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By Martin Kreickenbaum
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German armed forces deploy 300 soldiers to EU mission “Irin” in Mediterranean

Germany will participate in the European Union’s military mission “Irin” in the Mediterranean with up to 300 soldiers. The marching orders for the Bundeswehr (armed forces) were approved by the Bundestag (parliament) last Thursday.

Officially, Irin is to monitor and enforce the arms embargo against Libya decided by the United Nations in 2016 and prevent oil smuggling from the country, which has been battered by civil war. In reality, however, the EU and the German government plan to push back their rivals—Turkey and Russia—for control of the rich oil reserves off the Libyan coast and in the eastern Mediterranean, and to be in the front line in the new **scramble** for Africa.

The Bundeswehr is providing a P3C-Orion maritime patrol aircraft, which requires 80 service personnel to operate. The aircraft can stay aloft for up to 13 hours and is designed for optical long-range reconnaissance. In addition, a good dozen soldiers will be deployed to the operations headquarters in Rome. From August, a frigate with a crew of around 200 will be made available. Originally, the defence ministry had refused to send a warship, but the German government knows it can assert its strategic interests in the region only if it takes a leading role in the European military operation.

The Irin **mission** was decided by the 27 EU member states in mid-February and launched at the end of March. Its mandate, which incorporates the deployment of aircraft, ships and reconnaissance satellites, includes not only gathering information on violations of the arms

embargo, but also, and above all, stopping and searching ships suspected of transporting weapons to Libya. Oil smuggling is also to be monitored.

The notorious Libyan Coast Guard, which acts as the European Union's henchman in its actions against refugees, will be further upgraded under the Irini programme. The rescue of shipwrecked refugees, however, is explicitly not being planned. Naval units will therefore operate only in the eastern sea area off Libya and thus outside the main refugee routes towards Italy.

At the end of March, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell declared that Operation Irini was "of the utmost importance" and would "make a clear contribution to promoting peace in our immediate neighbourhood by ensuring a lasting ceasefire." Nothing could be further from the truth.

The idea for the Irini mission originated at the **Libya Conference** held in Berlin in mid-January. At that time, the German government invited 16 powers and parties involved in the Libyan conflict to the conference, where they signed a 55-point plan that included a ceasefire, compliance with the UN arms embargo, the withdrawal of foreign forces and mercenaries, and the demobilization of the fighting militias.

The *World Socialist Web Site* warned at the time that the conference was not about "peace" in the war-ravaged country, but about sharing the spoils, and that it was a "preliminary stage to a military occupation of the country." We compared the Libya Conference with the Berlin Congo Conference of 1884, which promoted the colonial subjugation of Africa and aggravated the tensions between the imperialist powers. These warnings have been confirmed.

Since the Libya Conference and the EU's decision to launch the Irini mission, the situation in Libya has escalated. According to the UN, the ceasefire has been broken almost 900 times since January and several thousand tonnes of arms have been brought into Libya by ship or plane and across land borders.

In the Bundestag debate, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) justified Germany's participation in the military mission by saying that the situation had escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic. He declared, "When you consider that there are apparently some in the world who want to use this crisis to gain military advantage in the conflict in which they are engaged, you can't help calling it perverse."

But that is exactly what the German government is doing. Maas stressed it is important "that we now create instruments that are effectively suited to better monitor this arms

embargo.” He then described the operation as an example of Germany assuming “more responsibility in the world.”

This “responsibility” has nothing to do with humanitarian motives. Behind the official propaganda of a “peace” or “stability” mission lie brutal power-political interests. The continuing breaches of the ceasefire and the arms embargo serve to provide Berlin with the appropriate excuse to intervene into the Libyan conflict with increased military force—and with unforeseeable consequences. The EU mission will not only contribute to a further escalation in Libya, but also threatens to escalate into an open war between the regional and major powers behind the rival militias in Libya.

The civil war in Libya has been raging ever since a military alliance led by the US, Britain and France bombed the North African country in 2011 and assassinated long-time ruler Muammar al-Gaddafi. Since 2016, Fayeaz al-Sarraj has been prime minister of an official transitional government based in Tripoli. Al-Sarraj has long been supported within the EU, especially by Italy and Germany, and since November has received massive military aid from Turkey and Qatar. The arms transports for al-Sarraj are carried out mostly by sea.

His biggest adversary is Khalifa Haftar, whose official residence is in Tobruk. Haftar is supported by France, but above all by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Russia, among others. He obtains his arms supplies mainly by land and air.

The civil war between the militias and warlords in Libya has been raging for a long time, but with the massive intervention by Russia and Turkey, the European powers, and Germany in particular, see their strategic interests in the region threatened. Last year, Haftar, with the support of the Kremlin-affiliated Wagner Group, initially achieved massive territorial gains, which allowed his militias to advance as far as the gates of Tripoli.

Haftar’s offensive came to a halt when Turkey sent several thousand mercenaries of the Free Syrian Army from the Turkish-occupied territories in northern Syria to support al-Sarraj. The Turkish army also intervened directly in the fighting, with drones and warships positioned off the Libyan coast. In return, al-Sarraj signed an agreement on the “delimitation of areas of influence at sea,” which divides the eastern Mediterranean between the two countries. Based on this agreement, Turkey claims large gas deposits, which Greece and Cyprus also claim.

How the European Union intends to enforce the arms embargo in practice remains an open question. Since the mandate for Irini, which runs until 31 March 2021, initially provides

only for the enforcement of the arms embargo by sea, it would be above all the arms deliveries of NATO member Turkey that would be the focus of the European military powers. Such an intervention by the EU could provoke a direct military conflict with Turkey. In the current edition of the *Welt am Sonntag*, a southern European diplomat warns that “it is still completely unclear what happens if EU soldiers are to stop smuggling ships belonging to NATO member Turkey, but the weapons are not handed over and a violent clash even ensues.”

Fayez al-Sarraj has protested to the UN Security Council against operation Irini because the mission favours his rival, Haftar.

In an April position paper, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, which is close to the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), demanded that Irini also “record and document violations of the arms embargo by land and air in the context of air and satellite surveillance.”

The authors feared that “the new EU mission threatens to degenerate into a purely symbolic operation” if member states “continue to engage unilaterally with conflict parties in Libya.” The authors argued that “the EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borrell, but also Germany, as initiator of the Berlin process, is now called upon to take action.”

Germany and Europe are already preparing to intervene more forcefully in Libya and Africa. In the Bundestag debate, Johann David Wadehul, deputy leader of the Christian Democratic parliamentary group and a reserve major in the Bundeswehr, told the parliamentarians, “Ladies and gentlemen, we can make as many efforts as we want in Central Africa, in the Sahel region. If we do not pacify Libya, we will not get the situation under control.” Significantly, last week the Cabinet also decided to extend the German combat mission in Mali.

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