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Western and Iranian negotiators were putting the finishing touches on a far-reaching nuclear deal. Then, at virtually the last minute, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius joined in the talks. It didn't take long for the negotiations to unravel -- and for Fabius to publicly declare this round of the talks to be over.

It wasn't the answer U.S., European or Iranian teams had been expecting. One Western official said Paris hadn't been particularly involved in the painstaking negotiations that had taken place in the run-up to this weekend's talks in Geneva. "The French were barely involved in this," one Western diplomat said. "They didn't get looped in until a few days ago."

Yet the French response shouldn't have been a total surprise. The socialist government of French President François Hollande has adopted a muscular foreign policy that has [put it to the right of the Obama administration](#) on Libya, Mali, Syria and now Iran. Along the way, it has also become Israel's primary European ally and -- after the U.S. -- arguably its closest friend in the world.

Fabius, echoing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is said to have had two serious concerns with the deal. First, the agreement failed to prevent Tehran from continuing construction on its nuclear reactor at Arak. Once the facility is operational, a key part of Iran's nuclear program would be immune to airstrikes because bombing the plant would lead to massive, deadly, radiation leaks. Fabius was also upset that the deal didn't require Iran to reduce its stockpiles of 20% enriched uranium, which is approaching weapons-grade. The Hollande government, Fabius [told](#) French radio, would not be part of a "fool's game."

Publicly, Secretary of State John Kerry refused to say anything critical about the French, emphasizing instead that Iran and the so-called "P5+1" had made substantial headway towards a deal and would continue the talks later this month. "[I'd say a number of nations](#) -- not just the French, but ourselves and others -- wanted to make sure that we had the tough language necessary," Kerry said on the Meet the Press. In the French media, there were reports that the [big powers were united](#) -- and that it was Iranian negotiators who ultimately balked at making a deal in Geneva. Privately, though, many diplomats were fuming at the French.

However, Fabius has been a voice of caution on an Iran deal before - most recently at talks at the United Nations in September. "In the past years, we have been vigilant on this issue," said one French diplomat *told The Cable*. "We have never been easy going on this."

Fabius's strong opposition to the emerging nuclear deal has won Paris some unexpected fans on Capitol Hill, where lawmakers from both parties want the Obama administration to maintain the current economic sanctions on Iran and even begin adding new ones.

"[Thank God for France](#)," South Carolina Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham, a longtime Iran hawk, told CNN. "The French are becoming very good leaders in the Mideast."

Arizona Republican Sen. John McCain, another hardliner, busted out his own basic knowledge of French to praise the Hollande government in its own language.

["#France had the courage to prevent a bad nuclear agreement with #Iran,"](#) he wrote on Twitter. "Vive la France!"

Thousands of miles away in Tehran, Iranian leaders reacted with fury, reupping some previous remarks blasting France. ["#French officials have been openly hostile towards the #Iranian nation over the past few years;](#) this is an imprudent and inept move," tweeted the office of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, "A wise man, particularly a wise politician, should never have the motivation to turn a neutral entity into an enemy."

Beyond the rhetoric, France's opposition to the deal carries clear risks. The U.S. negotiators and their Iranian counterparts have both warned that the window for a diplomatic solution to the nuclear issue won't stay open forever. Not too long from now, Iran will have enough enriched uranium for a nuclear weapon. If the talks fall apart, France may have effectively scuttled any option of ending Iran's nuclear program without using military force, something no country -- including Israel -- wants to do. Paris also risks seriously degrading its relationships with Washington and London, its two closest allies.

"If weeks from now a deal is signed which forces Iran to even greater compromises, the French will come out well," said Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "But if months from now diplomacy has fallen apart and conflict appears more likely, the French could go down in infamy."

Fabius seems willing to gamble on the former. Paris has extensive knowledge of Iran's nuclear program, which they helped establish decades ago by supplying Iranian Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi with the technology and equipment that helped him build a uranium enrichment facility near the city of Isfahan.

According to Olli Heinonen, a leading expert on Iran's nuclear program and former Deputy Director-General for Safeguards at the International Atomic Energy Agency, France has also maintained "very good intelligence" on Iran's subsequent nuclear work through a large Paris-based Iranian exile community, which includes Iran's former top atomic energy officials, including Akbar Etemad, the founding father of Iran's nuclear program,

Mark Dubowitz -- the executive director of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a hawkish think-tank in Washington -- said France was uniquely positioned to spot potential flaws in the agreement because it has an array of officials who have working almost exclusively on nuclear issues for more than a decade and understand both the technical aspects of Iran's nuclear program and the economic impact of the hard-hitting economic sanctions that have been imposed in response.

"On the Iranian side, you've got men who have written books on these issues and forgotten nuclear tricks that many folks on our side haven't even learned," he said. "The only comparably level of expertise on our side is the French. The same people work the technical side and the economic side. On the U.S. side, those issues are handled by different people from different departments."

The French Foreign Ministry, officials say, has a particularly knowledgeable expert on Iran's nuclear program in Martin Briens, who used to run the department that handled nuclear negotiations with Iran and has an encyclopedic knowledge of the evolution of those talks from their beginning to the present.

Dubowitz said Paris deserved credit for helping to block what he sees as a deeply flawed deal. Under the terms of the agreement leaked to the press, Tehran would have agreed to keep a half-built reactor at Arak inactive for six months but not halt construction. That, he said, would leave Iran six months closer to having the facility be fully operational. He also faults the agreement for failing to force Tehran to stop all of its uranium enrichment activity or from adding to its large stockpiles of centrifuges, a key part of that program.

Heinonen said allowing more work on Arak would turn the facility into a "fait accompli."

"You become a hostage to Arak," he said. "Once it starts operating there is nothing you can do."

There may also be an element of personal pique in the French position. In September, when the Obama administration began publicly threatening military strikes against the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad after his regime used chemical weapons against his own people, France was the only American ally that promised to take part. Hollande told *Le Monde* at the time that the chemical weapons attack outside Damascus "must not go unpunished" and that France was "prepared to punish" Assad for the incident.

That made it all the more embarrassing for the French leader when Obama quickly dropped his plans for an American military intervention into Syria and instead cut a chemical weapons deal with the Syrian strongman. The White House move left France isolated when it didn't want to be. France is alone again, but this time it's very much by choice.

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