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Welcome to a new edition of the **TRENDS Med-MENA Nexus Monthly Report,** the analytical platform from TRENDS Research & Advisory dedicated to unpacking how Italy and Southern Europe are reshaping their strategic engagement with the Mediterranean, the Gulf, and beyond.

At the time of writing, regional instability affecting the Red Sea, the Strait of Hormuz and wider Middle Eastern connectivity routes continues to generate significant pressure on Europe–Gulf relations. While energy markets remain central, recent disruptions have also exposed the growing strategic importance of digital infrastructure, supply chains, transport corridors and mobility networks linking Europe and the GCC, while increasingly positioning the Mediterranean as a strategic political and economic connector between Europe, the Gulf and wider Indo-Pacific networks.

In this context, the present edition examines how Southern European and Gulf actors are responding to these pressures by deepening cooperation across infrastructure resilience, strategic connectivity and economic coordination. What emerges is not simply a reaction to crisis, but the acceleration of a broader trend toward more integrated Europe–GCC relations, in which economic interdependence is increasingly complemented by shared approaches to resilience, logistics and long-term strategic planning.

The report is structured around three interconnected dimensions of this transformation. The first explores the growing importance of subsea cables and digital infrastructure in shaping a Mediterranean–GCC connectivity ecosystem. The second examines how Europe and the Gulf are coordinating around supply-chain resilience, transport corridors and strategic investment. The final chapter analyses tourism and mobility as emerging pillars of Europe–GCC cooperation, increasingly linked to economic diversification, regional integration and long-term resilience strategies. Across all three domains, Europe and the GCC are progressively shifting from transactional engagement toward infrastructure-based strategic interdependence.

Chapter 1

Rewiring Connectivity: Subsea Cables and Strategic Connectivity: The Emerging Mediterranean–GCC Digital Corridor

Digital connectivity is increasingly emerging as a strategic pillar of Europe–Gulf relations. What had long been treated as largely invisible commercial infrastructure is now evolving into a broader ecosystem centred on resilience, interoperability and digital sovereignty. Submarine cables, terrestrial fibre corridors, data centres and satellite connectivity are becoming deeply intertwined with economic security, artificial intelligence (AI), strategic autonomy and geopolitical competition. In this context, the Mediterranean and the Gulf are no longer transit spaces for global data flows, but interconnected strategic theatres shaping the future of Europe–GCC cooperation.

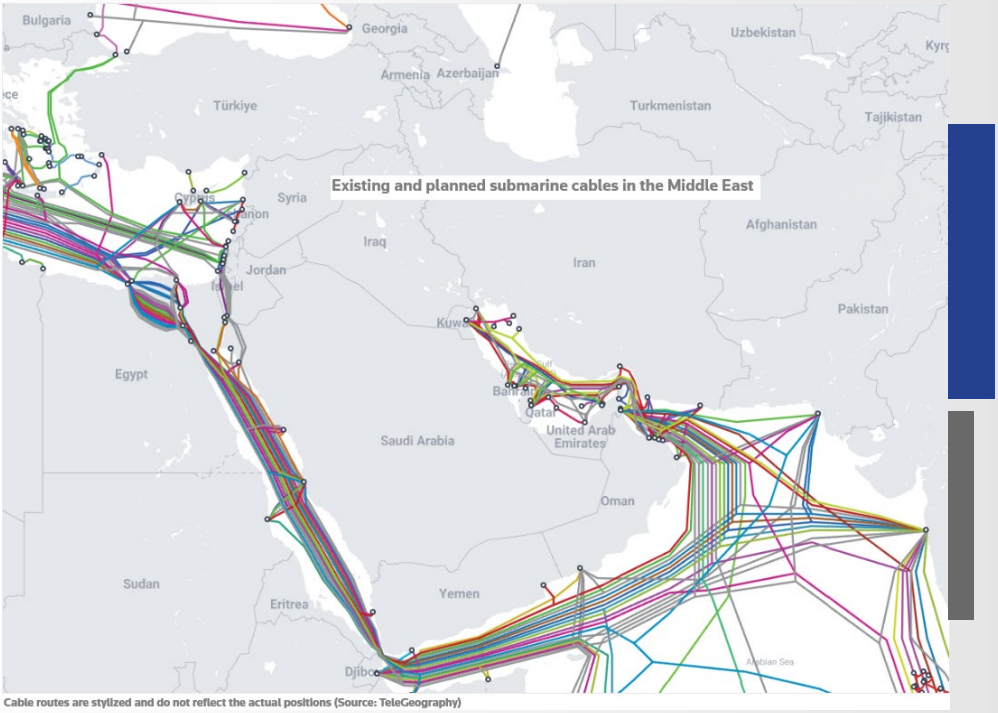
This transformation unfolds against the backdrop of rapidly growing global demand for data infrastructure. The expansion of AI, cloud computing and hyperscale data centres is dramatically increasing bandwidth requirements, pushing governments and private actors to secure more resilient and diversified connectivity routes. According to recent TeleGeography estimates, international bandwidth used by hyperscalers and AI-related services could increase ninefold between 2025 and 2035.[1] For GCC countries pursuing ambitious AI and digital diversification agendas, this creates both opportunities and vulnerabilities.

The Gulf states increasingly view digital infrastructure in strategic terms. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar are investing heavily in data centres, AI ecosystems and national technology champions, while simultaneously seeking to position themselves as global connectivity hubs linking Europe, Asia and Africa. Yet these ambitions depend on resilient external connectivity. In many ways, subsea cables are becoming for the Gulf's digital economy what pipelines and maritime chokepoints have long represented for its energy sector: critical infrastructure underpinning economic diversification and international integration.

Recent disruptions in the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz have reinforced this perception. The accidental severing of cables in Bab el Mandeb in 2024 and 2025, as well as subsequent delays affecting regional cable deployment highlighted the systemic vulnerability of concentrated maritime corridors.[2] In 2026, the continuation of regional instability further accelerated discussions surrounding route diversification, hybrid corridors and infrastructure resilience. Cable systems such as 2Africa, SeaMeWe-6 and the Blue-Raman corridor all experienced delays or increased operational risks linked to regional tensions and rising insurance costs.[3]

1. Jon Hjembo, "The Key Trends Shaping Long-Haul Capacity Demand," TeleGeography, May 2026, 4, https://resources.telegeography.com/the-key-trends-shaping-long-haul-capacity-demand
2. E. L. Murphy, T. Bryja, "The Strategic Future of Subsea Cables: Egypt Case Study," Analysis, CSIS, November 2025, 12, https://www.csis.org/analysis/strategic-future-subsea-cables-egypt-case-study
3. W. Qiu, "Orange and Partners Announce Via Africa Subsea Cable to Strengthen Europe-Africa Connectivity," Submarine Cable Networks, May 2026, 14, https://www.submarinenetworks.com/en/systems/euro-africa/via-africa/orange-and-partners-announce-via-africa-subsea-cable-to-strengthen-europe-africa-connectivity

Map 1: Middle East Existing and Planned Submarine Cables



Source: TeleGeography 2025, Submarine Cable Map, TeleGeography, https://www.submarinecablemap.com/

This shift is producing a more diversified connectivity landscape across the Gulf and the Mediterranean. Gulf countries are increasingly investing in hybrid infrastructure combining subsea routes with terrestrial corridors designed to bypass vulnerable chokepoints. Saudi Arabia's SilkLink project, supported by stc Group, aims to connect the Kingdom to the Mediterranean through Syria and Türkiye while reducing latency for AI-related services.[4] The UAE–Iraq WorldLink initiative similarly seeks to connect Gulf networks to Europe through Iraq and Türkiye,[5] while Qatar's Fibre in the Gulf (FIG) project combines subsea and terrestrial connectivity linking GCC states with Iraq and onward routes toward Europe.

The FIG initiative is particularly revealing in this regard. Announced jointly by Qatar's Ooredoo and Dubai-based du in May 2026, the 720-terabit-per-second system represents both a connectivity project and a political signal. Beyond its technical role, the initiative reflects improving economic coordination between Qatar and the UAE after years of regional tensions, while simultaneously reinforcing the Gulf's broader ambition to become an indispensable node within global digital networks.[6]

At the same time, Southern European countries are positioning themselves as strategic gateways within this evolving architecture. Italy and Greece have emerged as particularly active actors in framing the Mediterranean not simply as a transit space, but as a hub for Europe's digital resilience, technological sovereignty and strategic connectivity. Their growing cooperation on submarine cables, AI infrastructure, satellite connectivity and cybersecurity reflects a broader European effort to secure critical infrastructure while reducing dependence on external digital ecosystems.

The Italy–Greece dialogue held in Rome in May 2026 illustrates this trend clearly. Discussions between Italian Industry Minister Adolfo Urso and Greek Digital Governance Minister Dimitris Papastergiou focused explicitly on undersea infrastructure protection, interoperability, AI Gigafactories and satellite systems linked to the future IRIS² constellation. Importantly, both governments framed submarine cables not merely as industrial infrastructure, but as strategic assets connected to economic security and geopolitical resilience.[7]

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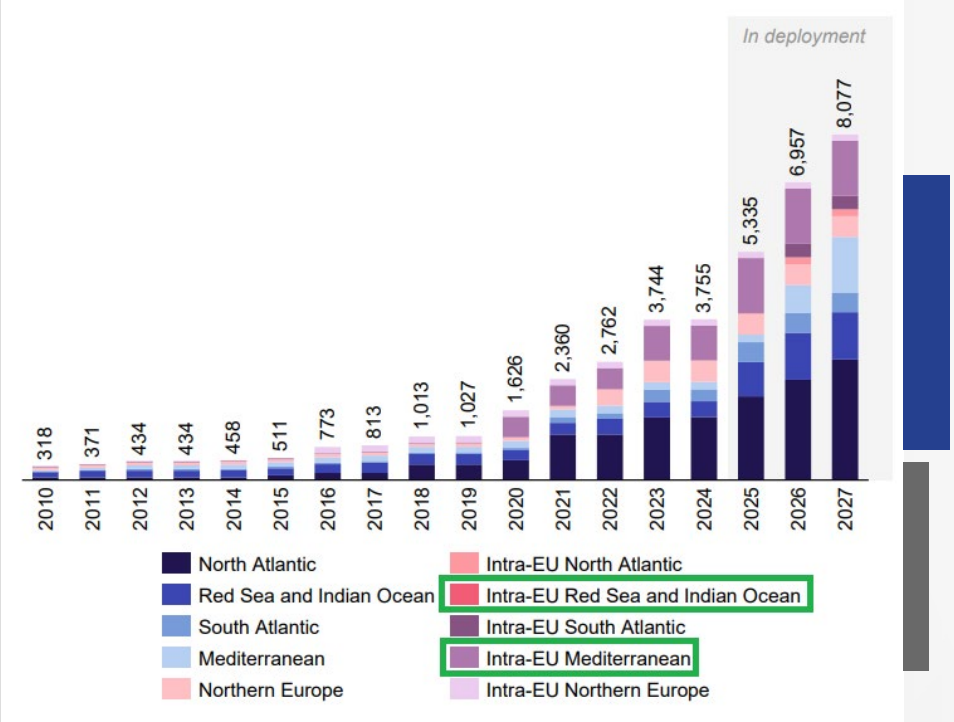
4. Elias Al Helou, "Saudi-Syrian Silklink agreement launches $800 million digital overhaul to connect Arab, Asian and European Markets," Economy Middle East, February 2026, 9, https://economymiddleeast.com/news/saudi-syrian-silklink-agreement-launches-800-million-digital-overhaul-to-connect-arab-asian-and-european-markets/
5. "WorldLink Hybrid Cable System to Connect UAE to Turkey via Iraq," Subsea Cables, Infrastructure News, February 2026, 17, https://www.subseacables.net/infrastructure-news/worldlink-hybrid-cable-system-to-connect-uae-to-turkey-via-iraq/
6. Dominic Dudley, "Qatar and UAE edge closer together with subsea cable project," Semafor Gulf, May 2026, 12, https://www.semafor.com/article/05/12/2026/qatar-and-uae-edge-closer-together-with-subsea-cable-project
7. "Greece–Italy Bilateral Dialogue (Roma, 07.05.2026)," Ministry of Foreing Affairs, Hellenic Republic, May 2026, 7, https://www.mfa.gr/italy/it/greece-italy-bilateral-dialogue-roma-07-05-2026/

Italy's role is especially significant due to its geographic position within the Mediterranean. Sicily and Southern Italy sit at the intersection of data flows linking Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia, creating opportunities for Rome to transform geography into strategic leverage. This approach is reflected in Italy's broader "whole-of-nation" strategy toward the underwater domain. The National Underwater Dimension Hub in La Spezia represents one of the clearest examples of this transformation, integrating defence institutions, industry, intelligence actors and scientific communities into a unified framework for undersea domain awareness and infrastructure protection.[8]

At the European level, this evolution is also reflected in the emergence of a more coordinated policy framework. In March 2026, the European Commission formally launched the "Team Europe" approach toward subsea infrastructure security, treating cables as critical infrastructure comparable to energy networks.[9] Simultaneously, the EU expanded funding for Cable Projects of European Interest (CPEI), including €200 million in support for resilient backbone infrastructure and SMART cable systems capable of integrating environmental and security monitoring capabilities.[10]

This transformation is not limited to physical infrastructure. Governance and interoperability are becoming equally important dimensions of Europe–GCC connectivity cooperation. Recent discussions at the International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC) plenary in Athens highlighted growing concern over systemic risks affecting submarine infrastructure, ranging from hybrid threats and regulatory fragmentation to repair bottlenecks and geopolitical competition. Increasingly, resilience depends not only on route diversification, but also on the ability of governments, regulators, operators and security actors to coordinate responses rapidly across jurisdictions.[11]

Chart 1 – Submarine Cable Capacity Connecting EU Member States Between Themselves and to Outside Countries



Sources: Analysys Mason, 2025; and European Commission: https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/report-security-and-resilience-eu-submarine-cable-infrastructures

8. Lorenzo Piccioli, "Undersea cables enter Italy's strategic debate," Decode 39, December 2025, 19, https://decode39.com/12889/undersea-cables-enter-italys-strategic-debate/
9. "Submarine Cable Security Toolbox and Cable Projects of European Interest," European Commission, Report, February 2026, 5,https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/submarine-cable-security-toolbox-and-cable-projects-european-interest
10. "Commission makes available €200 million for submarine cable and digital infrastructure projects," European Commission, Press release, March 2026, 17, https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/commission-makes-available-eu200-million-submarine-cable-and-digital-infrastructure-projects
11. "2026 Plenary Highlights," International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC), April 2026, 20, https://www.iscpc.org/events/2026-plenary-meeting/

This governance dimension became more visible amid growing discussions surrounding the potential politicisation of connectivity infrastructure. In May 2026, Iranian media floated proposals suggesting that Tehran could seek greater control over cables transiting the Strait of Hormuz through licensing frameworks or infrastructure fees. Although these proposals do not currently appear to represent formal Iranian policy, they illustrate how digital infrastructure is increasingly entering broader geopolitical competition and asymmetric pressure dynamics.[12]

Yet rather than triggering decoupling, these developments appear to be accelerating cooperation between Europe and the Gulf. Shared vulnerability is incentivising joint approaches to infrastructure resilience, route diversification and operational interoperability. In this sense, submarine cables are becoming more than technical infrastructure: they are evolving into platforms for structured interdependence between Mediterranean Europe and the GCC.

Ultimately, the transformation of Europe–GCC connectivity reflects a wider strategic shift. As AI, cloud infrastructure and hyperscale computing reshape global demand for bandwidth and data flows, resilient connectivity is becoming a core component of economic security and strategic autonomy. What is emerging across the Mediterranean and the Gulf is not a single corridor, but a wider digital ecosystem linking subsea cables, terrestrial routes, AI infrastructure and governance frameworks into a more integrated model of Europe–GCC cooperation.

12. "IRGC media float plan to levy fees for subsea Internet cables," Amwaj.media, Analysis, May 2026, 15, https://amwaj.media/en/media-monitor/irgc-media-floats-plan-to-levy-fees-for-subsea-internet-cables

Chapter 2

From Forums to Frameworks: How Europe and the GCC Are Rewiring Supply Chain Resilience

Recent disruptions in the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz have accelerated a broader reassessment of supply-chain resilience across Europe and the Gulf. What initially emerged as a response to regional instability is evolving into a more structured framework centred on connectivity, logistics, industrial coordination and economic security. Across the Mediterranean and the GCC, governments, investors and infrastructure actors are moving beyond transactional energy ties toward a wider model of strategic interdependence linking ports, digital infrastructure, advanced manufacturing and transport corridors.

This transformation unfolds against the backdrop of growing concern over the fragility of global supply chains. Prolonged instability affecting the Red Sea, disruptions to maritime traffic and the increasing exposure of strategic chokepoints have reinforced the perception that logistics infrastructure is no longer a purely commercial matter, but a component of geopolitical resilience. For both Europe and the GCC, the challenge is increasingly framed not only as maintaining trade flows, but as building diversified and interoperable networks capable of operating under geopolitical stress.

At the political level, Europe–GCC coordination intensified significantly between April and May 2026. The first EU–GCC Ministerial Meeting on Energy, held in Cyprus in April, focused on energy security, hydrogen infrastructure and resilient supply routes toward Europe, highlighting growing convergence between European and Gulf approaches to strategic connectivity.[13] In parallel, discussions during the MED Dialogues–Doha Forum regional initiative, including Luigi Di Maio, EU Special Representative for the Gulf Region, emphasised transcontinental integration, regional stabilisation and infrastructure resilience as pillars of future Europe-GCC cooperation.[14] Similar themes also emerged during recent UN–GCC consultations addressing the security of trade routes and emerging risks affecting global logisticsnetworks.[15]

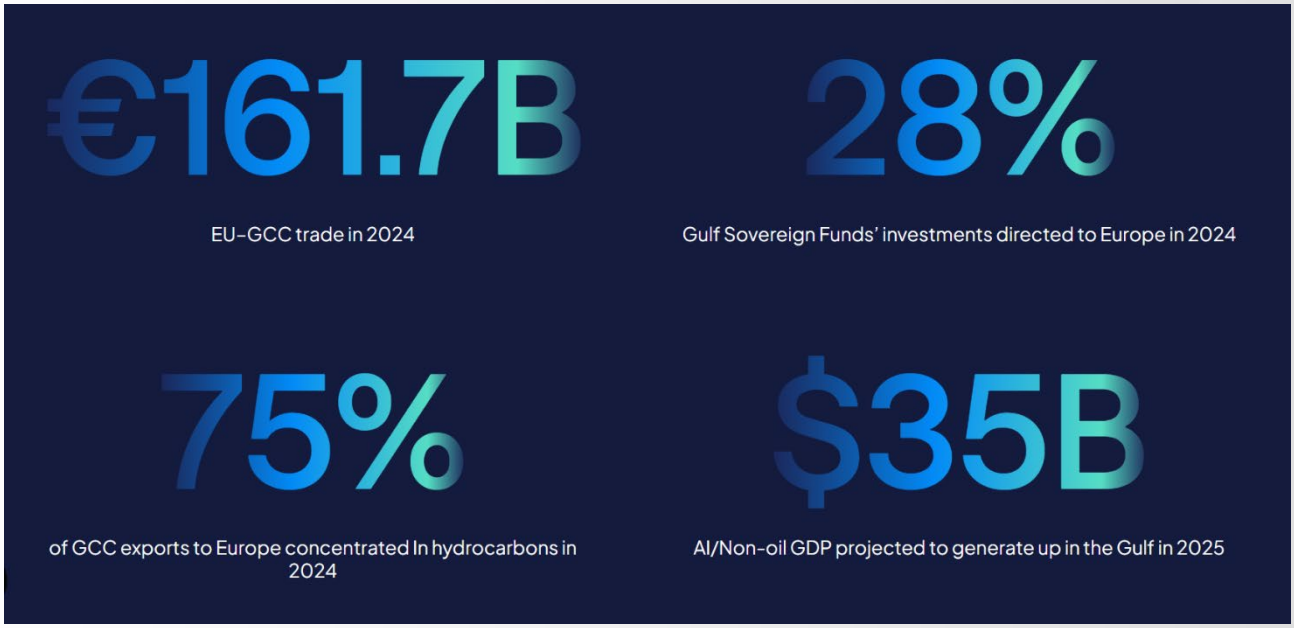
This shift is producing a more operational form of Europe–GCC engagement. Rather than focusing exclusively on trade agreements or investment volumes, recent initiatives increasingly emphasise industrial ecosystems, strategic logistics and infrastructure integration. In this context, the Mediterranean is consolidating its role as a central space connecting European industrial capacity with Gulf capital, energy resources and connectivity ambitions.

13. "During Informal Meeting of EU Leaders & Key Regional Partners in Cyprus, HE GCCSG Stresses Significance of GCC-European partnership; Calls for bolstering Cooperation to Guarantee Safety of Navigation & Security of Energy Supplies," Gulf Cooperation Council General Secretariat – Nicosia, Press release, April 2026, 25, https://www.gcc-sg.org/en/MediaCenter/News/Pages/news2026-4-25-2.aspx
14. "MED Dialogues – Doha Forum Regional Initiative Bridging Stability: EU-GCC Cooperation in an Era of Fragmentation," ISPI, Event, May 2026, 7, https://www.ispionline.it/en/event/med-doha-regional-initiative
15. "Watch: UN Security Council convenes to protect maritime trade," Safety4Sea, April 2026, 26, https://safety4sea.com/watch-un-security-council-convenes-to-protect-maritime-trade/

Unsurprisingly, Southern European countries are particularly active in this evolving architecture. Italy has increasingly positioned itself as both a logistical gateway and a strategic political and institutional broker between Europe and the Gulf, linking infrastructure resilience, industrial policy and Mediterranean governance. The decision by the Future Investment Initiative (FII) Institute to host its flagship European summit in Rome in June 2026 reflects this repositioning. Under the theme "Europe Reimagined: Capital, Sovereignty & Strategic Autonomy," the summit focuses explicitly on supply chains, AI infrastructure, industrial resilience and strategic investment.[16]

At the same time, Greece is positioning itself within this emerging Mediterranean–Gulf framework. The inaugural Europe Gulf Forum held in Navarino in May 2026 highlighted the growing convergence between Europe and GCC countries across trade, technology, connectivity and investment. Discussions framed Europe and the Gulf as complementary actors within global supply-chain and AI ecosystems: Europe contributes industrial expertise, regulatory frameworks and technological know-how, while Gulf countries provide liquidity, energy resources and long-term investment capacity, simultaneously highlighting the gradual emergence of a stronger political and institutional dimension extending beyond infrastructure alone.[17] In this framework, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's participation in Navarino further reinforced Italy's attempt to frame the Mediterranean as a shared strategic space linking Europe, the Gulf and wider Indo-Pacific connectivity networks, particularly across energy security, maritime trade, migration and regional resilience.[18]

Chart 2 – Selected EU-GCC Key Economic Indicators (2024-25)



Source: European Gulf Forum 2026: https://www.europegulfforum.org/

16. "FII PRIORITY Europe Summit to Convene in Rome as Europe Reimagines Capital and Sovereignty," Future Investment Initiative (FII) Institute, Press release, April 2026, 15, https://fii-institute.org/press/fii-priority-europe-summit-to-convene-in-rome-as-europe-reimagines-capital-and-sovereignty/; Official website: https://fii-institute.org/conference/fii-priority-europe-2026-summit/
17. "The Europe Gulf Forum | Greece | May 2026," Official website, May 2026, 15-17, https://www.europegulfforum.org/
18. "Meloni pushes Europe-Gulf strategy in Greece and Cyprus," Decode39, May 2026, 15, https://decode39.com/14804/meloni-pushes-europe-gulf-strategy-in-greece-and-cyprus/

Crucially, these initiatives are moving beyond abstract geopolitical concepts toward operational implementation. Discussions surrounding connectivity corridors, port integration and transport diversification are becoming more concrete. Trieste has emerged as one of the clearest examples of this trend. Recent roundtables and business forums held in the Italian coastal city throughout the last two months highlighted its growing role as a potential European gateway linking Gulf trade flows with Central and Eastern European industrial networks. The "IMEC Corridor: What Opportunities for Trieste?" roundtable and the "Next Innovation Road 2026" forum both stressed the importance of alternative Mediterranean logistics routes capable of reducing dependence on vulnerable maritime chokepoints.[19]

This transformation is also increasingly driven by financial actors. Gulf sovereign wealth funds, collectively managing several trillion dollars in assets, are progressively expanding their role within Europe's resilience agenda. Discussions on financing connectivity and logistics infrastructure at the Global Conference 2026, organised by the Milken Institute in May 2026, reflected growing interest in integrating Gulf capital into European transport, industrial and digital ecosystems. Increasingly, Gulf investment strategies in Europe are moving beyond traditional real estate or energy acquisitions toward infrastructure, AI ecosystems, manufacturing and strategic logistics.[20]

The technological dimension is equally important. Supply-chain resilience is increasingly linked to digital infrastructure, automation and AI-enabled logistics systems. Events such as Seamless Middle East 2026 in Dubai – originally scheduled for May, then postponed to September 22–24, 2026 – are poised to highlight the role of digital trade infrastructure, customs digitalisation and AI-driven logistics within future Europe-GCC connectivity frameworks.[21] Similarly, discussions surrounding AI supply chains increasingly connect data infrastructure, semiconductor ecosystems, energy availability and industrial policy within a broader vision of economic security.

Ultimately, the transformation of Europe–GCC supply-chain cooperation reflects a wider strategic evolution. Connectivity is no longer viewed simply as a matter of trade facilitation, but as a domain linking economic security, technological sovereignty and geopolitical resilience. Across the Mediterranean and the Gulf, a more operational, infrastructure-driven and strategically integrated architecture is gradually emerging—one in which infrastructure, capital, logistics and industrial policy increasingly converge into a shared framework of long-term cooperation.

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19. "IMEC Corridor: what new opportunities does it offer Trieste and its ports?," University of Trieste, April 2026, 14, https://portale.units.it/en/events/imec-corridor-what-new-opportunities-does-it-offer-trieste-and-its-ports; and: "Next Innovation Road 2026," March 2026, 3, https://www.clustertrasporti.it/next-innovation-road-2026-la-digitalizzazione-tra-mare-e-spazio-il-3-marzo-a-trieste/
20. "Global Conference 2026: Leading in a New Era," The Milken Insitute, Events, May 2026, 3-6, https://milkeninstitute.org/events/global-conference-2026
21. "Seamless Fintech Middle East 2026," https://www.terrapinn.com/exhibition/seamless-middle-east-fintech/index.stm

Chapter 3

Tourism, Connectivity and Resilience: Europe–GCC Cooperation Beyond the Crisis

Tourism is increasingly emerging as a strategic pillar of Europe–GCC relations. What was long treated primarily as a leisure and hospitality sector is evolving into a broader framework linked to economic diversification, international connectivity, infrastructure resilience and post-hydrocarbon transformation. Across the Gulf and the Mediterranean, tourism is becoming more deeply integrated with aviation networks, sustainability strategies, investment flows and regional connectivity agendas, reinforcing its role within wider Europe–GCC cooperation.

This transformation unfolds against the backdrop of significant geopolitical and economic uncertainty affecting the broader Middle East. Yet rather than slowing regional ambitions, recent tensions accelerated coordination efforts among GCC countries and their European partners aimed at preserving mobility, strengthening resilience and ensuring business continuity. Increasingly, Gulf countries are framing tourism not only as a driver of growth, but also as a stabilising component of economic resilience and international engagement.

This approach became particularly visible during the extraordinary GCC Tourism Ministers meeting held on 7 April 2026. Convened amid regional tensions, the meeting focused on ensuring the continuity and stability of the tourism sector across GCC states. Ministers emphasised the resilience of Gulf tourism infrastructure, the operational readiness of airports, hotels and tourism services, and the ability of GCC countries to maintain performance under conditions of regional uncertainty. At the same time, they highlighted the importance of coordinated rapid-response mechanisms, investor protection frameworks and joint tourism initiatives designed to reinforce confidence in the Gulf as a safe and reliable destination for international travellers.

Importantly, the discussions framed tourism within a broader strategic narrative centred on economic diversification and long-term competitiveness. GCC ministers stressed that the sector's current resilience reflects years of investment in infrastructure, regulatory flexibility and operational capabilities linked to national transformation agendas such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the UAE's broader diversification strategy. Rather than portraying tourism as vulnerable to geopolitical pressures, GCC states increasingly present the sector as evidence of institutional adaptability and regional integration.[22]

A key element of this strategy is the advancement of the GCC Unified Tourist Visa project.[23] Although still under implementation, the initiative has important implications for Europe–GCC mobility and Mediterranean–Gulf connectivity. By facilitating multi-destination travel across GCC countries, the unified visa would significantly improve the attractiveness of the region for European tourists while reinforcing the Gulf's position as an integrated tourism and aviation hub. The project also reflects broader GCC ambitions to harmonise mobility frameworks and strengthen regional economic coordination.[24]

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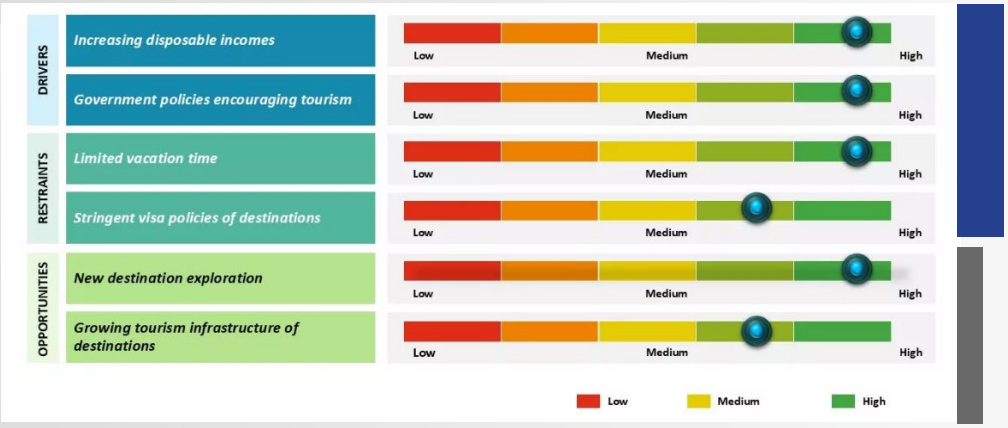
22. "HE GCCSG: The Escalating Challenges Facing Our Countries are No Longer a Passing Circumstance, but a True Test of Our Ability to Protect Our Achievements and Ensure the Continued Efficiency and Stability of Our Vital Sectors," Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) General Secretariat – Riyadh, Press release, April 2026, 7, https://www.gcc-sg.org/en/MediaCenter/News/Pages/news-2026-4-7-7.aspx
23. "GCC Announces Q4 2026 Pilot for Unified Tourist Visa, Led by UAE Economy Minister," Visa HQ, United Arab Emirates, January 2026, 29, https://www.visahq.com/news/2026-01-29/ae/gcc-announces-q4-2026-pilot-for-unified-tourist-visa-led-by-uae-economy-minister/
24. "GCC Grand Tours Visa," https://gccvisa.com/

This transformation is also visible at the bilateral level. European and GCC countries intensified tourism-related co-operation throughout 2026, linking tourism to wider agendas involving sustainability, connectivity, investment and cultural diplomacy. The 18th UAE–France Strategic Dialogue, held in Abu Dhabi in May 2026, identified tourism as a growing pillar of bilateral cooperation alongside sustainability and technological exchange. Discussions focused on joint tourism initiatives, sustainable tourism expertise and cultural cooperation, reflecting the steady expansion of French tourism flows toward the UAE, which surpassed 648,000 visitors, while GCC countries collectively continue to rank among the fastest-growing outbound tourism markets for Southern Europe.[25]

Chart 3 – GCC Outbound Tourism Market – Impact Analysis of Key Factors



Source: Coherent Market Insights, April 2, 2026: https://www.coherentmarketinsights.com/industry-reports/gcc-outbound-tourism-market

Similarly, the second Qatar–Spain Strategic Dialogue in February highlighted the growing importance of aviation connectivity, tourism and hospitality cooperation within bilateral relations. Spanish and Qatari officials linked tourism growth to broader investment frameworks, logistics integration and transport connectivity, reinforcing the perception that tourism increasingly intersects with infrastructure and economic cooperation rather than remaining an isolatedsector.[26]

Italy's expanding engagement with Gulf countries also reflects this wider shift. The postponed 2026 Italy–Arab World Business Forum, rescheduled for September, is expected to devote significant attention to hospitality transformation, tourism infrastructure and investment opportunities linked to Saudi giga-projects, further reflecting the growing integration between Mediterranean and Gulf economic diversification agendas.[27] At the same time, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's April 2026 mission to Jeddah connected discussions on regional stability and economic cooperation with broader themes of mobility, tourism continuity and Mediterranean–Gulf connectivity.[28]

25. "UAE-France Strategic Dialogue reaffirms commitment to advancing shared priorities," Emirates News Agency (WAM), May 2026, 7, https://www.wam.ae/en/article/c03crc7-uae-france-strategic-dialogue-reaffirms-commitment
26. "Minister of State for Foreign Trade Chairs Qatari Side at Trade Session of Qatar-Spain Strategic Dialogue," Qatar News Agency, Press release, February 2026, 26, https://qna.org.qa/en/news/news-details?id=minister-of-state-for-foreign-trade-chairs-qatari-side-at-trade-session-of-qatar-spain-strategic-dialogue&date=26/02/2026
27. "V Italian-Arab Business Forum," Joint Italian-Arab Chamber of Commerce, April 2026, 24, https://jiac.it/en/eventi/italian-arab-business-forum/
28. "President Meloni visits Saudi Arabia, Qatar and United Arab Emirates," Italian GovernmentPresidency of the Council of Ministers, Press relase, April 2026, 4, https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/president-meloni-visits-saudi-arabia-qatar-and-united-arab-emirates/31447

This evolution is not limited to bilateral relations. Tourism increasingly appears within wider Europe–GCC multilateral frameworks focused on sustainability, transport and regional resilience. The Extraordinary GCC–EU Meeting held in March 2026 reinforced this trajectory by linking sustainable development, regional stability and connectivity within a shared cooperation agenda.[29] The discussions also anticipated the second EU–GCC Summit, expected to take place in Riyadh later in 2026 as a follow-up to the inaugural Brussels summit of October 2024, with connectivity, mobility and economic resilience likely to feature prominently on the agenda.[30]

The growing integration between tourism and connectivity agendas became particularly visible during the World Travel & Tourism Council's (WTTC) "Leadership Cruise" held along the Suez Canal in May 2026, which brought together more than 300 tourism, transport and policy leaders worldwide – including from Europe and the GCC. Beyond its symbolic value, the summit highlighted the extent to which European and Gulf tourism ecosystems are structurally interconnected through aviation networks, maritime corridors and global transit hubs linking Europe, the Mediterranean and Asia.[31] Discussions involving GCC representatives and European actors — including Eduardo Santander, CEO of the European Travel Commission (ETC) — focused increasingly on operational resilience, coordinated crisis management and the creation of shared public–private mechanisms capable of mitigating geopolitical disruptions while preserving traveller confidence and transport continuity. [32]

The summit also reinforced the growing connection between tourism resilience and wider economic security frameworks. Participants discussed the need to align projected tourism growth – including projected European tourism growth of around 7.8%, alongside continued joint investments in airports, aviation corridors, logistics infrastructure and integrated Mediterranean–Gulf transport systems. At the same time, European and GCC stakeholders highlighted the importance of coordinated airspace management, shared travel advisory mechanisms and real-time information sharing aimed at preventing sudden disruptions to mobility flows across Europe–Gulf routes. These discussions reflected a broader recognition that tourism resilience increasingly depends not only on hospitality infrastructure, but also on wider systems involving transport connectivity, digitalisation, institutional coordination and strategic continuity planning.[33]

Importantly, the discussions aboard the Suez summit also reflected the broader geopolitical rebalancing currently shaping Mediterranean–Gulf connectivity. While Gulf countries continue consolidating their role as global mobility and investment hubs, GCC financial actors are increasingly expanding investments into North African tourism and connectivity infrastructure closely linked to European markets. More broadly, Europe and the GCC increasingly appear to view tourism cooperation as part of a wider architecture of Mediterranean–Gulf integration, where mobility, logistics, investment and strategic resilience increasingly reinforce one another.[34]

In this context, tourism is evolving beyond a purely commercial sector into a strategic platform supporting diversification, connectivity and long-term Europe–GCC integration.

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29. "Joint statement by GCC-EU Ministers' meeting on recent developments in the Middle East: Iran's attacks against GCC states," Council of the European Union, Press release, March 2026, 3, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/03/05/joint-statement-by-gcc-eu-ministers-meeting-on-recent-developments-in-the-middle-east-iran-s-attacks-against-gcc-states/
30. "The EU-GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification Project - Phase II," European Union External Action (EEAS), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/EUintheGCC-phase2_en
31. Misbaah Mansuri, "WTTC hosts Suez Canal cruise for tourism recovery talks," Connecting Travel, May 2026, 7, https://connectingtravel.com/news/wttc-hosts-suez-canal-cruise-for-tourism-recovery-talks
32. "High-level tourism meeting cruises through Suez Canal," Meetings & Conventions Asia, May 2026, 12, https://www.meetings-conventions-asia.com/News/Conferences-and-Exhibitions/High-level-tourism-meeting-cruises-through-Suez-Canal
33. Frank Kane, "WTTC'S Suez cruise reveals 'Dubai model' vulnerabilities," AGBI, Opinion, May 2026, 14, https://www.agbi.com/opinion/tourism/2026/05/wttcs-suez-cruise-reveals-dubai-model-vulnerabilities/
34. David del Valle, "Suez Canal summit: global tourism holds its breath," Euronews, May 2026, 19, https://www.euronews.com/travel/2026/05/19/suez-canal-summit-global-tourism-holds-its-breath

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