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Awakening Inter-regionalism?

The EU and Regional Arab Organizations Post-2011

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**Abstract:**

This article examines the region-to-region cooperation between the European Union on one side and the resurgent Arab regional organizations on the other. It focuses on the EU attempts to enhance cooperation schemes with the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council, aiming primarily at investigating potential opportunities for a resilient and sustainable inter-regional cooperation between Europe and the Arab region on a multilateral institutional level. The article starts with an examination of the EU-LAS rapprochement post-2011, especially in what regards the innovative creation of an EU-funded crisis room in the LAS headquarter. Then, it moves to tackle the EU relationship with the GCC, which, by contrast to the case of the LAS, has been and is still suffering a lingering stagnation. The analysis tackles these attempts of interregional cooperation within the contextual framework of the transformative political and security milieu, which the Arab region has been experiencing ever since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings. It concludes that while the EU-LAS cooperation post-2011 is novel, the apparent continuity in the League's chronic problems poses huge limits on the sustainability of the League's performance as well as on the extent to which the EU and the LAS can pursue concrete cooperation plans. As for the GCC, the accumulated frustration of the poor level of tangible economic cooperation with the EU added to the increasing strategic disconnect between the two sides post-2011 are key factors that continue to undermine meaningful interregional cooperation.

**Keywords:**

European Union, League of Arab States, Gulf Cooperation Council, Arab Uprisings, Regional Arab Organizations, Euro-Arab Relations, EU-GCC Dialogue, Crisis Rooms

**Word count: 8298**

## **Introduction:**

At the core of the debate on the transformative Middle East political and security environment in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings lies a heated discussion on the revived role of regional Arab organizations. On top of these are the all-encompassing League of Arab States (LAS) and the sub-regional Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), as both organizations have had important roles in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region following the widespread uprisings in late 2010 and early 2011.

Despite its poor record in representing collective Arab action, the LAS started to assume a notable role in regional dynamics, especially in conflict areas. This was particularly clear in the case of backing the NATO operation in Libya, endorsing the Gulf initiative for a smooth transition of power in Yemen, and engaging in active mediation for crisis management in Syria. On another front, the GCC and its key member states have been assuming a highly visible and assertive foreign policy in the Arab region through a multiplicity of instruments. These ranged from engaging in military efforts, offering political support, to disbursing huge amounts of funds whether in the form of aid, loans, or investments. This activism and assertiveness boosted both the GCC as a whole and its key members, especially Saudi Arabia, as a drive for political stability in the region (Koch, 2011; Isaac, 2013).

The rising profile of regional Arab organizations, as a major facet of the changing political order in Arab MENA post-2011, has triggered much interest on the European Union side. In fact, the EU has demonstrated interest and promptness in coping with its changing neighborhood. This was not merely manifested in the EU's early discussion of a Proposal on Democracy and Shared Prosperity in March 2011 and the effective release of a new European Neighborhood Policy in the following May, but also in attempting to revive the region-to-region ties. In this respect, the EU attempted to enhance its cooperation frameworks with both the LAS and the GCC, whose notable activism in reacting out to the Arab uprisings has marked a potential transformation in the role of regional Arab organizations. These attempts clearly contrast with the pre-2011 limited cooperation between the EU and the LAS as well as between the EU and the GCC, particularly in the framework of the 1988 EU-GCC Dialogue.

The quest for a more vigorous inter-regional cooperation post-2011, especially in the case of the EU-LAS relationship, is particularly novel compared to past practices. Previous literature clearly emphasizes the weak ties between the EU and the LAS prior to 2011 as well as the stagnation in the EU-GCC cooperation schemes. Understandably, the low profile of the LAS, which was regarded regionally and internationally as a mere talk-shop, was generally behind the reluctance of external actors to seriously approach it. The rising profile of the LAS after 2011 has however solicited the EU to reconsider its marginal relationship with the League, since close region-to-region contacts were perceived apt in creating a space for enhancing the two

sides' response to major developments in the Arab region. As a recent policy briefing of the European Parliament bluntly puts it, "The EU's clear objective is to make the 'new' Arab League the main channel for a strengthened Euro-Arab relationship" (Kettis, 2013, p.12). On another front, the EU has been frequently criticized for neglecting the Gulf region and even for failing to incorporate it as an intrinsic part of the Arab region in a comprehensive strategy that links the Gulf with the Mediterranean (Youngs and Echagüe, 2007; Burke, Echagüe and Youngs, 2009). Indeed, the relationship between the EU and the GCC is of low intensity that does not match the vital links, which have been established in several fields between the two sides, nor the strategic and political importance of the Gulf. Accordingly, a significant strand in previous literature attributes this weak EU-GCC cooperation to the fact that the EU has failed to consider the political and security priorities of the GCC states, which are the core priorities that elicited the formation of this sub-regional forum in 1981 (Serfaty, 1998; Fürtig, 2004, Bahgat, 2006). The active role of the GCC and its member states in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, especially in acting as a bloc within the LAS, has added much to the importance of the Gulf as a region and to the GCC as a relatively cohesive sub-regional forum.

In focusing on how the EU is attempting to adjust its policies and practices to enhance cooperation with these resurgent Arab organizations, this article aims primarily at investigating potential opportunities for a resilient inter-regional cooperation between the EU and both the LAS and the GCC. The article starts with an examination of the EU-LAS rapprochement post-2011, especially in what regards the innovative creation of an EU-funded crisis room in the LAS headquarter. Then, it moves to tackle the EU relationship with the GCC, which, by contrast to the case of the LAS, still suffers a lingering stagnation.

## **1. Breaking New Ground? The EU and the League of Arab States**

The powerful public revolts across the Arab region from the Maghreb to the Gulf, which particularly succeeded in toppling down dictators that were thought unshakable, imposed a new reality that regional and international actors alike could not overlook. The decades-accumulated public anger was acute and necessitated a sympathizing reaction. In fact, this was a key factor in motivating the initial LAS activism. It is nonetheless also true that the influence of key Gulf states on the LAS is crucial in understanding its reinvigorated role in the Libyan and Syrian crises (Lynch, 2012; Maddy-Weitzman, 2012). This influence is further accentuated considering that the high performance of the LAS in Libya and Syria was at no match for its timid reactions to uprising cases within the Gulf region, particularly in Bahrain and Yemen (Rishmawi, 2013, p.56-57). Yet, despite these important considerations, it remains factual that the relatively high performance of the

League post-2011 has emphasized its potential as a serious organization capable of representing collective Arab action. Indeed, the League's regional conduct post-2011 has set a new standard, compared to its past practices, which essentially attracted higher regional and international attention for it is now expected to take a stance, get engaged, and even deliver solutions.

What also reinforces this conviction about the LAS potential transformation is the fact that many of the old LAS reform plans were revived after 2011. The 1990s plans to establish an Arab Court of Justice were revived by a proposal from Bahrain in March 2012 to create an Arab Court for Human Rights. The Baghdad Summit in March 2012 adopted the statute of the Arab Parliament, which even if expected to be a weak body, would add an informal public flavor to the rigid intergovernmental structure of the League. Most remarkable is that the LAS, strained by developments of the Arab uprisings and their security consequences, has recently formed an independent committee of experts, chaired by Lakhdar Brahimi, to draw practical recommendations for inter-Arab cooperation in peace and security issues. According to a 2012 published interview with the LAS Secretary General Nabil Elaraby, the committee recommendations could be groups in three clusters: The first aims at reforming the secretariat general to avoid redundancy and improve performance. The second envisages the enhancement of coordination mechanisms among the League's organs. The third involves modifying the LAS Charter provisions so that the League's resolutions would be both binding and enforceable (Badawi, 2012). Even if none of these ambitious decades-long plans is yet into effect, the rebirth of such institutional reform plans has undoubtedly added much to the general perception of a promising renascent League.

### **1.1. A Potential Institutional Interlocutor: EU-LAS Intensified Contacts Post-2011**

The awakening in the LAS has positively echoed in the EU. It has been frequently reported that the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton is maintaining close political contacts with Elaraby, especially in mediating the conflict in Syria (Kettis, 2013, p.12-13). Also, a dialogue at senior officials level has been conducted regularly with the aim of enhancing mutual understanding on the EU and the LAS approaches to political developments in the region (The League of Arab States, 2012). It is indeed telling to note, for instance, the change in the frequency of EU-LAS meetings before and after 2011 to grasp the momentum in recent interregional rapprochement. Before the Arab uprisings only one ad-hoc EU-LAS foreign ministers meeting was held in Malta in 2008, which did not result in any tangible outcome nor was followed-up by any meaningful steps for a few years. The only outcome to mention was a Memorandum of Understanding, signed by the European Commission and the Secretariat-General of the LAS

is March 2009, with the objective of strengthening the LAS capacities to respond to political, social, cultural, economic and environmental crises. This MoU was followed in October 2009 with the formal opening of the European Commission-League of Arab States Liaison Office in Malta, which was established with the mission of formulating and implementing projects of technical cooperation between the Commission and the Secretariat of the LAS, but it has largely remained inactive. Post-2011, however, ambassadors of the EU Political and Security Committee have visited the LAS in Cairo in September 2012 to directly exchange views on major developments in the region. This visit was followed in October by a joint seminar to share the EU and the LAS experiences in election observation, which was enriched with a ground practice in observing elections by LAS officials in Lithuania (League of Arab States, 2012). The following November, a second EU-LAS foreign ministers meeting, convened in Cairo, resulting in a joint declaration that outlined an ambitious work program in a range of fields. Most recently, a third foreign ministers meeting of the EU and the LAS took place on 10-11 June 2014 in Athens.

What is most important about these high level meetings is that they have resulted in substantial institutional cooperation between the two organizations. In specific, the results of the second foreign ministers meeting in Cairo in November 2012 represented a major breakthrough in the EU-LAS inter-regional relations. A joint working program was setup, which outlined specific steps aiming at developing EU-LAS cooperation in many issue areas (EU, 2012a). Among these is the partnership of the LAS in an EU-funded project, developed by UN-Women, to establish a regional knowledge hub on Women's citizenship and political participation. Another important issue area is energy cooperation, in which the two organizations set the plans to cooperate in meeting the key challenge of developing renewable energy and in improving energy sufficiency, notably via the EU delegation in Cairo and regional technical assistance projects. Further cooperation schemes include establishing dialogue on human rights, civil society, cultural activities, legal cooperation, diplomatic training and humanitarian assistance (League of Arab States, 2012).

Most recently, a foreign ministers meeting between the EU and the LAS took place on 10-11 June 2014 in Athens, which resulted in signing a 10-page declaration that stressed the similar stances of both organizations in key Middle East developments. These include, the situation in Iraq, Syria, Libya and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Interestingly, and in a demonstration of the rising political importance of the LAS, Ashton's remarks following this meeting (EEAS, 2014, 140611/05) referred to the already good working relationship with the LAS saying that what is aspired is "a more strategic relationship". The political and strategic convergence between the two organizations was also visible in that meeting's joint declaration, which came to condemn all acts of terrorism. In this regard, an implicit reference was

made to the terrorist attacks that occurred in Europe the month before, where a gunman killed four people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels. The French suspect arrested over the attack had allegedly spent about a year in Syria after joining an extremist Islamic group fighting to topple Al-Assad regime. In fact, the spread of militant jihadist in many parts of MENA added to the fact that fighters from different parts of the world (including Canada, the United States, and Europe) are frequently reported to be traveling to Syria to join the Jihad, contribute to an amplified level of insecurity both in the Middle East region and further afield. The EU-LAS ministers exhibited understanding to this growing security problem, which undermines the stability of the region, by stressing the importance of joint cooperation in facing the threat posed by terrorist groups and foreign fighters. They agreed to share assessments and best practices, “including counteracting more effectively radicalization, recruitment, travel of terrorists and foreign fighters as well as dealing with fighters returning to their place of departure.” (EEAS, 2014, 140611/03).

## **1.2. Operational Security Collaboration: The EU-Funded Crisis Room at the LAS:**

Most importantly, and in an effort to revive the 2009 MoU, the EU and the LAS announced in November 2012 the effective establishment of a Crisis Room at the headquarter of the LAS. The Crisis Room is considered an important milestone in a broader project of cooperation in the field of early warning and crisis response (Babaud and Mirimanova, 2011). This project, which also aims at empowering the newly established EU’s European External Action Service, targets the establishment of a network of Crisis Rooms and information-sharing centers through direct partnerships with regional organizations, such as the LAS, the African Union and ASEAN (Pawlak & Ricci, eds, 2014). This actually explains why the Crisis Room at the LAS premises is linked to the EU’s early warning system,<sup>1</sup> and is co-financed to the tune of €1.9m by the EU’s Instrument of Stability (EU, 2012b). In launching the Crisis Room, the EU provided the necessary knowhow and tools to the project, which is implemented by the United Nations Development Program, mainly through training 200 Arab diplomats in order to run the embryonic project. The Crisis Room functions according to the TARIQA PRO open-source information system, producing daily and weekly bulletins that are shared between the two organizations. Essentially from a European perspective, this operational achievement reflects the growing importance of the LAS as a potential regional interlocutor that could positively contribute to regional security (Cairo Declaration, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> Through the European External Action Service (EEAS) Situation Room (SITROOM), which was created in 2012 in the EEAS’ Crisis Response and Operational Coordination Department.

After a slightly more than one year of its establishment, it is evident that the Crisis Room is still budding and that its success depends on “the ability of the general administration to make effective and routine use of produced analyses, which, notoriously, can take several years” (Pawlak & Ricci, eds, 2014, p.54). Besides, the competence of this crisis room as a reliable instrument for tackling crises in the Arab region (which are mostly of hard-security nature) is substantially doubted, since it relies on open sources, media, secondary analyses, and the opinion of internal experts in preparing its daily alerts and weekly bulletins (Ibid, p. 170-171).

The LAS envisages that this Crisis Room could represent the nucleus of a pan-Arab early warning system (League of Arab States, 2012). Yet, this goal still seems a long way off, since two persistent structural problems, which have usually blocked the success of any of the League’s institutional reform plans, continue to persist. The first is that the League lacks an enforcement mechanism, which significantly diminishes its capacity to act or to even follow-up on the implementation of its decisions. This means that the League, in confronting crises in the region, would have to be either dependent on the generosity of the oil-rich Gulf members, who would not cease from activating its mechanisms whenever their interests necessitate, or it would have to resort to the UN Security Council exactly as it did in the case of Libya in 2011 (Vericat, 2011). The second is the League’s financial crisis, which reached its peak in 2003. In fact, due to the lack of sufficient funds in 2003, the LAS was constrained to terminate 240 programs and activities in the region. It has also been financially strained to the extent that 500 of its personnel in various departments were getting their salaries paid from the organization’s financial reserves. In fact, by the end of 2003, the then Secretary General, Amr Moussa, refused to receive his salary from the League’s budget in protest of the reluctance of member states to provide necessary funding for the organization’s routine operation (Arab Strategic Report, 2004-2005).

The effective launch and operation of the Crisis Room at the LAS headquarter in Cairo is indeed novel, noting that the LAS has a rich history in attempting to introduce reforms to its mechanisms, specifically in the field of peace and security, without any tangible success. However, from the same prism, it is also sad that this sole institutional innovation came to existence thanks to a modestly funded cooperation venue with the EU rather than being a genuinely LAS-born initiative. An in-depth examination of the LAS role post-2011 demonstrates that the League had actually failed to develop a collective vision or internally strengthen a sense of purposefulness that could enable it to assume a systematically new reinvigorated regional conduct. Therefore, it has been easily influenced by the active and assertive policies of key Gulf States, whose influence was proved key to understanding the League’s proactive role in the Libyan and Syrian crises.



## **2. Stagnating Inter-Regionalism? The EU and the GCC**

The GCC and its member states have been playing crucial roles in regional dynamics post-2011, attempting primarily to face the destabilizing ramifications of the Arab uprisings. The Gulf states in this respect have demonstrated a notable capacity to act collectively under the GCC umbrella, to act as a bloc within the LAS, or to act singularly in a highly visible and assertive foreign policy conduct through a multiplicity of instruments. These included: First, engaging in military efforts, such as the Qatari and Emirati contributions to NATO's operation in Libya in 2011, the Saudi and Emirati military coordination under the umbrella of the GCC in suppressing what was largely perceived in the Gulf as a "Shiite-led" uprising in Bahrain, and the general Gulf willingness to intervene in Syria to put an end to al-Assad regime. Second, extending political support and initiating mediation efforts, such as the Gulf initiative for a smooth transfer of power in Yemen, which was endorsed by the LAS, the EU and many other regional and external actors. Third, disbursing huge amounts of funds whether in the form of aid, loans, or investments. The huge Gulf aid in specific has raised much controversy since they were extended to both Arab countries in transition and those countries who did not experience transitions. The allocation of massive assistance funds to Jordan, Morocco, Oman stand as notable examples, showing that Gulf generosity post-2011 addresses stabilization more than democratization.

No doubt that these influential and far-reaching roles in the wake of Arab uprisings has triggered much interest within the EU to seek closer relations with the GCC and its member states. Early in 2011, during a visit of Ashton to the Gulf in April, the High Representative ardently remarked that at this particular moment in the history of the region "it is vital to maintain close links with the Gulf states because we share many common challenges, and share many interests" (EU, 2011). Indeed, a noteworthy sign of this growing EU interest has been the decision to open a second EU Delegation in Abu Dhabi in 2013, a step that is largely aiming at intensify institutional cooperation through enhancing diplomatic representation. In fact, the EU has been heavily criticized in the past for neglecting proper diplomatic representation in the Gulf. It was even the GCC who took the initiative in 1994 to open a mission at the EU, whereas it was not until 2004 that the EU has established only one delegation in Saudi Arabia, which was accredited to the GCC as well as to its six member states. A political and strategic rapprochement with the GCC in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings is essentially perceived to be in Europe's own interests, in terms of having an important interlocutor in the Arab region, which is capable of influencing all aspects of Arab politics including the all-encompassing LAS. Normative discrepancies aside, The EU essentially shares the same interest of the GCC in endorsing regional stability. The EU and the GCC have repeatedly expressed similar views on a wide range of problems and security concerns in

the region. These include the crisis in Libya, the situation in Yemen, the Iranian nuclear program, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the stabilization of Iraq and other international issues like cooperation in the energy field, combating piracy off the shores of Somalia and countering terrorism (European Union, 2011; European Union 2012c; European Union 2013).

Nonetheless, the region-to-region cooperation between the EU and the GCC post-2011 has not been as novel as the case with the EU and the LAS. This is mainly due to the apparently continuing divergence in the priorities and expectations of both sides in forging cooperation schemes.

### **2.1. The Long “*Strategic Neglect*”:**

Although the partnership between the EU and the GCC goes back to 1988, when the two parties signed the EU-GCC Cooperation Agreement, the divergence between the EU interests and the Gulf priorities remains the key factor in explaining the stagnation in inter-regional cooperation. While the EU interests appear to be fundamentally economic, Gulf priorities have predominantly been and are still geopolitical and security-related. The GCC itself has been formed as a highly intergovernmental sub-regional security arrangement in 1981 rather than an economic integration model. Due to this “strategic neglect”, as coined by Youngs and Echagüe (2007), the relationship between the EU and the GCC results essentially of low intensity that does not match the vital links, which the two organizations have established in several fields. Most importantly.

When it comes to economics, the EU and the GCC have generally been engaged in a relatively successful economic cooperation according to their 1988 Agreement. A close look at the latest Joint Action Program (2010-2013) demonstrates how economic issues represent the core realm of bilateral interregional cooperation. This is said even if such cooperation is not immune from criticism due to the stagnation in the realization of the Free Trade Area (FTA), which the two parties have been negotiating ever since the early 1990s. The non-ending FTA negotiations have even marred bilateral relations, which was clear when the GCC decided to unilaterally suspend the FTA talks in 2008. Yet, the FTA aside, trade statistics demonstrate the economic importance of bilateral ties. Even with the Gulf economic shift to Asia, the EU-27 remains the first trade partner to the GCC states, and the overall EU-GCC trade (including oil) has been constantly increasing since the 1980s (See Table 1: GCC Trade with Top Six Partners, 2012). These strong trade relations are indicative, especially when noting that the oil imports of the OECD countries from the Gulf region – whose oil exports are increasingly directed to China and other Asian countries – has been constantly diminishing since the mid-1990s (Kandeel, 2013). However, since the Gulf region is a principle pillar in the global energy market, it remains of a high importance in the broader sense of European Energy security. Besides, the constantly growing GCC markets are attractive for European enterprises as investment

destinations. From the GCC perspective, however, there has been a gradual loss of interest in institutionalizing economic ties with the EU since it was increasingly perceived in the Gulf that the sole interest of Europe was to secure better access to Gulf markets for European products (Koch, 2014, p.5).

**Table 1: GCC Trade with Top Six Partners, 2012**

| Major Import Partners |               |                     | Major Export Partners |               |                     | Major Trade Partners |               |                     |
|-----------------------|---------------|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| Partner               | Value<br>Mio€ | Share in<br>World % | Partner               | Value<br>Mio€ | Share in<br>World % | Partner              | Value<br>Mio€ | Share in<br>World % |
| 1 EU                  | 81,103        | 23.5                | 1 Japan               | 111,237       | 16.0                | 1 EU                 | 133,794       | 12.8                |
| 2 China               | 46,520        | 13.5                | 2 India               | 76,615        | 11.0                | 2 Japan              | 132,601       | 12.7                |
| 3 India               | 42,764        | 12.4                | 3 S. Korea            | 74,105        | 10.6                | 3 India              | 119,379       | 11.5                |
| 4 USA                 | 42,726        | 12.4                | 4 China               | 71,307        | 10.2                | 4 China              | 117,827       | 11.3                |
| 5 Japan               | 21,364        | 6.2                 | 5 USA                 | 53,916        | 7.7                 | 5 USA                | 96,642        | 9.3                 |
| 6 S. Korea            | 16,730        | 4.8                 | 6 EU                  | 52,690        | 7.6                 | 6 S. Korea           | 90,835        | 8.7                 |

**Source:** European Union (18 April 2014) European Union Trade in Goods with GCC, [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc\\_113482.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113482.pdf) (accessed: 30 June 2014)

Even if there has been a growing EU cognizance, and apparently a collective political will on the multilateral institutional level, of the need to enhance EU-Gulf relations there has been little concrete actions to that end. Early in December 2003, the European Commission, together with the High Representative, has underlined the necessity to enhance the EU-GCC Dialogue and link the EU-GCC dialogue with the broader EU-Mediterranean partnership. The EC has further stressed the EU's need to explore proposals for a possible regional strategy for the Wider Middle East, comprising relations with GCC countries, Yemen, Iraq and Iran (European Council, 2003). The year after, the EC has adopted the "Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East", which incorporated the Gulf into a broader Mediterranean and Middle Eastern design (Youngs and Echagüe, 2007, p.31). Still however no coherent policies were adopted to interpret these ambitions into actions.

The EU has further exhibited marginal attention and weak engagement in the core security concerns of the Arab Gulf region. Such concerns revolve mainly around the Iranian nuclear threat as well as Iran's political agenda in the region, particularly through its close ties with Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Gaza strip, and the Syrian regime of al-Assad. Added to this, are Gulf concerns regarding the instability in Yemen, the chaos in Iraq and the impasse in the Palestinian-Israeli talks. Since, practically, EU attention to the Gulf has been directed to the economic realm, and because it failed to adequately engage in the region's security issues, the expectations of the GCC states have been increasingly focused on the United States as their main security provider and as the main broker in the Gulf/Middle East problems. As Fürtig indicates (2004, p.34), "although the EU as a whole represents a large economic player than the US, it cannot back common foreign policy initiatives, even when these are forthcoming, with military force projection".

Reasons why the EU has not been able to enhance its inter-regional ties over the past decades are multiple. First, the lack of consensus among member states, especially those southern members who are predominantly concerned with soft security threats emanating from the southern Mediterranean, is frequently cited as an obstacle. These members have been continuously pushing the EU to concentrate more on North Africa, as the EU's immediate neighborhood (Burke, Echagüe and Youngs, 2009, p.9). Although the Arab uprisings have presented a new context for the EU to revise its approach towards the entire Arab region, noting that the Arab uprisings have effectively swept all over MENA, the EU focused merely on revising its European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) towards the Southern Mediterranean without a serious reconsideration of its cooperation frameworks with the Arab Gulf. A second important factor has to do with the continuing tendency of key European states, mainly France, Britain and Germany, to individually preserve their privileged economic and political ties with the Gulf states away of collective European action (Santini, 2012, p.120). Examples proving this tendency include: (1) the Strategic Partnership Agreement between Germany and the UAE in 2004 to further enhance bilateral ties in political and economic areas. (2) The French acquisition of its first military base "Peace Camp" in Abu Dhabi in May 2009, which Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahayan, the UAE's president, described at the time as "an important pillar of our foreign policy because it helps the stability in the Gulf region" (Al-Jazeera, 26 May 2009). (3) The British defense cooperation with the GCC states, particularly British arms sales to Saudi Arabia under Al-Yamamah Project and the post-2011 UAE-UK talks to boost the UAE's defense capabilities (Salama, 2012). Finally, the classical set of structural impediments related to institutional incongruities and normative differences have continuously slowed down the pace of cooperation between the two parties on a formal institutional level. (Kock, 2014, p.14-15). These factors, out of political pragmatism, have reasonably contributed to giving a push to a closer bilateral cooperation whether on the side of European states or on that of the Gulf.

## **2.2. A Continuing Strategic Disconnect: EU-GCC Inter-Regional Relations Post-2011**

While all the aforementioned limitations continue to persist in the EU-GCC inter-regional cooperation, the two parties seem to be at a continuing strategic disconnect in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings. Simply, post-2011, while a mounting sense of insecurity and anxiety spread in the Gulf, the EU appeared increasingly irrelevant, powerless, and even lacking initiative and action.

The chaotic and instability ramifications of the Arab uprisings have intensified a growing sense of fear and insecurity in the Gulf states, as their core security concerns were further accentuated. There was serious anxiety in the Gulf about the political stability of their own monarchical regimes, the

intruding role of Iran in the Gulf and the Levant, the spread of militant Jihadists in the Arab region at large, and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood particularly in Egypt in 2012. It was no surprise hence for the GCC Secretary General, Abdullatif al-Zayani (2013), to note that the region was “going through one of the most difficult and complicated periods in its history”. Nor was it odd for the Saudi Crown Prince to openly express the Gulf fears at the US-GCC strategic defense dialogue in Jeddah in May 2014 (Saudi Gazette, 2014), saying that “the security of our countries and our people are at danger”.

While this was the prevailing spirit within the Gulf, the EU has manifested a low profile, if not a complete absence, in practical policy terms. Further, Europe, appeared generally dependent on the United States in outlining the general political orientation, failing to elaborate an authentic European stance toward key happenings in the Arab region. In fact, Europe’s political and security engagement with the GCC has always been at no match for that of the United States. A closer look at signs of EU versus US practical engagement in the region post-2011 makes the case. For example, the unmatched US commitment to enhancing the defense capabilities of the Gulf states continued after 2011. In late December 2011, the Obama administration announced a weapons deal with Saudi Arabia, saying it had agreed to sell F-15 fighter jets valued at nearly \$30 billion to the Royal Saudi Air Force. Shortly after, the then Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, addressed the first Gulf-US security forum in Riyadh on 31 March 2012 with plans for a Persian Gulf missile shield system, which is supposed to form a ring that starts from Turkey and includes Iraq and the Persian Gulf region. The littoral states of the Gulf have welcomed the missile shield plan in principle, in the framework of their increased concerns about the rise of Iran and its ambivalent political role in the region post-2011. Another important sign of practical U.S. commitment to the security of the Gulf was cooperative efforts in stabilizing Yemen. Parallel with US backing to the Gulf Initiative for the transfer of power in Yemen, the United States collaborated effectively with the Yemeni government in fighting Al-Qaeda elements there. In May 2012, Yemen received the assistance of the US military, which supplied the Yemeni army with American UAVs (most of them armed with missiles), unmanned drones, and 30 military experts to assist the Yemeni army in fighting terrorism by Al-Qaeda fighters in the south (Al-Ahram, 2012). By the end of May 2012, news came to announce that the US-aided Yemeni army has pushed al Qaeda out of the Zinjibar in Abyan, the southern part of Yemen (Al-Jazeera, 2012). By contrast, the EU, which is not primarily a security actor, has limited its response to condemning the use of violence in Yemen, stressed that it is the responsibility of Yemeni authorities to ensure respect for all human rights (European Council, 2011), and extended humanitarian assistance to Yemen that is estimated at €25 million in 2011 (European Commission, 2011). Ashton implicitly expressed the limitations of the EU role in the Gulf as well as the inevitability for the EU to act in the Gulf region alongside the lines of

Washington, by noting that in trying to facilitate peaceful solutions among the key players in Yemen, she has been closely in touch with the GCC and the United States. According to Ashton, the EU contacts with Washington and the Gulf capitals aimed at forming a strong and unified front by sequencing and coordinating their messages and actions on the ground (European Parliament, 2011).

Nonetheless, by mid 2013 the steady descent of the Arab region in instability and chaos has contributed to a growing Gulf mistrust about the reliability of the United States as a security partner and fueled mounting suspicions within the GCC regarding its role in the region (Wehrey, 2014). Key issues that stimulated Gulf anxiety were: First, the course of the Egyptian uprising, in which key Gulf States deemed the arrival of the MB to power in 2012 as a security threat to their own national security and that of the region at large. In this context, most GCC states were increasingly perplexed and disappointed at the close US and European support to the MB in Egypt (Isaac, 2014a). When the EU threatened to cut aid to Egypt following the fall of the MB regime in July 2013, Saudi Arabia announced that it stood ready to compensate for any cut in Egypt's aid from the West. The Saudi foreign minister, Saud al-Faisal, was even quoted saying that "those who have announced they are cutting their aid to Egypt, or threatening to do that, (we say that) Arab and Muslim nations are rich [...] and will not hesitate to help Egypt" (Fox News, 2013). Within a few days, the UAE, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia released a huge assistance package, estimated at \$12 billion, to sustain the post-MB political order in the country. Saudi Arabia further pledged full support for Egypt's "fight against terrorism" and ordered the dispatch of three fully equipped field hospitals to Cairo. Equally, Kuwait and the UAE expressed their support and reaffirmed their understanding of the "sovereign measures" that the Egyptian authorities have undertaken against the MB's violent demonstrations. In a sharp contrast with the democracy and legitimacy debates that dominated Western discussions of the unfolding events in Egypt, key Gulf monarchies focused on what they perceived as serious attempts to destabilize Egypt, weaken its armed forces, threaten its national security, and jeopardize its social and territorial integrity. It is therefore essential to note that the political developments in Egypt in specific have strengthened a sense of anxiety among key GCC states, who were increasingly convinced that the West is pursuing a determined effort aiming at weakening Arab armies and dividing Arab states along ethno-religious lines (Aaron et.al., 2011). Indeed, when the EU foreign ministers meeting in Brussels took the decision to suspend arms sales to Cairo on 21 August 2013 and after Washington followed in suspending significant military aid in October 2013, Saudi Arabia and the UAE funded a \$2 billion arms deal between Cairo and Moscow in February 2014. In the same vein, and in a sign of a revived sense of Arab solidarity stimulated out of a shared perception of common security threats, Egypt and the UAE conducted in March 2014 joint military exercises, codenamed "Zayed-1".

Being the first of its kind in terms of number and size of units involved, these joint exercises aimed at enhancing the interoperability of Arab armies (Isaac, 2014b). Second, the ongoing international negotiations between world powers and Iran concerning the latter's nuclear program. Particularly, the US suggestion that Iran could be allowed a limited capability to enrich uranium has provoked harsh reactions in the Gulf. As a consequence, Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal told the GCC conference in Bahrain in April 2014 that the Gulf states should be prepared for Iran's possible attainment of nuclear power by working on acquiring nuclear knowhow (Reuters, 2014; Al-Faisal, 2013). Third, is the Syrian crisis, in which the apparent reluctance of the United States and other key European powers to intervene has added to increasing Gulf disappointment.

Correctly, as Koch indicates (2014, p.17), the continuous failure of the EU to address the Gulf interests in a tangible manner has led to the GCC "turning away from the EU, including looking at other models of regional integration. Closer ties have been developed with ASEAN and dialogues have also been held with Mercosur". The GCC-EU relationship is at best stagnating, if not effectively spilling back. It is quite telling that in 2013 the GCC refused to discuss a new joint action program with the EU unless the FTA negotiations were concluded. Further, the GCC unilaterally took the decision to cancel a meeting between the foreign ministers of the Gulf states with their EU counterparts, scheduled for 23 June 2014, in protest of a statement by several European countries on the human rights situation in Bahrain. (Gulf News, 2014).

## **Conclusions:**

The analysis demonstrates that the EU rapprochement with the LAS in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings is novel, particularly when compared with the pre-2011 slow pace and reluctant attitude to construct practical cooperation schemes. The close political contacts, frequent high-level meetings, the setting up of a bilateral working program in a number of socio-political and economic fields, and the establishment of an EU-funded crisis room at the LAS headquarter are all signs of a reinvigorated inter-regional cooperation. These intensified links are indeed creating a new space for closer Euro-Arab ties on a multilateral institutional level. The nice showing of the League after 2011, even if it does not represent a genuine and systematic reverse neither in its institutional conduct nor in its vision and purposefulness, has contributed to rising expectations in the Arab public opinion for a LAS higher level of engagement in the Arab world plights. Indeed, the behavior of the League during the past three years has set a new standard, compared to its past practices, which the organization is expected to struggle to maintain in the future. Remains also true that the LAS is the unique regional organization

that encompasses all Arab countries in its membership, including the oil-rich GCC states, which renders it the most attractive interlocutor for external actors who seek to approach the Arab region collectively.

However, the apparent continuity in the League's chronic problems poses huge limits on the extent to which the EU and the LAS can pursue effective cooperation plans. Such problems also continue to undermine the League's prospects as a serious patron for peace, stability, and security in the region. The institutional setup of the LAS as a highly intergovernmental organization, the lack of member states' political will to seriously empower the League's institutional apparatus, the lack of an enforcement mechanism, and the League's epidemic financial crisis are inherent problems that continue to hinder the realization of any of the LAS reform plans. Accordingly, these problems, which in substance imply the lack of a minimum level of institutional autonomy, pose serious questions at the sustainability of the League's cooperation plans with the EU.

On another front, and nonetheless the EU's renewed interest in approaching the Gulf, the EU-GCC interregional cooperation results stagnating. The strategic disconnect in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings is a key factor in explaining this stagnation in region-to-region ties. Simply, post-2011, while a mounting sense of insecurity and anxiety spread among key GCC members, the EU appeared increasingly irrelevant, powerless, and even lacking initiative and action. The EU instead had the image among key Gulf states of a dependent actor on the United States for outlining general policy lines, failing to elaborate an authentic European stance toward key happenings in the Arab region. With the steady descent of many Arab countries in instability and chaos, most GCC states started to be suspicious about the role of the West in general and the reliability of the United States in particular as a security partner. From this perspective the repeated EU rhetoric on human rights and democracy in the region, in the time that key Arab countries are drawn in chaos and are experiencing different degrees of state failure, is dismissed by many GCC members, who increasingly perceive such rhetoric as instrumental rather than genuine. This prevailing environment of mistrust of the West and its institutions is therefore introducing another obstacle in the EU-GCC relations, if not in Euro-Arab relations at large. A practical sign of this was in the assertive rejection of Saudi Arabia in October 2013 of a seat in the UN Security Council, an act that was applauded and supported by Egypt, the LAS and the GCC.

Frustrated of the poor level of tangible cooperation with the EU, the GCC seems to be losing enthusiasm in the EU not only in terms of political and security cooperation but also in terms of economic partnership. Even with the current friction, especially between Qatar and the rest of the GCC members, the GCC itself as a sub-regional forum is expected to remain influential and cohesive. The relative economic, political, social and cultural homogeneity added to its economic status, political weight, and the relatively



shared sense of insecurity, which has been translated in many ways into political leverage, would enable it to assume such a role in various aspects of Arab politics. This includes also increased Gulf ability to influence the LAS, since the Gulf States would be expected to provide the bulk of any necessary funds for a genuine LAS-born reform initiative. Yet, the rising sense of Arab nationalism in the region coupled with an expected return of a strong Egyptian voice, could limit the semi-Gulf monopolization of the LAS, which was one of the main features of the LAS functioning during the past three years.

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