

## Macron's France and the Future of Franco-GCC Relations

*By Antonino Occhiuto  
Researcher  
Euro-Gulf Information Centre*

The election of the French centrist leader, Emmanuel Macron, to President of France is cause for great relief. This election is seen as rejection of the Islamophobic stance of his opponent Marine LePen and a hope for a Europe of integration. The extremist rhetoric which has always shaped the politics of the movement guided by Le Pen (Front National) is not only relevant to the domestic divisions affecting French society, but also to France's relations with countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Macron's election has the potential to strengthen friendly cooperation between France and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Although economically weakened by the Eurozone crisis, France is an important global actor, with a long history of engagement in the region and with a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council – it is yet an important partner to cooperate with in order to achieve regional stability.

Macron's victory has not been celebrated with resounding enthusiasm in the Arabian peninsula. For many Arab leaders, the future foreign policy of President Macron will be shaped by continuity with the past, leaving little room for a significant cooperation upgrade. In particular, France's interests in the MENA region are increasingly tied to political stability, considered key for creating the conditions which would benefit France's political influence and French economic interests. In the present context, this translated, into Macron's stated unwillingness to recognise unilaterally Palestinian statehood, or his intention to focus on ISIL rather than on the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Macron's France will continue to look for cooperation with stable regional countries, such as the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, key players in the stabilization of neighbouring states affected by violent conflicts.



The importance of military cooperation between France and GCC countries was already clear in May 2009 as (then) President, Nicolas Sarkozy, opened France's first ever military base in the Arabian Peninsula; in the United Arab Emirates. The operational capabilities of that base were strengthened in 2015, following the Paris attacks, by Francois Hollande when Macron was France's Finance Minister, in order to increase the effectiveness and the strength of the French military air campaign against ISIL. The importance of military cooperation between France and the GCC states is further evidenced in the context of the present situation in Yemen and the Gulf of Aden. Saudi and Emirati financing of the NATO-EU anti-piracy mission remains crucial, while France's support for the construction of a Saudi military base in Djibouti-alongside French military installations-signal a long-term shared interest in stabilising Yemen and the Southern Red Sea. Cooperation between France and Saudi Arabia is also particularly relevant to stabilise Sub-Saharan Africa. The 2013 French intervention in Mali to push back jihadi groups advancing towards the capital Bamako, demonstrated how France considers, as vital, the prevention of the formation of a safe haven for mass radicalisation on Europe's doorstep. Finally, Franco-Saudi military and trade relations strongly increased during the Hollande presidency, making France the second largest military supplier of the Kingdom after the US.

One of Macron's stated priorities is to attract investments to France and it seems likely that initiatives in international trade and finance cooperation will receive renewed emphasis. Already (former) President Sarkozy envisioned a number of cooperation projects with the GCC aimed at making full use of the Gulf states' strategic interest in investing in important countries of the EU such as France. Subsequently, Gulf Arab states have invested a significant amount of financial resources to revive the French economy, as during the financial crisis (2007). Given the liberal outlook of his economic policies, and his background as an economist and banker, we can expect Macron's administration to further promote investments from the GCC to the EU and even to encourage the diversion of investments done in the UK towards France, as the UK negotiates an exit from the EU.

On 07 May 2017 France chose a young, liberal, pro-European leader in an election that may have stopped the tide of extremism and populism sweeping across the EU. As most of the signals indicate that Macron will be a leader embracing continuity, the scenario unfolding in front of him continues to be extremely volatile. Key questions such as how his administration will deal with Russia-increasingly assertive in MENA and hostile to the EU-and with the enduring conflict between its traditional ally, Saudi Arabia, and an assertive regional power that some in France consider a prospective economic partner, Iran, remain unanswered. As such the nature of French involvement in the increasingly unstable MENA region remains uncertain but it will surely be determined by the assessment of France's national interests in the several unfolding regional crisis.