

Varoufakis banned from Germany, Nordstream Update & new US aid for Ukraine | Fabian Scheidler

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Zain Raza (ZR): Thank you for tuning in today, and welcome back to another episode of The Source. I'm your host Zain Raza, and today I'll be talking to author and independent journalist Fabian Scheidler. Fabian has written numerous books, the latest being *The End of the Mega Machine: A Brief History of a Failing Civilization*. Fabian, welcome back.

Fabian Scheidler (FS): Thanks for having me.

ZR: Let's start this interview with a recap of international development surrounding the Israeli assault on Gaza, which thus far has claimed the lives of 34,183 Palestinians, most of them being women and children. Recently, an independent investigation led by former French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna found that Israel has still not been able to provide any evidence to support its claim that the UN Relief and Works Agency UNRWA staff members are part of the terrorist organization Hamas. In January, Israel accused UNRWA of being infiltrated by Hamas, a claim that was not only uncritically reported by Western media, but also led nations such as the US, UK and Germany to cut their funding, despite the fact that 2.3 million people in Gaza rely on this agency for food, shelter and medicine. Germany has decided to resume its cooperation with UNRWA, but the US thus far has refused to do so. In another international development, the United States recently vetoed a resolution of the UN Security Council aimed at granting the State of Palestine full membership in the United Nations. US Deputy Ambassador Robert Wood informed the Security Council that the veto, quote, "does not reflect opposition to Palestinian statehood, but is acknowledgment that it can only be achieved through direct negotiations between the parties", unquote. In light of these international developments, what do you make of the United States actions on the international stage? Has it been constructive when it comes to addressing the Israel-Palestine issue?

FS: No. In fact, it has been very destructive, and the United States is more and more isolated on the international scene. The vote in the Security Council was a reflection of that. The

United States voted against Palestinian statehood, although, practically most of the other members of the Security Council were in favor – only two abstentions, two abstained. And the United States then said that they are in favor of a two state solution, but it has to come through negotiations. Who is going to negotiate here? Gazans are bombed, have been bombed for half a year now. And there is no independent Palestinian Authority. They are completely dependent on Israel and they are deeply corrupted. And, the thing is that the US has a track record of decades of saying that they are in favor of a two state solution, but in fact, blocking it because they allowed Israel to go forward with the colonization of the West Bank with the blockade of Gaza, which lasted for 16 years and now with war. And I think the international community, apart from some Western states like Germany, are completely aware of the isolation of the United States. And finally, I think a solution to the bad situation is that dire situation, can be achieved only either without the United States or by bypassing the United States or by the United States becoming aware that their stance on Israel and Gaza has no future.

ZR: Let's look at this issue from a regional perspective, namely between Israel and Iran. After an Israeli airstrike in early April, they destroyed an Iranian consulate in Syria, Damascus, killing a top military advisor of Iran, Iran responded by firing more than 300 projectiles at a military installation in Israel that included about 170 drones and over 120 rockets, causing minimum damage, according to the Israeli Defense Force. Days later, Israel responded with an airstrike that targeted an air defense facility near the city of Isfahan in central Iran. Iran has nuclear facilities, a drone manufacturing facility, and also a major airbase. According to various reports, the damage was quite limited as well. Western nations widely condemned Iran's attack on Israel, and when it came to Israel, they simply requested it to exercise restraint. The European Union agreed to tighten sanctions against Iran in retaliation for its attack on Israel, and announced it will target all components manufacturing the EU that are used in the production of unmanned aerial vehicles, drones or ballistic missiles. How do you view the spat between Israel and Iran, as well as the reaction of the West?

FS: Well, the reactions of the West were deeply hypocritical, because Israel started the whole conflict with their assault on the Iranian consulate in Damascus, which was in fact an act of war under international law. I mean, the embassies and consulates are considered to be the territory of that state. So that was indeed Iranian territory that was hit. And there was no real condemnation of that act by Western states, which is really amazing given that this was outrageous and things like that hardly ever happen. I mean, usually even in wars and conflicts, embassies and consulates are respected. So Israel clearly started the whole affair. Then Iran was in a difficult situation. They had to react, otherwise they would be seen as very weak. They went to the UN to demand diplomatic intervention. But that was not possible due to the interventions of the United States. So they had to do something. And so they went, I'm not going to justify what they did, but they did that – even Western observers noted that it was very restrained in its range. For nine hours long, which allowed the US, the Israeli Defense Forces and others to take down these missiles and drones and so on. Seymour Hersh even reported that there were, according to his sources, talks between the Pentagon and

Iranian military to make sure that no severe damage would be caused on Israel's territory because the US clearly don't want this kind of war between Iran, Israel and the rest. And so, it seems possible to me what Sy Hersh has reported here, that the Pentagon, not the Biden administration, they sort of let it go, they sort of let it happen that the Pentagon took the initiative to make sure that this would not escalate into a regional war. And I think, the Israeli response was sort of also restrained. I think what the US told them, that was also according to the reports of Seymour Hersh, is that if you want to go to war with Iran, you're on your own. And so I think the restraint in the Israeli response is a reflection of, that they don't have full backing of the US for major hits. But still, there's a huge risk of real escalation here.

ZR: Let us now look at some domestic developments happening around the issue of Israel and Gaza. You recently wrote an article in Scheerpost and the Berliner Zeitung entitled *Gaza and Germany's Path to Authoritarianism*. In it, you document how the German government is cracking down on voices critical of Israel's policies, endangering civil liberties and freedom of expression. In particular, you highlight the cases of former Greek finance minister and politician Yanis Varoufakis and the world renowned British Palestinian surgeon from Glasgow University, Ghassan Abu-Sittah, who have been banned from entering Germany and for engaging in any political activity here. This political bent took place in the context of a Palestine conference in Berlin, that took place on April 12th, which had been organized by Jews, Palestinians and Germans and was eventually raided by the police. The German government justified its actions by stating that the conference and the speakers aim to propagate anti-Semitic, anti-Israel sentiments as well as glorify or sympathize with the terrorist actions of Hamas. Can you comment on this case and talk about the state of civil liberties in Germany in relation to criticism of Israel?

FS: Yes. The crackdown on that conference was really outrageous. It was supposed to take place for three days and after two hours the German police shut down the conference. They took off the electricity on the claims that there was a certain Ghassan Abu-Sittah who was speaking via video message, and they claimed that this person didn't have a right to speak in Germany, that there was a ban on him. The people who were responsible for the conference didn't know about that. Ghassan Abu-Sittah even himself claimed that he didn't know about that. So the reasons given to shut down the whole conference were quite flimsy. And in fact, it raises serious questions about the rule of law here. Even if one person had made commands via video message that were not in line with German law, there is no reason to shut down the whole conference.

This really reminds me of what happened in the US in the McCarthy era, where dissenters and critics of the government were labeled as communists, as anti American and so on, where we saw a huge crackdown on civil liberties. And we have a similar development in Germany, unfortunately. And it's really absurd. Let's take another case, the case of the Berlinale, the film festival. The first prize, the award for documentaries, went to two filmmakers. One was Yuval Abraham from the Israeli newscast +972, who, by the way, has also revealed the story about the AI use in the Israeli military assault on Gaza. Yuval is from Israel and Basel Adra from Palestine and when they received the award, they referred to Israel as an apartheid state.

And that was a huge outrage in the German media and among German politicians, the mayor of Berlin and many others called these filmmakers anti-Semites. And we have to take into consideration that the two most renowned human rights organizations in the world, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, used that term for Israel. They have been using it for years after thorough research and studies on the ground for good reason. Because Palestinians do not have the same rights on their territory as Israelis. But if you use a term like apartheid, if you refer to human rights organizations like Amnesty International in Germany, you are a hater of Israel, you are a non-person, you are an anti-Semite. So it's really an absurd situation. And it goes on and on and on. You know, very renowned artists and scientists like Nancy Fraser, like Laurie Anderson, like Masha Gessen and have been uninvited from their teaching commitments and so on in Germany because they just named what is going on in Gaza with severe human rights violations, the severe violations of international law, which are very well documented. But if you say that and if you refer to the United Nations General Assembly, which demanded an immediate ceasefire by an overwhelming majority, you are an anti-Semite in Germany. And that's really quite disturbing given German history. And in my article, I also mentioned that I think this is a complete misinterpretation of German history of the Holocaust, of the Shoah, because what the German government and parts of the press claim is that the consequence of the Shoa should be that we have unconditional support for the State of Israel and its government, no matter who is in government, no matter what they do. They are extreme right wing now in government. And my conclusion from German history is that we as Germans should have a commitment to human rights independent of nationality, of religion, of the color of skin. So Gazans, Palestinians deserve the same protection, the same security as Israeli citizens. But the idea of the German government and the German press is quite the contrary. They call it reason of state. So we have to stick to whatever the Israeli state is doing. And I think that's a travesty of the lessons from the German past that we should draw.

ZR: Let us look at another development now, namely the war in Ukraine. After months of delay due to political differences, the US Congress was finally able to pass a comprehensive \$95.3 billion foreign aid package on Tuesday, April 23rd. This aid package includes \$61 billion to support Ukraine in its war against Russia, \$26 billion for Israel, and humanitarian aid for civilians in conflict zones around the world, including the Gaza Strip, and \$8.12 billion to, quote, "fight Communist China", unquote, in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly for Taiwan. As far as Ukrainian aid is concerned, most of the funds will go to replenish US stockpiles and purchasing US defense systems. One notable difference, however, is the Army Tactical Missile Systems, also known as "attack-ems". Until now, the US had sent attack-ems with a range of 160km, now for the first time, they will send attack-ems with a range of 300km, which, according to many military analysts appearing in Western media, will make a significant difference in favor of the Ukrainian military. What do you think of this latest round of aid? Can it lead Ukraine finally to a victory against Russia?

FS: It depends on what you define as victory. The whole idea that was propagated for two years in the West, in the US and in Germany, that Ukraine would be able to take back all the territory, Donbass and Crimea, is completely ridiculous. No one believes that. And, it's

completely out of line with the situation on the ground. Russia is advancing and Ukraine is running out of people. It's a very serious problem. The army is demotivated after two years of war. They have severe difficulties re-recruiting people. Millions of Ukrainians, who could serve, are abroad. They are trying to crack down on these people. They are trying to withdraw their diplomatic aid in countries like Germany to force them to come back to Ukraine, which they probably won't because they won't die in a war, that doesn't make any sense and any progress. And so this is the key problem for Ukraine. Now, when they get new weapons, it will take weeks and months for it to be delivered. The Czech government has also bought up internationally ammunition for Ukraine, which is an interesting case, because the Czech Republic is part of NATO and apparently NATO's running out of ammunition. So there's another question here. When the war in Ukraine started, the NATO military budget was 20 times the budget of Russia. And so we could ask why we are running out of ammunition so fast. And I think one of the answers is that there is huge scale corruption in the Western military system, especially in the US, but also in other countries. But that's another story.

Does it make a difference? Well, it will make a certain difference when these weapons arrive, but they will not turn the tide in favor of a Ukrainian offensive that could take back all the territory. What it does is to prolong the war. And we already have something that you could call a new Verdun. You know, the big battle in the First World War, which didn't make any advance for a year or even longer, and where hundreds and thousands of thousands of soldiers died. And we have to end this situation. And the only way to end that is not more military aid, but negotiations. And what could these negotiations be about? They could be about neutrality for Ukraine. That would have been part of the solution from the outset, as many, even including Henry Kissinger had said before the war, that would have, Russia had demanded neutrality of Ukraine for a long time, if the West had conceded that Ukraine wouldn't be part of NATO, we wouldn't have a war; most probably. Still, it should be part of negotiations. I think it would be in the interests of the Ukrainian people. Of course they need security guarantees of one form or another. And then there must be negotiations about the status of the territories held by Russia now and the negotiation position of Ukraine is much weaker now than it was at the beginning of the war. At the beginning of the war, Russia could have retreated to the lines before February 24th, 2022. I think they won't do it today, which is a sad story because I'm in favor of recognizing international borders. So, that was a severe breach of international law by Russia to invade. But now we have a situation on the ground where we have to prevent the further killing of hundreds and thousands of people for moving the border like five kilometers to the east or five kilometers to the west for the next ten years. I think we have to stop that, and we should engage in negotiations.

ZR: Let us look at the Nord Stream pipeline and get your perspective on some recent developments, especially considering the fact that you were the first European journalist to interview Seymour Hersh after he revealed how the US bombed the Nord Stream pipeline. For those who miss this interview, we will link that for you in the description of this video. In February, there were a number of developments in connection with the Nord Stream pipeline. Sweden announced that it closed its investigation into the explosion of the Nord Stream pipeline on the ground that it had no jurisdiction in the case and it headed over the

information obtained to the German investigators. After Sweden, the Danish authorities also ended their investigation and concluded that the pipelines had been deliberately sabotaged. However, they decided not to pursue the investigation any further, as there was no basis for any criminal proceedings in Denmark. The results of the investigations were not made public either. Can you provide your assessments of these developments and talk about this affair two years later?

FS: Yeah. I mean, what we see basically in, Western countries, those who have access to evidence like Sweden, like the US, of course, Denmark and Germany, there seems to be no real interest in making progress in that case. The interesting thing about Sweden is that they claim jurisdiction in the first place, although many legal experts said they didn't have any jurisdiction. And, now they say, no, I mean, we don't have jurisdiction, we won't go on with the case. So that's quite contradictory. And the suspicion here is that they claim jurisdiction to gather evidence and now they closed the case and they say, well, we won't give any statement. What I've heard is that the Swedish authorities have transferred the evidence. Apparently they have a container full of things they have gathered at the bottom of the Baltic Sea. They've given that to the German authorities. But the German authorities are not speaking either. So, I think there is very little interest in coming up with real evidence about who did it. And the reason is clear because still, the story that Seymour Hersh broke, has not been debunked really. We don't know if it's true. We don't know if it's partly true, but still, there is the possibility that the US was behind it, or at least that they knew about what was going on. One month after Seymour Hersh broke his story, the New York Times and Die Zeit and others came up with that sailboat story saying that the Ukrainians were involved with a sailboat. There were serious doubts about whether this would be feasible. The reports were – if someone would have provided these reports in the New York Times and Die Zeit, as a student, in his first semester, I think any professor of journalism would have refuted that because it was so full of mistakes, of miscalculations, of questions that were not asked. So later on they came up with more and more stuff, but still, there is no real clue whether that Ukrainian sailboat story is really part of the story.

What is entirely possible is that both the Hersh story and the Ukrainian sailboat story are part of a puzzle. Either the Ukrainian sailboat story being a red herring to distract from the real plan or, which would be another scenario, that Seymour Hersh had a prior version to what happened and the intelligence community came up with a second version, which also included a sailboat and Ukrainian forces. So still we don't know what happened, but I think it's not surprising that we don't see a real interest in finding out what happened, because if the US was involved in one way or another, that could be the end of NATO. I mean, the US bombing crucial infrastructure of its allies, including Germany, I mean, that's a severe case. And in an alliance, I mean, that would be really an earthquake. So I think it will take a long time. I hope one day we will get behind that, and we have to keep on asking the questions. What is really remarkable is that the version of Sy Hersh is rarely ever discussed in our media. Although it is plausible, which doesn't mean that it is necessarily true. But if you look at such a major crime, the largest case of sabotage in recent history, you should go on by criminalistic standards. I mean, every whodunit that you see on television every night, you're

asked, who has a motive, who has the means to do it? What kind of theories can we have about that? And of course, the US had a lot of motives. They wanted to sever the ties between Russia and Western Europe, which is an old, long history of US geopolitical strategies. They wanted to sell their liquid gas to Europe instead of Russia selling their cheaper gas. And, so there are lots of motives. And the US said it repeatedly, US President Biden said, standing next to Olaf Scholz in a press conference in the White House, he said, we will end this pipeline. And it's hardly ever discussed how it is possible that a US president says that they will be able to destroy crucial infrastructure of an ally and even less discussed whether they could be part of that story. There was so much distraction for years now over the pipeline issue. First, many media claimed that Russia blew up its own pipeline. It's such a ridiculous proposal. No evidence at all. After quite a time, even the intelligence communities, the Washington Post and others, came up with the conclusion that there's no trace of evidence whatsoever. But they wasted months with that allegation instead of looking in the other direction, to the US.

ZR: Fabian Scheidler, independent journalist and author. Thank you so much for your time today.

FS: Thanks for having me.

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