

Germany in the Mediterranean - Between Sincere Engagement, Impotence, and a Normative Paradox

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The Mediterranean region was catapulted to the forefront of German foreign policy because of the uprisings in 2011 and subsequent drastic developments. At first, genuine euphoria over people's power and the transitional steps towards more open democratic systems characterized Germany's standpoint, and relatively quickly resources were augmented and new instruments created to support projects and initiatives aimed at democratic and structural reforms. Today the region is in total disarray and Tunisia is the only exception, albeit an extremely strained one, of a country transitioning to a more pluralistic and open society. The German stand was altered accordingly but its engagement continued and was raised considerably. Despite continuous noteworthy engagement in the region, internal and external constraints prevent a more visible German hallmark at the macro-political level in the area, and the German government, as in the past, remains vulnerable to criticism because of a normative contradiction in its foreign policy.

Sincere Engagement - For Germany as well

Two major interests of Germany are to curb migration and fight terrorism. But it would be inaccurate and unjust to reduce the German approach to those two domains that have always featured prominently in Germany's politics towards the region. Germany has been supporting stability and economic cooperation in the Mediterranean for decades, long before the uprisings in 2011. Now, the country is one

of the key development and humanitarian aid actors. Germany's Official Development Assistance (ODA) to the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) has more than doubled since 2011. The lion's share of this increase flowed into humanitarian aid to Syria and host countries for Syrian refugees, as well as soft loans to Morocco in the renewable energy sector. Germany has been the key driver for comprehensively and collectively responding to the refugee crisis emanating from conflicts in Syria and Iraq. In 2017, it offered humanitarian aid in the Syrian crisis context to the figure of €720 million, which is topped only by the US. Since 2012, the Federal Foreign Office has made available a total of almost 2 billion euros for humanitarian projects in the region. The German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas recently reaffirmed the support for Syria and announced an additional €1 billion in aid to Syria and neighbouring countries who are hosting Syrian refugees.¹

Tunisia is an example that showcases how Germany, particularly when it observes genuine reform efforts from the bottom, but also by political elites, musters considerable resources and support. By way of an example, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development has raised its funds for Tunisia from 37.5 million euros in 2010 to 290 million euros in 2016. Tunisia is also a key beneficiary of the special initiative for the stabilization and development of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, an instrument with which German development cooperation tries to improve living conditions and promote political participation and social justice in the MENA region. Tunisia also received 75 million from the Transformation Partnership by the German Federal Foreign Office for more

¹ An example of a very successful alignment of humanitarian and development aid is the Cash for Work Programme that creates employment opportunities for both refugees as well as the inhabitants of host communities.

than 100 projects targeting good governance and the rule of law, employment and dual vocational training and civil society and professional media.² This is certainly not to suggest that there isn't legitimate critique of Germany's aid and room for improvement, but overall the engagement is considerable. Another certainty is that this aid should serve local communities and recipient countries, and civil society is placed centre stage in this engagement. Hence, Germany supports bottom-up stability and willing reform-oriented counterparts at the highest echelons. But this aid is undoubtedly also a core tool to further Germany's own interests of stability, security, and economic and trade expansion in the region, and, consequently, national interests at home. The migration file needs to be seen through this prism as well.

Migration and the Internal Calculus

The German government views all its economic, social and political endeavors in the region as measures that, if bundled together, should reduce push factors of migration. It has also created specific migration-related projects such as advice centres for rejected asylum seekers to assist them in establishing their own businesses and finding jobs upon returning. Whilst it is true that the entire engagement serves to curb migration, there is a securitized approach in the immediate handling of the issue, as walls are raised rather than torn down for people to reach Europe in a legal and human manner. For example, Germany is a key supporter of FRONTEX in terms of personnel and resources, and Germany is tolerating Italy's cooperation with militias and former human traffickers to control Libyan waters, the results in terms of devastating human rights violations being well-documented. At the same time, it is uncertain whether there will be noticeable progress on a new German migration law in this legislative period. Particularly after having paid a high political price for its open-door policy vis-à-vis Syrian refugees, the German government is primarily seeking to prevent people from crossing the Mediterranean. Germany's engagement pertaining to the migration issue will, today more than ever, be driven by internal

calculations on populism. In this legislative period, countries in the Maghreb are more likely to be designated as safe countries. The goal is to accelerate asylum application processes from these states, facilitate the repatriation of rejected asylum seekers to their countries of origin and – just as importantly – to convey a message inside Germany that the government is changing course and becoming firm on migration. Out of the three suggested Maghreb countries, Tunisia unquestionably scores best on a rule-of-law and freedom scale compared to the other two. Morocco and Algeria, for their part, should first enhance their human rights and rule-of-law record, as it is paramount for such a designation to be based on solid, scientific criteria: it represents a strong normative message to others in the region.

Restrained Policy, Diplomacy, and Multilateralism under Stress

Being an economic and political heavyweight in Europe, combined with the rise of a myriad of challenges globally, Germany's allies, together with international experts, have often called for a more active German role in both political and military terms. This debate flared up again when the US, the UK and France carried out airstrikes in Syria. Germany was not asked to join, and, precisely as a result of the message conveyed through their not being consulted, the why- and if- questions were once again on the table. Germany, because of its historical legacy, acts with restraint when asked to intervene militarily, and its reaction to crises, whether in the Mediterranean or elsewhere in the world, will always be, first and foremost, of a diplomatic and political nature. Any decision to engage militarily will always be preceded by an intense political but also public debate to assure the backing of German society. This was the case, for example, with the military support and training given to the Kurdish peshmerga in northern Iraq since 2014.

In principle, for the new, as well as previous, German governments, it is paramount to act within legitimate multi-lateral settings such as the United Nations (UN) or the European Union (EU); this is a pillar of Germany's foreign policy. While in essence

² It is beyond the scope of this paper to comprehensively list Germany's engagement. Hence several examples are depicted.

an approach worthy of respect, in recent years it has been increasingly undermined by several factors. The EU has never been able to manufacture a joint foreign and security policy towards the MENA region; bilateral relations always trumped EU politics. Today the EU is more fragmented than ever with the UK departing and the community of values being highly contested by members such as the Visegrád group. Against this backdrop, calls for at least Germany and France to join forces vis-à-vis the Mediterranean seem legitimate. A prerequisite, though, would be France's willingness to open up to Germany as regards a region it considers its own backyard because of its colonial past and strong ties. Whether this shift will materialize is marred with doubt.

On an international stage, the US has metamorphosed under President Trump into a very difficult partner for Germany. Envisaging both sides strategizing for the Mediterranean and finding common ground on many dossiers seems unrealistic. The blockage of instruments of international order and relations, such as the UN, by powers like Russia is an additional challenge. Syria is a case in point, where the UN is paralyzed and where there are two mediation processes competing with each other: the UN's Geneva process and the Sochi process, headed by Russia. The malfunctioning of these multilateral instruments, within which, in times of crisis, Germany is even more keen to embed its politics, combined with its non-military profile often lead to German impotence at the macro-political level in the region.

Impotence Because of Complexities

This impotence is not only a repercussion of divisions within the West and powers obstructing the rules of the international system and law. It is also related to the very nature of crisis that is prevalent in the Mediterranean. In Libya, for example, an extremely complex landscape of warlords, militias, terrorists, and criminals competing for power and resources and used as proxies by regional actors is prevalent. The same holds true for Syria. A feasible scenario of how Germany, or any actor other than the UN, should engage to find a political solution is non-existent. The rivalry between the two regional

powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran, and its destructive manifestation in countries such as Syria, Lebanon or Iraq is on the rise and the only power with clout here, the US, has sided with Saudi Arabia and is further jeopardizing the situation by threatening to annul the nuclear deal with Iran. All too often, a militarized autocratic mindset of elites that pursue zero-sum-politics reigns in the Mediterranean with hardly any room for compromise.

The leverage debate in such settings is ongoing. Before 2011, the climate in the southern Mediterranean might have been more conducive to consistent conditionality, a policy never applied by the West. Today, with increased emancipation from the West, a diversification of the MENA states' external relations and the existential nature of conflicts, conditionality might lead to a further deterioration of an already strained political and diplomatic infrastructure between the German government and some of its counterparts in the region. Besides, for conditionality to bear fruit, there needs to be much more coordination and streamlining of Western countries' foreign policies towards specific cases, which should also be in line with policies pursued by the European Union. Only collective relations constitute a powerful tool. As noted, though, divisions mark the reality today. Finally, if economic or military support are conditional on improvements in human rights practices or the like, it is likely to be rejected by states in the region, who may well then deny a country like Germany access to their markets and economic opportunities, even if this translates into losses for them as well. These economic losses need to be factored in. This is where the normative paradox in Germany's foreign policy rises to the surface.

Normative Paradoxes

Germany's foreign policy is formulated as a value-based policy. But human rights and democracy will always be subordinate to economic, security and strategic interests. Germany's wellbeing and its globalized social market economy depend on an economic and strategic interconnectedness with other states, including autocratic ones, worldwide. Credibly standing up for its own values and norms seems unattainable. Egypt, for example, is an autocracy but, according to German decision-makers' ra-

tionale, the country is too big to fail, and diplomatic channels need to be kept open because of its strategic location; and it is a giant market. While the logic of Egypt being too big to fail is understandable, as state failure or massive internal unrest indeed pose a huge security threat to the region due to the mere size of its population, the question remains: aside from economic gains, what political and diplomatic capital does Germany extract, respectively, by increasingly normalizing its relations with Egypt and compromising on the normative dimension of its policy?³ Furthermore, its aid programme also indirectly contributes to strengthening and stabilizing the regime itself.

The same paradox holds true for Germany's arms deal with countries in the region. While these policies might sound plausible for fighting terrorism, for example, they cannot obscure the fact that Germany might end up being an indirect actor in war crimes and human rights violations. A recent manifestation of such an unintended role are German tanks used by the Turkish military in its operations in Syria. In principle, even countries experiencing relative peace and which receive weapons and equipment today might be the culprits tomorrow, if these are then used against their own civilians or those of other countries. In a militarized region where an unprecedented arms race is underway, the option of war and violent confrontation ranks highest. Hence, Germany's policy here is incoherent and unsustainable, and this paradox sends out very mixed signals to societies in the region. Nevertheless, in general, and compared to other Western powers, Germany enjoys a positive image, a matter it should make more efforts to capitalize.

No Sense in a Mediterranean Strategy

The absence of a German strategy towards the MENA region in general, into which policies are embedded to attain defined goals, is often lamented. There are indeed common denominators regarding

the woes of countries in the region, such as corrupt governance, high unemployment, poor quality education systems, an absence of economic competitiveness, or dysfunctional social safety nets. Last but not least – with the exception of Tunisia and, to some extent, Morocco – countries in the region lag behind in terms of inclusive political systems and freedom. Although, given the extreme heterogeneity in the status quo and specificities, such a strategy would either have to be abstract, and hence hollow, or there would need to be tailor-made sub-strategies for different countries, as well as regions within countries, given the stark regional disparities in many countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, or Egypt. Besides, strategies for countries in relative peace, such as Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, or Egypt, and for countries in war, such as Libya and Syria, have hardly any common denominators; the context defines the instruments and possibilities.

What Germany should do more of is set geographic and thematic focuses for specific countries. While the macro level should not be abandoned, for reasons mentioned above, it is the level Germany has least influence over. Hence, more attention and resources should be devoted to creating and supporting islands of stability and democracy within autocratic or war-torn countries. The sub-national level, including local governance, should be more broadly targeted, and all German instruments should be channeled towards more confined geographic areas. This contributes more qualitatively to the development of certain communities within the Mediterranean states. Germany should also heavily invest in its soft power. Despite the magnitude of the challenge, it should unremittingly engage bi- or multilaterally to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran, among others, to advance on a much-needed security architecture for the region, and to diffuse the orphaned conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis. With so much bloodshed in the region, the necessity of a powerful country with a non-military record that enjoys considerable credibility cannot be overemphasized.

³ The legal status of Germany's political foundations was a matter of contention between the two governments. Now the German government seems to have accepted an agreement denying political foundations the right to carry out political projects, and all their funding activities and engagements need to be approved beforehand by the Egyptian authorities.