

TERRORISM

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Unifying the struggle against ISIS



A Kurdish fighter poses next to a destroyed ISIS truck.

PHOTO: AFP/GETTY IMAGES



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THE November 13 terrorist attacks in Paris – which struck at the heart of France and of Europe as a whole – have brought the terrorist threat posed by the Islamic State (ISIS) to the forefront of the foreign-policy agenda. For me, the answer to such assaults cannot be to lock our doors and board up our windows. To surrender the way we live, to give up on our open societies, would be to play into the terrorists' hands.

But our response needs to be, first and foremost, a political one: more vigilance at home and more intensive cooperation with our partners' security authorities. We in the West must show resolve in battling the social exclusion that breeds alienation, which implies stepping up our efforts to integrate Muslim and other immigrants at all levels. At the same time, we must tackle the evil of ISIS in the places where it began: Iraq and Syria.

On the night of the Paris attacks, Germany promised France that we would stand at its side. We decided recently that our responsibility to keep this promise includes a military contribution to the fight against ISIS.

We all know, of course, that terrorism cannot be defeated by bombs alone. But we also know that the threat posed by ISIS will not be overcome without military means, and that, unless ISIS is countered militarily, after a year there may well be nothing left on which to build a political solution for either Syria or Iraq.

I spent two days in Iraq recently. In the past year, ISIS has been successfully pushed out of a quarter of the territory it once controlled there. But the most difficult tasks in confronting ISIS lay ahead of us. Three components are crucial to the success of our political strategy.

The first component is support for those confronting ISIS. Germany's decision last summer to provide the Kurdish Peshmerga with arms and munitions was not without risk, but it was the right move. In November, also thanks to German support, the Peshmerga liberated the city of Sinjar, where ISIS carried out horrific massacres of Yazidis last summer. The advance by ISIS could not have been stopped without the Allies' air strikes.

Second, we know from previous conflicts how important it is to restore public confidence in areas liberated from ISIS. That is why we are investing in stabilising these regions, rebuilding police forces, schools, electricity grids, and water supplies. Thanks to German help, more than 150,000 people were able to return to their homes after the city of Tikrit was liberated.

The strategy's third component is the

most difficult to realise and yet the most important. In the long term, the conflicts and chaos that enabled ISIS to spread in the first place can be overcome only if all population groups in Iraq and Syria have a shared political perspective.

In Iraq, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has launched a courageous reform programme to pave the way towards greater political participation by Sunnis. In Syria, such a political process is of course still a long way off; nonetheless, we must do all we can to work in this direction.

German foreign policy is at the forefront of these efforts. I have had countless (and often difficult) talks in Riyadh, Tehran, Ankara, Beirut, Amman, and Vienna last year to help bridge the divide between countries in the region – and thus rein in their proxy forces battling one another in Syria.

I am heartened by the fact that, for the first time after almost five years of civil war, we succeeded in bringing all key states to the negotiating table in Vienna and agreed on a road map for a ceasefire and a political transition process. It's too early to celebrate, but there is finally a minimal consensus – shared not just by Russia and the United States, but also by Iran and Saudi Arabia – on a way forward to resolve the Syria conflict. The meeting of Syrian opposition groups in Riyadh in December was the first step on this path.

Achieving a political agreement will be a long and arduous journey, and the outcome is not entirely in our hands.

Some of the partners who we need on board are pursuing interests very different from ours. Some are at loggerheads with one another.

But complaining about the complexity of the situation in Syria is no substitute for action. The fact that some political realities do not fit the friend-foe template cannot be an excuse to sit back and wait until the region's antagonisms and conflicts resolve themselves – or until there is no Syrian state or institutions left to save.

The successful negotiations to contain Iran's nuclear programme showed that persistent good-faith diplomacy can work. In Libya, too, with an experienced German diplomat at the helm of talks being held under the auspices of the United Nations, we have the opportunity to find a political route back to an ordered state.

As foreign policymakers, we must face up to reality, with all of its uncertainties, and take responsibility for both our actions and our inaction – even when there are no guarantees of success either way. This makes it all the more important that we are certain of our bearings. We will not be able to counter ISIS and the threat posed by Islamist terrorism by pulling up the drawbridge; what we need is persistence and a political strategy that carefully integrates military, humanitarian, and diplomatic engagement.

The writer is Germany's Foreign Minister.
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