

German army steps up military intervention in Middle East

By Johannes Stern
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According to media reports, the German army is to massively expand its presence at the Incirlik air base in southeastern Turkey. The defence ministry under Ursula Von der Leyen has announced investments totalling €58 million.

According to Spiegel Online, €26 million is to be used to construct an airstrip for the Tornados stationed there and permanent accommodation for the troops. For an additional €30 million, the army will establish a mobile command centre for the deployment of the air force. For this, the building of a foundation will be necessary, which costs an additional €2 million.

The NATO Incirlik airbase is the main location from where the US-led air war in Syria and Iraq is waged, in which the German army has participated since last year with fighter jets, a warship, refuelling aircraft, satellite technology and up to 1,200 troops. The German Tornado pilots have flown approximately 500 reconnaissance missions since then.

The expansion of the airbase is part of a major intensification of German military offensives in the Middle East. Last Sunday, Germany sent a major shipment of weapons to the Kurdish Peshmerga in northern Iraq. According to the German army, it consisted of two Dingo I armoured vehicles, 1,500 G-36 machine guns, 2 million rounds of munitions and 100 Milan anti-tank rockets.

A recent report on the German navy's official web site stated that the frigate Augsburg was "well prepared and with good weather ... on its way to the Counter Daesh II mission." Between December 2015 and March 2016, the German warship accompanied the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle in an intervention allegedly aimed at ISIS in the Persian Gulf.

According to *Bild am Sonntag*, a further German

contingent with AWACS reconnaissance aircraft will begin operating over Syria around the end of October. The mission was already agreed upon at NATO's summit in Warsaw at the beginning of July. The German soldiers will also be stationed in Turkey.

With the sending of additional German troops and the extra investment in Incirlik, a relaxation in tensions between Berlin and Ankara appears to be taking place. Relations had reached a low-point in the wake of the attempted coup in July against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which was at least tacitly backed by sections of the ruling elite in the United States and Germany.

Prior to that, German-Turkish relations were badly damaged by the passage in June of a resolution in the German parliament (Bundestag) describing the murder of 1.5 million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire as "genocide." Erdogan warned at the time that the initiative "could lead to a deterioration in diplomatic, economic, political and military relations between the two countries," and prohibited Bundestag representatives from visiting the German troops stationed at Incirlik.

However, following the Turkish incursion to northern Syria and the concurrent visit of US Vice President Joseph Biden to Ankara at the latest, the German government has been attempting to rebuild its relationship with Turkey.

Last Friday, government spokesman Stefan Seibert distanced himself publicly from the Armenia resolution, stating that it was merely a declaration of intent by the Bundestag and "not legally binding." On the sidelines of the G20 summit in Hangzhou, China, German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) then met separately with Erdogan. At the same time, foreign minister

Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party, SPD) held talks with his Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu.

At the beginning of the week, a spokesman for the German foreign ministry declared it would be “a good and correct step” if the next visit to Incirlik planned by German deputies in early October could take place. Çavuşoğlu said of the procedure to *Die Welt*, “If Germany continues to behave as now, then we will consider it.” But he added threateningly, “If Germany tries to treat Turkey badly then that won’t be the case.”

A further dispute emerged on the following day. According to *Deutsche Welle*, an interview it had conducted with Turkish sports minister Akif Çatay Kılıç had been confiscated by his ministry. Kılıç merely claimed that he had not authorised it. According to the foreign ministry, German ambassador Martin Erdmann held “constructive” telephone discussions with the sports ministry.

On Thursday, the German government then announced Turkey had agreed to the visit of the deputies from the parliamentary defence committee to Incirlik. A note to that effect had been received by the Turkish foreign ministry. Steinmeier welcomed Ankara’s decision and added that now they had come “a bit” further. Behind the difficult attempts of the government to draw closer to Turkey, which are not supported unanimously within its own ranks, are a large number of strategic goals.

Firstly, notwithstanding the supply of weapons to the Kurdish Peshmerga, Germany views Turkey as its most important ally in the Middle East to enforce its imperialist interests—with increased independence from the US if necessary. Spiegel Online wrote that the expansion of Incirlik was “from the perspective of the military ... urgently required.” Since the beginning of the German intervention, the air force had “parked their jets on US airfields, kept them overnight in temporary buildings and relied on allies for technical support during their reconnaissance flights.”

Another maxim of German foreign policy is the sealing off of Europe’s borders to refugees fleeing the war zones in the Middle East. This had “only been sustainably achieved with the EU-Turkey agreement,” stated Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU) on Tuesday in parliament. “While last August there were 100,000 people counted for the month, this August we

had around 18,000.” This “reduction of 80 percent in one year” was an “achievement that some would not have expected within a year.”

German imperialism intends to be present and fully involved in the division of the spoils when the regime change operation in Syria being sought by the Western powers is achieved.

On Wednesday, a German delegation participated in the “Syria Conference” in London organised by the “High Negotiations Commission.” Çavuşoğlu stated there that to defeat ISIS a ground offensive against the city of Raqqa was required. However, Turkey would not be able to carry this out alone. “The security forces, including the military and intelligence forces, must comprehensively plan this operation. The planning and strategy of this operation must be well thought through and results orientated,” stated Çavuşoğlu.

The HNC, an opposition group mainly financed by Saudi Arabia which supports armed Islamists in Syria and has long called for the overthrow of the Russian-aligned Assad regime, left no doubt about what it understood by “well thought out” and “results orientated.” The head of the HNC, Riad Hijab, presented a paper for a “transition process,” i.e., the installation of a pro-Western puppet regime in Damascus.

Before Hijab switched to the opposition in August 2012, he was Syrian prime minister and a high-ranking official in Assad’s Baath Party. The German government has maintained close ties to him for some time. Two meetings between Steinmeier and Hijab have already taken place this year, in January and May.

A decisive role in organising the Syrian opposition in Berlin has been played from the outset by the Left Party. Already on November 15, 2013, the party’s foreign policy spokesman, Wolfgang Gehrcke, participated in a “background discussion” organised by the Körber Foundation with Hijab.

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