

My Welcoming Address for Saïda Keller-Messahli in Connection with the 2016 Human Rights Award from the Swiss Section of the ISHR

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends of Human Rights!

The 2016 Human Rights Award from the Swiss Section of the ISHR goes to a courageous woman who deliberately polarizes for the benefit of human rights and who is ‘poking’ at one of the most important hornets’ nests of our time.

The Romanist Saïda Keller-Messahli was born in 1957 in a suburb of Tunis and grew up in Tunisia in a Muslim family. From the age of eight to thirteen she lived with a foster family in Grindelwald. Besides Tunisia, she got to know Palestine and Saudi Arabia in particular. Reading the book *The Malady of Islam*, published in 2002, she found her vocation and founded the Forum for a Progressive Islam in 2004.

Since that time, she has not been in a fight against Islam. She respects that religion, but she is fighting for a progressive Islam. She has done immense educational work at the risk of her life. She is very concerned that Islam be understood as a modern, humane and life-affirming source that also stands up for the human rights of all people – hence the prize! On its web page the forum presents itself in the following way:

“We are primarily Swiss citizens who care about the liberation of Islam from a gridlocked, culturally antagonistic impasse. We are people of Muslim and non-Muslim denominations who read and understand the Koran as a text of its time and place. We want to supplement this text with our current state of knowledge and in this way enable it to become a modern, human and life-affirming source.”



An understanding of Islam that either affirms the use of violence to “defend” Islam or calls for the political and societal enforcement of Islam and thereby regards the classical interpretation of Sharia law as binding does not fit with the idea of human rights. For this classical interpretation of Sharia law, established at the center of theology, provides for only reduced rights for women, the death penalty for “apostates” of Islam (atheists, converts), and a subjugated status for Jews and Christians. For those who regard the theocracy established by Muhammad in Medina as an indispensable model for the present, democracy and human rights can only be seen a stopgap solution, with which one can perhaps temporarily conclude a “treaty” but which in the long run must be replaced by an Islamic order (in whichever form).

Therefore, all those forces that live and found an Islam that is democracy- and freedom-compatible should be strengthened, but limits should be set on all those who want to subordinate human rights to Sharia law. A more careful and more informed distinction should be made between “Islam” and “political



Islam” in politics and society. This is due to the fact that from all citizens, religious or not, a commitment to and active advocacy for human rights, democracy, the rule of law, tolerance, freedom and rights of equality can be called for – and should be called for.

I am proud that one of our sections has recognized this and translated it into a public thank you to a tireless fighter for the good.

Thomas Schirmmacher

President of the International Council of the International Society for Human Rights