

French Foreign Minister Fabius visits Iran to boost ties after nuclear deal

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On July 29, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius visited Iran to resume economic and diplomatic ties with Tehran. Fabius' visit, the first by a French foreign minister in 12 years, came after the Western powers sealed a deal with Iran over its nuclear program on July 14 in order to lift economic sanctions against Tehran.

Days before signing the nuclear agreement with Tehran, France took a hardline stance against Tehran, demanding more concessions and insisting that Paris will not approve the deal if Tehran refuses inspections of its nuclear sites as part of the final agreement.

Praising the nuclear deal, Fabius told reporters that Paris seeks to restore its historical ties with Tehran. "We are two great, independent countries. It is true that in recent years, for reasons that everyone knows, the ties have cooled, but now thanks to the nuclear deal, things will be able to change," he said.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said, "Tehran-Paris relations after the [1979] revolution have had ups and downs, but we want to look toward the future." He added, "The two countries have had a history of good political and economic cooperation—an example of that is the presence and investment of French companies in Iranian oil and gas industries." Rouhani was invited to visit Paris in November to promote bilateral cooperation.

Having taken a bellicose stance against Tehran in recent years, Paris sees the nuclear deal as an opportunity to boost its economic and diplomatic influence in Iran. France and the United States exerted pressure on Tehran to shift its policies to accommodate the predatory interests of the United States and the European union in the oil-rich Middle East. Imperialist powers wanted Islamic State to become more reactionary and ruthless in order to meet their interests.

"Before sanctions [were imposed on Iran], Paris was

an important trade partner for Tehran, and it hopes to regain its past position following the Vienna agreement," Fabius said.

As a result of the sanctions, France suffered significant economic losses in Iran. France's trade with Iran of some €4 billion ten years ago fell to €500 million in 2013. Iranian exports to France fell to €62 million from €1.77 billion between 2011 and 2013. During the same period, French exports to Iran fell to €494 million from €1.66 billion.

French automakers including PSA Peugeot-Citroën and Renault used to be leading sellers on the Iranian market. Renault has \$562 million stuck in Iranian banks under the sanctions. Before sanctions, Iran was PSA's second-biggest market outside France, with sales volumes of around 400,000 cars per year. PSA pulled out its operations in 2012 following pressure from its then-partner, US automaker General Motors.

After the preliminary nuclear agreement, French manufacturers reportedly have begun re-establishing commercial ties in Iran. Jean-Christophe Quémard, PSA's director for Africa and the Middle East, said the new nuclear accord between Iran and major powers "allows for a significant advance in our ongoing discussions."

French automakers will face competition from Korea's Kia, Hyundai and Toyota, China's Chery and Lifan, and Germany's Volkswagen.

French oil and energy giant Total is preparing to resume work with Iran's energy sector, including the development of Iranian oil fields. In this sector, Total will compete with Italy's ENI and Anglo-Dutch Shell.

Iranian Oil Minister Bijan Zanganeh said, "France has been among pioneers in bilateral oil and gas cooperation with Iran and is also among countries with which Iran plans to expand energy cooperation."

A high-level French business delegation, focusing on sectors such as cars, agriculture, energy and the environment, will visit Iran in September.

Far from easing tensions, French imperialism's scramble for economic influence in Iran will escalate conflicts and tensions in the region. In securing lucrative Iranian markets, France is facing competition from its rivals, including the US, Germany and China.

Before Fabius' visit, Germany sent a business delegation to Tehran to restore economic ties with Iran. *L'Express* wrote, "Germany for its part intends to profit from Iran's return to the concert of nations. Berlin, Iran's main trading partner before the sanctions, has maintained more sustained relations while the country was under sanctions, with \$1 billion in trade in 2013."

Last year, Washington warned Paris against doing business with Iran after top French executives visited Tehran to boost Franco-Iranian business ties. The French employers' organization Medef organized that visit because it was aware that "American business circles were already preparing their return," said economist Michel Makinsky.

The imperialist scramble for Iranian markets underlines the neo-colonial character of the nuclear accord. Facing crippling sanctions that devastated Iran's economy and halved oil exports, Tehran desperately looked for a rapprochement with the US and the EU, opening up Iran for foreign investment.

The rapprochement with Iran was warmly welcomed by the French bourgeois media, who called for consolidating diplomatic ties both with Tehran and its rivals in the Sunni regimes.

Le Monde praised Fabius' trip, writing: "The French foreign minister was quite correct. We must restart our relations with this great regional actor. ... The stakes for the EU and for France are not only commercial. Ideally, the European Union should be well placed to play the role of 'honest brokers' between the Shiite alliance and the Sunni world. The tumult that is tearing apart the Middle East will not calm down if Riyadh and Tehran do not negotiate. It falls to Europeans to make this dialog possible."

Before the nuclear deal, Paris was deeply hostile to Tehran, in the context of its support for neo-colonial NATO wars in Libya and Syria. Paris criticized sharply Iran for supporting the Syrian regime, while Paris and Washington promoted a proxy war by arming Al-Qaeda

linked Sunni militias aimed at toppling President Bashar al-Assad. Paris strengthened diplomatic ties with Tehran's regional rivals, including Israel and reactionary Sunni Gulf monarchies like Saudi Arabia.

Paris wants Iran to renounce its anti-imperialist pretensions and to align more with French imperialism's ambitions in the region. In particular, Paris aims to isolate Syria, facilitate the ouster of President Bashar al-Assad and replace him with a proxy more amenable to French interests.

Fabius stressed that Iran "is an influential power" in the region, which shares with France a "commitment to peace and stability," citing issues such as Syria, Yemen and Israel. Fabius called for "stabilization and the opening of a path towards peace, though things often take time."



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