



**PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY
OF
THE UNION FOR THE
MEDITERRANEAN**



Committee on Political Affairs, Security and Human Rights

MEETING
Thursday, 27 January 2011
10.30 a.m. - 6 p.m.
Room ASP 1E2
European Parliament
Brussels

MINUTES

The meeting was chaired by Tokia Saïfi (EP).

1. Adoption of draft agenda (AP 100.778)

Mr Saad (Egypt) objected strongly to the title of item 4, 'Exchange of views on the rise of violence against religious communities in the Middle East and on politically addressing religious intolerance'. After a debate, a compromise was reached and the agenda was adopted with item 4 renamed 'Exchange of views on the situation of religious communities in the Mediterranean'.

2. Approval of minutes of meeting of 30 September 2010 (AP 100.777)

The minutes were approved.

3. Chair's announcements

The Chair said that the events in Tunisia had sent a shock wave throughout the entire region. She noted a common malaise among the populations despite the countries being in different situations: 'The Committee on Political Affairs must take the people's aspirations on board and determine the best way of responding to them'.

She stated that the March plenary should also look at this issue. As it stood, the plenary agenda contained four items:

- a progress report on the UfM
- the immigration/integration problem
- maritime security
- transforming FEMIP into a bank for the Mediterranean

The Chair also felt that the developments in Lebanon, where the balance of power had altered radically after the fall of the Hariri Government, warranted special attention before the plenary. She was sorry that the Lebanese member, Mr Jaber, who could have informed the Committee of the latest developments, had been unable to attend the meeting.



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4. Exchange of views on the situation of religious communities in the Mediterranean in the presence of

- **H. E. Raouf Saad, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the People's Assembly of Egypt**
- **Fleur Brading, Advocacy Officer for the Middle East and North Africa, Christian Solidarity Worldwide**

The Chair stressed the continued emphasis that the Committee placed on intercultural dialogue. Violence in the name of religion poisoned societies. She referred to the resolution on violence against religious communities adopted by the European Parliament on 20 January and to the Declaration of the Bureau of the PA-UfM adopted in Rome on 21 January in response to the recent upsurge in violence.

Mr Saad emphasised the predominant role played by religion in the southern Mediterranean. He made the distinction between the official government policies that criminalised all discriminatory behaviour and the actual practices in society. Egypt's Christians should demand more attention and better access to key posts. He explained that the Egyptian Government was focusing on education and removing from all schoolbooks any elements that might fuel fanaticism. Those responsible for the recent attack in Alexandria were seeking to sow dissension. He noted that the EP resolution of 20 January had welcomed the reaction of the Egyptian authorities. Mr Saad was concerned about the growth of Islamophobia in Europe. He called on the governments to ensure greater respect for immigrants' traditions and on immigrants to obey the laws in their host countries. He also referred to the adoption of an action plan for the Mediterranean by the Alliance of Civilisations, at the instigation of President Mubarak.

Mrs Brading noted that fundamentalism was growing in the region. She cited the series of recent attacks on the Coptic communities in Egypt. She explained the collective reprisal mechanisms used in Egypt and called for the perpetrators to be brought to justice. She welcomed the EP resolution of 20 January 2011.

According to Mr Aferiat (Morocco), it was important to distinguish between the ideological differences between religions and the differences based on social situations. Fundamental rights and freedom of religion were respected in Morocco.

Mrs Daği (Turkey) highlighted the Turkish Government's efforts to promote religious pluralism and condemned all forms of violence.

Mrs Badran (Jordan) suggested that this topic be raised at future meetings.

According to Mr Sanduka (Palestine), the exploitation of religion for political gain was at the heart of a global problem. He felt that Europe's colonial policy had played a part in the current divisions in the Arab world.

Mr Hadjinicolaou (Cyprus) called for respect between religions and dialogue.



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Mr Vella (Malta) hoped that the Mediterranean governments would come together to promote tolerance. He called on the southern countries to ensure the same protection and the same rights as Europe, including for atheists.

Mr Blanchart (Belgium) called for respect for freedom of thought. Violence could be brought to an end through education, which should encompass more religions in order to give people a choice. He also called for severe sanctions for all acts of intolerance or terrorism.

Mr Schennach (Austria) agreed with Mr Blanchart that respect had to be instilled through education and stressed the importance of ensuring protection for all under the law.

Mr Triantaphyllides (EP) called for more mobilisation in the fight against violence and human rights violations.

Mr Ramponi (Italy) noted that all members condemned violence and called on the religious leaders to adopt a clear position.

Mr Whebee (Israel) called on the MEPs to help the governments to combat intolerance.

Mr Saad (Egypt) disagreed with what Mrs Brading had said.

According to Mr Radi (Morocco), religious freedom was a matter of democracy. The Mediterranean had experienced a great period of tolerance in the past.

Mr Rezgui (Algeria) criticised the growing Islamophobia in Europe.

The Chair noted that this issue had been raised at the Bureau meeting in Rome on 21 January.

According to Mr Barham (Palestine), Christian places of worship in Palestine were at risk because of the Israeli occupation.

The Chair gave the floor to Bishop Angaelos of the Coptic community in the United Kingdom (attending as an observer). The Bishop regretted the widespread sectarian violence and called for greater social cohesion, citizenship and equality.

5. Exchange of views on the ongoing draft recommendations

Due to the extension of the debate on item 4, there was very little time to consider the rapporteurs' proposals.

The Chair informed the rapporteurs that they should present to plenary short texts in the form of recommendations. Given the large volume of contributions already submitted, she suggested that the key recommendations be identified and then translated and sent to the members with a deadline for tabling amendments. She told the rapporteurs that 7 February was the deadline for sending any remaining contributions to the secretariat.

The rapporteurs on the topic of security in the Mediterranean - Mr Panzeri (EP), Mr Rezgui (Algeria) and Mrs Daği (Turkey) - presented their contributions. Mr Pedret (Spain) spoke about the role of civil society on behalf of the co-rapporteurs, Mrs Flautre (EP) and Mr Aferiat and Mr Moro (Morocco). As Mr David was absent for health reasons, the text of his contribution on



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the Arab Peace Initiative was distributed. The co-rapporteur, Mr Chiheb (Algeria), agreed with the broad outline of Mr David's recommendations, but wished to reinforce the fact that the settlements were the main stumbling block in the peace process.

6. Exchange of views on the situation in Tunisia

Mr Dupla Del Moral, Director for North Africa and Regional Policies, European External Action Service, stated that Tunisia's underlying problems had been evident for a long time. Although the EU could itself be criticised in one respect, he felt that the goals of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) should be maintained. Measures envisaged by the EU for Tunisia included support for the electoral process. Moreover, the ongoing review of the ENP and action plan would result in additional support.

The Chair informed the members that an *ad hoc* EP delegation was being set up to visit Tunisia very soon and that a resolution on Tunisia was due to be discussed in the EP plenary session on 3 February.

According to Mr Álvaro de Vasconcelos, Director, EU Institute for Security Studies in Paris, Tunisia had to be an absolute priority for the EU if it were to gain strength. He outlined a number of transition scenarios and emphasised the importance of ensuring that the process was inclusive. He advised the EU to maintain a strong presence during the transition and firmly oppose any regional interference. It should also consider an ENP status that was even more advanced than Morocco's and re-examine the UfM, which thus far was neglecting to support democracy.

Mrs Rym Ayadi, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), Brussels said that it was a political error to have separated economic growth in Tunisia from political developments. She stressed that the Tunisian people did not want to lose what had already been achieved, particularly in the area of women's rights, and warned about the structural muddle of the regime's leaders, which posed an obstacle to the transition.

The Committee listened to an account by Mrs Sihem Bensedrine, a Tunisian journalist and human rights activist, via Skype. Mrs Bensedrine welcomed the 'first meeting of the Committee on Political Affairs without the false Tunisian deputies'. In her opinion, the Tunisian people had succeeded in their revolution, but not yet in their transition. She warned against the constant presence of President Ben Ali's apparatus, which put the people on guard. She outlined the road to a new electoral framework and free elections.

Mr Sanduka (Palestine) noted that the Arab regimes were already reacting. He regretted the delays in Europe's support for the changes taking place. He criticised the EU's opposition to the results of the democratic elections in Palestine in 2006. He also felt that the EU was putting up obstacles to trade in the Mediterranean and that it gave priority to contacts with the regimes in power.

Mr Stratakis (Greece), Mr Ramponi (Italy) and Mr Obiols (EP) defended the EU, highlighting the efforts made to support civil society in the Mediterranean and the regular contacts,



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particularly on the part of the EP, with human rights campaigners. They called on the EU to give priority to action in Tunisia.

Mr Obiols (EP-Spain) and Mr Pedret (Spain) drew parallels with the transition in their own country. As far as Mr Pedret was concerned, it was the international community's duty to promote democracy. Time was needed to establish democratic bases before organising elections.

Mr Bichara Khader, Director of the Centre for Studies and Research on the Contemporary Arab World, Catholic University of Louvain, spoke about the specific characteristics of the Tunisian revolution. He stressed the Tunisian people's level of education, the absence of ethnic, religious and linguistic divides, and the positive role of the army. He also recognised the EU's contribution to the emergence of civil society. Mr Khader warned about the obstacles that could hinder the Tunisian transition and called on the EU to help consolidate what had already been achieved.

Mrs Daği (Turkey) recalled the proclamation by the Organisation of the Islamic Conference of the 'people's right to good governance'.

Mr de Vasconcelos encouraged the EU to forget its fear of political Islamism and accept the risks inherent in any democratic transition.

Mrs Ayadi noted the absence of any criteria for accepting an Islamic party into the political game.

Mr Khader concluded by noting that four myths were being dispelled: the existence of an Arab exception as regards democracy, the possibility of social and economic modernisation without freedom, the idea that the populations were content to consume without any political participation, and the viability of clannish capitalism.

4. Date and place of next meeting

3 March 2011, Rome.
