

Germany deploys Tornado fighter planes into Afghanistan

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Germans must learn how to kill,” ran the headline in the newsweekly Der Spiegel at the end of last year, describing the public debate about extending Germany’s military involvement in Afghanistan. A representative of the Bush administration made the demand to Karsten Voigt, the official in Berlin responsible for German-American relations.

Last week, the German cabinet agreed to deploy between six and eight Tornado fighter planes in southern Afghanistan, a region that has witnessed fierce fighting. Moreover, the cabinet wants to send an additional 500 German soldiers to Afghanistan—in addition to 2,900 already stationed in the country. The cost of expanding German involvement amounts to approximately €35 million, according to official figures.

A final hurdle before the additional resources can be deployed is securing the agreement of the Bundestag (federal parliament). The question to be debated is under which mandate the Tornados are to be sent. At present, German troops are operating in Afghanistan under two different mandates—Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The latter allows both the operation of the armed forces throughout the entire country, as well as the use of military force. However, the size of the German contingent is limited to 3,000 soldiers and operations outside northern Afghanistan are strictly circumscribed.

In the new operational area in southern Afghanistan, the US-led OEF forces find themselves in an escalating counter-insurgency campaign against Taliban rebels. In the past, ISAF stressed the importance of reconstructing the civilian infrastructure in the north, presenting its own military presence as a “humanitarian mission.”

In the debate about the new mandate, the overlapping of both missions has become very clear. For weeks, leading politicians from Germany’s Christian Democrat-Social Democrat grand coalition have sought to mask the belligerent character of the mission. Merely “reconnaissance flights” are being planned; there is no question of there being any hostile engagements, according to Defence Minister Jung (Christian Democratic Union, CDU).

His predecessor Peter Struck, who today leads the Social Democratic Party (SPD) parliamentary faction in the Bundestag, is somewhat clearer. Of course it is a “combat mission,” he told the Bonner Generalanzeiger, posing parliamentary approval or rejection of the new deployment as a “question of conscience.” The grand coalition can afford this luxury, since the government can be sure of an overwhelming majority in the Bundestag.

The duplicity of the mantra of “reconnaissance flights—yes, combat missions—no” is plain: the only purpose of military reconnaissance is to identify the targets that are to be attacked, strafed or bombed from the air.

Significance of the Tornado deployment

The cabinet’s decision signals not merely the quantitative expansion of Germany’s military operations in Afghanistan, but a real turning point. It marks a development that will lead to German forces being involved directly in the war in the Middle East.

It is comparable to the decision of the SPD-Green Party government, in the wake of its election victory in 1998, to send AWACS planes and Air Force Tornados, as well as 500 soldiers, to support the NATO attack on Serbia. That decision served to open the door for the German military to participate in military operations world-wide.

To correctly gauge the implications of Germany’s expanded military commitment means understanding the strategic significance of Afghanistan. The country shares a 945 kilometre-long border with Iran. As well as bordering the Caspian republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the country also has a small border with China. Since its beginning in 2001, the war in the Hindu Kush has served as a means for the US to secure a strategic position in Central Asia—among the most important regions geo-strategically.

The occupation of Iraq nearly four years ago placed Iran in a vice. To the west and also to the east there are now powerful contingents of American forces.

The deployment of Germany’s armed forces in southern Afghanistan is directly connected with the fact that open warfare has prevailed in this area since last summer, and the military strategists in the Pentagon want to bring the situation under control in order to be able to concentrate on suppressing the resistance in Iraq and preparing an attack against Iran.

In the past one and a half years, whole regions and cities in southern Afghanistan have been seized by rebel forces, only to then be recaptured by American and Canadian troops.

The loss of life is high among the rebels, the coalition troops and the civilian population. During 2006, some 4,000 people were killed in the fighting—117 from coalition forces. A third of the Afghans killed are thought to be civilians. The US-led occupation increasingly meets resistance among the civilian population, and support for the rebels is growing rapidly. According to media reports, some soldiers feel that operations in southern Afghanistan today are more dangerous than in Iraq.

The rebels have announced a large-scale offensive for this spring—some 2,000 suicide bombers are ready, a Taliban spokesman claimed. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice responded to these warnings, “If there is a spring offensive, then it should be ours.” It is for this purpose that the coalition is reinforcing; Britain has increased its troops by 500, and the US has announced it will delay the return of approximately 3,200 soldiers by around four months.

Two weeks before the German cabinet decision, President Bush announced he would be supplementing the financial and military resources allocated for the war in Afghanistan by up to \$10.2 billion. The majority is to be spent on training the Afghan police and military,

which are to be increasingly utilised in combat missions.

Massive public opposition

According to the polling organisation Forsa, the expansion of Germany's mission is largely rejected by the general public. Forsa reported that 77 percent of those asked opposed the planned expansion.

In response to this popular opposition, a determined campaign of propaganda and disinformation has been launched. In its recommendation to the Bundestag, the government referred to the "restricted transmission" of reconnaissance results from the Tornado flights to the OEF, which is nothing but a verbal trick. The newsweekly Die Zeit points out that it is "unclear" how these restrictions will translate in practice, "since the ISAF commander is also the deputy OEF commander."

At the same time, prominent figures in the military, leading politicians and journalists are demanding the defence ministry call a halt to "appeasement" and openly support a stronger German military commitment.

Ernst-Reinhard Beck (CDU), a member of the parliamentary defence committee expressed anger with the formulation of a "restricted transmission of information," calling it "veiled language." "We might as well leave the Tornados at home if we don't want to share the reconnaissance results of our aircraft," he told Die Zeit online. Both serving and retired military top brass have expressed themselves similarly—it was remarked that they would certainly not be shooting photos of the "newly built roads and bridges."

Reinhold Robbe (SPD), Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces was more guarded. The deployment of the Tornados, he said, "is not a walk in the park."

On the day of the cabinet decision, Claus-Christian Malzahn of Spiegel-online, a strong advocate of the US war in Iraq, wrote, "Those who wage war should call it war." In answer to the headline in Bild newspaper the same day—"Are we now at war?"—Malzahn demands that Chancellor Angela Merkel "should be honest enough to answer this question with a clear 'Yes.' While she's at it, she should add that this has been the case for the last five years."

"German hesitation" meant that NATO had failed to "develop a convincing concept for Afghanistan," he added.

Malzahn, who had formerly been close to the Greens and had written for the liberal Tageszeitung, now rages against the opponents of war. The "reservations" about the Afghanistan deployment run from left to right in Germany, he writes. "It is a bitter reality that many Germans on the left couldn't care less that innocent people could be hanged in football stadiums in Kabul in the near future, or that a religious party could be measuring the lengths of mens' beards and barring women from walking alone on the street."

On the other hand, former defence undersecretary Willy Wimmer (CDU) is decidedly against the planned deployment of the Tornado jets. He warns, "The German pilots who use these airplanes to reconnoitre the villages that are then destroyed by the Americans will find themselves on a direct flight to The Hague," since it is a matter of participating in war crimes.

The German government's decision to escalate its participation in the war in Afghanistan further demonstrates the urgency of developing an international political movement against war and militarism.

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