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Bombing is not a strategy

Why Germany should not take part in retaliatory strikes on Syria

Read this article in German or Russian.

Read the counterpoint to this article by Jan Techau.

There are signs that a major Syrian-Russian offensive on the province of Idlib is imminent – yet another humanitarian nightmare for the people in the battered country. Leading Christian Democratic politicians, along with some members of the Green Party and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), advocate German participation in a military operation should Assad use chemical weapons. Some are even suggesting a preventative strike.

It is an open secret that the US government, not least in the person of Ambassador Richard Grenell, is applying a lot of pressure on the German government. So far however, there has neither been a toxic gas attack nor any specific request from the US. Therefore there's no reason to rush to offer President Trump our services, especially because it is not the US President, but the German Parliament that decides on the use of German military forces – autonomously and in accordance with our constitutional principles and international law.

The outrage over Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad's ruthless actions with Russian and Iranian backing is clearly justified. Using chemical weapons is indisputably an international crime. We are doing our utmost to ensure that no one uses these outlawed weapons in Idlib or elsewhere. UN investigators have documented that the Syrian government has, in fact, used these weapons, and therefore must be brought to justice before the International Criminal Court – the court whose statute the US has still not signed and on which it recently even 'declared war'.

The international community's

collective failure

Despite all this, international law does not include the right of military retaliation, certainly not by a state or by any kind of 'coalition of the willing'. For good reason: The prohibition of force is a cornerstone of international peace. Only the UN Security Council or, given its paralysis, the General Assembly, can authorise the international community to act militarily on the basis of the *Uniting for Peace*-Resolution of 1950. Without a resolution, we lack the legitimation of international law and cannot agree to deploy German forces in Syria.

The West, or whatever remains of it, has nothing more to say in Syria. Since autumn 2015, Russia, Iran and Turkey have been in charge.

It's of course hugely problematic that the right to veto prevents the UN Security Council from intervening when the most severe human rights violations and cases of mass murder happen. Well-known experts on international law have rightly called for 'more consideration of the "gentlest" institutional ways to cautiously create legal change'. If we do not manage to counter the law of the strongest with the law of the international community we will have decades of anarchy in many places of the world.

The purely hypothetical debate about German participation in military strikes against the Syrian government also distracts from a few extremely uncomfortable and bitter truths:

What we are experiencing in Syria is the international community's collective failure. The country has become a pawn in geopolitical conflicts. Russia, Iran, the US, Israel and Turkey are all involved and fuelling the war. The UN and the EU watch helplessly, unable to do anything more than repeatedly express how 'concerned' they are. The West, or whatever remains of it, has nothing more to say in Syria. Since autumn 2015, Russia, Iran and Turkey have been in charge.

A retaliatory strike will not change anything

Since Obama drew the first red line in 2012, many other red lines have been announced and crossed. Nevertheless, after having used chemical weapons in March and August 2013, the Syrian regime was finally pushed to join the Chemical Weapons Convention and declare its chemical weapons stocks. Under the United Nations' auspices, the declared munitions were taken out of the country and destroyed – with

German assistance in particular.

Yet despite that, over 30 uses of chemical weapons have been reported since 2014. Experts from the UN and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) have proved that, in most cases, it was the Assad government which used the poison gas – as in the devastating chemical attack that caused over 80 deaths in Khan Shaykhun in April 2017. The subsequent retaliatory strikes by the US, Great Britain and France did not impress either Assad or Putin much – or lead to any behavioural change.

Our priority must be to prevent another humanitarian catastrophe in Syria – with all political tools we have at our disposal.

It's certainly legitimate to consider all possible options. But the truth is that a retaliatory strike will not protect people from murder or expulsion. Assad and his allies' barrel bombs and artillery fire have caused most of the more than 450,000 deaths in Syria. Now the threat of another slaughter – even without chemical weapons – is looming over Idlib.

Diplomacy first

Our options are limited: Assad's ground forces are winning the fight against the rebels with Russian and Iranian help, and Russia has controlled the Syrian airspace since 2015. In recent years, the West has found no sensible response to the alliance Russia and Iran have formed with Assad. And the Europeans just couldn't agree on a common approach.

Therefore, efforts to find diplomatic solutions are not just our top priority, but are all we have left. Airstrikes are no substitute for a Syria strategy; in the current situation they're nothing more than action for action's sake.

What Germany and the EU can offer is mediation on the basis of international law and international institutions. Germany is already the largest donor and has recently pledged another one billion euros for Syria and neighbouring countries until 2020. Since 2012, the federal government has provided €4.56bn for refugees in Syria and neighbouring countries. Putin will only get the help he wants to rebuild Syria if Russia supports a political solution under the U's auspices. It must also guarantee the security and rights of millions of Syrians who have had to flee Bashar al-Assad and Russian bombs.

Until then, we must continue to use the diplomatic means at our disposal

to prevent another massacre in Idlib and to work on a possible post-war order in Syria. Whether this will be possible without Assad, who indisputably belongs before the International Criminal Court, is an open question. In any case, it requires the participation of Russia and Turkey. It's good to know that, with our partners, the German Foreign Minister and the Foreign Office are working tirelessly and with the greatest dedication on a political settlement. Our priority must be to prevent another humanitarian catastrophe in Syria – with all political tools we have at our disposal.



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