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Putin Visits Saudi Arabia, UAE on Middle East Tour

By AFP

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Vladimir Putin and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman hold a meeting. **Sergei Savostyanov / TASS / kremlin.ru**

Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in Saudi Arabia Wednesday after visiting the United Arab Emirates, making a rare trip abroad as Moscow seeks to reassert itself on the global stage.

It is only the third trip the Russian leader has taken outside the former Soviet Union since he invaded Ukraine, following visits to Iran and China, and comes as Moscow seeks to bolster its influence in the Middle East.

Putin was seen greeting the country's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, before the two briefly sat down for televised talks.

"Nothing can prevent the development of our friendly relations," Putin told Prince

Mohammed, inviting the Saudi royal to visit Moscow.

"It is very important for all of us to exchange information and assessments with you on what is happening in the region. Our meeting is certainly timely," Putin said.

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Prince Mohammed said bilateral cooperation had "helped remove many tensions in the Middle East and contributed to enhancing security" — and would continue to do so in the future.

The Kremlin said ahead of the meeting that the two would discuss oil markets, as well as ways to promote de-escalation in the war in Gaza.

Since March, Putin has been wanted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court over the invasion of Ukraine.

He skipped the BRICS summit in August in South Africa, which recognizes the ICC, to avoid causing a "political show," and missed the G20 summit in India in September.

But neither the UAE nor Saudi Arabia have signed the ICC's founding treaty, meaning they are not obliged to arrest him.

'Unprecedented relations'

The Russian leader was earlier welcomed with a full cavalry escort and motorcade in the UAE, where he met President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

A national air show team drew a Russian flag with colored fumes in the sky.

"Today, thanks to your posture, our relations have reached unprecedented levels," Putin told his counterpart at the presidential palace, saying the UAE was "Russia's main trading partner in the Arab world."

Bilateral trade hit a record $9 billion last year, according to the Kremlin, and Putin said "a number of projects" were underway in the oil and gas sector.

The UAE is currently hosting the COP28 UN climate talks, but the Kremlin did not specify whether Putin attended any related events.

Putin is next set to host Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi for talks in Moscow on Thursday, as the two countries strengthen economic and military ties in the face of Western sanctions.

With Moscow largely adapted to Western sanctions thanks to rebounding oil revenues, and its military fending off a Ukrainian counteroffensive in recent months, analysts say Putin may be sensing reviving fortunes.

"Putin has certainly been speaking more confidently now than any time since the war began," said Nigel Gould-Davies, senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

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