

Looking Beyond Iran to the Persian Gulf

German Foreign Policy Must Get Serious about the Entire Region

By Cornelius Adebahr

The security situation around the Persian Gulf is a crisis waiting to happen that should make European policy-makers shiver. Possible scenarios include nuclear confrontation, severe disruptions of world trade, and a persistent environmental crisis that foments social unrest and could lead to the toppling of regimes and disintegration of states. While Germany and Europe have a key role to play on the Iran nuclear file, only contending with it is too limited. Instead, the next German government should overcome its nuclear myopia and develop a coherent and comprehensive approach to the entire region.

Iran Is Key for a Geopolitical Europe

With all the crises engulfing Germany and Europe at present, Iran is not considered a major problem. That, however, is a mistake. Only seeing Iran through the nuclear lens means neglecting other, equally concerning challenges – one of which is the longer-term threat posed by the recent developments in neighboring Afghanistan. As it now stands, Berlin is not sufficiently focused on the breadth of the “Iran File,” the set of wider issues emanating from the Islamic Republic. That will have to change with the next federal government.

In fact, Iran is emblematic of future global fault lines. Mirroring authoritarian turns in many countries, big and small, its hard-liners have now taken over the country. Regional alliances

are shifting that are part of a global rebalancing of power, ultimately raising the question of whose order will prevail. The current negotiations in Vienna to safeguard the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, can only tackle a single element of this larger confrontation – albeit a crucial one. Ostensibly, the talks aim to prevent Tehran from developing a nuclear weapon. However, this diplomatic dance is also about two fundamental things: first, the integrity of the global non-proliferation regime and, second, the reach of US superpower and the ability of the United States to impose sanctions on third countries at will. Consequently, the negotiations are also related to the ability of other powers – not only those such as China, Russia, and Iran but also, to a lesser extent, those in Europe – to withstand such pressure.

While Germany cannot address such overarching challenges on its own, it has a distinct role to play in bolstering a common European position. To ensure that the European Union (EU) can be an actor in this global contest, the next German government needs to broaden its view of Iran and invest more resources, both political and in terms of personnel, in its diplomacy. Because the Iran File is too important to leave to (too few) diplomats and (some) experts, Germany must:

- Focus much more on the regional security dimension while pushing all partners to return to the nuclear deal;
- Set a broad regional agenda – from ending proxy conflicts to securing maritime routes; from investing in environmental cooperation to engaging with the people in all countries concerned; and

- Work on the home front to explain why Germany and the EU need to engage with problematic governments, especially because the Islamic Republic will become an ever more divisive subject under its new leadership.

DETERMINING FACTORS
Domestic Entrenchment with Regional Effects

When former supreme justice Ebrahim Raisi became Iran’s president in early August 2021, succeeding Hassan Rouhani, hardliners took control of all levers of power. That said, this transfer near the top – the ultimate arbiter of power in Iran remains Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – spells continuity rather than change. In response to Washing-

ton unilaterally abrogating the JCPOA in 2018 and the Trump administration’s subsequent “[maximum pressure](#)” policy, those in Tehran advocating for a military-security approach prevailed over those championing political and economic engagement. The new Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, dubbed the “[revolutionary diplomat](#),” has a history of working with conservative figures from the security establishment. Also, it was no coincidence that, at Raisi’s August 6 inauguration, the leaders of militias funded by Iran – Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah – were prominently seated in the front row.

While the effort to revive the JCPOA to benefit from lifted sanctions has

Khamenei’s backing, Iran’s fixation on “strategic depth,” as well as its “axis of resistance,” will gain more prominence in the coming months. Both concepts (defined below) have tangible implications for the wider region – not only around the Persian Gulf but also stretching west into the Levant and further south to the Gulf of Aden. In addition, given the chaotic withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan, these concepts will increasingly impact the region to Iran’s east, including its border with Pakistan.

“Strategic depth” alludes to a doctrine prevalent in the security apparatus – in particular, among the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) – to defend the country’s territory far

Iran’s Allies and Foes in the Middle East



Source: Iran’s Networks of Influence in the Middle East (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019)

away from its borders. In this vein, the Guards' elite arm for foreign operations, the Quds Force, has already taken the fight to places like Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. It may not be long before the IRGC feels the need to extend its presence in Iran's eastern neighborhood. While welcoming the departure of US forces from Afghanistan, (Shia) Tehran is concerned about both the (Sunni) Taliban ruling the country and an increased presence of Islamist fighters there. Just as it fought the so-called Islamic State deep into Iraq, Iran could feel compelled to intervene more forcefully in Afghanistan.

The "axis of resistance" refers to Tehran's alliance with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the Lebanese

Hezbollah, including Shia militias in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen. Again, the IRGC is responsible for such alliances, not the the ministry of foreign affairs – a fact that Iran's previous and US-educated foreign minister, Javad Zarif, bitterly complained about in a confidential conversation leaked earlier this year. The recent hardline takeover of government promises to steer Iran off the "path of moderation" initially championed by Rouhani and put it on an opposing one of resistance.

Indeed, this "axis" more broadly represents Iran's attempt to side with non-Western powers in an effort to free the region from US hegemony. This includes choosing Russia as its main military partner in the Syrian theatre or China as its main economic partner (due, not least, to broad US sanctions that prevent European companies from dealing with the country).

bolized by the signing of the "Abraham Accords," which normalize relations between Israel and Bahrain and Israel and the United Arab Emirates. However, Arab countries have also sent clear signals to Tehran that they infinitely prefer an arrangement with their neighbor to all-out confrontation. Iran has not only kept Saudi Arabia in check by wearing it down in Yemen and demonstrating Arab vulnerabilities through regular attacks – whether on oil installations on land or ships in international waters – but it has also prevented a full alignment of the Gulf states by working closely with neutral states like Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar. At the same time, despite this overarching rivalry, there remains a lot of potential for practical cooperation on issues from jointly battling the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of climate change to managing both migration flows and religious tourism in the region.



Government Attitudes to Iran:

ALIGNED
 TILTING
 TOWARD
 OPPOSED
 NEUTRAL

Note: This overview includes non-state partners within countries but only those that are aligned with or tilting toward Iran.

CHALLENGES
 US Withdrawal and
 Regional Rivalry

Iran's domestic entrenchment is compounded by shifting regional alliances that, so far, have continued to work in Iran's favor, despite US President Joe Biden keeping up the "maximum pressure" of his predecessor. This policy is only one facet of the gradual withdrawal of the United States from the region that started with Barack Obama's "pivot to Asia" and was followed by Donald Trump's – and now Biden's – campaign to "end the forever wars." Its disastrous retreat from Afghanistan and the departure of its combat troops from Iraq by the end of 2021 also speak to the priority that the United States now accords to the Asia-Pacific. This suits Iran perfectly, as it aims to become the dominant regional power around the Persian Gulf.

Sensing the loss of US protection, some Arab states have reached out to Israel to jointly confront Iran, as sym-

As the era of a US-dominated Persian Gulf comes to an end, the new order will be decided by both littoral countries and outside powers jostling for influence. The former – all being non-democracies – think in terms of regime stability and national sovereignty; the latter – China, Russia, and partly also Turkey – seek to fill the vacuum left by the United States. So far, only Beijing's geopolitical Belt and Road Initiative, which crosses the region over land and at sea, offers a coherent vision of the future. But it is one that can hardly be considered to be in Europe's interest.

RECOMMENDATIONS
 A Comprehensive Approach
 with Public Backing

Against this background, three points should be high on the next federal government's foreign policy agenda. It needs to:

Formulate a coherent regional approach to the Persian Gulf and its many shared challenges, which in-

*This "neutral" designation refers to the previous internationally-backed government.

cludes addressing water scarcity, maritime security, social inequities, and the desolate human rights situation. For decades, it has been a hallmark of European policy to galvanize neighboring countries to invest in collective security – comprehensively understood. The next German government would do well to revive such engagement.

Develop a “Plan B” in case the nuclear talks in Vienna should fail. This ultimately rests on the political will of both Washington and Tehran to implement the long list of technical measures already agreed. Given Iran’s considerable nuclear advances under the current circumstances, such an alternative plan would have to include non-diplomatic means to contain the Iranian program. It must also build leverage to address the worrying

expansion of Saudi Arabia’s own work on nuclear and missile technology.

Include the wider public in its deliberations. Today, any debate about the right policy toward Iran is drowned out by vocal opposition based on Tehran’s enmity with Israel. However, German and European interests in nuclear non-proliferation, social stability, broader economic development in the region, and, not least, the [ongoing consular cases involving EU citizens](#) do not allow for lofty disengagement from an unpleasant regime – whether that of the theocrats in Tehran or the royals in Riyadh. On this, in particular, elected representatives can play a decisive role in explaining policies to a German audience that – like its leadership – is only slowly waking up to the international challenges the country faces.

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Rauchstraße 17/18
10787 Berlin
info@dgap.org · www.dgap.org
@dgapev

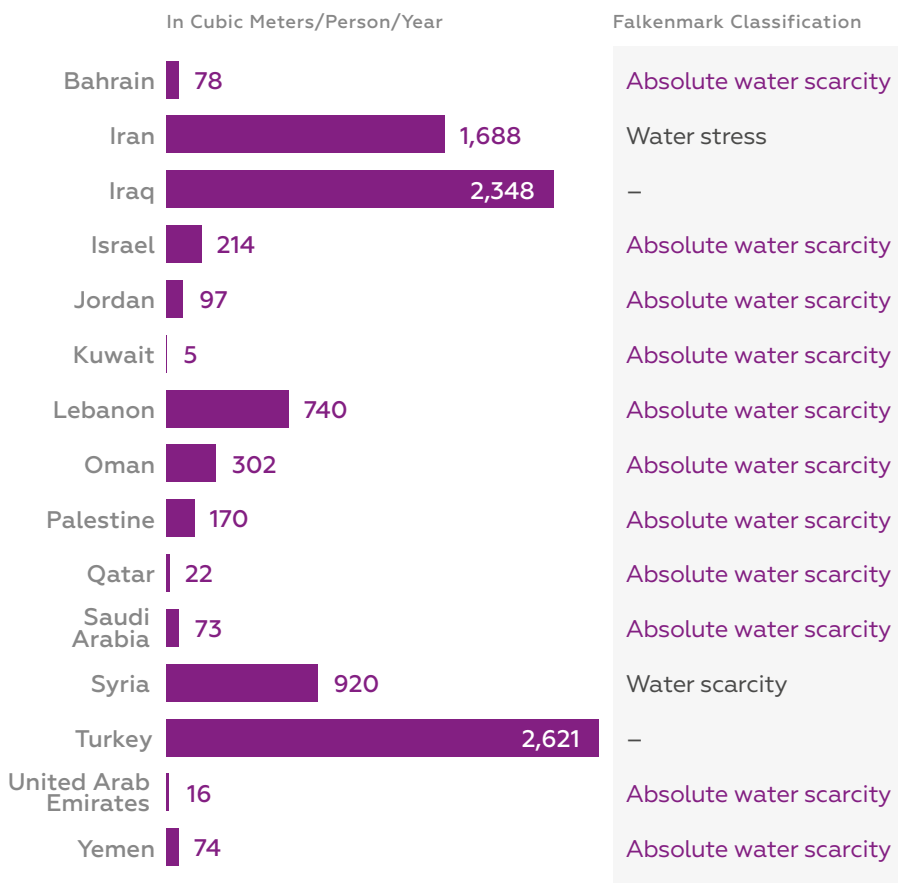
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Water Availability in the Middle East



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