

Near East expert Ulrich Tilgner reports about current developments in Iran

A land awakening yet in an upheaval

Ulrich Tilgner, the prominent near east correspondent and director of the ZDF office in Teheran, lectured on January 17, at a well attended Empa Academy gathering in Dubendorf, about „Education, Technology and Economic Developments in Iran“. Herewith is a report about his thrilling speech.

Tilgner, who lives in Teheran, started his talk by making clear, in the light of Iran's recent history, that Iran's policy of development has been dominated by the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Iran's attempts at westernization were blocked on ideological grounds internationally, and the country was hampered by the West by economic sanctions. Iran considered these sanctions as set backs provocations, and this eventually contributed to the election in 2005 of a radical-conservative government with President Ahmadinejad at its head. The intensified international sanctions which followed the 2005 election, had, in the meantime, again, set the country further back, as Tilgner could report from his own daily experiences. Since the large Swiss banks froze their business contacts with Iran, it is no longer possible at present to complete money transfers to Iran through European banks, and even internet access to his own bank account information in Germany is blocked and inaccessible. These days the basic conditions for Iran's further development are clearly dictated from the outside. In domestic politics, the ultra conservative Ahmadinejad government finds itself increasingly isolated due to the international sanctions imposed since the last election. There are clearly recognizable signs for efforts to leave powerful figures in the administration, „out to dry“, as Tilgner remarks in his observations. The majority of the population no longer wants a religiously dominated, isolationist hard liner government policy. Even at the highest political levels it has become clear that Iran must open itself to the west and moderate its policies, though the present ruling conservative-religious establishment is probably not yet ready for negotiations with the west.

Nuclear Iran: bluff or a real danger?

The contradictory attitudes of the present power holders in Teheran, is expressed particularly, according to Tilgner's analysis, in the politically acute question of nuclear politics. Even known experts can not determine realistically from the outside, how far advanced the Iranian nuclear programs are. According to Tilgner, the possibility of a propaganda motivated „showing off“ can not be completely discounted. Weapon grade Uranium requires an enrichment of over 90%, which is technically difficult to achieve, and according to Iranian sources an enrichment of only 8% has been achieved at present. Tilgner thinks that it will probably be only in March when an

analysis could be made if the leadership in Teheran will adopt a future strategy which may signal a readiness to negotiate, or maintain provocation by publicizing new nuclear progress.

The stress of Iranian leadership

According to Tilgner, the leadership can stem the rising discontent of the country's population only through far reaching concessions. An additional chronic stress situation with the West, without further loss of domestic power, can not be sustained for long. We can therefore count on the leadership team to be somewhat more ready to moderate or compromise its hard stands in the near future. At present the internal power struggles between moderate reform forces and the revolution-conservatives take place at all levels. The worsening of living conditions for the Iranian population will inevitably lead to a loss of power by the conservative establishment. The regime therefore tries to strengthen its endangered role in the short term through unsound economic policies of subsidies. Such, though, are not long term solutions. In addition, the Iranian leadership's propaganda declarations clearly warn that in the event of a western attack, an armed conflict on several fronts around the Arabian Gulf shall be the inevitable result, and will no doubt include numerous Arab oil sources.

Population explosion, economic boom and oil politics

With regard to the oil question, Tilgner pointed out that despite all of the outside restrictions there is a growing domestic economy as well as a continuing increase in population. These growths exponentially increase Iran's energy consumption as well. While the country possesses the third largest world oil reserves, oil production is for some time now, antiquated, inefficient and no longer up to date due to international sanctions. Tilgner referred to computer projections which forecast that Iran shall no longer be able to export oil around 2013/2015, because of its own continually growing domestic needs. Since at present all commodity shipments to Europe are crippled because of intensified sanctions, exports to Eastern Asia compensate for the loss of European markets. In the light of the hardened political conditions, Tilgner, the near east expert opines, that the rapidly growing additional oil needs of the developing countries in East Asia, does not make the situation easier for the west in the long run. The detour of gas flows away from Europe enables Russia as the European main supplier of gas, to assume the role of profiteer. The same would also be true in the event of a military escalation around the shipping lanes in the straits of Hormuz, where tankers carry most of the oil destined for Europe. As Tilgner reports, at the recent UN negotiations about sanctions, Russian interests were considered to a large extent without any reservations, and Russian nuclear exports to Iran were not affected by the sanction resolutions.

Increasing Education and new roles for Women

Following the Islamic revolution, the educational situation has markedly improved. For young people, the countrywide illiteracy rate stands for all practical purposes at zero, and graduates of Iran's outstanding universities are welcome abroad, according to Tilgner. With a 6% yearly economic growth rate, which can be characterized at stagnation level, there exists in Iran a considerable demand for university graduates on one hand, but on the other hand more jobs must also be created for each year's continually growing population. Tilgner's observations led him to the conclusion that the growing development boom may be substantially furthered by well trained women entering the work force. At present more than 60% of university students are women, even in the technical and scientific fields of study. In his own production team, Tilgner employs two women assistants, and this would have been inconceivable a few years ago. Tilgner, the media man, appreciatingly stated to his audience: „Women are simply better“, and received in return spontaneous applause from his listeners. Nevertheless, this development also carries with it certain long term social problems, since the well educated women, frequently encounter difficulties in finding suitable marriage partners.

Partially counter productive sanctions

Tilgner opines that should a military attack on Iranian nuclear production facilities occur, the resulting armed conflict will not be limited to Iran only, since the country's technical achievements is in some measure surprisingly advanced. In Iran, as in China, foreign high technological products are copied and adaptively modified. The transfer of western high tech products and modern weapons systems can not be prevented, despite the existing commercial sanctions which take into account the chaos reigning in neighboring Iraq. In conclusion, Tilgner sated that should the present sanctions against Iran become even more intensified, the country's on going development would probably last for another six to eight years, utilizing its natural resources, raw materials, money and manpower, before collapsing politically and implode as a near east factor, and that of course would lead to foreseeable consequences.

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Near East Expert Ulrich Tilgner animated in „body and soul“, during his lecture at the Empa Academy.



The auditorium at the Empa Academy was fully occupied during Ulrich Tilgner's lecture about Iran.