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What Responsible Statecraft on Iran Would Mean



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Europe is counting the costs of a war that some of its leaders encouraged but could neither control nor bring to a satisfactory conclusion. The Iranian government remains in place. Regional security has deteriorated. European consumers and businesses are paying the bill. Responsible statecraft must begin by acknowledging that the policy has failed.

The war also contributed to the Republican rout in the American midterm elections. Donald Trump himself acknowledged its role in the defeat. In exit polls, 74% of American voters said the Iran war was a "crucial" or "major" factor in their vote last week.

Meanwhile, in Europe, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz recently put Europe's additional energy costs, resulting from the Iran war, at more than €100 billion over eight months. That is a striking admission from a leader who welcomed Israel's attacks on Iran in June 2025 as the "dirty work" being done for the West. When the United States and Israel launched their war this year, he argued that it was no time to lecture allies – despite the fact that Berlin is otherwise rarely reluctant to instruct foreign governments on international law.

The resulting inconsistency has practical consequences. Europe cannot credibly demand respect for legal restraints elsewhere, like in Ukraine, while treating them as an inconvenience when its allies use force. Nor do these double standards purchase influence over Washington or Tel-Aviv. Europeans have discovered that they can bear substantial costs without acquiring much say over the decisions producing them.

Meanwhile, Tehran's leadership has survived and appears emboldened by its survival. Iran has recently announced the removal of its self-imposed 2,000-kilometre limit on ballistic missile range.

That announcement does not establish that it has deployed a new arsenal capable of reaching every European capital. It does signal a willingness to widen the geographical scope of its deterrence. Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi's warning that there would be no more red lines for Iran should be interpreted as a message to Europe that, should the U.S. renew the bombing, European countries could become a target of Iranian retaliation if seen as enabling the American attack.

The honest assessment would be, then, that the war has made the Europeans neither more prosperous nor safer.

What, then, would responsible European statecraft entail?

First, European governments should tell Washington plainly that further escalation offers no credible route to a durable settlement. Trump seems to be ready, for now, to forgo another offensive against Tehran.

Yet his position remains unsettled. Asked on 12 November whether Iran's leadership remaining in power when he leaves office would constitute a defeat, he replied: "Yes, that would be a defeat … Absolutely."

Meanwhile, Mossad chief Roman Gofman was in Washington for talks with senior administration officials as Netanyahu pressed for renewed military action. Trump's words and continued Israeli lobbying suggest that another round of war remains a serious risk.

Even if Trump resists that pressure for now, his latest post suggests he is disengaging from diplomacy too: "we don't need a deal with Iran", he said on Truth Social, directing Vice President JD Vance to focus on internal matters.

However, this "no war, no deal" status quo is inherently unstable. It would entail the preservation of the U.S. blockade of Iran and attempts to strangle it economically through new initiatives, such as the CENTCOM's Iron Gate that seeks to expand the maritime blockade to Iran's land borders.

Iran sees that as a continuation of the war by other means and would be incentivized to break the blockade to force a settlement that respects its interests. To avoid renewed hostilities, European diplomacy should support Pakistani and Qatari mediation to encourage both the U.S. and Iran to return to the Islamabad Memorandum as a starting point for detailed negotiations on all matters of discord, including Iran's nuclear program.

Second, Europe should work systematically with the countries already investing in regional diplomacy. The Mecca Pact linking Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan is an important development, alongside Qatar's and Oman's mediation channels. These countries have their own disagreements with Iran, but also compelling reasons to prevent another destructive escalation.

The October Istanbul meeting bringing the R4 group of Turkey, Egypt, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and the E3 group of Britain, Germany and France offered a useful opening. It should develop into a sustained dialogue and coordination platform addressing all the regional flashpoints - the Palestinian issue, U.S.-Iran conflict, developments in Yemen and security in the Strait of Hormuz. European participation will be most useful when it supports regional initiatives and brings resources and diplomatic weight to their implementation.

Third, European governments should refuse the use of bases on their territory for any further attacks on Iran. The threat of war remains as long as there is no deal between Washington and Tehran. Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has taken the lead in opposing the war form the outset. He denied the use of the Spanish bases and airspace for operations connected with the offensive. Other governments should, at last, establish an equally clear position.

Such decisions give diplomatic positions substance. Explicit denial would reduce the risk that Europe becomes an expanding theatre of the conflict.

Fourth, Europeans should begin supporting regional states in outlining an inclusive regional security architecture. Mecca Pact should be seen in that light – not as another exclusive military bloc but as an embryo of such an arrangement.

Indeed, representatives of Turkey and Pakistan have consistently voiced their openness for such an arrangement. Saudi Arabia may have more reservations due to its own complicated relationship with Iran, but a recent Mecca Pact meeting in Tehran with Iranian authorities was a necessary first step towards establishing broader regional understandings.

Although the immediate focus of the Tehran meeting was on the Yemeni Ansarallah, also known as the Houthi movement, and its attacks on Saudi Arabia, discussing contours of a post-war regional order is a key incentive for Tehran to use its influence constructively.

No durable Persian Gulf settlement can rest on the permanent exclusion of a country of Iran's size, power and capabilities to disrupt it. Equally, inclusion cannot mean accepting Iranian coercion or overlooking the security concerns of Arab states. That would require addressing the role of armed non-state actors, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and the Iraqi militias. Reciprocal undertakings on sovereignty, non-interference and non-aggression pacts should form the basis of the new, win-win regional settlement.

Fifth, Europe should offer a concrete, region-wide programme for post-war recovery. Its diplomatic contribution would carry greater weight if accompanied by concrete financial commitments to help reconstruct damaged civilian infrastructure in Iran and the Gulf, restore essential services and address environmental harm.

European expertise could support water management, pollution monitoring, coastal protection and the repair of energy infrastructure. Maritime confidence-building could include incident

reporting, communication between coastal authorities and practical agreements protecting commercial navigation.

These measures would give regional governments and their populations a material interest in working with Europe. It would also recover European reputation in the region, where its inability to impose meaningful consequences on Israel for its war crimes in Gaza and to oppose the U.S./Israeli war on Iran have rendered it increasingly irrelevant.

If Europe has paid a hefty price for the war in Iran, at least it should have gained some clarity on a more responsible alternative course.

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