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A Pivotal EU-GCC Summit

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The second European Union-Gulf Cooperation Council summit scheduled to be held in Riyadh in the fall of 2026 comes at a critical moment in international affairs. What began as a historically underdeveloped relationship between two neighboring economic and geopolitical blocs is rapidly evolving into one of the most strategically consequential partnerships of the emerging multipolar era. If the inaugural EU-GCC summit in Brussels in October 2024 symbolized the opening of a new chapter, a second summit in Riyadh comes at a moment where both sides need to transform political ambition into sustained strategic cooperation.

The regional and global environment that confronts Europe and the GCC states has become dramatically more unstable, fragmented, and competitive in recent years. The current ongoing US-Israel-Iran conflict is fundamentally reshaping the security calculations of governments across the Middle East and Europe alike with a multidimensional crisis evolving that has direct implications for global energy markets, maritime security, supply chains, inflation, defense spending, political stability, and the future structure of international alliances.

In addition, the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, instability in the Red Sea, uncertainty surrounding long-term American strategic commitments, and the growing weaponization of trade, energy, and technology are all fundamentally altering the calculations of policymakers in both Brussels and GCC capitals. The good news is that in this context, the EU and GCC have begun to recognize that their interests are now interconnected and not merely complementary.

In this context, the importance of hosting the summit in Riyadh should not be underestimated. The ongoing US-Israel-Iran war has exposed vulnerabilities for both Europe and the Gulf states in ways that are impossible to ignore. For the GCC countries, the threat is immediate and existential. The Gulf sits at the center of the regional confrontation. Any escalation involving Iranian retaliation, attacks on energy infrastructure, disruption of maritime traffic, cyber warfare, or proxy conflicts threatens the economic and national security foundations of the Gulf monarchies. Even in the absence of direct military confrontation on Gulf territory, instability alone creates enormous risks for investor confidence, economic diversification plans, tourism sectors, logistics networks, and long-term development agendas such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.

For Europe, the implications are equally severe, albeit in different ways. Europe remains heavily dependent on stable global energy flows and secure maritime trade routes. Since the war in Ukraine, European economies have already experienced the consequences of geopolitical disruptions to energy markets. A prolonged Middle Eastern conflict involving Iran threatens to generate another wave of energy volatility, inflationary pressure, and supply-chain instability at a time when many European economies remain fragile. The restrictions imposed on the strategic Strait of Hormuz and the continued vulnerability of the Bab el-Mandeb and the Red Sea have more than underlined the direct consequences for European trade and industrial production.

Moreover, the conflict has highlighted the limits of existing international security arrangements. The United States remains the dominant military actor in the Gulf, yet many regional partners increasingly question the predictability and long-term sustainability of American commitments. Simultaneously, Europe has discovered that it cannot indefinitely outsource its strategic interests in the Middle East to Washington while remaining insulated from the consequences of regional instability. This realization is driving a new convergence of interests between the EU and GCC.

A Riyadh summit in 2026 would therefore represent far more than a diplomatic gathering. It would offer an opportunity to establish a more structured and operational political-security partnership capable of addressing the realities of an increasingly dangerous regional environment.

Several issue areas come to mind in this regard. The first is maritime security cooperation. Enhanced EU-GCC cooperation on naval coordination, maritime surveillance, intelligence sharing, and the protection of critical sea lanes will be a vital component to strengthen regional resilience. The EU has already accumulated considerable operational experience through naval missions such as Operation Atalanta in the Horn of Africa and Operation ASPIDES in the Red Sea.

A second area is overall defense preparedness in the GCC states. The EU's comparative advantage lies in integrated security cooperation that includes resilience-building, technology partnerships, cyber defense, intelligence coordination, industrial cooperation, and crisis management. In terms of defense-

industrial cooperation, Europe's defense sector can contribute to developing local defense manufacturing ecosystems, joint research and development programs, technology transfer agreements, and military-industrial partnerships focused on long-term sustainability. Air and missile defense cooperation would be a critical domain in this regard.

Beyond hard security, the political and diplomatic dimension of the next summit would be equally important. Here, the GCC states have emerged as active diplomatic actors capable of mediating conflicts and facilitating dialogue between rival powers. Europe, despite internal divisions, remains one of the world's largest diplomatic and economic blocs with considerable influence in international institutions. Closer EU-GCC political coordination could therefore create new avenues for de-escalation diplomacy, humanitarian coordination, reconstruction planning, and regional stabilization efforts.

Finally, the current conflict has reinforced the importance of economic diversification, supply-chain security, and strategic investment partnerships. The instability generated has revealed the dangers of overdependence on fragile trade routes and concentrated supply chains. Europe and the Gulf share an interest in developing resilient transport corridors linking Europe, the Middle East, and Asia and strategic projects involving ports, railways, digital infrastructure, and logistics integration will be essential to help both regions reduce vulnerability to geopolitical shocks.

This includes the importance of long-term energy coordination. Although Europe seeks to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, Gulf energy producers will remain indispensable to global energy stability for decades. At the same time, the Gulf is positioning itself as a future leader in clean energy exports, particularly hydrogen. A structured EU-GCC energy partnership will not only help stabilize markets during periods of geopolitical volatility but equally lay the foundations for the next generation of energy cooperation.

Ultimately, the importance of a second EU-GCC summit in Riyadh lies in the recognition that the geopolitical environment confronting both regions has entered a new and more dangerous phase. The US-Israel-Iran conflict is not merely a temporary regional crisis. It is part of a broader transformation of the international order characterized by fragmentation, strategic competition, and chronic instability.

For decades, EU-GCC relations failed to meet their true potential. Europe viewed the Gulf primarily through the lens of energy dependence and regional security concerns, while Gulf states often regarded Europe as an important trading partner but not a decisive geopolitical actor. The relationship lacked strategic depth despite extensive commercial ties. The process to strengthen relations started in May 2022 with the EU's joint communication on "A Strategic Partnership with the Gulf," and the first EU-GCC summit in Brussels in October 2024 marked a step in the right direction toward correcting this imbalance by formally elevating the relationship into a broader strategic partnership centered on political dialogue, economic cooperation, regional security, and connectivity.

Yet the real test of any diplomatic breakthrough lies not in the first summit, but in the second. Initial meetings can produce declarations and goodwill; follow-up summits determine whether institutional trust, policy coordination, and long-term strategic alignment can emerge.

If the first summit in Brussels established the political foundation for a stronger EU-GCC partnership, the second summit in Riyadh must provide the operational framework to make that partnership meaningful. In an increasingly unstable world, sustained cooperation between Europe and the Gulf is no longer optional—it is a strategic imperative.

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