

USA-IRAN  
DID KHAMENEI SAY “NO” TO DIRECT TALKS?

Walter Posch  
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

*The views expressed in this and all LISD commentaries are solely those of the authors.*

Vice president Joe Biden surprised participants at the Munich security conference with a diplomatic gesture towards Iran when he publicly pondered the idea of direct talks between the two nations. Iranian foreign minister Salehi, also present at the conference, retorted in kind: according to him, there are no principal objections against direct talks. – At least unless a supreme power intervenes.

This seems to have been the case when Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei took the pulpit on the occasion of his annual talk to the Iranian Air Force personnel. Western media took his answer as a clear “no” to negotiations and as an unnecessarily rude rebuke of Joe Biden’s gesture. This said, a closer look at his speech reveals other aspects and allows for a more nuanced reading.

To begin with the obvious: Khamenei gave his speech while the country is under tremendous international pressure, with social tensions mounting and when the nation faces a vicious circle of factional infighting within Iran’s political class. Therefore, his speech has to be careful in order not to strengthen one faction over the other. But in circumstances of domestic tensions and political stalemate a big diplomatic leap forwards can hardly be expected.

This said, Khamenei moved compared to his position a decade ago. Back then in 1999, after the brutal crackdown of Tehran’s student protests, he had to rein in the most radical Hezbollahis and Basijis. In exchange he had to promise that relations with the US “will never take place.” But a decade later, in spring 2009, he answered president Obama’s New Year’s (Noruz) message more nuanced – it depends on US conduct and the national interest of Iran whether relations can be normalized. Four more years later, indirectly answering Biden, Khamenei stressed again that “threats and negotiations don’t go together” and with a quip to Foreign Minister Salehi Khamenei underscores that he is “not a diplomat but a revolutionary” and does no double talk but prefers clarity over obfuscation. And clarity about US intentions on Iran is what the Iranian nation can expect, thus he asked “either you negotiate or you shoot at us (*ya mozakere kon ya shalik kon*).” Is this a clear “no”?

Similar to his speech in 2009 this year too Khamenei assumes that the US would expect as a precondition that Iran gives up its self-reliance, its independent foreign policy and its scientific progress. The technological achievements of the revolution are extremely dear to him and he is obviously proud of the fact that Iranian airmen are able to maintain and to rebuild their military hardware. Hence Iran should, according to Khamenei, be self confident.

Whether this self confidence is justified when one compares Iran’s advancements in military technology with the state of the art military equipment of the US deployed in the region is anybody’s guess. Even so, Khamenei excels in riding out crisis. The situation in Syria is a catastrophe for Iran, but the assumption that some of the post-Al-Qaida terrorist networks in Syria are more anti-Western than they are anti-Asad or anti-Iranian and thus pose a serious long term threat for the West, is simply true. Likewise, the nuclear clock may tick, but so is

the Afghanistan clock ticking for the West. As of January 1, 2015 the world is back to the status quo ante intervention in the Hindukush, and this brings back the old loose alliance between Russia, India and Iran against the Taliban. Hence, India's position towards Iran on the nuclear file will be closer to the position it had before the 2008 nuclear deal with the US and more in tune with India's traditional position with the non aligned countries, the vast majority of which is supporting the Iranian reading of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. In other words, the future may not be bright for Iran, but there is more than just some anti-imperialist silver lining on the horizon for the Islamic Republic. Hence, Khamenei thinks time is more on Iran's side than on the US's.

But there is another reason why Khamenei's speech is important: the Ayatollah criticised US meddling in Iranian affairs like in the post electoral unrest of 2009, refers to espionage, etc. But then he also reminds his public of the fate of Iran's first democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, a staunch nationalist and secularist. Khamenei asks rhetorically what he got from his pro-American stance, namely a coup d'état (in 1953). Elaborating on this sordid episode he accused the CIA to have "come with coffers full of money and handing it out to the rascals of the town." That is true if he means the "Fedayan-e Eslam," Iran's first radical Islamic movement, which is responsible for several assassinations in the 1940s and 1950s. This detail is in so far interesting as the Basijis, Iran's mass volunteer force, and their allied militias like *Ansar-e Hezbollah*, are ideologically closer to the Fedayan than to the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Some former Fedayans were among those, who wanted to see much more bloodshed in 2009 pro democracy protests. The same groups favour a permanent Islamist world revolution and therefore rule out any normalisation of relations with the USA as a matter of principle. Yet in spite of all their anti-American reading of his speech (for example in the *Keyhan* newspaper), the fact remains that Khamenei did not support their radical positions.

In sum three points of his speech deserve attention:

(1) Khamenei's evident distrust towards the US expressed in the quote "no negotiation under threat" is more based on historic experience than on ideology. (2) In ideological terms, he relies on patriotism and nationalism and the national interest – but not on political Islam. (3) Hence, he interprets US-Iranian antagonism in terms of conflicting interests, whereas ideology is of secondary importance. In other words, he did not say "yes" but he did not say "no" either.

Those who wanted to see Khamenei taking the initiative had to expect disappointment: great steps were never his style; he prefers to "lead from behind."