

Saudi Arabia, its relations with the EU and its role in the Middle East and North Africa

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The European Parliament adopted by 546 votes to 32, with 17 abstentions, a resolution on Saudi Arabia, its relations with the EU and its role in the Middle East and North Africa.

Parliament recalled that Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is an influential political, economic and religious actor in the Middle East and the Islamic world, the world's leading oil producer, and a founder and leading member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and of the G-20 group. It is an important trading partner for the EU. However, the changing political and strategic context in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region necessitates a reassessment of EU-KSA relations.

Parliament stated that KSA needs to ensure the real freedom of religion, particularly regarding public practice and religious minorities, in line with an important role that KSA plays as custodian of the Two Holy Mosques of Islam in Mecca and Medina.

Recognising the interdependence between the EU and KSA in terms of regional stability, relations with the Islamic world, the fate of the transitions in the Arab Spring countries, the Israel-Palestine peace process, the war in Syria, as well as a number of other areas, Parliament underlined that the **geopolitical environment** makes KSA and other GCC member states a focus of security challenges that have regional and global implications. Parliament underlined the European interest in a peaceful and orderly evolution and political reform process in KSA, as a key factor for long-term peace, stability and development in the region.

Parliament called on the KSA to:

- allow its National Human Rights Association to operate with **independence** and to comply with the UN standards on national human rights institutions (the Paris Principles);
- honour its commitments to several human rights instruments, including the Arab Charter on Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention against Torture, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women;
- sign and **ratify the Rome Statute** of the International Criminal Court (ICC);
- improve their Shari'a-based criminal justice system in order to meet the international standards governing procedures for arrest, detention and trials, as well as prisoners' rights;
- **release prisoners of conscience**, to end judicial and extra-judicial harassment of human rights defenders and to speed up the implementation of the new legislation on NGOs, ensuring their registration, freedom to operate and ability to operate legally;
- reform the justice system in order to **eliminate all forms of corporal punishment and the death penalty**;
- ensure that all allegations of torture and other ill-treatment are thoroughly and impartially investigated, that all alleged perpetrators are prosecuted, and that any statement that may have been extracted under torture is not used as evidence in criminal proceedings;
- revoke the male guardianship system;
- outlaw **public executions** bearing in mind that KSA is one of the countries in the world that still practises public executions, amputations and flogging and that these practices constitute a gross violation of a number of international human rights instruments to which KSA is a party;
- **eliminate all restrictions on women's human rights**, freedom of movement, health, education, marriage, employment opportunities, legal personality and representation in judicial processes, and

all forms of discrimination against women in family law and in private and public life in order to promote their participation in the economic, social, cultural, civic and political spheres;

- stop exerting pressure on those who campaign for the right of women to drive;
- review and reform women's education in order to increase their economic participation;
- stop the recent violent attacks against migrant workers and to release the thousands who have been arrested and are being kept in makeshift centres, reportedly often without adequate shelter or medical attention.

Moreover, the EU institutions are urged to **increase their presence in the region** and to strengthen working relations with KSA, by increasing resources to the Delegation in Riyadh and by planning regular visits to the Kingdom, namely by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy;

Financing and supporting terrorism: Parliament is concerned that some of the KSA's citizens and organisations provide financial and political support for some religious and political groups notably in North Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and in particular in South Asia (namely Pakistan and Afghanistan), Chechnya and Dagestan, which may result in reinforcing fundamentalist and obscurantist forces that undermine efforts to nurture democratic governance and oppose the participation of women in public life.

It called on the KSA authorities to work with the EU and internationally to stop Salafi movements supporting the anti-state activities of the military rebels in Mali, which are leading to the destabilisation of the entire region.

Syrian issue: Parliament stressed that KSA is a key member of the 'Friends of Syria Group' and called KSA to contribute to a peaceful, inclusive solution to the Syrian conflict notably through support for the Geneva II talks, without preconditions.

It also called for:

- more active support and the provision of all possible humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people affected by the Syrian civil war;
- stop any financial, military and political support of extremist groups.

Although Parliament shared some of the concerns expressed by KSA on the Syria issue, it urged the government to actively and constructively engage with the international community. It welcomed in this context notably the agreement between the United States and Russia on ridding Syria of chemical weapons while avoiding a military confrontation.