



[Aspiration and Reality. On German Development Cooperation](#)

# Trapped in the Crisis Mode of the Status Quo

Jordan Is Stable, Not Least thanks to German Support –  
But a Political Strategy Is Lacking

Edmund Ratka

Jordan has become one of the top recipients of German development funds over the past decade. As a way of supporting an anchor of stability that cooperates with the West in the otherwise so troubled Middle East region, this has certainly been successful. Yet not only does international aid to Jordan risk getting mired down in details. The influx of money from abroad also takes pressure off the elites to reform, and the country is stuck in a cycle of dependency. Instead of continually embarking on new projects, development cooperation with Jordan needs a political strategy – and that applies to cooperation between Jordan and Germany, too.

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Jordan is an authoritarian monarchy with democratic elements. Public political debate is possible and at times there is very marked criticism of the government, not least in the Hashemite Kingdom's elected parliament. Yet what parliamentarian Mohammed Al-Fayez did at the end of 2022 clearly went too far. While weeks of strikes and protests by freight forwarders and truck drivers against rising fuel prices were paralyzing large parts of the Jordanian hinterland, Jordan's Prime Minister Bisher Al-Khasawneh travelled to Riyadh for consultations (apparently with the hope of a cash injection, too). Al-Fayez then published a letter to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman complaining that Saudi Arabia's generous support for Jordan "only lines the pockets of a corrupt class that enriches itself at the expense of Jordanian dignity". The Jordanians were too proud to be called beggars, Al-Fayez heatedly remarked: "We don't want your help!"<sup>1</sup> Despite coming from an influential family, Al-Fayez was immediately removed from office by a large majority in parliament and disappeared from the political scene.

This provocative letter expressed a populist sentiment that is anathema not only to Jordan's elites. Many Jordanians fear that political incitement in the guise of democracy could endanger the stability of their demographically and socially diverse country. The ousted parliamentarian certainly touched on a sore point, however. Every

day, Jordanians hear about development projects and aid money flowing into the country, while social inequality is worsening. There are increasing complaints about the declining efficiency of the state, including everything from administration and education to healthcare – at least among those who lack good contacts to the authorities and are unable to afford the expensive private schools and state-of-the-art private clinics in the capital Amman (or abroad).

For decades now, there has been political and academic debate about the extent to which a steady flow of development funds from outside reduces the pressure for reform in the recipient country, perpetuating dysfunctional structures and therefore potentially being counterproductive. The majority opinion among experts is now that there is no clear, universal answer to this question: everything depends on the individual case.<sup>2</sup> And Jordan, too, shows that there is no simple answer. The enormous international support that it receives because of its geopolitical significance is both a blessing and a curse.

### **Geopolitical Significance of Jordan**

"Anchor of stability" is the attribute most often used by politicians from Germany and other Western countries when talking about Jordan. And that is certainly true. Jordan shares borders with Syria and Iraq, two countries that have been

rocked by civil war, proxy conflicts and terrorism in the past two decades. To the west, across the Jordan River, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which had smouldered for years, has recently escalated with the massive terrorist attack on Israel perpetrated by Hamas on 7 October and the ensuing Israeli retaliation in the Gaza Strip. Jordan's southern neighbour Saudi Arabia is an unwieldy partner for Europe and the United States that is becoming steadily more independent and self-confident.

Notwithstanding its involvement in the Arab-Israeli wars of the Middle East in 1948/1949, 1967 and (at a low level) 1973, Jordan has always maintained a cooperative relationship with the West. During the Cold War, the Hashemite Kingdom was considered a bulwark against the

revolutionary socialism of the Arab republics. Most recently, it has become an important base for Western troops carrying out operations in the Middle East. The German Federal Armed Forces have been in Jordan since 2017, using it as a base for their involvement in the international counterterrorism efforts in Iraq. In the course of the current reorganisation of its forces in the region, the United States is actually increasing its presence in the country, with more than 3,000 soldiers now stationed there. A new US-Jordanian defence agreement was signed in early 2021, among other things allowing the US army to bring troops and material into Jordan without specific controls and enabling them to move freely in the country. Some diplomats quip that the country is an "American aircraft carrier in the desert".



"American aircraft carrier in the desert"? Jordan's King Abdullah II in conversation with US General Michael Kurilla. The United States has recently increased its already strong military presence in Jordan. Photo: © Royal Hashemite Court, Zuma Press, picture alliance.



For both the Americans and the Germans, supporting Jordan always means supporting Israel, too. Tel Aviv and Amman signed a peace treaty back in 1994. Israel shares its longest border – 240 kilometres in length – with Jordan, one that has been peaceful for decades, not least thanks to security cooperation between the two countries. Jordan still maintains good relations with the Palestinians, too, especially with the Palestinian Authority, and attempts to play a mediating role in the Middle East conflict.<sup>3</sup> For Germany in particular, there is a further motivation to stabilise Jordan: its capacity to take in refugees. In the past, the country has already been a place of refuge for hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who were driven from their homes in the Israeli-Arab wars. Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria in 2011, more than a million people have fled from there to Jordan – equivalent to around ten per cent of the Jordanian population.<sup>4</sup>

### **Jordan recorded the receipt of foreign assistance amounting to 4.4 billion US dollars, with its overall state budget totalling around 10 billion.**

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Yet even beyond its role in relation to security and refugee policy, Jordan has a key function in terms of further development in the Middle East. Large-scale regional infrastructure projects require Jordan's participation simply by virtue of its geography, and Jordan enjoys a good reputation among many regional actors due to its traditionally moderate and dialogue-oriented foreign policy. This applies to ideas that seem rather visionary at the moment, such as a rail link between Saudi Arabia and Israel, but it is also true of concrete efforts to boost regional energy and electricity cooperation. One prominent example of this is the reopening/expansion of the Arab Gas Pipeline, which is to be used to supply Egyptian gas via Jordan to Syria and Lebanon.<sup>5</sup> In view of this geostrategic situation,

Jordan has attracted the interest – and therefore the resources – of Western powers ever since it became a state.

### **A Country on a Drip**

The predecessor of the Kingdom of Jordan, the Emirate of Transjordan, emerged in 1921 from the remains of the Ottoman Empire after the latter's defeat in the First World War. The then British colonial minister Winston Churchill is credited with saying that he created the country "with a stroke of a pen one Sunday afternoon". The desert strip east of the Jordan River, still sparsely populated at that time, was dominated by largely independent tribes while at the same time being a refuge for Arab nationalists from the Levant, who fought from there against colonial influence in an attempt to create an expanded Arab empire. Meanwhile, the Hashemite Prince Abdullah was setting up his own power base in Transjordan. Abdullah was one of the sons of the Sharif of Mecca, who had fought on Britain's side against the Ottomans in the First World War, so the British now supported Abdullah's ambitions to rule so as to pacify the region in their own interests. Indeed, without the financial support from London and the help of the Royal Air Force, Abdullah would hardly have succeeded in gaining control over recalcitrant local tribal leaders and repelling the attacks of desert warriors from the Arabian Peninsula. International support was thus integral to the young state's model of rule from the very beginning, enabling it to hold its own despite its meagre resources and the expansionist desires of its more powerful neighbours.

The United States replaced the British as Jordan's protector in the 1950s and remains the country's most important donor to this day. Its financial assistance to date totals more than 26 billion US dollars and is now around 1.5 billion US dollars per year. This means that Jordan is currently the second largest recipient of American financial aid (after Israel).<sup>6</sup> The World Bank and Germany follow the United States in the list of top donors. In 2022, the Jordanian government recorded the receipt of foreign

assistance – including soft loans and funds to take care of Syrian refugees – amounting to 4.4 billion US dollars (around 40 per cent of which took the form of budget support), with the country’s overall state budget totalling around 10 billion US dollars.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the Arab Gulf states are investing in specific infrastructure projects such as motorways and hospitals; these investments are not necessarily statistically recorded as development aid (but they are highly visible to the Jordanian population).

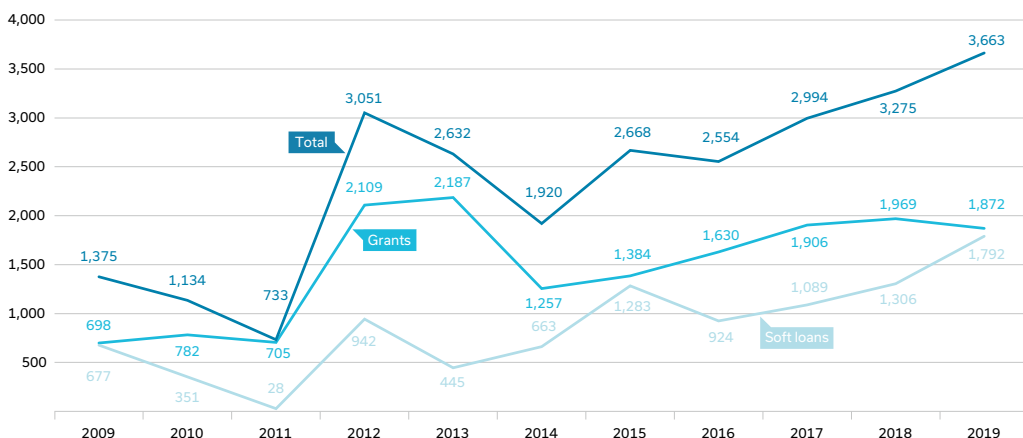
**If Jordan were to succeed in emancipating itself more from international aid, its foreign policy could become more independent.**

De facto, Jordan therefore pursues a rentier state model, at least in part, in which the external capital inflow is not generated by exporting oil and gas (as is typical of the monarchies in the Gulf, for example), but by raising international aid money. It has long been recognised that such a model has disadvantages for a country’s

democratic development and for a diversified and innovative economy, especially with regard to the Arab world.<sup>8</sup> This applies, at least to a somewhat lesser extent, to Jordan, too, as the country’s former foreign minister Marwan Muasher recently openly lamented: “Jordan’s current economic state is the inevitable and accumulated result of an economic and political approach that has largely depended on rentier economics and foreign aid to manage the country. The government has made no attempt to build an economic system based on meritocracy, productivity, and its own resources.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, annual growth in Jordan over the past decade has been limited to just over two per cent of economic output. One in three Jordanian employees works in the public sector, which has reached its limits in terms of its capacity to absorb more manpower. The unemployment rate in Jordan is over 20 per cent – and twice this figure for young adults. At 14 per cent, the female employment rate is among the lowest in the world.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, dependency on international aid may entail restrictions on political maneuvering space. Jordan felt this particularly acutely when it opposed the US-led military campaign against Iraq in 1991: the United States and the

**Fig. 1: Development of International Financial Assistance to Jordan (in Million US Dollars)**



Data for 2016 to 2019 without funds for refugee aid. Source: own illustration based on Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation 2019: Foreign Assistance Report 2019, in: <https://ogy.de/9p85> [28 Jul 2023].

Gulf states temporarily suspended their support as a result. A complaint now increasingly heard in Amman is that Jordan is unable to defend its own interests more resolutely in the Middle East conflict, especially vis-à-vis Israel, because it has to pay too much regard to the positions adopted by Western countries. In economic policy, Jordan also has to follow the guidelines of international financial institutions – which has negative consequences in terms of the legitimacy of political decisions within its own population.<sup>11</sup> The reverse might then also be true: if Jordan were to succeed in emancipating itself to a greater extent from international aid, its foreign policy could become more independent – and therefore more independent of the West. Is that in Germany’s interests?

**The volume of German development cooperation with Jordan has increased tenfold within a decade.**

For the time being, however, Jordan’s state and economic model remains dependent on external support. Since the outbreak of the “Arab

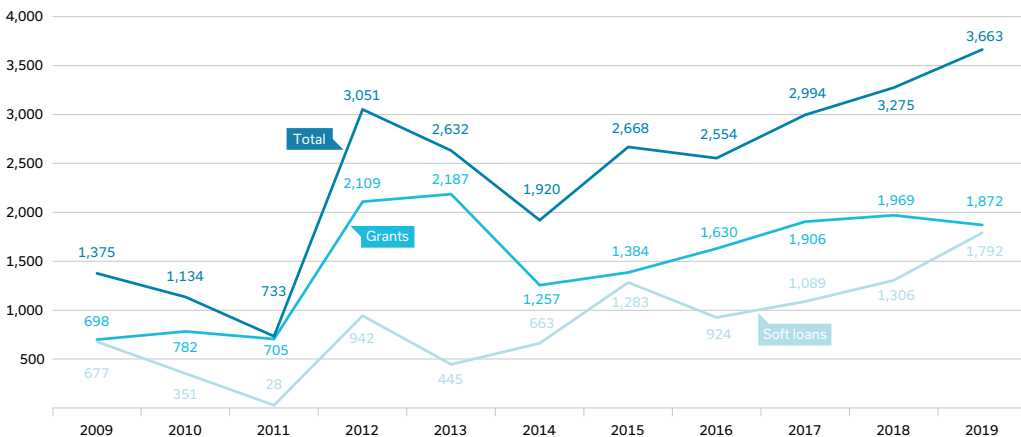
Spring” and the Syrian refugee crisis more than ten years ago, international aid to Jordan has tripled, now having settled at a high level.

**German Development Cooperation in Jordan**

The series of civil protests known as the “Arab Spring” set off a shock wave in the Arab world that took a particularly destructive turn in Syria in the form of civil war. Jordan has been severely affected by the influx of refugees from its neighbouring country and the breakdown of Syrian-Jordanian economic relations. At the same time, it gained importance as one of the remaining stable states in the crisis-ridden, war-torn region – especially for Germany. The volume of German development cooperation with Jordan has increased tenfold within a decade – from around 40 million euros per year before the “Arab Spring” to the current level of about 400 million euros. In 2019, Germany made a record pledge of 729 million euros (for projects lasting several years in some cases), most of which went into financial cooperation and soft loans.

At the most recent government negotiations in October 2022, for example, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and

**Fig. 2: German Development Funds for Jordan (in Million Euros)**



Source: own illustration based on data published by the OECD, converted into euros, see OECD Library, in: <https://stats.oecd.org> [28 Jul 2023].

Development (BMZ) pledged 95 million euros for the education and employment of Syrian refugees alone.<sup>12</sup> For years, Germany has been promoting “shift work” at Jordanian schools by means of such measures as paying additional teacher salaries. This enables regular schooling for 150,000 Syrian children. Thanks in part to international and in particular German support in looking after refugees, the latter have experienced a better reception in Jordan than in Syria’s other neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, the question increasingly arises as to the extent to which Syrian refugees should be integrated into Jordanian society or whether the primary aim is to work towards the prospect of an early return to Syria. The Jordanian government would prefer the latter solution and does not see any long-term absorption capacity for Syrians in its country – one of the reasons it is seeking rapprochement with the Assad regime in Damascus. By contrast, Germany and other Western donors are pushing for greater integration. It is true that the majority of Syrian refugees hope to return “one day”. In a recent survey by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), however, only three per cent said they really intended to do so within the next year.<sup>13</sup> As in other areas of German development cooperation with Jordan, the question arises here as to a shared longer-term objective that goes beyond immediate crisis management.

### **German development cooperation risks getting mired down in the constantly increasing number and intricacy of projects.**

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Even beyond the support for Syrian refugees, education and employment are a priority of German development cooperation, the focus here being on women and rural regions. Germany’s flagship in the education sector is the German Jordanian University (GJU), founded in 2005. Based on the model of a German university of applied sciences, it educates some 5,000

students, each of whom is required to spend a semester studying in Germany. The GJU is rightly considered a model of success: alumni with a link to Germany are frequently found working as young leaders in various positions in Jordan’s public and private sectors. The impact of the GJU – which is also financed by high tuition fees – inevitably remains limited, however. In fact, it fits into an increasingly noticeable division in Jordan between good, mostly private educational institutions with an international orientation on the one hand, and public schools and universities on the other, whose quality is stagnating at best and whose graduates fail to find their feet in the job market.

The third and traditionally most important priority area of German development cooperation concerns the water sector – water being an existential resource for Jordan. The population has increased tenfold since the 1960s, so there has been an enormous increase in demand. However, three quarters of Jordan’s land area is desert, and the country is now considered one of the most arid in the world. Germany has been involved in this sector for decades, from infrastructure projects such as the construction of sewage treatment plants and wells to advising on water tariff reforms. The German development bank KfW alone has ongoing projects in Jordan’s water sector with a volume of more than 800 million euros.<sup>14</sup> Jordan is currently planning new large-scale projects to develop additional water resources through the desalination of seawater on the Israeli Mediterranean coast and off the south Jordanian port city of Aqaba on the Red Sea. For the latter project, the European Investment Bank has also pledged a loan of more than 500 million euros. Bilaterally, Germany will contribute a further 65 million euros through the KfW.

### **The More the Better?**

Although Germany is addressing structural deficits and needs that are genuinely important for Jordan, fundamental challenges in development cooperation are evident at both the strategic and the operational level. This is because, in



Water scarcity: The expansion of Jordan's water infrastructure is a focus of German development cooperation with the Kingdom. However, due to technical defects and theft, only half of the water produced reaches the end consumers. The picture shows a waterworks located at the King Talal Dam. Photo: © Thomas Imo, photothek, picture alliance.

spite of the aforementioned priorities, German development cooperation is not integrated into a political vision for the country. Instead, it risks getting mired down in the constantly increasing number and intricacy of projects. The sheer number of German organisations and political bodies active in more and more areas inevitably leads to duplication, making it more difficult for German support to have a leveraging effect – no matter how hard the actors involved on the ground may attempt to coordinate their activities with each other.

In terms of promoting civil society in Jordan, for example, German political foundations have traditionally been active along with church-based and other non-governmental organisations. Although these are partly funded by the BMZ, the ministry is commissioning Germany's federally owned implementing organisation – the Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) – to take on more and more new projects in this area. In addition, the Federal Foreign Office has maintained its own stabilisation department for some years now with funding lines for civil society that are also being

rolled out in Jordan. Moreover, the European Union launched its own “Democratisation Project” in June 2023 with a volume of more than ten million euros for the next few years.

Such a dense juxtaposition and partial overlapping of actors and projects does not really serve German and European visibility and influence in the country, and the same phenomenon can be seen in other areas, too. Indeed, according to a recent survey, a large majority of Jordanians is in favour of strengthening relations with Germany. But Saudi Arabia and the United States have been mentioned as the most important partners. On the list of the countries that are perceived as most influential in Jordan – after the front-runners United States and Saudi Arabia – also Great Britain, China, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Turkey are ranked above Germany.<sup>15</sup>

The constant flow of funds from Europe and the United States – increasingly difficult to keep track of and often not subject to political conditions – also runs the risk of diminishing the responsibility of Jordanian policymakers. For example,





rather than improving framework conditions for civil society engagement by strengthening civil liberties, there seems to be a preference for organising one series of workshops after another. While countless internationally funded civic education training courses and dialogue measures are provided for young people in Jordan and are worthwhile in themselves, there must be an actual social space for practical application if these are to translate into genuine structural change.

Remarkably, King Abdullah II and the Jordanian government have committed to engaging in a genuine reform debate and are promoting greater political involvement, especially among young people. In May 2022, a new law on elections and political parties came into force with a view to strengthening political parties and promoting a politically more active parliament. Yet the authorities still exercise tight control. Some human rights organisations even complain of increasing obstacles to a critical civil society.<sup>16</sup> One curious incident occurred in the summer of 2022 during the German Week on the campus of the GJU: intelligence officers confiscated publications by a German political foundation that was running a stand there – even though the books (on Islamism and Israeli-Jordanian relations) had been published several years previously and had been registered with the National Library of Jordan. It is thus not surprising that many young Jordanians remain sceptical, despite appeals from the highest levels of government for more political involvement and an amendment to the legal framework that now allows political parties to be active at universities: according to a survey, 60 per cent of students assume they would be questioned by security authorities if they were to attend an on-campus event organised by a political party.<sup>17</sup>

### **From Crisis Mode to a Political Strategy**

In the wake of the disintegration of the regional order and the numerous internal conflicts in the Middle East, German foreign and development policy has identified Jordan as a key state. With a high level of funding and a focus on key

areas such as refugees, education/employment and water, it has made a contribution towards stabilising the country. Yet more than a decade after the “Arab Spring”, it is high time for German development cooperation to find a way out of crisis management mode and permanent financing of the status quo. For that, the following three points could provide some orientation:

#### *1. Less is More*

In times of tight public budgets and in view of the challenges facing German foreign policy elsewhere, such as in Ukraine, the extraordinarily high level of financial support for Jordan of the past decade will not be sustainable in the long run. German development cooperation should see this as an opportunity to take a critical look at its activities in Jordan and align its support more closely with the Jordanians’ own commitment. Germany should only get involved if and where a serious and honest effort is discernible on the part of the Jordanian government to sustainably improve structures for the benefit of the population. If German taxpayers’ money were to end up compensating for governance deficits and the unwillingness of power elites to reform, well-intentioned support would risk becoming an obstacle to substantial development.

**Germany can no longer be just a big donor, but has to find its new role as a political partner.**

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#### *2. Complementarity instead of Duplication*

The traditionally rather decentralised approach of German foreign and development policy still has its advantages. While the GIZ has experts embedded in the ministries of the host country and maintains a close working relationship with the authorities, for example, the independent political foundations cultivate close and differentiated contacts at the deeper layers of Jordanian society. In a relatively small country like

Jordan in particular, where there is a high density of development projects, however, the specific fields of action must be clearly defined and the organisations concerned have to make use of their respective core competencies – especially where various federal ministries are involved in project funding. This can only succeed if development cooperation is embedded in an overall foreign policy strategy. Here, aspects of trade and security policy must always be taken into account as well.

### 3. Political Vision

It goes without saying that the various actors in German development cooperation can only act in concert if the direction is clearly defined. Merely financing the status quo buys time – but to what end, and for how long? In 2021 and 2022, the Jordanian government launched a major modernisation offensive on the personal initiative of King Abdullah II, with political, administrative and economic reforms designed to make the country fit for the future. This also provides an opportunity for the country's partners – including Germany – to take the Jordanian side at its word and refocus their support.

There are certainly points of reference and positive approaches here: Jordan is seeking to become a hub for regional energy cooperation while increasing its own production capacity in the area of renewable energy, for example. Germany has been supporting this since 2019 through the German-Jordanian Energy Partnership managed by the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (and implemented by the GIZ). A bi-national degree programme in hydrogen technology is currently being developed at the GJU. In 2018, the KfW built a state-of-the-art photovoltaic system comprising 30,000 solar modules for the Zaatari refugee camp, which could also be used to supply the surrounding Jordanian communities in future. If such successful policy elements could be better interconnected, leverage of German aid might increase even more.

In other areas, there is an evident lack of an overarching strategy for the country and a failure to

make German cooperation with Jordan dependent on political conditions. If Germany is serious about supporting democratisation processes and promoting civil society, for example, the Federal Government should articulate more clearly to Jordanian authorities that there are deficits in civil liberties such as freedom of expression and assembly. And in spite of all the German support in the water sector, a quarter of the water is still lost due to technical problems with the pipes: only a little more than half of the water produced ultimately reaches the end customer due to mismanagement and theft.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the Jordanian government has long maintained its high water subsidies and shied away from addressing the issue of water waste in the agricultural and construction sectors, as well as in the wealthier private households. Only recently, a new tariff reform was announced to tackle the problem.

Engaging in serious and honest dialogue with the Jordanians and attaching more conditions to German support does not need to place a burden on German-Jordanian relations – on the contrary. Recognising Jordan as an equal partner also means highlighting the country's own responsibility while at the same time openly seeking to establish common interests and promising fields of cooperation. The Middle East is changing, as regional actors increasingly strive to shape their own destiny. For Jordan, this means working its way out of the cycle of international dependence, at least in the long term – even at the price of laborious domestic reforms. And Germany needs a foreign and development policy debate about what it can and wants to achieve in the region. In any case, a mere “business as usual” approach fails to do justice to the new geopolitical dynamics. Germany can no longer be just a big donor: it must find its way into a new role as a political partner.

*– translated from German –*

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- 3 In February 2023, for example, Jordan hosted the first meeting between high-level representatives of the newly elected Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority in the southern Jordanian port city of Aqaba, with the participation of the United States and Egypt. On Jordan's role in the Middle East conflict, see also Ratka, Edmund 2023: Kollateralschäden jenseits des Jordan, in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 18 Mar 2022.
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- 5 Hanan, Mohamed 2022: Egypt signs agreement with Lebanon, Syria to supply natural gas, *Egypt Today*, 21 Jun 2022, in: <https://ogy.de/9kza> [28 Jul 2023].
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