

Kronberg Middle East Talks

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Speech by Dr. Gunter Thielen

Chairman and CEO of the Bertelsmann Stiftung

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a privilege to be with such a distinguished group this evening.

I have had the pleasure of meeting many of you in earlier years but this year's Kronberg talks are particularly important to me.

We are all honored by the presence of the Vice-Chancellor and Foreign Minister of the Federal Republic of Germany, Dr. Frank Walter Steinmeier.

Herzlich willkommen, Minister Steinmeier, we truly appreciate your participation.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The 2008 Kronberg Talks are taking place at a time of special promise. After many difficult years, we now see movement in central aspects of the Middle East conflict.

We have always sought to explore possibilities and options for a negotiated settlement and to discuss them with all involved parties.

None of the meetings we have held so far has been easy, and none has lacked controversy.

Moreover, we in Kronberg have always had a focus that went beyond the Middle East conflict in a more narrow sense.

From our viewpoint, and from a European strategic perspective, it is important to consider the entire Mediterranean region, the Middle East and the Gulf region as a whole.

These considerations motivated the founders of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, Reinhard and Liz Mohn, to organize a major conference in Barcelona in 1992, marking the beginning of the foundation's involvement in this area.

I am therefore particularly pleased that Liz Mohn is able to be with us this evening. The personal commitment she has shown is evidence of the significance of this gathering. Liz, I should like to extend a special welcome to you.

The greater Middle East is one of the most sensitive regions in world affairs. Nowhere else are political opportunities and risks, power and powerlessness, abundance and need so closely linked.

Europe has close ties to the Middle East – the Mediterranean region represents the cradle of our civilization. Many of our religious and cultural traditions are rooted in the Middle East – it is more than simply a centuries-old trade hub on the way to Asia. The knowledge that we have gained from the peoples of this region has greatly enriched Western thought and science.

From the movement of goods, to energy supplies, to investments, to the great waves of migration, the lifeblood of European industry still runs through this region.

The conflicts in the Middle East also affect our security. We are more than just neighbors of North Africa, the Middle East and the Gulf region. And we cannot choose a strategy based on the idea that “good fences make good neighbors.”

We Europeans will have to do our part to help achieve a negotiated settlement.

Without the active role played by the United States, it will be impossible to reconcile the various differing interests; without Europe's involvement there can be no permanent solution.

It is up to us not only to play a supporting role in securing negotiated results, but also to enhance the opportunities for economic and social development in the region.

This requires targeted efforts to improve overall economic conditions: in other words, transparent and reliable regulations and a predictable legal framework for companies, freedom of investment – in both directions – and effective public administration bodies.

On the part of the European Union, we need more openness.

The region that stretches from the western Mediterranean to the Gulf needs enormous investments in education, training and lifelong learning in order to take full advantage of its value-added potential.

We Europeans have a great deal to contribute in this regard, not least because we have not yet done our own homework.

I should note, by the way, that I am not convinced that a “Mediterranean Union” is a better way to achieve these goals, as the French president recently suggested.

I consider it necessary and sensible for the entire EU to be involved.

Countries like Germany, too, are neighbors to the Mediterranean, although our geographical territory shares none of its coastline.

Germany’s domestic market is the single market of the EU, and our external borders are the borders of the Schengen region. Our security region is defined by NATO and the EU, and we are firmly tied to both by solidarity clauses and the obligations we have accepted to provide mutual assistance.

As I outline the European position, from a German perspective, I am fully aware that all of you bring with you to Kronberg your own interests and priorities as well as those of your countries and organizations.

And that is what is so exciting about these talks.

Over a period of two days, some seventy guests from twenty-six countries, representing the political, business and academic spheres, will engage in discussion.

The unique character of our discussions here in Kronberg is of great significance.

Our exchange of ideas takes place in an intimate atmosphere.

A strategy paper offers a starting point for our discussions and debates.

To highlight the continuity of the Kronberg Talks, let me mention three distinguished individuals who have been involved from the very beginning:

Osama El-Baz, from Cairo,

George Lord Weidenfeld of Chelsea, from London, and

Hassan Abouyoub, from Rabat.

Like these three, all of you are the real pillars on which the Kronberg Talks are based. I am pleased that you have taken the time to come to Kronberg on this occasion. We need your contributions and the opportunity to exchange views with you.

Throughout the year we work toward this event, in preparatory workshops and in partnerships with think tanks and institutions from many different countries.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This year we would like to focus on three lines of discussion.

First: The Annapolis and Paris process has again set in motion a vital exchange of views between Israel and Palestine. We need to discuss options and strategies for a settlement.

Second, since the challenges and conflicts in the Middle East are interrelated, we intend to consider the consequences of Annapolis for the entire Gulf region, including Iraq, Iran and the Gulf states.

Motivated by the Bertelsmann Transformations Index, we would like – in the third focus of this year's Kronberg Talks – to consider the socioeconomic challenges facing the Arab countries.

I wish us all a fruitful dialogue that will produce exciting ideas and creative proposals.

I am particularly pleased in this context that the Vice-Chancellor and Foreign Minister of the Federal Republic of Germany, Dr. Frank Walter Steinmeier, will be giving the opening address this evening.

Last year, during Germany's dual presidency of the Council of the European Union and the G8, he was very much involved in the realization of the EU reform treaty and the discussion of energy security.

He regards a strategic European perspective as one of the fundamental aspects of German foreign policy.

With respect to the Middle East, Minister Steinmeier inspired the EU Action Plan for the rehabilitation of the Palestinian territories; he was instrumental in getting Syria involved; and he has carried out sensitive negotiations regarding Iran.

Minister Steinmeier,

Both East and West are looking forward to hearing from you. We are eager to hear your assessment of the current situation and your ideas for the future.

I invite you to take the podium.