

# German defence minister on the offensive in the Middle East

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German Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) is currently on tour in the Middle East. The central goal of the trip is the strengthening of Germany's political, economic and military influence in this resource-rich and geo-strategically critical region.

Von der Leyen's first stop was the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where she was met Wednesday evening at the King Salman Air Base in Riyadh by Saudi deputy defence minister General Mohammed bin Abdullah Al-Ayesh, German ambassador Dieter Walter Haller and defence attaché Colonel Thomas Schneider.

On Thursday, the defence minister visited the headquarters of the so-called Islamic Military Counter-Terrorism Coalition and asserted in an official press release that Saudi Arabia was a country which "decisively combats terrorism and is aware it has a special role in combatting Muslim-Arabic terrorism in the Islamic world."

This is patently absurd. Hardly anything could more clearly expose the German government's empty phrases about human rights and propaganda about the "war on terror" than the close military and political collaboration between the Western powers and Saudi Arabia.

The reactionary and Islamist character of the Saudi regime is so obvious that even the German media could not avoid raising some issues. According to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, there were "throughout last year ... more than 150 executions. There are also frequent public floggings, [and] the rights of women and minorities are massively curtailed."

About the impact of Saudi Arabia's bombing campaign in Yemen, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* noted: "The bombardments have destroyed the infrastructure

of the Arab world's poorest country and repeatedly kill civilians. According to investigations by human rights activists, one in three attacks strike civilian targets." According to the UN, "the more than 10,000 victims of the war include more than 4,000 civilians—many die from bombs from the air which frequently strike hospitals."

And, according to public broadcaster ARD, "Saudi Arabia is ... a strict Islamic governed monarchy, in which—much like the Islamic State (IS)—political opponents are beheaded and women stoned if they end a marriage."

In Syria, Saudi Arabia is among the chief sponsors of Islamist militias with close ties to al-Qaeda and which are officially designated as terrorist organisations by the German government. The Ahrar al-Sham militia, backed financially and politically by Saudi Arabia, is a "foreign terrorist organisation," according to the German attorney general, and "one of the largest and most influential Salafist-Jihadi organisations in the Syrian uprising movement." It pursues the goal of "toppling the regime of Syrian ruler [Bashar al-] Assad and establish a theocratic state based entirely on Sharia law."

None of this has prevented the German government and defence minister from intensifying military cooperation with Saudi Arabia. According to reports, Von der Leyen pledged to train Saudi soldiers in Germany. The training of "several young officers and contractors with the Saudi Arabian military" will begin in Germany in the coming year, the German ambassador announced Thursday.

In addition, further arms exports to the Gulf monarchy are planned. Recently the Federal Security Council, meeting in secret, approved the shipment of 41,644 shells to Saudi Arabia, even though Germany's

official export guidelines prohibit the supplying of arms to states “engaged in armed conflicts.” According to government sources, weapons exports totaling more than €484 million [US \$511 million] were approved to Saudi Arabia in the first half of the year, including helicopters and components for fighter jets.

With its massive rearmament of the Saudi monarchy, Berlin is pursuing two main goals. First, Riyadh is to be placed in a better position to violently suppress social unrest on the Arabian Peninsula. In early 2011, a few weeks after the revolutionary upsurges in Tunisia and Egypt, Saudi troops and tanks intervened in Bahrain with brutal violence to suppress mass protests taking place there. In addition, the German government views the heavily armed Arab monarchies as important allies in the imposition of German imperialist interests in the region.

After her stay in Riyadh, Von der Leyen travelled directly to Bahrain. She participated in the Manama dialogue, the most important security conference in the Middle East. Several heads of state and government, ministers, military personnel and representatives from security agencies attended the event organised by the influential International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) think tank to discuss the wars and conflicts in the region.

Von der Leyen’s last destination is Jordan, where she will symbolically hand over 24 “Marder”-type armoured vehicles.

Von der Leyen spoke in Bahrain in 2015, announcing greater German engagement in the Middle East. At the time, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* enthused in an opinion piece, “Germany is no longer indifferent. Germany has managed to expand its foreign policy weight. At the Manama Dialogue, Defence Minister Von der Leyen can point out that the Federal Republic is no longer holding back.”

The “fundamental German interest” in the region was already summarised in a strategy paper by the CDU-aligned Konrad Adenauer Foundation in 2001, “It is directed primarily towards a stabilisation of those states and societies to prevent dangers to its own security and that of its European partner states, to secure a seamless supply of raw materials and to create export opportunities for German business.”

The study, entitled “Germany and the Middle East: standpoint and recommendations for action,”

emphasised the importance of the “export markets in the region’s core states (Egypt, Turkey, Iran), but above all the wealthy Gulf states” for German exports. Here it was necessary to “make a contribution to securing sales markets, obtain the broadest possible access to these markets and compete with the US, the Eastern European countries and also the East Asian industrial countries.”



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