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Germany should assume a bigger role in the Middle East

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Bonn, 20 January 2017. The exorbitant economic cost and catastrophic social and security consequences of military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have essentially made the notion of intervention as a foreign policy choice almost unfeasible. This is especially true for countries like Germany, where interventions and arms exports are, for historical reasons, politically very sensitive issues. Therefore, serious crises entail difficult and divergent engagement modes and bigger actors have greater responsibilities whether they like it or not. Germany should play proactive roles to contribute to the prevention of the total collapse of the Middle East, at least for its own interests and moreover for global peace and security. Although German humanitarian and development aid to the MENA region has more than doubled since 2011, its political influence remains limited. Changing this situation into a more influential role will enhance Germany's position as a constructive player in the global world order. The current humanitarian disaster and security vacuum in the Middle East have had direct impacts on Germany. New cases of state-failure in the Middle East are possible and would create further displacement and dangerous security risks. Structural deterioration in the neighbouring Middle East may pose existential threat to the system of European integration on which the German economy is based upon.

Better Late Than Never

Serious peace efforts by key international actors could have defused the current Syrian crisis in 2012 or 2013. But that did not happen. And Germany is, of course, not invited to intervene in the Syrian conflict. Rather, it can now help to mitigate other ongoing and potential crises in the region by showing a stronger presence there. There are three areas in the Middle East where Germany can take more active roles: the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, Jordan and Yemen.

a. Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Today the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) faces great political and economic destabilizing challenges that may result in a humanitarian crisis and the outbreak of violence. Germany made the decision to provide the Peshmerga, the military forces of KRG, with arms like the Milan anti-tank missiles to push back IS threat in 2014 and 2015. Unlike such a reactive decision, Germany can assume a more strategic role in supporting the stability of Kurdistan by long-term capacity building to develop the Peshmerga and the Asayish, local police, into less tribal

and more professional forces. Moreover, German development agencies can support small and medium enterprises especially in the agricultural sector. As a respected country in Kurdistan with its reputation of supporting the Peshmerga and Yezidis, Germany can also encourage and push for democratic rule and good governance among KRG's different institutions as part of a larger engagement with Iraq to consolidate decentralism.

b. Jordan

Jordan is one of the countries most affected by the spillover of the Syrian crisis. Jordan may not be able to accommodate the new realities and transformations currently going on in the social and economic domains on its own. Some camp-based refugee communities are likely to be transformed into new cities while other urban refugee communities may take the form of new slums. With its long-standing developmental relations with Jordan, Germany can help with designing and implementing bilateral sustainable action-plans to tackle these realities. Germany can also utilize and develop its educational presence in Jordan, like the German-Jordanian University, to serve this purpose.

c. Yemen

The crisis in Yemen is alarming, underreported and lacks sufficient attention by the international community. Atrocities are committed by both Hadi government and their Gulf (mainly Saudi) allies on one hand, and Tehran supported Houthi fighters on the other hand. Germany will be a good facilitator, considering its special role in striking the Iranian nuclear deal and being a potential neutral actor that the Saudis can trust as they have few friends nowadays. It can give it a try and call for an inclusive international peace conference to stop the war in Yemen. If succeeded, peace in Yemen may bring peace in Syria closer as Iran and Saudi Arabia will be closer.

Act Now!

If the Trump's USA will further disengage from the Middle East, Germany and the EU should engage more: if not for humanitarian concerns and atrocities prevention, then for securing the next-door region of Europe. Germany's lack of a colonial legacy in the region particularly enables it to consider more engagement in the Middle East. Encouraging good governance, strategic long-term development partnership and active diplomacy can be tools in Germany's toolbox for a safer Middle East and a safer Europe.