

Germany and the Arab Spring

Timo Behr

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On the wrong side of history?

Much of the analyses of German reactions to the Arab Spring uprisings have focused on Germany's contentious decision relating to Libya.ⁱ By siding with the critics of military intervention in abstaining from UNSC 1973, Germany vexed its allies and arguably displayed an astonishing lack of geostrategic foresight and moral rectitude. Germany, many noted, had clearly failed to grasp the geopolitical significance of events in the Arab world and was neither able nor willing to support the project of a democratic Middle East.ⁱⁱ This is wrong. Beyond all the finger-wagging and public chastisements over the Libya intervention, Germany has played a key role in pushing reform of the EU's Mediterranean policies and has broken new ground in its relationship with emerging Arab democracies. While Germany clearly lacks the geostrategic ambitions and capacities of France or the UK, it has become a more proactive and independent regional player following the Arab Spring.

The Middle East and North Africa has traditionally been a region of limited strategic importance for Germany. With the notable exception of Israel, and at times Iran, Germany held few clear interests in the region and has largely failed to articulate a comprehensive regional approach of its own.ⁱⁱⁱ Instead, it has been content with having its partners set the regional agenda, while quietly pursuing its limited commercial interests. On regional security issues, Germany followed the US lead. Within the EU, Germany consented to French dominance but advocated a balanced approach between Europe's southern and eastern neighborhoods. When Germany did intervene, it was usually in order to curb French ambitions, such as during the Mediterranean Union debate, or in order to safeguard Israeli interests. Beyond that, German diplomacy was cautious not to get embroiled in the region's multiple crises or to interfere with the regional ambitions of its allies.

Timo Behr is a researcher for the European Union research programme at the Finnish Institute for International Affairs. He has a Ph.D and M.A in International Relations from Johns Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies. His expertise is in EU foreign and security policy, Euro-Mediterranean affairs, contemporary Middle Eastern politics, and German foreign and defence policy.

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An Arab catalyst for change

This started changing in the 2000s. German demographics, migration flows, international terrorism, a focus on trade-led growth and growing international pressure brought the region closer to Germany and encouraged occasional spurs of greater foreign policy activism. However, this mostly took the form of greater German opposition to the perceived missteps and excesses of its allies, for example, concerning the 2003 invasion of Iraq, rather than eliciting bold national initiatives or the formulation of a comprehensive regional vision. On the eve of the Arab Spring, German foreign policy was therefore torn between a keen appreciation of the growing importance that the region played for German interests and a continuing reluctance to take on a more proactive role.

Given this situation, the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime and the subsequent wave of protests that engulfed the region provided a catalyst for change. Following the outbreak of the uprising, German policy-makers and diplomats were quick to admit the failure of past EU policies and began to openly question the role played by southern EU member states; particularly given their initial resistance to regional developments.^{iv} CDU foreign policy spokesperson Philipp Missfelder, amongst others, voiced this concern by stating that “there is no consistent EU policy toward North Africa because until now we have ceded everything to the former colonial powers of France and Italy.”^v This widely shared perception of the need to rebalance Euro-Med policies elicited a more pro-active German position on both the bilateral and multilateral level.

European Neighborhood Policy reforms: Towards a new division of labor

Within the EU, Germany broke with tradition by putting forward its own vision for the reform of Euro-Med relations, instead of conceding to French leadership on the issue. Following a non-paper by six southern member states demanding a redistribution of resources from the eastern to the southern neighborhood, greater aid, more flexibility, and a key role for the French-led Union for the Mediterranean, German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle launched his own catalogue of proposals, backed by a number of northern and eastern member states.^{vi} The Westerwelle proposal opposed a geographical redistribution of resources and instead suggested to refocus existing funding towards democracy and human rights, by introducing a much more stringent form of aid conditionality.^{vii} The proposal also suggested a further opening of EU markets, in particular in agriculture, as well as greater mobility and a new focus on civil society engagement.

In addition to pushing for wide-ranging reforms of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), German diplomats also promoted a change in the ailing Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). Having been deadlocked since its inception, Germany favored a re-multilateralization of the institution, by transferring the European Co-Presidency from France back to the European Commission. This position once again went against the grain of French policies, which favored a more intergovernmental approach. Finally, German diplomacy advocated an open dialogue and closer ties with Islamist parties in the neighborhood, including the Muslim Brotherhood, a subject which had proven controversial amongst EU countries. To this end,

Westerwelle sought a close dialogue with the moderate Islamist parties in Egypt and Tunisia and was the first western Foreign Minister to visit Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi and express his confidence in his leadership.^{viii}

While some of these initiatives, such as the preference for trade over aid, reflect long-standing German positions, the way in which they were articulated signified a new approach and the willingness to exercise influence in determining the EU's regional strategy. It would be misleading to suggest that this amounts to a German claim for leadership of Euro-Med affairs; as usual a compromise was struck between the French and German positions. But it does indicate that Germany has begun to think more strategically about the region and that it is no longer willing to be excluded from regional affairs where it sees its vital interests at stake.

Bilateral ties: Beyond the “low-politics” approach

In parallel to this new activism at a multilateral level, Germany was also quick to re-forge its bilateral ties with the emerging Arab democracies by offering them the opportunity to engage in a strategic *Transformationspartnerschaft*. To this end, the Foreign Office appointed a special representative for the Arab world and made €100 million of additional funding available for the region for 2012-2013, with further funding provided by other ministries.

On the occasion of his first visit to post-revolutionary Tunisia on 12 February 2011, Westerwelle proposed this new partnership format to the Tunisian transitional government. This led to the formal initiation of a *Transformations-Dialog* on 13 September 2011, with a focus on supporting Tunisia's political and economic transition. During the third meeting of the *Transformations-Dialog* on 9 January 2012, Germany and Tunisia signed a common declaration of intent, detailing various funding and support measures, including transforming €60 million of Tunisian debt into Official development assistance (ODA) and €32 million of concrete support measures for 2012-2013.^{ix} Funding for the Tunisian operations of development agency GIZ and development bank KfW were also increased by a further €60 million in 2011 and greater funding was provided for German political foundations in Tunisia.

Similarly, Germany and Egypt, agreed on a number of measures for closer bilateral cooperation when signing the “Berlin Declaration” on 12 August 2011.^x The declaration outlines broad areas for bilateral cooperation and foresees exchanging €240 million of Egyptian debt for ODA over a four-year period. Significantly, it also establishes a bilateral strategic dialogue to be held annually at senior official level to discuss bilateral, regional and global issues. Like Tunisia, Egypt also benefitted from additional funding for civil society development and technical cooperation in line with Germany's traditional low-politics approach.^{xi}

In both cases, these measures indicate a new level of engagement. By bolstering its foreign aid commitments, Germany has become one of the largest ODA providers in North Africa. Moreover, the transformation partnerships that Germany established with Tunisia and Egypt go beyond Germany's traditional focus on low-politics and development cooperation and indicate a greater level of political engagement. In Egypt, the controversial closure of the *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung* in December 2011 had little effect on this approach.^{xii}

Geo-strategic realism or geo-economic opportunism?

Apart from the widely-noted Libya debacle, Germany has also been more active in supporting the transitions in Yemen and Syria. On issues pertaining to the Syria crisis, Germany has largely been in line with its partners and has supported dialogue amongst opposition activists by using track-two diplomacy.^{xiii} Reports that German naval assets have been used to monitor the situation in Syria have fuelled speculation that the involvement of the *Bundesnachrichtendienst* may be higher than officially admitted.^{xiv} Some German politicians have also speculated that Germany might not be able to abstain in the case of an international intervention in Syria.

Controversially, Germany has strengthened its cooperation with a number of the Arab Gulf countries, especially in the contentious arms sector. Thus, it emerged in 2011 that Germany was negotiating the delivery of up to 270 Leopard II tanks to Saudi Arabia, following an earlier licence for exports to Qatar. These and other arms deals – most notably a major arms deal with Algeria for the delivery of frigates and APCs – have revived the debate over Germany's growing role as an arms exporter. In late 2012, the German government reconfirmed its intention to go ahead with the Saudi deal, quoting "regional stability" as a main motivation.

Overall, these measures appear to suggest a growing willingness to make controversial decisions, if they serve perceived German interests in the region. Whether this is an expression of greater realism and strategic thinking, or an indication of Germany's growing focus on "geo-economics" at a time when German companies are more dependent than ever on securing key export markets remains open to interpretation.

Conclusions

The Arab Spring has provided an opportunity for German diplomats and politicians to rethink their approach to a region that has visibly gained in importance for Berlin over the last two decades. This has enabled Germany to break some foreign policy taboos. Most notably, it appears determined to play a more political role in the region and is no longer willing to blindly follow the lead of its allies. Germany has also dropped its opposition to closer EU relations with North Africa and is now willing to invest greater political and economic capital in its ties with key bilateral partners. While Germany is likely to remain a reluctant partner on questions of war and peace, fears that it may side with the BRICs or adopt a strategy of geo-economic opportunism appear exaggerated. In the future, the greatest challenge for German foreign policy will be to reconcile its growing ties with the region's moderate Islamist regimes with its traditional iron-cast commitment to Israel.

ⁱ Edmund Ratka (2012), "Germany and the Arab Spring – Foreign Policy between new Activism and old Habits," *German Politics and Society*, Issue 102, Vol. 30, No. 2, Summer 2012.

ⁱⁱ Joschka Fischer, "Deutsche Aussenpolitik – eine Farce," *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, 22 March 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Guido Steinbger, ed. (2009), *Deutsche Nah-, Mittelost- und Nordafrikapolitik: Interessen, Strategien, Handlungsoptionen*, SWP-Studie 15, May 2009.

^{iv} Especially the suggestion by French Foreign Minister Michele Alliot-Marie to dispatch French riot police to Tunisia and the blockage of a common EU position on Tunisia by France and Italy.

^v Philipp Missfelder, "Wir muessen die europaeischen Interessen deutlich machen," *Die Zeit online*, 12 April 2011.

^{vi} French Foreign Ministry, "Non-Papier: Action de l'Union européenne en direction du voisinage Sud," 16 February 2011.

^{vii} *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, “Westerwelle: Zusagen für Nordafrika an Reformen knüpfen,” 18 February 2011.

^{viii} *Welt Online*, “Westerwelle staerkt Islamist Mursi den Ruecken,” 10 July 2012.

^{ix} Gemeinsame Absichtserklärung der Regierung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der Tunesischen Republik, 9 January 2012.

^x Berlin Declaration, German-Egyptian Consultations, 12 August 2011.

^{xi} A substantial amount of the €100 million provided by the Foreign Ministry is earmarked for civil society cooperation, with a further €36 million being offered by various development cooperation funds for the region.

^{xii} Nicole Renvert, “Gefährdet oder gefährlich? Politische Stiftungen und der arabische Frühling,” *Internationale Politik*, Online-Exklusiv, January 2012.

^{xiii} Jörg Lau, “Das neue Syrien kommt aus Wilmersdorf,” *Zeit Online*, 26 July 2012.

^{xiv} Matthias Gebauer, Christoph Reuter, Raniah Salloum, “Das Raetsel des deutschen Spionageschiffs,” *Der Spiegel Online*, 20 August 2012.