

# Connected by fate: West Asian Grassroots Solidarity with Ukraine and the intricacies of Russian imperialism in the region

Friday 29 September 2023, by [STARODUBTSEV Vladyslav](#) (Date first published: 19 September 2023).

*This article is based on the materials of the West Asian left activists' conference, which was organized by the Global and the European network in solidarity with Ukraine (ENSU). The activists were representing various grassroots initiatives, organizations, and parties. They were sharing the experience of Russian imperialism in their respective regions, their government's politics, as well as how to develop solidarity under conditions of dictatorship and war.*

*The speeches of [Frieda Afary](#), Fatemeh Masjedi, Sedat Durel, Jacob Ben Euftrat, and a Syrian activist who was introduced as Wael were used in this article.*

The conference participants focused on discussing Russian imperialism in particular, yet emphasized that it's far from the sole actor in the region.

**The most common narrative in all the reports was about the interconnections of Russian imperialism and authoritarian powers in West Asian countries. Russia is the main ally of autocrats, and its success proves to be the existential threat to all left activists especially for those who operate under conditions of dictatorship. That is why the defeat of Russian imperialism gives a high hope for democratic development in the region.**

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Even before Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, all of us were perfectly aware of what Russian imperialism is capable of: brutal invasion of Ichkeria, 'fighting with terrorism', and infamous occupation of Georgian territories. Yet Kremlin imperialistic ambitions were far from being satisfied so its logic proceeded to magnify Russian crimes and influence further into West Asian countries.

Russia's appearance in the region as a 'main player' was caused by the Kremlin's desire to regain its world superpower status. Rich in natural resources politically unstable region became a valuable platform for Russian imperialism to pursue its ambitions.

One of the main Russian partners in the region is the infamous Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, who managed to persevere his regime by conducting mass killings and other military crimes against his nation. In 2015, the Russian army started its intervention in Syria with massive bombing, destroying residential infrastructure, schools, and hospitals with its men and weapons. In return, Syria provides Russians with the opportunity to use its territory as the primary base for its actions in the region (for example, [by transiting natural resources from various African countries](#)).

Russian imperialistic regime was actively searching for ways to build up its dominance in West Asia.

It became most active after American imperialistic intervention into Iraq which translated into hundreds of thousands of deaths on Iraqis side, as well as the US losing its status of geopolitical hegemony. Russia found its main allies in authoritarian regimes in the region like nationalistic Syria and theocratic Iran. Iranian dictatorship is conducting its own nuclear research program and actively tries to suppress internal revolution with Russian help. At the same time other anti-democratic regimes like Egypt governed by corrupted military autocrats, have options to rely on support from both Russia and the US.

Similarly to Russia and Iran, such countries as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel are also prone to militaristic actions, which cause constant suffering to all people in the region. The Kremlin tries to expand its influence in West Asia by establishing cooperation with local powers and redistributing their spheres of influence in the region. This strategy has manifested itself, for example, in Russian-Turkish intrusion into the war in Libya. West Asia became Russia's first step in fulfilling its ambitions of establishing itself as not 'regional' but the world superpower. With Russia's intervention in Ukraine, the fates of West Asian residents and Ukrainian society have become inseparable.

### **Connected by Fate: Russia's war against Ukraine and Syria**

In 2011 [Syria](#) as well as many other countries of the 'Arab Spring' was swept by revolution in which democratically oriented political forces rose against the hereditary dictatorship of Bashar Al-Assad. In North Africa, national strikes have managed to overthrow pro-western dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia, yet Al-Assad remained in power thanks to Russia (and Iran), who supported Syria's authoritarian regime during the revolution. A few years later, in 2015, Russia conducted a military intervention in Syria on behalf of Bashar Al-Assad.

[It was in Syria where Russia was 'testing' its new tactics and strategies, which it would finally implement in Ukraine later in 2022.](#) The Syrian nation became a 'test subject' for the Russian military machine. Syrian activist Wael, who preferred to remain anonymous says: *"They were killing our children the same way they're killing yours now"* He mentions that Western countries' predisposition to compromises gave a carte blanche to the Russian regime which otherwise could have been stopped years ago: *"They [the West] had and have all the necessary abilities to stop this war as well as what has happened to Syria. They allowed Russia to invade Syria. They allowed Russia to attack the revolution. We empathize with the Ukrainian people. Our children were killed the same way as Ukrainians are being killed now. We need justice everywhere in our world, we all have the same enemy"*.

Putin is exposing Ukraine's civilian infrastructure to massive bombing because he was allowed to do it in Syria and remain unpunished, [writes](#) analyst Zaher Sahloul. He claims that the lack of any reaction to Russian military crimes in Syria has strengthened its confidence that it can also get away with the mass murder of Ukrainians.

["Our fates are connected,"](#) Syrians say. While attacking Ukrainians Russian Army also continues its war against the Syrian people. On June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023, not long before the infamous shelling of a cafe in Kramators'k, Russians conducted yet another airstrike on civil infrastructure in Syria killing at least [9 people](#) as a result of bombing Jisr ash-Shughur market (according to various reports every one of these attacks took 13 lives each). *"Syrian military in cooperation with friendly Russian forces delivered a number of precise and successful air and rocket strikes on fortified headquarters of the terrorist organizations in the Idlib region"* hypocritically claimed the Syrian government a few days after its next terrorist act in the same fashion as Russians report on their atrocities on Ukrainian civilians almost every day calling it strikes on 'military objects'. For Russia Syrian regime serves as an operational center for their military activities and [extractivism](#) in West Asia and Africa. That's why the very necessary defeat of Russian imperialism in Ukraine would mean a huge win for the

Syrian people as it would significantly weaken Assad's regime.

## **The two autocratic trajectories: Iran and Russia in a fight against the West and democracy**

Iran is one of Russia's main allies. The history behind the collaboration of Khamenei's authoritarian-fundamentalist regime with Putin is long and eventful. Since the 2000s, Russia has supplied Iran with weapons, particularly rockets, air defense, and jets. The country is a strategic partner in Iran's nuclear development program. Both are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as well as the Gas Exporters Countries Forum (GECF).

The long-term ambitions of both Russia and Iran have also coincided in Syria. Both countries support Assad's regime, and both have their own agendas for expanding their influence in the region. Upcoming Western sanctions have only tightened their relationships. In fact, Iran and Russia have become the only possible trading partners for each other.

From the very start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine Iran continuously supplied Russia with military drones which are now targeting and striking Ukrainians. It's also become known that [Iran is building its drone manufacturing facilities in Moscow](#). On the one hand military cooperation between the two states helps Russia to wage its occupying war against Ukraine and on the other, it gives Iran more tools and opportunities to oppress its own popular resistance against the regime.

In September of 2022 yet another [series of mass protests](#) against the country's dictatorship occurred in Iran. This time the fact that 22-year-old Mahsa Amini was tortured to death by morality police served as a main trigger for social explosion. The official reason for torturing Amini claimed to be "the inappropriate way of wearing a hijab". The victim's death was followed by mass protests against the anti-human behavior of the authorities. During the most eventful weeks of what could've eventually grown into a full-scale Iranian democratic revolution, the Iranian government was receiving substantial financial support from Russia to repress the protests. By rough estimates, almost half of a thousand Iranian people have perished due to governmental repressions.

Russia helps the Iranian regime to wage a war against its own people and in return, they help Russians kill Ukrainians. Ukrainian and Iranian women have naturally become allies. [Frieda Afary](#) and Fatima Masjedi are Iranian feminist activists who as of now reside in the US and Europe respectfully yet remain active participants in organizing and supporting the fight for women's rights in Iran. They're making a chronology of solidarity between Iranian and Ukrainian people from the very start of the full-scale invasion.

During the first days of the full-scale war in February 2022 Iranian feminist human rights activist, lawyer, and Sakharov Prize winner [Nasrin Sotoudeh](#) wrote a [letter of solidarity](#) with Ukrainian people from her cell in Iranian prison.

"In the last few days the world has witnessed Russian military aggression against Ukraine, the country which declared its independence almost 30 years ago according to all rules of the international law. Ukrainians met the aggression with a powerful resistance. They are people who will not allow themselves to be quietly squished by the aggressor's boots. And this is the call to the world to help them. As a woman who lives in a country which for the last 8 years participates in war, I found myself able to imagine the horrors of war and blatant violence against defenseless people. I express my horror in the wake of such mindless aggression. This war is a fight between democracy and dictatorship but fortunately Ukrainian people are not alone in this fight. The world rushed to help Ukraine".

In turn, [Ukrainian feminists also declared their solidarity with Iranian women](#) and their protests under slogans 'Woman, life, freedom' and 'Death to the dictator'.

From the very start of the full-scale invasion, Iranian activists actively participated in Ukrainian solidarity marches and together organized protests. Similar events were also organized [by the Iranian community in Ukraine](#). They stood against the collaboration of the Iranian regime and Russian imperialism: "The ruling regime in the country where we were born sends (military) drones to kill our friends. It is very painful and we must express our disagreement with this" Protest of the significant scale jointly organized by Ukrainian and Iranian diasporas regularly take place in Canada, the US, and Europe.

At the same time, Frieda Afary expressed her concern that there were monarchists (supporters of Reza Pahlavi a son of a sheikh who was overthrown by the 1979 revolution) and members of People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran spotted at the events of Iranian solidarity with Ukraine in the US. The aforementioned organization Mojahedin-e Halk was established earlier and combines some features of Marxism-Leninism, nationalism, and Islamic socialism, and according to Frieda Afary is a militaristic cult. Both groups tried to cooperate with democratic and progressive oppositions, but those types of coalitions didn't last long due to the chiefistic nature of those groups. Afary also thinks that cooperation with those organizations can be unhealthy.

Unfortunately, the radical left is too divided: campist [1], abstract-pacifist, and de-facto pro-Russian views have a strong influence among them. For example, in May of 2022, a website of the Iranian left 'Critical Political Economy', [organized](#) an online debate by the name 'Ukrainian crisis in the shadow of the Cold War'. Speakers' thoughts were distinctively varying. Some claimed that this [Russia's war in Ukraine] is a 'proxy war', some even said that Russia can't be called an imperialistic country. Yet at the same time, Kurdish scientist Karman Matin firmly protected Ukraine's fight for self-identification and challenged the left campists, who do not recognize this war as an act of Russian imperialism.

But according to Frieda practically all Iranian people and progressive politicians strongly support Ukrainians and hate the Russian regime which supports Iranian authorities in murdering its people. Today under the circumstances of Russia's war against Ukraine and the revolution in Iran, Ukrainians and Iranians find mutual understanding and solidarity in a common fight. Despite the statement of feminist, human rights, and worker's organizations in March 2023 which according to Frieda must be one of the most radical ones in the history of Iranian grassroots initiatives doesn't mention Ukraine and Syria directly it closes with the call to "normalize relationships with all the countries based on justice, mutual respect, non-proliferation of nuclear weapon and desire for peace all over the world".

### **Turkish 'realpolitik' and grassroots activism**

Turkey has sent a certain amount of drones trying to demonstrate its support for the Ukrainian people but there wasn't a whole lot more in this gesture than pure hypocrisy. Erdogan's government is not only very similar to Putin's in its methods of gaining and withholding power but both countries are also close partners. Economic relationships between Turkey and Russia haven't long been as fruitful as they are today. Sedat Durel a member of the Worker's Democracy Party which positions itself as Trotskyist says that that Ankara helps Russian companies to use Turkey in order to bypass Western sanctions. From the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Sedat took a major part in organizing humanitarian aid convoys for Ukrainian trade unions and victims of war. He cautions from falling into the charm of Turkey's nondemocratic government because they are no friends of Ukraine. It shares too many similarities with Putin and uses the war to get the most from collaboration with both Russia and the West.

Most of the radical left in Turkey have also fallen into campism, but this is unfortunately nothing new. Most of them didn't express any support for the Syrian people in their fight against Assad's regime whatsoever, and their optics on Ukraine is not any different. Some of the left have refrained from taking the same approach, but still in their majority stick to campist 'blaming both sides'. One of the most influential left forces in Turkey pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) while recognizing Russia's actions as unacceptable [still argues](#) that Russian aggression isn't just about satisfying its imperialistic ambitions but 'a part of a wider and larger war between Russia and NATO's expansionism. It's a far larger battle for influence which uses Ukraine as a battlefield'. On itself such a statement isn't much more than a recreation of a well-known conspiracy [\[2\]](#) about 'NATO's aggressive expansion to East' and that it directly 'threatens' Russia. Sadly, similar optics are very prevalent amongst the left in Turkey particularly in HDP's partners from the Turkey Worker's Party (TIP) even though their leader is very open about his hate of Putin.

In these circumstances, says Durel, solidarity with Ukraine remains crucial. His party actively participates in organizing convoys of worker's solidarity with Ukraine. Together with their comrades from Argentina and Spain, they've visited Kyiv, Zaporizhzhia, Kryvyi Rih, and a part of the Donbas region which remains under Ukrainian control. They're now planning to visit other places to provide any humanitarian aid necessary. They communicate with Ukrainian independent trade unions to always be in the know of what Ukrainians need so the activists can collect aid from other countries and online. Durel closed his speech with a call to collect money and help Ukrainian workers and Ukraine as a whole.

### **Russo-Israeli relationships, colonialism, and the rise of authoritarianism**

The end of the Cold War substantially changed Russian politics in West Asia. While the USSR actively acted as an Arab countries' patron in the regional conflict, a new form of Russian statehood started to improve its relationship with Israel, particularly through Russophone Israeli diaspora. Yet actually consistent and solid cooperation between the two countries began [only after a particular politician](#) who claimed to be pro-Israeli came to power. It was Putin. Meanwhile, Putin's rise to power coincided with the intensification of right-winged more 'pro-Russian' political movements in Israel. Benjamin Netanyahu found great success with voters from the former USSR in his first term as prime minister during the 1990s. In the 2000s Ariel Sharon was also looking for opportunities for strengthening the relationships between Moscow and Tel-Aviv.

Despite the radical differences in their official propaganda (while Russia's doubling down on its rhetoric of fight against the 'Western World' (which more often than not goes toe to toe with antisemitism), Israel positions itself as an outpost of the aforementioned 'Western World' in the region) pragmatism of Russian-Israeli relationships dominated over their fundamental ideological differences. Israel didn't condemn Russia's occupation of Crimea while in 2014 during the 'Operation Protective Edge' (Operation Strong Cliff) Putin officially [declared](#) his support of Israel's right to 'protect its people'. Already in 2015, it became known via various media outlets that Israel supplied Russia with military drones that were used to kill [Syrians](#) and [Ukrainians](#). With the authoritarian turn in Netanyahu's politics relationships between Russia and Israel can potentially reach some new heights. But at least for now, there are certain circumstances that serve as a restraining factor one of the main of which must be the alliance between Israel and the US.

Jacob Ben Eufat one of the co-heads of the Jewish-Arab Da'am Workers Party in his speech tells about the context of Israel and the World. [The party condemns Israel's acts of war](#) and its illegal settlements on the Palestinian territory as well as the violation of human rights against the Arab population. They also share positions of feminism and eco-socialism. Before 2016 they supported the concept of the 'two countries' [\[3\]](#) but later abandoned the idea. During the latest elections, they've used the slogan 'One state equals green economy' to make their new political optics clearer. Da'am

lacks any representation in the elected bodies of government regularly receiving no more than a few thousand votes in the elections, none the less it takes an active part in organizing events dedicated to the expression of solidarity with Ukraine and Syria.

“Our history with Ukraine started with Syria,” says Jacob “We saw the slaughter initiated by the Syrian regime with the support from Russia and Iran” Da’am organized protests during the Russian representative’s official visit to Israel and picketed the Russian embassy. The party while small is one of the very few political forces in the country who went the extra mile to publicly oppose Russian acts of aggression while others remained silent at best. The Israeli government maintained neutrality using the following logic: “We don’t care about human rights, all sides [of the war in Syria] are equally bad for us” “We couldn’t believe that the world just watched doing nothing [regarding the mass killing in Syria]. We were following these events day by day, hour after hour. We’ve found ourselves amidst the tears and despair” “When will the world pay for its silence on Syria?!” asks the speaker.

This inaction and indifference of the global community made it much easier for Putin’s regime to further undermine democracy by sponsoring right-wing nationalists, conservatives, and other authoritarian movements around the world. Russian support of Trump became a factor that for the first time in recent history both directly (by interfering in elections) and indirectly (ideologically) jeopardized the functioning of American democracy.

It’s not surprising then that Netanyahu became one of the most notorious supporters of both Putin and Trump. In fact, the latter was also one of the first to recognize the annexation of Golan Heights as well as making Jerusalem the capital of Israel. *“On the streets, there were huge billboards depicting Netanyahu with Putin, and then Netanyahu with Trump. The idea was to depict Netanyahu as the chief diplomat with whom the whole world reckons. And Putin in his turn supports Israel’s colonial resettlement as well as the idea of depriving Palestinians of all of their rights.”* Cooperation between the Russian and Israeli government was always substantial and Putin as the ‘pro-Israeli candidate’ consistently supported the most authoritarian acts of Israel. Similarly to Russia Israeli government recognizes democracy as a threat not only because it is strongly disliked by the country’s regional allies (autocracies like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and UAE) but also because Netanyahu’s ultra-right administration copies ideologically related regimes of Hungary and Turkey.

According to Ben Euftrat, today the fate of the whole world depends on supporting Ukrainian resistance.

“When we’re talking about Ukraine we are talking about Ukrainian people, America, Europe, Africa, Israel, the entire West Asia, and the whole world. Ukraine today is what Spain was during the Civil War. Let’s hope that the fascism won’t win this time. We support Ukraine because we support democracy. Because if Putin wins the rest of the world will lose. Russia’s failure instead may open a new democratic opportunity for Syria, Egypt, Maghreb countries, Israelis and Palestinians.”

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All speakers at the ENSU conference emphasized the importance of international solidarity and support for movements against imperialism, occupation, and authoritarianism. They tend to see the war in Ukraine as a consequence of the world’s indifference to mass killings of Syrians as well as the constant development of Russia’s imperialistic ambitions which the people of Syria experienced firsthand when Russians were given a cart-blanc of non-selective bombing and killing of civilians. Their fate also depends on the success of Ukrainian resistance and our success is directly related to



their will to further support us. That's why solidarity which in itself is a universal value and doesn't require further substantiation becomes a necessity for human survival, peace, anti-colonial and democratic development.

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**Vladyslav Starodubtsev**

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<https://commons.com.ua/en/nizova-solidarnist-z-ukrayinoyu-na-blizkomu-shodi/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] Is a position in the left discourse that depends on the vision of a certain geopolitical camp but not universal values.

[2] A debunking of this false theory can be found in Carl Mirra's article 'Not One Inch Unless It Is from Lisbon to Vladivostok. NATO-Russia Mythmaking and a Reimagined Kyivan Rus'.

[3] The concept of two states is a compromise between two projects of self-determination existing in the Palestinian territory. The compromise is that two independent states coexist within the borders defined by the UN in 1947. Today this concept defines the core optics of the Palestine Liberation Organization. It should be noted that there are also other concepts like, for example, the National State of Palestine; The United State of Jewish and Arab People; or the State of Israel in its current form. Yet more often than not such concepts remain problematic in their practicality or compliance with democratic standards.