

The War in Ukraine and the MENA Countries

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On the 24 February 2022, Russia-Belarus invaded Ukraine, sending a shockwave all around the world. The countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) found themselves unprepared to deal with this new development. For some of them, Russia supports their own political cause making it difficult to make an open condemnation of the invasion. In addition, many MENA countries depend on Russia and Ukraine for their food supplies, i.e., wheat. However, the majority of countries from the Middle East used the occasion of the 11th United Nations (UN) Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly to denounce the invasion. This paper looks at the MENA countries' stance in the UN and role in the Russian-Belarus invasion of Ukraine. A general conclusion which emerges from this discussion is that the MENA's political stance very much depend on their own analogous historical experiences with wars and invasions. However, most importantly, their stance depends on their current alliance with Russia and/or their current relations with the USA. The latter is the most important determinant of their role in the conflict.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, Belarus MENA, Syria, Turkey, Israel, war, energy, food, wheat, international relations

Introduction

Is the Russian-Belarus¹ invasion of Ukraine undermining the international order that emerged after the 2nd World War?² Definitely not. Is this the first time that a sovereign country member of the United Nations invades another sovereign country, also a member of the UN? Definitely not. Is this the first time this has happened in Europe after the 2nd World War? Definitely not. On the contrary, Turkey—a European country—invaded another European country, that of Cyprus, in 1974 and still today occupies 40% of its territory. In 1992 and 1999, NATO bombed Bosnia and Serbia respectively. The world's reactions were different and what really makes a huge difference this time is the threat of an escalation which will force all countries to take sides. This is definitely the case with the MENA countries which is the focus of this paper.

In Papanikos (2000), I described an international economic order of three blocks: American, Asian, and European. The current war in Ukraine does not reject my analysis. In Papanikos (2005), I edited a collection of essays of research on global affairs, which looked at the international order, including a chapter on Russia's policy towards Ukraine (Kaloudis 2005). The conclusion is that these

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¹I include Belarus as well because it is part of the invasion. As a matter of fact, the UN declaration condemned both Russia and Belarus.

²In a series of papers, I have examined this issue both from an international perspective Papanikos 2022a, 2022b) and from a strictly Greek perspective (Papanikos 2022c, 2022d).

issues were considered very important for global security, but nobody expected that a war would be the solution.

A common characteristic was the dominance of one country in each block: USA, Japan and Germany. Twenty years after, Japan has been overtaken by China. This is to be expected, but it is quite possible that, by 2050, China will be overtaken by India. However, as I have argued in a series of papers concerning the Ukrainian War (see fn. 2 above), the USA not only dominates its own region/ continent, but leads the rest of the world as well. Russia and China are not in a position to threaten the hegemony of the US. The international order will continue to be shaped by the US's strategic interests; the most important of which are its own economic interests. The US can dominate by acting alone. However, many countries willingly or unwillingly align themselves with the strategic global interests of the US. The Ukrainian War is not an exception. In the conclusions of Papanikos (2022b), I briefly mentioned how the world reacted to the Ukrainian War by geographical areas. The aim of this paper is to look at one of these areas, namely the MENA countries.

This study looks at the stance of the MENA countries on the war in Ukraine. I do emphasize the voting behaviour in the UN; both their rhetoric and their actions thereafter of selected countries. It seems to me that their stance stands out as examples of ambiguous foreign policy actions, primarily because they have strategic and economic difficulties in choosing sides. Of particular interests are countries like Israel and Turkey. These two countries have had a more direct role in the conflict by offering their services to mediate between the two fighting sides. This role, which historically is not unique, explains the two countries' stance: verbally condemning the invasion at the UN level, but refraining from taking any action such as imposing sanctions. These issues are examined below.

Including this introduction, the paper is organized into five sections. The following sections select a few points made by the UN resolution and relates them to Turkey's and Israel's past violations of international law and UN Charter. The third section discusses in some detail the voting behaviour of the MENA countries during the UN General Assembly meeting on 2 March 2022. The fourth section looks at the EU-MENA relations and how these are affected by the Ukrainian War. The last section concludes.

The United Nations' Role

The United Nations (UN) plays a very limited role in settling international disputes, even in cases that there is no direct involvement of the permanent members of the Security Council. Thus, it did not come as surprise that the Security Council failed to condemn Russia's invasion given the veto power of Russia. However, the issue was discussed in the General Assembly which met for the 11th time in an emergency special session on 1 March 2022. In total, 141 countries followed the US in condemning the Russian-Belarus invasion of Ukraine, 35 abstained and 5 were against. This shows that the US is an indisputable leader in world affairs, but not with unlimited power.

The main purpose of this paper is to briefly discuss how the MENA countries voted in the UN resolution. This issue is taken up in the next section of the paper. In the remainder of this section, I discuss some important issues mentioned in the UN declaration of the “Aggression Against Ukraine”, which relates very much to the issue of the MENA’s countries positions vis-à-vis the Russian-Belarus invasion.

The UN declaration recognizes that this invasion is a joint action by both Russia and Belarus. In the declaration, it is clearly stated that the General Assembly of the UN, “*Deplores* the involvement of Belarus in this unlawful use of force against Ukraine, and calls upon it to abide by its international obligations.” Therefore, it is legitimate to use the term “Russian-Belarus Invasion” of Ukraine, as I did in all my previous papers on this issue.

In the UN declaration there are many points made which, if they are assumed that they are applied in the rest of the world, will have a direct effect on the MENA countries’ historical past.

It is claimed that the UN is “*Reaffirming* that no territorial acquisition resulting from the threat or use of force shall be recognized as legal.” It is of interest to note here that two countries which voted in favor of this statement and offered their kind services to mitigate and end the conflict –Turkey and Israel— have been historical violators of this principle. Both countries occupy lands by the use of force, and despite the various UN resolutions, do not oblige to their international responsibilities which as the UN declaration states, “*Bearing in mind* the importance of maintaining and strengthening international peace founded upon freedom, equality, justice and respect for human rights and of developing friendly relations among nations irrespective of their political, economic and social systems or the levels of their development.”

Now both countries ask Russia not to use force to acquire territories. Russia could have replied by asking these two countries to give up territories which were obtained by the use of force. As a matter of fact, the Russian foreign minister did make a link with Turkey’s territorial invasion and occupation of 40% of Cyprus by the use of force. And they are right. Both invasions and occupations have been justified using exactly the same rhetoric and in violation of International Law and the UN Charter. Why then is Turkey so against the Russian-Belarus invasion?

Relative to the issues discussed in this paper are the impacts of the conflict on food and energy supply.³ In the words of the UN declaration, “*Expressing concern* also about the potential impact of the conflict on increased food insecurity globally, as Ukraine and the region are one of the world’s most important areas for grain and agricultural exports, when millions of people are facing famine or the immediate risk of famine or are experiencing severe food insecurity in several regions of the world, as well as on energy security.”

These two issues of food supply and energy are directly related to the stance that the MENA countries have taken on the Russian-Belarus invasion of Ukraine. Both issues are discussed in the next sections of the paper.

³On the latter issue and relative to the Mediterranean countries’ energy policy, see Papanikos (2017).

The MENA Countries Stance in the UN Resolution on Ukraine

The positions of each country are based on a policy brief released by The Washington Institute for Near East Policy as a *Policy Analysis* document on 2 March 2022 and the official stances of individual countries, if available, obtained from various sources.

Table 1 compares votes and percentages of all countries with the MENA countries. The resolution was sponsored by 96 countries; 4 of which were from the MENA region (see Table 2). In total, 181 countries participated in the vote out of 193 UN member states. From these, 141 countries voted in favor, 5 against (Belarus, North Korea, Eritrea, Syria and Russia), while there were 35 abstentions.

As far as the approval rate is concerned, the MENA countries' voting behaviour was similar to the voting of all UN members. Of those whom voted, 78% of the UN members approved the resolution;⁴ the same approval rate was achieved by the MENA countries. If the abstentions are included, then 74% of the MENA countries approved the resolution, which is one percentage point higher than the overall UN approval rate.

Table 1. *Voting on the UN Resolution on Ukraine (2 March 2022)*

Voting	Number of Countries	Percentage of those Voted	Percentage of the total UN Members	MENA Countries	Percentage of the MENA Voted	Percentage of the MENA Members
Approval	141	78%	73%	14	78%	74%
Against	5	3%	3%	1	6%	5%
Abstain	35	19%	18%	3	17%	16%
Absent	12	-	6%	1	-	5%
Total	193	100%	100%	19	100%	100%

Note: Percentages may not add up due to rounding.

The conclusion which emerges from Table 1 is that the voting behaviour of the MENA countries is no different from the overall vote of the UN members. This might come as a surprise given the direct interests and the historical experiences and ties of these countries. The most important interests are economic and security-defense.

Table 2 presents how the individual MENA countries voted during the emergency special session of the UN General Assembly on 2 March 2022. MENA countries may vote very similar to the world average, but the justification of their vote shows that there are differences. This explains their actions and rhetoric which were expressed during the UN meeting and the following days as the war progressed.

For example, Turkey and Israel voted in favor and cosponsored the resolution (see Table 2). However, this voting behaviour did not prevent these two countries

⁴However, the opposite is true if countries voting is weighted by their population. Then, only 36% of the world's population condemned the Russian-Belarus invasion of Ukraine. Two-thirds of the world's population either abstained or voted against the resolution.

to play a leading role in trying to bring the two sides of the conflict together, and through a peaceful dialogue, solve their differences.

Turkey and Israel used very strong language in condemning the Russian-Belarus invasion of Ukraine. According to Turkey's position in the UN, "...In today's resolution, the UN emphasizes loud and clear that it stands against egregious violations of the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political unity of fellow member states."

Turkey used the same arguments in favor of Libya, as I have explained in Papanikos (2020b). What is of interest here is that Turkey is guilty of violating international law when it invaded Cyprus in 1974. However, Turkey wants to play the role of a mediator with the hope that this will improve its relations with the neighboring countries, EU and most importantly with the US. In addition, Turkey is facing an economic crisis and next year (2023) an election is forthcoming.

Turkey's historical role,⁵ at least in the previous century, was always wait and see. It did not participate in the 1st and the 2nd World Wars when all of Europe was in flames. It appears that it wants to follow a similar line by not taking an active role in condemning Russia, even though in the UN resolution was very critical of the invasion and no action followed this rhetoric.

Turkey abstained from voting on Russia's expulsion from the Council of Europe and refrained from following the EU and US in imposing economic and other sanctions. Russia is Turkey's biggest economic partner. Turkey depends on Russia for its gas and wheat needs. It is also a great destination for Russian tourists. On the other hand, Ukraine is an important trade partner of Turkey, especially in the supply of military equipment.⁶ This explains why Turkey finds itself in a very difficult position.

Similarly, Israel strongly condemned the invasion and call for a respect of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine. At the same time, they offer their services to find a diplomatic solution; in their own words, "Given our deep ties with both sides, we are willing to contribute to the diplomatic effort if so requested, and have been trying to do so in the last couple of weeks. Israel expresses its concern for the safety of the people of Ukraine, including the numerous Israeli citizens living there and the sizable Jewish communities in the affected areas."

But as was the case with Turkey, Israel has also been condemned for exactly the same violation as Russia in international law and the UN charter. As in the case of Turkey, Israel faces many dilemmas over the Russia-Belarus invasion of Ukraine. Israel wants to maintain its good relation with Russia so that it can operate with relative freedom over the Syrian skies. In addition, both countries of the conflict have strong Jewish communities; part of which is the current President of Ukraine.

These two countries are examples, if nothing else, of the hypocrisy of the countries' stance when it comes to international affairs. The international law and the principles of the UN are accepted and used if and only if it serves the present

⁵On the role of Turkey, I have written a number of papers; see Papanikos (2020a, 2021a).

⁶The military spending issue is discussed in Papanikos (2015).

interests of the countries. This is what history teaches us starting from the father of history, Herodotus, but above all the greatest historian of all time, Thucydides.⁷

Table 2. *The MENA Countries Vote in the UN General Assembly (2 March 2022)*

	Country	Formal Vote	Justification	Stance/Tone
1	Algeria	Abstain	Dialogue	Neutral
2	Bahrain	In favor	Dialogue	Pro-USA
3	Egypt	In favor	Dialogue	Pro-USA
4	Iran	Abstain	Dialogue	Anti-USA
5	Iraq	Abstain	Dialogue	Pro-Russian
6	Israel	In favor – Cosponsored	UN Charter International Law Israeli Citizens	Pro-USA
7	Jordan	In favor	UN Charter International Law	Pro-USA
8	Kuwait	In favor – Cosponsored	UN Charter International Law	Pro-USA
9	Lebanon	In favor	UN Charter International Law	Pro-USA
10	Libya	In favor	N/A	N/A
11	Morocco	Absent	N/A	N/A
12	Oman	In favor	N/A	N/A
13	Qatar	In favor – Cosponsored	UN Charter International Law	Pro-USA
14	Saudi Arabia	In favor	N/A	N/A
15	Syria	Against		Anti-USA
16	Tunisia	In favor	Dialogue	Pro-USA
17	Turkey	In favor – Cosponsored	Very strong anti-Russian position	Pro-USA
18	United Arab Emirates	In favor	Dialogue	Pro-USA
19	Yemen	In favor	N/A	N/A

Syria's justification of its vote is of great interest. It voted against the resolution for a number of reasons. Firstly, it voted against because it wanted to reject the west's hegemony. Secondly, it voted against because Israel continues to occupy Arab lands. Thirdly, it voted against because Turkey and the US have violated the sovereignty of Syria. However, it does not say anything about Turkey's occupation of Cyprus which is similar to Israel's and Turkey's occupation of Arab and Syrian lands respectively. However, the biggest contradiction is what Turkey did to Syria –invasion and occupation—and is exactly what Russia and Belarus did to Ukraine, i.e., invasion and occupation. Thus, if someone did not know that the Syrian regime is a puppet of Russia, one would have concluded that Syria is against the resolution not so much because it favors the invasion, but because the UN did not do anything in other similar cases in the area (not to mention all of them but the ones which has an interest to them). A crystal-clear position would have been that Syria is against the resolution because it is in favor of the Russian-Belarus invasion. This is not clear from the official Syrian position. This is common to

⁷On how to use history to explain current affairs see Papanikos (2015b, 2016, 2020a, 2020c, 2020d, 2022e).

many other MENA countries' stance on the issue as is shown below. All of them use the invasion as another excuse to attack the US and the west.

Three MENA countries abstained from voting even though they have strong ties with either side of the conflict. These were Algeria, Iran and Iraq. Even though they had a common stance on the UN voting, their motivations for their voting stance however, is different as discussed below. As a general rule, one may interpret the abstaining vote as echoing divisions within the country itself.

Algeria abstained, but the language used in its position in the UN can be considered as pro-US. It called for "peaceful coexistence" and "international peace and security". Algeria's position is really surprising because of its own struggle against the French occupation which ended in 1962. However, Algeria's position can be explained albeit it is a very complicated one. Most probably, the majority of Algerians would support Russia based on historical reasons that go back to the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the recent developments have found Algeria to collaborate with NATO by participating in the last twenty years in the NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue with many other countries of the region, including Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, and Israel.

Apart from these strategic and security explanations there are strong economic reasons that Algeria could not ignore. Firstly, the invasion increased energy prices benefiting Algeria's economy because it is a large supplier of energy to Europe through pipelines to Spain and Italy. These huge increases would compensate Algeria for the dramatic decreases in energy prices due to the pandemic. However, there is a serious tradeoff. The war increased energy prices but at the same time it increased the price of staple foods. Algeria is one of the world's largest importers of wheat. All these are short-to-medium-term effects. In the long-term, if the Europe's shift to politicize its economic relations, then Algeria might be included in the list of those countries with authoritarian regimes which Europe would want to exclude from its international trade relations. All these reasons might explain why Algeria decided to abstain, and instead make a vague statement about peace and especially peaceful co-existence between Russia and the other countries which have a direct interest in the conflict which is the case with the EU.

Iran abstained, blaming the US and NATO for the invasion. It was the US that provoked the Russian invasion, Iran claimed in justifying its abstention in the UN. It nevertheless called for an immediate ceasefire and a peaceful resolution through a dialogue. Such stances are contradictory in nature. If the US is to blame for the Russian-Belarus invasion, how then will this be served by an immediate ceasefire if the Russian concerns are not met. All countries suggest a dialogue. By definition, a dialogue requires at least two parties. There is no doubt that one party is Russia. Who is going to represent the second part of the dialogue? This is not clear in many of the positions of the countries in the UN, irrespectively of how they voted. Iran is one of many such countries. Iran's stance most probably reflects internal divisions within the country and power bickering among the Office of the Supreme Leader, the Presidency, and the Revolutionary Guards. Further research based on inside information is needed to shed light on Iran's position.

To nobody's surprise, Iraq argued and voted in a similar manner as Iran. However, there is a difference. Iraq did not accuse the US and NATO as provoking

the invasion. Its justification makes no sense though. It claims that, “Iraq has decided to abstain because of our historical background in Iraq and because of our sufferings resulting from the continuing wars against our peoples.” The justification would fit a vote against the Russian-Belarus invasion because this is what broke a war and endangers further escalation in Europe and elsewhere.

Of interest are the positions of the other MENA countries as well. Lebanon issued a strong statement condemning the Russian invasion which brought a strong reaction from the Russian ambassador in Beirut. Similarly, Kuwait, the only Arab country to co-sponsor the resolution, condemned Russia.

The United Arab Emirates –the only Arab country to hold a seat in the UN Security Council—abstained from condemning the Russian-Belarus invasion at the Security Council level, but voted in favor of the resolution in the UN General Assembly meeting.

The other Arab countries like Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia (as well as Algeria examined above) depend on Russia and Ukraine for their huge wheat imports and they wanted to follow a more neutral approach despite how they voted in the UN meetings.

In concluding this section and taken into consideration the active role of some MENA countries, it is evident that Turkey and Israel have used their good relations to act as mediators in the conflict, despite the fact that both countries condemned Russia for its invasion in Ukraine. Given the dominance of the US in world affairs –as this is actually demonstrated by the overwhelming majority of supporting resolution suggested by US itself—one may infer that these two traditional and strong allies of the US, such as Turkey and Israel, would never have taken these bold initiatives without the “permission” of the US. The US never condemned Turkey or Israel either for showing such a great interest.

The second overall conclusion of the MENA countries’ stance on the issue is that, despite their stance in the UN, countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar would have been more willing to increase the supply of energy resources to Europe given the latter’s decision to disentangle it from its dependency on Russian sources. It appears that there is a strong readiness all across Europe to make a permanent shift away from its dependency on Russian energy supplies to the great satisfaction of US officials. The US has committed to supply oil and gas at an affordable and competitive price. In this context, Qatar will play a leading role. This brings the discussion into the EU-Mena relations examined in the next section.

The EU-MENA Relations

To the surprise of many, the EU’s stance on the Russian-Belarus invasion was united, and most importantly, it acted very fast in imposing economic and other sanctions. The economic sanctions are imposed not only on Russia, but Belarus as well. The measures taken by the EU are unprecedented and reveal a strong disposition to move away from its past, characterized by unwillingness and indecisions to act, resulting in endless deliberations. In the case of the Russia-

Belarus invasion, the EU acted quickly in closing its aerospace to Russian aircrafts, but most importantly the EU decided to deliver weapons to Ukraine. The EU is pushing other countries in the world to follow its example and the MENA countries are no exception.

As mentioned above, the EU countries are determined to end their dependency on Russian oil and gas. The EU is eager to restore the Iran Nuclear Deal of 2015 which Russia wanted to use it to pressure the US and EU by demanding that the sanctions will not undermine its economic and military relations with Iran. US vehemently rejected the Russian proposal. Once the deal is revived, then the EU will have another rich source of energy available to cut off its dependence on Russian energy supply. However, a deal is not an easy one, and even if it is achieved new challenges may emerge such as Russia using Iran to evade the EU- and US-imposed sanctions. It is well known that sanctions are easily imposed on paper but very difficult to enforce when it comes to effective implementation of them. In addition, Russia sells weapons to Iran and a deal is negotiated between the two countries to sell Russian warplanes and submarines. All these will affect the EU-MENA countries' relationships and not only with Iran.

The second important new development in the EU-MENA relations is the enhanced role of Turkey. Turkey has aspirations for an eventual EU entry—something that many member states reject for various reasons including political (lack of democracy⁸), economic integration and global stances on various issues including the threat on member states, and the Turkish invasion of Cyprus and its occupation of the 40% of the island's territory. Cyprus is a full member of the EU which includes the eurozone. Turkey is a member of NATO and therefore, at least on paper, is committed to defend any member country of NATO in the occasion of being attacked by any other country, which of course includes Russia.⁹ Currently NATO is deploying its military resources in countries like Bulgaria, Rumania, Hungary and Slovakia. In the unfortunate event of a NATO-Russia war, Turkey cannot play a neutral role without costs. In addition, and relevant to the EU's interests, Turkey can play an important role with Georgia which has formally applied to become a member of EU.

The next critical EU relations are with the Gulf countries. In particular, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Even though they voted in favor of the UN resolution and therefore against Russian invasion, they nevertheless

⁸The arguments of democracy have been used in the Ukrainian War as well. Many pro-US positions were based that this war is not only a war of Ukrainian versus Russia, but a war of democracy and freedom against autocracy. The notion of democracy at the theoretical level and its practical implications is discussed in Meydani (2022), Papanikos (2020e, 2022f, 2022g) and Petratos (2022).

⁹Turkey finds itself in another awkward position. Turkey is a member of NATO and in many occasions has threatened Greece with war. In such a case, NATO will find itself in the difficult position to defend a NATO member against the possible aggression of another NATO member. This might explain why the EU and the US are trying very hard to prevent such an unfortunate event. Despite the claims made in both Greece and Turkey, it is more than evident that the EU, and especially the US, has no any strategic interest to support one country against the other. Greeks blame US as being pro-Turkish while the opposite is the case with Turkey which blames the US for being pro-Greek. In the case of the EU, the situation is different because Turkey is not a member of the EU.

think they have been left out from the EU and especially from US in their security concerns. A weaker Russia will not help their anxieties of long-term security. The EU, obviously, depends on these countries if they want to decrease their dependency on Russia. On the other hand, these countries have vital economic interests with Russia because the latter co-determines energy policy and pricing as a member of OPEC+.

The last important EU relations are with Israel which refused to follow the EU in imposing sanctions on Russia and cut ties. On the contrary, Israel will come into conflict with the EU if it continues its relations with the Russian oligarchs. Another potential source of conflict will arise if the EU reaches an agreement in Vienna, then Israel will be prompted to attack Iranian nuclear installations.

Summarizing, the EU will face many difficulties with its relations with the MENA countries. These countries do not speak with one voice and their interests are so diverse and, in many cases, antithetical, which makes EU's foreign policy with the region a very difficult one. One thing is certain: the war in Ukraine did not help in improving the EU-MENA relations.

Conclusions

The general conclusion which emerges from the above discussion is that despite the fact that the MENA countries' vote in the UN which was very similar to the overall UN voting, the differences and the strategic interests of the MENA countries in the Russian-Ukraine conflict are so diverse that one cannot explain this similarity. All countries are irrelevant in how they voted and their calls for a ceasefire and instead finding a peaceful solution via the process of a dialogue. As a matter of fact, two countries of the MENA region –Turkey and Israel—have offered their services as mediators. This is despite the fact that both countries condemned Russia for its invasion.

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