Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor for me to speak to you today at this prestigious venue. Woodrow Wilson was a hugely influential figure in modern history and an architect of the paradigm shift in international relations toward a world order governed by the rule of law. Wilson’s role in establishing Geneva as a hub for international relations was fundamental. To this day, he is remembered and revered in Switzerland for his achievements in working toward world peace and for strengthening ethical values in international affairs. Against this historical backdrop, it comes as no surprise that the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars expertly unites the world of ideas with the world of policy.

This is the perfect setting to recall the events that led to the founding of the Red Cross and the signing of the first Geneva Convention 150 years ago. Henry Dunant’s shocking experiences on the battlefield of Solferino in July of 1859—less than two years before the outbreak of the American Civil War—led him to write his book A Memory of Solferino. In his compelling account of the horrors he encountered on the battlefield, Dunant proposed to create a neutral organization to help soldiers wounded in combat.

More importantly, Dunant also became politically active. The vision that took shape in Solferino laid the foundations for a series of instruments, the significance of which has not diminished today. With the help of a handful of citizens from Geneva, Dunant created the International Committee of the Red Cross to realize his idea on the ground. The Committee convinced the Swiss government to convene a diplomatic conference. The conference ended with the signing of a groundbreaking international agreement: the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field.

Today, more than 150 years later, Dunant's description of the reality of war appears strangely familiar. Eyewitness accounts from Syria, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan are uncannily similar to the picture painted by Dunant. Technological advances have altered warfare, but Dunant’s pioneering idea has lost none of its relevance and urgency.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Switzerland has always played an important role in the Red Cross movement. It is no coincidence that the Swiss flag and the Red Cross emblem are identical, but with reversed colors. Up to the present day, Switzerland has been the depository of the Geneva Conventions and its subsequent instruments. Humanitarian law and humanitarian action play an important role in Swiss foreign policy and are closely connected with neutrality as a foreign policy concept.
One hundred fifty years later, the Geneva Conventions are still the core of international humanitarian law. Their scope has been considerably expanded to include the shipwrecked, prisoners of war, and the civilian population. The conventions cover war between States as well as armed conflicts within national borders. They apply to traditional military warfare as well as to asymmetric conflicts such as the war on terror.

Respect for humanitarian principles and humanitarian law still present a challenge. Even the most fundamental principle of international humanitarian law, that any human being not directly involved in hostilities must be treated humanely even under the exceptional circumstances of war, is far from respected in the many armed conflicts that continue to plague the lives of hundreds of millions of people worldwide.

Most war victims are defenseless civilians, which is particularly disturbing because the very purpose of international humanitarian law is to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants during armed hostilities.

Civilians regularly suffer collateral damage and today often even become targets or are misused as human shields. The number of the dead makes the effects of war tangible only to some extent. People are maimed, wounded, raped, abused, and traumatized in far greater numbers. Providing assistance to them is usually difficult, if not outright impossible. Civilian facilities, such as hospitals, schools, and homes, are frequently affected and sometimes directly targeted.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

With those grim realities in mind, I cannot think of a better way to honor the 150th anniversary of the First Geneva Convention than to look at war from the victims’ perspective. Swiss photographer Jean Mohr, who was born in 1925, is among those in the best position to address this subject today. His images not only have a unique graphic quality; they are also remarkable for their great sensitivity and respect for the dignity of individuals affected by war and conflict.

Jean Mohr was a delegate to the International Committee of the Red Cross before becoming a professional photographer. Building on his firsthand experience as a humanitarian worker as well as on his artistic talent, Jean Mohr focuses on the consequences of war on refugees, prisoners, and civilians rather than on the horrors of war.

I especially like three aspects of Jean Mohr’s photographs.

First, his respect for victims. Too often victims are portrayed in a way that does not respect them as persons, as individuals. They become a means in a narrative, sometimes abused for a purpose that serves others. And through this, they very often become victims for a second time.

Second, Jean Mohr represents a stark contrast to conventional media attitudes that very often compete for more shocking news. Frightening readers, listeners, and viewers is often not the best way to tackle problems and to make the world better.

Third, as already mentioned, through his camera he tries to stimulate your thinking. He helps the viewer to understand that photography is not a self-contained work of journalism or art, but requires the observer’s pivotal role.

Jean Mohr’s photography reminds us that our work—whether academic, legal, political, or operational—is always about protecting the dignity of those individuals who are affected. The Geneva Conventions seek to uphold human dignity even during armed conflicts. This unwavering commitment to human dignity continues to be at the core of all humanitarian action.

Or, as Nelson Mandela once said in referring to the Geneva Conventions: “The Geneva Conventions continue to remind us most forcefully of our common obligation to care for each other.”

I am delighted that so many of you are here today to view the exhibition and become witnesses, through Jean Mohr’s photographs, to the impact of war and conflict on those individuals who are immediately affected by it.

Thank you.