

Article – Iran: can the EU help to defuse the situation?



Relations with Iran have been fraught for years over fears that the country was developing nuclear weapons. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action agreement was meant to prevent this, but recent events culminating in the death of one of Iran's military leaders in a US airstrike earlier this month have ratcheted tensions to new levels.

MEPs will discuss recent development this afternoon. [You can follow the debate live online shortly after 15.00 CET.](#)

Read on to find the background to today's situation, including information on the nuclear agreement and the EU's role.

Nuclear agreement

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is an agreement to ensure Iran's nuclear programme remains peaceful in exchange for lifting restrictive measures against the country. It was signed in July 2015 by Iran, France, Germany, the UK and the EU plus China, Russia and the US.

Implementation of the deal started on 16 January 2016 after the International Atomic Energy Agency confirmed that Iran had complied with its nuclear dismantlement commitments.

Trump

Donald Trump, who became president of the US in January 2017, has consistently opposed the deal. In January 2018 he announced the US would stop implementing the agreement until its “disastrous flaws” could be addressed. Despite efforts by the EU to address his concerns, Trump announced in May 2018 that the US was withdrawing from the deal and would re-impose sanctions. These sanctions mean American firms are banned from doing business with Iran while foreign businesses that do so risk significant fines and being blocked from the US banking and financial system.

The EU continued to defend the nuclear deal, saying it was subject to strict nuclear inspection and that the International Atomic Energy Agency had confirmed several times that Iran was abiding by its commitments under the agreement. The EU tried to come up with measures to enable companies to continue doing business with Iran without being penalised by the US.

Iran initially continued to comply with the agreement, but gradually announced deviations from the original deal, such as breaking the limit on how much low-grade uranium it could keep.

Escalation

Tensions flared after the US announced at the beginning of January that it had killed Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in an airstrike. US authorities said he was actively developing plans to attack American diplomats and service member in Iran and nearby countries.

Shortly after the strike, Iran announced it was withdrawing from the JCPOA deal and attacked two US military bases in Iraq with missile attacks in retaliation.

The situation further escalated after Iran said on 11 January that it had accidentally shot down a Ukraine International Airlines flight, killing all 176 people on board. Following the announcement, Iranians protested on the streets

The EU's role

The EU has called for a de-escalation of the situation and on Sunday France, Germany and the UK urged Iran to again comply with its commitments under the nuclear deal.

Parliament continues to monitor the situation in Iran and the Middle East and regularly holds debates and adopts resolution to highlight specific issues. For example, on 19 December MEPs adopted a [resolution](#) denouncing the disproportionate use of force by Iranian security forces against non-violent protesters. Parliament has also pledged its support for the nuclear deal over the years.

[Cornelia Ernst](#) (GUE/NGL, Germany), chair of the [Parliament's delegation for relations with Iran](#), said: “We as the EU have to make clear to the US, that the murder of Soleimani was a breach of international law and the fuelling of

conflicts in Middle East is a threat to world peace. We have to make clear to the Iranians that violence is the totally wrong way to deal with demonstrators. The EU can and has to play an important role as a moderator.”

[David McAllister](#) (EPP, Germany), chair of the [foreign affairs committee](#), said: “I am gravely concerned by the latest violent developments in Iraq, after the recent death of Iranian General Soleimani and Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. There is now an immediate need for an urgent diffusion of tensions and for all parties involved to exercise serious restraint in order to stop the cycle of violence and reprisals. Further confrontations and loss of human lives must be avoided, with so many years of joint efforts to combat ISIS and bring peace and stability to Iraq and the whole region clearly at stake. Preserving the Coalition is key in this regard.”

He also called on the EU to keep supporting the JCPOA agreement and on Iran to stick to its commitments under the deal.