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The Local Link

Municipal partnerships as drivers of GCC-EU cooperation

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Synopsis

This policy brief proposes thematic partnerships between GCC and EU cities to deepen interregional cooperation. Positioned at the intersection of both regions' strategic priorities, cities can advance shared goals in governance, social cohesion, spatial planning, and economic development, thus responding effectively to global urbanisation and sustainability challenges.

Rationale

The projected doubling of the world's urban population by 2050 positions cities as critical engines of sustainable development. The United Nations' New Urban Agenda highlights the importance of international city cooperation in advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.¹ In this context, urban diplomacy, defined as the participation of cities in global governance², has emerged as a growing dimension of international development cooperation.

The 2022 GCC-EU Joint Communication outlined six strategic areas for enhanced cooperation: prosperity, sustainability, global security, development, people, and institutional collaboration.³ Urban areas sit at the intersection of these priorities, offering concrete platforms to advance regional objectives. Furthermore, differing development trajectories, planning experiences, and institutional frameworks in both regions offer high potential for mutual learning.

This policy brief proposes establishing a thematic GCC-EU sister-city network, aligned with the GCC-EU Joint Action Programme (2022-2027)⁴, to strengthen interregional ties and advance shared goals on a municipal level. Such a partnership network strengthens GCC-EU cooperation at the local level between like-minded municipalities, creating a solid foundation to navigate dynamic interregional relations and to bridge periods when region- and national-level collaboration slows or stalls.

Context

GCC cities play a central role in national transformation agendas, such as Qatar's Second National Development Strategy (2018) and Saudi Arabia's National Transformation Program (2022), which focus on smart infrastructure, diversified economies, sustainable spatial design, and enhanced quality of life.⁵ However, rapid urban growth poses challenges to liveability due to low-density urban sprawl, causing traffic congestion and limiting community spaces. To mitigate these challenges, GCC cities have launched

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innovative mobility concepts and created novel cultural spaces, such as the Riyadh Metro Project and Boulevard Riyadh City, fostering social interaction across diverse population groups. While the centralised governance structure of GCC countries enables rapid project implementation, its top-down nature lacks citizens' perspectives on community-specific needs. Introducing participatory feedback mechanisms, strengthening municipal governance, and fostering inter-city knowledge exchange could complement and enhance this centralised approach.

EU cities are hubs for economic growth, innovation, and cultural life, accommodating 75% of the population and generating 85% of GDP.⁶ They are also focal points for contemporary challenges, including aging populations, social inequality, migration, public health risks, and climate change. These pressures have impacted urban liveability across the EU. To address these challenges, the EU promotes sustainable urban development, innovative urban design, and inter-municipal knowledge exchange through the European Urban Initiative.⁷

City partnerships originated in Europe after World War II to promote reconciliation and cross-border cooperation. Today, the EU views them as vital instruments of innovation, cultural exchange, and joint socioeconomic development. The member-states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have begun to deploy a similar strategy, leveraging initial city partnerships, such as the pilot cooperation between Dubai and Frankfurt, to advance their ambitious urban agendas focused on liveability and economic diversification.

Recommendations

To address shared municipal challenges of fostering sustainable mobility, inclusive urban design, prospering economies, and digital governance, this policy brief recommends establishing thematic city partnerships between matched municipalities across four pillars:

1. Governance

- Facilitating structured exchanges, modelled after the European Urban Initiative, among municipal governments, citizen representatives, and administrative experts on digital governance, participatory development, regulatory frameworks, and service delivery to promote citizen-oriented decision-making.
- Establishing regulatory innovation labs to pilot adaptive governance models that can easily respond to challenges as they arise.
- Co-creating urban policies with academia and the private sector.

2. Social

- Promoting collaborative initiatives in education, culture, and social infrastructure.
- Supporting peer learning on inclusive education systems, cultural exchange, heritage preservation, and the creation of vibrant public spaces.
- Establishing joint cultural funds to facilitate cross-regional activities that enhance social cohesion and mutual understanding.

3. Spatial

- Enabling joint innovation in urban design, focusing on sustainable and inclusive infrastructure and housing.

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- Developing research and innovation labs that address regeneration, preservation, and development strategies and connect broad-scale planning with policy interventions.

4. Economic

- Matching cities with similar industrial profiles to stimulate innovation, FDI, and interregional trade.
- Supporting integrated global value chains, cross-regional entrepreneurship, and joint ventures.
- Promoting local employment through shared R&D, green technologies, and industrial upskilling.

Implementation

Pilot phase

1. Launch one Gulf-EU city partnership per GCC country by 2027, as proposed in Table 1.
2. Establish a joint EU-GCC Urban Diplomacy Task Force, including representatives of all bilateral city partnerships and urban development experts, under the framework of the GCC-EU Joint Action Programme (2022-2027).

Stakeholder engagement

1. Involve municipal authorities, urban planning agencies, chambers of commerce, educational and cultural entities, and citizen groups and representatives of both regions in identifying and structuring partnerships following existing models like the European Urban Initiative.
2. Conduct biannual meetings of bilateral city task forces to evaluate progress, discuss ongoing challenges, and exchange innovative solutions. Report to the EU-GCC Urban Diplomacy Task Force during annual meetings to extend bilateral urban innovation and collaboration frameworks to a trans-regional level.

Funding and support mechanism

1. Mobilise resources through the European International Urban and Regional Cooperation programme⁸, EU-member state programmes like Germany's Connective Cities Initiative, and GCC sovereign wealth funds.
2. Explore public-private partnerships to co-finance city partnerships, for instance, through industrial contributions.

Scaling

1. Formalise an EU-GCC Urban Diplomacy Platform to support knowledge sharing, coordinate partnerships, and inform policy.
2. Expand to 15-20 city pairs post-2027, using lessons from the pilot phase to scale successful models.

Table 1. Proposed Gulf-EU City Partnerships

Category	City Partnership	Rationale
Governance	Helsinki – Dubai	Helsinki is one of Europe’s most advanced smart cities, leading in intelligent planning capacities, while Dubai deploys futuristic technologies to explore innovative smart city solutions. Both cities could benefit from strategic exchanges on digital governance and smart city development.
Social	Vienna – Kuwait City	Vienna is ranked the most liveable city in Europe due to extensive social housing and cultural initiatives. Kuwait City is renowned for its communal spaces – such as Diwaniyat – that foster social exchange, as well as its rich cultural heritage. This offers opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration and innovative solutions to promote social inclusion in both cities.
Social/Spatial	Athens – Manama	Athens has extensive experience in cultural heritage preservation and developing historical anchors. Manama prioritises cultural preservation to strengthen social engagement, exemplified by its ban on cultured pearls and the Pearling Path project, which safeguard heritage. Strategic knowledge exchange would allow both cities to enhance heritage preservation and education.
Social/Spatial	Paris – Muscat	Paris is a renowned cultural hub that combines modern art with historic heritage. Muscat focuses on preserving its distinct architectural heritage while creating space for its emerging cultural scene. For example, the Raneen Arts Festival uses historic spaces – including Muttrah Fort – to showcase contemporary artwork. Together, these cities can form innovation hubs focused on integrating culture into urban regeneration and public space design.
Economic	Stuttgart – King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC)	Stuttgart is Germany’s leading automotive and advanced manufacturing hub, integrating innovation ecosystems and linkages between industry and academia. KAEC, a master-planned city in Saudi Arabia, is being developed as a new automotive cluster to host international assembly lines and the new Saudi car brand CEER. Collaboration could focus on joint industrial innovation strategies, skills development, and sustainable economic ecosystems.
Spatial	Stockholm – Doha	Stockholm excels in public transportation systems, providing affordable and inclusive mobility solutions. Doha has rapidly expanded its public transport systems to connect the city’s cultural and economic anchors. Through knowledge transfer on sustainable mobility solutions, both cities can enhance available systems and foster innovation.

The table presents proposals and rationales for partnerships between GCC and EU cities to be implemented in the pilot phase.

Endnotes

- 1 United Nations 2017: New Urban Agenda, Quito.
- 2 Acuto, Michele 2016: City diplomacy, in: Constantinou, Costas/Kerr, Pauline/Sharp, Paul (eds.): The Sage Handbook of Diplomacy, London, pp. 510-520.
- 3 European Commission 2022: Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: A strategic partnership with the Gulf, 18.05.2022, in: <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Joint%20Communication%20to%20the%20European%20Parliament%20and%20the%20Council%20-%20A%20Strategic%20Partnership%20with%20the%20Gulf.pdf> [02.09.2025].
- 4 Council of the EU 2022: Co-Chairs' Statement - 26th EU-GCC Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting, 22.02.2022, in: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/02/22/co-chairs-statement-26th-eu-gcc-joint-council-and-ministerial-meeting/pdf/> [02.09.2025].
- 5 Planning and Statistics Authority 2018: Qatar Second National Development Strategy 2018~2022, in: <https://gss.psa.gov.qa/en/knowledge/Documents/NDS2Final.pdf> [02.09.2025]; Communication and Media Department 2022: National Transformation Program's Annual Report, in: <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/gujmov05/2022-ntp-annual-report.pdf> [02.09.2025].
- 6 European Commission n.d.: Sustainable urban development, in: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/themes/urban-development_en [02.09.2025].
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 International Urban and Regional Cooperation n.d.: About IURC, in: <https://www.iurc.eu/about/> [02.09.2025].

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