

The 2025 German Federal Election

Middle East and North Africa: the importance of long-term effects

Prof Markus Loewe

German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS)



Bonn, 17 February 2025. The Middle East and North Africa are Europe's direct neighbours. Whatever happens there sooner or later has an impact on Europe too. Germany and Europe as a whole thus have an interest in promoting positive development in this part of the world. In this context, however, the next German Federal Government should aim to achieve lasting impacts rather than seeking quick advantages in terms of trade, the stabilisation of authoritarian regimes or migration management, as the latter often have disastrous side-effects in the long term.

Development in the countries of North Africa and the Middle East is not sustainable in any respect: for the past 15 years, the average economic per capita growth rate has been around zero and has created very few jobs. Exports mainly consist of fuel, raw materials, basic services and products for which little know-how is required.

Inequalities in income, health and education are on the rise in and between the countries in the region. It is also the only region in the world in which consumption and production are not becoming less energy intense.

At the same time, pollution and overuse of soil, water and other resources are increasing. The region is also particularly hard hit by global environmental changes: some areas such as northern Iraq and eastern Syria might soon become uninhabitable, because temperatures there increasingly frequently exceed 50°C over periods of many weeks. The rise in sea level is jeopardising large areas of southern Iraq, while in the Nile Delta it is leading to excessive salinity levels in large areas of farming land. More than anything, however, there is hardly anywhere else in the world where so many countries have similarly large deficits in terms of political participation, transparency and legal certainty. Other countries in the region are suffering from the impacts of violent conflicts: Sudan, Libya, the Palestinian territories, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria.

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More so now than before the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011, the region has reached a tipping point. Many people there are becoming increasingly dissatisfied. This is leading to a lack of trust, declining consumption and trade, instability, displacement and migration. Germany and Europe have an interest in selling European goods, though, and in seeing a decrease in migration to Europe, long-term political stability and legal certainty for investors and citizens.

In the pursuit of quick successes, conflicts may arise between these objectives, however: if, for example, Europe provides the governments of Tunisia, Libya or Egypt with financial rewards for stopping refugees on their way to Europe, it will be supporting authoritarian rulers, who will be able to expand their armies and security services, increase their capabilities for armed conflicts and suppress their citizens more easily. If Europe creates political stability by supporting existing political structures, it will reduce the likelihood of success for activists or non-governmental organisations in their fight for change. If Europe continues to protect its agricultural sector against

imports from North Africa and the Middle East by imposing non-tariff trade barriers, people there will find it more difficult to gradually improve their income. If Europe allows human rights to be ignored in many countries, the numbers of migrants making their way to Europe will continue to increase. And without support for climate action and for measures to adapt to the impacts of climate change, people will also be forced to leave the region.

The next Federal Government should therefore make cooperation with the Middle East and North Africa one of its priorities and partly adjust it. It is not a question of Germany and Europe not pursuing their own interests too, but in doing so they need to focus more heavily on lasting impacts. And in the long term, sustainable, socially just growth, social cohesion and the rule of law in the countries of North Africa and the Middle East will be in the interests of Germany and Europe as well. This approach leads to prosperity, sales markets for German products, political stability beyond the short-term horizon and prospects for people to live a decent life in the region so that there is no longer any reason for them to try to reach Europe.

At the same time, the next Federal Government should assume more responsibility in the European Neighbourhood Policy towards the Middle East and North Africa. Germany cannot achieve enough on its own. Cooperation between the member states of the European Union (EU) on their policy towards the Middle East and North Africa has been very limited to date, however; in some cases, they have in fact been working against one another in this area.

As the largest EU member state, Germany should attempt to forge alliances for common interests. It should work to ensure that Europe opens up its markets to a greater extent for goods from the Middle East and North Africa and that it offers support in improving the situation in terms of legal certainty for investors and citizens, fair economic competition in the markets, human rights, environmental protection, adaptation to the impacts of climate change, social justice, education, health and political participation. In future, financial assistance should be provided for achievements in these areas and not as a reward for support with migration management or in return for votes in international organisations. Reconstruction in Gaza, Syria, Lebanon and Libya is obviously of key importance too in order to prevent new tensions in these countries from spreading throughout the region.