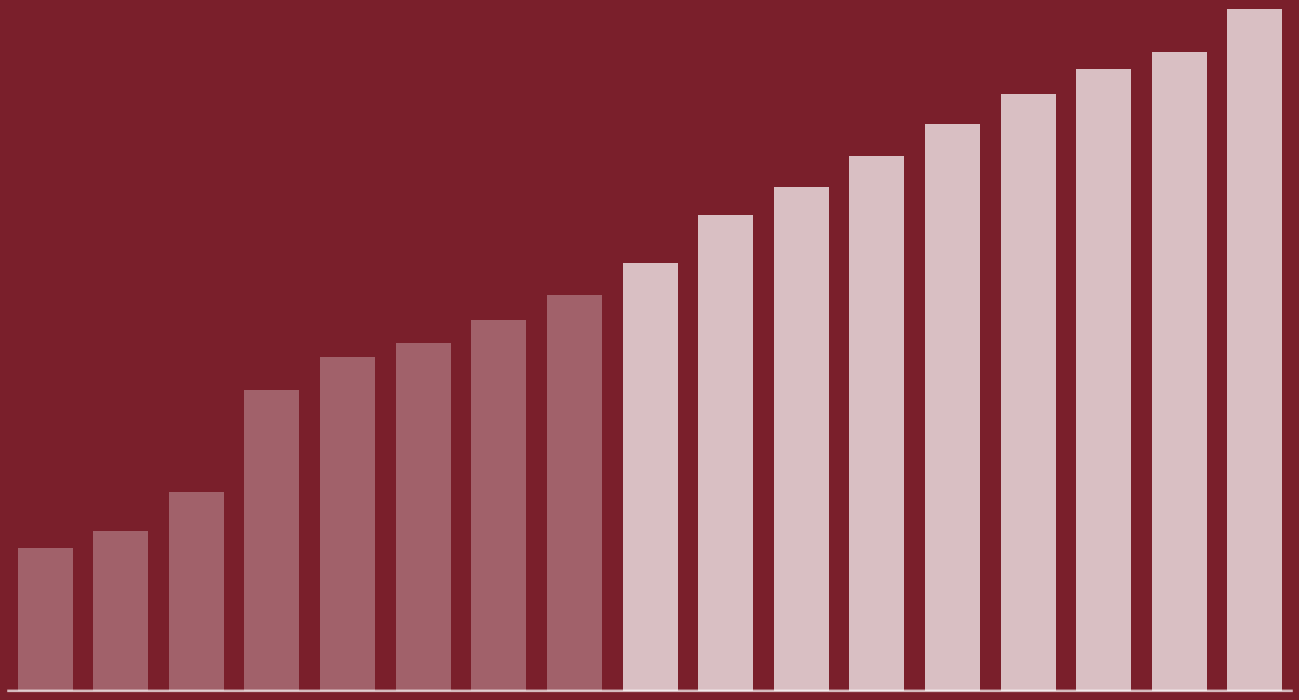
EPIC | Emirati Perspectives and Insight Centre



POLICY PAPER · EPIC-PP-2026-048

The Abu Dhabi Channel: UAE Mediation between Russia and Ukraine

Prisoner Exchanges and Trilateral Talks, January 2024 to November 2026

EPIC Research Team

November 2026

The Abu Dhabi Channel: UAE Mediation between Russia and Ukraine

Prisoner Exchanges and Trilateral Talks, January 2024 to November 2026

EPIC – Emirati Perspectives and Insight Centre

EPIC-PP-2026-048 · Gulf Strategy · 17 November 2026 · EPIC Research Team

Abstract

Since January 2024 the UAE has mediated a series of exchanges of captives between Russia and Ukraine. By 23 October 2026 the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) reported 27 successful mediations and a running total of 8,537 captives exchanged (MoFA 2026k). The pace has risen: on MoFA's own totals, about 2,157 captives were exchanged in seven mediations in 2025 and 3,896 in ten mediations between January and 23 October 2026 (EPIC calculations from MoFA 2024d; 2025d; 2026k).

In 2026 Abu Dhabi also became a venue for direct talks. The UAE hosted trilateral talks between Russia, Ukraine and the United States in January and February 2026, and a third round opened on 10 November 2026 (MoFA 2026a; 2026b; 2026l). Two exchanges in March 2026 were described as joint UAE and US mediations (MoFA 2026c; 2026d). Reporting on the third round found no breakthrough on a settlement, but both sides agreed in principle to a large prisoner exchange (BBC News 2026; Reuters 2026).

This paper compiles the official record of the exchanges from MoFA releases and traces how the channel moved from humanitarian exchanges to hosting negotiations, noting where the public record is silent. UAE foreign assistance as an instrument of policy is covered in EPIC paper 029 (aid-as-statecraft).

Keywords: UAE; mediation; Russia; Ukraine; prisoner exchange; captives; prisoners of war; trilateral talks; Abu Dhabi; United States; Ministry of Foreign Affairs; humanitarian diplomacy; Gulf Strategy

1. Scope, sources and method

The core source is the series of MoFA releases announcing each exchange. EPIC located and read 17 releases that report a number of captives, and three further releases on the first exchange and the trilateral talks. Each exchange release states the number of captives released and a running total exchanged through UAE mediation; most also give the exchange's ordinal number. Releases for the second to sixth, ninth and eleventh to thirteenth mediations were not located, so the paper does not report their individual dates or sizes. Their combined size is captured in the running totals.

MoFA's figures are official statements by the mediating state and are not independently verified. They count captives released by both sides; an exchange of 150 Russian and 150 Ukrainian captives is reported as 300 (MoFA 2024d). Annual figures are differences between running totals and are labelled as EPIC calculations. Ordinals for three exchanges in February and March 2026 are inferred from the running totals, which leave no room for other exchanges between them.

Reports on the trilateral talks come from MoFA, The National, BBC News, Reuters, Anadolu Agency and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Secretariat. The paper refers to officials by title.

2. The exchange record, 2024 to 2026

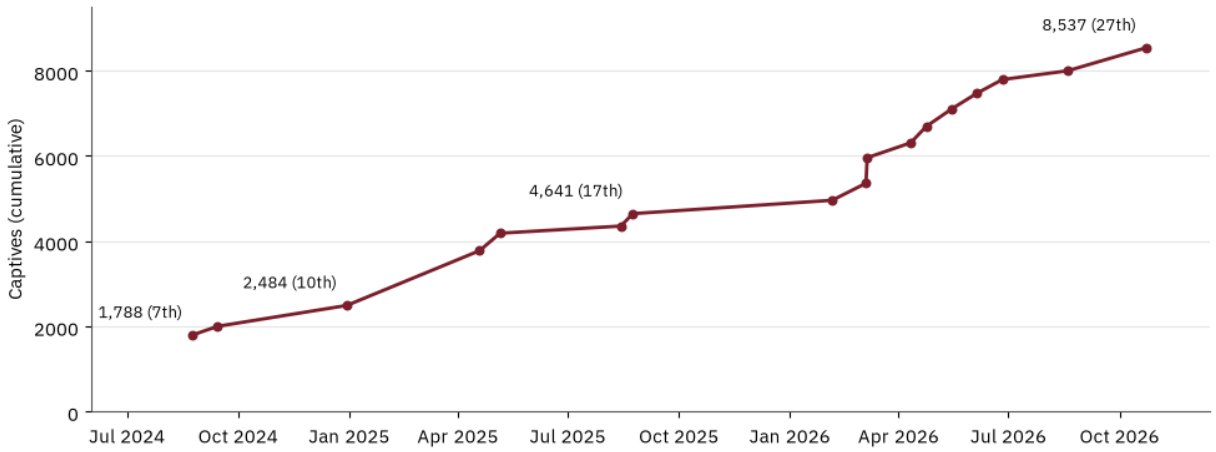
MoFA announced the first exchange on 3 January 2024 without a number, describing it as "one of the largest exchanges of captives between the two sides since the beginning of the war" (MoFA 2024a). By the seventh mediation, on 24 August 2024, the running total was 1,788 (MoFA 2024b). The tenth, on 30 December 2024, released 150 captives from each side and brought the total to 2,484 (MoFA 2024d).

The largest single exchange in the record came on 19 April 2025. MoFA described the fourteenth mediation as "the largest exchange since the outbreak of the conflict"; it covered 246 captives from each side together with 31 wounded Ukrainians and 15 wounded Russians, 538 in all (MoFA 2025a). The seventeenth mediation, on 24 August 2025, took the total to 4,641 (MoFA 2025d). The next located release, on 5 February 2026, added 314 and gives a total of 4,955 (MoFA 2026b); the difference of 314 shows that there was no other exchange between those dates.

Table 1. UAE-mediated exchanges of captives between Russia and Ukraine located in MoFA releases

Date	Mediation	Captives	Running total	Source
3 Jan 2024	1st (inferred)	n/a	n/a	MoFA 2024a
24 Aug 2024	7th	230	1,788	MoFA 2024b
14 Sep 2024	8th	206	1,994	MoFA 2024c
30 Dec 2024	10th	300	2,484	MoFA 2024d
19 Apr 2025	14th	538	3,771	MoFA 2025a
6 May 2025	15th	410	4,181	MoFA 2025b
14 Aug 2025	16th	168	4,349	MoFA 2025c
24 Aug 2025	17th	292	4,641	MoFA 2025d
5 Feb 2026	18th (inferred)	314	4,955	MoFA 2026b
5 Mar 2026	19th (inferred)	400	5,355	MoFA 2026c
6 Mar 2026	20th (inferred)	600	5,955	MoFA 2026d
11 Apr 2026	21st	350	6,305	MoFA 2026e
24 Apr 2026	22nd	386	6,691	MoFA 2026f
15 May 2026	23rd	410	7,101	MoFA 2026g
5 Jun 2026	24th	370	7,471	MoFA 2026h
26 Jun 2026	25th	320	7,791	MoFA 2026i
19 Aug 2026	26th	206	7,997	MoFA 2026j
23 Oct 2026	27th	540	8,537	MoFA 2026k

Figure 1. Captives exchanged between Russia and Ukraine through UAE mediation, cumulative total as stated by MoFA



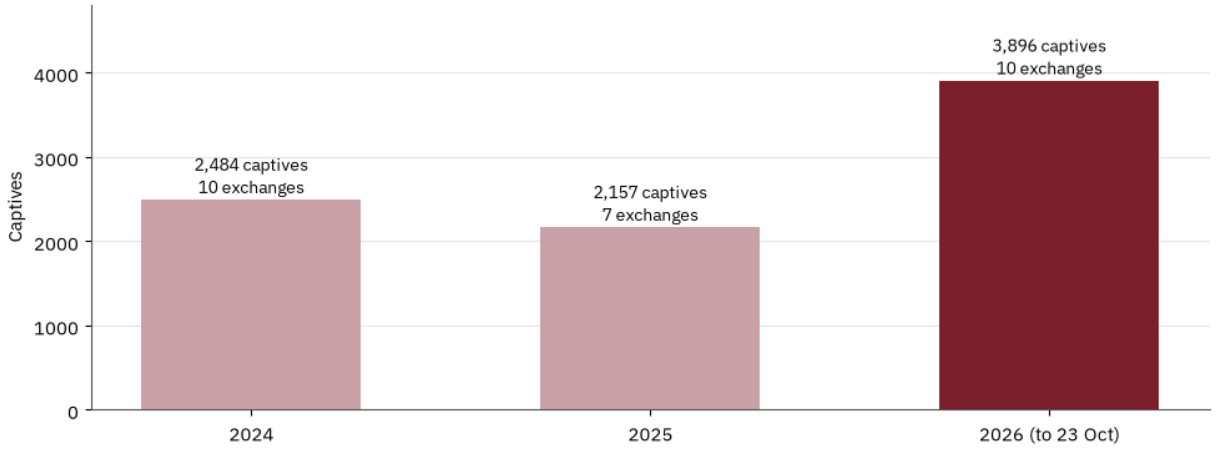
Points mark MoFA releases located for this paper (17 of 27 exchanges); the line joins them and does not show the dates of releases not located.

Trilateral Russia-Ukraine-United States rounds in Abu Dhabi: January, February and November 2026. Sources: MoFA 2024b to 2026k.

Figure 1. Captives exchanged between Russia and Ukraine through UAE mediation, cumulative total as stated by MoFA

The 2026 series is faster and larger. Between 5 February and 23 October 2026 there were ten exchanges, an average of about 390 captives each, against about 308 in 2025 (EPIC calculations; Figure 2). The exchanges of 5 and 6 March 2026 released 1,000 captives over two days (MoFA 2026d). The April 2026 release put the total at "21 mediation efforts" (MoFA 2026e), and the October release called the latest "the 27th to date" (MoFA 2026k).

Figure 2. Captives exchanged through UAE mediation, by year, and number of exchanges



2024: cumulative total stated on 30 December 2024 after the tenth exchange since the start of 2024. 2025 and 2026: EPIC calculations as differences between stated totals (4,641 less 2,484; 8,537 less 4,641). 2026 runs to 23 October. Sources: MoFA 2024d; 2025d; 2026k.

Figure 2. Captives exchanged through UAE mediation, by year, and number of exchanges

3. From exchanges to hosting talks

The channel changed in January 2026. On 23 January MoFA welcomed the UAE's hosting of trilateral talks between Russia, Ukraine and the United States in Abu Dhabi (MoFA 2026a). The National reported a UAE statement that the talks built on the country's "prior role in hosting multiple rounds of Russia-Ukraine negotiations that resulted in approximately 17 successful prisoner-of-war exchange operations" (The National 2026). The figure of 17 matches the ordinal of the last exchange of 2025 in the MoFA record.

The exchange of 5 February 2026 coincided with the second round of trilateral talks in Abu Dhabi (MoFA 2026b). The exchanges of 5 and 6 March were the first that MoFA described as conducted "jointly with the United States of America" (MoFA 2026c; 2026d). In the March release, MoFA said the UAE was "drawing on its close partnerships and balanced relations with all parties" (MoFA 2026c).

The third round opened in Abu Dhabi on 10 November 2026 in the presence of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and MoFA described the talks as part of the UAE's support for US efforts (MoFA 2026l). The GCC Secretary General welcomed the round and commended the UAE's role (GCC Secretariat 2026). BBC News reported that the round, the first since February, ended with "no hint of any breakthroughs", although both sides confirmed that a large-scale prisoner exchange was in the works (BBC News 2026). Reuters reported that the two sides agreed in principle to a major exchange, which a US envoy called the "biggest humanitarian release of prisoners" of the war (Reuters 2026). On 14 November Ukraine's president said the exchange under discussion would involve 1,200 to 1,300 people from each side and described it as the "main outcome" of the talks (Anadolu Agency 2026).

4. What the record shows and what it leaves out

The MoFA record supports two findings. The UAE has run a sustained, repeated channel, with 27 exchanges across almost three years and exchanges in every quarter of 2026 to October. Both governments have accepted the UAE in a mediating role across that period, and the channel survived the start of direct talks, which might have displaced it. If an exchange on the scale described after the third round takes place, it would exceed the whole of 2025 in a single operation (EPIC calculation: 2,400 to 2,600 against 2,157).

The record is thinner on how the channel works. MoFA releases give numbers and attribute success to the trust of both parties; they do not describe the negotiating process or the categories of captives. The sources reviewed for this paper do not cover exchanges arranged through other channels, so the UAE's share of all exchanges between Russia and Ukraine cannot be calculated. The joint UAE and US exchanges of March 2026 also make the attribution of individual exchanges to a single mediator less clear.

5. Implications for UAE strategy

The exchange channel gives the UAE a role in the war that rests on working relations with both governments and does not depend on taking a position on the conflict itself. MoFA's language of "balanced relations" describes this position (MoFA 2026c). Hosting three rounds of trilateral talks extends the role from humanitarian brokerage into the venue for political negotiation, alongside the United States as the convening power.

The risk for the channel lies in its link to the talks. If the third round's prisoner agreement is implemented, it will strengthen the case that Abu Dhabi can deliver results while a settlement remains out of reach. If it stalls, the exchange track may become hostage to the political track for the first time since 2024. Publishing a consolidated list of past exchanges, with dates and numbers, would put the full official record in one place and allow independent comparison with the parties' own reporting.

6. Limitations

The record is compiled from the mediator's own releases and has not been checked against Russian or Ukrainian government figures. Releases for nine individual mediations were not located. The paper does not assess the conduct of the war or the substance of the security proposals discussed in the trilateral talks.

References

Anadolu Agency. 2026. "Zelenskyy Says Ukraine, Russia Discuss Prisoner Swap Involving 1,200-1,300 People from Each Side." 14 November 2026. https://www.aa.com.tr/en/russia-ukraine-war/zelenskyy-says-ukraine-russia-discuss-prisoner-swap-involving-1-200-1-300-people-from-each-side/4125097 (accessed 17 November 2026).

BBC News. 2026. "Russia-Ukraine Talks Turn to Post-war Security but End without Breakthrough." 11 November 2026. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ck792we7zrz4o (accessed 17 November 2026).

Gulf Cooperation Council Secretariat General. 2026. "HE GCCSG Welcomes the Launch of the Third Round of Trilateral Talks between Russia, Ukraine, and the United States in Abu Dhabi." 10 November 2026. https://www.gcc-sg.org/en/MediaCenter/News/Pages/news-2026-11-10-4.aspx (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA (UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs). 2024a. "Success of UAE Mediation to Exchange Captives between Russia and Ukraine." 3 January 2024. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2024/1/3/3-12-2024-uae-mediation (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2024b. "230 Captives Released Following the Seventh UAE Mediation Effort between Russia and Ukraine." 24 August 2024. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2024/8/24/24-8-2024-uae-russia (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2024c. "206 Captives Released Following Eighth UAE Mediation between Russia and Ukraine." 14 September 2024. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2024/9/14/14-9-2024-uae-ukraine (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2024d. "UAE Mediation Efforts Succeed with New Exchange of 300 Captives between Russia and Ukraine." 30 December 2024. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2024/12/30/30-12-2024-uae-russia (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2025a. "Largest Exchange Since Outbreak of Conflict between Russia and Ukraine, UAE Mediation Efforts Succeed with New Exchange of 538 Captives." 19 April 2025. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2025/4/19/19-4-2025-uae-russia (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2025b. "UAE Mediation Efforts Succeed with New Exchange of 410 Captives between Russia and Ukraine." 6 May 2025. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2025/5/6/6-5-2025-uae-russia (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2025c. "UAE Mediation Efforts Succeed with New Exchange of 168 Captives between Russia and Ukraine." 14 August 2025. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2025/8/14/14-4-2025-uae-russia (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2025d. "UAE Mediation Efforts Succeed with New Exchange of 292 Captives between Russia and Ukraine." 24 August 2025. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2025/8/24/24-8-2025-uae-ukraine-russia (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2026a. "Abdullah bin Zayed Welcomes UAE's Hosting of Trilateral Talks between Russia, Ukraine, and the United States." 23 January 2026. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2026/1/23/uae-russia-ukraine-united-states (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2026b. "Latest UAE Mediation Efforts Succeed with Exchange of 314 Captives between Russia and Ukraine." 5 February 2026. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2026/2/5/uae-russia (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2026c. "Latest UAE–US Mediation Efforts Succeed with Exchange of 400 Captives between Russia and Ukraine." 5 March 2026. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2026/3/5/uae-usa (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2026d. "Latest UAE–US Mediation Efforts Succeed for the Second Consecutive Day with Exchange of 600 Captives between Russia and Ukraine." 6 March 2026. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2026/3/6/uae-usa (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2026e. "Latest UAE Mediation Efforts Succeed with Exchange of 350 Captives between Russia and Ukraine." 11 April 2026. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2026/4/11/uae-russia (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2026f. "Latest UAE Mediation Efforts Succeed with Exchange of 386 Captives between Russia and Ukraine." 24 April 2026. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2026/4/24/uae-russia-ukraine (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2026g. "Latest UAE Mediation Efforts Succeed in Exchange of 410 Captives between Russia and Ukraine." 15 May 2026. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2026/5/15/uae-russia-and-ukraine (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2026h. "Latest UAE Mediation Efforts Succeed in Exchange of 370 Captives between Russia and Ukraine." 5 June 2026. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2026/6/5/uae-russia (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2026i. "Latest UAE Mediation Efforts Succeed in Exchange of 320 Captives between Russia and Ukraine." 26 June 2026. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2026/6/26/uae-russia-ukraine (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2026j. "Latest UAE Mediation Efforts Succeed in Exchange of 206 Captives between Russia and Ukraine." 19 August 2026. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2026/8/19/uae-russia-ukraine (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2026k. "Latest UAE Mediation Efforts Succeed in Exchange of 540 Captives between Russia and Ukraine." 23 October 2026. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2026/10/23/uae-russia-ukraine (accessed 17 November 2026).

MoFA. 2026l. "Abdullah bin Zayed Attends Launch of Third Round of Trilateral Talks between Russia, Ukraine, and United States in Abu Dhabi Today." 10 November 2026. https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2026/11/10/10-11-2026-uae-russia-ukraine-usa (accessed 17 November 2026).

Reuters. 2026. "Russia, Ukraine Reach Deal on Prisoner Swap as US Says Lack of Trust Holds Back Talks." 11 November 2026. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/us-russia-ukraine-start-second-day-abu-dhabi-peace-talks-2026-11-11/ (accessed 17 November 2026).

The National. 2026. "US Hails Progress at 'Historic' Talks with Russia and Ukraine in Abu Dhabi." 24 January 2026. https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/uae/2026/01/24/us-ukraine-russia-talks-in-abu-dhabi-conclude/ (accessed 17 November 2026).

Dated source log

Date checked	Key	Route	Status
17 Nov 2026	MoFA 2024a to 2026l (20 releases)	Opened	Retrieved; each dated on page (3 Jan 2024 to 10 Nov 2026)
17 Nov 2026	The National 2026	Opened	Retrieved; dated 24 Jan 2026
17 Nov 2026	BBC News 2026	Opened	Retrieved; dated 11 Nov 2026

Date checked	Key	Route	Status
17 Nov 2026	Reuters 2026	Opened	Retrieved; dated 11 Nov 2026
17 Nov 2026	Anadolu Agency 2026	Opened	Retrieved; dated 14 Nov 2026
17 Nov 2026	GCC Secretariat 2026	Opened	Retrieved; dated 10 Nov 2026
17 Nov 2026	MoFA releases for mediations 2 to 6, 9 and 11 to 13	Searched	Not located; individual sizes not reported

Calculations by EPIC

- 2025 captives: 4,641 - 2,484 = 2,157 over 7 mediations (11th to 17th); average 308.
- 2026 captives to 23 Oct: 8,537 - 4,641 = 3,896 over 10 mediations (18th to 27th); average 390.
- Gaps: 4,641 + 314 = 4,955 (no exchange between 24 Aug 2025 and 5 Feb 2026); 5,955 + 350 = 6,305 (no exchange between 6 Mar and 11 Apr 2026).
- Prospective exchange: 1,200 to 1,300 from each side = 2,400 to 2,600 captives, against 2,157 in 2025.

Cite as: EPIC Research Team (2026). The Abu Dhabi Channel: UAE Mediation between Russia and Ukraine (EPIC-PP-2026-048). EPIC – Emirati Perspectives and Insight Centre. https://epicuae.org/research/abu-dhabi-channel.html
Licence: CC BY 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), except where otherwise noted. Third-party data remain under their own licences.