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What Does the Conflict in the Middle East Mean for Ukraine?

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A car passes by a billboard bearing an Israeli national flag and reading 'We pray for Israel' in Odesa, on October 14, 2023. **Oleksandr Gimanov / AFP**

Ukraine has never shown a close interest in conflicts in the Middle East, but the current flare-up in the Palestinian-Israeli enmity has presented Kyiv with a dilemma. At first, the Ukrainian government reacted to the Hamas terrorist attacks of October 7 the same way as most other countries: by condemning the Palestinian militants and expressing their condolences to the Israelis.

But the subsequent actions of the Israeli army in Gaza have impacted on attitudes to Israel. The United States and most other Western countries still support Israel, while many countries of the so-called Global South have condemned it for its indiscriminate airstrikes against Gaza and insist that it also bears some responsibility for the outbreak of violence.

As a result, Ukraine has found itself between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, it's

important for Kyiv to emphasize its unity with the West and not to fall out with Israel, a valuable potential ally. On the other hand, overly enthusiastic support for the Israelis could damage Ukraine's relations with countries in the Global South, for whose sympathies Kyiv has been actively vying with Moscow.

For most Ukrainians, the Arab world is seen as something distant and foreign, while there are many socio-cultural and business ties between Ukraine and Israel. In addition, Israel is broadly seen as a good example of a state that has successfully repelled attacks from aggressors for decades and at the same time is prosperous and technologically advanced: everything that Ukrainians would like their own country to be.

There was a lot of talk and intensive study of the "Israeli model" in Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, including the organization of its security forces and formation of a strong coalition of allies. The increasingly protracted nature of the hostilities in Ukraine has only increased interest in the Israeli example of how a country can adapt to war while thriving economically.

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Ukrainians also inevitably view the current escalation in the Middle East through the prism of their war with Russia. Israel's retaliatory actions in Gaza are met with understanding in Ukraine, where Israeli society's emotional demand for retribution resonates. For many Ukrainians, who know little of Palestinian grievances, the Hamas terrorist attacks are reminiscent of the crimes committed by Russian troops during the occupation of the Kyiv and Chernihiv regions in February and March 2022.

The war between Israel and Hamas has created both new risks and new opportunities for Ukraine. Given Moscow's pro-Palestinian and pro-Iranian position, Ukraine's support for Israel could help improve relations between the latter two countries. Since last year, the Ukrainian government has been doing everything possible to convince the Israelis to impose sanctions against Russia and provide Kyiv with tanks and air defense systems. But the Israeli government has been reluctant to sever relations with Moscow and declined to go beyond providing humanitarian aid and limited supplies of air raid warning systems.

In June 2023, the Ukrainian ambassador to Israel criticized the country for collaborating with the Kremlin. Now Ukraine has the opportunity to rebuild the relationship. The Ukrainian authorities have already started comparing Hamas to Russia and bringing up Moscow's close cooperation with the organization, promoting the narrative of an "axis of evil" consisting of Iran, Hamas and Russia. It's not clear, however, whether Israel is prepared to provide military assistance to anyone else now that it is waging a large-scale military operation in Gaza that risks escalating into a war on several fronts.

In terms of risks to Ukraine, it's possible that it will now find itself competing with Israel for much-needed U.S. and EU assistance and attention. An equally alarming prospect is a possible split in Europe over the Palestinian-Israeli issue. Pro-Palestinian demonstrations in European capitals are putting pressure on EU governments. The longer the bombing of Gaza goes on and the more civilians killed there, the more toxic unequivocal support for Israel is becoming. Western countries are increasingly calling for the declaration of a humanitarian

pause, the creation of an independent state of Palestine, and for preventing the war from escalating into a full-scale regional conflict involving Iran, Lebanon, and Syria.

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A major war in the Middle East would destabilize the entire region, which would not only distract the United States and its European allies from Ukraine, but also rock the global economy and energy markets. The Kremlin could take advantage of the chaos, believing that the more crises in the world that threaten the security and economy of the West, the easier it will be to persuade it to compromise on Ukraine.

At the same time, the need to choose a side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict threatens to damage relations with those who support the opposing camp. Adopting an overly pro-Israeli position could jeopardize Ukraine's relations with the Global South, for whose sympathies Kyiv has been competing with Russia for many months, investing enormous resources and energy to that end.

It cannot be said that the pro-Palestinian countries of the Middle East and Africa are watching Ukraine's position too closely: it has never been a serious player in the region. But non-Western states could cite support for Israel's actions as a reason for refusing to support Ukraine's negotiating position or join anti-Russian sanctions, or as justification for cooperating with Russia. Support for Israel only reinforces Ukraine's image as a pro-American country.

Ukraine is reluctant to risk its hard-earned ties with the Global South, but it certainly cannot afford to lose irreplaceable Western assistance, leaving Kyiv with very little room for maneuver. The safest option for now appears to be to follow in the slipstream of Western politics.

For the foreseeable future, therefore, Ukraine will most likely try to ensure that it is included in the same Western aid program as Israel, especially since the Biden administration has already proposed combining support for the two countries into one package, to the ire of Republicans. Such a package looks like the best outcome for Kyiv, since it would guarantee funding for Ukraine's military needs in the strategic perspective and protect it from internal political squabbles between different U.S. administrations.

In these circumstances, burnishing the country's image in Arab nations may not be a priority for Kyiv, though it will try not to get involved in disputes over the future of the Middle East and will say as little as possible on the Israeli-Palestinian issue to avoid provoking a negative reaction in the countries of the Global South.

Ukraine's pro-Israel stance is unlikely to develop into a more practical alliance between the two countries. Israel will be preoccupied with very different external and internal problems for the foreseeable future. Kyiv can only hope that the fighting in the Gaza Strip does not develop into a distraction for the West or increase the risk of the war with Russia becoming a frozen conflict: a prospect for which the Ukrainian leadership is not prepared.

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