

Current Concerns

The international journal for independent thought, ethical standards, moral responsibility, and for the promotion and respect of public international law, human rights and humanitarian law

English Edition of *Zeit-Fragen*

US and Israel attack Iranian cultural sites

by Dr Reza Gholami*

24 March 2026

First the Golestan Palace in Tehran, then the Chehel Sotoun Palace in Isfahan. The US and Israel are attacking historical cultural sites – just as they did in their previous acts of aggression in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine. Some of these sites are protected by UNESCO and recognised as World Heritage Sites. UNESCO has therefore sounded the alarm, yet the bombing continues.

An attack on cultural heritage – wherever in the world it occurs – is not merely an attack on a country or a nation. It is an attack on the historical memory and the shared cultural capital of all humanity. The destruction of these sites means, as the Iranian scholar *Mojtaba Najafi* put it: “My memory is being razed to the ground.”

Since the start of the US-Israeli attacks, some of Iran’s most significant historical sites have been targeted. These sites are not only part of Iran’s historical identity, but also an integral part of the world’s cultural heritage.

From the perspective of international law, such actions are clearly unlawful. Under the 1954 *Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*, the parties to the conflict are obliged to protect cultural, historical and religious sites from attack or damage. The preamble to the *Hague Convention* (1954) states that damage to cultural property, regardless of which people it belongs to, constitutes damage to the cultural heritage of all humanity, as every people makes its own contribution to world culture.

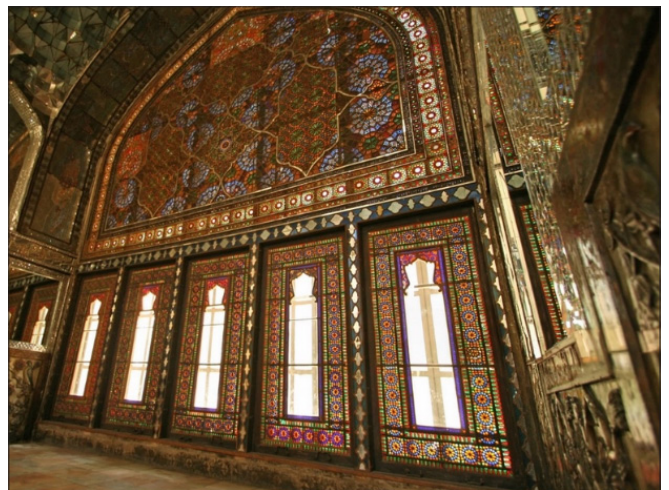
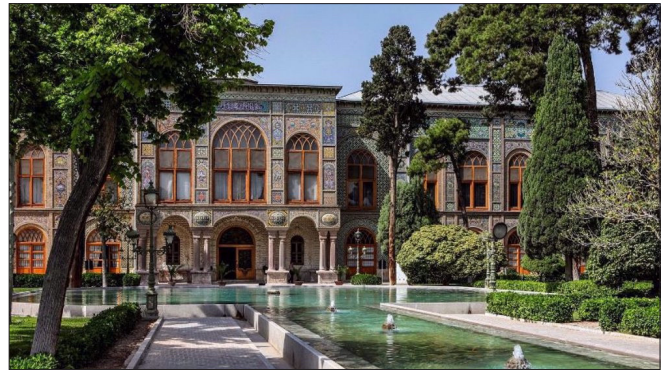
Similarly, the 1972 UNESCO *World Heritage Convention* emphasises that outstanding cultural and natural properties are not the exclusive property of a single state, but are regarded as the common heritage of humanity. Their preservation is therefore a global responsibility. The destruction or endangerment of such sites thus constitutes a serious vi-

olation of international law and may, in certain circumstances, even be classified as a war crime.

Added to this is UN Security Council Resolution 2347, which classifies attacks on cultural sites as a violation of international law. A statement by US Secretary of Defence *Pete Hegseth* is cause for concern, in which he said that America would not apply “stupid rules” of warfare in this conflict. According to the NGO *Blue Shield*, it is precisely these rules that embody international humanitarian law – not only for the protection of cultural heritage, but also of hospitals, schools and the entire civilian population.

Attack on the Golestan Palace

The scale of this problem becomes clearer when one considers specific examples of Iran’s significant historical sites. A prime example is the *Golestan Palace* in Tehran. This royal complex, whose origins date back to the Safavid period [16th–17th centuries] and which was expanded during the Qajar period [1789–1929], is a unique example of the fusion of traditional Persian architecture with 19th-century European artistic influences. The palace, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is a living testament to Iran’s political and cultural transformations in the modern era. Damage to this complex would represent



The Golestan Palace in Tehran, a UNESCO World Heritage Site: exterior view and the Throne Hall before and after a US-Israeli missile strike. (pictures Press TV)

an irreparable loss of an important chapter in history.

On 1 and 2 March 2026, the shockwave from a missile strike on the nearby Arag Square severely damaged the palace: the

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"US and Israel attack ..."

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famous Hall of Mirrors was shattered, historic wooden doors (*Oarsi*) were destroyed, and arches and panelling were damaged. UNESCO Director *Lazare Eloundou Assomo* stated that the palace was comparable to the Palace of Versailles.

Another significant monument is the *Shah Mosque* (Isfahan) – also known as the *Abbasid Mosque* – in the historic city of Isfahan. This masterpiece of Safavid architecture is situated in the heart of the historic Naqsh-e Jahan Square and, with its impressive dome, precise geometric architecture and unique tiling, is regarded as one of the most significant examples of Islamic architecture in the world. Any damage to this building would be a loss not only for Iran, but also for the history of Islamic art and architecture as a whole.

In western Iran, the monumental *Falak-ol-Aflak Castle* is also situated in the city of Khorramabad. This mighty fortress, whose history dates back to the Sassanid Empire [3rd–7th centuries], is one of the most significant historical defensive structures on the Iranian plateau. Over the centuries, it has witnessed political, military and cultural developments and today stands as one of the most important historical symbols of the Lorestan region.

Attack on Chehel Sotoun Palace

Furthermore, Isfahan is home to a unique ensemble of historic buildings which together form an extraordinary cultural landscape. These include the magnificent *Chehel Sotoun Palace* from the Safavid era, with its famous murals depicting historical events in Iran, as well as the impressive *Ali Qapu Palace*, a symbolic Safavid government building that



The ancient site of Persepolis is a reminder of the heyday of the Persian Empire from the 6th to the 4th century BC. UNESCO has included this site on the World Heritage List. (picture ma)

reflects the political and artistic grandeur of that era.

Pictures show smashed doors, broken windows and rubble. The *Muqarnas* ornamentation and the wall paintings in particular have been damaged. Damage caused

by shock waves from nearby explosions has been confirmed. The *Masjed-e Jame* is Iran's oldest Friday Mosque and a building featuring layers of Islamic architecture from the 8th to the 20th century. It too was damaged by the tremors.

International law applies to all

Statement by International-Lawyers.Org to the Special Meeting of the Human Rights Council held on 25 March 2026

*International-Lawyers.Org** urges all States to do their utmost to respect international human rights law in peacetime and during armed conflicts.

While we recognize the duty of all parties to the conflict, including Iran, Israel, and, the United States, to respect international law, we unequivocally condemn the acts of aggression by Israel and the United States against Iran in June 2025 and again in February-March 2026. These acts of aggressions occurred in the middle of ongoing negotiations. The attacks constitute the crime of perfidy as well as international wrongful acts of using force against Iran committed by Israel and the United States contrary to article 2, paragraph 4, of the UN Charter, that cannot be justified as article 51 self-defense.

Israel and the United States must be made to answer to international justice

for their internationally wrongful acts in violation of the *Genocide Convention* and the *Charter of the United Nations*. Ensuring this happens is an important and necessary step towards securing human rights in the region.

Similarly, the *International Criminal Court Prosecutor* can contribute to ending hostilities and securing human rights, by investigating and prosecuting particularly Israelis and Americans who are participating in acts aggression while at the same time engaging in genocide against the Palestinian people.

International law requires that Israel and the United States must end their unlawful use of force, provide reparation to the victims, and restore peace and security to the Middle East, which their illegal acts have seriously destabilised. Moreover, no State should recognise the illegal situation created by Israel and the

United States, as the ICJ has recognised all States have an *erga omnes* obligation not to recognise situations created by illegal acts.

We also note that Iran, or any State acting in collective self-defense with Iran, and using force against Israeli or American military assets anywhere in the world is acting in a manner justified by Article 51 of the Charter, but must observe the principles of proportionality and distinction between military and civilian targets.

International law applies to all.

** International-Lawyers.Org is an international non-profit, non-governmental organisation with Special Consultative status with the United Nations (ECOSOC), the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, and the UNFCCC. It is registered in Geneva, Switzerland, and Makeni, Sierra Leone.*

UNESCO expresses concern over the protection of cultural heritage sites

On Monday 2 March, the *Golestan Palace* in Tehran, a UNESCO World Heritage site, was reportedly damaged by debris and the shock wave following an airstrike to the Arag Square, located in the buffer zone of the site in the Iranian capital.

UNESCO continues to closely monitor the situation of cultural heritage in the country and across the region, with a view to ensuring its protection. To that end, the Organization has communicated to all parties concerned the geographical coordinates of sites on the World Heritage List as well as those of national significance, to avoid any potential damage.

UNESCO recalls that cultural property is protected under international law, notably the 1954 *Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*, including its enhanced protection mechanism, as well as the 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

Source: <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-expresses-concern-over-protection-cultural-heritage-sites-amidst-escalating-violence-middle-of-2-March-2026>

"US and Israel attack ..."

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The *Falak-ol-Aflak* fortress, dating back to the Sassanid Empire from the 3rd to the 7th century AD, is situated in the historic Khorramabad Valley. On 8 March 2026, an attack on the fortress perimeter completely destroyed the Lorestan Provincial Cultural Heritage Office and damaged the archaeological museums. Five staff members were injured. The valley was only added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2025.

On 14 March 2026, Iran's Ministry of Culture reported at least 56 damaged cultural sites [as of 25 March, a UNESCO official reported 132 damaged cultural and historical sites], including 19 in Tehran alone, and twelve in Kurdistan, Isfahan, Lorestan, Kermanshah, Bushehr and Ilam. Since 17 March 2026, reports have indicated that more than 100 sites have been affected. UNESCO has officially confirmed at least four of these. Iran and Lebanon's request to place further sites under enhanced protection is currently before UNESCO.

The consequences of such attacks are by no means limited to Iran. The destruction of cultural heritage has far-reaching global consequences. Firstly, it represents the irretrievable loss of a part of humanity's historical memory – a memory that scholars, artists and future generations need in order to understand the



(picture IRNA)



Following the bombing of Naqsh-e Rostam in Isfahan, a UNESCO World Heritage Site: "Should we redefine the term "barbarism"?! In the 21st century, the most advanced weapons are being turned against the oldest symbols of civilisation. Siwasepol and Naqsh-e Rostam are not merely works of art, but documents of the co-existence of religions and ethnic groups. These bombs struck at the heart of humanity's collective memory. World, do not remain silent in the face of these crimes!" (Mehdi Jamalnejad, Governor-General of Isfahan Province, on X on 2 March 2026). (picture Press TV)

development of human civilisation. Secondly, it undermines international standards for the protection of cultural property in armed conflicts, thereby opening the door to similar crimes in other parts of the world. Thirdly, such acts exacerbate cultural tensions and the sense of global injustice.

The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas

Over the past few decades, the world has watched in horror as extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and *Islamic State* have destroyed historic sites. A particularly shocking example was the demolition of the famous *Bamiyan Buddhas* by the Taliban. These acts were rightly condemned worldwide as crimes against humanity's cultural heritage. If similar patterns now emerge in the context of state warfare, this represents a dangerous step backwards for

the international legal system and the civilisational values that have been built up over decades.

It is also worrying that there is a real danger of further attacks on Iran's cultural heritage and even on its archaeological sites in the coming hours or days. Such a development could trigger a cultural catastrophe – a catastrophe whose damage would affect not only Iran but also the cultural heritage of all humanity.

If similar patterns are now emerging in the context of state-led warfare, this represents a dangerous step backwards for the international legal system. This is all the truer given that the US simultaneously announced its withdrawal from UNESCO – one of the key instruments of multilateral cultural protection. The looting of the Iraqi National Museum in 2003 following the US-led invasion, or the destruction of

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War against the civilian population escalates – the ICRC also speaks out

cc. On 24 March 2026, the Iranian state broadcaster PressTV reported:

In a statement released on Tuesday [24 March 2026], Pir-Hossein Koulivand [President of the Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS)], said that 82,417 civilian units, including 62,440 residential houses, and 19,187 commercial buildings have been severely damaged across Iran since the start of Israeli-US aggression on February 28.

In Tehran Province alone, 25,280 houses and commercial buildings have been destroyed or damaged by the aggression.

He added that 281 medical facilities including pharmacies, and emergency buildings have been hit along with 481 schools and 17 IRCS centers.

Additionally, 3 IRCS helicopters, 48 operational vehicles, and 46 ambulances have been destroyed, the IRCS chief concluded.

Furthermore, in a letter to the World Health Organization (WHO) Director General *Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus* on Monday, Koulivand expressed his grave concerns over relentless strikes by the US and Israel on Iran's medical infrastructure, categorically condemning them.

The IRCS head further stressed that the strikes are flagrant violation of international humanitarian law, including four *Geneva Conventions* and *additional protocols*, urging the WHO

to condemn the attacks, and launch an independent investigation into the hostilities". (<https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2026/03/24/765788/Over-8200-civilian-units-damaged-by-Israeli-US-aggression-IRCS> of 24 March 2026)

* * *

The day before, the International Committee of the Red Cross's website stated:

"ICRC president: War on essential infrastructure is war on civilians; every effort to de-escalate is critical

Geneva (ICRC) – The following is a statement from ICRC President *Mirjana Spoljaric*.

War on essential infrastructure is war on civilians. It must stop. Every effort to de-escalate is critical. Deliberate attacks on essential services and civilian infrastructure can amount to war crimes.

We are seeing energy, fuel, water and health-care infrastructure damaged and destroyed. This disturbing trend is not limited to the Middle East or the last three weeks; it has been pervasive in conflicts across regions. But what we have seen in recent days in the Middle East risks reaching a point of no return. Most alarming is the potential harm to nuclear facilities, whether deliberate or incidental. Damage to these sites could trigger irreversible consequences, which is why they are afforded heightened protections under the rules of war.

Attacks on essential infrastructure have already punished millions of civilians both near and far from the front lines. This pattern, combined with an escalatory rhetoric that disregards the limits imposed by international humanitarian law, normalises a style of warfare that strips away our shared humanity.

Respecting the dignity of civilians is the basis for de-escalation and political solutions from which peace and stability can be built". (<https://www.icrc.org/en/statement/icrc-president-war-on-essential-infrastructure-is-war-on-civilians> of 23 March 2026)

* * *

PS In a joint statement on Iran issued on 27 March 2026 of G7 foreign ministers from Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, and the High Representative of the European Union, they stated:

"We call upon an immediate cessation of attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure. There can be no justification for the deliberate targeting of civilians in situations of armed conflict as well as attacks on diplomatic facilities." – *The truth is upside down!* (<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/g7-news/article/joint-statement-of-g7-foreign-ministers-on-iran-27-03-26> of 27 March 2026; translation *Current Concerns*)

"US and Israel attack ..."

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Palmyra in 2015, demonstrate that cultural catastrophes in times of war are not accidents, but the consequences of deliberate or negligent decisions.

Preventing such a tragedy requires an immediate and resolute response from the international community. International organisations in the field of culture and

heritage conservation, in particular UNESCO, as well as archaeologists, historians, art historians and other figures in the cultural sphere worldwide, should condemn these acts with a clear and resolute voice. Only through widespread international condemnation and moral and legal pressure can we prevent such attacks from recurring and a global cultural catastrophe from becoming a reality.

Cultural heritage serves as a bridge between the past, the present and the future. Its destruction signifies not only the loss of stone and mortar, but also the severing of future generations' connection to the history of humanity. Defending Iran's cultural heritage is therefore also a matter of defending humanity's shared heritage and the civilizational memory of our world. • (Translation *Current Concerns*)

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“A moon will rise from the darkness”

by Karin Leukefeld

“A moon will rise from my darkness.” This slightly adapted line comes from the English version of a poem by *Mahmoud Darwish* – one of the most important voices in modern Arabic literature. Born in 1941 in the Palestinian village of Al-Birwa, east of Acre, Darwish shared the experiences of flight, displacement, loss, and exile with hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. He found words for their suffering, their grief, their life in exile, and their enduring connection to their homeland – words that resonated widely and offered strength.

“A Moon Will Rise from the Darkness” is also the title of the book¹ under review, subtitled “Reports on Israel’s Genocide in Palestine”. The 178-page volume was published in English by *Pluto Press* in London in autumn 2025. The cover features “Children of Gaza Dream of Peace”, a painting by *Malak Mattar*, a Palestinian artist from Gaza who attended UNRWA schools as a child, where her mother taught. The book was released simultaneously in the UK and the US, with all proceeds going to UNRWA.

The author, *Francesca Albanese*, serves as the UN *Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories* (OPT). The book brings together three reports she submitted to the UN *Human Rights Council* and the UN General Assembly during the war in Gaza: “The Anatomy of a Genocide; Genocide as Colonial Extermination; and From the Economy of Occupation to the Economy of Genocide”.

These reports, along with an introduction by Albanese, are preceded by a foreword from the editors, *Mandy Turner* and *Lex Takkenberg*, as well as contributions from three of Albanese’s predecessors: *Richard Falk*, Professor Emeritus of Law at the University of the Witwatersrand and Leiden, and former UN *Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories* (OPT) from 2001 to 2008, *John Dugard*, Professor Emeritus of Law at the University of the Witwatersrand and Leiden, who was UN *Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories* (OPT) from 2001 to 2008, and *Michael Lynk*, who taught law at the Faculty of Law, Western University London from 1999 to 2022, Professor Emeritus (2023), who was UN *Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories* (OPT) from 2016 to 2022.

The volume concludes with a substantial appendix of notes and sources for each chapter, encouraging further research.

At the beginning of the book, several pages present endorsements from prominent figures familiar with the region and the Palestinian cause, including *Ilan Pappé*, Prince *Hassan bin Talal*, *Craig Mokhiber*, *Andrew Feinstein*, *Avi Shlaim*, and *Ramzy Baroud*, among others. Two representative remarks are worth quoting:

Raz Segal, associate professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Stockton University in Galloway Township, New Jersey, writes:

“A Moon Will Rise from the Darkness reflects Francesca Albanese fearless pursuit of truth, her struggle for accountability, and her belief in a different world that is, indeed, already rising.”

“ ‘A Moon Will Rise from the Darkness’ is also the title of the book under review, subtitled ‘Reports on Israel’s Genocide in Palestine’. The 178-page volume was published in English by *Pluto Press* in London in autumn 2025. The cover features ‘Children of Gaza Dream of Peace’, a painting by *Malak Mattar*, a Palestinian artist from Gaza who attended UNRWA schools as a child, where her mother taught. The book was released simultaneously in the UK and the US, with all proceeds going to UNRWA.”

Ghassan Abu-Sittah, Professor of Surgery at the American University of Beirut and Rector of the University of Glasgow, writes:

“When I came out of Gaza at the end of November 2023, I discovered that Israel was only the tip of the genocidal iceberg. The rest was the enablement apparatus – a system of states, institutions, and individuals – which ensured the longevity of a genocidal project [...]. This book dissects this apparatus, shedding light on its constitutive accomplices.”

Hitting a nerve

“Looks like I’ve hit a nerve.” That was Albanese’s response in July 2025 after *Donald Trump* announced that her name had been placed on a US sanctions list.² The move followed a “confidential letter” she had sent earlier that year to several major corporations – including *Alphabet Inc.*, *Amazon*, *Caterpillar Inc.*, *Chevron Corporation*, *Hewlett-Packard*, *IBM*, *Lockheed Martin*, *Microsoft*, and *Palantir Technologies*.

In the letter, Albanese informed them that they would be named in an upcoming UN report for allegedly contributing to serious human rights violations in Gaza and the West Bank. The companies sought assistance from the White House as *Reuters* reported. The Trump administration subsequently imposed sanctions on Albanese for “writing threatening letters.”

The slander, the hatred and the persecution directed at the UN *Special Rapporteur* is reminiscent of medieval witch hunts. That the comparison is not far-fetched is demonstrated by remarks made by the Israeli UN Ambassador *Danny Danon* at the UN General Assembly in October 2025. In her report “Gaza Genocide: A Collective Crime”, Albanese had accused the inter-

national community of complicity for supporting and allowing Israel’s war against the Palestinians to take place. Danon accused her of “cursing Israel with lies and hatred”. He called her “a witch” describing her report as another page in her “spell book of”.³ If she could, she would ensure that Israel’s crimes “would stop once and for all”, Albanese said.

More recently, the foreign ministers of France and Germany – *Jean-Noël Barrot* and *Johann Wadephul* – have called for her resignation. They accused her of bias and misconduct, Wadephul stated that Albanese had already been “abusive” several times and that, following her “recent outbursts against Israel,” her position was “untenable.”

Barrot alleged antisemitism and declared on behalf of the French government “France unreservedly condemns the outrageous and reprehensible remarks made by Ms Francesca Albanese, which are directed not at the Israeli government, whose policies may be criticised, but at Israel as a people and as a nation, which is absolutely unacceptable.”

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“A moon will rise”

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The controversy stemmed from a video clip of Albanese speaking at a conference in Doha, broadcast by *Al Jazeera*. According to a translation by *Amnesty International* (London), she criticised

“The fact that instead of stopping Israel, most of the world has armed, given Israel political excuses, political sheltering, economic and financial support [...] We who do not control large amounts of financial capitals, algorithms and weapons, we now see that we as a humanity have a common enemy, and freedoms, the respect of fundamental freedoms is the last peaceful avenue, the last peaceful toolbox that we have to regain our freedom.”⁴

However, the ministers claimed she had referred to Israel itself as “common enemy” of humanity.

“I would recommend Francesca Albanese’s book to the ministers and their staff. In fact, given the positions they hold, they ought to have read all the reports by the UN Special Rapporteur. That is, in fact, their job, and they should, in fact, have ceased their support for Israel long ago if international law and the UN Charter still meant anything to them.”

Amnesty International has called on several European governments – Austria, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, and Italy – to retract what it describes as false accusations and to investigate how misleading, selectively edited footage came to be circulated without proper verification. The broadcaster *France 24* has also examined the case in its program *Truth or Fake*, concluding that the allegations against Albanese were unfounded.⁵

I would recommend Francesca Albanese’s book to the ministers and their staff. In fact, given the positions they hold, they ought to have read all the reports by the UN Special Rapporteur. That is, in fact, their job, and they should, in fact, have ceased their support for Israel long ago if international law and the UN Charter still meant anything to them.

Francesca Albanese has tirelessly drawn attention to precisely this point: governments, companies and individuals become an accessory if they do not oppose the extermination of the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, the destruction of their livelihoods and their rights, and if they do not cease their own aid, financing, arms deliveries to and arms purchases from Israel.

The book “A Moon Will Rise from the Darkness” was completed in October

2025. At that time, the war of extermination against the Palestinians in Gaza had been raging for two years and had “accelerated with violence, ethnic cleansing, apartheid, and the threat of annexation of what remains of historic Palestine,” according to the foreword by editors Mandy Turner and Lex Takkenberg. The line from the poem by Mahmoud Darwish is “a metaphor for hope and strength even in the darkest times.” The book is dedicated “to the past, present, and future struggles of the Palestinian people for freedom, justice, and dignity.” Until that day of freedom arrives, it will be “spoken out and resisted all attempts to mute voices for Palestine.”

Francesca Albanese dedicates her brief introduction before the three detailed reports that form the core of the book to those who guided her during her training, leading her to where she is standing today.

She thanks everyone who has supported her work since October 2023, especially her predecessors in office who confirmed her appointment.

Life in Gaza is “painful and apocalyptic,” she writes. However, in Greek, apocalypse also means “to uncover” and “to unveil.” In Gaza, what has long been hidden is now open; much is coming to light, demanding attention and action. Change is being prepared, and every change comes at a high price. Everyone is called upon to act in light of what is happening in Gaza – every individual, every society. “The arc of history will only tilt toward accountability if we refuse to look away,” Albanese says. And call a spade a spade. ●

¹ <https://www.plutobooks.com/product/a-moon-will-rise-from-the-darkness/>

² <https://www.reuters.com/investigations/trumps-war-global-justice-court-staff-un-face-terrorist-grade-sanctions-2026-02-06/>

³ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20251030-israeli-ambassador-calls-uns-francesca-albanese-a-witch-after-her-report-on-gaza-she-replies-mockingly/>

⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/02/european-states-must-retract-attacks-francesca-albanese/>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHChXErbGs>
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A Moon Will Rise from the Darkness

Reports on Israel’s Genocide in Palestine



Francesca Albanese

EDITED BY MANDY TURNER AND LEX TAKKENBERG

ISBN 978-0-7453-5231-2

“Albanese, through her reports as well as media and public engagement has undoubtedly helped to mobilise global opposition to Israel’s genocide against the Palestinian people. Neither Israel nor the United States seem concerned by allegations that their behaviour shows contempt for the UN and violates international law and basic human decency. But their actions – particularly US sanctions against Albanese and Israel’s shrill yet hollow accusations of antisemitism against its critics – are a sign of rising frustration that Israel is on the cusp of losing international support. The *Hague Group of states*, which seeks to hold Israel accountable through legal and diplomatic means, was formed in January 2025 and civil society support for the *Palestinian boycott, disinvestment and sanctions movement* (BDS) and other solidarity initiatives is rapidly accelerating in tandem with the famine, and malnutrition crisis afflicting the Gaza population.

Both Israel’s genocide and the US/Israel, contempt for the UN vindicate the heroic efforts of Francesca Albanese as a reading of this volume will confirm. It should also remind us of the precious value of special rapporteurs as canaries in the coalmine* of the twenty-first century.” (excerpt from the foreword of Albanese’s book from *Richard Falk, John Dugard and Michael Lynk*).

* Canaries formerly were used in mines to detect gas leaks. (Editor’s note)

Economic sanctions: An invisible weapon of war

A study that has changed everything

by Jean-Guy Rens, Montreal, Canada*

In July 2025, *The Lancet Global Health* published a study that can be described as historic. The authors – economists *Francisco Rodríguez* (University of Denver), *Silvio Rendón* (Inter-American Development Bank), and *Mark Weisbrot* (Centre for Economic and Policy Research, CEPR) – have undertaken a first systematic and causal assessment of the impact of economic sanctions on global mortality. By analysing a dataset spanning 152 countries and five decades (1971–2021), they arrived at a conclusion that is as precise as it is disturbing: Unilateral sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union caused approximately 564,258 deaths annually during this period (with a 95 per cent confidence interval between 367,838 and 760,677). Over 50 years, these deaths add up to roughly 38 million human lives lost.¹

This figure is neither a rough estimate nor a speculative extrapolation. The researchers used four different econometric methods designed to infer causal relationships from observational data – entropy balancing, Granger causality, event studies, and instrumental variables. The robustness of the results, which are consistent across all four approaches, significantly reinforces the validity of the conclusions. The sanction-related mortality rate corresponds to a 3.6 per cent increase in overall mortality in the sanctioned countries.

War by other means

The title of the article in *The Lancet* sounds like a scientific provocation: The authors quote *Woodrow Wilson*, who as early as 1919 described economic sanctions as “something more tremendous than war,” and conclude: “Our study suggests that he was right.” Wilson’s statement, made at the founding of the League of Nations, shows that the idea of resorting to economic suffocation rather than weapons is not new. What is new, however, is that science is now confirming the American president’s intuition with unprecedented accuracy.²

The mechanism by which sanctions kill is indirect but relentless. By blocking access to financial markets, international

trade, foreign exchange, and technology, sanctions undermine a state’s ability to fund its healthcare system, import medicines, maintain drinking water and sanitation infrastructure, and ensure the food security of its population.

These effects are not immediately apparent: They are cumulative and intensify over time. The study in *The Lancet* is particularly clear on this point: Sanctions lasting less than three years increase child mortality by 6 per cent; those lasting four to six years increase this number to 8.6 per cent, and those lasting more than seven years raise it to 10.5 per cent. The duration of sanctions is a creeping death sentence.³

gimes, and criminal networks. The statistical reality paints a very different picture. Children under five account for 51 per cent of sanctions-related deaths. By extension, if one counts victims aged 15 and younger together with those aged 60 to 80, the figure rises to 77 per cent of sanctions-related deaths. It is the most vulnerable – those who have no influence over their governments’ political decisions – who pay the highest price.

The impact on child mortality is precisely quantified: US sanctions are associated with a 9.3 per cent increase in neonatal mortality, a 9.1 per cent increase in under-1 mortality, and an 8.5 per cent increase in under-5 mortality. Behind

“One might rightly ask whether, in 50 years, historians of international law will not treat massive economic sanctions in the same way we treat torture or the death penalty today – a practice long accepted by the official justice system, gradually exposed as ineffective and morally unacceptable through empirical research, and ultimately outlawed. The difference is that 50 more years of sanctions at the current rate would mean 28 million additional deaths.”

The comparison with armed conflicts is striking. The average of 564,000 deaths per year due to unilateral sanctions “is within the range that researchers have calculated for annual deaths related to armed conflicts.” In 2021, more than 800,000 people died as a direct result of the sanctions imposed by Washington and Brussels – roughly eight times the number of deaths from combat in all armed conflicts worldwide that same year. The *Progressive International Organisation* put it more precisely: This tally corresponds to a rate of 1,500 deaths per day, comparable with the siege of Leningrad by Nazi Germany.⁴ According to some estimates, Western sanctions have claimed at least as many lives in the 20-year period covered by the study as all armed conflicts and genocides worldwide combined.

First and foremost: Innocent and young victims

One of the most disturbing findings of the *Lancet* study concerns the identity of the victims. The official narrative portrays sanctions as targeted instruments aimed at ruling elites, authoritarian re-

these abstract percentages lie concrete and tragic realities: infants who do not receive the necessary vaccinations, children who die from infectious diseases because antibiotics are no longer available, mothers who give birth without adequate medical care. Another study, published by Stanford University in *The Lancet Global Health* in March 2025 and specifically addressing sanctions against development aid, estimates that if these measures last more than five years, they can wipe out up to 64 per cent of the progress made in reducing maternal mortality and up to 29 per cent of the progress made in reducing child mortality in low-income countries.⁵

The most famous response to this fact remains that of *Madeleine Albright*, then US ambassador to the UN, when interviewed on CBS News’s “60 Minutes” in 1996. Interviewer *Lesley Stahl* pointed out that sanctions against Iraq had resulted in the deaths of half a million children under the age of five – more than those who perished in Hiroshima – and asked if this toll was worth the price. Albright’s reply: “I think it’s a very difficult deci-

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“Economic sanctions: ...”

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sion, but yes, it’s worth the price.” Decades later, in 2020, she admitted to having made a “stupid remark,” adding that she had learned that “global sanctions often harm the population of the country without really achieving what is intended to be done to change the behaviour of the sanctioned country.”⁶

Africa, a favourite target

The *Lancet* study does not break down the findings by continent, but the available geographical data paints a clear picture. Relative to its population and level of development, Africa is the most heavily sanctioned continent in the world. Ten African countries are the subject of active sanctions programmes involving the United States, the European Union, and, in some cases, the United Nations. It is no coincidence that this list almost entirely coincides with the World Food Programme’s “hunger hotspots.”⁷

The case of Zimbabwe is telling. Since 2001, US and EU sanctions have cost the country, by its own estimates, more than US\$150 billion in frozen assets, cuts in aid, and blocked trade opportunities. The arms embargo imposed on the Central African Republic in 2013 deprived a state embroiled in civil war of the means to defend itself against external terrorist groups – an example of how perverse measures presented as protecting human rights can be.⁸

Several African analysts and legal scholars have termed this phenomenon

African Country	US-sanctions	EU-sanctions	UN-sanctions
Central African Republic	X	X	X
Democratic Republic of Congo	X	X	X
Libya	X	X	X
Somalia	X	X	X
South Sudan	X	X	X
Sudan	X	X	X
Guinea	X	X	–
Mali	X	X	–
Zimbabwe	X	X	–
Guinea Bissau	X	–	X

Source: Council on Foreign Relations, June 2024

economic neo-colonialism: Unilateral sanctions are a tool used almost exclusively by the world’s richest countries against the poorest, exacerbating power imbalances inherited from the colonial era. A legal opinion issued by the African Bar Association puts it bluntly: “By violating the right of African states to equality and sovereignty, unilateral coercive measures exacerbate the power imbalance between the countries of the Global South and the Western powers, thus becoming an instrument of neocolonialism.”⁹

“Humanitarian exemptions” that do not work

In response to recurring criticism, the governments of the US and Europe invariably maintain that their sanctions

include “humanitarian exemptions” for food, medicine, and emergency aid. In November 2022, a group of independent United Nations experts issued a strongly worded statement on the matter, describing these exceptions as “ineffective and inefficient.” The problems are systemic: The exemptions do not cover all sanctioning systems; humanitarian organisations and banks lack the expertise and resources to navigate labyrinthine legal systems; the fear of inadvertently violating sanctions drives financial institutions to paralysing overcompliance, and the deadlines for obtaining special licenses often exceed the timeframes for humanitarian emergencies.¹⁰

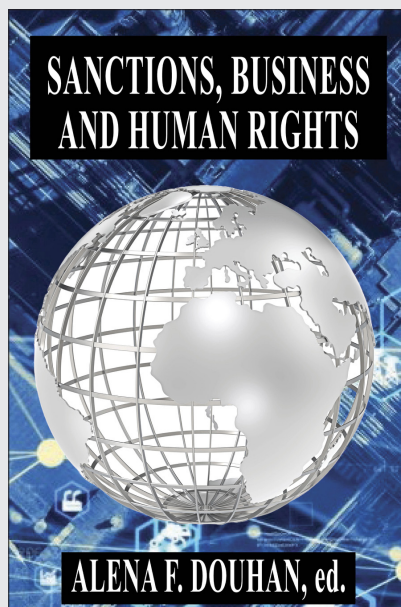
The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically highlighted these shortcomings. In

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“The use of unilateral sanctions, the means of their enforcement and over-compliance, and the implementation of the UN Security Council resolutions in the face of unilateral sanctions all raise serious concerns from the point of view of international law, including international human rights and humanitarian law, as well as questions around political and economic decision-making.

Despite the existence of multiple publications focusing on UN Security Council sanctions and on unilateral sanctions, the issues of over-compliance, sanctions enforcement, assessment of the legality and impact of various types of unilateral sanctions, and the access to justice and to remedies appear to have been overlooked. The current state of affairs with regards to unilateral sanctions demonstrates a clear need for a comprehensive analysis and assessment, not only from the perspective of human rights law but also by involving other disciplines [...].

Multiple reports demonstrate that access to justice, to remedies, and to mechanisms of accountability and redress universally recognised as the means of promotion and protection of all human



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rights, as well as of the rule of law in general, cannot be guaranteed in sanctions environments and sometimes cannot be applied at all. [...]

As the legal assessment of unilateral sanctions is mostly done from the perspective of the law of international responsibility only, and other spheres of international law as well as the humanitarian impact of unilateral sanctions are nearly ignored, I hope that this volume will encourage sanctioning and sanctioned states, the United Nations Organisation, its organs, entities and specialised agencies, corporations, lawyers, humanitarian organisations, scholars and other actors to assess the use of unilateral sanctions, means of their enforcement, derisking policies from the perspective of international law and humanity as enshrined in the *Charter of the United Nations* in full respect of its norms and fundamental principles, and to pay more attention to the problem and do more research prior to policy enactment.”

Prof. Dr. hab. Alena F. Douhan, UN Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on human rights

(Excerpt from the introduction to the book)

"Economic sanctions: ..."

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2020, the Norwegian Refugee Council warned: "The current sanctions regimes restrict our ability to help people in need in many places." When the Afghan economy collapsed following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, humanitarian organisations found themselves unable to transfer funds into the country for fear of violating sanctions: Exemptions were granted late and only partially, with educational activities initially excluded. Exemptions exist on paper; in practice, however, they represent a bureaucratic labyrinth that only large organisations can navigate, and that sometimes, but not always.¹¹

A 69 per cent ineffective weapon

The main justification for sanctions is their supposed diplomatic effectiveness: They are meant to change the behaviour of targeted governments at a lower cost than war. This premise is seriously challenged by the data. The seminal study by Gary Hufbauer and his co-authors for the *Peterson Institute for International Economics* remains the academic reference in this area, and this concludes that sanctions are "successful" in about 34 per cent of cases – meaning they fail in the remaining two-thirds. The CEPR arrives at a comparable rate of 31 per cent. However, it must be noted that this definition of "success" is very vague: It includes any outcome where the sanctions "contributed substantially to the achievement, in whole or in part, of the foreign policy objective."¹²

In the cases receiving the most media coverage, the ratio of human cost to political outcome is particularly unfavourable. North Korea, for example, remains a nuclear-armed nation despite decades of sanctions. Cuba remains under communist rule despite a 60-year US embargo. Russia continues its war in Ukraine despite an unprecedented sanctions regime imposed since 2022. There are even cases wherein sanctions strengthen the target governments: Faced with an external threat, populations often rally behind their leaders, who can instrumentalise the sanctions to legitimise their cause and attribute their economic difficulties to an external enemy. This "rally-round-the-flag" dynamic has been documented in Russia, Iran, Cuba, and many African countries.¹³

A policy without a democratic mandate

At some point, the question of trust inevitably arises: Have the citizens of the US and Europe ever been consulted on sanctions policy? This governance issue is as crucial as the humanitarian record

What is OFAC?

jgr. The *Office of Foreign Assets Control* (OFAC) is an agency of the US Department of the Treasury responsible for administering and enforcing economic and financial sanctions imposed in the interests of US national security. Specifically, it is responsible for issuing and enforcing regulations that prohibit certain transactions, order the freezing of assets, and prohibit "US persons" (US individuals and companies, but also all entities that use the dollar or the US financial system) from trading with sanctioned countries, companies or individuals. In particular, OFAC maintains the well-known SDN list (*Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List*): anyone on this list is effectively excluded from a large part of the financial system. Banks and companies worldwide are therefore obliged to check their customers and partners against this list

in order to avoid what are often very heavy monetary penalties.

Historically, OFAC is the successor to a system established during the Second World War to prevent Nazi Germany and its allies from accessing funds held in the United States. Since then, its remit has expanded considerably: Today, it administers dozens of sanctions programmes targeting states (Iran, Cuba, Russia, etc.), as well as organisations (terrorist groups, drug cartels) and even individuals accused of crimes under US law, etc. The OFAC acts on the basis of presidential executive orders and very broadly defined framework laws. The bulk of US sanctions policy is, in effect, enacted by this administrative body, without detailed parliamentary debate and certainly without consultation with the voting public.

itself. However, the answer is unequivocal: *They have not.*

In the United States, almost all sanctions are imposed by presidential *executive order*, without a vote in Congress and without any consultation with the public. The legal basis is usually the *International Emergency Economic Powers Act* of 1977, the IEEPA, which authorises the president to declare an "extraordinary national emergency" as soon as he determines an "unusual and extraordinary" threat that originates wholly or partly abroad. This definition is so vague that it can be applied to almost any crisis situation. In fact, "the power to impose sanctions has increasingly shifted to the executive branch over the past hundred years, so that the *Office of Foreign Assets Control*, the OFAC), [see box] can sanction thousands of entities annually, with remarkably limited legislative oversight."¹⁴

The increase in sanctions programmes illustrates this problematic development. The *Biden* administration imposed more sanctions than any previous president, doubling the number imposed by *Trump* (during his first term). In 2022, no fewer than 11,097 new entries were added to US lists in a single year, a historic record. In 2024, the OFAC *Specially Designated Nationals* list¹⁵ was expanded by an additional 3,135 entries, a 25 per cent increase over 2023. Globally, there are now more than 70,000 sanctioned individuals and organisations, a 370 per cent increase since 2017.¹⁶

In this context, the question of the democratic legitimacy of these decisions is by no means theoretical. It points to a fundamental tension between two understandings of democracy. On the one hand, elected representatives grant the govern-

ment a general mandate to conduct foreign policy. On the other hand, a policy that causes the deaths of more than half a million people in third countries every year – including hundreds of thousands of children – has a severity comparable with a declaration of war. Yet no electoral mandate, neither in the United States nor in Europe, has ever explicitly referred to the need to sanction this or that country. No presidential platform has offered voters a choice between sanctions and dialogue regarding Iran, Cuba, or Zimbabwe. No popular referendum has endorsed a policy the humanitarian consequences of which are, as we now know, comparable with those of war.

The *Brennan Center for Justice*, a respected American legal institution, has pointed out that when Congress passed the IEEPA in 1977, it anticipated that these emergency powers would be used "rarely and briefly" – "not as a substitute for normal and ongoing problems." Today, "national emergencies" that justify sanctions programmes are declared and extended indefinitely, often for decades, and the populations of either the sanctioned or the sanctioning countries are never consulted.

On the European side, the mechanism is somewhat different but leads to the same result. EU sanctions are decided unanimously by the Council of Ministers, an unelected body composed of representatives of the member governments. The European Parliament, the only directly elected institution, has no formal right to co-decision on matters of the *Common Foreign and Security Policy*. Thus, European citizens have no more say than their American counterparts.

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A weapon that must be reviewed or abolished

The *Lancet* study does not advocate the abolition of all forms of international pressure. However, it pointedly notes that United Nations sanctions, i.e., those decided by the UN Security Council, – the only ones subject to a multilateral consultation process involving the affected countries – have no statistically measurable effect on mortality. This observation suggests a line of reasoning: The legitimacy of the process by which sanctions are decided is not without influence on their humanitarian impact. Furthermore, unilateral sanctions imposed without discussion or agreement with the affected countries create resentment that leads populations to resist foreign interventions in the form of sanctions rather than turn against their leaders. These sanctions miss their mark, and they hurt those that are the most vulnerable.

The authors of the study reach a clear conclusion: "It is difficult to imagine other government measures that have such devastating effects on human life and yet continue to be so widespread." Mark Weissbrot, one of the co-authors, goes even further: "It is immoral and indefensible that such a deadly form of collective punishment continues to be used and has even been regularly expanded over the years."¹⁷

In this context, the concept of "collective punishment" is particularly noteworthy. International humanitarian law – in particular Article 33 of the *Fourth Geneva Convention* – explicitly prohibits collective punishment against "protected populations" for acts they did not commit. However, this prohibition formally applies to situations of military occupation and not to international economic policy, creating a significant legal loophole. The difference between bombing a hospital and disrupting the supply of medicines to an entire country is small from a moral point of view, even if it is clear from a legal one.¹⁸

One might rightly ask whether, in 50 years, historians of international law will not treat massive economic sanctions in the same way we treat torture or the death penalty today – a practice long accepted by the official justice system, gradually exposed as ineffective and morally unacceptable through empirical research, and ultimately outlawed. The difference is that 50 more years of sanctions at the current rate would mean 28 million additional deaths.

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(Translation *Current Concerns*)**Oppressive US Sanctions against Cuba**

gl. For over 60 years Cuba has been subject to US sanctions, against the explicit and repeatedly stated will of almost all members of the UN. With the exception of a few states such as Israel and the Ukraine, the UN General Assembly requests each year a unanimous agreement to lift the sanctions under which the population immensely suffers. The sanctions have been tightened since the US attack on Venezuela, and a complete oil embargo is imposed as well. Venezuela, as former oil exporter may no longer deliver to Cuba. Even Mexico, which has traditionally maintained very good relations with Cuba, doesn't dare to provide Cuba with oil due secondary sanctions threatened by the US. Cuba's power supply completely collapsed, causing catastrophic consequences for daily life and survival.

This situation is extremely obscene for the healthcare system. Cuba maintains an excellent health care system and well-educated doctors who are made available in many Latin American countries and in the entire world, when necessary. Around 500 Cuban doctors work in Calabria, Italy who were expressly requested by the regional government. The US government is now demanding that Italy expel these doctors, just as Guatemala has already done under pressure from the US.

The Neutrality Initiative – Striding towards a referendum

by Dr iur. Marianne Wüthrich

During the 2026 spring session, the Neutrality Initiative was rushed through the parliamentary conciliation process in an unusually expedited procedure – presumably to limit the time available to the initiators for preparing the referendum. In their haste, the parliamentarians apparently had little time to think, and the results reflected this. It is precisely to avoid this that the National Council and the Council of States usually resolve their differences from one session to the next, thereby allowing themselves three months until the next debate. At the end of the frantic back-and-forth, the substantial text of the initiative was whittled down to a counter-proposal consisting of a single sentence, and ultimately both the initiative and the counter-proposal were rejected by a majority in both chambers. We can be glad that Parliament can only issue a voting recommendation on a popular initiative. The final say lies with the people and the cantons. The referendum will take place this autumn.

As a reminder: on 19 June 2025, the Council of States held an intensive three-hour session to discuss the initiative, during which a number of councillors from various parties made a strong commitment to Swiss neutrality. Ultimately, the Council of States rejected the initiative by 33 votes to 9, but approved a direct counter-proposal very clearly by 27 votes to 15 (with 1 abstention).¹ In doing so, it sought to enshrine neutrality as a principle in the Federal Constitution, although key elements of the initiative's text – concerning the very core issues of Swiss neutrality – would be omitted.

Text of the initiative

Art. 54a Swiss neutrality

1 Switzerland is neutral. Its neutrality is perpetual and armed.

2 Switzerland does not join any military or defence alliances. The exception is the cooperation with these alliances in the event of a direct military attack on Switzerland or of preparations for an attack of this kind.

3 Switzerland does not take part in military conflicts between third countries and does not impose non-military sanctions on warring states. The exceptions are obligations to the United Nations (UN) and measures to prevent the circumvention of non-military sanctions by other states.

Conciliation Committee

mw. Art. 91 of the Parliament Act (ParlG) states:

1 If there are still differences following three detailed discussions in each council, a conciliation committee shall be appointed. This committee is responsible for seeking a compromise solution.
2 The preliminary consultation committees [here the Foreign Affairs Committees (FAC), mw] shall each contribute 13 members to the conciliation committee. [...] The composition of the delegations from each committee is governed by Article 43 paragraph 3*.

3 The committee president of the first council [here the Council of States] shall chair the conciliation committee. [...]

* Art. 43 para. 3 ParlG: The composition of the committees and the allocation of seats among the committee chairpersons are determined by the strengths of the parliamentary groups in the relevant council. Wherever possible, appropriate account should be taken of the official languages and regions of the country.

4 Switzerland makes use of its permanent neutrality to prevent and resolve conflicts. It acts as a mediator.

Counter-proposal of the Council of States of 19 June 2025

Art. 54a Swiss neutrality

1 Switzerland is neutral. Its neutrality is perpetual and armed.

2 the Confederation uses its neutrality to safeguard Switzerland's independence and security, to prevent conflicts or to help resolve them. It acts as a mediator.

A tug-of-war in the spring session

On 5 March, the National Council – despite 86 speakers taking the floor, though with far less depth of discussion than in the Council of States – clearly rejected both the initiative and a direct counter-proposal. On 12 March, the Council of States decided by a very narrow margin of 21 votes to 21, with the President of the Council of States casting the deciding vote, to stand by its counter-proposal. On 17 March, the National Council stood by its rejection of both the initiative and the counter-proposal.

On 18 March, the Council of States deleted the second paragraph of its counter-proposal, reducing it to a single sentence: “Switzerland is neutral. Its neutrality is



perpetual and armed.” This was done solely to persuade the National Council to back down. A tragedy! But even this minimalist version went too far for Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis: “The Federal Council remains convinced that the current concept of neutrality, with the existing scope for action, is the best way to safeguard Switzerland’s interests. It therefore remains convinced that neither the adoption of the neutrality initiative nor the counter-proposal before us today would be in Switzerland’s interests.”

Also on 18 March, the National Council stood by its rejection of even the minimalist version of a counter-proposal. On 19 March, the Conciliation Committee (see box) narrowly rejected a counter-proposal by 14 votes to 12. The majority of the Conciliation Committee ultimately proposed: “The Federal Assembly recommends that the people and the cantons reject the initiative.” A minority of eight conference members (not only from the SVP) unsuccessfully called for the motion to be rejected, meaning that Parliament would not have been allowed to issue a voting recommendation. On the same day, both chambers approved the Conciliation Conference’s motion. As mentioned, there was no time to give thorough consideration to what is best for Switzerland.

Credibility as a neutral country in the world

Any Swiss citizen with eyes to see and ears to hear can see for themselves how the Federal Council “safeguards Switzerland’s interests” – or rather, abuses its “scope for action”! Through the Swiss Army’s participation in NATO alliance exercises, the transit of foreign troops and aerial refuelling in Swiss airspace, the authorisation of arms exports to a select group of states and export controls or bans for the “rest of the world”, with sanctions against states and individuals

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Notes on Swiss neutrality IV

Switzerland in the interwar period from 1918 to 1939

Reflecting global political developments – a severe test for neutrality

by Dr phil. René Roca, Director of the Research Institute for Direct Democracy (www.fidd.ch)

During the First World War (1914–1918), Switzerland sought to uphold its traditional, armed neutrality. At the outbreak of the war, the political situation in Switzerland was still very unstable. German-speaking Switzerland tended to sympathise with the German Empire, whilst French-speaking Switzerland sided with France. It took the words of warning from *Carl Spitteler* (1845–1924), who later won the Nobel Prize in Literature, to strengthen the country's internal cohesion.

In his “Unser Schweizer Standpunkt” (Our Swiss Standpoint) speech, he explained:

“Above all, we must be clear about what we want. Do we or do we not wish to remain a Swiss state that

presents a united front to the outside world? [...] The people of French-speaking Switzerland are in danger of being tempted to align themselves too closely with France; for us, the opposite is true. In both cases, admonition, warning and correction are necessary. [...] Well then, in the face of this immense international suffering, let us fill our hearts with silent emotion and our souls with reverence, and above all, let us take our hats off. Then we shall be standing on the correct, neutral Swiss standpoint.”

This call for a rational, neutral stance on the part of Switzerland, alongside other conciliatory voices, helped restore greater internal cohesion to the Swiss political

landscape. It thus emerged – despite all the restrictions – relatively unscathed from the war. Overall, it can be said that the First World War strengthened the unifying power of neutrality.

Consequences of the First World War – General Strike of 1918

Whilst this unifying force managed to bring together this multicultural and multi-religious country, clear social divisions began to emerge as the war progressed. With the national strike of November 1918 – a nationwide general strike – the federal state plunged into its most severe political crisis. As in other European countries, social unrest reached a peak at the end of the First World War. The *Olten Action Committee* (OAK) – an alliance of

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“The Neutrality Initiative – ...”

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– including the freezing of their funds in Swiss bank accounts – that violate the law of neutrality and international law. With this outrageous and un-Swiss for-

eign policy, the Federal Council may well be safeguarding the interests of the major Western powers and their corporations, but it is certainly not safeguarding the interests of the Swiss people. It also continues to damage Switzerland's

credibility in the world as a neutral country that fulfils its self-imposed and widely respected obligations towards people and nations.

The Swiss people will decide on our country's neutrality

The *Neutrality Initiative* aims to stop the Federal Government in Bern from abandoning the principle of neutrality, which is of vital importance to our country. To this end, the fundamental criteria of Swiss neutrality are to be enshrined in the Constitution. The initiators have not reinvented these criteria; until a few years ago, they were clear to every Swiss citizen. The fact that our security is best protected when we stay out of foreign wars and military alliances is not a “myth of Marignano”, but a lesson learned from experience, even in recent times. It is equally clear that adopting sanctions imposed by foreign powers against third countries renders our country unfit to act as a credible mediator.

Now, this autumn, the Swiss people will decide on this fundamental question without being distracted by a toothless counter-proposal: do we wish to uphold neutrality and thereby preserve the core of Switzerland's identity and its credibility abroad, or do we bow to pressure from foreign powers to abandon Switzerland's path and submit to their command?

Neutrality is the backbone of Switzerland

Hans-Peter Portmann (FDP, ZH) in the National Council on 5 March 2026: “If the Swiss people reject this initiative and are not presented with an alternative proposal, this will be interpreted abroad as a message that Switzerland no longer stands behind neutrality. [...] People abroad will read headlines in their media stating that Switzerland no longer has neutrality, that Switzerland has abandoned neutrality.” Question from a fellow councillor: “If this Council does not consider the counter-proposal, which is to be expected: will you then vote yes to the initiative, or will you vote no to the initiative?” Portmann's reply: “[...] Yes, having weighed up the pros and cons, I personally have strong sympathies for supporting this neutrality initiative if there is no counter-proposal.”

* * *

mw. He did not find the courage, and with him a number of Council of States members from various parties and many National Council members from the centrist group, who had advocated for a counter-proposal not merely for tactical reasons, but whose votes revealed a genuine desire to preserve Switzerland's neutrality. How can seasoned Swiss parliamentarians allow themselves to be deterred by propaganda (“the Blocher initiative”) from support-

ing the *neutrality initiative*? In Switzerland, a country of direct democracy, every citizen has a vote. The fact that *Christoph Blocher* is in favour of neutrality surely cannot be a reason to reject the initiative.

Daniel Jositsch (SP, ZH) in the Council of States on 12 March 2026: “To summarise, the conclusion and stance of the committee rapporteur – and apparently of the majority – is: “We want to be neutral, except in war.” That makes about as much sense as lending someone an umbrella whenever it isn't raining. For that reason, I believe we must say something – namely, define what neutrality is.”

Marco Chiesa (SVP, TI) in the Council of States on 19 March 2026: “Switzerland is neutral; its neutrality is perpetual and armed. This means that what has been a firm principle for generations is now increasingly being called into question. What was once virtually set in stone is being increasingly eroded. But neutrality is a principle that cannot be bent or stretched at will. It must not be adapted to changing circumstances on a whim. Neutrality is the backbone of Switzerland, and when a country begins to doubt its own values, that is more than worrying. It is a warning sign.”

¹ *Current Concerns* No. 13 of 17 June 2025; <https://www.zeit-fragen.ch/en/archives/2025/nr-13-10-juni-2025/sommersession-2025-neutralitaetsinitiative-im-staenderat>

“Switzerland in the interwar ...”

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leading trade unionists and Social Democrats – threatened strikes and put political demands on the agenda. Added to this was the bourgeoisie’s fear that a development similar to that which had led to the 1917 revolution in Russia might unfold in Switzerland. The Federal Council decided to mobilise the army against the protesters. Nevertheless, the OAK called for an indefinite general strike and, at the same time, drew up a comprehensive list of reforms. The proclamation contained nine demands, some political and some social in nature. Among other things, it called for the immediate re-election of the National Council under proportional representation, the introduction of women’s suffrage, the 48-hour working week, the safeguarding of food supplies, and old-age and survivor’s insurance (OASI).

The OAK, increasingly fearing a violent crackdown on the strike by the army, called off the strike after just two days. However, a number of key social policy demands were subsequently introduced via referendums. For instance, thanks to the proportional representation system, the left-wing parties won more seats in the National Council in the national elections. A massive reduction in working hours was also achieved with the introduction of the 48-hour week, and the AHV project later led to a significant shift in social policy.

The significance of neutrality for Switzerland

The establishment of the League of Nations in 1920 marked the beginning of an active period in Swiss foreign policy. The Federal Council decided to apply for membership and resolved to put the decision to a vote by the people and the cantons. This step represented a significant extension of direct democracy into the realm of the country’s international relations. The Council of the League of Nations ultimately confirmed that, should Switzerland become a member, it would be exempt from military sanctions but not from economic sanctions. From then on, Switzerland was to describe its neutrality not as “integral” but as “differential”. On 16 May 1920, the people (56 per cent) and, by a very narrow margin, the cantons (11½:10½) approved Switzerland’s accession to the League of Nations. Geneva prevailed over international competition to become the seat of the League of Nations.

Switzerland became even more involved in arbitration proceedings, particularly through the participation of Swiss nationals in dispute settlements under the

peace treaties of 1918–19. With the rise of totalitarian regimes, Japan, Germany and Italy withdrew from the League of Nations during the 1930s. In the wake of the League of Nations’ sanctions against Italy over its war in Abyssinia (from 1935), Switzerland returned to “integral” neutrality on 14 May 1938, with the approval of the Council of the League of Nations. This status exempted it not only from military but also from economic sanctions obligations. From then on, Switzerland expanded its good offices, represented the diplomatic interests of other countries through numerous mandates, and thus promoted the settlement of disputes between them.

The global economic crisis and Switzerland

The global economic crisis of 1929 unfolded differently in Switzerland than in other countries. Although it hit the export sector early on, the sharp downturn did not begin until 1931 due to the favourable performance of the domestic economy. The low point in 1932 was followed by a period of stagnation lasting until 1936, during which unemployment rose. Conversely, agreements between the parties and associations gained in importance. The fundamental change in relations between employers and employees, which had been based on greater dialogue and trust since the national strike, now paid off. This led to an increase in the number of collective labour agreements being concluded, resulting in fewer strikes.

There were also anti-democratic forces in Switzerland, such as the Communists and the Frontists. Although these relatively small groups achieved some success, they were never able to pose a fundamental threat to the existing institutions or to democracy. At that time, there was a broad anti-totalitarian consensus amongst the Swiss population.

In this political climate, the social democratic and trade unionist camp and the bourgeois camp negotiated important compromises regarding economic policy. For instance, job creation and military rearmament were linked (the 1936 Defence Loan), and the principle of collective labour agreements was extended. This ultimately culminated in 1937 in the machinery and metal industry in the so-called “Peace Agreement”, which promoted lasting industrial peace.

Europe’s path to the Second World War

Whilst Switzerland returned to “integral” neutrality, the threat of war in Europe grew steadily. Germany unleashed

the Second World War on 1 September 1939 with its invasion of Poland. A good week earlier, the Hitler–Stalin Pact had shocked the European left. Whilst the Soviet Union now occupied the eastern part of Poland promised to it in a secret agreement and attempted to bring Finland to its knees during the Winter War of 1939–40, Hitler pressed ahead with his “blitzkriegs” in the rest of Europe. Following the fall of Paris on 14 June 1940, Switzerland found itself surrounded by totalitarian powers. Faced with this extremely difficult situation, the Federal Council remained silent for a long time. When Federal President *Marcel Pilet-Golaz* (1889–1958) delivered a conciliatory speech on 25 June 1940, the Swiss population was deeply unsettled. It was not until General *Henri Guisan’s* (1874–1960) *Rütli Report* on 25 July 1940 and the *Réduit* strategy that tempers were somewhat calmed. Subsequently, during the war years, Switzerland sought to strike a delicate balance between accommodation and resistance. ●

The article was first published in the *Schweizerische Kirchenzeitung* (SKZ) on 5 and 12 March 2026.

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Swiss citizens are leading the way

A visit to Jacques Baud and the Swiss Embassy in Brussels

by Eva-Maria Föllmer-Müller

Two weeks ago, a delegation of 20 Swiss citizens travelled to Brussels to campaign for the release of *Jacques Baud* from his sanctions prison and thereby send a message in support of freedom of expression. The programme also included a visit to the Swiss Embassy in Brussels and the submission of a letter to the ambassador there, *Jacques Pitteloud* (see box). More than ten *Freundschaftstrychler* 1 (friendship bell ringers) were present, drawing attention to the delegation's cause with traditional bell ringing.

The visit to Brussels was initiated by *Vital Burger* from the Swiss movement "Nous sommes Jacques". The documentary "For a Swiss citizen, Jacques Baud: Protest against



Friendship-Trychlers with traditionale cow-bells at the Swiss Embassy in Brussels. (picture screenshot)

EU sanctions outside the embassy in Brussels" can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RU_9RUXtMUM. Burger summed up the aim of the campaign in the following words: "We are here in Brussels today to send a clear message that we do not stand idly by when a fellow citizen is punished for expressing their views. The right to freedom of expression is a fundamental right enshrined in our constitution, and we want to make it clear that this is not acceptable. The Swiss Embassy here in Brussels has to follow its directives from Bern, and the current Foreign Minister is not particularly active in this regard. We do not know which powers are pulling the strings here, and whether he is truly representing only Swiss interests."

The Swiss had also brought Jacques Baud some food, each in their own way. The Berlin-based journalist *Patrik Baab*, who was accompanying the tour group, captured the handover of the gifts from Switzerland in his video report (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11hNvX4mBm0&t=624s>): cheese, bread, sausage, butter, honey, jam, tea, biscuits and more. Baud is visibly moved as he thanks the delegation: "I am touched that you have come here. A piece of Switzerland coming to Belgium. I would, of course, like to thank you all for everything – first and foremost for your presence, but also for everything you have brought with you. [...] It's absolutely wonderful to have people like this in Switzerland and to be able to count on people like you as friends – because I consider you friends. Thank you very much for coming here."

At the Swiss Embassy, the delegation was received by the chargé d'affaires and deputy head of mission, *Léonard Graf*, to the sound of cowbells ringing out, and the letter signed by the delegation members was handed over (see box).

One participant commented after the visit to the embassy: "I am concerned about

the situation we have in Switzerland, particularly regarding freedom of expression. [...] And that is why I said I would come along; I want to do something, because what is happening with Jacques Baud – these sanctions – is simply unacceptable. I think the Swiss representation is not doing enough. I think it's very positive that the chargé d'affaires received us, but I didn't find the answers satisfactory. [...] They haven't done enough for him. What are the reasons? Are they afraid? What are they afraid of? Are

they being put under pressure? I suspect so. But I don't know if that's the case or where it's coming from."

And in response to the interviewer's remark in the video recording of the visit: "As a Swiss citizen, you're now standing up for a fellow Swiss citizen", she continues: "That's exactly right. Otherwise, we'll all end up being sheep and won't be able to say what we want anymore. I have a German friend who is very afraid. She didn't come with us because she still has relatives in Germany. She has now been naturalised in Switzerland. She didn't come with us because she's afraid that she'll no longer be in good standing in Germany either. And I think that's absolutely, absolutely terrible."

* * *

On 28 March, the Berlin-based journalist *Hüseyn Dođru* posted a plea for help on X. Dođru has been subject to extrajudicial sanctions by the EU since May last year. His accounts have been frozen, and anyone who helps him is liable to prosecution. Dođru lives with his wife and three young children on a monthly allowance of 506 euros, which was granted to him to cover "basic needs". A local court had rejected an urgent application by Dođru to have the restrictions on his account eased. A few days later, the situation for the Dođru family deteriorated further. This is evident from the following international appeal for help:

"!!! HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY CALL !!! As of yesterday, German authorities seized the bank accounts of my wife. She is not sanctioned and has committed no crime. As of now we have only ca. 104 euros left – with two new-born babies and one 7-year-old child!!!"

There is an urgent need for strong protest from upright citizens. •

Letter to the Swiss Ambassador in Brussels, Jacques Pitteloud

"Dear Mr Pitteloud,

As Swiss citizens, we are standing before you, dressed in traditional shepherds' attire and wearing cow-bells from the Alps. This shall demonstrate our will to uphold the values of our ancestors.

Switzerland, a country with few natural resources, is particularly distinguished by the fact that we consider diversity of opinion as an important asset. Only if all people can contribute their views in a constructive dialogue something new and creative may emerge.

More than 90 years ago, a culture of only one single correct opinion was introduced in our northern neighbour country. Critical thinking was suppressed. Unpopular individuals were silenced. Everyone can read in history books, documenting where this led to.

Apparently, the European Union, actually under the leadership of a daughter from our northern neighbour, claiming to represent all the people of Europe, did not learn from history.

Dear Mr Ambassador, please help to fill the gaps of this lady's historical knowledge, and advocate for *Jacques Baud* to be allowed to express his opinion freely once again.

If the European Union continues down this path, all of us may become Jacques Baud, and conditions in Europe will resemble those we know from former times.

Please, send the clear signal to the European Union that a Swiss citizen must not be treated in this way. Please help to stop these legally and morally unjustified sanctions against Jacques Baud and ensure that justice will be done.

Brussels, 20 March 2026"

(Translation Current Concerns)

Talking to children about war and other disasters

by Renate Dünki

All over the world, the family is the place where children are protected and cared for. As well as looking after their physical well-being, its primary task is to lovingly nurture their mental and emotional health. Every child relies on this caring social embeddedness for their development.

In our world, where all values are being turned upside down before our very eyes, this is no easy task. For many years, we have been able to live in peace in our region, protected by the international legal system and the UN Charter, which was established in the wake of the devastation of the Second World War. Today, political upheavals bring with them unforeseeable dangers; armed conflicts are the order of the day, and images of these wars are broadcast around the world. Parents, but also schools, face major challenges.

How can we successfully engage into conversation with children amidst the daily horror stories and impart to them a sense of confidence and, above all, trust in their



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at the start of the war in Ukraine and is, sadly, as relevant today as it was when it was first published.

The authors of this highly readable book are Dr *Eliane Perret* and Dr *Rüdiger Maas*, both well-known for their publications on educational and psychological issues. As a psychologist and special needs teacher, Eliane Perret has a wealth of knowledge and experience in both theory and practice; Rüdiger Maas, a psychologist, heads the Augsburg *Institute for Generational Research*.

Three key areas

The book can be divided into three parts: The first part (Chapters 1/2) focuses on reliable information that enables us, as parents, to perceive situations impartially. The authors urge you to exercise caution when assessing conflicts, so as not to foster prejudice against other populations in yourself and your children. To this end, the book provides clarification, including by identifying the propaganda tools commonly used today to shape public opinion in times of war (Foreword). When it comes to dealing with news of the war, they recommend planning enjoyable time together as a family and taking a break from the media from time to time.

The main section (Chapters 3/4) focuses on age-appropriate conversations between parents and their children. This section outlines the characteristics of the child's developmental stages. The specific challenges posed by such a sensitive topic as war are illustrated through real-life conversation examples. The final, equally valuable section (Chapters 5/6) documents projects being tried and tested in practice for schools or day-care centres which, in addition to helping children engage the various topics, also provide them with

fellow human beings? For fear and hatred are a poor emotional foundation for the future, for which the will and readiness to reach peaceful conciliation will be more necessary than ever.

It is therefore good to pick up a book once again that can provide objective and nuanced answers to these pressing questions: "How to talk to children about war and other disasters." *A guide for parents, teachers and educators*. It was written

practical ways to make an active contribution. Engaging such topics together with our children requires preparation, sensitivity and time to convey to them: we are part of the human family; we want to help ensure that we can live together in peace.

When it comes to such topics, we as parents and educators are called upon to be genuine partners; we play a vital role and should make time for conversations. The authors emphasise this time and again. Supporting families and schools in this task is a major concern for them. They address us in short, easy-to-understand chapters and offer valuable advice: A calm, matter-of-fact approach from parents, without adding to the dramatics, forms the basis for any conversation with their children. And such conversations are the foundation of confidence.

What does my child want to know?

Parents often underestimate just how much of the news from the media their children pick up on. Today, for example, *social media accounts* are used intensively as propaganda tools. We adults must therefore be attentive and alert, open to our children's questions. It is clear that each age group of children and young people need different answers – but what exactly?

In the practical section of the book, we find examples that illustrate such questions and answers. One example is a conversation with a primary school child. The child wants to know from their parents why there is war and who is to blame. At this age, a child is already asking more complex moral questions about war; they wonder why one country attacks another, who is at fault, and what happens afterwards. As parents, we can point out the complexity of the situation and reply that there is usually not just one party to blame. And that international courts address these issues, even if this is not always possible. There are also neutral countries that do not take sides in a war and offer to act as mediator.

Going into the details of agreements between countries would be too much for a primary school child to handle. International treaties are not easy for us adults to understand either. However, children should learn that rules exist even in war. We tell them that many people are looking for ways to resolve the conflict, to help people, to end the war and to prevent war in the future. It is important for every child to know that many adults are thinking about these things.

And how do I talk to pre-school children? How to teenagers? Here, too, we find examples of conversations, accom-

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rd. With a pre-school child, the aim is to understand what is exactly on the mind of a child who has seen images of destruction on television. Asking follow-up questions clarifies what they want to know and have understood: "a destroyed house and crying women". An answer that remains factual about the situation but nevertheless conveys confidence could therefore be (quote p. 29, abridged):

"There has been a big dispute between the country where the women and children live and another country. Soldiers are fighting each other and destroying houses too. That is why the women are crying. They don't know what to do. Now many people in other countries have to think about how to settle this dispute. Because everyone wants to live in peace."

The mother is therefore trying to grasp the child's question precisely; she does not want to overwhelm the child with further explanations that go beyond the child's existing knowledge. Asking questions calmly, listening and giving age-appropriate answers in a confidential conversation will reassure the child. After all, they want to know what is going on, but above all, whether it will ever end. She points out that it is the adults' responsibility to mediate in such conflicts and tackle this problem.

“Serving World Peace”

by Karl-Jürgen Müller

The debate over how people will live together in future is ongoing not only between states or between alliances of states, but also within states themselves. The disregard for fundamental human rights and basic norms of international law is met by voices that know what is right and what justice means.

The monstrosity, audacity and force of ignorance and contempt for what is right must not be allowed to checkmate us. Instead, we must be reminded of what is right, why it is right, and why what is right is indispensable. As soon as anyone commits or even justifies a breach of the law, we must stand against it – knowing the fatal consequences of unchecked perversion of justice. History books must become textbooks.

Independent thinkers and fellow human beings show us the way. *Alfred de Zayas*, one of them, wrote his “Epigram for March 2026” (*Current Concerns* No. 6 of 24 March) succinctly and to the point. It reads:

“History teaches us that civilisations decline and end when societies abandon their foundational values and no longer respect the rules of the game. Legal uncertainty leads to chaos, violence and war. A ‘culture of cheating’, double standards and bad faith betray the ‘human Covenant’ and undermine the proper functioning of society.”

His final sentence reads:

“As civilisations rise and fall, the responsibility for maintaining our culture and values rests on each one of us”.

Our advantage: we need not content ourselves with legal-philosophical considerations. We can invoke positive law. In international relations, these are primarily

the principles of peace set out in the *United Nations Charter*: the equal rights of all UN member states, the prohibition of the use of force in inter-state relations – with only two exceptions: the use of force on the basis of a Security Council resolution and self-defence.

Many people are unaware that domestic law also imposes an obligation to promote peace. Germany is one example. The preamble to its constitution obliges all Germans to “promote world peace”. Article 26, in its first paragraph, states: “Acts tending to and undertaken with intent to disturb the peaceful relations between nations, especially to prepare for a war of aggression, shall be unconstitutional. They shall be criminalised.” Article 2 of the *Two Plus Four Treaty* of September 1990, which is binding on Germany, declares “that only peace will emanate from German soil”.

The constitutions of the federal states, as the well-known journalist and columnist *Heribert Prantl* reminded readers in the “*Süddeutsche Zeitung*” of 27 February under the headline “Joy of Peace”, assign the schools of the federal states – in Germany, the federal states are responsible for the school system – the essential task of ensuring that children and young people become capable of peace – not of waging war.

For the book “*Visions 2050. Where are we heading?*” [Visionen 2050. Wohin steuern wir?], published by *Eberhard Hamer* in 2016, I had compiled the provisions of the German state constitutions regarding the educational objectives of the federal states (page 99ff.). The objectives of schools are “to instil a love of peace in young people” (Baden-Württemberg) and to “educate pupils in the spirit of reconciliation between peoples” (Bavaria); “to promote peacefulness and solidarity in the coexistence

of cultures and peoples” (Brandenburg), “to educate for peaceful cooperation with other people and nations” and “to participate in the cultural life of one’s own people and of other nations” (Bremen), “to shape young people into morally upright individuals” and “to prepare them for political responsibility through independent and responsible service to the people and to humanity, through reverence and charity, respect and tolerance, lawfulness and truthfulness” (Hessen) and to educate them to become “free individuals” who are “prepared to bear responsibility for the community with other people and nations” (Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania); “in the spirit of humanity, to respect the convictions of others, to foster international solidarity and a spirit of peace” (North Rhine-Westphalia), “in the spirit of reconciliation between peoples” (Rhineland-Palatinate), “in the spirit of Christian charity and reconciliation between peoples” (Saarland), to instil “reverence for all living things, charity and peace” (Saxony), to educate pupils in “responsibility for the community with other people and nations” (Saxony-Anhalt) and to “promote peacefulness in the coexistence of cultures and peoples” (Thuringia).

Heribert Prantl identifies key elements of peace education: “Peace education is not about avoiding conflict, but about teaching people to recognise, identify, negotiate and resolve conflicts.” “Peace education is training in the art of compromise. It is a school of curiosity that engages with others without immediately passing judgement.” “Education for peace means [...] learning: even the other person, whom I may not even like, is somebody and has something to offer.”

At the end of his column, *Prantl* quotes *Nelson Mandela*: “Education is the most powerful weapon for changing the world.”

“Talking to children ...”

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panied by important guidance for each age group. The aim of such conversations must always be to give children and young people hope and a sense of purpose.

A range of projects

Chapter 5 in the third part contains fundamental considerations for schools or day-care centres. It summarises what is needed outside the family to help children and young people see other people as fellow human beings – even if there are no ready-made answers. “The most important thing in times of crisis is that adults – parents first and foremost, but also teachers – provide children with guidance and

security. This includes reliable daily routines as well as time for conversation.” (p. 46) Some of these ideas are highlighted here: “We condemn the war, not the people.” This helps children understand that in a war, everyone suffers, not just one war party. The authors also discuss how important it is to understand the experiences of the children in front of them, as every class includes children from crisis-hit areas. It is essential, particularly for them, to keep the conversation at a general level and to treat everyone with respect. It is the experience of peace education that learning about global efforts to contribute to greater peace is encouraging. One example is the work of the *International Committee of the Red Cross*.

The practical section (Chapter 6) presents various age-appropriate projects for schools, all of which strengthen the sense of togetherness amongst us as human beings. Working together with children and young people gives rise to discussions and opportunities to make a contribution to others. The project reports reveal how much confidence is built in children and young people when they themselves become active as helpers. They grow through this, drawing courage even in times of crisis. A whole range of projects is presented in this section, and it would be particularly important today to address the themes of mutual aid in every school and every day-care centre, in order to give our children a human perspective in times of war.