



Jürgen Todenhöfer Interview (EVENT 15.01.2017)

Note: This transcript may not be 100% accurate

INTRO: Jürgen Todenhöfer is a German author, journalist, doctor of law, media manager and politician. He first entered German Parliament for the Christian Social Democrats in 1972, visited dictator Augusto Pinochet in Chile in order to secure the release of political prisoners, pushed for the reduction of US and Russian ICBMs and supported the politics of German reunification. He has traveled to war zones, the countries of the Arab Spring and the so-called Islamic State. Has interviewed Bashar Al-Assad and the Ayatollahs of Iran and was present in Gaza during the Israeli assault known as Operation Protective Edge. Todenhöfer's recent best-selling books include "Thou shalt not kill" and "My journey into the heart of terror: 10 days in the Islamic State". Ladies and Gentleman: Jürgen Todenhöfer.

Zain Raza: It's a pleasure to have you on today. Let's start with some background, because I think that's been missing in the discussion. The US has a long history of intervention in the Middle East. It didn't start in 2011 with the Syrian War. It didn't start in 2003 with the Iraq War. In 1953, the President of Iran was overthrown, Mossadegh, for trying to nationalize the oil industry. In the 60s the CIA attempted numerous times to destabilize the nationalist government of Iraq, then if you move a little forward when Saddam Hussein was in power, it was supported by the West to destabilize Iran which led to the Iran-Iraq War. So, when we move to the 90s we have the First Gulf War, UN sanctions and now we are here in 2003. Why is the US so interested in the Middle East and what have been the human costs of these interventions?

Jürgen Todenhöfer: I have nothing new to tell you about the Middle East. They are interested because there is a lot of petrol in the Middle East and they want to be present there and they want to be able to avoid competitors like Russia or like China to have too much influence in the Middle East and therefore they support friendly governments and they try to destroy unfriendly governments. So, if somebody is friendly, he can be a dictator, they don't care. If he is unfriendly, he can be the president-elect, the democratic president like, like many presidents, like in Chile for example. They didn't care. He was elected, democratically but they kicked him out because he didn't like the United States. So, I was trying to find out what was driving the American Policy for years and years and years - and I'm an honorary colonel of the American Army by the way, that is from my former times as a member of the German parliament and my constituency was in Ramstein, Landstuhl. So, I know a lot about these things and I had a lot of theories what is driving American Policy, politics. It's just to have...

to be more powerful than the others and to be the world power number one and when I ask myself: Why did they support the Shah? The Shah was a dictator. And why did they kick out Mossadegh? Who was a democratic elected prime minister of Iran and that's clear. Mossadegh didn't like the Americans and the British and the Shah liked the Americans. So, the Shah could stay and Mossadegh had to leave. That's the only thing. I'm just reading a book, unfortunately not a book written by a woman. It's a book by the future... Yeah, unfortunately many of the books about the United States are written by men and the future Security Advisor Michael Flynn... I'm just reading this book right now and he is only talking about friendly guys and unfriendly guys and what Scahill said is not true. He thinks, Michael Flynn, that is the most powerful man in Foreign Policy, more powerful than the Secretary of State or than the Defence Minister, the National Security Advisor is extremely powerful and he has a list of enemies and on the head of this list are the Islamic State and Iran. Iran will have a very, very, very hard time under him and also Russia. He thinks that Russia is an enemy and Russia has to be considered as an enemy. So, it's always: you are a friend, you have good times and if you are unfriendly you have bad times. So, he's for example very angry that Obama didn't support Mubarak, that Obama didn't support Ben Ali. And if somebody really wants to know, to understand American politics, he should read Michael Flynn "the Battlefield". It's incredible, you won't believe it. I can tell you many things about this book now, you won't believe it. I will publish some quotes on Facebook in some weeks. It's incredible. That's a man who hates everything which is Islam and he is hating everything which is not friendly to the United States.

ZR: So, let's move on to ISIS. It's a complete mess over there. So, on the one hand you have the western powers aligned with the Gulf States and on the other hand you have Iran, the Syrian government and Russia aligned and some proxy war with Hezbollah in there. And everybody is fighting terrorism but somehow ISIS persists. So, can you unpack this conflict for us?

JT: No. No, but this is impossible because you have several thousand rebel groups in Syria. You just can't explain. I can tell you, that in this Syrian tragedy there is no good guy. Both sides, all the sides, commit criminal things, war crimes. That's very clear for me. The rebels and the regime also. But the whole thing started in 2011 - and I was there at this time - with legitimate demonstrations against the dictator. This was legitimate, it was quite peaceful, not completely peaceful but quite peaceful and the reaction of Assad's Secret Service was not acceptable. They were shooting into the crowd. I was talking to him... I said: "That's completely irresponsible". He said they will face trial and they never faced anything. But this was the first stage. It took, let's say, half a year. Democratic demonstrations against a dictator. But then the Saudis, like Scahill has said, the Qataris, the Kuwaitis, the Americans also and some western countries like UK and France realized that it was impossible to bring down Assad. They didn't like Assad because Assad is an ally of Iran and Assad is not friendly with the Americans and Iran is not friendly with the Americans. So, it's an enemy. And they saw that with demonstrations it was impossible to break his power. So, they started delivering weapons and bringing rebels into Syria and this is a second phase. It's a completely different story. But our mainstream media still continue to talk about the freedom fighters fighting against the dictator. This was true for the first half year, but now it's a proxy war. And behind the rebels and behind the terrorists are Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United States, UK, France and behind and cooperating with Assad is Russia, Iran, Hezbollah from Lebanon and... You know, I have met leaders of the rebels, not only ISIS. And I've met several times Assad. They don't play the main role in this war. they are pushed from one side to the other. The ugly role which is played, the dirty role like Scahill would say is played by those powers behind who

are sitting in their chairs, delivering weapons and enjoying that now a new city is destroyed and some soldiers from the regime are killed or some rebels are killed. The powers behind are, for me, the criminals. And so, the powers behind are for example the Saudis and the Americans. That's the truth.

ZR: You mentioned the Saudis and there's an ongoing conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Why doesn't the West pursue a diplomatic solution between these two countries?

JT: This is... so, if you would ask me how to solve these problems... You cannot solve the problem of Syria just by talks between the rebels and Assad because the rebels are not free and Assad is not completely free. The main problem in the Middle East beside the power wishes of the United States, the main problem is the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. There's an obsession between these two countries and they fight against each other and if somebody would really like a solution for the Middle East he should try to find a solution, not a friendship but a solution between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This must be possible and if we don't find a solution between these two powers in the Middle East then the wars will go on and I'm talking with the Saudis, I'm talking with the Ambassador of Saudi Arabia, just two days ago I spoke with the Ambassador of Iran. They would like to have a solution but they don't find a solution. And they know and I know that the Americans don't want a solution. The western countries don't want a solution. That's wonderful. In the Middle East... Saudi Arabia against Iran and Syria against everybody and Israel and everybody is killing each other and... I personally believe after I started to go the first time in the Middle East during the Algerian War, you know in the 60's. I think the western countries don't want a solution for the Middle East. They don't want stabilization. They want destabilization. Destabilization is in our interest. Destabilization is not in the interest of the people from the Middle East, of the people in Saudi Arabia or in Iran.

ZR: Germany hasn't shied away from the international stage. It supported spy missions in Vietnam, exported weapons to Israel and Saudi Arabia and also provides logistical and technical support - as Scahill was saying - to the United States. What role does Germany play in the current crisis in the Middle East and is it benefitting in any way?

JT: Not really. You know, I'm criticizing a lot this government and as you know I'm still a member of the Christian Democratic Party. I don't care I criticize also Mrs. Merkel and sometimes in a way that they don't like at all. But I would say the German politics in the Middle East are not, is not the most aggressive one. Germany is sitting in the driver's seat in Europe but they don't sit in the driver's seat in the Middle East and I think that it is a pity. I think that Germany should play a much bigger role in the Middle East but not as an aggressive power making more war or backing the war mongers. Our role could be the intermediary. A role to find solutions, to find peace solutions and this should be our aim. And the people in the Middle East when I speak to Saudis or Syrians or Egyptian politicians, they say: "You are so strong" - or Iraqis - "why don't you play a role?" I don't understand and this is something I don't like in the German government, that they think they should not play an important role in the Middle East, because that's the field of the United States. We should play an important role and I also hope that - you know, I don't give a judgement about Trump, I gave certain judgements during the election campaign but now I would like to give him these famous 100 days - but of course I'm fearing this new situation and I think that if it goes in the wrong direction Germany should say: No, no Mr. President! We are not following

you. We are an independent country and certain things we are not going to do with you. And this is the position of the new Germany, I think. The role that Germany should play. To be an independent country, but a country that would prefer peace solutions instead of war solutions and therefore I'm quite happy that we didn't at the beginning participate in Iraq, in the war against Iraq, which was illegal. It's a war crime to make this war. You have asked how many people have suffered in Iraq. More than a million people have died, more than a million. We didn't participate in Libya, and I think that's good. Our role after all this long German history should be that we contribute to find peace solutions in the world and not to make wars.

ZR: You are part of the Christina Democratic Union, which you just mentioned. Have you been able to change people's views within it? Because it's against the mainstream view within that party.

JT: Oh, yes. I speak quite often with members of this government and I was talking about Iraq with the former government, with Schröder, several times. I speak also with this government quite often and unfortunately, they don't follow me always. That's life! But whenever I go to a country like Iran, I played a little role to bring Iran and the United States together and the German government helped me, you can read this in Wikipedia. And whenever I make a trip to Gaza, I'm quite often in Gaza, because I think we should not forget Gaza even when we talk about the big powers now in the Middle East and when I go to Syria or when I go to Iraq or when I go to Yemen, very often after these journeys I'm meeting members of the German government and I'm telling them what I've seen. And I met members of the German parliament also after my visit in the Islamic State and I said don't underestimate these people. They are very, very dangerous and READ what they are saying, because they do what they are saying. They are un-Islamic gangsters, they are very dangerous...

ZR: Very dangerous... To my last question, you mentioned the antiwar movement in Germany at the moment and... it failed. So, what needs to be done to revive this movement and what tactics need to be employed that are effective in changing our foreign policy as it is today?

JT: I don't have a strategy. I write about these problems on Facebook. We reach between one and 16 million people with one post, so more than... more than our Chancellor by the way and sometimes especially, these young people who read Facebook – 24 years old usually, that's the average – and they say: "What can we do?" They are the public opinion, they are important and you know, Scahill said politicians need money. That's ok, but politicians feel the public opinion and if you open your mouth, if you make clear that you clearly disagree with certain things and if you write a letter to the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung or if you make a peace demonstration in a city, this is very, very important. You know, I was a member of the German Parliament... you depend on public opinion and therefore you should be very loud, you should go on Facebook, you should back things that you like and you should continue, you should always continue to fight against these dirty wars we have at this time. And let me say one word about that, because sometimes people say: "yeah, but you need wars. Sometimes it's necessary". In every war country I go, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria I always go to a hospital and in the war hospitals you see what war is. The big stories of heroic wars and all... that is all lies! When you see a soldier dying and beside you see a rebel dying and you see a child who has lost his leg and you see a mother heavily injured then you see

what war is and don't listen to people who tell you that sometimes war is necessary. War is really never necessary, war is a failure. War is a failure of the politicians and that's really my last sentence. There's something you have to understand. There is no fair war, you know, there is no fair war. You cannot expect from one side that the rebels are nice. There is no nice killing. Killing is dirty and you have to make it clear that because killing is dirty, wars are dirty and therefore we should be against wars, especially as Germans.

ZR: Good words. Jürgen Todenhöfer, best-selling author and journalist. Thank you so much for coming today.

JT: Thank you.

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