

After Trump's Iran Decision: Is the West Going to Split?

In the Conflict Over the Nuclear Deal, Germany and the EU Take Iran's Side against Washington

By Matthias Kuentzel

On May 8, 2018, when US President Donald Trump spoke to the press to make the case for the US decision to leave the nuclear deal with Iran, he stated: "America will not be held hostage to nuclear blackmail."¹

With this sentence, Trump initiated a new phase to diplomacy with Iran. Up to this point, nuclear blackmail, the threat that Iran would otherwise build a bomb, had defined and shaped the dynamic of negotiations. This *worst case* hung like a sword of Damocles over the actors. In order to avert it and in order to secure the nuclear deal, Obama refused to support the Iranian protest movement in 2009, just as in 2013 he refused to make good on the red line he had drawn in the Syrian war.

Also in the formulation of the nuclear deal, the international negotiators were held hostage, and they abandoned one position after another. The deal not only permits nuclear enrichment and its further development. It also prevents IAEA inspectors from examining military sites, allows the regime to continue its missile programs and will expire a few years after it was signed.² Iran's Foreign Minister Zarif played the game of fear with great virtuosity. At the beginning of the negotiations, he threatened that "you only have one way to insure that the Iranian nuclear program remains peaceful. You must allow the nuclear program to be able to develop in a peaceful international context."³

Donald Trump, with confidence in American strength, stopped paying attention to those kinds of threats. He announced that he wanted to reach a genuine, comprehensive and permanent answer to Iran's nuclear development, together with American allies, an answer that would simultaneously bring an end to Iran's missile development and to its conduct of wars in the region. Effective sanctions should compel the Iranian leadership to sign a new agreement. Effective sanctions, however, require the cooperation of Iran's most important trade partner, the European Union.

Europe vs. the USA

However, the diplomats of the EU, as well as the E-3—Great Britain, France and Germany—do not want to discuss new sanctions. Instead they are dominated by the fear that Tehran could leave the nuclear deal. Ali Khamenei, the leader of the Iranian revolutionary regime, stoked this fear. He trusted the E3 as little as he did the United States. Without strong guarantees from the three EU countries, there would be no reason for Iran to stick with the deal.⁴ Iran's President Hassan Rouhani has taken over from

Khamenei, hoping to lure the EU together, along with Russia and the People's Republic of China, into positioning themselves against the USA. If the Europeans would make sure that the deal would continue to benefit Iran, Rouhani said that the deal could continue.

Where Donald Trump threatened the Europeans with leaving the Iran deal in order to carry out a harder policy toward Iran, now Tehran is threatening the EU in order to force it to treat Iran well.

And in fact, Rouhani's vague declaration has led the EU powers to attempt to thwart the new US view of sanctions. The goal of the government of the Federal Republic of Germany is "that the current European sanctions relief should of course remain in force."⁵ German Chancellor Angela Merkel was not below conveying this message personally to the Iranian President over the phone.⁶

The biggest irritation for the Europeans concerns the so-called secondary sanctions, which allow the US Treasury Department to put European companies active in business in Iran on a list with which American companies, banks and persons are prohibited from doing business.

In 2017, German exports to Iran comprised only about 0.2 per cent of total German exports. In the past year, Iran was 33rd among recipients of Europeans exports, behind countries such as Kazakhstan and Serbia.⁷

This means first of all that the fuss that German-language media have made about the supposed damage to the German economy due to renewed sanctions is vastly exaggerated. Second, it means that European exporters will sooner stop their exports to Iran than give up on their exports to the United States. Ralf Thomas, the finance chair of the Siemens corporation said "it must be recognized that one of the most important industrial nations on the planet [the United States] has taken a political decision."⁸

This sort of calm assessment is not heard much from politicians. The speaker of the European Commission stated that "we are working on plans to protect the interests of European firms," that is, only those firms that are engaged in Iran. Here there is talk of establishing exceptional rules, offering government payments to offset sanctions or even considering the introduction of counter-sanctions against American firms.

But no one in Germany is asking why it is legitimate to do business with a regime that terrorizes the region and its own people and that wants to exterminate Israel. No one asks how the German Chancellor can square her special engagement for business with Iran with "Germany's special historical responsibility for the security of Israel," as Angela Merkel put it in the Knesset in Jerusalem on March 18, 2008. The scandal does not consist in the fact that the new American Ambassador strongly urges German employers to end their business connections with Iran. The scandal lies instead in the fact that this demand does not come from the German government itself.

In the German context, this current partisanship for the Iranian regime and against the United States has a long tradition. As early as 1995, when US President Bill Clinton prohibited American firms from trading with Iran, it was Germany that systematically counteracted the American efforts at sanctions. Hossain Mousavian, then the Iranian Ambassador in Germany, reported that the Iranian

government in Tehran was very pleased with those German efforts. He wrote that Iran's decision makers "were aware in the 1990s of Germany's significant role in breaking the economic chains, with which the USA had wrapped Iran."⁹

In September 2004, German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer was astonishingly open about the point of his Iran intervention. "We Europeans have always urged our Iranian partners to see us as a protective shield in our own well understood self-interest." The former Foreign Minister, in a speech widely circulated by the German government, described Germany as a protective shield for Iran and against the United States.¹⁰

Fischer's comment indicates that differences in dealing with Iran belong to the norm of trans-Atlantic relations. The presidency of Barack Obama was an exception. Today, however, the trans-Atlantic conflict differs from those in the past in two essential points. First, it takes place in a period in which the EU is trying to establish itself as a new center of power with a calculated distance to the United States. That is why, in the context of a new euro-nationalism, Europeans cling so vehemently to the atomic deal. In Germany and in France, the agreement is interpreted as a kind of prototype of European overcoming of conflicts in the course of which the Europeans would now have to "teach the USA a lesson" and "pick a fight with the Americans" as a position paper of the German Council on Foreign Relations puts it.¹¹ Bruno Le Maire, France's Economic and Finance Minister adopts a more aggressive tone when he asks: "Do we want to be vassals of the United States who obey unconditionally."¹² The anger about Trump's decision erupts in anti-American expressions. "The spirit of these days appears to be that of yelling and screaming," according to EU Foreign Minister Federica Mogherini. The editor for Foreign Affairs of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* sees the American President as a "subversive on an extermination mission."¹³

Is the West actually about to break apart as several commentators have suggested? Is there a danger that it could split into a pro-Iranian and a pro-Israel wing?

I don't think so. Trump has seen through the illusions of the Europeans and has drawn conclusions from the obvious, namely that the nuclear deal did not lead to more peace but instead to more war in the region. In that sense as well, the trans-Atlantic argument differs from the debates of the past. Since 2004, the terror of the Iranian regime against its own people as well as its expansive conduct of war in the region and against Israel has considerably intensified. This has been the case especially since the signing of the nuclear agreement which poured millions into Iran's war chest.

There is by now a broad agreement in Germany on the point that Nikolaus Busse made in an editorial in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* "Iran used the room for maneuver created by the end of sanctions not to moderate its revolutionary claim but to enhance its power position in the region."¹⁴ The regime has plunged the region into war adventures, provoked the mass flight from Syria and Iraq without having to abandon the development of its uranium and rocket experiments. As a result, the E-3 powers in the "common declaration" of May 8 committed themselves to the following balancing act. On the one hand they demanded that "the existing sanctions relief for Iran" be continued but on the other

hand that “the question of the ballistic missile programs and also the destabilizing regional activities, especially in Syria, Iraq and in Yemen must be solved.”¹⁵

The position of the German Foreign Minister, Heiko Mass is no less Janus-faced. He said that he wants “to continue to integrate Iran” but at the same time “the pressure on Iran should be increased.”¹⁶ Only one of these two options is possible. Today, anyone who believes that sanctions relief for Iran will lead to change in its behavior is ridiculous.

Anyone who wants to prevent the Iranian regime from continuing its destructive course must intensify pressure on it until it stands before the alternative of “changing policy” or “collapse.” That will be possible only with massive sanctions. But rather than face and acknowledge this simple truth, the major European powers have once again let themselves be driven by the fear that Tehran could abandon the deal. Does not the collapse of the nuclear deal and the possibility of an almost unhindered Iranian nuclear armament, and with it the danger of war constitute grounds for fear?

Fear of War

Naturally, the thought of an Iranian atomic bomb is horrible. It is because of this fear of nuclear weapons in the hands of religious fanatics that the tactic of blackmail with the motto “nuclear deal or war” has functioned so well for so long. However, at least for the time being, Tehran is not interested in an escalation of the situation. As a result of its expensive wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and in Lebanon, the country is extremely weak, and the domestic mood is tense. The discontent of the population grows from day to day as a result of the economic crisis. On May 6, *The Wall Street Journal* reported on hundreds of recent labor conflicts. In countless internet messages, people in Iran are said to have celebrated Trump’s exit from the nuclear deal.¹⁷ Iran’s leaders know that a massive reaction to Trump’s decision, whether it is a matter of enrichment of uranium or an exit from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty would end the relative isolation of the United States and unite the world community against Iran.

At the same time, Trump’s change of policy is not without risks. Given the nature of the Iranian regime, irrational responses and war scenarios cannot be ruled out. If it should come to that, Guido Steinberg, an adviser to the German government writes in a remarkable essay that “Germany and Europe will have to take a position. They should conclude that it is more important to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons than to prevent a war.”¹⁸ The risk of war cannot be swept off the table, but it is calculable, more calculable in any case than Iran’s gradual acquisition of nuclear weapons under the cover of the nuclear deal which does not prohibit atomic research, prevents controls and inspections of military sites and makes possible the further development of missiles capable of carrying nuclear weapons.

Since the Iranian regime is able to enrich uranium, it can threaten with the atom bomb. The sooner the European states are freed from the pressure of this blackmail, the better. Appeasement is based on a combination of wishful thinking and fear. The appeasement policy of the European Union has collapsed. The sooner the political leaders in Germany and Europe understand that this is the case, the better things will be for peace in the world.

The debate about Iran is not about sensitivities. It is about doing the right thing. Whatever criticism should be made about Donald Trump, his decision to leave the nuclear deal was a first and important step to ending nuclear blackmail and threats, and to changing the dynamic of dealing with Tehran.

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¹ The text of the Trump speech is available at:
<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/05/full-transcript-iran-deal-trump/559892/>.

² Regarding the fundamental weaknesses of the deal, see my:
<http://www.matthiaskuentzel.de/contents/donald-trump-und-der-atomdeal-mit-iran>.

³ FM Javad Zarif interview with Press TV: "All Options are Not on the Table; Iran cannot be deprived of its Nuclear Rights," in: Iran Daily Brief, September 12, 2013.

⁴ Cf. Rainer Hermann, "Wer kann noch wem vertrauen?," in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 11. Mai 2018.

⁵ Government Press Conference, 9. Mai 2018.

⁶ Reuters, "Germany wants to keep Iran nuclear deal, Merkel urges de-escalation," 10. Mai 2018.

⁷ Jack Ewing and Stanley Reed, "European Companies Rushed to Invest in Iran. What Now?," New York Times, May 9, 2018; "Amerika setzt Frist für Iran-Geschäfte," in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 11. Mai 2018, p. 17.

⁸ "Amerika setzt Frist für Iran-Geschäfte," Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 11. Mai 2018, p. 17.

⁹ Seyyed Hossein Mousavian, *Iran-Europe Relations*, Milton Park 2008, p. 133.

¹⁰ Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung. Rede des Bundesministers des Auswärtigen, Joschka Fischer, zur Eröffnung der Botschafterkonferenz am 6. September 2004 in Berlin.

¹¹ Henning Riecke, "Iran-Abkommen ohne die USA. Europa betreibt Schadensbegrenzung," DGAP Think Tank, 9. Mai 2018.

¹² "Iran-Sanktionen machen die Deutschen ratlos," Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 12. Mai 2018, p. 19.

¹³ Klaus-Dieter Frankenberger, "Zeitenwende," Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 11. Mai 2018.

¹⁴ Nikolaus Busse, "Irans Ambitionen," Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 11. Mai 2018.

¹⁵ Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, Gemeinsame Erklärung Deutschlands, Frankreichs und Großbritanniens zum Rückzug der Vereinigten Staaten aus dem Nuklearabkommen mit Iran, 8. Mai 2018.

¹⁶ Heiko Maas in an Interview with ARD program „Tagesthemen“, 8. Mai 2018.

¹⁷ Menashe Amir, "Iran is full of Trump supporters," Israel Hayom-Newsletter, 10. Mai 2018, at: <http://www.israelhayom.com/opinions/surprise-iran-is-full-of-trump-supporters/>.

¹⁸ Guido Steinberg, "Umgang mit dem Iran," in: Internationale Politik, 73. Jahrgang, Nr. 3, Mai /Juni 2018, p. 65. Steinberg participates in the otherwise rather pro-Iranian „Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik“.