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**Arab Islamic legacy is not against reform, says FM**

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| First Deputy Premier and Foreign Minister, H E Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem bin Jabor Al Thani, during a seminar on reform and democratisation and the role of the European Union in Brussels on Thursday. |

BRUSSELS: The following is the text of the speech delivered by the First Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, H E Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem bin Jabor Al Thani, on reform and democratisation and the role of the European Union .

Excellencies, dear friends, ladies and gentlemen, i would like to thank the Royal Institute of Foreign Relations, as well as the Centre of Studies and Research on Arab and Mediterranean countries, European Institute for European and Euro-Arab Cooperation, for hosting and sponsoring this seminar, and for giving me this opportunity to speak on the implications of the process of reform and democratization and role of the European Union. It is the current topic in the Arab world, despite differences between governments and peoples in terms of wishes, objectives as well as scope and inclusiveness of reform.

I would first like to outline our perception in the state of Qatar of the process of reform and democratisation. Thanks to the policy drawn up by the Emir of the State of Qatar, H H Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, and applied since 1995, the state of Qatar has concluded that the ideal and probably only method which enable us to achieve peace, security, justice and comprehensive development is reform founded on democratisation on the basis of responsible people’s participation without neglecting our society’s particular characteristics.

Hence, we have clearly and openly pursued the building the state on the basis of the constitution, law, institutions, respect of human rights and guarantee of male and female citizens’ basis rights and equality before the law as regards rights and duties to enable them to build and develop the homeland. We are looking forward to the implementation of the constitution promulgated on June 8, 2004 after being approved by strong support by our people in April 2003.

Such democratic position, which we adopted before September 11, is not a complete adoption of a pre-determined world model and is not imposed by an outside factor. Rather, it springs from our own belief that it constitutes a healthy and sound practice rooted in the Shura (consultation) principle, a basic principle in the teachings of Islam to which we adhere and are proud of its enlightened rules, values and principles. Although democratisation is the major pillar of reform in politics, it is not enough and has to be supported by development schemes and processes in other fields. Hence, we continue to implement huge projects for comprehensive economic development. Education and health are among top priorities. The family also receives considerable support in the social field.

We are well aware in our adoption of this option of the nature of challenges facing us. At the national front, we have responsibility to provide constant orientation as regards the following:

n Belief that the Arab Islamic legacy is not against reform, since there are numerous reformers whom we can follow and be inspired by their ideas. Such a fact leads to introspection to benefit from modern life experiences and deter dangers. This is not impossible.

n Religious legacy does not oppose reform. It is not against pursuit of revival and better life on the bases of good governance.

n Reform based on conscious self-will and considerate of society’s distinctive characteristics does not mean sacrifice of principles and essential values reflecting the foundation of society’s existence and identity. We have publicly and openly declared our position and demanded that the Arab region should adopt such approach, starting with self-criticism, and debunked all excuses made to evade the necessity of the reform process.

As regards challenges at the regional level, there are especially those closely linked to the reform process and democratisation and dependent on political and security stability. Continued tensions and crises in our region due to bilateral conflicts, use of armed force sometimes and the WMD issue adversely and deeply affect development projects. Failure to achieve this objective leads to lack of political stability and security condition and, consequently, tensions and crises continue.

To adopt the reform and development course at the national front will not break such a vicious circle unless solutions based on common international action, international legitimacy, principles of justice are found to solve conflicts and crises in the region, especially the Palestinian cause, Middle East conflict, and stability in Iraq. In addition, it is necessary to turn the middle east into a WMD-free zone, otherwise, the reasons for frustration leading to extremism, violence and terrorism cannot be eradicated. These are all major challenges to security as well as reform and democratisation in the region.

The question now is where do the Arab world and the gulf region stand on reform and democratisation?

It is quite known that the Arab world is flooded by proposals and initiatives to draw the future image on the basis of development and reform. It seems that such proposals and initiatives launched from the United States, European Union and Nato have a common intellectual basis, namely that Arab countries suffer from reaction and backwardness, which requires reform in order to provide security at the international level as well for the us and EU.

While such proposals and initiatives reflect considerable attention to the Arab region by influential powers in international relations, they are not identical in the manner of presentation, approach, total or partial content and priorities set. Reactions in the Arab world have responded to all such domains.

At the Arab level, we observe some positive indicators on a limited scale, such as disappearance of the excuses-based logic to evade the reform process and a general consensus on declaring the need for it as a basic approach for man to attain better life in the present age, that the reform process and democratisation should spring from national self-will, taking into consideration the particular characteristics of local circumstances and religious and cultural heritage.

The history and heritage of the Arab and Muslim nation has witnessed reform movements and reformers. Comprehensive development which leads to progress requires reform and democratisation following the identification of ills and obstacles in various fields, as indicated by Arab Development Reports for 2002-2004. Nevertheless, the declarations on the necessity of reform were not supported in reality by a practical programme with set steps which makes the declarations an actual firm policy, the implementation of which is transparent and set in motion in accordance with a clear time-table.

At the international level, it seems, in my opinion, that such changes in the Arab image have been understood. Declarations issued by international meetings held in June 2004, namely the declaration of the G-8 at Sea Island, (Georgia) on June 9, declaration of the US-EU summit at Dromoland, Ireland on June 26, and Nato summit in Istanbul on June 28, 2004 have all reflected such understanding. We observe interrelated positions, adoption of the principle of coordination, partnership and dialogue to carry on reform and democratization process and need for such practice to be launched from the self-will of the region’s peoples and countries, understanding of the Arab position at the Arab summit in Tunis on May 22-23, 2004, clear linkage between political, military and security aspects, on the one hand, and recognition of the importance of joint programmes and allocation of money to initiate some of them in these fields under the sponsorship of countries in and outside the region. As a matter of fact, convergence of views would not have occurred had it not been for the adoption of dialogue and rejection of forcing positions from outside.

We need to shoulder common responsibility on the basis of the concept of strategic partnership between EU countries, other countries which are influential in international relations and countries of the region. Such strategic partnership should not be limited to political, military and security aspects but should involve realisation of the priorities of justice, equality, mutual respect, common interest and genuine economic, social and cultural openness and interaction. Such partnership should pay particular attention to the elimination of poverty, ignorance, disease and underdevelopment and for the propagation of democratic culture.

In addition, such responsibility should simultaneously, boldly and effectively attempt to solve regional conflicts, especially the Palestinian issue and Iraq’s stability, since the causes of despair lead to violence, extremism and terrorism cannot be eradicated unless the roots of such conflicts are addressed. Strategic partnership requires an agreed clear programme in all fields which should be implemented on the basis of clear understanding, mutual respect of each partner’s interests, transparency as well as readiness to make reciprocal concessions. In the field of security and other fields, in general, lessons should be learnt from experiences. Reality shows that consultations by our major partners with countries of the region are held only after problems and dilemmas result from individual policies and stands, in contradiction with the concept of strategic partnership, which essentially involves consultations before a position is taken so as to ensure its success and, hence, partners’ common interest is accomplished.

In addition to the above points relating to the concept of strategic partnership, which we hope EU countries will consider and apply, other important points linked to Gulf-European relations need to be added:

n Undertaking an effective role which is not limited to continued dialogue about specific points and others changed from one occasion to another without solution or applicable decision as well as avoiding raising obstacles impeding the conclusion of the free trade agreement before the end of the current year as already agreed.

n More balanced economic and trade relations which ensure addressing the problem of continued deficit in trade balance.

n Emphasis on the importance of cooperation in the field of investment, especially because numerous measures have been taken in gulf countries relating to preparation of the investment climate.

n Relations between the state of Qatar and GCC countries in general with the European union should not be limited to energy supplies. There are numerous domains for cooperation such as training, education, culture, health, the environment and others.

n Activation of the European role in the solution of political issues in the region as such issues would hinder achieving peace, security and stability on the basis of international law. I hope that this modest participation will provoke dialogue and discussion. Thank you.”