German government sends more troops to Mali and northern Iraq

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The German government has responded to the terrorist attacks in Paris and the escalating conflicts in the Middle East with a massive military build-up at home and abroad.

After a meeting of the Defence Committee of the German Bundestag on Tuesday, Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) announced the extension of German military missions in the Middle East and Africa.

The discussions had "been dominated by the attacks in Paris," von der Leyen declared. Her official statement read: "It was very clear that there was a strong wish and conviction that we should stand alongside France and must do everything possible to help them in the difficult situation."

The defence minister then spelled out what she meant by "help." The German government will extend its support for the Kurdish Peshmerga and send more soldiers to train them in the war zone in northern Iraq, "We will ask parliament in January to extend the mandate and propose upping the threshold of soldiers to 150" from the previous 100, she said. The German aid was "decisive" in enabling "the Peshmerga to continue to undertake its opposition to the so-called Islamic State and register significant defeats."

In addition, the Bundeswehr is preparing for a combat mission in the war-torn region in the West African country of Mali. The intention "was to support the United Nations Mission MINUSMA [and] contribute much more clearly and substantively within this mandate," von der Leyen stated.

To "compensate for the weaknesses of the MINUSMA mission," the plan was to send another 650 soldiers to Mali. So far, only a few German soldiers are involved in MINUSMA. Approximately 200 other German soldiers train the Malian army within the context of the EU mission EUTM.

Von der Leyen justified the expansion of Germany's military interventions as providing "relief to France in the fight against the Islamic State." At a meeting of EU defence ministers last week following the terrorist attacks in Paris, the French Government requested all EU member states to provide support after "an armed attack" based on Article 42, paragraph 7 of the EU Treaty. Von der Leyen had at that time already announced plans to send more German troops to Mali.

The Defence Department presents the most dangerous missions to be undertaken by German troops since the country's intervention in Afghanistan as "help for France" and in response to the terrorist attacks in Paris. In reality, however, these actions have been planned long in advance and are integral to the aggressive new foreign policy announced by the German president Joachim Gauck, foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) and von der Leyen at the Munich Security Conference in January 2014.

In her speech to that conference von der Leyen explained that, in view of the "terrible wars" in the Middle East and Africa, a policy of "wait and see" was "no longer an option" for the federal government. "If we have the means and abilities, then we also have a responsibility to get involved," she said. Germany would "strengthen our contribution in Mali" not only "as a major economy and as a country of considerable size" but also "to support the destruction of the remains of chemical weapons from Syria."

The terrorist attacks in Paris and the state of emergency in Brussels are being used to further promote the return of Germany to an aggressive foreign policy and great-power politics. This week the Bundestag also approved the defence budget for 2016. Germany will increase its defence spending and carry

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out extensive rearmament. According to the recommendation of the Budget Committee, defence spending in the coming year will total 34.28 billion euros, an increase of 1.32 billion euros compared to this year.

According to the plans of the Ministry of Defence more than a third of the budget increase is for the acquisition of new weapons systems. In the coming year, 4.68 billion euros are to be spent for this purpose, 594 million euros more than in 2015. The budget for procurement of equipment and maintaining bases will total over 10 billion euros. Expenditures on personnel, the biggest item in the defence budget, will rise to almost 17 billion euros.

The budget debate made clear that all of the parties in parliament agreed on the issues of upgrading the military at home and abroad.

In his inaugural speech as the new leader of the Left Party, the head of the parliamentary opposition Dietmar Bartsch lined up explicitly behind the chancellor and commented on the reactions to the terrorist attacks as follows: “It is understandable in human terms, that when one is confronted with the dead and the terrible events, feelings of helplessness, anger, despair arise. And yes, one must consider how to deal decisively with the terrorists responsible.”

The speech of the Chancellor hardly differed. “We stand in solidarity with France in mourning for the victims. We are in solidarity with France in the fight against terror,” Merkel said, adding, “We have to be—and I would like to thank the majority of the German Bundestag—vigilant and on guard. That is why it was right—this was done even before the attacks—to decide on the strengthening of our security agencies in terms of personnel and technology.”

One thousand new police positions are to be created in the coming year to build so-called “robust units trained and equipped to deal with terrorist situations.” Their capabilities will clearly go beyond “what the state police and the GSG 9 (elite units) already can do,” she said. In addition to creating a paramilitary police, Merkel announced that the intelligence services are to be strengthened both in terms of personnel and technology.

The SPD parliamentary speaker, Thomas Oppermann, gave his own seal of approval to the proposals. It was “correct to create 3,000 new jobs for the federal police. I think it’s good and I am glad that the period in which finance ministers in federal and state governments cut jobs in the police force finally belongs to the past,” he said. Besides this, more money should be spent on spying. “The fact that we wish to establish powerful intelligence services is reflected in the substantial funds made available for additional staff in the budget,” Oppermann said.

Referring to the military intervention by western powers in the Middle East, he declared: “This fight [against the IS] can only be successful if Russia, and regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia are involved, i.e., so there is a broad alliance in the international community.” Oppermann then warned: “This alliance is now threatened by the shooting down of a fighter aircraft along the Syrian-Turkish border.”

While Oppermann has for some time formulated a position close to that of the government, i.e., the forging of a wartime alliance with Russia against the IS, the leader of the German Green Party, Anton Hofreiter, called for the overthrow of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. “It is clear: ISIS must be fought militarily, [but] we need an overall strategy to combat IS,” Hofreiter demanded. The focus of this overall strategy, he said, must be a “solution to the problem of Assad.”

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