GULF COUNTRIES, IRAN, IRAQ AND YEMEN

The EU has cooperation agreements with the Gulf Cooperation Council (a regional organisation grouping Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) and with Yemen, and a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Iraq. Currently, the EU has no contractual relations with Iran but recognises that there is potential for deeper relations.

LEGAL BASIS

— Title V (external action) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU);
— Articles 206-207 (trade) and 216-219 (international agreements) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

1. GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC)

The GCC was established in May 1981. Today, the group — still comprising the original members, namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) — serves as the main conduit for the EU’s relations with the six countries. On a number of occasions, the EU and the GCC have taken joint positions on problems in the Middle East.

The oil-rich Gulf countries are undergoing considerable socio-economic and political changes, although the progress of reform is uneven. The effect of the Arab uprisings on the monarchies of the Gulf has been subdued by preventive policies — subsidies and an expansion of public-sector employment — and by repressive measures, notably in Bahrain and in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia. The GCC countries have maintained active roles in Middle Eastern diplomacy, sometimes in rivalry with each other. This has contributed to the ongoing diplomatic crisis between Qatar and the other GCC countries, which accuse Qatar of supporting terrorist and sectarian groups (including the Muslim Brotherhood), financing groups associated with Iran, infringing its neighbours’ sovereignty and instigating political dissent in neighbouring countries.

While the EU hopes to develop its political relations in the region, EU-GCC relations have largely been defined by economic and trade ties. Trade volumes between the two sides grew steadily between 2007 and 2015, but have dropped slightly in the last two years. In 2016, the GCC was the EU’s fourth-largest export market.

The EU and the GCC signed a Cooperation Agreement in 1988. The agreement aims to strengthen stability in a region of strategic importance, facilitate political and economic relations, broaden economic and technical cooperation, and deepen
cooperation on energy, industry, trade and services, agriculture, fisheries, investment, science, technology and the environment. The agreement provides for annual joint councils/ministerial meetings, and for joint cooperation committees at the level of senior officials. The agreement makes no provision for a parliamentary body. In April 2016, the EU-GCC Joint Cooperation Committee agreed to establish a more structured informal dialogue on trade and investment. This was followed in July 2016 by the EU-GCC joint council and ministerial meeting. The diplomatic crisis that erupted in June 2017 between Qatar and the other Gulf countries has prevented new meetings from being convened.

The EU and the GCC agreed on a Joint Action Programme for 2010-2013, setting out a roadmap for closer cooperation in areas such as information and communications technology, nuclear safety, clean energy, research and economic dialogue. The renewal of this programme has, however, been delayed, mainly because of the lack of progress over trade matters. Negotiations on a free trade agreement were started in 1990 but have stalled since 2008, with the question of export duties remaining a source of disagreement. Since 1 January 2007, funds from the Partnership Instrument (and its predecessor, the Instrument for Cooperation with Industrialised and other high-income countries and territories (ICI)) have been available to finance measures for implementing the EU-GCC Cooperation Agreement. The GCC countries also benefit from the Erasmus Mundus programme.

ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Parliament adopted a resolution on EU relations with the GCC on 24 March 2011[1] calling for a strategic partnership with the GCC and its member states. This position was reiterated in Parliament’s resolution of 9 July 2015 on the security challenges in the Middle East and North Africa region and the prospects for political stability[2].

Parliament’s Delegation for relations with the Arab Peninsula holds regular interparliamentary meetings with the consultative councils in the region and monitors the development of relations between the EU and the GCC. Parliament’s Subcommittee on Human Rights also closely monitors the situation in the Gulf countries.

In its current term, Parliament has adopted resolutions expressing specific concerns about the human rights situation in some GCC countries, including Saudi Arabia[3] and Bahrain[4], and the return to the practice of capital punishment in Kuwait and Bahrain[5]. Following the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the murder, calling for an international, independent and impartial investigation into his disappearance and extrajudicial killing and urging the Saudi authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all human rights defenders.

Parliament has also called for greater cooperation with the GCC to manage migration. On 13 September 2017, Parliament adopted a resolution on arms exports[6], which explicitly states that it believes that arms exports to Saudi Arabia are non-compliant with at least one of the criteria outlined in EU Common Position 2008/944/CFSP, defining common rules governing the control of exports of military technology and equipment. Parliament’s Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought for 2015 was awarded to Saudi blogger Raif Badawi.

2. YEMEN

EU-Yemen relations are based on the 1997 Cooperation Agreement, covering trade, development cooperation, culture, communications and information, the environment and management of natural resources, and political dialogue. In March 2015, an international military coalition led by Saudi Arabia launched a campaign against rebels who had ousted the incumbent president. The EU supports the mediation conducted by the UN towards a political solution to the conflict.

On 18 February 2019, the Council of the EU adopted conclusions on Yemen, reaffirming its commitment to the unity, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Yemen. The EU supports the ‘Stockholm Agreement’ reached between representatives of the Yemeni parties under the auspices of the United Nations in December 2018 and the UN-led political process with a view to ending the conflict and fostering an improved regional environment.

The Union has stepped up its assistance to address the dramatic situation in the country, where more than 80% of the population are in need of humanitarian assistance. The EU has committed a total of EUR 233.7 million in humanitarian aid to Yemen since 2015. This is in addition to the EUR 440 million earmarked for development cooperation with Yemen in the multiannual financial framework (MFF) for 2016-2020. The EU pledged EUR 161 million at the donor conference for Yemen, which took place in Geneva on 26 February 2019. Pledges reached USD 2.6 billion.

Since February 2015, the EU Delegation to the Republic of Yemen has been operating from headquarters in Brussels.

ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Parliament adopted resolutions on Yemen in July 2015, February 2016, June 2017, November 2017 and 4 October 2018[7] expressing serious concern at the alarming humanitarian and security situation and calling for the effective implementation of a ceasefire. On 13 September 2017, Parliament adopted a resolution on arms exports[8], which deplores the fact that military technology exported by the Member States is being used in the conflict in Yemen. Parliament’s Delegation for relations with the Arabian

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Peninsula is responsible for relations with Yemen and for monitoring the situation in the country.

3. IRAQ

The EU has been a key provider of assistance to Iraq since the 2003 war. A Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) was signed between the EU and Iraq in May 2012. It provides a framework for dialogue and cooperation on a number of issues, including political issues, counter-terrorism, trade, human rights, health, education and the environment. Within the framework of the PCA, the first ever Cooperation Council meeting between the EU and Iraq was held in January 2014, and a second meeting took place on 18 October 2016. For the 2014-2020 period, the Commission pledged to provide Iraq with EUR 75 million for cooperation in the areas of human rights and the rule of law, education and sustainable energy.

The EU adopted a new strategy for Iraq in January 2018. The strategy focuses on delivering continued EU humanitarian aid to the Iraqi people and facilitating the stabilisation of areas liberated from the Islamic State (IS) group (Daesh), with three million displaced Iraqis still unable to return home. It also seeks to address the reform, reconstruction and reconciliation efforts in the longer term that Iraq needs to pursue in order to consolidate peace and build a united, democratic country in which all citizens can fully enjoy their rights in greater prosperity.

Given Iraq’s deteriorating security and humanitarian situation, the Commission increased its humanitarian assistance to the country. This totalled EUR 159 million in 2016 and EUR 82.5 million in 2017. Since 2014, the Commission has provided over EUR 370 million in humanitarian aid and enabled life-saving operations throughout the country.

ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Since the beginning of its current term, Parliament has adopted several resolutions on the situation in Iraq[9], including on the IS offensive, on gender violence, on the persecution of minorities, on the situation in northern Iraq/Mosul, on mass graves, on education, on the destruction of cultural sites by IS and on arms exports. Parliament’s Delegation for relations with Iraq holds interparliamentary meetings with Iraq’s Council of Representatives. Parliament’s Sakharov Prize for 2016 was awarded to Nadia Murad Basee Taha and Lamiya Aji Bashar, who are survivors of sexual enslavement by IS in Iraq and have become spokespersons for women afflicted by IS’s campaign of sexual violence. They are public advocates for the Yazidi community in Iraq, a religious minority that has been the subject of a genocidal campaign by IS militants.

4. IRAN

The EU shared the international community’s concerns about Iran’s nuclear programme and, through the Vice President / High Representative (VP/HR), supported and coordinated the E3+3 group (France, Germany, the UK, China, Russia and the US) in its long negotiations with Iran. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was finally agreed in Vienna in July 2015, and in January 2016, once Iran was shown to be complying with its obligations, international nuclear-related sanctions against Iran were lifted. In the plan, Iran formally renounces the military use of nuclear energy and agrees to undertake substantial infrastructure transformations in order to make its nuclear sites civil-use only. It also accepts a number of important constraints regarding uranium and plutonium enrichment for a period of 10-15 years. Some other provisions, such as on the oversight of Iran’s manufacturing of yellowcake uranium, are to last for 25 years. The JCPOA put in place a comprehensive and strict system of inspections and monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

However, the continuing Iranian tests of ballistic and cruise missiles, although technically not in breach of the JCPOA, are a cause for concern in the EU and beyond, as is Iranian support to armed groups across the Middle East. Citing these concerns and perceived weaknesses of the deal, the US decided to unilaterally withdraw from the agreement in May 2018 and had fully re-imposed its nuclear-related sanctions on Iran by November 2018. The EU (along with the other E3+3 members) nevertheless remain committed to the implementation of the JCPOA and to pursuing trade with Iran, as long as Iran fulfils its obligations. The IAEA has confirmed 14 times since January 2016 that Iran is in compliance with the agreement. The EU has voiced support to the Instrument for Supporting Trade Exchanges (INSTEX), established by the E3 countries (the UK, France and Germany) in January 2019 with the aim of allowing European exporters and importers to pursue legitimate trade with Iran without the need for direct financial transactions. At the same time, EU sanctions related to the grave human rights situation in Iran are not part of the JCPOA and remain in place. In January 2019, the EU also adopted sanctions in response to Iran’s hostile activities on European territory, adding the Iranian intelligence service to the EU terrorist list.

ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

In its resolutions, Parliament supported the EU’s ‘twin-track’ approach (sanctions coupled with diplomatic negotiation), welcomed the JCPOA and emphasised the importance of defending human rights in Iran. In 2016, Parliament adopted a resolution on the EU strategy towards Iran following the nuclear agreement[10], expressing support for Iran’s reinsertion into the world economy but also concern over the country’s poor level of respect for human rights. Parliament awarded the Sakharov Prize for 2012 to human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh and film director Jafar Panahi. In December 2018, Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the new arrest and imprisonment of Nasrin Sotoudeh[11], and it further denounced the situation of human rights in Iran.

rights defenders in Iran in March 2019[12]. In May 2018[13], Parliament condemned the imprisonment of a number of EU-Iranian dual nationals in Iran following unfair trials. Parliament’s Delegation for relations with Iran monitors developments in Iran, including the situation of minorities, the death penalty issue and the Iranian role in fighting IS in the region. In December 2017, the Delegation for Relations with Iran visited Tehran and Isfahan, to attend the sixth Interparliamentary Meeting (IPM) and to strengthen the direct and critical dialogue with both the Majlis and the Iranian Government. In September 2018, a high-level delegation from the Majlis visited the European Parliament for the seventh IPM.

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