

Islamic Civilisation Talk Series (ICTS): Global Superpowers in the Geopolitics of Security and Peace: Its Impact Beyond Europe and on Muslim Countries
(IAIS Facebook Live, 15 March 2022)

Wan Naim Wan Mansor

This IAIS forum attempted to delve deeper into the dynamics between global superpowers in the unfolding Russia-Ukraine conflict, as well as its ramifications for countries beyond Europe. Ukraine, a nation with deep historical and cultural roots with Russia as part of the defunct Soviet Union, has already been in various armed conflicts with Russia over the last decade, beginning with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the war in Donbas, and several smaller-scale battles. Invited expert panellists were Assistant Professor Dr Olsi Jazexhi from the Department of History, IIUM, and Assistant Professor Dr Ahmad El-Muhammady from ISTAC, IIUM, and the event was moderated by Wan Naim Wan Mansor from IAIS Malaysia. Jazexhi, in his presentation, provided a brief account of the historical, cultural, and religious background of Russia and Ukraine. He then updated us on the current developments in the ongoing war and, most importantly, explained the underlying politics of ‘energy diplomacy’ between the two countries. According to Jazexhi, Ukraine’s heavy-handedness in its energy politics with Russia, coupled with several instances of disruption to Russian gas pipelines in the country, have played a significant role in provoking Russia’s military action. At the moment, economic pressure is testing the resolve of European countries in sustaining their economic sanctions on Russia due to their heavy dependence on the latter’s energy and food exports. Ahmad El-Muhammady’s presentation began with an introduction to the geopolitical backdrop of the region as the Soviet Union transitioned to post-Cold War Russia. Previously comfortable with a large buffer zone against other global superpowers, Ukraine’s policy of cosying up to the EU and NATO beginning in the 1990s has become a sore point for Moscow, being seen by the latter as an encroachment on its national security and geopolitical interests. Ahmad also covered the Malaysian government’s position, which condemns the military aggression by Russia, although while falling short of imposing any diplomatic action or economic sanctions due to the country’s policy of non-alignment. According to Ahmad, the general Malaysian sentiment, however, showed a slight inclination towards Russia. The two presentations were then followed by several question-and-answer sessions. Among the highlighted issues raised by the audience was whether Ukrainians are entitled to their own

national aspirations despite being at odds with Russian interests. In response to this question, Ahmad pointed out that historical and geopolitical realities could not be easily discounted, and that being neutral would be in the best interests of both Ukraine and Russia. Other questions included the position of Muslims and Islam in Russia, the potential impact of the war on Malaysia, the question of fake news and misinformation surrounding the conflict, and the ethics of war in general.

Forum: Child Conversion in Malaysia: Issues and The Way Forward (IAIS Facebook Live, 24 March 2022)

Ahmad Badri Abdullah

This online forum featured two prominent personalities in academia. The first was Associate Professor Dr Mohamed Azam Mohamed Adil, Director-General of the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM). The second was Dr Faridah Abdul Jalil, a former law professor at the National University of Malaysia (UKM) and a current advisor to the Institute of Political Reform and Democracy (REFORM). The forum aimed to shed light on the pressing issue of unilateral child conversion, especially with regard to the recent case involving a Chinese mother, Mrs Loh Siew Hong, whose children were taken and converted to Islam by her former husband. More importantly, the forum also discussed the way forward in addressing the complex conundrum within the country's legal system.

In his session, Azam narrated the progression of the Loh Siew Hong case and compared it with previous child conversion episodes, such as the Subashini and Susie Teoh cases. Most of these cases, argued Azam, revolved around the word 'parent' in article 12 (4) of the Federal Constitution which states that the religion of a person under the age of 18 shall be decided by his or her parent. In the Indira Gandhi case, the Federal Court decided that the word 'parent' means both father and mother, which added to the complexity between the civil and shariah courts. The decision triggered a conflict between the two courts, as some state enactments do allow either one of the parents to determine their child's religion. In the Islamic legal tradition, according to Azam, there is a dispute regarding religion as a criteria when determining custodial rights. While the Shafi'is and Hanbalis consider religion as the determining factor, the Hanafis and Malikis are of the view that it is not the only criteria (despite putting certain