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Germany and the US in the Middle East and North Africa: from joint interests to conflicting strategies?

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Introduction

The ongoing re-shuffle of the Middle East presents a challenge to Germany and Europe as well as to the United States. With the post-colonial order eroding and other regional and international actors gaining influence, transatlantic cooperation in the region seems more important than ever. Against this backdrop, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) and the Middle East Institute (MEI) have convened German and American experts to discuss assessments, interests and foreign policy strategies concerning the protracted and difficult dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa from Berlin's and Washington's viewpoint.¹

While the protest movements of the 'Arab spring' have largely failed thus far, the region is subject to profound changes both in domestic and regional terms. In a quest for stability, policy-makers in Germany and the United States are facing the dilemma of either clinging to a status quo that is increasingly difficult to sustain or promoting unpredictable transformation processes. Equally challenging is the question of reliable partnerships in the region.

This conference report outlines interests uniting and dividing Germany (and Europe) and the United States. In addition, instruments to pursue the respective interests in light of an increasingly unsettled region will be examined. In general, it can be said that interests still align but are being pursued with increasingly different instruments. The structure of this report is roughly based on the workshop's agenda and reflects the findings of the discussions. Accordingly, we first address the overarching common interest of guaranteeing stability in the region by strengthening (good) governance and empowering regional partners. We will then take a closer look at several regional hot spots such as the Saudi-Iran rivalry, Syria, the Middle East conflict and North Africa.

¹ The conference "American and German Perspectives on the Middle East" took place in Berlin, in February 2019. In addition to staff from KAS and MEI, experts from other American and German think tanks, including the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the Hudson Institute, the Center for American Progress (CAP), the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), the German Council of Foreign Relations (DGAP), the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO) as well as German government officials and parliamentary advisors participated in the two-day workshop. This report, which draws on the often controversial discussions during the workshop, does not necessarily and exclusively reflect the views of individual participants or their respective institutions.



Stability: the overriding common interest in the Middle East

While the rhetoric of promoting democratic transformations in the Middle East has lost importance in Western foreign policy discourses, stability in the Middle East is considered key on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to the interest in stability, the Federal Republic of Germany remains faithful to its most traditional focus in the Middle East, i.e. the security of Israel. Energy security and the non-proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) are considered German interests in the region, too. The 'migration crisis' that Europe and Germany had to cope with in 2015 shaped the image of the Middle East as well as North Africa and has become an important factor in Germany's foreign policy toward the region since.

'Don't bother us' – that is how one could roughly describe the current American mood vis-à-vis the Middle East. US influence and interest in the region seem to be waning. While President Trump is trying to further reduce US engagement in the Middle East, thereby continuing a trend his predecessor had started, his rhetoric on Iran is extremely aggressive. Israel, too, remains at the top of the United States' Middle East agenda. Trump has undertaken unprecedented unilateral steps to support Israel and the Netanyahu government, whereas at least some waning of support has been registered among Democrats. In addition, the killing of the US-resident and Saudi journalist Kashoggi in Saudi-Arabia's consulate in Istanbul and the ongoing war in Yemen are two issues that have often been conflated in US policy discourse. Hence, US-Saudi and US-Emirate relations entered a difficult phase last year. In general, both Gulf monarchies have become more assertive in their foreign policies and less dependent on the United States.

Against this background, the question of how to bring about the stability both Berlin and Washington are aiming for remains a difficult challenge. Stability (or 'resilience' as it is now often framed in the EU's discourse) should not be confused with stagnation. Whereas Western policy-makers cannot avoid some level of 'tolerance' toward non-democratic regimes, counting first and foremost on authoritarian strongmen is unlikely to stabilize the region in the long run. Instead, pushing toward 'better governance' would be a tedious but more promising enterprise. The establishment of institutional frameworks that can provide services to the people (not necessarily state-driven) could become a sustainable antidote to extremism. However, given the difficult context, Western ambitions for the Middle East should be modest. Beyond the support of governance, the US and Germany/Europe ought to focus on conflict resolution and mitigation, thereby trying to contribute to managing the changes the Middle East is currently undergoing.

With Europe still struggling to become a coherent and capable foreign policy actor and given the declining willingness and capacity of the United States to engage with the Middle East, the question of regional partners has gained importance. While Europeans favor a regional security architecture that engages as many actors as possible, Trump has made a clear choice in counting on 'traditional' allies such as Israel and Egypt and the Sunni Gulf monarchies in order to build support not only for counter-terrorism efforts but also to pressure the Islamic Republic of Iran further.

Dealing with Iran's and Saudi Arabia's regional ambitions: containment versus engagement

The current US administration's attitude toward Iran is unambiguous: Teheran is regarded as the most detrimental actor in the Middle East and as such must be contained. Interestingly enough, one can detect a bipartisan stance by both Democrats and Republicans on the analysis of the nature of Iran and the influence the country exerts over its neighbors. Yet, the two political camps in the United States differ on what conclusions to draw from this analysis. Though the Democrats acknowledge the shortcomings of the 'nuclear deal' (JCPOA), especially with regard to Iran's ballistic missile program, they tend to lean toward an approach of engaging and controlling the country through a multilateral regime. Trump's administration, however, has made it crystal clear that Iran is to be brought to its knees through potentially crippling economic sanctions. Saudi Arabia on the other hand has been enjoying the overwhelming support of the White House for the past two years by ways of arms sales especially. Yet, the legislative branch in Washington – including both political parties – has toughened its attitude toward Saudi Arabia. In fact, Congress has passed several resolutions according to which the US should end assisting Riyadh militarily. Thus, the gulf separating domestic opinions on how to deal with Saudi Arabia has increasingly widened since the killing of Kashoggi in October 2018.

Germany has also adapted its approach toward Saudi-Arabia since that incident. All weapon exports to the kingdom were put on hold. Already prior to the killing of Kashoggi, German-Saudi diplomatic relations suffered several hiccups. While traditionally, Riyadh was regarded as a guardian of stability in an otherwise perennially crisis-shaken region, the more offensive Saudi foreign policy

course of recent years has prompted increasing criticism both in the German political and media discourse. On the other hand, Riyadh perceives Germany as being too Iran-friendly due to Berlin's staunch support of the JCPOA.

Very little room for cooperation on Iran exists between Germany and the US since the current approaches to Teheran differ so starkly. However, a common transatlantic approach that combines 'carrots and sticks' could be more effective in bringing about more cooperative behavior on the part of Teheran.

Syria: room for cooperation on helping rebuild the country on the basis of conditionality?

While the Trump administration is unwavering in its tough approach towards Iran, current US policies vis-à-vis Syria seemingly contradict Washington's strategy of curbing Teheran's detrimental influence in and over the region. As the US under Barack Obama had begun to chip away at the country's footprint in the Middle East – a course of action Trump has perpetuated despite its otherwise unyielding reversal of his predecessor's policies – other actors, first and foremost Iran and Russia, have moved into the vacuum to take control of developments in Syria. It is far from certain what the United States' goal in and for Syria looks like as the administration is sending mixed signals in this regard. First off – and as already mentioned – America's Syria policy clashes with its all-dominating approach toward Iran. If Washington were serious about curbing Iran's influence in the region, Syria would be the place to focus on for the implementation of exactly this policy. Secondly, American officials are ambiguous about the length and size of continuing the US's troop presence in Syria. Whether or not the United States is going to continue its support of Kurdish forces in Syria has a significant impact on US-Turkish ties as well as

Ankara's room for maneuver with regard to its neighbor to the South.

The removal of Assad has been a long-standing goal of Germany/Europe and the United States. Sticking to this policy could serve Berlin and Washington as a point of leverage before agreeing to contribute to the re-building of Syria. Jointly formulating and enforcing political conditions for a post-war order would lend substance to the German-US demand for a Syria without Assad in power. At the same time, both Berlin and Washington should realize how limited their means of influencing future developments in Syria are, which makes it all the more important that they agree on a common stance on 'conditioning' their help in rebuilding the war-torn country.

The Middle East conflict: toward the end of the 2-states-paradigm?

The security of the state of Israel has been a long-standing interest uniting the United States and Germany. For almost three decades this has included the endorsement of the "2-state-solution". While no progress has been made since the failure of the Oslo process, Germany and other Europeans as well as the US had continued to defend this paradigm prior to the election of Donald Trump. However, incumbent Israeli and Palestinian leaders have proven unwilling and unable to move forward with resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It remains to be seen if the current US administration's approach – supporting Israel without demanding many concessions – can move the stalled conflict forward. It is highly unlikely that the Palestinians will accept living in a 'golden cage', i.e. receiving economic support in exchange for giving up demands of self-determination. While Germany and most other Europeans have been withstanding Trump's unilateral measures so far, it is not to be expected that Europeans will step in as

honest brokers to mediate between Israelis and Palestinians. Furthermore, in spite of some low-level rapprochement between Israel and the Arab Gulf monarchies, 'normalization' between Israel and the Arab world will not be possible without at least some tangible progress toward Palestinian state-hood: the road to peace still leads (also) through Ramallah and not (only) through Riyadh. A multilateral approach that encompasses the conflicting partners, regional and international actors, such as the US and the EU, could thus serve as a useful framework for negotiations. Transatlantic cooperation would be a great asset in this regard. However, Washington is not willing to compromise on the matter with its European partners for the time being.

If multilateral mediation and negotiation attempts continue to fail, alternatives beyond the 2-state-solution paradigm have to be considered more seriously. Annexation of at least parts of the West Bank, i.e. main Israeli settlements, is increasingly discussed in Israel in general and within the ruling Likud party in particular. At the same time, ideas such as the dissolution of the Palestinian Authority (PA) have gained some traction among younger Palestinians. Such developments make clear that the long-upheld 'Oslo process' is increasingly turning into an empty shell.

North Africa: which path of transformation after the 'breakdown of politics'?

North Africa has witnessed a 'breakdown of politics' with each of the countries undergoing different paths of change and transformation. Today, Europe sees enormous destructive potential in the region and considers North Africa more as a shield (against immigration and security threats) than a bridge (into the cooperation potential with the rest of Africa and the Arab world). Europe, once a champion of multilateralism in the Euro-Med region, is increasingly re-nationalizing its policy toward North

Africa. The United States has always preferred to pursue relations with North African countries on a bilateral basis. Traditional American interests – stability, containing the spread of terrorist groups and maritime security – persist. In addition, much more than Berlin, Washington nowadays considers the region a theater for competition between great powers, in particular involving Russia and China.

As the democratic transition in Tunisia – a country receiving support from both the US and Germany/Europe –, is noteworthy and the elite's ability to compromise deserves recognition, challenges in the country remain and are often under-estimated, in particular with regard to the socio-economic situation and the lack of citizens' trust in the political class. In Algeria, the dominant role of the army has to be underlined. The stability of the country that is of special concern to both Washington and Berlin should not be taken for granted. Social micro-protests, which have been going on for long, reflect the frustration of large parts of the population.² Democratic ambitions are very difficult to realize in such a context as could be observed in Egypt where the military took over power in 2013. However, in the long term, only more inclusive forms of governance can bring sustainable stability to the region. With US and German interests very much aligned in North Africa, the region offers untapped potential for transatlantic cooperation when it comes to development assistance and the provision of international legitimacy among political actors.

One can conclude that Germany and the United States are united in their overall goal for the Middle East and North Africa, i.e. stability. How to reach sustainable stability in the region and how to pursue further common interests, such as Israel's security, access to energy resources, counter-terrorism and containing the expansion of "non-Western" actors, however, is a more difficult question and responses on both side of the Atlantic increasingly differ. Berlin and Washington, on a political and sub-political level, should nevertheless continue identifying areas – Syria for example and North Africa – in which not only their goals but also their policies can closely align to fully exploit the potential for transatlantic cooperation. In view of the current geopolitical reshuffle and the complex transformation in the Middle East and North Africa and with Western influence dwindling in this region, the unity of Germany and Europe on the one hand and the United States on the other hand, is more important than ever.

² Shortly after the conference, on 22 February 2019, a massive and long-lasting protest movement led to the resignation of long-time President Bouteflika in April 2019. Presidential elections have been postponed, following the demands of protesters. It is still unclear, which kind of 'transition' will unfold in Algeria.

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