

Iran's Nuclear Debate: The Domestic Politics

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Brief Analysis

Two Iran experts discuss how the Supreme Leader, other key officials, and the Iranian public view the ongoing negotiations with the West and the strategic purpose of the nuclear program itself.

On February 21, 2014, Nima Gerami and Mehdi Khalaji addressed a Policy Forum marking the publication of the new Washington Institute study [Leadership Divided? The Domestic Politics of Iran's Nuclear Debate](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/leadership-divided-the-domestic-politics-of-irans-nuclear-debate) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/leadership-divided-the-domestic-politics-of-irans-nuclear-debate>). Gerami is a research fellow at National Defense University's Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction. Khalaji is a senior fellow at Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

NIMA GERAMI

Despite Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's guarded support for nuclear engagement with the West, Iran's fractious internal dynamics remain a major obstacle to a comprehensive, long-term agreement. When discussing Iranian politics, Western observers tend to speak only of "reformers" and "hardliners," but the nuclear issue does not fall neatly along such lines. The regime is structurally complex, and its leaders sometimes disagree about how best to serve Iran's interests. They also have a long history of prohibiting and censoring debate on the nuclear program. This culture of secrecy often prevents them from sharing information, and the legislators in the Majlis have been consistently shut out of many important aspects of nuclear decisionmaking.

Decentralization has hampered this decisionmaking process as well. Although Khamenei sits at the head of the table, he makes decisions on nuclear issues and other matters by consulting with advisors throughout the government. The process has improved somewhat under President Hassan Rouhani -- the nuclear portfolio has been transferred

from the Supreme National Security Council to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, allowing Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to be more consistent and proactive in his negotiating positions. Yet his ministry continues to sideline the Majlis.

Currently, Iranian elites involved in the nuclear debate tend to fall into one of three camps:

- Nuclear supporters such as Atomic Energy Organization chief Ali Akbar Salehi and Maj. Gen. Mohammad Jafari, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, who take the maximalist position that Iran has the right to develop nuclear weapons as a credible deterrent against military threats.
- Nuclear detractors, who question the need for even civil nuclear infrastructure given the increasing economic toll of the sanctions.
- Nuclear centrists such as Rouhani and former presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Muhammad Khatami, who believe they can end Iran's international isolation and revive the economy without conceding the country's nuclear breakout potential.

Indeed, Rouhani and likeminded officials are trying to achieve a delicate balancing act between normalization with the West and retaining a latent nuclear capability. Their past statements give some idea of the breakout timeline this latent capability would imply.

Meanwhile, the detractors have been consistently marginalized over the years, and Khamenei has vacillated between the supporters and the centrists. Most recently, the dire state of the economy has led him to side with the centrists.

Despite this shift, Iran's nuclear decisionmaking remains an elite debate restricted to a small group of individuals; the public does not play an important role. Elected officials in the Majlis have long complained that they are not part of the process and have even summoned two-thirds of Rouhani's cabinet for questioning and possible impeachment. There has been some public discussion about safety risks associated with the nuclear program, such as unsafe conditions around Bushehr or Isfahan, but these conversations have not been echoed among the elite -- they have been limited to nuclear detractors outside the decisionmaking circle.

MEHDI KHALAJI

The main conclusion to draw from Mr. Gerami's study is that not everyone in Iran is pushing for a nuclear program. There has long been disagreement over the program's proper scope among the leadership and the people, particularly since 2010, when international sanctions truly began to bite.

At the popular level, sensitive foreign policy issues remain taboo in Iran, meaning public discussion of them is virtually nonexistent. When it comes to topics such as Tehran's role in the Syria conflict, newspapers heavily censor themselves to avoid crossing boundaries and angering the regime. Yet the increasing popularity of online media and satellite television has given Iranians a means of bypassing government censorship and more freely criticizing the regime. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has blocked the publishing of books that catalogue public opinion, student opinion, or arguments about the economic costs of pursuing a nuclear program, but those works can reach a much wider audience online.

Today, the Internet and satellite TV have led many Iranians to question the utility of pursuing a nuclear program. While the BBC has done good work in this regard, the United States can do much more in the way of broadcasting information to the Iranian public and challenging the one-sided message coming from the regime.

As for potential nuclear safety issues, the debate on this subject is limited in Iran. Yet concerns about a possible meltdown at the Bushehr nuclear power plant, which is situated close to the Persian Gulf, are occasionally aired in the media of other Gulf nations.

Meanwhile, nuclear disagreements among the Iranian political elite have been public for some time. During his time in office, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad openly criticized the thinking of former presidents Khatami and Rafsanjani. In the face of such attacks, Rouhani, Hossein Mousavian, and others who led nuclear negotiations with the international community in the early 2000s defended themselves by broaching the subject in their memoirs and publishing letters showing Khamenei's endorsement of their work. The Supreme Leader joined Ahmadinejad in criticizing these centrists, however, leading observers to believe he had gravitated toward the nuclear supporters.

Mr. Gerami divides the Iran leadership into three camps, but many of those who have been identified as centrists are not centrists when it comes to the regime's strategic goals -- they define the purpose of the nuclear program in the same way as Khamenei, they simply support different tactics. Khamenei's more hardline tactics can be traced to his belief that the United States still desires regime change in Iran. And while Rouhani told the UN General Assembly in September that he was willing to manage his disagreements with Washington in order to avoid direct military confrontation, this should not be seen as a sign of imminent thawing in bilateral relations. The Supreme Leader's resistance to America is too closely linked to his identity, and he has called those who place their hopes in normalization either naive or traitorous.

Many opposition figures do not share the view that the West is after regime change. They believe the United States benefits from the negative perceptions created by the hardline regime; accordingly, they argue that Iran could better shield itself from external threats by softening its policy.

Khamenei has given Rouhani leeway to negotiate with international powers over the nuclear program, but the president's worries about retaining domestic legitimacy go beyond whatever success he may have in extracting concessions from the West. In order to preserve his position, he must also live up to his campaign promises by persuading Khamenei to release political prisoners and protecting journalists from censorship.

For his part, the Supreme Leader seems confident that his "resistance" approach to the nuclear standoff has succeeded. He has good reason to believe this -- while the international debate once centered on stopping uranium enrichment, it is now generally accepted that Iran will not permanently suspend such activities. Based on the example of Libya's Muammar Qadhafi and others, Khamenei believes that those who give up resistance to the international community lose everything. In his view, the way to lift the sanctions and eliminate economic pressure is to bolster Iran's nuclear capability and thereby increase the country's influence as a world power.

Finally, some outside observers and Iranian officials have claimed that one of Khamenei's past fatwas prohibits the regime from building nuclear weapons. Yet the religious ruling in question was verbal and its wording has been subject to change, leaving experts to wonder whether the Supreme Leader has proscribed the production of weapons of mass destruction or simply their use. Whatever the case, the regime has frequently violated both the Iranian constitution and Islamic law, so no fatwa will prevent it from making nuclear decisions that are in its perceived interests.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Jeremy Brinster. ❖

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