

German arms to Saudi Arabia

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For the past two weeks the German government and opposition have been arguing over the approval of tank sales to Saudi Arabia. The opposition is using the issue to put pressure on the government, but is trying to hide the fact that when it was in government arms exports to the sheikdom rose considerably.

The tank deal is part of an arms race between all the leading industrial nations for influence in this oil-rich region. At the same time, the Saudi kingdom is being bolstered as a bulwark against Iran and the rebellions throughout North Africa and the Middle East.

Der Spiegel reported on 2 July that, in a secret meeting of the parliamentary security committee, the government had agreed to the sale of 200 “Leopard” tanks to Saudi Arabia. Based on information from Saudi security circles, *Reuters* news agency reported that 44 tanks had already been bought from Germany. The value of the tanks is estimated at €1.7 billion. The Leopard tanks are being built by the German arms companies Krauss-Maffei Wegmann and Rheinmetall. In addition, many suppliers are involved.

The manufacturers advertise the latest model as a “battle tank of the 21st century,” which provides the “right answer” to “asymmetric threats, for example, terrorists, IED’s [Improvised Explosive Devices] or individuals.” In addition to a machine gun and searchlight, the Leopard also posses a “clearance plow,” which can be used to clear away cars, and, if necessary, mass demonstrations.

Finance daily *Handelsblatt* reported on 3 July that the government has also concluded an arms deal with Algeria worth billions. Over the next ten years, ten billion euros worth of military equipment will be shipped to Algeria, with some being built in joint ventures, including “Fox” armored personnel carriers, heavy goods vehicles, off-road vehicles and frigates. A central component of the deal will be the production of defence electronics and security equipment for border protection.

During his visit to Berlin last December, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika received Chancellor Angela Merkel’s (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) offer of help from German companies to build an effective border security system, “to stem the flow of refugees from Africa to Europe.” According to *Handelsblatt*, the European aircraft and arms manufacturer EADS has already delivered similar systems to Saudi Arabia.

In March, it was clear that the Saudi ruling family was using the military against protestors. Saudi troops and tanks (produced in the US) were sent to Bahrain to crush the movement against the despotic monarchy there. Bahrain is the base of the US Fifth Fleet.

As has now become known, the German Interior Ministry described the Saudi Arabian invasion into Bahrain as a “critical security measure.” Broadcaster *Mitteldeutsche Rundfunk* (MDR) cited an internal memo from the Ministry dated 29 March, in which Saudi Arabia had “sent a 1,000-strong National Guard deployment to Bahrain in order to protect critical infrastructure.”

The German government defends the tank deal with Saudi Arabia using a similar argument. Defense Minister Thomas de Maiziere (CDU), told the *Hamburger Abendblatt*, Saudi Arabia was an ally of the West and “one of the most important anchors of stability in the region.”

The despotic character of the Saudi monarchy is of no serious concern to the German government. Despite “significant shortcomings in human rights,” the oil-rich desert kingdom is a land of “great strategic importance,” said Chancellor Angela Merkel on the TV channel *Sat.1*.

In the tabloid *Bild*, Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle (Free Democratic Party, FDP) agreed, saying, “Responsible foreign policy must also take into account our interests and the security of our allies.” He added that, to ensure peace and security, the government had to work together with partners in the Middle East who “do not meet our standards of democracy.”

The international economic crisis has exacerbated the conflict between the superpowers. In the Middle East, a violent struggle for influence is unfolding in the oil-rich region between the United States, traditionally the closest partners of Saudi Arabia, the European powers, especially Germany, and China. Saudi Arabia has the world’s largest oil reserves, and is one of the biggest producers.

Speaking in the Saudi capital Riyadh, Chinese diplomat Li Wei, responsible for the economic relations with his country, told the *New York Times*: “Every month, Chinese delegations come to Saudi Arabia.” In November 2010, for the first time, China supplanted the US as the largest buyer of Saudi oil. Companies from China and Saudi Arabia are investing in large petrochemical and refinery projects. “We are very busy,” said Li Wei.

Ben Simpfendorfer, chief economist for China at the Royal Bank of Scotland in Hong Kong, said the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and China coincided with a broader strategy of the Saudi ruling family to expand its own global influence in Asia. It would also reduce dependence on the United States.

Germany and Saudi Arabia have long maintained good relations based on their mutual economic interests. In 2008, Germany exported goods worth €5.19 billion to Saudi Arabia, while imports amounted to €1.5 billion (mainly crude oil products and petrochemicals), reports the Foreign Ministry. In face of the global economic and financial crisis, the volume of trade did not rise in 2009, but in the future “growth is again expected.”

Economic interests are closely aligned with geo-strategic questions. The arming of Saudi Arabia is aimed directly against Iran. The German government has explicitly defended the tank deal and German arms exports to Saudi Arabia in general as the strengthening of the country against Iran. “Everyone here knows that Saudi Arabia is also a major regional power in relationship to Iran,” the Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Hans-Joachim Otto, said last week in the Bundestag (parliament).

For this reason, the German government is closely coordinating delivery of the tanks with the US and Israel. In the past, deference to Israel had prevented Germany from exporting any heavy military equipment such as the Leopard tank to Saudi Arabia. Now Israel has agreed to the tank deal in order to arm Saudi Arabia against Iran.

“Saudi Arabia and Iran are embroiled in a cold war,” Theodore Karasik of the Institute for Military Analysis in the Middle East and the Gulf region told *Dubai Welt Online*. Karasik sees an emerging proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

In 2009, Saudi Arabia spent more than 11 percent of GDP on its defence budget; in 2010 this amounted to \$43 billion. In October 2010, the country agreed to an arms deal with the US which runs to the year 2025 and is worth more than \$60 billion.

In early July, the Gulf Cooperation Council, which includes Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and the United Arab Emirates, agreed to increase the strength of its joint forces to 100,000 troops. A question mark was placed over Bahrain as a base for these troops, according to the broadcaster *al-Jazeera*.

But the Saudi royal family is not only improving its conventional weapons, it is also seeking to acquire nuclear weapons. In April, it announced plans to sign a nuclear agreement with China—“for peaceful purposes.” *Arab News* reported a few weeks ago that it had signed a “treaty of nuclear cooperation” with Argentina.

The *Guardian* reported in late June that a member of the royal family, Prince Turki al-Faisal, said during a meeting with NATO representatives that his country would pursue a policy that could have unspeakable consequences. “We cannot live

with a situation in which Iran has nuclear weapons and we do not,” said the prince. “It’s that simple.” Saudi Arabia also needed to develop nuclear weapons in this case, he said.

Criticism of the tank deal is aimed primarily against the fact that the tanks will be sent to a country where political parties, demonstrations and strikes are forbidden by the king. Moreover, it is undemocratic that such a decision is taken in secret in the parliamentary Security Committee, behind the backs of parliament.

Green Party parliamentary leader Jürgen Trittin loudly declared that the CDU and FDP “stood on the side of despotism.” Green Party chair Claudia Roth added, “The government turns out to be a servant of the arms lobby.” The Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Left Party also opposed the arms deal with Riyadh. According to SPD chair Sigmar Gabriel this was “politically and morally indefensible.”

The fact is that arms exports were greatly expanded under the SPD-Green Party government from 1998 to 2005. In 1999, Saudi Arabia received arms worth €26.1 million. By 2004, arms shipments to the “despots” had risen in the reign of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) to about €60 million. The SPD and the Greens gave their approval, just like the Merkel government, in a secret session of the parliamentary Security Committee.

And as far as the government being the servant of the defence lobby, this is a fact; since the time of the SPD-Green Party coalition under Schröder and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Greens), Germany rose from fifth to third place in the international arms trade.

The SPD’s and the Greens’ criticism of the tank deal with Saudi Arabia is designed to increase pressure on the government and advance the interests of the two parties, which believe they could defend the imperialist interests of Germany better and more consistently than Merkel and Westerwelle.



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