

## **The EU and Iran: The EU must think of a bigger solution**

*Heinz Gärtner*

Iran believed it had to retaliate against the killings of leaders of Iran's allies Hamas and Hezbollah on Iranian territory and in Lebanon in order not to lose its credibility. It sent 180 missiles into Israel. This cycle of violence will not end if it is not interrupted by a political and creative solution.

### **Where is the EU?**

The European Union (EU) has lost more and more influence in the Middle East in general and on Iran in particular. How can it regain this influence?

- The EU has failed to revive the nuclear agreement with Iran (JCPOA), which was unilaterally terminated by President Donald Trump in 2018. It remained inactive. The INSTEX mechanism created by the EU, which was intended to help EU states wishing to do business with Iran to circumvent the sanctions threatened by the USA, remained completely toothless.
- The Iranian President at the time, Rouhani, had hoped that the EU would lift sanctions against restrictions on the nuclear program. In contrast, the EU supported all US sanctions. This policy strengthened the opponents of the JCPOA and the anti-Western forces in Iran.
- The EU did not offer any alternatives to the so-called Trump/Kushner plan for the Middle East from 2019. It would have left the Palestinians with a completely fractured territory. In return, financial contributions were promised to come from Arab states that have never confirmed this. The “Abraham Accords” of 2020 between Israel and some Arab states were based on this plan. The plans developed by the EU for decades for a two-state solution remained in the drawer.
- The agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2023 was not brokered by the EU, but by China. The EU summit with some Gulf states in Brussels in mid-October 2024 was intended to improve the EU's relationship with these states. This was not only about energy, trade and investment, but also about limiting Russia and China's influence in the region.
- Following the violent crackdown on protests in Iran in the fall of 2022, the EU completely suspended cooperation with Iran.

### **Iran's response**

These poor relations between the EU and Iran had negative consequences.

- Iran has been slowly but steadily expanding its nuclear program since 2019. The enrichment level of uranium was increased to 60 percent, whereas 90 percent would be necessary to build a nuclear weapon. The stockpiles of enriched uranium from 20 to

60 percent have multiplied. New centrifuges were installed. All of these developments were prohibited under the JCPOA of 2015, from which the USA withdrew.

- Every year, the European states France, the UK and Germany submitted a resolution to the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna condemning Iran for its lack of cooperation.
- Iran looked for alternative partners. It was accepted into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) of Central Asian states and the expanded BRICS states. Iran increasingly leaned towards China and Russia. A 20 to 25-year cooperation was agreed with both countries. There were mainly arms contracts with Russia. Above all, oil was supplied to China, albeit below the world market price, which is viewed with suspicion by Russia and the Gulf states. The Gulf states view Iran's cooperation with Russia with suspicion because it could be at their expense. Overall, Iran's cooperation with Russia and China has its limits because these two states also want to maintain good relations with Israel and the other Gulf states. They will not come to Iran's aid in the event of an open military conflict with Israel.
- Iran has strengthened its ties with the “Axis of the Resistance”, which primarily consists of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza and militias in Syria and Iraq. However, this also creates a dilemma for Iran. However, these are increasingly developing a life of their own and their own interests. Their conflicts with Israel are increasingly threatening to drag Iran into a direct war with Israel, which Iran wants to avoid.

### **A creative proposal**

The EU has joined the USA in imposing more and more sanctions on Iran. They concern the nuclear program, the delivery of drones and missiles to Russia and human rights violations. They have not changed Iran's behavior. However, the EU could look beyond punishments and consider greater solutions to defuse Israel's conflict with Iran.

It could offer Iran to lift a large part of the sanctions if it recognizes Israel within the 1967 border lines. This would confirm the EU's commitment to the two-state solution within the 1967 border lines. The proposal would also be within the Arab peace plan of 2002, which stipulates that Israel should only be recognized within the 1967 borders. Iran's justification of having to support its non-state allies, Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthi, would lose its significance. Israel would no longer feel threatened in its existence. Israel's existence would have to be the EU's top priority over all other measures.

A historical analogy would be the visit of US President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to China in 1972 when the One-China policy was being defined. On the fringes of the meeting, Party Chairman Mao promised to restrict support for the communist insurgents in South East Asia, which is exactly what happened.