

# Germany and the Muslim Brotherhood

By Guido Steinberg

Germany's policy toward the Muslim Brotherhood has included a domestic and a foreign policy dimension ever since the first Brothers arrived in Germany during the 1950s. Although German policymakers do not seem to have seen any connection between the two fields of action, policies in both were until recently characterized by a rejection of the Brotherhood. In domestic politics, organizations connected to the Muslim Brotherhood were first granted an official role by the federal government in 2006, albeit reluctantly. In foreign policy, the Muslim Brotherhood was only recognized as a potential partner after the Arab uprisings in 2011 and the subsequent empowerment of the Islamists made clear that Berlin could not ignore the movement any more.

Germany's policy towards the Muslim Brotherhood went through three distinct phases. In the first phase, which lasted from the late 1950s to 1979, relations were shaped by a profound lack of understanding of the phenomenon and the significance of the rise of Islamism in general and the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood in particular. Interest in and contacts with the Brotherhood were largely confined to the intelligence services. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 until 2010, Islamism and the Muslim Brotherhood gained more attention by the German government, although many policymakers did not grasp the significance yet either. Islamism was still seen largely as a backward-oriented movement which would not play any major role in the future of the Arab and Muslim worlds. Nevertheless, incomprehension was now complemented by a rejection of Islamist aspirations. As a consequence, even after 1979, it was still the German intelligence services which took care of the few contacts to the Muslim Brotherhood.

This second phase of rejection might, however, can be subdivided into two sub-phases. In 2001, the attacks in New York and Washington prompted the German security authorities to take a closer look at the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as other Islamist organizations. In parallel, the German Foreign Office decided to task a newly founded section in its cultural affairs department with establishing contacts with a variety of Muslim activists worldwide, including the Muslim Brotherhood. Nevertheless, it remained official policy to reject all contacts to the Muslim Brotherhood. Rather, the German government increased its support for authoritarian regimes in the Arab world in order to improve its counterterrorism capabilities.

As a result, in 2011 after it became clear that Germany would play a major role in the so-called transformation states in the Arab world, especially in Tunisia and Egypt, the country had to devise a totally new policy regarding the Islamists. This third phase, which started after the Arab Spring, is one of cautious engagement, in which Germany has pragmatically reacted to new realities, giving up its former policies of rejection and accepting the political roles the Muslim Brethren now played or were about to play. This attitude mirrors the generally guarded nature of German Middle East

policies and the relative lack of importance German foreign policy has placed on the Muslim Brotherhood's home countries in North Africa.

## 1. The Muslim Brotherhood in Germany

The history of relations between Germany and the Brotherhood began on German soil when the latter built a presence in the country in the late 1950s. This process was hardly noticed by the German body politic and the public, but it was of utmost importance to the Brotherhood's development in Western Europe. The organization first gained a foothold in Germany when the Geneva-based Egyptian Said Ramadan (1926-1995), a close confidant and son-in-law of the founder of the Muslim brotherhood, Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949), took control of a Commission which had as its stated goal the construction of a mosque in Munich in southern Germany in 1961.

### *Said Ramadan and the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Germany*

Ramadan had had to leave Egypt after the Free Officers' government crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in 1954. From exile in Geneva, he laid the foundations for the emergence of the Brotherhood's network in Europe. Munich became an early center of these efforts. In the 1950s and 1960s, West Germany became an increasingly popular destination for Arab students who studied engineering, medicine and sciences at its universities. Ramadan himself studied law at Cologne University and earned his Ph.D. in 1959 with a thesis on Islamic law.<sup>1</sup> Together with a group of Arab student supporters he then took over an earlier project of building a mosque in Munich.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1960s, under the leadership of the Syrian-Italian Ghalib Himmat (born 1939) a trusted aide of Ramadan, and in cooperation with the Egyptian businessman Yusuf Nada, the mosque (also called the Islamic Center Munich) became the early headquarters of the Brotherhood in Germany and Europe.<sup>3</sup> In Himmat's years at the helm of the mosque, the Mosque Construction Commission developed into the nucleus of a network of mosques, centers and associations in all major West German cities. In 1982, this structure was named the Islamic Community of Germany (Islamische Gemeinschaft in Deutschland (IGD), the main representative of the Brotherhood in Germany, reflecting the growth of its structures in the country.<sup>4</sup> The affiliation of the mosque to the Muslim Brotherhood became perhaps most obvious between 1984 and 1987, when the prominent Egyptian brother and the Muslim Brotherhood's future supreme guide Mehdi Akef (born 1928) lived in Munich and served as head Imam of the mosque.<sup>5</sup>

Besides the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in Munich, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was strongly represented in Aachen, close to the Belgian border, under the leadership of Issam al-Attar, one of

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<sup>1</sup> The first English edition of the text was published in 1961. Said Ramadan, *Islamic Law: Its Scope and Equity* (London: Macmillan, 1961). The thesis has been published in numerous editions and languages.

<sup>2</sup> On these events in detail cf. Johnson, Ian: *A Mosque in Munich: Nazis, the CIA, and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the West* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2011), passim and pp. 122-123, 128, 134.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp. 157 and 190.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 197.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 194. Akef served as supreme guide between 2004 and 2010.

the most important leaders of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Although Attar served as an honorary member of the Munich mosque as well, the two branches of the Brotherhood remained independent from each other. Both were of major significance to their organizations because the repression of Muslim Brotherhood activities in Egypt and Syria forced leaders like Akef and Attar into exile, where they made use of civil liberties to develop the international structures of the Muslim Brotherhood.

### *Egyptian and Syrian Structures in Germany*

The indifference of the German government allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to build larger structures all over Germany, which were divided between the Egyptian Brotherhood with its headquarters in Munich and the Syrian Brotherhood with its headquarters in Aachen. At times, the structures cooperated intensely but they remained separate entities. While the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has gained in importance, the Syrian branch has reduced its public visibility in recent years.

The Egyptian brothers focused their organizational efforts on the IGD, which is structured as an umbrella organization of Arab mosque associations in Germany. Its headquarters remain in the Islamic Center in Munich, but it controls other Islamic centers in Frankfurt (Main), Marburg, Nuremberg, Stuttgart, Cologne, Münster and Braunschweig and possibly other cities. Although German security sources speak about only 1,300 members of the organization, it is more influential among German Muslims than this number might suggest. One indicator is the IGD's yearly meetings, where up to several thousand predominantly young Muslims participate.<sup>6</sup> The IGD controls a number of affiliated associations, the most influential of which seems to be the Islamic Center Cologne (Islamisches Zentrum Köln) and the German Muslim Students Association (Muslim Studenten Vereinigung in Deutschland). The Islamic Center in Cologne was founded in 1978 and has been closely connected to the Turkish Islamic Community Milli Görüş, which has its headquarters in Cologne, as well. The embodiment of these connections is the Egyptian-German Ibrahim El-Zayat (born in 1968), head of the center since 1997, who has established himself as the most prominent Brotherhood representative in Germany.<sup>7</sup> Zayat rose to prominence as a leading member in several Islamist youth organizations, most notably the German Muslim Students Association, an organization of several Muslim student associations at German universities. It was founded in 1964 in Munich, and was closely connected to the Islamic Center there. Today, it is located in Cologne.

The Islamic Center Aachen, serves as the headquarters of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in Germany. In the 1960s, Arab students studying at the well-known Technical University in Aachen

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<sup>6</sup> On the conference in 2007 cp. Bundesministerium des Innern: *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2007*, Berlin 2008, p. 214. The reports of the German domestic intelligence agency (Office for the Protection of the Constitution) can be downloaded from <http://www.verfassungsschutz.de/de/publikationen/verfassungsschutzbericht/>

<sup>7</sup> On the Turkish Islamists in detail cp. Guido Steinberg: "Germany", in: Barry Rubin (ed.): *Guide to Islamist Movements* (Armonk NY/London: M.E. Sharpe 2010), 2 Vols., Vol. 2, pp. 459-468.

started constructing the Bilal mosque. In 1978, the Islamic Center Aachen was founded as the body responsible for the mosque association. Its head was Issam al-Attar (b. 1927), the former head of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, who left his native country in the 1950s. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Islamic Center Aachen became the headquarters of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in Europe. From the 1970s, the Brotherhood spearheaded an insurgency against the regime of the late Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad (1930-2000) which culminated in a civil war 1979-1982. Several writers have blamed the center for becoming the command center of the Syrian Islamists' insurgency against the Asad regime at that time.<sup>8</sup> The Damascus government shared that interpretation and sent secret agents who targeted Syrian Muslim Brothers in Germany. In their most publicized attack, they killed Attar's wife in his Aachen home in March 1981.<sup>9</sup> After Syrian troops subdued an uprising in the city of Hama in spring 1982, however, the insurgency quickly lost momentum and the Brotherhood's center in Aachen lost some of its former importance. Although it seems as if he lost his political importance in the early 1980s already, Attar continued to entertain relations in Belgium and France and remains a highly respected personality in Islamist circles.<sup>10</sup> He remained an important figurehead for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in 2011 and 2012.<sup>11</sup>

The Islamic Center in Aachen maintained close relations to the Munich center just as the Syrian Muslim Brothers were closely connected to their Egyptian colleagues in Switzerland. Both Egyptians and Syrians cooperate in the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (*Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland* (ZMD)).<sup>12</sup> Some of its critics consider its current chairman, the German-Syrian Aiman Mazyek (b. 1969), as the most important representative of the Syrian branch in the Central Council. Nevertheless, the Syrians and the Islamic Center Aachen insist on their independence from the more powerful Egyptian branch.

#### *Government reactions*

Although Middle Eastern governments saw the presence of the Brotherhood on German soil as tacit support on the German government's part, the latter does not seem to have paid any attention to the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood in the country (and the significance of the Brotherhood in the Middle East) until the early 1980s. An important reason seems to have been a lack of understanding of the relevance of Islamist groupings in general. As a veteran diplomat, who followed Germany's policy towards the Muslim Brotherhood from the early 1980s, stated:

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Binswanger: "Fundamentalisten-Filz – Getrennt marschieren, vereint schlagen?" in: Bahman Nirumand (ed.): *Im Namen Allahs. Islamische Gruppen und der Fundamentalismus in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Köln: Dreisam 1990, pp. 129-148 (143).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 129-132.

<sup>10</sup> According to Brigitte Maréchal, the Da'wa mosque in Paris and the Al-Khalil mosque in Brussels were affiliated to Attar and the Syrian Brotherhood. Brigitte Maréchal: *The Muslim Brothers in Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 62.

<sup>11</sup> Attar appeared at several conferences of Syrian oppositionists in Istanbul. For example, Syrian exiles call for army to side with people. Reuters, July 13, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Until 1981, the Islamic Center Aachen had been a member of the IGD. Grundmann, Johannes. *Islamische Internationalisten* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2005), p. 59.

There was a prevalent view that conflicts between the Muslim Brotherhood and its governments were of no concern to Germany and that these were “domestic quarrels.” Our policymakers did not grasp the relevance of the Islamist movement because religion was widely considered to be an important factor for underdevelopment and the Islamists seemed backward-oriented while the dictatorships in the Middle East were seen as modernizing elements.<sup>13</sup>

If there was any interest in the Islamists’ activities in Germany and the Middle East, it was one that developed through the prism of the Cold War. German intelligence services appear to have seen some of the Muslim brothers in Germany as possible assets in their quest to win information as to the situation in Syria. As a diplomat with long experience in German-Syrian relations states:

In Syria, the Germans and their allies could monitor the Eastern bloc outside the Eastern bloc. There, our services could watch the latest Soviet weapons systems in action. This is why our services developed an interest in Syria and—as a consequence—in Syrian oppositionists like the Muslim Brothers on our soil.<sup>14</sup>

This prevalence of the East-West-Conflict in German official thinking on the Muslim brotherhood reflected a similar attitude of their American colleagues in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Munich. As the journalist Ian Johnson calculated, Said Ramadan probably received CIA-support for his activities, which led to the takeover of the Munich mosque by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1961. The Americans regarded their cooperation with the anti-communist Ramadan and his followers as a means to counter Soviet influence in the Third World.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, however, they did not grasp the significance of the Islamist movement for the future of the Arab world, so that they seemed to underestimate Ramadan with the consequence that they lost control of his activities.

There is no evidence that the German government accepted the presence of Arab Islamists in the country because it wanted to exert pressure on their home countries. If anything, the intelligence services might have been interested in individual personalities who they wanted to use as informants on the situations in their home countries. Instead, the German authorities acted inconsistently: they closely supervised the Munich mosque in its first years, but then appeared to have lost interest. Although they had a superficial knowledge of the Muslim Brotherhood’s presence in Germany from the 1960s, they paid little attention to the organization and its transnational contacts. This only changed in 2001, with increased scrutiny of Islamist actors and their transnational relations. As a domestic intelligence officer who formerly worked on the Muslim Brotherhood recounts:

We only woke up after 9/11. Suddenly, we were asking ourselves questions about organized Islam in Germany and we realized how well the IGD was connected to the international MB. Most strikingly, we found out about its relations to the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe (FIOE), the coordination center of MB activities in Europe. From then on, interest in the Muslim Brotherhood

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<sup>13</sup> Author’s Interview with German diplomat, Berlin, June 4, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, *A Mosque in Munich*, pp. 128, 171.

in Germany never subsided again and media reporting about the MB connections of personalities like Ibrahim El-Zayat kept politicians' interest in these developments high. Debates about whether to accept the MB as a potential partner in government initiatives gained special importance in the run-up to the German Islam Conference.<sup>16</sup>

The German Islam Conference (Deutsche Islamkonferenz) was convened by the Federal Interior Ministry in September 2006, with the stated goal to work out a binding agreement on guidelines for the interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims in Germany. The Brotherhood was represented among the five Muslim umbrella organizations by the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD) and gained official recognition with its participation. This policy of limited engagement by the German government was, however, restricted to the domestic scene, where the ZMD seemed to be such an essential player that the government thought it could not ignore him. With regard to the Brotherhood in the Middle East, rejection remained the rule until 2011.

## 2. Germany and the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East until 2010

German policies regarding the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world partly mirror domestic policies in Germany. There, Islamism in general and the Brotherhood in particular played no role whatsoever in official thinking until the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Then, incomprehension turned into rejection. One of the reasons for this negative attitude was the widespread anti-Semitism of the Muslim Brotherhood, especially among its Egyptian and Palestinian followers. After 2001, there was a new awareness of the importance of the Muslim Brotherhood and its transnational structures, and debates over whether to establish contacts with the organization intensified. However, in the post 9/11-world, the authoritarian regimes in the region were seen as necessary allies in the fight against terrorism. As a consequence, the German government intensified its counterterrorism cooperation with countries like Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Syria and Kuwait, while continuing its rejection of any contacts with the Muslim Brotherhood. Thereby, the German government effectively supported the regimes against their Islamist opposition. However, the German neglect of the Muslim Brotherhood conformed to the broader outlines of German Middle East Policy.<sup>17</sup>

### *German Middle East Policy*

For the last decades **[how many?]**, Germany's Middle East Policy has focused on three topics: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, relations with Iran and—if one accepts the definition of Turkey as a Middle Eastern state—to Turkey. In this larger framework, Germany at times developed good relations to Arab states—especially Egypt. Yet, if there were any political dimension to these relations, it usually revolved around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and did not reflect any deeper interest in Egypt (or the Arab world in general). As a consequence, the question of whether to build relations with the Muslim Brotherhood was not seen as especially relevant for Germany.

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<sup>16</sup> Author's Interview with German Intelligence official, June 1, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> For an introduction into German Middle East Policy until 2009, see. Guido Steinberg (ed.): *German Middle East and North Africa Policy: Interests, Strategies, Options* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2009) (SWP Research Papers 9/2009).

Considering the preoccupation with Israel's survival and the Muslim Brotherhood's anti-Israeli attitudes, it is easy to understand why the German government kept its officials from building even low-level contacts with the Muslim Brotherhood. As a diplomat stationed in Egypt in the 1990s recalls:

When I was working in the German Embassy in Cairo in the 1990s, I was not allowed to establish contacts with the MB. There was no official prohibition, but it was clear to everyone that this was out of the question. At the same time, there was a division of labor between the diplomats and the spooks. The BND [i.e. foreign intelligence] resident in Cairo did talk to the Brothers. This general attitude towards the MB only changed in 2011.<sup>18</sup>

After 2001, Germany added a new dimension to its Middle East Policies by intensifying its relations with Arab Gulf countries, especially the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. This policy was started by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder between 2003 and 2005, when he visited the Gulf countries twice, and followed by his successor Angela Merkel and several members of her cabinet, who made the GCC countries an important destination. Although this policy primarily reflected commercial interests (and from 2008 a growing desire to bring Gulf investments to Europe), it was paralleled by a slowly growing awareness of the Arab countries' importance of the region.

This new German policy towards the Gulf was affected by changes in the European Union's policy as well. Germany has always been an avid supporter of a European Common Security and Foreign Policy (CSFP) that really deserves this name.<sup>19</sup> As one consequence, the European dimension is often important for an analysis of German foreign policy. This is mainly due to the fact that Germany, unlike other major European countries, has made multilateralism its favored approach in international affairs. For Germany, multilateralism after 1949 meant regaining sovereignty, while for Britain and France it meant relinquishing sovereign powers, causing them to hesitate. Even after reunification in 1990 and full sovereignty in 1992, Germany stuck to this approach, although there were hints during Chancellor Schröder's government (1998-2005) that Germany might become a more assertive partner than it had been until the late 1990s.

During these years, Germany developed a keener interest in North Africa. Until the 1990s, an implicit labor-sharing agreement had been in force, according to which France together with Spain and Italy took the lead in the EU's relations to the southern Mediterranean. At the same time, Germany focused on the EU's extension into Eastern Europe. In the late 1990s, however, this changed when Germany began to show a keener interest in Mediterranean affairs. This was mainly due to the treaty of Schengen which came into force in 1995 and the treaty of Amsterdam of 1999, which abolished intra-European borders between the signatories. Although not all borders were opened, Germany, Italy and Spain were part of the treaties so that the German borders had in fact

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<sup>18</sup> Author's interview with German diplomat, Berlin, June 4, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Volker Perthes: Germany, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East: Approaching the Region through Europe, in: Haim Goren (ed.): Germany and the Middle East. Past, Present, and Future (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Press 2003), pp. 161-170 (p.162).

advanced to the Mediterranean coasts. Therefore,—and because migration from North Africa is a major preoccupation for Germany—Berlin was forced to define its own interests and approaches to the southern Mediterranean and engage with the countries of the region. Security aspects were paramount in this policy.

### *Counterterrorism*

Countering jihadist terrorism became the most pressing of these issues after the 9/11 attacks. Among German policymakers, there was an awareness that the threat originated in the Arab world. Consequently, the government's policies after 2001 were mostly aimed at containing violence in the region. This became especially urgent when the invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to a wave of terrorist attacks in Europe primarily aimed at those countries which had sent troops to the country to assist the U.S. effort. Since 2007, European security agencies feared above all that North African terrorism could stretch out to Europe. Therefore, to prevent terrorist activity from having negative repercussions on the resolution of regional conflicts and the stability of individual states, the German government decided that it must help Arab governments to keep these groups under control. Stability rather than change became the paradigm of German relations to the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>20</sup>

As a consequence, the German government intensified its security cooperation with several Arab governments. This cooperation was also initiated because of the lack of expertise by the German security authorities, most notably the Federal Intelligence Service (Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND)). For decades, it had focused its activities on the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact and, therefore, suffered from a serious lack of Middle East specialists and Arabic speakers. Consequently, the services aimed at fostering cooperation with those countries where most of the al Qaeda terrorists came from, and counterterrorism cooperation with countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Jordan, Kuwait and Syria was intensified. Some German observers realized that this cooperation was problematic, because it might help these authoritarian regimes to use equipment, training, and finances provided by the West to fight not only al Qaeda-style jihadists, but also the other parts of their Islamist opposition and thereby consolidate their rule. Nevertheless, the government opted for Realpolitik and did not follow up on its rhetoric demanding political reform and respect for human rights. As a result, while the German government and the European Union defined political reform and democratization as goals of their Middle East policies, the reality was obviously much different.

However, this conflict of goals was never systematically debated in Germany. This became clear in winter 2007–08, when a commission of inquiry into the activities of the BND discussed cooperation that occurred in 2002 between the German government (then a coalition of Social Democrats and Greens) and Syria. Whereas the German side had hoped to gain information about jihadist networks, the Syrian government was interested above all in surveillance of Syrian dissidents in

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<sup>20</sup> This section is based on the author's "Countering Jihadist Terrorism," in: Guido Steinberg (ed.): *German Middle East and North Africa Policy: Interests, Strategies, Options* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2009): (SWP Research Papers 9/2009), pp. 15-21.



Germany—among them the Muslim Brotherhood. The BND had quickly ended the cooperation because the benefits seemed limited. But rather than discussing the broader implications of a strategy which resulted in the strengthening of authoritarian regimes, critics complained that the German government had cooperated with a state where prisoners were often tortured. Besides this episode, cooperation with Arab governments drew little attention.<sup>21</sup>

The period post 9/11 saw some bureaucratic changes which also affected German policy towards the Middle East and indirectly the Muslim Brotherhood. As the terrorist threat became a more important topic in relation to the region, the German Interior Ministry became an increasingly important player. In fact, the German government conducted counterterrorism activities with partners in the region as an extension of domestic interior policy and counterterrorism. Its policies were part of a move in which the Interior Ministry after 2001 massively expanded international cooperation, especially with EU member states and the United States, but also with Middle Eastern countries. Cooperation in the Middle East focused on states where the security agencies identified threats to Germany, but was also influenced by foreign policy orientation so that pro-Western regimes profited most. The most important field of cooperation in 2008 and 2009 was North Africa, primarily with Algeria but later also with Morocco and Egypt. This policy mirrored a threat perception according to which al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb was feared to expand terrorist operations to Europe. Besides, the German government intensified its cooperation with Jordanian and Kuwait security forces. Beyond that, the Interior Ministry also showed a clear interest in working with Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria and other countries that have produced many terrorists and/or have been targets of terrorist attacks.

### **3. Germany and the Muslim Brotherhood from 2011**

The dominance of the security and counterterrorism paradigm hindered the German government from establishing closer links to the Muslim Brotherhood before 2011. Although the Foreign Office stuck to its rejection of any political contacts with the Muslim Brotherhood even after 2001, some diplomats realized that they needed to know more about developments in the Arab and Muslim worlds. In 2002, this resulted in the inauguration of an initiative entitled “Dialogue with the Islamic world,” as a part of the Foreign Office’s cultural outreach program. A special representative was appointed as its head, given a small staff of specialists in Berlin and new jobs were created at the embassies. The special representatives and the “network of specialists”<sup>22</sup> mentioned in the official description established first contacts with Muslim Brotherhood representatives and other Islamists worldwide. Although this was not official policy, it paved the way for the first more substantial

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<sup>21</sup> Exceptions were a short debate about cooperation with Libya starting in April 2008, when news broke that the BND had taken part in the training of Libyan security forces. In the course of the discussion, the more general question to what extent Germany should cooperate with authoritarian regimes in the Arab world played a (limited) role.

<sup>22</sup> Auswärtiges Amt Interkultureller Dialog ([http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Aussenpolitik/KulturDialog/InterkulturellerDialog/IslamDialog\\_node.html](http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Aussenpolitik/KulturDialog/InterkulturellerDialog/IslamDialog_node.html)). In 2007, the name was changed to “special representative for intercultural dialogue.”

contacts after the beginning of the Arab Spring by increasing the Foreign Office's knowledge of relevant Islamist actors. According to a diplomat formerly involved in the program: "These guys were allowed to do things that others were not and the aim was to build capabilities our side."<sup>23</sup> Critics, however, saw this "Islam dialogue" as a way for the Foreign Office to reverse former budget cuts and as evidence pointed to the fact that many of the "specialists" were career diplomats with no prior knowledge of the topic. Nevertheless, this was one of only two initiatives with which the German government could claim to have prepared for the events unfolding in the Middle East in 2011. There was no major resistance, however, against the Foreign Office building first contacts not only to Muslim, but also to Islamist politicians. From 2009, officials and later parliamentarians took part in several multilateral meetings involving European governments and Muslim Brothers from most countries of the Middle East. These trust-building steps contributed to the development of a new German policy in 2011.

*On the Way to a New Policy (A Strategy Paper)*

Like all its Western counterparts, the German government was taken by surprise when the revolutions started in North Africa in December 2010. The official reaction was cautious and largely incoherent and remained so until late 2011, although Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle travelled to Tunis and Cairo in early 2011 promising support for the revolutions in these two countries. At the same time, parliamentarians and high-ranking bureaucrats called for engaging the Muslim Brotherhood in a dialogue, expecting the movement to play a role in Tunisia, Egypt and possibly other countries.<sup>24</sup> In most of these cases, the proponents of an opening toward the Brothers hoped that by integrating them into democratic political processes, they might moderate their positions. The oft-mentioned model was the moderation undergone by the Turkish Justice and Development Party, headed by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, after they came to power in 2002.<sup>25</sup> Although this argument is more popular with left-of-center politicians and therefore with the opposition, leading foreign policy specialists of the ruling conservative-liberal coalition subscribed to it as well.

The lack of any coherent strategy regarding the revolutions in the Arab world became obvious when the civil war in Libya started in February 2011 and Germany's NATO allies including the United States, France, Britain and Italy decided to intervene militarily together with Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Most problematically, Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, a Free Democrat (FDP), had expressed his support enthusiastically for the North Africa revolutions and had presented conditions for Germany taking part in any military campaign in support of the Libyan rebels. These conditions had included a UN mandate allowing for military action and the support of the Arab League for such an endeavor. Westerwelle does not appear to have expected both conditions to be

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<sup>23</sup> Author's interview with German diplomat, Berlin, June 4, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> The most prominent voice was Ruprecht Polenz, the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Reuters, February 1, 2011 (CDU – Außenpolitiker – Dialog mit ägyptischen Muslimbrüdern suchen).

<sup>25</sup> Interview with the Green Party parliamentarian and former Minister of State in the Foreign Office (2002-2005) Kerstin Müller, in: Deutsche Welle, September 21, 2011 (Keine Panik vor den Muslimbrüdern).

fulfilled, so that his subsequent rejection of a military intervention was highly embarrassing to the German government. On March 17, 2011, Germany abstained together with Russia and China, when its allies passed UN Security Council resolution 1973, paving the way for the NATO campaign in Libya and the subsequent fall of the Gaddafi regime. In the run-up to the intervention, Germany even withdrew its personnel from NATO units involved in the war.

Although the Foreign Minister drew most criticism for the decision to reject the Libya campaign, his stance mirrored the whole government's preferences. While Westerwelle tried to justify the decision in public, it had unanimously been taken by the Chancellor Angela Merkel, Defense Minister Thomas de Maizière and the Foreign Minister, with Westerwelle's vote arguably being less important than Merkel's. When in August 2011, Westerwelle still contended that international sanctions had mainly been responsible for the Gaddafi regime's fall, large parts of a disbelieving public demanded his resignation.<sup>26</sup> But with events quickly developing in other Arab countries and more pressing issues like the "Euro-crisis," the episode soon lost its importance. Nevertheless, the German government had another reason to proceed carefully in its policies towards the Arab uprisings.

During summer and autumn 2011, it became clear that the Brotherhood would play an important role in the emerging political systems in Tunisia and Egypt, so that Westerwelle's diplomats began to prepare for such an eventuality. In November 2011, after the Islamist Nahda-Party had won more than 40 percent of the vote in the Tunisian parliamentary elections, the Foreign Office prepared an internal paper presenting outlines for a strategy of cautious engagement with the Islamists in the Arab world. According to Foreign Ministry officials, the paper was an effort to establish a common working basis for the European Union and prepare the German parliament and parts of the public for a possible success of the Muslim Brotherhood in the parliamentary elections in Egypt (which were to start in November and last until January 2012).<sup>27</sup>

The paper's authors assumed that events in the Arab world would result in "a more influential role for political Islam" and that moderate Islamist parties—moderate in the sense that they adhere to non-violence, rule of law and democracy—have already emerged or are likely to emerge as strongest parties in elections in Tunisia, Egypt and other countries and are likely to be in a strong position to influence the constitutional process in Tunisia and Egypt.<sup>28</sup>

The document expressly named the Muslim Brotherhood as one of these "moderate Islamist parties" and movements, but also added words of caution and hints at benchmarks for judging the moderation of the respective Islamist groups:

Generally, moderate Islamist groups stress adherence to principles of democracy, rule of law and human rights. However, it remains to be seen how these theoretical positions are translated into political actions under democratic conditions. In addition, important differences in understanding

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<sup>26</sup> *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, August 27, 2011 (Westerwelle vollzieht Kehrtwende bei Nato Militäreinsatz).

<sup>27</sup> Author's interview with group of German diplomats, Berlin, June 4, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Non-Paper: Political Islam, Berlin, November 2011.

(compared to Western interpretation) exist regarding the role of religion, minorities and women's rights.<sup>29</sup>

The most expressly formulated reservation concerns the Muslim Brotherhood's relations towards Israel:

Even moderates express strong anti-Israeli rhetoric and positions and they are likely to exploit public opinion in elections. At the same time, moderate Islamist and MB affiliated groups take a rather soft stance at the moment and have publicly subscribed to the importance of regional stability and the respect of international treaties.<sup>30</sup>

Based on these assumptions, the paper goes on to formulate guidelines for dealing with Islamist actors, the most important being that the European Union should be ready for a dialogue with the fore-mentioned moderate Islamists:

As moderate Islamist groups will be important political actors we should be ready for dialogue with these groups. While not disregarding ideological differences we need to be in a position to engage in discussions about concrete political, economic and social issues.<sup>31</sup>

According to the document, the embassies should be tasked "to intensify contacts with moderate Islamist parties." Then it defines important qualifications:

To identify groups that qualify for dialogue, we need to apply criteria, such as: adherence to the principles of democracy, rule of law, plurality and human rights, rejection of political violence, respect of international obligations and treaties, a constructive approach to regional issues in the Middle East. With regard to Israel, the two-state-solution and the Arab Peace Initiative we should articulate clear expectations.<sup>32</sup>

The message of the paper was clear: Germany would cooperate with the Nahda-Party in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, but it would not accept the rule of Hamas in the Palestinian territories even if it won elections again. Quite surprisingly for some of the authors, there was little resistance to the proposals. This held true for the European Union, where France had been reluctant to agree to an engagement of the Islamists up to that point, but also for the German parliament. When the Foreign Office's commissioner for the Middle East presented the gist of the paper in a session of the Foreign Affairs committee in the Bundestag, even conservative parliamentarians offered no resistance. Meanwhile, the paper had been given to some journalists, who reported about

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Non-Paper: Political Islam, Berlin, November 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

the new engagement policy without causing any public stir, effectively showing that the debate had ended before it had really started.<sup>33</sup>

### *Implementation of a New Policy*

Part of the reason why the November 2011 strategy paper provoked little resistance was that it was cautiously worded and formulated several conditions for cooperation, which—according to diplomats—were designed to reduce possible resistance against the engagement of the Islamists. Some officials argue that the paper had become obsolete after the election victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, because “it does not make sense to formulate benchmarks when the Islamists are already in power.”<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, from November 2011, the paper’s content informed the official German policy regarding the Brotherhood.

In parallel, the Foreign Office and Westerwelle began to promote a cautious engagement of the Muslim Brotherhood in North Africa, beginning with the Minister’s confirmation in November 2011 that Germany had indeed established contacts with the Muslim Brotherhood. Westerwelle explicitly mentioned the Turkish AKP of Prime Minister Erdogan as a possible model for Islamists in the Arab world. Yet, he defined “red lines” for all political forces in the Arab world aiming at building relations with the Europeans, namely “to abstain from violence, and to profess democracy, the rule of law, pluralism just like peace at home and abroad.” He added: “Because in this regard we always have to bear the security interests of Israel in mind.”<sup>35</sup> Although these ideas were crucial to a fundamental change in German policy towards the Muslim Brothers, there was no major resistance. In the following months, the government elaborated its new strategy and put some of it into practice.

Following a visit to Tunisia in January 2012, Westerwelle presented a more elaborate version of his ideas when, in an article in the conservative daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, he argued that “Political Islam is not the same as radical Islamism.” Refusing to call the Muslim brothers “Islamists” he named them “islamically-oriented forces” and highlighted the successes of “moderate-islamic parties,” who had won pluralities of votes in Morocco and Tunisia. Again, he named the Turkish AKP as a role model for an Islamist party taking part in democratic political processes. Especially important in a German context, the Foreign Minister uttered his hope that “moderate Islamic forces” would establish “Muslim democrat parties,” thereby drawing a parallel to the Christian democrats in Germany. Again, he referred to the red lines, and promised support for

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<sup>33</sup> Report about the paper in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 15, 2011 (Ende der Vorbehalte. Bundesregierung strebt Dialog mit Islamisten in Arabien an).

<sup>34</sup> Author’s Interview with German diplomat, Berlin, June 4, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> *Financial Times Deutschland*, November 24, 2011 (FTD-Interview mit Guido Westerwelle: Deutschland hält Kontakte zur Muslimbruderschaft).

all those who professed democracy and the rule of law, a pluralistic society, religious tolerance and peace at home and abroad.<sup>36</sup>

In the following months, the German government focused its efforts on Tunisia. During his visit to the country in January 2012, Westerwelle said that the country had the potential to become “the model country for change in the region.”<sup>37</sup> The German government promised support and upgraded its relationship with Tunisia, especially after the Tunisian Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali—a member of the Nahda-Party—visited Berlin in March 2012. At the meeting between Merkel and Jebali in Berlin in that same month both agreed to intensified “governmental cooperation” (Regierungszusammenarbeit) between Tunis and Berlin. Notably, Tunisia is the only Arab country to date with which Germany has agreed upon a “transformation dialogue” involving regular consultations between the two governments on different levels and several joint projects.<sup>38</sup> Although it remains to be seen what the practical outcome of this exercise will be, it is striking that Germany agreed to start the experiment with a country governed by Islamists of the Nahda-Party. With the other “transformation states,” German policy remained more cautious. This held especially true with regard to Egypt, where the German government established contacts with the Muslim Brotherhood just as other political players did. The same held true for Syria, where Germany built contacts to most strands of the opposition in exile, including representatives of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, without giving any support to the Islamists.

#### **4. No Engagement Strategy Yet**

Rather than following a worked-out strategy, the German government reacted to developments in the Arab world by engaging the Islamists only when it became clear, in late 2011, that they would play a major role in the new political systems in North Africa. In fact, Germany did not prepare for cooperation with the Muslim Brotherhood and similar Islamist actors in those parts of the region where governments had not (or not then) come under pressure by protest movements. Saudi Arabia and its allies, the small Gulf countries, were still regarded as stability factors in a rapidly changing environment. This became most obvious when news broke in July 2011 that the German government approved the sale of some 270 Leopard 2A7+ battle tanks to Saudi Arabia.<sup>39</sup> The chancellor’s office appears to have made this decision, giving it special importance in analyzing German Middle East Policy. Significantly, Merkel (like her predecessor) increasingly assumes responsibility concerning those topics of German Middle East policies which are considered to be of vital importance to Germany, namely the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, relations to Iran and (since 2003) the Arab Gulf countries. Events in the rest of the Arab world are being dealt with in the Foreign Ministry and the chancellor’s office only intervenes if it discovers a special interest in a certain issue. The conclusion might then be that while cooperating with Saudi Arabia is an important

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<sup>36</sup> Guido Westerwelle: Politischer Islam und Demokratie, in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, January 13, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted after: Süddeutsche Zeitung, January 10, 2012 (Westerwelle im Musterland des Wandels).

<sup>38</sup> Author’s interview with German diplomat, Berlin, June 15, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Spiegel online, July 2, 2011 (Deutschland will Saudi-Arabien Kampfpanzer liefern).

topic in German regional policies, relations with the Muslim Brotherhood in the transformation states—with the possible exception of Tunisia—are not of equal significance.

There is ample evidence that Germany will not alter its policies concerning those states in the region that have remained stable. Although the government did not comment publicly on the tank deal, conservative parliamentarians defended it by arguing that Saudi Arabia was a stability factor and that it needed to be supported in confronting Iran. Besides, security cooperation with countries like Jordan, Morocco and Algeria continued, effectively showing that the German government did not fundamentally change its policies. Furthermore, the government did not change its erstwhile policy of limited engagement of the Muslim Brotherhood in Germany itself, which was further evidence that its policies in the Middle East were a pragmatic reaction to events which could not be reversed.

### **Conclusion**

The German government's engagement of the Brotherhood in North Africa and the Middle East did not mirror any strategic change. Now, and in the future, the government will undoubtedly stand by and accept Islamists as partners only when they become too strong to be ignored any more in individual countries. The only condition will be that they are not openly hostile to Israel.

The most urgent question for the German government will be to what extent it will be ready to build contacts to Salafists. Strikingly, the new engagement policy toward the Islamists did not include the Salafists, which the German government considered to be more “radical” or “radical Islamist.” If they are able to play a major role in the politics of any country in the region, it is very likely that the German government will react as well.