

US, Europe Must Convince Each Other To Pursue The Right Goals In Iran

by Walid Phares



French President Emmanuel Macron held talks with his American counterpart last week in Washington. He was followed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel as the Europeans make a last ditch effort to convince President Trump to step back from his possible withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement.

It's not surprising that the world is closely watching this issue as that deadline, May 12, ticks closer. But we should all be deeply concerned if the spectacle of the nuclear issue distracts attention away from broader concerns regarding Iran's conduct in the region and around the globe. This is something that both Macron and Trump have clearly been taking seriously throughout their respective tenures.

In other words, we should all hope that the Western leaders

would address the Iranian activities that threaten the world not just five or ten years from now, but right at this moment.

Among European leaders, Macron has been bringing attention to the need for constraints on Iran's ballistic missile program, which contributes to regional instability. Macron has also been decidedly vocal about the danger that the Iranian regime poses in Syria, where it is the most loyal and longstanding backer of Bashar al-Assad and his collective violence against the Syrian people.

It bears mentioning that Trump's aversion to the nuclear deal and Macron's commitment to countering Iranian influence in Syria are clearly based on the same correct understanding of the Islamic Republic. That is to say, both men seem to recognize that Iran's behavior will not change in any meaningful way until it undergoes a change of government. So while nuclear negotiations might limit the current government's ability to develop the most destructive weapons, the nuclear issue will never be fully resolved as long as that government continues to set policy for the nation.

Meanwhile, the persistence of Iran's regional intransigence serves to safeguard the theocratic regime, complete with its belligerent, nuclear ambitions. By contrast, multilateral efforts to push Iran out of Syria and other regional conflict zones would weaken the regime and force it to face domestic problems, which include a restive population and a protest movement that quite possibly poses a greater challenge to the regime than it has ever faced before.

Iran's domestic uprising is of particular significance to Macron in light of the fact that Iranian President Hassan Rouhani called him on January 2 and urged the French government to crack down on the main Iranian opposition movement, the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (MEK), which has a presence in France and is reported to be a significant player in the proliferation of Iran's anti-

government protests in recent months.

A week after that call, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei delivered a speech in which he explicitly blamed the MEK, for planning and initiating the protests that spanned every major Iranian town and city in December and January, leading to explicit calls for regime change.

Macron naturally rebuffed Rouhani's appeal, and this speaks to the common ground that the French and American presidents are establishing as they work together on charting the future course for Western policy toward Iran.

Multilateral sanctions are the first and most natural option for supporting and promoting those voices, especially as they continue to speak out loud on the streets of cities like Isfahan, Kazerun, and Ahvaz, where protesters recently clashed with security forces even three months after the violent suppression of the January uprising. With their collective tools of economic and diplomatic pressure, the US and Europe share a responsibility to keep international attention focused on the human rights abuses that often meet such protests, and to hold the perpetrators of those abuses to account.

And now more than ever, it is incumbent upon American and European leaders to establish a plan of action. Many experts on the Middle East have suggested that a resurgent uprising by the Iranian people may be just around the corner.

In March, on the occasion of the Iranian New Year celebration Nowruz, the Iranian opposition leader, Maryam Rajavi delivered a speech in which she urged the Iranian activist community to turn the year ahead into "a year full of uprisings." The latest protests show that that progress is already being made toward that goal, which Rajavi predicted to lead to ultimate victory over the widely despised clerical regime.

When that victory comes to pass, and only then, the issue of Tehran's nuclear ambitions will finally be resolved. This is

something the Europeans must keep in mind as they fret over the future of the nuclear agreement. But at the same time, the Trump administration must be encouraged to recognize that complete disengagement from the Middle East in the face of the Iranian regime imperialism would only strengthen the regime and mitigate the threat it faces at this moment.

In this sense, it is clear that the Trump administration and its European counterparts have important lessons to learn from each other.

Dr. Walid Phares is a professor of international relations and served as a foreign policy advisor to Donald Trump in 2016. He is the author of many books including [The Lost Spring: US Policy in the Middle East](#) and [Catastrophes to Avoid](#) @walidphares