

ISRAEL-IRAN TENSION

Renaud Girard, Senior Reporter and International Columnist at *Le Figaro*

I would like to come back to the Israeli-Iran tension. I said that Catherine Ashton in Astana launched some kind of negotiations with Iran and then the Americans with Obama joined them and there was a big result with the July 14, 2015 Vienna Agreement on Iran's nuclear program. Everything went right, the international agency in Vienna checked that Iran was fulfilling its obligations and then Trump came in, withdrew from the accord that had been changed into a UN resolution, and the Europeans were unable to make the agreement work. The French and the Germans tried with a very complicated thing called INSTEX, and I will not go into detail, but they tried because they wanted to continue the Vienna accord. However, they were unable to, there was too much pressure from the American Treasury on German and French companies.

Volker, is there any role for us left in trying to prevent a war between Israel and Iran or do we have to leave everything to Trump and Elon Musk? You know, Elon Musk went to see the Iranian UN Ambassador to maybe prepare a big bargain, I do not know. What is your assessment of that?

Volker Perthes, Non-Resident Senior Fellow and Senior Advisor to the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)

Thanks for the question, I think it is actually two questions. First, if you have two parties that are intent on confrontation, they will probably not ask the Europeans for advice. If Israel or an Israeli government decides against all good advice, including from the White House, to attack Iran on a big scale in order to destroy their nuclear program or the regime, the Europeans will basically have no means to prevent it. However, preventive diplomacy starts beforehand, and I would still commend the JCPOA or what you call the Vienna Accord, which was a first step. It was a great achievement in preventive diplomacy, and it could have worked. It was a first step, the regional dimension was missing, which was criticized by the Gulf countries, and probably rightly so. But it was an enormously important first step and the Iranians were prepared to comply with it. As you rightly said, the Iranians did not call it off, it was the Trump administration who unsigned it and thereby basically destroyed it, along with pressures on European, particularly French and German companies, to not do business with Iran.

Second, right now, in preparing for the Trump administration and the official, legal end of the JCPOA, which runs out around this time next year, Europeans have a role again. There is a discussion about the so-called snap-back, which is a means of pressure on Iran, snapping-back the UN sanctions on Iran if they don't comply with the agreement. The Americans cannot do that because they are no longer a party to the JCPOA, the Europeans can do it. I was not in the room but as far as I know, in the discussions the European representatives had with the Iranian

representative in Geneva two weeks ago, the Europeans were very transparent. They said they wanted a deal and would also support a US-Iranian deal if it comes. But if the Iranian side was not going to play ball, they would join the Americans this time to put more pressure on them, including getting the snap-back enacted and bring the sanctions back. At the same time, we can be instrumental if following a deal between the Trump administration and Iran sanctions have to be lifted, and Iran has to be reintegrated into the region for real. I am very much in favor of any contact the President-elect of the United States has with the Iranians. I would be in the Itamar Rabinovich school here of thinking that in the end, President Trump in his second tenure would rather have a deal with Iran than take the United States into another Middle East war, which would not be short. I know that many policymakers who start wars or generals who advise them, are telling the public that this would be a very short war, but it never happens this way. George W. Bush was convinced that the war on Iraq would be very short, and American troops are still there. I guess that is one thing that Donald Trump instinctively understands. He does not want these forever wars in the Middle East anymore. You can discuss the way he made an agreement with the Taliban that Joe Biden then had to implement, or how he gave orders to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, which no one implemented, but he does not want to bring American troops into another war in the Middle East. That is a good starting point for the Europeans to use their diplomatic skills, experience and resources and try to work with the U.S. on an agreement with the Iranians.

There is in my view also a real chance here because Iran had to suffer a defeat. The Iranians aren't saying they have been defeated, no one really does that, but they have. They no longer have an effective air defense, and more importantly, their regional clout, which everybody had exaggerated before, has been seriously weakened. In overestimating that clout, we may all have become victims of both Iranian and Israeli propaganda. The Iranians were saying they were so big they can dominate everything, and the Israelis said, look, the Iranians are so big they threaten everything, and, in the end, we believed it. Now much of it has proved to be more a specter than a reality. Not only have they been unable to deter Israel. Much more important, they have been unable to protect their proxies, which means that their image, their aura, in the Middle East is gone. I guess they will have some hard internal discussions in Tehran, and I hope, and basically also expect, that they will decide to build their own country rather than trying to dominate regional countries, because that is what President Pezeshkian has been elected for. And that means making up with the Europeans and the Americans over their nuclear program.

Renaud Girard

Marc, I would like your assessment on the main issue of a possible Iran-Israel conflict and also whether you think it is realistic to have a big bargain between Iran and the West. You know that in 2005 the Iranians proposed a big bargain to George W. Bush, which he refused. What is your assessment?

Marc Hecker, Deputy Director of Ifri, Editor-in-Chief of *Politique Étrangère*, and Research Fellow at the Security Studies Center, Ifri

I think the situation is very different today. A few facts must be taken into account. First Iran is closer than ever to a nuclear breakout, which is very scary for several actors in the region, above all for Israel. Second, a number of Iranian leaders pledged to destroy Israel. Third, Iran

is probably weaker than ever before in previous decades. The different pillars of the Iranian strategy have been weakened. The first one was the proxies. I think it is fair to say that Iran has lost its proxy war. The second was ballistic missiles and drones to target Israel and perhaps other countries. When Iran launched hundreds of them in April and October 2024, a good part of them were destroyed or proved ineffective in doing real harm to Israel. The third pillar is the nuclear issue. Israel and Trump want to get rid of Iran's nuclear program, but the question is how. I think that some kind of military operation is more likely today than it was six months ago, but I agree with Volker: the Iranians know they are weak and no longer have any air defense. So they may be tempted to make concessions. They are either very ideologically determined to continue as they have been for the past decades, and the result will be a tragedy at some point, or they will negotiate. We do not know the precise terms of the deal but there will probably be a proposal. For the moment all options are open.

Renaud Girard

Mohammed, let us say that Elon Musk's idea in going to the Iranian Ambassador was to prepare a big bargain. Let us assume that if he is confirmed by the Senate, Marco Rubio will call American allies in the GCC and ask them what kind of conditions you would like in this big bargain agreement between America and Iran, what would be the answer from the Emirates, Saudis and others?

Mohammed Baharoon, Director General of the Dubai Public Policy Research Center (b'huth)

I think we would easily fall into a trap if we thought that this is Iran's point of weakness, and we need to hit it now and put conditions on it because it is defeated. I think that would be a big mistake. So far, we have seen a lot of changes in Iranian behavior and those are not just because of military weakness, it has to do with their own legitimacy, which is connected to their own economic realities. They have looked at the region and their biggest foe used to be Saudi Arabia, not because it is equivalent in size and power, but because they see themselves as the leaders of the Shia Islam while Saudi Arabia was the leader of Sunni Islam. Now Saudi Arabia is no longer playing that game, it is focusing on geoeconomics and a different kind of economic revolution. Iran is left with that old ball in its hands and nobody else to play with, so they have to be part of that. I think we would be making a mistake if we said that is good, this is the time to hit Iran and destroy the regime and then we will be victorious. I think this is the time when we should help Iran make the change and play according to the new games. We have heard Itamar talk about the two conditions for a grand bargain, and I think the second condition is possibly already there. Iran is not using its proxies and people say that is mostly because of Israel, maybe but also remember that Hezbollah agreed the demarcation of the marine borders for economic reasons not military ones. There were actually even discussions before October 7 on an agreement on demarcation of the land borders, which would have meant that there was a peace agreement between Lebanon and Israel, with no contested borders, which means that Hezbollah is no longer a resistance. In my view, that is the right approach and that means we no longer have any problems with Israel because we do not have the border issues. Yes, we support the Palestinian cause, but we are not in direct confrontation. This is what we need to do right now, and, in my view, a grand bargain is far more possible, not because the US can force it on them but because I think Iran needs it.