



## GCC-Estonia Relations

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The establishment of diplomatic relations between the GCC countries and Estonia dates back to the early 1990s, following Estonia's independence from the Soviet Union. Since then, the relationship has steadily grown, driven by shared interests and mutual benefits. The relationship between the GCC countries and Estonia has evolved significantly in terms of security and economic cooperation. Historically, Estonia, a small Baltic nation, has fostered close ties with GCC states primarily through trade relations and diplomatic engagements. While the historical connection might not be as deeply rooted as other bilateral relationships, recent developments have paved the way for enhanced political collaboration, as well as in cybersecurity, economic, and cultural/educational cooperation.

### *Political Cooperation*

While the GCC states and Estonia have enjoyed diplomatic relations for some time, the Baltic state has renewed its focus on the region in recent years. For instance, in October 2018, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Sven Mikser was the first Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs to visit Saudi Arabia. Mikser stated that “relations between Estonia and Saudi Arabia are good but have remained on a modest level so far” and that “a number of Estonian companies already operate in Saudi Arabia, but interest in the country and the region as a whole could be significantly greater” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia, October 2018).

To support this effort, in 2020, Estonia appointed its first non-resident ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, H.E. Jaan Reinhold, residing in Abu Dhabi, after Estonia established an embassy there in 2019 to develop both political and economic relations between

the GCC states and Estonia. He is accredited also to the State of Kuwait (2019), the Kingdom of Bahrain (2020), and the State of Qatar (2022). Moreover, Estonia's current ambassador to the Sultanate of Oman is H.E. Ingrid Amer, who was appointed in 2022 and resides in Cairo. From the Gulf side, the current ambassadors to Estonia are H.E. Nesreen Alshebel (Saudi Arabia), H.E. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum (United Arab Emirates), H.E. Najeeb Al-Bader (Kuwait), and H.E. Sheikh Ahmed bin Nasser Al-Thani (Qatar).



*H.E. Jaan Reinhold presenting his credentials, in the UAE (Embassy of Estonia in Abu Dhabi, September 2019).*

High-level visits between Estonia and the GCC states have been few and far between, and those that have occurred have focused mainly on economic cooperation. In this regard, Estonia plays a role as a member of the EU and has supported the recent outreach by Brussels to move forward with the “Strategic Partnership with the Gulf.” It is expected that engagement between Estonia and the GCC states will be fostered at this level given that the EU and the GCC have agreed to broaden their cooperation also when it comes to a structured political and security dialogue.



One avenue of dialogue that could be used to enhance political consultations is regular participation in high-level conferences. In Estonia, one good opportunity is the Lennart Meri Conference (LMC), named after the first President of Estonia, and held annually in Tallinn, which brings together experts, policymakers, academics, and practitioners in foreign and security policy to discuss and address critical issues. In the 2023 conference, the role of the Middle East, the rise of Saudi Arabia in regional and international diplomacy, and the Kingdom's de-escalation efforts with regional countries such as Iran and Türkiye were all highlighted in the conference proceedings. Venues such as this can serve as a valuable platform to address common issues of concern and areas of potential collaboration in various sectors, such as technology, investments, and trade.

### *Security Cooperation*

In terms of security ties, maritime security is an important aspect of collaboration between Estonia and the GCC states. Estonia's maritime security primarily revolves around the Baltic Sea. The Baltic Sea has been historically important for Estonia's trade, transportation, and security. Estonia is a member of NATO and the European Union, both of which have a vested interest in maintaining maritime security in the Baltic Sea.

Estonia also participates in various Baltic Sea regional cooperation initiatives to enhance maritime security, including information sharing, joint exercises, and cooperation with neighboring countries. Although the GCC states have different maritime security concerns, they each have taken steps to enhance their maritime security, including through joint naval exercises, the establishment of maritime task forces, and cooperation with international partners like the United States.

In October 2020, Estonia joined the US-led multinational maritime security initiative known as The International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), which was formed in July 2019 to ensure the safety and security of shipping and maritime trade in critical waterways, particularly in the Arabian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb, and the Gulf of Oman. Bringing its own experiences to the table, Estonia plays an increasing role in enhancing maritime security in the Gulf, protecting commercial vessels, and maintaining the freedom of navigation in the region.

Another relevant issue is that of cybersecurity. Estonia, known for its digital advancements and e-governance, has a compelling opportunity for cooperation with the Gulf regarding cybersecurity given that as former Minister of Foreign Affairs Sven Mikser has emphasized, "stability and peace in the Middle East is a major objective for the region, Europe, and the whole world" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia, October 2018). With the threat of cyberattacks on the rise, there is a common cause for concern and cooperation on this front.

Although Estonia and the GCC states are geographically distant, one of the things they have in common is that both are undergoing digital transformations. Moreover, despite their geographic and socio-economic differences, Estonia and the GCC countries share similarities in their approach to cybersecurity. Both regions acknowledge the importance of building robust institutional frameworks and close collaboration between government agencies, private entities, and academic institutions. Additionally, information sharing, capacity-building initiatives, and developing a skilled cybersecurity workforce are common priorities for Estonia and the GCC states.

While Estonia's cybersecurity journey has been a decades-long process marked by proactive measures and investments, the GCC countries



are relatively new to this domain. However, the GCC nations are actively developing and implementing their own cybersecurity frameworks and enhancing their cybersecurity capabilities by establishing national cybersecurity agencies, enacting legislative frameworks, and investing in cybersecurity education and training. This is where improving relations with Estonia can have a significant impact.



*A high-level Saudi delegation, in Estonia in May 2023 (The Baltic Times, May 2023).*

On several levels, Estonia already engages with several of the Gulf states when it comes to advancing their digital sector and e-governance. In recent years, Estonia and Saudi Arabia have established cybersecurity collaborations to enhance their cyber resilience frameworks. In May 2023, Saudi Arabia's Governor of the Digital Government Authority (DGA) and Chairman of the Executive Council of the Digital Cooperation Organization, H.E. Eng. Ahmed Mohammed Al-Suwayan and his delegation visited the Republic of Estonia, where they held a number of meetings on bilateral cooperation and expertise exchange. Al-Suwayan met with Luukas Ilves, Estonia's Government Chief Information Officer and Undersecretary for Digital Development at the Ministry of Economic Affairs, and Nele Leosk, the Ambassador-at-Large for Digital Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia (Saudi Press Agency, May 2023).

In Kuwait, the two countries signed an MoU in October 2019 to increase cooperation on cybersecurity, digital governance, and digital transformation through information sharing, learning, joint training, and capability building (MENAFM, October 2019). In Oman, Nortal, an Estonian company, in collaboration with the National Centre of Statistical Information (NCSI), carried out Oman's first-ever digital census (Paraskevopoulos, February 2023).

Estonia, as an innovative country, can thus share its expertise on e-governance with the GCC states so that they can integrate modern technological advancements into their systems. Additionally, by fostering international cooperation, strengthening regional partnerships, and sharing best practices, both regions can fortify their cybersecurity frameworks and protect their digital ecosystems at a time when technology continues to advance, bringing with it a range of problems such as deep fakes, digital manipulations, hacking, swarming tactics, drone attacks, and ransom demands. Thus, Estonia and the GCC could establish channels for information exchange on cyber threat intelligence, incident response protocols, and best practices. Moreover, joint capacity-building programs could be designed to train cybersecurity professionals, further strengthening the cyber defense capabilities of both regions.

In terms of future collaboration, Estonia and the GCC states could focus on exchanging researchers between the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) in Estonia and national defense universities in the Gulf. Additionally, the GCC and Estonia should also enhance dialogue on critical policy issues within international organizations and forums such as the United Nations and the Global Conference on Cyber Space (GCCS).





## *Economic Cooperation*

Existing GCC-Estonia cybersecurity collaboration can extend to opportunities for economic cooperation in other areas. Joint research and development initiatives, startup collaborations, and sharing cybersecurity innovations can drive economic growth in both nations. Additionally, Estonia has sought to attract GCC investments in areas such as infrastructure development and renewable energy. Estonia has mainly focused on two countries: Saudi Arabia and the UAE. For instance, a recent high-level meeting took place in October 2023 between the Saudi Minister of Economy and Planning, H.E. Faisal Alibrahim, and the Estonian Minister of Economic Affairs, Tiit Riisalo, where they discussed increasing economic ties and trade between the two countries (Arab News, October 2023).



*The Saudi-Estonian Business Forum organized by the Federation of Saudi Chambers (FSC) in October 2021 (Saudi Gazette, October 2021).*

In October 2021, the Federation of Saudi Chambers (FSC) held the Saudi-Estonian Business Forum in Riyadh, bringing together ministers, ambassadors, and business leaders to discuss ways to enhance commercial and investment cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Estonia. The Estonian delegation was made up of commissions and businesses engaged in a variety of activities, with a focus on promoting Estonia's international commerce, information and communications technology (ICT), defense, and space programs, as well as

commercial entrepreneurship and innovation in the electric and electronic sectors (Saudi Gazette, October 2021).

In June 2023, the two countries held the Saudi-Estonian Investment Forum in Tallinn. Saudi Arabia's Minister of Investment, H.E. Eng. Khalid bin Abdulaziz Al-Falih, emphasized the various investment opportunities available in the Kingdom, especially through the implementation of mega projects aligned with the Saudi Vision 2030 aimed at diversifying the economy (SPA, June 2023).



*Saudi Minister of Economy and Planning, H.E. Faisal Alibrahim in October 2023 (Arab News, October 2023).*

Following the Forum, the Minister of Investment met with several high-level government officials and private sector leaders, including Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, Minister of Economic Affairs and Information Technology Tiit Riisalo, and Minister of Regional Affairs H.E. Madis Kallas, to discuss enhancing bilateral relations even further (ZAWYA, June 2023).

The Minister's visit concluded with the establishment of a Saudi-Estonian business council and the announcement of five MoUs and cooperation agreements between the two countries. The agreements included: a cooperation agreement between the Federation of Saudi Chambers and the Estonian Chamber



of Commerce and Industry for the establishment of a Business Council, an MoU between Saudi's Shammal Commercial Investment Company and Estonian DeepTech startup GScan to establish a joint venture and to introduce Muon Flux Technology to Saudi Arabia, an agreement between the Ministry of Investment of Saudi Arabia's entrepreneurship sector department and Estonian computer numerical control machine manufacturer 5.0 Robotics to establish a framework of support to explore opportunities for expansion into Saudi Arabia, a cooperation agreement between MISA and Estonian autonomous system developer Auve Tech to establish a strategic partnership to share expertise and explore manufacturing options in the region, and an agreement with capital management firm Rigel Capital and Estonian autonomous delivery innovator Clevon to support the expansion of innovative last-mile autonomous technology and the establishment of a Clevon Academy branch in Saudi Arabia" (ZAWYA, June 2023)

Estonia has taken similar steps in the UAE. In September 2021, H.E. Dr. Ahmad Belhoual Al Falasi, UAE Minister of State for Entrepreneurship and SMEs, and H.E. Andres Sutt, Estonian Minister of Entrepreneurship and Information Technology, co-chaired the UAE-Estonian Business Forum to enhance cooperation and partnerships in economic fields (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Economy, September 2021). According to H.E. Dr. Ahmad Belhoual Al Falasi, "the UAE-Estonian Business Forum is a very important platform through which we have put forward joint plans between the two governments for future paths of cooperation. It places particular emphasis on increasing cooperation in the fields of entrepreneurship to include new paths, stimulate bilateral and mutual investments in the two countries' markets, and create channels for direct communication between the companies of the two countries. These will give them the opportunity to agree on investments

and projects with promising prospects during the next phase, especially in the sectors of health care, finance, agriculture, and manufacturing" (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Economy, September 2021). H.E. Andres Sutt, on the other hand, highlighted the importance of Expo 2020 to Estonia and the various opportunities it presents for Estonian companies, especially in digital transformation.

As a result of the Forum, the UAE Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry and "Enterprise Estonia" signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the intention of creating a UAE-Estonian Business Council (UEBC) to encourage economic cooperation and investment between the two nations' commercial sectors. In March 2022, the first session of the UEBC was held in Dubai on the sidelines of the Estonia Business Forum and the Estonian National Day at Expo 2020 Dubai (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Economy, March 2022). The Estonian Business and Innovation Agency also organized a trade mission to the UAE and KSA for the food and beverages sector from November 20-24, 2022 (ZAWYA, November 2022). Table 1 below shows Estonia's trade with the GCC in 2021.

Table 1: Estonia's Trade with the GCC, 2021 (Million USD)

	Exports	Imports	Total Trade
Saudi Arabia	123	55.6	178.6
United Arab Emirates	77.4	17.4	94.8
Oman	7.37	1.81	9.18
Qatar	8.88	0.01	8.89
Kuwait	5.18	0.02	5.20
Bahrain	2.35	0.52	2.87
GCC	224.18	75.36	299.54

Source: *The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC)*.



### *Cultural and Educational Cooperation*

Cultural and educational exchanges between Estonia and the GCC countries remain limited, but they hold value in increasing societal and people-to-people ties. Moreover, they enhance mutual understanding and collaboration. Cultural and educational ties between the GCC countries and Estonia offer several benefits for both sides. They foster greater mutual understanding and respect, facilitate people-to-people connections, and contribute to a more inclusive and diverse academic and cultural environment. These ties also play a crucial role in creating a positive image of each other, which can enhance broader diplomatic and economic relations. Cultural and educational cooperation can be achieved through increased scholarships, joint academic initiatives, and collaborative cultural projects. Education and culture were also on the list of priorities in the EU's Joint Communication on a "Strategic Partnership with the Gulf."

Estonia and the GCC can build on their cultural and educational cooperation in three main ways. First, the GCC states and Estonia should develop language and cultural programs to facilitate cultural exchange. These initiatives would help bridge the linguistic and cultural gap between the two regions.

Second, universities in Estonia and GCC should encourage student organizations to organize events and activities that celebrate cultural diversity on campus. These events would include food festivals, cultural performances, and lectures, creating opportunities for cultural exchange.

Third, the embassies of GCC countries in Estonia and Estonian embassies in the GCC would organize cultural events, exhibitions, and

seminars that facilitate intercultural communication and promote cultural ties.

In the future, there is potential for further expansion in educational and cultural exchanges, especially as the GCC states continue developing their educational sector. The GCC, for instance, has launched meetings and committees to represent joint cooperation regarding education. The GCC states' funding and financial commitments to improving their education sectors are among the most significant drivers of growth. It is also important to emphasize that the GCC states allocate 20-25% of their total government expenditure to education budgets. As the educational and cultural links grow, they can serve as a solid foundation for deeper cooperation in various fields, strengthening the overall GCC-Estonia relationship.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the GCC-Estonia relations have evolved, converging primarily on economic cooperation and cultural exchange. Looking ahead, the prospects for GCC-Estonia relations remain promising. Both sides recognize the potential for collaboration in the technology and renewable energy sectors. Strengthening these avenues would result in a win-win situation, allowing Estonia to tap into the GCC market and the GCC countries to leverage Estonia's expertise in digital transformation.

Additionally, educational and cultural ties offer the chance to deepen mutual understanding and appreciation. Strengthening these multifaceted relations not only benefits the involved regions but also contributes to global stability, prosperity, and resilience in the face of complex international challenges.



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