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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

24 December 2018

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25.12.2018

European powers condemn Trump's withdrawal from Syria

The withdrawal of US troops from Syria announced by US president Donald Trump and the subsequent resignation of his defence secretary James Mattis have provoked a fierce response from European leaders. After the initial shock, the European ruling elites reacted overwhelmingly with calls for a more independent European foreign and defence policy. In Germany, in particular, leading politicians and the media are outdoing one another with demands for an even faster rearmament of the German army (Bundeswehr) and the establishment of a European military force.

Trump's decision evidently came as a complete surprise to European governments. In their official statements they condemned the decision and urge a continuation of the war against the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria. "The decision of the White House is cause for concern," reads an official statement of the German defence ministry. IS was "territorially under control, but by no means defeated." One hopes that "the Americans will not withdraw in an overly hasty manner, but are aware of their responsibilities, not only to their own troops but also to others."

A similar response came from Germany's foreign minister, Heiko Maas (Social Democratic Party), who campaigned for greater military and economic intervention by Germany in Arab countries during his visit to Iraq last week. "The abrupt change of course of the American side was surprising" and not only for Germany. There was "the danger that the consequences of this decision will harm the fight against IS and jeopardise the achievements made." The fight against the IS will be decided "in the long run—militarily

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and also with civil means: Bringing about stability requires security and political order, which can continue into the future.”

The governments in London and Paris also condemned Trump's plans and announced they would continue their military intervention in Syria. On Thursday a French foreign ministry spokesman stated: “The fight against terrorism is a priority for France. The fight against the global threat of Daesh [IS] is ongoing and a long-term commitment.” British defence minister Tobias Ellwood said he “strongly disagreed” with Trump's decision. On Twitter, he wrote that IS “has morphed into other forms of extremism and the threat is very much alive.”

There are several reasons for the fierce European reaction to Trump's withdrawal order. In the first place the European powers are angered that the withdrawal of US troops from Syria endangers their own war plans. Unlike the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Libyan war in 2011, all the major European powers were, from the outset, part of the imperialist offensive against Syria. They supported the goal of overthrowing the regime of Bashar al-Assad and replacing it with a pro-Western puppet regime. In 2012, the German foreign office, together with the German SWP think tank, and part of the Syrian opposition, initiated the project “The Day After” and published a “Vision for a post-Assad order.”

Now the European powers fear complete victory for Assad and, consequently, of his allies in Moscow and Teheran. “Assad and his government are being strengthened—by the fact that the Kurdish militia or so-called Syrian Democratic Forces, [...] are caught between the wheels,” warned SWP director Volker Perthes in an interview on *Deutschlandfunk*. Following a withdrawal of American forces from northern Syria the allies of the Kurds and Arabs in the West “would have to accept the conditions of Damascus to a large extent. That is, the flag of Damascus, the Syrian state, will soon again fly over the Kurdish provinces in the east.”

Another reason for the anger of European powers stems from domestic political considerations. Similar to the ruling class in the US, European governments have used the guise of the “war on terror” to curtail democratic rights and establish veritable police states. The imperialist intervention in Syria has resulted in terrorist networks that served as a pretext for far-reaching attacks on democratic rights. Under conditions of growing social and political opposition across Europe, Paris, London and Berlin want to intensify this reactionary campaign. Trump's claim that IS in Syria is “defeated” undermines these plans.

At a very fundamental level, the European response to recent developments in Washington has exposed the deep rift in transatlantic relations. “The damage goes far beyond Syria,” writes the traditionally pro-American daily *Die Welt*. “Who can rely on the US if long-term allies like the Kurds are being sacrificed overnight? What peace can the US guarantee? Which aggressor can it deter?”

And the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* comments: “With the withdrawal of troops from Syria, the US President has betrayed his allies all over the world.” The paper concludes: “The European pillar must now be consolidated in the alliance with enormous energy, and improvements made to European foreign policy’s capacity to act. That will require a lot of money and even more political will. There is ‘was too little of both.’”

Leading foreign policy politicians from both the government and the opposition are demanding further military rearmament. Jürgen Hardt, the foreign policy spokesman of the Union (Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union) parliamentary group, described the “resignation of Mattis” as “a turning point in foreign and security policy.” One must now “continue to invest in the Bundeswehr” and “this two-percent target by 2024”—i.e. the increase in military spending to at least 75 billion euros annually—“must be taken seriously.” He added threateningly that one would be able “to make clear to the public at large that this is how it has to be.”

Agnieszka Brugger, who sits on the Bundestag's defence committee for the Green Party, also called for increased European intervention in the Middle East. Trump's retreat is “a nasty surprise” that “causes huge foreign policy chaos.” When asked by a reporter, “What can, what must Europe do? Does Europe have a chance? Does Germany have a chance?” She replied: “The European Union should finally wake up from its slumber and take on a more active role in Syria.” One cannot “duck away from this difficult debate.”

The megalomaniacal plans of the ruling class being discusses behind the backs of the population is illustrated by a recent article by Jan Techau, head of the Europe Program of the German Marshall Fund of the United States in Berlin. Under the title “Strategic ability and World pain. German foreign policy through 2030,” he demands that Germany must “recognise its size, power and relevance for Europe and humbly accept it. It has to take up its leading role.”

And further: “It must be communicated to [Germany] that the maintenance of order will entail maximum effort and entail enormous costs.” All this would “have to be explained to the population, again and again, by politicians, even at the risk of their mandates ... And if that is not popular, then leading state players have to risk their political lives for it. The

same applies to the financial and human resources of the Bundeswehr. Two percent of defence spending is not needed for Trump, but rather against him, because these investments are supposed to strengthen exactly the multilateral, rule-based order he wants to abolish.”

The attempt by Techau to portray the revival of German militarism as some sort of progressive response to Trump is utterly hypocritical. Everyone is aware of the monstrous crimes of German imperialism in the two world wars of the 20th century. In the course of the past two decades, the German ruling class has been actively involved in America’s illegal wars of aggression, and now it is essentially criticizing the Syria policy of the ultra-right billionaire in the White House from the right. There is only one way to stop this dangerous development: building an international anti-war movement based on the working class and fighting for a socialist program. This requires the revolutionary unification of European and American workers against all factions of the capitalist class in Europe, the US and worldwide.