

Christian democratic solidarity with the weak

*A study of the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) 's attitude
towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (1980-2010)*



The three Prime Ministers the CDA brought forth between 1980 and 2010
(from left to right: Dries van Agt, Ruud Lubbers, and Jan Peter Balkenende)
at the party's congress in 2015. © Maarten Hartman/Hollandse Hoogte

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts

Faculty of Humanities



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Academic year: 2020/2021

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Abstract

This thesis explores how the Christian Democratic Appeal's (CDA) attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has affected the party's understanding of its key principle solidarity during its most prominent years in government between 1980 and 2010. By analyzing primary source material in the form of personal statements from key CDA members, election programs and official party documentation, it focusses on two aspects of the CDA's identity: (1) its membership of a family of Christian democratic parties, whose political identity is based on an explicit appeal to Christian values in general; and (2) its primary objective of both "nationally and internationally appealing to the responsibility of the strong to show solidarity with the weak" as laid out in the party's Statement of Principles in 1980. This thesis concludes that the CDA, throughout its years in government, has been gradually drifting away from these aspects of its Christian democratic identity, because of (1) the CDA's core principle of solidarity being originally inspired by Catholic social doctrine, (2) the Israel-Palestine conflict having been an internally dividing topic ever since the start of the CDA, and (3) the increasing support of the secular vote having made the party's successes possible in the first place. This combination of factors has often made room for circumstances in which not always the content of the party's foundational Statement of Principles was of the utmost priority. Moreover, it has often resulted in a negligence of the protection of those Christian values and traditions in places where Christian solidarity was actually needed the most. While this research gives an interesting insight into the CDA's developing understanding of solidarity towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, future research on the connection between Christian democratic politics and threatened Christian communities in the rest of the world might be a welcome addition to the discussion.

Introduction

This thesis explores how the Christian Democratic Appeal's (CDA) understanding of solidarity has been affected by the party's attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It primarily aims to find out what has become of the CDA's key principle of "solidarity with the weak," during its most important years in government between 1980 and 2010.¹ Within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this has often come down to victims of human rights violations, which have sometimes been Christian communities in East Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories themselves.² Knowing this, this research focusses on two aspects of the CDA's identity: (1) its membership of a family of Christian democratic parties, whose political identity is based on an explicit appeal to Christian values in general; and (2) its primary objective of both "nationally and internationally appealing to the responsibility of the strong to show solidarity with the weak" as laid out in the party's Statement of Principles in 1980.³ This research analyzes how these two aspects of the CDA's foundational identity have been viewed and understood, in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, about which both party insiders and outsiders have said that there has been no other foreign policy issue that has divided the CDA so strongly as this one.⁴ The main question of this thesis will therefore be: how has the CDA's attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict affected the party's understanding of its key principle solidarity during its most prominent years in government between 1980 and 2010?

The topic of this thesis is strongly connected to statements made by Dutch Arabists Jan Jaap de Ruiter and Rena Netjes, who in 2018 noted that political parties and politicians in the West with a distinctive Christian identity, do not always act in solidarity with help seeking Christian communities elsewhere. Moreover, the authors claimed that Western support for Israel often damages the status of Christians in the Middle East.⁵ A few of the driving forces

¹ CDA, "Program van Uitgangspunten van het Christen Democratisch Appèl," (1980), 27.

² For more on this, read: Daniel Williams "The Persecution Of Christians In Today's Middle East," in *The Future Of Religious Minorities In The Middle East*, by John Eibner (Zürich, 2016) 147-156.; Franck Salameh, "Christians Of The Holy Land-Exodus, Disintegration, and Ideological Necrophilia," in *The Future Of Religious Minorities In The Middle East*, by John Eibner (Zürich, 2017), 221-234.; or Andrea Zaki Stephanous, "Arab Christians And Political Participation," in *Political Islam, Citizenship, And Minorities: The Future Of Arab Christians In The Islamic Middle East* (2010), 115-152.

³ CDA, "Program van Uitgangspunten van het Christen Democratisch Appèl," 27.

⁴ Fred Grünfeld, "Zestig jaar Nederland-Israël." *Internationale Spectator* (2008), 681-682.

⁵ Jan Jaap de Ruiter and Rena Netjes, "Christelijke steun aan Israël schaadt minderheden in Midden-Oosten," *NRC* (2018).

behind their article were concerns expressed by leaders of Christian communities in Egypt, Lebanon and Israel, directly aimed against U.S. President Donald Trump's decision in 2017 to relocate the United States embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Shortly after Trump's announcement, Christian patriarchs and heads of local churches in Jerusalem jointly wrote an open letter to President Trump, warning that such steps would "yield increased hatred, conflict, violence and suffering in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, moving us farther from the goal of unity and deeper toward destructive division."⁶

In a reaction, the Dutch government – at the time consisting of a coalition of the conservative-liberal VVD, the Christian democratic CDA, the social-liberal D66, and the social-Christian CU – jointly declared Trump's decision "unwise and counterproductive."⁷ Moreover, a majority of individual political parties in the Netherlands condemned the plans straight away. Yet, two of the three parties with a Christian foundation in Dutch parliament immediately expressed their support for Trump's decision. A prominent member of the Christian Union (CU) directly called Trump's decision "a good thing." The parliament leader of the Reformed Political Party (SGP) also praised Trump for his decision and claimed that "Jerusalem is indeed the undivided capital of Israel." While almost all Dutch political parties publicly condemned or supported Trump's decision – with the CU and the SGP even claiming that the Dutch government should follow the American example of relocating its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem – the CDA itself abstained from commenting on the issue.

The CDA's public silence in 2017 seems to be comparable with the party's attitude over the already mentioned embassy issue in 1980. This issue took place shortly after Israel passed its so-called 'Jerusalem Law,' in which it, in the face of negotiations on Palestinian autonomy in the territories, affirmed Jerusalem as its capital. In reaction, the United Nations passed a resolution in which it condemned Israel for violating international law and human rights and called upon "those States that have established diplomatic missions at Jerusalem to withdraw such missions from the Holy City."⁸ While the Dutch government under CDA Prime Minister Dries van Agt eventually complied with the resolution and relocated the embassy to Tel Aviv, the CDA's own leadership did not issue a statement on the issue at all.⁹

⁶ Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, "Heads Of Local Churches Send Letter To President Donald Trump Regarding Status Of Jerusalem," *Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem* (2017).

⁷ NOS, *Zijlstra over Trump-plan Jeruzalem: onverstandig en contraproductief* (2017).

⁸ Security Council, "Resolution 478 of 20 August 1980," *Search engine for the United Nations Security Council Resolutions* (1980).

⁹ Fred Grünfeld, *Nederland en het Midden-Oosten. Het Arabisch olie-embargo 1973/1974. De verplaatsing van de Nederlandse ambassade in Israël 1980* (Leiden, 1984), 137.

These examples of the CDA's public silence over issues concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should not be seen as examples of disinterest. On the contrary, as CDA spokesman Hans Gualthérie van Weezel stated in 1983, "the Middle East issue is the most sensitive issue in Dutch society and affects Christians very deeply."¹⁰ While it was ultimately foreign pressure that was decisive in the Dutch government's decision in 1980 to relocate its embassy, historians also described this event as a crystallization point of the frequent and ongoing discussion about the Middle East within the CDA itself.¹¹ According to the already mentioned Gualthérie van Weezel, there was no other foreign policy issue that divided the CDA so strongly as this one.¹² This internal struggle within the CDA – over how to stay true to some of the most prominent aspects of the party's identity, while at the same time trying to relate to one of the most sensitive contemporary conflicts of our times – formed the main motivation for this research project.

In essence, this thesis aims to get a better sense of how this long-term internal divide within the CDA over how to respond to this issue in the Middle East has affected the party's understanding of the concept of solidarity and how it might have even impacted the ideological character of the most prominent Christian party in Dutch political history during its most important years in government. This kind of contemporary historical comparative research could benefit to a better understanding of how the ideas behind Christian democratic solidarity through discourse and political practice have evolved over time.

¹⁰ Grünfeld, *Nederland en het Midden-Oosten*, 36.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Grünfeld, *Zestig jaar Nederland-Israël*, 680-681.

Methodology and sources

To answer the main question of this thesis – how the CDA’s attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has affected the party’s understanding of its key principle solidarity, during its most prominent years in government between 1980 and 2010 – the theoretical framework of this research sets itself around the theory behind Christian democratic ideology. As a political theory, Christian democracy contributed to establishing stable democracies in Europe in the aftermath of the second world war. As many authors have previously claimed, its role in the creation of the United Nations, the European Union and the international human rights can hardly be underestimated.¹³

This thesis essentially tries to understand how Christian democracy’s historical core principles, evolving around its belief in the inherent dignity of humans, its moral critique of materialism and its resolute internationalism, are being grasped by today’s Christian democrats. The latter’s commitment to both supranational cooperation amongst established powers and a duty of solidarity with respect to less fortunate peoples and countries, is of essential importance when trying to understand the developments within Christian democratic thought in the Netherlands. It aims to assess the validity of the already mentioned argument that support for Israel in the West, which often comes from Christian politicians and political parties, frequently damages the status of Christians in the Middle East. However, understanding how the CDA’s solidarity towards Christians in Israel and the Palestinian territories has developed, also requires an understanding of the role and place that Christian democratic ideology has taken in the Netherlands in the 20th century.

The literature review discusses what researchers have already written about the essence of Christian democracy and its impact on Dutch politics. It explores how Dutch Christians went from decades of confessional politics, strictly separated between denominations, to the foundation of the first Christian democratic party in the Netherlands in 1980, the CDA. Moreover, by focusing on how Christian democratic ideology ultimately even reinvented itself in the Netherlands through the foundation of the CDA, this review is able to place the party’s key principle of solidarity into the right perspective. This approach is necessary to further on understand the impact that Christian democratic ideology has had on the contemporary political

¹³ Carlo Invernizzi Accetti and Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, "Can Christian democracy save America from Trump?", *The Guardian* (2018).

history of the Netherlands in general and the ideological character of the CDA more specifically.

To build on this, chapters 1 and 2 will be focusing on those developments within the CDA itself between 1980 and 2010. In these three decades, the party has led nine coalition governments.¹⁴ These coalitions have seen three different CDA prime ministers, namely Dries van Agt (1977-1982), Ruud Lubbers (1982-1994), and Jan Peter Balkenende (2002-2010). By analyzing primary source material in the forms of official party documentation, personal memoirs, interviews with and essays from prominent figures within the CDA, these chapters explore how both the people and the party have developed their understanding of the Christian democratic concept of solidarity, their international attitude towards “the weak,” and their approach towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the party’s most prominent years between 1980 and 2010.

It should be noted that this thesis will not be analyzing government positions and policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during these years. Despite the fact that in all of these nine coalition governments, the CDA was the dominant party by far, this thesis is not focusing too much attention on the implementation of decisions made by those governments over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but rather the decision-making processes within the CDA itself. In the case of the aforementioned embassy issue in 1980, it was therefore not the Dutch government’s ultimate decision – after discussion within the coalition – to relocate its embassy that was of prime interest for this thesis, but much more the CDA’s consideration to publicly stay silent over the matter.

In its final discussion, this thesis evaluates how the ideas behind Christian democratic solidarity in the Netherlands have evolved. It reflects on both the CDA’s Christian democratic appeal to preserve Christian values, as well as its strong sense of showing international solidarity with the weak.

¹⁴ The fragmented Dutch political landscape forces parties who are willing to take part in government to forge coalitions with other parties in order to reach a majority in parliament.

Literature review: Christian democratic solidarity

Introduction

This review will discuss the origins and impact of Christian democratic ideology on the CDA's process of developing its key principles. It analyzes political theory in general, together with specific statements of principles, early election programs and other historical documentation from the CDA's foundational years. It will briefly touch upon the post-war Dutch political landscape from before the foundation of the CDA. This will be followed by an analysis of the emergence of Christian democracy in Western Europe in general and the Netherlands in specific. Finally, a deeper dive into the CDA's key principles will be taken, specifically into the genesis, meaning, and development of solidarity. In sum, this review aims to find out what scholars of the Christian democratic ideological tradition can teach us about the foundation of the CDA in general and the party's concept of solidarity in an international context in particular.

Confessional politics

Since the end of the First World War, Dutch parliamentary history has been dominated by three confessional parties, each of them with their own Christian foundation: the predominantly Reformed Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP), the Dutch Reformed Christian Historical Union (CHU) and the Catholic People's Party (KVP). Until 1967, the political dominance of these three parties even resulted in them having half or more of the total numbers of seats in Dutch parliament, making it possible to leave liberal and social democratic parties out of coalition government. In 1980, after years of working together in both government coalitions as well as the opposition, these three confessional parties managed to merge into a new party: the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA). As already mentioned, historians have previously researched how this fusion might have affected the ideological character of the new party, which some claimed had up until then "still not been fully developed."¹⁵ A valid question, considering the different backgrounds all three parties historically came from, with the ARP and CHU having been both protestant parties, and the KVP having had an outspoken catholic identity. One could describe this post-war period, apart from the years between 1994 and

¹⁵ Rutger Zwart, *Gods wil in Nederland: Christelijke ideologieën en de vorming van het CDA (1880-1980)*, (Kampen, 1996), 13-14.

2002,¹⁶ as one in which governments in the Netherlands were fully or partly represented by parties with Christian foundations. However, one could also acknowledge that this post-war period was one in which the Netherlands experienced a shift from confessional to Christian democratic politics.

Emergence of Christian democracy

One could say that the Christian democratic wave arrived rather late in the Netherlands, compared to the rise of Christian democratic people's parties in the rest of Europe some decades earlier.¹⁷ It is often described as one of three main political schools in the Netherlands, together with liberalism and social democracy. Where the latter two already took shape in the early nineteenth century, Christian democracy only came to surface in the Dutch political landscape from the second half of the twentieth century onwards. Admittedly, there are scholars who claim that the first 'Christian democratic Party' in the Netherlands – in the sense that it made disagreement within one and the same denomination possible – was already founded in 1905, when several left leaning members of the already mentioned ARP split-off, creating a more progressive current within the Protestant community.¹⁸ However, as historians Anthonie Lucardie and Hans-Martien ten Napel rightfully notice, it was not until 1980 before the first actual Christian democratic party for *all* people would emerge.¹⁹

In terms of their intended audience, the differences between these confessional and Christian democratic parties were more than clear from the start. As opposed to confessional parties, which base themselves on a certain creed, for which they recruit almost all their voters from certain denominations, Christian democratic parties, by definition, open themselves up to a diversity of people. However, whether despite or because of this, scholars have asked themselves what Christian democracy actually stands for. To put it even more strongly,

¹⁶ Between 1994 and 2002, the Dutch government was led by so-called 'Purple Coalitions' of social democrats (red) and liberals (blue). This was the first time since the First World War that Christian parties were excluded from government.

¹⁷ Anthonie Lucardie and Hans-Martien ten Napel, "Van confessioneel naar liberaal-conservatief? De ontwikkeling van het CDA vergeleken met christen-democratische partijen elders in Europa," in *Jaarboek Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Politieke Partijen 1992*, by Gerrit Voerman (Groningen, 1993), 54.

¹⁸ For a broader description of this period in Dutch politics, see: H.J. Langeveld, "Horsels rond het antirevolutionaire paard. Progressieve dissidenten in de protestantse politiek tussen 1900 en 1940," in *Een land nog niet in kaart gebracht. Aspecten van het protestants-christelijk leven in Nederland in de jaren 1880-1940*, by J. de Bruijn, (Amsterdam, 1987) 91-112.

¹⁹ Lucardie and Ten Napel, 54.

academics have been discussing whether or not to describe Christian democracy as an actual ideology at all.

Academic neglect as an ideology

If one were to follow Michael Freeden's theories from his influential book 'Ideologies and Political Theory,' one might define political ideologies as "systems of political thinking... through which individuals and groups construct an understanding of the political world they, or those who preoccupy their thought, inhabit, and then act on that understanding."²⁰ Freeden argues that political ideologies should consist of three key components: they are to be understood as "systems" or "constellations of political concepts;" they should perform a range of political services, without which societies could not function adequately, if at all; and they are "forms of group thinking," making them different from political theories or philosophies.²¹ Interestingly enough, although Freeden substantively writes about liberalism, conservatism, socialism, feminism, and ecologism, he does not mention Christian democracy.

This neglect of Christian democracy's prominent place in Europe's post-war history is, according to political scientists Stathis Kalyvas and Kees van Kersbergen, consequential for two reasons. First of all, it distorts our understanding of European politics, since Christian democracy, together with social democracy, has decisively shaped postwar Europe. Secondly, from a theoretical perspective, the lack of effort that has gone into theorizing Christian democracy reflects a deep difficulty in grasping the relationship between religion and politics in Europe.²²

It might seem all the more ironic that Christian democracy only became the focus of more research attention right after the Cold War, when Christian democratic parties in all of Europe seemed to be experiencing an unstoppable decline in support. In the Netherlands, 1994 was the year in which a coalition government was formed without the help of Christian democrats or confessionals, for the first time in 76 years. Perhaps because of the fact that a part of the academic world had declared it practically dead, these post-Cold War mid-1990s produced some fascinating analyses of Christian democracy.

²⁰ Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford, 1996), 3.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² Stathis N. Kalyvas and Kees van Kersbergen, "Christian Democracy," *The Annual Review of Political Science* (2010), 184.

Essence of Christian democracy

While many attempts have been focused on capturing Christian democracy's conceptual essence, historians have come across several issues when trying to formulate the distinctiveness of the Christian democratic ideology. Historian Jean-Dominique Durand for example argued that there is no "single Christian democratic ideology or movement," describing it as a formula that is able to contain "a wide variety of internal differences, stemming from religious, philosophical, but also historical, sociological and electoral factors."²³ Although the already mentioned Freedman failed to mention Christian democracy in his influential book on ideologies, Italian scholar Carlo Invernizzi Accetti argues that it should indeed be seen as an actual ideology. However, he has to admit that it might be hard to reduce Christian democracy to the thought of one individual, or perhaps even a small group of great thinkers²⁴ – unlike how one is able to link John Lock or John Stuart Mill to the liberal tradition, Edmund Burke to classical conservatism, and Karl Marx to socialism – making it practically impossible to refer to one universally recognized set of sources when analyzing the concept. Historian Martin Conway also pointed out that the ideas and principles of Christian democracy have not shown a "substantive continuity" over the past two centuries.²⁵ According to Conway, broad accounts of the history of Christian democracy are likely to be replaced by more contextual approaches, "in which the influence of national political systems and mentalities, of internal tensions and external developments, will all come to the fore."²⁶ In sum, there is not much to be won by trying to define Christian democracy from an essentialist angle. Therefore, focusing too much attention on identifying Christian democracy's conceptual essence might be something exactly what one should not do.

While internal differences and evolutionary discussions as brought forth by Durand and Conway indeed have to be taken into account when trying to define Christian democracy, it is also necessary to focus on those things that do unite its ideological tradition. According to Invernizzi Accetti, Christian democracy should be seen as "a constellation of reciprocally defining (and action-orienting) political concepts."²⁷ Belgian scholar Guido Dierickx claims

²³ Jean-Dominique Durand, *L'Europe de la Démocratie Chrétienne* (Brussels, 2005), 12.

²⁴ Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, *What is Christian Democracy?: Politics, Religion and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 23.

²⁵ Martin Conway, "The Age of Christian Democracy: The Frontiers of Success and Failure," in *European Christian Democracy: Historical Legacies and Comparative Perspectives*, by Thomas Kselman and Joseph A. Buttigieg. (Notre Dame, IN, 2003), 45-46.

²⁶ Conway, 45-46.

²⁷ Invernizzi Accetti, 23.

that the core of Christian democracy lies in its “communitarian critique of modernity.” While “the family is put forward in virtually every policy context,” it is primarily social policy that Dierickx traces back to Christian democracy’s “ethically founded notion of solidarity.”²⁸ Historian Kees van Kersbergen argues that “integration and societal accommodation are the principal elements of Christian democratic distinctiveness, in the dual sense of commitment to class reconciliation and transnational cooperation”²⁹ Jean-Dominique Durand suggests that “in any definition of Christian democracy, it is indispensable to highlight the importance of the idea of Christian ‘inspiration’... While avoiding religious fundamentalism as well as clericalism, Christian democracy is characterized first and foremost by the attempt to operate a mediation between religious faith and practical politics.”³⁰ Yet, while all of the above-mentioned analyses on what distinguishes Christian democratic ideology from others, Invernizzi Accetti rightfully points out that it is impossible to decide which of these components contains its essence. As British politician and academic Michael P. Fogarty already wrote in 1957: “It is a common error to think that Christian Democracy is identified with one political and social formula. (...) There are many formulas, and much of the internal debate in the Christian Democratic world is concerned precisely with choosing between them.”³¹

Influence of Catholic social doctrine

Because of the difficulties that one comes across when trying to define the essence of Christian democracy, Invernizzi Accetti argues that it might be better to adopt an intermediary functionalist approach. Drawing on recent works from Jan-Werner Muller and Paolo Pombeni, Invernizzi Accetti suggests defining Christian democratic ideology in terms of a specific challenge or goal: “that of reconciling Christianity with modern democracy, by carving out a political role for the former within the institutional and conceptual horizon of the latter.”³² More specifically, as several historians have already pointed out, the challenge was to carve out a certain measure of autonomy from the Vatican, without at the same time severing its links from it entirely. This particularly had to do with the corpus of the Vatican’s officially

²⁸ Guido Dierickx "Christian Democracy and Its Ideological Rivals," in *Christian Democracy in Europe: A Comparative Perspective*, by David Hanley, (London, 1994), 23-29.

²⁹ Kees van Kersbergen, "The Distinctiveness of Christian Democracy," in *Christian Democracy in Europe: A Comparative Perspective*, by David Hanley, (London, 1994), 36.

³⁰ Durand, 14.

³¹ Michael P. Fogarty, *Christian Democracy in Western Europe 1820-1953* (Notre Dame, IN, 1957), xvii.

³² Invernizzi Accetti, 20.

sanctioned Catholic social doctrine, which this thesis will expand on further in this chapter. In other words, the challenge was to carefully reconcile Catholic doctrine with political ideology.

Some authors have previously argued that it is a common mistake to equate Christian democracy with the social movement of Catholics. Italian priest and scholar Don Luigi Sturzo for example claimed that Christian democracy, having gained a political character with the formation of Christian democratic or popular parties, had “passed the stage of simple activity on behalf of the working classes and placed itself on the political plane with its own program and action.”³³ According to Luigi Sturzo, “this program and action were quite distinct from those of other Catholic nuclei.” Although Invernizzi Accetti agrees with Sturzo that it is too easy to state that Christian democratic ideology’s content can simply be read off Catholic social doctrine, he does argue that the corpus of the latter constitutes part of the material of the former.

Foundation of the CDA

In order to get a better understanding of how the CDA has managed to reconcile this religious doctrine with its own political ideology, it is necessary to return to the party’s genesis. Especially for a party that itself is the product of the merging of three confessional parties, all with their own religious backgrounds, into one Christian democratic party.

Motivations behind confessional cooperation

Historians have extensively researched the reasons behind the strengthened cooperation between the KVA, CHU and ARP, with all three of these confessional parties historically having very different denominational beliefs and convictions. In his 1996 dissertation, Dutch historian Rutger Zwart claimed that a majority of the literature written before him designated the longing for political power as the main reason for these three confessional parties to merge.³⁴ The electoral losses that the three confessional parties experienced in 1967, 1971 and 1972, are hardly ever forgotten in narratives about the CDA’s genesis. Admittedly, as Dutch historian Hans Righart stated, 1967 was not only the year in which the political dominance of the three confessional parties in parliament had been broken for the first time since the end of the First World War – it was also the year in which the merger talks intensified.³⁵ Even the first leader of the CDA, Dries van Agt, later admitted to his biographer that the electoral losses of

³³ Luigi Sturzo, "The Philosophic Background of Christian Democracy," *The Review of Politics* (1947), 5.

³⁴ Zwart,, 13-14.

³⁵ Hans Righart, *Het Onveranderlijke Nederland: Een eeuw confessionele politiek* (Voorburg, 1989), 25.

those years were the main reason for the three parties to merge,³⁶ going directly against the CDA's official narrative, which has always mentioned ideological kinship as the main motivation.

Dutch scholar Ruud Koole tries to take these analyses a bit further, by putting the electoral losses suffered by confessional parties in the second half of the 20th century into perspective. According to Koole, the emergence of the CDA should be seen as “a clear consequence of the de-pillarization³⁷ and secularization” of Dutch society.³⁸ He continues: “A structural decline in voter support, or a prospect of it, in a society that was becoming increasingly secularized, was the main reason why the three major confessional parties started to cooperate.” In other words, the social context of de-pillarization and secularization of Dutch society formed the basis for these three parties to preserve their political power through fusing.

The already mentioned Dutch historian Zwart, however, wishes to emphasize another element of importance at the time for the rallying of Dutch Christians: the ideological convergence which was taking place among these three confessional parties. In the late nineteenth century, when both Catholics and Protestants claimed to have found ideologies that were directly derived from faith, political positions were given a special status, since they were more or less identified with the will of God. During the late nineteenth century, it was ideology that formed the dominant barrier for cooperation. In the second half of the twentieth century however, those ideas lost in relevance within politics. The intellectual elite within these confessional parties realized that it was impossible to establish an unambiguous link between religion and politics. Political insights that for long had been proclaimed as “the truth” lost in status, and the belief in the ideal Christian society was left aside. According to Zwart, this insight formed an “indispensable condition for the emergence of the Christian democratic strive for unity.”³⁹ It made it possible for Christian politicians to sometimes differ from their own party's standpoints, while at the same time making it possible for Christian voters to break free from feeling religiously obliged to only support one's own party.

Interestingly enough, this loss of status and function of the initial Christian ideologies not only caused the barrier to disappear, but some also describe these developments as an

³⁶ Peter van Meriënboer et al., *Van Agt, Biografie. Tour de Force* (Amsterdam, 2008), 236.

³⁷ During the late 19th and a large part of the 20th century, the Netherlands was subjected to so-called ‘pillarization’ (Dutch: *verzuiling*). This refers to the segregation of Dutch society along politico-denominational lines. The process of de-pillarization (Dutch: *ontzuiling*) referred to the process that managed to counter this segregation along politico-denominational lines.

³⁸ Ruud Koole, *Politieke partijen in Nederland* (Utrecht, 1995), 187.

³⁹ Zwart, 256.

internal stimulus to achieve Christian democratic cooperation all together. As historian Hans-Martien ten Napel likes to point out, even during the heavy electoral years, it was not only the longing for political power that opened doors, but also, as he described, the continuing “wish to form an explicit connection between the Christian faith and political action.”⁴⁰ Without claiming that the new party was founded by strictly unanimous idealists, Zwart argues that cooperation between the three confessional parties would not have been possible without these ideological developments.

In summary, one could conclude that historians are not unanimous in their analyses of the CDA’s genesis. Where one group explains the motive behind the merging of these three confessional parties through the preservation of power, another group gives all the credit to an increased mutual kinship between the KVP, the ARP, and the CHU. One might find both those claims made in a purely social context, as well as those made from a purely ideological perspective, reasonable and justifiable, but perhaps a mixture of the two comes closest to historiography. As Dutch historian Dik Verkuil concluded, after he acknowledged that those mutual feelings of kinship were indeed present but not sufficient for the parties to actually merge: “From the start, the emergence of the Christian democracy was marked by the impending confessional decline of power.”⁴¹

Effects of the merger

While many historians have acknowledged that the 1980 formation of the CDA has had a substantial influence on party politics in the Netherlands, it was Ten Napel in his 1992 dissertation who even claimed that this process is to be considered one of the most important events in post-war Dutch political history, in terms of the example it had set for parties from different corners of the political spectrum to aim for compromise during government negotiations. Ten Napel considers this to be essential for a country with a fragmented political landscape like the Netherlands. One could argue that the overwhelming body of academic and historiographic literature on the formation process of the CDA more or less supports Ten Napel’s claim.

The conceptual questions over whether or not to call Christian democracy an actual ideology, which we have already discussed in this chapter, are not solely being devoted to

⁴⁰ Hans-Martien ten Napel, *Een eigen weg. De totstandkoming van het CDA (1952-1980)* (PhD dissertation, Leiden, 1992) 372.

⁴¹ Dik Verkuil, *Een positieve grondhouding. De geschiedenis van het CDA* (Den Haag, 1992) 283.

Christian democracy in and of itself. On the contrary, ever since its existence, there has been discussion over where to ideologically place the CDA's foundational principles. In its Statement of Principles from 1980, the CDA formulated the basic principles on which it wanted to approach key issues of its time. It did this on the basis of four key concepts: justice, diversified responsibility, solidarity, and stewardship.⁴² According to Zwart, one should be cautious with calling such a set of concepts an "actual ideology."⁴³ The CDA's Statement of Principles from 1980 could therefore perhaps best be seen as a first conceptual step towards a Christian democratic ideology.

Ten Napel claims that the 1980 merger of three confessional parties into one Christian democratic party should be seen as a continuation of Christian ideology. He argues that one should not "overestimate the differences" between the on the one hand confessional – ARP, CHU, and KVP – and on the other hand Christian democratic – CDA – party types. Besides a few differences, Ten Napel primarily observed a continuation of the new party's wish to once again "connect religion to politics."⁴⁴ Zwart rightfully adds to these claims, that it is exactly because of this wish to find such a connection, that the different voices within the new party had until then been drowned by disagreement.⁴⁵

Others raised more questions over the effects of the merger on the party's ideology. In 1998 Kroeger and Stam claimed that, for a party with a Christian foundation like the CDA, redundancy was an even more bitter fate than division. "A society that thinks it no longer needs that inspiration is not what the Christian democrats have worked for." In their eyes, Christian politics had become an option rather than a choice. And where values and norms are possible and not necessary by definition, "principle consensus building is replaced with opportunism."⁴⁶

Where Kroeger and Stam described this Christian democratic redundancy in the late 1990s as an effect of the CDA's opportunism, Voerman argues that this opportunism followed out of the fact that the relationship between religion and voting behavior had become increasingly weaker.⁴⁷ The self-evidence from earlier times of church-going Christian voters casting their votes for Christian parties, had stopped existing. Or as the prominent Catholic

⁴² CDA, *Program van Uitgangspunten van het Christen Democratisch Appèl* (1980), 16.

⁴³ Zwart, 256.

⁴⁴ Hans-Martien ten Napel, *Een eigen weg*, 372.

⁴⁵ Zwart, 256.

⁴⁶ Pieter Gerrit Kroeger and Jaap Stam, *De rogge staat er dun bij: Macht en verval van het CDA, 1974-1998*. (Amsterdam, 1998), 342.

⁴⁷ Gerrit Voerman, *De conjunctuur van de macht: Het Christen Democratisch Appèl, 1980-2010* (Amsterdam, 2011), 10.

bishop Johannes Bluysen quickly observed after the electoral losses of 1967, voting had become a “completely personal and individual matter.”⁴⁸ Without claiming that the CDA had always lost or will lose voters, directly proportional to the secularizing character of Dutch society, Voerman does argue that in order to preserve its place in the Dutch political landscape, the CDA must explicitly fight to win over non-religious voters. In their search for secular voters, the Cristian democrats have occasionally, as Voerman described it, “successfully risen above themselves.” However, according to the author, this almost always had to do with specific circumstances, making it of a more cyclical nature, rather than a structural nature.⁴⁹

Formulating key principles

Ever since its foundation, CDA watchers have been very clear in emphasizing the importance of the party’s key principles. Dutch scholar Marcel ten Hooven described these principles as the CDA’s “ideological cement.” Yet, he also emphasizes that, although taken from Christian sources, the crux of these four key principles of the CDA is that they are political principles, not denominational ones.⁵⁰ According to Ten Hooven, Christian democracy should be seen as a political ideology, not as an ecclesiastically bound vision for society. Provided one subscribes to its political principles, anyone can become active for the CDA, “whether he or she adheres to Christianity or another faith, or never sees a house of God inside.”⁵¹

Taking this into account, it is interesting to have a look at the CDA’s understanding of its key principles, with the concept of solidarity in particular. Despite the importance of individual experience from prominent party members, it was also important that the CDA was based on a well thought-out and practically manageable political ideology, expressed in four key principles: distributed responsibility, public justice, stewardship and solidarity. Despite being politically in character, all of these principles have their origins in Reformed philosophy and Catholic social doctrine, with specifically solidarity finding its theoretical basis in the latter.⁵² According to this Catholic social doctrine, solidarity was to be seen as an expression of the belief that people not only live for themselves, as autonomous individuals, but also derive

⁴⁸ J. A. Bornewasser, *Katholieke Volkspartij 1945-1980: Heroriëntatie en integratie (1963-1980)* (Nijmegen, 2000), 222.

⁴⁹ Voerman, 11.

⁵⁰ Marcel ten Hooven "Een machtspartij met idealen. Een geschiedenis van het CDA, 1980-2010," in *De conjunctuur van de macht: Het Christen Democratisch Appèl, 1980-2010* by Gerrit Voerman (Amsterdam, 2011) 70.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² The contours of this Catholic understanding of solidarity can be found in so-called encyclicals, which can best be described as weighty papal documents of a doctrinal nature.

their dignity from the communities in which they live. In its Statement of Principles, the CDA writes: “Solidarity shows that people are concerned with each other. Solidarity transcends borders, not only from our own group, but also from our own country.” This suggests solidarity is not to be understood as a national affair but should instead be seen as an international responsibility, which is further referred to in the explanatory notes of that same Statement of Principles. In Chapter V, the CDA states that “the norm of justice cannot survive without the norm of interconnectedness, solidarity, of being involved with each other.”⁵³ Christian democratic politics needed “to be recognizable by showing solidarity with the weak and appealing to the responsibility of the strong.” Its mission “is to give the weak in our world society a view of the future.”⁵⁴

Conclusions

This review has discussed how the decline of confessional politics in a secularizing Dutch society made room for Christian democracy to enter the political landscape in the Netherlands. It has aimed to reconstruct how the emergence of both Christian democratic ideology ultimately led to the foundation of the CDA. This chapter also argued that the latter should not be defined by its essence, but by its function. Subsequently, this chapter has addressed the influence that Catholic social doctrine has had on Christian democratic ideas and political policy. Finally, this chapter has analyzed how all of these insights have led the CDA to formulate its four key principles, one of which is solidarity.

It is fair to say that the direct reason for the three confessional parties’ ultimate merging into the CDA in 1980 can be described as an attempt to preserve power in an increasingly secularizing Dutch society. The long-lasting ambition of all three confessional parties to strengthen their mutual kinship by traversing denominational boundaries did exist but was not sufficient for an actual merge. Subsequently, the CDA’s explanation of how Christian democratic politics should relate itself with the concept of solidarity, as laid out in the party’s Statement of Principles from 1980, might seem rather abstract at first. As Ten Napel already mentioned, these principles should therefore be seen as an attempt to ultimately reach the ideal of a “responsible society.”⁵⁵ Formulating a coherent vision on society and state, which was based on the Christian conception on humanity and which took the ecclesiastical, social and

⁵³ CDA, 26.

⁵⁴ *Idem*, 27.

⁵⁵ Hans-Martien ten Napel, *CDA partijgeschiedenis* (2018).

political changes of the time into account, had almost seemed impossible in the last few decades of the three confessional parties' existence. When one acknowledges the timeframe in which this Statement of Principles was constructed, it is fair to call this effort a political achievement of consensus building, in which three former confessional parties, through collective effort, managed to formulate their vision for the future of Christian democratic politics.

The CDA's ambition to make Christian democracy "recognizable by showing solidarity with the weak and appealing to the responsibility of the strong," could not be clearer. Despite the fact that the CDA is a Christian democratic party, it is interesting to see that the concept of solidarity can predominantly be traced back to Catholic social doctrine. This essentially suggests that solidarity, and thus the "solidarity with the weak in our world society," has significantly more historical connection with the CDA's Catholic members of the disbanded KVP, than with the members of its Reformed predecessors CHU and ARP. Without immediately drawing too many conclusions from this argument, it does raise the question to what extent the concept of solidarity after 1980 became an internally equally accepted principle within the CDA.

1. Between principles and pragmatism: Van Agt, Lubbers and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (1980-1994)

1.1. Introduction

To further investigate the validity of the concluding question from the previous chapter, this chapter will focus on the CDA's foreign policy approach towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, both in official party documentation, as well as personal views by prominent party members. While this thesis in general covers the years between 1980 and 2010, this chapter itself only analyzes the years between 1980 and 1994.⁵⁶ In these fourteen years, the CDA contiguously delivered the Dutch Prime Ministers, namely: Dries van Agt (1980-1982) and Ruud Lubbers (1982-1994). Moreover, for twelve consecutive years, apart from the years 1980-1982, the CDA has been able to set the agenda of Dutch foreign policy through its Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hans van den Broek. In other words, one could argue that the Dutch attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian from the 1980s to the early 1990s was predominantly designed by Christian democrats.

While it is of course interesting to analyze how the Dutch government's approach towards the conflict has developed between 1980-1994, this chapter only focusses on developments within the CDA's attitude towards the Israelis and Palestinians. This chapter analyzes both official party documentation and election programs, as well as personal views and statements from prominent individuals within the CDA. This will give us a better understanding of how the CDA's attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has developed during its first fourteen years on the governing stage.

1.1. The Dutch and Israel before 1980

There are different views on whether the Netherlands is an important player on the political world stage. According to Ruud Lubbers, the longest serving Dutch Prime Minister and lifelong member of the CDA, the Netherlands should not consider themselves too important. In his memoirs, he stated:

⁵⁶ Given, between 1977 and 1980, the three confessional parties KVP, ARP and CHU were already cooperating in a coalition government with the liberal party VVD. While this was already under their yet to be founded and thus unofficial party name CDA and under the leadership of Dries van Agt, this coalition government had to deal with a part of the CDA faction that only supported the cabinet conditionally. Since these so-called 'loyalists' followed the cabinet critically until 1980, thus making it impossible to already speak of a fully agreed upon party line, this thesis does not include these years into its analysis.

“You could say that the Netherlands is at its peak when it comes to international influence. That is to say in the role of mediator, of broker between the large countries. That is about the maximum that a country like the Netherlands can do in the international relations. The fact that the Netherlands cannot develop itself as a major power is only an advantage.”⁵⁷

Yet, in terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Dutch connection should not be underestimated. According to historian Fred Grünfeld, who has done extensive research on Dutch post-war foreign policy, the Netherlands do not only know a long history of supporting Israel through its voting behavior in the United Nations, but they have also supported it materially. As one of the founding members of the European Economic Community (EEC, the precursor of the European Union), the Dutch government was partly involved in closing an association agreement between the EEC and Israel. Moreover, during the Six-Day War in 1967, the Dutch government openly supplied Israel with weapons on a large scale. Given, Dutch foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has not continuously been independently designed. The introduction of the European Political Cooperation (EPC) in 1970, an influential agreement between European powers to coordinate their foreign policy, paved the way for a closer alignment between Dutch foreign policy and that of its European partners. According to one study, Dutch Middle East policy in the 1970s was mainly being shaped in context of the EPC. Moreover, in 1980, it was the European Community (EC) that brought forth the Venice Declaration, in which its members actively coordinated their policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁵⁸

1.2. The CDA under Van Agt (1977-1982)

While this thesis only analyzes the CDA’s foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict under Van Agt between 1980 and 1982, it is also wise to briefly touch upon the three years prior to that. As mentioned, although the three confessional parties already competed with the 1977 general elections under their yet to be founded name CDA and under the leadership of Van Agt, it was not until 1980 before the party’s foundational Statement of Principles was issued. It is therefore fair to say that it is impossible to speak of a fully agreed upon party line between 1977 and 1980. This might be the reason that the CDA’s election

⁵⁷ Theo Brinkel, *Haagse jaren: De politieke memories van Ruud Lubbers*, (Amsterdam, 2020), 232.

⁵⁸ Grünfeld, *Nederland en het Midden-Oosten*, 11-13.

program of 1977 only briefly touches upon the conflict in the Middle East. In the program's fourth chapter 'Responsibility for the world,' the CDA states:

“A resolution of the Middle East conflict requires that Israel and its Arab neighbors can exist within safe and recognized borders, that territorial occupations will be ended and that the position of the Palestinians will be settled in political form.”⁵⁹

Later on, in the explanatory notes on chapter 4, the program states that Dutch foreign policy in general should be characterized by two perspectives: advancement of an international legal order and solidarity with the weak and unprotected.⁶⁰ According to the CDA, the focused and specific attention that is demanded in domestic policy for the needs of individual people and groups, must also apply to countries, peoples and groups elsewhere in the world. Interestingly enough, the CDA goes on: “Everywhere, with no exception of no country, we must stand up for the disenfranchised and enslaved. This should also determine our position on the problems that South Africa and the Middle East pose to our world society.”⁶¹ The program explains the mentioning of them in particular, because the situation there was “a threat to international peace and security.”⁶² In essence, standing up for those whose rights and security are threatened most in the Middle East is of prime importance in the CDA's election program of 1977.

The CDA's election program of 1981 approaches its views on foreign policy in general and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict slightly different. Where in 1977 its views on foreign affairs are only mentioned in chapter 4, in 1981 the CDA chooses to start its election program with its first chapter called 'International solidarity.' Moreover, it is not only the Middle East that is mentioned, but also the Israeli-Palestinian conflict itself. While for the first time as one single Christian democratic party, the elections would later become the second that were won under the leadership of Dries van Agt, who would stay on as Prime Minister. In 1981, a year after unanimously agreeing on its Statement of Principles, the CDA argued that within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Netherlands should respectfully contribute to the reconciliation of underlying contradictions. Despite the CDA's wish to maintain intensive contacts with the parties involved, its election program does state that no official contacts should be maintained with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), “as long as it aims

⁵⁹ CDA, *Niet bij brood alleen: CDA-verkiezingsprogramma 1977-1981*, Election program (The Hague, 1977), 56.

⁶⁰ The literal text from the explanatory notes on Chapter 4 is: “It should establish and strengthen an international legal order; and it should show solidarity with people and peoples who are oppressed, suffer from poverty or are in any other way at risk of falling between two stools.” (CDA, *Niet bij brood alleen*, 62).

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

⁶² *Ibidem*.

to destroy the state of Israel.”⁶³ This is all the more interesting, considering the fact that all European ministers of Foreign Affairs already officially recognized the Palestinians’ right to self-determination and the PLO as their discussion partner in 1980, a year before the CDA’s election program was issued. The program continues by stating that the Netherlands should commit itself, not only “to the safe survival of the state of Israel,” but also “to the assurance of the constitutional rights of Palestinians.”⁶⁴ In sum, although external pressure might suggest that there was no other way for the Netherlands than to officially recognize the Palestinian cause, the Dutch government led by the CDA under prime minister Van Agt kept on hitting the brakes within Europe when rapprochement with the Palestinians was on the table.

CDA’s foreign policy

Continuing on this, it is interesting to see that the 1981 election program separates its paragraphs on the Middle East from its paragraphs on human rights. In its view on the latter, the CDA talks about the importance of preserving human rights in both European and global context. It states that “as long as there is no effective system of international control and sanctions, countries in which human rights are systematically violated must be effectively confronted with steps evidencing rejection.”⁶⁵ While this reads as hard breaking points for a party of principles like the CDA, the latter admits that it only wants to pursue sanctions in UN or European context and subsequently argues that they should only be applied to situations which pose a fundamental threat to international peace, security or human rights.⁶⁶

Overall, the CDA’s election programs of the early 1980s do specifically mention the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but only refer to it as a threat for nation-states, and not as a threat for human rights. Moreover, despite these mentions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is fair to say that the CDA’s foreign policy approach of the early 1980s was primarily focused on the international nuclear arms race. As Hans van den Broek, CDA minister of Foreign Affairs between 1982 and 1993, once wrote about these early years: “The Cold War was still raging. The relationship of the US and the European Community (EC) with Israel was dominated by counteracting Soviet influence in a region rich in oil and therefore geopolitically and economically of great importance.” Interestingly enough, while Van den Broek starts his article

⁶³ CDA, *Om een zinvol bestaan, nieuwe wegen naar een verantwoordelijke samenleving: CDA-verkiezingsprogramma ‘81-‘85*, Election program (The Hague, 1981), 13.

⁶⁴ CDA, *Om een zinvol bestaan*, 13.

⁶⁵ *Idem*, 12.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

by arguing that he tried to pursue the most balanced policy possible during his tenure as minister of Foreign Affairs, he concludes with admitting that because of these mutual relationships and national interests, “Israel could count on the support of the West.”

This clear focus on these mutual relations due to Cold War tensions is also visible in research and policy documents issued by the CDA’s scientific institute in the 1980s. In a special report from 1981 called *About peace policy*, the institute argued that the nuclear arms issue deserved special attention, for it was fundamentally changing international relations. Moreover, it was not an isolated issue. The nuclear arms threat could neither be controlled by the Netherlands, nor Western-Europe, nor NATO on their own. According to the CDA’s scientific institute, the party had to ask itself what they had to do, “as Christians.” Should they primarily stand up for the righteousness of God and bear witness to it? Or should they also, as Christians, submit to the rules, customs and yoke of the political profession and participate in it? Without answering these questions, it is interesting to see how the scientific institute attempts to discuss the various ways in which the CDA might approach its peace policy. By putting its prime focus on the trickle-down effects of a nuclear détente, the institute suggests that once the political tensions between East and West are reduced, humanitarian issues will automatically come to the fore.

Van Agt’s personal views

Despite a party’s continuous line that is generally maintained in election programs and special reports by its scientific institutes, it is also wise to include personal views and beliefs by individual party members into analyses. Especially when researching the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As been mentioned in the introduction, there has been no other foreign policy issue that divided the CDA so strongly as this one.⁶⁷ With that said, it is already safe to state that not all Dutch politicians have been as open about their views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the CDA’s first prime minister, Dries van Agt. At the same time, there are also not that many politicians in the Netherlands that have openly converted from one side to the other – in the case of Van Agt, from the Israeli side to the Palestinian. Although some of his opponents have claimed throughout the years that Van Agt has always been anti-Israel, his biographers have convincingly pointed out that history shows that this is incorrect. On the contrary, one could even argue that Van Agt, in the years prior to the foundation of the CDA in 1980, might have

⁶⁷ Grünfeld, *Zestig jaar Nederland-Israël*, 680-681.

even actively favored Israel over the Palestinians. Numerous anecdotes, which are backed by substantial archival material – especially from his years as the Dutch minister of Justice between 1973 and 1977, on behalf of the Catholic People’s Party (KVP) – seem to confirm this image.

For example, 1974, Van Agt opposed a proposal by then minister of Foreign Affairs Max van der Stoel,⁶⁸ in which the latter wanted the Dutch government to abstain from voting on a UN resolution. According to Van Agt, the resolution had to be voted against, since it endorsed the objectives of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), thereby de facto denying the existence of the state of Israel. While Van der Stoel feared that Arab countries would act against the Netherlands if it would be the only country in the EEG that voted against the resolution, Van Agt wondered whether the Netherlands might ever be able to stop sharing “other countries’ cowardice.” At another occasion in 1975, Van Agt spoke out against a proposal by then minister of Development Cooperation Jan Pronk,⁶⁹ in which the latter tried to get a film about the Palestinian issue subsidized. According Van Agt, the Dutch government needed to be weary for “a very one-sided presentation of the Palestinian question.”⁷⁰ Moreover, in 1976, Van Agt had referred to the state of Israel as “still threatened.” According to a copy of a code message from the Dutch embassy in Cairo, one of the Dutch embassy employees was called to account for Van Agt’s comments, since the Egyptians had allegedly taken offense of his words.⁷¹ Finally, in early 1977, Van Agt summarized the foreign policy section of the CDA’s party program on television as follows:

“There is a lot at stake in the world around us, but there is one point that deserves special attention when people ask: ‘Where does the CDA especially stand for?’ To those people I tell that we stand for the State of Israel in particular, which I have referred to in my speech at the convention of December 11 [1976], as ‘a brother in trouble.’”⁷²

This collection of events, which has been convincingly backed by substantial archival material, shows a picture of a man who during his years in office has time and again put the interests of

⁶⁸ Max van der Stoel served, on behalf of the social democrat Dutch Labor Party (PvdA), as minister of Foreign Affairs under prime minister Joop den Uyl, a fellow social democrat, between 1973 and 1977.

⁶⁹ Jan Pronk served, on behalf of the social democrat Dutch Labor Party (PvdA), as minister of Development Cooperation under prime minister Joop den Uyl, a fellow social democrat, between 1973 and 1977.

⁷⁰ Ronny Naftaniel, "Van Agt heeft selectief geheugen," *de Volkskrant* (2005).

⁷¹ On December 17, 1976, Van Agt had dropped out when medals were awarded to helpers of Jewish people in hiding: “It is our duty to be vigilant and make sacrifices, if necessary, for the conservation of the still-threatened state of Israel.” According to the copy, the Egyptians had taken offense at the words ‘still threatened.’ For more on this, see: Merriënboer et al., *Van Agt, Biografie: Tour de Force* (Amsterdam, 2008) 492.

⁷² *Idem*, 491-492.

the state of Israel above the interests of the Palestinians. Taking this into account, it is all the more interesting to see how his personal position shifted over time, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

International context

According to Van Agt, from the moment he became the CDA's first Prime Minister in 1980, the Netherlands followed "a more Arab course than before."⁷³ Despite the fact that he carefully tries to connect this with his arrival to the highest Dutch political office, this had less to do with Van Agt himself and more with the international context to which the Netherlands had to adhere to. On June 13, 1980, heads of state and government and ministers of Foreign Affairs of the European Community (EC) came together in Venice for a summit on "the situation in the Middle East."⁷⁴ This meeting brought forth the 1980 *Venice Declaration*, in which the EC agreed upon the fact that "growing tensions affecting this region constitute a serious danger and render a comprehensive solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict more necessary and pressing than ever."⁷⁵ Point 6 of the Declaration reads:

"A just solution must finally be found to the Palestinian problem, which is not simply one of refugees. The Palestinian people, which is conscious of existing as such, must be placed in a position, by an appropriate process defined within the framework of the comprehensive peace settlement, to exercise fully its right to self-determination."⁷⁶

With the declaration, European leaders essentially expressed their support for the Palestinian people's right to self-determination and for the PLO's participation in peace negotiations. The statement followed Israel's plan to annex occupied East Jerusalem. Incidentally, according to some, the eventual declaration went, due to the position of the Dutch, less far than some countries would have wanted.⁷⁷ After Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem, where the Dutch embassy was located, the Netherlands was forced to move to Tel Aviv, in accordance with a U.N. Security Council resolution and under Arab pressure. A year later, in June 1982, the

⁷³ Merriënboer et al., 492.

⁷⁴ European Economic Community, "Declaration of the Venice Summit," (Venice, 1980), 1.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁷ According to the Dutch *Nieuw Israelietisch Weekblad* of May 29, 1981, it was predominantly the French government that would have liked to see stronger agreements coming out of the summit in Venice. This argument is backed by statements coming from then minister of Foreign Affairs Chris van der Klaauw, who wrote about the summit in his memoirs. For more on this, see: Chris A. van der Klaauw, *Een diplomatenleven* (Amsterdam, 1995), 271.

Israeli Army invaded Lebanon. Together with the rest of the world, Van Agt strongly condemned Israel's actions. The Dutch Lower House of Parliament even immediately insisted on exerting direct pressure on Israel. Assuming that the U.S. would eventually put pressure on Israel, Van Agt withheld from undertaking any direct actions. A proposal by opposition leader Joop den Uyl later that year, to recall the Dutch ambassador in Israel and to suspend the country's association treaty that it had signed with the European Community, was eventually ignored by Van Agt.⁷⁸

On October 19, 1982, six days after he announced his departure from national politics, Van Agt delivered a startling speech on an event that had been organized by the Dutch *Center for Information and Documentation Israel* (CIDI).⁷⁹ In it, Van Agt raised several issues, including the possibility of a Palestinian state. In his eyes, peace was only possible if Israel's existence was reconciled with the rights of the scattered Palestinian people. Therefore, an actual agreement should include both security guarantees for Israel and the right to self-determination for the Palestinian people.⁸⁰

A month before Van Agt held his speech, over a thousand Palestinians were murdered in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, which had been closed off from the outside world shortly before by the Israeli army.⁸¹ While the murders themselves were committed by the Maronite Phalangists, a group of Lebanese Christian militia, a legal committee of the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that Israeli minister of Defense Ariel Sharon should have foreseen the massacre, making Israel partly responsible.⁸² In an interview years later, Van Agt was asked why he had not addressed the issue in his speech at the CIDI event a month after the massacre, to which he replied:

“At that time, I myself could not imagine that Israel would commit serious crimes. It was not reported to me that Israel behaved so brutally there. However, I doubt that I would have wanted to read such a report back then, since that was the state of mind at the time of me and almost all Dutch people.”⁸³

⁷⁸ Merriënboer et al., 493.

⁷⁹ The CIDI, founded in 1974, is a Dutch organization dedicated to combating antisemitism and spreading awareness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Its mission, as their website states, is “to safeguard the Jewish people's right to a peaceful and secure existence, in Israel and around the world.” For more on this, see: <https://www.cidi.nl/over-cidi/english/>

⁸⁰ Merriënboer et al., 493.

⁸¹ Charles Smith, "The Arab-Israeli Conflict," in *International Relations Of The Middle East* by Louise Fawcett (2019), 285.

⁸² *Ibidem*.

⁸³ Dries van Agt, radio interview in *De ochtenden* (2005).

This last sentence seems to sum up Van Agt's attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during his time in office reasonably well. Despite his strong personal beliefs in the Jewish people and attachment to the state of Israel, written and spoken statements from these years build an image of a man who tends to follow the state of mind of "almost all Dutch people." While a moral compass and strong ethical beliefs time and again resulted in Van Agt attempting to guide his people during his five-year tenure, it was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that pushed him towards docility. His personal statements from and about these years might suggest that his own solidarity with the Israeli people did not purely come from his strong tenacity to the CDA's Christian democratic principles. On the contrary, his views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seem to have been predominantly based on popular support within the Netherlands of the time. Given the electoral erosion of the CDA's voting base in the 1980s, combined with the sensitivity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict both within the party and Dutch society, this seems to be perfectly explainable from a purely political point of view. Nevertheless, one could also question whether Van Agt's focus on the need for international solidarity with the weak and the protection of international human rights would have ever been so prominent had he not come from a strong Catholic social background in the first place.

1.3. The CDA under Lubbers (1982-1994)

According to his biographer Theo Brinkel, Lubbers' years in politics can best be divided into three sub-periods: that of minister of Economic Affairs (1973-1978); that of vice-chair and subsequent party leader in Dutch parliament (1977-1982); and that of Dutch prime minister (1982-1994).⁸⁴ Lubbers characterized himself during these periods as a professional, as a CDA man, and as man of the nation.⁸⁵ The thesis is focusing on these last two.

From party to nation

As CDA man during his time as party leader in parliament, Lubbers was tasked with bringing the three traditions of anti-revolutionaries, Christian historians and Catholics together into one Christian democratic party. According to Brinkel, Christian democracy had to be reinvented. During the CDA's foundation, the main focus was on the Christian character of the party and

⁸⁴ Between 1992 and 1995, Dutch biographer Theo Brinkel held fifteen extensive conversations with then prime minister Ruud Lubbers about his years in Dutch politics. The book that was to be published during this period, based on these conversations, was blocked from publication for more than 25 years, until 2020.

⁸⁵ Brinkel, 8.

the balance between its basis and its political action. While others might have thought that this merger process would be difficult for a devoted Catholic and former KVP man who had been raised within a Catholic-social tradition, Lubbers himself was convinced of the opposite. In his view, it was precisely these intensive debates that accompanied the process and ultimately provided the CDA with a new idealistic driving force.⁸⁶ In other words, not despite internal debate, but because of it, the CDA was able to formulate its vision for society.

According to Brinkel, the support base that Lubbers had built up during his years as party leader, made it possible for him to become the man of the nation during his time as prime minister. During Van Agt's last year in office, the CDA had been forced to give up ground in a time of high government debt, economic stagnation and high unemployment. From 1982 onwards, it was able to find its way up again under Ruud Lubbers. In both the general elections of 1986 and 1989, the CDA obtained 54 out of 150 seats in parliament, with which it was possible to form the largest political group in Dutch parliamentary history. Brinkel argues that the CDA was successful thanks to a convincing combination of the right person with the right content.⁸⁷ Historian Rutger Zwart described Lubbers' style in politics as "pacifying, depolarizing and above all, very solution-oriented."⁸⁸ Lubbers himself called his style of "pragmatic no-nonsense politics," aimed at always finding solutions across ideological differences, both his strength and his weakness at the same time.⁸⁹ About his views on Christian democracy, Lubbers stated: "Christian democratic politics is social politics. And social politics is not about fine words. Social politics is all about outcomes. Outcomes, outcomes and more outcomes. No bullshit." In light of this, Zwart rightfully raised the question whether Lubbers' entrance into the prime minister's office also meant the entrance of the manager into Dutch politics.

According to Brinkel, this image of 'no-nonsense manager' does not do any justice to the role that faith has played during Lubbers' political career. Faith was no private matter but could be of meaning for both politics and society. Not through certain official Catholic teachings, but as an experience, as a source of inspiration. About the tradition that Lubbers attempted to embrace during his political career, Brinkel interestingly writes that "it does not include a religion that is imposed on society from above. That tradition also has no ideology

⁸⁶ Brinkel, 9.

⁸⁷ *Idem*, 10.

⁸⁸ Rutger Zwart and Sander Peters, "'Pragmatistische no-nonsense politiek, dat was ons gezicht'," *Historisch Nieuwsblad* (2000).

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

as a closed system. Christian democracy uses principles, or - to use another word from Lubbers - starting points. No endpoints.” In particular this last element is interesting, since it keeps up a certain ambiguity or non-commitment about the role that faith might have played in his acting as prime minister. Whether it was a strategy out of conviction or necessity, historian Gerrit Voerman argues that the effects of the ongoing secularization of Dutch society were compensated by the attraction of both Lubbers’ personal appearance and his socio-economic policy. During the elections of 1986 and 1989, this was especially true amongst non-Christian voters. Voerman: “The share of this electoral group in the CDA’s voter support was with about 15 percent, three times as high as normal.” Ironically, one could conclude that, while Lubbers personally liked to emphasize how important the connection between faith and politics was for him, the support of non-Christian voters had never been as important as during the CDA’s most successful general elections of 1986 and 1989.

Lubbers’ CDA and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

While the already mentioned massacres in the Lebanese Sabra and Shatila refugee camps took place during Dries van Agt’s time in office, the aftermath of the international response to it fell into the hands of Lubbers.⁹⁰ In September 1982, the United Nations General Assembly condemned the massacre and declared it an act of genocide.⁹¹ American scholar Charles Smith describes the 1980s as a decade of vast expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. No major change in the diplomacy of the Arab-Israeli conflict in general and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in specific occurred until December 1988, when the United States agreed to talk to the PLO, declaring that it had satisfactorily renounced terrorism and accepted Security Council Resolution 242.⁹² Despite being a major steppingstone, motivation for this recognition lay not in diplomacy, but in the intensity of the Intifada, which began in 1987 and lasted into 1991.⁹³

⁹⁰ The massacres brought the United States to reinstate their forces in Lebanon in 1983, which became caught up in Lebanese factional disputes, subsequently resulting in president Reagan ordering the withdrawal of US troops in early 1984 (Smith, 285).

⁹¹ United Nations General Assembly, "Resolution ES-7/9." *Question of Palestine* (New York, 1982).

⁹² Resolution 242 was unanimously adopted by the United Nations Security Council in 1967 and called for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the occupied territories, acknowledges the claim of sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every state in the region and calls on the UN Secretary-General to appoint an Envoy to facilitate an acceptable solution to the conflict (Security Council, *Resolution 242*, 1967).

⁹³ According to Smith, “the intensity of Palestinian protests and the brutality of the Israeli response focused international attention on the nature of Israeli’s role as occupiers of these lands and called into question the future of the territories. In addition, the intifada gave legitimacy, if only indirectly, to PLO claims to represent the Palestinians in the territories” (Smith, 286).

One could conclude that the peace talks in Madrid in 1991 and Oslo in 1993 were also results from this period of intensified conflict.

Judging by its election programs from the 1980s, Lubbers' CDA kept its favorable attitude towards Israel. Under Lubbers, the focus on securing Israel's right to exist was "paramount."⁹⁴ Only then, the possibilities for constitutional rights for the Palestinians could be explored.⁹⁵ Interestingly enough, contrary to the years under Van Agt, the election programs under Lubbers all connected its paragraphs on human rights with regional conflicts in general, including specific mentioning of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 1982, 1986 and 1989, the CDA urged to act within European context.

Although these election programs suggest a consistent approach towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict under Lubbers, there are also developments to be found. Differences between the party's programs of 1982, 1986 and 1989 can also be spotted in the CDA's attitude towards the PLO. Where the CDA in 1982 had already closed the door towards official contacts with the PLO, four years later it argued that the Netherlands was keeping intensive contact with all parties involved. "As such, this also applies to the PLO," it stated in 1986. In the election program of 1989, the CDA went even further by proposing to promote an international conference, "involving Palestinians as well, including the PLO."⁹⁶ Apart from the fact that Lubbers' CDA indeed developed its approach towards the Palestinians and the PLO, it is safe to say that during this period the party kept its primary focus on the promotion of Israel's interests.

Lubbers' personal views

In 1988, Lubbers became the first Dutch prime minister to visit Israel. In one of the many conversations that his biographer Theo Brinkel had with Lubbers in the 1990s, they discussed this special visit once again. Lubbers recalled that the Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Shamir expected some criticism of the policy towards the Palestinians, but also said: 'Prime Minister Lubbers comes as a friend, as a very important European leader whom we deeply respect.' During the visit, Lubbers himself did express his concerns about Israeli actions against the

⁹⁴ CDA, *Uitzicht, samen werken voor morgen*, Election program (The Hague, 1986) 13.

⁹⁵ See: CDA, *Om een zinvol bestaan: CDA-verkiezingsprogramma '82*, Revised election program, (The Hague, 1982), 18; CDA, *Uitzicht, samen werken voor morgen*, 13; and CDA, *Verantwoord voortbouwen: Program van Aktie '89-'93*, (The Hague, 1989), 84.

⁹⁶ CDA, *Verantwoord voortbouwen: Program van Aktie '89-'93*, 84.

Palestinians. At the same time, he said with emphasis: “I am not impartial, no matter how critical some things may sound to you.”⁹⁷

This single anecdote, coming from Ruud Lubbers’ own memoirs, stands in slight contrast with the overall image that has already been discussed in this chapter, of Lubbers being the pragmatic and political leader. In Lubbers’ own words, especially his years in The Hague gave him strength in prayer and faith in God.⁹⁸ However, one might question as to what extent Lubbers was able to see any difference between the state of Israel and the Israeli people. In his memoirs, after just having discussed his mentioned visit to the state of Israel, he continues:

“I love history. I can fascinate a Jewish group of people by telling them about the role of the Jews in the nation-building of the Netherlands. How tolerance among the Jews themselves started in the dealings between the Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews. I have a strong emotional involvement with Israel. It is the Holy Land for me. Maybe it is a bit of political balancing, but it is a very emotional visit.”

Taking this statement into account, one might conclude that Lubbers at the time did not feel the urge to separate his personal relationship with the Israeli people and the Holy land – which was “strongly characterized by emotionality” – from his relationship with the state of Israel. With Lubbers even admitting that he was “not impartial” when it comes to Israel’s actions, one might see some parallels with Dries van Agt’s approach towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Where first Van Agt referred to the state of Israel as the CDA’s “brother in trouble,” he subsequently shifted towards becoming increasingly “angry” and “sad” because of the situation of the Palestinian people. Without focusing too much on Van Agt’s drastic turn of opinion, both Van Agt and Lubbers seem to be allowing themselves to be guided by their emotions in their opinions of Israel.

International context

In terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one of the most historic events in Ruud Lubbers’ years as Prime Minister might be the Oslo Accords. On September 10, 1993, the Israeli government and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) exchanged letters, in which they had formally recognized each other. Three days later, on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington D.C., the Declaration of Principles on Palestinian Self-Government⁹⁹ –

⁹⁷ Brinkel, 225.

⁹⁸ Brinkel, 11.

⁹⁹ The Government of the State of Israel and the P.L.O. team, representing the Palestinian people, *Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements* (Washington, D.C., 1993).

commonly known as ‘Oslo I’ – was signed, sealed with the historic handshake between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat. Two years later, on September 28, 1995, the Israeli–Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip¹⁰⁰ – also known as ‘Oslo II’ – was signed on the exact same spot by the exact same people, in the presence of U.S. President Bill Clinton, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and King Hussein of Jordan. It provided for the transfer of a large number of cities in the West Bank to the Palestinian Authority. According to Israeli historian Avi Shlaim, the ‘Oslo Accords’ that came from these two events should not be seen as full-blown agreements. Unlike the official titles might suggest, the accords were essentially agendas for negotiations, governed by a tight timetable. “In short,” as Shlaim argues, “it promised to set in motion a process that would end Israeli rule of the two million Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza.”¹⁰¹

Despite the fact that both Oslo I and II were eventually signed in Washington D.C., there is no disagreement about the fact that the accords, hence the nickname, were largely the product of secret diplomacy in the Norwegian capital. When signing the letter to Arafat in which Israel formally recognized the PLO, Rabin said: “I believe that there is a great opportunity of changing not only the relations between the Palestinians and Israel, but to expand it to the solution of the conflict between Israel and the Arab countries and other Arab peoples.”¹⁰² The decision to hold direct talks with the PLO can in and of itself be described as “a diplomatic revolution in Israel’s foreign policy.”¹⁰³ Therefore, without further normatively analyzing as to why the Oslo Accords eventually failed to deliver on their promises, the process itself – for which Arafat, Rabin and then Israeli President Shimon Peres were rewarded the 1994 Nobel Peace Prize – can descriptively be called historic.¹⁰⁴

Lubbers on ‘Oslo’

With that in mind, it is interesting to dive deeper into the Dutch attitude towards the 1993 Oslo Accords. A fascinating firsthand take on the CDA’s attitude towards the accords can be found

¹⁰⁰ The Government of the State of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, the representative of the Palestinian people, *Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip* (Washington, D.C., 1995).

¹⁰¹ Avi Shlaim, "The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process," in *International Relations of the Middle East*, by Louise Fawcett, 298-316, (Oxford, 2019) 302.

¹⁰² *Idem*, 304.

¹⁰³ *Idem*, 300.

¹⁰⁴ Of course, the Oslo Accords were received with more than enough skepticism and rejection. However, this thesis is merely referring to the fact that these direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians on itself had never occurred before, hence the reason for using the adjective ‘historic.’

in Lubbers' own memoirs, written down by the already mentioned biographer Theo Brinkel. About the Oslo Accords, Lubbers himself writes:

“The coalition against Iraq and the cooperation in the Gulf War enabled a rapprochement between Israel and the Arabs. Ultimately, it culminated in the September 1993 breakthrough in Washington, the agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). We [the Dutch government] are not involved in working towards the agreement between Israel and the PLO. After all, the Netherlands is so clearly divided into the camp of Israel that it has no added value compared to America. I do have a lot of contacts, especially with the government of Israel and with Shimon Peres in particular. The Norwegians were better able to play that mediating role.”¹⁰⁵

One might describe the spirit of Lubbers' statement about the absence of the Netherlands in the peace negotiations as somewhat pragmatic, or even indifferent. Yet, Dutch historians Leonard Ornstein and Max van Weezel claim that, despite the Dutch government's contentment with the peace in the Middle East, it was also a bit envious of the Norwegians. According to the authors, the Netherlands would have loved to play such a mediating role. The authors refer to institutions like the Peace Palace and the International Court of Justice, which were already located in The Hague, together with the fact that “like no other European nation, the Netherlands had good relations with the Israelis. (...) Besides, we didn't have a bad reputation with the Palestinians either. They knew that the Netherlands cared a lot about human rights.”¹⁰⁶

Lubbers having “a lot of contacts, especially with the government of Israel and with Shimon Peres in particular,” might not only demonstrate that the Norwegians were on itself well able to play that mediating role, as Lubbers recalled. It might also suggest that the Dutch government was just not able to enter the talks unprejudiced. On the contrary, CDA minister of Foreign Affairs between 1982 and 1993 Hans van den Broek later even strongly suggested that the Dutch government was indeed not.¹⁰⁷ According to Van den Broek, the only benefit of the Oslo Accords was that the Israelis and Palestinians had started talking directly to each other. “The Netherlands,” he argued, “with the CDA as driving force, has shown unconditional support for Israel.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Brinkel, 314.

¹⁰⁶ Leonard Ornstein & Max van Weezel, *Op heilige grond: Achter de schermen van het vredesproces in het Midden-Oosten* (Amsterdam, 2001), 83.

¹⁰⁷ Hans van den Broek "Wil het CDA een rechtvaardige vrede in het Midden-Oosten?" *Christen Democratische Verkenningen* (2010), 119-125.

¹⁰⁸ *Idem*, 119.

1.4. Conclusions

This chapter has shown that individual political views of CDA members on both the state of Israel and the Palestinian question have often been strongly influenced by personal traumas, experiences or emotions. Regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict, it is safe to say that the CDA has kept its strong connection with the state of Israel, ever since the party's foundation. While both the Catholic CDA prime ministers Van Agt and Lubbers acknowledged that their views on the conflict were strongly connected to public opinion of that time, their emotional attachment to the state of Israel and the Jewish people did set the tone, making it hard for both men to take a neutral position in the conflict during their time in office. Yet, under Lubbers, the CDA did make developments in its attitude towards the Palestinians, moving from more or less neglecting their interests, towards including them in international peace talks. Under Lubbers, the CDA started to connect the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with its ambition to address human rights issues, something that had not been able before under Van Agt.

The question whether the CDA is essentially a party that exists for its principles or a party that is primarily there to govern, has been going on ever since its foundation. Under Lubbers, the CDA seemed to have developed itself into the latter. However, its identification with individual people and focus on governing not only made the party powerful, but also vulnerable. Losing sight of key principles would mean losing sight of the system of Christian democratic norms and values on which the party was founded. This strategy might seem logical for a Christian democratic party that tries to keep its head above the water in an increasingly secularizing society like the Dutch one. Nonetheless, it was Lubbers' general election defeat of 1994 that many political scientists and CDA members were quick to describe as a merciless punishment for this pragmatic fixation on political and administrative power.

2. Pressure on both sides: Balkenende and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (2002-2010)

2.1. Introduction

Similar to the years under Van Agt and Lubbers, the CDA under prime minister Jan Peter Balkenende had to relate itself to a further secularizing Dutch society and a declining Christian electorate. Yet, during a speech in October 2005, in honor of the CDA's 25th anniversary, Balkenende himself said that his party was "still a determining factor in Dutch politics."¹⁰⁹ Around the same time, party chairman Marja van Bijsterveldt wrote about the CDA being a party "deeply rooted in our society." Three years before, the CDA had won the general elections of 2002, taking 43 out of 150 seats in parliament, an outcome which once again came close to the CDA's historic election results under Van Agt and Lubbers. According to Balkenende, the CDA was and would remain to be "one of the three main political currents in the Netherlands."¹¹⁰ As if the electoral defeat of 1994 had been forgotten.¹¹¹

This self-confidence ultimately proved to be overconfidence during the general elections of 2010, when the CDA just like in 1994 lost twenty seats in parliament. According to Dutch historian Gerrit Voerman, the election result was no surprise for a modernizing and secularizing society like the Dutch one, where Christianity had been on the decline for decades. In his eyes, it was merely a moment which made it visible for everyone that the natural electoral constituency for Christian democracy had shrunk considerably. Just like during the 1960's and 1970s, when the three confessional parties in the Netherlands had to face an increasingly individualizing and secularizing society, the CDA was now confronted with similar issues. According to Voerman, this was not only connected to the decreasing number of churchgoers in the Netherlands, but also to the weakening relationship between religion and voting behavior.¹¹² Voter statistics show that the CDA's years of prosperity under Balkenende were, just like under Lubbers, mainly made possible by the increasing support of secular voters. During the elections of 2002 and 2003, respectively 18 and 19 percent of those who voted for

¹⁰⁹ Jan Peter Balkenende, "Van "opdracht in bescheidenheid" naar "eenheid in verscheidenheid"." *Jubileumbundel 25 jaar CDA*, (2005), 47-48.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹¹ In the general elections of 1994, the CDA lost twenty seats in Dutch parliament, experienced the biggest defeat ever in parliamentary history, and was forced to take place in the opposition for eight years.

¹¹² Voerman, 10.

the CDA described themselves as secular. In 2006 it was even 31 percent of the party's electorate.¹¹³

The CDA did use its 25th anniversary as a moment to reflect on itself. It called April of 2005 the 'Month of Dialogue.' The party leadership organized a nationwide conference to talk about the C in its name. In addition, special discussion groups were set up to talk about Christian social ideology, Islam and Christianity, the human face of healthcare and international solidarity. Lastly, young party members and elderly who had actively participated in the foundation of the CDA, were invited to the party bureau in The Hague, to talk about the four key principles of the party, as laid out in its founding Statement of Principles of 1980. Interestingly enough, one could argue that after eight years of opposition under social democratic leadership, it was the social course of the CDA that continued to be a topic of discussion under Balkenende.

2.2. The CDA under Balkenende (2002-2010)

Balkenende's eight-year tenure has proven to be anything but dull from a foreign affairs perspective. With the aftermath of the failed Camp David 2000 talks, the eruption of the Second Intifada, the death of Yasser Arafat in 2004, Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, Hamas's stunning electoral victory following the Israeli blockade of Gaza in 2006 and the major clashes between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon in that same year as a view examples of the region's intensity during Balkenende's time in office.¹¹⁴

Election programs

Yet, in almost all of the CDA's election programs under Balkenende, there is no mentioning of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nor of the situation in the Middle East. According to Dutch historian Duco Hellema, this is completely in line with the little attention that was paid to international issues in general during the elections between 2002 and 2010. "The political debate was being dominated by domestic issues such as integration and security."¹¹⁵ The election program of 2002, during Balkenende's first run for the highest office, does contain a

¹¹³ Voerman, 13.

¹¹⁴ Charles Smith, "The Arab-Israeli Conflict." In *International Relations of the Middle East*, by Louise Fawcett, 271-297. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 293.

¹¹⁵ Duco Hellema, "Het buitenlands beleid van de kabinetten-Balkenende." *Christen Democratische Verkenningen*, (2010), 110.

chapter specifically focused on international solidarity.¹¹⁶ However, it mainly focuses on standing up for the interests of the Dutch society, on strengthening the international order, institutions and European integration, and fighting poverty and underdevelopment. Interestingly, the CDA states that all of these focus points are all about ultimately solving “one of the greatest social issues of this time: migration.” While the CDA emphasizes that the fight against terrorism should be fought within the framework of the European Union and NATO (p. 69), the conflict in the Middle East is not specifically mentioned.

In its 2006 election program, the CDA only mentions the Middle East in its paragraphs on energy policy, emphasizing the importance of reducing Western over-reliance on fossil fuels, “also in order to be less dependent on the Middle East and Russia at the same time.”¹¹⁷ While the CDA not mentions the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by name, the 2006 election program does state that the CDA takes interfaith and intercultural tensions extremely seriously.

“This is another reason why an institutionalized dialogue between Europe and the representatives of the Christian, Jewish and other world religions with the Council of Europe and the EU is of great importance. (...) Priority should be given to support for democratization processes, the advancement of women and the position of religious minorities.”¹¹⁸

In sum, judging by the CDA’s election programs, the party’s focus on expressing international solidarity with the weak during the 1980s and 1990s, made way for the goal of strengthening international cooperation in the beginning of the 21st century. Regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one could argue that during the first Protestant CDA leadership under Balkenende, the party has not treated it to be an issue worth addressing in its election programs, like the party specifically did under Van Agt and Lubbers. According to the CDA, human rights were to be addressed in international context and with full compliance of the Netherlands’ allies only. The CDA’s plans on paper proved to be in line with Balkenende’s ultimate foreign policy in practice, which Dutch historian Duco Hellema later described to be “often conservative and reactive from a political point of view.”¹¹⁹

Balkenende’s personal views

¹¹⁶ CDA, *Betrokken samenleving, betrouwbare overheid: verkiezingsprogramma 2002-2006*. Election program, (The Hague, 2002) 69.

¹¹⁷ CDA, *Vertrouwen in Nederland, vertrouwen in elkaar: verkiezingsprogramma 2006-2011*. Election program, (The Hague, 2006), 93.

¹¹⁸ *Idem*, 98.

¹¹⁹ Hellema, 110.

One could argue that Balkenende's views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have been quite consistent over his eight-year tenure. From the start, he has been critical of both Israel as well as the Palestinian Authorities. For example, during the annual government budget debates in Dutch parliament of 2003, Balkenende said that "both sides are seriously at fault. Therefore, selective sanctions against Israel alone are out of the question. The international community must keep both sides under pressure."¹²⁰

Moreover, in January 2009, Balkenende was still making the exact same argument in an interview on Dutch television at the end of his tenure in January 2009, at a moment that the tensions between Israel and the Palestinians were again at an all-time high. Just like during his first years in office, the international community had to put great pressure on both Hamas and Israel to stop the violence in the Gaza Strip. "Both sides," he added "have to understand what benefits their own people most: refraining from violence."¹²¹ His Protestant

Critique from within

While Balkenende received more than enough criticism for several of his cabinet's foreign policy decisions, his attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in which he time and again urged the international community to put pressure on both parties instead of choosing sides, might at the least be called distantly persistent. Nevertheless, his lack of emotional attachment to the issue stood in stark contrast with that of his predecessors Van Agt and Lubbers. Perhaps because of this, it was during Balkenende's time in office that several Catholic CDA members openly criticized the party's neglect of human rights violations within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The most prominent critiques came from former prime minister Dries van Agt himself and former minister of Foreign Affairs under Ruud Lubbers, Hans van den Broek. In September 2002, Van Agt signed a "flaming petition" from the Dutch *Stop the Occupation* foundation. "I feel compelled to stop passively watching injustice done to the Palestinians. Human rights are now widely violated by Israel, for which you can read the statements of the UN Human Rights Commission."¹²² Interestingly enough, Van Agt himself only converted to the Palestinian

¹²⁰ Jan Peter Balkenende during a debate in the Lower House of parliament on September 18, 2003.

Immediately after Budget Day (in Dutch: *Prinsjesdag*), every third Tuesday of September, the party leaders of the political parties in the Lower House of parliament discuss the main points of the budget bill and the national budget. These two days of debates are called the 'General Political Considerations.'

¹²¹ *De Volkskrant*, *Balkenende: Hamas en Israël beide aanspreken* (January 4, 2009).

¹²² Theo Koelé and Frank Poorthuis, "'Nederland moet EU-sancties tegen Israël steunen!'" *de Volkskrant*. (2002).

cause after a pilgrimage with his wife to Palestine in 1999, more than one and a half decade after his years as prime minister. According to his biographers, he got into it and became “increasingly ‘angry’ and ‘sad’ because of Israel’s continuous occupation, its colonization policy and its construction of the separation wall against suicide bombers, which was being built on Palestinian soil.”¹²³ In 2002, a Dutch reporter asked why Van Agt during his time in office had never criticized Israel for fifteen years of ignoring UN resolutions, he responded: “Of course, I could not do that as prime minister. But then again, I also did not feel back then, the way I feel right now. It does make a difference whether a country does not care about UN resolutions for 10 or for 35 years. But indeed, as far as I remember, I have never spoken a word of criticism about non-compliance with resolutions. Israel must finally comply with those resolutions under penalty of sanctions.”¹²⁴

On another occasion in 2005, Van Agt wrote an opinion piece in a Dutch newspaper under the headline: “A cry for justice for the Palestinians.”¹²⁵ In the article, he particularly referred to a ruling by the International Court of Justice from July 9, 2004, on the unlawfulness of the construction of the separation wall that Israel had planned to build upon Palestinian land. The court confirmed that the Israeli settlements established in occupied Palestinian territory were illegal. While this was not the first resolution which called for an end to the occupation, Israel ignored the ruling. Van Agt admitted that he himself had made ugly misjudgments on the question of Palestine during his period in office – “although it had not taken on as dramatic a shape as it now has” – he noticed that there was all the more reason to speak out loud now. Of course, Israel was allowed to defend itself against terrorist attacks, but only with a wall on its own ground. “The main cause for the violence lies in the endless occupation, the creeping annexation, the ripping of Palestinian land and all the disaster that ensues from it,” he wrote. According to Van Agt, the international community was not allowed to let Israel go its way. Moreover, he argued that the Dutch government under the leadership of Balkenende’s CDA was failing to fulfill its constitutional duty.¹²⁶

Critique also came from Hans van den Broek, CDA minister of Foreign Affairs under prime minister Lubbers between 1982 and 1993, aimed at his fellow CDA party member

¹²³ Daan Dijksman "De bekering van Dries van Agt," *HP/De Tijd*, (2006).

¹²⁴ Koelé and Poorthuis, (2002).

¹²⁵ Dries van Agt, "Een schreeuw om recht voor de Palestijnen." *de Volkskrant* (2005).

¹²⁶ Van Agt: "Our country has - this is very exceptional, if not unique - a Constitution that prescribes (Article 90): ‘The government promotes the development of the international legal order.’ And so, the Dutch government must seriously resist against continued violations of that legal order” (Merriënboer et al., 494-495).

Maxime Verhagen, who was at that time serving as minister of Foreign Affairs under Balkenende. “Despite all pious words,” Van den Broek argued in his 2010 article, “it is crystal clear that the Palestinians absolutely do not benefit from the human rights commitment that is expressed in it, even if the memorandum rests on the core idea that human rights are universal, and therefore always apply, to everyone.”¹²⁷ According to Van den Broek, the Dutch government’s unconditional and long-lasting support for Israel strongly contrasts with the “laudable human rights strategy” that Maxime Verhagen, CDA minister of Foreign Affairs under Balkenende, had launched in 2007.¹²⁸ During a debate with the Lower House of Dutch parliament, following the presentation of this strategy paper, Verhagen told parliament he was pleased with its judgement that respect for human rights should be an integral part of foreign policy.¹²⁹ Van den Broek on his turn claimed that due to the Dutch unconditional support to Israel in recent years, with the CDA at the forefront, the EU had not been able to make a fist against Israeli’s international law violations. “The Netherlands is blocking systematic policies that could increase pressure on Israel,” he argued.¹³⁰

2.3. Conclusions

Under the Protestant CDA leader Jan Peter Balkenende, the CDA initially managed to release the emotional attachment to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that had been dominating the party’s foreign policy during the 1980s and 1990s. Balkenende kept a consistent distance from the conflict. In fact, the Israel-Palestine conflict or the situation in the Middle East no longer had a prominent place in the early years of Balkenende’s foreign policy. The concept of international solidarity had made room for the emphasis on international cooperation and the attention for foreign policy was overshadowed by a focus on internal security and counterterrorism. Under Balkenende, the CDA argued that pressure had to be put on both sides, but only in cooperation with the international community. This awaiting attitude, at a time

¹²⁷ Van den Broek, 123.

¹²⁸ Maxime Verhagen, *Naar een Menswaardig Bestaan*, Human Rights Strategy for Foreign Affairs (The Hague, 2007).

¹²⁹ According to a report of the debate, Verhagen told parliament that it was already testing its policy in practice for more than a year. On the specific Israeli-Palestinian situation, the report of the debate states: “The minister has also protested to Israel against the administrative detention and against the settlements and *road blocks*. With the Palestinian Authority, attention was asked for the importance of the fight against terrorism and the release of hostages.” For the full report, see: Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, “Mensenrechtenstrategie voor het buitenlands beleid.” *Tweede Kamer, vergaderjaar 2007–2008, 31 263, nr. 17* (The Hague: Sdu Uitgevers, 2008), 1-13.

¹³⁰ Van den Broek, 122.

when addressing human rights violations by Israel was more socially accepted than during the 1980s and 1990s, was often met with harsh critiques, especially from within the CDA.

Final discussion and conclusions

This thesis has researched how the CDA's attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has affected the party's understanding of its Christian democratic principle of solidarity, during its most prominent years in government between 1980 and 2010. This thesis argues that the CDA has not always taken its objective of showing international solidarity with the weak in our world as serious as it initially aimed to do. If Christian democracy is described as an attempt to preserve the connection between religion and politics, it is fair to say that the foundation of the CDA is a perfect example of this. However, as this thesis has shown, the irony is that the CDA's biggest electoral successes between 1980 and 2010, became increasingly dependent on specifically secular voters.

With the foundation of the CDA in 1980, the dominance of confessional politics, with sticking to one's own creed and only serving voters from within denominations, was over. Following the rest of Western Europe in embracing Christian democracy, which by definition opens itself up to a diversity of people, seemed inevitable. And yet, throughout the CDA's governing history, the latter has proven to be both the party's biggest advantage, as well as its most threatening weakness. Due to the fact that the CDA has predominantly been founded out of electoral necessity in a secularizing Dutch society, instead of out of a widely shared belief that all Christian blood groups fundamentally belonged together, internal division along denominational lines has always kept existing behind the scenes. However, instead of drifting apart over these differences, the CDA had to rally around its Christian democratic key principles. Given the fact that Christian democracy itself is hard to fit into a strictly framed ideology, it is all the more interesting to notice that the CDA did choose to hold on to those principles.

Despite the fact that the CDA has from the start presented itself as a Christian democratic party, it is interesting to trace back the origins of the new party's key principles. While three of them can be traced back along all denominational lines within the party, only the concept of solidarity convincingly finds its way to Catholic social doctrine. Solidarity, and thus the CDA's aim for "solidarity with the weak in our world society," has significantly more historical connection with the CDA's Catholic members than with its Protestant faction. This raises the question whether the concept of solidarity has ever become an equally accepted principle within the CDA itself.

Nevertheless, the fact that the CDA has always preferred unity over division, is also recognizable in its handling of sensitive policy issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. According to both party insiders and outsiders, there has been no other foreign policy issue that has divided the CDA so strongly as this one. Instead of drifting apart over internal differences over how to relate itself towards the Middle East, the CDA had to rally around its Christian democratic key principles. Yet, in times of internal division or electoral hardship, it was precisely this set of principles that the CDA was quickest to unleash.

While a moral compass and strong ethical beliefs time and again resulted in prime minister Dries van Agt attempting to guide his people during his five-year tenure, it was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that pushed him towards docility. His personal statements from and about his years in office suggest that his own solidarity with the Israeli people did not purely come from his strong tenacity to the CDA's Christian democratic principles. With prime minister Ruud Lubbers came the Netherlands' first managing prime minister. His pragmatic political style was both his strength, as well as his weakness at the same time. Interestingly enough, in terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, his personal attachment to the state of Israel were paramount in his understanding of solidarity towards the issue. Under Van Agt and Lubbers, the CDA's commitment to Israel was strongly influenced by their personal traumas, experiences and emotions. While both the Catholic CDA prime ministers acknowledged that their views on the conflict were strongly connected to public opinion of that time, their emotional attachment to the state of Israel and the Jewish people set the party's tone.

Under the Protestant prime minister Jan Peter Balkenende, the CDA initially managed to release the emotional attachment to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that had been dominating the party's foreign policy during the 1980s and 1990s. Balkenende kept a consistent distance from the conflict. Pressure had to be put on both sides and the CDA's focus on international solidarity with victims of human rights violations was replaced with the aim for international cooperation in the fight against terror. Interestingly enough, critique on the party's neglect of human rights issues within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, primarily came from the Catholic faction within the CDA itself. That both the Catholic Van Agt and Van den Broek switched from the Israeli to the Palestinian side does not disprove the argument that solidarity has stronger ties with Catholic social doctrine than with Protestant ideology. It merely strengthens the idea that the former feels a stronger urgency to interfere in universally achieving solidarity than the latter. Only after they had openly critiqued the CDA's neglect of human rights issues within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during Balkenende's tenure, the CDA decided to once again take it up in its 2010 election program.

Whether one of the CDA's worst election results in its thirty-year existence in 2010, had any causal relationship with fact that in that same year, the CDA specifically expressed its opinion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for the first time in years, is hard to tell. However, it does seem to symbolize the identity crisis that the CDA has experienced ever since its foundation. While the CDA can rightfully be called a Christian democratic party, its *raison d'être* might have become subjective to a rather awkward paradox, since both the reason for its foundation, as well as its subsequent rises and falls, can all be traced back to an increasingly secularizing Dutch society. Both Lubbers' successes in 1986 and 1989, as well as those of Balkenende in 2002, 2003 and 2006, were primarily made possible through the significant increases in the CDA non-Christian voter support.

Throughout the CDA's years in government, different leaders have given different interpretations to its key principles. Given its merger process, this was not unexpected. The CDA has often had to deal with a lack of internal agreement over how to respond to difficult issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In these cases, individual political views of CDA members on both the state of Israel and the Palestinian question have often been strongly influenced by personal and emotions and religious backgrounds. This combination of factors has throughout the CDA's years in government made room for circumstances in which not always the content of the party's foundational Statement of Principles were of the utmost priority.

By specifically comparing the CDA's attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in these three sub-periods during the years 1980-2010, this thesis has analyzed how the ideas behind Christian democratic solidarity in the Netherlands have evolved over time. It shows that both the CDA's Christian democratic appeal to preserve Christian values, as well as its strong sense of showing international solidarity with the weak, have sometimes resulted in a negligence of the protection of those Christian values and traditions in places where Christian solidarity was actually needed the most.

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