

# French- Iranian Relations: A New Realistic Perspective

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## Abstract

Relations between Iran and France have undergone many ups and downs during the past three decades. However, these relations have been on a downward spiral during the past several years. It seems that factors such as recent developments in the Middle East, Iran's nuclear dossier and the two countries' divergent approaches to foreign policy are responsible for this new situation. This article tries to answer the question of why relations between the two countries have reached their lowest point. The author uses the concepts developed in the framework of neo-realist theories emphasizing the necessity of preventing the rise of regional hegemonic powers to argue that France's concerns about Iran's increasing influence in the region, their conflict of interests at the regional level, and Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear technology - which contributes to the enhancement of its influence and can escalate their conflict to the international level - constitute the most important reasons for the unfriendly relations between the two countries.

**Keywords:** France, Iran, Iran's nuclear dossier, Middle East, Persian Gulf, regional hegemony, balancing, Sarkozy

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### **Introduction**

Since the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, relations between Iran and France have undergone many ups and down, given different variables and conditions governing international and regional scenes. On the one hand, a series of variables promised the establishment of friendly relations between the two countries, and on the other hand, some other variables along with some developments, actions and stances made rapprochement between them improbable. The positive attitude towards France among Iranians due to its historical record, hosting of Imam Khomeini during the months immediately before the advent of the Islamic Revolution, longstanding cultural ties, relatively independent policy in relation to the previous two superpowers, and possibility of using France's technological advantages to respond to the needs of Iranian industry were among variables which could contribute to the forging of solid and close relations between the two countries. But, on the other hand, conflicting worldviews (religious government in Iran and France's laic political system), policies adopted by Iran which have rattled conservative Arab regimes especially in the southern part of the Persian Gulf and France's tendency towards Arabs and particularly Iraq in the framework of "France's Arab Politics" as well as granting of asylum to groups opposed to the Islamic Republic of Iran were among factors which could hurt bilateral relations.

The interaction of these two groups of variables in special circumstances and in light of everyday events brought about intermittent periods of amelioration and deterioration in bilateral



relations. But, during recent years, some events occurred at the regional and international levels which have had a negative impact on relations between the two countries. It is most probable that these variables are unaffected by the recent change of government in Paris and coming to power of François Hollande from the Socialist party. This article tries to answer the question of why relations between the two countries have reached their lowest point, with diplomatic exchange between them almost severed and high-ranking officials using harsh words against each other. The author believes that France's concern about the increasing influence of Iran in the region, conflict of interests at the regional level, as well as Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear technology - which can significantly increase its power and escalate the level of conflict to an international dimension - are among the most important reasons for the unprecedented downward spiral in relations between the two countries. As advocated in neo-realist theories, the acquisition of advanced technologies by a state, especially those technologies with dual use, increase the threat perceptions of that state and create some hostilities towards it. Along these lines and to respond to the abovementioned question, this article first studies Iran's status in regional and international equations. Then, it examines the goals of France's foreign policy regarding regional and international issues as well as its past relations with Iran. Finally, it addresses the areas of conflict between the two sides and explains France's behavior in the realm of foreign policy in light of what has been said.

#### **I- Iran's Status in Regional and International Equations**

Iran has the full potential of being a regional hegemonic power because of its size, population, resources and geopolitical situation. Iran's size accords it such a strategic depth that any ground attack seems inconceivable. In addition to rich energy resources, Iran has high-skilled human resources unrivalled by other regional countries. Also, in geographical terms, Iran is situated close to the greatest



energy reserves in the world, and overlooks the strategic Strait of Hormuz, the most important waterway for energy flow in the world. Furthermore, events have occurred in Iran's favor in recent years. Regimes hostile to Iran in Iraq and Afghanistan have fallen, and governments in which pro-Iran elements have plenty of influence have come in their place. Iran has gained influence in some areas of the Middle East such as Lebanon and the Palestinian territories through increasingly powerful military groups which challenged Israel's superiority during the two recent disputes in 2006 and 2008. Furthermore, Iran's success in acquiring nuclear technology, which gives it an edge in this regard over other regional players while provoking sensitivities and concerns due to its dual-use nature, all make Iran closer to achieving regional hegemonic power status.

Naturally, in the anarchic environment in which states exist, dominating different regions in the world - especially strategic ones - is a special advantage which should be denied to rivals. In such circumstances, states are fearful of each other.

If a state which is the candidate for reaching hegemonic power status in the sensitive region of the Middle East is equipped with nuclear technology, it will pose a serious threat and confronting it will be necessary for some extra regional powers. For this reason, containment of Iran has been placed on the agenda of the U.S. and its allies. This is because Iran has the ability to pose threats against countries situated in the southern part of the Persian Gulf through direct contiguity and Israel through the contiguity of its protected groups. Iran can also endanger international security via its domination of the flow of energy and entering of the nuclear club.

Generally, it can be said that Iran's increasing power, which stems from a combination of its natural resources, favorable geopolitical situation and acquired capabilities, has created some challenges in the Middle East and at the international level. This challenge, in the first instance, is addressed to the U.S. as a power claiming global hegemony. However, we should see how France,



whose relations with Iran constitute the subject of this article, has reacted to this situation. France is a country with a long historical presence in the Middle East and has vested interests in the region. France, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, NATO, G-8, G-20 and the EU, is sensitive to every action which could hurt international security and the global economy.

## II- France's Foreign Policy Goals

Studying France's foreign policy goals and priorities at the international and regional levels, especially in the Middle East, is necessary to gain a better understanding of its reaction to abovementioned challenges. In this part, we review the evolutionary trend of France's foreign policy principles and goals since the establishment of the fifth republic. Then, we study how these principles and goals have been modified to adapt to the new situation in the post-Cold War era. Finally, we address the goals and interests pursued by France, with a particular focus on the Middle East region.

**a) France's Foreign Policy Goals:** The main axis of France's foreign policy after the establishment of the Fifth Republic and the presidency of De Gaulle was so-called Gaullist principles. They asserted that France should not rely on any foreign country, should not obey superpowers for assuring its survival and should preserve its honor and glory. According to Gaullist thought, the U.S. domination on the scene of international politics leaves no room for maneuvering for a power such as France (Meunier, 2006). De Gaulle emphasized the necessity of adopting a "third way" which meant that a strong Europe and a strong France could pave the way for the advent of a multi-polar international system (Boniface, 1998). In fact, this was not an ideological concept; rather it was a geopolitical concept referring to the distribution of power in the international system.

On this ground, France's foreign and security policy was determined as follows: building of national nuclear weapons (*force de frappe*), emphasis on inter-bloc diplomacy (*politique de l'est*), wide-



scale global engagement (tous azimuths) and europeanization of policy (l'Europe de l'Atlantique à l'Oural) (Pachta, 2003:8).

During the Cold War era, France could play a balancing role in three fronts by pursuing this policy. First, given its independent foreign policy, France could perform political maneuvers between the Eastern and Western blocs. Second, in Western Europe, France could create an obstacle against the U.S. influence, and third, due to the fact that Britain was considered as a Trojan horse of the U.S. and there was much fear of the revival of German power, it could play a balancing force among European nations (Pachta, 2003:8).

In addition, France considered itself to have a global mission for promoting French values throughout the world. Therefore, it can be said that France tried in those years to play a more effective role in international equations with its independent stance, and while preserving its influence in international decision-making, primarily through its permanent membership in the UN Security Council, to have a greater role in devising European Economic Community's initiatives. One of the necessities for playing such a role was having an independent nuclear capability. In addition to abovementioned considerations, establishing close relations with some parts of the Arab world and former colonies were among its goals.

But with the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequently the end of the Cold War, France's importance and influence decreased (Belkin, 2009). Under these circumstances, France tried to redefine its foreign policy to be able to continue its role in international relations. Since France could not liberate its foreign policy from the heavy shadow of Gaullism, it tried to make a compromise between the new situation and its Gaullist foreign policy through more reliance on the EU and more emphasis on the principle of multilateralism. However, following the September 11, 2001 events, France along with Germany was opposed to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, in accordance with its traditional policies and emphasis on multilateralism. This position put France under



heavy pressure from the U.S. and kept it distant from the international scene, leading to passivity in its foreign policy.

With Sarkozy's coming to power in May 2007, he tried to make France's foreign policy more compatible with new requirements through aligning it with U.S. foreign policy. Along this line, he reintegrated France into NATO's unified military command structure in April 2009. As a result, some experts came to the conclusion that Gaullism has been completely replaced by Atlanticism in French foreign policy (Vaisse, 2008:5). However, some other experts do not believe this "break with the past" to be so deep and radical. They consider it as the continuation of necessary modifications in traditional policies to make them compatible with the new situation in order to gain more room for maneuver, regarding the changes as tactical. Generally, it can be said that Sarkozy's new foreign policy was a redefinition of Gaullist principles while retaining its main essence: ensuring France's continued influence in international equations. In other words, France - a middle power – has the aspirations of a great power even though it does not have the means. As America, following its attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq, faced major challenges, Sarkozy realized that he would be able to find new opportunities for influencing international trends by helping the U.S. find solutions for its security problems.

Under the new circumstances, France's foreign and security policies, goals and priorities have been formed around threats posed to it in the three areas of international security, international economy and environment.

**International Security:** Fighting terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, organized crime, drug trafficking, and illegal immigration.

**International Economy:** Overcoming the global economic crisis and the danger threatening the existence of the common European currency (the euro) as a result of huge budget deficits in some EU countries, and ensuring energy security.



**Environment:** Confronting the effects of an increase in greenhouse gas emission including climate change and global warming, and producing clean energy (France Diplomatie, 2008).

Along these lines, France - while pursuing the abovementioned goals - tries to prevent confrontation between Islam and strengthening moderate forces in Islamic countries. France's new military doctrine, which was published in 2008 as a "White Paper", emphasized restructuring France's military bases network and giving priority to vital and strategic regions instead of France's traditional zones of influence (Moran, 2008). Also, France seeks to integrate rising powers such as China, India, Brazil, etc into the new world order by involving them in decision-making through G-20, etc. It believes that this would force these powers to observe the rules of the game.

**b) French Middle East Policy:** France's historical presence in the Middle East dates back to its colonial past in North Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and France's mandate over Lebanon and Syria during the inter-war period. During the years following the Second World War, France faced Arab struggles for independence in its colonies in North Africa, and was for this reason suspicious of Arab nationalism, which was led by Nasser at that time (Grosser, 1984:216). Therefore, France tended to support Israel against the Arabs. But following the independence of North African countries, France revised its relations with Israel because the energy resources of the region were too attractive on the one hand, and the Arab world was considered as a profitable market for its weapons and other products, on the other. This revision formed the basis of what is referred to as "France's Arab Policy". This policy was also based on General De Gaulle's view that France should be a counterweight against Germany in Europe, a counterweight against the U.S.- Britain axis in the Atlantic zone, and have strategic depth in the Middle East (Saint – Prot, 2007: 53). In the following years, this policy showed itself in Iraq more than any other place in the Arab world, as France





became the biggest arms supplier to Baghdad after the Soviet Union. France's military aid to Iraq, especially during the Iran- Iraq war, was more evident than any other time in the past. France provided Iraq with intelligence as well as sophisticated weapons including Mirage F-1 fighters. Moreover, during the tanker war in 1986, France delivered Exocet missiles and Super Etandard jets to Iraq (Styan, 2006:144). In addition to Iraq, France has always paid special attention to Lebanon, and is traditionally considered as the guarantor of the security of Christians in that country. France has sent troops to the UN peacekeeping forces (UNIFIL) in Lebanon. Now, about 2000 French troops are serving in these forces. Also, since the 1990s, enhancing political and economic links with the countries situated in the Southern Persian Gulf, especially the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, has been placed on the agenda of French foreign policy.

Generally, France's foreign policy approach in the Middle East including the Persian Gulf has been formed on the basis of the following factors:

**Ensuring Energy Supplies:** Given the existence of vast oil resources in the Persian Gulf and France's need for oil from this region, establishing security and stability in the region and guaranteeing the safe and free passage of oil through it are among the priorities of France's foreign policy. In 2008, France imported 2.389 million barrels of crude per day from the region and Saudi Arabia was the second largest exporter of oil to the country after Norway. In general, France satisfies about 30% of its need for oil from the Middle East region (CIA Fact book, 2010).

**Export Market:** The Middle East region is considered to be a good market for French products due to its high population and existence of oil resources which provide regional countries with vast revenues. France is the leading trade partner of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, the second trade partner of Lebanon, and the third trade partner of Egypt (Guitta, 2005). Also, during the years from 2004 to 2008, about 40% of France's arms sales went to the Middle East. The



United Arab Emirates alone accounted for 32% of France's weapons exports (Bromley, Haltom, Perlo- Freeman & Wiseman, 2009). On the other hand, in recent years, France has tried to cooperate with the Middle Eastern countries on nuclear technology due to its comparative advantage in this field as well as regional desire to acquire it. The signing of nuclear cooperation contracts with Libya, Algeria, and the UAE, signing a letter of understanding in this regard with Qatar, carrying out of preparatory negotiations with Morocco and Jordan, and proposing to conclude contracts in this field with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are worth noting in this line (Hershco, 2008:2).

**Consolidating Political Influence:** As noted before, France in the new international environment has emphasized an increase in its military presence in vital and strategic points instead of its traditional zones of influence to gain more sway over international affairs. The building of a military base in UAE, explained in the framework of arms sales, in fact denotes some points. First, following the loss of its foothold in Iraq and weakening of its position in Lebanon, France now tries to direct its Arab policy to the southern part of the Persian Gulf and has chosen UAE as its main partner (Landais, 2008). France, in addition to concluding profitable contracts with UAE regarding arms sales and building of nuclear plants, has signed a defense agreement with this country. According to this agreement, if the UAE is attacked, France will protect it through military means. Second, although the French military base in the UAE cannot accommodate more than 500 military personnel, it can perform military and logistical missions including helping keep the Strait of Hormuz open in case of the occurrence of any military conflict in the region. Third, the building such a base can be seen as one of the results of the foreign policy pursued by Sarkozy to have closer ties with the U.S.; otherwise it seems unlikely that France would do such a thing. The last point is that for the countries situated in the Southern part of the Persian Gulf including UAE, having a close relationship with European powers and



reliance upon them to some extent could strengthen their stances at the domestic and international levels in line with diversifying their supporters. However, according to Joseph Bahout, a French expert on regional issues, "the building of a military base by France suggests how it intends to be influential in this sensitive region of the world within the next 15 years". (Direct Matin, 2009).

France's reaction to the developments in the Middle East and North Africa called the "Arab Spring" has been active and pioneering. This is to some extent the result of an effort to compensate for its inaction towards the national uprising in Tunisia and its support of Ben Ali's tyrannical rule in the past. France supported attacks on certain targets in Libya shortly after the ratification of UNSC Resolution 1973 in March 2011, which authorized the creation of a no-fly zone, emphasizing the necessity of safeguarding the lives of civilians. Similarly, France advocates exerting the most severe pressures on Syria to pave the way for the toppling of Assad's government.

In addition, the presence of 3750 French forces in Afghanistan to help establish peace there in the framework of ISAF signifies, on the one hand, that France wants to reduce the U.S. burden in Afghanistan, although it cannot send more troops due to its domestic considerations. On the other hand, it also signifies France's efforts to preserve its position in the region as well as exploiting future advantages resulting from its participation in military campaigns.

One of the other efforts made by France to expand its influence in the Middle East has been an initiative called "Union for Mediterranean". Although this initiative, since its realization in 2008, has not brought about any concrete achievement (Belkin, 2009, p.9), the goals France pursues behind the declared primary goals of this institution – fighting terrorism and illegal immigration, developing alternative energy resources, increasing trade exchange, cleaning the Mediterranean Sea and protecting its environment, and helping sustainable development - should be taken into account. On the one



hand, this initiative is regarded by the EU as an act of rivalry by France in response to Germany's efforts to expand its influence in the East. On the other hand, it aims at discouraging the full membership of Turkey in the EU through its participation in this regional organization, paving the way for the normalization of Israel and its recognition by regional countries, and influencing the Muslim societies of Mediterranean countries through luring them into the adoption of Western values and marginalizing Islamic radical groups in these countries (Izadi, 1387:93).

*Expanding Cultural Influence:* France has always used cultural tools to expand its influence. This applies more in the Middle East due to the existence of countries which were formerly colonized by France or were under its mandate. It established Francophone organizations with the goal of preserving and promoting the French language and culture in former colonies and expanding cultural exchanges. In addition, France, in line with increasing its influence in the southern part of the Persian Gulf, opened a branch of Sorbonne University in UAE in 2000 and plans to open a branch of Louvre museum in this country in 2012.

*Considerations Regarding its Muslim Population:* During the recent decades, France has witnessed a change in its demographic composition. Today, at least 10% of France's 62 million inhabitants are Muslim. Given the higher birth rate among Muslims, it is expected that this figure will reach 25% by 2030 (Guitta, 2005). The presence of this Muslim population in France leads the French government to pursue Middle East affairs with special attention. This is because any conflict in the region, especially between Arabs and Israel, can have negative repercussions for the internal security of France. Also, France is concerned about the increasing influence of radical Islamic groups on French Muslims who suffer from some social and economic discrimination. For this reason, it seeks to marginalize and isolate these groups and to strengthen moderate forces in the Muslim world (Deltombe, 2005).



### III- Areas of Conflicting Interests

Generally, political relations between Iran and France faced tension since the early days of the coming to power of the revolutionary government in Iran and have not been friendly ever since, except for some short periods. This is despite what was expected due to some factors such as the lack of any negative attitude towards France in Iran, Imam Khomeini's stay in France during the days just before the fall of the Shah, the existence of long-lasting cultural ties and considerable potentials for economic and technological cooperation. In the first decade after Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979, events such as the hostage-taking of Americans in Tehran (1979-1980), France's hosting of Iranian opposition groups, beginning of the Iran-Iraq war (1980) and the support accorded to Iraq by France through equipping it with sophisticated weapons and French accusations that Iran supported terrorism on French soil – which led to the Embassies' war (1986) - all led relations between Iran and France to become tense. During the second decade after the Islamic Revolution and the beginning of the era called "Reconstruction"(1989-1997) in Iran, cooperation between the two countries - especially in the fields of economy and technology transfer - expanded. French oil companies ignored U.S. sanctions and invested in Iranian oil fields. But even in this period, we witnessed some tensions in bilateral relations; the most important of them resulted from the cancellation of Francois Mitterand's visit to Tehran due to France's stance regarding Iran's reported complicity in the murder of Shahpour Bakhtiar and the Mykonos event (1992), leading to the recall of EU ambassadors from Tehran. In the third decade after the Islamic Revolution, with the coming to power of a reformist government in Iran, a new chapter of cooperation between the two countries opened, culminating in President Khatami's visit to France. In 2003, with the advancement of Iran's nuclear dossier, France played an important role in talks between Iran and the EU troika, leading to the suspension of uranium



enrichment by Iran for two years in line with confidence-building efforts. But following the resumption of Iranian uranium enrichment activities in 2005, as well as the occurrence of some developments in the region and the election of Sarkozy as new French president in 2007, relations between the two countries have been downgraded to the lowest level. Sarkozy's policies regarding getting closer to the U.S. and his support of sanctions against Iran within the UN and EU were among the factors responsible for this downward trend in bilateral relations (Izadi, 2009:170).

Now, given Iran's increasing influence in the region following the fall of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq and Taliban government in Afghanistan and Iran's considerable advances in acquiring nuclear technology, we study the areas of conflicting interests at the international and regional levels. This study is carried out in light of the point of view that to prevent the rise of a regional hegemonic power, measures such as balancing or containment should be adopted.

**a) International Level:** At the international level, what apparently has created concerns for France as well as other great powers is Iran's nuclear issue. From France's point of view, this issue endangers international security. Along these lines, French officials including former foreign minister Bernard Kouchner and Sarkozy himself have repeatedly spoken of the "Iranian bomb" or "bombing Iran" (De Roquefeuil, 2007). Iran's entrance into the nuclear club has not only broken the nuclear monopoly of powers like France, but also created concerns about a potential nuclear race in the region and the likelihood of an Israeli attack on Iran, which could destabilize the entire Middle East. In this regard, Sarkozy said that "acquiescing to unsupervised nuclear development by Tehran would be perilous, risking an Israeli attack on Iranian installations and increasing instability in the Middle East" (Cody, 2009). He continued that "it is time to move on to stronger measures in tandem with Washington". (Cody, 2009). France argues that Iran's acquirement of nuclear



technology would endanger the stability of the existing international system, and as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and given its special considerations - which regard Iran as a threat in other fields – France plays a pioneering role in declaring the necessity of putting pressure on Iran. For example, when Obama proposed to establish direct and unconditional contacts with Iran in the beginning of his presidency, Sarkozy said:” I strongly hope that the new elected U.S. president, Mr. Obama, adopts a tougher stance towards Iran's nuclear program in any direct talks with Iran" (Le Parisien, 2009). It seems that France's stance is only explicable when considering that Iran is in a favorable position for access to the status of a hegemonic regional power, thereby threatening France's foothold in the region via its acquisition of special capabilities. As Stephen Walt has said, “states’ attainment of special capabilities could increase their potential for generating threats" (Walt, 1990: 148). Due to the fact that the Middle East, for the abovementioned reasons, is of great importance for France, Iran's ability to use nuclear capabilities while posing a serious challenge at the international level, would significantly increase the Islamic Republic’s regional power.

**b) Regional Level:** At the regional level, as argued above, the areas of conflict between Iran and France are primarily in France's traditional zone of influence, including Lebanon, with which France has historical and emotional ties. Also, we can mention the Persian Gulf region, which while enjoying a strategic situation has become a profitable market for France's technology and products. France tries to balance Iran by using the countries situated in the region.

*Lebanon:* After Israel's withdrawal from the south of Lebanon in 2000, the political scene of this country has been overshadowed by the Shia group Hezbollah, which played a major role in the Israeli withdrawal. Since that time, powers such as the U.S and France have been worried about the increasing power and influence of Hezbollah and the likelihood of the group’s potential seizing of power, which can tilt the balance of power in Lebanon. Therefore, referring to the



Taif Accord in 1989 - which ended the civil war in Lebanon – the U.S. and France initiated efforts to pass Resolution 1559 which calls for the disarmament of all militia groups in Lebanon. The text was adopted by the UN Security Council in September 2004. In February 2005, then-Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri was assassinated. The UN Security Council pointed its finger at Hezbollah, and urged the implementation of Resolution 1559 regarding the disarmament of Hezbollah as well as the establishment of an international tribunal for investigating Hariri's assassination. However, the occurrence of the 33-day war and the failure of Israel in reaching its military objectives made Hezbollah much stronger and revealed Israel's vulnerabilities. France as a country participating in the UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon is worried about the lives of its troops. From France's point of view, Hezbollah is supported by Iran and is considered as Iran's strategic arm for gaining influence in Lebanon (Levitt and Jacobson, 2007). In line with thwarting Iran's involvement in Lebanon, France tried to forge closer ties with Syria - a country with long-lasting influence on Lebanon - to persuade it to take distance from Iran and Hezbollah. However, its efforts led to no results due to Syria's reluctance and subsequently the occurrence of unrest in Syria. Consequently, it can be said that France regards Hezbollah's (and thereby Iran's) threats to its interests in Lebanon a serious matter, because in case of a seizure of power by this group, France would lose all its leverage in Lebanon.

*Persian Gulf Region:* As said above, in France's new military doctrine, it has been prescribed that France should have a military presence in vital and strategic regions and the establishment of a military base in UAE has been realized in line with this new directive. In fact, France is balancing against Iran through arms sale to regional countries, conclusion of security agreements with UAE and Qatar, and building a military base in UAE. Sarkozy recently stated that Iran's increasing influence in the region and the alleged likelihood of Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapon have created anxiety among the





regional countries and in the case of an increase in threat perceptions by them, "we would be forced to arrange some measures for protecting and defending these countries" (Bastide,2010). In fact, France tries to contain Iran and prevent its hegemony over the region through increasing its presence in the region. Also, its military presence can help keep open the Strait of Hormuz - a major passage route for oil supply to European markets – and thereby realize one of the other goals pursued by France in the region.

### Conclusion

In the past, despite the existence of difficulties, Iran and France tried to keep open some windows for dialogue and bargaining. To explain the unprecedented downward trend in Iran–France relations, we can use the argument that preventing the rise of a regional hegemonic power is among the imperatives of great powers to preserve their influence in different regions. Recent developments in the region such as regime change in Iraq and Afghanistan – two neighboring countries of Iran – and coming to power of some forces in these countries which are close to Iran, in addition to Iran's natural and acquired potentials making this country a candidate for achieving the status of a hegemonic power, changed the regional balance of power. Naturally, this provoked reactions among powers that have invested interests in the region. Among these states, France - a second-tier former colonial power which still tries to keep its grandeur despite its limited means by whatever way available to it - and as a country with a special look to the Middle East as its strategic depth, felt danger from the new situation and reacted to it. This reaction crystallized in the form of balancing and containing Iran this time. France, which had lost its major partner in the region – Iraq - turned its attention to the Persian Gulf. The new international situation forced France to change its military doctrine and according to its new "White Paper" published in 2008, the emphasis has been on the reorganization of its military bases network orienting towards vital and strategic regions including



the Persian Gulf instead of France's traditional zone of influence such as Africa. On the other hand, Iran's increasing influence in some parts of the Middle East like Lebanon, where France has traditionally enjoyed a certain level of influence, worried France and made it react in the form of trying to disarm Hezbollah, a group under Iran's influence, to support the formation of an international tribunal to investigate Hariri's assassination.

More importantly, it was Iran's nuclear dossier which created an extraordinary sensitivity for France so that it sometimes played a pioneering role in deterring Iran from obtaining a nuclear capability. From France's point of view, Iran's acquisition of such a capability and entrance into the nuclear club would significantly increase its influence to become a regional hegemonic power. This would, in France's view, pose a danger for international security and Iran therefore should be contained by every means. In fact, the threats supposedly posed by Iran have gained an international dimension as a result of the abovementioned factors. What complicates the issue is the lack of awareness about each other's intentions. This leads to an increase in mutual suspicion, contributing to worsening reactions between the two countries. This is just what we have witnessed in relations between Iran and France in recent years. With the coming to power of François Hollande in France, all the abovementioned factors will remain in force. However, it is expected that Hollande - who lacks Sarkozy's ambitions to be depicted as a proactive player on the international scene - will take a milder tone in dealing with Iran.

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