



## Gulf Diplomacy is Forging Ahead

Christian Koch – June 23, 2023



Gulf diplomacy was on full display during the week of June 16 to 23. While Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan paid the Kingdom's first visit to Tehran since 2006 to further solidify the re-establishment of diplomatic ties, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was in France where he met with President Emmanuel Macron at the Elysée Palace and took part in the Summit for a New Global Financial Pact.

UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed, meanwhile, followed his visit to Turkey where he met with newly elected President Recep Tayyip Erdogan with a trip to Russia to hold talks with President Vladimir Putin at the sidelines of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum. As part of their discussions, the UAE President called for diplomatic efforts to end the war in Ukraine.

If that was not newsworthy enough, Qatar's Emir Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani traveled to Baghdad where he met with the Iraqi Prime Minister and pledged billions of dollars of investment "in the coming years." GCC investment in Iraq is increasing steadily, representing a core element in Iraq's overall recovery.

In the meantime, GCC Secretary-General Jasem Al-Budaiwi visited Brussels where he met with EU High Representative Josep Borrell and the new EU Special Representative for the Gulf Region Luigi Di Maio before traveling on to Germany for further meetings. Highlighting the multi-faceted ties in place between the EU and GCC, Mr. Al-Budaiwi expressed his appreciation for the EU's initiative of a "Strategic Partnership with the Gulf Region" issued in May 2022. Both sides further engaged in discussions about the next EU-GCC ministerial meeting to be held in Oman in October 2023.

Finally, the week was complemented by the visits of Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian to Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates during which he stressed the need for the "collective participation of countries in the region" as the best way forward to the resolution of existing

challenges. The Sultan of Oman, Haithem bin Tariq Al-Said had himself visited Iran at the end of May. The UAE and Qatar also announced the resumption of their diplomatic relations in the past week.

Three things stand out from the week's flurry of activity.

First, the key message to be taken away from this diplomacy is the efficacy of regional solutions to regional problems. There is a determination to move the Middle East away from being a region in crisis towards continued de-escalation and hopefully the longer-term resolution of conflicts. Here, the GCC states have taken the lead underscoring their determination to inject new optimism into the region and leading with their agency at the core. This also follows a realization that external actors have simply managed Middle Eastern affairs in the past rather than actually contributing to and pushing for effective solutions. With economic diversification, climate change, the energy transition, the war in Ukraine, and other ongoing regional conflicts producing a confluence of threats, Gulf states simply do not see themselves as having the luxury of time. The time to act is now.

Second, one should not view the recent developments as one-off events or expect a significant slow-down anytime soon. Based on a recent visit to the region by the author, there is a genuine commitment to continue on the diplomatic path and to maintain the momentum until it produces more concrete results. While underlying recent efforts at de-escalation provide one with an honest assessment that the region has only just begun taking the necessary preliminary steps, there is equally the determination to continue on the sketched-out path. As Prince Turki bin Faisal Al-Saud stated at the 5<sup>th</sup> Germany-GCC Dialogue conference in Berlin recently, the emphasis is on "step-for-step" cooperation rather than "step-by-step."

Third, the Gulf's approach is highly pragmatic and based on multi-alignment in terms of whoever can deliver the results. There are no automatic alliances to be assumed and neither should certain engagements be seen as constituting support for one or the other side, for example, as far as Ukraine is concerned. The UAE president maintains his communication channels with President Putin while Ukrainian President Zelensky visits the Arab League Summit in Jeddah. China is able to provide the breakthrough in Saudi-Iran diplomatic ties while key U.S. officials hold "constructive" high-level talks with the Saudi leadership in the kingdom. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey in the meantime apply for possible membership in the BRICS International Forum Group.

For Europe, the core takeaway from all of this is that it needs to quickly get a better grasp of the new dynamics taking place in the region with Gulf foreign policy at its core, and they need to do it quickly. The risk of not grasping the opportunity that the Gulf agency represents means seeing a sidelining or even a full disregard for Europe's role and interests. The same meeting that Prince Turki spoke at in Germany also underlined the view from the GCC states that while the region is ready to work with Europe if there exists shared concerns and interests, they are also ready to move forward without Europe if not.

To be sure, Europe is still the partner of choice for the GCC states. Overall relations between the EU and the GCC and the respective member states are broad and comprehensive, and they provide a solid foundation on which to build. Yet, if Europe is serious in its recent proclamation that Gulf security is also European security, then its engagement requires a deeper commitment and a better understanding of the policies being pursued by their regional partners.

