

Ayatollah Khamenei: Pessimistic Negotiator, Optimistic Strategist

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Despite offering nominal support for Iran's nuclear negotiating team, Khamenei and his circle continue to criticize the talks and could sabotage them outright if internal dynamics go against President Rouhani.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei seems to be paving the way for potential stagnation in the nuclear negotiations. On February 19, he sent an official order to all three branches of government to implement what he calls a "resistance economy." Under this plan, Iran would increase its exports of oil, gas, electricity, and petrochemical products by strategically selecting customers, creating multiple methods for oil sales, and involving the private sector. Yet the plan also asks officials to gradually reduce budgetary dependence on oil revenue, increase tax revenue, "logically downsize" the government, and eliminate unnecessary expenses. Khamenei publicly mentioned this approach in a January 17 speech in which he attacked the United States for its animosity to "Islamic revolution" and the Islamic Republic: "[U.S.] animosity will not be vanquished by [negotiations], there is only one way to confront this animosity: that is to rely on national sovereignty and national capability, and to consolidate the country's internal structure...As the Quran says, if you help God, God will help you and will not let you give up...The Iranian nation will celebrate its victory on all grounds while evil-minded and envious [enemies] watch."

Through these and other statements -- some of them seemingly contradictory, and others likely amounting to mere bluster -- Khamenei may be sending different signals to his domestic and foreign audiences, assuaging listeners at home while attempting to improve Iran's bargaining position with the P5+1 (i.e., Britain, China, France, Russia, the United States, and Germany). Whatever the case, a closer look at the recent rhetoric coming out of Tehran offers insights into the regime's potential strategy going forward.

SUPPORTING THE NEGOTIATION TEAM WITHOUT EMPOWERING IT

Although Khamenei has officially permitted the government to negotiate with the P5+1 on the nuclear program, he not hesitated to express his disappointment about the interim Joint Plan of Action signed in Geneva in November, nor his profound pessimism about reaching a final resolution. According to Javad Karimi Qoddoosi, a member of the parliamentary committee on national security, the Supreme Leader said in mid-January, "I have read the text [of the Joint Plan]. This text does not admit Iran's right to enrich [uranium]." For his part, Karimi Qoddoosi accused Iran's negotiation team of "not insisting on Iran's nuclear right." When someone quotes Khamenei inappropriately, his office usually issues a denial statement, but in this case it did not, indicating that the quote was accurate.

Indeed, while the Supreme Leader supports the negotiation team in public, he does not miss any chance to reiterate his pessimism or decry the fundamentally deceptive nature of the "enemy," especially United States. In a January 30 speech, for example, he stated, "One of the benefits of recent negotiations was that the animosity of American officials to Iran, Iranians, Islam, and Muslims has been revealed...When they said 'we cannot destroy Iran's nuclear technology,' they are right...But why can't they? Because the Iranian nation decided to resist...When an enemy sees a nation is [resisting], that enemy inevitably gives up."

Those who are close to Khamenei often echo this mindset. On February 19, Gen. Mohammad Jafari, commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, stated, "Since the current period is sensitive and negotiations should proceed, and since we do not want to give anyone an excuse, we should keep silent because [negotiations] are very sensitive and the goal is to decrease the economic pressure on the people, which is very important...This is why we have to go through this cautiously." And in a February 17 editorial, *Kayhan* newspaper -- one of the main propaganda outlets controlled directly by Khamenei -- criticized Iranian politicians who believe detente policy would solve the disagreements with the West, noting that the Soviet Union disappeared as a result of such policies. It also mentioned Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi, who was toppled after he gave up his nuclear program. Under such circumstances, the editorial argued, countries must rely not on "diplomacy or negotiations," but rather on "empowering the internal economic, cultural, and political structure." In general, *Kayhan* has systematically attacked the negotiations, describing them as an opportunity to rediscover the uselessness of talking to America.

NO FEAR OF MILITARY ACTION?

Although Washington has reiterated that the military option remains on the table if diplomacy fails, Iranian decisionmakers, especially Khamenei, do not seem to believe that the U.S. or Israeli military threat is credible. This belief is based on four perceptions within the main power circle: first, that the chaos in Syria has made the West fearful of spillover to neighboring countries in the event of an attack on Iran; second, that the West is extremely concerned about Iran's potential reaction to an attack; third, that Israel cannot strike Iran without either waiting for a green light from Washington or jeopardizing its relations with the United States; and fourth, that an attack would give Iran enough legitimacy to militarize its nuclear program, which the West and Israel want to avoid most.

In light of these perceptions, Iranian officials seem to regard U.S. statements about armed action as offensive but ultimately empty. Therefore, military leaders have not hesitated to counter such statements with harsh rhetoric that serves their propaganda goals. On January 25, General Jafari responded to Secretary of State John Kerry's previous remark about the military option by declaring, "Mr. Kerry, America and its military capability are so little in the eyes of our faithful and *mujahed* people," referring to the populace's supposed willingness to struggle against the West. He went on: "If you do not have the expertise or good understanding of military and security issues, ask your experts whether America is able to tolerate the devastating ramifications of using the military option against Iran." And on February 12, Maj. Gen. Hassan Firouzabadi, chief of the joint staff, declared that "the Islamic Republic is ready for determined war against America and Israel."

OIL SALES BREED OPTIMISM?

Even as he repeatedly expresses pessimism about the process, Khamenei seems to believe he has already achieved a good deal of what he expected from Tehran's tactical negotiations with the P5+1. According to him, the anti-Iran international consensus has dissipated, and foreign oil companies are no longer willing to bear the ongoing sanctions. In his January 17 speech, he stated, "The world needs us more than we need the world. Today the world depends on oil and gas more than anything else, and we are the first [provider of oil and gas in the world]...Did you see how showing a little smile made foreign companies rush for [our products]?...How much longer can Americans resist and maintain their stubbornness? If we rely on our capability, their resistance will be broken...As long as we put our hope in other's hands and wait to see when they lift this or that sanction...we get nothing." Although this emphasis on exporting oil seems to contradict his calls for a "resistance economy," he may just be sending different signals to different audiences.

At the same time, Khamenei apparently believes that continuing the nuclear negotiations would discourage the West from pressuring Tehran on other issues such as Syria. The Iranian negotiating team has demanded that the talks focus solely on the nuclear program, not other disputed issues. And during their recent meeting in Munich, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif told Secretary Kerry that he is not authorized to talk about Syria. Indeed, Khamenei has ample motivation to keep the nuclear negotiations going while trying to maintain the upper hand in Syria and spoil any solution reached on that crisis without Iran's direct involvement.

CONCLUSION

Ayatollah Khamenei's nominal support for the nuclear negotiation team is not unconditional. Many factors could lead him to retract his support, including the increasing unpopularity of President Hassan Rouhani's government. Rouhani has overrated the economic impact of negotiations and mismanaged the subsidies offered to the poor; the government recently announced that the price of gasoline and certain other basic goods will have to be increased in two months. He has also failed to convince Khamenei to release opposition Green Movement leaders from house arrest and end massive human rights abuses. On February 20, *Aseman* newspaper -- a new pro-Rouhani publication describing itself as the first newspaper launched under "the government of hope and management," Rouhani's motto -- was shut down one week after it opened, pointing to continued suppression of speech. If Iran's internal dynamics go fully against Rouhani, Khamenei would feel more comfortable sabotaging the nuclear talks.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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