**Koenders speech**

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

Thank you for your kind words of introduction.

A special word of welcome to His Excellency Lakhdar Brahimi. Your work as a diplomat, as a mediator, has always been a source of inspiration to me. Your last job serving as the UN and Arab League envoy for Syria has been an extremely challenging one, and this work is (as we all can see) by far not finished. It is clear to me that – regardless the situation on the ground and the current military efforts - diplomatic efforts and the on-going involvement of the UN on finding a political solution to the situation in Syria is crucial. Diplomacy can make a difference in the lives of people, in the fate of nations, and it is up to us, the international community as well as partners in the region, to make it happen. Your presence and your advice here today should inspire us all and give us input for necessary next steps.

Expanding the Euro-Arab dialogue, that is the main mission of the Luftia Rabbani Foundation, the foundation created by her son Mahmoud Rabbani. Mahmoud Rabbani was a remarkable man, an epitome of the Dutch-Arab dialogue. For many of my generation, he was the embodiment of the meeting of two worlds, the Arab and the Dutch, in a time where few of my compatriots rarely, if at all, gave any thought about the Arab world. He died before his time, in 2002 at the age of 68. His spirit lives on in the Foundation he created.

I would like to use this opportunity to share with you some ideas about present developments and future possibilities, roles and responsibilities, focusing specifically on the current situation in Libya and Iraq/Syria. Ultimately, much of what we want to bring about is turns around behaviour and attitudes. That will be the focus of my final remarks.

With everything happening in the Arab world today, the topic chosen for this forum could not have been more pertinent: the future is now, is made by us in the present. There are huge challenges across the board:

Let me refer to developments in Libya where there is a power vacuum and where public authority is only limited to a small stretch of the country.

Allow me to mention the Syrian crisis and the devastating consequences it has not just for the Syrian people but also for the wider region, notably Lebanon and Jordan. The staggering number of victims, well over 200,000. The vast number of refugees and displaced people which adds to the global refugee crisis that we are witnessing today.

And I would like to highlight the rise of ISIS. The specter of ISIS poses immediate security threats, not just to the countries where the self-proclaimed caliphate is operating - in Iraq and Syria. Its consequences are felt far and wide, even in the heart of this very city of The Hague, where demonstrators have brandished the black flag of ISIS during demonstrations, shouting anti-Semitic slogans.

In the face of these realities, 'transition' is not among the first words that spring to mind. We are witnessing a continuous series of shake-ups, of revolutions and counterrevolutions, the end of which is not in sight. We must realize that the region will be impacted for years, even generations, to come. And we must realize that we Europeans will be touched by these events for many years as well.

I am the first to say that it is not up to the EU to shape events in Arab countries or to solve their problems for them. It is the Arab players, movements, where possible civil society that is responsible for shaping their countries. No external pressure or intervention can bring about deep and sustainable democracy; the call for change needs to come from within society.

And that is exactly what has happened in the Arab world, ever since Mohammed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor set himself on fire almost four years ago, on 17 December 2010. In my country you will find streets named after Jan Palach, the Czech student who committed suicide by self-immolation as a political protest against the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies - in Rotterdam inter alia. I think it would be a fitting tribute to Mr Bouazizi if he were honoured the same vein.

Because Mr Bouazizi made clear that people were fed up with the ruling elites that made it impossible even for a street vendor to realize his modest dreams. Tragically, his country - Tunisia - is the only one where structural change did take place. In other parts of the Arab world the political willingness to reform proved to be limited. Lip service was paid to the need for transition and disappointment - if not worse - was quick to set in. Or genuine intentions to bring about democratic change were replaced by the need for a state to provide security for its people.

The fact that responsibilities rest with the Arab leadership does not mean Europe does not have a role to play in helping bring about transition. There are two reasons why I think that we should be interested:

One major reason rests in factors explained by geographic proximity, by economic interdependencies, by historical ties, by religious sentiments and by feelings of kinship. We have learned from each other, we have profited from each other. These and many other factors explain the shared destinies of Europe and the Arab world.

And the second reason is that the EU has a clear and obvious interest to see its Southern neighbours - any of our neighbours for that matter - transform into stable and vibrant societies, bringing new perspectives to their populations.

In sum: helping transition occurring smoothly, improves security on all levels - human, economic and social. Europe may not be able to shape the future, but she can foster political willingness to transform. Reform will be slow and costly and won’t necessarily bring political gain in the short run. We can help overcome those obstacles, speeding up the process, creating political incentives to reform.

Events in Libya, Syria and Iraq force us to take a closer look at the tenets of EU support in the recent past. One principle that has been dear to the us is the incentive based approach: we should offer more support to countries that reform well. And support should be cut back where reforms are lagging behind.

This principle of 'less for less, more for more' sounds simple and commonsensical. It should be admitted it can also be too simplistic, naive in a way. In recent years we have seen how complicated the realities in the Arab world are.

It is easy enough to reward countries that do well – I have the example of Tunisia in mind. But what to do when talking about transition no longer makes sense, like in Libya? What to do in places where transition is a process of steps forward and backward at the same time? Egypt is an important strategic partner, and we applaud its engagement to help solve regional problems. But a long term democratic development also requires human rights and rule of law improvements. We should continue our dialogue about these issues.

A tailor-made approach should be followed: there is no 'one size fits all' when it comes to the Southern neighbourhood. We are it in for the long haul – transition doesn’t happen overnight and it will always be a process with ups and downs. A recent advice of the Dutch Advisory Council on International Relations on the future of relations between the Netherlands and the Arab world makes the same argument and I think they have a valid point.

The situation with regard to Iraq/Syria and the rise of ISIS present us with even more difficult dilemmas. We are confronted with a material threat to regional and international peace and stability. We may be forced to take sides with partners we would normally shun. And we are faced with political divisions that make it difficult to come up with an effective solution to the crisis, both globally - within the UN Security Council - and regionally - epitomized by the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia for regional leadership.

This Forum is not the appropriate venue for me to take positions on these issues. I just want to underline three notions of a more general nature, that all of us need to take into account when addressing the civil wars in Syria and Iraq, crises that feed off each other.

There is no lasting military solution, only political solutions can show the way forward. For this to become a reality, all players - regional and global, - need to come together, taking due consideration of the tremendous suffering of the Syrian and the Iraqi people. The humanitarian cost of these crises is too big for individual countries to continue to let their own interests prevail.

If history has proven anything in the Middle East, it is that solutions imposed by outside agencies are bound to fail. The peoples of Iraq and Syria need to find their own way, supported by a unanimous international coalition. Both Syria and Iraq are in need of inclusive national governments, operating to the benefit of all - Sunni and Shia, Alevites and Christians, Kurds and Arabs, etc. etc.

And thirdly, the international community should be guided by the notion to do no harm. “Primum non nocere”, as the doctor says.

If no external pressure and no intervention will bring into being deep and sustainable democracy, what does that mean for the role of the EU? I believe that the provision of support by the EU is helpful, yet insufficient in itself. For Europe to really succeed in fostering transition it is essential it takes its own behavior and attitudes into account.

In the past we have seen hard power instruments fail spectacularly in bringing about transition in the Arab world. Several American administrations and a few European governments as well have learnt this the hard way.

I believe that leadership by example is the best way to harness the soft power needed to entice countries to reform, to transform and rise again from the rubble. It is not by telling but by showing that we can persuade people of the merits of democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights. That market oriented economic policies bring the biggest gains to countries, to communities, to individual human beings.

Success breeds success. If other countries find little to admire in our societies, if they feel that following the lead of countries like Russia or China brings greater gains, then we should not be surprised if transition fails.

I would like to conclude by sharing with you a part of a poem by Faraj Bayrakdar. It was published in the book 'Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline'. A book both shocking and uplifting. Shocking in the way that it shows the appalling consequences of civil war, uplifting in the way it shows that art can be a healing force. The poem is called - Tashriqa: Prayer for Homs. It describes the kind of city, the kind of future of the Arab world, that the poet is praying for. I quote:

You are safe of whatever you say or don't,

believers and nonbelievers,

for all those who lit up its promises

with candles in their fingers

so the city can see its tomorrow, our people.

May this prayer be answered. I look forward to hearing from Lakhdar Brahimi and all others at this Forum.

Note: the poem quoted can be read in full at the following website - www.aljadid.com/content/tashriqa