

22. “We help international academics who have found their way to Germany”

Julia Gerlach with Florian Kohstall¹

Julia Gerlach: Florian Kohstall, you are one of the few non-Arabs portrayed in this book. Who are you, and how are you linked to Arab Berlin?

Florian Kohstall: Thank you, I'm delighted to be part of this project, although I'm not of Arab origin and originally not even from Berlin. I was born in Rosenheim, a small town in the southeast of Germany, and I came to Berlin for my studies in Political Science. I guess I am honored to be part of this book because of my doctoral studies and decades of living and working in Morocco and Egypt. In addition, my previous role as head of the Freie Universität Berlin Cairo Office and later the Welcome@FU Berlin Program for refugee students, and my current role leading the program “Academics in Solidarity” all involve working with students and scholars of Arab origin.

J.G.: Why did you start to study Arabic in the first place?

F.K.: It was by coincidence. During my studies in Political Science, I wanted to do a semester abroad and applied to universities in Spain. I found the University of Granada quite interesting and read on the website that the university sees itself as a bridge between the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic civilizations. In my application letter, I referred to that, and when I started my studies there, I did several seminars on the topic. That's how I got interested in the Arab region, and I subsequently shifted my studies to Middle Eastern Studies. That was in 1997 when I was 23. That's how it all started. And I've spent many years in Morocco and Egypt since then and traveled to most of the countries on both shores of the Mediterranean.

J.G.: Interesting, and please say a little more. What exactly made you interested in the Arab world? Other people who go to Spain for a year abroad study the history of the Spanish Civil War or other similar topics.

1 Translated from German by Julia Gerlach.

F.K.: Yes, you're right. Let me think about what got me interested. . .

J.G.: Well, while you're thinking, let me tell you how it was for me. We may have had similar experiences. I went to France as an exchange student and met many fellow students originally from Algeria. I had a professor, Bruno Etienne, who studied Islam in France. He would always insult us students, telling us that we were too stupid to understand the world, especially the relationship between the Arab world and Europe. The students of Algerian origin also told me that I would never be able to understand what really mattered to them. That's when I decided to learn Arabic.

F.K.: Bruno Etienne? I know him. He was my professor later when I did my Master's in Aix-en-Provence. My experience was similar, indeed! In Granada, it was also a professor who got me interested in the region. He didn't tell us that we were stupid, but he provoked us in other ways and made me curious to explore and learn for myself. He was part of the old tradition of orientalism, and this encouraged me to challenge his views.

J.G.:

And your first visit to the Arab world was Morocco?

F.K.: Yes, I traveled to Morocco with friends, and we had a good time exploring. Later on, I did an internship with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. I loved it. I lived in Rabat city, and every day was an adventure. From the moment I left the house, I could be sure that it would be anything but boring. At first, everybody in the neighborhood came up and asked where I was from. After a few days they got used to me and I became part of everyday life there. The office was in a very modern part of the city. So every day I moved between these very different worlds. I enjoyed the contrast between the different communities.

J.G.: And from there you moved to Cairo?

F.K.: Yes, about four years later. Originally, I went to Cairo because I was looking for a country of reference: I wanted to compare my scientific findings from Morocco to another country in the region – I was working on education reform back then. I went to Egypt, and my plan was to stay for one month. In the end, I stayed for nearly ten years.

J.G.: How was your experience of Cairo when you first got there?

F.K.: Cairo was very different from Rabat and Casablanca. Life there was much tougher. In Morocco, you can constantly dive into the flair of the old towns and Kas-

bahs and breathe the past. Cairo is very different. If you are not in places like Khan Al Khalili you won't find this flair.

J.G.: Still, you decided to stay in Cairo. . .

F.K.: Yes, I quickly found a job there at the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) office and soon got a scholarship. It was easy to connect to a network of researchers there and it was good for my career, and I stayed for – on and off – ten years. I didn't make a conscious decision to do so; it just happened and was very good. Cairo is a very interesting, vibrant, and also a very tiring city.

J.G.: I know two types of people: The first type comes to Cairo and finds the city awful – loud and polluted – and they leave as soon as possible. The other type falls in love with all the different aspects of this city immediately. I know very few people who remain indifferent, and hardly any change their opinion later.

F.K.: Hmm, so I might be an exception. When I first arrived, I was sure I wouldn't like to stay more than a week at most. But then I got along very well, and I liked living there. There are ups and downs, and I still go there a lot to visit our family.

J.G.: When and why did you decide to leave Cairo?

F.K.: Between 2013 and 2015, I felt I needed to get out of there. I felt like I was losing touch with life in Germany and starting to get *verbuscht*. It took me two years to find the right perspective to return to Germany. It's not easy. Many people I met in Cairo really struggled to move back to Germany. It's challenging to find a job or develop a perspective or some sort of plan.

J.G.: You used the ugly German word "verbuscht". Can you describe what it means?

F.K.: Do you think it's ugly? I would say it is a phenomenon that many expats in Arab countries experience: We have this saying, "*Im Ausland ein Fürstchen und in Deutschland ein Würstchen*" – a princeling abroad and a nobody (a sausage!) in Germany. As an expat in countries like Egypt, you have many privileges you don't have at home. That's something you get used to. You lose contact with reality.

No matter how much you try to integrate into the Arab host society, you will always experience living in a bubble – even though I must admit that my bubble here in Berlin is even smaller than my bubble in Cairo was! The people I meet these days in Berlin are even less diverse than those I was meeting back in Cairo. This is not only because of the pandemic and because I have a family now, though these things do play a role.

J.G.: When you came to Berlin in 2015, many people from Cairo – ex-pats and Egyptians – also moved to Berlin. So, I guess parts of your old bubble migrated with you, right?

F.K.: Right. I found many of my Cairo friends in Berlin.

J.G.: You came back to Berlin after a long time abroad. How was it to come back?

F.K.: I studied in Berlin from 1997 to 2002, and then I left first for France and then for the Arab World. I came back in 2015. I was always in touch with people in Berlin and came here often over the years. But Berlin has also changed a lot, especially in terms of Arab Berlin. After 2015, you started hearing people speaking Arabic everywhere you went. Arabic became a part of the city's soundscape. That has changed the atmosphere in the city.

J.G.: And the cultural sphere has also changed, with all the artists and intellectuals coming from Syria and the other post-Arab Spring countries, right?

F.K.: Hmm, you're reminding me of the concerts and events I used to attend. It seems so long ago. Before the pandemic. Yes, that was a very vibrant time that started in 2011.

J.G.: You started the Welcome@FU Berlin program to welcome students from Syria and other countries to the region.

F.K.: Yes, that seems so long ago! We are now receiving the seventh cohort of refugee students; in many ways, things are similar to 2015. There is this enormous wave of volunteer work and initiatives to support and welcome the refugees from Ukraine. Especially in the beginning, it was very similar to Syrian refugees back in 2015. Many people wanted to meet Syrians and host them. There was a lot of solidarity and sympathy. Of course, in hindsight, this sentiment didn't last long, and nobody can predict how long the current wave of solidarity will last. It is our task now to build on past experiences and institutionalize support programs for refugees, regardless of which region they are coming from.

J.G.: Still, things are different now, right? How is your program different compared to that of 2015/16?

F.K.: We have much more experience with students from abroad without the typical framework of scholarships and exchange programs. It makes a big difference whether someone comes here with a scholarship from the DAAD, for example, or

whether they come as refugees. The DAAD-sponsored students come with a complete support package, and everything they need is provided. Refugee students, by contrast, need funding and housing and often much more help to settle their residency status. We've learned a lot in this respect, but there is still much to do.

Back then, we also had some incidents and problems. For example, we had language classes with a very low percentage of female students. There were cases of homophobic and antisemitic incidents among students. The university is very sensitive to these cases. Still, it is important not to blame all problems on where the students are from. We try to solve some problems by getting a good mixture of students. But that's not always easy. In 2015, we had classes with 90 percent of male students of Arab origin. I'm sure we will see classes with many female students from Ukraine. We try to connect newcomers with regular students through our Buddy Program. At the moment, we have 100 students who are in our one-year preparation program.

J.G.: And is the program successful?

F.K.: We have quite a few students who entered the faculties. It's not easy, but it is possible. Some even got scholarships from the *Studienstiftung des Deutschen Volkes*. Others changed their faculties or even stopped. This is also sometimes due to their family situation or problems getting settled. Despite good counseling, you can't always plan trajectories from beginning to end.

J.G.: And how has your work changed over the years?

F.K.: Now I'm more involved with coordinating our Global Responsibility program, and I've started other programs, such as *Academics in Solidarity*. This program was born out of an AGYA idea competition, and it aims to match newly arrived researchers with established researchers all over Germany. Unlike other programs, we help those academics who already live in Germany. Many faculties are enriched through these researchers, especially concerning regional studies. At the same time, the number of applicants for academic positions in Germany is so high that it's challenging to get one. We try to identify niches within the system and work on changing it from within through this transnational network of solidarity and its unique expertise in the academic systems in our members' home and host countries. We currently have 130 mentees from Arab countries, Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan, as well as Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.

J.G.: What impact does all of this have on regular German students? Would you think that interest in Arab society and civilization is growing? I remember when I started learning Arabic in FU in 1992, we were seven students in the Islamic Sciences course.

F.K.: Ok, that's really a long time ago. We've seen some changes since then. The first big increase in the popularity of the course and the topic, in general, was in 2001 when we had over 100 students, and there was another wave in 2011. For these students, it has become complicated: When they were ready to start their fieldwork and research abroad, it became increasingly difficult to travel to certain countries.

J.G.: For you, the Arab World is not only a region you work on. For you, it is also part of your daily life, as you have family in Egypt.

F.K.: Yes, I think family visits changed my relationship to Cairo. I used to live in the quarters where foreigners typically live: Zamalek, Mounira, and Downtown. When I travel to Egypt now, I mostly come to see our family, and we spend a lot of time in New Cairo. Our flat is in a gated community the size of a mid-sized town in Germany. I think there must be something like 200,000 inhabitants. It's primarily Egyptian upper middle class, and many Syrians live there now. Some people might argue that this is not the real Cairo, but it is part of it, just as we are now part of Arab Berlin because in our household, we speak both Arabic and German.

I'm sure this also has an impact on my professional work. I have become known as someone who prefers to sustain the dialogue and continue cooperation even in difficult times. Others may have a different point of view in that regard. My experience from living and working in Egypt and my connection to Egypt through my family have shaped my perspective. It gives me valuable knowledge, insight, empathy, and understanding of life and the people there.