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Udo Steinbach on Europe and the Gulf · 08.03.2023

## Let's have none of the old arrogance

**Middle East expert Udo Steinbach has been advocating closer relations with the Gulf states for years. Genuine interest in regional development, however, needs to look beyond the stereotypes. Birgit Svensson spoke to him in Baghdad**

By Birgit Svensson

*Despite the scandal-ridden World Cup in Qatar, you are appealing for closer relations with the Gulf states. Why?*

**Udo Steinbach:** They represent the future in the Arab region. Egypt and the Levant states offer no comparison. The issues of the future are being discussed in the Gulf. Science and technology, that's what people there are currently interested in. In the rest of the Arab world, the old issues remain hopelessly predominant.

Although there are still presidential structures in the Gulf, they are actively seeking to connect with progressive forces around the globe. That is what makes the Gulf so fascinating right now.

*But such development doesn't come from within, there is not one serious scientific institute or world-class research institution in the region. Aren't they buying into this development from the outside?*

**Steinbach:** Yes, they are buying into it from the outside, but then we need to ask, why are they doing that at all? Are they doing it out of delusions of

grandeur to show off? There is more to it than that. For many years, the United Arab Emirates were considered worlds away – both culturally and historically.

## **No longer consigned to the slipstream of international politics**

Despite this, they were undeniably seafaring states. It was possible to reach the Indian Ocean from the Gulf or the Omani coast.

This fostered a sense of self-confidence they carry with them to this day. And yet, for many years they were consigned to the slipstream of Arab and international politics. Ever since oil and gas have become the driving force, however, they have begun to step out of the shadows. The future is all they talk about, the past is irrelevant.

Look at the museums being opened in the Emirates, they are all future-oriented. At the same time, Gulf Arabs hold fast to their political, social and cultural traditions. To be rooted in tradition and to want simultaneously to pursue ultra-modern, outsize projects, seemingly driven by an internal impulse to be at the forefront of modernity – that fascinates me immensely.

*Can they really manage to strike a balance between tradition and modernity?*

**Steinbach:** At the moment, it would appear so. Circumstances may sometimes seem a bit strange, like at the World Cup, but the fact that Qatar hosted the World Cup within the FIFA framework was a huge deal for the whole Arab world. Yet Russia also got to host the event, and human rights were an issue then, as well. What's more, a current bid exists from China.

Since the World Cup was awarded to Qatar in 2010, however, the world has completely shifted, there are new emphases, new balances of power. That's why when Qatar was awarded the World Cup, it caused such a stir. Of course it was a question of money, but it was also a question of status and part of the political dynamic we are currently witnessing.

## **A situation fraught with contradiction**

*Is the fact that Qatar has been bribing the European Commission in order to*

*influence political decisions also part of this dynamic?*

**Steinbach:** Such behaviour should certainly have no place in international relations. Yet, as we saw when the World Cup was awarded to Qatar, some people are always going to be susceptible to the idea of making a quick buck.

If the EU wants to live up to its claim of fostering value-oriented politics, it must engage its partners in a dialogue about values. If, however, relations are limited to doing business with "the sheikhs", we should not be surprised if these "sheikhs" only do business too.

*The situation is fraught with contradiction. Germany has its issues too. The human rights commissioner of the Federal Republic cancelled her trip to Qatar, while the minister of the interior flew there. Economics Minister Habeck practically went down on bended knee in Doha in order to be allowed to buy gas. The German national team covered their mouths with their hands in a free speech protest.*

**Steinbach:** We have yet to grasp what this is all about. When we talk about Qatar and the Emirates, we have a disrespectful image in our heads. On the other hand, we want and need to get oil and gas from the Gulf. So how can we get on the same wavelength with the people there? In the case of Qatar, we don't understand the situation and the country's perspective, seeing only the human rights violations. Yet Qatar has shown that an Arab country can be world-class.

It is true that the migrant workers there have been exploited for years, but things are changing, something even the trade unions recognise. Moreover, many millions of people in Pakistan and Bangladesh depend on the money they receive from relatives working in Qatar for their livelihoods.

## **Dialogue for change**

*The World Cup was not merely about the situation of the foreign workers who built the stadiums, it was also fundamentally about the modern slavery that prevails in the Gulf: when foreign workers are treated like serfs, have to hand*

*in their passports and cannot simply change jobs.*

**Steinbach:** That's right, that doesn't fit into today's world, and that's where most of the criticism comes from. Things are changing, however. The ILO – the International Labour Organisation – has recorded a marked shift. The reality now is not what it was ten years ago. Much has changed as a result of the discussions we have had since then.

*Do you mean dialogue has been responsible for the changes achieved?*

**Steinbach:** Yes, and this dialogue needs to continue, but we need to strike the right tone. What I keep hearing in the Gulf is this: 'Yes, we do business with the Chinese, and also with the Russians, but we want to talk to Europe. We are seeking a dialogue of equals, with none of the old European arrogance'.

To get along with the Gulf Arabs, we not only need to put economic interests first, we also have to acknowledge their cultural interests, something the Chinese and Russians don't do.

We need to understand that the world has changed and we can no longer act the way we used to. Our assessment of the political and social conditions in the region is utterly wrong. The Gulf has never been the focus of German policy before; it is only now that we are being confronted with it as a result of the energy crisis. Until now, the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula have been completely ignored by German politicians.

## **The Gulf is the future**

*Do we have to get used to each other first? Is that why there is so much frustration at the moment?*

**Steinbach:** We have to get to know each other. The balance of power is currently being reshuffled, and as a result, there is naturally turbulence in the Gulf and the Middle East over leadership roles – rivalries between Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Take Egypt, for example. For years, the country on the Nile was the powerhouse in the Middle East. Today, Egypt is nothing.

Even in the Arab League, Egypt has long since ceased to play the role it once did. The jealousies persist, but the emphasis has changed. This is the Arab world's greatest challenge. It must come together again with a new understanding of the world to rebuild Syria, Iraq and elsewhere. Europe and the Americans can provide assistance, but the impetus and capacity for development must come from the Arab world.

*Is it even possible to talk about the Arab world today?*

**Steinbach:** I believe so. Arab nationalism has run its course, true, but there are signs of pragmatic cooperation. And the Gulf states are intent on taking the lead. I see this as an opportunity for them to shape the future of the Arab world together.

*Interview conducted by Birgit Svensson*

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*Udo Steinbach, born in Zittau in 1943, is an Islamic scholar and was head of the German Orient Institute in Hamburg from 1976 to 2007. Today he is a board member of the German-Arab Friendship Society and responsible for the Maecenata Foundation's MENA Study Centre.*