“How much plain speaking must a foreign minister do?”

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Since assuming office, Sigmar Gabriel has been on 27 trips abroad. In this interview, he takes stock of his first 100 days as Foreign Minister. Published in the BILD newspaper on 5 May 2017.

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What surprised you most in these 100 days?

Surprised isn’t the right word, but I was not prepared for how close I would get to almost inconceivable human suffering, and how deeply that would affect me. In Somalia on Monday, for example – thousands of people who have been displaced by drought, forced to live in hunger in dirty tents where everything is caked in mud. Or an 8 year-old Iraqi girl, a refugee, living in Hasansham camp near Erbil. She was born deaf, severely wounded in a fire, and then she was driven from her home by IS. She’s already experienced more hardship than anyone should have to bear in their entire life.

You and Chancellor Merkel have underscored that you want to remain in dialogue even with anti-democratic regimes. Even with those that are responsible for the suffering you speak of? Is that really necessary?

If we want ceasefires to be agreed, we have to talk to the parties waging the wars. There are always two things we have to do simultaneously. We have to defend our values and we have to assert our political interests. But we should not apply double standards. Anyone who criticises talking to Russia’s President Putin has to explain why it’s all right to maintain good relations with China, and vice versa. If we only want to talk to people who are like us, then I’d never have to fly anywhere more than two hours away!

How much plain speaking must a foreign minister do?

As much as possible. Sometimes it’s not possible in public, but in private it has to be done.

What has talking to Putin achieved in the past few years?

It’s true that peace has not been restored in eastern Ukraine, but the negotiations between Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine did avert an escalation of the conflict. Iran has ended its nuclear programme because we pursued the negotiations to a successful conclusion. And

in Syria, the aim now is to help Russia out of the corner it has manoeuvred itself into. It cannot be in Russia’s lasting interest to support the Syrian butchers who kill their own people with poison gas. This message can only be got across by means of diplomacy. It certainly won’t be communicated by dropping bombs.

And yet you seemed more understanding when the US bombed Syrian airports after the latest poison gas attack.

Yes, the US strike was understandable as a direct and targeted response to an unacceptable use of poison gas by the Assad regime. And hopefully it will deter the Assad regime from using poison gas again. But it goes without saying that military action will not bring peace to Syria. None of today’s conflicts can be solved except through negotiation and by ensuring a viable future for the region concerned. That’s why it is a big mistake for President Trump to increase spending on arms and cut spending on development assistance.

On your first official visit to Israel you wanted to meet organisations that are extremely critical of the government. Your talks with Prime Minister Netanyahu were cancelled as a result. Looking back, would you do the same again?

Yes, of course. Among democrats, it has to be possible to meet with organisations critical of the government as well as any others. I therefore thought it was a great gesture that the Israeli President took a lot of time for us and alluded to the right of freedom of expression in Israel.

What would have been the problem with postponing your meeting?

Democrats don’t give each other ultimatums. The Israeli Prime Minister wanted to force me to cancel a meeting with respectable Israeli citizens because they are critical of his policies towards the Palestinians. It is not just us who think that Israel’s settlement policy is a violation of international law and an obstacle to the peace process. The Netanyahu Government’s policy on this is also extremely controversial in Israel. It thus seems self-evident to me to hear what the critics have to say, too.

Interview with N. Blome and R. Kleine.

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