

## Conference

# The Taif Agreement - 25 Years Later

### 22 - 24 October 2014 - Beirut, Phoenicia Hotel

Opening Remarks by **Achim Vogt**,  
Resident Director, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Beirut

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I would like to welcome you all, on behalf of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, to this event tonight and to the conference of the coming two days, revisiting the “Taif Agreement” exactly 25 years after it was concluded. I am deeply grateful that we have succeeded in organizing this conference together with our friend Talal Husseini and the Civil Center for National Initiative. Thank you very much for your work on this joint endeavour!

I believe it is an important moment to discuss Taif – and it is the right moment: Lebanon finds itself at a crossroads once again, with the quest for a new president of the republic, the debate on the extension of the parliament’s mandate, the uncertain future of the social contract and the impact of the severe conflicts in the immediate neighbourhood of this country. How do the Lebanese, how does the state and its citizens want to confront these enormous challenges in the future? Can the Taif Agreement, with all its well-known deficits and shortcomings, still be a base for a national understanding on the key pillars on which the existence of the country and the nation rest?

I believe there are two key issues that need to be mentioned here:

First: While the tough negotiations of those 23 days in the autumn of 1989 were certainly accompanied by a number of regional and international actors, sometimes more supportive, sometimes more interfering, the Taif Agreement was – at the end of the day – an internal Lebanese achievement. I remember that many of us were skeptical at the time whether Taif would not just be another round of negotiations like so many before. And it would indeed take almost another year before the war finally ended. But that skepticism missed the point that the base of Taif was broader than it had been in any of the earlier attempts of peace-making.

And second: After 14 years of a destruction and disintegration, Taif did not only help to end the war but it also brought back some sense of the state, as fragile as it was and as it probably still is today.

I am well aware that there are very good reasons to argue that a sustained peace and a sustainable political system would have to look different and that there is still a long way to go. But I would argue that Taif was the cornerstone for a period of a quarter century of relative peace. In my view, the key problem was and is that crucial points of the agreement were never implemented, sometimes not even seriously discussed and that, therefore, Taif got stuck and met a dead-end in its first phase. The challenging debate will have to be whether to just struggle on to implement Taif as it stands, to reform it or to completely re-negotiate it.

Today, I do work on and in Lebanon, as somebody who accompanies and supports the complicated political processes in this country, in the framework of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Germany's oldest political foundation and think tank which has been present for almost fifty years in Lebanon.

One of the key challenges for Lebanon as for any multi-confessional society will be to work on a political and societal culture of "continuous compromise" – and I believe it is important to stress here that this is valid for the current status of a consociational system as for the envisaged non-confessional political structure of the Lebanese state in the future. We all know that the art of political compromise does face an uphill battle in this region but it will be of utmost importance for all political actors, including the existing spoilers, to understand that a sustained peace can only be achieved if a long-term win-win situation is assured for all parts of society.

The second key challenge, in my view, is the need for reforms. Re-forming the state and its institutions necessarily means change. But change is often perceived as a potential and even existential danger by the different groups of a divided and polarized society who feel affected by these changes. Only if the necessarily level of trust in state institutions, in their transparency and accountability, can be built, this confidence in the usefulness of reforms will develop.

These reforms will have to include socio-economic aspects. Only if the middle-class as the backbone of any healthy society will no longer feel the need to emigrate, only if the young, educated and skilled generation of this country feels the incentive to stay, to invest and to build the future of Lebanon, only if the social cleavages between the few rich and the many poor are no longer aggravating, only with social peace will political stability be achieved in the long run. Otherwise, I am afraid that there will – as a political analyst put it very nicely some days ago – continue to be two emigrations in Lebanon: one to North America, Europe and the Gulf – and one to radicalism.

Please permit me to add one aspect here, which might seem merely semantic, but is nevertheless of crucial importance. We usually say that a war breaks out, it begins, it starts. But we should always be aware of the fact that a war is started by people, by the political actors involved. And the same is true for peace, for political peace as much as for the peace within a society: It does not come overnight, it does not come on its own. It is achieved by politicians, by personalities, sometimes by the society – and it is always a long and tedious process which has to continue.

I will not go into the details and deficits, the achievements and challenges of Taif here. Rather, I would like to seize this opportunity to invite you all to meet and listen to the statements and analyses of so many distinguished speakers, Lebanese and international, politicians, religious leaders, representatives of Lebanon's civil society, academics and witnesses of the Taif negotiations over the coming two days.

Our former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt once said: "He who has a vision should go see a doctor." With all respect for this great statesman, I beg to differ here. I would rather subscribe to Martin Luther King's "I have a dream!" And therefore, allow me to close by not merely wishing you all fruitful deliberations and discussions and many new thoughts – but to hope that in 25 years from now we might all meet again and analyze the situation of a then peaceful and politically stable Lebanon in which a non-confessional government and political class work for the common interest of all Lebanese, for a sustainable socio-economic development in a country which offers a prosperous future for its citizens.