

d·i·e

Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development
Institute

Trump, the Middle East and Germany

By Bernhard Trautner and Mark Furness,
German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)

The Current Column

of 20 January 2017

Trump, the Middle East and Germany

Bonn, 20 January 2017. The election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the USA was in itself enough to trigger in part strong responses in the Middle East, despite the fact that little is yet known of the specific policy of the new administration. Trump's "Twitter politics", which extends to the field of foreign policy, appears less than coherent, even with his swearing into office and the appointment of central administrative posts. The meaning behind the political headline policy of "America first" remains unclear. Stances relevant to the region include Trump's vocal announcements of his desire to turn his back on multilateralism, to only grant military security for other countries in return for payment, to seek rapprochement with Russia to secure the pacification of Syria and to target Islamic State. Political dynamite for the region lies in the announcement that the multilateral nuclear agreement with Iran will be examined critically or even torn up, together with the relocation of the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and the desire for a massive increase in domestic oil production.

Islamic State celebrated the result of the election as a sure sign of the forthcoming decline of the US as a global power. Authoritarian rulers such as Syria's Assad and Egypt's al-Sisi, as well as the Israeli government perceive the result as backing for their suppression of civil society and opposition. Iran threatens to respond to any American cancellation of the nuclear treaty with a push for civil use of nuclear energy. How should Germany respond to a likely realignment of US policy in the Middle East?

1. Exploit the value of Germany's privileged position

Germany occupies a privileged position with a high degree of freedom of action and negotiating influence when it comes to the uncertainty regarding future global and regional power constellations worldwide and proxy politics in the region. This power is primarily based on "soft" components such as the high humanitarian reputation gained through the acceptance of a large number of refugees in 2015/16, as one of the largest donors of humanitarian aid in the Syrian crisis and its actions as mediator in the nuclear treaty with Iran, as well as an honest broker in the Palestine conflict. This power is also backed in realpolitik terms, as with the agreement with Turkey on refugees, the (limited) trade in armaments with the region and military support for the Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq. Germany has more potential than most other donors, in particular as a

mediator, but also as a guarantor of the observance of agreements. If Germany does not assume this role, no-one will.

2. Retain flexibility regarding the use of funding and instruments, increasing this where necessary

As a consequence of actual or anticipated shifts in the regional parallelogram of forces, failing states such as Syria, Iraq and Yemen could fall apart completely. In the short term, this means a massive increase in requirements for humanitarian aid or to achieve stabilisation, possibly also acting to support the return of refugees and reconstruction. The fields of both humanitarian aid and development co-operation are subject to different logics of action as well as different political mandates. The goal for Germany here is to prioritise and apply its specific co-operation advantage in the region. The latter is only partly linked to the use of more German or European tax money. Of greater importance here is to guide the existing instruments and in particular the co-operation with other, especially Arab, donors, for example in the scope of joint programme funding.

3. Priority: support sustainable development

Giving a long-term form to the mode of co-operation is justified on the one hand by the global sustainability goals, in particular SDG 16 (peace and security). On the other hand, the forms of co-operation must be suitable for addressing the specific conflict of interest between the short-term stabilisation of fragile states and the politically sustainable development of societies. In the time "bought" through short-term stabilisation measures the underlying obstacles to development will not otherwise be dismantled - despite the fact that these have long been analysed and acknowledged on the Arab side.

The costs of the regional conflicts and for the ongoing obstacles to development have thus far been borne primarily not by those responsible, but by the civilian population and foreign supporters. Whether or not the US foreign policy under President Trump recognises this as part of the problem or even as part of the solution remains to be seen. Regardless of this and in acknowledgement of the indivisibility of human security Germany can exert a positive influence on the focus and modes of international co-operation with the Middle East, in part directly, but more strongly indirectly.