



Europe and Regional Security in the Gulf

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Photo Source: [GCCSG](#)





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The release of the document entitled “Vision of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for Regional Security” in March 2024 represents an important and long overdue addition to the discussion on how to promote stability in the Gulf region. While Iran put forward its Hormuz Peace Initiative advocating a collective security system in the Gulf and Russia released its own proposal, one that was quite similar to the Iranian one, no similar document has previously been put forth by the GCC states. This gap has now been filled.

While the GCC document lays out the principles and drivers for regional security alongside a series of positions on issues of regional importance, it should be clear that the vision cannot be implemented by the GCC states alone. To see the vision move towards some form of implementable policy, the Arab Gulf states will need international partnerships. What is interesting to note when one looks at the GCC document in more detail is the fact that the word “international” is prominently featured throughout. In the relatively short document, the term “international” is referenced 19 times and the vision clearly states that “establishing a solid international relationship is vital in enhancing regional security and stability and upholding international peace and security.”



Source: [Arab News](#)

When it comes to the issues on which action is required to strengthen regional security, the document refers to “supporting international endeavors,” adhering to “international standards,” and engaging with “international stakeholders.” This differentiates the Vision from those of Iran and Russia mentioned above which largely emphasize a move away from concerted international involvement in regional affairs. The GCC document is clear in its conviction that the regional environment cannot be separated from the international one. In this sense, the proposal now being put forward follows the conclusions made by former Saudi Foreign Minister Saud bin Faisal Al Saud who argued in 2004 when presenting his framework for regional security that “international help will always be needed in this regard...Gulf security cannot be realistically separated from factors that have bearing on the international system” and that as a result, international guarantees are required if a stable and lasting system of regional security is to be constructed.

While the United States will continue to play the paramount role when it comes to security issues in the Gulf, recent developments appear to indicate that Washington might not be willing or even capable of continuing to play its historical role in the medium- to long-term future. On the one hand, the U.S. has seen its most recent Middle East adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan turn into quagmires resulting in a weariness to contemplate such continued involvement. On the other, as the recent crisis over Gaza illustrates, the U.S. does not have a balanced position on critical issues pertaining to regional security. Its refusal to pressure the current Israeli government for an immediate ceasefire and an end to the atrocious Israeli campaign in Gaza heightens rather than alleviates the dangers of regional escalation and increased extremism. Similarly, the strategy of



tit-for-tat bombing raids on proxy forces supported by Iran that threaten the regional status quo, for example, the Houthis and their attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea, cannot be considered a strategy capable of ultimately ending one of the main challenges to regional stability. While the U.S. is still the predominant military power in the Middle East, the lack of a consistent and balanced political strategy means that Washington by itself is insufficient to set up, maintain, or protect a regional security system.

Just as former Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud bin Faisal called for guarantees from the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the so-called P5), the current GCC vision will require a coordinated supporting role being played by the wider international community. The starting point is of course the Gulf states themselves taking responsibility for initial steps that lay the groundwork for regional de-escalation and deconfliction. Here, the GCC states are doing their job. The GCC rift over the issue of Qatar has been resolved, Saudi Arabia and other GCC states have reached out to Iran including for the re-establishment of diplomatic ties between Riyadh and Tehran in March 2023, and Saudi Arabia has made serious efforts to bring the Yemen War to a close. Even with Gaza still in flames, the GCC states have underlined their policy that normalized relations with Israel will happen once the two-state solution and the rights of Palestinians are achieved.

In this context, the determination to “preserve regional security, ensure the stability of regional countries, promote the prosperity of their peoples, and bolster international peace and security” as stated in the GCC vision document should receive widespread support from countries with their own vested interests in regional stability. After the United States, the next key player in this regard is Europe.

Over the past few years, efforts have been underway by the European Union and its member states to better define what a European contribution to regional security could look like. The Strategic Partnership with the Gulf region released in May 2022 by the EU represents a clear acknowledgment that “the security and stability situation of the Gulf region bears direct consequences for the EU” and that “the European Union stands much to gain from a stronger and more strategic partnership with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and its member states.”



Source: [Arab News](#)

Since June 2022, this document has represented the official policy line when it comes to the Gulf region following its approval by the EU Council. Importantly, the policy description outlined has since then not simply remained on paper but, in fact, numerous steps have been taken to implement ideas propagated by the proposed partnership. This includes the appointment of a Special Representative of the European Union (EUSR) for the Gulf Region in the person of former Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio, who started his post in June 2023; bringing back the annual EU-GCC Ministerial Joint Council meetings with the last one held in Oman in October 2023 and the next scheduled for later in 2024; and the holding of the first EU-GCC Security Dialogue held in Riyadh in January 2024. On April 22, 2024, the first high-level GCC-EU Forum at the



ministerial level will be held in Luxembourg. The EU has also increased its institutional profile in the GCC states with the opening of an EU delegation office in Qatar in 2022 and one planned for the Sultanate of Oman. It can therefore be argued that there is a lot of movement in the relationship between the two sides, which also suggests the potential for a continued deepening of ties on issues referred to in the GCC vision.

When looking in-depth at the issues mentioned in the GCC document, one can immediately see the numerous overlaps with the EU Strategic Partnership text. Specific reference is made in the GCC vision to concerns over non-proliferation, maritime security, combatting terrorism and extremism, cybersecurity, stable global energy markets, climate change, as well as water and food security. The EU document meanwhile includes references to cooperation mechanisms for enhanced maritime security, initiating a dialogue on cyber security, setting up a dedicated EU-GCC energy and climate expert group to broaden the policy dialogue on green transition challenges, and stepping up cooperation on Countering Terrorism (CT) and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). What one can conclude is a clear complementarity between the path envisioned by the GCC and what is being proposed by the European Union within a possible regional security framework.

What makes Europe a potential partner of choice is also the EU's growing awareness of the strategic significance of the Gulf region and the subsequent need for Europe to double down on its efforts to build a substantive working relationship with the GCC states. During her keynote speech at the 18th IISS Manama Dialogue summit in Bahrain in November 2022, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated: "Gulf security matters to Europe, as Europe's security matters to the Gulf...I believe we face a historic opportunity to build new ties between our two

regions." It was a significant statement highlighting a shift in discourse from Europe towards greater coherence and optimism in its overall approach to the Gulf region. What was particularly noteworthy was von der Leyen's acknowledgment that Europe has thus far not listened sufficiently to the GCC states when assessing the regional environment, in particular when it comes to Iran. She noted "It took us too long to understand a very simple fact that while we work to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, we must also focus on other forms of weapon proliferation, from drones to ballistic missiles. It is a security risk, not just for the Middle East but for us all."



Source: [Kuwait News Agency \(KUNA\)](#)

The GCC states have long lamented that their analysis of the regional environment, a neighborhood that is their own, has by and large been disregarded by most of the international community, first and foremost by the U.S. and Europe. Europe's recognition that any dialogue with the GCC states must be on an equal basis in which the role of any outside power is to listen first, is a key step in the right direction. In an encouraging sign, Brussels has followed suit with its own statements of intent to increase the number of dialogue channels through which the GCC and the EU states can regularly confer when it comes to issues of both regional and global concern. The EUSR Di Maio also underlined that his initial focus on assuming his mandate was "to engage on behalf of the EU, with our partners in the Gulf, to listen to them, to understand their interests and their sensitivities."



That the EU and the GCC have seen their relationship improve substantively was underlined by the GCC-EU Ministerial meeting held in Oman in October 2023. In the joint communique issued after the session, the two sides agreed “to coordinate efforts on regional and global issues, including nuclear, missile and drone proliferation; maritime security; cybersecurity; counterterrorism; terrorism financing, recruitment, and ideology; human trafficking; drug trafficking; irregular migration; organized crime; in addition to energy security, security of global food supplies, disaster preparedness, and emergency response.”

Of particular importance was the joint statement on the events in Israel and Gaza given that the meeting was held in the immediate aftermath of the events of October 7th. There was a reference to the protection of civilians, the obligations of all parties under international humanitarian law, the release of all hostages, and the urgent need to revive the Middle East peace process in accordance with the Arab Peace Initiative. Since then, Europe and the Arab Gulf states have maintained their dialogue on the Gaza crisis and there exists a growing consensus among the EU-27 that an immediate ceasefire alongside efforts to bring about a permanent political solution is the best way forward. This includes the consideration of more EU countries extending their formal recognition of a sovereign, independent State of Palestine as well as the possibility of a move at the United Nations pushing for a UN Security Council Resolution formally enshrining Palestinian statehood.

The issue of Red Sea security also underlines the common assessment and approaches that the GCC states and the EU states have. With the approval of Operation Aspides to protect merchant shipping, the EU not only classified the Red Sea as being of critical

concern but also underlined that maritime security has become a priority item for them. Operation Aspides follows numerous other naval missions that Europe already has in place in waters surrounding the Arabian Peninsula including Operation Atalanta launched in 2008 to prevent and combat acts of piracy in the Indian Ocean and the European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) mission and its military arm Operation Agenor launched in January 2020.

Given its emphasis on deconfliction, Operation Aspides could become a platform for building trust and confidence with the GCC and other Arab states. As outlined by European officials, Europe, through its operation, wants to allow some de-escalatory space with an emphasis on the protection of shipping and keeping sea lanes open as much as possible. Similar to the position of the GCC states, the objective here is to prevent greater escalation in the region in addition to avoiding any confrontational stance vis-à-vis Iran. It is therefore another illustration that European and GCC views on current developments in the Middle East and how to overcome existing challenges broadly overlap and should therefore be seen as supportive of one another.



Source: [Saudi Gazette](#)

At the same time, Europe is not a panacea for all of the region’s ailments. Not only is Europe preoccupied with the crisis in Ukraine and the implication it has on the European security order as a whole, but Europe has in the past



never proven that it is a security actor in its own right or that it can provide the guarantees necessary for having an impact on the volatile Middle East regional security environment. Europe's lack of unity on the crisis in Gaza highlighted once more its serious shortcomings when it comes to having a principled position on a critical issue of concern. Yet, what Europe brings to the table is a potentially consequential political role that, coupled with the security function being fulfilled by the United States, could prove critical when it comes to seeing the GCC vision on regional security materialize.

At the end of the day, vision documents are nice to have, but to leave a legacy they require implementation. With their document, the GCC states have taken an important step to see regional tension decrease and a new order being contemplated. As such, it deserves the serious attention of its international partners.

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