



PRESS STATEMENT

Riyadh, 16 February 2015

Afzal Khan (S&D/ United Kingdom) and Henna Virkkunen (EPP/ Finland), Members of the European Parliament's Delegation for Relations with the Arab Peninsula (DARP), paid a visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from 14-16 February 2015 in the framework of the 12th interparliamentary meeting between the European Parliament and the Majlis Ash-Shura.

"Our visit takes place at a crucial moment and we came here to deliver three key messages", said MEP Afzal Khan, who led the delegation: "First, we wish to deepen dialogue and bilateral cooperation on topics of mutual interest. Second, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council are crucial partners in the prevention and fight against terrorism and extremism and we need to step up our cooperation in this field. Third, we wish to deepen our dialogue on human rights and to contribute to a better understanding between the European Union and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia".

The delegation held meetings with H.H. prince Turki Al-Kabeer, Undersecretary for Multilateral Affairs, Dr. Mohammed Amin Jefri, Vice-Speaker, and other Members of the Shura Council, Mr Abdul Latif Al Zayani, Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Mr Mufleh Al Kahtani, Chairman of the National Society for Human Rights, and representatives of EU Member States. Mrs Virkkunen also visited Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University for women.

Discussions concentrated on the crises in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the need for a global partnership in the fight against terrorism, including closer cooperation with Saudi Arabia and regional organisations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League. The delegation also addressed the problem of rising Islamophobia in Europe and the need to enhance political, economic and cultural cooperation.

According to Afzal Khan, "there is common understanding with our Saudi counterparts that we need a multidimensional approach to fight terrorism and extremism. We need to stop our nationals from travelling to war zones and to put an emphasis on deradicalisation structures and processes for returning foreign fighters. Saudi Arabia has a long experience with this and can share good practices. We also need to address the underlying factors of radicalisation by working on social cohesion, inclusiveness and political, cultural and religious tolerance. Furthermore, we have to take measures to disrupt financial support to terrorist organisations and to counter-balance online incitement. Again, our Arab partners play a key role in this. I also encouraged our Saudi interlocutors in their efforts to discredit Da'esh's ideology publicly and to curb radicalisation and incitement in public places. Saudi Arabia and its neighbouring states also have a central role in giving an alternative vision to that of terrorist groups. At the same time, it is important to ensure that the anti-terrorism measures are proportionate and that they are in line with minimum standards of the protection of human rights."

The delegation also delivered the messages of the European Parliament's resolution of 12 February 2015, calling for the unconditional release of Raif Badawi, Waleed Abu Al-Khair and all other prisoners of conscience. MEPs also addressed the situation of foreign workers, the reform of the sponsorship system and the situation of women.

Mrs Henna Virkkunen stated: "I am very pleased about the appointment of the first 30 women to the Consultative Assembly in 2013. And Princess Nourah University is doing a very good and important job in promoting the role of women through education. I also commend Saudi Arabia for the reforms undertaken to facilitate the integration of women in the labour market and encourage our partners to take further steps. Another important step will be the holding of municipal elections in which women will have the right to vote and to stand as candidates, and I hope that they will take place this year as announced. Moreover, I welcome the fact that Saudi Arabia considers education and research as a national priority and that it invests a considerable amount of its yearly budget in the development of its human resources".

As far as multilateral relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are concerned, the delegation welcomed the establishment of a joint parliamentary committee of the GCC which aims to deepen relations with the European Parliament. The delegation also welcomed the full entry into force of the GCC Customs Union on 1 January 2015 and called for the renewal of the EU-GCC Joint Action Programme and the finalisation of negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement. Discussions also focused on the need to enhance bilateral relations between the EU and Saudi Arabia, complementary to EU-GCC multilateral cooperation, in fields of common interests such as trade, transport, energy, visa facilitation, education, research and inter-cultural as well as inter-religious dialogue.