

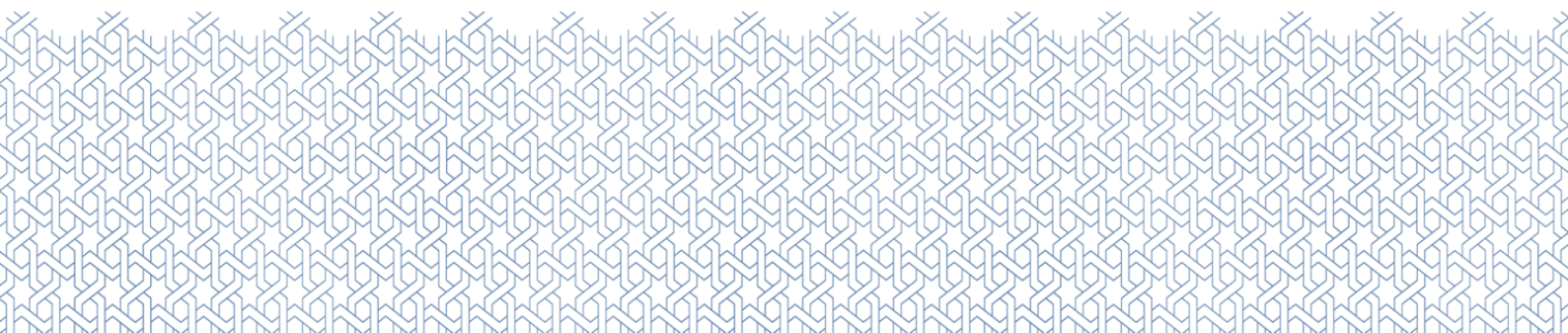
Security Politics

# Germany and the Arab World: Finding a New Cooperation Model in Times of Growing Escalation

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Germany and the Arab World amid the Gaza War:  
A Contested Partnership

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**The Divan Centre is a young think tank under the umbrella of Der Divan – The Arabic Cultural House in Berlin. Organizing political and economic events as well as publishing studies, the Divan Centre focuses on geopolitical issues and contributes to mutual understanding between the Arab and European worlds.**

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# 01

## Introduction

In recent months, relations between the Arab world and Germany have faced serious challenges as a consequence of the Israel-Gaza war, which has resulted in more than 34,000 Palestinian casualties and 1,200 Israeli deaths following the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

In this regard, Germany's historical relationship to Israel has emerged as a hot topic of contestation: Already in [2008 at the Israeli Knesset](#), Germany's former Chancellor Angela Merkel called the security of Israel as Germany's "reason of state" (*Staatsräson*) which was repeated by [Chancellor Olaf Scholz](#) five days after the Hamas attack on Israel: "At this moment, there is only one place for Germany: firmly at the side of Israel. This is what we mean when we say that the security of Israel is and will remain the prime motivation for the actions of the state of Germany," Scholz said. The [commitment to Israel](#) is more than just a political goal, it is a core component of the self-definition of German politics. It is also explicitly mentioned in the coalition agreement of the current government consisting of the social-democratic party (SPD), the Greens (*Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*) and the liberal party (FDP).

[In parts of the Arab world](#), Germany's position on the Gaza war is considered as pro-Israeli and biased. As a consequence, political, and civil society relations have become dominated by polarization and stigmatization which has resulted in a growing alienation between Germany and its Arab partners.

For instance, some Arab partner organizations of [German political foundations](#) have decided to either reduce or cut working relations with their German counterparts due to the diverging positions on Israel's role in the Gaza war; Germany has a [“massive problem of its credibility”](#).

### **The Gaza war is putting the government to the test and has shattered its credibility in wide parts of the Arab world**

Furthermore, statements by high-ranking German officials and members of the government soon after the escalation of tensions on October 7<sup>th</sup> have been interpreted as expressions of Germany's [‘double standards’](#) as they are turning a blind eye towards the misery of the Palestinians, taking mainly a pro-Israeli position.

In recent months, the domestic debate in Germany on Israel's military engagement has become more diverse and nuanced indicated by a [more differentiated assessment](#) of the term [“Staatsräson”](#). In March, [50% of the German public](#) thought that the Israeli military actions in Gaza “go too far”.

However, observers still blame the German government for its reluctance to criticize the Israeli engagement in Gaza and call it a “[German dilemma](#)”: On the one hand, Germany is committed to Israel’s security. On the other hand, it must help to [prevent](#) the deaths of civilians in Gaza.

Hence, the Gaza war is putting the government to the test and has shattered its credibility in wide parts of the Arab world as it does not recognize enough the suffering of the Gaza people from the Israeli attacks. In addition, Germany has been accused of providing Israel a carte blanche for its military actions in Gaza.

In a broader context, such period of alienation has not started just after October 7<sup>th</sup> but even before: For instance, the [controversial debate in Germany](#) about the FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar fueled public tensions with Qatar and other Arab countries.

In Germany, Qatar has been criticized in the media for alleged human rights violations, [structural exploitation of migrant workers](#) and the lack of equality for women and the LGBTQI+ community. [Human rights organizations](#) and [trade unions](#) demanded [comprehensive labor reforms](#) to protect migrants. Calls for a World Cup boycott were supported by [some fan initiatives](#), which was also reflected in the decline in spectator numbers.



However, in this [polarized debate](#), the various lines of criticism became [blurred](#): Oftentimes, the controversy on human rights was mixed with fundamental criticism of the conditions of commercialized football, the corruption of football associations and the alienation of fans from their ‘beautiful game’, which was expressed by instrumentalizing Qatar as a scapegoat for the [over-commercialization of global football](#).

In Qatar, in turn, such debate was labeled as double standard, Eurocentric, and ignorant. Prior to the start of the tournament, in October 2022, the Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani accused the European criticism as [an unprecedented campaign](#). Many people in the Arab world [expressed their solidarity with Qatar](#) on social media and in the Arab media under the hashtag #I\_Am\_Arab\_and\_I\_Support\_Qatar.

During the World Cup, the image of the West in the Arab world further diminished, and in public spaces such as social media, anti-Western sentiments became more prominent. In particular, the German accusations were labelled as hypocritical, disrespectful, and Islamophobic. Here, the [episode of the “One Love” badge intensified anti-German sentiments](#) and resulted in the complaint by the [German ambassador to Qatar](#) in December 2022 that such actions undermine bilateral political and business relations and hamper the German reputation in Qatar and beyond.

# 02

## Germany's Balancing Act

Indeed, German foreign policy finds itself in a general dilemma: on the one hand, it propagates a value-based approach and defines universal human rights as the “most important shield for the dignity of the individual”, as stated in the coalition agreement.

For [Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock](#), “values and interests are not contradictory”, but Germany must take a “[clear stance](#)” in a changing world. This approach can also be found in the strategic policy papers on [feminist foreign](#) and [development policy](#), which were presented jointly by the Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development on February 1, 2023. Both strategies are focusing on inclusion, participation, gender equality, and a more holistic understanding of security including climate and health security and the goal to reduce power inequalities in the form of patriarchy, racism, sexism, ableism, or classism.

In addition to both strategies, Germany's first [national security strategy](#) adopted in [June 2023](#) also presents an integrated definition of security. In times of a multipolar world order and growing international crises, Germany has to act in a [robust, resilient, and sustainable manner](#) by defending the international order.



Trade relations need to be diversified and society prepared for growing challenges such as systemic rivalries, pandemics, or climate change. From a governmental perspective, the strategy serves as a “[compass](#)” for such purposes, writes Chancellor Olaf Scholz in his foreword, while Baerbock names the [security of freedom](#) as a priority goal.

Germany finds itself in a period of fundamental “watershed” or “turning point” ([Zeitenwende](#)) as Chancellor Scholz described it after the start of the war against Ukraine in February 2022. Old certainties have crumbled since then and Germany must find its position in a new world order.

# 03

## How to Deal with the Middle East

Despite such efforts to conceptualize a strategic foreign policymaking in the German decision-making, the Arab world and in particular the Gulf region are not mentioned in detail.

So far, Germany [lacks a clear and credible vision for its position in the world and in particular in the Near and Middle East](#). In foreign policymaking circles, such debate is already ongoing, but a comprehensive result has not been achieved yet. This fact shows once again that Germany has neglected the geopolitical relevance of the Arab world in its foreign policy concept in recent years. A brief look at the history of German foreign policy since its reunification in 1990 shows that there are more complex reasons behind this lack of prioritization than just ignorance and disinterest: In line with the United States, the [transatlantic partnership](#) dominated Germany's foreign and security policy, while integration into the European Union (EU) became the second pillar of German foreign policy. Multilateralism, Europe, and the transatlantic partnership served as key drivers for German foreign policy action in recent decades and continues to do so.

As a consequence, Germany focused on soft power and foreign cultural and development cooperation rather than on an autonomous policy approach towards the Middle East.

It wanted to be perceived in the world as a moral actor – as a [“good German”](#) – and not as an assertive superpower after the traumatic experiences under Nazi Germany: The moral behaviour became the *raison d'être* of the peace and civil power Germany.

However, this traditional approach has been put to the test more than ever in the face of a [fundamental erosion of the old global order](#) and in light of the war in Gaza.

Therefore, it becomes even more urgent for Germany to develop a comprehensive strategy that takes into account its special relationship with Israel and thus also promotes a multidimensional discussion about the definition of “Staatsräson” as its [concrete meaning](#) and implications remain vague.

Additionally, Germany has a profound defender of international rule of law needs to take humanitarian and political responsibility towards the people in Gaza. Finally, the Arab world has emerged as a relevant region for Germany’s interest in particular in geostrategic, energy-related, and economic terms.

Demands that Germany should fulfill an “[anchor function](#)” in foreign policy have been expressed even before October 7<sup>th</sup> from different angles, but has become even more urgent in recent months.

However, expertise, financial capacities, and human resources are oftentimes lacking in German foreign policymaking which also limits a pro-active, constructive, and comprehensive engagement in the Arab world. Despite the government’s ambition to [better streamline and design foreign policy](#), over-bloated administrative processes, lack of personnel in ministries, cultural entities, academic institutions and security organizations, as well as existing competition among the different ministries and departments prevent decision-making from implementing efficient and long-term policy actions.

# 04

## Mutual Interest in De-escalation

**In light of the current escalation in the Near and Middle, such shortcomings have been put in the international spotlight and thus driving a further wedge between Germany and the Arab world.**

As a consequence, this atmosphere of alienation and mistrust does not contribute to a solution for the manifold conflicts in the region, and also does not serve the multiple security, economic, and political interests in Germany and the Arab world.

In light of growing regional tensions and further escalation between Israel and Iran, Germany and Arab partners should therefore engage in enhanced communication and dialogue as both sides are seriously interested in de-escalation.

Indeed, regular communication is taking place on high-ranking political levels as indicated by the official trips of [Chancellor Olaf Scholz](#), [German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock](#) and other German politicians to the region and serious efforts to promote “crisis diplomacy” on a multilateral level.

Here, Germany and its partners in the Arab world are discussing conflict solutions and concrete actions such as substantial aid provision to Gaza or the implementation of a ceasefire.

Communication channels on a political, cultural, and economic level remain open due to well-established networks and trustworthy partnerships between Germany and its counterparts in the Arab world. Despite a decline in mutual trust and diverging positions on the regional crises, both are interested to remain in close dialogue and find ways for conflict resolution and diplomatic efforts.

**Despite the increasing focus of the Gulf states on Asian partners, and their rhetorical and political alienation from Europe, European companies still feature prominently in their partnership portfolio**

On an economic level, business interests will continue to drive Germany's cooperation with the region. Traditionally, economic and energy policy interests have mainly dominated German-Gulf Arab relations in particular in light of the growing need for Germany's energy diversification since the beginning of the Russian war on Ukraine. Such appetite in enhanced cooperation is likely to continue and thus could create more platforms for confidence-building measures.



On the Arab side, Germany has lost in attraction as a promising economic heavyweight in recent years but still features prominently as a trade and investment partner. This is particularly the case for the Arab Gulf monarchies: In 2021, the total value of imports and exports between Germany and the Gulf monarchies amounted to [EUR 18.9 billion](#), with German exports contributing EUR 13 billion to the trade balance.

With a volume of EUR 8 billion, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are Germany's most important trading partner in the Gulf, followed by Saudi Arabia with EUR 6.6 billion.

**Germany, in turn, has entered closer cooperation models with energy-rich Gulf states since the beginning of the Russian war on Ukraine in order to diversify its traditional energy mix**

In 2019, prior to the World Cup, Germany ranked as [Qatar's fifth most important trading partner](#) behind the US and China and exported goods worth [EUR 1.5 billion](#). In the construction and machinery sectors as well as in engineering and services, the World Cup provided [German companies](#) excellent opportunities to enter the market. A total of [150 German companies](#) were active locally in 2021.

Qatar, on the other hand, has invested more than [EUR 25 billion in German companies](#).

Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia are undergoing a fundamental socio-economic transformation and are in dire need for foreign direct investment (FDI), trade partnerships, closer cooperation in know-how transfer and educational exchange in order to diversify their rentier economy away from oil and gas and create jobs for the young generations.

Despite their increasing focus on Asian partners such as China, Korea and Japan and their rhetorical and political alienation from Europe, European companies such as from Germany still feature prominently in their partnership portfolio.

Germany, in turn, has entered closer cooperation models with energy-rich Gulf states since the beginning of the Russian war on Ukraine in order to diversify its traditional energy mix. Before the war, Germany [obtained 55%](#) of its gas supplies from Russia, which in turn created a highly problematic political dependency on Moscow.

As part of the national energy transition, Germany is aiming to [reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 65% by 2030](#) increase the [share of renewable energies in electricity generation to 80%](#) and achieve [climate neutrality by 2045](#). Hydrogen is thus set to become a key component of the German energy mix.

Back in June 2020, the then German government launched the [National Hydrogen Strategy](#), which provides a framework for hydrogen-based energy generation and aims to secure the necessary imports.

Gulf states such as Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE aim at establishing themselves as [regional hydrogen champions](#) which also enhanced potential for German-Gulf energy cooperation.

In March 2021, Germany and Saudi Arabia signed the [German-Saudi Energy Dialogue](#) to promote bilateral cooperation in the [production and transportation of hydrogen](#), and in February 2022, Germany opened an “[Office for Hydrogen Diplomacy](#)” in the Saudi capital Riyadh in cooperation with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. Similar partnership models also exist with Qatar, Oman and the UAE.

The growing German interest in energy cooperation with the Gulf states was symbolized by [the visit of Robert Habeck](#), Minister of Economic Affairs and Climate Action, to the UAE and Qatar in March 2022. During [Chancellor Scholz’s first trip to Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Qatar in September 2022](#), the focus was also on energy security and economic cooperation.

During this time, tough negotiations took place between Qatar and Germany before an agreement was reached: In September 2022, Doha and Berlin agreed on a [more comprehensive energy partnership](#), under which Germany is to purchase liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the state-owned company Qatar Energy via the US company ConocoPhillips for 15 years from 2026.

# 05

## Need for Enhanced Dialogue

**Despite such ongoing political dialogue and economic and energy cooperation, a coherent German strategy on its Near and Middle policy is lacking. Instead of just reacting to current crises, Germany is expected to take a clear and credible position on the situation in the MENA (Middle East North Africa) region.**

More than ever, Germany thus needs an open, self-reflective and self-critical discussion that reconceptualizes its own policy in the Near and Middle East. Certainly, the special relationship with Israel will be at the heart of this approach, but the humanitarian responsibility for the victims of the Gaza war and the interest in long-term regional stability and de-escalation must not be neglected.

It is therefore necessary to better align values and interests rather than considering them as opposites. Germany has lost a great deal of trust in the region and should try to restore it. To this end, it is important to communicate its own position more clearly by pointing out the complicated situation in which Germany finds itself.

The 'Zeitenwende' is a time- and resource-consuming process that not only needs more financial, logistical, military, and human capacities, but also a change in mental and strategic thinking.

In times of growing lack of trust, platforms for political, social, and public communication need to be supported in order to provide safe spaces for open dialogue and critical exchange. Here, not only economy and diplomacy but also civil society initiatives, NGOs, development cooperation players, journalists, and media activists have to be included in order to promote open and critical discussions.

Against this backdrop, experts in dialogue and mediation as well as conflict resolution initiatives, and think tanks should be encouraged to establish more platforms and projects aiming at bringing people from Germany and the Near and Middle East region together.

In this regard, more projects to engage partners both from Germany (and other European countries) and Arab countries are needed to overcome existing stereotypes and work on a common understanding. Existing initiatives and institutions have been criticized in light of the Gaza war.

Against this backdrop, experts from academia and research, business, non-profit organizations, culture



and arts, media, migration policies and development cooperation, sports, tourism, and entertainment need to discuss topics of mutual interest in order to identify chances for closer cooperation on an interdisciplinary level.

Certainly, the current polarization creates tensions and a lack of understanding on both sides but [learning from and listening to each other](#) seems more important than ever before.

So far, many workshops, conferences, or discussion forums still take place with a small group of the already established “usual suspects” and “opinion shapers” from research, policy advice, politics, and the media, while newcomers and junior talents only gain access to these formats gradually.

Too often, scientific, civil society and economic discourses take place in isolated communities, which prevents interdisciplinary exchange and widespread public attention.

Therefore, Germany’s cultural diplomacy also needs a strategic reassessment to rebuild trust and win back hearts and minds in the Arab world. Such a constructive model of communication and cooperation should be driven by realistic expectation management for conflict resolution and its limits, commitment in respectful and inclusive dialogue and exchange, and empathy for opposing positions and different argumentation lines.

However, political animosities are likely to prevail. Here, Germany should better communicate and explain what drives Germany's foreign policymaking. Still, knowledge and expertise on the complexities of Germany's decision-making are lacking in the Arab world which oftentimes results in misunderstandings.

Sometimes, the impression exists that Germany as Europe's most important economic power almost automatically has the necessary capacities to pursue a proactive foreign and security policy. In many discussions in the Arab world, interlocutors are surprised and irritated that Germany, despite its economic power, does not seem to be interested and/or capable of increasing its involvement in the region due to a lack of financial and human capacities, expertise, and institutional networks.

Furthermore, the historical background and multiple complexities of Germany's close relations with Israel are hardly known in detail in the Gulf region, and has not been comprehensively communicated from the German side. As a consequence, such lack of knowledge creates mistrust on both ends.

Therefore, political stakeholders, media, public pundits, and other stakeholders should find a *modus operandi* to discuss topics of contestation with respect and serious commitment to find concrete solutions.

Playing the blame game does neither help the war victims in Gaza, nor does it result in de-escalation. In contrast, warmongers in Iran, Israel and elsewhere could benefit from such tensions.

Against this backdrop, red lines should be communicated in an open and frank manner in order to manage expectations properly and prevent deconstructive *whataboutism*.

Concrete fields of mutual cooperation are diplomatic dialogue and political exchange as well as economic collaboration. In addition, enhanced coordination of humanitarian efforts in Gaza and beyond, more cultural and people-to-people exchange and intensified efforts to introduce confidence-building measures are needed to re-build shattered trust on both sides.

Indeed, the perspectives on the Gaza war diverge from each other, but the overarching interest in regional stability features prominently on the German and the Arab side. Certainly, a sustainable and inclusive conflict solution for the Gaza war cannot be achieved with the engagement of regional powers alone as substantial contribution from Europe and the United States is needed.

Here, Germany could in principle play a more important role in closer cooperation with regional players such as the Gulf monarchies, Iraq, Jordan, or Egypt.

However, the more Germany is accused of ignoring Arab interests, the less the chances for constructive cooperation remain. Hence, Germany needs to precisely define its interests towards the Near and Middle East in political terms: Without the clear definition of interests there is no plan, and without clearly formulated goals, credible cooperation with the Arab world is most likely to fail.

In times of regional escalation, such approach should not be considered just as an option, but rather as a priority. Otherwise, the catastrophic situation in Gaza will only deteriorate, which is neither in the interest of Germany nor of the Arab world states.

## About the Author

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