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The Netherlands, the EU and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Why The Hague Continues to be One of Israel's Most Faithful European Allies

Peter Malcontent

Department of History and Art History, Utrecht University, The Netherlands
p.a.m.malcontent@uu.nl

Abstract

This historical study assesses the determining factors behind the development of the Netherlands as one of Israel's most faithful European allies in its conflict with the Palestinians. As such it wants to contribute to the academic debate on foreign policy Europeanisation that started two decades ago with the publication of Ben Tonra's seminal study on *The Europeanisation of National Foreign Policy*. Comprehensive studies using primary sources of the EU's individual member states' policies towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continue to be scarce. This study about the Netherlands contributes to filling this gap. It first sets out why the Dutch government's position has always been more pro-Israel compared to that of the EU by assessing the relative influences of the EU and the Netherlands' national Parliament as external and internal foreign policy determinants. After having established the dominating role of Dutch Parliament the latter part of this article tries to explain what continues to motivate a right-wing majority in Dutch Parliament to protect the Dutch government's traditional pro-Israel position against external influences from the European level.

Keywords

EU foreign policy – Israeli-Palestinian conflict – Small states – The Netherlands

Introduction

Since the outbreak of the second Intifada two decades ago, European public opinion has grown increasingly critical of Israel's conduct against the

Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.¹ This development is not only visible in traditionally pro-Palestinian/Arab countries like France, but also in the traditionally pro-Israel countries Germany and the Netherlands. In both countries, however, increasing criticism of Israel has not resulted in less pro-Israel government policies as this study will show.

To clarify why the Dutch government still positions itself as one of Israel's most important allies in Europe, this article first offers a short historical overview showing how, two years after Israel's independence declaration in 1948, the Netherlands replaced its neutral position towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with a wholeheartedly pro-Israel stance, which, in spite of some periods of moderation, still counts as relatively pro-Israel when compared to that of the general position of the European Union (EU) on this issue. The second part of this study will explain 'why' by assessing the relative influences of the European Union and the Netherlands' national Parliament as external and internal determinants of Dutch foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It will be established that the role of Dutch Parliament has been decisive most of the time. Dutch governments are always based on coalitions between two or more political parties, they are far more sensitive to Parliamentary demands than one-party governments. As the Dutch parliament, apart from the 1990s, has always been dominated by a majority in favour of Israel it has been able to limit the government's room for manoeuvre seriously as long as the member states of the European Community (EC), and later the European Union, were not capable of pressing the Netherlands to act differently. With the exemption of the 1970s and the European Council's adoption of the Venice Declaration in June 1980, this was never the case. Most of the time the pro-Palestinian consensus at the European level was too flimsy to be used by less pro-Israeli Dutch Foreign Ministers to convince a majority in Parliament that a policy adjustment was essential.² In other words, it was only in the period from the early 1970s until Venice 1980 and during the 1990s

1 Pew Research Centre, *Global Unease with Major World Powers*; Del Sarto, 'Israel and the European Union: Between Rhetoric and Reality', p. 171.

2 One could argue that the EU member states showed another example of deliberate common action after the establishment of the Oslo peace Accords in 1994 when they took the role of main financier of the Palestinian state building process. This self-drawn role could, however, not hide that there was lack of unity at the European level to usurp a stronger political role in the peace process. As a consequence, no consensus developed on which political steps to take when Israel would sabotage the Palestinian state building process or when the Palestinian Authority as the Palestinians' provisional government

that Dutch foreign policy had the opportunity to develop in a pro-Palestinian direction.

After having established Dutch Parliament's major role in determining the course of the Dutch government's foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict it will be explained what drove and still drives Parliament's pro-Israel right-wing majority and why it was never bothered about Israel's increasing unpopularity in society, which reached a new low during the last Gaza war in May 2021.³

By clarifying the Netherlands' continuing pro-Israel position, this article hopes to add to the still very limited number of studies analysing the policies of individual EU member states concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁴ Many authors define the EU's policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as weak and ineffective because of diverging political and economic interests between the member states.⁵ More in-depth country studies based on primary

would turn out to be too corrupt and authoritarian to spend Europe's financial assistance effectively. See for the EU's ineffective approach of technocratic Palestinian state building without taking into account the political context in which it takes place: Bouris, 'The European Union's Role in the Palestinian Territory after the Oslo Accords: Stillborn State-building'; Bouris, *The European Union and Occupied Palestinian Territories: State-Building without a State*; Wildeman, 'Neoliberalism as Aid for the Settler Colonization of the Occupied Palestinian Territories After Oslo', pp. 153–173; Tartir, 'Securitizing Peace: The EU's Aiding and Abetting Authoritarianism', pp. 227–247.

3 See for example Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant*, 21 May, 2021.

4 This article is based on my 2019 monograph *Een Open Zenuw. Nederland, Israël & Palestina* [An Open Nerve. The Netherlands, Israel & Palestine], analysing the Dutch position on the Palestinian issue since the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Most available studies on individual EU countries consist of journal articles, limited in scope and predominantly based on existing literature and media sources. One of the few available exceptions is Eriksson's *Small-State Mediation in International Conflicts. Diplomacy and Negotiation in Israel-Palestine*. Noteworthy to mention are also Abadi's short but primary sources based historical accounts on the relations of southern EU member states with Israel. See 'Constraints and Adjustments in Greece's Policy toward Israel', pp. 40–70; 'Constraints and Adjustments in Italy's Policy toward Israel', pp. 63–94; 'The Road to Israeli – Spanish Rapprochement', pp. 177–202; 'Constraints and Adjustments in Portugal's Policy toward Israel', pp. 83–108. Studies on the positions of the 'Big Three' countries Germany, France and the UK – strangely enough – continue to be limited to short and rather outdated literature based journal articles and book chapters like: Wood, 'France and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Mitterrand Policies, 1981–1992', pp. 21–40; Edwards, 'Britain', pp. 47–58.

5 Del Sarto, 'Stuck in the Logic of Oslo: Europe and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict', pp. 387–388; Le More, *International Assistance to the Palestinians after Oslo. Political Guilt, Wasted Money*, pp. 92–93; Gordon and Pardo, 'Normative Power Europe Meets the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict', pp. 265–267; Musu, *European Union Policy towards the Arab-Israeli Peace Process. The Quicksands of Politics*, pp. 172–174; Miller, 'Troubled Neighbours: The EU

sources, like this article which is based on confidential documents from the Dutch Foreign Ministry and interviews with former policymakers and Foreign Ministers, may help to obtain a more profound understanding of the limits and opportunities of the EU with regard to ending the longest conflict in modern history.

At the same time, this study about the Netherlands and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also wants to add to the discussion on the Europeanisation of national foreign policies of smaller EU member states, a discussion that only took off with the publication of Tonra's *The Europeanisation of National Foreign Policy* in 2001.⁶ Several case studies have been published since, but their number remains small and their range restricted.⁷ Studies on EU founding fathers like Belgium and the Netherlands are, for example, hardly available or are of disputable quality.⁸

This study applies the fruitful conceptualisation of foreign policy Europeanisation as developed by Wong and Hill. They understand Europeanisation as three distinct but interrelated processes: a top-down process indicating the impact of EU membership on the national foreign policies, a bottom-up process indicating the impact of national foreign policies on EU foreign policy, and a bi-directional process of 'cross-loading' between bottom-up and top-down resulting in a convergence in terms of policy goals, preferences, and identity between both levels.⁹

How did the Netherlands Become Europe's Most Pro-Israel Country in Europe?

For a country that regards itself a one of Israel's last remaining friends in Europe,¹⁰ the Dutch government's response to Israel's birth in May 1948 was

and Israel', pp. 656–658; Persson, *The EU and the Israeli – Palestinian Conflict 1971–2013: In Pursuit of a Just Peace*, p. 136.

6 Tonra, *The Europeanisation of National Foreign Policy: Dutch, Danish and Irish Foreign Policy in the European Union*.

7 The European CFSP's influence on Greek foreign policy, for example, has already been the topic of several articles and book chapters. See for example Tsardanidis and Stavridis, 'From Special Case to Limited Europeanization', pp. 111–130.

8 Which also count of Tonra's case study on the Europeanisation of Dutch foreign policy which is based on a small bibliography of outdated sources.

9 Wong and Hill, eds., *National and European Foreign Policies. Towards Europeanization*, pp. 2–4.

10 According to former Dutch Foreign Minister Uri Rosenthal: Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, 30 September 2011.

far from enthusiastic. As the Netherlands was still trying to regain its control over the Dutch East Indies, the government in The Hague thought it would be unwise to insult the Muslim population of its most precious colony by supporting the Zionists against the Arab claims to Mandatory Palestine. It was only after the definitive loss of Indonesia in December 1949 that the Netherlands decided to formally recognise the Jewish state of Israel.¹¹

Now that pleasing Indonesia's leaders was no longer necessary key political figures like Labour Party Prime Minister Willem Drees could finally express their existing sympathies for Israel more openly. Against the background of an evolving Cold War and David Ben-Gurion's decision to move his country into the Western camp, Drees immediately started to strengthen Dutch relations with Israel and even built a kind of personal friendship with his Israeli colleague and ideological compatriot. Like many European social democratic leaders at the time, Drees admired the attempts of Ben-Gurion's Labour Party to raise a social democratic paradise from the Palestinian desert soil. But the close connection he felt to the young Jewish state was also a result of his personal experiences during the Second World War, when he had seen the Holocaust's cruelties with his own eyes as a political prisoner in camp Buchenwald.¹² Another key political figure whose position towards Israel was dominated by his experiences during the war was Catholic People's Party (KVP) politician Joseph Luns who took office as Foreign Minister in 1952 and would remain so for nearly 20 years. When in the 1960s newly arrived Israeli ambassador Shimson Arad asked him to what he owed his warm welcome in the Netherlands, Luns answered: 'Before the war, 120,000 to 140,000 Jews lived here, now only 20,000.'¹³

After the outbreak of the Six-Day War in 1967, feelings of guilt about the Holocaust would also increasingly determine Dutch society's attitude towards Israel. The massive support for Israel during the Six-Day War came at a time when Dutch society was in a process of re-experiencing its war past, stimulated by Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem, this included a highly popular documentary series about the Nazi occupation on national television and the publication of new books about the Holocaust. Many Dutchmen were still not able to confront the bitter truth that no other western European country had

11 Soetendorp, *Pragmatisch of principieel. Het Nederlands beleid ten aanzien van het Arabisch-Israëliësch conflict*, pp. 51–56. See also Malcontent, *Een Open Zenuw. Nederland, Israël & Palestina*, Chapter II.

12 Mendes, *Jews and the Left. The Rise and Fall of a Political Alliance*, p. 96; Peeters, *Gezwoven vrienden. Het geheime bondgenootschap tussen Nederland en Israël*, pp. 54–71.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 161.

allowed so many of its Jews to be transported to Auschwitz and other extermination camps. Supporting the small Jewish state of Israel against the combined military powers of its Arab opponents proved to be an excellent outlet for the growing awareness that the Nazi's persecution of the Dutch Jews had met far less resistance than most people had been willing to believe.¹⁴ Polls conducted by the Netherlands Institute of Public Opinion (NIPO) taken right after the Six-Day War showed that 67 per-cent of the Dutch population sympathised with Israel, which was considerably more than in other western European countries (in the United Kingdom it was 59 percent, in France 58 percent and in the United States 55 percent). Respondents most often cited the Holocaust as a reason to support Israel. Other arguments, however, such as 'the Jews have the right to a land of their own' and 'this land has always been under threat', were cited almost as often.¹⁵

Dutch governmental and public support for Israel remained high after 1967 even though Israel resisted withdrawing from the territories it had occupied during the war, as demanded by UN Security Council resolution 242. In Parliament, only the small Pacifist Socialist Party (PSP) found it problematic that, as a result of Israel's occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, 1.4 million Palestinians became subject to a military regime without a clear end date.¹⁶ And although opinion polls show that public support for Israel started to wane slightly after 1967 (from 67 percent in 1967 to 51 percent in 1969, to 37 percent in 1974 and after a temporary increase to 57 percent in 1979 back to 35 percent in 1982) vocal protests against Israel's unwillingness to withdraw remained limited to the marginally operating Dutch Palestine Committee (NPK), whose membership even at the peak of its existence in the 1970s would never exceed that of a few thousand.¹⁷

At government level, Minister Luns realised that with the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, the Palestinian issue could no longer be reduced to a humanitarian problem. During a special session of the General Assembly at the UN on 28th June 1967, Luns concluded an impassioned speech saying that 'the-20-year-old problem of the Palestinian refugees, now further aggravated by the recent war, demands a final settlement, in which both the national interests of the States concerned and the fundamental rights of the refugees should

14 Soetendorp, *Pragmatisch of principieel*, p. 99.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Van Leeuwen, 'Nederland en de Palestijnen', pp. 12–14.

17 De Boer, 'The Polls: Attitudes Toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict', p. 125; NPK Newsletter 7, no. 4/5 (1979), Archive NPK, International Institute for Social History (IISG); Grünfeld, 'Nederland en het Nabije Oosten', pp. 49–50.

be fully vouchsafed.¹⁸ But even after Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) had entered the stage as a new factor of political significance and the PLO internationalised its armed struggle by hijacking European airplanes and killing Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, neither Luns nor his successor and party colleague Norbert Schmelzer were willing to move in the direction of recognising the Palestinians' right to self-determination. Both Ministers fiercely resisted the French attempts to develop a pro-Arab-oriented common European Middle East policy. And when it turned out to be impossible to block this, Schmelzer reassured his Israeli colleague that, although he had failed to prevent the music from starting, he still intended 'to let it fade away in an acceptable manner.'¹⁹

It was therefore no surprise that in October 1973 the Dutch government again expressed its support for Israel when it was caught by an Arab surprise attack while celebrating the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur. As it did in 1967, the Dutch government immediately responded by offering material assistance for Israel's war effort. Again feelings of remorse among leading individual politicians like Labour Prime Minister Joop Den Uyl and his party colleagues Max van der Stoep (Foreign Affairs) and Henk Vredeling (Defence) played an important role in this. 'I had seen the Jews drift away once, and then I could not prevent it. I thought that would not happen to me a second time', Vredeling said of the motivations behind his decision to open the Dutch armouries in an interview after he had left the Ministry.²⁰ Even when the Arab countries confronted the Netherlands with an oil embargo, which they were only prepared to lift if the Netherlands would withdraw its support for Israel and recognise the Palestinians' right to self-determination, the government initially refused to adapt its position.²¹

Dutch governmental support for Israel would never be as high as it was in 1967 and 1973. Nevertheless, the Netherlands would remain a pro-Israel country and sometimes in a way that even provoked irritation on the German side, such as in early 2012 when Foreign Minister Uri Rosenthal of the conservative liberal party VVD refused to agree to a joint European statement referring to a critical EU report about the Israeli occupation regime in the West

18 Speech Luns in the UN General Assembly, 28 June 1967, Publication of the Dutch Foreign Ministry, no. 86 (Den Haag: Staatsdrukkerij, 1967), p. 66.

19 Schmelzer to Dutch embassy in Jerusalem, 18 February 1972, National Archives (NA), 2.05.192, 193; Memo Schmelzer, 21 February 1972, *ibid.* See also Luns to the Dutch Permanent Representative (PR) in New York, 18 February 1971, NA, 2.05.273, 444; Memo Luns, 19 December 1970, NA, 2.21.351, 1118.

20 Peeters, *Gezworen vrienden*, p. 204.

21 Hellema, Wiebes and Witte, *The Netherlands and the Oil Crisis. Business as Usual*, p. 60.

Bank. Rosenthal remained stoic under the collective criticism of the Germans, French and British and shortly afterwards he dared to torpedo another critical EU report. After his refusal was subsequently leaked, Rosenthal even threatened to block further talks on the Palestinian territories within the framework of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), as long as their confidentiality could not be guaranteed.²²

In Brussels Rosenthal's stance was being regarded as 'the harshest Dutch position ever', which was also illustrated by the fact that he was the first Dutch Foreign Minister who, contrary to Security Council resolution 242, no longer wished to speak in terms of 'occupied territories' but rather of 'disputed territories'.²³ Although Rosenthal's successors were less radical in tone, their practical policies hardly differed, as this article will show. This brings up the question 'why'? How is it possible that even today Dutch policy with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is still so pro-Israel that it sometimes even trumps Germany's? In order to uphold its international image Germany has no choice but to maintain the Holocaust as a leitmotiv for its foreign policy.²⁴ But the Netherlands' responsibility for the Holocaust is incomparably smaller.

A Pro-Israel Parliamentary Majority

From 1949 the Netherlands started to strengthen its bonds with Israel; this was not only because the loss of Indonesia allowed this politically, but also because a broad Parliamentary majority was most willing to support the government in the effort.²⁵ Only in the second half of the 1970s did this pro-Israel consensus start to show serious fissures when Labour began to move in pro-Palestinian direction after the electoral victory of Menachim Begin's conservative Likud Party in 1977.

22 *NRC Handelsblad*, 5 April 2012.

23 *Ibid.*, 30 September 2011.

24 Wolffsohn, 'Israel and Germany: From Former Foes to Distant Friends', p. 289; Gardner Feldman, *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation: From Enmity to Amity*, pp. 133–182. Germany's political establishment is not only conditioned by feelings of remorse but also by political pragmatism. Continuing to acknowledge the black pages of its recent history helps the country to secure its redeemed position as a respected and reliable member of the international community: Hall, *Emotional Diplomacy: Official Emotion on the International Stage*, p. 162.

25 In October 1956, for example, almost the entire Parliament backed the government's defence of Israel's invasion of the Egyptian Sinai: Hellema, *Negentienzesenvijftig. De Nederlandse houding ten aanzien van de Hongaarse revolutie en de Suezcrisis*, pp. 144–145.

While from the early 1970s the traditional support for Israel among Europe's social democratic parties had started to fade – amongst others in Bruno Kreisky's Austria and Olof Palme's Sweden – those in the Netherlands and West Germany continued to be loyal allies. At a meeting of the Socialist International in London right after the October War of 1973, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir lashed out at her European colleagues for their lack of support during the war. The only two spared from Meir's attack were Dutch Prime Minister Den Uyl and West German Chancellor Willy Brandt, who were abundantly thanked for their moral and material support.²⁶

After 1973, not only the German but also the Dutch social democrats persisted on a pro-Israel course. Significant was a Parliamentary debate in November 1974 following the adoption of resolutions 3236 and 3237 in the UN General Assembly. These resolutions explicitly recognised the Palestinian right to self-determination and admitted the PLO as an observer at General Assembly meetings. Labour Foreign Minister Max van der Stoep had instructed the Dutch delegation in New York to abstain from voting on the first resolution and to vote against the second. In Parliament, Van der Stoep explained that also voting against resolution 3236 would have broken the unity among the member states of the European Community. Nevertheless, the Labour faction in Parliament felt that the Netherlands should have voted against because, just as in resolution 3237, in 3236 no explicit mention was made of Israel's right to exist within safe borders.²⁷

After Likud's rise to power in Israel, however, Dutch social-democrat sympathies towards Israel began to cool significantly. Not only because Begin's election victory forced Israeli Labour to go into opposition for the first time in its existence, but also because it was clear from the start that Begin's neo-revisionist Zionists were even more prone to continue Israel's presence in the occupied Palestinian territories than previous Labour governments. In September 1977, less than three months after Begin's installation, Dutch Labour Parliamentarians, together with the leader of the smaller social liberal party D66, secretly met with PLO representatives on a barge in the north-western

26 Brandt, nevertheless, had regularly clashed with Meir over Israel's role in the Middle East conflict and his material support for Israel during the October War had limited itself to allowing the US to use German ports for the shipping of war material to Israel. A permission Brandt, moreover, already withdrew before the war had ended: Wolffsohn, 'Israel and Germany', p. 294; Hellema, Wiebes and Witte, *The Netherlands and the Oil Crisis*, pp. 27–30, 32–33; Jacob Abadi, 'Sweden's Policy toward Israel: Constraints and Adjustments', pp. 33–38; Bachleitner, 'Golda Meir and Bruno Kreisky – A Political and Personal Duel', p. 41.

27 Plenary debate Dutch House of Representatives (DHR), 27 November 1974, Dutch House of Representatives (DHR), 1974–1975, pp. 1583–1585, 1593.

part of the Netherlands to discuss the establishment of a PLO office in The Hague.²⁸

The Dutch Labour Party's change of course could, however, not prevent a smaller but stable pro-Israel majority of right-wing parties from continuing to dominate the Dutch Parliamentary debate on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that now evolved into a typically left-right debate with, on the one hand, Labour, the social liberals of D66 and the smaller radical left-wing parties PPR and PSP, that in 1990 would merge into the Green party GroenLinks, and on the other hand, the conservative liberal VVD, the central right and Christian Democrat CDA and the small orthodox Calvinist parties SGP, GPV and RPF of which the latter in 2000 would merge into the Christian Union (CU).

Exemplary of the left-right polarisation in Parliament was a discussion on the European Council's Venice Declaration in June 1980. In this statement the nine member states of the European Community for the first time explicitly recognised the Palestinians' right to self-determination and called for the PLO to be 'associated with' future peace negotiations.²⁹ The Netherlands, Denmark and West Germany had favoured avoiding direct mention of the PLO in the Declaration, but this was unacceptable to France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg and the UK, which demanded explicit mention of the PLO as a participant in future negotiations. A compromise was found whereby the final text only called for PLO association, rather than full participation.³⁰ In the Dutch Parliament, however, the VVD and the SGP regarded this compromise as still too radical since the PLO continued to be unwilling to recognize Israel's right to exist. The Christian democrats were prepared to accept the Declaration as long as it would not be a first step in the direction of recognising the PLO as the Palestinian people's only representative. The moderate left-wing parties D66 and Labour on the other hand embraced the Venice Declaration, while the PPR and PSP, apart from showing acceptance also deplored the fact that the European Community remained unwilling to recognise the PLO wholeheartedly.³¹

28 Blekendaal and van Melick, 'Nederland en de politieke erkenning van de PLO'.

29 Allen and Hauri, 'The Euro-Arab Dialogue, the Venice Declaration, and Beyond. The Limits of a Distinct EC Policy, 1974–89', pp. 93, 99.

30 Miller, 'The PLO Factor in Euro-Israeli relations, 1964–1992', p. 137.

31 Plenary debate DHR, 24 June 1980, DHR, 1979–1980, pp. 5610, 5611, 5614, 5616–5617, 5624, 5629–5630.

Europe as Countervailing Power

At the same time, the pro-Israel Parliamentary majority's criticism was a clear sign that it was not completely successful in making its mark on government policy. In Venice, conservative liberal Foreign Minister Christ van der Klaauw had no choice but to compromise. He had managed to prevent France from presenting the Venice Declaration as the start of a joint European peace initiative with a pro-Arab character. But to resist even more would not have been an option because the other EC partners were already annoyed by Van der Klaauw's unruliness, and political isolation within the framework of the European Political Cooperation (EPC) had to be prevented by all means.³²

The EPC was established in 1970 at the initiative of France with the aim of promoting cooperation between the EC member states in the field of foreign policy. It was decided to use the Middle East as a test case. The Dutch government watched this development with concern for fear that France would misuse the EPC's intergovernmental forum as an extension of its own pro-Arab-oriented foreign policy. For the Netherlands as a loyal ally of both the United States and Israel this was unacceptable. However, although The Hague was backed by West Germany,³³ effective counterplay turned out to be more difficult than hoped. In December 1972, the Netherlands voted in the General Assembly of the UN, like all other EC member states, in favour of resolution 2949, which explicitly spoke of 'the rights of the Palestinians'. In Parliament, Foreign Minister Schmelzer admitted that the Dutch vote had been influenced by the growing European foreign political cooperation within the EPC.³⁴

After the October War in 1973, Schmelzer's successor Van der Stoel went one step further. In exchange for European support against the Arab oil embargo, he agreed to a joint EPC statement emphasising that peace in the Middle East was impossible without recognition of the 'legitimate rights of the Palestinians'.³⁵ In March 1974, Van der Stoel also reluctantly agreed with the establishment of a Euro-Arab dialogue promoted by France.³⁶ Finally, he also

32 Interview with Foreign Minister Van der Klaauw in Grünfeld, *Nederland en het Nabije Oosten*, pp. 173–174; van der Klaauw, *Een diplomatenleven*, pp. 271–272.

33 Möckli, *European Foreign Policy During the Cold War: Heath, Brandt, Pompidou and the Dream of European Unity*, pp. 75–76.

34 Response Schmelzer to questions from Labour, 18 January 1973, DHR, 1972–1973, Appendix, no. 246.

35 Statement by the Nine Foreign Ministers on the situation in the Middle East, Brussels, 6 November 1973, in *European Foreign Policy. Key documents*, eds., Christopher Hill and Karen Smith, Document 4b/1; Hellema, Wiebes en Witte, *The Netherlands and the Oil Crisis*, pp. 88–92.

36 Message Van der Stoel, 1 November 1974, NA, 2.05.192, 198. Message Celer (= signed on behalf of the Foreign Minister), 4 February 1974, NA, 2.05.273, 444; Message Van der Stoel, 11 February 1974, *ibid.*

ceased his resistance against establishing diplomatic contacts with the PLO. First, because, as the PLO expanded its diplomatic network, it became increasingly difficult for Dutch diplomats stationed in Beirut, Cairo and Damascus to avoid PLO representatives. Secondly, because diplomats from other European countries did enter into discussions with their Palestinian colleagues. As early as October 1975, the Dutch ambassador warned that 'all my EPC colleagues, without exception, tend to maintain informal contacts with PLO representatives more or less regularly.'³⁷ In February 1977, his colleague in Damascus also reported that all EC ambassadors had contact with PLO leaders either personally or through their staff.³⁸ Without informing Parliament, Van der Stoel and his immediate successor Van der Klaauw finally gave in.³⁹ When in November 1979 Parliament passed a motion that allowed the government to maintain limited contacts with PLO representatives, these had already existed for more than two years.⁴⁰

The Dutch move towards Europe halted in Venice in 1980. After that, the European Community's relative influence on the Netherlands' position towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict started to wane because the Nine, after their common recognition of the Palestinian right to self-determination, subsequently failed to agree on the way to achieve it. The member states could not reach consensus on a policy that would include coercive measures to force the conflict's parties to accept the EC's declaratory policies. As a result, Israel's shared responsibility for the 1982 massacres by Christian Lebanese militias in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila in Lebanon was only condemned in words. The same happened with Israel's disproportionate crackdown on the first Palestinian Intifada that started in December 1987.⁴¹

37 Dutch embassy Cairo to Foreign Ministry, 10 October 1975, Archive Foreign Ministry (AFM).

38 Dutch embassy Damascus to Foreign Ministry, 25 February 1977, AFM.

39 Dutch embassy Cairo to Van der Stoel, 22 December 1976, AFM; Dutch embassy Damascus to the Foreign Ministry's Director-General Political Affairs (DGPZ), 3 January 1978, AFM; Memo DGPZ to Van der Klaauw, 3 January 1978, AFM, Secret Files; Memo DGPZ to Van der Klaauw, 17 January 1978, AFM.

40 Debate on the proceedings of the UN General Assembly by the Standing DHR Committee on Foreign Affairs, 5 November 1979, DHR, 1979–1980, OCV/UCV, pp. 345–346.

41 Allen and Hauri, 'The Euro-Arab Dialogue, the Venice Declaration, and Beyond. The Limits of a Distinct EC Policy, 1974–89', p. 101; Persson, *The EU and the Israeli – Palestinian Conflict 1971–2013*, p. 81; For a typical example showing how divided the EC member states were on how to proceed after Venice see the vague statement concerning the Middle-East by the Foreign Ministers of the Twelve, Bonn, 8 February 1988, in *European Political Cooperation*, 4 (1988), no. 1, document 88/036.

As Europe's influence on Dutch policy started to cease because of a lack of internal consensus, that of Parliament was able to increase again. This was bad news for Foreign Minister Hans van den Broek who took office in 1982. Despite his CDA background, he appeared to have more support for the Palestinian cause than any of his predecessors.⁴² But, unfortunately for him, he did not have much political space to display it. With the exception of the small orthodox Calvinist parties, Parliament shared Van den Broek's and Prime Minister Ruud Lubber's (CDA) decision to cancel a visit to Jerusalem to mark Israel's 40th anniversary out of protest against the violent suppression of the Palestinian Intifada. At the same time, however, a Parliamentary majority continued to resist further rapprochement with Arafat's PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people.⁴³

An example was the storm of indignation Van den Broek had to endure when, following Arafat's announcement in 1988 to end the armed struggle against Israel, he decided to send a high-level delegation to Tunis to strengthen diplomatic relations with the PLO. The CDA stressed the importance of good relations with Israel. The orthodox Calvinist SGP warned Van den Broek not to go against God's plan for the world, and Israel in particular. And the VVD concluded that Van den Broek had embraced 'the PLO's new style' too quickly and enthusiastically.⁴⁴

As a result, it would not be until 1990 that Van den Broek dared to welcome a Palestinian delegation at his Ministry, and even then, pro-Israel right-wing Parliamentarians, supported by pro-Israel lobby groups, deemed this to be unacceptable.⁴⁵ In comparison, Van den Broek's Belgian, Greek, and Italian colleagues had already met with their PLO counterpart in 1979. In that same year, PLO leader Arafat officially visited Austria, Portugal and Spain. In 1982 the British Foreign Minister for the first time welcomed a Palestinian delegation at

42 Interview author with former Dutch diplomat and ambassador Koos van Dam, 14 September 2016, Wassenaar. Van Dam worked closely with Van den Broek and assisted him during his travels to the Middle East.

43 Consultation between Van den Broek and the Standing DHR Committee on Foreign Affairs, 10 February 1988, DHR, 1987–1988, 20200 V, no. 90; *NRC Handelsblad*, 13 April 1988.

44 Consultation Van den Broek and the Standing Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs, 15 December 1989, DHR, 1988–1989, 20800 V, no. 77.

45 VVD Member of Parliament Frans Weisglas to the Chair of the Standing DHR Committee on Foreign Affairs, 18 April 1990, AFM; Dutch Israel Committee to Van den Broek, 17 April 1990, AFM; Ronnie Naftaniel, director of the Centre for Information and Education on Israel (CIDI) to Van den Broek, 20 April 1990, AFM; Foreign Ministry's North Africa and Middle East Department (DAM) to Van den Broek, 19 April 1990, AFM.

his Ministry. And in 1989 French President François Mitterrand received Arafat for an official visit at the Élysée Palace in Paris.⁴⁶

The Oslo Years

When in 1993 the Oslo Accords were established and in 1994, for a period of eight years, the pro-Israel right-wing parties lost their traditional majority in Parliament, a new government, including the conservative liberal VVD, but dominated by Labour and social liberal party D66, finally got enough leeway to sail a more pro-Palestinian course. Prime Minister Wim Kok (Labour) would go down in history as the first Western government leader to stay with Arafat in the Palestinian territories.⁴⁷ And by personally attending the ground-breaking of the construction of a sea harbour in Gaza, Kok emphasised the role of the Netherlands as one of Europe's most financially generous contributors to the Palestinian state-building process. In the period 1994–1998, the Netherlands disbursed 113.2 million USD, an amount which was only exceeded by Norway (221.4 million) and Germany (270.8 million).⁴⁸

Offering a substantial contribution to the European Union's self-imposed role of the Palestinian Authority's banker, however, did not turn out to be a very rewarding one. On the one hand because of the PA's corruption and repression of its own people, as a result of which the government in 1997 froze its financial assistance for the training of Palestinian policemen,⁴⁹ and on the other hand because of Israel's unremitting efforts to obstruct the Palestinian state-building process. Israel not only continued to build new settlements in the West Bank, but also sabotaged European infrastructural projects in the Palestinian territories, including the construction of the Gazan sea harbour.⁵⁰ After the Israeli army bulldozed the construction site twice, the project had to be permanently terminated. Dutch Development Cooperation Minister Eveline Herfkens (Labour) could hardly believe what had happened: '11 million guilders

46 Rory Miller, 'The PLO Factor in Euro-Israeli relations, 1964–1992', p. 141–142; Geoffrey Edwards, 'Britain', p. 54; *The New York Times*, 3 May 1989.

47 Consultation between Foreign Minister Hans van Mierlo (D66) and the Standing DHR Committee on Foreign Affairs, 10 January 1996, DHR, 1995–1996, 23432, no. 8.

48 *Palestinian Territories. Review of the Netherlands Development Programme for the Palestinian Territories, 1994–1999*, Policy and Operations Evaluation Department, Dutch Foreign Ministry (IOB), 1999, p. 21. <http://archieff.iob-evaluatie.nl/sites/iob-evaluatie.nl/files/282%20Palestinian%20Territories.pdf>.

49 DAM to Foreign Minister Van Mierlo, 4 February 1998, AFM.

50 Ibid.

in tax money and development assistance has been raised to the ground just like that. I find this quite shocking.⁵¹

Dutch frustrations came to a head in October 2000 when, to the surprise of many and much to the annoyance of his own party, the conservative liberal Jozias van Aartsen became the first Dutch Foreign Minister to dare to lash out at Israel publicly.

In accordance with the official response of the EU,⁵² Van Aartsen openly accused Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak of provoking the Palestinians and unleashing a new Intifada by allowing Likud opposition leader Ariel Sharon to visit the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in East Jerusalem. According to Van Aartsen, this was like 'putting a match in a room full of explosive gasses'. Barak immediately responded by accusing Arafat of having prepared the new Palestinian upheaval in advance. Van Aartsen, however, based on information from the Dutch posts in Ramallah and Tel Aviv, relegated this story to the realm of fantasy and called the Israeli army's use of violence to suppress the Palestinian riots 'excessive'.⁵³

In the UN Human Rights Commission, diplomats from other EU countries nevertheless continued to accuse their Dutch colleagues of being biased. The Dutch never failed to take an opportunity to stress the importance of international human rights, but in the case of the occupied territories gladly subordinated this inclination to systematically balancing every anti-Israel statement. Palestinian non-governmental organisations shared this objection. Why did the Dutch government finance their activities but not support their work in the Human Rights Commission? Van Aartsen indeed refused to support one-sided, politically charged initiatives like the annually tabled draft resolutions by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). But even when the OIC succeeded in gaining the support of an EU majority by removing radical language like classifying Israel's human rights violations as 'mass killings', 'war crimes', or 'crimes against humanity', the Netherlands continued its resistance as long as it felt supported in this by Germany and the UK, its major pro-Israel EU partners.⁵⁴

51 Dutch newspaper *Trouw*, 19 September 2000.

52 Statement by the Presidency of the European Union on behalf of the European Union on the situation of Jerusalem and in the Territories, 2 October 2000, in Pardo and Peters, *Israel and the European Union. A Documentary History*, p. 258.

53 Telephone interview author with former Dutch Foreign Minister Van Aartsen, 10 March 2018; Response Van Aartsen to questions from GroenLinks, 3 October 2000, DHR, 2000–2001, p. 7–360; *de Volkskrant*, 4 October 2000; Dutch embassy Tel Aviv to DAM, 2 October 2000, AFM; Representation Ramallah to DAM, 2 October 2000, AFM; Representation Ramallah to DAM, 7 October 2000, AFM.

54 Dutch PR Geneva to Foreign Ministry, 12 April 2001, AFM.

In 2001 the latter refused to go along with a watered-down OIC resolution as it still exclusively focused on Israel's conduct in the occupied territories while leaving out acts of Palestinian violence. An ex-post evaluation by the European Permanent Representatives in Geneva was dominated by mutual recriminations. France, on behalf of the pro-Palestinian camp, believed that as long as the Islamic countries remained willing to meet the EU to some extent, there should be some compensation. On behalf of the pro-Israel camp, the Dutch Permanent Representative countered that it was absurd to reward any form of moderation with a vote in favour if the end result nevertheless remained unacceptable.⁵⁵

Pro-Israel Revisionism

When after 9/11/2001 the US put the PLO and Islamic Hamas on a par with Al Qaida and in the Netherlands the pro-Palestinian left-wing parties after eight years lost their Parliamentary majority, Dutch foreign policy became increasingly pro-Israel once again. The Dutch government continued to financially assist the Palestinian Authority, but at the same time Christian democratic Foreign Minister Jaap de Hoop Scheffer refused to demand compensation from the Israeli authorities for their destruction of the Gaza sea harbour project.⁵⁶

What helped the pro-Israel majority in Parliament to strengthen its influence on the government's Middle East policy was that most Dutch Foreign Ministers in the new millennium revealed a stronger personal tendency to protect Israel from internal and foreign criticism than that of Van Aartsen and his direct predecessors. Exceptions were the Christian democrat Ben Bot and the Labour Ministers Bert Koenders and Frans Timmermans, though their hands were bound. Bot had the ambition to do more for the Palestinians than just provide them with financial assistance as a means 'to save our conscience'. However, soon he realised that 'trying to increase our political support for the Palestinians' cause turned out to be a waste of time and energy, as initiatives in that direction would be automatically blocked by a right-wing majority in Parliament, including that of my own party.⁵⁷

55 Dutch PR Geneva to Foreign Ministry, 28 March 2002, AFM; Internal E-mail exchange Foreign Ministry's Human Rights and Peace Building Department, AFM; Dutch RP Geneva to Foreign Ministry, 15 April 2002, AFM; Dutch PR Geneva to Foreign Ministry, 5 June 2002, AFM.

56 Letter De Hoop Scheffer and the Minister for Development Cooperation to the Chair of the DHR, 3 December 2003, DHR, 2003-2004, 23432, no. 135.

57 Interview author with former Dutch Foreign Minister Bot, 9 June 2017, The Hague.

Even more illustrative was Frans Timmermans' term as Foreign Minister in Rutte II (2012–2017) before he moved to Brussels to become vice-Chair of the European Commission in 2014. As the Labour Party's foreign policy spokesman in Parliament, Timmermans had consequently opposed Rosenthal's revisionist Middle East policy. After replacing Rosenthal as Foreign Minister, however, he would discover that neither the VVD, as the coalition government's dominant partner, nor a continuing right-wing majority in Parliament would allow him to adjust his predecessor's course.

Just how small Timmermans' political leeway was became clear in November 2012, when the UN General Assembly was due to re-examine a request by President Mahmoud Abbas to upgrade the status of the Palestinian representation to that of a 'non-member observer status'. Earlier Timmermans had supported this request as a Member of Parliament.⁵⁸ But only five months later, in his new capacity as Foreign Minister, he ordered the Dutch delegation to abstain when Abbas' request was put to the vote. Although the Netherlands was in the company of nine other EU countries, including Germany and the UK, a majority of 16 EU member states, together with 122 other countries, voted in favour of raising the Palestinian status.⁵⁹

More promising was Timmermans' engaged contribution to the EU's differentiation policy directed at excluding Jewish settlement-linked entities and activities on the West Bank from EU bilateral relations with Israel. But when the government's policy of discouraging Dutch companies from doing business in, or benefitting from, Jewish settlements resulted in a pension fund investor (PGGM) and two companies (Vitens and Royal Haskoning DHV) cancelling their activities in occupied territory,⁶⁰ Timmermans was confronted with serious criticism from the political right in Parliament.⁶¹

58 On 5 July 2012 the Labour faction in the DHR with Timmermans as the party's spokesman on Foreign Affairs voted in favour of a motion by the SP in which Foreign Minister Rosenthal was requested to support the Palestinian representation's upgrade in the UN, DHR, 2011–2012, no. 105, item 41, p. 93; *Ibid.*, no. 105, item 86, p. 208.

59 Letter Foreign Minister Timmermans to the Chair of the DHR, 15 November 2012, DHR, 2012–2013, 23432, no. 336; Consultation between Timmermans and the Standing DHR Committees on Foreign and European Affairs, 15 November 2012, DHR, 2012–2013, 21501–2, no. 1203; *NRC Handelsblad*, 30 November 2012; United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 29 November 2012. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2012/ga11317.doc.htm>.

60 *NRC Handelsblad*, 8 January 2014 and 10 January 2014.

61 *Ibid.*, 7 January 2014; Consultation between Timmermans and the Standing DHR Committee on Foreign Affairs, 12 February 2014, HTK 2013–2014, 23432, no. 370; Oral question time, 14 January 2014, DHR, 2013–2014, no. 40 item 2; Response Timmermans to questions from the CU, 6 March 2014, DHR, 2013–2014, Appendix, no. 1315; Response Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation Lilian Ploumen (Labour) to questions from the CDA, 17 January 2014, DHR, 2013–2014, Appendix, no. 986; Response

Timmermans also encountered great Parliamentary opposition when he decided in October 2013, following the lead of the United Kingdom and Denmark, to ban products from Jewish settlements in the West Bank, such as fruit, wine, olive oil and cosmetics. Timmermans invoked European regulations that required that the country of origin must be stated on the labels of products. Since the Netherlands and the EU did not consider Jewish settlements in occupied territory to be Israeli, it would therefore be misleading if products derived from them were nevertheless labeled as 'made in Israel'.⁶² However, after furious reactions from Israel supported by the VVD Timmermans had to reverse this decision and have an advisory directive removed from the website of the Ministry of Economic Affairs.⁶³ Timmermans had little choice but to wait for clear EU guidelines on labelling. These were issued in 2015, though their implementation and enforcement varies between member states.⁶⁴ In the Netherlands, these continue to be weak. When in 2018 GroenLinks confronted VVD Foreign Minister Stef Blok with accusations of labelling fraud, Blok replied that he lacked the time to keep track of the origin of millions of cans, jars and boxes and that the responsibility for this lay with the producers and suppliers.⁶⁵

Due to a lack of consensus as a result of diverging national political and economic interests, a European policy adding deliberate action to the EU's ritual condemnations has not been forthcoming.⁶⁶ The only thing on which there is agreement in Brussels is to stick to the two-state solution. And in order not to lose sight of that completely without jeopardising relations with Israel, the EU is confining itself to financially sustaining the Palestinian Authority while leaving Israel's continued sabotage of the Palestinian state-building process untouched.⁶⁷

Timmermans on questions from the VVD, the CU and the SGP, 23 December 2013, DHR, 2013–2014, Appendix, no. 849.

- 62 Letter Timmermans to the Chair of the DHR, 7 October 2013, DHR, 2013–2014, 23432, no. 351; Hugh Lovatt and Mattia Toaldo, 'EU Differentiation and Israeli Settlements', European Council of Foreign Relations, July 2015, p. 7. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep21602.pdf>.
- 63 *NRC Handelsblad*, 4 May 2013.
- 64 Lovatt and Toaldo, 'EU Differentiation and Israeli Settlements', pp. 6–7; Hugh Lovatt, 'EU Differentiation and the Push for Peace in Israel-Palestine', pp. 5–7.
- 65 Consultation between Foreign Minister Blok and the Standing DHR Committees on Foreign Affairs and Development and Foreign Trade, 19 April 2018, DHR, 2017–2018, 23432, no. 448.
- 66 See note 5 above.
- 67 See note 2 above.

Punitive measures are virtually non-existent while there is no reason to assume that they would not be effective. This became apparent in 2013 when the EU excluded settlements in occupied territory as a destination for subsidies from the EU research and development program Horizon. Israel found this unacceptable but did eventually relent after it became clear that the Israeli academic world would otherwise miss out on hundreds of millions of euros.⁶⁸ Thus as long as there is no enthusiasm in Brussels for stricter conditionality and sanctions, the political right in Parliament will have little trouble maintaining the broadly pro-Israel character of Dutch foreign policy. Support for sanctions, such as the freezing of the Israeli association agreement with the EU, only exists among the leftist minority in Parliament.⁶⁹

Motives and Causes

The question that remains to be answered is why a Parliamentary majority consisting of conservative liberals, Christian democrats, orthodox Calvinists – and nowadays supported by Geert Wilders' populist Freedom Party (pvv) – persists in believing that Israel's right to self-determination is more important than that of the Palestinians? This question becomes all the more relevant when taking into account the fact that the Netherlands since the 1970s has increasingly presented itself as one of the staunchest advocates of international human rights, strongly emphasising their non-selective promotion and protection all over the world.⁷⁰

An important factor that still influences the political right's views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is 'Atlanticism', or the idea that Dutch security benefits the most from a US-oriented foreign policy. The American or 'Atlantic' orientation originated from the Cold War and the Dutch political elite's fear of getting trapped in a European Community dominated by France and West

68 Persson, 'EU differentiation' as a case of 'Normative Power Europe' (NPE) in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, pp. 196–197; Lovatt and Toaldo, 'EU Differentiation and Israeli Settlements', p. 6; Lovatt, 'EU Differentiation and the Push for Peace in Israel-Palestine', p. 3.

69 Labour election programme 2017, p. 61. <https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/10867/19/PvdA-Verkiezingsprogramma-2017.pdf>; GroenLinks election programme 2021, p. 98. https://groenlinks.nl/sites/groenlinks/files/2021-03/GroenLinks_Verkiezingsprogramma%202021.pdf; D66 election programme 2017, p. 136. https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/10864/1/D66_vp_TK2017_def.pdf.

70 See for example Malcontent, 'Myth or reality? The Dutch Crusade Against Human Rights Violations in the Third World', 1973–1981, pp. 229–257.

Germany.⁷¹ There was little discussion in Parliament until well into the 1990s about the Atlantic course of Dutch foreign policy. Only a small leftist minority consisting of GroenLinks and the Socialist Party (SP) seriously struggled with the Dutch membership in NATO and the image of the Netherlands as a loyal ally of the US.⁷² Instead, GroenLinks urged the government to strengthen EU military cooperation with the aim of establishing an independent European army. In the new millennium, Labour and D66 also began to move in that direction.⁷³ Even the VVD and the CDA were no longer opposed to European military cooperation, but just like the PVV and the orthodox Calvinist parties, they continued to emphasise the Atlantic alliance as the cornerstone of Dutch security policy.⁷⁴

Because of their unaltered Atlantic focus, the Dutch conservative liberals and Christian democrats also kept on opposing assertive Dutch or European action in support of the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, as this could undermine American efforts to overcome the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Complementary to their Atlantic paradigm, the CDA and VVD continued to believe that the US, as Israel's most important ally, was the only international power capable of bringing the conflict to an end. Even US President Bill Clinton's failed attempt to save Oslo during the Camp David summit in 2000 did not shake this conviction.⁷⁵ When in 2013 President Barack Obama's Secretary of State John Kerry launched his ambitious peace initiative, Labour, and especially D66 emphasised that this should not become an excuse to rule out additional European initiatives.⁷⁶ However, the conservative liberals and the Christian Democrats wanted the EU to back off. According to them there was simply no room for another 'show in town' than Kerry's.⁷⁷

A second factor behind the pro-Israel sentiments in Dutch politics concerns the presence of an orthodox Calvinist bible belt in the Netherlands running from the south-west to the north-east of the country. Although orthodox Calvinists only constitute a minority of the Dutch population, they have always been represented in Dutch Parliament by two or three smaller political

71 Duco Hellema, *Dutch Foreign Policy*, Chapter VI: 'The Hey-Day of Dutch Atlanticism. The Years 1960–1970'.

72 Parliamentary election programmes GroenLinks and the SP, 1989, 1994, 1998.

73 Parliamentary election programmes Labour and D66, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2012, 2017, 2021.

74 Parliamentary election programmes VVD, CDA, PVV, SGP and CU, 2010, 2012, 2017, 2021.

75 Consultation between Foreign Minister Van Aartsen and the Standing DHR Committee on Foreign Affairs, 30 January 2001, DHR, 2000–2001, 23432, no. 34.

76 Consultation between Foreign Minister Timmermans and the Standing DHR Committee on Foreign Affairs, 11 November 2013, DHR, 2013–2014, 23432, no. 353.

77 Ibid; Consultation Timmermans and the Standing DHR Committee on Foreign Affairs, 3 September 2013, DHR, 2013–2014, 21501–02, no. 1288.

parties. Today, the orthodox Calvinist movement within Dutch society is represented in Parliament by the SGP and the CU. Both parties continue to stress the Biblical connection between Christians and Jews as God's chosen people and therefore support the return of the Dutch embassy to Jerusalem as Israel's undivided capital.⁷⁸ Even though their limited number of seats in Parliament (since 2006 an average of seven or eight out of a total of 150) suggests that their political influence is marginal, the opposite is actually true, as during the past decade both the CU and the SGP were necessary to establish stable coalition governments in an increasingly fragmented political landscape.⁷⁹ The CU's participation in Rutte II made it considerably easier for the VVD to force Labour Foreign Minister Timmermans to adopt a pro-Israel position. For Labour spokeswoman on Foreign Affairs, Desiree Bonis, the opportunities to influence her Minister's Middle East policy were so few that in order to save face she decided to submit her resignation as a Member of Parliament.⁸⁰

As the distance from the Second World War increased, a third influential factor – feelings of guilt about the persecution of the Jews – started to lose their ability to maintain Dutch society's special bond with Israel. This became particularly clear in the aftermath of the Bijlmer aircraft disaster in 1992, when an El Al Boeing 747 cargo plane crashed into a block of flats in the Amsterdam city quarter Bijlmer. After the Israeli airline's managing board proved unwilling to cooperate with a Parliamentary inquiry established to uncover the causes of the disaster, a public opinion poll showed that 52 per-cent of all interviewees no longer wanted to speak of a special relationship between the two countries.⁸¹ But this development could not stop right-wing parties from equating every form of indignation about Israel's conduct in the Palestinian territories with anti-Semitism. When in January 2009 left-wing parties tabled motions in Parliament against Israel's disproportional use of violence during operation Cast Lead, the orthodox Calvinist SGP responded with a motion specifically directed against the rising number of anti-Semitic incidents in Europe since the start of Israel's military offensive.⁸² An even clearer example were the

78 Speech by SGP-leader Kees van der Staaij, 21 April 2018. <https://www.sgp.nl/actueel/partijrede-kees-van-der-staaij-geloofd-zij-de-heere/8999>; Christian Union Election program, 2017–2012, p. 96. <https://www.christenunie.nl/verkiezingsprogramma>.

79 The CU was a coalition partner in Balkenende IV (CDA, Labour and CU), 2006–2010 and Rutte III (VVD, D66, CU), 2017–2021. Together with the SGP and D66 it externally supported Rutte II (VVD and Labour), 2012–2017.

80 *NRC Handelsblad*, 24 August 2013.

81 ANP press release, 19 February 1999.

82 Plenary DHR, 14 January 2009, DHR, 2008–2009, pp. 41-3664-41-3680.

right-wing attempts to delegitimise Socialist Party Parliamentarian Harry van Bommel for his critique of Israel's conduct in Gaza by referring to his participation in a demonstration, which in spite of its moderate character had, indeed, included some anti-Semitic slogans.⁸³

Against the background of an increasingly polarised political climate, the positions of both Christian democrats, conservative liberals and the orthodox Calvinist parties hardened and almost started to become caricatural. Especially the latter three regarded Israel's use of disproportional violence as a legitimate means to defend its existence and believed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would be solvable if the Palestinians would lay down their arms.⁸⁴ The question of why Palestinians used violence at all seemed to be irrelevant in their eyes, as if it had no cause but was congenital; this view already prevailed in Dutch newspapers from the 1920s and 1930s, which tended to describe Palestinians as Eastern farmers with a 'cruel psychology', a 'passionate soul', and capable of 'intense cruelties'.⁸⁵

Persisting in defending Israel's ongoing repression of the Palestinians' right to self-determination while Israel's popularity in public opinion continued to decrease was, however, not without electoral risks. Especially the VVD and the CDA were, as people's parties with a broad electorate, far more vulnerable to the decreasing sympathy for Israel in Dutch society than the smaller orthodox Calvinist parties. One way to explain the electoral risks the VVD and the CDA were taking is by referring to their strong bonds with the Dutch pro-Israel lobby, a small but very effective platform of secular, Calvinist, Catholic and Jewish organisations led by the Centre for Information and Education on Israel (CIDI).

The pro-Israel lobby's influence on Dutch politics should not be underestimated. According to former diplomat and deputy-director of the Foreign Ministry's North Africa and Middle East Department (DAM), Koos van Dam, the CIDI's influence on the Ministry in the 1970s was quite large.⁸⁶ In 1980, when a PLO envoy was received for the first time by a senior official at the Foreign Ministry, the CIDI succeeded in getting Foreign Minister Van der

83 Consultation between Foreign Minister Maxime Verhagen (CDA) and the Standing DHR Committee on Foreign Affairs, 9 January 2009, DHR, 23432, no. 287.

84 See for example consultation between State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Dick Benschop (PvdA) and the Standing DHR Committees on Foreign and European Affairs, 6 December 2001, DHR, 2001–2002, 21501–02, no. 414.

85 Dutch newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 28 August 1929; Dutch newspaper *De Banier*, 29 August 1929.

86 Van Dam and Keulen, *De vrede die niet kwam. Twintig jaar diplomaat in het Midden Oosten*, pp. 65–66.

Klaauw to publicly promise that this would never happen again as long as the PLO refused to renounce terror.⁸⁷ Earlier, in 1976, the pro-Israel lobby had succeeded in preventing the Dutch Committee on Information and Awareness Development Cooperation (NCO) to offer a financial subsidy to the Dutch Palestine Committee (NPK). Even though the NCO had to admit that there were no substantive arguments to reject a NPK grant application, it successfully advised Development Cooperation Minister Jan Pronk (Labour) to turn it down because of 'the existing climate' in the country and the need to spare the feelings of the Jewish population.⁸⁸

In Parliament the influence of the pro-Israel lobby continues to be visible in the interventions by representatives of right-wing parties who often refer to the CIDI as a source of information when substantiating their positions.⁸⁹ Especially the VVD's relations with the Dutch pro-Israel lobby are quite enduring, as can be illustrated by the fact that since 1999 three successive terms of the CIDI's chairmanship have been fulfilled by active VVD politicians.⁹⁰

What seems to be an even more important reason for the conservative liberals and Christian democrats to disregard the decreasing public enthusiasm for Israel is that the realisation that – as opinion polls from the 1980s and the period after 2000 show – the Palestinians had never been able to benefit fully from Israel's decreasing popularity. Although Dutch sympathy with the Palestinian cause rose from 4 percent in April 1977 to 30 percent two years later, it then stagnated, a development that could not even be reversed by the Sabra and Shatila massacres in 1982. Thirty per-cent was hardly comparable to the sixty-seven per-cent that had sympathised with Israel in 1967.⁹¹ Also in the decades to come, Dutch sympathies with the Palestinians would never reach,

87 *Nieuw Israëlitisch Weekblad*, 16 May 1980.

88 Application NPK submitted to the NCO for 1977, Archive NPK; Transcript interview with former NCO-Chair, E.W. Hommes in a Dutch radio programme, 17 November 1976, *ibid*; NCO-advice, 8 October 1976, *ibid*; Letter Catholic Council for Israel and four Calvinist denominations to Minister Pronk, 26 November 1976, *ibid*; Letter Working Group Israel to Minister Pronk, 15 November 1976, *ibid*; Letter Dutch Israelite Denomination, Liberal Jewish Congregation, Dutch Zionist Union to Minister Pronk, 15 November 1975, *ibid*; NPK Newsletter, no. 4, (1977), *ibid*.

89 See for example consultation between a.o. Foreign Minister De Hoop Scheffer and the Standing DHR Committees on Foreign Affairs, European Affairs and Defence, 13 March 2003, DHR, 2002–2003, 21501–02, no. 469; See also *NRC Handelsblad*, 18 August 2014.

90 Harmsen, *De VVD en de kwestie Israël-Palestina sinds 'Oslo' (1993). Een inventarisatie van standpunten*, pp. 167–168. See also Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf*, 12 March 2010 and 13 March 2010.

91 Results Netherlands Institute for Public opinion (NIPO) opinion polls from the period 1977–1982, published in Grünfeld, 'Nederland en het Nabije Oosten', pp. 200–202. See also De Boer, 'The Polls: Attitudes Toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict', p. 125.

let alone exceed, that level. In 2003 the German Marshall Fund survey established that, in Europe, Dutch society not only continued to have the warmest feelings for Israel but also the coolest for the Palestinians.⁹² According to a CIDI poll from 2013, only nine per-cent believed the Palestinians deserved stronger support than the Israelis, while sixteen per-cent preferred the opposite and a majority of sixty-nine per-cent favoured either equal support for both camps or wanted the Netherlands to stay neutral.⁹³

Criticising Israel for its conduct in Gaza and the West Bank was one thing, but supporting the Palestinians' cause for self-determination seemed to be another. One explanation might be that, during its heyday, Israel's popularity in the Netherlands was nurtured by a common history and culture. Israel had mostly been built by European Jews, while the shared experience of the Second World War had deepened the Dutch emotional involvement with Israel's fate. And even though the special bond the Dutch had with Israel weakened as the war faded in the Dutch collective memory, it did not vanish. Nor was it replaced by a similar level of identification with the Palestinians, as this lacked a historical basis. For most of the twentieth century, Palestinians had only inhabited the Dutch collective mind as orientalist caricatures and anonymous refugees. As Palestinians, they did not exist. This only began to change in the 1970s when they finally started to become accepted as an identifiable group with its own culture, history and rights.

The strength of this argumentation is that it might also explain why German sympathies for the Palestinians would never match or exceed sympathies for Israel. Like the Netherlands, Germany lacks a substantial historical relation with the Arab peoples of the Middle East, while its government's position towards Israel continues to be determined by the tragic common history shared by the German and Jewish peoples.⁹⁴ The burden of the war past may be losing relevance for German society, especially where younger generations want to leave the Nazi past behind. Nonetheless, as in the Netherlands, Israel's decreasing public image in Germany has never resulted in a similar level of public support for the Palestinians' cause. A 2014 survey conducted by the Bertelsmann Stiftung shows that even though German support for Israel had decreased to fifteen per-cent, support for the Palestinians only amounted to seven per-cent. Both in the Netherlands and in Germany, Israel's repression of the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank since 1967 has mainly resulted in an ever-increasing

92 *Transatlantic Trends, 2003*, German Marshal Fund of the United States and the Compagna di Sao Paulo. <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/transatlantic-trends-2003>.

93 <https://www.cidi.nl/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/SamenvattingCIDIenquete.pdf>.

94 See note 24 above.

number of people unwilling to take sides.⁹⁵ A 2007 Pew Research Centre survey on global attitudes and trends shows that also in the UK, France, Spain and Italy, high percentages of society were unwilling to take sides. However, in all of these countries – which, either because of their former colonial presence in the Middle East or because of their geographical proximity to this region, were far more familiar with Arab culture and history – pro-Palestinian feelings did exceed sympathies for Israel.⁹⁶

Conclusion

Apart from the 1970s and the 1990s, the Dutch government's position with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has always been controlled by a rightist pro-Israel majority in Parliament. The most important factors causing the right-wing political establishment to remain pro-Israel are its interwovenness with pro-Israel lobby groups, an Atlantic or American orientation in international affairs, religious motives and a caricatural, or orientalist, view of Palestinian Arabs. As the distance to the Second World War increased, feelings of guilt about the persecution of the Jews lost their strength. In spite of this, however, the Holocaust continued to play an instrumental role when Israel-oriented political parties tried to silence their left-wing opponents by framing their indignation about Israel's conduct in the Palestinian territories as anti-Semitism.

The fact that the EU has made a divided impression ever since the Venice Declaration of 1980 has helped the rightist majority in Parliament maintain its influence on the government's Middle East policy. Recognising the Palestinians' right to self-determination on the basis of a two-state solution was one thing, but achieving this was another. The EC – and later the EU – could never agree on how to push Israel in the direction of the negotiating table and whether sanctions were allowed. Before Venice, Dutch Foreign Ministers were able to convince Parliament that moving along with the other European partners was indispensable to evade an isolated position. After Venice, with an increasingly divided EC, this argument started to lose its value.

Parliament's grip on the government's policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shows that smaller European countries still have room for manoeuvre at the national level in terms of preferences, policy goals and identity, as I also

95 Hageman and Nathanson, *Germany and Israel Today. United by the Past. Divided by the Present?*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2015. <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/germany-and-israel-today>. According to this survey 34 per cent of German society did not favour neither Israel nor the Palestinians.

96 *Global Unease with Major World Powers*, Pew Research Centre (June 2007).

demonstrate in another study on the Dutch position in the UN Human Rights Commission.⁹⁷ This study thus nuances Hellema's standard work on the history of Dutch foreign policy, in which he describes Dutch foreign policy as an organised adaptation to external circumstances.⁹⁸

In the words of Wong and Hill the 1970s were characterised by a top-down process of Europeanisation during which the EC forced the Netherlands to adapt its policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by recognising the Palestinian right to self-determination. But after Venice 1980 this process was replaced by a long-term bottom-up process continuing until today during which the Netherlands, together with like-minded states as Germany, have been able to restrict a further 'Palestinianisation' of European foreign policy.

Is it also possible to recognise a bi-directional process of convergence – or cross-loading, as Wong and Hill define it – between Dutch foreign policy and that of the EU concerning the Palestinian issue? Certainly, the top-down and bottom-up processes described above did bring The Hague and Brussels closer together, but only to a limited extent. As mentioned earlier, in 2012 Brussels regarded the position of Dutch Foreign Minister Rosenthal, who no longer wanted to speak of occupied but only about disputed Palestinian territories, as 'the harshest Dutch position ever'. Rosenthal even managed to provoke irritation on the side of like-minded Germany. In the end a state like the Netherlands, limited by size and power but with a strong sense of its own distinctive history and culture has been able to exploit the structural inability of European foreign policy to achieve more than a broad consensus on a controversial issue like that of the Palestinians. The Hague needed the cover provided by collective diplomacy in general and the two-state 'solution' in particular but its own domestic politics acted as a brake on change in the national position and thus by extension also on what could be agreed within the EPC and the CFSP.

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