

Speech on Middle East peace process at Al Ahram Centre, Cairo

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Let's talk soccer. I hear that you are as crazy about soccer in Egypt as we are in the Netherlands. So to prepare for my first visit to Egypt as a minister, I replayed Mohamed Abutrika's amazing goal from last year's final of the African Champions League against Sfaxien from Tunisia. This year, Abutrika's team Ahly may be on its way to win the Champions League for the third time in a row. The last time any Dutch soccer team made it to a European Champions League final was in 1996.¹ I envy you: you have an exciting summer ahead of you.

Obviously, though, I did not come here just to talk about Egyptian soccer victories. I chose Egypt as the first stop on my trip because of the outstanding relations between our two countries, Egypt's leading role in the region and its important mediation efforts in the Middle East peace process.

I am privileged to be here today at the Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies. I would particularly like to thank your Director, Dr Said Aly, for his hospitality. Political analysts and decision-makers around the Middle East and beyond turn to Al-Ahram for insights on a host of issues affecting the region. Dr Said Aly's regular contributions to Asharq Al-Awsat and to Arabic satellite news channels show that your insights are in high demand. So I feel it is fitting to begin my first visit to the Middle East here.

At the outset, let me emphasise that I have come to listen and learn. Of course, as a Minister of Foreign Affairs, I have opinions. I will share some of them with you today.

But opinions should never be cast in stone. I am happy to listen to your views and open to your ideas. As you say in Egypt, I know I'm here selling water on the street of the water carriers [*Mish habeeyah el mayya fi haret al saa 'ayeen*].

I would like to talk about two issues today. First, the prospects for the Middle East. Second, the importance of dialogue, both between and within our societies.

1. Middle East Peace Process

(Palestinian-Israeli conflict)

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict continues to hold the world's attention. Despite decades of effort, no lasting solution has been agreed on. This does not only compromise peace and stability in the Palestinian territories and Israel. It also hampers progress in the wider region and leaves its mark on international relations worldwide. Even in my country, it sets people against one another. The debate is often very heated and emotional.

(leaders need to show moral courage)

Ending the Palestinian-Israeli conflict should be a top priority, locally, regionally and internationally. Without a breakthrough, we face the prospect of continuing violence and suffering. Everyone knows by now that the other side is not about to disappear, even if some people's visions of crushing victory may suggest otherwise. Both sides know that they will somehow have to deal not only with each other's existence but also with each other's wishes and aspirations. This requires the will to make concessions for the sake of the greater good. Give and take is part of every responsible politician's life, from the municipal level to the UN General Assembly in New York. Leaders who reject compromise do not serve the interests of the people they represent.

I applaud the moral courage of politicians who have tried to break the deadlock. Anwar Al-Sadat was one such man: the first Arab leader to officially visit Israel and speak before the Knesset in 1977. Yitzhak Rabin is another inspiring example. Together with Yasser Arafat, he might have turned the Oslo Accords into reality. Both Sadat and Rabin were assassinated by extremists in their own countries. The tragedy is that the prospect of *ending* the conflict cost them their lives. They were leaders who reached out to their opponents instead of choosing to spread hatred and fear.

(condemnation of terrorism)

The Israeli and Palestinian peoples still very much need to reach out to each other. It continues to be the historic responsibility of leaders on both sides to work towards a peaceful solution, which will benefit everyone. And I stress the word 'peaceful'. Terrorist acts should never be condoned, least of all by democratically elected governments. That obviously includes the Hamas members of the Palestinian government. Under no circumstances can terrorism be excused. Innocent civilians are the sole victims of the vicious circle of action and reaction that violence sets in motion.

(short-term confidence building measures)

Before the fundamental questions can be addressed, the current cycle of violence and tension needs to be broken. To that end, confidence building measures should be taken by all parties. Let me suggest some of these measures. First, of course, prime minister Olmert and president Abbas should meet regularly. Dialogue between them is crucial. Both parties can also take unilateral steps. For example, Israel should increase freedom of movement for Palestinians, freeze all settlement activity, release elected representatives and transfer the tax money it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinians should also do their part. For example, the National Unity Government should ensure an end to rocket attacks on Israel, it should actively engage in a process to release corporal Shalit (and as a first step, prove that he is alive and well), and it should make a credible beginning with the reform of the Palestinian security sector. As a partner in that government, Hamas should transform itself into a normal political movement, which means transparency and accountability about its income and expenditure. And of course, that includes the denouncement of violence as a legitimate political instrument. During my visits to Jerusalem and Ramallah in the days ahead, I will strongly advocate such measures, as the initial steps required to break the vicious circle of violence and destruction.

I know that the government of Egypt has been actively negotiating the release of prisoners. I support and commend these efforts and hope that they will soon bear fruit. Equally, I hope that Egypt continues its efforts to stop arms entering Gaza.

Such short-term measures could be the prelude to negotiations on a comprehensive peace agreement. I would like to talk about what I see as the main elements of a comprehensive settlement, how I think we can get there, and finally, how I think we can make it last.

(contours of peace agreement)

I believe that the broad outlines of a final agreement are not as controversial as one might think. Forty years of the peace process have obviously given us some insight into what the two parties want and need.

For the Palestinians, a settlement must include a sovereign and viable Palestinian state. This state should be based on the borders of the fourth of June 1967.

East Jerusalem would have to be its capital with an arrangement to guarantee access of Muslims, Jews and Christians to the holy places. And a just solution for Palestinian refugees would have to be agreed on. The Clinton parameters, the results of the Taba talks and the Geneva accord, among other things, can provide guidance.

For Israel, it is essential that a final agreement guarantees the Jewish character of the state. It should meet Israel's security needs and provide international recognition and legitimacy.

Both sides will have to make painful concessions. Creating a viable Palestinian state means that Israel will have to dismantle the great majority of its settlements. Jerusalem should be shared with the Palestinians and connected to Palestinian territory on the West Bank.

With regard to the refugees, I personally do not believe that large-scale return of refugees to Israel - within its 1967 borders - is feasible. Instead, I would suggest that Israel and the international community have a responsibility to compensate those refugees who will not be able to return.

(how will we get there?)

The question of how to arrive at a final agreement depends, first and foremost, on the parties' political will to negotiate. I do not want to create any misunderstanding here: of course it is up to the parties themselves to agree on a settlement. If they agreed, for example, on amending the 1967 borders to resolve some of their outstanding issues, none of us should insist otherwise. The bottom line is: what is acceptable to the parties must be acceptable to us.

In view of the present deadlock in the negotiations, however, the parties may benefit from help in jumpstarting the process.

The Arab Peace Initiative, which was recently relaunched – not least due to Egyptian efforts – provides a historic stepping-stone. The Quartet, which will meet at ministerial level on the 26th and 27th of June here in Egypt, should use that occasion to consult closely with key Arab players. I can envision the Quartet's building on the Arab Peace Initiative and presenting its ideas for, or even an outline of, an agreement to the Security Council. As a next step, the Council could endorse this outline and present it to both the Israeli government and the Palestinian authority as a solid basis with moral authority for a final agreement – again, obviously, to be negotiated by the parties themselves.

I applaud the constructive role Egypt continues to play in working towards a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I welcome the recent meeting between your foreign minister Abu El-Gheit and Jordanian foreign minister Al-Khatib with Israeli foreign minister Livni. Other moderate Arab countries should now join these outreach efforts. It is often the most radical voices that resonate most loudly, while achieving the least. For this reason, I believe the Arab League commission that has been set up to explain the Arab Peace Initiative should include other moderate countries in the region.

I sincerely hope that Egypt will be instrumental in convincing other moderate countries to take part. In my view, the commission should not restrict itself to talks with the Israeli political establishment, but reach out to the wider Israeli public as well.

(how will we make it last?)

To ensure that a peace agreement lasts, the international community will have to guarantee two essentials: security and development.

Obviously Israel cannot accept any agreement that threatens its security. This is completely understandable. So, once Israel withdraws to the borders of the fourth of June 1967, there should not be a security vacuum in the previously occupied territories. The best way to guarantee this would be the presence of a strong international force to be deployed after a peace agreement.

International assistance will also be essential to create an economically viable Palestinian state and offer Palestinians the prospect of a better life. The Netherlands stands ready to assist, both bilaterally and through the European Union, which is a member of the Quartet. In 2006, the European Union pledged more than 655 million euros for assistance to the Palestinian people. I would welcome significant additional contributions from countries in the region in support of the Palestinian people.

The Netherlands spends approximately 45 million dollars a year, most of it through UNWRA. We are about to pledge an additional half a million dollars to the Flash Appeal for Palestinian refugees in northern Lebanon. The Netherlands also contributes to the Temporary International Mechanism. Among other things, the salaries of civilian police in the Palestinian territories are paid from this money. We are convinced that support to Palestinian police is in the interest of both Palestinians and Israelis, as it increases security and stability on both sides of the border. One final project I would like to mention - because I consider it such a great success - is the Dutch flowers project in Gaza. Palestinian farmers sell their flowers via Israeli exporters to the Dutch flower auction in Aalsmeer; thousands of Palestinians have benefited. Through this project we have also been able to improve the crossing at Karni. If such cooperation is possible on a relatively small scale, we can also imagine bigger things happening.

(regional relevance)

Ladies and gentlemen,

Peace in the Middle East does not just depend on the political will of Israel and the Palestinian Authority to reach agreement, but on other actors as well.

Syria's role is crucial. It can play either a very constructive or a very destructive role in the Middle East. The Netherlands wants to treat Syria as a partner, taking into account its legitimate claim to the Golan Heights, which should indeed be addressed. But Syria has to live up to its responsibilities, for example in Lebanon.

To date, the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions 1559 and 1701 has been inadequate. The flow of arms to Hezbollah across the Syrian-Lebanese border is only one factor that makes it impossible for the Lebanese government to effectively exercise sovereignty over its entire territory. I regret that Prime Minister Siniora has not

been given the support he deserves in seeking much-needed reforms. It would be very helpful if Syria visibly exerted its influence to rein in destructive forces.

I welcome the establishment by the Security Council of the Hariri Tribunal, which has now paved the way for prosecuting the perpetrators of the murder of Prime Minister Hariri and others. The tribunal must be allowed to function effectively, as the Lebanese government wants.

2. Dialogue

Ladies and gentlemen,

At the World Islamic Economic Forum, which took place about two weeks ago in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysian Prime Minister Ahmad Badawi said the following:

Development must...be at the top of the agenda of all Muslim countries and communities. This is not simply an issue of income levels, good housing and adequate health facilities. It must also mean a literate and informed society, a representative political system that gives effective voice to the people, the absence of severe inequalities, efficient and honest administration and a commitment to the rule of law. A country cannot be considered developed until rights are respected, women are empowered, minorities protected and corruption eradicated.²

I fully agree with Prime Minister Badawi's words. One of Al-Ahram's publications, the Arab Strategic Report, quotes President Mubarak as saying that reform priorities should be decided by the people and governments of the region. It is true that sustainable reform should have its roots in the countries themselves and cannot be imposed from outside. I encourage such home-grown reform.

At the same time, I believe the European Union can and should help countries carry out reforms. The Netherlands and Egypt have cooperated successfully on many reform issues - always, I hope, respecting each other's history, traditions and culture.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This brings me to an appeal I would like to make to you today: for an open dialogue to foster stability and prevent extremism. In recent years, the West and the Islamic world have been depicted as opponents headed towards the much-heralded clash of civilisations.

Yet I am certain that we all share the same hopes for a prosperous and peaceful world. If we don't know each other well enough, we should invest in building trust and confidence, as we are asking Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas to do. I am a staunch supporter of dialogue, between cultures and religions and between the West and the Islamic world. We need to improve our listening skills before passing judgment; we need to shed our prejudices; and we need to discover what binds us instead of emphasising what separates us. As the Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih said when his fellow villagers questioned him about his trip to Europe:

They were surprised when I told them that Europeans were...exactly like them, marrying and bringing up their children in accordance with principles and traditions. That they had good morals and were in general good people. Just like us they are born and die, and in the journey from the cradle to the grave they dream dreams some of which come true and some of which are frustrated.³

"Just like us", ladies and gentlemen, are three words that say it all. This year, the Netherlands joined the Group of Friends of the Alliance of Civilisations. In 2008, Amsterdam will host the Interfaith Dialogue. This type of initiative can help us build bridges between our societies. Last December my Ministry financed a conference of TV and newspaper editors from Europe and the Middle East. This is another good example of a project that resulted in an ongoing dialogue. Participants agreed to keep communicating with one another through a blog. This is especially important because the media are the source of information the public relies on to form its views. The more accurate the information in the media is, the better. False or incomplete information can unleash considerable negative energy and inspire harmful actions. And as you wisely say in Arabic: not every genie will go back into the bottle.

If we succeed in increasing mutual understanding and respect, there will be fewer incidents like the cartoon crisis. While we must uphold freedom of expression, I've always maintained that it does not include a right to insult. Freedom should go hand in hand with responsibility and respect for each other. At the same time, aggressive reactions are counterproductive, as they do nothing to soften the tone of the debate.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We do not only need a dialogue *between* our societies; we also need a dialogue *within* our societies.

Globalisation has increased migration. Worldwide, people from different cultural origins are one another's next-door neighbours – literally. In the Netherlands, out of 16 million people, 10% are of foreign descent, mostly Muslims with roots in North Africa and Turkey. This has created tensions between groups, stemming from lack of understanding and respect and from socioeconomic differences. To overcome them, the Dutch government has to invest in dialogue in our own country. We need to bridge gaps and foster moderation. *Inclusion*, not exclusion, should always be our objective. At present, our government includes two foreign-born Muslims

This is an important sign to Dutch society as a whole about the integration and participation of minority groups within the framework of our values.

We do not only want to talk. Dialogue also includes disseminating knowledge and solving problems. Unemployment, lack of education and the living conditions of disadvantaged people, especially among young people of immigrant origin, are urgent, high-priority problems that we mean to tackle. They all contribute to a low level of participation in society. And we want everyone in the Netherlands to participate to their full potential, within the limits set by the rule of law and universal human rights norms. The Dutch government now includes a minister who is responsible for all policies concerning youth. He will address the issues I just mentioned. And of course he will make sure that all his colleagues are aware of their policies' impact on young people.

From Egypt, I will travel to Jerusalem and Ramallah. I hope to engage in constructive dialogue there as well. Not only with governments, but with civil society and the public at large. So I am glad that a group of young people from the Netherlands, of different faiths, from different walks of life, will accompany me on the next leg of my trip. Together we will share experiences and insights with local young people and strive for more understanding, as I have asked you to try to do today.

(End)

Ladies and gentlemen,

Usually it isn't so hard to build bridges between people who feel strongly about sport. But it can be very hard to build bridges between people who feel strongly about politics. A soccer match can be decided with penalties. But in the conflicts in the Middle East, either everyone will be a winner or everyone will be a loser. It depends on whether we manage to break through the barriers that until now have prevented a lasting solution. It is in all our interests to create a win-win situation. I look forward to working closely with you to this end, and invite you to be my partners in dialogue here at Al-Ahram.

Thank you.

[1](#): In the 1995/1996 season. Juventus and Ajax drew 1-1. Juventus won on penalties.

[2](#): Financial Times, 27 May 2007

[3](#): Tayeb Salih, Season of Migrations to the North