

The Gulf Cooperation Council as a New Regional Power: Time for the EU to Propose a Strategic Partnership

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a Strategic Partnership**

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About the Author

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Abstract

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a *de facto* regional power in the Arab world. Its role has been crucial in some of the outcomes of the Arab Spring. The GCC countries have been very pragmatic in dealing with the uprisings, avoiding any revolutionary spill-over throughout the Gulf region. This paper examines to what extent the policies of the European Union (EU) in the Gulf have changed since the beginning of the Arab Spring. It argues that despite the calls by the European Parliament and by the High Representative Baroness Ashton to improve the relationship, the EU's support for a new policy in the Gulf after the Arab Spring is stalling, and little new or concrete has been achieved. The paper concludes that the Union needs a reinforced partnership that merges the various EU policies in the region into a single strategic partnership with the Arab countries.

Introduction: a unique chance for the EU to develop a strategic partnership

"A deeper relationship also means an open one and means honest discussions on issues where we may of course have different perspectives. We did that today, and we will continue to do that in the future."¹

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), established in 1981, is a *de facto* regional power in the Arab world. It plays an increasing role in assessing and determining the outcomes of the Arab Spring in Syria, Bahrain and Yemen and has already played a fundamental role in Libya. This paper examines the European Union's policies vis-à-vis the GCC countries since the beginning of the Arab uprisings in December 2010. At the EU-GCC Joint Council in 2012, Baroness Ashton, the EU's High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, called for a "more strategic, more dynamic" relationship between the two regional organizations following the events of the Arab Spring.² A closer bond could potentially help in dealing with issues that are important to the future of both parties, such as energy supply, regional security and diplomatic progress in the Middle East peace process. Therefore, this paper addresses the extent to which EU policies in the Gulf have changed since the beginning of the Arab Spring.

The EU has neglected the Gulf region for many years. Today, new momentum has been gained, as the Arab population rebelled against long-standing dictators. The Gulf countries have increased their influence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The EU needs to be aware of this and foster its relations with the GCC. The European Union has a unique opportunity to develop a new approach toward the GCC, not only in economic terms, but also with regard to a more intense political dialogue. However, despite this 'window of opportunity' and the calls to improve the relationship, a EU new policy in the Gulf after the Arab Spring is still pending. This paper argues that in the long term a strategic partnership seems the only path suitable to merge the various EU policies in the region into a single partnership with Arab countries. Nevertheless, the EU's support for such an approach is stalling, notwithstanding the European Parliament's frequent calls for a closer relationship.

¹ European Union, *Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton following the 22nd EU-GCC Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting*, Luxembourg, 25 June 2012, p. 2.

² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, it identifies the increasing role of the Gulf countries on the international scene, in particular Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, in the last few years. The GCC is intervening with more consistency in regional questions and it is gaining international recognition for its engagement. Long-standing political and economic interests lie behind these commitments. Second, the paper assesses the EU's need for a new Gulf Strategy based on an analysis of the main strategic concerns and priorities for the EU, including the EU-GCC Free Trade Agreement (FTA) which is still under negotiation.

What makes the Gulf count?

This section aims to define the enhanced role acquired by the GCC countries on the international scene.

New challenges for the Gulf countries

On 25 May 1981, the Gulf Cooperation Council Charter was signed in Abu Dhabi.³ Dugulin argues that one of the main reasons for its establishment was the necessity to create a "safer regional environment so that the core existence of the State is not compromised by outside threats" following the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran war.⁴ The petro-monarchies had many common features that distinguished them from other countries in the region. Yemen, Iraq and Iran were kept out of the new regional organization. All six countries are oil producers, they are absolute monarchies and they are Arabs and Muslims, with a majority of Sunnis (except Bahrain, but the island has always felt the influence of Saudi Arabia).⁵

While the security element has always been a vital feature of GCC integration, at least two other important pillars of the project should be taken into account: a) the enhancement of "domestic well-being both through long-term economic development, sustaining the upward evolution of the nations' standard of living, and the

³ The Charter was signed by the six monarchs of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. R. Dugulin, *A Neighborhood Policy for the Gulf Cooperation Council*, Dubai, Gulf Research Center, 2010, p. 9; B. Khader, *L'Europe et les pays arabes du Golfe – des partenaires distants*, Paris, Public – Quorum – Cermac, 1994, p. 39.

⁴ Dugulin, *op.cit.*, p. 9.

⁵ Khader, *op.cit.*, p. 40.

protection of national values and traditions”, and b) the establishment of “a strong regional club able to respond to local threats and changes on the world scene”.⁶

Today, the role of the GCC has been advanced considerably. It is not passively waiting to “respond to local threats and changes”.⁷ On the economic side, the GCC has until a few years ago been an authentic success. In 2003, the GCC countries set up a customs union⁸ “in order to facilitate intra-GCC flow of goods and creating a collective negotiating power”.⁹ Many difficult tasks still lay ahead such as establishing a monetary union and a single currency. Although the GCC agreed on the location of the Monetary Board in Riyadh, in May 2009, these ambitious goals have been postponed.¹⁰

Cooperation in the area of military and external policy was established in 1982 with the creation of the “Al-Jazeera Shield Joint Forces”, followed by the signing of the GCC Joint Defence Agreement in 2000. With regards to cooperation in the field of human and environmental affairs, the official documents do not mention a specific field of cooperation or related projects in the field of human rights, good governance or democratization.

Notwithstanding its strengths and weaknesses, the GCC has been an oasis of peace – when compared to the surrounding region – and the “only functioning sub-regional integration project in the Arab world”.¹¹ The uprisings in the Arab region and the persistent challenges to the legitimacy of the eight remaining monarchies in the region¹² are seriously worrying the GCC states. All six GCC states have poor human rights records. *Freedom House* has constantly placed five of them in the ‘not-free’ category of its ranking of independent countries, with due exception for Kuwait listed

⁶ Dugulin, *op.cit.*, p. 10.

⁷ Khader, *op.cit.*, p. 40.

⁸ With the exception of Bahrain that accounts for only 5% of the GCC GDP. “Executive Focus: Gerd Nonneman, Dean, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar”, *The Prospect Group*, 8 January 2012.

⁹ “The GCC: Process and Achievement”, *The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, Secretariat General, Riyadh, Information Centre, 2009, 4th edn.*, p. 65.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹¹ C. Hanelt, “The Middle East as a Region of Opportunity”, *Spotlight Europe*, November 2010.

¹² The six GCC countries, the Kingdom of Morocco and the Kingdom of Jordan. The last two have been officially invited to join the Council, even if enlargement does not appear realistic in the short run. “Executive focus: Gerd Nonneman”, *op.cit.*; S. Al Qassemi, “An expanded GCC: Challenges and Opportunities”, *Gulf News*, 11 May 2011.

as 'partially free'.¹³ At the same time, the GCC countries' political and economic power puts them in the spotlight of the international community and of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The latter have increased their presence on the ground¹⁴ and are publishing considerably more reports about serious violations of human rights taking place in the region.

During the last 18 months, protests have increased enormously in the Gulf. For example, the detaining of five prisoners of conscience in the UAE in 2011 led to calls for urgent action by *Amnesty International* and *Human Rights Watch*. Known as the "UAE 5", the five men were jailed for almost eight months, following some comments published in the online political forum UAE Hewart.¹⁵ They were charged with the offense of "insulting officials" under article 176 of the country's penal code,¹⁶ and the online forum was eventually banned by authorities. *Amnesty International* earlier this year published a press release to raise awareness about six men still languishing in jail in Saudi Arabia one year after their arrest.¹⁷ They were jailed because they tried to organize the "Day of Rage" in Riyadh. Moreover, *Amnesty* reported that at least one of the detainees "was tortured or otherwise ill-treated after being detained".¹⁸

Although the human rights record points to an imminent upheaval, many Gulf commentators and scholars hold a different view. For instance, Abdullah warns not to expect anything comparable to what has happened in Egypt or Tunisia because there is currently no room for political change.¹⁹ Al Qassemi argues that the "centuries-old tribal nature of the Gulf societies ensures that authority is by tradition delegated to a tribal chief".²⁰ A strong intellectual class and the omnipresent religious authority, through their *fatwas*, are the main obstacles towards any reforms.

¹³ Freedom House, "Combined Average Ratings – Independent Countries", 2011.

¹⁴ In the last few years, major NGOs have been invited by the sovereigns to set up human rights commissions. For instance, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in 2005 "invited both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to send their inspectors to Riyadh". R. Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, London, Arrow Books, 2009, pp. 271-272.

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, "UAE: Expunge activists' convictions", 30 November 2011.

¹⁶ Amnesty International, "Amnesty launches Edinburgh Festival campaign to 'free the UAE 5'", 8 August 2011.

¹⁷ Amnesty International, "Saudi Arabia: at least six men held for a year for intending to protest", Press release, 9 March 2012.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ "Al Jazeera interviews Dr. Abdulkhaleq Abdulla", *Al Jazeera Forum*, 12 March 2011.

²⁰ S. Al Qassemi, "Reform in Arab Gulf regimes is unattainable – for now", *The Guardian*, 26 January 2012.

The outbreak of the Arab Spring was also caused by underlying economic difficulties. The social contract between the sovereign and the citizens, where the government has the duty to provide employment, housing, healthcare and all the fundamental services related,²¹ had been breached.²² The other major reason is related to the perception of gross human rights violations.²³

The Gulf 'momentum'

In the last few years, the Gulf states have acquired a primary role on the international stage. This recent success is the sum of many factors stemming from the past – such as the independence from the United Kingdom acquired only in the 1970s – and from the present – for instance, the strong personality of sovereigns leading these nations. Moreover, in the last few decades they have stood as supporters of Western policies and they have provided “an anchor of stability in a troubled environment where peace has been repeatedly challenged”.²⁴

The Gulf countries, thanks to their immense gas and oil reserves, are “taking the lead, influencing events, assuming greater financial responsibilities, projecting socioeconomic confidence, and becoming increasingly conscious of their newly acquired status as a regional power”.²⁵ According to *The New York Times*, the centre of gravity in the Arab region has moved towards the Gulf, and the United States is trying to adapt and take care at the same time of its interests, namely a facilitated access to the oil and gas reserves, a strong support to the fragile system in Iraq and a commitment to avoid Iran from developing the nuclear bomb.²⁶

²¹ “The Arab Gulf States afford to postpone democracy as long as they deliver on socioeconomic, development and adhere to the welfare programmes as policy priorities”. A. Abdullah, “Contemporary socio-political issues of the Arab Gulf moment”, *The Centre for the Study of Global Governance*, September 2010, p. 19.

²² B. Khader, “The Arab Spring: promises and challenges”, lecture, Bruges, College of Europe, 18 January 2012. It is also a matter of “unsustainability of the state” according to S. Colombo, “The GCC Countries and the Arab Spring: Between Outreach, Patronage And Repression”, *IAI Working Papers*, vol. 12, no. 09, Rome, Institute of International Affairs, March 2012, p. 3.

²³ An ‘Arab Spring model’ revolution in the Gulf countries would, according to Mishaal Al Gergawi, result 80% from economic problems and 20% from the perception of a lack of human rights. Interview with Mishaal Al Gergawi, Emirati affairs commentator and Gulf News columnist, via skype, 15 March 2012.

²⁴ “The EU and the GCC – a new Partnership”, *Policy Papers RSC*, no. 02/7, Florence, European University Institute, 2002, p. 6.

²⁵ Abdullah, *op.cit.*, p. 1.

²⁶ R. Takeyh, “The Gulf Is Where It's At”, *The New York Times*, 8 February 2012.

The GCC countries' rising consciousness regarding its global role has never been so high. According to Ambassador Al Hamad, the GCC countries have a strategic location at the centre of a hotspot region, and they are in a strong position to contribute to building a secure and stable Middle East.²⁷ Economically, the GCC countries perform consistently well. "[T]he World Bank has classified their economies among the best performing, with an average of 5.8 per cent annual growth during the first decade of the twenty-first century."²⁸ Qatar, as the fastest-growing country of the region, is leading the progress of the GCC countries. In the European press Qatar has been defined as a "mammouth par la force de frappe diplomatique et économique"²⁹ as well as a "pigmy with a punch of a giant".³⁰

The reasons for the Gulf 'momentum' are mostly pragmatic when it comes to the untiring defence of the Arab world. Nonneman rightly points out the necessity for most of the GCC countries to gain diplomatic leverage, due to their small size, and he argues that they can best achieve this by improving their country's 'brand' and recognition profile on the international stage.³¹

What interest for the GCC in the Arab Spring?

Libya was the first case where Qatar played a primary role, side by side with much more powerful allies such as France, the United Kingdom and the United States. Qatar was the first Arab country supporting the UN Resolution establishing a no-fly zone over Libya in March 2011.³² "Its muscles, in the form of weapons, cash, fuel, airlift, six fighter-bombers, 100-plus field advisers and vigorous diplomacy, bolstered NATO's bombers and drones and helped oust Colonel Qaddafi."³³ As a matter of fact, Qatar was the bank of Libyan rebels during the revolution,³⁴ pledging an estimated \$400-500 million of the total \$2-3 billion asked for by the rebels. As a result, Qatari ruler Sheikh Al-Thani was jokingly nicknamed as "Emir of Qatar and Libya".³⁵

²⁷ Interview with Ambassador Al Hamad, Ambassador of GCC Delegation in Brussels, via email, 5 & 14 March 2012.

²⁸ Abdullah, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

²⁹ B. Barthe, "Le Qatar à la conquête du monde", *Le Monde – Géo & Politique*, 27 February 2012, p. 4.

³⁰ "Pigmy with the punch of a giant", *The Economist*, 5 November 2011.

³¹ "Executive focus: Gerd Nonneman", *op.cit.*

³² "Special Report – Qatar's big Libya adventure", *Reuters Africa*, 9 June 2011.

³³ "Pigmy with the punch of a giant", *op.cit.*

³⁴ "Qatar asserts its diplomatic clout", *Al Jazeera*, 1 February 2012.

³⁵ "Special Report – Qatar's big Libya adventure", *op.cit.*

Bahrain was a more complex case, as the tiny Kingdom is part of the GCC countries and strategically fully dependent on Saudi Arabia. In March 2011, 1.500 members of Saudi Arabia's National Guard marched towards Manama, capital of Bahrain, in order to violently hush thousands of peaceful protesters asking for democratic change.³⁶ The Saudi troops, joined by UAE police forces, were marching under the banner of the GCC.³⁷

In Yemen, the GCC has been pushing forward for six months the implementing mechanism, finally signed by President Saleh in Riyadh on 23 November 2011. This was another major diplomatic achievement for the Gulf states. The success is particularly valuable for Saudi Arabia, which wanted to handle the crisis in order to avoid any kind of revolutionary spill-over. "From a diplomatic standpoint [the GCC initiative] is an acceptable solution",³⁸ because it obliged President Saleh to resign and transfer his powers to Vice-President Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi. Nevertheless, many complaints have been expressed by the opposition side regarding the personal immunity assured to Saleh. The GCC initiative showed to the rest of the world their democratic commitment. At the same time, it kept the balance of power in the region, preventing youth and civic movements from gaining a powerful position in the new government.³⁹

Currently, the Syrian situation is mobilizing human rights activists around the world. The GCC countries have been continuously mustering their political weight and delivering humanitarian aid during the last several months. They expelled, on 7 February 2011, the Syrian ambassadors from their capitals "in protest at the continued brutal repression of protests aimed at toppling Bashar Al Assad".⁴⁰ They have also abandoned the Arab League plan in Syria as it seemed to them "the mission was turning a blind eye to regime atrocities".⁴¹ At the end of February 2012, the Prime Minister of Qatar proposed to arm the Syrian rebels, to solve the impasse in which the UN Security Council has found itself hamstrung by the veto of China and

³⁶ T.C. Jones, "Saudi Arabia versus the Arab spring", *Raritan, a Quarterly Review*, 2011, pp. 43-59.

³⁷ High officers of UAE forces, *Dubai Police*, have refused any implication in the affair

³⁸ A. Alwazir, "Yemen's GCC initiative: Cosmetic or Comprehensive change?", *Al Akhbar*, 30 November 2011.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ P. Sands, "Damascus faces diplomatic isolation as Gulf states expel Syrian envoys", *The National*, 8 February 2012.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Russia on the table resolutions. Qatar, backed by Saudi Arabia, has been asking for international support to stop the killings of civilians.⁴²

From a political perspective, the Gulf countries, above all the UAE and Saudi Arabia, fear the rising power of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist parties in the post-Arab Spring elections. During the last few months, new contacts have been established between the sovereigns of GCC and the Muslim Brotherhood party in Egypt. So far, the political party enjoys a semi-recognized status only in Bahrain and in Kuwait.⁴³ Concerning the relations with the UAE, the Muslim Brotherhood is willing to establish good relations with this country, also taking into account the great amount of investments of the Emirates in Egypt.⁴⁴

Another reason for a stronger diplomatic action by the Gulf countries are the enormous foreign investments that have been put in place over the last years. The economic figures show investments amounting to over \$110 billion between 2003 and 2008 in the Arab region.⁴⁵ A comparison of these investments to those of European countries is striking, considering that "an average Gulf investment in the MENA is \$268 million compared to \$70 million from Europe".⁴⁶

To sum up, the GCC countries have reached the stage of a "key global player which has a pivotal role in solving global challenges".⁴⁷ For the first time, the Gulf states are conscious of their role and they want to use it to foster their strategy. This strategy consists of: avoiding Arab Spring spill-over, as they "have witnessed some sort of public protest in one form or another"⁴⁸ also in the Gulf region; playing a primary role in all Arabic regional dossiers, to protect their investments and increase their influence among Arab countries; and, finally, diversifying their economy. The UAE

⁴² "Qatar PM calls for arming Syrian rebels", *Reuters*, 27 February 2012.

⁴³ S. Al Qassemi, "Will Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood mend ties with Gulf States?", *Egypt Independent*, 7 February 2012.

⁴⁴ For further details see C. Giardullo, *The GCC as a new global actor in the Arab turmoil: A renewed dialogue between the EU and the Gulf countries*, Master's thesis, Bruges, College of Europe, 2012, p. 14.

⁴⁵ E. Burke, A. Echagüe & R. Youngs, "Why the European Union needs a 'broader Middle East policy'", *FRIDE Working Paper*, no. 93, Madrid, February 2010, p. 2.

⁴⁶ P. Henry, S. Abdelkarim and B. de Saint-Laurent, 'Foreign direct investment into MEDA in 2007: the switch', ANIMA Investment Network, 2008, cited in E. Burke & S. Bazoobandi, "The Gulf takes charge in the MENA region", *FRIDE*, Working paper, no. 97, Madrid, April 2010, p. 5.

⁴⁷ T. Renard, "The Treachery Of Strategies: A Call For True EU Strategic Partnerships", *EGMONT*, Paper, no. 45, Brussels, April 2011, p. 5.

⁴⁸ Colombo, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

and Qatar are paving the way for the coming decades, when they will not be able to rely as much on oil and gas reserves.

Enhancement of the EU's involvement in the post-Arab Spring Gulf

This part analyzes the major stakes around the EU-GCC relationship and the reaction of the EU to the Arab Spring, through its policies, in the Gulf.

EU-GCC relations: between 'momentum' and little ambition

The GCC and the EU were set up with different priorities. The former was created "as an inter-governmental institution with the emphasis on cooperation rather than integration",⁴⁹ while the latter has "always [been] looking for ways in which actual integration can be fostered".⁵⁰ The institutional relationship between the EU⁵¹ and the GCC was established through a Cooperation Agreement that was signed in 1988, with the main objectives of "strengthening stability in a region of strategic importance and to facilitate political, trade and economic relations".⁵² The Agreement was not very ambitious,⁵³ as it pursued the specific aim of starting institutional relations and merely fostering regional integration.⁵⁴

The Agreement establishes joint institutions such as the Joint Council and the Joint Cooperation Committee as the backbone of the relations between the two regional organizations. Moreover, the Cooperation Agreement called for the signing of a Free Trade Agreement. However, the two parties have faced many hurdles in the negotiations of a new agreement.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ C. Koch, "Limited Possibilities: Defining the Interaction between the EU and the GCC", in B. Balamir-Coskun & B. Demirtas-Coskun (eds.), *Neighborhood Challenge – The European Union and its Neighbors*, Boca Raton, Universal Publishers, 2009, p. 166.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ At the time the European Economic Community.

⁵² "Political and economic relations", *EU Delegation*.

⁵³ "The EU-GCC Cooperation agreement lies at the lowest rank of the EU economic preferences pyramid [...] do[es] not include any tariff preference, with both the EU and the GCC granted each other Most Favored Nation Treatment", N.K. El-Amir, "Towards a Security Transregional Relations between the EU and the GCC: Possibilities and Obstacles", Workshop organized by the Gulf Research Center, European University Institute, Montecatini Terme, 21-25 March 2007, p. 12.

⁵⁴ "EMPHASIZING the fundamental importance attached by the parties to consolidating and strengthening regional integration", *Official Journal*, L 054, 25 February 1989, p. 1.

⁵⁵ For further details see Giardullo, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

The backbone of EU-GCC relations are the annual Joint Council meetings at Ministerial level. They have been held alternatively in the Gulf countries and in Europe and they have provided the basis for developing the partnership. Momentum was reached again in 2010, with the establishment of a Joint Action Programme (JAP) (2010-2013)⁵⁶ for the implementation of the EU-GCC Cooperation Agreement. It strengthened cooperation in 14 sectors⁵⁷ and “must be regarded as a very positive step”, which aims to “expand the relationship to also include the private sector, research institutions, universities and other nongovernmental actors”.⁵⁸

The Joint Action Programme has fostered many projects. For instance, in the field of ‘higher education and scientific research’, Erasmus Mundus scholarships have been established⁵⁹ for the exchange of students with several Gulf universities.⁶⁰ The “GCC cultural days” have been organized in seven different European capitals, and the “EU cultural days” were held for the first time in Riyadh.

At the Joint Council held in Luxembourg in June 2012 the parties “commended progress achieved through the implementation of the 2010-2013 EU-GCC Joint Action Programme [and ...] agreed to the preparation of a joint work programme for the next period (2013-2016)”.⁶¹ The Joint Council discussed mostly regional security issues, due to the on-going protests and adjustment process throughout the Arab region, notably the Middle East Peace Process, Syria, Iran, Iraq and Yemen. The parties agreed to hold the next meeting in Bahrain in 2013.

⁵⁶ “Joint Action Programme for Implementation of GCC-EU Cooperation Agreement of 1988”, 2010-2013.

⁵⁷ In particular “economic, financial and monetary cooperation”, “investment”, “trade and cooperation”, “energy”, “transport”, “environment and climate change”, “industry”, “combating money laundering and terrorist financing”, “intellectual property rights”, “telecommunications and information technology sector”, “higher education and scientific research”, “tourism”, “cultural and mutual understanding”, “antiquities and museum”. *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ M. Bauer & R. Rieger, “Enhancing Interregional Partnership: Europe and the Gulf” in E. Ratka and O. Spaier (eds.), *Understanding European Neighbourhood Policies: Concepts, Actors, Perceptions*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2012, p. 185.

⁵⁹ There has not been a large success so far for these scholarships. The reason lies in the small economic sum granted through the scholarships by the EU, if compared to the Gulf standard, Interview with an official, Arabian Peninsula, Iran, Iraq Division, EEAS, via telephone, 30 March 2012; Interview with an official, European Parliament, Brussels, 23 April 2012.

⁶⁰ University of Bahrain, Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, the University of Qatar, Zayed University and Nuzwa University in the UAE. Interview with Ambassador Al Hamad, *op.cit.*

⁶¹ “22nd EU-GCC Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting Luxembourg”, 25 June 2012.

EU-GCC FTA: a "missing milestone"⁶² to boost further relations

The GCC admires the EU's regional economic integration. According to Ambassador Al Hamad, the EU serves as a model of economic and monetary integration for the GCC, despite its current crisis, and the GCC can learn from its experience, success and shortfalls.⁶³ During the summit of the GCC in Riyadh on 20 December 2011, King Abdullah said: "I ask today that we move from a phase of cooperation to a *phase of Union* within a single entity".⁶⁴

The aspiration is even clearer when one looks at the effort of the Gulf countries to establish a Gulf Dinar,⁶⁵ a common currency, initially forecast for 2010 and now delayed. Moreover, the GCC "has adopted the same convergence criteria stated in the Maastricht treaty for the EU, namely, interest rate, inflation rate, public debt as well as the public deficit",⁶⁶ and the upcoming Gulf System Central Bank will eventually follow the EU system, "i.e., a central banking system including the Gulf Central Bank as well as the National Central Banks".⁶⁷

Furthermore, some government officials from the General Secretariat of the GCC have been sent to Luxembourg to study the functioning of EUROSTAT in order to improve the common statistics services. The Gulf countries are well aware of the problems the EU is facing with the crisis, but after having studied various models of economic integration, they came to the conclusion that the "European one is the best".⁶⁸

The deadlock rests on all the disputes that occurred in the EU-GCC FTA negotiations. Notwithstanding the intensity of bilateral trade that ranks the GCC as the EU's 6th trading partner and the EU as the GCC's main trading partner, no agreement has been reached so far. The European Commission effectively re-launched negotiations on the EU-GCC FTA in 2002, with the goal of reinforcing a new regional market and

⁶² A. Sager, "Towards a Comprehensive GCC-EU Partnership", *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, 12 February 2012.

⁶³ Interview with Ambassador Al Hamad, *op.cit.*

⁶⁴ "Saudi King Abdullah urges GCC 'to move from phase of cooperation to phase of union", *Al Arabiya*, 20 December 2011 [emphasis added].

⁶⁵ Also called *Khaleeji Dinar*.

⁶⁶ A. Echchabi *et al.*, "The implementation of the Gulf Dinar and its possible impacts", Paper presented at the 13th Malaysian Finance Association Conference 2011, 10-12 June 2011, p. 9.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶⁸ Interview with an official, EEAS, *op.cit.*

bringing it closer to the EU market. Since 2007, the EU Commission has been very close to concluding an agreement that will not only be an important region-to-region FTA in the global trading system, but it will also open doors for new investments and new trade beyond what the EU and the GCC offer each other through the World Trade Organization.⁶⁹

The FTA would not only improve economic relations. It also has a great potential to enhance a stronger partnership with the Gulf. For instance “[t]he EU’s proposal for a Memorandum of Understanding on energy cooperation has been rejected by the GCC countries, insisting that an FTA is the precursor to deepening other areas of cooperation”.⁷⁰ Finally, as the EU has concentrated its efforts so far in the region on economic and trade matters, the achievement of a coherent strategy “has been overshadowed as a result of the stalemate in the FTA negotiations”.⁷¹

Although there is some admiration for the EU’s economic integration model, the GCC countries are looking elsewhere to further enhance strategic and economic relationships. The GCC has already signed FTAs with Singapore, New Zealand and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), while it is negotiating new FTAs with other important regional and influential countries such as China, India and Turkey.⁷²

The EU’s Gulf Strategy: strategic concerns and priorities

In the past years, the EU has created many subcategories in its approach towards the Arab region. “[The] European policy is still divided into separate ‘policy blocs’. [...] The disjuncture between the Mediterranean and Gulf components is especially notable”.⁷³ The Arab Spring could be a unique opportunity for the EU “to rethink the artificial compartmentalization of its policies and finally develop a single regional framework”.⁷⁴ A singular strategy does not imply an absolute equality in relations and approach, but more broadly it means a substantive use of “the principle of

⁶⁹ Interview with an official, DG Trade, European Commission, via e-mail, 18 April 2012.

⁷⁰ R. Youngs & A. Echagüe, “Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Need for Triangulation”, *The International Spectators*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2010, p. 33.

⁷¹ Bauer & Rieger, *op.cit.*, p. 181.

⁷² R. Youngs, “Impasse in Euro-Gulf Relations”, *FRIDE Working Paper*, no. 80, Madrid, April 2009, p. 3. Moreover, the GCC is negotiating FTAs with Australia, Korea, Japan, Pakistan, Hong Kong, Chile and Malaysia. “Free Trade Agreements”, *UAE Ministry of Foreign Trade*, 2010.

⁷³ Youngs & Echagüe, *op.cit.*, p. 28.

⁷⁴ T. Schumacher, “The EU and the Arab spring: Between Spectatorship and Actorness”, *Insight Turkey*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2011, p. 113.

differentiation"⁷⁵ at least in the three macro sub-regional areas of the Maghreb, Mashreq and the Gulf.⁷⁶ A new strategy is even more necessary towards the GCC as "[t]he nature of Gulf polities has allowed little scope for the kind of economic and social bottom-up engagement which characterises EU external policy".⁷⁷ With the recent increase in GCC investments in the Mediterranean region, the EU will need to foster a regional framework for economic integration.⁷⁸

The reaction of the European Union to the Arab Spring cannot be clearly defined so far, and the EU's strategy in the Gulf remains unsettled.⁷⁹ It oscillates between waiting for "the settling down of the Arab spring"⁸⁰ and a 'pro-active aptitude' as the role of the EU "is set to become more central and relevant" in the entire region.⁸¹ As confirmed by Abdullah, "Europe, regardless of the difficult time it is going through and the crisis, has always been influential to us and the world".⁸²

A strategic partnership⁸³ between the Gulf and the EU would help secure energy supplies and reach a closer mutual understanding,⁸⁴ but it has not been developed yet for the GCC.⁸⁵ In formulating its response to recent developments, the EU will need to take into account the new actors in the region, the Gulf countries. This is due to the fact that "some of the Gulf States are facing their own protests and demands for political reform, their present governments have a distinct interest in seeing the Arab world return to peaceful political processes".⁸⁶ The stakes around this partnership are not only cultural or economic. It can be argued that the main

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁷⁶ Today differentiated by the nature of its policies: "principle of regionality" in the EMP, "different bilateralism" as in the case of the ENP and "inter-regionalism" for the Gulf region. *Ibid.*, p.114.

⁷⁷ Youngs & Echagüe, *op.cit.*, p. 29.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁷⁹ "It is high time for a more nuanced understanding of the Gulf countries and their varying economic and political agendas". E. Woertz, "Qatar and Europe's Neglect of the Gulf Region", *Notes Internacionales CIDOB*, no. 46, February 2012, p. 1.

⁸⁰ M. Emerson, "Just Good Friends? The European Union's Multiple Neighborhood Policies", *The International Spectator*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2011, p. 58.

⁸¹ C. Koch, "Strengthening an Enduring EU-GCC Partnership", *ArabNews*, 20 April 2011.

⁸² Cited in A. Mustafa, "GCC can learn much from the EU experience, says panel", *The National*, 3 May 2012.

⁸³ It would be the EU's 11th strategic partnership. The EU has expressly created the concept of strategic partnership to "make its voice heard in a multipolar world". Renard, *op.cit.*, p. 1.

⁸⁴ Even more, the MEPs are well aware of the role these countries could play in the Euro crisis through their fundings. Interview with an official, European Parliament, Brussels, 23 April 2012.

⁸⁵ Interview with an official, EEAS, *op.cit.*

⁸⁶ Koch, *op.cit.*, p. 129.

strategic concerns and priorities are related to regional security issues. The first dossier is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "Both the EU and the GCC perceive the conflict as a relevant factor in their security".⁸⁷ According to Bauer and Rieger, this conflict is of a threefold interest for the Gulf states:

- 1) the Gulf monarchies have an important strategic interest in a peaceful conflict settlement [...]
- 2) the Gulf state regimes have a genuine interest in a significant improvement of the Palestinian people's living conditions [...]
- 3) the GCC countries have an economic interest in a normalisation of relations with Israel.⁸⁸

Finally, "a pro-active GCC working in concert with the EU can provide tangible benefits for the overall stability of the Middle Eastern region".⁸⁹ In order to achieve this result, the GCC has to be reassured by the EU about the "growing consciousness" that "has emerged within the institutions of the European Union about the Gulf's strategic importance".⁹⁰ The GCC countries "want their interest reflected in other policy circles [...and] to become part of the mainstream debate".⁹¹

The EEAS and the European Parliament pushing for a Gulf Strategy

Notwithstanding the growing interest of the GCC in Asian markets and alliances⁹² and a renewed US security and economic strategy in the region, the EEAS and the European Parliament are struggling to foster a more concrete partnership with the Gulf countries. The European Parliament published in March 2011 a resolution "on European relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council".⁹³ The resolution was released in the midst of the Arab uprisings and it is the most advanced analysis of the current relations between the two regional organizations. The European Parliament

⁸⁷ R. Aliboni, "EU and GCC Strategic Interests in the Mediterranean: Convergence and Divergence", in Roberto Aliboni (ed.), *The Mediterranean Opportunities to Develop EU-GCC Relations*, Rome, Istituto Affari Internazionali, June 2010, p. 73.

⁸⁸ Bauer & Rieger, *op.cit.*, p. 179.

⁸⁹ Koch, *op.cit.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.* For the time being there is a kind of round of observation from both sides, Interview with Erwan Lannon, Professor at the College of Europe, 29 April 2012.

⁹² A. Echagüe, "The European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council", *FRIDE Working Paper*, no. 39, Madrid, May 2007, p. 4. "[W]hereas the GCC member states' geo-economic shift of focus towards Asia - in response to the rising demand for oil on Asian markets", European Parliament, *European Parliament resolution of 24 March 2011 on European Union relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (2010/2233(INI))*, P7_TA-PROV(2011)0109, lett. K.

⁹³ European Parliament, Resolution of 24 March 2011, *op.cit.*

emphasized the importance of signing the FTA because “such an agreement will constitute mutual recognition of the credibility of two entities that have chosen the path of multilateralism and integration”.⁹⁴ The resolution also “asks the EU to initiate a strategic dialogue with the GCC [...] on regional security issues [...] (the Middle East peace process, Iran’s nuclear programme, the stabilisation of Iraq, Yemen and Darfur)”⁹⁵ and in the same spirit calls “on the EU and the GCC to step up joint efforts to bring about a negotiated end to the occupation of the Palestinian Territories [...and it] suggests in this regard more regular cooperation between the Quartet and the Arab League monitoring committee”.⁹⁶

Moreover, the European Parliament stressed the necessity of a strategic partnership, given the role of the two organizations⁹⁷ on the international scene and “highlights the importance, to that end, of introducing periodic summit meetings of heads of state and government, independently of the progress of ongoing negotiations”.⁹⁸ In addition, it requests the setting up of an EU delegation in each of the six GCC member states⁹⁹ in the region, “thereby helping to raise the profile of the EU”.¹⁰⁰ Towards this end, another EU delegation might be opened in 2013 in the region.¹⁰¹

The High Representative was the first to stress that the JAP (2010-2013) “confirms aspirations from both sides to have a more strategic relationship”.¹⁰² She delivered the same message again in 2011 at the Joint Council, when she underlined that “recent developments in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula are a clear demonstration of the need for closer dialogue between the EU and GCC”.¹⁰³

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, point 1.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, point 19.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, point 22.

⁹⁷ The call for a strategic partnership was also presented in the final report of the Delegation for Relations with the Arab Peninsula (DARP) to Oman. “Last but not least, the Delegation is convinced that the EU should develop a more ambitious policy, a *strategic partnership* with the GCC Countries” [emphasis added]. European Parliament, “Report from Ms Angelika Niebler, Chair of the European Parliament Delegation for Relations with the Arab Peninsula - 6th EP/Oman Interparliamentary Meeting”, *Delegation for Relations with the Arab Peninsula*, 20-22 February 2011.

⁹⁸ European Parliament, Resolution of 24 March 2011, *op.cit.*, point 4.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, point 43.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, point 6.

¹⁰¹ Interview with an official, European Parliament, *op.cit.*

¹⁰² Quoted in Koch, *op.cit.*

¹⁰³ European Union, *Statement by Catherine Ashton, following the EU-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting*, Brussels, 20 April 2011.

Moreover, Baroness Ashton has intensified meetings with her counterpart, the GCC Secretary Dr. Abdullatif bin Rashid Al-Zayani.¹⁰⁴ During their meeting in January 2012 they shared their concerns about Syria, Iran and Yemen and EU-GCC relations. Once again, the HR stressed her determination “to intensify our dialogue and cooperation on many matters of common interest”.¹⁰⁵

As some commentators have noted, the real challenge now “will be on keeping the momentum going”.¹⁰⁶ The visit of the GCC Secretary shows the interest in fostering a stronger relationship from the Gulf side and also underscores “the increased attention that is being paid to the Gulf region by the European Union [and the ...] recognition that the GCC is gaining as an organization committed and contributing to promoting security and stability”.¹⁰⁷

A stalling strategy? And yet it does move!

In light of the new regional role that the Gulf countries have acquired, the EU should show a major interest in dealing with the GCC. The EU policy in the region is still divided into three ‘policy blocks’: The first covers the Mediterranean, the second includes the Gulf and the third one comprises Iraq, Iran and Yemen.¹⁰⁸ A strategic partnership would allow the EU to work “outside the bilateral framework [and ...]it would be more helpful to think in terms of triangulation and variable geometry”¹⁰⁹ with the Mediterranean area. Triangulation refers “to cooperation in third regions where the EU and its partners have mutual, if not common, interests”.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, it would be a good starting point to evaluate the merging of all EU policies throughout the region in a common partnership with the Arab countries.

In fact, the 2004 Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East (SPMME) was a first step to overcome the fragmentation of EU frameworks towards

¹⁰⁴ A GCC Secretary seeming quite EU oriented, Interview with Echagüe, Senior Researcher at FRIDE, via skype, 19 April 2012.

¹⁰⁵ European Union, Statement by the High Representative Catherine Ashton after her meeting with Dr Abdullatif bin Rashid Al- Zayani, Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Brussels, 31 January 2012.

¹⁰⁶ Sager, *op.cit.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Burke, Echagüe & Youngs, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁹ Renard, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

the MENA region.¹¹¹ The SPMME embraces the countries of North Africa, the GCC, Yemen, Iraq and Iran. However, it still distinguishes the countries of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership from those east of Jordan. The initial proposal from the Commission and High Representative to envisage a possible regional strategy for the Wider Middle East was not followed up.¹¹²

A new condensed strategy could be profitable for both the EU and the GCC in many domains, as for instance: 1) Iraq, Iran and regional security; 2) the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; 3) improving trade exchanges; 4) a common and stronger response to the financial crisis; 5) energy supplies; and 6) counter-terrorism.¹¹³ In 2012 the EU intensified the dialogue with the GCC “to inject greater strategic depth into EU-GCC relations to guide the preparation of the next programme”.¹¹⁴ More exchanges and cooperation are needed to reach a shared model of economic sustainability and inclusive development.¹¹⁵

Conclusion: towards a strategic partnership?

This paper has examined to what extent the policies of the European Union in the Gulf have changed since the beginning of the Arab Spring. Despite the challenges ahead and despite the calls by the European Parliament and by Baroness Ashton to upgrade the relationship, the EU’s new Gulf Strategy after the Arab Spring has not taken shape yet. The EU has been, and will remain, a crucial partner for the GCC, but this partnership lacks strategic vision.¹¹⁶ This paper has shed light on the difficult challenges that the EU faces in establishing a strategic partnership with the GCC. Yet, such a reinforced partnership that merges the various EU policies in the region into a single strategic partnership with the Arab countries would be in the interest of both sides. A reinforced relationship between the two regional organizations is also useful to work in terms of ‘triangulation’ with the Mediterranean countries. Until today, the EU approach treats the MENA region as a collection of divided blocs such as: a) the Mediterranean; b) the Gulf and c) Iraq, Iran and Yemen.

¹¹¹ European Council, “Final Report on an EU Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East”, June 2004.

¹¹² European Commission/High Representative report, “Strengthening EU’s Relations with the Arab World”, D(2003) 10318, Brussels, 4 December 2003, p. 7.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-10.

¹¹⁴ “22nd EU-GCC Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting Luxembourg”, *op.cit.*

¹¹⁵ Interview with an official, EEAS, *op.cit.*

¹¹⁶ Interview with Ambassador Al Hamad, *op.cit.*

The major reason for the EU to establish a strategic partnership with the GCC is the growing regional power acquired by the Arab monarchies. A persistent deadlock of the negotiations on the FTA has blocked any progress. The EU should overcome its long-standing 'strategic neglect' of the region. Despite frequent meetings that have been taken place between Baroness Ashton, the GCC Secretary General, and other high level politicians of the Gulf,¹¹⁷ no major result has so far been achieved.

The EU's most likely course of action is not to propose a strategic partnership straight away. However, it may begin these talks before agreeing on the next JAP (2014-2017) at the Joint Council in 2013. Moreover, it is in the EU's interests to try to further a political dialogue and to definitely close the FTA question, also scheduling a second visit to the Gulf by Commissioner De Gucht in the following months. Finally, specific EU actions that could prove fruitful in the current context include:

- Increasing the EEAS and EU delegation staff working on the GCC countries.¹¹⁸
- Improving communication through specific people-to-people exchanges which help to increase the visibility of the EU in the region, as the EU is most of the time perceived as "a group of 27 Countries"¹¹⁹ and not like a single entity.
- Broaden the political dialogue between the EU and the GCC through sending out Electoral Observation Missions (EOM).¹²⁰ These missions, whose goal is also to 'strengthen respect for human rights' have been on the cutting-edge of the EU promotion of human rights. European Electoral Observers have been sent throughout the world, to about 40 countries, in the last few years. The only obstacle to the deployment of these missions is the necessary formal invitation of the host countries.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ On 1 March 2012, for instance, Baroness Ashton has met Hamad Bin Jassim Bin Jabr Al Thani, Prime Minister of the State of Qatar in Brussels.

¹¹⁸ The EU dedicates to its relations with the Gulf countries only about ten people between the EEAS and DG Trade. Interview with Echagüe, *op.cit.*

¹¹⁹ Interview with an official, European Parliament, *op.cit.*

¹²⁰ The main goals of the EOM are "the legitimisation of an electoral process, where appropriate, and the enhancement of public confidence in the electoral process, to deter fraud, to strengthen respect for human rights", European Commission, "Supporting elections".

¹²¹ In addition, there is a substantial risk observed in past missions that the EU could "give unfree elections a clean bill of health". R. Youngs, *Europe's Decline and Fall: The Struggle against Global Irrelevance*, London, Profile Books, 2010, p. 127.

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