

Growing Ukrainian Involvement in the Middle East

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Recently, Ukraine has been emerging as a more prominent and assertive actor in the Middle East. While this trend does not suggest that Kyiv has become a system-shaping power in the region, it does indicate that its role is no longer limited to merely seeking aid and political solidarity. Against the backdrop of the war in Iran, Ukraine is offering regional states practical and unique operational experience in confronting the Russian-Iranian aerial threat. At the same time, Kyiv is increasing pressure on Russian interests in maritime logistics, including in the Mediterranean arena and vis-à-vis Israel. As a result, the Ukrainian issue is becoming part of the Middle Eastern agenda on an operational level, as well. Israel should take this into account, reducing unnecessary friction and making full use of Ukrainian experience in areas relevant to its needs.

The Russian-Iranian Connection: Why Has the Ukrainian Experience Become a Regional Resource?

Ukraine is not an entirely new player in the Middle East. During the war with Russia, it operated in the region, at the very least, as a party to negotiations hosted by Middle Eastern states. However, shifts in the military capabilities balance between Kyiv and Moscow, and especially the outbreak of the confrontation with Iran which disrupted the security balance in the Persian Gulf, have expanded the range of tools available to Ukraine and transformed it into a more proactive and influential actor in the Middle East.

Over the years of Russian aggression, Ukraine accumulated battlefield experience under fire, much of it based on confronting Iranian technologies — particularly Shahed UAVs supplied to Russia by Tehran. Over time, the Russians improved these technologies, upgraded operational solutions, and ultimately transferred them back to Iran. In practice, the Iranian attacks against Gulf states in March-April, which relied to a significant extent on these enhancements, exposed gaps in the cost-efficiency, pace, and sustainability of those states' air defense systems.

Russian assistance to Iran appears to have [included](#) upgrades to communications, navigation, and precision capabilities for Shahed UAVs, tactical guidance regarding the deployment of drone swarms,

flight altitudes, the timing of attack waves, and the attrition of air defense systems, as well as satellite intelligence for directing strikes. It may also have included fiber-optic-guided [FPV drones](#) (although these have not yet been observed in Iran, Hezbollah has begun employing similar technology against Israel). In addition, the Iranian method of attacking energy infrastructure appears to draw [inspiration](#), among other things, from Russian tactics used against Ukraine.

For Kyiv, this constitutes a gateway into the Middle East: Ukraine is intimately familiar with these threats, having adapted to sustained attacks involving hundreds of drones per day, and has developed not only technological countermeasures, but a holistic model of operational adaptation that integrates a broad range of tools and tactics. Ukraine can now offer this package to the Gulf states and other anti-Iranian actors. The [U.S. position](#) on the matter is also noteworthy: while President Trump dismissed, in early March, any need for Ukrainian assistance against aerial threats, the State Department and the Pentagon are advancing an agreement with Kyiv aimed at ensuring joint production and the export of Ukrainian technologies to the United States.

Another area of Ukrainian interest in the crisis with Iran is the Caspian Sea — the corridor connecting Russia and Iran, which is utilized for transport, sanctions evasion, and weapon supplies. Ukraine has previously [targeted](#) this corridor, and even though the Israeli strikes in the Bandar Anzali area on the Caspian coast in March 2026 were not linked to Ukraine, they certainly contributed to Ukrainian interest in disrupting this two-way Russian-Iranian axis.

Ukraine prefers that stability be restored to the Gulf as quickly as possible. The consequences of the war — rising oil prices benefiting Russia, the freeze on U.S. sanctions on Russian oil that has been [extended](#) for the third consecutive time, and the accelerated depletion of interceptor missiles from American air defense systems (a resource over which Kyiv competes with Gulf states) — have harmed Ukraine and incentivized it to act on two fronts: first, against Russia's [oil export capabilities](#) and second, with Gulf states to improve the effectiveness of their air defense systems (see below).

The Gulf States and Jordan: From Mediation to Consumers of Ukrainian Security Expertise

Prior to the current confrontation with Iran, the Gulf states' primary role vis-à-vis Ukraine centered on the diplomatic mediation they provided. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar participated in humanitarian negotiations, prisoner exchanges, and communication channels between Kyiv and Moscow, proving among the most effective actors in these efforts. However, since the onset of Iranian aggression against them, the situation has shifted: within a matter of weeks, they have become major consumers of Ukrainian security services.

Initial Ukrainian assistance was [dispatched](#) to them less than two weeks after the outbreak of the war. Kyiv sent more than 200 air defense specialists to Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, while also deploying experts to a U.S. base in Jordan. According to reports, their mission focuses on transferring operational expertise: low-cost interception methods (including light anti-aircraft guns and interceptor drones), electronic warfare, mobile response units, and layered air defense systems.

It should be noted that Ukraine does not constitute an exclusive solution. Gulf states continue to rely on the United States, Pakistan, Turkey, China, and domestic defense industries as well. Kyiv's advantage is more niche, yet highly significant — fresh, readily available experience in countering mass drone attacks.

At the end of March 2026, against the backdrop of ongoing Iranian strikes, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan. Following these meetings, understandings were [announced](#) regarding ten-year security and defense cooperation agreements between Ukraine and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE. [Additional states](#) also appear interested in joining. Ukraine is offering a concrete package of capabilities: interceptor drones, electronic warfare systems, sensors, radars, software systems for managing air defense, and the operational experience of expert teams already deployed on the ground that are, according to Zelenskyy, already [involved](#) in intercepting aerial threats. Aside from several isolated projects in Europe, this collaboration with the Gulf states represents the first major example of how Ukraine is realizing its new military-technological potential as a provider of defense solutions.

Ukraine's interests are equally clear. In [exchange](#) for the procurement of Ukrainian interceptor drones, training, and the optimization of air defense systems, options are being explored regarding the transfer of outdated or surplus air defense components to Ukraine, alongside investments, joint defense manufacturing, and technological partnerships. A separate contribution involves understandings concerning the supply of diesel fuel from the Gulf states to Ukraine for one year, up to 700,000 liters per month, an arrangement that has reportedly already [begun](#) to materialize.

Turkey and Syria: An Access Channel to the New Syrian Configuration

President Zelenskyy's April 2026 visit to [Turkey and Syria](#), as part of his broader series of regional meetings, demonstrates that Ukraine's Middle Eastern policy is not being shaped solely through the Arab monarchies. Turkey has long served as a distinct regional channel for Kyiv: it supplied weapons, played a role in maritime export logistics during the period of Russian dominance in the Black Sea in the early years of the war, and hosted direct negotiations between Ukraine and Russia. Following the fall of the Assad regime, the Turkish connection also helped Ukraine formalize contacts with the new government in Damascus. In this sense, Turkey serves Ukraine not only as a regional partner, but also as an access mechanism to arenas where Kyiv's independent reach remains limited.

In the Syrian arena, Ukraine [maintained](#) ties with anti-Assad factions even before the change of government in the country. Ukrainian intelligence assisted Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) headquarters in Idlib with drones as early as 2024, and Ukrainian sources even reported [cooperation](#) between Ukrainian units and opposition forces against Russian targets in Syria in the months leading up to the regime's collapse. After the fall of Assad, Ukraine began transitioning this channel into an official framework (the Ukrainian Foreign Minister visited Damascus in late December 2024). In April 2026, as noted, contacts reached the leadership level when, following a meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Istanbul, Zelenskyy [visited](#) Damascus and met with his counterpart, Ahmed al-Sharaa.

For Kyiv, Syria is important as a sphere in which Russia's former position has become less stable and where the new leadership requires partners, food supplies, reconstruction assistance, and security systems. However, Ukraine's influence remains limited: the new Syrian administration also maintains ties with Moscow, and Russia continues to seek ways to preserve a residual role in the country, including maintaining its military foothold. Consequently, the Ukrainian line in Syria is still not sufficiently established and will require continued investment.

The Strengthening of Interdiction Capabilities Against Russian Maritime Logistics

Alongside its diplomacy and security assistance in the Middle East, Ukraine is increasing pressure on Russia's commercial and energy interests in distant arenas, including the Mediterranean region. This reflects a sustained effort to disrupt the mechanism through which Moscow generates revenue, bypasses sanctions, and maintains influence: vessels, the obscuring of cargo origins, and "shadow fleet" infrastructures. This effort is carried out through two complementary channels: direct kinetic strikes on Russian assets (vessels) and diplomatic-legal pressure on third-party countries, ports, and importers involved in these trade chains.

In recent months, several incidents in the Mediterranean have pointed to an expansion in Ukraine's kinetic operational reach. In December 2025, the tanker *Qendil* was [hit](#) south of Crete; in March 2026, the gas tanker *Arctic Metagaz* was [struck](#) near Libya (both vessels identified with the Russian "shadow fleet"); and in May 2026, Greek authorities [announced](#) the discovery of an unmanned surface vessel of Ukrainian origin carrying explosives. The significance of these events lies not only in their increased frequency, but also in the evolving operational pattern: whereas earlier sabotage operations appeared to involve [explosive charges pre-attached](#) to vessel hulls, there are now indications of the possible use of unmanned naval systems. Such a pattern requires launch points, communications infrastructure, maintenance capabilities, and operational support much closer to the arena itself.

These incidents do not necessarily indicate the existence of an institutionalized Ukrainian security presence in any particular country in the region. Nevertheless, repeated activity across such a broad geographic space may suggest, with due caution, some basic support infrastructure and the possibility that Kyiv is establishing operational channels with local actors in the North African-Mediterranean arena.

This hypothesis is not based solely on operational logic. Since 2022, Ukraine has demonstrated a willingness to act against Russian interests beyond the immediate war zone, particularly in conflict environments where local actors are fighting pro-Russian elements. In [Sudan](#), for example, the Ukrainians operated alongside the official armed forces against elements linked to the Wagner Group, which supported the RSF (Rapid Support Forces) — a Sudanese paramilitary organization fighting the regime. In Syria, as noted, Kyiv assisted HTS in Idlib. And in Libya, which is particularly important for understanding activity in the Mediterranean, local sources reported that Ukrainian forces [operated](#) in the western part of the country, and that the attack against the *Arctic Metagaz* on March 3 originated from a military facility in Tripoli. These claims do not prove the existence of a formal Ukrainian base or official cooperation by a regional state, but they do reinforce the assessment that Kyiv is building or testing channels of cooperation with regional actors against Russian assets.

Ukraine's Relevance for Israel: Drones, Grain, and the Russian Factor

Thus far, Israel has paid little attention to the growing Ukrainian involvement in the region, even though the resulting potential (operational learning and diplomatic leverage) and the risk (the implications of continued problematic imports from Russia) warrant greater attention to the issue. The fact that Israel was not included in Zelenskyy's regional tour highlights the very gap between Ukraine's growing relevance and the limited nature of the direct political channel with it. In an [interview with an Israeli media outlet, Zelenskyy himself pointed out](#) the lack of significant contact with the political leadership in Jerusalem, noting that Israel was the only country in the region to which he had not been invited. In

March, reports emerged that the Israeli Prime Minister expressed interest in speaking with the Ukrainian President, but the conversation ultimately never took place.

From a military standpoint, Israel admittedly handles the Shahed drone threat better than the Gulf states and possesses a more advanced air defense system. However, the importance of cooperation with Ukraine is not limited solely to combating this specific type of UAVs.

Israel has much to learn in areas where the tactical environment is evolving rapidly. The most prominent example is Lebanon. The [sharp rise](#) in attacks by Hezbollah using fiber-optic-controlled drones has created a new type of threat: devices that do not rely on wireless communication and are therefore immune to electronic warfare measures. This technology was forged on the Russian-Ukrainian front. In this context, and as noted above, reports that Russia [considered](#) (apparently during Operation "Roaring Lion") transferring thousands of fiber-optic guided drones to Iran and training their operators. While there is no definitive proof that this plan materialized or that such drones made their way to Hezbollah, the very existence of these reports illustrates the potential for cross-arena connectivity. Therefore, Ukraine's [experience](#) — both in developing such systems and in confronting them on a daily basis — could be highly valuable for Israel in areas such as detection, physical protection, counter-fiber measures, and the rapid training of operational units.

Despite this, security contacts between Israel and Ukraine since 2022 have remained limited: a number of [examples](#) of system supplies to Kyiv are known (at the very least, in the fields of detection and electronic warfare), and there is very little evidence of institutionalized cooperation between defense companies. To date, no active Israeli effort has been identified to bring Ukrainian operational experience into Israel for learning purposes, in contrast to the approach adopted by the Gulf states.

At the same time, Ukraine is intensifying its enforcement of sanctions against Russian cargo — not only through physical strikes but also through diplomatic efforts aimed at preventing Russian vessels from entering foreign ports. In recent months, [two public incidents](#) involving Israel arose over the entry of ships into the Port of Haifa carrying grain cargoes allegedly sourced, according to Kyiv, from territories in eastern Ukraine occupied by Russia. The first incident occurred when the vessel *Abinsk* unloaded its cargo on April 15, despite Kyiv's request to prevent it from doing so. The second involved a ship named *Panormitis*. Ukraine requested that both the vessel and its cargo be detained in order to collect grain samples and inspect documentation, but Israel maintained that the evidentiary basis was insufficient. Ultimately, on April 30, it emerged that the cargo had not been unloaded in Israel due to a decision by the [importer](#), rather than a directive from the Israeli government. Meanwhile, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs continued criticizing the Ukrainian side over procedural shortcomings in the submission of its request.

These incidents also drew [attention](#) from the European Union, which expressed concern over the possibility that Israel might be violating sanctions against Russia. A separate development was the publication of an investigative journalistic [report](#), suggesting that these were likely not the only vessels to have unloaded problematic Russian cargoes in Israel during the years of the war in Ukraine.

It is worth noting that Ukraine is employing this approach [not only with Israel](#) but also with other countries in the Middle East. This method reflects a growing assertiveness in Ukrainian diplomacy: Kyiv is no longer merely seeking support, but is increasingly expecting its partners to tighten trade procedures and import inspections when dealing with Russia. For Israel, this is a sensitive issue: even if

Jerusalem does not wish to make the Ukrainian question a central focus, the mounting pressure is forcing it to respond and make decisions, while balancing three separate variables: Ukrainian demands, European criticism, and its relationship with Russia.

Assessment of Ukrainian Policy and Future Outlook

Ukraine's policy in the Middle East currently stands at an intermediate stage between diplomatic breakthrough and institutionalization. The diplomatic effort is evident: visits to the Gulf states; understandings reached with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar; ties with Jordan; the maintenance of a Syrian channel via Turkey; and diplomatic pressure against Russian logistics networks. A practical dimension is also emerging: Ukrainian specialists are deployed in Gulf states to provide air defense training, while discussions are underway regarding cooperation in production, fuel supply, and investments in interception technologies. This comes alongside continued anti-Russian activity — including maritime sabotage operations against “shadow fleet” vessels, apparently accompanied by a growing operational foothold in the region.

Ukraine's principal achievement has been a change in status: it has ceased to be merely an object of aid and is transforming into a subject, whether in providing assistance or exerting pressure. Kyiv's main weakness at the current stage is a lack of deep institutionalization and its dependence on broader international dynamics. Framework agreements are not yet major defense contracts, expert missions are not yet permanent training centers, and discussions of joint production have not yet evolved into serial manufacturing lines. Likewise, anti-Russian operations and sanctions enforcement remain largely localized: they impose costs on Moscow and create political discomfort for third-party countries, but a systematic mechanism for neutralizing Russian trade capabilities has yet to emerge. Given a shift in regional focus that reduces the perceived urgency of the Iranian drone threat, or a worsening economic climate that drives countries to rely more heavily on Russian supplies, some of Ukraine's leverage could diminish.

Ukraine must now strive for quick wins, particularly vis-à-vis the Gulf states: concrete data demonstrating the successful performance of Ukrainian defense systems and the signing of specific cooperation contracts. If it can show practical results within a few months, Kyiv's standing in the region is likely to stabilize, and the effectiveness of its pressure on Russian interests could rise. However, a total overhaul in the relationship between the Gulf states or Turkey and Russia should not be expected; these states are likely to persist with their risk-diversification policies, and are unlikely to aim for a long-term reduction of ties with Moscow under conditions of expanding geopolitical uncertainty.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Israel

Israel must acknowledge the fact that Ukraine is becoming a more prominent actor in both the political and operational arenas of the Middle East. Ukraine is not a substitute for Israel's regional partners, but it is a source of unique experience that is already in demand among Gulf states and could also prove valuable for Israel. Jerusalem should evaluate Ukraine as a partner for learning and improvement in techno-operational fields, including fiber-optic guided drones, low-cost interception, UAV warfare, and the utilization of unmanned maritime capabilities.

This relationship should be developed cautiously, yet the current inertia of effectively ignoring the Ukrainian factor is becoming increasingly irrational. A policy of “turning a blind eye and staying out of

it" could lead to missed opportunities — such as the rapid adaptation of units to drone threats — and direct damage if Israel is perceived by the pro-Ukrainian sanctions coalition as a weak link in trade involving Russian cargoes.

There is no need to transform policy toward Ukraine into a deep and highly public partnership. Cooperation could instead be framed through closed professional information-exchange mechanisms — both in the context of learning from unmanned threats and in fostering effective intergovernmental dialogue surrounding problematic cargoes of Russian origin. The *Abinsk* and *Panormitis* incidents demonstrated how the absence of a clear procedure can quickly turn a commercial event into a political crisis with Ukraine, and potentially with European partners as well.

Additionally, Israel must monitor the expansion of Ukrainian activity against Russian vessels and assets in the Mediterranean. This is necessary due to potential collateral risks to shipping lanes, maritime insurance, Israeli commercial interests, as well as for operational insights relevant to the Israeli Navy.

Israel's overall approach should therefore remain pragmatic: extracting practical lessons, minimizing unnecessary areas of friction, and maintaining a precise, professional, and less reactive dialogue with Kyiv.

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