

Hold the Line

How Germany can help stabilize the Middle East during America's leave of absence

As ISIS rampaged through Iraq and Syria during the summer of 2014, Germany was among the first countries to pledge and provide military support and training to stem the tide. By the end of 2014, a Coalition of over 50 countries was working together to defeat ISIS and return displaced civilians to their homes. Germany became the leader in one of the most important aspects of our campaign: Stabilization in the wake of military operations. Without Germany, none of the Coalition's important achievements in returning civilians to their homes – including over four million Iraqis – would have happened. Berlin contributed \$1.7B in stabilization support for Iraq and later extended that support to Syria. Today, Germany remains actively engaged in efforts to win the peace, recognizing the campaign's long-term strategy.

Unfortunately, the cooperation that led to success in the Counter-ISIS campaign has come under increasing strain. Germany and the United States now seem to be sniping at each other rather than listening to one another and working to combine our wisdom and power to protect our mutual interests. This benefits nobody; and in the Middle East, it risks jeopardizing a joint success built on years of cooperation and consultation.

Diverging assumptions underlying our respective Iran policies have become a prime source of irri-



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tation. Washington assumes that economic strangulation will ultimately lead to better Iranian behavior in the region and draw Tehran to the table for a more comprehensive deal on its nuclear program, ballistic missiles, and malign activities. Berlin assumes maximum American pressure will meet maximum Iranian resistance, thereby worsening Iranian behavior and significantly increasing

the risks of conflict. Differing policy assumptions are difficult to resolve. If Germany, based on its own experience and analysis, believes that Washington's policy is more likely to result in conflict than stability, Washington should not expect Berlin to support this policy.

In August 2017, then Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis famously told American troops in Jordan to "hold the line until our country gets back to respecting one another." The same can be asked of our allies: Hold the line and look for areas of convergence even where larger differences are unresolvable. In the Middle East, there are at least three areas where Germany can fill gaps and help ensure that hard-fought gains are not lost.

First, Germany can continue to lead stabilization efforts in Iraq, where a new government faces multiple pressures. Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Maas recently expressed support for Iraq's policy of balancing between the region's multiple stakeholders. On Berlin's part, recognizing the reality of Iraq's geo-strategic position is sound policy. Against the background of mounting pressure from Iran, Berlin can continue supporting both Iraq's stabilization and its ties to Europe and the Gulf.

Second, Germany can fill the diplomatic void left by America's relative absence and increasing engagement by Russia and China. The West should seek to de-escalate the flashpoints of Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria, all of which are complicated by malign Iranian behavior and intra-region rivalry between Qatar and Turkey on one side, and the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt on the other. Absent diplomatic engagement and maintenance, there is a real risk of the region suffering a new wave of instability that will eventually reach our shores.

Third, in northeast Syria, Berlin can continue to support stabilization activities even as the US recedes. This has become far more difficult in light of Trump's sudden and impetuous decision to further remove American forces, but Berlin remains a leading voice on following through on military gains – and should loudly protest abandonment of partners that fought ISIS and helped maintain a stable peace. The west still has not determined what

to do with thousands of foreign fighters, families, and children now held in northeast Syria. Berlin has unique convening authority and might consider an urgent meeting of Coalition stakeholders to recommend concrete action in this area.

Donald Trump's foreign policy vacillates wildly between two camps within the Republican Party, one interventionist (with an ongoing belief in the use of unilateral American force), the other more isolationist, demanding an end to foreign wars and a renewed focus on domestic problems. While Trump himself tends towards the latter, his policies tend towards the former, leading to confusion, incoherence, and sudden jolts, as we have just seen in Syria. Public opinion polls show that most Americans rest between these positions, believing in multilateral problem-solving and restrained engagement in the world. We will likely return in time to such an equilibrium, and we can hope that our allies hold the line as we figure it out. ✘