GLOBAL 15.04.2019 | Michael Lüders

Déjà vu?

The West tries to bring about regime change in Caracas. But it must stop before Venezuela turns into another Syria

Read this article in German or Russian.

Of course, Venezuela is not Syria, and President Maduro is not Bashar al-Assad. South America and the Middle East are worlds apart, not just geographically. But they do have one thing in common: Washington is keeping a close eye on them.

In Syria, the US and its allies tried to bring about regime change, but failed. They are now trying the same thing in oil-rich Venezuela, and will probably fail there, too, because the military continues to back Maduro. At the same time, tensions between the US and Russia are increasing because in both, Syria and Venezuela, Moscow takes the side of the incumbent ruler. It's the country's people who pay the price for this kind of geopolitical charade, as their living conditions dramatically worsen under conditions of war, violence and economic crisis.

Let's start with Syria. The war began in 2011, in the course of the Arab Spring. The demonstrations that took place in a number of cities, mainly against corruption and the lack of positive economic prospects, were at first peaceful, but then brutally put down by Assad's security forces. Afterwards, the protests were radicalised and increasingly taken over by jihadists, principally from Iraq, the home of the 'Islamic State'.

A declassified US Defense Intelligence Agency document of 12 August 2012 unambiguously states that various Islamist groups, including Islamic State, were by then 'the driving forces behind the uprising in Syria'. It further alleges that, in their desire for regime change, the Western states, the Gulf states and Turkey would welcome the establishment of a 'Salafist-ruled territory' in the east of Syria in order to isolate Damascus.

This contextualisation is fundamentally important in that it contradicts the Western narrative about the war in Syria currently accepted in politics and the media. According to this, the Syrian people have risen up

against their oppressors, embodied in the Assad regime, in a desperate struggle for freedom. Western politicians, in this narrative, motivated by their fundamental values, were unable to ignore the cries for help.

The decision to depose Assad was evidently taken in 2009 – in that year, Assad declared that a planned pipeline from Qatar to Turkey would not be allowed to cross Syria.

They had a moral duty to intervene and help the Syrians in their struggle for freedom, and therefore to bring about regime change. Their means were economic sanctions, but also arms supplies to the 'rebels' – with support of foreign-based Syrian opposition groups and the active participation of Turkey and the Gulf states. If only the 'bad guys' – Assad's allies, Russia and Iran – had not lent massive support to the regime, in particular military support, Syria would have been liberated long ago and a democratic dawn ushered in, with the aid of the much-invoked local civil society (which, it has to be said, exists only in rudimentary form in such semi-feudal states).

A gift from the gods

This deeply ideological narrative takes little account of the geopolitical background to the war in Syria, or of the realities on the ground. In spite of all the brutality exhibited by the Assad regime, religious minorities, including Christians, have never taken part in the uprising against Damascus. The social base for the uprising was and remains primarily the Sunni population enduring a precarious existence in the bigger cities, which includes many former small farmers forced by drought and global warming to abandon their rural subsistence livelihoods. These impoverished Sunnis also make up a large proportion of the Syrian refugees in Germany.

In terms of geopolitical strategy, the US has been trying since the early 2000s to weaken Iran by destabilising its most important ally in Damascus. At the same time, however, Syria is an important transit country, via roads and pipelines, from the Gulf region towards Turkey and Europe.

The decision to depose Assad was evidently taken in 2009 – in that year, Assad declared that a planned pipeline from Qatar to Turkey would not be allowed to cross Syria. Assad's ally Russia was willing to pay any price to prevent competitors entering the European market for gas. For geopolitical strategists and hardliners in Washington – but also in Paris and London – the 2011 uprising was a gift from the gods: the ideal

pretext for propagating regime change in the name of freedom.

There's no question: Assad is a tyrant. However, so are other rulers in the region, and regime change or far-reaching sanctions are only propagated or imposed where the ruler is not pro-Western.

Was it worth it?

A moral stance does not substitute the need for political analysis. Until 2011, Syria was a major recipient of German development aid. Relations between Berlin and Damascus were excellent. But instead of attempting to mediate in Syria, or offering to act as an honest broker, the German government simply adopted the policy of regime change already pursued by Washington, London and Paris. Berlin chose to prioritise solidarity with its allies, thus willingly accepting joint responsibility for decisions taken elsewhere, with all of the consequences – including taking in 800,000 Syrian refugees, most of whom have had their claims for political refugee status recognised without detailed investigation.

Was it worth it? Russia, Iran and, in the background, China have won the proxy war in Syria against the US and its allies. Assad will remain in power. Sooner rather than later, the Arab League will revoke its exclusion of Damascus and the first of the Gulf emirates will re-open its embassy in Syria. Germany and the EU, by contrast, will continue their economic sanctions, to the cost of the Syrian people.

The German government should have no part in any policy of regime change – in Venezuela or anywhere else.

German foreign policy is often conducted unencumbered by strategic calculation. This brings disastrous consequences at some later point, particularly in times of global upheaval and challenge. On one side, now we have the declining global superpower of the US; on the other, the ascendant powers of China and Russia. Why not maintain balanced and positive relations with every one of these significant actors? Instead, both Berlin and Brussels seem to be happy to act as a junior partner to Washington, and to implement US instructions that are at the least partly imperialist in tone.

This is happening not just with respect to Syria but above all to Iran: here, following the withdrawal of the Trump administration from the nuclear agreement, the European partners – Germany, France and Great Britain, plus the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs – have offered only token objections to the secondary economic sanctions

applied by the US in contravention of international law. And recently something similar happened with respect to Venezuela.

Following the narrative

Despite their many differences, Syria, Iran and Venezuela display distinct parallels. In all three countries, the US is trying – or tried, in the case of Syria – to bring about regime change, for various geopolitical and economic reasons but also to constrain and weaken Russian and Chinese interests. These three hotspots are textbook examples of conflicts that, in addition to their regional dimensions, have an impact on global politics, including on the latent possibility of military escalation between Washington and Moscow. To convince the Western public of the necessity of regime change, the media and politics evidently follow a set pattern.

First, the ruler, or regime, that has fallen out of favour is demonised and blamed for human rights abuses and for the poor or catastrophic economic situation. Certainly, the Venezuelan government under Maduro has been guilty of serious failings. But it's also true that the US has for many years been subjecting the country, which it labels socialist, to economic strangulation. The Trump administration has evidently given the CIA the green light for a military coup in Caracas.

Secondly, an opposition characterised as the 'good guys' is lionised and contrasted with the 'bad guys' of the ruling regime. Then it's suggested that the West is more or less obliged by its fundamental values to support the good guys. In Venezuela, the good guy is the charismatic, neo-liberal opposition leader Juan Guaidó, Washington's darling, who has been proclaimed the saviour.

Thirdly, opinion-makers and decision-makers obscure the backstory to the crisis and don't mention the destabilising role played by Washington. They prefer to depict the suffering of the people, for which Maduro/Assad/the mullahs are exclusively responsible.

Both Brussels and Berlin recognised Guaidó as the interim president of Venezuela in February 2019 – a decision that's questionable under international law, as the research department of the German Parliament has confirmed. The German government should have no part in any policy of regime change – in Venezuela or anywhere else.



Michael Lüders

Berlin

Dr Michael Lüders is a political consultant, publicist and author. He was long-time Middle East correspondent of the German weekly *Die Zeit*. Lüders studied Arabic literature, Islamic studies, political science and journalism in Berlin and Damascus.