

## **Watan Annual Conference**

**Istanbul, 10 December 2015**

**Introduction by Ambassador Dr. Nikolaos van Dam**

**Special Envoy of the Netherlands for Syria**

Ladies and gentlemen,

When I visited Syria for the first time, more than half a century ago in 1964, I could easily travel anywhere in this beautiful country. Most striking of all was the kindness and hospitality of the Syrian people, wherever I went. I got to know the people in Syria as being kind, respectful, tolerant and open-minded. Also then people were living under a harsh dictatorship, but to the outsider this was less visible.

I enjoyed the fascinating suqs of Aleppo and Damascus, the beautiful mountains of the coast, Hama and Homs, Palmyra, and many other places. Many of the beautiful places I visited in the past, now remind us of fierce battles and bloody war. Aleppo with its burnt out suqs, Hama with its blood bath of 1982 and heavy destruction during the Syrian Revolution, Homs with its

embattled district of al-Wa'r, among others, Palmyra with its infamous prison and occupation by Da'ish. The forgotten or dead villages in Northern Syria with their interesting ancient ruins, where some of the best olive oil was produced, are now disrupted by fierce battles in places like Kafr Nubul and many others. Bosra Eski Sham with its spectacular Roman theater close to Deraa, where the Syrian Revolution started in 2011, is now part of the Southern Front. When I crossed the border from Syria to Iraq by train in 1965, I got a stamp in my passport at Tel Kotchek, a border that now is ruled by Da'ish terror.

If I were to visit Syria now, I would be confronted with many dangers. For me this is just a pity, because I cannot any longer visit my favorite country.

For the people of Syria themselves the situation is, of course, dramatically worse. The people in Syria are suffering heavily on a daily basis and continuously fear for their lives and for their families. More than a quarter of a million Syrian people have already been killed or tortured to death at the hands of the

dictatorial regime. The terrorists of Da'ish are killing without any justifiable reason, insulting the essence of Islam itself.

I was born in a country that has not seen war in my lifetime. My country is a democracy, with full freedom of expression; and looking at Syrian society going through its present ordeal, I realize the more how privileged I am.

It is extremely important for people in the West to have real empathy with, and understanding for, those living inside Syria, as well as for those who feel the pain of exile.

Many people tend to think that the terrible situation in Syria cannot become even worse than it already is. But past experiences have unfortunately shown that even worse developments are almost always possible. Often too little is being done, too late, to prevent this. Often, side issues are being addressed without seriously looking at the core issues of the war in Syria itself. Yes, the refugee issue and terrorist attacks are extremely important, but looking at the root causes of these issues is most important.

Many Syrians have fled the horrors and are now living in very bad conditions abroad – often safe from physical harm, with thanks to our generous Turkish hosts and also to the governments of Jordan and Lebanon – but with millions of children unable to go to school, and millions of good people unemployed.

Altogether, this paints a very bleak picture, without clearly visible prospects for a better life in the foreseeable future. We have to be clear about this.

Nevertheless I am not without hope for Syria and the Syrians. It is clear that there will not be an end to war, without making peace. And peace you have to make with your enemies.

Therefore political meetings are necessary to bridge differences and find ground for solutions, with international players and Syrians alike. Be it in Vienna, Riyadh, Geneva or elsewhere. But progress is painfully slow, and has not yet given me hope this conflict will *soon* be resolved.

What *does* give me hope, is seeing the people in this gathering, and the people they represent. And I thank the organizers of this conference, which we support, for giving me the chance to say a few words.

The government of the Netherlands gives substantial amounts of aid for the people of Syria, with emphasis on education and maintaining self-reliance of Syrian families. Only last month, we gave 110 million euros extra for humanitarian cross-border aid, and aid in the countries surrounding Syria. We also support civil defense by the White Helmets, we support the Free Syrian Police in the north, and we provide non-lethal support to the moderate Syrian armed opposition. We work together with the United Nations and with other large organizations, also in support of the political processes. Our focus is to ensure that Syrian voices, and especially those of people inside Syria and of women, are heard in the political processes.

What fewer people know, however, is that we also fund a lot of local initiatives. Even if I have not met most of you in person, I have met many people who are working to maintain the Syria I know from the grass-roots up. We support, for instance, a small

center for human rights. We support an organization delivering children's books. We support a critical young Syrian filmmaker, who is free to say whatever he wants. We supported a municipality installing street-lighting, to help women and men going out at night without fear, and many other activities for the Syrian people. These initiatives do not feed all the hungry, and we are not doing enough, we cannot do enough. But it is these local initiatives – thought of by Syrians, implemented by Syrians, for the benefit Syrians – that really show the community spirit of free Syria.

Of course there cannot be hope for the future without an end to the fighting and a lasting political solution, agreed upon amongst Syrians, and backed by all Syrians. We cannot at all be joyful without an end to the fighting.

But the fact that people like yourselves are working every day to keep the spirit of a free Syria alive, even under these terrible conditions, this gives us hope that a free future will one day come.

Thank you for your good work.

Thank you for your attention.