

Russia at War and the Islamic World

How Russian Muslims and the Middle East Are Dealing with the War

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- “Russia’s Islam: Balancing Securitization and Integration, *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 125, Ifri, December 2021.
- *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East West*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021.

Abstract

While Russia's military invasion of Ukraine has resulted in a decoupling with the West of a scale not seeing since the worst years of the Cold War, Russia has not been isolated from the non-Western world and has even reinvested its diplomatic energy toward the Global South. This paper focuses on Russia's relationship to the Islamic world and how they have been transformed—or not—by the war. It discusses both Russia's "internal" Islamic realm, and how the Middle East has reacted to the strategic tectonic shift unleashed by the war and Western sanctions. It explains that the role and place of Islam in Russia has been reinforced by the war context, as Islamic institutions and Muslims are seen by the Russian regime as among the most loyal constituencies. It also concludes that main Middle Eastern regional powers have been able to consolidate their transactional foreign policies and use the war to assert their autonomy toward Western actors so that Russia's weakening does not result in the West's increased influence, but in a more multipolar and chaotic order.

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Introduction

Russia's war against Ukraine marks a tectonic shift in the world order. The war is dramatically reshaping the Western world, reenergizing Europe's sense of unity and accelerating its energy decoupling from Russia, and giving a newfound sense of legitimacy to NATO mission. It is also generating many domino effects all over the world, from renewed nuclear risks to global food-security challenges, as well as speeding up the division between a Global North revigorated by the war and a Global South refusing to take a stand on a war that is not seen as theirs. On the home front, the decision to "partially" mobilize men for the war front is also shaking Russian society, contributing to a re-adjustment of the inner equilibrium between its different segments.

Following a previous Ifri's *Russie.NEI.Visions* on Russian Islam published in December 2021,¹ this new *Note* takes stock of nine months of Russia's war against Ukraine to reflect on Russia's relationship to the Islamic world, both domestically and internationally. Russian citizens from Muslim backgrounds have indeed been playing a critical role in the Russian Armed Forces, and the Islamic world, especially the Middle East, has been able to keep a balancing act between both sides of the conflict and has even risen in terms of strategic autonomy. This confirms that the war has a global effect on the world order, and that Russia's decline does not mean a rise of the West's influence; on the contrary, it seems to substantiate a decline of both on the global scene in favor of a more decentralized and chaotic world order.

1. M. Laruelle, "Russia's Islam: Balancing Securitization and Integration", *Russie.NEI.Visions*, No. 125, December 2021, www.ifri.org.

Domestic Islamic World: The Place of Muslims in Russia's Ukraine War

One of the main paradoxes of Russia's war in Ukraine is that it is being carried out in the name of a supposed Russian-Ukrainian shared identity, but non-ethnic Russians have been overrepresented among Russian troops. Indeed, it seems ethnic minorities have been heavily drafted, mostly for the reason that their ethnic identity overlaps with an impoverished socioeconomic status.² Military service tends to attract young men from economically depressed regions with no other professional or income-generating alternatives. This has been accentuated over the months with the Russian authorities offering generous financial and status-related packages for those new recruits enlisting in the army or joining the volunteer battalions.³ Two key regions have been disproportionately sending men to war: the North Caucasus (Dagestan and Chechnya, and to a lesser extent Ingushetia and North Ossetia) and the Baikal region (Buryatia and Tuva).⁴

Kadyrov's Military and Political Offensive

The North Caucasian case combines classic socioeconomic characteristics that favors the army as a ladder of social promotion in regions with high male youth unemployment,⁵ and local political specificities, especially in the case of Chechnya, known for its infamous local dictatorial regime led by Ramzan Kadyrov. In some

2. A. C. Lenton, "Who is Dying for the 'Russian World'?", *Riddle*, April 26, 2022, <https://ridl.io>.

3. N. Petrov, "Volunteer Battalions: From Offense to (Territorial) Defense?", *Russia Post*, August 19, 2022, www.russiapost.info.

4. "BBC Russian Service and Mediazona Uncover the Names of More than 5,700 Russian Soldiers Who Died in Ukraine", *Meduza*, August 19, 2022, <https://meduza.io>.

5. J. -F. Ratelle, "The North Caucasus and the Russian War in Ukraine", Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 802, October 13, 2022, www.ponarseurasia.org.

cases, recruitment for volunteer battalions was indeed a coercive one, with pressure placed on families to send their sons.⁶

There are several Chechen units fighting in Ukraine currently, even if it is difficult to assess precise numbers and actions given that much of the information available online and spread by actors themselves is fake. The most conservative reports seem to be around 10,000 men, with some (less credible) of up to 70,000.⁷ The main groups, such as the famous Akhmat-Grozny OMON troops—the oldest remaining organization dating from the First Chechen War—are part of the Russian National Guard (*Rosgvardiia*), which reports directly to Vladimir Putin. They are trained for law enforcement more than for classic military battles but are supervised by well-trained Chechen officers, including those who were deployed on the Syrian war theaters. Some other groups are integrated into the Russian Armed Forces, such as the Zapad (meaning “Occident” or “West”) Battalion, formed in 2003 by Said-Mahomed Kakiev, who opposed the Dzhokhar Dudayev regime and sided with Moscow, now reorganized into several other entities such as Yug (South) and Sever (North).⁸

Strong from their first-hand experience in the Russia’s operation in Syria,⁹ Chechen troops have played a key role in Russia’s offensive in Ukraine. They were on the front lines in the first days trying to capture Kyiv and the Chernobyl nuclear station, then redeployed to Mariupol and later on the Donbas front, in Severodonetsk and Lisichansk. Kadyrov has stationed himself and his troops squarely in Russia’s newly occupied territories: the leader of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic, Denis Pushilin, stated that he will use the experience of Grozny to rebuild destroyed cities,¹⁰ and Kadyrov has been negotiating for controlling the postwar reconstruction of Mariupol.¹¹ The Akhmat Kadyrov Fund has also been involved in charity activities in the occupied territories.

But Kadyrov’s total engagement in the war can also be explained by domestic, intra-Chechen concerns: there is indeed a parallel war

6. S. Kozlov, “Caucasian Knot” correspondent, “Rodstvenniki kontraktnikov iz Čečni rasskazali ob ulovkah rekrutirov”, [Contractors’ families from Chechnya tell about recruiters’ strategies], *Kavkazskij Uzel*, July 28, 2022, www.kavkaz-uzel.eu.

7. J.-F. Ratelle, “The North Caucasus and the Russian War in Ukraine”, *op. cit.*

8. “Ramzan Kadyrov formiruet novyj polk”, [Ramzan Kadyrov forms a new battalion], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, July 14, 2022, <https://nvo.ng.ru>; “Severnyi Kavkaz i Ukraina: 20 nedel’ ‘special’noj voennoj operacii”, [North Caucasus and Ukraine: 20 weeks of the ‘special military operation’], *Novaâ Gazeta*, February 24–July 15, 2022, <https://novayagazeta.eu>.

9. N. Hauer, “Chechen and North Caucasian militants in Syria”, Atlantic Council, January 18, 2018, www.atlanticcouncil.org.

10. ChP/Chechnya, Telegram, March 30, 2022, <https://t.me/chpchechnya>.

11. SKFO Telegraph Z, Telegram, April 1, 2022, https://t.me/skfo_telegraph.

within the war going on, as the Kadyrovite battalions are fighting their Chechen opponents siding with Kiyv: the Ukraine-based Sheikh Mansur Battalion and the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion are both populated by anti-Kadyrov soldiers who have been fighting against the regime in Grozny from abroad and hope to take the war to Russia on Russian soil.¹² This intra-Chechen struggle was reinforced by the Ukrainian Rada (Parliament) taking the decision, in October, to declare Ichkeria (the name for an independent Chechnya) as a territory “occupied” by Russia.¹³

If the Putin’s regime survives the war, the place of Kadyrov among Russian elites may be consolidated while his traditional enemies from the intelligence directorates may appear weakened by their failure at delivering reliable information on the potential success of what should have been a blitzkrieg to overthrow the Zelensky’s government. Like the Wagner group, Kadyrov’s praetorian guard appears as a successful model to “do the job” asked by the president, more than an (now) exhausted, demoralized, and logistically challenged regular army.

It seems Kadyrov was one of the first to be informed of Putin’s war plans,¹⁴ and since the launch of the invasion, has been taking maximum advantage of the legitimacy he has been able to garner from this war context.¹⁵ He has publicly denounced the weaknesses, hesitations, and cowardice of many of the military top brass, and tried to portray himself as Putin’s most loyal foot soldier. After the humiliating retreat of Russian troops at Izyum, he called for the “self-mobilization” of Russian society rather than waiting for Moscow to declare martial law or mobilization, harshly criticized Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu, and invited each region to send at least 1,000 volunteers.¹⁶

While criticizing the established military elites for their war mismanagement, Kadyrov has continued to work at integrating Chechnya into the ideological infrastructure of the Russian regime

12. N. Hauer, “Chechens Fighting Chechens in Ukraine”, *New Lines Magazine*, March 3, 2022, <https://newlinesmag.com>.

13. “Verhovnaâ Rada Ukrainy ob”âvila Iĉkeriû territoriej okkupirovannoj Rossiej”, [Ukraine’s Rada declared Ichkeria a territory occupied by Russia], *Meduza*, October 18, 2022, <https://meduza.io>.

14. “V rajone Majdana ili Kresĉatika tancy podgotovim’. Ĉto ĉeloveku s golosom Kadyrova dokladyvali nakanune”, [“We prepare dances in the the Maydan and Krechatik neighborhoods.” What a man with Kadyrov face declared the day before], *BBC News Russkaâ SluŹba*, February 26, 2022, www.bbc.com.

15. I. U. Klyszcz and H. Chambers, “Kadyrov’s Ukraine Gamble”, Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 28, 2022, www.fpri.org.

16. “Russian Governors Back Kadyrov’s Call to ‘Self-Mobilize’ Residents for Ukraine Deployment”, *Moscow Times*, September 16, 2022, www.themoscowtimes.com.

and its new radical wartime framing. Putin's mentions of Russia as an imperial project fit well with Kadyrov's own vision of Chechen nationalism as a crucial *matryoshka* component of a pan-Russian nationalism.¹⁷ Chechen national pride is presented as a key component of a state-centric nationalism that embraces the cult of ethnic and religious diversity at home and an imperial agenda abroad. Chechen troops' heavy presence on social media—in a full-blown information war against Ukrainian troops on Instagram and TikTok—plays a performative role of showing disciplined troops reproducing the most radical version of the state narrative on the need to “denazify” Ukraine, while at the same time cultivating the traditional clichés of Chechen fighters' cruelty.

On several occasions Kadyrov has been ambiguous about his federal ambitions, and his announcement on September 3 that he would like to resign from his status as head of state of Chechnya could be a call for a reward of a federal status once most of the active hostilities are over.¹⁸ The loyalty of the Chechen leadership as a whole has been rewarding: Kadyrov was promoted to the rank of Colonel General of the Interior troop, and the *Rosgwardiâ* Chechen branch leader Adam Delimkhanov awarded the title of Hero of Russia for his military role in Ukraine.¹⁹ As stated by Canadian researcher Jean-François Ratelle, “Kadyrov and his followers have moved from a regional armed group in Russia to a rising political force in the field of Russian federal politics.”²⁰ This raises the question of the consolidation of the role of Muslims in Russia.

A Consolidated Role for Muslims in Today Russia?

While the impact of the war on Russian society and its regime is still unknown, one may envision that given the course the regime is maintaining, the place of ethnic minorities in postwar Russia will be consolidated: while many young, highly-educated ethnic Russians are leaving, and the Russian middle class is generally unhappy with the deteriorating economic and political conditions, the poorest regions and the state-budget-dependent constituencies, of which ethnic

17. H. Chambers, “The Shifting Political Hierarchy in the North Caucasus”, Foreign Policy Research Institute, June 15, 2022, www.fpri.org.

18. “Chechen Leader Kadyrov Says He Deserves ‘Indefinite’ Break, Sparking Speculation about Future”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 3, 2022, www.rferl.org.

19. H. Chambers, “The Shifting Political Hierarchy in the North Caucasus”, *op. cit.*

20. J.-F. Ratelle, “The North Caucasus and the Russian War on Ukraine”, *PONARS Eurasia Policy memo* No. 802, October 2022, www.ponarseurasia.org.

minorities make up an important part, will become even more central to regime security and stability.

With Putin's announcement of a "partial" mobilization, waves of protests have shaken Dagestan as well as some other ethnic republics such as Buriatiya and Sakha (Yakutiya).²¹ The already high death toll paid by ethnic minorities has merged with accumulated grievances against differential treatment between citizens coming from Russia's rich metropolitan centers and provincial populations. Kadyrov declared his republic already fulfilled its quota and stopped the mobilization earlier than other regions, and the spouse of the Dagestan's mufti made a similar declaration.²²

The existence of a protest mood among some Russian Muslim populations does not automatically translate into political dissent. While Western pundits tend to insist on Russia's ethnic minorities as being dissidents by their very nature, survey data shows us exactly the opposite: ethnic minorities are among the most loyal constituencies of the Putin regime, both for socioeconomic reasons (state support for their regions' development, large constituencies funded by state budget) and cultural reasons (stronger conservatism in the area of social morality issues that fit the regime's ideological language), as well as for idiosyncratic issues associated with local politics, such as the mass use of the "administrative resources" organized to deliver voters for the president's party.²³

Muslim minorities are not the only ones heavily targeted by the authorities to enlist. Dramatically lacking in manpower for its armed forces, the regime has developed strategies to reach out to labor migrants from Central Asia. The Duma passed a law making it easier for foreign nationals to obtain Russian citizenship if they sign up for military service for no less than a year (three years before).²⁴ The Wagner Group appears to have also tried to recruit Central Asians on

21. C. Humphrey, "The Military Call-Up and the Flight of Buryat Men to Mongolia", *Russia Post*, October 10, 2022 <https://russiapost.info>; A. Zueva "Three Buryats for the Price of One Muscovite", interview with Alexandra Garmazhapova, October 6, 2022, <https://russiapost.info>.

22. "Žena muftiā Dagestana poprosila ob otstročke dlā mobilizovannyh", [The spouse of the Dagestan mufti asked for the suspension of the mobilization], *Radio Svoboda*, September 29, 2022, www.svoboda.org.

23. M. Laruelle, "Russia's Islam", *op. cit.*; M. Laruelle, "A Grassroots Conservatism? Taking a Fine-Grained View of Conservative Attitudes among Russians", *East European Politics*, Vol. 37, No. 2, April 2021, www.tandfonline.com.

24. Russian State Duma, "Inostrancy, služušie v rossijskoi armii po kontraktu, smogut polučit' graždanstvo RF v uprošennom porādke", [Foreigners serving in the Russian army by contract may receive the citizenship of the Russian Federation in a simplified way], September 20, 2022, <http://duma.gov.ru>.

social media.²⁵ Some Uzbek migrant associations have invited their fellow citizens (many migrants have dual citizenship) to enlist in the Russian Armed Forces as a way of showing thankfulness to their adoptive motherland Russia, but this created a backlash in all the Central Asian states, which each stated publicly that it is forbidden for their citizens to enlist in foreign military service. The Muslim Board of Uzbekistan declared unambiguously that “*Muslims are not permitted to unite with non-Muslims and fight against another community of non-Muslims.*”²⁶ Toughening its tone, Russia’s Presidential Human Rights Council proposed mandatory military service for natives of Central Asian countries who have had Russian citizenship for less than 10 years;²⁷ so far, this has not been implemented.

The shooting in a Belgorod military camp on October 15 relaunched the debate on the place of Muslims in Russian warfare. From the preliminary information available, the shooting was conducted by 2 or 3 men with a Muslim background (likely Tajiks) who refused to serve, saying it was not “their war.” What followed was a vivid discussion with the camp administrator who declared it was a “*holy war*” for all Russian citizens. The Muslim soldiers replied that holy war is only for Muslims against non-Muslims, only to be answered that Allah was a coward—up to the point where the Muslim soldiers took out their weapons and killed at least 11 people.²⁸ This case, so far unique, is nonetheless revealing of the potential tensions to emerge within the Russian Armed Forces with a growing number of conscripts, volunteers, or mobilized men from Muslim backgrounds and the logistical adaptation it will necessitate (time and place for prayers, *halal* food, etc.).

More globally, Russia’s Islamic institutions such as the Moscow- and the Ufa-based Spiritual Administration of Muslims have been supporting the state-backed war narrative.²⁹ For them, the war is less

25. “Wagner Recruiting Kyrgyz, Uzbek Citizens to Fight in Ukraine—Reports”, *Moscow Times*, July 20, 2022, www.themoscowtimes.com.

26. “Učastie v vojne meždu Rossiej i Ukrainoj sčitaetsâ haramom—Upravlenie musul’man”, [Participating in the war between Russia and Ukraine is considered a sin, declared the Spiritual Administration], *Gazeta* (Uzbekistan), September 23, 2022, www.gazeta.uz.

27. “V SPČ predložili obâzat’ vyhodcev iz Central’noj Azii služit’ v armii”, [The Council for human rights under the president proposed to make military service mandatory for men from Central Asia], *RBK*, September 22, 2022, www.rbc.ru.

28. A. Arni, “Bolee 10 čelovek byli zastreleny 15 oktâbrâ na voennom poligone v Belgorodskoj oblasti. Minoborony RF nazyvalo ČP teraktom”, [More than 10 people were killed on October 15 on the military polygon of the Belgorod region. The Russian Ministry of Defense called it a terrorist act], *Deustsche Welle*, October 16, 2022, www.dw.com.

29. G. Sibgatullina, “Russia’s Muslim Leaders on the Invasion of Ukraine: United in a Display of Loyalty, Divided in Competition for Power”, Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 765, April 7, 2022, www.ponarseurasia.org.

problematic than it has been for the Russian Orthodox Church, which lost control over a large part of its parishes in Ukraine. Ufa-based sheik Talgat Tadzhuiddin, always the loudest and least nuanced of voices, issued a *fatwa* proclaiming the dead Russian Muslim soldiers *shahids*;³⁰ Albir Krganov, Mufti of the Spiritual Assembly of Muslims, who has gained control over the Muslim community of Luhansk (but not of that of Donetsk),³¹ has been in favor of Russia's recognition of the regions' independence;³² and some North Caucasian figures known for their hawkish positions declared the special military operation a *jihad*,³³ or called for liquidating Ukraine,³⁴ often in the name of exposing Western hypocrisy.³⁵ While all these institutions are divided by vivid internal struggles, they can unite in the name of the anti-Westernism. Only the Moscow-based Spiritual Administration led by Ravil Gaitnudin showed some reluctance and call for peace.³⁶

As many constituencies of the Russian population, Muslims have been polarized by the war. The majority has supported the regime in its decision, sided with a new level of anti-Western propaganda, and accepted to enroll massively in the Armed Forces, while a minority has denounced a war between Slavic and Christian nations in which Muslims have nothing to do. Those who protested are composed of a mixed bag of people opposing the war for ideological reasons and those denouncing above all the material conditions of a poorly executed recruitment and the lack of serious training before being sent to the front. In any case, the war has involuntarily reopened the question of Russia's federal identity and the place that minorities, and especially Muslims, play in it. It has also shaken Russia's place in the global Islamic world and especially its status in the Middle East.

30. Central'noe duhovnoe upravlenie musul'man Rossii [Central Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia], March 25, 2022, www.cdum.ru.

31. R. Sulejmanov, "Musul'mane DNR i LNR integriruiutsâ v islamskoe soobshество Rossii", [Muslims from DNR and LNR enter Russia's Islamic community], *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, May 17, 2022, <https://nvo.ng.ru>.

32. Ajrat Galimziânov, "Ne vse rossijskie muftii podderžali voennuû specoperaciû na Ukraine", [Not all Russian muftis support the military operation in Ukraine], *EurAsia Daily*, March 31, 2022, <https://eadaily.com>.

33. "Muftij Čečni ob"âsnil džihadom učastie zemlâkov v voennom konflikte na Ukraine", [Chechnya's mufti consider jihad the participation of his cofellows in the military conflict in Ukraine], *Kavkazskij Uzel*, February 28, 2022, www.kavkaz-uzel.eu.

34. Galimziânov, "Ne vse rossijskie muftii podderžali voennuû specoperaciû na Ukraine", *op. cit.*

35. Ūliâ Syčeva, "Muftij Tatarstana zaâvil o podderžke specoperacii na Ukraine" [Tatarstan's mufti expressed support for the special operation in Ukraine], *URA.ru*, March 2, 2022, <https://ura.news>.

36. *Ibid.*

The Foreign Islamic World: The Middle East's Reaction to the War

As with the rest of the non-Western world, the Islamic world has moved cautiously regarding the war. In March, the UN General Assembly resolution condemning the war (ES-11/1) garnered large support: the majority of Muslim countries condemned the invasion, though some abstained (as did a total of 35 UN member states, including Senegal, Mali, Algeria, Sudan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), a few were conveniently absent (Morocco, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), and among Muslim countries, only Syria, one of Russia's most loyal client states, voted "no." A similar result was obtained at the United Nations General Assembly in its Resolution ES-11/4 condemning Russia's annexation of four Ukrainian territories in October: 143 in favor with 35 abstaining and 5 opposing. The majority of abstainers are countries from Asia and Africa, while the Middle East is divided.³⁷

But many more Muslim countries refused to vote to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council: 58 abstained, among them Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia. And the Global South largely united to refuse to join the 8 waves of sanctions decided on by the US and Europe, in the name of preserving their own economies (see Table 1).

37. S. Shidore, "Global South Again Shows Ambivalence on the Ukraine War", Quincy Institute, Responsible Statecraft, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org>.

TABLE 1. Main Muslim regional powers and their position toward the war in Ukraine

	UNGA Res. ES-11/1, condemnation of Russian invasion and recognition of LDNR (Mar. 2)	UNGA Res. ES-11/3, UNHRC suspension (Apr. 7)	UNGA Res. ES-11/4 Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territories (Oct. 12)
Algeria	abstention	N	abstention
Bahrain	Y	abstention	Y
Bangladesh	abstention	abstention	Y
Egypt	Y	abstention	Y
Indonesia	Y	abstention	Y
Iran	abstention	N	abstention
Iraq	abstention	abstention	Y
Jordan	Y	abstention	Y
Kuwait	Y	abstention	Y
Libya	Y	Y	Y
Morocco	absent	absent	Y
Oman	Y	abstention	Y
Pakistan	abstention	abstention	abstention
Qatar	Y	abstention	Y
Saudi Arabia	Y	abstention	Y
Sudan	abstention	abstention	abstention
Syria	N	N	N
Tunisia	Y	abstention	Y
Turkey	Y	Y	Y

UAE	Y	abstention	Y
Yemen	Y	abstention	Y

Source: Compiled by author from United Nations / Digital Library
 Aggression against Ukraine : resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, 2022
digitallibrary.un.org/record/3959039?ln=en,
 Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine : resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, 2022
digitallibrary.un.org/record/3965954?ln=en, and
 Suspension of the rights of membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council : resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, 2022
digitallibrary.un.org/record/3967778?ln=en

The Reasons for the Muslim World's Cautiousness Toward the War

The reasons for the Middle East—as for much of the Global South—to refuse to take sides in the conflict can be found in both local political cultures and worldviews, as well as pragmatic interests.³⁸ First, the West's framing of the war in Ukraine as a fight for democracy against authoritarianism does not resonate with many regimes for whom democracy is a synonym for chaos and foreign interference, and would have had a better chance of success if it had been framed as a defense of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.³⁹

Second, seen from the South, the war is largely interpreted as belonging to the Global North, pitting US and European normative imperialism against Russia's own imperialism in its “near abroad.” While many in the South may have been shocked by Russia's blatant violations of international law, the Muslim world has painful memories of what it sees as US unilateralism and military interventionism. Memories of the US invasion of Iraq, the management of the Libyan crisis, and the failed 20-year NATO presence in Afghanistan, as well as accumulated resentment against former European colonial powers such as France or the UK, have all shaped public opinion in Muslim-majority countries, with the result that the Western narrative on the war in Ukraine does not really resonate with many of them.

To this should be added the feeling in the Muslim world that migrants and refugees coming from the South have been largely mistreated when compared to the warmer welcome given to Ukrainian refugees in Europe, with many non-Ukrainians having

38. D. Mirgorod, “Bližnij Vostok: režim ožidaniâ” [The Middle East in an expectation regime], *Rossiâ v global'noj politike*, April 2022, <https://globalaffairs.ru>.

39. K. A. Grieco, M. Journal, “Democracy vs Autocracy Is the Wrong Framing for the War in Ukraine”, *World Politics Review*, June 14, 2022, www.worldpoliticsreview.com.

found themselves relegated to the lower ranks of the refugee hierarchies, which reinforces narratives on Western racism.⁴⁰

Even before the war, Muslim public opinion tended to be more divided on its views of Russia than did Western public opinion. In formerly socialist countries such as Algeria or Iraq; and in Russia's strategic partners such as Iran and Turkey; but also, more interestingly, in traditionally more Western-oriented countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan; Russia could rely on at least a 1/3 favorability rating—although this was only a plurality, as its disapproval rating remained quite high as well (see Table 2). In May 2022, a YouGov survey of 14 Middle Eastern countries found that 66 percent of respondents had no stance on the war. An almost equal number backed Ukraine and Russia (18 and 16 percent respectively), while 24 percent blamed NATO for the start of the war.⁴¹ We can therefore conclude that the current cautious position of many Muslim countries toward Russia's war is explainable more by resentment toward the West than by a pro-Russian position per se.

TABLE 2. Perception of Russia by Muslim countries polled by Gallup, most recent year, only countries with data since 2016

	year	approve	disapprove	Don't know
Afghanistan	2021	13%	76%	11%
Algeria	2021	39%	43%	19%
Bangladesh	2021	33%	35%	32%
Egypt	2021	10%	53%	37%
Indonesia	2021	27%	47%	27%
Iran	2021	42%	42%	16%

40. P. Rutland, "Why the West Is Losing the Global Information War over Ukraine and How It Can Be Fixed", Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 803, October 17, 2022, www.ponarseurasia.org.

41. F. J. Abbas, "Our YouGov Ukraine Poll Exposes Deep Arab Mistrust of the West", *Arabnews*, May 30, 2022, www.arabnews.com.

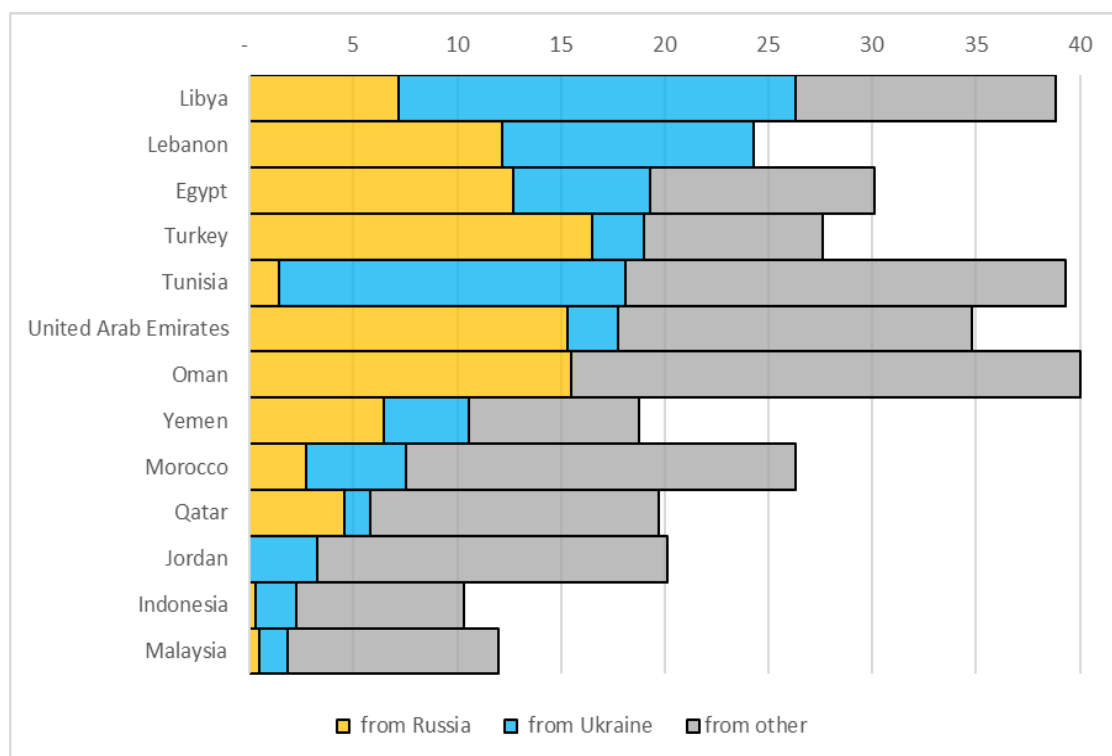
Iraq	2021	33%	62%	5%
Jordan	2021	19%	36%	45%
Libya	2019	25%	56%	19%
Morocco	2021	35%	27%	38%
Pakistan	2021	19%	49%	32%
Tunisia	2021	22%	42%	36%
Turkey	2021	37%	47%	16%
Yemen	2019	19%	60%	21%

Source: Compiled by author from Gallup, <https://www.gallup.com/home.aspx>

Third, national economic interests dominate and no one in an already fragile Middle East wants to aggravate their domestic economic situation in the name of sanctioning Russia. Many Middle Eastern countries depend heavily on cereal imports from both Russia and Ukraine, with Lebanon for instance receiving 96% of its wheat supplies from these two countries, Egypt 85%, and Libya about 75% (see Table 3).⁴² Rising prices of basic goods are usually seen as the main recipe for social protests—a scenario that no one in the region wants to see repeated. The grain-export agreement between Russia, Ukraine and the UN secured by Turkey, aimed to avert a global food crisis by guaranteeing the safe passage of ships in and out of Ukrainian ports, is working only partly and so far only about 30 percent of cargo has gone to low and lower-middle income countries.⁴³ Given the climate crisis, with 2022 being a record year in terms of temperature and climatic catastrophes, many Muslim countries may still face wheat deficits in the winter, coupled by high energy prices.

42. “Rising Food Prices Shake North Africa as Ukraine War Rages”, *AFP/France 24*, March 12, 2022, www.france24.com.

43. J. Saul, N. Hunt, and P. Polityuk, “Even with UN Deal, Ukraine Faces Long Haul to Shift Grain Mountain”, *Reuters*, September 8, 2022, www.reuters.com.

TABLE 3. Cereal imports from Russia and Ukraine by Muslim countries, in USD, 2019

Source: Compiled by author from UN Comtrade, comtradeplus.un.org, and World Bank, data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL

The Balancing Act of Middle Eastern Regional Powers: Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt

The war is generating repercussions felt all over the world and especially throughout the Middle East, with regional powers able to exercise a pragmatic, transactional foreign policy that keeps them from having to take sides and helps them in raising their own profile and autonomy.

Turkey is without doubt the country in the Middle East that has been benefitting the most from Russia's weakening resulting from the latter's engagement in the war in Ukraine. It now finds itself seated comfortably in a position from which it is balancing between all actors and has been able to bolster its international prestige and play up its "crossroads" or multipronged foreign policy to the hilt.

Before the war, Turkey had strengthened its partnership with Ukraine, including deepening defense ties, especially with the sale of

its Bayraktar TB2 drones started even before the war, which have proven instrumental in helping Ukrainian forces attack Russian positions and could develop in a new stage of joint production. Support for the Crimean Tatar community also reinforced Ankara's support for Kiev in the pre-2022 war tensions with Moscow.

But Turkey's multifaceted relationship with Russia has remained important. Russia has been a major trade partner (\$32.5 billion as of 2021), foreign investment source (more than \$10 billion), a major source of tourists (about 5 million visitors per year), an energy supplier, and a military partner for Turkey (with the purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system).⁴⁴ Geopolitically, the Russia-Turkey relationship has been more complicated, with tensions in their shared neighborhood, especially over the Caucasus or the Balkans, and a soft, mostly economic and cultural, competition in Central Asia. Yet both regimes have been pragmatic and transactional enough to work together in several war zones where their strategic interests collide such as Syria, Libya, and Karabakh.⁴⁵

With the war, Turkey's middle-ground position has been challenged, and yet President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has succeeded in maintaining his balancing act. Ankara has stood firm with its NATO allies, enforced the closing of the Bosphorus Straits to the Russian Navy, and called Russia's invasion an act of war. But it has not imposed sanctions or cancelled flights between the two countries. Many Russians have moved to Turkey, bringing with them their own businesses to avoid sanctions—something economically positive for the Turkish economy.⁴⁶ Ankara also wants to take advantage of the war to achieve its long-term goal of becoming a major energy transit hub—with the latest proposal by Moscow (just after the Nord Stream explosions) to launch a new version of the failed South Stream Pipeline project to export Russian gas to Turkey.⁴⁷ Erdoğan's proactive approach to the conflict has bolstered Turkey's diplomatic prestige, positioning it as one of the few countries that might be able to bring the two warring parties to the negotiating table. Ankara has

44. For the most complete picture of the bilateral relationship, see I. Facon, *Russie-Turquie: Un défi à l'Occident?*, Paris, Passés composés, April 2022, www.frstrategie.org.

45. I. Kusa, "From Ally to Mediator: How Russia's Invasion Has Changed Ukraine-Turkey Relations", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 7, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org>; I. Kusa, "Turkey's Goals in the Russia-Ukraine War", Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Kennan Institute, June 13, 2022, www.wilsoncenter.org.

46. J. Malsin and E. Kivilcim, "Superyachts, Seaside Apartments and Suitcases Full of Cash: Russians Pour Money into Turkey", *Wall Street Journal*, World, April 7, 2022, www.wsj.com.

47. V. Hopkins, S. Timur, and S. Reed, "Putin Offers to Make Turkey a Gas Hub to Preserve EU Energy Hold", *New York Times*, October 13, 2022, www.nytimes.com.

indeed become the main forum for diplomatic talks between Kyiv and Moscow, and it sealed the wheat deal under UN leadership.⁴⁸

Like Turkey, Iran is also benefiting from Russia's weakened global status. The bilateral relationship had already improved under Hassan Rohani's presidency (2013–2021) thanks to Moscow and Tehran's military coordination in Syria and Russia's established support for the renewal of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal. With the war in Ukraine, the military partnership has become the new driving engine of the relationship.⁴⁹ The selling of Iranian "kamikaze drones" to Russia, deadly used on the Ukrainian battlefield, has embodied this newfound military cooperation—possibly also with the deployment of Iranian military personnel on the ground to train Russian Armed Forces to use them⁵⁰—costing Tehran the loss of accreditation of its ambassador in Ukraine.⁵¹

For Tehran, a weakened and isolated Russia guarantees to get it the Kremlin's ear and support more than before, when Moscow was trying to position itself in more of a balancing role between Iranian and Western actors. President Ebrahim Raisi has thus gone all in on supporting Moscow in its anti-Western rhetoric, and on sharing Russia's view of the conflict as a meddling by the West in Russia's sphere of influence.⁵² Iran's long experience with Western sanctions also contributes to its rapprochement with Moscow: in case (quite improbable so far) of the relaunch of the nuclear deal, the lifting of sanctions on Iran could help Russia to bypass its own sanctions through a swap deal (Tehran could buy Russian oil for internal use and export its own oil to clients on Russia's behalf).⁵³ Yet this new alliance cannot resolve Russia's major issues: the Iranian economy, already exhausted, cannot offer many reliefs from sanctions to

48. E. Chausovsky, "Turkey Is the Biggest Swing Player in the Russia-Ukraine War", *Foreign Policy*, August 11, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

49. B. Hadžehpur, "Ukrainskij krizis i dilemmy dlâ Irana" [The Ukrainian crisis and Iran's dilemma], Valdaĭ Meždunarodnyĭ Diskussionnyĭ Klub, April 29, 2022, <http://ru.valdaiclub.com>.

50. J. E. Barnes and J. Ismay, "Russian Errors Prompted the Deployment of Iranian Drone Personnel to Ukraine, a U.S. Official Says", *New York Times*, October 20, 2022, www.nytimes.com.

51. Al Jazeera and news agencies, "Ukraine to Reduce Iran Embassy Presence over Russia Drone Attacks", *Al Jazeera English*, September 24, 2022, www.aljazeera.com.

52. I. Delanoe, "Le partenariat russo-iranien à l'épreuve du conflit en Ukraine", *Diplomatie*, August-September 2022, pp. 62-65.

53. "Report: Russia to Use Iran to Bypass Sanctions and Sell Oil if Nuclear Deal Clinched", *Times of Israel*, August 24, 2022, www.timesofisrael.com.

Moscow, and the Ayatollah regime is busy with repressing its domestic public opinion.⁵⁴

Saudi Arabia, too, has had to walk a fine line between the two sides in the war. A traditional bastion of US strategic presence in the Persian Gulf, the Wahhabi kingdom has been losing confidence in America's commitment to the Middle East and has improved its relations with Moscow over the years. In 2007 Putin became the first Russian leader to officially visit Riyadh. Ten years later, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud became the first Saudi king (then followed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman) to visit Moscow. In 2021, at a time when the Kingdom was still marginalized on the international scene after the horrific murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Russia signed an agreement on military cooperation with Riyadh.⁵⁵

Both countries take opposing positions in their policies toward Syria, Iran, and Egypt, but they also share a lot, especially through the OPEC+ framework. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has been quite explicit that his Kingdom's long partnership with the United States was not a sufficient reason to trump his relationship with Russia (or with China, for that matter), whatever the pressures emanating from the White House.⁵⁶ This strategy was confirmed in early October with the decision of OPEC+ to sharply cut production by 2 million barrels per day and thus boost crude prices, a decision that resulted in the West accusing the organization of siding with Russia.⁵⁷

Similarly, the Emirates joined China and India in abstaining on the first UN resolution condemning the invasion, seeing in the war a European, not a global issue, and being frustrated by the US changing involvement in the Gulf and tensions with China. They also have some pragmatic interest related to Russia's role in the OPEC+ and have appreciated Moscow's quite neutral posture on internal Gulf tensions and the Yemen war.⁵⁸ Moreover, as everywhere in the Middle East, the image of a strong leader cultivate by Vladimir Putin did help to generate support. As stated by Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, Professor at

54. N. Smagin, "Sobrat po sankciâm. Čto dast Rossii sblizhenie s Iranom" [Cobrother on sanctions. What brings Russia its rapprochement with Iran], *Carnegie Politika*, October 28, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

55. I. Naar, "Saudi Arabia, Russia Sign Deal to Develop Joint Military Cooperation", August 24, 2021, *Al Arabiya English*, <https://english.alarabiya.net>.

56. T. Singh Maini, "Biden's Address at the Jeddah Summit: Important Takeaways", *The Geopolitics*, July 21, 2022, <https://thegeopolitics.com>.

57. F. Marsi, "Is OPEC 'Aligning with Russia' after Production Cuts?", *Al Jazeera English*, October 7, 2022, www.aljazeera.com.

58. 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*, April 26, 2022, www.atlanticcouncil.org.

UAE University, “because of Putin's deep respect for the leading role of the Gulf states and for what they have achieved, some considered he deserved reciprocity.”⁵⁹

Among other regional powers trying to keep their balance in the conflict, one should also mention Egypt. The country imports its cereals mostly from both Ukraine and Russia, and tourists from both countries represent up to 1/3 of annual visitors. President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi has been reinforcing his relationship with Russia since he came to power in 2014, which resulted in a comprehensive partnership agreement in 2018. Egypt also has deep economic and military ties with Russia, which is financing and building Egypt's first nuclear power plant at Dabaa on a Russian loan of \$25 billion (which is likely to be disrupted now) and provides about 40% of Egypt's weapons, making it the country's primary arms supplier.⁶⁰ Yet Egypt is mostly weakened by the war because of its grain dependence and cannot enjoy high revenues from oil and gas as Saudi Arabia, or enhanced regional strategic status as Turkey and Iran.

The War's Repercussions for Middle Eastern Conflicts

While Middle Eastern regional powers have been managing their balancing act fairly well, Russia's miscalculation of the cost and length of the war—having forecast it as a few days-long “special military operation”—is having a direct impact on existing conflicts in the Middle East in which Russia has been involved. Syria and Libya are both likely to pay a high price for the complete breakdown of US-Russia relations.⁶¹

The Russian official military forces, as well as informal troops such as those from the Wagner Group, have been reduced in both countries, as Moscow has sent back parts of its military forces to the Ukrainian battleground. In Libya, Russia and Turkey sided with different local partners: Moscow support the self-appointed “field-marshal” Khalifa Haftar, sent his Libyan National Army weapons, then the Wagner Group's support, and have cooperated with Egypt and the UAE's in support of Haftar, while Ankara has preferred to

59. Interview with Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, “The Ukraine Crisis and the Gulf: An Emirati Perspective”, Moutaigne Institute, September 1, 2022, www.institutmontaigne.org.

60. K. Al-Anani, “Russia's War on Ukraine: Egypt's Limited Room for Maneuver”, Arab Center Washington DC, April 6, 2022, <https://arabcenterdc.org>.

61. S. A. Cook and B. Sanner, “Russia Still Has Willing Partners in the Middle East”, *Foreign Policy*, July 20, 2022, <http://foreignpolicy.com>.

sustain the UN-backed Tripoli government and sent military trainers, planners, Syrian mercenaries, and armed drones.⁶² Wagner troops already partly left, and Moscow's direct involvement on the ground is destined to decline as the war in Ukraine consumes most of Russia's military reserves, both in terms of manpower and equipment.⁶³ In Syria too, Russia is gradually letting Iranian-backed groups and Turkey dominate the conflict zones.⁶⁴ It could also find itself challenged in keeping its highly strategic Hmeimim Air Base in Syria, overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. With the closure of the Bosphorus to the Russian Navy since March, Moscow has faced difficulties in continuing to supply the Syrian regime and its troops, as well as to execute air strikes against its enemies.⁶⁵

Will Russia's military retreat from direct involvement in the Middle East result in the de-escalation of conflicts there, as supposed by Pavel Baev?⁶⁶ Or could it, on the contrary, accelerate these, as it shifts the local balance of power? The Libyan situation could indeed evolve with Moscow's decreased presence, but in Syria, Russia will continue to back Bashar al-Assad as much as possible. Moreover, the regime in Damascus is in the process of being slowly reintegrated into the regional scene and recognized (even if reluctantly) as legitimate by neighboring actors. Turkey and Iran have consolidated their positions as the main powerbrokers of the Syrian crisis, and Erdoğan now seems to be in a dominant position to expand Turkey's "security zone" in northern Syria against the Western-backed Kurds,⁶⁷ without Russia being able to slow him down.

Several other Middle Eastern conflicts, such as the Yemen war and the enduring Israeli-Palestinian conflict, do not have Russia as one of their key actors and therefore are not directly impacted by Moscow's power retreat.

62. A. Borshchevskaya, "Moscow and Ankara Will Continue Uneasy Cooperation", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 6, 2020, www.washingtoninstitute.org.

63. J. Harchaoui, "The Pendulum: How Russia Sways Its Way to More Influence in Libya", War on the Rocks, January 7, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com>.

64. N. Danforth, "How Much Multipolarity Does a Strongman Need? Why Erdogan Has Benefited from Russia's Failure in Ukraine", War on the Rocks, September 9, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com>.

65. A. Hamzawy, K. Sadjadpour, A. D. Miller *et al*, "What the Russian War in Ukraine Means for the Middle East", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 24, 2022, <http://carnegieendowment.org>.

66. P. Baev, "Irrelevant Intrigues and Diminished Power Projection: Russia in Retreat from the Middle East", Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 801, October 10, 2022, www.ponarseurasia.org.

67. M. Tokyay, "Ankara, Damascus Discuss Potential Normalization after Years of Broken Ties", *Arab News*, August 16, 2022, www.arabnews.com.

Further to the east, the war in Ukraine followed another geopolitical earthquake (albeit one of a smaller scale at the global level) in Russia's backyard: the catastrophic US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's return to power in Kabul. Since the Islamic State's presence in Afghanistan has been reinforced, Moscow has recently begun developing ties with the Taliban after years of considering them unacceptable as partners, based on the realist idea that it is easier to negotiate with a reactionary regime anchored in local realities than it is with a highly ideological and transnational grouping motivated by the total destruction of its enemies, as would be the case with the Islamic State.

Russia's long-term Special Representative for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, has been a central figure in this strategy. The Kremlin invited the Taliban to Moscow for talks in late 2021,⁶⁸ agreed to reaccredit Taliban diplomats in March 2022, and in September signed an economic agreement with them for the delivery of oil, gas, and wheat.⁶⁹ Russia is the first country in the world to sign such agreement with the new Taliban regime, yet without recognizing it as legitimate (the Taliban are still legally considered as a terrorist group in Russian legislation).

This partnership makes sense for both parties: the Taliban are in search of international recognition and economic and humanitarian support, and will therefore leverage Russia's partial recognition as a model that can be followed by other countries; Russia needs to have counterparts in Kabul to try to mitigate narcotic flows going through Central Asia and ensure that no Islamic movement targeting Central Asia and Russia would be supported by Kabul.⁷⁰ In Central Asia, Russia's pragmatic approach has been pretty well understood by all local regimes, themselves in search of stabilizing a relationship with the new Afghan government—with the exception of Tajikistan, for whom the lack of status given to Afghan Tajiks in a heavily Pashtun-centered Taliban regime remains a sensitive issue.

68. "Russia Invites Taliban to Afghanistan Conference in Moscow", *Al Jazeera English*, October 7, 2021, www.aljazeera.com.

69. "Taliban Signs 'Preliminary' Deal with Russia for Oil, Gas, Wheat", *Al Jazeera English*, September 28, 2022, www.aljazeera.com.

70. F. as-Surani, "Kak skladyvalis' otnošeniâ Moskvyy s talibami?" [How Moscow's relationship with the Taliban took shape?], *InoSMI*, August 17, 2022, <http://inosmi.ru>.

Is Russia's Weakening Re-Legitimizing the SCO and BRICS?

Paradoxically, Russia's weakening on the international scene because of both its brazen violation of international law and its inability to succeed militarily on the Ukrainian battlefield may consolidate the emergence of a new regional order. Russia's diminished great-power status indeed contributes to a rebalancing of power in the non-Western world, with China confidently taking the lead in this sphere, and Turkey consolidating its place in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) will likely confirm Iran's full membership by the summer of 2023: Tehran has signed the MoU preparing the way for its entry into the Organization, a form of recognition for which it has long been waiting. Indeed, for Tehran, joining a rising diplomatic forum such as the SCO, with no obligations to fulfill (the SCO is based on consensus and has very limited institutional capacity) is a new springboard for its regime at a time when it is being shaken by nationwide protests from within and hit hard by US sanctions from without. For Russia, Iran's entry guarantees a new friend in an organization largely dominated by China. And for the Central Asian states, Iran is potentially the missing link for them to reduce their own dependence on Russia's transit hub status.⁷¹

Several regional powers such as Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia (and potentially Indonesia as well as Argentina) are interested in a membership in BRICS and their potential accession has already been discussed by Russia, China, and India in the recent months.⁷² While BRICS is less political and more economics-focused than the SCO, it still reveals the attraction and consolidation of a non-Western world order. For all the BRICS members and aspiring members, the way the US has been leading the economic warfare against Russia is a push factor toward financial and monetary decoupling from Western institutions and the dollar's dominance (a risk recognized by the International Monetary Fund already in March 2022 during the first waves of sanctions)⁷³ and toward technological sovereignty, both for

71. N. Grajewski, "Iran One Step Closer to SCO Membership", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 14, 2022, www.washingtoninstitute.org.

72. I. Numan Telci, "Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey's Joining BRICS Can Be a Game Changer", *Politics Today*, September 2, 2022, <https://politicstoday.org>; "BRICS Expects Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey to Join Group Soon", *Middle East Monitor*, July 14, 2022, www.middleeastmonitor.com.

73. J. Wheatley and C. Smith, "Russia Sanctions Threaten to Erode Dominance of US Dollar, Says IMF", *Financial Times*, March 31, 2022, www.ft.com.

controlling information flows but also to avoid being disconnected from the World Wide Web, the SWIFT payments system, etc.

In both the SCO and the BRICS cases, we see four main Muslim regional powers (Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Emirates) emerging as key actors able to pragmatically pivot their foreign policies in a new chaotic environment to take advantage of the decline of both the West and Russia and the emergence of new multipolar blocs.

Conclusion

With its miscalculated war, Russia has been destroying many of the successes it had secured over the last two decades. It has lost a large part of its legitimacy in Eurasia itself, accelerating the end of the post-Soviet order in the region;⁷⁴ and it has lost years' worth of economic integration with European and global Western industries and markets, sending the country backward in terms of economic, industrial, and technological development. It has also transformed its domestic scene, not with the war itself (which is largely seen by the population as being far removed from their lives), but with its mobilization, which means that the war is now coming to the home front too.

With a contracting economy (though it is not yet collapsing as Western pundits had been prematurely announcing), the Kremlin will likely have to become much more repressive and ideologically indoctrinating to keep the population supportive of the regime's decisions. In such an equilibrium, Muslim minorities may play a critical role, on both sides: creating pockets of protest mood in some corners, while also offering both genuine and forced support for Moscow's policies in others. Whatever the future of the Russian political system will be, depending on how the war is managed and brought to an end (or not), Russian Muslims, and especially the North Caucasus, will become a key factor in the regime's stability or collapse.

On the international scene, Russia is down but not out. The decline is resulting in a retrenchment strategy—that is, a redefinition of Russia's objectives to core commitments, drawing down everything that is nonessential, to deal with its geopolitical decline and newly exposed weaknesses. In such a retrenchment strategy, the Middle East will continue to play a key part of Russia's foreign policy: with few hope of rebuilding its relationship with the West for years to come—if not decades—the Kremlin will now fully concentrate on the Global South. By losing part of its great power status, it will become a more equal partner toward its fellow BRICS members and BRICS-

74. M. Laruelle, "How Putin's War Has Hurt Russia in Central Asia and the Caucasus", *Foreign Affairs*, October 13, 2022, www.foreignaffairs.com.

aspiring countries, as well as in the role it plays within the SCO, and let China leading both organizations.

The Kremlin will have to learn to deal with its weakened status and projection of power, with some potential impact on its capacity to support the Syrian regime, to be involved as far away as the Libyan theater of operations, and to maintain its presence in African countries like Mali and DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo). Turkey and Iran will be able to regain influence in their own “near abroad” with less coordination coming down from Moscow. For the Kremlin, the OPEC+ forum and its relationship to Riyadh will become crucial to keeping up the pressure on Western energy markets.

In this new configuration, the main regional powers of the Middle East have been maintaining a delicate balancing act between the West and Ukraine on one side and Russia on the other, and have so far been successful at it. All have excelled at transactional maneuvering and nonalignment, a sign that Russia’s weakening power projection does not result in the West’s rising, but rather in the West’s decline too. All are trying to maximize their gains from the conflict and the strategic autonomy that it has suddenly offered, and to adjust this rebalancing to the intra-regional rearrangement occurring since a few years (Israel’s improved relationship with Gulf states, Syrian regime’s gradual regional reintegration, Iran’s securing its nuclear status, etc.). Turkey appears to be emerging as the main beneficiary (along with China) of Russia’s weakening, but other regional powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Emirates, and Egypt have also been navigating the conflict with nuance.

Russia’s retrenchment may be seen as a victory of the West in Europe itself, but there is no Western victory in the Global South; on the contrary, the war is accelerating the fragmentation of the world, the deglobalization and regionalization of strategic blocs and economic ties. Regional powers are learning their lessons from the way the West is leading its economic warfare against Russia and will reinforce their own autonomy from Western institutions and pressure points, especially in relation to the dollar’s extraterritoriality and the US’s digital supremacy. This provides confirmation, if any was still needed, that if the war may result in a reconsolidated “collective West” in the Global North, outside of the West the war is accelerating the multi-polarization of the world, and therefore the West’s global decline.



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