



**Federal President Joachim Gauck  
honouring Houcine Abassi on his receipt of the  
Africa Award from the German Africa Foundation  
on 19 November 2015  
in Berlin**

Good evening! And above all, mesa al kher! During my state visit to Tunisia six months ago I was told that was the correct way to address Tunisians, including today's award winner, at this time of day.

And let me add a most heartfelt bonsoir! As neighbours and friends, many people in our country – including me – feel a special affinity with France at this present time. Even more than at other times, so shortly after the cowardly attacks in the French capital, we sense that freedom and democracy have to be defended time and again, that we have to ensure neither fanaticism nor terror is allowed to thrive. Of course, that applies not only to Europe. People in other parts of the world, especially in Africa, have been suffering most terribly for some time now due to the violence unleashed by the terrorists. Yesterday's attacks by Boko Haram in Nigeria were another brutal example of such cruelty. They, too, remind us how important it is that the civilised international community defends universal human rights.

You, too, Mr Abassi, epitomise this conviction in a quite special way. The German Africa Foundation asked me in the spring whether I would like to present you with the 2015 Africa Award. At that time the attacks of 13 November were no more foreseeable than was the fact that another jury would beat us to it, a jury with the crucial word peace in its name. Now I can congratulate you on two counts: on the Africa Award and on the Nobel Peace Prize!

In both cases, the honour for you as an individual is inextricably linked to your membership in a key Tunisian grouping, the National Dialogue Quartet, which comprises the Tunisian General Labour Union, the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts, the Tunisian Human Rights League and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers. The Quartet was founded in the summer of 2013 – two years after such

great hopes flourished in the Arab Spring, only to wither in the sun – and you were instrumental in its foundation. You became a trailblazer for peaceful change and democracy during a most precarious phase when your country was on the brink of violence, civil war and anarchy. You have achieved great things in and with this Quartet! Perhaps now, in the light of the recent attacks, we Europeans can appreciate even better the extent of your achievements.

I trust you will pass on my congratulations and best wishes to all of your colleagues and fellow activists. It is true that the ceremony today is expressly honouring one man only, yourself. But I think you will agree when I say that the respect and admiration this award expresses is directed at all those involved and is intended to inspire as many people as possible.

Our world needs more people like you, Mr Abassi. Our world needs men and women who place their faith in dialogue and compromise – not in dictatorial rule and the use of force. Our world needs committed democrats who are ready to admit that democracy can sometimes be hard work, but who also leave people in no doubt that democracy is always worth this effort. Why? Because there is simply no other political system which gives the individual so much freedom and enables people to explore their potential whilst at the same time providing a secure, reliable framework for the community as a whole.

You, Mr Abassi, have time and again advocated this system vigorously and doggedly, and you have not let the setbacks discourage you. When your country was at risk of descending into chaos in 2013 following the assassination of opposition politician Mohamed Brahmi, it was you, as Secretary General of the UGTT trade union movement, who pointed Tunisia in the right direction. It was you who kept on calling for peaceful dialogue. And it was you who first brought the government of the day, the opposition and the constituent assembly together at a single table.

The 2015 Africa Award is bestowed on you for all of this.

And let me add furthermore that the impact of your actions has been enormous. Tunisia really has taken the road you staked out. Tunisia has in the meantime held two free elections and adopted a constitution which is in many ways exemplary for the Arab world. Tunisia has become a beacon of hope. And that makes us so glad.

This transition was and remains no small feat, of that we are all aware. I have to admit that I do not know as much about Africa as Horst Köhler, one of my predecessors in this office. But I can see the huge challenges facing the individual countries. During my visit to Tunisia, I was reassured by the fact that the political class and civil society had taken the right fork in the road. I was often reminded of

the difficulties involved in establishing a true democracy. Many of you, if not all, know that I come from what was once East Germany. I still recall precisely what it was like when we were in the process of reinventing democracy for ourselves and implementing it ourselves, how complicated it was to forge German Unity in the face of so many opposing influences. And yet we were lucky, for we had our West German compatriots at our side to serve as strong partners, partners who pointed us toward successful political and economic solutions. They gave their stabilising support to those who were busy trying to mould a new democracy.

When we turn to look at Tunisia, we find ourselves asking where is this strong shoulder to lean on? And we realise that the people in Tunisia have to negotiate on their own all those changes for which we East Germans received such immense support, not least prodigious financial support. Tunisia has to do it all with its own resources. The task is compounded by the external and internal threats, such as the long, relatively porous border to Libya. And when a country is so immersed in a process of transition, when it has to bring its resources to bear so intensively at all levels of society, there is yet another issue it needs to tackle simultaneously. Some kind of internal reconciliation process has to take place. This, too, has to be driven forward. One has to be clear on how the dictatorship's functionaries are to be dealt with.

There are so many tasks that have to be tackled at the same time. I am glad that Tunisia is successfully mastering these challenges and, in spite of everything, is adhering to the democratic principle of seeking compromise. That has earned your country great respect. I want to use this opportunity today here in Berlin to give fresh encouragement to your fellow Tunisians back home. To them I say, as I said during my visit to Tunisia, the road you are taking is a good road, regardless of how many countries have yet to take it. The road you are taking is a good road, even if the going is slow. Stay on this road. The countries of Europe differed in the length of time they took to entrench the vital principle of democracy into their state structures. But everywhere that democracy has been implemented, it has been good for the people.

Without a doubt, we must continue to watch Tunisia. And we have to take an interest in how we can stabilise this fledgling democracy. There are various ways in which we can help. In my political career, I have attached great importance to addressing the wrongs of the past. But there are many more imperative tasks to be dealt with in Tunisia, such as preventing terrorist attacks, combating corruption – a scourge that hinders progress in many transition countries. In addition, we need new economic sectors to be developed, and above all, we need jobs for young people. Tunisia needs its young people – and economic recovery. All of these tasks have to be pursued simultaneously. Tunisia could serve as a role model – at least that is

what I and many others hope. It could be an inspiration to other countries on the continent.

I speak as a friend of your country, Mr Abassi, but also with another development in mind, a development that has occupied us greatly these past weeks and months – I am referring of course to the great flows of refugees, including the movement to the European continent from Africa. The fact that people are leaving their homes to seek freedom, democracy and a better life elsewhere not only poses a great challenge to the countries they arrive in, but also to their countries of origin. Because, as we know, it is often the young and the well educated who leave. Then these people's strength and abilities are sadly lacking in the countries they have left. And sometimes the strength to stand up to injustice is gone. The strength to build a new society with verve and vigour is likewise in short supply.

Ladies and gentlemen, when I see you all here before me, MPs, businesspeople and cultural professionals alike, then I truly think how wonderful that we have all joined forces. I am proud that so many good things have already been initiated. But, to be honest, days like this bring it home to me that although we are quite happy to speak words of praise, and to show our gratitude to wonderful people like today's award winner, but there are other days, weeks and years when I ask myself what are we doing to stabilise this promising process? At such times I wish that our democratic support for these reform movements were accompanied by activities to bring economic stability, economic innovation. We need our business elite, as well as smaller chambers of commerce and business associations and individual companies to engage actively in countries such as Tunisia, in order to establish the material conditions that are genuinely necessary. After all, our own democracy did not put down roots simply because we had brilliant statesmen like Konrad Adenauer, but because we developed a stable economic system that brought prosperity to the people. This prosperity made people glad to live in their country each and every day. That's how it was. And therefore we have to complement our heartfelt congratulations today with great exertions. We have to work out what else we can do to lend more sustainable assistance to countries that have successfully completed the first steps in their process of transition.

To sum up, we are today commending a magnificent winner, and it is our great pleasure to do so. But this award ceremony should also serve as a reminder, as food for thought. Changes in Tunisia are in our common interest – in our active interest. If you call yourself a partner, or even a friend, you take on special obligations. Making that clear to yourself is one of the major constant tasks of any democratic society. We recognise ourselves by the challenges we accept. This applies to the major domestic issues we face, and equally to foreign policy challenges. Anyone who keeps challenges at arm's length will

ultimately become a stranger to themselves. Whereas those who confront the great challenges will be able to recognise themselves in the manner in which they bear the ensuing responsibilities.

With this in mind, it is my great pleasure, Mr Abassi, to know that in your country and in Germany people have come together who are and will remain interested in the prosperity and well-being of Tunisia and in the growth of democracy there.

Similarly, I view our handshake – I trust you will shake hands with me in just a moment – as symbolising a shared desire: to see this handshake joined by very many more – we need them all to forge a bridge between Africa and Europe.