

Ukraine at Greater Jeopardy with War in the Middle East

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Ukraine energy grid struggles under Russian attack

The horrific U.S.-Israeli attack on Iran will have many victims, foremost among them the people of Iran who have bombs, missiles, and massive clouds of burning oil descending upon them and who will almost certainly be denied the democracy that most of them crave. Others who live in the region will suffer as well, and globally all who survive on the edge will be devastated by the coming crisis of the world economy. As the cameras focus on Iran, Israel has been able to bombard Lebanon and renew its genocidal cut-off of food and aid to Gaza. But there are other, less obvious but no less real victims of this terrible Middle East war: the people of Ukraine, who have been fighting for their lives against Russia for four long years.

On February 24, 2022, Vladimir Putin launched an all-out war against Ukraine in an attempt to recreate the Tsarist and Soviet empires. Like Trump in his war of choice against Iran, Putin used the language of existential danger and self-defense to cover up an act of naked aggression. And just as MAGA today preposterously claims there is no war on Iran – just an “operation” or “an excursion” – in order to claim Trump’s campaign promises of peace remain intact, Putin outlawed using the term war, rather than “special military operation” to refer to his invasion. And just as Trump and Netanyahu launched their attack while in the midst of peace talks with Iran (meriting the same infamy as Japan for its attack on Pearl Harbor), Putin tried to disguise his perfidy by declaring he was pulling back his troops just before his forces crossed the Ukrainian border.

As the Ukrainians knew from the beginning, Russia has 28 times the territory of Ukraine, 3.6 times the population, and a dozen times the economy. Yet the Ukrainian government and its people had the courage to resist Russian imperialism, and with arms from the United States and Europe, and with their heroism and ingenuity, succeeded for a few years in leveling the playing field. They did not win, but neither could Russia defeat them.

When President Donald Trump entered his second term a year ago, he began to tilt the field sharply in favor of Russia. He pressed Ukraine to accept Russia’s demands, that Kyiv cede major chunks of its territory, including land that is still in Ukraine’s hands. He berated Volodymyr Zelensky for not being sufficiently obsequious. But most seriously of all, in 2025 he ended all new U.S. military aid authorizations to Ukraine. Some previously approved arms were still delivered and the Europeans were allowed to buy some U.S. weapons to give to Ukraine. This limited aid enabled Ukraine to gain a little territory in 2026, but it was not adequate to prevent Russia from wreaking havoc on

Ukraine's power grid.

Now, however, the U.S-Israeli war on Iran has severely weakened Ukraine's position. The very weapons that Ukraine desperately needs – particularly antimissile munitions — are now being expended at a prodigious rate by Washington and its allies in the Middle East. Last June, during the previous, much more limited U.S.-Israeli attack on Iran, the US diverted some 20,000 missiles from Ukraine to the Middle East. Bloomberg reports that the United States and its partners in the Gulf have probably used well over 1,000 PAC-3 interceptors alone in the first week of the current war. That's almost twice the annual production of the weapons and more than the US and its allies have supplied to Ukraine since the Russian invasion four years ago, according to Kyiv. Clearly Trump is not going to prioritize Ukrainian needs. U.S. weapons won't be available for direct transfer to Ukraine or for European purchase and redelivery to Ukraine.

Russia on the other hand has no such problems; while it was getting drones from Iran earlier in the war, it has since acquired the technology to build and improve Iranian-style drones in its own factories.

At the same time, the war has led to the "largest supply disruption in the history of the global oil market," and a surge in the price of oil – a disaster for much of the world, but a benefit for Russia, which is a major hydrocarbon exporter. And now Trump has temporarily lifted sanctions on Russian oil sales. All this will give Moscow more money to finance its war on Ukraine.

Not only Iran and the Middle East, but the entire world is drawn into the war as oil markets, trade routes, and stock markets are affected. Prices will rise and life will become harder for many. We live in an age where authoritarian leaders—most recently Donald Trump, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Vladimir Putin—violate international law, invade foreign nations, depose their leaders and impose new ones, commit crimes against humanity, and even genocide.

The war's impact on world politics will also be profound, strengthening authoritarianism and great power imperialist rivalries. Trump's war on Iran, which violates the U.S. Constitution which give Congress the power to declare war, is also a violation of the U.N. Charter, a kind of world constitution intended to prevent acts of aggression. And Trump has now demanded Iran's unconditional surrender and asserted his right to choose its new leader, yet another and more egregious violation of national sovereignty and democratic norms.

Wars and violence, decapitation strikes and the slaughter of civilians – these often set off spirals of terrorism. The horrendous attacks on Iran and Lebanon have already led to new terrorist incidents, including antisemitic violence, in the United States and around the world. And we can expect to see more. The war will help extremist groups recruit, raise funds, and buy arms to engage in terrorism. This has nothing to do with left politics, and indeed it will serve the interests of state power, as governments respond to terrorist attacks by mobilizing more police and restricting civil liberties, creating an even more authoritarian political environment.

If the war goes on for very long, it will lead to mass migration as people fleeing the war seek safety in other countries. Even in the best of cases such migration leads to tensions between migrants and host nations, and in the worst of cases is accompanied by xenophobia and violence. Rightwing parties have in the past demanded that their nations exclude migrants and the issue has frequently carried them to power. All of this is bad for the world at large and particularly for Ukraine.

Ukraine's war of self-defense is that of a democratic state—however deeply flawed—against one of the world's most authoritarian nations. Ukraine's democracy has been weakened in part by its leadership's conservative economic policies but also by the state's transformation because of the

war. Wartime conditions led President Zelensky to remain in office without new elections, a reasonable decision, but one that over time undermines democracy.

The pressures on Ukraine have also led Zelensky to offer the country's expertise on drone missiles and the defense against them—won at great human cost— to help the United States in defending its bases in the Middle East. This is unfortunate and disappointing. One understands the impossible dilemma that Ukraine faces: it's hard to plead for U.S. arms and then refuse help in return, particularly when the European have failed to decisively oppose Washington's war on Iran. Nevertheless, this further ensnares Ukraine in great power politics, puts Zelensky on the side of the U.S.-Israeli imperial war, and will undermine the moral support it has garnered as an opponent of imperialist aggression.

The U.S. anti-war movement has yet to gain any traction, in part because everything has happened so quickly (other invaders have taken some time to build their public case), in part because of the complexity, and in part because some of the groups organizing the anti-war movement have been supporters of the Iranian government. If an anti-war movement is to be successful, it will have to clarify its views on both Iran and Ukraine.

In the case of Ukraine, we must reassert our support for Ukrainian sovereignty and self-determination and that country's right to get arms wherever it can in order to defend itself. At the same time we must support those Ukrainians who fight against their country's neoliberal economic policies and who defend democracy, unions, workers' rights and women's and gay rights.

In the case of Iran, we must unequivocally oppose the U.S.-Israeli war, while opposing as well Iran's theocratic and totalitarian government that was prepared to kill 30,000 people to stop popular protests. We support the struggles of the Iranian people for reform, for democracy, and for human rights.

[Update: March 16: The characterization of the European attitude to the Iran war has been clarified to indicate a lack of decisive opposition.]