Russia, the Iran War, and the Middle East

by Keith Kellogg **(/experts/keith-kellogg)** , Anna Borshchevskaya **(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya)** , Matthew Tavares **(/experts/matthew-tavares)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Keith Kellogg (/experts/keith-kellogg)

Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Joseph "Keith" Kellogg has served Senior National Security Advisor and Assistant to President Trump, National Security Advisor to Vice President Pence, and Special Presidential Envoy for Ukraine.



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.



Matthew Tavares (/experts/matthew-tavares)

Matt Tavares is a former Defense Department official with two decades of experience in U.S. national security affairs.

Brief Analysis

Former senior U.S. defense officials join a Russia expert to discuss how the Iran crisis is shaping Moscow's military, political, and economic ambitions in the region.

On July 9, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Matthew Tavares, Keith Kellogg, and Anna Borshchevskaya. Tavares is a former Pentagon official with two decades of experience in U.S. national security affairs. Kellogg is a highly decorated U.S. Army officer who

*has served as special presidential envoy for Ukraine and senior national security advisor to the president, among other posts. 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, and coauthor (with Tavares) of its 2026 report "**After Ukraine: Prospects for a Russian Resurgence in the Middle East (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/after-ukraine-prospects-russian-resurgence-middle-east)**." The event was moderated by veteran journalist and author Christian Caryl. The following is a rapporteurs' summary of their remarks.*

Matthew Tavares

Russian equipment may be cheap and no match against U.S. airpower, but many countries without a competitive air force or proper defense will still elect to purchase S-300 and S-400 missile systems from Moscow. Most such customers are not looking to field a force capable of defeating combined U.S.-Israeli strikes.

Moreover, despite the allied demonstration of unmatched air superiority over Iranian systems, Tehran and Moscow both have a defense industrial base designed to defeat the United States in these types of conflicts. A war of attrition like the current one advantages the adversary—in this case, Tehran's forces can rely on Shahed drones to conduct attacks with no footprint, disguise themselves from overhead imagery, and externalize their industrial base.

On the flip side, Ukraine can play a key role in reducing Russia's regional influence by providing counter-drone technologies and assistance. This has been proven during the Iran war—after multiple Iranian attacks on the Gulf states, Ukrainian defense officials led the allied outreach to these governments aimed at crafting anti-drone assistance agreements. In many cases, Kyiv can replace the defense-material assistance that Russia currently provides by taking on government contracts for deploying and maintaining weapons systems and fighting vehicles. If this shift takes place, the momentum behind multiple Russian regional relationships could slow.

Although Moscow's defense sales and outreach to the Middle East have been suppressed because of the Ukraine war, it is important to think about how these relationships might revive and expand once that conflict ends. Prior to the war, the Russian defense industry was among the state's primary levers in many Middle East countries. Today, the industry remains a main arm of the state, producing 4,000–5,000 Shahed drones a month. The prewar Russian corporate imperative could quickly become a diplomatic imperative, strengthening the Kremlin's resolve in the Middle East.

Various countries want to avoid doing business with Russia because of the Ukraine war, but once that barrier is removed, they will presumably see that Moscow's weapons systems are not only low cost and battle-tested, but also free from end-use monitoring—a major competitive advantage. Some Middle East countries are already responding to the Iran war and U.S. policy inconsistencies by diversifying their weapons suppliers, including prospective purchases from Russia and China. Washington should think carefully about reforming its acquisitions and Foreign Military Sales programs in order to remain attractive to Moscow's potential customers in the region.

Notably, the Russians have taken serious foreign policy blows in both Ukraine and Syria, and in each case proven able to walk it off. In fact, Moscow could lose both of its bases in Syria tomorrow and still be able to pivot elsewhere. Russia retains a slew of options in the Middle East and beyond; Washington and its allies need to understand that Moscow can shift direction more quickly than they realize, and make shrewd policy decisions in the face of setbacks.

Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Joseph "Keith" Kellogg

Russia's global role and reputation have steadily deteriorated since the beginning of the Ukraine war in 2022, and the Iran war has delivered another hit. Russian technology in Tehran's hands has failed to withstand American kinetic action, eroding confidence and reducing the appetite for Russian influence in the Middle East. Given that both wars remain unresolved, Middle East countries will continue to hedge their bets. Yet after many Iranian attacks on Gulf countries executed with Russian assistance, these states especially will be apt to rethink their Russia policy.

Ukraine's successful yearslong defense against Russian aggression has revealed Moscow's diminished power. Now in the fifth year of war, Russia lacks military or diplomatic strength and grows weaker economically by the day. Nor can it dictate global policy as did the Soviet Union, instead being consigned to a spoiler role.

Russia's potentially disruptive role in U.S.-Turkey relations bears mention. In 2017, Turkey purchased the S-400 missile defense system from Russia, creating strains in its strong, historic alliance with the United States. Washington has in turn shown unease about the long-suspended sale of F-35 fighters to Ankara, specifically over the prospect that they might fall under Russian control.

As the Russian role wanes, Ukraine finds itself poised to become a military and economic powerhouse. The country has distinguished itself for quick production of defense material, sometimes on a six-month timeline, perhaps offering a model for a less bloated U.S. defense-industrial base. Even as it fights Russia at home, Ukraine is also countering Russian interests in the Sahel, thus honing its defensive abilities and strategic thinking. Gulf countries are already looking to Ukraine for military partnerships, and President Volodymyr Zelensky has been a vigorous advocate of such arrangements.

In its diminished role as a regional power, Russia's main points of leverage are its nuclear weapons and oil economy. A country as strong as Russia claims to be would not require support from North Korean troops, as Moscow has sought, and U.S. narratives that inflate Russian strength based on the Soviet legacy can encourage fear-based policymaking prone to mistakes. A greater sense of realism, by contrast, could further boost the American position with respect to Russia. China poses a greater threat than Russia and therefore should be the focal point for America and its allies.

Anna Borshchevskaya

There is no indication that Russia is disengaging from the Middle East. Viewed through a wider lens, Moscow's regional strategy is considerably more sophisticated than mere alliance on Iran. In postrevolutionary Syria, for example, the consensus that Russia suffered a lasting defeat turned out to be a narrow reading. Russia's relationship with former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was never the real objective but instead a means of positioning Russia as a counterweight to the United States. That is why Russia has kept its foothold in Syria even after Assad's fall, retaining its bases in a way the United States never managed to do after withdrawing from South Vietnam.

Russia's broader approach to the region does not resemble the old Soviet playbook. Leaders in Moscow have studied the USSR's failures closely and adjusted accordingly. Rather than trying to replace the United States as a security guarantor, Russia is playing a patient, multi-track game aimed at eroding American influence, with arms sales one tool among several. Tellingly, the region has not moved to isolate Russia over its invasion of Ukraine. At best, Middle East states have been ambivalent, and some relationships—notably, with the United Arab Emirates and Turkey—have actually deepened over the past four years, extending well beyond military ties into trade.

Regional hedging has consequences for the war in Ukraine, which has evolved from a European into a global conflict exposing deep ties between Europe and the Middle East. Gulf states, unconstrained by Western sanctions, have kept engaging Russia commercially, including on dual-use technology that has helped sustain its war effort. Abu Dhabi could buy technology from almost any state, yet it still does business with Moscow, a sign that no regional country wants to be the one picking a side against Russia. Until Russia's resources are meaningfully depleted, this dynamic will likely prolong the fighting.

Energy and food security gives Russia further leverage. Moscow is bidding on Saudi Arabia's first commercial nuclear power plant, and its role in OPEC+ keeps it central to Gulf energy calculations even amid the war. Russia has also become one of the world's top fertilizer producers, positioning itself as a guarantor of global food security rather than just an oil exporter. Russia's relationship with Israel follows a similarly careful logic. Neither side wants a bilateral crisis, and Russia's Jewish population gives Moscow a point of leverage with Jerusalem. Syria remains a shared concern, with Israel watching Russia's role there as one balancing force among several on its border.

Russia has a long history of rebounding from losses and rebuilding ties even with former adversaries, as illustrated by its recent recognition of the Taliban, a historically anti-Russian group. That pattern argues for taking the long view of Russian behavior rather than judging it day to day. Whatever the outcome in Ukraine, the United States should expect a Russia that remains angry, unrepentant, and a persistent challenge across the Middle East for years to come.

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