Dossier: Mediterranean Ramifications of the Ukraine War

The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and the Arab and Mediterranean States: Impact and Reactions

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Since 24 February 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has aroused dismay, shock and great concern in the West. The effects of this senseless invasion are devastating. Apart from the oil and gas exporting countries, no country has emerged unscathed. The human, material and psychological cost for Ukraine is incalculable. Russia, hit by unprecedented sanctions, comes out of it geopolitically weakened and economically anaemic. The European Union, hard hit by the economic, energy and financial impact, has stood united, reinforcing its cohesion and validating its usefulness in the face of its detractors, but will it remain so if the war continues or after the guns have fallen silent? NATO, which had been deprived of an enemy by the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1990, has been reinvigorated, gaining increased attractiveness, with new countries applying for membership (Sweden and Finland) and others knocking at its door, but if it neglects diplomacy too much, does it not run the risk of widening the battlefield and putting the whole of Europe under fire? The United States has taken the lead in opposing Russia, providing Ukraine with financial aid, weapons and ammunition. But hasn’t its supposed “hyperpower” already been dented, since even some of its allies around the world have refused to stand with it in “condemning” Russian aggression and applying sanctions? This is particularly the case for certain Arab and Mediterranean countries.

Indeed, the Arab and Mediterranean countries, although far from the battlefield, have not been spared the negative repercussions of this war on their economy (increase in oil and gas prices, decline in trade, drop in Russian and Ukrainian tourism revenues) and on their food security, as shown in Chart 4 (disruption of wheat and fertilizer supplies, skyrocketing prices and increased insurance premiums). Arab oil and gas exporting countries are doing rather well as the sanctions imposed on Russia are allowing them to export more gas, oil, aluminium and steel and to reap huge profits.

CHART 4
Food Dependence of Arab Countries on Ukraine and Russia

Source: Arab Reform Initiative, 2022.
The reaction of Arab and Mediterranean countries to the Russian invasion reflects their concern, but also their desire to assert themselves as sovereign states. While the United States and the EU have called on them to “take a stand” by condemning Russia’s “illegal” invasion and applying the sanctions imposed on it, all Arab and Mediterranean countries (including Israel and Turkey), with the exception of Syria, have deplored the Russian invasion and demanded a complete withdrawal of Russian forces but refused to apply the sanctions, preferring to remain neutral, pragmatic and detached.

The Reaction of Arab and Mediterranean Countries to the Russian Invasion: An Explanation

While Western countries have stood united in the face of the Russian invasion, Arab countries have reacted in a fragmented fashion. This differentiated positioning is explained by the history of each country, regional geopolitics, international alliances and the impact of the war in Ukraine on their economy. The differentiated positioning of Arab countries explains the Council of the Arab League’s extreme caution with regard to the Russian invasion. Meeting on 28 February, the Council limited itself to “expressing its concern about the development of events and stressing the importance of respecting the principles of international law and the United Nations Charter.” The statement avoided qualifying or even condemning the Russian invasion. Nevertheless, the League dispatched a “Contact Group” chaired by the Algerian Foreign Minister to meet with Russian Minister Lavrov on 4 April and Ukrainian Minister Kuleba on 5 April and reiterate the need to cease hostilities.

Although all Arab and Mediterranean countries are affected by the Russian invasion, they are not suffering the consequences of the war with the same degree of severity. Thus, their political positioning in the face of Russian aggression varies: condemnation without application of sanctions in the case of the majority, unwavering support for Russia in the case of Syria alone, outright hostility in the case of the Lebanese State (but not the Hezbollah party), Kuwait and the Tripoli government, or simple “indifference” shown by abstention votes or even non-participation in the vote (Morocco has often practised the empty chair policy). This differentiation was manifest in the votes on the Security Council resolutions and especially the UN General Assembly votes. In any case, the countries’ votes have also varied according to the subject of the resolution, as shown in Table 2:

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Own table based on United Nations data.
*Palestine does not have the right to vote.

1. The 2 March 2022 resolution deplored the Russian aggression and demanded the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine. The resolution received 141 votes in favour, 35 abstentions and
five votes against. Of the Arab countries, only Syria voted against it. Three Arab countries abstained: Algeria, Iraq and Sudan. One was absent: Morocco. Palestine does not have the right to vote. The other 16 Arab countries voted in favour of the resolution. Israel and Türkiye also voted in favour.

2. The April 7 resolution suspended Russia from the Human Rights Council. It was adopted by 93 votes in favour, 24 against and 58 abstentions. Two Arab countries voted against it: Algeria and Syria, 12 abstained, four did not vote and only three Arab countries voted in favour. Israel and Türkiye voted in favour as well.

3. The 12 October resolution called on Russia to reverse its “illegal annexation attempt” of four regions of Ukraine. It was adopted by 143 votes in favour, five against and 35 abstentions. Of the Arab countries, only Syria voted against it. Algeria abstained. Djibouti and Sudan did not take part in the vote. All other 17 Arab countries voted in favour of the resolution. Israel and Turkey voted in favour as well.

4. The 14 November resolution established that Russia must compensate Ukraine for the victims and damage caused by its illegal invasion. 94 countries voted in favour of the resolution, 73 abstained and 14 voted against it. Among the Arab countries, only Syria voted against it. Five countries voted in favour in the resolution, one (Morocco) was absent and the other 14 abstained. Turkey voted for the resolution, but this time Israel abstained.

Why Have Arab and Mediterranean Countries Reacted in a Fragmented Manner to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine? Several Reasons Are Given

Russia is a reliable ally: this is the position of the Syrian regime, which has been narrowly saved from collapse by Russian military intervention since 2015. This explains Syria's support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Through its illegal occupation of Ukrainian territories, Russia threatens “international security”, and aggravates the problems of the Middle East and North Africa. This is the position of 16 countries of the Arab League. The most vociferous in their condemnation of the Russian invasion have been Kuwait, the Lebanese State (but not Hezbollah) and the Libyan government in Tripoli. The former was occupied in 1990 by Saddam Hussein's army and has retained a bitter aftertaste from this sad episode. Lebanon has been suffering for decades from dual occupation by Syria and Israel. And in the case of Libya, the government in Tripoli has suffered from Russian interference in the Libyan conflict through the Wagner Group in eastern Libya. In all countries, the Muslim Brotherhood (in Syria, Egypt and elsewhere) is following along the lines of the Tripoli Government, accusing Russia of killing their own in Syria and of supporting the al-Sisi military regime that overthrew President Morsi in July 2013 and has been cracking down on the Muslim Brotherhood ever since.

Arab countries are “disappointed” with US policy and with the West's inconsistent handling of the crises in the Middle East and North Africa

This is a war between the West and Russia: the Arabs have no business getting involved. Hence, to varying degrees, the Arab countries have opted for pragmatism, taking different positions depending on the subject of the General Assembly resolutions. When voting on the 2 March resolution deploring the Russian invasion, for instance, 16 out of 21 Arab countries voted in favour, but only three countries voted in favour of the 7 April resolution suspending Russia from the Human Rights Council. This variation can be found in the votes for the 12 October and 14 November 2022 resolutions as well, where 17 Arab countries voted in favour of the 12 October resolution calling on Russia to reverse its decision to annex Ukrainian regions,” but only five, voted in favour of the resolution demanding that Russia compensate for the damage caused by its invasion. Israel, which voted in favour of the resolutions of 2 March, 7 April and 12 October, abstained in the vote on the 14 November resolution, demanding compensation from Russia. No doubt it fears a similar resolution in the future.
The West is “inconsistent” and “unreliable.” Overall, Arab countries are “disappointed” with US policy and, in general, with the West’s inconsistent handling of the crises in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This can be seen in multiple opinion polls. Already in 2017, a PEW poll revealed that only a quarter of Arab respondents had a positive opinion of the United States, compared to a third with a positive opinion of Russia (Fetterolf & Poushter, 2017). This situation did not change much in 2022. Indeed, a poll conducted by the Washington Institute’s Fikra Forum in August 2022 in seven Arab countries found that in four countries (Bahrain, Lebanon, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia), the majority of respondents viewed relations with Russia and China positively (McDonough, 2022).

President Biden tried to change this perception by participating in a US-Gulf Cooperation Council plus Jordan, Egypt, Iraq mini-summit in Jeddah on 16 July 2022. On the summit’s agenda were three issues: the energy question, the establishment of a sort of Arab NATO for regional defence against Iran, and Chinese penetration of the Middle East. The summit was a failure on practically all three issues.

**Case Studies**

**Saudi Arabia**

At odds with the United States, which they accuse of having abandoned their allies (namely the Mubarak regime in 2011), of neglecting the security of the Gulf, negotiating with Iran, having remained passive in the face of drone attacks by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels against Saudi oil installations, treating Saudi Arabia as a “pariah state” following the assassination of journalist Khashoggi on 2 October 2022, and above all of waving the banner of human rights whenever it suits them. The Saudis “deplored the Russian invasion” on 2 March 2022, but have thus far refused to implement the sanctions or play their traditional role as a “balancing producer” by increasing oil production to compensate for the loss of Russian oil hit by the embargo. Indeed, on 5 October 2022, the OPEC+ countries decided to reduce oil production by 2 million barrels to avoid a sharp drop in prices.

Saudi Arabia’s desire to diversify its strategic alliances explains not only its rapprochement with Russia, but also its pivot towards Asia. This decision was perceived as a snub in the US. In Saudi Arabia, it was a response to the country’s economic imperatives, a desire to emancipate itself from ties of dependency, and a rejection of the “logic of blocs.” Saudi newspapers such as Okaz or Arab News have been quick to comment on the transformation of the international order towards a “multipolar system” and avoid making Russia bear the sole responsibility for the conflict, which is described as “a confrontation between great powers for world hegemony” that has nothing to do with compliance with international law.

It must be acknowledged that Saudi Arabia’s distancing from the United States, a strategic ally since 1945, predates the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For several years, in fact, and particularly since the election of Joe Biden, Saudi Arabia has been moving closer to Putin’s Russia in order to diversify its strategic alliances, avoid oil competition (OPEC+ agreement of 2016 with Russia), and ensure access to Russian technologies in the military and the civil nuclear fields. The participation in August 2021 of the Saudi Deputy Minister, Prince Khaled Ben Salman, in the Moscow Arms Fair and the signing of a 2022 Military Cooperation Agreement confirm this new strategic orientation.

Saudi Arabia’s desire to diversify its strategic alliances explains not only its rapprochement with Russia but also its “pivot towards Asia,” particularly towards China, of which they are the main oil suppliers and whose trade reached $87 billion in 2021. It is

1 See the article by Alain Gresh in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, May 2022: “Quand le Sud refuse de s’aligner sur l’Occident en Ukraine.” www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2022/05/GRESH/64659.

2 Chinese trade with Arab countries overall reached the record figure of $330 billion in 2021, growing by 37% from the previous year, and China hopes to increase total trade to $470 billion by 2027 (www.cgnt.com, 10 December 2022).
significant that in the midst of the Ukrainian crisis, Saudi Arabia organized a triple summit in Riyadh on 8 December 2022: China-Saudi Arabia, China-Gulf Cooperation Council, and China-Arab countries, with the presence of President Xi Jinping. This must not have pleased the US Administration.

United Arab Emirates

The Emirates do not harbour the same resentment towards the United States. But they do not wish to take a position in a conflict in which they are not involved. They thus abstained from the Security Council vote on 27 February 2022 but, after much pressure from the US and Europe, changed their minds and supported the UN General Assembly resolutions of 2 March and 12 October, while abstaining from the votes of 7 April and 14 November. This hesitation reflects the Emirates’ conflict between their traditional Western allies and their new Russian partner, with whom the Emirate signed a “strategic partnership” in 2018 that had economic, military and technological components. Although the Emirates voted for the resolution of 2 March 2022 deploring the Russian invasion, that same month Abdullah Ben Zayed, Minister of Foreign Affairs, visited Russia to discuss energy and food security. On 11 October 2022, it was the President of the Emirates himself, Mohamed Ben Zayed al-Nahyan, who travelled to St Petersburg to meet President Putin. It must be acknowledged that the Emirates and Russia are on the same wavelength on many issues: the rehabilitation of Bashar al-Assad’s regime (the Emirates welcomed Bashar al-Assad in March 2022), rejection of the Muslim Brotherhood, advocacy of a “multipolar world” and a preference for “authoritarian stability.” This last point is essential and largely explains the breakthrough of China and Russia in the Middle East and North Africa. It is symptomatic that not only 57% of Emiratis, but also 55% of Saudis and 53% of Kuwaitis, were complacent towards Russia in an April 2022 poll, agreeing with the statement “We cannot rely on the United States these days so we have to look to Russia and China.”

As in the case of Saudi Arabia, the Emirates are among the winners in the Ukraine War. Not only do they welcome Russian tourists and oligarchs, but above all their oil exports are on the rise, as they manage to buy Russian oil at a discount, refine it and re-export it at market prices to Asia and Europe (Lim, 2023), thereby circumventing Western sanctions.

Qatar

A “major non-NATO ally”, Qatar has cordial relations with the United States and is home to the largest US airbase in the Gulf. It abstained on only one resolution, that of 7 April 2022. The country is highly courted by European countries, as demonstrated by the historic 15-year agreement between Qatar and Germany for the annual export of 2 million tonnes of LNG. Although this is only 6% of the volume of Russian gas Germany imports, other European countries could follow suit. Qatar is therefore aiming to increase its annual production of LNG from 77 to 120 million tonnes.

Egypt

With its 110 million inhabitants, Egypt is the world’s largest importer of wheat. Out of an annual consumption of 21 million tonnes, Egypt imports 10 million from abroad. However, 85% of these imports come from two countries: Russia (61%) and Ukraine (24%). The country is thus compelled to be cautious and neutral. Even if it means turning a blind eye to a flagrant violation of international law, Egypt cannot risk jeopardising its privileged relationship with Russia. Of course, this ambiguous position shocks its Western allies, especially the United States. But Egypt counters that “bread is a matter of ‘national security’. “ Called eich (life) in Egyptian dialect, it is the basis of the daily diet: an Egyptian consumes 185 kg of it annually, compared to a world average of 80 kg. Not providing bread is a recipe for political and social unrest. Seen from a national perspective, the Russian invasion is a calamity for Egypt’s economy because not only are imports from Ukraine halted, but the price of a tonne of wheat has more than doubled since the beginning of the year, reaching $450 a tonne, and the insurance premium for shipping has risen by

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30%, pushing Egyptian government subsidies for foodstuffs up from $3.3 billion to over $5 billion. This is a major drain on Egyptian finances, compounded by a loss of tourism revenue, as Russian and Ukrainian tourists account for at least a third of the total number visiting Egypt.

While Russian oligarchs are hunted down in the West and their assets confiscated, Israel welcomes Russian oligarchs of the Jewish faith with open arms.

In addition to all these elements, there is increased cooperation between Egypt and Russia in the military and civil nuclear spheres, with the construction of a nuclear power plant worth more than 20 billion dollars.

The Maghreb Countries

These countries have shown the same reluctance to take sides in the war against Ukraine. Algeria abstained from the vote on 2 March 2022 demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops and an immediate end to the use of force. A staunch Russian ally, Algeria alleges that this is “a war between Europeans” and that it does not intend to interfere. It has therefore opted for “pragmatic neutrality.”

Appointed as head of the Arab Contact Group, mandated by the League of Arab States, Algerian Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra met with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in Moscow on 4 April and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Kuleba in Warsaw on 5 April. Speaking on behalf of the Contact Group, the Algerian minister called for “direct negotiations” between Russians and Ukrainians and expressed his “concern about the fallout from this crisis and the danger entailed by its continuation.”

This did not prevent Algeria from voting against a UN General Assembly resolution of 7 April 2022 calling for Russia’s exclusion from the Human Rights Council, or from receiving Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov with great fanfare in May 2022. Officially, he came to consolidate economic and military cooperation, but in reality Lavrov above all wanted to dissuade Algeria from giving in to Western pressure to increase its deliveries of liquefied gas to Europe.

Morocco practised the “empty chair” policy during the General Assembly votes on the Ukrainian issue. This made the US Administration grumble. US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken travelled to Rabat to urge Morocco to “choose sides.” Morocco balked because it has to go easy on Russia, which it badly needs, not only for wheat imports, but also for many metals and petrochemicals. Indeed, of the four General Assembly votes concerning Ukraine, Morocco was absent three times.

Türkiye

Türkiye is facing the same conflict. It has therefore opted for “active neutrality.” Russia is an important economic partner, with trade amounting to $34.7 billion in 2021 and nearly 7 million Russian tourists visiting Türkiye annually (Marcou, 2023). Russia is also a strategic partner selling sensitive equipment to Türkiye, such as the S-400 air defence missiles that have caused much concern in the United States. This “pragmatic complicity” allows Türkiye to launch military offensives in Syria against the positions of the Kurdish PKK without running the risk of a confrontation with Russia, protector of the Syrian regime.

Türkiye’s relations with Ukraine are longstanding and cordial. Ukraine is a significant trading partner, with trade amounting to $7.4 billion in 2021, and there were nearly 2 million Ukrainian tourists in 2021. Moreover, since the 2018 agreement, Türkiye has been supplying Bayraktar combat drones to Ukraine. This is how much the Russian invasion of Ukraine has left Türkiye in a quandary: it cannot remain silent about a flagrant violation of international law, but it cannot cut ties with Russia.

Türkiye strongly condemned the Russian aggression as “a clear violation of international law,” applied the Montreux Convention of 1936 and closed the Bos-

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4 In 2021, 81% of arms deliveries and defence materials were from Russia.
porus and Dardanelles straits to warships, but refused to apply the sanctions imposed on Russia. This pragmatic stance allowed it to attempt mediation, which was crowned with success. On 22 July 2022, the Black Sea Grain Initiative was signed in Istanbul, providing for a “grain corridor” and a “joint coordination centre” that inspects transport vessels. It was a masterstroke by Erdogan, who managed to free himself from “a rigid alliance with the West … by refusing to join in the sanctions” (Marcou, 2023) and to position himself as a courted mediator, confirming the role of Türkiye as a “pivotal state” in the Black Sea.

Israel

As for Israel, its connection to Russia is a matter of domestic politics, since there are more than a million Russian Jews in Israel and they weigh heavily at the polls. Moreover, Israel relies on Russia’s neutrality in Syria to have free rein to conduct its regular raids there without Russian interference. Nevertheless, Israel voted in favour of the three resolutions of 2 March, 7 April and 12 October, but abstained on the 14 November resolution concerning Russian compensation for the damage caused in Ukraine, no doubt for fear that it might one day have to compensate the Palestinians for its long occupation and illegal annexation.

But to this day, Israel refuses to apply the sanctions against Russia. In fact, while Russian oligarchs are hunted down in the West and their assets confiscated, Israel welcomes Russian oligarchs of the Jewish faith with open arms, giving them the benefit of the “Law of Return” by granting them Israeli nationality. And despite Western pressure, Israel refuses to hand over its anti-missile shield to Ukraine. In his speech to the Knesset on 21 March 2022, Zelensky expressed his disappointment. Can this disappointment explain Ukraine’s vote on 11 November 2022 in favour of a UN resolution requesting an “advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice concerning Israeli practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem”? Some Israelis think so. In fact, Ukraine’s opposition to Israeli settlement activity has a long history and, as Aryeh Savir recalls, “out of a total of 122 resolutions concerning Israel, Ukraine has voted against Israel 95 times and abstained 27 times” (Savir, 2022).

Conclusion

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has thrown Arab and Mediterranean countries into disarray. The impact of the war is keenly felt in all non-oil countries. Oil-producing countries are doing quite well, reaping significant profits from their increased energy exports. All countries are reacting to events in Ukraine according to their “national interest.” Hence, pragmatism and “active neutrality” have been the watchwords: they deplore the Russian invasion but do not align themselves with the “belligerent escalation” of the protagonists and call for a rapid end to this crisis, which poses a serious threat to peace in Europe and its neighbouring areas.

The reaction of Arab media and civil societies to the Russian invasion is marked by indifference and detachment

The reaction of Arab media and civil societies to the Russian invasion is marked by indifference and detachment. A survey of 7,835 people in 14 Arab countries conducted by Arab News in May 2022 found that 18% of respondents sided with the Ukrainians, 16% sided with the Russians, but 66% were indifferent (74% in Algeria and 71% in Saudi Arabia). Of course, the Arabs sympathize with the suffering of the Ukrainians and denounce the “scorched earth” policy practised by Russia. But the media mainly highlight the negative effects of the war on Arabs, the instrumentalization of the war, the unequal treatment of Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian refugees, the inconsistency of Western countries, and above all their “double standards” policy. This is the most recurrent criticism of the West. In this respect, the Ukrainian issue has been a revealing one.

5 Arab News, 3 May 2022.
On the one hand, the West, in rare unanimity, condemns the Russian invasion, imposes “packages” of sanctions on Russia, militarily and financially supports the “heroic resistance” of the Ukrainians, welcomes its refugees with open arms, and even the Russians who want to escape mobilization as well. But on the other hand, this same West has been turning a blind eye to Israel’s occupation-annexation of Arab and Palestinian territories since 1967, even protecting it at Security Council votes, supporting it diplomatically, militarily and financially, and criminalizing the Palestinian Boycott (BDS) movement. Arab media recall that the US has used its veto power 42 times to protect Israel since 1980 and continues to oppose any prosecution of the State of Israel at the International Criminal Court in the Hague.

EU countries are no less inconsistent. In the latest UN General Assembly vote on 11 November 2022 requesting an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice concerning Israeli practices affecting the human rights of the Palestinian people in the Occupied Palestinian Territory including East Jerusalem, nine European countries voted against, eleven abstained and seven voted in favour of the resolution.6

The war in Ukraine has brought down the masks. This shows the urgency of going beyond a “Eurocentric” reading of the war in Ukraine and taking into account the points of view of the countries of the South, in particular the Arab and Mediterranean countries.

References


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6 Against: Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania and Romania; abstained: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Latvia, Netherlands, Slovakia, Spain and Sweden; in favour Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal and Slovenia. www.ijc-cij.org/public/files/case-related/186/186-20230120-PRE-01-00-EN.pdf.