

*Position Paper*

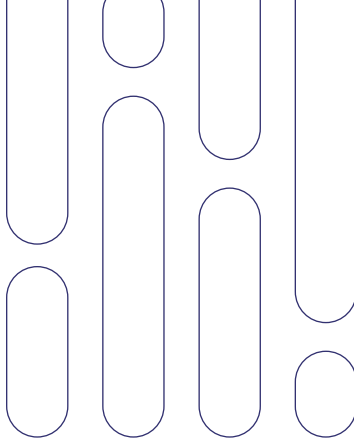
# Mobilizing Foreign Fighters in the Russian- Ukrainian Dispute: Justifications and Ramifications

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Members of Ukraine's Territorial Defense Forces, volunteer military units of the Armed Forces, train close Kyiv, Ukraine, February 5, 2022.  
Photo: Efrim Lukatsky/AP.



While the Russian-Ukrainian crisis has been experiencing many political, security and economic complexities since it broke out, a new complexity in the past days has emerged. The Ukrainian authorities announced receiving a large number of foreigners wanting to fight against the Russians. On the other side, Moscow announced receiving fighters of non-Russian nationality to fight alongside its forces in Ukraine. At this point, it seems that the practice of recruiting foreign fighters during the ongoing crisis is reminiscent of past experiences that involved recruiting and arming foreign fighters in different arenas of dispute among the major world powers — and the incendiary outfits it spawned such as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS/Daesh) and its manifold ramifications for national security worldwide.

The two countries involved in the ongoing crisis opening the floodgates for foreign fighters to engage in the war is considered a dangerous turn with multiple ramifications. This development necessitates looking into the nature and characteristics of this phenomenon as well as the dimensions of engaging outside elements in the ongoing war in Ukraine and the repercussions of foreign fighter involvement on the regional and international landscapes.

## Recruiting Foreign Fighters in the Russian-Ukrainian Dispute: Characteristics and Motives

The recruitment of foreign fighters and the formation of paramilitary groups to fight in the arena of dispute in Ukraine is nothing new. Since 2015, the Donbas region has witnessed the emergence of armed groups that entrenched their military and political clout. They embraced radical ideological tenets to create a full-fledged militant atmosphere. These militias have entrenched their presence along the frontlines between Russia and Ukraine. This phenomenon of foreign fighter recruitment entered a completely new stage after the start of the Russian military operation in Ukraine last February through the recruitment of militias and foreign fighters by both parties to the dispute raging on Ukrainian soil. For its part, Ukraine announced that 16,000 to 20,000 fighters from 20 countries had volunteered to partake in its current dispute with Russia on its own soil. On the other side, Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed to allow foreign fighters to join the conflict. The Russian Defense Ministry said that 16,000 volunteers from the Middle East were ready to join the Russian forces.

### Characteristics of the Phenomenon of Recruiting Foreign Fighters in the Ongoing Crisis

In light of the information available regarding foreign fighters in Ukraine, it can be said that there is a host of traits and characteristics unique to this phenomenon. These can be identified as follows:

- **The large numbers:** It is still too early to estimate the actual number of foreign fighters who are engaged in the current international crisis. But this does not negate the fact that the number is large — in light of the official remarks made by the parties to the crisis. Ukraine has announced that 20,000 fighters had arrived to join its forces. Meanwhile, the Russian Defense Ministry announced that 16,000 volunteers were prepared to fight in Ukraine alongside Russian forces. Overall, it can be said that such figures are likely to increase as the crisis drags on. Hence, this phenomenon points to a number of significant challenges facing both sides as well as the potential ramifications for regional and international security.

- **The geographical and ideological diversity:** Several reports indicate that Russia and Ukraine have recruited foreign fighters from various regions. Some fighters have come from Eastern and Western Europe while others volunteered from the United States, the UK, Mexico, and other countries. Some fighters also came from the Middle East and Africa, which further complicated the phenomenon, rendering its aspects multiple, its dimensions intertwined and its future ambiguous after the ongoing crisis ends.
- **Mutual employment:** Both parties to the crisis have sought to recruit foreign fighters. The Ukrainian president has called for the formation of the “International Legion of Territorial Defense of Ukraine” while the Russian president announced his intent on sending fighters from the Middle East to Ukraine. This confirms the fact that the battlefield in Ukraine is witnessing the mutual employment of foreign militias by both parties to the crisis as part of the developing proxy war in the country. In other words, there is a decline in the dependence on national forces, with a preference toward the engagement of armed militias. This preference entails future dangers and challenges that will not be confined to the boundaries of Europe. They are likely to spill over into Arab countries.
- **Several European countries declare support for the recruitment process:** Some European countries have encouraged their citizens to partake in the war in Ukraine, primarily Denmark. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced that her country would allow volunteers to join the international force formed by the Ukrainian government. The government of Latvia followed suit. The country’s Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs announced that his country approved legislation that would allow volunteers to join the fighting in Ukraine. Some countries, meanwhile, warned their citizens of engagement in the fighting in Ukraine. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison called on Australian citizens not to travel to Ukraine to partake in the war. As for the UK position, the issue is a bone of contention within the government. While British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss announced support for Kiev’s calls on those desiring to partake in the fighting in the ranks of its forces, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned that British citizens traveling to Ukraine would

stand trial when they returned home. He also called on civilians to avoid traveling to Ukraine to participate in the fighting.

▪ **Divergent motives:** The foreign fighters participating in the conflict in Ukraine are motivated by a wide range of factors. Several foreign fighters decided to join the fighting because of European nationalist sentiments to defend the sovereignty of the Ukrainian state's borders. Others were fueled by historical motives such as their animosity to Russian intervention and their desire to represent Western forces and defend their principles in the ongoing fighting. The volunteers are also drawn from countries that were previously under the auspices of the Soviet Union — as well as fighters coming from European countries and the United States. Economic motives also played a role for some actors or fighters. These were apparent in the participation of the Russian paramilitary organization the Wagner Group on the side of Russia in its dispute with Ukraine. This is in addition to the participation of fighters from countries facing political and economic crises due to internal disputes and competition among international actors.

### **Dimensions of Employment**

This landscape is inexorably complicated and intertwined in light of the parties to the crisis seeking to recruit foreign fighters and attempting to confer legitimacy on their operations. This foreign recruitment raises a host of questions about the real dimensions of the employment for both sides as well as for the rest of the Western powers. These dimensions and the questions surrounding them will be explored as follows:

▪ **Mutual attrition and pressure:** The regular forces of the two countries have faced difficulties on the battlefield, and they are attempting to reduce the casualty rate as much as possible. Yet, Moscow and Kiev are seeking to benefit from the lever of foreign fighters for the sake of attrition and exerting additional pressures making the war costlier and increasing its risks. On the one hand, the Ukrainian government is well aware that it will not be able to repel the Russian attack via conventional methods — especially as some NATO member countries have refused to send their military forces.

This prompted Ukraine to counter Russian advances through using attrition — hybrid tactics as well as other unconventional tactics — against Russian forces. These tactics aim in the long run to exhaust Russia militarily and economically.

For its part, Russia is seeking to demonstrate its ability to threaten global security, particularly European security in case its demands go unheeded. Russia has hinted at bringing in fighters from the Middle East to fight in Europe and this has raised concerns among several European countries regarding the impact of this recruitment on the continent's security and political dynamics.

By contrast, the Western powers are betting on this lever of foreign fighters to exhaust the Russian army through a long war of attrition — copying the Afghan experience — through creating threats and raising Russia's geopolitical fears over foreign fighters joining the war. This will secure a major strategic advantage for the United States through excluding Russia from the global competition arena and allowing it to devote its full resources to the other and more powerful pole: China.

▪ **Preparing for the decisive stages:** Several weeks have passed since the crisis broke out. During this time, Moscow has sought to implement several military strategies, starting from carrying out destructive strikes against Ukrainian military infrastructure, attempting to take control of Ukrainian nuclear plants and later encircling and imposing a siege on mid-size and large cities without storming them. It seems that the crisis is now passing through its most important strategic stage: seeking to storm the major cities. This requires the forces of the two countries to engage in face-offs. Hence, the massive recruitment of foreign fighters is considered as a preparation for this decisive stage.

▪ **Institutionalizing the engagement of foreign fighters in the war:** The Ukrainian president's call goes beyond summoning foreign fighters to bolster the country's military front. Rather, it amounts to the institutionalization and legalization of the operations that foreign fighters will play in the upcoming battles. Establishing an international force and issuing legislation that regulates the engagement of foreign fighters are attempts by the Ukrainian

government to legitimize and avert the legal loopholes which could be created by foreign fighters being involved in an external dispute. In other words, these Ukrainian moves aim to prevent foreign fighters from being classed as mercenaries or foreign fighters transcending national borders, turning them instead into soldiers fighting under the command of the Ukrainian forces through signing volunteering contracts. These moves also aim to remove any awkwardness that could be caused to Western governments, particularly if their citizens are killed or detained during the ongoing military operations.

### **Similar Russian Practices in Syria and Libya**

The Russian-Ukrainian crisis and the Syrian crisis have many aspects in common, with Russia using parallel military formations in this war —mirroring its experience in Syria and Africa. Over the past years, Russia has formed multiple military units in Syria with the aim of deploying them in the open regions and spaces between Syrian cities and to plug the gap between the Syrian army's units. Yet such formations also act as a logistical support for the Russian rearguard in Syria and on other frontlines. The Iraqi and Syrian groups are expected to join the fighting under the command of the Russian army in Ukraine in the coming period. This comes especially amid talks of the Syrian government starting to mobilize thousands of fighters to fight on the side of Russia. Yet information has also circulated about attempts to recruit Iraqis via social media platforms to partake in the war in Ukraine.

In this vein, it is not ruled out that Iranian militias are also one of the potential options for the Russians in the future — in search of a lightning victory in Ukraine. The Russian official announcement about opening the door for fighters from the Middle East to join the fighting could be an indirect message addressed to Tehran for several reasons. Among the considerations is the coordination the two sides are pursuing on several regional matters, including the Syrian file. Nonetheless, the actual response from Tehran to such Russian calls depends on the fate of the nuclear file and its desire to keep room for maneuverability between the parties to the dispute in Ukraine. On the one hand, Tehran will not take the risk of sending its forces to



the Ukrainian battlefield to fight on the side of the Russian forces — not to be accused of backing Russia and not to affect the trajectory of the nuclear negotiations in Vienna which have reached an advanced stage. On the other, Tehran could send the militias working under its umbrella to support the Russians. This manifested clearly when some parties affiliated with the so-called Axis of Resistance — run by Iran in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen — showed unambiguous bias toward the Russians.

Several of them began leaving Syrian and Iraqi regions. This coincided with the meeting held in the T4 military airport in Syria between a Russian military delegation and its Iranian counterpart — along with the Lebanese Hezbollah. By contrast, reports indicated that Iraqi fighters from Iraqi militias, including Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, received financial offers in exchange for their fighting alongside Russian forces in Ukraine.

In addition to Syria, Russia seeks to marshal support from Libya where several fighters affiliated with the Wagner Group or with other militias are deployed. These militiamen are looking at the Ukrainian arena as a better battlefield for making several economic gains. Despite the Russian need for recruits from Libya, it is not expected that it will resort to pulling back all its elements from the region. The Russian presence in Libya remains very strategic for Moscow in terms of empowering it to follow up on its strategy, the centerpiece of which is putting pressure on Europe — especially in the field of energy. Therefore, based on this, the Russian government risks losing this lever in the midst of its mounting crisis with Europe.

## **Ramifications of Employment**

The marshaling and mobilization of foreign fighters by both parties to the crisis and deploying them in the current arena of dispute have many ramifications, primarily the following:

### **Prolonging the Internal Dispute**

The process of widening the scope of volunteering, recruitment and resorting to foreign fighters with various efficient capabilities and expertise — as some of them are affiliated with elite military forces

— aims to turn the Ukrainian territories into a battlefield for guerilla warfare, with each side aiming to exhaust the other. However, in the long run, this will lead to prolonging the dispute and further complicating the trajectories for resolving it. It will also lead to losing control over its determinants, especially in case of sneaking into and infiltrating Ukrainian society and setting up networks of interests and agendas independent of the principal cause of the dispute. This will make dismantling such networks difficult when the war ends, even if the parties to the dispute have the desire to dissolve them. Examples of this are too numerous to count. In Iraq, Libya and Mali, the governments of these countries face major hindrances in controlling such networks and curtailing their security and political dangers.

### **Creating Chronic Security Problems**

The race for recruiting foreign fighters, institutionalizing and legalizing them as well as seeking to establishing extremist outfits and activating a so-called proxy war under the umbrella of international parties supporting one of the parties to the dispute against the other represents a high-stakes conflict and undermines global security and peace. This evolving situation will present the international community with unconventional threats and escalating dangers. Maybe this dispute will unleash a stronger wave of ideological and political violence and extremism. Repelling such threats emerging from this dispute will be an uphill mission. Some European parties are concerned about security risks concomitant to the international mobilization of foreign fighters in this crisis and the empowerment of extremist right-wing elements, particularly in terms of the expertise in battles and fighting they could gain. Therefore, such elements could enhance their combat expertise and employ it in promoting their nationalist and racist propaganda — forcibly imposing it on Western societies.

### **The Employment of the Religious Dimension in the Ongoing Dispute Between Russia and Ukraine**

Since the previous Russian-Ukrainian crisis broke out in 2014, Islam and Christianity have been engaged in the dispute between the two

sides. Clerics in each country stood against their co-religionists in the other country. This appeared clearly when the Ukrainian president appeared on television for several days wearing a shirt with the symbol of a cross. This was a sign of employing Orthodox Christianity in the current conflict and using religion to mobilize people in other vital Orthodox Christian spheres such as in Eastern Europe, Greece and the Caucasus—in addition to Christian minorities in the Eastern Mediterranean countries.

This military employment of Christianity is no less significant than the attempts to employ Islam in the ongoing war. This came after the Russian Council of Muftis said that the special Russian operation carried out by the Russian army in Ukraine is in accordance with the rules of the Holy Quran.

The council did not stop at such a remark. It also called on Muslims in Russia and worldwide to unite for the sake of defending Russia. It seems that this call came in response to several Ukrainian Islamic institutions that weighed in on the ongoing war. This included the current Mufti of Ukraine Said Ismagilov joining the ranks of the International Legion of Territorial Defense of Ukraine to partake in the Ukrainian military confrontation against Russia.

### **The Future of Fighters After the End of the Crisis**

Readings into the future of foreign fighters after the end of the ongoing crisis have varied. The first reading argues that the mutual recruitment by the parties to the dispute will contribute to turning Ukraine and the neighboring sphere into a new hotspot for international terrorism. Proponents of such a reading contend that the areas of dispute across the world have generally become incubators for armed and extremist groups. Hence, the ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine will pursue the same path. Turning the Ukrainian arena into a hotbed for attracting different forms and models of extremist and terrorist groups of varying nationalist and religious affiliations and ideologies will contribute to the morphing of these groups and will enhance their expansion and clout and they will actively search for loopholes to exploit in order to sneak into other countries. In addition, this dispute provides a suitable environment for these outfits to develop their own ideological agendas, generating new organizations.

The second reading argues that the major world powers busy fighting on the Ukrainian front will increase the chances of the re-emergence of armed groups and organizations in their main strongholds — especially in Syria and Iraq. These potential groups will not take sides in the ongoing crisis, rather they will take advantage of the world powers' preoccupation with the fight in Ukraine — whether in terms of widening the scope of their recruitment or seeking to take advantage of the crisis to carry out operations. The attack mounted by ISIS in the last weeks in the desert of Palmyra in the countryside of Homs, east of Syria, is considered the biggest of its kind in recent months. It appeared clear that the attack took advantage of the absence of Russian planes which were used to intensify airstrikes before the Ukrainian crisis. Yet the group's call on Muslims in Russia and Ukraine not to fight in the ranks of the two armies fighting on Ukrainian soil and recalling its elements to come to the so-called Land of the Promised Caliphate represents a clear attempt at taking advantage of the war, the state of instability and security laxity resulting from the Russian-Ukrainian war in order to recruit more foreign fighters to its hotbeds and expand the network of its active cells.

All in all, the two perspectives hold that this crisis marks a dangerous sign and a potential backdoor for the return of terrorist organizations to the global landscape. This comes at the time when some countries are still grappling with the challenge posed by the hundreds of fighters who joined the ranks of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. It is expected that the crisis will exacerbate in light of the talk of the flow of tens of thousands of foreign fighters who have volunteered to fight in Ukraine.

### **Contradicting the International Posture on the Phenomenon of the Recruitment of Foreign Fighters**

The current foreign recruitment by Russia and Ukraine, the tacit acceptance of the involvement of foreign fighters by some countries, and the unequivocal support provided by other countries as well as the promotion of their citizens traveling to Ukraine as a show of solidarity with the Ukrainian people points to the significant weaknesses of international law. This comes despite the fact that

traveling to Ukraine is flagrantly against UN Resolution No. 2178 issued in 2014 which includes preventing and criminalizing the recruitment or transfer of foreign fighters. The resolution also bans and restricts the financing and traveling of these fighters.

The paradox here is that the violation of international law is not confined to a single country or party. But it includes several countries which have supported the phenomenon of recruiting foreign fighters and promoting it apparently within the context of “volunteering” for the sake of solidarity. This is despite the fact that the aforesaid volunteering is associated with avowed promises of financial rewards; in contradiction with the definition of volunteering. In this context, it is worth noting the International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries defines a “mercenary” as:

*Any person who: (a) Is specially recruited locally or abroad in order to fight in an armed conflict; (b) Is motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain and, in fact, is promised, by or on behalf of a party to the conflict, material compensation substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar rank and functions in the armed forces of that party.*

Because the convention linked a mercenary to material gain, what is happening now is mostly promoted under the pretext of volunteering to avert collision with this convention.

The aforementioned also points to the sharp double standards when it comes to the criteria and response to terrorist threats. The takfiri ideology is as dangerous as the desire to take up arms and engage in an armed conflict. Whatever the pretext given for the recruitment of fighting elements — whether foreign fighters, paid mercenaries, or terrorist jihadists — in all the previous cases they are considered an increasing transnational terrorist threat. This practice must be tracked and monitored to avoid the security and intellectual consequences — whether in the country that is witnessing the dispute or in their original societies after they return home.

## **A Complicated Crisis for Arab Countries**

The ongoing crisis between Russia and Ukraine has directly impacted the region such as raising the level of political polarization in the region or impacting it from the energy fallout. But the indications regarding the region's preoccupation with the war in Ukraine now go beyond the energy crisis. Countries in the region may get involved in the crisis through deploying combatants in Ukraine. This potential scenario is in light of Arab concerns regarding the Afghan crisis in the 1980s and the ideological polarization that occurred between the two poles in the crisis and the terrorist attacks carried out by those returning from Afghanistan in Arab countries — which spread destruction and devastation there. It seems that the world is now attempting to resurrect this scenario, with Russia and Ukraine pursuing the same policy of opening the door for recruiting fighters with different ideologies and backgrounds, including former seasoned military officers, mercenaries, and zealots. This is added to the recruitments being carried out inside Syria in bulk numbers — and this could be followed by militiamen aligned with Iran, who will soon be deployed to the region's countries, fueling violence there and expanding the scope of confrontation. Therefore, this stage is delicate and sensitive and needs the highest levels of attentiveness and vigilance.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the Russian-Ukrainian crisis marks a turning point in international policy and global security. Its consequences will be of a wider scope, and it will have a deeper impact than what has been revealed. The new turn the two countries have taken in terms of the increased reliance on foreign fighters reflects a narrow vision of interests, which does not consider the consequences of recruiting such elements or the ramifications of such employment in the post-dispute stage. The impact of such consequences will affect several of the world's countries — in light of the potential disarray of weaponry and foreign fighters. This will lead to prolonging the war, let alone the bigger danger related to the fates of these fighters after the end of the international crisis.



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