Social Democrats demand more active German role in Syria

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) and Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle (Free Democratic Party—FDP) have signaled Germany's political support for US action against Syria, but have held back from concrete commitments in view of the current election campaign. They fear losing votes in the September 22 election if they openly support an unpopular war.

In response, Social Democratic Party (SPD) parliamentary leader Frank-Walter Steinmeier has demanded a more active role for Germany in Syria. Steinmeier is an important figure in German politics. He headed the chancellor's office under SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder for six years, and for four years was German foreign minister in a grand coalition led by Merkel.

In a SpiegelOnline article headlined "German Foreign Policy Has Failed in the Syrian Crisis", Steinmeier criticises the chancellor for "standing idly on the sidelines". He writes that it was "essential for Ms. Merkel to use the summit in St. Petersburg to take the initiative for a political solution."

Steinmeier supports a military strike against Syria. He repeats US propaganda, unsubstantiated by any credible evidence, that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is responsible for a poison gas attack on civilians. The pictures of dead Syrian children are unbearable, he writes, imploring: "The poison gas attack must not pass without consequences."

But Steinmeier maintains that a military strike will not be sufficient, and could even be counterproductive if it remains isolated. "While it is correct not to shrug your shoulders and accept the criminal use of poison gas against innocent civilians and children", he asserts, "it is also unsatisfactory merely to respond with bombs and cruise missiles."

Arguing that two days of bombing would not endanger Assad, he writes, "The real danger he faces is a rapprochement between the US and Russia and an end to division in the Security Council."

This is where Steinmeier sees the main opportunity for German foreign policy. He believes Germany should use its relations with Moscow to move the Putin government to adopt a common approach to the Syrian issue. "Germany is tasked with bringing the two key players, the US and Russia, to sit at the same table, and thereby bring the Security Council back into the process."

However, Steinmeier cautions, "There is considerable doubt as to whether German foreign policy, which has lost influence in Washington and has barely any communication channels still open in Moscow, [is] up to the task". He bitterly accuses Merkel of allowing relations with Moscow to languish "as a result of her short-sighted foreign policy, which lacks any creative vision and merely aims to impact on the domestic political scene."

According to this leading SPD politician, there are sadly "no longer any reliable communication channels between Berlin and Moscow."

Steinmeier is trying to sell his proposal as the way to achieve a "political solution" that is more effective and involves less risk than the one preferred by the US. In fact, he is pursuing the same goal as Washington: regime-change in Damascus and Assad's replacement by a puppet, whose strings will be in the hands of Washington and Berlin.

However, Steinmeier thinks Berlin would be much better able to pursue its own economic and political interests in the region if it managed to bring the UN Security Council and Putin into play, rather than simply tagging behind the United States. Steinmeier is not

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advocating a “more humane” or “peaceful” solution to the Syrian conflict, but rather a more aggressive German foreign policy.

He by no means rules out the use of military force. Until now, the SPD has supported all the measures taken to prepare for war against Syria. Earlier this year, it agreed to the deployment of Patriot anti-aircraft missiles on the Turkish-Syrian border. It condoned the use of German Navy spy ships on the Syrian coast, assisting the German Intelligence Service (BND) and Strategic Reconnaissance Command (KSA) in collecting and passing on information to the NATO allies and Syrian “rebels”. Like the Left Party and the Greens, the SPD cooperates closely with the Syrian opposition, which is pushing for military intervention by NATO countries.

The Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), a government-funded think tank, recently clarified what is meant by Steinmeier’s favoured “political solution”. The SWP lists three points under the heading of “How the West Could Win Russia to a Joint Resolution of Conflict in Syria.”

First, the UN inspectors’ report must clearly state that the responsibility for the use of poison gas lies with the Assad regime. Second, a “punitive military operation” must be launched in close consultation with the regional “stakeholders” in order to impress upon Moscow “the danger of self-isolation.”

Third, “It should be made clear that military action is not a substitute for the search for a political solution”. Only if the punitive action remains limited and—parallel to this—the Geneva II Middle East peace process is advanced, the Institute argues, will it be possible to dispel Moscow’s concern that the US and its allies want to topple Assad in order to expand their sphere of influence in the region at Russia’s expense.

The call for a negotiated settlement involving Russia is actually a part of the preparations for war. Russian compliance in the Security Council would strengthen Washington’s position and encourage it to accelerate the long-planned pursuit of regime-change in Syria. An American puppet regime in Damascus would become the prelude to an intensified offensive against Iran, and conflict with Russia would be renewed in a more acute form.

This is the real policy of the SPD. It fully supports the US offensive in the Middle East and has, above all, the interests of German imperialism in view. How little its stance has to do with offering a peaceful resolution of the conflict is shown by a glance at the latest edition of *Die Zeit* national weekly newspaper, one of whose editors is Social Democratic ex-Chancellor Helmut Schmidt.

Bernd Ulrich, deputy chief editor and head of the political department, writes in the paper about a “world-historical moment”. He hopes that Obama will win a “solid [pro-war] majority” in the US Congress. Otherwise, he argues, not only could Obama “forget about the rest of his presidency”; the West as a whole would “have abdicated its responsibility as a force for world order, and all the dictators would get a clear shot at their people.”

A military strike against Assad is imperative, and better “for the people of Syria than none at all”, writes Ulrich. He regards German reluctance to go to war as shameful, lamenting: “Let’s put it historically: Germany failed to free Germany.”



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