Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the German Bundestag: approving a mandate for German participation in the anti-IS coalition and the related air surveillance support by NATO AWACS planes

2016-10-20

Mr President, Fellow members of this House,

The images and news from Aleppo depict unparalleled cruelty – a sea of rubble where life used to thrive. The people are traumatised. Children have lost their homes and families. I must say – and this is something we made clear to President Putin yesterday in what was certainly not an easy discussion – we cannot and must not allow this insanity to continue. We must put an end to it.

Our priority now must be to provide the men, women and children of Aleppo with the essentials they need to survive. People are starving and dying of thirst. We need secure ways of accessing them to bring help. We are currently working flat out, including all day today, with the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and partner organisations to achieve this. This evening I will talk to the Saudi Arabian and Qatar foreign ministers to ensure that opposition groups also pledge to guarantee the safety of aid organisations.

Moscow’s announcement that there will be a brief pause in the fighting must only be the beginning. Eight hours – or now that it’s been prolonged – eleven hours, three or four times over is a start. However, it’s far from enough to provide the city’s besieged people with relief supplies. And it certainly isn’t enough to unbundle the opposition from radical and terrorist groups. It is indeed possible that in East Aleppo, terrorist groups such as al-Nusra are using people as human shields and seeking out hospitals and schools to hide in. But even 1,000 or a possible 1,500 al-Nusra fighters do not justify reducing Aleppo to ash and rubble.

That’s why we are doing everything we can to bring about a ceasefire. It’s true that our efforts to reach a political solution have not been successful so far, but that’s no reason to give up. I maintain that it will never be possible to resolve this conflict through military means. Those who still believe this will see themselves proved wrong.

Colleagues,

We all know that Aleppo is just a snippet of a significantly bigger arc of crisis – characterised by crumbling authoritarian structures, sectarian divides, social unrest and fragile statehood.

In recent years, it is above all the terrorist militia IS who have benefitted from this conflict; the battle for Mosul is making this extremely clear to us at the moment.

Moreover, the barbaric rule that IS has imposed reaches far beyond the region. IS is threatening our security here in the heart of Europe, as evident from the attacks in Paris, Brussels, Nice, Rouen as well as elsewhere. Again, this is why it is so important for us to be united and resolute in countering this terror. Naturally we will not do so through military means alone, but neither can we do so without them.

In the meantime, 67 countries and three international organisations have come together to form the international anti-IS coalition. We have participated through aerial reconnaissance measures, in-flight refuelling as well as by providing an escort to protect a French aircraft carrier. We want to continue to do so, complemented by AWACS reconnaissance elements that we'll work with others in the anti-IS coalition to incorporate. To clear up any misunderstanding from the start: this will take place exclusively from Turkish and international airspace and without the accession of

NATO

as an official member of the anti-IS campaign. This is something we attached great importance to in the consultations regarding the deployment of AWACS planes and I think that it would also be in the interests of this house.

We know that fighting on the ground will have to be carried out by regional and local forces – another reason why our training and equipment support for the Peshmerga in Iraq is so important. Back then, we had an open and balanced discussion about the risks of providing such assistance, and I still think that we took the right decision at the time. The seemingly unstoppable advance of IS into northern Iraq was indeed stopped.

There's no reason to be euphoric. We'll be dealing with the situation in the Middle East – the erosion of state order and ethnic or religiously motivated power struggles – for a long time to come. But even though we'll still be grappling with these issues in the future, we should fully acknowledge the changes that have taken place in the past year.

The fight against IS has changed the situation on the ground. A look at Syria shows this: there, IS has lost a fifth of its territory to the opposition and the Kurds, including strategically important cities such as Manbij, Jarabulus and Dabiq.

Iraq also demonstrates this in no uncertain terms: since the summer of 2014, IS has lost over half its territory there.

And last but not least, this change can be seen in the battle now starting for Mosul where, with the support of the anti-IS coalition, the Iraqi army and Peshmerga troops are advancing into the last IS stronghold in the country. If Mosul falls, then IS will no longer hold any notable contiguous territory in Iraq.

No one is under any optimistic illusions. The battle being waged there will not be easy to win. At the moment, no one can say how long it will last. We can however say one thing for sure: we now need to do everything possible to prepare for the day it ends.

That's why our engagement in Iraq and in the region is not limited to our support for the anti-IS coalition, which we're asking you to approve today. We want to offer the people better prospects for their long-term future and therefore we're embedding our action in a comprehensive approach that incorporates elements ranging from humanitarian assistance to political efforts and the increasingly key topic of stabilisation.

With regard to Mosul that means that what we need to do now is alleviate need and help the people who are fleeing the embattled city to the camps that have been set up in the surrounding area. Germany is already one of the main donors of humanitarian assistance to Iraq. We have once again made 35 million euros available specifically for Mosul.

We must start working on what will happen in Mosul when the city is freed from IS. To this end, today we're meeting with a large group of states in Paris – and will meet them again in Berlin in November – in order to prepare Mosul for 'the day after'.

It makes sense to do so, because although Mosul has not yet been freed, we already have experience from other situations, such as the liberation of Tikrit. There, working with the United Nations and using resources from Germany, we rapidly restored electricity and water supply lines and ensured that there was at least a basic level of healthcare provision. These measures led 90 percent of the displaced population to return to the city. That is why I believe that this is the right path.

Water, schools, hospitals – people will need all of these services when they return. However security also plays a crucial role: we're talking to our partners in the Iraqi Government, saying that once Mosul has been liberated it will be important to avoid a relapse into old ethnic or religiously motivated conflicts.

If after the city is liberated, the scourge of IS is simply replaced by a power struggle between Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites then the people of Mosul will be no better off. We have thus proposed a 'Mosul stabilisation council' to the Iraqi Government, a council in which significant local players sit down together now to start jointly planning and organising the city's reconstruction. A first meeting to discuss humanitarian aid has already taken place. It was an initial meeting, a first step and yet I was very encouraged by this initial phase and the discussions between the participants.

Colleagues,

Aleppo, Mosul, Falluja, Tikrit and Ramadi – we need a comprehensive approach if we are to live up to our responsibility towards this truly battered region. Participating in the anti-IS coalition is one component of it. That’s why I’m asking you to support the proposed mandate today.

Thank you.

Overview "Newsroom"

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