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Developing multi-system wagons and routes between the GCC area and Europe

I. PURPOSE AND CONTEXT

1. Working document [TECH-26014-CTE18-7.4](#) examined the technical and legal feasibility of developing multi-system wagons capable of operating on and between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) rail network and the wider European 1435 mm rail system under COTIF and EU law. It concluded that, from a legal and technical perspective, the existing UTP/TSI framework is suitable for accommodating additional technical systems, provided responsibilities and procedures under the ATMF UR and the TSIs/UTPs are respected and the political will for the mutual acceptance of certain standards exists.
2. ~~This~~The follow-up paper [TECH-26027-CTE-WGT58-4.2](#) underlines~~d~~ that technical feasibility alone will not make traffic happen. Realising rail freight services between the GCC and Europe requires strong political support and coordinated action by states and sector organisations along a future corridor. This paper therefore calls for engagement by OTIF members and non-Member States along potential routes, sector organisations and the European Commission, and provides suggestions for the GCC railway authorities with regard to transparency on vehicle requirements.
- ~~2.3.~~ [This paper reproduces the content of TECH-26027-CTE-WGT58-4.2 and substantive changes are indicated.](#)

II. STRATEGIC RATIONALE AND STAKEHOLDERS

- ~~3.4.~~ The value of EU–Gulf region total trade in goods in 2024 amounted to €161.7 billion¹, with a product mix that is, to a large extent, suitable for transport by rail. Rail freight services along a GCC–Europe corridor would diversify transport options, increase supply-chain resilience and provide environmental benefits compared with air, long-haul road or maritime transport. This would benefit not only the EU and the GCC, but all states along a future route. The recent conflict resulting in the blockage of the Strait of Hormuz amplifies the need to diversify transport options and strengthens the case made in this paper.
- ~~4.5.~~ The following OTIF members, non-members and stakeholders could support efforts in connection with establishing EU-Gulf region rail links:
 - OTIF Member States in Europe could support the subject being placed on the European and international political agenda, highlighting the economic potential and increased resilience to future crises.
 - Once railway traffic resumes on their territory, OTIF Member States whose membership is suspended, notably Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, could reactivate their membership and represent their interests in OTIF organs in their capacity as possible transit and origin/destination countries. Jordan is an Associate Member of OTIF and might be interested in pursuing full membership for the same reasons.
 - The GCC Member States (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) are not currently members of OTIF. They could signal their interest in the development of said railway links and pursue OTIF membership to represent their interests.
 - Sector organisations (railway undertakings, wagon keepers, freight forwarders and logistics associations, wagon manufacturers and supply industry), could lobby for better rail links, as they would clearly benefit from new business opportunities.

¹ https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/gulf-region_en

- the European Commission, as promoter of the development of the EU rail system, its external transport policy, trade policy and connectivity initiatives, including under its wider neighbourhood policies, could use its influence to promote the development of rail links.
- International financial institutions, including multilateral development banks, could require the application of COTIF rules and standards as a condition for funding rail projects. This would strongly encourage the use of harmonised technical and procedural requirements, reducing the risk of incompatible systems long-term and facilitating seamless cross-border operations.

III. POSSIBLE CORRIDORS VIA TÜRKIYE AND SYRIA

5.6. Both the GCC rail project and the European OTIF rail networks are based on the 1435 mm gauge. Türkiye and Syria historically formed key segments of the Ottoman-era routes linking Europe with the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula. These routes demonstrate that long-distance rail connections along this axis were geographically and historically feasible and could be again.

6.7. In broad terms, possible corridors for future GCC-Europe rail freight traffic could include, inter alia:

- **A north-western axis:** GCC through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, via the Turkish core network and existing cross-border links to EU Member States (e.g. Bulgaria and Greece). The part from Türkiye to Saudi Arabia is referred to as the Hejaz railway.
- **A north-eastern axis:** GCC branch to Kuwait, via Iraq to Türkiye.
- Additional border-crossings or ports (for example, use of rail-ferry or short-sea segments) that may be re-activated or upgraded, combining existing lines with new or revitalised infrastructure.

7.8. On 9 June 2026, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye signed rail and logistics cooperation agreements to support a Gulf–Europe transport corridor via Syria and Jordan. ~~Recent news indicates that the political founding agreements are being concluded to develop such corridors by the states involved.~~

IV. NEED FOR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

8.9. Political engagement is required to explore and develop these opportunities. Accelerated by the recent conflict, political momentum appears to be gaining pace. It is essential that developing parties consider the legal basis under which railway services can be developed, including the necessity of building infrastructure and rolling stock to international standards that are compatible with the networks to which they will be connected.

9.10. The development of technical concepts for multi-system wagons, the analysis of how GCC requirements could be aligned with or brought under the COTIF/TSI framework, and an inventory of possible routes are necessary first steps. It is suggested that the development of cross-border freight connections requires:

- A political vision shared by the states concerned.
- A governance structure (corridor platform, high-level group, or similar) in which transport, trade and foreign affairs ministries, regulators, infrastructure managers and railway undertakings are represented; and
- Coordination of infrastructure, rolling stock and operational development projects supported by appropriate financing instruments.

~~10.~~^{11.} Political engagement is required to:

- Encourage OTIF Member States and non-Member States along the likely route(s) to consider any future corridor as a strategic element of their connectivity and trade policy.
- Support dialogue with the GCC and its Member States and railway authorities on interoperability and vehicle requirements.
- Create a favourable environment for sector organisations to invest in vehicles, terminals and logistics services for such traffic.

12. It is worth noting that at its 9th session (Berne, 24 June 2026), the ad hoc Committee on Legal Affairs and International Cooperation designated the following states whose accession to COTIF should be promoted as a priority:

- states located on the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route; and
- Member States of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf.

V. INFORMATION REQUESTED FROM THE GCC RAILWAY AUTHORITIES

~~11.~~^{13.} Document TECH-26014-CTE18-7.4 underlined that the GCC countries have opted for North American-style freight wagons and that their freight systems appear to be at least partly based on AAR standards, while passenger rolling stock is reportedly based on European standards. This offers opportunities but also underlines the need for clarity on the applicable technical requirements. To move from conceptual analysis to practical work on multi-system wagons and route compatibility, the following information is essential:

- A consolidated description of applicable vehicle requirements for freight wagons in GCC operations, including:
 - the requirements and standards applied (e.g. for car body strength, couplers, braking systems, bogies and wheelsets);
 - the vehicle interfaces with signalling and train protection systems (e.g. European Train Control System (ETCS)) and train detection requirements.
- Information on operational rules relevant to wagon design, such as braking system requirements, train length and weight limits, and operating speeds.
- Clarification on vehicle safety responsibilities, including how functions and responsibilities akin to the functions of entities in charge of maintenance (ECMs) are organised.
- Any existing or planned provisions on the acceptance of foreign wagons, in particular wagons designed to UTP/TSI requirements, and applicable admission procedures.

~~12.~~^{14.} Clarifying GCC vehicle requirements will enable manufacturers, assessment bodies and competent authorities to examine the practical feasibility and possible design parameters for multi-system wagons, including for braking, couplers, axle loads, loading gauge, noise and train detection.

VI. POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS

~~13.~~^{15.} The Committee of Technical Experts could be invited to:

- take note of this paper, which highlights the need for political engagement to realise the potential of multi-system wagons and GCC–Europe rail freight corridors, including via Türkiye and Syria;

- call upon OTIF Member States, non-Member States along potential routes, relevant sector organisations and the European Commission to consider how they can contribute politically and operationally to the development of such corridors; and
- request the Secretariat, in coordination with WG Tech, to seek a structured exchange with the GCC railway authorities on the vehicle requirements and operational rules that are relevant for interoperability, and to report back to the Committee of Technical Experts.