

Trump's speech in Saudi Arabia intensifies tensions with Europe

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The speech delivered Saturday by US President Donald Trump in Saudi Arabia provoked sharp reactions in Europe. While politicians expressed themselves cautiously, since they will meet with Trump at a NATO summit in Brussels on Thursday and a G7 summit on Friday in Sicily, several media outlets sharply criticized his speech.

The central criticism was that with his clear partisanship towards Saudi Arabia and hostility towards Iran, Trump further escalated the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites.

Trump “described the Islamic Republic [Iran] as an equally important opponent as the Sunni extremist al-Qaida or the Islamic State (IS) organisation. This is a shift in course,” wrote the French newspaper *Le Monde*. It accused the American president of strengthening “the Saudi monarchy, the most dictatorial and backward in the region,” in his speech, given a day after Iran’s presidential elections, in which 57 percent of voters backed the reformer Hassan Rohani.

The German weekly *Die Zeit* commented, “With such blanket partisanship—here the ally Saudi Arabia and the enemy Iran over there—Trump is intensifying the conflict in the region.” The *Tageszeitung* wrote, “Although Trump rejected the ‘struggle between different religions,’ he simultaneously further incited the conflict within Islam between Sunnis and Shiites.”

The Italian newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore* also accused Trump of “further provoking the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites” by reviving the old strategy of isolating Iran.

The European powers are no less willing than the United States to provoke ethnic and religious conflicts in the Middle East in pursuit of their economic and great power interests. Almost all of them are involved in the wars in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq with military

forces, arm various regimes and militias, and played a decisive role in inciting the Syrian civil war. If the European media is now complaining about an intensification of the conflict by Trump, there are two main reasons.

Firstly, they fear that further wars in the Middle East could destabilise Europe and lead to the breaking apart of the European Union. In 2015, the arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees resulted in bitter conflicts within the EU. The EU was only able to halt the flow of migrants by reaching an extremely fragile deal with Turkish President Erdogan and by sealing off the Mediterranean Sea, leading to the deaths of thousands of refugees every year. If conflicts escalate further, even these brutal methods would prove insufficient to prevent desperate people from fleeing to Europe.

Secondly, and this is the most important factor, Trump’s clear siding with Saudi Arabia and Israel collides with the strategic interests of the European powers. Germany in particular, as well as France, is banking on the opening up of Iran as a way to establish a foothold in the region. With Iran’s large oil reserves and young, well-educated population, Germany and France have more economic interest in the country than Saudi Arabia.

Germany also has a strong interest in China’s “new silk road” project, which also plans to incorporate the Gulf region. It is therefore opposed to Trump’s confrontational approach towards Iran, which is also aimed at China. Germany’s Foreign Ministry was heavily involved in bringing about the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, which was supposed to gradually relax sanctions on the country and open up Iran to international investment.

Several comments have therefore urged Germany and the European governments to more aggressively pursue

their interests in the region against the United States.

Typical was a piece in the *Rhein-Zeitung*, which stated, “Precisely at the moment when the reformer Hassan Rohani has won the election in Iran and many Iranians are hoping for a further opening to the west, Trump declares the country to be the... arch enemy and criticises its democracy... This is a slap in the face to the reform forces in Iran. Opening up this new front is strategically stupid...”

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* accused “Trump and his people” of wanting to “isolate and contain Iran,” and urged, “In this situation, Europe can and must adopt an arbitrator role, even if it is lacking the hard tools of power to really exert influence. Sticking to the nuclear agreement with Iran is part of this, just as much as the maintenance of relations with both sides of the Gulf.”

Trump’s policies are reactionary, but the criticism of them in the German media have no progressive content. It is bound up with an intensive military build-up, which will be aimed at giving Germany and the other European powers “the hard tools of power” which they are “lacking, to really exert influence.”

At the NATO summit on Thursday, the European heads of government will once again give Trump the assurance that they will increase their military spending to 2 percent of GDP—which for Germany amounts to almost a doubling of defence spending. The events in the Middle East show that this spiralling rearmament will be accompanied with mounting conflicts which could lead to war between the current NATO allies.

The extent of the tensions already present in US-German relations was shown by the lead article in the latest edition of *Der Spiegel*, which was written prior to Trump’s speech in Riyadh. Such a denunciation of a US president has not been seen in an established German newspaper since 1945.

The news magazine’s editor-in-chief, Klaus Brinkbäumer, wrote that Trump is “a convicted liar a hundred times over, a racist, a fraudster” and “a danger for the world.” To get rid of him, he proposes “five possible solutions,” the first four of which he immediately abandons as unrealistic: Trump must resign, be removed through an impeachment process, be declared to be unfit for office by a majority of his cabinet, or replaced after the mid-term elections in 18 months.

As the fifth variant, the “necessary and... possible”

option, Brinkbäumer proposes, “The world community wakes up. Finds ways to get around the White House. Becomes capable of acting without the United States.”



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