



Suddenly, a More Sober European Turn on Iran

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Is Europe finally waking up to the true nature of the Iranian regime?

For decades, European officials have been the most ardent proponents of engagement with the Islamic Republic, believing that trade and diplomacy would help moderate Tehran's rogue behavior. Over the past couple of years, this has taken the form of feverish advocacy in favor of reviving the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and the West—a foreign policy priority that the Biden administration shares. Yet recent days have seen something of an about-face from Brussels, where attitudes toward Iran seem to be hardening amid a growing recognition of Iran's deeply problematic policies at home and abroad.

One reason for the policy shift is the ferment taking place inside Iran. Since they broke out in response to the mid-September death of a young woman at the hands of regime security forces, anti-*hijab* protests have spread throughout the country despite an increasingly heavy-handed state response that has left scores dead and hundreds imprisoned. That dynamism, in turn, has fired the imagination of policymakers in the West about the possibility of fundamental change in Tehran, and European officials are mobilizing sanctions against regime officials responsible for the crackdown as a way of showing solidarity.

More central to Europe's calculus, however, has been Iran's growing involvement in Ukraine. In recent weeks, the Iranian regime has come to the aid of the Kremlin, helping to shore up Russian President Vladimir Putin's flagging war effort. Tehran, for instance, has supplied military materiel like helmets and bulletproof vests to outfit Russian soldiers being sent to the front lines. More significantly, it has sent multiple shipments of Iranian-made drones to the Russian military, and deployed military trainers to Crimea to assist Russian servicemen in operating them properly.

Moscow is putting Iran's assistance to nefarious use, including through the intentional targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine—meaning the Islamic Republic is complicit in Russian war crimes. "Tehran is now directly engaged on the ground, and through the provision of weapons that are impacting civilians and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine," National Security Council spokesman John Kirby has confirmed.

In the process, the Iranian regime has waded into the most consequential European conflict in more than half a century, and officials there have taken notice. In the wake of the Islamic Republic's meddling, officials like EU foreign policy czar Josep Borrell increasingly recognize that they have been played for fools. Opinion in Europe is beginning to sour on the idea of re-engagement with Iran. The resulting message is clear: the Islamic Republic, which has long operated without fear of meaningful consequences from Europe, might have at long last crossed the Rubicon.

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Rhetorically, at least, the Biden administration seems to be on the same page. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has stated publicly that, in light of Iran's domestic turmoil and its role in aiding Russia's war, there are no "near-term prospects" for a new nuclear deal with Tehran. And the administration's Iran envoy, Rob Malley, has maintained that the White House is preparing a "slew of new sanctions" in response to Iran's repression of domestic dissent. Privately, however, Washington insiders say the White House's offers of engagement with Iran, entailing potentially massive sanctions relief in exchange for some sort of nuclear compromise, are still very much on the table.

In other words, the once-idealistic Europeans appear to be gravitating toward a view of Iran that's more pragmatic and sober than the one that prevails in Washington. That's because, increasingly, officials across the Atlantic are recognizing what their American counterparts still haven't: that the Islamic Republic has definitively chosen sides in today's most consequential global conflict, and thrown its weight squarely behind Russia's war against the West.

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