

Germany seeks to normalise relations with Iran

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Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi paid a surprise visit to Germany on February 8. During the two-day trip he met with Foreign Affairs Minister Joschka Fischer (Green party), Federal Economics Minister Werner Müller (non-party), the chairman of the parliamentary foreign affairs committee, Hans Ulrich Klose, as well as Bundestag (parliament) President Wolfgang Thierse and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (all Social Democratic Party—SPD).

At the same time as Kharrazi's visit, protests were held in several large Iranian cities against the Islamic regime's repressive policies, in which several thousand took part. According to opposition statements, the demonstrations were forcibly broken up and hundreds arrested, with dozens hurt and one killed.

Kharrazi's trip was kept secret up to the last minute. In July last year Iranian President Mohammed Khatami visited Germany. Thousands of Iranian exiles protested against the visit at that time, despite a substantial police operation and a fierce press campaign against the Iranian opposition.

The German Foreign Ministry has revealed little about the content of the discussions with Kharrazi. A statement said that they involved regional questions relating to Chechnya, the situation in the Middle East following Israel's prime ministerial elections, and the situation in Iran itself, including relations between Iran and Germany. The statement went on to say that security and disarmament policies were also discussed, as well as the human rights situation in Iran. The German Foreign Ministry reported that the discussions went well.

The national Iranian press agency *IRNA* reported an "expansion of bilateral relations, particularly in the areas of economics and trade". It said that Germany had agreed to fund higher export credits. Iranian radio reportedly announced that the German government understood "that it must conduct its relations with Iran in such a way as not to interfere in the internal affairs of our country."

On February 18, Thierse travelled to Iran for four days. Chancellor Schröder, who had already announced a visit there "in the near future", accepted an invitation from President Khatami, with the reservation that "the right conditions" would have to exist. However, the Foreign Ministry did not want to say what these conditions were. Schroeder denied he was putting off the visit.

The Swiss daily *Neuer Züricher Zeitung* commented: "After Tehran condemned reformers for their participation in a conference in Berlin, in January Schröder initially postponed his travel plans. The harsh verdicts against journalists, writers and civil rights activists, as well as the general degradation of the human rights situation, put a burden on German-Iranian relations in January. The German ambassador to Teheran was recalled to the Foreign Ministry. Now Berlin has returned surprisingly quickly to its previous line of determined rapprochement with Iran..."

"During Khatami's visit to Germany last year the federal government left no doubt that within the European community it most clearly favoured closer relations with Teheran.... Human rights questions—as shown also by

the treatment of China and Russia—do not play a very large role in the foreign policy of the Red-Green coalition."

Propaganda and reality

The German press and government justified their warm reception for Kharrazi with the usual propaganda: contact must be preserved with President Khatami's Iranian government, i.e., the so-called "reformers", in order to strengthen them in the fight against the "conservative hard-liners".

Since Khatami's visit to Germany last July, in an almost parallel development, Iran's relations with Germany and the EU improved while repression and poverty within Iran worsened. A report in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of February 9 soberly summarised previous developments: "The counterattack by the Iranian opponents of reform against President Khatami and his reformers increasingly takes the shape of a campaign of destruction.... Khatami's warnings that social development is not possible without freedom ... sound ever more hollow."

In August, state religious leader Khamenei stopped all further discussion in Iran's parliament about relaxing press laws. Over the past nine months more than 30 newspapers and magazines, i.e., almost all the organs of the "reformers", have been banned. Almost two dozen journalists and publishers are in prison facing absurd accusations. About 80 politicians, student leaders and clerics are presently in jail or before the courts.

In August last year, following violent provocations by religious fanatics, street battles occurred between the religious militia and students and workers. Seventy were hurt, and a state of emergency was imposed. Meanwhile, 140 court proceedings are running—predominantly against the demonstrators.

In September an appeal tribunal imposed heavy sentences against 13 Iranian Jews accused of "espionage" in a political show trial. In January of this year their lawyers said the Supreme Court had rejected an appeal request.

At the beginning of October last year, the formation of a special unit to act against "cultural, social and economic uncertainty" was announced. Since then the unit has attacked and terrorised cafés, cinemas and private dwellings where men and women meet together and socialise. The unit, which recruits from among the religious fanatics, shows no restraint, even attacking defenceless women with clubs, who are subsequently arrested and sentenced by judges in short order.

At the end of November a conservative Iranian newspaper proudly announced that the unit had already been "employed" 40,000 times in 40 days. In January and February of this year private parties with several hundred guests were stormed, and several women were given 70 lashes of the whip in "punishment". This year two women have been condemned to death by stoning.

A new law raising the age of marriage for girls from nine years was blocked after it was vetoed by the conservative Council of Guardians, as was a law making it easier for women to study abroad.

In mid-January the court issued its verdict against Iranian participants in

the Berlin conference organised by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, which is close to the Green party. Journalist Akbar Ganji received the harshest punishment—10 years in prison, followed by banishment to a remote place. He had become famous for his articles and a book concerning the so-called “serial murders”. Ganji and other journalists had written how, during the 1990s under the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani, known today the “grey eminence” of the conservatives, hundreds of critical intellectuals were murdered. They accused Rafsanjani and his secret service chief at that time, Ali Fallahian, as well as other high-ranking politicians and clerics of pulling the strings.

At the end of January, fifteen accused were condemned—two to death—for four such murders up to the end of 1998. Official sources claim this was the full extent of the crimes.

None of the accused were highly placed. The judge determined that the crimes involved only an isolated group within the security apparatus. He stressed they had acted on their own initiative; the case was thereby closed and the judge strictly forbade any “unauthorised disclosures”.

Relatives of the victims boycotted the proclamation of the court's verdict as a “farce”. Their lawyers had never been shown, “for reasons of national security”, important documents, and some were even imprisoned themselves.

Leading “reformist” politicians had to face absurd accusations before the courts. These included well-known personalities such as Reza Khatami, the president's brother, the deputy Interior Minister Tajzadeh, and Culture Minister Mohajerani, who resigned last year following a furious campaign by the conservatives. The chairmen of the Council of Guardians and the Supreme Court openly attacked the parliamentary majority for allegedly holding attitudes that were too liberal.

Khatami and his supporters in parliament have not seriously opposed the offensive by the right wing, apart from repeating some clichés about the necessity for democracy and tolerance and the injurious nature of extremism and intolerance. In an interview he gave at the end of last year, Khatami complained that he lacked the means to prevent despotic actions and offences against the constitution.

But when the “reformers,” who hold more than two thirds of the seats in parliament, called for a constitutional amendment granting the president more authority, Khatami started back-peddalling: the constitution, he said, was “our common starting point, its modification is not acceptable”. In December, when the president was delivering a speech in front of students and was confronted by someone shouting “freedom for the political prisoners”, he responded by demanding to know how they knew that the prisoners were innocent.

In February of this year, the “reformers” threatened criminal proceedings against *Guardian* correspondent Geneive Abdo and her husband Jonathan Lyons, who headed the Iranian office of the *Reuters* press agency, forcing them to flee. The reason given was that Abdo had conducted an interview with Akbar Ganji in which Ganji warned that state repression would lead to a “social explosion”.

Abdo commented: “The radicalism of Mr. Ganji in his interview ... makes the broad reform movement vulnerable to criticism from the side of the conservative establishment. It wasn't possible to attack Mr. Ganji, who has been confirmed as a hero for the reformers following his political sentencing to 10 years in jail by a court of hard-liners, so I was attacked.”

European interests

The conservatives do not have any objections, however, to a limited opening up of the Iranian economy and intensified cooperation with the European Union (EU). They have not blocked privatisations or laws allowing the establishment of private banks and protecting foreign investments. In the summer and autumn of 2000, German Labour Minister Walter Riester and Economics Minister Mueller both visited Iran.

Müller's visit in October was followed by an economic delegation in November. Then came the first round of a German-Iranian investment

protection agreement, as well as contracts for Continental to supply technology for manufacturing tires, orders for over 20 diesel trains from Siemens, and for Krupp to build the world's largest plant producing polyethylene.

In addition, French, Italian, Russian and Japanese companies have invested in Iran's oil and gas sector. Altogether the European Union has more than a 50 percent share of Iranian foreign trade, while Germany is the country's largest individual trading partner, accounting for 1 to 1.5 billion German marks (10-15 percent) of Iranian exports. Schröder had agreed with Khatami last year to quadruple export credit guarantees to one billion marks.

German and European cooperation with Iran is part of their pursuit of wider political, economic and geo-strategic interests.

The country, situated between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, possesses the world's second largest reserves of natural gas and the fifth largest reserves of oil. Iran is extending its pipeline network substantially, and so far has engaged in negotiations with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, the Ukraine and Armenia regarding the transportation of oil and gas.

In January, the opening of a railway line was agreed with Turkey, going from Alma Ata (Kazakhstan) via Tashkent (Uzbekistan) and Tehran to Istanbul, connecting Central Asia economically with Europe. The European Union Commission recently announced it wanted to initiate negotiations with Iran over a global “trade and co-operation agreement”.

A not insignificant issue is the situation in the Middle East. It can hardly have escaped notice in the European Union that Iran, despite its radical verbal denunciations of Israel and the US, has not only improved relations with its traditional ally Syria, but also with the traditionally pro-Western regimes in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, as well as with Morocco, Egypt and Jordan, countries that have for a long time maintained comparatively good relations with Israel.

The *Neue Züricher Zeitung* commentated on February 9: “Brussels hopes that Iran's putative influence on radical Islamic groups will provide the dividend of strengthened bilateral relations with Teheran, and a constructive Iranian role in resolving or at least containing the Middle East conflict. The paralysis of the peace process blocks the EU's plans announced five years ago for the gradual building of an all-Mediterranean region of peace and stability, providing common prosperity and mutual understanding [prosaically: an economic union].

“Looking forward to better times, last November an EU foreign ministers' conference and their Euro-Med partner states acknowledged this policy, which despite all adversity Commission President Prodi tried to give new momentum with his trip to the Maghreb, and Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.”



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