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*Argentina-GCC Relations. The role  
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**ARGENTINA-GCC RELATIONS. THE ROLE OF STATE AND NON-STATE ACTORS  
(2003-2015)<sup>1</sup>**

**A RELAÇÃO ENTRE ARGENTINA E O CONSELHO DE COOPERAÇÃO DO GOLFO. O  
ESTADO E OS ATORES NÃO-ESTATAIS (2003-2015)**

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**Abstract:** The long-established relationships between Argentina and the Arab world are the result of the significant presence of Arab communities and actors in Latin America, due to several migratory waves along history. However, bilateral relations with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have only deepened much more recently. Initiatives to widen relations such as the Summits of the South American-Arab Countries (ASPA, from its acronym in Spanish) and MERCOSUR-GCC have worked not only as a framework but also as a platform to diversify those relations in terms of the actors and initiatives involved. Since its beginning, the relationship between Argentina and the GCC states has had continuity in terms of trade exchanges and public diplomacy, even during periods defined by the absence of public policies towards the GCC countries. In this context, initiatives of a different nature conducted by socio-cultural or religious non-state actors have filled the gap, in a process of multiple exchanges, have added value to the relation and have gone further than the economic realm and formalities of public diplomacy, especially in the period 2003-2015.

**Key words:** *Gulf Cooperation Council, Argentina, bilateral relations, non-state actors.*

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The long-established relationships between Argentina and the Arab world are the result of the significant presence of Arab communities and actors<sup>4</sup> in Latin America due to several migratory waves along history. However, bilateral relations with the countries of the GCC<sup>5</sup> have been deepened much more recently, not only in terms of trade and public diplomacy but also in other grounds involving non-State actors such as think tanks, universities, study centres, churches, and foundations, among others. There have also been multilateral instances such as the Summits of the South American-Arab Countries (ASPA, from its acronym in Spanish) and MERCOSUR<sup>6</sup>-GCC, which have contributed to widen relations acting as a platform for their promotion and diversification.

Since its beginning, the contacts between Argentina and the GCC states has had continuity in terms of trade exchanges and the formalities of public diplomacy, despite some periods without public policies towards the GCC countries. The lack of commitment on a deeper relation could be explained by the fact that Argentina's foreign policy has been strongly influenced by its external relations with the major powers located in the developed West, the European countries and especially the United States (US). This has often led Argentina to ignore certain actors in the international system, whose potentialities could have otherwise encouraged a diversification of the country's relationships. As for the GCC states, which, except for Saudi Arabia, have achieved their independence fairly recently, they maintained a strong link with the United Kingdom (UK), the former colonial power and its network of alliances, which also limited their interest in other regions.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has undergone several changes in the correlation of forces of the international system such as the rise of the emerging economies, the increasing importance of raw materials in the new strategic global setting -linking food security and energy security-, the efforts to foster multilateralism and the encouragement of inter-regionalism. Within this context, state and non-state initiatives have grown simultaneously, complementing each other and giving rise to a more interdependent world. The activity of these actors provide more options to generate

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<sup>4</sup> Nowadays this mainly refers to descendants of the Arab immigrants.

<sup>5</sup> The GCC is a political and economic union of Arab states bordering the Arabian Gulf, namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

<sup>6</sup> MERCOSUR stands for Common Market of the South by its meaning in Spanish. It is a regional organization compound by: Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela.

new alliances in the multilateral and bilateral fields and contribute to intensify the existing ones, like the case of the relation between Argentina and the GCC States.

As energy and food commercial hubs respectively, the GCC countries and Argentina in its region have the best conditions to improve their cooperation in various fields. “The potentialities of Latin America and the Gulf suggest grounds for stronger ties. The GCC has a food security deficit, while Latin America has—in Brazil, Argentina and Peru—a strong food export profile, and Gulf oil is a key supply for Latin America” (THE ECONOMIST, 2014:21).

There are several studies on Argentinean-Arab World/Arab Islamic World Relations<sup>7</sup>. However, few of them refer specifically to the relation between Argentina and the GCC States. These studies have been developed in the last decade, being worth mentioning the advances made on the topic by Alejandra Galindo (2007 and 2013) from the University of Monterrey, Mexico; Ornela Fabbani (2011) from the National University of Rosario, and Juan José Vagni (2005 and 2014) from the National University of Córdoba, both from Argentina.

Bearing this information in mind, the aim of this paper is to explore the role of the State and of non-state actors in fostering Argentina-GCC cooperation between 2003-2015 and to shed light on the potential opportunities offered by these promising relations. In this research, we contend that there is room to fostering trade and bilateral exchanges where “political timing” and “business timing” need to find their commonalities, based on individual interests and goals. In this sense, through official channels, the Argentinean government has created since 2003 a more appropriate framework which led to deepen mutual knowledge between Argentina and the GCC countries, in a context of a growing trade.

The year 2003 has been taken as the starting point since a new government came to power in Argentina, with Nestor Kirchner. The end of Cristina Fernandez’s presidency in 2015 closes the period of study. Therefore, in this paper we start with a brief description of the political-diplomatic and commercial relations between Argentina and the GCC countries since their independences. Afterwards, we analyze the evolution of their relations between 2003 and 2015 at the bilateral and multilateral level, taking also into account the role of non-state actors.

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<sup>7</sup> Carrancio (1999); Brieger; Herskowich, 2003; Paredes Rodríguez, 2010 and 2011; Montenegro, 2012; Martínez Lahidalga, 2013; among others.

This is a qualitative research based on governmental reports, official and non-official commercial data, academic articles, media news and informal contacts with professionals who are specialists on the Gulf region or who are close to it.

## **ARGENTINA AND THE GCC STATES SINCE THEIR INDEPENDENCE**

### ***1. The roots of the Argentine-GCC linkage.***

Bilateral relations with the GCC countries can be traced to the 60s. In this early period the connection with these countries took form of bilateral agreements, the establishment of diplomatic relations or ephemeral connections in multilateral fora. Taking a look into a case-by-case analysis, this statement can be evidenced in the lack of further initiatives beyond traditional actions pertinent to the diplomatic grounds.

Argentina established diplomatic links with the GCC states during the period between the end of World War II and the 70s, as in 1971 the United Kingdom ended the protectorate system in the region.<sup>8</sup> In 1946 Buenos Aires established diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and Iraq, in 1968, with Kuwait, and in 1974, with Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman and Qatar. In subsequent years, the relations underwent different stages as a result of not only domestic factors that arose from Argentina's political instability and oscillations but also the successive Middle East crises and its place in the international agenda, which affected Argentina's policies towards the area.

At the multilateral level, the first forum that Argentina shared with these countries was the United Nations (UN). The second one was the Non-Aligned Movement, created in 1961, which Argentina joined as full member in 1973. For young countries and countries which are not a priority to each other, the multilateral arena may function as a key stage to play an international role and explore commonalities and common interests. It is where they start developing alliances, presenting their views on foreign affairs, and building bilateral relations with chosen partners.

Along the years, and despite some ups and downs, Argentina's foreign policy toward the overall Middle East has tried to keep a neutral and equidistant position with all parties involved

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<sup>8</sup> The Persian Gulf Residency was an official colonial subdivision of Great Britain created in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to maintain economic and political control over several Gulf States. London exercised a *de facto* protectorate with the responsibility of protecting the smaller Gulf States and guiding external affairs and defense.

in the region's conflict. When Carlos Menem came to power the profile of the relations with the GCC countries and the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) overall was in fact relatively low.

Nevertheless, as Galindo states “[i]n an attempt to gain the confidence of the US, Argentina was the first and only Latin American country to send two units of its navy to support the blockade of Iraq in September 1990” (GALINDO, 2007: 11). Far from his electoral promises, Menem's first trip to the Middle East in February 1991 showed that his administration preferences in the international arena would be close to the US allies. Moreover, the first country that Carlos Menem visited was Israel, then Egypt, and finally Tunisia –where the Palestine Liberation Organization had its headquarters.

“The attack on the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992 is perceived as a product of Argentina's intention to become committed to the Arab-Israeli conflict, as a reaction to its improved relationship with Israel, and a warning not to forget the Arab side of the conflict” (CARRANCIO, 1994: 149). Only on May 1992 (3 years after he came to power) - in Menem's second trip to the Middle East- he visited Saudi Arabia, Kuwait<sup>9</sup>, Turkey, and Egypt. Although no significant economic agreements were achieved, after these visits Argentine exports to the Middle East beat historical records, mainly with cereals -wheat, barley, corn-, fat and oil, among others<sup>10</sup>.

The short interval of Fernando De La Rúa's government (1999-2001) did not show any substantial shift in the foreign policy towards the region. “Argentina focused more on domestic problems and in its immediate area, reinforcing commercial ties with its neighbours through MERCOSUR” (GALINDO, 2006: 15). Yet, in 2000, a new strategy for a commercial approach with the Middle East and North Africa was implemented, through the multi-sector trade missions, conformed not only by high-level officials but also by actors from the private sector. However, those activities were mainly focused in North Africa. In the end, the domestic situation (especially economic difficulties) led to a low foreign policy profile related to high profile world events, like the World Trade Center terrorist attacks in 2001.

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<sup>9</sup> An Argentine Embassy in Kuwait was opened in 1993.

<sup>10</sup> The effort for an improvement of relations was seen in the increased frequency of voyages from one region to the other: the Nova Chartering and Shipping Co – which rendered transport services to the Middle East for loading chilled food – started making regular stops in Argentina to facilitate the trade with the Gulf region.

The following government, headed by Eduardo Duhalde showed continuity in this sense and kept the low profile towards relevant international events like the US, UK and Spain's intervention in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's overthrow. Notwithstanding the economic and social crisis, in 2002 Argentina launched a new commercial multi-polar strategy with the objective of diversifying the supply and commercial destinations, as well as increasing the number of exporters participating in Argentina's trade abroad. The government launched the Foreign Trade Support Program (PDCEX by its acronym in Spanish) led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Within this framework, the GCC states were seen as potential partners and markets with opportunities for the Argentina's business community, all of which would widen the commercial spectrum beyond traditional relations.

Thus, the 21st century opened a new stage in the relations between Argentina and the GCC. Although it is true that the region may not have been the primary goal of Argentina's foreign policy, the need for diversification –of both parties- functioned as an incentive to foster new relations and deepen and diversify the existing ones. The 2001 crisis in Argentina started to close a period in the country's foreign policy when the relation with the US was a priority. The 2001 World Trade Center terrorist attacks in the US derived in a change of the security paradigm, diminishing Washington's attention to Latin America and moving toward fighting terrorism through an increasing military cooperation (SLAUGHTER, 2004:1-35). Therefore Latin American countries had at that time more margins of manoeuvre to display their foreign relations. Consequently, in 2003 Lula Da Silva and Néstor Kirchner came to power in Brazil and Argentina with expectations of a deeper mutual cooperation and a more autonomous foreign policy, with a diversified international agenda.

## ***2. Political and Diplomatic Relations since 2003.***

### ***2.1. Bilateral Relations.***

Bilateral relations between Argentina and the GCC states during the period 2003-2013 showed a progressive increase in the number of political-diplomatic meetings, during which the countries signed several Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and agreements, which were tailored according to mutual national interests. Argentina's strategy towards the region has been designed on a *case by case* basis according to trade opportunities and commonalities, built up through historical bonds based on migratory waves and culture. In this sense Argentina's

strategies have taken advantage of certain areas in which the country can offer its expertise as a bridge for a closer cooperation.

Since 2003, there have been several interactions between Argentina and the GCC countries, which ranged from high-level visits and intergovernmental exchanges to multi-sector missions coordinated by the Argentina's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, integrating non-state actors. The underlying idea of those initiatives was to develop long-term bonds that would progressively lead to the opening of the GCC's markets to Argentinean exports. For instance, the *Agri-food and Agribusiness Strategic Plan*<sup>11</sup> was launched in 2010 with the purpose of improving "productivity with greater added value, employment and exports" (MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, LIVESTOCK, AND FISHERY OF ARGENTINA, 2010: 28-30). In this plan the GCC countries were targeted as strategic partners based on complementarities. The overall objective of this new strategy was to change the country's traditional trade patterns and achieve the opening of new markets in Asia and Africa. The initiative was also aimed at creating "new foreign postings for Agribusiness Councils"<sup>12</sup> under the orbit of the International Agri-food Relations Office of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Fishery of Argentina.

### *2.1.1. Inter-governmental exchanges.*

The bilateral association with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar has received greater political attention and commitment in the last years, since they are likely to be markets with a high potential for Argentina's exchange abroad. Relations with Saudi Arabia are the oldest in history and also the most dynamic in current times. Argentina and Saudi Arabia established diplomatic relations in 1948 but it was only in 1981 that they signed an agreement for economic and technical cooperation. Since then, 20 years would pass until the recent rapprochement between both countries, which has opened a clearly new stage for bilateral relations.

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<sup>11</sup> Its design has gathered all the actors: provincial governments, technical teams, scientists (from the provinces and the municipalities), organizations that are part of the Ministry of Agriculture (INTA, SENASA, INASE and INV) and other national ministries, producers, entities, cooperatives, cereal exchange, private and public faculties of Agricultural, Veterinary, Food, Agri-business and Economy Sciences, more than 450 agro technical schools, international organizations, researchers, technicians, specialized journalists, rural workers, and agrarian youth, among others.

<sup>12</sup> In 2010, the Federal and Participative Agri-food and Agribusiness Strategic Plan announced a project to create an agribusiness national office in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Despite good intentions, the office has not been opened yet.



Since 2002, Argentina and Saudi Arabia have signed seven bilateral accords in areas such as economy, industry, sports, technology and financial cooperation. There have also been consultations between their respective Ministers of Foreign Affairs on aerial services, peaceful use of nuclear energy, agriculture, livestock, environment since 2009, and on outer space activities since 2013. In this case, bilateral relations have triggered trade relations, opening up the Saudi market to new products from Argentina, beyond the predominant traditional commodities such as grains and grain products. The most recent advance in the relation has been the cooperation in terms of land irrigation, where Argentina could become a leading provider of expertise in such strategic issue for the Saudi government.

Diplomatic relations with Kuwait were officially established in 1968, but there were no significant approaches until recently. From 2010 there has been a growing dynamism that is visible not only in the number of agreements signed but also in the intensity of the process: Argentina and Kuwait have signed accords related to cultural and artistic cooperation, technical, scientific and technological cooperation, environment and sustainable development; a MOU regarding bilateral consultations; agreements on trade, sports cooperation, economic and technical cooperation and parliamentary cooperation, among others.

During this period, there were also bilateral commission meetings, inter-parliamentary visits, and trade and institutional missions. There was also progress regarding lines of credit to finance infrastructure and equipment projects in Argentina. In 2009 there was an official visit of the Prime Minister of Kuwait, Shaikh Al-Sabah<sup>13</sup>, during which both parties signed agreements on scientific, technical, technological and cultural cooperation. These agreements have been followed by official visits including the interaction with Argentinean provinces.

Diplomatic relations between Argentina and the UAE were established in 1974, followed by the signature of a bilateral agreement on economic, industrial, technological and financial cooperation in 1988. As in the case of Saudi Arabia, it is only recently that most of the bilateral agreements with the UAE were concluded – one in 2009 and three in 2013. Moreover, 2014 has been dominated by official meetings in order to deepen bilateral cooperation in agriculture and biotechnology, which was accompanied by the visit to Argentina of the UAE's Minister of Agriculture, Rashid Ahmed bin Fahad, in January 2015.

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<sup>13</sup> He was accompanied by the Deputy Prime Minister and Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Finance, and Trade and Industry, and businessmen.

As for the previous cases, after establishing diplomatic relations with Qatar in 1974 and appointing an ambassador in Doha in 2003, there were no substantial bilateral actions until 2007, when accords regarding commercial aviation<sup>14</sup> and economic and trade cooperation were signed. Additionally, in 2011 agreements on technology transfer from Argentina to Doha and on technological innovation were reached. As a proof of this new interest in cooperation, in 2003 the first Argentinean Ambassador was appointed in Qatar -despite more than 40 years of official diplomatic relations. Bahrain and Oman are the only countries with which Argentina has established diplomatic relations without concluding further agreements, although trade has grown.

### *2.1.2. Multisector missions: Building a New Approach.*

Some years after Néstor Kirchner was elected as President, his government recovered the impulse towards the GCC countries following Brazilian initiatives and emulating its interest in regions beyond Latin America and the US umbrella. In November 2005, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Jorge Taiana, headed a mission to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait accompanied by Argentine businessmen, in order to promote and intensify Argentina's presence in the Middle East and the Gulf countries. A year later, the Argentinean Group of Suppliers for the Oil & Gas Industry visited Oman and Yemen, after participating in the Dubai's International Trade Fair (ADIPEC<sup>15</sup>).

In December 2007, there was a third trade mission to the UAE and Saudi Arabia to diversify the relationship and "make the Argentine firms become aware of the existence of Arab markets"<sup>16</sup>. The mission was integrated by representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Arab-Argentinean Chamber of Commerce. Two years later, a multi-sector mission visited Qatar and the UAE, within the framework of the official visit of high officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to those countries. This mission was part of the actions derived from the

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<sup>14</sup> As a consequence of these negotiations, on June 24, 2010 the inaugural flight on Doha-San Pablo-Buenos Aires route, with daily frequency, took off.

<sup>15</sup> The Abu Dhabi International Conference and Oil Exhibition is the largest annual event of the Middle East in the field.

<sup>16</sup> For further information, we recommend reading "Oriente es el nuevo Norte," <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/984240-oriente-es-el-nuevo-norte>.

“Integrated Program for commercial promotion and development of external markets 2009”. This Program was developed by the Argentinean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and it made huge advances by expanding the number of activities such as multi-sector missions, seminars and Argentina’s participation in International events taking place in the GCC countries<sup>17</sup>.

In April 2010, another mission was sent to Kuwait and Qatar headed by the Minister of Science and Technology, Lino Baraño, in order to promote an agreement to exchange information about the activities carried out by both countries regarding science, technology, and productive innovation, and to define the future of joint activities<sup>18</sup>. In that opportunity Minister Baraño held meetings with the Ministers of Health, Industry and Commerce, Electricity and Water, and Communication, as well as with the General Director of the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development, Abdulwahab Al Bader. A few months later, in January 2011, an institutional agreement on scientific-technological cooperation between the Ministry of Science, Technology and Productive Innovation of the Argentine Republic and the Qatar Foundation was signed during the visit of the Argentine president. Moreover, the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET, for its acronym in Spanish) has a partnership agreement with the Qatar Energy and Environmental Research Institute (QEERI).

In January 2011, Argentina’s President Cristina Fernández led an important trade mission to several Arab countries including Kuwait and Qatar, to reaffirm the political actions taken over the past years. Furthermore, on January 14 2013, President Fernández arrived in the UAE, where a series of agreements were signed with Shaikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan<sup>19</sup>: the Cooperation

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<sup>17</sup> For a detailed list of activities in chronological order, by sector or by country, refer to the above mentioned document. Activities by country can be found as follow: Bahrain, pp.62, 84, 148, 242; Kuwait, p. 125; Qatar, pp. 21, 106, 188, 269; Saudi Arabia, pp.75-76; UAE, p.106-107).

<sup>18</sup> Minister Baraño held meetings with the Ministers of Health, Industry and Commerce, Electricity and Water, and Communication, as well as with the General Director of the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development, Abdulwahab Al Bader. A few months later, in January 2011, an institutional agreement on scientific-technological cooperation between the Ministry of Science, Technology and Productive Innovation of the Argentine Republic and the Qatar Foundation was signed during the visit of the Argentine president. Moreover, the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, CONICET) has a partnership agreement with QEERI (Qatar Energy and Environmental Research Institute).

<sup>19</sup> The following agreements were concluded between Argentina and the UAE: Cooperation Agreement on the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy; Memorandum of Understanding between the Argentina National Space Activities Commission (CONAE) and the Emirates Institution for Advanced Science and Technology (EIAST); governmental Air Services Agreement in both national territories; Memorandum of Understanding on the Cooperation between the Argentine Minister of Agriculture, Livestock and Fishery and the Ministry of Water and Environment of the UAE.

Agreement on the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy; a MOU between the Argentina National Space Activities Commission (CONAE) and the Emirates Institution for Advanced Science and Technology (EIAST); a governmental Air Services Agreement in both national territories; and a MOU on the Cooperation between the Argentine Minister of Agriculture, Livestock and Fishery and the Ministry of Water and Environment of the UAE.

The Argentinean Chief of State also participated in the VI World Future Energy Summit in Abu Dhabi, where the meetings held by Argentine and local businessmen to get new investors for the energy sector took place. These actions were followed by another Mission in February 2014 to Saudi Arabia and UAE to continue increasing cooperation in the field of the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

## *2.2. Multilateral Relations.*

Beyond bilateral interactions, multilateral fora have also served as ground to foster cooperation giving room to exploration of commonalities and opportunities. At the interregional level it is worth examining their participation in ASPA Summits (Brasilia 2005, Doha 2009, Lima 2012, Saudi Arabia 2015) and MERCOSUR- GCC negotiations, which not only work as spaces of intergovernmental interaction but also contemplate the interactions of non-state actors from both regions.

The ASPA Summit is a political coordination forum between the South American and Arab countries belonging to the League of Arab States<sup>20</sup>. It is defined as a cooperation mechanism in the fields of economics, culture, education, science and technology, environmental preservation, tourism and other relevant subjects concerning the sustainable development of the population of both regions.

The first ASPA Summit took place in Brasilia in 2005 and its final Declaration stated that the main objectives of the forum are to promote the inter-regional dialogue on the main regional and international issues and enhance bi-regional cooperation through the promotion of trade, investment, tourism, and cultural dissemination.

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<sup>20</sup> Argelia, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egipt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United States Emirates and Yemen For further information in this topic we recommend: Martínez De Lahidalga, Lucía, *Las relaciones interregionales entre países de América del Sur y países árabes entre 2005 y 2012. Análisis de la cooperación interregional a través de ASPA.* 2013.

The Declaration of the second ASPA Summit in Doha highlighted improvements in the political dialogue, providing a solid framework for cooperation in key areas and for the arrangement of joint meetings of Ministers on various issues relating to culture, economics, environment, society, water resources, and fight against desertification (i.e. the First Meeting of South American and Arab Ministers of Culture, held in Algiers, in 2006, and the Second which took place in Rio de Janeiro, in 2009; the First and Second joint Meeting of Ministers of Economic Affairs held in Quito (2006) and Rabat (2007); the First meeting of ASPA Ministers of Education, held in Kuwait in 2011; the First Energy Ministerial, held in Abu Dhabi, in 2013; and the joint Ministerial meeting on Tourism held in Petra-Jordan, 2013, among others).

The Argentinean government has used this forum -outside the UN- to discuss its positions on various issues with the GCC members and to gain support for its historical claim over the Malvinas Islands. Therefore, the third ASPA Summit in 2012 issued the Lima Declaration in which the countries expressed their support for Argentina and rejected UK's unilateral exploitation of hydrocarbons in the Southern Atlantic.

Within this umbrella for South-South cooperation, Argentina found a launching pad to foster and diversify relations with the GCC states. Moreover, in its declarations this forum has highlighted the importance of the role played by actors such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR, for its acronym in Spanish), the UN and the Arab League in facilitating policy agreements.

This forum has also been useful for non-state actors like those integrating the Argentinean business sector which, parallel to the Ministerial Summits, have held meetings with their Arab business counterparts. For instance, the ASPA Business Forum was born taking advantage of the countries' political will to expand the debate as well as cooperation on subjects concerning the development of both regions, such as infrastructure, food security, energy and natural resources, and trade. As the President of Peru, Ollanta Humala, stated in the third ASPA Business Forum:

Undoubtedly, the ASPA forum is a space where everyone contributes to political dialogue and confidence building and where new cooperation opportunities are opened up. Our economies are clearly complementary. For every product or need, we will always find a suitable partner within the ASPA forum; therefore, we must adopt the policies needed to take advantage of the great number of available opportunities (HUMALA; 2012).

In cultural realms the ASPA Summits have been introduced to the international community as part of the spirit of the Alliance of Civilizations Project proposed by the former Spanish

president, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, at the 59<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly, in 2004. This Alliance was headed by Spain and Turkey and its main goal was to generate a mechanism to foster dialogue and knowledge among the different cultures of the world as a way of reducing tensions and avoiding conflicts. In this sense, ASPA Summits have worked on highlighting common values gathering Arab and South American people (VAGNI, 2014: 2).

Since 2001 Saudi Arabia in particular has shown a deep interest in cultural diplomacy aiming at the dilution of stereotypes about Arab-Islamic countries and trying to use it as a tool to build prestige and place the country in new regions that could be strategic for its development policies.

During the ASPA Summit, in May 2005 the MERCOSUR and the GCC signed an Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement. As a consequence, the first MERCOSUR-GCC meeting was held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on November 26-27, 2005, where the governments discussed various activities like holding an Investment Conference to attract possible investors from/towards both regions, organizing meetings to share their experiences about macroeconomic procedures and customs of each region, and encouraging trade missions to promote trade and a better knowledge of their respective markets.

Although three rounds of negotiations have taken place with the GCC since 2006, there has been little progress due to certain pending issues like the formulation of the general Rule of Origin<sup>21</sup>, the application of a mechanism of preferential safeguards, and other matters regarding tariff relief<sup>22</sup> (BID, 2009:130). These differences have placed a roadblock in the negotiations showing more limitations to advance in economic cooperation than in other areas that have been highly prolific under ASPA's umbrella.

### ***3. Argentina's Trade with the GCC region since 2003.***

This trend to develop initiatives based on "impulses" and the lack of stable patterns of interaction has made it difficult to understand the "logics" behind Argentina's trade with the

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<sup>21</sup> The GCC requires a minimum regional content of 35 percent, while MERCOSUR has aspired to establish a more demanding criteria since it will not accept less than 50 percent. That is to say that the GCC expects MERCOSUR to give preferences to goods that have 35 percent of regional content (added value), while MERCOSUR would only give preferences to goods that have a regional added value of at least 50 percent.

<sup>22</sup>The GCC demanded that MERCOSUR improved its tariff relief offer (MERCOSUR Report, no.14, pp. 130) and the resistance of the chemical industry of MERCOSUR to open its market to products that come from the GCC.

GCC countries. Although figures are not relevant in comparative terms, commercial exchanges have continuously grown within the years, especially in the last decade.

Trade flows between the GCC and Latin America increased from US\$3bn in 2003 to US\$17bn in 2013, and GCC exports to the region posted the largest global rise over the last four years of 32.7%, albeit from a low base. Unsurprisingly, the bulk of this trade is exports of hydrocarbons from the GCC and exports of food from Latin America (THE ECONOMIST, 2014, 22.).

Argentina-GCC relations are not the exception to this rule.

According to official data available at the Center for Business Economics, an office under the Argentinean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, between 2004 and 2011, total Argentina's exports to Middle East rose 237 percent, from about US\$34,550.2 million-FOB to US\$ 82,131.3; in turn, exports to the Gulf region grew by 189 percent, from about US\$168.8 million dollars-FOB to US\$ 2,216.4. Finally, exports to the GCC, 176 percent, from about US\$616.1 million to US\$1,086.9 million-FOB.

In their economic-commercial profile, the GCC countries complement Argentina because they demand farm products, know-how and transfer of technology related mainly to the Agricultural sector. Regarding Argentina's farm exports, cereals, seeds and oilseeds are the main export products, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE are the principal destinations - accounting for more than 80 percent of the exports to the GCC- since they operate as hubs for the distribution of Argentinean products in the region.

New buyers like Bahrain are emerging, showing a tendency to diversify the destinations beyond traditional partners. In this sense, between 2004 and 2011, exports to Bahrain rose 544 percent, to Saudi Arabia 219 percent, and the UAE, 197 percent. Irrespective of the increase in exports to Bahrain, the main markets for Argentina in the GCC are still Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Referring specifically to Argentina's exchange with Saudi Arabia, since 1990 to date the balance of trade has been favourable to Buenos Aires, according to the Center of Information and Statistics of Saudi Arabia. From the data available we can observe that Saudi Arabia exports to Argentina have fluctuated to a high degree due to the volatility of prices of energy commodities (and derived products), which dominate Saudi exports to Argentina. In the case of imports, they have periodically increased (Argentina used to rank in position 54 as destination of imports in 1991, having reached position 26 in 2013). In relation to the UAE it is worth to mention that

since 2004 to date Argentine exports to this destination, as in the case of Saudi Arabia, have also doubled.

#### ***4. The Role of Non-State Actors in Promoting the Relationship with the GCC.***

It is widely accepted that while state actors can help to develop general frameworks to promote national and sub-national cooperation, thus creating spaces for the interaction of non-state actors (socio-cultural and economic-commercial), the former ones often play diverse roles that help to materialize and/or diversify diplomatic initiatives in very specific areas and fields.

Since its beginning, the relationship between Argentina and the GCC states has had continuity in terms of trade exchanges, even during those periods when the diplomatic relations had a low profile. With a smaller scope, there was continuity in the cultural field due to initiatives led by non state-actors in the socio-cultural and religious field, in a process of multiple exchanges, which contributed to add value to official policies toward the region.

There are several examples that support this idea for the case of Argentina-GCC relations. The main reason for this fact is their long-standing experience as bridges between the civil societies of both regions decades before the institutionalization promoted by initiatives like ASPA. Socio-cultural relations were a kind of pioneer in fostering cooperation between both regions and through the years, they deeply contributed to opening other channels more related to economic activities. Many of these organizations –i.e. Chambers of commerce, NGOs, religious institutions, schools, charitable institutions, clubs and churches- trace their origins to Syrian and Lebanese immigrants who arrived from the Middle East to Argentina, decades ago.

Stressing the significance of the role of non-state organizations as promoters of agribusiness is important since, as Ricardo Nazer noted “the private actors – political, economic and cultural – create specific spaces for the study of these issues [non-state actors’ role in fostering interregional cooperation] and can provide a different perspective”. [...]”They detect weaknesses and opportunities as they are **facilitators** that help to avoid the ups and downs in bilateral relations.”<sup>23</sup>

#### ***4.1. Culture, Religion and Business.***

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Doctor Ricardo Nazer, an active member of the Arab community and the Arab-Argentine Chamber of Commerce, by Noemí S. Rabbia, Rosario, March, 2013.



At the socio-cultural level, an interaction of several actors which share their roots with the GCC countries can be unveiled. Among the most important is the Argentinean Arab community itself, whose historical contribution through the creation of a multiplicity of social institutions (PÉREZ GARCÍA, 2010: 6-7) has paved the way for other actors and has secured the connection between both regions, even during times where the diplomatic and political relations did not have a high profile in Argentina's foreign policy.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Argentina and Brazil, like other Latin American countries, received waves of Syrian-Lebanese immigrants. After the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, a big Palestine contingent arrived and concentrated mainly in Chile. The last migratory wave appeared in the 70s after the Lebanese civil war, attracted by the construction of the Itaipú dam in the area known as Triple Frontier between Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina. Like the other communities that have arrived in these lands, they tried to organize themselves and keep in contact with their region of origin, forging bonds that would set the course for inter-regionalism.

Silvia Montenegro acknowledges that “the Arab community in Argentina is not homogeneous and there is a plurality of significations as regards what can be self-defined as ‘Arab’” (MONTENEGRO, 2012: 66). However, we could add that although most of them do not come from the GCC countries, their presence in the region contributed to a great extent to create a sense of familiarity with the Arab culture, realities and their language.

Within the years, the bonds that this community helped to develop were also evolving and, unlike the initial migration period, the institutions that originated in Arab national-based communities now are no longer exclusively ethno-cultural settlements. Instead, they have become more open to the overall society beyond their own historical roots. In these new institutions, “the general public gathers [...] for different purposes, such as learning traditional dances, tasting ethnic food, playing sports or studying the language of the community” (MONTENEGRO, 2012: 87).

Moreover, as Montenegro highlights, although religious differences among these communities have been more significant at the international level over the last years, these disagreements were not reflected in their institutions in Argentina, and they have gained importance as they appeal to a general Arab identity, regardless of religion or national origin. Montenegro considers that they are the representation of an almost completely assimilated

community (even when there was an opposite tendency worldwide, especially after the 9/11 events).

Due to the historical evolution of the GCC countries, there have not been migratory waves from the region towards Argentina and, therefore, this particular connection was absent. Nevertheless, the previously mentioned presence of the Arab community, spread over the Argentinean provinces, has been the initial driving force behind the initiatives that have expanded in recent years. This movement has helped to add value and diversify commercial exchanges and commonalities that, in turn, succeeded in having a faster development and larger presence than the cultural ones. These organizations are all part of the network of organizations created by the Argentinean civil society to keep alive the links that bind them to their ancestors.

A wide range of organizations are found in the socio-cultural field, such as social clubs, cultural centres (i.e. the Argentinean-Palestinian Friendship Centre and the Argentinean and Palestinian Entities Federation); professional circles; Islamic associations (i.e. the Islamic Center of Argentinean Republic and the Argentinean Islamic Organization); charitable organizations; parishes; mosques (i.e. the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Fahd's Cultural Islamic Center -the largest Islamic temple in Latin America- and the mosque Al Tahaid); orthodox associations (i.e. the Orthodox Administrative Council in the Capital City, the Orthodox and Syrian Union and Fraternity Society (Córdoba), the Orthodox Centre of Córdoba, the Syrian Orthodox Society of Junín (Buenos Aires), the Syrian Orthodox Association of Beneficence (La Plata, Buenos Aires), the Orthodox Centre San Jorge (Mendoza), the Orthodox Association (Rosario, Santa Fe) and the Orthodox Centre of Tucumán; and educational institutions related to the community.

Most of the above mentioned are related to the American-Arab Entities Federation (FEARAB, for its acronym in Spanish) a non-governmental institution which was founded in 1973. FEARAB has a branch in Argentina which gathers and represents Argentine-Arab entities and community and some specific associated organizations. FEARAB-Argentina counts with 15 regional federations and each of these federations is composed of a varied group of Arab-Argentinean entities<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Further information is available at its official webpage: <http://www.fearab.org.ar/>

As for the economic-commercial sphere, it is worth mentioning the initiatives taken by sectoral chambers of commerce, especially those related to Agribusiness -due to Argentina's agricultural export profile<sup>25</sup>. Within the institutions created by Arab descendants, the Arab-Argentine Chamber of Commerce is one of those actors which triggers processes to be sustained in the long run, as the main goal is to further the interests of businessmen. In that sense, their actions are done on behalf of certain interests and sectoral needs and thus, effectiveness highly depends on their ability to establish relations with national, provincial and local governments, not only in the domestic field but also abroad.

Nevertheless, when it comes specifically to the relation with GCC countries (with the predominance of agribusiness), this chamber becomes a marginal player since the main activities are performed by sectoral chambers. Many of these Chambers are involved in the PDCEX, i.e. AFAC; the Argentinean Association of manufacturers of Machinery, Tools and accessories (AAFMHA); the Argentinean Chamber of the Oil Industry (CIARA), the Dairy Products Industry Centre (CIL); the Argentinean Meat Exporters Group (ABC); the Argentinean Federation of Citrus (FEDERCITRUS); the Argentinean Federation of Naval Industry (FINA), among others.

Regarding the economic-commercial actors within the non-state players, firms are the ones with the most active role due to the current global importance of economic and commercial matters, which are also significant in the relationship with the GCC region. In general terms, the economic-commercial sector normally develops its own dynamics, which do not always coincide with the political and diplomatic timing.

Furthermore, within the group of firms involved, we can distinguish between transnational firms, on the one hand, and Small and Medium Enterprises (SME<sup>26</sup>), on the other. Transnational firms in the agribusiness<sup>27</sup> sector have the resources and the logistics to plan their strategies on a global scale and allocate their production according to their export destinations. They have their own foreign trade agents and rarely need state assistance either in their head office or branch offices. On the contrary, due to their nature, SMEs have a smaller capacity to manage resources

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<sup>25</sup> As PwC Argentina states, Argentina is World leader in vegetal oils such as sunflower oil and soya oil.

<sup>26</sup> A SME is any business composed of a smaller number of workers and with a moderate turnover. Moreover, there is a specific quantitative criterion, which varies according to each country. In the case of Argentina, we suggest visiting the following link: <http://www.sepyme.gob.ar/sepyme/clasificacion-pyme/>.

<sup>27</sup> ADM, Bunge, Cargill, Louis Dreyfus, Toepfer and Noble are the most remarkable firms based in Argentina that trade with the Gulf region.

and they need not only the State support but also the help of other private actors like the chambers of commerce and specialist from academia, which facilitate their activities at both local and international levels reflecting a higher degree of limitations.

In spite of that, in the last decade, both private and public actors have found a common ground at international fairs, where agribusiness groups play an important role. Participation in these fairs has been a relevant instrument of Argentine foreign trade policy in the region. The most important ones are organized in Dubai,<sup>28</sup> and Argentina has participated in several editions of all these fairs. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, together with ExportAr and CFI, are helping SMEs to internationalize. Some sectoral chambers have also had key roles in the promotion and preparation of activities.

Finally, there are actors which, despite having a smaller scope and direct participation in the development of bi-regional relations, do not lack importance. They include universities and institutions of higher education, which add value to the relationship through the creation of knowledge. In Argentina we can find several examples of institutions leading studies on the Argentina-Arab/Islamic World relation, including works that specifically analyze Argentina-GCC relations.

Among them we can mention: the Rosario's Institute of Studies of the Arab and Islamic World (*Instituto Rosario de Estudios del Mundo Árabe e Islámico-IREMAI*), the Western Studies Center (*Centro de Estudios Orientales*), the Middle East Studies Group (*Grupo de Estudios del Medio Oriente-GEMO*), within the South-South Cooperation Program (PRECSUR), at the National University of Rosario; the Middle East Studies Program (*Programa de Estudios sobre Medio Oriente*), at the National University of Cordoba, the Master's Degree on Cultural Diversity at the Tres de Febrero University; the African Observatory and Central Asia Observatory within *the International Studies Centre for the development*; and *Alta Política*, the first observatory linking the Arab world with Western civilization, among others.

In this sense, the need for cooperation between State and these kinds of actors as well as between academia and other private actors is becoming stronger. Academia is not only an actor which creates specific knowledge but also provides cultural and historical insights, helping to

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<sup>28</sup> Middle East Electricity, Arab Health, Gulfood, Arabian Travel Market, Beauty World, DIHAD (Dubai International Humanitarian Aid & Development Conference & Exhibition) and Food Speciality.

promote economic bonds through the exploration of advantages, challenges and opportunities for the State and businessmen in these emerging markets.

### **CLOSING REMARKS**

Since their origins, first as colonies and then as growing energy hubs and petro-states, the GCC countries maintained a strong connection with the former colonial powers and the Western countries overall. In this sense, the relation with more remote areas like Latin America has faced bigger challenges due to the lack of direct commonalities, a common language and above all, the lack of geographical proximity.

Nevertheless, changes in the global patterns of cooperation, technological advancements and the rise of economic-financial issues, which led to a need for diversification of providers and suppliers for almost every country in the world, are some of the main factors that promoted state and non-state relations between Argentina and the GCC countries. In this sense and as a consequence of the acceleration of the process of globalization, non-state actors have gained an increasing importance as triggers of cooperation between distant regions. However the role of the state in building the appropriate framework for these interactions to flourish is undeniable, as it is shown in the case under study.

In the last decade Argentina-GCC countries relations have increased their potential due to their complementarities as well as to the creation of multilateral instances that have helped to explore bilateral cooperation in diplomatic terms, creating more opportunities to promote trade. As an agro-exporting country, Argentina has a strong potential to be a relevant partner for the GCC countries. Until recently, Argentina, the GCC states and their sub-national public and private actors were practically disconnected. But this mutual disconnection could be sorted out with the synergy between the respective governments and non-governmental actors.

There has been an increase in the exchanges at the governmental level as well as in the interactions among private commercial actors. For small enterprises, this is evident in their participation in various activities under the umbrella of the government, such as the case of ASPA, with the multi-sector commercial missions sent to the countries of the region. Along the different levels of articulation, non-state actors contributed to open Arab countries' doors, showing the particularities of their respective cultures, encouraging dialogue and promoting trade. For the big companies, multi-sector missions have not been as relevant as they have been

for medium and small enterprises, for they have their own trading agents in the countries of destination.

The commercial relationship is clearly marked by the predominance of agribusiness, due to Argentina's prominent position in this sector but especially due to the demand of the GCC countries. Non-state actors like the Arab-Argentine Chamber of Commerce – constituted on a base of immigrant identities from certain regions of the Middle East – have contributed to broaden the scope of this link. Sectoral chambers like the one related to agricultural machinery have also promoted relations between the private sectors. Additionally, multinational and some national agribusiness firms have already started to expand in the region. SMEs are attempting a start too, but they lack infrastructure, financing, and logistics.

However, in spite of the increasing optimism about the relation between Argentina and its GCC partners, there seem to remain some limitations that should be addressed in order to turn potentialities into real opportunities. Firstly, because Argentinean initiatives could be seen as the result of regional instances mainly fostered by the leadership of Brazil in the region or bi-regional efforts, (i.e. ASPA and MCS-GCC) more than a national strategic plan. In this sense, the main challenge from the Argentinean side is to overcome the lack of continuity in the strategies toward the region.

Secondly, despite the commonalities and complementarities between Argentina and the GCC countries, a deeper cooperation beyond the mere exchange of goods should be sought, in order to expand the

links beyond official agreements. Therefore, the state should coordinate its activities with non-state actors at national and local levels to “put flesh to the bones” in the relation. Governments, firms, and business chambers should forge their connections to make this synergy produce more positive results. They could focus on agribusiness and energy, which are the key sectors that can improve the relationship between Argentina and the GCC countries with more State policies which do not change along with governments.

Finally, we strongly believe that further research could be conducted to explore more diversified channels of cooperation and to promote governmental initiatives which could facilitate the role that Argentinean non-state actors could play in order to continue and consolidate this positive but still modest trend in the relations with the GCC countries.

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