



# Time for Europe to Raise Its Voice on Iran



by Riccardo Alcaro

- Europe's alignment with US pressure and its reliance on coercive tools over diplomacy indirectly contributed to escalating tensions with Iran.
- The Iran war has exposed Europe's deep economic and security vulnerability to Gulf instability, underscoring the need to regain strategic initiative and actively promote regional stabilisation.
- Europe should coordinate with like-minded regional actors, especially Gulf Arab states, to support an inclusive, long-term diplomatic framework for security and economic interdependence in the region.

Among the many tragedies arising from the war in Iran, the one affecting Europeans – particularly France, Germany and the United Kingdom (the E3) – carries a note of bitter irony, given that they indirectly contributed to the chain of events that led to the conflict. The ongoing US-Iran ceasefire creates a window for the Europeans to reverse the trend and invest again in the long-term stabilisation of the Gulf area.

## Non-proliferation and regional stability

For years, Europe's policy toward Iran rested on a dual objective: preventing nuclear proliferation in the Gulf and avoiding regional conflict. When, during his first term, Donald Trump withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal – which,



from the European perspective, had served the aforementioned interests – Europe found itself in an increasingly untenable position.

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The US maximum pressure campaign, never fully abandoned by Joe Biden and later resumed under Trump's second term, undermined the more pragmatic faction within Iran's leadership, paving the way for the incremental takeover of the government by the hardline wing. The nuclear programme resumed and expanded, while Iran became more assertive in the Gulf and more repressive domestically. The whole promise of the nuclear deal eroded.

### **Transatlantic relations and European security**

For Europeans, defending the diplomatic option gradually became secondary to other priorities. Particularly under the second Trump administration, concerns over misalignment on Iran with Washington weighed heavily, given potential repercussions on more urgent dossiers – from tariffs to NATO cohesion to support for Ukraine. Iran's military support for Russia's war effort in Ukraine and the waves of ever bloodier internal repressions of anti-government protesters made it easier for Europe to progressively align with US and Israeli positions, albeit without embracing their belligerence.

In spring 2025 the E3 requested a report from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on Iran's nuclear programme, which predictably highlighted, among other things, uranium enrichment levels incompatible with civilian use. The aim was to strengthen Washington's hand in ongoing direct negotiations with Tehran.

Yet the effect was the opposite: the IAEA report was cited by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Trump administration amongst the reasons justifying the June 2025 bombing campaign of Iran.

### **New assumptions**

The Twelve-Day War reshaped the assumptions underpinning Europe's Iran policy: the attack had after all moved the prospect of an Iranian atomic bomb further away without causing the much-feared regional conflict. Europeans concluded that Iran had entered a phase of structural weakness, and that diplomatic openings should be conditioned on more stringent demands.

Threatening the reinstatement of UN sanctions via a special tool under the 2015 nuclear deal (so-called snapback mechanism), the E3 demanded that Iran account for all enriched uranium on its territory, reopen its nuclear programme to IAEA inspections and resume negotiations with the United States. In effect, the E3 demanded concessions that Iran, emerging from aggression and threatened with punishment under an agreement first violated by the United States, could realistically meet during, not before, negotiations.

Rather than seeking an understanding with other permanent Security Council members to extend the timeline for sanctions reinstatement and create negotiation space, the E3 opted for pressure. This also spared them the political cost of engaging with a regime increasingly discredited in Europe, which became toxic after the savage suppression of protests in January 2026. The EU's response was to further delegitimise the Islamic Republic by designating the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the paramilitary body controlling Iran's security policy and the main pillar of the regime, as a terrorist organisation.

But this framework of normative condemnation, economic pressure (following the snapback the



EU also reinstated its own large-scale sanctions) and alignment with US and Israeli narratives came under strain when Iran was attacked again during negotiations with Washington in February 2026.

### The fallacy of new assumptions

The Israeli-American aggression triggered the very regional conflict Europe had sought to prevent. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz by Iran and strikes on energy infrastructure destabilised oil, gas and food markets, creating inflationary pressures and raising the risk of economic slowdown, or worse, in several European countries.

The Iranian regime, now dominated by the Revolutionary Guards, proved capable not only of maintaining control of the state but of executing a well-planned asymmetric war strategy, with no signs of imminent collapse. The aggression also increased the likelihood that Iran – no longer restrained by the inflexible but cautious late Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, whom Israel assassinated on the war's first day – would pursue a military nuclear option.

Finally, Europe's refusal to join an illegal war, in which it had not been consulted, reinforced Trump's biases regarding European fecklessness and unreliability. His increasingly vitriolic attacks have poisoned the discourse on the value of the transatlantic relationship and US commitment to NATO within segments of the US foreign policy establishment. It is too early to ascertain how deep the poison has sunk, but part of the damage may well be beyond repair.

Viewed from any angle – strategic, security, energy, economic, or normative – the war against Iran has gravely harmed European interests. At present, options for remedying the situation are limited, but the Pakistani-brokered two-week ceasefire between the United States and Iran announced on the night of 8-9 April has created a new, albeit still very narrow, opening for the Europeans.

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### Hard-nosed realism, diplomacy and inclusion

European countries have so far pushed for a UN-led fertiliser corridor to avoid a food crisis and committed to a post-conflict maritime security arrangement in the Strait of Hormuz. These are commendable initiatives that should be pursued while the US-Iranian talks are ongoing – the former regardless of the outcome of the negotiation. But they are insufficient. The Europeans should seek an understanding with Gulf Arab states, Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan and others – including China – to openly advocate for a longer-term diplomatic process.

One option for the Europeans is to position themselves for a post-conflict strategy aimed at Iran's permanent exclusion. Politically, this would be in line with their growing proximity to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and their reluctance to antagonise Israel or the United States. But it would entail high-cost military postures from all parties involved without necessarily shielding the region from future conflict and Europe from its consequences.

The Europeans had best reconsider their Iran policy in light of the costs that US-Israeli belligerence has inflicted on their own economies as well as the reality of an Islamic Republic which may come out of this war weaker but emboldened and further radicalised. They should regain the strategic foresightedness that in the early 2000s led the E3 to ignore US opposition and reach out to Iran on the nuclear file, starting the process that culminated in the 2015 nuclear deal. They should therefore support laying the diplomatic groundwork for a regional system in which the security and



economic interests of all Gulf countries would eventually become mutually dependent, as Oman and Qatar in particular are arguing.

This is a major project requiring regional ownership as well as a buy-in from Washington and Israel. It appears unrealistic today, but it could gain feasibility as alternative approaches continue to fail or deliver sub-optimal results. In coordination with their partners in the Gulf and beyond, the Europeans should convey the message to the Trump administration that the US-Iran talks should be used to agree on principles for diplomatic engagements with long-term stabilisation as the ultimate aim.

Trump may be persuaded that attaching his name to a historic peace-building process would bring him more credit than continuing a war he has economic and political reasons to end soon or striking a limited, separate truce with Iran without addressing the key issues of Gulf maritime security and regional stability. Israel would be harder to convince, but could relent if the United States were to endorse this broad multilateral endeavour. Given the animosity with Trump, the Europeans should fashion a diplomatic, financial and technical package as support for a regionally-driven diplomatic process, so that their voice reinforces that of countries – especially Gulf Arab states – with which Trump is on better terms.

The components of such a system – to be pursued sequentially or simultaneously across multiple tracks involving direct participation of Gulf Arab states – would include a new nuclear

agreement and a non-aggression pact between the United States and Iran and between Israel and Iran, extended to Lebanon. The Europeans should also contemplate support for the establishment of a temporary, regionally-shared toll system for the Strait of Hormuz, with proceeds funding energy infrastructure repairs, if Iran's insistence on maintaining control of the Strait proves indeed insurmountable in the talks with the United States.

They could also advocate the release of Iranian funds frozen abroad to rebuild medical, industrial, transport and research infrastructure damaged by Israeli and US strikes, and the selective lifting of EU and US sanctions to enable multinational investment in Iran's energy sector, to create a mutual interest in the economic development of the region that could work as a deterrent against future conflicts. The lifting of sanctions on non-military-relevant sectors, a revival of academic and cultural exchanges, and the facilitation of ordinary Iranians' travel abroad, Europe included, would give the exhausted Iranian population some much-needed respite.

By pursuing this path, Europeans would provide sound strategic direction to their policy toward the region in line with their security and economic interests. Even if unsuccessful or only partly successful, they would regain visibility and restore some of the international credibility eroded by their repeated vacillations in foreign policy.

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