

Khamenei Attempts to Restore Optimism and Normality in Nowruz Speeches

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

Mar 23, 2023

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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

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



Brief Analysis

Despite facing unprecedented protests and other deep challenges, the Supreme Leader delivered upbeat New Year’s messages and argued that simply controlling runaway inflation would solve most of Iran’s ills.

When Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei delivered his annual speech marking the Iranian new year on March 21, one moment spoke volumes. As he mentioned President Biden’s support for the recent mass protests in Iran, the crowd began shouting “Death to America!” Visibly annoyed at being interrupted, Khamenei told them, “Well yes, death to America, but let me speak!” The exchange epitomized the main thrust of this year’s Nowruz messages, which were marked by a forced insistence that all is well even as the regime deals with waves of internal and external challenges. After suppressing the country’s most significant protests since 1979 without offering any reform, Khamenei sought to downplay the ongoing social turmoil and project a return to normalcy after the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A Ship in Quieter Waters

Khamenei often uses his annual Nowruz remarks to convey his thoughts on domestic and foreign affairs, and this year’s twin addresses—the [March 21 speech \(https://english.khamenei.ir/photo/9596/Leader-s-speech-on-the-first-day-of-the-Iranian-New-Year\)](https://english.khamenei.ir/photo/9596/Leader-s-speech-on-the-first-day-of-the-Iranian-New-Year) and a [Nowruz Eve message \(http://english.khamenei.ir/news/9590/New-Year-s-slogan-is-Inflation-control-growth-in-production\)](http://english.khamenei.ir/news/9590/New-Year-s-slogan-is-Inflation-control-growth-in-production) the day before—were no exception. Some recent Nowruz speeches have reflected Iran’s grim circumstances; for example, [the 2020 speech \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khameneis-nowruz-speech-time-coronavirus\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khameneis-nowruz-speech-time-coronavirus) came just a few weeks after the pandemic broke out and was delivered from a secluded room, spurring Khamenei to describe the previous year as “tumultuous” and the country as a “ship in stormy waters.” His 2021 and 2022 speeches were likewise delivered remotely due to coronavirus concerns. Yet this year’s speeches marked a return to the occasion’s traditionally festive atmosphere in the holy city of Mashhad.

The celebrations began with his March 20 Nowruz Eve message—typically a shorter speech summarizing the past

year, setting the tone for the coming year, and focusing on domestic issues. Noting that the Persian year 1401 was “full of events” both good and bad, Khamenei asserted that Iran’s overall situation is improving. He also insisted that “the most important issue for the nation” is the economy, urging officials to invest more time in improving the people’s livelihood. Indeed, the past year was [a bad one for Iran’s currency](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-currency-collapse-may-not-lead-diplomatic-desperation) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-currency-collapse-may-not-lead-diplomatic-desperation>), with the dollar reaching a record exchange rate of 600,000 rials as recently as late February.

Khamenei also uses his yearly Nowruz Eve messages to unveil annual slogans. Nine of the past ten slogans focused on the economy, and this year’s slogan continued that theme: “The Year of Controlling Inflation and Growing Production.” In that vein, Khamenei highlighted inflation as the country’s preeminent problem, explaining that the increased prices for food and basic necessities are disproportionately affecting the weaker sectors of society. The day before his message, reformist newspaper *Etemad* had published a [grim infographic](https://twitter.com/etemadonline/status/1637356432252125184?s=61&t=VQ6-9xhZIUlqMaZB8RgpeA) (<https://twitter.com/etemadonline/status/1637356432252125184?s=61&t=VQ6-9xhZIUlqMaZB8RgpeA>) illustrating major price spikes over the past year, including a 125% increase for meat, 250% for onions, 82% for eggs, and 78% for rice.

Yet Khamenei took an optimistic approach to these issues. Noting that all countries—including ones with strong, advanced economies—have such problems, he asserted that some are “worse off than us in this sense” and implicitly referred to the recent banking scandals in the United States and Europe. To “save the country” from these problems, he urged officials to improve domestic production. If Iran reduces its economic problems, he argued, many of its other problems “will also be solved”—presumably referring to the protests and social turmoil that have shaken the country since September. Continuing this hopeful tone, Khamenei noted that although his goals for the past year were not fully met, the country was able to decrease its unemployment rate, achieve growth in prominent sectors, and get “thousands of factories” operating again.

Uniting the Faithful, Looking East, and Lying About Ukraine

Khamenei’s March 21 Nowruz Day speech maintained this positive spin. During [last year’s speech](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khamenei-declares-his-new-years-resolutions-iran) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khamenei-declares-his-new-years-resolutions-iran>), many observers noted the contrast between his claims of victory over the pandemic and his decision to stay in Tehran and avoid the main festivities once again. This year, he finally returned to the grand stage in Mashhad, speaking unmasked before masses of worshippers in the Imam Reza Shrine alongside prominent figures such as his son Mojtaba and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps chief Hossein Salami.

Disregarding the continuous unrest his regime has experienced since last fall, the Supreme Leader declared that Iran is in a good situation. He asked, “Which country and revolution do you know that has been able to resist the blows of the world’s most powerful countries?” He then lashed out at the West for “meddling” with Tehran’s internal affairs and creating “unprecedented Iranophobia” via the media. In his view, the West’s goal is to change the essence of Iran’s “Islamic democratic regime” and transform it into a “fake” Western democracy that obeys the “global arrogant powers.” These powers aim to erode Iran’s “points of strength,” he argued, referring to the ideals of the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and *velayat-e faqih*, the doctrine granting the Supreme Leader his authority. Yet instead of weakening Iran, these efforts supposedly had the opposite effect—as he put it, “All those who supported the recent riots received a slap in the face from the people.”

Following this blatant mischaracterization of the protests, Khamenei called on his audience to stay united in the face of America’s “hybrid war” against them, and not to let small differences of opinion polarize society or demoralize youths. Iranians are people of faith, he noted, and even those who appear to be less religiously adherent on “certain issues” still have strong faith in the “Quran, God, and the Imams.”

Khamenei applied the same rosy tint to Iran’s foreign affairs. Despite the enemy’s attempts to isolate Tehran internationally, he argued, the opposite happened. The regime’s relations with Europe may have weakened, but its relationship with the Middle East improved and its ties with Asia become “100 percent stronger.” Surprisingly, he did not mention the government’s **recent agreement with Saudi Arabia** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-beijings-iran-saudi-deal-means-and-what-it-doesnt>), perhaps out of a sense of restraint given the longstanding enmity between Riyadh and Tehran. In any case, his speech reflected the theme of “Looking East” that ran throughout Iranian rhetoric in the past year, including frequent media headlines like “The Sunset of the Westernizers” and the “Rise of the East.” President Ebrahim Raisi echoed this theme in his own **Nowruz Eve speech** (<https://www.president.ir/en/143070>), stating that the new global order entails a transition to Asia and emphasizing Iran’s irreplaceable geostrategic position in that order. Alignment with the East was also evident when Khamenei discussed the Ukraine war. During last year’s Nowruz speech—delivered a few weeks after Russia invaded—Khamenei did not mention Moscow but heavily criticized the West for its supposed “hypocrisy” about the war. Since then, however, Tehran has **intensified its support for Russia** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/after-ukraine-russias-potential-military-and-nuclear-compensation-iran>), providing drones that facilitated the Kremlin’s bombardment campaign against Ukrainian civilian targets. Despite **clear evidence** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/making-irans-support-russia-more-costly>) of this military support, however, Khamenei’s Nowruz speech asserted that Iran is not involved in the war, instead blaming Washington for starting and prolonging the conflict for its own benefit.

What to Expect in the Year 1402

Although Khamenei criticized Washington’s supposed attempts to weaken Iran and demoralize its people, his Nowruz Day speech did not specifically mention the **stalled nuclear negotiations** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-nuclear-endgame-warrants-change-us-strategy>) or the **recent advancements** (<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3878385-is-iran-ready-to-build-a-nuclear-bomb-or-not/>) in the regime’s nuclear program. Instead, he repeated his old argument that the best way to counter U.S. sanctions is not through diplomacy, but through domestic efforts that render them toothless. This stance is unsurprising given that the regime has been downplaying the prospects of returning to the 2015 nuclear agreement **for more than a year now** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-preparing-its-public-not-yet-nuclear-compromise>).

More specifically, Khamenei emphasized the need to continue decreasing the country’s dependence on the West, noting how other sanctioned countries have improved their situation via methods such as “putting the dollar aside and trading in local currencies.” He also invoked the longstanding regime concept of a “resistance economy,” urging officials to rely on the country’s internal powers and resources as they strive to expand domestic production. In his view, this entails building confidence in the private sector and encouraging people to participate in the economic field, thereby improving their livelihoods and facilitating continuous, rapid national growth. Such rhetoric helps illustrate why Khamenei may genuinely see the regime’s deepest set of challenges in decades as an opportunity to advance his broader mission of moving the Islamic Republic ever further away from the West.

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



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Mapping the Islamic State's Activity: Implications for U.S. Counterterrorism Policy

Mar 23, 2023



Aaron Y. Zelin,
Gina Ligon,
Thomas Hegghammer

[\(/policy-analysis/mapping-islamic-states-activity-implications-us-counterterrorism-policy\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Middle East Matters, Episode Two: The Mideast Impact of the Ukraine War, One Year On

Mar 23, 2023



Hanin Ghaddar,
Grant Rumley,
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/middle-east-matters-episode-two-mideast-impact-ukraine-war-one-year\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Hezbollah Infiltrates Israel (Part 2): Potential Responses

Mar 22, 2023



Nadav Pollak

[\(/policy-analysis/hezbollah-infiltrates-israel-part-2-potential-responses\)](#)

TOPICS

[Energy & Economics \(/policy-analysis/energy-economics\)](#)

[Proliferation \(/policy-analysis/proliferation\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

