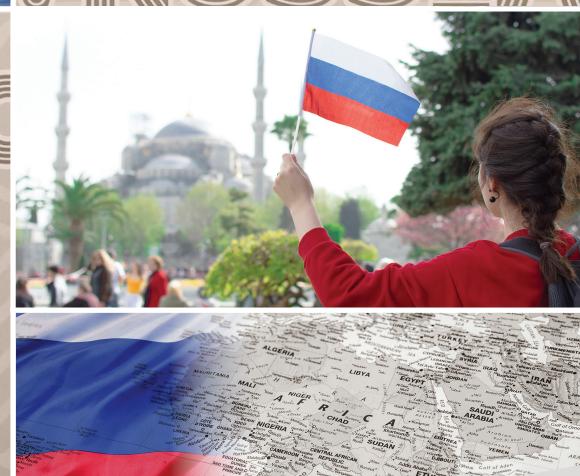




After Ukraine

Prospects for a Russian Resurgence in the Middle East

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Images include Egyptian President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the 2024 BRICS summit in Kazan, a Russia House cultural center in Syria, and a woman holding a Russian flag in Istanbul.
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Russia maintains influence in the Middle East, despite geopolitical upheavals since late 2024. What is more, Moscow could widen its regional footprint if the war in Ukraine pauses or ends, or if the United States moves toward normalization of ties with Russia.

Three recent developments pointed to the possibility of Russia losing influence: the fall of Moscow-backed Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, the weakening of Kremlin-allied Iran and its proxies, and Russia's continued war against Ukraine. To be sure, Russia has not remained unaffected by these developments, but its general resilience has frustrated Western hopes for a rebalancing.

Russia has retained clout in the region for several reasons Western actors may not have appreciated:

- Pent-up demand for Russian equipment and military items developed to support the war in Ukraine will yield a ready list of buyers across the region.
- Grievances against the United States, centered on its perceived unreliable or hypocritical behavior toward the developing world, will create opportunities for Moscow to enhance its political influence.
- Russia's role in the energy market and economic forums, such as BRICS,¹ supports Moscow's larger objectives of diminishing American influence in favor of a multipolar world, or "polycentric" world in Russian usage.²
- These levers of influence will create openings for Russia to increase information operations, including through regional media, and better project friendly Russian narratives across the Middle East.

The Assad regime is gone, and Iran and its proxies are severely degraded as a result of Israel's military offensives after the Hamas-led attack on October 7, 2023. Yet absent punitive postwar terms, Russia could emerge from the conflict with Ukraine in many ways stronger than before. While some may perceive Iran's weakening in the region as a setback for the Kremlin, this trend likely will not damage Russia's goal of realigning the world order under its umbrella

of influence. Moreover, the Iranian regime's weakness could produce greater dependence on Russia, thus strengthening the Kremlin over time.

Russia has maintained political, economic, and cultural ties to the Middle East over centuries. During the Cold War especially, Moscow prioritized military relationships to support ideologically aligned states. Up until now, this legacy has allowed Russia's foreign policy vision to transcend the region's geopolitical shifts.

According to Russia's vision, U.S. global dominance will give way to a reality of privileged spheres of influence for the respective great powers. This does not mean Russia seeks to replace the United States as the primary Middle East security guarantor any time soon. Rather, it means Russia wants to degrade Washington's influence by thwarting its work with partners, propping up U.S. adversaries in ways that drain U.S. resources, undermining American credibility, and presenting itself as a better alternative—or even an indispensable one on select issues. Some might mistake such moves as those of a mere spoiler, but the Kremlin has a darker, zero-sum outlook that includes the Middle East.

To ensure U.S. interests in the region, Washington should take the long view on Russia and position itself to compete for influence. Policy steps toward this end can focus on crafting a holistic approach to countering Russia—including a defense strategy toward the East Mediterranean—supporting partners in the region, and revisiting the use of sanctions.

The authors would like to thank Washington Institute experts Soner Cagaptay, Simon Henderson, Matthew Levitt, Richard Nephew, Noam Raydan, Grant Rumley, and Dana Stroul for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. They would also like to thank outside reviewer Jeff Edmonds and Institute research assistant Shivane Anand for their significant contributions. Finally, Anna Borshchevskaya would like to express her gratitude to Harold Grinspoon, the sponsor of her fellowship at the Institute.

Deep Historic Ties to the Region

From wars with the Ottoman and Persian Empires, to a search for warmwater ports, to the pursuit of economic, cultural, and religious ties, Russian leaders have long considered the Middle East a priority. They have forged a highly durable connection spanning the imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods—and this connection will undoubtedly outlast the presidency of Vladimir Putin.

During the Cold War, Soviet military advisors helped train and organize many of the post-colonial militaries across the developing world, including in Algeria, Egypt, and Syria. Today, those militaries carry the cultural legacies spawned during earlier years. Deep military-to-military links were strengthened through the supply of Soviet arms within larger packages of assistance, helping bolster Russian influence in the post-Soviet period.³ Even amid the current war in Ukraine, Middle East countries send their military personnel to attend Russian military educational courses, tender contracts on Russian military equipment, participate in Russian military trade shows, and maintain strong diplomatic relationships with Moscow.⁴

Although Russian arms sales are notoriously opaque given the lack of data from Moscow, available information indicates that before the war in Ukraine, Russia consistently ranked among the top two or three defense suppliers to the broader Middle East—and to North Africa in particular.⁵ (Indeed, for a long time, Russia has distinguished itself as one of the world's foremost exporters overall.⁶) Between 2017 and 2021, Russia accounted for 81 percent of

weapons imports to Algeria, 44 percent to Iraq, and 41 percent to Egypt.⁷ In Egypt specifically, despite years of U.S. defense sales, the country's ground forces still remain bifurcated into American- and Russian-supplied units. Iraq likewise separates some of its military units along U.S./Western and Soviet lines. For example, the Iraqi main tank brigade has battalions delineated U.S./Western M1A1/M113 and Soviet (T-72s/T-80s/BMPs). Much of the region's Soviet-era military equipment is still maintained by Russian contractors,⁸ and regional and sub-Saharan militaries hold contracts with Russia for weapons upkeep. Moreover, most Middle East regional partners operate Russian air defense systems at some level in their military or have sought Russian air defense systems in the recent past to address capability shortfalls, potentially hindering U.S. cooperation on exercises that advance interoperability, showcase U.S. military technology, and share tactical and operational lessons learned with partner forces.⁹ Despite a clear interest in moving away from Russian influence, even post-Assad Syria will likely have a hard time weaning its largely Russian-armed and trained military establishment off Moscow's equipment.

Many of the region's militaries, including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, and even post-Assad Syria, are heavily inclined to accept support from Russia based on human-to-human relationships nourished by shared training experiences, military equipment, and doctrine dating back decades. The Gulf states, despite closer defense ties with the United States, have also pursued military ties with Russia, while Russian arms producers maintain a prominent presence at Gulf defense events. These ties with the Middle East and North Africa will likely play an important role in Russia's future role in the region, providing a strong foundation for relationship building outside the military realm.

How Russia's Regional Ties Survived the War Against Ukraine

In the aftermath of Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, traditional U.S. allies and partners in the region reacted with ambivalence at best (as detailed in later sections). Overall, they did not join Western sanctions on Russia, and in some cases they helped Russia evade sanctions and engaged in other dubious acts. Such moves hindered Western efforts to diplomatically isolate Russia and failed to serve Ukrainian or European defense needs. Some states, especially the United Arab Emirates and Turkey, deepened their economic cooperation with Moscow.

Meanwhile, America's adversaries in the region, chiefly Iran and its proxies, actively supported the war. And even if some U.S. allies and partners viewed Russia as culpable, and if associated military relationships in the region weakened temporarily, this judgment was not forceful enough to create a lasting break with Moscow. Simply put, too many other forces remained to pull the sides back together. Nevertheless, the war did create complications. After the invasion, Arab officials in Washington expressed concern that Russia would be unable to deliver on existing contracts and, as the war progressed, feared their purchases would violate Western sanctions.¹⁰ In November 2023, for example, Russia reportedly approached Egypt seeking the return of more than a hundred helicopters needed for the war effort.¹¹ Then, in January 2024, a *Kyiv Independent* report based on leaked documents revealed Saudi doubts about whether Russia would fulfill its obligations on an April 2021 contract for supply of a Pantsir-S2M air defense system valued at 2.14 billion euros.¹² But the same report noted that Riyadh did not appear to have canceled the Pantsir contract with Moscow after the invasion, despite the risk of repercussions with the United States.

Durable Defense-Industrial Base Despite Sanctions

In the climate of outrage following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Western policymakers harbored optimism that countries would downgrade their military-to-military ties with Moscow and pivot elsewhere, even if not directly toward the West. Around this time, top U.S. military and Biden administration officials contemplated a perceived opening that could be widened between Russia and its historical partners in the Middle East and central Asia. In early 2023, Jessica Lewis, the assistant secretary of state for political-military affairs, identified "tectonic changes" among many countries regarding the transition away from Russian equipment. She elaborated, "We are seeing countries coming to us and saying, 'Look, we may need to diversify in ways that [we] haven't before,'" noting their perception of a "strategic failure for Russia."¹³

Russia's arms exports to the region did decline, but countries by no means turned away from Moscow as a supplier. Moreover, despite struggles on the battlefield, Russia has actually made a strong case for its military products and support. After nearly four years of war and a historically punishing sanctions regime, Russia has shown that it can keep producing and innovating military equipment at scale, while tapping new technical partnerships with countries like Iran. And it can pursue sales. For example, Russia is reportedly still seeking to sell up to twelve of its lone fifth-generation stealth fighters—the Su-57, meant to rival U.S. fighters—to equip the Algerian air force.¹⁴

Indeed, policymakers failed to establish enforcement mechanisms that would allow sanctions to meaningfully hinder Russia's arms industry and empower Ukraine's long-range, deep strikes to set back Russian arms production.¹⁵ Today, Russia's ability to generate new combat systems remains robust enough to support its brutal offensives in eastern Ukraine along with frequent drone attacks across the country. Western news consumers are only getting a partial

picture when they view Ukrainian video footage showing the failure of these systems in the field.¹⁶

Russian weapons, many of them experimental or produced in limited quantities before the war, have proven themselves in combat and been scaled to meet the needs of Russian offensives. They will entice buyers abroad once the war concludes, provided no punitive terms are implemented to restrict Russian defense sales. Relevant systems include the UMPK glide bomb kits for all major sizes of Russian air-dropped munitions,¹⁷ Lancet drones, variants of Iran's Shahed family of drones (Geran-2 and 3), and numerous smaller modifications for Russian infantry fighting vehicles and Russian main battle tanks to increase their survivability, lethality, and communications.



A Shahed/Geran-2 drone of Iranian/Russian origin on display outside a church in Kyiv, November 2025.
REUTERS



Footage showing Russian service members transform a FAB-500 aerial bomb into a guided munition by attaching it to a UMPK guidance kit and installing it under a Sukhoi Su-34 bomber.

Sustained Diplomatic Clout Across the Region

Russia's retention of support across the Middle East after the Ukraine invasion owed in part to active diplomacy. Mindful of Russian lobbying, regional countries may have backed nonbinding UN General Assembly resolutions, but they refrained from joining Western sanctions or rescinding any major agreement with the Kremlin. All the while, Russia expanded its strategic cooperation with Iran.

In his first post-invasion trip outside the former Soviet Union, in July 2022, Vladimir Putin visited Tehran, where he met with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, other Iranian officials, and Turkish officials. Khamenei called for increasing Iran-Russia cooperation to resist the West, and adopted Putin's anti-Western narrative on the war. "If you had not

taken the initiative [in Ukraine], the other side [the West] would have caused a war on its own initiative," Khamenei told Putin.¹⁸ Four months later, in November 2022, Moscow and Tehran finalized a \$1.75 billion agreement for Russia to domestically produce Iranian Shahed-136 drones, a clear sign of the countries' expanding military partnership.¹⁹ Putin's choice to go to Tehran spoke volumes about his priorities in focusing on the Middle East, as did Tehran's welcome extended to the Russian leader and support for the Ukraine invasion.

In December 2023, Putin visited Tehran's rivals in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh with an emphasis on increasing energy and advanced technology collaboration and cooperating on oil prices within OPEC+—thus helping Russia fund its war effort in Ukraine. The visits did not yield any firm deals, but they helped strengthen mutual ties, likely paving the way for



Russian President Vladimir Putin and then–Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran, July 2022. REUTERS

future energy-related and diplomatic agreements in particular. Still other high-level diplomatic exchanges sent the message that Russia was far from isolated on the world stage—and at times produced tangible economic and political benefits. For example, Russia's bilateral trade with Saudi Arabia increased by more than 62 percent in 2024, reaching almost \$4 billion.²⁰

In June 2025, moreover, the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the UAE signed a free trade agreement, reinforced by a supplemental Russia-Emirates deal that August.²¹ For the duration of the war in Ukraine, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states have prioritized cooperation with Moscow on oil production. Moscow has also hosted officials from the region, such as the UAE's President Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and his successor, Masoud Pezeshkian, Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, and Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan.

In the same vein, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and then-Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, among others, continued to hold high-level meetings throughout the region.²² After Muhammad bin Zayed's August 2025 visit to Moscow, the UAE and Russia signed a trade in services and investment agreement, strengthening not only bilateral economic cooperation but also the EAEU.²³ Upon Emir Tamim's visit to Moscow that same month, Qatar and Russia signed a deal committing each to contribute an extra 1 billion euros (\$1.14 billion) to a joint investment fund.²⁴ Bilateral trade between these countries grew as a result, as the next section outlines in more detail. The UAE and Turkey, for their part, helped broker a number of prisoner exchanges between Russia and Ukraine, while Qatar facilitated the return of displaced children belonging to some twenty families.²⁵

Even after invading Ukraine, Russia presented itself as a mediator in the Middle East, despite the lack of neutrality shown in Putin's response to the October 7 attack. In his first public comments, the Russian leader not only declined to directly condemn Hamas

or express sympathy for Israel, but he blamed what he described as misguided U.S. policies. "This is a clear example of the failure of U.S. policy in the Middle East," he said, adding that the United States had not accounted for the interests of the Palestinian people.²⁶ Putin thereafter attempted to carve out a role for Russia as a regional broker on the Gaza war, along with the Iranian nuclear program. Just weeks after the massacre, Putin hosted a Hamas delegation in Moscow in what Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov described as an "effort to maintain ties with all sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."²⁷ Israel summoned its Russian ambassador afterward in protest.²⁸ Although Russia did not offer genuine resolutions in such matters, it succeeded in inserting itself as a potential key arbiter, without drawing pushback from regional countries, notwithstanding Israel's summoning of its ambassador.

In February 2024, after the resignation of Palestinian Authority legislators, several Palestinian factions came to Moscow to discuss forming a new government.²⁹ The same month, Israeli Ambassador Simona Halperin gave an interview to Russia's *Kommersant* daily criticizing among other things Russia's ties with Hamas, in response to which the Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry issued a critical statement and summoned her for her "unacceptable" comments.³⁰ Yet criticism of Russia by Israeli officials was isolated and not intended to rupture relations, despite the tenor of Putin's post-October 7 comments. Putin, who understood Israel's intentions and need to balance other interests in the region, was likely wagering that Russia could tolerate weakened relations with Israel and that he could reap benefits from Arab states for his criticism. In early 2025, Moscow also offered to mediate between Washington and Tehran on nuclear talks, dovetailing with Iran's own request for Russian mediation.³¹

Increased Economic Engagement

The Kremlin views economic engagement as an important tool of geopolitical influence. Given this view, Moscow has enhanced its overall economic

position across the Middle East over the past fifteen years or so. In the period since the Ukraine invasion, Russia has made particular gains with the Gulf states and Turkey. Its heavy trade surplus with Turkey provides notable leverage.

Russia's ability to finance its war against Ukraine has been largely enabled by continued energy sales and deepened trade relations, including with the Middle East. Moscow has employed the common tactic of hiding the origin of its oil, opening new export routes through third countries, reportedly including Turkey and Morocco.³² Overall, as will be detailed later, Russian bilateral trade with Turkey and the UAE has increased several-fold since Russia's invasion, while Saudi Arabia has engaged in its customary reluctance to increase oil production and thereby lower prices. Such cooperation has indirectly undermined Western sanctions.³³ Also, in the wake of Western sanctions, Russian oligarchs and other wealthy residents seeking to protect their fortunes fled in significant numbers to the UAE and Turkey.³⁴

Enhanced Economic Ties with UAE and Turkey

In recent years, the UAE has emerged as Russia's most important Arab strategic partner, a relationship that has only intensified since the war against Ukraine. In June 2018, the two countries signed a strategic partnership agreement,³⁵ and Russia-UAE trade has increased nearly sixfold in the past five years, according to official Russian statistics.³⁶ By October 2022, Valentina Matviyenko, the speaker of Russia's Federation Council, identified the UAE as the first Arab destination for Russian investments and the largest Arab investor in Russia.³⁷ Among Russia's export markets, the UAE rose from forty-first to eighth place by early 2023, with trade reaching \$11.4 billion, according to Emirati sources.³⁸ Overall, Russian statistics on Russia-UAE trade have tracked with those reported in the Emirates. President Muhammad bin Zayed himself noted that his country's bilateral trade with Russia reached \$11.5 billion by mid-2025.³⁹

In April 2023, Russian intelligence officers reportedly bragged about undermining the United States with new ties to the UAE and circumventing sanctions.⁴⁰ Western actors later raised public concerns with Emirati counterparts about the country's trade in dual-use goods that support Russia's defense industries, such as computer chips, electronics, and other sanctioned products.⁴¹ Nevertheless, in December 2024, Abu Dhabi finalized an economic agreement with the Russia-led EAEU, signaling even deeper commercial cooperation.⁴² Around the same time, President Putin personally highlighted economic growth between Russia and the UAE, while senior official Mikhail Ivanov declared that the Emirates was Russia's largest trade partner in the Middle East, especially in the energy sector.⁴³ Putin further described relations between the two countries as a "strategic partnership."⁴⁴ Muhammad bin Zayed, for his part, pledged in August 2025 after meeting with Putin in Moscow to double the UAE's trade with Russia by 2030, likewise emphasizing the "strategic partnership" between the two countries.⁴⁵

With Turkey, Russia's relationship has endured and even grown in some economic areas. Before the Ukraine invasion, Russia generally held the upper hand, including in energy—particularly as a supplier of natural gas through the TurkStream pipeline.⁴⁶ Russia also began to build Turkey's first nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, following a traditional Russian pathway to influence over other countries.⁴⁷ Overall, Turkey's imports from Russia had far outweighed its exports, constituting another form of dependence.⁴⁸ And Turkey emerged as a top-two tourist destination for Russians, furnishing significant revenue.⁴⁹

At times of bilateral tension, Putin could use these levers of influence against Turkey. This occurred in 2016, when he shut off the tourist tap and enacted other punitive measures after Turkey downed a Russian plane over Syria, killing the pilot. The 3.5 million Russian visitors to Turkey in 2015 shrank to 866,000 in 2016, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan ultimately apologized to Putin.⁵⁰ Thus, more than 4.5 million Russian tourists visited

Turkey in 2017, and the numbers have continued rising, with the exception of the Covid period. By 2024, the figure reached 6.7 million: based on average spending per tourist of roughly US\$972, Russian tourism generated an estimated \$6.51 billion in revenue for Turkey that year, or roughly 10 percent of the sector's total earnings, which itself accounted for 12 percent of Turkey's total GDP.⁵¹ Put in plainer terms, more Russian citizens relative to any other nationality now travel to Turkey, which means Turkey's tourism industry—the country's second largest economic sector behind manufacturing—is more dependent on Russia than ever before.

On the economic front, as of March 2022—the month after the invasion—the number of Russian-owned businesses in Turkey had nearly quadrupled from the previous year.⁵² These businesses planned to take advantage of Turkey's "golden passport" law, which allows foreigners to obtain Turkish citizenship within three to four months by investing at least \$250,000 in real estate, or \$500,000 in Turkish government bonds, companies, investment funds, or bank accounts.⁵³ According to an August 2023 report citing data from Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges on Turkey (TOBB), Russians had established more than two thousand companies in Turkey over the prior eighteen months.⁵⁴ A June 2025 Reuters report noted more than 13,000

Russian-owned or affiliated firms registered in Turkey since 2022, citing data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat).⁵⁵

In 2023, air travel was also expanded between the two countries, helping facilitate the flow of tourists on which the Turkish economy had become increasingly dependent.⁵⁶ Putin addressed this issue directly in April 2023 at a ceremony marking the delivery of fuel for the Akkuyu nuclear plant, noting, "It's important to provide favorable conditions for travel between the two countries [Russia and Turkey], and in this context, we've agreed to increase the volume of bilateral air services."⁵⁷ Direct flights between Turkey and Russia now include Istanbul–Sochi and Istanbul–Kazan, in addition to flights originating in Moscow and St. Petersburg.⁵⁸

Dating back to 2003, Russia-Turkey bilateral trade has generally trended upward, and despite hiccups the Ukraine invasion has not interrupted the trajectory. In 2022, Turkey became the top importer of Russian goods, valued at some \$59 billion, double the amount from the previous year, and Turkish exports to Russia also increased.⁵⁹ Overall, between 2022 and 2023, bilateral trade surged to approximately \$65 billion, according to the Russian consul-general in Istanbul.⁶⁰ In 2023–24, with Turkey as a top destination for Russian tourists,⁶¹ the



Russian President Putin and Turkish President Erdogan meet at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Uzbekistan September 2022. The SCO also played a role in empowering Iran within Russia's orbit.

increase in flights offset Russia's isolation caused by Western closures of airspace and sanctions on Russian airlines and other companies. Turkey has correspondingly emerged as a key link for Russia in international flights.

In 2024, Western sanctions reportedly drove bilateral trade down somewhat, to just under \$53 billion, but Erdogan later reaffirmed his commitment to increasing levels, with the goal of hitting \$100 billion.⁶² Moreover, as of late 2024, Russia remained Turkey's largest energy supplier, providing 66 percent of Turkey's oil imports and 41 percent of its natural gas imports.⁶³ TurkStream and the new "Turkish Blend" project allow Moscow to hide the origin of its gas and exert influence across Europe.⁶⁴ Such dynamics show the durability of the Russia-Turkey economic relationship and how Moscow could pursue expanded opportunities should the war in Ukraine pause.

Deepened Cooperation with Iran

One striking dynamic to emerge during the Ukraine war has been the deepening of relations between Russia and Iran. After the invasion, the Islamic Republic was granted elevated status by two groups in particular: the Eurasian Economic Union, Putin's project aimed at creating a counterweight to the European Union, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which was established jointly by Russia and China. In July 2023, the SCO granted Iran full membership, an upgrade from its previous observer status. And in December 2024, the EAEU gave Iran observer status, facilitating a free trade agreement that went into effect in May 2025.⁶⁵

In January 2025, Moscow and Tehran signed a twenty-year strategic partnership agreement that detailed cooperation on defense, intelligence sharing, energy and other trade, nuclear energy, as well as media/information and cultural exchanges.⁶⁶ Russian Duma (parliament) speaker Vyacheslav Volodin said the agreement takes Russia-Iran relations "to a fundamentally new level," hailing it as "the most important event in the history of these two countries."⁶⁷ Perhaps most noteworthy is the shared commitment to avoid

aiding an aggressor if either country is attacked. Whether the two countries will live up to such rhetoric is an open question, but the mere agreement on language indicates an intent to build closer ties.

Iran's twelve-day war with Israel in June 2025 offered something of a test case. Yet while many Western observers wondered why Moscow did not do more to support Iran, Russia was not obligated to do so, given that the strategic partnership is not a mutual defense treaty. Iranian leaders, moreover, may have been disappointed by Russia's inaction, but they have few other partners to turn to. After the war, the Supreme Leader's rhetoric shifted from religious to nationalist, implying a greater emphasis on national self-defense and perhaps an intent to accelerate the country's nuclear program.⁶⁸ Such a shift gives the Iranian leadership ever more reason to work with Russia along with other U.S. adversaries including China.

The collapse of the Iranian regime would have dealt a heavy blow to Russia's strategic position in the region given Moscow's reliance on Tehran—along with Beijing—to remake the world order according to its vision. Moreover, the Iranian people tend to be more anti-Russia relative to the leadership, suggesting that a post-regime government could lean to the West. A pro-Western Iran has long worried Russia more than a nuclear Iran.⁶⁹

And should a still standing but vulnerable Islamic Republic pursue a nuclear weapon, this would not necessarily harm Moscow's interests in light of the countries' strategic partnership and overall deepening cooperation. Moscow's view of Iranian proliferation has long been nuanced. In 2011 and before, Russia indicated its preference for Iran not to develop a bomb, but it has simultaneously acted as Tehran's lawyer, claiming Western concerns about the program were overblown. In the future, if anything, Moscow will likely increase its support for Iran's nuclear program and continue to claim that Western concerns are exaggerated, prioritizing confrontation with the United States as well as a good relationship with Tehran over fears about a nuclear Iran.⁷⁰

Indicators of Russia's Future Success in the Middle East

On a range of issues, from defense and energy sales to pressure against the U.S. dollar as the global reserve currency, Russia will have much opportunity to expand its influence in the Middle East, especially if the Ukraine war pauses.

A Diversified Defense Industry Post-Ukraine

The war in Ukraine has compelled Russia to diversify its defense-industrial-base supply chains deep into Iran and China. While born of need and likely at first discomfiting to the Kremlin, this diversification could constitute an enduring benefit, allowing Russia to weather sanctions and create a safe zone from which core military items can be produced and shipped. Even North Korea, which previously guarded its Soviet-era equipment, has taken the bold step of selling arms and providing personnel to support Russia's war, a move whose ramifications for the North Korea–South Korea military balance have yet to be fully realized.⁷¹ The sum total of these moves is to make Russia an even more attractive hedge for Middle East actors against a potentially capricious West.

Russia has built new economies of scale around two product categories for which there will be ample demand once the war concludes: (1) one-way attack munitions (and realistic decoys); and (2) payload-carrying and reconnaissance UAVs. These systems, particularly when combined, could allow relatively unsophisticated and otherwise less capable militaries to conduct mass precision strike against nearly any regional adversary at a time and place of their choosing.⁷² Meanwhile, Russia's battlefield success has proven to potential Middle East buyers that the sum effect of Russian systems will be to facilitate

their own success in combat. When combined with Russia's lack of end-use monitoring, potential foreign buyers know they can use Russian weapons for various purposes at which the West might balk for its own sales, and at an acceptable price point.

Once the war concludes, Russia will be prepared, at least from a defense industry perspective, to become the largest seller of inexpensive precision strike munitions to countries barred from purchasing Western defense materiel due to their poor human rights record or Western sanctions. A recently completed factory in Yelabuga, Tatarstan, boasts the ability to produce nearly a hundred Geran/Shahed drones a day, and other facilities almost certainly could be enlisted to meet the drone-production demands of new customers.⁷³ Facilities such as the Yelabuga plant and likely other smaller ones ensure that if buyers exist for Russian one-way attack drones, the national defense industry will be able to increase scale to meet demand.

Russia's Continued Importance to OPEC+

A member of OPEC+ (but not OPEC itself), Russia plays a leading role in the group alongside Saudi Arabia, giving it considerable influence over energy politics in the Middle East. In November 2016, after coordination between Moscow and Riyadh, OPEC members reached the historic Vienna agreement with several non-OPEC oil producers.⁷⁴ The driver was a desire to reduce oil oversupply leading to low prices, marking a first for non-OPEC cooperation on this scale. By granting Russia a co-leadership role in OPEC+, the agreement also gave unprecedented status to a major non-OPEC producer. It bears noting, however, that Moscow and Riyadh have sometimes undermined the organization's unity by disagreeing, and OPEC states need Russia to keep production at desired levels, rendering the arrangement somewhat rigid and limited in scale.

Nor did Russia's role in OPEC+ diminish after the Ukraine invasion, despite Western sanctions,

war-related constraints, and shifting global energy dynamics. In July 2022, for example, the organization's secretary-general, Kuwaiti oil executive Haitham al-Ghais, noted Russia's role as vital to the success of the agreement.⁷⁵

Indeed, Russia's role is vital for both its sheer energy-production capacity and its political influence. Even after invading Ukraine, Russia has remained the largest non-OPEC oil producer. During the war years, Russia's production rates have hovered around 9–10 million barrels per day, down only slightly from earlier years, the highest in 2016.⁷⁶ The current figures are essentially on par with Saudi Arabia's; when including the United States, these countries make up the world's top three oil producers.

In critical decisions on production cuts, Russia uses its leverage as a major producer to wield influence in OPEC+, thereby preserving its resources, playing its desired role in the energy market, and maintaining its ability to wage war. OPEC+ members perceive Russia's role in the energy market as indispensable regardless of the war in Ukraine. Between 2023 and 2024, for example, Moscow participated in several voluntary oil production cuts in coordination with Riyadh.⁷⁷ Russia's relationships with OPEC members and non-Western energy networks alike add to perceptions of its indispensability, encouraging Middle East states to work with and even court rather than isolate Moscow. Russian officials are fully cognizant of and willing to exert this leverage. Regrettably, more committed Western diplomacy and a readiness to sanction Russian exports might have delivered an outcome more favorable to U.S. interests on this front. As with other trade arrangements, OPEC+ serves not merely as a means of commercial profit for Moscow but also as a Russian avenue to undermine American influence.

BRICS as a Driver of De-Dollarization

Russia initiated the intergovernmental BRICS group following the global financial crisis, serving as chair at its inception in June 2009.⁷⁸ The American origins

of the crisis prompted countries including Russia, which sought to erode the U.S.-led post–World War II order, to question the supremacy of the U.S. dollar—a pillar of America's global leadership. Moscow did not invent dissatisfaction with the dollar but rather tapped into existing disgruntlement among many countries, including to varying degrees in the Middle East.⁷⁹ Thus, at the inaugural BRICS summit in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg, then-President Dmitry Medvedev emphasized the need to “create conditions for a fairer world order and a better atmosphere for solving urgent global tasks.”⁸⁰ Such language permeated BRICS discussions over the years.

The American banking system plays a central role in most international payment transactions, allowing the United States to monitor financial flows, including sanctions evasion and funding of terrorism. The dollar has also been the pivotal currency in the commodities and energy trades. As recently as July 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump noted that BRICS was seeking to undercut American financial dominance. “BRICS was set up to hurt us,” he said, “BRICS was set up to degenerate our dollar and take our dollar...off as the standard.”⁸¹

Russia has recently been a key proponent for expanding BRICS, with a particular emphasis on engaging Middle East countries. In January 2024, Egypt, Iran, and the UAE became official members of the bloc; another invitee, Saudi Arabia, has not yet joined but has formally participated in meetings and discussions.⁸² Palestine, whose statehood Russia recognizes, applied for full BRICS membership in September 2025, according to Palestinian ambassador to Russia Abdel Hafiz Nofal.⁸³

Over the years, BRICS has focused on financial cooperation to create an alternative to Western and U.S.-led financial institutions, in the process establishing mechanisms to reduce the impact of sanctions. Such efforts accelerated after Russia became the world's most-sanctioned country following its invasion of Ukraine. The war gave Putin added reason to push for de-dollarization, with the West having frozen nearly \$300 billion in Russian

assets held outside the country and cut off Russia from the SWIFT banking system.⁸⁴ Russian as well as Chinese leaders have vacillated from calls for outright de-dollarization to efforts to deter “weaponization” of the dollar, especially through sanctions.⁸⁵ Direct calls to de-dollarize have occasionally alarmed BRICS members, and Putin has perhaps softened his tone to safeguard their support—but he has not changed his strategic aim.⁸⁶

BRICS has likewise emphasized the importance of a multipolar world, financial cooperation within the BRICS countries, transactions in local currencies, and alternative payment systems. Members have taken concrete steps on these matters by establishing institutions like the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), and arrangements such as a common BRICS Pay digital system for retail transactions. Egypt and the UAE joined the NDB in 2021, and Algeria was authorized to join in 2024.⁸⁷

In October 2024, at the BRICS summit in Kazan, the capital of the Russian Republic of Tatarstan, Putin also advanced initiatives for a BRICS Cross-Border Payment Initiative (BCBPI), an alternative to the SWIFT payment system, and alternatives to the U.S. dollar through a digital messaging system with the names “BRICS Bridge” and “BRICS Clear”—although members have thus far hesitated to accept this overarching idea.⁸⁸ The same year, BRICS discussed an alternative gold-backed currency, the “unit,” to sidestep the U.S. dollar.⁸⁹

Western conventional wisdom has tended to dismiss the ability of BRICS to challenge the world order. But a number of analysts, especially in recent years, have noted the significant nature of BRICS actions aimed at creating a parallel institutional framework, even if it does not yet constitute an effective coordinated assault on the U.S. dollar.⁹⁰ One in-depth study by Zongyuan Zoe Liu and Mihaela Papa, published by Cambridge University Press, found that BRICS countries used both institutional and market mechanisms to achieve greater autonomy and influence.⁹¹ And while not all BRICS members

necessarily prioritize de-dollarization, they wrote, U.S. adversaries, allies, and partners all “have economic incentives to reduce the dollar’s dominance and hedge against exchange risk.”⁹² Thus, multiple cuts over time could presumably erode the dollar’s supremacy if left unchallenged, requiring the United States to devote attention to responding. Zineb Riboua, at the Hudson Institute, opined specifically about the Gulf states: “If Washington fails to respond effectively, the Gulf could become a laboratory for BRICS-backed financial alternatives—with Washington’s traditional partners serving as the test subjects of a new, parallel economic order.”⁹³ And in an essay published with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Alexander Gabuev and Oliver Stuenkel contended: “The gradual emergence of an alternative to the U.S. dollar will put the current global system with the greenback’s privileged position under increasing stress. The challenge may seem insignificant and remote, but doing nothing about it only increases the risks of it materializing some years down the road.”⁹⁴

Backlash Against U.S. Sanctions

After Russia invaded Ukraine, some Gulf officials privately expressed concern about whether U.S. sanctions, including those targeting Russian oligarchs, might later be used against them. Precipitating events, in this view, might include a Gulf state’s response to unrest, the targeting of activists, or the triumph of a U.S. administration that rethinks its global relationships and prioritizes domestic oil production specifically. Some Gulf officials also alleged American hypocrisy, contrasting U.S. rhetorical advocacy for liberal values in the Ukraine context with its support for repression elsewhere, such as in the Palestinian context.⁹⁵

Official statements reflected concern about the potential costs of sanctions. The Egyptian government indicated “outright rejection of using economic sanctions outside the framework outlined by the mechanisms of the multilateral world order,” adding that sanctions had previously had “tragic

humanitarian consequences.”⁹⁶ Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and senior officials repeated that Ankara would not join Western sanctions, both to avoid harming its own economy and to maintain dialogue with Russia.⁹⁷ Perhaps indirectly, the application of U.S. sanctions against Russia thus contributed to regional dissatisfaction with the supremacy of the dollar, or at least the need to hedge against it.

Despite still far-reaching confidence in the dollar,⁹⁸ increased competition has emerged in the global oil market, where a full one-fifth of trade was conducted in local currencies as of 2023,⁹⁹ versus all-dollar transactions in past years. The shift was largely a result of Russian and Iranian sales to countries like China and India, whose leaders were pleased to make the purchases, often at lower prices. The trend also applies to Gulf oil producers such as Saudi Arabia. IMF findings from June 2024 indicate that the U.S. dollar continues to cede ground to non-traditional currencies in foreign exchange reserves, although modestly.¹⁰⁰

The UAE has joined Saudi Arabia in edging toward non-dollar trade. For example, in July 2023, the Emirates signed a deal with India to conduct bilateral trade in local currencies, and in June 2024 Saudi Arabia joined the Bank for International Settlements, a global umbrella group, and a China-led central bank digital currency project.¹⁰¹ While the Bank for International Settlements does not pose a direct threat to the dollar, the move exemplifies steps by countries to diversify away from it. Continued steps in this direction will benefit Russia’s ability to trade with the region, bolstering its position at the expense of the United States.

Another concern harbored by U.S. regional partners arose after the freezing by America and its mainly European allies of some \$300 billion in Russian foreign reserves held in their jurisdictions. The action targeting these funds, primarily debt securities denominated in U.S. dollars and euros, was unprecedented for countries with which the West was not at war, creating a legal basis whereby the state

property of an aggressor nation was no longer immune from seizure. Middle East states were alarmed by the move, which was designed to create a future loan to reconstruct Ukraine, rendering Russia financially responsible for its illegal invasion. They now feared the vulnerability of funds in their own jurisdictions should they stray from Western norms during a future conflict.¹⁰²

Information Manipulation

Russia has long engaged in information manipulation as a tool of statecraft to undermine Western influence. Disuse of information is also inseparable from Moscow’s approach to warfare. Dmitry Kiselyov, a leading Moscow propagandist who has now become the country’s most influential news anchor, put it this way in an interview: “If you can persuade a person, you don’t need to kill him. Let’s think about what’s better: to kill or to persuade? Because if you aren’t able to persuade, then you will have to kill.”¹⁰³ In a general sense, information manipulation plays into Russia’s soft power efforts, a reality long underappreciated by commentators.¹⁰⁴

In the Middle East, the Kremlin’s extensive manipulation of information predates the Ukraine war. Specifically, Russia has invested heavily in reaching Arabic and Turkish audiences, primarily through RT Arabic, Sputnik Arabic, and Sputnik Turkey, including tailored social media campaigns.¹⁰⁵ RT (formerly Russia Today) has been Moscow’s primary state-funded propaganda outlet for reaching foreign audiences since 2005.¹⁰⁶ When Putin visited RT headquarters in 2013, he stressed that its aim was to “break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly” on global information streams.¹⁰⁷ Over the years, RT and Sputnik have increased Russia’s legitimacy in the region, not only by filling the informational space, but by partnering with local media outlets to project the Kremlin’s narrative. Between 2016 and 2023, multiple Arab countries signed deals with Sputnik, including Algeria, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, while Egypt signed an agreement with Russia to “develop cooperation and expand media

broadcasting across Egypt and Russia.” The latter agreement, according to Euronews, “preceded an explosion in the popularity of RT Arabic...making it the most trafficked news website in the country right after *Youn 7*, a semi-official newspaper that frequently reposts Russian media.”¹⁰⁸

In addition, Russian cultural centers, aka “Russia Houses,” notorious as fronts for intelligence gathering, have grown in number, staging cultural events with other groups and helping boost Russia’s image across the region.¹⁰⁹ Determining exact numbers of Russia Houses can be tricky given naming inconsistencies and rebranding of existing centers, but virtually every Middle East country has one. After Russia invaded Ukraine, Russia opened new centers in Tunisia, Morocco, Iraq, and Qatar.¹¹⁰

To address such practices, since July 2022 the European Union has sanctioned Russia’s Rossotrudnichestvo agency, which falls within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, based on its propaganda and possible intelligence gathering activities in the war context, rather than mere promotion of Russian language and culture abroad.

Moscow’s claims about the necessity of invading Ukraine, including to prevent NATO encirclement, found sympathy across the region, both among youth and ruling elites.¹¹¹ In the Middle East, Russian state-run media has retained full access to the airwaves, enabling the Kremlin to propagate its narrative. Moscow has typically framed the war as a Russian challenge to the liberal global order, an argument that plays well in many Arab capitals. This framing feeds into the region’s multiple frustrations with the West overall and the United States specifically. Since the invasion, several public opinion surveys across the region have indicated support for Russia’s position, findings supported by private conversations with regional elites during the war.¹¹² Moreover,

Russian propagandists and diplomats in the region typically speak fluent Arabic and can thus engage directly with their audiences, unlike Western officials and experts who tend to need translators.¹¹³ A direct correlation between the effectiveness of Russian media and regional opinion is difficult to prove—with the debate on this question dating to the Cold War—but no one disputes that Moscow has ample opportunity to project its narrative across the Middle East and beyond, including through Kremlin-controlled media.

As the war has dragged on, Ukrainian leaders have realized they need to do more to compete for hearts and minds and counter Russian narratives—and not only in the Middle East. They opened embassies, especially in Africa, with the aim of better projecting their narrative.¹¹⁴ But the country appears to have lacked the personnel to staff the embassies and the expertise to navigate the region’s cultural landscape. In private, Western officials note that their own recent efforts to help Ukrainians improve their image across the Middle East and Africa have yet to achieve the desired results.¹¹⁵

Moscow’s image remains resilient because it has faced no effective challenge and because the country’s message still resonates.¹¹⁶ And the Kremlin is not resting on its successes. In early 2024, for example, Moscow began negotiations with Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE aimed at opening more cultural centers.¹¹⁷ Abu Dhabi reportedly will aim to open a Russia House by 2026 or 2027.¹¹⁸ Finally, contrary to the notion that Russia was weakened by its failure to militarily aid Iran during the twelve-day war, Moscow’s passivity at the least did no harm, given the negative views of Iran held in many Arab states. Russian intervention likewise would have harmed its status with Israel—and, to some extent, with Turkey.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Russia's continued influence and likely future resurgence in the Middle East hold multiple policy implications for the United States:

- When the war in Ukraine ends, Russia's strong industrial base will allow it to offer far more to potential Middle East buyers than prior to the war, and countries may be eager to purchase military systems given their lower cost and fewer restrictions relative to U.S. counterparts. Such an outcome would substantially increase Russia's influence across the region, especially in the arms trade but also likely in diplomatic, economic, and cultural areas.
- The risk of proliferation of Russia's low-cost systems to terrorist groups and rebel factions will increase, particularly in the Middle East (e.g., Iraq) and Africa (e.g., Sudan, Somaliland/Puntland, Djibouti, Kenya), where existing government-militia relationships combined with poor equipment monitoring leave much room for unscrupulous individuals to share arms. To take one previously unimaginable example, the deployment by Yemen's Houthis of thousands of drones in coordinated attacks across Israel could be far more likely than ever in the past.
- Russia will have more time and resources for engaging with the region, which can translate into gains at the expense of the United States. Moscow could take advantage of opportunities to erode trust in American leadership, whether by positioning itself as a mediator in regional crises, playing an expanded role in the oil market, or continuing to degrade trust in the U.S. dollar. Regional players, for their part, will likely feel vindicated for having stayed essentially neutral on Ukraine, rather than openly siding with the West. Middle East leaders will see that Russia remains a key global player they cannot afford to isolate. Last of all, these

levers of added engagement could open doors for Russia to further project its narrative across the region in order to weaken American influence and the liberal global order.

Rather than wait for these scenarios to unfold, the U.S. government can take several steps now to better position itself against Russia in the region:

Compete for the region as part of a holistic strategy.

The 2017 U.S. National Defense Strategy prioritized great power competition with Russia and China as a key objective for American policy, casting Russia as an "immediate and persistent threat to international peace and stability."¹¹⁹ Similarly, the 2022 National Defense Strategy described Russia as an "acute threat."¹²⁰ Still, in practice the United States has siloed its responses to Russia, emphasizing specific regional theaters rather than crafting a holistic strategy. The Kremlin, by comparison, ties its actions to a perceived global confrontation with the West. From Moscow's perspective, the Middle East is one key arena where competition plays out, although the Ukraine war has highlighted the region's inter-connectivity with Europe.

The latest U.S. National Security Strategy, released in November 2025, does not mention Russia as a threat to America but acknowledges Europe's perception of Russia as an existential threat. The document notes as well that "it is a core interest of the United States to negotiate an expeditious cessation of hostilities in Ukraine...and reestablish strategic stability with Russia."¹²¹ If Vladimir Putin regards Ukraine as being about more than Ukraine, then the United States could also take a higher-level strategic view and seek ways to connect and counter Russia's actions across different theaters as part of a larger project. And if the United States prioritizes a negotiated cessation of hostilities in Ukraine, along with establishing strategic stability with Russia, it needs to be ready to counter Russia's resurgence in the Middle East.

Develop a defense strategy for the Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean Sea is perhaps the most strategically important combatant command seam today. Coordinating across it is a perpetual challenge

for U.S. Central Command, U.S. Africa Command, and U.S. European Command, each with varying resources, authorities, and engagement capabilities. Simply put, this fractured approach has allowed Russia to play American bureaucratic inertia across applicable combatant commands and federal government agencies to its advantage, working into increasingly cozy relationships with Libya and Sudan, and likely maintaining a foothold in Syria to the detriment of U.S. and European policy aims in the region. A focused and clear strategy in the Mediterranean would appropriately prioritize U.S. interests in the sea, while propelling cross-combatant-command efforts to secure and appropriately engage with Mediterranean states. If the rumored adjustment to the Unified Command Plan and combatant commands goes through, it may improve integration of counter-Russia activities in previous organizational gray areas.¹²²

A U.S. Mediterranean strategy should include checking Russia's long-term presence in Syria, undertaken with the knowledge that Russian aspirations in the region date back centuries, transcend the Cold War and Moscow's 2015 Syria intervention, and will outlast Vladimir Putin. Even now, Russia retains a presence in Tartus, supplies Syria with oil, and is positioning itself disingenuously as a protector of minorities. A weak and fragmented Syria will be ripe for Moscow's influence. In the East Mediterranean, Moscow has allegedly been engaging in attacks on undersea infrastructure and probing for weakness with navy submarines. Indeed, in recent years, experts have warned that Russian submarines pose a threat to undersea cables and pipelines, which serve as a multibillion-dollar backbone for the internet, global trade, regional energy flows, and military logistics for the United States and its partners and allies.

The United States needs to regard Syria as part of a bigger strategic vision for the East Mediterranean, aimed at enhancing American—and more broadly Western and NATO—influence and checking Russia. A comprehensive approach could include better

protection of undersea infrastructure, increased intelligence sharing with regional partners, and increased naval task force operations to ensure freedom of navigation, safe transit for commercial traffic, and if necessary, to reestablish air control over the sea. As part of this broader vision, the United States should prioritize Syria, offering the country a path toward Western integration, working with Syrian authorities to help build economic and diplomatic capacity, alleviating political and ethnic tensions, improving human rights, and creating a space for U.S. presence and influence, along with that of its allies and partners.

Boost Ukraine's standing across the region.

The United States has every reason to empower Ukrainian interests across the Middle East as part of its competition with Russia. At a time when America is looking to recalibrate its regional engagement toward a more limited, transactional approach, supporting Ukrainians in the region would save time and resources while still promoting core U.S. interests. Given close Middle East ties to the European theater, Ukraine's success in the Middle East will also likely aid U.S. interests in Europe, including blocking Russian ambitions across the continent. Europe's security is tied to Ukraine's security. If America is looking for "strategic stability" with Russia, Ukraine could help establish it by limiting Russia's ability to operate.

Ukraine is well positioned to counter Russia in the Middle East in several ways:¹²³

- **UKRAINE CAN COUNTER RUSSIA IN THE ARMS AND TECHNOLOGY MARKET.** Ukraine is likely to emerge from the war with Russia with one of the most innovative arms industries in Europe, and with significant expertise in modernizing and maintaining Russian equipment.¹²⁴ This opportunity should not be understated. In areas where America does not have an attractive product to sell, it should continue and perhaps accelerate support for Ukrainian and relevant European arms sales to Middle East countries in order to block Russia.

- **UKRAINE CAN PROVIDE AN ALTERNATIVE TO RUSSIAN ENGAGEMENT AND MESSAGING ACROSS THE REGION.**

The United States and European countries have already begun to help Ukraine engage more effectively with the region but could do more. Although difficult amid the defunding of the U.S. Agency for Global Media, America could help build Ukraine's diplomatic capacity and guide the leadership in navigating the region's cultural landscape with more effective messaging. To this end, U.S. officials could work with Ukrainian counterparts to establish a more prominent media presence to counter outlets such as RT and Sputnik. Finally, Washington could facilitate exchanges between Kyiv and America's Arab partners aimed at disseminating Ukrainian insights on challenges such as countering large-scale drone campaigns and information warfare, thus helping Arab states (and Israel) counter Iran and its proxies.

- **THE UNITED STATES COULD HELP SUPPORT UKRAINIAN TRADE WITH THE REGION, STARTING WITH FOOD PROVISION TO SYRIA.**

Until recently, Russia was a key, if not the largest, supplier of wheat to Syria—much of it stolen from Ukraine.¹²⁵ The two countries, among the world's top wheat producers, compete for market share in the Middle East—and Ukraine's wheat production has generally endured despite Russia's targeted wartime attacks on the industry.¹²⁶ With the fall of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, Russia temporarily suspended its shipments before resuming them in April 2025.¹²⁷ U.S. facilitation of Ukraine's trade with Syria could create other openings for Ukrainian businesses in Syria and across the region. Ukrainian traders meanwhile are reportedly looking to export to the Middle East given the expiration of their duty-free access to the European Union market, which was granted after Russia's invasion.¹²⁸ The United States, along with the EU, could pursue avenues to help Ukraine better protect its agriculture infrastructure, reduce shipping costs, and overcome other logistical hurdles.

Prioritize regionally, project globally in communications.

The United States has an opportunity to craft a more nimble operation focused on real-time countering of Russian narratives in regional news markets and social media—one with global reach but cultural relevance for Middle East consumers. Early Trump administration cuts dissolved the Global Engagement Center, but creating a new, more action-oriented replacement with primary responsibility for public affairs and messaging in critical information terrain could help achieve such goals.

In addition to the earlier-noted support for Ukrainian media, the United States could invest more resources in better training the region's journalists and funding media outlets that broadcast U.S. messaging. Washington needs to take seriously the countering of Moscow's propaganda, treating it as central to a Russian strategy to erode liberal norms and the liberal global order. This is the perspective U.S. policymakers need to keep in mind when crafting their own messaging.

Meet BRICS partners where they are.

The BRICS agenda, which has increasingly included Middle East actors, works for Russia largely at the expense of the United States and the Western-led economic order. Diminishing its relative importance, while working against developments such as de-dollarization and the establishment of a parallel international financial infrastructure, must therefore be a consideration in any U.S. economic policy.

In the context of economic interests, the United States maintains significant power and influence through its trade relationships. The Trump administration has adopted a policy approach that heavily favors trade and commercial deals, notwithstanding its outward protectionism. The United States could eventually push for new trade arrangements and revised policies that better mirror BRICS interests, particularly with powerful members, with the goal of protecting Western financial interests against ac-

tual harm. The United States can also recommit to a fair and free trade approach while reducing unnecessary sanctions that heighten corporate risk in important BRICS countries.

Reset and clarify existing international sanctions regimes. Over the last fifteen years, the United States and its European allies have created a dizzying array of sanctions and sanctionable offenses, increasing risks for international business and developing economies, and suppressing commercial risk-taking. Meanwhile, the impact of sanctions is often highest when they are immediately applied. Over time, targeted countries, including Russia, develop sanctions evasion programs, recognizing that enforcement is resource heavy and often inconsistent. Russia's continued ability to fund its war and grow its military-industrial base perhaps testifies to prewar preparedness, but it also likely reflects the West's soft, incremental approach to enforcement.

The United States and its allies should therefore reexamine existing sanctions regimes and discard irrelevant measures, while creating a shared understanding of global business "rules of the road." Because sanctions are most effective when first implemented, adversaries will find more ways to circumvent them as time passes. Alongside eliminating effectively obsolete sanctions, Washington and its allies should expedite implementation of relevant sanctions to achieve stronger results, as well as their eventual turnoff for more decisive diplomatic impact. They must also work harder to keep pace with

sanctions evasion and implementation problems.

In tandem, America should improve its direct outreach to businesses about compliance with both new and existing sanctions, thus minimizing hard-to-quantify risk and encouraging investment in Middle East countries. These steps will help reassure actors engaged in international commerce who would otherwise like to work with Western counterparts but remain anxious about seemingly inconsistent application of sanctions.

Revisit CAATSA. Drones are the future of warfare, and the United States has an interest in ensuring Middle East countries buy drone technology from the West. This will involve setting the conditions for appropriate end-use monitoring to ensure these systems are used only for their intended purpose and not proliferated for use in other conflicts or terrorism. Revising guidance for the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act to include drones, one-way attack munitions, and other low-altitude air threats could help stem the tide of these systems going to weak and illiberal governments. The State Department, for example, could revisit the case of Shahed and similar drones and potentially classify them as subject to CAATSA enforcement. Doing so would help ensure that the purchase or proliferation of Russian precise autonomous weapons systems—regardless of their internal complexity—are sanctionable offenses. Pushing for statutory revisions is also an option, although likely more heavy-handed than currently required. ♦

NOTES

- 1 Comprising eleven countries. The acronym reflects its founders, Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.
- 2 See Andrey Kortunov, “Between Polycentrism and Bipolarity,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, November 2019, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/between-polycentrism-and-bipolarity/>; Alexander Dynkin and Natalia Ivanova, eds., *Russia in a Polycentric World* (Izdatelstvo Vesmir, 2012).
- 3 Alexei Vasiliev, *Russia’s Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin* (Routledge, 2018); Yevgeniy Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present* (Basic Books, 2009); Galia Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East: From World War Two to Gorbachev* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).
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- 5 “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2020,” fact sheet, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2021, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2021/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-international-arms-transfers-2020>.
- 6 Prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, SIPRI consistently ranked Russia number-two globally for arms exports; between 2016 and 2020, Russia accounted for 20 percent all the world’s arms exports, <https://www.sipri.org/research/armament-and-disarmament/arms-transfers>. After the invasion, Russia fell to third: see Gerry Doyle and Leen al-Rashdan, “Russia’s Sanctioned Rostec Says Arms Exports Will Recover,” Bloomberg, November 18, 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-11-18/russia-s-rostec-says-soaring-war-output-compensates-for-exports>.
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- 9 For example, the UAE operates the Pantsir and Igla, Oman operates the Igla/Strela and ZSU 23, and Bahrain operates the Igla. Egypt is also well provisioned in air defense capability by Russian systems, including the Igla, Buk, and S-300. Alia Chughtai and Marium Ali, “What Are the GCC’s Air Defence Capabilities?” Al Jazeera, September 19, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/19/what-are-the-gccs-air-defence-capabilities>; *The Military Balance* 2024 (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024), <https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/2024/the-military-balance-2024>.
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