

Report From Germany by Rainer Apel

Schröder Visits Arabian Peninsula

The potential now exists for applying Germany's revolutionary maglev rail technology to the Gulf states.

In a Feb. 27-March 5 tour, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder visited Saudi Arabia and six other states on the Arabian Peninsula, five of these—Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and Yemen—for the first time. And although not explicitly proclaimed by the Chancellor and his entourage of 170 German business leaders, this tour not only served German economic interests, but also pursued policies of intensified cooperation, in stark contrast to the anti-Islamic, confrontation policy of the Bush Administration.

Schröder addressed 1) the need to reconstruct the Iraqi state and economy in close cooperation with the direct neighbors of Iraq; 2) solving the Iranian nuclear problem in the framework of expanded economic cooperation, including between Iran and its neighbors on the Arabian shore of the Persian Gulf; 3) preference to promotion of political and societal reforms in Arabian states by constructive dialogue with pro-reform currents in those states, rather than by “megaphone diplomacy”; and, 4) deepening the “dialogue of cultures” between Europe/Germany and the Islamic World.

These themes will rank prominently in the new Arabic-language program of Germany's Deutsche Welle TV and radio abroad, inaugurated during Schröder's visit.

As far as Iraq is concerned, the Chancellor reiterated that his government will not deploy any troops there, but will continue to limit its role to the training of Iraqi police, militiamen, and anti-terror units, at locations in the United Arab Emirates. The Chancellor advertised joint industrial cooperation projects with Iraq's neighbors, espe-

cially with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, but also with Iran.

In terms of industrial agreements, projects worth a total of 4 billion euros were signed, or will be signed soon. These include the construction of a refinery complex with a plastics-manufacturing plant in Bahrain, for 1.3 billion euros; and a gas-fueled power complex in Kuwait and port facilities in Kuwait City worth several hundred million euros each. German assistance features the development of petrochemical industries, to replace the Gulf states' currently predominant role as suppliers of crude oil and natural gas. For example, in Qatar, Germany's Uhde construction firm has already built one of the world's largest production sites for ammonia, and the Qatar Fertilizer Company plans to vastly expand this kind of production.

Also in Saudi Arabia, the Maaden firm, which plans the world's largest phosphate-mining complex in the country's north, in combination with a huge fertilizer-production complex, may use German know-how.

A prominent German role may also be featured in Saudi railway-development projects, for some 3,000 kilometers of rail track: the east-west link, projected under the name “Saudi Arabian Land-Bridge,” from Riyadh to Jeddah, and on to Mecca and Medina; and the freight-railway project, from the Saudi Gulf port of Dammam, to the minerals resources basin in the north. The Chancellor voiced his hope that German engineers might play a “strategic role” in Saudi Arabia's railway projects, saying in Riyadh that he is eagerly looking forward to the day when Saudi Arabia signs railway con-

tracts with Germany, and that he would visit Riyadh again, to be present at the signing.

In Qatar on March 1, Schröder advertised the German maglev train Transrapid, as the ideal option for the project of a new 45-km bridge for combined highway and railway transit, across the Gulf strait between Qatar and Bahrain. A memorandum of understanding on that project was signed between Qatar and Bahrain the day before Schröder's arrival, but there is no decision yet on whether to use conventional railway technology or the revolutionary maglev technology developed in Germany. If Qatar and Bahrain decide on the maglev, the technology also has a chance of being used on a larger section of the 2,000-km railway line that is planned as the first rail link among all states on the Arabian side of the Persian Gulf.

German-Arab agreements to carry out maglev feasibility studies were signed with Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, and Oman is expected to join soon. The Chancellor also offered to host a German-Arab rail/maglev conference soon, to which the Gulf leaders would be invited. This would include a test ride on the Transrapid experimental train in Lathen, Germany. The leaders of Qatar and Bahrain, who favor maglev technology, accepted the invitation.

The maglev workforce at Thyssen-Krupp in Kassel, which after the completion of the Shanghai project in China six months ago were put on short-work, waiting for the first German project in Munich to start, welcome a Gulf project. This would also re-employ many of the 5.21 million officially registered jobless Germans. The new record high in mass unemployment in Germany, which was published the day Schröder began his talks in Riyadh, was a major news item on Arabian media.