
BALANCING POLICY OF THE ARAB STATES OF THE PERSIAN GULF IN THE FACE OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the determinants of the balancing policy of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf in relation to the war in Ukraine and the political and economic consequences of this policy. The main hypothesis holds that the foreign policy of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf toward the war in Ukraine is primarily a function of their relations with the USA and Russia and their own political/economic interests/gains (primarily the enhancing of their own power position in the international arena). Three research questions were posed to verify this hypothesis: 1) Why are the Arab states of the Persian Gulf pursuing a balancing policy in relation to the war in Ukraine? 2) How do US-Arab and Russian-Arab relations translate into the foreign policy strategy of the oil monarchies toward the war in Ukraine? 3) How will the balancing policies of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf affect their relations with the USA and Russia? The paper makes a reference to the theory of neorealism, thanks to which selected determinants of the policy of balancing/non-involvement in the war in Ukraine were indicated.

Key words: *War in Ukraine, Middle East, Persian Gulf, Arab States, Russia, USA*

INTRODUCTION

There are a number of relationships between war and foreign policy. According to the theory of realism, international relations are dominated by conflicts of interest, which are most often resolved by war [Morgenthau 1965; Morgenthau 1985]. War, therefore, is an instrument of foreign policy (“War is the continuation of policy with other means,” Carl von Clausewitz [Clausewitz 2010]), with states pursuing imperial interests at the expense of other states and by imposing their conditions on them. Recourse to war is also a result of the balance of power in the international arena or the position occupied by a state in the international system [Vasques, Elman 2002]. Countries that are striving for dominance must have advanced military capabilities and technologies that will allow them to engage in warfare. Last but not least, once a war breaks out, it is an important determinant of foreign policy that influences other countries, pushing them to behave in certain ways: to support, to oppose or to remain neutral/not engage with, the warring parties.

However, in recent years, the Arab States of the Persian Gulf/the Member States of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, which include Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates, have been waging/engaging in proxy wars far more frequently than in traditional wars. They were and still remain a form of competition for dominance in the Middle East (e.g. proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, or between the UAE and Qatar in Libya). This is confirmed by Stephen Walt, a representative of the school of neorealism, who emphasizes that Middle Eastern states are rational actors who compete for power in a hostile and anarchic environment, which is in a state of the permanent threat of war/upheaval/revolution [Walt 1987]. However, despite the continued operation of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf in an unstable environment, they have not chosen to become directly involved in the hostilities in Ukraine. The Arab states have taken neither the side of Russia nor the side of Ukraine (USA), perceiving this conflict as a struggle between two different visions of the world (democratic-liberal supported by Ukraine, and represented by the USA and the EU, and undemocratic and anti-liberal, represented by Russia, but also by such countries as Iran and China), for which they do not intend to suffer financial or material, let alone human losses.

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The hypothesis holds that the foreign policy of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf toward the war in Ukraine is primarily a function of their relations with the USA and Russia and their own political/economic interests/gains (primarily the enhancing of their own power position in the international arena).

To verify the above-mentioned hypothesis, the author posed three research questions:

1. Why are the Arab states of the Persian Gulf pursuing a balancing policy in relation to the war in Ukraine?
2. How do US-Arab and Russian-Arab relations translate into the foreign policy strategy of the oil monarchies toward the war in Ukraine?
3. How will the balancing policies of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf affect their relations with the USA and Russia?

The paper makes a reference to Stephen Waltz's neo-realist concept of balance of threat and the policy of balancing, which in turn is derived from the realist concept of balance of power. These concepts have proven useful in explaining the motives behind the behavior and perceptions of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf of the war in Ukraine.

THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE OIL MONARCHIES TOWARDS THE SUPERPOWERS BEFORE THE WAR IN UKRAINE

The oil monarchies of the Persian Gulf have for many years been seen as traditional allies of the USA in the Middle East. However, the war in Ukraine that started in 2022 became a catalyst in Arab-American relations and made Arab leaders realize that building an alliance based solely on one superpower is a mistake. The Persian Gulf still remains a zone of American influence, but a process of change has been underway for many years that includes China and Russia in the emerging new subregional order (*in statu nascendi*).

During Barack Obama (2009-2017) and Joe Biden (2021-) presidencies a very clear desire to limit direct American engagement in the Middle East region has been noticeable. This is due to, among other things, the shift in the focus of geopolitical competition for hegemony in the world to East Asia ("Pivot to East Asia") [Goldberg 2022]. The list of America's "failures" in its relations with the countries of the Middle East that Arab leaders have pointed to is long: the abandonment of US allies (including Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia) during the Arab Spring, the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, the withdrawal of support (especially in the form of arms sales) for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, the negotiation of a nuclear deal with Iran, the failure to respond to Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons in Syria, attempts to make Saudi Arabia an international pariah for its involvement in the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul, and much more. The war in Ukraine has moved to the top of the US foreign policy agenda and "relegated" the Middle East to a distant position. Although the American administration convinced Arab states that the Middle East region is among US foreign policy priorities, in the opinion of Arab leaders, these assertions did not correspond with American declarations [Yahya 2022]. Such an Arab perception has led to a rise in anti-American sentiment in the Middle East but was also a signal that the oil monarchies either needed to be more self-reliant in terms of security or needed to find other allies. Russia and

China have decided to take advantage of the US withdrawal in the Middle East and the growing disillusionment of Arab leaders with US foreign policy; the two countries have become open to new initiatives and cooperation with the wealthy Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

The reduction of the US presence in the Middle East has been exploited by Russia. Moscow has concluded numerous trade agreements with GCC countries (UAE), oil supply agreements (Saudi Arabia), technical and military agreements (Qatar), and agreements within OPEC+, and established a formula for trilateral consultations on Syria [Frolovskiy 2018: 83-94]. As part of the Russian-Saudi cooperation, the Kingdom Holding Company (KHC) owned by prince Alwaleed bin Talal invested USD 500 million in Russian energy companies Gazprom and Lukoil both before and during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, when sanctions were already imposed on Russia. Unfortunately, such actions make it more challenging for the West to isolate Russia and weaken European and US pressure on the aggressor. Moreover, any economic cooperation between Arab states and Russia could negatively affect the West's relations with the oil monarchies of the Persian Gulf.

The war in Ukraine also fosters closer cooperation between Arab states and China, united by their opposition to US hegemony and their desire to change the dominant liberal-democratic order. The war is an opportunity for China to draw the Arab states of the Persian Gulf away from the orbit of US influence. The balancing policy of the Arab states is an approach that may appeal to China. Arab leaders do not directly challenge the hegemony of the USA, but through the expansion of international contacts, closer economic cooperation, and making symbolic gestures in opposition to US actions (or lack thereof) in the region, they are showing their dissatisfaction with the state of Arab-US relations. At the same time, the government in Beijing asserts that foreign interventions and "external patriarchy" are the source of conflict and civil unrest in the Middle East [Mohseni-Cheraghlou, Vafei 2022: 5-34].

Arab-Chinese relations have also been developing in recent years. China remains the main importer of Saudi oil (38%) and the amount of trade between GCC countries and China in 2020 was USD 160 billion [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021]. Xi Jinping's talks with Arab leaders in recent months have concerned, among other things, the inclusion of the Belt and Road Initiative in the Arab economic diversification programs referred to as VISION 2030. Lastly, when Nancy Pelosi, US Speaker of the House of Representatives, visited Taiwan on August 2, 2022, the UAE described it as "provocative" and emphasized its support for the One China policy [Omar 2022]. The government in Beijing is also slowly escalating military cooperation with countries of the subregion. Examples of this cooperation are the sale of military unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to the United Arab Emirates and the agreement to launch a Chinese military drone production facility in Saudi Arabia.

China is also monitoring shipping lanes that are of critical importance to security in the Persian Gulf region, being aware of threats to Saudi oil shipments. To this end, in 2019, together with Iran and Russia, China conducted maritime operations exercise in the Gulf of Oman in an attempt to protect regional shipping lanes [Israsena-Pichitkanjanakul 2022: 74-97]. However, as it was emphasized before, the USA still remains the main external guarantor of the security of Arab states, as evidenced by the US military bases located in the subregion and the numerous military cooperation agreements between the USA and the GCC member states.

THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE OIL MONARCHIES TOWARDS THE SUPERPOWERS AFTER THE OUTBREAK OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

The war in Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, has reminded the world, particularly the West, that hard power remains an important foreign policy instrument, especially for authoritarian states. This is one of the main tenets of realism, which emphasizes the importance of strength and power in relations between states. Although the role of hard power in the world diminished with the end of the Cold War, it has always been one of the main foreign policy instruments for the Persian Gulf states.

Given the state of Arab-American relations before the outbreak of the war and the improvement in their countries' relations with Russia and China, Arab leaders have decided to pursue a policy of balancing between the USA and Russia. One of the main factors that have determined the choice of such a policy is the perception of the international environment by the oil monarchies, as well as the distribution of power in the international arena: the increasing dehegemonization of the USA and the growing role and importance of Russia in the Middle East and China in the world. It is hard not to notice that Arab leaders have seen the winds of change blowing in the international order, until now based on democratic and liberal principles with the dominant position of the USA. An opportunity has surfaced to offset this order due to the rise in the position and importance of authoritarian states in the world. The balancing policy of the GCC member states is a part of this global trend. The process of adaptation to the changing international situation is also one of the determinants of each country's foreign policy.

Consequently, the oil monarchies of the Persian Gulf do not reject the Russian narrative (or American narrative presented by John Mearsheimer [Mearsheimer 2014: 74-89]¹) that Russia's national security has been threatened as a result of Ukraine being dragged into the orbit of Western influence and the attempt to build a Western (NATO) bastion in Ukraine on the border with Russia. Saudi Arabia is facing a similar

¹ According to offensive realist representative John Mearsheimer "...the United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility for the crisis. The taproot of the trouble is NATO enlargement, the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrate it into the West", J. Mearsheimer, Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin, Foreign Affairs, vol. 93, no. 5 (Sep.-Oct. 2014), pp. 77-89.

situation in its war with Yemen, where the authorities in Riyadh seek to secure their country's borders and border areas from shelling by the Houthis and terrorist organizations. The situation is viewed the same way by Russia, which wants to secure its border areas: a zone that would be free of Western, particularly NATO, influence in Ukraine.

On the other hand, the oil monarchies have not responded to US President Joe Biden's call to freeze oil prices/increase oil production and exports to global markets to address the energy crisis and inflation caused by the cutoff of oil and gas supplies from Russia to Europe. The Arab states have not decided to cooperate with the USA because they acknowledged that the ultimate political profits and benefits resulting from this cooperation are not favorable to them/their relations with Russia. Moreover, Arab leaders decided not to follow all of Washington's orders [Miller 2022]. If the oil states had complied with the request of the USA, they could have weakened the impact of Russia's economic blackmail against Europe and strengthened the US and European position in the war in Ukraine. That is why the Arab states decided to decline the American appeal, thus gaining not only influence on the prices in the fuel markets but also more revenue from oil sales, so urgently needed after the pandemic that limited this revenue: the less oil supplied to the market, the higher its price. Perhaps if President Biden had decided to lift the blockade on the sale of American offensive weapons to the Saudi coalition in the Yemen Civil War, the talks about increasing oil production would have had a different outcome (transaction policy). Such a reaction by the Arab states indicates an increase in their independence from the USA and their attempts to strengthen their bargaining position with Washington (e.g. concerning enhanced security guarantees, including in the nuclear talks with Iran and a reduction in its support for its proxies in the region, permission to sell offensive weapons to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the war in Yemen, recognizing the Houthis as a terrorist organization, etc.).

However, the Arab leaders are concerned about Iran's support for Russia in the war in Ukraine. Iran has supplied Russia with medium-range missiles and combat drones. Moreover, instructors from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have been identified in Russian-occupied Crimea, where they supported Russia in operating Iranian equipment in the territory of Ukraine [Hardie 2022]. Iran has extensive experience in countering international sanctions, which could prove useful to Russia in the face of the sanctions regime imposed on it. The situation shows that the two countries, which are under sanctions, can cooperate on at least weapons and money transfers. For instance, Russia may use shell companies to hide the real sources of money, which would allow it to bypass the international financial sanctions imposed against it. This dissuades Iran from returning to the 2015 nuclear agreement, which has two consequences. On the one hand, it means the further isolation of Iran by the West, which is a severe economic blow to Tehran and clearly weakens its relations with the oil monarchies. On the other hand, it could lead to Iran's greater involve-

ment in proxy wars in the region, for example, in Yemen, Iraq, or Syria, and could potentially result in a more significant threat to the security of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. How do Russian-Iranian relations (Iran is Saudi Arabia's arch-enemy) affect Arab foreign policy toward the war in Ukraine?

As mentioned before, Arab states will engage in the war in Ukraine if it brings them concrete benefits. Saudi Arabia has taken part in mediation with Russia (10 prisoners of war captured by Russian soldiers in Ukraine were released) and has also provided USD 400 million in humanitarian aid to Ukraine. For Saudi Arabia, involvement in the war in Ukraine and being the country that can tip the scale in that war is a chance to emerge from international isolation after Riyadh was accused by the USA in 2018 of involvement in the murder of a Saudi journalist working for The Washington Post and other media. However, it seems that the oil states perceive the energy crisis as an opportunity to increase their revenues from oil/natural gas sales in their own budgets after many of them signed agreements to supply the raw materials to European/EU countries (including Germany – ZEA [Kerr 2022] and Qatar [Wintour 2022], France – ZEA [Irish 2022], and Poland – Saudi Arabia [Aramco 2022]).

Without explicitly taking sides in the war in Ukraine, the Arab states chose a strategy of balancing between the superpowers (the USA and Russia) while retaining the right to negotiate and talk with each of them. Moreover, the oil monarchies do not want to weaken Russia by supporting the USA and, conversely, do not want to weaken the USA by supporting Russia. They have ties with each of the great powers, which were once strong in the case of the USA but became weakened in recent years, or, in Russia's case, were quite weak but became stronger as a result of the Russian Federation's return to the Middle East (mainly through its involvement in the war in Syria). The table below illustrates the selected actions taken by the Arab states of the Persian Gulf in relation to the USA and Russia during the war in Ukraine. Russia is satisfied that the traditional allies of the USA have not supported the military efforts of the USA/Ukraine. A frequently repeated question is whether the policy of non-involvement of Arab states in military operations in Ukraine results from reluctance and a decrease in trust in the USA, and thus a desire to support Russia, or whether these states are "using" Russia to signal their dissatisfaction with the state of Arab-American relations? Qatar and Kuwait are those member states of the GCC that most boldly spoke out against Russia's aggression and disapproved of the attack on Ukraine at the UN. The UAE, as a member of the UN Security Council, refrained from supporting the resolution drafted by the USA which condemned the Russian invasion, explaining that supporting either side in the conflict would only lead to increased violence. A few days later, however, the country supported the UN resolution calling for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine.

The USA can either abandon its allies in the Persian Gulf, thus pushing them into the arms of Russia and China, or it can offer/implement at least some of the demands that the oil monarchies have made with regard to the war in Yemen or the American

policy toward Iran. This is certainly not the first, nor the last, crisis in the Arab-American relations.

Table 1. Selected actions of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf towards the USA/Ukraine and Russia during the war in Ukraine in 2022

Pro-American actions	Pro-Russian actions
Lack of military support for the Russian armed forces	Lack of military support for the Ukrainian armed forces
Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and UAE supported the UN resolution calling for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine (March 2, 2022)	The UAE abstained from voting in favor of the draft United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine by the UAE (February 25 and 27, 2022)
Qatar and Kuwait called for a diplomatic solution that would recognize Ukraine's territorial integrity	Lack of consent to Joe Biden's request to increase oil production (cooperation with Russia in the framework of OPEC+) Failure to join the sanctions imposed by the EU and the USA against Russia
A vote in favor of the UN resolution condemning the so-called referenda and calling for the return of the Ukrainian territories annexed by Russia (October 12, 2022)	The opposition of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf to the UN resolution suspending Russia from the Human Rights Council (April 7, 2022)
Humanitarian aid provided by the Arab states of the Persian Gulf to Ukraine	The Kingdom Holding Company (KHC) owned by Prince Alwaleed bin Talal invested USD 500 million in Russian energy companies Gazprom and Lukoil despite the sanctions imposed on Russia
Qatar provided a platform to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the annual Doha Forum	Phone calls by the Saudi Arabia and UAE leaders to Vladimir Putin and refusal to hold a telephone call with Joe Biden
Mediation of Saudi Arabia with Russia over the release of (US/British) prisoners	
Conclusion of gas and oil contracts with European/EU countries	

Source: prepared by the author

THE BALANCING POLICY IN THE THEORY OF REALISM

There are many theories and approaches to studying the foreign policies of states. One of the theories of international relations that is particularly useful in explaining political and international processes in the Middle East is (neo)realism.

Realism assumes that states are in a state of perpetual danger because of the conflicting interests and rivalries in the international arena that force states to constantly seek security and survive in an anarchic environment. States achieve security and seek survival by maximizing their power and pursuing their own selfish interests. When establishing spheres of influence, superpowers use all necessary means (including military force) to prevent other states from entering the orbit of another superpower (as in the case of the war in Ukraine). Also, according to the theory of realism, international relations are an arena of clashes between great powers (e.g. USA and Russia) and, therefore, it is in the interest of some states to weaken others, e.g. in a country that is defending itself against an invader and is supported by another power [Goodin 2010: 132-133].

The above assumptions are reflected in the war in Ukraine. Russia has recognized that Ukraine was moving away from its sphere of influence and encroachment into the orbit of Western influence. Since diplomatic efforts, as well as interference in Ukraine's internal affairs, had not yielded the desired results, Russia launched an invasion aimed at preventing the NATO enlargement into the East and from drawing Ukraine into its orbit. When Ukraine successfully resisted Russian's first offensive, the West provided support to the government in Kiev and prevented Russia's quick victory.

The outcome is a situation similar to the Cold War: two great powers wage a war in the territory of a third country, supporting or engaging directly in warfare. In order to understand the roles and place of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf in this war, one would have to answer the following questions: What exactly is the balancing policy? In what situations do states opt for it and what are the consequences, both for the states pursue this policy and its recipients?

The concept of balancing comes from the realist balance of power theory, which assumes that hegemony is unattainable in a multipolar system (Arab states recognize the existence of a multipolar system, with an important role of Russia and China in the world), because hegemony is perceived by other states as a threat (in recent years, the support of leaders of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf for US dominance in the region has declined), leading them to balance its potential, influence, and power [Levy 2004:37]. Balancing involves supporting/taking actions that a particular state or group of states take in order to equalize the odds (Russia and China) against more powerful states (USA). Balancing mainly concerns states (Arab states) that seek to survive and ensure/enhance their security in order to constrain the most powerful and rising state that can prove a potential threat [Waltz 2008: 137]. In the case of the oil monarchies, the balancing policy is related to the increase of anti-American sentiment in the Persian Gulf and a decline in the confidence in the USA as a guarantor of their security (war in Yemen, talks with Iran). This refers to the principle of reciprocity: you have not helped us in "our" conflicts so we will not help you in "your" war either. The balancing policy of the Arab states is supported by Russia and China,

which are interested in reducing US involvement in the Middle East and establishing their own spheres of influence. The balancing policy pursued by the oil monarchies is therefore the result of the development of their relations with Russia and China, which are important poles of power and authority in the international arena.

Although the power of the state plays a vital role in the balancing policy, it is not the only factor. Balancing is also a response to a threat and, in line with the above exemplification of the balancing policy, it concerns the oil monarchies' declining sense of security in the face of a reduced US presence in the Middle East. In an effort to demonstrate the decline in their security and the increase in the potential threats to the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, I will apply elements of Stephen Walt's balance of threat concept. According to this concept, with the rising threats and to protect their security and interests, states form alliances and either balance (by allying against a common enemy) or join (bandwagon) other states (e.g. an aggressor). Balancing and bandwagoning are, therefore, a state's foreign policy strategies, whose choice depends on the factors that affect the level of threat posed by a state. Walt identifies four criteria states use to evaluate the threat a state poses: 1) its aggregate strength or power (size, population, latent power, and economic capabilities); 2) its geographic proximity; 3) its offensive capabilities; and 4) its offensive or hostile intentions. For most states, a balance of power in which there is no hegemony of one country is the most favorable arrangement in relations. Walt's concept will be used primarily to show the motives behind the Arab states' decision to balance between the USA and Russia during the war in Ukraine [Walt 1987].

Therefore, states analyze the above factors and decide to balance or bandwagon. Since the USA has abundant resources (population, industrial and military potential, and technological capabilities), Arab states can see this as an opportunity or a threat. Because the US policy toward the Middle East has not met their expectations in recent years and recognizing the increasing dehegemonization of the USA in the world, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf have decided not to support the vision of liberal-democratic order that the USA is fighting for in Ukraine.

For the Arab states, the war in Ukraine is primarily a European conflict because it is far from their borders [The Ukraine Crisis and the Gulf: A Saudi Perspective 2022]. It is not a direct threat to the oil monarchies' security; therefore, their interest in participating in the war is limited. Arab leaders indicate that a similar stance was taken by Western countries toward the wars in Syria or Yemen, where the refugees were seen as a serious challenge to Europe and the USA failed to respond to Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons despite earlier declarations. In addition, the biggest security challenge for the Arab states of the Gulf is posed by the nearest countries, such as Iran. President Joe Biden's policy toward Iran (an attempt to rejoin the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA), as well as the military incidents that have occurred in Saudi Arabia or the UAE after attacks by Iran or the Houthi, have proven that the USA does not fully guarantee the security of its allies.

Further tenets of the concept of balance of threat are offensive capabilities and offensive intentions. Russia is not showing aggressive intentions toward the states of the Persian Gulf. On the contrary, Arab-Russian relations have been developing in recent years as part of Russia's resurgence in the Middle East, if only through its involvement in the wars in Syria or Libya. Therefore, the Arab states chose not to explicitly support the American-led coalition. The mere fact of aggression was not a decisive argument for the oil monarchies to oppose Russia. On the contrary, John Mearsheimer's argument about the threat posed by NATO's proximity to Russia's borders is quite understandable to such countries as Saudi Arabia, which faces a similar threat on its southern borders with Yemen. Perhaps a more real threat could be cooperation between Iran and Russia in the Middle East, which, given Tehran's support for the Russian military operation, is a possible scenario, but for now it is not a decisive argument for the oil monarchies to join Russia's opponents.

These arguments convinced the Arab states of the Gulf to choose a policy of balancing between Russia and the USA in the war in Ukraine. For many decades, the oil monarchies were the USA's traditional allies in the region. However, given the sequence of the decisions and actions of the USA in the Middle East in recent years, the continuing dehegemonization of the USA, the change in the dominant liberal-democratic order in the world, and, most importantly, the involvement of Russia and China in the events taking place in the region, the choice of a pragmatic/transactional foreign policy by the oil monarchies appears warranted

SUMMARY

The above analysis of the foreign policy of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf confirms the hypothesis that the choice of political strategy towards the USA and Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine is a function of the oil monarchies' relations with these two powers, but also the result of their pursuit of their own interests rather than the expectations of either power. Three research questions were posed to verify the hypothesis: 1) Why are the Arab states of the Persian Gulf pursuing a balancing policy in relation to the war in Ukraine? 2) How do US-Arab and Russian-Arab relations translate into the foreign policy strategy of the oil monarchies toward the war in Ukraine? 3) How will the balancing policies of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf affect their relations with the USA and Russia?

In answering the first question, one should consider the critical argument, i.e. the state of the Arab-American, Arab-Russian, and Arab-Chinese relations. Realizing the changes that are unfolding in the international order, the Arab states do not yet want to sever their relations with the USA, which is the main guarantor of their security, but at the same time they already want to build another alliance with China (for now, an economic one) and Russia. In order to reconcile the conflicting interests of the superpowers, the oil monarchies are trying to find a balance between them. The unequivocal support for the USA by the oil monarchies would weaken the GCC mem-

ber states' relations with China and Russia. China is a strategic economic partner in the context of both buying/selling oil and other commodities and supporting the implementation of the GCC member states' economic diversification program (VISION 2030), e.g. participation in the Belt and Road initiative. Russia, on the other hand, being politically and militarily involved in the Middle East, provides the Arab states of the Gulf an alternative to the USA, thus strengthening their bargaining position in possible negotiations with America. The Arab states of the Persian Gulf no longer rely solely on the USA due to their expanded cooperation with China and Russia.

The second question was: How do US-Arab and Russian-Arab relations translate into the foreign policy strategy of the oil monarchies toward the war in Ukraine? In answering this question, one would have to take into consideration the improvement in the relations of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf with Russia with the simultaneous deterioration of their relations with the USA and the gradual reduction of the involvement of the American superpower in the Middle East. Arab leaders have made statements about the changing international order, with a gradual dehegemonization of the USA and a rise in the position and importance of China, with which these countries are strengthening their relations, especially economical ones. In this situation, the Arab states did not choose to support the USA in the war in Ukraine in an outright way because the USA did not support (or supported insufficiently) their involvement in the war in Yemen or against Iran.

However, the protracted war in Ukraine will lead Russia to focus its attention on military operations more than on the Middle East/Persian Gulf region. Since the war is absorbing a large part of Russia's military resources, some Russian groups and weapons have already been redeployed from Syria. As a result, Russia may be incapable of sending more resources to the Middle East and thus helping its Middle Eastern partners (e.g. Syria) [Katz 2022]. This argument also supports the balancing policy, as still no one knows how the war in Ukraine will affect Russia's and America's power projection in the Middle East. The policy of balancing adopted by the Arab states of the Persian Gulf towards the USA in the war in Ukraine and the restraint in the choice of/support for a side in the conflict show that American-Arab relations are undergoing a transformation. While the USA was reducing its presence in the Middle East, Russia and China were expanding their spheres of influence.

The third question is how the balancing policies of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf will affect their relations with the USA and Russia Concerning further developments in the context of the war in Ukraine. It can already be seen that the lack of clear support of the oil monarchies for the USA/Ukraine will reduce the confidence of Washington in the Arab autocrats. Symptoms of limited confidence were evident even before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine when a deal for the UAE to buy more than fifty American F-35 fighter jets was suspended in December 2021 amid fears of leakage of US military technology to China, which maintains good relations with the government in Abu Dhabi [Rumley 2022]. On the other hand, the USA will continue

to play the role of a guarantor of the security of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, which, due to the halted of the nuclear negotiations between the West and Iran, could lead to an increase in Iran's military involvement in the region. For several years, the USA has been shifting the weight of its involvement from the Middle East to Asia, where China remains the main challenge; therefore, it is not surprising to see declining US involvement in the former region.

The Arab-Russian relations are based on common political, economic, and security interests. In the context of the war in Ukraine, many experts emphasize the consolidation of authoritarian regimes in the face of America's attempt to maintain its hegemony. Because of Russia's growing importance in the region (Syria, Libya, Iran, Algeria, and Lebanon) and the world, Arab states will be keen to maintain good relations with authorities in Moscow. Russia, however, will not play the role of a security guarantor for the oil monarchies (e.g. due to its inferior military technologies compared to those of the USA), but is more likely to be taken advantage of for short-term opportunistic "deals," acting as a bargaining chip for these countries in their relations with the USA. What unites Russia and the member states of the GCC in the long run is their shared vision of a regional order that has no place for pluralism, human rights, or democracy, and favors a strong dynastic rule instead.

The war in Ukraine has once again highlighted the strategic importance of the oil monarchies to the global energy sector and the major powers. In the short term, it still does not seem that China and Russia will dominate the Middle East's regional order, but certainly the foreign policy of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf is a signal to the USA that if they do not treat them as partners, the USA's traditional allies will cease to support American interests in the Middle East and globally in the long term.

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