

A Russian Win in Ukraine Would Be a U.S. Loss in the Middle East

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Brief Analysis

With preparatory peace talks in full swing and the war set to enter its fourth year, Washington must take a pragmatic approach to enlisting Arab help and ensuring that the outcome does not empower Moscow and Iran.

February 24 marks the third anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which from Moscow's perspective was always a global battle with the United States and the broader West over competing visions of the world order. In Russia's view, the preferred order is a world divided between great powers that have the right to act with impunity in their spheres of influence.

Western nations imposed heavy costs for this unprovoked aggression, but not heavy enough. Because they did not isolate Russia globally, Moscow found sufficient resources abroad to sustain the war effort—perhaps most crucially in the Middle East. In seeking resources and influence in the region, Moscow moved closer to Iran and its proxies and actively **fueled (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/countering-russias-strategy-arming-anti-american-proxies>)** chaos in various locales to distract and undermine the West. Meanwhile, America's regional partners have been ambivalent or worse in their approach to the war, pursuing their own interests and offering only limited assistance, if any.

Indeed, the Trump administration's decision to center its initial Ukraine diplomacy on the Middle East speaks volumes about the region's importance to both the war and broader European security. Earlier today, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov met in Saudi Arabia, where President Trump **eventually expects (<https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/5141580-trump-putin-meet-saudi-arabia/>)** to hold his first Ukraine meeting with Vladimir Putin. Meanwhile, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky is **planning a tour (<https://www.barrons.com/articles/zelensky-says-visiting-uae-saudi-arabia-turkey-soon-ac3387ee>)** to Riyadh, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey, though it remains unclear if Washington will include him in its exploratory meetings with Russia.

Superficial Condemnation, Divergent Priorities

Broadly speaking, Middle Eastern governments offered only superficial condemnation of Russia's invasion at international forums, such as voting in favor of nonbinding resolutions at the UN General Assembly. In other forums, they were even more circumspect. Immediately after the invasion, for example, the Arab League expressed "great concern" over the situation and called for "dialogue and diplomacy," without directly condemning Russia. By July 2024, key regional states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the UAE **were abstaining** (https://x.com/UN_News_Centre/status/1811500642847932816/photo/2) even from General Assembly **votes** (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/07/1152016>) that demanded an unconditional Russian withdrawal.

Moreover, when Middle Eastern partners failed to support Western sanctions on Russia, there was no cost—the United States did not impose penalties on them, and they saw no benefit to confronting Moscow on their own accord. In private, regional officials repeatedly noted their desire to stay out of the war and continue balancing good relations with both Washington and Russia, which they perceived as another great power alongside China. In addition to prioritizing their own pragmatic interests, some regional officials felt Washington was being hypocritical for rushing to Ukraine's aid but not doing as much for Middle Eastern partners in their time of need.

Meanwhile, Russia's narrative about the war **resonated deeply** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-disinformation-machine-has-middle-east-advantage>) across the Arab world, and regional interest in Russian weaponry persisted. Further arms purchases have been held back only by U.S. sanctions and concerns that Moscow could not deliver on existing contracts. Russia's poor military performance in Ukraine has not gone unnoticed in the Middle East, but the weapons that have been least effective—such as tanks and armored fighting vehicles—are not Russia's primary exports to the region. Rather, Middle Eastern customers are most keen on buying aircraft, aircraft engines, and missiles, which have performed relatively well in Ukraine.

As the war continued, Arab states became more concerned about the threat posed by Russia's deepening relationship with Iran. Rather than challenge Moscow on this front, however, they chose accommodation—in part because they view the United States as an inconstant partner. This pattern was evident years before the invasion of Ukraine. After Russia entrenched itself in Syria, for example, Saudi Arabia **increased engagement** (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2017-10-10/will-russian-saudi-relations-continue-improve>) with Moscow and offered it economic incentives in the (ultimately vain) hope of peeling it away from Iran.

Mediation and Humanitarian Assistance

As part of their strategy of not taking sides in the war, the Gulf states have repeatedly positioned themselves as mediators between Moscow and Kyiv. Saudi Arabia has led the way, facilitating a major prisoner exchange in September 2022, providing over \$400 million in humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, and hosting an international peace summit in August 2023. Similarly, the UAE brokered an exchange of 180 prisoners in June 2024, then **negotiated** (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uae-brokers-massive-russia-ukraine-prisoner-swap-new-years>) the transfer of 300 more at year's end. And Qatar has **provided** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/qatar-provide-ukraine-with-100-mln-humanitarian-aid-kyiv-2023-07-28/>) over \$100 million in humanitarian assistance to Ukraine to support health, education, demining, and, most recently, the "Grain from Ukraine" program, which **aims** ([https://mofa.gov.qa/en/qatar/latest-articles/latest-news/details/1444/05/02/qatar-contributes-\\$20-million-for-humanitarian-program-to-help-african-countries](https://mofa.gov.qa/en/qatar/latest-articles/latest-news/details/1444/05/02/qatar-contributes-$20-million-for-humanitarian-program-to-help-african-countries)) to help African countries acquire wheat and other goods from Kyiv.

Indeed, the war has made the Middle East and North Africa **especially vulnerable** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mena-countries-stand-lose-most-if-ukraine-grain-initiative-falters>) to food insecurity. In tandem with the UN, Turkey helped broker the important Black Sea Grain

Initiative early in the conflict, which helped mitigate the resultant global food crisis. Yet the deal collapsed in July 2023 when Russia pulled out. Moreover, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has often used such mediation to play a delicate balancing act between Ukraine, Russia, and NATO, while seeking to enhance his domestic position in the process.

Emphasis on Commercial Ties with Russia

Far from sanctioning Russia, the Arab world and Turkey have deepened their commercial ties with Moscow over the past three years, especially leading energy producers Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This has helped the Kremlin generate additional revenue to fund its war. For example:

- Turkey and the UAE emerged as top destinations for sanctioned Russian oligarchs.
- Russia-Turkey trade continued to grow during the war, with Erdogan reaffirming (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/07/erdogan-meets-dear-friend-putin-russia-turkey-eye-cooperation-syria>) his commitment to increase bilateral trade from \$55 billion to \$100 billion.
- Russia-Egypt trade reportedly reached (<https://tvbrics.com/en/news/russia-egypt-trade-surges-to-us-8-billion-in-2024-as-economic-ties-strengthen/>) a new milestone of \$8 billion last year, a more than twofold increase from \$2.9 billion in 2022.
- Russia-UAE trade has increased nearly sixfold in the past five years according to official Russian statistics (<https://forumspb.com/en/news/news/fond-roskongress-i-iti-proveli-issledovanie-potentsiala-sotrudnichestva-rossii-i-oae-k-pmef-23/>). By early 2023, the UAE had risen from forty-first to eighth among Russia's export markets, with trade reaching (<https://tass.com/economy/1814515>) \$11.4 billion. Late last year, Putin personally highlighted (<https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/106835/>) this growth, while senior official Mikhail Ivanov declared (<https://www.wam.ae/article/b61k4f1-russias-deputy-minister-industry-and-trade>) that the UAE was Russia's largest trade partner in the Middle East and North Africa, especially in the energy sector. The West has been particularly concerned (<https://www.reuters.com/world/us-allies-press-uae-over-russia-trade-sanctions-2024-05-01/>) about the UAE's trade of dual-use goods that support Russia's defense industrial base, such as computer chips, electronics, and other sanctioned products. In December, Abu Dhabi finalized (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-12-11/uae-finalizes-pact-to-boost-trade-with-nations-including-russia>) an economic agreement with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, signaling even deeper commercial cooperation on a strategic level.
- Saudi Arabia has indirectly undermined Western sanctions by coordinating with Russia on oil issues, including production cuts (<https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/06/business/oil-price-goldman-sachs/index.html>) that kept oil prices high and provided additional revenue for Russia's war machine.

Policy Recommendations

President Trump's desire to resolve the Ukraine war and his administration's proactive efforts to get that process started quickly are laudable. Yet the manner in which the war is concluded will have a direct impact on U.S. interests in the Middle East, among other consequences. If Russia emerges as the winner, America's credibility and global leadership will be diminished, and regional leaders will have additional incentive to court Moscow as the more reliable partner. Putin will also have far more time and resources to devote to the Middle East—including arms deliveries—as well as more avenues to undermine U.S. interests there. Because enlisting regional support for Ukraine and against Moscow has been such a challenge, Washington should focus on pragmatic mutual interests when talking to partners about efforts to forestall the worst outcomes of a Russian victory.

For example, a Russian win could diminish the U.S. position on future Iran nuclear negotiations, despite the fact that Tehran's power projection capabilities have been severely diminished over the past year. Going forward,

Washington should realize that Moscow and Tehran must be treated as one strategic set—if either of them is empowered, the other will be empowered as well. Although the fall of Syria’s Assad regime was a major failure for them, the relationship between Iran and Russia now stretches beyond that front. To be sure, some friction is still evident, as seen in a [recently leaked speech \(https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Iranian-Commander-Discusses-the-State-of-the-Axis-of-Resistance.pdf?x85095\)](https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Iranian-Commander-Discusses-the-State-of-the-Axis-of-Resistance.pdf?x85095) by senior Iranian military officer Behrouz Esbati implicating Russia in Syria’s collapse. Yet Moscow and Tehran also [signed \(https://irangov.ir/detail/456479\)](https://irangov.ir/detail/456479) a comprehensive strategic partnership treaty last month that includes strengthening their defense cooperation.

Washington should emphasize these Iran-related points to its partners. It should also take advantage of the current window of opportunity to engage in post-Assad Syria and prevent Russia’s resurgence there, especially since Moscow is not out of the game yet and still has cards to play in Damascus. U.S. action on Syria would send a signal across the region that Moscow is not the reliable partner it claims to be, reaffirming the message conveyed by Putin’s abandonment of Bashar al-Assad. Although Trump’s recent [trade wars \(https://apnews.com/article/trump-tariffs-reciprocal-imports-tax-trade-economy-54c0a26687dc96157d96229068894720\)](https://apnews.com/article/trump-tariffs-reciprocal-imports-tax-trade-economy-54c0a26687dc96157d96229068894720) and ongoing economic uncertainty may inadvertently give regional partners other reasons to move closer to Russia (and China), the most important thing the United States can do is ensure that Ukraine wins.

Crucially, U.S. officials must acknowledge that no such victory can be declared—let alone achieved—without safeguarding the security of Ukraine and Europe. This means demonstrating that Russia has failed to subjugate Ukraine, and that it has paid a heavy price for its invasion. The former goal requires establishing security conditions under which (1) Russia can never attack Ukraine again, and (2) Ukraine can remain a strong, independent, democratic nation. Even more than seizing territory, Moscow aims to keep Ukraine destabilized and vulnerable to its influence. With peace talks imminent, the regional and global order is at a critical inflection point, and U.S. officials should structure their negotiating points accordingly.

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