

Germany is strengthening its links with Arab countries

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Between 7 and 10 March the German vice chancellor and minister for the economy, Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) paid a visit to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, and on 13 and 14 March he visited Egypt. The main aim of the visits was to strengthen economic ties with the countries in the region. On these visits Sigmar was accompanied by an economic delegation composed of approximately 100 representatives of German companies. The Egypt Economic Development Conference (EEDC) held in Sharm el-Sheikh, was attended by approximately 1,700 representatives of the German administration and business, and Siemens here signed an agreement regarding the construction of gas power plants and wind farms worth approximately 10 billion euros.

Commentary

- Germany has been active in Arab countries for some time. In 2014 the six states of the Persian Gulf were worth 26.65 billion euros in exports to Germany, thus being the third largest exports market for Germany outside Europe, following the US and China. The most important trading partners in the region are the UAE (with German exports in 2014 worth 11.41 billion euros), Saudi Arabia (8.92 billion euros), Egypt (2.9 billion euros) and Qatar (2.09 billion euros). For German companies the most attractive industries are renewable energy, and energy and transport infrastructure. The International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) is based in Abu Dhabi and Germany contributes the most to IRENA's promotion and funding. German companies and project offices are implementing many projects in the region, including those linked to the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar.
- Prior to the visits a media campaign was held in Germany to persuade Sigmar Gabriel to condemn human rights violations in Arab countries, which is part of German debate about the interests and values in foreign and economic policies. During his conversation with the king of Saudi Arabia Gabriel criticised violations of human rights and the persecution of the opposition. During his visit to Qatar he praised the progress made in respecting the rights of migrant workers in Qatar. Additionally, during Gabriel's visit to Saudi Arabia the dispute within the coalition over exporting arms to the Middle East came up again. While the opposition (the Left and the Green party) and the Social Democrats are opposed to arms sales to Riyadh (in 2014 Saudi Arabia purchased arms worth US\$ 5.8 billion and was the world's largest importer of arms), the Christian Democrats see such a possibility as part of the support that Germany also gives its allies in their fight

against Islamist terrorists. The SPD however approves exports of military equipment for the purpose of protecting external borders.

- The visit to Egypt also had a political dimension, along with its economic part and the signing of a contract by Siemens. Gabriel extended Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi an official invitation to visit Germany. In doing this Germany wishes to enhance the legitimacy of the president's power and express its support for Egypt's fight against Islamist terrorism. This represents a change in Berlin's previous position which held that the visit to Egypt could only take place following the country's parliamentary elections scheduled for autumn. By extending this invitation Germany is determined to improve its relations with Cairo which have been strained since the military coup conducted in July 2013.