

Germany participates in war preparations against Syria

Christoph Dreier**31 July 2012**

Behind the scenes, the German government has long been active in the civil war in Syria and in preparations for military intervention.

Berlin is an important hub for the Western-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Syrian National Council (SNC), who discreetly work there on plans to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The 70 states comprising the “Friends of the Syrian People” group, who have supported the armed uprising against Assad, maintain a secretariat in Berlin and met there last month.

So far, many of these activities have taken place in secret. Outwardly Berlin poses as a mediator, seeking to win Russia and China to support a Syria resolution in the UN Security Council. That orientation appears to be over, however.

Early last week, German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* a “turning point” had been reached in Syrian policy. Berlin is no longer seeking to approach the matter with the backing of the UN Security Council, but to go it alone with the “Friends of Syria”—even against the wishes of Russia and China.

A foreign ministry paper produced for Berlin's European partners says that the Assad regime will no longer be able to regain full control of Syria. Because the Western powers cannot intervene with the blessing of the Security Council due to the rejection of military intervention by Russia and China, other arrangements must be found for reconstruction after the end of the regime, the paper states.

This is a thinly veiled call for military intervention by a “coalition of the willing”.

Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, the Bundeswehr (German armed forces) has played a key role in the Syrian “rebels” arms supplies. Many of these weapons were transported by sea to the Lebanese port of

Tripoli, and from there over the border to Syria.

The German navy has been stationed in this region since 2006, as part of the UNIFIL mission and is officially tasked with halting weapons smuggling. Not a single delivery to the “rebels” has been held up. On 28 June, the Bundestag (federal parliament) extended the mandate of Germany's mission, citing the situation in Syria.

Moreover, Berlin pushed strongly for the EU to adopt and regularly intensify sanctions against Syria. In Syria, the embargo has led to a catastrophic social situation. Inflation in May was 33 percent, and the ban on oil imports to the EU alone cut revenues by \$3 billion. Some 65 percent of small industrial companies have had to close as a result.

Since the end of May, Germany has been part of the “Friends of the Syrian People” group comprising countries that support the FSA and work for the overthrow of Assad.

The group's coordinating office, which maintains contact with the Syrian rebels, is based in Berlin and led by the former head of the Afghan offices of the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW), Gunnar Wälzholz. It is financed with €600,000 from the foreign ministry.

In cooperation with the SNC, the group is supposed to organise the reconstruction of Syria after Assad's fall. This means the privatization of state enterprises and the development of a free-market economy.

As the weekly *Die Zeit* reported, since January this year the foreign ministry has also maintained a secret project called “Day After”, organised by the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (Foundation for Science and Politics, SWP) in cooperation with the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in Berlin-Wilmersdorf.

Up to 50 representatives of the Syrian opposition have been flown in to work with the two institutions on plans for the post-Assad era. Among them are ex-generals and representatives of the Free Syrian Army, as well as the

Muslim Brotherhood and secular nationalists.

The SWP was established in 1962 and receives approximately ten million euros in federal funds annually. As the largest facility of its kind in Europe, it advises the federal government on foreign and security policy issues. With "Day After", it has become a key foreign policy player in relation to Syria.

According to SWP head Volker Perthes, it has had the chance to "create a discourse community, unobserved and without pressure". In August, a document will be submitted outlining the "necessary" reforms of Syria's constitution, army, security agencies and economy.

For months, the SWP has published analyses calling for Western military intervention in Syria and demanding German participation. In an article dated 3 June, "Day After" chief Muriel Asseburgs wrote that the time for compromises in Syria was over.

"The violence in Syria will not be stopped by negotiations, but only by the victory or the exhaustion of one side," she wrote, summing up the new position of the federal government.

In May, the foundation's research group leader for security policy, Markus Kaim, published a text declaring a NATO operation against Syria to be probable, and drawing up five scenarios for a military strike. His first proposal, to arm and train the rebels, as well as sabotaging the Assad regime, has already been put into action.

A purely symbolic participation by Germany in a military intervention would not be enough, according to Kaim. The German role in the euro crisis has "again raised" the question of "German willingness to lead, and its capabilities in Europe, but also further afield", he writes. "To decide now to condemn the actions of the Assad government against the opposition but ultimately to accept them would discredit German foreign policy."

Berlin's support for the armed Syrian opposition and its preparations for a post-Assad period show that this view has gained the upper hand in government. Germany is prepared to impose its economic and strategic interests in Syria by force of arms.

This marks a significant turning point in Germany's Middle East policy. Since the end of World War II, West Germany established strong economic ties not only to Israel and the other US-dominated states but also to all countries in the region. In 2009, the Middle East was the second-largest importer of German goods outside the EU after the United States.

These interests have increasingly been thwarted by the United States' efforts to militarily dominate the region

with interventions and wars. Berlin opposed the Iraq war and the bombing of Libya. German firms still refuse to abide by the embargo against Iran, supported by Berlin, because their Iranian contracts are too lucrative.

This position has reached its limits, however, because Berlin is not in a position to confront the United States militarily. A key experience in this regard was Libya.

Last year, when France, the US and Britain conducted the war against Libyan Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi to force regime change, Germany and the so-called BRIC states abstained in the UN Security Council and refused to participate militarily. Besides Berlin's own economic interests in Libya, the government had thereby also in mind Germany's economic and strategic cooperation with Russia and China.

While German industry had lucrative business ties with Gaddafi, after the victory of the rebels and the installation of a puppet regime, German interests in Libya were seriously harmed. In 2011 German exports to Libya fell by 67 percent and German imports from Libya by 36 percent, compared to the previous year.

From the perspective of German imperialism, this scenario cannot be repeated. Germany is therefore participating intensively in preparations for war. In Syria too, Germany has strategic economic interests. In 2009, Germany was Syria's largest customer in the oil sector, and Syria is Germany's eighth-largest oil supplier.

With an eye to China and Russia—two key German export markets and sources of raw materials—Germany kept its efforts to support the Syrian opposition partially secret, and officially declared it would only accept military intervention under a UN mandate.

The secrecy has yet another reason: the deep-rooted opposition to war by the German population. According to a recent survey, only 12 percent of Germans would support military intervention in Syria; while 13 percent support military and financial support for the opposition. The vast majority of the population rejects both scenarios.

To implement its aggressive foreign policy, German imperialism must fight on two fronts: against Syria and against the German working class.



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