



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
in a video message ahead of his trip to Israel, Oman and
Qatar
at Schloss Bellevue,
25 November 2023**

A visit to Israel now? Yes, especially now! I am travelling tomorrow to assure Israel of our continued solidarity – solidarity not only with Israel as the victim of terror but also with Israel as a country that is defending itself.

7 October, the day of Hamas' terrorist attack against the kibbutzim, against dancing young people, the brutal murders and abduction of defenceless children, parents and grandparents, was seven weeks ago now. Since then, war has been raging in the Middle East and, since then, many thousands of men, women and children have lost their lives in the Gaza Strip, too.

It may be a difficult trip, but it is necessary. Tomorrow I am travelling to an Israel which the world no longer primarily regards as wounded and under attack. Rather, I am travelling to an Israel which is defending itself. That is fighting for its existence. An Israel which has been criticised time and again by the world for these very efforts to defend itself.

Since its establishment 75 years ago, Israel has always been under threat in a hostile neighbourhood. Yet Israel has never been as deeply wounded as it was on 7 October. Never since the Holocaust have so many Jews been murdered in one day. Never has Israel's status as a safe homeland for Jews been in such jeopardy. 7 October marks a watershed!

An Israeli friend said to me recently, "What is the idea behind the State of Israel? It is not that we Jews will never again be under threat. Unfortunately, antisemitism will always exist. Rather, the idea is that we will never again be defenceless! That is the "Never again", which Israel promises us."

Our country, too, has a responsibility to ensure that this promise is honoured. Our country in which the worst crime against Jews in the history of humankind was conceived, planned and committed.

But what does the oft-invoked "right to exist" mean in concrete terms? Naturally, it means the right to self-defence when the country's very existence is under threat. That is what Israel is fighting for at present. It is a war against Hamas, but it is also a fight to uphold Israel's fundamental promise: to never again be defenceless.

No one can deny Israel's right to fight terrorism resolutely. However, this fight has brought great suffering – also to unarmed civilians. Every precaution must be taken to get civilians out of the firing line. What is more, they must be supplied with vital necessities. That is required under international humanitarian law and we Germans expect that, too.

Yesterday, I met Germans who had been able to leave the Gaza Strip during the past days. Their accounts of what they and their families experienced there are grim. I was deeply moved by them. There must also be space in our country for their stories, for the suffering and despair of the Palestinians.

Germany is providing humanitarian assistance for the civilian population in Gaza and – this too will be the subject of my discussions – we will talk to Israel about how people can get out of and relief goods get into the danger zones during the ceasefires. We stand ready to help evacuate sick people and children.

There is no doubt in our minds that every human life is of equal value. Therefore: no, we must not make any distinctions in humanitarian terms. Our sympathy goes out to all civilian victims of this war.

In political terms, however, we have to make a distinction. For the terrorist attack against Israel on 7 October must not be repeated. And I would welcome it if the voices criticising Israel were to at least recognise the dilemma it faces. Neutralising Hamas and, at the same time, protecting civilians: that is a terrible dilemma – a dilemma which Hamas has deliberately brought about by using people as human shields, by concealing its weapons, its tunnels, its command structures under houses, schools and hospitals. They have done so systematically, intentionally, for years. Hamas is not a liberation organisation for the benefit of the Palestinians. Hamas is a terrorist organisation which wants to destroy Israel and, at the same time, is cynically and wilfully allowing Palestinians to suffer.

Because of that, there are no easy answers. Nevertheless, a first step has been taken: I am infinitely happy that the release of the first hostages, also of German hostages, has begun, including that of the two little girls whose father, filled with despair, sat before me here in Schloss Bellevue just a few weeks ago. I would like to thank the mediators who

helped bring about these releases, and I will talk about how the negotiations can now proceed during my visit to Qatar. The fighting will and can only be ended through releasing the hostages. All hostages!

But it is also true to say that a ceasefire today will not automatically result in peace tomorrow. There can be no lasting peace as long as Hamas continues to pose a deadly threat to Israel. At the same time, the war which Israel is now waging must not thwart any chance of an understanding in the future. It must not give rise to a new desperate generation.

The only answer is a policy based on two principles: more security for Israel and more prospects for a brighter future for Palestinians. And if in the end there should be a peace which has a chance of becoming durable, that can only mean one thing: two states! The Palestinians must be able to exercise their right to political self-determination and to live in dignity, freedom and peace with their neighbours. During the last few years, the concept of two states has, above all, been a story of missed and wasted opportunities – missed by the international community and partly wasted due to the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

If this low point in the history of the Middle East can bring about something better, then it would be renewed and urgent impetus for a two-state solution understood by the entire world. I also want to take this impetus with me on my trip.