

# Ukraine and the Middle East: A year since Russia's invasion





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## INTRODUCTION

**F**or much of the past 20 years, some of the world's worst conflicts have been concentrated in the Middle East and North Africa.

The invasion of Iraq, Libya's collapse, Syria's civil war, the ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, the war in Yemen, proxy conflicts involving Iran, and the rise and fall of non-state armed groups are among the regional events and issues that have dominated global news and geopolitics.

However, Feb. 24 marks the first anniversary of Russian tanks rolling into Ukraine and now it is Europe, historically the scene of the most barbarous conflicts of the modern era, that is once again host to the most intense military clashes in the world.

Understandably, the focus of the world has been on the battlefield and the debates in the US and Europe about which types of weapons systems should be provided to Ukraine. The emphasis on the latter has shifted from providing just enough help to ensure Kyiv does not lose the war, to potentially giving it the opportunity to win it.

In Russia, meanwhile, the conflict reportedly has led to an exodus of about 1 million citizens.<sup>1</sup>



Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky gave a press conference after a round-table meeting during an EU summit in Brussels, on Feb. 9, 2023. AFP

Yet the ripples from the conflict have traveled far around the world, undermining the foundations of international relations and even engulfing the Middle East and North Africa region.

## COLD WAR 2.0?

Following a UN General Assembly vote on the crisis in March, 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky praised those states who had, in his view, "chosen the right side of history."<sup>2</sup>

Both Washington and Moscow are angling for influence over which side Middle Eastern states are on when it comes to Ukraine.



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Russian FM Sergei Lavrov met with his Saudi counterpart Prince Faisal bin Farhan in Riyadh on June 1, 2022, during the former's visit to the GCC. AFP

However, the reality is far more nuanced than either side would like.

The Russian narrative is that Ukraine is a regional conflict triggered by aggressive NATO expansionism, and that Moscow's allies in the Middle East should be understanding of what it is trying to do.

Russian authorities have also been at pains to paint a picture of the wider US withdrawal from the Middle East, promoting the idea that America can no longer be trusted as an ally — as demonstrated most recently by its abandonment of the government in Afghanistan toward the end of 2021.

However, while the US might no longer have the presence or intentions it once had in the region, it still has a much larger footprint and greater geopolitical clout than Russia.

The latter, on the other hand, has the advantage of Putin's two decades in office and the personal connections that come with that. Moscow has always adopted a more realpolitik, or practical, approach to the region, in contrast to Western approaches focusing on democracy and human rights that are undermined by accusations of hypocrisy and double standards.

The reality is that neither the US nor Russia are the same superpowers they were when they bestrode the world order in the decades immediately after the Second World War.

In 1961, we saw the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement, which today has a membership of 120 states and is the second-biggest grouping of countries behind the UN itself.<sup>3</sup>

Yet there is unlikely to be a similar formal grouping of states in response to the events in Ukraine, with regard to which most Middle Eastern states are refusing to align with any particular state or strategy. Strategic neutrality is the name of the game — and it is a much easier game to play in those countries that are major energy exporters, at a time when energy supplies have become a central component of the wider conflict beyond Ukraine's borders.

Ukraine's main needs are for money, weapons and other forms of military support. Its allies, meanwhile, look to the Middle East for diplomatic support and a willingness to fall in line with military and energy policies designed to heap pressure on Moscow.

Russia, protected by its UN Security Council veto, might be less interested in diplomatic support from the region, but maintaining its trade and military links is crucial if it is to prevent the Western-led sanctions policy from causing too much harm to its economy.

That said, diplomatic pressure is most definitely in play, through both UN institutions and a series of high-level visits





Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman met with US President Joe Biden in Jeddah on July 15, 2022. AFP

harkiv, the second largest city in Ukraine, and its outskirts were the target of heavy Russian shelling in 2022. AFP



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from world leaders, including US President Joe Biden's trip to Saudi Arabia in July 2022;<sup>4</sup> Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's visit to the Middle East in May 2022;<sup>5</sup> and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's tour of the region in January 2023.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, strategic neutrality allows states in the region to host all sides and demonstrate their own autonomy. Türkiye, for instance, is a NATO member and has the second-largest army in the alliance, yet it has played this neutral role deftly to date, using its good offices to bring about the deal that allowed grain exports from Ukraine to resume, to the benefit of the region at large.

It has also closed the Black Sea to military vessels and urged all sides to respect the 1936 Montreux Convention<sup>7</sup>, which allows Türkiye to limit access through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles in times of war.

Other states in the region have also stayed true to a policy of strategic neutrality despite having much closer relationships with the US.

Israel has promised to provide Ukraine with "life-saving defensive equipment"<sup>8</sup> but is not supplying offensive weaponry. In April, 2022, it supported the UN General Assembly vote to suspend Russia's membership of the UN Human Rights Council, whereas Saudi Arabia abstained.

In October, Saudi Arabia supported a General Assembly vote to condemn Russia's "attempted illegal annexation" of four partially occupied regions in Ukraine, but also spearheaded an OPEC+ decision



*Most Middle Eastern states are refusing to align with any particular state or strategy.*

to slash oil production, despite US pressure not to do so.

This is "100 percent a balancing act," Dina Esfandiary, an adviser to the Middle East and North Africa program at the International Crisis Group think tank, told Germany's international broadcaster Deutsche Welle. "They are balancing between two giants."<sup>9</sup>

### TAKING SIDES

Few states in the region have thrown in their lot with either of the two warring parties but, unsurprisingly, given its reliance upon Russian support, Syria is an exception.

The Syrian regime's loyalty to Moscow has been demonstrated not only by voting against all resolutions on Ukraine at the UN, but also by signaling that it would send fighters to join the Russian troops. Reports in March last year suggested that Syria's military was offering payments of \$3,000 a month<sup>10</sup> — up to 50 times the normal monthly salary for a Syrian soldier — to those prepared to make the trip. There has to date been little evidence of this happening on a scale that might affect the military balance on the ground in Ukraine.

Interestingly, such overt positioning by Damascus does not seem to have altered the delicate balance of armed actors inside Syria itself. Russia appears happy to compartmentalize its relations with the US in Syria and, despite the two countries' forces facing off in the northeast of the country, nothing drastic has happened. Indeed, at the







Russian President Vladimir Putin met with his Syrian counterpart Bashar Assad in Sochi on May 17, 2018. AFP

start of this year, Moscow chose not to veto an extension of a UN resolution allowing the delivery of aid to northwestern Syria,<sup>11</sup> despite fears the issue would fall foul of Ukraine-related politics — a decision that proved to have huge ramifications following the devastating earthquake that hit parts of southern Turkiye and northern Syria on Feb. 6.

Iran's position might be seen as mirroring that of Syria, especially in light of a \$140 million deal in which Tehran agreed to supply combat drones to Moscow. Yet there have been reports that Iran is backpedaling on the deal and, with the prospect of a revival of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, still in the air, it has good reason not to throw its lot in with Moscow.

### THE ARMS DILEMMA

Iran's position highlights another of the policy challenges arising from the conflict in Ukraine: If strategic neutrality is the sensible choice, how do trade, energy and military relations fit into that stance?

Countries whose military forces use Russian tanks and artillery cannot simply pivot and shop elsewhere. The challenges facing the Ukrainian military illustrate the difficulties involved in transitioning from one system to another.

In 2015, 36 percent of all Russian arms

exports went to MENA countries.<sup>12</sup> More recent figures, from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, estimate that Russia exported about \$600 million of arms to the region over the past two years.<sup>13</sup>

Countries such as Algeria and Iraq rely heavily on Russian hardware. In the mid-2010s, Egypt bought more military equipment from Moscow than at any time since the 1970s.

Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict allowed it to showcase various new military systems and, in a speech, President Vladimir Putin described his Syrian campaign as "a more effective training for the country's military than drills."<sup>14</sup>

In 2017, Russia began collaborating with the UAE on the development of the state-of-the-art Sukhoi Su-75 Checkmate fighter, but the conflict in Ukraine, and the associated international sanctions, have seemingly put the venture on ice. At the moment, it is difficult to see Russia having a high profile at upcoming arms fairs in the region.

But if Syria was a showcase for the effectiveness of Russian weaponry, the war in Ukraine could highlight its weaknesses, particularly in terms of tanks and associated armor.

### THE TRADE-OFF

Speaking in January on Radio Davos, a

podcast by the World Economic Forum, Gabrielius Landsbergis, Lithuania's Minister of Foreign Affairs, said that the conflict in Ukraine "touches every region in the world. It touches every country, one way or another"<sup>15</sup>.

There are certainly clear winners and losers in the MENA region in terms of the economic fallout from the war. The winners are those with thriving energy-export sectors. Qatar, for instance, in November agreed a 15-year deal to supply Germany with liquefied natural gas, beginning in 2026<sup>16</sup>.

The International Monetary Fund predicts that oil-exporting states in the Middle East will make an additional \$1.3 trillion in revenues over the next four years, after the price of oil jumped from \$70 to \$120 a barrel immediately after Russia's invasion, although it subsequently dropped back to around the \$80 mark<sup>17</sup>.

The losers are those who have found that a squeezed energy market and rising global inflation is further undermining their ability to maintain subsidies for basic food items.

About a third of the world's wheat comes from Russia and Ukraine, and some Middle Eastern states had come to rely on those two countries for more than half of their imports. Egypt, for example, is dependent on them for about 80 per cent of its imports.

Lebanon was already in an economic downward spiral and the war in Ukraine has added to its commodities costs. Immediately after the Russian invasion, amid widespread panic-buying, Lebanese wheat importers stopped placing orders on the global market and started rationing supplies to supermarkets<sup>18</sup>.

The Black Sea grain export deal in July eased some of the fears in Lebanon but there can be little doubt that the conflict has made a bad situation there worse by stalling growth and accelerating inflation. Indeed, at the start of this year Lebanon removed the state subsidy on infant formula, the latest casualty of the nation's economic crisis.

### ATTENTION-DEFICIT SYNDROME

Looking at the effects of the conflict in Ukraine on the MENA region 12 months on, the themes of strategic neutrality and economic winners and losers are clear. What is not so clear is whether these dynamics will shape the coming 12 months in a rapidly changing conflict.

There is talk of spring offensives by both Russia and Ukraine on the news agenda, and the decision by several Western states to supply Kyiv with battle tanks is part of



A Russian military police APC along a road near the northeastern Syrian town of Amuda in Hasakeh, during a joint patrol between Russian forces and Syrian Kurdish Asayish internal security forces on Oct. 24, 2019. AFP

Russia partnered with the UAE in 2017 to develop the Sukhoi Su-75 Checkmate fighter. Image: Anna Zvereva/Wikimedia/CC BY-SA 2.0

a pattern of a continuing escalation of the stakes in the conflict.

The Kremlin expressed alarm this month that the "Doomsday Clock," introduced in 1947 by The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists to illustrate how close humanity has come to the end of the world<sup>19</sup>, had edged closer to midnight than ever.

If the escalation in Ukraine continues, the strategic neutrality that many states have adopted might be harder to maintain. In November, Michael Turner, at the time the top Republican on the US House Intelligence Committee, said he was "personally disappointed" that Israel had opted not to supply Ukraine with weapons<sup>20</sup>.

There is another, perhaps more insidious, consequence of the conflict in Ukraine: The fact that so much of the world's political bandwidth is being taken up by it. The levels of attention-deficit syndrome triggered by the events in Ukraine are evidenced by the fact that between

January and the end of September 2022, Ukraine received five times more media coverage than the total combined reporting on the 10 worst conflict-affected countries in the whole of 2021<sup>21</sup>.

Lebanon's financial collapse, the rising violence in the West Bank, the prospect of famine in Syria and the potential for Iran to acquire nuclear weapons are among the significant regional issues that have been put in the global shade as a result of the events in Ukraine.

In recent years, the good offices of Middle Eastern countries have proved hugely valuable — for example, Oman's role in the Iran nuclear deal, Qatar's in negotiations with the Taliban, and Turkiye's in the Black Sea grain-export agreement. So it seems logical to suggest that states that enjoy good relations with Moscow, Washington and Kyiv should adopt a more active form of diplomacy,

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