

Russia's Disinformation Machine Has a Middle East Advantage

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Articles & Testimony

The region has been most receptive to Moscow's war narrative, which Russian state-run media outlets have been permitted to spread far and wide with no Ukrainian or Western counter-narrative.

Over a year into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the group of countries directly aligned with Moscow remains a motley handful of lackeys and vassals, including Aleksandr Lukashenko's Belarus and Bashar al-Assad's Syria. Just six countries voted with Moscow against the U.N. General Assembly's [anniversary resolution \(https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-politics-china-united-nations-6965d19c953c2f6e45f483c1dfe04a7f\)](#) calling for Russian withdrawal, compared with 141 that voted for it. By this measure, the effort to isolate Russian President Vladimir Putin on the world stage has been a great success.

But such votes can be deceiving. The Middle East is a prime example. Conversations with elites in many Middle East capitals—influential diplomats, government officials, journalists, and businesspeople—reveal a surprising appreciation for Russia's position, including sympathy for Putin's argument that Russia was forced to act to avoid encirclement by NATO. In addition, the Arab Youth Survey 2022, conducted by the Dubai-based PR consultancy firm ASDA'A BCW, [found \(https://arabyouthsurvey.com/en/findings/#my-global-citizenship-10\)](#) that more young Arabs (aged 18-24) blame the United States and NATO, rather than Russia, for the war in Ukraine.

There are several reasons so many of Washington's traditional friends in the Middle East are, at best, ambivalent about the Ukraine war. Some of this has to do with their own sense of abandonment by the United States in their hour of need, a common complaint of [Saudis \(https://www.arabnews.com/node/2174446/middle-east\)](#) and [Emiratis \(https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/experts-react-iran-backed-houthis-launch-drone-attack-in-abu-dhabi/\)](#) who, like Ukraine, have been on the receiving end of Iranian drones—but not, in their view, the same massive showing of U.S. support.

Some relates to the fact that Washington—which was willing to send more than half a million U.S. soldiers, sailors, and airmen to liberate Kuwait a generation ago—considers it a heavy lift today to send arms and ammunition to support the Ukrainians fighting their own battle, suggesting there is scant chance the United States would ever again send its young men and women to protect a distant Arab state.

Some of this is born of the perception that Russia is the strong horse, more comfortable wielding power than Washington—evidenced by Putin's willingness to prop up his ally in Damascus after former U.S. President Barack Obama [balked \(https://www.vox.com/2018/4/15/17238568/syria-bomb-trump-obama-russia\)](#) at the use of force despite promising to punish Syria for using chemical weapons against innocent civilians. And, especially common in Cairo salons, is nostalgia for the days when Russia was the prime supplier of weaponry at a time, decades ago, when Egypt was an Arab colossus.

These ideas, however, did not take root all by themselves. The missing ingredient that brought these ideas home to so many in the Arab world is the pervasiveness of Russia's disinformation outlets.

Years before the Ukraine invasion, the Russian state-owned media outlets RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic [emerged \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-arabic-propaganda-what-it-why-it-matters\)](#) as major sources of legitimate regional news in the Middle East. In the West, RT's and Sputnik's sister outlets never had the same degree of credibility and, with the start of the war, they were either [banned \(https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-60584092\)](#) outright, as was RT's fate in Britain, or chose to [shut down \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?bX35I6AnprjLFkTBkeRgLBw00CnV0kMwQdCmNUy_tqXKmo3TGZLFkttf2YiovoVF3advF4Jjt067PCs6mJK5UFCWA40jDmYKtWMUd-S3qXcApj7s55h0Kv6EvaY0UXkDw8TZy6JvrX7VJ5cRt1rx3_RPCS4XPvAJWc9Z4W5LH50M-\)](#) due to “unforeseen business interruption events,” as happened to RT America after satellite TV provider DirecTV and streaming company Roku both dropped the channel in 2022.

But in the Middle East, Russian state-run media have retained full access to airwaves throughout the Ukraine crisis, enabling the Kremlin to propagate its [narrative \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?bKKLFQqY2nJtm42LGu-dIA5W3m1Bv6Up1ITpCGLhwvc2n-QjLahCiU5c0Azuo54nFSMQGm-SabKACn1KnpTmPuxlmyVIH2y4zzaik2S7hm65tn4k4gS84pBTcp-cvDH\)](#) on the war via [regional \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?bnXW116_rXyAcuk-levEIQRv_8ztowhN8TmIGvGjSRXfQWh9lpWr91yaTLzxf-dTgYEC1CBCmvKaAxH7VopQeFweo7eu790nFvPHxjs_TD9yOMBkslljesogfywAa882\)](#) media. And Moscow knows its audience in the Middle East well. It routinely frames the war as a Russian challenge to the U.S.-led hegemonic order, an argument that plays well in many Arab capitals.

For example, the Arabic news aggregator [Nabd \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?bWzKWRwZ3QZyMrSHR0WuZ48kdWREt4Rhn8H_ddq0_poPz64ZGspdaeFkpn7GoTebEr5YtDrbP3FcPAfPyrvtvXg--\)](#) frequently reposts RT Arabic articles. The European Union's [disinformation database \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?bMrY-ol-yAVrVIC_FVip5Gd7uFwzXouFuByMGo41dYgINBFAUKlo0Dom36KW5QBm0Ce646ub5I9pC95L5n9pWODWoFtnOhqLtnqFxAHalenetrvVtJtep7THHmdlzGAEhm3jVQW9HkfyIvofW4mEIZCzONXzc8W5B85oU-\)](#) offers an extensive record of RT Arabic reposting across regional media, at Nabd and other sites. The headlines are as typical as they are illustrative: “The West and US not interested in supporting Ukraine but weakening Russia,” “Washington's mission is to limit the growth of its European and Asian partners,” “Ukraine is forced to fight on behalf of NATO,” and so on. These Russian-sourced articles—even cartoons—eventually made their way into the Arab media, without reference to their origin.

The impact has been real and powerful. Time and again, in private conversations with Arab interlocutors, I heard echoes of the Kremlin's favorite propaganda lines: Russia was provoked by NATO enlargement; Russia-Ukraine history is “complicated”; and the United States, which invaded Iraq without cause, has no standing to criticize Russian action in Ukraine.

Diplomatically, these sentiments have translated into repeated calls by regional officials, including those of the [UAE \(https://uaeun.org/statement/uae-unsuc-ukraine-27sept/\)](#) and [Iraq \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/un-resolution-ukraine-how-did-middle-east-vote\)](#), for peaceful negotiations to resolve the Ukraine-Russia crisis, a non-accusatory alternative to condemning Russia for its unprovoked aggression. To give another example, immediately after the invasion, the Arab League issued a [statement](#)

(<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2033381/middle-east>) that expressed “great concern” over the situation in Ukraine and called for “all efforts aimed at resolving the crisis through dialogue and diplomacy,” without naming Russia as the aggressor.

Economically, Russia’s information offensive has scored a victory in convincing Arab capitals not to join Western sanctions regimes, with some Middle East states (chiefly [Turkey](https://www.wsj.com/articles/russias-ukraine-war-effort-fueled-by-turkish-exports-11675447477) (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/russias-ukraine-war-effort-fueled-by-turkish-exports-11675447477>) and the UAE (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-02-03/us-warns-turkey-on-export-controlled-goods-sent-to-russia#xj4y7vzkg>)) even registering increases in their bilateral trade with Moscow in a year when the West was pushing to isolate Russia.

If this is the situation after year one of the war, imagine how much worse it will be as the war continues. Because the United States and its allies have largely succeeded in getting most world leaders to vote the way they want in the U.N. General Assembly, they believe they are winning the battle of narratives. But in much of the world—including important places such as India, South Africa, and much of the Middle East—Russia is faring better than they probably think. And with another year of disinformation and propaganda masquerading as news and analysis, sympathy for Moscow’s position will only spread.

Helping Ukraine achieve a victory on the battlefield is the swiftest and surest way to ensure Moscow doesn’t deepen its hold over Arab hearts and minds. But as the West settles in for a protracted war, there is much still to be done to counter Russia’s deceptive narrative and compete with its warped media outlets. The West needs to seize the initiative in countering Russian disinformation in the Middle East and broadcast its own vision clearly to the region.

A battle for narratives has always been an inseparable part of warfare. Effectively countering Russian narratives outside the liberal world is a key missing piece of Western efforts to support Ukraine. Past EU practices of countering disinformation can be useful, so there is no need to reinvent the wheel entirely. But the Middle East presents its own unique challenges.

For example, more than Europe, the Middle East needs stronger journalism training programs and improved access to outside information tools. This could include increased funding for outlets such as VOA Arabic and BBC Arabic, as well as effective ways to get the Western—including, in particular, the Ukrainian—narrative into local media. Indeed, the region has yet to hear the Ukrainian narrative to the same degree it has heard the Russian one. Most of all, the West needs to think strategically and long term. Western leaders talk about isolating Russia globally, but they cannot achieve this goal without discrediting the Kremlin’s narrative where it resonates most.

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