

German government to deliver weapons to Kurds in northern Iraq

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The German government has agreed to send arms to the war zones in Iraq. The decision marks a fundamental break with the country's previous policy of a complete ban on the supply of military weapons to crisis regions. It represents a further step towards the revival of German militarism and preparations for new wars.

On the sidelines of yesterday's cabinet meeting, a small group of ministers—including German chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party, SPD) and Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen (CDU)—decided to send arms to the Kurdish Peshmerga, which is currently fighting the radical-Islamist militias of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Until now, the German army (Bundeswehr) has flown in relief supplies in the form of medical equipment, blankets, tents and food to Erbil in northern Iraq. Last week, however, it was announced that for the first time in its postwar history, the German army would fly in so-called non-humanitarian equipment to Iraq. Such equipment includes vehicles, body armour, helmets, night-vision devices and booby trap detectors from Bundeswehr (armed forces) stocks.

Just three days later, the government announced it had decided to go one step further and deliver arms.

The speed with which the government has altered its position—a position accepted for decades by all political parties since the end of World War II—makes clear the extent of the current political and social crisis.

A few days ago, a government spokesman told the press that German arms exports were subject to clear rules and very strict limits. The spokesman drew attention to a policy paper titled “Political principles of the federal government for the export of war weapons

and other military equipment”. According to the document, “arms exports are ruled out in crisis areas, unless there is a particularly vested security interest”.

Now, this taboo has been broken.

Defence Minister von der Leyen has been urging arms supplies to the Kurds for a number of days. In an interview with the German weekly *Die Zeit*, she said that the argument that there were already a lot of weapons in Iraq and that the Kurds were already being supplied with arms by the US and other NATO countries had a certain justification. What was at stake, however, in the debate on arms deliveries was first and foremost a “further development of Germany's security policy”, she said.

Von der Leyen declared: “More important than the question of whether and what weapons we provide is the readiness to overcome taboos and conduct an open discussion. This is where we are now.” For a long period, the supply of German arms to crisis regions was inconceivable, she said, and this could no longer hold in the current situation.

It was not about humanitarian aid versus military equipment, she insisted, it was about both. “What is long past is a policy solely based on getting out the checkbook,” the defence minister stated. “This leads to domestic debates which are both painful and full of dilemmas, but which we have to confront in light of the increasing economic and political importance of our country.”

Her argument provides ample leeway for the next step. The deployment of weapons in war zones is to be followed by the deployment of troops. A foreign policy based on the checkbook is to be followed by a policy based on the use of arms and boots on the ground.

German foreign minister Steinmeier is less direct in his comments and speaks mainly about the risk of a

humanitarian catastrophe in Iraq as a result of an advance by radical Islamist militias. “We must give the Kurds an opportunity to defend themselves,” he told German television on Tuesday. Steinmeier added, “There are situations in which doing nothing is just as bad as taking action.”

This humanitarian argument is thoroughly misleading. The German government does not care a jot about the fate of refugees. In the course of the past few weeks, the Israeli army has bombed Gaza, an area with a much denser population than Berlin, unleashing death and destruction for the civilian population. This week, the number of deaths rose to 2,020, according to the health authority in Gaza. This figure includes 543 children and 252 women. Not a single word of criticism of the Israeli government has emerged from German government circles. On the contrary, at every opportunity, the government has emphasised Israel’s right to self-defence, thereby justifying the war crimes of the Israeli government.

The situation is no different in Ukraine. The German government is working with the regime in Kiev, which in turn relies on fascist militias, to terrorise the population in large industrial cities in eastern Ukraine with fighter planes and tanks.

As for the treatment of refugees in Germany itself, in many cases they are sent back to the border, or crammed into emergency shelters under inhumane conditions to await deportation. Neither Steinmeier nor any other government official regards their fate as a humanitarian tragedy or warns against the danger of doing nothing to help them.

In reality, the arms shipments to Iraq are aimed at implementing the revival of German militarism and commencing the military buildup announced earlier this year at the Munich Security Conference.

The political priority for both government and opposition is to overcome the long-standing resistance to militarism on the part of the German population. Recent polls show that 71 percent of respondents oppose arms sales to Iraq.

It is against this background of sustained opposition that the Left Party is emerging as a key force for implementing the desired military build-up. The role of the party is to camouflage the turn in German foreign policy towards militarism with homilies about human rights.

The leader of the Left Party in the Bundestag, Gregor Gysi, was one of the first to call for arms supplies to the Kurdish combat units in Iraq. Germany and NATO should intervene to stop atrocities of ISIS, he told the *taz* newspaper in early August.

“Actually, I am strictly against German arms exports,” Gysi said. “But Germany is a major arms exporter, an arms export there could be permissible in this exceptional case if other countries are not immediately capable of helping. You cannot stop ISIS with protest letters.”

Later, he qualified his statement and told *Deutschlandfunk* that he had possibly expressed himself in a misleading way. His retreat was purely tactical and understood as such by the political establishment.

Earlier this week, *FAZ* online published an article with the headline “Iraq conflict: Arms deliveries thanks to the Left Party”. The paper had previously posted this article in the print edition of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* (*FAS*). The conservative daily stressed that the Left Party had played an important role in helping implement the German intervention in Iraq and ensuring that the “foreign policy consensus” of postwar Germany “disintegrates at breathtaking speed.”

Germany could no longer remain on the sidelines of wars taking place outside of Europe, *FAS* wrote. It was to be welcomed that no less than the Left Party had assisted in overcoming the long overdue taboo, the paper concluded.



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