

Food and Energy: How Domestic Concerns Shape North African Approaches to Russia

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine and Russia’s recognition of the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk has upended foreign partnerships over the past several months—including the global networks linking MENA countries to other world powers.

The crisis has also had its own regional repercussion, affecting major supply lines to the Middle East and sparking growing crises in food and energy. These pressures have, in turn, shaped how Arab countries have responded to the ongoing conflict, with most taking “neutral” official positions in an effort to preserve economic and military relationships with Russia, the United States, and its allies.

Still, there is variation among Middle East countries’ positions towards the crisis, a pattern first clear from the voting decisions of Arab countries during the special emergency session of the United Nations General Assembly last March. Several Arab states—such as Egypt, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, the Sultanate of Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the UAE, and Yemen—voted in favor of a non-binding resolution condemning the Russian invasion and demanding that Moscow withdraw its forces from Ukraine. Meanwhile, three Arab governments—Algeria, Sudan, and Iraq—abstained from voting, while Syria opposed the resolution and Morocco avoided embarrassment through its representative’s absence from the voting session. The notable divergence of North African countries’ attitudes towards this crisis is instructive and provides a window into how the war has played a role in reshaping North Africa’s other foreign policy relations as well.

While parallels are most frequently drawn between Russia’s actions in Syria and Ukraine, Libya has had its own experiences with Russian military involvement through the Wagner Group. Tripoli was consequently the first Arab government to break silence regarding the Ukrainian crisis. Since February, Tripoli has emphasized its commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. In a statement from its Foreign Ministry, Libya called on Russia for calm, while demanding the withdrawal of the military buildup on the Ukrainian border and in the occupied Crimean Peninsula and the use of the language of dialogue and diplomacy rather than war.

The speed and consistency of the Libyan position is explained by the internationally recognized Tripoli government’s rejection of any Russian presence on Libyan territory, with the government accusing Russia of supporting division between Tripoli and Tobruk and disrupting key Libyan players, in addition to controlling Al Jufra Air Base in Libya. However, concurrent internal divisions have prevented Libya from playing the role once envisioned by the United States and Europe to adopt Libyan gas as a partial alternative to Russia’s gas supply to Europe. The country’s largest oil field has in fact been shuttered as the country’s internal conflict is potentially reemerging, with the Russian-backed alternative government pushing for international recognition.

In contrast, Rabat initially chose an approach of total neutrality by not voting in the initial resolution—thereby refusing to take any official position—without giving any details or stating any justifications for this move. It appears that Rabat chose to steer a middle course regarding the Russian-Ukrainian conflict for two main reasons. First, Morocco is working to **strengthen certain pillars of its strategic foreign policy**

<https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AA%25D9%2582%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A%25D8%25B1/%25D8%25A3%25D8%25B2%25D9%258%25D8%25B1%25D9%2588%25D8%25B3%25D9%258A%25D8%25A7-%25D9%2588%25D8%25A3%25D9%2588%25D9%2583%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586%25D9%258A%25D8%25A7-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2585%25D8%25BA%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A8-%25D9%258A%25D9%2585%25D8%25B3%25D9%2583-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B9%25D8%25B5%25D8%25A7-%25D9%2585%25D9%2586-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2588%25D8%25B3%25D8%25B7-%25D8%25AA%25D9%2582%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A%25D8%25B1/2542106>, especially with the major powers that are permanent members of the Security Council. For another, no less important reason, Moroccan academics believe that Rabat will not ultimately align with any side: Morocco values the role of Russia, which did not oppose the Security Council’s draft Resolution 2602 that extended the mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara. However, Morocco did participate in the U.S.-led conference at Rammstein to plan support for Ukraine.

Somewhat similar to Rabat’s approach, Algeria has avoided issuing any political comment on Russia’s war in Ukraine, limiting its official foreign ministry communications to the status of Algerian citizens in Ukraine and how to extract them. This is understandable to some extent because the military relationships that join Algeria and Moscow have progressed in recent years, with the military deals signed by **presidents Putin and Bouteflika** (<https://www.swissinfo.ch/ara/%25D9%2586%25D8%25AD%25D9%2588-%25D8%25B4%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D9%2583%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B3%25D8%25AA%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA%25D9%258A%25D8%25AC%25D9%258A%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A8%25D9%258A%25D9%2586-%25D9%2585%25D9%2588%25D8%25B3%25D9%2583%25D9%2588-%25D9%2588%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AC%25D8%25B2%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A6%25D8%25B1/1975308>) in 2001 totaling USD 2.5 billion, under which Moscow has provided Algeria with air, land, and sea weapons over a period of years. Moreover, Russia is Algeria’s main supplier of grain, followed by Ukraine, and France has recently slipped as a supplier of wheat to the Algerian market amid tense relations and Algeria’s demands that France acknowledge the crimes of the colonial era. In contrast to Morocco, which may be leaning closer towards the U.S. position on the war, Spanish foreign minister has accused Algeria of moving closer to the Russian position in response to the latter’s cancellation of a bilateral ‘friendship treaty’ last week.

The close relationship between the two countries was also reflected in the visit of Dmitry Shugaev, the director of the Russian Federation’s Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation, in March of 2022. Shugaev was the **first high-ranking Russian official** (<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%25D8%25A3%25D9%2588%25D9%2584-%25D9%2585%25D8%25B3%25D8%25A4%25D9%2588%25D9%2584-%25D8%25B1%25D9%2588%25D8%25B3%25D9%258A-%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B3%25D8%25AA%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA%25D9%258A%25D8%25AC%25D9%258A%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A8%25D9%258A%25D9%2586-%25D9%2585%25D9%2588%25D8%25B3%25D9%2583%25D9%2588-%25D9%2588%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AC%25D8%25B2%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A6%25D8%25B1/1975308>) in 2001 totaling USD 2.5 billion, under which Moscow has provided Algeria with air, land, and sea weapons over a period of years. Moreover, Russia is Algeria’s main supplier of grain, followed by Ukraine, and France has recently slipped as a supplier of wheat to the Algerian market amid tense relations and Algeria’s demands that France acknowledge the crimes of the colonial era. In contrast to Morocco, which may be leaning closer towards the U.S. position on the war, Spanish foreign minister has accused Algeria of moving closer to the Russian position in response to the latter’s cancellation of a bilateral ‘friendship treaty’ last week.

[%25D9%258A%25D8%25B2%25D9%2588%25D8%25B1-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AC%25D8%25B2%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A6%25D8%25B1-%25D9%2585%25D9%2586%25D8%25B0-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A1-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A3%25D8%25B2%25D9%2585%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A3%25D9%2588%25D9%2583%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586%25D9%258A%25D8%25A9\)](#) since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis to visit Algeria, where he participated in a meeting of the joint Algerian-Russian governmental committee for military-technical cooperation. In the same month, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman visited Algeria in advance of Blinken's visit in late March, where Blinken [discussed \(https://www.state.gov/commitments-to-regional-security-and-prosperity-underscore-secretary-blinkens-travel-to-algeria/\)](https://www.state.gov/commitments-to-regional-security-and-prosperity-underscore-secretary-blinkens-travel-to-algeria/) regional security and trade relations with the Algerian president.

Aside from the language of diplomacy, it appears that Europe is in greater need than ever of Algeria's gas supplies amid the shuttering of the planned [Nord Stream 2 pipeline \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/msrhyt-altwtrat-alamyt-twdy-aly-thwlat-muklft-fy-aswaq-altaqt\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/msrhyt-altwtrat-alamyt-twdy-aly-thwlat-muklft-fy-aswaq-altaqt). Yet Algeria's relations with Spain have been increasingly on the rocks due to Spain's position on the issue of Western Sahara, and in late April it signaled the [potential shuttering \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/explainer-algeria-spain-gas-controversy\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/explainer-algeria-spain-gas-controversy) of gas imports to Spain. Algeria has, however, since stated that it will [honor \(https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-11/algeria-says-it-respects-all-gas-commitments-with-spain\)](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-11/algeria-says-it-respects-all-gas-commitments-with-spain) extant gas commitments with Madrid.

In contrast to Morocco and Algeria, Tunisia decided to vote in favor of the UN General Assembly's resolution [condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine \(https://www.diplomatie.gov.tn/ar/%25D9%2585%25D8%25B1%25D9%2583%25D8%25B2-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A5%25D8%25B9%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7%25D9%2585-%25D9%2588%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA%25D8%25B5%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584/%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2585%25D8%25B3%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B9%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B9%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A8%25D9%258A-%25D9%2588%25D9%2585%25D9%2582%25D8%25B9%25D9%2587-%25D9%2585%25D9%2586-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B5%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B9/a-60786173\)](https://www.diplomatie.gov.tn/ar/%25D9%2585%25D8%25B1%25D9%2583%25D8%25B2-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A5%25D8%25B9%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7%25D9%2585-%25D9%2588%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA%25D8%25B5%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584/%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2585%25D8%25B3%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B9%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B9%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A8%25D9%258A-%25D9%2588%25D9%2585%25D9%2582%25D8%25B9%25D9%2587-%25D9%2585%25D9%2586-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B5%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B9/a-60786173). The Tunisian Foreign Ministry justified the vote in support of the resolution by saying that the Tunisian position represents a victory for the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, upon which Tunisia's foreign policy was based, and affirmed the country's eagerness to end the crisis through peaceful means of conflict resolution.

At the same time, Tunisia is engaged in talks with donor agencies, particularly the International Monetary Fund, to secure financial loans intended to place the long-struggling economy on more solid ground. Tunisia, which enjoys advanced-partner status with the European Union, seeks to promote and support its interests through the international mobilization of traditional economic partners, such as the European countries.

Egypt is among the countries that rely heavily on [wheat imports from Russia and Ukraine \(https://www.shorouknews.com/columns/view.aspx?cdate=08032022&id=13dc3d11-656c-45fc-a397-4388aa5c8f00\)](https://www.shorouknews.com/columns/view.aspx?cdate=08032022&id=13dc3d11-656c-45fc-a397-4388aa5c8f00), importing about 50% and 30% from each of them, respectively. Thus, Egypt has been greatly affected by the crisis, despite major donations to keep the country's economy afloat and food shortages at bay. Likewise, Russian-Egyptian exchanges last year grew by 10%, and Russia regained its presence as a [main supplier of arms \(https://www.dw.com/ar/%25D8%25AA%25D8%25AD%25D9%2584%25D9%258A%25D9%2584-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A3%25D8%25B2%25D9%2585%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A3%25D9%2588%25D9%2583%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586%25D9%258A%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B9%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2585-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B9%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A8%25D9%258A-%25D9%2588%25D9%2585%25D9%2582%25D8%25B9%25D9%2587-%25D9%2585%25D9%2586-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B5%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B9/a-60786173\)](https://www.dw.com/ar/%25D8%25AA%25D8%25AD%25D9%2584%25D9%258A%25D9%2584-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A3%25D8%25B2%25D9%2585%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A3%25D9%2588%25D9%2583%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586%25D9%258A%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B9%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2585-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B9%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A8%25D9%258A-%25D9%2588%25D9%2585%25D9%2582%25D8%25B9%25D9%2587-%25D9%2585%25D9%2586-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B5%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B9/a-60786173) to Egypt for the first time since the 1973 war in the Middle East.

As Ukrainian ports remain shuttered despite international negotiations efforts to reopen them, countries that import wheat, maize, and vegetable oils are simultaneously seeking out alternative markets, as is also the case for Lebanon, the GCC countries, and the rest of the MENA region. These issues will increasingly serve as the most pressing issues facing Arab countries' governments, and their attitudes towards the conflict in Ukraine are likely to shift depending on who can help solve this growing food crisis.

As the crisis continues to reshuffle partnerships and impact global supply chains, Washington must work to broadcast messages of reassurance to allies and take substantive steps to protect the energy sector and food security together with its traditional partners. The United States and Western countries, led by Canada and France, can cover the shortages of wheat, grain, and oil affecting some Arab countries. The United States should also work closely with Arab oil-exporting countries to control market prices and block the way for Russia, as it attempts to blame Western sanctions for the growing international food shortages.

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