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Country Report

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Geopolitics and Connectivity Take the Center Stage at the First EU-GCC Summit

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The first ever EU-GCC Summit on 16 October 2024 served as a pivotal moment for both the European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), emphasizing mutual interests in economic growth, security, and energy cooperation. Two areas dominated the discussion: on the one hand finding common ground on pragmatic cooperation, particularly in the field of energy and connectivity, on the other hand finding common language on a number of current regional conflicts. While the number of concrete deliverables of the meeting has been limited (which was to be expected) and much work still lies ahead, the summit as such is remarkable signal. Both sides decided to meet every two years at heads of state level, the next meeting is to take place in Saudi-Arabia in 2026.

Participants

21 of the heads of state and government of the 27 EU countries attended (which can be considered as a high turnout), from the side of the GCC countries the representatives were either on the highest and second-highest level, i.a. Mohamed Bin Salman from Saudi-Arabia. The departing President of the European Council Charles Michel, the re-elected Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and the outgoing High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borell equally took part. Olaf Scholz was a notable absentee and was represented by French president Emmanuel Macron. It was noteworthy that Charles Michel chose not to participate in the closing ceremony of the EU-GCC summit, with Josep Borrell stepping in instead – the opening and the closure of the event was thus handled by two personalities who will leave their positions in just a few weeks. Michel was not only the driving force behind organizing the summit on the EU side but also the official host as President of the European Council.

Finding a common stance on common geopolitical challenges:

1. War in Ukraine

One of the EU's primary goals during the summit was to strengthen ties with the Gulf states to address pressing global security issues, most notably Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. While the Gulf states share the EU's concerns over sovereignty and international law, they have been keen to

avoid taking sides too explicitly. The finalised joint statement that was prepared in advance of the summit was extremely difficult to negotiate and agree upon. Given the stance of the Gulf states on the issue (in the past two years they have condemned Russian aggression and the annexation of Ukrainian territory but shied away to support further-going measures such as Russia's exclusion from the Human Rights Council or sanctions) the wording in the final joint declaration is as explicit as the EU could have realistically hoped for: It recalls the UNGA resolution that "demands that the Russian Federation immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraws all of its military forces" and condemns attacks against civilians and civilian and critical infrastructure. The mention of Russia (even though only via quote) was considered a win for Brussels by observers.

2. Conflict in the Middle East

The escalating violence in Israel, Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon were equally an important part of the discussions, with calls for an immediate ceasefire, the release of hostages, exchange of the Palestinian prisoners and humanitarian access to the civilian population. It also condemns the Israeli government's decisions to further expand settlements and legalise settler outposts. The joint declaration also refers to the two-state solution. The summit lacked a concrete roadmap for addressing these crises, but merely welcomed a number of initiatives that have been started by either (or both) sides since (Bahrain declaration, Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, etc.).

According to some reports the GCC delegation left Brussels somewhat frustrated as they had conceded to tougher language than they intended upon with regards to Russia, but did not get concessions in return from the EU on the war in Gaza. Without directly criticising the EU, Qatari leader Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani warned against "any double standards" in his opening speech in Brussels, while the country's foreign minister told press in Brussels that countries must not be "selective" about their principles.

3. Tensions with Iran

While the EU and GCC member states agree that Iran poses a great threat to international stability and peace, the language on Iran in the joint statement was quite cautious. This is notable given Iran's strong involvement in financing and supporting the Houthi rebels in Yemen but reflects the different relations of the GCC countries with Teheran. It is also worth noting that many of the GCC countries would prefer to avoid language which would complicate the already delicate diplomatic situation between them and Iran.

4. Other issues

The joint declaration also refers to Lebanon (call for an immediate ceasefire, calls for restraint), Syria, Sudan, Somalia (support in the post-ATMIS-era, commitment to

close coordination), Yemen and the Red Sea. Regarding the latter, it is noteworthy that both sides aim to “develop a joint GCC-EU approach to maritime security”.

Commitments to future collaboration EU-GCC collaboration:

1. Trade and Investment

The summit also focused on enhancing economic cooperation, particularly in areas such as renewable energy, critical minerals, and hydrogen production. Both the EU and the GCC underscored their commitment to restarting talks on a long-stalled Free Trade Agreement (FTA). While the revival of these talks is significant, there was no immediate breakthrough or clear timetable for resuming negotiations. The decision to revive talks on the EU-GCC Free Trade Agreement can be considered noteworthy, but the absence of a clear action plan or timeline underscores the hesitancy on both sides to commit fully. It can also be read as an attempt of caution given the fact that the EU has already been trying for three decades to negotiate such an agreement (access to public procurement being apparently one of the thorny topics in these discussions). In the absence of a comprehensive deal, the EU side is interested to strengthen ties on certain aspects of trade or to deepen bilateral ties with individual GCC members.

2. Energy Cooperation, Climate, and Connectivity

Energy cooperation was a key theme of the summit, with both the EU and GCC reaffirming their commitment to collaborate on renewable energy, hydrogen and connecting energy grids. The Gulf's potential as a major producer of renewable hydrogen, due to its vast solar and land resources, was highlighted as a promising area for future investment. However, the contents of discussions that were made public lacked detailed commitments on specific projects or investment frameworks. While the summit underscored the potential for future collaboration in green energy, it also revealed the need for more concrete and immediate actions. The GCC supports the green transition but prefers a slower pace than the EU to ensure their economy, which depends on energy exports, remains stable. The declaration also expressed the readiness to explore cooperation on IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor) and the EU's Global Gateway initiative. The joint declaration supports the creation of bodies, investments events and fora of European and Gulf business representatives of both regions. Both sides also commit to a decision on climate finance at the upcoming COP 29.

Notable omissions:

1. Very light focus on Human Rights: Human rights concerns, particularly in the context of labour and civil rights in the GCC, were largely absent from the discussions. The declaration merely refers to the deepening of the human rights dialogue between both sides. This omission reflects the EU's focus on strategic and economic

interests over its traditional emphasis on normative issues such as human rights, particularly in dealing with the Gulf states. While the participation of Mohamed Bin-Salman was met with heavy criticism by human rights groups and some MEPs, the times when he was considered a persona non grata by his EU peers are definitely gone.

2. No progress on visa-liberalization: The GCC actively sought to procure the right for visa-free travel to the EU for their citizens. However, this request was not granted (the document merely refers to work on constructive steps towards a visa-free travel arrangement). At the margins of the summit, GCC representatives argued that they met all the pre-requisite requirements for visa-free travel.

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