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A strategic partnership with the Gulf

1. Introduction

The Gulf is a dynamic neighbouring region and an important gateway between Europe, Asia and Africa. The security and stability situation of the Gulf region bears direct consequences for the EU. Likewise, the EU has a lot to offer to the Gulf partners, as the world's biggest single market, trading bloc and investor, a leader in research and innovation, and an important mediator and promoter of multilateralism, democracy and social transformation including human rights and gender equality.

At a time of insecurity and significant challenges to the rules-based international order both in Europe and in the Gulf region, and as the world faces the consequences of the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic and the urgent imperative of the green and digital transition, the European Union stands much to gain from a stronger and more strategic partnership with the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) and its member states.¹

Increasing trade and investment, fighting climate change, ensuring global health and energy security and a smooth green transition, meeting growing global development and humanitarian needs and promoting peace and stability and de-escalation of tensions in the broader region are all issues of strong mutual interest. A strategic partnership between the EU and the GCC and its Member States will increase the prosperity and security of both partners and make a real difference in meeting global challenges. Such a partnership will build on the traditional strong links that already exist between individual GCC and EU Member States. Involvement of other key Gulf countries in the partnership may also be considered as relations develop and mature.

A stronger partnership with the Gulf region has a key role to play in the implementation of the European strategy to REPowerEU² and the complementing EU External Energy Strategy.³ This includes such important topics such as an increase of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) supplies, measures to stabilise oil markets, cooperation on hydrogen, energy efficiency and faster deployment of renewable energy.

Recent developments in the Gulf are encouraging. The end to the rift within the GCC in 2021 has facilitated the resumption and expansion of EU-GCC cooperation. The promising societal and economic changes underway in the GCC countries, based on ambitious transformative agendas ('Visions'), and their further development, offer a wide range of opportunities for cooperation and investment. Moreover, a positive conclusion of the Vienna negotiations aimed at facilitating a return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) by the United States and resumption of full implementation of all JCPOA commitments by the United States and Iran could provide a platform for further efforts to reduce tensions and build confidence in the wider region.

Given the wealth of developments since the 1989 EU-GCC Cooperation agreement,⁴ and the need for much stronger and more comprehensive cooperation, the EU is determined to partner with the Gulf region and revitalise cooperation through a robust strategic partnership and solid bilateral institutional frameworks.

¹ Kingdom of Bahrain, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, State of Kuwait, State of Qatar, Sultanate of Oman, United Arab Emirates.

² Communication from the Commission, REPowerEU: Joint European Action for more affordable, secure and sustainable energy, COM (2022)108, 8.3.2022.

³ Joint Communication on EU external energy engagement in a changing world, JOIN (2022) 23, 18.5.2022.

⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A21989A0225%2801%29>

This Joint Communication⁵ therefore proposes a stronger partnership in a series of key policy areas and sets out a number of concrete proposals for the EU and the GCC and its Member States to strengthen their co-operation in their mutual interest, with a clear focus on delivering results.

2. A partnership for prosperity

Together the EU and the GCC represent 20% of the global economy, 17.5% of global trade, and cover more than half of global foreign direct investments. In 2020, the EU was the GCC's largest import and fourth-largest export partner (with proportions of 17.8% and 6.9%, respectively).⁶ A privileged trade and investment relationship between the EU and the GCC and its members is of strong mutual interest, increasingly important and has clear further potential. This is even more relevant in a fast changing geopolitical context where the EU must build alliances and platforms of cooperation to pursue its objectives and enhance its open strategic autonomy. Further to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the EU will actively work towards building stronger ties with the GCC to seek alternative sources of energy, including renewable energy.

Building on the 1989 Cooperation Agreement, the EU and GCC were engaged in negotiations on a Free **Trade** Agreement, which came to a halt in 2008, mainly due to different levels of ambition on key points. Since then, the EU framework for free trade agreements has further developed and currently includes ambitious provisions on sustainable development, labour rights, the phasing out of export duties and other measures that distort trade and investments. Expert level discussions continue to further improve mutual understanding of the positions, in view of possible negotiations for a trade agreement, which would address issues of mutual interest, including an enhanced trade and investment environment, regulatory and customs cooperation as well as sustainable development objectives. In the meantime, the EU will explore ways to deepen the economic partnership and to strengthen the existing EU-GCC Trade and Investment Dialogue to further facilitate regulatory cooperation, increase the protection of intellectual property rights including geographical indications, further strengthen the cooperation on customs and anti-fraud matters, including the fight against counterfeiting and smuggling, support renewable energy, energy and resource efficiency and digital trade, and promote sustainable and global supply chains. The EU and GCC will coordinate positions on multilateral trade policy agendas, including within the World Trade Organization on its reform. The EU will also seek to strengthen EU-GCC cooperation on economic integration and sustainable business and investment environment with well-functioning and fair markets where enterprises can compete on their merits on a level playing field and addressing unfair trading practices or subsidies that distort competition. Moreover, the EU will consolidate economic bilateral partnerships with each GCC country, complementary to the existing EU-GCC trade and investment partnership.

This would also contribute to **economic diversification**, in which the Gulf countries have a strong interest. They have adopted strategic 'Visions'⁷ that aim to diversify their economies, shifting away from dependency on oil and gas revenues. They are also focused on developing

⁵ It is also informed by outcomes of targeted consultation events and feedback provided during a call for evidence process (between 3 February and 3 March 2022).

⁶ The EU's imports consisted mainly of fuel and mining products as well as chemicals, while exports consisted of machinery and transport equipment, chemicals and agriculture and raw materials.

⁷ Qatar's 'National Vision 2030'; Kuwait's 'Vision 2035'; Oman's 'Vision 2040'; Bahrain's 'Economic Vision 2030' and Saudi Arabia's 'Vision 2030'.

other sectors and a robust private sector that can generate jobs, growth and foreign investments, and on addressing job market distortions by generating employment for their own nationals. The EU and its Member States could share best practices with the GCC countries on how to stimulate a conducive business environment for small and medium sized enterprises in sectors such as digitalisation, energy, the green economy and sustainable tourism, and on supporting the alignment of study curricula and developing and supporting an entrepreneurial culture. The EU will continue working with the GCC to further improve business cooperation by removing outstanding market access barriers and supporting fair, transparent and non-discriminatory investment-inducing policies. To achieve these objectives, the EU intends to support the creation of an EU Chamber of Commerce in the GCC countries.⁸

The economic transformation that is currently underway in both regions presents an opportunity to reflect on how to best tackle our respective labour market shortages and ensure our economies have the skills they need to grow and innovate, focusing on youth mobility between the EU and the GCC countries.⁹

Gulf countries are important partners in the collective efforts to tackle the impact of the **COVID-19 pandemic, global health security and in the international initiatives to improve pandemic preparedness and response**. Joint efforts will be important to continue improving public health delivery and ensure a robust global framework that increases resilience and response capacity for future health crisis. Further work on linking the Gulf countries to the EU Digital COVID Certificate system and on recognising vaccinations would support safe international travel and contribute to the global recovery. The EU will also engage with them on long-term recovery instruments and the NextGenerationEU, and seek their support for its diversified funding strategy that includes the issuance of medium-term and long-term bonds. The EU will also enhance and strengthen cooperative efforts in the fields of preparedness and response to public health threats.

In the field of **transport**, the EU will seek to continue improving aviation cooperation with the Gulf countries and common efforts towards more regulatory cooperation and convergence, and sharing best practices and standards in fields such as aviation safety and security, air traffic management, social and environmental standards in aviation, and air passenger rights. The EU also supports regional aviation cooperation between Gulf countries. Reinvigorated EU-Gulf cooperation¹⁰ on railways could cover the use of the EU rail signalling and traffic management system, research and innovation, zero-emission technologies and regulatory models and best practices.¹¹ On infrastructure, the EU will explore cooperation with Gulf countries, including in relation to the ongoing discussions on a future Trans-Mediterranean Transport Network in the Southern Neighbourhood, aiming to promote stronger connections with adjacent strategic corridors in Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia.

The EU will continue its dialogue with the region on shipping and aim to strengthen cooperation especially on **maritime safety**, environmental protection and maritime transport interconnections. The EU will continue working with Gulf countries at the International

⁸ Through the Economic Diversification project, which is managed by the Commission and designed to increase dialogue on economic diversification, market access conditions and sustainable structural change.

⁹ The Commission presented recently the Communication on attracting skills and talent to the EU COM (2022) 657 final, 27.04.2022.

¹⁰ Building on the 2017 Memorandum of Understanding between the GCC Secretariat and the EU Agency for Railways.

¹¹ This could include the EU's own experience with setting up the ERA, in light of the ongoing discussions on creating a railway agency in the Gulf region.

Maritime Organization to ensure a high level of safety and environmental standards and more ambitious greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets.

The EU is determined to tackle the challenges and maximise the opportunities offered by **digitalisation** and to engage with the GCC, including on digital transition, connectivity and innovation. Through the Global Gateway strategy¹², the EU will support the deployment of digital networks and infrastructures in underserved regions of the world, ensuring they are safe, resilient and trustworthy and protect people's integrity, notably by promoting the EU 5G toolbox. The EU will support the increase of secure international connectivity notably between Europe and the Gulf and will engage in discussions on supporting a human-centric approach to digitalisation, including respect for universal values. This may in turn open up possibilities for further cooperation on the data economy, high performance computing, or a human centric approach to artificial intelligence. A starting point for strengthening the data economy could be to explore mutual interest in cooperation on industrial data spaces. The EU and the GCC can work together to further support the digital up-skilling of people in the GCC countries, in particular women and young people, so they can benefit from the opportunities of the digital transition. The mutual interest in cooperating on the EU concept of digital innovation hubs can be explored. The EU will also support exchanges with Gulf countries on EU data protection policies and practices to promote further convergence with EU and international standards.

EU cooperation with the GCC countries on **research and innovation** will create new markets and jobs, contribute to economic diversification and the economic recovery in the region and address societal challenges like the climate and energy transitions and global health issues. This cooperation will be based on the EU's new strategy¹³, which will also inform and guide international cooperation under the Horizon Europe framework programme.¹⁴ It will promote openness, balanced with greater levels of reciprocity, and will seek a level-playing field based on respect for fundamental principles such as academic freedom, gender equality, ethics, integrity and inclusiveness of research, open science and evidence-based policy-making.

The EU aims to strengthen cooperation with the GCC on **space** issues. GCC countries have become more active in this field and have expressed interest in the joint development of space-based augmentation for GPS and Galileo to cover the Gulf region. This will allow safety-critical applications to make use of GPS and Galileo for high precision approaches to airports, reducing the need for ground infrastructure.¹⁵ EU-GCC cooperation could also address the use of Earth-observation data provided by the EU's Copernicus system for applications such as pollution monitoring or water vapour measurements.

Action points:

- Strengthen EU-GCC cooperation on trade and investment in general, including on economic integration and diversification, and notably the existing EU-GCC Trade and Investment Dialogue. This would include exploring possibilities of reaching a common

¹² Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank on the Global Gateway, JOIN(2021) 30 final, 1.12.2021. Through the EU Global Gateway the EU plans for major investments in infrastructure development around the world, with a focus on the green and digital transitions, including in the energy, transport, health, education and research sectors.

¹³ Global approach to research and innovation – Europe's strategy for international cooperation in a changing world – Council conclusions adopted on 28 September 2021, 12301/21.

¹⁴ The Horizon Europe framework programme (2021-2027) will continue to promote international collaboration between researchers and businesses in the EU and the rest of the world, similarly to previous framework programmes for research and innovation.

¹⁵ One option for such a system involves extending the existing EU EGNOS system, which would require several monitoring stations to be sited locally.

understanding on possible negotiations for a trade agreement, which would address issues of mutual interest, including an enhanced trade and investment environment, regulatory and customs cooperation as well as sustainable development objectives.

- Organise exchanges on youth employment and business creation.
- Pursue common efforts to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular on recognition of certificates and vaccinations.
- Enhance and strengthen cooperative efforts in the fields of preparedness and response to public health threats and work towards an improved global health architecture to counter health crises.
- Improve cooperation on transport issues, including regulatory aspects, safety, traffic management, interconnections and social and environmental standards.
- Further cooperate on the development of a human-centric approach to digitalisation, including in terms of connectivity, infrastructure development, digital transition, digital skills and data protection.
- Improve awareness of research and innovation cooperation opportunities and institutional training opportunities, including under the Horizon Europe programme.
- Strengthen cooperation on space issues.

3. A partnership for a green transition and sustainable energy security

Given the magnitude of climate change challenges and the opportunities that the green transition can offer, joining forces is paramount for the EU and the Gulf region. Achieving the overriding goals of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement and the Convention on Biological Diversity are key shared priorities. While Gulf countries are emerging players on the international stage in addressing the fight against climate change, by which the Gulf region is particularly affected, the EU can share expertise and know-how in related fields as a pioneer on climate change initiatives. At the same time, Gulf partners are reliable Liquefied Natural Gas providers and have a considerable role and further potential in the context of overall sustainable energy security and a smooth transition to net-zero. However, being the world's biggest producer of fossil fuels, Gulf countries will have to take bold steps to shift away from this economic model in the longer term, becoming not only significant exporters but also major investors in renewable energy and energy efficiency in the broader Middle East region and financial supporters of global climate related efforts. At the same time, the EU is interested in alternative energy sources and will increasingly need considerable imports of renewable energy from diversified sources by developing an environment conducive to undistorted trade and investments in green energy goods. Therefore, there is an overriding common interest in engaging more strategically, speeding up the green transition and the move to circular economies, address the respective trade interests of both regions, and successfully meeting climate-related commitments. This is also reflected in the EU External Energy Strategy.

The recent **net-zero announcements** by Gulf partners are important steps forward in filling the climate change mitigation gap and keeping the Paris 1.5C goal in sight, if these are accompanied by equally ambitious long-term low greenhouse gas emissions development strategies. Implementation of the pledges and announcements made and phasing out subsidised fossil fuel energy must now be the priority. **Methane emissions** reduction is another area of

potential EU-Gulf cooperation that could contribute to achieving a gradual phase out of fossil natural gas towards biogas and biomethane, renewable and low-carbon hydrogen and synthetic fuels¹⁶.

The EU will also step up its cooperation with Gulf countries on **climate action and clean energy transition** by facilitating exchanges and partnerships on renewable energy (including renewable hydrogen), energy efficiency including the Energy Efficiency First principle, carbon capture utilisation and storage, carbon pricing and carbon markets, climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction and resilience. This cooperation will also explore best practices, technology options, innovation, regulatory frameworks and standards.¹⁷ The EU will further pursue the active involvement of and support for the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which could provide a useful avenue for work on clean energy transitions. The EU will engage with the Gulf countries and notably the UAE, on preparations for COP27 in Egypt and COP28 in the UAE as well as with frameworks such as the Saudi Green Initiative and the Middle East Green Initiative.

The green transition and climate adaptation and mitigation will require large-scale **investments** globally. The Global Gateway provides a useful framework for a joint venture with the Gulf to foster sustainable investments in the broader Middle East region, as well as in Africa. It could be instrumental in bringing together the investment capabilities of the EU and Gulf countries and their financial institutions and effectively engage the private sector to unlock the necessary capital, expertise and experience.

EU-GCC cooperation can play an important role in aligning **finance flows** with a pathway towards low greenhouse gas emissions and climate-resilient development, especially with a view to the post-2025 goal on climate finance. The EU and Gulf countries will strengthen their cooperation by exchanging on sustainable finance initiatives and green bonds issuances, including with European, Gulf-based and multilateral development financial institutions, and in the context of discussions in the relevant international fora. The EU thus encourages the participation of Gulf countries in the International Platform on Sustainable Finance.

EU-GCC partnership will be also essential in the context of **global and regional sustainable energy security and smooth green transition as reflected in the EU's External Energy Strategy published in parallel with this Communication**. Endowed with some of the best solar and wind resources in the world, GCC countries have a considerable potential to lead the transition towards sustainability and decarbonisation, including by enhancing energy efficiency and applying the Energy Efficiency First principle. EU-Gulf cooperation will focus on know-how, technology, regulatory frameworks, standards and investments, among other issues. The Gulf countries can contribute to limiting the volatility of markets impacted by the energy transition not least through increased exports of Liquefied Natural Gas as an alternative to pipeline gas.

However, the Gulf region can also play a role as a producer and supplier of **decarbonised energy**, including renewable hydrogen and electricity. The Communication REPowerEU underlines the need to replace gas by higher levels of renewable energy including hydrogen. This, combined with the Gulf partners' aspirations to become lead exporters, will bring new avenues for EU-GCC cooperation. The EU will explore opportunities for production and trade

¹⁶ Most of the Gulf countries have signed the EU/US led Methane Pledge, some energy companies from the region are part of the Oil and Gas Methane Initiative 2.0, led by the UN and EU.

¹⁷ The EU-GCC Clean Energy Network project played an important role in promoting EU-GCC cooperation on clean energy policies and technologies, with the new follow-up project being broader, going beyond energy cooperation and to cover the green transition as a whole.

to enable the undistorted imports of renewable hydrogen in particular, building upon existing projects, notably in the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean region.

An integrated gas and hydrogen infrastructure, hydrogen storage facilities and port infrastructure is necessary in both the EU and the Gulf countries. The EU is already working on a Mediterranean Green Hydrogen Partnership, and will explore with Gulf countries opportunities for concluding Green Hydrogen Partnerships. The EU will also promote a closer cooperation on electric connectivity and sustainable transport connections. Opportunities will be also pursued for **triangular cooperation** on clean and just energy transition, in particular with Africa, Asia and the broader Middle East. The EU will promote regional energy integration and cooperation.¹⁸

The EU and Gulf countries could also work together further on environment issues. The conservation and sustainable use and management of the seas, **marine** resources and water management, including water-energy nexus, and the need to address marine pollution in particular in densely urbanised coastal areas are areas of shared interest. Given the volume of shipping from the Gulf across the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean, the EU will explore further cooperation on reducing emission levels from maritime transport. Opportunities for cooperation in fisheries and aquaculture, desalination, and coastal tourism could be also further explored.

Further EU-GCC exchanges on the global **biodiversity** framework for action should also take place, leading to an expansion of the current marine protected areas in the Gulf. Other aspects that could be covered include addressing all drivers of biodiversity loss, restoring ecosystems, developing and implementing strategies against invasive species and working together with other sectors, such as transport and industry.

The EU will share expertise with Gulf countries on circular economy, such as measures for **waste** reduction and sustainable waste management and on **recycling**, and will work closely with them on a legally-binding instrument to end plastic pollution.

The EU will also work together with the Gulf countries to build fair, sustainable, healthy and environmentally friendly **food systems** - in line with the EU's Farm to Fork Strategy,¹⁹ the Communication on Safeguarding food security and reinforcing the resilience of food systems²⁰, aiming to enhance global food security. This is of particular importance in light of the impact of the Russian aggression against Ukraine and its consequences on global food markets. The EU and the Gulf countries will also further cooperate with the aim to combat **desertification** and **deforestation**, as well as on developing arid climate agri-technology.

The partnership with the Gulf in these fields will focus on **bilateral and regional** levels. Frameworks like the Saudi and the Middle East Green Initiatives could offer an important avenue for dialogue. The EU will also promote **triangular cooperation**, of which the Israel-Jordan-UAE desalination-electricity project is a good example.

Action points:

- Set up a dedicated EU-GCC energy and climate expert group to intensify policy dialogue on green transition at regional and bilateral level.

¹⁸ The Egypt-Saudi Arabia electricity interconnection project is a good example of this.

¹⁹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0381>

²⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/food-farming-fisheries/key_policies/documents/safeguarding-food-security-reinforcing-resilience-food-systems.pdf

- Hold an annual EU-GCC Ministerial meeting on the green transition, complemented by a related private sector initiatives (e.g. Green Business Forum), to identify further tangible joint initiatives.
- Further facilitate regulatory cooperation and infrastructure interconnections, support renewable energy development and energy efficiency and production and promote the creation of competitive markets enabling trade in renewable energy without export restrictions or price distortions.
- Develop engagement on sustainable finance, including in partnership with European and Gulf-based financial institutions.
- Set up a dedicated facility allowing expertise to be exchanged on the policy areas relating to the green transition, the circular economy and sustainable growth models and help operationalise EU-GCC cooperation on green transition.
- Hold a high-level seminar on the green transition looking ahead to COP27 and COP28.
- Launch a marine protection initiative around the Arabian Peninsula aiming to create protected areas and joint mechanisms to prevent the pollution of the marine environment and improve marine science cooperation and disaster relief/risk reduction.

4. A partnership for regional stability and global security

Preserving peace, security and stability in the wider Gulf region is a key priority for the EU, and an important shared interest with the GCC and its Member States and other international and regional partners. Instability in the wider Gulf region has a direct bearing on the EU's security and economic interests, and reverberates not only in the EU's neighbourhood but also in other areas of common interest such as the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. With Gulf states increasingly active in their own region and in the broader Middle East and beyond, it is clear that lasting stability in the EU's broader neighbourhood will require close cooperation with them.

There have been positive steps taken by the Gulf countries recently, such as the Al Ula Agreement marking an end to the 'GCC rift', the normalisation agreements with Israel and the steps of some GCC Member States to resume or deepen dialogue with Iran. These developments offer an opportunity for the Gulf countries to improve wider regional stability based on respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law and on an agreed set of shared interests as well as universal principles and values, such as good neighbourly relations, non-interference in domestic affairs, peaceful resolution of disputes and non-proliferation, and through building progressively a regional security architecture. It would also offer a useful platform for engaging on broader societal issues and economic integration. The EU, as a successful peace project itself, can be a valuable partner in supporting these goals.

The EU coordinates efforts to ensure the full and effective implementation of the JCPOA, which can contribute to comprehensive and lasting efforts to ensure that the Gulf region remains permanently free of nuclear weapons and in itself can help address other regional issues. A positive conclusion of the Vienna negotiations aimed at facilitating a return to the JCPOA by the United States and resumption of full implementation of all JCPOA commitments by the United States and Iran could provide a platform for further efforts to reduce tensions and build confidence in the wider region. Of course, the countries of the region - on both sides of the Gulf - should lead and guide such efforts, but the EU and the wider international community can and should offer support and advice. In this context, the EU will be ready to engage with the GCC, its Member States, with Iran and other key states in the region, in a

gradual and inclusive approach, in full transparency and with the ultimate objective of developing arrangements which provide for greater security for all countries in the Gulf region.

To this end, the EU could work on dialogue, **transparency and confidence building measures** and share expertise in fields such as maritime safety/security; conflict prevention and mediation, disaster preparedness and response; chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) safety; countering terrorism; cyber security and countering disinformation.

In addition, a dedicated **political-military dialogue** with GCC and its Member States could facilitate the exchange of information on military exercises, policy and budgets, voluntary measures to improve transparency in armaments, arms control arrangements in support of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and the Ottawa-Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, and on the effective implementation of non-proliferation agreements. This dialogue could be complemented by military-to-military contacts.

These activities could in the medium and long-term lead to a structured EU-facilitated **dialogue process** that could gradually contribute to a more inclusive regional security architecture. The regional Baghdad Conference on Cooperation and Partnership, and its follow-up process with EU involvement, could serve as a useful example for region-led processes.

Improved cooperation on **maritime security**, on the basis of international law, could help enhance the rules-based order at sea, including freedom of navigation and overflight. This could include de-confliction channels, sharing maritime information, incident prevention and codes of conduct²¹. EU Operation ATALANTA's growing regional presence creates a space for such engagement. The EU could also explore additional cooperation through the European-led maritime awareness in the Strait of Hormuz operation, which aims to support a safer navigation environment and de-escalation. An EU-Coordinated Maritime Presence²² in the North Western Indian Ocean, and the creation of the EU Maritime Area of Interest, in line with the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy²³, could also provide a wider platform for this work, in coordination with international and regional partners.

The EU and the GCC could exchange good practices in **disaster prevention and preparedness**, in particular through improved cooperation between the EU's Emergency Response Coordination Centre and the GCC Emergency Management Centre. Where appropriate, the EU will also propose technical exchanges with other Gulf countries, the League of Arab States and the Arab Coordination Mechanism for Disaster Risk Reduction to contribute to regional cross-border capacity building.

Given the increasing role played by nuclear energy in the GCC countries, the EU could envisage enhancing the collaboration on nuclear safety and nuclear emergency preparedness and response, including on public health consequences of intentional or unintentional CBRN threats. In particular, nuclear safety could benefit from dedicated technical support on key areas such as nuclear safety culture or accident management, whereas nuclear emergency preparedness and response could be addressed through strengthening the emergency information exchange between the EU and the GCC, in line with ongoing projects on this

²¹ Such as the use of Indo-Pacific regional information sharing by Gulf partners through dedicated capacity building initiatives within the framework of the Djibouti Code of Conduct that increases maritime domain awareness and communication.

²² Council Conclusions on the Implementation of the Coordinated Maritime Presences Concept in the North-Western Indian Ocean – adopted on 14 February 2022, 6075/22.

²³ Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council 'The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific', 16.09.2021

matter. Such lines of collaboration should take place between the EU and the GCC Emergency Management Centre, and could also eventually include other Gulf countries.

Further consolidation between regional partners and the EU in relation to **CBRN**, CBRN medical countermeasures and the governance of CBRN materials could be explored. In addition to its current focus on biological preparedness, chemical safety and security, and emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the CBRN Centre should propose regional activities on strategic export controls on dual-use goods.

The EU and Gulf countries have already stepped up their coordination on regional crises in the broader Gulf, Middle East region and the North and Horn of Africa. Peace and stability in this wider region is a strong shared interest, whether in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Libya, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine or Somalia, Ethiopia or Sudan. The EU also values GCC and its Member States' important role in international mediation. Recent examples include the role played by Qatar with regard to Afghanistan and Chad, the KSA and UAE in the Horn of Africa, Kuwait on Lebanon and Oman in Yemen. The EU is ready to propose closer cooperation and the sharing of methodologies, experience and best practices on **conflict prevention and mediation**, at both bilateral and regional level.

Deepening **counter-terrorism** engagement with the Gulf countries can be envisaged on issues such as countering violent extremism and radicalisation, financial support for extremism, exportation of extremist literature, and terrorist threats from the region and beyond. The EU will explore avenues for stepping up its support for exchanges of best practice to counter extremist narratives and promote the productive use of traditional and social media, including closer collaboration with existing organisations²⁴. Stronger cooperation could also include joint activities to increase awareness of legal and institutional frameworks to counter terrorism financing and combat anti-money laundering. The EU will also continue to work with the Gulf countries to advance and promote a global, open, stable and secure **cyberspace** with a particular focus on cybersecurity and protecting critical infrastructure against cyberattacks.

The EU will also explore possibilities to improve **judicial and law enforcement cooperation** in order to better combat serious cross-border organised crime, particularly in relation to the fight against terrorism, money laundering investigations, asset recovery and combatting trafficking in human beings. Exchange of best practices and support under the EU Global Facility²⁵ is being offered to assist international compliance in relation to combating money laundering and tackling financing for terrorism, notably in order to comply with recommendations from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). Cooperation could be stepped up with Eurojust, potentially through setting up contact points, and with the European Public Prosecutors Office.

Both the EU and the Gulf regions have been affected by **hybrid attacks**, such as artificially induced migratory flows and terrorism, including terror attacks using drones and missiles. EU and Gulf countries should further cooperate to tackle such challenges effectively. In the perspective of addressing such hybrid threats the EU is also strengthening its **strategic communication** to detect, analyse and address foreign information manipulation and interference that may fuel regional tensions. The EU will work towards frameworks to support freedom of expression, media freedom and pluralism which are at the core of healthy information environments, including by supporting societal resilience in the region and raising

²⁴ Such as Hedayah, the independent, multilateral 'think and do' tank devoted to preventing and countering violent extremism based in Abu Dhabi (the EU is a member of its Steering Board).

²⁵ <https://www.global-amlcft.eu/global-anti-money-laundering-and-countering-terrorism-financing-context/>

awareness of the increasing use of foreign information manipulation and interference as a foreign policy tool. Implementing measures to counter disinformation and misinformation will remain a key aspect of this approach²⁶.

Action points:

- Initiate and further strengthen political and dedicated dialogues and coordination on issues pertaining to regional and global stability and security, including on increasing resilience and response against hybrid threats.
- Propose the appointment of an EU Special Representative on Gulf security.
- Develop a cooperation mechanism for enhanced maritime security, building on Operation ATALANTA, EMASoH and the Coordinated Maritime Presence in the North Western Indian Ocean.
- Strengthen technical support in the area of nuclear safety, and promote collaboration in the area of nuclear emergency preparedness and response between the EU and GCC EMC.
- Step up EU-GCC cooperation on Countering Terrorism (CT) and Countering Violent Extremism (CEV) between the EU and the GCC and its member states.
- Develop mutually beneficial cooperation on disaster preparedness and response between the EU Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) and the GCC Emergency Management Centre.
- Initiate a dialogue on cyber security.

5. A global humanitarian and development partnership

Gulf donors and their financial institutions are major providers of Official Development Assistance for humanitarian aid and development cooperation, and their aid is primarily bilateral. Better, more systematic engagement with Gulf donors, notably regarding delivery through multilateral agencies and a burden-sharing approach, is essential to address global challenges and in particular the unprecedented challenges to the international humanitarian system. These include the widening funding gap between rapidly growing needs and the financial resources available, increasing disregard for International Humanitarian Law and protracted conflict situations.²⁷

Gulf countries are substantial donors of **humanitarian aid**. The EU will step up its engagement with the Gulf countries on funding, efficiency, quality aid and overall support for the international humanitarian system, as an integrated part of the EU-Gulf political dialogue. In this context, specific attention will be paid to countries facing protracted crises. The EU will also encourage Gulf donors to step up their engagement and multiannual funding towards the UN-coordinated global humanitarian system and the relevant UN agencies, including the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which is key for the stability of the Middle East region.

²⁶ Building on the joint action plan against disinformation (5 December 2018), the European democracy action plan (COM/2020/790) and the experience from the COVID-19 pandemic, EU strategic communications efforts will be rooted in European values and principles.

²⁷ Acknowledging the existing challenges, the Communication on “EU’s humanitarian action: new challenges, same principles” of 10 March 2021 and the subsequent Council Conclusions call for increased EU engagement with emerging donors, including Gulf countries.

Gulf countries have also a specific role to play in terms of promoting and applying **International Humanitarian Law** in the region and beyond, given their geographical and/or cultural proximity and influence on some of the most acute crises. The EU will step up its dialogue and advocacy actions with Gulf donors to promote respect for International Humanitarian Law and humanitarian principles to facilitate access to and the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance and protection of civilians. The EU encourages Gulf countries' participation in relevant initiatives to develop humanitarian standards and guidelines for the transparent implementation of these guidelines, based on shared experiences of crises such as those in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Libya, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, the Rohingyas, and Afghanistan.

The EU will also seek stronger partnerships with Gulf countries, Arab financial institutions and regional bodies including the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC), to tackle the underlying political and structural drivers of conflicts, and to better link political dialogue, relief and longer-term development in a **humanitarian-development-peace nexus**. The EU will particularly explore the potential for joint integrated approaches to addressing fragility in the Middle East/North Africa region as well as in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, and Central Asia, including Afghanistan. There will be dedicated exchanges on the root causes of humanitarian crises in multilateral fora such as the Arab-OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) dialogue²⁸ and with the Arab Coordination Group.

As regards **development cooperation**, Gulf partners are strongly engaged in areas such as infrastructure, renewable energy, health, education, and recent contributions to the COVAX mechanism. This opens opportunities for potential partnerships in many areas. As a first step, increasing coordination work with Gulf donors and their financial institutions is taking place in partner countries of mutual concern and internationally. The construction of the Gaza central desalination plant is considered a flagship example of cooperation between the EU and its Arab partners.

The EU will further step up policy dialogue and donor coordination with Gulf donors at multilateral level, notably within the **OECD Arab-DAC dialogue on development**. The EU will push to reform this dialogue to make it more effective, building on the Team Europe approach, better aligning procedures, social and environmental safeguards and aid effectiveness.

In addition, the EU will step up its relations with regional organisations and Gulf financial institutions, especially the Islamic Development Bank and the Arab Coordination Group, engaging on priorities and programming exercises and encouraging partnerships with European finance institutions. The EU will in particular explore investment opportunities within EU policies and initiatives such as REPowerEU, the European Green Deal and the Global Gateway.

Under Global Gateway, the EU and Gulf partners could explore joint initiatives in third countries through triangular cooperation, financial support, capacity building and technical assistance. Moreover, the Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)-Global Europe rapid response pillar offers opportunities to address joint foreign policy priorities through policy dialogue.

Action points:

- Organise an EU-GCC Ministerial Meeting on humanitarian assistance in 2023.
- Promote the effective delivery of need-based humanitarian assistance and overall support for the international humanitarian system and promote respect for International

²⁸ The next Arab-OECD DAC dialogue will be held in Brussels, for the first time, in 2022.

Humanitarian Law and humanitarian principles. Explore synergies in humanitarian logistics operations and opportunities for parallel funding of UN led projects in crises of mutual interest.

- Step up policy dialogue and donor coordination with Gulf donors at multilateral level, notably within the OECD Arab-DAC dialogue on development.
- Identify opportunities for cooperation on Global Gateway initiatives and promote Gulf partners' collaboration with EU institutions, Member States, financial institutions and the private sector, reflecting the Team Europe approach.

6. A partnership for people

Ongoing societal and economic transformations in the Gulf region offer a wealth of opportunities for cooperation, notably to support the ambitious transformative visions announced by the Gulf countries. Driven by economic diversification and the growing number of increasingly engaged and 'globalised' young people, Gulf countries are implementing domestic social development policies. These long-term policies are often accompanied by social reforms, with the potential to mark a turning point in these societies, notably in relation to women's rights, labour issues (e.g. dismantling the *kefala* system²⁹ for migrant workers) and freedom of religion and interfaith dialogue. While human rights, democratisation and rule of law related challenges remain, the EU can cooperate with the GCC in accompanying such reform efforts, building on bilateral human rights dialogues with GCC countries and facilitating people-to-people contacts, especially for young people, to deepen mutual understanding and promote trust between societies in both regions around successful cooperation activities. In this regard, the EU will share its experience in promoting inclusive dialogue with civil society.

The EU is keen to support the work being done by the GCC countries, including through EU cooperation instruments, to strengthen respect for the **rule of law and good governance**, in order to support transparency, accountability and trust in the institutions. The EU can promote and share its experience of inclusive dialogue with civil society and social partners in the context of the implementation of the social aspects of the GCC countries' national visions.

In particular, the EU strongly encourages GCC countries to live up to their international commitments on **human rights**, including to ratify relevant UN human right treaties, actively support the work of the UN Human Rights Office and the UN Special Procedures, fully cooperate with UN human rights mechanisms and ratify and implement International Labour Organization conventions and recommendations. The EU will continue to defend and promote the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including the importance of the protection of journalists and the independence of the media. The EU stands ready to share best practices, provide technical assistance and offer expertise as appropriate, building on the regular structured human rights and sectoral dialogues between the EU and the GCC countries, which have proven to be a constructive avenue for frank exchanges on human rights, including on individual cases of concern.

The EU stands by the principle that human rights apply both online and offline. The EU encourages Gulf countries to implement legislation and safeguards to protect people from unlawful or unnecessary **surveillance and data collection**. The EU has export controls, notably in the dual-use area where civilian technologies have potential military or security uses. These rules contain specific provisions to ensure that traded digital technologies are used legitimately, respecting human rights. The EU stands ready to share expertise with its Gulf

²⁹ Sponsorship system which gives employers excessive powers over foreign employees.

partners as well as to address jointly the need for the introduction and implementation of international legal standards pertaining to digital rights, at multilateral level.

The EU intends also to strengthen its engagement to promote **gender equality and women's empowerment**, in close cooperation with governments, civil society, the private sector and other key stakeholders in the Gulf region. Improved partnerships in this area may in particular promote access for women and girls to education and training, health, and ensure they have equal legal capacity and access to justice. Promotion of women's participation and representation in employment, politics, governance and civic engagement, and prevention of and combating sexual and gender-based discrimination and violence, is a promising area of EU engagement. The EU will continue to encourage a safe environment that empowers civil society, girls and women's rights organisations, human rights defenders, peace-builders and female journalists.

Cooperation and inter-**cultural** and inter-faith exchanges can improve mutual understanding and trust and, at the same time, are vectors of tolerance and peaceful coexistence.³⁰ For instance, the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi is an applaudable example of such exchanges in the GCC region. Also, the EU National Institutes for Culture, located in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE, continue to promote activities in various fields such as fashion, film, music, architecture and design, and visual arts. The EU and GCC states also invested in the protection of cultural heritage in recent years, which offers opportunities for intensified dialogue and joint actions.

The EU can further support cross-regional ties in **education**, vocational **training**, skills development and civic participation through the Erasmus+ programme. In 2021-2027, in the field of higher education, Erasmus+ will offer possibilities for partner institutions in the Gulf to develop curricula such as teaching modules on EU-related matters, via the Jean Monnet actions. Higher education institutions from the region will also be able to join academic consortia with the EU and other international partners, to deliver integrated Master's degree programmes via the Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters. In addition, the International Credit Mobility, which facilitates short-term exchanges for academic students and staff, and the Erasmus Mundus Design Measures, which offer the opportunity to co-design a joint Master's degree, are now also accessible to partner institutions in the Gulf region.

In the framework of the 2022 European Year of Youth, the EU Delegations in the Gulf are encouraging these kinds of mobility opportunities for the region's young people in the fields of higher education and research. This will be complemented by activities by the Erasmus+ Students and Alumni associations, together with the possibility offered for Gulf countries to set up Erasmus+ national focal points.

Joint promotional efforts can also improve EU-Gulf cooperation on **research**, for example by supporting participation by researchers from the Gulf in Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions, including international doctoral networks and staff exchanges.

Consular protection is increasingly relevant given the rising number of EU citizens that reside in or travel to the Gulf. Better cooperation between the EU and its Member States and authorities in the Gulf could build on the established arrangements³¹, including on consular crisis preparedness and responses.

³⁰ The EU-GCC enhanced political dialogue, cooperation and outreach project, an ongoing 3-year EU project, actively supporting cooperation, public diplomacy and awareness-raising activities in the GCC.

³¹ Such as the arrangements made with the UAE and Qatar in the context of the EXPO 2020, the 2022 FIFA World Cup and the repatriation of EU citizens and people for whom the EU was responsible from Afghanistan.

Many citizens of GCC countries reside or own property in the EU or study at European universities. The EU recognises the GCC countries' strong interest in being included in the EU's list of **visa-free** countries.³² The EU also sees as its own interest to promote people-to-people contacts and travel between the EU and the GCC countries. The United Arab Emirates obtained visa free in 2015.³³ A proposal for the exemption of the nationals of Qatar and Kuwait has been presented by the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament.³⁴ For the remaining GCC countries, with a view to promoting the partnership between the two regions and strengthening the already dense political, economic, research, educational, cultural and societal exchanges, the Commission will rapidly engage in technical discussions to ensure fulfilment of relevant criteria in view of ultimately achieving visa exemption for all GCC countries³⁵, a shared interest for the GCC and the EU. Meanwhile, the EU continues to work towards reducing the burden for visa applicants from GCC countries, via local adaptation of its visa rules and towards systematically issuing multiple-entry visas with a long validity (valid for up to 5 years) for travellers who do not present any specific risks.³⁶ The proposal on digitalising the procedure for issuing Schengen visas will make the visa procedure largely paperless and contactless, and thereby more timesaving and cost-efficient for applicants.³⁷

Action points:

- Swift launch of technical discussions with the remaining visa required GCC countries on visa exemption. Facilitate the issuing of multiple-entry visas with a long validity.
- Strengthen exchanges on migration and mobility notably for youth, culture, and sports to bring people together and make societies more cohesive.
- Step up human rights dialogues with Gulf partners and follow up activities and promote inclusive dialogue with civil society. Particularly promote gender equality and women's empowerment.
- Develop cooperation on inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue to foster human fraternity, tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

³² Annex II of Regulation (EU) 2018/1806 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018 listing the third countries whose nationals must be in possession of visas when crossing the external borders and those whose nationals are exempt from that requirement, OJ L 303, 28.11.2018, p. 39.

³³ Council Decision (EU) 2015/785 of 20 April 2015 on the signing, on behalf of the European Union, and provisional application of the Agreement between the European Union and the United Arab Emirates on the short-stay visa waiver, OJ L 125/1, 21.5.2015.

³⁴ Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) 2018/1806 listing the third countries whose nationals must be in possession of visas when crossing the external borders and those whose nationals are exempt from that requirement, COM(2022) 189 final, 27 April 2022

³⁵ The criteria for visa exemption include irregular immigration, public policy and security, economic benefit, in particular in terms of tourism and foreign trade, and the EU's external relations with the relevant third countries, with explicit reference to considerations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as regional coherence and visa reciprocity (Article 1 of Regulation (EU) 2018/1806, cited above)

³⁶ In line with the revised Visa Code. Regulation (EU) 2019/1155 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 amending Regulation (EC) No 810/2009 establishing a Community Code on Visas (Visa Code), OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, p. 25.

³⁷ Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulations (EC) No 767/2008, (EC) No 810/2009 and (EU) 2017/2226 of the European Parliament and of the Council, Council Regulations (EC) No 1683/95, (EC) No 333/2002, (EC) No 693/2003 and (EC) No 694/2003 and Convention implementing the Schengen Agreement, as regards the digitalisation of the visa procedure, COM/2022/658 final, 27 April 2022.

- Improve GCC-EU cooperation on governance on issues such as fighting corruption, promoting transparency, and ensuring accountability.
- Step up EU-GCC cooperation on education, vocational training, scientific research, civic participation through the Erasmus+ programme and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions.
- Step up cultural and public diplomacy to raise awareness and make the EU more visible in the GCC countries to improve mutual understanding.

7. A stronger institutional partnership

Structured cooperation with the GCC and its members is governed by the Cooperation Agreement concluded in 1989, and bilateral Cooperation Arrangements between the European External Action Service and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the six GCC countries. This framework encompasses various formats for political and sectoral consultation and cooperation and exchanges on regional developments at different levels³⁸. Human rights dialogues have been launched with UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

There is increased momentum and a strong mutual interest in ensuring EU-GCC relations have a more strategic focus and in strengthening the institutional arrangements for cooperation. The EU will build on the existing framework combining bilateral engagement with strengthened regional partnership and, where possible, developing flagship actions. In this vein, the EU could explore the possibility of a Summit with the GCC.

The EU will increase the visibility and efficiency of EU action by opening a **Delegation** in Qatar in 2022. The EU is exploring the possibility of opening a Delegation in Oman and nominating an EU Ambassador to the GCC mirroring the GCC representation to the EU.

The EU intends to explore the possibility of negotiating **Partnership Agreements** with GCC countries, which would provide a more solid and comprehensive framework for institutional engagement.

The organisation of **sectoral ministerial meetings** between the EU and GCC on issues of mutual interest, such as trade and investments, economic diversification, transport, green transition and digitalisation, will improve the bi-regional framework. This new format will complement existing arrangements such as the EU-GCC Joint Council and the EU-GCC troika meeting, organised in the margins of the UNGA. It will ensure the implementation of the new EU-GCC Joint action Plan adopted at the last EU-GCC ministerial on 21 February 2022.

The establishment of an annual EU-GCC **political dialogue** would help address the geopolitical developments that affect the two regions, as well as political aspects of cooperation, advocacy and conflict resolution. In this framework, the EU and Gulf countries could also promote cross-regional cooperation, notably with the Southern Neighbourhood region, and engage with other regional organisations such as the League of Arab States, the Union for the Mediterranean and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

Additionally, the EU will pursue cooperation with the **GCC General Secretariat** through workshops, peer exchanges and study tours, based on EU institutional and organisational

³⁸ EU-GCC Joint Council and Ministerial meeting, co-chaired by the HR/VP and the GCC rotating presidency with participation by the EU and GCC Foreign Ministers; EU-GCC Joint Cooperation Committee, providing senior officials with the opportunity to discuss the way forward on sectoral cooperation; EU-GCC Troika ministerial meeting exchanging views on regional issues; EU-GCC Regional Directors meeting; EU-GCC Trade and Investment Dialogue; EU-GCC macroeconomic dialogue.

experience in areas of interest for the GCC General Secretariat, such as policy making and coordination and public diplomacy.

Action points:

- Further strengthen EU-GCC institutional engagement by holding an annual EU-GCC political dialogue, annual consultation on multilateral issues and sectoral ministerial meetings, starting with the green transition and coordination on humanitarian action.
- Explore the possibility of negotiating bilateral partnership agreements with the six GCC Member States.
- Step up institutional and organisational exchanges with the GCC General Secretariat.
- Pursue the implementation of joint activities in relation to health, trade and investment, migration and mobility, education and research, energy, energy efficiency and climate change, digitalisation and disaster preparedness and response.

8. Conclusion/The way forward

The EU will use all its tools and instruments to ensure the efficient, effective and swift implementation of this strategic partnership with the Gulf. Continuous and forward-looking dialogue between the EU and its Gulf partners will be mutually beneficial on all issues. The EU will emphasise ongoing work on the green transition, economic diversification and social reforms. The EU will pay particular attention to rule of law and human rights and in this context to designing actions focusing on the empowerment of women and young people. The EU will strengthen its cooperation with the Gulf countries, using all appropriate financial instruments, in particular the Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)-Global Europe, and will engage through public diplomacy to reinforce mutual knowledge and understanding.

The Commission and the High Representative invite the European Parliament and the Council to endorse the approach set out in this Joint Communication and to work together on implementing and reviewing its actions.