



**Analysis of the Relations between Major Middle Eastern Regional
Actors and Russia in the Context of the Russia-Ukraine War**

Simon Gureshidze

PhD in Humanitarian Science, History

Research assistant at G. Tsereteli Institute of

Oriental Studies of Ilia State University Address: G. Tsereteli 3.

+9995 595-56-61-23. Simon.gureshidze@iliauni.edu.ge

ORCID: 0000-0002-9545-8238

Abstract

The war in Ukraine, started by the Russian Federation on February 24, 2022, has had a significant geopolitical impact on the Middle East region, where states' foreign policy is traditionally based on the principles of balance and power equilibrium. This article aims to analyze the attitudes and behavior of Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt towards Russia in the period after the start of the war. The analysis shows that these countries adhered to a double game tactic - on the one hand, they maintained a strategic partnership with the US and the West, and on the other hand, they did not sever economic and energy relations with Russia. Israel tried to maintain neutrality due to security interests related to Iran; Saudi Arabia and the Emirates continued to cooperate with Russia in the

OPEC+ format; and Egypt maintained cooperation with Rosatom in the field of nuclear energy. Considering the reality of 2025, the policy of the region's states is still based on a pragmatic balance, but Russia's influence has noticeably decreased - against the background of Iran's strengthening, Western sanctions, and China's economic activity. As a result, the Middle East has transformed into a multipolar space, where Russia's role is no longer perceived as the only, but decisive factor.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine war, Middle East, Israel, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Egypt, energy, foreign policy, strategic balance.

Contents

The article reviews the foreign policy positions of the Middle Eastern states - Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt - and their relations with the Russian Federation as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The war, which began on February 24, 2022, created new challenges in the region, where countries traditionally try to maintain a balance between the West and the East. The study shows that each state had its own motivation for maintaining a bilateral policy. Israel distanced itself from openly condemning Russia due to security calculations related to Iran, as Russia controlled Syrian airspace, where Israel operated against Iranian military facilities. Saudi Arabia, despite its partnership with the United States, maintained cooperation with Russia in the OPEC+ format and continued economic relations in the field of energy resources. The United Arab Emirates refrained from making sharp statements and partially became a haven for Russian capital, while Egypt, against the background

of the economic crisis and grain deficit, maintained relations with the Russian "Rosatom" in the nuclear energy project.

Methodology

In order to discuss the issue once again and to answer the questions raised, reliable and time-verified materials processed by analytical centers, published in open sources and leading media outlets were used, and based on their confrontation and comparative analysis, the main contours of a more or less accurate picture of the issue raised in the article were outlined. The study is based on official statements, diplomatic initiatives, and trends in economic cooperation.

Results

The study found that the Russia-Ukraine war, which began in 2022, did not lead to unambiguous positions in the foreign policy of the Middle Eastern states. The states in the region have chosen a policy of foreign balance and flexible pragmatism as a common strategy, which is reflected in the fact that none of them fully supported Russia's isolation, but neither did they openly support it.

In the case of Israel, a clear military-diplomatic caution was revealed: the country maintained cooperation with Russia in the Syrian direction in order not to lose operational freedom when acting against Iran. At the same time, Israel refrained from supplying defensive weapons to Ukraine, but still maintained political solidarity with the West. This indicates that Israel's security policy is largely governed by realpolitik calculations and is less subject to ideological factors.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates demonstrated classic energy pragmatism: they did not stop cooperating with Russia in the OPEC+ format, thereby ensuring the stability of oil prices and the growth of their own revenues. At the same time, both states tried to maintain relations with the West and at the same time not lose

security guarantees that are critical to them. This tactic shows that in countries dependent on energy resources, economic interests dominate political solidarity.

Egypt, against the background of the economic crisis and the food crisis, maintained cooperation with Russia in the field of nuclear energy, which reflects the country's dependence on external sources of funding. As a result, Egypt is trying to find an economic compromise between Western and Russian partnerships in order to avoid full dependence on one of the blocs.

In summary, it can be said that the states of the region use the Russian factor as an instrument of diplomatic maneuvering, through which they try to strengthen their positions in relations with both the US and China. Taking into account the data for 2023–2025, Russia's influence in the region has decreased relatively, while China's political and economic role has increased, especially in the direction of energy and trade cooperation. As a result, a new structure is being formed in which Russia is no longer a central actor in the political architecture of the Middle East. The region is gradually moving towards a multipolar power system, where states pursue their interests independently and with a logic more oriented towards economic benefits than ideological foundations.

Discussion

The military actions started by the Russian Federation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, were preceded by certain opinions in expert and analyst circles that this step taken by Russia would threaten European unity. Given that a number of EU and NATO member countries had trade, energy security, political, and military (Turkey in Syria) agreements and obligations with the Russian Federation, there were not unfounded opinions that, in the conflict started in Ukraine, speaking out against Russia would create a rift among NATO member

countries, as well as between the organization itself and the United States. However, today the world has witnessed unprecedented Western unity and assistance towards Ukraine. That is why I consider it interesting and necessary to analyze the reactions and activities of the Middle Eastern countries, how monolithic the countries of the region can be in their relations with Russia, and what reasons they have for their actions.

Israel. On March 5, 2022, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett (13/072021-30/06/2022) unexpectedly visited Moscow and tried to play the role of a mediator in the war started by Russia in Ukraine 3 weeks before this visit. Bennett's visit was preceded by two phone calls with Vladimir Putin and six with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The Israeli Prime Minister also explained his attempt with a moral obligation, and to emphasize the importance of his step, he visited the Russian President on Saturday, the day when conservative Jews do not travel unless a vital problem needs to be solved. The Ukrainian side welcomed Israel's activity positively and expressed some hopes, and some experts called Bennett's step a "positive shift". (1) However, it is also noteworthy that a few days before the mentioned visit, the Ukrainian ambassador to Israel, Yevgen Kornichuk, stated at a media conference that Israel was "afraid" of Russia. He called on Israel to hand over helmets and bulletproof vests to Ukraine, instead of blankets, medicines and other 100 tons of humanitarian aid, which that country provided to Ukraine that month. (2) Ultimately, the mediation initiated by the Israeli Prime Minister turned out to be unsuccessful for the de-escalation of the conflict. In addition to the fact that the Russian side was not going to abandon its goal at the beginning of the war, nor later, a number of indicators accompanied such a development of events. That is why I consider it necessary to once again review the preconditions that took

place before the March 5 visit. The war started by Russia in Ukraine on February 24 became a very serious challenge for Israel's foreign policy, since it has different kinds of relations with the parties indirectly involved in the conflict: the West (namely the United States), Ukraine, Russia, each of which in turn determines to some extent the attitude and rules of the game of this country with the rest of the actors in the region.

Diplomatic relations between Israel and Ukraine were established 31 years ago. Both countries are home to numerous Jewish communities (immigrated from Ukraine to Israel), in 2019 Ukraine became one of the 9 countries that signed a free trade agreement with Israel, and in 2021 the Ukrainian Minister of Defense visited Israel, during which they discussed the possibility of Ukraine purchasing the "Iron Dome" air defense system, anti-missile and cyber security systems. Although the US also supported this initiative, the agreement could not be reached. The mentioned result was not unexpected in the expert and analytical circles interested in the issue, because it is known that if Israel refrained from modernizing Ukraine's defense systems, Russia would limit the sale of weapons to Iran in return. In 2019, an advisor to former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed that Russia had canceled the agreement to sell missiles to Iran, to which Israel responded in the same way, namely, it twice promised not to sell weapons to Ukraine and also forbade Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to supply this country with weapons purchased from Israel. In 2014, Israel met the occupation of Crimea with silence, moreover, the delegation of this country did not attend the session of the United Nations General Assembly, during which a resolution to discuss the occupation of Crimea was voted on. Israel's restrained action towards the Ukrainian problem is again related to Iran and remains one of the main problems. It is known that in the

last 5 years, Israel, through coordination and agreement with the Russian side, has carried out air strikes on Iranian military facilities in Syria. Given that the Syrian airspace was mainly controlled by the Russian military, the Israeli side feared that if they acted in favor of Ukraine, Russia would stop the aforementioned cooperation with them. Regarding this fact, it is also interesting that on September 17, 2022, a former Russian diplomat, who was also the head of the Russia-Arab States Friendship Association, (3) Vyacheslav Matuzov, stated in Arabic on the Saudi Arabian-based television "Al-Hadath" that: the widespread opinion regarding the strikes carried out by Israel in Syria, that it was a coordinated action between the Israeli and Russian military leaderships, was not true. In order to dispel this issue, he went even further and cited the following unrealistic and subjective reasoning as proof of his statement: According to Matuzov's statement, the main factor in Russia's foreign policy today is the war in Ukraine. "This war is not being waged against Ukrainians and the Ukrainian army. The numerous military forces of the entire Western states are involved in the conflict, including Israel. We know very well what relations Zelensky and Israel, Defense Minister Reznikov, have. They are all of Jewish origin. Almost the entire leadership of Ukraine has Israeli passports: Zelensky, Prime Minister Shmyhal, Defense Minister Reznikov, the head of the Security Service. Therefore, it can be said that tension is going on between Russia and Israel," Matuzov said. (4)

Based on the aforementioned statement, one thing is clear: the prolonged Israeli airstrikes in Syria increasingly embarrassed the Russian Federation in the eyes of the Arab world and a certain part of the Iranian side. Along with all of the above, it should also be noted that Iran was involved in negotiations related to its nuclear program, in which the world's leading states, along with Russia, are part-

icipating. Russia also shares Israel's caution regarding the threat of Iran's non-peaceful use of nuclear potential and, for this reason, opposes the sale of strategic weapons to this state, which automatically led to the refusal to sell C-400 anti-aircraft systems. As for the internal political situation in Israel, since the 1990s, about one million Jewish emigrants from the former Soviet Union have arrived in this country, including, as mentioned above, 500,000 Ukrainian Jews and 400,000 Russian Jews, who together make up 12% of the voters. However, it is also worth noting the fact that in the 2020 elections, Netanyahu tried to attract "Russian votes" by playing on his connection with Putin, which ultimately did not have a significant result. (5) It should also be said that Israel's restrained position has also been criticized by some intellectual circles within the country. According to Emanuel Navon, a lecturer in international relations at Tel Aviv University, by pursuing such a policy, Israel was increasingly at risk of becoming one of "Putin's useful idiots." Sooner or later, their country would have to share the positions of its European and American allies and more clearly condemn Russia's actions. Also, according to him, Israel could make its modest contribution to the diversification of Europe's energy resources, supply natural gas and free it from dependence on Russia. It is also noteworthy that in February 2022, during a visit to Ukraine, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, upon his return, expressed his readiness to purchase natural gas from Israel and to facilitate the supply of this energy resource to Europe. (6)

Saudi Arabia. On February 18, 2022, the chairman of the International Committee of the Russian State Duma, Leonid Slutsky, stated that the Russian side welcomed the principled position of the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, regarding the forthcoming dialogue, which, according to the Prince, should be held not only between the Gulf countries, but also with all

players in the region. "This politically wise and diplomacy-based approach is the cornerstone of our initiatives, which also includes Russia's concept in the Gulf collective security issue," Slutsky said, and also positively assessed Riyadh's readiness to continue negotiations with Tehran. (7)

In addition to the above, Bin Salman's relations with the United States and Russia have a rather multifaceted and diverse history. According to a report published by the US Central Intelligence Agency in 2018, it was the direct intervention of the Crown Prince that lured Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Ahmad Khashoggi to the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul, which was followed by killing of Khashoggi. The publication of the mentioned report was carried out with the consent of President Joe Biden, but he no longer supported the UN-initiated investigation of this case. In addition to Khashoggi, a former Saudi intelligence officer, Saad al-Jabri, had filed a lawsuit in court, claiming that the prince was also planning to kill him. It is also known that the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia needs more help and support from the US due to the ongoing war in Yemen and the kingdom's development of a nuclear program. At one time, according to the first message of US President Joe Biden related to foreign policy, ending the war in Yemen was one of the main goals of his administration. In addition, the F-15, Tornado-type aircraft and Apache-series helicopters in the Saudi Arabian military air park are entirely dependent on the services of American and British technicians and spare parts supplied from these countries, which in turn was a peculiar lever of pressure on Bin Salman for the US President. David Hearst, co-founder and editor-in-chief of The Middle East Eye, not without reason noted that Joe Biden's assumption of the presidency caused changes in the foreign policy of the two Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which was reflected in the

lifting of the blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia and the investments made by the Emirates in Turkey. In addition, at a trade forum held in August 2021, Saudi Arabia signed a military cooperation agreement with Sergei Shoigu, the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation and close to President Vladimir Putin (Russian Minister of Defense 06/11/2012).

In addition, from February to March 2022, a member of the Saudi Arabian royal family, billionaire Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, invested \$500 million in Russian companies. The Prince's company acquired a \$365 million stake in Gazprom, invested \$52 million in Rosneft, and \$109 million in Lukoil. (8)

On September 21, 2022, it also became known that a large-scale exchange of prisoners took place between Russia and Ukraine through the mediation of Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Russia released 215 Ukrainian prisoners, including 5 commanders of the "Azovstal" defenders in Mariupol, in exchange for 55 people. A source close to Middle East Eye stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin personally asked his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to help release Viktor Medvedchuk, a Ukrainian politician and oligarch close to Putin. A month later, after meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Lviv, the Ukrainian President agreed to Erdogan's exchange of Medvedchuk for 200 Ukrainian prisoners.

Saudi Arabia participated in the release of foreign fighters, including Moroccan Brahim Saadoun and British Aiden Aslin, who were sentenced to death by the court of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic. Finally, along with the aforementioned individuals, British citizens John Harding and Shaun Pinner were also released, and the identities of two other released Britons were unknown at the time. Slightly later, British ex-Prime Minister Liz Truss (06/09/2022-25/10 /2022) thanked the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia for his parti-

cipation in the release of 5 British citizens captured in eastern Ukraine. (9)

United Arab Emirates. The Emirates have been sending mixed messages regarding Russia since that country invaded Ukraine. The Emirates supported the resolution passed by the United Nations General Assembly on the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine, but abstained from voting on the document drafted by the same Security Council on the issue. In addition, after February 24, 2022, Abu Dhabi largely replaced London in the issue of asset investment for Russian oligarchs sanctioned by the West, and the interest of Russian capital contributors in the Emirates was still high as of March of the same year. It is also noteworthy that none of the Gulf countries were interested in the fall in oil prices and were not going to give up the huge revenues received from petrodollars, which is why the Russian war was a profitable game for both Gulf countries (the Emirates and Saudi Arabia) to gain economic benefits. At that time, one of the challenges facing the Joe Biden administration was reaching an agreement with the United Arab Emirates on oil production issues, the aforementioned circumstance created a significant barrier for the White House to persuade the latter not to help Russia evade sanctions. (10)

Egypt. After the war started in Ukraine, the country faced unprecedented food inflation for the first time since the 2011 "Arab Spring". Three weeks after the start of the war, the price of grain in Egypt increased by 44% overnight, as the country had only 4 months' supply of this product left, and Egypt was completely dependent on Ukrainian grain, which could not be quickly replaced. At the same time, investors left the country's developing market due to instability, which automatically led to a decrease in the purchase of Egyptian government debt by investors. According to economist Amduh al-

Wali, due to all of the above, the country found itself in a double-edged, political and economic trap. It was the Russian-Ukrainian war that caused a \$3 billion outflow from Egypt a week after the invasion of Ukraine. Al-Wali explained that regardless of whether the war in Ukraine continued or stopped, Egypt's national debt would increase along with the US interest rate due to the outflow of investors.

It is also interesting to note another circumstance, which shows how much and in what areas cooperation with the Russian Federation remains. Despite the fact that the country is still considered a strategic partner of the United States in the region, (11) in 2015 Egypt and Russia signed an agreement according to which a 4,800 megawatt nuclear power plant with 4 nuclear reactors should be built in Dabaa, 130 kilometers from Cairo, the project cost is 30 billion dollars. The agreement also stipulates that the nuclear power plant must be supplied with fuel by the Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation Rosatom for the duration of its existence, and that operation and maintenance must also be carried out by the Russian side for 10 years. It is also worth noting the following circumstance: despite the fact that South Korea joined the economic pressure campaign on Russia implemented by the Joe Biden administration, ceased operations with the Russian Central Bank and funds, and banned the export of strategic materials to this country, it also became known on September 1, 2022, that South Korea would provide the turbines for the mentioned plant, for the implementation of which the South Korean state agency for hydro and nuclear energy signed a \$2.25 billion agreement with Rosatom. At a press conference held in Seoul on August 25, 2022, Choi Sang-mok, Senior Secretary to the President of South Korea for Economic Affairs, stated that the Dabaa nuclear power plant is his country's largest project export since 2009, when his country built the Barakah nuclear power plant in the United Arab Emirates. (12)

It should also be noted that Rosatom's projects did not end with the prospect of building a nuclear power plant in the region, and as of September 16, 2022, Rosatom signed a \$9.1 billion loan agreement with Gazprombank (which still had access to the international payment system SWIFT) for the construction and development of the Turkish Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant. In September, Rosatom publicshed an agreement already signed on August 3, according to which: \$7 billion will be used for the construction and subsequent operation of a nuclear power plant on the Akkuyu territory, which includes the provision of 4 reactors. \$1.6 billion will be used for the development of uranium deposits in Kazakhstan and the extraction of this element, and \$500 million will be spent on lithium mining costs. (13)

summarizing the processed factual materials, it can be concluded that the countries discussed in the article on the Middle East region are followers of the double game tactic. These states maintain a format of strategic cooperation with the United States, but at the same time try not to break ties with the Russian Federation. Such steps of theirs, in addition to the circumstances described in the article, are also caused by the fact that in the countries under consideration, with the exception of Israel, the established style of governance is far from the Western understanding of the democratic model and the fundamental values that human rights represent. Accordingly, maintaining relations with countries such as Russia and China is not only profitable but also attractive for these countries. At the same time, manipulation through relations with such countries gives the countries under consideration the opportunity to have additional leverage in relation to Western partners. However, it should also be noted that in 2022, the double game tactic of the Middle Eastern countries was initially perceived as benefit-based pragmatism, but by 2025 it had become a more calculated "strategic balance policy." The Russia-Ukraine war

and, in parallel, the Israel-Hamas conflict clearly showed that none of the region's states are ready to become a firm ally of one camp. Nevertheless, Russia is gradually losing influence in the region: relations with Israel have weakened, cooperation with Egypt is limited only to the energy level, and Saudi Arabia and the Emirates have come more under the influence of China.

Accordingly, it can be said that Russia's role in the Middle East by 2025 has diminished in terms of both political mediation and economic partnership—its place has been partially taken by China. Therefore, despite successful and unsuccessful mediation attempts, the prospects for resolving conflicts (not only in Ukraine) without active Western intervention now and in the foreseeable future seem quite unpredictable and vague.

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