Meherzia Labidi Maïza is Honorary President of Religions for Peace and is well aware of the potential for conflict harbored by religions. But she continually brings hostile parties together and is convinced that dialogue represents a path to peace.

She is one of those people who, once you’ve met, you’ll never forget. Radiant, bursting with energy and full of optimism, Meherzia Labidi Maïza is used to doing the unexpected and is a specialist for deadlocked situations. “I am extremely enthusiastic. I think that we will take a huge step forward at the conference in Lindau. ‘That would already be a success. “We give people the opportunity to talk to each other even if they aren’t compatible to others.”

She says that dialogue represents a path to peace. “Our task is to establish the conditions for dialogue,” says Labidi Maïza, before going on to list the bitterly antagonistic conflict parties that Religions for Peace has already managed to bring together. One instance saw the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem speaking in the same auditorium as a senior representative of Israeli Jews. Labidi Maïza also proudly recounts how peace talks between Indonesia and Aceh took a decisive turn toward success. “We give people the opportunity to talk to each other, even if they aren’t really able to talk to each other!”

This time, the situation seems to be particularly complex, with differences within the Muslim faith often being especially pronounced. Sunnis don’t always see eye-to-eye with the Shiites – but there is even conflict among the Sunnis, with Saudi Arabia and its allies facing off against the Qatar camp in proxy conflicts.

Some see the enthusiastic Labidi Maïza not primarily as someone who brings people together but as a representative of one of the conflict parties. Hardliners from the Saudi-led camp see the Tunisian Ennahda party as part of the movement connected to the Muslim Brotherhood and as such allied with Qatar. “That’s nonsense,” says Labidi Maïza. “Plus, what use are the doubts and mistrust? It brings us no further. We are concerned about humanity and improving people’s lives. We have to be open and receptive to others.”

She says her Ennahda party stands for the compatibility of democracy and Islam. Only recently, the party officially recognized the division between religion and politics. “You know, religion and faith can do so much good for people. Quite frequently, though, they are subsumed by traditions that serve first and foremost to put certain groups in power or keep them there,” she says. As such, she believes that freeing religions from adverse traditions is a precondition for achieving that which she refers to as the unleashing of the positive energies of religions. That and dialogue represent the foundations of Religions for Peace.

Once again, the word optimism comes up. “We are full of anticipation!” says Labidi Maïza. She expects not just representatives from Saudi Arabia, but also delegates from Iran to accept her invitation to the conference in Lindau. “That would already be a step in the right direction. But we hope the greatest breakthrough will come in a different conflict. At this conference, we will be focusing our attentions on Africa, especially on Nigeria. We hope to bring together Christians and Muslims,” she says – and once again, her voice has that particular ring to it. Labidi Maïza is deeply religious, and more than anything, she believes that human goodness and her own optimism is contagious.