

Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier to the German Bundestag on the debate on the Bundeswehr's mission against the terrorist organisation ISIS

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02.12.2015 - Speech 

Mr President,

Fellow members of this House,

Ambassador Etienne,

Esteemed colleagues of the French National Assembly,

There is a message that made the rounds of the Internet and has already been shared thousands of times, namely the words of a young father who lost his wife in the Paris attacks. He has the following to say to her murderers: "You will not have my hatred." While writing this message, he looks at his son, who is barely 17 months old, and continues:

"... his whole life, this little boy will threaten you by being happy and free. Because no, you will not have his hatred either."

These are the words of a man at a time of most terrible grief. And he is so right. Hate will not help us to fathom the reasons behind the barbaric actions of the terrorists in Paris, and it goes without saying that hate must also not be allowed to guide our political response to IS and Islamist terror. I hope that we agree to this much here in this House, regardless of our opinion of the mandate and mission at hand.

The terror waged by IS targets open society and all those who want to live in liberty and without state, ideological and religious oppression – whether here in Europe, in the Middle East, in Paris, Tunis or in Beirut. It targets Christians and atheists, Jews and Muslims. It has fundamental and fanatic dimensions. The more fundamental and all-

encompassing this terror seeks to be, the more comprehensive and united must be our response. Esteemed colleagues from Paris, the French President has asked Europe for support, and Europe has, almost without exception, pledged its support.

The European Union is closing ranks. In France, Europe as a whole was affected by the attacks, and this is why Europe must offer a response together with France.

When searching for a response, it is still the case that there will be no military solution to the conflict in Syria at the end of the day. It goes without saying that we all know that it will, at the end of the day, be impossible to defeat terrorism by military means alone. Everyone who says this and puts this argument forward is therefore right. But allow me to add that this is not the full story, and that we must respond at multiple levels. Of course, political negotiations are at the forefront of our efforts to resolve this conflict. Second, we need to achieve stability in the region, and third, yes, military means are also required at the present time.

If we do not prevent further parts of Syria from falling under IS control, then nothing will remain in Syria that we can pacify and, through a political process, transform into a different, hopefully better future. This is not just my assessment or the assessment of the entire Federal Government, but also the way that Americans, Russians and regional actors view the situation. Allow me to add that it may be too late for all these thoughts in one year's time. In one year's time, there may be nothing left and no role to play for an opposition that still exists and is active in Syria. We shouldn't turn a blind eye to this either. This is why a simple and categorical no to any military confrontation with IS is, despite the fact that a political settlement is our priority – which is something I genuinely advocate – not a way to protect Syria and the future of Syria. All those who already know now that they are going to reject this mandate must be clear on this.

I said here last week that the Federal Government will keep its promise of solidarity that we made to France. – We have weighed up our offer – as Ms von der Leyen has just said – carefully. We are doing what is needed from a military point of view. We are doing what we can, and we are doing what we can justify.

The Federal Minister of Defence will inform you about the details. The present mandate includes protective measures, reconnaissance capabilities and logistical support for the international coalition against IS. Moreover, the strategy also includes efforts to bolster the important ~~UN~~ (United Nations) mission MINUSMA in Mali and also the continuation of what Germany has been doing since the summer of 2014, namely providing support by training and equipping the Peshmerga in Iraq.

If we take a closer look, then we can see that it was the Peshmerga who have fought IS on the ground in northern Iraq and not only halted IS' advance in Iraq over the course of the past year and a half, but also even liberated and recaptured IS-controlled territory in recent weeks and months, as we saw in Sinjar. I will get a first-hand impression of the situation on the ground very shortly.

The mission that we are deciding on this week is not only about fulfilling a promise of solidarity made to France, but is also, to my mind, essential and legitimate under international law. Germany is supporting France, Iraq and others in the fight against IS on the basis of the right of collective self-defence, as enshrined by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations.

In three resolutions, the ~~UN~~(United Nations) Security Council has established that IS represents a threat to international peace and security. In resolution 2249, which is barely three weeks old, the Security Council called on the international community to take all necessary steps to counter this threat following the Paris attacks. Also in the wake of the attacks in Paris, France was the first member state of the ~~EU~~(European Union) to invoke the mutual assistance clause set out in Article 42, paragraph 7 of the Treaty on European Union or Lisbon Treaty.

Germany will offer military assistance, insofar as collective self-defence is provided in support of France, also in fulfilment of this ~~EU~~(European Union) mutual assistance clause.

The Bundestag's Research and Documentation Services have, if I am not mistaken, likewise confirmed the constitutionality and legitimacy under international law of the Bundeswehr's overseas deployment. This will hopefully help to clarify the open questions discussed here as well as the legal aspects of the debate.

Ladies and gentlemen, beyond the political and beyond the legal debate, there are also those who say: if we involve ourselves in this military action, wouldn't this be precisely the way to make ourselves targets of terrorists' ire here in Germany? Fellow members of this House, let me tell you with perfect candour that I consider this to be a perfidious line of reasoning. Sealing ourselves off, turning off the lights, battening down the hatches when the terrorists roam our streets, hoping that they will stop at our neighbour's where the lights are still burning brightly – that cannot be our approach.

I believe that if we take this approach in our actions, then this would make neither us nor our neighbourhood any safer, but that the opposite would be the case. And we would, if we acted and behaved in such a way, be betraying, of our own volition, part of what makes us who we are and what we are actually advocating here. That is my view of the matter, at any rate.

And so allow me to turn to what I consider to be truly important and decisive. It is the view of the Federal Government that this military engagement, which we must talk about and debate in light of the mandate that we have presented to you, is to take place within a strictly defined framework. After all, everything that we do is not restricted to a military rationale, but is embedded within a political process.

I believe that this German Federal Government has advocated more strongly than almost anyone else to ensure that this process exists at all.

Our military engagement, which we will decide on in the course of this week, is part of our policy against IS. It is certainly not a substitute for political dialogue, however. This is, at any rate, not how we want to be understood and not how I want to be understood. As necessary as the military engagement is that we are debating and perhaps disputing today, the more I remain of the opinion that we must continue to work unwaveringly at the political level to achieve a political settlement, with the aim of putting an end to the Syrian civil war.

It is for this reason that we will be continuing, first and foremost, the diplomatic efforts launched in Vienna to end hostilities in Syria. There is no reason for optimism; anyone who is familiar with the Middle East will confirm that. But after five years of civil war, after 300,000 dead and 12 million people who have lost their homes in Syria, we have, for the first time, at least something like a small glimmer of hope thanks to what has been started in Vienna.

It is a glimmer of hope that only exists because, for the first time, all international partners are at the table. These are all the partners that we need in order to discuss the future of Syria – Russia, the USA and, of course, the Europeans, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. These are opponents that, until just a few weeks ago, I believed would never enter the same room via the same door and remain seated at a table there together.

There is therefore, for the first time, an extremely narrow basis – and I am not exaggerating – for common ground on the international community's further approach to Syria. Everyone sitting there at the table wants the cancer of IS, which threatens everyone in the Middle East, and not only Syria, to be removed. They all fear that Syria's collapse could also bring down its neighbours, such as Lebanon.

An important, albeit still extremely tentative, agreement on the next steps that should be taken in the coming 18 months has therefore been reached, starting with talks with the opposition taking place in Riyadh next week.

And then there will be, hopefully before Christmas and perhaps in the third week of December, a further meeting in the Vienna format that seeks to make an attempt, following the talks with the opposition, to hold serious talks on a ceasefire between the armed forces of the opposition and the armed forces of the regime – and, allow me to make myself quite clear, I don't just mean the army here. Were we to achieve this step, then it would be possible to subsequently actually enter into talks on the establishment of a transitional government. While all of this is still very far off, we must work even harder to get closer to reaching this goal.

What does this mean for Assad? This is a question that is currently to be found in all the newspapers. The question as to what to do with Assad goes through cycles. Three weeks ago, many newspapers argued that the real mistake was that we are not talking to Assad. If you take a look at yesterday's and today's papers, then this has now changed again. Now what we read is rather the accusation that we are making a pact with the devil and associating ourselves with Assad.

On behalf of the Federal Government, let me say that none of us have forgotten the terrible, barbaric crimes for which Assad is responsible. What we are doing has nothing to do with military cooperation with Assad.

Yet it's also true that as long as the parties involved in the Syrian civil war only fight each other and wear each other down, there will be only one victor – IS. This cannot, in the long term, be in anyone's interest, at least not among those seated at the negotiating table with us in Vienna.

The regime can demonstrate now whether it really is prepared to fight against the IS terrorists or whether it intends to continue to deploy barrel bombs or chemical weapons against its own population. The decision is not ours to make. It is not even for the Syrian opposition to make. The decision is for Assad himself to make.

These are the things that matter, ladies and gentlemen. We are of the view that the political process takes centre stage, and our military actions will be and remain embedded within this political process. I therefore call on your support for our proposed mandate that we have presented to you, which is bound to the promise that we will do our utmost to achieve the political settlement required at the end of the day.

Thank you very much.

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