

Talking openly in the Rheinallee

After four years, the Academy of International Affairs NRW is establishing itself within the ranks of international think tanks

By Martin Wein

Bonn. 775 Massachusetts Avenue in Washington DC is one of the most important addresses for international politics. In this unassuming functional building, academics and politicians debate and define guidelines and concepts - usually behind closed doors. In 1916, philanthropist Robert Somers Brookings founded the independent Institute for Government Research. This later became the Brookings Institution. The Council on Foreign Relations at 58 East 68th Street in New York and the Royal Institute of International Affairs - Chatham House at 10 St James's Square in London pursue a similar concept. In the Anglo-Saxon world in particular, think tanks have established themselves as protected spaces for free speech and strategy formation. But with the Institut français des relations internationales at 27 Rue de la Procession in Paris or the Observer Research Foundation at 20 Rouse Avenue in New Delhi, there are also examples in other countries. In Germany, the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik at Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4 in Berlin, a government-affiliated think tank is most likely to fall into this category financed primarily from the budget of the Federal Chancellery. This is precisely why its independence is sometimes called into question.

Dr. Maysoun Zein Al Din would like Rheinallee 24 in Bad Godesberg to have a permanent place in the address book of international think tanks. The Pakistani embassy resided in the Wilhelminian-style Villa Schorlemmer until 1999. Since 2020, the newly founded Academy of International Affairs NRW has been based here in the heart of the former embassy district of the Bonn Republic. Ms. Zein Al Din is the Director of the state-owned non-profit limited company. She says: "With borders to two neighboring countries, Europe's largest inland port in Duisburg and a strong economy, North Rhine-Westphalia is heavily influenced by international developments." International crises and conflicts have a direct impact on everyday life in North Rhine-Westphalia. On the other hand, they can only be resolved cooperatively. "As the only German location of the United Nations, the state of North Rhine-Westphalia brings together renowned academics from all over the world in Bonn through the Academy's Fellow Programs, who might otherwise never have met."

People like Abiodun Egbetokun from Nigeria, for example, who is researching the political economy of Chinese investments in Africa at De Montfort University in the UK. Dr. Adam Bower from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, who deals with the regulation of security in space. Or Dr. Milla Vaha, who is researching the uncertainties of Pacific island states - from the nuclear tests of the past to the climate crisis of today. She has come to Bonn for two months from the University of the South Pacific. The Academy hosts around ten

Fellows at any one time, preferably for three to nine months. An independent committee selects the best minds. A multidisciplinary perspective plays a central role here. In addition, not only capacities from the leading industrial nations should be given a chance, but also experts from less developed countries.

Maysoun Zein Al Din knows the political scene as well as academia. In 1990, at the age of eleven, she fled to Germany with her parents and four siblings to escape the civil war in her Lebanese homeland. She later studied political science with distinction at RWTH Aachen University, where she also completed her doctorate. She is now a lecturer in the Theology and Global Development course there, as well as at the Institute of Political Science and Sociology at the University of Bonn. The unstable situation in Lebanon with its proportional democracy has also occupied Zein al Din academically on several occasions. "The Ottomans and later the French laid down the main features of the situation that is so muddled today," she says. As in Cyprus, Iraq or parts of the former Yugoslavia, a division of powers based on religious or ethnic proportionality does not lead to the formation of a genuine nation state in Lebanon either. "I am very concerned about why the whole region, with its large number of well-educated people, the sun as a new source of energy and the Suez Canal, is not coming to rest. It could be a prosperous area of the world," says Zein Al Din. The latest images of war in the Middle East have also affected her personally.

The political scientist knows the political business from the State Chancellery in Düsseldorf. From 2013, she worked there for eight years in the office of the then Minister President Armin Laschet (CDU), where she assessed international political issues before taking over the management of the new academy. However, Zein Al Din emphasizes that she has kept her distance from party politics and is non-partisan herself. However, today she benefits from the fact that she knows the ways and structures of the political business from the inside. Two research assistants and a coordinator are enough to manage the fellowship program. Visits with the fellows to the Düsseldorf state parliament and the Bundestag in Berlin for joint discussions are frequent. Many high-ranking politicians also come to Bad Godesberg. "We don't do any explicit political consulting," she qualifies. But the growing network of alumni helps all sides to understand international contexts from a wide variety of perspectives. In a new format, graduates with a close connection to the Academy's topics can also be associated and benefit from international expertise.

Hamid Karzai as a guest in Bonn

The Academy of International Affairs NRW also offers events for the general public.

On November 27, 2024, there will be a panel discussion with former Afghan President Hamid Karzai on the 23rd anniversary of the first Afghanistan Conference on the Petersberg in Bonn. On 2 December 2024, the Academy is organizing a side event on the UN campus for the UN World Space Forum taking place in Bonn entitled "Responsability in Space". Information and registration at www.aia-nrw.org. wmr