

EU ministers support Iran deal, fear IS resurgence

European foreign affairs ministers reiterated their support for the nuclear deal brokered with Iran and expressed concerns Friday that the escalating tensions in the region could lead to a resurgence of the Islamic State's activities.

BRUSSELS — The EU reiterated its support for the nuclear deal brokered with Iran, also expressing concerns Friday that the escalating tensions in the region could lead to a resurgence of the Islamic State's activities.

The EU's top diplomat Josep Borrell called the urgent meeting of European foreign affairs ministers in Brussels after the U.S. killing of Iranian general, Qassem Soleimani, in a drone attack in Iraq on Jan. 3.

Tehran responded earlier this week with missile strikes at U.S. bases and announced it would no longer respect limits set under the 2015 nuclear deal on how many centrifuges it can use to enrich uranium, fuelling fears Iran could quickly start building a nuclear arsenal.

"We need to understand that the fight against Daesh is not over," said NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg, who attended the meeting in the EU capital and referred to an alternative name for the Islamic State group.

"We have made enormous progress but Daesh can return."

In an attempt to avoid an escalation between Iran and the United States, EU leaders have intensified diplomatic activities, trying to keep alive the nuclear deal while making sure the U.S.-led anti-IS coalition continues to operate in Iraq. In the wake of the killing of Soleimani, Iraq's parliament called for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from the country.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas reiterated Germany's position that the fight against IS in Iraq needs to continue.

"I can't rule out that, if the anti-IS coalition leaves Iraq then IS will regenerate so much that it can carry out attacks in Europe again," said Maas, speaking to German broadcaster n-tv.

And Denmark's foreign affairs minister, Jeppe Kofod, said IS is the threat for Europe."

Despite calls from U.S. President Donald Trump to break away from the nuclear deal, the European Union remains committed to the treaty.

"Thanks to this deal Iran is not a nuclear power," Borrell said.

Iran struck the deal in 2015 with the United States, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Russia, and China. It has, however, been damaged by Trump's decision to unilaterally abandon it in 2018 and to impose sanctions that have hurt Iran's economy.

Iran has gradually rolled back its commitment to the accord and the recent escalation of tensions between Iran and the U.S. has dealt further blows to the pact.

"We are of the opinion that this agreement makes sense because it holds Iran to not developing nuclear weapons, and so we want this agreement to have a future," Maas said upon arrival at the meeting. "But of course it only has a future if it is complied with, and we expect that from Iran."

Despite its decision to get rid of restrictions in relation to its enrichment capacity, Iran has not stopped collaborating with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and has made clear it is ready to return to its commitments if sanctions are lifted.

Delivering the meeting's conclusions, Borrell urged Iran to get back "to full compliance without delay" to make sure the deal can be salvaged.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian continued to insist the accord "is not dead" and said Iran could get access to atomic weapons within "one or two years" if the deal continues to lose its substance.

In a phone call with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson also reaffirmed his support for the deal.

Borrell has invited Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif to Brussels for talks, but a date for his visit has yet to be set.

In front of Ghassam Salamé, the head of the UN Support Mission in Libya, the Council also addressed the current crisis in the war-torn country, with Borrell warning of an increased risk of terror activities if a cease-fire is not quickly reached.

Libya is currently governed by dueling authorities, in the east and the west, each relying on different militias. The east-based government is backed by the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, as well as France and Russia. The western, Tripoli-based government receives aid from Turkey, Qatar, and Italy.

Borrell said the presence of fighters coming from Syria and Sudan has been detected in Libya recently and insisted the conflict could lead to a new influx of refugees in Europe.

“This crisis may spiral out of control,” Borrell said.

Frank Jordans and Geir Moulson in Berlin, Angela Charlton in Paris contributed to this story.

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