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COMMUNICATING VESSELS: How does the war in Ukraine affect the Middle East and North Africa?

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After Europe, the Middle East and North Africa will be the region most affected by the war in Ukraine. The clearest and most immediate impact will be on energy and cereal prices. But other factors are worth observing, such as the diplomatic battle and the negotiations over the Iranian nuclear programme and its impact on the conflict dynamics throughout the region and beyond. One by one, we will look at how these insecurities interconnect.

Let's start with the effects of the war in Ukraine. The risks of Russian retaliation against the European Union and its members and potential energy supply problems strengthen the positions of countries that produce oil, like Saudi Arabia, and gas, such as Qatar and Algeria. In the short term this will provide an injection of unforeseen financial resources to these governments, delaying the necessary debate over the obsolescence of the rentier system. Diplomatically, the game is more subtle. Whereas it provides an opportunity for these countries to strengthen relations with the West, they will try this not to come at the expenses of their relations with Russia, a fellow producer country. The balance is tricky, as it is a decision that seems fairly binary: production will either be increased or it won't. In the medium term, other countries will emerge as potential suppliers to the EU, either through new pipelines or by developing renewable energies. Meanwhile, other countries will seek to position themselves in this field, including Israel (reviving the discussion over the Eastern Mediterranean gas pipeline), Egypt and Morocco (both of which have committed to conventional renewables and are investing in green hydrogen).

As well as the main energy-exporting region, the Arab countries also stand out as major importers of food and particularly cereals, the prices of which are often subsidised. Russia and Ukraine are key suppliers to most countries in the region. By volume, Egypt will be among the hardest hit, as Russia and Ukraine account for 45% and 24% of its cereal imports, respectively. Indeed, the situation was already very fragile, with the FAO warning for months that food prices are at their highest levels for a decade – comparable only to the rise in 2010. That precedent is significant, as elevated food costs played a major role in unleashing the wave of unrest that shook Arab countries in 2010 and 2011. The severe droughts

affecting several of the region's countries, including Iraq and Iran, do not help either. Energy price rises will only exacerbate the problem, increasing transport and fertiliser prices too. Not all of the region's countries will be equally able to withstand disruptions in the global food market, due to their differing levels of food dependency or budgetary headroom. The most vulnerable include those immersed in pre-existing economic crises like Tunisia and, above all, Lebanon. And then there are those who have been enduring humanitarian crises for years. Yemen, with 16 million people facing food insecurity and five million on the brink of famine, is the most dramatic case.

A key question is how the war in Ukraine will affect Russian military and paramilitary deployments in several African and Middle Eastern countries. For the European Union, Russia is not only its neighbour to the east, but also (to an extent) to the south, given its military presence in Syria, Libya, Mali and the Central African Republic.

More or less discreetly, a diplomatic battle is also being waged in the Middle East and North Africa. Which countries are speaking out about Russian aggression and how strongly? How do they vote at the United Nations Security Council or General Assembly? Will they opt to be "deeply concerned" or are they prepared to take some sort of action to collectively pressure Russia? Few reacted swiftly and forcefully. Russian aggression was condemned by Kuwait (which retains clear memories of invasion by its neighbour, Iraq), Lebanon (which has also suffered aggression and occupation by its neighbours, Syria and Israel) and Libya (where Russia has supported Khalifa Haftar). Meanwhile Bashar al-Assad's Syria expressed support. In contrast, most countries in the region seek as little involvement as possible. They do not want to set themselves against Russia or jeopardise cooperation with it in critical areas such as intelligence, civil nuclear power and arms contracts. They thus recognise Russia to be a major player in the region. However, in a speech to the European Parliament on March 1st, High Representative Josep Borrell said that no one should look the other way and that he would seek to build an international coalition to condemn the aggression at the UN General Assembly, warning that those who do not stand by "our side" will be remembered. Some of the most revealing acts of diplomatic contortionism have been performed by countries that define themselves as partners of the West: the United Arab Emirates, one of the few countries that abstained in the United Nations Security Council vote on February 25th, but which, like the other Gulf countries, supported the resolution condemning the Russian aggression in the General Assembly on March 2nd; and Israel, which voted in favour but which is keeping all channels open with Moscow. In the Maghreb, Algeria's abstention was not surprising, unlike Morocco's absence from the vote.

Turkey deserves individual consideration. Although a regional power in the Middle East, its role in this crisis derives from its membership of NATO and as a riparian country of the Black Sea. Neither Turkey nor Erdoğan wanted to oppose Putin, but they cannot be neutral. It is a position that requires delicate balances to be reached, such as applying the Montreux Convention of 1936 to close the straits to warships, while at the same time deciding to keep its airspace open. Ankara will look to exploit any gap to reiterate its offer to mediate. But if that hope is lost, it will have to position itself with its allies while at the same time trying to minimise the rift with Moscow in order to suffer as few reprisals as possible. The economic sanctions against Turkey, the personal attacks on Erdoğan and the geopolitical manoeuvring in Syria that followed the shooting down of a Russian plane in 2015 remain very present in the minds of Turkish leaders and diplomats. On another level, Turkey will seek to highlight the contribution its Bayraktar TB2 drones are making to the resilience of Ukrainian forces. Not only in order to justify not taking more drastic measures against Moscow, but also to seek new buyers for its emerging military industry.

In Syria, and especially in Libya, European countries have given a shameless display of disunity. The Kremlin may have expected these differences to reduce the potency of the EU's response to its aggression against Ukraine. Noticeable differences between Turkey and its Western partners were also worth exploiting to weaken the Atlantic Alliance.

A key question is how the war in Ukraine will affect Russian military and paramilitary deployments in several African and Middle Eastern countries. For the European Union, Russia is not only its neighbour to the east, but also (to an extent) to the south, given its military presence in Syria, Libya, Mali and the Central African Republic. If the war in Ukraine escalates, these troops could be brought home, including mercenaries from private military companies. The closing of the straits could also affect some operations, especially in Syria, where Russia operates the Tartus naval base. However, the Kremlin may choose to open up new fronts of destabilisation if it believes that will improve its negotiating position with the Europeans or contribute to at least weakening or distracting them. It wouldn't be the first time.

Doubts also persist over what impact this crisis will have on the negotiations over the Iranian nuclear programme taking place in Vienna, in which Russia participates alongside the other permanent members of the Security Council, Germany, the EU and the Iranians themselves. Will all these actors be able to move forward on the negotiations, regardless of any escalation by their respective capitals? Concluding an agreement

that is acceptable to all parties has become increasingly important. With ongoing international conflict – including nuclear threats – and oil prices skyrocketing, maintaining calm around the Strait of Hormuz is vital.

The war in Ukraine will have lasting effects on the MENA region, as it will on the whole world. It will set precedents about what is acceptable, about whether the law of the jungle is to prevail, and about the normalisation of war, including inter-state warfare, as a means of achieving political ends. These precedents are particularly significant to the Middle East and North Africa, whose past and present are marked by high levels of violence, intervention and occupation. This crisis is also breaking out at a time when several countries' threats to resort to inter-state warfare if necessary have increased. Israel's threats against Iran are the most obvious example but, albeit in a more nuanced way, so are the verbal escalations between Algeria and Morocco and between Egypt and Ethiopia.

Another largely overlooked variable must be thrown in: the extent to which the European, American and Russian positioning on the many conflicts in the Middle East, North Africa and beyond (Afghanistan, Sahel, Central Asia) have emboldened Vladimir Putin to launch the military operation on Ukraine. Much has been said about the impact of the disastrous evacuation of Kabul, but too little about the violation of the red lines set by the United States on the use of chemical weapons in Syria and, above all, about the impunity with which Russian air power has massacred Syria's civilian population. The decisive contribution it made to Al-Assad's survival must have bolstered Putin's faith in the strength of his military capabilities and, above all, in Western countries' fear of entering into conflict. Syria has been the testing ground for the war crimes Ukraine is now suffering. Another underestimated factor is the Kremlin's fear of contagion from the democratic protests that began in Arab countries in 2011. Putin was keen to introduce measures to further repress its own dissident voices and gladly joined the counterrevolutionary camp in the region.

In Syria, and especially in Libya, European countries have given a shameless display of disunity. The Kremlin may have expected these differences to reduce the potency of the EU's response to its aggression against Ukraine. Noticeable differences between Turkey and its Western partners were also worth exploiting to weaken the Atlantic Alliance. Finally, the panic with which Europeans have reacted since 2015 to the arrivals of refugees and migrants may well have sent the message that millions of Ukrainian refugees would frighten the EU.

The effects of the war in Ukraine on the countries of the Middle East and North Africa and the lessons the Kremlin learned from the conflicts that have ravaged the region underscore that Europe's security and that of its southern neighbours are communicating vessels. This also indicates that the impact of the Russian aggression and the war in Ukraine will be much deeper and longer lasting than higher oil prices.