

Gulf to play key role as EU plans to cut Russian gas imports, says envoy

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RIYADH: Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states will have an important role as the EU plans to cut Russian gas imports by two-thirds before the end of the year, said the EU ambassador to the Kingdom.

Speaking to reporters in Riyadh, Patrick Simonnet said that the EU has proposed a new plan to reduce its dependence on Russian energy amid Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states would play a key role as energy partners.

The European Commission, the executive arm of the EU, has proposed to reduce its purchases of Russian gas by two-thirds by the end of the year, and cease buying fossil fuels from Russia before 2030.

In a reply to Arab News, the envoy said that this would be achieved by diversifying suppliers, which includes energy partners in the Gulf, and by increasing renewable hydrogen production and improving energy efficiency in households.

The EU seeks to increase imports of green hydrogen from Saudi Arabia, which is one of the largest producers in the world, he said.

Saudi Arabia aims to produce 4 million tons of hydrogen by 2030.

The EU envoy said: "There are discussions and negotiations to import natural gas from the Gulf countries, led by Saudi Arabia, which has entered into the gas production strongly during the recent period and has launched many projects in this sector."

He said there is a new plan to change energy providers in general, especially renewable energy and hydrogen gas.

"We need to discuss with Saudi Arabia and other gulf countries how far we can redirect our gas imports," he said.

"The plan of Europe is also not only to continue importing gas from other sources but to invest in and import renewable energy."

During the press conference at the EU office in Riyadh, the envoy noted that the EU has a very close relationship with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, stressing the need to further expand relationships in all fields and work to further enhance the partnership.

The envoy said that to enhance cooperation with the Gulf countries, a special cooperation strategy has been developed between the countries of the region that will enter into effective implementation at the beginning of January

2023, based on the recommendations of the meeting of foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries with their counterparts from the EU countries.

“Pillars have been laid in various sectors, most notably commercial investments, tourism and energy, achieving security and stability in the region, as well as offering solutions to climate change problems and supporting the initiatives put forward, foremost of which is the Middle East Green Initiative, which was proposed by Saudi Arabia.”

Simonnet noted that an important basis for further expanding close ties is the Saudi support for humanitarian relief, as the Kingdom represents a living and active example in this, especially in Yemen, Syria, and Afghanistan.

Commenting on the resumption of free trade negotiations between the EU and the Gulf states, he said: “There are great moves towards restarting negotiations in the near future, after studying technical issues that are being worked on, paving the way for the two parties to sit back at the negotiating table, after a ministerial meeting was recently held in Brussels on this issue.”

Without specifying a timeframe for the start of negotiations, the envoy affirmed that the two sides have a strong desire to resume free trade negotiations.

Citing the latest statistics, Simonnet said that the EU is Saudi Arabia’s one of the largest trading partners, with about €40 billion (\$44 billion) trade in 2020, stressing that European companies aspire to increase their investments in all diversified economic and commercial sectors.





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