



SHARAKA
ENHANCING UNDERSTANDING
AND COOPERATION IN EU-GCC RELATIONS



شراكة
تعزيز التفاهم والتعاون في علاقات الاتحاد
الاوروبي ودول مجلس التعاون الخليجي



EU-GCC Regional Security Cooperation

Lessons Learned & Future Challenges

28-29 October 2013

New Library Building, Qatar University (Doha, Qatar)

CONFERENCE REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) and the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are seeking to broaden their cooperation to various sectors ranging from economic cooperation to energy, environment and scientific research. However, huge scope remains for much closer and more vigorous cooperation in the field of security, particularly in light of the major common challenges ahead, such as energy and food security, the conflict in Syria and the fragile transition in Yemen.

Bearing these challenges in mind, the Sharaka project and its partners from Qatar University (Gulf Studies Program at the College of Arts and Science) organised a two-day event to provide the platform for a fruitful debate, during which lessons learned were exchanged among academics and scholars, officials and politicians, as well as civil society actors from the EU, the GCC and other Arab countries. The “EU-GCC Regional Security Cooperation - Lessons Learned and Future Challenges” conference took place at Qatar University on 28-29 October 2013.

The conference kicked off with two thought-provoking keynote speeches, one from a Gulf speaker and the other from the European counterpart. The speaker from the Gulf talked about the premises of the EU-GCC dialogue at the time of its inception in the late 1980s, arguing that the EU and the GCC had a common interest in de-politicising energy and containing radicalism by committing to resolve crises through dialogue. The premises were there to become ‘sharaka’, partnership, but it is undeniable that this result, 35 years after the first EU-GCC dialogue was held in Bahrain, has not been achieved. Some areas of productive cooperation, such as consultation on central banking, money laundering, inflation and energy (including, increasingly, renewable energy) stand side by side with major misunderstandings and obstacles to cooperation. The impossibility to finalise the Free Trade Agreement, worsened by the fact that, as of January 2014, GCC countries will no

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longer fall under the EU's Generalised System of Preferences (GSP), thus determining an increase in their export tariffs, especially on petrochemicals, is a major concern across the Gulf. On top of that, there is the idea that the EU is not committed enough to preserving stability in the region, and overly committed to spreading its own human rights standards and ideas of democracy, which are seen as not necessarily compatible with the socio-religious identity of the Gulf.

The second keynote speaker, from Europe, underlined other areas of cooperation such as counter-piracy, and the training missions in Afghanistan and Palestine. At the same time, he also highlighted setbacks in the relationship as well as the challenges that lie ahead. For example, he acknowledged that the EU does not have the capabilities to replace the United States in a strategic security partnership with the Gulf, and will not have them in the foreseeable future given its 20 percent cut in defence spending. At the same time, the EU can hardly ignore its founding principles, which commit it to human rights promotion, and the lessons learned from its own mistakes, which make it wary of sectarianism taking root in the region as well as the political use of religion. Finally, the speaker underlined that it is hard to move ahead in the FTA negotiations if GCC integration is still so weak: the free market, monetary union and customs union have long been promised but have never materialised. The EU appeals to the GCC to undertake stronger integration, which would also be in their interest as it would make it harder for third parties to separate them.

After the keynote speeches, the first plenary session discussed rising powers and the challenges to regional governance. The first speaker highlighted how it could indeed be a moment of transition in regional governance, given the alleged US strategic shift towards Asia as well as the new developments in Iran. The heavy US presence in the region has long defined the GCC's foreign policy as one of band-wagging, which explains the feeling of abandonment and/or entrapment that is circulating in most Gulf states vis-à-vis the possibility of a US rapprochement with Iran. The case of Qatar is partially different, although this may ultimately change, following the latest political developments in the tiny country. A second panellist agreed on the idea of a transition, especially regarding the rise of new security paradigms. For the first time, Egypt and Syria are not key actors in the region's security, while two security axes are emerging, headed by Turkey and Iran. Turkey, whose influence is rising amongst moderate Sunnis across the Arab world, is somehow still perceived as the defender of the defence-less, and somewhat more of a stabilizing power. Iran instead is perceived as an agitating factor, even though its role in supporting the Palestinians is widely acknowledged. A third speaker focused on how the transition could be more of a perception than a reality, underlining the basics of the security architecture in the Gulf and the tropes that periodically arise but hardly materialise. The three basic, stable factors are that the GCC armies are not effective as they were conceived so as to prevent them from posing a concrete threat to other Gulf rulers; that the United States is the guarantor of Gulf security, even though the United States and the Gulf themselves might not like this fact; and that a shift in US interests represents an opportunity for the EU to increase its strategic profile and for the GCC to widen its Gulf security umbrella. Other ideas, like China or NATO replacing the United States as the security guarantor in the Gulf, or the establishment of a common regional security framework, are rather tropes. Creating a regional security framework is almost impossible if the preconditions set by Iran are that the United States has to leave the region, and that the GCC should not sit at the table with the United States. As for China or NATO replacing the security umbrella provided by the United States, China has repeatedly stated its interest in maintaining an apolitical role; while NATO can offer capacity building or security sector reform (for which there is no demand in the Gulf) but not the kind of security guarantees the United States provides. Another speaker responded to this last point by underlining that NATO is not engaged only in capacity building but also in intensive political consultations with Gulf states, especially after the approval of the New Strategic Concept. In addition, there is a sustained dialogue to enhance understanding and cooperation, for example by advancing interoperability. The



speaker stressed that the NATO negotiation approach is successful because it has overlapping bilateral and multilateral dimensions and tries to be as non-intrusive as possible by being demand-driven.

The first part of the second day of the conference was devoted to discussing the most pressing current security challenges, namely: transnational terrorism and cyber-security, food and energy security, and the cases of Syria and Yemen. In each working group, two papers were presented and discussed.² Finally, the conference ended with a roundtable discussion followed by a vibrant debate among participants on the future of EU-GCC security cooperation. Some speakers of this session mentioned unrealistic expectations as the causes of past setbacks in EU-GCC relations, and that they should be overcome to ensure smoother cooperation in the future. For example, it is unrealistic to expect the EU to have a stronger, more unified role in foreign policy in the foreseeable future. Today, the EU includes 28 countries and is considering extending membership to more countries in the Balkan region. Furthermore, it is going through a major economic and financial crisis, as well as an identity crisis, and has to deal with rising euroscepticism. In the security dimension, EU member states still seem to prioritise their individual, at times contrasting, interests at the bilateral level with individual Gulf states. For the time being, therefore, it is probably more realistic to expect a *géométrie variable* in EU-GCC cooperation: those European states that are able and willing to do so, will step forward and develop joint cooperation initiatives. The question then arose whether the GCC has a real interest in seeing the EU act as a unified actor in foreign and security policy, a realm in which the GCC is not itself unified. In Syria for example, the Gulf states are united in calling for regime change, but divided on whom to support to achieve the final goal. Substantial divisions among Gulf countries could also arise vis-à-vis a potential US-Iran rapprochement, should this materialise. This rapprochement is a source of major concern in the Gulf states, especially if the US-Iran dialogue does not address issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or Syria, or if it does not take into account the impact that a nuclear Iran could have on the regional balance of power. One European argued that a security partnership with the EU should be envisioned as a means not to counter military threats, but rather to prevent risks from becoming threats. The EU is the right partner for a whole range of risk management activities such as cyber-security, migration and border control, conflict and post-conflict management, reconstruction and disaster relief, and maritime security.

The two-day conference shed light on several obstacles to a strengthened EU-GCC security partnership, as well as on significant misunderstandings and key unanswered questions. Nevertheless, the European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council continue to hold regular talks and deepen cooperation in some, perhaps more technical and less strategic, areas. As a matter of fact, in many of these areas, cooperation has become fundamental and irreplaceable. This leaves room for hope that the differences that seem particularly sharp right now, will slowly be dealt with and that the EU and the GCC will finally find a partnership model that suits their mutual interests in the Middle Eastern region and globally.

² For more information about the working groups and the topics discussed see the papers that will be published on the Sharaka website in early 2014.