

## The Future of Germany's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: European, Transatlantic, and Eventually More German?

*By Almut Möller*

- How is Germany perceived in the Arab world and can this be useful in Middle East relations?
- Will Germany's federal elections impact its policies in the Middle East?

While there has been a focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the past, Germany's foreign policy agenda vis-à-vis the Middle East has widened gradually since the 1990s. On the one hand, the overall framework in which German foreign policy is operating is undergoing changes. On the other hand, developments in the Middle East such as the war in Iraq, the Iranian nuclear program, the fragmentation of the Palestinian territories and the Israeli invasion in Gaza, migration and terrorism, energy security, and the risk of failed states have added new problems. All this has created new challenges and opened new opportunities for future German engagement. However, there has been a gap between German interests and their implementation so far. This is unlikely to change with whatever new government will be voted into office by the German federal elections in fall 2009. The change will rather take time and will constitute yet another step in unified Germany's process of maturing as a foreign policy player.

In general terms, a new generation of post-WWII born political leaders has started to develop a more active interest-driven approach to foreign policy—while still being aware of the responsibilities that Nazi Germany's aggressive foreign policy mean for any present and future German government, in particular with regard to German-Israeli relations. Maturing as a foreign policy actor has gone hand in hand with a strong commitment to multilateralism, in particular in the framework of the European Union as well as a transatlantic orientation.

With the European Union's foreign policy mechanisms evolving since the Treaty of Maastricht in the early 1990s, Germany's room for maneuver as well as its responsibilities in the framework of the European Union have widened. The European Union's engagement in foreign policy has become more visible over time, especially in the neighboring Mediterranean and Middle Eastern region. Germany has been part of the group of European countries that are at the core of this engagement.

To name only a few examples, Germany is playing an active role in the European component of the Middle East Quartet comprised of the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations. It was Chancellor Angela Merkel who, during her EU presidency in the first half of 2007, guided the European efforts to mobilize then-President George W. Bush to revive the U.S.' engagement for an Israeli-Arab peace. President Bush eventually launched the Annapolis process in the fall of 2007. With its European partners, the German government continues to support the economic reconstruction and the security and legal reforms in the West Bank. Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier hosted an international conference on security and legal reform in the Palestinian territories in July 2008. However, Germany's and the European Union's political leverage in any peace negotiations have been rather weak so far. This has led to frustrations among political leaders and European and national administrations. In the absence of a political solution to the conflict to date, the Europeans continue to be the paymasters, but they are somewhat doomed to failure with their initiatives. Economic reconstruction can only

be sustainable in the presence of a political resolution of the conflict, especially with regard to the issue of access and movement in the Palestinian territories. However, despite many setbacks, the commitment to Palestinian state building remains high on the European and German agenda. At the same time the Europeans have tried to transform their economic leverage into a political one.

Germany has also been at the core of the “EU-3” (Germany, France, and the United Kingdom) initiatives to develop and keep channels of communication with Iran over its nuclear program. These were supported by the EU’s foreign policy representative Javier Solana, and eventually by the rest of the UN Security Council members. In its twofold policy of keeping the talks with Tehran alive, while at the same time supporting the international sanctions, the German government has been challenged by German companies’ business interests in Iran. This is an example of conflicting political and economic interests that a more active German foreign policy might increasingly have to face in both its internal (domestic) and external (European, transatlantic) dimensions.

Germany has also been supporting the UNIFIL II mission in the aftermath of the summer 2006 war in Lebanon. From a German perspective, the UN mission on the Israeli-Lebanese border is a particularly sensitive case. For the first time in the history of the Federal Republic, German soldiers were sent to the Middle East on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 in August 2006. Germany is leading the maritime component of the UN mission and German marines are patrolling in the Mediterranean Sea. This has been a major step for Germany and it is a vivid example of how clearly the framework of its engagement in the Middle East has been changing over the last years. While the effectiveness of the mission is questionable, the crucial point is that it IS actually happening. Germany’s support for Israel’s right to exist has and will never be put into question. It is the result of a long-term, sensitive German foreign policy that is today able to balance the responsibility for Israel and its security interests with the support for peace with its neighbors and for a Palestinian state.

Despite these examples, debates about the involvement of the European Union in the region continue to be dominated by critique. The effectiveness of European Union’s programs like the Barcelona Process, aiming at a long-term political and economic transformation of the region (and developed into a so far rather disputed “Union for the Mediterranean” in July 2008), or the southern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) are judged critically, along with the deficits in European foreign, security, and defense policy. However, it is fair to say that over time both the substance of the European engagement as well as the foreign and security policy instruments of the European Union have become more elaborate since the 1990s.

Along with a widened room for maneuver, expectations toward the German government to engage have grown too. Germany’s partners in Europe, in particular France and the United Kingdom, are asking for a stronger German contribution to “hard” security issues. A strong European security and defense policy will to a large extent depend on the group of European heavy weights’ will and ability to deliver. Germany undoubtedly belongs to this group, but the country’s deficits with regard to its security and defense capabilities have yet to be addressed. Here, Germany has a long way to go. German governments have also shied away so far from making future German foreign and security engagement a topic of wider public debate. German citizens see their country primarily as a soft power. But if future German governments continue to commit to a stronger engagement within the European security and defense policy (quite likely), they will not only have to provide the means. They will also have to discuss more openly with the citizens what it means to send German soldiers into war zones and to see coffins returning home. The discussion about the German engagement in Afghanistan has shown that the public is not yet ready for a new German foreign policy. With President Barack Obama’s announcement of “going multilateral,” the pressure could grow as well

from the transatlantic angle in the future. How will a new German government address these expectations in both its internal and external dimensions? It is too early to predict, but there will be some hard realities to face that touch the core of Germany's identity.

While the transatlantic orientation has been a stable pillar of the Federal Republic's foreign policy, one of the recent "lows" between Germany and the United States has opened up new avenues for Germany's role in the Middle East. Then-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's denial to support the U.S. invasion in Iraq in 2003 cooled down German-U.S. as well as intra-EU relations for a while. However, in retrospect, Germany's standing in the Arab world has grown with that decision. Will Germany capitalize on this asset? Despite the strong emphasis of conducting a foreign policy in the framework of the European Union ("European interests are German interests") and the transatlantic alliance, Germany has genuine national interests in the region that it could pursue more actively on a bilateral level. These include, for example, energy security and business opportunities. In the competition for the emerging markets in the Middle East, Germany will have to face a growing number of old and new players. Germany is in a good starting position. There are, for example, real opportunities to participate in the reconstruction of Iraq. For political and security reasons the German government has been reluctant to engage in Iraq until last year, when it began to connect German and Iraqi business. Then-Minister of the Economy Michael Glos visited Iraq with a business delegation in July 2008, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier followed with a delegation of business and cultural representatives in February 2009. Another country in which German business could be in a good position if political circumstances were changing (not unlikely) is Syria. Iran is certainly a less likely case in the short term, but if the U.S.-Iranian rapprochement on the political level eventually happens under President Obama and his administration, German business could pick up on old cooperation as well as create new opportunities.

It has to be underlined that Germany also has an interest in a peaceful transition of the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) toward democracy and a respect for human rights. However, Germany is less likely to promote bilaterally issues of political reform. It will rather choose to tackle them in the framework of Euro-Mediterranean initiatives. It is questionable, however, that these attempts will succeed. The Barcelona Process and the southern ENP policies have so far not triggered political reforms and can be seen as a failure in this regard. A future German government should revisit its democracy and human rights agenda and instruments and should discuss options how Berlin can make a genuine contribution in certain selected cases. Egypt's transition to the post Hosni Mubarak era that is likely to happen by 2011 (or earlier) would be such a case.

As a recent study on German foreign policy in the MENA region edited by Guido Steinberg of Berlin's Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik has made clear, it is worth looking into German interests, strategies, and options vis-à-vis the diverse countries in the MENA region in greater detail. In an overall perspective, he concludes, Germany's room for maneuver is narrow, but not as narrow as it is usually portrayed in the political discourse.

It remains to be seen whether the future German government will choose to exploit more of its opportunities in the Middle East. So far, the governing parties' candidates, Chancellor Angela Merkel of the Christian Democratic Union and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier of the Social Democrats, have not made the Middle East a topic in the run up to the elections. Unlike in 2002, when then-Chancellor Schröder capitalized on abstaining from the war in Iraq, this time the big gains are not likely to be made over German foreign policy in the Middle East. There has been some disagreement in substance between the Federal Chancellery and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the past, for example with regard to engaging Syria, but the debates in the 2009 election campaign are more likely to focus on the impact of the economic and financial crisis.

The American Institute for Contemporary German Studies (AICGS) strengthens the German-American relationship in an evolving Europe and changing world. Affiliated with the Johns Hopkins University, the Institute produces objective and original analyses of developments and trends in Germany, Europe, and the United States; creates new transatlantic networks; and facilitates dialogue among the business, political, and academic communities to manage differences and define and promote common interests.

Through its three program areas (Business & Economics; Foreign & Domestic Policy; and Society, Culture, & Politics), AICGS provides a comprehensive program of public forums, policy studies, research, and study groups designed to enrich the political, corporate, and scholarly constituencies it serves.

AICGS  
1755 Massachusetts Ave. NW  
Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20036  
[www.aicgs.org](http://www.aicgs.org)

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies.

Whatever the outcome of the elections, Germany's foreign policy agenda in the Middle East will remain by and large stable. Germany will continue to cooperate with the European Union in its Middle East policies and it will seek a strong link with the Obama administration in Washington.

However, if Germany at the same time defines and follows its genuine national interests in the Middle East and North Africa with greater emphasis, it will be interesting to observe the impact this might have on the cooperation with its European and transatlantic allies. Energy and trade, for example, could become areas of tension, if they clash with business interests of other European countries or the U.S., or, even more so, if they undermine their security agenda (for example with regard to Iran). Another point of potential tensions could arise if a more active German foreign trade policy will go along with a continued reluctance to engage in the security realm. European and transatlantic partners might be snubbed by a Germany that is active in pursuing its economic interests in Iraq, Syria, Iran, or the Gulf states while giving the impression of leaving the tough political and security issues to others.

It goes without saying that, for this scenario to unfold, Germany would indeed have to become more active in pursuing a more "German" foreign policy in the Middle East while lowering its multilateral ambitions. What is more likely for quite some time is perhaps business as usual: Germany will remain European and transatlantic, and it will argue, for some good reason, that this is very German.

*Almut Möller is a political analyst based in London and a Non-Resident Fellow at the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies (AICGS) at Johns Hopkins University in Washington D.C.*

***AICGS is grateful to the German Marshall Fund of the United States for its generous support of this Web Essay.***