

Confronting and engaging Iran together

Concerning Iran, Germany and Israel share the same policy objective: preventing an Iranian nuclear bomb and putting an end to Iranian destabilizing behaviour in the Middle East. While the German and Israeli policy approaches to reach that goal currently differ, they should move toward cooperation along the lines of a common “confront & engage” strategy. In doing so, Israelis and Germans could also contribute in bringing the United States and Europe closer together when it comes to the Middle East.

German interests

Security of Israel and nuclear non-proliferation

The security of Israel is an often declared interest of itself of Germany's Middle East policy which feeds into various policy domains and is particularly prominent concerning Iran. While German-Iranian relations are often portrayed as traditionally friendly, Berlin has in fact always been clear when it comes to Teheran's nuclear ambitions and aggressive rhetoric against Israel. Tellingly, Merkel gave the famous statement in her 2008 Knesset speech about the security of Israel as being part of Germany's *Staatsräson* (reason of state) in the context of Iranian threats against Israel and the chancellor was urging for international sanctions to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. This was – and remains – the main driver behind Germany's long-standing commitment for the nuclear deal with Iran (JCPOA) that was signed in 2015. Also in general, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is a long-standing German foreign policy goal.

Stability in the Middle East and containing Iran's subversive role

While in Germany it is widely accepted that Iran has – until recently – followed the rules of the JCPOA and that the United States' unilateral withdrawal from the agreement was a mistake, there is growing awareness that Teheran has been playing a negative role concerning the stability of the region, in particular with its “proxy strategy” (be it as a means of deterrence and “forward defence”, as sometimes claimed, or as means of seeking regional hegemony, fuelled by expansionist ideology). It is in any case evident that the Iranian proxy strategy, based on supporting (and controlling) specific confessional (armed) groups, weakens the central state and is one more obstacle to national unity and good governance in countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. In Syria, Iran has backed up the Assad regime, which is widely decried in Germany and Europe for having led the country into the civil war and for its massive human rights abuses.

Stability through participation: good governance and human rights

German Middle East policy has turned (again) more ‘realistic’ and stability-oriented during the last years. However, given the continued turmoil in the Middle East, many in Berlin’s foreign policy community are more than ever convinced that sustainable stability and fruitful international cooperation can only be achieved if minimum requirements of inclusive and rights-based governance are fulfilled. The popular protests in Lebanon and Iraq against corruption and sectarianism confirm this assumption as do the protests in the Islamic Republic of Iran itself. If the concerned governments react with violence to the peaceful expression of their citizens’ will and infringe upon their civic rights, they should face firm international condemnation and specific diplomatic and economic sanctions against those who are held accountable. The brutal crackdown on protesters in Iran during the last weeks cannot go unnoticed and Teheran has to bear consequences of its human rights violations.

Europe as foreign policy actor and transatlantic relations

Finally, a common European position – and action – has an intrinsic value to Germany. This is another reason for German’s support of the JCPoA, one of the rare major successes of European diplomacy. EU and/or E3 (with France and Great Britain) unity is an important (and relatively effective) pillar of Germany’s Iran and Middle East policy that will – and should – not be abandoned thoughtlessly. At the same time, despite the irritations that came along (not only) with the Trump presidency, transatlantic cooperation is still part of the foreign policy culture in Germany, in particular in the centre-right political spectrum. As a consequence, Berlin is always most “at ease” (and willing and ready to act) when European and transatlantic policy orientations are in line.

Potential for cooperation with Israel

Israel has successfully proven that it is able and willing to confront Iranian armed forces or Iranian proxies in its neighbouring states, in particular in Syria. However, also Israel would profit from a regional security architecture that leads to a more constructive behaviour of Teheran and nuclear non-proliferation without resorting to a risky and costly full-scale war with Iran and/or its allies such as Hezbollah. As Iran is under heavy economic pressure and as the regime faces increasing unrest from its own people, the Iranian regime could further provoke escalation, hoping for a “rally around the flag” effect once it is attacked at home. Iran has also, in the last months, forcefully demonstrated its geopolitical assets – and the potential costs of regional war – with the Iranian or Iranian-backed attacks against an American drone, oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz and oil producing facilities in Saudi Arabia.

A common front of Europeans, Americans, and Israelis – joined by regional Arab allies – to deal with Iran would have the biggest chance of changing Teheran’s behaviour and limiting its capabilities without the risks of a major war and/or sudden and complete regime change that is still unlikely to happen (at least peacefully). Europeans and the US have “carrots” of re-integrating Iran into global economy, whereas as the US and Israel have also military “sticks” to threaten against continued Iranian non-compliance. Combining both and re-engaging Iran – on tough terms – should be at least

seriously tried. Given that Jerusalem, Washington and Berlin all have special relations with each other, the three countries could play a facilitating and leading role in developing an “engagement with conditions”-approach toward Iran that is backed by a broader regional and international coalition. A more nuanced approach toward Teheran might also strengthen forces in Iran who do not want to escalate regional tensions and who favour – as many of the protesters in Iran do – a less offensive foreign policy of their country.

Foreign policy options

Instead of further straining both the transatlantic and the European-Israeli alliance on this issue, Israel and the United States should be ready to work out with the Europeans a common strategy on how to engage Iran into a broader “JCPoA 2.0” framework that takes into account the flaws of 2015 agreement (missile programme, sunset clause, regional issues). This could then be a first step into a broader security framework in the region.

At the beginning of 2019 and with the intent to alleviate the effect of US secondary sanctions on European enterprises, Germany, France and Great Britain have, with the help of the EU, registered INSTEX, a special purpose vehicle to facilitate trade with Iran. Europeans should restrict its use to non-sanctioned goods, such as medical and food products. At the same time, Washington should put no further obstacles to INSTEX becoming fully operative. This can be a first step of trust-building between the proponents and critics of the JCPoA. Also, facilitating trade with humanitarian goods will show to Iranians that sanctions policies are not against the Iranian people but intend to change their regime’s destructive behaviour. However, should Iran continue violating the JCPoA as it did in the last months, Europeans should, sticking to the text of the agreement, launch the “dispute resolution mechanism” and then, in case, re-impose European/international sanctions.

Israeli and German security and military cooperation has a successful track-record and intensified over the last years. This should be further expanded and also include joint trainings and exchange of technology and knowledge that would help dealing with Iranian military escalation. As another means of deterrence, Germany should do more to secure the freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz and contribute to the planned European naval mission that is to be set up in the French naval base in Abu Dhabi. Berlin should make sure that this mission works as closely as possible with the existing one which is led by the United States.

Germans and Europeans should keep the door to dialogue open and at the same time be more serious about “red lines” that Iran has to be confronted with (continued violation of JCPoA, destabilizing of other countries, human rights abuses at home). While Israel’s right to defend itself can of course include hitting its enemies militarily in Syria or elsewhere, a big regional war will not serve anybody. A common transatlantic (and Transatlantic-Israeli) front to counter Iranian threats and regional influence with a combination of confrontation and engagement is in Israel’s interest. Instead of encouraging Washington’s hawks into unilateral actions, Jerusalem can help building this front.