

## **Speech at the Opening of the Qatar Germany Year of Culture 2017 Doha, February 1<sup>st</sup> 2017**

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honor for me to be here in Doha today. It is not only due to the fact that being in Qatar always gives the feeling of being together with friends, but it is also because of the reason we meet today. It may look different at first sight, but it is about peace. To plan and implement a common cultural year is about peace. And that is what we all want:

Worldwide we want to foster a peaceful and fair cohabitation of humans. Everyone I know seeks recognition of himself as a person, of his religion and of his nation. Everyone seeks comprehension, mutual understanding and peace. This is why I dedicate myself to a multiethnic, multireligious und multicultural Europe in which Muslims have their fixed place.

The blooming period of the Arab-Islamic world 800 years ago was marked by tolerance and the acceptance of others. This leading power extended from Baghdad over Damascus all the way to Andalusia. The Islamic world bolstered science, progress and civilization. Human values formed the basis of the relationship to other civilizations, cultures and religions.

As we are facing hundreds of thousands of people killed, and millions of refugees displaced as a result of ideological, cultural and religious fundamentalism, I am convinced that the Islamic world needs to reconnect to the values and principles that ruled during the blooming period.

There cannot be a promising future for the Middle East without ideological openness, diversity and acceptance of differing points of view. Otherwise radicalization und fundamentalism can't be prevented. Furthermore, the Islamic world needs to be strengthened from inside, to overcome the hatred and intolerance.

In 2022 we'll experience the FIFA World Cup in Doha. Why do I mention this as a German? In 1954 the Federal Republic of Germany became FIFA World Champion for the first time. Nine years after a war that had torn apart the world, the German national team surprised it. Many consider this to be the moment when the Federal Republic was, in a

way, culturally founded. 52 years later Germany surprised the world again.

When the World Cup took place in Germany in 2006 everyone could see a lively, diverse and open society. A lot of cliches about Germany disappeared.

I personally wish that Qatar, the Islamic and Arab world will present themselves as lively, modern and creative countries, too. The world cup can especially be a platform for fostering cultural understanding in a region where dangerous groups try to achieve the exact opposite.

The German Year in Qatar we declare open today offers a lot of opportunities in that respect, too. Cultural exchange is one the most successful tools we have in international relations. Getting to know each other's countries and cultural backgrounds is key to prevent misunderstandings and conflicts. It also gives us the opportunity to reflect our own positions and opinions. It really fosters openness of a society and helps to overcome conflicts.

Therefore, I am very happy and grateful that Qatar has come up with this idea a few years ago. This year will show that cultural exchange is more than representing cultural successes but a good starting point to develop common perspectives.

It also could help re-shape the image of the Arab world in Europe, in particular Germany. The Arab-Islamic world needs a better management of its reputation. Little is known about the breathtaking developments with a lot of positive effects for the domestic populations and also for foreigners who come from less developed countries to work here. Few people focus on the positive effects for a lot of African and Asian countries due to financial transfers, collaboration and career opportunities.

For the post oil and gas era we need much more cooperation between Germany/Europe and the Islamic Arab world: this concerns traditional issues like regenerative energy, water, and nutrition, but also culture, education and the advancement of women.

It's time that political power conflicts are replaced by a common effort. I hope and wish that Orient and Occident, with their different cultural imprint, will foster exchange and understanding so that they will grow closer together, instead of facing a clash of civilizations.