

Tunisia in Transition

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The German-Tunisian Transformation Partnership – A model for supporting democracy in the Arab world?

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Introduction

January 14, 2011, marks not only the turn of an era in Tunisia, but also the starting point for a quantum leap in German-Tunisia relations. Friendly neglect has been for long the characteristic of German foreign policy towards Tunisia. Tunisia is an attractive tourist destination for half a million Germans each year. For some German manufacturers, for instance in the automotive supply industry, it serves as an advantageous extended work bench. Several German cultural institutions are present in Tunisia and thousands of young Tunisians have studied at Germany's especially Technical Universities. Such societal and economic ties notwithstanding, Berlin, much more occupied with developments in the European Union's Eastern neighbourhood, has counted for the most part on Paris – and Brussels – for “taking care” of the Maghreb.

With the popular uprisings that have been challenging several incumbent regimes since the beginning of 2011, the region rose in rank on Germany's foreign policy agenda. Furthermore, these unexpected events proved the previous European approach towards the Southern Mediterranean to be, at least to a great extent, erroneous. With the “traditional” drivers of the EU's Mediterranean policy paralysed or heavily discredited, Germany seized the occasion to enhance its own “actorness” in the region and made the successful transition process in Tunisia one of its foreign policy objectives. At the beginning of 2012, the governments of both countries signed an official “German-Tunisian Transformation partnership.”

The present paper examines the German policy towards post-revolutionary Tunisia and dwells on its origins and motives (section 1), carves out the specific characteristics of the German approach

(section 2) and gives a first assessment of this policy (section 3). In conclusion, the model character of the Germany's policy towards Tunisia for democracy promotion in the Arab world is discussed.

1. The motives for the German-Tunisian Transformation Partnership

Germans were as surprised as the other Europeans by the protests which swept Tunisia and soon several other countries in the Arab world and which led to the rapid fall from power of Ben Ali and Mubarak. The authoritarian rulers of the southern rim of the Mediterranean have been German allies for decades. However, Berlin has kept them a bit more at distance than Paris, Rome or Madrid and has traditionally been less involved in the region. This made it easier for Germany, after some initial hesitation, to adapt its policy approach towards post-revolutionary Tunisia and Egypt.

The protest movements in both countries and the ensuing consequences have multiplied the political and public attention to the Southern Mediterranean and the Arab world in Germany. In this context, a realignment of Germany's interests in the region took place. Since the 1990s the limitation and control of migration, energy security, the fight against Islamist terrorism, the promotion of democracy and human rights, and an overall desire for stability have emerged as Germany's interests (in addition to the traditionally strong German-Israeli relationship).¹ The successful uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt at the beginning of 2011 did not invalidate this mélange of interests, but they did reorient priorities. Heavy criticism against the previous European policy towards the Southern Mediterranean has since then dominated the public discourse

¹ For a discussion of Germany's interests and foreign policy in the region since the 1990s see Perthes, Volker, *Germany and the Middle East: Interests and options*, Berlin: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2002.

in Germany. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* for instance, one of the country's most important dailies, accused the democratic West in an editorial headed "The Faustian bargain": "One cannot buy stability from the outside, especially if one mistakes stagnation for stability. [...] For a poor gain – a little stability, a little peace – they have closed their eyes to the defiance of the most important political values."² In the public, and also among politicians, a new discursive paradigm gained momentum. The promotion of democracy, rule of law and human rights – previously defined as an only marginal interest– became now a key feature of a "new" Mediterranean policy, Germans were arguing for. Henceforth, democracy in the Southern Mediterranean was regarded as precondition for stability. Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle declared shortly after the fall of Ben Ali: "What we are witnessing today refutes the contention that democracy and civil rights make countries unstable. We are witnessing the opposite. [...] The road to stability passes through democracy."³

Drawing on the self-perception of Germany's public and political decision-makers, Germany's engagement in favour of Tunisia's democratic transition is based on normative, economic and geo-strategic interests.⁴ These interests are, as well as

²Kornelius, Stefan: *Der faustische Pakt*, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, p. 4, 31/01/2011.

³Westerwelle, Guido: *Speech at the German Parliament*, Plenarprotokoll 17/87, pp. 9767-9769, 27/01/2011.

⁴ The author has conducted confidential interviews in 2011 and 2012 with German politicians both from government and opposition parties and with officials from the Foreign Office and other ministries. In addition, public statements of German politicians, policy papers of experts and newspaper articles relating to the developments in Tunisia and the Arab world and to the German policy towards this region have been analysed. Please not that this paper has of course to generalize in working out the "German interests", even if some dif-

ferences or at least varying accents among Germany's foreign policy community exist in this regard.

the policy approach emerging from them, in line with the general foreign policy traditions of the Federal Republic of Germany. The compatibility or even interlocking of Germany's engagement with Tunisia with its overall foreign policy has made it easier to mobilize public and bipartisan support.

First, a "dose of bad conscience" (in the words of a leading official in the Foreign Office) motivated the Germans to step up their engagement in North Africa. The assumption that economic liberalisation would necessarily lead to political reforms in these countries has turned out to be wrong. The EU's Mediterranean policy, which included intensive cooperation with the now disgraced autocrats, was now morally tarnished. Especially for the Federal Republic this was hard to swallow: The country, with its specific experiences in the 20th century, claims to conduct foreign policy, which also takes into account a "moral dimension". Patching things up was thus the order of the day. For that, small and sympathetic Tunisia, the "pioneer of the Arab Spring" with its relatively peaceful revolution, seemed to offer an ideal occasion.

Second, Germany has gradually discovered the economic potential of the Maghreb, which has for long been considered by the French (and as such accepted by the Germans) as a kind of their post-colonial *chasse gardée*. The Tunisian Revolution indicated the overhaul of old patterns and Germany sniffed its chance to foster its presence in the region. Especially the promotion of solar energy in North African has become a hot topic in Germany since a couple of years. Even if the DESERTEC project did, for now, not live up to its ambitions, the idea is still present within the German public

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and among politicians. The need of Germany to further diversify its energy supply has been aggravated by its decision, in the wake of the Fukushima accident at the beginning of 2011, to radically accelerate its nuclear power phase-out. In addition, German industry is still leading in the field of renewable energy and interested in new markets.

Third, and most important, a *mélange* of interests has to be mentioned which can be summarized under the heading “geostrategic”. Aware of the opportunities and the risks of the historic events in Tunisia, Egypt and other Arab countries, Germany wants the transition processes to succeed. Failing economies in this region would increase the risk of mass immigration and ideological radicalisation (and thus the potential of terrorism); the return of the *ancien régime* would make the necessary cooperation with the governments of these countries difficult to justify. On the contrary, a prosperous and democratic North Africa could be a sustainable political and economic partner and serve, at the same time, as a kind of stable “buffer zone” towards the fragile Sahel zone and the tumultuous Middle East. However, Berlin was conscious that external influence on the protracted transformation processes in the Arab world is limited – as are the instruments and the funding Germany would be willing or able to employ. The Foreign Office thus decided to concentrate the German support on Tunisia and Egypt, hoping that a successful transition in these countries would positively radiate into other parts of the Arab world.

Beyond this regional geostrategic dimension, there is also an internal European one. Paris and Berlin are still at the heart of the European integration process, displaying an intricate relationship of intense cooperation and occurring competition. Seen from Berlin, Paris has failed in the EU’s

Southern Neighbourhood, bolstering Ben Ali down to the last wire. As the foreign policy spokesman of the German governing conservative party put it: “There is no consistent EU policy towards North Africa because until now we have ceded everything to the former colonial powers of France and Italy.”⁵ Germany was now willing – and claimed – to have its say in redefining the European Union’s Mediterranean policy. With negotiations in Brussels being, as usual, cumbersome, Berlin chose to make its bilateral policy towards Tunisia a showcase of what a “transformation policy” by Europeans could look like. It has thus tried to project its own approach on the European level in an indirect way through example-setting.

These interests, which Germany has defined concerning Tunisia and North Africa, are in line with its general foreign policy traditions – civilian power, trading state and being a European lead nation. Contrary to Paris or London, with their tradition of power projection in the realm of “high politics”, Germany has after the Second World War developed an approach to international politics which essentially rests on civilian means and the promotion of multilateralism and international law. The “soft” promotion of democracy (not imposing it, but supporting the target country itself in democratising) resonates well with this approach. However, this does not mean a purely value-oriented policy – it is a policy that prefers “trade instead of the flag” in pursuing national interests. As trading state, with a strong and export-oriented economy, Germany needs market access to other countries and, at the same time, to import the energy resources it does not possess itself. Finally,

⁵Mißfelder, Philipp: “Wir müssen die europäischen Interessen deutlich machen”, interview in: Die ZEIT online, 12/04/2011 (available online; <http://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2011-04/missfelder-libyen-westerwelle>; 14/03/2013).

Germany (the most populous EU member state) considers itself one of the lead nations in Europe. It thus aspires to shape what is done on the EU level, including EU foreign policy.

Finally, an internal factor played in favour of a relatively strong commitment of Germany to the support of the nascent democracies in the Arab world. Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, looking for domestic and international recognition, seized the opportunity to build up his (at that moment rather weak) foreign policy performance and made the subject of the transformation processes in the Arab world his own.

In principle, the German “transformation policy” was, from the beginning, directed to Tunisia and Egypt alike. However, Tunisia established much more rapidly a (fairly) functioning and legitimate government and displayed more interest and a better “absorption capacity” than Egypt. It thus became – in relative terms – a more important partner of Germany, given its minor demographic, political and economic weight compared to its “revolutionary twin” on the Nile. Tunisia, for its part, willingly cooperates with Germany, as it seeks to multilateralize its foreign policy orientation and is in need of international support which, among others, Germany could provide.

2. The character of Germany’s policy towards post-revolutionary Tunisia

Germany’s policy towards post-revolutionary Tunisia follows from its aforementioned national interests, its general foreign and development policy orientation and the instruments at its disposal as well as from the specific situation in Tunisia.

The German “transformation policy” has been mainly worked out in the Foreign Office, in cooperation with the Ministry for Economic Coopera-

tion and Development. However, the German approach aspires to be a comprehensive one, involving all potentially concerned ministries and agencies. The basic philosophy of the German approach is that democracy cannot be installed from the outside. Instead, supportive measures shall be taken once a strong internal movement has been started. Germany wants to avoid being perceived as a “teacher”, but as a partner that responds to the demands of another country.

Three overarching guidelines have been defined for the “transformation policy” in the wake of the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt: (1) accompanying the development towards democracy and rule of law, (2) supporting economic and social development and (3) an optimal efficiency in spending the limited resources in helping these countries.⁶ Germany thus decided to focus on programmes with multiplier effects and on issues in which it could make a difference and bring its comparative advantages to bear (this includes: sharing its own transformation experience, promotion of SMEs and vocational education). Against this backdrop and pretending to stay open to developments on the ground and the demands of the partner country, Germany’s foreign minister early defined the following priorities of the German “transformation policy”: embedding of liberal-democratic values and strengthening of the civil society, support for free and fair elections, the development of a party system and independent judiciary as well as creating educational opportunities and jobs. “Regional stability” is mentioned as

⁶Strategy paper of the Foreign Office, August 2011 (unpublished).

last point, referring especially to Egypt and its mediating role in the Middle East conflict.⁷

Moreover, Germany re-emphasized (or, more precisely: re-discovered) a principle, which proved to be very useful within the framework of the EU accession of the Central and Eastern European countries: conditionality. The idea of rewarding political and economic reforms of partner countries with more aid and closer cooperation has officially since long been part of the agreements between the EU and its Southern neighbours. However, it has never been applied. After the fall from power of Ben Ali and Mubarak, Germany declared to take conditionality seriously from now on. Concerning Tunisia, the application of the conditionality principle played rather in favour of the country (especially as the transition in Egypt turned out to be much more troublesome). Only once Tunisia was the target of (albeit rather symbolic) “negative conditionality”. In the aftermath of the attack on the American embassy and the looting of the American school in Tunis (where also German pupils are taught) on September 14, 2012, Chancellor Angela Merkel cancelled a foreseen state visit and several German-Tunisian events were delayed.

The German “transformation policy” started as early as February 2011 to take shape. The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development announced special funds (which amounted to more than 30 million Euros) for the promotion of democracy and for economic assistance to support the transformation in North Africa. Soon after, an additional 100 million Euros were allocated to the

Foreign Office’s budget for the “transformation partnerships” in 2012 and 2013, with approximately one third of the money earmarked for projects in Tunisia. In the wake of the official signature of the “German-Tunisian transformation partnership” at the beginning of 2012, the governments of both countries agreed that 60 million Euros of outstanding Tunisian loans should be swapped for development purposes (these funds are administered by the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development). In addition, the German development bank KfW provided a new credit line of 220 million Euros to Tunisia.⁸

Other governmental institutions such as the Ministry of Economy, which dispatched consulting teams to Tunis, are involved as well. However, the additional funds of the Foreign Office and the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development have been largely assigned to well-established German institutions and agencies in the field of development and foreign cultural policy. These often semi-public bodies bring their own specific background and ideas into play. Displaying such a variety is a long tradition of Germany’s foreign cultural policy and best epitomized by the different Political Foundations such as the (conservative) Konrad-Adenauer- and Hanns-Seidel-Foundation, the (social-democratic) Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation and the (liberal) Friedrich-Naumann-Foundation. Recently, also the (green) Heinrich-Böll-Foundation has opened an office in Tunis. The DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) is since long engaged in Tunisia via its lecturers and scholarships and has, after the revolution, strongly intensified its presence in the country. With the additional funding by the government, all these institutions stepped up their pro-

⁷Westerwelle, Guido: *Freiheit muss auch Wohlstand bringen*, in: *Der Tagesspiegel*, 17/02/2011 (availableonline www.tagesspiegel.de/meinungandere-meinung/guido-westerwelle-freiheit-muss-auch-wohlstand-bringen/3849752.html; 14/03/2013).

⁸Report of the Foreign Office to the German Parliament, April 2012 (un-published).

grammes in Tunisia and designed new projects in order to respond to the needs of the transition process. Being usually already engaged in Tunisia (often since decades), albeit on a small scale, these institutions had already a network of local partners (and their necessary confidence), which now facilitated the rapid extension of their activities.

Among the numerous examples one could cite German language training for Tunisian graduates in combination with an internship at a German enterprise (conducted by the Goethe Institute and the German Chamber of Foreign Trade), the strengthening of democratic structures in municipalities (conducted by the GIZ, formerly known as GTZ), the education of journalists (conducted by the Deutsche Welle Academy) or the support of judges and bar associations (conducted by the Hanns-Seidel-Foundation). Tellingly, the German federate state of Bavaria has launched an own “transformation partnership”, which foresees projects for instance in the environmental sector. Such a “decentralized approach”, with many institutions and agencies often working quite independently of the federal government and on relatively small-scale projects, reflects the German political and societal system itself.

With these bottom-up project activities being at the heart of the German approach, upgrading took place on the political level as well. German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle was one of the first high foreign officials to visit Post-Ben-Ali-Tunisia (on February 13, 2011). He started off a stream of German political and societal delegations coming to Tunisia, including for instance the President of the German Parliament. For their part, leading political figures from Tunisia, such as the then-Prime Minister Jebali or the President of the National Assembly Ben Jafaar travelled to Berlin

to speak with Angela Merkel and other politicians. In September 2012, the first round of intergovernmental consultations took place in the German capital on the level of state secretaries – a novelty for the relations of Germany with a North African country. At the same time, the German embassy in Tunisia, until then very small, considerably increased its staff after the Revolution.

On the European level, the German Foreign Office advocated facilitating the access of Tunisia and other Southern Mediterranean countries to the European single market and encouraging mobility from these countries into the EU. However, these proposals met scepticism or resistance not only by the Southern EU member states. Also within in Germany especially the Ministry of Interior and other politicians with a focus on domestic politics (worrying for instance about internal security) opposed concessions in this regard.

3. A first assessment of the German approach – and the challenges ahead

That Germany foreign policy “discovered” Tunisia after the Revolution is doubtlessly good news – for both sides. Germany must catch up on the Maghreb, which it has previously neglected. A success of the democratic transition in Tunisia would not only be beneficial for the Tunisians themselves, but for the whole region as well as for neighbouring Europe. Tunisia, for its parts, needs to better integrate into the international community, to diversify its foreign relations and to mobilise international backing and cooperation to overcome its enormous political and economic challenges.

It is too early for a final judgement of the German-Tunisian transformation partnership as a lot of the measures are still in the implementation phase.

Nonetheless, it is fair to say that Germany can indeed make a valuable contribution to the Tunisian transition, especially in the political-cultural and the educational field, including professional training. Germany's "decentralized approach" does justice to the burgeoning and diverse civil society in Tunisia and reflects the pluralism in a nascent democracy. Many German institutions and agencies have experiences in the field of transformation – both in Germany itself (with regard to the former GDR in East Germany) and in Central and Eastern Europe, where Germany has played an active role after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Moreover, to focus on projects with multiplier effects and with a sustainable character is a useful strategy given the limited resources at hand. Even if asymmetrical power relations are unavoidable between the donor and the recipient country, the German projects usually try to strengthen, wherever possible, the "ownership" of Tunisians and to take into account the specific needs of the local partners.

However, the German approach displays two shortcomings: a lack of coordination and, put bluntly, a lack of political courage and foresight. The lack of coordination is the downside of the "decentralized approach" outlined above. The different German institutions and agencies sometimes cover similar fields, especially after the Foreign Office has conceived new tenders for projects supporting the democratic transition. A clear division of labour is missing; competition for federal funding (and sometimes institutional vanity) can lead to doubling or the lack of cooperation among the German actors in the field, even if cooperation would be appropriate and efficient regarding certain projects. Even if some efforts already exist to improve this situation (as a regular "German insti-

tutions breakfast" in Tunis), the structural problems in this regard are not yet solved.

A better coordination is also in order on the European and international level. In spite of the EU activities concerning the support of the transition process in Tunisia, resolute coordination is missing. The EU programmes in response to the "Arab Spring" represents another policy layer, and not an integration or a consolidation of the policies of the member states. The member states, on their part, are eager to promote their own policies, with their own national stamp on it. Hereby, Germany is no exception. A complete "Europeanization" of especially foreign cultural policy would be counterfactual (as indeed different cultures exist in Europe), but better coordination, cooperation and a more efficient complementary should be possible. Germany, with a less emotional attachment to the Maghreb than the Southern EU member states, can set a good example in opening up its projects as much as possible to other European (and possibly international) partners.

The German project activities in Tunisia are necessary and useful – but not sufficient. In addition, Germany should foster its Tunisian policy in the "political realm". The intergovernmental consultations are thus a step in the right direction. However, to support Tunisia in overcoming the difficult post-revolutionary period and in providing strong incentives to push forward with democratic reforms, "big measures" have to be put on the table. This includes, as already foreseen (but never properly enacted) in the European Neighbourhood policy, gradual integration into the "four freedoms" of the European Union (free circulation of goods, services, persons and capital). This is of course a long-term objective, but intermediate steps are possible in the shorter term. Germany should

again, as it does quite successfully in the “project realm”, lead through example-setting. In contrast to the question of market access (which is indeed an exclusive EU competence), Germany can facilitate mobility for Tunisians and work out formats of circular migration on its own or together with other like-minded EU member states.

Finally, Germany has to further develop its “transformation strategy”. It must, on the one hand, take into consideration the broader regional context and be as coherent as possible. Why should the conditionality principle apply to new democracies (as Tunisia), but not to persistent autocracies (such as those on the Arab Gulf)? How does the “transformation policy” interrelate with the existing conflicts in the region with their enduring human rights abuses? On the other hand, Germany should prepare for various scenarios in its partner countries, including a worsening of the situation. This concerns Egypt in particular, but should also be done with regards to Tunisia. How to deal with radical political currents that have popular legitimization, but do not share the same values as Germany? At which point should the conditionality principle apply? How can (and should) the German foreign and development policy stay neutral in face of an increasing polarisation within the partner country? When does “co-ownership” descend into complicity with (neo-) authoritarian tendencies? Berlin has yet to give (operational) answers to these questions.

Conclusion

In the wake of the January-14-Revolution, Tunisia took the centre stage of the international community’s attention. The United States and most European countries launched new programmes and increased their aid for development projects in Tunisia. Germany did that under the umbrella of a

specifically conceived “transformation policy”. Directed in principle towards all willing Arab states in transition, Tunisia emerged as ideal-typical partner of this approach.

Can the German transformation policy and the post-revolutionary German-Tunisian relations serve as a model for supporting democracy in the Arab world? Not in general: The situation in each Arab country is too different, and the German approach is, first, relying on specific German instruments and traditions and, second, not “thought-out” enough.

However, Germany’s “project activities” can be a rich source of inspiration not only for international support for Tunisia, but in accompanying also other Arab countries in certain stages of their transition. The German approach is helpful to bolster already existing dynamics and in a situation where this kind of support is wanted by the society of the target country – and by its government. In a certain sense it is, to put it bluntly, a “fair-weather-approach”. The outlined German approach becomes much more difficult to implement if there is repugnancy within the partner country, as the examples of Egypt and the United Arab Emirates demonstrate, where activities of the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation have been prohibited by the authorities.

Even if the German-Tunisian post-revolutionary relationship is a result of a specific constellation in both countries, elements of this partnership can be adapted by and towards other countries. However, to serve as an example, Berlin and Tunis must cultivate and further improve their “transformation partnership” and make it sustainable. Germany has to find a way to cope with the current turbulences in the Tunisian transition and to better coordinate

both among its own institutions and on the European and international level. With the “project realm” of Germany’s transformation strategy being on a promising track in Tunisia, it is now time to push forward in the “political realm”, including market access and mobility. In complementarity of the German “bottom-up approach”, as sustainable it may be, one has also to think about bigger infrastructure projects, which can have the needed short-term effect in easing the economic crisis in

Tunisia. However, such projects must be conceived on a multilateral, at least on a European-Tunisian or Euro-Mediterranean level.

Berlin has made a good start in Tunisia. Now, it is time to gear up, to deepen and to open up its approach. In doing so, maybe its own specific national approach may not become a model. But, and this matters, it may thus contribute its share that a successful democratic and economic transition in Tunisia becomes a model for the Arab world.

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