

Speech of Leo Gabriel at the inauguration of the  
“All sides Consultation on a political solution in Syria”,

held on March, 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Ladies and gentlemen, friends, participants,

Since one year and a half our initiative [www.peaceinsyria.org](http://www.peaceinsyria.org) has been working on a dream whose realization you represent.. It is the dream that military conflict can be overcome by the will of the people, by the will of civil society.

“Peace is just a matter which is far too important to be left to the politicians”, we were always saying in the World Social Forum which is this worldwide gathering of social movements, of NGO's, of non-governmental instances which somehow reflect the spirit of the ground, the spirit of the people an international scale.

By the way, talking about the World Social Forum, the last conference, which I had the great pleasure of organizing and which also took place here in the Castle of Schlaining, in 1998. There are even some of my friends here today who participated in that conference.. And although that conference was not bigger than this one, the idea of the World Social Forum has been conceived here, before becoming the big gathering which has taken place on different continents, first in Porto Alegre, Brasil, then in Mumbai, India and the latest took place in Tunis. This was conceived in this room.

And what I am dreaming about is that also this meeting is going to be the “kick-off” for a longer process which gives the main role to civil society actors. That is why we call it “Consultation of Civil Society”. At the difference to the “Political Society” which is a system of representatives, more or less democratic, the civil society speaks for itself. For instance in the World Social Forum, at the beginning, one of the big trade unionists of France was saying, when somebody else was contradicting him: “You don't know whom you're speaking to! I represent 200.000 workers, so my opinion is stronger than your opinion.” However, according to the rules we established from the very beginning in the World Social Forum, everybody should speak for himself/herself. Because we knew that although we belong to different kinds of organizations and we reflect that in our reflection, we should not speak according to a preconceived “power code”, which means that one's opinion is bigger than another's opinion because of the power he or she represents.

This is a the first point I want to propose for this conference: Everybody speaks on behalf of him or herself and not on the behalf of others. The second point I want to propose is that in this conference we make as little as possible claims to the powerful.

In the past, unfortunately, it has been shown that the powerful don't react much to these claims. Therefore we should not waste our time to project our wishful thinking to those who are in power, may it be Russia, the USA, Iran or Saudi Arabia etc. I am not so megalomaniac to think they will listen to what I say! Instead the center of the conference should be: What can we do as civil society, inside Syria and outside Syria, in order to promote Peace?

Yesterday we had a very interesting tour in this wonderful castle here, where all of a sudden we saw a sentence written on a wall: "Peace is more than just the absence of war. Peace is also social justice, democracy and the respect for the other's religions or beliefs." All of that is part of Peace.

And in this sense I hope that our minds should be geared forward to this vision that peace is a possibility. Peace is a real possibility already now we can talk about and ask ourselves, what could we do in the different fields of action. These fields of action and of reflection you can find in the program of the conference. They are structured according to the different needs of the people: the needs of security, the needs of culture, the needs of the refugees, the needs of democratic reconstruction not only after the war but also while the war is going on; and finally the need for some kind of political transition.

At the difference to the Geneva-Process where the two powers of Syria, the government and the opposition were articulated in two delegations we are covering altogether a much broader range of civil society. In Geneva they were confronting each other, because they were very much underlining the question: "Who is going to be in the transitional government?", or: "What is the best formula for the so called "power sharing"?" In our conference we will also talk about that, but we will leave this to the very end of the conference and first of all deal with the needs of the people.

Dear participants,

I think there is a common claim inside Syria and outside of Syria that is the claim that this war has to stop. This is the sense of our initiative, when we define ourselves as "a sort of a movement for a political negotiation, as a movement of civil society to enhance the possibilities for a political solution".

Therefore we should claim that all people, in one way or the other should participate in these efforts. Some of them could not come, because, as they say in Spanish "los poderes facticos" (the powers of reality) did not allow them to participate here. But those who are here came, because they agree with the need for what we have called an "All Sides Consultation for a Political Solution".

You are coming from the most diverse sectors of Syrian society. And I don't speak only politically. I speak culturally, regionally and economically. You come from different regions, belong to different classes and political milieus. You are a true mosaic and it is this mosaic I've always appreciated so much when I went to Syria, because you are coming from a culture of great diversity, which is reflected somehow in this room.

And as somebody who is not just starting out with his life, but has passed already some years already in these efforts of peace-building in different parts of the world I want to ask you a last favor, which -I know - is very, very difficult to grant! Don't look back so much! I think it is inevitable to look back. But let's not waste too much time discussing what happened in the past? Who is the guilty one? . Not because this would not be important. I am convinced that one day these questions have to be dealt with, but our task here is a much bigger one here. Our task is to look forward in order to discover the real concrete possibilities for a sustainable Peace, which is not just a "peace" in abstract terms, but a real goal which we only can achieve step by step.

The format of our discussions is very easy to understand. We have broken down the problem, the problems into five chapters. And in each of these chapters, - you find them in the Program-outline -, we asked four participants to intervene, but not to give a key-note speech - just to get the discussion going. This is not a conference like many academic conferences where everybody gets to speak once and everybody talks for at least half an hour and the others listen... No! We would really like your participation around the table in the most lively and dynamic way possible. And this will be only possible if you stick to a certain time-frame: we ask you to limit yourself in this initial statement to five minutes for each intervention and then in the responses try to make three minutes. So that others also can react to each other and can make this discussion as fruitful and lively as possible.

We, from the initiative [peaceinsyria.org](http://peaceinsyria.org), some of them are present here, will take up the moderation of the discussion. We won't explain to you how Syria should be or how it is, because you know that far better than we do. We just want to facilitate this dialogue among the different actors around the table and to ask you to keep in mind our common objective: to establish a consensus around this table. I know it's difficult.

We, in the World Social Forum took up the old practice of the indigenes people who refused to be conducted by a majority rule. Because they say: "If there is a majority than there is also a minority and the minority will always feel bad by being overruled by the majority". That's why there is never a voting-process. The art consists in changing one's proposals in a way that finally you can reach the other, reach a consensus. And if we really have the light of Peace in front of us it will be all the much easier to sometime renounce to the formulation on some particularity which the others would not accept. Let's find a common ground. Let's find a consensus. So we can say to the outside world and perhaps at the press conference on Monday: "Although the constituency has been so diverse, as you are, it has reached a consensus on certain important points".

This consensus can be reached easier if your interventions are oriented by proposals; not so much on what the others should do, but - as I said at the beginning - what we can do. We, as part of civil society.

Already by listening to you and seeing your friendly eyes now I am pretty sure, that this meeting, that this consultation has the chance to be a historic step, if we manage not to fall back to the old schemes of contradicting each other at any price and accept the new light of peace-building from the perspective of civil society.