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**ASIA**  
INDO-PACIFIC AUSTRALIA WAR TRADE MIDDLE EAST UKRAINE JAPAN ISRAEL

- ASIAN GEOPOLITICS
- RUSSIAN INVASION
- UKRAINIAN FACTOR



## ASIA

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# POSITIONS OF THE STATES OF THE MIDDLE EAST REGARDING THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

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*This article examines the positions of the key Middle Eastern states regarding the Russo-Ukrainian war. Special attention is paid to descriptions of the policy of Türkiye, Iran, Israel, and the Gulf states. The article analyses specific factors that shape the moderate/neutral policy of the Middle Eastern states and determine the public opinion of their population on the issue of the Russian invasion; the potential of Middle Eastern actors to influence the course of the Russian aggression against Ukraine; and the threats and opportunities which arise from the Russo-Ukrainian war and directly affect the interests of the Middle Eastern states.*

## **Factors and Trends that Shape the Perception of the Russian Aggression against Ukraine in the Middle East**

The Middle East remains a heterogeneous, fragmented region. This fragmentation is facilitated by historical, religious, and ethnic elements. Despite the majority of their populations being Arabs, the idea of pan-Arabism remains unimplemented. Leadership in the Arab World is claimed by Saudi Arabia, which has gathered a coalition of allies and dependent states<sup>1</sup>. However, it cannot be considered as the core of a stable regional alliance. Some states in the region actively oppose the idea of Saudi hegemony.

The influence of non-Arab states which claim regional leadership in the Middle East

complicates the situation even more. The Republic of Türkiye seeks to play an active role in the region within the framework of the neo-Ottoman foreign policy concept<sup>2</sup>. Iran is trying to strengthen its position by actively using the religious factor and proxy forces<sup>3</sup>. Tehran's expansion of influence in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen is becoming a key threat to other states in the region.

A specific role in the Middle East is played by Israel. For many years, it was isolated from the majority of the Islamic world because of the unresolved Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Today, the common threat from Iran intensifies the process of normalisation of Arab-Israeli relations<sup>4</sup>. It could lead to Israel's inclusion in the regional system as a full-fledged member – but for now this is still incomplete.

1 A. Sunik, *Regional Leadership in Authoritarian Contexts – Saudi Arabia's New Military Interventionism as Part of Its Leadership Bid in the Middle East*, "Rising Powers Quarterly", 2018, # 3(1), pp. 65-85.

2 K. Dalacoura, *Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Power Projection and Post-Ideological Politics*, "International Affairs", July 2021, Vol. 97, Issue 4, pp. 1125-1142.

3 The International Institute for Strategic Studies (ed.), *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, Routledge 2020, p. 224.

4 M. Asseburg, S. Henkel, *Normalisation and Realignment in the Middle East*, SWP Comment, July 2021, # 45, p. 8.

Despite fragmentation, the region has specific features which in general determine the reaction of the Middle Eastern states to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Most of them are ruled by undemocratic regimes: secular dictatorships, absolute monarchies, and fundamentalist islamists. The Middle East is characterised by the personalisation of power. At the same time, the regional Eastern states remain close to the authoritarian Russian regime of Vladimir Putin in terms of their orientation. This impacts the perception of the latest events in Eastern Europe by the local political elites.

The leaders of the Middle East respect strength. This also plays into Russia's hands. The Russian military operation in Syria has demonstrated that Moscow is ready to support client regimes, and is able to ensure their security. On the contrary, the West's image as an influential player has received several serious blows. This was facilitated by sensitive defeats (e.g., the fall of the Afghan government of Ashraf Ghani) and their inability to support diplomatic rhetoric through force (the failure of Barack Obama's "red lines" in Syria). This allows critics of American hegemony to talk about a post-American Middle East in which a power vacuum has already been formed.

Regional peculiarities shape the worldview of the population of the Middle East and influence public perception of international processes. The Middle East remains a zone of intense armed conflict and terrorist activities. Its population lives in constant danger – so it has a specific attitude to the issue of interstate conflict and active hostilities. On the one hand, it has a better understanding of what Ukrainians have to face. At the same time, the presence of regional security challenges pushes the

issue of Russian aggression to the bottom of the information space. From the point of view of public perception, the locals are accustomed to such threats. Armed aggression and collateral civilian casualties do not cause such a shock in the Middle East as in the stable states of Western Europe and North America.

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On the contrary, the increased attention of the West to the problem of Russian aggression against Ukraine causes irritation and criticism. It is perceived as an illustration of the "policy of double standards". The narrative that for Europe and the United States the lives of Ukrainians are more valuable than the lives of Syrians, Palestinians, and Yemenis is quite popular in the Middle East. Russian propaganda and agents of influence, who are very active in the region, are trying to use the situation to their advantage, contributing to the spread of such views<sup>5</sup>.

Unfortunately, popular assessments of the Russo-Ukrainian War are also influenced by the spread of anti-Western sentiment in the Middle East. Ukraine does not have a negative reputation in the region. However, the war is perceived in the context of the confrontation between Russia and NATO, in which the "Arab Street" traditionally sympathises

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5 X. Gogitidze, *Люблять силу і не люблять Захід. Як арабський світ ставиться до війни в Україні (They love power and do not love the West. How the Arab world feels about the war in Ukraine)*, "BBC", 13 July 2022 [<https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-62146857>]

with Moscow. Russia is perceived there as a geopolitical opponent of the West, fighting against unjust imperialistic American hegemony. People ignore the neo-imperial and neo-colonial character of Russia's policy towards Ukraine.

In general, most Middle Eastern states are trying to remain neutral regarding the Russo-Ukrainian war at the official level. They demonstrate loyalty to the principles of international law within the framework of the multilateral platforms of the UN system, in cases where it comes to declarative support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, they refrain from making harsh statements and supporting practical measures aimed at deterring the aggressor. Their public position is influenced by geopolitical positioning within the framework of the confrontation between the West and Russia. Their reaction is determined not by the situation of relations with Ukraine, but by the nature of contacts with the United States and the Russian Federation. As the conflict does not concern their interests directly, they consider their position as an asset for building relations with the global players. The Middle Eastern states are using the situation to prove their importance as partners and to bargain for preferential treatment from Washington or Moscow.

Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine opens up additional opportunities for some Middle Eastern states which have energy reserves. As Europe is looking for an alternative to Russian supplies, they can ensure an increase in profits. The West's need for oil and gas from the Gulf states increases the geopolitical value of the latter, allowing them to build relations

with the United States and Europe on their own terms. However, in the long term, the negative consequences of the conflict for global economic ties can also affect their well-being.



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Also, the Russian aggression against Ukraine can lead to dangerous consequences for some states of the Middle East due to the role of agricultural exports from Ukraine and Russia in their food security<sup>7</sup>. Active hostilities, the occupation of some Ukrainian territories, and the blockade of the Black Sea ports of Ukraine pose a threat to them, determined by the place of the food issue in the system of social relations between the authorities and the population of the region. Providing affordable food remains a critical public policy responsibility from the perspective of the people. Supply disruptions and the increase in prices can lead to large-scale mass protests (as has happened in the past – during the Arab Spring).

### **Gulf States: In Search of Economic and Geopolitical Benefits**

The official reaction of the Arab states of the Gulf to the Russian aggression is shaped by their attempts to find a place in the current geopolitical balance of power. Traditionally, they have been considered

6 UN Resolution Against Ukraine Invasion, "Al Jazeera", 03 March 2022  
[<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/3/unga-resolution-against-ukraine-invasion-full-text>]

7 C. Welsh, *The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa*, Statement before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa and Global Counterterrorism, 18 May 2022  
[<https://www.csis.org/analysis/impact-russias-invasion-ukraine-middle-east-and-north-africa>]

close partners of the United States. These relations have guaranteed their security for decades. However, they are based solely on rational assessments of mutual benefits. The United States was interested in Arab energy resources, and paid for it with security guarantees. But today, forecasts point to a gradual decline in the importance of hydrocarbons in the global energy system. The liberal wing is gaining more and more weight among the political elite of the United States. The Gulf states understand that their importance for Washington will decline. Moreover, they are losing confidence that the United States will provide them with full support. There are differences in the assessment of the Iranian threat and the operations in Yemen between the USA and its Arab partners. This shows to Saudi Arabia and the UAE that the United States is not ready to unconditionally defend their regional ambitions.

Gulf states are interested in maintaining their status as Washington's partners. However, they are afraid to tie their international positioning solely to the United States. They respect strength, and this factor contributed to their orientation towards Washington at the time of the peak of American influence. But changes in the balance of power in favour of other players can lead to a shift in their positions. In recent years, the Arab states of the Gulf have diversified their foreign policies, demonstrating a willingness to deepen relations with geopolitical opponents of the United States<sup>8</sup>. Economic cooperation with China brings them undeniable benefits. Coordination with the Russian Federation within the framework of the OPEC+ system

allows them to regulate energy prices, maintaining them at a favourable level. In general, it is easier for the Arab monarchies to find a common language with the Chinese and Russian regimes. The latter are attractive not only due to lack of piety in human rights, but also because of internal stability and predictable foreign policy.

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Under such circumstances, the Gulf states are cautious about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. They condemn the very fact of war and call for a ceasefire. By doing so, they demonstrate a formal commitment to the fundamental principles of international law. However, they are not ready to declaratively join the camp of US allies who provide support to Ukraine<sup>9</sup>. Arab monarchies generally refrain from criticising the actions of the Russian Federation and raising accusations against Putin's regime. They also take a pragmatic stance regarding potential support for Ukraine. For the Arab monarchies of the Gulf, the Russian invasion is more a window of opportunities than a threat. They are less dependent on the export of grain from Ukraine and the Russian Federation. At the same time, they receive extra profits due to rising energy prices. Their position in negotiations with the West is also strengthening. European and American

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8 A. Aboudouh, *Russia's war in Ukraine is making Saudi Arabia and the UAE rethink how they deal with US pressure over China*, Atlantic Council, 26 April 2022 [<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-ukraine-war-is-making-saudi-arabia-and-the-uae-rethink-how-they-deal-with-us-pressure-over-china/>]

9 F. Wehrey, *The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa and Counterterrorism), 19 May 2022 [<https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/05/19/impact-of-russia-s-invasion-of-ukraine-in-middle-east-and-north-africa-pub-87163>]

politicians are trying to find alternatives to the supply of Russian energy resources. They need Arab oil and gas – so they are forced to turn a blind eye to the problems over human rights in the Gulf states.

Saudi Arabia is using the situation to unfreeze relations with the United States. The US-Saudi partnership has remained under pressure since Joseph Biden took office. Biden proclaimed a foreign policy based on values and moral obligations. Washington made it clear to Riyadh that it will pay greater attention to violations of rights and freedoms in Saudi Arabia. The US has reconsidered its attitude towards the Saudi operation against the Houthis in Yemen. An important step that blocked bilateral relations at the highest level was President Biden's refusal of a direct dialogue with Prince Mohammed bin Salman – the heir to the Saudi throne and de facto ruler of the Kingdom. In February 2021 Biden's Administration released a US intelligence report which stated that the Saudi Crown Prince had approved a plan which led to the murder of opposition journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018<sup>10</sup>.

However, Russian aggression against Ukraine has increased the importance of Saudi Arabia for Washington. The need for Saudi energy resources forces the United States to make compromises. Biden did eventually meet with Prince Mohammed during a visit to the Middle East<sup>11</sup>. A step was taken to unfreeze the cooperation. However, its results for the settlement of the energy

issue remain uncertain. Saudi authorities confirmed the availability of opportunities to increase oil production. However, the final decision is expected at the OPEC+ meeting in August.

The UAE is also cautious about the activities of the Biden's administration. The Emirates are not ready to respond to American proposals in the first instance, as such a move will threaten Abu Dhabi's relations with Moscow. The authorities of the Emirates remember the decision of the White House to temporarily suspend the sale of F-35 aircraft to them<sup>12</sup>. In the diplomatic arena, their actions are distinguished by independence, justified by the existence of agreements with Moscow. On 25 February 2022, the UAE abstained from voting in the UN Security Council on a resolution that condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine. By doing so, a supportive vote of the Russian Federation on the resolution on the situation in Yemen was ensured. Thanks to this, the Houthis were called a "terrorist group" in the documents of the Security Council for the first time<sup>13</sup>.

Qatar also refrains from public criticism of the Russian Federation. It remains one of the key investors in the Russian economy<sup>14</sup>. At the same time, it uses the situation to achieve economic benefits through the supply of liquefied gas to Europe, thus weakening the latter's dependence on Russia. An opportunity for the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy to speak at the Doha Forum – 2022 could be considered as a gesture in support of

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- 10 *Assessing the Saudi Government's Role in the Killing of Jamal Khashoggi*, US Director of National Intelligence, February 11, 2021 [https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/Assessment-Saudi-Gov-Role-in-JK-Death-20210226v2.pdf]
  - 11 R. Berg, *Saudi Arabia: Biden meets crown prince amid criticism*, "BBC", 15 July 2022 [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-62173934]
  - 12 *Biden suspends F-35 sale to UAE*, "Daily Sabah", 27 January 2022 [https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/biden-suspends-f-35-sale-to-uae]
  - 13 K. Klippenstein, *United Arab Emirates Chooses Solidarity Between Oil Producers Over Military Allies*. "The Intercept", 09 March 2022 [https://theintercept.com/2022/03/09/russia-oil-uae-ukraine-invasion/]
  - 14 A. Gostev, *Ни на чьей стороне? Кремль ищет союзников на Востоке (On Nobody's Side? The Kremlin is Looking for Allies in the East)*, "Radio Freedom: Crimea.Realities", 18 March 2022 [https://ru.krymr.com/a/ukraina-rossiya-voyna-vostok-kreml-soyuzniki/31759601.html]

Ukraine<sup>15</sup>. Qatar was also among the sponsor states for the resolution of the UN General Assembly on aggression against Ukraine, approved on 2 March.

Kuwait also co-sponsored this document. In addition, it became the only Arab state that joined the American initiative in a joint statement condemning Russian aggression<sup>16</sup>, adopted after an unsuccessful vote in the UN Security Council on February, 25. Thus, Kuwait is showing more solidarity with the United States in this matter than its neighbours.

### **The Republic of Türkiye: Mediator with Its Own Interests and Agenda**

Türkiye's position on the Russian aggression against Ukraine has been determined by the role of Kyiv and Moscow in Ankara's developing foreign policy, traditional approaches to security issues in the Black Sea region and the current interests of the Turkish authorities.

For Türkiye, an open conflict between Russia and Ukraine is becoming a challenge. Both states remain valuable partners for Ankara. It is interested in deepening its strategic partnership with Ukraine in trade and the military-industrial sphere. At the same time, Türkiye is not ready for a demonstrative break in relations with the Russian Federation. Russia remains an important partner in the energy sector; and provides a significant share of income for the Turkish tourism sector. Ankara is forced to reckon with Russian influence in strategically important regions (the South Caucasus, the

Middle East and North Africa). The Turkish authorities use demonstrative cooperation with the Russian Federation in certain areas as an illustration of their independent policy, which is especially important for them due to the aggravation of relations with the West.

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As a result, Türkiye takes a specific position on the Russo-Ukrainian war. It is trying to maintain a balance in its relations with Ukraine and the Russian Federation. Its principled position in supporting the territorial integrity of Ukraine remains unchanged. At the same time, the Turkish authorities think that a tough confrontation with the Russian Federation does not correspond to the national interests of the Republic.

Ankara has joined its NATO partners in condemning Russia's actions by means of diplomacy. It provides assistance to Ukraine: humanitarian support, as well as arms supplies under agreed contracts. Special attention should be paid to the activities of the Baykar company, as well as the pro-Ukrainian position of its CEO Haluk Bayraktar<sup>17</sup>.

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15 Volodymyr Zelenskyy at Doha Forum – 2022: Europe's refusal to purchase Russian oil and gas is only a matter of time, so it is necessary to increase energy production in the world, Official Website of the President of Ukraine, 26 March 2022 [https://www.president.gov.ua/ru/news/volodimir-zelenskij-na-doha-forum-2022-vidmova-krayin-yevrop-73849]

16 Joint Statement Following a Vote on a UN Security Council Resolution on Russia's Aggression Toward Ukraine, US Mission to the UN, 25 February 2022 [https://usun.usmission.gov/joint-statement-following-a-vote-on-a-un-security-council-resolution-on-russias-aggression-toward-ukraine/]

17 Turkey's Baykar drone company 'will never' supply Russia: CEO. "Al Jazeera", 19 July 2022 [https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/19/turkish-firm-wont-supply-uavs-widely-used-by-ukraine-to-russia]

The closure of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles to the Russian navy was an important step for Ankara. In this case, Türkiye acted in accordance with the provisions of the Montreux Convention, which remains at the core of Turkish Black Sea policy. This move will not allow Russia to strengthen its naval potential in the Black Sea. Such actions are also in Turkish interests: Ankara complicates logistical communications for the Russian military, and for Bashar al-Assad's forces in Syria.

At the same time, Türkiye refused to join in with the sanctions imposed against the Russian Federation. It has implemented such a policy before, justifying it by the need to maintain dialogue with Moscow for a diplomatic settlement of the conflict. In practice, Ankara pursues its own interests. A break with Russia could cause significant damage to the Turkish economy, which is already suffering from a deep crisis<sup>18</sup>. Under such circumstances, it remains possible for Russian business to use Türkiye to circumvent sanctions. There is evidence of Türkiye's involvement in the trading of Ukrainian grain which was illegally seized by Russian troops

in the temporarily occupied territories<sup>19</sup>. Türkiye is also working to ensure the flow of tourists from the Russian Federation<sup>20</sup>.

Turkish officials are quite diplomatic while talking about Russia's actions in Ukraine. For example, Defence Minister Hulusi Akar has repeatedly refrained from placing responsibility on the Russian Federation for the destructive actions in the Black Sea region, such as the use of mines<sup>21</sup> or attacks on Odessa<sup>22</sup>. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said that some NATO member states are interested in continuing the Russo-Ukrainian war, in order to weaken the Russian Federation<sup>23</sup>. Such a position clearly demonstrates the reluctance to aggravate relations with Moscow.

Turkish society in general supports this approach. It sympathises with Ukraine – but at the same time, between 73<sup>24</sup> and 80%<sup>25</sup> of the population believe that Ankara should remain neutral in this conflict. Openly pro-Russian views are not widespread in Türkiye. However, the perception of Russian aggression is affected by the problems in Türkiye's relations with its American and

- 18 'Nothing can be done' about placing sanctions on Russia: Turkey's Erdogan. "Al Arabiya", 25 March 2022 [https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2022/03/25/-Nothing-can-be-done-about-placing-sanctions-on-Russia-Turkey-s-Erdogan]
- 19 Y. Gaber, *Grain Drain: Why Turkey Can't Afford to Ignore Russian Grain Smuggling from Ukraine*, Atlantic Council, 25 July 2022 [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/grain-drain-why-turkey-cant-afford-to-ignore-russian-grain-smuggling-from-ukraine/]
- 20 S. Sidorenko, *Три компанії для росіян: як Туреччина допомагає агресору обходити санкції (Three Companies for the Russians: How Turkey Helps the Aggressor Circumvent Sanctions)*. "Європейська Правда" ("European Truth"), 04 May 2022 [https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2022/05/4/7138850/]
- 21 *Akar suspects mines in Black Sea released 'intentionally'*, "Hürriyet Daily News", 10 April 2022 [https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/defense-minister-suspicious-of-intentionally-leaving-mines-in-black-sea-172888]
- 22 *Türkiye 'concerned' after missile attack on Odessa port*, "Hürriyet Daily News", 23 July 2022 [https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/amp/russian-missiles-hit-ukraines-odessa-port-key-to-grain-deal-ukraine-175573]
- 23 A. Yusupov, *Чавушоглу: Ряд стран НАТО желает продолжения войны в Украине (Cavusoglu: A number of NATO countries want the war in Ukraine to continue)*, "Anadolu Agency", 20 April 2022 [https://www.aa.com.tr/ru/мир/чавушоглу-ряд-стран-нато-желает-продолжения-войны-в-украине-/2568819]
- 24 *How Turkey is courting Russia's oligarchs*, The Economist, 07 April 2022 [https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/04/07/how-turkey-is-courting-russias-oligarchs]
- 25 *Nearly 80 percent of Turkish population believe their country should stay neutral in Ukraine war – poll*, "Ahval", 5 March 2022 [https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-ukraine-crisis/nearly-80-percent-turkish-population-believe-their-country-should-stay]

European partners. Anti-Western views are widespread within Turkish society. Under these circumstances, Russia is often seen as an alternative centre of power and as a promising partner for stable cooperation that Ankara must reckon with. It is not surprising that only 34% of the population blame the Russian Federation for the Russo-Ukrainian conflict; at the same time, 48% consider the United States of America to be guilty of provoking the war<sup>26</sup>.

In general, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is becoming both a challenge and an opportunity for Türkiye. On the one hand, the Turkish authorities are using the current situation to their advantage. Ankara's support for Ukraine improves its image in the West. Türkiye seeks to prove its importance as a credible regional player to its Western partners. Due to this, Türkiye is trying to overcome the ongoing crisis in relations with the United States and Europe.

Meanwhile, the Turkish authorities are trying to play a key role in the diplomatic settlement of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Ankara is seeking to become a major mediator between Kyiv and Moscow. That corresponds to the current approaches of Turkish diplomacy to resolving regional conflicts. Türkiye remains one of the few states that can provide a platform for Ukrainian-Russian negotiations. Using their potential in this regard, the Turkish authorities want both to stop the war at their borders and to demonstrate Türkiye's international influence. They want to improve their position in the geopolitical

game with Russia. Success here is necessary for the Justice and Development Party, as well as for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan personally. In 2023, both presidential and parliament elections will be held in Türkiye. Erdogan is losing the support of the population because of a deep economic crisis. He seeks to compensate for his domestic failures with foreign policy successes that can be used in the election campaign. An open demonstration of his role in the Ukrainian-Russian negotiations, as well as achieving any practical results, would become an important element in the consolidation of his image as a strong influential leader<sup>27</sup>.

However, this strategy has a chance of success only if real progress is made. To date, it is obvious that Türkiye's ambitious plans to contribute to the ending of hostilities have remained unimplemented due to the destructive stance of the Russian Federation. The talks held in Türkiye in March had only a superficial effect. The recent agreement to unblock Ukraine's Black Sea ports for agricultural exports was seen as a great victory by the Turkish authorities. Ankara has tried to present it as the first step in a wider peace process<sup>28</sup>. However, it is doubtful that these statements are true, given Russia's unwillingness to compromise. The Russian missile attack on the port of Odesa the day after the signing of the grain agreement showed that Moscow is not going to abandon its aggressive campaign against Ukraine. The prime target of this attack was not Ukraine's infrastructure, but Türkiye's

26 *How Turkey is courting Russia's oligarchs*, The Economist, 07 April 2022  
[<https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/04/07/how-turkey-is-courting-russias-oligarchs>]

27 Y. Gaber, «Треба дати путіну врятувати своє обличчя»: що не так з позицією Туреччини в переговорах? («Putin should be Allowed to Save his Face»: What is Wrong with Turkey's Position in the Negotiations?), "Hromadske Radio", 25 April 2022 [https://hromadske.radio/podcasts/viy-na-informatsiynny-marafon/treba-daty-putinuvriatuvaty-svoie-oblychchia-shcho-ne-tak-z-pozytsiieiu-turechchyny-v-peremovynakh]

28 *Bakan Çavuşoğlu: Tahıl Anlaşmasının Ateşkesin ve Barışın Temelini Oluşturabileceğini Düşünüyoruz (Minister Çavuşoğlu: We Think that the Grain Agreement Can Form the Basis for Ceasefire and Peace)*, "TRT Haber", 04 August 2022  
[https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/bakan-cavusoglu-tahil-anlasmasin-in-ateskesin-ve-barisin-temelini-olusturabilecegini-dusunuyoruz-699268.html]

ambitions. It demonstrated the limits of Ankara's capabilities to construct a stable peace, if Russia does not want it.

Russian aggression also poses direct threats to Turkish interests. The continuation of active hostilities casts a shadow over Ankara's conciliatory position. It could have been an asset for Türkiye before the invasion or in the first weeks of open conflict. But now it harms the Republic's positions in relations with the West, creating the image of a "pro-Russian" Türkiye. The war in Ukraine is destabilising the Black Sea region. In the short term, it hampers Türkiye's economic activities in the area. In the long term, the aggression of the Russian Federation puts an end to the fundamental principle of Türkiye's Black Sea policy – the desire to turn the region into a zone of stability closed to external influence, where all important issues are resolved within the narrow circle of the Black Sea states. To date, this idea has no chance of implementation.

### **Israel: In the Shadow of the Iranian Threat**

Israel's foreign policy is aimed at preserving the independence and security of the Jewish state. Israel is not part of the so-called "collective West". It focuses on realistic assessments of its interests and threats from the regional environment. Israel has never declared support for implementation of an idealistic, moral- or value-based foreign policy. In the past, Tel Aviv itself has resorted to strategies and actions that were dubious from the point of view of supporters of the Western liberal model.

The current security threats to Israel remain the focus of attention of local politicians. The key security challenge for Israel is

Iran's aggressive policy. Tel Aviv considers Tehran as a key destructive element in the modern system of international relations<sup>29</sup>. Its fundamentalist regime is believed to pose a direct threat to the existence of the Israeli state. For Tel Aviv, the strengthening of the Iranian position in Syria, and the prospect of the development of nuclear weapons in Iran are unacceptable.

The Iranian factor has an indirect but decisive influence on Israel's reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It forms the context of Russian-Israeli relations. The Israeli authorities adequately assess the role of the Russian Federation in international politics. They understand that Moscow's revisionism toward US hegemony contradicts Israeli interests. They see the deepening of the partnership between the Russian Federation and Iran in terms of anti-Americanism. The Kremlin has traditionally supported Israel's enemies in the Middle East, whose military potential depends on cooperation with the Russian Federation and the supply of Russian weapons.



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***The Iranian factor has an indirect but decisive influence on Israel's reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It forms the context of Russian-Israeli relations***

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Theoretically, such a Russian policy can be counteracted either by force or by diplomacy. However, Israel does not have the ability to use force against Russia to limit its support for Iran, the regime of al-Assad in Syria or various terrorist groups. Under these circumstances, Tel Aviv relies on a diplomatic solution. By demonstrating a

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29 J. Rothwell, C. MacDiarmid, *Iran 'dangerously' close to completing nuclear weapons programme. Israel's prime minister says country will soon get its hands on a bomb unless the West stands up to the regime*, "The Telegraph", 11 June 2022 [<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/06/11/iran-dangerously-close-completing-nuclear-weapons-programme/>]

friendly position towards Russia, the Israeli authorities are trying to convince Moscow to weaken its support for anti-Israeli forces. They do not consider Russia as a friend, but accept as a fact the Kremlin's ability to exacerbate the threats to Israel's security. Tel Aviv is trying to avoid this by demonstrating readiness for dialogue with the Putin regime.

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**« Israel's reaction is limited to formal public declarations, condemning the Russian invasion. The key interest for Tel Aviv remains the safety of the Jewish population of Ukraine. Practical assistance is mostly humanitarian**

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Such a policy has been successful in the past. For example, Israel managed to freeze the supply of S-300 air defence systems to Iran in the early 2010s<sup>30</sup>. Freedom of action in Syria against Iranian military targets remains a key interest for Tel Aviv. Russia publicly condemns the attacks, but in practice takes a neutral position. The Russian air defences take no action in Syria against the Israeli air force. Tel Aviv benefits from maintaining the current situation, and is ready to pay for it through diplomatic activity. In particular, we are talking about refraining from excessive criticism of Russia's aggressive policy towards Ukraine.

Israel's reaction is limited to formal public declarations, condemning the Russian invasion. The key interest for Tel Aviv remains the safety of the Jewish population of Ukraine. Practical assistance is mostly

humanitarian. Israel has sent humanitarian cargoes to Ukraine; ensured the work of a field hospital in the west of Ukraine for one month; accepted Ukrainian refugees.

Of course, Israel is forced to consider the US position towards Russian aggression. Tel Aviv supports the initiatives of the White House regarding Ukraine, remaining an ally of Washington, and seeking American support against Iran. Representatives of its Ministry of Defence take part in the work of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group<sup>31</sup>. Thus, the Israeli authorities demonstrate solidarity with the position of the Euro-Atlantic community. At the same time, Israel refrains from providing weapons to Ukraine. Israeli supplies are limited to protective equipment. It is possible that some support is given clandestinely. But even in this case we can see the influence of the need to preserve relations with Russia on Tel Aviv's position, despite public rhetoric.

Such behaviour on the part of the Israeli authorities creates an image of their holding a pro-Russian position. However, only a small number of the local politicians adhere to such views (e.g., the leader of the Yisrael Beiteinu party Avigdor Lieberman). In general, Israeli politicians build their attitudes towards the Russian Federation on rational assessments of their national interests, or their own political benefits. For example, former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took an active part in Russian public events and demonstrated close relations with Putin<sup>32</sup>. But this was done to demonstrate his influence internationally and to attract the electorate. Such actions were not evidence of the pro-Russian views of the leader of the Likud party.

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30 A. Krechetnikov, Y. Maloveryan, *Россия задерживает поставку ракет Ирану (Russia Delays Delivery of Missiles to Iran)*, "BBC", 17 February 2010 [[https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2010/02/100217\\_russia\\_iran\\_s300](https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2010/02/100217_russia_iran_s300)]

31 *Israel attends US-led summit on sending more arms to Ukraine*, "The Times of Israel", 26 April 2022 [<https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-attending-us-led-summit-on-supplying-ukraine-with-more-arms/>]

32 R. Wootliff, *Netanyahu Touts Friendship with Putin in New Billboard*, "The Times of Israel", 28 July 2019 [<https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-another-league-netanyahu-touts-friendship-with-putin-in-new-billboard/>]

The perception of Ukraine in Israel has its own peculiarities. Issues of historical memory and contradictory assessments of some events and figures in Ukrainian history remain a source of misunderstanding. Israel also remembers Ukraine's position on the Palestinian issue, which does not correspond to Tel Aviv's interests<sup>33</sup>. However, all these factors have never been decisive in shaping the position of Israeli society and the political elite on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

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***Among the states of the Middle East, only Syria takes an openly pro-Russian position regarding the aggression against Ukraine***

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The influence of the memory of the Holocaust on the foreign policy of Israel is worth noting. Any speculation on this topic causes resentment in Israeli society. On the one hand, this leads to a critical perception of the rhetoric of the Ukrainian authorities regarding the genocide of the Ukrainian people implemented by Russia. This is perceived as a challenge to the exclusivity of the tragedy of the Jewish people during World War II. At the same time, historical memory determines the strict rejection of anti-Semitic statements made by Russian authorities, who have accused Israel of supporting so-called “neo-Nazism” in

Ukraine<sup>34</sup>. Such incidents can create a demand for a tougher policy towards the Russian Federation in Israeli society.

### **Syria and Iran: Russia's (Un) Reliable Partners**

Among the states of the Middle East, only Syria takes an openly pro-Russian position regarding the aggression against Ukraine. Damascus' recognition of the independence of the territories of the “ORDLO” is a clear illustration of Bashar al-Assad's course<sup>35</sup>. This is not surprising given its geopolitical orientation. Syria has traditionally remained part of Russia's circle of partners. Moreover, al-Assad was able to stay in power during the civil war only with Russian assistance (as well as Iranian support). De facto, his regime lacks international subjectivity. It is fully dependent on Moscow and Tehran in issues of political, economic and security support. Russia contributes to ensuring the food security of Syria (including through the supply of grain which was illegally seized in Ukraine)<sup>36</sup>. Damascus is paying the price for this by taking an appropriate position on international issues which have importance to the Kremlin. The willingness to facilitate the recruitment of Syrian citizens for participation in the aggression against Ukraine demonstrates the complete loyalty of al-Assad's regime to Russia. This move has no practical effect, but it is well suited for use by Russian propaganda<sup>37</sup>.

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33 *Resolution 2334 (2016) Adopted by the Security Council at its 7853rd meeting*, United Nations, 23 December 2016 [<https://www.un.org/webcast/pdfs/SRES2334-2016.pdf>]

34 *Russia Says Israel Supports Ukraine 'Neo-Nazis' as Row Escalates*, “Al Jazeera”, 03 May 2022 [<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/3/russia-says-israel-supports-neo-nazis-in-row-over-ukraine>]

35 *Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine Regarding the Severance of Diplomatic Relations with the Syrian Arab Republic*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 30 June 2022 [<https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/statement-ministry-foreign-affairs-ukraine-regarding-severance-diplomatic-relations-syrian-arab-republic>]

36 P. Sidel, *Russia-Flagged Ships Transport Stolen Grain to Syria, Ukraine Says*, “The Wall Street Journal”, 10 May 2022 [<https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/russia-ukraine-latest-news-2022-05-10/card/russia-flagged-ships-transport-stolen-grain-to-syria-ukraine-says-XldruHiMyqmJMUYskuRU>]

37 P. Bousset, *Syrian Mercenaries in Ukraine: Delusion or Reality?*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 23 June 2022 [<https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/87382>]

Russia is trying to use al-Assad's statements to legitimise its aggression against Ukraine. It seeks to show support for its actions and the absence of international isolation. However, such a campaign is aimed primarily at the domestic audience. The world understands the dubious legitimacy of al-Assad himself, as well as his total dependence on the Kremlin. At the same time, Russia's aggression against Ukraine complicates al-Assad's situation. It diverts Moscow's attention from the Middle East. Military failures on Ukrainian territory, as well as problems with supply due to the closure of the Black Sea Straits, weaken the Russian military presence in the Middle East.



***Despite its traditional partnership with Moscow, Tehran is in no hurry to openly side with it in the war against Ukraine. Iran does not want the issues of the Russian invasion and the imposition of sanctions against the Russian Federation to affect its relations with the West***

There are no existential threats to al-Assad's regime. After all, Russia is not giving up its political patronage of him. However, some vacuum of influence was formed, as a result of the withdrawal of part of the Russian contingent. It has been filled by Iran. Thus, the balance of power among Assad's patrons is changing. This affects the internal processes in the Syrian system of

government, strengthening the pro-Iranian forces. Iran and Russia have different goals in Syria. Russia used support for al-Assad as a showcase to demonstrate its foreign policy successes and influence. It was interested in stopping the civil conflict, and had a certain mediation potential, based on the reputation of an external force not involved in local contradictions. On the contrary, Syria remains only a bridgehead for operations against Israel for Iran. Tehran is directly involved in the Shia-Sunni confrontation. Al-Assad's well-being has no such value for the Iranian authorities as it does for the Kremlin. Weakening the Russian presence and strengthening the Iranian proxies could escalate the civil conflict, which is not good news for the Syrian regime.

Iran's opinion of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is determined by its geopolitical positioning. Tehran and Moscow have been considered partners for a long time. Their cooperation grew on the basis of antagonism towards the West. It is not surprising that Iran took a friendly position towards the recent Russian actions within the framework of the UN system. It abstained in the voting on resolutions condemning the Russian aggression against Ukraine<sup>38</sup> and its humanitarian consequences<sup>39</sup>; and it opposed the exclusion of the Russian Federation from the UN Human Rights Council<sup>40</sup>.

Officially, Iran refrained from full support for Russian actions or accusations against Ukraine. It called for a diplomatic settlement of the conflict. However, in practice, Tehran

38 *UN Resolution Against Ukraine Invasion*, "Al Jazeera", 03 March 2022 [https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/3/unga-resolution-against-ukraine-invasion-full-text]

39 *Ukraine: General Assembly Passes Resolution Demanding Aid Access, by Large Majority*, The United Nations, 24 March 2022 [https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1114632]

40 *UN General Assembly Votes to Suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council*, The United Nations, 07 April 2022 [https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115782]

uses the situation to criticize NATO<sup>41</sup>. It holds the Alliance responsible for the war, promoting a pro-Russian narrative.

The statements of the majority of the Iranian political elite correspond to this position. The speeches of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei are particularly harsh<sup>42</sup>. However, this is typical of Iran, when the supreme leader speaks less diplomatically than the government representatives. Also, it is worth noting that former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has spoken critically about the Russian aggression<sup>43</sup>. His reaction is due to confrontation with Khamenei, as well as because of his personal position (rejection of any forms of neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism).

Despite its traditional partnership with Moscow, Tehran is in no hurry to openly side with it in the war against Ukraine. Iran does not want the issues of the Russian invasion and the imposition of sanctions against the Russian Federation to affect its relations with the West. Despite the fact that the conservatives hold total power in Iran after the presidential elections of 2021, Tehran still hopes for a diplomatic solution to the issue of resuming the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (“nuclear deal”). The current situation in the international energy markets

creates additional opportunities, since Iran can partially replace Russia in them. However, this requires implementation of a careful policy regarding the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Providing practical support to Russia would undermine the diplomatic process with the West. This can turn against Iran not only the United States, but also Europe, which in recent years has treated Tehran more gently.

So, Iran has refrained from demonstrative cooperation with the Russian Federation, which could have been interpreted as a support for aggression. For example, the Iranian authorities continue to deny the supply of weapons to Moscow<sup>44</sup>. Russia may be interested in receiving Iranian UAVs, which have already proven their effectiveness in the Middle East. However, such deals could call a definitive halt to Tehran’s negotiations with the West. It is also unknown whether Iran can carry out such deliveries without threatening its own military potential in the face of the escalating confrontations with Israel and Saudi Arabia. In general, the danger of such cooperation with Russia exists<sup>45</sup>. However, it seems that Washington drew attention to this issue in July, 2022, as a preventive measure in order to warn Tehran that such actions will not remain undetected.

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41 M. Motamedi, *‘Rooted in NATO’: Iran responds to Russia’s Ukraine attack*, “Al Jazeera”, 24 February 2022 [https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/24/rooted-in-nato-inside-irans-response-to-the-ukraine-crisis-2]

42 *Key Points of Meeting [of Ayatollah Khamenei] with the President of Russia*, The Official Website of Ayatollah Khamenei, 20 July 2022 [https://english.khamenei.ir/news/9090/Key-points-of-meeting-with-the-President-of-Russia]

43 A. Lucente, *Former Iranian president Ahmadinejad praises Ukraine’s ‘resistance’, rebukes Islamic Republic’s support for Russia*, “Al-Monitor”, 03 March 2022 [https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/former-iranian-president-ahmadinejad-praises-ukraines-resistance-rebukes-islamic]

44 S. Z. Mehdi, *Iran denies sending drones to Russia amid Ukraine war*, “Anadolu Agency”, 15 July 2022 [https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iran-denies-sending-drones-to-russia-amid-ukraine-war/2638063]

45 M. Berg, *Iran preparing to send ‘several hundred’ drones to Russia, Sullivan says*, “Politico”, 11 July 2022 [https://www.politico.com/news/2022/07/11/iran-uav-drones-russia-00045195]

## Conclusions

The majority of Middle Eastern states take a neutral position on the issue of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Most of them support declarative calls to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity and condemn the use of force to resolve interstate conflicts. However, they refrain from directly blaming the Russian Federation and its leaders. They also avoid joining practical initiatives aimed at supporting Ukraine. Thus, their neutrality is often pro-Russian de facto.

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 ***the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine is not a priority security challenge for the states of the Middle East. They have neither legal nor moral and value obligations to offer active support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. Moreover, the spread of anti-Western views in the region forms a distorted perception of events, in which the responsibility for the conflict is assigned not to the aggressor, but to the United States and NATO***

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Their views are shaped by several factors. An important role is played by their positioning in the context of the global confrontation between the West and its geopolitical opponents (Russia, China). Relations with the United States and the Russian Federation, as well as plans for their further development, are also important. Even Washington's traditional partners are ready to diversify their foreign policy under the conditions of weakening American hegemony. They do not want to break off contacts with the Russian Federation, which provide them with economic benefits. For many states in the region, Putin's authoritarian regime remains a

more reliable and stable partner than the Western liberal democracies. They view the Russian aggression against Ukraine in the context of their national interests, and assess the threats and opportunities that these events create for them.

The Arab monarchies of the Gulf are using the situation to obtain financial profits from their trade in energy resources, as well as to improve relations with the United States and Europe. The West's need for their oil and gas strengthens their position in the negotiation process, which was hindered for a long time by problems over human rights. At the same time, the Gulf states are cautious about Western proposals, and are not ready to meet them at the first time of asking. They seek to bargain for maximum preferences for themselves. They also do not want to abandon the joint OPEC+ mechanism with the Russian Federation, which gives them control over energy prices.

The Republic of Türkiye pursues its own political and economic interests, stemming from a high level of relations with both Ukraine and the Russian Federation. It supports the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and continues to supply weapons to the Ukrainian Armed Forces. At the same time, Türkiye did not join the anti-Russian sanctions. On the contrary, it has intensified economic ties with the Russian Federation. Ankara is trying to use its potential as a mediator for the settlement of the Russo-Ukrainian war. The Turkish authorities are interested in ending the conflict, which destabilises the situation near the Turkish borders, and interferes with the implementation of the traditional Black Sea policy of the Republic. On the eve of the 2023 elections, they need diplomatic successes to ensure electoral support. However, the desire for a visible result under the conditions of Russia's unwillingness to compromise leads to an excessively soft Turkish position towards Moscow.

Israel remains a key US ally in the Middle East. However, it is also interested in maintaining contacts with Russia. This is due to the factor of the Iranian threat. Tel Aviv understands that Russia can strengthen Tehran's military potential, as well as complicate Israeli operations against Iranian facilities in Syria. The Israeli authorities seek to avoid this, refraining from direct confrontation with the Russian Federation, and limiting assistance to Ukraine mainly to the humanitarian.

Russia's traditional partners in the region, Syria and Iran, as expected demonstrate pro-Russian views. However, their positions differ. Syria de facto is not an independent actor. The al-Assad regime remains in power due to external support, and therefore openly supports the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. Iran is acting more cautiously. Moscow's propaganda rhetoric about its motives for the invasion is consistent with Tehran's anti-Western position. However, Iran has refrained from supporting the aggression in public, as negotiations on a nuclear deal with the United States continue. The West's need for Iranian energy resources opens a window of opportunity for it and strengthens its diplomatic position. However, the use of that asset will be impossible if Iran openly shows solidarity with Moscow.

In general, the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine is not a priority security challenge for the states of the Middle East. They have neither legal nor moral and value obligations to offer active support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. Moreover, the spread of anti-Western views in the region forms a distorted perception

of events, in which the responsibility for the conflict is assigned not to the aggressor, but to the United States and NATO.

Unfortunately, this approach is due to the trends in the development of the region, the nature of the ruling regimes, public perception of international processes, and the current interests of states. They have no complaints about Ukraine but consider it irrational to support it. Kyiv does not have the opportunity to significantly influence their position. However, under modern conditions, an important task is to spread the Ukrainian point of view on the war to the population and the political elite of the Middle East. Exposing the Kremlin's neo-imperial ambitions, and demonstrating the destructive influence of Russian revisionism on the stability of the global system of international relations gives the chance to sow doubts about the rationality of cooperation with Moscow. The Middle Eastern states have reasonable claims against the world created under the hegemony of the West. This can be overcome only by proving that the post-American international order that Russia wants to build will bring them nothing but additional problems and threats.

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