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Zelensky visits the Middle East: the beginning of military-technical cooperation with the region

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On 26–29 March, President Volodymyr Zelensky visited the Middle East, where he held talks with the leaders of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and Jordan. He also met with Ukrainian military instructors who, for the past three weeks, have been assisting the armed forces of countries in the region in countering Iranian drone threats. Ukraine signed 10-year security cooperation agreements with Saudi Arabia and Qatar and announced that a similar agreement with the UAE would be finalised within several days. Preliminary arrangements were also reached for the supply of diesel fuel from Saudi Arabia over a one-year period.

Kyiv seeks to leverage the considerable financial, resource, and political potential of the states in the region. It offers them, in particular, military expertise, unmanned systems, and counter-drone capabilities, expecting in return to obtain missiles for Patriot systems, investment in Ukraine's defence industry, and stable fuel supplies. By supporting the air defence of US partners targeted by Iran, Kyiv is signalling its utility and counting on reciprocity from both Washington and Middle Eastern states.

Commentary

- **Cooperation with Middle Eastern states is intended to yield tangible benefits for Ukraine.** Of particular importance are the scarce PAC-3 MSE missiles, which are the only interceptors operated by Ukraine capable of neutralising Russian ballistic missiles and protecting critical infrastructure against them. In return, Kyiv is offering systemic and more cost-effective support – interceptor drones, electronic warfare capabilities, radars, sensors, and air defence management software, as well as the operational experience of its personnel. The agreements signed are expected to initiate joint defence projects, including the co-production of armaments located both in Ukraine and the Gulf states, the exchange of technologies, the transfer of know-how, and the sale of military equipment. An open question remains whether the Gulf states will be willing to transfer PAC-3 MSE missiles, given the significant depletion of their own stockpiles, and whether they would obtain the necessary consent from the United States for their re-export.
- **Ukraine is seeking to project itself as a contributor to global security rather than merely a recipient of assistance.** The agreements concluded are likely to unlock the export of domestically produced armaments, long awaited by Ukrainian manufacturers, including rapidly developing counter-drone technologies. At present, such exports require a licence

from the State Service for Export Control; however, the authorities have justified the absence of decisions by citing the need to first negotiate the relevant conditions at the political level. The groundwork for the future conclusion of contracts has been laid by more than 200 Ukrainian military personnel stationed in the Middle East, who developed concrete solutions on site to strengthen air defence using Ukrainian technologies. Following the US strike on Iran, debate has intensified in Ukraine as to whether the opening of exports may come too late and whether Ukrainian producers might be supplanted by competitors on global markets.

- **Supplies of diesel fuel from Saudi Arabia would enhance the diversification of Ukraine's fuel import sources.** However, only the technical details of their implementation – subject to arrangements between the state-owned company Naftogaz and the Saudi side – as well as the price and volumes involved, will allow for an assessment of the significance of any future deliveries (Zelensky is understood to have secured only a political agreement in this regard). The procurement of fuel directly from the producer would undoubtedly contribute to stabilising supplies for the armed forces, as well as to stabilising prices for private consumers.
- **An important context for Zelensky's visit to the Middle East is the deterioration in relations with the United States.** Kyiv seeks to demonstrate that its capabilities in the field of air defence can represent an asset for Washington, enabling the more effective neutralisation of retaliatory Iranian drone attacks by its Middle Eastern partners. At the same time, frustration is growing in Ukraine over the Trump administration's easing of sanctions on Russian oil and its disregard for Moscow's support for Tehran, despite the presentation of concrete evidence (including the provision of satellite reconnaissance for attacks on various targets, including US military bases in the region, as well as the transfer of drones along with operational tactics). Mutual criticism between Kyiv and Washington is intensifying: comments by Trump undermining Ukraine's willingness to assist the United States and portraying it as an obstacle to the peace process have prompted responses from Zelensky. He has openly expressed dissatisfaction with what he describes as the White House's conditioning of security guarantees for Ukraine on its withdrawal from the part of the Donbas under its control.
- **Zelensky's visit to the three principal Arab states of the Persian Gulf points to the growing attractiveness of Ukrainian experience in the field of air defence, as well as to Kyiv's strengthening negotiating position vis-à-vis countries in the region.** The Ukrainian president had previously been received (including after 24 February 2022) in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Doha; however, discussions at that time focused primarily on humanitarian assistance, economic cooperation, mediation in the recovery of Ukrainian children abducted by Russia, and – in the case of Riyadh – on issues related to Ukrainian–Russian peace talks. These states – pursuing balancing policies and seeking to maintain good relations with Russia – had not been interested in defence cooperation, let alone in providing Kyiv with military assistance. The situation has changed as a result of Iranian retaliatory attacks carried out by Tehran in response to US and Israeli operations. Under these new conditions, Ukrainian know-how in countering Iranian drones and, more broadly, in the effective operation of air defence systems has become particularly attractive in the region. Although these states possess advanced (primarily

US-made) defence systems, they lack extensive practical experience in their use.