


Opening statement by Foreign Minister Steinmeier on the occasion of the Conference on the Syrian Refugee Situation - Supporting Stability in the Region on 28 October 2014, Berlin

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Prime Minister Salam,
United Nations High Commissioner Guterres,
Ministers,
Nasser Judeh and Gebran Bassil,
Representatives of the United Nations,

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

The world is showing that it will not stand by and leave millions of unprotected people in the face of the murderous rampage by the ISIS fanatics. Dozens of countries have formed a broad alliance to use joint military and political means to put a halt to the advance of ISIS.

However, our strategy to counteract ISIS will fall short if we do not also address the unprecedented humanitarian disaster threatening the stability of the entire region, namely the refugee crisis caused by the civil war that has been raging in Syria for three-and-a-half years.

Over three million people have fled from Syria to neighbouring countries. They have shown great generosity in hosting refugees. I would like to thank you all for this generosity as well as for accepting my invitation to today's conference in Berlin. The people in your countries deserve our solidarity.

Your countries are experiencing huge challenges as a consequence of the refugee crisis: The burden on infrastructures, schools, hospitals, public services is tremendous.

It is obvious that this situation poses a huge social, political and economic challenge. The refugee crisis puts the security and stability of the entire region at risk.

This is why we are meeting here in Berlin today. We enter into a commitment that will see us join forces in supporting the countries that are hosting refugees from Syria, so as to ensure their continued protection.

While the host countries are bearing the brunt of these challenges, the institutions of the United Nations that are active in the region are providing strong support under exceptionally difficult circumstances. I would like to express my respect and admiration for you, High Commissioner Guterres,

and all the United Nations representatives here with us today and to assure you of Germany's continued support.

I believe that we should focus on two things.

Firstly, we need to strengthen the host countries and their communities. We need to invest in hospitals, schools, water supply and waste disposal in order to prevent a collapse of the public services. This is not only a question of more money. We also need to use the funding more efficiently and sustainably. We want to undertake longer-term commitments and align our support more effectively with the host countries' priorities.

Secondly, we need to ease the refugees' hardship – we need to give them hope! Hopelessness and despair make people vulnerable to radicalisation and manipulation. This is a real threat, as half of the refugees are children and teenagers. We must ensure that all these young people have a chance to receive an education, and I know that host countries are already doing a lot to this effect.

When I say “hope”, the most important hope is, of course, to return home!

As long as the conflict in Syria continues, the only option for many people will be to escape. I know that there haven't been quick steps forward in political negotiations in the past. But we must not give up. We now need to make a new attempt to achieve a political solution to the conflict in Syria.

We will discuss this topic today with the United Nations special envoy, Staffan de Mistura.

Yet, while the refugee situation is as dire as it is, Germany is doing its part to help the people in Syria and its neighbouring countries. Since the start of the crisis, the German Government has provided almost 650 million euros in aid for the refugees and host communities since 2012 and over 70,000 Syrians have found refuge in Germany. The fact that my colleagues, Federal Minister Müller and Federal Minister de Mazière, are here with us today underlines how seriously we are taking the challenge of having a joined-up, efficient and sustainable policy of strong support to host countries.

We hear the call from host countries to reduce the numbers of refugees. And we are willing to identify sustainable solutions to ease the burden for host countries.

Our meeting today in Berlin must be a signal of our common and unwavering commitment to stand by the people of Syria. Thank you for your support.

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