

Ayatollah 'sent secret letter to Obama'

Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, said to have responded to overture from US president about collaborating against Isis if nuclear deal is reached



Ayatollah Ali Khamenei sent a 'respectful' but noncommittal letter to Barack Obama, according to the Washington Post. Photograph: Iranian government/EPA

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Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has responded to overtures from Barack Obama amid nuclear talks by sending the US president a secret letter, the Wall Street Journal has reported.

Citing an Iranian diplomat, the paper said the cleric had written to Obama in recent weeks in response to a presidential letter sent in October.

Obama's letter suggested the possibility of US-Iranian co-operation in fighting Islamic State if a nuclear deal was secured, the paper said, quoting the diplomat.

Khamenei's letter was "respectful" but noncommittal, it quoted the diplomat as saying.

Both the White House and the Iranian mission at the United Nations declined to comment on the report.

Khamenei said this week that he could accept a compromise in the nuclear talks and gave his strongest defence yet of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's decision to negotiate with the west, a policy opposed by powerful hardliners at home.

The nuclear talks with the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany are aimed at clinching an accord that would ease western concerns that Tehran could pursue a covert nuclear weapons program. In return is the lifting of sanctions that have ravaged the Iranian economy.

Negotiators have set a 30 June final deadline for an accord and western officials have said they aim to agree on the substance of such a deal by March.

The Israeli prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, who is due to address the US Congress on Iran on 3 March - to the annoyance of the Obama administration - has vowed “to foil this bad and dangerous agreement”.