



[In Retreat? Western Security Policy after Afghanistan](#)

Intervention Is Not Always the Solution (but Neither Is Non-Intervention)

Example from Iraq and Syria

[Simon Engelkes/ David Labude](#)

Is restraint priority number one? Much discussion currently revolves around the focus of future Western foreign policy and of military interventions. Simple black-and-white answers are of no help. Iraq and Syria are prime examples.

The intervention by the US and its “coalition of the willing” in Iraq had far-reaching consequences for the country itself and the region beyond. In the years since 2003, Iraq was engulfed by civil war and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians were killed; Iran took the opportunity to expand its influence over its neighbour. The invasion also contributed to the rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS). The US paid a high price, too: more than a trillion US dollars and 4,000 dead US soldiers. What is more, it came to be seen as a brutal occupying power. The mission in Iraq, much like the engagement in Afghanistan, further strengthened widespread rejection of Western interventions.

No Western coalition did intervene in Syria, however – despite pressure from large swathes of the Syrian population and international human rights organisations, red lines crossed, and humanitarian emergency. To date, the conflict has claimed the lives of more than half a million people; seven million Syrians have been internally displaced (the highest figure worldwide) and almost seven million more have fled to neighbouring countries and Europe. Terrorist organisations exploited the power vacuum and are still present in the country. IS was also able to establish its government for a while. For years, Syria has been the scene of international proxy wars – and there is no end of conflict in sight. The case of Syria illustrates the consequences of Western inaction.

This article presents the major events of both conflicts as well as the background and repercussions of the intervention in Iraq and restraint in Syria. What challenges have arisen, both for the countries themselves and for the region and Europe? What do the two cases have in common,

and how do they differ? An examination of the two countries reveals that there is no single answer to the question of intervention: the intervention in Iraq plunged the country into years of chaos (it remains destabilised), and the consequences of inaction in Syria were no less devastating.

Iraq: The Necessity of Compromise

Relieved, Mohammed al-Halbusi steps in front of the cameras in early January 2022. The young leader of Iraq’s strongest Sunni party, Taqadum, expresses his gratitude for his re-election as Parliament Speaker – the third most important office in the state. For the good of all Iraqis, all political parties must stand together, he urges. Tumult between Shiite MPs from Muqtada al-Sadr’s Sai’roun movement and his rivals led by Nuri al-Maliki preceded the vote. The latter, ex-Prime Minister of Iraq, and his allies, including militia leader and founder of the Fatah Party (political arm of pro-Iranian forces) Hadi al-Amiri, had left the chamber before voting started. Votes from al-Sadr and the Sunni and Kurdish parties were sufficient for al-Halbusi to get elected. Conflict in the Shiite camp has intensified since Iraq’s October 2021 parliamentary election. While Al-Sadr had won the election, Fatah had lost a lot of votes. Its chairman speaks of election manipulation. Several of its supporters died in violent protests in November. Despite the split in the Shiite camp, Iraq’s sectarian and ethnically diverse political elites continue to bet on unification. The re-election of al-Halbusi is likely to be followed in the coming weeks and months by the election of compromise candidates for President and Prime Minister. Given the bloody conflicts in recent years, especially between Sunnis and Shiites, these agreements would not always have been possible.

Almost twenty years after the US-led invasion (Operation Iraqi Freedom), Iraq is still far from being a functioning democracy.¹ Conflicts that Saddam Hussein's regime stoked and at the same time violently suppressed, blazed up at the end of his reign and have yet to be resolved. However, the 2003 US intervention led to a fundamental political and societal change: there was the emergence of civil society and acceptance of a democratic constitution establishing a separation of powers and forcing political rivals to compromise. Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, Head of the Iraqi Middle East Research Institute, believes that these changes would otherwise have scarcely been possible.² The US thus laid the unstable foundation for state-building that survives ten years after the end of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The 2019 protests and the ongoing violent clashes following the 2021 elections make it all the more important for Iraqis and their political leadership to further develop their state.

The Path to War

The 2003 US decision to invade Iraq continues to be highly controversial. Critics warned of unforeseeable consequences after the toppling of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. The US government also justified the invasion by citing a growing threat of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and connections to the al-Qaeda terrorist network, which had carried out the attacks on 11 September 2001. But it was neither able to credibly document that Iraq supported al-Qaeda, nor did it find the regime's alleged chemical weapons.

At the time, the German Federal Government categorically refused to participate in military action against Iraq. Former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder termed the supposed evidence for Iraq's weapons of mass destruction "dubious", stating that an invasion on such a basis was illegitimate.³

In the UN Security Council, the veto powers of Russia and France also opposed intervention. This denied the United States a resolution as the basis for invasion. The US then decided to intervene without a UN mandate. On 19 March 2003, it began the invasion with the United Kingdom,

Australia, and Poland, and less than a month later, this "coalition of the willing" reached Baghdad. After militarily defeating the Hussein regime, the US had to rebuild the country from the ground up. Not only was the infrastructure damaged by the invasion and the Hussein dictatorship, but after 30 years of Baath Party rule, Iraqi society was completely divided.

Blunders and Flawed Post-War Planning

Prior to the invasion, US planning had been largely military. The question of how the country was to be moulded into a democracy after Hussein was eliminated was secondary. At first, insufficient funds were set aside for rebuilding and administration. The US administration also underestimated the societal conflicts between the Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish population groups. In particular, poor decisions in the first few months of occupation exacerbated tensions.

Corruption and nepotism had rendered the Iraqi administration useless.

Insufficient Rebuilding Capacity

The US government assumed that the military campaign would be of limited duration and cost. Following the end of hostilities, Iraqi security forces were to ensure law and order so that the majority of US combat troops could be withdrawn, leaving just 30,000 to 40,000 troops in the country.⁴ The United States also expected a smooth transition of administration. After a few leaders belonging to the inner circle of the Baath Party were replaced, the Iraqi bureaucracy was to continue work as before.

In reality, corruption and nepotism had rendered the administration useless. The US decision taken in May 2003 to remove all Baath functionaries (85,000 officials) from public office and disband the security forces (720,000 policemen and soldiers) caused state institutions to collapse. This

power vacuum led to chaos and plundering across the country. Rapid reconstruction failed while most of the more than 20 billion US dollars of construction aid (until 2006) was lost to corruption.⁵

A Difficult Transition to Democracy

The tense security situation impeded the development of new political structures. Instability led to the postponement of Iraq's first democratic elections – a central US goal after the fall of the dictatorship and a primary concern of the Iraqi people. Moreover, the US heavily relied on exiled Iraqis for the political transition. These exiles were often unfamiliar with the situation in the country, but the primary problem is that they were unknown there. The US gave them a number of ministries in the newly formed transition government, which therefore lacked trust and legitimacy. Many Iraqis began to question American intentions.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Hussein's regime murdered hundreds of thousands of people.

After all, a democracy does not come into being after just a few months. The Hussein dictatorship had suppressed civil society, which is essential for democracy; there were no associations or trade unions and no wide selection of political parties. The Iraqi people had been excluded from the political process for three decades. Under Baath Party rule, it was impossible to peacefully negotiate opposing societal interests and resolve conflicts. A big reason for this was that important political leaders had fled the country out of fear of the Hussein regime.

A Society Divided

Iraq is very heterogeneous, both ethnically and religiously; the political and cultural contrasts among such groups as Kurds, Shiites, Sunnis,

and Christians are striking. Saddam Hussein's reign of violence exacerbated the polarisation of Iraqi society. Hussein was a member of the Sunni religious community and privileged other members with public goods and resources, whereas he often excluded Shiites and Kurds from public office and persecuted them brutally. In the 1980s and 1990s, his regime murdered hundreds of thousands of people, foremost among them members of these two groups. Ethno-religious conflicts that had been stoked for decades broke out into the open following the end of Baath rule in 2003. Individual population groups demanded that their exclusive interests be enforced: Iraqi Kurds pushed for the secession of northern Iraq, where they formed the majority of the population, and the Shiite majority demanded a complete de-Baathification of the state and society. When in 2003 the US dissolved the Iraqi state apparatus, which was infiltrated by Baath party members, it inevitably incurred Sunni wrath. Sunni rebels targeted not only US interests, but also Shiites and Kurds, as many Sunnis saw their influence threatened. Under these conditions, says Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, a civil war was almost unavoidable, since "at the time, there were no institutions that could have mediated between hostile groups". The strong ethno-religious polarisation and militarisation of society also promoted confrontation.⁶

A Civil War and New Players

Sunni terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda and later IS took advantage of the power vacuum arising from US intervention, gaining a foothold in Iraq for the first time. In addition to US troops, the international community also became the target of violent attacks. In August 2003, jihadists killed UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Iraq envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello in an attack on UN headquarters in Baghdad. Many Iraqis' frustration with the US occupation also fed extremist groups. Against them stood Shiite militias, often with ties to Iran. During Hussein's dictatorship, Iraq's Shiites had found refuge in Iran and returned after Hussein's fall. With their arrival, Iranian influence in the country increased.

During the Iraqi civil war mainly Sunni and Shia militias fought each other in bloody street battles, suicide bombings shook the country. The militias also began ethnic cleansing, partly as a revenge for previous demographic interventions by the Baath Party, which in the 1980s and 1990s had settled followers primarily in Shiite- and Kurdish-dominated areas and expelled supposedly oppositional population groups. The casualties – almost 30,000 in 2006 – led US experts to compare the Iraq intervention with the Vietnam War. The US massively reinforced its troop presence and involved local forces – not least Sunni adherents – in its security strategy for the first time, enabling it to contain the conflict. Clashes subsided in March 2008. The situation was relatively peaceful for a while.

In December 2008, President George W. Bush signed a Status of Forces Agreement with Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki that would lead to the withdrawal of most US troops by the end of 2011. Continuing the Iraq mission was no longer politically tenable: both sides were war-weary, with the Iraqis being particularly eager for a comprehensive withdrawal.

The IS genocide against the Yazidis and the attacks in Paris led to a paradigm shift.

By the end of Operation Iraqi Freedom in December 2011, more than 120,000 Iraqi civilians had died.⁷ As a result of the mass expulsions by Iraqi militias, 1.3 million Iraqis were internally displaced. More than two million people fled Iraq, almost 40,000 of whom applied for asylum in Germany.⁸

Rise of the Terrorist Militia and the Anti-IS Coalition in Iraq

Al-Maliki's policies heightened ethno-religious tensions once again. Many experts believe that his discrimination against Sunnis is responsible for the rise of IS starting in 2014. The Prime Minister led a campaign against prominent Sunni

politicians. In December 2011, he had Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlak, and Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi arrested, prompting Sunnis to turn their backs against the government. Iraq sank into an ethno-sectarian war once again.

The civil war in Syria, which broke out in 2011, fuelled the violence in Iraq. Having controlled large parts of Syria in 2014, IS invaded Iraq, occupying about a third of its territory. Large parts of the IS leadership structure in Iraq had been recruited from the old security cadres of the Saddam regime. Old hatreds and a security apparatus worn down by corruption facilitated its rapid advance. Iraq's security forces largely collapsed. In reaction, Christian, Sunni, and especially Shiite militias combined to form Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs). With the remnants of the Iraqi army and the support of a US-led international alliance that included Germany, they succeeded in driving IS back.

Germany's participation in Operation Inherent Resolve broke a taboo. Since their formation, German armed forces had only participated in two armed conflicts abroad. The IS genocide against the Yazidis in August 2014 and the attacks in Paris in November 2015 led to a paradigm shift: in defiance of public opinion which opposed military engagement, Angela Merkel's government supplied weapons to Iraq's Kurds and provided the Iraqi army with instructors.

In December of 2017, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared victory over IS, which has no longer controlled any Iraqi territory since then, but its members still carry out attacks. Some 70,000 Iraqi civilians died during IS rule, about 2,600 of them killed by anti-IS coalition troops.⁹ Around 3.3 million people became refugees.¹⁰ From 2014 to 2017, about 150,000 Iraqis submitted asylum applications in Germany.¹¹

The anti-IS coalition is still operating. After Qassem Soleimani, Iran's top general, and his Iraqi confidant and pro-Iranian militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis were killed in January 2020, the Iraqi parliament demanded a complete



withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq. Yet the decision was not binding for Iraq's government. The US then withdrew its combat troops in late 2021. But there are still 2,500 US soldiers in the country supporting Iraqi armed forces with training and military reconnaissance. The expansion of the NATO training mission in Iraq announced in February 2021, increasing the troop level from 500 soldiers to up to 4,000, has been delayed, however. Many NATO member states do not want to send troops, and hence the NATO contingent is likely to be smaller.

But the NATO mission does not play a large role for most Iraqis, says Farhad Alaaldin, chairman of Iraq Advisory Council; it is invisible, so to speak. NATO rarely appears in public. "Many Iraqis neither know who is part of the anti-IS coalition nor what NATO has to do with fighting IS", he says. Some considered NATO involvement a back door for the Americans to reinforce their troops. Only a few knew that the mission has nothing to do with the US. For the others, NATO and the US are one and the same thing: "foreign troops".¹²



Failed mission? Given the high number of casualties, US experts compare the Iraq intervention with the Vietnam War. Source: © Thaier Al-Sudani, Reuters.

balance of power that continues to be dominated by politicians and militias who gained strength after 2003.

In the October 2021 parliamentary elections, many Iraqis voted for new parties and independent candidates, many of which emerged from the 2019 protest movement. This is a signal that a growing share of the Iraqi public want change. The entry of these new parties into parliament could lay the foundation for a paradigm shift, changing the focus from identity politics based on confession and ethnicity to programme-based politics.

The security situation continues to be tense, but the threat has changed. In the past, it was primarily IS that destabilised the country. Now it is mostly pro-Iranian militias that challenge the state's monopoly on the use of force with attacks on US targets, civic leaders, and politicians. Such a militia allegedly carried out a drone attack on Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi in November 2021. Following the attack, Iraq's influential party leader Muqtada al-Sadr called on the Iran-backed militias to submit to the Iraqi government. Sadr's words are a declaration of war against Iran's militant forces in the country. After the electoral defeat of their political arm, the Fatah party, last October, they have been threatened with a further loss of political influence. This and the ongoing proxy war between the US and Iran could further exacerbate domestic conflicts.

Societal Compromise and Progress?

The IS threat led to an Iraqi truce that has lasted to this day. Iraq's political leaders are looking for compromises that will prevent violence from erupting again. The renewed support of primarily Shiite and Kurdish forces for Sunni party Chairman al-Halbusi in his election to the post of Parliament Speaker in January 2022 testified the commitment to political unity. The naming of compromise candidates for the offices of Prime Minister and President also illustrates the fragile

The current situation in Iraq is the result of the 2003 US intervention and its ramifications. The overthrow of the regime changed the political landscape of the country. But was it a change for the better? Given the victims of violence and the many unintended negative consequences, including for the US and its allies, even former supporters now find it difficult to provide an answer.

When the conflict in neighbouring Syria broke out ten years ago, many Western states feared that military intervention could lead to another fiasco. That is why they hesitated. But despite the restraint and without an intervention Syria suffered another humanitarian and political disaster.

Non-Intervention in Syria: Limited Options and a Lack of Political Will

Waad al-Kateab climbs hastily onto the ruins of a collapsed block of houses. Rescuers have helped a woman from the ruins, but a five-month-old baby is still missing. A Syrian regime helicopter has dropped a barrel bomb, the explosion shakes the entire residential quarter and is causing several buildings to collapse. This scene from the documentary film “For Sama” is just one example of the more than 10,000 airstrikes that the Syrian air force had flown over the city of Aleppo alone by the end of 2014.¹³ Many Syrians would have liked to have no-fly zones or deliveries of air defence missiles from the West to neutralise Syrian “aerial killing capabilities”, says Syrian political analyst Rime Allaf.¹⁴ But the West did not deliver. Such an intervention would have made it more difficult to use chemical weapons against the civilian population and may have curbed migration to neighbouring countries and Europe. It was too late when Russia intervened on the side of the Assad regime in September 2015, but even in the years preceding this the West had faced significant obstacles to intervention.

When in 2011 Syria experienced an increasing spread of protests against President Bashar al-Assad to which the regime reacted with force, escalating in a civil war, many analysts assumed that the dictator would be quickly defeated.¹⁵ The plethora of crises in the region, such as the instability in Egypt, Bahrain, and Tunisia, as well as the chaos in Libya, favoured the Syrian regime’s survival. Above all, however, active support from Russia and Iran and indecision on the part of the West ensured its continued existence. In contrast to Europe’s non-intervention against the Assad regime, other countries intervened in the conflict: Iran and allied militias,

Turkey, several Arab Gulf States, Israel, Jordan, the US, and Russia tried to assert their particular interests in Syria. The regime itself was rarely a direct target of such intervention, even of the later US-led military campaign against IS. There would have been scope for Western action against the Assad regime to protect the civilian population. Yet this was prevented by domestic policy considerations and a lack of political will.

Together with China, Russia has vetoed almost every UN resolution on Syria since the conflict began.

Powerful Friends and the UN Security Council Veto

In light of the state’s mass executions, imprisonments, and torture of political dissidents, barrel bomb attacks, and the siege of entire cities with the associated starvation of the civilian population, which fled the country in their millions, Syria appears to be a textbook example of the need for humanitarian intervention under the principle of international Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Yet there was no multilateral intervention – not least because of a deadlock on the UN Security Council due to divergent positions of the US and Russia. Unlike in Iraq, the US and the European states did not act on their own initiative against Assad.

Together with China, Russia has vetoed almost every UN resolution on Syria since the conflict began. Since October 2011, the Russian government has exercised 16 vetoes and is still a “reliable diplomatic shield for the Assad regime”.¹⁶ The motivation for Moscow’s blockade goes back to Western military intervention in Libya, among other things. President Vladimir Putin described the UN Security Council’s Libya resolution as resembling “medieval calls for crusades”.¹⁷ The Libyan regime was not changed for humanitarian reasons, he said, but to advance Western power interests. A distrustful

Russia insinuates the same in Syria – Western heads of state have repeatedly called for Assad’s removal.

Unsanctioned Use of Chemical Weapons

In Syria, the gulf between reality and rhetoric was great. As the conflict escalated, the Syrian regime’s repeated use of chemical weapons on the outskirts of Damascus in August of 2013, represented an appalling climax in the conflict. As early as December of the previous year, US President Barack Obama had called chemical weapons use a “red line” which, if crossed, would prompt a US reaction. Much pointed towards a full-scale Western military strike or intervention in 2013.¹⁸ But Obama was unwilling to act without the approval of the UN Security Council. The US was also war-weary, and Obama ruled out an extended air campaign or risky deployment of ground troops.¹⁹

A comprehensive regime change in Damascus was never a serious consideration on the Western agenda.

Public opinion in the United States also rejected military intervention after almost ten years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. These military deployments had devoured trillions of US dollars and cost the lives of thousands of soldiers. Without a direct threat to US interests, Obama would have had difficulty justifying intervention. Despite the poison gas attacks, polls continued to show that 63 per cent of the American population opposed intervention.²⁰ Moreover, nuclear negotiations with Iran influenced Europe’s and the US’s decision not to intervene in Syria. The US government did not want to jeopardise talks that might lead to containing the Iranian nuclear programme. Ultimately, many Western politicians feared that intervening in Syria could create a power vacuum like the one in Libya.²¹ They did not want to open another Pandora’s box in the region.

The reaction to Assad’s use of chemical weapons was correspondingly restrained. However, this undermined Western credibility “as the guarantor of international agreements”, encouraging Assad and his allies to adopt an even more offensive approach.²² Increased diplomatic pressure did at least prompt the Russian government to approve a UN Security Council resolution in September 2013, the first time since the beginning of the conflict; it called for the destruction of the Syrian chemical weapons arsenal.²³ But the repeated use of chemical weapons in the years thereafter showed the global public that the regime had by no means destroyed all of its stocks. By May 2020, the count of chemical weapons attacks in Syria had reached almost 350.²⁴

No-Fly and Protection Zones: A Missed Opportunity?

A comprehensive regime change in Damascus was never a serious consideration on the Western agenda. In the wake of the poison gas attacks, however, the establishment of protection or no-fly zones was subject to discussion. Permanently closing down parts of the Syrian airspace would not have eliminated the causes of the conflict, but would have kept the Syrian air force away. These are the lessons of Bosnia (1993-1995) and Iraq (1991-2003). It would also have been a way to delay the advance of regime troops.²⁵ There would likely have been fewer carpet bombardments of population centres, and the enormous destruction of civil infrastructure, from which Syria still suffers, would have been less. Militarily secured protection zones would have been possible, in which the civilian population could have sought refuge.

For set-up and security, the West would have had to engage in a comprehensive intervention with ground troops, and Western military experts estimated that up to 40,000 soldiers would have been needed.²⁶ Europe was particularly unwilling. At the time, many European countries were still shaken by the economic and financial crisis. Only a few years earlier, Germany had suspended conscription and cut down

on its defence budget. Nor was further military engagement conceivable from a European perspective given the ongoing mission in Afghanistan.

Disunity in the West

From the start of the civil war, Assad had allies who were willing to do anything to keep him in power. Europe and the US, on the other hand, often had no unified strategy or ideas about Syria's future, with or without Assad. There was therefore no will for a more comprehensive engagement. In particular, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany struggled to achieve a common Syria policy. France and the United Kingdom supported Syrian opposition factions militarily, and in early 2013 called for the EU weapons embargo against Syria to be partially

lifted. Germany, on the other hand, opposed weapons deliveries to the rebels on the grounds that they might destabilise the region. Only when the European partners threatened not to extend sanctions against Syria was there a modification of the EU weapons embargo.²⁷ But the arming of individual Syrian opposition groups such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) remained limited. For instance, they did not receive anti-aircraft missiles from the West. There were worries that delivered weapons systems would be lost in the fog of war or fall into the hands of extremist groups. One major worry was that these groups would attack civilian aviation.

The disunity and hesitation unsettled Western states' Syrian allies. US President Donald Trump's announcement that he would withdraw



Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin visit an Orthodox Christian cathedral in Damascus in 2020: A few years earlier, with the Assad regime on the brink of defeat, Russia had intervened supporting its ally and creating military facts. Source: © Alexei Druzhinin, Sputnik/Kremlin, via Reuters.

all US troops from northern Syria east of the Euphrates in 2019 surprised US allies, especially the SDF, which was dominated by Syrian Kurds. The events in Syria even triggered quarrels within NATO. French President Emmanuel Macron called the alliance “brain dead” in light of the lack of coordination between the US and its allies on strategic decisions. Western reliability with respect to assisting partners in crisis situations has been increasingly called into doubt since the war in Syria.

Rise of the Terrorist Militia and the Anti-IS Coalition in Syria

As of 2014, the Assad regime increasingly found itself on the defensive and had to focus its military efforts mainly on strategic targets and urban centres. The withdrawal from rural areas facilitated advances by several rebel groups and Islamist forces, and later IS, whose terrorist attacks in Europe, brutality, and the proclamation of its “caliphate” in large swathes of Syria and Iraq, as well as an effective media campaign of beheadings of Western hostages, gave new impetus to the debate on intervention in Syria in Washington and European capitals. IS atrocities were another sad climax in the Syrian conflict.

In contrast to the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime, the IS advance led to an international military reaction. The military alliance against IS united the European partners behind the same goal. In Iraq, the anti-IS coalition acted by invitation from the government, but in Syria it took the field without formal approval. The US-led alliance primarily supported the Kurd-dominated SDF as “ground components”. As in Iraq, IS was defeated territorially in Syria, but IS terror cells remain active in both countries to this day.

The Intervention of the “Others”

When the Assad regime was on the brink of defeat in 2015, in September Russia intervened on the side of its ally, creating new military facts on the ground. Russia’s intervention focused on preventing the regime from collapsing and on

acting as a new ordering power in the region.²⁸ The Russian intervention ended any chance of multilateral intervention, since Western forces would have risked direct confrontation with Russia. The Russian government thus became a key player in Syria, blamed by the UN for numerous bombings of civilian infrastructure.

There is currently a trend among states towards normalising relations with the Assad regime.

Regional allies of Assad such as Iran had already joined the conflict. The Iranian government initially supplied weapons and intervened from mid-2013 with its own troops and allied militias. Starting in 2016, Turkey, an Assad opponent, also repeatedly intervened in Syria with ground troops with the aim of preventing Kurdish attempts to become autonomous. The more other powers expanded their influence in the region, the more the West was relegated to the role of spectator.

Assad Regains Strength

With the help of allies, the Assad regime was able to recapture strategically important regions from the rebels starting in late 2016. It currently controls about 65 per cent of Syrian territory, and following more than a decade of war, there is no end of Assad rule in sight. Since the outbreak of hostilities, more than half a million people were killed, hundreds of thousands have been displaced, and the economy and infrastructure are in ruins. Roughly 13.4 million people, or over 65 per cent of the Syrian population currently depend on humanitarian aid. About six million people are internally displaced, and almost seven million have fled the country. Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan, Syria’s neighbours, host almost 5.6 million refugees and as of November 2021, almost 700,000 Syrians had applied for asylum in Germany.²⁹ They still have no hope of return, since persecution and

death await them under the Assad regime. The UN called the Syrian crisis the worst man-made disaster since the Second World War.³⁰

The US and Europe did not want to risk a confrontation with Russia or Iran.

There is currently a trend among states towards normalising relations with the Assad regime. Especially regional neighbours such as Jordan, Egypt, and several Gulf States are seeking rapprochement with Damascus. The US and Europe continue to refuse this course, but do not sanction the efforts of Syria's neighbours. Friendly relations with Assad no longer seem to be a taboo despite the blood on his hands.

Is Restraint Priority Number One?

Syria is an example of a new security policy reality in the context of increasing "Westlessness" – the relative withdrawal of the US and its European allies as players guaranteeing order.³¹ The conflict bears witness to how foreign policy restraint coupled with a blockade of the instruments and institutions of international conflict resolution can lead to more human suffering and strengthen authoritarian regimes. While Europe and Syria's neighbours are affected by the aftermath of war through refugee movements and tendencies towards societal polarisation, Russia and Iran are expanding their political influence in the region.

There was no political will to intervene in Syria. Democratic societies are especially prone to regular changes in their domestic balances of power and multifaceted interests, making long-term commitments difficult unless vital interests are at stake. Not least, the US and Europe did not want to risk a confrontation with Russia or Iran. Instead, they exerted diplomatic pressure and imposed economic sanctions on the Assad regime; measures that to this day have not led to any concessions in Damascus. At the same time, no credible military deterrence was set up.

Intervention narratives feed on past experiences. While the failed 1993 UN operation in Somalia was decisive for hesitation during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the failure of the West during the 1995 Srebrenica massacre enabled the 1999 Kosovo intervention. The decision not to act in Syria can also be traced back to the costly, controversial engagement in Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq. Iraq shows that an intervention can end in a fiasco if planning is based on unrealistic ideas and incomplete knowledge. The US underestimated the societal and political fault lines, with poor American decisions exacerbating tensions.

The cases of Iraq and Syria show that military interventions as well as restraint to engage with force are associated with many challenges and can exacerbate or provoke further problems. Neither approach can serve as a model of Western foreign engagement. The conclusion for Western foreign and security policy must not be to renounce interventions in principle. In hindsight, it can be stated that military interventions should pursue realistic goals as well as a holistic approach – an engagement in international crises that includes the resources of diplomacy, development cooperation, security policy, and humanitarian aid. Last but not least, there must be a willingness to engage in the long term if necessary – particularly in facilitation roles and in dialogue with the local population. After all, even inaction can have dramatic consequences: restraint in Syria ultimately contributed to the humanitarian crisis we see today.

– translated from German –

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