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The European Union in the Middle East

How can the EU expand its agency in the region?

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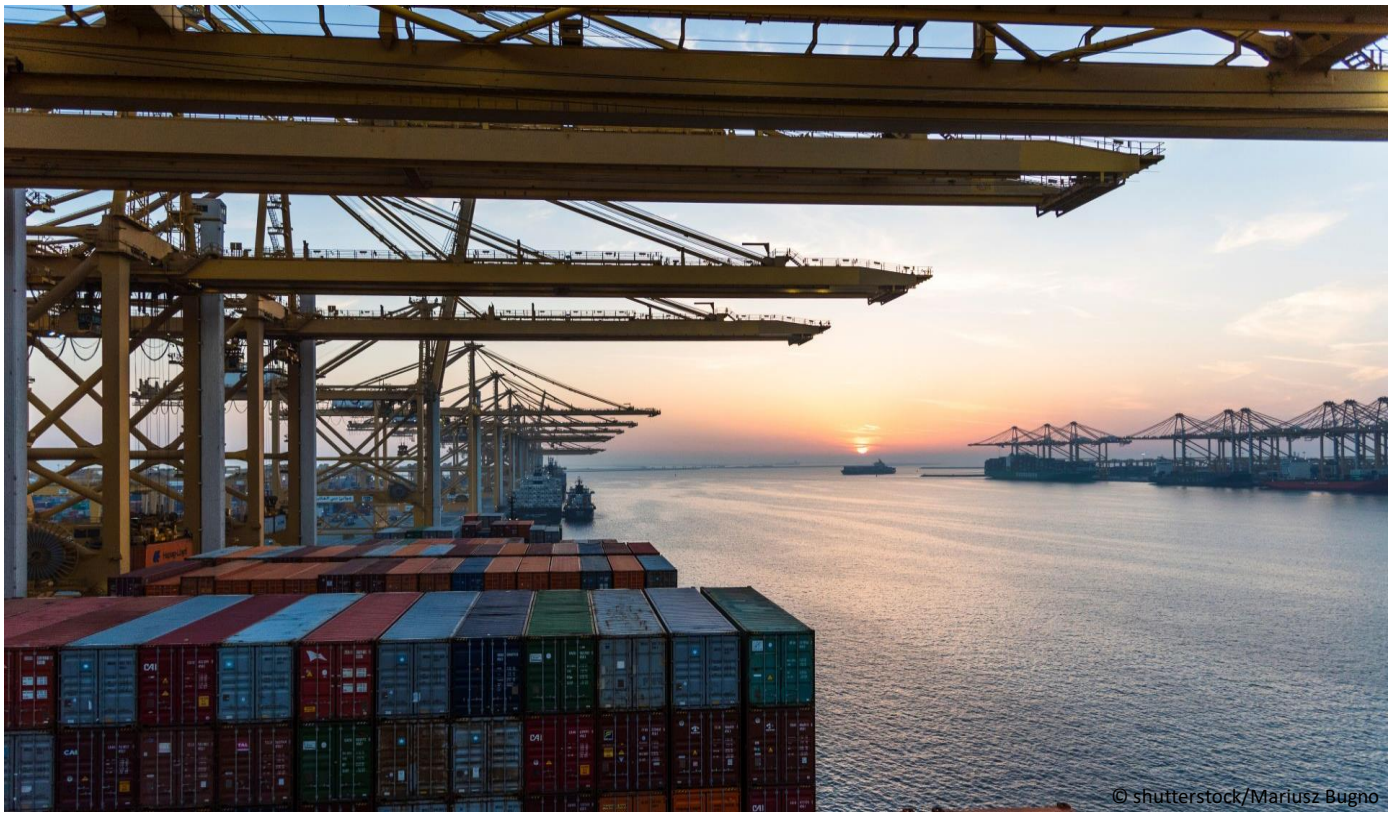

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The Middle East faces an uncertain future following the end of the war in Gaza. The European Union's Middle East policy is also at a crossroads. While the EU was able to establish itself as a key player in the region after the end of the Cold War, its influence has waned again in recent years. The region is nevertheless important to the EU in geopolitical terms. Not only because the influence of the major powers, direct and indirect, is evident there but also because Europe has tangible interests in the Middle East that are crucially important for the future. In view of these circumstances, cep advocates that:

- **Developing the Middle East strategy announced for 2026** should be recognised as an opportunity for an internal EU dialogue on common European interests in the Middle East as well as a chance to reduce the differences of opinion that arose during the Hamas-Israel war.
- The **India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor** is a foreign trade project whose realisation should be pursued to safeguard the future of the European economy and to increase the EU's geopolitical weight vis-à-vis other players.
- The **Cyprus EU Council Presidency** on 1 January 2026 represents an opportunity for a fresh start in Middle East policy. Cyprus should be supported in this task wherever possible.

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1 Introduction

The Middle East has played an important role in the EU's common foreign and security policy since the end of the Cold War. For a long time, the EU also played an important role on the ground and was able to represent its values and interests in the region. In the early 1990s, the Middle East was primarily a matter for the superpowers and - alongside them - the European nation states, but during the course of the 1990s and 2000s Brussels started to play a more important role. This transformation was made clear when the EU joined the "Peace Quartet" in April 2002, together with the United Nations, the United States and Russia. The EU also managed to acquire a key position in the nuclear negotiations with Iran. When reports of a secret Iranian nuclear weapons programme began to emerge in 2002, the EU positioned itself as an important player. The diplomatic activities of France, the UK and Germany were overseen to a large extent by Javier Solana, then Secretary General of the Council of the European Union and High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy. The EU's major role in the negotiations continued until the successful conclusion of the Vienna nuclear agreement (known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) in October 2015.

It is thus apparent that the EU was particularly successful at a time when diplomacy and conflict resolution were the focus of international politics. The economic clout and attractiveness of the Single Market gave the EU negotiating power in this situation. The prospect of co-operation and market access persuaded many partners to make concessions.

International politics today follows a different logic. The power factors that were decisive in international negotiations have shifted in favour of military factors. The EU, which is not a military power, is now losing out in negotiations, as it did e.g. against the USA in the early summer of 2025.[1] Due to the security-policy emergency caused by the Russia-Ukraine war, Europe was not prepared to take a more offensive negotiating position vis-à-vis the United States. Hence the motto of the negotiations: No escalation with Washington. In Middle East policy, the fact that Europe is more divided than ever on key issues makes it considerably more difficult to pursue an effective policy towards the region.

For years, the Middle East has been gaining geopolitical relevancy in Europe. The Syrian civil war resulted in large-scale refugee movements, which peaked in the summer of 2015. This had a significant impact on the voting behaviour of the British electorate in the referendum on their country's EU membership, and the political fallout elsewhere remains huge to this day. It is thus apparent that a stable Middle East and a stable Europe are interdependent.

In economic terms, too, the region, and the Gulf in particular, is also becoming a more significant economic trading partner. In view of the energy crisis in Europe triggered by the Russian attack on Ukraine, relations with countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia are gaining in importance. Essentially, the geopolitical rivalries that characterise global politics as a whole are evident in the Middle East: Russia, China and the United States each play different roles in the region, while regional powers such as Turkey are becoming increasingly influential. The EU must also find a role in the region which reflects the new realities.

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[1] Matthias Kullas, "Zoll-Deal EU-USA: Ein Katalysator für den Binnenmarkt: Pragmatische und strategische Optionen", cepAdhoc, 26 August 2025; https://www.cep.eu/de/eu-themen/details/zoll-deal-eu-usa-ein-katalysator-fuer-den-binnenmarkt.html.

For the EU, the overall question is how to achieve and expand its agency in the international arena. How can Brussels regain its former prominence? The Middle East is a region where the deficit is particularly evident. The question of how the EU can influence developments in the region today and harmonise the different approaches and interests of the Member States is thus becoming more pressing.

2 The EU's role in the post-war arrangements for Gaza and Israel

On 9 October 2025, Israel and the Islamist group Hamas signed a ceasefire. After more than two years, interrupted by temporary ceasefires in November 2023 and January-March 2025, the Hamas-Israel war has thus come to an end (for the time being).

Negotiations were brokered by the United States, Qatar, Egypt and, in the final stages, Turkey. In the meantime, the EU (including its Member States) has played hardly any role, either during the term of office of US President Joe Biden or since the start of Donald Trump's second presidency.

Although the EU was represented by EU Council President António Costa at the summit in Sharm el-Sheikh on 13 October 2025, after the ceasefire had been concluded, it has still not found its role even now that the war has ended. Its attempt to gain a seat on the "Board of Peace" (often referred to as the Board of Governors in reporting) for Gaza, which is intended to oversee the work of the transitional government of the Gaza Strip, have so far failed. What is interesting from an institutional perspective is the fact that other states were able to play a key role in the negotiations on the future of Gaza, either because of their proximity to Israel (United States) or to Hamas or the Palestinian side (Qatar, Egypt, Turkey). The EU is not in a position to gain a seat on the board, either by way of an "Israel ticket" or a "Palestine ticket". This was recently made clear in statements made by Avi Nir-Feldklein. Israel's ambassador to the EU explained that EU membership of the board (which will be chaired by US President Donald Trump) would only become conceivable if Brussels changed its policy towards Israel, not least by withdrawing Israel's partial exclusion from Horizon Europe as well as the threat to suspend fundamental parts of the EU-Israel Association Agreement, such as customs exemption.[2] At the same time, however, there is no pressure from the Palestinian side (e.g. from Turkey) to involve the EU in the Gaza policy since the EU is not significantly pro-Palestinian. The EU is thus falling between all the stools, to its own detriment.

Thus, for now, the EU is left with the role of technical support. The EUBAM Rafah mission, which was already deployed on the border between Gaza and Egypt during the ceasefire in January-March 2025, plays an important role here.[3] The mission was launched in November 2005 to support the Palestinian Authority in handling border traffic between Egypt and the Gaza Strip and to support the development of state structures by professionalising police work at the border - in line with the Oslo Process. However, EUBAM Rafah was only able to take on this task for a short time; when Hamas seized power in the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2007, the mission's work had to be put on hold.

After 7 October 2023, however, it quickly became clear that EUBAM Rafah could play a key role in Gaza's post-war arrangements. This was also the view in Washington during the Biden administration.

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[2] Tim Ross, 'EU must lift penalties on Israel now that Gaza ceasefire has begun, envoy says', 13 October 2025; https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-must-lift-penalties-israel-now-gaza-ceasefire-begun-envoy-says/

[3] Rafah is the border crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. As part of the ceasefire between Hamas and Israel, the crossing is to be reopened for goods and, in humanitarian cases, people.

The US government therefore asked Europe to keep EUBAM Rafah ready for use after the war. During the second ceasefire (January to March 2025), the EU mission resumed its work, initially with around 20 European police officers. This was also planned for the period following the renewed ceasefire, which came into force on 10 October 2025. As of today (24 November 2025), however, this has not happened, because the opening of the border crossing depends on the handover of the mortal remains of the last remaining Israeli hostages.[4]

The importance of the mission for the resilience of the ceasefire cannot be overestimated. In order to improve the work of EUBAM Rafah, however, an adjustment of the mandate should be considered. The mission currently has a non-executive mandate, meaning that its representatives cannot fulfil any sovereign tasks. Their role is therefore more one of support, training and counselling. Changing the mandate would be a temporary move away from the logic of a two-state solution, in the spirit of which the mission was originally launched in the Oslo years. Nevertheless, such a step would seem necessary in order to ensure the most efficient possible movement of people and goods while at the same time combating arms smuggling. Given the prevailing conditions, it is clear that the situation cannot be compared with that of 2005. The success of the mission will be crucial for the economic development of Gaza and the security of the region. Moving away from the logic of establishing state structures, for a temporary transitional period, will thus guarantee the long-term foundations of the two-state solution.

In addition, the EU also needs to ensure that the work of the mission is better integrated into its public diplomacy work in Israel. The EU currently has a bad reputation in the country. According to figures published in September 2025 by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and Mitvim, 67% of Israelis currently view the EU as hostile and only 14% see it as a friend.[5] The EU should enhance its reputation by pointing to the fact that it too is contributing directly to Israel's security through the work of EUBAM Rafah and the associated fight against arms smuggling. After all, the Israeli population currently sees the EU more as an effete trade organisation that is only able to take very limited security policy measures such as border protection. In the interests of the EU, people should be made aware that the reality is more complex.

Among the announcements released after the summit in Sharm el Sheikh, it was notable that the one from António Costa referred, in addition to EUBAM Rafah, also to a mission that has not played a role in relation to Gaza for a long time: EUPOL Copps.[6] Like EUBAM Rafah, this mission, founded on 1 January 2006, dates back to a time still characterised by the Oslo Process that was initiated in the previous decade. The mission supports the Palestinian Authority in professionalising its police work. In the West Bank, this work continues to this day. With regard to the Gaza Strip, however, the mission will be much more dependent than EUBAM Rafah on conditions reaching a minimum level of normalisation due to its inevitable presence within the Strip, meaning that it will take some time before active work can commence. Also, the EU should only get involved if it can exert sufficient influence on local conditions. While the EUBAM Rafah mission can already make a positive contribution at a low-

[4] This currently concerns three hostages: Dror Or, Ran Gvili and Sudthisak Rinthalak. On 24 November, it was reported that the remains of a hostage had been found in Nuseirat.

[5] Mitvim Foundation, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 'The Israeli Foreign Policy Index 2025', September 2025; https://mitvim.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Mitvim-Institute-%E2%80%93-The-Israeli-Foreign-Policy-Index-2025-%E2%80%93-Key-Findings-1.pdf.

[6] EU Neighbours South, 'Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on the Comprehensive Plan to end the Gaza Conflict', 13 October 2025; https://south.euneighbours.eu/news/statement-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-the-comprehensive-plan-to-end-the-gaza-conflict/.

level, EUPOL Copps is at greater risk of becoming a prestige project with dubious added value in terms of security policy. It all depends on which police forces can be trained locally and whether the EU can influence developments via the Board of Peace.

The handling of the EU-Israel Association Agreement, which has governed relations between the Middle Eastern country and Europe since 2000, will remain an extremely contentious issue within the EU for the time being. According to an announcement by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in mid-September, the agreement was to be partially suspended. After successful conclusion of the ceasefire, however, the Council no longer had the required majority of Member States that had previously existed. Nevertheless, the Commission, which wanted to take a tougher line on Israeli policy towards Gaza, did manage to partially suspend Israel's participation in Horizon Europe. This was because Horizon Europe falls within the Commission's sphere of competence, whereas a Council decision is required for a partial suspension of the Association Agreement. The EU's policy towards Israel is thus based more on institutional logic ("what works") than on what makes sense: exchanges between European and Israeli scientists are not really the area to prioritise for suspension in reference to the war in Gaza.

The status of Europe's approach to the Hamas-Israel war is therefore currently unsatisfactory. The lack of influence that characterises European Middle East policy is also noticeable here. The question in the coming years will be how to work strategically towards expanding the sphere of action. Above all, it will be a question of transforming the EU's role, from that of technical service provider for reconstruction missions back into a creative power. With regard to Gaza, the EU should make it a priority to get a seat on the Board of Peace and, in case of doubt, not shy away from linking other activities to this position.

Another important opportunity to expand the EU's influence is offered by foreign trade policy projects, whose chances of being realised have increased again as a result of the end of the conflict. This includes the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor as part of the EU's Global Gateway Initiative.

3 EU Middle East Strategy: Requirements for a modern policy towards the region

The EU's Middle East policy is faced with a paradox. Whilst the Union's influence in the Middle East has waned, it is becoming increasingly clear that the EU attaches growing importance to the region. This is also reflected on an institutional level. On 1 February 2025, the new Directorate-General for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region began work under the leadership of Stefano Sannino. The Directorate-General reports to EU Commissioner for the Mediterranean Dubravka Šuica. The creation of this position in the Commission at the start of the new term of office on 1 December 2024 was partly justified by the intention to pay greater attention to the Middle East.[7] The number of EU summits with the region's political leaders has also increased significantly in recent years. Thus, on 22 October 2025, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Commissioner Šuica welcomed the President of Egypt, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, along with the Foreign Minister and the Investment and Trade

[7] Emanuele Errichiello, 'What the EU's new Commissioner for the Mediterranean means for the region', 07 January 2025, LSE Blogs; https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2025/01/07/what-the-eus-new-commissioner-for-the-mediterranean-means-for-the-region/.

Minister, Badr Abdelatty and Hassan el Khatib, to Brussels.[8] Most notably, ever closer cooperation is being pursued with the Gulf Cooperation Council (see below). It is therefore logical that the EU has announced the development of a Middle East strategy for 2026, which will build on the Gulf strategy published in 2022.[9]

A large part of the EU's Middle Eastern initiatives are related to foreign trade. Many of these projects come together under the umbrella of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor. This initiative was signed in September 2023 on the fringe of the G20 summit in New Delhi. In addition to India, the United States, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the European Union and its Member States Germany, France and Italy are among the signatories. In the USA, the Eastern Mediterranean Gateway Act relating to IMEC is currently before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives as a draft bill.[10] Both the EU and the USA see the IMEC corridor as a response to China's Belt and Road Initiative and therefore as a geostrategic project. There is also direct competition with Turkey, which would like to realise its own economic corridor in cooperation with Iraq (see the case of the EuroAsia Interconnector, below). Competition with the so-called North-South Economic Corridor being pursued by Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran is also relevant.

The topic of Middle East policy will also play a prominent role for the Cyprus EU Council Presidency, starting on 1 January 2026, as apparent from the country's work programme, which also makes special mention of the IMEC corridor. This orientation should come as no surprise, as the island state has already utilised its geographical location on the border between Europe and the Middle East for political purposes in the past. The Republic of Cyprus is also a founding member of the EastMed Gas Forum together with Egypt, Greece and Israel and, as a member of this alliance, is pursuing the construction of a hydrogen-capable gas pipeline to Europe as part of the IMEC corridor. The project has gained new momentum this year, and particularly since the end of the Gaza war, .[11]

Cyprus is also pursuing a closer connection to the European mainland in terms of the electricity grid. In October 2022, the EuroAsia Interconnector project was defined as a project of common interest under the then EU Energy Commissioner Kadri Simson. Once completed, the project will connect the Cypriot electricity grid with those of Israel and Greece, thus building a bridge between Europe and the Middle East. What is interesting from a regional policy perspective is not least the fact that the realisation of the project could make the EU a relevant player in terms of future economic cooperation projects in the Middle East. One example of a project that is relevant both economically and in terms of stability policy is the so-called Green Blue Deal between Jordan and Israel, which provides for the supply of water from Israel in exchange for Jordanian supplies of solar power. The Hamas-Israel war has for the time being, however, put an abrupt end to the project. Back in November 2023, Jordan made it clear that it would not be pursuing the Green Blue Deal for now due to Israel's conduct in the

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8 European Commission, 'EU and Egypt join forces to accelerate strategic investment, industrial transformation and innovation', 22 October 2025; https://north-africa-middle-east-gulf.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-and-egypt-join-forces-accelerate-strategic-investment-industrial-transformation-and-innovation-2025-10-22_en

9 European Commission, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 'Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: A strategic partnership with the Gulf', 18th May 2022; https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Joint%20Communication%20to%20the%20European%20Parliament%20and%20the%20Council%20-%20A%20Strategic%20Partnership%20with%20the%20Gulf.pdf

10 Lena Argiri, 'Initiative in US Congress seeks to establish EastMed as strategic hub within IMEC framework', 9 May 2025; https://www.ekathimerini.com/politics/foreign-policy/1269270/us-bill-seeks-to-establish-eastmed-as-strategic-hub-within-imec-framework/.

11 Seth Frantzman, 'Israel, Gaza ceasefire opens door for new Cyprus, Greece energy deal - analysis', 9 November 2025; https://www.jpost.com/international/article-873274.

war.[12] Now that the war is over, the aim will be to organise the project in such a way that the Gaza Strip and the West Bank can also benefit from it. This is the only way to persuade the Jordanian side to resume the programme. The EuroAsia Interconnector would make the EU, as an electricity importer, a major player in Middle East politics whose views would gain weight on the ground and could influence this and similar projects. From a geostrategic perspective, the project is therefore in Europe's core interest.

The EuroAsia Interconnector also opens up new opportunities in other directions, such as in relation to the north-west of Saudi Arabia, where a large-scale expansion of solar plants is planned around the Neom urban project (in addition to the construction of the world's largest plant for the production of green hydrogen). However, the EuroAsia Interconnector project is currently experiencing considerable delays, not least due to tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean region. An Italian research vessel carrying out exploration work in Greek waters was harassed by Turkish navy vessels in March 2025. The Greek government has therefore frozen funds for the infrastructure project for the time being.[13] Further developments will also depend on the extent to which the EU will be able to find a modus vivendi with Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Its sister project, EuroAfrica Interconnector, which is to connect Egypt, Cyprus and Greece by way of a submarine power cable, was initiated a few years earlier. Even though the actual implementation has already been delayed by several years, the signing of an agreement between Greece and Egypt in September 2025 was a significant step towards carrying out the necessary feasibility studies.[14] The connection to Egypt is also attractive from an EU perspective. In addition to the economic and energy policy benefits, it would also establish the EU as a relevant player in North Africa.

This will provide concrete opportunities for closer cooperation with the Middle East. However, implementation will also require the necessary political will in the coming years. In the course of its increased focus on the Middle East, the EU should take care to precisely define Europe's common interests in its Middle East strategy, announced for the coming year, so that it can represent these interests more effectively both within and vis-à-vis the region.[15] Most notably, it will be important to harmonise security policy and economic policy interests. This will also involve incorporating the different perspectives of the Member States. The economic policy interests of states such as Italy and France in the Middle East must be reconciled with the policy interests, primarily security-related, of the Eastern and Central European states (such as working towards curbing Russian-Iranian cooperation).

4 The EU and the Gulf Cooperation Council: A new alliance?

For some years now, cooperation with the Gulf region has been a central pillar of EU foreign policy. Geopolitically and economically, this approach also seems to make sense, as the Gulf monarchies are

[12] Peter Schwartzstein, 'The Rise, Fall, and Possible Rise Again of the Middle East's Most Ambitious Environment Scheme', 01 November 2024; https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/rise-fall-and-possible-rise-again-middle-easts-most-ambitious-environment-scheme

[13] Chrysa Liangou, Vassilis Nedos, 'Greece-Cyprus energy link put on ice', 7 March 2025; https://www.ekathimerini.com/economy/energy/1263430/greece-cyprus-energy-link-put-on-ice/.

[14] Ahram Online, 'Egypt, Greece agree to study Europe power link project', 29 September 2025; https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/554020.aspx?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

[15] For an initial overview, see Ursula von der Leyen, 'Mission Letter', 1 December 2024; https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/1600f2ce-6c02-4d68-a0f2-d72e5d9f700d_en?filename=mission-letter-suica.pdf

an anchor of stability within the region. On 16 October 2024, the EU and the Gulf Cooperation Council met for the first time in Brussels for a summit at the heads of state and government level. A year later, the foreign ministers of the EU Member States met their counterparts in Kuwait. The next meeting at the heads of state and government level is planned for 2026 in Saudi Arabia. In 2024, former Italian Foreign Minister Luigi di Maio took up the position of EU Special Representative to the Gulf Cooperation Council. The EU Member States, first and foremost France and Italy, are also pushing this new policy. Thus, in December 2024, the French Republic concluded a strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia.[16] The volume of trade between the EU and the Gulf Cooperation Council has increased significantly in recent years; in 2023, it totalled more than € 170 billion.[17]

At the same time, a rapprochement with the Gulf states is also evident at a political and strategic level. Following the meeting of foreign ministers in Kuwait in September 2025, the European side acknowledged for the second time, in the communiqué, the United Arab Emirates' claim to Abu Musa and the Tunb Islands - in addition to criticising Iran's nuclear weapons, missile and drone programme. The small islands are strategically located in the Persian Gulf and have been controlled by Iran since 1971. Thus, in the days that followed, Tehran voiced strong criticism of the EU.[18] The summit in October 2024 was the first time that the EU had adopted this position. The Member States had also previously always been cautious about this issue.

With a view to further development of the EU's Gulf strategy, care should be taken to further clarify the common goals and interests of the Gulf Cooperation Council and the EU as well as the EU's position vis-à-vis the Gulf region. Realisation of the IMEC corridor, and free trade negotiations with the UAE and the Gulf Cooperation Council as a whole, play an important role here. The issue of non-proliferation remains no less relevant. In view of the threat of a regional arms race in the event of Iranian nuclear armament, the urgency of the matter is obvious. The issue of maritime security in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea should also bring the Gulf Cooperation Council and the EU together. In the medium term, the EU should press for the Gulf states to participate in the monitoring of the Red Sea (or contribute to the costs).

In view of the Russian-Ukrainian war and the crisis in European industry, the issue of energy security is of central importance to the EU. From a strategic perspective, it is important to work towards maximising the distance between OPEC and Russia in the OPEC+ format. Europe's goal here, in order to lower world market prices for oil and energy in general, must be to dissuade OPEC from pursuing a restrictive production policy. For the EU, there are two key strategic elements at stake here: lowering energy prices with the aim of promoting the competitiveness of European industry and reducing Russian sources of income for the war in Ukraine.

However, the Gulf region will have to be offered something in return. The intensified further development of the IMEC project should be a central component of this strategy. Ultimately, however, there will also have to be a security policy component. The Israeli air strike against Hamas in Qatar has fuelled considerable doubts about the reliability of American security guarantees to the Gulf states.

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[16] Élysée, 'Draft Joint Statement at the conclusion of the State visit of His Excellency the President of the French Republic, Emmanuel Macron, to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia'; https://www.elysee.fr/admin/upload/default/0001/17/9769221135ec68bc7b314ea0d3e3a41ab3c17c94.pdf

[17] Council of the European Union, 'EU trade relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council'; https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/eu-gcc-trade/?.

[18] Iran International, 'Iran summons European envoys over EU-GCC statement on islands, missiles', 8 October 2025; https://www.iranintl.com/en/202510081617

Saudi Arabia responded with a significant readjustment of its alliance policy and subsequently signed a comprehensive defence agreement with Pakistan, a nuclear weapons state.[19] If the EU wants to become a fully-fledged player in Middle East policy, it must also find its role in relation to such issues and answer the question of what it can offer in the course of closer cooperation with the Gulf.

However, the European approach already indicates the desire for a foreign policy that has understood the realities of the Trump era. Economic and security policy are increasingly being considered in tandem, even if their practical implementation has not yet been fully developed. It remains to be seen whether the EU's Middle East policy is capable not only of uniting these two policy areas on a conceptual level, but also of combining them into political reality. Finding a new internal European consensus on Middle East policy will be crucial. It must then be used to turn the ceasefire in the war between Hamas and Israel into an opportunity for a fresh start in the region.

[19] Naade Ali, Marvin G. Weinbaum, ' Pakistan's strategic defence pact with Saudi Arabia: A new security architecture in the wider Middle East', 8 October 2025; https://www.mei.edu/publications/pakistans-strategic-defense-pact-saudi-arabia-new-security-architecture-wider-middle.

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