Pseudo Stability in the Middle East and North Africa: Few Options for Germany

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Normative and Ethical Dimensions in Retreat
For some time, Germany’s main goals in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have been to foster political stability and security in order to advance its own economic interests and to guarantee the security of Israel. Additional concrete objectives have come to the fore in recent years: curbing Islamist terrorism and staunching the flow of migrants to Europe.

It has been virtually impossible for Germany to promote liberal democratic values in the region – for one thing because of limited opportunities to exert influence; and for another, because the political will was missing to exert pressure through leverage available before the upheavals of 2011. Hence the normative and ethical dimensions of Germany’s foreign policy receded further and further into the background.

It is true that German decision makers did call for a new, more sustainable definition of regional stability after 2011 – one that would promote socioeconomic justice, political participation, and respect for human rights as the cornerstones of stability – and for foreign policy to be adjusted accordingly. But the design of German policy still fails to reflect this understanding of stability. The federal government classifies countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia as relatively stable; it cooperates with them and with other MENA countries despite their authoritarian political practices, alarming disregard for human rights, and regional policies that exacerbate conflict rather than resolving it.

Relationships of Dependence
Certainly, Germany’s cooperation with MENA states is marked by dilemmas. Cooperation is urgently needed in areas like fighting terrorism and stemming migration. Because MENA governments are crucial to solving various regional conflicts, moreover, the German government cannot afford to jeopardize its diplomatic channels of dialogue with them. This would be the case if it were to apply strict conditionality by, for example, linking all cooperation strictly to progress on protections for political freedoms and human rights. The region’s ruling governments would see this as an affront to their own sovereignty. Considering the seriousness of the conflicts in Syria,
Libya, and Yemen, such a policy would not contribute to putting viable solutions into place.

The region also continues to present German businesses with a very lucrative market. Affluence and progress in the Federal Republic of Germany are interwoven with its economic ties to authoritarian states around the world, not least in MENA. Indeed, if economic cooperation is tied to conditions in the political realm, the German government and, with it, German society must be prepared to accept a certain amount of economic loss.

Moreover, due to changing foreign policy parameters, for example, the highly controversial and destabilizing MENA policies of Russia and the United States, Germany’s engagement here is more crucial than ever.

Unavoidable Risks, for which Germany Also Bears a Responsibility

The majority of governments in MENA pursue policies that fan the flames of radicalism rather than addressing their root causes. Political repression, the unjust distribution of resources, and a lack of opportunities prepare the ground for new forms of potentially violent confrontation. Moreover, the highly militarized regional policies practiced not only by Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt but also by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and Turkey exacerbate situations of conflict rather than resolving them. Such national policies leave little if any room for political solutions involving conflicting parties directly. This, too, increases the likelihood of new waves of refugees and migrants surging toward Europe.

Germany may be partially capable of warding off risks emanating from the region, but it is hardly ever able to address their fundamental causes. Cooperation with intelligence services and military forces in the fight against terrorism has indeed helped avert terrorist attacks in Europe and at least partially suppress extremist groups such as ISIS. Such successful individual instances of cooperation on hazard prevention and emergency response do take place frequently, and these will continue. But the region will remain mired in conflict as long as its political elites are unprepared to address the urgent issue of social inequality and ensure pluralism and respect for human rights at home.

While the region’s political elites are mainly responsible for these grievances – and hence for the potential conflicts in the respective countries – Germany is also indirectly responsible. Germany’s economic cooperation does strengthen and legitimize autocratic regimes. The company Siemens, for example, has a contract worth billions of euros – the largest in its corporate history – to build gas-fired power plants for Egypt. The megaproject has supplied some parts of the country with electricity for the first time and improved supply in others. Although this does benefit large parts of the population, it also enhances the status of Egypt’s ruling powers. Germany’s economic cooperation with such leaders may indeed help stabilize their regimes in the short and middle term by contributing to some extent to their ability to bring about economic and social change. But it hardly contributes in the long term to stabilizing society as a whole and guaranteeing social peace.

A Franco-German Initiative: New Opportunities

Germany remains highly regarded in the region due to its economic power and comparatively balanced policies toward the region’s different countries. It should supplement these strengths. The renewed partnership with president Emmanuel Macron of France offers both European heavyweights an opportunity to act together in MENA. There is much to recommend the two states working together here. In MENA countries, relations with the European Union as a whole have less of a shaping role than bilateral relationships. The Gulf states in particular find the EU to be a conceptually difficult construct, and these countries place higher value on direct dialogue at the national level. Moreover, up until now, the EU has not pursued a coherent, coordinated Middle East policy. Considering the EU’s current internal divisions, attempts to catch up now are unlikely to bear fruit, which will further diminish the EU’s political and diplomatic weight.
Policy Recommendations

It is impossible to formulate a single strategy for the MENA region, considering the heterogeneous and complex nature of the problems there. But there are some sensible, cross-border measures that the next German government could take.

- **Establish long-term dialogue on security**

  The differing perceptions and approaches of individual MENA states need to be brought closer to those of Germany. Some minimum of mutual consensus – on identifying the parties to a conflict, threats and risks, and available courses of action – is a precondition for finding effective and sustainable solutions. Germany’s next government should set up individual long-term dialogue formats to discuss security not only with Saudi Arabia and Iran but also with the UAE, Turkey, and Qatar. Identifying shared threats, analyzing risks, and deepening trust should be at the top of the agenda for such a dialogue. This project will be hardest to achieve in Turkey, due to the present tension in Turkish-German relations.

- **Bundle European strengths**

  Standing together as advocates of the liberal world order, France and Germany should also fulfill that role in the MENA region, showing the regimes there greater resolve, and with it, greater strength.

- **Take a balanced approach to economic cooperation**

  The German government should not allow arms sales to any country that pursues dangerous interventionist policies, and still less to any country for whom there is a possibility of using armaments (in some cases, repeatedly) against its own populations. The immeasurable costs incurred by yet more warfare and destruction in the region would far outweigh the economic loss caused by the cessation of such sales.

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