



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All

Saudi-German Cooperation is Essential for Middle East Security

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Germany and Europe are re-discovering the importance of the Gulf region. This is not solely because of the Russian attack on Ukraine, which has confronted Europe with a war on its continent, exposed Europe's energy dependence on Russia, and led to skyrocketing energy prices. Already in May 2022, the European Commission released a communication calling for a "Strategic Partnership with the Gulf," a document that was in the works for more than two years. Instead, the conflict in Ukraine has jolted Europe and Germany out of their complacency with the need to define European and German interests more coherently and purposefully. Ukraine is, therefore, indeed the "Zeitenwende" that German Chancellor Olaf Scholz defined in a speech before the German parliament on February 27, 2022, meaning the end of an era and a turning point in history.

German Chancellor Scholz's visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar on September 24 and 25, 2022, underlines the increased recognition in Germany as well as in wider Europe that the stability and security of its neighborhood directly impact stability at home. The Russian attack on Ukraine has starkly underscored this fact for Europe's eastern neighborhood. However, the same acknowledgment also increasingly exists regarding Europe's southern neighbors in the Middle East. To simply treat the Middle East at arm's length is no longer an option. In that context, the Chancellor's trip is following on the heels of the visit of EU Council President Charles Michel to the Gulf region, during which he opened in Doha the fourth EU delegation office in the GCC countries. Oman is set to follow as the fifth delegation post in 2023.

The Chancellor's discussions in the Gulf will undoubtedly have an energy and economic focus first and foremost. Germany's oil and gas dependency on Russia has been blatantly exposed as a result of the Ukraine war leading to an almost desperate search by Berlin for alternative supplies. Here, the Gulf is an obvious first choice. Yet, the danger is one of the false expectations, including seeing higher Gulf production levels as the sole magic solution to the current high price energy environment. Instead, substantive energy ties between Germany and Saudi Arabia, and the other GCC countries must be seen as a package, one in which the interests of producers and consumers, as well as energy supply and demand issues, are all being considered. Moreover, the determined efforts by the GCC states to shift away from their hydrocarbons model, speed up the green transition, and move to circular economies need to be acknowledged. The project of Germany's Thyssen-Krupp and the Saudi NEOM Green Hydrogen Company for the world's first giga-scale green hydrogen electrolyzer is an example of what a mutually beneficial partnership can look like.



The energy and economic issues can, however, not be separated from the overall security-related challenges that Saudi Arabia and the GCC states continue to be confronted with. What is missing in this context from Germany is the playing of a more active political role that is commensurate with its economic power and its position as a leading European country. Just as a hands-off policy in terms of the EU's southern neighborhood is no longer tenable, neither is a German approach that separates the economic and energy concerns from the broader security environment. Instead, they are two sides of the same coin.

What Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Arabian Peninsula states therefore require is a German partner that works both in front and behind the scenes to bring greater stability to the Middle East and does so with regional partners on a bilateral and multilateral level. Given the events in the region in the past two decades, including the Arab Spring and the disastrous US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Saudi Arabia and the GCC states have understood that a quiet, behind-the-scenes approach to foreign policy is no longer sufficient. Instead, there is an urgent need to pursue an activist and even public role to steer developments in a positive and more stable direction. The determination and associated agency of the GCC states in this regard is still not fully understood in Germany and Europe. In this context, it is equally essential that Germany finally sees Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states are part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

An initial step would be for Germany and Saudi Arabia to engage in a substantive extensive political dialogue to dissect and better understand the Middle East's most pressing problems. At the outset, such a shared analysis process is essential to devise effective policy solutions for the way forward. Given the overall complexity of the regional security situation, it would be false to assume that a simple solution can be devised.

To be sure, the list of pertinent regional issues is long. First and foremost, Saudi Arabia and Germany need to work together to ensure that Iran becomes a responsible member of a Gulf security community that respects the interests and sovereignty of its neighbors instead of promoting an interventionist, sectarian policy. This includes ensuring that current negotiations over the JCPOA on Iran's nuclear program do not become an end itself but instead serve as a starting point under which other aspects of Iranian regional policy are addressed, including Teheran's support for violent non-state actors throughout the Middle East and the Islamic Republic's increasingly sophisticated missile and drone program.

The attacks on the Saudi oil installations at Abqaiq and Khurais in September 2019 were a blatant violation of international law and underscored Iran's intention towards its Gulf neighbors. With global energy markets already on a jittery edge, any further attacks like this would have devastating consequences also for the global



economy. Therefore, Germany and Europe must let Iran know that any additional actions of this kind carry immediate consequences.

Second, Germany and Saudi Arabia should continue the discussion to develop a joint approach toward rebuilding Iraq. Without a stable Iraq, the rest of the Middle East will not be stable, given Iraq's location at the heart of the region. Germany can here spearhead a wider engagement between the EU and the GCC when it comes to the reconstruction of Iraq. This would link with the GCC's own approach which included increased political dialogue, economic and investment ties and widened people-to-people contacts.

Third, there is a need to engage jointly in Yemen, including supporting the recently established Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council and public leverage to ensure that the truce currently in place between the warring parties is maintained. The recent visit by Rashad Al-Alimi, the Chairman of the council, to Germany was a good step in the right direction. To bring about a political solution and end the fighting, Yemen requires broad-based international involvement and commitment including that of Germany.

Fourth, countries like Egypt and Tunisia need to be provided with the tools to regain their economic viability, especially in light of rising food prices which directly impact their domestic stability. Germany and Saudi Arabia have a clear common interest in seeing widespread economic reforms implemented in order to re-establish the much-needed social trust of people within their fractured societies. The coordination between German and Saudi development agencies to align their respective efforts would be an important step to be undertaken.

Fifth, Germany and Saudi Arabia should coordinate their positions to revitalize the Arab-Israeli peace process. This conflict remains central to the mind of the Arab world as a whole. Here, the kingdom has already underlined that a full joining of the Abraham accords cannot be considered until a solution to the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people to their own state is realized. Moreover, the kingdom put forward its vision of a resolution to the conflict with the Arab Peace Plan initiated more than a decade ago. Constructive support and engagement from Germany could prove instrumental in seeing the Abraham accords fulfilling their overall aspiration.

Outside of bilateral conflict areas, Germany's role is important also on the multilateral front. For one, protecting international waterways is a critical component of a rules-based international order and vital to the continued supply of energy resources from the Gulf region. Here, the European-led maritime awareness in the Strait of Hormuz operation, as well as the EU-Coordinated Maritime Presence in the North Western Indian Ocean to which Germany contributes, are two initiatives that need further expansion and coordination with the GCC countries.



Overall, Germany needs to also better use its leverage within Europe to promote and develop deeper and more strategic EU-GCC relations. The recent EU Commission document on “A strategic partnership with the Gulf” is a notable document that contains numerous valuable suggestions for a more cooperative and substantive EU-GCC relationship. Germany must put its weight behind this document and push for detailed actions plain in all its domains so that the new strategy does not remain simply words on paper as many of the past initiatives in this field.

And as far as overall regional security is concerned, Germany can and should take a lead role in supporting recent de-escalation processes in the Middle East, including the Baghdad Conference for Partnership and Cooperation first held in 2021 or the current truce in Yemen. While any security process must ultimately be region-owned and led, the gaps and trust deficit between conflicting parties in the Middle East continue to be too large for regional efforts to be successful on their own. Ultimately, a security guarantor will be required, possibly along the one of the P5 of the UN Security Council. In the meantime, Germany and Europe’s role in providing the momentum for current de-escalation initiatives to be maintained, and to provide continued avenues for confidence-building and dialogue among conflict parties, is critical.

As the Ukraine crisis has underlined, pursuing a separate economic policy divorced from the political and security realities on the ground is no longer possible. Broader German involvement in regional issues will undoubtedly strengthen the processes of conflict resolution and prevention that the Middle East desperately needs. Left to fester, the consequences for Europe in general and Germany, in particular, are bound to be severe.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Germany maintain a positive and forward-looking relationship. What is often not understood in Germany is that bilateral ties are based on common principles of peace, security, and development. In Riyadh, Germany is widely seen as a respected and valuable partner. For Berlin, Saudi Arabia should be viewed in the same vein.