Statement on German Foreign Policy in Light of the U.S. and Israeli Attacks on Iran

Stellungnahme aus der Wissenschaft

19.03.2026 doi: 10.59704/1b8bccda57cd65ea

As scholars specializing in International Law and International Relations, we are concerned about the German government's response to the attack launched by the United States and Israel against the Islamic Republic of Iran on February 28, 2026. The German federal government's statements to date do not clearly condemn this action, which violates international law. This contributes to the further erosion of the rules-based and institutional order in Europe and in the world.

The use of military force against Iran by Israel and the United States constitutes a violation of the prohibition on the use of force under international law.

Since no armed attack by Iran on Israel, the United States, or any other state was imminent, the use of force is not justified by the right to self-defense. At the time of the attack, the U.S. and Iranian governments were still in negotiations regarding the Iranian nuclear program, and there is no evidence that the production and use of a nuclear bomb or other weapons were imminent.

Nor do the Iranian government's unprecedented atrocities against its own population justify the missile and bombing strikes by the US and Israel on targets in Iran. The use of armed force by states in response to serious human rights violations and humanitarian emergencies can only be authorized by resolutions of the United Nations Security Council. Invoking the controversial instrument of humanitarian intervention in fulfillment of the responsibility to protect, even without a UN mandate, is out of the question because the form in which the attacks are carried out and the selection of targets clearly do not serve to improve the humanitarian situation of the Iranian population. Neither the U.S. nor Israel has sought a multilateral approach by appealing to the Security Council or the General Assembly.

The Federal Government must take the illegality of this attack into consideration when taking decisions about the use of military bases on German territory, unless it wants to violate both international law and the German Basic Law.

Germany's historical responsibility, as well as the Basic Law's inherent alignment with international law, oblige the Federal Government to respect and strengthen fundamental norms of international law as the foundation of German foreign policy. The prohibition of the use of force is a necessary condition for a peaceful world order and is therefore non-negotiable. International cooperation, global governance, and transnational economic transactions are based on mutual trust that these rules will be respected.

Only a principled foreign policy can provide the background for ensuring that international law can also be demanded of other states in the future (e.g., in the demand for the security and sovereignty of Ukraine and Greenland). If third countries perceive the German federal government's enforcement of international legal norms as selective, this impression of double standards may undermine future agreements and trust-based cooperation.

In the long term, therefore, it is not only morally and legally imperative, but also in Germany's own interest, to insist on a rules-based order and to act accordingly. We therefore call for a return to the foundations of German foreign policy, which are based on the UN Charter and the Basic Law and which are mindful of embedding international relations in broadly agreed principles, norms and rules.

Editorial note: An earlier version of this post contained a translation error in its second sentence that

did not reflect the original meaning of the German version and read as if the statements of the German government violated international law, whereas the original German version states that the war against Iran violates international law. This error has since been corrected.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

der Wissenschaft, Stellungnahme aus: Statement on German Foreign Policy in Light of the U.S. and Israeli Attacks on Iran, Verfassungsblog, 19.03.2026, doi: 10.59704/1b8bccda57cd65ea.

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Langzeitarchiviert bei IntRechtDok unter: doi.org/10.17176/20260320-145516-0.