



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

# Political Divisions in Germany Have Implications for the Middle East

by Noah Phillips

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,024, December 3, 2018

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The decline of bipartisan political centrism in Germany portends significant changes, not only for the country itself but for other countries as well. While the right-wing Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) party is still far from dominating the German electorate, its increasing public support will force whatever will ultimately be the party in power to act more favorably towards the right, in comparison to the more leftist policies of departing Chancellor Angela Merkel's government. And with German political discourse centered around regional issues of the Middle East due to Berlin's intricate involvement in such conflicts, the political trends of the country are likely to have a significant impact on the future of that region.

Announced in the wake of a Bavarian regional election that saw immense losses for the centrist German bloc, Chancellor Angela Merkel's planned resignation in 2021 marks the conclusion of a unique era of bipartisanship in Germany. The rapid rise of the right-wing Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) party, coupled with the persistence of staunch left-wing parties like the Social Democratic Party (SPD), has fostered a heavily divided political atmosphere in Germany. The common ground established by the centrist Christian Social Union (CSU) in Bavaria and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) nationally has largely been abandoned in favor of a "winner take all" mentality.

### Migration

In recent years, Angela Merkel has endorsed a controversial open-border policy, permitting entry to vast swathes of migrants. This policy has caused a fractious rift in German politics and has been credited as a leading reason for the poor polling of Merkel's CDU and the left-wing parties – as well as for the double-digit percentage increase in support of AfD candidates.

Seven AfD state parliamentarians recently travelled to Syria and declared the war-torn state safe, concluding that refugees now residing in Germany should be returned home. This would be dangerous, as a mass return of Syrian refugees would almost certainly trigger a response from the regime of Bashar Assad, who has employed extremely violent tactics – including chemical attacks – against civilians and may do so again. From a humanitarian standpoint, a send-them-home ideology at the forefront of German leadership would be very troubling.

## **The JCPOA**

Regarding Iran, Merkel has always been a staunch advocate of the JCPOA nuclear agreement, with Germany contributing to its signing during the Obama era. While this liberal stance would inevitably continue under leftist leadership, the AfD remains unified in its support for Trump's withdrawal from the agreement and would look to do the same.

Merkel has also cultivated relatively firm economic relations with Tehran, which she sought to promote even in the aftermath of Washington's first round of reinstated sanctions on August 7. German firms hold a combined interest of more than 3 billion euros in Iran, with the German government offering domestic incentives to companies that operate within Iran to promote relations between the two states. Yet in spite of the prospect of sizable economic loss, Berlin in upcoming fiscal cycles will be largely removed from the Iranian market – a significant point for both countries as Tehran continues to falter with regard to foreign trade. With Germany serving as de facto leader of the EU (which collectively trades more than [10 billion euros' worth on an annual basis](#)) and serving as Iran's second-largest trading partner, the ramifications for the Islamic Republic could be immense.

## **Israel**

The AfD and the up-and-coming right wing of German politics have largely stood in support of Israel, opposing such movements as BDS and advocating expanded ties between the countries. Yet despite seeming common ground between Israel and the AfD, the anti-Semitic history of the party would likely serve as a hindrance to a robust AfD-Israeli partnership both economically and diplomatically. A leader of the party, Alex Gauland, while speaking at a party-youth event, called the Holocaust “a speck of bird s\*\*t” compared to the whole of German history. At a separate engagement, Gauland stressed the importance of a relationship with Israel, illustrating a contradiction within the AfD.

Other party members have been photographed beside Nazi propaganda and other obscene anti-Semitic imagery. And while party leaders have taken care to condemn such displays, the party has received harsh condemnation from

Israel's ambassador to Germany, Jeremy Issacharoff, and prominent Jewish leaders like Ronald Lauder, who described the party as "abhorrent." The denunciation of the AfD by leading Israeli and Jewish groups worldwide – as well as by members of Israel's own diplomatic corps – makes an official relationship with an AfD government unlikely. Benjamin Netanyahu formed a close diplomatic relationship with Merkel, who, in 2008, became the first German Chancellor to address the Knesset. Israel would be well advised to keep its distance from the AfD.

As the right wing continues its meteoric rise through the ranks of German politics, fragmenting the tenuous centrist and leftist blocs, the primary consequence of Merkel's resignation will almost certainly be a far more hands-off approach to Middle Eastern affairs, aligning with German right-wing ideology. And while an AfD leadership is not imminent, nor is it far off, with recent polls suggesting that it has passed SPD for second place.

*Noah Phillips is a columnist who writes on matters pertaining to Israel and the Middle East. Follow him on Twitter @noahaphilli.*

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family