

POLICY PAPERS



Fondazione CSF

CONCEPT NOTE

GULF-EUROPE TECH BRIDGE INITIATIVE: FOSTERING INNOVATION-DRIVEN COOPERATION

***MEDITERRANEAN CONNECTIVITY, IMEC, DIGITAL
PLATFORMS, AND THE PATH TO SECURITY AND
PROSPERITY***

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Executive Summary

The Gulf region has emerged as the Middle East's key financial hub and is asserting itself as a global laboratory for technological innovation. Gulf Arab states – notably, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – have embraced technology as a central pillar of their post-oil strategies, with governments allocating billions of dollars to develop smart cities, Artificial Intelligence (AI), fintech, blockchain, and cybersecurity. This rapid transformation is remarkable, enhancing the region's appeal as a pioneer in sustainable solutions and a front-runner in the global race for innovation.

Against this backdrop, Europe has a unique chance to build a new relationship with the Gulf, where innovation fosters cooperation, and partnerships are grounded in the shared aspiration to leverage technology for sustainable development, mutual prosperity, and enhanced security. Cooperation will be assessed based on the capacity to collaborate in building secure, resilient data centers, minimizing cybersecurity threats, and establishing value-based normative frameworks without hindering technological progress. Cross-border incubators, innovation hubs, and startup ecosystems will play a crucial role in fostering relations between members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and European countries, expanding the traditional agenda of economic cooperation.

The European Union (EU) offers mature regulations, extensive academic, research, and development resources. GCC countries have abundant capital, competitive tax policies, and ambitious government strategies.



Combined, these strengths and complementarities provide the rationale for a relationship that can profoundly influence the global innovation landscape. Companies from both regions are eager to tap all available business opportunities around technological development.

Initiatives such as the 2022 EU Joint Communication on a *Strategic Partnership with the Gulf*¹ and the 2024 EU-GCC Summit² are important milestones. Now it is time to move beyond the planning phase and bring together the diplomatic track and the business level, facilitating an organic exchange between the two regions around technology as a catalyst for shared growth and a lever for positive change. A *Gulf-Europe Tech Bridge* will offer such a new platform.

By combining research, policy-oriented convening, and targeted initiatives, the Gulf-Europe Tech Bridge is committed to engaging a broad spectrum of leading experts, institutions, and enterprises across Europe and the Gulf. Its main goal is to facilitate the exchange of knowledge, align priorities, and mobilize support for joint projects, with special emphasis on public-private partnerships (PPPs) as a pillar of Gulf-Europe cooperation.

Taking Gulf-Europe Relations to the Next Level

Gulf-Europe relations are rapidly expanding, shaped by mutual economic interests, strategic energy partnerships, and a growing focus on digital transformation. Both regions acknowledge that advanced technology and digital connectivity will play a pivotal role in fostering sustainable development, economic diversification, and enhancing their geopolitical leverage. Integrated digital development – anchored in strategic infrastructure investments and close cooperation on AI development and governance – may serve as the cornerstone of a strengthened Gulf-Europe partnership. Europe has the opportunity to tap into the Gulf's unprecedented pace of technological innovation, while offering scale and breadth for collaboration in critical tech domains.

It is time for the two blocs to take decisive steps toward strengthening their partnership, in fields such as resource mobilization, technical cooperation, regulatory dialogue, and standard setting, thus unlocking the full potential of their relationship. In this context, establishing a Gulf-Europe Tech Bridge would represent a significant shift, contributing to the emergence of a new cross-regional techno pole amidst the US-China rivalry for technological dominance.

Against this backdrop, a process is required to support and maintain the exchanges taking place at both diplomatic and business levels between Gulf and European countries. A Gulf-Europe Tech Bridge Initiative could contribute to addressing this need by providing a dynamic platform for charting the new course

of Gulf-Europe cooperation in the field of technology, while helping to turn business opportunities that are currently in blueprint into concrete, practicable projects.

With a focus on Mediterranean Connectivity, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), Digital Platforms, and a Path to Security and Prosperity, the Gulf-Europe Tech Bridge Initiative aims to put the spotlight on the following pillars of a shared positive agenda of Gulf-Europe cooperation:

- Build a tech-oriented, cross-sector Gulf-Europe community of practitioners and experts from government, the private sector, and civil society;
- Foster a pragmatic, forward-looking exchange of knowledge, best practices, and lessons learnt, with a preeminent focus on frontier and critical technologies;
- Facilitate interaction and dialogue between governmental and private sector actors, making PPPs a core tenet of Gulf-Europe engagement;
- Support strategically relevant projects by attracting the necessary attention, backing, and resources, to ensure their successful implementation;
- Promote policy-oriented research and debate on Gulf-Europe relations, emphasizing the technology-security and technology-development nexuses.

Taking Gulf-Europe Relations to the Next Level

The *Gulf-Europe Tech Bridge Initiative* recognizes that Gulf Arab states have become leaders in innovation within the global tech sphere, with Europe standing to benefit from closer dialogue and cooperation. It underscores the potential for GCC and European countries to play a pivotal role in promoting trade, technological transfer, and innovation-driven partnerships across the growingly inter-connected Euro-Mediterranean and Indo-Pacific regions. The Initiative also emphasizes that new and emerging technologies can significantly contribute to positive change if guided by a value-based approach. Ultimately, it envisions a Gulf-Europe partnership where technology fosters prosperity, security, as well as human development.

Mediterranean Connectivity

For decades, Gulf-Europe relations revolved largely around energy flows, with the GCC supplying hydrocarbons to European markets³. Today, driven by ambitious post-oil diversification strategies – such as Qatar's National Vision 2030⁴, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030⁵, and the Emirati *We the UAE 2031* and the UAE Centennial Plan 2071⁶ – the Gulf has emerged as a significant source of investment, and a growing market for technology, manufacturing, and digital services. Gulf sovereign wealth funds have significantly increased investments in European infrastructure, technology startups, and sustainability projects⁷. For the Gulf, the EU stands as the second largest trading partner.

A notable development is the growing role of the Mediterranean as a strategic bridge. Beyond serving as a physical corridor, the region has become a geopolitical and geoeconomic linchpin connecting Europe, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), as well as a key digital artery.



Undersea fiber-optic cables, digital ports, smart logistics corridors, high-speed data infrastructure, data centers, and cloud platforms increasingly traverse this region, enabling faster data transfer, more resilient digital communication, and broader access to digital services. Key projects such as Medusa, 2Africa, BlueMed, Blue Raman, and SeaMeWe-5 are transforming the Mediterranean into a global hub of digital communication⁸, linking data centers and cloud platforms between Europe and the Gulf region via North Africa and the Levant. Southern European countries like Italy and Greece, as well as France are emerging as crucial nodes in the global digital architecture – supported by strategic ports and growing ICT (information, communications and technology) sectors⁹.

Mediterranean Connectivity

Within this context, the Gulf-Europe Tech Bridge initiative stems from the understanding that the Euro-Mediterranean and Indo-Pacific corridors are becoming increasingly interconnected, with digital connectivity being among the most central components. As the Gulf-Europe technological relationship enters a new era, this evolving partnership is shaped not only by longstanding bilateral ties but also by the strategic use of digital platforms, investments in infrastructure, and broader connectivity initiatives. Among these, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, announced during the G20 Summit in New Delhi in 2023, stands out as a transformative initiative.

IMEC: A Transformative Corridor

Envisioned as a strategic transport and digital infrastructure network, IMEC aims to connect India with Europe via the Arabian Peninsula and the eastern Mediterranean¹⁰. Its digital component includes the laying of high-speed fiber-optic cables, expansion of digital trade links, and integration of cloud computing networks across regions. The EU regards the IMEC initiative as a key complement to its broader Global Gateway strategy¹¹, which seeks to foster secure, sustainable, and rules-based infrastructure worldwide, while offering a strategic counterbalance to alternative global projects, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). On the other hand, Gulf Arab states do not consider IMEC incompatible with the BRI; instead, they view it as another connectivity initiative that enhances the Gulf's role as a global commerce and digital hub.

The Blue-Raman submarine cable project exemplifies this, linking India via the Gulf and Djibouti to Europe. Blue will connect Italy, France, Greece, and Israel, while Raman will connect Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, Oman, and India¹². The project represents a significant step toward strengthening Gulf-Europe relations through high-capacity, secure digital infrastructures.

Leading industry partners like Google, Telecom Italia Sparkle, and Omantel collaborate on the initiative. The Blue-Raman is a key part of the EU's Global Gateway, IMEC, and the Italian Mattei Plan. The initiative – co-funded with a contribution of €37 million by the European Commission and supported by Italian digital infrastructure leader Sparkle – will enhance connectivity, stimulate research and innovation, and support technological convergence between Europe, Africa, and India¹³.

Overall, although full operationalization may span 8-10 years, the IMEC framework already offers an ideal platform towards strengthening the Gulf-Europe tech partnership and gradually building a robust cross-regional digital ecosystem. This ranges from securing digital trade networks (e.g. e-commerce, blockchains, cloud computing), working together on shared cybersecurity frameworks, particularly concerning data centers, and investing in research and education, among others.

IMEC: A Transformative Corridor

When discussing critical undersea infrastructures, it is important to bear in mind that they are highly vulnerable to natural hazards, accidental damage, and even deliberate threats or sabotage. Traditional survey techniques require the deployment of Remotely Operated Vehicles (ROVs). These surveys are typically infrequent and reactive, often conducted only after problems arise, rather than being proactively used to prevent failures. New technologies, including Autonomous Underwater Vehicles (AUVs), Uncrewed Surface Vessels (USVs), and satellites, among others, offer advanced tools for the constant monitoring, maintenance, and protection of these strategic assets¹⁴. Notably, investments in advanced underwater technologies represent another natural area for cooperation between the EU and the Gulf region, aimed at strengthening resilience and ensuring infrastructure security. Gulf-Europe public-private partnerships should therefore be encouraged, alongside the promotion of shared expertise to pursue collective solutions.

Digital Platforms and Technological Innovation

Digital platforms are increasingly central to Gulf-Europe relations. Gulf Arab countries are channeling substantial resources in platform-driven economies, smart government services, fintech, and e-commerce ecosystems. Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Riyadh are leading efforts to develop smart cities, such as Masdar City (UAE), Lusail City (Qatar), and NEOM (Saudi Arabia).

They are also advancing in AI and quantum technologies, while integrating digital platforms into public system services¹⁵.

The UAE launched its AI Strategy 2031, and is home to several government-backed high-tech innovation ecosystems, including Abu Dhabi's Hub71, Dubai AI Campus, and Dubai's Artificial Intelligence and Robotics Hub¹⁶. The Saudi Data and AI Authority (SDAIA) was established to lead the national Data and AI agenda, aiming to position the country as a top-tier data-driven economy globally¹⁷. The Kingdom is actively working to establish its tech dominance, as recently showcased by the launch of the new artificial intelligence platform HUMAIN in May 2025, to keep up with Abu Dhabi and Dubai in the AI race. King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) and King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KAST) are among those institutions that play a central role in the development of innovative technologies. In Qatar, the 'National AI Strategy' and the 'Digital Agenda 2030' underscore Doha's commitment to turn AI into a crucial driver of digital transformation across sectors such as government services, healthcare, and finance¹⁸. Qatar Science and Technology Park (QSTP) and the Qatar Business Incubation Center (QBIC) are among the leading platforms supporting technology companies and startups within the local ecosystem.

There is potential to foster collaboration with European tech firms in areas like cybersecurity, e-commerce, fintech, clean-tech and renewables.

Digital Platforms and Technological Innovation

Additionally, European tech firms and institutional investors recognize opportunities to work together with Gulf Arab partners in fields such as AI regulation and data governance. Cooperation in digital regulation can help avoid data monopolies and ensure that digital development remains inclusive, secure, and aligned with international norms.

In this regard, Europe has developed regulatory frameworks (e.g. GDPR, Digital Services Act) that Gulf countries are factoring in while developing their own approaches to regulation. Whereas specific regulatory outcomes may still significantly differ, responsible AI anchored to clear values is emerging as a shared priority. On the other hand, European firms can benefit from Gulf funding, testbeds for new technologies, and access to fast-growing markets. As a result, strengthening technological ties between these regions involves creating secure, resilient data centers, reducing cybersecurity risks, and developing predictive regulatory frameworks.

Meanwhile, joint ventures, tech incubators, and innovation hubs can nurture cross-regional digital talent and research.

A Joint Path to Security and Prosperity

Gulf-Europe relations are intensifying also in the security and defense fields due to heightened tensions in the Middle East, the proliferation of transnational challenges, and the threat posed by certain non-state actors¹⁹.

As digital infrastructures become crucial to national security and economic connectivity, Gulf-Europe cooperation on cybersecurity and digital resilience holds great potential.

The EU has engaged with MENA and Gulf countries on cyber diplomacy and infrastructure protection and offered dedicated dialogue formats on cyber security²⁰. GCC states are investing in cybersecurity institutions (e.g. Qatar's *National Cyber Security Agency*, the Saudi *National Cybersecurity Authority*, the UAE *Cybersecurity Council*) and are increasingly collaborating with European counterparts on cybercrime, data protection, and digital standards. Threats to critical infrastructure in both regions – especially in the energy and transport sectors – have underscored the need for joint vigilance. Targets include both digital and physical critical infrastructures. While cyber-attacks are increasing in both regions, protecting the Mediterranean-based undersea cables that connect Europe with Asia is emerging as a shared priority.

Enhanced security cooperation will contribute to regional stability, which is a requirement for economic growth and development. In fact, resilience has become central to both security and prosperity. As European universities open campuses and form partnerships in the Gulf and Gulf investment flows into European research hubs, the strategic dimension of ongoing initiatives promoting digital literacy, STEM education, and cross-border research and development (R&D) should be more fully appreciated.

Next Steps

Amidst a fast-shifting international landscape, Europe's search for partnerships will take an ambitious chapter in the Gulf region. In this respect, the recent upgrade in Gulf-Europe cooperation marks a noteworthy diplomatic achievement. Now, it is necessary to move from planning to action by engaging and bringing together relevant stakeholders and rallying support for targeted initiatives capable of delivering tangible outcomes. The Gulf-Europe Tech Bridge Initiative aims to support this process by focusing on key deliverables:

1. Build a tech-driven Gulf-Europe community:

- Connect experts from think tanks, industries, and policy circles across the Gulf and Europe;
- Organize workshops, as well as Gulf-Europe policy-oriented research and joint projects to facilitate discussion and promote knowledge exchange;
- Business-oriented roundtables addressing cutting-edge technologies and their implication in strategic domains (e.g. defense & cybersecurity).

2. Drive joint tech innovation and investment

- Facilitate dialogues on PPPs as a core mechanism for the Gulf-Europe tech-bridge with an emphasis on next-generation digital infrastructures (e.g. connectivity and digital platforms, smart infrastructures, cloud systems);
- Advance joint initiatives on ethical AI, data governance, AI regulation, and digital trade standards to promote a business-friendly environment and encourage private-sector involvement;
- Support innovation hubs and accelerators that link European and GCC start-ups, driving collaboration on AI, fintech, cleantech, smart cities, and renewable energy.



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