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by Roberto Aliboni

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Author/s: Roberto Aliboni, Vice-President at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Head of the Institute's programme on the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

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Abstract: While sharing a number of interests in the Mediterranean and Middle East region, the EU and the Gulf Cooperation Council have pursued different patterns of strategic concerns and relations. Nevertheless, a potential for developing common EU-GCC perspectives exists, as the Mediterranean and Middle East region are both part of the EU and the GCC neighbourhood and are a common location for investment. Diplomatic convergence on a number of issues could contribute to improving security and political cooperation as well, despite the fact that this is stymied by divergent views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Keywords: European Union / Gulf Countries / EU-GCC Relations / Regional Cooperation / Mediterranean / Middle East

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Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)
Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 00186 Roma, Italy
Tel.: +39/06/3224360 - Fax: + 39/06/3224363
E-mail: iai@iai.it - website: http://www.iai.it

EU AND GCC STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE

by Roberto Aliboni

The European and Arab countries gathering respectively in the European Union (EU) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), while sharing a number of important strategic and political interests, have developed distinctly different broad patterns of strategic concerns and relations in the last twenty to thirty years.

Both of them have special concerns for their respective neighbourhood, on the one hand, and extremely significant global relations, on the other. However, there is no doubt that the GCC countries have gone global more than the European Union, especially on political ground, whereas the European Union has focused on its neighbourhood and structured its neighbourhood framework far more significantly than the GCC. Most importantly, while both the GCC and the EU countries have a pivotal, yet separate political and security alliance with the United States, the former are now fundamentally oriented towards Asia from a strategic perspective, whereas the EU is oriented towards North America and its own neighbourhood - from the Mediterranean to Russia - with the GCC playing a definitely more distant role.

To a large extent, it could have been otherwise, had the European Union understood the importance and substance of the EU-GCC relations initiated eighteen years ago. During that long lapse of time, the EU failed to realise that the relationship had to be based on developing mutual economic and financial interests. In contrast, for a long time, it mistakenly protected is petrochemical interests and even today is still conditioning the upgrading of mutual relations on the GCC partners' engagement in domestic political reforms, something which is beyond any GCC perspective and has no EU political motivation.

Against this background, EU and GCC have failed to develop a common core strategic relationship and, as said, have distinct orientations today. However, it must also be pointed out that these orientations, as distinct as they may be, are never opposed to one another and continue to have significant point of contacts. As a result, a potential for developing common EU-GCC strategic perspectives – as distinct from a core relationship - still exists. It might be helpful today to explore the existing points of contact in an international political and security perspective. These points could, over time, again offer opportunities that were missed in the last twenty years.

This paper explores these points of contact in the Mediterranean area. In a strategic perspective, the Mediterranean area may bring together the EU and the GCC essentially for two reasons: (a) the strip of territory stretching from Morocco and – sometimes – Mauritania through to the Levant is largely, although not uniquely, part of the Arab world and, at the same time, is seen by the European Union as an important part of its neighbourhood; (b) the Mediterranean Sea is part of the complex system of sea basins and sea routes set at the juncture of Africa, Europe and South-western Asia, so that it is

a part of the geopolitical approaches that the European continent and the Arabian peninsula share; in other words, the Mediterranean (linked as it is to the Red Sea via the Suez Canal) is largely yet not uniquely, the platform where EU-GCC relations concretely take place. These two trends - the Arab Mediterranean world and geopolitical approaches to continental masses - can help in looking for strategic and political commonalities between the EU and the GCC.

1. Economic Development and Security in the Mediterranean

Recent economic developments illustrate EU-GCC convergence of interest towards the Mediterranean area. Probably the most important development relates to the evolving pattern of world transport as well as the Red Sea/Mediterranean Sea corridor's role in it and the implications of that evolution. Today, approximately 80% of world sea transport moves from South-west and South-east Asia, on the one hand, and goes to the Mediterranean, the Atlantic coasts of Europe, and North America, on the other. The most intensive segment of this route is navigation through the Arabian, the Red and the Mediterranean Seas. Merchandise and goods are unloaded at majors ports in South-west Asia and the Mediterranean on their way to more distant destinations in Northern Europe and America, and are channelled to minor destinations by local systems of transport. This transport web requires specific, technologically advanced equipment and highly specialized ports. The system is run by a handful of multinational corporations. However, Gulf and EU investment have been significantly attracted towards the Mediterranean (the most important Arab investment are in Tangiers and Damietta). The EU Commission has long begun to foster the effectiveness of Mediterranean infrastructure on land and at sea, in particular by planning a system of integrated sea-land highways across the Mediterranean and beyond. One of the major projects contemplated by the Union for the Mediterranean regards the development of Mediterranean sea highways.

One can hardly overlook the strategic implications of this development in transport and the role the sea approaches to South-west Asia, Europe and North Africa play in it. In more general terms, the point is that smooth access has to be assured to these approaches. This is above all a global issue, in which the United States has primary interest. But the same is also true of U.S. allies in Europe, the Mediterranean and the Arab world. Access to such approaches is a major strategic issue globally, but it is obviously of primary and common concern to local areas and countries, that is, among others, both the EU and the GCC.

So, there is a rationale for a double strategic EU-GCC convergence related to (a) the development of a region (the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean) that is part of the EU neighbourhood, part of the Arab world and a shared location for investment, and (b) the safety of access to that region. An important dimension of access safety is maritime security: beginning with the fight against piracy in the Arabian Sea and ending with depollution of the Mediterranean.

A shared development potential and the need to provide security to it offer the EU and the GCC an objective platform for strategic cooperation in the Mediterranean.

Today, this potential for strategic convergence is hardly used; more often than not it is ignored. Essentially, cooperation is hindered, despite objective strategic convergence, by the lack of strategic harmonisation and the two parties' failure to grasp opportunities that emerged in the last twenty years. Other stumbling blocks are also worth mentioning, however. The lack of cooperation is partly due to the EU's over-structured Euro-Mediterranean organisation, which tends to limit the EU's actions to the Mediterranean, so that it remains strictly regional and fundamentally exclusive with respect to adjoining regions.

More in particular, the EU's Euro-Mediterranean concept is in itself an obstacle. It encompasses both EU and non-EU countries. At the beginning, in 1995, non-EU countries were both Arab and non-Arab (Cyprus, Israel, Malta and Turkey) and the rationale for bringing Mediterranean countries together was geography and proximity. With Cyprus and Malta now members of the EU and Turkey's candidature for membership, the non-EU countries are now only the Arab countries and Israel so that the rationale is less clear and somehow uncomfortable. In fact, this kind of EU-Israel-Arab collective Mediterranean does not make much sense. In this sense, the European Neighbourhood Policy, with its bilateral emphasis, makes more sense, for it differentiates relations with Israel and with each Arab Mediterranean country in a very loose collective framework.

While the EU must be free to develop its own relations with Israel, of course, these relations should not be an obstacle to relations with the GCC and its member countries, as it is today for the Arab Mediterranean countries. One reason the GCC countries hesitate to enter Mediterranean undertakings with the EU is that the Euro-Mediterranean format compels them to cohabit or involves the risk of cohabiting with Israel. This was a problem with the New Middle East project and the related initiative of instituting a Mediterranean bank for development.

The EU should rethink its policy towards the Mediterranean. The format of this policy should be more flexible and should differentiate between countries and stop obliging countries to buy, along with the EU, into other partners as well. EU cooperation agreements, which are extended only to Mediterranean countries today, should be extended to other non-Mediterranean Arab countries, such as Iraq and Yemen, as well as individual GCC countries. Some years ago, the EU stated its intention to have a policy "east of Jordan", coherent with its Mediterranean policy, but that initiative came to a dead end.

The GCC countries also hesitate to enter into regional Mediterranean cooperation with the EU for another reason: not only the presence of Israel, but the absence of a shared political perspective in the Mediterranean. Just as the Europeans dislike being a "payer" and not a "player" in U.S. policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, so the GCC countries do not want to risk being the same in EU Mediterranean or other Western-initiated projects. But this is less an obstacle to the materialisation of the potential for EU-GCC strategic cooperation in the Mediterranean than the result of the lack of such cooperation.

To conclude on this point, there are trends and factors in the Mediterranean that would require and objectively invite EU-GCC strategic cooperation. However, this cooperation is limited and has not emerged because of a lack of strategic will combined with a number of obstacles stemming from the exclusive and ideological nature of the EU's Mediterranean policy.

2. Security and Political Cooperation in the Levant

Another matter that has strategic potential in EU-GCC relations is the Arab-Israeli, in particular the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both the EU and the GCC perceive the conflict as a relevant factor in their security. Saudi Arabia presented a plan for settling the conflict, which was later endorsed by the Arab League and became an Arab initiative. In its official security doctrine (the document endorsed by the European Council in December 2003 and reconfirmed at the end of 2008), the European Union emphasizes that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict constitutes a factor that affects its security.
Yet, two differences between the EU and the GCC are worth considering: the strategic contexts in which the conflict is set by the EU and the GCC, respectively, and the different strategic value of the respective alliances with the United States.

From the EU point of view, the conflict, in particular that between Israel and the Palestinians, is set in the Mediterranean framework (in the Levant, as a Mediterranean sub-region) and affects EU Mediterranean interests, prominently its interest in neighbourhood security. Apart from risks and spill over effects (largely attenuated since the beginning of the 1990s), at present the most important EU concern stemming from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the fact that this conflict makes European Mediterranean policies – the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership yesterday and the Union for the Mediterranean today – hostage to the conflict and prevents them from succeeding in stabilising the area. Conversely, from the GCC countries' point of view, the conflict is part and parcel of the Middle Eastern tangle of conflicts. Obviously, there are differences among members states in both the GCC and the EU. However, these differences are more significant in the latter than the former. A number of larger EU member states – with national foreign policies ranging farther afield than the Mediterranean, such as the United Kingdom and France – may have views akin to those of the GCC countries. However, as members of the EU they abide by Brussels' point of view and consider the Israeli-Palestinian conflict chiefly a Mediterranean factor.

In past years, with the changes impressed on the Middle East by the Bush administration's policies and wars, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become even more tangled with conflicts in the Gulf and the radical streams undercutting the greater Middle East. The conflict has allowed Iran to magnify its influence in a core Arab area such as the Levant. Today, for the GCC countries, and in general the moderate Arab coalition, the Levant is more integrated than ever in the Middle East. In the EU, attempts were made to changing the perspective (hinted at in the previous section), but they failed. All this prevents the EU and the GCC from having the same strategic perspective on the conflict, although they happen to be very close when it comes to specific policies.

In fact, in the framework of the EU-GCC talks, there is a strong, long-standing convergence on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, it is more a diplomatic than a political convergence and, in fact, does not translate into any common initiatives. This is the case, for example, on Hamas: the EU appreciated the Mecca accord and the efforts to integrate Hamas in a national Palestinian government; however, the EU abides by the four conditions set out by the Quartet and, beyond rhetoric, fails to understand how important national Palestinian reunification is for the regional security of the GCC and moderate Arabs. To be more precise, it understands the point, but it does not coincide with the EU's strategic perspectives.

One important reason the two perspectives diverge is the EU's and the GCC's different postures with respect to the United States; more in general, the different relevance of their alliances with the United States. While the transatlantic alliance is based on a community and, for this reason, despite difficulties and shifts, is undercut by primordial identity and security factors, the U.S.-GCC alliance is based on important yet ordinary security considerations.

The difference, when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is reflected by the developments that have unfolded in the framework of the first unfortunate attempt by the Obama administration to revive the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on final status. Both the EU and the GCC equally appreciated the first steps made in 2009 Spring by the new administration to set the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the wider Middle East context as a priority to be pursued on a parallel track, rather than – as usual – in sequence with other regional issues (chiefly Iran. To a question from the press on the existence of an "Iran first" approach, the President responded as follows: "If there is a linkage between Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, I personally believe it actually runs the other way. To the extent that we can make peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis then I actually think it strengthens our hand in the international community in dealing with a potential Iranian threat."). Both saw it as an opportunity to solve a conflict that has distinctive strategic value for both of them.

However, while the Europeans, waiting for Washington, abstained from taking initiatives and engaging in politics, Saudi Arabia and other GCC members quite naturally pursued their own policies in the inter-Arab and Gulf frameworks. To be put it more clearly, while the EU kept on abiding by the kind of "West Bank first" perspective held by the new administration, Saudi Arabia and most GCC countries kept on focusing on the necessity to reintegrate Hamas first in an appropriate inter-Arab context (hence the importance of the October 2009 Saudi visit to Damascus), i.e. focused on inter-Palestinian unity in the context of inter-Arab and regional relations.

In sum, things are seen quite differently by the EU and the GCC: in a Mediterranean vs. Middle Eastern context; in a communitarian transatlantic alliance vs. a non-communitarian Gulf alliance with the United States. (One could add that one reason why the EU hesitates to shift from a Mediterranean to a full Middle Eastern perspective is its alliance with the United States, however, this is not entirely true and could sound unfair to the U.S. because there are powerful intra-EU factors that keep the EU in the Mediterranean. At the end of the day, the transatlantic alliance does not in itself prevent any EU engagement in politics).

In this sense, one can conclude that, while economic cooperation (and its security implications) between the EU and the GCC in the Mediterranean may be based on a strategic rationale, from the point of view of political and security cooperation there is an important convergence yet it strategic rationales hardly coincide. It must be added that, to some extent, differences on political grounds – as already pointed out – may limit economic and security strategic cooperation in the Mediterranean.

Conclusions

Strategic convergence is hard to define. It may be determined by deep-seated factors, such as identity, if not destiny, and the like. More reasonably, history and institutions may make a difference with respect to strategic convergence determined by opportunities and more occasional contingencies.

Ordinarily, strategic convergence is the result of objective as well as subjective factors: there are objective factors fostering strategic convergence, but subjective factors may either encourage or limit such convergence. In the case of the EU and the GCC, while it would be absolutely misplaced to talk about deep-seated factors, identity or destiny (as the EU's bad rhetoric does with respect to Euro-Mediterranean relations), there is an important set of objective factors that could determine a strategic convergence, were the EU and the GCC only willing to consider it. This paper has discussed economic development, transport and security in the Mediterranean, but there are also other factors, such as financial stability and energy relations.

It is true that there are political limits to convergence. However, limits to convergence do not prevent convergence. In the Mediterranean – and elsewhere – EU-GCC strategic convergence is bound to rest on economic and financial factors. It is this opportunity that has not been seized upon in the last twenty years. As they were unable or unwilling to grasp existing opportunities in their relations, the GCC ended up opting for Asia and the EU for its neighbourhood, Russia and North America. Whether the EU and the GCC will recover from these missed opportunities to set up a strategic relation is difficult to say. This should not, however, prevent them from cooperating in more limited strategic areas such as economic development or financial stability in the Mediterranean and elsewhere. This could be a realistic objective to pursue.