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Gulf Affairs: How have EU-GCC relations developed in recent years? Any notable achievements?

Amb. Michele Cervone d'Urso: Since the signature of the Cooperation Agreement in 1988, EU-GCC bilateral relations have been developing steadily and broadening in scope. What had started off as a more economic-driven agenda has expanded into a wide breadth of partnerships ranging from the common work in fragile countries, to counter-terrorism, to building cooperation mechanisms on climate change, the environment, transport, agriculture and energy. Furthermore, the EU has been able to share its own regional integration experiences and has nurtured continued GCC integration.

One of the most notable achievements in recent years was the May 2017 establishment of the EU-GCC trade and investment dialogue, which provides a platform for discussing trade- and investment-related issues. This is the first such dialogue between EU and Gulf counterparts since the free trade agreement negotiations stalled in 2008. At the political level, I was closely engaged with the Secretary General of the GCC, Abdulatif Al Zayani, in one of the most significant GCC breakthroughs in the past years—the 2011

GCC initiative on Yemen that paved the way to the country's transition through a power-sharing agreement. That framework was all about “political inclusivity” and a united international community. We also have a wide range of avenues for joint engagement, including the annual EU-GCC ministerial meetings, which have enabled political-level dialogue. This year we had the first dialogue between ambassadors of the GCC and the EU Political and Security Committee. The groundwork for further deepening EU-GCC relations has clearly been laid.

Gulf Affairs: The 1988 EU-GCC Economic Cooperation Agreement laid the framework for free trade between the two regional blocs. Why has there been no agreement yet?

Cervone d'Urso: The Cooperation Agreement set out a free trade agreement as a key objective of EU-GCC relations. However, the negotiations were interrupted on several occasions—including one instance where a customs union between GCC members needed finalizing. The last interruption occurred in 2008, and no further negotiations have taken place since.

We were close to an agreement—most chapters had been closed and the EU had made proposals to the GCC on the pending issue of export subsidies. However, these proposals were not taken forward despite attempts to clarify the EU proposals to our Gulf counterparts. At this point in time, we might need to undertake a “reality check” on what was previously agreed upon given the changed global and economic contexts and the newly-reformed EU trade policy, should further negotiations take place.

Gulf Affairs: What is the EU's position on the recent crisis between some GCC countries and Qatar?

Cervone d'Urso: The EU's position is that this crisis has to be resolved as swiftly as possible, and the EU remains engaged with the GCC and all its member states. The EU High Representative has been in close touch with all parties, and unequivocally supports the regional mediation efforts of the Emir of Kuwait. The EU has been a historical partner of the GCC, and this crisis has diverted attention away from our strengthened cooperation with the GCC at all levels. The EU has the firm intention to maintain strong relationships and ties with all the Gulf countries. While this is not the first crisis in the region, it appears to be far more serious than past ones, and we remain committed to a regional solution.

Gulf Affairs: What is the current status of the JCPOA between Iran, the P5+1 and the EU? Have GCC countries shared their evaluations on the agreement thus far?

Cervone d'Urso: The JCPOA is working as intended and is keeping the Iranian nuclear program in check and under close surveillance. The JCPOA is an important element of the global non-proliferation architecture. It does not belong to any single country—it is a multilateral agreement endorsed by Security Council Resolution 2231.

GCC countries support the JCPOA, although some have voiced their concerns on the perceived “limitations” of the agreement. We remain persuaded that the JCPOA is a non-proliferation agreement and there should be other mechanisms to address broader issues outside the scope of the JCPOA, including Iran's regional activities. Furthermore, we would not be in a better place to address these issues without the JCPOA.

IV. Interviews

Gulf Affairs: Both the EU and GCC are made up of individual member states. How does the EU manage its partnership with the GCC despite European countries often having competing and differing bilateral relationships with Gulf states and even the GCC bloc as a whole? And, will Brexit impact trade exports to the Gulf region?

Cervone d’Urso: The EU works in close partnership with its member states. The Gulf countries also have a long tradition of working with individual European countries; while the EU is a newer actor in the Gulf region, it opened its first Delegation in Riyadh in 2004. The EU is stepping up its engagement with the support of its member states, and is working closely and in complement to the member states’ bilateral engagements.

GCC countries are clearly strategic partners for both the EU and the UK. The Brexit negotiations between the UK and the EU-27 are ongoing, so it is premature to anticipate the impact. However, it’s clear that the GCC will maintain its excellent relations with both the EU and the UK regardless of how the discussions unfold.

Gulf Affairs: In your view, what are the main challenges facing the GCC states? How can the EU support the GCC in these areas?

Cervone d’Urso: The challenges cover three main areas. Firstly, the GCC is facing a “youth bulge” that is shaking up the social contract and forcing sky-rocketing domestic expectations in an open and globalized world to be better managed. The EU wants to be a positive partner that accompanies and supports the process of social transformation in the pace of the concerned countries. Secondly, all GCC states share the same need to diversify their traditionally fossil fuel-driven economies. The EU sees itself as a partner in economic diversification for the GCC and is willing to share the experiences of its own economic transformation. The intent is to build stronger partnerships at the regulatory level and between our private sectors—this is essential to ensure the success of any diversification strategies. Thirdly, and finally, the current Gulf crisis has superimposed itself on all of these existing challenges. The GCC has always been seen as a haven for stability and there is a need to ensure that this image prevails in an already-turbulent regional and international environment.

Gulf Affairs: What is the EU’s current stance on the Saudi-led coalition’s intervention in Yemen? What type of solution does the EU support?

Cervone d’Urso: The EU has been at the forefront in calling for an inclusive political solution and has supported the efforts of the UN Secretary General Special Envoy, calling on all parties to engage in negotiations without preconditions. We are concerned about the dismal humanitarian situation and that the Yemeni people can see no “light” out of the current crisis. The EU remains committed to continuing to support all efforts to bring warring parties to the negotiations table, and, to reach a ceasefire and political settlement. It is time to respond to the legitimate demands of the Yemeni people, who want the establishment of a democratic, modern and civil state that respects and protects the rights of all its citizens.