Speech by Federal Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the OSCE Mediterranean Conference in Jordan

2015-10-20

OSCE

colleagues,

Colleagues from our Mediterranean partnership,

Excellencies, honoured guests,

There are now flights between almost all countries in the world, especially if they are virtually neighbours.

However, I have just come from two countries that are an exception to that. There are no direct flights between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Luckily, we had our own plane with us.

I am mentioning this to give you an idea of the deep rift between these two countries. But not only the Persian Gulf is deep – the impression I have at the end of my trip is that the Middle East is pervaded with rifts that are more numerous and complex than ever and plagued with conflicts that have never been more bitter or more dangerous than they are today.

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However, I am not describing this precarious situation as an observer. I myself, and if I may say so, all of us here, are affected by this situation as Europeans and as inhabitants of the Mediterranean region. It is no coincidence that we are meeting here today under the auspices of the

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, as the umbrella organisation for security in Europe. After all, the Middle East and North Africa are more than merely geographical neighbours for us in Europe.

- When the brutality of terrorism also spreads to our countries;

- when the diabolical siren call of the so-called Islamic State draws young people from Europe and the entire Mediterranean region to the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq;

- when state structures in the Middle East crumble bit by bit;

- when ethnic and religious conflicts tear entire societies apart, forcing people to flee their homes and travel across the Mediterranean and the Balkan route to Europe,

then the crises of the Middle East are not simply knocking on our doors – they have long since arrived! This year, we in Germany will take in one million refugees, mainly from Syria and its neighbouring countries. Neither Germany nor Europe as a whole are in a position to take in so many people each year in the future. And the threats are incomparably closer and greater for our partner countries in the southern Mediterranean region.

This is why we are meeting here today! On the one hand, we want to lend new impetus to the well-established tradition of cooperation between the

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and its Mediterranean partner countries in this difficult situation. But we also want to say that we are all affected by the conflicts in the Middle East and that this is why we must not simply offer to work together to resolve them – we must insist on doing so.

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The situation is grim. We are meeting here at the Dead Sea, the Earth’s lowest elevation on land. And unfortunately, this location seems like a fitting metaphor in view of the crises in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and very close by in Jerusalem. And although this conference is focusing on the situation in the southern neighbourhood and the Middle East, we must not forget that we also have a conflict at home in Europe, the Ukraine crisis, which calls the fundamental principles of our security into question.

Nevertheless, I do see signs of hope for diplomacy in this situation.

We have seen progress in Libya thanks to the untiring endeavours by

UN

Special Representative Léon. Proposals for an agreement and transitional leadership are now on the table. The Libyan parties must seize the opportunities afforded by the

UN

negotiations and clear the way to establishing a transitional government of national unity. We and our regional partners want to provide further support to this process. In this regard, I also

hope that Libya will be able to take part in future meetings of the Mediterranean partnership, thus allowing us to include all North African countries in this format.

The agreement we reached with Iran in the summer on its nuclear programme is a further sign of hope. The Vienna agreement does not only prevent Iran from gaining access to nuclear weapons, thus making it the first major disarmament policy success here in the region for many years – it can also lay the foundations for greater security in the region if all sides work seriously and resolutely towards this.

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But the question remains: even if we agree that we urgently need to make progress in the Middle East – how exactly is that supposed to happen?

From its own background, the

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is familiar with political and ideological rifts that were just as deep – the rifts of the Cold War. When these rifts were perhaps at their worst, and the Cold War at its coldest, the CSCE launched a process of rapprochement, understanding and cooperation that played a crucial role in overcoming the divisions. At the start of the negotiations, who would have dared to hope this could happen?

Now, I know that what works in one situation may not work in another. And you certainly can't transfer an entire security architecture to another region. The current situation in the Middle East is completely different.

- Firstly, we are not dealing with a Cold War here, but rather with heated conflicts that claim lives every day and threaten the survival of entire countries.

- Secondly, this is not a confrontation between two blocs – instead, the rifts permeate countries and their societies.

- And thirdly, the large number of actors – including a growing number of non-state actors – makes it incomparably more difficult to decide who should be at the negotiating table, and when and where talks should take place. We are only too aware of this from the two abortive conferences on Syria.

And this is why our experiences in Europe are not a blueprint. But perhaps they can provide a range of principles and processes that can also offer countries a glimmer of hope for political settlements in the Middle East.

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I would like to mention three principles:

- Firstly, we need to move away from zero-sum logic because cooperation, as the Helsinki process showed, can create benefits for all sides, even between bitter enemies.

- Secondly, this leads to a different, non-confrontational notion of security. Those who do not think in terms of zero-sum games are looking for real security with each other rather than for precarious security from each other. I firmly believe that more confrontation, even if it allows you to feel you have the upper hand for a while, does not lead to greater security in the long run.

- The third basic principle is sovereignty. The prerequisite for talks must be that each actor recognises the sovereignty and integrity of the other actors. This is an essential principle if the process is to work. It applies to all countries and includes Israel's right to exist.

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The next step is to ask what concrete form processes could take on the basis of these principles.

- The first and most important point is to keep an open mind about the outcome of the talks. At the start of the détente policy in Europe, who could have imagined what would emerge from the Helsinki process? In 1973, who would have dared to hope that my country would be celebrating the 25th anniversary of its reunification this month? At the start, all we had was the same feeling we have today – the feeling that things cannot go on this way.

- Secondly, and as simple as it sounds, we need to persevere. Institutionalised negotiation processes have the advantage – and this was also the case in Europe – that people talk with, and not merely about each other. You meet, and then you meet again, even if you can't agree on as much as the agenda for the next meeting. But a certain amount of trust is created simply by the fact that the talks continue.

- Thirdly, where there are major political and social differences, one needs to look for concrete, practical areas that are less controversial and of benefit to both sides, such as the environment, water supply, energy issues and academic collaboration. This is exactly what we have been doing in the Barcelona Process between the European Union and the Mediterranean states for the past 20 years.

- Successful cooperation on practical issues creates trust, which brings me to my fourth point. This building of trust allows such processes to increasingly address larger and more complex challenges and to search for joint solutions. Such topics of crucial importance to the region, including migration and strategies to combat religious extremism, are on the agenda of our conference.

- And fifthly, in all of the above, the international community must be willing to support and flank the processes of understanding. I regard the nuclear agreement that the E3+3 reached with Iran as an encouraging example.

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Once again, there is no blueprint for peace. And pious hopes do not get us anywhere in this conflict-ridden situation. During my visits to both Iran and Saudi Arabia, I pointed out that in times of eroding international order, every actor in this region also bears responsibility that goes beyond national ambition or national pride. No external party can take on this responsibility, which is ultimately more crucial to survival than any national interest. This is why this region needs joint principles and processes for greater security.

The path must be a “policy of small steps”. These steps start when people meet. And this brings me back to the flights I mentioned at the start of my speech. Many years ago, when my country was still divided by the Iron Curtain, freedom of travel and individual exchanges were an important element of the policies between the two blocs. Societies can only become closer if there is contact between people – and this is also the only way to reach political consensus. The aim of this conference is to explore ways and connections and to conduct dialogue on different perceptions of reality, thus facilitating cooperation despite the rifts. During my visit to Iran, of all places, I came across a saying that reminds me of this spirit: “A mountain never meets a mountain, but a man meets a man.” With this in mind, I hope we will have a productive conference.

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