

# How the Middle East Became an Arena for Putin's Power Struggle with the US

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Articles & Testimony

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**Russia's arms sales, military relationships, and paramilitary activity across the region remain central to expanding its local influence and boosting its anti-Western strategic interests.**

**C**onflict across the Middle East continues to spiral, and the future US position in the region remains at the forefront of foreign policy discussions. However, this discussion would be incomplete without looking at Russia's role in the region—specifically, how Moscow uses defence relationships to enable long-term competition with the West in the Middle East.

In the backdrop of the ongoing escalation between Iran and its proxies with the United States and Israel stands the question of long-term competition between great powers in the region. Russian President Vladimir Putin, for his part, believes he is fighting an existential battle with the United States, and the Middle East is an arena where he believes Russia can shape this competition.

Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Middle East and North Africa had emerged as Russia's second most important arms market. Russia itself had re-emerged as one of the world's top arms exporters, second only to the United States.

However, with Moscow's fixation on Ukraine, foreign policymakers must monitor the state of Russia's arms trade and how its defence relationships in the Middle East are propelling its influence and larger strategic interests. Russian defence presence in the Middle East stands on three pillars: arms sales (along with joint military exercises), access to military bases, and use of paramilitary forces, chiefly the Wagner group, recently renamed the Afrika Korps.

# Arms Deals with the Middle East

**A**vailable data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) shows that Russia's share of global arms exports fell before the invasion of Ukraine. However, the primary reason for this trend is that India, the top purchaser of Russian weaponry, significantly reduced its imports of these weapons (though most recently, India significantly increased its imports of Russian oil).

Russia has continued to focus on Middle East arms sales, which compete with traditionally dominant sales from the West. In February 2021, Russia's Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation stated that military exports to the Middle East had hovered around \$6bn per year over the previous five years, or between 40-50% of total military exports. Russia also emerged as Algeria's largest weapons supplier by 2021—in particular, supplying some of its most advanced systems, such as fighter aircraft, including the Sukhoi 57.

Following the invasion of Ukraine, reports citing US government officials stated that Russian supplies of weaponry became constrained by sanctions, export controls, Russia's prohibition from using the SWIFT payment system, and its own shift in focus towards supporting its forces in Ukraine. Indeed, in private, Middle East officials expressed concern at the start of the invasion of Ukraine that Russia would be unable to deliver on existing contracts. Two years on, these concerns have been validated as the Russian military has received a drubbing at the hands of the Ukrainians, forcing Russia's armament industry to turn its full attention to maintaining and reconstituting its own forces in Ukraine.

As the invasion progressed, some wondered if Russia's poor military performance would reduce interest in Russian arms in the region. This poor performance has not gone unnoticed, but there has not been a corresponding drop in interest as experienced after the US-led coalition destruction of the Soviet-trained and equipped Iraqi military in 1991.

One reason for this current reality is likely to be the types of weapons Russia exports, primarily aircraft, aircraft engines, and missiles. The weaponry that has performed poorly in Ukraine, such as tanks and armoured fighting vehicles (AFV), is not a primary export.

Nor have Russian air defence systems shown themselves to be a failure. Thus, interest in Russian aircraft, missiles, and air defence systems is likely to continue. On the contrary, Iran's use of aerial drones against the Saudi oil terminals at Abqaiq in September 2019 and the Houthi use of these drones and ballistic missiles keep Russian air defence weapons a relevant and desired commodity among countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Indeed, in recent months, some regional officials have privately observed that Western sanctions prevent additional purchases of Russian weapons, implying that their own interest in Russian weaponry has not declined. In May 2023, several sanctioned Russian weapons manufacturing companies with direct ties to the Russian military, including companies that produce helicopters deployed to fight in Ukraine, came to Saudi Arabia to participate in a trade event.

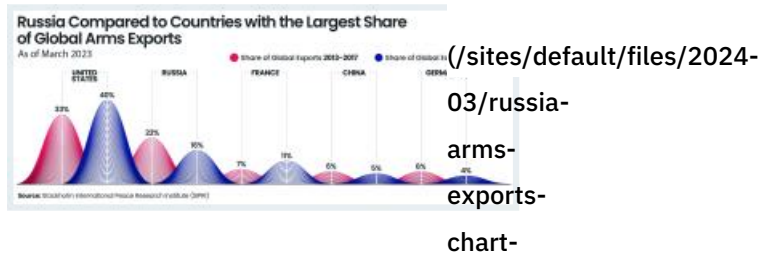
At the end of the year, Putin personally visited both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, where he declared the UAE as Russia's main trading partner in the Arab world. Reportedly, topics of discussion during these meetings included trade in advanced technology. Algeria, for its part, held a military dialogue with Russia at the end of 2023.

To be sure, there are tell-tale signs that things are not good with Rosoboronexport, Russia's state armaments manufacturer. Russia sought to retrieve parts of the defence systems it exported to countries to replenish its own weapons stocks being expended in Ukraine.

One of those countries was in the Middle East, specifically Egypt. *The Wall Street Journal* reported in November

2023 that Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi agreed to deliver approximately 150 engines. This report came after reports in April of another Russia-Egypt deal to send Russia 40,000 rockets, a deal that ended following US pressure on Egypt.

This overall picture suggests that while Russia's ability to export weapons to the Middle East may become limited in the long term, Moscow remains attentive to the region, which sees it as an important player in balancing the great power competition engulfing it. Arms sales are and will likely continue to be at the tip of Moscow's foreign policy spear in this competition.



## Closer Military Ties with Iran

The invasion of Ukraine accelerated cooperation between Russia and Iran, including in the military sphere. This trend is likely to continue.

Multiple reports following the invasion hinted at a broader high-tech and defence partnership, and US officials began publically expressing concern. US National Security Council official John Kirby noted in late 2022, "Russia is offering Iran an unprecedented level of military and technical support that is transforming their relationship."

Iran's provision of Shaheed attack drones for use in Ukraine has received much attention and, to be sure, is important, as no country other than Iran has willingly helped Russia kill Ukrainians. But what Russia is providing to Iran deserves at least as much attention. At the end of 2023, Iran's deputy defence minister told the Tasnim news agency that Iran had finalised arrangements to deliver Russian-made Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets and helicopters.

The Russians have yet to confirm the deal, but what is confirmed is the export to Iran of training aircraft, which would enable Iranian pilots to make the leap to the much more advanced Su-35. If this deal goes through, it would significantly increase Tehran's ability to conduct offensive air operations by replacing its antiquated 1970s inventory of US aircraft, which the Shah purchased before the Islamic Revolution.

Iran remains a primary threat to the Gulf states, and the provision of Su-35s to Iran would shift the military balance within the region in Iran's favour, causing the Gulf states to change their security planning. But even if the deal does not go through, a trend of strategic cooperation has already emerged, including through bilateral Russian-Iranian and multilateral Russian, Chinese and Iranian exercises, a pattern that goes back at least five years.

In late 2019, when Russia, China and Iran conducted their first trilateral military drills, Second Rear Admiral Gholamreza Tahani told Iran's state-run Press TV that the drills were a signal that relations between these three countries had reached a "meaningful level," and that it was the first time Iran held joint drills with two world naval powers on such a scale.

This trend has continued ever since. At the end of 2023, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov announced progress on the Russian-Iranian treaty on a "comprehensive strategic partnership." At the beginning of the year, Russia's state-run TASS reported that the document is being finalised and is set to confirm bilateral respect for each state's sovereignty.

With the increased frequency and intensity of diplomatic and military relations, as well as the associated information narratives, it is no wonder Iran is among the newest members of BRICS. The UAE has joined, while

Saudi Arabia remains invited but has not formally accepted accession to the group. With Russia assuming the chairmanship on 1 January this year, it will be important to watch if Russia attempts to court many in the Middle East and Africa by dangling defence contracts.

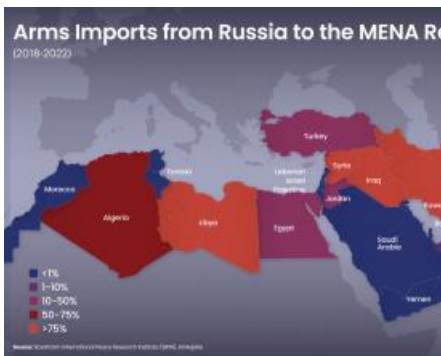
## Expanded Military Presence and Wagner

A chief Western strategic objective is to keep Russia out of the Mediterranean. This position allows Russia to exert diplomatic and economic pressure on the European Union and project military power into the Middle East and Africa while posturing on NATO's southern flank.

Russia's **Black Sea Fleet** (<https://en.majalla.com/node/300586/politics/ukraine-offensive-makes-waves-black-sea>) has suffered debilitating losses. Still, the Russian Navy remains largely intact and can strike NATO targets with Kalibr land attack missiles across the Mediterranean.

If Russia were to enhance its position on the Mediterranean further, it would impact its ability to conduct its war on Ukraine, but as the West waffles in aiding Ukraine, the Russians may see even greater opportunity in North Africa and the Middle East. Thus, Moscow understands the strategic importance of this region and continues to vie for influence there.

Not only does Russia maintain its permanent bases in Syria, chiefly in Tartus and Khmeimim, but it continues to look for access to a naval base in Libya, which has been another focal point of Russia's Middle East activities for approximately the last five years. Reports in late 2023 suggested that Russia is moving ahead with plans for gaining docking rights in a naval base in Eastern Libya, most likely in Tobruk, after Putin's meeting on September 28 with eastern military commander Khalifa Haftar.



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These plans do not appear to have been finalised, but Moscow is clearly working towards expanding its military influence in Libya. Tobruk is a deep-water port that would add to Russia's logistical capabilities, especially with the shallow-water port of Tartus. Russia also continues to seek access to a naval base in Sudan on the Red Sea, with an eye towards permanent access to the Suez Canal, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Peninsula.

Many of Russia's efforts to expand its military influence have either been spearheaded by or maintained with the help of its so-called private military companies (PMC), such as the Wagner Group. This group has been an instrumental tool for the Kremlin. It has officially been rebranded in the aftermath of Putin ally Yevgeny Prigozhin leading a failed mutiny and subsequently dying in a plane crash in August.

Subsequently, the Russian defence ministry has taken over many of Wagner's security, oil, and gold mining contracts and the group's relationships with African leaders. In Africa, Wagner has been most recently rebranded as Afrika Korps; the takeaway is that the Kremlin needs a paramilitary force to continue carrying out foreign policy objectives, whether as Wagner or by any other name.

## Taking the Long View of Russia

Some might look at Russia's declining arms trade and sanctions on the Russian military-industrial complex that, if kept in place, portend the decline of Russia's military capabilities and losses in Ukraine and conclude there is no need to worry about Russia's influence in the Middle East. But this view is both myopic and misleading.

Russia continues to vie for influence in the region through cementing access to strategic ports and using paramilitary groups and proxies, all of which Russia can afford absent Western pressure to cease these activities. Its defence contracts are foundational to these efforts.

Within Russia itself, the war in Ukraine is not only a chief military and foreign policy priority but also the main driver of economic growth. Russia's 2024 budget shows that for the first time in decades, military and defence spending is higher than social spending.

Indeed, the war has militarised Russian society. In the aftermath of the Ukraine conflict, if it needs to release pressure incurred by an excess of combat veterans, it may employ them abroad, especially through the use of paramilitary groups such as Wagner.

This will be far easier to accomplish now that the Defense Ministry fully controls the group. Thus, when it comes to Russia's defence relationships in the Middle East, Western policymakers need to take a long view that accounts for both Putin's strategic objectives and the implications of the Ukraine war, regardless of its outcome.

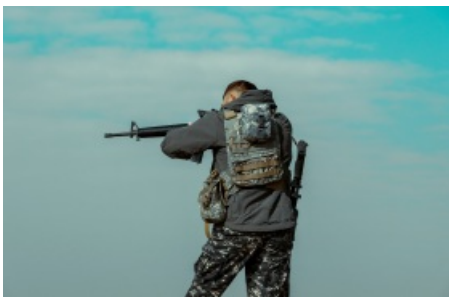
More to the point, if the US Congress continues to dither and delay aid to Ukraine, Russia may soon tip the scales decisively in its favour. If this happens, America's standing in the world will be diminished, and its adversaries will grow emboldened.

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