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# **The impact of the Russo-Ukrainian war on the Middle East. Introduction**

The outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022, seen by many analysts as a ‘proxy war’ between the United States and the Russian Federation, can be seen as another manifestation of tensions developing in East-West relations since at least 2008. At that time, not only was there a global financial crisis that undermined confidence in the liberal world order (global market mechanisms and economic institutions controlled by the Western powers) but there was also the outbreak of the Russian-Georgian war, a prelude to the subsequent Ukrainian crisis (2013–2014) and Russia’s annexation of Crimea.

However, the Russian-Ukrainian war has far-reaching implications beyond the Euro-Atlantic region. Thus we will be most interested in how it has affected the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In the MENA region,

we are dealing with several states with regional power aspirations (Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran). All of them are looking at transforming the structure of the international system in a direction other than unipolar, willing to benefit as much as possible from this transformation. That is why Saudi Arabia is no longer as devoted an ally of the United States as it was in the 1990s, and the US administration views Iran as a potential counterweight to unpredictable Saudi Arabia.

The Saudis were not eager to take clear sides in the American-Russian dispute, as evidenced by Riyadh's warm relations with Moscow and Muhammad Ibn Salman's cold relations with Joe Biden. Similarly, Turkey – a crucial member of NATO – has also tried to get as much for itself as possible (both in the Kurdish context and in the energy and military context), acting as a mediator rather than as a partisan of the US. Other Middle Eastern countries (except for pro-Russian Syria) had begun to watch the situation closely, especially since the negative consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian war have become severe for them. These include the food crisis that the war has caused. Indeed, many MENA countries depend on imports of agricultural goods (mainly grain) from Russia and Ukraine. These events are part of growing tension between the Western/democratic bloc (led by the United States) and the Eastern/authoritarian bloc (where China is the strongest; however, Russia also plays an important role – especially in the European and Middle Eastern contexts). This has led many scholars to return to neorealism as a theoretical basis for analysing international relations.

According to neo-realists (or structural realists), states are on their own. If they enter alliances, it is only to increase their sense of security (according to defensive realism) or to expand (according to offensive realism). Power should be measured only in relation to the power/capabilities of other states (relative power). It is because there is a certain distribution of power/capabilities in the world, which can change over time, which in turn can lead to a qualitative change in the distribution of power/capabilities and, thus, a change in the hierarchy of powers. The distribution of power/capabilities thus determines the structure of the international system, which can be unipolar, bipolar or multipolar. While during the Cold War, this structure was bipolar (according to neorealists, the international system was the most stable then), after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it became unipolar – with the United States as the only superpower.

A superpower cannot be sure of its position, meaning it must continue to act to increase its power at the expense of other powers to preserve the

status quo, i.e. to secure its dominance. This kind of situation creates a security dilemma, which means that if one actor increases its potential, especially its military capabilities (regardless of its intentions, e.g. wanting to protect itself from a potential attack), then other actors feel more threatened and also seek to increase their military capabilities (the security dilemma is thus the basis of the arms race). In turn, other powers (e.g., regional powers) with greater ambitions may seek to change the balance of power and challenge superpower hegemony, which in turn causes them to be referred to as revisionist states. China and Russia can currently be considered as such.

Using the neo-realist theory, regardless of the variant (defensive or offensive), one can note that the unquestioned hegemony of the United States within the unipolar system lasted quite a short period (just over a decade). Indeed, in the last decade or so, we can observe the relative rise in power of the other superpowers – China, Russia and India, with China and Russia seeming to challenge US hegemony to the greatest extent. While China does so through economic means (at least so far), Russia seeks, first, to stop the further eastward expansion of NATO at all costs, especially into post-Soviet areas (the Georgia and Ukraine cases), and second, to increase its military presence in the Black Sea and Mediterranean basins.

Under a bipolar system, states that are not great powers can either join one of the rival blocs or try to pursue a balancing policy between the blocs, using the global rivalry to their advantage. During the Cold War, the MENA region was divided into two camps – the revolutionary one supported the Soviet Union, and the conservative one supported the United States. However, some countries, such as Egypt (which in the 1970s shifted its orientation from pro-Soviet to pro-American), tried to use global rivalry to their advantage. It remains an open question whether, in the face of a ‘new Cold War’, the Middle Eastern states will also try to balance between antagonistic blocs (the West and the East – with China and Russia as its prominent representatives), trying to gain as much as possible for themselves. Indeed, the bipolar system creates such an opportunity.

Our preference for various kinds of realist approaches does not mean that other theoretical approaches cannot help analyse the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on other regions and states. Especially since the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a century of multiple interdependencies, mainly economic (manifested by the networks of supply chains and international trade), these should also be considered. Economic interdependencies, internal factors (such as the type of political system in a country), and international organisations are areas of

interest for proponents of the liberal (and neo-liberal) approach. In turn, the subjective dimensions of politics, including the public's perception of the Russian-Ukrainian war and the securitisation of various potential threats related to it, are of interest to proponents of constructivism. All of them – and many more – can be useful in analysing the impact of this Eastern European conflict on the MENA region.