



Iran's Support for Russia and Lessons Learned from Ukraine

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Testimony submitted to the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (U.S. Helsinki Commission)

April 21, 2026

Thank you to Chairman Wicker, Co-Chairman Wilson, and the commissioners for giving me the opportunity to testify today on Iran's support for Russia, lessons learned from Ukraine, and the broader context that affects not only allies in Europe and the Middle East, but also the broader Asia-Pacific theater.

Since the United States and Israel launched their war on Iran and its proxy network on February 28, Moscow has reversed the flow of support that Iran had been providing to Russia in its all-out war against Ukraine since 2022. The Kremlin has been supplying Tehran with parts to modify Shahed drones, providing improved communication, navigation, and targeting capabilities, and sharing its accumulated experience from using drone swarms against Ukraine, including advice on how best to launch coordinated multi-drone attacks.¹ It has also been providing Iran with targeting intelligence on the locations of U.S. warships and aircraft.²

Outside of direct military support for Iran, Russia has also indirectly benefited. The war has drained supplies that Ukraine needs in defending itself, diverted U.S. diplomatic attention from Kyiv, and, as a consequence of the Strait of Hormuz being closed, produced higher oil prices and increased export opportunities that boost Russia's ability to pour added income into its military spending on the Ukraine front. President Vladimir Putin has simultaneously offered to mediate an end to the Iran war—a typical strategy that Moscow has used to try to extract more legitimacy and prestige on the world stage.

While Russia has certainly taken advantage, the war has also provided important opportunities for

¹ Thomas Grove, Milan Czerny, and Benoit Faucon, "Russia Is Sharing Satellite Imagery and Drone Technology With Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia-is-sharing-satellite-imagery-and-drone-technology-with-iran-Odd95e49>.

² Natasha Bertrand, Jim Sciutto, Zachary Cohen, and Jennifer Hansler, "Russia is aiding Iran's war effort by providing intel on US military targets, sources say," CNN, March 6, 2026, <https://www.cnn.com/2026/03/06/politics/russia-aiding-iran-targeting>.

the Ukrainian government to build new ties with the Gulf states and Syria as well. In late March, President Volodymyr Zelensky embarked on a high-profile tour of the Gulf region, signing security partnerships with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Kyiv agreed to provide Gulf states with a complete air defense system based on its experiences in dealing with Russia's use of Shahed drones. This includes maritime drones, electronic warfare, and interception technology against these Iranian drones.³ In quick order, Zelensky dispatched more than 200 counter-drone specialists who helped directly shoot down Shahed drones launched at several Gulf countries beginning earlier this month.⁴

This is an important early step for Ukraine in undermining Russia in the region. Gulf states no longer see Moscow as a neutral actor, but as a participant in the war on Iran's side, opening opportunities for Kyiv to attract investment, scale production of its defense-industrial complex, and weaken Russia's position as a traditional player in the Middle East arms market.

Additionally, Ukraine has leveraged the collapse of the Assad regime to build new diplomatic relationships in Syria. Prior to December 2024, Syria had historically been a deep ally of the Soviet Union and, later, Russia going back to the 1960s. In January 2025, Zelensky announced plans to restore diplomatic relations with the new Syria, which was formally reestablished at the UN General Assembly in September 2025.⁵ Zelensky even visited Damascus just a few weeks ago.⁶ Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha framed the Syria opening explicitly in anti-Russian terms, stating that the collapse of Assad's dictatorship "significantly weakens the expansionism of Russia, which for years used Syrian territory, its resources, and people as a foothold to spread its destructive influence in the Middle East."⁷

During their most recent meetings earlier this month, issues related to joint security were discussed: logistical security related to securing trade and maritime routes as well as food security related to grain transfers from Ukraine to Syria. Since the two countries have restored diplomatic relations, bilateral trade has increased ninefold.⁸ This is all crucial because Russia maintains a small foothold at its bases on Syria's Mediterranean coast, while the United States completed its full military withdrawal from the country last week. Therefore, an easy win for U.S. policy in the Middle East—one that undermines Moscow and, indirectly, Iran while bolstering the U.S. security architecture in the region—is to push Syria to ask the Russians to leave their bases and have Ukraine replace them as a security partner. Washington could also help expand cooperation between Ukraine and Syria in other sectors such as humanitarian and educational cooperation.

Another component worth mentioning is the fact that the Iran war has strengthened Putin's hand

³ Sasha Vakulina, "What are Ukraine's new Gulf defence deals? Here is what Zelenskyy signed," EuroNews, March 30, 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/2026/03/30/what-are-ukraines-new-gulf-defence-deals-here-is-what-zelenskyy-signed>.

⁴ Clement Charpentreau, "Zelenskyy: Ukraine trading drone defense for fuel, interceptors from Gulf states," AeroTime, April 10, 2026, <https://www.aerotime.aero/articles/zelenskyy-ukraine-drone-defense-oil-diesel-gulf>.

⁵ See: https://t.me/G_CSyriaa/167; and "President al-Sharaa meets Ukrainian President Zelensky at UNGA," Syrian Arab News Agency, September 24, 2025, <https://sana.sy/en/international/2269431>.

⁶ Presidency of the Syrian Arab Republic (@SyPresidency), X post, April 5, 2026, <https://x.com/SyPresidency/status/2040822173124706461>.

⁷ "Ukraine to restore diplomatic relations with Syria," Ukrainian World Congress, January 3, 2025, <https://www.ukrainianworldcongress.org/ukraine-to-restore-diplomatic-relations-with-syria>.

⁸ Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha (@andrii_sybiha), X post, April 5, 2026, https://x.com/andrii_sybiha/status/2040846411021828147.

against European allies due to the Trump administration relaxing some sanctions on Russian oil and natural gas. This waiver was extended for another month just days ago,⁹ making it harder for Europe to increase pressure on Moscow. Such developments undermine the U.S.-European relationship by motivating a number of states to de-risk from what they view as an increasingly erratic American ally and accelerate their autonomous defense capabilities.

In short, the Iran war has allowed Ukraine—once entirely dependent on Western patrons and peripheral to Middle Eastern affairs—to leverage the deepened Russia-Iran partnership and position itself as a security exporter. Kyiv is trading battlefield-proven drone expertise for Gulf oil, Western weapons, Syrian diplomatic footholds, and a growing role in shaping a “post-American” European defense architecture.

Instead of hindering Kyiv, Washington should work with it to bolster Ukraine’s regional role—an effort that would also help America secure greater ties with Europe’s largest country. Toward that end, the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives should heed the following recommendations:

Formally reframe Ukraine as a net security exporter and institutionalize that status through Congress. The most urgent and achievable shift is a conceptual and legislative one: the United States must stop treating Ukraine exclusively as an aid recipient and begin treating it as a strategic partner that generates security value for American interests globally. As my Washington Institute colleague Anna Borshchevskaya has argued recently, Ukraine’s outreach to the Gulf states gives the United States a unique opportunity to counter Iran and Russia while boosting the security of American partners and forces in the region, and the Trump administration should therefore facilitate a durable Ukraine-Gulf partnership while beginning the long-term process of eroding Russia’s destabilizing influence over these governments.¹⁰ Legislatively, the Senate’s Supporting Ukraine Act of 2025 (S.2592), while focused primarily on the Indo-Pacific theater, is a ready vehicle for important opportunities related to the Middle East as well. The bill acknowledges that Ukraine’s adaptive defense strategies in unmanned systems, cyber defense, and decentralized operations have yielded critical insights directly relevant to deterring aggression, and that lessons from Ukraine should be immediately applied to deterring foreign adversaries. Congress should pass this bill and establish the “Ukraine Lessons Learned Task Force” it proposes. This could create a legislative architecture that treats Ukraine’s battlefield knowledge as a strategic American asset rather than a charity obligation.

Negotiate a multiyear defense memorandum of understanding codified by Congress, with a dedicated special envoy for Ukraine issues. The current framework of annual or semiannual authorization cycles is strategically incoherent for a partnership of this complexity and duration. U.S. support must include targeted funding and clear partnership objectives, with regular cooperation authorizations, appropriations mechanisms, and a multiyear memorandum of understanding to provide steady and predictable resources. Further, the appointment of an empowered U.S. special envoy for Ukraine’s security and defense, with individual resource control and senior political backing, would ensure consistent leadership. Without such an instrument, Ukraine’s value as a partner remains contingent on executive branch goodwill and vulnerable to the kind of oscillation seen in 2025, when the United States suspended military aid entirely for two weeks following a single diplomatic dispute.

⁹ “US extends sanctions waiver on purchases of Russian oil,” Agence France-Presse, April 18, 2026, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/us-extends-sanctions-waiver-purchases-154313374.html>.

¹⁰ Anna Borshchevskaya and Matt Tavares, “Washington Should Jump on Ukraine’s Outreach to the Middle East,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 13, 2026, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/washington-should-jump-ukraines-outreach-middle-east>.

Build a trilateral U.S.-Ukraine-Gulf security architecture around counter-drone technology.

The Iran war has created a narrow but real strategic opening to link Ukraine's drone warfare expertise with Gulf states' defensive needs and American interests in regional stability. The United States should institutionalize this before the window closes. The U.S. government should serve as the institutional backbone for this triangle: facilitating technology transfer approvals, easing export licensing, and providing the intelligence integration that neither Ukraine nor the Gulf states can supply on their own. Russia, Iran, and other U.S. adversaries in China and North Korea (aka CRINK) are increasingly cooperating to challenge the United States and its global standing. Each node in the counter-CRINK network—including the Gulf states, Syria, Ukraine, as well as European and Asian-Pacific allies—needs to be systematically reinforced.

Weaponize Russia's role in the Iran war to deepen Gulf state estrangement from Moscow and tighten sanctions. Russia's active intelligence support to Iran during this war (supplying satellite imagery, drone upgrade components, and tactical advice against Gulf targets) provides the United States with its most powerful argument yet for decoupling the Gulf states from their historically balanced posture toward Moscow. Congress should pass the Russia sanctions legislation being advanced by bipartisan members, tie any sanctions relief explicitly to verifiable withdrawal from Ukraine, and simultaneously publicize Moscow's role in arming Iran against Gulf partners to shift regional politics away from continued double-dealing with Russia.

Embed Ukraine's drone ecosystem into U.S. and NATO defense industrial strategy for the long term. The deepest and most durable recommendation is structural: the United States must integrate Ukraine's defense-industrial innovations into the Western military-technological base before either the war ends or the technology gap closes. For Congress specifically, the actionable step is to direct the Pentagon to establish joint production facilities with Ukrainian defense companies in NATO member states (Denmark, Germany, and the United Kingdom have already begun this), and to require the Defense Department to incorporate Ukrainian counter-drone doctrine and AI-assisted targeting innovations into U.S. military procurement standards. Ukraine's drone ecosystem, properly integrated, is not just an asset for the current war, but also the most battle-tested counter to the weapons systems that Russia, Iran, and their partners are proliferating globally.

Use Ukraine's restored relationship with Syria as diplomatic leverage to press for Russia's eviction from its Mediterranean bases, linking U.S. sanctions relief to Damascus with Russian base withdrawals. The situation at Russia's Syrian bases represents one of the most consequential and underutilized points of leverage in the entire Russia-Ukraine-U.S. strategic triangle, and Washington should use Ukraine's renewed relationship with Damascus to help close them. Russia's bases in Hmeimim and Tartus function as security enclaves beyond the control of the new Syrian government, creating friction among security actors and serving as potential flashpoints for sectarian conflict. The Kremlin has a vested interest in retaining them as leverage in negotiations with the United States and as a tool of influence over Turkey and Israel. This is precisely where a U.S.-Ukraine-Syria triangle becomes strategically potent. Congress should condition U.S. sanctions relief packages for Damascus explicitly on Syria's progress in terminating Russian basing agreements. Congress should also back Ukraine's offers of agricultural exports, drone expertise, and military training to the new Syrian government as incentives that give Damascus a Western alternative to continued military dependence on Moscow. Replacing Russian dependency with Ukrainian and Western military cooperation would simultaneously deepen Syria's ties to the West, deprive Russia of its only Mediterranean naval facility, disrupt Moscow's African logistics chain, and reward Kyiv's diplomatic initiative. This would achieve four interlocking strategic objectives with a single coherent policy framework.