



## France and the Iranian Nuclear Program

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: France's bold move to hold up a nuclear deal between the P5+1 and Iran reflects its broader Iran policy. France is genuinely concerned about a nuclear Iran. Its interest in maintaining its arms trade relationship with Saudi Arabia and concerns for instability in Lebanon have Paris at loggerheads with Tehran.**

France's tough stance in Geneva during negotiations between the P5+1 group and Iran over Tehran's nuclear project drew great international attention. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius firmly opposed any "fool's deal" unless Iran accepts a full suspension of activity at the heavy water reactor in Arak and the downgrading of its stockpile of enriched uranium from 20 percent to 5 percent. He also demanded that the West not be required to recognize Iran's right to enrich uranium. There are various reasons for France's behavior.

First, Paris' stance reflects its genuine concern about an Iranian attack on its territory. France has begun making concrete preparations for such a scenario and considers its own nuclear capabilities as its main deterrence against an attack. This concern was expressed in the French national security doctrine White Papers of 2008 and 2013. Furthermore, as part of its national security doctrine of detection and early warning capabilities, France has initiated an anti-ballistic missile project to be ready by 2020. The project includes an anti-ballistic radar and accompanying missiles with a range of up to 3,000 kilometers, which could intercept an Iranian ballistic attack.

Second, France regards itself as an important actor on the international scene in combating the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

Consequently, France has initiated several rounds of EU and UN sanctions aimed at stopping the Iranian nuclear project.

Third, France defines the promotion of its political and economic status in the Middle East as a top objective of its national security policy. In media interviews, Fabius mentions French attentiveness to the concerns of Israel and other countries in the region regarding the Iranian threat. France maintains a constant strategic dialogue with Israel and appreciates the Israeli professional assessments on Iran. Furthermore, France is in a deep economic crisis and values its political, economic, and security cooperation with its major defense client Saudi Arabia, which also is very concerned about Iran's nuclear project. France probably relishes the fact that its firm policy makes it appear a more reliable ally in a time when US prestige in the region is in decline.

Another regional French consideration apparently relates to the Iranian involvement in the Syrian crisis together with its Hizballah proxy. France provides economic, diplomatic, and humanitarian support to the Syrian opposition and has demanded Bashar al-Assad's ouster. France is immensely concerned about the spillover of the Syrian civil war to Lebanon as result of Hizballah and Iran's involvement. France regards Iran as a threat to Lebanese stability, to which it is historically attached. Moreover, France considers Iran's involvement in the Syrian civil war as a threat to the entire Middle East. Paris is concerned that a nuclear Tehran will increase its influence in the Middle East. In addition, France is worried that a nuclear Iran might trigger the proliferation of WMDs in the turbulent Middle East. Additionally, a nuclear Iran might transfer WMDs to terrorist groups such as Hizballah.

France has recently proven that it is capable of adopting an assertive approach on issues of top security importance. That was the case during its military intervention in Mali and its willingness to join an American military operation against the Syrian regime. However, there is no guarantee that France will persist in its tough approach during the next round of talks with Iran. Fabius himself stated that France is firm in its position but not locked into it ("*France est ferme, mais non fermée*"). However, France and the P5+1 have bought some more time to reconsider the toughening of the terms and means to ensure that Iran fulfills its commitments regarding an eventual deal, one with crucial and far reaching ramifications. French President François Hollande's upcoming visit to Israel will provide an opportunity for greater French-Israeli cooperation on strategic matters.

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