

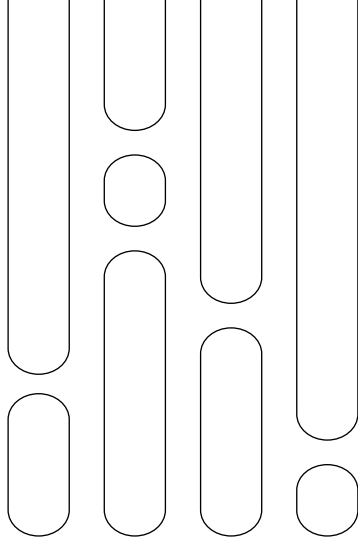
*Position Paper*

# AN INDISPENSABLE AMBITION: CAN RELIGIOUS RESTRICTIONS PREVENT IRAN FROM POSSESSING NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN THE FUTURE

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In a notable development concerning Iran's nuclear program, Mohammad Fakher Meybodi, a faculty member at the Center for Islamic Sciences, affirmed on March 23, 2024, Iran's rationale for pursuing nuclear armament as a contemporary method of deterring potential adversaries. This assertion diverges from the disputed religious decree, or fatwa, issued by Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, which prohibits the acquisition of nuclear weapons — a stance the Iranian establishment insists guides its actions regarding this matter. However, the breach of this fatwa has been a topic of debate among various religious and political figures over time. This discrepancy suggests the possibility of the government altering its stated nuclear policy at some point, especially given the absence of any inherent constraints in terms of its outlook. Moreover, practical considerations may compel such a shift, as possessing nuclear capabilities endows Iran with the deterrent capacity necessary to counter external threats and streamline its pursuit of foreign objectives.

What significance does this statement carry at the current stage? How can its signification and implications on Iran's nuclear program be construed? Can the establishment really change its nuclear approach in the future?

## **A Delicate Nuclear Juncture**

Since 2002, the Iranian nuclear program has been a pivotal factor shaping Iran's relations with major international powers, notably the United States and Western nations. This program has afforded Iran significant leverage in its dealings with the West. Additionally, following the Iran-Iraq War, Iran strategically developed its missile capabilities to serve as a deterrent against potential threats, drawing on past experiences such as Iraq's aggression in the 1980s. Expanding its influence beyond its borders, Iran established militias in neighboring countries, effectively projecting its military presence and creating defensive buffers. The nuclear issue became central to Iran's geopolitical strategy, serving both as a focal point for conflict and as a bargaining chip to alleviate pressure on the ruling establishment.

Iran's approach to its nuclear energy program has been characterized by an insistence on its peaceful intent, citing a religious decree by Supreme Leader Khamenei that prohibits the possession of nuclear weapons. This stance has been consistently upheld by Iranian authorities, even in the face of external pressures and threats. A recent exchange between a broadcaster and Mohammad Salami, head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization, sheds light on Iran's stance regarding nuclear weapons. When questioned about Israel's possession of nuclear weapons and its threats against Iran, Salami reiterated Iran's commitment to a policy of active deterrence. He emphasized that the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, is not aligned with Iran's security and defense strategy. Salami underscored the significance of Khamenei's fatwa, which categorically prohibits the use of nuclear weapons, stating that pursuing nuclear armament for the sake of nuclear peace is not part of Iran's national strategy.

Iran's nuclear ambitions have been evident from the outset, with the program initially developed clandestinely with the aim of achieving nuclear capability. Moreover, Iran's activities in this realm have raised concerns about their alignment with peaceful purposes, particularly given the extensive technical advancements made since the program's unveiling in 2002. A significant shift occurred following the United States' withdrawal from the nuclear agreement in 2018, prompting Iran to scale back its commitments under the deal. This included the installation of more advanced centrifuges and the enrichment of uranium at higher levels, surpassing internationally accepted thresholds. Simultaneously, Iran restricted international oversight of its nuclear facilities. Despite potential understandings between Iran and Western powers, indicating Iran's pledge not to cross certain nuclear red lines set by the United States, recent reports from international agencies suggest Iran is moving closer to the nuclear threshold. This trajectory raises concerns about Iran's nuclear intentions and underscores the delicate nature of negotiations surrounding its nuclear program.

Despite the constraints imposed by Khamenei's fatwa, Iran finds itself navigating a complex landscape concerning the nuclear agreement. Its approach combines elements of transparency and ambiguity, aimed at buying time while projecting an image of peaceful intentions to alleviate pressure and avoid further sanctions. This strategy aligns with implicit understandings and involves incremental concessions, reflecting a "little for little" approach that has characterized negotiations since President Joe Biden assumed office in early 2021. However, Iran's actions reveal a tendency to exploit loopholes in this strategy, capitalizing on international and regional circumstances to advance its nuclear capabilities. This includes efforts to enhance technical expertise and material resources, potentially paving the way for a transition from a peaceful posture to a military one if deemed necessary. Iran appears poised to seize opportunities presented by the complexities of global competition and regional conflicts after the war on Gaza, leveraging these dynamics amid diplomatic stalemates and heightened tensions.

Iran's overarching strategy appears to involve maintaining a flexible approach, ultimately aiming to achieve membership in the nuclear club, despite official Iranian denials. This perspective gains credence when considering recent [statements](#) by Rafael Grossi, secretary-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). When asked about the time Iran might require to develop nuclear weapons, Grossi acknowledged that Iran currently lacks such weaponry. However, he highlighted Iran's significant accumulation of high-purity uranium, a development that raises concerns. According to Grossi, enrichment activities at this level typically accompany nuclear weapons possession.

## **Significations and Repercussions of Rising Calls for Possessing Nuclear Weapons**

Indeed, the statement by Grossi conveys significant signals and implications, potentially leading to various arrangements and repercussions, some of which are particularly concerning:

■ **Momentum within the establishment to reconsider Khamenei's fatwa:** Mohammad Faker Meybodi's recent statement is not an isolated occurrence but rather part of a series of similar remarks made by prominent figures within the Iranian establishment. For instance, in August 2022, Mohammad Reza Sabbaghian, a member of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, [issued](#) a warning indicating Iran's readiness to reconsider its stance on nuclear weapons if provoked by continued hostility from adversaries. Sabbaghian's assertion reflects a growing sentiment within the establishment regarding the potential reconsideration of its nuclear strategy and the religious edicts prohibiting nuclear weapons production. This sentiment has been echoed by other high-ranking officials in Iran's political and military spheres over the past few years. Notably, former Iranian Intelligence Minister Mahmoud Alavi made a striking [statement](#) in February 2021, suggesting that Iran might pursue nuclear weapons development if "cornered" by persistent Western pressure. The revelation by Fereydoun Abbasi-Davani in November 2021 regarding the establishment of a system for producing nuclear weapons by Mohsen Fakhrizadeh highlights a significant contradiction within the Iranian establishment. Despite Supreme Leader Khamenei's fatwa prohibiting the production, storage and use of nuclear weapons, insiders like Fakhrizadeh were reportedly involved in setting up infrastructure for such purposes. This contradiction is further underscored by threatening statements from other Iranian officials. Mohammad Javad Larijani, the secretary general of the Iran High Council For Human Rights, notably warned that Iran could proceed with the development of an atomic bomb unhindered if it chose to do so. Such remarks suggest a growing divergence from Khamenei's stated position on Iran's nuclear arsenal, with certain factions within the establishment advocating for and even openly demanding and hinting at the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

■ **A choice fitting with Khomeini's vision:** In 1987, when Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the "Islamic Republic of Iran," sought to justify Iran's acceptance of United Nations Resolution 598, he shed light on the perceived limitations hindering the Islamic

system's objectives. In a confidential letter, Khomeini referenced the significance of nuclear weapons and laser-guided weaponry, suggesting their importance for the future of the Iranian political system. Khomeini's remarks in this letter underscored a strategic perspective that acknowledged the potential role of advanced military capabilities in bolstering Iran's position on the global stage. By alluding to the importance of nuclear weapons and precision-guided armaments, he hinted at aspirations for Iran to possess such capabilities in the future, despite the prevailing constraints at the time. The revelation of Iran's nuclear program in 2002, following a clandestine initiation, marked a significant moment in the country's trajectory. Notably, the late Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani conveyed Ayatollah Khomeini's message to the media, albeit with the omission of the term nuclear weapons. This pattern of selective disclosure resurfaced with Mohammad Fakher Meybodi's recent statement, where the Mehr News Agency chose to withhold the mention of nuclear weapons, substituting this word with the less provocative one "new weapon." This strategic editing reflects Iran's cautious approach to managing its international image, particularly amid ongoing efforts to navigate the challenges posed by US sanctions and the potential return of Donald Trump to the White House.

■ **A call for militarizing Iran's nuclear program:** The recent statement represents a clear endorsement for the Iranian establishment to advance toward acquiring a nuclear weapon. Importantly, neither the establishment nor its leaders refute the notion that Iran possesses the necessary knowledge and technologies to achieve this goal. This shift from religious to political discourse, coupled with the frequency of internal statements advocating for nuclear armament, could eventually lead to an internal consensus favoring a change in Iran's nuclear approach, including disregarding Khamenei's fatwa. Iran's nuclear ambitions, deeply rooted in national interests, transcend ideology. Thus, internal consensus may emerge, especially during critical moments, compelling Iran to pursue nuclear weapons. Numerous statements from Iranian officials affirm Iran's capability to acquire nuclear weapons at will, indicating that the

issue is snowballing, reflecting the public mood favoring a transition from a peaceful nuclear path to a military one.

■ **Curtailing restrictions related to the nuclear file:** Some within Iran perceive the current state of the nuclear program as mirroring the country in a cycle of isolation. Instead of continuing to make concessions and yielding to Western pressures, there is a growing belief that possessing a nuclear weapon could break this impasse. This perspective sees nuclear armament as a potential means to end Iran's longstanding issue of isolation and to challenge the imposition of a new reality by the international community. These sentiments are often justified as responses to Western and US pressures, particularly following the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement. Disappointment over the failure to revive the agreement during President Biden's term has only deepened this frustration, leading to economic repercussions domestically. As a result, there is a growing willingness among some Iranians to reject US pressures and alter Iran's approach in an effort to address the deteriorating reality.

■ **Providing a massive deterrence force to counter challenges:** Iran has endured international pressure, sanctions and isolation for over four decades, facing significant security challenges along its borders. In this context, nuclear weapons could offer a deterrent force to safeguard Iran's interests and potentially spare it from the ongoing efforts required to maintain regional influence and protect its territory from external threats. Facing adversaries with considerable military superiority, Iran remains vulnerable to attacks targeting its scientists, leaders and critical infrastructure, including nuclear facilities. Acquiring nuclear weapons could serve as a deterrent against such risks, compelling competing parties to reconsider their strategies and approaches toward Iran.

## **The Future of Khamenei's Fatwa and Iran's Nuclear Approach**

In light of the increasing calls for Iran to acquire nuclear weapons, several potential scenarios can be envisioned as follows:



■ **Strategic patience:** Even if Iran were to abandon the proclaimed peaceful nature of its nuclear program, it would likely do so implicitly, continuing to invoke Khamenei's fatwa to mitigate risks and signal its intentions to avoid isolation and external pressure. At present, Iran is expected to pursue a nuclear policy that balances escalation and restraint, while adhering to the fatwa prohibiting the possession of nuclear weapons. Iran may escalate its nuclear measures in response to increased pressure from the United States, leveraging its experience in navigating the complexities of the nuclear file. Iran's primary objective is to safeguard the ruling establishment and prevent a confrontation that could risk its survival. The United States has made preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons a red line, and Iran is keenly aware of this. However, Iran's strategy involves exploiting stages of escalation to enhance its nuclear capabilities while reducing its commitments, potentially edging closer to crossing the nuclear threshold. This trajectory could culminate in Iran imposing a nuclear *fait accompli* on the world. Current international dynamics, including competition among global powers and US focus on conflicts threatening its international standing, may provide opportunities for Iran to advance its nuclear ambitions. This could bolster Iran's aspiration to possess a nuclear deterrent force and reshape regional and global power dynamics in the process.

■ **Openness and understanding:** Despite the IAEA's expressed concerns over Iran's nuclear program and the lack of complete oversight, there seems to be a perception in the United States and Western countries that Iran's nuclear activities are manageable. This is evident from the absence of immediate actions such as resorting to the Security Council to restore sanctions, as was done previously. This suggests that there may be underlying understandings between the parties, potentially paving the way for a return to the 2015 nuclear agreement. There are indications of indirect communication channels between Tehran and Washington, and the possibility of introducing amendments to the agreement as some provisions near expiration. However, diplomatic efforts face significant challenges. Disagreements persist over reciprocal concessions to restore the

pre-2018 status quo, exacerbated by indirect confrontations such as Iran's involvement in regional conflicts and escalating tensions following the Israel-Gaza conflict. Moreover, external factors like the Russia-Ukraine war and the upcoming US elections pose additional constraints on Biden's approach to Iran, with the potential for a shift if Trump returns to office.

■ **Embracing a new doctrine:** According to US [intelligence](#), there is a possibility that Iran could escalate its nuclear activities in response to additional sanctions, attacks, or criticism of its nuclear program. This escalation could involve installing more advanced centrifuges, increasing its stockpile of enriched uranium, or even enriching uranium up to 90%, steps that could potentially bring Iran closer to possessing a nuclear weapon. Several factors contribute to the plausibility of this scenario. Iran has already made significant advancements in its nuclear capabilities and claims to possess the necessary technologies and knowledge to develop a nuclear weapon, according to its officials. Additionally, Iran faces significant security risks and challenges that threaten its borders and national security, which could potentially compel it to reassess its nuclear doctrine.

In this context, Khamenei's fatwa, which was not publicly revealed until 2003 during Iran's confrontation with the West over its nuclear program, is not seen as a barrier to Iran potentially shifting toward a militarized nuclear approach. Iran's ideological framework allows for such changes, and according to the political system's principles, political considerations, such as the survival of the Iranian republic, take precedence over religious dictates. Therefore, calls for nuclear weapons possession may gain traction, especially given the evolving circumstances and variables. Moreover, the Iranian leadership perceives nuclear weapons as crucial for state security, particularly in a volatile international system where the survival of the powerful is paramount. Iran views nuclear weapons as a deterrent against aggression, akin to chemical or biological deterrents, which could help safeguard its sovereignty and integrity. Khamenei contends that the United States opposes Iran's nuclear program not to limit proliferation but to prevent Iran from gaining independence and

economic leverage. Iranian leaders, including Khamenei, assert that while independence may come at a cost, it is a price worth paying for national sovereignty and honor. According to this perspective, any country aspiring for independence and self-determination must be prepared to make sacrifices.

The accelerated pace of Iran's potential pursuit of nuclear weapons is driven by threats of regime change, particularly with the prospect of installing a government aligned with Western policies, which is a significant concern for the Iranian leadership. Given Iran's apprehensions regarding US policies, any actions perceived as risking the political system's survival could prompt a recalibration of Iran's strategic calculus. This could lead to a heightened desire to swiftly develop nuclear weapons as a means of deterring military aggression and bolstering Iran's defensive capabilities. The outcome of conflicts like the Gaza war could also influence Iran's strategic thinking. A major defeat for Palestinian resistance factions could undermine Iran's regional influence in certain arenas, leaving them vulnerable to potential threats. In response, there may be a perceived need for a substantial deterrent force to counterbalance these threats and safeguard Iran's strategic interests. In this context, the pursuit of nuclear weapons may be viewed as a strategic imperative to enhance Iran's security and protect its sovereignty in the face of external pressures and regional challenges. However, such actions would likely escalate tensions in the region and exacerbate existing conflicts, posing significant risks to regional stability and security.

## **Conclusion**

It is plausible to suggest that all paths are leading Iran toward the nuclear threshold, albeit with varying degrees of pace and speed in reaching that milestone. Even if Iran were to return to an understanding with the United States and the West and subject its nuclear program to international supervision once again, doubts about Iran's ambitions to possess a nuclear deterrent force in the future would likely persist. The nuclear agreement, while aimed at delaying Iran's nuclear ambitions and subjecting it to periodic supervision, does not necessarily eliminate Iran's long-term aspirations for

nuclear capabilities. Iran could potentially exploit the circumstances surrounding the suspension of the agreement to advance its enrichment capabilities, particularly at higher levels. Given this, it is conceivable that Iran may not hesitate to pursue a nuclear deterrent force, even under supervision, if conducive conditions emerge. The ruling establishment views nuclear capabilities as vital to serving its strategic interests, and it may seek to attain such capabilities regardless of international agreements or oversight mechanisms. The current reality suggests that Iran is effectively achieving its objectives behind its nuclear program, leveraging undeclared implicit understandings without actual oversight. Iran continues to pursue a strategy of balancing pressures and gaining advantages, which allows it to narrow the gap in knowledge, technology and capabilities necessary to move closer to possessing a nuclear weapon. This approach aligns with the ruling establishment's doctrine of strategic patience, which it applies to critical and sensitive issues. The incremental progress in Iran's nuclear activities gradually brings it closer to the nuclear threshold without facing significant consequences that threaten the ruling establishment's survival or risk its nuclear advancements. Even if the approach to countering Iran's nuclear ambitions shifts, whether through limited strikes on nuclear sites or intensified efforts at regime change, this could prompt the leadership to accelerate its nuclear efforts. Iran could exploit the accumulation of enriched uranium and its expanding knowledge base, potentially with support from allies, to advance its nuclear objectives. In this context, the religious fatwa may not pose a significant obstacle to achieving Iran's goal of obtaining a nuclear weapon. The leadership has demonstrated a pragmatic rather than strictly ideological approach over decades, indicating a willingness to adapt its strategies and policies to achieve its objectives.



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