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NATO Parliamentary Assembly

MEDITERRANEAN SPECIAL GROUP

VISIT TO BAHRAIN AND KUWAIT

VISIT REPORT

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1. The annual country visit of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly's Mediterranean Special Group (GSM) took place in Bahrain and Kuwait between March 28 and April 1. A Group of some 20 European and North American parliamentarians met fellow legislators as well as senior government officials from the two Gulf countries. Discussions focused on common security concerns in the Gulf and the Middle East, economic and political developments in the region and relations with NATO in the context of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). Meetings with civil society and media representatives were also held in both countries. As one of the most important outcomes of the visit, parliamentarians from Bahrain and Kuwait were invited to participate as observers in selected NATO PA activities.

I. THE ISTANBUL COOPERATION INITIATIVE (ICI)

2. Officials from both countries had a very positive evaluation of the ICI and the role of NATO in the Gulf region. The Bahraini Minister of Defence, **General Sheikh Khalifa bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa**, regarded the ICI as a good step in the right direction, but also said that further efforts would be needed. The ICI has allowed Bahrain to participate in more than 80 NATO activities so far, the Minister said.

3. The Bahraini Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, **Dr Nizar al-Baharna**, expressed a similar appreciation for the ICI. He requested cooperation with NATO in disaster management, especially in nuclear disaster management and environmental issues. According to him, Bahrain could cooperate in many fields with NATO, e.g. maritime security, terrorism, border security and information sharing.

4. In Kuwait, the Vice-Chairman of the National Security Bureau, **Sheikh Thamer Ali Al-Sabah**, regarded the ICI as a very valuable and helpful tool for Kuwait. He stressed that Kuwait was the first country to join the ICI. He also expressed the wish that Kuwaiti scholars could participate in NATO Defense College activities in Rome. However, he expressed his unease at the idea that the NATO Training Cooperation Initiative, launched at the Riga Summit in 2006, may include the development of a common training facility or centre for Mediterranean Dialogue and ICI countries. Kuwaiti officials would prefer that the two programmes remain separate for the time being.

5. When asked about the popular opinion about the ICI, **Dr Haila Al-Mekaimi**, Head of the Euro-Gulf Research Unit and Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science at the University of Kuwait, replied that there were conspiracy theories around the ICI in the beginning, but that confidence-building measures have taken place, e.g. the visit of Kuwaiti delegations to Brussels, which included groups considered as Islamists in Kuwait. According to her, Kuwait wants to diversify its security partners and the Europeans would be a good choice because of their knowledge of and long experience in the Gulf region.

II. IRAQ

6. Discussions among the parliamentarians often focused on the situation in Iraq. Several members of parliament in both Bahrain and Kuwait were keen to highlight US and British "mistakes" in handling the aftermath of the conflict that toppled Saddam Hussein.

7. In Kuwait, Al-Khorafi, said – out of friendship with the Americans, he stressed – that the US committed some major mistakes in Iraq and did not listen enough to Kuwaiti advice, for example to listen to the British who have more experience in the region. According to him, other mistakes

were the dismantling of the Iraqi police and the army and that the US put people into positions, jobs and regions in which they had no expertise.

8. He expressed his hope that the US would not leave Iraq without a proper disengagement program now; otherwise the country would end up in civil war. Finally, he expressed the hope that Europeans would play a larger role in finding a solution to the Iraq issue in the future.

9. When asked to offer advice, Kuwaitis in particular lamented the fact that the US administration had so far failed to follow some of the main recommendations of the Iraqi Study Group, notably to open a dialogue with Syria and Iran. There was, however, general consensus both in Bahrain, Kuwait and among the NATO PA members, that the partition of Iraq should be avoided and the country's unity preserved. Some Kuwaiti parliamentarians even called for another increase in US troops in order to avoid further bloodshed. In several meetings the fear of a sectarian strife in Iraq and the danger of a spill over effect into neighbouring countries was expressed.

III. IRAN

10. Officials from both Bahrain and Kuwait expressed serious concerns about the deterioration of relations between Western countries and Tehran in the recent past.

11. There were, however, different opinions in both Bahrain and Kuwait whether Iran and its assumed struggle for nuclear weapons are seen as a regional threat. Most Bahrainis and Kuwaitis agreed that Iran should not be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons, but they also reiterated the traditionally good relations between their countries and Iran, especially in Bahrain. They expressed concern for the presence of nuclear weapons in the Middle East (including with regards to Israel), but felt unable of influencing Tehran's decisions.

12. In Bahrain, **Jameel Ali Al-Matrook**, member of the Finance and Economy Committee of the Shura Council, stressed that Bahrain has always had good trade relations with Iran. Although Bahrain would like to see a non-nuclear Iran, like most other GCC countries, it would not want to get involved much in exercising pressure on Iran. Their internal developments should be respected. Bahraini MP Latifa Mohammed Al-Qaud expressed a similar view.

13. Minister Al-Baharna said that Iran has not declared that it is developing nuclear weapons and has signed the NPT and said that it would cooperate with inspectors.

14. The Bahraini Minister of Defence, however, regarded the current Iranian regime as a threat to stability in the region and even as a threat to world peace. According to him, developments in Iran have a direct effect on Gulf security, maritime security and oil prices. He mentioned that the GCC countries have an ongoing and working dialogue with Iran, and Bahrain has always encouraged Iran to be transparent about its nuclear issues and to cooperate with the IAEA. A military intervention should only be a last resort; there would be many options before that.

15. In Kuwait opinions on Iranian developments were as diverse as in Bahrain. Ambassador Laing said that the Iranian policy would very difficult to analyse, that Kuwait would be cautious, but would not necessarily see Iran as a hostile country or a direct threat. Dr Al-Mekaimi mentioned that in her country there was widespread belief that many in Iran would actually want to adopt a more friendly attitude towards the West.

16. Other Kuwaitis clearly warned of the dangers of potential Iranian nuclear weapons. The Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the National Assembly warned that many in the

West were currently underestimating Iran's influence over the whole region. He warned of the danger of Iran by highlighting its large oil revenues and its support for the Hezbollah last summer in Lebanon. According to him, Hezbollah (and thus Iran) almost defeated Israel during the 2006 war.

17. Sheikh Al-Sabah also mentioned that Iran is now interfering in Iraq and in Lebanon and he used the alliance between Ahmadinejad and Chavez as an example to understand how the Iranian government thinks and acts. But he strongly warned Western colleagues against military strikes against Iran. His major concerns were Iranian retaliations via sleeping Islamist cells in Kuwait, as well as ecological consequences for the Gulf if such strikes were to hit nuclear facilities. Kuwait does not want Iran to have nuclear weapons, and is already afraid that existing Iranian missiles could reach Kuwait.

18. While NATO parliamentarians voiced their profound anxiety at the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran, some legislators from the two Gulf countries were apparently more worried about an extreme radioactive release from the Bushehr Iranian civilian power plant—situated near the Northern shore of the Gulf—as a result of a military strike against Iran or a nuclear accident. Because both countries' economies depend heavily on the Gulf, e.g. for food supplies, they also expressed concerns about the possible ecological consequences of military action against Iran, as well as a fear of trade disruption. The Kuwaiti Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the National Assembly likened a potential Bushehr fallout to the European experience with Chernobyl. Ahmad Ibrahim Bahzad, a member of the Committee for Foreign Affairs, Defense and National Security of the Shura Council in Bahrain mentioned that he had already raised this issue when he participated in the ICI meeting in Istanbul in 2004.

19. On the Bahraini side it was proposed that the whole Middle East, including Iran and in particular Israel, should become a nuclear free zone. This was expressed by **Abdulrahman Muhammad Jamsheer**, President of the Committee for Foreign Affairs, Defense and National Security of the Shura Council, and by Sheikh al-Baharna, who also added that Iran had voluntarily signed the NPT and the Additional Protocol, while Israel has not. Iran is surrounded by a nuclear Pakistan, a nuclear India, Afghanistan and Russia and, according to them, it might find it reassuring to possess nuclear weapons. A nuclear free Broader Middle East region is thus seen as a possible solution to the current Iranian aggressive stance.

20. Another solution that was reiterated both in Bahrain and Kuwait was a direct dialogue between the US and Iranian governments. In the Bahraini Foreign Ministry it was explained that Iran has felt isolated and ignored for a long time, while it actually saw itself and as an important player in the region and beyond. Sheikh Al-Baharna predicted that Teheran would keep resisting Western efforts, until an important player sat down at the same table with Iran and engaged it in serious negotiations.

21. In Kuwait, Sheikh Al-Khorafi also suggested direct talks between the US and Iran as a solution. He also said that the Arab world would partly side with Iran on this issue, not so much because Iran would be right, but because it would be considered as unfair to speak about Iran and its nuclear weapons but not about Israel.

IV. ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

22. In most meetings the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was extensively discussed. The prevailing opinion on all sides was that this is the most important conflict in the region and that its solution might help solve many other problems of the region. The Bahraini and Kuwaiti speakers who

addressed this topic had a rather negative view about the position of Israel and partly also the role of the US and the West in the conflict.

23. In Bahrain, the meeting with the more outspoken and diverse Council of Representatives led to a very frank exchange of opinions. **Adel A. Rahman Al-Moawda**, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs, Defence and National Security Committee, blamed both NATO and the West in general for not solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He doubted the Israeli need for security and stressed instead that Palestinian land and the Middle East region as a whole lacked security as a consequence of Western actions.

24. **Khalil Ebrahim Al-Marzooq**, Chairman of the Legislative Committee, mentioned that there was constant Israeli violence against the Palestinians and daily abuse of human rights in the occupied territories. He believed that if there was a serious approach from the West to contain the Israeli violence, many issues could be resolved.

25. **Jalal Fairooz Ghuloom**, member of the Foreign Affairs, Defence and National Security Committee, elaborated that the main concern for Bahrain and most countries in the region would be peace, democracy and human rights. But the main problem was Israel, which forced Bahrain to spend a large percentage of its budget on defence. He also stated that NATO would never get involved in a solution for the conflict because the US actually controls the Alliance. NATO PA members strongly rejected this view, clarifying that Alliance decisions are taken unanimously by its 26 members.

26. The continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was also linked to terrorism. Mr Jamsheer stated that without the conflict that has lasted for so many decades now terrorism would not exist. Sheikh Al-Khorafi also believed that if there was a just and lasting solution to this conflict, certain other problems including terrorism in the region would automatically be solved. He saw, for example, the Israeli destruction of Palestinian houses as one of the driving factors behind terrorism.

27. As a reply, **Jean-Michel Boucheron**, (France) Chairman of the Mediterranean Special Group, expressed his solidarity with the Palestinian cause and declared that he supported the establishment of a Palestinian state. But he also stressed that the right of the Israeli people to live in peace and security cannot be denied. He suggested that the Arab side should take the first step to recognize Israel and to acknowledge its need for security because this might start a peace logic. **Jan Petersen** (Norway) also pointed out that Middle Eastern and Gulf countries should help more in all the conflicts discussed. He suggested that both the Israeli and the Arab side should rather concentrate on what they themselves could contribute to the solution of the conflict instead of demanding this from the other side all the time. Similarly, **José Lello** (Portugal), President of the NATO PA, stressed that the Arab side, including the Gulf States, should contribute more initiatives and ideas to a solution of the conflict in order to build mutual confidence.

28. The Arab Peace Initiative, a Saudi-inspired peace plan adopted by the Arab summit in Beirut in 2002 that envisages a comprehensive peace between the Arab nations and Israel, based on the Jewish state retreat to the pre-1967 borders in exchange for full Arab recognition, and that was revived recently in Riyadh, was generally supported both in Bahrain and in Kuwait.

V. REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

29. Both Bahraini and Kuwaiti officials stressed the importance of good relations between the member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Western countries.

30. In Bahrain, **Khalid Hussain Al-Masqati**, President of the Finance and Economy Committee of the Shura Council, pointed out that Bahrain has close links with Saudi Arabia, especially through the causeway, and that Saudi Arabia has helped Bahrain a lot in the past. Bahrain has close links with Qatar as well and only recently has an agreement between Bahrain and Qatar for a causeway linking the two countries been signed. It was also mentioned that Bahrain is close to signing a trade agreement with the European Union and that, unfortunately, the EU is imposing heavy taxes on petroleum products.

31. General Sheikh Khalifa bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa described Bahrain's collective defence system with the GCC and the US. He mentioned that Bahrain would have capable security forces and could deal with internal and external threats. Nevertheless any help from NATO countries would be welcome. According to him, this is one of the main reasons why Bahrain joined the ICI and why it should be stepped up. **Latifa Mohammed al-Qaud**, the first woman elected to the Bahraini Parliament (Council of Representatives, Majlis al-Nuwab) emphasized the importance of the bilateral relations between Bahrain and the US. According to her, this relationship, however, should not be used to "blackmail" Bahrain.

32. During a roundtable in Kuwait, **British Ambassador Stuart Laing** described the Kuwaiti relations with the US as a "well-working symbiosis". While Kuwait heavily relies on US aid, especially military aid, the US also needs Kuwait, e.g. as a base for transport of personnel and supplies to Iraq.

33. **Jassem Mohammed Al-Khorafi**, the Speaker of the Kuwaiti National Assembly, expressed a special interest in hearing European political opinions on recent issues because, until now, Kuwait would have been exposed mainly to American opinions. He hoped that Europe could express a different point of view that could be a compromise for regional problems.

The NATO PA delegation was also informed by Dr Al-Mekaimi about the new Euro-Gulf Research Unit at the University of Kuwait that offers a study programme for Western students and organizes events and conferences of mutual interest.

VI. DOMESTIC DEVELOPMENTS IN BAHRAIN AND KUWAIT

34. NATO PA members were pleased to witness the vitality of democratic institutions in both countries where elected assemblies offer a real counterbalance to the executive branches.

35. In Bahrain, the discussions with parliamentarians, officials from the executive branch, civil society representatives, academics and journalists focused on the role of the Shura Council, economic and social developments, defence, the media and human rights. The Shura Council consists of 39 members appointed by the Emir. Its Finance and Economy Committee Chairman, Mr Al-Masqati, gave a detailed explanation of the Shura's role in the lawmaking process. While the elected members of the Council of Representatives are free to draft decisions and law proposals, the final decision whether a law would be promulgated rests with the appointed Shura Council, who could reject to forward it to the Emir. The Shura Council has no power, however, in the appointment of ministers and the cabinet. When asked by NATO PA members about how the members of the Shura Council are chosen by the Emir, Shura member Al-Matrook replied that they are chosen based on their qualifications and personality and that they could be replaced every four years. He stressed that the current Shura Council represented the whole Bahraini society and included different religious groups, Jews, Persian Arabs and other minorities, including one Christian woman. He preferred this appointed system to elected parliamentarians because one could not be sure in the case of elected politicians that they would represent the will of the people after being elected.

36. Concerning economic developments in Bahrain, a generally positive outlook prevailed. Mr Al-Masqati stressed that Bahrain was hosting more than 300 banks and currently constructing the Bahrain Financial Harbour, a modern financial centre offering a number of high-level international services. To tackle the low but existing unemployment, a reform of the Bahraini labour market is currently taking place, complemented by a reform of the education system. It was also mentioned that Bahrain is currently trying to diversify its economy away from complete oil dependency towards new resources such as tourism and industry. There are proposals for a single currency to be introduced in the GCC countries by 2010. A positive economic development is also expected from the causeway between Qatar and Bahrain that is about to be built. The NATO PA delegation also had the chance to be briefed by a representative of the UN Industrial Development Organisation in Bahrain about their programmes to promote investments in Bahrain and set up entrepreneurship networks etc. The largest Islamic investment Bank, the Kuwait Finance House, currently invests US\$ 10 billion annually in Bahrain.

37. Defence and security issues were discussed with the Bahraini Minister of Defence. When asked about the threats for Bahraini security, he stressed that Bahrain is facing threats similar to those to European states, i.e. international terrorism, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and regional threats such as Iran. According to him, Bahrain is working both collectively through the GCC and individually with NATO member countries to tackle these issues. He also mentioned that Bahrain is dealing with energy, especially oil security. When asked about the parliamentary oversight of the army, he replied that the annual military budget is controlled by the parliament.

38. During an evening meeting the delegation had the chance to discuss current media developments and political issues with two outspoken Bahraini journalists. **Reem Khalifa**, Senior Editor for Diplomatic Affairs for Al-Wasat newspaper, briefed the group on the last elections, the "Bandargate Scandal" and how the Bahraini media would be prevented from reporting on it ("Bandargate Scandal" refers to an alleged political conspiracy by some government officials to deal with sectarian strife and marginalize the majority Shia community). She also mentioned that Bahraini journalists still suffer from the government interfering in their reporting, especially since the recent Shia clashes started, in which the government would fire rubber bullets and tear gas at demonstrators. In her opinion, the government is trying to obstruct the freedom of press and opinion as much as possible. Critical opinions were also expressed by **Mohammed Fadhel** from Al-Waqt newspaper. He called Bahrain an "unhealthy environment" and mentioned that Bahraini journalists are currently testing the limits of freedom of press. On a positive note, Fadhel mentioned that a journalist union was finally authorized and is currently under formation. Despite all their criticism, both Ms Khalifa and Mr Fadhel agreed that both Bahrain and Kuwait probably have the freest press and media landscape in the Gulf region.

39. During the same session, the NATO PA parliamentarians were also briefed on the state of human rights in Bahrain, mainly through a discussion with **Abdulla Alderazi**, the Deputy General Secretary of the Bahrain Human Rights Society. Mr Alderazi gave an overview of the human rights situation in Bahrain and its violations that involve especially the treatment of foreign workers in Bahrain that do not have individual or political rights, but also discrimination because of sexual orientation.

40. In Kuwait, the discussions with parliamentarians, officials from the executive branch, civil society representatives, academics, Western ambassadors and journalists focused on recent political developments in Kuwait, the economic and social situation and the media.

41. Recent political developments were outlined by Ambassador Laing. He explained that Kuwait's foreign policy would be strongly influenced by its relations with its three neighbours, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran, and that all of these three had proven to be sources of instability in the recent past. He also mentioned that the Iraqi occupation and liberation in 1990/91 would feature strongly in the Kuwaiti consciousness. While the physical damage has been more or less repaired,

many Kuwaitis feared until 2003 that Iraq could invade again. Only since the fall of Saddam has this feeling disappeared and the resulting relaxation been reflected in an increase in the back-investment to Kuwait from abroad. According to him, Kuwait is today mostly afraid of refugees from Iraq and thus Kuwaiti border security is an important issue. As a recent domestic development, he mentioned that the parliament got into conflict with the government over the “grilling” of one minister that lasted for ten hours. The whole cabinet resigned as a reaction, a new democratic vote followed, and the same Prime Minister was installed again. Of the new cabinet, two ministers are elected members of the National Assembly and there are now also two Shiites, two women and two to three Islamists in the “carefully calibrated” government to avoid further rivalries over the cabinet. Ambassador Laing also mentioned that he has not observed –like in most other states in the region- a sharp difference between a pro-Western government and an anti-Western population. Except for some Islamists, most Kuwaitis have feelings of gratitude towards the West, which they think has already ‘rescued’ them three times in the past.

42. With regard to the economic and social situation, Sheikh al-Khorafi said that economic links between Europe and the Gulf had been growing in the past and would continue to grow even more. When asked in particular about Eastern Europe, Sheikh al-Khorafi replied that Kuwait has started to invest all over the world and if the idea was carried forward, Central and Eastern European countries could be a place for Kuwaiti investments. It was also mentioned that the GCC countries have been waiting for a EU Free Trade Agreement since 1988 and that the recent visit of Angela Merkel instilled hope that it would be concluded soon.

43. When asked about women in Kuwait and their situation, Ms al-Mekaimi replied that the situation would not be so bad in the Gulf States and is improving for good. According to her, the female participation in the last elections had an influence on the outcome. Kuwaiti women in general are rather affluent and have an advanced level of education. According to Ms al-Mekaimi, this actually delayed their right to vote, because they were already engaged and active in politics before. She also mentioned the existence of female NGOs dealing with domestic violence, that there is a female Kuwaiti ambassador to the UN and that most Kuwaiti women hold at least a BA university degree.

44. The media situation in Kuwait was described as generally good. **Eman Al-Awadhi**, Assistant Editor with the state Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), briefed the group on the media landscape in Kuwait. She explained that every newspaper has different tendencies but also that the five main newspapers all tend to agree on certain foreign policy issues, as well as on the necessity to promote democracy, security and to keep good relations with the US. The only minorities issue, however, that are discussed in Kuwaiti newspapers are the “Bidoon” issue referring to those people living in Kuwait without any citizenship. When asked about freedom of the media, Ms Awadhi replied that censorship applies only to Internet pornography, but otherwise media are free.

45. During this successful visit to Bahrain and Kuwait the group also had the opportunity to visit the National Museum of Bahrain, as well as the Scientific Center and oil installations in Kuwait.
