Germany: Democratic rights under attack following arrest of alleged bombers

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28 August 2006

A campaign has been launched to give the German state greater police powers following official claims that bombs found in two regional trains at the end of July were likely left by two young Lebanese men. Security measures severely restricting fundamental democratic rights are now to be introduced in fast-track legislation.

Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble, a member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and consistent advocate of a stronger state, spoke of an "unusually serious" and "close" terror threat, and in the same breath demanded the collection of wide-ranging "anti-terrorism data," increased use of video surveillance in public places, and expanded monitoring of the Internet.

In the liberal weekly *Die Zeit*, Robert Leicht supplied the philosophical rationale for the voluntary renunciation of democratic rights. "The simple zero-sum game," he wrote, "according to which more security is always at the cost of certain freedoms has given way to the view that a minimum of security is one of the elementary conditions of freedom...."

The two suitcase bombs that were found on July 31 in regional trains bound for Dortmund and Koblenz certainly represented a serious threat. According to expert opinion, they did not explode because the obviously inexperienced bomb-makers had made certain technical mistakes.

Although the bombs were primitive—a propane gas bottle, several bottles filled with gasoline, a detonator and batteries—their detonation in a moving train could have claimed many victims. This marked the first known attempt to carry out an attack in Germany similar to those previously carried out in Madrid and London.

Nevertheless, no one should allow his critical faculties be clouded by the panic and hysteria that is being encouraged by the political establishment and the media. The establishment of a police state will not prevent terrorist attacks. Rather, moves in that direction create a climate in which terror and violence can flourish.

In order to prevent such attacks, it is necessary to examine their social and political causes. The claims of President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair that such attacks have nothing to do with the wars in Iraq and Lebanon, but rather arise from a religiously motivated hatred of "Western values," become no more credible when repeated by German politicians.

Which "Western values" are meant? The illegal war against Iraq, which was justified by lies and has cost the lives of more than 100,000 Iraqis and each month claims more victims than the September 11 attack on the World Trade Centre? Or does this phrase mean the brutal bombardment of Lebanon by the Israeli Air Force, which killed 1,200 civilians, destroyed large parts of the country's infrastructure, and razed whole villages to the ground?

In Germany, there was a public outcry against the Iraq war. However, the destruction of Lebanon has been either supported or downplayed by the media and the establishment political parties. Neither the trade unions nor the Left Party have participated in demonstrations against the war in the Lebanon. Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) was enjoying a barbeque with President Bush as the first bombs fell on Beirut, and both immediately declared their solidarity with Israel.

Under these circumstances, can it be any surprise that the rage and indignation over imperialist crimes in the Middle East result in reactionary acts of terrorism against innocent bystanders?

Taking into account everything that is known so far about the attempted train bombings and the alleged bomb-makers, the attack seems not to have been the result of long-term planning by an experienced terrorist organisation, but rather a relatively spontaneous reaction to the war in Lebanon.

The crude design of the bombs, which experts say is "completely atypical" for terrorists, points to this conclusion. According to Kai Hirschmann, an expert from the Essen Institute for Terrorism Research and Security Policy, the attempted bombings could only be the work of amateurs. The suitcases were not hidden, and the explosive used was not professional. In Kai's opinion, there are many indications that the desired result was to create a shock rather than massive destruction.

Twenty-one-year-old Youssef Mohammed el-Hajdib, who was arrested at the weekend in Kiel, has lived in Germany for two years and was undertaking a preparatory course to study at technical college. According to the Lebanese secret service, his family has connections with the Salafist group Hisb ut-Tahrir, which calls for the establishment of a worldwide Caliphate, but so far there are no indications that Youssef entered Germany intending to commit acts of terror.

Rather, it seems that the recent dispute over anti-Mohammed cartoons has radicalised devout Muslims. The right-wing Danish newspaper *Jyllands Post* published the cartoons last year in a deliberate political provocation, aiming to insult and outrage Muslims. The newspaper thereby unleashed a worldwide wave of protest.

When Youssef's class discussed the cartoon controversy, the otherwise calm pupil was said to have become highly agitated, according to a report in *Die Zeit*. "He was very radical and aggressive," the newspaper quotes a schoolmate as saying. On February 10, *NDR* television filmed him at the head of a demonstration against the cartoons in Kiel.

This was followed by the Lebanon war, which had direct consequences for Youssef. One of his brothers was killed by an Israeli bomb.

Little is known so far about the second alleged bomber, 19-year-old Jihad Hamad. He lived for two years as a student in Cologne. Last Wednesday, he presented himself voluntarily to the Lebanese police, protesting his innocence.

The German police claim to have DNA evidence linking both young men to the bombs. Moreover, they claim to have found receipts for gas bottles—like those used in the bombs—in Jihad Hamad's Cologne apartment. If the latter claim is true, it likewise suggests the perpetrators were inexperienced conspirators, rather than seasoned terrorists.

The chief federal prosecutor has accused the two not only of murder, but also of membership in a terrorist organisation. The Federal Criminal Investigation Office is searching for further accomplices, and on Friday

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two additional arrests were made. However, no evidence has been presented thus far indicating that the suspects were members of a terrorist organisation.

Some politicians involved in German security policy have conceded the link between the attempted bombing and the war in Lebanon. In an interview in *Die Zeit*, Interior Minister Schäuble said, “Early on, we had pointed out that the longer the dispute in Lebanon persists, the greater the danger it will affect us.”

Schäuble is very conscious of the effect that the pictures of the devastating war will have. An Arab public, unlike Europeans and Americans, can see these images uncensored.

“I do not want to pass judgement on a popular satellite channel such as al-Jazeera,” he told *Die Zeit*, “however, the pictures, which they broadcast non-stop probably do not encourage tolerance and peacefulness.” The responsibility for this, however, does not lie with al-Jazeera for broadcasting the images, but with Israel and the US, which are responsible for the suffering.

Erhart Körting, a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and interior senator in the Berlin city legislature, told the daily *Berliner Zeitung* that the danger of terrorism in Germany could increase further if German soldiers were deployed in the Middle East and local people reacted negatively.

However, neither Schäuble nor Körting are talking about a U-turn in German foreign policy, which, since the grand coalition of the CDU and SPD took office, has followed in the wake of the US. Both support the despatch of German soldiers to Lebanon and reckon with military intervention in the Middle East causing further terrorist attacks and mounting domestic opposition.

It is in this context that the granting of greater powers to the security authorities, which is now being energetically advanced, should be seen. Such measures do not serve to protect the general population from terrorist attacks, but to suppress and intimidate political opposition.

At the core of the called-for “security precautions” is the collection of so-called “anti-terrorism data.” This has been under discussion for a long time. However, its introduction has failed so far for a variety of reasons. Interior Minister Schäuble had wanted to introduce these measures during the soccer world championship in July this year. Now he sees a new chance to rapidly implement the necessary legislation.

The collection of wide-ranging “anti-terrorism data” opens the floodgates for the state to conduct monitoring on a Kafkaesque scale. It eliminates the constitutional separation of the police and secret service, enabling the almost complete monitoring of individuals, arbitrarily stamping everyone as a potential suspect without them being able to challenge this. It creates a network of monitoring and suspicion, from which there is no escape if one falls inside.

The data collected will include information garnered by the secret services and police, the Federal Criminal Investigation Office, state criminal police agencies, military intelligence, the Federal Information Service and Customs Office. The files to be kept and made accessible at any time to the security authorities will include data about organisations and persons suspected of a connection to terrorism in any form.

The data banks are to store addresses, telephone records, lists of web pages visited and individual bank account details. Mobile phone data is also to be stored, since this enables the movements of an individual to be reconstructed. Moreover, the files are to contain information about where suspects like to meet and travel. Even physical characteristics such as tattoos, scars or speaking a certain dialect are to be recorded.

The number of those who could be caught up in the dragnet is almost unlimited. According to the draft bill, the new law will affect persons and organisations “who use illegal force as a means to implement international political or religious interests or support or endorse such a use of force, or deliberately cause it through their activities.”

According to this definition, proponents of the Iraq war would also have to be included in the data records, since it can hardly be denied that the Iraq war involved using “illegal force as a means to implement international political or religious interests.” But this is certainly not what is intended. However, this example shows that the legal wording can be stretched at will and applied to political tendencies that the state regards as undesirable.

Should this extensive definition still be too narrow, so-called “contact persons” may be placed under surveillance and their details recorded. Thus, practically everyone can be the subject of “anti-terrorism data” collection.

According to the former president of the Federal Constitutional Court, Jutta Limbach, speaking to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, those “who live in a student hostel in the neighbourhood of a terror suspect and have allowed such a person to use the hostel telephone could unexpectedly find themselves listed in the anti-terrorism data.”

If the collection of such anti-terrorism data is expanded internationally, as is intended, an individual might come under the suspicion of the secret services and end up in a camp like Guantanamo. The Stasi (State Security Police) in the former East Germany would look like amateurs by comparison.

In an interview, Interior Minister Schäuble admitted that the collection of anti-terrorism date could hardly have prevented the attempted attack on the two regional trains. However, it provides the authorities with an outstanding instrument to monitor and suppress undesired opposition tendencies.

Above all, left-wing and socialist organisations could be subject to state observation and repression. What is to be understood by the “endorsement of force” is a very relative and flexible question. A large-scale industrial strike might fall under such a definition, or a broad movement against a war in which Germany is involved.

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