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# Iran's Leaders Emphasize Limitations of the Nuclear Agreement

by [Mehdi Khalaji](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### [Mehdi Khalaji](#)

Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

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**While the Supreme Leader has expressed cautious support for Iran's nuclear negotiating team, conservative media outlets and officials are emphasizing that the new deal is only partial and that Tehran could readily back out.**

On November 25, an editorial in *Kayhan* -- Iran's most influential newspaper, known for voicing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's unspoken views -- claimed that Secretary of State John Kerry betrayed [the latest nuclear agreement](#) when he noted that its terms did not recognize Iran's right to enrich uranium. The paper also called the United States "untrustworthy." Although President Hassan Rouhani and various reformist media outlets have attempted to put a more positive spin on certain aspects of the deal, these domestic political divisions do not change the overall impression: namely, Iran's leaders all seem confident that the regime did not surrender any of its essential nuclear activities in Geneva.

## KHAMENEI DOWNPLAYING THE DEAL?

On November 24, Rouhani sent a public letter to Khamenei soliciting his approval for the Geneva deal. In it, he claimed that the "undoubtable achievement of this agreement is the recognition of Iran's nuclear rights" and "protection of its nuclear achievements," in addition to "stopping the unjust sanctions, lifting some of the illegal pressures of unilateral sanctions, and beginning the destruction of the sanctions regime." He went on: "Big powers came to the conclusion that sanctions and pressure would not work, and as Iran has declared from the beginning, they found no option but mutual, respectful negotiation."

According to Rouhani, the "nuclear rights" in question include the right to enrich uranium -- an issue that has

seemingly become his administration's resistance flag, to be used in official propaganda as a way of showing both conservatives and the general public that the regime did not give up the essence of its nuclear program. Indeed, the letter's main purpose was to secure protection against hardliners who criticized Rouhani for his leading role in the 2003 nuclear negotiations and still believe he is giving too much to the West without getting enough in return.

The same day as the president's letter, Khamenei responded by expressing cautious and passionless support for Rouhani's Geneva team, emphasizing that "resistance against the greediness [of other countries] should be a criterion" for keeping Iranian negotiators and officials on the "right path." Yet despite explicitly supporting the team members and calling them "revolution children," he seemed to choose his words very prudently in commenting on the negotiations in general and the agreement in particular. Compared to Rouhani's letter, Khamenei's response was short and dry. The next day, Ali Akbar Salehi, head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, downplayed the role of other officials, stating, "Decisions made in Geneva were not personal; had those agreements not been approved by the Supreme Leader, the negotiations could not have taken place at all."

Meanwhile, *Kayhan* editor-in-chief and Khamenei confidant Hossein Shariatmadari wrote today that Washington betrayed the agreement when Kerry stated that the document's wording did not include recognition of Iran's right to enrichment. Although portions of the accord leave room for recognizing that right in the future, it offers no such recognition at the moment, contrary to Shariatmadari's assertion.

His editorial went on to insist that "this agreement is provisional and for six months. It is not unprecedented; Iran has made such an agreement before at least three times." He also pointed out that the government would continue to enrich uranium to 5 percent, and that the West would negotiate Iran's long-term enrichment rights within a year. Rather than trumpeting what the negotiators had achieved, Shariatmadari's main point was that the deal is limited, and that its advantages for Iran are modest at best: "The fundamental structure of the sanctions is still intact, and they are supposed to talk about it in future." He criticized the enthusiasm generated by reformist and state media regarding the talks, noting that the current agreement "is a gradual process that depends on next steps and negotiations." In his view, the media "must not raise people's expectations by suggesting victory and making people excited."

Khamenei may well share this evaluation that the accord is not a big deal, and such ambivalence will do little to help Rouhani overcome hardliner pressure. In his 2011 book *National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy*, the president included a letter from Khamenei expressing approval for the 2003 nuclear agreement, but this did not stop hardliners from criticizing Rouhani -- after all, the Supreme Leader later reversed himself and denounced that agreement. Khamenei's recent remarks leave the door open for repeating this reversal tactic with the latest deal. In an October 12 speech, for example, he insisted that "every nation that trusted America has been defeated, even those who have been U.S. friends...Negotiations on specific issues are okay, but I do not trust, I am not optimistic about the negotiations. But they want to negotiate, so let them negotiate, and there will be no harm for us, God willing."

## **ROUHANI'S DOMESTIC CHALLENGE**

Interestingly, in his first interview with state television after returning from Geneva, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif made many of the same points Shariatmadari emphasized about the agreement's limited character, stating, "Enrichment is an inseparable part of the nuclear program. None of the nuclear facilities will be shut down." He also noted that "all of our confidence-building actions and commitments are reversible, and we can undo them in a matter of a few weeks," though he emphasized "we hope this would not happen." Earlier today, at a gathering organized by Basij militia volunteers associated with the Atomic Energy Organization, he claimed that the strategy of using sanctions had met with "defeat," stating, "The West has gone in the wrong direction for ten years...It is true that people were under economic pressure in this period, but the production of centrifuges grew from 10 to 19,000."

During the speech, he donned a keffiyeh headdress -- a symbol of both the Basij and Palestinian resistance.

Apparently, the main challenge for Rouhani's government is to convince the public that Iran did not give up its essential nuclear activities, and that the agreement will improve the economy at least gradually, and perhaps quickly. By contrast, hardliners are portraying both aspects as not particularly significant: neither what Iran gave up nor its economic impact. For example, Fars News Agency, affiliated with the regime's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, reported that the auto market did not react to the agreement, and that the value of the rial has dropped again after temporarily rising for a few hours. In short, Rouhani's government will not be immune from widespread criticism of its nuclear stance in the coming months, making the political environment potentially unbearable for the negotiating team.

## NORMALIZING RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES?

**S**ome U.S. officials likely hope to follow the nuclear negotiations with discussion of potential American rapprochement with Iran. Obviously, the manner in which Tehran implements the current agreement will profoundly affect the prospects of any such initiative. In particular, Khamenei's future reactions to continued nuclear negotiations will show to what extent he is inclined to open up the discussion about bilateral relations and ease the pressure on Iranian diplomats who might be working on that subject.

So far, there are very few indications that Khamenei is thinking beyond the nuclear issue. In the aforementioned October speech, he stated, "America's animosity toward the Iranian nation and the Islamic Republic is not about the nuclear issue...The nuclear issue is a pretext. Before the nuclear program became an issue, the same animosity and disagreements existed -- from the very beginning of the Islamic Republic. If someday the nuclear issue would be solved -- let's assume that the Islamic Republic has given up -- [U.S. animosity] would not end. They come up with dozens of other pretexts: why do you have missiles, why do you have drones? Why do you hate the Zionist regime? Why don't you recognize the Zionist regime? Why do you support resistance in the so-called 'Middle East'? And why and why and why?"

Normalization of relations would never come in one leap; the question is whether Khamenei is willing to even start the process. Depending on the trajectory of the nuclear talks, Washington could take several steps to test his mindset on the matter. For example, the two countries could ease the visa process for each other's citizens (Iran greatly restricts travel by American journalists, scholars, and analysts), facilitate cultural exchanges, negotiate direct flights between the United States and Iran (security would be tricky on this issue, of course), and coordinate humanitarian relief in Syria within the framework of the UN (an issue that is separate from discussions about Syria's political future). They could also make a serious effort to establish regular, official ties, perhaps by using the British-Iranian model of "long-distance" embassies based at home with periodic visits abroad, or some other model that would allow a de facto U.S. consulate.

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



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