

In Israel, French President Hollande takes bellicose stance against Iran

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On a three-day visit to Israel beginning Sunday, French President François Hollande assured the Israeli ruling elite that he will keep pushing for economic sanctions and military pressure against Iran over unsubstantiated allegations that Iran is developing nuclear weapons.

After receiving a warm welcome from Israeli leaders, Hollande declared in Hebrew that “I will always remain a friend of Israel.”

Having pushed for war with Syria in September, Hollande is pressing for a bellicose stance against Iran. He said, “France will maintain all its measures and sanctions until we are certain that Iran has renounced nuclear weapons ... Iran is a threat to Israel, to the region, and to the whole world.”

Hollande’s visit came after France’s intervention led to the failure of the first round of talks on Iran’s nuclear program in Geneva, between the Iranian government and the six major powers in the so-called P5+1 (the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany).

At the Geneva talks, the world powers demanded Iran end its alleged program to develop nuclear weapons, which the Iranian government has denied seeking to do. According to the proposed deal, Iran would have suspended its nuclear program, receiving in exchange limited relief from US-EU imposed sanctions that have heavily impacted the Iranian economy, undermining oil exports and provoking soaring inflation.

France took a hard line against Iran, opposing the first proposed deal at the last minute after three days of intense talks. “There are some points on which we are not satisfied,” French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius told France Inter, citing the “highly proliferating” heavy water reactor at Arak and the issue of uranium enrichment. “There is a stock of 20 percent enriched

uranium, which is a lot. How can we get this stock back down to 5 percent enrichment, which is far less dangerous?”

Unless these issues were resolved, Fabius said, a deal “would not be possible.” He warned that the six P5+1 powers should not play a “fools’ game.”

The Israeli government cheered France’s last-minute decision to torpedo the agreement with Tehran, after having reacted with bitter anger over the US decision to negotiate with Iran.

Speaking against the deal with Iran at a joint press conference with Hollande on Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said: “I’m concerned, gravely concerned, that this deal will go through and in one stroke of the pen, it will reduce the sanctions on Iran—sanctions that took years to put in place—and in return for this, Iran gives practically nothing.”

Having continued the policy of its conservative predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy, who worked to align French and US foreign policy on a policy of war in the Middle East and North Africa, Hollande is now pressing Washington to escalate the confrontation with Iran. It was also embarrassed by Washington’s decision in September to postpone a war with Syria for which France publicly and actively lobbied.

The Obama and Hollande administrations had both supported the Syrian opposition, which is comprised largely of Al-Qaeda elements, aiming to topple Assad and install the opposition as part of a neo-colonial, pro-imperialist regime in Syria. Divisions inside the US foreign policy establishment and concern over overwhelming popular disapproval of the war drive led the Obama administration to retreat from its planned military assault against Syria, however.

France’s hard line against Iran has encouraged the Netanyahu government to view it as a reliable partner

in the Middle East. Hollande's aggressive stance against Iran and Syria is also supported by layers of the US political establishment who are calling for tougher sanctions against Iran and for regime change in Syria.

South Carolina Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham, hardliner against Iran, told CNN: "Thank God for France. The French are becoming very good leaders in the Mideast."

Arizona Republican Sen. John McCain, another hawk, praised French opposition to the deal, writing on Twitter: "#France had the courage to prevent a bad nuclear agreement with #Iran. Vive la France!"

On November 10, *Foreign Policy* magazine wrote: "The socialist government of French President François Hollande has adopted a muscular foreign policy that has put it to the right of the Obama administration on Libya, Mali, Syria and now Iran. Along the way, it has also become Israel's primary European ally and—after the US—arguably its closest friend in the world."

Paris is deeply concerned by the sudden shift in Washington's military policy in the Middle East and its moves to negotiate with Iran. It sees Washington as a critical guarantor of French imperialist interests internationally, and fears that the decision to ease war threats signals a dangerous US disengagement from the Middle East.

The Hollande government also views the whipping up of war hysteria as critical to its reactionary domestic agenda. It is deeply unpopular at home, due to its austerity policies and an assault on the jobs and wages of the working class. Hollande administration officials have said that they are modelling themselves on British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's pursuit of austerity policies after her government's victory in the 1982 Falklands War. (See also: "France seizes on murder of RFI journalists to intensify Mali war")

These remarks reveal the false character of the ruling Socialist Party (PS), whose policies have nothing to do with socialism—a fact that was briefly acknowledged by former PS Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in 2000. It also exposes the bankrupt policies of the petty-bourgeois parties, like the New Anti-capitalist Party, that supported Hollande's election. They are complicit in the pursuit of militarism abroad and social war against the workers at home.

Last week, Fabius called for aggressive US intervention in the Middle East, criticizing

Washington's foreign policy after it retreated from launching war against Syria and decided to negotiate with Iran.

In a speech to mark the 40th anniversary of the formation of the French Policy Planning Staff, Fabius said: "The United States seems no longer to wish to become absorbed by crises that do not align with its new vision of its national interest." He criticized Washington's "non-response" in Syria—that is, the Obama administration's decision to postpone war with Syria.

Fabius said, "An American disengagement [from the Middle East], given the role of the United States, is a disengagement, period. This can leave major crises 'up to themselves.'"



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