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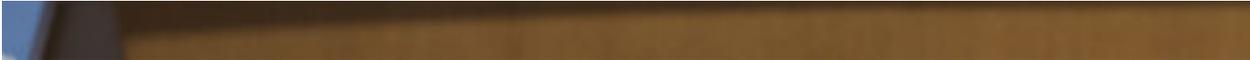
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Is Europe waking up on the Iranian threat? Most experts say

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By Ariel Ben Solomon/JNS





French President Emmanuel Macron addresses a United Nations press conference on Sept. 19, 2017. Credit: U.N. Photo/Kim Haughton.

Is France's public quarreling with Iran in recent months a sign that Europe will fall in line with the hardline policies of the U.S. and Israel against the terrorism-supporting Tehran regime?

Experts say that a sea change in that continent's policy towards the Islamic Republic is unlikely to materialize.

"The French may be publicly voicing stronger rhetoric than their European counterparts on Iran's missile threat and regional adventurism, but so far have shown no appetite to make their business overtures to Iran conditional on different behavior," Iran expert Emanuele Ottolenghi, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies think tank, told JNS.

"Europe favors a unified position in foreign policy, which usually means a watered-down approach to issues unless there is a strong consensus," he said.

On Dec. 17, Iran described French President Emmanuel Macron as President Donald Trump's "lapdog" for Macron's stern rhetoric against the Iranian ballistic missile program. **Reuters reported** that France's Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, who was in Washington on Dec. 18 to meet with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, said that Iran's "hegemonic temptations in the region is a matter of urgency."

Last month, Macron **called for** negotiations on Iran's ballistic missile program. In what seemed to be a response to the French leader's comments, Hossein Salami, a commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, said in an interview **translated by the Middle East Media Research Institute** that "until now, we felt that Europe did not pose a threat to us, so we did not plan the range of our missiles to reach Europe, even though we can."

Salami warned that “we will extend the range of our missiles to wherever we feel threatened.”

Dr. Emmanuel Navon, a researcher at the recently established Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies and a senior fellow at the Kohelet Policy Forum, explained that despite Macron’s remarks, some top French diplomats favor a conciliatory attitude towards Iran.

“Many French politicians, diplomats and analysts see in the 2003 Iraq war an unforgivable mistake that eventually produced ISIS. By contrast, they consider Iran a stabilizing factor against Sunni fundamentalism,” Navon told JNS.

The French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs, for example, “has a very favorable attitude toward Iran,” he said, adding that Macron “is going against a French pro-Iranian tide.”

Asked if European countries could be willing to align with the Trump administration by increasing sanctions on Iran and cutting off business ties, Ottolenghi responded that countries like France, Germany, the U.K. and Italy can sway the rest of Europe if they are determined to do so, but that they currently have “too much at stake in business deals with Tehran to risk them on a policy gamble led by a U.S. president that most European leaders, at least in private, strongly disagree with.”



In July 2015 in Vienna, upon the announcement that Iran and world powers had reached a nuclear agreement, the foreign ministers and secretaries of state pictured from left to right include China's Wang Yi, France's Laurent Fabius, Germany's Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the European Union's Federica Mogherini, Iran's Mohammad Javad Zarif, the U.K.'s Philip Hammond and America's John Kerry. Credit: Bundesministerium für Europa, Integration und Äusseres via Wikimedia Commons.

The problem with the European approach to Iran is that the July 2015 nuclear deal “did not solve any of the challenges Iran presents to European interests,” said Ottolenghi, noting that Iran continues to support terrorism and that Tehran's actions in Syria are the main driver of the migrant crisis that has engulfed Europe.

Iran continues to arm the Lebanese terror group Hezbollah with the goal of triggering a new war with Israel, and the Islamic Republic's missile program is contributing to an escalation of tensions in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia **said it intercepted** an Iranian-supplied Houthi missile targeting Riyadh on Dec. 19.

Further, Iran is behind the trafficking of opium into Europe and continues kidnapping dual nationals with Western passports in order to extract ransoms, Ottolenghi said.

“And if that were not enough, doing business in Iran almost invariably means entering partnerships with or facilitating business for the Revolutionary Guard,” he said.

European restrictions on business, trade, banking and transport are the only ways the continent can get Iran to change its behavior, asserted Ottolenghi.

“Unless Europe is willing to contemplate new sanctions, it will not be able to push back Iran's malign activities,” he stated.

Navon said that since the Shi'a axis of Iran, Syria and Hezbollah is supported by Russian President Vladimir Putin, while quiet cooperation between Israel and the Sunni states of Saudi Arabia and Egypt is backed by Trump, Macron “wants France to play its own role by opposing Iran's hegemony but without endorsing Israel's positions, such as on Jerusalem or Saudi policy in Yemen.” This is how Macron can simultaneously speak out

against Iran's missile program and U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, according to Navon.

At the same time, Macron "doesn't want to affect the business of French companies in Iran" or to harm France's interests with Sunni states, said Navon. Therefore, he said, Paris is seeking to maintain "a balanced stance in the region's 'cold war' and it hopes that, by doing so, it will gain more influence in the Middle East."

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