

ЕТНІЧНІ ТА РЕЛІГІЙНІ МЕНШИНИ СХІДНОГО ПОХОДЖЕННЯ В УКРАЇНІ

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BETWEEN CIVIC LOYALTY AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY: HAS THE MUSLIM WORLD’S ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR AFFECTED UKRAINIAN MUSLIMS?

Denys Brylov

DSc (Philosophy), Associate Professor

A. Yu. Krymskyi Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS of Ukraine

4, Mykhailo Hrushevskiy St., Kyiv, 01001, Ukraine

Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient

33, Kirchweg, Berlin, 14129, Germany

dbriyov@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0001-6214-2782

The Russian-Ukrainian war has highlighted the problem of the relationship between civic loyalty and religious identity, especially against the backdrop of the ambiguous attitude of Muslim countries and movements towards the conflict. In the article, I examine both the reaction on the Russian-Ukrainian war at the level of government structures in Muslim countries and at the level of transnational Islamic movements that have followers in Ukraine. I also examine how Muslim communities in Ukraine address this issue at the level of behavioral strategies, as well as theological and public discourse. Particular attention is paid to how situational identity is expressed in the clash of interests between religious and civil reference groups to which Muslims in Ukraine belong. In the article, I highlight three types of attitudes among Muslim communities towards the war in Ukraine: 1) neutrality (“This is not our war”); 2) support for Russia; 3) support for Ukraine. I conclude that Muslims in Ukraine, despite their diverse origins, form a loyal community to the state, with Muslims born in Ukraine showing the greatest civic loyalty.

Keywords: Islam in Ukraine; Russian-Ukrainian War; “Muslim Brotherhood”; Hizb ut-Tahrir; Jihadist movement; Hamas

Introduction

The Russian-Ukrainian war, which began in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea, has led to significant transformations in Ukraine’s religious landscape, including within the Muslim community. Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022 further intensified the transformation processes, involving religious communities outside Ukraine in the conflict and forcing them to take one side or the other in the escalating confrontation between Russia, seeking support from the countries of the so-called “global South”, and Ukraine, supported primarily by countries with established democratic systems belonging to the so-called “Western world” (naturally, both of these processes have many caveats, and I am using them rather schematically).

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Muslim migration in and out of Ukraine during the war has brought about active transformative changes within the Ukrainian Muslim community. While Muslim women and male non-citizens of Ukraine left the country, those arriving were predominantly representatives of Muslim movements and groups determined to fight against Russian forces.

The start of the Russian-Ukrainian war (in 2014), and especially the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, led to significant changes both within the Ukrainian Muslim community and in the transformation of relations between Ukrainian Muslims and their co-religionists in Muslim countries, and, separately (given the close ties and relations before the war) – in Russia. In this regard, a number of researchers can be identified who cover this topic from different perspectives, including Elmira Muratova [Muratova 2024], Denis Shestopalets [Shestopalets 2021], Mykhailo Yakubovich [Yakubovich 2017], and Oleg Yarosh [Yarosh 2024].

In my study, I examine both the reaction on the Russian-Ukrainian war at the level of government structures in Muslim countries and at the level of transnational Islamic movements that have followers in Ukraine. Most of the studies mentioned above, which show the attitudes of various groups of Ukrainian Muslims towards the Russian-Ukrainian war, often lack a global context, and the reaction of Ukrainian Muslims is considered in isolation from their ideological centers and like-minded people outside Ukraine, mainly from the point of view of their civic position.

The Muslim Community of Ukraine amidst the War

Currently, it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of Muslims living in Ukraine, including those in occupied territories. No comprehensive studies have been conducted to determine the Muslim population in Ukraine, so all estimates rely on data from the All-Ukrainian Census of 2001. Consequently, any evaluation of the Muslim population in Ukraine remains speculative, often manipulated by representatives of the Muslim community in different interviews based on their situational needs. For instance, Said Ismagilov, the Mufti of the Religious Administration of Muslims of Ukraine “Umma” (2008–2022), gave different estimates of the total number of Ukrainian Muslims, calling in one interview the figure of 1 million people, and in another – 1.5 million [Brylov 2021b, 112].

The Razumkov Centre has attempted to estimate the number of Muslims in its annual reports on the religious situation in Ukraine. However, these estimates also raise many questions as they vary significantly from year to year, ranging from no Muslims at all to 0.9 % of respondents (0.7 % in 2000, 0.9 % in 2010, 0.7 % in 2013, 0.2 % in 2014, 0.0 % in 2018, 0.1 % in 2019, 0.5 % in 2020, 0.2 % in 2021, 0.2 % in 2022, 0.1 % in 2023 and 0.1 % in 2024) [Yakymenko, Bychenko and Mishchenko 2024, 32].

Considering the approximate estimates by Ella Libanova, the Director of the Institute for Demography and Social Studies, the number of Ukrainian citizens remaining in Ukraine in 2023 was around 34–35 million [Fedorchuk, Davydenko 2023]. In this case, if we assume that the Razumkov Center’s estimates at least approximately reflect the real situation, then the number of Muslims in Ukraine currently stands at around 34–35 thousand people. At the same time, according to Said Ismagilov, 2 % of Ukrainian Muslims serve in the Armed Forces of Ukraine [Yak muftii Said... 2024] (the number of Ukrainian Armed Forces personnel does not exceed 1,050,000 [Wilk, Żochowski 2025], which means that 21,000 of them are Muslims). According to Suleiman Khairullaev, military chaplain of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, this figure is 4 % (i.e., 42,000) [Badyuk, Spiridonov 2025]. According to Mufti Murat Suleimanov of the DUMU-Umma, at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, at least 50,000 Muslims moved to Lviv alone (some of whom, from Kyiv and the Kyiv region, later returned home) [Khvorostovska 2023]. In any case, given that Russia has occupied the regions where the largest local Muslim communities in Ukraine lived (Crimea, Donetsk

region, part of Kherson and Zaporizhia regions), and the lack of accurate data on the number of Muslims who left Ukraine, it is impossible to give an objective assessment of the current number of Muslims in the territory controlled by Kyiv.

Ukrainian Muslims are dispersed among several religious centers. Most of them are part of or closely connected with transnational Islamic movements, ranging from Sufi to Islamist groups. As of January 1, 2024, the State Service of Ukraine for Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience (DESS) provides data on five religious associations, and also Shia and independent (“other”) Muslim religious organizations [Report... 2024].

Among the associations reflected in the DESS statistics, three stand out as the most influential:

- The Religious Administration of Muslims of Ukraine (DUMU) (founded in 1991, comprising sixty-one religious organizations),
- The Religious Administration of Muslims of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (founded in 2016, comprising six religious organizations),
- The Religious Administration of Muslims of Ukraine “Umma” (DUMU-Umma) (founded in 2008, comprising twenty-seven religious organizations).

The other two associations mentioned in the DESS statistics are:

- The Religious Administration of Independent Muslim Organizations of Ukraine “Kyiv Muftiate” (founded in 2007, comprising three religious organizations),
- The Spiritual Center of Muslims of Ukraine (founded in 1994, comprising eighteen religious organizations).

However, the latter two associations are practically absent in public discourse and have no significant influence on the processes occurring within the Ukrainian Muslim community¹.

The largest and oldest of the listed religious associations is the Religious Administration of Muslims of Ukraine (DUMU – *Dukhovne upravlinnia musulman Ukrainy*). During its early years, DUMU provided legitimacy to unregistered underground Muslim communities that existed in Ukraine during the Soviet period. Additionally, DUMU is closely linked with the transnational Sufi network, the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects (better known as “Al-Ahbash” or *habashiyya*) [Brylov 2021a, 365], and serves as the center of Al-Ahbash in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space. The association itself is typically viewed as a pan-Sufi organization, a “Sufi response” to Islamic fundamentalism, and as a mass protest of middle-class intellectuals against the politicization of Islam, with the Sufi component being key to understanding the ideological roots of the movement [Hamzeh, Dekmejian 1996, 221].

DUMU is a co-founder and member of the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (UCCRO), established in December 1996 on the initiative of Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma. UCCRO serves as a representative interfaith consultative and advisory body, uniting about 95 % of Ukraine’s religious network. Independently or as part of UCCRO, DUMU is a member of specialized councils under various ministries, including the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, the Ministry of Health of Ukraine, and others. The most significant focus area of DUMU’s activities is education. DUMU operates the only higher Islamic educational establishment in Ukraine, the Islamic University (founded in 1993). It also oversees the general education school “Irshad” and approximately forty Sunday schools. Before the full-scale Russian invasion, DUMU comprised over 120 religious organizations. However, due to the occupation of the part of Kherson region, DUMU lost about half of its communities located there, which were primarily composed of Meskhetian Turks (Ahiska Turks).

The second largest organization is the Religious Administration of Muslims of Ukraine “Umma” (DUMU-Umma). It coordinates the activities of twenty-seven Muslim communities across thirteen regions of Ukraine, primarily in the eastern part of the country.

Specifically, the largest number of registered communities are in Donetsk and Luhansk regions (eight and four respectively), four communities in Kyiv, two in the Dnipropetrovsk region, and one each in Vinnytsia, Zhytomyr, Zaporizhzhia, Kyiv, Lviv, Sumy, Kherson, Khmelnytskyi, and Chernivtsi regions. Most of these communities consist of ethnic Ukrainians, but their goal is to serve the entire Muslim community of Ukraine.

One of DUMU-Umma's most important activities is participation in volunteer projects, helping internally displaced persons and military personnel, and the development of military chaplaincy. In 2017, DUMU-Umma initiated the adoption of the "Social Concept of Muslims of Ukraine", which specifically addresses the role of the Ukrainian language. In the section "Islam and Patriotism," it states that:

Muslims of Ukraine stand for the preservation and development of national identity and language. They support the Ukrainian language as the sole state language and recognize the Crimean Tatar language as the language of the indigenous people of Crimea [Sotsialna kontseptsiiia... 2017].

While DUMU-Umma's leadership emphasizes its patriotic stance, the latter sometimes closely aligns with nationalist sentiments. A notable example is the proposal by the first mufti of DUMU-Umma, Said Ismagilov, to release a Ukrainian translation of the Quran with a cover in the red and black colours [Koran yak shliakh... 2015, 6] – originally the flag colours adopted by Stepan Bandera's Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists in 1941 and until recently associated mainly with the nationalist organization Right Sector.

Ukrainian researchers typically consider DUMU-Umma as an entity affiliated with the public organizations association "Alraid"; together, they are part of European Muslim structures connected to the "Muslim Brotherhood" [Bogomolov et al. 2015, 7] movement. In our research, it is also important to note that the "Alraid" association and DUMU-Umma place significant emphasis in public discourse on the "Palestinian issue" and openly sympathize with the Hamas movement [Brylov 2014, 74].

The Ukrainian authorities regard the Religious Administration of Muslims of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (DUM ARK – *Dukhovne upravlinnia musulman Avtonomnoi respubliky Krym*) as the main partner within the Muslim community of Ukraine, despite it being the smallest and youngest of Muslim religious associations. It is considered a Kyiv-loyal alternative to the Religious Administration of Muslims of Crimea (DUMK – *Dukhovne upravlinnia musulman Krymu*), led by Mufti Emirali Ablayev, who has taken a pro-Russian stance since the beginning of the annexation of Crimea [Zaremba 2015]. At the same time, in legal terms, the DUM ARK is seen as the successor of the DUMK, the "correct, pro-Ukrainian" DUMK. This position with regard to the DUM ARK manifested itself in the inclusion of the DUM ARK in the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (UCCRO)² precisely as a "reinstatement" of the DUMK membership:

After the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and the implementation of the decision by the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine to ban the activities of religious organizations affiliated with centers of Russian influence in Ukraine, the membership of the Religious Administration of Muslims of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (DUM ARK), representing Ukrainian citizens residing in Crimea who adhere to Islam, was reinstated to the UCCRO on July 18, 2023 [Ayder Rustemov 2023].

Moreover, in 2023 and 2024, it was one of the DUM ARK communities that hosted official *iftars* (evening meals to break the fast during Ramadan) attended by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and the leadership of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People [President... 2024]. The DUM ARK is primarily composed of religious organizations that follow the Salafi branch of Islam [Brylov 2023, 513–514]. These organizations, along

with followers of the Hizb ut-Tahrir movement, were forced to leave Crimea and relocate to Ukrainian-controlled territory due to religious persecution by Russian authorities.

A distinct group among Muslims in Ukraine are the followers of the transnational Islamist movement “Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami” (HTI). HTI cells appeared in Ukraine in the late 1990s, primarily in Crimea, as well as in the Kharkiv and Poltava regions. Initially, HTI’s party ideology spread in Ukraine through students and other individuals from Muslim (mainly Arab) countries. Between 1999 and 2003, HTI was effectively legitimized in Ukraine as it established numerous autonomous Muslim communities in Crimea. By 2013, the HTI network in Ukraine included about 20 registered and several dozen unregistered Islamic communities in Crimea and all regions, as well as several NGOs [Aulin 2016, 160–161].

The HTI influence among Crimean Tatars was significant enough to be perceived as a threat by the leadership of the Mejlis. Consequently, in 2010, the Mejlis issued a resolution “On the activities of the Hizb ut-Tahrir party and other radical organizations and sects, and their harmful consequences for the Crimean Tatar people”, describing HTI supporters’ actions as “openly hostile” and called on local self-government bodies of Crimean Tatars and Muslim communities to vigorously counter the movement’s activities [Medzhlis izdal... 2010].

Following the Russian annexation of Crimea, the number of active HTI supporters in Crimea significantly decreased due to the repressive nature of Russian legislation towards HTI. Another reason was the relocation of the leadership and some party activists to mainland Ukraine. According to Fazil Amzayev, head of HTI’s Information Office in Ukraine, the Russian special services’ repressive actions against Crimean Tatars in annexed Crimea created conditions for dialogue between the Mejlis and HTI. This was particularly notable given that, a few years prior to the annexation, a faction within the Mejlis had already begun advocating for dialogue with HTI. Amzayev highlighted that the Mejlis supported those arrested in Crimea on February 12, 2016, without focusing on the Russian prosecutor’s accusations of their HTI affiliation:

We, Muslims, Crimean Tatars, and representatives of the Kurultai and the Mejlis, are Muslims and Crimean Tatars. This forms the basis for dialogue. Naturally, differences remain – we advocate for the unity of religious and worldly matters, while the Mejlis supports a secular path for the development of our people [Amzayev 2016].

After the annexation of Crimea, symbiotic relations emerged between the Mejlis and Islamic movements (Salafis and HTI). Previously, they competed with each other. On the one hand, the Mejlis leadership provided these groups with protection at the national level, particularly through the Commissioner of the President of Ukraine for the Affairs of the Crimean Tatar People. On the other hand, unlike the Mejlis, most of whose supporters remained in occupied Crimea; these groups had a human resource advantage due to the mass migration of their followers to Ukrainian-controlled territory.

The “Muslim World” and the Russo-Ukrainian War

From the outset of the Russian invasion, the Muslim world has taken a cautious stance. While the UN General Assembly resolution condemning the war (ES-11/1) and the resolution condemning Russia’s annexation of four Ukrainian territories (ES-11/4) received support from the majority of Muslim countries (with some abstaining), the initiative to exclude Russia from the UN Human Rights Council received significantly less support from them [Laruelle 2023, 14]. Regarding anti-Russian sanctions, Muslim countries have been even more reluctant. Specifically, the Secretary-General of the Arab League, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, stated that Arab states believe that the issue of sanctions should be addressed only within the framework of the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly [Gensek... 2022]. The largest Muslim-majority country in the world, Indonesia,

also refused to support the sanctions. Moreover, as noted by Marlène Laruelle, the weakening of Russia in its confrontation with the West makes it a more attractive partner for Muslim countries (and the Global South in general), as it fosters more equal relationships between the parties. Mykola Zamikula notes that most Middle Eastern countries support declarative calls to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity and condemn the use of force to resolve interstate conflicts, but they refrain from directly accusing the Russian Federation and its leaders. He describes their stance as *pro-Russian neutrality* [Zamikula 2022, 16].

Syria and Iran demonstrated explicitly pro-Russian positions in the region, though their stances are not identical. Until his overthrow on December 8, 2024, and Bashar al-Assad's flight to Moscow, his regime openly supported the Russian invasion, whereas Iran acted more cautiously at the beginning of the conflict, refraining from publicly endorsing the aggression. Zamikula linked this to the ongoing nuclear negotiations with the United States at that time [Zamikula 2022, 16–17].

However, by the end of 2023, negotiations on the nuclear deal had reached a deadlock. According to the UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo, there has been a lack of diplomatic progress despite repeated calls to all interested parties [Effort... 2023]. Additionally, in October 2023, the expiration of Section 4 of Annex B of UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which imposed restrictions on the transfer of missile-related items, services, and technologies to and from the Islamic Republic of Iran, further impacted the situation [Iravani 2023]. As a result, Iran's pro-Russian stance became more pronounced, primarily through intensified military cooperation. By early January 2024, Iran had supplied Russia with about 400 Fateh-110 surface-to-surface ballistic missiles [Hafezi et al. 2024], and in May 2024, reports emerged about Iran supplying Qaem-5 guided bombs to Russia [Barnes 2024].

Turkey, one of the most influential Islamic countries, holds a unique position. As a NATO member with a predominantly Muslim population (along with Albania), Turkey adopted the friendliest stance towards Moscow among all NATO countries following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It refrained from imposing sanctions, maintained air traffic, and continued close cooperation on many issues. Furthermore, despite the dissatisfaction of its NATO partners, Turkey purchased S-400 missile systems (NATO reporting name: SA-21 Growler) from Moscow. In 2023, the United States proposed Turkey transfer its S-400 systems to Ukraine; however, Turkey categorically refused, calling it an interference in its internal affairs [Ryabokon 2024].

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also opposes NATO's involvement in the Russo-Ukrainian war, insisting on the inevitability and necessity of peace negotiations involving Russia: "While putting forth our support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, we have already said that peace plans excluding Russia will not yield any results" [Gumrukcu 2024b]. According to Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan:

Our view is that both sides have reached the limits of what they can get by war. We think that it is time to start a dialogue for a ceasefire. That doesn't mean recognizing the occupation [by Russia], but issues of sovereignty and ceasefire should be discussed separately [Gumrukcu 2024a].

As observed by Iliya Kusa, Turkey seeks to leverage the Russian invasion to position itself, at the very least, as a key regional actor. The main tool for achieving this goal is the role of mediator, which Turkey assumed from the very beginning of the war. This allows it to claim the position of the primary intermediary between Russia and the West when their relations are increasingly strained [Kusa 2022].

The Gulf monarchies, in particular Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, should be singled out as a separate group, as they play an important role in the negotiation processes between Ukraine and Russia (primarily regarding the exchange of prisoners and the reunification of children with their families). Although all Arab countries in the Persian Gulf

condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and supported the UN General Assembly resolution in March 2022, they did not join the sanctions regime against Russia. Saudi Arabia served as a platform for indirect negotiations between Ukraine and Russia in early 2025, taking a position of *proactive neutrality* and balancing the interests of the US and Russia. Despite condemning the invasion and supporting Ukraine (including financially), Saudi Arabia maintains close ties with Russia, in particular within the OPEC+ and BRICS+ formats. The United Arab Emirates took the most "pro-Russian" neutral stance, assuming the role of a kind of "safe haven" for Russian finances after the start of the war. In addition, the UAE joined BRICS as a full member, and UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan even visited Russia and met personally with Putin after the start of the Russian invasion. At the same time, several prisoner exchanges were organized through the mediation of the UAE, and in total, more than 3,000 prisoners of war were released through the mediation of Abu Dhabi. Qatar, for its part, has taken a "pro-Ukrainian" neutral stance, largely due to its role as the closest ally of the US in the region. Without severing economic ties with Russia, Qatar, unlike the United Arab Emirates and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia, nevertheless refrained from strengthening economic cooperation with it. Qatar focused its mediation efforts primarily on reuniting Russian and Ukrainian children who were separated from their families during the war [Jacobs 2025].

Overall, we can say that the Russian invasion is not perceived as a security threat by Middle Eastern countries and the Muslim world in general. Moreover, strong anti-Western sentiments in the region often result in the conflict's responsibility being attributed not to Russia but to the United States and NATO. The attitudes towards the Russian-Ukrainian conflict are equally complex among different factions within the global Muslim Ummah. In broad strokes, we can identify three main positions.

"Wars between Crusaders and Crusaders"

What are these three positions?

- a neutral stance ("This is not our war"),
- support for Russia,
- support for Ukraine.

The neutral position is based on the view that Russia and Ukraine are non-Muslim states; therefore, their conflict either does not concern Muslims or should be leveraged in the interests of Muslims. This position is widespread among some Salafi movements, including jihadists. As noted by Sara Brzuskiewicz, the most common reaction among jihadists has been to celebrate the fact that two nations of infidels are fighting each other. For this reason, some jihadist ideologues have permitted their followers to join either side of the conflict, as aiding any side would contribute to the cause of jihad [Brzuskiewicz 2022, 167].

The authors of the report *The Global Jihadi Movement – Divided Over The Russia-Ukraine War; Possible Implications For The West* highlight the reaction of ISIS supporters, describing the conflict as "a war between crusaders and crusaders" [Stalinsky et al. 2023]. Al-Qaeda supporters have also commented on the Russo-Ukrainian war, claiming that the conflict "has prevented the international community from providing any assistance to the Somali government" in its fight against Al-Shabaab, Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Somalia [Stalinsky 2023].

Mina al-Lami, Editorial Lead for the BBC's Jihadist Media Monitoring Team, suggested categorizing the jihadists' positions on the war into two groups: *pragmatists*, who believe that ideological flexibility is necessary for survival; and *hardliners*, who advocate for uncompromising adherence to Salafi-jihadist principles [Terrorism... 2022].

One example of a hardline position is that of Abdul Karim al-Krymsky, the commander of the "Crimean Tatar Jamaat" (a military unit) within "Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar".

At the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014, he equated Ukraine and Russia to territories where infidels (*kafirs*) humiliate Muslims. In his view, it is useless for Crimean Tatars to appeal to international organizations, and they must initiate an open war against the infidels:

We see that Muslims and Tatars who moved to Ukraine are humbled, while here [in Syria], the Muslims are walking with heads held high; we just see the difference... We ask Allah that He will set Tatar Crimea, Tatars, the people of Crimea on this path [Jihad], so that we could, through joint efforts, establish the laws of Allah on this land [Quoted from: Brylov 2016, 274].

Meanwhile, those who support a pragmatic approach see the Russo-Ukrainian war as an opportunity to gain combat experience and skills with new types of weapons (such as mastering FPV drone warfare tactics). As Mina al-Lami notes, pragmatic jihadists advocate for using Ukraine's relatively open borders and friendly attitude towards foreign fighters to later organize attacks on "crusader" targets in Ukraine, Russia, or upon returning to their countries of origin [Terrorism... 2022].

The transnational Islamist movement Hizb ut-Tahrir (HTI) also views the situation from a perspective similar to that of the hardline jihadist international:

From the point of view of Shariah, it is a grave sin to take part in a war, either on the side of Russia or on the side of Ukraine, because it is a battle on the side of disbelief and under the flag of disbelief [...] This is the situation of the Muslims of Russia, Ukraine and Crimea now: they go to die under the banner of the disbelievers on the path of Taghut (*idolater*. – D. B.), and those under Russian rule still go to die for their own occupier [Shai-khetdin 2023].

Moreover, Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami holds a rather ambiguous position regarding Ukraine. HTI members consider Crimea to be *Dar al-Harb*, a "Territory of War", meaning Muslim lands that have been occupied, where Islam is oppressed, and which must be liberated [Orofino 2021, 1286].

At the same time, Ukrainian members of HTI find themselves in a difficult situation, as the Ukrainian government, after the annexation of Crimea, actively supports them. This support leverages the persecution of HTI by the Russian occupation authorities in Crimea to attract the attention of human rights activists and Western partners [Rzheutska 2020].

A mutual understanding has also been reached with the leadership of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar people, with whom HTI had been in conflict until the Russian annexation of Crimea. However, the question remains as to what position HTI will take after the war ends, and the need for a situational alliance with the Ukrainian authorities (whom HTI considers idolaters) disappears. Additionally, it is important to consider that HTI is banned in Ukraine's major European allies – Germany and the United Kingdom [Fautré 2024] – and it is difficult to predict how long the Ukrainian government will support the current situational alliance.

Make the World Multipolar Again

The second position is support for Russia and its invasion of Ukraine. This stance is primarily observed among official Russian muftiates, who attempt to theologize the legitimacy of their believers' participation in the war. Specifically, Russian Muslim organizations issued a joint statement calling the Russian invasion a "necessary measure" to protect Russia from the threat of "nuclear and biological weapons from NATO countries" [Rossiyskiye muftii... 2022].

This statement was signed by all the muftis of the Coordinating Centre of Muslims of the North Caucasus, as well as the Chairman of the Central Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Russia (TsDUM – *Tsentral'noye dukhovnoye upravleniye musul'man*),

Supreme Mufti of Russia Talgat Tadzhuiddin, Chairman of the Spiritual Assembly of Muslims of Russia (DSMR – *Dukhovnoye sobraniye musul'man Rossii*) Albir Krganov, Mufti of Tatarstan Kamil Samigullin, and Mufti of Bashkortostan Aynur Birgalin. The head of the Religious Administration of Muslims of the Russian Federation (DUMRF – *Dukhovnoye upravleniye musul'man Rossiyskoy Federatsii*), Ravil Gainutdin, initially took a more cautious stance, calling for prayers for peace and the preservation of human lives [Prizyv muftiya... 2022]. However, he later joined in supporting the actions of the Russian authorities [Muftiy Gaynutdin zayavil... 2022].

Later, various muftis (notably Talgat Tadzhuiddin and the Mufti of Chechnya Salekh Mezhiev) issued religious decrees (*fatwas*) declaring that the war in Ukraine is considered *jihād* (a holy war) and that Russian Muslims who die in this war become martyrs for the faith (*shahids*).

Among transnational Islamic movements with followers among both Russian and Ukrainian Muslims, Hamas, which until recently was the Palestinian branch of the global movement “Muslim Brotherhood,” has shown the most pronounced pro-Russian stance. During his visit to Moscow in 2022, Deputy Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau, Mousa Abu Marzook, stated that Hamas supports Russia’s actions in Ukraine:

Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine aims to end US dominance in the world, to make the world multipolar. This is beneficial to all oppressed peoples, especially the Palestinian people, as the most suffering from American hegemony. Therefore, we support Russia’s efforts to form a multipolar world [Khamas obyasnil... 2022].

The pro-Russian stance of Hamas has placed some Ukrainian Muslims, who are ideologically close to the “Muslim Brotherhood”, in a dilemma regarding how to respond to such statements. This is especially challenging given that some group leaders have regularly expressed support for the Palestinian resistance movement. For instance, as Seyran Arifov, head of the Alraid Association and the Congress of Muslims of Ukraine and a member of the Sharia Committee of the DUMU-Umma, wrote in 2020,

We have no grounds to accuse Hamas of terrorism for their armed struggle against the occupier who has attacked Palestinian land, killed women and children, expelled Palestinians from their country, and destroyed their homes [Arifov 2020, 678].

The situation became even more of a paradox after Hamas attacked Israel in October 2023. After that, Hamas’s leadership openly stated that their attack successfully diverted the international community’s attention from the Russo-Ukrainian war.

We want the Arab communities in the West to be active, and [we want] cooperation with superpowers like China and Russia. For your information, Russia has benefitted from our [attack], because we distracted the U.S. from them and from Ukraine. China saw [our attack] as a dazzling example. The Russians told us that what happened on October 7 would be taught in military academies³.

As a result, although this group of Ukrainian Muslims publicly takes a pro-Ukrainian stance, they remain completely silent regarding Hamas’s support for Russian aggression. A telling example is the interview with Ukraine’s most prominent Muslim leader, Said Ismagilov, who also represents those Ukrainian Muslims ideologically aligned with the “Muslim Brotherhood”. Describing the Islamic world’s view of the Russo-Ukrainian war, he noted that the attitude from the Muslim world has worsened due to the Middle Eastern conflict and its new phase that began in October 2023:

The situation has not improved. It has worsened due to the Middle Eastern conflict, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the new phase that began in October of last year. Russian propaganda is very skillfully manipulating this. Some Ukrainians side with Israel, while some Muslims in Ukraine sympathize with Palestine. I have not seen any strong support for us from either Israel or Palestine⁴.

At the same time, Ismagilov avoided mentioning Hamas and its role in diverting attention away from Ukraine, attributing the main role in this to Russian propaganda. It should be noted that this is a perilous position in the long term, especially from the perspective of adequately assessing the situation by the Ukrainian authorities. Viewing the pro-Russian stance of a significant part of the Islamic world as a result of Russian propaganda may create the illusion that the problem can be solved through counter-propaganda.

However, as I have pointed out earlier, the basis of pro-Russian neutrality in the Islamic world lies in longstanding anti-Western sentiments, which have only intensified in the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Changing sentiments in the Islamic world in favour of Ukraine will require long-term efforts that go far beyond the realm of counter-propaganda.

***“Those Who Die Defending Their Family are Martyrs
for the Faith (Shahids)”***

The third position is supporting Ukraine in its resistance against Russian armed aggression. Undoubtedly, the primary proponents of this position are the Muslims of Ukraine. Since the beginning of the war, representatives of Ukrainian Muslim organizations have played a significant role in shaping the attitude of the Muslim world towards the Russo-Ukrainian war. At the very beginning of the hostilities, the Mufti of the Religious Administration of Muslims of Ukraine (DUMU), Sheikh Ahmed Tamim, called on Muslims around the world to support Ukraine. Later, the leader of the world's largest Muslim organization “Nahdlatul Ulama”, Yahya Cholil Staquf, and the Grand Imam of Egypt's Al-Azhar University, Ahmed El-Tayeb, who have close ties with DUMU, called for an end to the violence in Ukraine [Brylov, Kalenychenko 2022]. In response to the DUMU Mufti's appeal, the European Council of Muslim Leaders (EULEMA) also expressed support for Ukraine [Prayer for Ukraine 2022].

The leader of another Ukrainian Muslim organization, the Religious Administration of Muslims of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (DUM ARK), Sheikh Ayder Rustemov, maintained close ties with Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), consistently raising the issue of increasing support for Ukrainian Muslims amid Russian military aggression. Furthermore, he repeatedly addressed Russian Muslims, urging them not to participate in a war that cannot be justified under Sharia law. Another representative of the DUM ARK, Suleiman Khairullaev, is a military chaplain in the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense.

Another Ukrainian Muslim leader, the then-head of the DUMU-Umma, Sheikh Said Ismagilov, called on Russian Muslims not to participate in the war and to start a liberation movement [Perun 2022]. In addition, he himself left his post as mufti of the DUMU-Umma and joined the ranks of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The DUMU-Umma also includes the Office of Military Chaplaincy for Muslims of Ukraine, which works with Muslim military personnel.

A significant portion of Ukrainian Muslims from various ethnic groups opposed the Russian invasion. Not only are they condemning it, but also actively joining the ranks of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and volunteer battalions. Currently, the largest groups of Muslims in the Ukrainian Armed Forces are Crimean Tatars [Barieva 2023] and Azerbaijanis [Ajdynly 2022], each numbering around 500 people. Leaders of almost all Ukrainian Muslim organizations have spoken out against the aggression and in support of Ukraine (as already mentioned above).

Regarding external support for Ukraine from transnational Islamic movements, it is important to note that there are proponents of supporting Ukraine in this war among representatives of the pragmatic approach within the jihadist movement. This primarily refers to the group “Ajnad al-Kavkaz” and its leader, Rustam Azhiyev, also known by the pseudonym Abdul Hakim al-Shishani. This jihadist group fought in Syria against the

Bashar al-Assad regime and was mainly composed of exiled Chechens after the Second Chechen War [Starr 2023]. In early October of 2022, Rustam Azhiyev arrived in Ukraine to fight against Russian forces. Azhiyev and his squad became part of the Separate Battalion of Special Purpose (OBON) of the Armed Forces of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, which is, in turn, part of the International Legion of Ukraine of the Directorate General of Intelligence of the Ukrainian Defense Ministry [Brylov 2023, 524].

Furthermore, increased support for Ukraine from the jihadist movement can be expected, as Russia (primarily through PMC Wagner forces) has been actively assisting African regimes, especially in Mali, Niger, and, to a lesser extent, Burkina Faso, in their fight against Salafi-jihadist insurgents [Karr 2024]. At the same time, Ukrainian military intelligence is also conducting combat operations in Africa, primarily targeting Russian mercenaries from PMC Wagner [Sereda, Lozovenko 2023]. As stated by Kyrylo Budanov, head of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, “We conduct such operations aimed at reducing Russian military potential, anywhere where it’s possible. Why should Africa be an exception?” [Ignatius 2024].

Among the supporters of Ukraine, there are also some unofficial (and often banned) communities of Russian Muslims. Support for Ukraine among Russian Muslims is partly explained by the fact that soldiers from the North Caucasus (and the Baikal region) make up a disproportionately large share of the units participating in combat operations [Laruelle 2023, 16]. Additionally, there is criticism of the Russian invasion, particularly from Salafi communities. For example, the well-known Dagestani Salafi preacher Abu Umar Sasitlinsky has declared that Muslims serving as contract soldiers in the Russian army are apostates⁵.

The largest group of Russian Muslims supporting Ukraine and fighting on the side of Ukrainian defence forces consists of Chechens. Since the second half of 2022, Ahmed Zakayev, a Chechen politician, field commander, and diplomatic representative of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, has been actively visiting Ukraine. He is referred to in Ukrainian media as the “head of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in exile”.

He said, “Today, the army of the Chechen state is being restored and revived in Ukraine”⁶ as a part of the International Legion of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Besides, anti-Russian Chechens received support from the Ukrainian authorities. The latter recognized the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (the name of independent Chechnya) as a territory temporarily occupied by Russia [Statement of the Verkhovna Rada... 2022].

Conclusions

As the Russian-Ukrainian war shows, Ukraine’s Muslim community has been faced with a difficult choice between civic loyalty and religious identity. One of the main reasons for this is the wariness of Muslim countries towards Ukraine’s main allies in the current confrontation with Russia, primarily the US, the UK, and Western European countries. The fears of Muslim countries regarding a unipolar world led by the US are evident, as is the continuing mistrust following the Western coalition’s invasions as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom (also known as Shock and Awe, Iraq, 2003–2011) and Operation Enduring Freedom and the subsequent Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (Afghanistan, 2001–2014, 2014–2021), as well as Donald Rumsfeld’s anti-Islamic rhetoric [Nasaw 2009]. Furthermore, one should not underestimate the influence of Russian propaganda, which appeals to anti-colonial rhetoric and nostalgically recalls Soviet policy of “support” for Muslim countries. On the other hand, as recent events have shown, the pro-Russian neutrality of Arab countries can be easily overcome by adjusting the US position on the Middle East. This refers to the postponement or cancellation of the Russian-Arab summit scheduled for October 2025. Vladimir Putin cited his unwillingness to interfere with US President Donald Trump’s efforts to conclude an agreement on Gaza as the main reason for postponing (or canceling) the summit. At the same time, according to Bloomberg, the

main reason is that too few regional leaders have confirmed their participation, in particular Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates. According to analysts, such blatant disregard for the summit may indicate that most of the Arab world is more interested in establishing relations with Trump than in participating in Russia's efforts to demonstrate its support and influence in the region [Moscow Postpones Arab Summit... 2025].

On the other hand, as part of the global Ummah, Ukrainian Muslims must confront and oppose the influential pro-Russian discourse prevalent in the Arab-Muslim world. In most cases, this confrontation does not favour Ukrainian Muslims, as they are either not well known in most Muslim countries or face restrictions from reference groups within the Islamic world. This is particularly evident today, when, against the backdrop of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza provoked by Israel, support for Palestine and the Palestinians, including Hamas, which takes an openly anti-Ukrainian stance, is growing in the Western world.

Overall, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has shown that Muslims in Ukraine, despite their diverse origins, form a loyal community to the state. This loyalty is largely due to the religious freedoms provided by the Ukrainian government, in contrast to Russia, where Muslims often face persecution and discrimination.

At the same time, the most loyal to Ukraine are those Muslims who were born in Ukraine, even if they belong to ethnic minorities. It can be said that their national identity is dominant, whereas, among some Muslim migrants, loyalty to Ukraine is often less significant. As former Mufti of DUMU-Umma Said Ismagilov stated,

The majority of Muslims here moved from elsewhere. Even Crimean Tatars, about half of Ukraine's Muslims, returned from deportation. My goal was to educate the Muslim immigrants, so they feel Ukrainian. To fight together with other Ukrainians. But the people I worked with ran to Europe, the United States, Canada, anywhere. This shocked me in the first months of the war [...] And when it got bad for this country where you lived, got married, had children, ran your business – it turns out you don't need the country [Januta, Yermak 2024].

In any case, the Russian-Ukrainian war has brought significant transformations within the Ukrainian community, often concerning issues of identity. Muslims in Ukraine found themselves having to choose whether to identify primarily as citizens of their country or as members of a global religious community whose interests do not always align with those of Ukraine. In the current situation, it can be said that the position of the Muslim world and individual transnational groups has little influence on the point of view of Muslims in Ukraine, and in the conflict between religious and civic identity, the latter prevails. However, it is difficult to say today how this conflict of identities will develop over time.

¹ Regarding the Spiritual Center of Muslims of Ukraine, almost all religious organizations under its umbrella are located in the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In 2022, these organizations, as part of the so-called Religious Administration of Muslims of the Donetsk People's Republic, joined the Religious Administration of Muslims of the Russian Federation, led by Ravil Gainutdin, as a regional branch (*muhtasibat*). The "Kyiv Muftiate", due to its Russian ties (its main donor was the Tatarstan-based "Tatneft"), also disappeared from the public space following the onset of the full-scale invasion.

² Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (UCCRO), an independent religious public association representing 95 percent of Ukraine's religious network and serving as the main (sometimes sole) partner of the Ukrainian government in state-confessional dialogue.

³ Sada Elbalad (2023), *حقائق واسرار مع مصطفى بكري || خالد مشعل في حوار صادم*, October 26, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YekMxgJlyQY> (50:00) (accessed September 23, 2025). (In Arabic).

⁴ “Ukraina prograye viynu za musulmsankiy svit – Said Ismahilov” (2024), in *Showbisyky*, February 7, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24Sevpfa57I> (2:15-2:45) (accessed September 23, 2025). (In Ukrainian).

⁵ Abu Umar Sasitlinsky (2022), “Putinskaya Voyna v Ukraine”, March 10, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGUKpHQVl_0 (3:37-3:55) (accessed September 23, 2025). (In Russian).

⁶ Zakayev A. (2022), “V Ukraine vosstanavlivayut chechenskuyu armiyu”, *24 Channel*, September 23, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrM19648gZI> (accessed September 23, 2025). (In Russian).

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Д. В. Брылов

Між громадянською лояльністю та релігійною ідентичністю: чи вплинуло ставлення мусульманського світу до російсько-української війни на українських мусульман?

Російсько-українська війна актуалізувала проблему взаємозв'язку між громадянською лояльністю та релігійною ідентичністю, особливо на тлі неоднозначного ставлення мусульманських країн та рухів до конфлікту. У своїй статті я аналізую реакцію на російсько-українську війну як на рівні урядових структур мусульманських країн, так і на рівні транснаціональних ісламських рухів, які мають прихильників в Україні. Окрім того, аналізую, як мусульманські громади в Україні підходять до цього питання на рівні поведінкових стратегій, а також теологічного та публічного дискурсу. Особливу увагу приділено тому, як

ситуативна ідентичність виражається в зіткненні інтересів між релігійними та громадянськими референтними групами, до яких дотичні мусульмани в Україні. У цій статті я виділяю три типи ставлення мусульманських громад до війни в Україні: 1) нейтралітет (“Це не наша війна”); 2) підтримка Росії; 3) підтримка України. Доходжу висновку, що мусульмани в Україні, незважаючи на своє різноманітне походження, утворюють лояльну до держави спільноту, причому найбільшу громадянську лояльність виявляють мусульмани, народжені в Україні.

Ключові слова: іслам в Україні; умма; російсько-українська війна; “Брати-мусульмани”; Хізб ут-Тахрір; джихадистський рух; Хамас

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