

Short Analysis



TABLE OF CONTENTS

3

MULTIPOLARITY AND THE MIDDLE EAST: EXPLORING
REGIONAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

4

AT A GLANCE

5

I. RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT: RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE WAR

8

II. ECONOMIC SANCTIONS

8

III. EFFECTS OF THE WAR

10

IV. VIEWS ON US (DIS)ENGAGEMENT IN THE REGION

11

V. SKEPTICISM TOWARDS LARGER EU ENGAGEMENT IN THE
REGION

12

VI. THE GEOPOLITICAL NATURE OF THE WAR, REGIONAL SUPPORT
TO RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

14

VII. GEOPOLITICS AND THE FUTURE IN THE REGION

16

CONCLUSION

17

METHODOLOGY

18

REFERENCES

19

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

MULTIPOLARITY AND THE MIDDLE EAST: EXPLORING REGIONAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

SHORT ANALYSIS

Russia engaged in a major escalation of its war against Ukraine with a large-scale invasion in February 2022, that has caused tens of thousands of deaths on both sides and Europe's largest refugee crisis since World War II. The consequences continue to be felt around the world, including in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

The region has faced a multitude of crises over recent years. Violent conflicts within MENA have had grave humanitarian consequences. Food insecurity has been exacerbated by climate change and environmental degradation, economic decline, rising energy and fuel prices, as well as protracted displacement resulting in further societal tensions. The Russia-Ukraine War has disrupted major trade lines in a region heavily dependent on imports from the warring countries, aggravating an already challenging situation.

The MENA region was already at a geopolitical crossroads prior to the Russia-Ukraine War. Since the Obama era there have been talks about a United States (US) retrenchment from the region. The US track record, from failed grandiloquent democratization and nation building experiments in Iraq and Afghanistan, to protracted alienation of erstwhile prime Arab ally, Saudi Arabia, and agonizing efforts to prevent a nuclear Iran, is sobering to say the least. Others have happily stepped in where America left off.

Meanwhile, Russia's brutal 2015 intervention in Syria has given the global power a direct large-scale military foothold in the Middle East. And China has very recently orchestrated the first Beijing-brokered rapprochement in the region, between former arch rivals: Iran and Saudi Arabia. After the European Union (EU), China is most MENA countries' first trading partner, with almost 50% of its oil and gas imports originating in the Gulf. The EU, although geographically the closest outside global power to the region, has been reduced to the role of a hapless bystander, marginalized in most of the conflicts. An unfortunate position, as it is the most affected by the region's crises, not least when it comes to migration and forced displacement.

The interest and commitment of world powers in the region does not mean that regional states have been reduced to mere pawns on a great geopolitical chessboard. Quite the opposite, and the Russia-Ukraine War so far has proven this. Most if not all MENA states are skillfully—or ruthlessly, depending on one's point of view—navigating the waters of what they perceive to be a new multipolar reality.

The West's closer allies stand out as states that have refused to align themselves with either Russia or Ukraine. While many disapprove of Russia's brazen breach of international conventions, they nonetheless reject the idea of any sanctions against Moscow, preferring to remain on speaking and sometimes even cordial terms.

In this context, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's Regional Peace and Security Project commissioned a survey covering twelve countries in the region¹ to: **1. Understand people's perceptions of the Russia-Ukraine War 2. Identify the impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on the MENA region 3. Understand people's opinions on the involvement of Russia and the US in the affairs of the MENA region and 4. Understand people's perceptions of global power distribution.**

¹ The survey was conducted in: Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Tunisia, and Turkey.

The survey aimed to find out whether the foreign policy stances of the regions' governments were reflected in the attitudes of their populations. Likewise, it sought to examine whether the gap between Western and MENA region government responses to the war was reflected in public perceptions from the region. Does the public of the MENA region see the Russia-Ukraine War differently? And if so, why might that be?

AT A GLANCE

The **key findings** of the survey, analyzed in the **following 7 chapters**, showed that respondents in the MENA region:

1. View **Russia as the primary instigator** of the Russia-Ukraine War, but the **US as the primary beneficiary**, while they consider their **countries as staying neutral**
2. Reject the **use of economic sanctions**, including against Russia
3. **See negative effects** of the war both for their country and in their day-to-day life
4. Tend to **support US military withdrawal from MENA**,
5. But are **skeptical towards more EU involvement** in the region
6. See the Russia-Ukraine War **through the lens of a larger geopolitical power struggle between Russia and the West**, and are largely unsure which countries from the MENA region benefit most from the conflict
7. Are very **skeptical towards both Russian and US involvement** in the region, tend to prefer no or multiple superpowers instead of one, and are **cautiously optimistic about peace and security** across MENA in the future

A country-by-country breakdown of the results shows a continuum of perceptions across MENA countries, allowing us to speak of a MENA public opinion, with general trends spanning a range of countries. Notable exceptions were **respondents from Israel and Iran, who showed opinions that diverged from the rest of the region on a range of questions**. Israel often with a clear majority, Iran with a plural majority.

Interestingly, respondents from both countries were closer to what one could perceive as a default Western perception: more closely aligned with Ukraine, more skeptical towards Russia, more positive towards the US. In Israel, this aligns with the Israeli government's pro-Western position (although not with its specific position towards the ongoing war, where Israel is much softer on Moscow than either the US or the EU). In Iran, survey respondent position differs notably from the Iranian government's standpoint of clear political and military support to Russia. The Iran-Israel alignment on many (albeit not all) questions is remarkable because the governments of both countries are at opposite ends of the ongoing geopolitical struggles in the region.

In sum, the general tendency in the twelve countries surveyed was one of **alignment between populations and governments**. The ambitious political balancing act that most countries engage in, refusing to take clear sides or deploy sanctions, is generally a good reflection of what samples from their populations said in this survey.

From a Western point of view, this may be remarkable because the authoritarian nature of most of these governments may make them more detached from popular pressure. Nonetheless, even in democracies, foreign policy as a political field is often shielded against popular preferences, with democratic governments frequently overruling public opinion if they deem necessary.

It is difficult to state whether the correlation of government and public position seen here is one of cause and effect. It can however be stated that in most countries surveyed, government position on the ongoing war is not a major point of public contention, regardless of whether or not the public is allowed to articulate itself freely.

Survey results pointed generally towards **ongoing alienation of the US as the major external geopolitical power in the region**. US military retrenchment seemed welcome by most populations (results suggest much more so than by official government positions), and respondents felt that Washington benefits most from the Russia-Ukraine War.

Resentment towards the US was not balanced by a more welcoming attitude towards **Russia**. Moscow is as much, if not more, **distrusted in terms of both its involvement in Ukraine and in the region**. Both the world's prime nuclear powers thus suffer from broad reputational damage in the region.

If MENA governments embraced **a new multipolar world order**, this would be generally welcomed by their populations, the survey suggests. Respondents

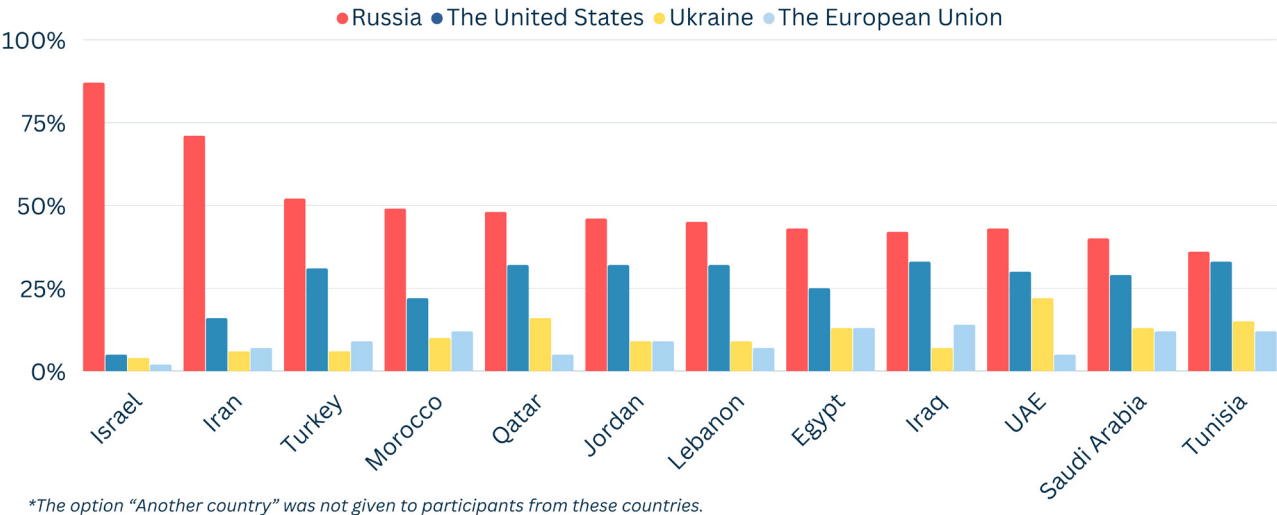
wanted the US out, rejected letting the EU in, and were evenly split between favoring a world without superpowers and, on the contrary, a world with many. They rejected a unipolar world with great determination. Attitudes towards China were not asked for, with the survey taking place before the most recent Beijing-brokered agreement.

While there are many conflicts in the region, the majority of survey respondents were still optimistic about improved peace and security over the next five years. This may reflect a general détente sensible in the region, seen over the last three years, with the recent Beijing-brokered Iran-Saudi rapprochement exemplifying a tangible result that filters through to public mood. Notable exceptions were, again, Iranian and Israeli respondents who were less optimistic about mid-term improvements in peace and security.

I. RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT: RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE WAR

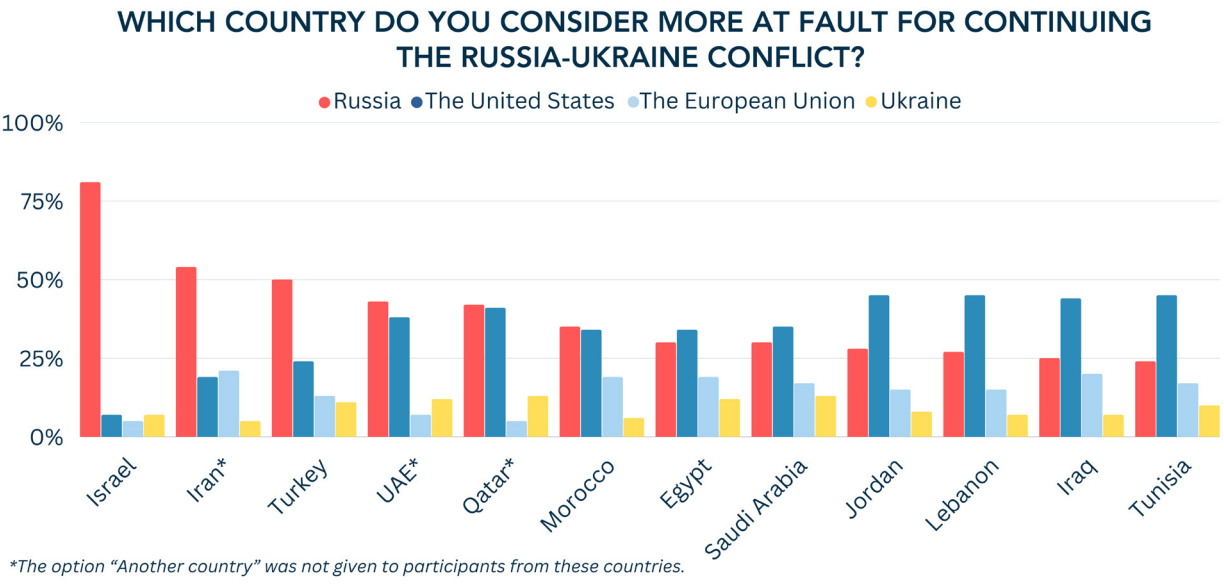
When asked whom they consider mainly responsible for the war in Ukraine, either pluralities or slim majorities of respondents across most countries surveyed said Russia. The US was a close second in some countries, including Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia. In almost all countries, except Israel and Iran, at least 20% of respondents deemed the US to be mainly responsible for the war.

WHICH COUNTRY DO YOU CONSIDER MAINLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE WAR IN UKRAINE?



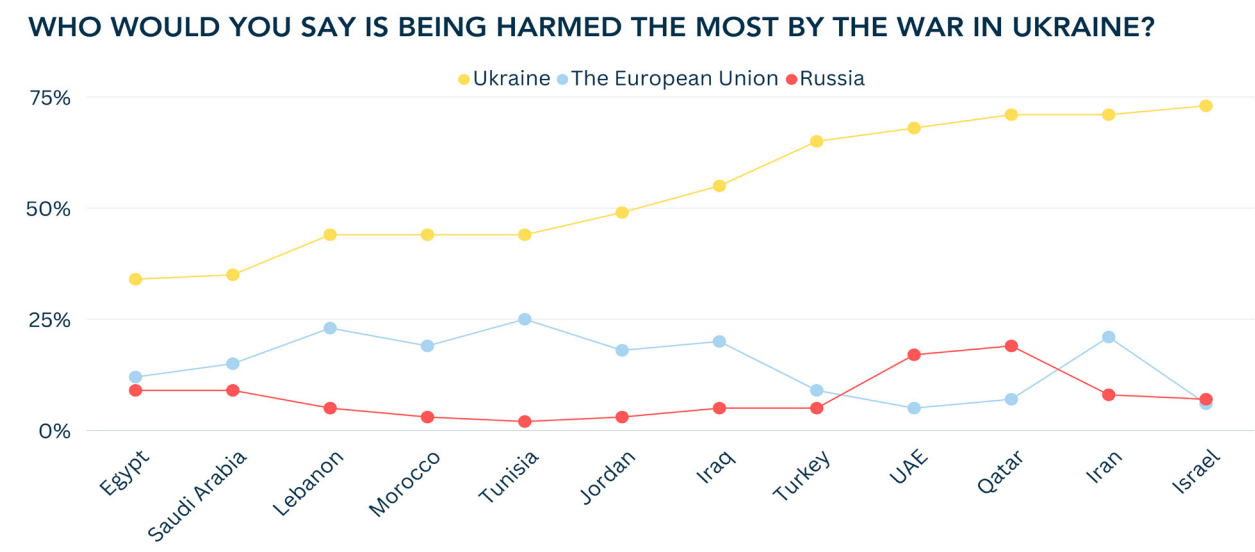
In Israel, almost 90% of respondents, and in Iran seven out of ten respondents, considered Russia mainly responsible for the war—despite both substantial Iranian military support for Russia² and the Israeli government's slow move to express support for Ukraine³.

Remarkably, the overall majority of respondents (and by a significant margin in three quarters of countries) held countries other than Russia responsible for continuing the war. Substantial pluralities of respondents in two thirds of all countries surveyed pointed at the US. Again Israeli and Iranian respondents bucked this trend, joined this time by respondents from NATO-ally Turkey (all are non-Arab countries). The Moroccan response was almost tied between Russia and the US.



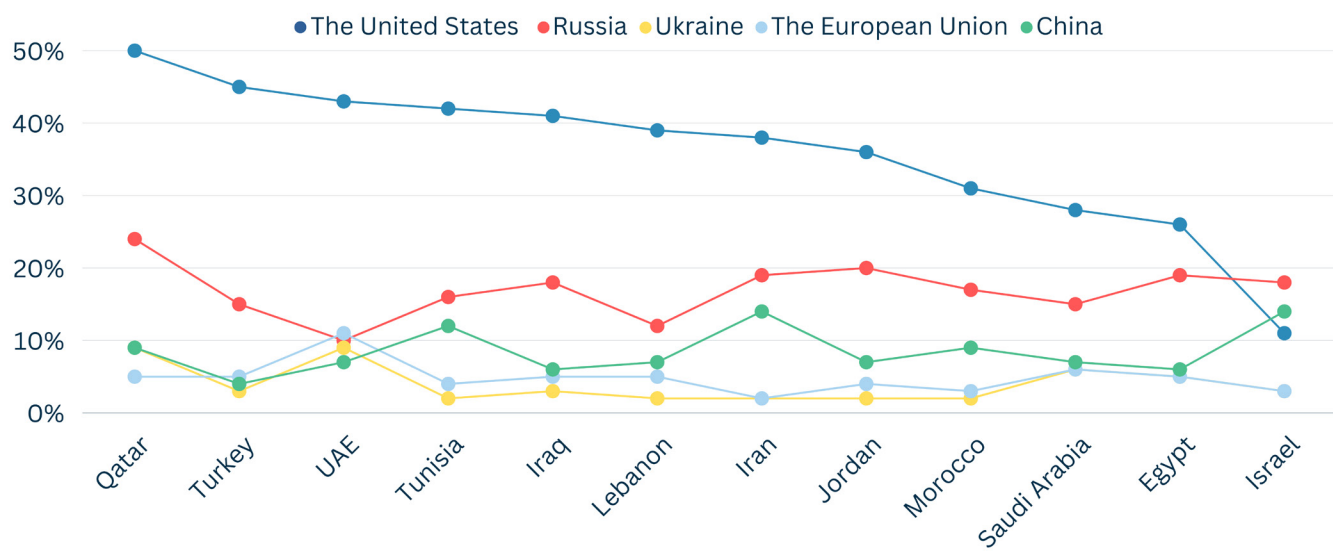
Responsibility for the Russia-Ukraine War was therefore perceived as split **between Russia, which was mainly considered the aggressor and the US, which was deemed responsible for continuing the conflict**, despite not actively being a warring party.

A considerable plurality of respondents across the surveyed countries considered **Ukraine to be harmed the most by the war** (34% in Egypt, up to 73% in Israel), distantly followed by the EU (2% in Egypt, up to 25% in Tunisia).



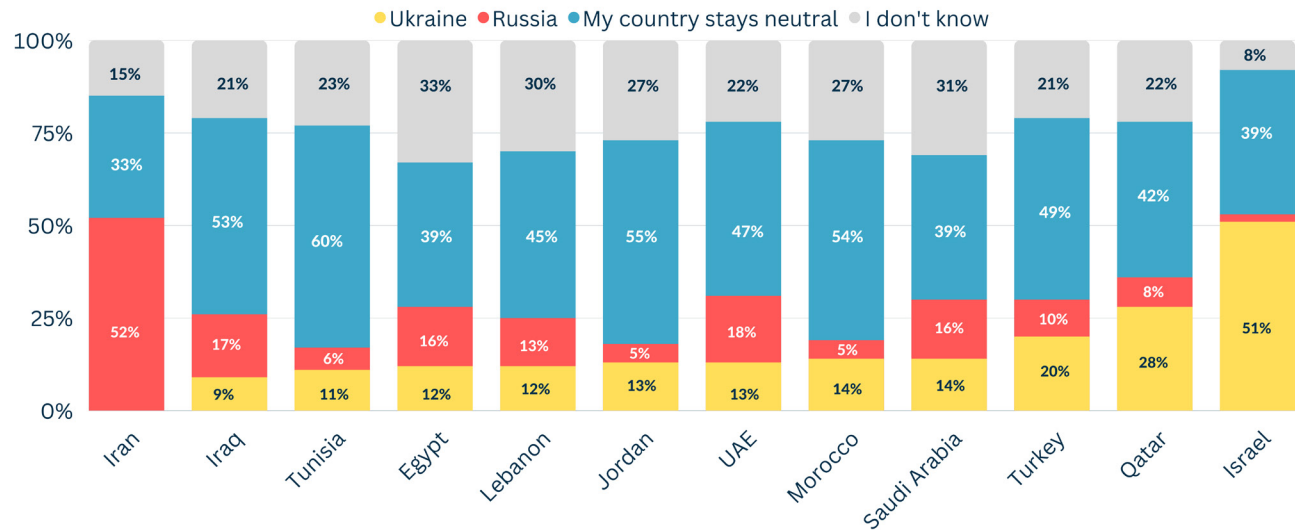
These findings go hand in hand with surveyed perceptions of **who benefits most from the war**. A great plurality of respondents in the region **pegged the US as the main beneficiary**, with the only notable exception from respondents in Israel, who largely did not know (42%) or named Russia (18%). It is noteworthy that across most countries surveyed, more people were uncertain about who is benefiting from the war (4%-42%) than thought that Russia was benefiting the most (10%-24%).

WHO WOULD YOU SAY IS BENEFITTING THE MOST FROM THE WAR IN UKRAINE?



Along with widespread uncertainty about who gains from the war, a **large plurality of respondents said that their home country was neutral**. Exceptions included Iran, where respondents indicated their country’s support for Russia (52%), and Israel, where—despite aforementioned Israeli government restraint in foreign policy—51% said they think their country supports Ukraine in the war.

WHICH COUNTRY DO YOU THINK YOUR COUNTRY SUPPORTS IN THIS WAR?



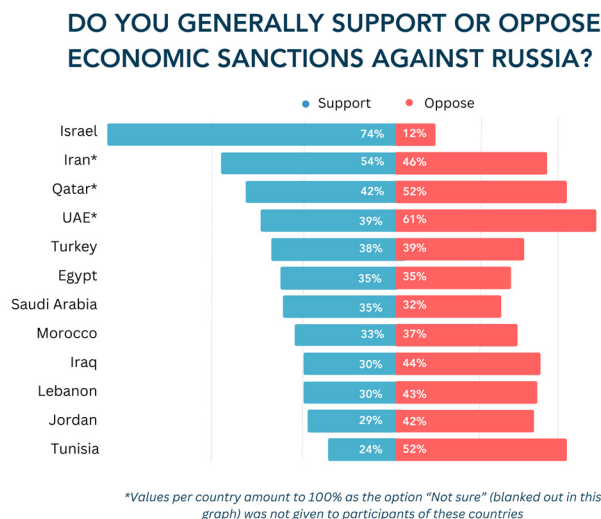
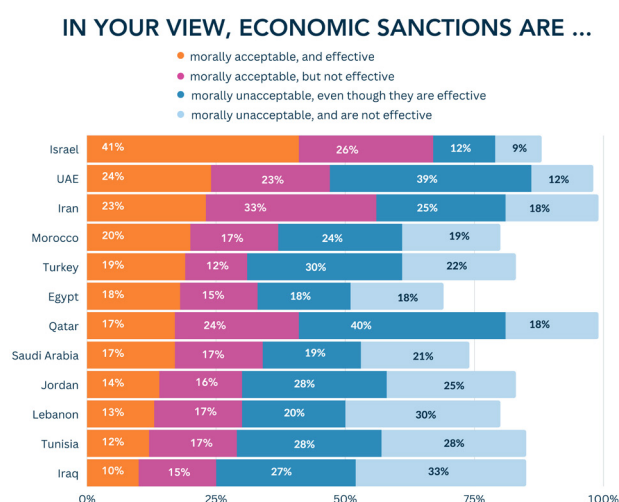
Generally, respondents’ predominant mention of neutrality shows that the positioning of most regional governments who have refused to take clear sides in this conflict is well anchored in public awareness. Respondents’ perceptions of responsibility for the continuation of the war and who benefits most, point to strong regional resent-

ment of the US. These are certainly results that differ from the picture the US paints of itself, but also from published opinion in Europe that holds that without forceful US support and the strong pro-European commitment of the Biden administration, Ukraine would have been lost⁴.

II. ECONOMIC SANCTIONS

Many respondents in the region rejected the idea of economic sanctions in general as morally unacceptable, with the exception of Israel and Iran (67% and 56% respectively answered “morally acceptable”, regardless of whether they considered them effective or not). Rejection of sanctions in any form was particularly high amongst respondents from Tunisia (56%) and Iraq (60%).

Israel was the only country surveyed where a majority of respondents (74%) supported economic sanctions specifically against Russia. Respondents in Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Morocco were divided, while respondents in the other six surveyed countries were against economic sanctions.



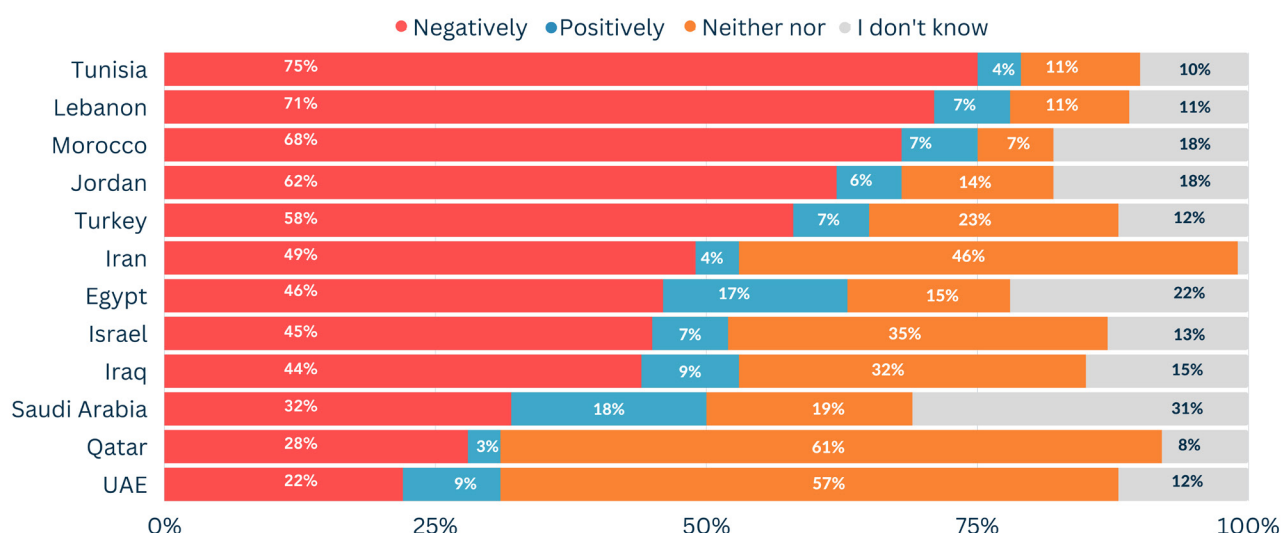
A sanctions-averse attitude may stem from the fact that these populations have often found themselves at the receiving end of Western sanctions policy in the past—sanctions having become in recent decades a foreign policy go-to. While economic sanctions, at least in theory, are often targeted at decision-makers, in reality people in the Middle East often end up as collateral damage.

Surprisingly though, attitudes were much less hostile towards sanctions in the most sanctioned country of the region, Iran (having the third highest support for sanctions, after Israel, and Qatar - even though still with a plurality against). Which may indicate public capacity to differentiate between the rationale behind this instrument and the effects it has.

III. EFFECTS OF THE WAR

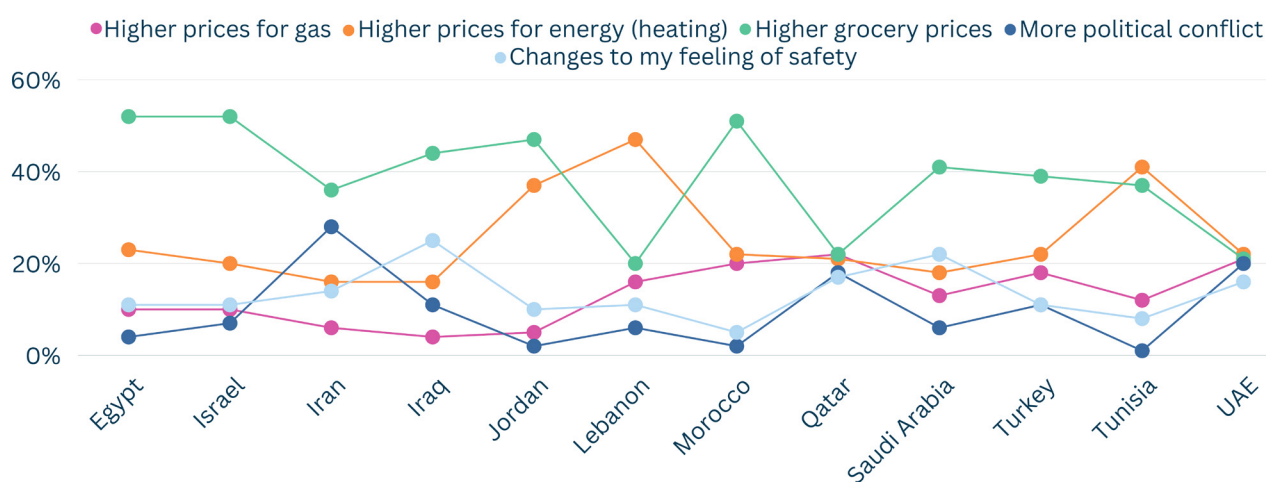
Respondents in many parts of the MENA region perceived **their country to be negatively affected by the war and said they felt personally affected as well**. Only respondents in two Gulf countries felt that their home states were neither positively nor negatively impacted: the United Arab Emirates (UAE) at 57% and Qatar at 61%. Israeli and Iraqi respondents were undecided on whether or not they personally felt the effects of the war (46% vs. 44% in Israel, 41% vs. 40% in Iraq).

IS YOUR COUNTRY MORE POSITIVELY OR NEGATIVELY AFFECTED BY THE WAR?



Personal experiences of the effects of the war on daily life most frequently included higher grocery prices in seven countries. However, respondents in Tunisia, Lebanon and, interestingly, UAE and Qatar, named higher energy prices first (53% Tunisia, 63% Lebanon, 43% UAE and 44% Qatar).

WHAT EFFECTS OF THE WAR DO YOU EXPERIENCE IN DAY TO DAY LIFE IN YOUR COUNTRY?



The biggest concern expressed with regard to the Russia-Ukraine War were **increased costs of living**, most often mentioned by respondents in Tunisia (36%), Morocco (32%) and Jordan (31%). **Innocent people killed and injured in Ukraine** constituted the second most frequent answer, most often cited by respondents in Israel (31%), Iraq (25%) and Turkey (24%). Concerns over **the threat of the use of nuclear weapons** were also prevalent among many respondents in the region.

Many respondents thought their economies were affected by their country's position on the war. Exceptions were respondents in Lebanon and Jordan, who were fairly undecided, and Iraq, where 37% of respondents considered their country's position not to have much of an impact on its economy.

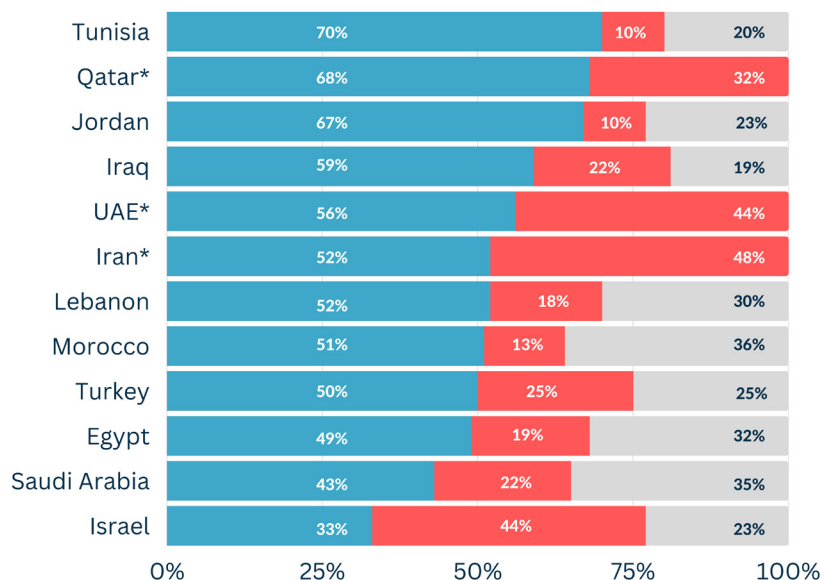
IV. VIEWS ON US (DIS)ENGAGEMENT IN THE REGION

The mistrust towards the US highlighted by survey responses concerning the Russia-Ukraine War was mirrored in regional views on US retrenchment. **A large majority of respondents said they would support a US military withdrawal from the MENA region**, many indicating they thought it would improve intra-regional relations and make the region safer.

WOULD YOU SUPPORT OR OPPOSE THE US MILITARY RETRENCHMENT FROM THE MIDDLE EAST?

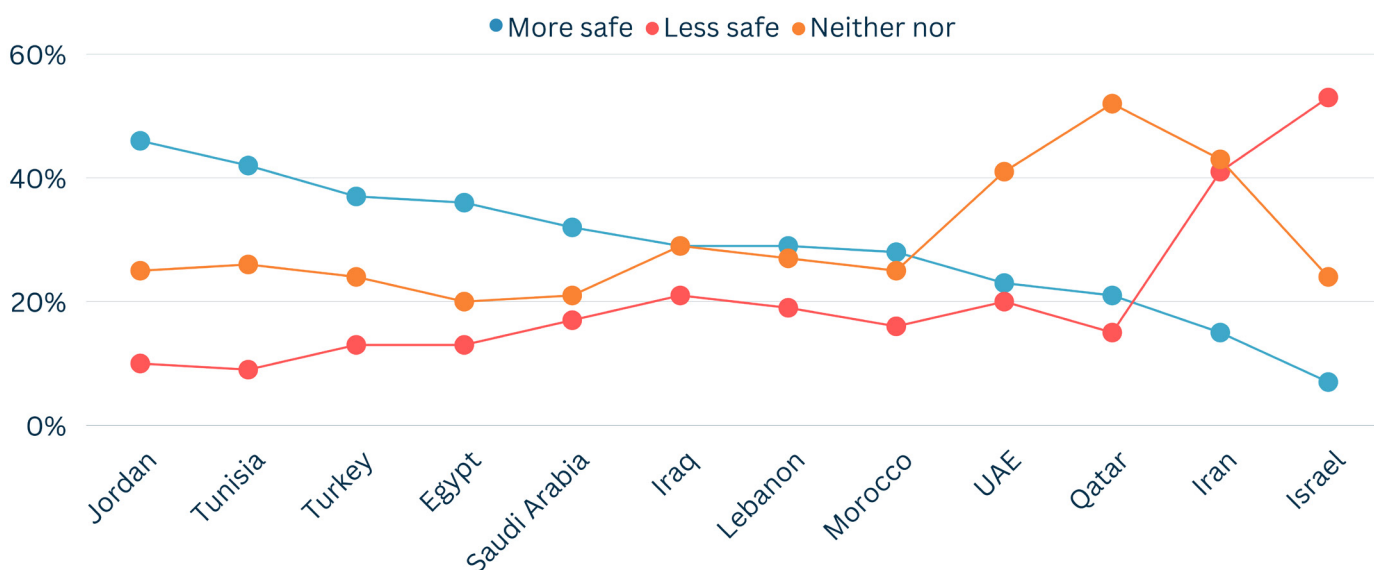
- Support
- Oppose
- Not sure

**The option "Not sure" was not given to participants from these countries.*

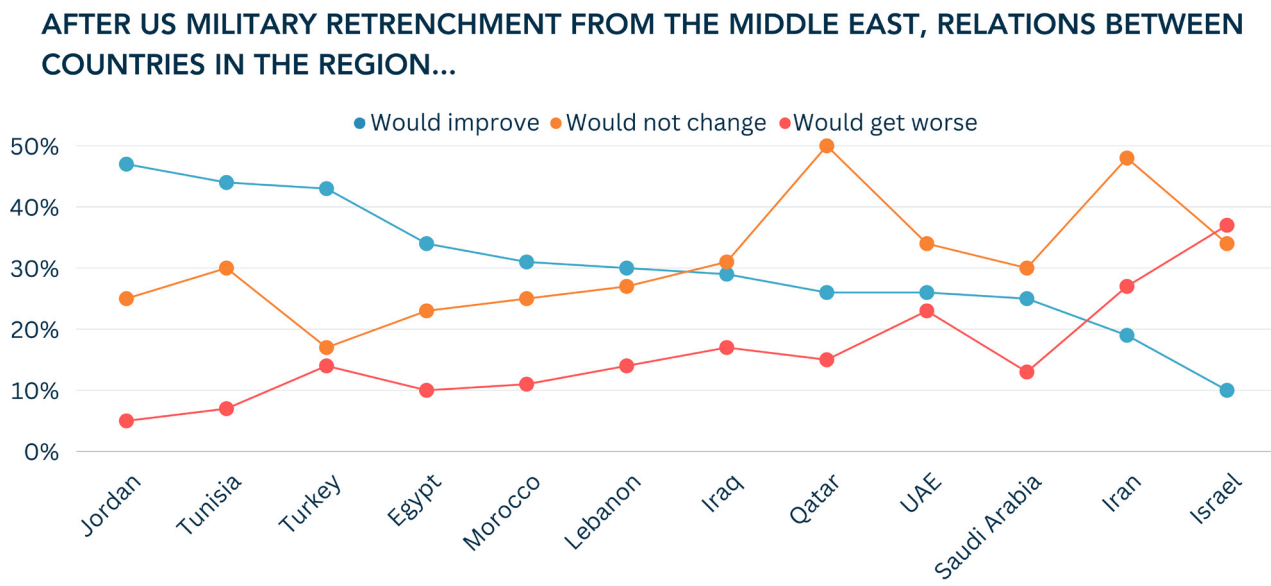


Notable exceptions were Israeli and Iranian respondents, where attitudes were more favorable towards the US. Iran stands out in this regard, with a plurality of respondents (41%) believing a US withdrawal would make the region less safe – in stark contrast to the stated goal of the government in Tehran vis-à-vis its key antagonist.

WOULD US MILITARY RETRENCHMENT MAKE THE REGION MORE OR LESS SAFE?



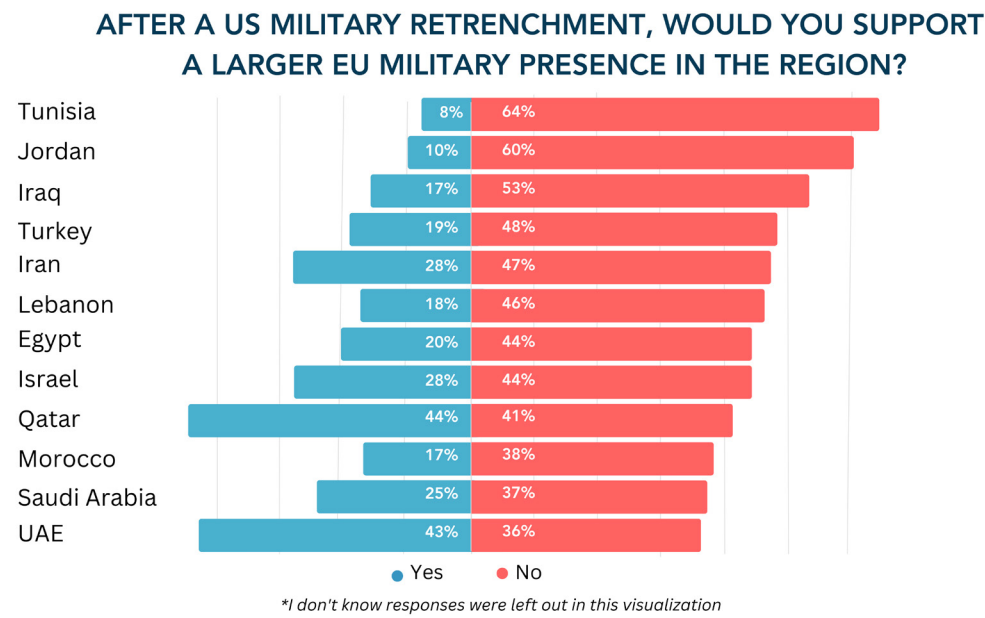
The only NATO country in the region, **Turkey, is of particular interest.** Half of Turkish respondents were very supportive of the idea of a US withdrawal and 37% were optimistic that this would make the region more safe. A plurality of respondents in Turkey alleged that relations between regional actors would improve as a result of a US withdrawal (43%). A similar picture, although less pronounced, prevailed in Saudi Arabia and Egypt.



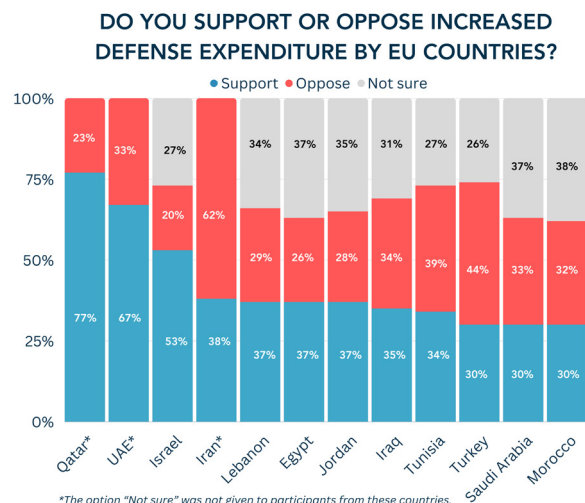
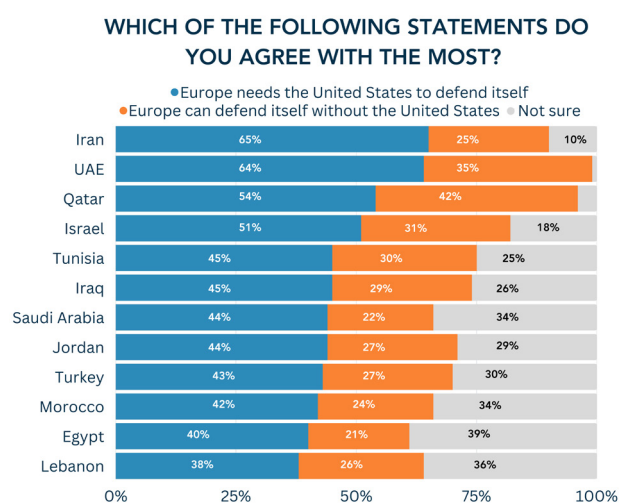
The survey results indicated that the reputation of the US may be suffering a decline, not only in the region in general, but also among the populations of some of its strongest allies (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt). Support for the US remains strongest in Israel and Iran, according to the survey. In Israel this reflects the strong alliance between both countries. Whereas in Iran it runs counter to 44 years of extreme antagonism between the US and Iranian governments.

V. SKEPTICISM TOWARDS LARGER EU ENGAGEMENT IN THE REGION

Survey respondents said they were not in favor of a hegemonic switch from the US to the EU in the MENA region. Instead, many respondents were critical of the idea of external superpowers interfering.



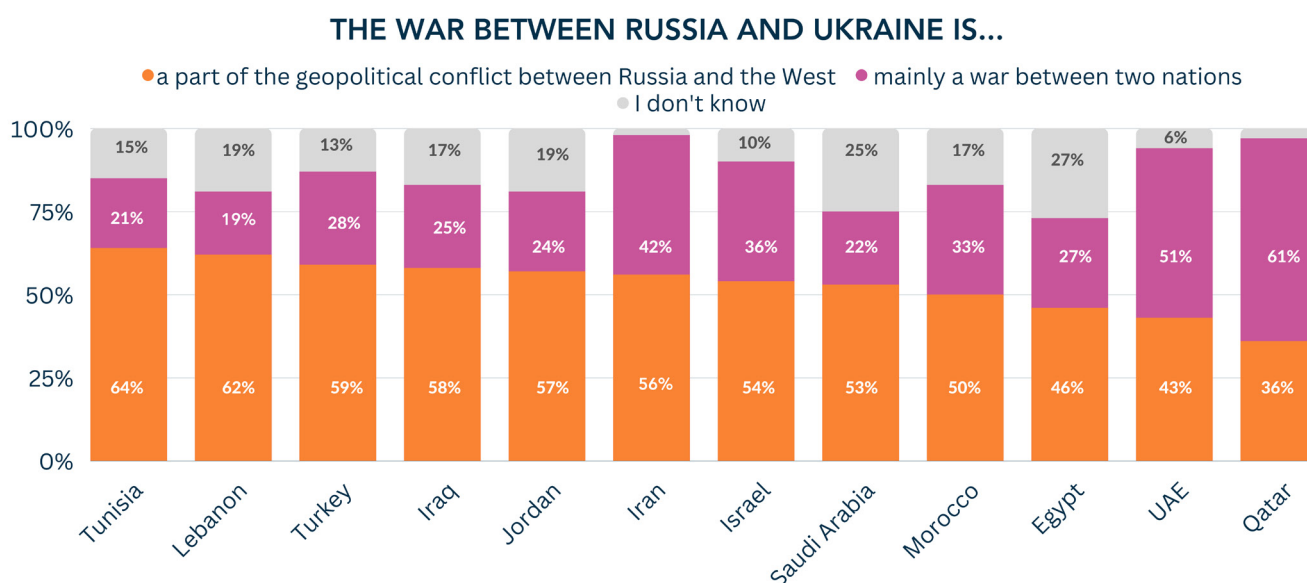
Most respondents, particularly those in Iraq (53%), Jordan (60%) and Tunisia (64%), **opposed the idea of an increased EU military presence** in the event of a US withdrawal from the region. The **EU was seen by many respondents as not capable of assuring its own security**, and largely dependent on US support to defend itself.



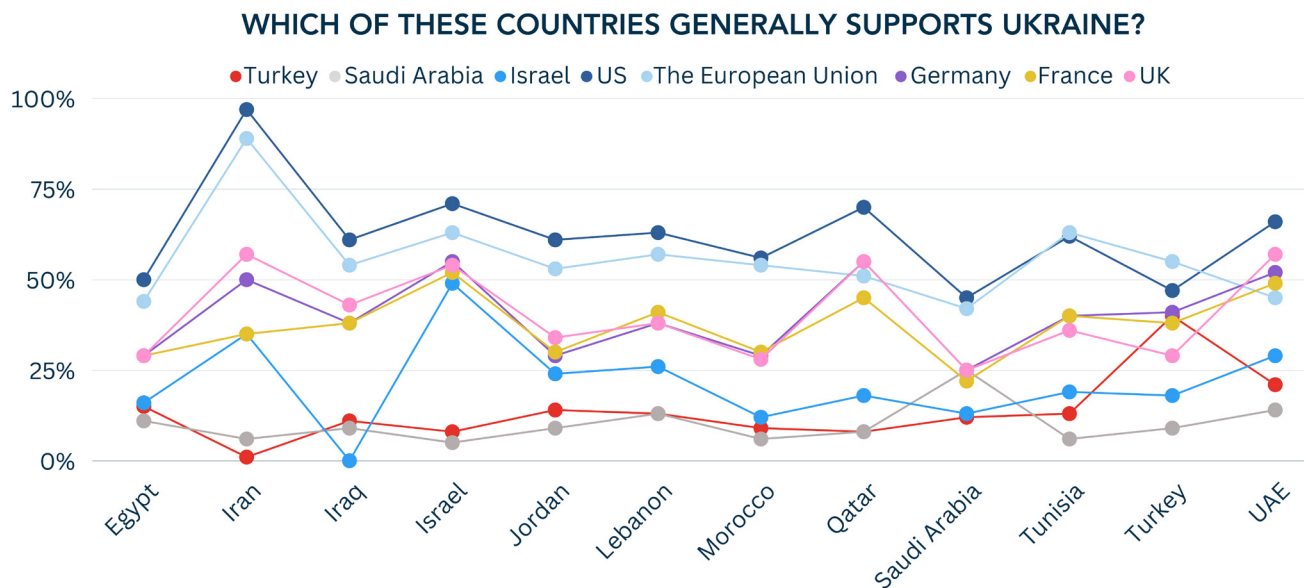
Increases in European defense budgets were supported by most respondents in Qatar (77%), UAE (67%) and Israel (53%). Others opposed this idea, most notably Turkey (44%), Tunisia (39%) and most significantly Iran (62%). Those **in favor of a larger military role by the EU in the region were confined to respondents from the Gulf countries.**

VI. THE GEOPOLITICAL NATURE OF THE WAR, REGIONAL SUPPORT TO RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

Overall, the **Russia-Ukraine War was seen as one of many battlefields in a larger conflict between Russia and the West by survey respondents.** Only Qatar and UAE respondents considered it to be a conflict mostly between two nations fighting for power and territory.

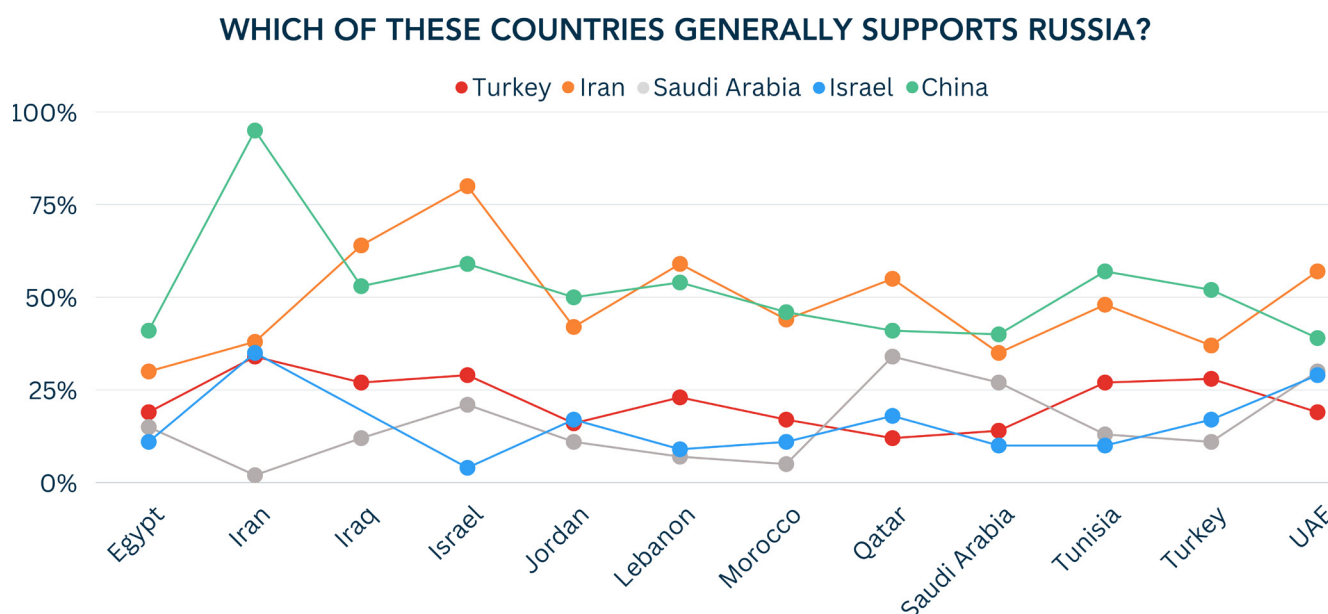


Most respondents named the US and the EU, Germany and France, as Ukraine supporters than any other countries or regions, followed by the UK. **Some countries from the MENA region were also often named as supporting Ukraine**, frequently by their own survey sample, and sometimes in contrast to their government's official policies.



When asked about which countries would generally support Ukraine⁵, 49% of responses in Israel, and 40% of responses in Turkey mentioned for instance that their country supports Ukraine, while the official position of both governments is poised on a tightrope between maintaining cordial relations with both Ukraine and Russia. Saudi respondents—after naming the US and the EU as top Ukraine supporters—were split fairly evenly between their own country, Germany, France and the UK, at 25%.

38% of responses in Iran and 28% of all answers in Turkey named their own country when asked about which countries generally support Russia⁶. This correlated with a majority of respondents across the region who deemed **Russia's major supporters to be Iran, Turkey and China**.



⁵ Multiple answers were possible for this question (multiple choice), thus, resulting overall percentages can exceed 100%.

⁶ *ibid.*

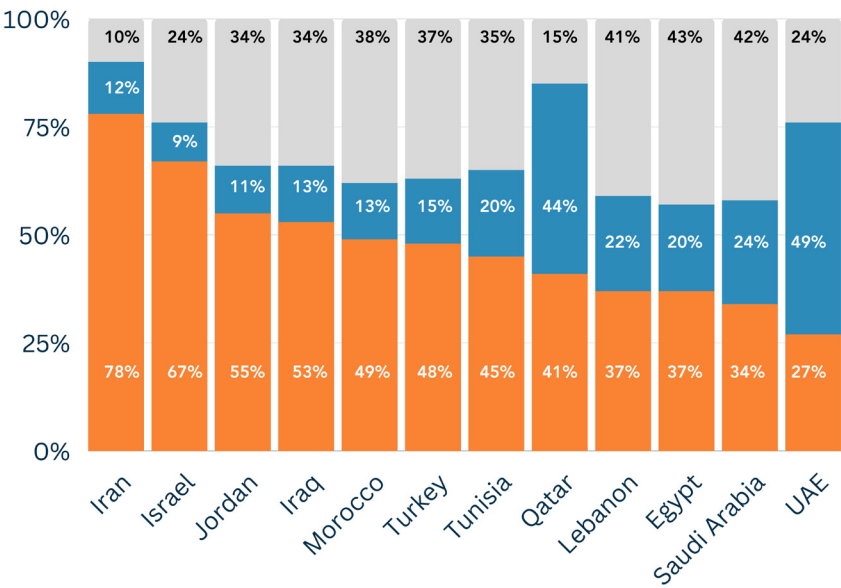
When asked about **which country from the region benefits from the conflict**, pluralities ranging from 24% to 56% across all survey countries were unsure. Among those countries mentioned, **Turkey, Israel** and—cited by 33% of Israeli respondents—**Iran**, figured most prominently. Respondents across the region appeared to be well aware of the ambiguous balancing act that particularly Turkey has assumed towards the Russia-Ukraine War, the only NATO country in the region, yet maintaining ties to both conflict parties and capitalizing on its pivot position at the same time⁷.

VII. GEOPOLITICS AND THE FUTURE IN THE REGION

The idea of a US withdrawal received widespread approval from respondents that was not offset with support for stronger involvement of the EU in the region. Regional perceptions of Russia did not fare much better.

RUSSIA'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST IS GENERALLY...

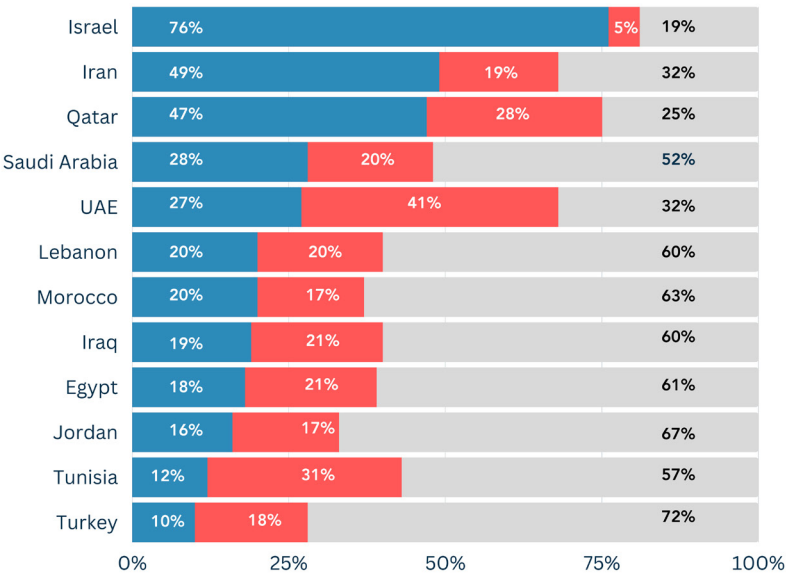
- More harmful to the region
- More beneficial to the region
- Not sure



Russia’s involvement in the Middle East region was broadly seen as more harmful than beneficial, particularly by Iranian (79%) and Israeli (67%) respondents. Pluralities of respondents in the UAE and Qatar saw more benefits for the region from Russia’s involvement than did respondents from other countries. A substantial number of respondents across the region were unsure whether Russia’s regional involvement was negative or positive. In Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, 41% of respondents were unsure, and in Egypt 43%.

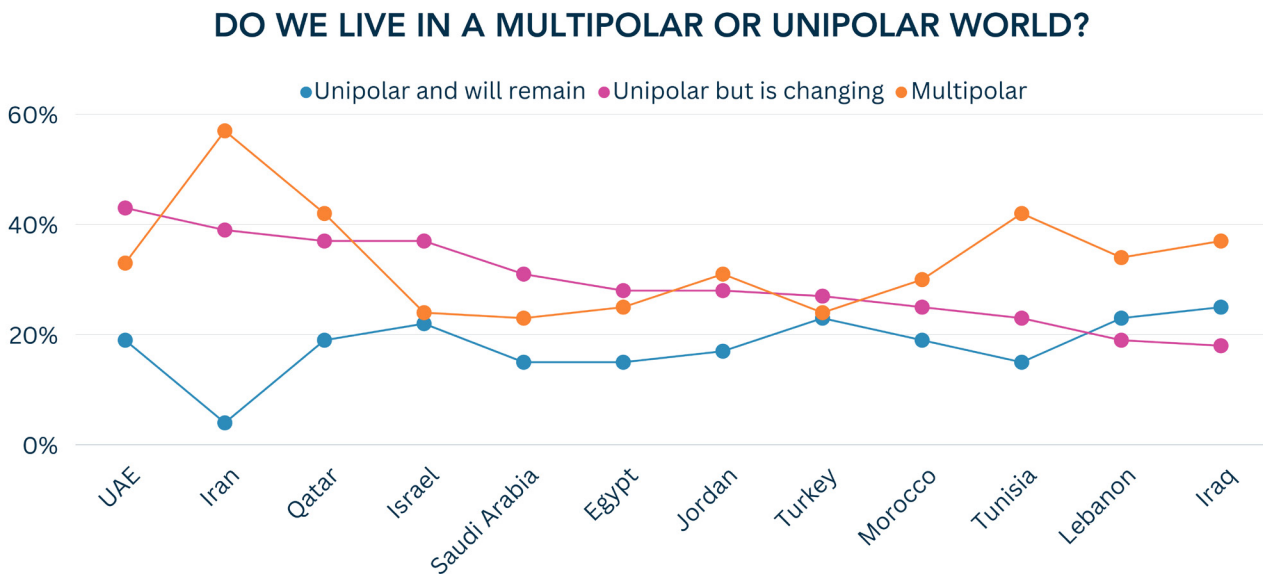
BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE US, WHO DO YOU TRUST MORE IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

- The United States
- Russia
- Not sure

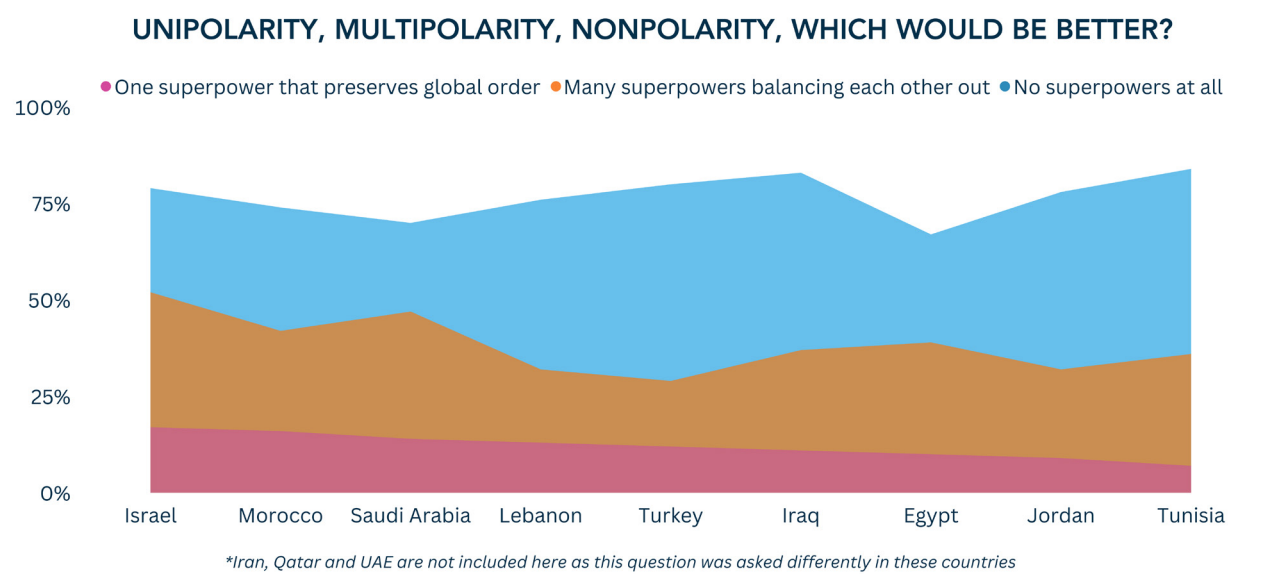


Consistent with approval of a US withdrawal and a critical view of Russia’s involvement, most respondents in **eight of the twelve countries surveyed were “not sure” whether they trusted either Russia or the US more to do the right thing in the region.** Interpretation of what could be subsumed under “not sure” is open – one could suppose that some of these majority respondents considered both superpowers’ involvement as equally detrimental, especially given that in ten out of twelve countries Russia’s actions in the region were perceived as more harmful than beneficial.

Exceptions were pluralities in Iran (49%) and Qatar (47%), as well as a strong majority in Israel (76%), who said they trust the US more to do the right thing than they trust Russia. Again, the Iranian sample is noteworthy, especially considering that Tehran has recently stepped up its military cooperation with Moscow to an unprecedented level. Iran’s population, however, appears among the most Russia-skeptic in the region.



Providing telling insights, these findings align well with views in the region on global power dynamics. While most respondents perceive **one country⁸ in the world to be far more powerful than the others**, they are divided about whether this will remain the same in the future, and would prefer many superpowers balancing each other out, **or no superpowers at all.** A majority of respondents in seven out of twelve countries perceived the world as already multipolar.



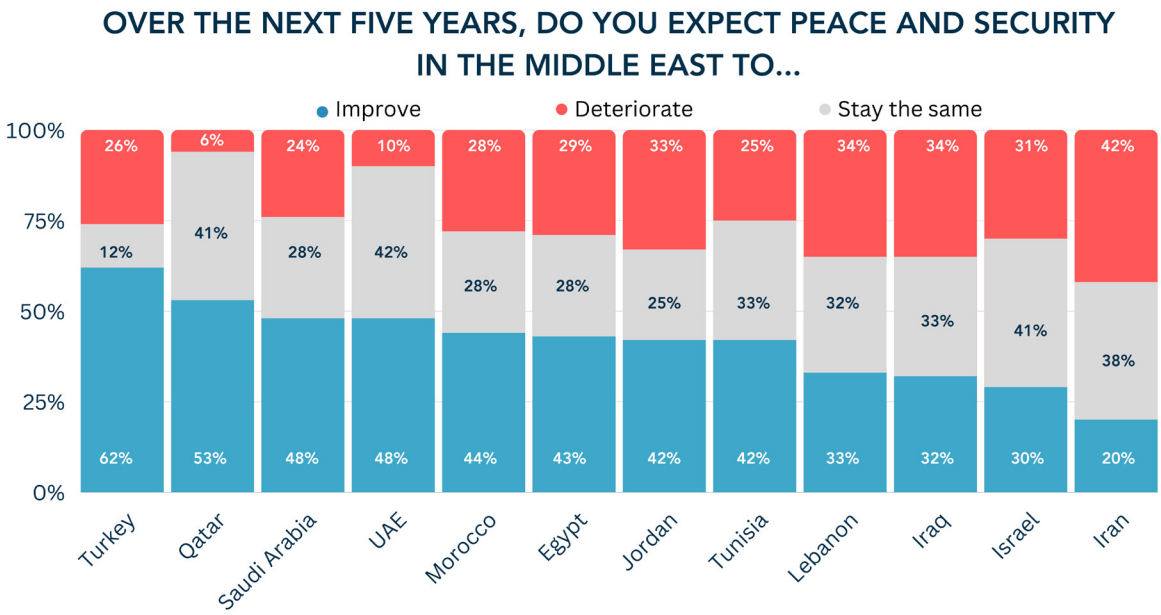
This may point to a certain **superpower fatigue** across the region: the unipolar moment that the US exercised post-Cold War to a great degree in the Middle East, from the Gulf War in 1991, the Oslo Accords in 1994, the wars in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003, to the military intervention in Libya in 2011, were not well received by MENA populations, causing a widespread desire for change.

Whereas relations between superpowers have rapidly deteriorated at a global level, the Russia-Ukraine War being the most recent indicator, the Middle East has recently enjoyed a general détente for the last three years, the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement in 2023 constituting a preliminary highlight.

Correspondingly, **respondents in many countries in the region were optimistic that peace and security in the MENA region will improve or somewhat improve in the next five years.** Turkish respondents were especially optimistic, with 44% thinking that security would improve and 18% that it would somewhat improve.

In contrast, respondents from Lebanon, Iraq and Israel were rather undecided, while those in Iran expected the situation to stay the same (38%), or deteriorate (42%). These views were shared before the recent Saudi-Iranian agreement.

Uncertainty also prevailed among respondents when asked about when they expected the Russia-Ukraine War to end, with the exception of Israel where 44% said they thought it would be over by the end of 2023.



CONCLUSION

Perceptions of the Russia-Ukraine War by respondents in the twelve countries of the MENA region covered by this survey give an ambivalent picture. While most ascribed a central role to Russia, responsibility for, and beneficiaries of, the conflict were attributed to other key actors as well, especially the US.

Similarly, respondents indicated wariness of the **influence of external powers in the MENA region**, whether from Russia, the US or the EU.

The results of this survey indicate a desire to avoid the pitfalls of taking sides as much as possible, notwithstanding **exceptions such as Israel and**, less expected, Iran. In contrast to the diametrically opposed positionalities of their governments, respondents from both countries showed persistent similarity in their views: more in favor of the political West, more skeptical towards Russia. This breaks with what otherwise appears to be widespread **strong align-**

nment of populations and governments in their views on the Russia-Ukraine War, sanctions and geopolitics.

This also seems to hold true for another key finding: the ongoing **alienation from the US** as a major external geopolitical power in the region. While US military retrenchment is welcomed by many in the region, **appetite for a replacement such as Russia or the EU appears low**.

Yet, respondents largely perceived the Russia-Ukraine War as a **reiteration of former Cold War confrontation**. Accordingly, many across the MENA region indicated a preference for no allegiance with either side, favoring a **multipolar international order** instead. Eventually, respondents were generally more **optimistic than pessimistic about prospects for the peace and security of the region in the near future**.

METHODOLOGY

The survey is based on a structured interview questionnaire. In Iran, Qatar and UAE, it was conducted by a leading global market research firm in January 2023, utilizing Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) upholding the highest standards for market research set by the European Society for Opinion and Market Research (ESOMAR) in terms of data security, confidentiality, and participant safety. In all other countries, the survey was conducted as online interviews via the internet in November 2022 by YouGov, an international research data and analytics group headquartered in the UK. More than 500 individuals were interviewed in each country of the survey, except for Iraq (n = 400), Qatar (n = 101) and UAE (n = 100). The margin of error ranged largely between 4.3 and 4.7%, except for Iraq (5.7%). Differences in sample sizes and margins of error are based on factors such as population size and access to respondents, and have been controlled for by the survey research companies and during analysis.

SEX, AGE, LOCATION

The data was disaggregated by sex, age and location in the country. Across surveyed countries, men (and, to a lesser extent, older men) were more likely to report believing the US is at fault for continuing the Russia-Ukraine War than women in each country sampled – with the exception of Israel and Turkey. Across most countries, women were slightly more likely to say they would prefer no superpowers in the world than were men, who were slightly more likely to say they accepted a world with superpowers that balanced each other out. According to data collection companies, the general impression is that anti-US sentiment (measured by faulting different countries for starting and perpetuating the war in Ukraine, for benefiting from the war, and for contributing to instability in the region) is a consistent 5% higher among men.

A number of findings can also be interpreted as being age-specific. Younger respondents with the exception of Israel, Iran and Turkey were slightly more likely than older respondents (male or female) to say Russia is responsible for continuing the war. In each of the countries surveyed, respondents in the oldest age cohort, constituting between five and ten percentage points, were more likely to say they believe the Russia-Ukraine war is directly impacting their country negatively than are respondents in the youngest age cohort. Younger respondents are also slightly more likely to say they believe Russia is benefitting from the war than are older generations, who are more likely to say the US is benefitting the most. Throughout much of the survey, however, the demographic differences by age and gender are not large.

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* This Short Analysis provides an overview of the results of the conducted surveys. For more in-depth analysis, please refer to the longer survey analysis under the title **Multipolarity and the Middle East: Exploring Regional Attitudes towards the Russia-Ukraine War**, June 2023.

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