

**Looking at Iran: Perspectives on Contemporary Iran and Iranian Culture in Germany
and Israel, University of Haifa, March 29, 2009**

Trivialisation and Economic Cooperation

Perception of the Iranian threat in Germany and Austria

By Stephan Grigat*

When following the German discussion on the Islamic Republic one repeatedly encounters the assertion of an ongoing “demonisation” of Iran.¹ Sabine Schiffer for instance alleges the construction of a “Bogeyman Iran.” In her opinion – cf. an article she wrote and the *Campaign against Sanctions and Military Intervention in Iran* (CASMI) published on their website – the Islamic Republic is subject to “demonisation” through metaphors, comparable to those employed during national-socialist agitation against Jews². In Austria Georg Hoffmann-Ostenhof, *Profil's* chief editor for international policy, Austria's largest weekly, labels criticism of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as “hysteria”.³ Gudrun Harrer, *Der Standard's* (left-liberal Austrian daily) chief editor for international policy, uses the notion of “Iranophobia”⁴ – an expression deployed by the Iranian regime to delegitimise any criticism directed against the Islamic revolution and law.

This author's view runs contrary to the claim in contemporary Austria and Germany of a prevalent demonisation of Iran insofar as he contends that relevant opinion leaders of these successor states to Nazi-Germany trivialise the Iranian regime. The trivialisation of Iran enables a continuation, even an expansion of the economic and political cooperation Austria and Germany conducted for the past 30 years.

Authors who portray Iranian society factually and refrain from diminishing the Iranian threat certainly exist, e.g. Wahied Wadath-Hagh of the German daily *Die Welt*, Henryk M. Broder of *Der Spiegel* or Christian Ortner, a prominent columnist in Austria. Occasionally Israeli voices find themselves represented in German and Austrian media outlets as well, voices who firmly warn against the threats of the Iranian nuclear programme.⁵ Similarly some political

¹ For example, see Christoph Bertram: Partner, nicht Gegner. Für eine andere Iran-Politik. Hamburg: Edition Körber 2008, p. 66

² Schiffer, Sabine: Anmerkungen zur Selbstbeweihräucherung in Sachen Israelsolidarität. <http://www.campaigniran.org/casmii/index.php?q=node/7385>, Jan 23, 2009 (March 21, 2009).

³ Georg Hoffmann-Ostenhof: Dr. Seltsam. Wer hat Angst vor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad?, in: *profil*, Nr. 40, 2007.

⁴ Gudrun Harrer: Im Dschungel der iranischen Politik, in: *Der Standard*, 14. 3. 2008.

⁵ For example, see Shimon Stein: Dialog mit der Zentrifuge, in: *Die Zeit*, 26. 2. 2009.

scientists, such as Matthias Küntzel, draw a realistic picture of the Iranian threat.⁶ Due to limited space the focus will remain on the *majority* of publications and statements, a majority with a clear tendency to minimize the danger of the Iranian regime becoming nuclear.

During the '80s and the '90s the suppression of women, the persecution of the opposition parties and groups, and the international terrorist activities of the regime comprised the main topics of German and Austrian discussion on Iran. Since the beginning of the 21st century a shift occurred and the Iranian nuclear programme, as well as its threats of extermination against Israel emerged as the predominate topics. This article will outline some of the established lines of reasoning, used by substantial parts of the Austrian and German media, politics and science to suggest the inexistence of an Iranian threat – or at the very least its considerably lesser degree of severity in comparison to assertions by critics of the Islamic regime. In conjunction with this line of reasoning possible explanations for similar cognitive dissonances shall be explored.

The details of Iran's Holocaust denial and its reception in Germany and Austria demand another article. Nevertheless – before proceeding to the perception of Iran in the political mainstream of Austria and Germany – a few words on the extreme right, whose enthusiasm does not limit itself to the Tehranian regime's denial of the Holocaust. Especially those authors, who allude to a “demonisation” of Iran or to “Iranophobia”, tend to assert that critics of the regime perform the job of right-wing extremists. An odd assessment considering the Iranian regime enjoys the solidarity of German Nazis and Austrian right-wingers. Due to their ethno-pluralistic and culturalistic concepts, simultaneously agitating against Muslims in Germany and Austria and fraternising with the Islamic Republic poses no problem for said right-wing extremists. Jürgen Gansel, one of the chief ideologists of the neo-Nazi *National-Democratic Party* of Germany, postulates: “The Muslims can be certain of the solidarity of nationalists against American neo-colonialism and Israeli state terrorism. Unquestionably Iran has the right to self-determined usage of atomic energy without interference by the hostile atomic powers USA and Israel.”⁷ Sascha Roßmüller, vice-chairman of the NPD, articulates his wishes in front of Iranian journalists as follows: „I hope for two things. On the one hand: that the NPD will soon obtain the power-political clout necessary to shape Germany, and that

⁶ See Matthias Küntzel: *Friedlich in die Katastrophe. Deutschlands Rolle im Atomstreit mit dem Iran*, in: Stephan Grigat/Simone Dinah Hartmann (ed.): *Der Iran – Analyse einer islamischen Diktatur und ihrer europäischen Förderer*. Innsbruck – Wien – Bozen: Studienverlag 2008, p. 181-202. Scholars like Küntzel are attacked by authors like Sabine Schiffer, who accuses him for speaking like a Nazi-Anti-Semite (see Schiffer: *Anmerkungen zur Selbstbeweihräucherung in Sachen Israelsolidarität*) – an accusation, which is completely unacceptable.

⁷ Jürgen W. Gansel: *Der Nationalismus im „Kampf der Kulturen“*. Eine Positionsbestimmung zwischen Islamismus und Amerikanismus; http://www.npd.de/index.php?sek=0&pfad_id=9&cmsint_id=1&detail=309

Mr. Ahmadinejad will then be still on hand as a potential ally for a new Germany.”⁸ The radical right-wing newspaper *Nationalzeitung* praises “traditionally German-friendly Iran” and fantasises, that “fear of the Iranian nuclear programme is being systematically fuelled in Germany.”⁹ By the same token Heinz-Christian Strache, leader of the right-wing *Austrian Freedom Party*, campaigns for the regime in Tehran and rages against the “radical outlawing of Iran, modelled on the US-approach.”¹⁰ Furthermore three prominent Austrian right-wing activists, namely neo-Nazi lawyer Herbert Schaller, former FPÖ-district councillor Wolfgang Fröhlich and the author of *Zur Zeit* Hans Gamlich, took part in the Holocaust Denial Conference in Tehran in 2006.

Not only neo-Nazis and right-wing extremists in Austria and Germany, but the Iranian regime's friends and protectors on the left equally praise the theocracy. Oskar Lafontaine, head of the German party *Die Linke*, notices similarities between left-wing and Islamic concepts, and raises the question, whether Iran does not have the right, to be equipped with nuclear weapons, in light of its apparent concession to Israel.¹¹ Tobias Pflüger, who represents *Die Linke* in the European Parliament and its foreign affairs committee, constantly agitates against any form of tightened pressure on the regime in Tehran.¹² The anti-imperialist left boasts groups, which escalate even further. To mention just one example: the Austrian Trotskyist *League of the Socialist Revolution*, which is known as *Group Worker's Power* in Germany, postulates: “For the right of Iran, to establish and utilize nuclear facilities – for peaceful as well as military matters!”, and: “For the military defence of Iran against the imperialist aggression!”¹³

But let us take a look at the political mainstream: The Iranian regime has been propagating the annihilation of Israel since the “Islamic Revolution” in 1979, it finds itself on the edge of achieving the appropriate means to put this threat into practice, and it continuously facilitates the dissemination of anti-Semitic propaganda. How do Austria and Germany respond?

On days of remembrance, such as the 9th of November or the 27th of January, representatives of nearly all political backgrounds in Austria and Germany exercise themselves in cautioning and admonishing with regard to the National-Socialist past. But criticism of contemporary

(August 13, 2007).

⁸ Report Mainz: Antisemitismus und Schwulenhass. NPD-Funktionäre reden Klartext, Sendung vom 10. 12. 2007, ARD; <http://www.swr.de/report/-/id=233454/nid=233454/did=2769038/iialvn/index.html> (December 11, 2007).

⁹ http://www.dsz-verlag.de/Artikel_07/NZ51_1.html (December 14, 2007).

¹⁰ OTS-Presseaussendung des Freiheitlichen Parlamentsclubs, 30. 11. 2007.

¹¹ See Jörg Lau: Oskar Haider, in: *Die Zeit*, Nr. 26, 2005; http://hermes.zeit.de/pdf/archiv/2005/26/Spr_9fche.pdf (November 1, 2007).

¹² See <http://tobiaspflueger.twoday.net/stories/4528690/> (December 13, 2007).

anti-Semitism in its Islamic and Iranian form hardly passes the lips of a speaker during these rituals of commemoration. Of course you could name exceptions to this statement: This year for example a discussion- and commemoration meeting took place at the Bavarian *Landtag* on January 27 – a meeting that explicitly combined the commemoration of the liberation of Auschwitz with warnings against the Iranian nuclear programme. Given the fact that similar events represent isolated cases, it would stand to reason that commemoration in Austria and Germany limits itself nowadays to dead Jews, while the Jewish state facing the Iranian threat is being denied solidarity.

This assumption is – among other things – mirrored in the fact, that leading political analysts in Germany call for dialogue with the Iranian regime and allied jihadist groups – such as Hamas or Hisbollah. Muriel Asseburg, who is an expert for the Middle East at the *German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik)*, a think tank that advises the German government and parliament on foreign policy, regards “the present policy of isolation [...] towards Iran” as “counterproductive” and intends to take Iran’s “legitimate interests seriously.”¹⁴ Volker Perthes, head of the *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, pursues the same approach and demands consideration of the „interests of all relevant actors”¹⁵ in the conflict with Iran. In Austria Georg Hoffmann-Ostenhof suggests “legitimate security interests” of the Islamic Republic.¹⁶ This jargon, originating from the Realist school of international relations, completely abstracts from the character of the Iranian regime. It pretends as though Iran were just another state akin to Iceland or Ireland, and not an Islamo-fascist dictatorship, whose founder openly stated that his interpretation of Islam lays claim to global domination.

Influential authors in Austria and Germany systematically repudiate the menace that emanates from this dictatorship and its nuclear programme. Christoph Bertram, who used to head the *International Institute for Strategic Services* in London and later the *German Institute for International and Security Affairs* declares: “The danger of a nuclear armed Iran would be [...] manageable.”¹⁷ “The contemporary development does not amount to a manifest nor to an immediate danger.”¹⁸ “There is no convincing reason for the assumption, that the Islamic

¹³ Michael Pröbsting: Zu den Waffen! USA und Israel drohen mit neuen Krieg gegen den Iran, <http://www.arbeiterinnenstandpunkt.net/> (August 27, 2007).

¹⁴ Muriel Asseburg: Wie weiter nach der Waffenruhe?, in: Internationale Politik, September 2006, p. 104f.

¹⁵ Volker Perthes: Iran – Eine politische Herausforderung. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2008, p. 121.

¹⁶ Hoffmann-Ostenhof: Aufwind für die Tauben. Entwarnung an der Iran-Front, in: profil, No. 50, 2007.

¹⁷ Bertram: Partner, nicht Gegner, p. 86.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

Republic of Iran would use nuclear weapons for any other reason than deterrence of external threats.”¹⁹ “Iran is to be conceded to continue its nuclear programme for the moment.”²⁰

The Innsbruck-based political scientist Gerhard Mangott also argues, that a nuclear armed Iran would represent no existential threat for Israel. Udo Steinbach, former head of the Middle East department of the *German Institute for International and Security Affairs* and director of the *German Orient Institute* said in an interview: “Europe should not feel threatened”, should Iran secure nuclear weapons.²¹ Perthes, Bertram, Mangott, and Steinbach exemplify a whole series of scientists. Their positions routinely appear in the most important Austrian and German media, and they strongly influence the discussion on the Iranian regime in these two countries. Their main argument for an all-clear signal regarding Iranian nuclear weapons implies, that even an Iran in possession of such weapons would be contained by the military deterrence capability of Israel and its assumed arsenal of nuclear weaponry. According to those views, Iran constitutes a rational actor who would never employ an atomic bomb.

First of all many participants in the German-speaking discussion underestimate the concurrence of pragmatism and irrationality, that characterises the Iranian regime. Second, the apocalyptic and messianic elements of the ideology of the regime go unheeded. The same holds true in regards to the ideology of martyrdom. In the German-speaking discussion the regime in Tehran frequently ranks on the same level with authoritarian regimes such as Russia or Algeria.²² The *specific* danger of the Iranian regime, which results from the combination of apocalyptic martyrdom, anti-Semitism and the aspiration for technology of mass destruction; very few authors in Germany and Austria – for example Matthias Küntzel – turn this into a topic of discussion.²³

Third, people ignore the fact that Iran would not even have to use nuclear weapons to endanger Israel’s existence, and to change the rules of the game of international relations in favour of Islamic Jihadism. The Iranian bomb – in contrast to the assumed Israeli nuclear weapons – would lead to a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. The Austrian and German discussion rarely mentions those consequences of an Iranian atomic bomb, that Yossi Klein Halevi and Michael Oren outlined: “No Arab partner will be able to make concessions to

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 30.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 50.

²¹ <http://www.eurasischesmagazin.de/artikel/?artikelID=20070404>, April 30, 2007 (March 26, 2009).

Steinbach is part of the Academic Advisory Board of the Campaign Against Sanctions and Military Intervention in Iran. See <http://www.campaigniran.org/casmii/?q=node/6012> (March 26, 2009).

²² For example, see Gerhard Mangott: Über die Rationalität iranischen Erdgases, in: Die Presse, December 22, 2007.

²³ See Matthias Küntzel: Ahmadinejads Mission. Warum die iranische Nuklearoption verhindert werden muss, April 25, 2008 (March 26, 2009).

Israel with a nuclear Iran standing over them. Israel will find its military options severely limited. Foreign investors will flee the country, and many Israelis will, too. In one poll, 27 percent of Israelis said they would consider leaving if Iran went nuclear.” Oren and Halevi summarize: „The promise of Zionism to create a Jewish refuge will have failed, and, instead, Jews will see the diaspora as a more trustworthy option for both personal and collective survival.“²⁴ Instead of taking such scenarios seriously, leading political analysts and commentators in Germany and Austria advise Israel to resign itself to the Iranian atomic bomb.

The threats of annihilation against Israel allegedly serve solely “internal purposes”, and merely constitute rhetoric. They are considered as means used by the regime to distract from economic and social problems.²⁵ It escapes these opinion leader's attention that anti-Semitism represents not one tactic among others, but belongs to the ideological core of Islamic Jihadism. Regarding the threats of annihilation against Israel these authors suggest, that they are confined only to president Ahmadinejad. Supposedly the problem will resolve itself should Ahmadinejad lose elections in June. In their mind a solution to the Middle East conflict or an improvement of the situation of the Palestinians would bring an end to the Iranian threats of annihilation.²⁶

On the one hand these explanations omit, that not only the present Iranian president, but the entire regime calls for the extermination of Israel. Hardly any articles in Germany and Austria point to such utterances made by the strong man of Iran, the Supreme Leader Khamenei, or by other members of the political system. On the other hand they fail to take into account, that in regards to the Middle East conflict the Iranian regime harbours no interest in the improvement of the situation of the Palestinians. The Iranian regime displays no disposition towards a compromise and settlement, or even a two state solution, but promotes and pursues the “liberation of the whole of Palestine” – a euphemism for the annihilation of the Jewish state. These activities started not with Ahmadinejad’s presidency, but 30 years ago. As David

²⁴ Michael Oren/ Yossi Klein Halevi: Israel’s worst nightmare. http://www.aish.com/jewishissues/middleeast/Israels_Worst_Nightmare.asp (March 22, 2009). In German see Michael Oren/ Yossi Klein Halevi: Israels Alptraum. Zur Rezeption der iranischen Gefahr im Staat der Shoahüberlebenden, in: Stephan Grigat/Simone Dinah Hartmann (ed.): Der Iran – Analyse einer islamischen Diktatur und ihrer europäischen Förderer. Innsbruck – Wien – Bozen: Studienverlag 2008, p.90-101.

²⁵ For example, see Gerhard Mangott: Das Interesse Israels, in: Die Presse, September 14, 2007. See also Amirpur, Katajun: Religiöse Minderheit unter Druck, in: taz, February 10, 2009.

²⁶ For example, see Sarah Shokouhbeen: Die Islamische Republik Iran. Regimestabilität und Atomkonflikt, in: Jochen Hippler (Hg.): Von Marokko bis Afghanistan. Krieg und Frieden im Nahen und Mittleren Osten. Hamburg: Konkret Literatur Verlag 2008, p. 121.

Meshari put it once: „Iran’s attitude to Israel was one of the rare examples of adherence to dogma.“²⁷

In the German-speaking discussion the anti-Semitic character of the Iranian regime is denied by referring to the Jewish community still remaining in Iran. Certainly the Jews do not face persecution in the same systematic manner as the Baha’i. Nonetheless this reference conceals the unequal status of Jews in the Islamic Republic. Their rights remain in place only when they resign themselves to live as a discriminated and considerably disfranchised minority and they irrevocably disassociate themselves from Israel. These discussions likewise refrain from addressing the possibility that due to the ideological direction of the regime the systematic discrimination can turn into open persecution at any time and that Khomeini’s ideology not only targets the state of Israel, but also Judaism and the Jews – to both of which Khomeini openly declared his enmity.

Occasionally some in Austria and Germany contend, that Ahmadinejad not even mentioned wiping Israel off the map. Rather they characterise such portrayals of Ahmadinejad's words as mistranslations.²⁸ Despite their small size a left-wing group called *Arbeiterfotographie* successfully disseminated this contention. Katajun Amirpur in the daily newspaper *Süddeutsche* picked it up for instance.²⁹ Every time a public lecture on the Iranian threat takes place in Germany or Austria somebody mentions it. Incidentally they ignore that Ahmadinejad himself published the speech in question on his English-speaking homepage.³⁰ Be that as it may: The commonly accepted and supposedly correct German translation reads: “The regime, that occupies Jerusalem has to be erased from the annals of history”. This of course means nothing less than demanding the extermination of Israel.

To sum it up: The German and Austrian perception of the Islamic Republic of Iran features both trivialisation of the anti-Semitic character of the regime, by down-playing the threats of the Iranian nuclear programme to Israel and the West and – a motif worth of further investigation elsewhere – ignorance towards those voices of the secular opposition in Iran and in exile, who do not promote such trivializations.

Why is this kind of perception flourishing in Austria and Germany?

²⁷ David Menashri: Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran. Religion, Society and Power. New York: Routledge 2001, p. 281

²⁸ For example, see Schiffer Anmerkungen zur Selbstbeweihräucherung in Sachen Israelsolidarität.

²⁹ Katajun Amirpur: Der iranische Schlüsselsatz, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, March 26, 2008.

³⁰ It was also published on the Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran: „O dear Imam (Khomeini)! You said the Zionist Regime that is a usurper and illegitimate regime and a cancerous tumor should be wiped off the map. I should say that your illuminating remark and cause is going to come true today. The Zionist Regime has lost its existence philosophy, the Zionist regime faces a complete deadend and under God’s grace your wish will soon be materialized and the corrupt element will be wiped off the map.“ June 2, 2008 (March 26, 2009).

1. By means of their policy towards Iran Austria and Germany pursue economic and political issues. I will concentrate on these topics in my following remarks.
2. In parts of the public opinion, in the media and even in parts of the political arena a certain naiveté regarding the Islamist ideology seemingly prevails. Obviously displeasure over facing a serious threat and drawing inconvenient consequences exists, noticeable in the comparatively reluctant course of action against Islamist organisations in Austria and Germany themselves.³¹
3. Austria and Germany have to be characterised as post-National-Socialist societies,³² susceptible to secret admirations for the anti-Western furor of the Iranian regime. Despite relying out of necessity on speculations in this field, one should remain aware of the fact, that a specific kind of resentment plays a role even at the top ranks of politics and economy. Several surveys brought terrible results concerning the population to the surface: In 2003 65 percent of the Germans thought of Israel as being the biggest threat to world peace – dead level with North Korea, and distinctly ahead of Iran.³³ In 2008 77 percent of the population displayed a negative attitude towards Israel according to a BBC-poll – a more negative outcome than either North Korea or Iran.³⁴ This utterly skewed perception of the Middle East conflict, which always perceives Israel as the troublemaker, influences the perception of Iran: The public opinion in Austria and Germany is more than willing to deem the utterances of Iranian politicians and clerics, which aim at the extermination of Israel as essentially justifiable criticism of Israeli behaviour towards the Palestinians.

The relations between Germany and Iran have been some of the closest between the Islamic Republic and any Western nation. The same holds true for Austria. After 1979 Austria and Germany formed the political vanguard in regards to leading the Islamic Republic out of international isolation. Already shortly after Khomeini's seizure of power the respective governments laid the groundwork for the good relations between Austria and the Mullah-dictatorship. After the overthrow of the Shah federal chancellor Bruno Kreisky expressed that nothing has changed for Austria. He explained that Austria maintains relations with Iran as a state and not with the actual government. While the USA imposed sanctions on Iran in

³¹ For example, the Hisbollah is still not banned in Germany and the German Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (the think tank of the Social-democratic Party of Germany) organized a conference together with Hisbollah in Beirut in 2006.

³² See Stephan Grigat (ed.): Transformation des Postnazismus. Der deutsch-österreichische Weg zum demokratischen Faschismus. Freiburg 2003

³³ See http://www.welt.de/print-welt/article270732/Laut_Umfrage_sehen_EU_Buerger_in_Israel_die_groesste_Gefahr_fuer_den_Weltfrieden.html, November 4, 2003 (March 1 2009).

reaction to the seizure of its embassy in Tehran, and requested Western nations to follow suit, Austria referred to its neutrality, an act greatly appreciated in Tehran. As a result of this policy Vienna emerged as one of the centres, via which the Khomeini-regime established economic relations with other European countries during the 1980s.

In 1984 Austrian Social-Democrat Erwin Lanc was the first Western minister of foreign affairs to visit Iran. His German counterpart Hans-Dietrich Genscher followed him merely a month later. In 1991 Kurt Waldheim, the Austrian federal president with a Nazi-past, became the first Western head of state to pay the regime in Tehran a courtesy visit. He lay a wreath at Khomeini's sarcophagus. His visit precluded further visits by high-ranking politicians from several Western European countries – especially from Germany.

Aside from the economic interests a political one takes shape. Throughout all parties in Germany a strategic approach, which focuses on a disengagement from the USA, established itself. Egon Bahr for example, one of the opinion leaders of German *Social-Democracy*, regularly demanded a “policy of détente” towards the Islamic states for years, in order for Europe to attain a better standing in its competition with the United States.³⁵ Kinan Jaeger, a political scientist at the *University of Bonn*, recently spelled out its significance in regards to Iran. In a publicly financed quarterly newsletter widely read in the German foreign policy community, he wrote: “Anyone who is capable of bringing Iran to his side, is not only ‘set for life’ as far as energy logistics are concerned, but could also face the U.S. in a different way.” From the perspective of a German-Iranian alliance the atomic weapons programme would even be appreciated. Jaeger continues: Through the “attainment of an atomic bomb”, Iran would “become a hegemonic power in the Gulf and would be capable of confronting the U.S. in the Gulf region more or less ‘as an equal.’”³⁶ Such a statement blatantly uncovers the implicit intentions of a „strategic partnership“ between Germany and Iran, an aspiration shared by German political advisers Christoph Bertram and Volker Perthes.

The good political relations, briefly impaired by the aftermath of the Mykonos-Trial in Germany³⁷, laid the foundation for the substantial economic cooperation between Austria, Germany and the Iranian regime. In 2006 the president of the Iranian chamber of commerce

³⁴ See <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,470061,00.html>, March 6, 2007 (March 3, 2009).

³⁵ See http://www.welt.de/print-welt/article452562/Das_Interview_Wann_wachen_wir_endlich_auf.html, (February 27, 2009)

³⁶ Der Mittler-Brief, No. 3, 2007, p. 7. See also Matthias Küntzel: The Theran-Berlin-Axis, in: Wall Street Journal, May 15, 2008.

³⁷ See Norbert Siegmund: Der Mykonos-Prozeß. Ein Terroristen-Prozeß unter dem Einfluß von Außenpolitik und Geheimdiensten. Deutschlands unkritischer Dialog mit dem Iran. Münster et al.: Lit-Verlag 2001

Ali Naghi Khamoushi emphasized: “Austria is the gateway to the European Union for us”.³⁸ In April 2007 the *OMV*, Austria’s top listed industrial company and the biggest oil corporation in Central Europe, signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Iran concerning the completion of a joint natural gas project. The company has not publicized any figures regarding the financial scope of the investment, but the Austrian daily newspaper *Der Standard* reported that the contract with the *National Iranian Oil Company* amounts to nearly 22 billion Euros over the next 25 years. According to the Federal Ministry of Economics and Labour Austria imported commodities worth 222 million Euros from Iran and exported commodities worth 315 million Euros to Iran in the year 2006. Austrian exports to Iran have nearly doubled since 2002. However, a comparison with German exports to Iran, ranging in the *billions* for quite some time, reveals that not until *OMV*’s billion Euro deal materializes, will Austria be elevated to a long-term strategic partner of the mullah dictatorship. For a long time the Austrian federal government unconditionally supported *OMV*’s business with Iran. Meanwhile critical statements concerning a contract formation at the present date were made public. *OMV* represents not the only company eager to intensify its business with Iran: around 650 Austrian companies are busy there. According to an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, the Austrian *Raiffeisenbank* repeatedly replaced European banks backing out of the Islamic Republic.

Several renowned German companies are involved in major Iranian infrastructure projects, especially in the petrochemical sector, such as *Linde*, *BASF*, *Krupp*, *Siemens*, *Mercedes*, *Volkswagen* and *MAN*. Annual trade between Germany and Iran totals roughly 4 *billion* Euros, making the federal republic Tehran's most important European trade partner. From January to November 2008, German exports to Iran grew by 10.5 per cent compared to the same period a year earlier. According to Germany’s export control office, commerce in the year 2007 included 39 “dual-use” contracts, i.e. equipment and technology usable both for military and civilian purposes.

According to the *German-Iranian Chamber of Industry and Commerce*, “75% of all small and medium-sized factories in Iran contain German technology.” As a result, “Iran is certainly dependent on German spare parts and suppliers,” as Michael Tockuss, at that time director of the Chamber, told German weekly *Focus* in 2006.³⁹ Tockuss estimates: “Some two thirds of Iranian industry relies on German engineering products.” That means: Of all places Germany possesses

³⁸ For the Iranian-Austrian relations see Stephan Grigat/ Florian Ruttner/ Farideh Azadieh: Geschäft und Verbrechen. Ökonomische Kooperation mit dem Iran und die postnazistische Gesellschaft in Österreich, in: Stephan Grigat/ Simone Dinah Hartmann (ed.): *Der Iran – Analyse einer islamischen Diktatur und ihrer europäischen Förderer*. Innsbruck – Wien – Bozen: Studienverlag 2008, p. 214-235.

³⁹ See Küntzel: *Friedlich in die Kathastrophe*, p. 181.

the highest capability to put the Iranian regime under massive pressure. But how does German politics comport itself?

The following statement by German federal chancellor Angela Merkel echoed positively in Israel: “We must take the Iranian president’s rhetoric seriously.” On the occasion of the annual Munich Conference on Security Policy in 2006 Merkel emphasized, that the world must act now to stop Iran from developing a nuclear bomb: “We want, we must prevent Iran from developing its nuclear program further.” She emphasized Germany's own experiences during the 1930s: “Now we see that there were times when we could have acted differently [...]. For that reason Germany is obliged to clarify what is permissible and what is not.” Merkel said Iran had “blatantly crossed the red line”. It was “unacceptable” for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran to question the extent of the Holocaust: “A president that questions Israel’s right to exist, a president that denies the Holocaust, cannot expect to receive any tolerance from Germany”. And she added: “We have learned our history.”⁴⁰

This clear statement met with approval in Israel and the USA. But Merkel's tough political rhetoric stands in sharp contrast to the business deals German firms have closed with the Tehran regime. The German federal government and the chancellor so far focused on a so-called “voluntary self-control” of German companies and only advised big enterprises against doing business with Iran instead of prohibiting it. Notwithstanding the positions of the German chancellor, Herbert Honsowitz, the German ambassador in Tehran, assures at the same time, that “the German embassy tries to maintain and improve the connections between private companies of both countries.” While Merkel verbally urges restraint of trade and demands, „that the trade channels must not lead to Iran via detours“, the words and deeds of her diplomatic body tell another story. Honsowitz openly divulges, that the main part of German exports reaches Iran indirectly via Dubai and that he thinks such deception is worth backing.⁴¹ Given the reality of this double game the assumption is permissible, that Merkel’s lip service is predominantly to be understood as a skilful strategy, to move German companies out of the line of fire of international criticism.

The fact that “voluntary self-control” makes no impact became obvious in the beginning of 2009 at the latest, as it became apparent, that German trade with Iran increases further, despite all appeals by the federal government.⁴² International criticism has however led to the fact that

⁴⁰ <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/05/international/europe/05munich.html>, February 5, 2006 (March 24, 2009).

⁴¹ See Küntzel: *Friedlich in die Katastrophe*, p. 182

⁴² See

http://www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/international/bluehende_geschaefte_deutschlands_mit_iran_1.2087809.html, February 25, 2009 (March 26, 2009)

the German economy tries to prevent open discussion about its engagement in Iran. According to the German business paper *Handelsblatt* “German companies are trying [...] not to publicize their contracts with Iran.”⁴³

Even the so far inconclusive calls for an extension of sanctions by the chancellor encountered severe resistance in Germany. For example chancellor Merkel aspired for a suspension of the Hermes-guarantees – the government guarantees, by which German policy hedges and fosters its foreign commerce. This suspension would not have even remotely qualified as a consistent policy of sanctions towards Iran, but it would have meant a step in the right direction – nevertheless due to the resistance of the industry and the minister for economic affairs its failure would have been all but certain.

Despite the threats emanating from the Iranian regime, Germany remains Iran’s most important trading partner in the West. German companies continuously support the regime and undermine international efforts to divert Iran from its aggressive course via sanctions. Minister of foreign affairs Frank-Walter Steinmeier admittedly supports further UN sanctions, should Tehran remain unwilling to relent, although not prior to autumn of this year. Despite the acid rhetoric Germany obviously refuses to impose consistent unilateral sanctions.

Spelling out consequences emerging from the German trade with Iran constitutes the exception in the German debate to date. The coalition *STOP THE BOMB* represents one of these rare exceptions, in its attempt to enforce sanctions against Iran in Austria and Germany and to openly promote a discussion about the character of the Iranian regime. Their online petition appropriately states: „To stop the Iranian bomb, the regime must be subjected to politically and economically targeted pressure. The German government has failed to apply sanctions on a national level and has blocked important international sanctions; German-Iranian business ties have not been effectively restricted but were partly even promoted. Verbal reprobation of the Iranian regime and declarations of solidarity with Israel must be followed by action. Those who trade with the unpredictable Iranian regime are supporting the oppression of the Iranian people, international terrorism, the nuclear armament of Iran, anti-Semitic hate crimes, as well as Holocaust denial.”⁴⁴

Whenever talking about the perception of Iran in Germany and Austria, one of the most important aspects to keep in mind is that those countries consider Iran a significant economic market. A fitting example for such an assertion is a guidebook, published in 2008 and titled “Business Success in Iran”. This guidebook draws a comparatively realistic picture of the

⁴³ <http://www.handelsblatt.com/unternehmen/banken-versicherungen/usa-draengen-deutsche-firmen-aus-iran;1202748>, January 11, 2007, (March 26, 2009)

conditions in the Islamic Republic and for example alerts the reader to the discrimination against the Iranian Jews. Despite these depictions, it characterises Iran as one of the most important growth markets for consumer and investment goods in reference to the federal agency for foreign commerce, and wishes “Good luck with your business.”⁴⁵

Discussing a realistic evaluation of the Iranian regime and an appropriate and responsible policy towards Iran, which takes Israel’s security interests seriously, only makes sense, if Austria and Germany played the vanguard of a struggle for a consistent regime of sanctions against Iran. But currently the opposite proves the case. Admittedly minor changes in the positioning of the Austrian and German governments in regards to a consistent extension of sanctions occurred during the past year. However these changes predominantly resulted from the US increasingly applying pressure. Beyond superficial modifications no indication of a substantial change of policy is yet discernible. Austria and Germany, the successor states of National-Socialism, still accommodate the Iranian regime with economic cooperation and political appeasement.

* **Stephan Grigat**, studied political science in Berlin and Vienna; holds a PhD from the Free University of Berlin; since 2003 lecturer at University of Vienna, Department of Political Science; research fellow in Tel Aviv in 2005; since 2008 scientific advisor for the STOP THE BOMB-coalition (www.stopthebomb.net) in Austria, author of „Fetisch und Freiheit. Die Rezeption der Marxschen Fetischkritik, die Emanzipation von Staat und Kapital und die Kritik des Antisemitismus“ (ça ira 2007), editor of „Transformation des Postnazismus. Der deutsch-österreichische Weg zum demokratischen Faschismus“ (ça ira 2003) and „Feindaufklärung und Reeducation. Kritische Theorie gegen Postnazismus und Islamismus“ (ça ira 2006), co-editor of „Der Iran – Analyse einer islamischen Diktatur und ihrer europäischen Förderer“ (Studienverlag 2008) and “Iran im Weltsystem. Bündnisse des Regimes und Perspektiven der Freiheitsbewegung” (Studienverlag 2010).

⁴⁴ STOP THE BOMB: Cut off Deals with the Iranian Regime!
<http://de.stopthebomb.net/en/start/germany/sign-now.html#c324> (February 26, 2009).

⁴⁵ Michael Gorges: Geschäftserfolg im Iran. Verhandeln, Arbeiten und Führen in der persischen Geschäftskultur. Zürich: Orell Füssli 2008, p. 19, 21.