

European powers press to intervene in Lebanon

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Following the decision of the United Nations Security Council to deploy a 15,000-strong occupying force in Lebanon, a number of European powers have shown their eagerness to take part.

France, which played a leading role in securing the UN resolution, has long since made clear its readiness to form the “backbone” of such a force and assume its command. It already leads the 2,000-strong UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) contingent in south Lebanon, which will now be expanded and given a “robust” mandate to intervene.

Last weekend Italy announced it would also send 3,000 soldiers to Lebanon and is regarded as a potential second-in-command for the operation. Sweden and Greece have declared their readiness to participate, and it is widely expected that Spain and Poland will follow suit.

It is presumed that Germany has also already made the decision to take part in the Lebanon mission. While the government is reluctant to make the decision official, according to media reports, the leaders of Germany’s governing coalition parties (Christian Democratic Union—CDU, Christian Social Union—CSU and Social Democratic Party—SPD) are united in their desire to see a German participation in the UN force.

Over the weekend the chairman of the SPD, Kurt Beck, made the first move. In a television interview he surprisingly made an appeal for the deployment of German troops to the Middle East and in so doing unleashed controversy within both his own party and the other coalition parties. Until now it had been argued that Germany’s responsibility for the Holocaust excluded the possibility of German military deployments involving Israel. In addition, critics maintained the German army was already overstretched as a result of its involvement in missions in the Balkans, Afghanistan, the Congo and elsewhere.

Beck, however, won support from other leading politicians. In a telephone conference, the SPD presidium “unanimously” confirmed the position put forward by the party chairman and both the German defense secretary, Franz Josef Jung, and interior minister, Wolfgang Schäuble (both CDU), publicly spoke out in favor of a deployment in Lebanon. Schäuble told German television: “We do not want to refuse our services. We cannot refuse.” Finally the German president Horst Köhler (CDU) declared: “In this case we cannot get out of it.”

On Tuesday the Berlin *Tagesspiegel* cited government circles to confirm that German Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU), Vice-chancellor Franz Müntefering (SPD), Foreign Minister Frank-

Walter Steinmeier (SPD) and Defense Secretary Jung had all agreed in principle to the deployment of the German military. This would, however, be confirmed at a later point, to minimize any opposition in the German parliament (Bundestag), which had to agree to such a step.

NATO member Turkey, which lies adjacent to the crisis region, is also keen to take part in the Lebanon mission. After meeting with prominent military commanders, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan announced that a formal decision would be made as soon as the UN had finalized its plans for the intervention force.

The Lebanon deployment is considered extremely hazardous. The cease-fire is only a few days old and renewed fighting could break out at any time. The UN resolution, on which the cease-fire is based, is ambiguous and has been interpreted differently by the various parties involved.

Despite the risks, however, European governments are pressing to send soldiers to Lebanon—a clear indication that they are seeking thereby to defend their own substantial interests in the region. At the same time the interests of the different participating nations are by no means identical. It is noteworthy that the deployment is to be carried out under the flag and initiative of *individual* European nations rather than under the banner of the European Union.

France, which, as former colonial power, maintains close relations with the Lebanese ruling class, regards the UN force as an opportunity to strengthen its position in the Middle East.

After the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a personal friend of President Jacques Chirac, France cooperated closely with the US last year to drive Syria out of Lebanon and help assure the success of the so-called “Cedar Revolution.” France is also hostile to Hezbollah, an ally of Syria. This does not mean, however, that France and the US are pursuing the same goals in the region.

For Washington, which was involved at an early stage and fully supported the Israeli war plans, the Israeli attack on Lebanon served as preparation and dry run for a military strike against Iran. It approved of Israel’s initiative to smash Hezbollah, which has the support of the local Shia population, as a means of wiping out a potential source of opposition. At the same time, the air raids carried out on Hezbollah bunkers served as a test for the effectiveness of air strikes against Iran. These points were made this week by American journalist Seymour Hersh writing in the *New Yorker* on the basis of his discussions with intelligence and military circles.

France, which previously expressed its opposition to the Iraq war, remains extremely skeptical about the US plans for war against Iran. It has sought to function as an ally of the moderate Arab bourgeoisie, which fears being torn apart by the aggressive actions of the US, on the one hand, and the increasing political radicalization of the masses, on the other.

While Washington rejects any contact with Teheran, during the Lebanon war the French government sought to include Iran in negotiations. During a visit to Beirut on July 31, the French foreign minister, Philippe Douste Blazy, declared: "More than ever we regard the Iranians as a respected and important participant." In a comment aimed at Washington and Jerusalem, he then added that it was obvious "that we cannot accept the destabilization of Lebanon, which would involve the destabilization of the region." Iran is "a great country, a great people and a great civilization, which is respected and plays a stabilizing role in the region."

Although there were only minimal differences between the French and US stances towards Lebanon, media sources close to the government—such as the daily *Le Figaro*—sought to depict France as a major opponent of the US.

The newspaper celebrated the Security Council resolution on Lebanon, which fell far short of the requirements of Washington and Jerusalem, as a major success for French diplomacy.

For its part German foreign policy has lined up unconditionally with Israel. In this regard it stands much closer to American policy than to the French. During the entire Lebanon war not a word of criticism was to be heard from Berlin over Israel's military offensive.

There is also a complete lack of impartiality in the official debate over the deployment of the German army. One of the most frequent reasons advanced to justify dispatching German troops is "securing the existence of the state of Israel," which, as government spokesman Thomas Steg put it, is a "basic constant of German foreign policy."

To prevent conflicts arising between German and Israeli soldiers, it is proposed that the German military should not be stationed in southern Lebanon on its border with Israel. Instead, according to media reports, German forces are to patrol the Lebanese coastline and act as a policeman over the Lebanese-Syrian border to cut off Hezbollah's supply of weapons.

Both the Israeli head of government, Ehud Olmert, and the Central Jewish Council in Germany have expressly called for the intervention of German armed forces in Lebanon. One factor motivating the Israeli government is that Germany could act as a counterweight to France. The *Frankfurter Rundschau* commented, "They know that the French will play a special role. They are considered as rather 'Arab-friendly.' Therefore Jerusalem is quite happy if the Germans prevent any one-sided orientation."

However, along with Paris, Berlin is also keen to maintain good relations with the Arab states. Although any criticism of America's Middle East policy has been largely suppressed since the CDU's Angela Merkel took over as chancellor, Washington's aggressive activities in the region continue to threaten German economic interests. Germany remains heavily dependent on oil from the Middle East (and gas in the future) and considers the

region a significant market for its goods. Therefore its foreign policy seeks to avoid the provocative policies adopted by the US.

In contrast to Paris and Washington, which have sought to systematically boycott Syria, Berlin has tried to involve Damascus in a joint approach towards Lebanon. After months in which no high-ranking politician apart from the Spanish foreign minister, Miguel Angel Moratinos, had visited the Syrian capital, German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier scheduled an August 15 meeting with the Syrian head of state, Bashar al-Assad. In return for cooperation in Lebanon, Assad was to be offered closer economic ties with the European Union.

Steinmeier called off his trip, however, at the last minute after Assad made a speech to Syrian journalists in which he termed Israel the "enemy," with whom there could be no peace, and went on to proclaim Syrian support for Hezbollah to be a "great honor."

The proponents of a German army mission in Lebanon always stress that such an deployment serves the national interest. Government spokesman Steg, speaking on behalf of the chancellor on Monday, declared that a German contribution to peace and stability in the Middle East was a question of "direct national interest." Alongside historical reasons, i.e., the security of the state of Israel, he also included geopolitical reasons: the Middle East lies directly adjacent to Europe.

Various CDU politicians, such as the foreign policy speaker of the CDU-CSU faction, Eckart von Klaeden, stress that the stability of the Middle East lies in "Germany's interest." And the Green Party chairman Reinhard Bütikofer spoke in the *taz* newspaper of a "virulent German interest in a rapid containment of the conflict."

What is meant by "Germany's interests"?

This refers, on the one hand, to the economic and political interests of German imperialism in the region. A military presence there would make it easier for Germany to protect its interests against other great powers, in particular the US.

On the other hand, an additional factor has emerged as a result of the Lebanon war and the unexpected resistance mounted to the Israeli military. The ability of Hezbollah to resist the offensive launched by a highly equipped Israeli army for over a month is indicative of a revolutionary ferment taking place amongst broad layers of the population. Such a development is not limited to Lebanon and endangers the conservative Arab regimes as well as Israeli and other imperialist interests in the region.

Against this background the differences between the US, French and German positions recede into the distance. For German foreign policy, "stability in the Middle East" means first and foremost the containment of this revolutionary potential. This is why the German government is sending soldiers to participate in the thoroughly risky enterprise of disarming Hezbollah while at the same time justifying and excusing the war crimes committed by Israel.



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