

Khamenei Focusing on “External Threats,” Not Protest Demands

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Dec 2, 2022

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Brief Analysis

In an attempt to rally Iranians around the flag, his latest speech fixated on “Western plots,” indicating that he has no imminent plans to make significant concessions to protesters.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei often uses his speeches to signal both domestic and foreign audiences about his approach to current events. On November 26, he spoke before an audience of Basij—the paramilitary branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) responsible for enforcing internal security and promoting Islamic and “revolutionary” culture. Lately, the Basij have played a prominent role in suppressing the mass protests that have **rocked the country (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/conversation-masih-alinejad>)** since September, leading many to assume that Khamenei’s remarks to them would focus on the unrest. Instead, he dedicated most of **his speech (<https://english.khamenei.ir/news/9334/Today-the-enemy-is-seeking-to-dominate-minds>)** to promoting “Basiji values” in Iranian society and reiterating claims of a “Western conspiracy” against the country. He made only a few passing remarks about the unrest, describing protesters as “rioters” and “mercenaries” who are trying to help the United States pressure Iran.

External vs. Internal Threats

Obviously, this theme of a global battle between the Islamic Republic and its main enemy, America, has marked many of Khamenei’s speeches over the years. This time, however, his overriding focus on external threats contrasted sharply and atonally with the deep internal unrest undeniably manifesting on Iran’s streets.

In the Supreme Leader’s view, Iran is fighting a multifaceted Western plot to establish and maintain dominance in the Middle East. Accordingly, much of his speech was dedicated to listing the history of Iranian grievances against the United States and its allies, starting from the days of President Truman. These include “unfulfilled promises” that Washington has made on several occasions, such as the 1981 Algiers Accords (which ended the embassy hostage crisis) and the 2015 nuclear deal (aka the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA). In light of this

claimed U.S. unreliability, Khamenei concluded that Washington will only settle disputes if Tehran pays “ransoms” that cross its redlines.

For example, he accused U.S. negotiators of repeatedly moving the goalposts for uranium enrichment: “First, they say stop 20 percent enrichment, then 5 percent enrichment, then they demand a halt to the entire nuclear industry.” Yet he is more concerned about alleged U.S. demands that extend beyond the nuclear issue, such as changing Iran’s constitution, canceling the regime’s unelected Guardian Council, and shutting down its “defense industries.” Referring to the prospect of future negotiations with Washington, he argued that a “JCPOA 2” would result in Iran “completely abandoning its regional presence,” while a “JCPOA 3” would force the regime “not to produce any strategic or important weapons.” He concluded that no patriotic Iranian—even citizens who oppose the government—would submit to such payoffs.

Khamenei’s notion that making concessions will only increase the U.S. appetite for more concessions is not new. For example, when reformist parliamentarians suggested negotiating a nuclear deal as far back as 2003, he publicly lashed out at them, asserting that Washington will not stop pressuring Iranian officials until they renounce Islam, the Islamic Republic, and popular governance, essentially giving the West control over the country. He has repeated this idea time and time again since then.

Knowing and Countering the Enemy

Elsewhere in the speech, Khamenei argued that because the Islamic Republic lies at the epicenter of the geopolitically crucial Middle East, its revolutionary nature hinders Western “colonial policies.” Therefore, the United States has concluded it must weaken Iran by targeting the regime’s regional allies in Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Syria, with the ultimate goal of destroying “Iran’s strategic depth” and overthrowing the regime. Khamenei’s answer to these claimed Western plots is “resistance” and “steadfastness,” which he emphasized by citing the late general Qasem Soleimani’s track record of defeating Washington’s hegemonic efforts in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria.

To fully counter the West, however, Khamenei believes Iranians must first know the enemy and identify its tactics. Hence, his speech briefly circled back to the protests, reminding the audience of Basij members that the demonstrators they are fighting on the streets are just agents of the “global arrogance,” the regime’s codename for the United States and its allies. In other words, Iranians who unsuccessfully pushed for wider compromises with the West in the past are now trying to “create riots and chant slogans.” He urged his audience to understand how the enemy attempts to “dominate the minds” of Iranians so that they will “gladly hand over the country.” Specifically, he claimed that “presenting fake news in satellite channels and social media” has become one of the enemy’s main strategies.

Real Indifference or Just a Facade?

As a religious leader, Khamenei often uses Islamic references to support his claims. In this speech, he closed by quoting a Quran verse that rejects compromise: “Do not falter or grieve, for you shall have the upper hand if you are believers” (Surah al-Imran, 139). According to tradition, this verse was meant to encourage the Prophet Muhammad’s army after its defeat in the Battle of Uhud. Iranian officials have often cited the battle to illustrate the need for remaining vigilant against enemies and not giving in to temptation, as elements of the losing army did when they ignored the Prophet’s orders and left their posts to find loot. In a 1997 speech, Khamenei declared “our entire life is like the Battle of Uhud,” explaining that if Iran “moves well,” the enemy will be defeated, but if it lets down its guard and goes looking for booty, it will lose. The analogy holds for today’s situation as well.

Does Khamenei truly believe that today’s internal situation is manageable and that no reform in foreign or domestic policy is needed? It is difficult to say with certainty, but his latest rhetoric suggests the answer is yes. The regime

continues to use a “more of the same” strategy to meet the current challenge on the ground—not intensifying its already harsh [tools of suppression \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/social-media-irans-protests-new-public-sphere\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/social-media-irans-protests-new-public-sphere), but not suggesting meaningful concessions either.

Yet the country is fast approaching a series of important anniversaries that may intensify the protests and require the regime to rethink its approach. The first is Student Day on December 7, followed by several revolutionary commemoration days starting on January 9, when Iran honors the 1978 Qom uprising against the shah. One thing is sure: the [emphasis on patriotic and nationalist themes \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/team-melli-vs-team-usa-irans-game-contradictions\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/team-melli-vs-team-usa-irans-game-contradictions) will continue as the regime attempts to rally the public around the flag and highlight the perils of weakening the state at a time of external “colonialist” plots.

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

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