



# PERSPECTIVES

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## The EU's Utopian Approach to Iran

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Europe's attitude towards Iran, particularly with respect to the 2015 nuclear deal (the JCPOA) and related ballistic issues, is hard to understand. A collective desire to defy the US, which pulled out of the JCPOA in May and re-imposed tough sanctions on Tehran, can't be the cardinal reason. It is more likely that the EU states are succumbing to a sophisticated blackmail campaign directed by the Iranian regime aimed at preserving the JCPOA and deepening existing cleavages among the transatlantic partners.

On August 7, Federica Mogherini, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, said:

We are doing our best to keep Iran in the [JCPOA nuclear] deal, to keep Iran benefiting from the economic benefits that the agreement brings to the people of Iran, because we believe this is in the security interests of not only our region but also of the world. If there is one piece of international agreements on nuclear non-proliferation that is delivering, it has to be maintained. We are encouraging small and medium enterprises in particular to increase business with and in Iran as part of something [that] for us is a security priority.

This open defiance of President Donald Trump's policy over the Iran nuclear agreement reflects the determination of the E3 (France, Germany, and the UK) to rescue the JCPOA.

The EU governments are committed to keeping the JCPOA alive, and Tehran has agreed to give their efforts a chance – on the condition that they provide

“practical guarantees” that Iran will reap the economic dividends of the deal despite the American withdrawal and re-imposition of sanctions.

The Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, has made clear that “the JCPOA is a means, not the goal, and if we come to the conclusion that it cannot serve [our] national interests, we will leave it.” Iranian President Hassan Rouhani urged his French counterpart as well as the remaining signatories to the agreement to act faster and in a more transparent manner to preserve it. However, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Muhammad Ali Jafari, congratulated his nation on the US withdrawal, describing the JCPOA as “not credible even before the withdrawal.”

Tehran has set out several specific conditions if it is to remain in the deal: an EU commitment to preserve its oil trade with Iran and a guarantee that it can sell as much oil as it wants on the world market; the provision of practical ways to bypass the US financial system by making direct, euro-denominated payments for Iranian oil to Iran’s central bank; an increase in EU investment in Iran; and a commitment to refrain from seeking new negotiations on Iran’s ballistic missile program and its activities in the Middle East.

The most significant measure the EU has taken to defy the US was the decision to establish a mechanism to facilitate payments for Iran's exports, including oil, as well as its imports, reached after high-level closed-door talks at UN headquarters. The public joint communique on the matter, issued on September 24, is clear: “Mindful of the urgency and the need for tangible results, the participants welcomed practical proposals to maintain and develop payment channels, notably the initiative to establish a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) to facilitate payments related to Iran's exports, including oil.”

This measure is in addition to the EU decision to activate the “Blocking Regulation” (initially adopted on November 22, 1996), which is aimed at protecting EU businesses against the effects of extra-territorial application of legislation adopted by a third country. The Blocking Regulation is expected to be amended by the European Commission to include the new US measures. In effect, this will order EU businesses not to comply with US sanctions.

For Tehran, the EU’s continuing support for the agreement – together with Russia and China, and, most recently, India – signals confirmation of the legitimacy of the nuclear deal and the endorsement of Iran as a responsible and credible partner. As long as the EU is convinced that Tehran is fulfilling its commitments, its right to a civilian nuclear program – including uranium enrichment – is guaranteed, and regime change is not on the international agenda. The IAEA has certified repeatedly (most recently on August 30) that Iran

continues to fully implement its commitments under the JCPOA and that the IAEA has been given access to all sites and locations that it needs to visit.

The EU is not insisting that UN nuclear inspectors have immediate access to all sites, including non-nuclear military installations, as the US administration demands. This difference is highly consequential, considering the various covert operations in the nuclear domain conducted by Iran prior to the JCPOA era. So too are the divergences pertaining to ballistic issues.

The attitude of the EU towards Iran is nourished, in part, by the glory of Iranian history up to the rise of the ayatollahs and the IRGC; by the inability to distinguish between the fanatical Iranian regime and the decent Iranian people; by the grossly misleading façade of the regime's key figures; and by tempting economic calculations. A fear of Iranian might likely plays a role as well.

Is Europe failing to realize Tehran's true nature, or is it well aware and simply unwilling to clash with it? Geopolitically speaking, its approach to Iran is irrational. The strategic orientation of the Islamic Republic is perfectly clear: Russia, China, North Korea, and Assad's Syria.

A vivid illustration of the Iranian-North Korean nuclear and ballistic interface – mirroring Tehran's approach with respect to the nuclear and ballistic spheres – was furnished during the visit of North Korea's foreign minister, Ri Yong-ho, to the Iranian capital on August 7. The two countries were facing similar challenges from the US, particularly after the summit between North Korean leader Kim Jung-un and President Trump. The foreign minister's visit to Tehran might have presaged an attempt to covertly retain and transfer cardinal North Korean nuclear and ballistic assets to Iran.

Those assets – in addition to operational weaponry – located in North Korea that are intended to be eliminated or dismantled might instead be conveyed, either assembled or unassembled, to Iran, where they will be warmly welcomed. Pyongyang might be planning to move weaponry, technological assets, and skilled personnel to Iran rather than declare their existence and eliminate, dismantle, or reassign them. The absence of a common border between the two countries will make camouflaged transportation from North Korea to Iran complicated and risky, but the two countries should be expected to do their utmost to overcome that disadvantage.

Two processes are occurring in parallel: the EU's defying of Washington's pull-out from the JCPOA and its challenge to any kind of re-imposed sanctions (the second phase of which are to be activated in early November); and the EU's intensive contacts with Iran to keep the JCPOA alive irrespective of US policy.

When President Trump was inaugurated, bringing the Obama era to a close, a rupture opened up in transatlantic relations. This was visible in the EU's harsh criticism of Trump's unilateral strategy in several domains in the international arena. The body's leading states are horrified by Trump's abrasive and non-diplomatic style, and they continue to tout liberal values through the prism of political correctness. In their eyes, "Trumpism" represents a severe danger to the Western democracies. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas recently called on Europeans to counter Trump's policy of "America First" by adopting the idea of a "United Europe."

In keeping with this attitude, the EU is advocating for an independent capability to take its own decisions as a sovereign body. On this matter, the leader of the liberal group in the European parliament, Guy Verhofstadt, a former prime minister of Belgium, said: "we as Europeans must strengthen our foreign policy to be able to shape relations with the greater Middle East independently from the US." Not surprisingly, the uncompromising polemics over the JCPOA are among the toughest ongoing diplomatic transatlantic quarrels.

It would be superficial and foolish to assume that economic interests related to high-volume European investments in Iran, as well as future prospects for enhancing EU involvement in developing the Iranian industrial infrastructure, are the sole explanations for the EU's insistence on conserving the JCPOA as the mechanism by which to ensure the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program.

In fact, the E3 (France, Germany, and Britain) were firmly in favor of amending the JCPOA in order to avoid a US withdrawal. The French even used the term JCPOA-2 to highlight the original deal's key shortcoming, namely that it does not address Iran's ballistic missile program. French President Emmanuel Macron stated in February that "we need to put Iran under surveillance over its ballistic missiles. It's indispensable for the security of the region and so we need a mechanism of sanctions and control adapted to that."

On January 22, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian claimed that Iran was violating UN Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015), which was ratified to endorse the nuclear deal. Le Drian said European countries will have "the opportunity of underlining our firmness on Iran's compliance with... Resolution 2231, which limits access to ballistic capacity and which Iran does not respect." This wording is less restrictive than the prior prohibition on missile testing contained in [UN Security Council Resolution 1929](#) (2010), which said that Iran "shall not undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons."

While Mogherini has stated that Iran's missile tests wouldn't be regarded as violations of the JCPOA provisions, the German intelligence community

claimed in May that Tehran has continued its attempts to acquire nuclear and missile technologies, which violates the nuclear deal agreement.

An Iranian government spokesman asserted that “Tehran categorically rejects France’s proposal to open discussions concerning the ballistic and missiles program, because such talks would violate Iran’s defensive and national infrastructure. Therefore, the door is closed to this unofficial French initiative.”

In June, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei urged the IRGC to boost Iran’s missile program. “Work on missiles as much as you can,” he said in a meeting with IRGC commanders, according to his own official website. “You can see how much the enemy is vigilant about [Iran's] missiles, therefore, you should know that your work [on missiles] is very important,” he added.

Iran’s arrogant dismissal of the EU’s initiative on this matter was demonstrated by its conducting of a series of ballistic missile live tests, as well as the spectacular disclosure of the Khorramshahr missile, which has a range of 2,000 kilometers (1,243 miles) and the ability to carry multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRV) within a range of 1,800 kilometers. Iran was known to have missiles of similar ranges, like the [Shihab-3](#), which is based on a North Korean prototype, but the Iranian ballistic program extends far beyond that range.

The hardliners in Tehran – particularly in the IRGC – are intentionally utilizing Iran’s long-range ballistic missile arsenal as an aggressive diplomatic tool to deliver a message to EU members, first and foremost to France: “Back off.”

The operational launch by the IRGC of six ballistic missiles into eastern Syria on October 1, targeting ISIS-related facilities, employed Zolfaghar and Qiam variants, which have ranges of 750 kilometers (465 miles) and 800 kilometers (500 miles), respectively. This was a message not only to the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, but to the EU as well. It is not by coincidence that the operational use of the long-range missiles took place just a month after French FM Le Drian warned Iran (on August 31) that it “cannot avoid” talks on its ballistic missile program and role in Middle East conflicts.

By acting in this way, Iran appears to have been signaling 1) that it will not hesitate to employ strategic weapons for tactical purposes; and 2) that it already possesses the necessary technological and operational capacity to threaten targets in Europe.

This is not the first time Iran has launched ballistic missiles after French warnings. On June 18, 2017, six Iranian ballistic missiles were launched targeting ISIS forces in eastern Syria. The missiles reportedly were of the

[Zolfaghar](#) type (an upgraded Fateh-110 with a longer range and optional cluster munition warhead), with a reported range of 750 kilometers. This striking incident occurred shortly after an EU senior delegation conducted high-level talks in Tehran (on the occasion of Rouhani's inauguration) during which Iran was firmly advised to abandon its ballistic missile program.

Another incident took place on November 9, 2017, when the Houthi rebels in Yemen launched a ballistic missile targeting Riyadh just a few hours after French President Macron left the Saudi capital for Dubai. The missile was successfully intercepted by Saudi air defense. Macron blamed Tehran for the attack, stating that it was by definition an Iranian missile. He said, "There are extremely strong concerns about Iran among its Arab neighbors in the Persian Gulf region over the missile launch, and there are negotiations we need to start on Iran's ballistic missiles."

The Iranians probably used other means as well to sway the EU into abandoning its ambition to impose sanctions on Iran for its ballistic missile program. On March 29, 2018, it was [reported](#) that at a closed door meeting, Italy, Spain, and Austria rejected a plan to freeze assets and impose travel bans on some 15 Iranian individuals, companies, and groups linked to Tehran's ballistic missile program and its involvement in the Syrian civil war. According to EU rules, such a decision can't be taken without unanimous agreement.

A "traditional" instrument available to Tehran and probably used by it to achieve its goal of thwarting the EU was activation of its sleeper terror networks in Europe. The foiled terror attack in Paris in June 2018 was officially attributed to Iran's Ministry of Intelligence. The French interior, foreign, and economy ministers said on October 2: "This extremely serious act envisaged on our territory could not go without a response... France underlines its determination to fight against terrorism in all its forms, particularly on its own territory."

France subjected Iranian diplomat Assadollah Asadi and another man, Saeid Hashemi Moghadam, to six-month asset freezes. Asadi and five others were arrested by European police. The French government said it also froze the assets of Iran's Ministry of Security and Intelligence.

"I hope it's a wake-up call across Europe to the nature of the regime and the threat that they pose," [said](#) John Bolton, President Trump's national security adviser, on October 4. A State Department official was quoted as saying that "in light of Iran's failed attack in Europe, it is all the more important that our European allies and all countries join us in holding Iran accountable for its dangerous and malign behavior, including by increasing economic pressure on Iran to deter such threats."

The hardening of relations between Paris and Tehran could have far-reaching consequences for Iran as President Rouhani's government looks to European capitals to salvage the nuclear deal following the US pull-out. As for the EU, its utopian approach towards Iran, as expressed by Mogherini, will eventually come up against Iran's true face.

The EU states are facing a sophisticated blackmail campaign directed by the Iranian regime aimed at preserving the JCPOA and deepening existing cleavages among the transatlantic partners. The same applies in the ballistic missile domain. Contrary to naïve conventional wisdom in Europe, President Rouhani's smile is just a façade. The decision-maker in the Iranian regime is Supreme Leader Khamenei, and the IRGC is under his personal command. It is time to acknowledge the true nature of the governing elements in Iran, their intentions, and the meaning of their conduct.

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