

Speech by Minister of State for Europe Michael Roth to representatives of Lebanese and Syrian civil society in Beirut

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Welcome

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Ladies and gentlemen,

A very warm welcome to all of you! It is a great pleasure to have you here tonight. Thank you all for coming.

This is my first visit to Lebanon. I haven't seen much of Beirut yet as we arrived just a few hours ago. But from what I have seen and heard so far, I am already deeply impressed by this country. Such a diversity of confessions, languages, culture and history is indeed very unique. Your country is a true melting pot! I am well aware that this diversity also creates tensions and problems, for example gridlocked political institutions. But in the long run it can be a great asset if well managed.

Some might wonder why the German Minister of State for Europe has come to Lebanon, a country with no aspirations to join the European Union. The reason lies in the current refugee crisis which affects us all – here in Lebanon, but also in Europe and in my home country. War, terror, hunger and poverty are forcing increasing numbers of people to leave their homes.

Taking into account its size and population, Lebanon is one of the countries carrying the greatest burden of the refugee flow. It is indeed striking how well Lebanon has managed to take in about a quarter of its own population. The numbers are enormous compared to those we are talking about in Europe. Germany, for example, has received more than one million refugees during recent months. But I don't even dare to think about what would be going on in Germany if we received 20 million refugees, which would be a quarter of our population. In this respect we can all learn a lesson from your country!

As you know better than me, much has been done, but much more still needs to happen. Many refugees still lack proper shelter, education, safety, residency and work permits. In this context, Germany will spend about 300 million euros in Lebanon this year to support both host communities and refugees alike.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have not come here to Beirut just to give a speech and then go back home. I am here to learn from you about your country, about your views on the refugee situation in Lebanon, how it is linked to the political situation and how we can all work together to make this great challenge into an opportunity.

Turning to regional affairs, allow me to add a few words on Syria. We finally have to end the violent civil war in Syria which has claimed more than 250,000 lives, and displaced more than 12 million people. We are working hard and are exerting all diplomatic efforts to find a political solution which brings about peace in Syria.

In February, the international community increased its efforts to implement a cease-fire. We have succeeded in reducing the number of casualties in recent weeks and we have been trying to create momentum for the political process. There is still a very long way to go. But for the first time in years, we have the opportunity to end the violence and begin a political transition process.

At the end of the day, it is the Syrian people who must decide on their political fate, and we have tried to help find options for a political transition. Unfortunately, recent events have shown that the cease-fire is extremely fragile and many ideas about a political solution in Syria now lie in tatters.

I am well aware that the situation is even more difficult and demanding for civil society actors. Some of you have come under fire. In war or war-like conditions, scope for civil society actors shrinks at the same pace as violence increases. This is a sad truth.

However, the situation is not without hope. When I talk to Syrians in Germany, and there are now many, especially in my constituency, I always feel that there is so much we could build on. Despite tragic experiences, the loss of family members, destruction of property, many Syrians hope for a better future. The time will come when the civil war raging in Syria will end and then it is up to the active civil society to rebuild and reinvest in Syria.

In Syria as well as in Lebanon, the space for strong and active civil society organisations must further increase for the sake of all Lebanese and Syrians. Without a vibrant civil society there will be no peace, no stability, no prosperity. Germany will continue to support civil society actors because they are the builders of democracy. Prosperous and functioning democracies are those where every group's voice can be heard and where civil society can freely monitor and openly criticise government activities. An active and vibrant civil society acts as a bridge between people and governments.

I look forward to hearing what you as civil society actors would like to share about your work and experience, what we all collectively need to do better and how your vision for this region shapes up.

Thank you again for being here, now the floor is yours.

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