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Study



Russian-Ukrainian War:
Shifting Security, Military, and Economic
Perspectives in the Middle East

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Executive summary:

The Russian-Ukrainian war has internationalized the repercussions of the crisis to include geographical areas elsewhere the European continent, where the battles between Russia, Ukraine, and the West at large take place. The war continues to have complex ramifications on many regions of the world. The geopolitical, security, military, and economic impacts, both medium and long-term, have become a tangible reality that can be observed in all regions, especially in under developing countries.

In the light of this complicated war that's remains nearly two years and aftermath the COVID-19 crisis, the Middle East is undergoing rapid and significant changes. The region is re-evaluating its security and political alliances. since the early 20th century, many countries in the MENA region, have been influenced by U.S. and British political and security's vision. There's a growing and significant move towards more independent policies, which these countries are trying to adapt to a shifting world order. This includes a strategy to diversify their partnerships, both regionally and globally.

While the U.S. is showing a relative withdrawal from the Middle East — even though the current U.S. administration doesn't seem keen on pulling out from some countries like Iraq, seeing it as leverage against Iran and tied to the ongoing Vienna talks to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the nuclear deal) — its diminished role, especially in resolving the Syrian, Yemeni, and Libyan crises, has prompted Middle Eastern and North African countries to adapt. They are finding ways to cope with the current security dynamics by defending their borders and sovereignty and filling the void left by the reduced American oversight.

Countries in the Middle East are recalibrating their security and military strategies, envisioning a multipolar world. They're forging ties with emerging global partners, notably China and Russia, who have recently increased their presence in the Arab region. The aim is to diversify alliances, especially given the diminishing role of the U.S., which had historically been the region's primary security guarantor. This past American involvement is evident in security agreements with nations like the Gulf states, where U.S. military bases were established to rally Arab and Gulf resources against potential Iranian threats.

This document aims to analyse the impacts of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the Middle East, addressing the hypothesis of the region benefiting from an emerging multipolar world order because of shifting global and regional power dynamics. The analysis delves into primary and secondary changes that influence the policies of the region's most pivotal countries. These new dynamics and principles are gradually ending confrontational stances among regional system stakeholders and are fostering quality partnerships that are mutually beneficial.

Keywords:

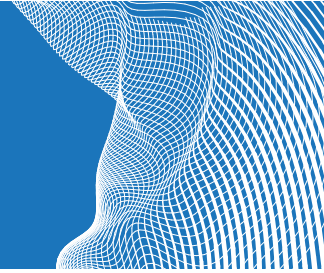
The Middle East - international axes - independent policies - major and secondary variables - regional factors - international alliances - multipolar world - patterns of external behaviour - military, security and economic repercussions.

INTRODUCTION

The ripple effects of the Russian-Ukrainian war, while rooted in Europe, vastly outstrip the confines of the continent's geography. The conflict, though between two European countries, has cascaded into geopolitical, security, military, and economic domains, reaching far and wide across the globe. The Middle East, a region sensitive to such tremors, is experiencing pivotal changes in its central structures—shifts in perception and the adoption of new policies by its countries. These shifts indicate a significant departure from past political trajectories. Now, these countries are engaging with global and regional alliances in new and unconventional ways. This shift underscores the importance of a structural and systemic change in the security perspectives and strategies of the regional states, particularly the Gulf Arab states. They are inching towards closer relations with powers like Russia and China, and are actively pursuing a place in a multipolar world, stepping away from reliance on the U.S. security umbrella.

The Russian-Ukrainian war has contributed to solidifying the reflection of changes in the international system onto the regional system's nature. The major powers, particularly the United States, are distancing themselves from the crises in the Middle East, most notably the Syrian, Yemeni, and Libyan crises. This has compelled the countries of the region to confront their destiny and defend their borders against real threats and challenges they face. Moreover, they are increasingly relying on new mechanisms and various types of alliances with other international actors that, until recently, could not penetrate the Arab region. This is occurring as Washington, which used to serve as the protective shield and primary sponsor for the countries in the region, particularly through security agreements with the Gulf states and by establishing military bases in the Gulf region to mobilize Arab and Gulf capabilities to confront Iranian expansion, seems to be redefining its role.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE:



This paper tackles a problem of profound scholarly interest due to the Russian-Ukrainian war being one of the most pivotal events shaping the global landscape in the last two years. It stands as a prominent crisis on the international stage post-Cold War. The crux of this study is to explore how this conflict has shifted the security outlook within the Middle East. It delves into assessing the potential effects this war might have on the strategic decisions of Middle Eastern nations, their crisis management strategies, shifts in international alliances, and the redefinition of regional players' roles. The research also aims to grasp the main and secondary factors that drive the transformation of active states' behaviours and foreign policies in the region and their global partnerships.

Furthermore, the paper scrutinizes the political, military, economic, and geopolitical fallout of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the Middle East, seeking alternatives for those nations traditionally allied with Western powers, especially the United States, whose agreements have somewhat shaken the region's security structure, even amidst the presence of vast military bases in the Arabian Gulf.

The tentative thaw in relations between certain Middle Eastern nations and Iran, or rather, the dialing down of hostilities, alongside renewed dialogues with Turkey and a constructive approach towards Russia, is subtly eroding the bedrock of reasons for aligning closely with Washington. This shift could lead to a waning of America's relative sway in the region. It's a significant turn, given that the U.S. has long leveraged the narrative of countering Iranian influence and expansionism as key drivers for its Middle Eastern engagement and safeguarding its stakes within the Gulf nations.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

This research endeavors to unpack a multitude of queries concerning how profoundly the Russian-Ukrainian conflict reverberates through the Middle East. It pivots on a series of essential suppositions as follows:

The direct impact hypothesis: It postulates a direct influence of the war on the national strategies of countries in the region, with a particular focus on military and security aspects, as well as a shift in foreign policy priorities. Additionally, this paper considers the alterations in the external behaviour of these countries, which includes the adoption of new alliances with major powers or at least seeking to find out an approach towards new partners. This is exemplified by the budding rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Turkey's growing ties with Arab states, and the development of advanced partnerships with Russia and China.

The non-direct impact hypothesis: The study evaluates the hypothesis that there is no direct impact from the conflict, with countries in the region continuing to follow the same security and political systems. It also considers the persistence of traditional alliances, particularly with the United States.

The uncertainty security hypothesis: The study also attempts to test the hypothesis of security uncertainty associated with non-oil-producing Middle Eastern countries that suffer from acute structural crises, as well as the fate of collapsed states like Yemen, Libya, and Syria.

Testing the **hypothesis of political and economic collapse** in the developing countries of the Middle East amidst the Ukrainian war, and the margin of manoeuvre for oil-rich states despite the surge in oil prices.

Testing the **hypothesis that Middle Eastern countries could benefit from the emergence of a multipolar world order**, potentially making independence from Washington a characteristic of the upcoming phase.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was based on a synthesis of methodologies, with the descriptive approach being of particular importance. This involved an examination of the phenomenon in question, with an emphasis on detailing and diagnosing the events observed. Additionally, the research employed a historical perspective, reviewing key foundational events leading up to the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Also, the structural and functional approach was employed in interpreting the primary and secondary variables that may encompass the substructures of the regional security system in the Middle East, as well as the impact of changes in the international system's structure on the evolution of sub-systems in the researched areas. This takes into account that the region is not a coherent and integrated geographical area in terms of facing international crises, even though there are similarities in the nature of the authoritarian regimes in power.

The use of the systems approach in the study allows for an understanding of the inputs of the Russian-Western conflict and its effect on the outputs of the Middle Eastern countries, which have started to adopt different policies aimed at diversifying partnerships rather than entrenching under American patronage. This is certainly a result of the change in the policies and strategies of the major powers towards the region.

FIRST: THE SHIFT IN POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES AND THE FORMATION OF NEW SYSTEMS:

It's certainly too early to fully assess and witness the entire impact of the Russian-Ukrainian War on the conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. Yet, it is evident that its consequences will be multifaceted, especially in the realm of establishing new security frameworks and patterns. Although its effects may be limited in the military and security domains, from a political standpoint, it is observable that the international and regional players in the conflict have positioned themselves against each other and the wider global stage, which in turn affects the dynamics of political alliances.¹

Prior to the Russian-Ukrainian War, the Middle East was navigating a relatively new landscape shaped by regional de-escalation efforts over the past two years. This shift saw the restoration and redirection of Turkish-Arab relations² and a cooling of Saudi-Iranian tensions, which eased significantly after both countries engaged in Iraq-mediated bilateral talks. These talks ultimately led to a noticeable thaw in diplomacy and the reestablishment of diplomatic ties. Furthermore, the region witnessed changes in U.S. policy with President Joe Biden taking office, including renewed negotiations with Iran aimed at reviving the nuclear agreement. The U.S.-Saudi relationship faced challenges, notably after the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and became further complicated by Saudi Arabia's role in pushing for higher oil prices within OPEC+5, which the Biden administration views as Saudi backing of Russia, potentially undermining the effect of Western economic sanctions on Moscow.

¹ The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa, International Crisis Group, 14 April 2022: [link](#)

² After a decade of strained relations in the Arab region, Turkey, under President Erdogan, has recently initiated efforts to rebuild ties with key regional players like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel. This includes opening dialogue channels and breaking the ice with Cairo and Damascus. This shift is seen as Turkey's new approach to the region in the post-Arab Spring years.

The Saudis anticipate stronger U.S. backing for the kingdom national security, including assistance with their proactive measures to gear up for a future less dependent on hydrocarbon energy. However, they sense a shortfall in the support they urgently need. The U.S.'s lack of a robust response to the September 2019 missile and drone attacks on Saudi Aramco facilities, which are widely attributed to Iran, marked a pivotal moment for Saudi Arabia, likely extinguishing any remaining Saudi expectations that the Trump-led administration would foster an improved relationship with Washington or bolster their national security framework. Saudi Arabia's oil pricing strategies now seem to operate independently of U.S. political interests, focusing instead on preventing oil prices from dropping to levels they deem unacceptable. In doing so within this tightly-knit partnership, Saudi Arabia's indifference to U.S. political agendas appears to be a move to prioritize its own strategic interests.³

Certainly, the U.S. presence in the Middle East extends beyond the quest for energy resources⁴; it largely aligns with the strategic shift towards Asia and the focus on "great power competition," particularly with China. The Gulf region, endowed with crucial energy assets and strategic maritime routes, continues to be a decisive competitive edge for the U.S. and a mainstay of its global influence, especially regarding relations with powers in South and East Asia. For the U.S. to effectively leverage this advantage, a primary local ally is essential. Among the regional players, Saudi Arabia emerges as the most capable of fulfilling this role, given Iraq's challenged governance, Iran's position as a challenger to the established order, and the lack of comparable strategic weight in population, geographic spread, and economic significance among other Gulf nations.

³ Husein Ibish, Why the U.S.-Saudi Crisis is So Bad and So Unnecessary, Oct 14, 2022, [link](#)

⁴ Jon Alterman and Husein Ibish, The Middle East's Coming Centrality: A Conversation With Jon Alterman, October 4, 2022 [link](#)

While the Russian-Ukrainian war has not impacted the trajectory of regional de-escalation, its repercussions have been notably evident in other contexts—from the dynamics in Syria and the Iranian nuclear negotiations to the reshaping of Turkey and the Gulf's relations with the West, as well as the tension between Iranian-Western and Israeli-Russian relations ⁵.

On the other hand, understanding the limits of Russia's role in the region at large, and particularly in countries choked by conflicts, tops these matters. Russia, which seeks to assert itself in the global order as a major power challenging the dominance of the United States and its allies, sees the Middle East as a suitable field to showcase its various power components. This approach has been reinforced by Moscow's conviction that the Soviet Union's withdrawal from the region during Mikhail Gorbachev's presidency signaled its collapse as a superpower⁶.

Furthermore, one cannot overlook the link between Russia's return to the Middle East and the developments in the Black Sea since 2014, specifically following Moscow's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and its organization of a referendum on the status of the peninsula, which resulted in its official annexation in March 2014. Russia has sought to establish good relations with Middle Eastern countries, aiming to attract investments from the region, break its regional isolation, and counter the international sanctions that were imposed on it at that time. Between the 2014 crisis and the current situation in Ukraine, Moscow's goals in the Middle East remain firm and unchanged, which dispels any predictions of an imminent Russian withdrawal from the region in light of these developments⁷.

In the political arena, the Middle East is simmering with pivotal changes. Many countries in the region are mired in civil wars, and generally, the influential parties are avoiding overt alignment with either Russia or Ukraine and the West.

⁵ Mahmoud Alloush, The Ukraine War Has Reshaped the Middle East, Al Jazeera Net, February 28, 2023, [link](#)

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Pressuring complications: The effects of the Ukrainian war on the paths of conflicts in the Middle East, May 30, 2022, Rawabet Center for Research and Strategic Studies, [link](#)

They are cautiously hedging their strategic bets and choices for fear of misjudgment or miscalculations that could adversely affect their standing due to potential outcomes of the war. Only the Syrian and Iranian regimes, along with Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, have expressed their explicit and direct solidarity with Russia. Within the United Nations, three Arab countries have somewhat opposed the Russian intervention. Kuwait has vehemently rejected the Russian invasion and supported a UN resolution to stop the war alongside 80 other nations. Lebanon has echoed this stance; its foreign ministry, with the onset of the Russian military operation in Ukraine, condemned the invasion and called for Russia to "immediately" cease its actions. Lebanon also supported the UN resolution on March 2, 2022, condemning Russian intervention. Libya condemned the invasion as well, describing it as a "violation of international law."

Amidst the regional turmoil, Egypt has taken a nuanced stand, affirming the UN resolution on March 2 yet refraining from endorsing economic sanctions against Russia, favoring a rapid peaceful resolution. Qatar also supported the resolution, urging restraint and diplomatic dialogue to defuse tensions. The UAE, during its Security Council presidency, chose to abstain from the vote condemning Russia's actions, instead focusing on mediating efforts between the conflicting parties to work towards a solution.

Saudi Arabia supported the UN resolution regarding the conflict, and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has signified the kingdom's willingness to mediate between Russia and Ukraine, holding 2 phone conversations with both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to discuss potential pathways to resolution. Morocco took a stance of abstention on the UN resolution, reaffirming its commitment to the principle of non-use of force and the promotion of peaceful settlement initiatives for conflicts. Meanwhile, Tunisia supported the UN resolution but also emphasized that peaceful means remain the only and best way to put an end to the escalation.

Three Arab nations chose to distance themselves from the conflict. The Palestinian Authority comes first, as Algeria, which abstained from voting on the UN resolution and did not issue a statement regarding the conflict, with the spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mohamed Aboudi, declaring that his country refuses to be a party to the dispute. The third Arab nation that adopted the same position is Iraq⁸.

Numerous nations in the region, including those of the Arabian Gulf, are treading a tightrope as they seek to curry favor with both Russia and Western countries, attempting to mediate as Israel has done. The endorsement of Western choices, as seen in the United Nations General Assembly vote condemning the Russian invasion, often results from Western diplomatic pressure—as was the case with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates—rather than voluntary agreement with those policies and decisions. This suggests that the Middle East is navigating a delicate phase generally characterized by stepping out of the shadow of dominant powers and engaging with all significant regional actors towards de-escalating crises and employing soft power to achieve self-reliance goals at the military and operational levels.

On another note, the repercussions of the Russian-Ukrainian war on Syria and the related regional policies can be narrowed down to four main variables:

- The relative decline of the Russian military presence in Syria, which has presented Iran with an opportunity to bolster its influence in the country.
- The growing strain in Russian-Israeli relations increasingly limits Israel's ability to continue its efforts to target the Iranian military presence in Syria. Turkey's policy towards Damascus has shifted due to the growing
- partnership with Russia.
- the increasing Arab trend to re-establish relations with Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria.

⁸ The war in Ukraine: Have the Arab countries changed their positions a year after the Russian invasion?, France 24, February 17, 2023: [link](#)



Despite the fact that the Russian-Ukrainian war has reinforced regional trajectories that were already in place before the war, its profound impact is most notably evident in the Gulf's relations with the United States, as well as Iran's relations with the West and Russia.⁹

Because of the depletion of diplomatic efforts and the donor community's fatigue from indirectly engaging in the Russian-Ukrainian war, the level of interest in the region's crises, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Lebanon's economic collapse, the growing threat of famine in Syria, or the humanitarian disaster in Yemen has essentially reduced. It is likely that interest in these crises by international actors will diminish as they are preoccupied with urgent and pressing events unfolding in Europe¹⁰.

⁹ Mahmoud Alloush, *The Ukraine War Has Reshaped the Middle East*, Ibid

¹⁰ *The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa*, idem.

SECOND: THE RUSSIAN EQUATION AND LIMITED INFLUENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST:

Despite Russia's considerable progress in expanding its political and military influence in the Middle East over the last decade, its ability to secure major, long-term benefits for itself remains limited by its range of resources and capabilities. In comparison with the economic influence wielded by powers like the United States, the European Union, and China, Russia's economic influence in the region is relatively minor. Therefore, Russia tends to engage in beneficial partnerships when regional players have the financial means to afford its assistance, or where it can depend on the extraction of natural resources like oil or minerals¹¹.

In the wake of its invasion of Ukraine, Moscow is attempting to harness any strategic gains it has made in the Middle East from its various interventions and the diplomatic leverage gained from its aid policy. Specifically, Russia has redeployed thousands of mercenaries from the WAGNER Group from Syria and Libya to eastern Ukraine, while also reportedly recruiting pro-Bashar al-Assad Syrian militias¹².

However, the impact of these developments, particularly their military significance in Ukraine, should not be overstated. The Kremlin employs private security firms and irregular groups like WAGNER in modern warfare. This group has the capacity to maneuver and adapt as a paramilitary force, engaging in combat with insurgents, guarding infrastructure for contracting states, supporting dictatorial regimes and warlords in unconventional battlefields in Africa and the Middle East. Concurrently, it aims to achieve economic gains, benefit from international investments, and plunder the resources of these countries in exchange for providing security services and aligning with certain dictatorial regimes.

¹¹ Frederic Wehrey, The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa, May 19, 2022, [link](#)

¹² Al Jazeera documentary reveals the secrets of Wagner's connection to the Kremlin and its violations in Syria and Central Africa, June 30, 2023, Al Jazeera Net, [link](#)



In the traditional warfare landscape of Ukraine, the WAGNER Group confronts an enemy that is not only better equipped and trained but has also been able to significantly demoralize the Russian regular forces over nearly two years of conflict. The combat environment there is distinct, with less emphasis on infantry skirmishes and more reliance on heavy artillery, missiles, and drone strikes.

Moreover, Moscow's enlistment of a substantial number of Syrians, whose numbers and actual deployment to Ukraine may have been overestimated and whose combat skills are deemed low and unprofessional, does not provide Russia with any substantial advantage. They are essentially easy targets for Ukrainian and Western forces.

On the other hand, Russia's strategic intent to keep WAGNER troops stationed in Libya serves to cement its influence there and poses a potential challenge to American and European policy strategies in that nation¹³.

¹³ Frederic Wehrey, The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa, 19 May 2022, [link](#)

THIRD: SECURITY AND GEOPOLITICAL REPERCUSSIONS:

Militarily, there have not been many changes that could lead to significant shifts in the current balance of power in the Middle East region. However, it may only be a matter of time before several military and security repercussions begin to take shape. Russian power projection has been limited to Syria and, indirectly, through the non-state WAGNER Group in Libya.

In Syria, the Russian understanding with Israel allowing the latter to target Iranian and Iran-backed assets remains in effect. While some WAGNER fighters in Libya appear to have returned to Russia, others remain stationed in military bases and barracks. However, changes can bring about effects of both the first and second order with greater force, potentially intensifying existing conflict dynamics, such as the escalation of military confrontations between Iran and Israel in theaters of operation that could encompass the entire region¹⁴.

On the military front, the regional implications of the Ukrainian war are beginning to manifest on multiple levels, with the clearest impact likely to be seen in Syria. This is due to several factors, including the reported recruitment of Syrian fighters to combat on behalf of one side in the Russian-Ukrainian war. If these reports are accurate, redeploying Syrian fighters, especially those loyal to Bashar al-Assad's regime, could create a security vulnerability, particularly in areas under Syrian government control. Furthermore, the combat capabilities of both Russian forces and those Syrian forces supported by Moscow might decline due to shortages of ammunition and spare parts needed for maintenance, in light of the closure of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to Russian ships.

¹⁴ The Impact of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on the Middle East and North Africa, International Crisis Group, 14 April 2022, [link](#)

Additionally, concerns are raised about the future of the ceasefire agreement in Idlib province, northwest Syria, reached in March 2020. The durability of this agreement is largely dependent on the relationship between Russia and Turkey. The worries stem from Ankara's actions, such as sending drones to Ukraine and closing the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to Russian warships. Therefore, there are fears that these Turkish positions might prompt Russia to escalate its military actions against the Turkish presence in northern Syria.

Unconfirmed reports suggest that some units of the "WAGNER" group and Syrian fighters loyal to Moscow have withdrawn from Libya and returned to Russia. However, considering Russia's strategic goals in Libya, Moscow may be inclined to continue using "WAGNER" forces in Libya to exert additional pressure on Europe across the southern Mediterranean¹⁵.

The extent to which the Gulf Arab states have adopted relatively neutral stances towards the Russian-Ukrainian war highlights their desire for increasing independence from Washington and their determination to assert this autonomy. In an increasingly multipolar world, the region's countries are striving to make the foreign policies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, oriented towards diversifying trade and security relationships in ways that ensure higher levels of independence and unity in sovereign external decision-making, independent of American tutelage. Practically, this involves strengthening relations with various global actors regardless of the intense international competition between powers, including the United States on one hand and Russia and China on the other¹⁶.

The GCC's reaction to Russia's aggression against Ukraine must be understood within a broader geopolitical context. Over several U.S. administrations, the Gulf Arab states have lost confidence in Washington's ability and willingness to act as a guarantor of an effective and enduring regional security system. Milestones of perceived U.S. administrative failure

¹⁵ Pressuring complications: The effects of the Ukrainian war on the paths of conflicts in the Middle East, May 30, 2022, Rawabet Center for Research and Strategic Studies, [link](#)

¹⁶ Goergio Cafiero, where has the Ukraine Conflict Left Gulf States? 22 Feb 2023, [link](#)

in addressing Middle Eastern issues have accumulated, starting with the Bill Clinton administration's unsuccessful mediation in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in the 1990s, the George W. Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq in 2003, the Barack Obama administration's stance on the Arab Spring revolutions and the Syrian crisis, the Donald Trump administration's reactions to the ongoing regional crises including the Yemeni conflict and the American response to the September 2019 attacks on Aramco, and the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan under the Joe Biden administration. These factors have contributed to shaping the Gulf Arab states' view of Washington as an unreliable partner in bolstering security and stability in the Middle East¹⁷.

Moreover, there are many areas in which the GCC members aim to continue their engagement with Russia despite Western pressures to sever these ties. The common interests of the Gulf states and Russia lie in the energy sector, where Russia and the GCC members of OPEC+ (which includes all Gulf Arab states except Bahrain and Qatar) maintain their cooperation and coordination as a bloc led by Riyadh and Moscow. Cooperation between the GCC states and Russia also spans banking, investment, tourism, and collaborative efforts in counterterrorism.

The Gulf Arab governments' abstention from condemning the Russian military cooperation with Iran in Ukraine underscores Moscow's success in maintaining positive relations with both Tehran and all GCC members. This balancing act in foreign policy has been a doctrine of Russian foreign policy in the Gulf region, where Moscow sees this subregion as a crucial stage for countering American influence. More than a year into the Ukrainian war, this balance in Russia-Gulf relations remains intact. However, as the Ukrainian war enters its second year and with indications that the Russian-Iranian accord is set to strengthen, the critical question remains whether this burgeoning alliance between Moscow and Tehran will lead to disputes and tensions between the GCC states and Russia¹⁸.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

FOURTH: ECONOMIC REPERCUSSIONS:

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has opened the doors to global crises in numerous areas, with food and energy being at the forefront. It has also prompted shifts in European policy and the characteristics of international relations.

Ukraine, a key country on the global food production map, has been severely affected by the war, which is reflected in significant impacts on the prices of food commodities in the global markets. This has threatened food supplies, posing a threat to food security, especially for developing countries. Political interventions through initiatives such as the Black Sea Grain Initiative and European measures via solidarity corridors and others, have significantly mitigated the war's repercussions on food levels.

On the other hand, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, energy prices, which had already been gradually rising in 2021 as life began to return to normal after the historic paralysis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, increased further. Consequently, it became imperative to seek possible economic solutions and alternatives, especially by the European Union and the G7 countries. The European and international measures, along with other factors, including a slowdown in the global economy and thus a decrease in energy demand, contributed to a noticeable reduction in energy prices¹⁹.

¹⁹ Jihad Al-Mallah: A YEAR ON THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE GLOBAL ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS, February 24, 2023, [link](#)

The rapid developments of the war in Ukraine and its negative consequences on the global economy have dealt a strong blow to the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, as this region is actually exposed to the repercussions of the transition due to the economic crisis. The Middle East is only about a thousand kilometers away from Ukraine if we imagine a straight line drawn from Ukraine to the countries of the region. Economically, some countries in the region also have a trade partnership with Ukraine and Russia. Therefore, the effects of the crisis will be tangible and clear - albeit to varying degrees - on the economies of the region. What is worrisome is that there could be negative multipliers on levels of food security and welfare across the region, in addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, disruption of supply chains, and internal problems specific to each country in the region.

Accordingly, we can summarize the main channels of the crisis's impact into five categories:

- Food price shocks (especially wheat).
- Increases in oil and gas prices.
- Investor risk aversion/tendency towards safer investments, which could affect the flow of private capital into emerging markets.
- Remittances from expatriates.
- Tourism²⁰.

Before the war, Russia and Ukraine accounted for more than a quarter of global wheat exports. The countries most vulnerable to the effects of price increases resulting from the war are those for whom wheat is a primary food source, rely on imports to meet their food security needs, and most of their wheat imports come from Ukraine and Russia. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), fifty countries depend on Russia and Ukraine for at least thirty percent of their wheat imports.

²⁰ Farid Belhaj, Growing Pressures: The War in Ukraine and Its Repercussions on MENA, World Bank Blogs, July 3, 2022, [link](#)

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, these countries include Lebanon, Egypt, Libya, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Tunisia, Iran, Jordan, and Morocco.²¹

The escalation in food prices is shaping both international and national policies, notably in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, where the FAO's Global Food Price Index has hit a 50-year high. In 2013, amid the Arab Spring's protests and regime shifts, the FAO Food Price Index soared to unprecedented levels in March 2022. This surge followed two years of steady increases driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Countries in the MENA region, being particularly susceptible to global food price fluctuations, face varied risks of food insecurity. The effectiveness of governmental responses to these risks, along with the cautious and limited international reactions, especially from major powers like the United States, depend on diverse factors and differ from country to another²².

Certainly, there are no winners in the Middle East from a devastating war like the one in Ukraine, but hydrocarbon-exporting countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Libya, and Algeria may see improvements in their public finance balances, external payment balances, and growth rates. Additionally, gas-exporting countries, in particular, are likely to experience a structural increase in demand from Europe, where the European Union authorities have expressed interest in diversifying their energy supply sources.

Non-oil-producing countries will likely face negative repercussions that could lead to additional social tensions. Regarding remittances, especially those sent by expatriates in the GCC countries, they will only partially offset the hydrocarbon shock (as in the case of Jordan and Egypt). Countries heavily reliant on tourism, such as Egypt (where Russians and Ukrainians constitute at least a third of incoming tourists), are expected to experience a downturn in this sector, with negative implications for employment rates and the balance of payments.

²¹ The importance of Ukraine and the Russian Federation for global agricultural markets and the risks associated with the current conflict," Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), March, 2022, [link](#)

²² FAO Food Price Index ends year with sharp decline," FAO, 12 January, 2012, [link](#)

Finally, the conflict in Ukraine will have a tangible and negative impact on several economies in the region, such as Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. These countries fundamentally rely on Ukraine and/or Russia for their food imports, especially wheat and grains. The crisis is expected to disrupt the supply chains of grains and oilseeds, increase food prices, and significantly raise local production costs in the agricultural sector. Decreased crop yields and incomes, particularly for small-scale farmers, will negatively affect livelihoods. This could especially impact the poorer and more needy groups who depend on agriculture for their livelihoods more than others²³.

In light of the economic fallout from the Russian-Ukrainian war, a significant portion of the populations in the Middle East and North Africa are facing the threat of food insecurity. For example, Egypt finds itself in a precarious position, as a majority of its population (88%)²⁴ depends on the government's bread rationing system for subsidized bread. Similarly, Lebanon is grappling with a dire economic and humanitarian crisis, with 82%²⁵ of its residents teetering on the edge of poverty.

Yemen and Syria host some of the most vulnerable and socio-economically fragile populations in the world. In Yemen, there are over 4 million internally displaced persons, and 67% of its population lives below the poverty line. In Syria, there are more than 6.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs)²⁶, with 90% of the population living below the poverty threshold. Consequently, the impact on food security and fuel costs is particularly severe for these countries. For instance, food prices in Syria were 37% higher in April 2022 compared to February of the same year, just one month following the onset of the war in²⁷Ukraine.

²³ Farid Belhaj, *Growing Pressures: The War in Ukraine and Its Repercussions on MENA*, Ibid.

²⁴ Michael Tanchum, *The Russia-Ukraine War has Turned Egypt's Food Crisis into an Existential Threat to the Economy*, 3 March, 2022, [link](#)

²⁵ Multidimensional poverty in Lebanon (2019-2021) Painful reality and uncertain prospects, UN, ESCWA, [link](#)

²⁶ Needs mount as conflict in Yemen rages on, 1 April 2022, [link](#)

²⁷ WFP Syria Situation Report, May 2022, [link](#)

Additionally, it is evident that the Middle East and North Africa region is economically impacted by the fallout of the war. However, it's noteworthy that the severity of the crisis varies depending on the economic strength of these countries, their demographic rates, their response level to potential food collapse, and the extent of government support to the population due to shortages and supply chain disruptions. For instance, Gulf countries, with their substantial oil and gas resources, are better positioned to overcome these challenges through the significant revenues they garner from the record-high prices of hydrocarbons.

While many Arab countries are facing economic difficulties due to the Ukrainian war and the preceding COVID-19 crisis, the steep rise in consumer goods prices, reduced purchasing power, failure of government policies to address economic decline, inflation, high unemployment rates, and weak investment and development rates could contribute to the possibility of social protests and unrest in these countries, similar to what occurred after the Arab Spring in 2011.

Meanwhile, many countries experiencing armed conflicts, such as Syria, Yemen, and Libya, remain at risk of complete collapse due to the weakness or absence of a central government, fragile and unstable economic infrastructures, and declining international humanitarian aid. Should the Russian-Ukrainian war persist, it could exacerbate the food crisis, increase poverty rates in these countries, and lead to higher levels of refugees and migration flows.

FIFTH: CAN MIDDLE EASTERN NATIONS GAIN FROM A MULTIPOLAR WORLD ORDER?

The developments in the Ukrainian crisis have revealed indications of an emerging shift in the global balance of power, even though the outcomes of the war remain unclear.

The first indication: A state of paralysis has emerged in international system institutions, like the United Nations Security Council and multilateral cooperation organizations, due to intense polarization and escalating conflict between the West and Russia, along with the increasing unease in China's positions and roles.

The second indication: Nations traditionally relying on soft power through economic influence, like Germany, Japan, and China, are beginning to incorporate political and military dimensions into their influence, aiming for a more balanced global role.

The third indication: A growing number of Arab countries, alongside many globally, are increasingly discontented as major powers and international bodies focus primarily on the Ukraine war and the U.S.-China rivalry. This focus shifts attention away from critical issues like global debt, COVID-19 impacts, and climate²⁸ challenges.

Experts note that the Ukraine conflict has revitalized a non-alignment inclination among non-Western nations, though in a distinct manner. Given the substantial debt crisis affecting over 50 nations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and unsuccessful IMF negotiations in countries like Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Tunisia, there's a growing pursuit for viable alternatives to move beyond the traditional "Bretton Woods" framework.

²⁸ Moncef Al-Sulaimi, how does the Ukraine war affect the alliances of Arab countries with the West? DW TV, February 24, 2023, [link](#)

Meanwhile, many countries are currently showing tendencies to seek solutions to their problems and new alternatives that do not rely on the rules of the prevailing global system, yet these tendencies have not yet crystallized into organized new forces. In the Arab world, despite a number of regional countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, Algeria, and Morocco making political decisions that demonstrate a degree of independence from the West, primarily the United States and then Europe, there are no clear indications of coordination among them. Rather, the considerations of each country's individual interests seem to dominate.

The signs of a developing multipolar global system are leading Arab nations to rethink balancing their interests and relationships with various global powers, such as China, Russia, and Europe. This indicates a shift from a solely Western-aligned alliance to exploring "manoeuvring spaces" among global powers competing for influence. This strategy is seen as a "wise approach" to maximize benefits and gains from these influential competing powers.

China holds the position of being the primary economic partner for Gulf nations. However, even with Saudi Arabia's moves towards a closer relationship with Moscow, including hosting a China-Arab summit, the deep-rooted regional security ties under the U.S. umbrella render these initiatives limited. It's improbable that Saudi Arabia would forgo its U.S. alliance for a partnership with Russia or China. These actions could be strategic manoeuvres by Arab nations like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, aiming to signal to their American ally to consider their concerns and issues of importance²⁹.

²⁹ Ibid.



In truth, given the persistent divisions and lack of regional integration among Arab countries, with the Gulf Arab states being an exception, it's likely that Arab nations will continue to rely on alliances with Western powers for their stability and strategic security. This reliance may persist even as these alliances evolve into new forms and concepts, adapting to the changing dynamics of the international system. This trend is particularly evident in the absence of broader regional integration, such as in the Maghreb for North African countries.

SIXTH: PREVENTIVE POLICIES, POTENTIAL ALTERNATIVES, AND CONCLUSIONS:

Undeniably, the conflict in Ukraine is having a profoundly adverse effect on the less stable and more vulnerable nations in the MENA region. To alleviate the effects of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the following steps can be taken:

- Implementing policies that are somewhat independent of the major powers' influence, focusing on the critical interests of the Arab region. This involves forming strategic, temporary alliances aimed at decreasing military tensions and aiding in resolving crises. Such policies encourage regional dialogue and strive to align differing viewpoints, moving away from intense rivalry and dependence on U.S. or European support.
- Developing new security, political, and economic dynamics and perspectives aimed at fortifying the Middle East against the repercussions of international conflicts. This approach seeks to move beyond the logic of aligning solely with the West or Russia, ensuring that the Arab region does not become a victim of these conflicts and pay a heavy price in the medium to long terms.
- Capitalizing on the global competition and polarization, especially in the Middle East, where a new international system is taking shape. This emerging order features new dimensions that lean towards a multipolar structure, with influence distributed among multiple international players.

- Fostering integration between Middle Eastern and North African nations, and creating a system of regional assistance. In this system, wealthier countries would provide economic aid to the more vulnerable Arab states, particularly for securing food supplies. A case in point is Lebanon, which lost its only grain silo in the Beirut explosion in August 2020, severely impacting its grain storage capacity. It's imperative now to find alternatives to Russian and Ukrainian food supplies and to identify suitable locations and solutions for storing these vital resources.³⁰
- With Ukraine banning the export of many food items, other wheat-producing countries like the United States and Canada should elevate their response and support by increasing their exports to the World Food Programme.
- It's essential for donor nations and bodies to prioritize the complete financing of humanitarian response efforts in the region, aiming to halt further decline in living conditions. Moreover, these donor governments need to devise strategies to offset rising food prices, ensuring that entities like the World Food Programme and NGOs do not have to cut down on food allocations for the vulnerable and impoverished segments of the population.
- The Ukrainian conflict has underscored the global dependence on fossil fuels. In response, donor nations should use this crisis as a catalyst to promote energy source diversification and enhance the adoption of renewable energy in the Global South, particularly in countries severely affected by the rising costs of fossil fuels.

³⁰ Maha Al-Dahan and Ellen Francis, Lebanon faces a challenge to provide food with scarce stocks and without a grain silo, Reuters website, August 7, 2020. [link](#)

CONCLUSION

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has reshaped the relationships of Middle Eastern regional powers with external players, altering the influence of major global powers in the region. This shift is most notable in the Gulf, where its significance in the global energy landscape has intensified, and its autonomy in foreign and oil policy from the U.S. has been bolstered. The imperative for oil led U.S. President Joe Biden to make a strategic visit to Riyadh, aiming to enhance ties with Saudi Arabia.

However, the war has offered Gulf and Arab nations a chance to further diversify their external partnerships with major powers, focusing on their national interests. In addition to Riyadh maintaining its oil partnership with Moscow, China has stepped up as a new international player in the region, seeking to fill the vacuum left by the diminishing Gulf-U.S. partnership. The entry of three Arab countries into the BRICS group in August 2023 signifies a move towards a multipolar world that seeks vital interests beyond the realm of classic alliances³¹. Gulf countries have crafted a new geopolitical identity for themselves and enhanced their strategy to counterbalance the reducing American influence in the region, turning the war into an opportunity to reformulate their partnership with the United States on a foundation of mutual benefits³².

The war, while offering Middle Eastern nations a chance to bolster their role in regional and international geopolitics, has also brought forth significant political, security, and economic challenges. Central to these challenges is the region's ability to maintain a degree of detachment from the intensifying global rivalry among major powers, and to mitigate the risks associated with escalating regional unrest, especially considering the dwindling chances of reviving the Iranian nuclear deal and the growing tensions between Israel and Iran.

31 BRICS summit: Why do Arab countries request to join the group? August 21, 2023, BBC. [link](#)

32 Mahmoud Alloush, The Ukraine War Has Reshaped the Middle East, Ibid. [link](#)



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