

Cooperation with North Africa

Why the next German government needs a long-term approach to Tunisia and Morocco

by **Mark Furness and Annabelle Houdret,**

German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)



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North Africa has been a priority area for cooperation for recent German governments and is likely to continue to be for the incoming one. This is because of important shared interests in trade, security, climate and energy cooperation, but also because many of the political and economic problems that drove the Arab Uprisings in 2011 are unresolved.

If, as Chou En Lai may never have said to Henry Kissinger, it is too soon to know what the effects of the French revolution will be, then after a mere decade, it is far too soon to be able to say what political, social and economic outcomes the Arab Uprisings will have. The Arab world is going through a societal transformation process that is far from completed and nobody can say with any certainty where it will end. Germany therefore needs a cooperation approach that is long-term, patient, supportive, and less susceptible to being undermined by short-term interests and diplomatic spats.

North Africa's political instability remains a cause of concern for Europe, and the need to help strengthen prosperity and social cohesion in North African countries continues to present long-term challenges and opportunities for German foreign and development policy. Recent events in two North African countries highlight the potential consequences of failure and the potential for shared benefits when cooperation works. Tunisia and Morocco are 'reform partnership' countries where German governments have invested significant financial and diplomatic resources to support reforms aimed at improving governance and the macro-conditions for private enterprise.

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Tunisia's democratic transition has substantial relevance to democracy across the Middle East and North Africa region. This stalled in the summer of 2021, following President Kais Saied's suspension of the country's parliament, dismissal of the prime minister and subsequent rule by presidential decree. Tunisians are divided between those supporting the demise of what had been perceived as an inefficient and corrupt government, and others accusing Saied of torpedoing the country's democratic transition. Western observers widely condemned Saied's move, seemingly without trying to understand viewpoints that had broad political support locally.

Germany's response to Saied's move was muted, with the foreign ministry stopping short of calling it a coup. This suggests awareness that the situation is not black and white, but at the same time the German government did not say how the crisis affects its cooperation programmes, and how those may need to be adapted. External actors can only support political change when it is locally rooted and legitimated, and Germany needs to provide unequivocal support to democratic actors and processes. Nevertheless, the Tunisian people will decide whether the current crisis will mark a return to authoritarian rule, or if it is a step in the country's transition to a representative democracy of some kind.

Morocco is a confident country, which is looking to build relations with the rest of Africa and attract investment from other global actors. A new Moroccan government has recently been appointed. Unfortunately, tensions built up over the last two years over a number of issues, including the status of Western Sahara, have led to a freeze in German-Moroccan diplomatic relations and the suspension of most development cooperation programmes. Trust, built up over more than 40 years of successful cooperation in the fields of renewable energy, environmental policy, security and trade, has been put to a severe test.

Morocco's New Development Model, which highlights the country's main strategic socio-economic objectives for the coming years, provides many entry points for cooperation, ranging from the transition to a climate-friendly economy to employment, education and vocational training, citizen participation and private sector investment. The shared benefits of resuming cooperation with new initiatives in some of these areas, and on existing projects on climate policies, solar and wind electricity and hydrogen production, should be clear to the new governments in both countries. This raises expectations that bilateral relations can return to their full potential soon.

The new German government can play a positive role in support of transition in Tunisia and Morocco without compromising on core principles like social justice, human rights and open economic exchange. While Germany must be prepared to stop cooperation if and when these principles are seriously threatened, it must also accept that discussions on questions of sovereignty and democratic governance models are likely to be difficult. If Germany is to enter into dialogue on these issues, it needs to avoid hypocrisy, especially on migration and trade protection, where principled language often masks exclusionary policy. Fighting climate change and its impacts, reducing socio-economic inequalities, and security are areas where there is mutual interest in benefitting the common good. With core principles in mind, these areas should be central to the new German government's long-term approach to cooperation with North African countries.