The Ayatollah Contemplates Compromise

by **Mehdi Khalaji (/experts/mehdi-khalaji)**

May 9, 2012

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mehdi Khalaji (/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

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

Articles & Testimony

The new talks have put Khamenei in a perilous position: compromising is as dangerous for him as digging in his heels.

The 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 regime, especially the Revolutionary Guards, whose leaders and industries have been directly targeted by the international community. But these are not the only factors.

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

Iran, it must be remembered, cares as much about its image as it does about its nuclear achievements. A successful strategy must allow Iran to come out of talks with a smile on its face, even if it 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 preserve 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: intensifying political pressure and economic sanctions, while negotiating 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 regime is not

pursuing nuclear weapons. If things break down, the possibility of a pre-emptive military strike, whether by Israel or the US, 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 him as digging in his heels. This might be the last chance for Iran to change its nuclear policy, prevent military confrontation, and save the 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 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 that choice. Ahmadinejad disobeys his orders, tries to discredit him with the public by challenging his authority, and undermines 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 faces a deeper problem: he is not Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, his predecessor and the Islamic Republic's founding Supreme Leader, who shaped the system's identity. Khomeini was so self-confident, and his authority was so well consolidated, that he was not afraid to make concessions if he thought it 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, he 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 human rights and democracy, and eventually to regime change.

Given this, a guarantee that the West, especially the US, 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, in US President Barack Obama's phrase, the window closes. The problem for Khamenei -- and thus for those negotiating with Iran -- is that there is scant benefit for him 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, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

Project Syndicate

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett’s Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya’s Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Proliferation (/policy-analysis/proliferation)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)