

Speech by Former Federal President Christian Wulff

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General van der Laan,

Dr Wachs,

Ladies and gentlemen,

According to the UN Arab Human Development Report, there were violent conflicts in five Arab countries in 2002 – in 2016, there were conflicts in eleven countries. In 2014, the Arab world accounted for just five percent of the world's population, but 45 percent of all terrorist attacks took place there.

Sixty-eight percent of all those killed by war, 47 percent of all internally displaced persons and 58 percent of all persons fleeing abroad come from Arab countries.

One thing becomes clear. The sentence I occasionally hear from Arab friends, “You have the clocks – we have the time”, is not true. On the contrary, time seems to be becoming increasingly scarce for people in many countries of the Arab world. Peace and social progress are urgently needed, as the figures I just mentioned show.

I am very interested in the Middle East and the Arab world. If you read Jim Al-Khalili's book “The House of Wisdom” about the then largest city in the world, Baghdad, with over one million inhabitants, as the centre of the sciences that sowed the seeds of our culture, you have to be interested in an intensive exchange between Europe and the Arab world.

There are serious and courageous choices to be made; decisions that may cost politicians their offices and the powerful their power. It is clear that no one enjoys taking such decisions – but on the other hand, it is these decisions that change people's lives for the better and shape the course of history.

Our hope for the countries of the Middle East is for politicians like Winston Churchill who in 1946 – after two wars with Germany – said that we need a United States of Europe, with a strong Germany and a strong France; or the Polish bishops who wrote to their German counterparts in 1965 to express forgiveness for the crimes committed by Germans in the Second World War and to ask for forgiveness for the crimes committed against Germans during the expulsion; or Mikhail Gorbachev, who in 1989 put the European peoples' right to self-determination, including that of the Germans, above his own political future.

There is an inscription on the Holstentor, a gate to the Hanseatic city of Lübeck, which says “Concordia domi et foris pax”. This means “harmony within, peace without” and is a precise description of what the goal of a political system should be – to maintain cohesion and to live in peace with all its neighbours.

That involves exploring how increasingly heterogeneous societies and countries can achieve and maintain a sufficient degree of unity despite their diversity. It involves the question of national identity, especially in times when identity seems to be the opposite of globalisation. Where national identity is lacking, national sovereignty cannot develop.

It involves the people who live in a country. The idea of unity in diversity must be supported by the majority, especially in democratic countries. This demands a lot of the individual, namely the ability to deal with ways of life that differ considerably from their own. They have to accept that people have different beliefs, different types of relationships and different ways of thinking than they do. In short, unity demands a high degree of tolerance from the individual towards others.

Achieving this internal unity is a task for parents and teachers, who must give their children and pupils the necessary tools to see diversity and openness not as a threat but rather as an enrichment and teach them the self-awareness and clear framework of values based on the pillars of a constitution that enables them to classify something new and alien.

This individual dimension of unity is a necessary, but by no means sufficient, prerequisite for a state to function and to provide its citizens with the protection to which they are entitled. Moreover, it concerns the overall social dimension; the protection of minorities; the enforcement of the rights of the few, where necessary against the will of a majority; the possibility of participation by all; an effective system of checks and balances – in short the separation of powers and a functioning constitutional state.

I see a lot of interest in the region in learning from Europe's experiences, such as those of the Peace of Augsburg of 1555 and the Peace of Westphalia of 1648. The fundamental right to freedom of religion, measures against sectarian hate speech, acceptance of borders and safeguarding by guarantor powers are the keywords in this respect.

In Germany, we have had good experiences with a multi-level federal system that already takes into account at the level of state organisation the different conditions under which people live in Germany, their regional characteristics and local features. It is clear that this cannot be a "one size fits all" model that would be easily applicable in Iraq. But many of the fundamental ideas by which the authors of the Basic Law were guided when they drew up our constitution seem to me to be basically the same for Iraq: to limit central power without making it inefficient; to remind the regions of their duties by granting them extensive autonomy; and finally, the awareness that many things can best be decided by those who have to live with the consequences of the decisions on the ground.

We need a culture of contact to create a better, more equitable and fraternal nation. Mutual recognition of others' cultural heritage is also vital.

The attempt to create homogenous states has repeatedly led to massacres. We need a strategy for multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious and multicultural co-existence that succeeds and points the way to the future.

In the Middle East, Christians, Jews, Muslims (Sunnis and Shiites), Kurds and Arabs lived together peacefully for centuries.

We need courage to achieve the Holstentor's goal of "harmony within, peace without" for the Middle East. The internal unity of the Arab world is also in our interest – peace without, and thus also lasting peace among the countries, can only be achieved in this way.

I wish the Common Effort community every success and good results!