German event with Tehran envoy ‘legitimizes evil’

US Christian group, Iran experts slam govt, evangelical academy for inviting diplomat

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BERLIN – A German government ministry and an evangelical church academy provoked outrage in the US and Germany by inviting the Iranian ambassador – allegedly involved in the massacre of Kurds – to speak at a conference slated for this week in Lower Saxon state.

“It’s deeply troubling to learn that a Christian organization is taking steps to legitimize the Iranian regime. Let’s not forget, this is a regime which denies the Holocaust while openly dedicating itself to perpetrating a second Holocaust,” David Brog, the executive director of Christians United For Israel, told The Jerusalem Post on Friday.

CIFI is the largest pro-Israel organization in the US, with more than a million members.

Germany’s Economic Cooperation and Development Ministry is listed on the conference program as the sponsor of the three-day event in the village of Loccum titled “How can Iranian civil society be strengthened?”

Brog added, “The Iranian government these invited speakers represent has been implicated in terrorism which has killed Jews, Americans and Israelis around the world. This conference will do nothing to improve civil society in Iran. But it will help give the Iranian dictators the legitimacy they crave.”

Ambassador to Germany Ali Reza Sheikh Attar is slated to attend the conference, which will also address the Islamic Republic’s nuclear program.

According to the conference program, Attar will speak on a “new dynamic in Iran’s politics.”

Iranian dissidents accuse Attar of carrying out a massacre of Iranian Kurds during his tenure (1980-1985) as governor of the provinces of Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan.

Tommy Steiner, a senior research fellow at the Institute for Policy at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, told the Post on Saturday, “The problem is not with the Iranian ambassador appearing in a conference and presenting the Iranian official view on the issues at hand. The problem is with the German Foreign Ministry that chose not to withhold its agreement and approved the appointment of Ambassador Sheikh Attar as ambassador to Germany in the first place.”

Dr. Kazem Sadjapour, from Iran’s Foreign Ministry, is slated to speak on how the next round of nuclear talks could lead to a breakthrough.

The presence of Iranian government representatives prompted one prominent German-Iranian scholar to pull the plug on his participation in the event.

Dr. Wahdat-Hagh, a fellow with the European Foundation for Democracy and a leading authority on the Islamic Republic of Iran, slammed the event in a public letter last week.

“Attar represents a dangerous center of terror – in the name of Iran’s embassy – in the middle of Europe which represents totalitarian policies contemptuous of human rights,” Wahdat-Hagh said.

He blasted Dr. Marcus Schaper, the organizer of the event and director of international politics at the Evangelical Academy, in an email exchange. Wahdat-Hagh asked if he was expected to sit in a discussion with “my potential executioner who hanged my father,” and charged Schaper and his colleagues with making Iran’s regime “acceptable” to German society.

Wahdat-Hagh further accused Schaper of perverting Christianity to justify the dialogue with Iran’s regime.

Schaper, in his efforts to defend the event, cited a quote from the New Testament, Romans 12:14-21, about “overcoming evil with good.”

Responding to Schaper, Wahdat-Hagh wrote, “You are legitimizing evil and working with a regime that threatens Israel and Iranians in exile.

In a telephone interview with the Post, Schaper said, “The idea of the conference is to see what German policy toward Iran should be in the future” and to “bring together smart, intelligent people to avoid an Iranian bomb and support civilian society in democracy.

He stressed that the “role of the ambassador is very limited at the conference” and noted that “the smart people I am talking about” are German “policy types.”

Asked about Attar’s purported role in massacring Kurds, Schaper said he was “not rejecting these reports.”

“We know we are dealing with fundamentalists,” he said about the two Iranian government participants.

A Foreign Ministry spokesman in Berlin told the Post on Friday that Germany had withdrawn its participation in the event.

The spokesman added that the ministry had “not made a financial contribution to the conference,” and that participation in the conference was at the discretion of the organizer.

Asked if the event – funded by German taxpayer euros – was undercutting international efforts to isolate Iran and compel its government to adhere to UN, EU and US sanctions, whose aim was to stop Iran’s nuclear program, the spokesman declined to answer.

It is not the first time the German evangelical church has come under fire for work with Islamists seeking to obliterater Israel.

In 2010, the Evangelical Academy in the southern Germany city of Bad Boll invited Dr. Basem Naim, Hamas health minister in Gaza, to participate in a conference titled “Partner for Peace: Talking with Hamas and Fatah.”

The EU and Germany recognized Hamas as a terrorist organization in 2003.

Dr. Matthias Küntzel, a Hamburg-based political scientist who has written about Iran-German relations, told the Post on Saturday that after the failed nuclear talks with Iran, it appears Germany wanted to increase its cooperation with Tehran. He cited the conference’s stated aim to “improve the German-Iranian relationship” in this regard.

“It is shameful how the evangelical church betrays the concerns of the Iranian democracy movement by inviting top officials of the regime,” Küntzel said. The panel with Iran’s ambassador should be renamed “working together with the regime of Holocaust deniers,” he added.

Schaper, from the Evangelical Academy, said there would be no Holocaust denial at the conference. Denying the Shoah is illegal in Germany.

Küntzel called on the German government and political parties to break their silence and reject the conference’s path to a new relationship with Iran.

Katharina Mänz, an Economic Cooperation and Development Ministry spokeswoman, sent the Post an email on Saturday.

“The critical position of the federal government with respect to Iran’s nuclear program and the human right’s situation is known,” she wrote, declining to say what the positions were and what the ministry contributed financially to the event. She referred further questions to the Merkel administration.

Germany has the largest bilateral with Iran within the EU.