

Khamenei vs. Rouhani: Projecting Very Different Views on the Nuclear Deal

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Brief Analysis

The Supreme Leader's initial reaction has sent discouraging signals about Iran's willingness to comply with its commitments in the long term.

As expected, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's reaction to the nuclear deal was utterly different from that of President Hassan Rouhani. Right after the agreement was announced on July 14, Rouhani appeared on state television and praised the outcome. Yet when he and other officials visited Khamenei's home a few hours later, the Supreme Leader did not say anything about the deal apart from a few lines thanking the negotiators. This reticence signaled to hardliners that they should increase their attacks on the agreement.

On July 15, in order to protect himself against these critics, Rouhani told the cabinet that Khamenei was "carefully following up" on the details of the final negotiations and "had meticulous supervision" over the process, to the point where the Supreme Leader "truly undertook much heavier responsibility in this regard" than any other official. But even this did not help him much. On July 14, Rouhani sent Khamenei a letter reporting on the deal's results, but the Supreme Leader delayed his response by a day in order to show his lack of excitement about it. The letter thanked Khamenei for his "intelligent guidance and perpetual and explicit support to the negotiating team," who "could successfully implement all policies determined by the Supreme Leader and respect redlines set" by him. Khamenei's delayed answer -- hardly a third as long as the president's letter -- avoided any wording that might indicate his total satisfaction with the accord, his direct role in the negotiations, or his responsibility for the deal. Instead he wrote, "The text needs to be studied carefully and go through the predicted legal process. Then, if it is approved, it needs to be protected against potential violations of the deal by the other party."

Khamenei also failed to mention who should approve the deal. Rouhani's team and the hardliners are currently in the midst of a hot dispute about whether that responsibility lies with the Majlis or the Supreme National Security

Council. The hardliners insist on parliament, arguing that all international agreements should be adopted by the legislative branch of the government. Yet Rouhani's team says that only the Supreme Council should review and endorse it. Not coincidentally, the president is the titular head of that council.

SHARP HARDLINER CRITICISM

On July 16, hardliner website Raja News published the third part of an article series titled "Some Aspects of the Deal Which Should Remain Unveiled," by Ali Akbar Taheri. The article explains how the final deal reached by Rouhani's negotiating team crosses six different redlines previously set by the Supreme Leader:

1. *Long-term limitations on the nuclear program.* Khamenei has said that Iran should not agree to ten-year limitations because "ten years is a lifetime." According to the article, however, the signed agreement contains at least fourteen Iranian commitments lasting ten or more years (e.g., a twenty-five-year limit on inspections and surveillance over enrichment of mined uranium; a fifteen-year ban on uranium enrichment at the Fordow facility).
2. *Unconventional inspections and access to military facilities.* Khamenei has explicitly rejected such measures, but the final agreement allows the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to conduct surveillance in all factories that enrich mined uranium, among other things. The agency can also ask to inspect military facilities such as Parchin if they deem it necessary.
3. *Limitations on enrichment at Fordow.* Khamenei has opposed any such restrictions at the mountain facility, but the final agreement contains several.
4. *Delayed lifting of some sanctions.* Khamenei previously insisted that all sanctions be rescinded as soon as the deal is signed, but the agreement indicates that some U.S. congressional sanctions and EU sanctions will not be lifted right away, if at all.
5. *IAEA conditionality.* Khamenei has often expressed his distrust of the IAEA and declared that sanctions relief should not be conditioned on Iran's implementation of the deal. Yet UN sanctions will not be lifted until the IAEA verifies that Tehran has complied with the agreement's terms.
6. *Limits on centrifuge research.* Khamenei has said that no restrictions should be placed on Iran's nuclear research for the duration of the deal. Yet the agreement includes a ten-year limit on enrichment R&D related to the IR-4, IR-5, IR-6, and IR-8 centrifuges, among other things.

The article also downplays Rouhani's claim about lifting sanctions related to weapons, noting that "these sanctions would be replaced by limits [imposed on Iran's weapons trade]...[E]very missile that is able to carry a nuclear warhead would be limited, all Shahab missiles and satellite carriers and so on." In addition, the article claims that Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said the following: "Russia and China wanted weapons sanctions to be lifted, but despite our support the Iranian team itself agreed to continuation of the sanctions for the next five years!"

On July 16, at an event called "The Beginning of the Math Class" (a sarcastic title indicating that the time of verification has begun), hardline analyst Fouad Izadi criticized the deal from a different angle: "If the U.S. Congress rejects the agreement, America would not be bound to implement it, but if Iran implements the agreement, it will lose all leverage." Izadi, who is close to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, went on to claim that in the case of disagreement between Iran and the P5+1, "the arbiter is the UN Security Council," which means that the United States and other P5+1 members would essentially become the arbiters of their own dispute. "If Iran gets accused of violating the agreement, [these countries] can issue a resolution against it," he said, but if the United States or another party is so accused, "the Security Council cannot issue a resolution because one of them could just veto it." He also pointed out that the Majlis should approve the agreement, and that it should condition Iran's implementation of the deal on U.S. congressional approval, explaining that "the U.S. president will not be in office in nineteen months, and after him the U.S. administration would not be bound by the agreement if Congress disapproves it."

Also on July 16, the hardline newspaper *Kayhan* claimed that the largely insignificant financial reaction to the nuclear deal -- i.e., no sharp changes in the stock market or exchange rate -- shocked those who have been "overexcited" about the negotiations. "People expected the foreign currency rate to drop and the national currency value to go up," said one article, "and now they ask why the opposite has happened."

CONCLUSION

In the United States, the same political body that was in charge of negotiating with Iran is also in charge of implementing the agreement. But in Iran, the president and his negotiators have little authority over foreign policy, the nuclear program, or military activities. Instead, those sectors are under the purview of Supreme Leader Khamenei, who is usually reluctant to take any public responsibility for major decisions. Furthermore, he has repeatedly expressed his distrust toward Americans, the West, the UN, and the IAEA. And while he has more or less supported Iran's negotiators in his public statements, he has clearly sought to distance himself from them as well. If he decides to stop implementing the deal in the next year or so, he would likely blame the West or the negotiating team for cutting such a deal, as he did in 2003 and 2004. His initial reaction to the new agreement has already sent discouraging signals about Iran's willingness to comply with its commitments in the long term.

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

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