

German Economics Minister Rushes to Exploit Business Opportunities in Iran

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Rarely in recent years have the foreign travels of a leading German politician caused such a stir as the visit earlier this month to Iran by the German Vice Chancellor and Minister for Economic Affairs Sigmar Gabriel (Social Democratic Party, SPD). With the ink barely dry on the recently-negotiated nuclear program agreement with Iran, Gabriel was already bound for Tehran in the company of a high-level business delegation.

Berlin's foray into one of the most strategically important and resource-rich countries in the Middle East—Iran has the fourth largest oil and second largest gas reserves in the world—is part of German imperialism's return to the world stage. Significantly, the visit took place the same week as the federal government enforced a brutal austerity program on Greece and German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier visited Cuba with a delegation.

Gabriel's trip to Iran was so sudden and his related objectives so obvious that even a number of media outlets, which otherwise regularly beat the drum for a more aggressive German participation in world affairs, felt compelled to comment critically on the expedition.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper called it “embarrassing” and warned: “Now the impression has been given that Germany is mainly concerned about its business interests. Arriving late is stupid, but sometimes flying off too early is a lot more stupid.”

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* also referred to Gabriel's trip as “quick off the mark, if not over-hasty.” The paper's columnist wrote that it might perhaps “help German industry to once again secure a foothold in this market after the long years of sanctions.” It was, however, “an ambiguous signal” in relation to German foreign policy, according to FAZ.

Criticism of Gabriel's delegation even came from within the government's own ranks: “I'm worried about the declaration that Iran is one of our friends,” said Roderich Kiesewetter (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), the CDU/Christian Social Union (CSU) alliance representative in the foreign affairs committee of the Bundestag (federal parliament). He added that Iran could only be “our friend and a stability factor in the region,” when it “actually recognises Israel's right to exist.” Former SPD parliamentarian and German-Israeli Society president Reinhold Robbe stated that Gabriel gave the impression “that Germany sets its economic interests above everything else.”

The arrogant bluster of Gabriel certainly helped to confirm this “impression.” Soon after his government plane landed at Mehrabad international airport in Tehran, he told German reporters:

“Traditionally we have good relations [with Iran], and many companies want to build on existing contacts. And the chance for this will emerge when the agreement enters into force early next year. It will be the first major step, but there will certainly be many more that will have to be taken.”

The business representatives in his entourage were even less able to restrain their enthusiasm for the new opportunities opening up for the export and commodity-hungry German imperialism. President of the Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce (DIHK) Eric Schweitzer said, “German industry is highly regarded in Iran,” and continued: “During the reign of the Shah, Iran was Germany’s second most important export market outside Europe. Many want to follow up on that.”

DIHK head of foreign trade Volker Treier proclaimed,

“The Iranian economy is geared more towards industry than one might assume. With its 80 million inhabitants and a strong industrial base, the country is predestined to be an export market for German companies.”

The German business press is also enthusiastic about the development. The monthly *Manager Magazin* gushed that, in addition to “a highly qualified workforce,” there are “a lot of raw materials” available in Iran. The country is seen as “a sleeping giant” that has “substantial pent-up economic demands as a result of sanctions in recent years.”

German imperialism and German capital consider the Iran nuclear agreement, brokered in part through the efforts of German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, as an opportunity to build on their traditionally close relations with Iran and increase their economic and political influence across the whole region.

Die Welt writes that “the opportunities opening up for German companies in Iran are outstanding.” Relations between businesses from both countries are recognised to have “grown over decades,” and “some German companies have been involved in the heartland of the former Persian empire for more than 100 years.”

According to official sources, some 80 German companies are currently operating directly through branches in Iran, and about 1,000 other enterprises have representatives there. Among the largest German concerns on site are Henkel, Siemens and Bayer. Following the sharp decline in economic relations over recent years, the value of German exports had already increased by almost a third to €2.4 billion (US\$2.6 billion) in 2014.

The DIHK now expects a doubling of German exports within the next two years to around €5 billion (US\$5.5 billion). The Federation of German Industries (BDI) even assumes that German companies could be exporting goods worth more than €10 billion to Iran in the near future.

Following a joint meeting with Iranian oil minister Bijan Namdar Zanganeh on Monday, Gabriel announced that Germany and Iran will resume the operation of a joint economic commission beginning in 2016. Iranian President Hassan Rohani expressed hope that Berlin would play a “positive role” in the development of relations between the two countries and also between Europe and the entire Middle East, “just as it had done in the nuclear program negotiations.”

What Rohani and the Iranian regime describe as “positive” means in fact the complete submission of the country to the plundering of imperialist powers 35 years after the Iranian revolution.

Commenting under the headline “The Great Race,” the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* suggested that Germany “is not the only country that wants a careful return to normality.” It pointed out that, although Gabriel was the “first high-ranking western politician in Iran” since the nuclear deal, several other EU foreign ministers had already paid visits to Tehran. France had already sent “a 130-strong business delegation to Iran in February 2014,” in which oil giant Total, plant builder Alstom, the Orange telecommunications group and French automakers were represented.

China is also regarded as an obvious competitor. Anton Börner, head of the BGA foreign trade association, predicts that it will probably be “difficult” for the German business community to “once again become Iran’s largest trading partner.” According to Börner, Chinese companies that have exploited the past years of sanctions “to establish themselves in Iran” would “fight to maintain their position, when the sanctions are withdrawn.”

Commenting on increasing competition from Asian countries, Volker Treier said: “Chinese and Korean companies in Iran have now taken our place in the sun.” He said the Chinese now had “a trade volume of US\$50 billion in their business with Iran. We won’t be able to get near such a scale of investment.”

The fact that leading German business representatives are again claiming their right to “a place in the sun” has far-reaching historical implications. When the imperialist forces of the so-called “late emerging German nation” first aspired to achieve “a place in the sun” (words subsequently used in Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow’s address to the German parliament on December 6, 1897), the phrase mainly referred to the possession of colonies in Africa and the Middle East, and the development of a unilateral global policy which twice led to disaster in the 20th century.

As in the past, the renewed grandstanding of German imperialism on the world stage will exacerbate tensions with the US. Although not openly discussed in public, the rush of German businesses to stake claims in Iran is driven by an attempt to forestall potential American competition, which will be excluded from the country prior to the US Congress’s vote on the nuclear program agreement. An Iran dominated by German imperialism or German-led European imperialism would also be a direct geo-strategic challenge to US imperialism, which has concluded the nuclear deal primarily in order to defend its own hegemony in the region.

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