

France urges tough EU approach on Iran to save nuclear accord

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French President Emmanuel Macron.

Brussels: France urged the European Union on Monday to consider new sanctions on Iran over its involvement in Syria's civil war and its ballistic missile programme, as Paris tries to persuade Washington to preserve a 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran.

U.S. President Donald Trump has given the European signatories a May 12 deadline to "fix the terrible flaws" of the deal, which was agreed under his predecessor Barack Obama, or he will refuse to extend U.S. sanctions relief on Iran.

In response, the three European signatories – France, Britain and Germany – have proposed new EU sanctions targeting Iranians who support Syria's government in that country's civil war and Tehran's ballistic missile programme, according to a confidential document seen by Reuters.

"We are determined to ensure that the Vienna accord is respected," French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian told reporters on arrival for talks with his EU counterparts, referring to the city where the 2015 deal was signed.

"But we must not exclude (from consideration) Iran's responsibility in the proliferation of ballistic missiles and in its very questionable role in the near- and Middle East," he said. "That must also be discussed to reach a common position."

The confidential document cites "transfers of Iranian missiles and missile technology" to Syria and allies of Tehran, such as Houthi rebels in Yemen and Lebanon's Shiite Hezbollah.

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But new sanctions would need the support of all 28 EU member states. Some of them are keen to rebuild a business relationship that once made the EU Iran's top trading partner and its second-biggest oil customer.

"We have to explore all the possible measures to have the same type of pressure as we had in the nuclear dossier," Belgium's Foreign Minister Didier Reynders told reporters.

"We have to examine all the possibilities that we have to put pressure on Iran in these areas," he said.

EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, who chaired the final stages of the nuclear negotiations between Iran and Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States, stressed that there was no formal EU position on new sanctions.

“We’ll discuss ways in which we can keep the full implementation of the nuclear deal with Iran,” Mogherini said of the EU strategy so far. “There’s no (EU) proposal of additional sanctions against Iran.”

- Reuters