

Iran and immigration: why Europe surprises most analysts

By Dr. John C. Hulsman

I lost my patience long ago with most European analysts and their analysis; it is hard to think of another area of study so bogged down in theological—rather than real world—thinking. True believers in the cause of ever-closer union ignore the huge array of empirical evidence arrayed against their cause, from disastrously and endemically low growth rates, to a vainglorious ‘common’ foreign and security policy that punches several notches below its own Olympian self-regard.

On the other hand, those gleefully heralding the end of Europe have seen one too many End of Days movies. With the largest market in the world, crammed full of well-educated and creative people, skeptics have long seemed to me to be as blindly against the EU as euro-cheerleaders are for it. In both cases, it has long been embarrassingly clear that facts that don’t fit preconceived theories are too abandoned, dooming the field of European political analysis to be long on platitudes, if short on real-world complexity.

A by far better way to assess the Europe of today is to observe how the beast actually operates in the global jungle, as both strengths and weaknesses become glaringly apparent when exposed to the world we actually live in. Here Europe confounds, being far more than the nothing that its skeptics dismiss and far less than the world’s next superpower as it’s more gormless advocates have labeled it, in a supreme gesture of wish fulfillment.

The largely positive example of Iran

Over Iran, the EU has had a surprisingly good innings. During the dark days of the George W. Bush administration, when vast amounts of time were lost with the White House naively refusing even to meet with Iranian representatives, it was

Europe and European powers who kept things going, doing the dull but vital work of maintaining contacts and relationships with the recalcitrant Islamic Republic, waiting for the day when a strategically comatose America awoke from its disastrous slumbers.

The present last, best chance for a deal with the new Rouhani administration has been rightly put down to the effectiveness of global—particularly western—sanctions. Since they were tightened in mid-2012, global sanctions have more than halved Tehran's crude oil exports, cutting desperately needed revenues by at least a crippling \$35 billion a year. Here Europe, with its long-standing trade ties to Iran, has quietly proven to be the key player. Whereas America has had little economically to do with Iran since the 1979 revolution, in the case of Europe, the new sanctions it imposed on Tehran has proven to be the critical difference in actually forcing the mullahs back to the negotiating table, in what just might amount to good faith. In other words, in the rare cases Europe actually unites behind a specific foreign policy initiative, it has genuine great power economic heft going for it.

But here Europe's efficacy comes to an abrupt end. Everyone alive knows that it is the ultimate sanction of military air strikes on Iranian nuclear installations that is the sword of Damocles hanging over Rouhani's head, the sole elemental reason he is prepared to discuss any curbs on Iran's nuclear program. Over this central point, the EU in particular, but also the great European powers as a whole, simply do not have skin in the game. They can withhold or allow economic carrots to be doled out as a primary feature of diplomacy; unfortunately we do not live in a world populated entirely by rabbits.

It is American (and to a lesser extent Israeli) air strikes that concern the mullahs, not anything a militarily bereft Europe could threaten Iran with. As such, it is a US-Iran deal that is central to preserving peace here, with Europe as an important if secondary player, waiting in the wings. Over Iran, Europe has not

amounted to nothing as skeptics would have it, but it is also not central to what is going on, as euro advocates might dream.

The largely negative example of Lampedusa

If Iran points to Europe as an important, if secondary, global player, recent tragedies in the Mediterranean highlight the continent's indelible limitations. On October 13, more than 350 people drowned when an overloaded fishing boat capsized off the Italian island of Lampedusa. Aboard were prospective African immigrants, endeavoring to illegally come to Europe.

But Europe was of little immediate help to the hard-pressed Italians. Hardly moving at lightning speed, on October 25, 2013, EU leaders agreed on a timetable for overhauling the bloc's immigration and asylum policy, promising a review of the rules by the middle of 2014. Crucially, the accord does not allow for providing extra money for Frontex--the EU's border-sea coordinator--to spend on equipment to save lives. Study the problem slowly, write a White Paper, and spend no more money. This is what the EU too often seems to do: Shrink before the advent of a real crisis. As ever, the EU works better over slow motion crises such as Iran, rather than in the face of fast-moving events.

Here Europe and a larger European policy perspective ought to be a strength; dealing with this transnational issue rather obviously requires the multi-national response instinctively favored by European elites. But that's international relations theory, not practice. In reality, individual European states must deal with the rise of populist anti-immigration parties. Here the rubber hits the road, with the altruistic impulse to save lives running up against the real political need to curb illegal immigration, as a majority of Europeans would like.

Nor do hard-pressed northern states feel a particular imperative to come to Italy's rescue. As a share of population, the Scandinavian states, Switzerland, and

Ireland bear a greater refugee burden than Italy. It is at this state level-which euro-advocates so often willfully ignore, as it doesn't fit their theory of the world—that lack of collective action can be explained.

So as our two recent real world examples illustrate, for the foreseeable future the EU will a frustratingly inconsistent entity, sometimes posing as a superstate and global foreign policy player, often being far less than the sum of its parts. The only way to really gauge what is going on in Europe is to take the sage advice of one its greatest writers, Joseph Conrad, who put it well, saying, “Actions matter, far more than intentions.” Look at what Europe does, and not what people say about it, and one might just begin to get it right.

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