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# **GCC-EU Ties are Progressing but Obstacles Remain**

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## GCC-EU Ties are Progressing but Obstacles Remain

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GCC-EU relations are in general on a positive trajectory. The points of contact between the two sides have intensified markedly in recent years at both the governmental and institutional levels guided by the "Strategic Partnership Document" put forward by the EU in May 2022. Europe has underlined its determination to play a stronger regional security role including contributing to the de-escalation of tensions in the wider Middle East. This includes the recently operationalized naval operation Aspides with the participation of 19 EU member states for safeguarding shipping in the Red Sea.

The "Strategic Partnership Document" remains the key policy guideline from the European side to move the relationship forward with its focus on six main areas: trade and investment; the green transition and energy security; regional security and stability; humanitarian and developmental issues; governance, reform, and human rights; and institutional cooperation.

The field of institutional relations has seen particular improvement over the past two years. In addition to the 27<sup>th</sup> GCC-EU Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting held in Muscat, Sultanate of Oman on October 9 and 10, 2023, the two sides have agreed on a number of other institutional mechanisms including a work program for the years 2022 to 2027 that is continuously updated, a regularly structured GCC-EU regional security dialogue with four working groups, and a high-level forum on **regional security and cooperation** to complement the work undertaken at GCC-EU official meetings. The first structured regional security dialogue took place in Riyadh in January 2024 while the High-Level Forum will be held on April 22, 2024, in Luxembourg.



(Photo Source: [Hungary Today](#), 2023)



Other recent sessions that have been held include the 31<sup>st</sup> meeting of the GCC-EU Joint Cooperation Committee (February 2023), the 24<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Political Committee (January 2023), the 12<sup>th</sup> GCC-EU Macroeconomic Dialogue (November 2022), the 5<sup>th</sup> Trade and Investment Dialogue (March 2023) and a first meeting of the GCC Aid and EU Services Committee (September 2023). The 7<sup>th</sup> GCC-EU Business Forum was also held in November 2023 in Bahrain.

The past two years have also seen an increase in visits by high-level European officials to the Gulf including EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, EU Council President Charles Michel and the EU's Vice-President and High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell. Mr. Borrell in fact has traveled several times to the GCC countries and such high-level visits have become more the norm rather than the exception as was the case in the past. In addition, numerous EU Commissioners have traveled to the GCC countries to hold talks highlighting a determination to build closer relations across a variety of policy issues. In return, GCC Secretary-General Jasim Albudaiwi has come to Brussels, most recently in March 2024.

In the realm of closer EU-GCC ties, the appointment of Luigi Di Maio, the former Italian Foreign Minister, as the new EU Special Representative for the Gulf Region has been particularly important. From the very outset of his appointment in June 2023, Mr. Di Maio has engaged with all sectors of the GCC, almost without interruption, making it clear from day one that his first task was to listen to regional stakeholders to gain their insights and perspective before deciding on a clear action plan from the EU side. Writing in *The National* in November 2023, Mr. Di Maio wrote: "We can write the perfect strategy in Brussels, but we need to work together [on] how we can converge and execute our shared ambitions and priorities. The real point is now to prioritize with the countries of the GCC...a common map to go ahead." His approach has overall been well received within the GCC states and, as a result, it can be argued that Mr. Di Maio was able to overcome initial skepticism about his appointment and gain a high degree of acceptance among Gulf policy leadership.

Closer institutional relations provide an important foundation for more substantive and broader ties between the two sides. Equally relevant has been the EU's acknowledgement of the active role being played by the GCC states in their neighborhood, characterizing them as "emerging players on the international stage" and underlining their growing influence both regionally and globally. With the Gulf experiencing unparalleled level of economic and societal transition, as well as being subject to the volatile regional security climate, Europe will continue to acknowledge the new dynamics taking place in the Gulf region or risk seeing their interests not being given consideration.

With regard to the war in Gaza, initial European positions of unconditional support for Israel were met with a level of deep disappointment inside the GCC. Ultimately, this led to charges of hypocrisy, double standards, and moral failure, in particular when taken in account the contrasting EU position when it pertained to Ukraine. It was only as the Israeli onslaught of Gaza intensified and public protests in Europe increased, that the European position began to shift. Calls for an immediate ceasefire started gaining momentum by the end of 2023, but some would argue these have come too little, too late in terms of preventing the greater calamity of dragging the entire Middle East, once again, into a period of prolonged instability and uncertainty.



There is thus a lot of work to be done. On the current crisis in the Middle East, it is hoped that the upcoming EU-GCC High-Level Forum in Luxemburg will serve as a further step to develop a common plan of action for the two sides to follow. Of equal importance, however, is progress on the many other issues listed in the Strategic Partnership document, including revitalizing EU-CC Free Trade Area negotiations, setting up a dedicated EU-GCC energy and climate expert group, and holding an EU-GCC Ministerial meeting on humanitarian assistance. Particular emphasis must be given to increased mobility at the youth, culture and education level. This includes visa facilitation for all GCC countries as soon as possible.

What the above suggests is that GCC-EU relations remain a work in progress in which mutual ties must continually be reassessed and adjusted to changing circumstances. There has indeed been a greater degree of convergence of key policy issues and the two sides have underlined their shared interests on a wide variety of topics. Yet, while a degree of momentum in GCC-EU cooperation is apparent, there is at the same time a sense of déjà vu given that numerous pronouncements in the past either did not materialize or live up to their expectations. Europe remains the partner of choice for the GCC states in many domains. The more concrete that ties can be structured, the more sustainable the relationship will be.

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