

Germany's Zeitenwende

While Europe is talking, the Middle East is acting

The universal lesson of the Second World War seemed clear: “Never again”. But in Germany and Israel two very different interpretations of these words have evolved. For Germany, the consequence has been “never again war”, instead focusing on collective security and defense systems and primarily using checkbook diplomacy to avoid the need for military engagement. For Israel, the consequence of the Shoah has been “never again genocide”; “never again” will the Jewish people have to be dependent on other countries to defend and protect themselves.

The basic premise of the “Zionist project” is the creation of a secure state for all Jews in the world.¹ It has been – and still is – perceived as the answer to thousands of years of persecution of the Jewish people. This need for security is exacerbated by real enemies that loom within Israel’s immediate vicinity, a position that is often not understood by Germans. After World War II, potential threats to Germany have been countered by a system of alliances – or have not been noticed at all.² In particular, the security guarantees of the United States have put Germany in a comfortable position in which security has been seen as a given, and was even taken for granted. In 1992 the term „surrounded by friends“ used by German Defense Minister Volker Rühe was the ironic, yet accurate description of the environment Germany found itself in after the end of the Cold War.³ Since then, German millennials, who now have assumed responsibility in politics, have grown up in an unprecedented era of peace, freedom, and prosperity.

It is this different interpretation of “never again”

which occasionally poses problems of mutual understanding to German-Israeli relations. It was not until the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 that a gradual process of reappraisal of German foreign policy began. However, it seems that only with the Russian war against Ukraine did German foreign policy shift back towards political realism.⁴ Germans are becoming more aware that there are actual risks to peace and freedom that cannot be solved without military armaments, a new sentiment that is evident in an abrupt change of public opinion. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, 78 per cent of Germans are in favor of arms deliveries to Ukraine, and of the rearmament of the Bundeswehr, the German Armed Forces. Only 16 per cent think that both is wrong.⁵

Recent polls even indicate that 69 per cent of Germans fear that NATO might be dragged into the conflict. Unexpectedly, Germany finds itself directly affected by a confrontation that is reminiscent of the Cold War era.⁶ German Chancellor Olaf Scholz fittingly introduced the term *Zeitenwende* - a watershed moment - in his speech at the emergency meeting of the German Bundestag that followed the Russian invasion.

As a response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Germany’s governing coalition of Social Democrats (SPD), Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), and Liberals (FDP) launched an urgently needed re-orientation of German security and defense policy. The dangerous situation at the EU and NATO’s eastern border created political momentum. The drastic change in public opinion makes it possible to make hitherto unpopular decisions, namely the procure-

ment of much needed equipment for the German Armed Forces through a new special fund budgeted at 100 billion euros. The fund is intended to finally meet NATO's 2 per cent target, which was agreed at the NATO summit in Wales in 2014 but which Germany has since consistently fallen short of.⁷

Therefore, Chancellor Scholz's explicit reference to the acquisition of armed Heron drones from Israel in his speech seems only to further confirm this shift.⁸ On the one hand, the Heron is already in use by the German Armed Forces for reconnaissance purposes. On the other hand, the reference to the Jewish State is certainly no coincidence.

When it comes to Israel, the German Chancellor was referring to a state that has had to repeatedly defend itself against existential external attacks, using defensive and preemptive systems. Israelis understand the necessity of national defense, something that the German public too should get acquainted with. The sudden shift in Germany's perception of its security situation might have a significant impact on its relationship with Israel. So far, the focus has been on Germany's contributions to Israel's security, which is part of Germany's reason of state. Now a new perspective is emerging, in which Israel can also contribute to German security.

Given this shift, there is now a higher likelihood that Germany will now actually be better able to compre-

hend the security context in which Israel finds itself. Most significantly, a better understanding of the Iranian threat. In Israel's opinion, and those of many other states in the region, Germany should turn away from its appeasement policy towards Tehran and instead adopt a goal-oriented realpolitik.

Iran – On its way to regional dominance?

Considering the Russian aggression towards Ukraine, it seems unimaginable to still work together with the Russian regime, but cooperation will remain necessary to effectively and permanently thwart Iran's aspiration of acquiring nuclear weapons. It is Russia's nuclear capabilities and its blatant threats of the possible use of nuclear weapons that makes NATO reluctant to intervene more forcefully in Ukraine's favor. It is uncomfortable to imagine the situation in which the Western alliance might find itself should Iran succeed in its nuclear ambitions. With a credible threat of the use of nuclear force, Iran could achieve immunity for its proxy forces in the Middle East and effectively shield them from outside interventions.⁹

In July 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was agreed upon. Just like the Minsk Agreements (September 2014 & February 2015), the JCPOA adoption took place at a point that was characterized by a predominantly optimistic outlook on foreign and security policy. In today's context, the question of the resilience of both agreements,



and the reliability of the respective parties must be raised. This is illustrated by Iran's violations of the JCPOA through sustained uranium processing and enrichment. In Western circles, a large-scale Russian attack on Ukraine has long been considered hard to imagine. A similar mistake could be made regarding the Iranian threat.

The original Iran nuclear agreement was negotiated between Iran, the permanent five members of the UN Security Council - China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States - as well as Germany and the European Union.¹⁰ With regards to the JCPOA's future, the question arises to what extent the foreign policy interests of Western democracies coincide with those of Russia and China. The original agreement is designed in a way that requires all Western countries, Russia, and China to stand on the same side. However, the latter two seem to strive towards a common stance with Tehran that is detached from the other parties of the agreement. This trend is evidenced by the 25-year cooperation agreement signed by Iran and China in March 2021.

Russia too is seeking Tehran's proximity. In the current negotiations, Moscow is advocating for far-reaching guarantees for Iran, to which end Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Adollahian made a trip to Moscow in mid-March 2022.¹¹ It is also quite possible that Iran and Russia will resort to using the same proxy forces in the years to come. Reports of Russian recruitment of Syrian forces for deployment in Ukraine serve as a clear indication.¹²

Iran has the potential to become an emerging power. In the past one and a half decades, this potential has only been restricted through sanctions. An increase in oil prices would serve as a catalyst for a potential rise of Iran. As a result, the budgetary capabilities of the regime in Tehran for military support of proxy groups would increase even further if left unchecked by the international community.

Even the U.S. is apparently not immune to making far-reaching compromises vis-à-vis Iran to cushion world market prices and minimize the economic

damage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine by the release of Iranian oil exports. An indication of this are the reports of U.S. plans to remove the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) from its list of terrorist organizations.¹³

Implications of Europe's New Defense Policy for the Middle East



The focus of U.S.-American security policy is increasingly shifting from the Middle East (and other regions) to the Indo-Pacific. The Russian invasion of Ukraine will concentrate Europe's attention and resources to Eastern Europe. This leaves a two-sided power vacuum in the Middle East, with devastating effects for regional stability. The recent relocation of the German corvette Erfurt, which was supposed to begin duty off the coast of Lebanon, to the North and Baltic Sea is a first indication of that shift.¹⁴

However, the Russian intervention in Syria demonstrated that the security challenge posed by Russia is not just taking place in Eastern Europe, but also in the Middle East. Through its engagement in Syria, Russia has once more emerged as a regional power in the Middle East.¹⁵ In fact, the Russian military involvement in Syria took place only two and a half months after the signing of the JCPOA, clearly indicating the conclusions Vladimir Putin drew from the negotiations: restraint was interpreted as weakness.

The Arab Spring also triggered a migration crisis, which exemplified the immediate impact that developments in the Middle East have on the stability of European democracies. Brexit was in part a reaction to the refugee crisis, fueled by the Syrian civil war.¹⁶

It is therefore in Europe's very own interest to engage in security policy in the Middle East.

Hope in Dark Times: The Abraham Accords and the Turkish Thaw

The Russian war in Ukraine already has far-reaching and global economic implications, among them in the agriculture sector. The Middle East, which is heavily affected by drought and conflict, is especially dependent on imports. Rising food prices could hence have a severe impact on the region. In Egypt, for instance, 25 per cent of its wheat imports stem from Ukraine, and 60 per cent from Russia.¹⁷ Nearly the entirety of Lebanon's wheat imports come from the Black Sea region. While Lebanon's economy was already in collapse before the war in Ukraine, rising prices are further driving the country into a growing dependency on foreign donors to cover much-needed imports.¹⁸ Anything more would endanger the already frail stability of the country, and potentially lead to similar developments as in Syria, where the outbreak of the civil war was facilitated by a severe drought between 2006 and 2010.



Innovation from Israel: Drip irrigation

In the short term, shortages of certain types of food may be compensated by other countries and Western financial aid. However, in the long term a different approach is necessary to ensure security of resources. The Abraham Accords, a normalization and intensification of relations between Israel and several Arab states, is therefore of great strategic importance.¹⁹ Israeli innovations in the agricultural sector, as well as advanced agriculture and water shortage and purification technologies, could make a key contribution to dealing with food scarcity in the region. Furthermore, an expansion of the Accords to include more Arab states could create additional synergies and counteract the ongoing destabilization of the region. However, while Europe is still discussing possible solutions, action is already being taken in the Middle East. It is in Europe's interest to actively support and promote these developments to strengthen the stability and security of the entire region.

Simultaneously, Turkey has redefined its foreign policy in recent months. It actively sought dialogues with the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Israel, and Armenia – following its new so-called doctrine of a “problem-free circle”.²⁰ Europe should note and support this development, especially the thawing in relations between Ankara and Jerusalem.

A major obstacle in this context is the EastMed pipeline project, in which Turkey's interests conflict with those of its neighbors. The project by Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, and Greece could come to play a more important role, as it could serve as a building block in the search for alternatives to Russian gas supplies. This could be an opportunity for Europe to increase its engagement and support the project by mediating a compromise between Turkey and its neighbor states.

With regards to this, Germany and Europe have several security interests. One interest is the security of energy supplies; a second is the good relations with Turkey as a NATO ally, who is after all the partner with the second-largest troop strength within the alliance.²¹ The use of military bases on the Bosphorus is a third important interest for European security



commitments in the Middle East.

There is a wide range of German interests in the Middle East worth pursuing. Of course, the question of feasibility and political willingness remains. Regarding Israel, there is a close link to the German reason of state, which includes the security of the Jewish State. So far, this commitment to Israeli citizens has

not yet been subject to scrutiny. It is therefore paramount that the commitment to the security of Israel, as a part of Germany's reason of state, is filled with meaning and life. A stronger German involvement in the JCPOA negotiations, support for the Abraham Accords, and a mediating role in the EastMed negotiations could thus be important contributions.

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