

# Russia's Defense Ties in the Middle East Poised to Rebound

by [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](/experts/anna-borshchevskaya), [Matt Tavares \(/experts/matt-tavares\)](/experts/matt-tavares)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](/experts/anna-borshchevskaya)

Anna Borshchevskaya is the Harold Grinspoon Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.

### [Matt Tavares \(/experts/matt-tavares\)](/experts/matt-tavares)

Matt Tavares is a former analyst for the Pentagon, focusing on Russian military strategy and U.S. foreign policy.



Articles & Testimony

**Demand for Russian weapons has hardly disappeared—MENA officials would see even a limited or temporary Ukraine deal as a green light to quickly take advantage of Moscow's new supply chains, so Washington should prepare accordingly.**

Russia's defense relationships in the Middle East and North Africa have been gravely weakened as a result of its war in Ukraine. However, a peace deal, sanctions relief, or even a lengthy ceasefire could provide Russia with an opportunity to resume arms sales and security assistance to the Middle East, Africa, and the Indo-Pacific. The West may be surprised at the speed with which its traditional partners in the Middle East and North Africa will seek such normalization with Russia. Washington should prepare now to block Russia's potential return.

## The Middle East Remains Interested

Prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Moscow was the second largest arms supplier to the Middle East. It is now [third \(https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/fs\\_2503\\_at\\_2024\\_0.pdf\)](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/fs_2503_at_2024_0.pdf). Russia faced a number of constraints to its ability to supply arms: Western sanctions, export controls, Russia's exclusion from the SWIFT payment system, and Russia's own shift towards supporting its forces in Ukraine. As a result, in a region already prone to diversifying defense sales among multiple great powers, the Middle East and North Africa increasingly seek alternative suppliers for their stocks of Russian-manufactured defense equipment. The fall of Syria's Bashar al-Asad last December further weakened Russia's defense sales in the region.

Nevertheless, countries in the region remain interested in Russian weapons. In private, senior officials in the region

note that Western sanctions and Russia's inability to deliver on existing contracts is what has reduced Russia's arms exports. In other words, demand for Russia's arms hasn't disappeared. Some might point out that Russian weaponry performed poorly in Ukraine, but the weapons Russia exports to the region—chiefly aircraft, aircraft engines and missiles—continue to perform well, or well enough to satisfy their price point.

## Russia's Defense Industrial Base Remains Durable

Russia's entire economy is now geared towards military production. In private, Western officials acknowledge that Russia now produces more munitions than all NATO members combined. Over the last two years, the Russian defense industry **has built** (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/trade-data-reveal-the-inner-workings-of-russia-and-chinas-defense-industrial-cooperation/>) entire new supply chains to overcome sanctions while in conflict. Russia shifted production internally, and **found new subcontractors** (<https://kyivindependent.com/china-supplying-chemicals-gunpowder-machine-tools-to-russian-military-factories-ukraines-foreign-intelligence-chief-says/>) in China to rapidly ramp up production of drones and precision-strike munitions such as the Geran 2 and 3, hundreds of which now attack Ukraine every day. Indeed, sanctions have hurt the Russian economy, but not enough to force the Kremlin to make concessions to end the war.

Russian soldiers at the frontline continue to be trained and equipped, supported by an increasingly diverse array of communications equipment, and defended from drone attacks by electronic warfare systems. The majority of the Russian armed forces remain relatively untouched by the war, and have learned valuable, if costly, campaign lessons that will be applied to future warfare. Despite the loss or damage of nearly half of the Russian Black Sea fleet, the Russian Navy remains quite capable, and even continues to **produce new ships and modernize** (<https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/01/russian-navy-new-ships-milestones-in-december-2024/>) while simultaneously embroiled in conflict.

## Russia Will Be Able to Offer More Postwar

Russia has a real opportunity to emerge from the war with Ukraine with far more to offer to potential arms buyers in the Middle East than before the war. It will have a strong industrial base oriented towards external customers. In a post-war scenario, Russia will likely be one of the top countries in the world for inexpensive one-way attack drones and precision-strike munitions, and with a defense industry ramped up and hungry for new contracts abroad after years of continuous warfare and **associated defense** (<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/winning-industrial-war-comparing-russia-europe-and-ukraine-2022-24>) industry surges to increase capacity.

The downturn in Russia's global arms sales won't last once the fighting ends or takes a pause. Based on production rates, over the last two years of war, Russia's defense industrial base **has only grown stronger** ([https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/general\\_cavoli\\_opening\\_statements.pdf#page=4](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/general_cavoli_opening_statements.pdf#page=4)) and is now capable of churning out certain weapon systems at even higher rates than pre-war, while developing entirely new classes of arms to support Russia's military operations. For example, Russia is now able to produce more missiles than pre-war and to produce tanks in excess of their attrition in combat. Russia has transformed Iranian one-way attack drones into the Geran 2 and now Geran 3 at a blistering clip. Furthermore, a variety of Russian weapon systems that failed during the initial stages of the war have been continuously tweaked to improve their success in combat.

Potential arms buyers in the region have taken notice. Multiple African countries continue to consider a broader relationship with Russia; countries like Algeria will need Russia to maintain their largely Russian-supplied military hardware. Recent improvements in Russia's relationship with Sudan's Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, after jettisoning their previous preferred Sudanese partner, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as "Hemedti"), have allowed Russia to keep a toehold in Sudan, and **reportedly** (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c30del8dz51o>) secure the long sought

goal of a Russian naval port in the Red Sea. Libya is reportedly a target for Russia to replace its Mediterranean naval base in Syria.

## A US Potential Counter

There is also an opportunity for the US at present: Ukraine is well positioned to counter Russia in the region. Prior to the war, Ukraine's military industry was arguably the most competitive replacement to Russian sources of arms in the world. Like Russia, Ukraine will likely emerge from the war with one of the most innovative arms industries in Europe and with significant expertise in modernizing and maintaining Russian equipment. Given European and American investments, Ukraine will have increased capacity in its defense industry. For countries with significant Russian equipment but hesitant to renew relations with Russia, Ukraine provides a ready alternative that avoids some of the regulatory and end-monitor burdens inherent in purchasing Western equipment.

To be sure, the Kremlin shows no interest in ending the war, the Ukrainians won't simply capitulate, and the war is unlikely to end anytime soon. But the US can act now to better position itself in the Middle East arms markets by facilitating a push for Ukrainian technology and preventing further Russian profit-making for its arms industry. As the US defense industry adapts to the revolution in military technology created by Russia's war against Ukraine, particularly at the low-end of the technology spectrum, it should free the US defense industry to compete against Russian suppliers in difficult markets. Regardless of how the war in Ukraine plays out, taking action now to compete with Russia will only serve US interests.

*Anna Borshchevskaya is the Harold Grinspoon Senior Fellow in The Washington Institute's Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East. Matt Tavares is a former analyst for the Pentagon, focusing on Russian military strategy. This article was originally published [on the Jerusalem Strategic Tribune website \(https://jstribune.com/borshchevskaya-tavares-russias-defense-ties-in-the-middle-east/\)](https://jstribune.com/borshchevskaya-tavares-russias-defense-ties-in-the-middle-east/). ❖*

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