



### **Euro MPs assured of fair and free Iraq elections**

Fears about the Iraqi elections being manipulated were expelled today when the European Parliament was assured that a decision to exclude more than 500 politicians had been reversed.

MPs from the Iraqi Council of Representatives met with the European Parliament's newly created Delegation for Relations with Iraq following concerns that next month's poll may be wrecked by violence.

Struan Stevenson MEP, President of the European Parliament's Delegation, said he was satisfied that the elections would be fair and free after assurances from Sheik Khlaid Al-Atiyah, Deputy Speaker of the Council of Representatives.

Mr Stevenson said: "This was a frank and robust exchange of views which has cleared the air of all doubts and misconceptions in the run-up to the elections in Iraq on 7th March."

The meeting followed an announcement by the Justice and Accountability Committee in Baghdad that 515 politicians would be banned from the election process as part of a de-Baathification process.

Mr Stevenson added: "Having welcomed the introduction of the new election law with provision for all the hundreds of thousands of expatriate Iraqis to vote and a transparent open list electoral system, we were hoping that everything was set fair for a free and democratic election.

"But the announcement that 515 politicians were to be expelled gave rise to deep concern in both the EU and Washington DC with fears that it could de-stabilise the election and lead to more violence and unrest.

"Sheik Al-Atiyah was able to reassure us that only yesterday an appeal court comprising of seven judges in Baghdad had ruled that they should be re-instated and allowed to stand.

"They will each be individually scrutinised by the courts following the elections and any who are elected but subsequently found to have Baathist sympathies or past criminal records, contrary to the constitution, will be forced to step down.

"This has reassured us that the election can now go ahead in a relatively calm environment."

Sheik Al-Atiyah and Dr Al-Hasani MP - former speaker of the Iraqi Parliament - were also questioned on minority rights, security, the seige of Camp Ashraf and Iranian meddling in Iraq.

Mr Stevenson said:

" We reassured the visiting Iraqi MPs that we welcomed their new NGO law, were pleased to hear that they had resolved their budget dispute and we pledged to give them every assistance in the future to help rebuild Iraq as a safe, dynamic and free country with a vibrant economy.

"To this end we said that our aim, like theirs, was to see the election of a nationalist, secular government on March 7th free of narrow sectarian motives and representative of the whole of the Iraqi people."

STRUAN STEVENSON, MEP

President of the European Parliament's Delegation for Relations with Iraq