

## EU-GCC: partnerships of convenience

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One common characteristic the Gulf Cooperation Council and the European Union share as of today, is their lack of ability to coordinate their foreign policies. Forcing both to act in smaller “units” composed of several members of their respective unions. If internal mechanisms can still reveal efficient cooperating platforms on issues of common interests (military trainings<sup>1</sup>, anti-corruption<sup>2</sup>, culture<sup>3</sup>, maritime security<sup>4</sup>), the competing goals among countries push them to favor bilateral engagements rather than multilateral platforms. It is in that vein that several countries of the GCC and of the EU are now deepening their ties outside of the unions’ frameworks and based on short-terms convergence of interests. Another common characteristic both unions share, is the acknowledgement of the United-States’ disengagement from the Gulf region, and the strong hints of US’s willingness to reduce its presence and support to its EU partners<sup>5</sup>.

### Toward a new security deal?

By sending mixed messages for the past years, the Trump administration has been settling a new security reality that forced its partners to adapt and, in the end, build new or reinforce existing cooperation. Whether the US disengagement of the Gulf region will actually take shape on the ground or not, is secondary to the understanding from both unions that it should act as if the US weren’t part of maintaining its security anymore. However, how intellectually thought-provoking the idea is, the reality is that neither the GCC nor the EU, as of today and for any coming years, would be capable of filling the gap.

Despite the creation of the 2019 European-led Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH), a military surveillance mission politically supported by Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Italy, the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/qatar-s-adapter-pour-resister,3425>

<sup>2</sup> <https://m.gulf-times.com/story/641196/Qatar-attends-GCC-integrity-protection-and-anti-co>

<sup>3</sup> <https://menafn.com/1099558175/Kuwait-GCC-heritage-show-reflects-historical-depth-NCCAL-chief>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-security/gcc-countries-begin-enhanced-maritime-security-patrols-u-s-fifth-fleet-idUSKCN1SP0IR>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53058985>

Netherlands, Portugal and France<sup>6</sup>, the EU continues to be seen by the GCC members as “a weak strategic partner, in the MENA region” according to a report by the European Council on Foreign Relations<sup>7</sup>. And that is only being accentuated by the fact that one of the main European military power, the United Kingdom, is in the process of leaving the union and launched its own separate mission in the Strait few months after the EU<sup>8</sup>.

Under President Obama, the main EU powers and the US were somehow aligned on how to deal with Iran and what should be the framework of ending the sanctions over it, to the great dissatisfaction of the Arab partners. If the Arab partners saw in Obama’s “cold peace”<sup>9</sup> an unbearable “treason”, they considered the JCPOA as giving a blank check to the Iranian authorities, for which they hold both the US and the EU responsible. With the Trump administration, EU and US policies in the region started to diverge significantly. While the Trump administration’s actions seem to confirm the US disengagement of the Gulf, it nevertheless ruined the regional political status quo between Iran on one side and the GCC on the other, to such an extent that it took dangerous military actions to remind all the stakeholders that any further provocations would reveal extremely costly (Abqaiq attack). Therefore, the warmongering narrative emerging from the GCC, blessed by Washington, together with the continuous Iranian regional interferences, almost nullified the fragile status quo.

On one hand, in the eyes of the EU, the main interests’ estrangement with the US revolves around Iran, that several leading EU powers would like to trade with. On the other, in the eyes of the GCC, the main differentiation between the US and the EU, is that the former is an essential security partner while in the case of the latter “in the era of Vision 2030 the GCC is primarily motivated by economic interests” as Omar Al-Ubaydli wrote<sup>10</sup>.

In addition, the US and the EU both have different priorities in the region as Visiting Fellow at RUSI Umar Karim puts it: “Under President Trump the US lens towards the GCC is framed by the personnel connections of Trump’s son in law, Jared Kushner, with Mohammed bin Zayed and Mohammed bin Salman. EU itself has been more vocal on humanitarian issues within the GCC particularly the war in Yemen. Individual EU states have differed in this regard. UK and France have been for more engagement with GCC states and not conditionalizing their engagement with human rights records while at the same time engaging politically to end conflict like UK’s role in Yemen. Germany on other hand took a harder stand as it halted arm exports to Saudi Arabia.”

### **Old policies, new alliances**

Among EU countries, the tension arises when it comes to arms dealings<sup>11</sup>, which demonstrates how economic competitiveness among members can derail any common foreign policy, together with demonstrating how unable the EU countries are of shaping new policies toward the GCC. In effect, if

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/eight-member-states-back-european-led-naval-mission-in-strait-of-hormuz/>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/a\\_gulf\\_apart\\_how\\_europe\\_can\\_gain\\_influence\\_with\\_gulf\\_cooperation\\_council](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/a_gulf_apart_how_europe_can_gain_influence_with_gulf_cooperation_council)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jan/04/royal-navy-vessels-sent-to-protect-shipping-in-strait-of-hormuz>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/#7>

<sup>10</sup> <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2019/07/03/Why-the-GCC-and-EU-should-restart-negotiations-on-a-free-trade-agreement>

<sup>11</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/18/europe-is-at-war-over-arms-exports/>

the GCC countries now see the EU simply as a market, the reciprocity has been the rule for decades as the GCC countries were mainly seen from European capitals as EU products consumers and more particularly key clients of State-supported arms manufacturers. Despite the very mitigated economic results<sup>12</sup>, that policy seems to remain unchanged still as of today. The clear result is however portrayed by the fact that European countries are supporting foes in the GCC and the wider MENA for which business contracts appear to be among the main motives. Few examples include the fact that France was unable to deliver arms to Saudi Arabia for months because of Germany blocking arms exports<sup>13</sup> following the murder to Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul and the Saudi-led war in Yemen<sup>14</sup>. Or France and Italy finding themselves in a tense relationship on the Libyan front due to Italian's historical relationship with the country, but also to arm deals with Qatar<sup>15</sup>.

Along these lines, now several GCC countries and EU countries find themselves in short-terms convergences of interests and the current situation in Libya together with the implications in the wider Mediterranean region exposed these partnerships of convenience to the bright light. The UAE, France and Greece are battling Turkey and the ministers of these countries together with Egypt "condemned the illegal Turkish movements taking place in Cyprus' exclusive economic zone and its territorial waters" in a joint statement in May 2020<sup>16</sup>. All bringing support to General Khalifa Haftar's LNA, while Italy supports the GNA in Tripoli alongside Turkey and Qatar<sup>17</sup>. However, in June 2020, Italy and Greece announced<sup>18</sup> that they reached an economic-zones agreement, that disputes the Turkish-GNA agreement signed in November 2019<sup>19</sup>. Embroiled in a severe battle of influence with Turkey<sup>20</sup>, mainly triggered by the country's support to Qatar in the GCC crisis, Saudi Arabia has also significantly strengthened its ties with Cyprus and Greece over the past years<sup>21</sup>. Similarly, even if it said that French President Macron and Saudi Arabia Crown Prince MBS's personal relationship is tensed, both countries keep an open channel<sup>22</sup>.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia's axis has demonstrated enduring cohesion over the past years, despite tensions over the Yemen war between the Saudi-supported Hadi government and the UAE-supported separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) in Aden. Nevertheless, their perceive bet on the Trump administration and continuous call for tougher actions against Iran, has led both countries to alienate the Democrats<sup>23</sup> opposition and lose influence in the US power structures. This position has threatened the countries' abilities to level influence particularly in the prospect of Trump failing to get reelected.

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<sup>12</sup> [https://www.challenges.fr/entreprise/defense/les-mauvais-comptes-de-la-france-en-arabie-saoudite\\_484209](https://www.challenges.fr/entreprise/defense/les-mauvais-comptes-de-la-france-en-arabie-saoudite_484209)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-germany-arms/france-germany-closing-in-on-arms-exports-pact-idUSKBN1W42I7>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/france-and-germany-ink-compromise-on-arms-export-rules/>

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.intelligenceonline.fr/renseignement-d-etat\\_premier-cercle/2018/07/11/mariage-fincantieri-naval-group--les-dessous-d-une-bataille-a-couteaux-tires,108316469-eve](https://www.intelligenceonline.fr/renseignement-d-etat_premier-cercle/2018/07/11/mariage-fincantieri-naval-group--les-dessous-d-une-bataille-a-couteaux-tires,108316469-eve)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1673176/middle-east>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-italy-to-cooperate-in-libya-for-permanent-peace>

<sup>18</sup> <https://twitter.com/WalidPhares/status/1270388824322031616>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/mediterranean-countries-call-turkey-gna-deals-void-200109062417867.html>

<sup>20</sup> <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/4/29/saudi-turkey-media-war-reflects-mbss-growing-internal-problems>

<sup>21</sup> <https://twitter.com/qdepim/status/1224338491175247872>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1690816/saudi-arabia>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/politics/us-allies-saudi-arabia-20-questions.html>

Added to the US disengagement from the region, or its reduce presence, portrayed by the lack of US response over the drone attack of Saudi oil facilities of Abqaiq and Khurais in September 2019, strongly believed to have been carried out by Iran<sup>24</sup>, forces the UAE and Saudi Arabia to look toward East. While the UAE has downgraded its public stance toward Iran, even delivering medical supplies to Iran amid Coronavirus pandemic<sup>25</sup>, Saudi Arabia has been strengthening its relationships with key Eastern powers such as China, India, South Korea and Japan<sup>26</sup>.

### **The Iran's question in time of US retreat**

From a GCC perspective, the EU has proved unable to contain Iran's destabilizing regional policies and its willingness to save the JCPOA and implement the European special-purpose vehicle INSTEX, is perceived as an act of aggression. Wary of not risking US sanctions over European companies, the EU members of the JCPOA (France, UK and Germany) are still reluctant to abandon the deal entirely<sup>27</sup>. Economic prospects given by the Iranian market aside, the EU's perspective is its strong commitment to respect the "given word" in a time in which its weight in the region is declining. For the EU countries, respecting a deal promoted and signed by its members is a priority for the countries to stay relevant on the global stage, when strong competing powerhouses are emerging and destabilizing the former World order. Pressured by its Arab partners to abandon the deal, by Iran to respect its commitments and by the US to fall in line, France, the UK and Germany find themselves being sidelined by all.

The hope is for President Trump to draw a similar deal by his own making, that would allow him to fulfill his own personal ambition of recognition as an unavoidable "deal maker", or seeing a more EU-aligned President being elected in November 2020. President Trump made recent comments inviting Iran to negotiate a deal now, rather than wait until after the elections. One was in a tweet on Navy veteran Michael White's release by Iran early June, in which the President stated: "Thank you to Iran. Don't wait until after U.S. Election to make the Big deal. I'm going to win. You'll make a better deal now!"<sup>28</sup>. The other one was at a rally in Tulsa on June the 20<sup>th</sup> where he said that Iran should negotiate now otherwise it will "pay a much higher price"<sup>29</sup>. These calls show Trump openness to reviving the negotiations with Iran and converge with his reluctance to military intervene in the region together with his willingness to disengage from it.

### **Less ambitious policies**

The GCC and EU countries have understood that and operated a shift on States' levels, rather than on multilateral platforms, yet are unable to fill in the gap. However, some regional issues remain non-negotiable to the several stakeholders. To Saudi Arabia, the prospect of a retreat from Yemen is not foreseeable as the kingdom considers its own national security is at stakes. To the UAE, the rift with Qatar is profound and the authorities will not agree to release the pressure on the neighboring nation.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-12/missiles-used-in-saudi-attacks-last-year-came-from-iran-un-says>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium-uae-s-surprising-coronavirus-gesture-toward-iran-may-signal-regional-shift-1.8768087>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1692666/saudi-arabia>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1620501>

<sup>28</sup> <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1268774841810911232?s=20>

<sup>29</sup> <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/trump-tells-iran-negotiating-after-us-elections-means-paying-a-much-higher-price-/30682379.html>

To Qatar, appearing to succumb to pressures and abandoning its independent foreign policy together with its influence provided by Al Jazeera, would amount to becoming a satellite state. Even if the countries have been harshly hit by the economic effects of the coronavirus and the drop of oil prices, these issues remain their priorities over which they will continue to dedicate significant funding.

However, it is to believe that more global interventions and diplomacies will be scrapped or downgraded due to the scarcity of financial resources. In that line, the GCC countries are greatly focusing on diminishing their reliance over foreign products, developing their economies through diversification, cutting their needs in foreign workers, and trying to enhance a regional stability for their markets to attract foreign investments. The GCC look toward East also forces the countries to agree for a far less aggressive approach toward Tehran that maintains strong ties with China and India. The EU could reveal a precious ally to the GCC countries in making sure that Iran still is being challenged on its weapons' ambitions, as the EU will not abandon the JCPOA and while the Asian powers are less committed to engage on this issue. To some EU countries and most particularly the Mediterranean ones, some GCC countries could reveal precious partners in securing and promoting their interests. Yet in the long-term, the Mediterranean space is not a direct priority to neither Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and only a useful issue on which they can exert pressure over Turkey and thus over Qatar. If the EU countries will not be able to fill in for the US, it will however be able to reinforce its position as a strong economic partner, able to provide investments, tools, and know-how to economic diversification.