

The fate of hostage Susanne Osthoff and the role of the German government

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Concern is growing over the fate of 43-year-old German archaeologist Susanne Osthoff, who was taken hostage in Iraq along with her Iraqi driver on November 25. There has been no news of her whereabouts since the passing of the kidnappers' December 2 deadline for meeting their demands.

Mrs. Osthoff has been active in humanitarian aid in Iraq for many years. She speaks fluent Arabic and was already familiar with the country during her studies in the 1980s. At the beginning of the 1990s she helped organize and accompanied the delivery of relief supplies to Iraq at a time when the country was hard hit by UN economic sanctions. Her activities were aimed at combating hunger, poverty and a lack of medicines, particularly for children in remote regions of the country.

She was adamantly opposed to the US war against Iraq. Along with the immense human suffering arising from the war, she was deeply indignant about the brutal destruction and plundering of irreparable cultural artifacts, which the American occupiers did nothing to prevent. Two years ago, together with friends, she intensified her efforts for humanitarian assistance. Following her marriage to an Iraqi, Mrs. Osthoff has enjoyed exceptionally good contacts in Iraq.

Ten days ago, she was kidnapped in the northeast of Iraq by a dubious group calling itself "Storm Troopers of the Earthquakes." The kidnappers sent a video to the German television channel ARD that shows the hostages together with their captors. The group also allegedly gave an ultimatum threatening to kill Osthoff last Friday if Germany did not break off all relations with the US-dominated Iraqi government. During her first week of captivity, the German government claimed it was unable to contact the kidnappers. There has been no further sign of life from Osthoff since the video.

A sister of Susanne Osthoff made a dramatic appeal to the government via the media: "I hope that the German government is not stubborn and gives much more thought to changing its policies with regard to Iraq." In light of her social commitment and rejection of the war, Susanne Osthoff enjoys widespread popular support. Two years ago, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* awarded her a prize for civil courage.

Immediately after details of the kidnapping emerged, the new German government explained that it categorically rejected any sort of political compromise with the kidnappers and any concessions to their demands.

Germany's new chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian

Democratic Union, CDU) began her first speech to parliament last Wednesday by addressing the kidnapping. She announced: "This government, and I believe also this parliament—we will not allow ourselves to be extorted ... it must be principally acknowledged: international terrorism remains one of the biggest threats to the world community." There could be no letup in the "fight against terror," she added.

A number of political commentators have seen a direct connection between the kidnapping and the recent coming to office of Germany's grand coalition consisting of the CDU, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Christian Social Union (CSU).

According to one intelligence expert, Kai Hirschmann, it is no coincidence that Susanne Osthoff was kidnapped at this point. The terrorists wanted to send a political message to the new government in Berlin: "Do not support the US in Iraq!"

Along with the government and its constituent parties—the CDU, CSU and SPD—representatives of German opposition parties—the Free Democratic Party (FDP), the Greens and the Left Party—also unanimously called for a hard line against the hostage-takers. As most newspapers note, all parties agree that under no circumstances should any concessions be made to the kidnappers' political demands. Any response to the demands of the kidnappers represents a strengthening of terrorism.

This position turns reality on its head. It is first and foremost the Iraq war itself—conducted in defiance of international law—which has led to the destruction of Iraqi infrastructure, the deaths of tens of thousands of people, and the installation of a hated puppet regime by the occupying power, which has created the conditions in which reactionary fundamentalist and criminal groups can operate unhindered in Iraq.

Kidnapping in Iraq has developed into an industry over the recent period. Between 20 and 30 kidnappings take place on a daily basis in the capital Baghdad alone. At virtually the same time as the kidnapping of Susanne Osthoff, four other human right activists from Great Britain, Canada and the US were also taken hostage. And last Monday, a French engineer was kidnapped in the centre of Baghdad by armed men.

It is so far unclear who is behind the kidnapping of Susanne Osthoff. The demands made on the German government indicate a political grouping, although, according to experts, the video is somewhat unusual. It could also be the work of criminals intent on a ransom. It is clear, however, that any strengthening of "terrorism" does not stem from those campaigning for the release

of the hostages, but rather from the criminal and brutal occupation of the country. Anyone seriously interested in undermining the basis of criminal gangs and reactionary Islamic groups must demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the occupation troops.

After all of the official justifications for the Iraq war—weapons of mass destruction, support for Al Qaeda, etc.—have been exposed as a tissue of lies, emphasis has now switched to the “war against terrorism” as the official justification for the occupation and the terror employed against Iraqi cities such as Fallujah. At the same time, basic democratic rights have been systematically abused in the US and Europe in the name of the “war on terror.”

The political responsibility for the Iraq war and its consequences lies primarily with the American government. But the German government also bears a substantial share of responsibility for the current situation in Iraq and the associated kidnappings.

Not a single member of the grand coalition has sought in any way to question the role of German foreign policy with regard to Iraq and Afghanistan. The media has also refrained from bluntly stating the truth: Germany is in fact much more deeply involved in Iraq than is generally thought. On the basis of defending German interests, the former SPD-Green government rejected the Iraq war launched by American imperialism and refused to directly involve its troops.

But it continued to allow the US to use its bases on German soil to conduct the war and refrained from placing any restrictions on the American military’s use of German air space. The war was led by US units stationed in Germany with the complete knowledge and active support of the German government. Following embittered resistance by the suffering Iraqi population to the military occupation, the German government supported the occupation powers in establishing an administration “made in the USA.”

Both Iraqi police and armed forces have been given training in Germany. Hundreds of Iraqi policemen and a battalion of engineers have already undergone training by German experts in cooperation with the Arab Emirates. High ranking Iraqi officers receive special training at the German Army staff academy. Several hundred million euros have been spent on this “structural work.” In addition, the German government declared its readiness to forgive Iraqi debts estimated at €4.7 billion. In August 2004, Germany also re-established full diplomatic relations with Iraq.

Approximately 40 German companies have in the meantime re-established their offices in Iraq, in particular in the Kurdish-controlled north. Last year alone, German exports to Iraq had risen to their pre-war level of €370 million.

One of the first actions of the newly formed German government was to prolong the participation of the German Army in the so-called anti-terror war (Enduring Freedom) for a further year. This mandate includes combat missions for German special forces (KSK) in Afghanistan and elsewhere. An extra €100 million has been allocated for this intervention.

The main priority for the crisis team established in the Foreign Office to deal with the Osthoff kidnapping is to prevent information leaking out to the public. Even the video which was passed on to the ARD in Baghdad is not to be made public. Why

not? Is it to prevent knowledge of the demands made by the hostage-takers and subsequent critical questions being directed at the German government?

In the case of a similar kidnapping, that of the British hostage Kenneth Bigley last year, the Blair government in London sought to calm the anxious family of the victim. It strove to prevent Bigley’s courageous and uncompromising criticism of the policy of the Blair government becoming public. However, Bigley’s family members refused to be intimidated. They helped expose the myth that the occupation had led to the establishment of a democratic government in Iraq. Ken Bigley’s urgent appeal for the withdrawal of British troops to allow the Iraqis themselves to determine their own future was ignored by Blair. Bigley had to pay with his life for the reactionary policy of the Blair government.

In similar manner, the Merkel government is seeking to exploit the kidnapping for domestic purposes. German Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU) explained immediately after news of the kidnapping was made public: “This case confirms that we Germans are also threatened by international terrorism. This applies to foreign countries as well as here.” Along with tightening up domestic security, Schäuble is also seeking to use the incident to step up pressure for the use of German troops for domestic purposes.

For its part, the US government has used the kidnappings to emphasize the “increasing danger of international terrorism” and to divert attention from recent revelations regarding the criminal activities of the American intelligence agencies. In recent weeks, the European media has carried out a series of exposures of the illegal transport of CIA prisoners to so-called “black sites” situated all over the world, where victims are tortured and imprisoned without charges or legal advice. German airports have been used regularly as a stopover in these state-organized kidnappings.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, recently in Berlin to seek closer cooperation from the new Merkel government, promised to “clarify” the activities of her government’s intelligence agencies. In the event, her “clarification” was nothing but a defiant defence of such criminal practices.



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