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## Putin, Macron Bond Over Shared Unease at Trump's Actions



Russian President Vladimir Putin and his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron attend a session of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF), Russia May 25, 2018.

ST PETERSBURG, Russia (Reuters) Russian President Vladimir Putin and his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron found a common cause in their shared unease at U.S. President Donald Trump's actions on Iran, climate change and international trade.

France is at odds with the Kremlin over its annexation of Crimea from Ukraine four years ago, and allegations that Moscow meddled in a French presidential election in support of one of Macron's opponents. But there were only fleeting signs of those differences when Macron met Putin at the St Petersburg International Economic Forum, an annual showcase for investment in Russia that the Russian leader hosts in his home town. Instead, the two leaders focused on concerns about the future of a multinational deal on Iran's nuclear deal program, now in jeopardy after Trump pulled the United States out of it.

**Washington's withdrawal from the pact raises the prospect that Russian or French companies doing business with Iran could be hit with unilateral U.S. sanctions.**

Speaking at a question-and-answer session in front of an audience of business executives and Russian officials, Putin said the U.S. withdrawal was damaging and counter-productive. He also railed against the United States applying its laws beyond its borders to punish foreign companies. "This is unacceptable and it has to end," he said. Macron, who had traveled to Washington in an unsuccessful bid to persuade Trump to keep faith with the Iran deal, did not explicitly criticize the U.S. leader. He said he had a strong relationship with Trump, but he acknowledged there are "issues on which we have differences".

He said he would try to convince Trump to return to talks about Iran's nuclear program, and was also critical of Trump's decision to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, out of step with the stance of most European governments. "That was not desirable," Macron said, adding that the embassy move played a part in sparking fatal clashes between Palestinian protesters and Israeli security forces.

### TERMS OF ENDEARMENT

During the session, Macron sat alongside Putin, referred to him as "Dear Vladimir", and the two men nodded in agreement with each other about a range of issues. Macron said that Trump had, de facto, lost an international argument over the Paris climate change agreement because the international consensus in support of the accord had held, even though Trump had decided to exit the deal.

Trump's administration last month imposed sanctions on a raft of major Russian companies. The step also hurt European and other international firms who had to cut off business ties with the sanctioned entities for fear of punitive action by Washington.

As he sat alongside Putin, Macron referred repeatedly to the need to establish "European financial sovereignty" - a jab at European economies' reliance on the U.S. financial system.

He also arrived in St Petersburg with a large delegation of French business executives keen to sign deals with Russia, despite the new U.S. sanctions.

Putin accused the United States of undermining global trade rules by using sanctions as a weapon in its drive towards protectionism.

The Russian leader pointed to the presence of large numbers of foreign executives at the event as evidence that the U.S. sanctions were failing to achieve their aim.

## Lebanon Tells Syria Development Law Could Hinder Refugees' Return

BEIRUT (Reuters) - Lebanon expressed concern to Syria over a new law aimed at redeveloping areas devastated by seven years of war, saying the initiative could hinder the return of many Syrian refugees to their homeland.



Lebanese Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil wrote in a letter to his Syrian counterpart Walid al-Moualem that the terms of "Law 10" could make it difficult for refugees to prove property ownership, and in turn discourage some from returning. The legislation came into effect last month as the army was on the brink of crushing the last insurgent enclaves near Damascus, consolidating President Bashar al-Assad's grip over nearly all of western Syria.

It allows people to prove they own property in the areas chosen for redevelopment, and to claim compensation. But aid groups say the chaos of war means few will be able to do so in the time specified. The law has yet to be applied.

Bassil, whose country hosts more than a million Syrian refugees, voiced concern over the limited time frame given for refugees to prove possession of their properties. "The inability of the refugees to practically present what proves their possession (of their properties) during the given time limit might lead to them losing their properties and their sense of national identity," Bassil said in the letter, according to a Foreign Ministry statement.

"This would deprive them of one of the main incentives for their come return to Syria," he added, echoing comments earlier by Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri. Hariri said the law "tells thousands of Syrian families to stay in Lebanon" by threatening them with property confiscation.

Bassil sent a similar letter to U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, calling for action to protect the rights of Syrian refugees in maintaining their properties.

## Syria Says it Has Named a Constitutional Committee

Courtesy from the Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria — Syria's Foreign Ministry says it has handed to the Russian and Iranian ambassadors in Damascus a list of the members it has named to a committee to review the national constitution. Control over the constitutional process has been a key point of conflict between Presi-



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