

German government presses for military deployment in Lebanon

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The German government decided Wednesday, September 13, to send German naval ships to the Lebanese coast. Within the context of a United Nations mandate, the German Navy will have the task of cutting off the supply of weapons to Hezbollah. The German parliament (Bundestag) is expected to give its approval for the deployment next week, opening the way for the immediate dispatch of German frigates.

The German government has been vigorously pushing for a military engagement in the crisis region since the start of discussions in the UN over an internationally supervised ceasefire in Lebanon. In the case of previous military engagements the German government gave the impression that it was rather reluctant to send troops, and would only do so on the basis of express requests. This time round Berlin has badgered the UN for the chance to send in its troops.

Barely had the UN ceasefire resolution of August 12 been agreed, government circles in Berlin were making their own suggestions for military intervention. The leading role was played by the chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Kurt Beck, closely followed by Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung, Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble and German President Horst Köhler (all three of the Christian Democratic Union—CDU). Two days later the press announced that the government had agreed in principle on a deployment of German forces and that a special meeting of the parliament would shortly follow.

Along with the dispatch of the German Navy to monitor the coast, the government also indicated it was prepared to send German troops to guard the Lebanese-Syrian border—a proposal which was quietly ditched, however, when Damascus made clear its strict opposition. At the time, Defence Minister Jung (CDU) was keen to refer to the German deployment as a “combat mission.”

The military plans faltered when it became clear that German troops are not welcome in Lebanon. The official request from the Lebanese government—necessary according to international law—was slow in coming. In Beirut the German army was looked upon as an occupation rather than a peacekeeping force, with Germany taking a partisan position and unable to play the role of an impartial mediator in the conflict with Israel. The Lebanese public were well aware that the government headed by Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) had unconditionally backed Israel and the US during the 34-day Israeli bombardment and refrained from making the slightest criticism of the devastating air raids. The

German government even refrained from calling for a ceasefire.

In particular the Shiite parties, who represent 40 percent of the Lebanese population, look upon the monitoring of the coast by the German Navy as a violation of Lebanese sovereignty. The Amal movement, led by parliamentary president Nabih Berri, and Hezbollah both set conditions for agreeing to such a deployment. They called for an immediate lifting of the Israeli sea blockade, which has paralysed the Lebanese economy for months. Secondly they demanded that German warships remain a distance of between 6 and 12 nautical miles from the coast and only search other ships with the agreement of the Lebanese navy. These terms met in turn with opposition from the German and, in particular, the Israeli government.

Under these conditions negotiations over the Lebanese mission dragged on for weeks. Following prolonged diplomatic haggling involving UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Israel finally lifted its air and sea blockade at the end of last week. French, Greek and Italian ships are now patrolling the Lebanese coast until the arrival of the German Navy.

The official request by the Lebanese government was finally delivered to the United Nations on Monday. It was attached to the condition that warships under the flag of the UN flag remain a distance of six miles from the coast—a condition which was rejected by the UN. According to the rules of engagement agreed Tuesday the German Navy, supported by other international forces, will patrol the entire Lebanese coastline and the German contingent is allowed to use force. The presence of a Lebanese officer on each ship is regarded as sufficient to award the Lebanese government at least some sort of symbolic recognition of its “sovereignty.”

The question arises, why is the German government so eager for a military deployment, which is both expensive and very risky?

According to defence expert Hans Rühle, who occupied high-ranking positions in the Defence Ministry and NATO for many years, there are “a number of concrete definable military risks for German soldiers.” These include acts of terror involving high-speed boats along the lines of the attack which was carried in Aden against the US warship *Cole* in October 2000, or attacks with guided missiles. Such a missile struck the Israeli corvette *Hanit* 15 kilometres from the Lebanese coast in July this year.

The German government has given two reasons for its intervention: guaranteeing the right of existence of the state of Israel, as well as humanitarian and peace purposes.

“When, however, it is a matter of state for Germany to ensure the right of existence of Israel,” chancellor Merkel declared during the budget debate in the Bundestag last week, “then we cannot simply say: If the existence of Israel is endangered in this region—and it is—we will simply stand aside. If we want to take part in the necessary humanitarian and political process, then it will be very difficult to say: others should please take over responsibility for the military component.”

Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier (SPD) took a similar approach. Also speaking in the budget debate, Steinmeier declared that never had “a contingent of German soldiers been sent into a region with the task of destroying or increasing German influence in the country.... This government and previous governments have always sought with their decisions to either supervise peace treaties, create stability for people or put an end to expulsions and mass murder.” Likewise, the German army in Lebanon “has the task, together with soldiers of other countries, of ensuring that the weapons in this region remain silent in future.”

This official version, whereby on the one hand Germany is obliged for historical reasons to defend the “right of existence of Israel”—which amounts to an uncritical acceptance of Israeli government policy—and on the other hand secure “peace” in the Middle East with the aid of the German army, is reflected in the vast majority of media reports and comments. Any sober examination of recent events, however, shows the absurdity of such a representation.

The Israeli attack on Lebanon was part of imperialist efforts to reorganise the entire Middle East—a process which had begun with the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and is aimed at securing US control of the entire region. The military operation in Lebanon had been prepared long in advance by Israel and took place with the unconditional support of the US. Israel had already begun intensified air raids on Lebanon, even prior to the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers by the Hezbollah militia. The kidnapping merely provided the pretext for a campaign of bombing terror, which struck broad swathes of Lebanese infrastructure and killed over a thousand civilians.

As the WSWS wrote on July 21, “The immediate aim of this war—the elimination of Hezbollah as a military and political force within Lebanon—is directed against all mass resistance to Israeli and American domination of the country. The Bush administration and its allies in Jerusalem see this as an essential step toward: 1) the removal of the Syrian Baathist regime, and 2) the launching of a full-scale war against Iran.” (See “The real aims of the US backed Israeli war against Lebanon”)

This analysis has been confirmed in detail by research carried out by the US journalist Seymour Hersh in an article in the *New Yorker* magazine, which explains how American and Israeli agencies planned the attack on Hezbollah as a kind of dress rehearsal for a war against Iran.

Jerusalem and Washington agreed to a ceasefire only following the failure of the one-month Israeli bombing campaign against Hezbollah and growing international indignation over the role of Israel, the US and the main Arab regimes in the Middle East. Nevertheless, their failure in Lebanon led to a severe weakening of US and Israeli political and military authority.

This is the real reason for Germany’s eagerness, along with that of the other German powers, to intervene in the Middle East. It is seeking to both support, and partly replace, Washington in its self-appointed role as world policeman. At the same time, European powers detect a chance to establish their presence in a region which has long been dominated by the US.

This was spelled out in a commentary in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* by Karl Kaiser, an expert on international policy, who formerly headed the German society for foreign policy and now teaches at Harvard University. His article was titled “Europeans to the front.”

He establishes at the beginning of the article that the military conflict in Lebanon has “—in light of the consequences of the previous policy of the Bush government—changed the relation of forces in the region, at the expense of Israel and America’s capacity to act.” There now exists the danger “that the existing anti-Israeli front, based on the nationalism of secular Arab states, could turn into a pan Islamic and thus religiously-motivated front, which would be much broader and more militant.”

Kaiser writes that this represents a challenge to Europe both politically and militarily: “Europe’s significance is growing in this strategically changed landscape. The policy of the Bush government—even in the eyes of the moderate Arab regimes—has so substantially weakened the reputation of the US as to dramatically reduce its capacity to act as a mediator. In this situation the European Union—in the interest of the West, including Israel—must play a substantial role as initiator and mediator, and secure this by the deployment of its own resources.”

The term “resources” refers to military means. Such an attempt by the European Union to keep the Middle East under military control “in the interests of the West, including Israel” has its own, predictable logic. It will inevitably result in German and European soldiers coming into conflict with the populations in a region, which has been a centre for imperialist interests and intrigues since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

It will also plunge those countries which refrained from involvement in the Iraq war into a spiral of violence and conflict. Such a development is already visible in Afghanistan, where NATO took over command from the US. The situation will be no different in Lebanon. A deployment of the German Navy in this conflict must be decisively rejected.



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