



Beware of simple answers!

30.04.2015 | Frank-Walter Steinmeier

Speech by Federal Foreign Minister of Germany Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the University of Tunis El Manar, 24.01.2015

Rector,

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

And above all, students!

I am delighted to be here – on a trip that took me first to Morocco, then brought me here to Tunisia yesterday, and will take me on to your neighbours in Algeria this afternoon. And I am particularly delighted to be here with you, the students of the University of Tunis El Manar, as your guest – at the mid-point of my trip!

With this in mind I would like to be bringing good news with me!

However, my visit as Foreign Minister is – like most of my visits at the moment – characterised by the many crises and conflicts that are troubling us in the world.

Yes, our world can indeed strike fear into us! I believe that my sense of this as Foreign Minister is no different from yours as young people. Crises and violence are raging throughout the world: in your neighbourhood – in Libya, Syria and Iraq – and in ours in Europe. The conflict in Ukraine has been holding Europe's attention for many months, and a few weeks ago – right at the start of the new year – a series of brutal, Islamist attacks targeted our friends and neighbours in the very heart of Paris. Three Tunisians were among the victims.

Yes, the world can indeed strike fear into us, and the future is uncertain. In this complex world you young people have to wrestle with especially difficult questions. You are asking yourselves: What kind of world am I entering? If I start a family, will they be able to live in peace? Where should I look for a job? What can I do today to make sure I have good prospects tomorrow? Those are questions that you are posing in Tunis just as frequently and as urgently as young people in Berlin and Dresden and Rome.

And because these questions are so difficult, we long for simple answers! I, too, am familiar with this yearning from my work as Foreign Minister. At times, after the gruelling, stressful Ukraine crisis

talks in recent days and weeks, I yearn for clear, simple answers – wouldn't it be wonderful if they existed! But the truth is that they don't exist.

Unfortunately there is no lack of demagogues who try to lure us into believing that simple answers can be found. When a young person is looking for guidance, when he or she feels threatened by this complex world and asks, "What are my prospects for the future?", there are many simple, drastic answers that are tempting to accept – answers luring young people here in Tunis, or in Berlin, or Dresden, and especially in the murky depths of the Internet.

Some are calling out, "The politicians are to blame for everything – they are ruining your country." Others, who are particularly vocal in some German public squares, are shouting: "The media are to blame – they are feeding you lies." Sadly, some voices in German public places are also shouting: "The Muslims are to blame. They have no place here with us in Europe." And then there are the Islamist demagogues, who cry, "The infidels are to blame – you must fight them!" It is shocking – also to me personally – that so many young people are listening to these voices. In the most extreme cases they are even opening their hearts and responding to the calls with radicalisation and violence.

But have you noticed? All these voices have one thing in common: "The others are to blame!" That is the message at the heart of all the simple answers. It is the idea of "us and them". Yet "us and them" explanations are as wrong as they are dangerous. "Us and them" explanations have no place in this world, a world in which almost everything is interrelated and very little can be perceived in terms of black or white. And that is why I believe that anyone who uses religion to create an "us and them" situation is just as misguided as those who create an "us and them" situation to attack religion! Anyone who uses religion to fuel animosity is just as bad as those who fuel animosity against religion!

"Us and them" explanations are like a fire in a haystack – as psychologist Bar-On illustrates in his book "The 'Others' within us". The fire is bright and the flames shoot up high. It may ignite people's passions in the short term, but over time it sets their own house alight.

You are well aware that my field is foreign policy. And in foreign policy we have to be careful not to overestimate our abilities. Particularly in times of global crisis. I don't have the answers to all the questions and conflicts in the world, and neither has my country. But one thing I do know, in all humility: There are very few things in the world that can be defined in terms of black and white – in most cases they blur into various shades of grey.

Take, for example, the so-called Arab Spring in this region.

An analysis of what happened in one country cannot be applied to the next one. What began four years ago here in Tunisia as a protest by a young movement for freedom against an old, authoritarian regime certainly did not follow the same pattern in the Syrian civil war, which is now overshadowed by a brutal regional proxy conflict. Yet anyone who uses crude templates to explain the world will only be able to provide crude answers. During the many years I have spent in politics, one principle has become increasingly clear to me: "Beware of simple answers!"

I would even go so far as to say that religion encourages us to be wary of such answers! In my view religion, which in public debate is used far too often to polarise, teaches us the very opposite: to show tolerance towards the unfamiliar; to accept diversity – and rejects radical, superficial

answers! Both the Koran and the Bible state that God created the world and humanity in all their diversity – and we should respect this diversity. It has been explained to me that in Arabic this is expressed by the word Tasaamuh. And in a Christian context, Peter in his first letter sums up the respect for diversity in a brief maxim: ‘Honour everyone!’

“Beware of simple answers” will therefore be the guiding principle in my discussion of bigger and smaller political issues with you today – or, to be more precise, the difficult and the very difficult issues.

Let’s start with the practical questions you are all asking yourselves: How do I find a job after university? How can the North African countries generate more jobs and growth? The truth is that throughout the Mediterranean region unemployment is far too high, particularly among young academics. Not only here in Tunisia and throughout North Africa but also in southern Europe. One out of three young people in the countries bordering on our shared Mediterranean is out of work. That is a tragedy, and, as is so often the case, many people must work to put a stop to it.

Firstly, we need investment. Tunisia has attracted many foreign investors since the 1960s. Tunisia’s greatest opportunities for investment lie in its proximity to Europe – and through the Association Agreement with the EU you will be able to make even more of these opportunities. To date Germany alone has invested around 300 million euros in Tunisia. Several representatives of these German companies are sitting in this hall, and they are all here because they still regard Tunisia as a country in which it is worth investing.

And secondly, investment only occurs when the right conditions are in place: legal certainty, transparent tendering procedures, efficient administration, a functioning banking system. All this you will and can expect your new government to provide.

And thirdly, it is up to you! We need ideas: ideas for new products and projects; as well as persistence and hard work to make them a reality. Where is all that to come from, if not from you? There are already young people here in Tunis, students like you, who have set up small IT businesses and created jobs for fellow students. For example, I have heard of a type of software developed by young people here which can be used remotely to make medical diagnoses. That’s a great idea! I am certain that plenty of other good ideas are lying dormant just in this hall. Team up with friends, set up a small business and maybe we can use our German-Tunisian relations to support you: We can help get IT start-ups off the ground and network them with German IT companies.

Many people here in Tunis are asking me: “What do you Germans do to have such a strong economy?” I remember very clearly that nobody was asking that question ten years ago! Germany was experiencing a serious economic crisis. Commentators described us as “the sick man of Europe”. And at that time, too, there were no short cuts along the path to recovery. It was hard work. We implemented reforms that didn’t go down well with everyone. Everyone had to do their part: politicians, enterprises and employees – and today we are reaping the benefits of those reforms. And to enable Germany and Tunisia to share these and other experiences with one another, we have enjoyed a transformation partnership for more than three years now.

My second topic is equally existential: security. The Paris attacks have shown us once again that nowhere in the world is safe from the threat of terrorism. The UN Security Council has rightly classified the ISIS terrorist group as an international danger. Yet at the same time we in Europe

also know that nobody is as seriously plagued by terrorism as the Islamic world itself! Studies show that more than 80 percent of the people who have been affected by Islamist terrorism worldwide in the last few years are Muslims.

It therefore goes without saying that Islamist terrorism is our common enemy – and we should not let any meeting between Arab and European states pass without also discussing how we can work together to fight this enemy. This includes, for example, cooperation between our security authorities, the exchange of information, border security.

All this is necessary, and yet with regard to the issue of security, too, there are no simple or quick answers. At the end of the day, a society can only be secure if it is stable at its core. In other words, there are peaceful ways to deal with and defuse tensions within society; and criminals should be punished with the means and within the framework of the rule of law. This also means that citizens must be able to put their trust in those who are responsible for their security – the policy, the military, the justice system – and that those people must honour this trust.

Let us take the specific issue of the Foreign Fighters. The threat is huge – for Tunisia and for Germany, for the Maghreb and for Europe. The scale of this problem is terrifying. We assume that more than 500 Islamists from Germany alone and more than 2000 from Tunisia have travelled to the conflict areas in Syria and Iraq. We must therefore do everything in our power and join forces to confront this threat, particularly once the fighters return. That is why cooperation between our security authorities is so important. But all that will not be sufficient. No matter how much money and effort we invest in our security systems, we will not be able to keep every radicalised or endangered citizen under surveillance. And that is why, as societies, we have to ask ourselves a much more difficult question: How can it be that so many young people who have grown up with us can become caught up in the spell of preachers of hatred? And above all, how can we bring these young people back into mainstream society? Our countries must also discuss these difficult questions with one another, and that is why intercultural and interfaith dialogue is so important, as promoted by the Goethe-Institut and undertaken by the Anna Lindh Foundation in Alexandria, for example.

All of that means we can't talk about security without also talking about the very heart of our society: about democracy and civil society. For all the problems and difficult questions we are discussing today, there is a positive message I want to give you too. We Germans congratulate all Tunisians on the path your country has taken in recent years on its journey towards democracy. Just four years after the revolution started, you have achieved something remarkable together. You have given yourselves a modern constitution and chosen a President in free and fair elections for the first time in your country's history. That's something to be proud of – and it's a beacon for the entire region!

Now, you're about to see your new government formed, which will need to be approved by the majority of the elected parliament. Believe me, I know only too well how difficult and laborious it is to form coalitions and find the right partners. For one thing, how much do different parties' policy ideas actually overlap? For another, how can a stable majority be established that has the strength to take unpopular decisions too? These are the immediate questions facing your representatives, and I am sure they will live up to their responsibility to answer them well.

The real, tough questions, however, need to be asked at a deeper level. The formal structures of a democracy – parliaments, governments, public authorities – are just part of the story. They are the

skeleton of a democracy, if you like. But it's how things are fleshed out that makes the difference! A democracy only really lives and breathes when every young person, every single one of you in this room, feels they can make their voice heard and play their part. Only when young people feel they have a place at the heart of democratic society are they immune from the lure of radical voices and "us and them" explanations. Democracy is not just a system of government. It's a way of life. And there's no instruction manual for making it grow from a system of government into a way of life; each country has to find its own way of doing it. That road will always involve a bit of searching and a bit of trial and error – whether we're talking about a fledgling democracy like Tunisia or a relatively young democracy like post-reunification Germany.

Let me give you an example: democratic elections. Universal suffrage is limp and lifeless if people don't go and vote. When I first paid attention as a teenager to an election that was going on in Germany, I couldn't really see what the point was supposed to be. But in that election, many young people voted for a man who then became Federal Chancellor and brought about real educational reform for young people. It was thanks to that reform that I was able to go to university, the first in my family and one of the first from my village ever to have the privilege. Having experienced that, I always tell young people at home – and I say the same to you now – get to the polling station! Look after your democracy, and it'll look after you!

And it's not just elections that matter.

– It's important for people to be able to become involved. A young man from Gafsa, for instance, should feel he and his commitment can change society, not just the elites in the capital and on the coast. That's what democracy means: you, not just "them up there", hold your future in your hands.

– It's important for men and women to have equal opportunities. A third of the members of your new parliament are women, which is more than many European countries can boast. That is a real strength for your country, and you should build on it.

– It's important to communicate. Everyone wants to be seen and heard – especially the young. You all have questions and worries, and you want those matters to reach the ears of those who are allegedly in the driving seat. And when you speak or write or blog about these things, you want to be sure that you won't be punished for it.

– And what's important in the end is a goal that matters within a society just as much as it does in foreign affairs, namely mutual understanding. When Islam is discussed back home in Germany, I often find myself thinking, how little we know about one another! How can we possibly understand each other?

Three months ago, I was in an Arab country and met a wise lady who told me a little vignette. She said, "Arab women think European women go to work wearing bikinis and run off with their bosses. European women think Arab women have to spend their lives roaming the desert with their husbands and camels – but the camel walks at the front with the woman 10 metres behind." The lady was quite right, of course, when she concluded: "Both images are utter nonsense!" That's why I'd really like to see more exchange, both for my own country's sake and for the Arab world's. We need to learn each other's languages more; we need to learn more about each other; we need more dialogue. Limiting contact to those whose views or conventions differ from our own may be the easier answer, but it's the wrong answer.

I would ask you students, who can put all that into practice, if not you? Who can dismantle prejudice and push back when others stir up enmity, if not you? You and your generation can ensure that Tunisia, already geographically a bridge between Europe and the Arab world, also becomes a bridge of mutual understanding. We are glad to provide political support for exchange

and dialogue wherever we can. There's the Erasmus Programme run by the EU, there's the German Academic Exchange Service – and a whole host of other exchange programmes. As part of our transformation partnership, for instance, we have given 100 young Tunisians trained as engineers the opportunity to come and do internships with businesses in Germany. Some have stayed, and some have come back home and are putting what they've learned to good use here in Tunisia. If you're interested, get yourselves qualified and apply!

I've left the toughest question to last: religion, and the relationship between religion and democracy. This is the most difficult question, but it's also the most important.

It's vital for you, the young people of Tunisia and indeed of the entire Arab world. After the exuberance of the Arab Spring, what's needed now is day-to-day proof that each and every one of you is free to live as simultaneously a good democrat and a good Muslim. Those who say "Democracy is a Western invention that doesn't suit us Muslims" need to be proved wrong.

All that is vitally important – not only for you but for us in Europe too. As Europe's Muslim population grows steadily, more and more people are starting to cast doubt on the compatibility of Islam and democracy. I was given pause recently when a survey by the Bertelsmann Foundation found that more than 60% of Germans think that Islam doesn't belong in the Western world. And why do many people harbour such doubts? It's because they have not yet seen the evidence to prove otherwise in the Arab world. It's because the images they see of this region mostly depict crises and conflicts. And above all it's because our debate is polarised – as if democracy needed to beware of Islam, and vice versa!

I dispute that idea. I am convinced that there is a way for democracy to accommodate Islam, and there is a way for Islam to accommodate democracy. That's the route Tunisia has chosen. It has been a long struggle, and now, as of exactly one year ago, the Tunisian Constitution says it loud and clear in Article 1: "Tunisia is a free, independent and sovereign state. Islam is its religion, Arabic its language, and the republic its system."

That, ladies and gentlemen, is the proof on paper; now it needs to become part of day-to-day life.

Personally, I believe that religion is not only compatible with the day-to-day realities of democracy but can also – when properly understood – nourish it. A wise man in my country, a judge at the Federal Constitutional Court, once said that a state is built on preconditions which it cannot itself create. Democracy needs the people to provide it with ethics to build on – and religion can help do that.

I know very well that this is a difficult road, and I cannot predict where it will lead. I certainly wouldn't dream of telling a Muslim how to live out their faith in civil society. But maybe I can take off my foreign minister's hat for a moment and finish by saying something very personal. I too live according to my faith. I'm a Christian, and I'm active in the Protestant church. And naturally my Christianity affects what I do as part of society. After all, I don't leave my religion at the door when I go to the office in the mornings. There's a place in the Koran that says, "Ma ja'ala allahu li rajulin min kalbain fi jaufihi." God gave man not two hearts but one. My faith inspires what I do, both privately and in the public sphere. However, my faith must not itself become a political matter, not to mention an instrument to suppress those who believe something else.

That's why, in the Bible, Peter says, "Honour everyone." Be charitable – towards everyone, not

just Christians. A Muslim acquaintance of mine from Frankfurt told me a very similar quote from the sayings of Mohammed: “Would you seek God? Then go among the people, not into the desert!”

In that sense, any mosque or church or synagogue, whether it's in Frankfurt or in Tunis, is not only there for its faithful but for the benefit of the whole neighbourhood. In that sense, religion, when it doesn't close itself off and shut people out, can make society stronger.

Ladies and gentlemen of the student body,

I began today by talking about the tough questions that young people ask. I said that there were no easy answers. You may well put me on the spot now and ask me what the right, not-easy answers are then.

Quite honestly, I don't have those answers either – but you do!

This is where religion and democracy meet – in the belief that each and every person has the freedom to conduct themselves well. That's where Christianity and Islam meet too – in the belief that God places His trust in each individual. “Do not be afraid,” the Bible says, and do not put yourself above others.

And so my speech was not meant only to put you on your guard against easy answers but also to encourage you. Start looking for those difficult answers! I'm not just saying you can do it; I urge you to – for so much in this world depends on you succeeding in this quest.

Source: [Federal Foreign Office](#), Germany