Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier to the German Bundestag on the situation in the Middle East

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Madam President,

Fellow members of this House,

Yesterday, a terrorist attack in the centre of Istanbul claimed the lives of twelve people. Many were injured. We know now that ten of the victims were Germans. They were tourists, curious to see the world. They were gazing in amazement at one of Turkey’s most beautiful squares at the very moment the bomb went off.

We are united in mourning with the families of the victims, but also united in rage and disgust at this vile act. For it is clear to us that Germany must not and will not be intimidated by murder and violence. On the contrary, together with our partners, we will continue to counter terrorism: here at home by means of the police and the rule of law but also in the struggle for the minds of young people. And not least also using the scope offered by foreign policy by endeavouring to counteract escalations in our neighbourhood that merely foment new hatred and terrorism.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is especially true of the Middle East, a region in which over many years the divides and the religious or denominational tensions have become more fierce and the conflicts more brutal. Furthermore, the struggle between Sunnis and Shiites and their firm exponents Saudi Arabia and Iran is having an ever greater impact.

At the start of this year, the tension between Riyadh and Tehran escalated in an extremely dangerous manner. Extremely dangerous not only because bilateral relations between the two took a clear step towards open confrontation but also because this escalation is threatening to destroy everything we had achieved last year. After all, it was there, in the arc of crisis between Libya and Iraq, we managed in 2015 to create a glimmer of hope.

After more than ten years of negotiation, we managed in July to conclude an agreement with Iran on its nuclear programme and we are now on the threshold of Implementation Day. At the end of the year, Libya managed to take an important step towards a government of national unity - also thanks to the mediation efforts by the

UN

, most recently with a German diplomat at the helm. After five so very long years of bloodshed in the Syria conflict, we managed in the so-called Vienna process to finally get all the players we need for a solution around the table - also Riyadh and Tehran.

Ladies and gentlemen, this was a long and arduous journey. And precisely for that reason, it must not be jeopardised now. That is why we expect Tehran and Riyadh to follow the negotiation route and not torpedo what has been achieved by bilateral escalation moves.

They, both of them - Iran and Saudi Arabia - have crucial influence in the neighbourhood. This holds for Yemen, but it is also true of Syria. We expect them to make circumspect and responsible use of this influence. We, Germany, Europe, the E3+3, can provide political and diplomatic support, but we cannot replace the good sense and responsibility of others. The horror in Syria must stop. That is why the hard-fought Vienna negotiations must be continued, and what is more with Tehran and Riyadh. It won’t work otherwise.

The political processes are at the heart of our efforts in the Middle East. But they are certainly not everything. You know the buzzwords: the fight against IS terrorism, stabilising crisis states and above all providing humanitarian assistance for those affected and displaced. I cannot mention everything in my allotted time. In this House, we adopted a budget at the end of the year making possible an unprecedented amount of humanitarian assistance in the Middle East. I can promise you that we in the Federal Government will do what we can to implement this assistance.

In the fight against IS, another mandate is up for debate tomorrow. At the request of the Iraqi Government, the Bundeswehr has been lending support in northern Iraq for almost a year now. We have trained and equipped Peshmerga and local security forces. Our commitment is having an impact. IS is losing ground. We want to further step up training and also invest in protecting our soldiers. Let me ask now for your support for this mandate.

But at the end of the day, this hard work only pays off if it is firmly rooted in political processes. For this, we also need to talk to difficult partners. Of course, I understand the scepticism when it comes to Saudi Arabia. Of course, we must not turn a blind eye when it comes to human rights, to executions or to extremism.

But the question is what conclusions we draw.

Cancelling trips, pulling up the drawbridge, finger-wagging in our media - anyone who believes that is how foreign policy works is to my mind wrong. Foreign policy doesn’t work sitting on the sofa with the remote control in your hand. If we want to achieve something, we need to stride forth in the world, we need to go to the conflicts. We need to talk to the conflicting parties, above all the difficult ones. In other words, if I were to stop talking to the countries whose political views we do not share, then, it’s true, I would have more time to foster our wonderful relations with Luxembourg. That would be great. But it is considerably

less than the world expects from us. In the coming year, I will for one probably make more and certainly not fewer trips to the Middle East.

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