

# Iran's Nuclear Holiday: A Final Attempt to Deter Trump

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Brief Analysis

**Hardliners will take comfort in the government's latest nuclear warnings to Washington, but the rhetoric could backfire if more Iranians come to believe that costly new projects hold little economic benefit for them.**

The twentieth day of Farvardin, which usually coincides with April 8 or 9, is known in Iran as "National Nuclear Technology Day." The unusual celebration began under former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who declared it an official holiday in 2006 after Iran reached a significant milestone in its uranium enrichment efforts. Since then, it has served as an opportunity for the regime to overplay the status of its nuclear program by publicizing new, sometimes exaggerated advancements and accomplishments.

## FROM THREATS TO CELEBRATION

Under Ahmadinejad, the holiday was typically used to threaten the West by unveiling new nuclear facilities and declaring that Iran had joined the "nuclear club of nations." In 2007, for instance, he announced that Iran had mastered uranium enrichment on an industrial scale; in 2009, he inaugurated a nuclear fuel manufacturing plant near Isfahan; and in 2010, while the West was discussing a new round of sanctions, he revealed a "third-generation centrifuge."

This routine continued until the 2015 nuclear deal. After the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was agreed to that summer, the holiday's narrative shifted to focus on the nuclear industry's contributions to the Iranian public. In an attempt to deflect hardliner criticism of the JCPOA, President Hassan Rouhani's government tried to portray the deal as a success. Rouhani also sought to make the case that the nuclear program was still active despite the deal, with benefits for the Iranian nation such as radiopharmaceutical research.

## AND BACK TO THREATS AGAIN

This year, however, many Iranian officials seem to believe that President Trump [will revoke the JCPOA in May](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-will-iran-prepare-for-potential-u.s.-) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-will-iran-prepare-for-potential-u.s.->

**withdrawal-from-the-jcpoa**, his declared deadline for deciding whether to renew major sanctions. Accordingly, Nuclear Technology Day has once again become a podium for threats. On April 9, the regime unveiled no less than eighty-three new nuclear projects, twice the number as last year. Among them are the first transfer of uranium yellowcake produced in Iran's new mines, and improvements in the regime's enrichment program and reactors.

Although none of the announced achievements seems to breach the JCPOA or indicate a major improvement in the nuclear program, the regime's rhetoric has clearly sought to create an air of menace. Rouhani warned, "If the deal breaks, they will witness the fallout in less than a week," claiming that Iran would be the winner in the court of international public opinion. He also responded to ongoing hardliner criticism by asserting that the nuclear program has not stopped during his term, but is actually moving faster.

Similarly, the director of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, Ali Akbar Salehi, has warned several times in recent days that Tehran is preparing a "special surprise" for the United States if Trump pulls out of the JCPOA. He even promised to resume enrichment up to 20 percent—an important phase in achieving weapons-grade uranium—within four days after a U.S. withdrawal. The AEOI spokesperson elaborated on Salehi's remarks, asserting that Iran's Fordow plant contained 1,600 operational centrifuges that only required gas injections to begin enrichment, "like a car that is ready to move but only needs fuel" (a claim at odds with the IAEA's February finding that there are no more than 1,044 centrifuges in Fordow, as required by the JCPOA).

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

**A**lthough the tough rhetoric surrounding this year's holiday seems to reflect a desire to deter Washington from leaving the JCPOA, Tehran is still practicing major self-restraint regarding Trump's looming May decision. Iranian officials hinted that they will not rush to respond, since that could put their international legitimacy at risk and facilitate the formation of a Western coalition against Tehran.

For their part, Iran's conservative camp and military apparatus might find comfort in the nuclear program's declared renaissance, though this approach may soon prove to be a double-edged sword. As the exchange rate of the rial **continues to plummet (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/mismanagement-leaves-irans-economy-vulnerable>)**, many Iranians could perceive nuclear festivities as a farce, celebrating costly new projects that hold little benefit for them or the economy.

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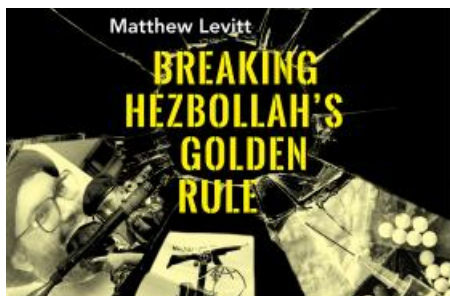
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