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The GCC and Africa in 2026 Toward a New Model of Partnership

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In 2026, relations between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Africa are expected to develop into a partnership centered on growth, delivery, and strategic alignment. The partnership intends to build long-term economic ties, coordinate on political matters, and establish shared development priorities.

The shift is driven by structural changes in the Gulf and Africa. As oil price volatility persists, GCC members are accelerating economic diversification into African economies with significant growth potential, resources, and capital needs. At the same time, African governments, facing significant infrastructure gaps, are actively diversifying their partnerships and turning towards the Gulf states as preferred strategic partners.

Africa's financing gap illustrates the scale of the challenge and the opportunity. The continent requires approximately 170 billion USD annually to meet infrastructure needs, while current infrastructure investments remain at 80 – 90 billion USD.[1] Gulf states have already invested over 100 billion USD and committed further capital to priority sectors such as energy, mining, infrastructure, agriculture, and the digital economy.[2] In 2026, the focus will increasingly shift toward implementing these commitments and growing cooperation where Gulf capital, expertise, and strategic interests align with African development priorities.

In this regard, tangible outcomes, such as ports delivered, power generated, and trade financed, will further demonstrate the Gulf states' credibility as strategic partners for Africa. However, regional instability, conflict, and violent extremism threaten to derail Gulf-Africa relations.

The Gulf-Africa partnership is shaped by a wide-ranging diplomatic engagement. High-level conferences, bilateral meetings, and multilateral platforms are essential to building trust, aligning strategic interests, and setting priorities for cooperation. In 2026, these engagements will play a greater role in cementing relations, serving as channels through which political cooperation translates into economic cooperation.

Over the past year, forums such as the UAE-Africa Tourism Summit, the UAE-Africa Tourism Summit, the Doha Forum, and the Africa Investment Forum brought together high-level Gulf and African delegations, including government leaders, sovereign wealth funds, development finance institutions, and the private sector.[3] The platforms aligned strategic objectives and facilitated partnership agreements across trade, tourism, mining, and infrastructure sectors.

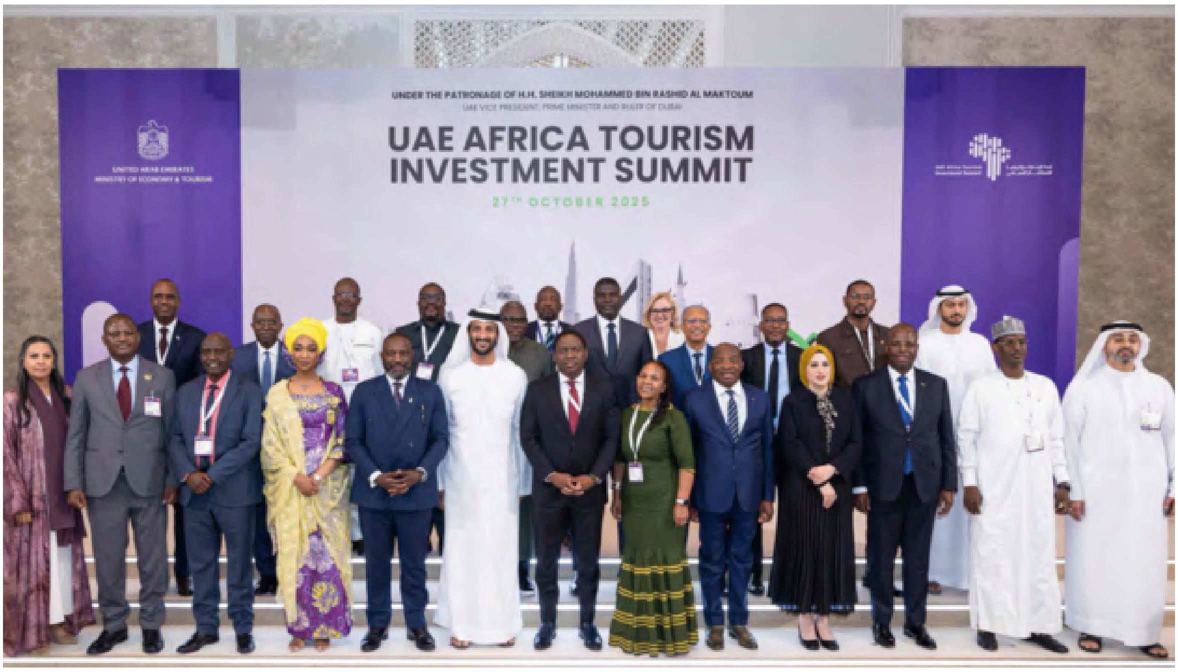


Photo Sourse: Arab News (2025)

Multilateral conferences will elevate relations on the global stage; for example, at the G20 in 2025, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, H.H. Sheikh Khaled bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, announced an AI for Development initiative aimed at strengthening economic and social development on the continent. Participation in platforms such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, BRICS, and the G20, among others, demonstrates that the Gulf and Africa are in regular communication and offer more opportunities to shape mutual interests. These engagements will increase further over the coming year.

Economic Relations

In 2026, economic relations between the GCC and Africa are expected to grow both in scale and depth, as Gulf states deliver on investment pledges and deploy capital across priority sectors. Investment flows, joint partnerships, and trade volumes are on course to grow, as African economies are turning to the Gulf states, which have shown their appetite for it. Qatar announced 100 billion USD in investment commitments for mining, agriculture, telecoms, digital economy, and energy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique, and three other countries.

Africa will mobilise Gulf capital through export-credit financing, co-financing arrangements, and partnerships with African development institutions. The recently elected President of the African Development Bank, Dr. Sidi Ould Tah, intends to leverage his relations in the Gulf to steer more investments into Africa. The Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa (BADEA), based in Riyadh, pledged 800 million USD, while the OPEC Fund for International Development has committed 2.3 billion USD.[4] The AfDB intends to increase contributions from other partners to enable countries to access more financing.

The private sector will be the engine of growth; therefore, public-private partnerships will be increasingly present in Gulf-African relations. Chad's President Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno launched his 30 billion USD National Development Plan, "Connection 2030," at the UAE-Chad Trade and Investment Forum, where it secured 20.5

billion USD in agreements and pledges. Over the next five years, private Emirati investments in Chad will focus on developing mining, infrastructure, agriculture, and energy projects.[5] Other countries, including Ghana, Senegal, and Congo, have called on Gulf stakeholders to invest in their respective countries. In 2026, African countries will increasingly pivot to the Gulf states and their private sectors as partners.

African companies and banks are establishing a footprint in the Gulf with overseas offices to bring them closer to Gulf capital. South Africa's Absa Bank and Nigeria's United Bank for Africa (UBA) are operating and opening offices in the Dubai International Financial Centre and Riyadh's King Abdullah Financial District.[6] The Gulf states have invested over 100 billion USD in priority projects in Africa. By establishing offices in the Gulf, the African private sector and banks can identify interested partners to finance development projects.

Additionally, as Gulf investments continue to flow into the continent, there are opportunities for African Banks to act as co-guarantors. DP World secured a 365 million USD facility agreement with Standard Bank to expand its logistics operations and increase market access.[7]

Trade is another essential consideration for Gulf-Africa relations. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) offers Gulf investors access to a unified market of over 1.4 billion people, strengthening the commercial rationale to embolden trade ties. The UAE will pursue comprehensive economic partnership agreements with African economies to facilitate trade and investment flows. Saudi Arabia, through the Saudi Exim Bank, is growing trade finance partnerships with Ghana Exim Bank, Africa50, and the Republic of Guinea, aiming to increase trade volumes and private-sector cooperation.[8] Chambers of Commerce, joint business councils, and bilateral trade committees are expected to hold more frequent engagements, thereby strengthening institutional links and expanding market access for the Gulf and Africa.

Key Sectoral Developments in 2026:

Infrastructure

The Gulf states, intent on diversifying their trading partners and expanding into more markets, are investing in Africa's infrastructure to support regional and international trade. Through AD Ports and DP World, the UAE is developing ports in Senegal, Congo, and Angola to support trade logistics.[9] Etihad Rail has agreements with Kenya, Chad, Cameroon, and Uganda to build railways. In the Horn of Africa, it will build a 3 billion USD railway network connecting the Berbera Port in Somaliland to Ethiopia. Meanwhile, Qatar intends to make Rwanda and East Africa a logistical trading hub and thus is modernizing the Bugesera Airport; these initiatives demonstrate how trade ambitions are being matched with supporting infrastructure.

Energy

600 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa lack access to energy. With the rapidly growing population, energy needs must be met urgently. Mission 300, a joint AfDB and World Bank initiative, intends to provide energy to 300 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa by 2030.[10] Against this backdrop, Gulf energy companies, including AMEA Power, ACWA Power, and Qatar Energy, are expected to play a growing role in closing this gap and securing additional partnerships in power generation and energy infrastructure.

Energy developments to monitor include:

- Qatar Energy oil exploration license in the Republic of Congo
- AMEA Power solar power plant in Togo
- ACWA Power AfDB 5 billion USD energy cooperation

Critical Minerals and the Energy Transition

GCC member states are forging ahead with the energy transition, and securing green energy supply chains is an increasing priority. There is rising demand for critical minerals such as copper, cobalt, and lithium. African countries, notably the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Zambia, and Guinea, are leading sources for such materials and therefore present opportunities for strategic partnerships that support Gulf ambitions. Qatar Investment Authority's stake in Ivanhoe Mines in Congo and other explorations in Angola demonstrate that it is joining the race for critical minerals.[11] In 2026, competition for access to these resources is expected to intensify, as Saudi Arabia will also be looking for mineral opportunities, having not yet secured mining interests on the same scale as Qatar and the UAE.

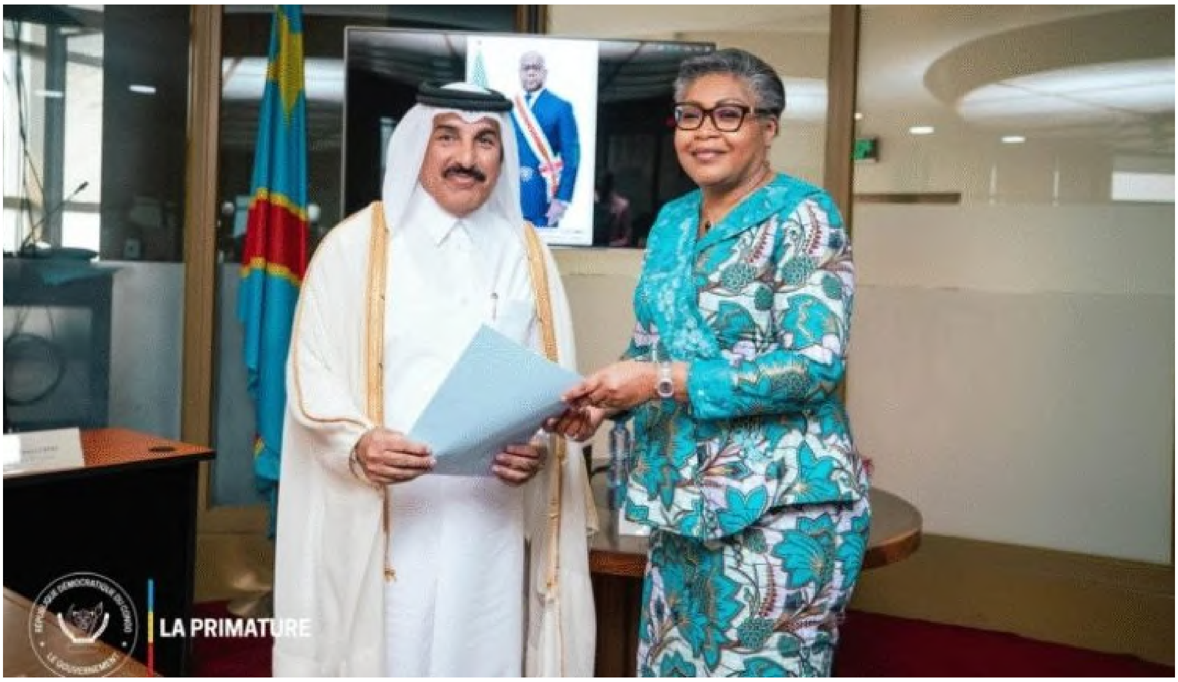


Photo Source: Mining & Business (2025)

Tourism and Connectivity

Tourism is essential to diversification, and the Gulf states are expanding air routes to strengthen links with African markets. Emirates and Qatar Airways continue to increase destinations and flight frequencies to African cities, promoting cultural and economic tourism. With Saudi Arabia hosting the World Cup in 2032, airlines such as Saudia and Flynas are expected to further expand their African networks.

Visa liberalization between the Gulf and Africa will facilitate tourism, increase the frequency of cultural exchanges, and make it easier for African nationals to travel to the Gulf for conferences or investment summits. With growing air routes, civil aviation agreements, and airline and airport partnerships, visa liberalization represents the next strategic step in deepening Gulf–Africa connectivity.

Digital Economy and Financial Technology

Africa's recent digital leap has created opportunities for fintech, e-commerce, and related sectors, thereby increasing the continent's attractiveness to GCC sovereign funds and private capital.[12] In 2025, remittances to Africa exceeded 95 billion

USD, with an increasing share sent through fintech companies and mobile money operators, offering cheaper and faster transfers than traditional banks. In recent years, the Middle East accounted for 27% of inflows to Africa, underlining the growing commercial logic for African fintech to establish outposts in the Gulf, particularly in the UAE.[13]

The rise of fintech also creates demand for digital infrastructure. The UAE is making rapid advances in this area and has announced multiple digital infrastructure investments in Africa,[14] including a 1 billion USD artificial intelligence hub in Ghana and 5G networks in Senegal. In 2026, digital infrastructure is expected to become more prominent in Gulf–Africa economic relations.

Challenges and Risks

However, regional instability remains the most significant constraint on the momentum of Gulf–Africa relations. Conflicts in the Horn of Africa and Eastern Congo have the potential to delay projects, disrupt supply chains, and raise political and security risks for Gulf investors. Instability across the Red Sea also presents a strategic risk, as it could further complicate Saudi Arabia's regional ambitions, including large-scale projects such as NEOM.

At the same time, conflict in mineral-rich Eastern Congo poses direct risks to the Gulf states' mining interests, namely the UAE's IHC and the QIA. For Qatar, a prolonged conflict in eastern Congo could undermine its standing as an effective peace broker.[15] As a result, Congo is likely to remain a strategic priority for Qatar, which has worked in concert with the United States towards peace efforts in the country, where security for mineral supply chains has been a key consideration.

Furthermore, African economies must strengthen their regulatory frameworks and reinforce investor confidence in the protection of capital and contracts. A predictable and business-friendly environment remains essential, including through special economic zones and industrial parks, such as Angola's industrial park, which aim to reduce operational risks. Beyond public policy, the role of the private sector in providing guarantees and risk-sharing mechanisms will be increasingly important in mitigating investor concerns.

Countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and, until recently, Qatar, tend to follow relatively risk-averse investment approaches; as such, African countries should prioritize political stability, regulatory clarity, and investment protection. In this context, the African Development Bank is working with member states towards a pan-African investment guarantee platform, which could help mitigate projects, crowd in private capital, and accelerate structural economic transformation.

Photo Source: World Economic Forum (2025)

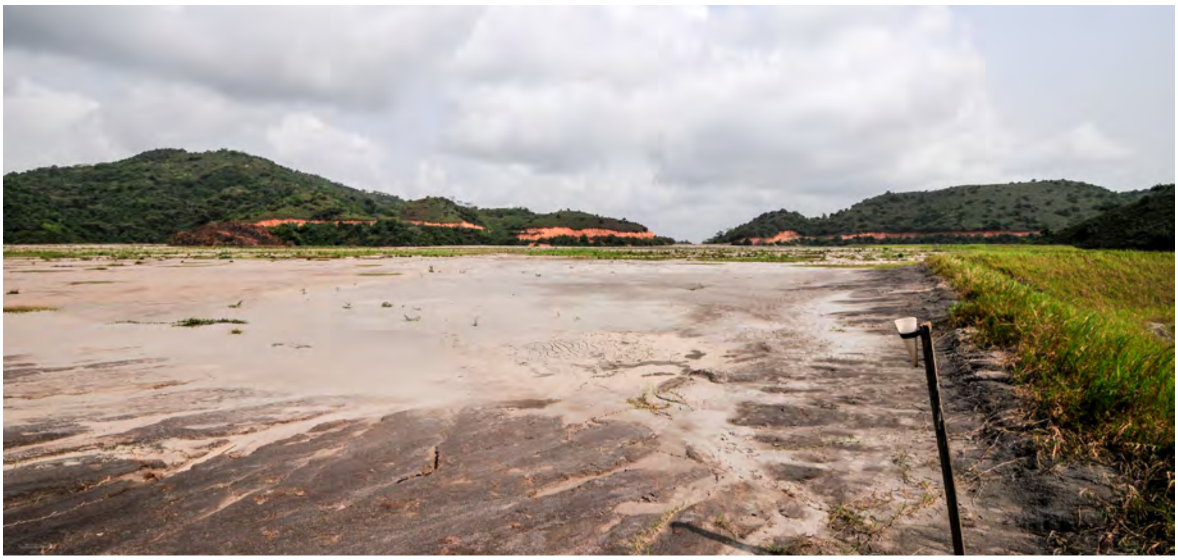
The Way Forward

Gulf commitments must materialize, and African countries must continue to strengthen business-friendly policies and institutional frameworks that protect foreign direct investment.

The Gulf states must deliver on their economic commitments to cement their standing as strategic partners for African countries. Since committing over 50 billion USD to trade and the development of strategic sectors in Africa at the Saudi Arabia-Africa Summit in 2023, Saudi interests have increased. Last year, Vision Invest announced a 700 million USD stake in ARISE IIP to develop agro-processing and supply chains, while ACWA Power signed a 5 billion USD agreement with the African Development Bank to develop power generation and water desalination projects across the continent.[16] These initiatives signal a shift from pledges toward implementation.

DP World committed 3 billion USD over three to five years to develop port infrastructure in Africa. It is on track to deliver the Banana Port in the DRC by 2027 and has broken ground on the Dakar Port in Senegal.[17] Like Saudi Arabia, the UAE demonstrates that it delivers on its pledges, reinforcing its credibility. Credibility will be decisive in maintaining long-term relations between the Gulf and Africa and in unlocking further opportunities. DP World subsequently signed an MoU to develop a logistics free zone outside Dakar. This trend of investment commitments coming to fruition is likely to strengthen long-term economic ties. Qatar pledged over 102 billion USD across five African countries; whether and how these commitments materialize will be a key indicator of Qatar's long-term economic strategy on the continent.

Looking ahead to 2026, Gulf-Africa partnerships will be tested by delivery rather than ambition. The extent to which investments translate into operational infrastructure, expanded trade, energy access, and industrial capacity will determine whether this relationship evolves into a lasting strategic alignment. If successfully implemented, the Gulf-Africa partnership could emerge as a defining pillar of Africa's external economic relations and a core component of Gulf states' long-term diversification strategies. The new model for partnerships between the GCC and Africa is dynamic and pragmatic. It consists of geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic components. Trade and investments will continue to grow, and economic engagement will be shaped by multiple stakeholders, including the private sector, governments, development finance institutions, sovereign wealth funds, and banks.



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