

d·i·e

Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development
Institute

Time for a paradigm shift in policy on Syria and the Middle East?

By Bernhard Trautner,
*German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*

The Current Column

of 31 March 2015

Time for a paradigm shift in policy on Syria and the Middle East?

Bonn, 31 March 2015. In a recent television interview with CBS News, Syria's President Assad renewed his offer of a political partnership with the West. In the preceding weeks, the US and German foreign ministers had already indicated that the regime should be involved to a greater extent in attempts to find a solution to the conflict. But does this open up the possibility of the Assad regime becoming a Western partner once more?

So far, all United Nations political negotiations with the regime have failed, with Assad considering himself to have been released from existing agreements (Geneva I) as a result. Further international attempts to resolve the crisis (Geneva II, Moscow I) have come to nothing due to a lack of even the remotest prospect of finding a political solution.

Meanwhile, upgrading the regime to a wayward yet potentially effective 'enforcer of law and order', an idea that has now been floated in the political arena, would do nothing to end the ongoing brutality of the conflict or even merely stop the spread of the self-appointed Islamic State (IS). Unfortunately, such Western rapprochement with Assad would instead elevate IS, already possessing surprising military strength, to a major political power, enhancing its reputation and boosting its following to a much greater extent than anything it could do on its own. IS would be able to demonstrate *de facto* independence of political patronage and of massive outside financial support, achieving a position currently only enjoyed in the region by stabilising powers Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and Iran. IS's purported sovereignty as an Islamic caliphate would gain even greater traction if the Assad regime were dependent on outside recognition. The politically failed regime in Damascus is already reliant on Russian weapons supplies and on direct paramilitary support from Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah militias. Sovereignty is the political status symbol in the region, and not only in the eyes of those fighting the supposed Holy War or Jihad.

At the same time, the fact that IS only rose to prominence as a result of societies in the region having been weakened by the Syrian civil war and the US intervention in Iraq appears to be of secondary importance to the Jihadists. And we should not forget either that IS also owes its success to the fact that Assad released inmates from his own prisons who would later become its leaders. Rather than being deterred by IS's violent methods of governance, including political repression, persecution of minorities, rape, protection racketeering, extortion of ransom money, resource theft and the sale of ancient cultural artefacts, its sympathisers

would seem to find them appealing.

European and US politicians should no longer indulge rulers and individual entrepreneurs of violence while they trot out the familiar Middle Eastern narrative about the Muslim/Islamist threat or even the supposed inability of Arabs/Muslims to make democracy work. The Arab Spring of 2011 showed this narrative to be entirely hollow. Tunisia, for instance, while it faces serious threats, is an impressive example of an effective political system, despite the recent attacks on the Bardo Museum.

There is no question that actors such as IS, various Al-Qaeda spin-offs, Jihadists, and perhaps even the Muslim Brotherhood pose a real danger in and of themselves. At the same time, they are also just as much of a threat in that their existence helps autocrats in the region to gain political prestige in the West and even attract financial support from there. It would be disastrous for Western politicians to indulge the aforementioned narrative, as such a strategy would prevent the causes of conflicts and potential solutions being identified, as was the case before the Arab Spring. Moreover, it is the people in the region who are the first to feel the effects of short-sighted policies. These are individuals who – despite political repression and terrorist threats from their own regime, entrepreneurs of violence and foreign fighters – find the courage to pursue a vision of peaceful transformation and co-existence for all.

Western security, foreign and development policy must be on the side of these people. The West cannot resolve the conflict proper. On a small scale, we must work to ensure the survival, prosperity and future of refugees, the communities taking them in, and neighbouring countries. Federal Minister Gerd Müller's announcement of 31 March that Germany will be providing 155 million € to help deal with the Syrian refugee crisis is a significant contribution in this regard. On a larger scale, it is necessary to pave the way for major powers in the region to bring even their conflicting interests to the negotiating table. None of the parties in the Syrian conflict has anywhere near the necessary degree of sovereignty left even to resolve the core dispute about rebuilding society and redefining the nation's politics. In particular, this dispute concerns the interconnectedness of competing interests and conflicts within Syrian society and those between Syria and other states. The same is true of the current crises in Iraq, Yemen and Israel/Palestine. It is now time to revive and develop the old, yet still relevant vision of a Conference for Security and Cooperation in the Middle East.