



Statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
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On Opportunities and Challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean: Examining U.S. Interests  
and Regional Cooperation

# **Implications of Russia's Ukraine Debacle for US Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean**

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Chairpersons, Ranking Members, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. Russia's unprovoked, illegal, and brutal invasion of Ukraine is transforming our world. It has profound implications for the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East regions. The US and its NATO allies must recognize that transformation and its implications, avoid clinging to paradigms that five weeks of war have invalidated, and chart a new course forward in a world in which Russia's conventional military power has been seriously and enduringly weakened. This world will offer opportunities as well as challenges if we are willing to exploit them.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is in the midst of expending his conventional military against Ukraine. He has committed most of his available ground combat power to the war and suffered devastating losses. Western officials estimate Russian casualties at above 40,000 killed, wounded, and missing—roughly 20% of the entire force Russia committed to the invasion. Combat units have likely taken the lion's share of these casualties, and many elite and first-tier formations have likely been rendered combat ineffective. Russia's military leadership losses have been stunning—commanders and deputies of combined arms armies, divisions, brigades, and regiments have been killed at rates that the poorly-led Russian military can ill afford. Russian materiel losses are also significant, and the Ukrainian General Staff reports that the Russian military is struggling to bring old T-72s out of stores and get them into the fight.

The dismal performance of Russia's air force and missile units has been perhaps the most shocking aspect of this war. Russia has failed to secure air superiority over the battlespace. Ukrainian manned and unmanned aircraft have successfully attacked Russian ground units. Ukrainian aircraft and ground-based air defense systems have taken a serious toll of Russian aircraft and missiles. Western officials and the Ukrainian General Staff report that Russia has used a high proportion of its arsenal of precision-guided munitions—and that the failure rates of those munitions have been remarkably high. Russia's vaunted S-300 and S-400 air defense systems have notably failed to sweep the skies of Ukrainian aircraft. The Ukrainian military deserves tremendous credit for these feats. Its determination and skill in fighting the Russian invaders has been essential to causing Russia's military misfortunes. But the general incompetence and incapacity of the Russian military has also been demonstrated for all to see, as have the limitations of Russia's military industry to produce modern weapons at

scale and with the necessary quality.

Russia's disastrous invasion of Ukraine has made at least one thing obvious: the Russian conventional military was simply no match for a serious adversary even before the catastrophic losses it has suffered and can ill afford to replace. The US must therefore immediately reevaluate its approach to deterrence and escalation management with respect to Russia. We must recognize that the Russian conventional military is not a significant challenge to the U.S. at this time, and that we must not be as deterred as we have been by the fear of having to engage it if Russia seeks to prevent the US from taking action we believe is vital to our national security interest.

The implications of that fact in the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East writ large are significant. The US has constrained its policies, aims, and activities in Syria since Russia entered the war there in 2015, partly out of fear of becoming involved in a conflict with Moscow. It is now obvious, however, that neither the US nor Israel should fear the outcome of a military confrontation with Russia in Syria or anywhere in the region. We should not court a conflict, to be sure, and we should certainly not seek out or initiate a war with Russia. But we must internalize the reality that it is Russia that should fear us in Syria, Iraq, and the eastern Mediterranean in general, not the other way around. Put simply, there is nothing Ukraine can do to Russian military forces that US and Israeli forces cannot do more and better.

Russia's setbacks in Ukraine are already having effects in the Middle East and North Africa region. Russia began pulling both private military company and local proxy forces from Libya and Syria early in the war. Russian officers in Syria more recently have begun asking for Syrian forces that have worked under Russian commanders to be sent to Ukraine. Russian air operations in Syria may be reduced if they have not been already. These trendlines are likely to continue. Russia lacks a ready reserve of trained personnel to make good its losses in Ukraine, and Putin is reluctant to accept even more Russian casualties if he can find others to fight his war for him. It is not clear how many Syrians will end up fighting in Ukraine—probably far fewer than the Russians hope or have been reported in some Western media outlets. But more will likely go, which could affect the complex and delicate balance in Syria in unpredictable ways.

If Russia continues to back away from Syria it may create a partial vacuum that Turkey, Iran, Assad himself, and the Salafi-jihadi groups may seek to fill. The US must be very alert to that jockeying and must consider now which new configurations of power are acceptable and which must be resisted and how. Assad may seek to regain effective control over the armed elements the Russian military created as well as the territory they control. Turkey may seek to benefit from the reduction in Russian air power to advance its interests in Idlib in particular and elsewhere in the north. The Iranians will likely continue to consolidate their influence and control in eastern Syria, which they were already doing, and may seek to extend their influence elsewhere—but they are probably not optimally positioned at this moment to do so rapidly. And Syria’s Salafi-jihadi groups will likely seek to take advantage of any disarray among their adversaries to regroup and extend their reach.

The US will have to adapt to changing circumstances. The relative stasis that has characterized the Syrian theater—and US policy therein—for some time is likely to be broken. Any reduction in the Russian presence, or our fear of it, gives our Turkish allies and our Kurdish partners on the ground opportunities. But their interests diverge, and the US may find itself once again in the role of mediating in an effort to keep our partners oriented on common objectives. A partial Russian withdrawal, on the other hand, also offers opportunities to Assad and Iran to make gains that increase the risk of regional conflict. The US must be alert to their activities and work to deter or disrupt them.

It is time for the US to press Turkey in particular to abandon the notion that Ankara can balance between Moscow and Washington. Moscow has nothing to offer Turkey any more sufficient to offset the benefits to Turkey of the NATO alliance and a renewed relationship with the US. The Ukrainians are in the midst of demonstrating that the S-400 is not such a game-changer that it was worth the price the Turks have paid for it. Russia will emerge from the Ukraine war broke, its conventional military in shambles and humiliated, its weapons revealed as sub-par, its military industry in disarray and focused on recreating some semblance of a renewed Russian armed forces, and its leader revealed as an incompetent, out-of-touch, aggressive, and brutal tyrant. The US and its NATO allies will emerge stronger and likely more unified than they have been. It is time for Turkey to return to the fold.

The US must above all recognize that the Middle East kaleidoscope will very likely be shaken up once again by decisions made in Moscow, and that the situation we have become accustomed to will change. The US continues to have an important role to play in determining the shape of that change and important interests at stake in doing so. I am grateful to the committee for holding this hearing at this time to consider this important matter.