

Why is the German press silent on US preparations for war against Iran?

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There have been a series of reports recently in the American and British media over US plans for a military strike against Iran. For its part, the German press has refrained from any comment. This silence over the danger of a new US war with Iran is also being maintained by the German government and all the parties represented in the German parliament (Bundestag).

Under the headline “Bush setting America up for war with Iran,” the British *Sunday Telegraph* reported last Sunday, “President George W. Bush and his inner circle are taking steps to place America on the path to war with Iran.” The newspaper bases its report on comments by “senior American intelligence and defence officials.” (See “Bush administration consolidates plans for war against Iran”)

“Senior officials believe Mr. Bush’s inner circle has decided he does not want to leave office without first ensuring that Iran is not capable of developing a nuclear weapon,” the report states. Since Bush’s term in office is due to expire in January 2009, this would mean the likelihood of war in the next few months.

According to the *Sunday Telegraph*, differences between Vice-President Dick Cheney, who has long advocated a military strike, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who was said to prefer a “diplomatic solution,” have been overcome. Rice was “prepared to settle her differences with vice-president Cheney and sanction military action.”

The newspaper also outlined a “chilling scenario”—how the war is to be provoked. After public accusations that Iran was supporting rebels in Iraq—similar to those already made by American military and government representatives—the US would attack Iranian training camps and munitions factories across the border in order to provoke a reaction from Iran, “perhaps in the form of moves to cut off Gulf oil supplies.” This would then provide “a trigger for air strikes against Iran’s nuclear facilities and even its armed forces.”

The *Sunday Telegraph* quotes an intelligence officer who said there were “two major contingency plans” for such air strikes: “One is to bomb the nuclear facilities. The second option is for a much bigger strike that would—over two or three days—hit all of the significant military sites as well. This plan involves more than 2,000 targets.”

A similar report had already been published last Tuesday on the website of the right-wing US television station Fox News. Referring to “a well placed Bush administration source,” the station reported that there was now taking place “a broad discussion about the costs and benefits of military action against Iran, with the likely timeframe for any such course of action being over the next eight to ten months.”

Fox News also reported two possible scenarios, whereby the alternative involving widespread bombing would last “at least a week.”

Fox News, at a meeting held in Berlin at the beginning of September, the German government refused to support intensified sanctions against Iran. This is alleged to have been decisive in the decision by the Bush government to go to war. With reference to “diplomats from other countries,” the report states that German government officials “gave the distinct impression that they would privately welcome, while publicly protesting, an American bombing campaign against Iran’s nuclear facilities.”

The British *Guardian* newspaper also wrote on Saturday that there were “signs that the Bush administration is running out of patience with diplomatic efforts to curb [Iran’s] nuclear programme. Hawks led by the vice-president Dick Cheney are intensifying their push for military action, with support from Israel and, privately some Sunni Gulf States.”

The *Guardian* continues: “Washington is seriously reviewing plans to bomb not only nuclear sites, but oil sites, military sites and even leadership targets.”

The German media has refrained from any comment on the issue. Up until Monday evening (September 17), the online editions of *Spiegel*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *FAZ* and *Die Welt*, which usually provide hourly updates of all important international developments, failed to publish any reports or commentaries on the US war preparations.

The only reference came in the form of widespread coverage of a warning issued by the French foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner. In an interview on Iran last Sunday, Kouchner had declared: “One must be prepared for the worst. That is war.” Kouchner called for intensified European Union economic sanctions against Teheran, while declaring at the same time that negotiations remained the most important option for France, and he saw no basis for a military strike at the moment.

A month ago, the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, had already declared that the development of nuclear weapons by Iran was unacceptable. Sarkozy called for “escalating sanctions” on the part of the European Union, in order, as he said, “to avoid a catastrophic alternative: an Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran.”

Berlin has reacted to all this with silence. The foreign ministry merely issued a short statement rebutting the report in Fox News and denying that Germany was opposed to further sanctions. According to foreign office speaker Martin Jäger, the German government maintains the option of imposing further sanctions and is ready to support further “necessary steps.” No mention was made of the war scenarios being discussed in Washington.

What lies behind this silence on the part of the German media and government?

The first point that needs to be made is that such silence is tantamount to complicity. The fact that political circles in Washington are seriously discussing a blitzkrieg against Iran would require any newspaper with an ounce of independence to inform its readers in detail.

A war of aggression contravening all existing international law is being prepared that outstrips even the illegality of the Iraq war. In August, two British security experts published an 80-page study outlining military preparations against Iran, which concluded that the US had sufficient military capabilities to destroy 10,000 targets. The result would be huge damage and many thousands of casualties, not to speak of the long-term consequences for the entire region. Should tactical nuclear weapons be used—a possibility not excluded by the authors of the report—the likely death toll would be around 3 million. (See “British academics warn US is preparing ‘shock and awe’ attack on Iran”)

It is not difficult to imagine the public reaction to such a crime. The biggest international antiwar demonstrations took on the eve of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Millions took part in such protests in Germany. The silence over new war preparations against Iran is intended to keep the German people in the dark for as long as possible and prevent the emergence of a politically conscious opposition.

The silence on the part of the German government can only be interpreted as the first step towards support for such a war. Given the substantial German economic interests in Iran, Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) and Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party-SPD) would certainly prefer a diplomatic agreement with Teheran. But should the US go to war with Iran—as now appears likely—then Merkel will seek to ensure she does not follow the path of her predecessor, Gerhard Schröder (SPD).

Four years ago, Schröder had spoken out against the Iraq war and worked closely together with Russia and France. Although he drew no practical conclusions from his opposition and allowed the US to use German bases and logistics for the war against Iraq, Schröder’s stance led to a clear cooling off in mutual relations. Merkel, who headed Germany’s parliamentary opposition at the time, had publicly criticised Schröder for his standpoint, and upon being elected chancellor, Merkel sought to close the gap with Washington.

Following presidential elections this spring, France has also drawn closer to the US. President Nicholas Sarkozy and his foreign minister Bernard Kouchner have repeatedly fired off criticism against Teheran. For some time, Sarkozy has been campaigning for the European Union to impose unilateral sanctions against Iran—similar to those imposed by the US—and has instructed major French companies such as Total and Gaz de France to freeze their investment projects in Iran.

Berlin has so far rejected unilateral sanctions by the European Union. German diplomacy has stressed that any decision over sanctions should be left to the United Nations Security Council, in which Russia and China have a right of veto. Any open break with Moscow and Peking on the issue, Berlin fears, would result in an unhealthy dependency by Germany on the US. At the same time, there are growing reservations in Berlin against a close alliance with Russia, such as that pursued by former chancellor Schröder. Strengthened by increased oil revenues, Russia is increasingly asserting its own great power interests, which do not correspond to those of Germany.

Ultimately, the German government is likely to side with the US if the latter decides for a military strike against Iran. It will certainly not pose any serious resistance to Washington. If it comes to a war, it will

regard siding with Washington as the best guarantee for its own imperialist interests in the region.

There are already signs that Germany is prepared to respond to pressure from Paris and agree to intensified sanctions. The French newspaper *Le Monde* reported last week that after a meeting of the two leaders in Meseburg, Germany, Merkel supported Sarkozy’s suggestions in principle, but was still hesitating due to reservations on the part of her coalition partner, the SPD.

Official circles in Berlin also stress that German companies are conscientiously adhering to the UN sanctions imposed against Teheran. German banks have already largely pulled out of Iran, although they were not obliged to do so. This has less to do, however, with the policy of the German government, and reflects pressure from Germany’s transatlantic business partners, who in turn fear sanctions from the US government.

Under such conditions, the German establishment has absolutely no interest in an informed critical public or an active antiwar movement. This is why the government and the press are keeping silent.

At the same time, the German government is stepping up its preparations to deal with precisely such an oppositional movement. It is in this light that one should examine the increasingly bizarre campaign by Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU) and Defence Secretary Franz Josef Jung (CDU) to whip up a mood of hysteria over Germany’s security.

At the weekend, Jung announced that he would give the order to shoot down hijacked passenger planes, although the German constitutional court had recently explicitly condemned such an instruction as illegal.

And in a newspaper interview, Schäuble announced the inevitability of a terrorist attack in Germany involving nuclear weapons. “Many experts are in the meantime convinced that it is not a question of if, but when such an attack should take place.” He then added the macabre sentence: “However, I ask everyone to remain relaxed. It makes no sense to waste the time remaining to us by succumbing to a doomsday mood in advance.”

This campaign aims at both: Providing the rationale for ever harsher security laws and creating the hysteria that is indispensable for rallying public support at the outbreak of war.



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