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What the Russian war in Ukraine means for the Middle East?

Introduction

Constructing scenarios of international relations connects theory to practice and is a method of understanding future world events. While it focuses on predicting future trends, it is based on analysing current world politics. It suggests making decisions on a problem-solving basis.¹ For this reason, the terminology used to construct future scenarios actually refers to the present and helps to understand current policy conditions.

The scenario method was initiated by Hermann Khan in his 1962 book *Thinking about the Unthinkable*, in which he pointed out that decision-makers should anticipate the consequences of their decisions. Khan was primarily concerned that these decisions would not lead to a nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union.² Both Khan and Peter Schwartz believed that forecasting the future in

¹ Dong-ho Han, "Scenario Construction and Its Implications for International Relations Research", *The Korean Journal of International Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, June 2011, pp. 39–65.

² H. Kahn, *Thinking about the Unthinkable*, New York: Horizon Press, 1962, p. 185.

international relations meant identifying and analysing the “changing aspects of our present environment.”³ These aspects are referred to as fundamental dynamics that determine trends in international relations. These, in turn, may include both continuities and discontinuities and, in each case, include uncertainties.

The scenario methodology supports several vital concepts. These are driving forces, predetermined factors, critical uncertainties, wild cards and scenario plot lines.⁴ Driving forces can be defined as factors that, appearing in various combinations, are elements of a cause-and-effect nature that surround a problem, event or decision.⁵ Schwartz defines them as “the elements that move the plot of a scenario that determine the story’s outcome.”⁶ Driving force forms a structure of each scenario plot line in determining trends and their likely development. As for predetermined elements, these events have already happened or are sure to happen; however hard to predict their consequences. Dong-ho Han describes them as ‘givens’ and emphasizes that predetermined factors affect outcomes, but not directly. These are the factors hidden under the surface of the phenomenon that should be considered, and their impact on the phenomenon should be understood. The relationship between predetermined elements and outcomes can be compared to the meaning of the underlying cause, which does not have such an impact on the outcome like proximate causes do. It, however, does not mean that underlying causes do not impact the outcome.⁷

However, the most important in the discussion about the future are critical uncertainties. These are the conditions of these elements of reality that we consider essential or even the most important but whose nature and scope of impact still need to be fully known and predictable. The discovery of those factors affecting reality that are the most uncertain and, at the same time, the most important for the assessment of the phenomenon is decisive for forecasting the future.⁸ If critical uncertainties are known, although the scope of their impact and the related consequences are not fully known, then wild cards are to be expected, which no one can predict and which can have a profound impact on political strategy and radically change the course of events.⁹

³ P. Schwartz, *The Art of the Long View*, New York: Currency Doubleday, 1991, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 100–117.

⁵ Dong-ho Han, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁶ P. Schwartz, *op. cit.*, pp. 101–102.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁸ See S. Weber, “Prediction and the Middle East Peace Process”, *Security Studies*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1997, p. 173.

⁹ J.L. Peterson, *Out of the Blue: Wild Cards and Other Big Future Surprises, How to Anticipate and Respond to Profound Change*, Arlington, Virginia: The Arlington Institute, 1997, p. 1.

A narrative or a story about what is happening is equally crucial for assessing the situation. A plot line describes how driven forces interact with predetermined elements and indicates possible combinations of critical uncertainties. Narratives or stories follow the events in question in a specific sequence and place them in time. It is essential for the social reception of the presented events and the decision-making process by politicians.¹⁰

Two plot lines

An Arab News/YouGov opinion poll conducted in May 2022 by the Arab News/YouGov showed that out of 7,835 respondents in 14 Arab countries, 66% had no opinion on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. At the same time, 18% of respondents supported Ukraine, and 16% supported Russia. Sympathy for Russia was highest in four countries: Algeria (19%), Oman (19%), Qatar (19%) and Tunisia (18%). In the Gulf States, 22% of respondents declared themselves on the side of Ukraine and 15% on the side of Russia. The widespread lack of interest in the Arab countries in the war in Ukraine was conditioned, according to analysts, by several factors. The first was the geographical remoteness of the conflict site. For the inhabitants of the Middle East, conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Libya and Palestine were closer. The conflict in Ukraine was perceived as a European conflict, and its impact on the situation in the Middle East was assessed through the prism of rising energy and food prices. Ukraine and Russia were among the leading grain suppliers to Middle Eastern countries, and this fact could have been influential in formulating the view of the conflict. For example, in Egypt, which imported as much as 85% of imported grain from Russia and Ukraine, interest in expressing a view was higher than in countries less dependent on grain imports from Russia and Ukraine.¹¹

The same opinion poll showed that most respondents in 14 Arab states expressed that the responsibility for the conflict lies not with Russia but with NATO. The only exception was Syria, whose inhabitants blamed Russia and NATO equally for the Ukraine war outbreak. Arab public opinion thus had a completely different opinion on the causes of the conflict than public opinion in Europe. The countries of the Middle East did not accept the Western

¹⁰ P.D. Aligica, "Analytic Narratives and Scenario Building", *Futures Research Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 2, Summer 2003, p. 61.

¹¹ Arab News Staff, "Poll finds that Arab street has no stance on Russia-Ukraine conflict", *Arab News*, 31.05.2022, p. 5, www.arabnews.com/node/2092841/jserrors/page_view_timing/aggregate [accessed: 5.07.2023].

narrative of an ‘unprovoked act of aggression’ by Russia against Ukraine.¹² According to this line, Western leaders were not in the least responsible for the terrible events, and the West was simply a victim of the world’s madman. Putin was either a madman or a megalomaniac, trying to revive the imperial, expansionist agenda of the Soviet Union.¹³

The Arab respondents’s trust in the Western media was shallow. One in four respondents believed that Western media are not impartial in their coverage of events in Ukraine, and only 27% of respondents considered Arab media coverage credible. Only 8% of the respondents believed the Russian media, and 33% believed that no media conveyed accurate pictures of the war in Ukraine.¹⁴

The vote in the UN General Assembly on a resolution demanding an end to the Russian offensive in Ukraine on March 2, 2022, showed that out of 193 UN members, 141 countries supported the resolution. Only five countries (Belarus, North Korea, Eritrea, Russia and Syria) were against it. The vote showed that Russia was isolated and that the UN was determined to defend Ukraine’s sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity. However, as many as 35 countries abstained from voting and were among China, India, and other countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Among the countries in the Middle East, only Algeria, Iran, and Sudan abstained from voting.¹⁵

¹² It was the EU statement of 28 February 2022, see “EU Statement regarding Russia’s unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine”, *European Union. External Action*, 28.01.2022, www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-statement-regarding-russia%E2%80%99s-unprovoked-and-unjustified-military-aggression-against-ukraine_en [accessed: 7.07.2023].

¹³ J. Cook, “Russia-Ukraine war: How the US paved the way to Moscow’s invasion”, *Middle East Eye*, 10.01.2023, www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/russia-ukraine-us-invasion-paved-how [accessed: 12.06.2023].

¹⁴ L. Fouad, “Most Arabs distrust media coverage on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine: Poll”, *Arab News*, 30.05.2023, www.arabnews.com/node/2092851/media [accessed: 8.07.2023]; it is difficult to determine what impact on the Arab world was influenced by the voice of Pope Francis on June 14, 2022, who said that Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine “maybe was somehow provoked or not stopped” and who described Nato’s action against Russian aggression as “barking at the gates of Russia”, see A. Giuffrida, “Pope Francis says Ukraine war was ‘perhaps somehow provoked’”, *The Guardian*, 14.06.2022, www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/14/pope-francis-ukraine-war-provoked-russian-troops [accessed: 14.03.2023], this voice was surely heard in the Middle East.

¹⁵ “General Assembly resolution demands end to Russian offensive in Ukraine”, *UN News*, 2.03.2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113152> [accessed: 30.03.2022]; The Diplomatic Service of the European Union, “UN General Assembly demands Russian Federation withdraw all military forces from the territory of Ukraine”, *European Union. External Action*, 2.03.2022, www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/un-general-assembly-

However, voting results can be misleading. A year after Russia's aggression, in the circles of the Middle Eastern power elite, understanding prevailed for Russia's position as a country that had to take military action to avoid being encircled by NATO. Moreover, a survey of youth opinion in Arab countries showed that in 2022, 31% of Middle Easterners aged 18–24 blamed the war in Ukraine on the United States and NATO, not on Putin. At the same time, 37% of respondents had no idea who was responsible for this war or did not want to express their opinion. As many as 78% of the young Arabs surveyed believed that China was a more reliable ally of the Arab world than the US.¹⁶

Such high support for Russia in the Arab world had various interpretations. Anna Borshchevskaya, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, drew attention to the Russian disinformation campaign with the help of the Russian state-owned media outlets *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik Arabic*. In the West, these and similar media were either banned outright or chose to shut down. In the Arab world, these media had constant access to the audience.¹⁷

The propaganda factor undoubtedly played an essential role in shaping it. However, it must be said that the main slogan of Russian propaganda, presenting Russian aggression as a challenge to the US-led hegemonic order, fell on fertile ground. One of the explanations for this result of the Arab public opinion poll was common in the Middle East to equate NATO with the US and the bad experience of the people of the Middle East with US military operations in the region.¹⁸ The example of Iraq in 2003 came to mind as a comparison of events in Ukraine in 2022. The US and Britain invaded Iraq as illegally as Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. A similar role was played by the

demands-russian-federation-withdraw-all-military-forces-territory-ukraine_en [accessed: 30.03.2022]; A. Finnis, "Who voted against the UN vote on Ukraine? Results in full and which countries abstained on Russia withdrawalnited Nations", *News World*, 24.02.2022, <https://inews.co.uk/news/world/un-vote-ukraine-who-voted-against-results-which-countries-abstained-russia-2170599> [accessed: 30.03.2022].

¹⁶ J. Jarallah, "Arab Youth Survey 2022: democracy in the Middle East will never work, most say", *The National News*, 21.09.2022, www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2022/09/21/arab-youth-survey-2022-democracy-in-the-middle-east-will-never-work-most-say [accessed: 20.03.2023].

¹⁷ A. Borshchevskaya, "Russia's Disinformation Machine Has a Middle East Advantage", *Foreign Policy*, 23.03.2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/23/russia-ukraine-war-disinformation-middle-east-rt-sputnik-arabic> [accessed: 23.06.2023].

¹⁸ J. Gornall, "Study shows Arabs more likely to blame NATO than Russia for Ukraine war", *Arab News*, 30.05.2022, www.arabnews.com/node/2092861/middle-east [accessed: 6.06.2023].

Western media, which portrayed Saddam Hussein as a dangerous, irrational ruler who refused to compromise and had ties to al-Qaeda, so he was responsible for the Twin Towers attack of 9/11 and had weapons of mass destruction to hit Europe in 45 minutes. As we know, United Nations inspectors could find no trace of Iraq's biological and chemical weapons arsenal.¹⁹

Predetermined factors

In March 2022, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace published a report entitled "What the Russian War in Ukraine Means for the Middle East." Its authors emphasized that the conflict in Europe is perceived by the inhabitants of the Middle East and North Africa through the prism of food security, energy prices and jobs. The war is well known to the people of the Middle East, as it continues in Syria, Libya and recently took a bloody toll in Iraq and Lebanon. For Middle Eastern governments, a war in Europe means the potential for fragile economies to collapse and public discontent to erupt on a large scale. An example is Egypt, which imports food and subsidizes the prices of basic foodstuffs. Egypt needs land to grow grain and depends on grain supply from abroad. About 85% of imported wheat comes from Ukraine and Russia. Considering that about 30% of the Egyptian population lives in poverty or is on the verge of poverty, the considerable importance of grain supplies from abroad becomes understandable. The Egyptian government has expanded relations with Russia in recent years and has started buying Russian weapons and cooperating with Russia to build a nuclear power plant. In the Arab arena, Egypt informally supported Russia's policy in Syria and Libya. The war in Ukraine forced the Egyptian authorities to manoeuvre diplomatically between commitments to Russia and commitments to its strategic partner, the US and the EU.²⁰

Tunisia turned out to be in a similar situation. This country felt the effects of the war in Europe in two ways, economically and diplomatically. The Tunisian economy depended on the influx of tourists from Russia, and the society depends on grain imports, 80% of which came from Ukraine.

¹⁹ J. Cook, "Russia-Ukraine war: A different invasion, the West's same 'madman' script", *Middle East Eye*, 28.01.2022, www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/russia-ukraine-war-invasion-madman-script-same [accessed: 18.11.2023].

²⁰ A. Hamzawy *et al.*, "What the Russian War in Ukraine Means for the Middle East", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 24.03.2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/03/24/what-russian-war-in-ukraine-means-for-middle-east-pub-86711> [accessed: 2.07.2023].

Immediately after Russia's aggression in Tunisia, wheat prices surged. In turn, the increase in oil prices to USD 100 per barrel forced the Tunisian government to increase the size of fuel subsidies. As a result, the budget deficit deepened to such an extent that the only way out was the help of the International Monetary Fund. However, negotiations with the IMF were complex due to the authoritarian tendencies in Tunisian politics, which became apparent after President Kais Saied took power on 25 July 2021. Another factor that hindered the negotiations was Tunisia's position in the Ukraine war. The Tunisian authorities sought to maintain good relations with Russia due to tourism and trade with this country. At the same time, they wanted to avoid criticism from the West, on which the Tunisian economy depended. As a result, neutrality in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was declared, which met with strong criticism from the European Union. On 28 February 2022, the EU ambassador to Tunisia described Tunisia's neutrality as siding with the aggressor. Following this pressure, Tunisia voted on 2 March 2022 in the UN General Assembly for a resolution denouncing the Russian invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, the Tunisian authorities emphasized the importance of the bilateral relationship between Russia and Tunisia and Tunisia's desire to strengthen that relationship. Saied's government carefully assessed the price of severing relations with Russia and the possible gains from siding with Ukraine. It was about economic interests and preventing the outbreak of social discontent due to the deterioration of living conditions.²¹

The determinants of the Palestinian response to the war in Ukraine were even more complex. On the one hand, Palestinians know what war and being a refugee mean. On the other hand, the West's response to Russian aggression made it clear to the Palestinians that the West's policy towards their cause is inconsistent and full of double standards. While the West recognized Ukrainians' resistance to aggression as 'legitimate and heroic'²² and condemned Russia's human rights violations,²³ the State Department strongly condemned

²¹ S. Yerkes, 'Tunisia,' [in:] A. Hamzawy *et al.*, *op. cit.*; Marcus Cornaro@AmbUeTunisie, Tweet, 28.01.2022, <https://twitter.com/AmbUeTunisie/status/1498343878784655373> [accessed: 14.06.2023]; "Jerandi recoit l'ambassadeur de Russie en Tunisie", *LaPresse.tn*, 9.07.2023, <https://lapresse.tn/124780/jerandi-recoit-lambassadeur-de-russie-en-tunisie> [accessed: 8.07.2023].

²² See "Joint Statement on Further Restrictive Economic Measures", *White House*, 26.01.2022, www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/02/26/joint-statement-on-further-restrictive-economic-measures [accessed: 14.03.2022].

²³ See A.J. Blinken, Secretary of State, "Promoting Accountability for Human Rights Abuses Perpetrated by the Governments of Russia and Belarus", *Statement, U.S. State*

the actions of Palestinian human rights organizations calling for boycotts of goods produced by companies accepting Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.²⁴ The US has consistently blocked draft resolutions criticizing Israel at the United Nations Security Council,²⁵ and in March 2021, the Department of State objected to the International Criminal Court (ICC) launching an investigation into human rights violations in Palestine.²⁶ President Biden's administration imposed sanctions on Russian citizens and Russian goods, and on the other hand allowed the importation of goods produced by Israeli settlers on the occupied West Bank. Attempts by Palestinian human rights organizations to boycott the goods of Western companies in the occupied territories were assessed by the American administration through the prism of an expanded interpretation of anti-Semitism, which reduced any criticism of Israel to anti-Semitism.²⁷

Such politicization of the human rights issue and the exceptionalization of Israel undermined in the eyes of Arabs, especially Palestinians, the credibility of "Biden's effort to restore respect for the rules-based international order and the normative framework upon which it was built."²⁸

Department, 15.03.2022, www.state.gov/promoting-accountability-for-human-rights-abuses-perpetrated-by-the-governments-of-russia-and-belarus [accessed: 28.03.2022].

²⁴ C. Downey, "State Department Says It 'Firmly Rejects' BDS Movement amid Ben & Jerry's Israel Withdrawal", *yahoo!news*, 21.07.2021, https://news.yahoo.com/state-department-says-firmly-rejects-013914204.html?guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuYmluZy5jb20v&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAALm6xOjv1ooy6tO5WMlhhFyQ8Z-o1WK6HfAQs0Z2u7oAVF7NTQ6B4NbyZKLE143QwRaCMwl0jddQD7heZmoTiHkK4xDILwzU5AR8cJlJCdj58G5QZjwCyByNAybaCMFrCrGbQTkxrzvVj7xqY0aqp4INKxyMfW4fhTT8wfwY0vN29&gucounter=2 [accessed: 14.06.2023].

²⁵ According to UN data, the US has blocked 53 drafts of such resolutions since 1972, see "Security Council – Veto List", *the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, UN*, https://www.un.org/depts/dhl/resguide/scact_veto_table_en.htm [accessed: 12.06.2023]; see also C. Newton, "A history of the US blocking UN resolutions against Israel", *Aljazeera*, 19.05.2021, www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/19/a-history-of-the-us-blocking-un-resolutions-against-israel [accessed: 12.06.2023].

²⁶ A.J. Blinken, Secretary of State, "The United States Opposes the ICC Investigation into the Palestinian Situation", *Statement, Statement, U.S. State Department*, 3.03.2021, www.state.gov/the-united-states-opposes-the-icc-investigation-into-the-palestinian-situation [accessed: 14.06.2023].

²⁷ M. Arria, "Biden administration says IHRA definition of antisemitism is 'gold standard'", *Mondoweiss*, 29.06.2021, <https://mondoweiss.net/2021/06/biden-administration-says-ihra-definition-of-antisemitism-is-gold-standard> [accessed: 14.06.2023].

²⁸ Z. Hassan, 'Palestine', [in:] A. Hamzawy *et al.*, *op. cit.*

Driving forces

(a) Türkiye: Strategic autonomy

Turkey's position should be considered in a geographical and historical context. Turkey is a neighbour of both parties to the conflict, sharing the Black Sea coastline. Over the centuries, Turkey has resisted Russia's efforts to gain greater control over the Turkish Straits, Russia's gateway to the Mediterranean. At the same time, the Ottoman Empire did not stop Russia's expansion on land and lost the Balkans, and in 1878, a hundred years after Constantinople lost Crimea, Russian troops were on the outskirts of Constantinople. Turkey treated Ukraine as a buffer against the expansion of Russian influence in this basin. Ankara expressed concern about the future of relations in the Black Sea basin following a possible collapse of Ukraine before the Russian attack on 24 February 2022. Such a prospect would also be unfavourable for Ankara's cooperation with Kyiv in defence. Ukrainian companies supplied Turkey with engines for aircraft and tanks, including the Bayraktar TB-2 drone. In December 2021, the Turkish company Bayrak bought land in Ukraine on which it intended to build a factory producing drones. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov expressed deep concern about this. Russia cooperated with Turkey in Syria but it was clear that did treat Ukraine as a post-Soviet area and did not allow anyone to interfere in the affairs of this area.²⁹

Consequently, Ankara avoided situations that could increase tension in relations with Russia and, on the other hand, tried to prevent Russia from gaining an advantage over Ukraine. President Erdogan did not visit Kyiv until August 2022, six months after the start of the war and after Western leaders had already visited Kyiv. Turkey has condemned Russia's aggression and has sent drones and other military equipment to Ukraine but has not joined the Western sanctions against Russia. At the same time, Ankara tried to use the conflict to strengthen its international position. In particular, it opposed Sweden's admission to NATO because Sweden refused to extradite persons suspected of belonging to Kurdish organizations banned in Turkey who had found asylum in Sweden. The policy of maintaining neutrality was also expressed in the opening of Turkish territory to refugees from both Ukraine and Russia.³⁰

²⁹ R. Soyly, "Ukraine conflict: Why it really matters to Turkey", *Middle East Eye*, 27.01.2022, www.middleeasteye.net/news/ukraine-turkey-why-conflict-matters [accessed: 12.04.2023].

³⁰ M. Abu Sneh, "Russia-Ukraine war: Seven ways it shaped the Middle East and North Africa", *Middle East Eye*, 23.01.2023, www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-ukraine-war-middle-east-north-africa-shaped [accessed: 12.04.2023].

Turkey's policy towards the war in Ukraine should be seen in the broader context of changes in the international system. The transformation of this system from a US-led unipolarity to a multi-actor-centric multipolarity that has taken place over the last decade has benefited Turkey's interests as a medium-sized country. In the past decade, Turkey has become involved in the civil war in Syria and Libya and the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, has established friendly relations with Russia and has proceeded to normalize relations with the Sunni states of the Middle East and Israel. Hakan Fidan's foreign minister appointment on 4 June 2023 shows that Turkey intends to continue this line in foreign policy. Fidan, who has headed the National Intelligence Organization since 2010, played a crucial role in making critical decisions as part of a post-American international order. These decisions shaped another concept of 'strategic autonomy' as a central element of Turkish activity in the international arena. This concept assumes maintaining multipolarity in the international system and seeking a balance of power politics among regional and global powers in Turkish national interest.³¹

(b) Israel: Regional security first

Israel was walking on an even thinner line. Ukraine was an important trading partner for Israel in agricultural products and technology and home to tens of thousands of Jews. Ukraine was willing to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, even though the UN recognized the city as occupied territory. All this led to taking the side of Ukraine. On the other hand, Russia was an essential partner of Israel in Syria, agreeing to Israeli air strikes on Iranian forces and their allies. About 150,000 Jews from Russia lived in Israel and maintained family and emotional ties with the country of exile. Some observers believed that apart from state security issues, ties with Russia also strengthened the illiberal tendencies in the policies of both Putin and Netanyahu.³²

Besides, Israel's policy towards the war in Ukraine was determined by Syrian and Iranian factors. After the intervention in Syria in 2015 to save Bashar al-Assad, Moscow played a double game in Syria. On the one hand, it cooperated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and their allied Shia militias to break up the anti-government opposition. On the other hand, it disregarded more than

³¹ MEMO Staff, "Turkish foreign policy in the new era", *Middle East Monitor*, 15.06.2023, www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230615-turkiye-foreign-policy-in-the-new-era [accessed: 7.07.2023].

³² S.A. Cook, "The Deeper Reason Netanyahu Won't Arm Ukraine Against Russia", *Foreign Policy*, 6.01.2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/06/israel-ukraine-war-russia-hawk-air-defense-netanyahu> [accessed: 20.06.2023].

1,000 Israeli air strikes against Iranian and Hezbollah forces, resulting in losses to al-Assad forces. Prime Minister Netanyahu built this strategic cooperation over the years, and its failure could adversely affect Israel's security. At the UN Security Council's February meeting in 2022, Russia objected to Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights. It could be translated as a warning that if Israel comes out strongly against the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there could be consequences for its campaign in Syria.³³

Hence, Israel played a very cautious game in the Ukrainian-Russian war. Immediately after Russia's attack on 24 February 2022, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid condemned the Russian attack and called on the Israeli government not to assist Russian oligarchs of Jewish descent in connection with the sanctions imposed on them. At the same time, Israel did not support the resolution submitted by the US to the UN Security Council condemning the Russian invasion, which was supported by 87 states. However, on 28 February 2022, Israel voted for a similar resolution the UN General Assembly. Israel disagreed with the US proposal to transfer the Iron Dome defence system to Ukraine, as it could deteriorate relations with Russia. Prime Minister Naftali Bennet tried to involve himself in the conflict as little as possible and tried to be an intermediary between Kyiv and Moscow. However, it was known that Moscow did not need mediation services, as Putin's goal was to win over Ukraine.³⁴ In October 2022, President Volodymyr Zelensky renewed his appeal to the Israeli authorities of February 2022 to side with Ukraine, primarily because of the strengthening alliance between Moscow and Tehran, but the government led by Naftali Bennett rejected the possibility of departing from a balanced policy.³⁵

Prime Minister Yair Lapid, who headed the Israeli government on July 1, 2022, rejected the possibility of joining the sanctions imposed on Russia by the European Union and the US and provided only humanitarian aid to Ukraine. The Israeli government justified its caution in taking radical steps towards the war in Ukraine by the increasingly complicated situation in the Middle East region. International isolation pushed Russia towards Iran, and military cooperation

³³ T. Lazaroff, "Russia takes issue with Israel's sovereignty over Golan Heights and Jerusalem", *The Jerusalem Post*, 24.01.2022, www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-698512 [accessed: 25.06.2023].

³⁴ Y. Melman, "Russia-Ukraine war: Israel's ties with the West strained by its fear of Putin in Syria", *Middle East Eye*, 2.03.2022, www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-ukraine-war-israel-west-strained-fear-putin-syria [accessed: 15.04.2023].

³⁵ F.S. Isik, M.F. Yavuz, "Russia-Ukraine war: Israel's tricky balancing act", *Middle East Eye*, 4.03.2022, www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/russia-ukraine-war-israel-tricky-balancing-act [accessed: 2.06.2023].

between the two countries gave rise to Israel's concern about the consequences of this cooperation for the state's security. The more so that Iran was perfecting drone technologies that could reach Israel. Many observers believed Russia could limit its involvement in Syria due to the war in Ukraine, which could mean an increase in Iran's activity in Syria. At the same time, a decreased Russian presence in Syria could mean less support from Moscow for Iran-backed militias and the Syrian regime, giving more operational freedom to Israel. However, this could also mean more missiles fired from Lebanon and Syria towards Israel, embroiling Israel in a deeper conflict.³⁶

In December 2022, a government led by Benjamin Netanyahu was formed in Israel, and Israel's position in the Ukrainian-Russian conflict has not changed. Although in February 2023, many observers believed that Israel was gradually siding with Ukraine and pointed to events such as the visit of Foreign Minister Eli Cohen to Kyiv on the eve of President Biden's visit to the Ukrainian capital, Prime Minister Netanyahu refrained from condemning Russia and did not express his sympathy with the Ukrainians. Although Israel promised to deliver the Iron Dome missile defence system to Ukraine in October 2022, it did not fulfil this promise by the end of February 2023. Tel Aviv has not granted the loan requested by Ukraine so far.³⁷

In February 2023, Israel assumed that the war in Ukraine would not end soon and was guided primarily by security considerations in the region, specifically the strategic rapprochement with Russia in connection with its role in containing Iran's ambitions in Syria.³⁸ Prime Minister Netanyahu defended his balanced stand between Russia and Ukraine, saying on 9 March 2023 in an interview with Italian daily *La Repubblica*:

³⁶ J. Roche, "Iranian and Syrian factors shape Israeli response to Russia's Ukraine invasion", *Atlantic Council*, 27.04.2023, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/iranian-and-syrian-factors-shape-israeli-response-to-russias-ukraine-invasion [accessed: 25.05.2023].

³⁷ A. Abu Amer, "Israel is gradually taking Ukraine's side in the war against Russia", *Middle East Monitor*, 28.01.2023, www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230228-israel-is-gradually-taking-ukraines-side-in-the-war-against-russia [accessed: 26.06.2023]; T. Krämer, "Israel's Ukraine dilemma?", *Deutsche Welle*, 21.10.2022, www.dw.com/en/israels-ukraine-dilemma/a-63517231 [accessed: 22.06.2023].

³⁸ J.-P. Filiu, "Why Israel still refuses to give military aid to Ukraine", *Le Monde*, 15.05.2023, www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/05/15/why-israel-still-refuses-to-give-military-aid-to-ukraine_6026664_4.html [accessed: 3.06.2023]; MEMO Staff, "Israel concerned by Russia's military cooperation with Iran", *Middle East Monitor*, 16.06.2023, www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230616-israel-concerned-by-russias-military-cooperation-with-iran [accessed: 4.07.2023].

Israel is the only country whose pilots fly over the Golan Heights at a very short distance from the Russian jets in Syria because we have to prevent Iranian military aid to Hezbollah [...]. We are interested in avoiding a confrontation with Russia [...]. Our relationship with Russia is very complex.³⁹

(c) Iran: Drone diplomacy

Iran has moved even closer to Russia and has provided military assistance in the form of drones, hoping primarily for a transfer of military technology from Russia, which would help Iran modernize its military potential under Western sanctions. According to American sources, Russia offered Iran ‘an unprecedented level of military and technical support,’ which should not be treated as an ordinary commercial transaction, but as a technological and defence partnership at a higher level than before. In addition to expanding the production of transport and combat helicopters, the Mil Mi-38, Mi-28N, and Kamov Ka-32/-226/-60/-52 and expanding the naval fleet, Tehran also counted on Russia’s help in expanding its nuclear weapons arsenal.⁴⁰

In 2023, Russia’s military cooperation with Iran deepened. At least, that is how the American side assessed it. In May 2023, State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel will name Iran ‘Russia’s top military backer’ that supplies Russia with artillery and tanks. Patel reported that since August 2022, Iran had supplied Russia with 400 Shahed drones, which have been used by the Russian army to attack Ukrainian critical infrastructure.⁴¹ Iran hoped to tighten military cooperation with Russia and signalled its intention to purchase Su-35 fighter jets, combat helicopters, radar and Yak-130 combat trainer aircraft from Russia. National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby described the extent of military cooperation between Iran and Russia as ‘unprecedented.’⁴²

³⁹ G. Zampano, “Israel’s Premier Netanyahu says Ukraine war will likely continue”, *World*, 9.03.2023, www.aa.com.tr/en/russia-ukraine-war/israel-s-premier-netanyahu-says-ukraine-war-will-likely-continue/2841290 [accessed: 2.06.2023].

⁴⁰ L. Dugit-Gros *et al.*, “After Ukraine: Russia’s Potential Military and Nuclear Compensation to Iran”, *Policy Analysis/Policy Watch 3693*, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 20.01.2023, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/after-ukraine-russias-potential-military-and-nuclear-compensation-iran [accessed: 14.06.2023].

⁴¹ VOA Persian Service, “US Says Iran, Russia Are Expanding Military Ties”, *VOA News on Iran*, 16.05.2023, www.voanews.com/a/us-says-iran-russia-are-expanding-military-ties/7095107.html [accessed: 4.07.2023].

⁴² L. Seligman, A. Ward, “New U.S. intelligence shows Russia’s deepening defense ties with Iran”, *Politico*, 6.09.2023, www.politico.com/news/2023/06/09/united-states-security-council-russia-iran-weapons-00101191 [accessed: 4.06.2023].

Another possible direction of cooperation is Russia's modernization of the Iranian oil and gas industry. In May 2023, a delegation of 28 Russian companies visited Iran, expressing interest in cooperation with Iranian partners in the modernization of the Iranian oil and gas extraction and processing industry. The talks concerned joint exploration and extraction of raw materials from new wells.⁴³

The rich and the poor

The war in Ukraine has deepened the inequalities in the region. For the oil states of the Persian Gulf, the war brought additional revenues from the sale of energy resources. In August 2022, the Saudi company Aramco announced that in the second quarter of 2022, it achieved record profits of \$48.4 billion. In March 2022, the price of Brent crude oil rose to \$119.84 per barrel, the highest since May 2012, while the price of West Texas Intermediate crude oil was \$116.57 per barrel, making it the highest since 2008. This increase in profits meant increased opportunities for many development projects in the oil countries of the Persian Gulf, Algeria, Libya and Sudan. On the other hand, Arab countries such as Jordan, Tunisia and Lebanon were painfully affected by the increased fuel and energy prices, and their ability to implement development projects deteriorated. Tunisia found itself in a challenging situation, as almost half of Tunisia's grain imports came from Russia and Ukraine, both belligerent countries, which threatened to disrupt supplies. In addition, in 2019, Tunisia was visited by almost 750,000 tourists from Russia, providing Tunisia with a significant share of tourism revenues.⁴⁴

The war in Ukraine, combined with climate change and economic stagnation caused by COVID-19, has led to further price increases in Middle Eastern countries. In April 2022, the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) reported that cooking oil prices rose 30% in Yemen and 39% in Syria. Wheat rose 47% in Lebanon, 15% in Libya and 14% in Palestine. Even before the war broke out in Ukraine, inflation and rising prices made the situation of the poorest families critical. The cost of a basic food basket providing the minimum food needs per family per month increased in Lebanon

⁴³ MEE Staff, "Iranian press review: Russia to modernise Iran's outdated oil and gas industry", *Middle East Eye*, 18.05.2023, www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-russia-modernise-dated-oil-gas-industry-press-review [accessed: 4.06.2023].

⁴⁴ M. Abu Sneineh, "Russia-Ukraine war: How soaring oil prices will be felt in the Middle East", *Middle East Eye*, 4.03.2022, www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-ukraine-war-soaring-oil-prices-middle-east-felt-how [accessed: 12.04.2023].

by 351%, the highest increase in the entire region. In Syria, the increase was 97%, and in Yemen, it was 81%. These three countries were the most dependent on food imports and experienced the highest depreciation of their currencies. In Syria, a rise in imported food prices coincided with a drought-induced crop failure. The most challenging situation was Syria and Yemen, where 29 million people needed food assistance and 19 million were directly dependent on daily food supplies from WFP. Meanwhile, WFP's financial capacity has deteriorated due to higher prices and smaller donor subsidies.⁴⁵

The limits of autonomy

Since the global rivalry has led global powers to follow realpolitik in their foreign policies, many regional powers, such as Brazil, India, Germany and Turkey, have been trying to increase their autonomy to protect their national interests against these global powers. It led to tensions in situations of conflict of interest. An example from the Middle East is the decision of the Opec+ countries to reduce production by 2 million barrels a day from November 2022 to keep prices at the current level. This decision was met with severe criticism from the US. The American administration assessed that the Opec+ countries help Russia achieve high revenues from oil sales and, simultaneously, need to do more for Ukraine. President Biden was furious and announced that the US would review its policy towards Saudi Arabia. Since the Opec+ decision meant that Saudi Arabia was on the same side as Russia on oil issues, suspicion arose in Washington that Riyadh and Moscow were working together to undermine the US position. Senator Bob Mendez, chair of the influential Senate Foreign Relations Committee, announced an immediate freeze on all aspects of cooperation with Saudi Arabia except "what is absolutely necessary." The condition for returning to the previous cooperation was that Riyadh would take the 'correct' position in the face of the Ukrainian-Russian war. The decision of Opec+ coincided with the midterm elections in the USA, and it was known that fuel prices are an essential factor in the elections to the US Congress.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ "War in Ukraine pushes Middle East and North Africa deeper into hunger as food prices reach alarming highs [EN/AR]", *reliefweb*, 31.03.2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/war-ukraine-pushes-middle-east-and-north-africa-deeper-hunger-food-prices-reach> [accessed: 15.04.2023].

⁴⁶ U.A. Farooq, "Outraged US looks for ways to break up Opec, reassess Saudi ties", *Middle East Eye*, 11.10.2022, www.middleeasteye.net/news/outraged-us-looks-ways-break-opec-reassess-saudi-ties [accessed: 16.04.2023].

In response to criticism from the US, Saudi Arabia stated that it is guided by its interest in the implementation of development projects, and Amin Nasser, Chief executive of Aramco, said: “We are looking at it from a Western point of view and the rest of the world needs to adapt. Well, it does not work like that.”⁴⁷ However, the Ukrainian-Russian war and US policy significantly limited the room for manoeuvre for regional powers, in this case, Saudi Arabia. Despite its significant role in the fuel and financial markets, this country cannot pursue a completely independent foreign policy, as it primarily depends on US arms supplies. In June 2022, the US Government Accountability Office reported that between 2015 and 2021, the Department of Defence provided \$54.6 billion in military aid to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates for the war in Yemen, which the United Nations characterized as one of the world’s greatest humanitarian disasters.⁴⁸ The American side raised the argument of Saudi Arabia’s dependence on American military aid in the person of Congressman Ro Khanna, who stated that Riyadh’s ignoring President Biden’s appeal to increase production should result in the immediate suspension of arms supplies to Saudi Arabia.⁴⁹

Undoubtedly, the US is a significant player in the Middle East. The policy of the administration of President Joe Biden towards the Middle East is part of the US grand strategy of global hegemony, which Washington has been implementing since 1945. This strategy focuses on three world regions of particular importance to the US: Western Europe, Eastern Asia and the Middle East. The global hegemony of the United States depends on preventing the emergence of “a dominant rival on the Eurasian landmass or a single power in the Gulf controlling the majority of the world’s oil reserves.”⁵⁰ The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 eliminated such a dominant Eurasian rival. In the Middle East, US supremacy was served by the ‘war on terror’ announced

⁴⁷ MEE staff, “War of words escalates between US and Saudi Arabia over Opec+ cut”, *Middle East Eye*, 25.10.2022, www.middleeasteye.net/news/war-words-escalates-between-us-and-saudi-arabia-over-opeccut [accessed: 15.04.2023].

⁴⁸ U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Yemen: State and DOD Need Better Information on Civilian Impacts of U.S. Military Support to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates”, 15.06.2022, www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-105988 [accessed: 16.04.2023].

⁴⁹ U.A. Farooq, “Outraged US...”, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ R. Ramesh, “The US was prepared to bomb the Middle East into shape. In Ukraine, it seems no less self-serving”, *The Guardian*, 18.03.2023, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/mar/18/middle-east-ukraine-washington-iraq-kyiv [accessed: 4.06.2023].

by President George W. Bush, which was guided by the belief that Middle Eastern countries are ‘either with us or against us.’⁵¹

On the other hand, Washington’s zero/one game towards its allies in the Middle East means that the American authorities ignore the psychological aspect of international contacts, which in the case of the Middle East are intercultural, and ignore the personal ambitions and egos of the leaders of Middle Eastern countries. In previous decades, Western paternalism spurred the search for other allies and stimulated rapid policy changes in the Middle East. Examples include events in Egypt after 1952 and Iraq after 1958. Although Egypt and Iraq returned under American wings after many years, the example of Afghanistan shows that pure hard power is only sometimes effective without a combination with soft power.

From this point of view, the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Saudi Arabia on 8 December 2022 gave a lot to think about. It meant that China treated Saudi Arabia as a strategic partner in specific sectors of the economy, in particular, the energy sector and short- and long-term investments. At the same time, strengthening cooperation in the military sector is noteworthy. Between 2016 and 2020, Chinese arms sales to Saudi Arabia increased by 286%.⁵² China’s activity in the Middle East can be assessed as an element of shaping a new world order and even replacing the US as Saudi Arabia’s strategic partner. On the other hand, the question is whether the Saudi-Chinese cooperation results from China’s strength or the weakness of US policy during Joe Biden’s presidency. The key question is whether US relationship with Saudi Arabia ‘is critical to maintaining stability in the Middle East.’⁵³ From this point of view, the US remains a strategic partner for Saudi Arabia regarding regional threats to this country from Yemen and Iran. On 2 August 2022, the State Department agreed to sell 300 Patriot missiles to Saudi Arabia to bolster Saudi Arabia’s air defence system against possible Houthi attacks from Yemen. This decision was made after President Biden visited Saudi Arabia on 15 July 2022, during which the US held talks with the Saudi side about human rights and energy security.⁵⁴

⁵¹ “The Bush Doctrine”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 7.10.2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2002/10/07/bush-doctrine-pub-1088> [accessed: 5.07.2023].

⁵² W. Taleb, “On heels of Biden visit, China’s Xi expected to visit Saudi Arabia soo”, *Fox News*, 20.08.2022, www.foxnews.com/world/on-heels-biden-visit-chinas-xi-expected-visit-saudi-arabia-soon [accessed: 10.04.2023].

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ P. Best, “State Department approves potential sale of 300 Patriot missiles to Saudi Arabia”, *Fox News*, 2.08.2022, www.foxnews.com/world/state-department-approves-potential-sale-300-patriot-missiles-saudi-arabia [accessed: 11.04.2023].

On the other hand, President Biden's emphasis on human rights in talks with the Saudi side was perceived in Riyadh as an expression of American paternalism towards Saudi Arabia and a sign of the design to alienate the kingdom policy. It prompted Riyadh to increase its cooperation with Beijing.⁵⁵

The political position of the Middle Eastern countries regarding the war in Ukraine resulted from combining national interests with allied obligations with the USA. At the same time, a high degree of independence and autonomy in decision-making was visible. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel are regional powers still thanks to American support and still have to accept American paternalism to maintain their positions. It was made clear by Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman, the Saudi energy minister, speaking about Washington's pressure to increase Saudi Arabia's oil production in October 2022. "I keep listening, are you with us or against us? Is there any room for 'We are for Saudi Arabia and for the people of Saudi Arabia?'"⁵⁶

In addition, there are other types of limitations to the independence of the region's countries in conducting policy. The war in Ukraine has revealed many weaknesses in the Middle East, including the problem of food dependence. The Middle East is primarily dependent on grain imports. Home crops in Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya meet only half of the demand for wheat. The state subsidizes grain prices to keep the price of bread low. It harms public finances, but governments have no choice. To maintain social peace, they must subsidize essential food items. In Egypt, about 72 million inhabitants out of 102 million of the total population benefit from price subsidies. Ukraine and Russia gave the Middle East about 70% of grain supplies. The war that broke out on 24 February 2022 stopped deliveries from Ukraine and forced the governments

⁵⁵ B. McKernan, "Joe Biden defends human rights record ahead of Saudi visit", *The Guardian*, 14.07.2022, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jul/14/joe-biden-defends-human-rights-record-ahead-of-saudi-visit [accessed: 5.07.2023]; Q. Forgey, K. Hooper, "Biden fist bump with MBS triggers backlash", *Politico*, 15.07.2022, www.politico.com/news/2022/07/15/a-fist-bump-at-the-palace-biden-squares-off-with-mbs-00046106 [accessed: 5.07.2023]; R. Michaelson, "Joe Biden lands in Saudi Arabia seeking to halt shift towards Russia and China", *The Guardian*, 15.07.2022, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jul/15/joe-biden-lands-in-saudi-arabia-seeking-to-halt-shift-towards-russia-and-china [accessed: 5.07.2023]; D. Ottaway, "Partners of Choice: Biden's Plan to Check China in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf", *Insight and Analysis*, 1.05.2023, *Wilson Center*, www.wilsoncenter.org/article/partners-choice-bidens-plan-check-china-saudi-arabia-and-gulf [accessed: 5.07.2023]; M. Bishara, "The Middle East: Goodbye America, hello China?", *Aljazeera*, 6.06.2023, www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/6/6/the-middle-east-goodbye-america-hello-china [accessed: 5.07.2023].

⁵⁶ MEE Staff, "War of words...", *op. cit.*

of Middle Eastern countries to take extraordinary steps to ensure the continuity of bread supplies to the population.⁵⁷

Disruptions in grain deliveries exacerbated inflation. In 2022, compared to December 2021, it increased on average monthly from 3% to 8% in Morocco, from 7% to 10% in Tunisia, from 8% to 22% in Lebanon, from 36% to 52% in Iran and from 49% to 52% in Turkey.⁵⁸ The increase in inflation was therefore moderate. Food prices, such as wheat, which had risen in the first days of the war, soon returned to pre-war levels. However, the challenge posed by the Middle East's dependence on grain imports will play an increasingly important role in the region's geopolitics and needs to be adequately addressed.

New weapons and new producers

In the military sphere, the Russian-Ukrainian war introduced Turkey and Iran to the international arena as essential manufacturers and exporters of drones. Iran has started to deliver the Shahid-136 suicide drone to Russia and train Russian soldiers to use it. At that time, Ukraine introduced Turkish Bayraktar TB-2s drones into the fight, which had proven themselves early in Libya, Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey started working on the Bayraktar TB-2 UAV model in 2007 and it entered military service in 2014. The successes of Ankara meant that Turkish drones have found buyers in the UAE, Kuwait and Romania since 2017. The demand for drones from Iran turned out to be equally high. The interest in drones in Iran dates back to the 1980s and the Iran-Iraq War. Since the Iranian air force could not develop after the US sanctions, the authorities turned to simpler weapons that did not require advanced Western technology. The rapid development of this weapon production occurred in the last ten years when the Iranians shot down an American drone and began copying its design. In early 2022, Iran launched a drone factory in Tajikistan to avoid Israeli attacks

⁵⁷ M. Abu Sneineh, "Russia-Ukraine war: Seven ways...", *op. cit.*; R. Soyulu, "Why Ukrainian grain is not going to countries with a food crisis", *Middle East Eye*, 13.08.2022, www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-ukraine-turkey-grain-deal-explained [accessed: 15.04.2023]; F.S. Schiavi, "The Costs of Food Insecurity in the MENA Region: A Conversation with Roberta Gatti", *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, 1.06.2023, www.ispionline.it/en/publication/the-costs-of-food-insecurity-in-the-mena-region-a-conversation-with-roberta-gatti-130388 [accessed: 4.07.2023].

⁵⁸ L. Fruganti, "How the Ukraine War Has Disrupted the MENA Region, One Year On", *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, 24.02.2023, www.ispionline.it/en/publication/how-the-ukraine-war-has-disrupted-the-mena-region-one-year-on-117984 [accessed: 3.06.2023].

on this facility and establish closer contacts with Central Asian states. The political and diplomatic aspects of Iran's production of drones should be considered as important as the military ones. Tehran's cooperation with Russia in the production of drones began in 2016.⁵⁹

It can be assumed that Turkish and Iranian drones will change the arms market in the Middle East and will become competition for many types of Western weapons due to their low price and ease of use. With the price of the Iranian Shahed-136 ranging from \$20,000 to \$30,000 and the cost of a rocket that can knock it down at around \$300,000, it is understandable that this weapon is growing in popularity, which could mean reshaping the battlefield. The Middle East has been filled with weapons from the former Soviet Union and the US for decades, ranging from Katyusha rocket launchers and AK47s to M16 rifles and FIM-92 Stingers surface-to-air missiles. However, now new manufacturers are expanding in the region. In the Middle East, this means reshaping the political landscape and the birth of a new generation of warlords, definitely more dangerous and able to buy these drones. The situation may be similar to that in Afghanistan in the 1980s when the Mujahideen became warlords thanks to the Stinger missiles.⁶⁰

Impact on Syria

The war in Ukraine had a visible impact on the situation in Syria, which before 24 February 2022 was characterized by a difficult humanitarian situation and a delicate balance of political power due to the military involvement of five foreign powers in the conflict: Russia, Turkey, the USA, Israel and Iran. Each of these countries created a sphere of influence in Syria and tried to expand the borders of its sphere.⁶¹

As a direct result of the war in Ukraine, the humanitarian situation in Syria deteriorated. The Syrian economy has been completely devastated by

⁵⁹ E. Gjevori, "Russia-Ukraine war: The rise of Iran's drone industry", *Middle East Eye*, 30.10.2022, www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-ukraine-war-iran-drone-industry-rise [accessed: 15.04.2023]; M. Abu Sneineh, "Middle East turns arms exporter as combat drones take flight in Europe", *Middle East Eye*, 31.10.2022, www.middleeasteye.net/news/middle-east-arms-exporter-combat-drones-take-flight-europe [accessed: 15.04.2023].

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ UK Parliament, "Syria's civil war in 2023: Assad back in the Arab League", *House of Commons Library*, 9.06.2023, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9378> [accessed: 4.07.2023].

the war, mass displacement of residents, mismanagement, sanctions, COVID-19 and the financial crisis in Lebanon. Before February 22, 2022, nearly 90% of Syria's population lived in poverty, and two-thirds depended on humanitarian aid. In December 2021, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization indicated that 55% of the Syrian population is dependent on daily food supplies and that the Syrian population is at risk of famine due to severe drought and a steep decline in the country's wheat harvest. With the outbreak of war, fears arose that grain supplies from Ukraine and Russia, on which the lives of 1.35 million people in the northwestern depended, would be disrupted.⁶²

In the political sphere, the war in Ukraine has raised concerns about the prospects of preserving the delicate balance of power in Syria. In particular, it was feared that Russia, due to new priorities in Europe and the confrontation with NATO, would be forced to limit its military presence and would cease to be a factor in stabilizing the Syrian regime. From the point of view of the West, such a situation threatened Iran's strengthening in Syria, which would be unfavourable primarily for Israel and Turkey. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine had no significant impact on the Russian official military posture in Syria. Russia mainly maintained aerospace defence forces and military police in Syria rather than substantial ground forces, which only numbered around 4,000. Russia has also not changed its strategy towards Syria as a military and political base in the Middle East, allowing it to influence this region. As a result, in the first months after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, tensions between Russia and the US and Israel did not escalate in Syria. Russia and Turkey continued to jointly patrol Syria's northern border based on the March 2020 cease-fire agreement. Only relations between Israel and Iran escalated in tension following the killing in early March of two officers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. There were also informal talks between Russia, Turkey, the US and European countries on the supply of humanitarian aid.⁶³

The developments in Syria after 24 February 2022 indicate that Russia and Iran quickly adapted their policy in Syria to the new international situation. Russia must still change its strategic plans for Syria and the Middle East. On 16 July 2022, President Putin paid a visit to Iran, and on 19 July, in

⁶² S. Adar *et al.*, "The War in Ukraine and Its Impact on Syria", *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, no. 32, April 2022, p. 1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

Tehran, Putin met with President Erdogan and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, during which the coordination of activities in Syria was discussed.⁶⁴

It could be assumed that Russia wanted to normalise the situation in Syria in connection with its military and political involvement in Ukraine. It was to be achieved by persuading Turkey to move closer to the al-Assad regime at the expense of Turkish support for the Syrian opposition. Such a solution was in Turkey's interest, as it allowed some refugees to return to Syria, whose maintenance was a heavy burden for the Turkish economy. The price of such a solution was to neutralise the Kurdish militia in Syria. Iran's role was to refrain from steps that could lead to an escalation of tension in Syria. Confirmation that such a scenario was the subject of talks in Tehran was the statement of Turkish Minister Cavusoglu on 23 August 2023 that Turkey had no preconditions for dialogue with Syria. It showed that Ankara had softened its stance towards the authorities in Damascus. It was confirmed by the statement of the government of President Erdogan about the need to start negotiations between the regime and the opposition in Syria, which coincided with the steps of the Arab states towards the normalisation of relations with Damascus.⁶⁵ These steps ended on 19 May 2023 with the decision of the Arab League to restore Syria's membership in this organisation.⁶⁶

Conclusion

In 2022, the US continued the policy initiated during the 2003 Iraq War of presenting the region's countries with the choice: 'You are either with us or against us.' However, paternalism towards the Middle East has proved ineffective. It has created tensions between the US and its clients, who were trying to balance supporting Ukraine and maintaining good relations with Moscow. Moreover, the Western narrative about the causes of the war in Ukraine has deepened the Arab public's suspicions that the West is playing a double game: it accuses Russia of imperialist intentions while pursuing the same policy

⁶⁴ France24 Staff, "Putin, Erdogan and Iran's Raisi pledge cooperation against 'terrorists' in Syria", *France24*, 19.07.2023, www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20220719-putin-to-meet-turkey-s-erdogan-and-iranian-president-raisi-in-tehran [accessed: 4.07.2023].

⁶⁵ M. Otte, "Syria, the Middle East and the war in Ukraine", *Egmont*, 6.09.2022, www.egmontinstitute.be/syria-the-middle-east-and-the-war-in-ukraine [accessed: 4.07.2023].

⁶⁶ Aljazeera Staff, "Arab League brings Syria back into its fold after 12 years", *Aljazeera*, 7.05.2023, www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/7/arab-league-agrees-to-bring-syria-back-into-its-fold [accessed: 5.07.2023].

towards the Rest. Middle Eastern elites focused on national interests, the main driving force of Middle Eastern policy in the war in Ukraine.

Iran has moved even closer to Russia and has provided military assistance in the form of drones, hoping primarily for the transfer of military technology from Russia, which, under Western sanctions, would help Iran to modernize its military potential. Oil countries saw increased revenues from oil sales, and Arab states without oil were hit hard by the increase in energy and fuel prices in the aftermath of the war. Turkey and Israel tried to maintain a delicate balance in relations with Moscow and Kyiv to avoid losing their regional power positions. The policy's increasingly vital predetermined factor was grain shortages in the Middle East and dependence on agricultural imports from Ukraine and Russia. The impact of another predetermined factor of Middle East policy, the US policy in the region, was equally strong.

In each case, the driving force of the policy of the Middle East countries was state interests and the desire to maintain or strengthen their positions in the region. It was most evident in the case of Israel, for which state security considerations were paramount. If the war in Ukraine continues, Israel will be under increasing pressure from the US to take an unequivocal side with Ukraine. However, despite Tel Aviv's cautious approach and public remarks supporting Ukraine, it would be tough for Israel to join the countries imposing sanctions on Russia.

In the case of the oil states of the Persian Gulf, the war in Ukraine revealed the processes that have been taking place in this region in recent years. These are tendencies to increase independence from the US and strengthen its autonomy in foreign policy. A manifestation of this tendency was maintaining neutrality towards the Russian-Ukrainian war. It was confirmed by the visit of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to Saudi Arabia on 18 May 2023 to participate in the Arab League summit. Arab countries declared their willingness to cooperate with Ukraine. However, talks with the Ukrainian president did not go beyond the formula for ending the war, protecting Muslims in Ukraine, and returning political prisoners from the Russia-annexed Crimea region.⁶⁷

On the other hand, the countries of the region, in particular Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have long-term commitments with the United States, especially in the military sphere. In this situation, in order to strengthen autonomy, they try to diversify trade and security relations to obtain a higher level of independence. In practice, this means expanding economic and partly

⁶⁷ MEE Staff, "Zelensky arrives in Saudi Arabia to attend Arab League summit", *Middle East Eye*, 19.05.2023, www.middleeasteye.net/news/arab-league-zelensky-arrive-saudi-arabia [accessed: 16.06.2023].

military cooperation with Russia and China, and normalizing relations with Iran. However, in the military issue, the view that Russia can replace the US as the guarantor of the security of these countries was debatable even before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, and the military operations after February 2022 confirmed the assumption that Russian weapons cannot compete with Western weapons.⁶⁸

Although the countries of the Middle East did not become participants in the war in Ukraine, the ongoing war had a visible impact on the situation in the region. First of all, the war in Ukraine marks the closing of a chapter in the history of the Middle East known as ‘the global war on terror,’ which started the 9/11 terrorist attack against US hegemony. It was characterized by limited cooperation between the US, Russia and China in combating terrorism, and in particular the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Currently, the Middle East is entering a new period of global competition between global powers and the Middle East will become one of the arenas of this competition. The war in Ukraine, however, did not become a wild card that could overturn the entire pyramid of hierarchy and dependencies. Changes in strategic links are unlikely.

It is worth noting that the delicate game played by the Middle Eastern power elites in connection with Russia’s war in Ukraine showed how vital the Russian intervention in Syria in 2015 was. It had significant consequences for the global balance of power. Putin used Russia’s position in Syria as a bargaining chip in the negotiations on the Minsk Agreement. The presence of Russia in Syria was assessed in the Middle East as proof of the weakening position of the US in the region and the limited possibilities of the West in solving problems in the Middle East. The position of Israel and Turkey towards Ukraine proved that in 2022–2023 Russia was still playing the Syrian card.

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⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

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Abstract

This article refers to the impact the war in Ukraine had on the policy of the Middle East countries in the international and domestic aspects and what development of events can be expected in this connection. The Middle East countries reacted quickly to the war in Ukraine; most condemned Russia’s aggression. However, none sided with Ukraine, and Iran firmly sided with Russia. How to explain it? Also, Arab public opinion did not accept the Western narrative about the causes of the war in Ukraine. Was it the result of Russian propaganda, or were there more profound reasons? Washington strongly pressured its Middle Eastern allies to move away from their policy of neutrality. Still, a year after the aggression, the Middle East not only continued to maintain relations with Russia but also expanded its

scope. Was it the result of the rejection of American paternalism or the greater autonomy of the region's countries in the conditions of multipolarity in international relations? The article tries to explain these questions within the methodology and terminology of constructing scenarios of future trends in international relations.

Key words: Russian-Ukrainian war, Middle East countries, policy, plot lines, driving forces