

Visit at the Lebanese University

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I would first like to thank you most sincerely for the great honour that it is to be awarded an honorary doctorate. And I am delighted to be able to address you on this occasion today. As some of you may know, this is not my first visit to your beautiful country. If I am not mistaken, then this is the seventh time that I have visited your city in a range of different capacities. However, I have been told that no German head of state has been to Lebanon for 120 years. And therefore I am especially pleased that this visit, which is my first as Federal President, constitutes another premiere.

I associate Beirut with another "first", a moment that is deeply etched in my memory. Back then – I had only been Foreign Minister for a short period of time – I learned that diplomacy and the quest for peace are not only a question of patient, often tough negotiations, but can also be about success. Tangible and visible success. I have clear memories of that moment during the war in 2006. On 7 September here in Beirut, I was standing with the then Prime Minister on the balcony of his residence. A little dot appeared on the horizon that came closer and closer. This dot increasingly took on the shape of an aircraft, which finally came in to land. It was the first plane to touch down in Beirut after weeks of a blockade. On board was food aid from the United Nations.

Lebanon was no longer cut off from the outside world because a lifting of the blockade had been achieved via diplomatic means with the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah. Many helped back then – foreign policy actors from many nations. We Germans were able to help safeguard the conditions of the peace agreement by seconding border police and

soldiers, and by providing equipment for the Lebanese navy. I will never forget this moment on the balcony of the Grand Serail – it was one of those moments that we work to achieve. We stood there, Lebanese and Germans. Many had tears in their eyes – the negotiations, the wrangling, the disputes, and even the setbacks, had not been in vain.

It is good when a war ends. Wars always last too long. They exact far too high a toll – including peace, and, above all, the lives of innocent people. The 2006 Lebanon War was one of the first of the new century, and yet it was also an old conflict. Lebanon, your country, has experienced and suffered a whole series of wars, civil wars and violent uprisings in its neighbourhood.

I have not come here today to tell you what war means. You, esteemed students, have lived through this terrible experience and I have not – and I am a number of years older than you.

But it was precisely your generation that also discovered how difficult it is to regain peace permanently. My daughter drew my attention to a young Lebanese musician – Yasmine Hamdan – who has transformed this experience into something creative and enriching.

"Violence has followed me," she says. Some of you will be familiar with her story. As a child, she fled the civil war with her parents from Beirut to Greece, before passing through various Arab countries to Kuwait, where the Gulf War caught up with her, and from there back to Lebanon. She now lives in Paris. But the violence of war that she wanted to escape also followed her there.

"I cannot escape violence; I don't know any other reality," she says – and that is the experience of a number of generations in too many countries of the Middle East. At the latest since terrorism reached Europe, this form of violence is an experience that we also share in Europe.

Yet artists like Yasmine Hamdan go to show that hope is even more tenacious than war. Her odyssey taught Yasmine Hamdan five languages and the love for her mother tongue, Arabic, which she has mastered in almost all of its dialects. With her style of singing, she draws on traditions while challenging them at the same time, thereby creating something new. She not only brings together various Arab cultures and worlds in her music, but it also seems to appeal to many young people – in the Arab world and Europe alike.

What I like about this is the way in which a young woman searches for answers to open questions. She does not want to have any concepts foisted upon her or to be labelled in any way, and this includes labels that the Western and European part of her audience finds for her. She fights against attempts to equate her home country with war and violence.

The approach she takes is empathy, emotion, for instance when she sings about the atmosphere of pre war Beirut. This establishes a dialogue, also beyond language barriers, in an almost implicit way.

And this is what I would like to talk to you about today. About how – despite the ubiquitousness of violence and conflicts, particularly in this region – we can achieve a dialogue and find solutions. I believe that you, the young generation, are the best people to talk to about this.

Yasmine Hamdan's example makes me hopeful that the young generation – in the Arab world and beyond – has much more in common than cultural preferences, that it shares desires and fears, as well as hopes: the hope for opportunities for free personal development, economic prospects and, above all, the hope for peaceful coexistence – after all, conflicts in this region have, for far too long, been waged at the expense of your, the young, generation.

I have often travelled this region and have spoken to many young people – their wishes and hopes are very similar. In Beirut and in Tunis, in Tehran and Riyadh, in Cairo, Ramallah and Tel Aviv.

I not only believe that dialogue can be achieved, but I believe that Beirut can be the place where it is achieved. Beirut lies at the intersection of many opposing interests and many tensions. And yet it can be a place of hope, indeed inspiration, far beyond its own borders – for the entire region.

Beirut is the capital of a country that believes in accepting others, in the ability to overcome conflicts and that is, last but not least, founded on the democratic virtue that is the willingness to reach compromises. This makes Beirut a city that is loved by all Arabs, and this fascination is shared far beyond the borders of the Middle East. This is where religious and secular people, Muslims and Christians, Sunnis and Shiites, Druze, Maronites and Chaldeans, conservatives and progressives, right and left have lived and argued for thousands of years. Where 18 Christian and Muslim religious communities coexist and share responsibility for the community, we Germans want to continue to support you in your efforts to build bridges.

During my previous visits to your country, I gained the impression that the people in Lebanon have derived a life principle or, even better, a survival principle from their painful experiences – you must accept the other and leave them be because such mutual recognition is the prerequisite for peace and reconciliation. There are possibly as many varieties of this exercise as there are nationalities and confessions in Lebanon. And the principle of mutual acceptance is surely called into question or violated time and again. But only where there is peaceful coexistence can there be cooperation.

Decades ago, the Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi noted that the search for a historical or philosophical basis for Lebanese nationality goes on. I suppose it still does. Meanwhile, he contends, it is the daily practice of being Lebanese that actually makes the people of Lebanon a nation.

Yet this practice requires certain preconditions: it needs reliable and functioning state institutions. This is the reason why Germany has invested heavily in efforts to strengthen these institutions in Lebanon in recent years – in building up the army and navy, police

force and border security. We intend, also in the future, to strengthen the forces in your country that not only represent the specific interests of individual groups, but foster their coexistence in society.

It goes without saying that such a complex arrangement with regard to power-sharing of the sort practised in Lebanon is not without its problems. Compromises are, by their very nature, imperfect. However, reconciliation and overcoming violence are, at the end of the day, always based on mediation and the balancing of interests. Plural societies need compromise and tolerance just as we need air in order to breathe. Without this, it is impossible to achieve or preserve peace either at home or abroad.

My country, Germany, acquired the ability to reach democratic compromises only during the last century. More precisely, Germany had to learn this lesson several times over, also because the first German republic founded one hundred years ago failed and a criminal Nazi regime seized power. Even today, the ability to compromise cannot be taken for granted. We see signs of that right now. Some – quite thoughtlessly, I might add – even question the value of compromise as such. Instead, they champion the opposite, namely uncompromising action taken by autocratic regimes. What is certain is that, the more rapidly a society changes, and the more diverse it becomes, the harder it will be for those with political responsibility to build bridges. However, the more difficult this is, the more important it is.

This is true not only at national level, but also between neighbours. After 1945, the Europeans began to create institutions and mechanisms that helped our continent, which was repeatedly ravaged and devastated by war, to balance our various interests and take joint action. It took over twenty years for the idea that was the Conference on Security and Co operation in Europe (CSCE) to become a reality and for the participating States to agree to the inviolability of their borders, the peaceful settlement of disputes, the respect for human rights and cooperation among all countries. The patience was worth it and the CSCE was a first step towards creating trust among the participating States. This was, in hindsight, vital to the European integration process.

Of course, Europe's experiences are no blueprint for achieving peace in the Middle East. But they do widen horizons, provide experience and lessons learned and, ideally, possible courses of action. History, including the history of other nations and regions, can help when it comes to asking the right questions here and now.

Looking back at our history, the only way to gradually bring intractable conflict closer to resolution was often to engage in tough negotiation and tedious balancing of interests. The Thirty Years War in Europe was a bitter conflict for European hegemony that claimed millions of lives and that was rife with tension between different religions and confessions. It ended with a peace agreement that to a certain extent left unanswered the question of absolute political or even religious truth.

I think parallels can be drawn to this region. Absolute truth and justice may be what every party to the conflict aims to achieve. But whoever makes this an absolute prerequisite for peace and reconciliation will never achieve either one. I know that not all observers hold this view. For me, the way for the Middle East to achieve a brighter future is precisely not to escalate or polarise. Peace will not come about if politicians maintain absolute positions, or insist that all of their interests be fulfilled; rather, they must take the opposite approach. Here in Lebanon, this is not an academic issue. Instead, it is a question of survival.

The unresolved conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has a direct impact on your country. In Germany, too, many doubt whether unilateral recognition of Jerusalem by the United States actually brings us closer to the goal of a peaceful Middle East. Vice versa, I do hope no one sees these doubts as justifying hatred and violence towards Israel, whether in my own country or elsewhere. Our position in Germany is clear. We believe that the final status of Jerusalem, just like the other key issues of the conflict, must be negotiated as part of a two state solution between the parties – as tedious and difficult as that may be.

You also feel the direct impact of growing tensions between the major regional powers Iran and Saudi Arabia. These tensions threaten to tear apart the carefully crafted fabric of compromise in Lebanon – compromise that, though imperfect, does in the end keep the peace.

In your neighbouring country Syria, a war has raged for the past seven years that is so brutal and violent that the possibility of social reconciliation, not to mention political compromise, appears unattainable in the foreseeable future.

Achieving peace requires great patience and setting out on a very long path. I have been in politics long enough to know that this is much easier said than done. Yet precisely because that is the case, Lebanon has much greater expertise than many – including in my country – may suspect. Because so few things in the world are clear cut, and because common ground must be found and compromises reached between very different people around the world, Lebanon is such a valuable example. That, too, is why, also speaking on behalf of Germany, I am so keen to strengthen and support Lebanon.

I share the concerns of my French counterpart President Macron regarding stability in the entire region. I call on all stakeholders to reduce tensions and find ways to reach compromises. We want to, and we will, lend our support to the forces in this country and the entire region that are willing to assume responsibility and make a serious effort at the negotiating table towards achieving understanding. All too often, conflicts that were not your own have been fought out on Lebanese soil.

Of course, we Europeans will continue to do our utmost to help you deal with the effects that your neighbour's terrible war has brought to Lebanon. I am well aware that people here in Lebanon – and in Jordan, which I have just visited – have borne a tremendous burden in recent years. Both countries have taken in millions of Syrian war refugees. I

know that not everyone supports this. Allow me, though, to say one thing: you are doing tremendous things, and for this you deserve not only recognition – you also deserve support. The German Government, and many German aid organisations, will maintain their strong support for Lebanon as it tackles this enormous task, by providing political, financial and substantial support on the ground.

Our appreciation for what Lebanon is doing is even greater knowing that it is based on your country's own experiences. The Lebanese know what displacement means. You know what it means to lose your home. Today, more Lebanese live abroad than in your own country.

In Germany, too, we have taken in hundreds of thousands of people in recent years. As countries providing refuge, Lebanon and Germany have a common challenge, namely caring for people who had to flee their homes and integrating them into our societies. For Germany, taking in Syrian refugees is the humanitarian side of our engagement. But it is also important to fight the root cause of the problem. We will continue to do what lies in our power to help achieve a political solution to the conflict.

Ultimately, however, the region will have to take the initiative. For this, Lebanon can serve as an example. How to be tolerant and achieve compromise – that is what the region can learn from Lebanon. Stefan Leder, former Director of the Orient-Institut Beirut, calls it Beirut ingenuity: the liberal worldview that is so immediately apparent to everyone who comes here, and the coexistence of contradictory lifestyles and general attitudes – that is what makes Lebanon special. It is something that I have observed time and again, and that I have not experienced anywhere else in the region.

It is my hope, and my wish for all of you, that this Lebanese way of life be preserved. We Germans want to support you in this endeavour. If your self confident and resilient way of living is successful here, in this society – despite all the difficulties – then it can serve as an example for the entire region. I hope that Beirut ingenuity spreads beyond your borders. Allow me to close by quoting Charles Malik, one of your country's great men, who knew better than I do what Lebanon can offer the world: ""If we have any contribution to make, it is in the field of fundamental freedom, namely freedom of thought, freedom of conscience and freedom of being.""

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