

BROOKINGS

Speech by Bert Koenders, Minister for Development Cooperation

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I want to start by thanking you for this opportunity to address you here today. The Brookings Institution is one of the greatest institutes in the world when it comes to offering a platform to voices of reason in turbulent times of increasing social-economic, political and religious divides in the world. During my graduate studies across the street at John Hopkins, Brookings was already an important source of knowledge and inspiration.

These days my country, the Netherlands, is less and less portrayed as a country of relative calm, liberal and tolerant attitudes, tulips and wooden shoes. More and more often we make the headlines because of discussions on stigma, Islam and Islamophobia, political upheaval or by the political murder of a politician and filmmaker who stood up for freedom of speech against illiberal Islamic voices. Both images- as always- are caricatures. But caricatures always have an element of truth in them. And what is true about this caricature is paradoxically not different from what happens all over the world, namely a fierce debate on the right of self-definition of nations and social and religious groups in a time of migration, globalisation, and the increased sense of risk that these developments create for all of us, including the risk of a restriction of civil liberties. This issue is important for me as minister for development cooperation.

Major trends and dilemmas become real when fundamental principals are at stake: freedom of expression, freedom of religion - now so hotly debated in our society, in our parliament and among citizens in rich and poor countries alike. One of our Dutch MP's recently made a movie called Fitna, depicting the horrors of terrorism in New York, in Madrid and elsewhere, linking them in direct and digital terms to the Qu'ran and indirectly to migration in the Netherlands. Naturally, such a film became subject of fierce debate in the Netherlands and elsewhere. My government had to take its responsibility by standing for the freedom of expression, but at the same time reconciling it with the need to warn for the repercussions the announcement of this film and its showing could have on our society and those elsewhere in the world. When the film was released Prime Minister Balkenende made it very clear he condemns the depicted acts of terrorism, carried out in the name of the Islam or otherwise. And he added that the vast majority of Muslims do reject extremism and violence. In fact, victims of terrorism are often also Muslims as well. 93% of Muslims worldwide wants more freedom and rejects any acts of violence, according to a recent Gallup poll. We should form an alliance with that majority rather than stigmatising and therewith isolating the Muslims as has been done in the movie Fitna. This message was clearly distributed and broadcast around the world.

Let me continue by sharing an extended quote with you, one of the reactions to the film.

[Quote] "Dutch MP Geert Wilders released his movie Fitna, attacking Muslims and the Qur'an, amidst wide international worries that airing the movie would only lead to further cross-cultural

tensions, and perhaps violence. Influential Muslim figures, including some Salafi Saudi scholars, had threatened to boycott the Netherlands while official figures in Iran threatened to review diplomatic relations with the country if the film was aired. Once again, the overall cross-cultural scene seemed less than promising.

Thankfully, the reaction of Dutch Muslims was sedate. Moderates of both sides should make a quick move to prevent radicals from determining the course of events surrounding this debate. The Dutch Constitution prevents the government from banning the movie, and I am personally sceptical towards any attempt to silence an idea. Such subjective decisions open the door for totalitarian regimes to restrict the freedom of expression of their opposition.

Boycotts are the red flags that send alarm signals when things seem to be getting out of control. They also signal the failure of sustaining a constructive dialogue that is based on mutual respect and appreciation of diversity.

A successful dialogue never takes place over a few days or weeks. In fact, it would be impossible for such a discourse to cover the wide range of contentious cross-cultural issues in a few sessions, especially with mounting frustration and mutual mistrust. It should therefore be ongoing and take different forms, including student exchange programmes, seminars, lectures, conferences and exhibits, while building self-sustaining institutions that scrutinise cross-cultural issues and would guarantee continuous interaction.

Freedom of expression has been increasingly manipulated over the past few years, and has been used as a pretext for insult, one that contributes to widening the gap between different cultures and civilisations. To ensure this freedom is not compromised, moderates on both sides should step in and find a sustainable mechanism to bridge the divides in our increasingly globalised world, in which racism and radicalism have a devastating effect on everyone." [End of quote]

Ladies and gentlemen,

This quote did not come from a Western liberal philosopher. In fact, it is an excerpt from an article by Ibrahim el Houdaiby, a prominent member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. I found it to be a promising quote, as it shows a chance for dialogue and debate by -in this particular case- a group with an at least ambiguous position towards democratic principles.

[the freedom of expression & the image of freedom]

Let me also put the movie in the context of what we have seen in Dutch politics over the last seven or eight years. It reflects a debate in society, in our cities, between our citizens that concerns many inter-related issues such as the freedom of speech, freedom of religion, respect for each other's beliefs and our national identity in a globalizing world. We have witnessed the assassination of a leading politician -Pim Fortuyn- (the first political murder in The Netherlands in 400 years) and then the murder of a well-known artist - Theo van Gogh. Lastly, we have seen a Dutch politician claiming that Islam equals Fascism.

This turbulence is something we are not used to in The Netherlands - or something we had not experienced in a long time. We used to be a society that was known for its tolerance, open-mindedness, where people could live the life that they wanted, believe what they wanted to believe, side by side with and tolerating the life that others wanted to lead or the beliefs that they held dear. Dutch society has changed dramatically over the past few decades. Immigration, the internet-age,

secularization, an enormous growth in wealth, globalization, an expanding European Union: all factors that have emerged relatively quickly over the last twenty years. In the major Dutch cities, typical 'white' working class neighbourhoods changed into Turkish or Moroccan ones. Differences increased sharply in levels of education, income, and work. Too often, high levels of unemployment and criminality were symptomatic of immigrant neighbourhoods. The number of non-Western immigrants grew exponentially: today, one third of the youngsters in the big cities are of non-Western origin. Close to one million Muslims live in The Netherlands, a country of 16,5 million in total. With the benefit of hindsight, Dutch politicians believed too long in our traditional 'pillar' structure for organizing society for too long, in which each group -socialist, catholic, protestant, would organize their own schools, churches, sport facilities and political representation. A model that no longer provided solutions for the problems that people were facing.

Geert Wilders' film *Fitna* has to be perceived against the backdrop of this recent Dutch history. The Netherlands has experienced a period of volatile discussions for about 6 years now on what goes well and what goes wrong in multicultural societies and how we can accommodate the Islam in our type of constitutional democracies. It is from this perspective that I would like to share a couple of thoughts with you, for I consider the controversies around freedom of expression and democracy not just a Dutch disease. It is a universal challenge in a time of growing tensions between different cultural and religious groups, combined with major shift in distribution of wealth, power and security. In an age where images seem to dominate the debate in stead of reason.

On the one hand the horrific attacks on the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, on innocent civilians in 2001 have led many people to believe and fear that somehow all Muslims are extremists, seeking to destroy us. While on the other hand in 2006, for many Muslims, and others, the image of the US was no longer the Statue of Liberty but the hooded prisoner at Abu Ghraib. Fear and a feeling of rejection have become dominant in communities both in the West and in the Muslim world. Simplifications in politics and the media tend to deny too often that the horrendous attacks on the World Trade Center were a statement of extremist and not of all Muslims. Similarly, the degrading treatment of Iraqis by some deviant soldiers is often portrayed in other quarters as a determined policy of the West, while in fact it amounted to a denial of Western values. The caricatures of Mohammed in the Danish press and the recent film *Fitna* are a direct consequence of this way of perceiving the world in either black or white. What we should really be fearful of is that our freedom might fall victim to the controversy.

All people must have the opportunity to express themselves freely. Freedom of expression lies at the heart of democracy and forms the basis for all other freedoms. Open debate is the heartbeat of our society. If only one way of thinking is permitted, the continuous flow of ideas and opinions, the lifeblood of our democracies, will dwindle. This will inevitably spell the end for our systems of government. How long would we have thought the world was flat if Galilee had not questioned the dominating theory? Scepticism about the superiority of one's own values, and those of others, is an invaluable asset. It is the antidote to fundamentalism. The Egyptian author Alaa al Aswani, known for his bestseller '*The Yacoubian Building*', proves this point by stating: "[In Egypt] you can say what you want, but the government also does what it wants. In a democracy, freedom of expression is an instrument of evaluation and change".

Some argue that, in the case of the Danish cartoons and the cut-&-paste movie by Geert Wilders, it is just Muslims who are the ones having to pay the price of freedom. But those people are wrong. Because the same freedom enables those who feel offended to speak out and to defend themselves. I strongly oppose anyone who reduces the debate to a divide between fundamental secularists and those who respect religion; between the Western and Islamic Worlds. It is not

Christians and Muslims who are drifting apart, but the tolerant and the intolerant. I am convinced that freedom of speech and freedom of press give the right to all our citizens -be they agnostic, or Christian or Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu - to express themselves fully.

Freedom of expression and freedom of religion are two sides of the same coin. Freedom of speech is, in my view, a precondition for all Muslims to assert their rights in Europe, in the US and elsewhere in the world. This is the path to reciprocity and a common purpose.

However, freedom of speech does not imply a right to insult; I feel no sympathy whatsoever for a liberal jihad. But on the flipside, people do not have the right not to be insulted, not to be hurt, and not to be disrespected. Democracy doesn't only require wisdom and responsibility in exercising its freedoms. It presupposes respect of the view of the minority; it assures that the voice of the weak is also heard. But democracy cannot force respect, only teach it. It cannot force listening, but presupposes a real dialogue.

[Democratisation]

Ladies and gentlemen,

Traditionally, freedom of expression occurs within the constitutional and legal boundaries of a state. Nowadays, opinions travel around the world at the speed of a mouse-click and are directed towards cross-border groups. When a movie is released on You Tube, it can be seen instantly on the other side of the globe. Reactions and possible repercussions are therefore no longer confined to the state where the opinion originated. In this increasingly interconnected world a whisper at home can lead to a hurricane elsewhere, a place where the political and social context might be completely different. As one of the founders of the Rushdie Defence Committee in the Netherlands, Maarten Asscher, recently stated: national states can no longer effectively protect their citizens: the new globalized situation requires an international approach. An approach which should also account for the complex and specific domestic realities and avoids the reification of Religion - In Kepels' struggle for the Muslims minds in Europe, there is a completely different social and political context for religion in Europe as compared to many parts of the Arab world. Yes, there is the internet and there are transnational links. But many European Muslims already have found their place as educated activist citizens of Europe; others however might choose Islamic rigidity, rejecting integration and embrace separation. That's what we should counter. Integration is key but not always easy.

Many citizens ask our government to be much more aware of the risk of low-skilled migrants from other Muslims countries crowding out part of our cities and traditional cultural context. That voice has to be taken much more seriously as well. Fear of this type of globalisation, often by the short-term losers of globalisation, should never be neglected. To the contrary it requires serious dialogue, but also good investment in inner cities, education and obligation of our immigrants to learn the language and integrating into the new environment. And it requires the ultimate defence of free speech without intimidation by Islamic radicals. We have to clearly defend our democratic values and stand tall. In many parts of the Islamic world the social and political context is also fastely changing, leading to conflicts that in some cases become religious in character between fundamentalist and modernisers, Shia's, Shiites, democrats and authoritarians. We can see in the Arab world how the Islam can be an ideological shield for authoritarian regimes but also the outlet for the social anger of the poor and the increasing number of youngsters not being able to find jobs in their closed societies. These groups can also create risk for Europe, western societies. It has little

to do with Islamofascism. That caricature does not help us to find answers. The Islamic world is too rich and diverse for simplifications. In fact simplification is a mistake. Let me give you an example.

I think that the imminent threat to our homeland security may have led us away from our focus on international democratisation and reform in the Arab world. Democracy not imposed but fostered from within. I am convinced we have to re-focus on this agenda. It is no accident that 95% of the worst economic results over the past forty years were furnished by non-democratic governments. Compared with autocracies, democracies are structured to take account of a broader range of interests. The separation of powers also serves as a constant reminder, by whom 'the central government's powers are limited'. Thus, it encourages the expansion and the independence of the private sector and forms of civil society. This, in turn, fosters a climate of innovation and entrepreneurship, the engines of economic growth.' Democracies produce better development indicators on average 'because they tend to be more adaptable'. In a functioning democracy, corrupt and ineffective leaders are more likely to lose their jobs. Finally, thanks to their adaptability and 'quality of steadinesses', democracies are better able to respond to economic and humanitarian disasters. For large parts of the population, this can make the difference between life and death.

Today 120 countries have governments resulting from elections in which all adult citizens could vote. Hierarchies are breaking down; closed systems are opening up. More than ever before, media, the image of reality and those who have the power over it determine the outcomes, policies and state of democracy. Unfortunately the democratisation of the electoral process can also be a democratisation of violence. There is a danger that democratisation will be reduced to formal election of warlords, separatists or racists.

The country with the largest Muslim population, Indonesia, has a functioning democracy, with both nationalists and Islamists in parliament, joining hands against Muslim extremist. Close to 80 percent of Indonesians prefer a secular state over an Islamic one. Yet in a Taoist, Confucian country like China, even the local version of 'Pop Idol' was banned for stirring up democratic sentiments.

So, absence of democracy is not necessarily a religious matter. Yet, the democratic calibre of the Arab region silhouettes negatively from the rest of the world. Out of 18 countries in the region- although modest progress has been made in recent years- only one can be considered a full democracy. The political exclusion and oppression of large groups, combined with the great divide between poor and rich, results in discontent and radicalisation. Once mixed with the many conflicts in the region, this produces a political tinderbox.

Democratisation of the Arab region and beyond should be one of our main priorities. The Arab Human Development Report 2006, which was written by scholars from the Middle East and sponsored by the United Nations, features some important conclusions in this respect. The Arab region has fallen from a fifth to a seventh of the OECD per capital income average. Most young people remain un- or underemployed. According to the Report Arab nations need to urgently embark on rebuilding their societies if they want to prevent the region from falling further behind. With that in mind it sets a few very clear priorities: (1) full respect for human rights and political freedoms, (2) the complete empowerment of Arab women, taking advantage of all opportunities to build their capacities and (3) higher investment in education.

Governance, gender and education are the keys.

The report gives us further guidance and warns by saying that further repressive situations in Arab countries will breed conflict and terrorism. Other countries should work to spread democracy not by military force but by supporting local forces of change.

I would like to challenge all democracies, all moderate forces in the West and in the rest of the world to put our money where our mouth is. And we could be really successful: according to all available surveys Arab citizens believe even more strongly than Europeans that democracy is the best form of government. We can all contribute: the World Bank has a role, the UN, democracies, human rights activists, all moderate forces from all parts who believe in sensible solutions. Unfortunately, this will be too late for the young woman killed in Saudi Arabia last week by her father because she had chatted with a man on the internet website Facebook. And let me stress again that this is, as far as I am concerned, a matter for a criminal court, not a matter of incompatibility between a certain religion and freedoms and human dignity.

The question is not whether we should or should not assist in promoting democracy and economic reform, but how we should do so.

[Dialogue & the Fund for Pluriformity, Participation and Development]

I am afraid that small signs of upcoming democracy in the middle east during 2004 and 2005: the Cedar Revolution, the small promise of liberalisation in Egypt, some positive changes in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are now overtaken by severe political polarization and in some cases by dramatic gains of Islamist radicals. Too many authoritarian leaders say to citizens: you want democracy? Look at Iraq!! So many in the West have given up on difficult, but crucial support for democracy in the Middle East. That would be a strategic mistake with tremendous repercussions, which I regret as Minister for Development Cooperation. We have to be bridge builders, put an end to double standards, and strive for intelligent support for democratic developments throughout the Middle East. I am a believer in interfaith and cultural alliances, both in my own country and across the borders and we should be much more daring in bringing them about. We should never be naïve about jihad terrorism, but find appropriate answers without creating a security illusion or underestimating the globalisation of terror. We should never forget to foster democracy. As we should address the root causes - without ever legitimizing terrorism- as a matter of priority.

The Netherlands, as one of the world's leading donors in the field of development cooperation, attaches great importance to substantive democratisation and participation of all citizens in the process of development. Substantial Dutch support to human rights activists around the globe will be strengthened including many parts of the Islamic world.

On top of that, we will establish a new instrument in the fight against radicalisation, the fight for democratic developments in societies in the Islamic world. We will launch a fund for Pluriformity, Participation and Development. The fund aims at the goals I mentioned before by enhancing the ability of civil powers that advocate home-grown reforms, aimed at pluriformity. Democratisation should not be about imposing western copies. Principles of democracy are universal, but the way a country fleshes it out, is a local matter. This is not cultural relativism, but a simple conclusion that a democracy should, as the word means, be carried by the people it represents. We will support projects and activists that structurally contribute to decision-making processes and include groups that are otherwise limited in their freedom.

I advocate an active brand of tolerance in which freedom is subject to criticism, where the legal acceptance of a great degree of freedom in how people live their lives does not necessarily imply

the moral acceptance of that way of life. Because we don't want to forbid certain opinions and behaviours, we should utilise the power of dialogue, debate, critique and confrontation to defend our core values and to challenge others.

It is important to reach out to the many Muslims in the world that want a job, a better life and a better government. And, let me stress once more, freedom of speech, as a recent Gallup study has shown. That is not always going to be easy. Many groups in the area are influenced by extremist and anti-western ideologies. In many ways they are inspired by hatred. Here is no place for complacency or naivety. But we have to try. And we have to be prepared for very serious dilemmas.

Let's start by undertaking a serious dialogue, within our societies and with the moderate Muslims - to start with, in the Arab World. Not just with governments, but also with moderate groups, which in fact are gaining popularity among the population in the Arab world. A coalition of reason. I think this is well possible. Since the end of the nineties, many Islamic parties have chosen a new course, more aimed at democratisation and denouncing violence. Under the Islamic rhetoric, democratic values are unveiling, like representation and transparency. Now is the time to seek the similarities rather than the differences. In difficult times this is a marriage of Hope.

But it is a challenge as much to the Arab world and the Muslim community at large as it is to ourselves. The images imprinted in our heads, are great enemies of a true dialogue. The news cycle feeds us 24/7 with images of fear. Fear of each other, fear for the other. More and more often the persistent fallacy is being propagated that Islam cannot be reconciled with democratic values. Many tend to pass over the idea of the Islam not being a monolithic bloc. We have to brace ourselves against those images. Let's stop thinking as 'The West against the rest'. And start bridging the divide.

If the issue of the Wilders movie makes one thing clear, it is that Europeans, Americans and Arabs, Christians and Muslims, are more dependent on each other than ever. The current developments therefore compel us to increase, not decrease, our commitment to dialogue with each other. Let us use this situation as an opportunity for the West, the Islamic world to improve and build on our relations. Apologies are not called for. The West must stand by its principles. Freedom of expression, freedom of religion, respect for each other. Beliefs do not create differences, but bridge them. That is the real lesson from Fitna. The world is truly one, and only we can make that happen.

Thank you.