

# Khamenei's Silence: Iranian Reactions to the Nuclear Framework

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Brief Analysis

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**Initial public statements by Iranian officials emphasize that the United States and its partners have accepted an outcome in which Tehran need not change course.**

**T**he most obvious point about the Iranian government's response to the just-released nuclear framework is that Tehran is not treating it as a signal accomplishment like Washington is, but instead as a step along the way to a final agreement. While President Obama made an official statement yesterday about the tentative terms -- a speech that was unprecedentedly broadcast live on Iranian state television -- Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has so far kept silent about the U.S.-issued fact sheet, and even his official website has not published any report or comment. Yet given the redlines Khamenei set for the negotiations in recent months, the framework deal can hardly be satisfactory to him.

## HARDLINERS SET TO UNDERMINE ROUHANI

**D**uring a February 8 address to Iranian air force commanders, Khamenei stated:

"We have heard that they say, 'Let us agree about general principles for the moment. Later on, we can come to an agreement about details.' I do not like this. Our experience with the behavior of the other side gives us the feeling that this will become a tool for them to make constant excuses about details. If they want to make a deal, they should

agree about details and general points in one single session and then they should sign it. If they come to a deal about general points and then they attend to details on the basis of these general points -- which are vague, interpretable, and analyzable things -- this is not reasonable...Everything that is agreed upon between our officials and the other side should be clear and transparent, and it should not be open to interpretation."

Given these views, it is inauspicious that right after the Obama administration released its fact sheet, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and the Iranian government's official website ([www.dolat.ir](http://www.dolat.ir)) accused Western media and the U.S. government of providing a false report about what had been agreed in the Lausanne negotiations. If this war of interpretation drags on, it could create serious problems for President Hassan Rouhani's team as they attempt to justify the deal to the Iranian people and defend it against hardliners.

From an outsider's perspective, it would seem obvious that Zarif and Rouhani have been able to put Iran on a path toward sanctions relief while the previous approach resulted in tougher sanctions. But the focus in Iran is instead on whether the accord will result in quick and far-reaching sanctions relief. Zarif has argued that the U.S. fact sheet "does not reflect reality" because it says sanctions will be lifted not right after the deal is signed, but only after the International Atomic Energy Agency has verified that Iran has implemented the deal. Zarif's argument fits with the Supreme Leader's position. In Khamenei's March 21 speech in Mashhad on the second day of Nowruz -- his most important annual speech, a kind of "State of Iran" address -- he declared, "Americans repeatedly say that they will sign an agreement with Iran and that they will lift sanctions only if the Iranians adhere to it. This is a wrong and unacceptable statement and we do not agree with it. Lifting sanctions is one of the terms of the negotiations, not a result of it. Those who are involved in the negotiations clearly understand the difference between the two."

Indeed, the hardliners have expressed little praise for accepting compromises to achieve an international understanding, instead focusing on what Iran has accomplished through "steadfastness" and the "justness" of its longstanding demands. This fits with Khamenei's belief that negotiations would never truly push back the "enemy." In a speech delivered August 19, 2005, he mentioned the example of Israel withdrawing from Gaza: "Some people would pretend that this withdrawal was a result of negotiations; this is a childish claim. In the course of seventy years of Palestinian occupation, Zionists never left the territory by negotiation. Which negotiations?...Gaza was not liberated by negotiation, [negotiation] does not liberate anywhere else, it would never do so...Gaza was liberated only as a result of resistance by the Palestinian people."

As such, persistent hardline opposition to the framework is almost guaranteed. Hossein Shariatmadari -- Khamenei's representative at *Kayhan* newspaper and a man widely known as the Supreme Leader's mouthpiece -- told Fars News Agency that the announced terms mean "we gave away a saddled horse and received cut reins in return." And Ismail Kowsari, a member of the parliament's national security and foreign policy committee, said, "The United States achieved all of its objectives in the nuclear negotiations, but Iran did not achieve its main demand, which was full sanctions relief."

The expectations that Iranian leaders are creating of quick sanctions relief do not augur well for how the deal will play out over time. Rouhani has raised high hopes about a deal's potential impact on people's lives, a point brought home by the jubilant responses already being witnessed on the streets of Iran. Earlier today, he announced that all sanctions will be lifted right after the final deal is signed in June. This mindset places a heavy burden on his government to quickly translate the agreement into concrete achievements on the domestic economy and everyday living conditions. Hardliners have criticized Rouhani's claim that a nuclear deal is the main solution for rescuing the economy. If improvements are slow to come, they could use the people's disappointment to diminish his popularity through the television and radio outlets they monopolize, which are the main source of news for most Iranians. In other words, Rouhani largely trapped himself, raising expectations so unrealistically high that the day after a deal is signed could be the beginning of his political end.

# IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL POLICY

There are few if any indications in Iran that the nuclear framework signals a new approach toward foreign policy and working with the United States. In his Mashhad speech, Khamenei emphasized that the current negotiations are "only on the nuclear dossier; that's all. Everybody should know it. We do not negotiate with America on regional issues. America's objectives in the region are the opposite of our objectives. We want security and peace and people's sovereignty, but American policy is to create insecurity and distress...On regional issues or domestic issues and weaponry issues, we absolutely do not have any negotiations with America."

Iranian rhetoric thus far also asserts that the nuclear issue is the latest case in which the United States and its partners have been forced to accept Iran's "correct stance," as they supposedly did on ISIS as well. The focus is therefore on the concessions the West has made and its recognition of Iran's accomplishments.

In this regard, the top leadership in Tehran has taken a paradoxical approach. On one hand, they want to use the nuclear program as leverage to lift all political and economic pressure on the Islamic Republic, even non-nuclear sanctions issued in response to concerns about terrorism sponsorship and human rights abuses. On the other hand, Iranian negotiators have been careful to distinguish between the nuclear dossier and other disputed issues, especially those relating to Iran's policy in the Middle East.

This contradiction may jeopardize the final deal's sustainability. If Tehran perceives nuclear concessions as a gift to the West, it will no doubt expect Western governments to tolerate its activities in the region. Yet if Washington and its allies instead maintain or increase pressures on Iran (e.g., for its involvement in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Bahrain, or its support to armed groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas), the leadership would see it as a continuation of the Western policy of undermining Iran's power in the Middle East and mobilizing international allies against Tehran. As indicated above, the leadership also expects one final concession: ending Western pressure on Tehran for violating human rights and suppressing civil society. If Iran signs a nuclear deal but Western governments and NGOs continue such pressure (e.g., by funding Persian media outside the country and supporting human rights organizations, journalists, political activists, and fragile civil institutions in Iran), the Supreme Leader would take it as proof of what he has repeatedly claimed: that the West's real target is not the nuclear program but the regime's very existence. Tehran can hardly make enduring nuclear commitments to countries it believes are relentlessly trying to subvert the regime.

For the purposes of finalizing the nuclear deal, both sides may agree to separate the nuclear dossier from other issues. Yet the agreement's sustainability cannot be guaranteed if Iran and the West have fundamentally incompatible perceptions about its impact on disputed non-nuclear issues.

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