

Iran's Leaders Still Touting Nuclear Progress

Leaders Show No Signs of Preparing Public for Concessions to West

By

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Tributes on a Tehran street and the city's Holy Defense Museum for assassinated nuclear scientists. *Jay Solomon/The Wall Street Journal*

TEHRAN—A senior cleric delivering a nationally televised sermon urged a crowd that included former President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) and the head of Iran's nuclear energy organization to observe sexual piety, aid the poor and support Iran's development of nuclear power.

"This technology is progressing our nation," Ayatollah Imami Kashani said at weekly Friday prayers at the University of Tehran. "Our enemies are against such progress."

The sermon, like other speeches and television appearances by senior leaders recently, offered few signs the government is conditioning Iranians for any major limitations on nuclear work. But in talks Iran is pursuing with world powers, U.S. and European officials

are aiming to significantly scale back Iran's nuclear capabilities to guard against development of nuclear weapons—something Tehran denies that it seeks.

To reach a deal that would ease international sanctions, the clerical leaders will have to make significant concessions. But by defining the program as one of its signature achievements, U.S. and European officials worry the regime is making it harder to accept the limits the West is demanding.

Wednesday marked the National Day of Nuclear Technology across Iran, and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei declared that his country's "nuclear achievements are unstoppable." Tehran's Islamist leaders continue to build national shrines and memorials to the scientists who have worked—and were killed—for Iran's nuclear advances.

Independent researchers now estimate Iran's nuclear program, tracing back more than three decades, has cost the government more than \$100 billion, when expenditures and lost revenues from economic sanctions are calculated.

Thousands of scientists and engineers are employed at a growing number of nuclear facilities in cities including Isfahan, Qom and Natanz. Senior leaders, including President Hasan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, have advanced their careers by championing Iran's nuclear rights as diplomats on the international stage.

"Any retreat on the nuclear issue, given the amount of pride and sunk costs it is entangled with, would have to be accompanied by momentous Western concessions," said Ali Vaez, a London-based Iran expert at the International Crisis Group.

"Before it becomes clear that the West is prepared to make equally painful concessions, it is unrealistic to expect the Iranians to condition their public for a compromise, reveal their bottom lines, and invite premature criticism."



A Tehran rally for nuclear power. Jay Solomon/The Wall Street Journal

The Obama administration has already walked back from the previous U.S. demand that Iran completely dismantle its nuclear-fuel production facilities in exchange for an easing of Western economic sanctions. Iran's infrastructure has grown too vast in recent years, U.S. officials said, and the international community's willingness to maintain expansive sanctions on Iran appears limited.

U.S. and European negotiators are instead seeking to significantly slow the pace at which Tehran could produce weapons-grade nuclear fuel by limiting the number of centrifuges it spins to enrich uranium and scaling back capabilities of a plutonium-producing reactor.

The head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, Ali Akbar Salehi, said Wednesday that Tehran was prepared to redesign its heavy water reactor in the city of Arak, "so that its production of plutonium will decrease drastically." However, his overture appeared to be undercut by his statements on Sunday that Iran would need to build 30,000 more centrifuges, according to state media.

U.S. diplomats involved in the diplomacy said Arak was probably one of the easier issues to solve. They said it remains far from clear whether Tehran will dismantle thousands of centrifuge machines, as Washington demands, and agree to scale back its missile program.

"To get to where Iran's nuclear program is today, Iran has made great sacrifices, both in terms of the direct costs of the program and the enormous price it has paid as a result of the sanctions," Robert Einhorn, a chief nuclear negotiator for the Obama administration until last year, wrote in a recent paper. "It will not want those sacrifices to be in vain."

Iran's relentless promotion of its nuclear program has continued apace.

In the rolling hills of northern Tehran, the government is completing a multimillion-dollar Holy Defense Museum. Much of the facility's exhibitions are dedicated to the Iranian soldiers who died during their country's eight-year war with Saddam Hussein's Iraqi military. There are also halls commemorating the lives and teachings of Mr. Khamenei and the Islamic Republic's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

But the nuclear program is taking on increasing prominence.

One exhibit shows the fueling of the Bushehr nuclear power reactor. An outdoor shrine commemorates four nuclear scientists killed in car bombings and drive-by shootings. The gnarled remains of four cars destroyed by magnetized bombs are on display, covered in blood-colored shrouds and festooned with roses.

Descriptions and photos of the men are embossed on golden plaques. One inscription reads that Darioush Rezaeinejad was shot six times in 2011 by two assassins sent by Israel's Mossad intelligence agency. He died "in the presence of his wife and little daughter."

Israel has neither confirmed nor denied any role in the attack.

Young men streaming out from the Friday prayers in Tehran carried banners with the faces of the slain scientists and chanted: "Death to America" and "Death to Israel."

"We support our nuclear program, and we want to tell the world we won't stop it," said one student, who asked not to be named.

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