

# THE ROLE OF THE GCC IN THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN COUNTRIES: REACTIVE RESPONSE MORE THAN PROACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

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**Since 2011, the GCC countries have increased their presence in the Southern Mediterranean region.**

Since 2011, much talk has been heard about the impact and alleged leverage of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on developments in the Southern Mediterranean countries. This impact is the direct consequence of the actions undertaken by the GCC in response to the Arab uprisings, which caught the Arab Gulf governments as much by surprise as they did in the case of other international players, such as the European Union (EU). These actions were also accompanied by unprecedented visibility of the GCC as a regional player on the international scene.

The GCC countries have arguably increased their presence, be it material or ideational, in the Southern Mediterranean region, thus also contributing to blurring the artificial division line that the EU had drawn between North Africa and the Middle East, on the one hand, and the Gulf region, on the other. Whether through direct military intervention, economic support or political and religious influence, the GCC countries' increased presence in the post-Arab Spring context has been appreciated by a number of observers, both from the Southern Mediterranean countries and from Europe.

**The type of activism of GCC countries is the activism of the individual governments rather than that of the GCC as an organisation.**

Their actions have been particularly felt in the Middle East, which has historically been more prone as a region to the meddling and interference of external and regional actors. The protracted civil war in Syria, the precarious stability of Lebanon, as well as the crisis in Iraq resulting from the jihadist takeover of a number of key towns are the contexts in which the GCC countries' presence is more prominent and their impact potentially felt the most.

Against this backdrop and in light of the upward trend experienced by the GCC countries in terms of their impact on the Southern Mediterranean vis-à-vis other players, including the EU, in the past three years, a few considerations can be advanced. First, talking about "impact" seems premature when it comes to the GCC's engagement with the Southern Mediterranean countries. While a certain degree of influence and leverage cannot be denied, particularly when they are the result of ambitious and, arguably, unsustainable assistance packages and investments made available to the cash-strapped economies of the Southern Mediterranean, what we are observing today is more the GCC countries' activism in a region in which chaos and the lack of (a new) order still dominate.

Second, the type of activism we have been witnessing on the part of the GCC countries in the past three years has some peculiar features. It is the activism of the individual governments in the region more than that of the GCC as an organisation, which, after some initial attempts to revamp its role in catering for security and mutual cooperation in the Gulf region, has been almost completely sidelined by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, whose competition sometimes bordering open conflict has further diminished its relevance. As already recalled, the GCC countries' activism has manifested itself as a direct response to the Arab uprisings and their potential spread to the Gulf region.

It has indeed been reactive and mainly dictated by the sometimes conflicting domestic agendas of each country. In this respect, it is not so striking that Saudi Arabia and Qatar have welcomed the ascent of the mainstream Islamist movements to power in some Southern Mediterranean countries in a markedly different way, despite sharing concerns about abrupt changes in the regional status quo. Similarly, different domestic considerations have played a role in shaping the stances of Riyadh and Muscat with regard to the Iranian nuclear issue. Finally, the overall response of the GCC countries to the Arab uprisings and the ensuing transitions has been characterised by pragmatism more than any kind of vision for the region, which makes future gains in terms of leverage and impact increasingly difficult to assess.

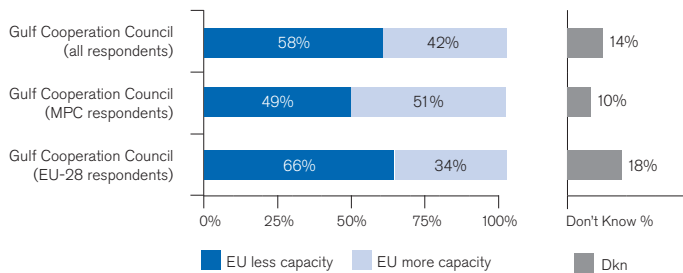
**The overall response of the GCC countries to the Arab uprisings has been reactive, pragmatic and dictated by conflicting domestic agendas of each country.**

What does all this mean for the EU's engagement with the GCC, particularly in the Southern Mediterranean region? The GCC is regarded as having a greater role in the Southern Mediterranean than the EU (see graph 1). This is particularly true in the eyes of European observers, who tend overall to perceive such a role as something unprecedented and potentially detrimental to Europe's influence in its neighbourhood. After a careful assessment of the GCC countries' activism, its motivations and goals, European policy-makers should make an extra effort to engage with their Gulf partners, both at the bilateral and multilateral levels, with a view to channelling such an activism in promoting peace, stability and democracy in their common neighbourhood. By initiating a dialogue on security and prosperity in the Southern Mediterranean and by taking concrete cooperative actions, the EU and the GCC could also work together to unlock the unfulfilled potential of their mutual cooperation.

**European policy-makers should engage with Gulf countries in order to direct their activism towards promotion of peace, stability and democracy in a common neighbourhood.**

**Graph 1: Assessing the EU's future role in MPCs compared to GCC**

(the graph below shows the EU's relative capacity to influence regional developments compared to other actors)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 5th Euromed Survey