

# German foreign minister goes on the offensive in the Middle East

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Just days before the G20 summit in Hamburg, and in the midst of the Qatar crisis, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel traveled to the Arabian Peninsula.

He visited Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on Monday. The two states, together with Egypt and Bahrain, broke off all diplomatic ties with Qatar last month and closed their borders. They have accused the emirate of sponsoring terrorist organizations, even though they are themselves supporters of Islamist terrorist groups in Syria that are serving as proxy forces in the US-led war to overthrow the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

On Tuesday, Gabriel, a leading member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), travels to Qatar, whose relations with Iran are a major irritant to the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. On Wednesday, Gabriel will visit Kuwait, which is playing the role of arbitrator in the crisis and managed to secure a 48-hour extension of the ultimatum issued to Qatar by the Gulf states and Egypt.

The June 22 ultimatum brought the Middle East to the brink of full-scale war. Saudi Arabia and its allies deliberately posed demands they knew Qatar could not accept. They demanded, among other things, that the emirate downgrade its ties to Iran, close the Turkish military base in Doha, shut down Al Jazeera, and deport alleged Islamic State and Al Qaeda terrorists, as well as members of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizbollah. With support from Turkey and Iran, Qatar rejected the ultimatum, which would have transformed Doha into Riyadh's vassal.

The German Foreign Ministry and government are cynically seeking to portray themselves as impartial arbitrators concerned solely with the welfare of all states in the region. Gabriel declared in a statement prior to his departure, "For weeks, brother and

neighboring states have faced off in a troubling conflict on the Arabian peninsula. We are concerned that mistrust and disunity will ultimately weaken all sides and the Gulf as a whole."

He continued, "We are not taking sides. We are not partisan. However, the conflict in the Gulf does not affect just those engaged in the dispute, but also concerns us and our interests. This applies to the struggle against ISIS, but also to the stability of a region that is deeply scarred by crises, tensions and wars, and confronts major economic and social challenges in the future."

Germany supports "emphatically the attempts by the Emir of Kuwait to reach a compromise, Gabriel added. "What is now required is a serious dialogue among those involved to find constructive solutions through negotiations."

There is nothing disinterested or benevolent in Gabriel's "solutions." They are bound up with German imperialism's offensive to assert its geo-strategic and economic interests in the energy-rich region, and increasingly to do so independently and in opposition to the United States.

Shortly after the outbreak of the crisis, Gabriel published a sharply-worded statement opposing the Saudi action, backed by US President Donald Trump, against Qatar. Gabriel warned of the "Trumpification of relations" and stated that the "recent massive arms deals between the American president and the Gulf monarchies [intensify] the risk of a new arms race." This was, he added, "a completely wrong policy, and certainly not Germany's policy."

With Trump and the Saudis adopting a confrontational approach towards Iran, the German government fears that the sharpening conflict could undermine German imperialist interests. Like France,

whose oil company Total signed a multi-billion-euro deal with Iran on Monday, the German government is working towards an opening up of the country so as to obtain new energy supplies as well as markets for the export-dependent German economy.

The German Foreign Ministry's website states: "German-Iranian economic relations are traditionally close. Approximately 30 percent of industrial infrastructure in Iran was German produced."

Due to the international sanctions resulting from Iran's nuclear program, economic relations have been in decline since 2007, but in 2014, they "for the first time developed in a positive direction." Bilateral trade volume has risen sharply ever since, growing by 22 percent in 2016 compared to the previous year. The sharp increase in German exports has been based "above all on the rising export of machines, mechanical devices and utility vehicles."

The Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia, are also close partners of Berlin. After the UAE, Saudi Arabia is Germany's second most important trading partner in the Arab World, while Germany is Saudi Arabia's third most important export destination.

According to the Foreign Ministry, "Saudi Arabia imported German products and services in substantial quantities and increased this tendency in 2015 despite falling oil prices. The most important German export goods are machines, vehicles, and chemical, electro-technical, fine mechanical and optical products."

Another German export is weapons! In March, the German government approved the dispatch of two additional patrol boats to Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Navy will receive 48 in total.

According to media reports, Germany's Federal Security Council also approved the export of a technical package for a radar system for border security, the sale of 330 "Sidewinder" air-to-air missiles, and the export of parts for a military training base in the United Arab Emirates.

Notwithstanding all of the rhetoric about "peace" and "human rights," the Middle East makes clear how aggressively German imperialism is asserting itself after two lost world wars. To pursue its interests, Berlin is moving to conclude its own political, economic and military alliances in the region. Just two weeks ago, Germany's parliament agreed to redeploy Tornado fighter jets stationed in Turkey to Jordan, meaning they

will be closer to the war zone in Syria and Iraq.

In a recent interview with the foreign policy magazine *Internationale Politik*, Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen noted, "A country with the political and economic significance of Germany cannot look away if, as in 2014, ISIS attempts genocide on the Yazidi people... we have supplied weapons to a crisis-ridden war-zone for the first time since the Second World War."

Everyone knows, she continued, that "nothing can be achieved against ISIS without military force; it does not negotiate, it beheads."



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