

We Can't Face Down Putin Alone

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

May 6, 2022

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/la-ymknna-mwajht-bwtyn-whdna\)](#)

Also published in *Atlantic*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Some potential allies in the Middle East may not be democracies, but they're not revisionist states either, so the United States cannot afford to write them off.

Russian President Vladimir Putin provided a wake-up call for the United States and its European allies, reminding us collectively of a number of truths: Hard power matters. Borders can be changed by force. Attempts to erase nations have not been relegated to the past. And conflict and competition will define the international landscape for the foreseeable future. If we are to deter the former, and shape the latter, we need partners.

While [Russia's invasion \(https://www.theatlantic.com/category/russias-invasion-ukraine/\)](https://www.theatlantic.com/category/russias-invasion-ukraine/) and [its atrocities \(https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/04/bucha-ukraine-bodies-russian-military-crimes/629485/\)](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/04/bucha-ukraine-bodies-russian-military-crimes/629485/) have repulsed much of the Western world, many nations in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America sit on the sidelines. Moreover, Putin retains the [support of China \(https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/03/xi-putin-friendship-russia-ukraine/626973/\)](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/03/xi-putin-friendship-russia-ukraine/626973/) and countries such as Iran, which has no interest in accepting the norms that the West believes should guide international behavior.

Even as Putin continues his war against Ukraine, the United States must begin thinking about building coalitions for the period after the war ends. When Putin decides to conclude this war, we cannot return to business as usual.

Mobilizing the democracies of Europe and Asia is just a start. President Joe Biden often speaks about being at an [inflection point \(https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/04/cambodian-autocracy-democracy-\)](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/04/cambodian-autocracy-democracy-)

[rusian-war/629505/](#)) in the struggle between democracy and autocracy. But if we divide the world only along those lines, we exclude many nations that we need to be part of any global coalition capable of countering Russia's and China's efforts to impose their rules on the international system. We cannot afford to write off those nations that might not be democracies but are also not revisionist states. In the struggle against powers that are determined to create a new normal in which might makes right, we must be able to join with those that add to our leverage and assets.

Consider the Middle East. Because Biden understood the importance of denying Putin the ability to finance his war, he needed to find alternatives to [Russian oil \(https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2022/03/russian-oil-sanctions-gas-prices/627074/\)](#)—not just to meet Europeans' needs, but also to try to minimize the explosion in energy costs. The administration's effort to get Saudi Arabia, the only country with substantial spare production capacity, to pump more oil was unsuccessful. A number of factors may have led the Saudis to say no, but as one senior Saudi official recently told me, "You in America are quick to ask us to respond when you want something and nonresponsive to us when we call you." (He spoke on condition of anonymity, in order to offer a candid assessment of the situation.) He went on to say that in the past, the Saudis tried to be responsive to our requests because they saw the U.S. as "a reliable friend" when their security was threatened. After being hit repeatedly by the Houthis and their Iranian-provided drones, cruise missiles, and rockets, and seeing us hesitate in the region and in our responses, they no longer feel that way.

From an American standpoint, other factors have been at play here. The murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi; Donald Trump's readiness to give the Saudis a pass for his killing; other human-rights violations; and the way the Saudis prosecuted their war in Yemen, all understandably generated bipartisan criticism of the kingdom, and led to the Biden administration's decision to "recalibrate" U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia. But Putin's war brought the reality of our needs back into focus. And the reality is that Saudi Arabia is strategically important in the competition with Russia and China.

Saudi oil is needed now and for the next couple of decades, as the world manages the transition from fossil fuels to renewables. Saudi Arabia is among those states in the Middle East that are trying to build modernizing, resilient societies, and face an Iran that seeks to perpetuate the region's conflicts in order to exploit them. Tehran's support for Russia is not an accident. Iran is a revisionist power, seeking to dominate the Middle East, offering a pathway of imposed austerity for the sake of a narrow, intolerant ideology of resistance. What the Iranians call the "axis of resistance" is really an axis of misery; Iran's main exports are drones, missiles, militias, and failed or failing states. (Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq are testaments to what awaits states where Iran exercises its influence.)

Perpetuating a Middle East that is shaped by conflicts may serve Russian and Iranian interests, but it does not serve ours. Thankfully, a growing coalition that includes the Saudis, Emiratis, Egyptians, Jordanians, Moroccans, Bahrainis, and Israelis is already cooperating to counter Iranian plans for the region. America's Central Command provides both a mechanism to support their security needs and an umbrella under which they can integrate their intelligence, counterterror, and early-warning, cyber- and missile- and drone-defense activities—making them collectively more secure than they would be on their own. The more we encourage the sort of economic cooperation and trade that Israel and the UAE are now establishing, the stronger a basis for regional peace we will create, and the more we will foster a robust coalition supporting the rules of the game we seek internationally.

Does this mean we have to surrender our concerns about human rights and walk away from our values? No, but it means we will do what we have always done: weigh our priorities and try to balance values and interests. We must prevent Putin's rules—by which stronger states dictate to their weaker neighbors, and civilian populations are the target of choice—from defining our collective international future. We need to build a broad coalition of states that share that goal—a goal that reflects our values, and not just our interests.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the Atlantic website (<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/05/putin-ukraine-coalition-middle-east/629774/>) and is republished here under the auspices of the Institute's Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Building an Arab-Israel Bloc: Can It Compensate for a Reluctant Washington?](#)

May 12, 2022

◆
Nickolay Mladenov,
Zohar Palti,
Ebtesam al-Ketbi,
Karim Haggag

(/policy-analysis/building-arab-israel-bloc-can-it-compensate-reluctant-washington)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Qatari Visit to Iran Suggests Possible Policy Breakthroughs](#)

May 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/qatari-visit-iran-suggests-possible-policy-breakthroughs)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The KRG Turns Thirty: The Future of U.S.-Kurdish Relations in Iraq](#)

May 17, 2022, starting at 1:00 p.m. EDT (1700 GMT)



Vance Serchuk,
Amberin Zaman,
Bilal Wahab

(/policy-analysis/kg-turns-thirty-future-us-kurdish-relations-iraq)

TOPICS

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Great Power Competition (/policy-analysis/great-power-competition)

Gulf & Energy Policy (/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)