

# Is There a Coherent EU Policy Towards the Iranian Crisis?

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Brief Analysis

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After several days of demonstrations, protests, and civilian deaths as a result of clashes with security forces, the EU, through a spokeswoman for EU Foreign Policy chief Federica Mogherini, cautiously put out statements urging “restraint” and saying it was “monitoring the situation” after having “been in touch with Iranian authorities” and that they “expect that the right to peaceful demonstration and freedom of expression will be guaranteed.”

These statements were echoed by British foreign secretary Boris Johnson and German foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel, voicing hope that demonstrators have the right to protest peacefully and that the Iranian government should respect those rights.

These utterings from the heavyweights in EU foreign policy circles can be seen as accurately reflecting the dilemma EU members are in due to the current disturbances in Iran. Having invested a considerable amount of diplomatic capital in the JCPOA two years ago, and since then selling goods to Iran worth 10 billion USD in 2016 alone, as well as trying to get over the shock of having Donald Trump as the President upsetting policy conventions across the globe, the last thing the EU needs now is another potential disruption in their backyard in the Middle East.

This approach to the protests in Iran can be compared to other crises where the EU has taken a stand of some kind. There is no common policy or approach concerning such events, other than reiterating basic EU policies towards, for example, human rights. Other than that, every case is considered on its own merits, or ought to be. Comparatively, the cautious approach to the events in Iran is a result of the major economic and political investments after the nuclear agreement. In essence, the EU is trying to have their cake and eat it too, an approach that is seldom successful.

Moreover, with statements from the UK, Germany, and the External Action Service being overtly careful not to irritate the regime in Tehran—for example, asking “all concerned parties to refrain from violence” as if weapons were evenly distributed all around—the largest democratic bloc of states on the planet came very close to toeing the lines drawn up in Moscow, Damascus, and Ankara, where the gist of the messages were that these are either “domestic matters” (Moscow) or the results of “American and Zionist intervention” ( Hamas and Turkey).

The economic windfall expected after the JCPOA hasn't materialized and even if there really was a belief in Brussels that the deal would actually change Iranian regional politics, that belief should by now have been discarded. President Rouhani might be considered a "moderate" by some, but only perhaps in comparison with his predecessor Ahmadinejad and since the IRGC—with the backing of Khamenei and the hardliners in the regime—are so well-entrenched in the economy, that his room to maneuver is very limited indeed. The track record of authoritarian regimes to reform by themselves is rather depressing and so far there are no real signs that Rouhani's much touted ideas for economic reforms will ever see the light of day.

Still, with so much invested in the nuclear deal and with so much at stake, it is increasingly difficult for the EU—and Mogherini especially has showed a particular eagerness to push ahead with warmer ties with Tehran—to walk at least some of that back and pressure Iran to refrain from using violence.

The sad irony is of course that that is exactly what the EU could do, if it wanted. Without external pressure and sanctions, Iran would never have entered the nuclear talks in the first place and it is being very dependent on Europe for trade and investments. But for now, the economy will trump (no pun intended!) any trampling of human rights in Iran as the regime is going to come down harder on the demonstrators, as is expected. The fact that access to what's going on is limited, despite the fact that a lot more Iranians have smartphones today than in 2009, will help the EU to maintain a certain distance until the latest crisis is over.

The only other alternative for the Union is to go along with a more aggressive U.S. stance. But considering the already tense relations between Washington and Brussels, that is, at least for now, not very likely to happen. And even if something like that were to happen, the kind of pressure to be applied could realistically only be in the form of new sanctions, leaving the problem of what kind of sanctions to impose. The chances of the EU touching the JCPOA and finding tools to hurt the regime, especially the IRGC and its economic assets, without hurting the Iranian population, is not going to be easy.

The Union consists of twenty-eight countries—soon maybe only twenty-seven— and has never really had a coherent and synchronized position on big and important foreign policy issues, other than maybe positions decided by a lowest common denominator. There is nothing strange or necessarily wrong with that though; on the contrary, it reflects the obvious fact that even though the Union does indeed have common ideas on democracy, the rule of law and social matters concerning free speech, health-care and such, there have always been divergent opinions on foreign policy matters. Not the least in the Middle East, where this has been common knowledge and, consequently—and depending on the country and region—specific EU-countries (such as France or the UK) have been calling the shots, with the others either going along or going away.

The pussyfooting on Iran so far does only reflect that reality and perhaps it would serve the Union better to acknowledge that reality and act accordingly, instead of trying to pose as a serious foreign policy actor and "honest broker," now that that job is up for grabs, and in the process only alienating friends for doing too little, and failing in appeasing foes by still "interfering" in domestic issues.

The EU will not be able to credibly support the demonstrators in Iran and simultaneously keep relations unchanged with the regime. The idea that the JCPOA would open up Iran economically and ease the repressive regime was flawed from the start. It is to be hoped that the recent protests can help a more sober and realistic view to take hold in Brussels. ❖



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