

Regional Ambivalence Towards Russia and Ukraine



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Abstract This chapter traces responses across the Middle East to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It argues that while superficially the region sided with the West, a deeper look at diplomacy and trade shows that the region overall was careful not to antagonize Russia and preferred not to condemn Russia directly for its illegal invasion, nor did it join sanctions. Trade with Russia has grown, especially for Turkey and the UAE, while the region also by and large bought into the Kremlin narratives and framing of the war. As a result, the West could not isolate Russia globally and Russia was able to use the Middle East to circumvent Western isolation and continue to finance the war on Ukraine. The West needs to craft a comprehensive strategy that should include discrediting the Kremlin in the eyes of the region, among other tools. Analysts tend to see great power competition with Russia unfolding in Europe, but Russia looks at this competition globally. The Middle East remains an arena great power competition between the US, Russia (and China).

Keywords Russia · National security · Ukraine war · Turkey · Sanctions · Great power competition · Middle East

1 Introduction

In order to focus on China, President Biden came into office seeking a “stable, predictable relationship with Russia.”¹ This was always an unrealistic expectation, and when Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine in February 2022, he created the greatest

¹ Soldatkin, Vladimir & Marrow, A. (2021 13 October). Putin sees potential to work with Biden on energy, security and more. *Reuters*.

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challenge to the liberal global order since 1945. Both Russian and Western intelligence expected Kyiv to fall in a matter of days.² Both were wrong. By the end of the year president Biden and his national security adviser Jake Sullivan made it clear that the US will not be entering the conflict directly but would continue to support Ukraine for as long as it takes. Most other Western leaders share this view.

Putin for his part continues to frame the war as Russia's existential struggle, where the West attacked Russia using Ukraine.³ Meanwhile, Russian military activities continued to destabilize Georgia and Moldova throughout the year, actions that supported concerns that Moscow's long-term aims go beyond Ukraine. In fact, Russia's actions highlight its disregard of the international order, specifically the most basic belief that every state should respect another's territorial integrity. This view was reiterated on the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine when United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Antonio Guterres described the Russian war as "an affront to our collective conscience [and a] violation of the United Nations Charter and international law....Russia's attack on Ukraine challenges the cornerstone principles and values of our multilateral system."⁴

The U.S. has recently recalibrated its foreign policy trajectory towards great power competition. Yet, when Western analysts and policymakers look at competition with Russia, they tend to see it as mainly unfolding in Europe (and in the Indo-Pacific when it comes to China). The Russian state, however, is pursuing a global battle. And it is winning in the global south. Reactions to the invasion in the Middle East highlight this point. Syria and Iran have openly sided with Russia—and Iran has contributed to Russia's war efforts. Meanwhile Middle Eastern allies and partners to the US responded in a variety of ways to the invasion, but overall, the region reacted with ambivalence, rather than taking a firm stand on the war. The Kremlin plays on these sentiments and finds ways to stay afloat. Despite superficial condemnations at the UN and other international forums, the region engaged in diplomatic ballet rather than firmly condemning Russia's invasion. Moreover, the Arab world and Turkey have deepened commercial ties with Russia as compared to the year before the invasion.

² Scitutto, J. & Williams, K. (2022, February 25). "US intelligence assessed that the city could fall soon after the invasion. *CNN*.;

In March 2022, CIA director Bill Burns also told lawmakers that Moscow's strategy was centered on "seizing Kyiv within the first two days of the campaign. See, Greg Myre, "A frustrated Putin is likely to 'double down' in the coming weeks, CIA says, "March 8, 2022 NPR <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/08/1085155440/cia-director-putin-is-angry-and-frustrated-likely-to-double-down.>;

Perhaps the most striking example of the Kremlin's expectation of victory in Ukraine was the accidental publication by Russia's state-run RIA Novosti of on February 26, 2022, celebrating Russia's victory in Ukraine, declaring for instance, "Ukraine has returned to Russia," which suggests preparations for a quick victory. RIA quickly deleted the article but the episode was widely reported in the West. See for instance Ukraine crisis: Russian news agency deletes victory editorial—BBC News <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-60562240>;

After the initial failure to take Kyiv in the early days of the war, the Russian military recalibrated its strategy, which also suggested a lesson learned from an initial expectation of taking Kyiv in days.

³ President of Russia. (2023 21 February). Presidential Address to Federal Assembly." *Kremlin.ru*.

⁴ United Nations in Ukraine. (2023 22 February). Remarks of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly Emergency Special Session on Ukraine *United Nations in Ukraine*.

Perhaps one underlying factor is that the Kremlin narratives resonate in the region on a deeper level than policymakers understand. As a result, Russia was able to find additional avenues to circumvent Western sanctions, especially when it came to energy sales, and thus was able to continue financing the war. Western policymakers have often painted Russia as having lost ideologically and economically as a result of the invasion, but at the time of this writing this was only true in the liberal free world. Russia's position in the Global South is more nuanced as it continues its fight to change the fundamental rules of the international system that the US put in place after World War II and replace it with a multipolar (or polycentric) world, as the Russians often describe it.

2 UN Votes

On the surface, most of the international community has condemned Russia for its illegal invasion of Ukraine. In March 2022, the UN General Assembly met for its first emergency session in twenty-five years which led to a vote demanding Moscow withdraw forces from Ukraine. Many described the vote as historic⁵: 141 votes in favor, 5 against, and 35 abstentions. Only Belarus, Syria, North Korea, Eritrea—and Russia itself—voted in Russia favor.⁶ Similarly, most countries condemned Russia in the October 2022 vote.⁷ However, General Assembly resolutions are non-binding, and when it came to the Security Council, only two Middle East countries—Kuwait and Turkey—supported the Resolution condemning the Russian invasion on February 25, 2022. Several countries abstained, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which held a rotating seat on the Security Council.

Most Middle Eastern countries also abstained from the UN vote in April to suspend Russia's membership in the UN Human Rights Council, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Jordan, Qatar, Kuwait, and Iraq.⁸ In their explanations of votes, many regional leaders repeatedly called for "peaceful negotiations" over the course of the year, rather than directly condemning Russia. To give a few examples, immediately after the invasion, the Arab League issued a statement that did not directly

⁵ Pamuk, H. & Landay, J. (2022 2 March). U.N. General Assembly in historic vote denounces Russia over Ukraine invasion. *Reuters*.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/un-general-assembly-set-censure-russia-over-ukraine-invasion-2022-03-02/>

⁶ European Union External Action Website. (2022 2 March). UN General Assembly demands Russian Federation withdraw all military forces from the territory of Ukraine. *europa.eu*;

Leshchiner, D. et al., (2022 March 2). The UN Resolution on Ukraine: How Did the Middle East Vote? *The Washington Institute*;

UN News. (2022 12 October). Ukraine: UN General Assembly demands Russia reverse course on 'attempted illegal annexation.'" *UN News*.

⁷ UN News. (2022 12 October). Ukraine: UN General Assembly demands Russia reverse course on 'attempted illegal annexation.'" *UN News*.

⁸ UN News. (2022 7 April). UN General Assembly votes to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council. *UN News*.

condemn Russia. Rather, the statement expressed “great concern” on the situation in Ukraine and called for “all efforts to resolve the crisis through dialogue and diplomacy.”⁹ Iraq expressed mere “regret” over the “deterioration of the situation and the escalating tensions between the Russian Federation and Ukraine.” Turkish president Erdogan described Putin as a “friend” and accused Ukraine’s supporters of escalating the conflict, while praising Turkey’s more “constructive” approach towards Russia.¹⁰ Even Israel, which was the only country to establish a field hospital in western Ukraine, initially did not condemn Russia directly, and only did so after rebuke from Washington. Rather, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett called for a “responsible and measured approach in March 2022.”¹¹ At year’s end, UAE Ambassador Mohamed Abushahab, their deputy permanent representative to the UN, said about Ukraine, “In order to be credible and sustainable, any processes that aims to bring us closer to peace must be inclusive, and any actions that undermine the prospects for constructive dialogue must be avoided by all parties.”¹²

The Russian government had violated the most fundamental tenants of the post-World War II global order, but the region did not take a firm stand to defend it. In private, some at least worried about the precedent of allowing Russia to get away with blatantly violating the sovereignty of its peaceful neighbor, but the concern of antagonizing Russia outweighed these worries. Without a clear, direct and public condemnation of the invasion, the implied message to the Kremlin was that it could continue to press on with the war.

To be sure, a bigger issue always stood in the background of the UN-related issues. The United Nations failed to act in its intended purpose—to prevent the very war the Kremlin had unleashed. Of course, no one seriously expected the UN to do so in February 2022. But its failure—given the magnitude of the war—was another step that undermined the liberal world order, an illustration for the world of how far the original intent of this organization had fallen from reality. Adding insult to injury at year’s end, Russia retained its seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

⁹ Zaida, M. (2022 28 February). Arab League following Ukraine developments with ‘great concern.’ *Arab News*.

¹⁰ Erdogan, R. (2022 6 February). Twitter.

¹¹ Kaufman, E. Liebermann, O. & Hansler, J. (2022 28 March). Lawmakers are starting to grumble about Israel’s lack of action in Ukraine. *CNN Politics*;

For more details on the evolution of Israel’s approach to Ukraine, see Anna Borshchevskaya, Non-equilateral triangle. Why Israel is hesitant about supplying Ukraine with air defense systems, *The Insider*, November 15, 2022, <https://theins.ru/en/opinion/anna-borshchevskaya/256998>.

¹² Permanent Mission of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations. (2022 27 September). UAE Statement at the UN Security Council Meeting on Ukraine. *uaeun.org*.

3 Deepened Commercial Ties

Russia's invasion had a global economic impact. In 2022 Russia had emerged as the world's most sanctioned country, surpassing Iran and North Korea.¹³ Export and monetary sanctions had disrupted global supply chains. And to be sure, sanctions had impact. The Congressional Research Service has highlighted that, "Russia's financial sector faces losses of hundreds of billions of dollars, the Russian military is having difficulties procuring key components for its war effort ...hundreds of U.S. and international companies have exited the Russian market; and Russian oil is selling below market prices."¹⁴ Yet, at year's end, Russia's economy contracted far less than many predicted, by 2.1%.¹⁵ There are many reasons for this outcome, and increased commercial ties with the Middle East is part of the answer.

Middle Eastern states did not join Western sanctions on Russia. And since the start of Russia's invasion, many Russian oligarchs have fled to the region, primarily to the UAE and Turkey, which provided a safe haven for billions of dollars of their wealth.¹⁶ Crucially, the Russian government had continued to sell oil and increase overall commercial ties to the region. Indeed, Russia's oil production has fallen less than experts predicted, a "modest decline of about 0.3 mb/d since its invasion of Ukraine, much less than the 2.5–3.0 mb/d decline anticipated in the International Energy Agency's April 2022 Oil Market Report."¹⁷ Russia's continued ability to sell energy and otherwise deepen trade relations was a major reason why Russia could continue to finance its war effort in Ukraine.

Among Middle Eastern states, Turkey and the Arab Gulf (especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE) have emerged as crucial to Russia's increase commercial ties to the region. This is all the more ironic since Turkey, a NATO member, played a key role in negotiating the Black Sea Grain Initiative, as part of a wider effort to curb the effects of the Ukraine invasion on the global food markets. Still, other countries in the region also played an important role.

3.1 The Gulf States

As *The Economist* documented, a "robust and extensive" shadow economy of energy shipping and financing infrastructure has emerged over the course of 2022. It includes

¹³ Bella, T. (2022 8 March). Putin turns Russia into world's most-sanctioned country, beating out Iran, North Korea after Ukraine invasion. *The Washington Post*.

¹⁴ Congressional Research Service. (2022 13 December). The Economic Impact of Russia Sanctions. *Congressional Research Service*.

¹⁵ BBC. (2022 20 February). Russia's economy shrinks by less than expected. BBC.

¹⁶ Faiola, A. (2022 1 April). How Russian oligarchs are finding safe havens in Turkey, the United Arab Emirates. *The Washington Post*.

¹⁷ Nagle, P. & Temag, K. (2022 16 December). Oil prices remain volatile amid demand pessimism and constrained supply. *World Bank*.

the Gulf, China, and India.¹⁸ Over the course of 2022, Gulf Arab states have resisted U.S. pressure to help isolate Russia and to pump more oil to help replace lost Russian supply.

By late 2022, the OPEC+ group drew ire from Washington when the group decided to cut oil output by 2 million barrels per day. National Security Council spokesman John Kirby accused Saudi Arabia of strong-arming other oil producing countries to agree to the major oil cut. “The Saudi Foreign Ministry can try to spin or deflect, but the facts are simple,” Kirby said, adding that the kingdom knows the decision will “increase Russian revenues and blunt the effectiveness of sanctions” against Moscow.¹⁹ Yet, Saudi officials continued insisting that their decision was made for purely economic reasons.

Saudi Arabia also has been importing significant amounts of low-cost Russian fuel oil to burn at its power plants while freeing up more crude for exports, and according to Reuters began importing diesel from Russia in February 2022.²⁰ Saudi Arabia was not alone. Most recent reports indicate that the UAE “has been taking more cargoes of Russian crude oil,” while “Russia has been selling both crude and refined products at discounted prices.”²¹ And in May 2022, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov came to Oman and announced a commitment to the OPEC+ output agreements.²²

Nor was Russia’s trade with the Gulf limited to energy. According to Russian customs data analysis by Washington DC-based Free Russia Foundation, the UAE was still exporting drones to Russia at the end of 2022,²³ while “non-oil trade between Russia and the UAE grew by 57% in the first nine months of 2022.” In particular, exports of electronics increased sevenfold, to \$283 million, and at year’s end Russia was still exporting drones to the UAE.²⁴ In December, Emirati Trade Minister Thani bin Ahmed al-Zeyoudi pledged to “push trade to even greater heights.”²⁵ In March

¹⁸ The Economist. (2023 29 January). How Russia dodges oil sanctions on an industrial scale. *The Economist*.

¹⁹ Northam, J. (2022 13 October). The White House accuses Saudi Arabia of aiding Russia and coercing OPEC oil producers. *NPR*.

²⁰ Reuters. (2023 7 March). UPDATE 1-Russia begins diesel exports to Saudi Arabia -traders, Refinitiv data. *Reuters*.

²¹ Reuters. (2023 6 March). Exclusive: Russian crude oil heads to UAE as sanctions divert flows. *Reuters*.

²² Foreign Ministry of Oman. (2022 11 May) Oman’s Foreign Minister holds talks with Russian Foreign Minister. *Foreign Ministry of Oman*.; Arab News. (2022 11 May). Oman, welcoming Russian FM, says committed to OPEC+ agreement. *Arab News*.

²³ Free Russia Foundation. (2023 January). Effectiveness of U.S. sanctions targeting Russian companies and individuals. *Free Russia Foundation*.

²⁴ Financial Times. (2023 1 March). West presses UAE to clamp down on suspected Russia sanctions busting. *Financial Times*.

²⁵ Matthews, S. (2023 2 March). “UAE is ‘country of focus’ as US looks to target Russia’s economic partners. *Middle East Eye*.

2023, the Russian government announced it was preparing visa-free travel agreements with 17 countries, which include Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and Syria.²⁶

3.2 Turkey

Turkey has emerged as another key trade partner with Russia. According to Turkey's official TurkStat, Russia's role in the country's foreign trade significantly increased because of its war against Ukraine. Turkish imports from Russia doubled as compared to 2021, from approximately \$29 billion (USD) in 2021 to \$58.85 billion in 2022. Indeed, Russia emerged as the top country of imports for Turkey in 2022. Since Turkey did not join Western sanctions, it was able to take on a role of what some described as a "trade platform" between Russia and the West.²⁷

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that Turkish firms have exported a total of at least \$18.5 million worth of items, to Russia, "including plastics, rubber items and vehicles, to at least 10 Russian companies sanctioned by the U.S. for their role in Russia's assault on Ukraine... The Turkish companies sent at least three shipments of American-made goods, according to the data reviewed by The Wall Street Journal." Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said in February 2023 that Turkey is not exporting products that could be used in Russia's war effort. He added that Turkey is not violating US and EU sanctions, and that sanctions are not being violated via Turkey.²⁸

Moscow now retains full control of only one route for Russian gas to Europe, and it is Turkstream, a natural gas pipeline that, directly connects Turkey to the largest gas reserves in Russia,²⁹ and in late 2022, Putin suggested that Russia could create a major gas hub in Turkey by redirecting supplies intended for the Nord Stream pipelines under the Baltic Sea after an explosion on the pipeline earlier in the year³⁰ Putin said, "Turkey has proven to be the most reliable route for gas supplies to Europe, thanks to your firm position in support of building TurkStream."³¹ Moreover, in late 2022, Putin and Erdogan discussed creating of a gas hub where the EU could purchase Russian gas through Turkey. As Erdogan claimed, "Europe is currently thinking

²⁶ Essaid, S. (2023 6 March). Russia to add Gulf countries to visa-free travel list. *Al-Monitor*.

²⁷ Buyuk, H. (2023 31 January). Turkey's Foreign Trade Deficit Spikes, Imports from Russia Double. *Balkan Insight*.

²⁸ Hayatsever, H. & Pamuk, H. (2023 20 February). Turkey not exporting items for use in Russia war effort—Foreign Minister. *Reuters*.

²⁹ Turkstream website. <https://turkstream.info/project/>

³⁰ Gotev, G. (2022 13 October). Putin puts 'gas hub' plan to Erdogan, hints at sabotage attempt against TurkStream. *EURACTIV.com*;

Entous, A., Barnes, J., & Goldman, A. (2023 7 March). Intelligence Suggests Pro-Ukrainian Group Sabotaged Pipelines, U.S. Officials Say. *The New York Times*.

³¹ Gotev, G. (2022 13 October). Putin puts 'gas hub' plan to Erdogan, hints at sabotage attempt against TurkStream. *EURACTIV.com*.

about how to ensure energy supplies in the coming winter period. We, thank God, do not have such a problem. Moreover, at our last meeting with Putin, we agreed to create a gas hub in Turkey.”³²

The US government expressed concern publicly in early 2023 that Russian companies continue to ship oil worldwide and use intermediaries while importing U.S. and European technology in countries that have not imposed sanctions on Russia. “We are specifically concerned about increases in trade with Russia in the kind of goods that can be used on the battlefield and those who are aiding designated Russian entities,”³³ Elizabeth Rosenberg, the assistant Treasury secretary for terrorist financing and financial crimes, said in March 2023. Turkey and the Gulf region have emerged as especially important in this regard. “UAE, along with countries like Turkey, is providing a critical economic lifeline to the Kremlin, which could help its war effort. Many of the missiles and drones deployed by Russia rely on western component parts,” Rosenberg said.³⁴

3.3 *Iraq, Egypt and Other Arab States*

Outside the Gulf and Turkey, Russia continued commercial activity throughout the Middle East. When it comes to Russia-Iraq relations, bilateral trade has risen 40% from January to August 2022, to \$313 million. While the total volume is small, the upward trajectory after the invasion of Ukraine is noteworthy.³⁵ Russian foreign affairs minister Sergei Lavrov came to Iraq in 2002 and in early 2023 to discuss business, especially energy issues, including Lukoil and Gazprom, and implementation of the corresponding resolutions of the Russian-Iraqi commission on trade, economic and scientific cooperation.³⁶ Upon the meeting’s conclusion Lavrov said:

In current circumstances, with illegal restrictions imposed by the US and their satellites, it is critical to preserve legitimate economic relations from illegal Western pressure, as many countries in the region are doing when, instead of using the dollar, converting to payments, including payments for oil supplies, in currencies of other trustworthy countries that care about their reputation as participants in international economic transactions.³⁷

³² Al Mayadeen. (2022 19 October). Erdogan: EU will be able to purchase Russian gas via Turkey *Al Mayadeen*.

³³ Remarks by Assistant Secretary Elizabeth Rosenberg for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes at the Association of Women in International Trade, U.S. Department of the Treasury. (20,232 March).

³⁴ Byrne, J. et al., (2022 August). Silicon Lifeline: Western Electronics at the Heart of Russia’s War Machine. *RUSI*.

³⁵ Russia Briefing News. (2022 6 November). Russia-Iraqi Trade Up 40% In 2022. *Russia Briefing News*.

³⁶ Frantzman, S. (2023 6 February). What is Russia’s Lavrov doing in Iraq?—analysis. *Jerusalem Post*. 7.

³⁷ TASS. (2023 6 February). Russia, Iraq have to protect their cooperation from illegal Western sanctions—Lavrov—Russian Politics & Diplomacy. *TASS*.

Russia also continued to pursue energy ties with Iraqi Kurdistan, where in previous years Russia's energy giant Rosneft had agreed to construct a pipeline to Turkey, which significantly expanded Moscow's reach into the Middle East energy sector.³⁸ More to the point, ties with Iraq—both Baghdad and the KRG—are also important for Moscow from a geopolitical perspective. Given Russia's existing strategic position in Syria, additional inroads in Iraq could potentially allow Russia to carve out a strategic corridor.

Meanwhile, in Egypt, Russia continued with construction to build Egypt's El Dabaa nuclear power plant.³⁹ Indeed, the West has not sanctioned Russia's state-owned nuclear energy monopoly Rosatom, which builds nuclear power stations around the world, Egypt included.⁴⁰ In addition to energy cooperation, in the first half of 2022, trade between Egypt and Russia has increased slightly by 2.2%, according to the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS).⁴¹

In January 2023 Russia announced it is working on a way to settle payment for grain exports to Egypt in rubles instead of dollars, which is especially important given that Egypt is Russia's largest wheat buyer. Indeed, Russia's central bank, The Bank of Russia, announced on 18 January 2023 that it had set an official exchange rate for the ruble against nine foreign currencies; in addition to the Egyptian pound, these include the UAE dirham and the Qatari riyal.⁴²

Beyond Iraq and Egypt, Russia's exports to Morocco reportedly doubled in the first half of 2022, nearly \$1.2 billion,⁴³ while Russia and Algeria held talks to boost military cooperation.⁴⁴ A recent letter by a bipartisan group of US senators called for sanctions on Algiers, given Algeria's growing ties with Moscow, especially arms deals.⁴⁵ In response Lavrov said the US "attacked the wrong person" and confirmed Algeria's rapprochement with Russia.⁴⁶ Thus, Russia appears intent on deepening ties with Algeria. And in the context of the dire economic situation in Lebanon, Moscow

³⁸ Borshchevskaya, A. & Wahab, B. (2018 14 June). In Search of a New Patron, the KRG Turns Back to Moscow *The Washington Institute*.

³⁹ Hosny, H. (2022 7 November). Egypt, Russia commence second phase of nuclear power plant construction *Al-Monitor*.

⁴⁰ Sebastian, C. (2023 6 March). Why the West hasn't gone after Russian nuclear energy. *CNN*.

⁴¹ Al-Aees, S. (2023 22 January). Trading EGP on Moscow Exchange will have positive impact on Egyptian economy: Official. *Daily News Egypt*.

⁴² Tabbhika, K. (2023 24 January). Switching trade with Russia from dollars to roubles 'could boost Egyptian economy.' *The National*.

⁴³ Rahhou, J. (2022 4 September). Russia's Exports to Morocco Double in First Half of 2022. *Morocco World News*.

⁴⁴ The Defense Post. (2023 27 February). Algeria and Russia Aim to Boost Military Ties. *The Defense Post*.

⁴⁵ Haboush, J. (2022 29 September). Bipartisan letter to Blinken calls for sanctions on Algeria after Russia arms deal. *Al Arabiya*.

⁴⁶ Aamari, O. (2023 4 February). Sergey Lavrov Confirms Depth of Russia's Alliance with Algeria. *Morocco World News*.

is working to build good will in Lebanon by donating wheat and oil products to Beirut.⁴⁷

Rhetoric certainly matters in politics, and lack of a direct condemnation of Russia's invasion from the region was bad enough. But on a practical level, the commercial ties Moscow was able to improve with the region after its invasion had allowed Russia to retain resources to continue to finance and wage war on Ukraine. From a pragmatic standpoint, the West could not isolate Russia globally at the time of this writing. The region's willingness to deepen these commercial ties with Russia showed the limits of what economic sanctions could do to deter Russia, as well as the limits of Western diplomacy in enlisting Middle East allies in partner in a joint effort to isolate and deter Russia.

4 Kremlin Narrative Resonates

Commentators have declared over the course of 2022 that Ukraine won the narrative on the war against Russia, but this has only been true among liberal democracies. In the Middle East, the Russian narrative overall has resonated. The region does not see the global dimension to the Russian invasion, rather it tends to see it as a far-removed from the European war. It also tends to see the West as hypocritical, in a sense that it helped Ukraine far more than it helped its allies in the region. Time and again, in private conversations with Arab interlocutors, this author heard echoes of the Kremlin's favorite propaganda lines: Russia was provoked by NATO enlargement; Russia-Ukraine history is "complicated"; and America, which invaded Iraq without cause, has no standing to criticize Russian action in Ukraine. While regional leaders tend to be more circumspect in public, Kishore Mahbubani, Singapore's former permanent representative to the UN, explained recently in an article when speaking about the global South, that "in their heart of hearts, many leaders of these countries do not buy the 'black-and-white' story that the West is selling on the conflict: Ukraine and the West are completely virtuous; Russia is completely evil."⁴⁸

Egyptian writer, Amr Salah, writing for Carnegie, writes that support for Putin, is rooted in societal polarization and competing narrative over whether strongman rule or democracy is a better form of governance. He adds, "... the official Western responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine represent another element in building support for Putin among Arab populations. For Putin's supporters, Western responses to the Ukrainian crisis reveal double standards and contradict the prevailing Western discourse on the Arab crises."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Al Arabiya. (2022 13 October). Russia to donate 25,000 tons of wheat to Lebanon: Minister. *Al Arabiya*.

⁴⁸ Mahbubani, K. (2023 18 February). Time for the West to Rethink Goal of Total Defeat for Russia in Ukraine. *South China Morning Post*.

⁴⁹ Salah, A. (2022 16 June). Why Does Some of the Arab Public Support Putin's War in Ukraine? *Carnegie Endowment*.

Years before the Ukraine invasion, *Russia Today* (RT) *Arabic* and *Sputnik* emerged as major sources of legitimate regional news. The Middle East media landscape overall has provided fertile ground for these outlets, more so than in the Western world. In the Middle East, RT and *Sputnik* have relied heavily on social media allowing the Kremlin to exploit the growing Arabic-speaking youth bulge to lay the foundation for long-term influence. Furthermore, RT and *Sputnik* have provide substantial coverage of major regional issues in Syria, Iran, Egypt, Israel, the Gulf, and the West, along with Russia's internal politics.⁵⁰ After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian state-run media have retained full access to airwaves in the region, enabling the Kremlin to propagate its narrative on the war via regional media.⁵¹ And Moscow knows its audience in the Middle East well. It routinely frames the war as a Russian challenge to the US-led hegemonic order, an argument that plays well in many Arab capitals. For example, the Arabic news aggregator Nabd frequently reposts RT *Arabic* articles.

Polling among Arab states and Turkey has leaned towards positive perceptions of Russia. A recent European Council on Foreign Relations poll for example showed a stark difference between public opinion in Turkey and opinion in the West regarding Russia. The survey showed that most Turkish citizens view Russia as a “necessary partner” or “ally” rather than a rival or adversary. On the war, almost half say a settlement should be found “as soon as possible, even if it means Ukraine giving up territory.”⁵² Arab News-YouGov found in Spring 2022 that among the Gulf states, only 22% of respondents sided Ukraine. Some experts suggested that they are echoing the views of their governments, also see the war as a European conflict.⁵³ And my colleague David Pollock's Washington Institute poll in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait found that “while around three-quarters in each country actually voice a negative view of Russia's military actions in Ukraine, most would probably not support active measures against Russian interests—or are in favor of American ones”.⁵⁴

A battle for narratives historically was always an inseparable part of warfare. It was also closely linked to morale and will to fight. That Kremlin narratives resonate in the Middle East among Western allies and partners is an example of Russia gaining in the battle against the US-led global order Moscow is waging in Ukraine. In the backdrop of low morale within the Russian military, there is another battlefield unfolding—for the hearts and minds of the global south, and here the Kremlin's morale does not

⁵⁰ Borshchevskaya, A. & Cleveland, C. (2018 19 December). Russia's Arabic Propaganda: What It Is, Why It Matters. *The Washington Institute*.

⁵¹ Sherman, A. (2022 3 March). Russia-tied cable news station RT America closes amid Ukraine invasion. *CNBC*.; Oweidat, N. (2022 18 April). The Russian Propaganda in Arabic Hidden from the West *The Washington Institute*.; Borshchevskaya, A. & Cleveland, C. (2022 9 May). Is the West Losing the Battle of Narratives in the Middle East? *The Washington Institute*.

⁵² Ash, T., Krastev, I., & Leonard, M. (2023 22 February). United West, divided from the rest: Global public opinion one year into Russia's war on Ukraine. *European Council on Foreign Relations*.

⁵³ Fouad, L. (2022 30 May). Poll finds that Arab street has no stance on Russia-Ukraine conflict. *Arab News*.

⁵⁴ Pollock, D. (2022 30 April). Russia's Move on Ukraine Polls Poorly in Arab Gulf. *The Washington Institute*.

need a boost. The will to fight (along with resources) is a key ingredient in who wins in protracted warfare. To discredit Russia ideologically outside the liberal world, the West needs to discredit its narratives on Ukraine in the Middle East.

5 Conclusion

The West deserves a lot of credit for making sure that Ukraine does not lose on the battlefield but is having more trouble framing Russia as a global pariah. Russia's ability to make greater inroads in the Middle East after invading Ukraine—and the region's receptivity to Russia—is a case in point.

President Zelensky and senior Ukrainian officials called for complete victory at the end of 2022, meaning the reconquering of every inch of Russian-occupied territory, including Crimea.⁵⁵ Polls in 2022 indicated that the vast majority of Ukrainians want to fight until they achieve complete victory against Russia and believe they can win.⁵⁶ But the West has not come up with a clear vision of how Ukraine is going to win, and it remains unclear what a Ukrainian victory would look like. Ukraine is facing long-term protracted warfare. Protracted warfare puts Ukraine at a disadvantage. To reverse this trend the liberal world needs to turn Russia into a global pariah. Only then will Russia start losing its ability to wage war.

Western analysts have focused over the course of the year on Russia's poor military performance in Ukraine, but what is less mentioned is that the assault on Kyiv had come close to succeeding, and at year's end Russia controlled 17% of Ukraine's territory, about ten percent more than at the start of the invasion. As Graham Allison, a professor of government at the Harvard Kennedy School has summarized, if the second year of the war goes on as the first year did, Russia will control almost one-third of Ukraine by February 2024.⁵⁷ While China presents a longer-term challenge to the US than Russia, Russia is not going away anytime soon. Even a severely weakened Russia will remain important, especially in the global energy market. The Middle East understands this point and does not want to choose between great powers. From the region's perspective Russia will remain a permanent feature of geopolitics.

Therefore, the US will need to walk and chew gum at the same time—it will need to focus on both Russia and China. To that end the West needs to do a better job in isolating Russia from its global economic and military lifelines. This entails putting together a comprehensive strategy that goes beyond sanctions alone. This strategy should look at competition with Russia through a broader aperture, beyond Europe

⁵⁵ YouTube. (2023 24 February). Ukraine's president pledges push for victory on war anniversary. *YouTube*.

⁵⁶ Reinhart, R. (2022 18 October). Ukrainians Support Fighting Until Victory. *Gallup*;
Tyshchenko, K. (2022 11 August). Poll shows 98% Ukrainians believe in Ukraine's victory, 91% approve of Zelenskyy. *Ukrainska Pravda*.

⁵⁷ Allison, G. (2023 23 February). A Report Card on the War in Ukraine. *Foreign Policy*.

alone. It should include a successful global information narrative that shows Russia (and China) for what they are, states consumed by imperial grandeur, a vision that is ultimately a losing one compared to what the West has to offer. The West should also recognize that the Middle East is a vital arena of great power competition—as it had been for several hundred years—and it cannot win the competition of this century without an active presence there. Russia, for one, understands this and is excelling at it.

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