

The European friends of the Ayatollah Khomeini

by Thierry Lalevée

If Hitler's economics minister Hjalmar Schacht were alive today, he would be most satisfied with his Iranian pupils. Indeed, only through the most drastic Schachtian austerity measures have the Iranian rulers succeeded, after more than three years of war, in maintaining \$13 billion in foreign currency reserves. Massive Iranian oil exports, at the level of close to one million barrels per day, coupled with a precipitous collapse of the living standards of the population, have been key to this "success" of the Khomeini government. As a result of these measures, the majority of the population can no longer afford to eat meat. The average yearly wage is 25,000 rials (ca. \$300), and meat costs 1,000 rials a kilogram. Even rice costs 500 rials per kilogram.

Also key to this economic "success" have been a few countries which, despite the atrocities perpetrated by the Iranian regime, have maintained and even increased their trade commitments. Three countries stand out as particularly complicit: Great Britain, West Germany, and Italy. They are now locked in a fierce competition for the place of top exporter to Iran.

Britain has offered an array of weapons to Iran, including Rapier missiles, defying repeated requests from the Reagan White House and the Pentagon to heed Washington's effort to organize an arms embargo against Iran.

As for West Germany and Italy, responsibility for support for Iran rests with the two foreign ministers, Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Giulio Andreotti, both known as friends of Iran. The two were essential during the 1979 hostage crisis in breaking the American and European Community-approved boycott of Iran.

Today's European trade with Iran is a far cry from the nuclear energy projects and other industrial development deals begun during the reign of the Shah; now it is a corrupt arms-for-drugs traffic which is thriving. Whatever industrial goods are imported by Iran today are only meant to maintain already existing projects, to counterbalance the destruction brought about by the war with Iraq. If from time to time rumors fly about how some Western industrialist is about to get a contract to restart Iran's nuclear energy program, these reports amount to nothing more than an efficient psychological warfare campaign by the mullahs aimed primarily against Iraq.

The bulk of exports to Iran are weapons or military-related materiel. Purchase of a tank is often camouflaged under the designation "tractor," etc.—particularly in the case of West Germany, whose arms export business is a very sensitive foreign-policy issue. Weapons are loaded on trucks or dismantled and sent to Portugal before reaching Iran through indirect routes.

Iran has received authorization in recent months to establish its own trucking terminals in Munich, Frankfurt, Salzburg, and Vienna. Several hundred trucks leave each day for Iran from these depots. In the case of the new Frankfurt terminal, several dozen trucks depart daily, not taking the usual route through the Balkans and Turkey to Iran, but heading from Czechoslovakia into the Soviet Union, around the Black Sea and into Iran via the northern border.

Trade is booming and West Germany last year again reached the pre-1978 level of trade with Iran—6 billion deutschmarks (about \$2.4 billion). At the vanguard of such a relationship is the Mercedes-Benz company, which produces cars as well as trucks. Demand for air-conditioned and armored Mercedes is booming. But Mercedes is also a front for delicate negotiations handled by the Bonn foreign ministry or the intelligence services. Mercedes' Iran team is regularly debriefed in the quiet suburbs of Bonn.

At Teheran's recent trade fair, no fewer than 165 German firms were present, and discussions were sensitive enough that neither the Chamber of Commerce nor Genscher's foreign ministry would release the list of participants. Indeed, ever since Genscher was caught protecting Iranian diplomat and drug-smuggler Sadeh Tabatabai in February 1983, Bonn has become very cautious on the public aspect of its relations with Teheran.

While the spotlight is on West Germany, Italy is not far behind. Recent articles in the Italian press have heralded Rome's export policy toward Teheran as putting Italy ahead of Britain, Germany, and Japan—to the tune of several billion dollars in annual orders. Unlike West Germany, Italy has no reason to worry about public appearances in its arms trade, and has become an aggressive exporter of its own helicopters, weapons, and gunboats, as well as of any American hardware it can put its hand on through its membership in NATO. Italian-Iranian relations were good under the Shah, with Italy's nobility often being the guests at the Shah's court. Today, Italy's nobility is contemplating a conversion to the Ayatollah, and some have already made the leap.

In turn, Teheran has made its embassy to the Vatican its most important in Europe, coordinating the activities of all Iranian embassies in Europe and of its staff at United Nations facilities in Geneva. The embassy to the Vatican serves as a deployment center for terrorist commando squads throughout Europe. It is hardly a coincidence that while the Americans and the French were being bombarded in Beirut by militias under Iranian control, the Italian contingent of the multinational force was left in peace.