

# No Voice of Reconciliation: Khamenei Targets the West

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Brief Analysis

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**The Supreme Leader's latest statements, harping on "unreasonable" demands, are not preparing the Iranian public for compromise.**

**S**ince May 16, Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has spoken publicly on three occasions, covering topics including the Yemen crisis and the nuclear negotiations. The third of these speeches, on May 20 at the graduation ceremony for Imam Hossein University -- the official training center for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) -- was characterized by especially inflammatory language and a harsh tone.

## Tough Language, but Modest Steps, on Yemen

In this latest speech, Khamenei warned as follows: "I have [received] some news that our enemies, in cooperation with some of the stupid officials [governments] in the region...intend to extend the proxy war to the Iranian borders...The Pasdaran [IRGC] and all those who are in charge of protecting the national security are alert and ready. Everyone should know that if there is mischief, Iran's reaction will be very tough." The specific reference here is unclear, but the Supreme Leader may have been referring to threats in the Persian Gulf, echoing his May 16 statement addressing government officials, ambassadors, and consular officials from Muslim-majority countries that "an insecure Gulf would be insecure for all." He accused the United States and the West of generating a "proxy war" in the Middle East by inciting animosity and sectarian conflict among the region's nations. Addressing U.S. officials, he said, "It is you who are terrorist; terrorist acts are enacted by you."

Yet paired with Khamenei's statement, the Islamic Republic made something of a concession by agreeing that an Iranian cargo ship sailing to Yemen with 2,500 tons of food and medical supplies would submit to international inspections in Djibouti before continuing on to Yemen's Hodeida port, which is under control by the Iran-backed Houthis. "We have decided to dock our ship in Djibouti so the United Nations inspection protocol can take place," said Iran's deputy foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, according to the Iranian Students News Agency

(ISNA). The vessel's voyage had threatened to further escalate the regional confrontation over Yemen. In an interview after a meeting between Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and UN undersecretary Valery Amos, Amir-Abdollahian remarked, "Iran has prepared various kinds of aid. The plan was to send, at least in the first phase, three cargo loads carrying food to Yemen from Djibouti and two cargo loads carrying medication from Oman." He added, "We suggested that Kish Island [a free zone in the Persian Gulf] become one of the main depot zones for transmitting international aid to Yemen."

## Khamenei Elaborates on His Worldview

**A**side from the Yemen issue, Khamenei has elaborated more broadly on his worldview in his recent speeches. For example, he claimed that "in today's world" there are only "two discourses: the new Islamic discourse and jahiliyya discourse." In both Islamic theology and modern Islamism, jahiliyya is a significant Quranic term. In theology, it refers to the pre-Islamic era in the Arab Peninsula -- a period seen as lacking order and civilization and ending with the emergence of Islam. The term also denotes the moral corruption and barbarian violence that the Prophet Muhammad fought against by offering Islam to the peninsula's inhabitants. In the twentieth century, the term was used by Islamists to describe "modernity" and the "West" as elements yet to submit to Islam and therefore governed by a savage and corrupt system. Muslim Brotherhood theoretician Muhammad Qutb (1919-2014), the brother of Sayyed Qutb, wrote *The Jahiliyyat of the Twentieth Century*, which was published in Cairo in 1965 and translated to Persian two years later. Reflecting the heavy intellectual influence of the Brotherhood on Khamenei, he translated several of Sayyed Qutb's books from Arabic into Persian before the revolution.

On May 20, Khamenei defined "the new Islamic discourse" as that "created by our Imam [Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini] and whose flag was raised by the Iranian nation with altruism and sacrifice." For him, today's "jahiliyya discourse" is an "unjust, bullying, arrogant, selfish discourse [produced and held] by the world's dominant powers." He continued, "Islamic discourse advocates justice and human rights and annihilating exploitation and colonialism and ending imperialism." Further: "The reconciliation and rapprochement between these two discourses would never be possible, because one discourse believes in injustice and fighting with nations while the other believes in supporting suppressed people and confronting oppressors."

In his May 16 speech, the Supreme Leader emphasized that "Yemen, Bahrain, and Palestine are oppressed, and we protect oppressed people as much as we can." His comments prompted the summoning of Iran's charge d'affaires in Bahrain on Sunday to protest what was characterized as "blatant interference in the internal affairs of the Kingdom of Bahrain" and "unacceptable statements." Bahrain's Ministry of Foreign Affairs undersecretary Abdullah Abdul Lateef Abdullah stressed the need for an immediate end to "such irresponsible remarks," because they "disregard the United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and international laws that emphasize respect for the sovereignty of all countries and the principles of independence." Shortly after Khamenei's speech, Bahrain's foreign minister, Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed bin Muhammad al-Khalifa, tweeted, "I advise Khamenei to contain his malice against Arabs in their countries and worry about his own people's wrath against him. I remind him that lying is a sign of being *munafiqin* [literally, hypocrites; but religiously referring to those who falsely claim they are Muslim]."

## Divergent Views on a Nuclear Deal

**B**oth Iranian and U.S. officials have repeatedly said that the nuclear deal is expected to address only the nuclear program and associated sanctions imposed on Iran. In his May 15 interview with Al-Arabiya, President Obama reiterated his recognition of Iran's troubling behavior in the region: "I've been very clear that just because we are able to resolve the nuclear issue does not negate the very real problems that we've had with [Iran's] past state sponsorship of terrorism, with the potential for mischief in the region. And that's something that we will continue to address jointly with our GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] partners."

Khamenei, for his part, expects a nuclear deal to generally relieve pressure on the Islamic Republic. And he has repeatedly insisted that a deal would not prompt a change in Iran's behavior. Indeed, he would never tolerate a nuclear deal if the perceived outcome were increased pressure on Iran over its regional activities. On the other side of the coin, while Obama is working to reassure Washington's Gulf allies that a deal would not herald a softer U.S. policy toward Iran's regional interventionism, these allies fear that lifted sanctions will invariably strengthen Iran's hand in conflicts across the Middle East.

For now, on both the nuclear and the regional files, Khamenei dwells on what he sees as impertinent foreign demands. On May 20, he angrily asserted that "we will never yield to pressure...We will not accept unreasonable demands...Iran will not give access to its [nuclear] scientists." Elaborating on the last point, he said: "I will not allow foreigners to come and talk to the nation's dear scientists and children and interrogate them...our rude and brazen enemy expects us to let them talk to our scholars and scientists about a fundamental national and domestic [achievement], but such permission will never be issued...this should be clear for the enemies of Islamic government and all those who are waiting for the government's decision [on the nuclear deal]." More generally, Khamenei repeated his philosophy about how the enemy should be treated and said that the "only way to confront the brazen enemy is by firm determination, not passiveness." He explained that "one of the challenges [of the nuclear negotiations involves] the other party's bullying and unreasonable demands...our enemies still do not know Iranian people, Iranian officials. This is why they are bullying us. The nation and the government that emerged from it will not yield to bullying demands."

## Conclusion

Even as Ayatollah Khamenei has intensified his rhetorical objections to foreign "arrogance," Iran's actions have not kept pace in their toughness, as exemplified by Iran's submission to the UN inspection of the Yemen-bound ship. And the nuclear negotiations continue. All the same, Khamenei is inflaming public opinion, not preparing the Iranian people for compromise.

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