

Ukraine Can Help Dismantle Russia's Influence in the Middle East

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With strategic Western support on grain deliveries, embassy staffing, counter-messaging, and other initiatives, Ukraine can contribute much to rolling back Moscow's malign influence in the region.

The fall of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad has dealt a significant blow to Russia's ambitions in the Middle East. Yet Russia still retains influence across the region through trade, diplomacy, and military ties. Even now, Moscow maintains a presence in Syria, making it imperative for the West to capitalize on Russia's setback there and work to reduce its influence across the region. One way to achieve this is by supporting Ukraine's efforts to build stronger ties in the Middle East.

First, Ukraine can assist in rebuilding Syria, an effort Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has [expressed willingness \(https://kyivindependent.com/ukraine-can-help-restore-stability-in-syria-after-years-of-russian-interference-zelensky-says/\)](https://kyivindependent.com/ukraine-can-help-restore-stability-in-syria-after-years-of-russian-interference-zelensky-says/) to undertake. While much attention is given to the future of Russia's military presence in Syria, its commercial ties to the country are equally important.

The U.S. can support Ukrainian trade with Syria, starting with food. Until recently, Russia was the largest supplier of wheat to Syria—grain largely stolen from Ukraine. However, with the fall of Assad's regime, these shipments have been suspended, creating an ideal opening for Kyiv. Wheat could serve as a starting point for [expanded trade \(https://kyivindependent.com/ukraine-hits-24-5-billion-in-agro-exports-nearing-pre-war-levels-agriculture-ministry-reported/\)](https://kyivindependent.com/ukraine-hits-24-5-billion-in-agro-exports-nearing-pre-war-levels-agriculture-ministry-reported/), alongside the development of diplomatic, cultural, and potentially military ties between the two nations. Ukrainians have already [taken initial steps \(https://kyivindependent.com/ukraine-syria-discuss-russian-presence/\)](https://kyivindependent.com/ukraine-syria-discuss-russian-presence/) to build diplomatic relations with Syria, and a strengthened Ukrainian presence there could limit Russia's options beyond its military bases, should it manage to retain them.

Second, Ukraine can assist the West in countering **Russian narratives** (<https://kyivindependent.com/tag/disinformation/>) across the Middle East and Africa. Moscow's influence in these regions has been significant, helping explain why some Middle Eastern partners have not supported Western efforts to isolate Russia.

Ukrainians themselves acknowledge their failure to invest in the region, allowing Russian propaganda to take root. In private conversations, Ukrainian officials have admitted to this misstep, but they are now taking steps to change it, including opening more embassies across the Middle East and Africa. The West can support Ukraine in these efforts, helping the region understand Ukraine's position.

Building meaningful relationships in the Middle East has proven challenging for Ukraine, and here the West can play a crucial role. Kyiv lacks sufficient diplomats to staff its embassies, and the West can help build Ukraine's diplomatic capacity. Moreover, Ukrainians would benefit from Western guidance in navigating the region's complex cultural landscape to craft more effective messaging. Kyiv urgently needs personnel capable of engaging with the region. In addition to diplomatic and cultural training, Ukrainians could collaborate with Western governments to establish a more prominent media presence as a counterbalance to outlets like RT Arabic and Sputnik.

Lastly, Ukraine can share its experience with Iran as part of its increased engagement with the Middle East, assisting Arab partners (and Israel) in countering Iranian influence. After Russia's use of Iranian drones in Ukraine and Iran's supply of short-range ballistic missiles to Russia, Ukraine has gained valuable insights into dealing with Iran. These lessons could benefit audiences in the region, and the West can help shape this engagement, highlighting the similarities between Ukraine's fight against Russia and Middle Eastern efforts to push back against Iran's malign activities.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has underscored the interconnectedness of the Middle East and European theaters. Western support for Ukraine can help Kyiv secure new revenue to fund its fight against Russia, as well as bolster its credibility in the Muslim world.

A greater Ukrainian presence in the Middle East will offer multiple benefits for the West, contributing to a shift in the regional power balance in its favor and countering Russia's influence. Ukrainians understand that victory over Russia requires expanding their influence beyond Europe. The West has every reason to empower them in this effort in the Middle East.

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