



PERSPECTIVES

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Macron's Proactive Position on Iran: Dialogue vs. Sanctions

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Emmanuel Macron, France's charismatic new leader, has adopted a proactive approach towards Iran that combines a moderate attitude with Sarkozy's hard line. On the one hand, he supports the strict preservation of the 2015 nuclear agreement of 2015 and opposes Trump's "fix or annul" view of the deal. He also supports tightened bilateral relations with Tehran. On the other hand, he has adopted a hard line, demanding the establishment of an international mechanism of inspection and sanctions on the Iranian ballistic missile program as well as a restriction on its destabilizing involvement in the region. Macron's demands have started a war of words between Paris and Tehran that has the potential to escalate.

Emmanuel Macron's presidency has been characterized, so far, by an ambitious promotion of bilateral relations and dialogue with as many states as possible – as well as a refusal to ignore bones of contention. His object is to promote France's political status on the international scene and consequently its commerce and economy. He would also like to enhance his image as a mediator of international conflicts. His approach is on full view in his stance on Iran, particularly with regard to the 2015 agreement on Iran's nuclear project.

Notably, during the negotiations of the 5+1 (US, Russia, France, Britain, China, and Germany) on the Iranian nuclear program, Paris was the main opponent of the proposed deal, demanding a more assertive approach and more rigid measures of international control. It insisted, for example, that Tehran accept full suspension of its plutonium-producing reactor in Arak and a downgrading of its stockpile of highly enriched uranium. France even initiated several rounds of severe EU and UN sanctions aimed at influencing the ayatollahs' regime to stop the project.

However, once the nuclear agreement was signed in Geneva in July 2015, France renewed diplomatic and commercial relations with Iran. In January 2016, on the occasion of the visit to Paris of Iran's President Rouhani, the two countries concluded numerous deals in fields such as health, industry, agriculture, telecommunications, aeronautics, sustainable development, and transport.

Macron, who was elected president of France in May 2017, adopted the stance of his predecessor, Francois Hollande, in support of the agreement. Indeed, he underlined that any progress in France's relations with Iran would be conditioned on its preservation of the terms of the agreement. However, he also said that Paris should continue its dialogue with Tehran, as it does with Saudi Arabia (France's close ally).

Macron continued Hollande's line of promoting commercial relations with Iran, as did other European countries (particularly Germany). For instance, in July 2017, the French energy company Total signed an agreement with Tehran worth \$5 billion dollars for the development of gas reservoirs in Iran. In August 2017, Renault signed an agreement worth \$870 million for car manufacturing in Iran, a few days after President Trump signed new sanctions on Iran.

Macron consistently claims that the nuclear agreement should not be changed. This is in contrast to US President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who demand that the agreement be either fixed or annulled since it does not prevent Tehran from going nuclear, particularly upon its expiration in 2025. Netanyahu has also repeatedly raised Iran's support of terrorist activities around the world and its overt threats to destroy the state of Israel.

Despite these arguments, Macron insists that there is no better alternative than the 2015 agreement to stop Tehran from developing nuclear weapons. In January 2018, he called on the international community to maintain a "permanent" dialogue with Iran and criticized the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia – all French allies – for denouncing the agreement. In his opinion, such denunciation could lead to war with Iran.

While Macron has been consistent in his support for the preservation of the nuclear agreement, he has also increasingly criticized the conduct of the Iranian regime and has noted significant issues that were missing from the deal.

In September 2017, during UN General Assembly deliberations in New York, Macron declared that the agreement was insufficient in view of the unstable situation in the region, Tehran's destabilizing efforts to increase its regional influence, and its continuation of its ballistic missile program. Macron has proposed sanctions on that program and on Tehran's interference in the region, and has raised the question of what might happen after the agreement expires in 2025.

Macron also criticized Tehran during a visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in November 2017. He again stressed the need to adopt a determined stance against Iran's ballistic missile program as well as its ambition to expand its influence in the Middle East. French Foreign Office spokeswoman Agnès Romatet-Espagne emphasized that the EU has already imposed sanctions on Iranian units involved in the ballistic missile program as it counters UN Security Council Resolution No. 2231 from 2015, which calls on Tehran to suspend all activities related to ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear weapons.

Macron's marathon visit to the Gulf States reflects the importance France attaches to its relations with those countries, which are, *inter alia*, the biggest clients of the French defense industry. In addition, France maintains permanent military navy-air-ground bases in Abu Dhabi. They were created in 2009 during Sarkozy's presidency to ensure (among other things) France's strategic interests in the Gulf and the Hormuz Straits and to limit Tehran's growing influence in the region.

In a typical "Macronian" aspiration to play the role of mediator, he also spoke of the need of the Gulf states to adopt a responsible attitude and not be dragged into further struggles. In December 2017, Macron visited Qatar, which was besieged by Saudi Arabia and its allies. He made clear that he wishes to ease tensions with Tehran and favors wide-ranging economic deals (specifically, the construction of a metro in Doha and procurements from the French defense industry).

Tehran seemed unimpressed by Macron's "balanced" message. It rejected his call to launch negotiations regarding its ballistic missiles program, demanding instead that Paris refrain from interfering in its internal affairs. It underlined the program's (supposed) defensive character and lack of any connection to the nuclear deal. However, senior commanders of the Revolutionary Guards threatened in November 2017 that Iran could expand its ballistic missile range beyond 2,000 kilometers if threatened by Europe. Reportedly, Tehran had already tested the Soumar missile – which has a range of 2,500 kilometers and can reach southern Europe as far as Budapest – in 2015.

Further questions about the effectiveness of Macron's strategy arose during the Iranian regime's suppression of the massive demonstrations of December 2017-January 2018, which led to many dead, injured, and incarcerated protesters. On January 3, 2018, Macron called on Rouhani to show restraint, stressing that it is important to maintain freedom of speech and the freedom to demonstrate. Rouhani attributed the protests to incitement by a "terrorist Mujahedeen" organization of Iranian exiles in France and asked Paris to act against them – a controversial issue between the two countries.

France announced the postponement of Foreign Minister Jean Yves le Drian's visit to Tehran, scheduled to have taken place that week. Macron himself was supposed to visit Iran in spring 2018, but no announcement has been made regarding the date. The issue of Macron's visit to Tehran has prompted media reports that he has set three conditions: accept renegotiation of the nuclear agreement, accept negotiation on the ballistic missiles program, and stop interfering in the region. These reports triggered Iranian denials that Macron has introduced any conditions for his visit. Tehran insists that it will take place on a date yet to be determined.

Macron's "double game" strategy is being challenged by President Trump's demands that the three European countries that took part in the negotiations – France, Britain, and Germany – support his call to either cancel or amend the agreement with Iran. Trump demands particularly that Tehran allow international inspections of all its installations and accept new stipulations that would prevent its developing nuclear weapons when the agreement expires. On January 13, 2018, Trump agreed to waive new US sanctions but set a 120-day ultimatum for the European countries involved in the Iranian deal: either fix it or accede to the resumption of severe sanctions on Iran. In a phone conversation with Trump on January 11, 2018, Macron continued to insist on France's determination to respect all provisions of the agreement.

This does not mean Macron is not concerned about Trump's ultimatum. He is, because new US sanctions could potentially be applied not only to Iran but also to countries trading with Tehran, such as France and Germany. They might even start a disruptive economic struggle between the US and the EU. Yet Trump's threats to cancel the agreement were seemingly used by Macron as a pressure tool to get European support for the moves he was trying to lead relating to Iran's ballistic missile program and the restriction of its hegemonic maneuvers.

In the end, Macron will likely find it challenging and perhaps impossible to have it both ways in his mediation efforts: to express unreserved support for the existing Iranian deal and promote dialogue and bilateral cooperation with Tehran while at the same time supporting the imposition of sanctions on Iran for its refusal to compromise on its missile ballistic program and its destabilizing efforts in the region.

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