds fall to zero if Washington withholds security assurances or waits for the inevitably chaotic transition period.

On April 10, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned that "President Trump will continue to ratchet up the pressure on the Islamic Republic of Iran so that their behavior will change." Despite the dogged U.S. campaign to **further tighten sanctions (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/renewing-the-iran-sanctions-waivers-part-1-nuclear-activities)** , however, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has persistently emphasized the need for a "resistance" policy that hinges on innovatively circumventing painful economic restrictions, developing Iran's missile program, and maintaining the regime's defiant regional policy. The most recent evidence for this posture was his decision to appoint Gen. Hossein Salami as commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps soon after President Trump announced that Washington had designated the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. Compared to his ousted predecessor, Salami is both ideologically closer to Khamenei and more hardline in his views.

Naturally, such moves raise questions about how far Khamenei's "resistance" policy might go, and what could compel him to "change Iran's behavior." Specifically, are there any circumstances under which the regime would be willing to return to the negotiating table and discuss nuclear issues, the missile program, and regional policy?

KHAMENEI'S ULTIMATE PRIORITIES

First and foremost, the eighty-year-old Khamenei wants to leave a legacy of securing the regime's survival long after he is gone. Standing in the way of this goal is his firm belief that the United States and its allies seek to

change the regime itself, not just its behavior—a conviction that formed over many years and has endured despite changes in U.S. leadership and policy. In his view, Iran's triangle of advanced missile technology, a nuclear program with military potential, and asymmetric warfare capabilities works as a firewall against potential enemy aggression of all sorts. Put another way, Khamenei seems to believe that the regime's biggest existential threat is direct military confrontation with Western-led forces on Iranian territory. This explains his track record of hostile rhetoric occasionally interrupted by studied caution at sensitive moments.

Khamenei's second priority is to pave the way for a smooth leadership transition once he is no longer in power, with the hardliners keeping their hegemonic status and the regime avoiding ideological metamorphosis. Tehran's efforts toward that end are quite sophisticated, even obscure at times, but one can recognize them in trends such as Khamenei's appointment of relatively young, confident hardliners to sensitive positions in the judiciary and Imam Reza Shrine. Also telling is his effort to cast the IRGC as an irreplaceable institution by involving it in such a wide array of vital national activities, from keeping the country secure against foreign and domestic enemies, to rivaling the executive branch on economic enterprises and natural disaster recovery, to leading the regime's "soft war" through media control and advanced manipulation of cyberspace.

Sanctions could become a vital parameter in any such transition process, whether by crippling elites' ability to achieve consensus and make competent decisions on crucial matters, or by laying fertile ground for social chaos if public economic dissatisfaction spirals out of control in the absence of Khamenei's concentrated power. A problematic transition could in turn spur regime transformation by hardline rivals or democratic forces, assuming the political system does not collapse entirely.

In fact, those scenarios are more in line with Khamenei's greatest fear: that the Islamic Republic might come to an end not through sudden regime change, but through gradual Western cultural influence. This phobia has led him to take systematic, aggressive action against outside "invasion" of the cultural and social arena. Khamenei's anti-Americanism stems from his worldview in which Islam is the ultimate solution for all the world's problems, the humanities only dilute this ideology, and scientific/technological advancement is the best means of perennially expanding the regime's power. According to him, adopting Western lifestyles would only ruin the younger generation's motivation to sacrifice their lives for his brand of Islam. As he put it during an April 24 speech to a group of workers, "We are after society's welfare, scientific progress, material growth, and technological advancement, but we are also after society's spirituality, dignity, interest, and moral progress."

KHAMENEI DOESN'T TRUST "BEHAVIOR CHANGE"

The Supreme Leader seems to believe there is no substantial difference between "regime change" and the Trump administration's oft-demanded "change of behavior." To his eyes, regime change is the open or hidden agenda behind Washington's every move, so any negotiation on regional issues or missile control would inevitably circle back to pressure on domestic affairs, democracy, and human rights. The West's expectation that Iran should transform into a liberal democracy seems to astound him—not just because it would be tantamount to regime change, but also because it looks like a double standard given Washington's willingness to work closely with other undemocratic regional states like Saudi Arabia.

As for missile development, regional interventionism, and other security issues, Khamenei likely believes that U.S. demands on those fronts are aimed at denying Iran any meaningful role in the Middle East. That scenario would in turn render the regime more vulnerable to regional power moves by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other rivals.

THE PERILS OF WAITING

Although the Iranian regime is not a classic dictatorship in which power is entirely concentrated in a single person's hands, Khamenei does largely have the last word on major domestic and foreign policy issues,

particularly given his role as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. In order to consolidate his power over the years, he created innumerable parallel institutions that are accountable only to him. As a result, his "supreme" leadership will not automatically transfer to his successor without some degree of internal crisis and competition. The same goes for the IRGC's unmatched power as a military body and an economic-cultural-political complex.

Given these inevitable uncertainties, the best time to effectively tackle U.S. problems with Iran is while the current leadership is still in place. There is no guarantee that post-Khamenei Iran will be a more reasonable and flexible party for negotiation with the West. His departure will not lead to the appointment of an authoritative successor who immediately wields comparable control over the regime's armed forces, intelligence apparatus, media outlets, judiciary, and vast financial empire. This precarious transition period may last for a long time, during which elites may be unable to reach consensus on serious issues and the IRGC might be tempted to take more aggressive steps abroad in order to cement control at home.

DISCERNING THE EMPTY THREATS

The key to making any progress with the current regime may lie in understanding the discrepancy between Khamenei's words and actions. His statements are designed to project an uncompromising revolutionary attitude on all essential matters, yet his policy record reveals a cautious soul who is neither suicidal nor immune to the vulnerabilities caused by domestic pressure.

Among the most eye-catching examples is the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. For years before the nuclear deal became a reality, he forbade any public talk about negotiations with America—that is, until he felt the heat of sanctions in 2011 and allowed talks to proceed, characterizing his drastic shift as an instance of "heroic flexibility." Later, when the United States was still party to the JCPOA and President Trump was freshly elected, Khamenei publicly warned that Iran would burn the agreement "by fire" if Washington withdrew from it. The Trump administration soon crossed that redline, but Khamenei has yet to make good on his threat, even after Europe failed to meet his expectations for shielding Tehran from sanctions.

If anything, the Supreme Leader has toned things down even more since then. During an April 18 meeting, he instructed an audience of army commanders to be cautious in their **response to the IRGC's new FTO designation (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-might-tehran-respond-to-irgc-designation)** : "Whatever irritates the enemy is good and right. On the other hand, every action that makes the enemy fighting mad…is bad and disagreeable, and everyone should avoid it in his speeches and actions." This careful calibration of Iranian defiance indicates his awareness of the fact that a major war would likely topple the regime given its current economic, military, ideological, and political situation. Thus, while some Iranian officials have issued provocative threats about closing the Strait of Hormuz, Khamenei and others have been more circumspect.

POSSIBLE CONDITIONS FOR RESUMING NEGOTIATIONS

In light of Iran's economic hardship and international isolation, at least some hardline elites seem amenable to resuming negotiations with the United States, especially if President Trump wins a second term. They may believe he will pursue the same approach he took with North Korea—increase pressure on the regime to force it to negotiate, but rather than insist on solving all differences at once, simply start the negotiations and leave them more open-ended, trading with Tehran step by step based on mutual consent and readiness to concede.

Given past experience with the scope and content of U.S.-led talks, however, Khamenei seems to believe that any future negotiating team may reflect the Trump administration's emphasis on discussing a wide variety of demands at the same time. If this perception persists—namely, that U.S. demands are too comprehensive, too radical, too conducive to regime change, or too threatening to the hegemonic power of hardliners—then negotiations are unlikely to take place. Alternatively, if the administration manages to convince Iranian leaders that their gain and loss would

be fairly proportionate, then they may be willing to make a list of potential areas of concession and agree to launch preliminary negotiations.

Toward that end, and assuming the goal of U.S. sanctions is to force Iran to negotiate, then the administration should reconsider some of its recent counterproductive gestures. For instance, having American officials publicly meet with Iranian opposition figures or deliver speeches at their political gatherings sends a confusing message to Tehran, which often interprets such outreach as part of a hidden agenda to subvert the regime or even build toward war (similar to Iraq in 2003).

More broadly, to maximize the benefits of the Trump administration's economic pressure policy, U.S. officials need to be precise in their redlines and rhetoric, and strictly committed to them in practice. In past negotiations, Iran insisted on reliable security guarantees that it would never be targeted militarily by the United States or Israel. Previous administrations resisted that absolute request, and the Trump administration is unlikely to accept it either given the improbable but real possibility that Iran may decide to close the Strait of Hormuz. Yet Washington can still find mechanisms to persuade the regime that any military action against Iran would remain defensive, limited to responses necessitated by the regime's own military actions.

In addition to making Iran aware of U.S. redlines in the clearest manner possible, officials should draw a glaring line between "regime change" and "change of behavior." By persuasively illuminating the contents and precise short/long-term objectives of U.S. policy toward Iran, Washington may be able to convince the regime that negotiations will focus on delivering rewards (or penalties) for each minor step it chooses to take (or reject). Meanwhile, in mobilizing its regional allies to pressure Iran, the Trump administration should make credible efforts to show Khamenei that the same leverage can compel these allies to ease tensions if Tehran compromises. In short, the United States should adopt a coherent approach in which Western offers are clearly perceived as being adjustable to the regime's regional behavior and peaceful aspirations.

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