

Khamenei Intensifies His Anti-Americanism to Weaken President Rouhani

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Brief Analysis

The Supreme Leader used his Nowruz address to launch a strong attack on the United States and make Rouhani the scapegoat for continued American pressure, which augurs poorly for U.S.-Iranian cooperation.

In his twenty-sixth Nowruz speech in Mashhad, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei reiterated his radical anti-American position and implicitly criticized Iran's nuclear negotiating team for violating some of his redlines and giving in to U.S. pressure. He also indirectly criticized President Hassan Rouhani, who has been referring to Iran's latest elections as "JCPOA 2" in order to point out the transformative implications of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action signed with the P5+1 last year. Khamenei characterized such rhetoric as a U.S. plot to inject the idea of political change into the minds of Iranian elites and, by extension, the general citizenry. Moreover, his declared motto for the new Persian year -- "The Resistance Economy: Initiation and Action" -- signals that he will make Rouhani's economic agenda a target for extraordinary scrutiny and criticism from hardliners.

ON TRANSFORMING IRAN'S ISLAMIC IDEOLOGY

Since he took office in 1989, Khamenei has traveled to Mashhad, his hometown and the holiest city in Iran, to deliver a ceremonial speech on the first day of the Persian calendar. This year's speech fell on March 20, and the Supreme Leader's eighty-five-minute address focused on the complexity of Western and especially American animosity against Iran, casting the United States as Iran's "enemy par excellence."

The speech's main theme was how the enemy is trying to use sophisticated tricks to impose its will on the nation by suggesting that Iran must choose between two roads: accept what Washington wants, or tolerate constant problems and pressures created by the United States. He elaborated his point by complaining about Iranians in the political elite and ruling class who naively believe this dichotomy or are otherwise intimidated enough by U.S. threats to lose

their self-confidence. He emphasized that compromising with Washington is not like compromising with any other government: "Compromising with the United States is necessarily equal to conceding to its impositions. This is the nature of [any] agreement with the United States." As an example, he mentioned the nuclear agreement: "Although we endorsed the JCPOA and declared that we acknowledge and appreciate [the Iranian negotiating team]...our respected foreign minister told me on several cases that 'at this point, we were not able [to resist], we couldn't watch this redline'...When the other party is the United States...compromising means giving up some of the things that one insists on holding fast to."

According to Khamenei, by creating such "inevitable duality," Washington is attempting to show that while the JCPOA's objective was to let Iran tap into its tremendous economic potential, the nuclear deal is not adequate on its own -- Iran must also cross its own redlines and change its policy on many other issues, such as cooperating with U.S. plans for ending the current chaos and violence in the Middle East: "There was an agreement on the nuclear issue, we called it the JCPOA. Now other JCPOAs on regional issues and constitutional matters are needed -- JCPOA 1, JCPOA 2, JCPOA 3, et cetera -- so we can live easily. This is a logic that [the United States] is trying to sell to the society's elite and, through them, public opinion." In his view, such logic means that the Iranian people are being asked to give up Islamic sharia and revolutionary values, including "the Palestine issue" and support for the "resistance" front -- that is, to stop giving political and other support "to people who are victims of injustice such as the Palestinian nation, the people of Gaza, Yemen, and Bahrain, in order to become closer to what the United States desires." By this same logic, Washington's protests against Iran's long-range missile tests and military exercises will gradually lead to broader questions about the regime itself: "Why was the Qods Force formed? Why were the Islamic Revolutionary Guards formed? Why are the Islamic Republic's policies...based on Islam?...What is the Guardian Council's role in the society? Why is the Guardian Council authorized to reject bills due to their incompatibility with sharia?...This is what I have described several times; this is transformation of the Islamic Republic's essence. The facade of the Islamic Republic might be preserved, but it becomes empty of its content. This is what the enemy wants."

ON NUCLEAR SANCTIONS AND THE ECONOMY

Regarding the nuclear agreement and the lifting of sanctions, Khamenei argued that the United States has deliberately and confidently refrained from delivering what it promised. He blamed both Washington and Rouhani's negotiating team for this situation: "As our own foreign minister said...through various sophisticated ways [the United States] blocked Iran from achieving its objectives...Our banking trade, our efforts to return wealth from their banks, various kinds of businesses that require financial services, all of these are still facing problems. When we investigate the issue, it becomes obvious that [the banks] are afraid of the United States. Americans said 'we lift the sanctions.' On paper they have actually lifted. But through different ways they try to prevent sanctions relief from bearing fruit."

Khamenei then criticized Rouhani's government for exaggerating the role of sanctions in pushing Iran's economy toward crisis, and for overstating the significance of sanctions relief in pulling the economy out of crisis: "[They said] if sanctions continue as they do, this and that will happen. These things didn't happen and...would never happen." As a result, he concluded, the enemy got the impression that sanctions are harmful to Iran, and that "by using sanctions as a tool, it can pressure the Iranian nation." He then laid out two options for responding to this tool: "Either we have to tolerate sanctions, or we have to stand firm with a resistance economy," his oft-stated strategy of cutting Iran off from the global economy and becoming self-sufficient in order to resist outside pressures.

Khamenei disparaged what the Rouhani government has done so far to implement a resistance economy, calling its efforts "preliminary" and "inadequate." To redress this problem, he asked the government to invite hardline economists -- the same figures who often criticize Rouhani's team -- into the process because they know the

mechanisms that will help Iran increase its national production. He also gave ten points of economic advice to the government (e.g., supporting small industries), declaring that such measures would make Iran so powerful that it would be insulated against the threat of sanctions. "We do not need to give up our principles and values to [dissuade] America from sanctioning us," he said. "If there was resistance economy, the enemy's sanctions would not have a remarkable impact."

ON OBAMA'S NOWRUZ MESSAGE

Khamenei also directed harsh words at President Obama's annual "Nowruz Message to the Iranian People," issued on March 19: "When I say 'enemy,' I mean 'U.S. government.' I am saying this bluntly. Obviously they say 'we are not your enemy'...They sent a Nowruz message and showed sympathy to our youths, or they arrange a *haft-sin sofreh* [a traditional Nowruz display] in the White House. Well, this is like deceiving a little kid. Nobody would believe such things. On one hand they maintain the sanctions...which is pure animosity, they threaten us, which is pure animosity...On the other hand they put a *haft-sin sofreh* in the White House, or in their Nowruz message they say 'we are after employment for Iranian youths.' Nobody believes such things."

Khamenei continued this characterization of the enemy's deceit by describing how the Americans "cheated on us" in the aftermath of the JCPOA: "They threaten to impose other sanctions...The U.S. Treasury secretary is working hard day and night to prevent the Islamic Republic from receiving its benefits from the JCPOA...The current administration will be changed after the election in seven or eight months. There is no guarantee that the next administration will implement the U.S. commitment even on the small scale that the current one is doing. And now candidates and their campaigns are competing with each other on saying bad things about Iran." Such rhetoric is intended to prove his claim that the United States is Iran's main enemy, despite what many people around President Rouhani or outside the government may believe.

CONCLUSION

While it is by no means certain that Ayatollah Khamenei will force Iran to stop complying with the nuclear deal in the near future, his latest speech could pave the way toward justifying such a move, particularly if Iranian authorities are already weighing the costs and benefits of walking away from the JCPOA. First, by directly quoting Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Supreme Leader essentially accused him -- and, by extension, President Rouhani -- of crossing the regime's redlines in the negotiations. Second, he argued that the United States is not complying with the JCPOA, asserted that sanctions would not have been as harmful as Rouhani and his supporters have claimed, and declared that the only way to neutralize the sanctions threat is to avoid compromise with the United States and enhance the resistance economy. In his view, the ultimate aim of negotiations and agreements is to transform the Islamic Republic's nature and allow the United States to impose its will on Iran.

To be sure, many of these elements -- vociferously criticizing the notion of compromise with the United States, accusing Washington of seeking regime change, turning against Iranian presidents, and calling for a resistance economy -- are nothing new for Khamenei. Yet his latest accusations show a particularly strong and vocal distaste for the Rouhani government's efforts on nuclear and economic issues, which likely means that he will no longer give the president license to pursue a more conciliatory agenda at home or abroad. Rouhani frequently uses the term "JCPOA 2" to refer to change on nonnuclear issues as a result of his success in the nuclear negotiations; in fact, he used it a few hours before Khamenei's speech in his own Nowruz message, referring to last month's elections as "JCPOA 2." Such open conflict with the Supreme Leader's positions will make the lead-up to the June 2017 presidential election very difficult for Rouhani. Hardliners will interpret Khamenei's speech as another green light to escalate their attacks on the president, mainly by intensifying their criticism of the JCPOA, accusing Rouhani's team of naivete or incompetence in implementing the resistance economy, and creating various problems for the government in different fields in order to shrink Rouhani's social power base.

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