

The Most Important Speech of the Year in Iran

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Brief Analysis

The Supreme Leader's latest Nowruz speech signaled concern about the regime's political legitimacy while remaining notably silent on the nuclear deal.

The most important annual speech in Iran is Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's lengthy address to pilgrims in Mashhad on March 21, Nowruz Day (not to be confused with his less significant midnight television address marking the beginning of the holiday). Over the years, the Mashhad speech has been the best indicator of what Khamenei has in mind for either domestic policy, foreign affairs, or both over the coming year. The speeches can be found on his website, khamenei.ir, translated into English and many other languages; all quotes here are from that source, edited for clarity as necessary.

WHY NOWRUZ, AND WHY MASHHAD?

Tens of millions of Iranians travel during the extended Nowruz festival. Schools close, newspapers stop the presses, and most businesses and government offices shut down for at least part of the holiday.

The most popular travel destination is Mashhad, specifically the shrine of the eighth imam Ali Reza. On Nowruz Day, hundreds of thousands of people crowd this magnificent building, one of the architectural wonders of the Middle East. The shrine is also an immense economic power; its foundation, the Astan-e Qods Razavi, has tens of billions of dollars in assets and subsidizes trips for many poor pilgrims.

Khamenei claims Mashhad as his birthplace and has always felt comfortable there. He gets more respect from Mashhad clerics (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/apocalyptic-politics-on-the-rationality-of-iranian-policy>) than from the leading Shia seminaries in Qom. His Nowruz Day appearance at the shrine affords him a vast audience, something he clearly appreciates.

KHAMENEI'S 2015-2017 SPEECHES

Last year's speech did not touch at all on contemporary foreign affairs. His only comments about the United States were two passing references to the great powers that supposedly bullied Iran in the decades before the Islamic Revolution. Instead, his main thrust was to celebrate the economic progress Iran has made by relying on its own efforts rather than foreigners. This theme was a prescient recognition of the people's growing economic discontent, which Khamenei was trying to head off by reminding listeners about the Islamic Republic's ample economic gains since its founding. The protests that broke out across the country in December showed that the economy was indeed on Iranians' minds, but they rejected Khamenei's perspective, focusing on rampant corruption and high unemployment.

In contrast, the 2016 speech was mostly about foreign policy, with an emphasis on castigating the United States for its perceived bullying. He complained that U.S. policy was a lose-lose proposition for Iran: "Either we have to [go] along with America and her demands, or we have to endure her pressures, her threats, and the losses that we will suffer as a result of opposing America." He also made very clear that the previous year's nuclear deal was about nuclear matters only, and that Iran would not change its stance on other regional affairs as a result of it. "When you retreat in the face of the enemy while you can resist him," he warned, "the enemy will advance." Such rhetoric signaled that Tehran would keep up its assertive, interventionist approach to Syria, Iraq, and other countries rather than becoming more cooperative with the international community.

The 2015 speech focused on two main themes: reminding the people about their duty to support the regime, and describing how foreign sanctions had made the economy into an arena of battle with the enemy. Speaking only a few weeks before nuclear negotiators reached an agreement in principle, Khamenei expressed support for the coming deal so long as it involved lifting current sanctions and avoiding restrictions on Iran's regional activities. The speech was the means by which he explained to regime hardliners why the deal was needed, signaling that they should support the Rouhani government in reaching an agreement that respected his redlines.

THIS YEAR'S SPEECH

Khamenei's latest Mashhad address (<http://english.khamenei.ir/news/5575/No-country-in-the-world-has-a-people-who-are-as-independent-as>) began with a lengthy defense of how well the Islamic Republic advances freedom, social justice, democracy, and independence from foreign domination. Yet such remarks were a clear example of "the lady doth protest too much," showing his recognition that more and more Iranians reject the regime's political legitimacy.

He also argued at length that Iran's ample "human and natural wealth" offer wonderful prospects for the economy. He told listeners that the slogan for 2018 is "Support for Iranian Products," explaining in detail why they should buy domestically produced goods. The ongoing collapse of the Iranian rial

(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/mismanagement-leaves-irans-economy-vulnerable>) is making imports more expensive, so Khamenei sought to justify why the difficulty of buying foreign products is actually a good thing.

He concluded with a few points about regional matters and "American malevolence," focusing on the Islamic State/Daesh. "In order to divert the minds of nations away from the usurping Zionist regime," he declared, "it was America's plot to create Daesh. By Allah's favor and grace, we managed to foil this plot." The defensive tone of his remarks about the group is intriguing. It may be an indication that Sunni jihadism is more of a threat to Iran than authorities have let on. Mashhad and Tehran each have Sunni communities in excess of a million people, most of whom face severe discrimination. It would not be surprising if some young hotheads are attracted to jihadism.

Khamenei then ridiculed Washington's inability to defeat the extremists it claims to be fighting: "It is sixteen years

now that the Americans have entered Afghanistan, but what the hell have they done? Have they managed to ensure security in Afghanistan? No, not at all...Some people say that they've failed, and some say that they did not want to achieve security in the region."

Regarding Iran's own activities abroad, Khamenei claimed that unlike the United States, Tehran has not "behaved in a tyrannical manner" or "interfered in the affairs of other countries." Instead, it has merely "offered help" to certain governments based on "reasonable and logical motives."

As for nuclear issues, Khamenei said exactly nothing—a seemingly surprising omission at a time when President Trump seeks to fill the vacant posts of national security advisor and secretary of state with hardliners (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/vulnerable-iranian-economy-tests-u.s.-policy-resolve>) who oppose both the nuclear deal and the Iranian regime. The Supreme Leader has repeatedly argued that the United States never fulfilled its promise to lift sanctions, so observers may have expected him to complain that Washington is preparing to reaffirm its untrustworthiness by walking away from the nuclear deal. He said no such thing, however, nor did he issue threats about slapping back hard if foreign powers step up the pressure on Iran.

CONCLUSION

This year's edition of Khamenei's most significant annual speech revealed a clear defensiveness about the regime's domestic legitimacy, as well as a desire to dispense with dire warnings about the fate of the nuclear deal. He may have decided that Trump will pull the plug on the agreement no matter what, so perhaps he did not want to lay down threats on which he might soon be expected to deliver.

Patrick Clawson is the Morningstar Senior Fellow and director of research at The Washington Institute. ❖

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