

Introductory remarks by Uri Rosenthal, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, on the panel ‘Is Israel losing Europe?’ at the 11th Annual Herzliya Conference, Israel, 8 February 2011

Thank you, Mr Joffe.

Distinguished speakers, ladies and gentlemen,

- Is Israel losing Europe? To respond directly to the question: the answer in the short term is no. And the answer in the long term is also no. To reassure you: no country in the European Union denies Israel’s right to exist or its legitimacy. And no EU country will ever deny Israel this right.
- At the same time, let me say emphatically, I cannot accept what is going on in some international forums. There is indeed a creeping tendency to condone the delegitimisation of Israel. Sometimes it seems that we’ve resigned ourselves to a proliferation of one-sided resolutions attacking Israel. I will keep urging my colleagues in the EU to object vocally to this trend. It’s important that we stand united in telling the world that delegitimisation is unacceptable to us. The Dutch government will not tolerate Israel-bashing. And Israel-bashing shouldn’t be acceptable to anyone.
- But views may differ on *how* the EU, Europe, should relate to Israel. Should our relations be seen first and foremost in the light of the Middle East Peace Process? Or should the EU treat Israel just like any other country it associates with, for instance through the European Neighbourhood Policy?
- In my view, relations between the EU and Israel within the Neighbourhood Policy should largely be allowed to develop at their own pace. Progress in the peace process should not always or entirely dictate the depth of our relations. So conditioning the European Neighbourhood Policy strictly on the Middle East Peace Process is not appropriate. But progress in the peace process will help the EU move forward.

- The EU should invest in its relations with Israel. First and foremost, this is a matter of simple and straightforward principle. Israel is a democracy based on the rule of law. It is the only country in the region, I repeat, in the region, that can truly say this. The EU was built on these same values. We share these values. And they are not something superficial; they are fundamental values, the bottom line of what the EU stands for. And, I would also say, they are the bottom line of what Israel stands for, here in the region. So of course, when you have values in common, as Europe and Israel do, friendship should come naturally.
- This is not to say that the EU, and the Netherlands, may never or should never be critical of what Israel is doing, or failing to do. Refraining from criticism when criticism is called for is not my idea of friendship. Good friends should be able to speak their minds. To speak up. Directly to one another.
 - For instance, Europe and the Netherlands should be able to tell Israel that Israel, too, needs to be more forthcoming in the peace process.
 - Israel needs to understand why we think that the settlements are not legal and, importantly, why the settlements are not conducive to the peace process. That they are in fact an impediment to peace.
 - We should also be able to express our strong conviction that Israel's security is compatible with a viable Palestinian state based on the pre-June 1967 borders.
 - We should also be clear that the status of a capital city that is claimed by two states needs to be negotiated.
- We should feel free to express these convictions to our Israeli counterparts. And as friends, we should be confident that our words will be heard and taken seriously. I am not talking here about delegitimisation or Israel-bashing.
- I believe that we can express our concerns and criticisms more effectively by engaging more closely with Israel than by keeping Israel at a distance. In that sense, good relations, close relations, are not just a matter of principle; they are also instrumental in making headway on contested issues.

- It is my opinion, and it is the Dutch government's opinion, that isolating Israel – some people even speak of driving Israel into a corner – is no way to move the peace process forward. Closer relations do help. They will enable us to better address the more contentious issues. At the same time, to be realistic, those promoting closer relations need to see something in return for their efforts to bolster Israel's position. If nothing happens, if no results are forthcoming, if Israel doesn't even seem to listen, they will become increasingly isolated within the EU – and we shouldn't forget the UN either. In this case the proponents of an even-handed approach, which entails a strong condemnation of Israel-bashing, will become lone figures who can easily be shouted down. This would not be in Israel's interests.
- For the EU, the European Neighbourhood Policy gives us a framework to discuss topics of concern to both Europe and Israel. We shouldn't neglect the opportunities that the ENP provides.
- This leads me to a more general remark about the Neighbourhood Policy. With the unfolding of events in the Arab world, from Tunisia to Egypt and beyond, we should all consider how to make the best possible use of the ENP to promote economic growth, democracy and the rule of law in the region. The EU and its Mediterranean neighbours have a common responsibility for stability, peaceful development and dignity for all. Based, I repeat, on promoting economic growth, democracy and the rule of law. And, to comment quickly but clearly on Minister Shalom's remarks: the Arab world will have to move forward on two paths. One is the path to free and fair elections. Another, equally important, is the path to the rule of law and human rights. Free and fair elections will never be a sufficient condition for a democratic and stable regime.
- As you know, the Dutch government is strongly in favour of stepping up relations with Israel. Both bilaterally and in the framework of the EU. The Netherlands looks forward to reinforcing the EU's relations with Israel. Not just our political relations but also our economic ties and our cooperation on technology, and research and development. It's a pity that the last Association Council was postponed, though not

cancelled. I look forward to the next one, two weeks from now. And I trust that we will be able to take some concrete steps forward.

- The EU should equally invest in relations with the Palestinian Authority. We are talking about an even-handed approach. This is not a zero-sum game, but a variable-sum game. One side's gain is not necessarily the other side's loss.
- As far as the EU's role in the peace process is concerned, I believe that our efforts should be supportive of the leading role of the United States as it tries to get the parties back to the negotiating table. But the EU does have something of substance to offer in its own right. We are after all your direct neighbours. If only for reasons of proximity, we have a direct interest in the region's future. Which is an extra incentive to invest in it.
- To conclude with a harsh reality: for many young people, for the younger generations in general, World War II is ceasing to be a memory and becoming history. When we talk about Europe and Israel, that is a significant factor. A second factor is the many ways in which Israel has shifted its focus in the last decade from Europe to the US. An 'American-style' approach to public policy and public affairs does not always fall on fertile ground in Europe.
- My final conclusions on Israeli-European relations are twofold. Is Israel losing Europe? No, Israel is not losing Europe. On the other hand: yes, Israel will have to do its part to show that our relations are a two-way street.

Thank you.