



NATO Parliamentary Assembly

SUB-COMMITTEE ON
NATO PARTNERSHIPS

MISSION REPORT

RIYADH, SAUDI ARABIA

16-18 APRIL 2018

I. SAUDI ARABIA FACES DUAL CHALLENGE OF ENGAGING IN AMBITIOUS REFORMS AND COPING WITH A PRECARIOUS REGIONAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

1. Led by Metin Lutfi Baydar (Turkey), Chairperson, the Sub-Committee on NATO Partnerships (PCNP) visited Saudi Arabia from 16 to 18 April 2018. The purpose of this fact-finding visit was to learn about the country's ambitious reform programme and to obtain Saudi views on the security situation on the Arabian Peninsula and in the Gulf. The eight parliamentarians from four NATO member countries met with senior Saudi officials, including the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and of the Interior, as well as members of the *Majlis al-Shura*, senior representatives of the Gulf Cooperation Council and other host country officials.

II. VISION 2030

2. During the visit host country interlocutors repeatedly emphasised the importance of "Vision 2030", the ambitious programme designed to reduce Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil revenues and promote wide-ranging economic and social change. Members of the *Majlis al-Shura* were optimistic that "Vision 2030" will lead to increased transparency and accountability and bring government performance to a higher standard. Moreover, the initiative, which has broad public support, will increase participation of women and the younger population, who are drivers of change, the delegation heard. In contrast to previous reforms which were announced when energy prices were low but only pursued half-heartedly, the Saudi leadership, particularly Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, now seems determined to see the reforms through, diplomatic observers commented. "Vision 2030" is, at this point, about the modernisation and normalisation of the country; it is not about democratisation, as a diplomatic observer commented. That said, the initiative also has the potential to promote values and deserves support by Allied countries, the delegation learned. This is relevant as even a resource-rich country like Saudi Arabia is unable to implement such a comprehensive initiative by itself. Therefore, Saudi Arabia is reaching out to international – particularly Western – investors, the delegation was informed.

3. More generally, "Vision 2030" is part and parcel of Saudi Arabia's political agenda which also includes strengthening the military, re-evaluating the country's alliances and countervailing Iranian influence in the region. Diplomatic observers noted that "Vision 2030" can go a long way to modernise the country, though the implementation of the initiative will require considerable effort at a time when Saudi Arabia also faces important security challenges.

III. KEY SECURITY CONCERNS FOR SAUDI ARABIA: IRAN AND THE THREAT POSED BY TERRORIST GROUPS

4. Saudi Arabia's key security concerns remain Iran and the continuing challenge of terrorism.

5. With regard to Iran, host country interlocutors consider the regime in Tehran as the primary source of instability in, and beyond, the region. Iran is actively working to destabilise Bahrain, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen either directly with its own forces or through proxies like Hezbollah, the delegation heard. Noting that the United States and Europe had not sufficiently appreciated the threat from Iran in the past, government representatives expressed deep concern about the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – the nuclear deal with Iran. They commented that the agreement will not deter Iran from developing its nuclear capacities but will only benefit Tehran financially and embolden it to continue meddling in the affairs of its neighbours, either directly or through proxies. The Foreign Minister, Mr Adel al-Jubeir, suggested that it is possible to fix the agreement by addressing the sunset provision and by expanding the scope of the inspection regime. In this context he proposed that the International Atomic Energy Organisation (IAEO) could also inspect undeclared nuclear sites. Moreover, Iran must be held accountable for supporting terrorism

and for its violations of the Ballistic Missile regime, the delegation heard. One diplomatic observer suggested that the proliferation of Iranian ballistic missiles in the region (including to the Houthis) is a major threat to the stability of the region.

6. Concerning the continuing challenge posed by terrorist organisations, the delegates recognised Saudi Arabia's pivotal role and contribution to the security of the Gulf region and to the global fight against terrorism. Saudi interlocutors recognised that the Kingdom had faced serious issues in the past, particularly regarding the dissemination of radical thought that facilitated recruitment for terrorist groups. However, they underlined that the authorities now tackle this challenge on various levels, including in the media, financially, and on the ideological front. The Kingdom now pursues a "zero tolerance" policy towards terrorist groups and remains very committed to countering terrorism in any form, Saudi officials emphasised. A key message of host country interlocutors was that there is no relationship between Islam and terrorism.

IV. THE WAR IN YEMEN

7. The civil war in Yemen was also high on the agenda during the exchanges. Mr al-Jubeir stressed that Yemen is a war Saudi Arabia did not want but which was imposed on it by the Houthi insurgents. Host country interlocutors underlined that Saudi Arabia, supported by the other partners of the coalition, is helping the legitimate government of Yemen to re-establish control over the country. This has been largely successful, as the legitimate Yemeni government now controls more than 80% of the territory, the delegation was informed.

8. However, while the coalition has made progress in Yemen, it has lost the communications battle, the Foreign Minister noted. In this context Saudi officials suggested that human rights violations by Houthi insurgents have not received adequate attention in the international media while the criticism of coalition forces for unintended civilian casualties has been misrepresented and/or exaggerated. Major General Fayyadh al-Ruwaili, Chief of Staff of the Saudi Armed Forces, stressed that the forces of the coalition are doing their best to avoid civilian casualties. Any harm to civilians (and damage to property) that occurred was unintended and when mistakes were made, they were investigated, delegates were told. Government representatives also reminded the delegation that Saudi Arabia is also providing considerable humanitarian relief and stressed that the Saudi-led coalition is doing everything to alleviate the plight of the Yemeni people. Host country interlocutors agreed that a solution to the civil war in Yemen cannot be achieved through military means and that a political solution, which will obviously also include the Houthis, is necessary. They were guardedly optimistic that a political settlement is within reach, as the Houthis are now militarily exposed. One official interlocutor cautioned, however, that it is not clear if the Houthis will agree to a political settlement as they may want to continue exploiting the areas they control. Another official noted that Iran is hampering efforts to reach a political settlement in Yemen. Host country officials emphasised that the last thing Saudi Arabia could accept is to have the equivalent of a Lebanese Hezbollah dominating Yemen, nor would it want Yemen to become a lawless region like Somalia.

V. PROLIFERATION OF BALLISTIC MISSILES

9. The proliferation of ballistic missiles, allegedly provided to the Houthis by Iran, is seen as an important factor that destabilises the region. The ballistic missile threat poses a considerable problem for the Kingdom, the delegation learned. Host country officials stressed that the vast majority of ballistic missiles fired from Yemen were shot down. One diplomatic observer cautioned, however, that there is a risk that Houthi missile attacks could claim more victims in the future – which would put additional pressure to act on the Saudi government. The situation would escalate further if commercial shipping in the Red Sea came under ballistic missile attack, the delegates learned.

VI. SYRIA

10. Other issues that were addressed during the visit included the situation in Syria, the diplomatic crisis with Qatar, and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. On Syria, Prince Turki bin Faisal commented that the world appears “criminally incapable” of taking any action to end this suffering. The inability to enforce a ceasefire continues to be a major challenge, he explained. Every time a ceasefire has been announced, there has been no mechanism to enforce it – which has been a major flaw in all negotiations this far. The Syrian people obviously do not want Assad, but the world community seems to tell them that they have to live with him. A major mistake of the international community at the beginning of the Syrian crisis was to not provide the opposition with military equipment and support – which has led to opposition forces becoming increasingly radicalised, he noted. Another official stressed that the brutal actions of the Assad regime against the Syrian population make it imperative to remove the regime. It is also important to remove the Iranian militia from Syria and give the country back to the Syrians.

VII. MISCELLANEOUS ISSUES

11. Host country officials were hopeful that the diplomatic crisis between, on the one hand, Saudi Arabia and other states and, on the other, Qatar can be overcome soon; the mechanism is there, NATO parliamentarians were informed. So far, the crisis has not negatively impacted the Gulf Cooperation Council, delegates heard.

12. As to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the delegation heard that the decision by the Trump administration to move the US embassy to Jerusalem enflamed the Muslim world and has set back a possible solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict tremendously. It is now important to find a way to revive the talks between Israel and Palestine, the delegation heard. The two-state solution is the only way forward; the existence of Israel is a fact, and so is the existence of Palestine, host country officials stressed.

13. The delegation also received comprehensive briefings on the implications of the changing energy landscape for regional and global energy security at the International Energy Forum (IEF) and on the role of the IEF. The extensive humanitarian assistance that Saudi Arabia provides to many countries and regions in the world was the main topic during the discussions at the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre. The programme concluded with a visit to the Headquarters of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), where General Raheel Sharif, Commander-in-Chief of the IMCTC, briefed the delegation about the structure and activities of the IMCTC.