



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All

Gulf-Europe Relations

Prof. Saleh Mohammed Al-Khathlan*
September 2024



@Gulf_Research Gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter



Gulf-Europe Relations

Relations between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and the European Union (EU) have witnessed remarkable development in recent years, especially in the intensification of meetings and contacts between the two sides and the appointment of the first EU Special Representative to the Gulf. This development came as a result of major changes in the regional and international environment, especially the Russian-Ukrainian war and its repercussions on the European economy. The importance of the Gulf countries to the EU comes mainly from their role as a reliable source of energy, especially after the European sanctions imposed on Russia, which prompted Europe to reassess its relations with the Gulf and open new channels to enhance cooperation.

One of the most prominent developments reflecting this growing European orientation towards the Gulf countries is the announcement of a European-Gulf Summit to be held in Brussels on October 16. The Summit is the culmination of a strategic rapprochement initiated by the EU with the launch of the “Strategic Partnership with the Gulf” in May 2022. The partnership includes a multidimensional plan aimed at enhancing cooperation in the areas of security, energy, economy, and culture.



Photo Source: *Arab News* (2023)



Motivations of the EU

The EU's growing interest in the Gulf stems mainly from the challenges facing Europe in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis. Securing alternative energy sources has been a key goal for the EU, with Gulf oil and gas becoming essential to offset Russian supplies. Europe is also pushing for a deeper partnership with the Gulf in other areas such as countering terrorism and extremism, clean energy, nuclear safety, and cybersecurity.

The Strategic Partnership document with the GCC states has prioritized “security in the Gulf.” The document emphasizes that “peace and stability in the Gulf” has a direct impact on the EU's security and economic interests. However, the EU tends to focus on more general global security issues such as counter-terrorism and violent extremism, which may not fully align with the security priorities of the Gulf states.

GCC Priorities

For the GCC states, the top priority in relations with the EU is regional security. The main sources of threat include Iran's nuclear program and Iranian interference in the affairs of Arab countries. The development of Iran's nuclear capabilities represents a direct threat to the stability of the region and will undoubtedly lead to a tectonic shift in the regional balance of power if Iran manages to acquire a nuclear weapon, as the IAEA recently warned.

Iran's nuclear capability would dramatically enhance its diplomatic and military leverage over the Gulf states, compelling them to align with Iranian interests to prevent confrontation. This would enable Iran to assert substantial influence over regional dynamics, fundamentally shifting the balance of power in its favor. Iran's ability to project power through non-state actors such as Hezbollah, the Houthis, and various Shia militias could be emboldened, with Tehran leveraging its nuclear deterrent to provide greater support to these militias.

Therefore, the Gulf must urgently begin to take this more seriously and prepare for a “Day After” scenario if and when Tehran conducts a nuclear test. It is equally crucial for our European partners to recognize and plan for this possibility. From this perspective, the Gulf states are looking forward to a clearer and more assertive European role towards Iran, but it is clear that the EU is trying to avoid directly addressing this issue because of its relations with Tehran.

Although the issue of regional security is addressed in the Strategic Partnership document, the mechanisms proposed appear to be generic and not geared toward addressing real threats. It touches broadly on issues such as countering terrorism and violent extremism, supporting maritime security, and enhancing nuclear safety and disaster response, but does not provide a clear plan on how to deal with the Iranian nuclear threat. This gap in the European proposal highlights the need for a clearer and more decisive Gulf position.



The Importance of a Unified Gulf Position

In order for the GCC states to succeed in steering the course of cooperation with the EU to serve their security interests, they must adopt a clear and unified vision towards regional security issues, especially with regard to the Iranian threat. Gulf states should clearly raise this issue at the upcoming summit and emphasize the need for the EU to take a tougher stance toward Tehran and its nuclear program. In addition, the threat of militias in Iraq cannot be ignored, nor can the repercussions of the Houthis' tightening control over northern Yemen on security and stability in the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf, or its ongoing threats to shipping lanes in the Red Sea.

It is essential that the Brussels summit comes up with practical and concrete mechanisms for security cooperation between the two sides, not just engage in general political dialogue. The Gulf states must also be prepared to put forward their own vision of relations with Europe, rather than simply go along with a European vision that may not be fully compatible with their security needs.

The Rise of the Far-Right and its Impact

Another aspect that may affect Gulf-European relations is the rise of far-right currents in Europe. These movements are hostile to minorities, especially Muslims, and could lead to escalating tensions in European societies. Although the strategic partnership addressed the issue of cooperation to counter violent extremism, it is important for the Gulf side to include the issue of the far-right as one of the challenges that must be addressed in political consultations between the two sides. The rise of the far-right could lead to acts that are offensive to Islam and Muslims, increasing tensions between the Gulf states and the EU. Therefore, Gulf countries should voice this issue during bilateral dialogues with the EU, and work to find ways to cooperate in confronting this challenge.

Conclusion

Gulf-EU relations are in a new phase of their development, but the success of these relations requires a common understanding of priorities and interests. The EU is interested in securing energy sources and cooperating on global security, while the Gulf countries are focused on more sensitive regional security issues, especially with regard to Iran.

For sustainable and fruitful cooperation to take place between the two sides, there must be clear mechanisms to deal with common threats, while emphasizing the role of the Gulf states in putting forward their own vision and ensuring that this vision is an integral part of the strategic partnership.

**Prof. Saleh Mohammed Al-Khathlan is the Senior Advisor at the Gulf Research Center (GRC).*

Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All



مركز الخليج للأبحاث
المعرفة للجميع



**Gulf Research Center
Jeddah
(Main office)**

19 Rayat Alitihad Street
P.O. Box 2134
Jeddah 21451
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 12 6511999
Fax: +966 12 6531375
Email: info@grc.net



**Gulf Research Center
Riyadh**

Unit FN11A
King Faisal Foundation
North Tower
King Fahd Branch Rd
Al Olaya Riyadh 12212
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 112112567
Email: info@grc.net



**Gulf Research Center
Foundation Geneva**

Avenue de France 23
1202 Geneva
Switzerland
Tel: +41227162730
Email: info@grc.net



**Gulf Research Centre
Cambridge**

University of Cambridge
Sidgwick Avenue,
Cambridge CB3 9DA
United Kingdom
Tel: +44-1223-760758
Fax: +44-1223-335110



**Gulf Research Center
Foundation Brussels**

Avenue de
Cortenbergh 89
4th floor, 1000
Brussels
Belgium



@Gulf_Research Gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter

www.grc.net

مركز الخليج للأبحاث
المعرفة للجميع