

Solidarity Is Not a One-Way Street

MP Rolf Mützenich discusses the refugee crisis, the war in Syria, and the role of values in foreign policy

To put a finer point on the question of values: Has Germany done enough to support refugees in and around Syria?

We have kept the people of Syria and its neighboring countries in mind from the start. I recall that the first conference to shed light on the situation in Syria's neighboring countries was held here in Germany. Indeed, we have also significantly increased the assistance we provide for these countries, including financial assistance. Since 2012, Germany has committed more than one billion euros for humanitarian and structural aid in the region, making it the world's third largest donor. There's that for starters. But I would also like to come back to the Geneva Refugee Convention. These people have come to us based on the fact that they meet the criteria of civil war refugees. With this in mind, we need to do more than just getting involved with the neighboring countries in the region. We need to have a discussion at the international level. I think that Germany has certainly earned the right to point this out.

Will the 1.8 billion euro increase in the UNHCR budget that was recently achieved by Federal Foreign Minister Steinmeier be enough?

The budget certainly needed to be raised. After all, the reason that these refugees started moving is that there have been times when there were not enough supplies in the refugee camps anymore. But the key question here is if we are going to live up to the commitments that we always make at these conferences while in the public eye. Needless to say, we are unable to implement relevant sanctions for this. After all, we cannot simply loot the coffers of other donor countries or have complete control over them. Unfortunately, many countries are happy to make commitments that they do not live up to in the end.

But the key question here is if we are going to live up to the commitments that we always make at these conferences while in the public eye.



Last week in Vienna, the regional powers sat down together for the first time to try to find a solution for the ongoing war in Syria. Is this the breakthrough we have been waiting for so long?

At the very least, it is a fresh start. If you hold the political players in Iran responsible for the problems in Syria, then you also need to include them in solving these problems. That is why we have deliberately used our influence on the US so that representatives from Iran were also invited. In the long run, Iran has a more crucial role in bringing peace to Syria than Russia does. This is yet another example of how difficult it actually is to

reach a joint consensus among all the stakeholders. Saudi Arabia is exceedingly defensive in reacting to any kind of advancement of Tehran in the region. Riyadh views Iran as a rival and not a partner – and not just in Yemen. However, only the regional powers can ultimately resolve the conflict in Syria.

It is not just in Yemen that Saudi Arabia is proving problematic. Saudi Arabia is anything but a model partner of the Western world in terms of human rights as well. To put it bluntly, is it finally time to put an end to our close collaboration?

Saudi Arabia is not the kind of country that we can simply turn a cold shoulder to. As a stakeholder, it is too central and important to do that. It is home to the holy sites of Mecca and Medina and has strong political and military ties in the region. It also has resources that we cannot simply overlook. After all, the partnership between the US and Saudi Arabia – which is still strong – did not just appear out of thin air. Yet I should also mention – not least as a democratically elected Member of the Bundestag – that Saudi Arabia's current behavior is more conducive to aggravating the conflict. This is why I am inclined to be wary of Saudi Arabia and its political elites, and I would be reluctant to make further commitments towards and in the country.

Do the Saudis do what the Iranians are always being accused of doing?

I think it is best to look at individual cases, but one thing is clear: Saudi Arabia is currently waging a ruthless war in Yemen with devastating consequences, and this is not being perceived in Europe. When Saudi Arabia bombs the only port through which the UN's few aid supplies are still entering the country, for instance, this should surely be met with much harsher critique as well as the respective consequences.

How can we ease the fear that is clearly behind Riyadh's current policy?

It is hard to ease the country's fear, because it is not just afraid of Iran gaining strength. The political elites are primarily afraid of losing power in their own country. That is why they are even willing to allow extremist groups to form in other countries and to provide them with financial support in order to destabilize the political climate there. Even if this is done less by state actors, we should be more open in calling this what it is.

How should we interpret the results of the Vienna meeting? The calls for Assad to step down and for the country to be unified are by no means new.

This is true, but surprisingly enough, the Vienna meeting reached agreement on more than just the unification of the country. The question of a secular state and the role of the UN were also discussed. This is far more than had been expected. That is why there is still some hope for the next round of talks, which are now scheduled to take place bi-weekly. Does Assad need to go? We should not give the impression that we will be giving a free pass to the people who committed the worst human rights violations if a political solution is reached. This needs to be investigated by the international criminal justice system. Otherwise we would pay a price that is too high. In any event, I continue to support holding talks because there is no military solution. It is clear that there will be calls for new borders to be drawn as the conflict progresses

We should be very cautious before we discuss whether new borders should be drawn. We Europeans have already left enough of a colonial legacy on the people in the region.



How reasonable is it to continue to maintain that borders absolutely cannot be touched?

We should be very cautious before we discuss whether new borders should be drawn. We Europeans have already left enough of a colonial legacy on the people in the region. New injustices are created each time that borders are redrawn, which is why I would caution anyone who is looking at the region and considering new borders for geostrategic purposes.

In reality, though, didn't the regional partners already more or less agree to spheres of influence?

That may be. And if that helps bring peace to the situation, I would certainly be willing to support it in the end as well. Once again, though, I would caution against having anyone on the outside state that any particular arrangement would ultimately lead to a peaceful solution. After all, there are frequently entirely different conflicts that are also simmering in the background. Because of this, I would be very cautious about starting off with new borders and regions being imposed from the outside and even about accepting these directly.

And yet we are not exactly refusing to get involved altogether. Are we seeing the return of interventionism in the region given the prospect that the only alternative to waves of refugees is state building?

Your question is based on the premise that interventionism stopped at some point. I do not believe that to be the case. The US and other states continue to intervene in specific regions and in specific countries. From my point of view, the principle of intervention was never entirely abandoned, whether it involves soldiers on the ground, air strikes, or influence exerted directly on governments. However, the problem in the past and now is that this did not go hand in hand with solid state building. On the contrary, if you consider how the Bush administration abandoned all the government institutions, structures, and checkpoints in Iraq after its intervention, you can see how unplanned and short-sighted that intervention was.

This is why it is so important to allow the United Nations to play a larger role in these matters. Not just as an actor that is best suited to provide assistance in humanitarian issues, but also as a provider of legitimacy. That is why it was so important that we managed to obtain a Security Council resolution and a significant contribution from Germany in order to remove the majority of Syria's chemical substances, including chemical weapons. This act was immensely important and I very much regret that this mandate was not unanimously approved by the German Bundestag.

However, having the United Nations play a meaningful role in Syria would in no small way mean establishing a secure area.



However, having the United Nations play a meaningful role in Syria would in no small way mean establishing a secure area. At the moment, it is virtually impossible for aid organizations to operate in the country.

I am by all means prepared to support such an approach if it does not open up the potential for new problems. The problem is that the protection zones are being called for by actors who are deeply involved in the conflict themselves. Consider Turkey's position in this context, for instance. Ankara certainly wants to have safety zone, but only if it is designed to divide up the Kurdish region. All this shows how complicated things are. This is why it is so important that we determine whether the plan proposed by Stefan de Mistura involving local ceasefires will be productive. This plan will only work, however, if all the parties involved accept it and if we can identify countries that are capable of securing such an area without this being seen as a provocation.

How does the Russian intervention in Syria increase the likelihood that a grand bargain will be reached with Moscow through Syria and Ukraine? After all, that is clearly Putin's thinking...

Yes, that may be true. However, I cannot claim to know Moscow's strategy in detail. Russia certainly has enough influence to have an impact on the separatists in Eastern Ukraine. Russia is a key player, and will remain so – this is something we have always said. However, the fact that Russia may try to pit Syria against Ukraine does not mean that we should allow ourselves to get involved in this match.

When you look at the timing of these crises, starting with the Ukraine crisis, then Ebola, Greece, ISIS, and now the refugees, we have been in continuous crisis mode. What does this mean for the government's ability to maintain control? What impact does this have on politics?

Well, the days when foreign ministers were mocked as being all smoke and mirrors are long gone. Unfortunately, so are the days when people thought that a Member of the German Committee on Foreign Affairs had a good job. Nowadays, it is evident how strong of an impact foreign policy has on domestic policy and how enormously it can change a society.

On the other hand, this of course means that a great deal is demanded of us. The executive branch is certainly the main actor here, i.e. Germany's Federal Foreign Office. However, experience from my time working in foreign policy has shown me that the Parliament certainly has an influence as well. As the longstanding Chair of the German-Iranian Parliamentary Group, I am pleased that the Members of Parliament were able to support a task that has achieved something. The goal was to show that even an international security problem that appears to be as unsolvable as the Iranian nuclear crisis can ultimately be resolved peaceably.

Brief bio:

Dr. Rolf Mützenich has been a Member of the German Bundestag since 2002 and has served as the Deputy Parliamentary Leader for Foreign Policy, Defense, and Human Rights since December 2013. From November 2009 to December 2013, Dr. Mützenich was the Speaker on Foreign Affairs for the Parliamentary Group of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD).

NOTE:

This text is part of an interview with MP Rolf Mützenich published in IPG Journal. The full length German interview can be found here:

<http://www.ipg-journal.de/rubriken/aussen-und-sicherheitspolitik/artikel/solidaritaet-ist-keine-einbahnstrasse-1145/>