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## Laudatory speech for adopt a revolution

### Category: Exemplary Organization

### Speaker: Ivesa Lübben



Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Sophie Bischoff, dear Alan Hassaf, dear Ferdinand Dürr,

You are here today to receive the Bremen Peace Award 2015 for the organisation *Adopt a Revolution*. In doing so, we wish to honour your civil society commitment in Syria. I hope it is also in your interest if I pay tribute to your partner organisations in Syria at the same time as talking about your own work. They are both politically and emotionally linked to you, as the word *Adopt* suggests. Your partners risk their lives, and those of their families in Syria, in their campaign for a better and more peaceful future. They often enough witnessed how some of them working in Syria disappeared into prisons, lost their lives or had to flee as their work was crushed to pieces between the many battle lines in Syria.

One of your partners is the lawyer and human rights activist Razan Zeitouna, the founder of the *Union of the Local Coordination Committee*. She tried to bring together all the small local initiatives which formed in the wake of the uprising in 2011. In 2013, Razan Zeitouna, her husband Wael Hamada and two friends were kidnapped from Douma, a small town near Damascus, probably by a Salafist group. Inhabitants of the town and deserted soldiers had, in October 2012, freed Douma from the hands of the Syrian army. Activists like Razan Zaitouna and her friends had hoped to build the foundation for a democratic Syria. With great commitment and enthusiasm and under extremely difficult conditions, they began to re-write curricula for the local schools, publish newspapers, document breaches of human rights carried out by the regime and also the opposing groups and organise elections for town councillors. Razan built a centre for women, plans were made to set up a local police force and independent law courts, although Douma was surrounded by troops from the regime and was thus completely cut off from the outside world. It was bombed on a daily basis and many people starved to death.

The brutality of the Syrian security forces towards the activists lead to the increase in influence of radical Islamic groups supported by rich Arabs from the Gulf and for whom the secular ambitions of the civil society activists were increasingly a thorn in the side. To date, no one knows where Razan Zeitouna is and if she is even still alive. Douma is exemplary of the Syrian tragedy which has meanwhile arrived in Germany in the form of hundreds and thousands of refugees. Most of them have fled – as shown by a recent survey conducted by her organisation – from the Assad regime.

When *Adopt a Revolution* was founded in autumn 2011, Syria was for most people in Germany just another white spot on the world map – unlike the holiday destination Egypt. It was a country which had shut itself off from the outside world. But Syria was also closed on the inside. No one dared to speak openly about their political opinion for fear of the 16 secret services. Even Syrians abroad kept silent about the political situation in their country. They were too afraid that their relatives living in

Syria would have to pay the price in the form of an occupational ban, inquisition from the secret service or that the blame would be transferred to them.

At the beginning of 2011, hundreds and thousands of Egyptian men and women occupied the central Tahrir Square in Cairo and demanded “*Aish, Hurriya, Karama insaniya*” (bread, freedom, human dignity), and after the Mubarak regime failed to react to their demands, they shouted “*isqat al-nidham*” (down with the regime). At that time, people in Germany sitting in front of their televisions shared their excitement. The people in Syria also followed the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. They also wanted bread and an even larger proportion yearned for freedom and human rights. Inspired by the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, at the beginning of March 2011, school children in the town of Deraa in the south of Syria wrote the words *al-shaab yurid isqat al-nidham* (the people want the fall of the regime) on the walls of their school. They had heard these words on a daily basis in the live satellite broadcasts from Tunisia and Cairo. The children were arrested and tortured. When the parents demanded the governor of Deraa to release their children, they were scorned. The whole of Deraa took to the streets. Deraa became the beacon for the Syrian uprising. During the following months, people in the whole of Syria demonstrated for political reforms, and when the regime failed to react, for a political change of power. People’s Committees grew up everywhere, organised the protests and built up a network on facebook and other digital media. Every Friday there was a different motto agreed on by the activists via internet: *The Day of Dignity*, the *Day of free Women*, the *Day of the Martyrs*, the *Day of the Tribes*, *Azadi*. *Azadi* is Kurdish and means freedom. In doing so, the activists wanted to show that the Kurds should also have equal rights as part of a democratic Syrian society in the future. In Hama alone, 400,000 people demonstrated in July 2011, practically the whole town. In 1982, an uprising of the Muslim brothers was crushed in Hama which cost the lives of between 10,000 and 35,000 people.

The weekly slogans were, however, a symbol of the growing frustration about the silence of the outside world in the face of the brute force with which the Syrian regime crushed the protests: *Your silence is killing us*, were the words on one Friday. *Death is better than humiliation*, on another. And after the Syrian regime started throwing deadly barrel bombs on demonstrators and rebellious villages, the slogans became a cry for help, like in the case of the *Friday for a Flight Ban Zone*.

*Adopt a Revolution* did not remain silent. On the contrary – they are almost unique in their attempt to break the silence in Germany and to support the Syrian civil society which is just beginning to come into existence. In the spring of 2011 – just as the first demonstrations began in Syria – Elias Perado, a young environmental activist travelled to Beirut just simply to have a little time out. In Beirut he got to know Rami Nakhle, a well-known Syrian blogger. Rami smuggled his German friend over the Syrian border a couple of times where Elias took part in several demonstrations. He saw how young Syrians organise themselves. They told him what they needed. Together with Rami Nahlke, Elias developed the concept for *Adopt a Revolution*. The idea was to organise financial and political sponsors for individual committees in Germany. In the meantime, the committees had come together to form a network of local coordination committees. Razan Zaitouna became their spokeswoman; she has been missing since December 2013. These sponsorships should not only create more transparency, but a face should be given to the activists through the German solidarity movement. This in turn should make it easier to understand the difficult political and human implications of the situation for the Syrians. The activists should be guaranteed reliable and consistent support making it possible to break through the feeling of isolation. Perhaps the hope was that, as a result, contacts may develop which in turn may help the committees later when building up a Syrian democracy.

Every committee compiled a list of the monthly expenditures which were covered by a sponsorship: for cameras, to document the campaigns, but also human rights violations committed by the regime and later armed rebels, for laptops and mobile phones, for paying the rent on flats where the activists could be hidden when fleeing from the regime. Some committees also needed donations to pay for the living costs of the families of prisoners and those killed. One condition for support through *Adopt a Revolution* was, and the principle is still also true today, that the committees which are supported have to apply the rules of peaceful resistance; they may not buy weapons; they must respect human rights and the rights of minorities, and they have to support democracy.

Later, more demanding projects were included. *Adopt a Revolution* thus supports initiatives in Irbin and Deraa which build schools or prepare them for re-use. The aim is to prevent entire generations from growing up without education. At the same time, these schools provide an alternative to the Koran schools of the Islamic groups. In the village of Talbise and in the Kurdish Manbej, they support media centres which, with the help of underground newspapers and a radio station, are able to create a counter-public and allow information to be communicated to the outside world.

On account of the direct contact to many different initiatives throughout the whole of Syria, *Adopt a Revolution* has become an important mouthpiece for the democratic Syrian revolution in Germany. They have not only made friends. In 2014, the finance office in Leipzig where their association is registered, even wanted to retrospectively withdraw its status as a charitable organisation. The justification was the following: the association follows political aims and is therefore unworthy of support. Several Syrian activists accused them of turning the liberated areas over to the terror of the regime by rejecting protected areas and flight ban zones.

But they were also criticised by members of the peace, solidarity and anti-military movement. *Adopt a Revolution* simply plays lip service to the rejection of military violence. In reality, by giving support to groups which work within the *National Syrian Coalition*, they were supporting a change of regime. An explanation: The *National Coalition of the Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces* is the largest opposition coalition. Belonging to it are two civil organisations - including the Local Coordination Committee - as well as the *Free Syrian Army*, made up of deserted soldiers.

It is true to say that *Adopt a Revolution* faces a dilemma. They had to witness how several of the activists present from the very beginning, faced with the violence of the regime, bought a Kalashnikov and joined armed groups. Some committees saw how people turned away from them because they were not able to protect their villages and towns from the regime's barrel bombs. The committees active in the liberated areas work in cooperation with the *Free Syrian Army* and other armed groups in defending their villages and organising daily life – sometimes more and sometimes less successfully. Peaceful resistance has become a mixture of civil and violent forms of resistance.

Even icons of peaceful resistance like Razan Zeitouna, the human rights lawyer who defended political prisoners under Bashar al-Assad, the activist who started up new projects and refused to cover her hair even though Douma was controlled by Islamic groups, even they in principle did not question the existence of the *Free Syrian Army* but demanded the army of the opposition to subordinate themselves to the civil committee.

*Adopt a Revolution* stood up to face this dilemma. "It is a problem to support civil resistance when the partners do not distance themselves from armed resistance, or even demand armament", they say in a statement. They decided to support civil resistance at a time when the *Free Syrian Army* was of little

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significance, and moreover they point out that there are still civil groups and promise to do all they can to guarantee that funding is not used for the wrong purpose. The symbolic meaning expressed by the support is far more important than the money itself, that is to say, the feeling of not being left alone. Because: "The more recognition and support civil resistance is given, the greater are the chances that it does not come to a civil war which spreads over the whole country."

But also we who live here in peace have to ask ourselves the question if we can morally refuse the right to resist in the case of activists who have witnessed how entire families were wiped out by the barrel bombs, were threatened by the Islamic State, or like Razan Zeitouna, bore witness to chemical attacks in Douma. Have we ever really thought about how we would react if put in the situation of the Syrian activists? Do we have any alternatives to offer them? "I try again and again to let the day pass once more before my inner eye, this time in slow motion, in the hope that tears will come as they do for normal people. I am appalled at the feeling of numbness in my chest, this confusion of pictures moving around my head," says Razan as she describes her feelings after she saw, on the day when poison fell on Douma, how parents searched in desperation for the bodies of their dead children and doctors bitterly cried and had to watch their patients die because they had no drugs to help them. "This cannot be a normal reaction after a day when I had to walk over dead bodies all lying in rows in long corridors, wrapped up in white linen and old woollen blankets, only their blue faces left visible, dry foam around their mouths, sometimes mixed with a trickle of blood", she wrote, shocked about the paralysis of her own feelings.

Militarisation and the process of adding fuel to the fire which mark the differences in faith is not the only reason that the lines of conflict have lost their clear definition. In Syria, wars of proxy are fought in many different regions: between Saudi Arabia and Iran, between Sunnite and Shiite extremists, between Turkey and the PKK – to name but a few. In addition to this, there is the global competition over areas of influence. And none of these parties is interested in the democratic movement – on the contrary, it seems as if they have all pledged an oath to stop the further spread of democratic utopia in the region. It is rather the case that there are those in favour of making the Assad regime a partner in the international fight against the Islamic State. They do not see that the violence of one is a precondition for the violence of the other. "Now, the hate-filled despotic Assad nihilism has been joined by a religious suicide nihilism which saw death as an awakening to life. But the first nihilism was the mother of the second", the Syrian author Samar Yazbak wrote of the IS fighters in her book "The Stolen Revolution". During the first months of the uprising, the Assad regime had released the majority of the Jihadists from his prisons with the task of infiltrating the revolution. Until the end of 2014, the IS neither fought against the Assad regime and neither did the Assad regime fight against the IS. Both aimed their weapons at the Syrian opposition.

Since violence has now taken on a life of its own and we are witnessing a growing divide between religions, the question remains to be asked whether a democratic solution in Syria is possible at all under these conditions. Many voices are pessimistic. The philosopher Sadiq al-Azm believes that it is too late to support a civil path of development. Uprising and suppression of this uprising had manifested themselves and many young people had become radicalised. The economist Arif Dalila, one of the spokesmen of the Damascus Spring in 2000, which was far too short, actually doubts that the Syria we know today will exist in the future.

In spite of this, new civil society networks still continue to form again and again. Before the revolution began there were a few hundred associations, most of which were controlled by the government.

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Today, in the 5th year of the uprising, there are more than 5,000. Up until today, the people of Kfar Nabel, for example, well-known worldwide on account of their caricatures, demonstrate using new pictures: in the weeks previous they denounced the bombing of their villages by Russian planes. People in the regions controlled by the regime also organise aid for the refugees and document human rights violations. Even in the areas occupied by the IS, there are many civil resistance groups working underground which remind of the fate of millions taken hostage by the IS. In this way, the group *Raqqa is Slaughtered in Silence* risk their lives to document the crimes of the self-appointed Emire, but also the consequences of the bombings carried out by the Anti-Isis-Coalition on the civilian population. Two of them were recently executed.

*Adopt a Revolution* supports the foundation of civil society centres which offer a place for discussion between the different groups. Members of different confessional, religious and ethnic groups can meet here and talk together both about different ways of overcoming the conflicts and also about the path towards a more open and tolerant society. They recently published the plea from non-government organisations demanding unconditional negotiations between all conflicting parties with the inclusion of the civil society. The initiative is called *Planet Syria*. The Syrian activists call upon the international civil society to accompany them in this peace process so that their voice can also be heard outside Syria.

Has such an initiative any chance at all against the IS claim for absolute validity, against the barbarity of the Assad regime, against the radicalisation of desperate people and against the interests of all the countries involved in this conflict? I really do not know. But I do know that in the course of history there have always been people who never lost hope even during the darkest moments. The painter and communist Matisse was criticised by the resistance during the German occupation of France because he did not stop painting beautiful pictures despite the war and Nazi terror. He was painting the beauty which it was worth fighting for, was his answer. Since 2011, *Adopt a Revolution* has continued to support a democratic and peaceful utopia for all Syrians – independent of their confessional and ethnic affiliation – even when several of the protagonists of this utopia stared themselves to have their doubts about it. They have made a contribution to keeping the light of this utopian vision alive. They have given the activists the feeling of not being completely alone and encouraged them not to give up hope. And they have given a clear signal to the policy makers, who – whether due to indifference, ignorance or disinterest – have given up on the Syrian crisis. For all of this, I would like to thank you in the name of those present here this evening.



Ivesa Lübben, Centre for Near and Middle East Studies, (CNMS), Philipps University of Marburg.