

Some words on Syria

Welcome to you all. We are here together in the Spiegelzaal for a great cause. We are here for the children of a great nation: Syria. I have lived and worked in its capital Damascus for three years, 2006-2009, before the war. In those days Syria was a beautiful country, in many respects:

- Nature: desert with wildlife and beduin with camels, mountains with lots of snow in winter, a lovely mediterranean coast;

- Culture: millennia of history which saw the empires of the Assyrians, Phenicians, Romans, Ottoman sultanate and French mandate pass by; many remnants of these different periods are still there like Palmyra, Apamea, Krak des Chevaliers, and also the treasures of Damascus and Aleppo;

- People: a wide diversity and true mosaic of religions, from sunni muslims and shiites including alawites, to many christian denominations, both orthodox and Roman Catholic, plus the mysterious Druze on their holy mountain - as well as different ethnic groups, not only Arabs but also Kurds and Armenians, Circassians and Turkmenians. They all used to live together peacefully, with tolerance and respect. Moreover, they were a very warm, kind-hearted and hospitable people, rightly proud of their great history and culture..

Syria also had its less beautiful sides. It was, and is, a dictatorship, with minority rule, oppression of human rights, and thousands of political prisoners. During my tenure in Damascus I spoke with many victims of the regime, and their stories would bring tears to my eyes.

But despite this darker side, Syria was a functioning country. Millions of adults had a job, millions of children went to school. Farmers produced crops, bakers baked bread, doctors provided healthcare.

Moreover - and this is a great good - Syria was a secular state and there was freedom of religion. I witnessed many schoolgirls walking hand in hand, one in jeans with sleeveless t-shirt, one veiled. Christians were invited to iftar meals during Ramadan, muslim neighbours would be invited to familiy dinners during Xmas. Tolerance and respect were the general norm.

This is no longer the case. The Syria I knew does not exist anymore. Its people are dead, or wounded, or have fled away from Assad's barrel bombs, or the terror of Jabhat an-Nusra or Islamic State. By the millions, as we know.

This is not the place to analyse the political causes of the war. What is relevant here is how fast a process of total destruction can take place. In 2011, Syria was still a functioning country. In 2016, it is nearly totally destroyed. And we should realise: Syria is not unique.

Take Asia, Vietnam and Cambodia in the 70s, where civil war and the reign of terror of the Khmer Rouge killed millions. Take Africa, Rwanda in the 90s, where a true genocide was planned and carried out. Take Europe - our Europe - where we saw a vicious civil war in the

Balkans, with former Yugoslavia falling apart, quite comparable to today's Syria. And let us not forget that only 70 years ago, Germany - a nice and developed and civilised country - fell prey to Nazism with all its terrible consequences for the whole continent.

These are only a few examples from different countries during the 20th century. Examples of the downward spiral which quickly sets in when violent conflict takes over. I think what we can learn from all these recent wars - and unfortunately poor Syria is no exception - is that the layer of civilisation is very thin.

Here in The Netherlands, we do not always realise how precious everything is that we have built up after the Second World War. We should cherish what we have and uphold our civilisation, our prosperity, our freedom, our values. Part of these values is: compassion, solidarity.

And that is why we are here today. To show compassion with the Syrian children in the refugee camps in neighbouring Turkey. To show solidarity with an entire population at drift. The Syrian children desperately need schools and hopefully our collective effort will contribute to that goal.

I want to end on a note of hope. The Netherlands was a bleak and destitute place in 1945, but it slowly spread out its wings and thrived in the decades thereafter. Rwanda has risen and is doing well, and so is Vietnam.

One day, the war will stop and Syria will rise from its ashes. In that period of reconstruction, it will need a new generation. It will need young people, with hope and energy and a vision for the future. It will need *educated* young people, able to take leadership positions, to become doctors and teachers and engineers, determined to rebuild their country.

I think it is truly wonderful that UNICEF and the Soroptimists have put together this event to support the Syria Back to School project. In a storm of violence and despair, that is a seed of hope to be planted, which will hopefully grow and bear fruit in the future.

Désirée Bonis
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