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**The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East
and North Africa**

Dr. Frederic Wehrey

Senior Fellow

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

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Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and members of the subcommittee, it is a privilege to speak with you here today about the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the Middle East and North Africa, and specifically how that invasion has affected Russia's military influence and interventionism in the region—and how the United States should respond.

I join you remotely from Tripoli, Libya, a city that was the target of a Russian military assault from 2019 to 2020 in the form of hundreds of mercenaries from the Kremlin-linked "Wagner Group," along with regular Russian military personnel, who were backing Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar's bid to topple the internationally recognized Libyan government. I observed that battle firsthand from the frontlines, witnessing how Wagner forces, working in conjunction with armed drones piloted by a U.S. security partner, the United Arab Emirates, relentlessly shelled civilian neighborhoods with scant regard for human life. Though the Russian-backed campaign failed, it caused thousands of deaths, and it left deep political divisions in Libya that have yet to mend. It also severely truncated Libya's sovereignty, entrenching thousands of Wagner forces, and hundreds of tons of advanced Russian military hardware at air bases and oil facilities across the country.

Russian Activism in the Middle East

In many respects, Russia's meddling in Libya is emblematic of its renewed activism in the Middle East, especially in its blend of military intervention and arms sales, diplomatic mediation, a quest for energy and infrastructure projects, and the use of soft-power tools like propaganda and media. Rather than constituting a well-planned or principle-driven strategy, its engagement is largely opportunistic and ad-hoc. It seizes on instability and power vacuums in the region, missteps by the United States and its European partners, and local grievances. It exploits the insecurities of Arab autocrats about the durability of long-term U.S. support, especially amid the so-called U.S. "pivot to Asia" and their displeasure with the conditionality that the U.S. sometimes attaches to its arms sales. In contrast, Russian arms deliveries are faster, free from restrictions related to human rights, and unencumbered by concerns about domestic blowback. But Russian assistance is also largely transactional and often short-term, bereft of any ambition to provide security guarantees or sustainable development.

There is no question that Russia's low-cost, commitment-free strategy has paid dividends for the Kremlin. This is most evident in the case of Syria, where Russian military intervention in 2015 during the civil war was decisive in rescuing the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and securing air bases and ports for Russian forces. Similarly, in

Lebanon and Gaza, Russia has gained traction as a mediator between opposing factions, underscoring its ability to engage with groups like Hizballah and HAMAS that are off-limits to the West. Beyond the Levant, Moscow has counted Algeria and Egypt among its top-five arms customers worldwide. Meanwhile, in the Gulf, U.S. security partners Saudi Arabia and U.A.E. have coordinated with Russia on oil, signed arms deals, and have increasingly aligned their foreign policies on a number of files, most notably in Libya. Here, both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi gave cash or promises of cash and military support to Libyan militia commander Khalifa Haftar, who was also backed by Russia. These convergences underscore that Arab regimes' warming to Russia is not simply a matter of hedging against the perceived U.S. "retreat" from the Middle East but rather because they share with the Kremlin a similar ideological vision about regional order—an order that stifles pluralism, quashes political Islam, preserves the status quo, and enshrines autocracy in the form of a strongman or dynastic rule.

Yet despite its splashy advances in the region over the past near-decade, Russia's ability to shape outcomes to its long-term advantage—as opposed to clinching short-term gains and disrupting the policies of the West—is ultimately circumscribed by its limited toolkit. In particular, Russia's footprint in the Middle East is bounded by its meager economic clout, which pales in comparison to that of the United States, the European Union, and China. As a result, Russia is more likely to engage when it senses local states or actors have the financial resources to pay for its assistance or where it can count on the extraction of lucrative natural resources, like oil or metals.

Indeed, this resource-dependency illustrates an important and oft-overlooked facet of Russian relations with Arab states. Many of these states, especially those flush with cash, exert far more agency and discretion in determining the depth and breadth of Russian influence in the region than is often recognized. And many of them, particularly longtime U.S. security partners, have become adept at courting Russian military aid to pressure Washington for greater leniency on domestic governance and wrangle concessions, especially sought-after arms deals.

Despite their threats to shun America, these states ultimately recognize that Russia has neither the will nor the capacity to serve as their primary security patron. At best, Russia will supplement, rather than supplant, the U.S. security role. And even when Middle Eastern states go ahead with Russian purchases, they are often frustrated by the materiel's inferior quality, absence of sustained service and follow-up, and problems of integration and interoperability. Added to this, even Moscow's most reliable arms customers are often fickle about granting longer-term access. Famously non-aligned Algeria, for example, has repeatedly rebuffed Russia's requests to build a naval base at

the Mediterranean port of Oran, and the Egyptian government has often denied Russian military planes overflight rights. These dynamics show that, with few exceptions, Russia has been unable to advance its relations in the Middle East beyond purely commercial or transactional encounters to establish genuine alliances and lasting partnerships.

The Impact of Russia's Ukraine Invasion

Now, in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine, Moscow is trying to harness whatever strategic gains it has made in the Middle East from its multiple interventions and call-in diplomatic favors from the recipients of its assistance. Specifically, it is redeploying thousands of Wagner Group mercenaries from Syria and Libya to eastern Ukraine while reportedly also enlisting pro-Assad Syrian militiamen. These developments are certainly alarming, but their impact and especially their military significance in Ukraine should not be overstated. The Wagner Group's greatest asset for the Kremlin is its deniability and adaptability as a paramilitary force fighting insurgencies, guarding infrastructure, and propping up dictators and warlords on unconventional battlefields in Africa and the Middle East, all while seeking economic gains. In Ukraine's conventional war, not only are these virtues of plunder and secrecy mooted, but the Wagner Group will face a vastly more formidable, better-equipped, a better-trained foe that has already shattered the morale of Russia's regular forces, as well as a battlefield that is marked in many areas less by infantry combat and more by salvos of missiles and artillery and drone strikes. Similarly, Moscow's recruitment of vast numbers of Syrians—whose actual arrival in Ukraine has been overstated and whose fighting competence is similarly poor—will not give Russia any real advantage; they are simply there as cannon fodder. In Libya, meanwhile, Russia has an interest in keeping Wagner forces on the ground as a form of leverage and a potential means to complicate U.S. and European policies.

On the diplomatic front, Middle Eastern states that have engaged with Russia, including America's Arab security partners, have deferred on joining the Western-led condemnation of Russia's aggression and refused to join efforts to isolate Russia economically. In many cases, again, this is more of a form of local signaling, especially by the Gulf monarchies, to convey discontent with America's supposed inattentiveness to their security needs rather than a full-throated embrace of Russia. Exemplifying this dynamic, the United Arab Emirates abstained from voting in favor of a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) draft resolution condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine, partly as a response to what Abu Dhabi saw as Washington's slow and inadequate response to attacks on its territory by Houthi militants in Yemen, but also in return for Moscow's support for a UNSC vote designating the Houthis as a terrorist organization. More disturbingly, Gulf Arab states have allowed Russian oligarchs to launder money

and have spurned Washington's request to pump more oil to bring down global prices and make up for the shortfall in Russian exports to Europe due to sanctions.

For their part, Arab citizens have been muted on the war or supportive of Russia as a way of telegraphing their opposition to America's policies in the Middle East. More specifically, their cheering of Putin is a way of highlighting the hypocrisy in the outpouring of Western resolve on Ukraine and especially Europe's welcoming of Ukrainian refugees – which contrasts sharply with perceived Western inaction on the Syrian civil war and the resulting refugee exodus – as well as Washington's partisanship toward Israel and its neglect of Iran's malign influence in the Middle East.

These developments underscore a deep dysfunctionality in America's outmoded partnerships with Arab autocracies and a growing global trend of multipolarity defined by the primacy of self-interest rather than shared norms and rules. They are also evidence that the Arab public remains deeply suspicious of Washington's intentions and policies in the region – especially its decades of military interventions and double standards on human-rights abuses. However, Arab ambivalence on the Ukraine war does not herald a new security order in the region dominated by Moscow or even Beijing or point to newfound clout by either power in "flipping" Middle Eastern states into their orbit.

U.S. Policy Responses

With this in mind, U.S. strategy should not try and coax Arab states back to the fold with promises of more American weapons to compete with Russian offers or, as Gulf Arab states have requested, provide more formal defense assurances. Instead, U.S. policies should let Moscow's mounting deficiencies speak for themselves, amplifying, where possible, the effects of Russia's disastrous military performance in Ukraine in reducing its attractiveness as an arms provider and using financial tools to constrain its arms flows.

In the past years, the Kremlin has tried to use its military campaign in Syria and successive arms expositions in Moscow to showcase its prowess as an arms provider for Middle Eastern states and as a compelling alternative to the U.S. While some states, as mentioned, have certainly responded favorably to these overtures, they will find that Russia before the Ukraine war is not the same as Russia after the Ukraine war. Russia's much-hyped military systems are being added shown to be flawed in combat— epitomized by the "jack-in-the-box" effect of exploding turrets on its T-72 tanks— which add to deficiencies that were previously on display to the world during its Crimea campaign in 2014. On top of this impending dent in demand for its weapons, Russia's

Ukraine war is causing significant supply side problems. The Russian military itself is facing severe resupply, repair, and logistical problems, which undermines its ability to service customers in the Middle East. Moreover, the prolongation of combat in Ukraine is whittling down its stocks of advanced weaponry, especially precision-guided munitions. These losses due to battlefield expenditures and attrition are compounded by the effect of suffocating Western sanctions and embargoes against Russia related to the Ukraine war, which has degraded its defense industrial base, particularly in sophisticated electronic components like semi-conductors. Adding another layer to these pressures are preexisting U.S. financial penalties: namely, the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) of 2017, which has raised the cost for Middle Eastern states in obtaining Russian hardware but remains hobbled by inconsistent application by the U.S.

All of this will have enormous and deleterious effects on Russia's ability to keep pace as a competitive arms seller in a crowded Middle East arms market that includes traditional suppliers like the U.S., China, and France, as well as a revitalized German defense industry and capable middle-power producers like Turkey and Israel. Even longtime Russian clients in the Middle East will be inclined to turn elsewhere as Moscow cannot fulfill its requirements. In light of these shortfalls, China may attempt to grab a greater share of the market, especially since it possesses large quantities of Russian weapons and spare parts that it can sell to these states to keep their Russian inventories running. It may also sense an opportunity to market more of its own indigenously produced systems, especially drones, missiles, armor, and ships. Here again, like Russia, China is an attractive patron for many, especially when compared to the U.S.: its weapons are cheaper, delivered more quickly, and devoid of restrictions, though they are often of inferior quality.

In response to this new landscape, the U.S. needs to adopt a firm but judicious approach. It should leverage Ukraine-related financial sanctions and more effectively and uniformly apply CAATSA penalties to dissuade current and potential Russian clients from purchasing arms from Moscow. At the same time, it should identify how it can support its Middle East partners who have counted on Russia in the past and now have gaps in their defense capability. The U.S. can either fill those gaps itself or encourage a responsible diversification to European suppliers like France, Italy, or Germany, or regional exporters, like Turkey or Israel if it wants to deny China access.

A more durable and appropriate strategy, however, would be to question why Arab security partners have embarked on massive shopping sprees for conventional arms in the first place since these weapons do not often address the threats these states face.

Moreover, these arms are often purchased for reasons of prestige and have been used for domestic repression or to launch destabilizing wars that have inflicted civilian casualties.

Given these glaring shortcomings in the entire security assistance enterprise, the U.S. should avoid the rush to ply Arab security partners with greater military support simply because they threaten to turn to Russia or China. An often-overlooked facet of Arab states' longstanding reliance on American arms transfers is that they are not just obtaining defense capabilities but purchasing an insurance policy against abandonment in the face of both domestic and foreign threats. As noted, neither Moscow nor Beijing has the interest or ability to fulfill this role. But more importantly, as I have [written about](#), for many of these states, especially in the Gulf, regime insecurity is chronic and deeply rooted—a function partly of their geostrategic location facing Iran but also their autocratic nature—and no amount of U.S. or other outside support will ever fully assuage them. Moreover, the U.S. has already provided substantive and responsive defensive support against Iranian or Iranian-backed missile attacks in the Gulf, and it maintains a far more robust military presence in the region than common Gulf narratives suggest, belying the notion of a real "retreat."

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, in closing, it is clear that Russia's multi-faceted and opportunistic activism in the Middle East is concerning and runs counter to U.S. values and long-term interests. And as I've outlined above, Russian actions require a sustained but nuanced pushback that accounts for the region's built-in obstacles to Russian penetration, recognizes the agency of local actors in determining the extent of Russian influence, and, especially, exploits Russia's diminished capacity as an arms provider in the wake of the Ukraine war. Most importantly, they necessitate a degree of U.S. flexibility and some acceptance of the coming multipolarity and security diversification in a region that is already declining in importance for American interests. To put it differently, an overreaction by the U.S. could be worse than the actual challenge posed by Moscow, creating unanticipated second- and third-order instability, and siphoning American energy away from addressing other priorities, at home and in Asia, and from tackling global threats like climate change.

More specifically, Washington should not let this new frame of "great power rivalry," which Middle East autocracies have heartily welcomed and exploited, distract it from scrutinizing the behavior of these regimes at home and from helping the region's citizens and societies address the socio-economic and political problems they face now and in the coming decades. These afflictions, which include the fallout from the pandemic, food insecurity from the Ukraine war, climate change, the looming end of the oil era, and growing frustration with the absence of economic opportunity, to name but a few, have

the potential to cause very real unrest. None of them can be addressed by a return to the overly securitized policies that have defined the American approach to the region for decades.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you here today.