

A new “Agenda for the Mediterranean” should include the GCC

Why is there a need for close relations between the EU and the Gulf states?

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History of relationships

In 1988 the then 12 states of the European Community (EC) and the 6 members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) signed a partnership and cooperation agreement that dealt with a whole range of topics. In essence, however, it was about fossil energy on the one hand and trading in consumer, military and capital goods on the other. Since then, there have been 26 meetings at ministerial level between the European Union (EU) and the GCC, but not much has been achieved.

The last meeting in person took place in 2016. After that, due to the pandemic, there was only one more virtual meeting in 2020. Both the EU and the GCC have been dealing with internal issues that made further cooperation difficult. There were also several external factors that stood in the way.

The realignment of the EU climate and energy policy reduced the importance of the Gulf region as a supplier of fossil energy. With the decision of the EU member states to significantly expand renewable energies, the European energy mix changed at the expense of fossil fuels.

The GCC members only play a small role as an export market for the EU, while the EU is the second largest trading partner for the GCC. Not only European companies but also public opinion is paying more attention to other regions. There are only few experts who follow the social, political and economic changes in the member states of the GCC. Europeans do not know much about the Gulf region and news are mostly negative: human rights issues such as the case of migrant workers building the football stadiums in Qatar, the murder of the Saudi journalist Kashoggi, gender inequality in Arab societies, intra-Muslim conflicts in general and especially the Qatari blockade under the leadership of Saudi Arabia, tensions with Iran or proxy wars in Yemen and Libya.

Obstacles on both sides

It was not only bad news from the Gulf region that reduced the European appetite in close ties with the GCC. Internally, the EU was concerned with the consequences of a series of crises, including migration issues and the outcome of the Brexit referendum. In terms of foreign policy, the election of U.S. President Trump in 2016, and as a result the de facto end of the American security guarantee for the states there, changed the geopolitical situation. Since they could no longer rely on the U.S. as a protective power, the Gulf States began to change their security policy and are heavily investing in weapons and defense technology. This is benefiting the armaments industry of some EU states but is making it more difficult for the EU to formulate common positions. It is also neither in line with a value-based foreign policy nor does it correspond to the ideas of mainstream public opinion in most EU member states.

Not only Europeans have their biases and show a lack of differentiation about developments in the Gulf. The same can be said for the other side. The EU has first and foremost been perceived as an important importer of fossil energy and an exporter of consumer goods, capital goods and armaments. But the EU has never been taken seriously by the GCC members as a relevant political power, neither as a foreign policy player nor as a normative actor, not to speak of its military role. There is a lack of knowledge and interest in the EU, which is viewed as over-institutionalized. For some European criticism of the political systems in Arab states and the human rights situation appears as arrogant and as a post-colonial reflex. There is a lot of room for improvement on both sides.

Reasons for a closer cooperation

Generally speaking, the current state of EU-GCC relations seems to be largely determined by the past, although new and promising opportunities arise in the future. The EU faces several needs and challenges that GCC members can help to fix. There are also various overlapping interests that could lead to a new relationship and a promising future.

Strategic autonomy

Former German Chancellor Angela Merkel's insight during Donald Trump's US presidency that the EU will have to take its affairs into its own hands is increasingly becoming mainstream thinking in Europe. Previously, French President Emmanuel Macron campaigned for European sovereignty in foreign policy, but with very little success. Meanwhile there is not only a new EU Global Strategy, which was presented by High Representative Josep Borrell and which specifies the realignment of the European foreign and security policy in a multipolar world. There is also an increasing political will to act together and invest more in a collective European foreign policy.

Step by step, it becomes clear what this can mean for the EU's relations with other parts of the world and especially for its neighbourhood and the Wider Middle East.

The new Agenda for the Mediterranean

In spring 2021, the European Commission, together with the Council, the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee, presented a joint communication proposing a new "Agenda for the Mediterranean." Twenty-six years after the beginning of the so-called Barcelona Process, it outlines a reorganization of relations with the countries bordering the Mediterranean. This seems necessary for several reasons. The development of relations with North Africa and the countries of the Middle East has lagged behind expectations in recent years. There are enough topics that cannot be dealt with unilaterally and rather ask for common solutions.

Security

In contrast to various GCC members who are strongly involved in Libya, the EU hardly plays a role there. France and Italy support different local actors. Turkey is present with boots on the ground, not least to win allies in a conflict with Greece and Cyprus. Ankara is interested in changing maritime borders to exploit oil and gas reserves in the Mediterranean. It also supported Qatar militarily and with food supply during the blockade of some GCC members.

Growing concerns about Iran as a nuclear power, among other reasons, has led the UAE and Bahrain to adjust their stance towards Israel and establish official diplomatic ties. Israel and the Middle East conflict were a central obstacle in the development of the European Neighborhood Policy, because in the past most Arab Mediterranean states did not want to participate in a policy that treated Israel as a partner on equal footing. Now that relations have improved a little, engaging with GCC states could be an option both in the fight against terrorism and in the questions that are related to the stabilization of the wider Middle East.

Migration

Without a stabilization of the situation in Libya and Syria, but also in Iraq and Yemen, mass migration and a potential humanitarian catastrophe remains a permanent threat that massively affects the EU and social stability in European societies. Where there are armed conflicts and humanitarian emergencies, people are forced to seek protection elsewhere. The effects of climate change from droughts, environmental disasters and famine are exacerbating the situation. The influence of the Gulf states in the region, which has increased noticeably in recent years, makes the members of the GCC a game changer that the EU should not do without.

Renewable energy

The members of the GCC are still seen primarily as exporters of fossil fuels and it also defines the mindset of most people, although the restructuring of the business model has long been underway. Not all Gulf States have recognized the urgency of phasing out a fossil fuel economy in the same way or are showing solidarity. Most prominently Saudi Arabia has massively increased its production volumes and wants to

expand its market share in fossil fuels as other producing countries withdraw from production. All GCC have ambitious midterm strategies to meet sustainability targets. The Arabian Gulf region in particular offers significantly better opportunities to produce solar energy and green hydrogen than in Europe. This offers new economic opportunities for cooperation that do not automatically lead to new dependencies but can instead serve mutual interests and create win-win-situations.

Outlook

The EU should pay more attention to the GCC states and take note of the dynamic development in the Gulf region, where far-reaching changes are taking place. Europe has neither fully understood yet what is happening in the region, nor did it adapt its foreign policy to the new opportunities. This applies to a change in the local business model, but also to social adjustments and, last but not least, a growing foreign policy presence that also reacts to new geopolitical realities such as falling interest from the U.S. and an increasing presence of China. Particularly in dealing with its most urgent tasks, the EU can and should offer opportunities to expand its relationship with the GCC. This could be beneficial for everyone involved.

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