

Opportunities for an Environmental Security Dialogue in the Gulf and a Role for Europe.

EU-GULF CONNECT, Series – POLICY BRIEF

By Dr. Cinzia Bianco – Senior Expert on EU-Gulf Relations

Despite the March 2023 agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia unlocking a potential path towards addressing this difficult regional conflict, bilateral and multilateral processes for regional de-escalation among the Gulf monarchies, Iraq, and Iran remain very fragile to several challenges. These include the collapse of talks to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – also known as the nuclear deal with Iran; sustained domestic protests in Iran fuelling a hyper-securitisation of the regime; tensions with Israel – especially after the latest Hamas terror attack in October and subsequent Israeli retaliation; and the impact of great powers rivalry in the Gulf.

In this context, a platform for dialogue on climate and environmental security may be one of the few politically feasible and sanction-free options to sustain and further regional diplomacy channels. There is no denying the necessity of such work. The Gulf is one of the world's most vulnerable regions to climate change, witnessing temperatures increasingly often exceeding a threshold for human adaptability and

extreme weather events such as sandstorms, the Shaheen cyclone in October 2021, or the floods in both the summer and winter of 2022.¹ While environmental projects can, at times, raise political red flags, Iran and Iraq see the value in cooperating with wealthier and technologically more advanced Gulf monarchies. Both countries, for example, witness recurrent public protests about water scarcity, the impact of pollution on public health, and the growing waves of internally displaced water refugees.² The Gulf monarchies, able to deploy financial and technological resources to meet their own environmental challenges, have shown ambitions to think regionally about environmental security, with the likes of Saudi Arabia's Global Water Organization or Green Initiative.³ With varying degrees of intensity, environmental threats are already affecting the economy, politics and even security calculations in regional capitals, as they directly impact people's livelihoods, food, health and energy security.

EUROPEAN ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION IN THE GULF

Fostering closer intra-regional ties and constructive cooperation on environmental security is largely in line with the European approach to the Gulf region. Environmental questions are very much at the heart of European thinking on the Gulf, both as individual member states and collectively via the EU. For example, in 2021, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, wrote that "water security is a real issue" in the Gulf, and that "[Europe] can help."⁴ Environmental

¹ Aisha Al-Sarihi, "Managing Climate Change in the Gulf: Challenges, Policies, and the Way Forward," Emirates Policy Center, 7 August, 2023, <https://epc.ae/en/details/featured/managing-climate-change-in-the-gulf-challenges-policies-and-the-way-forward>

² Jamie Dettmer, "Water Protests Roil Mideast, Alarm Region's Governments," Voice of America, 27 July, 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/middle-east_water-protests-roil-mideast-alarm-regions-governments/6208777.html

³ Sarah Elzeini, "Saudi Green Initiative: From Policy to Action," Middle East Policy Council, 2023, <https://mepc.org/commentary/saudi-green-initiative-policy-action>

⁴ Josep Borrell, "The EU's stakes and options in a changing Gulf region," European External Action Service, 30 September 2021, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu%E2%80%99s-stakes-and-options-changing-gulf-region_en

security also had a prominent place in the EU's Joint Communication for "A strategic partnership with the Gulf", which opened the door for cooperation on marine pollution, biodiversity, food and water security, desertification and deforestation, disaster relief, and risk reduction.⁵ While vaguely worded and scarcely operational, climate change and the environment was the first chapter of the joint statement released after the EU-GCC Ministerial Meeting, gathering foreign ministries and their representatives in October 2023 in Oman – the first one in eight years.⁶

Individual member states are already crucial players in the region when it comes to climate diplomacy, but also to environmental preservation from an operational point of view. Notably, France has taken the initiative to co-host two rounds of the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership – bringing together officials from Jordan, Egypt, Qatar, UAE, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran – which included a focus on the environment. The Netherlands have a water partnership with Oman, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, and is considered by these countries among the top partners globally in water efficiency, water for agriculture, coastal zone management, water governance, and wastewater management.⁷ Finland also has a Special Envoy for Water embedded at the Peace and Mediation Centre within the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, who recently travelled to Saudi Arabia.

Europeans should leverage this credibility to promote diplomatic and technical cooperation on environmental security as a platform for de-escalation in the Gulf.

⁵ European External Action Service (EEAS). "Joint Communication on a "Strategic Partnership with the Gulf"", official statement, 18 May, 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-communication-%E2%80%9Cstrategic-partnership-gulf%E2%80%9D_en

⁶ Council of the European Union, "Co-Chairs' Statement of the 27th GCC-EU Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting," Press Release, 10 October, 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/10/10/co-chairs-statement-of-the-27th-gcc-eu-joint-council-and-ministerial-meeting/>

⁷ Netherlands Water Partnership, "Middle East," 2023, <https://www.netherlandswaterpartnership.com/regions/middle-east>

But in order to operationalise a European contribution in this domain, the EU and individual European governments should proactively deploy diplomatic as well as actionable support for concrete ideas and projects benefitting all Gulf countries. COP28 and the Middle East Green Initiative Summit, as well as the third iteration of France’s Baghdad process – all happening in the region between November and December 2023 – will offer the ideal catalysts to launch such initiatives.

Europeans can build on existing initiatives on environmental security owned by regional actors themselves. Indeed, although obstacles and mistrust remain, over the past few years, governments have signalled growing interest in exploring the path of environmental security cooperation. Illustratively, Iraq organised – under a United Nations umbrella – a Baghdad International Water Conference in 2021, 2022 and 2023. All neighbouring countries were invited, as Baghdad urgently seeks new agreements on water management, including emergency mechanisms to guarantee minimum flows of water in summer.⁸

Similarly in 2022, Iran hosted representatives from Oman, Iraq, Syria, the UAE, Armenia, Qatar, Azerbaijan and Turkey for a conference on “Environmental Cooperation for a Better Future”, and in 2023, Tehran co-hosted with the UN a Conference on sand storms, albeit with disappointing regional participation.⁹ Iran’s Foreign Ministry is already having sand and dust storm talks with Iraq, Syria and Kuwait, and would like to include Saudi Arabia, too. Furthermore, in 2022, Emirati Minister of Climate Change and Environment, Mariam Almheiri, signed a bilateral agreement on environmental cooperation with Iran, which should allow for Iran’s full

⁸ Iraqi Ministry of Water Resources (MOWR), “Baghdad International Water Conference”, 2023, <https://baghdad-iwc.com/>

⁹ Arab News, “UN, Iran urge cooperation to battle sandstorm threat,” 9 September, 2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2370371/world>

involvement at COP28.¹⁰ This year, the country launched a global initiative on water scarcity.¹¹ Since 2021, Saudi Arabia hosted two summits on the Middle East Green Initiative, attended by the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Iraq, Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, Bahrain, Algeria, Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Oman, Palestine; so far, Iran is not part of the initiative.¹² Saudi Arabia also hosted the UNFCCC MENA Climate Week in October 2023 and will host the UN's World Environment Day 2024 with a focus on land restoration, desertification and drought resilience, alongside the 16th UN Convention to Combat Desertification in December 2024. Clearly, climate has jumped to the top of regional agendas.

WHAT CAN EUROPE DO?

Diplomatic engagement is crucial to unlocking regional technical cooperation, including in scientific research and joint strategic investments. Europeans should try to be as involved as possible in these and other existing regional initiatives, and ultimately bring on board the four diplomatic pivot actors (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and the UAE), together with the UN's Environmental Programme Regional Office for West Asia, to get an official greenlight to facilitate scientific and technical cooperation. Such a mandate could be officially discussed in the EU-GCC ministerial meeting gathering Climate Ministers, planned to take place on the sidelines of COP28. It could then be taken to a larger regional audience – including representatives of Iraq and Iran – at France's third Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership.

¹⁰ Mohammad Hashemi, "'Dust Diplomacy' and Climate Change May Bring Gulf States Together," Gulf International Forum, 2023, <https://gulrif.org/dust-diplomacy-and-climate-change-may-bring-gulf-states-together/>

¹¹ United Arab Emirates' Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Ripple Effect: Water Scarcity - The hidden threat to global security and prosperity," 23 September, 2023, <https://www.mofa.gov.ae/-/media/Ripple-Effect-Water-Scarcity--The-hidden-threat-to-global-security-and-prosperity---Sep22.pdf?la=ar-AE&hash=7B72719F6D7D342440FEB27D6EA6A90C>

¹² Saudi Green Initiative (SGI), "Saudi and Middle East Green Initiatives," 2023, <https://www.greeninitiatives.gov.sa/>

Joint research and technical cooperation would be beneficial in a number of domains including:

- ✚ Gathering data on maritime pollution;
- ✚ Exchanging knowledge on rain enhancement measures, including cloud-seeding and cloud-busting;
- ✚ Improving the affordability, efficiency and sustainability of desalination technologies;
- ✚ Developing a region-wide prediction and early warning, monitoring, and forecasting system on sandstorms;
- ✚ Promoting an urgently needed advancement of wastewater treatment solutions;
- ✚ Disseminating know-how on arid-climate agricultural technology.

Europeans can facilitate these projects. The EU should consider revisiting its INCONET-GCC project, a project funded by the European Commission's Directorate General for Research and Innovation that ended in 2017 and worked to establish a Science, Technology and Innovation International Cooperation Network between the EU and the GCC. A new INCONET should be expanded to scientific institutions in Iran and Iraq and to some EU partner countries, primarily the UK.

As INCONET is mostly a network of institutions, it could feature Gulf-based regional institutions such as Kuwait-based Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment (ROPME) and Oman-based Middle East Desalination Research Center (MEDRC), as well as representatives of the UNESCO Chair in Desalination and Water treatment at Qatar University. This new INCONET would become a platform for European and Gulf institutions to exchange ideas, foster and rejuvenate

research, and create new people-to-people links among scientific institutions in the process.

Specifically on desalination, the EU has at least two top-notch scientific projects on making desalination more sustainable – MIDES and REvived – that could offer tremendous stimulus to research in the Gulf.¹³ This support can be particularly useful for regionalising desalination, something that is likely to happen increasingly often in the Gulf as an emergency solution to droughts. For example, in 2018, Kuwait delivered desalination units to four Iraqi governorates after water scarcity protests swept southern Iraq; similarly, in 2022, Saudi Arabia inaugurated the first floating desalinators, an infrastructure that can be transported across borders, at least during crises. Europeans could also join forces with the Gulf monarchies for seed investments in strategic infrastructure for climate resilience in Iraq and Iran, such as wastewater treatment and arid-climate agricultural technology, which should not be subject to sanctions.

Europeans are aware that it is in their interests to promote de-escalation between Iran and its Arab neighbours. By leveraging its edge on climate security, it could strengthen the EU's position in an increasingly multipolar region, and help it fulfil its commitments to the environment. To make a substantive contribution in these domains, the EU and its member states will need to look beyond the environmental challenges in the region to the opportunities for common solutions, using their credibility on climate issues to promote a dialogue on political and technical cooperation between Iran, Iraq, and GCC countries.

¹³ REvived and MIDES are Horizon 2020 projects for low-energy desalination using, respectively, cutting-edge technology for electrodialysis (ED) and microbial desalination cells (MDCs), see: "Research & Innovation Projects relevant to Water research: HORIZON 2020," Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, March 2022, https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-03/water_research_and_innovation_projects_2014-2020.pdf

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

Author

Dr. Cinzia Bianco | Senior Expert on EU-Gulf Relations

**BRUSSELS
INTERNATIONAL
CENTER**

 @BICBrussels  @bicrhr  BIC

 www.bic-rhr.com  info@bic-rhr.com

 Avenue Louise, 89 1050, Brussels, Belgium  Tel:+32 027258466