Germany to deploy Tornado jet fighters to Afghanistan

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Last week, the German parliament (Bundestag) agreed to deploy up to eight Tornado jet fighters to Afghanistan. The planes will be used in a reconnaissance role in the south of the country—currently the scene of violent struggles—to support the operations of NATO troops under the command of the US. The deployment of the planes also means sending an additional 500 soldiers—on top of the 3,000 German troops already stationed there. The mission is to begin in early April and will extend until mid-October.

A clear majority of Germans reject this operation. Just two days before the parliamentary vote, a poll by *dimap* found that only 23 percent of respondents supported the deployment of the jets and soldiers, while 69 percent were opposed.

The vote in the Bundestag was also far from unanimous, with 405 voting for the government motion, 157 opposing and 11 abstentions. This is the highest number of dissenting votes cast for an international military mission.

The Green Party vote was split. Parliamentary party leaders Renate Künast and Fritz Kuhn endorsed the mission. Party head Claudia Roth said Germany was "being drawn into ever sharper and more violent actions." The Green Party parliamentary group chair Hans-Christian Ströbele remained true to his role as the pacifist fig leaf for the party, saying, "These Tornadoes will support the fatal war missions of the US in the south of Afghanistan."

There were 69 "no" votes in the SPD parliamentary faction—nearly a third of the group. This figure was higher than the predicted number of SPD dissenters.

The Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism voted en bloc against the deployment.

Two Christian Democrats also voted against: Winfried Wimmer (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) and Peter Gauweiler (Christian Social Union—CSU), who also lodged a legal objection to the Federal Constitutional Court.

Their reasoning for rejecting the despatch of German Tornado fighters expressed clear discontent with the conduct of the war in Afghanistan under US command. They pilloried "America's conduct of a war contrary to international law," which was "no longer covered by the right of self-defence as laid down in the Charter of the United Nations" and in which Germany was now increasingly participating. The sending of the planes was "the last step in a government policy that had stretched over many years and that has contributed to a silent and unwanted alteration to the substance of the NATO accord," they added.

For some time, Wimmer has ranked as one of the most vociferous critics of German participation in the war in Afghanistan. Some weeks ago, he said the path of the Tornadoes would lead from Afghanistan "directly to The Hague" to the War Crimes Tribunal, since the results of their reconnaissance missions would lead to the killing of innocent civilians.

The criticisms of Wimmer, Gauweiler and others, however, by no means represent a general rejection of military operations by Germany's Bundeswehr (armed forces) and is not an adaptation to the antiwar sentiments in the general population. Rather, it expresses the fear of being sucked into a military quagmire from which there is no going back.

As well as the military doubts, there are political ones—expanding participation in America's military enterprises could frustrate German foreign policy efforts to gain a foothold in the region.

Since the fall of the Taliban rebels at the end of 2001, the German army, which currently commands the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) mission in the north of the country, is striving to develop cooperation with local tribal leaders. Among other things, it is training Afghan police and military organisations.

As part of its mission the German army is cooperating with war lords and drug barons on the basis of a policy of mutual tolerance. The latter are permitted to continue their business with weapons and drugs, in return for which they do not undertake action against the weak central government of Hamid Karzai. As much opium was produced in 2006 in Afghanistan as ever before. Germany's previous foreign minister Joschka Fischer had continually stressed that the fight against drugs was a task of the police and not the Bundeswehr.

Germany's much proclaimed "special position" in Afghanistan rests on this kind of "peaceful coexistence." But this state of affairs is beginning to erode under conditions where the German army is increasingly involved in the fighting. Babak Khalatbari, the director of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Kabul, told the press that "Germany as an ISAF member and also a NATO member—in 2007 the fronts are becoming far more blurred. And one only sees foreign soldiers, regardless from which nation they come... Our bonus in the Hindu Kush will shrink and will become smaller."

This development was certainly sharply accelerated by the increasing German army deployments in the south. Here,

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Operation Enduring Freedom under US leadership means troops fighting a bloody war that many observers say cannot be won.

There were some violent debates about the character of the mission even before the decision was taken to send the Tornadoes. Special significance was given to the distinction between the activities of the ISAF troops and those of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Although both missions work hand in hand and share their assignments and also a considerable part of their command structures, in public discussion ISAF is described as being involved with "civilian development aid" while OEF is engaged in active fighting.

In order to provide a cover for the participation of Germany's Tornadoes as part of OEF, the text of the mandate covering their deployment uses the formulation of a "restricted" transmission of information by ISAF to OEF. But it is ridiculous to speak of any restrictions regarding the sharing of reconnaissance intelligence. Moreover, ISAF itself has long been embroiled in violent fighting.

As to whether the deployment of Germany's Tornados represents a "combat mission," here also there was no agreement between opponents and proponents. Defence Minister Franz-Josef Jung (CDU) insists upon the strict distinction between reconnaissance flights and combat missions—a distinction that makes no sense militarily. He even tried to present the mission as a contribution to the protection of the civilian population: The better identification of military targets would lessen "collateral damage."

On the other hand, several experts stressed the substantial links between reconnaissance and military strikes. Jung's predecessor at the Defence Ministry, Peter Struck (Social Democratic Party—SPD), said that "of course" it involves a combat mission. Others demanded a clear commitment to combat missions—including the sending of ground troops into the south.

Meanwhile, the long-announced NATO "spring offensive" is under way. On March 6, "Operation Achilles" was launched; a large-scale offensive against the Taliban rebels. Beforehand there had been repeated warnings of a Taliban attack wave, but US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had answered, saying if there were to be a spring offensive then "it will be ours."

Before the Bundestag vote, however, Defence Minister Jung did not want to know anything about a "spring offensive"—what was planned was merely the expansion of an already current "Operation Eagle," Jung told the press. He did not want to speak of an "offensive" in this regard.

For the commanders of the operation actually taking place this might be news. The military on the ground are clearly and openly talking about an offensive whose goal is to displace the Taliban from Helmand province in the south, where NATO troops have completely lost control. According to press reports quoting the ISAF regional commander for south Afghanistan, Netherlands Major General Ton van Loon: "Achilles is the biggest joint operation of ISAF and Afghan troops so far." The UN Special Representative for Afghanistan, the Green Party politician Tom Königs, shares this view.

Helmand is ascribed great importance; among other things, a vital dam forming part of the energy supply network is situated there.

At its highpoint, Achilles will comprise 4,500 ISAF soldiers and about 1,000 Afghan troops. No time limit has been placed on the mission. Experts say the next two months are crucial for the future of the country.

In the days before the official launch of the operation, sorties by coalition troops claimed numerous civilian victims. The bombing of "possible enemy positions" north of Kabul led to nine people dying in their home. Two days earlier, in the eastern city of Jalalabad, 10 people died with a further 34 injured when US soldiers opened fire on a crowd, reportedly fearing a suicide bomber.

Both incidents were preceded by rebel attacks. Although these caused no great damage, the escalating level of attacks on the occupation troops has led to increasing nervousness among the soldiers, often resulting in innocent bystanders being shot by the panicking troops. Eyewitnesses reported that in Jalalabad soldiers shot indiscriminately and in panic at everything that seemed suspicious to them.

The 4,000 reported killed in Afghanistan in 2007 included thousands of civilians, angering the local population. Together with stagnating or worsening living conditions in many places this has clearly strengthened the Taliban rebels, who have stepped up their attacks in the east of the country and in the capital Kabul.

An editorial in *Spiegel Online* about Jung's denial of a "spring offensive" commented that "NATO, and above all the Americans, are no longer fighting against the resistance of just a few in the country. The Taliban and the many sympathizers of the fighters of Mullah Omar in the country, goaded on by air raids and civilian deaths, are a very visible opponent."

Operation Achilles is part of a broader strategy: The terrain, which presently ties down important resources for the US armed forces in Afghanistan, is to be "cleansed" once and for all. This is in an effort to allow the Pentagon strategists to dedicate themselves to controlling a completely disintegrating Iraq.

The "cleansing" of Afghan territory also has another menacing dimension: Southern Afghanistan shares an almost 1,000 kilometre-long border with Iran, the target of verbal threats by the US in the past weeks and months. The transfer of an additional US aircraft carrier to the Persian Gulf points to the advanced preparations for an attack on Iran.

Only in this context can a correct evaluation be made of the despatch of Germany's Tornadoes and additional troops in support of Operation Achilles. Despite the claims of "peaceful reconstruction," Berlin is coming to the aid of US imperialism in the violent pursuit of its geopolitical goals.

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