

The War in Ukraine: Implications for Russian Influence and Great Power Competition in the Middle East

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Abstract

The Middle East remains reluctant to isolate Russia for its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, despite substantial pressure from the United States. This paper aims to address the following question: How has the war in Ukraine impacted Russian influence and the dynamics of great power competition in the Middle East? Expert opinions on this matter are divided. According to a recent poll, only 46 percent of Middle East scholars believe that the war in Ukraine has diminished Russian influence in the region, while 26 percent argue that it has, in fact, increased. In this paper, the author contends that despite the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, Russia remains a significant actor in the Middle East, wielding substantial military, diplomatic, economic, and informational resources to challenge U.S. interests in this increasingly multipolar region.

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Introduction

Vladimir Putin's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shook the international order, sending shock waves far beyond Eastern Europe—while dealing a severe blow to Russia's international standing and global influence. The United States and its Western allies have united to support Ukraine while imposing unprecedented sanctions on the Russian Federation. The Middle East, however, is one region that has remained neutral and refused to isolate Russia, despite significant pressure from the U.S. to do so. This paper will seek to answer the following question: How has the war in Ukraine affected Russian influence and great power competition in the Middle East?

Experts are divided on this issue: according to a recent poll, only 46 percent of Middle East scholars think the war in Ukraine has decreased Russian influence in the region, with 26 percent saying it has in fact increased (Telhami & Lynch, 2023). In this paper, I will argue that despite the war in Ukraine, Russia continues to be a major player with significant military, diplomatic, economic, and informational means to challenge U.S. interests in the increasingly multipolar Middle East. To start, I will outline the overarching goals of Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East. Then I will examine Russian influence in four key areas: Russia's declining arms sales but ongoing military presence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region; Moscow's significant diplomatic presence; expanding economic ties between Russia and the Middle East; and Russian dominance in the informational sphere. Finally, I will analyze the state of great power competition in the Middle East and what this means for U.S. foreign policy.

The Goals of Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East

Russian influence in the region is not exactly new. For hundreds of years, the Middle East was a key area of interest for the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. The collapse of the

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USSR in 1991, however, led to Russia's withdrawal from the region. During the 1990s, Boris Yeltsin, focused on domestic challenges and relations with the West, did not make a single visit to the Middle East during his presidency. In the early 2000s, Putin's rise to power along with Russia's economic recovery provided new opportunities for Russia to reassert itself on the global stage. From the beginning of Putin's second term in 2005, Russia significantly increased its political engagement with the Middle East, building relations with every major player in the region. In 2015, Putin's intervention in the Syrian Civil War affirmed the return of Russia as a major power in the Middle East (Stoner, 2021).

What exactly are the goals of Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East? Above all, Putin wishes to create a multipolar world in which Russia is once again recognized as a great power equal to the United States (CSIS, 2020). He firmly believes that Moscow should always get a seat at the negotiating table, including in the Middle East, where Russia seeks to offer an alternative to the U.S.-led regional order. Appealing to the fears of Middle Eastern autocrats, Putin has repeatedly criticized Washington's calls for democracy promotion and regime change—expressing clear opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the events of the Arab Spring, and NATO's intervention in Libya (Stent, 2023). Today, as U.S.-Russia relations hit rock bottom, Moscow's foreign policy continues to look for any opportunity to undermine American interests and influence in the region.

Russia also has significant security and economic interests. To protect its national security, Russia aims to contain Islamic extremism in the Middle East, thus preventing the spillover of separatist or terrorist movements into the territory of Russia and its neighbors. Russia's economic ties include arms deals, energy agreements, infrastructure projects, grain exports, and the extraction of natural resources in the region (CSIS, 2023). Since 2014, these

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economic links have become increasingly critical for the Kremlin, given the state of Western sanctions.

Russia's approach to the Middle East has several notable advantages over U.S. policy. Unlike the U.S., Russia does not pick sides in a region split by deep political rivalries. Moscow has been uniquely able to balance relations and exploit divisions between longtime adversaries like Iran and Saudi Arabia. Additionally, Russia never makes support conditional on human rights or political liberalization, a common complaint about U.S. aid. Russia's overall approach to the Middle East can be described as transactional and opportunistic (Stoner, 2021). Instead of building long-term alliances or commitments, Moscow focuses on relatively narrow areas of strategic cooperation, often by taking advantage of regional instability, U.S. inaction, and local grievances.

Russia's Military Influence in the Middle East

Declining Arms Sales

For any major power, one of the strongest ways to project power and advance strategic interests is through arms sales and military assistance. Russia has long competed with the U.S. as a major arms supplier to the Middle East and Northern Africa, one of the world's top arms-importing regions. Over the past decade, Russia has accounted for 16 percent of all arms sales in the MENA region. For countries like Algeria, Egypt, and Iraq, Moscow serves as the number one provider. In comparison to American arms, Russian weapons are available at a lower cost, with no strings attached. Globally, Russian arms sales peaked in 2011—nearly matching U.S. exports—with deliveries to 35 different countries (SIPRI, 2023).

The war in Ukraine, however, has dealt a devastating blow to Russian arms sales, which were already in significant decline over the past decade (Hendrix, 2023). Poor performance and

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attrition warfare on the frontlines combined with Western sanctions and export controls have seriously damaged Russia's defense industrial base and its reputation on the global stage. Russia has reportedly fallen behind on orders, with some countries canceling their purchases completely. In the weapons-hungry Middle East, these gaps could open up new opportunities for the U.S. and other competitors like France and China to step in. With no end in sight for the war in Ukraine, declining arms sales will continue to hurt Russia's economy and power projection capabilities—including its ability to exert political influence in the Middle East (Kavanagh & Wehrey, 2022).

But there appears to be one major exception to this downward trend: Iran. Longtime partners in Syria, Tehran and Moscow have significantly expanded their military relationship over the past year to what U.S. officials call a “full-scale defense partnership” (DeYoung & Warrick, 2022). In 2022, Iran ordered 24 of Russia's most advanced fighter jets, the Su-35, in a deal reportedly worth \$10 billion over 20 years (Saikal, 2023). Moscow is also expected to provide access to other weapons systems and advanced military components. In exchange, the Kremlin is believed to receive Iranian-made ballistic missiles and hundreds, if not thousands, of lethal drones to use in Ukraine. Moreover, the two sides have also increased joint military training and cooperation in other areas, including sanctions avoidance. Experts suggest that Russia is becoming more dependent on Iran—not the other way around—giving Tehran more leverage in this relationship. Nevertheless, the growing partnership will have significant implications in the long term. Russian shipments and Iran's ability to “reverse-engineer, replicate, and mass-produce components of these platforms” will strengthen the conventional military capabilities of Iran and its proxies. This has the potential to greatly undermine stability

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in the Middle East by increasing regional tensions between Iran and its rivals, while boosting defense spending across the region (Rumley, 2023).

Russia's Ongoing Military Presence

Russia's focus on the war in Ukraine, however, has not ended its on-the-ground military presence in the Greater Middle East. Beyond traditional means, there is a growing threat from the Wagner Group, a private military company with a significant presence in the MENA region that engages in training, combat, security, intelligence, and disinformation operations on behalf of the Russian government and the private business interests of its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin (Katz et al., 2020). With a combination of regular military personnel and private mercenaries, Russian soldiers in Syria, Libya, and Sudan continue to pose a danger to regional stability and U.S. interests in the Middle East.

In 2015, Russia made its big return to the Middle East with its military intervention in Syria. In crushing democratic resistance and saving longtime ally Bashar al-Assad, Putin played a deciding role in changing the course of the Syrian Civil War in his favor. To Arab leaders, Moscow appeared to be a decisive and reliable partner—drawing contrast with President Barack Obama's "red line" indecisiveness of 2013 (Stent, 2023 and Stoner, 2021). Russia's military campaign in Syria was also an opportunity to demonstrate new weapons systems and capabilities to other potential buyers in the Middle East. In exchange for weapons and military support, Russian forces were granted access to Syrian bases and ports, plus contracts for oil and gas exploration. Throughout the war in Ukraine, Moscow and Damascus continue to cooperate in Syria, with Assad making a recent visit to the Kremlin this year (Armstrong, 2023).

Less attention has been given to Russia's military intervention in Libya, starting in 2018. During the Libyan Civil War of 2019-2020, Russia sent regular military personnel, thousands of

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Wagner mercenaries, and advanced weapons to support Khalifa Haftar in his failed attempt to overthrow the internationally recognized government in Tripoli. Today, Russian forces continue to be positioned at military bases and oil facilities across the country, giving it control over Libya's vast oil reserves. Russia's ongoing presence in the strategically important Mediterranean Basin also fits into its overall strategy of challenging U.S. and European interests in the MENA region (CSIS, 2020). In Libya, Russian forces pose a potential threat to NATO's southern flank, while contributing to the destabilizing flow of migrants to the European Union. The U.S., meanwhile, has been largely absent from Libya after closing its embassy in 2014. Despite the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russian forces are not expected to withdraw from Libya (Eljarh, 2023).

Since 2017, Russian mercenaries have also played an active role in Sudan, a country of enormous strategic importance for the Middle East. In 2021, Russia actively supported Sudan's military coup, crushing the country's pro-democracy movement. In exchange for military and political support, Sudan has granted Russian companies access to gold mines, helping Russia in its effort to circumvent Western sanctions and monitoring (Elbagir et al., 2022). More notably, Moscow and Khartoum reached a tentative deal to establish the first Russian naval base on the Red Sea, at Port Sudan. Russian influence continues to grow amid the outbreak of civil conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), who have reportedly received powerful surface-to-air missiles and other weapons from Wagner.

Russia's Diplomatic Influence in the Middle East

Russia continues to play an important diplomatic role in the Middle East. Rejecting U.S. pressure to isolate Russia for its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, every major country in the region has since maintained or deepened relations with Moscow. Over the past year, U.S. allies in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan have welcomed Russia's top

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diplomat, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (Mathews, 2023). Arab rulers see no problem in continuing to cooperate with Putin, who shares most of their ideological views about regional order and preserving autocratic rule (Wehrey, 2022).

Moscow continues to engage in multilateral and bilateral negotiations on regional issues, mostly relating to the war in Syria. Russia's role in the Syrian Civil War has connected it to the full range of stakeholders involved in the conflict. Russia, Iran, and Turkey continue to meet in the Astana Peace Process—although results here have been limited (Kaylan, 2023). Israel-Russia relations, meanwhile, are largely shaped by a deconfliction agreement between Jerusalem and Moscow that essentially allows Israel to strike Iranian targets in Syria. More notably, Moscow is helping end the Assad regime's isolation in the Middle East by mediating talks to normalize diplomatic ties between Damascus and its longtime opponents in Ankara and Riyadh (Al Jazeera, 2023). In Yemen, Russia has also expressed interest in helping to find a settlement to the 9-year-long civil war, with the Saudi ambassador to Yemen recently visiting Moscow (*Russia-Saudi talks on Yemen*). Of course, Russia also holds significant leverage on the global stage as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, where it can act to counter U.S. interests in the Middle East, while backing its allies in Syria and Iran.

The success of Russia's current diplomatic endeavors remains to be seen. Furthermore, Russia's role as a Middle East negotiator may diminish with China playing a bigger diplomatic role, as seen with the recent Beijing-brokered rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Katz, 2023). Nevertheless, Russia's approach to diplomacy in the Middle East has several advantages over America's position. Moscow maintains close relations with everyone, both allies and enemies of the U.S. Over two decades, Putin has been able to develop personal relationships

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with fellow strongmen across the region. The U.S., meanwhile, is limited by increasingly tense relations with key players in the region, including with many of its longtime allies.

Russia's Economic Influence in the Middle East

The war in Ukraine has increased the importance of Russia's economic ties in the Middle East, as Moscow becomes increasingly dependent on the region to diversify its economic relations amid the growing pressure of Western sanctions. Russia's economic interests include arms deals, energy agreements, infrastructure projects, grain exports, and the extraction of natural resources in the region. In many ways, the Middle East has become Russia's economic lifeline (Mathews, 2023).

The Gulf states continue to deepen cooperation with Moscow over energy production (Weiss & Alexander-Greene, 2022). Russian ties with Saudi Arabia have expanded greatly in recent years, since the launch of OPEC+ in 2016. Both sides have shared interests in keeping oil prices high. Last year, the Saudis aligned with Russia in publicly rejecting U.S. requests to increase oil output. Some experts, however, see changing dynamics in Saudi-Russian relations, giving Riyadh the upper hand in this partnership.

Elsewhere, Russia continues to exert influence through local infrastructure projects, grain exports, and other forms of trade. Egypt is one country that seems to be increasing its dependence on Moscow. Russia's state-owned nuclear company Rosatom is continuing to build Egypt's first nuclear power plant, funded with billions of dollars from Russia. Amid the global grain crisis, Cairo is also importing more Russian wheat than ever before (Mathews, 2023).

Bilateral trade between Iran and Russia has reportedly increased tenfold, from \$4 billion in 2021 to \$40 billion in 2022 (Saikal, 2023). With Turkey, trade has surged by about 200 percent since the invasion of Ukraine. Russian exports to the United Arab Emirates, meanwhile,

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grew by 71 percent in 2022. More notably, the UAE has emerged as a key hub for Russian sanctions avoidance and money laundering. Emirati businesses have reportedly helped Moscow obtain American semiconductors and other sanctioned electronic parts worth millions of dollars. Thousands of wealthy Russians have also fled to Dubai, becoming the top buyers in its booming real estate market. Overall, growing ties between Moscow and Abu Dhabi have made the UAE “the most important strategic partner for Russia in both the Middle East and Africa” (Merchant et al., 2023).

Russia’s Informational Influence in the Middle East

In the informational sphere, Russia is gaining influence with propaganda and disinformation aimed specifically at Arab audiences (Borshchevskaya, 2018 and 2023). Misinformation is a well-known foreign policy tool of the Kremlin, but its dominance and credibility in the Arab world is often overlooked by the West. Under Putin, Russia has invested heavily in Arabic-language programming. RT Arabic, formerly *Rusiya Al-Yaum* or ‘Russia Today,’ was established in 2007 as the Kremlin’s first (non-English) foreign-language news network. Unlike in the West, where Russian state-run media has mostly been banned or forced to shut down, RT and Sputnik Arabic are seen as legitimate sources of regional news in the Middle East—with RT Arabic ranking among the top broadcasters and news sites in the Arab World. Beyond these major networks, Russia also engages in cooperation with local news outlets, while using unofficial Facebook pages and other organizations to spread pro-Kremlin, anti-Western narratives on social media. During the war, Russian propaganda has sought to justify the invasion of Ukraine, while blaming the U.S. and EU for causing the global wheat crisis. The Kremlin’s lies have found fertile ground in the Arab world, taking advantage of pre-existing anti-Western sentiment and the relatively weak media landscape of Middle Eastern countries. In

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attempting to exploit the large population of Arabic-speaking youth, Russia could be laying the foundation for long-term influence. A recent survey found that 72 percent of young Arabs consider Russia to be an ally of their nation. When asked who is primarily responsible for the war in Ukraine, 46 percent blamed the U.S./NATO or Ukraine, with only 18 percent blaming Russia (ASDA'A BCW, 2022).

Across the Middle East, the U.S. seems to be losing the war of narratives to Russia, with both elites and ordinary Arabs. The growth of Russian misinformation in the Middle East is a long-term threat to U.S. interests that should not be ignored.

Great power competition in the Middle East

What has been described as the “end of the post-Cold War era” (Telhami, 2023) will have great implications for a rapidly changing Middle East. The war in Ukraine has accelerated great power competition in the increasingly multipolar region, while boosting the independence and leverage of Arab states.

Russian influence must be seen against the backdrop of perceived U.S. disengagement from the region. Washington’s desired “pivot to Asia” has raised questions about American commitments to regional stability in the Middle East. In recent years, Gulf allies have expressed discontent with U.S. inattentiveness to threats from Iran and other security needs. The war in Ukraine has further strained U.S.-Gulf relations, empowering Arab leaders to hedge with China and Russia. Ultimately, it is not in their self-interest to pick sides between Washington, Moscow, and Beijing. Nor would they benefit from a clear Russian defeat in Ukraine. Instead, pursuing a multi-vectored policy of “omni-alignment” allows states to exploit great power competition by maximizing relations with all sides at once (Singh, 2022).

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The future of China's role in the Middle East remains uncertain, despite the diplomatic splash of the recent Saudi-Iran rapprochement. Militarily, Beijing supplies less than 5 percent of all weapons in the Middle East (SIPRI, 2023). For the time being, China's offer to the region is primarily economic.

At the end of the day, neither Russia nor China seem to have the will or capacity to replace Washington's role as top security provider in the region. Despite fears of an American withdrawal, the U.S. continues to maintain an enormous military presence across the Middle East with American troops stationed in Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (Ayesh, 2020). Despite significant tensions, American allies are unlikely to abandon their longstanding partnerships with the U.S.

Nevertheless, many experts have called on Washington to reevaluate its approach to dealing with the Middle East. The legacy of American foreign policy over the years has contributed to strong anti-U.S. sentiment among Arab citizens. According to a recent survey of young Arabs, 73 percent support U.S. disengagement from the Middle East (ASDA'A BCW, 2022). The U.S. must learn to accept the realities of an increasingly multipolar international system, without overreacting to moves made by China or Russia. American foreign policy toward the region should be flexible and sustainable, prioritizing long-term interests over short-term gains.

Conclusion

A weakened Russia is by no means less of a threat to American interests. President Barack Obama once infamously dismissed Russia as a declining "regional power"; today's leaders should not make that same mistake. The international isolation of Russia has dramatically increased the importance of Moscow's engagement with the Middle East. Although the war in

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Ukraine has attracted much of the Kremlin's attention and resources, Russia continues to exert significant influence in the region through military, diplomatic, economic, and informational means. This influence will not disappear anytime soon, and should not be overlooked by policymakers in the West.

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