



The diplomatic turn that Tehran does not expect

Why – and how – the European Union should establish official relations with Iran now

16/12/2011 | von [Cornelius Adebahr](#)

DGAPstandpunkt 13, 1 December 2011, 3 pp.

Kategorie: Arms Control and WMD, Security, European Union, Iran, Near and Middle East, Europe

After the storming of the British embassy in Tehran, the already uneasy relations between the West and Iran are on the brink of collapse. To break out of the spiral of escalating retaliation, the EU member states have to try a new trick: While they reduce their bilateral relations with Iran, they should mandate the EU to negotiate with the Iranian leadership. As a precursor to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Iran and the EU, the EU should dispatch a special envoy.

There is definitely a storm brewing. First the incriminating report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), then the new unilateral sanctions by Canada, Great Britain, and the United States, and now the storming of the British embassy in Tehran while the Iranian government looked the other way. The diplomatic result of this can only be further estrangement between Iran and the West.

However, to avoid an escalating spiral that is difficult to control and that could possibly end in a military confrontation with unforeseeable consequences, it is above all the EU that must take a step that previously seemed impossible. The 27 member states should offer to establish diplomatic relations with the Iranian government. This offer should come with clear conditions attached, such as free access to local interlocutors and security guarantees for their diplomatic personnel. And it should be initially limited to three policy fields: the nuclear issue, human rights, and regional cooperation. While it may initially sound absurd, or even appear conciliatory, it is in fact a possible way out of the current impasse in light of the long history of the conflict.

Diplomatic Ice Age

Since the unveiling of a secret Iranian nuclear weapons program in 2002, a series of negotiations and increasingly tougher sanctions have not brought a solution to the nuclear issue. The most recently imposed sanctions are only partially due to the IAEA report. Nor are they based on a goal-oriented analysis that would increase the probability that the Iranian regime – and especially the hard-liners around the supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards – will now break down or give up its resistance.

Ultimately, the sanctions are also aimed at domestic constituencies in crucial states like the United States and Israel – with consequences for their allies. The relations of most western countries to Iran were nearly frozen long before the recent escalation. Yet, it is in line with the

Islamic Republic's revolutionary logic to break out of the current painful blockade by sparking events that develop their own momentum and force the West to act.

The great danger is that retaliation may get out of hand if the international community does not maintain alternatives of action. However, any hope for a change in the US (which is already in election mode) or Israel (which feels existentially threatened by Iran) is as naive as asking the two veto-wielding powers Russia and China to stop keeping a protective hand over Tehran. In the end, it is the role of the EU to resolve this deadlock with a radical change of perspective

The establishment of diplomatic relations between Iran and the Union would be a game changer that opens new possibilities for all sides concerned. It would certainly be no belittlement of the potential threat emanating from Iran: Ultimately, diplomatic representation is not a sign of friendship, but a precondition to talk to the other side.

While such a step would still be impossible for the US to take at present, the EU as rather uninvolved actor could make such an offer in a more unbiased way. It would be key to make this step without new concessions but within the existing political framework, i.e. civilian nuclear cooperation in return for full transparency vis-à-vis the IAEA. This way, the EU could open a new playing field without softening the critical attitude of the European member states.

The Establishment of Direct Relations

It may at first come as a surprise that the EU itself has no direct relations with Iran, despite the fact that most EU countries have a diplomatic mission in Tehran. However, it is the member states themselves who have so far rejected the establishment of diplomatic relations between the EU and Iran so as not to increase the latter's international standing. Even previously planned negotiations on a partnership agreement – the most basic of the EU's contractual relations with a third country – could not begin after the revelation of Iran's nuclear program.

Moreover, contact on the inter-parliamentary level has been cut off repeatedly in the past. Recently the Iran delegation of the European Parliament had to cancel their planned trip because the Iranians did not grant access to the desired interlocutors. It is only within the framework of the nuclear talks that the EU has contacts with the Iranian government, as High Representative Catherine Ashton is involved in these negotiations alongside representatives from France, Germany, and the United Kingdom (the so-called E3 countries).

The EU would undoubtedly be entering new territory with this step – not only in diplomatic but also in political and institutional terms. It would offer the European External Action Service (EEAS), still plagued with the growing pains of an institution, a unique opportunity to demonstrate its added value. The EEAS could support the member states that, in a mixture of solidarity with Britain, concern for their own staff, and additional sanctions against the Iranian regime, would further scale down their presence in Tehran. This move would not only boost a badly battered EEAS, but would also be good for a crisis-ridden EU as a whole.

The First Step: An EU Special Representative

The establishment of diplomatic relations is not a short-term project. Therefore the EU should first appoint a Special Representative (EUSR) for Iran. While this nomination would clearly be different from previous envoys sent to resolve armed conflicts or monitor existing peace agreements, an EUSR for Iran would nevertheless be in the best tradition of exchanging diplomatic envoys when states have no permanent ambassadors.

The mandate of the EUSR should be clearly defined and tailored to the current problems: negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, reporting on the human rights situation there, and supporting regional cooperation (e.g., on refugee issues or drug trafficking). These political efforts would be accompanied by preparations to establish full diplomatic relations, including the opening of an EU delegation in Tehran.

Concentrating the political dialogue with Iran at the EU level and on these three core subjects would correspond with member state embassies focusing on non-political areas such as consular and cultural affairs. In order to avoid the experience of the Yugoslav conflict of the late 1990s when the EU representative could not pursue his work in the field because Belgrade refused him a visa, the EU could appoint one of the serving national ambassadors as EUSR. In addition, member states should make some of their personnel available to the EU. In this way, an experienced and functional EUSR team could soon take up its mission in the Iranian capital.

Diplomacy is Dead, Long Live Diplomacy

Simply continuing the current diplomatic escalation would not only be unimaginative, but outright dangerous. The most recent decision of the EU foreign ministers to impose further sanctions and the attacks against European targets in Tehran are likely to further worsen diplomatic relations. In this situation, measures beyond the prevailing logic of confrontation and punishment are badly needed. They could be even more effective as the opposite side would be completely unprepared.

Iran's response to such an offer is difficult to estimate. So far, the Iranian leadership appears eager to upgrade the country's relations with the EU. Admittedly, happening in conjunction with a retraction of the bilateral contacts and within the proposed mandate, this is not the type of international recognition that Tehran hopes for. That is exactly why the outlined approach – establishing diplomatic relations between the EU and Iran while reducing the involvement of member states – would be a clever move.