

## Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Europe's Uncertain Role in Middle Eastern Geopolitics

by Riccardo Alcaro

The Middle East is experiencing a reconfiguration of power. As has often been the case throughout the history of this troubled area of the world, external powers have been key contributing drivers in these processes. Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war, in particular, has consolidated a power bloc centred on Iran and its allies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. Similarly, the anti-Iran coalition made up of Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates owes much of its bellicosity towards Iran to support from the United States.

Europe has thus far played a secondary role in these ongoing realignments. The reason by no means lies in a lack of strategic interests. Ranging from security, to energy and normative concerns, Europe has much at stake in the region.

Nor does Europe lack assets to have an impact. Economic resources are comparable to those of the United States and its military capabilities not that inferior to Russia's. The largest EU countries have diplomatic networks spanning the entire region, and France and Britain even have military bases in the Emirates and Bahrain respectively.

So, what lies behind Europe's second-tier role in Middle Eastern geopolitics? As is usually the case, the key problem relates to the hardship of finding common ground among Europeans. That this point sounds trite makes it no less true.

Recent historical precedent provides a strong reminder for Europe's potential to actively contribute to regional developments on the basis of unity of intent. When Britain, France and Germany (the so-called E3) mustered support from the rest of the EU to

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pursue a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis, they eventually laid the groundwork for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the 2015 nuclear deal.<sup>1</sup> By successfully promoting the nuclear deal, the Europeans upheld the non-proliferation regime while greatly diminishing the risk of a military confrontation over Iran's nuclear programme.

If Europe wants to play a role in Middle Eastern geopolitics, its main asset is defending the nuclear deal. The greatest threat to the deal's survival is US President Donald Trump's conviction that the JCPOA is flawed and does not serve US interests. Consequently, Trump has indicated its intention to abandon the agreement unless certain conditions are met.<sup>2</sup>

Europe is thus confronted with a difficult choice.<sup>3</sup> On the surface, it appears that Europe has already made this choice. The E3 as well as the EU High Representative (HR) Federica Mogherini have pledged the European Union will continue to abide by the

JCPOA.<sup>4</sup> In practice, however, the defence of the nuclear deal may take different forms, with each having a different impact on Europe's ability to shape events.

There are two ways the Europeans can defend the JCPOA. One is predicated on the assumption that the deal is purely a non-proliferation arrangement with a country, Iran, which they consider a permanent source of tensions in the region. There is a temptation in Europe, particularly among the E3, to follow this path.<sup>5</sup>

Mollifying Trump is the main reason. The US president wants the Europeans to join in an effort to curb Iran's ballistic missile programme and reduce its influence in the region. Also important, is that France and Britain do not want to jeopardize their ties with Arab Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, to which they sell arms<sup>6</sup> and have provided some

<sup>1</sup> Riccardo Alcaro and Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi, "Europe and Iran's Nuclear Issue: The Labours and Sorrows of a Supporting Actor", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (September 2014), p. 14-20.

<sup>2</sup> Meredith Rathbone et al., "President Trump Reissues Iran Sanctions Waivers, but Warns That Concerns over JCPOA Must Be Addressed", in *Steptoe International Compliance Blog*, 16 January 2018, <https://www.steptoointernationalcomplianceblog.com/?p=1886>.

<sup>3</sup> Riccardo Alcaro, "All Is Not Quiet on the Western Front. Trump's Iran Policy and Europe's Choice on the Nuclear Deal", in *IAI Papers*, No. 18|07 (April 2018), <http://www.iai.it/en/node/8956>.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Emmott, "European Powers Urge Trump to Preserve Iran Nuclear Deal", in *Reuters*, 11 January 2018, <https://reut.rs/2mrzy4l>; European External Action Service (EEAS), *Second Brussels Conference "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region", Remarks by HR/VP Mogherini Upon Arrival*, Brussels, 25 April 2018, <https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/43465>.

<sup>5</sup> Anne-Sylvaine Chassany et al., "Merkel, May and Macron in Last-Ditch Effort to Save Iran Deal", in *Financial Times*, 29 April 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Warda Mohamed and Tony Fortin, "How France Participates in the Yemen Conflict", in *OrientXXI*, 12 September 2017, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/how-france-participates-in-the-yemen-conflict,1997>; Lizzie Dearden, "UK Sales of Bombs and Missiles to Saudi Arabia Increase by Almost 500% Since Start of Yemen War", in *The Independent*, 8 November 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/uk-british-weapons-arms-sales-saudi-arabia-yemen-war-increase-500-civilians-war-crimes-export-a8042871.html>.

diplomatic cover in the context of the Saudi-led military intervention against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen.<sup>7</sup> France and Britain may thus push Germany and the rest of the European Union to meet US demands (and Israeli and Saudi wishes) halfway, such as sanctioning Iran because of its ballistic programme and its regional policies.

If the Europeans were to go down this path, they would partly contribute to a containment strategy vis-à-vis Iran, as advocated by Israel and Saudi Arabia and fully endorsed by the Trump administration. They would do so hoping the United States stays in the JCPOA or, failing that, granting assurances that EU companies and banks doing business with Iran would at least win protection from US sanctions.

However, even if successful on these fronts (a big "if"), the Europeans would have to face negative consequences. In the first instance, they would inscribe their Middle East policy in a strategic framework defined by the anti-Iran coalition, thus curtailing their autonomous ability to interact with Iran. The second risk is that Iran may conclude that European ambivalence reduces the dividends of abiding by the JCPOA, leading Tehran to simply exit the agreement altogether. The Iranian government has already hinted at this eventuality.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> "UK Pushes Draft UN Resolution Condemning Iran for Weapons Smuggling in Yemen", in *Middle East Eye*, 19 February 2019, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/node/69188>.

<sup>8</sup> "Iran Deal No Longer 'Sustainable', Regardless of Trump, Deputy FM Says", in *Haaretz*, 30 April 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east->

In light of the above, the Europeans had best defend the JCPOA not only because it is a key non-proliferation arrangement but also a platform on which Europe could build a working relationship with Iran in an effort to reduce tensions in the region.

Six points can be made in support of such a strategic approach towards Iran, the JCPOA and the broader Middle Eastern region.

European states should first of all openly reject false claims that Iran is breaching the JCPOA.<sup>9</sup>

Second, EU states should avoid entangling themselves in a discursive framework that depicts Iran as the sole source of chaos and instability in the Middle East, as Israel and the Arab countries promoting this narrative bear considerable responsibility for the ethno-sectarian divisions and interstate rivalries that beset the area, not to mention the legacy of external interventions.

Third, the Europeans should not commit to any sanctions mechanism that may jeopardize the re-launching of EU-Iran political and economic relations. The latter is the only real asset they have to convince the Iranians that staying in the JCPOA is in their interest even if the United States pulls out.

[news/iran-iran-nuclear-accord-is-no-longer-sustainable-regardless-deal-or-not-1.6042352](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/iran-iran-nuclear-accord-is-no-longer-sustainable-regardless-deal-or-not-1.6042352).

<sup>9</sup> Chemi Shalev, "Netanyahu Tries but Fails to Bury Iran Nuclear Deal Before Trump Actually Kills It", in *Haaretz*, 1 May 2018.

Fourth, the Europeans should shelter EU firms and banks from the long arm of the US Treasury with political and legal protection, and devise means to facilitate European investments in Iran – as countries such as Italy and Spain have already done.<sup>10</sup>

Fifth, the Europeans should link efforts to increase pressure on Iran's allies in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to initiatives aimed at reducing violence and facilitating power-sharing agreements in these contexts.

It follows that, sixth, Europe should be ready to engage Iran on regional issues. The recently launched dialogue between the E4/EU (the E3 plus Italy and the HR) over Yemen is a step in that direction, but the Europeans should work on extending the scope to other regional crises.

Ideally, this new format could work to shape EU-wide policies towards the Middle East the way the E3/EU did on the nuclear issue. Greater coherence (for instance, on the issue of weapons sales to Arab Gulf countries)<sup>11</sup> would provide Europe with added political weight to press the Iranians to find solutions that could be deemed acceptable to its rivals and foes.

The Europeans find themselves between a rock and a hard place. Sticking to the JCPOA against US wishes would create a number of additional problems, as they would come under intense pressure from Washington and its anti-Iran allies. The point about defending the JCPOA, however, is that doing so provides Europe with leverage over Iran.

To squander the political capital Europe would reap by emerging as a strong defender of the nuclear deal by joining the anti-Iran coalition is a risky proposition. Instead, Europe should strive to carve out a middle course strategy whose aim would be the stabilization of regional flashpoints rather than a containment of Iran.

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<sup>10</sup> Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance, *Italy and Iran Sign a Master Credit Agreement for Investments in Iran*, 11 January 2018, [http://www.mef.gov.it/en/ufficio-stampa/comunicati/2018/comunicato\\_0008.html](http://www.mef.gov.it/en/ufficio-stampa/comunicati/2018/comunicato_0008.html); "Iran, Spain Sign MoUs in Tehran", in *Tasnim News*, 21 February 2018, <http://tn.ai/1663232>.

<sup>11</sup> Emanuele Scimia, "EU Calls for Stability But Its Arms Inflamm the Middle East", in *Asia Times*, 11 November 2017, <http://ati.ms/EEzjaj>.

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