I have long believed that Europe and the Gulf should explore the potential synergies of closer association and opportunities for closer alignment: politically, economically and strategically. I am therefore delighted that the Bussola Institute has been established as a centre for research into areas of mutual interest and as a focus for engagement between the institutions of European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council.

From its headquarters in the centre of Brussels, Bussola has embarked on building an organisation that should encourage and facilitate research into the principal avenues of national and international power relevant to both our regions. This is important work and reading this review of the first twelve months of Bussola’s activities I cannot help but be impressed by the vigour and evident enthusiasm of its supporters and staff, and by what has been achieved over the first year with relatively limited resources. This augurs well for the future.

José María Aznar
President of the Honorary Advisory Board of the Bussola Institute

As this Review reflects, this has been a busy first twelve months for the Bussola Institute. I am especially pleased that we have been fortunate and privileged to secure the commitment of several senior and influential figures on the European stage to inform our deliberations, to offer their advice and guidance, and to be our Honorary Advisory Board. Their commitment, both individually and collectively, has been vital in shaping and prioritising our initial research programmes and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their time and wisdom during this initial year of operation.

I am also grateful to our hardworking staff who have done so much to make the idea of the Bussola Institute a reality. Their effort and wholehearted commitment to our initiative has been inspirational and is greatly appreciated. I hope that Bussola will continue to develop as an important meeting point between our two regions where facts, opinions and differing perspectives can be explored openly and in a spirit of goodwill and shared respect.

Amal Abdullah Al-Haddabi
Chairperson of the Board of Directors of the Bussola Institute
April 2019 represents the culmination of the first year of operation of the Bussola Institute, a year during which it has grown from a vision to an established Brussels-based institution.

I am delighted to say that this period was a productive and successful 12 months, during which the Bussola Institute has made significant progress in building a high-quality research environment, combined with a strong outreach and public engagement programme. We are already well on course in advancing our central aim of fostering strong and positive relations between the countries of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) and the European Union (EU).

Within this short period, the Bussola Institute has started to generate impactful research and publications that are helping to deepen understanding of the diverse issues that affect policy making in relations between the GCC and EU, especially in the areas of political, diplomatic, economic, strategic, social and cultural endeavour.

What is more, our now regular seminar, round-table and majlis events are serving to stimulate genuine discussion, analysis and an understanding of the issues that lie at the heart of European political, institutional and diplomatic discourse in Brussels.

As we mark these early achievements with the publication of this review, I would like to take the opportunity to express my deep appreciation to everyone who has supported our efforts over the past year, most particularly the members of Bussola’s Honorary Advisory Board, our distinguished Guests of Honour, the contributors and participants at our many events and, of course, the Bussola staff team, whose admirable focus and commitment to our shared vision have been central to our success to date. I extend my special gratitude to our Chairperson and Board of Directors for their wisdom, guidance and unfailing support throughout the year.

We, in the Bussola Institute, are determined to drive our research and events agenda with optimism, vision, ambition, excellence and impact. In our increasingly globalised world, we look forward to further developing Bussola’s objective, independent, intellectual framework to support and nurture existing and future relationships between the GCC and the EU.

John Dennehy
Secretary General, Bussola Institute
The Bussola Institute (Bussola) has been established as a research centre and ‘think tank’ to explore and debate current and future relationships between the countries and institutions of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the European Union (EU) against the backdrop of regional and global change. It now operates from a permanent base in central Brussels. This is Bussola’s review of its first year of operation.

Bussola is an independent, not-for-profit, non-governmental foundation focusing on the main elements of national power and international relations – political, diplomatic, economic, strategic, social and cultural. Over time, Bussola aims to advance knowledge and conduct research that will inform policy making and provide a focus for greater understanding of the issues and relationships that affect both the GCC and the EU.

The aim of this review is to provide both an outline of the vision, mission and goals of the Institute, and to offer a brief overview of some of the outcomes from the initial stages of its research and engagement activities in 2018 and the first quarter of 2019.
VISION

The vision for the Bussola Institute is that it will grow and develop into a respected, world-class Research Institute and Think-and-Do-Tank, that will shape and encourage multicultural interconnections between the GCC region and the EU.

It is the intention that the Bussola Institute will become recognised worldwide for the quality and rigour of its research, analytical studies and activities, with its researchers providing an objective, independent, intellectual framework to understand and nurture existing and future relationships between the GCC and the EU, through a multi-dimensional approach embracing the five key areas of influence and power: Political, Social, Economic, Security and Cultural.

MISSION

The Mission of the Bussola Institute is to generate and share information, conduct research and analyse data with a view to developing deeper understanding of the diverse issues that affect policy making in relations between the GCC and EU.

The Bussola Institute will advance knowledge and support policy-making through producing objective, independent, rigorous research in co-operation with strategic partnerships and networks, both locally and internationally. The Institute will disseminate and communicate information and analysis to enrich and promote public debate and understanding through the publication of papers and books, contribute to professional journal publications, and through the organisation of events, including: seminars, workshops, majlis events¹, conferences and exhibitions.

The Bussola Institute will serve as a platform for a vibrant community of scholars and researchers and, in its drive for excellence, will monitor, evaluate and measure the quality of all its research, outputs and events against international, peer-level research and best practice.

¹ A ‘majlis’ is an Arabic word meaning "a place of sitting". It describes various types of gatherings among common interest groups to pursue administrative, social or religious engagement. Importantly, a ‘majlis’ encourages a free flow of discourse without facilitation or moderation.
During the period from its inaugural meeting in April 2018 to March 2019, Bussola published its first research papers and conducted a series of seminars, workshops and majlis events. Short summaries of these outputs and some of their outcomes are set out in the following review.
POLITICAL and SECURITY

From its inception, the Bussola Institute has pursued a variety of political and security-related themes, actively engaging the experience and wise counsel of the members of its Honorary Advisory Board.

Arguably political and security issues pose the most significant and urgent challenges for the future development of EU-GCC relations. It is therefore considered appropriate that Bussola researchers spent much of the Institute’s first year of operation focusing on matters under these headings.
In April, Bussola published its first research paper by senior analyst, Mark McKinney, entitled ‘Extremism and Terrorism’. This in-depth paper captured the diversity of issues confronting both the EU and GCC and concluded that extremism and terrorism remain a constant threat to the fabric of world society where numerous world terrorist organisations and those who support them remain actively engaged in doing everything in their power to disrupt and, in some cases, destroy the status quo in the countries they target.

The paper emphasised the perceived linkage between political Islam and extremism, as well as the regional ambitions of Iran that have occasioned deep rifts between it and many Arab and Western nations.

The paper also argued that Al-Qaeda (AQ) maintains its ability to conduct operations across the globe and continues to capitalise on the demise of Islamic State (IS). With the support of Iran and others, AQ has emerged as a true survivor and with a global network containing tens of thousands of foot soldiers willing to do its bidding. It is assessed that even though 2018 witnessed the near-elimination of IS as a territorial threat to both Europe and the Arab World, it and AQ’s extremist ideologies will continue to hold sway in the future and will remain a potent challenge to defence and security in both the GCC and EU.
In June 2018, Bussola conducted a workshop at Farmleigh House in Dublin, the prestigious official state guest house of Ireland. Members of Bussola’s Honorary Advisory Board and Guests of Honour discussed “Lessons for the Future Navigation of the Relationships between EU and GCC Countries”. Other invited participants included: Ms Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, a former EU Commissioner; Mr Bobby McDonagh, Deputy Secretary General at Ireland’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Mr Ciaran Madden, Ireland’s Consul General in New York and former Ambassador of Ireland to the United Arab Emirates; and Bishop Noel Treanor, the former General Secretary of the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Community. The Workshop also received a briefing on the then state of Brexit and EU Free Trade negotiations from Mr Simon Coveney, TD, Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister of Ireland) and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The Workshop was conducted under the ‘Chatham House Rule’\(^1\), as will be customary for most Bussola discussions. It was agreed that the Bussola Institute will be helpful in pushing forward renewed negotiations between the EU and the GCC with a view to establishing a new Free Trade Agreement; an initiative that has been stalled since the cessation of talks in 2008.

Ahead of the Pope’s planned visit to the United Arab Emirates, which took place in February 2019, it was agreed that Bussola could also play a useful and constructive role in promoting interfaith dialogue, particularly given that the UAE had already announced its intention to declare 2019, ‘The Year of Tolerance’ – a theme that Bussola will be pursuing in both the political and cultural spheres.

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\(^1\)The ‘Chatham House Rule’ states that: “When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.”
Subsequently, and in pursuit of exploring the political and diplomatic aspects of GCC-EU relations, Bussola published a paper by Mohammed Baharoon, one of Bussola’s Board of Directors, entitled ‘The Growing Role of Arabian Gulf Countries in Africa: More Than Security’. Prompted by French President Macron’s call for the establishment of a Sahel Region Counter-Terrorism Force, the author argued that the EU and GCC’s engagement with Africa should be understood beyond just issues of security. Instead, he argued that the EU’s support to the African Peace & Security Architecture (APSA) through financing the African Peace Facility has proved insufficient over the years and has instead led to increased scepticism over the EU’s true commitment to the region.

Against this backdrop, the paper went on to suggest that the development of political, as well as security, partnerships between Arab and Islamic countries led by the GCC countries will be most valuable in Africa, as well as serving the interests of both the EU and NATO. The author concluded that long-standing challenges require new thinking and that a GCC-EU partnership to pursue new, joint relationships could serve, not only to stabilise weak and failing governments across Africa, but also to further the mutual interests of the GCC and EU.
Bussola hosted a seminar at its Brussels headquarters in October 2018 to consider the emergence of the Arabian Peninsula as a “New Regional Security Paradigm”. The seminar explored the scope and scale of perceived strategic shifts and assessed the possible implications this new frame of strategic reference might entail for the future of the GCC, and its relationship with the EU, NATO and other international alliances and partnerships.

Participants agreed that the Arabian Peninsula faces a changing security environment that may be leading to a new geostrategic paradigm with direct and indirect implications for the Arab region and with potentially important consequences for the EU. Most obviously, these changes have included recent turbulence in global energy prices that have adversely affected public revenues in the Gulf. They have also manifested as differing approaches to economic reform across the region, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates most forward leaning in their embrace of economic diversification through their ‘Vision 2030’ and ‘Vision 2021’ programmes.

At the close of the seminar, it was agreed that for the EU, deepening ties with the Gulf states present both opportunities and challenges. Most importantly, the emerging strategic paradigm that is evident in the shift away from a limited focus on the strategic defence of the waters and coastline of the Arabian Gulf towards recognition of the Arabian Peninsula in its strategic entirety is of vital importance. This provides the context for understanding the GCC’s increasing strategic involvement in the Horn of Africa, the role that individual Gulf states are playing in Libya, Egypt and as far afield as Mali. It also means that, as the EU seeks to exert strategic influence along the North African littoral and to sustain relations with Turkey in opposition to Russian hegemonic ambitions for its own greater involvement in the Arab world, so the EU needs to recognise the GCC collectively as an important strategic, as well as economic, partner.
In November, the Honorary Advisory Board and senior members of the Bussola staff were accorded the honour of an invitation for a full day’s visit to the new headquarters of NATO. They were warmly received by NATO Secretary General, HE Jens Stoltenberg, and NATO Head, Middle East and North Africa Countries Section, Nicola de Santis. The Bussola team was then privileged to receive briefings from senior NATO representatives on current perceptions of the threats facing NATO with particular emphasis on Europe and the Middle East.

Finally, in February 2019, Bussola hosted a majlis event that focused on the ‘Stability of the EU’s Neighbourhood’. In partnership with the Bertelsmann Foundation, the gathering focused specifically on the roles of four key state actors: Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. It also considered their roles in light of the recent US decision to withdraw from its military commitments and undertakings in Syria. The event was an opportunity to engage with experts on each of these states to understand the impact of a potential change in the US role in the Middle East. The concluding remarks were dedicated to sharing recommendations on how the EU might help in stabilising its neighbourhood by taking these key states’ interests into account in formulating future foreign policy steps.
Bussola has also focused on the various aspects of how the countries of the GCC are developing national strategies for using present oil wealth to develop and transition towards becoming ‘post-oil’ economies that will be sustainable and enduring. It is widely understood that this is a matter of key interest to the EU and its member states, many of which are closely enmeshed with major economic projects and educational developments across the GCC.

ECONOMICS AND TECHNOLOGY
It was appropriate that the Bussola Institute marked its inauguration in April 2018 with its first seminar at its Brussels headquarters: “The Future Vision of GCC Post-Oil Economic Strategies: Challenges and Opportunities in Europe.” The Institute was delighted that this first event was opened by the President of Bussola’s Honorary Advisory Board, HE José María Aznar, the former President of the Government of Spain. In turn, he welcomed HE Sergei Stanishev, President of the Party of European Socialists (PES) who used his address to emphasise the importance of maintaining peace and stability within the GCC in order to engender stronger economic relations between the two blocs.

HE Antonio López-Istúriz White, General Secretary of the European People’s Party (EPP), emphasised his slightly differing view that enhanced economic relations between the GCC and EU should be possible because of the former’s emphasis on tolerance and the culture of openness that increasingly underscores EU-GCC relations. From the United Arab Emirates, HE Juma al-Kait, Assistant Under-Secretary for Foreign Trade Affairs, agreed continuing efforts to reinforce economic ties between the EU and GCC were crucial to strengthening relations between the two entities. He also hoped that this would lead to the completion of the long-proposed Free Trade Agreement between the EU and GCC.
In October, Bussola followed up its opening seminar with the launch of a paper by another of the Institute’s senior researchers, Angus Taverner, entitled: ‘Post-Oil Economies: Opportunities and Threats.’ The author outlined both the challenges facing the GCC and the many opportunities that have been identified. The paper argued that as the GCC moves into a “post-oil era” – perhaps over the next 30 years – a combination of reducing demand for hydrocarbons and the Gulf’s increasing reliance on developing areas of economic activity in competition with the rest of the world suggests that its ‘exceptional status’ will start to diminish.

Across the GCC in particular, the post-oil era will favour those with the education and mindset to benefit from new economic opportunities. This is why the UAE is seen to be leading the region as it continues its embrace of post-oil economic reform. The author also suggested that there is concern that this process is seen as leaving some people behind: perhaps the old, the religiously conservative, the less well-off, the less well-educated – and those who simply dislike change. These sectors of society could present a longer-term challenge for Gulf leaderships.

The paper argued that there remains the risk that economic diversification will not entirely deliver its current promise. Not only does it require a shift away from the current sense of Gulf economic confidence and well-being, but it also requires people – nationals and expatriates alike – to embrace change; never easy in the smallest of organisations and always immensely challenging for whole economic communities.
At the end of October, Bussola was invited to contribute to the 3rd European Union-Arab World Summit hosted by the Greek government in Athens. Bussola’s Director of Strategy, Brian Power, and Angus Taverner represented the Institute, with the latter giving a presentation as part of a Panel Discussion on European understanding of the Arab World, and the Arabian Peninsula in particular. He told the more than 1,000-strong audience that there was significant potential value in the EU focusing more specifically on its future political and strategic engagement with the countries of the Arabian Peninsula. As he emphasised, while other parts of the Arab World may be more geographically proximate to the EU and therefore of most direct concern, arguably strengthening EU relations with the Arab Gulf would serve both to exert influence in the Levant and along the North African littoral, as well as helping to strengthen economic ties between the two blocs.

The Summit also highlighted several important political issues concerning future Arab-EU co-operation. These included: migration, humanitarian and security crises, the rise of nationalism on a wave of populist sentiment, apparently in response to the impact of globalisation, and continuing concerns around the confusion between the central tenets of Islam and the lasting impact of political Islamism.

Delegates to the Summit agreed that shared challenges both for Europe and the Arab World were evident in a number of areas including: how best to respond to climate change, the development of renewable energy, sustainable development, water and food security, and broad-based social cohesion. These are all areas of concern for EU-GCC relations and will inform the Bussola Institute’s research programme over the next three years.
The Bussola Institute has been established, not only to conduct research into the fundamental elements of power that will continue to shape the future of GCC-EU relations but also to explore and encourage some of the less tangible, ‘softer’ dimensions of what these relationships entail. Since its inception, the Bussola Institute, through an exploration of the theme ‘The Values that Bind Us’, has been especially active in contributing to the promotion of peace, tolerance, cohesion and inter-faith dialogue between followers of different religions. This not only concerns the cross-cultural issues that are too often seen as divisive, but also matters of faith and tolerance that influence perceptions and opinions in fundamental ways that are sometimes hard to understand or acknowledge.
In June, Board Director Mohammed Baharoon, and Bussola’s Director of Strategy, Brian Power, travelled to Croatia to participate in an interfaith dialogue hosted by the Islamic Centre in Zagreb. The event was aimed at exploring the religious situation in Croatia where interfaith tolerance and co-operation have emerged as vital elements for the stability and well-being of the state. At the conclusion of the event, it was agreed that Bussola would continue to facilitate and encourage interfaith dialogue with the express intention of promoting tolerance and integration of Muslim and other minority communities in other European countries.
Mindful of the historic visit to the UAE by Pope Francis in early February 2019, where he attended a landmark ‘International Interfaith Meeting on Human Fraternity’, Bussola hosted a further majlis at its Brussels headquarters. This was entitled: ‘The Values that Bind Us: A Conversation on Tolerance and the Potential of Inter-Faith Dialogue’ and explored further the importance of inter-faith dialogue and particularly tolerance as key factors in building societies and reducing religious tensions and conflicts.

The majlis brought together 20 religious leaders, diplomats and civil society representatives from across the international spectrum to discuss important questions concerning shared values, the importance of inter-faith understanding, and dialogue. The majlis identified several themes that were deemed worthy of further consideration and development. These included:

- The importance of strong leadership so that the message of tolerance is communicated more powerfully and more effectively across all communities and faiths.
- The need to improve the quality of religious education and the need to inculcate ideas of tolerance and mutual respect from the earliest ages, so that children grow up understanding the many ideas shared across all religions while also appreciating that religious differences need to be understood, tolerated and even embraced.
- The importance of volunteering, particularly amongst young people, so that this becomes a core responsibility for every society. Volunteering provides an excellent means for promoting understanding and bridging age, class and differences of view.
- The promotion of interfaith tolerance still requires stronger role models who will be naturally followed and supported by global communities. This is now especially important in increasingly secular societies where a lack of religious understanding and frequent prejudice have become more pronounced.
- As ever, the media, both social and mainstream, have a vital part to play in changing religious narratives, embracing messages that encourage tolerance and shaping international attitudes and perceptions.
At the close of 2018, Bussola was delighted to host a majlis event concerning change and transformation in the Arab World by way of a ‘Conversation with Saudi Women Pioneers’. The five learned women contributors from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) explained how much change and transformation had taken place over the previous 12 months. It was widely agreed amongst contributors that the kingdom was undergoing a major transitional period with reforms implemented in the political, social, cultural and economic fields as elaborated by a new generation of leadership. Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) had also devised Vision 2030, aimed principally at diversifying the Saudi economy away from oil and to establish the kingdom as a major international economic presence.

The majlis encouraged a vigorous exchange of views on the many changes that had been introduced in Saudi Arabia, noting in particular that change had arguably been delayed for so long that it was of the utmost importance that the kingdom catches up. As one contributor emphasised, it is the era of globalisation. 70% of the Saudi population is below 30 years of age. Hence it is more likely they would be accepting of these changes. A majority of Saudis have also been educated overseas. They have experienced other cultures and the impact of globalisation first hand. Furthermore, change is not happening haphazardly but is accompanied by laws, legislation and royal decrees.
Exhibition of the Work of the Emirates Red Crescent

In February and March 2019, Bussola was pleased to host an exhibition mounted by the Emirates Red Crescent, which highlighted the movement’s humanitarian work around the globe, not just across the Arab World but also further afield. The show emphasised the altruism and compassion that is central to the work of this great international humanitarian movement: protecting human life and health, respecting all human beings, and preventing and alleviating human suffering. It also helped to remind visitors that, in charitable, humanitarian work, differences of faith are no barrier to shared responses to international crises in which the poor and the least able are so often the most prominent victims.
Memorandum of Understanding: Bussola Institute and Dublin City University

In June 2018, the Chairperson of the Bussola Institute, HE Amal Abdullah Al-Haddabi, and the President of Dublin City University, Professor Brian MacCraith, met in Dublin to sign a Memorandum of Understanding between the two institutions that will enable researchers and students to pursue joint projects concerned with the development of GCC-EU relations.

Speaking after the signing, Professor MacCraith declared: “This is an important collaborative partnership that we both hope will help to develop world class research and promote innovative thinking and actions in the areas of tolerance, diversity and inclusion”.

On the evening of our inaugural event in April, Bussola’s guests were treated to a splendid performance by the internationally renowned Oud soloist, Faisal al-Saari, whose excellence it was generally agreed would set the standard for the cultural aspirations of Bussola to be both an interlocuter for the GCC in Brussels, and a neutral space for encouraging and enhancing international understanding of the many ties that already underpin relations between the European Union and the Arab Gulf.

We were not only delighted that Faisal played so beautifully and movingly for us but he also entered into the spirit of our intellectual focus on matters of cultural importance by taking part in a brief Question and Answer session about the music of the Arabian Gulf and especially the importance of the Oud as an instrument that is prominent in the deep and rich cultural history of the region.
CONCLUSION

- During the first 12 months of its existence, the Bussola Institute has successfully established its research programme under the three pillars that will comprise the future development and evolution of GCC-EU relations. It has engaged with key stakeholders and peer organisations, both in Brussels and internationally. And it has commenced the process of bringing disparate communities together, both to promote greater shared understanding and to deepen recognition of the values that bind us.

- Europe and the Arab Gulf enjoy a long history of strategic, economic and cultural engagement. However, it remains evident that these relationships are too often hampered by the lack of truly objective understanding, scarcity of evidence-based research, and wider levels of general misunderstanding, due either to false assumptions or ill-informed prejudice.

- Against this backdrop, it is already evident that the work of the Bussola Institute will fill an important gap in the research and information base that is vital to building a body of empirical evidence, deeper understanding, and encouraging the development of improved relations to the mutual benefit of the GCC and EU.

- This has been a successful and optimistic first 12 months of operation. Over the course of the next year and beyond, the Bussola Institute will build on this start, expanding its research activities, widening its circles of engagement and building the Institute’s reputation for objectivity, independence and academic excellence.