

Dutch Foreign Policy & Social Division: A Lecture on International Law and Israel-Palestine

Good afternoon. Welcome and thank you for this opportunity. Peace be upon you all. We convene today to address a profound and troubling contradiction at the heart of the Dutch state. The contradiction places the stated principles of the nation in direct opposition to the tangible outcomes of its foreign policy. At the core of this issue is article 90 of the Dutch constitution. This article is not a vague aspiration or a piece of historical decoration. It is a binding mandate. It explicitly requires the government of the Netherlands to actively promote the development of the international rule of law. The policies currently enacted and defended by the Dutch government, particularly concerning the ongoing crisis in Palestine, represent a fundamental betrayal of this constitutional duty.

The actions of the civil servants present here today, engaged in an act of conscientious subjection, therefore, are of critical importance. These protests are not an act of disloyalty. It is an act of profound constitutional fidelity. You are holding the state to account, demanding that it aligns its actions with its own foundational legal and moral commitments. The response of state institutions to your principled stand serves as a crucial litmus test for the democratic health of the nation. What is a healthy democracy? One that does not merely tolerate dissent. It recognizes it as a vital corrective mechanism. When the state apparatus seeks to silence, marginalize, or punish those who expose its contradictions, it signals a dangerous slide towards authoritarianism.

Your courage forces a public confrontation with uncomfortable truths that the political establishment would prefer to ignore. In my talk here, which I will try not to make too long, I want to talk about these societal and political currents that expose these crises. So I want to talk about the insidious role of institutional racism within the Dutch body politic. I want to talk about the deliberate and accelerated shrinkage of the space for legitimate political dissent, and this staggering hypocrisy that underpins a foreign policy that applies the principles of international law with damaging selectivity.

The foundational principles of a liberal democracy are not abstract ideas for academic debate. They are essential, practical tools for holding power to account. This includes freedom of speech, the freedom of peaceful assembly and protest, and the freedom of association. Now week after week you are here. This is a living embodiment of these rights. It is an act of sustained civic courage. It reclaims the public square as a legitimate site of political contestation, challenging the state's attempt to monopolize the narrative. You are not simply protesting a single policy. You are actively defending the very mechanisms that safeguard democracy itself. These freedoms form the bedrock of a healthy, functioning society. They are the primary means by which citizens can challenge the decisions of the state. Without these freedoms, the state operates without a moral conscience, insulated from the moral and ethical consequences of its actions.

You are not simply unthinking cogs in a bureaucratic machine. You are citizens endowed with a conscience and with duties that transcend mere obedience to superiors. The constitution is not a dusty historical document but a living covenant that demands active fidelity from both the state and its citizens. This is democratic accountability.

There are severe limitations being placed upon all of these freedoms in the current political climate. It is shrinking. This is not by accident. It is by design. It is deliberate and it is calculated. We see this going on across Europe, including here in the Netherlands. Consider the preemptive banning of peaceful demonstrations in places such as Berlin or Paris. These were always maintained and justified to maintain public order, a pretext to silence solidarity with Palestine. This is very dangerous indeed. Consider also the pressure on Dutch universities, which should be bastions of free inquiry and critical thought. Universities are pressured to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of anti-semitism. Of course, anti-semitism is racism and to fight against it is a vital goal. This specific definition is highly contested because it conflates criticism of the state of Israel with anti-semitism. This contested definition is then weaponized to suppress academic freedom.

We have seen the cancellation of lectures, the sanctioning of academics, and the intimidation of students who are critical of Israeli policy. Even outside my own building on the 6th of May, where we witnessed some of the most horrific acts of police brutality against protesting students. What does this do for those who protest, who have something to say? It creates a climate of self-censorship. Critical voices, including from those from racialized or Muslim communities, are systematically reframed. They are not treated as legitimate participants in a democratic dialogue. Instead, they are struggled as potential threats to national security. This is insidious. It transforms public institutions across Dutch society: workplaces, universities, public forums. These should be sites of robust inquiry and robust debate. Instead, they are arenas of suspicion, surveillance, and fear. The very act of questioning the state's narrative on Palestine, of pointing out verifiable facts, is increasingly, or has been until very recently, construed as an act of disloyalty or even extremism. This creates an environment where speaking truth becomes a career-threatening risk, a phenomenon that has eroded democracy plainly in sight.

Let us name this injustice. Let us be unequivocal about what the reality is here that compels your protests. We must use, however, precise and accurate language. We are not witnessing a conflict between two equal sides. This framing is a deliberate distortion. We are witnessing a methodical, relentless, brutal campaign inflicted upon the Palestinian people. This campaign involves ethnic cleansing, collective punishment, and acts that the International Court of Justice, the world's highest court, has deemed plausibly constituting genocide under the 1948 Genocide Convention. This is a textbook case of colonial power enacting a systematic erasure of an indigenous population. The evidence for this is overwhelming and extensively well-documented by international bodies.

What have we got? We have got the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, such as homes, hospitals, universities, schools, bakeries, and cultural archives. This is not collateral damage. It is the destruction of the very fabric of life. We have got the deliberate targeting of

protected persons under international humanitarian law, such as civilians, journalists, doctors, academics, and humanitarian aid workers. We have got the engineered famine achieved through the blocking of food, water, fuel, and medical supplies. This is the use of starvation as a weapon of war. This is not a set of random acts. This is a calculated set of measures designed with a clear purpose: to make life in Gaza, and indeed all of Palestine, impossible. To break the will of the people to resist their own erasure, to extinguish their claim to their land, their history, and their future.

The physical violence is accompanied by a parallel campaign of narrative warfare. The stark reality on the ground is systematically underreported, deliberately distorted, and actively ignored by many of the world's most powerful media and political institutions, which have been banned from operating out of Gaza for the last 20 months by the state of Israel. The language used to obscure the truth includes this idea of 'both-sidesism', which creates a false equivalence between a nuclear-armed occupying power and an occupied, besieged population. It includes an obsessive focus on the violence of the oppressed while systematically ignoring or downplaying the decades of structural violence enacted by the oppressor, and the constant invocation of Israel's right to defend itself as a justification for indiscriminate acts on a population it illegally occupies. This is a process of manufacturing consent for the unconscionable. It creates a public discourse where the victims are blamed for their own suffering, and where solidarity with their plight is framed as controversial, extreme, or even hateful. The gap between the observable, verifiable reality of the violence and its public representation is vast. Your protest stands in this gap. It is a courageous insistence on seeing what is there to be seen and naming it for what it is: a genocide in motion.

This deliberate obfuscation of reality is sustained by a staggering hypocrisy. The hypocrisy exposes the moral bankruptcy of the current international order and, more specifically, the Dutch state's position within it. The most egregious manifestation of this hypocrisy is the selective application of international law. Let us look at some comparisons. In the case of Ukraine, when Russia launched its full-scale invasion, the Dutch government responded with righteous indignation. International law was presented as sacrosanct and inviolable. The response was swift and comprehensive, including widespread and severe economic sanctions targeting the Russian state and its enablers, the provision of extensive military aid to support Ukraine's self-defence, the welcoming of Ukrainian refugees with open arms and state support, and immediate calls for accountability through the International Criminal Court and other legal mechanisms.

Let us think of the case of Palestine. The principles so rigorously applied to Ukraine are systematically abandoned. For Palestine, we see the opposite response: a complete absence of sanctions for an illegal occupation that has lasted for more than half a century and has now escalated into a plausible genocide. We see the continuation and, in some cases, enhancement of military cooperation and arms trade with the perpetrator of documented war crimes. We see the demonization of Palestinian refugees and the criminalization of solidarity movements, such as the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions campaign. We see the active blocking of

accountability measures, including the obstruction of justice at the United Nations and the rejection of the jurisdiction of international courts.

Consider UN Security Council resolution 2334. The resolution, passed in 2016, unequivocally declares that Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories constitute a flagrant violation of international law and have no legal validity. The response from the Dutch state and its allies has been limited to occasional mild verbal condemnations. There have been no material consequences, no trade restrictions on settlement products, and no sanctions on the entities building them. Instead of accountability, the Dutch state offers the Israeli state continued trade, unwavering diplomatic cover, and vital military cooperation. This is not a failure of the law itself. The law is clear. This is a failure of political will.

This failure is rooted in a deeply entrenched, racialized hierarchy of human value. This hierarchy, a legacy of colonialism, deems some lives, white European lives, as more worthy of protection, grief, and justice than others who are perhaps brown, Arab, and Palestinian. We must name this reality without flinching. The double standards applied to Palestine are the logical outcome of a system steeped in ethnocentrism and white supremacy. These are not mere insults to be hurled in anger. They are precise analytical categories that help us to understand how global power operates. They explain how the colonization of non-white people has been historically justified and continues to be enabled in the present day. This racism is not merely the presence of individuals. It is institutional. It is baked into the very structures of the Dutch government, Dutch media, and Dutch educational systems. It shapes Dutch foreign policy, dictates media narratives, and informs the very language we use to describe the world. The Dutch government's policy on Israel and Palestine lays this institutional racism bare for all of us to see. It forces us to confront the poison that runs through the arteries of the Dutch body politic.

Let me offer you some concluding thoughts. Your protest here is about far more than a single foreign policy issue. It is a profound and necessary challenge to the foundational hypocrisies of the Dutch state and its place in the world. It is a demand for a moral and legal reckoning. You are asking your employer, the state, to look in the mirror and confront the grotesque contradiction between its professed values and its actual practices. You are insisting on a simple yet revolutionary principle, which is consistency. You are insisting that a state that presents itself as a global champion of international law cannot be actively complicit in its most flagrant and brutal violations. You are declaring through your presence a truth that should be self-evident: that the lives of Palestinians matter as much as the lives of anyone else. This is a simple, humane, and profoundly necessary demand. By standing here, you are not only defending article 90 of the constitution. You are defending our collective humanity from the corrosive effects of racism, hypocrisy, and indifference.

Thank you.