of a close relationship with the UAE, but it must also account for the diplomatic consequences of taking positions that directly challenge Iran's territorial claims. Ultimately, the controversy is about more than three islands.

It is about whether Western governments apply international law as a consistent framework or invoke it selectively when doing so serves their economic and strategic interests. Carney's government has yet to provide a sufficiently detailed historical and legal explanation for its categorical language. Until it does, the timing of the declaration, its alignment with Abu Dhabi's position, and the substantial economic incentives surrounding the visit will remain legitimate subjects of scrutiny.

For Iran, the position is clear: Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb are Iranian islands and an integral part of the country's territorial identity and sovereignty. No trade agreement, investment commitment, strategic partnership, or diplomatic declaration can alter that position.

Canada may seek to benefit from the UAE's financial resources. It may deepen defence cooperation and expand access to Persian Gulf markets. But the pursuit of those interests should not come at the expense of historical scrutiny, diplomatic consistency, or respect for Iran's sovereignty. A partnership built on economic opportunity should not require political concessions on the territorial integrity of a third country.

As Trump blows up Mideast

Regional leaders look to Europe



By Ellie Geranmayeh

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OPINION



From left to right: Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan bin Abdullah, French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot, German Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, British Foreign Minister Edward Miliband, Pakistani Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, and Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty pose for a group photograph during the R4 and E3 foreign ministers' meeting in Istanbul, Turkey, on October 23, 2026.
MUSTAFA HATIPOGLU/ PICTURE ALLIANCE

"Anything's possible" was Donald Trump's response when asked if he would launch a new attack on Iran after the midterm elections. Fears of what a return to all-out war would bring have set off a flurry of diplomacy. Two noteworthy tracks from European and regional powers have emerged as last-gasp attempts to prevent, or at least limit, the destruction a renewed conflict would cause. If they succeed, they could become the pillars of a new "coalition of the willing" to stabilise the Middle East without America in the lead.

The negotiators

The first track brings together the E4 — Britain, France, Germany and Italy — and the R4 of Egypt, Pakistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The foreign ministers of the E4+R4 met in Istanbul on October 23 to discuss preserving the viability of a two-state solution in Israel-Palestine, ending the US-Iran war, reopening the Strait of Hormuz and defending Saudi Arabia against the latest offensive launched by the Ansarullah (Houthis).

On the European side, the addition of Italy to the E3 is welcome. It bolsters Europe's diplomatic weight, offsetting Britain's Brexit-induced weakness and Germany's loss of regional influence over its staunch support for Israel. Berlin's relations with Tehran have also been tense since 2022. Italy does not carry the same baggage, nor did it take part in the E3's decision last year to trigger the "snapback" of sanctions on Iran. That could eventually help it reopen the path to negotiations.

The Istanbul meeting also showed how far the R4 has come since it formed earlier this year in response to the shifting power balance in the Middle East. All its members but Egypt signed the joint Defence Alliance, a military pact, in August. The pact was recently tested when members activated the collective defence measures in response to the Houthi offensive against Saudi Arabia. The grouping signals that the region's powers are increasingly willing to take responsibility for their own security.

The second diplomatic track opened three days after the Istanbul gathering, when security chiefs from Pakistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia met Iran's leaders in Tehran. The meeting was an attempt by regional powers to avert a new round of fighting by including Iran in a serious diplomatic process. It also allowed Iran to host, giving it a PR victory at a time when the Trump administration is attempting to impose a full blockade on the country.

These regional powers are scrambling to de-escalate as Tehran has made clear that its response to renewed US or Israeli strikes would be far more damaging than anything the Middle East has absorbed in the past eight months. It has already shown its reach through its ally in Yemen. In recent weeks, the Houthis have damaged critical infrastructure inside Saudi Arabia and attacked shipping through the Red Sea. A joint effort by the Houthis and Iran to disrupt transit through two vital waterways — the straits of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb — would have global economic ramifications. Pakistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia probably also warned Iran during the Tehran meeting that further strikes on its neighbours' critical infrastructure and civilian targets would undo any prospect of regional integration.

A coalition of the middle

Whether these tracks succeed or fail, they point to a changing reality. Most glaring is America's absence from both meetings, as European and regional powers increasingly try to work around an unpredictable Washington rather than with it. For the R4, the Trump administration's handling of Iran has shattered the assumption that America's armed forces offer iron-clad protection to its allies, a reality Europeans are also confronting over Ukraine. America and Israel might have the military capacity to devastate the region, but they have proved unable or unwilling to win the peace. Left to pick up the pieces, Middle Eastern and European countries have been made all too aware that stronger diplomatic efforts are needed for their own security. If war and maximum pressure pushed Iran, a country of more than 90 million people, towards state collapse, the consequences for its neighbours and Europe would be disastrous. This is particularly so given that neither America nor Israel is likely to invest the time and money needed to rebuild it. Yet the Islamic Republic's elite will probably remain in power for the foreseeable future.

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Averting disaster

The immediate priority for both tracks is to prevent a return to high-intensity war. It remains to be seen whether the E4+R4 can exert influence over both Trump and Tehran to end the conflict and reopen the Strait of Hormuz. But their combined leverage, if used with greater purpose and willingness, could add new force to diplomacy.

Teaming up more actively with the R4 would also give Europe better access to Washington and Tehran, both of which have increasingly dismissed European influence. That would improve Europe's chances of advancing two of its strategic objectives: ensuring the peaceful nature of Iran's future nuclear programme, and stabilising the Middle East. The E4 and R4 could also use their combined economic clout to press China to use its deep trade ties with Iran to secure the lasting reopening of the Strait of Hormuz.

The regional powers have also seen an advantage in fostering deeper cooperation with Europe. As the R4 countries seek to strengthen their defences, modernise their militaries and heal their economies after successive wars, Europe remains an attractive partner.

The E4 could also help middle powers in the region contain and potentially moderate the behaviour of Israel. Europeans could restrain Israeli military activity in Lebanon and Syria through stronger economic and technical support to central governments and increased funding for the Lebanese Armed Forces. The R4 will similarly look to European countries to expand measures targeting Israeli occupation policies and illegal settlements.

On Iran, Europe and its regional partners could use the prospect of eventual sanctions relief to nudge Tehran towards a stronger agreement on its nuclear programme. The E4 and R4 share concerns that in a future deal with Iran, Washington may be willing to curtail the role of the International Atomic Energy Agency in monitoring Iran's nuclear activities. Europeans could therefore make EU sanctions relief conditional on enhanced international monitoring, whatever Washington agrees bilaterally with Iran. The R4 could reinforce this by offering to be the first to invest in Iran's post-sanctions economy, given that European companies, wary of reputational exposure, are likely to be slower to return.

Both the E4 and R4 view Iran's missile and drone programme as a direct threat. Yet precisely because of its demonstrated effectiveness in the past year, Tehran is unlikely to negotiate a major rollback. Instead, the E4 and R4 could intensify efforts to slow Iran's advances by disrupting supply chains from China and Russia and interdicting shipments to groups such as Hezbollah and the Houthis. They could also press Beijing to demand that Iran halt technology transfers to non-state armed actors.



Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian (bottom 2nd-L) and other top officials meet with Saudi Arabia's Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman Al-Saud (top L), Pakistan's army chief General Syed Asim Munir (top 2nd-L), and Turkey's intelligence chief Ibrahim Kalın (top 3rd-L) in Tehran, Iran, on October 26, 2026.
president.ir

Security without superpowers

The E4+R4 format creates opportunities for Europeans and regional powers to lay the foundations of a broader security architecture for the Middle East, one that goes beyond the deterrence framework envisaged by the joint defense pact. Europe's own experience with security mechanisms across the EU could prove useful in de-escalating tensions, managing military capabilities, and, eventually, building shared security and prosperity.

A return to full-scale war between America and Iran may be inevitable given Trump's zero-sum instincts and apparent desire for a hard-power legacy. But even if the E4+R4 effort falters, it points to an emerging order shaped by the region's middle powers. These countries are now looking to Europe, not America, to shore up their diplomacy. For Europeans, it is a chance to bring their diplomatic weight to bear after a long period of marginal influence in the Middle East. The initiative's underlying commitment to de-escalation and a more inclusive diplomatic approach is precisely what the region needs.

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