Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the event “Germany and Tunisia”

2014-06-19

-- Translation of advance text --

Prime Minister Jomaa,

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Ms Mohn,

First of all I would like to express my sincere thanks to you and the Bertelsmann Foundation for receiving us at these magnificent premises on Unter den Linden.

And not only because we are neighbours. Not only, because we didn’t have to travel far to get here. But because today, in the midst of all the crises and conflicts – in particular the heavy and concerning fighting in Iraq – we have come here in order to talk about a country which, following the radical changes of recent years, has developed in a positive direction. A country which gives us encouragement!

In the 1930s, Tunisian poet Aboul Qacem Echebbi prophesied that the era of autocrats was drawing to an end, that they would be swept away by a wave of fury.

One of his best-known poems was called “Ila Tuchat al-Alam” – “To the tyrants of this world”. In it he says: “He who sows the thorns harvests the wounds.”

And that is what happened. On 17 December 2010, in the town of Sidi Bouzid the fruit and vegetable vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in the town in protest against harassment of the authorities.

Following this, a wave of fury did indeed sweep away whole regimes – not only in Tunisia but also in Egypt, Libya and Yemen.

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And nonetheless: we must resist the temptation to make generalisations about the many and diverse developments which have taken place in the Arab world.

Three and a half years after the wave of fury was triggered in Tunisia, the time has come for a frank evaluation of the situation. And only one thing clearly emerges from this evaluation: developments in the countries undergoing transformation have differed greatly.

It is not, and indeed never has been, appropriate to use the same template to assess all of them – a template of a young freedom-loving generation on the one hand and an old autocratic apparatus on the other. Such a template has never properly or sufficiently illustrated the complex nature of conflicts in the Arab world.

This template doesn't apply to Tunisia's neighbour Libya for a start, and it fails spectacularly to describe the conflict in Syria. There, a longing for democracy and freedom dominated at the beginning, and it is still present. But alongside this, another side of the opposition is growing, one which is no different from the regime in terms of brutality and ruthlessness. The fact that, right from the start, the conflict in Syria has also been a proxy war for hegemony in the Islamic world has been overlooked.

And this struggle over Sunni and Shiite spheres of influence has once more erupted in a brutal manner, in Iraq.

If this more complex analysis is accurate, then we urgently need to prevent violence on the ground in Iraq from turning into a proxy war between regional powers.

All neighbouring countries – Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Turkey and also Iran – cannot have an interest in a huge, lawless area developing beyond Syria in their immediate neighbourhood, which would become a stomping ground for mercenary groups, Islamists of all kinds, and terrorists. Iraq must not become a permanent threat to stability in the Near and Middle East.

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It is precisely because the structure of the region is so complex and the tensions are so high that we need to look carefully at the example of Tunisia. What have they managed to do which other countries have not?

Tunisia shows us one thing in particular: after radical change it is important for there to be an inclusive political process, a process which involves as wide a range of stakeholders and parties as possible, in the fairest and most transparent manner possible.

I still have good memories of my penultimate visit to Tunis just over a year ago. Then, the secular opposition told me that the Islamic Ennahda Party would never voluntarily vacate the Prime Minister's office. And yet that is exactly what the party went on to do! Former Prime Minister Ali Larayedh has my personal respect for this.

The Ennahda Party's handover of power to a non-partisan government under Mehdi Jomaa has led all groups in the population to have more confidence. This legitimacy is vital in order to implement the reforms needed for long-term economic and social stability.

That is the task which you are now confronted with, Prime Minister, and you have our full support in this.

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And so the key word for the success of this transformation is: participation. Political as well as economic. And participation for all groups – not only those who currently think they have the upper hand.

But how can such participation be organised? I am convinced – and the example of Tunisia reinforces this conviction – that the best prospects for success of political participation lie in democratic institutions, and of economic participation lie in the institutions of a market economy.

There is no question that democracies and market economies are not perfect – but I at least have yet to come across a better model.

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Let me initially say a few words on the political aspect, on democracy.

In Germany, we have offered Tunisia a transformation partnership. This term covers a long list of concrete projects – from exchange programmes for Tunisian officials to dialogue via our political foundations.

One aspect of our cooperation is of particular importance to me: parliamentary cooperation. We want to further strengthen this exchange between Germany and Tunisia. During many of my own visits, most recently together with my French colleague Laurent Fabius, I made it clear how important to us the success of democratic reforms in Tunisia is.

For if Tunisia does not succeed then what chance is there for the other countries in the region, where the conditions are worse?

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Alongside the aspect of political participation the economy too is now in the spotlight.

Prime Minister, you have set yourself the goal of putting your country back on a path of growth! And there is no one better suited to do so than you, Mehdi, a successful manager who has taken time off his regular job to serve his country. My respect for your active patriotism – I can't wait to read your memoirs about your excursion into politics ...

That is why the national dialogue at the political level is being followed by a national economic dialogue.

We’re looking forward to seeing the results!

Economic success is important, for democracy too! For if democracy does not also improve people’s quality of life then how is one supposed to win over their hearts and minds in the long run? Mehdi Jomaa, you rightly pointed out this connection.

In my talks – including in Tunis recently – I often hear people asking for more investment from Germany.

To date, Germany is only North Africa’s fourth trading partner behind Italy, France and Spain – Germany isn’t lucky enough to border the Mediterranean Sea. Although, of course, we wish it did, especially now that the holiday season is upon us, but that is simply the way things are ...

I do however share the desire to intensify economic relations between Tunisia and the

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as a whole – not only the Mediterranean region – because having the European Union on its doorstep presents great opportunities for Tunisia!

Today, 80% of Tunisia’s trade is with the

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is thus offering Tunisia the prospect of an enhanced and comprehensive free trade area and I hope that substantial negotiations on this can take place as soon as possible.

This process must be flanked by a European Neighbourhood Policy which properly suits each of our different partners. The

EU’s

financial support should therefore be more flexible and should offer attractive long-term prospects for the partners who have progressed the most. I stressed this, together with my French and Polish counterparts, at our meeting in Weimar at the beginning of April.

The

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has now made extensive financial support available to Tunisia. This was only possible because, for its part, Tunisia has voiced its commitment to a reform process supervised by the International Monetary Fund. This willingness to reform is positive and will ensure that investors gain confidence and engage more in Tunisia – and this will surely include German investors, even if we’re not a Mediterranean country ...

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In conclusion I would like to pick up on what Ms Mohn mentioned: I am pleased that the Bertelsmann Foundation wants to hold a discussion on the European Neighbourhood Policy in Tunisia next year. At this point I really must pay tribute to the valuable work of this institution – and not simply out of politeness towards our hosts. They make a great contribution to bringing Europe and its southern and south-eastern neighbours closer together – thank you very much!

Prime Minister,

When the Bertelsmann Foundation hosts an event in Tunisia next year, then parliamentary and presidential elections will already have taken place and there will be a robust government in place which is able to make courageous and forward-looking decisions to the benefit of the Tunisian people. In any case I very much hope that your country will have achieved this. And I assure you that Germany will continue to work to ensure that Tunisia can advance along this path.

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