



Germans, Nukes, and Mullahs

Axis of Nazis and Islamists, Germans and Iranians

When Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad persisted in denying the Holocaust, political scientist Matthias Küntzel of Hamburg had had enough. As a German he not only was infuriated that the Iranian was openly declaring his intention to wipe Israel off the map, but also was gravely concerned that many of his compatriots were indifferent. Thus Küntzel began investigating the bilateral relations between Germany and Iran. In the five chapters of this book he deals with the German Empire, the postwar Bonn Republic (West Germany), Iran's Islamic Revolution, the mullahs' regime, and the ongoing international dispute about its unrelenting efforts to develop nuclear weapons.



Central Powers in World War I: Germans, Austro-Hungarians, Bulgarians and Ottomans with some sway on Iranian Islamists

Küntzel explores both the open and clandestine sides of German-Iranian relations, which have contributed to Tehran's atomic armament. The author, also known for his book *Jihad and Jew-Hatred*,¹ takes the reader on a journey from Kaiser Wilhelm's era onward. The monarch wanted to incite jihad revolts in the Afro-Asian hinterlands of the colonial empires of Great Britain, France, and Russia. Iranians still tell stories of "Hajj Wilhelm Muhammad" who supposedly (he did not really) converted to Islam. But they do remember how the Germans and Ottomans worked to radicalize Islam during World War I. This included an attempt to provoke an Islamist revolution in Iran by inciting anti-British and anti-Russian sentiments.

The Nazis followed the same approach. Küntzel notes that they stressed an "Aryan" kinship with Iranians. In 1936, Berlin's finance minister Hjalmar Schacht traveled to the Middle East. He met Shah Reza and his son Muhammad, and said Iranians were "pure Aryans." The author observes that Crown Prince Muhammad Reza bid Schacht farewell with the salutation "Heil Hitler." But this is just half of the truth. If one looks into the report by the German envoy Johannes Smend of 8 January 1937,² the other half appears: Shah Reza and his son saw Schacht to the door where he saluted them in the mentioned manner, against all etiquette and protocol as Smend complained, while both Iranians, "mildly smiling," reciprocated in the same way. In other words, Schacht initiated the gesture whereas his hosts exercised courtesy and were not Hitlerites as the reader might conclude from Küntzel's account.

However, the Nazis implemented a special policy in dealing with Muslims, portraying Hitler as a messiah who was already foreseen in the Qur'an. The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Hajj Amin al-Husaini supported them from within. On four occasions since 1924, al-Husaini lived for some weeks in Tehran. According to his memoirs, he reached an agreement with Iranians in 1933 that Tehran would back Shi-ite Iranian groups of *mujahidun* fighters who worked with him in Iran and his policy in Palestine as well.³ Indeed, in 1933 and 1937 Tehran raised the Palestinian issue in the League of Nations. Al-Husaini maintained good ties with Islamists in the Shahrastani clan and with Abd al-Qasim al-Kashani, and Nawwab Safawi of Tehran. The Sunni-Shia divide was no problem for them.



Nawwab Safawi grew also in diverse networks of Amin al-Husaini's Islamists inside and outside Iran

Ultimately a foundation was laid for networks of ideological kinship that are still palpable, helping foster a further jihadization of Islam and some of the specific Nazi strains in the new ideology of Islamism. Islamists have combined their policy of jihad with racist Jew-hatred.

Certainly, relations of true human friendship exist in culture, commerce, and other fields. But is there such a thing as friendship between states, as the book's subtitle suggests? In any case, that is not the author's concern. Instead Küntzel focuses on those commonalities between Germany and Iran that were and continue to be directed against Jews, Israel, and democracy. He names German entrepreneurs who, after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, helped the mullahs in their drive to acquire nuclear weapons. At the same time, he describes ayatollahs in Tehran who acted against their Iranian opponents in Europe. This includes the death threats against the novelist Salman Rushdie in 1989 and, three years later, the murder of four Iranian dissidents in Berlin's Mykonos restaurant.

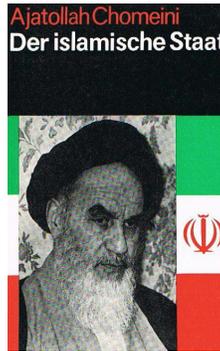
Küntzel notes Iran's dependence on German technologies, arguing that this also represents an opportunity for leverage against the regime. For evil does not come from technical equipment but from political intentions. The author maintains that the usual concept of deterrence does not work with Tehran as it did regarding the Americans and the Soviets in the Cold War. Both Moscow and Washington valued life and survival; not so Iran's leadership with their apocalyptic vision. In 2001, former president Hashemi Rafsanjani said a nuclear strike against Israel would not be irrational even if many Muslims were to die in a counterstrike. Israel, said this ayatollah, would be annihilated whereas the Islamic world would only suffer damage.

Germany's Duty to Act

One of Küntzel's key points is that if someone wants to die as a martyr, he will not be deterred. A death wish and enriched uranium, Holocaust denial and high tech, Shiite Mahdism and weapons-grade plutonium, go hand in hand. Küntzel asks whether or not Berlin will fulfill its obligation to prevent a second Holocaust and a nuclear arms race in the Middle East; in doing so he appeals to his government and his fellow citizens to act promptly.

Küntzel also has much to say, however, about the failures of politicians in Bonn; the book is basically a West German story. Although he notes in the preface that he concentrated on Bonn-Tehran relations during the Cold War, this represents a missed opportunity. Germany was divided, and the East Germans were very active in this context as well. As in many similar studies, certain major actions of the West German politicians in Bonn can be fully explained only by considering what was also transpiring in East Berlin. In the present case, this involves the more complex triangle of Bonn-Tehran-East Berlin; in this era there were two sides to the German coin, including with regard to the Middle East.

For example, in mid-1978 Shah Reza Pahlavi came to visit the East German leader Erich Honecker. At Humboldt University, a laudatory address for granting the Shah an honorary Doctor of Law degree had already been prepared. Secret-service chief Erich Mielke had all routes to and from East Berlin blocked in an action dubbed “Coexistence.” His agents drew double duty to shadow dissidents. The town of Dresden in the south had to cancel a beloved soccer game so as to ensure the sightseeing Shah’s safety. Yet, behind the Shah’s back, East Berlin followed the Kremlin in playing the game both ways: it cultivated political Islam, thus supporting the still-exiled Ayatollah Khomeini. Indeed, this ayatollah had grown so powerful that the Shah was unable to shake hands with Honecker as planned: a storm of unrest was brewing in Iran and on short notice the Shah had to cancel the trip. He was soon swept away, of course, by Khomeini’s Islamic Revolution.



1983 cover of Khomeini’s book *The Islamic State* as edited in East Berlin which includes his lectures given in Najaf in January and February of 1970

A “Peace” without Jews

Beyond the issue of Bonn-Tehran relations, it needs to be asked to what extent Bonn’s Iranian policy was actually independent and how the United States and NATO swayed key West German politicians. From 1974 to 1977, a time framed by two Indian nuclear tests, Washington reassessed and revised its nuclear policy toward India, Pakistan, and the region. A 1974 study by the U.S. National Security Council on nonproliferation policy concluded that India had accumulated plutonium for ten to fifteen bombs, while Pakistan was aiming for plutonium and reprocessing plants and was getting at least China’s political assistance.⁴ The outcome is now known. Clearly the Iranians, once the mullahs were in power, followed Pakistan’s example in playing for time – and did so successfully.

At any rate, Iranian history and politics in relation to German empires and republics remains a wide open field for historians of the Middle East as well. As a political scientist, however, Küntzel has managed to offer the first overview of German-Iranian relations in the previous century. What he reveals is not always pleasant to contemplate. Küntzel notes that Ahmadinejad was thrilled about every successful step toward nukes, and that rarely has a regime declared its intentions so frankly. In contrast, Moscow reacted deceitfully when accused in the late 1940s of rapidly building a nuclear arsenal. Tehran, Küntzel maintains, does not seek stability but rather to change the regional order.

For the West, what Ahmadinejad views as peace is not peace at all but is, rather, intrinsically linked to Jew-hatred. Küntzel takes note of the bloodily “reelected” president’s claim that the spread of “peace” means universal cooperation in annihilating Zionism – in direct parallel to the Nazi ideology. In 1943, the Nazis, too, formulated their wartime objective as the worldwide destruction of the Jews, viewing this as a precondition for world peace. Iran’s atomic armament entails nightmarish consequences, with nuclear terrorists able to blackmail both Arab and European countries and the Sunni Arabs entering a nuclear arms race. As for Israel, it would face the prospect of a nuclear Holocaust – as a result of the failed policy of democracies and their pursuit of “dialogue” without the needed resolve.

Küntzel’s book is a reminder that there is a historical and current responsibility, borne especially by Germans and other Europeans, toward the state of Israel. After all that has happened, it cannot be taken lightly when the most radical regimes seek the most destructive weapons, or dismissed as the empty threats of lunatics. A Middle East nuclear arms race cannot be allowed. Küntzel cites Chancellor Angela Merkel’s words on the need for coordinated action by leading countries. Berlin could and should use its bilateral relations with Tehran to prevent the worst case from materializing.

Although Matthias Küntzel is not a scholar on Iran with the apposite linguistic skills, he has struck some resonant chords in the German-Iranian context, frequently challenging the conventional wisdom. One can only hope the book will be translated into English and reach Iranians as well.

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz

Matthias Küntzel: *Die Deutschen und der Iran. Geschichte und Gegenwart einer verhängnisvollen Freundschaft* (The Germans and Iran: The History and Present Status of a Fateful Friendship), Siedler, 2009, 320 pp.

1 Matthias Küntzel, *Jihad and Jew-Hatred* (New York: Telos, 2007).

2 Political Archive of the Foreign Ministry, Berlin, RAV Teheran 28, Schacht 1/2, Iran, To State Secretary Hans Heinrich Dieckhoff, *Near East Report*, Tehran 01/08/37, 11, signed Smend.

3 Amin al-Husaini, *Muzakkirat al-Hajj Muhammad Amin al-Husaini* (The Memoirs of al-Hajj Muhammad Amin al-Husaini), ed. Abd al-Karim al-Umar (Damascus: Al-Ahali, 1999), 81-82. [Arabic]

4 US National Archives II, RG273, Presidential Directives, Reviews, Memoranda, *US Non-Proliferation Policy*, Report of the NSSM 202 Study Group, India and Pakistan, The White House, 1974, V/2-3, V/8-9.