

# EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

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

### **8th EP-Saudi Arabia Interparliamentary Meeting**

**7-13 February 2005**

#### **Draft report by Ms Lilli Gruber, delegation chair**

### **1. Introduction**

After a visit to Strasbourg by a Majlis Al Shura delegation in December 2004, a return visit by the Delegation for relations with the Gulf States, including Yemen, was organised for February 2005. The occasion for the visit was the first local elections ever to be held in the history of Saudi Arabia, beginning in Riyadh on 10 February 2005 and due to continue in other places throughout the spring.

The talks were held in an atmosphere of openness, characterised by the desire to intensify the dialogue between the two sides in order to break down mutual prejudice.

### **2. Meeting with members of the Majlis Al Shura (MAS)**

The MAS is a consultative assembly of 120 members appointed by the King. The talks, which were attended by a number of MEPs from different committees, were on the following subjects:

- Involvement of women in political life  
The chair of the EP delegation cited a newspaper report of the same day according to which the president of the Majlis Al Shura had mentioned the possibility of participation by women in the assembly being considered. (The report obviously came as a surprise to the MAS members, who were not aware of it.)

Reaction to the suggestion ranged from the wish to retain the status quo, whereby women are invited to attend meetings of the MAS where major issues affecting them are to be discussed, to acceptance provided that religious requirements are met and the population is generally in favour.

The EP party's argument that as long as the major part of society was excluded from exercising the right to vote, as in the present local elections, there could be no question of democracy, was met with the assertion that Saudi Arabia (SA) must find its own way to democratic structures, which would not necessarily be the same as the Western approach.

- Security issues in SA  
The Saudi side stressed that there had been problems in this area until recently; a report with concrete proposals had been drawn up. The situation was now back to normal, and the economy and the stock exchange were showing positive trends, which was an indication of the stable situation.
- Terrorism  
The EP party spoke of the role of an extreme form of Islam which was propagated in Europe via the Internet and had possibly led to the assassination of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh. The role of Wahhabism in Bosnia was also referred to in critical terms in this connection.  
The Saudi side began by pointing out that Wahhabism, which is widely followed in SA, is a religious movement whose original aim was to correct the excesses of Islam. Furthermore, information should not be taken from the Internet. Terrorism and Islam were mutually exclusive: those who committed crimes in the name of Islam should be prosecuted for them. Saudi society itself suffered from terrorism, so why should it propagate it? Instead, the Saudi side stressed, the root causes of terrorism should be addressed.
- Human rights  
The EP party suggested that one of the possible causes of terrorism was deprivation of the right of free speech. A telling example was that of the arrest of three Saudis who had filed a petition asking for the introduction of a constitutional monarchy. The Saudis pointed out that the trial had taken place in the presence of a lawyer and of international organisations.
- Religious freedom  
The EP group mentioned the principle of reciprocity in the exercise of religious freedom: churches should be allowed in SA in the same way as mosques were permitted in Europe. On the subject of the situation in France, it was emphasised that there was a clear separation of State and religion and that the law adopted in 2004 prohibiting the wearing of religious symbols was not directed against Islam, but concerned all religions.

### **3. Meeting with HRH Crown Prince Abdullah**

The delegation received an audience with Crown Prince Abdullah. This visit lasted longer than foreseen and matters of substance were discussed:

The Crown Prince, first of all, underlined the important relations Europe has had for over 60 years with Saudi Arabia. Europe enjoys high appreciation in the Arab world, but could play a more active role in supporting the dialogue between the different cultures and religions and in the fight against international terrorism.

The EU and Saudi Arabia should work together more efficiently to find a solution to the Middle East conflict.

With regard to the role of women in this society, HRHighness Abdullah pointed out that women in Saudi Arabia enjoy more rights than in other societies, due to the influence of the

Islamic religion. The right for women to vote or drive is less important than to give them a good education based on the Coran.

Regarding the democratic structures in his country, he referred to the history of Europe where 200 years were necessary to achieve democracy. Saudi Arabia, in its short existence, has already obtained a lot.

One of the members of the delegation thanked the Crown Prince for facilitating the participation of European Muslims in the Hajj. In his reply, the Crown Prince pointed out that all Muslims living in Europe are welcome in his country to visit the holy places.

The head of the delegation underlined the fact that it is not acceptable in a democratic society that women are prevented to participate in the electoral process and expressed her hope that at the next elections all the members of Saudi Arabian society could vote.

#### **4. Meeting with the Saudi Journalists' Association**

In answer to a question from the EP delegation about the numerous security precautions in Riyadh, including those in front of the Journalists' Association building, it was pointed out that in contrast with the situation in the past, when foreign premises were the main target of attacks, Saudi buildings now had to be protected as well: 'They (the terrorists) want to destroy us all'.

The development of the press in SA was initially funded with State help, but now it was self-financing.

The governing board was made up of freely elected journalists, two of them women. There were now 500 to 600 journalists working in SA, about 100 of whom were women.

The Saudi side emphasised that the new information law stipulated that a licence had to be issued, but these were obtainable without any very great difficulty. Anything could be published, provided the royal house and the religion were not criticised, and the country's security not put in jeopardy. Journalistic activity was subject to ethical criteria. Articles which might lead to social conflict had to be avoided at all costs.

September 11, where 15 of the 19 attackers had been Saudis, had had one positive outcome, according to the Saudi participants, in that it had opened society's eyes and also moved it in a direction which could lead to more rights for women.

#### **5. Meeting with the Secretary General of the King Abdul Aziz Centre for the National Dialogue**

This institution, which has been in existence for 15 months, but the preliminary work for which had already begun two years before 11 September, has so far organised five National Dialogues.

The first Dialogue, attended mainly by intellectuals and representatives of various social groups, including religious scholars, brought to light diverse views on the questions and issues raised, but also a number of points of agreement.

The second Dialogue, in which conservatives, liberals and – in separate rooms – women took part, addressed the question of the extent to which it was possible to propagate a moderate form of Islam and combat extremist ideas. In addition, issues specific to women

were discussed, such as the right of women to drive and the assertion of their rights in legal proceedings. Following this, working parties were set up, and made concrete proposals which would lead to legislative measures. The majority principle was applied, but minority opinions were noted in the report.

Further Dialogues addressed issues connected with young people and with drugs.

The meetings, with the exception of the first one, had been open to the public.

The job of the organisation was generally seen as being to inform society, so that the different social groups would understand each other better, because, in the words of the chairman, they lived on different islands; in the final analysis, an impetus should be given towards reform. However, in this process it had to be remembered that this was a conservative society, which was keenly observed by the six million pilgrims who travelled to Mecca each year.

One outcome of the meeting was the holding of dialogues. 200 interested people were now going to be trained to promote a willingness to dialogue in the rest of the country. The subject of the next Dialogue was 'Ourselves and the Others'.

At the moment only individuals were taking part in the programmes, but later, as soon as non-governmental organisations had been set up, these would also be involved. However, in this process it would have to be borne in mind that Saudi society was an Islamic society, onto which the Western multi-party model could not be grafted.

When the situation of guest workers was raised, the delegation was told that they were given contracts which had to be extended every two years. Those who lived in SA for more than 10 years had the option of taking Saudi nationality.

## **6. Private meeting with women**

On an initiative of the Italian Ambassador a meeting was organised in a private house where the members of the delegation had the opportunity of putting questions to men and women at the same time (men and women do not appear together in public at official occasions).

The majority view expressed was that reforms, where they had been started at all, took too long to be put into practice. Religion was always used by the ruling class as a pretext not to advance too quickly. In reality the country was controlled by a religious class. However, women were well educated, and a change in their status was quite possible. The gap between technical progress and the education and legal systems was generally deplored.

## **7. The local elections in Riyadh**

On the evening before the elections the delegation had the opportunity to visit candidates' election tents and hear about the preparations for the elections.

On election day itself the delegation visited three polling stations chosen by the Saudi hosts, spoke to election officials and was impressed by the organisation, which had been set up with the help of the German Society for Technical Cooperation (*Gesellschaft für technische Zusammenarbeit*).

Of the total number of 150 000 registered male voters – women were not admitted to the elections - 82% voted. 7 of the 14 local councils were elected. The remaining 7 are appointed by the King.

## **8. Meeting with representatives of the Chamber of Trade in Jeddah**

The talks were marked by a sense of open dialogue on both sides, in which the role of parliamentarians as a bridge for dialogue was stressed. The following specific topics were discussed:

- The security situation

The tense nature of the security situation was demonstrated by the fact that European airlines had either, like British Airways, stopped their flights to SA altogether or did not allow their aircraft or crews to remain there overnight. Lufthansa, for example, flew on to Ethiopia/Eritrea, Air France to Egypt and Swiss had its crews flown out to Bahrain.

- The elections

The results of the elections in Riyadh were less interesting than the fact that they had taken place at all. What was important now was that women should be enabled to take part in future elections as well.

- The situation of businesswomen

Women who wanted to open businesses encountered many obstacles: from obtaining a government licence or opening a bank account through to the daily running of the business. In general the percentage of women who wanted to join the world of business was small, also because of the fact that women received little education which would fit them for such an activity.

- The difference between SA and the EU

The Saudi side asked how many years, or centuries, the West had taken to reach the point it was at today. This was why the West had to be patient with the process of change in SA and, above all, not try to force models on Saudi society which would later be rejected by it. Reforms, whether of the political system, religion or human rights, had to come from Saudi society itself. This was why the dialogue between cultures was so necessary and reciprocal visits by delegations so desirable. The modus operandi of the Canadian delegation could be seen as exemplary: it asked how relations between SA and Canada could be improved, and did not ask questions about democracy, human rights and religion.

- Future relations

The image of SA propagated by the Western press as a State that encouraged terrorism was false and needed to be corrected. The EU and SA must work together on this. One way that this could happen was through exchange programmes for students and journalists, such as those that had been encouraged by the chair of the EP delegation in advance of the visit.

At the economic level it would be desirable for a contact point to be set up in the Commission's delegation office, according to the Malaysian and Japanese model. In this connection, it was important for both sides that the negotiations between the Gulf Cooperation Council and the EU were completed as soon as possible.

## **9. Meeting with *Arab News* journalists**

*Arab News*, a daily English-language newspaper published in Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait as well as in SA, is privately owned and employs 45 male and female staff members, who do not work in a gender-segregated environment as is usual in SA. The paper is mainly designed for expatriates, most Saudis reading their news online. The paper has a circulation of 53 000. During the Iraq War the paper had 3.7 million online readers. 26% of its readership are Saudis, 41% women.

At first the paper was government-subsidised, but now it finances itself independently from private advertising. It was described as independent, with no influence being exerted either by the proprietors or the government. Its journalists work freely; persecution such as that in Syria, for example, had never happened in SA.

The only limitations applied to the representation of religious subjects and defamation of public figures. Treatment of issues relating to women was so difficult because these issues needed to be taken up by the women themselves, which unfortunately did not happen. Maybe this was connected with a possible sense of intimidation on the part of women.

When it inquired about the insurance situation of foreign employees, the delegation was told that over 70% of those working for government bodies and firms were insured. For the rest there was now an initiative by the minister responsible aimed at introducing compulsory insurance in the private sector as well.

The press in SA now regarded itself as the fourth estate: previously taboo subjects were now discussed, such as the position of women in society. Exchanges between journalists were generally welcomed, with the proviso that Western views were not forced on the Saudis.

## **Final remarks**

The delegation's visit to Riyadh and Jeddah can be described as a total success. The meetings requested by the EP party were excellently organised by the Majlis Al Shura, despite the conference on terrorism which coincided almost exactly with the visit. The delegation's visit to the local elections was very interesting; it was impressed with the organisation and the peaceful conduct of the elections. The delegation was granted an audience with Crown Prince Abdullah, where matters connected with women's suffrage, EU-SA relations and the fight against international terrorism were discussed. During the audience the chair of the EP delegation was able to hand over a letter from the President of the European Parliament to the Crown Prince.

One criticism was that a press conference organised by the delegation had to be called off because not enough journalists were present (see attached press release). This was

presumably attributable to the fact that the necessary authorisation to hold the press conference from the Ministry of the Interior was not available. A further criticism relates to the fact that one cannot speak of Saudi Arabia having a free press in the way that the European Union does. The delegation therefore suggests that an exchange programme for journalists and students be set up to promote dialogue. In addition, the establishment plan of the Commission delegation's Riyadh office should be adjusted to meet growing needs.

The press release is appended to this report.

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### 8th Interparliamentary Meeting EP/Saudi Arabia

7-11 February 2005

## PROGRAMME

### SAUDI ARABIA (7-12 February 2005)

#### Monday 7 February (Riyadh)

Individual arrival of members of the delegation in Riyadh and transfer to

**Hotel**

*Holiday Inn Olaya, Riyadh,  
Tel : 966 1 461 2000*

20h00 Briefing with Protocol and EU Ambassador - Mr Bernard SAVAGE

#### Tuesday 8 February (Riyadh)

09h30 Joint meeting with members of the Shoura Council, Committees of Social Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Human Rights and Culture, Information and Youth

16h00 Courtesy call on HRH Crown Prince Abdullah

17h30 Visit to Nahda Association for women

20h00 Visit to campaign tents of candidates for local elections

#### Wednesday 9 February (Riyadh)

10h30 Meeting with the President of the Saudi Journalists' Association

11h15 Meeting with EU ambassadors at Dutch embassy

12h00 Meeting with the Secretary General of the National Dialogue

16h00 Visit to King Abdel Aziz Historical Centre



18h00 Meeting with Prince Abdallah Ben Turki

#### **Thursday 10 February**

10h30 Visit to various polling stations

16h00 Press point - hotel Holiday Inn Olaya

20h00 Reception at Dutch Embassy

#### **Friday 11 February**

11h00 Flight SV 1027 from Riyadh

12h40 Arrival Jeddah

##### **Hotel**

*Conference Palace, Jeddah*

*Tel : 966-2-661 2222*

16h00 Tour of old and new Jeddah

20h30 Dinner hosted by Mr Fahed Almugairin

#### **Saturday 12 February**

10h00 Meeting with the Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce and businessmen and -women

13h30 Lunch

15h00 Meeting with Editor-in-Chief Mr Khaled Al-Maena, Arab News, and journalists

18h00 Meeting with Prince Mohammed Ben Faisal

20h30 Dinner hosted by Mr Ghassan AlSulaiman, Vice-Chairman of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce

#### **Sunday 13 February**

Individual departures of members to Europe

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#### Members (8)

	<u>Group</u>	<u>Country</u>
Ms Lilli GRUBER, Chair	PES	Italy
Mr Thomas PFLUEGER, 1st vice-chair	GUE	Germany
Mr John ATTARD-MONTALTO	PES	Malta
Mr Sajjad Haider KARIM	ALDE	United Kingdom
Mr Joost LAGENDIJK	Verts/Ale	The Netherlands
Mr Patrick LOUIS	IND-DEM	France
Mr John PURVIS	EPP-ED	United Kingdom
Ms Marie-Line REYNAUD	PES	France

PPE-DE	Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats
PSE	Group of the Party of European Socialists
ALDE	Group of the Alliance of Democrats and Liberals of Europe
Verts/ALE	Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance
GUE/NGL	Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left
IND/DEM	Independence and Democracy Group

#### DG III Staff (2)

Mr Hans-Hermann KRAUS	Administrator
Ms Morag DONALDSON	Administrative assistant

#### Political group staff (1)

Mr Ton BEUMER	Advisor, PES Group
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#### Interpreters (4)

Mr Laurent BERNHARD	French-English
Mme Melpomeni KONSTANTINIDI	French-Arabic-French
Mme Mouna MRAD	English-Arabic-English
Mr Mounir EL-KHUDRI	Arabic-English-Arabic

News - 10/02/2005

### **EP delegation welcomes Saudi poll but insists on inclusion of women**

At the invitation of the Maglis Al-Shoura (consultative council), an eight-strong delegation from the European Parliament, led by Italian MEP Lilli Gruber, is visiting Riyadh and Jeddah this week, 7 to 11 February 2005, during the first ever nationwide local elections in Saudi Arabia.

The delegation met His Royal Highness Crown Prince Abdullah, the Secretary General of the national dialogue, women's representatives, candidates for the local elections as well as holding a "very productive" three-hour dialogue with members of the Maglis Al-Shoura on Tuesday 8 February.

The delegation visited campaign activities in the Riyadh region as well as a number of polling stations on election day, Thursday 10 February.

Members concluded that the local elections were a small but significant step towards social and political reform. At the same time, the delegation regretted the exclusion of women from the poll and expressed its solidarity with those Saudis who look forward to the inclusion of all citizens in the electoral process.

In contacts with the Government, the members of the Consultative Council and other representatives, the delegation underlined the importance of countering terrorism and fundamentalism whilst safeguarding basic human rights and civil liberties.

The delegation also discussed the state of EU-Saudi relations and found these required substantial strengthening in order to meet adequately such common challenges as peace, stability, economic cooperation and globalisation, political reform and above all, the need to remove the root causes of terrorism.

It was especially stressed that the EU and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia should support each other's efforts in achieving a satisfactory outcome of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The delegation urged the EU institutions to increase considerably their presence in the region and strengthen working relations with Saudi Arabia by an allocation of increased financial and personnel resources to the EU Commission delegation in Riyadh and by planning an early visit to the Kingdom by the EU Commissioner for external affairs and or the EU Council High Representative.