

German government agrees to participate in Syrian war

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The German cabinet agreed on Tuesday morning to join the Syrian war. Chancellor Angela Merkel and Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen left no doubt that the intervention would be a combat mission.

The German army plans to send six reconnaissance Tornado aircraft, air-to-air refuelling planes, a frigate, and up to 1,200 soldiers to Syria. A total of €134 million is to be spent over the coming year on the deployment, the largest intervention currently being conducted by the German army.

Never, since the end of World War II, has a German military intervention been decided upon so rapidly and rushed so swiftly through parliamentary committees. Neither the parliamentary fractions of the parties, nor the foreign affairs or defence committees, have given due consideration to the issue. Nevertheless, the first stage of consultations took place yesterday morning in the Bundestag. The second and third readings are to take place as early as Friday.

The government is using its large parliamentary majority to ram through the decision for war as quickly as possible, suppressing all discussion of its impact and consequences. The population is to be taken unawares and presented with a *fait accompli* by the government, acting in close alliance with the military leadership and sections of the media.

Participation in the war is being justified by reference to the Paris terrorist attacks of November 13. France had requested military assistance from Germany, and it was an “act of solidarity”, according to Merkel, responding to France’s wish.

The SPD fully supports the war policy and is playing a major role in driving it forward. Shortly before the cabinet meeting, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier told the *Bild* newspaper, “We are doing what is militarily necessary, what we can do best and

be politically responsible for.” He noted that the mission could take longer than is currently being claimed.

“Against an opponent like ISIS, we need to have a lot of patience,” said Steinmeier, who added that there is still “a long way to go” before the terrorist militia could be defeated.

At the same time, he made reassuring noises. He described the figure of 1,200 troops in the government mandate to *Bild* as the “upper limit, with a considerable security buffer.” He said, “I don’t think we will have so many soldiers abroad, and in the areas controlled by IS there will only be the pilots of our Tornados.”

Steinmeier said that the German government is acting responsibly as part of the anti-ISIS coalition, adding, “We all want to avoid the complete collapse of the Syrian state.”

This is absolutely untrue. The so-called anti-ISIS coalition is pursuing competing, at times mutually contradictory goals, and Berlin is acting utterly recklessly. It is already clear that the sending of Tornado aircraft is only the beginning. Involvement in the war has an inevitable logic. Demands for a stronger and wider intervention will follow, including ultimately calls for ground troops.

Much was written last year on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of World War I about the Balkans, which at that time had become an arena for international conflicts and rivalries. Today, a comparable situation is developing in the Middle East. A four-year-old proxy war in Syria has produced a highly explosive situation, which could quickly develop into all-out war between the United States and Russia.

The daily *Handelsblatt* wrote, in a piece entitled “The German Dilemma” last week, that the situation in Syria is extremely difficult to foresee and characterised

by a “dangerous test of strength ...Turkey against the Kurds and Russia, Russia against IS, but also against other opponents of the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, France against IS and Assad, IS against everyone—the situation in Syria is extremely complicated. Germany has the difficult problem of wanting to be a close partner and help France, but not to support every escalation by the self-proclaimed war president of France, François Hollande.”

Within the German government and ruling elite there are bitter disputes. Speaking of the possibility of an alliance with the Syrian army, Steinmeier said, “Nobody in the German government can forget the horrific crimes for which Assad is responsible. But it is also correct that as long as the warring parties in Syria fight among themselves and blame each other, IS remains content.”

Defence Minister Von der Leyen advanced a similar view. There were sections of the Syrian government’s army “with which one can and must work”.

This was rejected by the chairman of the foreign affairs committee in parliament, Norbert Röttgen, a Christian Democrat. He opposed any participation by Syrian government troops in the anti-ISIS fight, he told the *Passauer Neue Presse*: “There can certainly be no military cooperation with Assad’s troops. ... The terrorism of ISIS cannot be fought with Syrian state terrorism. We would lose all credibility.”

Apparently taken aback by the speed with which Berlin has decided to join the war, the head of the German Army Association, Andre Wüstner, declared: “War is not an end in itself. The war aims, war strategy and alliance partners have to be clarified first.”

Wüstner said he believed the fight against ISIS would be a long one: “I expect that this struggle, if one conducts it seriously, will last well beyond 10 years.” He added that the war would likely expand, insofar as ISIS operates not only in Iraq and Syria, but also throughout North Africa, including in Mali.

Wüstner and other critics are not arguing against German involvement in the war, but urging the government to consider the consequences of its decision and not adopt half-measures. Wüstner’s demand that lessons be learnt from previous German army interventions is above all aimed at rejecting continued subordination to the United States through NATO. In addition, he is arguing that one cannot be

called to war or dragged into a conflict by France, but must pursue one’s own interests and act independently.

It is clear that Germany’s intervention in the Middle East has been prepared over many years. The Paris attacks merely provided a pretext, long looked for, to implement pre-existing plans.

Two years ago, President Gauck, Foreign Minister Steinmeier and Defence Minister Von der Leyen proclaimed the end of military restraint. Germany was too large to comment on global affairs only from the sidelines, they declared, and should be prepared to engage earlier, more decisively and more substantially in foreign and security policy.

This return to German great power politics and militarism is now being put into practice, and no party in parliament opposes this.

The Greens argue along similar lines as the Army Association, calling for a more comprehensive agenda for the war, though they lean more towards support for the US in its opposition to the Assad regime and Russia.

Dietmar Bartsch made clear that in spite of its verbal opposition, the Left Party is also fully on board with military operations against ISIS, but thinks the measures do not go far enough.

“How can the support of Sunni communities for ISIS be broken? What has to happen to halt the stream of weapons and money, and also the stream of recruits? How can the oil trade be stopped?” he asked on German news programs on Tuesday.



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