

Conference - 15th February 2018: 'Europe and the Gulf'

On February 15, 2018, the **Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC)** hosted the third event of the series '**Lessons from History.**' The event was aimed at analysing the lessons that Europe can learn from its own history of engagement with the countries of the Arab Gulf. The panel included Dr. Silvia Colombo, Senior Researcher at the Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome and referent of the European Commission's Sharaka project on EU-GCC relations, an expert on the imperial history of the United Kingdom (UK), Dr. Gerald Power, from the Metropolitan University of Prague, and Dr. Rachid Chaker, researcher on France-GCC relations at Université Paris 2 Panthéon-Assas. More than 30 people attended the conference, including high-level diplomatic representatives from the UK, Kuwait, Spain and other countries as well as academics and journalists.

Dr. Mitchell Belfer (EGIC President), conveyed the initial greetings and spoke on the enduring mission of EGIC to analyse and strengthen Europe-Gulf relations, including through research and outreach activities. Afterwards, **Dr. Colombo** opened the discussions, addressing head-on the obstacles to tighter EU-GCC relations, including the contrast between the formal structural EU institutions versus the more informal approach of GCC ones, differences of perspectives on political issues as well as the structural difficulties for the EU to be a credible security partner and address the priority concerns of the GCC states. However, she concluded, despite setbacks and difficulties, there is potential for increasing cooperation between individual EU and GCC members at a bilateral level. These exchanges are increasingly profitable for both sides as well as based on trust and informal channels, which are privileged by Gulf officials. Speaking on the UK, **Dr. Power** indeed argued that Gulf leaders were left disappointed by the sudden disengagement of what they considered as a non-invasive, trusted protector in the late 1960s. Despite the current lack of a clear and consistent post-Brexit strategy by the UK government, Britain is clearly very keen to use past and present connections to rebuild a solid relationship with the Arab Monarchies of the Gulf. Several high-level visits by UK's Foreign Secretary to Saudi Arabia and occasional trips to other Gulf countries offer a clear evidence of this. Finally, **Dr. Chaker** closed the panel highlighting how 2009 marked a milestone in France-GCC relations as the French military opened a military faculty in Abu Dhabi. The speaker focused on the increasing difficulties faced by French President Emmanuel Macron in deepening ties with countries in the Gulf region, amid hostile public opinion, that simplistically blames Saudi Arabia and Qatar of supporting extremist interpretations of Islam within France. Despite this, Macron's pragmatic approach to foreign policy is likely to ensure the continuation of France's defence relations with Qatar as well as the solid Paris-Abu Dhabi support axis for General Khalifa Haftar in Libya.

The presentation was followed by a very lively debate, with several questions on different themes. The audience was particularly interested on the most recent instances of interactions between the EU and GCC member states regarding the future of the nuclear deal with Iran and on prospects for increased EU-GCC energy cooperation.

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