Germany, Iran, and Hezbollah

An Interview with Ben Weinthal

by Jerry Gordon and Rod Reuven Dovid Bryant (September 2019)



US Ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell, and German Chancellor, Angela Merkel

The G-7 Biarritz Summit in southwestern France over the weekend of August 23- 26, 2019 had a surprise guest: the unannounced arrival of Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. He was the guest of the host country French President

Emanuel Macron. Zarif met with Macron on the sidelines. Cheerleading Zarif's arrival was German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who expressed the view that it might lead to "progress" on Iran in hopes of a breakthrough over the impasse of tough US sanctions. Both France and Germany had perfected, but never implemented a special financing facility to maintain trade links that would ostensibly enable the Islamic Republic to evade the US re-imposed devastating economic sanctions. President Trump, at his news conference with President Macron at the conclusion of the G-7 Summit, suggested, following the Zarif appearance, that there might be a meeting with Iran's self-styled 'moderate' President Rouhani. He even offered the possibility of alleviating the economic burdens on Iran imposed by tough US sanctions by offering loans guaranteed by Iran's oil. The President's suggestion of a meeting was rejected by Rouhani as premature unless and until all sanctions were lifted. Those comments from Trump sent shudders through some in official Israeli circles, while the Jewish nation was engaged in an intensifying wide-ranging "shadow war" with Iran and its proxies in Iraq, Syria and, notably Hezbollah in Lebanon. Merkel's tolerance of Israel and US enemies Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah, may stem from her shift to the dominant center left and adoption of Social Democratic and Green Parties' positions that espouses "radical pacifism."

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Merkel has not turned Iran's Islamic Republic into a "pariah" because of economic trade and refusal to list Hezbollah as a

terrorist organization, despite the internal dangers to Germany. Germany is Iran's largest trading partner in Europe at $3.2 Billion. Recently the German Ambassador in charge of trade with Iran resigned after links to a holocaust denier were found. All this seems to question whether Chancellor Merkel's 2008 Knesset speech that Israel's security was "not negotiable" is the current policy towards the Jewish nation.

The reality is that Merkel's Foreign Ministry, led by Heiko Maas, a Social Democrat in her cabinet, has "courted Iran". Ben Weinthal, *Jerusalem Post* European Correspondent and Research Fellow of the Washington, DC-based Foundation for the Defense of Democracies thinks this is reflective of Merkel's "uber appeasement of the Islamic Republic." One example he cites was the early release from prison, before the terms of their sentences were up, of Iranian and Hezbollah assassins of Kurdish dissidents at a Berlin Greek restaurant in 1992.

The leader of US efforts to combat Germany's romance with the Islamic Republic is US Ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell, who has threatened to sanction German companies engaged in trade with Iran. Grenell led the successful fight to prevent the Bundesbank from transferring $400 million to a Frankfurt Iranian trade finance bank. Germany's trade with Iran dropped 50% in the first six months of 2019, no doubt occasioned by the tough US sanctions. US Ambassador Grenfell had blasted German Foreign Ministry representatives attending a celebration of the 40th anniversary of Iran's Islamic Revolution at the Berlin Embassy in February 2019, while the German President sent a telegram honoring the event.

Openly gay US Ambassador Grenell is also concerned about decriminalizing the Islamic Republic's "lethal homophobic"

policy, ill treatment of women's rights and suppression of the Christian minority. Weinthal noted that over the period from 1979 to 2008, 4,000 to 6,000 members of Iran's Gay/LGBT community were executed, according to a British Wikileaks cable. When a *Bild* reporter confronted Iran's Foreign Minister Zarif about the Islamic Republic's suppression of gays, he responded by saying "don't question our moral principles".

Then there are the warnings of Hezbollah's infiltration that have surfaced in reports of major German state and federal intelligence agencies. They estimate there are 1,050 Hezbollah operatives actively engaged in recruiting and fundraising in German mosques. The major hot spots are the cities of Munster and Bremen. A *Jerusalem Post* report by Weinthal cited a Washington, DC-based MEMRI translation of a video and 'poem' posted in December 2018 on the website of the Munster Shiite Mosque saying: "We Have Pledged Allegiance to Khamenei; We Are Accused of Terrorism and Are Proud of It." Then there is Germany's tolerance of the Islamic Republic's annual Al- Quds Day events in Berlin promoting destruction of the Jewish nation of Israel. Weinthal views that as dangerous given the potential lethal strains of anti-Semitic groups from the far left, far right and radical Islamists. The Party of The Left has a member in the Bundestag espousing such views who has appeared at those Al Quds Day events.

A recent German opinion poll found that half of the respondents viewed Islam as a threat. Merkel's immigration policies brought one million Muslim refugees with "regressive views"—some of whom committed acts of terrorism. 50 percent of Muslim immigrants polled in Germany harbored anti-Semitic views. Note the 2016 truck attack at a Berlin Christmas Market by a Tunisian Islamist that killed 12, injuring 49, including one Israeli. The rise of the anti-Islam Alternative for

Germany political party may secure an electoral win in the Brandenburg State.

So, what is behind Germany's tolerance of Iran? Weinthal suggests that may be the comments of Henryk M. Broder, Polish-born son of Holocaust survivors, *Die Welt* journalist, and best-selling author. It is "the completion of Hitler's Plan–destruction of Israel's six million Jews'; whether consciously or sub-consciously. That is reflected in German surveys where 40 percent of respondents cite "negative, loathsome" views that "despise Israel as not being legitimate"–the New Antisemitism. Weinthal considers that finding "significantly understated". As Israeli psychoanalyst Zvi Rex said, in a flash of biting historical sarcasm, "The Germans will never forgive the Jews for Auschwitz."

Against this background, Jerry Gordon and Rod Bryant interviewed Ben Weinthal, *Jerusalem Post* European correspondent and Research Fellow of the Washington, DC-based Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

Rod: Welcome to Beyond the Matrix, I'm Rod Bryant along with my co-host Jerry Gordon. We are going to be talking about a subject that will possibly by the end shake you in your boots. We are asking this major question. What is behind Germany's love affair with Iran and appeasement of Hezbollah. I don't understand it. Who is our guest who can answer these troubling questions, Jerry?

Jerry: The who is Benjamin Weinthal. He is the European Correspondent for the Jerusalem Post and he is also a research

fellow at the Washington D.C.- based Foundation for The Defense of Democracies. He looks at Iran sanctions, the Islamic regime's suppression of minorities in the Middle East and elsewhere. The most fascinating part of the program is his discussion of a major respected journalist in Germany who contends that Germans love Iran because it might be carrying out what Hitler didn't.

Rod: That is the shocking revelation. I have never read this before. However, when he quotes this author, he says the purpose is to get the German people to think. If there is any level of truth, whether it is a conscious or subconscious thought within the German society, it is very disturbing. We are going to be talking about a lot of things about what is going on inside Germany in this interview with Ben Weinthal. He is the European Correspondent for Jerusalem Post and most of his research focuses on the nation of Germany.

Rod: Ben, thank you so much for taking time to come onto the show and we really appreciate it. Why is Germany the center of your European reporting for the Jerusalem Post?

Ben: Thanks for having me on, Rod and Jerry. Germany plays a central role in Europe right now for European/Israeli relations because it's the main economic engine of Europe, and because German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared Israel's security to be non-negotiable during her famous Knesset speech here in Jerusalem in 2008. From a security, defense, and political establishment point of view Germany is viewed as an ally. Now, whether that so-called special relationship has been filled with meaning and content since Merkel announced that famous statement, one could argue there are question marks over whether there is a solid special relationship.

Jerry: Ben you've published a piece in the Jerusalem Post recently that talked about the impact of the Trump sanctions against Iran after the administration basically vacated the nuclear pact by Obama. What has been the impact on Germany?

Ben: From the Israeli and the American points of view, the appointment and confirmation of U.S. Ambassador Richard Grenell to Germany has really played a game-changing role because of his efforts to crack down on German- Iran trade. The trade, as of today, has plummeted by nearly fifty percent during the first six months of 2019. That's considerable because Germany is Iran's largest trade partner in Europe. Germany provides critical engineering technology to Iran. Germany has played, from American and Israeli points of view, a very disturbing and counterproductive role by mainstreaming Iran's regime and continuing to find ways to boost trade with Iran by setting up a mechanism to bypass U.S. sanctions. Ambassador Grenell has convinced many of the top German companies to stop trading with Iran and has announced several times that German companies will face sanctions and will not be allowed access to the American market. This was a form of shock therapy for German companies and that is why I think you saw the significant drop in trade.

Rod: Is this purely an economic motivation? Obviously, there isn't an ideological thing going on between them, correct?

Ben: The economic motivation is obviously one of the significant factors. However, critics in Israel, the United States, and Germany have also criticized Germany's "uber appeasement" of Iran's regime. For example, in February 2019,

German diplomats, including the number two at the Foreign Ministry, were sent to celebrate Iran's 40th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution at Tehran's Embassy in Berlin. Now, that included the German President also sending a telegram to Iran's regime on the 40th anniversary of its Revolution. A regime, by the way, that calls for the destruction of the Jewish State, the destruction of the United States, and defends the execution of gays. These are some disturbing examples of support of Iran's revolutionary ideology from Germany that I don't think should be dismissed based on German conduct.

Rod: Very good point. I think that sometimes we must realize that silence on an issue is like agreeing. They may not be saying anything overtly about some of their ideological views about Iran. But their silence on these issues seems to be support for these disturbing views. You mentioned U.S. Ambassador Richard Grenell and leaders of the German Jewish community have taken up a cause of anti-BDS and anti-Semitism in German publications. How extensive is BDS support and anti-Semitism in Germany?

Ben: Contemporary anti-Semitism, namely the loathing of the State of Israel, hatred of the Jewish state—that form of anti-Semitism—unfortunately is widespread in Germany. The classical anti-Semitism, depicting Jews as money-grubbing individuals, is not respectable, thankfully. However, turning Israel into a human punching bag and projecting some of these classical anti-Semitic concepts onto the State of Israel is already widespread.

Jerry: Ben, you have been investigating German banks engaged in BDS group transactions. What have been some of the findings

of those investigations that you have been conducting?

Ben: BDS is not as widespread in Germany as in the United Kingdom, Canada or the USA. The Bundestag passed a resolution in May classifying BDS as anti-Semitic. Now several banks in Germany, based on our investigation series for *The Jerusalem Post,* has closed accounts with BDS organizations because of these organizations' ties to Palestinian terrorism organizations and because of hardcore anti-Semitism. So, there seems to be some concern among financial institutions to associate themselves with these organization. I should mention one organization was a neo-Nazi party; it's called The Third Way and has ties with the Lebanese terrorist organization, Hezbollah, and the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. This neo-Nazi party had a PayPal account and, once I exposed it, PayPal closed the account. The party again, it's called the Third Way and it is a passionate supporter of BDS.

Jerry: A major concern of German State and Federal Intelligence Agencies has been the penetration of Germany by Iran's Quds Force and proxy Hezbollah. How extensive is that threat in Germany?

Ben: Germany has an intelligence agency that's comparable to the FBI—as do each German state (and) there are sixteen states. They release an intelligence report in addition to the federal report. According to a number of these reports that I have reviewed that are in German, there are roughly 1,050 Hezbollah members in Germany who raise funds for the terrorist group. These operatives recruit new members and spread jihadi and anti-Semitic ideologies. Hezbollah in Germany is a major problem. Chancellor Merkel, much to the disappointment of the Jewish community which made an appeal to her to, as has the

American government, including bi-partisan Congressional Democrats and Republicans, has not proscribed Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. The United Kingdom banned all Hezbollah in February, but Germany is vehemently opposed. It is a very dangerous situation because it contributes to an already high level of anti-Semitism in Germany. It also lays the groundwork for a potential series of terrorist attacks on European soil, so Chancellor Merkel is playing with fire. In my view, it would be helpful if the Americans would think about sanctioning some of these Hezbollah centers and mosques in Germany.

Rod: What do you think of the probability of that happening?

Ben: It's possible. US Ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell—in every meeting—raises the issue of banning Hezbollah with his German counterparts or German officials. The Americans have made this a priority. I wouldn't rule it out. Ambassador Grenell said recently that if Germany does not meet its NATO budget requirement of two percent each year for its defense budget, the United States plans to re-station it's troops into Poland. I think the Americans are quite serious and it could very well happen.

Jerry: Ben, we were talking about Chancellor Merkel's virtual refusal to list Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. What are those connections in Germany between Hezbollah and some political parties and, even worse, Palestinian groups in Europe?

Ben: Hezbollah's operatives attend different pro-Palestinian

rallies in Germany. They participate and help organize each year the annual Al-Quds Demonstration which takes place in the heart of Berlin. It is an Iranian regime-sponsored event that calls for the destruction of Israel. It calls for Israel to be conquered. You sometimes have Hezbollah operatives who are also protesting with members of different political parties, especially the left wing German political party called The Left. There have been demonstrations with these two groups. There has been an interplay with member of the Bundestag. Her name is Christine Buchholz and is a supporter of Hezbollah. She hasn't been criticized for her support of Hezbollah and Hamas. She has called for the legitimate resistance of these organizations against Israel. Which of course, when translated, means the elimination of Israel. Hezbollah's mosques and cultural centers are also integrated in many ways into the communities where they are situated in. Munster, a City in West Germany and Bremen, a city in Northern Germany, are hotspots for Hezbollah. In those cities you see an interplay between mainstream German society and these Hezbollah centers where politicians have appeared. It is a very disturbing trend and the fact that Merkel has not turned Hezbollah into a pariah organization in Germany is only going to create a situation, in my view, where there will be more tolerance for this types of terrorism and the ideology behind it.

Rod: In some ways that's already begun, don't you think, the tolerance level, because of the stand to refuse to put them on some type of terrorist list?

Ben: Yes, you are right, Rod. In 1992, Hezbollah and Iran conducted a joint operation to assassinate Kurdish dissidents in a Greek restaurant in West Berlin. Recently, Merkel allowed their killers to be released short of their prison sentence

term. The German government reportedly worked out a quid pro quo where Hezbollah and Iran can operate on German soil in exchange for not conducting any terrorist attacks. What does that mean? That means they could spread their ideology, they can raise funds, they can engage in terror finance. So, it is a very unsavory business and it has been going on for decades.

Rod: From your perspective, what do you think is stoking this tolerance from Merkel's side of the politics further left?

Ben: I think there is clearly a very potent streak of lethal anti-Semitism at work especially among left wing political parties and Islamic organizations. There is the toxic mix of the radical left, radical Islam and neo-Nazi extremist groups in Germany. You see these three disparate groups unifying for example at the Al-Quds Demonstrations in Berlin. Members from these different groups appeared at those demonstrations to call for the destruction of Israel. That is the form of contemporary anti-Semitism. Then there is the wide-spread indifference among the German public. It is not anything more intellectually complex than most Germans are indifferent to anti-Semitism. It is worth noting that a Bundestag study commissioned by the federal parliament found that 40 percent of Germans are infected with a modern anti-Semitic view. That was a study that was commissioned by the government and I believe that number is very low.

Rod: If this is the case—that anti-Semitism makes strange bedfellows in politics in Germany—it also has had a systemic effect in the overall society. Is that what you are saying?

Ben: Based on the one study where Germans were polled, a significant proportion of the population holds a modern anti-Semitic view. That means they despise Israel. There is a view that Israel's existence is not legitimate, that type of thinking. That survey was based on some very superficial questions. My point is that the 40 percent figure, I think, is very low. I think there is an overwhelming majority of Germans infected with modern anti-Semitism. I would argue that this has to do with the German response to the Holocaust. My theory is built largely on this idea of a very cynical or sarcastic idea from an Israeli psychoanalyst who once said the Germans will never forgive the Jews for Auschwitz. Now, that is a very profound idea because that means Germans are filled with guilt and the way that they purge their guilt is they rhetorically or physically attack Jews. My view now is Western Europe won't forgive the Israelis for the Holocaust because of Western Europe's complicity in the Holocaust including Germany's role in bringing about the Holocaust. That is a very systemic problem in Germany and across Western Europe.

Rod: That is an interesting view that I have never really heard before, but it makes sense psychologically. It is a stain on them. They dislike it but it is almost as if the Jews are the reason why we had to do that in the beginning. We don't like it anyway. It's kind of a weird deal.

Jerry: We noticed that a recent survey in Germany found that half the respondents viewed Islam as a threat. Is that a product of the country's immigration policies, lack of assimilation of migrants and the reaction of right-wing political groups like Alternative for Germany?

Ben: Germans who hold an unfavorable view of Islam has been

consistent over the last few years. I think it partly has to do with problems with assimilation and immigration since Merkel permitted over one million from Muslim majority countries with very regressive educational systems to enter the country without any proper vetting. There is also been a huge backlash as you mentioned, Jerry, that contributed to the rise of Alternative for Germany. The right-wing anti-immigration Alternative for Germany party is slated to win an election in the State of Brandenburg just outside of Berlin. The polls as I mentioned showed that it is leading in that state. The dislike of Islam is clearly in response to terrorist attacks in Germany. One can't forget the attack in 2016 in Berlin when a radical Islamist, originally from Tunisia, drove a tractor trailer into a Christmas market in Berlin and killed people, including an Israeli. There have also been scattered attacks across the country. I just reported on a Syrian refugee and a Palestinian who murdered a German who *helped* them with their immigration because they wanted to rob him. Anti-Semitism played a role in that murder even though he wasn't Jewish. They said he was rich and that means he's Jewish and they killed him. I don't see this type of terrorism decreasing in the years to come because of an immigration problem that Chancellor Merkel created and just can't manage the widespread anti-Semitism among many of these migrants and refugees.

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Jerry: Why does Chancellor Merkel have a hold on the German electorate?

Ben: She’s managed to have a hold on the electorate since 2005 because, in my view, she’s lifted or adopted the party programs of the left. That means the Social Democrats who are a part of her coalition, as a minority partner, and the Greens. Her conservative Christian Democratic party that has a coalition with the Christian Social Union for Bavaria. The Social Democrats is largely a traditional European social democratic party. That resonates with a country like Germany that is left of center, that believes in “radical pacifism” at the expense of its own security. In my view, that hasn’t helped her obviously with her next term, which will be her last term until 2022. There will be another candidate from her party. She has been very clever and positioned herself well. She didn’t turn out to be, as people feared, a Margaret Thatcher even though that would have helped Germany in terms of its foreign policy and national security.

Jerry: Does Germany still contribute to underwriting or financing certain aspects of armaments for Israel. Here, I refer to the Dolphin Submarines.

Ben: Germany provides these sophisticated submarines that can be converted into nuclear armed underwater vessels. There is a dispute in Israel now about whether the purchase of these submarines is still necessary. Israel received some subsidies for a lower price on many of these submarines. That helped Israel, but at the same time, of course, it helped the German economy and Thyssen Krupp, the manufacturer of the submarines. It provided jobs. So, it was a win-win situation for both countries.

Jerry: You have published articles regarding the status regarding gays, women and Christian minorities under oppressive Middle East regimes, especially in Iran. What is their status?

Ben: The human rights situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran is just wretched. The major exclusive story I broke earlier this year was on the Iranian regime publicly hanging a man in January 2019, based on an anti-gay charge. That story went viral. It was picked up by *The Drudge Report*, British newspapers and American outlets. Ambassador Grenell, who the most senior openly gay member of the Trump administration, then proposed a campaign to decriminalize homosexuality in countries across the world where it's a crime to be gay. That included Iran, where roughly 4,000 to 6,000 gays and lesbians had been executed since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, according to a British Wikileaks cable dispatch in 2008. What you see in Iran is a policy of widespread lethal homophobia. When Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammed Javid Zarif arrives in the U.S. to give interviews to Western media outlet that abysmal human rights record is rarely, if ever, brought up.

Rod: It almost seems like that the media is just too intimidated to ask those kinds of questions. I don't understand why though.

Ben: One reporter to his credit did. He is a German reporter from *Die Bild,* Germany's best-selling paper which has, in my view, the best coverage of Israel in all of Europe. The reporter asked that question of Zarif in Tehran in the presence of the German Foreign Minister. Zarif said "these are our moral principles and we are going to continue this policy of executing gays." But outside of that question from that one

German reporter, who was gay, there has been just utter silence and it's inexplicable. As you mentioned Jerry questions about the persecution of women, the persecution of Christians, these questions do not come up when Zarif is on his media tour to showcase the Iranian regime as some type of moderate Islamic country that can appeal to Westerners. It is a highly oppressive country and a dangerous country. In my view, the most dangerous regime in the world right now.

Jerry: That brings us circling back to the question of why Germany is so pro-Iranian. You have nailed it. What is most impressive in this discussion has really been the revelations about Ambassador Grenell, both in terms of going after anti-Israel as well as anti-minority and anti- gay situations in the Middle East. Why is Germany so predisposed to deal with Iran? Is it really because of the money?

Ben: One reporter and a bestselling author in Germany, is Henryk M. Broder, a German Jew, who was originally born in Poland. He writes for *Die Welt;* he wrote originally for *Der Spiegel,* and he is enormously popular. In my view he is the authoritative voice on modern anti-Semitism in Germany. He's said in a talk that this love affair, this infatuation between Germany and the Islamic Republic of Iran, might just be that Germany wants Iran to finish the job that the Germans didn't complete during the twelve years of national socialism.

Rod: Wow, that's a big statement

Ben: That is a big statement. He is being somewhat provocative. But one wonders what else could explain this romance between Merkel, Supreme Ruler Ali Khamenei and the rest of the Iranian regime.

Rod: That is why I asked earlier what was fueling the flames of this lethal attraction. You have nailed it. But what other explanation as you said could be there?

Ben: That is Henryk Broder's explanation. He's an enormously popular writer, you can google him. He has written two best sellers in Germany about capitulation to radical Islam and intolerance. He has been writing about anti-Semitism for over 40 years. One needs to delve into his explanation that perhaps there is a wittingly or unwittingly a view or both that the Germans want Iran to finish the job in terms of the over six million Jews who live in Israel, just to be rid of this problem. Because if Germany's foreign minister announced last year he went into politics because of Auschwitz, at the same time he is courting a regime that is the leading state sponsor of Holocaust denial and lethal anti-Semitism. How do you explain the disconnect? That's why I think Germany should turn to Broder's explanation and grapple with it.

Rod: That is an absolute scary thought. However, at the same time the other options doesn't even seem to be plausible. It just does not make sense that they have this attraction. Then you have this quote from this author, Henryk M. Broder. I hope that isn't the case, but it clearly could be. Could you tell us just a little bit about the Foundation for Defense of Democracy (FDD). What do you do there as a Fellow?

Ben: I am a Research Fellow at the FDD where I analyze European-Iranian relations, investigate sanctions violations, contemporary anti-Semitism, the Boycott Divestment Sanctions campaign against Israel and do a lot of investigative

journalism. The FDD is a non-partisan institution that is devoted to combatting terrorism ideology, whether, Islamic, extreme right wing and left wing.

Rod: Do you have a website that people can go to read some of the information you have published?

Ben: Yes, we have a website, The Foundation for Defense of Democracies. You could just type that, and my articles are posted on the website.

Rod: Benjamin it has been a real delight having you on the show. I hope this is not the last time that we can bring you on. We wish you the best and safe travels back and forth from Berlin to Jerusalem. Until next time, you have been listening to Beyond the Matrix here on Israel News Talk Radio. Jerry and I say shalom.

Jerry: Shalom.

Ben: Thank you.

Listen to this Israel News Talk Radio – Beyond the Matrix interview with Benjamin Weinthal, Research Fellow of the Washington, DC-based Foundation for the Defense of Democracies and European correspondent for *The Jerusalem Post.*

«Previous Article Table of Contents Next Article»

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