

# **Resistance at Home**

*Speech Andreas van Agt  
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Dear friends,

I am delighted to be here. It is a heartwarming experience to see you all, united not just in faith, but also in solidarity with a people whose most fundamental rights have been trampled for decades. I feel particularly honored to share the stage with his Beatitude Patriarch Michel Sabbah.

Dear friends, I was asked to deliver a speech to you titled "Resistance at Home". Before addressing the situation in my country, the Netherlands, I want to express my deepest respect and admiration for all those, here in Palestine and also in Israel, who struggle peacefully for a just solution to the conflict, for an end to Israel's military occupation.

These courageous peace and human rights activists, some of whom will be here in this room, are my source of inspiration. They are the ones that have extended a moral duty to me to work for peace and justice as long and as much as I can.

I salute these heroes of justice and peace for their seemingly endless energy, their endurance and their ability to keep hope alive.

And how difficult it is, to keep hope alive. This morning, while traveling to Bethlehem I passed this ugly fortress between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, the settlement of Har Homa, built on what was once one of the most beautiful hills in the Bethlehem region, where families used to picnic in the weekends, children used to play.

How sad it is that Israel persists in stealing land, thus darkening the prospects for peace! And how frustrating, yes indeed infuriating, is it that the so-called international community stands by and lets it all happen, or worse, in fact encourages Israel to build more settlements.

How else should we interpret the recent voting behavior of the United States in the Security Council, when the council voted on a resolution condemning the settlements, the text of which was based on language the US had previously used itself when criticizing and even rejecting the settlements. And then the US

vetoes a resolution that only confirms that the settlements are illegal and a core obstacle to peace? It is stunning, not to say absurd.

The European members of the Security Council, currently Germany and Portugal next to the permanent members Britain and France, voted in favor of the resolution. That is in itself praiseworthy. But I hasten to add that the EU has failed for all too many years to hold Israel accountable for its persistent violations of international law. The EU has never really stopped coddling Israel, by time and again upgrading its cooperation with that country and treading Washington's steps sheepishly.

Unfortunately, my country, the Netherlands, also plays a problematic role in this conflict. I have to acknowledge, it is an important donor to the Palestinian Authority and the refugee organization UNWRA. But when it comes to tackling the root causes of this conflict – i.e. the ongoing displacement and dispossession of the Palestinians – my country lets the Palestinian people down.

For decades, the Netherlands has supported Israel unconditionally, both in its bilateral relations and in international fora. Regardless of what Israel does, how many settlements it builds, how many Palestinian civilians it kills in Gaza: my country always comes to Israel's defense when international pressure is likely to increase.

In the European Union my country is always on alert when initiatives are taken by other members likely to be discarded or at least disliked by Israel. Presently, we have the most right-wing coalition government since times immemorial, much to my dismay.

The minority government of Christian Democrats and Liberals is supported by a party, the leader of which claims that a Palestinian state already exists: Jordan. The coalition agreement mentions one country, with which relations should be intensified, without stipulating any conditions. Indeed, Israel. The Dutch Foreign Minister, Uri Rosenthal, has personally committed himself to fighting the alleged “delegitimization” of Israel, without realizing that Israel delegitimizes itself by maintaining the occupation and the brutal suppression of the Palestinian civilian population.

But this will not discourage us. We'll never lower the flag in the battle for justice. My like-minded compatriots and I find hope and inspiration in the courageous and persevering work for justice and peace by activists both in Palestine and Israel. The latter, by the way, go through tough times nowadays.

Allow me to tell you about our efforts in Europe, particularly in the Netherlands. I made mention of the strong pro-Israel orientation of the coalition government currently in power. But there is good news as well. Opinion polls show convincingly that public opinion is indisputably shifting. Among the rank and file of the Dutch electorate, there is markedly more understanding and sympathy for the Palestinian cause than in past decades.

However, many people still tend to side with Israel. Public awareness of the horrors of the Holocaust keeps guiding numerous citizens towards abstaining from or at least softening criticism vis-à-vis Israel. The more so, since historians publicized studies proving that the Dutch during the German occupation could, hence should, have acted with more courage and determination to save Jewish co-citizens than they thought they had.

So there is a sense of being indebted to the Jews and a wish to acquit oneself of that debt by now supporting the state of the Jews through thick and thin. Moreover, there are Evangelicals, also in the Netherlands, who are confused and misled by ill-understood notions about God's chosen people and the Promised Land.

To increase awareness, we established a foundation in the Netherlands about a year and a half ago in order to spread the word about the root causes of the conflict and the present state of affairs, about the lasting occupation and the countless violations of human rights and international law. Also we draw attention on what should be done to restore justice and peace here, in particular what can and should be done by the Europeans to achieve that goal.

Beside informing the public, our foundation – called The Rights Forum – also targets parliamentarians and ministers, as well as people in key positions in society and the media. In doing so, we succeeded in enlisting the active support of an impressive number of personalities of high repute and authority, among them many former government ministers and professors of International Law.

I have myself received a lot of expressions of support after launching a personal website with my opinions and with background information about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. My mailbox is flooded with attestations of approval, my presentations throughout the country draw large audiences. In short, there is a momentous climate change. The forces that support Israel blindly, are clearly losing ground.

The other day, I published a book in the Netherlands, titled "Crying for Justice" and subtitled "The tragedy of the Palestinian people". This book found a wide

readership, among them many parliamentarians of all colors and stripes. Once again: the tide is turning.

Dear friends, allow me to raise your hopes a bit more. Little over a year ago, on 8 December 2009, an important development took place in Europe. Under the courageous leadership of the government of Sweden, the European Union adopted promising and strong positions on the Middle East peace process.

Among others, the EU said that it "will not recognise any changes to the pre-1967 borders including with regard to Jerusalem, other than those agreed by the parties." Moreover, it reiterated "that settlements, the separation barrier where built on occupied land, demolition of homes and evictions are illegal under international law, constitute an obstacle to peace and threaten to make a two-state solution impossible." The EU urged Israel "to immediately end all settlement activities, in East Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank and including natural growth, and to dismantle all outposts erected since March 2001." With regard to Jerusalem, it recalled that it has never recognised the annexation of East Jerusalem." And it concluded that the continued policy of closure of the Gaza Strip "is unacceptable and politically counterproductive."

Since the EU issued its statement in 2009, diplomatic efforts have gone nowhere. And that did not go unnoticed. Two months ago, in response to this statement, 26 former European leaders, among them various former Prime Ministers and former Presidents, as well as former European Commissioners, sent a letter to EU President Van Rompuy and EU High Representative Lady Ashton, calling on them to take concrete and effective measures, in line with positions the Union adopted a year ago, to salvage the Middle East peace process. The urgent need to do so has increased dramatically after the United States entirely failed in their attempts to restart the peace process.

This letter by former European leaders, which I had the privilege to co-sign, has also been sent to the Heads of Government and the Foreign Ministers of all 27 EU member states. Whereas the signatories of the letter no longer exercise formal power, it is a highly significant development that so many of them stand up now and raise their voices. Current leaders cannot close their eyes and ears from the message we have issued and will have to reflect on their approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, eventually paving the way for a rights-based, credible and effective Middle East policy.

For the Palestinians, all of that may not matter much in the short term. However, they have every reason to know that they don't stand alone in their struggle for self-determination. Sooner or later, they will be freed from occupation and colonization, a prospect that is also in Israel's true interest.

I hope you will permit me to add a few words about my own transformation: from a staunch supporter of Israel to a fierce critic.

In 1982 I served for a while as Foreign Minister and as Prime Minister, simultaneously. Hitherto I had hardly paid attention to Israel and that state's misbehavior. Then I was assailed by shocking news about the slaughter in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila near Beirut, carried out by Lebanese militias acting in close cooperation with the Israeli army that had fenced the camps, thus blocking all escape routes. That shook my firm belief in Israel's nobility.

A number of years later – I had left the national political scene by then – it was a visit to Bethlehem University in the context of a traditional pilgrimage that put my thinking on the Israel-Palestine conflict upside down. In an exposition on the state of the university and, necessarily, on the tribulations students and teachers have to cope with, the Vice President of the University (an American, mind you) presented a heart-rending example of how young Palestinians are frequently humiliated and scolded at when reporting at checkpoints on their way to the university. The young guy concerned had been ordered by megaphone to leave his vehicle not the normal way, but climbing out of the window. Then to walk to the checkpoint officer on his hands and feet and bark like a dog. Uttering protests did not work, he surrendered in the end and obeyed. Then a laughter roared in the barrack: "Mind, we've always said Palestinians are just dogs and once again they show it!"

That story shattered us. Later on, belatedly indeed, I started collecting information on all what has been and still is happening in the occupied territories. As a Saul I had stumbled from my horse. Let me tell you in passing that I am currently serving on the International Advisory Board of Bethlehem University, a most valuable institution.

In my book (and in my presentations) three compelling reasons are identified for Europeans, Americans and others to engage in strenuous efforts to bring justice and peace about in this region.

First, this horrendous conflict is raging in the Holy Land. No Christian can accept or acquiesce in the continuation of so much disaster and mischief in this very land.

Second, Europe in particular is highly responsible for the tragedy unfolding in Historic Palestine. Let us mention Europe's appalling contributions in chronological order.

During the first World War, the U.K. launched its Balfour Declaration, in close consultation with the Zionist movement and without paying any attention to representatives of the indigenous Arab population of Palestine, then a province of the Ottoman Empire. Britain cheated the Arabs in that period, invoking their belief that if they launched a rebellion against the ruling Turks, they would be rewarded in the end by political reshufflings in the region.

It would be all too bold to point out how the Middle East would have been fashioned without all this European interference, but it is fair to contend, anyway, that history would have taken a different course.

It is abundantly clear that the Holocaust during Second World War has shaped developments in Historic Palestine decisively. Without the genocidal campaign against the European Jews, the State of Israel would not have emerged so suddenly, yes indeed, as smashing, without any government in the world uttering a word of opposition.

Whereas Nazi-Germany is first and foremost to be blamed for the Holocaust, others carry a burden of responsibility and shame too: peoples under occupation for having failed to put up as much resistance against the deportation of Jews as they would have been able to do and others, not occupied at the time, because they failed to open their borders early enough for Jews seeking refuge and shelter.

Thirdly, nations of the civilized world, have a compelling moral duty to reach to the rescue of the trampled Palestinians, as the State of Israel keeps violating international law, continuously and very seriously.

No explanation is needed here. I merely refer to conventions on human rights law, as well as to treaties on humanitarian law regulating warfare and occupation. And I point to Israel discarding the ruling given by the highest court on the globe, i.e. the International Court of Justice, located in the Netherlands, which has clearly spoken out against the separation wall and the illegality of settlement building.

Dear friends, at the beginning of this month I turned 80 years. So struggling for peace and justice is my last mission in life. I consider this my most important mission. And I salute you as comrades in this noble struggle.