

Iran, the Nuclear Deal, and the Middle East (October 18, 2015)

Abstract

Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier pays tribute to Iran's key role in the Syrian conflict. The timing of his trip to Tehran carried symbolic significance since it coincided with the coming into effect of the nuclear deal that had been reached between Iran and the five members of the UN Security Council as well as Germany in summer 2015.

Source

When mountain and mountain do not come together

During his trip to the Middle East, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier is trying to find a common line for the Syria conflict. He is feeling a headwind already at this first stop.

For a few minutes, Frank-Walter Steinmeier is irritated. On Sunday morning, the German Foreign Minister gives a talk at the University of Teheran, behind him the German and Iranian flags. The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) has invited alumni to a conference about "Sustainable development and stability." "Mountain and mountain do not come together, but a person and a person do," Steinmeier quotes an Iranian proverb.

Suddenly, unrest spreads. Young men and women are raising banners in the back rows. In Farsi and English they remind the audience that Germany allegedly supplied chemical weapons to the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein during the first Gulf war. The signs read "Won't forget Sardasht".

A number of people were killed in that Western Iranian city in 1987 by Saddam's chemical weapons; the issue is strongly present in Iran to this day. Photographers and cameramen turn toward the demonstrators. Steinmeier continues to talk and cannot recognize their intention from a distance. After his speech, after the unrest had died down, he is handed a piece of paper that evidently informs him about the reason behind the protests.

Iran is the first stop on a four-day trip to the Middle East, which will take the Foreign Minister to Saudi Arabia on this Sunday afternoon and to Jordan on Monday. The University of Tehran, the country's oldest and largest, is considered the "mother of Iranian universities." Mathematics, astronomy, and physics were taught there already shortly after its founding 700 years ago, initially as a religious school.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 had its origins here; 1999 saw student protests at the university against the regime. Since the moderate president Hassan Rouhani took office in 2013, Iranian universities have been opening up a bit and becoming a little more international. Iranian students are being drawn abroad, Germany is the fourth-most popular destination – after Malaysia, the U.S., and Great Britain.

Anger over talks about human rights

Many students are hoping for an opening of the country. Asked about their preferred place to study or work, they mention the U.S., Canada, Germany, or Switzerland. Domestic political reforms are hoped for above all by the young, secular Iranians in the cities, who want to travel, secretly, watch American films at home, and who are able to circumvent the barriers to Facebook and Twitter. A German-Iranian

cultural agreement, which has been discussed for a long time, is supposed to be signed soon. Germany wants to strengthen education and cultural exchange above all. Rather than traveling with an economic delegation, Steinmeier is accompanied by, among others, Dieter Kosslick, the head of the Berlinale, and the general secretary of the Goethe Institute.

The change is thus to be shaped not only by trade, but equally so by word and picture. Some are pinning euphoric hopes on domestic reforms in the wake of the nuclear agreement signed in July. Steinmeier contradicts this and is thus engaged in a restrained management of expectations. Since the strength of the conservative forces in Iran cannot always be estimated, setbacks are possible at any time. The fact that more than 600 people have already been executed this year is seen as a success of the hardliners in the judicial and government apparatus.

Steinmeier does not speak openly about civil liberties in Iran; otherwise usual meetings with “civil society” are not planned. “For twelve years we were told: first the nuclear agreement, then we’ll talk about human rights,” says Omid Nouripour, the foreign policy expert of the Greens, “now we hear: first we’ll solve the Syria problem, then we’ll talk about human rights.” According to reports, however, Steinmeier did address the fate of individuals, for example, in the one-on-one talk with Ali Laridshani, president of the parliament. The Foreign Office considers these comments behind closed doors as more effective than public appeals.

Steinmeier and his Iranian counterpart know each other well

Steinmeier formulates expectations directed at Iran on a different issue, the nuclear agreement, which he negotiated for several years (and nights). This Sunday is “Adoption Day,” when the nuclear agreement is formally adopted. But that does not mean that it is already in effect. “The question now is whether Iran shows that it is fulfilling its obligations,” Steinmeier says on Sunday. Only after the International Atomic Energy Agency gives the green light will there be “Implementation Day,” by which the agreement takes effect. It should be in Tehran’s interest to shake off the sanctions before parliamentary elections in February 2016.

Steinmeier spends nearly the entire Saturday with Javad Zarif, the Iranian Foreign Minister. The two men speak privately, with their delegations, deliver speeches back-to-back at a conference of the Core Group of the Munich Security Conference, eat lunch together. They meet again for dinner. Their table is a little lost in the brightly lit Great Ballroom of the Diplomatic Club in Tehran. The mood seems friendly and distant over a dinner of eggplant puree, stuffed grape leaves, and fruit salad. The ministers sit together for a good hour-and-a-half over water and Coke, naturally without alcohol. Things are not coming off as comfortable or relaxed.

However, Steinmeier and Zarif know each other well, speak English with each other. The political scientist Zarif spent half his life in the U.S., studied there and worked for Iran’s delegation to the UN. The two men met repeatedly during the nuclear negotiations. “It certainly would not be a pleasure to sell him a used car,” says Steinmeier about his counterpart during the joint press conference on Saturday morning.

That can also be seen during that same half hour. Zarif, eloquent, charming, and very polite, lays out his positions sharply. Steinmeier also speaks very clearly, and so the two men yield nothing to each other on the issue of Syria even on an open stage. Steinmeier criticizes the barrel bombs that the Syrian ruler Assad is dropping on his own people.

What the Iranians think about Russia remains unclear

“I’m asking Iran to exert influence on Assad to take the first steps toward a de-escalation,” he says. Zarif, however, defends his ally Assad without mentioning him by name. “To insist that some people have no

future will not lead to results,” says Zarif. The two foreign ministers also argue different positions with regard to Russia’s role in Syria.

Steinmeier criticizes Moscow, he considers the Russian air attacks a step back, speaks of an escalation. Zarif rejects that. How the Iranians see Russia’s role outside of official statements remains a mystery. On the one hand, there are similar interests, on the other hand, Moscow, with its air attacks, is now depriving Iran of its importance in that war.

And then there is still the question of how the entire region can work together in this crisis. This point, in particular, is sensitive. The relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia is broken. Zarif reaffirms his country’s accusations against Riyadh that it provoked, or at least condoned, the many dead – also including Iranians – during the pilgrimage to Mecca. His voice sounds emotional on this issue.

Steinmeier, who is aware of the competition between these two countries for dominance in the region, wants to at least try and bring the opponents to the table to solve the Syria crisis.

He is convinced that Syria, this cluster of interests, cannot be solved militarily. Sounding out – so a Steinmeier phrase that can be heard again and again these days. Probing what is possible – that is how he understands his task. The point is to find someone who “builds bridges.” Although the Germans are engaged in shuttle diplomacy, they neither see themselves as a mediator, nor do they wish to turn themselves into one. The plan to bring the different forces to the table is ambitious. By comparison, the contact group in the Ukraine conflict that Steinmeier pushed forward with great effort was probably a walk in the park.

The talks in Riyadh will also become tricky

“We wish for Iran to play a constructive role in the international community and towards its neighbors,” says Steinmeier in his speech in front of the small setting of the Munich Security Conference in Tehran. The Foreign Minister will likely argue in this or a similar fashion in his political talks in Saudi Arabia on Monday. Skepticism on the part of Riyadh about Steinmeier’s preceding talks in Tehran has been factored in.

In addition to Syria, the talks will be about the civil war in Yemen, where the two powers Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a proxy war. In Riyadh Steinmeier therefore wants to meet not only the country’s king, additional members of the royal family, and the foreign minister. A meeting is also planned with Yemen’s president Abed Rabbo Masur Hadi, who is in exile there. Hadi is the democratically elected and legitimized president and therefor still the official partner for talks for Berlin. Yemen was also talked about in Tehran. Iran is following with interest how the military alliance of the Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia, has suffered setbacks in recent weeks in its battle against the Huthi rebels.

Steinmeier knows how arduous diplomacy can be at times, and his stoic perseverance is certainly helpful in this business. With regard to the nuclear deal, to what has been achieved and the tasks that remain, he quoted in Tehran the wisdom of a “great soccer philosopher.” Steinmeier recites the sentence in German and English: “Nach dem Spiel ist vor dem Spiel. After the game is before the game.”

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