

Broadcasting as a weapon

The Persian-language Nazi propaganda and its consequences¹

By Matthias Küntzel

As a German who doesn't even read Farsi, why am I dealing with Iran? It is firstly because Iran is a particularly fascinating country with a particularly fascinating history and population. Secondly, it is because I have always followed the great uprisings of the Iranian people against Ali Khamenei and his regime and supported them in my essays: the Green Movement of 2009, the Movement of 2019, and now, of course, the Woman-Life-Freedom Uprising, which continues today while we are here in Berlin. Third, I am also particularly interested in Iran because one of my research interests is the ideology of Islamism and its connection to antisemitism.

In the beginning of my research, more than 30 years ago, I naturally wanted to know how Auschwitz could happen and why my parents were able to love Adolf Hitler as teenagers. To understand this, I focused on Nazi ideology, and specifically Nazi antisemitism.

Since the 9/11 attack in 2001, I began to study Jew-hatred in Islamic societies and especially the Muslim Brotherhood, that is, Sunni Islam. In 2005, the then Iranian President Ahmadinejad demanded that Israel be erased and disappear from the map. That same year, at the Frankfurt Book Fair, I was able to buy from Iranian booksellers an English written copy of *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*: the most prominent antisemitic libel and Hitler's textbook for the Holocaust.

I started to study the reasons and roots of the Iranian regime's hatred of Israel and its antisemitism. I was especially interested in the influence that Nazi Germany had taken to create and strengthen this hatred also in Iran.

¹ This is the speech I gave on June 4, 2023 on the occasion of the Klangteppich V-Festival for Music of the Iranian Diaspora in Berlin. The sources of the quotes can be found in my book *Nazis, Islamic Antisemitism and the Middle East: The 1948 Arab War against Israel and the Aftershocks of World War II*, to be published by Routledge in August 2023.

In doing so, I discovered that the Nazis used very well done radio broadcasts to spread their hate propaganda in the Near and Middle East not only in Arabic, but also in Persian language, day after day from 1939 to 1945. After all, Ruhollah Khomeini was one of the regular listeners to the Persian-language propaganda from Berlin. This brings us to our topic - the Persian-language radio propaganda of the Nazis and its after-effects.

German-Iranian cooperation during World War II

Let me start with a few basic facts about the special relationship between Tehran and Berlin. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Germany and Persia have made a great team. Persia needed Germany because it distrusted all the other great powers but was dependent on foreign technical assistance. Germany needed Iran because it was the only raw material-rich country as yet unconquered in the nineteenth-century struggle for colonies. These mutual interests produced an unparalleled level of cooperation between a Christian and a Muslim country.

Already in the First World War most Iranians had supported the Germans, who were fighting their common enemies, the British and the Russians. Moreover, the Germans also enjoyed great prestige as technicians and engineers. Since the mid-1920s, Germany had not only laid the foundations of an Iranian industrial infrastructure, but also exported technical education to Iran.

With the start of the Second World War, cooperation became especially close. In 1940 47 percent of all Iranian exports went to Nazi Germany, while Germany's share of Iranian imports had reached 43 percent. During those years, eighty percent of all machinery in the country came from Germany.

Iran was of strategic importance for the Nazis' warfare. According to Adolf Hitler's plan the Wehrmacht would after the assault on the Soviet Union occupy the Caucasus and in so doing, open the way to the Middle East. Then Iran and Iraq would be conquered and the British Empire destroyed from the south. According to the Nazi plan, a pro-German mass-movement in Iran reinforced by a concentrated propaganda effort would prepare for the German invasion of that country. Fortunately, however, the war took a different course.

The Nazi radio at work

At the beginning of World War II German short-wave transmitters were broadcasting in 15 different foreign languages. However, of all the foreign-language broadcasting units, the “Orient Zone” was given “absolute priority”. It broadcast to Arabs and Persians, but also to Turks and Indians and employed about 80 people, including some 20 presenters and translators.

Editorial control was in the hands of the Foreign Office Radio Policy Department and the program content was determined in cooperation with the Propaganda Ministry and the Wehrmacht High Command’s Foreign Propaganda Department. The broadcasts were recorded in Berlin, Kaiserdamm no. 77 and then transferred by a special telephone line to Zeesen, a small village 40 kms south of Berlin.

The transmitter systems in Zeesen were equipped with state-of-the-art directional antennae. The American radio expert César Searchinger described the “huge” short-wave radio complex in Zeesen as “the biggest and most powerful propaganda machine in the world” and its “supremely cunning technology of mass influence” as “the most formidable institution for the dissemination of a political doctrine that the world has ever seen.”

While exaggerated, the assessment is not wholly false. While all the combatant powers in the Second World War used short-wave transmitters in different languages, the Zeesen radio had some special features.

Firstly, in 1936 the Olympics took place in Berlin. The overhaul of the Zeesen short wave equipment carried out in preparation for this event had greatly improved its long-range sound quality. No other station provided a better listening experience than Radio Zeesen.

Secondly, the Orient Zone editors succeeded in recruiting Bahram Shahrokh as their Persian announcer. He was an outstanding speaker with a good voice and excellent diction. A 1941 survey of German propaganda achievements in Iran boasted that “Sharokh [was] always praised as a brilliant speaker and was more popular than even others, including the enemy ones.”

Let me give you an example how Shahrokh's antisemitic incitement in Berlin had at times a direct impact on the situation of the Jews in Iran. An Iranian Jewish woman, her name is Parvin, who was 17 years old at the time, remembers in particular a speech by Bahram Shahrokh on Radio Zeesen on the occasion of the Jewish Purim festival. Shahrokh urged the audience to exact revenge for the alleged massacre of Persians by Jews that the biblical Purim story mentions. Parvin recalls:

"The next day some Muslim friends of my father came into his pharmacy and demanded an explanation. I was with him that day and heard them belittle and mock the Jews. When my father tried to explain the issue ... they attacked him and grabbed his neck, whereupon my father told me to run home. I never asked, nor did I ever find out how he got rid of them."

At the same time Shahrokh presented himself as brave and cheeky. He repeatedly made barbed remarks about Reza Shah, the detested Iranian ruler. Following angry protests from Reza Shah, who was a regular listener of the German radio station, at the end of 1940 the German Foreign Office had to take Shahrokh off air, but only temporarily. In August 1941 Britain and the Soviet Union occupied Iran, ousted Reza Shah Pahlavi from his throne and installed his son, Mohammed Reza Shah, in his stead. Shortly thereafter, Shahrokh was back on air.

Thirdly, the Zeesen broadcasts employed a crude and folksy antisemitism. In 1940 Reader Bullard, the British Ambassador to Iran, complained that, "Even if we [the British] do broadcast in Persian, we cannot hope to rival the Germans in interest, as their more violent, abusive style, with exaggerated claims ... appeals to the Persian public."

And indeed: Radio Zeesen's programs were rabble-rousing rather than factual. Their aim was not to inform, but to incite antisemitism and to boast of German successes. They were targeted at a mass audience rather than intellectuals. Thus, the United Nations was dubbed the "United Jewish Nations," and the Jordanian king, Emir Abdullah, was mocked as "Rabbi Abdullah" for wanting to negotiate with the Zionists.

The *fourth* distinguishing feature of this radio propaganda was its adaptation to Islam.

Already during World War I, many Shi'ite clerics had demonstrated reverence for the German Emperor as a protector and a secret convert to Islam. Hitler, for as long as the Germans were winning, was an even better figure upon which to project such a myth. A report on this matter by the German Ambassador in Tehran, Erwin Ettel, of February 1941 is illuminating:

“For months, reports have been reaching the Embassy from the most varied sources that throughout the country clerics are speaking out, telling the faithful about old, enigmatic prophecies and dreams which they interpret to mean that God has sent the Twelfth Imam into the world in the shape of Hitler. Wholly without Embassy involvement, an increasingly influential propaganda theme has come into being, in which the Führer and therefore Germany are seen as the deliverers from all evil.”

The German short-wave radio station was happy to exploit these fantasies in its Farsi broadcasts. However, Erwin Ettel was not satisfied. The Imam-belief strengthened the love of Germany, but it contributed little to hatred of the Jews. Here was still work for him to do.

It was understood in Berlin that German-style antisemitism would have little resonance in Iran. “The broad masses lack a feeling for the race idea,” explained the propaganda expert of the German embassy in Tehran. He therefore laid “all the emphasis on the religious motif in our propaganda in the Islamic world. This is the only way to win over the Orientals.” But how exactly could Nazi Germany, of all countries, conduct a religious propaganda campaign? Ambassador Ettel had an idea.

“A way to foster this development would be to highlight Muhammad’s struggle against the Jews in ancient times and that of the Führer in modern times,” Ettel recommended to the Foreign Office. “Additionally, by identifying the British with the Jews, an exceptionally effective anti-English propaganda campaign can be conducted among the Shi’ite people.”

Ettel even picked out the appropriate Koranic passages: firstly, sura 5, verse 82: “Truly you will find that the most implacable of men in their enmity to the

faithful are the Jews and the pagans”; and, secondly, the final sentence of chapter 2 of *Mein Kampf*: “In resisting the Jew, I do the work of the Lord.”

Ettel’s proposal demonstrates that the Nazis sought to use religion to create an implacable hostility to the Jews. Again and again the program makers of the Orient Zone repeated only those verses from the Koran that are suitable for presenting the Jews as “enemies of Islam.” Let me quote the historian David Motadel:

“Berlin made explicit use of religious rhetoric, terminology, and imagery and sought to ... reinterpret religious doctrine and concepts to manipulate Muslims for political and military purposes. ... German propaganda combined Islam with anti-Jewish agitation to an extent that had not hitherto been known in the modern Muslim world.”

These, then, were the four special characteristics of Radio Zeesen's Iranian broadcasts: First, the excellent sound quality, second, its popular speaker, third, the populist agitation, and fourth, the use and abuse of religion.

What do we know about the resonance of this propaganda among the Iranian population?

We must keep in mind that during the 1930s short-wave radios offered a medium with a great power of attraction. In his memoirs, Grand Ayatollah Husain Ali Montazeri recalls the installation of a radio in an Isfahan coffee house at the end of the 1930s: “Thousands of people” had come to see and hear the radio including Montazeri himself, who was wondering, “what is a radio?”

In those days listening to the radio was a public occasion. People did so in coffee houses and bazaars. Sometimes the radio would be placed on a pedestal in the town square around which the information hungry would gather. For example, the population in the center of Tehran was regularly bombarded with German news at the *Maidan-I-Sepah* Square. What had been heard would immediately then be talked about, further extending the reach of the programs’ message. It has been estimated that by the start of the 1940s, “about a million people were regularly listening to the radio in the Middle East and North Africa.”

Obviously, Germany's Farsi-language wartime broadcasts enjoyed great popularity. Let me quote Iranian writer Amir Hassan Sheheltan:

"In many newspapers and private notes of the time we find reports of how in the late 1930s ... during the broadcast of the Farsi-language news from Berlin people would gather together on the steps of the tea houses with a radio set in order to listen to the Germans' reports of their territorial gains on the various fronts. The reports inspired the fantasy of the crowd on the street that every victory corresponded to a defeat for the colonial powers, the Soviet Union and Britain, which they cheered and applauded."

Moreover, after the deposition of Reza Shah in 1941 by Britain and the Soviet Union, many fervently awaited the German invasion of Iran, hoping that it would put an end to the hated British-Soviet occupation. Now the Nazis' radio propaganda was more than just commentary on the war: it was an instrument in the service of the "liberation" of Iran by German forces.

"In those days", according to an American journalist, "swastikas were painted on the walls of many houses in Tehran. Bazaar traders sold pictures of Hitler. The new Shah recalled that, '... the German ... propaganda was very effective. ... The propagandists always depicted Hitler as a Muslim and descendant of the Prophet. He was said to have been born with a green band around his body'."

In May 1942, also Louis Dreyfus, the American ambassador to Iran at the time, was alerted: "German propaganda ... made a deep impression on the masses. The daily radio broadcasts from Berlin had been particularly effective and a film audience in the poor section of Tehran had cheered wildly for Hitler and at decidedly the wrong places when a British war film was shown. At one point, the British pressured the Iranian police to remove all radios from public places, but they were quickly restored, again at British request, when it was found, strangely, that one could not tune in the British broadcasts either, without a radio."

Finally, in June 1942, the BBC reported: "Although action is been taken to make effective the ban on public listening to Axis broadcasts, it seems that listening in private houses is still widely practiced. As a result it appears that many

people are still convinced that the Axis powers will win the war; Hitler, moreover, is said to enjoy great personal popularity.”

At the same time, after the fall of Reza Shah, who, despite his admiration for Hitler, did not share the latter’s antisemitism, Jew-hatred began to play a greater role in the Zeesen broadcasts. Among the regular listeners to this material was a man of whom the world was later to hear much more: Ruhollah Khomeini.

“Germany’s Persian service was, during the war, to enjoy the widest possible audience in Iran and Iraq”, writes Amir Taheri in his biography of Khomeini. When, in winter 1938 Khomeini, then aged thirty-six, returned from Iraq to Qum in Iran, he “had brought with him a radio set made by the British company Pye which he had bought from an Indian Muslim pilgrim. The radio proved a good buy. ... It also gave him a certain prestige. Many mullahs and talabehs would gather at his home, often on the terrace, in the evenings to listen to Radio Berlin [= Radio Zeesen] and the BBC.”

Even though Khomeini opposed Hitler and National Socialism, it is reasonable to assume that there is a link between the eruption of his Jew-hatred in 1963 and the invective from Berlin that he had imbibed over the radio 20 years previously.

Did Radio Zeesen influence Ayatollah Khomeini?

Research on the impact of the Nazi’s radio propaganda in Iran has just begun and many additional discoveries can be expected. What we can conclude today is that this radio propaganda changed the generell perception of the so-called Jewish danger.

In 1963, the Nazi seeds may have bore fruits when Khomeini enriched his anti-Shah campaign with anti-Jewish slogans. Now his religious warning cry “Attack on Islam” was replaced by the antisemitic battle cry “Jews and foreigners wish to destroy Islam!”

Khomeini’s most important book, *The Islamic State*, published in 1971, is full of antisemitic invective. Let me quote just one sentence: “[T]he Jews and their foreign backers are opposed to the very foundations of Islam and wish to

establish Jewish domination throughout the world. Since they are a cunning and resourceful group of people, I fear that – God Forbid – they may one day achieve their goal.”

Such fantasies about Jewish world domination were never part of the Shiite tradition. Here Khomeini has adopted a key idea of European antisemitism and linked it to his religion-based anti-Judaism. Khomeini had been a regular listener to the Nazis’ wartime Farsi-language broadcasts and, although it cannot in retrospect be proven, it would seem obvious that his fantasy had at least partly been shaped by this six-year-long barrage of antisemitic Nazi propaganda.

In addition, Radio Zeesen propagated exactly the kind of genocidal anti-Zionism which became prevalent after the Islamic revolution.

We have to keep in mind that between 1906 and 1979 no other Muslim country had such an enlightened religious leadership as Iran; a religious leadership that also accepted Iran’s good relationship with Israel.

As early as 1967, however, Khomeini started to preach a genocidal hatred against Israel. It is the “duty” of all Muslims, he told his followers during that year, “to annihilate unbelieving and inhuman Zionism.”

After the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, three things happened: First, Khomeini ordered the execution of Iran's most prominent Jew, Habib Elghanian, in a sustained effort to intimidate the Iranian Jewish community.

Second: He moderated his tone and promised to spare Iranian Jews, provided they accepted a subordinate status and radically distanced themselves from Israel.

Third: Iran's new rulers began to concentrate their anti-Jewish hatred on Israel. They began to use the term "Zionist" the way Hitler used the word "Judas": as a cipher for all evil in the world. "From the beginning," Khomeini declared in 1981, "one of our main goals was the destruction of Israel."

The real aim of Khomeini’s struggle with the Jews was, in my opinion, the wish to fight all aspects of modernity that could undermine his conservative concept

of Islam. This connection between antisemitism and anti-modernism also explains the popularity of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which is of Russian origin, in the Islamic world. This text was conceived as a rallying cry against liberalism: in order to drive forward the struggle against individual freedom the latter is denounced as the main tool of a global Jewish conspiracy. Ideas originally disseminated a hundred years previously by Tsarist agents in order to save Tsarism are today being repeated by key leaders of Islam in order to secure the domination of a conservative Islam.

At the beginning of my talk I mentioned the Woman-Life-Freedom Uprising, which continues today while we are here in Berlin. The courage of the women of Iran and their persistent fight for freedom is for me still a bright beacon of hope for the future. But for this hope to be realized, it is – I think - essential to also look back and answer the question - What went wrong? – which I at least partly tried to do today. Thank you for your attention.

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