

Strengthening the forces of moderation in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict

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Gelegenheid: Visit to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to the Beit Maierdorf Faculty Club today. I'm very grateful to the Harry S. Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace and the Netherlands Institute of International Relations at Clingendael for the invitation to open this unique conference. It is an honour and a pleasure to be able to speak to you on a subject that is close to my heart. I have always had a special, emotional bond with Israel and the Palestinian Territories. As a member of the Socialist International in the early nineties, I developed close contacts with the Israeli Labor Party, Fatah and many other political players. These types of contacts later proved instrumental in the negotiation of the Oslo Accords. Our recognition of the parties was crucial. And so was creating a climate of trust. There were personal ties between us, and although the debate was hard, it was also filled with realistic optimism. Everyone understood that confidence building was essential in light of the emotional weight of the past. But there was a prevailing sense that the forces of moderation had a real chance.

Later, while working at the European Commission's Directorate-General for External Relations, I was involved in organising the Palestinian elections of 1996. At that time a rare feeling of optimism again surrounded the Middle East Peace Process. Oslo 2 had just been signed, and the Second Intifada was still a long way off. Many Palestinians believed that the leaders they elected would be the first to govern an independent Palestinian state. As you know this was not the case, and unfortunately many more years of instability and conflict would follow.

After 1996 I continued to visit the region regularly as an MP for the Dutch Labour party. In the course of my travels I have not only seen Israel's society and political landscape change, from kibbutzim to high-tech and a fractious political system; I have also watched a divided Palestinian house without a single authority and a wider region falling into the grip of radical forces, corruption, sometimes authoritarianism. These elements, mixed with a young population without much chance for work or forming a family do not constitute a good basis to find forces of moderation.

Now I find myself here once again – this time as Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation. And as always, I'm on a very tight schedule. I want to see and analyse and understand as much as possible, and look at how we can play a positive role, however modest. Earlier today I spoke with Isaac Herzog, the Israeli social affairs minister and coordinator of humanitarian aid for the Gaza Strip during Operation Cast Lead. We had a good conversation, but I also made an important request: to open the borders of Gaza for commercial and humanitarian traffic.

Tomorrow I will be visiting Gaza to see the humanitarian situation with my own eyes. As we all know, conditions remain very serious there. I will meet with representatives of the United Nations Relief and Work Agency, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights and the International Committee of the Red Cross and listen to judge Goldstone who is investigating among other things the respect for international law. I will also be visiting entrepreneurs who, with Dutch help, are working to keep their businesses afloat, often with great courage and energy, against all the odds. If these people are abandoned; if they are unable to export their produce, it will be a direct blow to all moderates, to all those who want to build up their country in a spirit of fairness.

On Tuesday I will meet with the Palestinian Authority to discuss the current political situation and the ways in which the Netherlands and the European Union can contribute – under the current conditions – to developing the Palestinian economy and institutions. I would like to discuss the latter topic in the second part of my speech. First, I would like to devote a few words to the important subject that you will be addressing over the next two days: how to strengthen the forces of peace and moderation at a time when it is clearer than ever that radicalism is a dead end.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are talking to each other some three weeks after President Obama's Cairo address. It was a speech that many had been looking forward to with great anticipation. A speech aimed at opening a new chapter in US relations with the Muslim world, but without taking anything away from the long-standing solidarity between Israel and the United States. A speech that I support.

It was clear from the outset that the president's inspirational message would not satisfy everyone 100 per cent, and he refused to shy away from the difficult issues. He spoke about the 'unbreakable' bond with Israel. He passionately defended the Jewish right to a homeland. And he condemned anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial as 'baseless, ignorant and hateful'. At the same time he also demonstrated his grasp of the Arab and Islamic narrative. A narrative in which words such as 'dignity' and 'justice' often feature. I fully concur with him. It is long overdue to speak out clearly against 'humiliation' and 'occupation' and President Obama became the first American president to use the word 'Palestine'.

Whether we have indeed entered a new era of relations between the US and the Islamic world remains to be seen, of course. Recent events in Teheran have shown that reality can be complex and unpredictable; that the pursuit of democracy, development and human rights can take the form of a deadly struggle. We have to pay our respects to those who struggle for democracy and human rights. At the same time, years of suspicion and cynicism can not be easily forgotten. In the minds of many in the Arab world, those years will unfortunately forever be associated with names like Haditha, Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, with double standards when it comes to democracy and human rights. Now is the time to turn the page.

As President Obama himself said, everything depends on whether words can truly be turned into actions. We all have a duty to do what we can to help make that happen. The Dutch government, in any case, is prepared to lend its support to the forces that support democracy, human rights, and development. We will not apply double standards. We want to do everything in our power to bring about peace and development in the region. That is why I am here, and that is why my colleague, the Dutch foreign minister Maxime Verhagen, made an extensive visit to the region, including Israel, last week.

I hope this conference can further contribute to opening up the public debate. To do so it is important to stress that we have many shared interests, and to identify where they lie. Let me add my own modest thoughts on the subject. All the parties must be reminded of their responsibilities. No one can afford to simply sit back and wait for change to come. The way to a peaceful future will not be found in radicalism and confrontation. Instead we need a new, broader narrative – one that can serve as an incentive for change. A narrative that transcends all the obstacles and creates a vision – however brief – of a better world, and improved relations in the region. As development minister I understand the significance of that vision in almost every region in which we work. There are no solutions based on humiliation, division or terror. That is the clear lesson to be drawn from Middle East development policy in recent years.

Again, as a development minister – and one who is frequently confronted with the rhetoric of the ‘West against the rest’ – I also believe it was essential for Obama to reformulate the ‘with us or against us’ language of the War on Terror into a simple choice for or against peaceful co-existence. This forces radicals on all sides to show their true colours. This is positive because the history of the Middle East conflict teaches us that the paths of military action and terrorism lead nowhere. Acknowledging this leads not to naiveté but to realism and shared security. I am quite convinced that the solution to this complex conflict will only be found in compromise and restraint. And to achieve that, it is essential to strengthen the forces of moderation on all sides so they can talk realistically about compromise based on mutual interests. This will then facilitate economic development and poverty reduction.

Strengthening the forces of moderation; talking about compromise based on mutual interests: these are not self-evident choices at a time when radical forces are gaining ground all over the world as a result of political manipulation combined with a growing fear of globalisation. A time when conflicts within and between cultures are increasingly becoming conflicts of identity. Take the tensions between Sunni and Shia Islam. Or the ‘born again’ Islamists in Europe. Or the rising tide of radicalism within other world religions, from Christianity to Judaism and Hinduism: there are always manipulators who misuse faith for political gain.

The challenge before us is to think of new ways of promoting moderation. However we do it, I do not believe the answer lies in describing conflicts in existential terms, or in unilateralism, or in stirring up rivalries within or between different groups. Unfortunately, all three strategies are still being used in the Middle East. Now more than ever, many describe the conflict as a ‘zero sum’ game. This is what I mean by speaking in existential terms rather than in terms of territorial compromise. Some promote the ridiculous idea that the Islamic world is at war with the West. And as ever, some resort to unilateral action and violence that makes reaching a peace agreement difficult, if not impossible. The contours of the peace agreement have been around for years, and are -fortunately- still recognised by the public on both sides. Yet still, factionalism, personal vendettas and blockages generational changes combine to prevent the creation of trust. We see that in the political movements in the region.

How, then, can we promote moderation? As a former professor of conflict management at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, I believe that the literature on conflict management can teach us a great deal. In the final chapter of the book *Peacemaking in International Conflict*, my old professor William Zartman, who is Director of the school’s Conflict Management Programme, lists a number of methods and techniques for ending conflicts. He considers the question of when to negotiate directly and when mediation or arbitration should be applied. He discusses when states should act. Or international organisations and NGOs. When carrots and sticks work, and when they don’t. One of his most important lessons is that dialogue is one of the most important conditions for achieving peace. It is not simply a question of formal talks between governments, but of dialogue among ordinary people on both sides of the conflict.

I think that Zartman may be on to something here. Without mutual recognition of each other’s right to exist, there is little chance of peace. This applies to the current negotiations, but the principle also extends to the micro-level. As an MP, I remember awarding scholarships that allowed Palestinian students to attend Israeli universities. These young people not only studied with their Israeli fellow students; they talked, they debated and they formed friendships. The great advantage of exchange programmes like this is that they give people a chance to learn about each other’s cultures and societies. This kind of knowledge is essential for promoting moderation and moving closer to resolving this conflict. At this point the two societies scarcely know each other any more. These days, almost no one thinks in terms of sharing economic

progress or sovereignty. Walls have been erected between the two groups, both literally and figuratively: walls of humiliation and walls of misunderstanding. This approach has never worked. This same observation was made years ago by Palestinian thinkers and investors, and by economic regionalists like Shimon Peres. Economic blockades do not help to increase security, nor do rockets flying from Gaza. Working with the wider Arab region is crucial.

Besides dialogue, Zartman contends that trade is one of the best ways of promoting moderation and conflict resolution. I know it might be a cliché – the Dutch minister talking about trade – but I really do think that Zartman has a point. Strengthening global economic relations increases the number of people with a direct interest in peace. That's why the Netherlands supports many economic programmes, including an agricultural project that enables Palestinian farmers to earn money with the help of Israeli exporters. This benefits both parties and helps give a whole generation of Palestinians a glimpse of the brighter future that must one day come. When the Israeli government stops these exports it creates new sources of radicalism.

Perhaps Zartman's most significant conclusion is that 'peacemaking rests squarely in the hands of third parties'. He goes on to say that 'the very fact of conflict inhibits the parties involved from finding their own way out: they need help'. And that help 'may take the form of direct negotiation, or it may take the form of some kind of mediation – communication, formulation or manipulation. It may involve the utilisation of inducements, both negative and positive, to push the parties into a process of peacemaking and then to pull them successfully out of the process into peace.'

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is self-evident that the parties in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – unequal though they may be in power and income – will ultimately have to sort things out themselves. Only they can take meaningful steps on the path to peace; steps that go beyond 'feel good' signing ceremonies and interim agreements. Only they can ensure that the younger generation knows something other than war, and that cynicism does not prevail. That's not to say, however, that we don't need a robust international framework. In my view, such a framework can create an atmosphere of equality and equity which is clearly absent today so that moderates will be strengthened and radicals reined in. This brings me to my second main topic: the role of the European Union, and the Netherlands in particular.

I mentioned earlier that in the early nineties I was regularly in touch with both the Labor Party and Fatah, through the Socialist International. At the time there was a shared sense that Europe had a duty to promote Israel's security and encourage the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. It was felt that Europe had a part to play in the economic underpinning of peace, in areas like development cooperation and regional trade. The same is still true today in fact, even though the global, regional and local political context have changed radically. At a time when we're hearing a lot about the need for a 'multilateral moment', we have a responsibility to seek out the forces of peace and economic cooperation in the region as a whole. The Arab Human Development Report clearly shows how openness, labour intensive growth and women's rights are a prerequisite for the area to grow and survive in an increasingly competitive economy. Peace in the Middle East and development of the wider region can no longer be hijacked by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

I'm well aware that not everyone in the region sees the EU as a particularly potent actor in this respect. The Union's Middle East peace policy is always the result of discussion and hard-won consensus. This often makes the EU less effective than we would all like. On the other hand, this very deliberate decision-making process ensures that the EU is a constant factor and a reliable partner. A partner that maintains good ties not only with Israel and the Palestinians, but also with

the Arab world and the US. These are trump cards that the EU can play to help bring about a peace deal.

Another trump card is money. The days when the EU was nothing more than a paymaster are fortunately behind us. However, the Union remains the largest donor to the Palestinian territories. Considering the economic situation there, this is understandable. In its latest report on the state of the Palestinian economy, the World Bank reported unemployment in the West Bank and Gaza to be at a staggering 19 and 40 percent respectively, up from only 18 and 30 percent before the beginning of the Intifadah in 2000. The percentage of Gazans who live in deep poverty stood at 35 percent. This was, might I add, before the current economic crisis hit.

The humanitarian aid the EU provides through the UNRWA, its support for civil servants' salaries, pensions and benefits, and its involvement in developing the civil security sector are essential to the Palestinian people. Too essential, you could argue: last year, a report by the World Bank concluded that the single most important difference between the Palestinian economy now and a decade ago is that in 2000, economic development was driven by investment and private-sector productivity; now it's being kept afloat by government expenditure and donor aid. This is alarming, especially given the general assumption that aid can be swiftly replaced by trade in a viable Palestinian state, where people, goods and capital can circulate freely.

This, in a nutshell, is the dilemma of development cooperation in the Palestinian territories. A dilemma I am confronted with every day as the responsible minister.

Current Dutch development efforts in the Palestinian territories concentrate on three areas:

- humanitarian aid;

- economic support, which is a logical extension of humanitarian aid, because it creates the prospect of economic growth and prosperity, which become possible once there is peace;

- good governance, with a special focus on building up the civil security sector. Security in the Palestinian Territories is vital not only for the Palestinians themselves, but also for the security of Israel and the peace process as a whole.

We try to spend our aid to the Palestinian Territories in the most effective and sustainable way possible, but we've repeatedly run up against a number of political hurdles, which must be overcome if we want to see further improvement.

- Restrictions on humanitarian aid should be lifted at once. It is unacceptable that aid and reconstruction operations in Gaza are being frustrated.

- Well-functioning Palestinian institutions and economic growth depend on freedom of movement. A recent survey by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs identified 613 physical obstacles to this freedom. Many are related to Israeli settlement activity. Such activity must be suspended.

- The realisation of a Palestinian state, which is one of the chief goals of Dutch development efforts, is only possible through Palestinian unity, good governance and an end to violence against Israel.

At this point, development programmes in the Palestinian territories are facing a Catch 22: our policies aim to change the political parameters, but these policies can only be effective if political parameters are first redrawn. The issue of reconstruction in Gaza is a good example of this: reconstruction is necessary from a humanitarian and political perspective, but without a lasting ceasefire, Palestinian reconciliation and a relaxation of border controls, it will be

impossible to achieve large-scale reconstruction. Then there is the domestic political dimension: we can't ask the Dutch taxpayer to contribute to Gazan reconstruction unless certain prerequisites for sustainable investment are met. Dutch-backed infrastructure projects (like the port of Gaza) have been largely destroyed, and the restrictions on exports are undermining our support for investors in areas like flower cultivation. This plays into the hands of extremists and is unacceptable. These are important considerations at a time when people are rightly critical about development aid.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In conclusion, we find ourselves at a critical juncture in Middle Eastern history, where we must strengthen the forces of moderation on both sides. The two-day conference in which many of you will be taking part couldn't be more timely. The international community – that is to say, every one of us – has a responsibility to do what we can to support these forces in a way that contributes to a lasting peace in the Middle East.

I'd again like to thank the Harry S. Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace and the Netherlands Institute of International Relations at Clingendael for their invitation to speak to you today. My special thanks go to professors Avraham Sela and Steven Kaplan of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Dr Alfred Pijpers of the Clingendael Institute for organising this conference. I sincerely hope that the closer cooperation between these two institutions, of which this conference is the first example, will lead to a productive partnership in the future. That is in the interest of everyone, and above all, in the interest of peace. The Netherlands is ready to play its part.

Thank you for your attention, and I'd now like to take any questions you may have.