

EU's Foreign Policy towards the Arab Gulf since 2008 Is there any?

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ABSTRACT

In 1988 a Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council was signed, with the goal of strengthening and deepening economics and political ties between the two. The following year negotiations for the signing of a free trade agreement were initiated; in 2008 they were halted and never resumed. Since then, the EU didn't seem able to set a comprehensive and tailor-made foreign policy towards its partners in the Arab Gulf, due to both contingent and structural problems and an overall asymmetry in the level of integration of the two institutions.

Nowadays, the Arab Gulf and the political events unfolding there, have revived the EU's necessity of adopting a broad policy in shaping its relations with monarchies there. Nevertheless, the EU's external action is damaged by the resilience of national bilateral relations regarding strategic trade flows and diplomatic activities, hampering its common stand on sensible concerns.

Keywords: European Union, Gulf States, Bilateral Relations, Trade Relations.

Introduction

The history of the relation between the EU, then the European Commission (EC) and the Gulf Cooperation Council goes back to 1979, before the establishment of the latter. In 1979 a German initiative (Graf Lambsdorff-Genscher) pushed for the strengthening of cooperative relations with the Gulf monarchies. As early as 1985, the Council of the European Communities expressed its strong interests in formalizing ties with the new-born GCC in both the economic and political fields. Thus, a first ministerial meeting between the two was held in Luxembourg on 14 October 1985: on the occasion, the EC and the GCC agreed to speed up the negotiation process that would eventually lead to the signature of the Cooperation Agreement on 15 June 1988. The promptness on the European part in nurturing and consolidating relations with the Gulf new-borne organization, and the accelerating timeline in reaching the Cooperation Agreement, induced the general idea that the cooperation between Gulf and European countries would bear meaningful fruits, starting from the establishment of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

Using a political comparative approach, the research on the EU's foreign policy towards the GCC countries is conducted through a scientific qualitative analysis of the relationship in place between the European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council, assessed through the observation of partnerships in place and official statements on both sides, in the contest of the current international arena.

Firstly, going through the case of the EU-GCC relation, it will be assessed as the case in which the European Union has most underperformed. Secondly, it will be argued that Saudi Arabia (the most prominent monarchy in the Gulf and the traditional friend of the West) is becoming a difficult player for the Union to engage nowadays. The growing awkward position of Saudi Arabia will be compared to the particular case of the Islamic Republic of Iran. With Iran, the EU is, maybe, enjoying the fruits of a decades-long process of critical dialogue and diplomatic effort. Since the

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withdrawal of the USA from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) under the Trump Administration in 2018, the European Union as a whole has shown itself determined to protect the deal it brokered with Iran on the nuclear issue and its trade interests with the Republic.

Observing key indicators as the goals set by the 1988 Cooperation Agreement and their fulfilment, the rate and nature of trade flows between the EU and countries in the Arab Gulf, and the diplomatic activity of major European countries, the results of the research depict a situation in which the European Union's external action is undermined by members' national interests.

The underperformance of the EU in addressing the Arab Gulf by means of an all-encompassing foreign policy comes out to be caused by the intergovernmental method dominating the realm of the EU's foreign policy, an institutional setting spoiled by particular interest of national states in Europe and in the Gulf.

Trying to analyze whether the European Union (EU) has a comprehensive and concrete foreign policy towards the Gulf region isn't an easy task. The Union surely has a particular attention regarding the Gulf and its regional actors, and it surely has every interest in fostering dialogue and cooperation with Gulf countries, all of them, due to economic, as well as security reasons. However, the critics against the Union and its external action are many, especially regarding this particular geographical area. Analysts and experts of foreign policy accuse the EU of lack of coherence and consistency in approaching this region of the world.

These accusations are, often, not ill funded: the negotiations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on the project of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the EU were halted in 2008 and since then never really resumed; numerous are the calls for a renewed effort to give a new push towards a more structured relation with the GCC as a compact institutional actor. These calls remain, so far, of a fundamentally declaratory character and have to face structural and contingent shortcomings of both the GCC and the European counterpart.¹ Moreover, the unfolding events in recent years, in the Gulf and in the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, starting from the Arab Uprising in 2011, and the widespread instability that followed in the region, are putting the EU and its foreign policy goals to a very difficult test.

The European external action towards the Arab Gulf is embedded, whether criticized or positively assessed, in the broader engagement of the Middle East and North Africa. The approach towards

this area of the world, one of maximal importance for the EU, given the proximity to its borders, is based on the concept of resilience and its enhancement in the region.²

The key concept of resilience, as baseline for the improvement of critical relation with countries and institutions in the MENA region, seems to be the fruit of a "lesson learned" type of reasoning. The European Union has possibly learned that peace can not be brought about by means of external imposition, and that the outcomes of this kind of approach can be, and have shown themselves to be, catastrophic.³

The political unrest in North Africa and Middle East; the tragedy of Syria and the migration crisis that came from it in 2015 have strongly and unpleasantly shook Europe in a historical moment. The Union itself was going through severe difficulties because of the financial crisis and the grievances it gave voice to, causing the trembling of the European architecture triggered by old structural flaws coming to the fore. The Brexit and the rise of populism all over Europe gave the final hit. Against this situation the EU's Global Strategy was thought as a response to the crisis that was striking Europe, internally and externally.

As a fundamental area in the MENA region, given the reserves of natural resources that the Gulf monarchies and

¹ C. Colombo and C. Committeri (2013), "*Need to Rethink the EU-GCC Strategy Relation*", Istituto Affari Internazionali, Sharaka project Research Paper N.1.

² European External Action Service (EEAS), "*Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*", June 2016.

³ High Representative for European Foreign Affairs/ Vice President of the European Commission speech, Mach,6, 2019.

Iran hold, the huge profits that these resources generate, and the huge relevance that these oil-exporting countries enjoy in the whole region, the question is if the European Union is implementing any kind of wide-ranging foreign policy towards these states. A fundamental part of this issue lies on the non-granted assumption that a structured tailor-made foreign policy exists at all. At last the effort would be that of foreseeing if the Union is in the place to eventually bring about a more comprehensive type of approach towards the Gulf.

The European Union's foreign policy towards the Gulf appears to be flawed by poor policy-making. The emblematic example of the status of the project of an FTA with the GCC, clearly shows how these two institutions have given in to their own internal challenges, rather than maximizing a relationship that could have huge benefits in the long-term, not just for the EU and the Gulf sub-region, but also for the Middle East in general. The prolonged suspension of renewed concrete efforts towards the goal of developing economic and political links with the GCC, through cooperation in industry, energy and the environment, set in 1988 in the Cooperation Agreement, could be due to a shift in the EU's attention. The unfolding of the 2011 Arab Uprising in North Africa and the migration crisis that hit Europe in 2015, on which the Union dramatically failed and showed an unprecedented lack of European solidarity, put very urgent problems on the table. The EU has certainly been more focused on the events in the Mediterranean rather than in the Gulf, having to take care of security imperatives there. Relations with the Gulf were probably easier to tackle at the bilateral level, for both sides; oil, warfare trade and counter-terrorism cooperation have dominated the dialogue between the two regions so far. The Iran Deal and the fierce commitment that the EU has showed in striking and protecting it could be identified, both as an exception in the Gulf impasse of efficient foreign policy, or, again, as a case that demonstrates that the bilateral level is still the favored one on both sides. The renewed intra-Gulf confrontation for power between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the arguments among GCC countries (a prominent case is the 2017 blockade on Qatar by its neighbors) that halts the progress in the project of GCC integration, could all be among possible reasons for the underscoring cooperation performance between the EU and its Arab counterpart.

Ultimately, it all might come down to a lack of political will.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy to reflect on the nature of the actors involved: the EU for instance. The EU is a hybrid entity *per se*, unique in the world but also problematic in its very nature. At the state the European Union is today, the policy-making process is divided between the supranational character and the intergovernmental one. In particular, the realm of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy is still a strong intergovernmental one.

Thus, the EU and the external action it seeks to have is very much influenced by the uniqueness of its nature. The Union often conditions its engagement with a third party to the promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Not having an official European military, and having engaged mostly in civil missions, rather than military ones, the leverage that the EU has to put into use is that of trade benefits and opening of its free market area. This setting has proved not to be sufficient in constructing a relationship with the Arab Gulf. Hence, The EU's foreign policy is here analyzed as the policy of a post-Westphalian political entity where different methods, the intergovernmental one and the communitarian one, tend to enter into contrast with each other and generate disfunctions that reverberate on the EU's external action.

EU-GCC Relations

Since the end of the Cold War and the first Gulf war in 1991, the Arab Gulf was again identified as an essential focal point of Western foreign policy, on which the US and European countries spent a huge amount of both material and ideological resources. To tackle the issue, the two Western powers embraced substantial different approaches in dealing with the promotion of security in the region: on one hand, the US has placed itself as the main external influential actor in the Gulf, providing for economic investments, financial aid and granting security through military assistance.

Not having the same military resources that the United States enjoy, the European Union opted for a type of approach that could maximize its interests and remain coherent to its nature as an international actor. The European

tactic was that of putting forward economic and trade cooperation as main instrument in providing development in the Arab Gulf, a path that, according to the liberal mainstream, would automatically lead to stability in the region and therefore global security.⁴

The relation between the then European Community and the Gulf Cooperation Council, however, dates back to 1979, when the first initiatives were taken in order to conclude bilateral cooperation agreements: showing farsightedness, the two institutions signed, in 1988, a Cooperation Agreement meant to strengthen stability for strategic goals; facilitate political and economic relations; broaden economic and technical cooperation; broaden cooperation on energy, industry, trade and services, agriculture, fisheries, investment, science, technology and environment.⁵ In 1989, negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement between the two were initiated, taking the existing Cooperation Agreement as framework. The ultimate goal was to create a free trade area between the GCC and the European Community.

Already at that time, the two regions had strategic interests on one another, mainly due to the Gulf large supplies of oil and gas (holding the 45% of the known world's oil reserves and providing for the 20% of the world oil production), and the EU position as a big importer of such resources. In 1991, the GCC was the then EEC's largest export market and the EEC's exports to the GCC accounted for 1,4% of the total.⁶

Seven years after its birth in 1981, as a counter policy against the shadow of the Iranian Revolution, the GCC was already thought as a political and military alliance that could potentially become the European Union of the Middle East. Yet, soon enough, the realization that the GCC was nothing like the EU reflected itself on the slow and disappointing process of negotiations to take forward the goals of the 1988 Agreement.

In 2003, the six GCC countries agreed on the creation of a Customs Union that officially came into effect on the 1st January of that year, as a further step towards the complete integration of markets among the Gulf countries. Yet, the Customs Union, even if it increased the rate of intra-GCC trade,⁷ underscored in reaching the level required for reaching the next step of a Common Market, showing important shortcomings in terms of procedures and mechanisms for customs revenue collection and distribution.⁸ Adding to the difficulties of the GCC countries in reaching the status that the EU asked for as precondition to the initiating of the FTA, the EU also often conditioned the proceedings of the negotiations in the matter to the enhancement of human rights and democracy. Useless to say, Gulf countries perceived this kind of approach as one breaching in their own internal and sovereign matters, making mutual understanding between the parties even more awkward and difficult. Ultimately, negotiations on the trade agreement were unilaterally halted by the GCC countries in 2008:

“due to the absence of any progress in the negotiations, and the European side maintaining its previous positions, the GCC suspended negotiations, but approved the European demand to continue consultations between the two parties, until a common ground for resuming negotiations is achieved.” (Secretariat of the Gulf Cooperation Council)

The EU and the GCC after 2008

Nowadays trade between the two regions has not slowed down, nor has it lost relevance for both parties. (Figure 1)

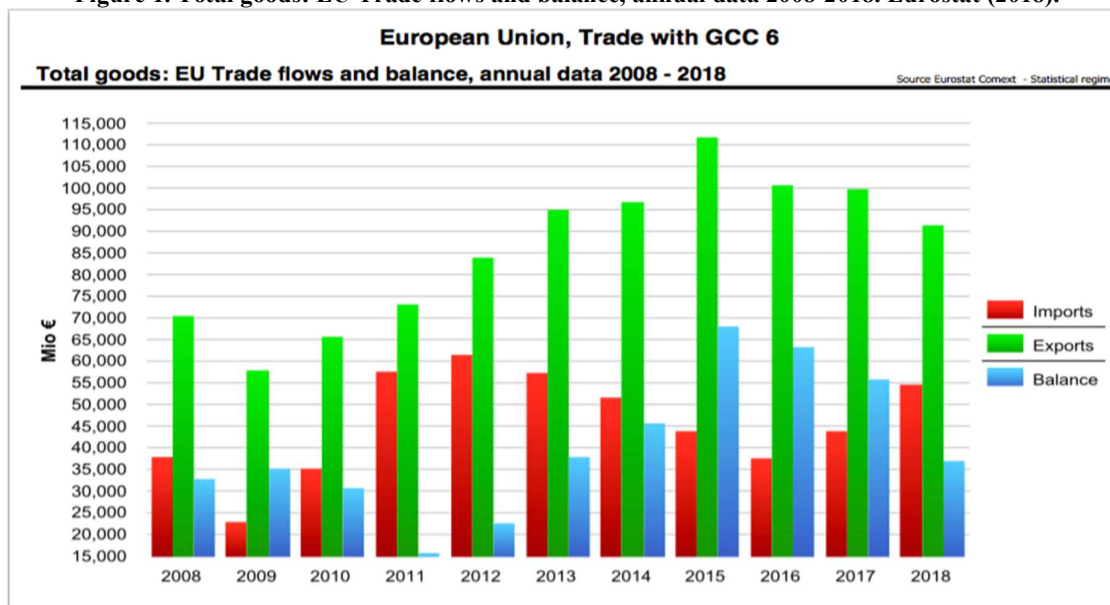
⁴ M. Brunelli (2011), “EU Policy and US Strategy towards the Persian Gulf- Different Approaches for Common Goals?”, Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs, Vol. 2, No. 5, pp. 163-184.

⁵ European External Action Service (EEAS), https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/middle-east-north-africa-mena/338/gulf-cooperation-council-gcc-and-eu_en

⁶ European Commission, Press Release Database, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-93-25_en.htm

⁷ On average, since the formation of the Customs Union, intra-GCC trade grew in volume by a rate of more than 20% every year. Secretariat General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), <http://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/CooperationAndAchievements/Achievements/EconomicCooperation/TheCustomsUnion/Pages/ImpactoftheCustomsUniononIntra.aspx>

⁸ L. Low, L. Salazar (2010). “The GCC Customs Union”. In “The Gulf Cooperation Council: A Rising Power and Lessons for ASEAN”, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, pp. 19-22.

Figure 1. Total goods: EU Trade flows and balance, annual data 2008-2018. Eurostat (2018).

Since 2008, GCC members went on in their effort of integration, creating a Monetary Union in 2010, aiming at finally adopting a single currency. Oman and the UAE opted out from the project; the Monetary Union Quartet (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait) opened negotiations to convince their neighbors to join the union in order to give a sprint towards the complete integration of markets.⁹

Since the freeze in negotiations on the trade agreement, however, contacts in the framework of the 1988 Cooperation Agreement continued in the form of joint workshop events and lectures on numerous fields such as finance, economy, monetary, trade, industry, investment, energy, nuclear safety, electricity, water, transport, environment, combating money laundering, combating funding terrorism, patent, protection of intellectual property, higher education and scientific research etc.

A relevant achievement was the establishment of a European Union and GCC network for clean energy in 2010, drawing from a common interest in the development of clean energy resources.¹⁰

However, the form of the EU-GCC relations are still not able to lead to the formation of an all-encompassing policy.

Two major projects have been launched, in order to facilitate the resuming of a comprehensive cooperation between the EU and the GCC that could give new life to the prospects of a trade agreement between them, namely “Al Jisr” project and “Sharaka”.

In 2010, the diplomatic “Al Jisr” project on “Public Diplomacy and Outreach devoted to the European Union and EU-GCC Relations” comprehended a consortium of think tanks and experts coming from both sides; the goal was to ease mutual understanding and the enhancement of good practices between the parties. This is because one of the problems manifesting at the negotiation table could be identified, in fact, precisely as a form of lack of adequate knowledge between the EU and the GCC countries. A patent example of this issue was the insistence of the EU to link the progress towards the free trade agreement to the enhancement of human rights and democracy in the Gulf states. If the GCC interpreted this forced conditionality as trespassing in their internal affairs, on the European side it was a sign of how there was little knowledge, or little will to acknowledge, the nature of those soon to be partners countries.

⁹ “GCC tries to persuade UAE and Oman to join currency talks”, June 29, 2014, <http://www.arabnews.com/news/593931>

¹⁰ EU-GCC Clean Energy Technology Network, <http://www.eugcc-cleanenergy.net/>

Implementing the policies proposed by the European Union would have possibly meant a drastic regime shift in the Gulf, something unthinkable if one considers that in the Gulf monarchies regime stability and security ranks first on the scale of national core interests.

Moreover, the lack of understanding between the EU and the GCC was further influenced by the media. Mass media on both sides tend, studies have shown, to convey biased images and perceptions of one another, having an impact on the conception of the nature of the interests of the other and impacting, in particular, on international investment in the Gulf.

Thus, “Al Jisr” was constructed as a dialogue between civil societies, particularly increasing the level of knowledge of the EU and its institutions in the six Gulf countries, raising the awareness of the necessity of renewed cooperation between the Union and the GCC, and of fulfilling the potential of tighter political and commercial ties between them.

The latest project launched by the Istituto Affari Internazionali to analyze the state of the EU-GCC relations was “Sharaka, Enhancing Understanding and Cooperation in EU-GCC Relation”.¹¹ The project aimed at assessing the current status of EU-GCC relations, drawing from its past and highlighting both problems and shortcomings of the interactions between the two blocs, and the areas starting from which a more constructive policy could be furthered.

The outcome of “Sharaka” has been particularly relevant in identifying some of the factors that have hindered the relationship between the European Union and the Gulf. These factors are of a double nature: both structural and contingent. At the structural level it is justly argued that three main elements can be causally linked to the shortcomings experienced in building an all-encompassing cooperation, and in developing the path towards a Free Trade Agreement.¹²

Firstly, both actors are afflicted by institutional deficiencies: in the EU and in the GCC the national interest of single member states still often prevails over the supranational will of the institution, causing a damaging resilience of bilateral relations between European and Gulf states. Nevertheless, it is important to specify how the GCC can not be compared to the EU in terms of integration and post-Westphalian character: the European process of integration has followed a neofunctionalist path that led European countries through a progression in pooling sovereignty into the EU’s core institutions. Today the EU has grown into being a *quasi*-federal regional state, having a parliament (the European Parliament), an independent judiciary organ (the European Court of Justice), an independent central bank (the European Central Bank), both a legislative and executive organ, respectively the European Commission and the European Council, and a Common Foreign and Security Policy. Moreover, the European Commission has the absolute competence in signing trade agreements with third parties on behalf of the whole European Union. On this respect, the high level of asymmetry between the EU and the GCC has constituted an obstacle in expectations and demands during the negotiation process.

On the other side, however, the EU has experienced big problems in maintaining solidarity and a common European identity at its core: the combining effects of the 2008 economic and financial crisis, the 2015 migration crisis and the consequential rise of populism and of far-right wings (to name some of many problems), have shackled the European Union from its fundamentals, jeopardizing the legitimacy of the principle of European solidarity and allowing states to pursue their own policies, going often into contrast with the European Union itself. This difficult contest has been mirrored on the progress of the EU-GCC relationship and on the negotiations over the FTA; it is not casual that negotiations were halted in 2008,¹³ and that major bilateral trade, mainly on energy and weapons, is

¹¹ “Sharaka, Enhancing Understanding and Cooperation in EU-GCC Relation”, http://sharaka.iai.it/?page_id=259

¹² S. Colombo, C. Committeri (2013), “*Need to Rethink the EU-GCC Strategy Relation*”, Istituto Affari Internazionali, Sharaka Project, Research Paper N.1.

¹³ Two aspects are to be considered here: first, in 2008 the EU was already greatly suffering due to the economic and financial crisis.

The velocity with which the crisis spread out from the US, touching Europe and the whole globe in no time served, probably, for the GCC to realize that binding themselves to the EU through an FTA was not at all beneficial in that particular historical moment. Second, the European Union had just undergone two processes of enlargement (one in 2004 and one in 2007) towards

happening between the major stakeholder states in both institutions.

Secondly, the project highlighted how, after 9/11, there has been a European trend in focusing relations with GCC state on counter-terrorism cooperation, leaving aside a number of equally relevant fields. Being the cooperation with the GCC and with its member state a pillar for counter-terrorism activities in Western policies, the logic has been that of sacrificing cooperation on other fields other than security and energy, so to maximize outcomes in countering terrorism, and not to jeopardize relations on this matter due to disagreements on other topics, most notably the FTA.

At last, it is precisely the different demands from both sides in negotiating the Free Trade Agreement, that ultimately have the most hindering impact on the realization of a comprehensive European foreign policy towards the GCC and the Gulf in general. As argued above, the European Union has repeatedly tried to condition the realization of a trade agreement on the internal reform of Gulf countries, in terms of respect of human rights and democratic practices. Meaning the internal reform demanded from the EU the weakening of the power of the regimes in the Gulf, these measures have always been welcomed by the Gulf monarchies with despire and outrage at the perceived attempt of external interference. This kind of issue relates, once again, to the lack of knowledge of one another, but probably more pragmatically, to the lack of political will, on both sides, in constructing a comprehensive relationship. Serious and productive cooperation is still relegated to the fields that hold major economic and security importance in the interests of the main single states in both the EU and the GCC, namely energy, warfare trade and counter-terrorism activities.

Contingent difficulties

Adding to the structural difficulties that the European Union and the GCC have to face in constructing their rapport, some contingent situations have risen up as endangering their progress. Today the Middle East regions is consistently different from the one existing before the 2011 Arab Uprisings. Today this part of the world is in a situation of political and security turmoil: regimes in the MENA region are more single-minded than ever in maintaining the status quo in their countries, at the cost of resulting in forms of authoritarianism, having to cope with a growing delegitimization of their positions. Numerous trans-national organizations challenge every day the various governments, taking support from angered and frustrated populations in every MENA country. The sectarian discourse is, moreover, at its highest, inflaming political conflicts with religious implications, easily manipulating the public opinion.¹⁴ Regimes either succumb to the sectarian drift, or make it integral part of their national discourses, so to employ it on behalf of their own interests. This is particularly true in the Arab Gulf. GCC members are neighbors to four countries, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq, all of which are currently on the verge of failure.

Within these four countries, the shi'a - sunni divide is more patent, giving voice to political and social grievances through a powerful discourse. In this contest, a revival in the confrontation between Gulf states, most of all Saudi Arabia and Iran, is becoming an imminent imperative for both parties' foreign and security policies. The competition for strategic influence in the Gulf region is dangerously taking the conflict spiral path. Taking two of the four countries as example, in Yemen a proxy war between the Saudi-led coalition and Iran is taking place, in the middle of social, political and religious cleavages animating the war.¹⁵

All of these elements and menaces of an imminent violent conflict in the Gulf, certainly make the prospects of a

Eastern Europe. Eastern Countries have tended to look inwards at their national problems (in terms of the heavy institutional and economic adjustment that they were asked to undertake in order to gain membership of the EU), calling for the Union to take care of its internal difficult situation and consequently slowing down the EU's external action.

¹⁴ R. Hinnebusch (2014), "*The Arab Uprisings and the MENA Regional State System*", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 11, No 42, pp. 7-27.

¹⁵ R. Hinnebusch (2016), "*The Sectarian Revolution in the Middle East*", *R/evolutions: Global Trends and Regional Issues*, Vol 4, No 1, pp. 120-152.

strengthening of EU-GCC ties even more challenging. It is clear that the atmosphere is roughly tense. Adding to the messy situation, the hopes of an internal reform in Saudi Arabia sponsored, at first, by Crown-Prince Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS), finally revealed itself as smoke in Western eyes. The Kingdom is going all the way down to the authoritarian spiral as demonstrated by its involvement in Yemen and in the Khashoggi murder. The latter, in particular, has triggered the loud condemnation, not only of the international community, but also, and more relevantly, of the international public opinion.

On the other hand, the European Union is more assertive than ever in protecting its strong diplomatic ties with Iran, holding on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, despite the US withdrawal from the deal and the American imposition of hard economic sanctions on the Islamic Republic.

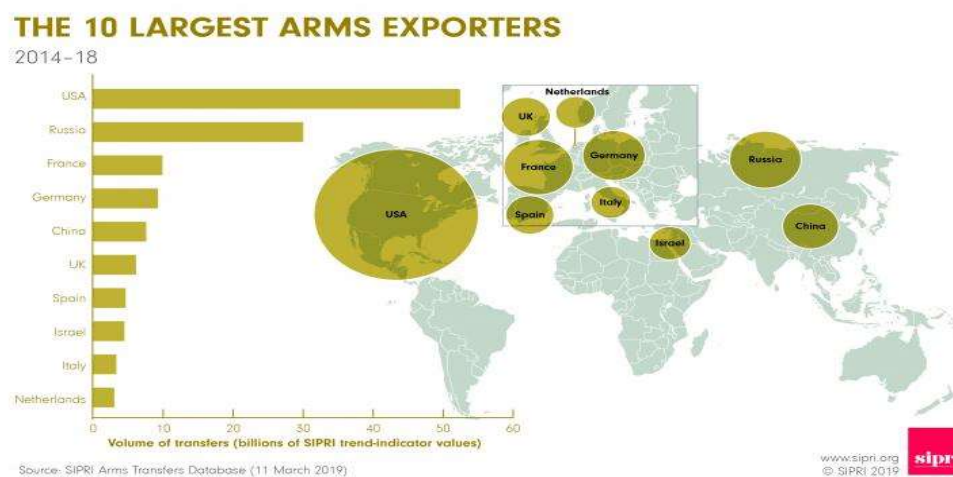
Arms Sale

One of the most important competences that the EU retains is that attaining to trade policy: the Union has the power of negotiating trade agreements with a national or regional third party on behalf of its member states. The negotiation of trade agreements, and the leverage that the EU as unitary actor enjoys, has proven to be one of the key instruments of expanding the Union's external action: it is common that agreements stipulated with the EU, not only regulate tariffs and other trade-related aspects, but also provide for human rights clauses.

Given the size and the relevancy of trade flows between the EU and the GCC¹⁶, the fact that no FTA was reached between the two actors is the reflection of their problematic relations, and of a certain degree of short-sightedness in developing a foreign policy towards each other, that actualizes the potential that such a policy would hold.

The trade relationship between the EU and the GCC has most developed in two main fields, namely energy and arms. The latter constitutes, nowadays, one of the mostly contested trade flows in the Western public opinion. That EU countries were bilaterally selling important amounts of arms and warfare-related technologies it is not recent news: six of the biggest arms selling countries are precisely European (France, Germany, Spain, United Kingdom, Italy and the Netherlands), all of which rank among the top ten sellers on global scale.¹⁷ (Figure 2)

Figure 2. The 10 largest arms Exporters. SIPRI Arms Transfers Database (2019).



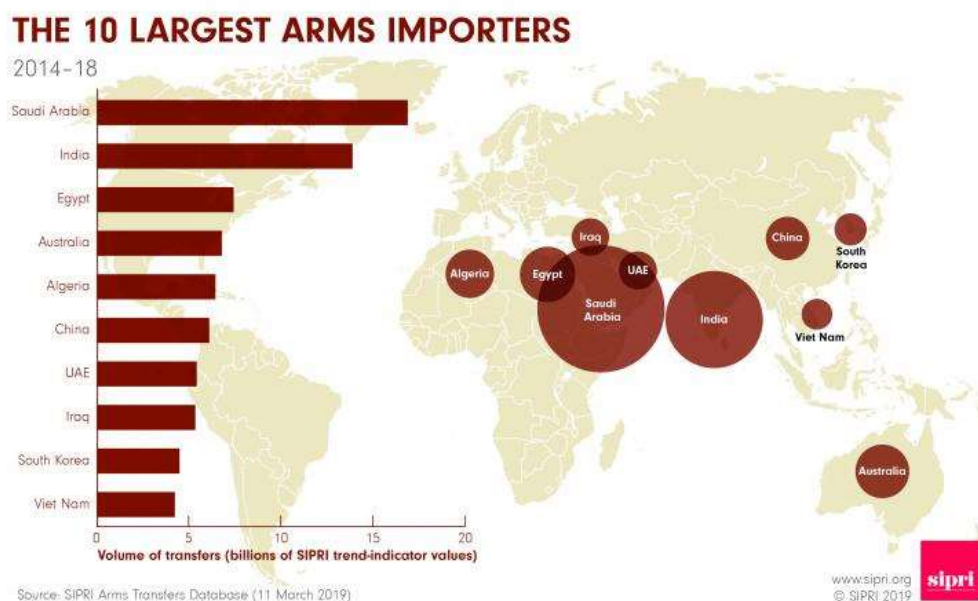
¹⁶ In 2017 the GCC is the fourth EU's largest export market (accounting for 4,4% of EU total trade), on the other hand the EU is the biggest GCC's trade partner (accounting for 14,7% of GCC's global trade). From the European External Action Service (EEAS), https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/middle-east-north-africa-mena/338/gulf-cooperation-council-gcc-and-eu_en

¹⁷ Data from SIPRI Arms Transfers Database.

A considerable part of this arms flow is headed towards the Arab Gulf and more specifically towards GCC countries. (Figure 3)

Considering the difficulties that the EU and the GCC encountered in negotiating a Free Trade Agreement, it looks interesting that the same difficulties are not met in this kind of trade. European states are the biggest arms exporters towards the Gulf: a number of deals on the sale of weapons and warfare technology of last generation have been concluded since the first years 2000s.¹⁸ The great success of warfare trade between Europe and the GCC countries is the reflection of a two folded phenomenon which, indeed, relates to one of the main obstacles to the construction of an all-encompassing relation between them: first, the resilience and convenience of bilateral relations on a state-to-state level between the two parts; second, the strength of this dynamic in fields which hold huge economic and security interests such as energy and arms sale.

Figure 3. The 10 largest arms Importers. SIPRI Arms Transfers Database (2019).



Moreover, the convenience of this phenomenon is particularly relevant for the European Union. The EU, in fact, holds in itself a full set of principles of democratic practices and respect of human rights, which are at the very core of its singular nature and which the EU is eager to extend on its neighborhood and on its partners in general. Evidently, the sale of warfare arms to notably autocratic regimes would be something of a paradox and would damage the political credibility of the European Union. Yet, the economic interests at stake in this particular field are immensely relevant for both Europe and the Gulf, thus ranking among those issues which profitability can not be endangered by the European Union's label. Therefore, it is easy to see why the sale of arms is still one of those issues which European countries retain in their sovereign domain and on which the EU could act upon, in a legally-binding way, solely in the context of the European Council, where policy-making is governed by the intergovernmental method.

How the national interests of EU member states are still prevailing on the common European Union's agenda, is

¹⁸ France, the UK, Germany and Italy have been selling mostly to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. The year 2009 is one in which most of arms sale deals were concluded. In the last two years 2017, and 2018 the United Kingdom and France have renewed sales towards the Gulf, among the condemnations of the Western public opinion. Data generated from SIPRI Arms Transfers Database.

also evident in acknowledging the timing in which this huge trade flow was happening: in the aftermath of the 2008/2009 financial crisis that hit Europe, the sale of arms was envisaged as a way to face the economic difficulties that every country had to meet, by both expanding their market and creating jobs at home. In those years great sales were concluded and the autocratic nature of the importers was overlooked and almost excused when considering the big economic interests that they were representing.

The impact of arms sale

However, the situation has changed and the trade-off between human rights and economic interest is growingly challenged by international events, and contested by the international public opinion. First, after the Arab Uprisings in 2011 and the masses of people asking for democracy, civil and political rights, and calling out their governments as corrupted regimes throughout the whole MENA region, have rendered for the EU difficult to close both eyes in favor of the economic interest of its own member states. Second, the dramatic humanitarian consequences of the war in Yemen, the involvement of GCC countries in it and the scandal of the Khashoggi murder, have all had a major impact on the flow of arms from Europe towards the Gulf.

The Western public opinion is calling out on their governments to be equally responsible, with the Saudi-led coalition acting in Yemen, for the humanitarian catastrophe that is taking place there. The news that the helicopters, bombs and technologies used in Yemen are mainly of a European origin have backlashed on European arms exporters. Moreover, the events unfolding around Saudi Arabia and MBS are adding on the damaged reputation of the EU. The internal political purge happening in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has made any hope for democratic reform there weak and unlikely; the case of the Khashoggi murder have ultimately killed such hopes.

Put under moral pressure by the Saudi bad reputation coming from the Khashoggi murder, the acute humanitarian crisis and the alleged war crimes committed by the Saudi-led coalition, resonating on the news and in public demonstrations in the West, both Germany and Norway have suspended their arms delivery towards GCC countries.

The European Parliament, on its part, has adopted resolution 2017/2849(RSP) calling on a European embargo on arms trade towards Saudi Arabia. Another similar resolution was adopted in 2016 but both are the reflection of European weakness. The year 2008 saw the adoption of a European Common Position on arms exports, regulating over licenses and sales and enhancing the transparency of this kind of trade. Both resolutions, in 2016 and 2017, have recognized that the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia goes right against the principles adopted in the Common Position, yet their nature remains mainly declaratory. Because of the deep-rooted sovereign affection of most European countries to certain fields of interest, for an arms embargo to be truly respected and effective throughout the EU, it would be necessary for the European Council to call on it, implying unanimity among European states. This possibility is clearly far from becoming reality: in 2017 France has doubled its sale commitments reaching a 7 billion of euros trade value¹⁹, while other major European arms exporters like the UK, Italy and Spain are not intentioned to stop their businesses with Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf.

In the light of the resilience that this kind of bilateral trade between European and GCC countries enjoys on both part, in stark contrast with the failure of negotiations of the Free Trade Agreement and the shortcomings in developing a comprehensive and efficient European foreign policy towards the Gulf, it is reasonable to think that one of the difficulties in creating an institution-to-institution relationship has been undermined, among other things, by singles national interests in the EU and the Gulf Cooperation Council. If the predominance of national interests over the institution's ones is still strong in the EU, the GCC is clearly even more exposed to this kind of dynamics. Considering the 2017 blockade on Qatar by its fellow GCC members, adds up to this argument.

Thus, in evaluating the likelihood of resuming negotiations on an FTA between the EU and the GCC, while

¹⁹ "Despite criticism at home, France's arms sales double in the Middle East", July 3, 2018 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-egypt-arms/despite-criticism-at-home-french-arms-sales-double-in-the-middle-east-idUSKBN1JT21E>

upgrading the nature of the relationship between the two into a more structured and principled foreign policy, has to take into careful account the interests at stake on both sides. Finalizing the EU-GCC bond would have a possible bad backlash on huge economic interests on both sides, notwithstanding the effect on the EU and its international role as a powerfully pledged to put democracy and human rights first.

Saudi Arabia: the awkward partner

As argued before, the European Union has clearly underperformed in its ability to expand as a unitary foreign actor towards the Arab Gulf. Great problems come from institutional flaws: the European Union has gone through an acute phase of crisis in a moment in which the European integration process was far from being completed. Fundamental aspects of what would make the Union a real unitary actor still lie in the sovereign hands of its member states. The kind of crisis that the EU has faced since 2008 has just made all European countries more eager not to let go of their sovereignty on matters like security, migration and major economic interests: the obvious reflection of the EU's condition is Brexit. Instead of acting through a single voice, each member state runs into its own direction, so to protect its own sensible interests.

On the other hand, GCC countries have enjoyed the current state of affairs. The GCC was never a strong comprehensive institution: its main organs remain basically powerless with declaratory functions; even if the hope was that of an integration process resembling the European one, the required conditions were lacking: Gulf countries have tended to protect their regime stability first of all, while competing among themselves for prominence in the region, and balancing against Iran. Thus, GCC countries have all the reasons to favor the maintenance of the independent bilateral character of their relations with Europe, in order to maximize their trade benefits from the EU, while avoiding to comply with the "basket" of moral principles and human rights that the EU holds in itself.

On the Gulf side, a country that is particularly enjoying this state of affairs is Saudi Arabia.

For sure the major country of the GCC, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is also the main "friend" of the West in the region, as well as the United Arab Emirates. This historical friendship is strengthened by, and reflected in, the enormous trade of oil and arms with its European partners and the one on the other side of the Atlantic.

The fact that Saudi Arabia positions itself as Iran's mortal enemy only makes it infinitely valuable as an actor in the Gulf.

Yet, this actor is becoming growingly awkward as a partner, especially for what concerns its relations with the EU. In line with what has been argued so far, Saudi Arabia is the emblematic example of how the European Union has failed in presenting itself as a partner. The Union's foreign policy towards the Gulf has succumbed to the nationalistic interests of its member states while, nowadays, it's being damaged by the lack of efficacy and coherence in acting upon the situation in Yemen and against the authoritarian drift that one of its biggest partners in the Gulf has taken.

A turning point? The EU's response to Saudi Arabia

Due to the scandal of the Khashoggi murder and the outcomes of the ongoing investigations, a new light has been shed on the autocratic spiral down which Saudi Arabia is going. The emerging figure of Crown-Prince Mohammed Bin Salman and the "liberal" reforms that he was putting the Kingdom through, made it momentarily look that something was qualitatively changing in Saudi Arabia. Instead, what gained new momentum and light spot after Khashoggi's murder in Istanbul was the political purge that the Kingdom was enacting against all its political opponents and human rights activists; moreover, the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen and the allegations of possible war-crimes committed by the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis have badly resonated all over.

In this context, the once "excusably authoritarian friend of the West", has been attracting everyone's attention on the Western involvement in such events as Yemen.

In Europe the Saudi scandal has put the Union in a uniquely difficult position: given the seriousness of the Khashoggi murder, the whole international community has voiced out its utter condemnation and incredulity and the EU was not an exception. However, if the Union was resolute in its condemnation of the murder and asked for

clarification of the circumstances and all the parts involved, EU member states were faced with the awkward situation of having to condemn a major trading partner with big leverage on them. It could be argued that the ever-autocratic Saudi regime has been able to play on its big connection with the West (mostly in terms of oil and arms sale) so to be more autonomous in implementing whatever internal, and external, policy it deemed necessary to its survival, putting its partners in a challenging position.

In fact, while Germany and Norway have suspended their arms flow towards the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia until light was shed on the actual circumstances of Khashoggi's murder, and voices in the European Parliament are calling for its members to implement a full arms sale embargo,²⁰ major European countries stubbornly went on in protecting their national economic benefits. Notwithstanding the Yemeni tragedy and the internal purge happening in the Kingdom, countries like the UK and France continue to sell arms to Saudi Arabia and members of its coalition.

A breakthrough in the European Union's position on Saudi Arabia seemed to have been reached when on February 13, 2019, the European Commission surprised everyone in putting the Kingdom in its black list of money laundering countries financing terrorism. This ideally meant that Saudi Arabia and its leadership were being labeled as dubious partners and being recognized as potentially dangerous; practically it meant that every banking transaction with the Saudis had to be carefully double checked for money laundering activities, thus rendering trade and economic affairs more complicated and possibly transparent.²¹

Once again, the proposed unitary voice of the European Union was defeated by the paradoxical unanimity of the EU 28 in voting against the Commission's one-week-old proposal. Even more paradoxical seems the reproaching of Saudi Arabia inside the walls of the United Nations' Human Right Council: in March 2019, a number of UN members rose their concerns about Saudi Arabia's possible involvement in Khashoggi's murder and for the Kingdom's violent and oppressive attitude towards activists and opponents.²²

It looks like the European Union is struggling in trying to act unitedly, without damaging its member states' interests. In doing so, however, the reputation and accountability of the EU as a whole is being heavily discredited by its incoherence. The recent events involving Saudi Arabia are the example of the difficulties faced by the European Union in implementing a comprehensive foreign policy towards this particular region of the world, one that is possibly unanimous and in line with the Union's identity pretensions.

The European Union's policy towards Iran

So far, the European Union didn't seem to be able to implement a sound and consistent foreign policy that would engage the Arab Gulf in a comprehensive and constructive way.

The efforts to resume an EU-GCC deep cooperation still lack concrete impact, and willingness or opportunity, caught as they are in the sovereign affairs of its member states.

Saudi Arabia, moreover, is proving to be a difficult partner to openly support and engage, given its involvement in the humanitarian tragedy staging in Yemen and the international atonement concerning the Khashoggi murder. If the latter is a case of crime against international law, the former is an even more dangerous case, attracting the attention of the international public opinion and sparking a number of civilian demonstrations against the Kingdom and against Western governments, which stand accused of indirectly fueling the war by selling weapons to Saudi Arabia and its coalition.

²⁰ European Parliament, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20181018IPR16536/meps-demand-end-to-eu-arms-exports-to-saudi-arabia>, October, 25, 2018.

²¹ "Saudi Arabia Added to EU's Draft Terrorism Financing List", January 27, 2019 <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/saudi-arabia-added-to-eu-s-draft-terrorism-financing-list-1.6875590>,

²² "Saudi Arabia rebuked over detention of women activists at UN forum", March 7, 2019 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47482779>

Nevertheless, the European inconsistency in its external action towards the region doesn't look as strong as an argument in the case of the other actor in the Gulf: The Islamic Republic of Iran.

The relationship between the EU and its Member States (especially the E3, Germany, UK and France) has been of good character since the days of the Iranian Revolution in 1979.²³

The relationship between the two, with ups and downs, has proven to be fundamental for both actors at the economic, as well as the political level. The three major European states, namely Germany, Britain and France, have cultivated their link with Iran on the base of a "critical dialogue" principle, acknowledging the influence that the Islamic Republic exercises in terms of energy resources and geopolitics of the Gulf.

Being the European approach towards Iran very different from the one conceptualized on the other side of the Atlantic by the US superpower, Iran comes to see Europe not only as an important trade partner, but also as an alternative needed to compensate for the USA containment and commitment to isolate Iran from the international community.

Thus, in the case of Iran, Europe has generally defied the US's condemnation of Iran as a "rogue state" and put forward its "independent" foreign policy towards it.

Of course, European countries have encountered a series of disagreements and critical situations in their relationship with Iran, but the beneficial aspect of their functionalist relations has always won in the political and economic calculations on both sides; hence, the EU's commitment to avoid to align to the USA's policy towards Iran in absolute terms, and to reach out to the Islamic Republic through diplomatic means.²⁴

The European approach of critical dialogue have, at last, proved successful precisely on the wake of the Iranian nuclear crisis in 2003, giving the E3, and the EU in general, the legitimacy and the ability to convince Iran to negotiate on its nuclear program. At the end of the long process of negotiations, the ultimate result was a diplomatic success for the European Union and its High Representative for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini, the E5+1 and the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in ratifying the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2016.

However, while the European policy towards Iran bore fruit because of its flexible and diplomatic nature, it is important to underline how this approach, and its concrete outcomes, relied on the existence of particularly favorable political environments both in the EU and in Iran. The Islamic Republic has seen different presidents taking office one after the other since its birth and, from the Western point of view, Iran's presidents differed from one another on the basis of their grade of openness/engagement towards Western countries. Thus, striking diplomatic successes in trade and cooperation between the two parties have been heavily influenced on the character of the men at the head, mostly in Iran.²⁵

Thus, the political circumstances under which the JCPOA was finally agreed on and implemented in 2016 appear the result of the alignment of a favorable political environment, with two moderates at the head of Iran (Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and President Hassan Rouhani) and Federica Mogherini as High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Vice-President of the European Commission, known for its fundamental role in bolstering the European Common Foreign and Security Policy and for giving birth to the EU's Global Strategy.

Since the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (or Iran Nuclear Deal), on January 16th 2016, the European Union has increased its imports from Iran of the 344,8%, for a value of 5,5 billion of Euros. European exports

²³ A. Tarock (1999), "Iran-Western Europe Relations on the Mend", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 26, No 1, pp. 41-61.

²⁴ A. Tarock, *ibidem*.

²⁵ The historical accord on oil trade between France and Iran in 1997 was reached under the newly elected president of Iran Khatami, known for its moderate positions, especially towards the West. Moreover, since the beginning of the nuclear crisis in 2003, the years of stalemate of negotiations over Iran's nuclear program and episodes of tensions between the EU and Iran mostly belong to the period of Ahmadinejad's presidency, a hard-liner regarding Iran's foreign policy and nuclear program.

towards Iran have also rose by 27,8%; in 2017, figures rose further.²⁶ This substantial rise in trade figures are a direct reflection of one of the major consequences of the JCPOA: first, the Council lifted all nuclear-related economic and financial EU sanctions against Iran on January, 16, 2016 on the JCPOA “Implementation Day”. Second, the striking success of the diplomatic effort led by the EU, drove the UN to adopt Resolution 2231(2015), regarding the JCPOA, endorsing it and allowing for a UN lifting of sanctions over Iran in January 2016, the same day as the EU did.²⁷

Thus, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action presents itself as a major win for the EU and its foreign policy. In this case, the EU has proved to be able to be the leading power mediating towards the reaching of an accord beneficial for all: bringing together Iran, the US, Russia and China and speaking with its own voice, Bruxelles has been able to conciliate its double interests: those of the Union as a whole and those of its member states. So much so that, when the Trump administration withdrew from the Deal and pledged to impose new sanctions against Iran, the EU has showed itself united and adamant in its will to protect the deal it brokered and its ties with Iran. On June, 6, 2018, through a Council Regulation, the Union enacted a Blocking Statute to nullify US sanctions on countries trading with Iran, in order to protect European companies doing legitimate business with the Islamic Republic.

Since then, Bruxelles has announced that it would develop a special instrument to facilitate EU-Iran trade and bypass the renewed US sanctions that started again in November 2018. The special instrument was finally registered on January,3, 2018 known as the “Special Purpose Vehicle/INSTEX” and it was presented by the European Council for Foreign Affairs as “a significant demonstration of Europe’s commitment”.²⁸ The peculiarity of the Special Purpose Vehicle lies, besides its nature of an *ad hoc* European instrument specifically designed to protect its diplomatic commitment and economic interests with the EU, in the fact that the E3 are also shareholders of the Instrument. For now, the Special Purpose Vehicle focuses on enhancing and protecting humanitarian trade (pharmaceutical, medical devices, agri-food goods), but further developments are being taken in spreading its effects on other trade sectors.

The commitment in Bruxelles to fight for one of its foreign policy biggest achievements is clear in the Iranian case. It is evident how the EU is treating Iran as not anymore “the other actor” in the Gulf, but rather the actor, signaling its acknowledgment of the fundamental importance of Iran in a positive way: good and tight relations with the Islamic Republic is, not only extremely economically beneficial for the EU and its member states, but, as the High Representative for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini asserted, “it is not about economics, but about security”.

Diplomacy between the EU and the GCC

At the diplomatic level, while the EU has tried to take a resolute stand towards recent fundamental issues regarding its relationship with the Arab Gulf, European member states have been pursuing their own specific foreign policies towards their partners in the Gulf.

The major European countries involved in the region are currently setting forward a series of enhanced diplomatic ties with GCC countries, following the particular national interests they need to respond to. Again, the track followed by each EU country in advancing their foreign policy towards their partners in the GCC has its own logic and interests; at their own pace, European countries still prefer to strengthen their diplomatic ties with the Arab Gulf on a bilateral level, careful not to “europeanize” such relationships.

The Gulf and the United Kingdom

One of the most determined country to cement its relationship with the GCC is certainly the United Kingdom. Driven by the necessities coming from the eventual departure from the European Union, voted for in the historical referendum in Summer 2016, the UK seeks to revive its role as a global power, while trying to agree on the terms on

²⁶ In 2017, EU imports account for 10.1 billion EUR, while exports for 10.8 billion of Euros.

²⁷ European External Action Service (EEAS), https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/2281/iran-and-eu_en

²⁸ European Council for Foreign Affairs, January,7, 2018.

which it will leave the EU.

In a visit to Bahrain, right in December 2016, the UK's Prime Minister Theresa May has addressed GCC leaders, making it clear that the UK had very serious intentions in bolstering its historical relation with the Arab Gulf in its "return east of Suez". It is precisely recalling the long historical relation that the UK and countries of the GCC share, that the English Prime Minister has pledged to enhance not only trade relations with its Arab partners, but also their cooperation in the security sphere, announcing that the UK would spend in the Gulf more than anywhere else in the world.²⁹

Since then, the pace at which the UK has reached out to the GCC has been fastening, particularly with Saudi Arabia. The UK Prime Minister visited the Saudi Kingdom in 2017, while in 2018 it was Crown-Prince MBS to visit Great Britain as one of its first visits after its appointment. The encounter between the two state representatives highlighted, among other things, the path towards a liberal reform that the Saudi Kingdom pledged it was undertaking, while reaffirming the English commitment in cooperating for mutual security and enhanced trade benefits.³⁰

The Gulf and France

On the European continent other two countries are bolstering their "run towards the Gulf", namely France and Italy. On one hand, France has always nurtured very deep economic and political interests in the Arab Gulf having Saudi Arabia and Qatar as main partners there. In 2017, after the blockade on Qatar imposed by its GCC fellow members, France promptly reacted in the effort to mediate in the tense situation, calling on the parts to take part into a diplomatic dialogue so to overcome their controversy. Being the third arms seller in the world, France's foreign policy towards its Arab partners is particularly shaped by its arms sale and by the multi-billion contracts that France has reached with Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, among others. Moreover, France have stood stiff in defying the international outcry to the stop of arms sales to the Gulf, in the aftermath of the ongoing war in Yemen (aggravated by the accusation against the Saudi-led coalition of committing war crimes), and the political backlash that the Khashoggi murder has triggered. Thus, the flow of arms has not stopped, particularly towards Saudi Arabia³¹,

while in 2019, France and Qatar have shielded their arms trade by signing a "strategic dialogue" agreement to cooperate on economic, energy and security matters.³²

The Gulf and Italy

On the other hand, Italy has also committed itself in an effort to enhance its foreign policy towards key countries in the Arab Gulf. In particular, Italy has recently directed its diplomatic activity towards Qatar. Again, the enhanced relation between the two countries stems from important trade in the defense sector: in 2016, the Italian Fincantieri has reached with Doha a four billion euros contract for the building of seven battle ships and other naval armaments.

The year 2019 has been one of multiple visits between Qatar's and Italy's high ranks: first the Italian Minister of Defense and then the Italian Prime Minister have both visited Doha with the goal of giving renewed relevance to a strategic partnership with Qatar. On this respect, the Italian effort is not only driven by powerful economic interests,

²⁹ Prime Minister's Speech to the Gulf Cooperation Council, December 7, 2016 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-speech-to-the-gulf-co-operation-council-2016>

³⁰ "Visit of Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia to usher in a new era in bilateral relations", February 27, 2018 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/visit-of-crown-prince-of-saudi-arabia-to-usher-in-new-era-in-bilateral-relations>

³¹ "France Confirms Contested Arms Shipment to Saudi Arabia", May 8, 2019 <https://www.france24.com/en/20190508-france-confirms-contested-arms-shipment-saudi-arabia>

³² "Qatar and France sign deal for greater economic, energy and security cooperation", February 11, 2019 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/qatar-and-france-sign-deal-greater-economic-energy-and-security-cooperation>

but also by its traditional concern about the Mediterranean and the recent unfolding events in Libya.³³

Hence, the European diplomacy with the GCC's members is still almost completely set at the bilateral level. Every European country has its own agenda that it puts forward relatively to its own interests at stake and geopolitical necessities. Among Gulf countries, each of them play out their relationship with Europe according to their convenience. The only European country that has shown to comply with the political stand of the European Union is Germany, which has chosen to stop its arms sale towards the Arab Gulf in respect of the European Parliament Regulations adopted on the matter.

Conclusions

The cases we have made so far have clearly showed that the setting of a European common foreign policy towards the Arab Gulf has to face consistent difficulties. Both sides have tended, and still tend, to privilege their own interest rather than agreeing on shared ground on which to find a common path to follow. The failure of the Free Trade Agreement between the EU and the GCC is the emblematic case of the preferences rank on both sides. When it came to possibly damage fundamental interests, the effort in arranging their political will towards a common beneficial goal, gave in to contingencies. Since the halt in the FTA negotiations in 2008, Europe has focused its attention and its priorities towards the Mediterranean as the closest source of instability for the European continent. Moreover, European problems at home have also prevailed, having to cope with the effort of restoring economic growth and the political commitment to the project of European integration, while managing unprecedented flows of immigrants and refugees.

On the other hand, the Gulf was never as cohesive as the EU is, thus the lack in its commitment to the FTA and in a more structured and principled relationship with the Union easily ceased to be a pressing priority. GCC countries have put all of their energies in their countries' development and in their regime's wealth and stability. The consequences of the fall in oil prices, the Arab Uprising in 2011 and the renewed struggle for power in the region, a struggle that is growingly using an extreme sectarian language, are all factors that hindered the Gulf willingness to tie itself to Europe. Problems of reciprocal understanding and of conditionality of each other's demands have only complicated the situation.

Thus, relations between Gulf countries and the European Union are still managed mostly at the single bilateral level, especially regarding high-interest field such as energy trade and arms sales. The bilateral level allows for countries on both sides to maximize their national interests without having to take into too much account the ideals and regulations that come with the EU labeling of their relationship.

However, this state of affairs is being growingly challenged by the events in the international arena. The humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen have shed an unwanted light on billions-worth flows of arms from Europe towards Gulf countries. The use of European weapons to bomb Yemen, causing what is addressed as the worst humanitarian crisis in the last 10 years, have driven the international public opinion to condemn, not only the war, but also their own governments which stand accused of immorally financing the conflict. Furthermore, the Khashoggi murder has erased every doubt on the authoritarian and violent nature of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its Crown-Prince Mohammad Bin Salman. This particular case has put Western governments cooperating with the Kingdom in a hurting awkward position. On this issue, the European Union, has again showed no sign of cohesiveness: while the European Parliament and the European Commission have proposed relevant actions against Saudi Arabia, EU's member states are reluctant to adopt such actions which have the undoubted potential to negatively backlash on their individual economic interests.

Against this trend of European underperformance in setting a comprehensive foreign policy towards GCC countries, the case of the Iranian Islamic Republic seems to constitute an exception of some level. With Iran, the European Union has showed to be able to be assertive in the protection of its diplomatic efforts, so much so that, after

³³ "Il Presidente Conte in visita nel Qatar", April 3, 2019 <http://www.governo.it/articolo/il-presidente-conte-visita-nel-qatar/11247>

that Trump has announced its administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, the EU has promptly announced its commitment to the Nuclear Deal and has, since then, been successful in the adoption of a special instrument to bypass US's sanctions against Iran. Yet, due to the recent resignation of the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, the favorable political conjuncture that made the JCPOA a reality is possibly compromised. Amid tensions rising up in the Arab Gulf, due to the renewed muscular confrontation between the United States and Iran, on the European side, the elections for the European Parliament held in May, will certainly have a relevant impact in reshaping the EU's foreign policy towards this region.

Ultimately, analyzing the trend in diplomatic activities linking EU's and GCC's countries, it is patent how the logic governing such relations is still that of constructing and strengthening bilateral ties at one's convenience and benefit, reacting to contingencies and necessities set by the international arena. Deals and cooperation initiatives are mainly focused in those realms where fundamental security and economic interests play out. The foreign strategies set by France and the United Kingdom are clear examples of a foreign policy constructed according to a very realist framework.

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السياسة الخارجية للاتحاد الأوروبي تجاه الخليج العربي منذ عام 2008 هل هناك علاقات بينهما؟

ناصر محمود طهبوب*

ملخص

في عام 1988 تم توقيع اتفاقية تعاون بين الاتحاد الأوروبي ومجلس التعاون الخليجي بهدف تعزيز وتعميق العلاقات الاقتصادية والسياسية بينهما. بدأت مفاوضات العام التالي لتوقيع اتفاقية التجارة الحرة ؛ في عام 2008 تم إيقافها ولم تستأنف قط. منذ ذلك الحين ، لم يبد الاتحاد الأوروبي قاذراً على وضع سياسة خارجية شاملة ومصممة خصيصاً تجاه شركائه في الخليج العربي بسبب المشاكل الطارئة والهيكلية وعدم التناسق العام في مستوى تكامل المؤسساتين.

في الوقت الحاضر ، أعادت دول الخليج العربي والأحداث السياسية التي تدور ضرورة إحياء أبواب التعاون مع الاتحاد الأوروبي من أجل بناء سياسات تهدف إلى تشكيل علاقاته مع الأنظمة الملكية في الخليج العربي. ومع ذلك، فقد تضررت السياسة الخارجية للاتحاد الأوروبي بسبب عدم وجود مرونة لبناء العلاقات الثنائية والتدفقات التجارية الاستراتيجية والأنشطة الدبلوماسية ، مما أعاق تنمية هذه العلاقات.

الكلمات الدالة: الإتحاد الأوروبي، الخليج العربي، العلاقات الثنائية، العلاقات التجارية.

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