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Russia, the Black Sea, and the Middle East

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Strong Russian influence in the Black Sea has long facilitated the pursuit of Russian ambitions in the Middle East. Ever since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, though, there has been a reversal in this pattern with strong Russian influence in the Middle East facilitating the pursuit of Russian ambitions in the Black Sea—particularly with regard to Ukraine.

This paper will discuss the general nature of the relationship between Russian influence in the Black Sea on the one hand and the Middle East on the other, how this relationship has changed since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the repercussions for Moscow’s Black Sea goals of three post-February 2022 shocks in the region (conflict between Israel and Hamas, conflict between Israel on the one hand and both Hezbollah and Iran on the other, and the downfall of the Assad regime in Syria), and how differing outcomes of the Russia-Ukraine war as well as other scenarios may affect the relationship between Russian influence in the Black Sea and the Middle East.

The Historical Pattern: Russian Influence in the Black Sea Enhances Russian Influence in the Middle East

In general, the stronger Russia’s presence in the Black Sea has been, the more able Russia has been to play an active role in the Middle East. The Black Sea, though, has not been Russia’s only entry point to the Middle East. Indeed, some of Tsarist Russia’s advances into the region occurred at the expense of Persia via the Caucasus region, the Caspian Sea, and western Central Asia.¹ While Russian naval vessels from its Black Sea fleet have had the shortest route to the Mediterranean, Russian warships have also been able to reach the Middle East via longer routes from the Russian Navy’s Baltic, Northern, and Pacific fleets.² Air traffic between Russia and the Middle East has not necessarily transited the Black Sea either. Michael Kofman, a leading analyst of the Russian military, observed that Russian air transport aircraft “typically flew routes over the Caspian Sea and through Iranian airspace, which would also be used by Russian Long Range Aviation when delivering strikes from the mainland.”³ He further observed that sometimes, “Russian bombers flew complex routes circling around Europe” in order to reach Syria.⁴

Further, Russia has not needed to control the entire Black Sea region (indeed, it never has) in order for Russia to play an active role in the Middle East. In other words, there has not been a direct one-to-one relationship between Russian influence in the Black Sea and Russian influence



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in the Middle East. Nevertheless, strong Russian influence in the Black Sea—including the ability to transit Russian naval and commercial vessels via the Turkish Straits—has certainly contributed to Russia’s being able to play a role in the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, and North Africa in the past.⁵

But Russia’s degree of influence in the Black Sea has not been the only factor enabling it to play an influential role in the Middle East. Another important factor has been demand from actors in the region for support from Russia (among others) against their neighbors, internal opponents, and other external great powers. While Russia’s strength in the Black Sea enhanced Russia’s ability to supply this support, it has been the internal political dynamics of the Middle East that created demand for it in the Middle East.⁶

Since February 2022: Russian Influence in the Middle East Enhances Russian Influence in the Black Sea

Since the Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014, and especially since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, good relations between Moscow and the Middle East have served to facilitate (or at the very least, not hamper) Russia’s aims vis-a-vis Ukraine and the Black Sea region.

To begin with, the refusal of every government in the Middle East (including America’s longtime partners there) to go along with the West’s Ukraine-related economic sanctions against Russia has helped Moscow evade those sanctions and gain both money and materiel needed for its war effort.⁷ Instead of heeding the Biden administration’s request that Riyadh increase oil production in order to keep oil prices low after the West initiated efforts to reduce petroleum purchases from Russia, Saudi Arabia joined with Russia via the OPEC+ format to reduce oil production in support of higher oil prices.⁸ The United Arab Emirates (UAE) in particular has served as a hub through which Russia has acquired Western goods that the West no longer sells directly to Russia.⁹ Indeed, Middle Eastern countries have seen Russian-Western differences over Ukraine as an opportunity to benefit economically from helping Russia evade sanctions, as well as from the redirection of Russian trade away from the West.

Russia has also been able to exploit the geopolitical outlooks prevailing in the Middle East where a multipolar world is seen as more geopolitically advantageous for states there than an American-dominated unipolar world. Arab governments have regarded past U.S. efforts to promote democratization and human rights, no matter how half-hearted, as threatening their very survival (indeed, some U.S. allies did not survive the 2011 Arab Spring). Russia, by contrast, has been a supporter of the authoritarian status quo.¹⁰ Further, there is a general sense among Middle Eastern governments that they can gain more from a multipolar world in which external great



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powers compete for their favor than from a unipolar world in which one great power has more sway than they would like.¹¹

Moscow has also benefited from general attitudes prevailing in Arab countries about how the West appears more concerned about Ukrainians under attack from Russia than about Palestinians under attack from Israel, Arabs under attack from Iran and its proxies, and Arabs engulfed in civil war as in both Yemen and Sudan. As a result, there certainly has been no public opinion groundswell in Arab countries pushing governments to be more supportive of Ukraine or less cooperative with Russia.¹² Even in Israel where public opinion has been more sympathetic toward Ukraine and critical of Russia, polls show that the Israeli public “understands” why the Israeli government has not been willing to support Ukraine.¹³

In addition to factors indigenous to the Middle East benefiting Russia’s ambitions in the Black Sea region, Moscow has had coercive tools at its disposal, though it has not always been able to effectively employ some of them. Israeli officials and observers, for example, have in the past cited Israel’s need to preserve the Israeli-Russian deconfliction agreement regarding Syria (wherein Russian forces did not interfere with Israeli attacks against Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria) as a reason why Israel could not more actively support Ukraine as both Washington and Kyiv requested.¹⁴ And while this issue disappeared with the downfall of the Assad regime and the departure from Syria of Hezbollah and Iranian forces, another issue which remains of concern to Israelis is that Moscow could undertake actions harmful to the Russian Jewish community if Israel provided weapons and other direct support to Ukraine.¹⁵

Another coercive tool that Russia appeared to have had at the beginning of the Ukraine war to help ensure Middle Eastern governments did not support Ukraine and would be more sympathetic to Russian aims toward it generally related to Black Sea grain supplies. The Middle East region imports much of its grain supplies from Russia and Ukraine. Russian efforts at the beginning of the war to halt Ukrainian grain exports via the Black Sea through the Turkish Straits had the effect of raising grain prices and thus undermining stability in poorer Middle Eastern states as well as threatening the security of richer states affected by developments in them. Russia was also in a position to cut off grain supplies to states it deemed “unfriendly.” However, Ukrainian grain supplies via the Black Sea were able to resume thanks to a Turkish-negotiated agreement. Moscow ended this arrangement in July 2023, but since then Ukraine has been able to ship its grain via ships sailing inside the territorial waters of Romania, Bulgaria, and Türkiye—all of which are NATO members.¹⁶ Moscow may also have relented regarding Ukrainian grain exports partly because Russia’s Middle Eastern partners expressed fears that their region could become destabilized if high grain prices were allowed to prevail.

One means of influence less available to Moscow since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 has been Russian naval access to the Middle East region from the Black Sea via the Turkish Straits. After the war began, Türkiye limited naval passage via the Straits under the terms of the Montreux Convention. Russian naval vessels with a home port on the Black Sea were only allowed to transit from the Mediterranean into the Black Sea, while those from other Russian fleets were only allowed to transit from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean.¹⁷ This made Russian retention of its Tartus naval base on Syria's Mediterranean coast all the more important for Moscow's effort to maintain a naval presence in the Middle East.

Another tool of Russian influence that has been less effective since the start of the war in Ukraine is the provision of arms to the Middle East. Buying weapons from Russia has been appealing to many authoritarian regimes in the Middle East because Moscow does not place the kind of human rights-related restrictions on their use that U.S. and Western arms suppliers have done. After the Russia-Ukraine war began in February 2022, though, the U.S. successfully pressured some Middle Eastern governments to cancel arms purchases from Russia—as well as to not sell arms to it. But just as importantly, Moscow's own ability and willingness to sell arms to Middle Eastern (as well as other) governments has been negatively affected by Western economic sanctions limiting Russia's ability to produce weapons as well as to Russia's own need for the weapons it does produce for its war against Ukraine.¹⁸ In other words, Russia's need for weapons in the Black Sea region has negatively impacted the supply of Russian weapons to the Middle East. As a consequence, Middle Eastern governments have been turning toward other arms suppliers.¹⁹

Russia's war against Ukraine (and its preoccupation with the Black Sea arena), then, has served to limit Russia's ability to influence the Middle East. But, as noted earlier, Russia has been able to play an influential role in the Middle East anyway due to the willingness of Middle Eastern governments to cooperate with it.

Impact of Three Post-February 2022 Shocks on Russia and the Black Sea

Subsequent to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Middle East has experienced three shocks which have affected not just Russia's position in the Middle East, but also its position in the Black Sea.

The first of these shocks was the Israeli-Hamas conflict that began October 7, 2023 with Hamas's raid into Israel during which it killed some 1,200 Israelis and captured hundreds of others. This was soon followed by Israeli military action against Hamas in Gaza which has resulted in the deaths of some 48,000 Palestinians there so far. Although Israel had resisted efforts by the U.S. and others to help Ukraine, Moscow immediately blamed the Israel-Hamas conflict on the U.S. and issued statements supportive of Hamas.²⁰

Russia, though, has apparently not provided weapons to Hamas in support of its conflict with Israel.²¹ But Moscow's pro-Palestinian statements were regarded favorably by Arab audiences while strong Biden administration support for Israel was not. The Israel-Hamas conflict also distracted attention away from the Russia-Ukraine war and provided governments in the Middle East and elsewhere in the "Global South" additional justifications for not supporting Ukraine or sanctioning Russia.²² Despite deep Israeli disappointment with Russia's pro-Palestinian position, Jerusalem remained hesitant to support Ukraine.²³ The Israeli-Hamas war, then, did not negatively affect Russia's position in the Black Sea and may have even enhanced it to some degree.

The second shock was the escalation of conflict between Israel and Hezbollah as well as between Israel and Iran (including the exchange of missile attacks between them). Unlike Hamas with which Moscow has had limited interaction and whose actions Russia does not appear to have materially supported, both Iran and Hezbollah have been important partners for Moscow in supporting the Assad regime in Syria.²⁴ In addition, Iran has supplied armed drones and ballistic missiles to Russia for use against Ukraine.²⁵ Israeli moves to weaken Hezbollah and Iran, then, undermined the ability of both to defend the Assad regime. And Russia's own preoccupation with Ukraine limited Moscow's ability to help Iran and Hezbollah counter Israel. While Israeli attacks against Hezbollah and Iran may not have materially affected Russia's position in the Black Sea, Moscow's preoccupation with the Black Sea made Russia less able to support its allies in the Middle East.

The third shock was the overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria by Turkish-backed Sunni Arab opposition forces. Neither Russia nor Iran acted to prevent this.²⁶ Russian support for its allies was limited to flying President Assad to Moscow and granting him asylum as well as (according to Vladimir Putin himself) flying some 4,000 Iranians back to Tehran.²⁷ By contrast, Syria's leading opposition group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, received military assistance not just from Turkey, but also from Ukraine in the form of twenty drone operators and 150 advanced first-view drones.²⁸

The downfall of the Assad regime not only entailed the loss of a longstanding ally, but also raised the prospect that Russia would lose its naval and air bases in Syria. Losing them could complicate Moscow's ability to support its Africa Corps forces operating in several African countries.²⁹ What was especially amazing was that while Russian forces were using its Syrian bases to attack the Assad's regimes opponents right up until just before the Assad regime fell, Moscow has asked the victorious leaders of those same forces for permission to keep its bases.³⁰ The new Syrian government, though, is reportedly only willing to allow this in return on conditions that Moscow will resist, including: the return of Assad and his other associates to



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Syria for trial, reparations from Russia for the damage caused by its past military support for Assad, and that Russia “address past mistakes.”³¹ In January 2025, the new Syrian government canceled the Assad regime’s contract with Stroitransgaz to manage Tartous’s commercial port (which is not the same as the naval facility).³²

Moscow, though, has already begun hedging against the possibility that it might not keep its Syrian bases through moving men and materiel from them to eastern Libya which is dominated by the Russian-backed strongman Khalifa Haftar.³³ But Haftar might prove to be an unreliable ally for Moscow since, as Ulf Laessing of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation noted, “Haftar is often switching allegiances, only controls half of the country and is, at an age of 81, not exactly a youthful figure.”³⁴

One way in which the downfall of Assad may affect Moscow’s position in the Black Sea is that Russia is no longer in a position to pressure Ankara through helping the Assad regime drive refugees from Syria north into Turkiye. Otherwise, though, the downfall of Assad has not diminished Moscow’s ability to operate in the Black Sea region. Indeed, to the extent that Russia is able to redeploy military assets from Syria to Ukraine, Moscow’s war effort against Ukraine may even marginally benefit from cutting its losses in Syria. The downfall of the Assad regime may not lessen the willingness of other Middle Eastern governments to cooperate with Moscow either. But it may have negatively affected Russia’s image there. As the prominent Saudi scholar Abdul Aziz Sager stated during a Carnegie Endowment webinar on great powers in the Middle East on December 18, 2024, “Russia...is a minor player for us in the region.”³⁵ An Iranian scholar even claimed that “Moscow has embraced an appeasement strategy in response to Israel’s aggressive regional behavior.”³⁶

Future Scenarios

It has been argued here that at present while the Russia-Ukraine war is still going on, it is Russia’s influence in the Middle East that has more impact on its influence in the Black Sea region than vice versa. The end of the Russia-Ukraine war, though, could change this. But how it does so will depend on how the Russia-Ukraine war ends.

If the war ends in a way that gives Russia the advantage over Ukraine and allows Russia to exercise greater influence in the Black Sea—and especially if Russian naval access through the Turkish Straits is restored—then Moscow might well turn its attention to trying to expand its influence in the Middle East. The Middle East’s ongoing internal rivalries would probably also make what appears to be a stronger Russia seem to be at least as desirable a partner as what appears to be a weaker West to Middle Eastern governments seeking support from an external great power against their regional rivals.

If the war in Ukraine, though, ends with a Russian “victory” but Russian-Western hostility remaining or even increasing, and if their rivalry shifts to Eastern Europe, then Russia may be no more able to exert influence in the Middle East than it is now. If Western sanctions against Russia remain or even increase, this will provide opportunities for Middle Eastern countries to continue profiting from sanctions busting as well as trading with Russia. If Russia’s need for weapons remains as high as it is now, though, Moscow may continue to be less reliable as an arms supplier to countries in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Finally, if the war in Ukraine ends with a Russian “defeat” (as a result, say, of a ceasefire with Putin not achieving his more ambitious goals vis-a-vis Ukraine and Kyiv’s relationship with the West), then Russia may be seen as a less useful partner to Middle Eastern governments.

There are, though, other, non-Ukraine-related scenarios. With the downfall of the Russian- and Iranian-backed government in Syria, Iran may seem less of a threat to Israel and Arab governments—and so placating Russia to reign it in may no longer seem as necessary to them. On the other hand, if the blows to Tehran’s regional ambitions results in increased Iranian determination to acquire nuclear weapons, Israeli, Arab, and Western concerns about Iran will increase. Russia, though, may no longer be as willing to restrain Iran’s nuclear ambitions as it was in the past.³⁷

If the other Black Sea great power—Turkiye—seizes upon the rise of its allies in Syria to pursue a broader “neo-Ottomanist” agenda aimed at restoring a broader Turkish role in the Middle East,³⁸ then Middle Eastern governments are likely to seek support from anyone they can—including Russia—against it. According to Reuters, “Israel is lobbying the United States to keep Syria weak and decentralised, including by letting Russia keep its military bases there to counter Turkey’s [sic] growing influence in the country.”³⁹

On the other hand, if Russia and Turkiye seek to support each other’s ambitions and share influence in the Middle East, then governments there are likely to actively seek support from the West and anyone else—perhaps even Iran—to thwart such a plan. This scenario, though, seems the least likely to emerge given the ongoing Russian-Turkish rivalries in the Middle East and South Caucasus.

In sum: the degree of Russian influence in the Black Sea affects Russian influence in the Middle East. But while Russian influence in the Black Sea is an important factor in enabling Russia to exercise influence in the Middle East, Russian influence in the Middle East also affects Russia’s ability to exercise influence in the Black Sea.

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