

**Leadership for Syria: Launch of the supplementary studies programme  
at the University of Konstanz, 11 November 2016**

*Leadership for Syria – Principles and Pragmatism*

Key-note by Wolfgang Seibel<sup>1</sup>

Many of you know that today, November 11, is a particular day. Not because you find yourself here in this lecture hall at the University of Konstanz but because in many countries it is a holiday. And the reason is that 98 years ago a war ended. A war that had claimed the lives of some 10 million people, known in English language as the Great War and in French *La Grande Guerre*.

But on November 11<sup>th</sup> 1918 not only the war ended, but the end of the war also paved the way for the implementation of an agreement signed two and a half years earlier between the British and the French. And the subject was the future of the Arab territories within the Ottoman Empire, then the ally of Germany and Austria and, consequently, England's and France's enemy. That agreement, as you may also know, was named after the diplomats who had brokered it, Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot. The Sykes-Picot agreement of May 1916, initially kept secret, envisaged the partition of the southern parts of the Ottoman Empire into two zones under

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British and French control. The agreement was finally confirmed in 1922 when these two spheres of influence were transformed into mandates under the formal authority of the League of Nations but in fact remained British and French protectorates. While the core of the British mandate were Iraq, Jordan and Palestine – part of which became Israel in 1948 –, the core of the French mandate became Lebanon – and Syria. Which is why many of you might have learnt French as first foreign language in school.

So, in a nutshell: Without November 11<sup>th</sup> 1918, you would not be sitting in this lecture hall. But this is of course just a very abstract information that barely conceals the contradictory and conflict-ridden history of the Middle East since then. It is a history in the course of which the notion of transferring western political ideals and institutions turned out to be just as illusory as the notion and the practice of authoritarian rule.

Which brings me to the subject and the philosophy of the very program you are participating in. This program entitled “Leadership for Syria” is basically simple and modest. Its prime purpose is not to contribute to all the efforts to make the world a better place. Its prime purpose is just to enable a very small cohort of young Syrian citizens to get a highly qualified academic education in various fields, primarily in the natural sciences, engineering, medicine and the humanities. The entire program, not just the additional curriculum under the auspices of the University of Konstanz

is based on one single principle which is sustainability. Neither is it about abstract models to be transferred to a future Syria nor is it a sort of democratic reeducation program. The main purpose of the Konstanz part of the program is to make you familiar with the challenges and experiences connected to leadership in various ways.

After all, it is you and your generation that at some point has to rebuild Syria, regardless of the circumstances under which that endeavor will take place. This program invests in the future of Syria literally in the form of human capital. It invests in you. And precisely because the dire circumstances under which you and your fellow Syrians will have to bring that capital to bear it is important and, I feel, indispensable to overcome the deep pessimism that is the dominant mindset not only as far as the Middle East is concerned but also as far as we in the West and, in particular, as far as the European Union is concerned. We should remind ourselves of what the French call *la longue durée* – the long endurance – of geopolitical developments as well as of success stories that were created under dire conditions similar to the ones you will be facing once back in Syria.

When I was a boy, the consequences of a war Germany itself had waged were still visible in more than one sense. People of my age remember the streets in cities where every second building was destroyed and not yet rebuilt. The country itself, Germany, was dismantled, with its two parts, the West and the East, belonging to two different spheres of a bi-polar geopolitical order which was the order of the Cold

War. In case of yet another conflict Germans would have been shooting on Germans, killing each other mercilessly and, according to all likelihood, wiping out the rest of what had been a rich and prosperous country with strong institutions and a rich culture shaped by tradition and diversity. But in 1945, when the *Second* World War ended, virtually nobody would have predicted that half a century later, a reunified Germany would be again a strong and prosperous country at the heart of Europe.

I hope it is obvious why I, here and now, refer to this miraculous rebirth of my own country literally out of the rubble. And yet we should not perceive and interpret the demise and rebirth of Germany as a naïve success story that could be copied elsewhere. It was the result of arduous and complex political learning. And that learning included determined international institution building and support. Long before the notion of globalization became part of a worldwide jargon the very fact of political and economic interdependence and the experience of self-destructive wars had made salient the indispensability of international institutions and stable multilateral arrangements. And it is a profound irony that enduring success conceals its own prerequisites. It is a very basic psychological mechanism: The more successful you are, the more you take success for granted.

It is more than unfortunate that this also applies to the unparalleled success story of international organizations and agreements. The fading memory of two catastrophic wars in Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century contributes to a renaissance of political

myopia based on nationalism, ignorance and a mental flight from reality that is gaining momentum in quite a number of European countries, including member states of the European Union. And I force myself to avoid any comment on what happened at the far side of the Atlantic Ocean earlier this week. It is indeed the European Union itself that, as a consequence, suffers the most from a weakened historical memory that undermines the foundations of its own remarkable success.

It is no coincidence, however, that Germany used to be one of the most ardent defenders of regulated globalization and European integration. This country had miraculously survived the consequences of its own ignorance of basic rules of conduct in a world of irreversible political and economic interdependence. That survival originated from an undisputed commitment to the multilateralism of foreign and security policy and a continuously intensified integration in the framework of what ultimately became the European Union. Not a single country on this globe is more dependent on international trade and thus international peace and stability than Germany, a country that generates some 50% of its gross domestic product on the export market. Not everybody among our international trade partners is happy with this. And it is only through firm international embeddedness that a strong and potentially hegemonic Germany is acceptable for the outside world.

Germany also promoted the first written security strategy of the European Union back in 2003. Actually in response to the Iraq war. The remarkable key-phrase

of that strategy, also known as Solana paper, named after the then high representative for foreign and security policy of the European Union, Xavier Solana – that phrase read, and I quote, “Our task is to promote a ring of well governed countries to the East of the European Union and on the borders of the Mediterranean with whom we can enjoy close and cooperative relations”. It is more than obvious that that strategy failed, partly even as far as the East of the European Union is concerned but certainly as far as the borders of the Mediterranean are concerned. Ukraine and Syria sadly demonstrate this very fact.

However, it is *still* in the strategic interest of Germany to promote the very ideas and objectives of the European Security Strategy of 2003 whose ghostwriter as Xavier Solana’s chief of staff was, by the way, no other than the current chief advisor of chancellor Merkel for foreign and security affairs, Christoph Heusgen. It is, again, no coincidence that Germany attempts to strike a balance between protective and supportive measures in the current refugee crisis. This is not that much about a transfer of political ideas and concepts but, instead, about institution building skills, skills designed to strengthen the indigenous resources in those very countries in the East of the European Union and at the borders of the Mediterranean.

One should admit that at some point that strategy lacked resolve and clarity, especially as far as Syria is concerned. For quite a while German diplomacy confined

itself to the role of a passive observer as far as the actual high politics were concerned. However, beneath the surface of high politics and visible crisis diplomacy Germany mobilized political and financial resources in the order of several hundred millions of Euros in support of refugee relief, infrastructure for the Geneva peace talks and, last but not least, for this program, Leadership for Syria.

It is, just in the spirit of the European Security Strategy, a program to the mutual benefit. So what should be mentioned for the sake of honesty and clarity is that some German selfishness is involved. The program costs German tax payers some 10 million Euros, counting your individual stipends and, to a very minor degree, the supporting program we are running here at the University of Konstanz. But it is just in the German interest as it is in the interest of the entire European Union to invest in a future Syria however unconceivable peace and stability in your home country might appear today.

Since there will be and there has to be a *return of investment*. We don't expect loyalty in return, at least not loyalty to the country that made possible your college education. But we do expect that you live up to the standard that is appropriately expressed in the program's name: Leadership. Leadership does imply loyalty, but loyalty to those who invest their hopes in your professional competence and your sense of responsibility. Leadership is about one's own career and achievements as

well as about one's family, a company, an authority and, ultimately, the wider community. Even if it sounds pathetic these days, you may remind yourselves of the famous key-phrase of John F. Kennedy's inaugural address as US President: "Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country".

You all are sitting in this hall for a reason. At first glance, the reason is banal, it is simply because you were successful in a highly competitive selection process for stipends funded by the Federal Government of Germany and enabling you to study at one of this country's institutions for higher education. By definition, you are part of a future elite and you have every right to enjoy this privilege. But just like in the old days of ruling nobilities the principle is still valid: *Noblesse oblige*. Privileges come with a price tag – they entail obligations. You should acknowledge that price tag.

This is not a moral requirement, let alone an admonishment. It is a principle of solid common sense. Because stable and prosperous societies are built on the acknowledgement of burden sharing and reciprocity. Leadership implies responsibility and responsibility is burdensome. Privileges may compensate for that burden but they only will be accepted by the non- or underprivileged whose life is even more burdensome if they have good reasons to believe that the privileged-ones pay something back to the benefit of all.



What makes me confident that my barely concealed appeal to your patriotism will pay? Again, it is about you and it is about us.

You have been recruited for this program not for the sake of charity; not because you are nice people or because you belong to the deserving poor in desperate need for help. You were recruited because you qualified for the program on a highly competitive basis. Only about 4% out of more than 5,000 applicants made it into the program. This was not luck, it was not chance, it resulted instead from your own intellectual strength and merit. Take pride in it.

The very same fact, however, entails a message for us as well. Your fields of study are as broad as one can imagine, ranging from physics to construction engineering and political science or law. And now you are sitting here in a lecture hall of a university in southern Germany at Lake Constance because, let's face it, you are required to do so. We have not the slightest illusion about the gap between what made and makes you tick when devoting your time and efforts to your own discipline of study *and* the motivation to participate in this side program that itself is demanding and time consuming and whose benefit might appear far less tangible than the subjects of your respective field of study.

But, believe it or not: This is just another privilege. You are a distinguished group of young Syrian citizens per se, because you made it into the program. But

what will really distinguish you from ordinary physicists, lawyers, physicians, chemists, engineers, biologists et cetera is that you learn something *they* usually don't learn. And the reason is that *they*, the ordinary high-skilled people, usually live under stable and peaceful conditions in the belief that they can afford to take those conditions for granted. This is obviously not the situation you will be dealing with.

So *you* will learn about the nature of peace settlements and public security, about normative principles of democracy and the rule of law, the role and varieties of civil society; about the art and craft of designing political institutions for multi-ethnic societies; the challenges of corruption and organized crime. You will learn something about the principles and institutions of transnational economic cooperation and what that has to do with the logic and institutions of the so-called neighborhood policy of the European Union. Unlike the average graduate in the natural science, engineering or medicine *you* will be familiar with the principles and institutions of social policy and educational systems. You will have acquired substantial knowledge in the ethics of public administration and about corporate social responsibility, about the nature of teams and teamwork and the mobilization of individualized human capital. And last but not least you may have learned how to cope with post-traumatic syndromes once back in a country of ubiquitous human suffering.

Of course, you should never use that knowledge like you use a book of recipes. Rather, it is a reservoir of awareness and consciousness. Like any sort of abstract

knowledge is has to be adapted to the circumstances at hand. But especially when those circumstances are complex and conflict-ridden it is helpful to have a firm backing in terms of abstract knowledge and principles. It is like with a strong but flexible spine. It combines a back-bone and mussels. We provide the bone, you provide the mussels. We provide theoretical and evidence-based knowledge creating, as we hope, awareness and consciousness while you use your proven smartness and intellectual capability that alone makes you responsible leaders.

We made efforts to facilitate that task. I am happy and kind of proud again that this program here in Konstanz is supported by accomplished leaders from almost every relevant institutional segment, ranging from municipal and state level administration to the diplomatic service, from the United Nations to a transnational non-governmental organization. I extend my deep gratitude to these experts and I will introduce them to you after the coffee break.

And let me, finally, also address in all modesty what distinguishes us, the professors and scholars of the University of Konstanz teaching these courses whose subject I just mentioned. I can't help telling that this is a brilliant bunch of teachers, many of whom leading scholars in their respective discipline. But that is not even the most important thing. What makes me proud when organizing and running this particular part of the program Leadership for Syria is the fact that when we were preparing our grant proposal back in April this year every single colleague I approached

spontaneously and without the slightest hesitation said the same thing: Yes, I'll be happy to participate.

You all have been become aware already that this program is being run basically by key-staff members with whom many of you have already been in touch. And it my pleasure to introduce them to you here and now.

[...]

We all, scholars and experts alike, share the conviction that this is a remarkable program and we believe that working with you will make a difference, for us as teachers and experts just as for you, the participants. Above all, however, for the future beneficiaries back in Syria regardless of the time span that may elapse between now and your return to your country.

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