

“Germany, Israel and the changes sweeping the Middle East” – speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the Academy of the Sciences and Literature in Mainz

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01.02.2016 - Speech 

-- Translation of advance text --

Minister-President, Malu Dreyer,
Professor Wilhelm,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Around 50 years ago, on a hot day in August 1965, Rolf Pauls, a former Wehrmacht officer, met Israel's President Zalman Shazar in Jerusalem. Pauls handed over his letter of credence. He was the first German Ambassador to Israel.

At around the same time, during that summer 50 years ago, the hearings at the first Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt am Main were reaching their conclusion.

And while President Shazar, Ambassador Pauls and Israel's Foreign Minister Golda Meir very cautiously began working together on the future, the enraged crowd gathered outside the presidential palace chanted: “Nazi”, “Go home Pauls” and “Six million times no”. Demonstrators, including many concentration camp survivors, eventually broke through the barriers and surrounded Pauls's car. The Israeli police had to intervene to protect the erstwhile enemy.

That was the atmosphere in the streets of Jerusalem back then, during the first weeks of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel.

And today? Five decades later?

I'd like to tell you a second story, one that's personal.

Last May, I had the great honour to be in Jerusalem for a ceremony at the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus, just a few kilometres from the spot where Rolf Pauls met the Israeli President half a century previously, at which I was presented with an honorary doctorate.

Once again, it was a hot day. There were young Israeli students in the audience. But there were also Holocaust survivors.

People who had survived the hell of Auschwitz. Also there was the then Israeli President, Shimon Peres. Peres, the great statesman. Peres, whose beloved grandfather, Rabbi Zvi Meltzer, was murdered by the Nazis. The Nazis forced the Rabbi and the Jewish community in Vishnyeva into the synagogue, locked the door and set fire to it. All that remained of them was ash.

Peres, the grandson of the beloved Rabbi who died in the flames, accompanied me to the Hebrew University. He came to congratulate the German Foreign Minister on this special day. And he did so with sincerity. As a partner and as a friend.

I was very touched by that.

The fact that the unique friendship which links Germany and Israel is possible today – 70 years after the crime against humanity that was the Shoah – fills me with profound gratitude and joy. It's truly a miracle!

This miracle was possible because the nation of the victims held out its hand to the nation of the perpetrators. And because the nation of the perpetrators, because we Germans acknowledged our guilt and our responsibility. And we still acknowledge it today.

This, the darkest chapter of German history, affects our own perception of ourselves and will always be inextricably associated with our country. It's not possible to simply draw a line under history. We therefore have a responsibility to stand up to any form of anti-Semitism or discrimination.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I'm glad that today Jewish life in Germany is flourishing once more. Rabbis are again being ordained here in Germany. Last summer, young athletes came to Berlin for the Maccabi Games, the largest Jewish sporting event in Europe.

It's no exaggeration to claim that the ties between Germans and Israelis are closer and more vibrant now than ever before. Malu Dreyer, you told me that this is the case here, too, in Rhineland-Palatinate. And perhaps you'll say more about this in a moment. Pupils from Speyer, Westerburg or Neuwied regularly visit friends in Israel. Academics in Mainz, Trier and Koblenz research and work together with Israeli colleagues. The exchange is close and the links are wide-ranging. It's this very vibrancy which we celebrated during the anniversary year with events throughout Germany and Israel. And not with political

speeches (or not only! I'm afraid you won't be spared that this evening). Rather, with concerts, with parties, at readings with authors, at the open days of German-Israeli start-ups.

In political terms, too, we've been on an amazing journey together during the last 50 years: a cautious relationship marked by mistrust has evolved into a close partnership.

Every year, members of the German and Israeli Governments come together and sit round a big table to discuss politics and joint projects. The next meeting is due to take place in Berlin in just a few days' time. These meetings are not polite, diplomatic routine encounters. I can't deny that there are often heated discussions. But precisely this is the mark of a close friendship: a willingness to speak frankly. This friendship is demonstrated by the fact that, even when we have different opinions – indeed, especially then – we remain engaged in an intensive dialogue.

That applies, for example, when we have the impression that new laws could mean restrictions for NGOs in Israel's democratic society. It's clear to us that the exchange between our civil societies, such as the one which German political foundations foster abroad, is useful and important.

We also speak frankly with our Israeli partners about issues which affect our relations with Israel's neighbours in the region.

I want to state very clearly here that this and every other German Government firmly believes that Israel's security is non-negotiable – that is a cornerstone of our foreign policy.

We don't always agree on how to achieve this, as the stance on Iran's nuclear programme shows.

We believe that the agreement reached in Vienna was a historic success for diplomacy. And when you hear these grand words from an otherwise rather sober native of Eastern Westphalia, then you perhaps realise how important this agreement is: after more than ten years of conflict, during which we were on the brink of a military escalation more than once, the danger of nuclear armament in the region has been banished for the foreseeable future. After ten years! I'd like to let you into a little secret: I turned 60 just a few weeks ago. Even for someone of my advanced age, ten years is a long time.

We're convinced that this agreement will greatly increase security for Israel and the region. It was precisely this which motivated us to go on negotiating. Nevertheless, we take Israel's scepticism about the agreement seriously and we intend to closely monitor its full implementation.

Even now that the nuclear deal has been sealed, Iran hasn't quickly become a normal partner. We condemn in the strongest possible terms the human rights situation, as well as Iran's activities in the region – support for the Assad regime in Syria or the Hezbollah in Lebanon.

However, we also see that Iran's society is developing. The forthcoming parliamentary elections at the end of February will be an important milestone. They will be an indicator of the chances of the country opening up further, both socially and politically.

The agreement has also proven that it's possible to resolve even deeply ingrained, complex conflicts that are characterised by mistrust and enmity. And it has thus also opened up a new perspective on the scope for action in the region, on the resolution of the complex crises in Israel's neighbourhood.

The brutal conflict in Syria has forced more than 11 million people to leave their homes. Many of them have fled to neighbouring countries, while others have travelled on to Europe, many to us in Germany.

The stories they have to tell about events in their country are disturbing and shocking. In the course of five years of bloodshed, more than 250,000 people have been killed. War, terror and violence prevail in many parts of the country.

It's clear that only when war and violence in Syria, in the arc of crisis from Libya to Iraq, is over, will people again have hope of a future in their own countries. And only then will the number of refugees coming to our country fall again on a durable basis. That's why our work on finding political solutions for the Middle East is so important.

And that's why it's so important that we've now finally – for the first time – created a process, the Vienna process, in which all players are involved who have to sit at the table if a solution is to be found in Syria: Russia and the US, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. And us: the Europeans. This was a long and arduous journey. And for that very reason, the current renewed escalation between Riyadh and Tehran is so dangerous. For we cannot allow this crucial process to be jeopardised. I'm therefore heading back to the region tomorrow to urge both Tehran and Riyadh to keep open the channels of communication.

Direct talks in Geneva between delegations from the Syrian regime and the opposition are all the more important now. Only there can the country's future – in which Assad cannot play a role – ultimately be negotiated.

I don't believe these talks will lead to a political solution any time soon. In my view, even an initial agreement on ceasefires, with the aim of securing humanitarian access to the many besieged towns in Syria, would be progress.

For ultimately this is what matters: giving people in Syria prospects for a future in their own country and not leaving them to become permanently displaced.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Whether we look at the nuclear dispute with Iran, at Libya or Syria: the work on political processes lies at the heart of Germany's efforts in the Middle East.

For this we also need to talk to difficult partners. Of course I understand the public's scepticism when it comes to countries such as Saudi Arabia. Of course we shouldn't turn a blind eye when it comes to human rights, to executions or to extremism.

But the question is what conclusions we draw. We can't conduct foreign policy from our armchairs. We can't close our eyes, batten down the hatches and ignore the world's problems – that cannot be an option for us. If we want to achieve something, then we have to seek out contact with difficult partners. For in the end, there can only be political processes where people talk to each other.

That also applies to Israel. And that brings me back to that country at the end of my tour through the region. We're very concerned about the wave of violence we're currently witnessing there, in Israel, in the West Bank and in Gaza. It's terrible that people have to live in fear, that they can become the victim of random violence in the streets.

Israel has every right to protect its population from attacks. However, ultimately what I've already said today also applies to relations between Israelis and Palestinians: only a political process can end this decades-long conflict. For violence won't disappear from the lives of Israelis and Palestinians without a political process.

It's considered almost naive today to talk of peace, but it's our vision for the future:

a fair and comprehensive solution to the conflict. We want to see a two-state solution in which Israel and a sovereign and viable Palestine live alongside each other in peace and security and recognise each other.

Let me also make it very clear that settlements hinder any progress in the peace process and pose a threat to the foundations of the two-state solution. Settlement construction in the occupied territories is a violation of international law.

It's true that it's not easy to find a way out of a spiral of mutual mistrust. Both sides need the courage to make difficult decisions in order to change direction.

We on the outside can only support what the parties on the ground are willing to achieve. We support the Middle East Quartet. And we support their suggestion that the two sides implement the measures already set out in existing agreements.

We're not naive when it comes to the complexity of the issues which have been part of this conflict for decades.

Incidentally, I experienced this personally recently and not only in my talks with Israeli and Palestinian partners, in government offices or conference centres.

However, scepticism and frustration are no reason to give up. On the contrary!

And there's something which makes me optimistic: the fact that a generation is growing up here in Germany and in Israel which has ties in all spheres of society from business to culture. This is a generation of young people who critically question their own and each other's government policy. Above all however, it's a generation of people who are curious about one another and about the world, people who think and live at an international level.

When I look at this generation I know that as unpeaceful as the world may be, our shared German-Israeli hope of reconciliation and understanding was not naive in the past, and neither will it be naive in the future!

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