



EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

**DELEGATION FOR RELATIONS WITH THE
THE GULF STATES, INCLUDING YEMEN**

9th EP - Saudi Arabia Interparliamentary Meeting

25-30 October 2008

**Report of Mr. Tobias Pflüger,
acting chair of the Delegation**

1. INTRODUCTION

Peculiar circumstances marked the preparation of the Delegation's visit. Due to Ramadan festivities and public holidays, the Saudi authorities confirmed at a very late stage that the Delegation is indeed welcome to visit the country. Finally, this confirmation came together with the generous offer to host the Delegation in the government-run Conference Palace Hotel. Similarly, the programme of the visit was only confirmed on a day-by-day basis and Members were unaware of large parts of it before arriving at Riyadh. Together with the highly secured accommodation, this meant the Delegation had to rely entirely on the Protocol service of the Shura Council which handled the stay with utmost courtesy, albeit tightly monitored.

Security concerns were also the main argument used by both, the Saudi authorities and the EC Delegation to confine the Delegation's movements to secure areas. Against this backdrop, spontaneous meetings and contacts with members of the civil society were impossible. Unlike in other countries in the region, the European Commission's premises (the small EC Delegation is poorly staffed with one acting Head of Mission and one temporary agent plus secretaries) could not be used for this purpose. The very last day, the Delegation managed to set up an informal dinner with independent Human Rights Defender Ibrahim Mugaiteeb, President of Human Rights First Society.

The Delegation received a comprehensive briefing from the EU Ambassadors covering all aspects of EU-Saudi relations, GCC negotiations, prospects of reform in Saudi Arabia and the regional situation in the Middle East. It took advantage of deepening discussions meeting virtually the whole diplomatic corps and other political actors during a reception given by the German Ambassador on the occasion of German Foreign Minister Steinmeier's visit to Riyadh.

2. MAIN SUBJECTS RAISED DURING THE MEETINGS

2.1 Saudi Arabia's role in the Middle East

The Delegation repeatedly underlined that the EU appreciates Saudi Arabia's role in combating terrorism and in stabilising the region. Containing the rise of Iran in the region is Saudi Arabia's main foreign policy concern. Syria is seen as an Iranian proxy within the Arab camp and Pakistan as a strategic ally.

The Saudis are pessimistic about Iraq and full of distrust towards the Al-Maliki government. Generally, there is fear of the Kingdom falling apart after a possible partition of Iraq. On the improved security situation in Iraq the Saudi side claims that the Sahwa fighters act with Saudi rather than with US help. Conversely, they consider that the US troops should leave Iraq not too early.

Turning increasingly to China, India and Russia, Saudi Arabia wants to diversify its partners. But a still pending arms deal shows that Saudi-Russian relations don't evolve as quickly as Russia wishes.

The Members of the Shura Council enquired as to the EU's position on Afghanistan and the possibility for the EU to weight on the positions of its Member States. Both sides shared the view that there is no military solution for Afghanistan, but the need of an agreement involving all actors.

Together with criticising Western double standards when it comes to the Middle East, many Saudi interlocutors called on the EU to take a stronger role in solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Mrs. Mănescu repeatedly insisted that the Palestinian issue is a shared responsibility of both Arabs and Europeans.

2.2 Impact of the global financial crisis

The Delegation was told that individual business people are struggling hard under the impact of the global financial crisis. However, the Saudi State is less hit than other Gulf States since Saudi State reserves were invested in safe assets. Both, the Chairman of the Delegation and the Saudi side widely agreed on the need of international rules to address the crisis. The Delegation's interlocutors, in particular in the Shura Council, voiced hope that the financial crisis might raise the attractiveness of Islamic financial solutions. While Mr. Roving told the interlocutors that he was the co-funder of Denmark's first Islamic bank, Mr. Karim pointed to London's ambition to become a capital for Islamic finance.

2.3 EU-GCC negotiations on a free trade agreement

The Saudi interlocutors reiterated their wish to conclude the agreement in 2008, but didn't hide their sense of fatigue with regard to the stalled negotiations. Indeed, the Delegation was conveyed the message that a deal is more in the EU's interest than in the GCC's. For the Saudis, the suspense clause in case of Human Rights violations is not acceptable. They argue that Human rights are an international issue to be dealt with at UN level and not in a regional FTA.

2.4 Justice Sector Reforms

The Delegation commended the judicial reform announced in October 2007 by King Abdullah, promising the setting-up of new specialised courts and improved training for judges and lawyers (see EP Plenary resolution on Women's rights in Saudi Arabia of 13 December 2007¹).

Current reform efforts lead to the gradual introduction of new concepts into the Saudi legal system. Changes are mainly linked to the international obligations signed by Saudi Arabia including campaigns against torture, domestic violence or marrying children. However, there are clear limits to reform. Sharia as the basis of the Saudi legal system is unlikely to change with the justice system intrinsically linked to the religious establishment.

The lack of a codified legal system makes the legal framework quite opaque. Instead, Saudi Arabia relies on traditional books and precedents (Sharia law). At the Ministry of Justice the Delegation learnt that codification of Sharia law has recently started, with the establishment of a new penal code, a code of procedures and a code of lawyers. This should ensure more transparency, in particular for foreign investors. Another move towards increased transparency is the publication of laws and ongoing efforts to publish some court rulings.

The Saudi interlocutors admitted problems with law enforcement and with the process of legal investigation, deploring the weakness of the administration, corruption and the low level of education.

¹ P6_TA(2007)0631.

2.5 Education

The bulk of Saudi Arabia's population remains badly educated with education being largely religion based. Educational reform has started at higher education level. The newly established universities are mostly US and UK-inspired. New research institutions, including a Saudi "MIT" in Jeddah, are planned. Yet, efforts on higher education are not matched with the ones on lower education. The Saudi authorities are aware of the problem, but implementation of reform is a painful process against the backdrop of vested interests. Positively, the Delegation was told that two third of the King's scholars going to study abroad are women.

Meeting with teachers and students of Political Science at King Saud University the Delegation witnessed a small sample of higher education on the spot. Although an independent faculty of Political Science has been in place since 2006, it appears as a minor branch besides the dominant Law faculty. Islamic Sharia is the basic subject of Law studies and religious practise structures the day at the campus.

Against this outset, the Delegation could not feel much ambition to reform amongst students who told the Members that they are preparing for careers in the Shura Council, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or in the private sector (mainly banks). Whereas the Delegation was informed that students elect their representatives, there is no organised political activity of students. Mr. Karim invited the students to link Saudi Arabia to the international students' association system. In general, the debate was rather driven by the teaching staff than by the students. It covered questions on the EU's policy towards Iran, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Danish cartoons crises. While the debate reflected a feeble degree of awareness of European realities, the Saudi side declared its interest in specific EU-Studies and cooperation in this field.

Visiting the King Faisal Centre for Islamic Studies, the Delegation found a very open environment for discussion. After a presentation of the scope of activities of the Centre, debate focussed on the Middle East conflict, nuclear proliferation and Iran in particular, Iraq and the EU-GCC Free Trade Agreement.

2.6 Security and Counter Terrorism

Representatives of the Ministry of the Interior briefed the Delegation on current security challenges and their efforts in counter terrorism. One major aspect of the Saudi response is in fact to work on the mindsets of terrorists using religious arguments and means to bring them back on "the right path". The Ministry tries to intervene as of the stage of recruitment to prevent radicalisation. A rehabilitation programme closely dealing with the families of terrorists endeavours to achieve sustainable de-radicalisation. Currently 991 persons face trials according to Sharia law as part of religious counter-terrorism efforts.

2.7 Human Rights and Death Penalty

Saudi Arabia has not signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This move is motivated by reservations on two points: freedom to change religion and freedom of marriage.

The Delegation met with two Human Rights organisations, the Human Rights Commission (HRC), a governmental structure created three years ago, and the one year older National Society for Human Rights (NSHR), labelled NGO although launched with substantial financial support from former King Fahd. Oddly, the

Delegation felt more openness and spirit of reform amongst the members of the HRC than within the NSHR.

With both organisations the Delegation raised the universality of human rights, pre-trial detention, the issue of the nationality of children born to immigrants, the situation of foreign workers, women's rights, freedom of association, the HR clause in the EU-GCC free trade agreement, the high level of executions and death penalty in principle. The Delegation underlined that the ban of capital punishment is not negotiable for the EU. The Saudi side admitted that it is difficult for foreigners to understand some types of punishment in the kingdom, recalling, however, that death penalty was divine law and is applied only for murder and drug trafficking.

Generally high in a worldwide comparison, Saudi statistics of death penalty evolve in waves. From the Saudi point of view, fewer executions in public and the presence of doctors while applying other physical penalties constitute tangible improvements, while the basic principle of such penalties is part of the doctrine.

Both, HRC and NSHR, follow-up complaints they receive from individuals. Since its creation the NSHR has been involved in about 13 000 cases including prisoners, workers, domestic violence etc. It said it investigates in all cases reported by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Their newer tasks include the supervision of elections for regional municipalities.

The HRC which operates in three regional branches in Riyadh, Jeddah and Damman participates in all new legislation and reviews current legislation as to its compliance with Saudi Arabia's international obligations. It advocates for women's right to drive.

The Delegation was informed about the government's plans to spread culture of Human Rights through communication and education.

The HRC claims a 40-50 % quota when examining Human Rights cases with the government authorities.

Given the interest of the HRC towards the European Parliament, the Chairman of the Delegation told its interlocutors that he will suggest to the Sub-Committee on Human Rights to establish contacts with the HCR. He further promised the interlocutors information on the issue of Human Rights and the GCC Free Trade Agreement, which they apparently were not aware of.

The EU Embassies in Riyadh have established an Experts Group on Human Rights and offered the Saudi authorities a dialogue. An official answer to this offer is still pending.

2.8 The situation of Foreign Workers

The Chairman of the Delegation regularly raised the question of the situation of foreign workers. Referring to the low share of foreign workers compared to the situation in other Gulf countries, the Saudi interlocutors looked for understanding that this issue is not a major concern in the Kingdom. However, they acknowledged the need of reforming the framework for recruiting workers abroad. Reform discussions within the Shura Council include the creation of a global agency of sponsorship for foreign workers replacing the current system.

Mr. Karim invited the Saudi authorities to consider giving Saudi nationality to children born to foreign workers in the Kingdom, as their countries of origin might one day stop granting citizenship to people who had never lived on their soil. The

Saudi side underlined that the presence of foreign workers was a temporary phenomenon and that most guest workers leave after a couple of years.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The Delegation' mission to Saudi Arabia was an information visit, allowing to convey certain key messages including on Human Rights to the Saudi authorities. In the absence of a structured bilateral cooperation with Saudi Arabia and without an elected parliamentary counterpart, the visit was necessarily a courtesy visit. Building bridges and creating opportunities for dialogue was warmly welcomed on the Saudi side. Thus the added value of the visit has to be seen in raising awareness for the European Parliament as a foreign policy actor and preparing the ground for the establishment of a working relationship at a later stage.

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DELEGATION FOR RELATIONS WITH THE GULF STATES, INCLUDING YEMEN

9TH IPM EP - SAUDI ARABIA

26 - 30 October 2008

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Members (4)

	<u>Group</u>	<u>Country</u>
Mr Tobias PFLÜGER , 1st Vice-Chair, Acting Chair	GUE/NGL	Germany
Mr Sajjad KARIM	EPP/ED	United Kingdom
Mr Christian ROVSING	EPP/ED	Denmark
Ms Ramona Nicole MĂNESCU	ALDE	Romania

EPP-ED	Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats
ALDE	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
GUE/NGL	Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left

DG III Staff (2)

Mr Stefan KRAUSS	Administrator
Ms Nicole DEVOS	Administrative Assistant

Political group staff (1)

Mr Rupert KRIETEMEYER	EPP Advisor
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Interpreters (3)

Ms Nirvana HASSAN	EN-AR-EN
Ms Khadiga BARRADA	EN-AR-EN
Ms Johanna TYSARCZYK	DE-EN

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Accompanying the Members (1)

Ms Cristina COVACI	Ms Manescu's assistant
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EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Delegation for relations with the Gulf States, including Yemen

9th interparliamentary meeting EP/Saudi Arabia

26 - 30 October 2008

Riyadh

Programme

Saturday 25 October 2008

Arrival of the Secretariat

Dimanche 26 octobre 2008

Preparatory meeting with EC Delegation (Secretariat only)

Individual arrivals of Members in Riyadh

Members will be welcomed by Mme Antonia Calvo Puerta, Chargée d'Affaires a.i. of the Commission in Riyadh

Transfer to hotel

*CONFERENCE PALACE HOTEL
In front of the Foreign Ministry
Riyadh - Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 1 4415 000
Fax: +966 1 4413 373*

Monday 27 October 2008

08h00 Departure from the hotel

08h30 Working breakfast with EU Ambassadors

Place: French Residence

10h30-11h30 Meeting with H.E. Dr Abdullah Bin Mohammed Al Sheikh, Minister of Justice

Place: Ministry of Justice

11h45-14h30 Meeting with the Committee for relations with EU of the Shurah Council followed by a lunch

Place: Shurah Council

17h00 Visit of the Musmak Fort

Place: Musmak Fort

Free dinner

Tuesday 28 October 2008

09h30 Departure from the hotel

10h00 Meeting with the National Society for Human Rights, VP Mr. Mefleh al Qahtani

Place: National Society of Human Rights

11h30-13h00 Meeting with students in international relations at the King Saud University

Place: King Saud University

Free lunch

16h15 Departure from the hotel

16h30 Visit of the King Abdulaziz Center (National Museum)

Place: King Abdulaziz Center

18h00 Projection of a slideshow on public security in the presence of a team from the Ministry of Interior

Place: Conference Palace Hotel

20h00-22h00 Reception at the German Embassy (German National Day)

Place: German Residence

Wednesday 29 October 2008

09h30 Departure from the hotel

10h00 Meeting with the Human Rights Commission (Mr Turki al Sudairy)

Place: Human Rights Commission

12h00-15h00 Working lunch offered by the Secretary General of the King Faisal Foundation for Research and Studies, Mr Yehya Mahmoud Ben Jenaid

Place: King Faisal Foundation

20h00 Dinner at the Globe with Mr Ibrahim Al Mugaiteeb, President of the Human Rights First Society

Place: The Globe Restaurant, Al Faisaliah Hotel

Thursday 30 October

Individual departures of Members to Europe