

Iran Keeps Compromise Option Open

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Brief Analysis

Whether by choice or through the military's influence, Ayatollah Khamenei has decided to keep a formerly marginalized regime figure -- and, by extension, the possibility of nuclear compromise -- in play.

Uncompromising rhetoric aside, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's recent decision to reappoint Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani as head of Iran's Expediency Council could be a sign that he is preparing the regime for making concessions to settle the nuclear impasse. If Tehran does decide to negotiate seriously with the P5+1 (i.e., the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany), Khamenei would certainly need someone like Rafsanjani to shepherd the process. As economic pressure on Iran increases and its banking system begins to buckle, the regime may feel compelled to compromise within the next few months.

Unexpected Reappointment

Despite his consistent and successful efforts to marginalize Rafsanjani in the domestic political sphere, Khamenei surprisingly asked him to continue as head of the Expediency Council for a new term that began March 14. In doing so, the Supreme Leader allowed him to retain his only remaining political position. In 2010, Rafsanjani lost his post as head of the Assembly of Experts, which nominally oversees the Supreme Leader's activities and the succession process.

The reappointment has seemingly little to do with the country's domestic politics. Khamenei has systematically weakened the constitutionally mandated Expediency Council in recent years. For example, he appointed Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi to head the Board of Arbitration and Adjustment of Relations among the Three Branches of Government, a new extraconstitutional entity that can easily interfere with the Expediency Council's own duty to resolve intragovernmental differences. And in May 2011, he created the Islamic-Iranian Model of Progress Center, a body with a job description matching the Expediency Council's other main mandate of outlining the government's general policies. In short, neither Rafsanjani nor his council is likely to play an important role on the domestic front.

Furthermore, most of Rafsanjani's allies on the council were not reappointed, including former intelligence minister Muhammad Mohammadi Ray Shahary, former oil minister Bijan Zanganeh, former prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi (the opposition leader currently under house arrest), former head of state television and radio Muhammad Hashemi (Rafsanjani's brother), and former Guardian Council member Muhammad Emami Kashani. They were likely replaced because they failed to condemn the opposition Green Movement or support the Supreme Leader's positions over the past three years.

More striking was Khamenei's reappointment of two significant council members: Hassan Rouhani, former chief nuclear negotiator and head of the Supreme Council for National Security, and Gholam Reza Aqa Zadeh, former head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran. Both are very close to Rafsanjani, and neither has spoken out against the opposition or vocally supported Khamenei during the tenure; in fact, Aqa Zadeh had close ties to Mousavi. Therefore, removing them would not have surprised anyone or had any significant political repercussions. Their continued presence on the council reinforces the theory that Khamenei is using the appointments to preserve the foreign policy option of nuclear compromise. Indeed, Rafsanjani, Rouhani, and Aqa Zadeh would make excellent interlocutors with the West in the event of negotiations. Their positions on the Expediency Council mean that the body could be charged with ending the nuclear impasse, thereby allowing the Supreme Leader to avoid responsibility for the compromises necessary to reach such a deal.

Also revealing was Rafsanjani's decision to publish a short note in *Etemad* newspaper the day after his reappointment. Apart from reflecting his political marginalization (i.e., top Iranian officials do not normally publish op-eds in newspapers, but Rafsanjani is presumably not permitted to use state television or radio for such messages and had to resort to print), the article took an interesting tone. His main message was that he has always undertaken the government's most difficult responsibilities, both before and since the Islamic Revolution. "I do not want to diminish my connection with the revolution...As much as I can and until my last breath, I will do my best to make Islam, Iran, and the Islamic Revolution proud." His tone suggests that he sees himself as an inseparable element of the regime who can serve its interests well, especially in a time of crisis.

Khamenei Not the Man to Compromise

In their recent Nowruz holiday message, both Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad focused on the economy, asking government agencies to concentrate on national production and urging the people to buy Iranian rather than foreign products. Economically, this recommendation does not make sense -- many Iranian factories were shut down last year because they could not afford to absorb subsidy cuts or pay their laborers, and products from China, India, and other countries now hold even greater dominance over the Iranian market. Rather, Khamenei's focus on such issues reveals his deep concern about the implications of the sanctions.

At the same time, the Supreme Leader continues to reiterate his uncompromising position by dismissing the impact of sanctions on Iran's nuclear program and economy. Typically, Khamenei makes his most strident statements on domestic or foreign policy during his annual Nowruz trip to Mashhad. During this year's Mashhad speech, he declared, "Those who think that if we give up on the nuclear program, America's animosity [toward us] would end, they are ignorant about this truth. [America's] problem is not the nuclear [program]. There are some countries in our region who have nuclear weapons, but [Americans] do not care. The problem is not nuclear weapons or technology or human rights. The problem is the Islamic Republic, which stands like a lion against them." He also argued that the situation in the United States is so bad that even racist citizens felt compelled to vote for an African American president because he promised change. "America is in trouble" he said. "We do not have atomic weapons, and we will not produce atomic weapons. But if America or the Zionist regime attacks us, for the sake of defense we will attack them at the same level."

Clearly, if anyone in the Iranian regime is going to publicly open negotiations with the West, it will not be Khamenei.

Even if the Supreme Leader decides to compromise in the coming months or is forced to do so by influential commanders in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, he would need people like Rafsanjani and Rouhani to step in and be the public face of any such process. These men have more reliable diplomatic reputations in the West than current chief nuclear negotiator Said Jalili or other officials close to Khamenei.

Conclusion

Whether by choice or force, Ayatollah Khamenei may be defining a new role for Rafsanjani and his remaining supporters on the Expediency Council. Although Rafsanjani will continue to be excluded from any significant role in domestic politics, he could play an important part in potential nuclear negotiations if the regime decides to compromise. Still, as long as Khamenei remains confidently on top of the nuclear program and the mounting effects of international sanctions, Tehran's existing, inflexible policy will continue, leaving Rafsanjani no room to reshape the regime's nuclear posture.

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