

Europe and the JCPOA

by [Olivier Decottignies \(/experts/olivier-decottignies\)](/experts/olivier-decottignies)

Jul 13, 2016

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/awrwba-wkhtt-almI-almshtrkt-alshamlt\)](/ar/policy-analysis/awrwba-wkhtt-almI-almshtrkt-alshamlt)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Olivier Decottignies \(/experts/olivier-decottignies\)](/experts/olivier-decottignies)

Olivier Decottignies, a French career diplomat, was a 2015-2016 diplomat in residence at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

In keeping with their limited view of the agreement's scope, and in light of their other pressing policy concerns, European officials are focused on enforcing the JCPOA's nuclear restrictions and ensuring that the West holds up its end of the deal.

July 14 will mark one year since the announcement of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear agreement with Iran. This article is part of [a series of PolicyWatches](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/twi-series-on-the-jcpoa-at-one-year) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/twi-series-on-the-jcpoa-at-one-year>) assessing how the deal has affected various U.S. interests.

For all the skin that Europe has put in the nuclear game with Tehran, the first anniversary of the JCPOA is unlikely to get much attention there. Shaken by Brexit and concerns over a possible banking crisis in Italy -- potentially a much more serious blow to their single currency than the Greek sovereign debt crisis -- Europeans are focused on internal issues, including the future of the EU bloc itself. As for external threats, the main European debate revolves around Moscow's renewed assertiveness, not Tehran's nuclear program (e.g., in the final communique of the recent NATO Summit in Warsaw, Russia is mentioned fifty-nine times, Iran only three). And when it comes to the Middle East, the chief European concern remains the Islamic State and the shock waves -- namely terrorism and refugees -- that the Syrian crisis is sending to the continent, which are [shaking the foundations](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-european-crisis) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-european-crisis>) of the EU as a political project.

That said, the nuclear negotiations have been a major, defining endeavor of European diplomacy. Talks with Iran were initiated as far back as 2002 by the so-called E3: Britain, France, and Germany (later, the group was enlarged to include the United States, Russia, and China, forming the P5+1). And in summer 2012, after seven years of stalemate, an unprecedented row of European financial and oil sanctions helped bring Iran back to the negotiating

table.

Institutionally, the talks gave breadth and visibility to the EU's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, a position inaugurated in 2009 and successively filled by Catherine Ashton and Federica Mogherini. In addition, the P5+1 format fostered the advent of a more prominent German diplomatic role in Europe and beyond, on par with Berlin's economic clout. Ironically, the nuclear negotiations with Iran might also be remembered as one of Britain's last contributions to the EU's common foreign policy.

But unlike in the United States and Iran, where the negotiations became increasingly politicized as they moved toward conclusion, the European approach remained largely consensual and nonpartisan. France, for instance, pursued the same policy under three successive presidents of different political stripes and diplomatic styles: Jacques Chirac, Nicolas Sarkozy, and Francois Hollande. The respective parliaments of Britain, France, and Germany were kept informed of the progress of the talks, as were their EU partners in Brussels. But unlike in Washington and Tehran, there was no legislative review of the deal post facto (and certainly no white smoke emanating from a supreme authority, as in Iran). The negotiators had full authority to conclude an agreement, and when the JCPOA was signed last July, it was a done deal for Europe.

Continental expectations about the agreement's consequences have remained limited as well. Significantly, most Europeans refer to the JCPOA as the "nuclear agreement" with Iran, not the panacea-sounding "Iran deal," reflecting their persistent concerns about the Islamic Republic's domestic and regional policies (most notably in Syria). Among other actions, the EU kept its human-rights sanctions in place under the JCPOA. The desired outcome was a transactional understanding in which Tehran restrained its nuclear program in exchange for economic relief. The idea that the deal should or could transform the Islamic Republic had little traction with European negotiators. In their view, this was something Russia and China would certainly oppose -- not to mention the Iranians themselves, who engaged in the talks primarily to salvage their economy, but ultimately to safeguard the regime.

Those limited expectations help explain why France, for instance, was particularly vigilant on the agreement's nuclear parameters, since they would be the only tangible deliverables. Europe's view is that the deal has to be judged on its own nuclear merits, and so far, the JCPOA has lived up to those expectations.

One year after the agreement was inked, and six months after Implementation Day, Europe's purpose is to enforce the deal, not reopen it. European authorities remain vigilant toward potential Iranian proliferation activities, as illustrated by the German intelligence community's **recent warning (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-half-life-of-the-jcpoa>)** about the regime's procurement efforts. In addition, the two European members of the UN Security Council, Britain and France, still have the power to invoke the "snapback" mechanism provided in the JCPOA and reimpose sanctions should Tehran violate the deal.

At the same time, the West must honor its own commitments to Iran. Europeans are concerned that legal, judicial, or regulatory initiatives in the United States could deter international banks and other economic actors from engaging in legitimate transactions with Iran consistent with the JCPOA. In Europe's view, clear and fair rules are needed so that Iran can get the agreed quid pro quo for allowing restrictions and unprecedented monitoring of its nuclear program -- and so that European companies, who bore the blunt of the sacrifices under the sanctions, can pursue business interests in Iran as long as they follow the JCPOA's rules.

Olivier Decottignies is a French diplomat-in-residence at The Washington Institute. ❖



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis\)](#)

TOPICS

[Energy & Economics \(/policy-analysis/energy-economics\)](#)

[Proliferation \(/policy-analysis/proliferation\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-
analysis/iran)