

Following Germany's uncritical support for Washington and Jerusalem

## How the German media reports on the Israeli aggression in Lebanon

By Stefan Steinberg  
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In the past two weeks, a major shift has taken place in German and European foreign policy. Under conditions where European nations are completely unable to develop a unified stance in opposition to the US, European leaders have decided to ditch their former reservations over the illegal US war against Iraq and now back the present bloody offensive by Israel against the Palestinian territories and Lebanon—an offensive planned and carried out in the closest consultation with the Pentagon. The necessary groundwork for such a shift in policy has been conducted in the course of a debate carried out in the German press, and in particular in Germany's so-called "quality" newspapers.

During the past week, many of Germany's most widely read and influential newspapers have opened their pages to pro-Israeli columnists, and in many articles and commentaries have turned reality on its head by presenting the nationalist Hamas and Hezbollah movements as the aggressor parties in the Middle East, with the Israeli army and government playing the part of the offended victim doing its best to defend itself.

As if the US-initiated catastrophe in Iraq had never taken place, a number of the German columnists now either concede that nothing can be done to prevent the growing involvement of the American military in the conflict, or actively call for the intervention by the US in the region. Not content with freeing Israel from any responsibility, a number of German papers then go to great lengths to demonstrate that the real source of the violence in Lebanon and Gaza is to be found in Damascus and Teheran.

While the presentation of events in the Middle East by the German press is certainly one-sided, it would be wrong to claim it is monolithic. Contemporaneous with the many uncritical pro-Israel articles, some journalists reporting from the besieged areas of southern Lebanon have provided graphic details of the devastation to life and limb caused by the savage bombardment of the region—reports that completely undermine the widespread presentation of the Israeli state as the offended party.

While the German press still maintains a degree of democratic debate that is increasingly absent in the mainstream press, for example, of the United States, it is noteworthy how numerous commentaries in the most influential German newspapers have, nevertheless, echoed the German government's own depiction of the current hostilities in the Lebanon.

At the G8 summit, US president George W. Bush laid down the line of the Washington administration—i.e., that Hamas and Hezbollah "terrorists," operating with backing from Syria and Iran, were responsible for the renewed outbreak of war in the Middle East. Israel, he claimed, was only "acting in self-defence." His message has since been repeated *ad nauseam* by the German chancellor and parroted in the German press.

Typical in this respect are a number of articles by journalist Thorsten

Schmitz in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper. On the July article entitled "Victory or a Middle East war," Schmitz states bluntly at the very beginning: "The escalation on two fronts in the Middle East region was not caused by Israel." Under conditions where hundreds of thousands of Lebanese and other nationals have been forced to flee the daily bombardments of housing quarters and Lebanese infrastructure by Israeli fighter planes and warships, Schmitz unashamedly declares that the Hezbollah and Hamas movements are responsible for the bloodshed in Gaza and Lebanon.

In the same article, he pleads for direct intervention by Western powers in the dispute, complaining that the worst danger in the situation arises from the "reckless passivity of the international community and in particular the US president...." Schmitz is concerned that the "US has become a Zaungast [someone innocently looking over the fence] in the Middle East conflict.... What is needed from President Bush are not admonishing words but deeds."

Having made an appeal for direct intervention by the US in the conflict, Schmitz goes further and attempts to identify a "Trail leading to Teheran." For Schmitz, responsibility for the bloodshed in the Lebanon does not rest with the power brokers in Jerusalem and Washington, but rather in the Iranian capital. Schmitz is quite prepared to pepper his entirely speculative musings over Iran's involvement in the current fighting with quotes from Israel's deputy prime minister, Shimon Peres, who, in typical thuggish militarist fashion justifies the bombing of Lebanon's main airfield by absurdly declaring that the "airport is controlled anyway by Iran."

Journalist Gero von Randow is anxious to follow the trail suggested by his colleague Schmitz, and in the widely read weekly paper *Die Zeit*—which is published by, among others, former SPD chancellor Helmut Schmidt—von Randow also seeks to demonstrate that the real instigators of the current war crisis are to be found in Teheran.

In a column headed "Call for Terror," von Randow undertakes a review of the Iranian press to prove that "Iran is a significant partner in the Lebanese drama, perhaps even the string puller." While he is forced to concede that the Iranian media is not explicit about Iran's role in the conflict, he nevertheless pulls together a wide range of commentaries to justify his claim that Iran is playing a leading role.

Von Randow quotes at some length from the web site of Iranian radio and from a comment made by the Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki who declared: "the Islamic Republic of Iran could acquire profound significance not only because of its huge oil and gas reserves, but also because of its strategic position at the heart of the Persian Gulf, central Asia and the Caspian Sea." Should it come to "critical situations such as

Iraq, Afghanistan, Central Asia or the Caucasus, “then “the significant role of Iran for the region” would become even clearer—with Iran playing “a stabilising role.”

For von Randow, Mottaki’s claim that Iran’s strategic position gives it more right to influence developments in the surrounding region than Israel or the US is completely unacceptable. Von Randow’s identification of Iran as the leading “string puller” is then taken up and developed one day later by *Die Zeit*’s chief columnist Josef Joffe, who, in a lead editorial, lists Syria alongside Iran as powers that “have brutally and efficiently established a monopoly of force” in the region.

Inadvertently or not, von Randow and Joffe give an insight into the thinking in Germany’s leading political circles, which have given their full support to the US-sponsored Israeli offensive in Lebanon, regarding the current Iranian government as an obstacle to their interests in the region.

In addition to the concerted efforts to identify Iran and Syria as the aggressors in the Middle East, a further campaign is underway to counter those who argue that the reaction of the Israeli army and air force can in any way be regarded as “inappropriate” or “excessive.” Leading daily papers have opened their columns to prominent representatives of Jewish organisations and institutions, who have virulently defended the activities of the Israeli state.

Michel Friedman, the former vice president of the Jewish Central Council in Germany, uses the opinion pages of the Berlin *Tagesspiegel* to openly defend the destruction of housing and infrastructure by the Israelis in Lebanon. Such a response is, according to Friedman, entirely appropriate under conditions where “Hezbollah deliberately seeks to kill civilians, while Israel is doing everything it can to avoid civilian casualties.” In reaction to the overwhelming evidence of Israeli atrocities against a civilian population Friedman responds by claiming that Hezbollah deliberately uses “protective shields in the form of women and children.”

Friedman’s arguments are quite frankly obscene. It is the Israeli regime that has turned naked provocations and terror against civilians into a fundamental component of its war strategy. Currently, one third of the hundreds of civilian casualties of Israeli bombardment in Lebanon are children but, according to Friedman, such loss of innocent life is entirely justified, because the enemy uses civilians as protective shields.

Friedman’s argumentation is taken one step further by Martin van Creveld, lecturer at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, writing in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper (July 19).

In an article entitled “Look at History,” Creveld writes in a blood-chilling manner: “Maybe it is not clear where this will all lead. But one thing is clear. Whatever the ladies and gentlemen in Brussels say, the problem in Lebanon is not Israel’s ‘excessive’ use of violence. Quite the opposite, the real problem could be Israel’s extreme reluctance to use a sufficiently high level of force to solve this problem once and for all.”

Friedman and Creveld express the standpoint of the pro-Zionist lobby, which exerts enormous

and concerted influence in the German media. Anyone with an understanding of the background of such forces will not be particularly surprised at what they have to say in response to this latest eruption of Israeli aggression. What is new is that they should be accorded such prominence for their views in established newspapers such as the *Frankfurter Rundschau* which have a longstanding liberal tradition, and that their extremist comments remain unchallenged.

In fact, Creveld’s brutal “Realpolitik” solution for the Middle East is taken up and embraced by the leading newspaper of the German conservative right wing. In its Friday edition, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* indicates that turning a blind eye to Israeli aggression might, after all, be the best alternative. The paper comments: “[T]he Israeli military offensive, under which the population in southern Lebanon and Beirut are

suffering, could provide one of the prerequisites for a broad solution.... Should Israel not only be able to drive Hezbollah militias out of the border region but also decisively weaken them militarily, than an aim would be fulfilled that neither the Lebanese army or a United Nations force could establish.”

There can be no doubt that the standpoint articulated by the *FAZ* is shared by broad layers of the political establishment in Germany. Under conditions where it has proved utterly futile to oppose in any way the naked imperialist ambitions of Israel and America, the German bourgeoisie has concluded that its best interests are served by unconditionally throwing in its lot with the criminal clique in Washington.

Despite the chorus of articles and commentaries that, in one form or another, uncritically regurgitate the propaganda put out by the German government and its spokesmen, there are also conscientious journalists who are prepared to report on the real scale of the horror currently being unleashed by the Israeli military.

In a report for *Spiegel-online* entitled “Beirut’s Hezbollah quarter—A neighbourhood in death agony,” Ulrike Putz reports on the devastation left behind by the Israeli bombardment. Once a neighbourhood housing 700,000 people, all that remains of Haret Hreik, Putz reports, is “an abandoned desert of rubble.”

Her report continues: “There are wars where the same bombed-out housing block is shown from so many different perspectives that the viewer concludes an entire city has been laid to waste. In Beirut, that is not necessary. Any cameraman seeking to show the consequences of war only has to make a stop in Haret Hreik: entire areas of this suburb of Beirut have ceased to exist.

“A trip to the southern suburbs of Beirut is like a nightmare, where things only get worse. At first, it is only the smell of burning that reminds one that the ruins along the way do not originate from the last war. Then come the bomb craters in the asphalt, then a burned-out gas station, then a motorway bridge that has just been strafed. But it is only when one parks one’s auto, marked with ‘TV,’ and proceeds on foot that one really becomes conscious of the apocalypse that has taken place in recent days in Haret Hreik. Behind each street corner is more destruction, more rubble.... Until the mass of devastated concrete blocks simply prevents one from penetrating any further into Haret Hreik.”

Over two pages, Putz details the appalling destruction that has taken place. Towards the end of her report, she writes:

“But even if the Israelis assumed this quarter was used as a retreat and operational base (for Hezbollah): any talk of ‘surgical strikes’ solely against military targets in Haret Hreik is absurd. The UN Human Rights Commissioner Louise Arbour spoke on Wednesday of war crimes having possibly been committed during the fighting of last week and that would have to be pursued. The ruins of the residential area could at least be used to justify the accusation of ‘premeditated killing and injury of civilians.’”

While the vast majority of Germany’s press has rapidly adapted to the change in international relations that seeks to justify the new line of “might is right” and play down the consequences of the Israeli onslaught, reports such as those by Ulrike Putz make clear that governments and editorial offices that now line up behind the US and Israel in the Middle East are themselves complicit in “war crimes.”

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