

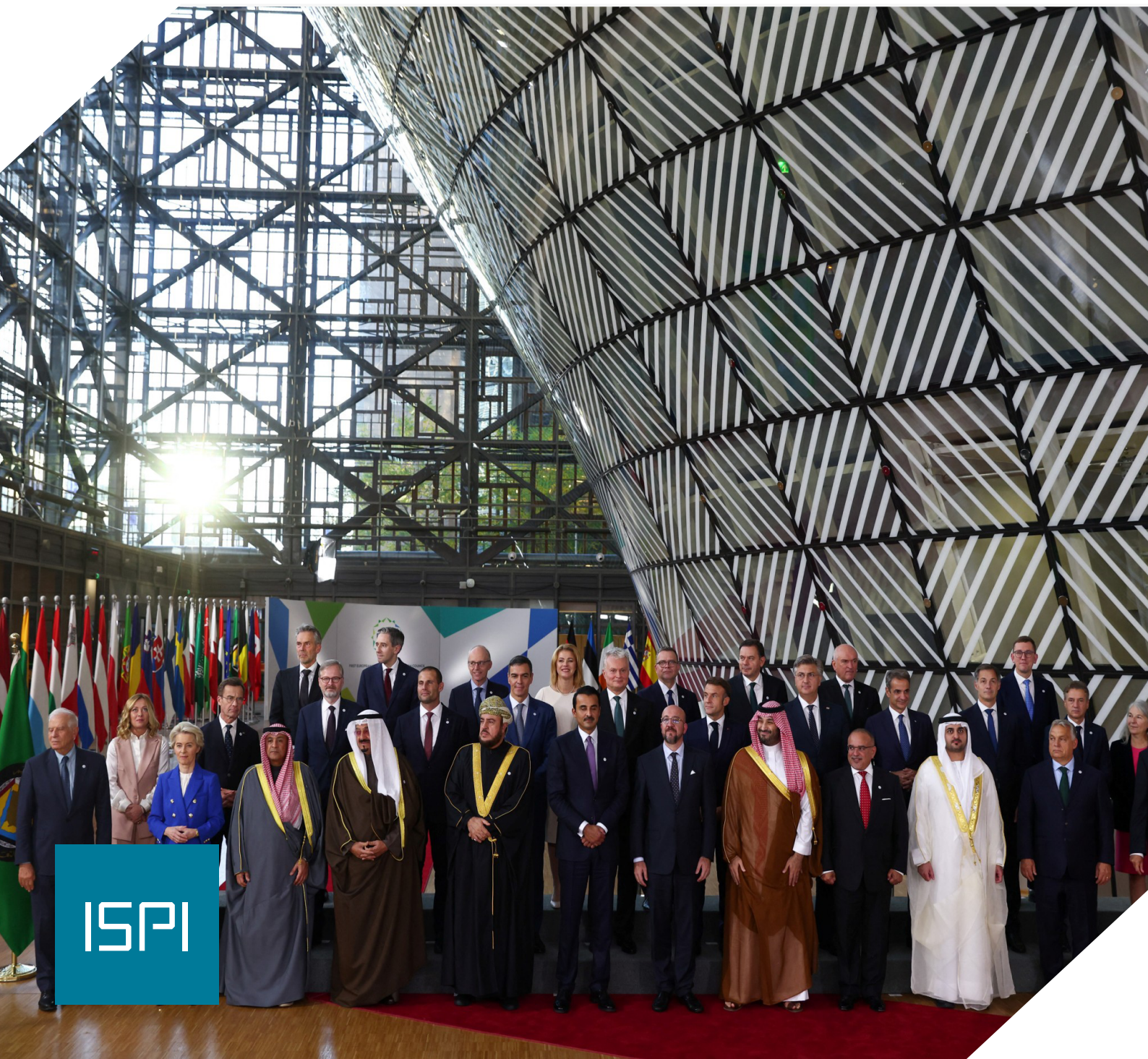
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BUILDING SHARED PROTECTION

GULF-EUROPE SECURITY AND DEFENCE COOPERATION AFTER THE IRAN WAR

edited by **Eleonora Ardemagni**

with Abdulla Isa Al Abbasi, Mohammed Ibrahim Al Dhaheer, Ebtesam Al Ketbi,
Rashid Al Mohanadi, Christian Koch, Abdulaziz Sager, Nourah Shuaibi





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Building Shared Protection: Gulf-Europe Security and Defence Cooperation After the Iran War

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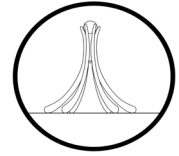
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KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- -The Iran war and the multifaceted crisis it has engendered, also in the Hormuz Strait, has further accelerated the Gulf-Europe growing cooperation trend, maximising shared interests and opening political avenues for collaboration, including on security and defence.
- -Despite intra-EU and intra-GCC political differences, the importance of Gulf-Europe cooperation is now acknowledged by all: priority should be placed on practical collaboration and issue-based coordination, rather than on institutional formats.
- -The Iran war and the ensuing crisis have highlighted that security extends well beyond defence. Therefore, an approach based on shared protection can effectively support the development of the Gulf-Europe partnership, with a special focus on critical infrastructures, maritime security, air defence and defence industry.



Gulf-Europe cooperation has strengthened under the pressure of recent crises: the Russia-Ukraine war, maritime disruption in the Red Sea and the conflict in Gaza. The Iran war and the multifaceted crisis it has engendered, also in the Hormuz Strait, has further accelerated this cooperation trend: it represents now **a stronger stimulus for Gulf-Europe relations**, maximising shared interests and opening political avenues for collaboration.

If seized, this strategic cooperation opportunity can bring to a deeper partnership, including on security and defence: these topics now stand at the top of European and Gulf interests, as both face – in different ways – **the decline of the US as sole security provider**. Despite intra-EU and intra-GCC political differences, the importance of Gulf-Europe cooperation is now acknowledged by all. Against this backdrop, cooperation priority should be placed on practical collaboration and issue-based coordination, rather than on institutional formats, with permanent EU-GCC forum and groups providing strategic direction.

In the Gulf as in Europe, the time-frame requires agile policy approaches to effectively shape joint action, with a focus on four, interconnected areas related to protection: **critical infrastructures, maritime security, air defence and defence industry**.

This article offers a framework and some policy ideas.

SECURITY OR DEFENCE? THE PROTECTION APPROACH

The Gulf, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean represent a single strategic corridor for energy flows, food supplies, trade, infrastructural and digital connectivity. The Iran war and the ensuing regional crisis have highlighted for both Gulf and European states that **security extends well beyond defence**, making it increasingly difficult – and at times unhelpful – to draw clear boundaries between the two given the complex nature of contemporary threats. Both security and defence are related to protection, of national and regional interests, in a shared environment characterised by hybrid threats combining military, economic, cyber and information dimensions.

Therefore, focusing on the 'protection approach' can effectively support **the development of a Gulf-Europe partnership**. Protection

expands defence by integrating security under a national perspective, stressing "a proactive approach aimed not only at reacting to a threat but at preventing it and mitigating its effects".¹ Protection also generates collective benefits while strengthening national ones.

The EU-GCC extraordinary ministerial meeting, held on 5 March 2026 as Iran was attacking the GCC states, implicitly builds upon a protection approach which should be further developed. In the joint statement, ministers reaffirmed "the importance of safeguarding regional air space, maritime routes, and freedom of navigation", as well as "the safety and security of supply chains and the stability of global energy markets".²

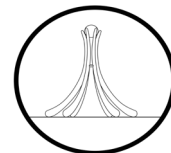
Is it about security or defence? Is it for national or collective interests? **The answer is interconnection:** it regards security and defence, national and collective interests. It's here that the protection approach allows to overcome dichotomies which don't properly mirror reality, nor the horizon of Gulf-Europe partnership.

Given this background, to better shape joint political action:

- **A permanent EU-GCC ministerial-level forum should be established**, building upon the ongoing EU-GCC Regional Security Dialogue, to provide strategic direction, coordinate policy and facilitate joint planning across maritime security, air defence and the protection of critical infrastructure.
- This effort should be complemented by **specialist working groups** covering maritime and air security, critical infrastructure protection and defence industrial cooperation.

ANTICIPATING RISKS, PREVENTING CRISES: WORKING TOGETHER ON RESILIENCE AND ADAPTABILITY

Recent crises in Gulf and Europe's shared neighbourhood have demonstrated that strategic vulnerability no longer emerges exclusively from military imbalance, but increasingly from **hybrid disruptions to the infrastructures and systems** that sustain economic continuity and societal functioning. Hybrid threats affecting interlinked dimensions "require an interdisciplinary approach, capable of drawing from paradigms typical of managerial sciences such as risk



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management, crisis management, organisational resilience and multi-level governance",³ also needing the involvement of public-private partnerships.

Therefore, Gulf-European cooperation should concentrate on efforts to anticipate future risks, and on mechanisms to prevent crises and manage escalation, **thus strengthening resilience and adaptability**. The real game-changer would be crafting shared capacity to absorb, adapt to and recover from disruption.

- **Strengthening Gulf-Europe analytical capabilities** through strategic foresights and scenario planning would improve joint abilities to assess geopolitical, technological, climate and economic risks before they materialise, supporting more proactive policymaking.
- With this purpose, **Track 1.5 and Track 2 Gulf-Europe dialogue platforms should bring together policymakers**, academia, think tanks, industry and the private sector to **identify emerging challenges before they transform into crises**, co-developing evidence-based policies.

PROTECTING CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURES

In the strategic corridor stretching from the Gulf to the Mediterranean, energy installations and grids, desalination plants, airports, ports, undersea cables and satellites, financial systems, data centres and cloud platforms have become assets of **a shared strategic space**.

Security planning must reflect the fact that current threats do not respect **the boundary between physical and digital domains**. Since physical and digital infrastructures are highly interdependent, they are exposed to hybrid threats combining physical disruption, cyberattacks and information pressure. Combining European expertise in cybersecurity and regulatory frameworks with Gulf's investment capacity would accelerate infrastructure modernisation while enhancing protection against cyberattacks and sabotages.

For the Gulf and Europe, resilience increasingly depends **on the ability to maintain essential functions** along the shared strategic corridor

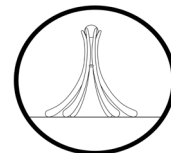
during crises, rather than simply to prevent attacks. This goal should require:

- Developing a **Gulf-Europe strategic resilience framework**: the protection of critical infrastructures is key to maintain essential functions and should be pursued through **a comprehensive framework combining energy and maritime security, technological and digital resilience**. This should entail infrastructure risk assessment and stress testing, cyber security exercises, emergency response protocols and shared methodologies for identifying current strategic vulnerabilities.
- Protecting critical infrastructures requires **an integrated approach to multi-domain threats**. Joint maritime and air situational awareness should be strengthened expanding information-sharing channels, and by integrating maritime and air surveillance data where feasible.
- Regular **wargames on the protection of critical infrastructures** involving Gulf and European military and civilian personnel, plus representative of industries, would train partners to think across domains to solve problems, and to make it together.
- A **Gulf-Europe task force on securing critical minerals flow** in times of disruption should be established, assessing the risk level of materials and maritime trade routes and preparing emergency plans in case of crisis.

MARITIME SECURITY

As disruptions in the Red Sea traffic and then the Iran war demonstrated, **a crisis in one part of the Gulf-Mediterranean strategic space can quickly reverberate along the corridor**, raising shipping and insurance costs, delaying cargo movement and increasing pressure on ports and consumers. For this reason, Gulf-European maritime collaboration should prioritise continuity planning.

- Regardless debates on naval presence, Gulf and European partners should therefore consider establishing **a permanent maritime coordination framework**, possibly at EU-GCC level. This should connect naval forces, coast guards, port authorities, customs



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agencies and commercial shipping operators to design consistent protocols to prevent risks and mitigate disruption.

- The coordination framework should work on maritime domain awareness, rapid information-sharing, counter-drone and counter-mine readiness and communication procedures during incidents. The overarching focus should **be preserving the movement of strategic goods and services under conditions of disruption**.
- Regular Gulf-Europe **joint maritime exercises**, including crisis simulation exercises, would support protocol's implementation. Exercises are crucial to build trust and to establish habits of cooperation before critical events happen, gradually moving towards **interoperability between Gulf and European's navies and coast guards**.
- **Gulf-European partners should consider ad hoc defensive measures for critical maritime assets**, such as tankers. As drones, missiles and hybrid attacks grow more sophisticated, **precautionary defence on large commercial vessels**, including LNG tankers, should be explored. These would be implemented through non-kinetic options: electronic warfare, jamming, detection technologies and, where suitable, emerging directed-energy systems (ex. lasers and microwaves), carefully assessing international law, maritime safety standards and flag-state rules.

AIR DEFENCE

Gulf states are facing **a complex threat environment** shaped by ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and unmanned aerial systems, in the availability of state and non-state armed actors. In different ways, both Gulf and European states still significantly depend on the US for air defence. European partners have important capabilities in radar, sensors, early warning, air-defence platforms and command-and-control systems; nevertheless, Russia-related threats are pushing EU states to rethink and empower air defence.

With this purpose, European states are cooperating with Ukraine to strengthen air defence capabilities, focusing on drone technology and production. As Iran attacked the GCC states, Saudi Arabia, the UAE

and Qatar signed **10-year air defence agreements** with Ukraine, also related to co-production. A similar deal with Kuwait has just entered in force, and a drone agreement with Bahrain is in the pipeline.

In this area:

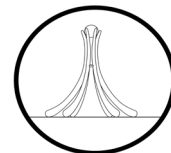
- **Gulf-Europe air defence cooperation** should include information sharing, joint maritime and air situational awareness and training.
- **Gulf-European layered defence planning** should be developed for specific sites, starting from those where Europeans have direct economic interests (ex. energy and industrial facilities, ports and logistics corridors).
- Building upon **emerging counter-drone experiences** among Gulf states, European states and Ukraine, crisis simulation exercises could be explored – possibly at the EU-GCC level, while taking into account different operational contexts – to test capabilities, share the lessons learned and improve coordination.
- Regarding aerial systems, **public-private partnerships involving Gulf and European actors** should be encouraged to catalyse innovation, anchoring business relations to a broader framework of strategic cooperation. For instance, special projects on Gulf-European air defence cooperation should be established, capitalising on defence economics tools such as Al Selmiyyah Defence Industrial Free Zone in the UAE and the Saudi venture capital Masna Ventures.

DEFENCE INDUSTRY

As part of economic diversification processes, Gulf states are working to **expand local industrial capacity and expertise**, while European firms need reliable partners, investments and access to long-term markets. Especially in the air and maritime domains, emerging threats bring new defence industry needs to Gulf and European states, pushing local companies to invest in partnerships and joint ventures.

In this area:

- Gulf-Europe defence industry cooperation should focus on Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul (MRO) hubs and specialised training.



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- Building upon existing partnerships between Gulf and European defence firms, Gulf and Europe should focus on **R&D cooperation and co-production**, which is the main trust-building tool to facilitate technology transfer, working to remove existing hurdles on it. Currently, the GCC states are bilaterally negotiating Strategic Partnership Agreements (SPAs) with the EU, which already include research and innovation. Regarding defence technologies, most European states are also NATO members, and the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain are NATO partners in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), with Saudi Arabia and Oman participating in selected activities within the ICI framework.
- **The GCC states' participation to defence projects** under the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument,⁴ the EU's loans mechanism for investments as part of *Readiness 2030*, should be considered to promote the sharing of industrial and technical skills. Current European rules exclude Gulf states because they don't have security and defence partnerships with the EU so far, although they are bilaterally negotiating comprehensive SPAs stressing increased strategic convergence. Furthermore, the categories of equipment to be funded by SAFE exactly correspond to **the priority areas of EU-GCC cooperation**: protection of critical infrastructures, maritime and underwater capabilities, anti-drone and anti-missile systems.
- Great attention should be placed on technical education and knowledge transfer. A "STEM for defence" academic programme should be established between Gulf and European universities to organise academic exchanges for promising students and early-to-mid career researchers studying Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines applied to the defence sector, boosting shared expertise.
- A European-Ukraine-Gulf lab for R&D on unmanned technologies, counter-drone systems and AI applied to drones should be explored to maximise innovative outputs.

SEIZING THE GULF-EUROPE MOMENTUM

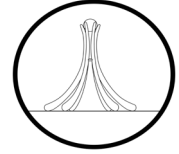
The Iran war and its consequences, starting from the Hormuz crisis, can further enhance Gulf-Europe relations, emphasising **convergent**

interests and interdependent supply chains that were already acknowledged before the Iran war. Under the pressure and the shock of the crises affecting the Gulf-Mediterranean strategic space, Gulf and European states have the concrete possibility to now invest in shared protection, strengthening the security and defence side of the partnership.

In a context of rising Gulf-Europe strategic cooperation, the protection of critical infrastructures, maritime security, air defence and defence industry should be prioritised, opting for **practical collaboration and coordination**. As conflicts and crises multiply, Gulf-European cooperation should concentrate on efforts to anticipate future risks, and on mechanisms to prevent emergencies and manage escalation, thus enhancing resilience and adaptability. Where appropriate, practical cooperation with NATO could also contribute to strengthen partners' logistics, rapid response and capacity-building, without creating formal security commitments.

As the second EU-GCC Summit in Riyadh looms, the Gulf-Europe momentum, a trend boosted by the Iran war and crisis, can lastly build **a stronger and goal-oriented security and defence partnership**, contributing to shared protection from the Gulf to the Mediterranean.

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1. Antonio Walter Rauti, "From Defense to Protection: Rethinking National Security in the Age of Hybrid Threats", SDA Bocconi-School of Management, Shield-Strategic Hub for Integrated Education on Leadership & Defense, p.3.
 2. European Council, "Joint statement by GCC-EU Ministers' meeting on recent developments in the Middle East: Iran's attacks against GCC states", 5 March 2026.
 3. SDA Bocconi-Shield, p.6.
 4. Stating the equipment must be mostly produced in the EU, with components produced outside the EU representing no more than 35% of the total cost and of the end product.



About the Authors

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