

Why France demanded to serve wine at meal with Iran's leader

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) This week Iranian President Hassan Rohani will become the first leader of the Islamic Republic to travel to Europe in a decade. And while he isn't scheduled to arrive in France until Monday, his visit has already sparked outrage across the country.

The uproar has nothing to do with Iran's nuclear program or potential business deals. Instead it was set off by Rohani's refusal to dine at the presidential palace in Paris if wine is served at the meal.

France's RTL radio reported that Iran requested a halal menu, which customarily means no alcohol. Yet France was unwilling to break with the tradition of serving French wine at official state lunches and dinners.

The *Washington Post* reported that Iran's request— based on Islamic law—"amounted to culinary sacrilege in France, a nation that puts the secular ideals of the Republic above all else."

The Post notes that the stir over fermented grapes plays into French domestic identity politics:

France is also in the grips of a domestic culture war, with its right wing raising alarms over "Islamification" that has spilled into its deep national relationship with food. The far-right National Front, for instance, has railed against the rise of kebab stands in the country of quiche.

Rohani and French President Francois Hollande have reportedly settled instead for a face-to-face chat next Tuesday after the Iranians refused to agree to an alcohol-free breakfast. RTL reported that they promptly rejected the counter offer because it appeared too "cheap."

France 24 reports that the controversy has threatened to overshadow Rohani's landmark visit. And advisors to Hollande have not hidden their frustration over the fuss, which they called "ridiculous," according to the French daily *Le Monde*.

Le Monde reported on Monday that French officials are due to travel to Iran this week to finalize the details of the trip. Business leaders hope the brouhaha over wine won't set the wrong tone for pending trade deals.

Rohani's visit comes four months after Iran and leading world powers, including France, reached an agreement aimed at limiting Iran's nuclear program in exchange for relief from international sanctions. The nuclear deal and the Syrian conflict are among the most pressing issues that he is expected to discuss with Hollande.

The two countries are also expected to sign several major political and business agreements next week. Analysts say Paris may initially secure deals in areas that were not specifically hit by sanctions imposed by the European Union and United States, most notably in agriculture and livestock, where France has relatively little activity in Iran.

"We are preparing certain agreements and memorandums of cooperation in industry in general, automobile, the energy sector which is important ... in the air and rail transport sectors," Iran's ambassador to France Ali Ahani told RFI radio. "There are a lot of contacts in the automobile sector and things are progressing. I'm optimistic in different fields."

This report includes material for the Associated Press and Reuters.