Speech by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas on the Federal Government’s motion “Deployment of armed German forces – Safeguard stabilisation, prevent the resurgence of IS and promote reconciliation in Iraq and Syria”

2019-10-24

I don’t think there’s any need today for me to give you a detailed analysis of the situation. You have all been following the news from northern Syria over the past few days: the US withdrawal announcement, the Turkish military action and its humanitarian impact, the agreement between the United States and Turkey on a ceasefire, the start of the withdrawal of Kurdish fighters, the advance of the regime’s forces and finally, the day before yesterday, the meeting in Sochi between President Erdogan and President Putin, at which the respective zones of influence were mapped out. Of course we cannot be pleased when these actors create unilateral facts; of course the international community needs to take a stance and respond.

Running through all the discussions in the Federal Government on the question of whether a “safe area” can be an answer is the key realisation that, ultimately, what matters is what we can agree on with our international partners in this situation. We have talked about that, and we are talking about that now. And what plans we do and don’t pursue will depend on this.

What we really do have to support now, though, ladies and gentlemen, even more intensively than to date, is the

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-led political process.

That is being somewhat ignored in the current debate. That is what we have been doing along with our international partners for years and months, providing a lot of money to support the Syrian opposition’s office in Geneva, and thus making the current negotiations possible at all. We are providing political, financial and logistical support for

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Special Envoy Pedersen because we are convinced that his proposals and his approach, which he has outlined once again, are the right ones. Only in this way is a political solution

possible, and only a political solution can bring lasting peace to Syria.

With the long-awaited agreement on the formation of a constitutional committee comprising representatives of various social groups from across Syria, we have finally taken a step forward which gives us the chance to launch this political process. The first meeting of the constitutional committee is supposed to take place in just a few days' time. If that happens, if all sides finally sit down at one table, then that is nothing less than the start of a real political process to resolve the conflict in Syria.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Turkish military operation over the past few days was, however, a bitter setback. Let me take the opportunity to say this, too, quite plainly: this military operation was triggered by the US announcement that it would be withdrawing its soldiers from the region.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Particularly in the last few days, we have worked with our international partners to set various things in motion. For example, in collaboration with our European partners, we called for two emergency sessions of the

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Security Council in recent days. And today again, at our initiative, the Security Council will be looking at the changed situation in Syria, and especially in north-east Syria, in the wake of Sochi.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Something else I wish to state quite clearly is this: last week's decision by the Foreign Affairs Council – namely an

EU

-wide suspension of arms sales to Turkey – was an important and correct one.

Of course everyone is free to discuss whether or not that goes far enough. But let me tell you, not least as someone who sits in such meetings regularly: getting the European Union to arrive at a united stance on such an issue so quickly – immediately after the Turkish offensive in north-east Syria – is, to my mind, a success, whether you think so or not.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is a tendency to forget that the Foreign Affairs Council also agreed at that meeting to consider further sanctions if there is no lasting ceasefire in north-east Syria.

Let me also tell you: because it is always better to talk with rather than about someone, I will be travelling to Ankara for talks on Saturday. Among other things, I will be discussing our expectations with the Turkish Foreign Minister. Allow me to clarify these again for you. The ceasefire must be observed and the civilian population protected. Turkey must respect international law in dealing with refugees. We, like everyone else involved, expect Turkey to support the political process under the aegis of the United Nations, particularly at this juncture. Only then will the stage finally be set, after years of hard work, for progress on the implementation of

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Resolution 2254 – a resolution, I may say, we were instrumental in getting through.

The second international priority approach now is and will remain the Global Coalition against Daesh. Because one thing has become clear in the chaos in north-east Syria in recent days: the IS terror regime has not been completely beaten, and even now it immediately makes use of every disagreement, every power vacuum, for its own ends. In Syria IS supporters have escaped from camps and prisons. The Iraqi Government is now very worried, because the first IS fighters have already returned to Iraq. And even now IS is already celebrating its resurgence in online networks.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Three things are crucial in the fight against IS – and that's what the mandate we are extending today is about.

Firstly: without a precise picture of where IS is on the ground and where it is growing stronger again, we will not be able to safeguard our previous successes in the fight against it. So it is especially important, now in particular, to continue aerial reconnaissance until the end of next March and then to pass it on to someone else.

Secondly: we need to do everything possible to ensure that IS does not regain its foothold in Iraq. The country has made great advances since the end of the IS reign of terror, as anyone on the ground can see. Iraq now plays very much of a mediating role in all conflicts in the region. Millions of refugees have been able to return to the country. We want to make that possible in other regions as well. Our civilian support in Iraq played a key role in this development. Capacity-building in the Iraqi security forces remains just as crucial; this work must continue.

And thirdly – this, too, needs to be said: it is often our military contribution and the engagement of the Global Coalition against Daesh that build the foundations for civilian engagement. Humanitarian assistance, stabilisation and reconciliation all need a guaranteed

minimum level of security. Regrettably, the situation is currently such that this needs to be military security.

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed colleagues,

Over the past few days we have provided assistance via the ICRC, World Food Programme and

UNHCR

to help the 170,000 or so displaced persons in northern Syria as much as possible. If the humanitarian emergency persists, then we will also need to be ready to continue our support, perhaps even to provide more than at present.

Madam President,

Let me conclude. Much would have been done to help these people, too, if we could remove the danger of IS once and for all. Because the people of Syria and Iraq fear nothing more than a renewed IS reign of terror. However, IS also remains a threat to our security in Europe. This, too, should be pointed out in this debate. That is why extending this mandate is in our own fundamental interest.

Thank you very much.

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