The pitfalls of Arab-Russian dependency

Food supply chains, energy partnerships, and political outlooks make it difficult for Arab states to pick a side in the Russia-Ukraine war

Russia's military assault on Ukraine came as a shock to the Arab states, most of which maintain close economic ties with both Moscow and Kyiv. About 70 per cent of Russian and 40 per cent of Ukrainian exports of wheat, maize, and sunflower oil go to the Middle East and Africa. So as a result of the invasion and the sanctions imposed on Russia, many countries are now facing a serious food crisis. In Egypt, the price of bread is rising so sharply that the country has already asked the IMF for help – also because the Egyptian pound has plunged some 18 per cent in value against the US dollar.

The economic priorities of individual countries reveal which developments are having the greatest impact: In the Gulf monarchies, it's principally the energy market instability, while in the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, there is great concern about the lack of tourists and possible disruptions to supplies.

The media calling out double standards

Arab media is reporting extensively on the war in Ukraine, with many trying to present the positions of both Moscow and Kyiv. Major pan-Arab media – especially the London-based *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper and the Emirate's *Al-Arabiya* international broadcaster – are explicitly assessing the events, with experts commenting on Russia's violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity, and breach of international law.

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The Qatari TV channel *Al Jazeera*, which is often critical of the West, has dispatched several correspondents to Ukraine and is now addressing the new refugee movement and Western states' double standards: That Middle

them, but not to us', writes Lebanese journalist Hazem Sagie in Ash-Sharq al-Awsat.

Easterners had great difficulties entering the EU in 2015, and some states completely rejected them remains a vivid memory. 'Ukrainians are Europeans, we are not. Western countries listen to them, but not to us', writes Lebanese journalist Hazem Sagie in *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*. Some analysts compare Russia's actions in Ukraine with Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories and recall the timid European response to Israel's West Bank settlement policy.

The Arab states have not been known to take unified foreign policy positions – and have no common position on the war in Ukraine. Most exhibit noticeable restraint, except for Syria, which depends on the Kremlin. Damascus immediately hailed the independence of the 'Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics' and welcomed Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine.

An appeal for peace

On 28 February, the Arab League issued a cautious statement that doesn't even mention Russia. It describes the invasion of Ukraine as a 'crisis' that should be 'resolved diplomatically'. Many Arab governments have limited their official statements to calling for de-escalation and stressing the need for a ceasefire. This is not just due to their relations with Moscow, but shows their mistrust of the West, especially the US – which grew following the hasty withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan last year.

What is more, some Gulf leaders maintain friendly relations with President Putin. The UAE and Saudi Arabia consider it important to comply with the agreements of OPEC+, which represents OPEC members and 10 non-OPEC states, including Russia. Energy contracts are key to oil-producing countries' economic recovery. Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Iraq depend on wheat imports from Russia and Ukraine and apparently view a neutral stance as the best way to minimise repercussions on their food situation.

Yet some are openly criticising the Kremlin's actions. On 24 February, Lebanon's Foreign Affairs Ministry condemned Moscow for violating Ukraine's territorial integrity and called on Russia 'to immediately stop military operations'. A few days later, the Libyan Foreign Minister also accused Russia of violating international law by invading Ukraine. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are seeking to mediate between the warring parties,

with their foreign ministers regularly calling their counterparts in Moscow and Kyiv. However, the only promising platform for a possible peace agreement is negotiations in Istanbul.

Increasing European interest

Since the war broke out, Middle Eastern countries are being courted by the EU as it searches to replace Russian energy. On 20 March, German Vice Chancellor and Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Protection Robert Habeck travelled to Qatar to negotiate a long-term economic partnership and liquefied natural gas (LNG) for Germany.

However, Qatar's Energy Minister Saad bin Sharid al-Kaabi had stated in advance that his country could not immediately replace Russia's gas exports to the EU. Although Qatar became the world's largest LNG producer last year, most of its production is destined for Asian customers under long-term contracts. Qatari authorities say that in the short term, only 10 to 15 per cent of the country's LNG can be diverted to Europe – after approval by their Asian importers. Qatar is planning to invest $30bn to double its production capacities. But that will take until 2025.

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Libya and Algeria could also be alternative sources of oil and gas for the EU. Algeria is already one of the five largest LNG producers for the European market. But there, too, big investments are needed to increase production capacity. And then there's the annoying fact that Germany has no dedicated LNG terminals. After Russia invaded Ukraine, the German government decided to build facilities in Brunsbüttel and Wilhelmshaven. But they won't come on stream until 2026 at the soonest.

Russian leaders are distracted from other foreign policy areas by the possible failure of their war on Ukraine. This includes Syria, where Russian troop activities have recently noticeably declined, for example air strikes in the border area with Iraq, where IS remnants are still operating. UN Security Council Resolution 2585 allows for delivering humanitarian aid for northwestern Syria through Turkey. But as relations deteriorate with the West, Moscow might veto its extension. That would seriously exacerbate Syria's humanitarian disaster – on top of the current disruptions to Russian food supplies. Weakening Russian influence might embolden Turkey to make further inroads into northern Syria. Stay tuned: The war in Ukraine may well trigger chain reactions throughout the region.



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