

# “HOW HAS THE INVASION OF UKRAINE RESHAPED RUSSIA’S INFLUENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST”



## SUMMARY OF A WEBINAR HELD BY ARAB GULF STATES INSTITUTE IN WASHINGTON (AGSIW)



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### OVERVIEW

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has once again emerged as a key power broker and military actor in the Middle East. In 2015, it sent its air force and a limited number of ground troops to Syria and in association with Iranian forces on the ground, saved President Bashar al-Assad’s regime from what looked like certain defeat.

Using its success in Syria as a springboard, Russia has transformed old relationships throughout the region and forged new ones. It has increased arms sales to Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt. Furthermore, Moscow has driven forward the ‘OPEC+’ agenda and has worked closely with Riyadh to keep the group of OPEC and non-OPEC oil producers compliant with production cuts.

However, Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine, the ‘alleged underperformance of the Russian army’ in that conflict, and the severe Western sanctions imposed on Russia have had a tremendous impact on international security and the international balance of power, including in the Middle East.

A webinar hosted by AGSIW with a panel of knowledgeable regional experts, examined the aftereffects of the war in Ukraine on Russia’s presence in the Middle East and more specifically amongst the Persian Gulf states. Some of the important questions addressed by the panel addressed the following topics:

- *Russia’s current foreign policy goals in the region and how these goals have been affected by the war in Ukraine;*
- *What has been the specific reactions of regional states to the war in Ukraine;*

- *What has been the effect of the war on Middle Eastern countries who have been heavily dependent on the importation of grains and fertilizer from Russia (and Ukraine) for food security.*

Other important regional considerations discussed by the panel were the implications of Russia's war in Ukraine for some Gulf countries in their attempts to re-establish relations with the Assad government, as well as how Russia might be expected to influence greater Iranian moderation in return for greater regional and international support for Moscow.

### **SUMMARY OF COMMENTS BY NAVE DROMI**

1. **Anna Borshchevskaya** (*Senior Fellow, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*)
  - History as far back as Peter the Great all the way to present times indicates that Russia has always craved for influence in the Middle East and warm waters for access to other international waterways so that it could compete with Europeans in the past and the US in recent times.
  - From a Russian perspective, before as well as now, everything in the region is calculated on a zero-sum basis.
  - Putin having learned from past Soviet failures in the region has instead adopted the 'Primakov approach' (former Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov who was well versed and experienced in Middle Eastern affairs) and sought to build contacts with all regional states as well as their opponents.
  - Reaction in MENA Countries (Middle East and North Africa) does not match the narrative of the West on the Ukraine war.
  - In this regard, the MENA countries are uncertain about how the war is going to end and for this reason, they prefer not taking sides at this time.
  - On the future of Russian arms sales to the region and beyond, there are short term and long-term implications: if the war ends and there is a settlement in the near future, then usual business could resume. If on the other hand, the war was to drag on, then future sales and more importantly delivery of new weapons will be a problem as Russia will also be needing to replenish its own arsenal.
  - In terms of what is actually happening in the war, it is a fact that Russia having especially made good use of its artillery to attain a position of

advantage, is now in control of much more territory than before bearing in mind that none of the Ukrainian successes have been achieved on the battlefield.

- In Syria, Russian prestige was enhanced in the region because of its decisive intervention and the fact that Russia was not hesitant for using brute force in order to get the result it wanted.
- So far what has happened in Ukraine has not tarnished that image given that unlike the West in Syria, the Russians said little and did a lot in getting the job done.
- Also, contrary to certain reports, Russia's posture in Syria has not changed because of the Ukraine war apart from some tactical changes having to do with 'Wagner' and their military police. Indeed, in Syria, the Russian air force have made the same number of sorties as before. The only possible change is that there might still be a Turkish intervention in the Kurdish held areas of northern Syria which the Russians had previously tried to prevent (perhaps less leverage by Russia on Turkey due to other considerations having to do with the war).
- In terms of people-people exchanges, an important indicator is that Russian tourists visiting for example Dubai in the past 5 months have fallen by 30%.
- Finally, in a period of uncertainty exacerbated by a period of predicted global recession, it is fair to assume that Russia has some willing partners in the Middle East unless it was to 'lose big' in Ukraine.

## 2. **Li-Chen Sim** (*Assistant Professor, Khalifa University*)

- Russia's interests in the Middle East can best be summarized by the following:
  - **1. Trade and investment:** Trade figures, albeit mostly with Turkey, have increased from US\$35 billion to US\$55 billion in the past few years.
  - **2. Security Field:** In this area, Russia as the second largest supplier of arms and military hardware, has been supplying some 40% of all the arms sales to MENA countries. Moreover, Russia conducts joint military operations with both the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and Egypt, while it continues to retain a military base in Syria.

- **3. Politics and diplomacy:** On this front, Russia has made great strides with UAE, KSA (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) and Algeria while having good ties with most of the other regional states as well.
- **4. People to people:** Russian tourism in the region in addition to its Arabic media influences in MENA countries has been quite remarkable.
- **5. Field of Energy:** Although Russia was never a part of OPEC, but its relationship with OPEC+ has been a most successful one. It is also important to mention that Russia has also been involved at promoting the sale of its nuclear plants, apart from selling oil, gas and coal to regional states (especially to Turkey), while also having a stake as a producer in Iran.
- The war in Ukraine provides an element of risk for some MENA countries such as Algeria, Egypt, and Iraq who have been recipient of arms purchases from Russia (especially given their less than adequate performances in the Ukraine war and the implications that may have for them). However, this is an issue that is not really applicable to the Gulf states.
- In the past, the Gulf states did not have much leverage over Russia. This is unlikely to change given the situation with the sanctions and the resultant difficulties associated with any kind of Gulf investments in Russia.
- However, on the other hand, this may inadvertently result in the Gulf states gaining some leverage with the US.
- The general consensus amongst most Gulf leaders is that Putin is still very much in the fight and not “horribly damaged”. As a result, their preference is to wait and see what the US and the Europeans do in the final analysis before committing themselves.
- As for Russia’s situation with the OPEC+ countries, the reality is that in their last meeting that was held on 2 August, all the oil producers agreed to increase production by a mere 100,000 barrels/day – which is the lowest in OPEC history. What this means is that none of the main producers are anxious to in any way alienate the Russians.
- The fact that there was even a small increase by OPEC+ was a simply a gesture to keep Biden happy in the aftermath of his recent trip to the

region. Nonetheless, it is important noting that in any calculation, Russia still continues to remain a key part of OPEC+.

- Key matters of concern behind the Russian Presidents' recent visit to Iran that came at the end of Biden's trip to the region, was in the first instance to encourage the Turkish president not to attack northern Syria while at the same making sure that any Russian void created as a result of the Ukraine war in Syria should not be filled by Iran.
- The visit to Iran following the Biden trip was also intended to highlight in a demonstrative way to the world that Russia was still playing a big role on the international stage, although what was achieved in the aftermath of the visit cannot be termed as being anything more than limited gains given the reality that at the end of the day, Iran and Russia are both competitors in the international energy market especially in South Asia and mainly with the Chinese.
- On the trade front, Russia will not want to import a huge amount from Iran except for things it cannot produce or manufacture at an economic price within Russia itself.
- In terms of regional relations with Iran, Putin's trip happened at a time when countries like UAE and Kuwait are seriously considering sending their Ambassadors back to Tehran and Saudi Arabia is also much more interested in reducing existing tensions with Iran and possibly following suit.
- On the question of food exports to the MENA region, Russia (and Ukraine) has been influential in exporting many items such as wheat and barely etc. For example, Egypt gets some 60% of its needs from Russia (25% from Ukraine).
- The consequences of the war has thus had a worrying effect for Egypt which has witnessed 14.7% inflation in food prices in the previous month as opposed to 5.3% in June 2021. However, the Gulf states have played a key role in bailing out Egypt so that it can navigate out of its short-term problems.
- What has however been affected as a result of the war is the construction of a Russia nuclear plant in Egypt because of sanctions and other constraints.
- In conclusion, even if Russia were to lose big in Ukraine, because of oil (gas and coal), most Persian Gulf states will still want to keep Russia onside.

### 3. **Alexander Tabachnik** (*Research Fellow, University of Haifa*)

- It is important bearing in mind that in the final analysis, Russia is declining power based on a number of important indicators such as the economy, military capabilities (especially as they relate to conventional arms and the technology associated with them) and finally, global diplomacy - with corruption in the Russian state having a great deal to do with these issues.
- Prior to the war the size of the Russian economy which had been equivalent to 7% of the American GDP has now declined to 4%.
- In the context of the Middle East, US political ambivalence has created a situation whereby the US is generally seen as being 'less of a security provider'. However, this perception is something that has nothing to do with Russian strength.
- On the subject of Russia's relations with Israel, the overall mutual ties continue to remain strong despite Putin's recent trip to Iran.
- Israel is aware that Russia is a very secular state contrary to the religious nature of the Iranian regime. Israel is therefore cognizant of the suggesting realities that there are finite limitations in the extent of relationship that can exist between them.
- Moreover, in the wake of the UN's utter failures in Syria and for the West having had a reactive approach in general terms, Russia recognizes Israel's security concerns in Syria in view of Iran's influence in that country. Thus, in the course of the past 5 months since the start of the war in Ukraine, Russian-Israeli relations have not changed significantly.
- However, there are rising Russian concerns that Iran might become more powerful than them in Syria and that Israel might be forced to comply with sanctions against them and gradually tilt more towards Ukraine.
- However, despite all these concerns, Israeli operations against Iranian targets in Syria have not been affected.

