



PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Trade Sub-Committee

MEDIA RELEASE

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Chair: Hon Bruce Scott MP
Deputy Chair: Maria Vamvakinou MP

Growing Australia's trade with the Middle East

Federal parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade has today released the report for its inquiry on Australia's trade and investment relationships with countries of the Middle East.

Chair of the Trade Sub-Committee, the Hon Bruce Scott MP, said in 2015, Australia's two-way merchandise trade with the Middle East and North Africa region, with a combined population of more than 420 million people, was worth nearly \$15 billion. Mr Scott said \$12 billion of that trade was with the six Gulf states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The report supports the efforts of the Australian Government to restart free trade negotiations with the GCC that stalled in 2009 but if they don't recommence by 2017, then the report recommends the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) actively pursue bilateral agreements on trade, and on services and investment, and also on double taxation, with individual GCC member nations with priority given to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar.

Australia's two-way trade with its largest trading partner the UAE in 2014-15 was worth more than \$6 billion with airlines Emirates carrying over 100,000 tonnes and Etihad more than 30,000 tonnes of air cargo from Australia last year – much of it fresh produce.

"Central to this trade relationship has been an extraordinary growth in flights between Australia and the UAE. Code sharing between Qantas and Emirates, and Etihad's partnership with Virgin Australia has resulted in more than 150 flights per week between Australia's major cities and Dubai or Abu Dhabi. This has led to premium cargos of chilled Australian lamb, seafood, cheeses, peaches, pears, and more filling these airliners' holds with the best Australia has to offer," Mr Scott said.

"While Australia's trade with Asia is strong, it would be prudent for Australia to diversify its trade into another fast-growing market such as the Middle East and North Africa region."

Other recommendations of the 18 in the report include:

- The Australian Government propose the formation of a Joint Economic Committee with the UAE as a forum for bilateral discussions on trade and economic issues and negotiations on a services and investment agreement;
- DFAT open a new post in Morocco and also Austrade offices in Egypt and Morocco;
- The Department of Immigration and Border Protection benchmark its processes for granting international student visas with competitor countries and undertake a review of the proposed simplified student visa framework reforms one year after its commencement later this year;
- Austrade seek to recruit staff with business experience and enhance the business acumen of its advisers by regular, on-the-ground engagement with small to medium-sized exporters;
- The Department of Education and Training expand its overseas counsellor network into the Middle East by posting an education consul in Saudi Arabia; and
- The Australian Government undertake a joint study with state and territory governments of Australia's trade promotion efforts, with a view to making reforms that will ensure a better coordinated, unified and coherent approach to promoting Australia's commercial interests.

For media comment: Trade Sub-Committee Chair, the Hon Bruce Scott MP, on **(02) 6277 4949** (Parliament House)

The complete report and information about the inquiry, including submissions and public hearing transcripts, are available on the website at www.aph.gov.au/jfadt or by contacting the committee secretariat on **(02) 6277 2313** or emailing jscfadt@aph.gov.au.