

Words of Welcome by Pierre Schori at the Olof Palme Prize ceremony, on the 29th of January 2016, in the old Parliament Building, Stockholm, Sweden.

Dear friends,

A warm welcome to all of you to this 27th Annual Award Ceremony of the Olof Palme Prize. A special welcome to Lisbet Palme and other members of the family present here today, and of course to our guests of honour, Gideon Levy and Mitri Rahab.

We are happy to see three members of the Swedish government here, as well as members of the Swedish and European parliaments and local governments, and we greet former prime minister Ingvar Carlsson.

We also welcome representatives of the diplomatic corps and the Foreign Ministry, civil society and churches, trade unions and Jewish and Palestinian solidarity groups, academia and think tanks, media and publishing houses, cultural workers and artists, the public and private sectors, students and peace activists, the Fair Trade movement, and of the EU Commission and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. What would the world be without the UNHCR in these times?

And we salute Anders Kompass, director for field operations at the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights here present. Earlier today he received the Swedish UN Association's distinction The UN Friend of the Year for his work to protect children and other vulnerable groups in conflict situations, in stark contrast to his incompetent superiors, During the civil wars in Central America in 1980s Anders saved hundreds of people fleeing from military death squads and contributed significantly to the regional peace processes. He also advised prime minister Olof Palme during his visit in Mexico and Nicaragua. Anders represents the best of the United Nations' core values.

We gather here in the old Parliament, where Olof Palme spent much time working as an MP. You can see his name on this wall to my right, next to that of former foreign minister Lena Hjelm-Wallén, also present here,

2016 will mark the 30th year after the assassination of Olof Palme. Three decades are a long time, but his legacy is intact and still engaging people of all generations worldwide.

Olof Palme, radical reformer at home, humble to people without power and fearless truthspeaker to oppressing elites, a promoter of peace, dialogue and disarmament in times of disinformation, propaganda and militarism. The concept of détente through common security, trade, culture, diplomacy and people to people relations are elements that are missing in today's world of confrontation, xenophobia, occupation, terror, erosion of human rights and the human right of seeking asylum.

It is not a coincidence, nor a whim, that, at a special commemoration, here in Stockholm next month, the theme will be Olof Palme and the Future (Framtiden med Olof Palme). It indicates that his personality, his politics and practical achievements have left an undeliable and inspiring mark. We need people like Olof Palme today. We need them badly.

Palme's legacy can be seen in today's politics, when prime minister Stefan Löfven in his first policy declaration said No to Nato membership and Yes to a Palestinian state.

And we just came from a meeting with foreign minister Margot Wallström, who greeted

our two laureats with a private conversation and a lunch at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. She confirmed Sweden's commitment to work for a global recognition of the state of Palestine.

As you have seen from the photo display on the screen, we have had, since 1987, the honour of awarding the Prize to men and women from all continents, people who have stood up for human rights with exceptional courage and dedication. Allow me to recognize in our midst Hans Blix, the 2003 recipient, for his work against the spread of weapons of mass destruction. He demonstrated under circumstances of strong external pressure independence and a commitment to principle which have inspired respect and admiration throughout the world. Had his work been allowed to be completed that spring of 2003, the world may have been spared the invasion of Iraq and all the horrific consequences we see today, in the region and beyond.

Waleed Sami Abu al-Khair received the 2012 Olof Palme Prize for his struggle to promote respect for human and civil rights for both men and women in Saudi Arabia. His relative Raif Badawi was sentenced in 2014 to ten years imprisonment and one thousand whip lashes for having "insulted Islam". We repeat again our demand on the Saudi government: Release Waleed and Raif and stop the horrific mass executions in your country! We remember in this context our 2000 awardee, Bryan Stevenson, lawyer and human rights activist in the United States, who has maintained tirelessly that the death penalty is an ultimate form of torture, and that the state does not have the right to kill its citizens.

But there is also hope.

In Tunisia Radhia Nasraoui, human rights defender and lawyer, who was awarded the 2012 Olof Palme Prize, for her untiring work against torture and impunity for more than three decades, is seeing results of her struggle. So does our 2005 awardee, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, then in confinement in Burma, who became an important symbol of peaceful opposition to repressive power to peoples around the world.

Friends, and foes for that matter,

It is in this tradition and spirit of the Olof Palme Prize that we honour Mitri Raheb and Gideon Levy. The reason is the following:

The 2015 Olof Palme Prize is awarded to the Palestinian pastor Mitri Raheb, and the Israeli journalist Gideon Levy, for their courageous and indefatigable fight against occupation and violence, and for a future Middle East characterized by peaceful coexistence and equality for all. By their work they both give a ray of hope to a conflict that has plagued and continues to plague millions of people and to endanger world peace.

Gideon Levy is working for peace and reconciliation by means of a passionate search for truth and a fearless faith in the victory of reason in a region infested by prejudice and violence, propaganda and disinformation. With parents who were forced to emigrate from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia, and as a true patriot, he has made reconciliation with the Palestinian people the mission of his life.

As preacher and pastor in the Lutheran church, Mitri Raheb sends a clear message to

the young generation of Palestinians: "We want you to live, not die, for Palestine." In a Bethlehem confined on three sides by the walls of the occupying Israeli power, and with Dar al-Kalima University College of Arts and Culture that he founded and his innovative artistic education in film, art, and drama, Raheb has made it possible for young people to investigate their Palestinian identity, to nurture beauty, and to invest in a culture of life as tools for a creative resistance against suffocating confinement and for nation building.

Friends,

In this connection, it gives me great pleasure to announce that Antje Jackelén, the Archbishop of Sweden, seems to share our feelings of respect for our awardees. She will meet Gideon and Mitri tomorrow in relation to a dialogue in the Cathedral of Stockholm, which is a church for the whole of Sweden, denominating itself as a church for tolerance and reason. The theme of their speeches there will be Can culture be a way forward to peace?

23 years ago Olof Palme spoke in the same church. He told us the story of Isam Sartawi who worked for Yassir Araft and, denouncing violence, came up with a plan for peace between Palestinians and Israelis. Sartawi had been killed three days before, on April the 10th 1983.

Palme also told the story of Nahum Goldman, founder and longtime president of the World Jewish Congress, who, shortly before his death and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, demanded the mutual recognition of Israel and the PLO. He argued that there would be no peace for Israel as long as there was not a state for Palestinians.

Palme ended his speech by praising the two leaders with a quote from the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament: "Blessed are those who make peace".

I say today, blessed are we to have such awardees, so are Israel and Palestine and the world at large Blessed are those who work for peace and reconciliation, tolerance and the rule of law.

Thank you, Gideon Levy and Mitri Raheb!