

Iran-Europe Ties: Past, Present, and Future

[Europe](#)[Int'l Relations](#)[Interviews](#)[Selected](#)[February 5, 2016](#)

Seyyed Hossein Mousavian, a former official at Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and an ex-member of Iran's nuclear negotiating team, has spoken about the efforts made by different Iranian administrations within the past decades to enhance the country's ties with Europe, and the requirements for having sustainable ties with the European Union.

During President Hashemi Rafsanjani's term, Iran and Europe held a series of talks referred to as Critical Dialogues. These talks were resumed during President Mohammad Khatami's term under the name of Constructive and Comprehensive Dialogues. The Critical Dialogues were left unfinished after the Mykonos restaurant assassinations, when European ambassadors left Tehran. The Comprehensive Dialogues also remained unfinished, and were curtailed when the country's nuclear issue escalated. Now that the nuclear deal (JCPOA) between Iran and world

powers has been implemented, we are hearing news of “High-Level Talks” between Iran and the European Union (EU) at the level of deputy ministers, which are scheduled to commence in the coming days.

A *Fararu* reporter held an interview with Dr. Mousavian, who spent more than a decade of his diplomatic life on improving Iran’s ties with Europe, and now has a considerable presence in European conferences and meetings. In this interview, Mousavian was asked about his viewpoint on the current state and future perspective of Iran-EU ties.

Here is the full text of the interview, which has been translated by Iran Front Page (IFP).

Mr. Mousavian, let’s get straight to the questions without any introduction. Since there are fundamental differences between the viewpoints of Iran and Europe on such issues as human rights and terrorism, and as Europe is part of the Western world and a strategic ally of the United States, on what basis one can be hopeful about the future of serious relations [between Iran and Europe]?



Obviously, we have basic differences of opinion with Europe. However, we should not deceive ourselves; there is no country in the world with which we are in total agreement and accord.

The government of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is one of the few Iran considers as a strategic ally. However, the Islamic Republic of Iran has a conflict even with Assad’s government in terms of its most fundamental principle, which is “religious government”. The Syrian government has taken a secular form, both under former President Hafez Assad and now his son Bashar Assad, while the basis of the Islamic Republic is a religious ruling system. Under Bashar’s government, Islamic hijab is not compulsory, dancing and use of alcoholic drinks are permitted, and so on. This shows that we should admit that we have to move forward in our foreign relations, based on national interests. Regarding ties with Europe, if we consider them as being based on national interest, we would like to be able to achieve “balanced and sustainable ties” at most, but not “strategic ties.”

Those “balanced relations” that you mentioned – are they the implication of President Hassan Rouhani’s recent visits to Italy and France?

No, President Rouhani’s trip was an excellent start for breaking the ice in the previously frozen Iran-Europe relations. The move is a great starting point.

In fact, because of deep ideological differences, Iran and Europe have conflicting opinions on such issues as human rights, terrorism, Israel, and the like. These differences will remain until the reappearance of Imam Mahdi, unless the nature of the Islamic Republic ruling system changes or Europeans convert to Shiite Islam, neither of which is going to happen. There won’t be any

change in the nature of Islamic Republic, and the Europeans wouldn't convert to Twelver Shiism. Even if Europeans convert, I fear they would act like our neighboring Shiite country, Azerbaijan, which has always been a US ally.

Even if Europeans become Muslims, we would not have strategic ties, because the history of our foreign relations after the 1979 Revolution has shown that our problems with certain Muslim states like Saudi Arabia have not been improved, and may even have got worse than those we have with Westerners. Within the decade before the nuclear deal, the Saudis became an ally of the Israelis, and put unprecedented pressure on the US to launch military attacks on Iran. However, the Europeans kept advising Washington against waging war on Iran.

Mr. Mousavian, as we've talked about, there are basic differences between the viewpoints of Iran and Europe on such issues as human rights and terrorism. How is it possible to achieve the "balanced and sustainable relations" that you mentioned, so that the new dialogues will bear fruit, unlike previous ones? Deputy Foreign Minister Majid Takht Ravanchi is going to start the negotiations soon. What is your suggestion?

We have had unstable relations with Europe since the Revolution. During the eight years of war Iraq imposed on Iran, many Europeans leaned towards Saddam Hussein. After the war, we started the critical dialogues with Europe to rebuild relations. I was the one who agreed upon their basis with Europe during a trip to Dublin in 1990, which was then the president of the Council of the European Union. At that time, I was the director-general of relations with Western Europe, and met the European troika (incumbent, preceding, and successor presidencies) for the first time. Later, we raised the level of negotiations to deputy ministers, after which Mr. Vaezi held responsibility for the talks for some years. In the last years of President Hashemi Rafsanjani's term, the talks were ended due to a Berlin court's verdict on the assassination of Kurdish leaders in a Mykonos restaurant.

After a while, the talks were resumed under the reformist administration, and there was the potential for a change from "critical dialogues" to "constructive dialogues." However, the exacerbation of US hostility toward Iran prevented that from happening, because George W. Bush held extreme anti-Iran stances. Later, under the administration of Mr. Ahmadinejad, our ties with Europe were totally destroyed.

However, the situation is different now under President Rouhani's government. It is now possible to establish some kind of strategic dialogue in a bid to achieve "balanced and sustainable ties" with Europe.

This goal, however, requires six basic conditions:

1. A national political will and consensus is needed within the country on the type of relations we want to have with Europe. The SNSC should determine and approve the minimum, maximum, content, and other aspects of these relations. If these are deemed suitable by the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, the foreign ministry should start the negotiations with a specific plan and goal,

so that once a deal is reached, we would not get engaged in domestic controversy and conflict, or, God forbid, we would not challenge the deal.

2. We should accept the fact that the anti-Iran domestic consensus in the United States is broken. No party in the US believes in “regime change” in Iran any longer. They believe in mutual interaction with Iran. However, there are still people inside the country who wish to play good-cop, bad-cop in the US.

3. For the new strategic talks with Europe to succeed, the Islamic Republic of Iran should be able to control the trend of decreasing tension with the US, and also to maintain the current gap between the US government and its elites on the issue of Iran, so as to prevent another anti-Iranian domestic consensus within the US. In the best-case scenario, Iran could turn the oppositional sides within the US into minimal and neutral forces. However, I don't see such a chance given the current circumstances in Iran.

Maintaining the existing gap requires consultation and dialogue with a US party that believes in working with Iran. The clear example is what President Rouhani did recently, under the Leader's supervision, in the cases of the nuclear deal (JCPOA), prisoner swaps, the release of the US sailors, and in claiming the \$1.7 billion the US has owed to Iran for 37 years. Europeans should also follow that lead. During the nuclear negotiations, Europeans established active lobbies in the US.

If this trend goes on, not only will the hostility between the US and Iran decrease, but also the gap in the US would persist, and can be further widened; especially given the fact that all current US presidential candidates have vowed to take much stricter policies than those of Barack Obama.

Maintaining the gap which already exists in the US would allow Europe to develop its cooperation with the Islamic Republic.

4. Iran and Europe should engage in multipurpose dialogue which includes both areas of conflict like human rights, and common interests like Daesh (ISIS), WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction), a Free Middle East, and the fight against illicit drug trafficking. The two sides should both negotiate and instigate operational co-operation at the same time. Such a development would lead to an “Iran-Europe Political-Security Partnership” on issues related to regional and international peace, stability, and security.

The weak point in Europe's past ties with Iran was that Europeans, under US pressure, would only negotiate on areas of conflict, and wouldn't co-operate with Iran on areas of mutual interest.

During my mission in Germany, thanks to the support provided by Deputy Foreign Minister Mr. Vaezi, Foreign Minister Mr. Velayati, SNSC Secretary Mr. Rouhani, and President Hashemi Rafsanjani, we held very important talks with the German Chancellery. Rouhani, Velayati, and Vaezi even held personal meetings with the then-Chancellor, discussing these issues specifically. Chancellor Helmut Kohl also accepted such co-operation, but we were surrounded and defeated by a four-sided problem.

The first side was US opposition. Kohl raised the issue of co-operation with Iran during two of his visits to the US, but the White House didn't accept it.

The second side was the heavy pressure exerted by Israelis.

The third side was the negative role Britain played in the restoration of Iran-Germany ties.

And the fourth side was provided by incidents as the separate assassinations of Kurdish leaders in Berlin, former Iranian Prime Minister Shapour Bakhtiar (the last one under the Shah), and the famous Iranian poet and entertainer Fereydoun Farokhzad in Bonn, as well as the confiscation of a Germany-bound mortar shell cargo in the Belgian port city of Antwerp. This, and many other similar cases, every now and then would ruin any new progress in Iranian-European relationships like a bomb. The US and Israel would also take advantage of such incidents to increase their negative propaganda against Iran's relations with Germany and Europe.

5. We should avoid such provocative measures as the 2011 attack on the British embassy in Tehran, Holocaust denial (under ex-president Ahmadinejad), and the recent attack on the Saudi embassy. If the culprits behind such attacks are not detained, they must at least be controlled. And, if they are agent provocateurs, they should be countered. Of course in this case, the Europeans should also avoid provocative issues. A clear example was the case of Salman Rushdie, who insulted the tenets of Islam and 1.5 billion Muslims, but who was repeatedly invited to prestigious events and given awards. Whenever we talked about that case, they would raise the issue of freedom of speech. I told Europeans that you don't consider freedom of speech whenever you arrest people for denying the Holocaust, which you regard as a crime. Therefore, you should also criminalize any insult to divine religions, such as Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, in the same way.

6. Finally, the economic ties between Iran and Europe should be promoted from "surface-level trade" ties to "deep industrial and economic" ties, in which the focus is on joint ventures, energy partnerships, joint presence in regional markets, and the like. To achieve this goal, Iran has to sign trade agreements with the EU and join the World Trade Organization (WTO).

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