

# Iran's Shifting Nuclear Narratives

by [Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](#)

Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

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**Detailed accounts by top Iranian negotiators and Khamenei himself show that the initial nuclear overtures between Washington and Tehran began well before President Rouhani took office, yet the Supreme Leader still seems intent on ducking responsibility.**

**T**he debate in Iran about the nuclear deal has been heating up. The latest maneuvering centers on competing narratives about the extent of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's responsibility for the negotiations and their outcome.

## KHAMENEI, THE MAJLIS, AND THE NUCLEAR TALKS

**P**resident Hassan Rouhani's team insists that the deal should be adopted by Supreme National Security Council rather than the Majlis, partly because Rouhani has no authority to overrule the parliament's decision, but even more important because a Majlis vote would give the Supreme Leader a way to quietly reject the deal. Khamenei could not easily disguise his responsibility for a Supreme National Security Council decision because unlike Majlis bills, the council's decisions become law only after Khamenei's official approval.

Khamenei has a long history of using unpublicized instructions to the Majlis as a way to have the government adopt policies for which he does not have to take responsibility. When he intervenes in Majlis affairs, he sometimes does so publicly and sometimes secretly. An example of the first is his speech on November 21, 2012, when he urged the parliament not to question then-president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad "because this is what the enemy wants." Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani immediately issued a deferential statement: "The guardian of the Muslim world [Khamenei] is fully aware of all Muslims' expediency, and his advice would certainly bring happiness to the Islamic society, and obeying your Excellency's orders is a duty and a matter of pride for me and the members of Majlis." Similar, the

other Majlis members issued a joint statement of their own: "The Supreme Leader's guidance and orders are mandatory for MPs and are considered as the last word." As for secret interventions, on January 30, 2015, Larijani said that Khamenei had advised the Majlis to cooperate with the government regarding the 3 percent budget increase for the National Development Fund. "The Supreme Leader did not want to respond to Majlis by a written letter, so he informed me of his advice verbally," he said. Before Khamenei expressed his view secretly, there was strong opposition to this bill in the Majlis, but it was subsequently approved.

As analyzed in [PolicyWatch 2460 \("Iran's Security Concerns and Legal Controversies Over the Nuclear Deal"\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-security-concerns-and-legal-controversies-over-the-nuclear-deal) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-security-concerns-and-legal-controversies-over-the-nuclear-deal>), Khamenei has been cagey about his stance on the nuclear agreement. For instance, on April 9, he downplayed the importance of the Geneva Accord and responded to the Rouhani team's claim that he had approved the details of the negotiations: "I am not indifferent to the negotiations, but neither in the past nor the future did I intervene in the negotiations."

## **NEW NARRATIVE ON NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES**

**A**s a way of forcing Khamenei out into the open, Rouhani's team has been trying hard to show that Khamenei is fully responsible for the negotiations and their results. That has led to the paradoxical situation in which Rouhani's team is suggesting that the initiative for nuclear negotiations with the United States did not come from the president but instead from the Supreme Leader.

Hitherto, the widespread narrative was that in the 2013 presidential election, Rouhani was the most moderate and diplomatically skilled candidate, and that his victory changed the country's attitude toward the nuclear issue and negotiations with Washington. In this narrative, Rouhani was depicted as a moderate who appreciated the economic and security ramifications of Iran's nuclear policy under Ahmadinejad. On the opposite side, Khamenei was portrayed as uncompromising in his stance on both negotiations with the United States and the nuclear policy. Recently, however, Rouhani's team decided to change this narrative in order to fight back against those critics of the nuclear deal who blame them for their naivete in trusting Washington enough to enter talks.

Ironically, two prominent negotiators who took the task of changing the narrative were involved in negotiations under Ahmadinejad too -- a fact that is overlooked by most of those who suggest that Rouhani's election was a turning point in Iran's foreign policy. First, Abbas Araghchi, a prominent nuclear negotiator under both governments, attended an off-the-record meeting with state radio and television officials to brief them on the talks so they would not be deceived by hardliner criticism and broadcast favorable content on the deal. The state radio and television news agency put a report about the Araghchi meeting on the Internet, enraging him. Araghchi is known for being the closest person to Khamenei among the negotiators and was tasked with briefing the Supreme Leader on the details of the talks and passing his advice to his team, under both Saeed Jalili and Mohammad Javad Zarif.

In this meeting, Araghchi reportedly claimed that Iran was under military threat even after Obama took office: "People may not know the details, but our friends in the military and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) know that...we were worried every night that they might install the necessary equipment for attacking all over Iran the next morning...In meetings with our military friends, they were showing military bases on the map and explaining which planes were on standby at which bases, and attacking Iran required nothing but Mr. Obama's political will." He then revealed that "these negotiations started under the previous government [Ahmadinejad's]; when Mr. Kerry was a senator he was sending us messages through Oman. At that time [around 2011], the leader of the revolution [Khamenei] ordered the negotiations...If you look at his 2013 Nowruz speech in Mashhad, [you would

find that] he said he does not oppose the negotiations with the United States; [this speech was] three or four months before Rouhani was elected." Araghchi also claimed that the negotiations were going on secretly until some elements inside the system found out and started to pressure the negotiators: "then [Ayatollah Khamenei] decided to go public, so it does injustice to him if we think he was not aware of the [details] of the negotiations or did not see the deal."

In the same meeting, Araghchi repeatedly insisted that the details were thoroughly known by Khamenei: "There was an explicit order by the Supreme Leader that in Fordow, 1,000 centrifuges should remain functional...[The P5+1] agreed with 1,014 centrifuges, ready for gas injection with the entire facility in Fordow." He also repeated Tehran's official position that the negotiations excluded all nonnuclear issues. At the same time, however, he emphasized Hezbollah's position in the Islamic Republic's regional policy: "John Kerry repeatedly said that 'with regard to the arms sanctions, you became the victim of your achievements in the region, and these achievements in Yemen, Beirut, Baghdad, and Damascus have made the region so sensitive about you that if we try to lift arms sanctions, we would not be able to convince Israel or Saudi Arabia'...We told [Kerry and P5+1 negotiators] that we cannot cease providing weapons to Hezbollah, and we would not make Hezbollah the victim of our nuclear program. Therefore, we continue doing what we are doing. If you want to make arms sanctions part of the deal, let it be. We negotiated long on this subject...Finally they themselves said 'We're separating the nuclear deal from the [UN Security Council] resolution -- we will include the arms sanctions in the resolution, not in the deal, so if you violate it, it would not be a violation of the deal.'"

A few days later, the government's official newspaper interviewed Ali Akbar Salehi, head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, who has served in both the Ahmadinejad and Rouhani governments, including as a member of the current negotiating team and as Iran's former representative to the IAEA. In the interview, Salehi defended Jalili's record in the negotiations and explained why the talks remained fruitless under Jalili:

"We came to the conclusion that negotiating simultaneously with the P5+1 is difficult because the P5+1 was not negotiating under the leadership of one single country. Ms. Ashton was the EU representative, but three negotiating countries -- America, China, and Russia -- did not belong to EU...It was not known who should lead the negotiations on their behalf...and in the gap between meetings, not only could we not reach a conclusion, but rather we were facing new demands...This is why I thought we should try a new process. In 2010 and 2011 when I was the foreign minister, Mr. [Hasan] Qashqai, the ministry's deputy [on parliamentary and consulate affairs], went to Oman to follow up the issue of Iranians in jail abroad, because we asked for Oman's help in securing the release of Iranians jailed in Britain and the U.S...An [Omani] official handed him a letter in which another official noted that 'Americans are ready to have nuclear negotiations with Iran, and they are interested in finding a solution for the tension between Tehran and Washington, and [Omani officials] are ready to help facilitate the process.' It seems to us a good opportunity. It was before the U.S. presidential election, but Obama had already started his campaign to enter the White House for the second term."

Salehi noted, "At first I did not take [this message] seriously because we did not know him." Later another person carried the same message to Salehi, and while Salehi expressed suspicion about the seriousness of the Americans, he also gave the messenger a note with Iran's main demands on it to be passed to the Omani official: "I wrote four specific issues; one of them was the recognition of enriching uranium. I was thinking if the Americans are sincere in this offer for negotiation, they have to accept these four demands...All four demands were related to the nuclear program...After receiving the note, the Americans said, 'With utter seriousness we are ready and can easily solve the problems mentioned by Iran.'"

In responding to the interviewer's question about who was the American official on the other side, Salehi said, "[The Omani official] was a friend of [John Kerry]. Mr. Kerry was not the U.S. secretary of state at that time. He was the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee." After exchanging several messages, Salehi asked the Omanis

to send him a letter and make the offer official. "I passed the official letter [signed by the Sultan of Oman] to the [Iranian] government officials and then I met with the Supreme Leader to brief him on the process...[Khamenei] finally said 'this is a right thing to do as an ultimatum and I have no opposition to it, but I have a few conditions: first, the subject of negotiation should only be the nuclear issue; no negotiations on bilateral relations. Second, be careful not to let the negotiations become 'negotiations for negotiations' as happened in the negotiations with the P5+1; try to reach a conclusion in the very first or second meeting.'"

Salehi said that at that time there were some elements in the government who were against negotiations with the U.S., and "the Supreme Leader was our only supporter." Meetings started to take place: "From our side Mr. [Ali Asghar] Khaji, the ministry's deputy on Europe and the U.S., along with some other [ministry] general directors were sent to Oman to negotiate [with the Americans]. In the first meeting, the Americans were so surprised that they said, 'We do not believe this actually happened. We thought Oman may have been joking. We are not prepared to negotiate with you at all'...The Supreme Leader was insisting that we have to gain recognition of our right to enrich uranium in the very first meeting."

According to Salehi, Americans interrupted the negotiations due to the U.S. election, "but during this time we were exchanging various information with Americans through a mediator, the documents of which are archived in the Foreign Ministry. We were not exchanging official letters, and all information exchange was taking place in a non-paper form...We have received a letter by Oman's ruler stating that the Americans are committed to the recognition of Iran's right to enrich uranium."

Negotiations were resumed after the U.S. election and then paused again as the 2013 elections arrived in Iran. Salehi explained what happened after Rouhani was elected: "I wrote a letter to Mr. Rouhani and then I met him and told him 'we have conducted these negotiations and currently we interrupted them due to the election, and now it is your turn to continue this path.' When Mr. Rouhani became aware of the details of the negotiations he could not believe it. I told him after the endorsement ceremony, 'Expedite this issue. You should not, God forbid, abandon it so the gap between two meetings becomes more than eight months'...Then the process of negotiations became faster and a new period in finding a solution to the nuclear problem began." In this interview Salehi also insisted that "some people think that the negotiating team is making decisions on its own. This is not true...The Supreme Leader is made fully aware of the general outlines and details, and Mr. Rouhani discusses the details. In this way the framework of the negotiating team's authority becomes clear."

## **KHAMENEI'S OWN WORDS**

**M**ost important of all, Khamenei himself publicly revealed how the talks began with the Americans in a major speech to government workers on June 23, delivered just as the last round of nuclear talks was getting underway in Vienna: "I would like to present a short history of these negotiations...Our negotiations with the Americans are, in fact, different from our negotiations with the P5+1. The Americans themselves asked for these negotiations, and their proposals date back to the time of the [Ahmadinejad] administration."

"So the negotiations with the Americans began before the arrival of the current administration," Khamenei continued. "They made a request and chose an intermediary. One of the honorable personalities in the region [Qaboos of Oman] came to Iran and met with me. He said that the American president had called him, asking him to help. The American president said to him that they want to resolve the nuclear matter with Iran and that they would lift the sanctions...Through that intermediary, [President Obama] asked us to negotiate with them and to resolve the matter. I said to that honorable intermediary that we do not trust the Americans and their statements. He said, 'Try it once more,' and we said, 'Very well, we will try it this time, too.' This was how the negotiations with the Americans began."

# CONCLUSION

Unlike Araghchi's statement, which was made in an off-the-record meeting, Salehi's statement was made in a planned interview with the official newspaper of Rouhani's government. Not only did Rouhani tacitly endorse it, but also the Office of the Supreme Leader did not react to it by denying any of Salehi's claims. Both Araghchi and Salehi's statements reveal new facts about the negotiations and transform popular perception about the Iranian negotiators. It was not only the media that made this perception the sole acceptable narrative -- the Iranian and American presidents played a role as well by generating the idea that Rouhani's election is what created an opportunity for negotiating with Iran, and that if negotiations fail with him, hardliners would defeat him in upcoming elections and close the negotiation doors. Reports about the exceptional personality and "moderate" mindset of Rouhani or Zarif in Western media are undercut by the new narrative provided by Salehi and Araghchi.

Note that neither Salehi nor Araghchi provide a clear explanation of why Khamenei ordered the change in policy. Their narrative places the key date for the change as prior to the tightening of U.S. and EU sanctions in late 2011. But a reader of their statements may get the impression that the combination of tough economic sanctions and the military threat by President Obama affected Khamenei's decision.

Their narrative is further evidence that the change of president may signal a change of policy but is not necessarily the reason the policy changed, and that real power still rests in the hands of Khamenei. The new narrative blurs the formerly clear line many people made to show the radical rupture between the Ahmadinejad government and the Rouhani government. Further evidence of the continuity between those two governments is the fact that Salehi and Araghchi were involved in the negotiations under both presidents. Furthermore, in the new narrative, the real architect of the U.S.-Iran negotiations is Salehi, not Zarif. This also stands against the whole characterization of Zarif as a major player in designing and conducting the negotiations.

But the main peril still stands. The ultimate decisionmaker in Iran is not the same person who undertakes the responsibility proportional to his authority and intervention. Despite repeated official statements made by negotiators, Khamenei denies his knowledge of or intervention in details of the talks. This will not be the last issue for which he will deny responsibility. Not making the nuclear deal officially approved by the Supreme Leader would jeopardize its sustainability in the long term.

*Mehdi Khalaji is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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