

New perspectives for European development cooperation

What to expect from a Biden administration in the MENA region

by **Bernhard Trautner and Erin McCandless**

German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)



The Current Column

of 18 December 2020

d·i·e

Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development
Institute



10 years after the onset of the Arab Spring, one of the few positive outlooks is on Joe Biden's presidency. A Biden/Harris administration offers potential for perhaps subtle but potentially catalytic changes for the MENA region. With the incoming administration, Germany and Europe will find a partner who is interested in addressing the root causes of conflict in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and in building more sustainable social contracts in the different countries after the current pandemic. Undoubtedly Biden will have to focus first on domestic challenges such as managing the effects of the Corona pandemic, dealing with a massive polarisation between the political camps, reviving growth, reducing the excessive influence of the arms lobby and repairing US diplomacy and development policy. In the MENA region, he will try to revise some of the decisions taken by President Trump. The controversial appointment of Reema Dodin, a Palestinian American, as part of his legislative affairs team that shapes presidential policies, alongside plans to repeal Trump's "Muslim Ban" suggests the potential for bold new agendas – both domestically and with respect to the MENA region.

„With the incoming administration, Germany and Europe will find a partner who is interested in addressing the root causes of conflict in the MENA region and in building more sustainable social contracts in the different countries after the current pandemic “

Challenges for peace and development have increased in the MENA region since the last change of power in the US four years ago. This is partly due to Trump's refusal to deliver on foreign policy: he did nothing to mediate in conflicts (for example in Yemen, Libya, Syria) but frankly strengthened regional powers and tolerated their involvement in these conflicts and the violations of international law and human rights. Critically, Trump has not inspired MENA countries to nurture inclusive transitions towards more participatory and egalitarian social contracts.

The next US administration will follow a different strategy for MENA but it will probably not be able to engage too heavily in the region, making Europe's enhanced engagement a welcome contribution to defusing conflict in that region. The Biden administration will be quite busy with the post-pandemic, social and economic reconstruction in its own country,

even with continuing domestic political blockade by a presumably Republican Senate in Congress and already excessively high foreign debt. Hence, it will hardly be willing to commit itself financially or militarily in the MENA region beyond the current state of contribution. Pending on re-joining an improved Nuclear Deal with Iran ('JCPOA+'), President-elect Biden is probably going to discontinue Trump's 'unsmart' sanctions against Iran: Implicitly aiming at the collapse of the Ayatollah regime, the sanctions actually strengthen the *hardliner* group in Iran. In Iraq, Biden might continue to pursue innovative foreign policy approaches as he did before, under Obama, by promoting the devolution of power in Iraq into federal or even independent states: one for the Kurds in the North and one for the rest of the country. Such approaches have potentially valuable transferability for other countries damaged by external intervention, such as Libya. But his position on many other issues is not yet clear – he may well seek to reset relations with Saudi Arabia and backtrack on intervention in Yemen.

In view of the mandate from the electorate, a Biden administration will undoubtedly cause less harm in the region than the Trump era but it will not be able to undo all the damage done so far. In addition, it remains an open question if the US will be a partner for autocrats, reformers, or both. Biden will need to build a reliable, principled approach to working with allies, mending relationships and taking decisions in the interests of sustainable transformation for the region – at the heart of which lies inclusive and responsive social contracts. He will not, and, given domestic economic challenges, he cannot revert to policing the region as earlier presidents have done.

Bearing this analysis in mind, a new German government from autumn 2021 will need to step up in terms of foreign, alliance and development policy vis-à-vis the MENA region. Together with the EU, Germany is already the largest donor in efforts to stabilise the quagmire around the Syria crisis and in Iraq, and Germany is crucially pivoting to support more sustainable post-conflict orders in the region. Together with a more coherent EU Southern Neighbourhood policy, and an increasingly rules-based US policy, MENA region citizens may regain inspiration and resilience against malignant domestic and external powers. More crucially, the region may find formidable obstacles removed that better enable Arab Spring aspirations, now a decade on, to be realised.