

Watching from the Sidelines and Still Affected: Europe and the War in Iran

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The war in Iran confronts Europe and its leaders with difficult dilemmas; not only does it harm the interests of countries on the continent in the Middle East, but it also touches on core issues in contemporary European foreign policy. European states are thus trying to formulate a position that bridges recognition of the Iranian threat, tensions with the Trump administration, reservations about Israel's strategy, commitment to Gulf security, adherence to international law, and concern over the war's consequences. So far, however, they have not formed a unified stance or a coordinated policy. As a result, they struggle to control the potential harm to themselves stemming from the war's repercussions. Israel, for its part, must carefully maneuver its diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis ambivalent and divided European governments, prepare for the possibility of an expanded European presence in the Gulf, and also for a widening rift between Washington and European capitals.

The response of European governments to the war in Iran reflects not only considerations tied to their interests in the Middle East but also a broader set of constraints and principles that have shaped European foreign policy in recent years, which have converged in the current crisis.

First, the war in Iran is yet another international event that illustrates Europe's geopolitical weakness. Israel and the United States did not coordinate their actions with European countries, nor did they feel the need to update most of them. European leaders have [repeatedly](#) emphasized this point and have

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not concealed their anger, attesting to Europe's lack of control over events. This weakness is particularly evident given the importance of the war's theater for Europe. Since the First Gulf War—and especially since [Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#)—European countries have invested significant efforts, both within the European Union and at the national level, in a region considered a “[strategic neighborhood](#),” where they aspire to play a [meaningful](#) diplomatic role, despite Europe's eroding position vis-à-vis other actors on the international stage over the past two decades. This is particularly true regarding the challenge posed by Iran—the European Union, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany were signatories to the nuclear agreement in [2015](#).

Moreover, there is strong awareness in Europe that the continent is among the regions likely to be most severely affected by the war's consequences, both due to its geographic proximity to the fighting and its high exposure to the [economic](#) fallout. In other words, Europeans may pay a heavy price for a course of action they did not want and over which they have little real influence.

The European response has also been shaped by the complex web of relations between European states and the belligerents. Relations between the regime in Tehran and Europe are at a low point. The strengthening of the Iran–Russia axis and its impact on the Ukrainian front, Iranian attempts to conduct influence campaigns in Europe or carry out [sabotage](#) there, European opposition to Iran's nuclear program and the activities of the pro-Iranian axis in the Middle East, as well as to the [regime's](#) internal conduct, alongside Tehran's adoption of hostage diplomacy directed in part against European citizens—all these have created multiple points of friction between Europe and Iran.

In the six months preceding the war, two events illustrated the hardening of Europe's stance toward Tehran. First, in August 2025, Germany, the United Kingdom, and France decided to activate the “snapback” mechanism in the [Iranian](#) nuclear agreement; in other words, effectively reinstating sanctions on Iran in response to its non-compliance. Second, in January 2026, the European Union designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a [terrorist](#) organization, a step taken in response to the violent suppression of protests.

Awareness of the Iranian threat and the perception of the Tehran regime as a hostile actor have contributed to a better understanding of Israeli concerns but have not translated into full identification with Israel on the issue. This is due to strained relations between Europe and Israel following nearly two years of disagreements over the war in the Gaza Strip, and due to a sense in Europe that Israel relies excessively on military force in managing tensions with Iran and the pro-Iranian axis. Already in June 2025, European governments responded unevenly and cautiously to [Operation Rising Lion](#), despite recognizing that it might serve [their](#) own interests.

Beyond Europe–Israel relations, a critical factor in assessing the European position is Europe–United States relations. Transatlantic relations have entered an unprecedented crisis due to President Trump's policies and European opposition to them. After about a year of tensions between Washington and European capitals, the US administration's attempt last January to take control of Greenland—territory under Danish sovereignty—sparked outrage across the continent. The United States, increasingly perceived as an unreliable ally and even a hostile actor [at times](#), has come to be seen by many Europeans as a direct threat to [European](#) sovereignty. By February, Trump's standing in European public opinion had reached a low point—even in the most pro-American countries and among conservative groups that had previously identified with him. This situation has placed European leaders under strain between

their desire to set red lines for the US [president](#) and strengthen European autonomy vis-à-vis Washington, and their recognition that there is no practical alternative to the American security umbrella protecting the continent, especially against the Russian threat, at least in the [immediate](#) term.

Part of the conflict between European leaders and the Trump administration stems from deep European concerns about the global order. European countries have built their modern identity on adherence to a liberal international order based on international law. Recently, this order appears threatened not only by revisionist powers, led by China and Russia, but also by the Trump administration [itself](#). This places European governments before another dilemma between the desire to preserve what remains of the old order and the understanding that they must prepare for a new reality in which hard power has become [decisive](#).

Against this complex backdrop, the US–Israeli operation against Iran—launched while negotiations between Washington and Tehran were officially underway—and the Iranian regime’s response, which also targeted Gulf states, effectively forced European leaders to shape a position within a relatively narrow space and to integrate sometimes conflicting considerations.

Most European states sought to balance their responses by condemning the use of force by Washington and Jerusalem—described as contrary to international law—while also condemning Iran’s actions as the root of the problem. They called for a ceasefire and a return to diplomacy while expressing a desire to prevent Iran from becoming nuclear or maintaining regional strike capabilities and even voiced hope for the end of the Islamic Republic. Based on these principles, a range of national positions emerged, depending on how responsibility was apportioned among the warring sides and on differing emphases regarding elements of a solution. Spain adopted the most critical line toward [US–Israeli](#) activity, while Germany’s government was the most supportive on the [continent](#), even as its reservations about the campaign grew.

The question of European assistance to the American effort also became a topic of debate. European governments were quick to rule out direct involvement in the campaign against [Iran](#). However, they adopted differing approaches regarding the American use of infrastructure on their territory or overflight permissions for aircraft involved in the fighting. Spain, in line with its principled position, announced that it would not allow the United States to use bases on its territory within the framework of [the war](#) and closed its airspace to US aircraft participating in the campaign. Other states imposed conditions: France stated at the outset that it would not permit US capabilities involved in strikes on Iran to use its territory, though it would allow transit for those involved in defending allies in the Gulf; Italy strictly requires prior coordination; and the United Kingdom expressed reservations about the use of its bases for operations against civilian targets. In practice, however, Europe—and especially Germany—became a critical logistical hub for [American](#) military activity.

The Iranian response against Arab states prompted a faster and less restrained European response. For Europe, Gulf states are vital economic partners and energy suppliers, whose importance has grown since the war in [Ukraine](#). Moreover, European states are actively involved in regional security: France has defense agreements with the UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar; the United Kingdom operates in Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar. Both France and the United Kingdom have established military bases in the UAE, while the European Union and its member states have developed security partnerships with [Jordan](#). With the onset of Iranian retaliation, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom deployed military assets and operated

aircraft to intercept [missiles](#) and [UAVs](#) over the Gulf and Jordan, while European bases in the region themselves became targets of [Iranian](#) attacks. At the same time, Paris deployed its aircraft carrier to the eastern Mediterranean, accompanied by ships from Spain, the Netherlands, and Italy, after missiles were launched toward British bases in [Cyprus](#). An [additional](#) British vessel was dispatched to the area.

In doing so, some European powers positioned themselves on the secondary fronts of the war. European involvement also intensified Iran's hybrid warfare against the continent, including disinformation and sabotage. Governments raised alert levels to thwart [Iranian](#) sabotage attempts, including against Jewish targets within [their territory](#). At the same time, some European leaders have sought to keep communication channels [open with Tehran](#). French President Emmanuel Macron, continuing his policy of the past year and seeking to position himself as a prominent opponent of Trump, has spoken several times with his Iranian counterpart since the [campaign](#) began. France also refrained from responding significantly to the death of a French soldier in Iraq attributed to pro-[Iranian](#) militias. In early April, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz announced the renewal of his contacts with the Iranian regime.

Regarding Lebanon, Europeans sought to formulate a position balancing their principles and interests. France sees itself as having a [special](#) role in Lebanon, and the European Union has invested considerable resources there in recent years in an effort to stabilize [the country](#). European forces are present in Lebanon as part of UNIFIL. With the renewal of fighting between Israel and Hezbollah—and while placing responsibility on Hezbollah and condemning attacks on Israeli civilian targets—European representatives called for respect for [Lebanon's](#) sovereignty, stressed the need to avoid disproportionate action, and expressed support for negotiations between Israel and [Lebanon](#).

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz and its implications posed additional challenges for European leaders, as it directly and indirectly harms European economic interests, particularly amid rising global energy prices. Nevertheless, European states refused Trump's demand to send forces to help reopen the strait by force, despite his threats and his framing of the request as an appeal to members of [NATO](#). This refusal stemmed from a European desire not to acquiesce to what was perceived as an attempt to impose on them, after the fact, the consequences of a move in which they had no part. It also reflected the broader atmosphere of strained relations with the United States and a reduced European willingness to assist Washington. Another reason was the limited capabilities of European militaries: Eastern European states prefer to preserve forces to counter the [Russian](#) threat, while Western European militaries are already stretched thin following deployments to the Gulf and eastern Mediterranean. This was particularly evident regarding the British Navy, whose performance during the war highlighted its difficulty in projecting significant power at [long](#) range.

The European refusal prompted a sharp reaction from President Trump, who portrayed it as disloyalty. He stated that he would remember NATO countries' failure to assist him and hinted that the United States might respond similarly when Europe needs [help](#). He even threatened to withdraw from the alliance or punish specific European states.

At the same time, European states are preparing the ground for a phase in which they may be more active in the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea. The European Union has operated in the Gulf of Aden since the late 2000s and in the Red Sea since February 2024 under Operation Aspides, aimed at securing maritime traffic—albeit on a limited basis—against the Houthi threat. Since Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz, a possible expansion of the operation has been raised by various European officials, though no

agreement has yet been reached. Meanwhile, France and the United Kingdom are working to establish a coalition of volunteers to operate in the area; about 50 countries participated in a meeting initiated by the two governments on April 17 to formulate initial plans. However, European representatives stress that their activity would be purely defensive and would take place only after the current war ends or as part of a [diplomatic](#) settlement—something that may not satisfy the US administration.

In any case, European governments [welcomed the ceasefire](#) between the United States, Israel, and Iran, hoping it would reduce the war's damage. They also quickly demanded that the agreement be extended to Lebanon and condemned [Israeli strikes there](#). While most analyses in Europe emphasize what is seen as US–Israeli failure vis-à-vis Iran and view it as validating the European principle of not relying solely on force, the fact that European states played no role in the diplomatic process that led to the ceasefire underscores their political irrelevance.

Across all these issues, even when European governments' positions are based on similar considerations, deep disagreements are evident. The current crisis occurs against the backdrop of growing competition for political and military leadership of the continent. While France managed to project power and independence at the outset of the war, other European powers are unwilling to accept its leadership and prefer to maintain their relations with the Trump administration. This lack of unity prevents the formation of a common EU position, paralyzes its institutions, and weakens the collective strength of its member states.

In conclusion, due to its complexity and the range of issues it encompasses, the war in Iran has served as an ultimate geopolitical test for European governments. Faced with the severe dilemmas it posed, they have mainly demonstrated political and military irrelevance and an inability to influence developments in the Middle East, even as they were involved in defending the Gulf and eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, European leaders' attempts to adopt a “middle line” between the warring sides have created a situation in which they are at odds with all parties: Israel and the United States accuse them of failing to contribute to the effort against the ayatollah regime, while Iran sees them as enemies and targets them with kinetic and hybrid means. Gulf states, especially those that have taken a more hawkish line toward Tehran, have also been only partially satisfied with hesitant European assistance focused primarily on de-escalation.

As for the deepening crisis in relations between European states and the Trump administration, as in other contexts, the war against Iran did not initiate the process but exacerbated it. As Trump's tone toward Europeans—particularly certain leaders—has grown harsher, voices on the continent calling for diversification of strategic partnerships and even for restoring ties with [Russia](#) and [China](#) have intensified. Europe remains dependent on the United States militarily, economically, and in terms of energy (especially given disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz), but the cohesion of the Western bloc appears to have been significantly challenged by the campaign against Iran—adding to Europe's dilemma regarding relations with Washington. The war also poses significant long-term risks for Europe that could further weaken it, from economic consequences affecting industry and agriculture to political repercussions, including potential damage to NATO or to support for Ukraine.

European capitals also identify long-term opportunities. The war has enabled European states to demonstrate a degree of independence vis-à-vis Washington and their importance to American power projection and is therefore seen as another step toward European “strategic autonomy.” European

governments also aim to leverage the post-war reality—especially if Gulf states conclude that they must diversify their military partnerships and not rely solely on American power. If so, additional opportunities may open for the European defense industry and for deepening existing security [agreements](#). However, European states would then face serious competition from other powers, particularly Pakistan, China, and Turkey.

For Israel, the current European reality is ambivalent. Europe's weakness has thus far served Israel's room for maneuver. European condemnations or calls to halt the fighting in Iran or Lebanon have not affected Israeli military operations or constrained them. Likewise, the current format of negotiations with Lebanon—led by the United States without European, particularly French, involvement—creates more favorable conditions for Jerusalem. However, Israel must prepare for attempts by European governments to play a more significant role in the “day after,” especially regarding the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf—developments that could affect its relations with Arab states and its efforts to establish itself as a central hub in trade routes between Asia and Europe, such as the IMEC initiative.

At the same time, the rift between Europe and the United States is not good news for Israel in the long term, as Europe is a key economic partner. Incidents involving US aircraft in European airspace—most notably France's refusal to allow US flights carrying munitions to Israel to cross its airspace—have demonstrated that cooperation from at least some European states is essential for the optimal functioning of the Washington–Jerusalem axis. A transatlantic rift would therefore require Israel to navigate carefully and skillfully.

Europe–Israel relations pose another dilemma for European leaders. On the one hand, the war in Iran has deepened the perception in Europe that Israel relies excessively on military force, undermines stability, and even endangers the global order. Moreover, the Israeli government is seen as having initiated the war and thus as responsible for its negative consequences. On the other hand, alongside the positive impression created among European security officials by Israel's operational achievements, there is also an understanding among parts of European public opinion that Israel is doing Europe's “dirty work” in Iran—as Germany's chancellor put it during Operation [Rising Lion](#) in the summer of 2025.

Within this diplomatic balancing act, Jerusalem should promote a narrative less focused on describing the Iranian threat—which Europeans already recognize—and more on emphasizing the benefits the war yields for them, benefits they tend to underestimate compared to the costs they have already paid or may yet incur. The success of such a narrative will depend on developments on the ground across the various theaters as the campaign concludes. Moreover, the ability to capitalize on opportunities created by the campaign in Iran vis-à-vis Europe depends on minimizing the damage to these relations caused by developments in Lebanon and the Palestinian arena. Indeed, there is a certain parallel between European leaders' positions on the war in Iran and their stance on the war in the Gaza Strip: in both cases, Spain stands out as the most critical country, while Germany is the most supportive in Western Europe.

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