

# Putin's War Has Middle Eastern Countries Hedging Their Bets

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**Facing greater regional demands and limited resources, Washington will have to be more judicious in its obligations and more consistent in following through, lest its assurances fail to assure.**

Like their counterparts around the world, Middle Eastern leaders are adjusting to the new geopolitical era created by the largest war in Europe since 1945. While the battle for Kyiv rages, many Persian Gulf governments are looking at what's happening some 800 miles further west—in Vienna, where negotiations on a revived Iran nuclear deal are nearing their denouement. For the Biden administration, a deal in Vienna this week would represent a crowning diplomatic achievement—and Washington appears to be in an even greater hurry to end Iran sanctions in the vain hope that Iranian oil will hit the market and help lower prices sent spiking by the conflict. Already, therefore, Russia's war in Ukraine is spilling into the Middle East.

It also won't be lost on Washington's partners in the region that the United States gave a security guarantee to Ukraine in 1994—in exchange for Ukraine relinquishing the nuclear weapons it inherited from the Soviet Union. Only this past January, President Joe Biden's White House issued a similar assurance to the United Arab Emirates after it had come under drone and missile attack by the Iranian-backed Houthi militia in Yemen. Responding to the attacks, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan assured the UAE of “unwavering” U.S. commitment, pledging that Washington would “stand beside [its] Emirati partners against all threats to their territory.”

Washington has also made explicit or implied security commitments to several other long-standing Middle Eastern partners, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, and Israel—the latter three as major non-NATO partners. To emphasize the point, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin just re-upped Washington's [perennial \(https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/01/31/the-monitor-merrimac-and-middle-east/\)](https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/01/31/the-monitor-merrimac-and-middle-east/) “ironclad” commitment to

Israel during a visit to the region last November.

While the Biden administration followed up its latest security guarantee by deploying F-22 fighter jets and dispatching a guided missile destroyer to the UAE, Abu Dhabi seems to have its doubts about U.S. commitments. Since then, the UAE has announced the purchase of 12 Chinese L-15 fighter jet trainers, with an option to buy 36 more. The announcement came just a few months after the *Wall Street Journal* **revealed** (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-china-uae-military-11637274224>) that China was constructing a military facility at a port north of the Emirati capital. Shortly after that revelation, in December 2021, Abu Dhabi suspended negotiations with Washington for the \$23 billion purchase of 50 F-35 jets.

The UAE's hedging is by no means exceptional. Saudi Arabia has also learned not to rely on the United States. After Iran's cruise missile attack on Saudi Aramco's Abqaiq oil processing facility in 2019, the Trump administration sent nearly 3,000 U.S. troops, two fighter jet squadrons, and air defense batteries to reassure Saudi Arabia. But relations have chilled under the Biden administration, even as Washington ostensibly remains "**committed** (<https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-saudi-arabia/>)" to providing "equipment, training, and follow-on support necessary to protect Saudi Arabia, and the region, from the destabilizing effects of terrorism, countering Iranian influence, and other threats." But having learned that U.S. commitments can be fickle, Saudi Arabia appears to be cooperating with China to **construct** (<https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/23/politics/saudi-ballistic-missiles-china/index.html>) its own ballistic missiles, according to satellite imagery.

Riyadh has also rejected the Biden administration's requests to increase oil production to help alleviate the spike in global prices exacerbated by Russia's war on Ukraine. Instead, as oil approaches \$120 per barrel, Saudi Arabia will abide by the quotas inked in its deal with Russia in the context of OPEC+. Besides its reluctance to abandon its oil strategy, Riyadh notes that this is another flip-flop in Washington: Only two years ago, then-President Donald Trump was begging the Saudis to do the opposite and cut production.

Of course, the primary concern uniting Washington's Middle Eastern partners is Iran, a threat that the Gulf states and Israel anticipate will become even more pronounced when and if the Biden administration reenters into a nuclear agreement with Iran. In the region, the bitter experience of what transpired after the 2015 deal remains fresh: Flush with cash, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps ran amok throughout the Middle East, better funding its destabilizing proxy militias in Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon, while developing advanced ballistic missiles. Fearful of jeopardizing the nuclear agreement, the Obama administration did very little to check Tehran's regional ambitions.

To be sure, Middle Eastern recipients of U.S. security assurances are under no illusions that Russia or China will fill the gap. But Washington's so-called pivot to Asia coupled with the messy withdrawal from Afghanistan, an articulated reluctance to use military force, and an increasing reliance on economic sanctions have several long-standing U.S. security partners in the Middle East diversifying their relationships. Egypt, which is poised to accept delivery of Russian-made Su-35 fighter jets—a purchase that could trigger U.S. congressional sanctions—may be the most prominent example of this phenomenon. With the exception of Israel, however, turning to Russia and China for weapons is a growing trend.

If partners are getting increasingly nervous about relying on the United States as their main defense supplier, the shift toward Russian and Chinese arms has other reasons as well. Restrictions on the use of these weapons are not as onerous as those imposed by the United States. In fact, restrictions are nonexistent. The shift to other suppliers also reflects the reality of an increasingly multipolar world in which Russia is now a player in Syria and Libya, and is likely to remain one even after the Ukraine war. Both Russia and China also have important energy-related economic ties to the Gulf. China, for example, imported roughly three times as much Middle Eastern crude in 2021 as the United States.

These new realities are impacting not only defense relationships but also U.S. diplomatic initiatives. During both the Trump and Biden administrations, notwithstanding multiple senior-level U.S. requests, not a single Gulf state has condemned China for its genocide of Muslim Uyghurs. Nor did any U.S. partner in the Gulf—with the notable exception of Kuwait—denounce Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in the initial days of the war. Even Jordan, a major recipient of U.S. military assistance, kept quiet. After the UAE’s refusal to condemn Russia in the United Nations Security Council last week, the Gulf states only came around to censuring Moscow in the U.N. General Assembly’s vote this Wednesday.

While Israel has criticized China on the Uyghur issue and censured the Russian attack on Ukraine, it reportedly **vetoed** (<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/b1woc6dk9>) the sale of the Iron Dome anti-missile defense system—jointly developed by Israel and the United States—to Ukraine. The Israelis apparently feared that the transfer would anger the Russians, complicating the already difficult deconfliction of Israeli Air Force operations against Iranian military targets in Syria, where Moscow’s sophisticated anti-aircraft batteries guard the airspace.

Notwithstanding the pivot to Asia, the United States’ diplomatic and military presence in the Middle East remains considerable. But the region’s diminished confidence in Washington undermines U.S. efforts to push back against China’s and Russia’s growing regional influence. Facing greater demands and limited resources going forward, Washington will have to be more judicious in its obligations and more consistent in following through, lest its assurances fail to assure. In the near term, whether or not Biden reenters the Iran nuclear deal, no U.S. commitment in the region is more critical than the pledge to assist its partners against the growing Iranian threat, even short of a nuclear weapon, especially as the high oil price sends ever more cash into Iran’s coffers. No matter what U.S. officials call their commitment—“firm,” “unwavering,” “ironclad,” or any other such diplomatese—standing by its long-standing partners is the best way for Washington to maintain credibility and deter adversaries.

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