The Peace of Westphalia as a model for reflection on the Middle East. Talk by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the Osnabrück Peace Forum

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Mayor,

Professor Lücke,

Dr Hermann,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope you won't mind if I start my presentation in this Westphalian city of peace with a few words about Silesia. There are various reasons why I choose to do this. One of them is my mother, who hailed from there. But more about that later.

In 1707, the Holy Roman Emperor and the Swedish King Charles XII concluded the Treaty of Altranstädt in Saxony, under which the Protestants in Silesia were granted the right to practice their religion freely. Or, to be more precise, the Emperor was forced to restore the Protestants' rights, having previously taken them away. In addition, he had to return a large number of confiscated churches, livings and privileges. The Emperor agreed to these terms in full awareness that Charles XII held the Swedish army at the ready nearby. But Charles not only had might on his side, he also had right on his side. 60 years earlier, freedom of religion for the Silesian Protestants had been enshrined in the Peace of Westphalia. Sweden – along with France – had been made a guarantor of the peace.

Charles' threat to enforce these Westphalian rights by means of force had the desired effect. The terms agreed at Altranstädt were duly implemented to the advantage of the Protestants. Shortly afterwards, it is true, Charles XII lost the Battle of Poltava to the Russians, and Sweden's star began its descent. But the Westphalian principles remained in force and guaranteed that Silesia remained a mixed Protestant and Catholic region in the heart of Europe.

And what precisely does this have to do with the German Foreign Minister? On the one hand, it allowed my mother's ancestors to practise their religion – and to pass it on to me. On the other hand, Silesia also illustrates the complexities of using both force and principles

combined in pursuit of peace. And that's what I would like to talk about today. About the Peace of Westphalia, and what I can learn from it for my work as an active Foreign Minister today.

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An unspeakably brutal conflict has raged in Syria for more than five years. More than 350,000 people have died so far in this war, and millions have been driven from their homes. Many of them have found refuge here in Germany, but even these many are but few in comparison with the estimated six million internally displaced people who are still caught in the war zone, or the millions who are sitting tight in tiny Lebanon, in Jordan or in Turkey. These regional neighbours are doing so much and deserve not just respect, but first and foremost our active support, not least financially.

The Syrian conflict is involved. It is too simplistic to describe it as a civil war. The true picture is more complicated – a multi-layered tableau of actors and conflicts: a regime that is waging war against its own people; rebels of all hues, including numerous Islamist extremists; ethnic and religious minorities who are trapped between the fronts or who, like the Kurds, want to seize the chance presented by the chaos; "Islamic State", a vicious terrorist organisation with no respect for human life, which murders and enslaves people in Syria and beyond who disagree with its ideology, and which has also carried out attacks here in Europe; regional powers waging a proxy war in Syria; and, of course, other external actors, including Russia and the United States.

As Foreign Minister, a lot of my time and energy is spent looking for solutions. We are facilitating negotiations in Geneva between the Syrian opposition and the regime, and we are negotiating with other regional and world powers in Vienna. Germany is providing billions of euros of humanitarian assistance for refugees, we are part of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, we are financing the rebuilding of towns liberated from IS and we are training journalists, police, and even a Syrian agency for technical relief.

And yet I wonder, when I come back from my trips to Brussels, Vienna, Geneva or the Middle East, if we couldn't do even more to stop the killing. Unfortunately, creative new diplomatic methods that might do justice to the complexities of the conflict are few and far between. Nothing can be said to change that. Otherwise we would have made far more progress. However, it is my firm conviction – and I'm not just saying this to parrot the philosophy of this series and flatter my hosts – that military solutions are never lasting solutions, nor can they ever be. And so, if we are to expand our diplomatic arsenal, as behoves us in the light of the dramatic situation in the region, it is, in my opinion, worth looking back to the past.

In an essay in the American journal Foreign Affairs, I recently attempted to analyse the transformation of Germany's role in the world over the past 20 years. To explain to the

international readers of this specialist publication how we view ourselves and how we choose to act, I described Germany as a “reflective power”. By this I mean that we are indeed willing to assume greater responsibility on the world stage, but that, due to our past, we seek to do this so in our own special way. The Americans, the Brits and the French, and even the Chinese and the Russians, for whom our way is perhaps at times too contemplative and stalling. But that’s not the aim. The aim is to avoid taking over-hasty decisions which would set us on a course that would not steer us towards future solutions but away from them. Please view what I say now as a dogged attempt based on careful analysis to foster peace.

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I am not the first to say that the Syrian tragedy, this wave of violence that has spread across the entire Near and Middle East, reminds me of the Thirty Years’ War, of the “war of all wars”, as it was called by the historian Bernd Roeck. You, too, Rainer Hermann, have drawn this comparison. The parallels are obvious to all historically-aware observers. A seemingly contained uprising against a ruler has triggered a cascade of conflicts. Rising and existing regional powers are exploiting the situation, fighting for hegemony, driven equally by a thirst for power and a fear of being encircled or shown up as inferior. Governments waver as they consider how best to maintain security – by making territorial gains or by political agreements. External powers foment religious conflicts to exploit them for their own ends. Smaller principalities seek to expand their autonomy in the wake of conflicts waged over their heads.

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Does it help us to make these comparisons? Well, that depends. Merely delighting in apparent or minimal parallels, saying, “that is just like ...” does not help at all. Such partial equations may curry favour in after-hours academic debate, but they are of little lasting use for policy-makers. They can even be damaging. They risk providing an excuse for looking the other way and promoting a wait-and-see attitude – if it is said this war must run its predetermined course until the combatants have exhausted themselves, as if one couldn’t do anything about it from outside until then.

That is why I do not wish to equate present events with past situations. But I do want to compare them – looking for parallels that will let me see things from another perspective, and help me identify special circumstances and alternative courses of action. History not only helps us to understand and categorise the world – activities that are of course important for intelligent diplomacy – but also opens our eyes to the indeterminate nature of historical processes, which only appear inevitable and inescapable when viewed in a very superficial manner. History does not lay down any rules for the future. What it does is illustrate options for action and their potential consequences – both good and bad. It can guide us. But it cannot determine our actions. In the words of the Canadian historian Margaret MacMillan,

who made her name in part by analysing the peace talks after World War I: “History, if it is used with care, can present us with alternatives, help us to form the questions we need to ask of the present, and warn us about what might go wrong.”

And of course we would be well advised not to impose our concepts on other world regions from the safety of our European armchairs all too thoughtlessly. We Europeans have done that too often in the past, and for Germans, whose spirit was once supposed to heal the world, this warning is particularly pertinent. Nevertheless, as German Foreign Minister (and a good Westphalian), I can’t help but see the Near and Middle East through the mirror of my history, of ours. Perhaps it is more honest to simply admit this fact.

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I've even been encouraged in this view by Middle Easterners themselves! It was roughly a year and a half ago, when I was in the Saudi port of Jeddah. I had the pleasure of taking part in a lively debate with a small group of Arab intellectuals. Of course, we focused on the big problems, on the dreadful violence and the complex fronts in the Middle East – between states and religious and social groups. Suddenly one of the younger participants started talking about the Thirty Years’ War. He was pretty knowledgeable, and he concluded by saying, “we need a Peace of Westphalia for our region!” Please note that the man spoke about the peace, not just about the war. My position is similar. I am more interested in the peace that was concluded to end the conflict than in the Thirty Years’ War itself. For the Peace of Westphalia contains various interesting mechanisms, peace-building instruments, which are worth looking at more closely. Most obviously, the congress itself, which was held in Münster and here in Osnabrück. The negotiations were incredibly laborious. They lasted years and involved hundreds of players; most of you know the story better than I do.

The Peace of Westphalia is fascinating from today’s perspective, because in essence it solved three key conflicts at once. It created the basis for peaceful co-existence between different Christian denominations after more than 100 years of conflict. It governed the internal balance of power between the Holy Roman Emperor and the princes by re-weighting member states’ sovereignty and establishing rights of interference. And lastly, the agreements reached at Münster and Osnabrück successfully put an end to the brutal struggles for hegemony between the European powers within the Empire’s territory.

Solutions were thus found for issues that interest us again today. How could people be granted the right to practise their religion – especially if the local prince followed a different faith from his subjects? The Peace of Westphalia came up with what came to be known as the “standard year”, which defined 1624 as the reference year for freedom of religion, and appointed certain countries as guarantors of the peace entrusted with enforcing the agreement.

The Westphalian system of sovereign states is a popular term used in political science to describe the balance of power in Europe since 1648. But sovereignty was not really a key issue for the deal-makers in Münster and Osnabrück. It is true that during the peace talks the princes managed to gain acceptance as partners. But if we take a closer look, we find a whole series of mechanisms designed to limit the sovereignty of these same princes in the interest of peace. These include the external guarantors of the peace, but also institutions such as the imperial courts and the imperial “executions”, which were in fact used in the years after 1648.

However, today’s conflict in Syria is not solely defined by religion and the internal balance of power. Regional and international actors have long since interfered in the conflict, and some of their interests are distinctly opaque – just as in the Thirty Years’ War. The Peace of Westphalia found solutions to some of these issues, too, albeit not all of them. The battle for hegemony between France and Spain was not resolved. But progress was made. It was agreed that it would no longer be fought on German territory. The battle for the “Spanish Road” along the Rhine to the Netherlands was brought to an end. Anyone reading about the Shia axis and Sunni encirclement in the Middle East today, will study such geo-strategic issues with special interest.

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At this point – which is near the end, do not fear – I should perhaps add another proviso. I have no wish to equate 17th century Sweden, Spain or France with today’s actors, regional or international. Nevertheless, the congress of 1648 provides us with some vital ideas, warnings and alternatives, just as Professor MacMillan said. It is also encouraging for another reason. It took years for the congress to conclude its treaties. And while it continued, the guns were not silent. Far from it – the parties constantly sought to influence the negotiations by making territorial gains on the front.

What we can learn from Westphalia is that those who seek peace cannot expect to find the full truth, clarity and justice all at once. Everyone, even the Emperor, had to make concessions. They had to weigh up their interests, and accept painful processes to pave the way for peace. In any war or civil war there are always multiple truths, as told by the various parties to the conflict. That is as true now as it was then. For that reason, the negotiators in Osnabrück and Münster chose not to seek the truth of the matter. Instead they focused on other, procedural matters and used the interests pursued by the parties as the main lever in their efforts to resolve the central conflict.

In this respect, Westphalia also teaches us humility. There is no patent solution. Even a masterpiece like the Peace of Westphalia could not solve all the problems of its time, and it certainly could not solve them for all perpetuity. I started this talk by mentioning the Swedish threat to intervene in Silesia in 1707, in its capacity as a guarantor of the peace. When,

another hundred years later, the Holy Roman Empire was dissolved under Napoleon’s influence, Sweden protested. As a guarantor of the peace for the Empire, such a decision could not, it said, be taken without consulting it. As history shows, its protest was to no avail. The complex interplay of right and might, of rules and guarantees, no longer functioned. The Westphalian system underpinning the Empire collapsed.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Peace of Westphalia is not a blueprint for peace in the Middle East. But if we look at it closely enough, we will see that it does offer us a number of instruments, methods and ideas. It is up to us to identify these, to extract them, refine them and make use of them in our diplomacy today. This is laborious work, but I firmly believe it is indispensable if we want to do more than simply manage a permanent state of violence and crisis.

Today I have given you a first glimpse of a new, freshly opened workshop in which we hope to hone our diplomacy. The floor of this workshop is still a bit too pristine, even for my taste. Perhaps the discussion with Rainer Herrmann and with you all in just a moment will help to remedy the situation slightly. The next steps of our work have been laid out and we have gained some interesting partners for our endeavours – a project at the University of Cambridge is exploring these questions, and the Körber Foundation in Hamburg is also rolling up its sleeves. I very much hope that the floor of this workshop will soon be covered with the sawdust of our ideas – the result of the discussions between academia and practice, between Europeans and regional representatives. I hope that some good ideas will take shape. And I hope that you and as many people as possible will choose to join us in this carpentry for peace! Thank you.

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