



Conference 24th September 2018

Reflections of MEP Anders Primdahl Vistisen

Report by Nikola Zúkalová

On 24 September 2018, the American University of Rome (AUR) and the Euro-Gulf Information Centre played host to Anders Primdahl Vistisen, Danish Member of the European Parliament in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) Group. The lecture, titled ‘Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Trump: State of Play in the Middle East,’ was the first public lecture of the newly established AUR Department of Peace Studies. As Vice-Chair of the European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs and the ECR Group’s Coordinator on the Special Committee on Terrorism with a long-term interest in the Middle East, MEP Vistisen presented a coherent analysis of the current state of play in the region from the perspective of an EU representative—which contrasted with the official EU policy towards the region. This lecture came at a very important time as the 73rd Session of the UN General Assembly was unfolding in New York and Iran’s destabilising regional efforts were being highlighted.

MEP Vistisen began his talk with an overview of the competitive dynamics between Saudi Arabia and Iran. He outlined three main reasons for European and US engagement in the Middle East, namely: a sense of responsibility for today’s turmoil as a legacy of the Sykes-Picot agreement; natural resources; and the great impact of regional affairs on Europe and the US (re: the rise of Islamist terrorism). Importantly, MEP Vistisen described the ideological conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran as a “religious arms race,” which resulted in the transformation of regional conflicts into proxy wars and created an extraordinary situation where Sunni Arab states became more open to rapprochement with Israel as they face a common enemy—the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The second part of the talk focused on the roles adopted by the EU and US in the Middle East, with a focus on their varying approaches and alliance selections. MEP Vistisen explained that although the EU tends to blame Saudi Arabia for radical Islamism, that phenomenon has its origins in the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution. Post-revolution Iran created a radical version of Shia Islam and allied itself with regional Sunni terrorist groups, such as Hamas. Saudi Arabia, at the same time, saw rise in Salafism to counter the narratives of Iran. Interestingly, MEP Vistisen's insider view helped to better understand the different approaches adopted by the EU and US regarding Iran. As such MEP Vistisen argued that the EU is more naïve than the US towards Iran—which explains the EU's emphasis on preserving the Iran Nuclear Deal—, while the US made a similar error with Turkey—which helps explain the US push for Turkey's accession to the EU. Accordingly, the EU seeks to show that it can formulate its own positions and tends to do the opposite to the US in the region. EU-US differences have become more apparent during the Donald Trump administration, but MEP Vistisen highlighted that Trump did not invent them and has only enforced what he saw as US regional priorities. Emphasis was also paid to some problems related to the EU's engagement to the Middle East, including: an incapability to make hard decisions and an unequally applied value-based approach to foreign policy. This may, according to MEP Vistisen, help explain the imbalance in the number of European Parliamentary resolutions against Egypt and Bahrain versus Iran and China—the European Parliament essentially bullies the former while turning a blind eye to the latter. And, the EU's selective inaptitude tied to its often ill-defined objectives is short-sighted. Unlike the US, the EU feels the consequences of engagement in the Middle East as there are impacts on European foreign and domestic policies. Europe should be much more responsible on its policy choices in the region or risk potent spillover.

MEP Vistisen is very active in the European Parliament and often organises events that seek to engage with other MEPs, specialists and the wider public to promote an impartial approach of Europe to the Middle East. We at the Euro-Gulf Informations Centre, together with our partners at the AUR, are grateful for MEP Vistisen's informative insights and look forward to our future cooperation. For more information about EGIC's upcoming events visit www.egic.info or follow us on Twitter: @EGIC_/Facebook: EU-Gulf Information Centre.

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