

# The Ayatollah of Rejection May Be Contemplating Compromise

by [Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

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



Articles & Testimony

## Khamenei's dilemma: To compromise he must save face; but, to save face, he must not compromise.

**T**he recent nuclear talks in Istanbul between the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, plus Germany and Iran have shifted the world's focus to the possible terms of a deal when the sides meet again, probably in Baghdad on May 23. So, what accounts for the new seeming willingness of Iran's leaders to reach an agreement?

Economic sanctions and political isolation have, of course, deeply hurt the Iranian regime, especially the Revolutionary Guards, whose leaders and industries have been directly targeted by the international community. But these are not the only factors at play.

The Iranian regime's propaganda machine is already portraying the Istanbul talks as a triumph for the Islamic Republic and a setback for the West. Indeed, the regime is setting the stage for a significant compromise by preparing both the Iranian public and the global community for that eventuality.

Iran, it must be remembered, cares as much about its image as it does about its nuclear achievements. A successful strategy must allow the Iranians to come out of talks with a smile on their face, even if the Islamic Republic gives up the most sensitive parts of its nuclear program.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, has made an uncompromising nuclear policy central to his domestic authority. For years, he sabotaged the efforts of Iranian officials who might have cut a deal with the West because he doubted their loyalty to him. Those whom Khamenei did trust were not skillful enough to craft a policy of compromise that would have preserved his ability to portray himself as a tough anti-American leader.

As the talks move ahead, the United States and its allies must stick to a dual-track policy: On the one hand they must intensify the political pressure and economic sanctions on Iran, while, on the other, they must negotiate seriously.

They should insist on transparency in Iran's nuclear program, while offering a gradual easing of sanctions in exchange for verifiable guarantees that the Iranian regime is not pursuing the development of nuclear weapons. If things break down, the possibility of a pre-emptive military strike, whether by Israel or the United States, remains an option.

Regardless of their outcome, the new negotiations have put Khamenei in a perilous position. As the person in charge of Iran's nuclear policy, compromising is as dangerous for the supreme leader as digging in his heels. This might be the last chance for the Iranian leadership to change its nuclear policy, prevent a military confrontation, and save the country's economy. But for Khamenei, nuclear concessions might also undermine his monopoly over domestic politics.

Khamenei is not a suicidal jihadist. In 23 years of leadership, he has avoided engaging in risky domestic and foreign policies. But he is not immune to miscalculation.

In 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad relied on Khamenei's financial and political support to win the presidency. Today, however, Khamenei is profoundly regretful about having made that choice. Ahmadinejad has disobeyed his orders, has tried to discredit him with the public by challenging the supreme leader's authority, and has undermined key institutions, including the judiciary and the parliament. It is an open secret in Iranian political circles that Khamenei also regrets permitting volunteers of the Basij militia to attack the British Embassy last November.

The troubling conclusion to be drawn from these episodes is that even if Khamenei is not looking for a military confrontation, he may very well be susceptible to misjudgments about how to avoid one.

Khamenei also faces a deeper problem: he is not Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, his predecessor and the Islamic Republic's founding supreme leader, who shaped the identity of the Iranian system. Khomeini was so self-confident, and his authority was so well consolidated, that he was not afraid to make concessions if he thought that this was necessary for the regime's well-being. Khamenei's political standing is closely associated with the current nuclear policy, and he lacks the charisma and authority necessary to move the political and religious elite toward compromise.

For Khamenei, nuclear capability is not a goal but rather a means to force the West and its regional allies to recognize the regime's strategic interests. Moreover, the supreme leader is convinced that the West is seeking to undermine the Islamic Republic through a "soft" assault of culture and politics, and that compromise on the nuclear program would lead inevitably to concessions on issues such as human rights and democracy, and eventually to regime change.

Given this situation, a guarantee that the West, especially the U.S., is not seeking the overthrow of Iran's leaders would have to be a key component of a nuclear compromise. Indeed, Khamenei might well demand that this guarantee cover Farsi broadcasts, financial and political support to opposition groups, and censorship of the Internet.

The nuclear crisis should be resolved through negotiations before the window closes, to borrow from U.S. President Barack Obama's phrase. The problem for Khamenei – and thus for those who are negotiating with Iran – is that there is scant benefit for the supreme leader in success. The biggest obstacle to a successful outcome is the contradiction of his situation: to compromise, he must save face; but, to save face, he must not compromise.

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

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