Speech by Federal Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle during the German Bundestag debate on the proposed continuation of the UNIFIL mission

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Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, colleagues,

The Federal Republic of Germany supports the UNIFIL mission to protect the Lebanese coast. But from our perspective the protection of the Lebanese coast is not a long-term job for the international community, nor for us. In order for Lebanon to be able to shoulder this responsibility for itself, we changed course last year following extensive debate here in the German Bundestag.

The altered mandate focuses on training the Lebanese navy. This year we will stay the course that we set last year. Lebanon is now capable of monitoring its coast with radar equipment. This spells success for our support and will also increase the security of the merchant navy, thus improving supplies to the Lebanese people. That’s why I would first and foremost like to thank all the men and women, all the soldiers, who have achieved so much as part of the UNIFIL mission, and who have made enormous personal sacrifices to make this mission a part of stabilizing the region.

Lebanon still needs our help. We’re continuing to focus on training, because that’s how we can develop the prospect of concluding the mission. Germany’s engagement remains firmly entrenched in efforts to bring about lasting peace and democratic stability throughout the region. We have gained credibility, goodwill and trust. It’s no coincidence that all parties – Israel, Lebanon and especially the United Nations – have asked us to continue contributing to UNIFIL.

To build on the Chancellor’s policy statement from this morning, we are of course experiencing a historical watershed in the Arab world. These past few months of events form the backdrop to today’s debate. The Arab world’s strivings towards more freedom, more democracy and greater personal prosperity also present an opportunity to us Europeans – the chance to open up a new chapter of social and economic cooperation. The end of dictatorship in Tunisia and Egypt offers hope.

In other parts of the region, however, concern still prevails. There's no getting round the fact that in Lebanon, too, the situation has become anything but simpler in recent months. The country has been without a government since January, and the formation of a government is not in sight. The situation remains highly critical for people in the Palestinian refugee camps. Negotiations on fixing borders with Syria are at a standstill. The governments of Syria and Iran continue to try to dominate Lebanon. There is overwhelming evidence of arms deliveries to Hezbollah.

A sober appraisal on which the German Bundestag can base its decision must therefore not only take into account what our men and women in uniform have achieved, but also of course critically evaluate the conditions, including political developments, that undoubtedly trouble so many of us gathered here today. I think we have to expressly address this point, because that's the only way to come to a carefully considered decision. The impression that this is a simple mission, that everything is okay and running smoothly, is misleading. It would be careless to assume this. We also need to see the difficulties of this mission, particularly the political difficulties.

What we are currently witnessing in Syria is not only a drama with terrible consequences for the people who have taken to the streets in pursuit of freedom and been met with repression – it is also a tremendous source of potential discord for Lebanon. In Brussels at the beginning of this week we gave a decisive response to the Syrian Government's continuing repression of its own people. Two-phase sanctions have been imposed – in agreement, by the way, with our partner, the USA. The Deauville G8 Declaration also leaves no room for doubt when it comes to criticism of the Syrian President and leadership. The sanctions have been imposed and will have the intended effect because they are targeted sanctions.

The repression of the Syrian people is a challenge for the European community of values. President Assad and his inner circle are not currently welcome in the European Union. Their accounts remain frozen. When a mockery is made of human and civil rights in our immediate neighbourhood, the European community of values must offer an unmistakeable response. Europe showed this week that the matter is serious and that we're just as serious about standing up for freedom and human rights in our immediate neighbourhood.

But in conclusion I'd also like to point out that what is pivotal for the entire region is progress in the Middle East peace process. For decades, this conflict has made its presence felt in all relations in the region. The events of the weekend before last have shown how quickly conflicts on the border between Israel, Lebanon and Syria can erupt into violence. We welcome the fact that President Barack Obama has again taken a very personal interest in the Middle East peace process. We in the European Union agree with the United States that only the two-state solution can bring peace to the Middle East.

I do not wish to repeat the Chancellor’s words on this matter this morning, but I would like to end by adding something to them. The Arab Spring’s encouragement of new chances for the Middle East peace process is a window of opportunity, perhaps a historical window of opportunity. And the other way round, the Middle East peace process will prove decisive for the success of the Arab spring.

We need to see this connection between the two. This is our message to all parties involved. Unilateral steps are not the right way – neither settlement building nor one-sided proclamations. A return to the negotiating table, direct talks – this is what we need now, and this is what the German Government supports.

Thank you for your attention.

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