

*Side event on the margins of the 43rd session of the UN Human Rights Council*

**Saudi Arabia: Cosmetic reforms and PR offensive  
to whitewash human rights abuses**

4 March 2020 at 2 p.m., Palais des Nations/Geneva

Good afternoon everyone and thank you for the invitation to participate in this conference.

I am very happy to be here with you, in such important place, to talk about a delicate issue as freedom and human rights in Saudi Arabia, a country that is becoming more and more crucial for global politics, due to its internal transformations and international ties.

In recent years, we have become accustomed to the story of a young prince who offers freedom and progress. Saudi Arabia would envy Disney movies if only this story stood up. Instead, it is the news, the one that manages to escape from the tight knit of oppression of the dictatorship, which opens our eyes to reality. Yes, there is a young crown prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, who actually boasts social reforms in front of international partners, but about rights and freedoms that we would call fundamental, we cannot even see a shadow. Saudi citizens and the many foreigners living in the Kingdom continue to be dominated by a regime that prohibits freedom of expression, association, the right to have a fair and equitable trial, and which clearly prevents gender equality.

Since presenting the *Vision 2030* project in 2016, that aims to change completely the face of the Kingdom, Mohamed bin Salman has done everything to transmit beyond the borders the image of a modern country, which would soon become locomotive for all countries in the region, guiding them on the tracks of progress. Detaching from dependence on oil, certainly not to save the planet, but rather to save the boundless riches, is a project that many liked, but his charisma as a businessman, alone, was not

enough to gain the trust of foreign investors, intimidated by the social situation in the country. For this reason, the Prince has introduced a system of reforms with the aim of unhinging that age-old society that cannot go hand in hand with the technological power model that should become Saudi Arabia.

Unfortunately, the method used was the one of the stick and the carrot: for every right granted, the application of which remains questionable, the regime imposes a squeeze on dissidents. An example are women's rights activists, in particular the ones who fought for the right to drive: they were arrested and detained in prison, even while the world congratulated the regime for giving women the right to drive.

What the Saudi crown prince proposed is nothing more than a restyling of the image with which he presents himself abroad. Nevertheless, hiding the dust under the carpet is not the good basis to build international relations, or at least it should not be. It is urgent to raise an international conscience that does not just look at what is happening on the surface, but that looks deeper into the enormous contradictions that Mohammed Bin Salman has fueled in recent years. On one side an openness towards women's rights and culture, on the other the tightening against human rights activists and journalists has become increasingly suffocating. The international community, starting with the United Nations that host us today, but also the European Union that I represent here, cannot come to terms with a regime that systematically violates human rights. It is unacceptable to see rights and freedoms sacrificed on the altar of economic, commercial and energy interests. It is unacceptable that hosting a football game can erase the atrocities that hide the regime behind this discordant air of progress. What worries me, in fact, in addition to the hard punch of the Saudi dictatorship, is western hypocrisy: we fight for rights, we call for a ceasefire in war areas, such as in Yemen, where is taking place the worst humanitarian crisis of the world, yet when it comes to interests, one eye is closed, sometimes even both. Some time ago I heard the testimony of a Yemeni activist, said that most of the people who live in the country do not even know where Europe is located, but they know its name

and the countries, because of the inscriptions found on the remains of the weapons abandoned on the ground.

In the European Parliament, one of the issues I deal with as Member of Parliament is Gender equality. We strive to ensure that women within the Union could enjoy the same rights and opportunities as men, but we are also committed to ensuring that gender issues are included in all Union policies, including in foreign affairs and in international trade agreements. Human rights and freedoms are a cardinal value of the European Union, to which all other policies must be conditioned. For this reason, in order for the EU to develop relations with Saudi Arabia, it is imperative that the Gulf monarchy not only publicize reforms, but also really grant rights to the population. I would like to remember that, despite the small steps presented in recent years, the tutoring system still forces women to live like little girls under the control of an adult male. They are not allowed to influence the growth of children, have legal custody of them or pass on their citizenship; with rare exceptions, it is not allowed to request documents or undertake journeys unless accompanied and they cannot even make decisions regarding their health or marriage. These denied rights go beyond social tradition or religious norms: it is simply a way imposed by the regime to maintain control over women. A control system that the European Union cannot accept.

However, not only women suffer the repression of the regime. The case that in recent years has shaken international public opinion, and in many cases has shone a spotlight on the human rights situation in the country, is that of Jamal Khashoggi, the Saudi journalist, columnist for the *Washington Post* and critic of the Royal family, killed in his country's consulate in Istanbul. An extrajudicial execution by the Saudi regime, which, driven by international pressure, thought it could resolve the matter by conducting a closed-door trial that led to the conviction of 11 people, without however touching the figures closest to Mohammed Bin Salman, who, according to international investigations, were the driving force behind the operation. We cannot

accept this manipulated reconstruction. We must insist to reach the truth. We owe it to Jamal, his fiancée and all the journalists and activists who risk their lives every day to defend the truth.

Another example we should never forget is Raif Badawi's story, the Saudi blogger arrested for creating a site for debating social and political issues. Sentenced in 2015 to 10 years in prison and a thousand frustrated, Badawi is still in prison. In 2015, the European Parliament awarded him the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, an award that the institution assigns every year to those who stand out in the fight for freedom of expression. His wife had to come to Strasbourg to collect the prize.

The G20 Summit in Saudi Arabia is scheduled for November of this year. A meeting where the greatest world powers will meet together to discuss the future of the region, the new global geopolitical balances, technology and innovation. Topics in which Saudi Arabia feels winning. The Saudi Presidency agenda for the G20 was presented in three points. *Empowering People*, so creating conditions in which everyone, especially - they say - women and young people, can live and work: definitely an ambitious goal considering that women are forced to seek permission from the guardian even for the simplest actions. *Safeguarding the Planet*, even if the Saudi Royal family has built and continues to feed financial empires thanks to the oil revenues. *Shaping New Frontiers*, which means adopting strategies based on technological innovation, while continuing to tighten the grip on those who spread information and knowledge that is not in line with the fable transmitted by the regime.

We cannot offer on a silver platter to Mohammed Bin Salman the opportunity to show itself to the world as a champion of a world in the process of modernization, when reality is very different. His country has taken on the role of locomotive for all the neighbors of the region, but the tracks on which it travels are not those of progress, but those of the violation of rights and the denial of freedoms, hidden by a thin veil of apparent development.

The European Union must play an important role in this matter and must be able to tackle the problem with one voice. Unfortunately, even in this case, it reflects how the interest of individual states prevails over the desire to establish a common European line. Many Member States benefit from bilateral agreements with Saudi Arabia, including for the export of weapons that the Saudis use to perpetrate the massacre of civilians in Yemen.

Last month I prepared a question with request for written answer to the Vice-President of the European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josef Borrell. With this text, I asked to turn the attention of the Vice President and the whole European Commission to the issue of organizing the G20 in Saudi Arabia.

Considering the unequivocal results of the investigation by Agnès Callamard, UN Special Rapporteur here with us today, on the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi, evidences that the chain of command for the execution leads directly to Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, and considering that this tragic and bloody event constitutes the tip of the iceberg of a crackdown against all forms of political dissent, how can the leaders of western democracies meet under the presidency of the crown prince? How can the representatives of the European Union, the cradle of human rights, legitimize the instigator of heinous crimes as president of one of the most important summits in the world?

I say that it cannot.

The usurpations of rights, the oppressions of freedoms, enforced disappearances, secret trials and extrajudicial executions cannot be allowed to remain unpunished. We must all together, the European Parliament, the UN, NGOs and civil society, combat widespread impunity in Saudi Arabia.