

Germany's Left Party and the war in Syria

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The speech in the German parliament last Friday by Sahra Wagenknecht justifying the Left Party's opposition to the war in Syria has drawn considerable attention. Politicians from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD) interrupted and heckled her with shouts, and the video has been widely viewed on YouTube.

Wagenknecht declared that a bombing campaign would not weaken Islamic State (IS), but rather strengthen it. The West, and "above all the United States," she said, had "created the monster which is instilling fear and terror in us today."

It was a "major failure of European policy" that for far too long, Europe had "extended its hand in support and covered the back" of the United States. It was a mistake to get dragged into a war in which 14 states were already fighting, "alongside each other, with each other and against each other." There was "no common goal, and no joint strategy, even within the NATO states."

Instead of taking part in a bombing war in Syria, the supply of weapons to Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other US allies should be stopped and the Vienna negotiations taken up to achieve peace, she said. Wagenknecht declared, "One week ago, we still had the feeling that [Foreign Minister] Steinmeier was genuinely and honestly working on the success of the Vienna peace talks." The escalation of the war would now destroy these attempts at peace.

Wagenknecht's antiwar rhetoric conceals the fact that the Left Party has long advocated Western intervention in Syria. As an appendage of Germany's foreign ministry, it has long participated in destabilising the Assad regime and strengthening the pro-imperialist Syrian opposition, with whose help Washington and Berlin have driven the country into civil war.

Among the Left Party's most important allies is the Syrian opposition member Michel Kilo, who is a

spokesman for Western military intervention. Only two years ago, Kilo demanded in an interview, "The US now has an obligation to carry out a military strike." He spoke at numerous Left Party meetings on the Syrian war and gave three detailed interviews to the party's newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*. Kilo wrote a contribution to a book on Syria by Wolfgang Gehrcke, a leading foreign policy expert within the Left Party.

When the United States temporarily put its plan to bomb Syria on hold in the summer of 2013, the Left Party switched tactics. Like the German government, it worked to support the Kurds in Iraq and Syria. In her speech, Wagenknecht even applauded the "struggle by Kurdish units in the region."

There are two main reasons for Wagenknecht's effort to portray herself as a pacifist in parliament. First of all, the Left Party knows that the military intervention in Syria is unpopular. It therefore portrays itself as opposed to war in order to prevent the emergence of a genuinely antiwar movement, which neither it, nor the other parliamentary parties could control. This was made all the easier because the votes of the Left Party's deputies were not decisive in parliament.

Secondly, the party is speaking for a significant section of the ruling elite that considers it a mistake to be drawn into a war on the coattails of the US and France, since Berlin cannot independently determine its aims, targets and the duration of the conflict. This is no policy for peace, but rather the pursuit of President Gauck's demand, formulated two years ago, that Germany has to play a role on the world stage that corresponds to its substantial economic power.

It is significant that several media outlets criticize the military intervention from the same standpoint.

The lead article in the latest edition of news weekly *Der Spiegel* is titled, "The wrong war". It begins with the words, "One does not have to be a pacifist to consider this military intervention to be a mistake." It

accuses the German government of ignoring the lessons from the “failed military intervention in Afghanistan,” that no intervention should be made “without a clearly defined goal.” It added, “don’t set a goal which you cannot achieve with the methods you are prepared to deploy.”

Like Wagenknecht, *Der Spiegel* notes that a victory over IS will “not be achieved by air strikes.” And like Wagenknecht, *Der Spiegel* calls on the German government to stop its supply of weapons to the close US ally Saudi Arabia and apply pressure on Turkey.

Similar arguments are advanced by Theo Sommer in the newspaper *Die Zeit*. Sommer writes under the headline “Three errors of the Syrian strategy” that the war cannot be won from the air because “bombs can only destroy a country, they can’t occupy it.” The political process of including Russia has to be given absolute priority, he wrote.

The chairman of the German Army Association, Andre Wüstner, also criticized the haste with which the German government joined the campaign in Syria. The war aims, the war strategy, the legal position and the issue of alliance partners had not been sufficiently clarified, he said.

It was no mere coincidence that *Spiegel Online* published a long interview this week with the Left Party parliamentary leaders, together with a flattering series of photos. In the interview, Wagenknecht largely abandoned her antiwar rhetoric from her parliamentary speech, speaking out instead in favour of a strategy to dominate the region. “Striving to find a common strategy for those actors really committed to combatting IS is correct. Without pressure from Russia, the Vienna conference would not have taken place. The road to a peaceful solution must be pursued further.”

The Vienna talks have as little to do with reaching a “peaceful solution” as those in Berlin in 1884 or Sèvres in 1920, when the Balkans and the Middle East respectively were partitioned among the imperialist powers. Instead, their aim is to implement a new re-division of the strategically significant region that is rich in raw materials.

Wagenknecht is being built up by the media as a politician who can assist in implementing a change of course in order to free German foreign policy from its dependence on the United States. It would not be the first time in the history of the Federal Republic that

such a fundamental shift has taken place by means of a new coalition. This was the case in 1969 with Willy Brandt’s Ostpolitik, and again in 2003, when Gerhard Schröder’s increasing closeness to Russia was halted.

Wagenknecht’s speech in parliament was equally revealing for what she did not say. While she repeatedly attacked the US, she did not go into any of the real motives behind Germany’s military intervention. She presented the campaign as merely as mistaken, indecisive and irresponsible.

But the grand coalition’s decision for war is no mere mistake. German imperialism is pursuing its own economic and strategic interests in the Middle East. A strategy paper by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation defined Germany’s “own national interest” in the region as “realising a seamless supply of raw materials and creating export opportunities for German business.”

It is clear that the Paris terrorist attacks provided a welcome pretext to put these plans into practice. Wagenknecht is silent about this, because the Left Party is directly involved in Germany’s great power plans. Left Party parliamentary deputy Stefan Liebich cooperated in 2013 in the drafting of the strategy paper “New power–New responsibility,” which called for a more aggressive German foreign policy based on militarism.

Early last year, several Left Party parliamentary deputies voted to support the sending of a German frigate to the Mediterranean Sea to destroy Syrian chemical weapons. A few weeks later, Gregor Gysi became one of the first German politicians to call for supplying weapons to the Kurds and demanded in parliament a massive intervention by UN troops.

Shortly afterwards, 14 leading Left Party politicians published a statement titled “Save Kobani!” that urged a military intervention in Syria and Iraq against the Islamic State. The signatories included 12 members of the parliamentary fraction, among them Dietmar Bartsch, Jan Korte, Petra Pau and Liebich.



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