



EURO-GULF RELATIONS

What the EU's New Delegation to Kuwait is all About

By Cinzia Bianco

The wider Middle East is increasingly polarised and the European Union (EU) is growing increasingly uneasy about it. This is particularly visible in the EU's relations to the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which has taken a few hits since the short-lived momentum of cooperation on post-Arab Spring Yemen, when the two intergovernmental actors coordinated on a plan, later unsuccessful, for the orderly transition of power from (former) Yemeni President, Ali Abdullah Saleh. Since then, a number of disagreements have emerged between the two parties including: the EU's staunch support for the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, aka the Iran nuclear deal) which is strongly opposed to by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain. Yet, it is perhaps the polarisation of the region and the fragmentation of the GCC, crystallised by the 2017 crisis — pitting Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain against Qatar — which more comprehensively impacted the EU's ability to effectively coordinate with the GCC countries. This is due to the traditional modes of the EU's engagement: being an intergovernmental organisation, the EU traditionally, favours a region-to-region approach to engagement. Until 2016, for instance, the EU only had a single delegation to cover the whole GCC region, which was situated in Riyadh—the capital of Saudi Arabia and seat of the GCC.

While multilateralism, as a political approach, is under strain at a global level, the EU is being weakened by internal crises including the United Kingdom's decision to leave the bloc, economic malaise in several of its members and the rise of populist nationali-

sm. These are impairing its already-limited ability to speak coherently in foreign affairs over the interests of individual members. To avert these limitations, the EU's response to relaunch its political engagement in the Gulf region and wider MENA, has manifested in an increased outreach to individual states and a more proactive pursuit of bilateral relations in general. In 2016, the EU opened a delegation to the UAE, situated in Abu Dhabi, as the UAE's impact in the region significantly grew. Then, in December 2018, the EU announced it would soon open another delegation in Kuwait. Arguably, this latest announcement signals key priorities for the European Union in a turbulent region.

Kuwait was the first GCC state to reach a Cooperation Arrangement with the European External Action Service (EEAS)—the EU's foreign service. Signed in 2016, the agreement is comprehensive in scope, providing the framework for increased political and economic cooperation. Alongside the EU's commitment to support Kuwait in its plans for diversification Vision 2035, something which Brussels prioritises across the Gulf region, a high-level political dialogue was established. This reflects a common political vision for the region as well as the appreciation of the EU's for Kuwait's role as a stabilising force.

For instance, Kuwait has shown a willingness to play a diplomatic role in some of the most complex regional situations, including the Qatar crisis and Yemen conflict. As Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt severed relations to Doha, Kuwait was quick to declare its neutrality and expended considerable energies in the attempt to mend relations, including by acting as an intermediary between the parties. Kuwait's Emir, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, who was previously the country's Minister of Foreign Affairs (for 40 years), deployed his long diplomatic experience to mediate in an increasingly tense context. Already in 2013-2014 Kuwait had successfully, although temporarily, mediated a similar conflict within the GCC, by getting the parties to agree to a dossier of principles. The EU has also refused to take sides in the context of the GCC crisis, due to its long-standing political and economic relations with all parties

involved, and has often expressed its support for Kuwait's role. For a small country like Kuwait, with a diverse population in socio-political and sectarian terms, regional tensions can easily produce domestic repercussions. Hence, Kuwait, arguably, retains a strategic interest in regional stability, as it is conducive to domestic stability. A similar rationale has driven Kuwait's efforts to pursue a political solution in Yemen, one of the theatres of a Saudi-Iran proxy conflict. For instance, the United Nations' peace talks between warring Yemeni parties was hosted in Kuwait City in 2016. In addition, Kuwait has maintained lines of communication open with all sides. Both the Qatar crisis and the Yemen war are crucial issues for the EU—albeit issues in which it lacks significant capabilities to have a game-changing impact. Closer coordination with Kuwait is thus also a way to stay proximate to negotiations on these key issues for the EU.

Kuwait has also been relentless in providing humanitarian aid not only to Yemen, but also to Syria and, indeed, 104 other states, via the United Nations as well as the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development. Just like the EU, which is one of the largest donors in all major regional conflicts, Kuwait believes in the importance of economic development and humanitarian aid as a vehicle of peace and stability. Kuwait and the EU co-chaired the International Conference for the Reconstruction of Iraq in February 2018, where both delivered the highest pledges for financial contribution. Beyond humanitarian aid, both the EU and Kuwait are eager to support the political process in Iraq and to work towards the formation of a stable, functioning and inclusive government after the May 2018 elections. Given its geographic proximity, instability in Iraq can easily spill over into Kuwait and an impoverished and highly-volatile Iraq is inevitably seen as a threat by Kuwait, which was invaded by Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 1990.

Perhaps the most important dossier of cooperation between the EU and Kuwait might be the tuning-out of power struggles in the region, sectarian-flavoured or otherwise. Kuwait itself lacks a sectarian agenda, and aims to preserve harmony between its Sunni majority and a large and influential Shia minority. While Kuwait has also lamented attempts by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to infiltrate a radical frin-

ge of its Shia community and setting-up espionage cells in the country, Kuwait's ruler made headlines in 2017 when he exchanged letters with Iranian leaders to improve relations between the two shores of the Gulf. While that attempt was unsuccessful, Kuwait's willingness to dialogue with the major parties is vital for the EU, which regards the reduction of sectarianism and political competition as crucial for stability in the region. In this context, a permanent presence in Kuwait may signal that Brussels is willing to step up its political game in, arguably, the most strategic and volatile body of water in the world.

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