

When the Ayatollah Cried Mouse

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Brief Analysis

Khamenei’s Ramadan speech combined explicit attacks on the United States, implicit criticism of Rouhani’s approach, and excessive demands on Europe, seemingly bracing the regime for one of the toughest challenges of his thirty-year rule.

Every Ramadan, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei uses the occasion of a post-fast *iftar* dinner to deliver a message to the Iranian people and the international community. On May 23, he offered public remarks during a meal with several top officials, among them President Hassan Rouhani, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani. This year’s speech served two ends: it outlined Iran’s starting position for negotiating with Europe now that the United States has left the nuclear deal, and it sought to unify the Iranian public against the hardships they will encounter in the coming months.

“TOM AND JERRY” IN TEHRAN

Not surprisingly, most of the speech was a response to the Trump administration’s recent withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Khamenei repeated his basic narrative that Washington seeks to overthrow the Islamic Republic, and that the nuclear issue was only a cover for reaching that goal. He then touted Iran’s ability to make progress despite U.S. “subversion,” promising that Washington’s plots will continue to fail like those of “the cat from the well-known Tom and Jerry cartoon.”

Khamenei has cracked the same joke in the past to make a point about the country’s resilience under U.S. pressure. In 2011, months before Washington imposed tough sanctions on Iran’s oil industry, he declared that such measures were ineffective because Tehran could readily counter “Tom” and his Western allies: “They do a lot of things, make a lot of noise and are big in size, but the result of their actions is not as good as expected.”

KHAMENEI’S SIX LESSONS

The heart of the speech was a list of six takeaways that Iranians should draw from the JCPOA experience. As always with Khamenei's remarks, every line was carefully crafted and infused with signals to different audiences. This time, the main audiences were the EU3 (Britain, France, and Germany), the Iranian people, and President Rouhani.

1. Iran cannot work with the United States. Khamenei claimed that President Trump's JCPOA decision was a symptom of a greater disease—Washington does not stand behind its commitments, no matter who is president. In his view, even President Obama breached the “spirit and body” of the nuclear deal and tried to destabilize the regime. Thus, Iran “cannot trust such a government, sign a contract with it, or work with it.” This message was directed at Rouhani and Zarif—who both supported diplomacy with Washington—and at those Iranian reformists who still aspire to engage America in a “Dialogue of Civilizations.” In short, it was Khamenei's “I told you so.”

2. U.S. animosity centers on the Islamic Republic's essence, not its nuclear program. Khamenei mentioned Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's May 21 speech on Iran, arguing that the administration's list of twelve demands merely confirms Washington's root problem with Tehran: namely, the regime's refusal to compromise with the United States, and its adherence to an Islamic system of governance and values. According to him, America's chosen method of addressing this “problem” is to “obliterate the factors of power in the Islamic Republic” such as its nuclear program and ballistic missiles.

3. Flexibility toward the “enemy” will only make it more aggressive. Khamenei noted that while he does not oppose efforts to reduce foreign animosity toward Iran, past experience has convinced him that this cannot be realized through “flexibility and compromise” with the U.S. “enemy.” As proof, he claimed that the compromises Tehran made under the Rafsanjani and Khatami governments only brought more pressure. This claim carries an implicit criticism of Rouhani, a key player in implementing policy under both of those governments. Ironically, Khamenei's line of argument also contradicts his own 2013 “heroic flexibility” speech, in which he professed that “flexibility is necessary in many areas, and there is nothing wrong with it, [but do] not forget who your opponent is.”

4. Resisting the West results in concessions. Khamenei reminded listeners that during the nuclear negotiations of 2004-2005, the West demanded that Iran dismantle its nuclear facilities and stop enriching uranium. Instead, Tehran established a uranium conversion facility in Esfahan and launched enrichment efforts at Natanz, eventually producing batches of uranium with as much as 20 percent of the fissile isotope U-235—a level at which most of the work needed to reach weapons-grade material (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-technical-implications-of-trumps-jcpoa-announcement>) has been completed. In other words, Khamenei argued, it was only by advancing the nuclear program and resisting the West that Iran managed to gain the enrichment rights enshrined under the JCPOA in 2015—not by negotiating a decade earlier.

5. Europe is untrustworthy because it sides with Washington on critical issues. To prove this point, Khamenei referenced several instances from the JCPOA negotiations in which the EU3 supposedly tried to undermine Iran's position in the talks. He also claimed that they deceived Tehran by failing to fulfill the promises they made in the 2004-2005 talks (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/risk-and-reward-what-iran-learned-after-a-decade-of-nuclear-talks>), and by looking the other way when Washington breached the “spirit and body” of the JCPOA.

6. Iran's problems are not tied to the nuclear deal or foreign affairs. Khamenei has long called on the Islamic Republic to be self-reliant and minimize its dependence on foreign powers. In Wednesday's speech, he explained that the country's economy has been on hold for months while foreign powers considered whether to maintain the nuclear deal. This situation cannot continue, he argued, noting that Iran must take measures to improve its

economy other than engaging with Europe.

In this regard, Khamenei urged Iranian officials to listen to “fair criticism”—a heavy dose of which he continued to pour on Rouhani, implicitly attacking him for linking economic recovery and engagement with the West. He also told officials to be realistic and not delude themselves with dreams, reminding listeners that the promise of Iran receiving a “hundred billion dollars” after the JCPOA was an illusion—a clear reference to statements made by Rouhani government officials in February 2016 about such amounts.

DEMANDS FOR EUROPE

In addition to reviewing these lessons, Khamenei’s speech included a list of demands that Europe must fulfill to keep Iran from revoking the nuclear deal:

- A European resolution against America’s “violation” of UN Security Council Resolution 2231.
- A promise “not to raise the issues of missiles and regional affairs of the Islamic Republic.”
- A commitment to resist any sanctions against Iran.
- A guarantee that if Washington impedes the sale of Iranian oil to other countries, Europe will compensate by buying the oil itself.
- A commitment to continue European banking transactions with Iran.

The Supreme Leader warned that if his demands are not met in due time, Iran has the right to resume suspended nuclear activities such as enriching uranium to 20 percent. Yet just as Tehran cannot meet all of Secretary Pompeo’s demands without changing the regime’s essence, European governments cannot complete Khamenei’s wish list given their diplomatic, economic, and military relationships with Washington, among other factors.

With the rial dropping to a record low and public protests increasing on domestic issues such as workers’ rights, water drainage, and women’s equality, Tehran understands that it needs to rally the people around the flag in order to survive future challenges and prevent another outburst of mass unrest. The regime also likely understands that the JCPOA cannot survive without Washington, and that any European countermeasures against U.S. pressure will have limited effect. Accordingly, the ayatollahs will almost certainly take any compensation offered if it helps them prepare for longer-term challenges, even if it means delaying resumption of the nuclear program for a few months.

Finally, Khamenei noted that “the enemy has placed the war room in the Treasury Department,” so Iran needs to set up its “headquarters in its economic centers.” Such statements acknowledge that even if he secures a limited European “carrot,” Iran will still face one of the toughest challenges of his thirty-year reign. It is no wonder, then, that he finished the speech with a long list of Iran’s strengths, seemingly hoping to convince the public that they can endure the pressures coming their way.

Omer Carmi is director of intelligence at the Israeli cybersecurity firm Sixgill and a former military fellow at The Washington Institute. Previously, he led analytical and research efforts in the Israel Defense Forces pertaining to developments in the Middle East and national security arenas. ❖

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