

SPEECH BY HER EXCELLENCY MARIE-LOUISE COLEIRO PRECA, PRESIDENT OF MALTA ON THE OCCASION OF THE 66th ANNIVERSARY OF THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL. WEDNESDAY 18 JUNE 2014.

Honourable Parliamentary Secretaries,

President Emeriti,

Excellencies,

Members of Parliament,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you Your Excellency, Ambassador Oren David for the kind words that you have just expressed.

On behalf of my husband and I, and on behalf of the Government and the People of Malta, kindly convey our sincere best wishes, on the occasion of the national day of the State of Israel, to His Excellency, President Shimon Peres, and to the Government and the People of Israel.

Excellency

Israel's national day of Independence comes at a moment when we are all concerned about the stability of our shared Mediterranean region.

Political instability, in neighbouring Libya, the prolonged conflict in Syria and now the deteriorating situation in Iraq, give rise to more questions than answers, and to more tensions and worries.

Our claim to a stabilised region emerge from the long-standing position Malta took a long time ago, to serve as a geostrategic hub for dialogue and peace in the area.

Our countries have achieved much; however it seems that we have still a long way to go to reach a fully-

fledged peaceful environment, where people could safely interact and prosper.

In this regard, we continue to call on all the states surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, and the State of Israel, in particular, to employ themselves towards a long-lasting peace that will change our region into an oasis of stability for all.

It was, in fact, immediately after Malta obtained its Independence in 1964, that institutional relations between the two sides were established.

Since then, our countries strived to enhance their bilateral relations through regular high-level visits from both sides.

It suffices to note the successful visit by Prime Minister Honourable Joseph Muscat to Israel in October last year, which paved the way to concrete cooperation in the fields of energy, health, education, tourism and agriculture, among others.

While such important visits continue to enhance cooperation on different levels, they are also a source of encounter, which render our friendly relations more solid and open to future collaboration in areas of mutual interest.

One important example of this collaboration is the first visit to Malta by three representatives of the Israeli-Maltese Parliamentary Friendship Group, led by Dr Orly Levi-Abekasis.

I am confident that their visit to Malta will pave the way to enhanced institutional cooperation and familiarisation of both our parliamentary systems.

Malta acknowledges the honourable members of the Parliamentary Friendship Group for finding the time to be with us this evening.

Their presence here renders the celebration of this year's National Day of Israel, a more significant claim

towards the common aspiration of well-being of our respective peoples.

When it comes to trade and investment between the two countries, it suffices to note that in 2013, this rose to €228.5 million, in particular related to trading in mineral fuels. Besides, there are around 70 companies registered in Malta with Israeli share holding.

Malta is conscious of the efforts both sides are employing to enhance trade cooperation.

Both countries are exploring new avenues of cooperation, such as research and development in areas of mutual interest.

The use of Malta's Freeport, a state-of-the-art terminal strategically positioned to cater for the transshipment of goods to and from Europe, North Africa, America, Asia and beyond, is another option.

Such cooperation would provide both sides with the possibility of enhancing their cooperation and understand each other better.

Excellency,

We have scope to believe that the future of our relations is encouraging.

Our two countries share the same region; we share a particular connection through the Sovereign Military Order of St John of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Malta.

The Order was present both at Acre (eikār) until the late 13th century, as well as in Malta two centuries later.

In Jerusalem, there is also an active Maltese community serving in Christian shrines, as well as in other areas, where they provide valuable social assistance.

Tourism plays a pivotal role in bringing people together.

In recent years, Malta welcomed tourism from Israel, which continued to increase reaching 25,000 in 2013.

While it is being predicted that these positive results are set to repeat themselves in 2014, I am convinced that, with enhanced cooperation between all stake parties in the sector, the number of tourists travelling to both countries stand to further increase in the years to come.

Both our countries have established solid ground upon which to continue building an enduring working relationship.

I have in mind Malta's support to Israel in the EU on earmarked areas, and our incessant support towards a two-state solution which we believe, is the only key that could bring the most desired Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process to a pragmatic solution.

Malta remains committed to a peaceful outcome of negotiations between the two sides whenever they take place.

We firmly believe that only through a structured dialogue, built upon the goodwill and perseverance of both sides, that peaceful coexistence could finally take place.

I therefore urge Israel to maintain pace with its efforts towards a viable solution in the best interest of both peoples and the region as a whole.

Culture is another important factor that brings people closer together.

Our respective countries have established a very strong collaboration in cultural exchanges and cooperation, through the regular participation of Israeli artists in the annual Malta Arts Festival.

Culture and the arts are the ultimate means of expression bringing people together, engaging with each other. Culture and the arts transcend borders. Culture and the arts acknowledge positively multiculturalism, promote intercultural societies, hence bringing about an automatic peace process.

Enhancing our efforts towards further co-operation on cultural and artistic initiatives is definitely much desired, and Malta looks forward to furthering its endeavours.

As we have already had the opportunity to discuss, Your Excellency, I personally look forward from the Presidency, to welcome to Malta, the astounding international group of dancers, who together with Maltese participants, performed at the open air theatre in Valletta, some weeks ago.

The International Multi Style Dance troupe consisting of a multicultural repertoire and organised by a group

of young Israelis, gave an amazing performance. They chose Malta to exhibit the positiveness that multiculturalism can bring with it to the people of the world.

Likewise, I note the mutual interest in furthering cooperation in the field of restoration and conservation.

I am sure that even in this vital sector, both our respective countries are firmly committed to search for new avenues of cooperation in the best interest of Maltese and Israeli young artists.

Excellency,

I am sure that the future of our relations is set to build on the right structures for further enhanced mutual cooperation.

I am confident that with almost fifty years of strong diplomatic relations, coupled with the will to move

ahead towards new horizons of collaboration, we have reason to celebrate this day.

Moreover, our collaboration is proof that where two peoples strive to come closer together, the results will be a relationship, characterised by mutual respect, and a steadfast resolve, towards the principles of global peace.

Let us endeavour further to enhance our efforts towards peace in the Mediterranean, and hopefully, towards world peace.

And now, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to invite you all to raise your glasses and drink in celebration of the National Day of Israel, the excellent relations between Malta and Israel and to peace and prosperity, among our peoples and in our region.

Toda Raba (*Thank you in Hebrew*)