

Former German foreign minister warns of Israeli strike against Iran

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In an article which appeared at the end of May in the English-language newspapers *Daily Star* (Lebanon) and *National Post* (Canada), former German foreign minister and Green Party leader Joschka Fischer warned that Israel is planning to attack Iran in the near future.

Under the headline “War With Iran Is On the Horizon,” Fischer begins by referring to a “misguided American policy” which has produced a situation where “the threat of another military confrontation hangs like a dark cloud over the Middle East.”

Fischer declares that as a result of Bush administration policy, the enemies of the United States have been strengthened and new alliances have been forged in the Middle East.

He cites a number of factors which heighten the probability of an Israeli military strike against Iran, including “persistently high oil prices, which have created new financial and political opportunities for Iran; the possible defeat of the West and its regional allies in proxy wars in Gaza and Lebanon; and the United Nations Security Council’s failure to induce Iran to accept even a temporary freeze of its nuclear program.”

Fischer points out that the central axis of the recent visit by President George Bush to Israel was not to encourage a resolution of the conflict between Palestine and Israel, but rather to put together an alliance to support harsher measures against Iran, including military options.

He writes that “those who had expected his visit would mainly be about the stalled negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians were bitterly disappointed.” He continues: “Bush’s central topic, including his speech to Israel’s Knesset, was Iran. Bush had promised to bring the Middle East conflict closer to a resolution before the end of his term this year. But his final visit to Israel seemed to indicate that his objective was different: He seemed to be planning, together with Israel, to end the Iranian nuclear program—and to do so by military, rather than by diplomatic, means.”

Fischer goes on to list six factors surrounding Bush’s visit to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the founding of the state of Israel that point to the likelihood of an Israeli assault on Iran:

First, Bush’s call to ‘stop the appeasement!’ is a demand raised across the political spectrum in Israel—and what is meant is the alleged nuclear threat emanating from Iran.

Second, while Israel celebrated, Defence Minister Ehud Barak was quoted as saying that a life-and-death military confrontation was a distinct possibility.

Third, the outgoing commander of the Israeli Air Force declared that the force was capable of any mission, no matter how difficult, to protect the country’s security. The destruction of an alleged Syrian

nuclear facility last year, which evoked no serious international reaction, is viewed as a precursor to the coming action against Iran.

Fourth, the Israeli wish list for US arms deliveries, discussed with the American president, focused mainly on the improvement of the attack capabilities and precision of the Israeli Air Force.

Fifth, diplomatic initiatives and UN sanctions when it comes to Iran are seen as hopelessly ineffective.

And sixth, with the approaching end of the Bush presidency and uncertainty about his successor’s policy, the window of opportunity for Israeli action is seen as potentially closing.

Fischer stresses that “the last two factors carry special weight... the feeling in Israel is that the political window of opportunity to attack is now, during the last months of Bush’s presidency.”

Fischer’s warning of an Israeli strike against Iran within the next few months should be taken with great seriousness. Fischer was foreign minister and vice chancellor in the two coalition governments of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Green Party between 1998 and 2005, and cultivated extensive political contacts in both the Middle East and the US.

He played a role in ensuring that Germany did not participate in the US-led “coalition of the willing” that invaded Iraq in 2003. Famously, in 2003 Fischer told then-US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld that he “was not convinced” by the reasons given by Rumsfeld to justify the Iraq war. At the same time, in his role as foreign minister, Fischer established close links with the Israeli government and repeatedly stressed that Germany would consistently seek to defend Israeli interests.

Following the defeat of the SPD-Green Party alliance in 2005, Fischer announced his withdrawal from leading political positions in the Green Party. However, he continues to write regularly on international political affairs. In his post as visiting scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Centre in Washington, Fischer maintains close relations with leading US political figures.

In April 2006, Fischer was one of a group of former foreign ministers—from France, the Netherlands, Poland, Luxembourg and the US (Madeleine Albright)—who publicly called upon the Bush government to open up direct talks with Tehran over the Iranian government’s plans for its own uranium enrichment program.

As foreign minister, Fischer consistently furthered the interests of German imperialism—in particular, in the Middle East. At the same time, while rejecting any direct role in the Iraq war, he sought to avoid a confrontation with the US.

It should also be noted that while now warning against the dangers of an Israeli strike against Iran, Fischer justifies the argumentation used by the Israelis themselves for such an act of aggression, i.e., the

“perception” of an existential threat to Israel from Tehran. Instead of criticising the Israeli war drive, Fischer stresses that Iran must back down and make concessions to prevent a conflict. Fischer makes clear that he would side with Israel (and the US) in the event of war.

Fischer’s warning of an impending war with Iran comes at a point when profound divisions are emerging within the German grand coalition government (SPD, Christian Democratic Union, Christian Social Union) about how to respond to US and Israeli aggression in the Middle East.

In March this year, German Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) visited Israel and gave a speech to the Israeli parliament in which she declared that Germany would not hesitate in “using additional, tougher sanctions to convince Iran to stop its nuclear program.” Any such hesitation, she continued, would mean that “we would have neither understood our historical responsibilities nor developed an awareness of the challenges of our time.”

Merkel’s declaration was taken as an unequivocal statement of solidarity with Israel and the US in their campaigns against Iran. In 2001, Merkel had made clear her own position of unqualified support for American imperialism by speaking out in favour of the US invasion of Iraq.

Since her March visit to Israel, Germany’s business lobby, which has extensive interests in Iran, has expressed its displeasure with Merkel’s stance. An article in the business newspaper *Handelsblatt* at the end of April noted that Merkel was becoming “the closest partner of Washington in the isolation of Iran” and warned that Merkel’s chancellery “had by and large excluded” the Foreign Office and the Economics Ministry with regard to Tehran.

While Fischer’s successor as foreign minister and vice chancellor, Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD), seeks to publicly play down any differences with Chancellor Merkel, there is increasing evidence that the coalition partners are adopting different approaches with regard to Iran.

German banks and corporations are still smarting from American pressure for intensified sanctions, which forced a number of key players to withdraw their interests from Iran. In response to US pressure, three of Germany’s leading banks (Commerz Bank, Deutsche Bank and Dresdner Bank) pulled out of Iran in 2007. There are signs, however, that the German Foreign Ministry and business interests are seeking to bypass Merkel and the chancellery and strengthen their ties with the Iranian government.

In a little publicised trip, Iranian Vice Foreign Minister S.E. Mehdi Safari visited Berlin in April for three days of talks with officials at the German foreign, interior and economics ministries. The Iranian vice foreign minister also held talks with judicial authorities and businessmen.

During his stay in Berlin, Safari warned that Germany was missing out on business opportunities in Iran. He told reporters, “Commerce between our two states has decreased... However, Iran’s trade with Asian nations has more than doubled in the past three years... Who is losing out? You have to ask yourself.”

According to figures released in February by the Economics Ministry, German exports to Iran dropped to 3.2 billion euros (\$5 billion) in 2007 from the 2006 figure of 4.3 billion euros (\$6.8 billion).

After slowing between 2005 and 2007, German exports rose by 13 percent in January. With 3.2 billion euros of goods going to Iran last year, backed by 500 million euros of export guarantees from Berlin, Germany remains the world’s second largest exporter to Iran.

The brochure “Growth Markets in the Near and Middle East,” published last September by the Federal Agency for Foreign Trade pointed out that Germany is Iran’s No. 1 supplier of almost all types of machinery except for power systems and the building sector, where Italian manufacturers dominate the Iranian market. According to the German-Iranian Chamber of Industry and Commerce, “75 percent of all small and medium-sized factories in Iran are equipped with German technology.”

These extensive business interests are now under increasing pressure, on the one side from the US-led campaign for economic sanctions against Iran, and from the other by increasing competition from the emerging Asian economies of India and China, which have both expanded their business links with Tehran. In a recent visit to Tehran for talks with Safari, a leading member of the conservative CSU, Peter Ramsauer, warned that “it would be a shame if the Europeans just allowed the market here to slip from their hands.”

Coming in the wake of the catastrophic Iraq war, an Israeli strike on Tehran would have disastrous consequences for the network of economic and political relations carefully built up over decades throughout by the Middle East by the German Foreign Ministry and intelligence services. Foreign Minister Steinmeier is currently touring the Middle East. Following a stop in Lebanon, he went on to visit Israel.

While maintaining the front of a unified position within the ruling German coalition, Steinmeier is evidently intent on developing a German-led European axis intent on a diplomatic solution to the issue of Iranian uranium enrichment, as opposed to the increasingly warlike rhetoric from Tel Aviv and Washington.

It is certainly no coincidence that during Steinmeier’s current trip a leading German intelligence agent in the region was instrumental in a gesture of conciliation, i.e., the handover to the Israeli government by the Lebanese Hezbollah of the remains of Israeli soldiers killed in the war between the two states in 2006.

The former foreign minister has now entered this foreign policy conflict to warn of the dangers of a unilateral military strike by Israel on Tehran. In his latest article, Fischer is ringing the alarm bells. After the fiasco of US policy in Iraq, Fischer and an influential layer of the German political and business elite fear that Israel, in alliance with the US, is threatening to plunge the entire Middle East into a military and political maelstrom with barely imaginable consequences.



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