

The Principle of Humanity

The 22nd Anniversary of the Baghdad Bombing

Speech by Dr. Dhafer Younis Al-Hussini

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Ladies, Gentlemen, Colleagues, and Friends,

Every 19th of August casts a long, aching shadow. Twenty-two years ago, on that black day in 2003, we lost 22 colleagues in the bombing of the UN Office at the Canal Hotel in Baghdad. In an instant, their voices were silenced, their laughter stilled, their dreams cut short. But their memory never faded. It beats within us in every act of justice, every moment of courage, every quiet promise to carry on.

I was there. One of the few national officers who chose to stay when others, understandably, left. The fear was real. The grief, crushing. But something held me. A duty, a bond, a fire inside that refused to let their memory fade into silence. I stayed, not as a hero, but as a witness. As someone who believed then, as I still do, that serving humanity is more than a job. It is a call. An act of faith in the dignity of people, even in their darkest hour.

In those days before the attack, I remember hearing a voice that seemed to echo the sorrow and hope of our people. It was the voice of Kadhim Al-Sahir, singing “We Want Peace.” Broadcast across Iraq, his words were a cry from the heart of a wounded nation a plea for unity, dignity, and healing. I listened to that song countless times. It gave voice to what many of us felt but could not say. Amid the rubble, amid the blood, it was a whisper of hope. A reminder that even when peace seemed far, we had not given up on it.

That same year, we began to rebuild physically, emotionally, and institutionally. From the ashes of the Canal Hotel, we laid the foundation for the UN Human Rights Office in Iraq. That office became more than a place of work. It became sacred ground. We gave it our strength, our health, our years in exile. We gave it our hearts. For us, this mission was personal. A promise to the fallen that we would carry their light forward.

Over two decades, I witnessed unspeakable suffering mass displacement, sectarian violence, assassinations, and terror. But I also witnessed something just as powerful: resilience. I saw young Iraqis rise for justice, survivors rebuild their lives, and victims become advocates. And I saw my colleagues silent, steadfast stand by those who needed them, not for praise, but because it was right.

Now, as we are preparing to close our office at the end of 2025, another kind of silence looms. Not the silence of peace but the silence of absence. What becomes of the families still searching for truth? The victims are still waiting for justice. The human rights defenders who once saw our presence as a thread of protection.

To me, this closure feels like a second loss. We're not just locking doors or transferring files. We are packing away dreams. Folding the blue flag that stood quietly but firmly for human dignity. Saying goodbye to a space where we held hope together.

And yet, I hear the words of Sergio Vieira de Mello our fallen High Commissioner: "The UN is at its best when it stays on the ground, when it listens, when it stands with the people." Sergio knew that humanity isn't abstract. It's not written in slogans or spoken in conference rooms. It is lived in presence, in compassion, in refusing to walk away.

So let this not be the end. Let this anniversary not be just mourning but a call to action. We, the survivors those who stayed, those who left carry a responsibility. A moral duty to ensure Iraq is not forgotten. That the sacrifice of our colleagues was not in vain. That the dream of justice and dignity lives on.

Let us remember not only the fallen, but the living. The brave colleagues who remained. The communities we served. The country we believed in. Let us carry forward the principle of humanity not in word alone, but in heart, in memory, and in the choices we make every day.

Let us not only mourn the past. Let us protect the future.

Thank you.