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By Seyed Hossein Mousavian

Rouhani's Trip to Paris and the Middle East Post-Iran Sanctions

Tehran, Jan 27, IRNA – Iran's President Hassan Rouhani is to visit Paris tomorrow. His trip will mark the start of a new era of political and economic ties between the two countries. The implications of such a deeper relationship forming between Iran and France will be felt across the Middle East and Europe. During his trip, Rouhani will undoubtedly make significant strides in enhancing economic cooperation between the two countries. However, the question is: will these direct talks between the presidents of Iran and France usher in a strong and enduring relationship between the two countries?

Paris and Tehran's relationship since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution has had its fair share of ups and downs. Before the victory of Iran's revolution, France was viewed admirably by many Iranians for hosting the founder of the Islamic Republic, the late Imam Khomeini, during his exile. This special place France held in the hearts of the Iranian masses for accommodating the father of their revolution put France in the unique position of being able to develop strategic relations with Iran; enabling it to help mend tensions between Iran and the West at this critical juncture.



Unfortunately, French decision makers at the time squandered this opportunity. With the fall of the dictatorship of the Shah, the Iranian people voted to establish an Islamic Republic by an overwhelming margin via a referendum. Some months later, Saddam Hussein's Iraq launched a sudden invasion of Iran, initiating an eight-year war that would claim the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iranians and cost the country hundreds of billions of dollars. Even worse, Saddam used chemical weapons during the war, killing and injuring over 50,000 Iranians. Sadly, throughout this tragic conflict, France gave unconditional support to Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, turning Iranians' appreciation for France into animosity.

The nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 world powers, which concluded in mid-2015 with a comprehensive agreement, also saw France at loggerheads with Iran. After the deal was reached, I asked my friends and former colleagues on the Iranian negotiating team which country they viewed as playing the most negative role during the negotiations. Their response was unanimous: France.

At critical points throughout the negotiations, France had taken hardline positions more extreme than even the United States. However right after the nuclear deal, Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius travelled to Tehran; with the seeming aim of positioning France at the forefront of countries seeking to clinch business agreements with Iran.

Consequently, the perception among many in Iran became that France is untrustworthy and opportunistic. Therefore, it is important that during Rouhani's trip substantial agreements are reached that could bring about a change in the mentality of Iranians and enable them to view France as a partner that is dependable, firm and trustworthy.

Developments in the Middle East have necessitated that such a relationship develops. Wahhabi Salafist groups—whose attacks on the West began with 9/11 and have since reached many European capitals including Paris with the bloody terrorist attack in November—have established a foothold in the region. Fortunately, it is now widely known by Westerners that the source of funding, arms, and even ideology for terrorist groups like ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Nusra are from Western allies, in particular Saudi Arabia.

U.S. Vice President Joe Biden has publically stated that the "largest problem in Syria" was the massive amounts of money and arms U.S. regional allies sent to "anyone who would fight against Assad." During her tenure as U.S. secretary of state, Hillary Clinton also stated that "it has been an ongoing challenge to persuade Saudi officials to treat terrorist financing emanating from Saudi Arabia as a strategic priority." This past September, she even went a step further, declaring: "Much of the extremism in the world today is

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the direct result of policies and funding undertaken by the Saudi government and individuals. We would be foolish not to recognize that."

Today, the global consensus is that Wahhabi Salafist terrorism in the form of ISIS and al Qaeda is the biggest threat to global peace and security. The world is also witness to Iran being at the frontline of the war against these groups. Iran has demonstrated that it can be a trustworthy and useful ally for France and Europe in the fight against these groups.

Furthermore, after the nuclear deal was reached, Iran was invited for the first time in October 2015 to participate in the Syria peace talks. Shortly thereafter, in November, the first agreement was reached for how to resolve the crisis. Indeed, increased cooperation between Iran and Europe can result in decisive steps being taken towards peace in Syria and in other regional conflicts like Yemen in 2016.

The recent increased tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, coupled with the crises in Iraq and Yemen, have also sounded the alarm for the security of the Persian Gulf. A durable solution to solving the threat posed to the stability of this waterway through which much of the world's supply of hydrocarbons passes through is to develop a regional cooperation system. This would include all of the countries that border the Persian Gulf; including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain. European countries, which have the experience of forming the EU, can provide invaluable assistance in creating such a system in the Persian Gulf.

Regional stability can also be enhanced by applying the measures of the Iran nuclear deal to all of the countries in the region. The nuclear deal was the most comprehensive agreement on nuclear non-proliferation ever agreed to and sets unprecedented limits on developing a nuclear bomb. Its standard can serve as a template for the rest of the region and help bring about a Middle East free of nuclear weapons.

These issues and other ones like combatting the illicit drug trade and organized crime are common interests between Iran and Europe. I have known and been colleagues with President Rouhani and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif for over a quarter century. I know they have long term and strategic perspectives and are committed to pursue steps that benefit global peace and stability. With Rouhani visiting France, it falls on Paris to decide whether it will just seek to sign a few trade agreements with Iran or seize this historic opportunity to foster a durable and strategic relationship with Iran. One that will see the two sides cooperate on the aforementioned issues and usher in lasting peace and stability in West Asia. (Le Monde, Jan 27)

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