

**Syria: Why the West Lets Assad Massacre His Own People**  
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BERLIN - In late 2011, a former German television correspondent in Tel Aviv, Sebastian Engelbrecht, reported some sensational news:

Hamas chief Khaled Mashaal had "renounced armed combat against Israel," conflicts among Palestinians were in the process of being resolved and "by early May in Gaza and the West Bank a new president and parliament will be elected."

According to Engelbrecht, the whole Arab world was moving, except for one player: Israel. Benjamin Netanyahu's government had made no gesture towards Arab Spring countries, no reaching out, no attempt at bridge-building. Instead he was busy building high-security facilities along the Egyptian border to keep out refugees from Africa, anchored in the mindset – according to Engelbrecht's report -- that "it was always bad with the Arabs and it can only get worse."

Wherever this TV clairvoyant got his information – maybe from studying the innards of a dead hen, or the grounds at the bottom of his coffee cup – his cluelessness was and remains symptomatic of reporting that bases itself not on the facts but on wishful thinking. If the news audience only knew how such "on-site" reporting from crisis areas comes together – usually in air-conditioned offices where multilingual staffers translate local media stories.

Syrian status quo, at any cost

For two years now, we have been experiencing a double catastrophe: the "civil war" in Syria, and the reporting on it. While the march of the Americans and their allies into Afghanistan and Iraq was carried live, and while we can follow the fighting along the Gaza/Israel border in real-time, with few exceptions we depend on amateur video posted on the Internet for reporting on Syria.

No matter what news show you watch, the anchors regularly point out that they can't verify the information these videos provide. But the wobbly images speak a language of their own: in early 2013, the Syrian city of Aleppo looks like Dresden in February 1945. It's a landscape of ruin. The United Nations reports that between 60,000 and 70,000 have died in Syria, and that there are around 800,000 refugees, of which tiny Jordan has accepted over 350,000 and Turkey over 100,000.

So the so-called "civil war" in Syria has taken on the proportions of a genocide, although few are those who dare pronounce that hideous word, because doing so would mean that we are guilty of remaining mere observers -- instead of coming to the help of people facing such a massacre. So in Germany, for example, we are left to join the chorus led by our own Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, enjoining all conflicting parties to be reasonable and refusing to assign blame because we can't really tell the good guys from the bad guys.

In 2000, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad "inherited" the country from his father Hafiz al-Assad who in 1971 took over leadership of the Ba'ath Party and of the country. What that means is that for more than 40 years Syria has been ruled by the same clique whose only interest is keeping power. Opponents forfeit their lives. However, President Assad had a pretty good reputation in the international community because he was considered – like his father – to be "reliable."

The Russians protect him, he gets financial and military aid from Iran, supports Hezbollah in turn, interferes in Lebanese affairs, votes every six months for extending the mandate of the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) in the Golan Heights. His threats against Israel are rhetorical in nature. If Israel blows a Syrian military installation up, the Syrian president learns about it on CNN. So it's not really surprising that the Israelis wish him many more years in the presidential palace in Damascus.

## History's lessons

Just what is it that leads the West to take an accommodating view of this dictator and mass murderer? The wish for continuity and stability. The wish for everything to stay as is. We tolerated the Communists in Eastern Europe until they imploded. Standing off to the side, letting things run their course: that's not something Guido Westerwelle invented, it's a long-entrenched characteristic of European politics.

We watched while Hitler re-militarized the Rhineland, emasculated Czechoslovakia, re-baptized Austria Ostmark and annexed it to Germany. We watched while the wall went up in Berlin in 1961.

The Tutsi genocide in Rwanda in 1994 took place under the eyes of the "United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda," whose main priority was seeing that their own members, mostly French and Belgian, stayed safe. When, the following year, 8,000 Muslims were murdered in Srebrenica, Dutch UN troops failed to intervene.

With a track record like that, it really wouldn't be a good idea to send European troops, with or without UN mandate, to Syria. But there are other options to make it at least harder for Assad to murder his countrymen, such as no-fly zones as there were in Iraq in Saddam Hussein's day, and breaking off diplomatic and trade relations with the regime and its henchmen.

And why couldn't NATO station one or two of its elegant warships off the Syrian coast? Just to scare them a little. But military strategists aren't willing to do that because they don't want to provoke Russia.

Not even the German peace movement has budged – no boat with medication to Latakia -- they need to save their energies for the next cruise to Gaza. Instead, a little over a year ago, six Left Party MPs signed a petition supporting lifting all sanctions against Syria.

The most infamous of all arguments against intervention is this: we don't know what we're going to get after Assad, it could be radical Islamists or members of al-Qaeda. The uprising against Assad could very well end the way the Arabellion has in Egypt. But if that's the price to pay for the murdering to stop, then we're going to have to pay it. Unless, of course, Sebastian Engelbrecht and his ilk have a better idea.