Speech by Foreign Minister Baerbock during a debate in the German Bundestag on Syria

2024-12-18

How often has this distinguished chamber had to discuss crises, violence and conflicts in recent years!

So, as the year draws to a close, good news is finally coming our way with the end of the brutal Assad regime – good news not just for the people in Syria but also for us.

Good for us because this news underscores how important it is that we do not let our politics be led by resignation or national interests that hamper our view of foreign policy but that, particularly at the most difficult of times, at the most difficult junctures, we stand up for our values and our interests and stand by those fighting for peace and freedom around the world.

In recent years, we have seen that our values and interests, namely safeguarding peace, freedom and security, could not be more closely interlinked in our globalised world. We have seen time and again how crucial it is for us to make plain:

Every human life counts and every human life has the same value.

That is exactly why it was so important – and here I want to say thank you, not just because Christmas is just around the corner – that, together, we in our country found the strength year after year not to let ourselves be driven by those calling for us to normalise relations with the mass murderer Assad but that together we issued a clear message:

What we need to do is stand firm.

Given what happened in Afghanistan, we have learnt our lesson that it was a mistake to be led purely by national attitudes or even by campaign considerations and that it was dangerous, even fatal, not just for the people in Afghanistan but, as we now know, also for our own security.

I am emphasising this now because, although Syria may seem far away, many, many people have come to our country in recent years.

For me, it is also important to say: for decades there have been people living in our country – some even members of this chamber – whose family and friends have fallen victim to the

Assad regime. That is another reason why the fall of this regime is important news and good news for people here in Germany.

This is precisely why in recent years, particularly at the very times when we wondered what on earth the future had in store, we worked so closely with these actors, at both international and national level, behind the scenes, with the Syrian opposition in exile, with the Syrian diaspora, with the many international contacts who time and again underscored: hope will come again to Syria.

This hope is exactly what we want to build on now although we do not yet know how sturdy the foundations will prove to be. We want to build together as the Federal Government in the various ministries, together with our international partners.

That is why a delegation from the Federal Foreign Office together with the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development were in Damascus yesterday to see for themselves how things look after 14 years of brutal civil war, to see what needs to happen so that people can breathe a sigh of relief not just for a few weeks and months but that this seed of hope can grow into sustainable freedom.

After all, all too often – and that is why it is important to emphasise this – we have seen this hope shatter because actors from the outside have succumbed to action for action’s sake. What we need now is clearly a process driven not by states, not from the outside, but a process driven by Syrians, driven from the inside.

After consulting with our closest partners, I presented an eight-point plan to this end last week. It is a plan based on opportunity and expectation, starting with the establishment of state institutions, taking in the destruction of chemical weapons, humanitarian issues, reconstruction and also opening the door for returns.

Now it is essential for us to work together at international level and with all the various actors to explore how this can come to fruition.

I therefore want to say in all clarity that, relieved as we are that these torture chambers are no more, we must not forget that there were a number of conflicts feeding into this civil war.

On the one hand, we need to remember what IS terrorists did in Syria, what they did to minorities, especially to Yazidis, especially to women who they enslaved.

On the other hand, we must not forget that in some areas we were able to provide development assistance and humanitarian assistance, not, however, in the capital, Damascus.

That was one of the messages our colleagues brought back: the unbelievable scale of destruction, particularly in Damascus where many people have been undernourished for

years.

That’s why we’ve acted swiftly to channel an additional eight million euro for humanitarian assistance. After all, it is clear that reconstruction can only work if people are given the basic necessities.

In turn, reconstruction and a political pathway can only work if they are rooted in justice. That is why Germany has provided so much support in the field of accountability in many regions of the world. We are also offering this support now, also when it comes to rebuilding the state.

After all, if there is to be a peaceful transition of power in Syria – and here we are in agreement with partners from the region – then the rights of all ethnic and religious communities clearly need to be respected.

We must not allow this Syrian dialogue process to be torpedoed, whether from the inside or the outside.

It is equally clear that international law applies to everyone.

We cannot say that often enough at this time.

In other words, it also applies to Syria’s neighbours who are citing security interests. After all, if we want peace in the region, Syria’s territorial integrity must not be called into question.

To put it plainly, long-term occupation of the Golan Heights is a violation of international law. It does not bring us closer to long-term stability in the region, stability that we all need and, above all, that the region itself so urgently needs.

Similarly, as I have mentioned and will continue to underscore at this time, there are currently tens of thousands of people in the Kurdish areas who have fled their homes fearing further attacks. Places like Kobanê are symbolic of the courageous battle fought by Kurds in the face of the IS reign of terror.

We, the Federal Republic of Germany, are part of the Global Coalition against Daesh; our Defence Minister has just returned from Iraq. That is why involving all groups is also in our own national security interest. During my visit to Turkey on Friday, I will make that very, very clear once more. After all, we and our various partners need to pull in the same direction. If we head in different directions, the road to peace will surely be closed off.

Esteemed colleagues, as we all pack our bags for our Christmas break, we are perhaps already in the throes of the election campaign. However, the world is not going to do us the favour of putting everything on hold while we spend two months on the election trail.

I am thus not only voicing my gratitude but also extending an invitation to stand together in the next two months so that we can uphold freedom, peace and security in our crisis-ridden world, not just in the Middle East but in all the conflict regions in our world.

Thank you very much and Merry Christmas to you all!

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