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MEDIATION OF THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL MEMBERS IN THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

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The Gulf Cooperation Council has played a nuanced role in the geopolitical landscape shaped by the Russian-Ukrainian war since its escalation in February 2022. This report analyses the GCC's peace initiatives, examining the motivations, strategies, and implications of their actions in the context of international relations.

Introduction

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine started in February 2022, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, comprising Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have consistently voted positively on UN resolutions that condemn Russia's invasion, occupation, and annexation of Ukrainian territory¹. Furthermore, the GCC states have maintained their positions calling for adherence to the established principles of international law and the United Nations Charter² that govern relations between states and the global system, based on respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, non-interference in their internal affairs, and respect for good-neighbourly relations between Russia and Ukraine.

However, considering the Gulf countries' foreign policies and economic relationships, most scholars³ believe that the GCC members have varying positions on the Russia-Ukrainian war, while conducting a balancing act between Russia and Western countries. While Saudi Arabia and the UAE maintain strong economic ties with Russia, Kuwait and Qatar condemn the country's violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity. Oman and Bahrain still keep their positions neutral.

The GCC's varying stances towards the Russia-Ukraine war differ geopolitically, economically, and strategically. While avoiding confrontation with Russia, the GCC states have managed to maintain their traditional Western alliances and economic engagements. This balancing act underscores the region's strategic importance, and the

1 UN General Documentation, <https://research.un.org/en/docs/ga/voting>

2 *GCC Countries Voice Deep Concern over Continuance of Russian-Ukrainian Crisis*, Qatar News Agency, 27.02.2022, <https://www.qna.org.qa/en/News-Area/News/2024-02/27/0036-gcc-countries-voice-deep-concern-over-continuance-of-russian-ukrainian-crisis>

3 G. Cafiero, *Two years on, what does the Ukraine war mean for the Middle East?*, The News Arabs, 5.03.2024, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/two-years-what-ukraine-war-means-middle-east>

Careful diplomacy required in the current geopolitical climate, especially during the largest war in Europe since the Second World War. Most of these GCC members maintain a cautious stance, to avoid the deterioration of relations with Russia. Consequently, each of those countries has its vision of how this war should be ended, and with which compromises between the warring countries. Several GCC members have already taken an initiative of mediation in the Russian-Ukrainian negotiations, having held Russia-Ukrainian face-to-face meetings, and participated in exchanges of civilians and military prisoners.



The GCC's varying stances towards the Russia-Ukraine war differ geopolitically, economically, and strategically

Several GCC states have emphasised humanitarian support and diplomatic engagement, and have represented themselves as active mediators. While Qatar has successfully mediated primarily in the reunification of Ukrainian children who were illegally deported to Russia with their families, as well as the reunification of Russian children with their families, Saudi Arabia held a meeting in Jeddah in 2023 regarding the situation in Ukraine⁴. In

addition to this, the United Arab Emirates has considerably contributed to the exchange of prisoners between Russia and Ukraine, having mediated the most significant (in numerical terms) exchange⁵ of soldiers and civilians (230 people) since February 2022.

About a hundred countries and organisations participated in the Summit on Peace in Ukraine⁶, held in Switzerland on 15-16 June 2024. Most participants were represented on either presidential or ministerial levels, while Russia was not invited. The summit ended with the expression of the support of approximately 80 countries for Ukraine's territorial integrity, and ongoing work on a comprehensive and lasting peace in Ukraine. The Joint Communiqué on a Peace Framework⁷ signed by the participating countries and organisations, demonstrates a joint vision on three key points: securing the nuclear power plants in Ukraine, global food security, and prisoner exchange.

Despite being present at the summit, India, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Indonesia, South Africa, Thailand, and Brazil (attending the summit as an observer) did not sign the declaration. However, those countries which did not participate or did not sign the joint communiqué are able to do it later. Thus far, only Qatar and Somalia⁸ have signed this declaration, while eight Arab countries (Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Somalia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) attended the summit.

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- 4 *انطلاق اجتماع جدة بشأن أوكرانيا بغياب روسيا وهكذا يراه زيلينسكي (Meeting in Jeddah starts with Russia absence, and that is how it is seen by Zelenskyy)*, Al Jazeera News, 5.08.2023, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2023/8/5/مباحثات-جدة-حول-روسيا-اوكرانيا/5>
 - 5 I. Vock, *Ukraine and Russia in 'biggest prisoner swap' so far*, BBC News, 3.01.2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67872417>
 - 6 *Summit on Peace in Ukraine*, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, 17.06.2024, <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/fdfa/fdfa/aktuell/dossiers/konferenz-zum-frieden-ukraine.html>
 - 7 *Joint Communiqué on a Peace Framework*, Office of the President of Ukraine, 16.06.2024, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/spilne-komyunike-pro-osnovi-miru-91581>
 - 8 *Summit on Peace in Ukraine: Joint Communiqué on a Peace Framework*, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, 16.06.2024, <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/fdfa/fdfa/aktuell/dossiers/konferenz-zum-frieden-ukraine/Summit-on-Peace-in-ukraine-joint-communicue-on-a-peace-framework.html>


Qatar's Perspectives

Qatar's foreign policy⁹ is based on principles of strengthening international peace and security by encouraging the peaceful resolution of international disputes. Therefore, Qatar aims to mediate in disputes between conflicting parties, in order to achieve peaceful resolutions, promote sustainable development, alleviate discrimination against women and religious minorities, bolster humanitarian assistance in regions of conflict and war, as well as to support and strengthen efforts to reduce the anticipated humanitarian needs in complex emergencies.

Due to Qatar's foreign policy strategy, Doha, known for its mediation and conflict resolution skills, is one of the key mediators in humanitarian catastrophes, like Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the war in Gaza. According to the initiative Qatar Vision 2030¹⁰, the country's mediation efforts might be made to improve the humanitarian situation for those affected by the war, providing humanitarian and medical help for injured people. Thus far, Qatar and Kuwait are the only GCC members who have voted for the condemnation of human rights violations in Crimea, a temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine. Being a vital ally of the West, and a significant natural gas supplier, especially after sanctions were imposed on Russia's natural resources, and being a GCC state that increased its new gas output¹¹, Qatar condemned the invasion, aligning

more closely with Western positions, while promoting diplomatic solutions.

Qatar has been playing a crucial role in the mediation process between Ukraine and Russia, as it is the first country, besides the international organisations, that managed to bring about the return of Ukrainian children kidnapped by Russia since February 2022. Doha has successfully mediated in more than six exchanges between the two countries, offering an integrated programme to provide 20 Ukrainian and Russian families, who arrived in Doha, with health care and comprehensive support (medical, psychological, and social) in April 2024.



Qatar aims to mediate in disputes between conflicting parties, in order to achieve peaceful resolutions, promote sustainable development, alleviate discrimination against women and religious minorities, bolster humanitarian assistance in regions of conflict and war

Qatar's enormous efforts have primarily concentrated on humanitarian mediation, which led to the first face-to-face negotiations on children exchange between Ukraine and Russia, held in Qatar in April 2024¹². During the visit of Ukraine's Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets, Ukraine passed on to Qatar a

9 *Foreign Policy*, Government Communication Office of State of Qatar, <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/focus/foreign-policy-en/>

10 *National Vision 2030*, Qatari National Planning Council, July 2008, <https://www.psa.gov.qa/en/qnv1/Pages/default.aspx>

11 *Qatar announces new gas output boost with mega field expansion*, Al Jazeera News, 25.02.2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/25/qatar-announces-new-gas-output-boost-with-mega-field-expansion>

12 Asmahan Qarjoui, *Russia announces deal to exchange children with Ukraine following Qatar's mediation*, Doha News, 25.04.2024, <https://dohanews.co/russia-announces-deal-to-exchange-children-with-ukraine-following-qatars-mediation/>

list of 561 Ukrainian children illegally deported to Russia¹³. Due to the ongoing mediation of the humanitarian aspects between the two warring countries, Qatar has gained credibility from the international community as one of the leading mediators between Ukraine and Russia.



Saudi Arabia's geopolitical strategy is based on striking a balance between the major global powers, including the United States, Russia, and China

Doha has actively engaged in international forums and organisations to support peaceful resolutions on Ukraine since 2022. Qatar has participated in multilateral discussions and peacebuilding initiatives (Qatari-Saudi Coordination Council, Ukraine Recovery Conference¹⁴, Summit on Peace in Ukraine), emphasising the importance of dialogue and conflict prevention. As of now, Qatar is the only country of the GCC that has signed the joint declaration of the Summit on Peace in Ukraine, where HE Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani¹⁵ represented his country.

Saudi Arabia's Perspectives

Saudi Arabia's geopolitical strategy is based on striking a balance between the major global powers, including the United States, Russia, and China. The Russian-

Ukrainian war began in February 2022 and has significantly changed the regional and global geopolitics. Saudi Arabia's stance on the conflict is crucial for understanding the broader implications of the war, since the country is a major player in the Middle East and a leading oil producer in the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Saudi Arabia's position is of significant geopolitical interest, given its strategic importance in global energy markets, historical alliances, and evolving foreign policy. The Kingdom has maintained a balanced diplomatic position on the Russian-Ukrainian war, while Riyadh has often highlighted the importance of dialogue and negotiation in resolving the conflict between the countries, and has condemned Russia's 'special military operation' on Ukrainian territory in 2022 via UN General Assembly voting. Being a participant in the Ukraine Peace Summit at a ministerial level, Saudi Arabia did not sign the joint declaration.

From an economic point of view, since February 2022, Saudi Arabia has been trying to maintain a collaborative relationship with Russia, both countries being members of OPEC+, which hosts major oil-producing countries. The cartel aims to manage oil production levels to stabilise the market. Despite the war, Saudi Arabia and Russia have continued to collaborate on oil production decisions, reflecting a pragmatic approach to their economic interests.

Prior to participating in the Peace Summit, Riyadh put forward peace initiatives to

13 K. Hodunova, *Ukraine passes list of 561 Ukrainian children held in Russia to Qatar, ombudsman says*, The Kyiv Independent, 25.04.2024, <https://kyivindependent.com/ukraine-passes-list-of-561-ukrainian-children-held-in-russia-to-qatar/>

14 *Qatar Participates in Ukraine Recovery Conference in Berlin*, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 11.06.2024, <https://mofa.gov.qa/en/qatar/latest-articles/latest-news/details/2024/06/11/qatar-participates-in-ukraine-recovery-conference-in-berlin>

15 *Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Participates in High-Level Conference on Peace in Ukraine*, Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 15.06.2024, <https://mofa.gov.qa/en/qatar/latest-articles/latest-news/details/2024/06/15/prime-minister-and-minister-of-foreign-affairs-participates-in-high-level-conference-on-peace-in-ukraine>

reach a consensus between the belligerent countries in direct and indirect ways. As a result, showing its mediation attempts and positioning itself as a possible mediator in the war, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia held a conference devoted to the war in Ukraine in Jeddah in August 2023, where more than 40 countries (without Russia) discussed possible solutions to end the security, humanitarian, and economic crises in Ukraine. This meeting aimed to contribute to reaching a solution that will result in permanent peace in Ukraine. Although this conference did not bring about progress in decreasing Russian-Ukrainian tensions, the Kingdom managed to leverage its regional influence and international partnerships to support diplomatic initiatives for resolving the war. The Jeddah initiative also demonstrates Saudi Arabia's potential to be a neutral mediator between various groups of countries.



Since the very beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, the UAE, known for its foreign policy based on national interests, diplomatic agility, and economic pragmatism, has taken a balanced neutral position

In September 2022, Saudi Arabia mediated¹⁶ an exchange of ten foreigners held captive in Russia (five British, one Moroccan, one Swede, one Croatian, and two Americans), who were taken from Ukrainian territory after the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Initially, those people were transferred to Saudi Arabia and then to their home countries. Most probably, due to holding peaceful negotiations as a mediator to

achieve peace in Ukraine and the successful exchange of foreigners, Saudi Arabia was trying to strengthen its political position on both regional and global levels, which gave Riyadh the chance to restore strained relations with its Western allies.

UAE's Perspectives

Since the very beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, the UAE, known for its foreign policy based on national interests, diplomatic agility, and economic pragmatism, has taken a balanced neutral position, with a calculated approach to the conflict. On 2 March, 2022, the UAE abstained¹⁷ from voting on the UN General Assembly resolution that condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but demanded an immediate withdrawal of Russian forces. This abstention highlights the UAE's cautious approach, striving to avoid alienating Russia, while signalling its support for international law and sovereignty principles. Also, during the meeting of the UN Security Council on the war in Ukraine, the United Arab Emirates abstained from voting on a resolution to condemn Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. Then, on the same day, the UAE Ambassador did not mention Russia as the aggressor in her speech. Yet, the UAE has not signed the declaration suggested in the Summit on Peace in June 2024, like Saudi Arabia.

Notwithstanding several cases of abstention in voting at the UN, the UAE has often called for de-escalation and a diplomatic and negotiated solution to the war, at international conferences and meetings. Abu Dhabi's approach gambles on mediation between the belligerents. The United Arab Emirates has also contributed significantly to the exchange of civilians and soldier prisoners between Russia and

16 *Саудівський принц про обмін полоненими: наші мотиви були гуманними*, BBC News Україна, 23.09.2024, <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-63013052>

17 United Nations General Assembly, <https://undocs.org/A/ES-11/L.1>


Ukraine, having mediated three exchanges. On 3 January 2024, the UAE mediated the exchange of 230 Ukrainians, which is the biggest number of POWs returned home since the invasion. On the other hand, it has close relations with Russia, including being a safe-haven for Russian business. However, unlike some GCC members, the UAE has not mediated face-to-face negotiations between the countries or held meetings aimed at peace initiatives.

The sanctions imposed on Russia led to Europe's energy war, which is more beneficial to the UAE than other GCC states. Firstly, apart from increasing the export of oil to Europe from countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, it is likely that the UAE will continue boosting its export of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Europe¹⁸. Secondly, once the war began in 2022, approximately 500,000¹⁹ Russians, wealthy and high-qualified people, including billionaires, moved to reside in the UAE, where the majority of them bought real estate, established companies, and enhanced supplies of Russian commodities, due to sanctions imposed by the EU, the UK, and the USA. Considering that the Russian diaspora has rocketed by more than 10 times (40,000 Russians lived in UAE in 2021²⁰), Abu Dhabi has significantly benefited from the inflow of Russian money.

Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain's Perspectives

Despite joining the majority of Arab countries in voting for the UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia's occupation, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain

have neither arranged peace initiatives in the Russian-Ukrainian war nor mediated negotiations and exchanges. However, Bahrain participated in the Peace Summit in Switzerland in 2024.



Despite joining the majority of Arab countries in voting for the UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia's occupation, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain have neither arranged peace initiatives in the Russian-Ukrainian war nor mediated negotiations and exchanges

Kuwait's stance on the war diverges from Oman's and Bahrain's. Among those GCC members, who are less involved in the Russian-Ukrainian negotiation process, Kuwait seems to have maintained a fairly consistent stance in favour of Ukraine, most probably because of Iraq's violation of its space and occupation of Kuwait in 1990-1991. On the very first day of Russia's invasion, Kuwait clearly called for the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine,²¹ and has been continuously voting for UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia's occupation of Ukraine's territories. Along with Qatar, Kuwait has supported several resolutions for the condemnation of human rights violations in Crimea. Kuwait's stance in the UN highlights its commitment to international law and collective security.

Bahrain, under the leadership of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, has maintained a

18 Nishant Ugal, *Abu Dhabi: Adnoc kicks off chase for giant LNG export terminal*, Upstream, 27.10.2021, <https://www.upstreamonline.com/lng/abu-dhabi-adnoc-kicks-off-chase-for-giant-lng-export-terminal/2-1-1086002>

19 Frank Kane, *The hopes – and insecurities – of Russian exiles in Dubai*, Arabian Gulf Business Insight, 6.10.2023, <https://www.agbi.com/opinion/people-lifestyle/2023/10/the-hopes-and-insecurities-of-russian-exiles-in-dubai/>

20 *Demographics of the United Arab Emirates*, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_the_United_Arab_Emirates

21 *Kuwait calls for respecting Ukraine's independence, sovereignty*, Kuwait News Agency, 24.02.2022, <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=3027315&language=en>

foreign policy that emphasises diplomacy, stability, and regional cooperation. Bahrain's approach to international conflicts has traditionally been characterised by its efforts to promote dialogue and peaceful resolution. While Bahrain's direct diplomatic influence on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict may be limited, its participation in the Peace Summit is noticeable among the other four GCC members.

Regarding Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Bahrain has not sided with either of the belligerents, trying to balance its position. However, the United States is Bahrain's key security partner. This fact could slightly impact the voting in the UN General Assembly's resolutions on Ukraine during the two and a half years since the invasion. Diana Galeeva²² believes that Bahrain will continue being neutral in the Russian-Ukrainian war, despite the country's support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, as Bahrain's politicians think that Moscow is a key political and commercial partner (trade, energy, and other sectors). Concerns over the Russian-Ukrainian war have not been considered an impediment to that relationship.

Being the 'Switzerland of the Middle East'²³ and staying neutral in most international conflicts, Oman is able to maintain positive relations with Russia, China, and other Arab countries. The same neutral approach has been chosen for Oman's foreign policy based on its national interests, notwithstanding its voting in favour of a UN resolution that condemned Russia's aggression. Oman's diplomatic efforts demonstrate the strategic

advantage of neutrality in international relations. By maintaining balanced relations with the conflicting parties, Oman has been able to facilitate dialogue and mediate disputes, enhancing its global diplomatic standing; however, Oman has not directly demonstrated its peace initiatives in the Russian-Ukrainian war by hosting international meetings or chairing mediated negotiations and exchanges. While Oman's direct influence on the cessation of hostilities has been limited, its diplomatic efforts have contributed to maintaining open channels for negotiation. Unlike Kuwait and Bahrain²⁴, Oman has not even sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine since the war began. In fact, this is the only GCC country that has not been engaged in humanitarian aid supplies to Ukraine.

Conclusion

The GCC's involvement in peace initiatives related to the Russian-Ukrainian war reflects the strategic use of diplomacy, economic leverage, and communications, to foster stability and maintain its global influence. By balancing its relations with Ukraine and Russia, the GCC has positioned itself as a key player in diplomacy, leveraging its economic and political clout, to mediate conflicts and promote peace.

The GCC states have adeptly balanced their foreign policy and economic interests amidst the conflict. By maintaining strong ties with both their Western allies and Russia, they have protected their strategic interests, while advocating for peace and stability. This balancing act is particularly

22 *Gulf States' Perspectives on the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict*, Gulf International Forum, <https://gulfif.org/gulf-states-perspectives-on-the-russo-ukrainian-conflict/>

23 *Switzerland of the Middle East: Economic crisis threatens Oman's neutrality*, Financial Times, 18.10.2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/2fac87cf-3ed4-4d3e-9ee9-280734d323f9>

24 *Bahrain pledges \$1 million to help humanitarian meet needs of civilian refugees*, Bahrain News Agency, 6.03.2022, <https://www.bna.bh/en/news?cms=q8FmFJgiscL2fwlZON1%2BDvvrzC9SEeyT7AzLIBI2tyHQ%3D>

crucial, given the region's economic reliance on both Western and Russian partnerships in various sectors, notably that of energy.

Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have generally been actively involved in international and regional peace initiatives, and attempted mediation between Russia and Ukraine. While all the GCC members have voted in favour of Ukraine in the majority of the UN resolutions, several countries (Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman) should be more interested in participating in peace negotiations between the belligerent countries.



The GCC states have adeptly balanced their foreign policy and economic interests amidst the conflict

Qatar represents itself as a mediator capable of holding meetings and negotiations between European and Middle Eastern countries. Qatar's foreign policy tools and strategies strengthen its position in geopolitics globally, which might be confirmed by it being the first country to mediate the return of Ukrainian children taken back to the occupied territory from Russia.

Saudi Arabia has shown its interest in peace initiatives by hosting the Jeddah meeting in 2023. This meeting could probably have had the aim of strengthening Saudi Arabia's relations with Western countries, and its position in international politics, as well as the mediation of returning ten foreigners held in captivity in Russia.

The UAE has also engaged in diplomatic efforts, using its strategic dialogues with Russia to address broader regional issues. For instance, the UAE's coordination with Russia on oil production cuts has provided a platform for broader diplomatic discussions, including prisoner exchanges between Ukraine and Russia. As of now, the UAE remains the only country globally that is able to mediate exchanges of hundreds of civilians and military prisoners fairly often, having succeeded in fostering the biggest exchange between countries.

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