

Speech by State Secretary Stephan Steinlein at the opening of the event of Landschaften der Hoffnung (Action for Hope) in Berlin at Radialsystem V

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Welcome

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01.10.2016 - Speech 

Dear Tamara al-Rifai,
Dear Fares Helou,
Dear Hamdy Reda,
Distinguished guests,

As a representative of the Federal Foreign Office, it is not easy speaking about Syria these days. After all, this horrible conflict puts the limitations of our profession into bold relief. For many years, my Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, as well as the entire Foreign Office, have worked tirelessly to bring an end to the bloodshed in Syria. We have not been dissuaded by setbacks. Many new attempts have been made, new ideas developed, and countless days and nights spent in tough negotiations. Despite all this, the conflict has grown bloodier and bloodier, as well as more gruesome and intractable.

Syria and hope – are these two words still compatible? Or are those right who claim that this conflict will be like the Thirty Years' War, which lasted for several decades, ending only after Germany itself had been ransacked and the many neighbours who had fanned the flames of the conflict were exhausted and weary of war?

Mentioning Syria today immediately brings to mind a country totally consumed by a conflict that is spreading incredible destruction and causing immeasurable suffering. For more than five years, death and torture have taken hold, and people have been forced to flee their homes. It is hard not to abandon all hope – especially considering the atrocities and everything people in Syria are having to face on a daily basis.

And not only the people are suffering. Famous sites such as Palmyra, the Great Mosque or the Old Town of Aleppo are symbols of the indescribable cultural wealth of Syria, which many of you who are present here today will know first-hand, and that I was able to see

just before war broke out. These architectural masterpieces are part of the cultural heritage of all mankind – as UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) has emphasised once again. Yet the cultural treasures of the country are being mercilessly attacked and destroyed.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The cold hard numbers cannot begin to describe the fates of all those who have been affected. All the same, I will mention some figures:

More than 13 million people in Syria depend on humanitarian assistance – aid that all too often does not reach them.

More than 6 million people have been internally displaced within Syria.

More than 6 million people have had to flee Syria. Many of them have sought refuge in neighbouring countries, in Europe and especially also in Germany.

For all of these people, it is important that we remain fully engaged, and that we not lose hope. Hope that peace is possible. Hope that their children have a brighter future. Hope that Syria, with its incomparable cultural heritage, will one day rise from the ashes.

At the moment, distinguished guests, we are far removed from this goal. The destructive power of war is insidious; it annihilates not only buildings and human lives, but erodes the very foundation of society. The destructive power of war threatens to tear apart the many and diverse social and cultural bonds that made Syria a unique country in the region. The peaceful coexistence of, and even interaction between, its various religions and cultures that once determined Syria's very identity has given way to helplessness, distrust and hatred. The mortar that held together Syrian society is slowly crumbling before our eyes.

We have come here today to say loud and clear that we are opposed to the dreadful news we hear each day: we, who have gathered here today, will not abandon the people in Syria. I thank all of the dedicated members of Action for Hope who have organised these days' events, and who are sending many signals of hope, trying to put an end to the horrors of war.

Action for Hope – the title is a strong call to action. A call to not idly stand by, to stop simply complaining, and to get up and do something, by helping to change things for the better. It also expresses the desire and obligation to bring hope to people in Syria.

Hope in a new, peaceful Syria is to a large extent being expressed by all those who are currently in exile. Many of them are artists. Many of them are in the audience, and I am very pleased to welcome all of you here today.

This weekend, Syrian and other Arab artists will share with us, and with each other, their art and their visions. Some of them want to maintain links to their home country. Others want to forge ties with their new home. It is all about building bridges, between one's

home country and the place of exile, between German and Arab artists, between the present day and the future.

Action for Hope has recognised the fundamental importance of cultural and artistic work, and of mutual exchange – and it is doing an excellent job!

There are so many examples: whether it be the founding of a music school for Syrian refugees and citizens in host municipalities in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, or conducting video workshops in refugee camps; whether it be giving refugees a place to communicate their experiences, to cope with their traumas, and to express their hope – and sometimes their desperation.

That is why I want to take this opportunity to most sincerely thank the organisation, and above all the committed people who work for it. Thank you, also, that you presented your work during the Inspiring People forum at Station am Gleisdreieck, as part of our cultural relations policy. At that event, we already enjoyed a performance by Fawaz Baker; if you attend Monday evening's concert, then you are in for a real treat.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Action for Hope has a message it never tires to repeat: securing survival is not only about material support, about providing food and shelter. It is also about preserving humanity, about maintaining our empathy and what makes us human. Culture and education are important for this.

And it is this approach that guides our involvement in the region. Germany is not only one of the largest donors of humanitarian aid. At the Federal Foreign Office, we make a great effort to repeatedly emphasise the significance of culture and education. Free access to culture and education are where a self-determined life begins. And the Syrian people must be given the chance to determine their own future. This is what we, as the Federal Government, are working to achieve.

We are trying to already now, with the means at our disposal, pave a road to this future. Syria needs a young generation of Syrians who will return home and rebuild when the horrors of war have ended.

That is why we are making available Leadership for Syria scholarships, through a programme of the German Academic Exchange Service and the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative, which enable Syrian refugees to study in Germany and the region. We are doing this in close cooperation with the UNHCR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). We are also stepping up our engagement: in 2016, the Federal Government is making available an additional 2560 scholarships, primarily for Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries.

Another example is the project *Stunde Null: A Future after the Crisis*. It aims to provide basic and further training to Syrian architects, archaeologists, building researchers, city planners and builders.

We are also supporting the Philipp Schwartz Initiative of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, which brings threatened foreign researchers to Germany so that they can pursue their research here.

In addition to our focus on education, we are trying to promote networking among the relevant stakeholders and to compile knowledge, with a view to eventual preservation and reconstruction of Syrian cultural sites. We have established the Archaeological Heritage Network for this purpose. Under the leadership of the German Archaeological Institute, this network connects research institutes, museums, universities and foundations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Of course, all these efforts are built on the hope that war in Syria will end. This goal can only be achieved through a political solution. The most recent prospective cease-fire nurtured hopes that we were drawing closer to a peaceful Syria. The despicable attack on the humanitarian convoy of the United Nations was yet another setback for these efforts.

But we will not give up. We will be unyielding in our commitment to achieving a solution to the conflict. Even though I must take a realistic stance when it comes to short-term success.

The great diversity of identities, religions and cultures that defined Syria in the past must be maintained. In Germany, many people are involved in impressive projects to achieve this. Also, new initiatives are constantly being launched: for example, the Goethe-Institut's Damascus in Exile project, which will open a storefront event space in Berlin in a few weeks' time.

Dear guests,

The Syrian author and poet Rafik Schami has written that "greeting the morning means having hope."

Looking at all of you, I see concern, I see grief and I see desperation. But I also see perseverance, commitment and human warmth – armed with which you bravely greet the morning. What we all share is that we have not lost hope – and we must not abandon it. On the contrary, we are working together to keep hope alive.

On that note, I wish you many fruitful discussions and a weekend filled with Action for Hope.

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