

# Khamenei Warns That Nuclear Deal May Fall Apart

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

## The Supreme Leader expressed skepticism that any progress was made at Lausanne and warned about barriers to resolving the nuclear impasse.

**T**he most important Iranian voice on foreign and security policy is that of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Today he finally broke his silence about the nuclear framework announced last week after negotiations at Lausanne. The news is not good.

## WHAT HE SAID

**I**n a major televised address to an important group of religious leaders, he began by saying, "I am neither for [the framework] nor against it." That may sound relatively encouraging at first glance, but his follow-up explanation is not: he noted that did not comment on the framework because "nothing has happened yet." And in response to recent speculation about his silence, he added, "Some ask, 'Why didn't he take a position about the nuclear negotiations?'...The reason [the leadership] did not take a position is that there was no reason to. Government and nuclear officials say nothing has been done and neither side made any commitment yet."

Similarly, he noted that "what took place [in Lausanne] does not guarantee either the deal itself or the deal's content. It does not even guarantee that this negotiation could lead to a deal. Therefore, congratulating [me for the framework] is nonsense." This was a clear rebuke to President Hassan Rouhani, who had congratulated the Supreme Leader after the framework was announced and thanked him for his supervision.

Khamenei threw in a variety of insults presumably aimed at the United States first and foremost, calling those on the other side of the negotiating table "a stubborn, cheating, bad-dealing party who is used to stabbing from behind." He warned that this "party" could put Iranian negotiators "in a bind" when the time comes to sort out the framework's details.

At the same time, Khamenei expressed his usual support for Iran's negotiating team, though not in particularly glowing terms: "So far I did not doubt them...but I am seriously concerned about the nuclear negotiation...Our main demand for [Iranian] officials is not to trust the opposite party, not to be deceived by his smile, not to trust promises he makes, because when they get what they want [they cheat] and laugh at you." He also warned that no deal is honorable if it "destroys the Iranian nation's dignity and interests."

Overall, the speech suggested that Khamenei's main concern about the negotiations was immediate sanctions relief, and that nothing less than that would be worth him making concessions over the nuclear program. "Sanctions should be lifted all at once and on the same day, not six months or a year later," he said. "It does not make sense to tie sanctions relief to another process, because the objective of the negotiations is to lift the sanctions." That last phrase is an implicit rejection of making sanctions relief dependent on Iranian actions other than the mere reaching of an agreement.

## SHARIATMADARI: THE BEST INDICATOR OF KHAMENEI'S VIEWS

As is often the case, the best predictor of Khamenei's position has been Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor of *Kayhan* newspaper and a close confidant of the Supreme Leader. In an editorial issued a few hours before Khamenei's address, Shariatmadari expanded on arguments he has made recently; his main theme was that Iranian negotiators should not accept a final deal that allows the outside world to monitor the regime's nuclear activities too closely. Similarly, Khamenei rejected some of the proposals for intrusive inspections, saying, "The country's military officials are not authorized to let aliens enter our security domain, and our support to our resistant brothers in various parts [of the Middle East] should not be affected by the negotiations. No unusual monitoring that makes the Islamic Republic of Iran an exceptional country in this regard would be acceptable."

Shariatmadari's editorial, titled "Under the Skin of the Lausanne Agreement," elaborated on this issue. After harshly criticizing Iran's negotiating team, describing them as "negligent" in letting America dictate its will on them, he concentrated fire on the Additional Protocol, the International Atomic Energy Agency's established measures for enhanced inspections. Iran accepted the protocol in 2003 but then walked away; Washington and its allies now want Tehran to sign it in earnest. According to Shariatmadari, the protocol would allow foreigners to inspect Iran's military and security facilities without notice: "It goes without saying that accepting such a protocol would seriously jeopardize not only the nuclear security, but also the military security of the Islamic Republic of Iran." He complained, "When the esteemed members of our negotiating team are asked why they accepted the Additional Protocol, which is beyond protocol, they respond by saying that accepting the Additional Protocol is voluntary!" In his view, voluntary acceptance of the protocol would not require legal approval from the Iranian parliament because it would not be a binding contract. In other words, he argued, the Americans trapped Iran's negotiators by asking them to accept the protocol voluntarily in order to bypass the parliament.

Shariatmadari's editorial also countered those Iranians -- including, in his view, Rouhani's team -- who have defended the framework despite sharing Khamenei's distrust of Washington. In particular, he took issue with the notion that if America cheats, Iran can simply go back to the pre-deal status quo, so there is little risk in signing an agreement. "Many of our commitments in Lausanne are not reversible," he argued, mainly in reference to the "voluntary" Additional Protocol. "The only solution," he concluded, "is to disregard the Lausanne agreement."

## IMPLICATIONS

Khamenei's speech strongly suggests he is not happy with what happened at Lausanne. Although he reiterated that he will not intervene in the detailed negotiations, he continues to make statements that will presumably affect the process. For instance, speaking about whether a deal should be reached by the end of June, he said that

Iran's negotiating team "should not exaggerate about this issue or rush; we should wait and see what happens...This three-month window is not unchangeable, and if this period extends there will be no problem, as the other party in the past has delayed the negotiations for seven months...If it takes four months rather than three months, it is okay."

Interestingly, he also suggested that the nuclear talks could lead to discussions with the United States about other issues. After insisting that Iran is negotiating only on nuclear matters, he said, "Negotiation on the nuclear issue is a test. If the other party would give up its misbehavior, this experience may be repeated with other issues." Yet he tempered that point with further salvos against Washington's untrustworthiness: "If the other party continues his misbehavior, this will only add to our experiences with not trusting the United States...I have never been optimistic about negotiating with the United States. This does not stem from an illusion but from experience...If the details of the issues and events and ongoing nuclear negotiation notes become available to the public in the future, everybody would find out the source of this experience." Moreover, the views he expressed on other regional issues left little room for optimism about broader U.S.-Iranian engagement. For instance, he concluded his speech by lambasting the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen, calling it a "genocide" that warranted "international prosecution" and denouncing the United States for supporting the Saudis.

On the domestic political front, Khamenei noted that Iranian officials should invite input on the nuclear issue from prominent critics: "If the critics have a point, [officials] should use it in order to improve the negotiating process, and if they don't, they should be convinced." This remark may well give hardliners a green light to increase their pressure on Rouhani and challenge his negotiating strategy in a way that could affect the course of the talks. Rouhani's camp has consistently labeled critics of the talks as either warmongers or beneficiaries of international sanctions, so Khamenei may be firing a shot across his bow by asking him to recognize their concerns.

Khamenei's latest criticism of the negotiations fits well with his style of putting himself in the safest position possible regardless of the outcome. He supports Iran's negotiators but also distances himself from them by expressing suspicion about the results. He makes both sides, Rouhani's team and the P5+1, fully responsible if the negotiations fail by setting up precise redlines, implying that if either party crosses these lines he will reject the resulting deal. He goes out of his way to leave the impression that he is the most patient and toughest person when it comes to foreign and nuclear policy. And perhaps most important, he suggests that he is carefully contemplating the potential failure of the negotiating process and is ready for that scenario, probably more so than anyone else in the regime.

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

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