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# The German economy minister's controversial visit to Iran

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Five days after the signing of an agreement in which UN representatives imposed restrictions on Iran's use of nuclear energy and thirteen years since the last visit of a member of the German government to this country, the German deputy chancellor and minister for the economy, Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) on 19–21 July became the first Western politician to visit Iran. The minister emphasised the importance of Teheran's acceptance of Israel's right to exist. Gabriel's eagerness to visit Iran so soon has been criticised by the German press, by politicians from all parties and by representatives of the Jewish community. The commonly shared opinion in Germany is that the economy minister should have behaved more moderately in economic contacts with a country which questions Israel's right to exist and violates human rights. In the opinion of many commentators, Germany cannot be a moderator between Israel and Iran, and it should definitely take Israel's side. In turn, German corporations have strongly approved of the economy minister's visit, seeing it as an opportunity to regain their once strong position on the Iranian market.

**Commentary**

- Sigmar Gabriel's visit was in accordance with the principles of German policy towards countries such as China or Russia. In contacts with them, Germany avoids taking a principled stance on human rights violations and makes efforts to develop pragmatic relations, focusing more on the need to act in accordance with the laws applicable in a given country. However, the public opinion's reaction to the visit in Iran proves that there is still a strong belief in Germany that economic interests in Iran should not obscure the significance of the special relations existing between Israel and Germany, even though Germany has become noticeably more assertive in contacts with Israel over the past few years. Germany sometimes takes a very critical stance on actions taken by the Israeli government with regard to Palestine. The deal with Iran includes accepting the rules of a partial lifting of the sanctions. The fact that Germany took part in negotiating it along with the five permanent UN Security Council members means they do not see any threat for Israel in this and that they view it as a success. This does not, though, equate to approval of a clear improvement of political relations with Iran, which is still an unpredictable partner.
- The economy minister's visit to Iran has also been criticised because it runs up against the desire to maintain the image of Germany as an unbiased mediator between the various parties to the conflict in the Middle East. Germany, being one of the world's

largest exporters, must take care of its economic interests in the different countries in this region and is not interested in ostentatiously supporting any of the parties.

- The recent debate in Germany will not cause this country to withdraw from the promising Iranian market; its moves will simply be more discreet now. German companies hope to sell in Iran, above all, machines for the production of oil and gas. Before the sanctions were imposed on Iran, the share German firms had of the Iranian market reached around 30%, whereas now Chinese companies predominate on this market. Germany hopes that its exports to Iran will increase from 2 billion euros to 10 billion euros within the next four years. This is even more important since the emerging economies are no longer a source for a two-digit increase in German exports, as had previously been the case. This is partly an effect of the tense international situation and falling oil prices.