

The Left party and German foreign policy

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Amongst those onboard the Gaza aid convoy, which was attacked in international waters by Israeli commandos on May 31, were two members of Germany's Left party who are also deputies in the German parliament: Inge Höger, disarmament spokeswoman, and Annette Groth, human rights spokeswoman for the party's Bundestag faction. Also onboard was Norman Paech, who was the Left party's foreign policy representative in the Bundestag faction until 2009.

For some time the Left party has been able to extend its influence in German politics. The party has the fourth largest parliamentary group in the Bundestag and is represented in 13 of the country's 16 state parliaments, as well as in two state governments. In the course of the economic crisis, the Left party has assumed the role of heading off social opposition to austerity policies and seeking to channel it into the wake of the Social Democratic Party. The party sits in coalitions with the SPD in state governments in Berlin and Brandenburg, where it has helped implement massive cuts in social expenditure and public services.

In light of the role the party plays in domestic politics, it would be naïve to believe that the Left party had supported the Gaza convoy purely out of humanitarian motives. As in domestic policy, the party has a definite political program in the sphere of foreign policy. The issue for the Left party is less the fate of the Palestinians, and much more the future course of German foreign policy, which increasingly faces a dead end.

Germany's longstanding uncritical support for Israel and close relations with Washington have proved to be an increasing hindrance to the pursuit of German economic interests in the Middle East. In particular growing tensions between Israel and Turkey have worried political circles in Germany.

Turkey, traditionally a close ally of Germany, is not only an important axis for the transport of oil and gas to Europe, it is also an important trade partner for European and above all German companies, serving as an economic springboard towards the east. Two thirds of Turkey's foreign trade is with Europe and above all Germany, which is also one of the most important suppliers of armaments to Turkey.

At the same time, Turkish trade with Arab countries has doubled since 2002. Turkey is currently involved in establishing a foreign trade zone with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. The German *Tagesspiegel* notes: "Turkey already serves many international companies—from Microsoft, to various automakers even up to the wine gum producer Haribo—as the supply center to the entire Middle East region."

Under these conditions the Left party has seized the initiative to urge the German government to undertake a careful change of

course in its Middle East policy. It is demanding that the government exert increasing pressure on Israel and not allow itself to be drawn into a further escalating conflict on the side of Israel and the US, as is already the case in Afghanistan. The participation of prominent Left party members in the Gaza aid convoy serves this purpose.

Even before the convoy took to the seas, Annette Groth appealed to the government: "We expect that Germany and the European Union support the aid initiative the "Free Gaza" convoy with all available diplomatic means."

She complained: "Up to now the Foreign Office has refused to give us any support. We were warned—no details were given—of dangers and advised against participating in the aid convoy. We hereby request the Federal government to turn to Israel, as did the Irish government, and request free passage for the flotilla to Gaza."

After the bloody Israeli assault on the flotilla, the Left party then called upon the German government together with the European Union to pressure Israel to waive the Gaza blockade. The party argued that, in order to guarantee the security of Israel, inspections on ships headed to Gaza should be carried out in future by the UN.

Such political prescriptions have nothing to do with a "left" or socialist policy. The Left party rejects any appeal to the Arab and Israeli masses to unite against bourgeois regimes and the imperialist powers in the region, just as the party rejects any questioning of the borders established by former colonial powers in the past century according to the principle of "divide and rule".

On 20 April the parliamentary group of the Left party in the Bundestag had already adopted a resolution, which calls for an agreement between the Zionist state and the different wings of the Palestinian bourgeoisie. It expressly advocates a two-state solution, along the lines argued by Germany, the US and other great powers for a long time—a solution that has continually foundered, however, because of the boycott of any such move by the Israeli government.

According to the Left party, the Palestinian state is to be limited to the territory of West Jordan and the Gaza Strip, which Israel occupied in 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital. In exchange, the Palestinians are to recognize Israel and largely forego their traditional demand for the return of all refugees. In the words of the Left party, "A way between return and compensation must be found."

Such a mini-state, lacking any sort of economic viability, would do little to improve the fate of the Palestinian population. For the Left party, however, such a solution promises to increase Germany's influence in the Middle East. According to the party,

the German government should act as a mediator, in close cooperation with Turkey—and thus demarcate itself from the US. Germany should co-host a Middle East conference including Lebanon, Syria and Iran. The Islamist Hamas, which governs at present in Gaza, should be included in peace negotiations and be recognized once it is prepared to recognize Israel.

This catalogue of demands makes clear why the Left party took part in an aid convoy, which was organized to a large extent by the Turkish Islamist relief organization IHH and unofficially supported by the Turkish government. Turkey, under the government of the Islamist AKP led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is seeking to expand its role as a major regional power and tentatively to liberate itself from its decade-old alliance with the US and Israel. (See: “US-Turkish tensions and the Israeli assault on the Gaza flotilla”)

Ankara maintains good diplomatic relations with nearly all of its neighbors and Arab countries, including Syria and Iran. The volume of trade between Turkey and Iran has risen fivefold since the AKP assumed power eight years ago, and Iran has become an important supplier of energy to Turkey. Erdogan's condemnation of the Israeli assault on the aid convoy had hugely increased his popularity in Arab countries.

The Left party also expressly supported the joint initiative by Turkey and Brazil to prevent new UN-sanctions against Iran over the latter's enrichment of Iranian uranium abroad. Following a recent visit to Turkey the Left party criticized German chancellor Merkel, declaring she wanted to win Turkey's support for tougher action against Iran “rather than supporting Turkey in its call for a nuclear-free Middle East”. Merkel oriented her position “on the US and NATO's policy of intervention and confrontation”.

It is not only the Left party which is arguing that Germany should play a more independent role in the Middle East in close cooperation with Turkey.

On June 14, in an article titled “The new strong role of Turkey,” *taz* Middle East correspondent Karim el-Gawhary declared that the Europeans “would do well to see Turkey not just as a European problem, but to take it seriously as a strategic partner in the Middle East.”

In a June 7 comment, the Turkey correspondent of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* called for a stronger role for Turkey: “What has so far made Turkey so valuable to the United States and also the European Union, was the fact that it was just not a party to one side. It had contact both to Palestinians and Israelis. Since the election victory of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Erdogan has insisted to the West that there cannot be a solution without discussions with Hamas. In return he has received much criticism, but he is right.” Now Turkey should use its influence to “secure from Hamas the concessions which Israel justifiably requires: an acknowledgment of its right to exist, an end to missile attacks”.

The most explicit call for a strategic alliance with Turkey came from the former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) in a contribution in *Weltonline* on 3 May. If the European Union wants to compete with the power centers of the US and China and be “a center of power of world politics and the globalized economy, it needs strong partners”, he wrote. These partners are, on the one hand Russia with its “enormous raw material resources”, and

Turkey which in 20 to 25 years will be the fourth or fifth-largest economy in Europe. Schröder continued: “Politically Turkey is very important for us Europeans. Due to its interface between Europe and the Middle East it exercises influence in the entire region.”

The Left party is pushing for a change of course in Middle East policy, which has substantial support in the ruling elite but currently lacks a majority. With the other four Bundestag parties largely united in their pro-Israeli and pro-American stance, there is little public debate over changes to foreign policy, and the Left party has taken on the task of proposing alternatives. This job is facilitated by their access to a number of experts formerly active in the foreign policy departments and intelligence services of the East German Stalinist regime.

The ruling elite could soon embrace such alternatives as international tensions increase, with the war in Afghanistan failing and an explosive situation brewing in the Middle East. The Left party is also finding growing support for its economic policies, which are largely drawn from the bourgeois economist John Maynard Keynes. The demand originating from ATTAC and the Left party for a transaction tax for banks (Tobin tax) has now been taken up not only by the SPD, but also by Federal chancellor Angela Merkel—in order to appease the opposition to her austerity course.

In foreign policy the Left party pleads for more independence from the US and closer alliances with other powers, in particular Russia. Should the ruling class consider such a change of course necessary, it can count on the support of the Left party. A change of government in Berlin could be the prelude for such a foreign policy shift. In 1969 the coming to power of an SPD coalition and the free-market Free Democratic Party served as the basis for the implementation of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*—a move that enabled the German economy to win urgently-required new markets in the east and that the conservative opposition began by fiercely opposing.

Despite its rhetoric denunciations of neo-liberalism and militarism, the foreign policy of the Left party has nothing to do with anti-war or anti-imperialist policy. The issue for the party is what strategy best serves the economic and strategic interests of Germany. In this regard the Left party advocates a more independent, more self-assured and correspondingly more aggressive German foreign policy.



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