

Arabs and the Silent Support for Russia

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The Arab attitude towards the Russian special military operation in Ukraine is considered a departure from the trends that usually govern Arab politics, which have generally been supportive of the United States. This is due to the fact that a number of Arab countries are historically U.S. strategic allies. It is also one of the unique situations that have witnessed an Arab consensus, without pre-coordination in this regard among Arab countries. Disagreements have always plagued efforts to formulate unified Arab policies. In the case of the Russian operation, every Arab country has taken its attitude in accordance with its national interests, and so it all has led to a common Arab position that is underscored by an understanding of Russian motives.

Arab countries realize that there is an American proxy war in Ukraine to drain Russia and curtail its international and regional influence.

It is quite obvious who is pouring fuel on the fire and escalating the conflict's intensity through the huge supply of weapons, logistic and

intelligence support, and the direct participation of experts and fighters. In fact, Russia stands up not only against Ukraine but the U.S., all NATO countries and their partners, including Australia, Canada, and Japan.

While Syria is the only Arab nation to have openly declared its support for Russia amid the on-going crisis, many other Arab nations have indicated support without announcing it publicly. However, Arab policies have been the most eloquent expression of it. The UAE's decision to abstain from a U.S.-led resolution to condemn Russia's operation in Ukraine at the UN Security Council on February 26 was considered tacit support for Russia. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have played an important role in the exchange of prisoners between Russia and both Ukraine and the United States, including Russian citizen Victor Bout, who spent ten years in a U.S. maximum-security prison.

Despite intense American pressure on the Arab countries, like the rest of the world, the Arab countries have not engaged in Western sanctions. They have maintained "positive neutrality" that allows them to develop their cooperation with Russia. All the Arab-Russian cooperation programs as well as trade have continued according to predetermined timetables. For instance, Egypt and Russia have poured concrete for the first and second units of the Egyptian nuclear power plant in Dabaa, in July and November, respectively. The Egyptian and Russian navies carried out the Friendship Bridge-5 joint naval exercise in the Mediterranean in December 2022.

Arab countries have welcomed Russian officials. Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov has been welcomed by many Arab nations, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and Algeria. He also delivered a speech at the Arab League on July 24, 2022. Russian President Vladimir Putin sent a message of greetings to the 31st Arab Summit held in Algiers on November 1, 2022. The UAE's President, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, visited Moscow in October 2022. Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has announced an upcoming visit to Russia. Arab officials have also participated widely and actively in all economic, military, and cultural forums Russia has held over the past ten months.

Furthermore, Arab engagement in the international organizations led by Russia has increased, enhancing security and economic cooperation between Russia and the Arab world. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have signed memorandums of understanding for their accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as Dialogue Partners. The BRICS Development Bank has admitted both Egypt and the UAE as members. Many Arab countries, including Algeria and Egypt, are seeking full membership in BRICS. Egypt has announced that it will list the Russian ruble among currencies used in Egypt, adopt Russia's Mir electronic card payment system and link it with Egypt's domestic Meeza card network. The doubling of the flights between Egypt and Russia is indicative of the growing human and economic interaction between the two countries.

There are several considerations that govern the Arab stance. The first is the common interests with Russia. In addition to the Arab countries' lengthy history of cooperation with Russia as a reliable partner during the Soviet era, Moscow has been able to develop strong bases of joint cooperation in many vital development fields with Arab countries over the last two decades, most notably OPEC+. Riyadh has confirmed that its policy within the framework of OPEC+, which has rejected American pressure to increase oil production, is governed by the national interests of all member states and not by support for Russia, even if the decision has practically led to that.

Secondly, it is the exposure of American policies and the decline in confidence in Washington as a trusted ally, especially with regard to the Gulf countries. It seems that tension looms in relations between the Biden administration and Riyadh. Biden has vowed to isolate Saudi Arabia and make it a "pariah state." Moreover, the Gulf countries believe there has been an American retreat from its commitment to Gulf security. Washington moved a number of its warships from the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain to the Seventh Fleet in the Pacific Ocean. The U.S. has frozen arms deals with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, declared itself ready to readmit the Iranian nuclear deal and open up to the Houthis



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regardless of Saudi interests. The Saudis and Emiratis are frustrated over the U.S. response to Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi.

Above all, the Arab world remembers the American hand in devastating many Arab countries, especially Iraq, under the pretexts and slogans of democracy and human rights. Arabs in Yemen, Syria, and Libya continue to suffer from the chaos and deterioration in economic and social conditions left by what Washington called the “Arab Spring revolutions.”

Thirdly, the stance of the Global South against the U.S. has encouraged the Arab countries to follow the same path. India is a good model for that. Despite its close partnership with Washington, New Delhi has pursued an independent policy that has served its national interests. It has rejected U.S. pressures to condemn Russia and to adopt U.S. sanctions. Instead, it has strengthened its cooperation with Russia in various fields.

Despite Washington’s plans, the Ukraine crisis has led to the deepening of cooperation between Russia and the Arab world, as the latter has chosen to further its constructive partnership with Moscow. The Arab world has matured and become more aware of its interests, and more able to distinguish between friend and enemy in a multipolar world where there is no one arrogant dominant power.