

EU – GCC DIALOGUE ON ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION PHASE II

A Project funded by the European Union

8. ACTIVITY REPORT

Trade and Investment Webinar

A project implemented by DAI in consortium with AHK and ICCS

DAI

ICCS

AHK

German Emirati Joint Council for Industry and Commerce

المجلس الألماني الإماراتي المشترك للصناعة و التجارة

EU-GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification
A project funded by the European Union

Activity Report

Trade and Investment Webinar
EU-GCC Business Forum webinar series

17 September 2026, Online

I. Summary

	Description
Theme	Trade and Investment Webinar from the EU-GCC Business Forum webinar series under the EU–GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification II
Purpose	To revisit key findings, recommendations and partnership opportunities identified during the 9th Forum and assess progress achieved since November 2025. Focus on translating these findings into concrete business actions, partnerships and policy recommendations to be showcased and advanced at the 10th Forum.
Date and time	17 September 2026, 13:00 Saudi Arabian time
Venue	Online (idloom, MS Teams)
Organised by	• DAI • AHK – German Emirati Joint Council for Industry and Commerce
Supported by	Delegation of the European Union to Saudi Arabia
Format	Online (fully virtual)
Language	English
Main Target Audience	GCC government authorities, EU and Saudi/GCC institutions and regulatory bodies, EU and GCC business community, and experts.
Number of Participants	110

II. Performance Reporting

1. Event Delivery

The webinar focused on how recent geopolitical disruptions have accelerated the EU and GCC's shared focus on trade resilience, supply chain security, and economic diversification. From a government perspective, Hamad Al-Nasr explained how Qatar successfully managed supply chain disruptions by monitoring critical products, diversifying logistics routes, and strengthening regional cooperation. Muhammad Arslan Khan described the significant impact of disruptions on regional shipping and port operations, noting that the crisis reinforced the need for alternative transport corridors, stronger land connectivity, and improved customs coordination across GCC countries. Meanwhile, Thierry Cloutet emphasised that resilience, security and economic development have

Throughout the discussion, speakers agreed that future competitiveness will depend on investments in resilient infrastructure, integrated transport networks, streamlined customs processes, and stronger EU-GCC collaboration. Industry representatives stressed the need for continued investment in ports, rail networks, technology transfer, workforce development, and local manufacturing capabilities. The webinar concluded with a clear message that resilience, diversification, connectivity and long-term partnership should be at the centre of future EU-GCC trade and investment cooperation.

1.1 Opening and moderation

The webinar was opened by Hanna Kuula Verbaan, who welcomed participants and explained that this was the second in a series of four webinars designed to bridge discussions between the 9th EU-GCC Business Forum in Kuwait (2025) and the 10th EU-GCC Business Forum. The objective was to review recommendations made at the Kuwait forum, assess developments since then, and identify practical business messages and partnership opportunities that could feed into official EU-GCC trade and investment discussions.

Florian Walther recalled that the 2025 Kuwait forum focused on diversification through partnership, emphasising co-development, logistics connectivity, and resilient trade routes. He noted that geopolitical disruptions over the past ten months had transformed these topics from long-term strategic ambitions into immediate operational concerns.

Contributor	Role	Background
Hanna Kuula Verbaan	Executive Assistant to the Team Leader, EU-GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification Project	Hanna Kuula Verbaan is the Executive Assistant to the Team Leader, EU-GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification Project and assist the Team Leader in all project activities. The project's overall goal is to enhance EU-GCC economic, trade, and investment relations in line with the EU's strategic partnership with the Gulf, while supporting GCC economic diversification and promoting European business engagement in the region.
Florian Walther	Country Representative for Kuwait and Pakistan, German Emirati Joint Council for Industry and Commerce	Florian Walther is Country Representative for Kuwait and Pakistan at the German Emirati Joint Council for Industry and Commerce, where he represents German industry interests toward public and private stakeholders in both markets and works to strengthen bilateral trade and investment ties between Germany and the region. He previously worked at Deloitte in audit and assurance and in management, strategy consulting.
Hamad Al Nasr	Director of Trade Development and Investment Promotion, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Qatar.	Hamad Al Nasr is Director of Trade Development and Investment Promotion at Qatar's Ministry of Commerce and Industry, where he leads the Ministry's foreign investment attraction, export development and trade exchange agenda. He oversees Qatar's commercial attachés abroad, manages the Ministry's bilateral trade and investment relations, and works across government and the private sector to advance Qatar's economic priorities.

Contributor	Role	Background
Arslan Khan	Area Sales Director, Hapag-Lloyd[1] Middle East	Arslan Khan is Area Sales Director at Hapag-Lloyd Middle East, overseeing commercial activities across seven countries in the Arabian Gulf and Pakistan. He brings over 25 years of professional experience, including more than two decades in senior management and leadership roles. Previously, he served as Managing Director of Maersk Line for Pakistan and Afghanistan and Head of Logistics for Milaha in the UAE and Oman. With extensive experience in regional shipping and logistics, Arslan brings a practical industry perspective on how the Middle East crisis is affecting maritime trade, supply chain resilience and business continuity.
Thierry Cloutet	Head of Regional Business Growth MENA, Airbus[2].	Thierry Cloutet is Head of Regional Business Growth MENA at Airbus, where he covers the full breadth of the company's activities in the region, from commercial aircraft and helicopters to Defence and Space. He also took part in the Trade and Investment session at the 9th EU-GCC Business Forum in Kuwait, bringing continuity to the discussion and a perspective on how industrial partnership, local capability building and sovereignty requirements have evolved across the Gulf.

1.2 Qatar's Perspective: Resilience Has Become Urgent

Speaking from Qatar's policy perspective, Hamad Al-Nasr stressed that recent regional disruptions had not altered Qatar's strategic direction but had dramatically increased the urgency of implementation. What had previously been viewed as a competitiveness agenda has become a resilience agenda. He further emphasised that the private sector knows its way in the economy, and it has shown this during the current crisis.

He described how Qatar's government responded to supply chain disruptions by closely monitoring over 5,000 products through a dedicated tracking system, allowing authorities to maintain visibility over inventory levels and ensure continuity of supply. He noted that despite a twenty-fold spike in demand for bottled water during the crisis, shelves remained stocked and strategic reserves were not required.

Qatar also rapidly diversified logistics routes, making greater use of land corridors through Saudi Arabia and ports outside the Strait. According to Al-Nasr, the crisis reinforced the importance of deeper cooperation with Europe and indeed has strengthened the relationship with Europe, particularly in pharmaceuticals, manufacturing, supply-chain resilience, and alternative transport routes. EU should be considered a co-partner for resilience and there is a need for the GCC and the EU to partner more on routes as the clock is ticking and there is urgency.

1.3 Logistics Perspective: The Scale of the Disruption

Arslan Khan explained the operational impact of maritime disruptions from the logistics sector's perspective. He first described how shipping lines had adapted to Cape of Good Hope diversions

[1] Hapag-Lloyd is a leading global liner shipping company that belongs to the leading ocean carriers for the trades Transatlantic, Middle East, Latin America and Intra-America.
[2] Airbus designs, manufactures and delivers industry-leading commercial aircraft, helicopters, military transports, satellites, launchers and more.

by deploying additional vessels and delaying ship retirements, which largely protected overall shipping capacity.

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz, however, created a far greater challenge. He noted that approximately 15 million TEUs[3] of annual cargo movement and terminals with a combined handling capacity of around 38 million TEUs were suddenly affected. Alternative ports located on the East Coast and in Oman offered a combined capacity of only around 10 million TEUs, creating severe congestion and logistical bottlenecks.

To maintain food security and critical supply chains, governments and shipping operators prioritised essential goods and rerouted cargo through ports such as Fujairah, Khorfakkan, Sohar, Salalah and Jeddah. Cargo destined for Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait increasingly moved via Saudi Arabia by road.

Mr Khan highlighted how the crisis accelerated the importance of GCC rail networks and land bridges, including links between UAE rail projects, Oman Rail and Saudi Rail infrastructure. He argued that future resilience depends on customs harmonisation, bonded transport systems and seamless border procedures across GCC states. According to him, even if maritime routes fully normalise, many businesses are likely to continue using alternative land corridors as part of their long-term resilience strategies.

1.4 Airbus Perspective: Resilience, Sovereignty and Local Capability

Thierry Cloutet explained how Airbus had observed a significant shift in regional priorities over the previous ten months. He noted that economic development, defence and security are now viewed as increasingly interconnected rather than separate policy areas.

He described Airbus's "360-degree partnership model", which rests on three pillars:

1. Supporting defence and security platforms and operations.
2. Enabling national sovereignty through secure communications, satellites, public safety networks and localised data infrastructure.
3. Expanding local capabilities through maintenance, support services and industrial partnerships.

Mr Cloutet emphasised that Gulf countries increasingly seek co-development rather than simple procurement. Airbus therefore aims to strengthen local industrial ecosystems, develop technical skills and invest in human capital across the region.

1.5 Discussion on Future Priorities

During a second round of discussion, the speakers outlined their key priorities for the future.

Hamad Al-Nasr argued that resilience today is the result of decisions taken years earlier and therefore current investments must prepare for future crises. He identified expanded land corridors through Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Turkey, investment in ports and dry ports, and customs cooperation as major priorities. He also highlighted the value of EU expertise in customs integration and logistics facilitation.

Arslan Khan explained that although new port infrastructure investments are already being launched, significant expansion requires years to complete. In the short term, shipping companies are adapting by reallocating services toward East Coast ports and strengthening road-based logistics networks. Capacity development to the East Coast is urgently needed as in the future it

[3] TEU is a standard unit of measurement in shipping. It stands for Twenty-Foot Equivalent Unit. EU is used to estimate how many ISO shipping containers a cargo ship can handle. A 20ft container = 1 TEU; a 40ft container = 2 TEUs. TEU is also used to measure port throughput, terminal capacity, vessel size, and freight rates.

will not be viable to transport goods purely sea-sea.

Thierry Cloutet noted a growing demand for local industrial development, technology transfer and workforce training. Airbus sees future success depending on local manufacturing partnerships, technical capacity-building and sovereign operational capabilities supported by local expertise.

1.6 Key Messages for the 10th EU-GCC Business Forum

When speakers were asked for a single recommendation for the next Business Forum:

- **Thierry Cloutet** called for a stronger partnership mindset focused on capability-building and long-term engagement rather than transactional relationships.
- **Arslan Khan** advocated customs unification and streamlined border processes to reduce delays and improve efficiency across GCC logistics corridors. Currently, getting through customs takes extensive time and in business, time is of the essence.
- **Hamad Al Nasr** proposed making resilience a central theme of the 10th EU-GCC Business Forum and suggested exploring deeper EU-GCC economic integration through customs harmonisation and trade facilitation measures. European and Gulf companies should join the Forum with actual project initiatives.

2. Audience engagement and follow-up

2.1 Question and Answer Session

A participant from Holland Acumen argued that the private sector should play a larger role in implementing solutions and asked why more execution-driven, private-sector-led initiatives are not visible. In response, Florian Walther noted that more than 600 companies participated in the Kuwait forum and emphasised the significant role played by businesses in the EU-GCC dialogue. Thierry Cloutet added that Airbus itself represents a major private-sector partner investing in local development, making 2/3rds of the panellists companies.

Participants raised practical logistics questions regarding transit times between Jeddah, Bahrain and Qatar. Arslan Khan explained that road transit itself takes approximately three days, but customs and documentation processes often add several days. He acknowledged that actual delivery times can be significantly longer because of congestion, port capacity limitations and documentation requirements.

Further questions focused on road freight corridors and the cost of resilience measures. Arslan Khan confirmed that major investments in freight infrastructure, logistics yards and alternative transport corridors are already underway in the UAE and wider region. He also observed that while resilience imposes costs initially, economies of scale usually reduce those costs over time, with some of the financial burden ultimately spread across supply chains and reflected in consumer prices.

3. Key outcomes

The final takeaway from the discussion was a shared recognition that **resilience, diversification, infrastructure connectivity and stronger EU-GCC partnerships have become urgent priorities**, shaping both business and policy agendas for the 10th EU-GCC Business Forum. Specifically:

- Stronger EU-GCC partnerships are needed: The discussion highlighted the importance of building long-term, strategic relationships between European and Gulf stakeholders across trade, logistics, manufacturing, technology and investment.
- Recent geopolitical and supply chain disruptions have transformed resilience from a long-

term strategic objective into an immediate business and policy priority. Governments and companies are focusing on ensuring continuity of trade, logistics and supply chains.

- Supply chain diversification is now essential: Businesses and governments can no longer rely on a single transport route or logistics hub. Alternative maritime routes, land corridors and multimodal transport solutions are increasingly viewed as critical components of resilient supply chains.
- Customs harmonisation remains a major challenge: Speakers repeatedly identified customs procedures, border crossings and documentation requirements as significant bottlenecks. Greater alignment of customs systems across GCC countries would improve efficiency and resilience.
- EU expertise can support GCC integration efforts: The European Union's experience with customs integration, trade facilitation and cross-border cooperation presents opportunities for deeper EU-GCC collaboration in logistics and trade policy.
- Economic development and security are increasingly interconnected: Businesses and governments now see trade, economic diversification, defence, security and infrastructure resilience as closely linked rather than separate policy areas.
- Local capability building is becoming a priority: There is growing demand for local manufacturing, maintenance capabilities, technical expertise and knowledge transfer to strengthen economic sovereignty and create sustainable growth.
- Significant infrastructure investment is underway: Governments and industry are investing in ports, logistics zones, freight corridors, road networks and future rail systems to strengthen regional connectivity and enhance resilience.
- The private sector must play a leading role: Participants stressed that businesses are critical partners in delivering practical solutions and translating policy ambitions into real commercial opportunities and investments.
- Resilience comes with costs but provides long-term benefits: While diversification and redundancy in supply chains require investment, speakers argued that these costs are outweighed by the benefits of avoiding major disruptions and ensuring continuity of trade.