

PRESIDENT PUTIN'S MIDDLE EAST SOJOURN 2023

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



In a rare diplomatic initiative on 6 December 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin embarked on a Middle East tour, commencing with visits to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia. This marked his first significant venture into the region since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring the strategic importance of these two nations to Russia as both crucial trade partners and major contributors to global oil production. President Putin's last trip to the UAE and Saudi Arabia was in 2019.

Beginning with the UAE, President Putin was greeted with much fanfare, receiving a full cavalry escort and a motorcade upon arrival. The meeting with UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan was characterized by a warm welcome, highlighting the unique nature of their relations. President Putin acknowledged the UAE's pivotal role as Russia's primary trading partner in the Arab world.¹ The discussions between the two leaders covered various aspects, including economic ties, trade relations, and the Israel-Hamas conflict. Despite its robust partnership with the United States, the UAE maintains significant ties with Russia.²

¹ "Putin Says Russian-Emirati Relations at an 'Unprecedented High Level'," Anadolu Agency, December 6, 2023.

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/putin-says-russian-emirati-relations-at-an-unprecedented-high-level-/3075090>.

² "President Sheikh Mohamed Welcomes Vladimir Putin to UAE on State Visit," The National, December 7, 2023.

<https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/government/2023/12/06/putin-uae-visit/>.

Key points of their exchanges encompassed international efforts to secure a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, ensuring unhindered humanitarian aid delivery, and safeguarding civilians in the conflict zone. Both leaders emphasized the imperative of achieving lasting peace in the region through a two-state solution. The meeting also focused on developments in Ukraine, with the UAE expressing support for global conflict resolution through dialogue and diplomacy.³ The COP28, hosted in Expo City Dubai, also took center stage, with the Russian President expressing hope that the conference would contribute to constructive solutions for climate challenges and bolster international climate action. Additionally, President Putin commended the UAE's influential role on the international stage, particularly within the UN Security Council, and its efforts to promote global stability.

Bilateral trade between Russia and the UAE reached an unprecedented \$9 billion in 2022, with ongoing projects in the oil and gas sector.⁴ The UAE stands as Russia's most substantial trade partner in the Middle East and the Gulf Region. Furthermore, according to the Russian President, the UAE's huge investments in the Russian economy, particularly a remarkable 103 percent increase in the non-oil sector over the past year, underscore the depth of their relations.⁵ Cooperation extends beyond economic ties, encompassing collaboration within international frameworks such as BRICS (acronym for a grouping of five major emerging national economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), where the UAE attained dialogue partner status in May 2023. The leaders emphasized efforts to advance strategic dialogue between the Russian Federation and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Following his visit to the UAE, President Putin proceeded to Saudi Arabia for talks with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. A primary focus was on Saudi Arabia's initiative to enhance strategic coordination among OPEC+ members. Regional conflicts, including those in Yemen, Syria, and the Israel-Hamas war, figured prominently. President Putin advocated for Russia's role in peace negotiations between Israel and Hamas, aligning with Riyadh's push for an immediate ceasefire and the eventual establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Discussions covered historical and strategic relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia, with both leaders affirming mutual intentions to develop and diversify their trade relations. The two leaders welcomed a substantial increase in bilateral trade volume in 2022 and underlined a shared resolve to further boost mutual and joint

³ "Russia-Ukraine War: Russia-UAE Relations at New High, Putin Says – as It Happened" The Guardian, December 6, 2023.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2023/dec/06/russia-ukraine-war-live-zelenskiy-to-join-g7-leaders-video-summit-amid-us-aid-row>.

⁴ "Putin Lands in Abu Dhabi on Middle East Visit" Business Recorder, December 6, 2023.

<https://www.brecorder.com/news/40277070/putin-lands-in-abu-dhabi-on-middle-east-visit>.

⁵ "Russia-UAE Talks," President of Russia, December 6, 2023.

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72918>.

investments. Cooperation in industrial initiatives, including significant projects in Jubail and Yanbu, and collaboration in the energy sector were emphasized. Both leaders reiterated their support for OPEC+ efforts to stabilize global oil markets and adherence to agreements essential for fostering economic growth.⁶

The timing of President Putin's visit assumes added significance against the backdrop of evolving regional dynamics. Noteworthy developments include growing discontent among Arab countries towards the United States, particularly in response to perceived inadequacies in addressing the Gaza conflict. The Russian President is making endeavors to assert global leadership despite formidable challenges posed by domestic and foreign policy issues, including the ongoing Ukraine conflict and the subsequent sanctions and severe labor shortage. As Russia heads to polls in 2024, economic issues, such as a weakened ruble, high inflation, and interest rates, also pose risks to household purchasing power.⁷ By aligning with the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, representing 57 Muslim countries (including Russia's de facto ally, Iran), President Putin has called for an immediate Gaza ceasefire and the establishment of an independent sovereign Palestinian state. ⁸This move aims to further strengthen ties with the Arab world and position Russia as a key player in regional affairs.

Simultaneously, declining oil prices present challenges for the OPEC Plus coalition, led by Arab oil-producing states and Russia. Efforts to elevate Brent crude prices to \$100 per barrel face headwinds due to factors such as China's economic slowdown and an increased focus on renewable energy sources in most developed nations. While Saudi Arabia and the UAE possess sovereign wealth funds of approximately \$776 billion and \$853 billion, respectively, allowing them to weather lower oil prices, President Putin is confronted with the urgent need for additional revenue to fund the ongoing Ukraine military campaign and mitigate domestic repercussions arising from the escalating costs of the conflict and internal economic challenges.⁹

⁶ "Saudi Crown Prince, Putin Underscores Need for OPEC+ Agreement " *Economy Middle East*, December 8, 2023.

<https://economymiddleeast.com/news/saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-russian-president-vladimir-putin-opec/>.

⁷ "Putin's Economic Challenges Are Many but Surmountable as Election Looms," *Reuters*, December 8, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putins-economic-challenges-are-numerous-surmountable-election-looms-2023-12-08/>.

⁸ "Russia's Putin Says Israel-Gaza Conflict Shows US 'Failure' in Middle East." *Arab News PK*, October 10, 2023. <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2388676/world>.

⁹ "What Does Putin Want from the UAE and Saudi Arabia?," *University of Western Australia*, December 12, 2023. <https://www.uwa.edu.au/news/article/2023/december/what-does-putin-want-from-the-uae-and-saudi-arabia>.

President Putin's diplomatic sojourn went ahead despite an International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrant related to the Ukraine conflict. Significantly, neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE, having not signed the ICC's founding treaty, are obligated to enforce the warrant. This geopolitical reality underscores the complexity of international relations and the pragmatic considerations that often guide diplomatic interactions. President Putin's subsequent meeting with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on 7 December 2023 in Moscow further exemplifies Russia's pursuit of strengthened economic and military ties, especially in the face of Western sanctions.

With Moscow demonstrating resilience against Western sanctions and successfully navigating the military dynamics in the context of the Ukrainian conflict, it can be argued that President Putin may be sensing a revival of fortunes. However, the efficacy of Putin's efforts to entice the UAE and Saudi Arabia towards closer ties with Russia remains uncertain. Both governments, akin to many of their Arab counterparts in the region, maintain deeply entrenched financial, technological, economic, trade, investment, and security ties with the United States. Russia, despite its overtures, does not currently possess the strategic standing to act as a credible substitute. While Abu Dhabi and Riyadh have expressed displeasure at the rhetorical level, there is no tangible shift in their strategic alignments. The UAE, for instance, has not altered its normalization of relations with Israel, and Saudi Arabia has postponed any further moves towards formal recognition of Israel. Yet, this does not imply an unwillingness to occasionally leverage their relationship with Russia, or, for that matter, China, to navigate Washington's pressures, especially on human rights issues or sentiments against Israel.

In conclusion, President Putin's diplomatic foray into the UAE and Saudi Arabia highlights the intricate dynamics of global relationships, with each nation strategically pursuing its interests within the evolving geopolitical landscape. The Middle East, as evidenced by these visits, remains a critical arena for major global players seeking to navigate shifting dynamics and assert their influence and this interplay of economic imperatives, geopolitical calculations, and regional alliances underscores the complexity of contemporary international relations.