

Russia uses Middle Eastern ties to mitigate isolation

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Middle Eastern states' ambivalent take on the Ukraine war has mitigated the effects of Russia's international isolation

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad plans to visit Moscow in mid-March to ask for additional assistance, the Vedomosti newspaper reported yesterday. Syria has been Russia's central 'project' in the Middle East for more than a decade, but Moscow uses diplomatic and trade connections with many other regional states to sidestep its international isolation. They are mostly ambivalent about Russia's war in Ukraine but reluctant to make a definitive choice between Moscow and Western powers.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (L) with UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan at a Gulf Cooperation Council meeting, Riyadh, June 2022 (Russian Foreign Ministry Press Service/AP/Shutterstock)

What next

Countries across the region will continue to engage with Russia on trade and diplomacy. One key partnership, with Iran, will grow stronger, with implications for the war effort in Ukraine but without Moscow letting this undermine its engagement with Gulf states. The other paramount partner is Syria, where Russia will encourage 'normalisation' with the Arab world and maintain its own strategic position on the ground.

Subsidiary Impacts

- Western efforts to isolate Russia will be hampered by Russia's Middle Eastern connections.
- US relations with Middle Eastern allies will be complicated by the mismatch in their views of the Ukraine war.
- Russian tourism and wheat supplies are central to economic ties with Egypt.

Analysis

After Russia invaded Ukraine a year ago, Middle Eastern states reacted in a range of ways, but generally with caution.

Even US allies and partners in the region largely refrained from criticising the Kremlin directly.

Voting symbolism

Only two -- Kuwait and Turkey -- supported the UN Security Council resolution condemning the Russian invasion on February 25, 2022. Several abstained, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which held a rotating Security Council seat.

The majority condemned Russia at the UN General Assembly on March 2 and again on October 12 (the vote on Russia's annexations in Ukraine). However, most -- including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, Qatar, Kuwait and Iraq -- abstained from the UN vote in April to suspend Russia's membership of the UN Human Rights Council.

Beyond this voting inconsistency, the invasion of Ukraine highlighted the difference of views between Western countries and their regional allies and partners, as well as frustrations with the United States.

Arab states may have voted against Russia but they did not join sanctions

Arab states did not sign up to Western sanctions against Russia. Nor did the Saudi-led OPEC+ group

support Western efforts to isolate the Kremlin by increasing oil production to cut prices. The Saudi-led output decision in October was the latest example of this trend.

Turkey, having close ties with Ukraine as well as Russia, pursued a careful balancing act. In the early days of the war, Ankara closed the Turkish Straits to Russian naval vessels (except those returning to home ports) and asked external states not to seek permission to send warships into the Black Sea. At the same time, Ankara sold unarmed aerial vehicles to Ukraine. Then it facilitated Ukrainian grain exports by brokering the Black Sea grain initiative.

Strategic relationships

Moscow's approach to regional partners in the Middle East varies according to conditions and opportunities.

Saudi Arabia, and the UAE too, have maintained good relations with Moscow and not succumbed to pressure to condemn the invasion.

The Saudi-Russian partnership in managing global oil price levels in the OPEC+ grouping is one reason why Riyadh values the relationship; another is reciprocation for Putin's refusal to join other G20 leaders in shunning Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman after the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

The UAE offers Russia a hub for legitimate and under-the-radar trade (see [RUSSIA: Moscow seeks friends' help to evade sanctions - December 2, 2022](#)).

In Libya, it combines efforts to use international diplomacy to present itself as a neutral influence with partisan support for the forces of eastern commander Khalifa Haftar (see [LIBYA: Washington will push against Russia in Libya - January 19, 2023](#)).

In Egypt, Russian connections are just as deep but are constrained by the government's need to heed US concerns and maintain neutrality on the Ukraine war (see [EGYPT: Egypt will aim to balance Russia and the West - November 24, 2022](#)).

Algeria maintains especially close military cooperation with Russia. In late 2022, the Algerian navy joined Russian warships for joint exercises in the Mediterranean, and Algeria also took part in the Vostok-2022 ground exercises in September.

A contract to buy advanced Russian combat jets and other weapons worth USD12-17bn was due to be signed during a December 2022 visit to Moscow by Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune. However, the trip has been postponed until May, in a possible reflection of Algerian caution about aligning too closely with Russia (see [ALGERIA: Algiers will diversify energy and other ties - February 7, 2023](#)).

Middle Eastern states are still receptive to Russian diplomatic visits. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has visited Algeria, Egypt, Jordan and Iraq. Last July, Tehran was the destination for Putin's first trip outside the former Soviet Union since the invasion of Ukraine.

Ever-expanding ties with Iran

In Iran, Putin met Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and held a three-way summit on Syria with President Ibrahim Raisi and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (see [RUSSIA/IRAN: Putin seeks solidarity in Tehran talks - July 19, 2022](#)).

Khamenei effectively repeated Putin's justification for invading Ukraine, saying that otherwise "the other side" would have started the war.

Relations between these two sanctioned states had been improving anyway, but the war took them to another level. Iran has supported Russia more than any other state, by supplying unarmed aerial vehicles that serve as an inexpensive supplement to Moscow's destructive power in Ukraine (see [RUSSIA/IRAN: Arms sales rebalance lopsided relations - December 8, 2022](#)).

In return, Russia is becoming more generous about giving Iran advanced weapons. In the past, Tehran's inability to pay was as much a constraint as Western sanctions. Now Iran has reportedly contracted to buy 24 of Russia's advanced Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets, although this was a somewhat accidental acquisition as the consignment represents an order placed and then cancelled by Egypt.

US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby warned in November that the "unprecedented level of military and technical support" offered by Moscow was "transforming the relationship".

Relations are also expanding on other fronts:

- integration of banking systems to get round both countries' exclusion from international financial systems;
- space cooperation, as Russia launched an Iranian satellite in August;
- sales of Iranian cars in Russia, though in modest numbers; and
- accelerated work on a north-south transport route from the Baltic Sea to the Indian Ocean (see [RUSSIA/IRAN: North-south rail route nears completion - December 1, 2022](#)).

No change on Syria

Despite the distraction created by the Ukraine war, Russia has retained its military and political focus on Syria.

The effort costs Russia little, and currently consists of helping Assad navigate his relations with Turkey and Gulf states towards 'normalisation', and also managing Iranian ambitions.

Moscow is the guiding hand in steering Damascus towards
'normalisation'

To that end, Moscow hosted a meeting between the Turkish and Syrian defence ministers and intelligence chiefs in December (see [SYRIA/TURKEY: Rapprochement faces many obstacles - January 27, 2023](#)).

In January, Moscow supported a UN Security Council resolution to extend arrangements for cross-border humanitarian aid entering Syria. The earthquake in early February adds to Russia's diplomatic power on the Security Council to trade aid access for sanctions relaxation and rehabilitation of the Assad administration.

Alongside diplomatic moves, Russia continued to exercise military power in Syria.

It reportedly withdrew an S-300 air defence system and a squadron of attack jets for use in the Ukraine war, but still carried out combat sorties, including strikes on local Syrian allies of the US-led coalition. These stopped short of direct confrontation but prompted the commander of US Air Force Central Command, Lieutenant-General Alex Grynkewich, to say in September that "The Russian presence in Syria has become, I would argue, more aggressive since the Ukrainian invasion".