

# The Iran war and the erosion of international law

Peter Schwarz  
31 March 2026

Among the first victims of the Iran war is international law, as it was developed after the Second World War. Almost all legal experts agree that there is no basis in international law for the war being waged by the US and Israel against the country of 90 million inhabitants. It is an illegal war of aggression, a “crime against peace,” as one of the main charges against the Nazi criminals in the Nuremberg trials read.

It is not the first time that the US and its allies have flouted international law. The wars against Yugoslavia (1999), Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011) clearly violated international law. But back then, the attackers still tried to keep up appearances and legitimise their wars with far-fetched arguments.

This is no longer the case today. President Donald Trump, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth and Secretary of State Marco Rubio have all publicly announced that they no longer care about international law.

Trump declared in early January that he needed “no international law,” and that only his “own morality” could set limits for him. At the Munich Security Conference, Rubio announced that in the future, one must no longer “place the so-called global order above the interests of our populations and our nations.” And Hegseth opened the Iran war with the announcement that the US was fighting “without stupid rules of engagement” and “without politically correct warfare.”

The German government immediately supported this. The open breach of international law was obviously convenient for it. Germany’s ruling elites, who were deeply implicated in the crimes of the Nazis, have always perceived the Nuremberg verdicts as a disgrace to which they only reluctantly submitted.

After the Nuremberg Tribunal ceased its work, the West German judiciary continued the prosecution of Nazi crimes only hesitantly. By 2005, in 36,400

criminal proceedings, only 6,700 of a total of 172,000 accused had been convicted. Many mass murderers, with the blood of hundreds and thousands on their hands, were never indicted and continued their careers unhindered. The control centre of the government, the Chancellery, was headed for ten years by a co-author of the Nazi race laws, Hans Globke.

Chancellor Friedrich Merz, who joined the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) nine years after Globke’s retirement, travelled to Washington immediately after the start of the Iran war to assure Trump of his support. “We agree that this terrible regime in Tehran must go,” he said in front of the cameras. To this day, Merz refuses to acknowledge the character of the war as contrary to international law.

Merz’s party colleague Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the EU Commission, also supports the war and speaks out against international law. On 9 March, she told EU ambassadors that the debate over whether the war was “a war of choice or a war of necessity” missed the point. Europe must simply “take reality into account.” It must “no longer be a guardian of the old world order.” This, she said, was part of a world “that belongs to the past and will not return.” The EU required “a more interest-driven foreign policy.”

There are, however, also voices in German ruling circles that consider the open rejection of international law to be a mistake. The most prominent comes from Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who at an anniversary event of the Federal Foreign Office in Berlin on 24 March declared: “This war is contrary to international law—there is little doubt about that. ... Our foreign policy does not become more convincing by our not calling a breach of international law a breach of international law.”

This criticism of the Chancellor by the Federal

President, who is actually supposed to stay out of day-to-day politics, is extraordinary. But Steinmeier and others who criticise Merz's stance are not concerned with international law per se, nor with the democratic principles for relations between states anchored within it. Rather, they fear that such an open breach with international law will harm Germany's foreign policy interests, undermine its support for the Ukraine war, and weaken its economic relations with other states. They have a tactical, not a principled, relationship to international law.

Steinmeier, a Social Democrat, himself repeatedly flouted international law during his eight years as German Foreign Minister. He is among the architects of the coup that swept away Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014 with massive Western support, creating the preconditions for the war with Russia. He defends the genocide against the Palestinians, even if he occasionally wags his finger and warns Israel not to take it too far.

The Federal President justified his adherence to international law by arguing that "the great powers" could possibly survive in a world without rules and perhaps even profit in the short term. But this did not apply, he continued, "to all those who cannot count themselves among the great powers"—among which Steinmeier apparently also counts Germany, the world's third-largest economic power.

A paper by the state-aligned think tank German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), published on 9 March under the title, "The Iran war as a test case for Germany's credibility", explains in considerably more detail why verbal adherence to international law is in the interest of German imperialism.

Right at the beginning, it states that Germany has little influence on the conflict in Iran but is directly affected by the consequences. Therefore, "a realistic determination of our own interests is all the more important." In order to maintain Germany's foreign policy credibility, the government must designate the war as a violation of international law and clearly highlight the risks associated with it. This was fundamental, not least with a view to the war in Ukraine, "currently the greatest security challenge for Germany and Europe."

Kiev could become a collateral victim of the Iran war in several respects: The already scarce air defence

munitions and reconnaissance and intelligence capacities of the US could be diverted to the Middle East, and Moscow could gain additional leeway, thanks to rising oil revenues, to continue its war with undiminished severity.

Above all, however, the questioning of international law by the government "removes the normative basis from the arguments on which Germany relies internationally in its dealings with Russia: the rejection of military force to change borders, as well as the condemnation of the targeted destruction of civilian infrastructure and the demand for a just peace."

In other words, the Iran war and the open rejection of international law expose the lies with which the government has so far justified its support for the Ukraine war to the tune of tens of billions of euros.

With the undermining of the rules-based order, according to the DGAP, Berlin is accelerating "the erosion of its own foreign policy effectiveness." Its credibility and influence would be weakened "especially in the Arab world and the Global South."

This dispute over international law is therefore not about right or wrong, war or peace, but about how the interests of German imperialism—the continuation of the war against Russia, the conquest of new markets and raw materials in the "Global South," greater independence from China and the US, and dominance in Europe—can be most effectively pursued.

The danger of a third world war, threatened by the escalation of the Iran war, will not be averted by a wing of the ruling class that commits itself to international law in words, but only by an independent movement of the international working class that fights against war, for social equality, democracy and a socialist society.



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**