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Published in ISPI Dossier

On

Bridging Continents: The Future of EU-GCC Cooperation

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October 2024



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Original piece was published in ISPI's dossier titled "[Bridging Continents: The Future of EU-GCC Cooperation](#)" by Aldo Liga and Chiara Lovotti on October 15th, 2024.

Increased tensions in the Middle East are pushing the GCC and the EU towards a more coordinated approach to **regional security**. This opens unprecedented spaces for security and defense cooperation. However, political challenges arise from internal differences and interests among members on both sides, particularly in the EU. In contrast, GCC members now have more aligned and integrated positions regarding Iran than they did before. Since the countering of non-state armed actors and the proliferation of missiles and drones in the Middle East are now acknowledged as shared security concerns, prospects of EU-GCC **security and defense cooperation** are gaining momentum. And this looks conducive to collaboration, at least in the short term.

What Has Changed: A Sense of Urgency Amid Rising Insecurity:

In latest months, EU-GCC security and defense relations have intensified at a dialogue level. The first-ever [EU-GCC High-Level Forum on Regional Security and Cooperation](#), at foreign ministers' level was held in Luxemburg in April 2024. Prior to that, the first [GCC-EU Regional Security Dialogue](#) took place in Riyadh in January 2024, where the parties agreed on regular security dialogues on issues such as maritime security and cyber security.

The recent decision by both sides to upgrade their institutional relations through high level and regular meetings emphasizes a strategic acknowledgment of the urgent security problems that both regions face. The GCC recognizes that working with the EU can provide vital diplomatic outlets and resources for addressing common challenges, despite the complexity of a comprehensive cooperation. Currently, increased tensions in the Middle East after the **October 7th** and the **war on Gaza** have created a sense of urgency for GCC members to work with external partners. In the same way, the EU and its members have "discovered" the GCC states as partners pursuing similar interests, considering the energy security issues arisen from the conflict in Ukraine and the prospects of a wider war in the Middle East.

Moreover, the EU's emphasis on multilateralism is consistent with the GCC's desire for a more **coordinated approach to regional security**. This encourages GCC states to engage in a dialogue with the EU to seek common ground, building cooperation mechanisms which might, ultimately, boost regional stability and international partnerships. Overall, there is a collective interest amongst GCC countries to foster robust partnership with the EU. This is especially due to the volatile security environment in the Middle East and the looming threat of a wider war occurring between Israel and Iran: a conflict in which the GCC states could find themselves dragged into.

Clear Expectations, Persisting Obstacles on Both Sides:

For the GCC states, the main security expectation regarding EU-GCC cooperation is clear: the establishment of a **comprehensive and effective security framework** to better address regional security threats. With this purpose, the enhancement of intelligence sharing remains on the top of expectations' list: for the GCC states, better **intelligence cooperation** with the EU would



be essential to implement preventative measures in case of attacks by Iran and/or its allies and proxies.

Furthermore, the GCC states would also be interested in conducting joint military training with the EU states, since it could support interoperability and the updating of Gulf military capabilities by learning from European cutting-edge defense technologies. The 2022 *Strategic Partnership with the Gulf* document already stressed the need for a political-military dialogue with the GCC and its members states, also mentioning the possibility of military-to-military contacts. The GCC states have a clear-eyed view that EU cannot be compared militarily with the United States: therefore, they have no expectations that European Union member states can serve as a replacement for the US security role in the Gulf. For instance, the deployment in early 2024 of a European-led naval mission in the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb, *EUNAVFOR Aspides*, has still not shifted Gulf states' perception of the EU as a security provider.

While the EU-GCC scenario looks now conducive for security cooperation, some obstacles persist and regards the polyphony of both the GCC and the EU 'blocs'. **The GCC crisis with Qatar** (2017-2021) has been overcome; however, political differences between member states remain on how to handle regional crises, especially vis-à-vis Iran.

Also, military to military cooperation still occurs more at bilateral, state to state level rather than at a GCC-EU level, as confirmed by the existence of some **bilateral defense and security agreements**. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates stand at the forefront of military cooperation efforts given their overall investment in national defense capacity-building; conversely, other GCC states, like Oman and Kuwait, have taken a more cautious approach than Riyadh and Abu Dhabi about military cooperation, prioritizing instead neutrality and balancing in international and regional affairs. In such a framework, the latter aspirations seem more oriented toward diplomatic engagement with the EU rather than to military cooperation.

Furthermore, the **EU's identity crisis**, with the rise of nationalism and extreme right parties, of economic inequalities, and divergent national interests, has become a ticking bomb for European institutions' cohesion. This significantly reduces the possibilities for the EU to effectively collaborate with foreign partners like the GCC. This fragmentation is going to undermine the European credibility in security and military cooperation, since member states do prioritize national interests over collective goals, thus leading to inconsistent policies.

De-Escalation but Wariness: A Growing GCC Consensus About Iran:

Between the GCC states, there is a common position that a **workable relationship with Iran** has to be found, since Iran is a geographic neighbour. Equally, all GCC states object now to Iran's interference in domestic GCC affairs, to the sponsorship of violent non-state actors throughout the Middle East, and to the **Iranian missile, drone and nuclear programs**. Where the countries have differed at times is in their approach to Tehran, with Oman, Kuwait and Qatar being the readiest to cultivate channels of communications with the Islamic Republic. Something that was not always seen as being positive in other GCC capitals: that dis-alignment has complicated the development of a unified security strategy in the past.



The recent scenario, and especially the current, **direct escalation between Iran and Israel**, has pushed some GCC states to reconsider however their positions: the need for a more collaborative, integrated GCC agenda has become critical. Regarding Tehran, all GCC states are pursuing a **de-escalation strategy** including regular diplomatic talks with Iran. This approach is a starting point that could also help aligning security assessments with the EU. Yet, it remains unclear how sustainable this would be, taking into account that EU member states have different stances about regional tensions in the Middle East and related security issues. At this stage, discussions on EU-GCC security and defense cooperation will therefore be focused more on the short term, rather than on the long run.

Non-State Armed Actors Are GCC-EU Shared Security Concerns:

About the countering of non-state armed actors, there is substantial opportunity for cooperation between the EU and GCC, as well as regarding the related topic of drones and missiles proliferation in the Middle East. The *[GCC Vision for Regional Security](#)* adopted in 2023, commit the Gulf institution to “intensify action with regional and international partners to prevent access by non-state actors to arms, ammunitions, ballistic missile technology and drone systems”: the document represents a consensus view between Gulf capitals and has been elaborated for the past three years.

Recent high-level discussions between the two sides have underlined the importance of cooperation on shared security concerns, considering rising regional tensions. The establishment of **cooperative working groups** under the framework of the GCC-EU regional security dialogue aims to coordinate efforts, for instance, on counterterrorism and asymmetric warfare. This emphasizes mutual acknowledgment of the challenges raised by non-state armed actors, as well as the importance of working together to effectively tackle these issues.

The availability of drones and missiles, also by state actors as Iran, poses a serious security risk to both the EU and the GCC countries. As both regions face shared security challenges, there is a growing chance to designing comprehensive initiatives that capitalize on each side’s capabilities. By collaborating on intelligence sharing, joint military exercises, and regional policy alignment, the EU and GCC can contribute to establish a more secure environment in the Middle East.

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