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# Nuclear Proliferation and EU-GCC Relations

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Nuclear proliferation remains one of the key issues of the contemporary global security agenda. The diplomatic crisis in the Korean peninsula is only the latest, powerful reminder of the potential of crisis and instability associated with the presence of nuclear weapons in the strategic equation of international and regional politics.

Nuclear proliferation is also one of the major issues of the current strategic configuration of the Middle East. Here, nuclear proliferation is notably worrisome for two reasons: firstly, because of the degree of potential crisis in a structurally unstable region; secondly, the presence of a particularly evident strategic interdependence and political competition, existing above all between those countries belonging to the geopolitical Islamic space, which makes the risk of miscalculations higher than elsewhere. As such, the Waltz equation<sup>1</sup> is likely inconsistent if applied to the Middle East. Thus, the nuclear issue remains central to the strategic calculations of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the European Union (EU).

1. Kenneth Waltz argued that the gradual spread of nuclear weapons was better than no spread and better than rapid spread given their power of deterrence. See K. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, Adelphi Papers, Number 171, 1981). Later, Waltz debated this with Scott Sagan, who had a different approach since, for him, the behavior of new proliferators depended on the features of their military organization. S. Sagan and K. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002).

This paper will explore briefly the state of relations between the GCC and the EU, the state of nuclear proliferation in the region, and the approaches of the EU and the GCC concerning this specific topic. The conclusions will outline some policy options and proposals on how the EU and GCC may foster a more meaningful and effective relationship concerning nuclear non-proliferation.

## EU-GCC Relations: An Overview

The revolutionary events of the Arab Spring have somehow narrowed the relational gap, at least in tactical terms, existing between the EU and the GCC.<sup>2</sup> They helped in boosting cooperation on some specific issues. However, political relations between the EU and the GCC<sup>3</sup> continue to lack coherence and depth. The description of the EU approach to the GCC countries provided by Geoffrey Edwards and Abdullah Babood still remains valid:

“The continued ambivalence of the Member States about deepening EU-Gulf relations is all the more remarkable given both the EU’s continued dependence on the region for its energy and the heightened tensions in the Gulf in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq and the assertiveness of Iran. The contrasts and the inconsistencies in EU policies are highlighted even further by the policies introduced over the past five years, including those designed, as Romano Prodi described it, to establish a ‘ring of friends’ around the Union through its Neighbourhood Policy - a ring from which the Gulf states were excluded.”<sup>4</sup>

2. That was evident in the managing of revolutions in the Maghreb and the Mashreq, while long-term divergences remain strong concerning the internal developments of Gulf countries. See “Toward a Strategic Partnership? The EU and the GCC in a Revolutionary Middle East,” Event Briefing, Brookings Doha Center and FRIDE, 2013. On the role and interests of the GCC in the Arab Spring, see *The GCC in the Mediterranean in Light of the Arab Spring* (Brussels: Mediterranean Paper Series, GMF-IAI, 2012).
3. For a general overview of these relations, see A. Echague, “The European Union and the Gulf Council,” FRIDE, Working Paper 39, May 2007; H. Fürtig, “GCC-EU Political Cooperation: Myth or Reality?” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 31, no. 1 (2004): 25-39; G. Nonneman, “EU-GCC Relations: Dynamics, Perspectives, and the Issue of Political Reform,” *Journal of Social Affairs* 23, no. 92 (2006):13-33; S. Hertog, *EU-GCC Relations in the Era of the Second Oil Boom* (Munich, CAP, 2007); C. Koch, *EU-GCC Relations and Security Issues: Broadening the Horizon* (Dubai: Gulf Research Center, 2008); G. Luciani, “EU-GCC Economic Relations in the Global Context,” in *Bound to Cooperate - Europe and the Middle East II*, eds. C. Hanelt and A. Moller (Gütersloh: Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008), 114-130; R. Youngs, *Impasse in Euro-Gulf Relations*, FRIDE, Working Paper 80 (2009); R. Youngs & A. Echague, “Europe and the Gulf Strategic Neglect,” *Studia Diplomatica* LX, no. 1 (2007), 29-41; N. Saleh, “The European Union and the Gulf States: A Growing Partnership,” *Middle East Policy Journal* VII, no. 1 (1999): 50-71.
4. G. Edwards and A. Babood, “Reinforcing Ambivalence, The Interaction of Gulf States and the

The EU remains particularly dependent on the countries of the Gulf, primarily concerning the issue of energy supplies. While this dependence is now less pronounced than it was during the '70s, these countries continue to represent a major source for EU energy supplies. Safe and steady access to relatively cheap energy supplies represents a strategic aim for the EU. In this sense, the Gulf region represents a major European interest. On the other hand, the Gulf countries are primarily interested in getting access to EU technology and manufactures. Moreover, they are increasingly interested in investing in different economic sectors in the EU.

The relationship between the EU and the GCC remains largely based on economic and trade relations. Strategic and political links remain under-developed. The two sides signed a cooperation agreement in 1988, effective from 1990. Since then, the two actors have tried to conclude a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) as well. However, the negotiation on this remains deadlocked. The EU aimed at introducing a human rights clause in the FTA. The Gulf countries believed that this was inconsistent with the rationale of the FTA.<sup>5</sup> In the Gulf region, the EU is still largely seen only as an economic partner. It is not considered an actor able to play a significant role on more strategic and political issues. In this context, the perception that the US remains the only external credible security provider in the area remains strong.<sup>6</sup> This further undermines the capabilities of the EU to play a more assertive role on critical regional issues. Nuclear proliferation is, of course, at the top of the strategic and security agenda of the region.

## Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East

Nuclear proliferation is among the most worrisome developments for the strategic configuration of the wider Middle East.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, the spread of nuclear weapons in the region will directly affect both the EU and the GCC. The EU is concerned principally due to geographical proximity and the possible consequences in terms of environmental and soft security issues. The risk of a direct military attack is not the

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European Union," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 12, no. 4 (2007): 537.

5. Edwards and Babood, "Reinforcing Ambivalence," 542.

6. This despite the fact that there is no formal treaty-based security guarantee given to US allies in the area. The existence of such a guarantee stems essentially from a range of unilateral American statements, bilateral security agreements, and the presence of US military forces in the region. B. Tertrais, "Security Guarantees and Extended Deterrence in the Gulf Region: A European Perspective," *Strategic Insights* VIII, no. 5 (2005).

7. Here only a brief overview of the state of nuclear proliferation in the region is provided. For a major, recent updated overview, see G. Bahgat, *Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2008).

major threat for the EU. It is highly unrealistic that regional countries may carry out a nuclear attack against the EU.

The conventional military dynamic should be analysed more on a South-South than a South-North axis. The true risks for the EU are different. They are mainly related to the probable consequences of eventual attacks in the Middle East such as an increasing flow of migrants; the risk of energy supply disruptions; the harm to EU economic interests within the region; and the imaginable environmental consequences of a nuclear attack. For the GCC countries, instead, the risk of being directly targeted by a nuclear attack is much higher. Although not likely, the possibility that, in a remote future, these countries could face the direct threat of a nuclear-armed attack remains on the table. Therefore, the concern over the nuclear race in the region is at the top of the GCC agenda.

In the Middle East, there are no declared nuclear powers. Unofficially, instead, there is one country considered to have a nuclear military capacity. It is widely held, in the academic as well as policy community, that Israel has a nuclear capacity. It launched its nuclear program shortly after its creation in 1948. However, Israeli authorities have never admitted the presence of this nuclear capacity. This opacity represents a key feature of its policy and has a double aim: avoiding the accusation of being the first official proliferating actor in the region, and increasing at the same time its deterrence capability through uncertainty. The presence of an Israeli nuclear arsenal represents a major source of concern for many regional states. In 1974, Iran under the Shah, jointly with Egypt, proposed the establishment of a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East to the UN General Assembly.

Concern about the risk of indiscriminate proliferation increased in the region following allegations of the development of a clandestine Iranian nuclear program in 2002 and 2003. Iran has been active in the field of nuclear research since the late '50s.<sup>8</sup> In the '70s, the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran was established, despite the country already being a signatory of the NPT. In those years, Western countries were very active in providing Iran with technological support for its ambitions.<sup>9</sup> However, following the revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Republic dismantled this program. He believed that the development of nuclear weapons was contrary to religious ethics and jurisprudence. During the '80s, some small-scale research into nuclear weapons restarted in the wake of the Iran-Iraq war.

8. An updated although brief history of Iranian nuclear proliferation efforts can be found in A. Vaez and K. Sadjadpour, *Iran's Nuclear Odyssey* (Washington D.C: Policy Paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace/Federation of American Scientists, 2013).

9. C. Quille, "Iranian Nuclear Weapons Policy: Past, Present and Possible Future," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 6, no.2 (2002): 17.

However, following the death of Khomeini in 1989 and the beginning of the Iranian Second Republic,<sup>10</sup> the Iranian atomic program gained some new momentum. In 2003, the IAEA claimed that it found evidence that Iran had started working on a clandestine nuclear program, triggering a reaction in the international community. However, during that period some other regional countries, such as Libya, officially gave up their nuclear weapons program.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, in the first ten years of this century, the nuclear scenario in the region was mixed. Some countries demonstrated interest in pursuing a civil nuclear capacity, in line with the nuclear renaissance that the world was witnessing. On the contrary, some others, in the past accused of moving toward an atomic military program, decided to give up their programs.

In 2011, two big events partially halted this renaissance, especially in the Middle East. Firstly, the Arab Spring revolutions affected some countries having civilian nuclear ambitions, such as Egypt. Second, the fallout of the Japanese earthquake showed the existence of major structural risks associated with the presence of atomic facilities in regions with high seismic risk. In a way, this concern exists also in the Middle East. The GCC's call for an inspection of the nuclear plant of Bushehr after the earthquake in southern Iran in April 2013 is a good example of such concern.<sup>12</sup>

## EU and GCC Approaches to Proliferation

### *The EU: Threat Perception*

As noted previously, the EU is not immediately militarily threatened by nuclear proliferation activities. Even so, it perceives the Iranian stance on this issue as dangerous to the stability of the global non-proliferation architecture. Moreover, the EU sees the Iranian stance as a direct threat to its stability because nuclear-armed Iran will likely trigger a chain reaction in terms of nuclear proliferation in its immediate neighborhood, specifically in its southern Mediterranean periphery. That explains why the EU, through UK, France and Germany, has been so active in the past ten years trying to negotiate a comprehensive agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue via the 5 plus 1 negotiations.

10. A. Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic* (London, Routledge, 2002).

11. J. Hart and S. Kile, "Libya's Renunciation of Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Weapons and Ballistic Missiles," *SIPRI Yearbook* (Stockholm, SIPRI, 2005), <http://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2005/files/SIPRIYB0514.pdf>.

12. "GCC Calls for Iran Nuclear Plant Inspection," *Al Jazeera*, April 14, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/04/201341415034914835.html>.

### *The EU Approach*

The nuclear issue has been at the core of European concerns since the beginning of the communitarian experience. The treaties of Rome of 1957<sup>13</sup> established the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM).<sup>14</sup> It had competencies over the nonmilitary nuclear programs of the member states. However, for a rather long time, the civilian sphere of nuclear developments remained the only domain in which the EC had a role. WMD proliferation remained outside the communitarian domain due to the political sensitiveness of the issue. A first shift occurred in the '80s. In 1981, the EC decided to create a Working Group on nuclear questions in the broader context of the European Political Cooperation (EPC).<sup>15</sup> Differently, from EURATOM, it finally addressed the question from an external point of view, ending decades of ostracism against this issue.<sup>16</sup> Its declared aim was to stop the intra-European disputes over the proliferation of nuclear weapons. It brought about a transfer of competency on the issue from the EC to the EPC. Nevertheless, the degree of cooperation between the member states remained weak. During the '90s, however, a deeper degree of cooperation was achieved, even though it was ineffective in getting any valuable outcome.

The end of the Cold War represented a major turning point in the field of non-proliferation policies. It primarily meant the end of the hegemony in this area of the two Cold War superpowers, the US and the USSR. The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)<sup>17</sup> is the best example of this shared hegemonic attitude. It was indeed promoted by their common interest in crystallizing the balance characterizing the global situation on nuclear weapons, a joint effort to legalize the unbalanced status quo between nuclear and non-nuclear powers. As of now, the NPT still represents the main pillar of the international non-proliferation structure. During the '90s, another

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13. EEC Treaty/Treaty of Rome: Treaty Establishing the European Economic Community, March 25, 1957.

14. EAEC Treaty/EURATOM Treaty: Treaty Establishing the European Atomic Energy Community, March 25, 1957.

15. European Political Cooperation was the major pre-EU framework for foreign policy coordination forum. The key foundational documents were: European Community, The Hague Summit Declaration. Communiqué of the Conference of the Heads of State and Government of the Member States of the European Community, The Hague, 2 December 1969; European Community, The Davignon or Luxembourg Report, First Report of the Foreign Ministers to the Heads of State and Government of the Member States of the European Community, Luxembourg, October 27, 1970.

16. C. Portela, *The Role of the EU in the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons: The Way to Thessaloniki and Beyond* (Frankfurt: PRIF Report no.65 2003), 2.

17. Treaty on the non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.: <http://www.un.org/disarmament/WMD/Nuclear/NPTtext.shtml>



important event related to the non-proliferation field occurred. The late accession of France to the NPT removed the last political obstacle to the establishment of a more active and complete European non-proliferation policy.<sup>18</sup> Finally, the Gulf War of 1991 and the subsequent allegations about Iraq's nuclear programs represented another element, leading the EU to produce a more effective non-proliferation policy.

However, it was only in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks that a more coherent and resolute EU non-proliferation policy emerged. These attacks highlighted the degree of vulnerability of the sole superpower left in the unipolar international system.<sup>19</sup> In the aftermath of this attack, the perspective that terrorist networks could try to obtain dirty bombs to carry out mass attacks using WMD became a major issue of concern.<sup>20</sup> That fear was strengthened also by allegations emerging on the efforts of Al-Qaeda to obtain a nuclear capacity.<sup>21</sup> Thus, in 2003, the Europeans opted to build a stronger, more coherent strategy in this field. There were two main documents representing the backbone of this brand-new EU approach toward the proliferation of WMD: the European Security Strategy document<sup>22</sup> and the EU Strategy against Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction adopted by the Council on December 9, 2003 at Thessaloniki, in Greece.<sup>23</sup> The first document stated that: "Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is potentially the greatest threat to our security."<sup>24</sup> There was also the awareness that the primary region of concern for the EU should be the Middle East: "The international treaty regimes and export control arrangements have slowed the spread of WMD and delivery systems. We are now, however, entering a new and dangerous period that raises the possibility of a WMD arms race, especially in the Middle East."<sup>25</sup>

The response of the EU to the problem of non-proliferation has been defined as "effective multilateralism" ("multilateralist approach to security, including disarmament and non-proliferation, provides the best way to maintain international

18. C. Grand, *The European Union and the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons* (Paris, European Institute for Security Studies Chaillot Paper 37, 2000), 11.

19. C. Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70, no.1 (1991): 23-33.

20. A. Schaper, "Nuclear Terrorism: Risk Analysis after 11 September 2001," *Disarmament Forum - Nuclear Terrorism*, Nr. 2./2003, 7-16.

21. B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 272-276.

22. European Union, *A Secure Europe in A Better World: European Security Strategy*, Brussels, December 12, 2003, <http://consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf>.

23. The Council of the European Union, *Fight against the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction - EU Strategy against Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction*, 15708/03, Brussels, December 10, 2003, <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/03/st15/st15708.en03.pdf>.

24. *A Secure Europe in A Better World*, 3.

25. *Ibid.*

order”<sup>26</sup>). It is a combination of diplomatic pressure, coercive measures, and lots of carrots, like offers of security guarantees and free nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.<sup>27</sup> The EU has been a strong supporter of the traditional approach in order to deal with the proliferation threat, centred on the multilateral arms control regime.<sup>28</sup>

The main features of the EU approach have been: universalizing disarmament and non-proliferation agreements; improving the effectiveness of the mechanisms of inspection and verification; reinforcing the policies of export control and trying to expand the cooperative threat reduction and assistance programs. In this context, international law plays a fundamental role.<sup>29</sup> The EU focused its efforts mainly on strengthening the existing multilateral non-proliferation regimes. As stated by the EU Strategy against Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction:

“The Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) must be preserved in its integrity.”<sup>30</sup>

A major new element, at least from a rhetorical point of view, has been the statement that:

“Political and diplomatic preventative measures (multilateral treaties and export control regimes) and resort to the competent international organisations form the first line of defence against proliferation. When these measures (including political dialogue and diplomatic pressure) have failed, coercive measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and international law (sanctions, selective or global, interceptions of shipments and, as appropriate, the use of force) could be envisioned. The UN Security Council should play a central role.”<sup>31</sup>

Although the centrality of international law remained essential, stressing that point may suggest that the EU would be ready to resort to force against those states not complying with international rules on non-proliferation. This claim, however, must be set in the right conceptual context. The EU lacks an effective military instrument, despite its increasing militarization. Therefore, this claim is essentially rhetoric and may hardly become operational unless a single member state should act on behalf – or instead – of the EU. In the narrower Mediterranean region, the EU explicitly affirmed that it was widely concerned about the risks of proliferation in the

26. Fight against the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, 5.

27. T. Valasek, “The European Union’s Role in Non-proliferation” in *U.S.-European Nonproliferation Perspectives, A Transatlantic Conversation* (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009), 44.

28. A. Cottey, *Security in the New Europe* (Palgrave, Houndmills, 2007), 155.

29. Portela, *The Role of the EU in the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, 24.

30. *Ibid.*, 5-7.

31. Fight against the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, p. 5, Art. 15.

Mediterranean. The Barcelona Declaration addressed the issue in a specific point:

“...promote regional security by acting, inter alia, in favour of nuclear, chemical and biological non-proliferation through adherence to and compliance with a combination of international and regional non-proliferation regimes, and arms control and disarmament agreements such as NPT, CWC, BWC, CTBT and/or regional arrangements such as weapons free zones including their verification regimes, as well as by fulfilling in good faith their commitments under arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation conventions.”<sup>32</sup>

However, once again it appeared to be merely rhetoric since the issue of non-proliferation was largely absent in the later documents dealing with the region. The European Neighborhood Policy<sup>33</sup> originally did not mention the question of WMD proliferation. It was included only later in the ENP agenda.<sup>34</sup> The European Strategic Partnership document, adopted on June 18, 2004, specifically addressed the question of WMD in the region.<sup>35</sup> In the following years, the EU increased its involvement in non-proliferation issues exemplified in the role played by the UK, France and Germany, on the Iranian nuclear issue.

As noted earlier, starting from 2003, there was enough evidence that Tehran was working on a secret atomic program. Therefore, European countries progressively focused their attention on the Iranian nuclear issue. Indeed, since 2005, concerns about the Iranian nuclear program have dominated EU-Iran relations.<sup>36</sup> The EU adopted a so-called “dual track” approach on the issue. It envisaged a mixture of diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions.<sup>37</sup>

32. The Barcelona Declaration, [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2005/july/tradoc\\_124236.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2005/july/tradoc_124236.pdf).

33. The two key documents of the ENP are: European Union, *Wider Europe-Neighbourhood: A New Framework For Relations With Our Eastern And Southern Neighbours Of 2003*. Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, *Wider Europe-Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with Our Eastern and Southern Neighbours*, Brussels, 11 March 2003 Com(2003) 104; European Union, *ENP Strategy Paper*, Communication from the Commission. *European Neighbourhood Policy. Strategy Paper*, 564, Brussels, May 12, 2004, Com(2004) 373.

34. B. Kienzle, *The EU as a Security Provider in its Neighbourhood: the Case of Non proliferation of WMD in the Mediterranean Area* (Barcelona: Working Paper of the Observatory of European Foreign Policy, Institut Universitari d'Estudis Europeus, no. 71, 2006), 10-11.

35. K. Pieters, “The Mediterranean Countries” in *The European Union and Its Neighbours: A Legal Appraisal of the EU's Policies of Stabilisation, Partnership and Integration*, eds. A. Lazowski and S. Blockmans (The Hague: T-M-C- Asser Press, 2006), 403.

36. European Union, *Factsheet: The European Union and Iran*, Brussels, June 6, 2013, [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/129724.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/129724.pdf).

37. For an overview on that, see O. Meier, “European Efforts To Solve The Conflict over Iran's Nuclear Programme: How Has The European Union Performed?” *Non-Proliferation Papers*, EU Non-Proliferation Consortium, no. 27/2013, <http://www.nonproliferation.eu/documents/non->

More recently, the EU has adopted some new measures concerning non-conventional weapons proliferation. In December 2006, the Council endorsed a concept paper outlining how to monitor and further enhance, through a WMD Monitoring Center,<sup>38</sup> the consistency of the EU WMD strategy implementation. Moreover, following the institutional innovation introduced by the Lisbon Treaty,<sup>39</sup> the consistency and coherence of the EU action in the WMD field has to be guaranteed by the European External Action Service (EEAS).<sup>40</sup> A major innovation was introduced in 2010, with the creation of a consortium of leading non-proliferation think-tanks, whose aim is to provide academic guidance and advice to the EEAS.<sup>41</sup> In 2010, there was also the review of the NPT.<sup>42</sup> The EU's foreign policy high representative Lady Catherine Ashton stressed the need to: "...continue to support the decisions and the implementation of the resolution on the Middle East adopted at the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference as well as the Final Document of the 2000 NPT Review Conference," bearing in mind the current situation.<sup>43</sup>

Ms. Ashton also outlined the new priorities of the EU concerning non-proliferation and the NPT.<sup>44</sup> Concerning the Middle East, the EU reaffirmed its commitment to achieving a regional WMD-free zone. In the eyes of the EU, this solution may offer a potential, although weak and fragile, framework to de-escalate the tension regarding Iran's and Israel's nuclear programs. This will remain a major cornerstone of the EU's approach on the issue.

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proliferationpapers/olivermeier51191b5bdb350.pdf.

38. The Council of the European Union, EU Strategy against the Proliferation of WMD: Monitoring and Enhancing Consistent Implementation, 16694/06 Brussels, December 12, 2006. Available at: <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/06/st16/st16694.en06.pdf>.
39. For an overview, see Diamond Ashiagbor, Nicola Countouris, Ioannis Lianos, *The European Union after the Treaty of Lisbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press University, 2012).
40. On the post-Lisbon foreign policy institution, see N. Verola, "The New EU Foreign Policy under the Treaty of Lisbon," in *The Foreign Policy of the European Union. Assessing Europe's Role in the World*, ed. Federica Bindi (Washington, The Brookings Institution, 2010).
41. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do>.
42. United Nations, The 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), New York, May 3-28, 2010. See: <http://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2010/>
43. Catherine Ashton, Speech at the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, New York, May 3, 2010, available at: [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/114169.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/114169.pdf).
44. The Council of the European Union, Council Decision 2010/212/CFSP relating to the position of the European Union for the 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, March 29, 2010, available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2010:090:0008:0014:EN:PDF>.

## The GCC

## GRC PAPER

### *Threat Perception*

Since the degree of its integration process is not as deep as that of the EU, defining a clearly unitary approach concerning nuclear weapons is a much harder task for the GCC. More than a common policy, it is only possible to outline a collective feeling of GCC countries concerning nuclear proliferation. Despite significant differences in geopolitical size and foreign policies, the threat perception among member states is largely similar. The GCC perceives the existence of a double nuclear proliferation threat in the Middle East, one coming from Israel and one from Iran. However, the latter has a major impact on the GCC, because of geographical proximity, historical reasons, and identity-centred rivalries.

Regarding Israel, the GCC countries have always been concerned about its unofficial nuclear program. As stated earlier, although unofficially, Israel is the only nuclear power in the Middle East and it has shown greater resilience, refusing to place its nuclear facilities under IAEA supervision and join the NPT. This stance raised issues among the GCC countries, with Qatar's permanent representative to the UN, at the 2007 General Debate of the First Committee of the General Assembly on Disarmament and International Security, stressing the failure of the political will preventing the NPT from raising its standard and advancing the disarmament and non-proliferation agenda.<sup>45</sup> Recently, the GCC countries once again raised the issue of Israel's clandestine program, pointing to the existence of double standards when dealing with the nuclear issue: the international community wants to punish Iran for exercising its treaty rights to enrich uranium whereas Israel, the only nuclear power in the Middle East, continues to be shielded.<sup>46</sup>

However, while the diplomatic rhetoric on Iran can be rather soft sometimes, the GCC countries, for geographical and historical reasons, still perceive the possibility of a nuclear Iran as a vital threat to their security. On a more general and political-ontological basis, Iran can be considered a fundamental factor in explaining why the GCC was created. Indeed, the process of integration in the Arab Gulf region was a political response to the Iranian revolution of 1979. The GCC framework offered the benefits of the politics of scale<sup>47</sup> to the countries of the organization. Saudi Arabia

45. N. Stracke, "Nuclear Non-Proliferation from a Gulf Perspective," FES Briefing Paper 3, April 2008, 6.

46. Penketh, "With Much at Stake, GCC Wants to Participate in Iran Negotiations," *Al Monitor* April 3, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/contents/articles/opinion/2012/anne-penketh/with-much-at-stake-gcc-wants-to.html>.

47. Abdullah Babood, "Dynamics and Determinants of the GCC States' Foreign Policy, with Special Reference to the EU," in *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe*,

aside, none of the GCC countries has the geopolitical size to face a specific military threat on their own or to play a more assertive and independent role in international affairs, although the impressive rise of Qatar as a major foreign actor,<sup>48</sup> signalled by its role in the events of the Arab Spring,<sup>49</sup> has shown that other assets may partially offset a limited geopolitical size.

Moreover, the powerful rise of Iran as a major regional power could have direct effects on the international stances of these countries as well as their internal stability. First of all, geographical proximity could represent either an opportunity or, at the same time, a threat. Thus, the classic approach concerning the eventual change in the regional strategic balance that an Iranian nuclear development may entail is still a major factor in the strategic calculations of the GCC countries. Moreover, there are also other factors shaping the risk perception of the countries of the GCC. For instance, a nuclear Iran will likely feel more self-confident, pushing Tehran to play a more resolute and pro-active role in the region. This may spark a rising irredentism among the Shia minorities in the Gulf countries which is perceived as a major risk by the Gulf States. Furthermore, this would also change the balance in the ontological geopolitical struggle for identity primacy in the Islamic space, between Iran and Saudi Arabia: that makes such a point fundamental for the interests of the GCC countries. Such a concern can be considered ontological in the context of the perception of the Arab rim of the Gulf towards its Persian neighbor.

The geo-strategic position of Iran puts it at the core of the broader dynamics of the Islamic world. Iran is a “*pays chernière*”,<sup>50</sup> a pivotal country in the area. It is at the intersection of different “identity worlds”, such as the Arab, Turkish, Indian and Russian worlds; of different spaces – Middle East, Central Asia, South Caucasus, Indian sub-continent, the area of the Gulf; and of three seas – the Caspian sea, the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman.<sup>51</sup> Anyway, in spite of its geographical centrality, Iran has built, through the centuries, a different identity which is really strong. It is Persian and Shia. Such self-perception of otherness puts the country at odds with many of its regional neighbors, above all with the Arab ones because of the memories of invasion and domination.

The specific historical circumstances of the present makes the powerful rise of Iran an issue of even more concern for the GCC countries. Iran has been the first, and

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ed. Gerd Nonneman (London/New York: Routledge, 2005).

48. M. Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

49. G. Steinberg, “Qatar and the Arab Spring, Support for Islamists and New Anti-Syrian Policy,” SWP Comments, 07, 2012, [http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2012C07\\_sbg.pdf](http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2012C07_sbg.pdf).

50. M.R. Djilili, *Géopolitique de l'Iran* (Paris, Editions Complexe, 2005), 5.

51. Ibid.

at the moment the only country in which a revolutionary movement hegemonised by an Islamic actor and narratives has been able to overthrow a secular regime linked to the West. More recently, and paradoxically, the US, by attacking the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, among the worst enemies of the Islamic Republic, helped Iran to further gain influence. On a domestic level, some of the Gulf countries could face a strong challenge to their stability in case of a rise in Iran's power. Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia all have substantial Shia minorities. On a regional and international level, on the other hand, the rise of Iran could lead some of the small countries of the Gulf to bandwagon, in order to better protect their security interests. This dynamic may have negative effects on the GCC integration process, reducing the level of mutual trust among the members of the organization and increasing the tensions among them. Sacrificing their commitment to the alliance in return for an appeasement with Iran if the risks of confrontation are too strong is a possibility that cannot be excluded.

From a strictly formal point of view, the GCC has never opposed the idea that a member country of the NPT could develop a peaceful nuclear capability.<sup>52</sup> Concern about Iran emerged with the allegations regarding its clandestine program in 2003. The GCC countries supported the creation of a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East. As stated earlier in this paper, originally, this idea was put forward by Iran and Egypt in a UN general assembly resolution in 1974. Later, this proposal represented one of the key points in the agenda of regional negotiations between Israel and the Arab states, but no clear progress has been made on pursuing it. More recently, the GCC countries have used this idea of the WMDFZ, narrowing its geographical scope. In 2005, the GCC announced the intention of the organization to declare the Gulf as a weapons of mass destruction free-zone based on the principle of progress from sub-regional to regional approach. Achieving an idea is that while a Middle East comprehensive security regime appeared to be impossible in one go. Thus, the idea was to establish a step-by-step regional security arrangement within the geopolitical Gulf region, to be extended at a later stage to other Middle Eastern states.<sup>53</sup>

Moreover, narrowing the regional scope of this WMDFZ reflected also the different priorities in the threat perceptions of the GCC countries. If originally the Iran-Egypt proposal was clearly directed at Israel's role in the region, this new, geographically narrower proposal has the clear aim to avoid the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran. Among the nine countries involved in this project of regional stability – the six GCC countries, Iraq, Iran and Yemen – only Iran had, at that

52. Stracke, "Nuclear Non-Proliferation from a Gulf Perspective," 2.

53. *Ibid.*, 4.

time, the capabilities and, likely, the political will to go nuclear. Possible further development of the Iranian nuclear program, as part of a broader framework of the Persian attempt to play a more assertive role within the region, can make the GCC countries change their attitudes towards the development of atomic capabilities. The GCC states do consider a nuclear Iran as a direct threat to their national security and the regional strategic balance. As argued by George Perkovich:

“The GCC move to explore nuclear technology tracks so closely with concerns about Iran’s ambitions that this factor must be central. Indeed, the announcement of this decision was made at the December 2006 GCC summit meeting in which Iran’s nuclear program was mentioned as a threat.”<sup>54</sup>

For the GCC countries, developing nuclear power is also a way to show to Iran, and the broader world, that Arabs also have the prowess and power to acquire nuclear technology.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, there are also economic concerns that provide a reason for these countries to go nuclear. The GCC countries have expressed the need to diversify their economies as well as their energy sources. Going nuclear can help in saving oil for export, thus earning them more revenues.. Therefore, the GCC countries have interests of different kinds, strategic – likely the most important in their calculations – and then also economic, that may make them explore the possibility of going nuclear. Indeed, in the past few years, the decision made by the UAE to develop a nuclear energy capacity is a step toward the nuclearization of the GCC.

The UAE’s \$20 billion worth civil nuclear program is on schedule with the country’s first nuclear reactor slated to start operations in 2017. As matters stand, construction of the UAE’s first nuclear energy reactor continues to progress, with the installation of the Containment Liner Plate (CLP) in the reactor containment building for Barakah Unit 1. The CLP is one of the many defense-in-depth barriers that ensure the safety of nuclear energy plants. The UAE is currently working on plans to have four nuclear power reactors operational in Barakah by 2020 to generate 5.6 GWe of electricity. The first plant has been under construction since July 2012.<sup>56</sup> Saudi Arabia as well is now pursuing plans for building its own nuclear reactors by 2020. This shift to civilian nuclear programs is symptomatic of a more structural shift in the way the GCC and the wider Gulf produces and consumes energy. Rising levels of domestic energy consumption have already made the GCC a regional energy consumer, rendering alternative sources of energy, including nuclear power,

54. G. Perkovich, “Nuclear Developments in the GCC: Risks and Trends,” *Gulf Yearbook* (Dubai: Gulf Research Center, 2008), 233.

55. Ibid.

56. “UAE’s Nuclear Energy Programme on Track,” April 8, 2013, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/general/uae-s-nuclear-energy-programme-on-track-1.1168069>.



an increasingly attractive long-term solution in view of the region's otherwise rapidly rising drag on its own main export products – crude oil and natural gas.<sup>57</sup> However, the fears about the development of nuclear energy that can be also used for military purposes in the future remain a major concern for the GCC countries. That explains also why the GCC wants to get involved in the P5+1 negotiations, as they think it is time for them to play a more assertive role concerning a strategic issue directly related to their geopolitical as well as economic and security interests.<sup>58</sup>

## EU-GCC Relations and Nuclear Proliferation: Some Policy Recommendations

In the specific field of non-proliferation policies, it would be easier for the EU and the GCC to start a more effective relationship based on shared fundamental interests and future policy choices.

### *Shared interests*

- Both actors are concerned about Iran assuming a more assertive regional role, as a consequence of its nuclear program. That does not imply that EU and GCC countries want to deny Iran the possibility of pursuing a civilian nuclear capacity. They simply want assurances that this program will remain limited to the civilian sphere.
- Both actors want to avoid a nuclear race in the region.
- Both actors need to explore new options in terms of energy supplies.
- Both actors have a long-term interest in reducing their dependency on the US on security issues.

These shared interests can represent a robust basis for building a more effective relationship between these two blocs that can push the EU and the GCC to:

- Foster political dialogue on the issue by implementing either an annual or semi-annual forum of dialogue on the specific issue of nuclear weapons and non-proliferation, planning also to create specific permanent or semi-permanent bureaucratic bodies to deal with this issue.
- Work together in specific international fora, presenting joint resolutions concerning nuclear proliferation, nuclear energy and missile proliferation (an

57. Laura El-Katiri, "The GCC and the Nuclear Question," Oxford Energy Commentary, December 2012, <http://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/The-GCC-and-the-Nuclear-Question.pdf>.

58. Al Monitor, "With Much at Stake, GCC Wants to Participate in Iran Negotiations."

aspect that I did not discuss in depth here for reasons of space but whose role in nuclear proliferation is almost as important as the presence of actual nuclear weapons).

- “Destroy the energy alibi”: Nuclear technology is particularly well suited for so-called dual use. As such, the major guarantee against non-proliferation is actually the non-existence of nuclear facilities. While this point may be controversial since, despite the post-Fukushima fears, many countries of the world still use nuclear energy to meet their energy needs; in the long run, the EU and the GCC should support the programs for development of renewable and green energy: they jointly have the technological skill, economic capital, and favorable environmental conditions to increase the share of green energy in their energy consumption. UAE’s progress in this field is a powerful reminder that it is possible. This would also free more resources in the field of oil and gas for export, helping the GCC to maintain healthy current account balances and fiscal positions.
- Promote a comprehensive dialogue with the countries involved in nuclear activities in the Middle East, tackling at the roots the political and strategic considerations pushing these countries to pursue a nuclear capacity.
- Increase the strategic profile of both organizations in order to become a more reliable and consistent partner for the US in tackling these problems on the global stage too.

### About the Author

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