

INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (IDIS)  
MIDDLE EAST RESEARCH GROUP

**THE MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA (MENA)  
STATES AND THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT:  
NON-ALIGNED OR REPOSITIONING?**

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# Introduction

George Meneshian

The Russia–Ukraine war (February 2022–present) has reshaped the global landscape in ways that extend well beyond the immediate conflict. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, known for its political, economic, and strategic diversity, plays a crucial role in influencing how the world responds to this crisis.

MENA's significance spans multiple domains. The region is a key part of global energy markets, hosting some of the largest oil and natural gas reserves. This vast wealth of hydrocarbons not only affects energy prices but also impacts supply chains around the globe. Additionally, MENA's strategic location—especially along key trade routes like the Suez Canal—cements its position as a vital connector between Europe and Asia.

However, the region faces its own set of challenges. Widespread food insecurity is a longstanding issue, driven by a heavy reliance on grain imports, particularly from Russia and Ukraine. This vulnerability has turned the war's impact on global grain supplies into a critical concern for stability in MENA. Furthermore, the region is no stranger to crisis. With several conflicts and fragile states struggling to maintain stability, and the influence of non-state actors—such as militias and insurgent or terrorist groups—the geopolitical and security landscape is often unpredictable.

Adding another layer of complexity, Russia has been deeply involved in MENA affairs. Its direct intervention in Syria (until December 2024) and its military presence in Libya highlight its engagement in war-torn states. This involvement has influenced Ukraine's decision to limit its operations against Russia and its affiliates in the region, aiming to damage Moscow's influence.

These dynamics are essential for understanding how MENA countries position themselves regarding the Russia–Ukraine war as they balance local security needs with broader geopolitical considerations.

In this context, the Middle East Research Group of the Institute of International Relations (IDIS) decided to explore the MENA states' responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Exploring MENA's response to the conflict

is also key to understanding shifts in the transitioning international system. Regional powers in MENA are increasingly influential, shaping not only their own futures but also broader regional developments. Observing how these nations manage complex challenges offers important clues about future alignments and shifts in global power.

One notable conclusion from this collection of analyses is that while some MENA actors—whether state (like Assad’s Syria and Iran) or non-state (such as the Libyan National Army and Yemen’s Ansar Allah movement)—have taken clearly defined positions, the majority of MENA states have chosen a pragmatic approach toward the Russia–Ukraine conflict. Even those who have vocally condemned Russia’s actions or expressed support for Ukraine have often simultaneously worked to strengthen their ties with Moscow. This balancing policy reflects the region’s complex mix of interests, including food security, energy needs, and stability, prompting a careful rethinking of foreign policy strategies. Overall, the responses of MENA countries provide valuable insights into both the region’s evolving geopolitical dynamics and broader international shifts.

Finally, it is important to note that the articles in this collection, prepared by the Middle East Research Group of IDIS, were written in the autumn of 2024—before key events such as the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, the Gaza ceasefire, and the inauguration of Donald Trump. Consequently, some events and policies discussed may have evolved by the time of publication, highlighting the rapid changes in both regional and international politics. Nevertheless, these analyses continue to offer important perspectives for anyone interested in understanding how the Russian invasion of Ukraine is reshaping foreign policy in MENA.

# Algeria

Andreas Papaiosif

On 24 February 2022, the day marking the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, became significant for the diplomatic relations between Algeria and Russia. The two countries have a long history of defense and economic cooperation, with Algeria being one of the main buyers of weapons and military equipment from Moscow since its independence in the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Since 2017, the two states have engaged in a series of joint military exercises, including the recent naval exercise in the Mediterranean Sea in 2022.<sup>2</sup>

However, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, relations between the two states appear to have reached a point where Algeria is trying to maintain a neutral stance, which is somewhat pro-Russia, regarding the war. On the international diplomatic stage, Algeria's stance was evident when it abstained from voting on the resolution condemning Russian aggression at the United Nations General Assembly in 2022.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, in the resolution for the removal of Russian Federation from the United Nations Human Rights Council, Algeria was among the few countries that voted against it.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Algeria took the lead in establishing the so-called "Contact Group" within the Arab League, aimed at initiating diplomatic contacts for the peaceful resolution of the war in Ukraine<sup>5</sup>. These actions suggest that Algeria does not maintain a necessarily negative stance towards Russia. On a

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<sup>1</sup> Hanneberg Sabina, Grant Rumley and Erik Yavorsky, "Algeria-Russia Relations After the Ukraine Invasion," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 18 May 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/algeria-russia-relations-after-ukraine-invasion>.

<sup>2</sup> Middle East Monitor, "Algeria, Russia hold joint naval drill in Med Sea ahead of 'Desert Shield 2022,'" 24 October 2022, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20221024-algeria-russia-hold-joint-naval-drill-in-med-sea-ahead-of-desert-shield-2022>.

<sup>3</sup> The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "The UN resolution on Ukraine: How did the Middle East vote?" 2 March 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/un-resolution-ukraine-how-did-middle-east-vote>.

<sup>4</sup> Al Jazeera, "UN suspends Russia from human rights body: How your country voted," 8 April 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/8/russia-suspended-from-un-human-rights-body-how-countries-voted>.

<sup>5</sup> Établissement Public de Télévision, "Algeria among Arab League contact group tasked to reach a diplomatic solution to the Russian Ukrainian crisis," 9 March 2022, <https://www.entv.dz/algeria-among-arab-league-contact-group-tasked-to-reach-a-diplomatic-solution-to-the-russian-ukrainian-issue/#:~:text=The%20Arab%20League%20Ministerial%20Council,Secretary%2DGeneral%20of%20the%20league>.

bilateral level, the meeting on 15 June 2023, between Russian President Putin and his Algerian counterpart Tebboune in Moscow<sup>6</sup> clearly reflects the current relationship between the two states. The signing of the declaration on 'Deep Strategic Cooperation'<sup>7</sup> precisely highlights Algeria's intention to remain a strong strategic partner for Moscow.

Based on the above information, it becomes apparent that relations between the two countries continue to have a positive outlook, despite the international condemnation faced by Moscow. This can be attributed to the tolerance shown by Algeria (as well as other North African countries) towards Russia's policies. The reason Algeria maintains this stance is that it sees its geopolitical role as being enhanced as the Ukraine-Russia war unfolds. On one hand, the West potentially finds an alternative market for natural gas in Algeria,<sup>8</sup> and on the other hand, Russia aims to retain "allies/supporters" worldwide with a possible incorporation into the BRICS, which Algeria desires.<sup>9</sup> This places Algeria in an advantageous position with both sides. As the potential cost of a diplomatic breakdown between Algeria and either side is expected to be high, Algeria benefits from its strategic position in the ongoing geopolitical dynamics. The geopolitical considerations and economic opportunities arising from the Ukraine-Russia conflict contribute to Algeria's pragmatic approach, allowing it to navigate its diplomatic relations carefully amid the global tensions.

In conclusion, it can be stated that for Algeria, the Ukrainian issue has offered a tremendous opportunity for upgrading its regional and global role, providing it with the chance to grow economically and in energy matters, while also securing significant military capabilities that could position it as a key regional actor.

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<sup>6</sup> The Arab Weekly, "Tebboune's visit to Moscow likely to fuel western concerns about Algeria's foreign policy," 16 June 2023), <https://the arabweekly.com/tebbounes-visit-moscow-likely-fuel-western-concerns-about-algerias-foreign-policy>.

<sup>7</sup> Embassy of Algeria in Brasilia, "Algeria – Russia: Signing the Declaration of In – Depth Strategic Partnership and several agreements and memoranda of understanding between the two countries," 15 June 2023, <https://embbrasilia.mfa.gov.dz/en/news-and-press-releases/algeria-russia-signing-of-the-declaration-of-in-depth-strategic-partnership-and-several-agreements-and-memoranda-of-understanding-between-the-two-countries>.

<sup>8</sup> International Energy Forum, "Algeria Powers Ahead with Huge Renewable Energy Plans," 21 June 2021, <https://www.ief.org/news/algeria-powers-ahead-with-huge-renewable-energy-plans>.

<sup>9</sup> Valdai Discussion Club, "Algeria at the BRICS' Doorstep: A Journey of Aspirations and Opportunities," 14 November 2023, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/algeria-at-the-brics-doorstep/>.

# Bahrain & Oman

George Meneshian

Compared to other Gulf States, Oman and Bahrain have largely sought to maintain a low profile in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have adopted more prominent stances, Oman and Bahrain have chosen a more cautious approach, reflecting their unique foreign policy traditions and strategic interests. This divergence—Oman’s neutrality and Bahrain’s strategic balancing—underscores their prioritisation of regional stability and economic pragmatism amidst a highly polarised global conflict.<sup>10</sup>

Bahrain’s response to the war in Ukraine reflects its attempt to balance longstanding U.S. partnerships and growing ties with Russia.<sup>11</sup> Before the invasion, Bahrain and Russia had steadily deepened relations, particularly in the areas of energy, trade, and technology.<sup>12</sup> Following the outbreak of the conflict, Bahrain’s response was much aligned with the wider GCC approach: the kingdom condemned Russia’s aggression at the United Nations General Assembly while abstaining from key votes, such as suspending Russia from the UN Human Rights Council, to avoid heightening tensions with Moscow.<sup>13</sup> This cautious approach has aligned Bahrain more closely with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, enabling it to safeguard its economic ties with both Russia and the West.

Following the invasion, Bahrain’s King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa engaged directly with President Vladimir Putin.<sup>14</sup> Western pressure to isolate Russia did not deter the two nations from expanding bilateral and multilateral cooperation. During a state visit to Moscow in 2024, King Hamad reaffirmed

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<sup>10</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “The GCC and the Russia-Ukraine Crisis,” *Arab Center Washington DC*, 22 March 2022, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-gcc-and-the-russia-ukraine-crisis/>.

<sup>11</sup> The Soufan Center, “Bahrain Emerges as Pivotal U.S. Ally,” 24 July 2024, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2024-july-24/>.

<sup>12</sup> Gulf Daily News, “Deep-rooted relations with Russia praised in Bahrain,” 8 February 2024, <https://www.zawya.com/en/world/middle-east/deep-rooted-relations-with-russia-praised-in-bahrain-q9llohmf>.

<sup>13</sup> UNGA ES-11/3, 7 April 2022, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3967950?ln=en&v=pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Amani Hamad, “Bahrain’s King, Russia’s Putin discuss conflict in Ukraine,” *Al Arabiya*, 15 March 2022, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2022/03/15/Bahrain-s-King-Russia-s-Putin-discuss-diplomatic-solutions-for-Ukraine-conflict>.



Bahrain's "*close friendly relations*" with Russia<sup>15</sup> and expressed interest in advancing collaboration on energy and economic development.<sup>16</sup> In the same year, Bahrain also sent a message via Moscow to explore normalising relations with Iran, highlighting growing relations with Russia.<sup>17</sup> Bahraini officials have also maintained a strong presence at Russian-hosted summits such as the Eastern Economic Forum and the BRICS Summit in Kazan.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, Bahrain has shown concern for the humanitarian consequences of the conflict by providing relief aid to Ukrainian refugees<sup>19</sup> and supporting multilateral peace efforts, including Ukraine's 10-point peace formula.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Bahrain has worked alongside its GCC allies to promote a diplomatic resolution to the conflict; in early 2023, Bahrain hosted a CPUNGA<sup>21</sup> meeting, which culminated in the Manama Declaration, calling for a peaceful resolution to the conflict and expressing concern over its humanitarian consequences.<sup>22</sup>

Public opinion in Bahrain adds another layer of complexity, with surveys have revealed significant support for Russia among Bahrainis, including both Sunni and Shia communities, possibly influenced by Russian information campaigns.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the Bahraini leadership has maintained a pragmatic approach, carefully balancing economic interests, regional stability,

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<sup>15</sup> Bahrain News Agency, "Bahrain-Russian relations: A strategic partnership underpinned by historical relations," 23 May 2024, <https://www.bna.bh/en/BahrainRussianrelationsAstrategicpartnershipunderpinnedbyhistoricalrelations.aspx?cms=q8FmFJgiscL2fwIzON1%2BDq0ie8bZNHIplaiCCKmxu8%3D>.

<sup>16</sup> Russian News Agency TASS, "Bahrain's king expresses desire to strengthen ties with Russia to make them comprehensive," 22 May 2024, <https://tass.com/politics/1791907>.

<sup>17</sup> Al Jazeera, "Bahrain sent message through Russia to normalise ties with Iran: Official," 7 June 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/7/bahrain-sent-message-through-russia-to-normalise-ties-with-iran-official>.

<sup>18</sup> Eastern Economic Forum, "Cooperation between Russia and Bahrain at key business events discussed in Moscow," 23 August 2023, <https://forumvostok.ru/en/news/v-moskve-obsudili-sotrudnichestvo-rossii-i-bahrejna-v-ramkah-kljuchevyh-delovyh-meroprijatij/>.

<sup>19</sup> Gulf Daily News, "Bahraini team delivering aid to Ukraine civilians," 21 March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220416221638/https://www.zawya.com/en/special-coverage/russia-ukraine-crisis/bahraini-team-delivering-aid-to-ukraine-civilians-yc13otwa>.

<sup>20</sup> Burç Eruygur, "Zelenskyy discusses peace formula with Bahraini, Kuwaiti rulers," *Anadolu Agency*, 8 January 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/russia-ukraine-war/zelenskyy-discusses-peace-formula-with-bahraini-kuwaiti-rulers/3103382>.

<sup>21</sup> Council of Presidents of the United Nations General Assembly.

<sup>22</sup> Gulf Daily News, "Bahrain is working with GCC to help resolve Russia-Ukraine conflict," 8 March 2023, <https://www.zawya.com/en/world/middle-east/bahrain-is-working-with-gcc-to-help-resolve-russia-ukraine-conflict-xzeglxt0>.

<sup>23</sup> David Pollock, "New Bahrain Poll Reveals Support for Russia, Entente with Iran, Split on Israel," *Fikra Forum*, 3 May 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-bahrain-poll-reveals-support-russia-entente-iran-split-israel>.

and global responsibilities. Manama has also successfully avoided alienating either Russia or Ukraine.

Oman's foreign policy, rooted in neutrality and non-intervention, has shaped a similarly cautious response to the Ukraine conflict. The Sultanate has avoided taking sides in the conflict, aligning with its broader tradition of diplomacy and dialogue.<sup>24</sup> In line with its diplomatic traditions, Oman refrained from taking sides. While the Sultanate supported UN resolutions condemning Russia's actions, it avoided moves that could alienate Moscow, instead emphasising the need for a peaceful resolution through dialogue.<sup>25</sup> This approach was reinforced during Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's visit to Muscat in May 2022,<sup>26</sup> which highlighted Oman's commitment to preserving its partnership with. Oman's leadership has also called for a "European solution" to the crisis, reflecting its preference for multilateral engagement over direct confrontation.<sup>27</sup>

This position is consistent with Oman's long-standing policy of prioritising constructive engagement over confrontation. The Sultanate has not joined international sanctions against Russia, instead focusing on maintaining stable economic relations. Oman's ties with Moscow are particularly evident in energy, food security, and regional diplomacy.<sup>28</sup> As a member of OPEC+, Oman collaborates with Russia on oil production quotas, and the two nations have strengthened their economic relationship, even amid global sanctions.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Russia remains a key supplier of wheat to Oman, a critical good for the Sultanate. Oman has also shown alignment with Russia in regional matters, maintaining relations with the Assad regime during Syria's civil war

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<sup>24</sup> Ibrahim Jalal, "The war next door: Omani foreign policy toward Yemen," *Middle East Institute*, 21 September 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/war-next-door-omani-foreign-policy-toward-yemen>.

<sup>25</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "Understanding Oman's Stance on the Ukraine War," *Gulf International Forum*, 9 June 2022, <https://gulfif.org/understanding-omans-stance-on-the-ukraine-war/>.

<sup>26</sup> The National, "Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in official visit to Oman," 11 May 2022, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/gulf-news/2022/05/11/russian-foreign-minister-sergey-lavrov-makes-official-oman-visit/>.

<sup>27</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "Understanding Oman's Stance on the Ukraine War."

<sup>28</sup> Diana Galeeva, "The Advantages of Oman's "Ideology of Politeness" in the Ukraine War," *Gulf International Forum*, 12 February 2023, <https://gulfif.org/the-advantages-of-omans-ideology-of-politeness-in-the-ukraine-war/>.

<sup>29</sup> The Cradle, "Russia, Oman sign agreement to boost trade ties," 8 June 2023, <https://thecradle.co/articles/russia-oman-sign-agreement-to-boost-trade-ties>.

and supporting Syria's reintegration into the Arab League.<sup>30</sup> Oman is also the only Gulf State which maintains close ties with Iran, a key Russian ally. This alignment was demonstrated in March 2024, when Oman participated in naval drills alongside Russia and Iran in the Indian Ocean.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, Oman has actively sought to engage with Ukraine. Ukraine's role as one of Oman's main wheat suppliers<sup>32</sup> has created concerns about potential supply shortages caused by the conflict,<sup>33</sup> prompting Muscat to strengthen ties with Kyiv. Simultaneously, Ukraine has recognised Oman's importance. In late 2022, Kyiv decided to open an embassy in Muscat to enhance bilateral relations. During the embassy's opening ceremony in October 2024,<sup>34</sup> Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrei Sibiga proposed establishing a food hub in Oman to facilitate the export of Ukrainian agricultural products to East Africa,<sup>35</sup> highlighting the growing economic relationship between the two nations.<sup>36</sup> Ukraine has also leveraged Oman's diplomatic neutrality, turning to the Sultanate for mediation in late 2022, when Muscat hosted talks between Iran and Ukraine regarding the use of Iranian-made drones by Russia.<sup>37</sup>

In conclusion, Oman and Bahrain have navigated the complexities of the Ukraine conflict with pragmatism and a focus on regional stability. Bahrain has leaned towards a cautious alignment with Russia, reflecting its strong economic and strategic ties, while Oman has adhered to its neutral stance, emphasising dialogue and non-intervention. Despite their differing

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<sup>30</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "Understanding Oman's Stance on the Ukraine War."

<sup>31</sup> Al Arabiya, "Iran hosts joint naval drills with Russia and Oman in Indian Ocean," 12 March 2024, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2024/10/19/iran-hosts-joint-naval-drills-with-russia-and-oman-in-indian-ocean>.

<sup>32</sup> Anna L. Jacobs, "The Ukraine Crisis Deepens Food Insecurity Across the Middle East and Africa," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 11 April 2022, <https://agsiw.org/the-ukraine-crisis-deepens-food-insecurity-across-the-middle-east-and-africa/>.

<sup>33</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "Understanding Oman's Stance on the Ukraine War."

<sup>34</sup> Foreign Ministry of the Sultanate of Oman, "Opening of Ukrainian Embassy in Muscat," 23 October 2024, <https://www.fm.gov.om/opening-of-ukrainian-embassy-in-muscat/>.

<sup>35</sup> Tetiana Herasimova, "Sybiha proposes to Oman to create food hub for entry of Ukrainian products to markets of East Africa," *Ukrainian News Agency*, 23 October 2024, <https://ukranews.com/en/news/1042997-sybiha-proposes-to-oman-to-create-food-hub-for-entry-of-ukrainian-products-to-markets-of-east-africa>.

<sup>36</sup> Maksym Subkh, "Ukraine praises Oman's role in Gulf region, keen to promote bilateral ties with Oman," *Times of Oman*, 8 April 2023, <https://timesofoman.com/article/129287-ukraine-praises-omans-role-in-gulf-region-keen-to-promote-bilateral-ties-with-oman>.

<sup>37</sup> Amwaj.media, "Inside story: The emerging Iran-Ukraine dialogue in Oman," 15 February 2023, <https://amwaj.media/article/inside-story-the-emerging-iran-ukraine-dialogue-in-oman>.

approaches, both states remain committed to avoiding confrontation and maintaining balanced relations with key global players. As the conflict continues, Oman and Bahrain are likely to sustain their roles as stabilising forces in the Gulf while carefully balancing their economic interests and geopolitical considerations.

# Egypt

Thanasis Argyropoulos

Egypt holds a prominent position in the Eastern Mediterranean and MENA regions, being the most populous Arab nation and controlling the strategically important Suez Canal. The Russia-Ukraine war has significantly influenced Egypt's domestic and foreign policy, affecting high-level decision-making and the daily lives of nearly 110 million citizens.<sup>38</sup> Driven by various geopolitical priorities, Egypt has adopted a carefully balanced approach to the conflict.

President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, who has been in power since 2013 following a military coup, has adeptly navigated Egypt's relationships with major regional and global powers. While fostering a robust partnership with Russia, evidenced by multiple agreements and high-profile meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin, he has also maintained strong ties with the United States<sup>39</sup> and the European Union. Since 2018, Egypt has ranked among the top three importers of Russian weapons,<sup>40</sup> highlighting the strategic depth of its military cooperation with Moscow. Simultaneously, Egypt remains one of the largest recipients of U.S. financial aid,<sup>41</sup> reinforcing its longstanding partnership with Washington. Cooperation with the EU further broadens Cairo's international engagement.<sup>42</sup>

Economically, Egypt's dependence on Russian and Ukrainian exports of essential goods like wheat and corn has underscored its vulnerability. Tourism and foreign direct investments from both nations also play a critical role in Egypt's economy, making the war's disruption to these sectors particularly destabilizing.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Michaël Tanchum "The Russia-Ukraine war forces Egypt to face the need to feed itself: Infrastructure, international partnerships and agritech can provide the solutions," *Middle East Institute*, 25 July 2023, <https://mei.edu/publications/russia-ukraine-war-forces-egypt-face-need-feed-itself-infrastructure-international>.

<sup>39</sup> Khalil Al-Anani, "Russia's War on Ukraine: Egypt's Limited Room for Maneuver," *Arab Center Washington DC*, 6 April, 2022, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/russias-war-on-ukraine-egypts-limited-room-for-maneuver/>.

<sup>40</sup> Egypt Independent, "Egypt among top 3 importers of Russian weapons since 2018," 18 March 2023, <https://www.egyptindependent.com/egypt-amongst-top-3-importers-of-russian-weapons-since-2018/>.

<sup>41</sup> Julia Haines, "Countries That Receive the Most Foreign Aid From the U.S.," *U.S. News & World Report*, 18 January 2024, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/countries-that-receive-the-most-foreign-aid-from-the-u-s>.

<sup>42</sup> Anthony Dworkin, "The EU and Egypt: Setting the Limits to the Partnership," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)*, 23 July 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/the-eu-and-egypt-setting-the-limits-to-the-partnership-181475>.

<sup>43</sup> May Gadallah and Nesma Mamdouh, "The Socioeconomic Impact of the Russia-Ukraine Crisis on Vulnerable Families and Children in Egypt: Mitigating Food Security and Nutrition Concerns," *Policy Research Report ERF*, PRR 46, June 2023, p. 7.

Regarding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Egypt initially kept a neutral position, adopting the doctrine of non-involvement.<sup>44</sup> This was an attempt to balance the two warring parties as well as the two emerging rival global coalitions: the West and the Russia-China axis. Cairo called for dialogue between the two belligerents and urged them to find a political solution to the conflict through diplomacy.<sup>45</sup> However, Egypt's attempts to maintain neutrality proved increasingly challenging. Its stance led to criticism from the Ukrainian side and political pressure from the U.S. and the EU, resulting in Egypt's decision to eventually vote in favour of a resolution condemning the Russian invasion at the United Nations General Assembly on 2 March 2022.<sup>46</sup>

El-Sisi maintained communication with both Russian and Ukrainian leaders, offering to mediate and pursue a peaceful resolution. Egypt's subsequent vote in October 2022 against Russia's annexation of four Ukrainian provinces<sup>47</sup> reaffirmed its 'forced' alignment with the international community. Yet, Egypt's foreign policy remained complex. The Egyptian government criticized sanctions imposed outside the multilateral international system, citing their global repercussions,<sup>48</sup> and initially planned to integrate Russia's MIR payment system into its own financial infrastructure. However, Cairo ultimately abandoned this plan, fearing U.S. sanctions and potential fallout with the International Monetary Fund, where U.S. influence remains pivotal in loan negotiations.<sup>49</sup>

Domestically, the economic toll of the war was severe.<sup>50</sup> Rising inflation and growing food insecurity forced the Egyptian government to adapt its strategies, prioritizing immediate national interests. This pragmatic approach involved maintaining and even strengthening ties with Russia despite external pressures. Trade data reflected this shift: since 2022, Russia's share of Egypt's wheat imports has grown, and Russian

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<sup>44</sup> Al Jazeera, "Egypt agreed to supply arms to Ukraine after US talks," 18 April 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/18/egypt-agreed-to-supply-arms-to-ukraine-after-us-talks-report>.

<sup>45</sup> Khalil Al-Anani, "Russia's War on Ukraine: Egypt's Limited Room for Maneuver."

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> State Information Service, "Egypt and the Russian-Ukrainian War," 31 March 2023, <https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/178602/Egypt-and-the-Russian-Ukrainian-War?lang=en-us>.

<sup>48</sup> Egypt Today, "Egypt rejects economic sanctions on Russia outside 'multilateral system' as it votes in favor of UN resolution against attack on Ukraine," 3 March 2022, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/113413/Egypt-rejects-economic-sanctions-on-Russia-outside-multilateral-system-as>.

<sup>49</sup> Pan Finance, "Egypt freezes Russian MIR payments," 10 October 2022, <https://panfinance.net/egypt-freezes-russian-mir-payments/>.

<sup>50</sup> Khalil Al-Anani, "Russia's War on Ukraine: Egypt's Limited Room for Maneuver."

foreign direct investments have slightly increased.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, by early 2024, the two nations had initiated the construction of a nuclear power plant in Egypt,<sup>52</sup> a project emblematic of their enduring partnership, while Egypt's accession to the BRICS<sup>53</sup> group reflects Cairo's alignment with Russian and Chinese efforts to shape international order.

On the military front, Egypt's dealings<sup>54</sup> with Russia faced obstacles since the start of the conflict. In 2022, the U.S. blocked a deal for Egypt to purchase Russian-made fighter jets.<sup>55</sup> In early 2023, U.S. intelligence revealed that Egypt had ordered the production of 40,000 rockets for Russia. Following intense American pressure, El-Sisi shelved the deal and instead approved the sale of artillery to the U.S., which was then transferred to Ukraine.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, in November 2023, Egypt approved the resale of 150 rotorcraft engines to Moscow,<sup>57</sup> showing its capacity to manoeuvre diplomatically amid competing pressures.

Regionally, Egypt and Russia have collaborated on various issues, sharing mutual interests in Libya, where both support the Libyan National Army under Khalifa Haftar. Their alignment extended to Syria's reintegration into the Arab League in May 2023. However, differences persist on certain issues, such as the Nile River dispute.<sup>58</sup>

Through these manoeuvres, Egypt has avoided committing to any single global power bloc, preserving its relationships with Russia and the West while maintaining the goodwill of its affluent regional allies. This ambiguous but strategic posture has been facilitated by the declining unipolarity of the United States and the emergence of a more contested global order. Nevertheless, Egypt remains mindful of the United States' enduring influence, especially regarding its economic stability and food security, which have been severely strained by the war.

In conclusion, Egypt's balancing act will depend on the war's trajectory and its broader implications for global geopolitics. The conflict continues to exacerbate

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<sup>51</sup> Amr Hamzawy and Rain Ji, "Soviet and Russian Policies Toward Egypt: Two Snapshots," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 26 September 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/09/egypt-russia-great-power?lang=en>.

<sup>52</sup> Reuters, "Putin, Sisi mark new phase of Egypt's Russian-built nuclear plant," 23 January 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/putin-sisi-mark-new-phase-egypts-russian-built-nuclear-plant-2024-01-23/>.

<sup>53</sup> Thaer Mansour, "Egypt's BRICS membership officially activated under Russian leadership," 2 January 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/news/egypts-brics-membership-officially-activated>.

<sup>54</sup> Egypt Independent, "Moscow says Egypt has acquired the most powerful Russian weapons," 30 July 2023, <https://www.egyptindependent.com/moscow-says-egypt-has-acquired-the-most-powerful-russian-weapons/>.

<sup>55</sup> Heba Taha, "Strategic Partners or Tactical Allies? A Decade of Egypt–Russia Relations," *South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA)*, Occasional Paper No 359, October 2024, p. 14.

<sup>56</sup> Khalil Al-Anani, "The Fallout of Sisi's Gambit with Russia," *Arab Center Washington DC*, 14 April 2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-fallout-of-sisis-gambit-with-russia/>.

<sup>57</sup> Heba Taha, "Strategic Partners or Tactical Allies?," p. 15.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

inflation and food insecurity in Egypt, tying the country's fortunes to the longevity of the crisis. Ultimately, Cairo's strategy reflects a pragmatic effort to manoeuvre through an unstable region, while protecting its national interests and solidifying its role as an influential actor in an increasingly multipolar world.



# Iran

Demet-Dimitra Uyar

Iran and Russia's partnership has witnessed unprecedented growth since the outbreak of the Ukraine war in February 2022, rooted in shared geopolitical grievances, economic pressures, and converging strategic interests. As both countries face isolation under Western sanctions, their cooperation has extended beyond bilateral economic and military domains to multilateral frameworks and broader geopolitical crises. The war in Ukraine has not only amplified their alignment but also redefined the dynamic of their relationship. At the United Nations General Assembly, Iran abstained from voting on resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine.<sup>59</sup> It further demonstrated its support for Moscow by voting against two resolutions—one that called for the suspension of Russia's membership in the UN Human Rights Council and another demanding that Russia pay war reparations to Ukraine.<sup>60</sup> Rhetorically, Tehran has embraced Moscow's narrative, framing the conflict as a consequence of NATO expansion and Western provocation. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has openly criticized the United States for perpetuating the war and destabilizing global security, emphasizing shared grievances with Russia over Western hegemony.<sup>61</sup> Iran's integration into Russian-led multilateral frameworks has further solidified this alignment. Tehran joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a full member in July 2023,<sup>62</sup> deepening its economic and security ties with Moscow and Beijing. Moreover, Iran's engagement with the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), although not formalized into full membership, reflects its readiness to align on shared

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<sup>59</sup> Aydın Güven, "Iran's Attitude Towards the UN Votes Concerning the Russia-Ukraine War," *Center for Iranian Studies (IRAM)*, 9 April 2022, [https://iramcenter.org/en/irans-attitude-towards-the-un-votes-concerning-the-russia-ukraine-war\\_en-731](https://iramcenter.org/en/irans-attitude-towards-the-un-votes-concerning-the-russia-ukraine-war_en-731).

<sup>60</sup> Islamic Republic News Agency, "Why Iran voted against UN resolution on Russian reparations for Ukraine?" 16 November 2022, <https://en.ina.ir/news/84944505/Why-Iran-voted-against-UN-resolution-on-Russian-reparations-for>.

<sup>61</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "Iran's Indispensable Role for Russia in the Ukraine War," *Gulf International Forum*, 20 February 2023, <https://gulffif.org/irans-indispensable-role-for-russia-in-the-ukraine-war/>.

<sup>62</sup> Riyaz ul Khaliq and Aamir Latif, "Iran becomes full member of Shanghai Cooperation Organization," 4 July 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/iran-becomes-full-member-of-shanghai-cooperation-organization/2936909>.

security priorities.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, Iran has pursued closer ties with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), by signing a free trade agreement to facilitate economic integration.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Iran's accession in the BRICS group<sup>65</sup> in 2024 represents another milestone in its engagement with Moscow and Beijing.

Economic cooperation between Iran and Russia has deepened significantly since February 2022, driven by their mutual isolation due to Western sanctions.<sup>66</sup> Bilateral trade volumes surged to unprecedented levels in 2023, encompassing energy deals, agricultural exchanges, and joint investments in industrial projects.<sup>67</sup> However, competition persists in energy markets, as Russia's discounted oil exports to China undermine Iran's share of this critical market.<sup>68</sup> Despite such tensions, the overall trajectory of economic ties reflects growing interdependence. The two countries have also initiated vital projects to enhance their economic relations; the Ukraine war disrupted traditional trade routes, highlighting the strategic importance of alternative corridors. The development of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC),<sup>69</sup> which will connect Russia and India via Iran and Azerbaijan, signifies a pivotal shift in Russian-Iranian relations and their influence on global trade routes.

Militarily, the Ukraine war has radically transformed the dynamic between Moscow and Tehran, ushering in unprecedented levels of cooperation. Once primarily a recipient of Russian arms, Iran has reversed roles by emerging as a critical supplier to Moscow. Iran's Shahed-136 drones, recognized for their

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<sup>63</sup> Mehr News Agency, "Iran invited to CSTO exercise in Belarus as observer," 28 August 2023, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/205268/Iran-invited-to-CSTO-exercise-in-Belarus-as-observer>.

<sup>64</sup> Amat Adarov and Mahdi Ghodsi, "The Impact of the EAEU-Iran Preferential Trade Agreement," *The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies*, Working Paper No. 179, May 2020, <https://wiiw.ac.at/the-impact-of-the-eaeu-iran-preferential-trade-agreement-dlp-5335.pdf>.

<sup>65</sup> Umud Shokri, "Iran Becomes A Member Of BRICS, With Hopes And Challenges," *Iran International*, 2 January 2024, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202401020918>.

<sup>66</sup> Ghazal Golshiri, Chloé Hoorman, Marie Jégo and Elise Vincent, "Russia, Iran and the fast track to a new world order," *Le Monde*, 1 November 2024, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/11/01/russia-iran-and-the-fast-track-to-a-new-world-order\\_6731277\\_4.html#](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/11/01/russia-iran-and-the-fast-track-to-a-new-world-order_6731277_4.html#).

<sup>67</sup> TASS Russian News Agency, "Trade turnover between Russia and Iran falls to around \$4 bln by end of 2023 — Novak," 28 February 2024, <https://tass.com/economy/1753113>.

<sup>68</sup> Umud Shokri, "Russia And Iran Enhance Energy Collaboration Amid Sanctions," *Iran International*, 2 March 2024, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202403026678>.

<sup>69</sup> *Tehran Times*, "Iran, Russia determined to implement INSTC," 17 September 2024, <https://tehrantimes.com/news/503776/Iran-Russia-determined-to-implement-INSTC>.

affordability and precision, have become a cornerstone of Russia's military operations in Ukraine.<sup>70</sup> Iran has also provided other unmanned aerial systems, including the Mohajer-6 drones, capable of reconnaissance and armed strikes.<sup>71</sup>

Apart from drones, reports suggest that Tehran has supplied artillery shells, rockets, and ammunition to replenish Russia's depleted stockpiles.<sup>72</sup> This support extends to logistical assistance, with Iranian technicians and advisors reportedly deployed in occupied Crimea to assist Russian forces in integrating and operating these systems.<sup>73</sup> The collaboration goes deeper, with intelligence suggesting that Russia and Iran are co-developing drone manufacturing facilities within Russian territory, an effort designed to bolster Moscow's self-sufficiency and circumvent Western sanctions.<sup>74</sup> In return, Iran has sought to capitalize on the partnership to enhance its own military capabilities. Tehran has reportedly requested advanced Russian weaponry, including Su-35 fighter jets, which would significantly upgrade Iran's air force capabilities. Additionally, Tehran is eager to acquire Russian S-400 missile defence systems to counter potential threats from Israel or the United States.<sup>75</sup>

Beyond the Ukraine war, the Iran-Russia partnership has deepened to include broader geopolitical challenges, with Russia's increasing reliance on Iranian-made weapons notably shifting its Middle Eastern strategy. For example, Moscow's public condemnation of Israel's actions in Gaza in 2023 marked a

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<sup>70</sup> Asami Terajima, "Explainer: Iran's cheap, effective Shahed drones and how Russia uses them in Ukraine," *The Kyiv Independent*, 17 April 2024, <https://kyivindependent.com/explainer-irans-cheap-effective-shahed-drones-and-how-russia-uses-them-in-ukraine/>.

<sup>71</sup> Emma Helfrich, "Iranian Mohajer-6 Drones Used By Russia Loaded With Western Parts," *The War Zone*, 17 November 2022, <https://www.twz.com/iranian-mohajer-6-drones-used-by-russia-loaded-with-western-parts>.

<sup>72</sup> Hanna Notte and Jim Lamson, "The Uncomfortable Reality of Russia and Iran's New Defense Relationship," *War on the Rocks*, 24 July 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/07/the-uncomfortable-reality-of-russia-and-irans-new-defense-relationship/>.

<sup>73</sup> Julian Borger, "Iranian advisers killed aiding Russians in Crimea, says Kyiv," *The Guardian*, 24 November 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/24/iranian-military-advisers-killed-aiding-moscow-in-crimea-kyiv>.

<sup>74</sup> Al Jazeera, "US says Iran is helping Russia build drone manufacturing facility," 9 June 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/9/us-says-iran-is-helping-russia-build-drone-manufacturing-facility>.

<sup>75</sup> Javad Heiran-Nia, "The Roots of Increasing Military Cooperation Between Iran and Russia," *Stimson Center*, 16 October 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/the-roots-of-increasing-military-cooperation-between-iran-and-russia/>.

notable alignment with Tehran.<sup>76</sup> Prior to 2022, both countries supported the Assad regime in Syria, but their wider regional objectives have since diverged. Russia has sought to balance its ties with Israel, which sometimes conflicts with Iran's more rigid stance on Middle Eastern security.<sup>77</sup> Despite these tensions, Iran and Russia, alongside Turkey, have solidified the Astana process—an alternative peace initiative for Syria that excludes Western influence. A similar effort is the “3+3” Platform for Regional Cooperation in the South Caucasus, another example of their growing diplomatic cooperation in a region where their interests converge.<sup>78</sup>

Challenges in the Iran-Russia relationship persist, however, particularly over sensitive regional issues. In July 2023, tensions arose when the Russian Foreign Minister endorsed the UAE's claim over islands in the Strait of Hormuz and referred to the waterway as the ‘Arabian Gulf’ instead of the ‘Persian Gulf,’ a move that Iran perceived as undermining its sovereignty.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, in September 2024, disagreements emerged over the proposed ‘Zangezur Corridor’ in the South Caucasus. Russia initially supported Turkish and Azerbaijani plans to establish an extraterritorial corridor through southern Armenia along the Iranian border—a project Tehran viewed as a direct threat to its access to the Caucasus and the Black Sea. Facing backlash from Iran and seeking to preserve bilateral ties, Moscow ultimately withdrew its support for the initiative.<sup>80</sup>

Concluding, the Ukraine war has marked a turning point in Russia-Iran relations, transforming their partnership from one of pragmatic cooperation to a more strategic alignment. Shared isolation under Western sanctions and a mutual desire to counterbalance Western influence have driven unprecedented levels of collaboration across economic, military, and geopolitical spheres. Tehran's integration into Russian-led multilateral

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<sup>76</sup> Hamidreza Azizi, “Allied against the West,” *International Politics and Society*, 12 March 2024, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/allied-against-the-west-7384/>.

<sup>77</sup> PSCR, “Recent Cracks in Russian-Iranian Relations,” *Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies*, 15 September 2024, <https://besacenter.org/recent-cracks-in-russian-iranian-relations/>.

<sup>78</sup> Hamidreza Azizi, “Allied against the West.”

<sup>79</sup> Ruxandra Iordache, “Iran at odds with allied Russia after Moscow backs UAE in island dispute,” *CNBC*, 12 July 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/12/iran-at-odds-with-allied-russia-after-moscow-backs-uae-in-island-dispute.html>.

<sup>80</sup> Eldar Mamedov, “Order restored to Iranian-Russian relations after geopolitical row,” *Eurasianet*, 19 September 2024, <https://eurasianet.org/order-restored-to-iranian-russian-relations-after-geopolitical-row>.

frameworks and its critical military support to Moscow highlight the deepening interdependence between the two nations. However, as their partnership evolves, underlying tensions—ranging from energy market competition to divergent regional interests—pose challenges to its long-term stability. Nevertheless, the post-Ukraine dynamics have elevated Russia-Iran relations to a new strategic dimension, with both nations leveraging their cooperation to reshape regional power balances and challenge the Western-led global order.

# Iraq

George Meneshian

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Iraq has pursued a careful balancing strategy, reflecting internal political divisions alongside economic and security concerns. Iraq's response underscores a nuanced foreign policy approach that neither fully aligns with Western condemnation of Russia nor endorses the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine. Instead, Iraq's stance reveals a commitment to strategic non-alignment, prioritizing internal stability, economic resilience, and regional autonomy in response to global shifts.

Iraq's cautious neutrality on the Russia-Ukraine conflict is reflected in its voting record on relevant United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions. Initially, Iraq abstained from a March 2022 UNGA vote (Resolution ES-11/1) condemning Russia's aggression.<sup>81</sup> Following strong U.S. and European pressure, Iraq voted in favour of the 24 March 2022 resolution (ES-11/2), acknowledging Russian aggression and demanding humanitarian aid access and protection in Ukraine.<sup>82</sup> Later, Iraq abstained from the 7 April 2022 vote (ES-11/3) that suspended Russia from the UN Human Rights Council<sup>83</sup> but voted in favour of Resolution ES-11/4, on 12 October 2022, which condemned the sham referenda in the Russian-occupied Ukrainian oblasts, and their subsequent annexation by the Russian Federation<sup>84</sup>. A month later, Iraq abstained from Resolution ES-11/5 that called for Russian reparations to Ukraine<sup>85</sup>. Finally, in February 2023, Iraq voted in favour of Resolution ES-11/6 calling for an end to the war. This move

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<sup>81</sup> The Washington Institute, "The UN Resolution on Ukraine: How Did the Middle East Vote?," 2 March 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/un-resolution-ukraine-how-did-middle-east-vote>.

<sup>82</sup> UN News, "Ukraine: General Assembly passes resolution demanding aid access, by large majority," 24 March 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1114632>.

<sup>83</sup> UN News, "UN General Assembly votes to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council," 7 April 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115782>.

<sup>84</sup> Samuel Ramani, "Iraq's Partnership with Russia Persists Despite International Pressure," 2 April 2023, <https://gulfif.org/iraqs-partnership-with-russia-persists-despite-international-pressure/>.

<sup>85</sup> Al Jazeera, "UN calls for Russia to pay reparations. How did countries vote?," 15 November 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/15/un-calls-for-russia-to-pay-reparations-how-did-countries-vote>.

was praised by Ukrainian officials as evidence of Baghdad's support for peace<sup>86</sup>.

Iraqi policy towards Russia and its voting behaviour within the UNGA is underscored by several factors. Relations between Moscow and Baghdad are often described as friendly and marked by cooperation. This does not mean, however, that Iraq is an ally of Russia. The Iraqi government has adopted a balanced approach in foreign policy<sup>87</sup> and Baghdad's priority is to enhance relationships with key regional and global actors to overcome existing internal problems.<sup>88</sup> Additional factors include Iraq's historical grievances with foreign intervention, notably the 2003 U.S. invasion, and longstanding challenges associated with Kurdish separatism.

Iraq's balanced approach reflects its cautious adjustment to both domestic and international pressures without severing ties with Moscow. The war in Ukraine and its secondary impacts are concerning for Iraq's food, economic, and energy security. Thus, Iraq considers maintaining its partnership with Russia essential<sup>89</sup>. In terms of food security, Baghdad has denied reports of purchasing Ukrainian grain smuggled by Russia,<sup>90</sup> while Ukraine has expressed hope that Baghdad will encourage Moscow to comply with the Black Sea Grain Initiative.<sup>91</sup> Regarding the energy sector, Iraq is largely dependent on crude oil sales. Following the imposition of Western sanctions against Russia's energy industry, Iraq's Central Bank advised halting deals with Russian firms to avoid secondary sanctions. Nevertheless, Russia has

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<sup>86</sup> Kurdistan24, "Ukraine 'appreciates' Iraq's vote at UN against Russian war, says chief diplomat," 17 April 2023,

[https://www.google.gr/search?q=Kyiv+hails+Baghdad%E2%80%99s+vote+in+favor+of+ending+the+Russian+war+in+Ukraine+at+the+United+Nations+General+Assembly+in+late+February%2C+the+east+European+country%E2%80%99s+foreign+minister+said+in+Baghdad+on+Monday.%0D%0A%0D%0A&ifsig=AL9hbdgAAAAZy-9uJshLPHeJYwEunlnU\\_bZaqIIOrUT](https://www.google.gr/search?q=Kyiv+hails+Baghdad%E2%80%99s+vote+in+favor+of+ending+the+Russian+war+in+Ukraine+at+the+United+Nations+General+Assembly+in+late+February%2C+the+east+European+country%E2%80%99s+foreign+minister+said+in+Baghdad+on+Monday.%0D%0A%0D%0A&ifsig=AL9hbdgAAAAZy-9uJshLPHeJYwEunlnU_bZaqIIOrUT).

<sup>87</sup> Farhad Alaaldin, "Iraq's Balanced Approach to Foreign Relations Continues," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 8 October 2023, <https://english.aawsat.com/opinion/4591766-iraq%E2%80%99s-balanced-approach-foreign-relations-continues>.

<sup>88</sup> Firas Abbas Hashim & Amer Hashim Awad, "Iraqi Diplomatic Strategies for Enhancing Geopolitical Influence in the Middle East: Contexts, Trends, and Challenges," *Hammurabi Journal for Studies*, 13, no. 50, 43-66, <https://doi.org/10.61884/hjs.v13i50.478>.

<sup>89</sup> Joost Hiltermann, Dina Esfandiary, Ricardo Fabiani & Ali Vaez, "The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa," *The International Crisis Group*, 14 April 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/impact-russias-invasion-ukraine-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

<sup>90</sup> BasNews, "Iraq Rejects Reports of Buying Ukrainian Wheat Through Russia," 7 July 2022, <https://www.basnews.com/en/babat/763617>.

<sup>91</sup> Samuel Ramani, "Iraq's Partnership with Russia."



been largely successful in mitigating the impact of Western sanctions on its oil-related business interests in Iraq.<sup>92</sup>

Bilateral cooperation remains crucial for Iraq, and the two nations are also working together in platforms such as OPEC+.<sup>93</sup> In February 2023, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Baghdad, where he met with Iraqi officials and praised the continuous growth of cooperation between the two countries<sup>94</sup>. Iraq is also interested in joining the BRICS.<sup>95</sup>

In the security sphere, Iraq's security cooperation with Russia has largely remained confined to intelligence sharing within the framework of the Quartet Information Exchange and Coordination Center, which was founded in 2015 by Iran, Russia, Syria, and Iraq to address the Islamic State (Daesh) and safeguard the Syria-Iraq border. During Lavrov's last visit to Baghdad, both sides underscored their mutual desire to strengthen bilateral military cooperation further.<sup>96</sup> Despite Iraq's interest in acquiring Russian-made arms, U.S. sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) prevent Iraq from advancing its defence ties with Moscow.<sup>97</sup> Consequently, pre-war negotiations on the acquisition of S-300s, S-400s, and Su-57 jets have ceased.<sup>98</sup>

Domestically, Iraq's stance is influenced by competing political currents, with factions supporting either Russia or a neutral, non-interventionist stance: Iranian-aligned Shiite militias and their political organisations linked to the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) support Russia, seeing the conflict as a consequence of NATO interference. Prominent militia leaders, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah's Abu Hussein al-Hamidawi, view Russia's invasion as a strategic

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<sup>92</sup> Samuel Ramani, "What does Russia's war in Ukraine mean for Iraq?," *Middle East Institute*, 4 April 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/what-does-russias-war-ukraine-mean-iraq>.

<sup>93</sup> Reuters, "Putin hosts Iraqi PM in Kremlin, hails cooperation in OPEC+," 10 October 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-hosts-iraqi-pm-kremlin-hails-cooperation-opec-2023-10-10/>.

<sup>94</sup> Ismaeel Naar & Sinan Mahmoud, "Russia's Sergey Lavrov visits Iraq for talks on energy and regional issues," *The National*, 6 February 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/2023/02/06/russias-sergey-lavrov-visits-iraq-for-talks-on-energy-and-regional-issues/>.

<sup>95</sup> Ali Kareem Ozheb, "Will BRICS open its arms to Iraq?," *Amwaj.media*, 26 October 2023, <https://amwaj.media/article/will-brics-open-its-arms-to-iraq>.

<sup>96</sup> Ismaeel Naar & Sinan Mahmoud, "Russia's Sergey Lavrov visits."

<sup>97</sup> Joyce Karam, Robert Tollast & Sinan Mahmoud, "US sanctions on Russia's weapon makers could cause problems for Iraq," *The National*, 22 March 2022, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2022/03/22/us-sanctions-on-russias-weapon-makers-could-cause-problems-for-iraq/>.

<sup>98</sup> Samuel Ramani, "Iraq's Partnership with Russia."



countermeasure to U.S. influence.<sup>99</sup> Conversely, Moqtada al-Sadr of the Sadrist movement, one of Iraq's most prominent political movements, has refused to support Russia's actions and advocated for a peaceful solution of the conflict.<sup>100</sup>

The situation in the autonomous Kurdistan region is more complicated. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has traditionally had closer ties with the West in comparison with the central government in Baghdad.<sup>101</sup> Nechirvan Barzani, President of the KRG, has expressed ambivalence toward the war. He supports Turkey's mediation efforts and favours diplomacy over armed conflict.<sup>102</sup> It is well-established that the KRG has close ties with the U.S. It owes Russia, however, for helping it avoid bankruptcy in 2016-2017 through important investments. As a result, the Russian energy giant Rosneft now controls 60% of the KRG's main oil pipeline. In addition, Russia did not oppose the KRG's 2017 independence referendum, and this has led some KRG leaders to take a more supportive stance toward pro-Russian separatism in Eastern Ukraine. Nevertheless, if Western countries enforce sanctions, the KRG might have to end its business dealings with Russia.<sup>103</sup> For now, the KRG continues to maintain ties with Russia.<sup>104</sup>

In sum, Iraq's diplomatic stance on the Russia-Ukraine war reflects a need to balance strategic economic interests, domestic political divisions, and regional stability. By refraining from full alignment with either Russia or the West, Iraq seeks to maintain flexibility in its foreign policy, underscoring a preference for a non-aligned approach in a world increasingly marked by great-power competition. During the first year of the war, Iraq did not hesitate to occasionally condemn Russia at the UNGA while continuing to engage with

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<sup>99</sup> Amir al-Kaabi, "The Militia-Russia Love Affair: April 2023 Update," *The Washington Institute*, 26 April 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/militia-russia-love-affair-april-2023-update>.

<sup>100</sup> Shafaq News, "Russia Consulate in Basra: Iraqis are applying to fight with Russia in Ukraine," 3 March 2022, <https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq/Russia-Consulate-in-Basra-Iraqis-are-applying-to-fight-with-Russia-in-Ukraine>.

<sup>101</sup> Joost Hiltermann, Dina Esfandiary, Ricardo Fabiani & Ali Vaez, "The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa."

<sup>102</sup> KurdPress, "Nechirvan Barzani discusses the Russian-Ukrainian war with Turkey FM," 13 March 2022, <https://en.kurdpress.com/news/2244/Nechirvan-Barzani-discusses-the-Russian-Ukrainian-war-with-Turkey>.

<sup>103</sup> Joost Hiltermann, Dina Esfandiary, Ricardo Fabiani & Ali Vaez, "The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa."

<sup>104</sup> Kurdistan24, "KRP Nechirvan Barzani, Russian Ambassador discuss elections, regional developments," 1 October 2024, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/397079>.

Moscow on issues of mutual interest. Domestically, Iranian-aligned forces are more likely to support Russia's policies toward Ukraine, while the KRG appears to be adopting Baghdad's approach to the conflict.

# Israel

Constantinos Gkinios

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has sparked global concern due to the instability it could introduce into the international system. The U.S. government, supported by a significant majority of its allies, imposed sanctions on Russia and provided active support to Ukraine in its defense.<sup>105</sup>

Israel, one of the United States' closest strategic partners, was among the countries that sought to maintain a neutral stance in the Russo-Ukrainian war, aiming to preserve its relations with Moscow. Although Foreign Minister Yair Lapid immediately condemned the Russian invasion,<sup>106</sup> Prime Minister Bennett limited his response to general statements emphasizing the protection of civilians.<sup>107</sup>

At the emergency session of the UN Security Council on Ukraine, Israel declined to sign the U.S.-sponsored resolution condemning the Russian invasion.<sup>108</sup> However, a few days later, it did support, by voting in the United Nations General Assembly, an initiative calling for an end to the conflict. Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett was the first foreign leader to visit the Kremlin on March 5, 2022, taking on a mediating role in efforts to end the war.<sup>109</sup> Following his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Bennett

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<sup>105</sup> “Disrupting and Degrading – One Year of U.S. Sanctions on Russia and Its Enablers”, *U.S. Department of Treasury*, last modified February 24, 2023, accessed January 15, 2024, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1298>.

<sup>106</sup> Yair Lapid (@yairlapid), “את מגנה ישראל, הבינלאומי הסדר של חמורה הפרה היא אוקראינה על הרוסית ההתקפה”, *Twitter*, February 24, 2022, 12:23pm, [https://twitter.com/yairlapid/status/1496792821457637378?s=20&t=2Ha\\_Ge0f-VjT4uFvPSn3Mw](https://twitter.com/yairlapid/status/1496792821457637378?s=20&t=2Ha_Ge0f-VjT4uFvPSn3Mw).

<sup>107</sup> Lazar Bernat, “Bennett refrains from condemning Russia in first remarks since invasion of Ukraine”, *The Times of Israel*, last modified 24 February, 2022, accessed January 15, 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/bennett-refrains-from-condemning-russia-in-first-remarks-since-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

<sup>108</sup> “Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution on Ending Ukraine Crisis, as Russian Federation Wields Veto”, *UN*, last modified February 25, 2022, accessed January 15, 2024, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14808.doc.htm>; Tovah Lazaroff, “Israel fails to sign onto US text condemning Russia at UNSC”, *The Jerusalem Post*, last modified February 26, 2022, accessed January 15, 2024, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-698743>.

<sup>109</sup> “General Assembly resolution demands end to Russian offensive in Ukraine”, *UN*, last modified 2 March 2022, accessed 15 January, 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113152>; Jacob Magid, “UN General Assembly, including Israel, votes overwhelmingly to condemn Russia”, *The Times of Israel*, last modified 2 March, 2022, accessed 15 January 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-general-assembly-including-israel-votes-overwhelmingly-to-condemn-russia/>.

communicated with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and subsequently briefed French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.<sup>110</sup> A year later, Bennett claimed that his mediation had secured Putin's assurances not to assassinate Zelenskyy and to refrain from demanding Ukraine's disarmament.<sup>111</sup> Kyiv's repeated requests for military equipment and sanctions against Russia went unanswered, with Tel Aviv focusing instead on humanitarian aid. The return of Benjamin Netanyahu to power in December 2022 opened a potential window for a shift in Israel's stance. However, during a visit to Kyiv on February 16, 2023, Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen clarified that Israel would intensify humanitarian assistance and support Ukraine's reconstruction efforts. He also affirmed support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, condemning Iran's backing of Russia.<sup>112</sup>

The question that arises is: what factors led Israel to adopt this stance of neutrality in the Russo-Ukrainian war? The primary factor influencing Israel's position involves critical geopolitical security concerns, while domestic political and social issues also play a secondary role.

In terms of security concerns, Israel's geographical position and lack of strategic depth have driven it to establish regional partnerships to defend its interests. The Syrian conflict and Russia's direct involvement since 2015 have underscored the importance of maintaining cooperation with Moscow. This collaboration benefits Israel by, first, helping to block the Tehran-Beirut corridor used by Iranian-backed militia groups; second, enabling joint efforts with Russia against ISIS; and third, facilitating Israeli operations to neutralize security threats. On the other hand, Israel is increasingly concerned about Moscow's strengthening ties with Tehran and its contacts with key Hamas

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<sup>110</sup> "Bennett returns to Israel after whirlwind trip to meet Putin, brief Germany's Scholz", *The Times of Israel*, last modified 6 March, 2022, modified 15 January, 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/bennett-returns-to-israel-after-whirlwind-trip-to-meet-putin-germanys-scholz/>.

<sup>111</sup> "Bennett: Putin assured me at Moscow meeting he wouldn't kill Zelensky", *The Times of Israel*, last modified 5 February, 2023, modified 15 January, 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/bennett-putin-assured-me-at-moscow-meeting-he-wouldnt-kill-zelensky/>.

<sup>112</sup> "Israeli foreign minister promises Zelenskiy more aid, rebuilding help", *Reuters*, last modified February, 2023, modified 15 January, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/israeli-foreign-minister-ukraine-first-time-since-war-began-2023-02-16/>; Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Why Israel still refuses to give military aid to Ukraine", last modified 15 May, 2023, modified 15 January, 2024, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/05/15/why-israel-still-refuses-to-give-military-aid-to-ukraine\\_6026664\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/05/15/why-israel-still-refuses-to-give-military-aid-to-ukraine_6026664_4.html).

leaders.<sup>113</sup> The recent counter-terrorism operations in the Gaza Strip following the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack, the partial involvement of Hezbollah, and fears of a broader war amplify Israel's need to balance its relations with Moscow. This concern is further highlighted by Russia's vote in favour of a ceasefire in Gaza at the UN General Assembly on December 12, 2023, which contrasted with Ukraine's vote against it—a symbolic reversal of Israel's 2022 vote on the Ukraine war.<sup>114</sup> However, recent statements by the Israeli President regarding the discovery of advanced Russian weaponry in Hezbollah's arms depots may significantly impact the Israel-Russia relationship,<sup>115</sup> despite Vladimir Putin's efforts to mediate between Israel and Iran amid the escalation in hostilities over recent months.<sup>116</sup>

Israel's internal political instability over the past decade has made policymakers increasingly mindful of the large Russian-speaking Jewish community within the country. This demographic group, which exceeds one million and originates from former Soviet Union states, generally supports Ukraine but favors safeguarding Ukraine's Jewish population, avoiding Israel's direct involvement, and limiting support to humanitarian aid.<sup>117</sup> The Jewish diaspora communities in Ukraine and Russia, numbering approximately 50,000 and 160,000 members respectively, display notable differences. Ukrainian Jews openly support Zelenskyy's government, both on the

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<sup>113</sup> Ellie Geranmayeh and Nicole Grajewski, "Alone together: How the war in Ukraine shapes the Russian-Iranian relationship", *European Council of Foreign Relations*, last modified 6 September, 2023, modified 15 January, 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/alone-together-how-the-war-in-ukraine-shapes-the-russian-iranian-relationship/>. See also: Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russia's Relationship with Hamas and Putin's Global Calculations", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, last modified 6 November, 2023, modified 15 January, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-relationship-hamas-and-putins-global-calculations>.

<sup>114</sup> "UN General Assembly votes by large majority for immediate humanitarian ceasefire during emergency session", *UN*, last modified 12 December, 2023, modified 15 January, 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/12/1144717>.

<sup>115</sup> "Netanyahu says IDF found 'state-of-the-art' Russian arms in Hezbollah bases", *Times Of Israel*, last modified 5 October 2024, modified 05 November 2024, [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/netanyahu-says-idf-found-state-of-the-art-russian-arms-in-hezbollah-bases/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/netanyahu-says-idf-found-state-of-the-art-russian-arms-in-hezbollah-bases/).

<sup>116</sup> "Russia struggles to balance between Israel and Iran", *The Economic Times*, last modified 21 October 2024, modified 05 November 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/putin-offers-to-de-escalate-israel-iran-tensions-says-in-touch-with-netanyahu-pezeschkian/videoshow/114434645.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>117</sup> Vladimir (Ze'ev) Khanin, "The Russian-Speaking Jewish Diaspora and the War in Ukraine", *The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies*, last modified 11 July, 2023, modified 15 January, 2024, <https://besacenter.org/the-russian-speaking-jewish-diaspora-and-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

battlefield and in other areas. In contrast, the vast majority of Russian Jews tend to remain distanced from openly taking a stance in the conflict.<sup>118</sup>

In conclusion, since the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian war, Israel, in its effort to safeguard its national interests, has maintained a neutral stance, attempting to balance its strong relations with the West while avoiding disruptions in its ties with Russia. However, recent political developments, the rise of the right-wing faction to power, and the eruption of conflict in Gaza appear to be significantly impacting relations between the two nations. The expansion of hostilities to southern Lebanon, Hezbollah's possession of a "Russian" arsenal, and the ongoing escalation with Iran are expected to strain Israel-Russia relations further. Despite these shifts, Israel's stance on the Russo-Ukrainian war is unlikely to change, as the ongoing conflict in the Middle East discourages it from provoking new internal political rifts or risking diplomatic disruptions with Russia.

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

# Jordan

Nikolaos Sidiropoulos

Jordan has long been a key U.S. ally in the Middle East, benefiting from this close relationship in terms of stability and support. Yet, despite its Western alignment, Jordan's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been notably cautious. Balancing its strategic interests, the kingdom has fostered ties with Moscow in recent years, particularly in security matters. This delicate position highlights Jordan's nuanced approach to navigating its alliances amidst shifting regional dynamics.

Traditionally, Jordan has been an important ally of the United States in the Middle East. In fact, Jordan largely owes its political stability to its alliance with the U.S. Despite the kingdom's strategic alliance with major Western powers, its attitude towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine can be described as mild. The main reason is that, in recent years, Amman has developed a close relationship with Moscow which includes bilateral cooperation, mainly in the field of security.<sup>119</sup> Even before that, Amman had maintained friendly relations with Moscow, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, despite its alliance with the U.S. There were instances, for example, of military-technical cooperation that included an agreement signed in 2019, Jordan's acquisition of Russian military transport aircrafts as well as a joint production of a man-portable missile.

Coming back to Jordan's post-February 2022 policy, the kingdom's effort to pursue a balanced, equal-distanced policy has an explanation. On the one hand, Jordan didn't want to come into direct confrontation with Russia, whose presence in Syria is very important for the kingdom and its border security. For Jordan, Russia's role in de-escalating conflict in Southern Syria is particularly important. Therefore, a partnership has been developed between Russia and Jordan, for securing the latter's borders and limiting threats, mainly connected to the activities of Islamist groups or Iranian-affiliated forces, but also for

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<sup>119</sup> Amer Sabailh, "The Strained Position of Neutrality Jordan and the Russia-Ukraine War," *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, April 2022.

facilitating the normalization process with the Syrian regime.<sup>120</sup> In this context, Russia and Jordan established in 2017 a centre in Amman to monitor the ceasefire agreement in Southern Syria, and, in 2021, Jordan was invited by Russia to participate as an observer in the seventeenth round of talks on Syria in Astana.<sup>121</sup> On the other hand, Amman didn't want to risk its close ties and commercial transactions with the West and especially the U.S.

In this context, Jordan's voting record at the emergency special session of the United Nations General Assembly on Ukraine was careful; together with other Arab states it voted in favor of the resolution that condemned Russia's invasion.<sup>122</sup> It avoided, however to characterize the Kremlin as an aggressor state in the conflict.<sup>123</sup> It then abstained from the General Assembly vote that suspended Russia from the UN Human Rights Council. The geopolitical advantages that the oil and gas exporting Arab countries (especially those within OPEC+), have proved to be important in limiting the political or other consequences of the war. However, for the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan things are different; lacking resources and dealing with economic difficulties created by this war (mainly related to the global food crisis), it has been unavoidable to seek help from its Western allies and partners.<sup>124</sup> Still, despite its contacts with Russia, Jordan has supplied Ukraine with anti-aircraft guns and other armaments.<sup>125</sup>

Concluding, the impact of the war in Ukraine, both for the Middle East and North Africa, and especially for Jordan, will largely depend on the duration of the conflict. Most governments believed in a short war, due to the assumption of Russia's overwhelming military superiority. They were quickly disproved,

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<sup>120</sup> Hanna Davis, "Jordan faces a difficult 'balancing act' in Russia-Ukraine war, experts say," *Middle East Eye*, 25 March 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-ukraine-war-jordan-faces-difficult-balancing-act-experts-say>.

<sup>121</sup> Amer Sabaileh, "The Strained Position of Neutrality Jordan and the Russia-Ukraine War."

<sup>122</sup> Jordan voted in favor of the resolutions ES-11/1 (02/03/2022) and ES-11/4 (12/10/2022).

<sup>123</sup> Osama Al Sharif, "Jordan is walking a diplomatic tightrope on Russia's invasion of Ukraine," *Middle East Institute*, 5 April 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/jordan-walking-diplomatic-tightrope-russias-invasion-ukraine>.

<sup>124</sup> Maha Yahya, "The Arab World and the Ukraine conflict: The quest for nonalignment," *Atlantic Council*, 12 July 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/uncategorized/the-arab-world-and-the-ukraine-conflict-the-quest-for-nonalignment/>.

<sup>125</sup> Military Watch Magazine, "West Scouring World For Arms For Ukraine: From Japanese Explosives to Jordanian Anti Aircraft Guns," 3 June 2023, <https://militarywatchmagazine.com/article/japan-explosives-ukraine-uk-stocks-short>.



and many are now facing the consequences of this war.<sup>126</sup> With a few exceptions, the Arab world has maintained its unity and neutrality on this matter, seeking to observe developments from a safe distance. Regarding Jordan, the Arab world's balanced approach to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is a necessary factor in enabling it to maintain the policy of equal distances between Russia and the West. The difference, however, is that Jordan is much more dependent on U.S. and EU aid comparing to the wealthy Gulf monarchies.

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<sup>126</sup> Hussein Mubarak, "The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and the Arab World, One Year After," *The Wilson Center*, 16 March 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/russian-invasion-ukraine-and-arab-world-one-year-after>.

# Kuwait

Vasiliki Stamidou

In 1990, the international community was shocked by the invasion and annexation of Kuwait, a country with abundant energy reserves, by Iraq under Saddam Hussein, who claimed that Kuwait had no right to exist as an independent country.<sup>127</sup> Iraq's attempts for territorial expansion through the annexation of Kuwait have been likened by many analysts to Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine.<sup>128</sup>

Three days before the invasion of Ukraine, Moscow recognized the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and on 24 February 2022, the President of the Russian Federation authorised a "special military operation" targeting certain regions and their infrastructure.<sup>129</sup>

The Russian invasion of Ukrainian territories has also brought massive reactions from the Gulf States, with Kuwait strongly condemning the Russian attack and extending its support to Ukraine.<sup>130</sup> Despite the fact that the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council do not seek to get caught up in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, they are characterized more by neutrality and do not seem to be fully aligned with the West. Kuwait, however, seems to have a stronger reaction to the issue. The Kuwaiti position can be explained by both the memory of 1990 Iraqi invasion and the strategic partnership between Kuwait and the US. The outbreak of the Ukraine war prompted Kuwait to co-sponsor the United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Russia for invading, occupying and annexing Ukrainian territories.<sup>131</sup> The Ministry of

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<sup>127</sup> Richard Haas, "A Tale of Two Invasions," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 22 June 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/article/tale-two-invasions>.

<sup>128</sup> Roy Allison, "Expert Comment: No UN member, whichever continent they are in, can claim Russian's invasion does not concern them," *University of Oxford*, 24 February 2023, <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2023-02-24-expert-comment-no-un-member-whichever-continent-they-are-can-claim-russias-invasion>.

<sup>129</sup> Lakshmi Priya, "Gulf Responses to the Ukraine Crisis," *Indian Council of World Affairs*, 21 March 2022, [https://www.icwa.in/show\\_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls\\_id=7193&lid=4861](https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=7193&lid=4861).

<sup>130</sup> Bichara Khader, "The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and the Arab and Mediterranean States: Impact and Reactions," in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2023* (Barcelona, 2023: European Institute of the Mediterranean): 158-165. <https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-and-the-arab-and-mediterranean-states-impact-and-reactions/>.

<sup>131</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "Where has the Ukraine Conflict Left Gulf States?," *ISPI*, 22 February 2023,

Foreign Affairs of the State of Kuwait underlined the importance of defending the territories and sovereign rights of the Ukrainian people by categorically rejecting the "use, threat of use and display of violence" between the two countries. It also underlined the need to implement the principles of international law and the United Nations Charter on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, promotion of good neighbourliness and finding peaceful solutions to conflicts.<sup>132</sup>

On 1 March, 2022, during an extraordinary meeting of the Kuwait Ministry of Foreign Affairs, chaired by the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah,<sup>133</sup> the consequences expected to be caused at multiple levels by the Moscow-Kyiv confrontation were emphasized as well as the measures required to be taken for the security of the Ukrainian territory, the protection and meeting the required needs of civilians.<sup>134</sup> In the UN General Assembly resolutions that followed the Russian invasion, Kuwait voted in favour of the March 2 Resolution condemning Russia's aggression and demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory. On 7 April of the same year, Kuwait, along with 57 other states, abstained in a resolution related to the suspension of the Russian Federation from the UN Human Rights Council. Later, Kuwait supported the October 12 Resolution that demanded the Russian Federation to reverse the illegal annexation of four Ukrainian provinces. Finally, in the 14 November, 2022, resolution, Kuwait was among the 94 countries that voted in favour of Russian reparations to Ukraine for the casualties and material damages caused by the invasion.<sup>135</sup>

Kuwait continued its vocal support for Ukraine. In a speech to the UN General Assembly in March 2023, Kuwait's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Mansour Al-Otaibi stressed out the urgent need to end the bloodshed, pointing to diplomacy as the only way to find a solution. He condemned the UN Security Council for failing to prevent the conflict which poses a danger to

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<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/where-has-the-ukraine-conflict-left-gulf-states-116712>.

<sup>132</sup> Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), "Kuwait calls for respecting Ukraine's independence, sovereignty," 24 February 2022, <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=3027315#>.

<sup>133</sup> Arab Times Kuwait, "Kuwait backs Ukraine sovereignty," 5 March 2023, <https://www.arabtimesonline.com/news/kuwait-backs-ukraine-sovereignty/>.

<sup>134</sup> Priya Lakshmi, "Gulf Responses to the Ukraine Crisis."

<sup>135</sup> Bichara Khader, "The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and the Arab and Mediterranean States."

global security and peace. Ambassador Al-Otaibi welcomed the talks held in Belarus between the two warring sides stressing the importance of continuing the dialogue to achieve peace.<sup>136</sup>

Despite Kuwait's clear stance on the war, Kuwait did not completely sever ties with Russia. Apart from the historically friendly ties between the two states, Russia is important for the Gulf monarchy's food security policy. At the same time, Russia's calls for an immediate ceasefire in war-torn Gaza are more than welcome by the Kuwaiti side.<sup>137</sup>

In conclusion, Kuwait has demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting Ukraine in the face of Russia's invasion, driven by a combination of historical experience and strategic interests. While maintaining a neutral stance within the broader Gulf Cooperation Council, Kuwait's vocal condemnation of Russia's actions and its active participation in UN resolutions reflect its alignment with international norms on sovereignty and territorial integrity. Kuwait's position is influenced by its own experiences with aggression, its strategic partnership with the United States, and its desire to ensure regional stability. However, despite its clear stance on the conflict, Kuwait has managed to maintain diplomatic ties with Russia, recognizing the importance of these relations for its food security and regional interests.

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<sup>136</sup> Arab Times Kuwait, "Kuwait backs Ukraine sovereignty."

<sup>137</sup> Kuwait News Agency, "FM: Kuwait keen on opening new cooperation horizons with Russia," 29 October, 2024. <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=3191927&language=en>.

# Lebanon

Andreas Papaiosif

Lebanon is a politically unstable state, characterized by weak government institutions and elements typically seen in a fragile state.<sup>138</sup> Since 2019, the country has faced a series of compounding crises, including an economic collapse, political paralysis, and widespread corruption. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is one such event that has exposed Lebanon's fragility, particularly in the energy and grain markets, while drawing the country into broader geopolitical dynamics.

The Ukraine war's impact on Lebanon has been felt most acutely in the economic realm. Lebanon depends heavily on wheat imports from Ukraine (85%) and Russia (15%), and the disruption of supply chains led to soaring food prices.<sup>139</sup> Similarly, rising global oil prices exacerbated Lebanon's energy crisis, with the removal of fuel subsidies resulting in a staggering 6,600% increase in fuel costs.<sup>140</sup> Inflation spiralled, and the country's currency, already weakened by years of mismanagement, lost 98% of its value since 2019.<sup>141</sup>

The war also diverted international attention and resources away from Lebanon. Western countries prioritized aid to Ukraine, leaving Lebanon, which hosts the world's highest number of refugees per capita, with diminished global support.<sup>142</sup> This neglect was especially stark compared to the robust international response following Lebanon's 2020 Beirut port explosion.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Samia Bazzi, "Why Has Lebanon Become a Failing State?" in *Language in a Failed State* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), p. 19-30.

<sup>139</sup> Kareem Chehayeb, "Lebanese fearful as fuel and wheat shortage deepens," *Al Jazeera*, 8 March 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/8/lebanese-fearful-as-fuel-and-wheat-shortage-deepens>.

<sup>140</sup> Al Jazeera, "Lebanon central bank stops fuel subsidies, prices set to rise," 12 September 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/12/lebanon-central-bank-stops-providing-dollars-for-gasoline-imports>.

<sup>141</sup> The World Bank, "Lebanon Poverty and Equity Assessment 2024 - Weathering a Protracted Crisis," 23 May 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-poverty-and-equity-assessment-2024-weathering-protracted-crisis-enar>.

<sup>142</sup> Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan, "Regional Strategic Overview 2024," 6 March 2024, [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-03/2024\\_regional\\_strategic\\_overview.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-03/2024_regional_strategic_overview.pdf).

<sup>143</sup> Jamie Dettmer, "While war continues, Lebanon is trapped," *Politico*, 28 October 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/opinion-lebanon-war-middle-east-israel-palestine-foreign-affairs-beirut/>.

Lebanon's response to the Ukraine war has been notably restrained compared to other MENA countries. Nonetheless, it was the first Arab nation to condemn Russia's invasion, aligning with United Nations resolutions<sup>144</sup> and citing its own history of foreign occupation by Syria and Israel. This position, however, exposed Lebanon's internal divisions. Hezbollah, the Iran-backed political and military group, strongly criticized the government's stance, accusing it of aligning with U.S. interests.<sup>145</sup> Despite its condemnation, Lebanon maintained amicable ties with Russia, a relationship underscored by Moscow's humanitarian gestures, such as offers of free wheat and fuel during Lebanon's economic crisis.<sup>146</sup>

Despite the immense challenges, the Ukraine war inadvertently created a rare diplomatic opening for Lebanon. The European Union's push to reduce reliance on Russian energy spurred U.S.-mediated negotiations between Lebanon and Israel over their disputed maritime borders. After 12 years of deadlock, these negotiations culminated in a landmark agreement in October 2022, enabling Lebanon to potentially access its offshore gas reserves.<sup>147</sup>

The October 2022 maritime agreement offered a rare diplomatic success for Lebanon, creating hope for economic relief. However, this progress was short-lived, as regional instability surged following the October 7 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, which led to a full-scale Israeli military intervention in Gaza. The conflict spilled into Southern Lebanon, where Hezbollah escalated attacks on Israeli positions, prompting retaliatory strikes by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF).<sup>148</sup> During Israel's incursions into southern Lebanon in the autumn of 2024, the IDF uncovered Russian-made weapons in Hezbollah's inventory. It is unclear exactly how the weapons reached Hezbollah, although

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<sup>144</sup> Reuters, "Russia says it is surprised by Lebanon's condemnation of invasion," 25 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-says-it-is-surprised-by-lebanons-condemnation-invasion-2022-02-25/>.

<sup>145</sup> L'orient Today, "Hezbollah chief blasts Lebanon's response to Russia – Ukraine conflict," 8 March 2022, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1293013/hezbollah-chief-blasts-lebanons-response-to-russia-ukraine-conflict.html>.

<sup>146</sup> Julian Nabil, "Lebanon To Import 35,000 Tons Of Wheat From Russia, Ukraine," *Forbes Middle East*, 12 July 2022, <https://www.forbesmiddleeast.com/consumer/food-and-drink/lebanon-to-get-35000-tons-of-wheat-from-russia-ukraine>.

<sup>147</sup> Carole Nakhle, "Lebanon and Israel's historic maritime border deal," *Geopolitical Intelligence Services*, 9 February 2023, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/israel-lebanon-maritime/>.

<sup>148</sup> David Aaronovitch, "One week on, how the Lebanon attacks have changed the Middle East," *BBC*, 24 September 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5y8gv1d8j8o>.

sources report that many were originally owned by the Syrian Army, which has been supplied by Russia for years.<sup>149</sup>

Hezbollah's connections to Russia are rooted in their cooperation during the Syrian Civil War, where both supported the Assad regime. Although Moscow has permitted Israeli airstrikes on Hezbollah and Iranian positions in Syria, the partnership between Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah has continued to evolve.<sup>150</sup>

Since the Ukraine war began, Iran's growing alignment with Russia has inevitably strengthened Hezbollah's ties to Moscow.<sup>151</sup> Reports have surfaced, for example, that Russia's Wagner Group is transferring air defence systems to Hezbollah.<sup>152</sup> However, despite Russia's condemnation of Israeli actions in Gaza and Lebanon, including its statements on the killing of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah,<sup>153</sup> Moscow has managed to keep an open line of communication with Israeli officials,<sup>154</sup> in an attempt to maintain influence while protecting its assets in Syria.

Economic activities between Russia and Hezbollah, as documented by the U.S. Department of the Treasury, are also part of a broader effort to evade international sanctions. This cooperation extends beyond military coordination, involving smuggling networks and illicit trade.<sup>155</sup> Although Hezbollah remains a key player in Russia's Lebanon strategy, Moscow has taken a broader approach. By building relationships with diverse political factions, including the Maronite Marada Movement<sup>156</sup> and the Orthodox

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<sup>149</sup> The Times of Israel, "IDF finding far more Russian arms in Hezbollah's possession than expected – report," 19 November 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-finding-far-more-russian-arms-in-hezbollahs-possession-than-expected-report/>.

<sup>150</sup> Tom O'Connor, "At War in Ukraine, Putin Emerges as Potential Peace Broker in Middle East," *Newsweek*, 31 October 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/war-ukraine-putin-emerges-potential-peace-broker-middle-east-1977721>.

<sup>151</sup> Niko Vorobyov, "What Russia wants from Israel-Iran escalation: Chaos good, war bad," *Al Jazeera*, 5 October 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/5/what-russia-wants-from-israel-iran-escalation-chaos-good-war-bad>.

<sup>152</sup> John Hardie, "Russia's Wagner Group to Transfer Air Defense System to Hezbollah, U.S. Intel Says," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, 7 November 2023, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/11/07/russias-wagner-group-to-transfer-air-defense-system-to-hezbollah-u-s-intel-says/>.

<sup>153</sup> Niko Vorobyov, "What Russia wants from Israel-Iran escalation."

<sup>154</sup> Tom O'Connor, "At War in Ukraine, Putin Emerges as Potential Peace Broker in Middle East."

<sup>155</sup> Aurora Ortega and Matthew Levitt, "Hizbullah and Russia's Nascent Alliance," *The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies*, 23 May 2023, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/hizbullah-and-russias-nascent-alliance>.

<sup>156</sup> Tom O'Connor, "Russia Courts A New Middle East Ally to Challenge the U.S.," *Newsweek*, 9 August 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-courts-new-middle-east-ally-challenge-us-1818102>.

community,<sup>157</sup> Russia aims to deepen its influence across Lebanon's sectarian landscape.

While Russia's engagement in Lebanon has grown, it remains limited compared to its broader influence in Syria and the rest of the region. Moscow's interactions with Hezbollah are pragmatic and not indicative of a full-fledged alliance. Russia's broader strategy in Lebanon involves maintaining relationships across sectarian and political lines, including with Christian factions and Sunni leaders. However, Russia's role in Lebanon is increasingly tied to its strengthening partnership with Iran, Hezbollah's primary patron. This Iran-Russia-Hezbollah triangle operates as a *de facto* axis, coordinating military and economic strategies to counter sanctions and Western influence. While Lebanon is not a central focus for Moscow, the country's instability and strategic location make it an important part of Russia's regional presence.

In essence, Lebanon's struggles with the Ukraine war exemplify how domestic vulnerabilities intertwine with global conflicts. The country's fragmented political system and weak governance leave it especially vulnerable to the ripple effects of global conflicts. While Lebanon's response to the war has been relatively muted compared to other MENA countries, its economy and internal stability have borne the brunt of the conflict's impacts, particularly in fuel and grain markets. At the same time, the war has underscored Lebanon's entanglement in broader geopolitical rivalries, from the Russia-Iran-Hezbollah partnership to the escalating tensions with Israel after October 2023.

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<sup>157</sup> Tom O'Connor, "At War in Ukraine, Putin Emerges as Potential Peace Broker in Middle East."



# Libya

George Meneshian

The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine has elicited diverse international responses shaped by political alignments, economic interests, and historical ties. Libya's reaction stands out due to its fragmented political landscape and Russia's deep involvement in its domestic affairs.

Libya today is a divided country, with two rival governments: the UN-recognized Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU), led by Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, and the Benghazi-based Government of National Stability (GNS), supported by the House of Representatives and Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA).<sup>158</sup> Simultaneously, parts of the country remain controlled by local militias, often representing ethnic minorities,<sup>159</sup> while Libya hosts a significant presence of foreign military and paramilitary forces, including mercenaries.<sup>160</sup>

The war in Ukraine has compounded Libya's economic struggles, particularly in the food and fuel sectors. Wheat prices have soared due to the nation's heavy reliance on imports from Ukraine and Russia, while gasoline shortages persist despite Libya's oil wealth. Political fragmentation worsens these challenges, as the two rival governments dispute control over vital institutions, including the National Oil Corporation and the Central Bank of Libya.<sup>161</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Libya has not presented a unified stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The GNU in Tripoli has condemned the invasion, aligning itself with Western positions. On February 24, 2022, GNU Foreign Minister

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<sup>158</sup> Security Council Report, "Libya: Briefing and Consultations," 21 August 2023, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2023/08/libya-briefing-and-consultations-15.php>.

<sup>159</sup> Tom Westcott, "Feuding tribes unite as new civil war looms in Libya's south," *Middle East Eye*, 10 February 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/feuding-tribes-unite-new-civil-war-looms-libyas-south>.

<sup>160</sup> Libya Review, "GCC Calls for Withdrawal of All Foreign Forces & Mercenaries from Libya," 10 September 2024, <https://libyareview.com/48151/gcc-calls-for-withdrawal-of-all-foreign-forces-mercenaries-from-libya/>.

<sup>161</sup> Joost Hiltermann, Dina Esfandiary, Ricardo Fabiani & Ali Vaez, "The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa," *The International Crisis Group*, 14 April 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/impact-russias-invasion-ukraine-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

Najla Mangoush unequivocally condemned Russia's actions.<sup>162</sup> At the United Nations General Assembly, Libya consistently supported resolutions against Russia, including ES-11/3, which suspended Moscow from the UN Human Rights Council. This made Libya the only Arab state to take such a position, marking a significant departure from the neutrality observed by other fellow Arab nations.<sup>163</sup>

Despite its initial anti-Russia stance on the conflict, the Tripoli government has maintained engagement with Moscow. In July 2024, Libya's General Union of Chambers of Commerce signed a cooperation agreement with its Russian counterpart,<sup>164</sup> demonstrating ongoing bilateral economic ties. Two months earlier, a delegation led by Presidential Council Deputy Abdullah al-Lafi, including acting GNU Foreign Minister al-Taher al-Baour and Libyan Army Chief of Staff Muhammed al-Haddad, visited Moscow and met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.<sup>165</sup> Moscow has also expanded its soft power through diplomatic channels and cultural outreach,<sup>166</sup> reflecting an effort to preserve influence in Libya regardless of Tripoli's alignment. Despite Russia's recognition of the GNS, Libya's embassy in Moscow is under the jurisdiction of the GNU<sup>167</sup> and the Tripoli-based administration has recently stated that it doesn't mind working with Russia as per diplomatic protocols.<sup>168</sup>

Upon its establishment, the Benghazi-based GNS immediately received Russian recognition.<sup>169</sup> However, on March 2 2022, a day following his

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<sup>162</sup> Mustafa Fetouri, "Libya turns on Russia over Ukraine war, but does it matter?," *Al-Monitor*, 16 March 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/libya-turns-russia-over-ukraine-war-does-it-matter>.

<sup>163</sup> Joost Hiltermann, Dina Esfandiary, Ricardo Fabiani & Ali Vaez, "The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa."

<sup>164</sup> Abdulkader Assad, "Libya, Russia agree on boosting economic cooperation," *The Libya Observer*, 23 July 2024, <https://libyaobserver.ly/economy/libya-russia-agree-boosting-economic-cooperation>.

<sup>165</sup> Libya Security Monitor, "GNU and LNA Delegations In Moscow as Russia Deepens Relations with Eastern And Western Libya," 7 May 2024, <https://libyasecuritymonitor.com/gnu-and-lna-delegations-in-moscow-as-russia-deepens-relations-with-easter-and-western-libya/>.

<sup>166</sup> Frederic Wehrey, "A Mixed Balance Sheet: Russia's Uneven Influence in the Maghreb," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 3 October 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/russias-uneven-influence-maghreb?lang=en>.

<sup>167</sup> Safa Alharathy, "Russia Reaffirms Commitment to Comprehensive Resolution of Libyan Crisis," *The Libya Observer*, 31 July 2024, <https://libyaobserver.ly/inbrief/russia-reaffirms-commitment-comprehensive-resolution-libyan-crisis>.

<sup>168</sup> Abdulkader Assad, "GNU says it doesn't mind working with Russia as per diplomatic protocols," *The Libya Observer*, 10 March 2024, <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/gnu-says-it-doesnt-mind-working-russia-diplomatic-protocols>.

<sup>169</sup> Joost Hiltermann, Dina Esfandiary, Ricardo Fabiani & Ali Vaez, "The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa."

election as Prime Minister of the GNS, Fathi Bashagha condemned Russia's invasion as a violation of international law,<sup>170</sup> and, two weeks later, he emphasized solidarity with Ukraine in a meeting with the Ukrainian ambassador.<sup>171</sup> However, Bashagha's influence in Eastern Libya was limited, as actual power resides with Khalifa Haftar, whose ties to Moscow remain robust.

Haftar's relationship with Russia is built on shared security, military, and political interests. Since the mid-2010s, Moscow has provided the LNA with logistical and military support,<sup>172</sup> often through the Wagner Group, now rebranded as "Africa Corps," which is stationed at key oil facilities and military bases.<sup>173</sup> After the Ukraine invasion, Russia expanded its military presence in LNA-controlled areas, using Libya as a strategic hub for operations across Africa.<sup>174</sup> This includes the deployment of Wagner operatives to secure oil infrastructure and supply military aid to other Russian allies in the region.<sup>175</sup>

Haftar has reciprocated this support with regular meetings with high-ranking Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in September 2023<sup>176</sup> but mainly with Russia's Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov.<sup>177</sup> In April 2024, Russian ships delivered significant arms shipments to the LNA, and reports suggest that a few months later, an influx of Russian fighters arrived, to bolster Haftar's control and secure Russia's interests in the country.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Mustafa Fetouri, "Libya turns on Russia over Ukraine war, but does it matter?"

<sup>171</sup> Joost Hiltermann, Dina Esfandiary, Ricardo Fabiani & Ali Vaez, "The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa."

<sup>172</sup> Frederic Wehrey, "A Mixed Balance Sheet: Russia's Uneven Influence in the Maghreb."

<sup>173</sup> Ibid

<sup>174</sup> Simon Speakman Cordall, "Under new general, Russia's Wagner makes deeper inroads into Libya," *Al Jazeera*, 25 February 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/25/under-new-general-russias-wagner-makes-deeper-inroads-into-libya>.

<sup>175</sup> Chiara Lovotti and Alissa Pavia, "Libya is the crucial hub for Moscow's activities in Africa," *Atlantic Council*, 30 July 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/libya-is-the-crucial-hub-for-moscows-activities-in-africa/>.

<sup>176</sup> Al Jazeera, "East Libya commander Haftar in Moscow for talks with Putin," 28 September 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/28/east-libya-commander-haftar-in-moscow-for-talks-with-putin>.

<sup>177</sup> Moataz Wanis, "Russia pledges to enhance capabilities of Khalifa Haftar's Libyan forces," *Anadolu Agency*, 2 June 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/russia-pledges-to-enhance-capabilities-of-khalifa-haftars-libyan-forces/3237786>.

<sup>178</sup> Africa Defense Forum, "Russia Sends 1,800 Fighters to Libya With Eyes on Greater Influence Across Africa," 2 July 2024, <https://adf-magazine.com/2024/07/russia-sends-1800-fighters-to-libya-with-eyes-on-greater-influence-across-africa/>.

In conclusion, Libya's domestic divisions and competing alliances shape its stance on the Russia-Ukraine war. While the Tripoli-based GNU aligns with Western positions at the UN, its engagement with Moscow highlights a pragmatic recognition of Russia's influence as a UNSC veto power and a major actor in Libyan affairs.<sup>179</sup> Meanwhile, the Eastern administration and Haftar rely heavily on Russian military and logistical support to sustain their position against the internationally recognized GNU.

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<sup>179</sup> Mustafa Fetouri, "Libya turns on Russia over Ukraine war, but does it matter?"

# Morocco

Elias Solomos

The Kingdom of Morocco is a country in northwestern Africa, part of the broader Maghreb region. It is considered one of the most socially and politically stable Arab-Muslim countries. From the outset of the war in Ukraine, triggered by the Russian invasion, Morocco adopted a cautious stance. Historically, Rabat has maintained good trade relations with both sides of the conflict. Before the war, 24% of Morocco's grain imports came from these two European countries.<sup>180</sup>

Following the start of hostilities, Morocco chose neutrality, even abstaining from the first UN General Assembly resolution condemning the Russian invasion in March 2022.<sup>181</sup> This position stems from the fact that Russia is a significant trade partner, particularly in sectors critical to Morocco's economy. Morocco relies on Moscow for agricultural production, importing large quantities of ammonia and fertilizers. Given that 45% of the Moroccan workforce is employed in agriculture, contributing 15% of GDP,<sup>182</sup> Morocco could not risk jeopardizing a sector so closely tied to its food security. The war's impact on Morocco was nonetheless significant, with inflation soaring to 8.3% by the end of 2022.<sup>183</sup>

Another key factor influencing Morocco's neutrality is the Western Sahara issue. The territory, self-declared independent since 1976, is considered by Rabat as part of its sovereign territory. The main supporter of the Polisario Front, the independence movement for Western Sahara, is neighboring

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<sup>180</sup> Austin Bodetti, "Russia-Ukraine war: Morocco's economy would risk heavy price for taking sides," *Middle East Eye*, 24 February 24 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-ukraine-war-morocco-economy-neutrality>.

<sup>181</sup> Beatriz Tomé-Alonso, "Morocco: The Impact of the War in Ukraine on International and Domestic Affairs. Between Autonomy and Crisis," in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2023* (Barcelona, 2023: European Institute of the Mediterranean): 213-215, <https://www.iemed.org/publication/morocco-the-impact-of-the-war-in-ukraine-on-international-and-domestic-affairs-between-autonomy-and-crisis/>.

<sup>182</sup> Adil Faouzi, "Report: Morocco Balances Ties with Russia Amid Ukraine War Pressure," *Morocco World News*, 4 October 2024. <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2024/10/365570/report-morocco-balances-ties-with-russia-amid-ukraine-war-pressure>.

<sup>183</sup> Beatriz Tomé-Alonso, "Morocco: The Impact of the War in Ukraine on International and Domestic Affairs."

Algeria. Russia, being Algeria's primary supplier of weapons systems,<sup>184</sup> is perceived by Morocco as capable of moderating Algerian support for Western Sahara's insurgents.<sup>185</sup> In return for Morocco's cautious stance on the Ukraine conflict, Russia invited only UN-recognized states to the second Russia-Africa Summit, avoiding potential controversy over inviting Western Sahara.<sup>186</sup>

Rabat's declared position of respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all UN member states did not prevent it from deepening its trade relations with Russia. Bilateral trade volume increased by 42% in 2022, the first year of the war, compared to 2021.<sup>187</sup> Total bilateral trade reached \$1.6 billion, making Morocco Russia's leading trade partner in Africa.<sup>188</sup>

On the other hand, Morocco cannot overlook its longstanding close ties with the United States, Ukraine's main financial and military backer. Since 2004, Morocco has been designated a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA). To counterbalance Algeria's purchases of Russian weapons, Rabat is Africa's largest buyer of U.S. weapons, with active defense contracts totaling \$8.54 billion.<sup>189</sup> Additionally, in 2020, the U.S. persuaded Rabat to recognize Israel, endorsing Morocco's claim over Western Sahara.<sup>190</sup>

The deepening Russia-Algeria military cooperation likely explains Morocco's partial shift in its stance on the Russia-Ukraine war. In early 2023, Rabat, at the U.S.'s behest, agreed to supply around 90 Soviet-made T-72 tanks to Ukraine, becoming the first African nation to send weapons to one of the belligerent parties. In exchange, Morocco is expected to receive the latest version of the Abrams tank from the U.S.<sup>191</sup> Moreover, since February 2023, Morocco has supported all UN resolutions condemning the Russian

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<sup>184</sup> Jihane Rahhou, "Russia-Africa Summit Excludes Polisario Despite Strong Algeria-Russia Ties," *Morocco World News*, 28 July 2023, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2023/07/356725/russia-africa-summit-excludes-polisario-despite-strong-algeria-russia-ties>.

<sup>185</sup> Adil Faouzi, "Report: Morocco Balances Ties with Russia Amid Ukraine War Pressure."

<sup>186</sup> Jihane Rahhou, "Russia-Africa Summit Excludes Polisario Despite Strong Algeria-Russia Ties."

<sup>187</sup> Adil Faouzi, "Report: Morocco Balances Ties with Russia Amid Ukraine War Pressure."

<sup>188</sup> Pedro Canales, "Morocco abandons its neutrality in the Ukrainian war and aligns itself with the US," *Atalayar*, 23 June 2023, <https://www.atalayar.com/en/opinion/pedro-canales/morocco-abandons-its-neutrality-ukrainian-war-and-aligns-itself-us/20220427142055136416.html>.

<sup>189</sup> Post-Soviet Conflicts Research Program - Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, "Arming Ukraine: How Russia Forces US and EU to Foot the African Kingdom's Bill," PSCRP-BESA Reports No 53, 27 April 2024, <https://besacenter.org/arming-ukraine-how-russia-forces-us-and-eu-to-foot-the-african-kingdoms-bill/>.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid

<sup>191</sup> Ibid

invasion.<sup>192</sup> Within this framework, Ukraine reached out to Morocco, with the two countries' foreign ministers meeting for the first time in May 2023. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba expressed Kyiv's view that Rabat's 2007 UN-proposed autonomy plan for Western Sahara is a reliable basis for discussion.<sup>193</sup>

Despite Morocco's consent to provide weapons to Ukraine and its change of stance in the UN to appease the U.S., it continues to maintain strong trade relations with Russia. In the first half of 2024 alone, Rabat imported 200,000 tons of Russian wheat.<sup>194</sup> Morocco also remains rhetorically cautious, avoiding direct condemnation of the Russian invasion.

In conclusion, Morocco has chosen a careful stance of neutrality on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, balancing the need to maintain close relations with NATO and the U.S., its main defense supplier, with its dependency on Russia for critical imports essential to the smooth functioning of its economy.

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<sup>192</sup> Safaa Kasraoui, "Ukraine War: Morocco Votes for UN Resolution Condemning Russia, Algeria Abstains," *Morocco World News*, 24 February 2023, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2023/02/354188/ukraine-war-morocco-votes-for-un-resolution-condemning-russia-algeria-abstains>.

<sup>193</sup> Africa News, "Ukrainian and Moroccan FMs meet in Rabat," 13 August 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/05/22/ukrainian-and-moroccan-fms-meet-in-rabat/>.

<sup>194</sup> Mahamadou Simpara, "Morocco Imported Over 200,000 Tons of Grains from Russia in First Half of 2024," *Morocco World News*, 2 July 2024, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2024/07/363616/morocco-imported-over-200-000-tons-of-grains-from-russia-in-first-half-of-2024>.

# Qatar

Stergios Vogiatzis

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Gulf region has seen diverse responses to the crisis, with each country navigating its foreign policy in alignment with its broader geopolitical and economic interests. Among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Qatar has maintained a nuanced approach, balancing its relations with both the West and Russia while positioning itself as a diplomatic actor in international peace efforts.<sup>195</sup>

Qatar's immediate response to the Russian invasion was marked by a cautious alignment with the international community in condemning Russia's actions. At the United Nations, Qatar, like the rest of the GCC countries, voted to condemn Russia's invasion.<sup>196</sup> Qatar also provided a platform for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at its annual Doha Forum in March 2022.<sup>197</sup>

However, Doha's actions have remained more balanced compared to the pro-Ukrainian stance of other U.S. allies. While Qatar refrained from participating in Western sanctions against Russia,<sup>198</sup> it has consistently called for diplomacy and dialogue, emphasizing the importance of respecting Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Since the start of the war, Qatar has also initiated humanitarian efforts. For instance, in July 2023, Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal announced that Qatar would provide \$100 million in aid to Ukraine.<sup>199</sup> A month later, the Qatari Prime Minister, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, visited

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<sup>195</sup> TRT World, "Russian-Ukrainian conflict: What does it mean to Qatar?" 11 March 2022, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/russian-ukrainian-conflict-what-does-it-mean-to-qatar-55415>.

<sup>196</sup> The Washington Institute, "The UN Resolution on Ukraine: How Did the Middle East Vote?" 2 March 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/un-resolution-ukraine-how-did-middle-east-vote>.

<sup>197</sup> Doha News, "Ukraine's President Zelenskyy makes surprise appearance at Doha Forum 2022," 26 March 2022, <https://dohanews.co/ukraines-president-zelenskyy-makes-surprise-appearance-at-doha-forum-2022/>.

<sup>198</sup> TASS Russian News Agency, "Qatar not withdrawing investments from Russia amid Western sanctions — Ambassador to Doha," 8 November 2024, <https://tass.com/economy/1869519>.

<sup>199</sup> Reuters, "Kyiv says Qatar will provide it with \$100 million in humanitarian aid", 28 July 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/qatar-provide-ukraine-with-100-mln-humanitarian-aid-kyiv-2023-07-28/>.



Kyiv, where he met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and other officials to discuss Ukraine's peace plan. Sheikh Mohammed's visit demonstrated Qatar's intention to become involved in the conflict resolution process, especially by playing a mediating role in humanitarian matters. Notably, Qatar offered its services as a mediator in the return of Ukrainian children who had been forcibly taken to Russia, aligning with its long-standing tradition of diplomatic mediation in global conflicts.<sup>200</sup>

Despite its alignment with the West on key issues like territorial sovereignty, Qatar has maintained open channels of communication with Russia. In meetings with Russian officials, Qatar has repeatedly called for negotiated solutions to the conflict while also emphasizing mutual economic interests. Bilateral trade between Qatar and Russia exceeds \$1.9 billion,<sup>201</sup> with the Qatar Investment Authority investing heavily in Russian companies. Discussions on diversifying trade relations, including through non-dollar transactions, further highlight the pragmatic dimensions of their bilateral ties.<sup>202</sup>

Qatar's willingness to engage with Moscow extends beyond Ukraine. During a July 2024 meeting between Qatar's Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, and Russian President Vladimir Putin, both leaders called for a ceasefire in Gaza amid escalating tensions in the Middle East<sup>203</sup>.

Doha has been trying to position itself as a potential mediator between Kyiv and Moscow. Qatar has consistently emphasized its commitment to dialogue and diplomacy as the primary means of resolving the conflict.<sup>204</sup> This approach mirrors Qatar's broader foreign policy strategy of acting as a mediator in various international disputes, from Middle Eastern conflicts to global negotiations. Some notable examples include the U.S.–Taliban and Israel– Hamas talks.

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<sup>200</sup> Arab News, "Qatari prime minister visits Ukraine, meets with President Zelensky," 28 July 2023, <https://arab.news/yt8cv>.

<sup>201</sup> Doha News, "Qatar and Russia working on national currency use for trade: envoy," 8 August 2023, <https://dohanews.co/qatar-and-russia-working-on-national-currency-use-for-trade-envoy/>.

<sup>202</sup> The Peninsula, "Qatar-Russia trade grew 7.5% to \$91m in 2023: Official," <https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/20/05/2024/qatar-russia-trade-grew-75-to-91m-in-2023-official>.

<sup>203</sup> Official Website of the President of Russia, "Meeting with Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani," 4 July 2024, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74468>.

<sup>204</sup> The Washington Post, "Ukraine's offensive derails secret efforts for partial cease-fire with Russia, officials say," 17 August 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/08/17/kursk-ukraine-russia-energy-ceasefire/>.

Qatar's role as a mediator was highlighted during Sheikh Mohammed's meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in June 2023.<sup>205</sup> In this meeting, Qatar reaffirmed its support for Ukraine's sovereignty while also underscoring the need for a negotiated solution to the crisis. Qatar's diplomatic engagement with Russia, while cautious, reflects its broader interest in maintaining good relations with Moscow. This balanced approach ensures that Qatar does not alienate either Russia or Ukraine.

In the meantime, Qatar's importance as a major hydrocarbon producer has grown following the invasion; with Europe seeking alternatives to Russian gas, Qatar showed a willingness to assist European countries in reducing their energy dependence on Russia. It signed a gas deal with Germany to bolster European energy supplies,<sup>206</sup> but these efforts did not yield substantial results in transforming Europe's energy dynamics. Nonetheless, Qatar's actions in the energy sector demonstrated its strategic intent to play a significant role in mitigating the global impact of the war.<sup>207</sup>

In conclusion, Qatar's diplomatic efforts align with the broader Gulf response to the war, which has been marked by a pragmatic stance. Like other GCC countries, Qatar has condemned Russia's actions at the United Nations but has also refrained from taking extreme measures, such as implementing sanctions. Despite Qatar's careful positioning, it remains aligned with the West on key issues, including support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. However, Doha has been reluctant to fully commit to a confrontation with Russia, seeking instead to preserve diplomatic channels with Moscow while maintaining its robust ties with the United States and European powers. This balancing act is crucial for Qatar, as it seeks to strengthen its role as a regional and global diplomatic player, leveraging its relationships with both the West and Russia to enhance its strategic relevance.

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<sup>205</sup> Al-Jazeera, "Qatar emir talks to Putin after Wagner mutiny in Russia," 26 June 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/26/qatar-emir-talks-to-putin-after-wagner-mutiny-in-russia>.

<sup>206</sup> The Guardian, "Germany agrees 15-year liquid gas supply deal with Qatar," 29 November 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/29/germany-agrees-15-year-liquid-gas-supply-deal-with-qatar>.

<sup>207</sup> Doha News, "Qatar's careful balance between Ukraine and Russia," 9 August 2023, <https://dohanews.co/qatars-careful-balance-between-ukraine-and-russia/>.

# Saudi Arabia

Christina Papastamopoulou

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Saudi Arabia has taken a relatively neutral position on the conflict. Like many Middle Eastern nations, the Kingdom has sought to protect its national interests, avoiding direct military involvement while navigating a delicate balance between global powers. While Saudi Arabia has not provided military aid to either side, it has played a significant role in shaping the international response to the war, with its energy policies, diplomatic engagements, and geopolitical calculations underscoring its approach.

Saudi Arabia's stance at the United Nations (UN) highlights its complex position. It has condemned Russia's invasion, particularly the annexation of Ukrainian territories, yet the Kingdom has often abstained from voting on key resolutions. Notably, Saudi Arabia refrained from supporting the suspension of Russia's membership in the UN Human Rights Council, a clear indication of its reluctance to fully align with Western powers. At the same time, Saudi Arabia has refused to implement sanctions on Russia, opting instead to maintain its economic ties with Moscow.<sup>208</sup>

A key element of Saudi Arabia's strategy has been its involvement in global energy markets. As one of the world's largest oil producers, Saudi Arabia's energy policies play a central role in the geopolitical landscape. Despite pressure from the United States and European countries to increase oil production in response to surging prices after the Russian invasion, Saudi Arabia, alongside Russia, chose to limit production within the framework of OPEC+ in an effort to stabilize global oil prices. This decision benefitted both countries: Saudi Arabia could fund its ambitious Vision 2030 development plan, while Russia could continue to fund its war efforts. This collaboration between Saudi Arabia and Russia in the oil market demonstrates their

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<sup>208</sup> Jens Heibach and Luíza Cerioli, "Saudi Arabia's ambivalent stance on the Russia-Ukraine war: Balancing regime stability and equal sovereignty," *Contemporary Security Policy* 45, no. 4 (2024), p. 670-672.

strategic partnership, particularly in maintaining control over oil prices and global supply.<sup>209</sup>

The Kingdom's economic relationship with Russia has extended beyond oil. Saudi Arabia, through its investment arm, Kingdom Holding Co, notably invested \$500 million in Russian energy companies such as Gazprom, Rosneft, and Lukoil, despite these companies facing Western sanctions. Additionally, Saudi Arabia's favorable position for capital flight from Russia has led to the influx of Russian wealth, further deepening financial ties between the two nations.<sup>210</sup>

While Saudi Arabia has avoided taking sides in the war, it has also positioned itself as a potential mediator. In September 2022, the Kingdom facilitated a prisoner exchange between Russia and Ukraine, further highlighting its diplomatic role.<sup>211</sup> Moreover, Saudi Arabia has pledged \$400 million in humanitarian aid to Ukraine. This humanitarian commitment aligns with the Kingdom's broader approach to maintaining regional stability and supporting peace efforts.<sup>212</sup>

Saudi Arabia's neutrality has not prevented it from deepening its engagement with both Russia and Ukraine. In May 2023, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman invited Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to participate in the Arab League Summit, underscoring Saudi Arabia's interest in maintaining dialogue with all parties involved.<sup>213</sup> In August 2023, Saudi Arabia hosted the Jeddah Summit, where 40 countries discussed Ukraine's peace proposal. While the summit did not yield significant results due to Russia's exclusion, it showcased Saudi Arabia's ongoing efforts to facilitate dialogue.<sup>214</sup> Further diplomatic activity included a meeting in Saudi Arabia in late 2023, where

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid

<sup>210</sup> Zhongmin Liu and Meng Shu, "The Russia-Ukraine conflict and the changing geopolitical landscape in the Middle East," *China International Strategy Review*, no. 5 (2023), p. 101.

<sup>211</sup> Andrew S. Weiss and Jasmine Alexander-Greene, "What's Driving Russia's Opportunistic Inroads with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arabs," 5 October 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/10/whats-driving-russias-opportunistic-inroads-with-saudi-arabia-and-the-gulf-arabs?lang=en>.

<sup>212</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "Analysis: The Russia-Ukraine war and the view from Saudi Arabia," *Al Jazeera*, 24 October 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/24/analysis-russia-ukraine-war-view-from-saudi-arabia>.

<sup>213</sup> Al Jazeera, "Ukraine's Zelenskyy seeks Arab League support on Saudi visit," 19 May 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/19/ukraines-zelenskyy-makes-surprise-visit-to-saudi-arabia>.

<sup>214</sup> Al Jazeera, "Saudi Arabia kicks off Ukraine talks that exclude Russia," 5 August 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/5/saudi-arabia-kicks-off-ukraine-talks-that-exclude-russia>.

representatives from Ukraine, India, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Canada, Japan, the United States, and the EU discussed Ukraine's peace proposals.<sup>215</sup>

In December 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Saudi Arabia for the first time since the war began. The discussions focused on oil production and the ongoing conflict in Gaza, marking an important moment in Russian-Saudi relations. Just days after Putin's visit, another meeting took place in Saudi Arabia to further discuss Ukraine's peace proposals, illustrating Saudi Arabia's continued diplomatic involvement.<sup>216</sup>

On the broader geopolitical stage, Saudi Arabia's role as a mediator is also connected to its growing alignment with global powers like China and Russia. The Kingdom's economic interests with China, Russia, and other BRICS members, particularly in energy cooperation and trade, have led some analysts to view Saudi Arabia's potential membership as a strategic move. The warming ties with Beijing and Russia have raised concerns in Washington, as Saudi Arabia's longstanding relationship with the U.S. has been increasingly complicated by these shifting alliances.<sup>217</sup>

In addition, Riyadh and Moscow have aligned on several key issues in the MENA region. Both countries have supported Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army in its conflict against the Turkey-backed, Tripoli-based Government of National Unity.<sup>218</sup> Another example of their growing cooperation is Saudi Arabia's improving relations with the Russia-backed Assad regime in Syria, signalling a shift in Saudi policy toward greater engagement with Damascus after years of opposition.<sup>219</sup>

In conclusion, Saudi Arabia's role in the Russia-Ukraine war reflects a careful balancing act between promoting its national interests and playing a diplomatic role as a mediator. While the Kingdom has remained neutral in the conflict, it has used its influence in global energy markets and diplomatic

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<sup>215</sup> Καθημερινή, «Πόλεμος στην Ουκρανία: Μυστική συνάντηση στη Σαουδική Αραβία για το μέλλον της σύγκρουσης», 9 Ιανουαρίου 2024, <https://www.kathimerini.gr/world/562820752/polemos-stin-oukrania-mystiki-synantisi-sti-saoudiki-arabia-gia-to-mellon-tis-sygkroyis/>.

<sup>216</sup> Layla Ali, "Russia – Saudi Relations: Two Years Post Ukraine Crisis," *Gulf Research Center*, February 2024.

<sup>217</sup> The Arab Weekly, "Focus on ties as Russia invites Saudi crown prince to October BRICS summit," 10 September 2024, <https://the arabweekly.com/focus-ties-russia-invites-saudi-crown-prince-october-brics-summit>

<sup>218</sup> Jens Heibach and Luíza Cerioli, "Saudi Arabia's ambivalent stance on the Russia-Ukraine war," p. 675.

<sup>219</sup> Layla Ali, "Russia – Saudi Relations: Two Years Post Ukraine Crisis," p. 5.

forums to foster dialogue, support humanitarian efforts, and maintain its strategic relationships with both Russia and the West. This pragmatism underscores Saudi Arabia's position as a key player in the evolving global order, as it seeks to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape shaped by the war.

# Syria

Elias Solomos

The Syrian Arab Republic<sup>220</sup> has been embroiled in civil war since 2011, with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's Ba'athist regime fighting against various anti-government rebel groups, which have often been fragmented and ideologically diverse. Since the outset of the conflict in Ukraine, Syria has openly supported Russia's invasion—primarily because Assad's regime owes its survival to Moscow's military backing since 2015, and secondarily because the Ukrainian cause is a priority for the Western alliance, which Assad deeply distrusts. His animosity towards the West stems from NATO and the European Union's longstanding opposition to his rule, as both have provided diplomatic and military support to anti-government rebel factions since the early stages of the Syrian civil war.

In return for Moscow's continued support, Syria aligned its foreign policy more closely with Russian interests. On 21 February 2022—just three days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine—Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad travelled to Moscow for a meeting with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov. There, Mekdad voiced Syria's support for Russia's decision to recognise the independence of the pro-Russian separatist *People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk* (officially part of Ukrainian territory) and condemned the West for what he described as a campaign of “*hypocrisy, lies, and deception*.”<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> This article explores Syria's policy before the fall of the Assad regime in Syria.

<sup>221</sup> Danny Makki, “Syria's role in Putin's invasion of Ukraine,” *Middle East Institute*, 9 March 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/syrias-role-putins-invasion-ukraine>.

With the official outbreak of the war, Syria's full alignment with Russia became evident. On 24 February, the day of the invasion, Putin called Assad, who asserted that "*Western nations bear responsibility for chaos and bloodshed*," fully endorsing Russia's accusations against the West.<sup>222</sup> Shortly afterwards, Syria was one of only five governments to vote against the United Nations resolution condemning Russian aggression.<sup>223</sup> Since then, it has consistently opposed any UN resolution criticising Russia's actions in Ukraine.<sup>224</sup> Another notable demonstration of Damascus's support for Moscow was its decision to sever diplomatic ties with Ukraine in July 2022.<sup>225</sup>

Damascus also withdrew from the UN-led peace talks on a political resolution to the Syrian conflict, mediated by Special Envoy Geir Pedersen, arguing that Geneva was no longer an acceptable venue after Switzerland joined the coalition of countries imposing sanctions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine.<sup>226</sup> Furthermore, in March 2023, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad travelled to Moscow, where, during a meeting with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, he reiterated Syria's support for what he described as the "*special operation against neo-Nazis and old Nazis*" in Ukraine.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Jared Gans, "These 6 countries sided with Russia in UN vote on Ukraine war," *The Hill*, 23 February 2023, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/3871761-these-6-countries-sided-with-russia-in-un-vote-on-ukraine-war/>.

<sup>225</sup> Al Jazeera, "Syria, a close Russia ally, breaks diplomatic ties with Ukraine," 20 July 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/20/syria-formally-breaks-diplomatic-ties-with-ukraine>.

<sup>226</sup> Marc Otte, "Syria, the Middle East and the War in Ukraine," *Egmond Royal Institute for International Relations*, 6 September 2022, <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/syria-the-middle-east-and-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

<sup>227</sup> Valerie Hopkins and Ivan Nechepurenko, "Assad offers Putin Syria's support for Russia's war in Ukraine," *The New York Times*, 15 March 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2023/03/15/world/russia-ukraine-news#assad-offers-putin-syrias-support-for-russias-war-in-ukraine>.



The Syrian regime's position is unlikely to change, given Russia's direct involvement in the Syrian civil war since September 2015, backing Assad through personnel deployments, primarily via the Wagner private military contractor,<sup>228</sup> and extensive naval and aerial bombardments against anti-Assad rebel forces. The Wagner Group played a pivotal role in several key battles that helped shift the war in Assad's favour, including the recapture of Palmyra in 2017, which had been under Islamic State (ISIS) control.<sup>229</sup> In recognition of Wagner's contributions, the Syrian government granted the group a 25% stake in the production of oil and gas fields, as well as phosphate mines, in the areas where it operated.<sup>230</sup>

The Russian-Ukrainian war has had significant negative consequences for Syria. In addition to the deepening involvement of Iranian proxies in the Syrian conflict—resulting from Russia's shift in focus to the Ukrainian front—and the subsequent increase in Israeli hostilities against Assad's regime,<sup>231</sup> Damascus also faces worsening food and nutritional insecurity for a large segment of the population due to the decline in wheat exports from both Ukraine and Russia.<sup>232</sup>

In conclusion, despite the numerous challenges posed by the war in Ukraine, the Assad regime has no leeway to diverge from

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<sup>228</sup> Paul McLoughlin, "Syria Insight: How the invasion of Ukraine has impacted on Russia," *The New Arab*, 27 September 2022, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/syria-insight-how-ukraine-war-has-impacted-russia>.

<sup>229</sup> Samer al-Ahmed and Mohammed Hasan, "Syria is where the conflict between Wagner and the Russian government began," *Middle East Institute*, 14 July 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/syria-where-conflict-between-wagner-and-russian-government-began>.

<sup>230</sup> Emad Bouzo, "The Wagner Group in Syria: Profiting Off Failed States," *Washington Institute of Near East Policy*, 21 July 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/wagner-group-syria-profiting-failed-states>.

<sup>231</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "How the Ukraine war is advancing Iran's influence in Syria," *The New Arab*, 16 May 2022, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/how-ukraine-war-advancing-irans-influence-syria>.

<sup>232</sup> Mohammad Al-Saidi, "Caught off guard and beaten: The Ukraine war and food security in the Middle East," *Frontiers in Nutrition*, 10 (2023): 1-15.

Russia's position. The survival of the Ba'athist regime remains heavily reliant on Moscow's diplomatic and military support. Given that Russia considers the conflict in Ukraine its top foreign policy priority, Damascus has little choice but to align fully with Moscow's stance.

# Tunisia

Christina Papastamopoulou

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Tunisia—like many MENA states—has taken a relatively neutral position on the conflict. On the one hand, Tunisia is dependent on the EU's economic partnership as well as on the USA's security guarantees. On the other hand, as an oil-importing country, Tunisia must attract new investors—namely Russia and China—to support its struggling economy. Moreover, both the Tunisian regime and its people do not strongly support Ukraine for several reasons.

First of all, a strong anti-imperialist sentiment prevails in the Global South. This sentiment has been reinforced by the double standard in the West's approach to the Ukraine crisis and the Palestinian issue. Specifically, Western countries provide support to Israel despite its actions against civilians in Palestine, whereas they emphasize the protection of civilian rights in Ukraine.<sup>233</sup> In addition, the EU willingly welcomes Ukrainian refugees, which contrasts sharply with its treatment of Syrian, Kurdish, Somali, and Afghan refugees.<sup>234</sup>

Moreover, the president of Ukraine has not made significant efforts to gain the support of MENA states. In contrast, Putin has effectively exploited anti-imperialist sentiment to bolster pro-Russian attitudes in the region. This is reflected in Tunisia's voting record at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) concerning the Ukraine crisis. Tunisia has often abstained from voting, casting its vote in favor of Russia withdrawing from Ukraine only three times. Tunisia also abstained from voting to suspend Russia's membership in the UN Human Rights Council.<sup>235</sup>

Furthermore, the Russia-Ukraine war has widened the gap between energy exporters and importers in the region. By the end of 2022, Tunisia, as an oil-

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<sup>233</sup> Youssef Cherif, "Ukraine and the Changing Face of the Southern Mediterranean – European Relations," in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2023* (Barcelona, 2023: European Institute of the Mediterranean): 131-137, <https://www.iemed.org/publication/ukraine-and-the-changing-face-of-the-southern-mediterranean-european-relations/>.

<sup>234</sup> Akram Belkaid, "Maghreb-Ukraine (2). Tunisia With its Hands Tied, Public Opinion Favorable to Russia," *OrientXXI*, 24 May 2022, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/maghreb-ukraine-2-tunisia-with-its-hands-tied-public-opinion-favourable-to.5635>.

<sup>235</sup> Youssef Cherif, "Ukraine and the Changing Face of the Southern Mediterranean."

importing country, had an external debt level of approximately 90% of its GDP and a growing current account deficit driven by the rising import bill. To avoid bankruptcy, Tunisia has been negotiating financial assistance in the form of a \$1.9 billion loan from the IMF. Nevertheless, negotiations have stalled due to the fact that, on the one hand, Tunisian President Saied is unwilling to implement the mandated reforms, whereas, on the other hand, the USA is reluctant to cooperate with an authoritarian leader.<sup>236</sup>

Thus, Saied turned to Russia, whose foreign minister expressed support, stating that “*the development of Tunisia's domestic political system benefits bilateral relations.*”<sup>237</sup> Since the beginning of the war, the two countries have signed numerous bilateral agreements in various fields, including agriculture, energy—such as nuclear energy—as well as advanced technologies, including space exploration.<sup>238</sup>

A point worth mentioning is that before the war, Ukraine supplied Tunisia with wheat. Nowadays, however, Russia supplies Tunisia with this vital resource, which is crucial for maintaining peace within the country.<sup>239</sup> As a matter of fact, in 2023, their bilateral trade reached \$1.5 billion. Regarding nuclear energy, the two states have agreed to use atomic energy for peaceful purposes. In the area of space exploration, a Russian carrier has already launched the first Tunisian satellite into orbit, and the two countries have signed an agreement for the joint production of five more space objects.<sup>240</sup> Moreover, flights from Russia to Tunisia are once again available through the Russian national airline Aeroflot.<sup>241</sup> Obviously, Tunisia remains open to Russian tourists and oil.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Riccardo Fabiani, “The Ukraine War’s Economic Impact on North Africa: Winners, Losers, and a Dangerous Lack of Long-Term Vision,” *Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)*, 14 June 2023,

<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/the-ukraine-wars-economic-impact-on-north-africa-winners-losers-and-a-dangerous-lack-of-long-term-vision-132037>.

<sup>237</sup> Oreanda, “Russia and Tunisia will develop cooperation in agriculture,” 21 December 2023, <https://www.oreanda-news.com/en/gosudarstvo/russia-and-tunisia-will-develop-cooperation-in-agriculture/article1499137/>.

<sup>238</sup> Sam Metz and Bouazza Ben Bouazza, “Russia’s foreign minister tours North Africa as anger toward the West swells across the region,” *The Associated Press*, 21 December 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-morocco-tunisia-war-lavrov-c825c46f0177b6cef72db1343d4134ce>.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid

<sup>240</sup> Oreanda, “Russia and Tunisia will develop cooperation in agriculture.”

<sup>241</sup> Driss Rejichi, “A Key New Ally For Russia That Makes The West Cringe: Tunisia,” *Inkyfada*, 17 May 2023, <https://inkyfada.com/en/2023/05/17/new-ally-russia-tunisia/>.

<sup>242</sup> Youssef Cherif, “Ukraine and the Changing Face of the Southern Mediterranean.”

This relationship between Tunisia and Russia has particularly concerned Italy, the only European state in close proximity to Tunisia. Italy warns that U.S. policies are driving Tunisia to align with Russia and China, which could negatively impact European national security.<sup>243</sup> Indeed, Tunisian Foreign Minister Nabil Ammar has stated that “*it is not in Tunisia’s diplomatic traditions to reject one partner for the sake of another.*”<sup>244</sup> Additionally, concerns are growing due to the fact that Tunisia, which has already joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, has also applied to join BRICS.<sup>245</sup> Last but not least, it is worth noting that Russia—the leading arms supplier in Africa between 2018 and 2022—is already present on Tunisia’s borders in Algeria and Libya. We should also take into consideration the fact that Tunisia is financially dependent on Libya.<sup>246</sup>

In conclusion, both the financial crisis in Tunisia and the stances of Western countries on the Israeli-Hamas war have driven Tunisia to strengthen its ties with Moscow. From a realistic perspective, Tunisia aims to promote its national interests, which, in its case, are closely tied to financial concerns. Consequently, Tunisia’s approach toward Russia could serve as a pressure vessel to compel Western states to provide assistance.

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<sup>243</sup> Salah Al-Din Al-Jorashi, “What connects Algeria, Russia and Tunisia?” *Middle East Monitor*, 30 June 2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230630-what-connects-algeria-russia-and-tunisia/>.

<sup>244</sup> The Arab Weekly, “Tunisian FM reaffirms his country’s policy of ‘openness to all partners’ during visit to Moscow,” 27 September 2023, <https://the arabweekly.com/tunisian-fm-reaffirms-his-country-policy-openness-all-partners-during-visit-moscow>.

<sup>245</sup> Arab Wall, “Why Tunisia is looking eastward to Russia?” 4 January 2024, <https://arabwall.com/en/why-tunisia-is-looking-eastward-to-russia/>.

<sup>246</sup> Driss Rejichi, “A Key New Ally For Russia That Makes The West Cringe: Tunisia.”

# Turkey

Nikolaos Markovitis

In recent years, Turkey, under President Erdoğan, has assumed increasingly pivotal roles in the international sphere, particularly within the complex dynamics of the Black Sea Region – a historically contentious area for power balance. Amid the ongoing conflict and instability in the wider region, examining the ways in which regional states influence and contribute to the situation becomes essential. On one side lies Russia's invasion of Ukraine, reshaping the security architecture of Eastern Europe and the Black Sea. On the other, Turkey's positioning as a significant regional actor.<sup>247</sup>

Turkey's stance has been pro-Ukrainian but certainly not anti-Russian. This allows Erdoğan to maintain a delicate balance among his NATO commitments, his mutual interests with Russia, and domestic politics. On one hand, Turkey has supported Ukraine, providing Kyiv with essential military hardware, such as the Bayraktar-TB2 drones. On the other hand, Ankara continues to maintain close ties with Moscow, giving Russia access to global markets.

Three primary considerations are central to understanding this geopolitical arrangement. First is Turkey's role as a NATO member and its implications for alliance solidarity. Second is Turkey's strategic autonomy as an independent regional power, marked by its distinct policies and nuanced diplomacy. Third, Turkey's participation and mediation efforts in the conflict demand closer examination to assess their impact on regional stability.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has introduced complex geopolitical dynamics that are reshaping Turkey's strategic position.<sup>248</sup> This conflict has positioned Turkey as a potential mediator within a volatile regional landscape. From the early stages of the war, Turkey's balanced approach has allowed Ankara to initiate ceasefire talks between the two belligerents. Turkey's mediation efforts were bore fruit with the July 2022 Black Sea grain deal,<sup>249</sup> an agreement that enhanced Turkey's role in global

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<sup>247</sup> Alişan Baltacı, "Rusya Ukrayna Savaşı Kapsamında Türkiye'nin Siyasi ve Ekonomik Rolü," in Güneş Açıköz (ed), *International Congress On Social Sciences, China To Adriatic-XIV – Proceeding Book, Kayseri, June10-12, 2022* (Ankara, Iksad Global, 2022), 517-524.

<sup>248</sup> Samuel J Hirst and Onur Isci, "Smokestacks and Pipelines: Russian-Turkish Relations and the Persistence of Economic Development," *Diplomatic History*, 44, no. 5 (November 2020): 834–859.

<sup>249</sup> Patrick Wintour, "What was the Black Sea grain deal and why did it collapse?," *The Guardian*, 12 July 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/20/what-was-the-black-sea-grain-deal-and-why-did-it-collapse>.

affairs given its importance for Middle Eastern and African countries facing food security risks.

In the meantime, Turkey has strengthened its strategic partnership by providing Ukraine with Bayraktar drones and other alliance-supported military resources, underscoring its support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and alignment with the Western coalition. This commitment is evident in Turkey's consistent voting record in the United Nations and official statements reaffirming support for Ukraine's sovereignty.<sup>250</sup> Additionally, Turkey's engagement in Ukraine extends to plans for establishing a UAV production facility near Kyiv,<sup>251</sup> further demonstrating its support for Ukraine and her defence capabilities. Beyond military and diplomatic support, Turkey has also delivered humanitarian aid to Ukraine and accepted thousands of Ukrainian refugees.

The Turkish-Ukrainian partnership has roots dating back to the 1990s and the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since Ukraine's independence, Ankara has maintained close and friendly ties with Kyiv, which has been important for several reasons. Ukraine is a significant market open for investment, and close ties with Ukraine have helped Turkey maintain a balance vis-à-vis Russia in the Black Sea, especially given the historically antagonistic relations between Russia and Turkey.

Turkey had another reason to support Ukraine; Ankara acknowledged that the Turkic Crimean Tatar community would be safer under Ukrainian jurisdiction. Through a Pan-Turkic framework, Turkey's support for the Crimean Tatars exemplifies its aspirations to reinforce solidarity among Turkic nations and to enhance its broader influence across the region. Turkey's stance on Crimea and its support for the Crimean Tatar minority is therefore noteworthy.<sup>252</sup>

Despite its evident support for Ukraine, Turkey maintains substantial economic ties with Russia. Ankara has refused to join Western-led sanctions, allowing Russia access to global trade and energy markets. Another important aspect of Russian-Turkish relations is their collaboration on the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant project.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Daily Sabah, "Turkey committed to Ukraine's territorial integrity," 17 March 2022.

<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-committed-to-ukraines-territorial-integrity>

<sup>251</sup> Peshia Magid, "Turkey's drone maker Baykar begins to build plant in Ukraine," *Reuteurs*, 7 February 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/turkeys-drone-maker-baykar-begins-build-plant-ukraine-2024-02-06/>.

<sup>252</sup> Gizem Nisa Çebi, "Turkish President Erdogan reaffirms support for Kyiv, calls for Crimea's return to Ukraine," *Anadolu Agency*, 11 September 2024. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkish-president-erdogan-reaffirms-support-for-kyiv-calls-for-crimeas-return-to-ukraine/3327489>

<sup>253</sup> Firdevs Yuksel, "Russia transferring \$15B for Türkiye for Akkuyu NPP," *Anadolu Agency*, 29 July 2022.

This partnership is reinforced through ongoing cooperation in natural gas initiatives,<sup>254</sup> providing Russia with a strategic advantage in the Eastern Mediterranean. Furthermore, Turkey has been a top destination for wealthy Russians since the start of the war.

In the broader context, Turkey's positioning reflects the growing agency of mid-tier powers within a multipolar world characterized by asymmetrical apolarity. Analysts suggest that Turkey's diplomacy is pragmatically influenced by geographic imperatives, which often justify its neutral stance. Hypothetically, Turkey's absence from NATO might subject it to heightened pressure to commit more firmly to one global bloc. This case study underscores Turkey's expanding foreign policy ambitions across the Black Sea and Middle East regions. Turkey's enhanced role, however, presents a strategic dilemma for Western allies: either support Turkey's mediation efforts or risk jeopardizing alliance cohesion. This dilemma is further complicated by Turkey's interest in joining both BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, signaling its pursuit of a broader multilateral engagement.<sup>255</sup>

In conclusion, Turkey's role as a mediator between Ukraine and Russia reflects its aspirations to establish itself as a key diplomatic actor in an increasingly polarized regional environment. This intermediary stance not only highlights Turkey's strategic recalibration within NATO but also its ambition to balance Western alliances with its longstanding ties to Russia. By navigating these complex relationships, Turkey seeks to enhance its influence as an emerging regional power, leveraging diplomatic engagement to secure both regional stability and global strategic advantages.

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<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/nuclear/russia-transferring-15b-for-turkiye-for-akkuyu-npp/35933>

<sup>254</sup> Alper Coşkun, Alexander Gabuev, Marc Pierini, Francesco Siccardi, and Temur Umarov, "Understanding Türkiye's Entanglement With Russia," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 2024.

[https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Coskun\\_Turkiye%20Russia-final.pdf](https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Coskun_Turkiye%20Russia-final.pdf)

<sup>255</sup> Huseyin Hayatsever and Jonathan Spicer, "What lies behind Turkey's ties with Russia and bid to join BRICS?" *Reuters*, 23 October 2024.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/how-close-are-turkeys-erdogan-russias-putin-2024-10-23/>



# United Arab Emirates

Maria Papagianni

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has adopted a policy of 'pro-Russian neutrality', balancing its economic, security, and political interests with global pressures. The UAE's response has reflected its foreign policy orientation based in neutrality, pragmatism, and strategic autonomy. This policy allows the Gulf monarchy to maintain strong relations with both Russia and the West, including Ukraine.

The UAE's response at the United Nations has been a key indicator of its nuanced position. While it voted for resolutions condemning Russia's invasion and expressing support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, it has been careful not to fully endorse the punitive measures taken against Russia.<sup>256</sup> For example, the UAE abstained from a UN Security Council vote condemning Russia's actions.<sup>257</sup> The UAE also abstained from supporting the UNGA resolution to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council.<sup>258</sup> This reluctance to fully align with Western-led calls for tougher sanctions demonstrates the UAE's desire to maintain diplomatic flexibility and avoid actions that might alienate Russia, with whom it enjoys close political and economic relations.<sup>259</sup>

In terms of economic and trade relations, UAE-based banks have reportedly seen an influx of business from Russian clients seeking to circumvent Western sanctions, while Russian investments in the country's real estate market have surged.<sup>260</sup> In February 2023, the UAE Central Bank granted a

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<sup>256</sup> Arwa Ibrahim, "UAE stance on Ukraine war reflects 'strong alliance' with Russia," *Reuters*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/3/uae-stance-on-ukraine-war-reflects-strong-alliance-with-russia>.

<sup>257</sup> Rahul Roy-Chaudhury and Emile Hokayem, "Understanding India and the UAE's abstentions over Ukraine," *Institute for Strategic Studies*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/03/understanding-india-and-the-uaes-abstentions-over-ukraine/>.

<sup>258</sup> Middle East Eye, "Gulf states abstain as UN suspends Russia from rights council over Ukraine abuses," 7 April 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-ukraine-war-gulf-countries-abstain-vote-suspend-un-rights-council>.

<sup>259</sup> Reuters, "Putin says Russia, UAE have 'strategic partnership', to discuss Middle East, Ukraine," 20 October 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-says-russia-uae-have-strategic-partnership-discuss-middle-east-ukraine-2024-10-20/>.

<sup>260</sup> Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), "UAE Investments in Russia: A Testament to Growing Bilateral Ties," 18 June 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/uae-investments-in-russia-a-testament-to-growing-bilateral-ties-177993>.

license to the Russian MTS Bank<sup>261</sup> to facilitate the economic activity of Russian sanctioned individuals. However, it later revoked the license amid fears of secondary sanctions.<sup>262</sup> Meanwhile, the UAE has emerged as a top destination for Russian tourists.<sup>263</sup>

Despite Western pressure,<sup>264</sup> economic relations between Russia and the UAE continue to grow. Bilateral trade has tripled in the past three years,<sup>265</sup> and there is increasing collaboration in business, investments, infrastructure, and logistics.<sup>266</sup> A notable example of this cooperation is the agreement between the UAE-based global port operator DP World and Russia's state-owned nuclear company Rosatom to develop a transit shipping route.<sup>267</sup> Additionally, the UAE has maintained cooperation with Russia on energy-related matters, especially within the framework of OPEC+,<sup>268</sup> while the UAE's BRICS membership further facilitates its strategic engagement and cooperation with Russia.<sup>269</sup>

The UAE's relationship with Russia extends beyond the realm of energy and diplomacy into shared geopolitical interests in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Both countries have mutual interest in Syria,<sup>270</sup> Libya,<sup>271</sup> and

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<sup>261</sup> Joasia E. Popowicz, "UAE grants licence to Russian bank," *Central Banking*, 9 February 2023, <https://www.centralbanking.com/fintech/7954453/uae-grants-licence-to-russian-bank#>.

<sup>262</sup> Reuters, "UAE cancels licence for Russia's sanctioned MTS Bank," 31 March 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-cancels-license-russias-sanctioned-mts-bank-branch-2023-03-31/>.

<sup>263</sup> ISPI, "UAE Investments in Russia: A Testament to Growing Bilateral Ties."

<sup>264</sup> Alexander Cornwell, "U.S., allies press UAE over Russia trade, sanctions," *Reuters*, 1 May 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-allies-press-uae-over-russia-trade-sanctions-2024-05-01/>.

<sup>265</sup> Russian News Agency (TASS), "Russia-UAE trade up three-fold in past three years — Putin," 20 October 2024, <https://tass.com/economy/1858763>.

<sup>266</sup> Nikita Smagin, "Is the Blossoming Relationship Between Russia and the UAE Doomed?" *Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center*, 13 April 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-urasia/politika/2023/04/is-the-blossoming-relationship-between-russia-and-the-uae-doomed?lang=en>.

<sup>267</sup> Pramod Kumar, "DP World and Rosatom to develop new shipping route," *Arabian Gulf Business Insight*, 25 October 2023, <https://www.agbi.com/transport/2023/10/dp-world-and-rosatom-to-develop-new-shipping-route/#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20Rosatom%20and%20DP,cooperation%20agreement%20during%20the%20St>.

<sup>268</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The GCC and the Russia-Ukraine Crisis," *Arab Center Washington DC*, 22 March 2022, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-gcc-and-the-russia-ukraine-crisis/>.

<sup>269</sup> Dean Mikkelsen, "How the UAE is energizing its partnership with BRICS nations," *Oil & Gas Middle East*, 2 September 2024, <https://www.oilandgasmiddleeast.com/business/how-the-uae-is-energizing-its-partnership-with-brics-nations>.

<sup>270</sup> Giorgio Cafiero & Arman Mahmoudian, "Russia and the UAE's growing synergy in Syria," *The New Arab*, 27 July 2021, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/russia-and-uaes-growing-synergy-syria>.

<sup>271</sup> Amy Mackinnon and Jack Detsch, "Pentagon Says UAE Possibly Funding Russia's Shadowy Mercenaries in Libya," *Foreign Policy*, 30 November 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/30/pentagon-trump-russia-libya-uae/>.

Sudan,<sup>272</sup> where they have worked together to exert influence. One of the most significant aspects of the UAE-Russia relationship, however, is Russia's support for the UAE in its Persian Gulf island disputes with Iran.<sup>273</sup>

At the same time, the UAE has maintained its relations with Ukraine, offering humanitarian aid and diplomatic support.<sup>274</sup> Abu Dhabi seeks to maintain good relations with Ukraine, balancing its economic interests with Russia while supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in principle. In June 2024, the UAE and Ukraine finalised a bilateral comprehensive trade agreement to boost trade and investment between the two nations.<sup>275</sup> The UAE has also positioned itself as a mediator in its relations with Russia and Ukraine.<sup>276</sup> While the UAE has refrained from providing military aid to Ukraine, it has provided humanitarian assistance and has offered its diplomatic services in facilitating dialogue. The UAE's efforts to broker peace have already brought some results, with a prisoner exchange deal between the two warring parties.<sup>277</sup>

In conclusion, the UAE has condemned Russia's aggression in principle while avoiding punitive measures that could harm its strategic relationship with Russia. It has played a key role in maintaining and enhancing its energy and economic cooperation with Moscow, positioned itself as a neutral mediator in the conflict, and worked to ensure its continued diplomatic and economic influence in the Middle East and beyond. The UAE's ability to maintain strong ties with Russia and Ukraine, as well as its broader strategic calculations, has allowed it to safeguard its own interests on the global stage.

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<sup>272</sup> Ben Farmer, "UAE using Wagner fighters to smuggle weapons into Sudan," *The Telegraph*, 14 September 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/09/14/uae-wagner-group-fighters-weapons-sudanese-civil-war/>.

<sup>273</sup> Kourosh Ziabari, "Russia, Iran, and the Territorial Dispute with the UAE," *Arab Center Washington DC*, 16 August 2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/russia-iran-and-the-territorial-dispute-with-the-uae/>.

<sup>274</sup> Dilara Hamit, "UAE highlights humanitarian efforts in Ukraine amid ongoing conflict," *Anadolu Agency*, 26 August 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/russia-ukraine-war/uae-highlights-humanitarian-efforts-in-ukraine-amid-ongoing-conflict/3313397>.

<sup>275</sup> Jack Dutton, "UAE, Ukraine conclude trade deal talks, Emirates to help post-war reconstruction," *Al-Monitor*, 29 April 2024, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/04/uae-ukraine-conclude-trade-deal-talks-emirates-help-post-war-reconstruction>.

<sup>276</sup> The Arab Weekly, "UAE leader could launch Ukraine-Russia initiative after US elections," 22 October 2024, <https://the arabweekly.com/uae-leader-could-launch-ukraine-russia-initiative-after-us-elections>.

<sup>277</sup> The Arab Weekly, "Russia, Ukraine exchange 206 prisoners after eighth successful UAE mediation," 16 September 2024, <https://the arabweekly.com/russia-ukraine-exchange-206-prisoners-after-eighth-successful-uae-mediation>.

# Yemen

Nikolaos Markovitis

The war in Ukraine has had far-reaching repercussions on the global stage, impacting various geopolitical arenas, including Yemen. This analysis examines the links between the conflicts in Yemen and Ukraine, highlighting their shared geostrategic interests, regional dynamics, and humanitarian crises.<sup>278</sup>

The ongoing situation in Yemen remains dire and is likely to continue as a significant regional and international issue. The civil war, which erupted in 2014, stemmed from political and governance instability, further aggravated by the Arab Uprisings (Arab Spring). The Houthi movement, a Zaidi Shia group, took control of the capital, Sana'a, sparking a conflict that has drawn in a range of non-state actors, including the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Al-Islah party, the secessionist Southern Transitional Council, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and ISIS. Yemen's strategic position and its alignment with broader Middle Eastern concerns—such as its outspoken support for the Palestinian cause and the Houthis' attacks on Israel—highlight the country's significance in the geopolitics of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.<sup>279</sup> This underscores Yemen's role not only as a domestic conflict zone but also as a focal point for broader regional rivalries and alliances.

The realist framework in international relations provides a foundation to examine these cases, highlighting how power struggles, alliances, and regional rivalries shape each conflict. While the nature of the conflicts is distinct—an international invasion in Ukraine versus a protracted civil war in Yemen—common patterns in regional influence and strategic significance become evident.

Yemen, like Ukraine, holds significant strategic importance for both Western and Eastern powers due to its proximity to critical maritime routes. Yemen's location near the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, a vital passage for global oil

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<sup>278</sup> Fathia Bahashwan, "The Impact of the Russian-Ukrainian War on Yemen," *Reliefweb*, 20 June 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/impact-russian-ukrainian-war-yemen>.

<sup>279</sup> Gerald M. Feierstein, "The Yemen Conflict: Consequences for the MENA Region," *European Institute of the Mediterranean*, <https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-yemen-conflict-consequences-for-the-mena-region/>.

shipments, highlights its importance to the West and regional actors such as Saudi Arabia. In contrast, Ukraine serves as a strategic buffer between Western alliances, particularly NATO, and Russia. Ukraine's position near the Black Sea places it at the heart of the competition for influence over Eastern Europe. Despite their geographical and historical differences, both Yemen and Ukraine have become battlegrounds in broader power struggles, attracting the attention of global powers.

Moreover, Yemen has developed a relationship with Russia based on solidarity and shared norms.<sup>280</sup> These relations can be examined from two key perspectives. Firstly, Moscow serves as an important partner for the Houthis. The Houthi movement, which controls significant parts of Yemen, is supported by Iran, while Saudi Arabia and its allies back the Yemeni government. This dynamic has created a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, mirroring the ideological and regional rivalry that shapes the Middle East. Secondly, Russia positions itself as a stabilising force in this context. Since the war's onset, only Syria, Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Houthis in Yemen have shown solidarity with Russia.

At this point, a two-fold contradiction emerges for Yemen. On the one hand, Russia has received support from Yemen and the Houthis, aiming to avoid the mistakes made in Syria and Libya. Russia claims to be strengthening its cooperation with Yemen, following the meeting between President al-Alimi and Alexander Kinshak of the Russian Foreign Ministry.<sup>281</sup> At this level, cooperation spans multiple fronts, including military support and equipment. An example of this is Hamza, a soldier fighting for Russia, like many others.<sup>282</sup> On the other hand, Yemen remains a partner for Russia while also voting in favour of United Nations Resolution ES-11/2, which supports

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<sup>280</sup> Ruslan Suleymanov, "Why the Kremlin Is Drifting Closer to Houthi Rebels in Yemen," *Carnegie*, 12 September 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia- Eurasia/politika/2024/09/yemen-russia-middle-east-cooperation?lang=en>.

<sup>281</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, "President al-Alimi hails Yemeni-Russian relations as historic," 16 October 2024, <https://www.mofa-ye.org/Pages/29721/>.

<sup>282</sup> Wagdy Assalemi and Selma Mhaoud, "Yemenis in Russian Military Plead For Help to Escape Ukraine War," *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, 7 October 2024, <https://www.occrp.org/en/news/yemenis-in-russian-military-desperate-to-escape-ukraine-war>.

Ukraine's sovereignty, and continues to stand as a strong supporter of the Palestinians and the war in Gaza.<sup>283</sup>

The conflict in Yemen has resulted in severe humanitarian consequences, including widespread displacement, famine, and economic collapse, solidifying its role as a centre of regional instability.<sup>284</sup> The humanitarian crisis requires urgent attention from both regional and global actors, particularly given Yemen's reliance on Ukrainian wheat imports, which account for nearly 40% of its supply.<sup>285</sup> This dependency links Yemen's crisis to broader global issues such as food security. Yemen's situation shares similarities with Ukraine's, particularly in terms of the devastation faced by civilians and the involvement of external powers in shaping local dynamics. Both conflicts demonstrate strategic significance within a realist framework, highlighting how global powers vie for influence in crucial regions. Russia's engagement, including economic proposals such as BRICS membership, underscores its efforts to provide stability and strengthen its geopolitical alliances in both contexts.<sup>286</sup> Examining Yemen and Ukraine together reveals the interconnected nature of contemporary conflicts and the pivotal role of regional actors.

Interestingly, Yemen's position on the Ukraine conflict adds a layer of complexity to the analysis. The Houthis, for instance, have publicly expressed their opposition to the war in Ukraine, signalling their disagreement with Russian interests.<sup>287</sup> Russia, however, has reportedly supplied arms to the Houthis, reflecting its broader strategy of cultivating alliances in regions critical to Western interests. This relationship highlights the realist concept of strategic balancing, where states engage in conflicts not necessarily to

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<sup>283</sup> Stacey Philbrick Yadav, "The Houthis' 'Sovereign Solidarity' with Palestine," *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 24 January 2024, <https://merip.org/2024/01/the-houthis-sovereign-solidarity-with-palestine/>.

<sup>284</sup> International Crisis Group, "The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa," 14 April 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/impact-russias-invasion-ukraine-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

<sup>285</sup> Al Mokha Center for Strategic Studies, "The impact of Russia-Ukraine Crisis on Yemen," 24 May 2024, <https://mokhacenter.org/en/the-impact-of-russia-ukraine-crisis-on-yemen/>.

<sup>286</sup> Pepe Escobar, "The Yemen–Russia riddle," *The Cradle*, 12 July 2024, <https://thecradle.co/articles-id/25865>.

<sup>287</sup> The Middle East Media Research Institute, "Yemeni-Houthi Official Mohammed Al-Bukhaiti: We Are A Moral Movement, That Is Why We Do Not Support The Russian Military Operation In Ukraine, Even Though Russia Supports Us," 24 January 2024, <https://www.memri.org/tv/mohammed-al-bukhaiti-yemen-houthi-official-moral-dont-support-russia-in-ukraine>.

support specific ideologies but to counterbalance regional adversaries and strengthen their global position.

To sum up, the broader context leads to the conclusion that the dynamics in Yemen and Ukraine reveal how regional and global conflicts are increasingly interconnected.<sup>288</sup> From this perspective, it is possible to analyze the goals of Russia and Iran in parallel with those of Saudi Arabia and Western alliances. Under the scope of these regional conflicts, the case of Yemen presents a contradiction in its partnerships<sup>289</sup>—being an ally of Russia while also criticizing the invasion of Ukraine and standing for state sovereignty. The civil war in Yemen serves as a case study of interconnected issues in the region while offering significant conclusions on the ongoing war in Ukraine.

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<sup>288</sup> Charles J. Sullivan, “The Bear, The Eagle, and the Falcon: Russia, America, and the United Arab Emirates in a time of great power rivalry,” *Asian Affairs*, 55, no. 3 (October 2024): 400–427.

<sup>289</sup> The Economic Times, “Is Russia helping the Houthis in Yemen? If it's true, it could lead to a major problem for shipping,” 21 November 2024,

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/us/is-russia-helping-the-houthis-in-yemen-if-its-true-it-could-lead-to-a-major-problem-for-shipping/articleshow/115534358.cms?from=mdr>.

## Key Takeaways

The response of MENA states to the Russia-Ukraine war has been driven by pragmatism, prioritising national interests such as food security, economic stability, and energy needs, rather than ideological alignment. Dependence on grain imports from Russia and Ukraine highlighted food security as a critical concern, pushing many MENA countries to balance their policies vis-à-vis Russia and the Ukraine war.

Regional conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Gaza further shaped MENA-Russia relations, with shifting alliances, which underscored Russia's growing strategic role. The Syrian and Libyan conflicts, in particular, reinforced ties between Moscow and states like Egypt, the UAE, Iraq and Jordan, while the Gaza conflict affected Russia's relations with Israel.

With the exception of Assad's Syria, most MENA states and several non-state actors, including pro-Russian groups such as Yemen's Ansar Allah (Houthis) and Libya's eastern administration, either supported Ukraine's territorial integrity or maintained a distance from Russia's decision to invade Ukraine. Even Iran, despite providing military support to Russia, refrained from backing Moscow in key UNGA votes, highlighting Tehran's early attempt for a balanced diplomatic approach. Morocco and Tunisia went further, providing military aid to Ukraine, offering more than rhetorical support.

However, this support did not translate into severed ties with Russia. Many MENA states, including strategic U.S. allies such as Kuwait, Morocco, Tunisia and Qatar, motivated by economic and strategic interests, deepened their relationships with Moscow, avoiding Western-led sanctions while simultaneously securing favorable economic deals.

For Iran, the Russia-Ukraine war has led to a significant shift in its relationship with Moscow. As Russia's increasing need for military supplies grew, Tehran and Moscow found themselves drawn into a closer, more strategic partnership. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia have sought to maintain a more neutral stance, positioning itself as a key mediator in the conflict, attempting to balance its relationship with both the West and Russia.



While many MENA states have pursued closer ties with Russia, they have also continued to engage with the West and Ukraine, where strategic relationships are vital. A notable example is Oman.

However, as the global system transitions toward multipolarity, MENA countries have found themselves in a unique position to navigate competing global coalitions. The desire to diversify alliances and reduce dependency on the U.S. and the EU has become increasingly evident, with several countries seeking membership in organizations like BRICS to further assert their strategic autonomy. Turkey, the UAE, Algeria, and Egypt are leading representatives of this trend. The war in Ukraine accelerated this process, due to the West's attempts to isolate Russia.

In sum, the main conclusion is clear: while MENA states are, for the most part, vocal supporters of international law and norms, they are not willing to sacrifice their strategic and economic interests for ideological reasons, especially for a war in Europe, although its implications affect the region as well. Relations of MENA state and non-state actors with Russia reflect a broader trend toward pragmatism, driven by the necessity of food security, investments, and political stability. At the same time, the international system is changing and MENA states are finding new avenues for engagement with global powers, including Russia, in ways that enhance their own strategic autonomy. The implications of this shift are profound, suggesting that the region will continue to prioritize its national interests and political stability over adherence to any singular international norm, all while navigating the complexities of a rapidly changing global order.

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