

# MP-IDSA *Commentary*

## Ukraine's Outreach to West Asia

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### **S***ummary*

Ukraine's March–April 2026 outreach to West Asia comes amidst deepening alignment between Russia and Iran.

## Introduction

Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s March–April 2026 outreach to West Asia, including engagements with key Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Jordan<sup>1</sup>, as well as visits to Türkiye and Syria, signals a shift in Kyiv’s approach from a war-affected state to a more active external actor. By leveraging battlefield experience in countering drones and missile threats, Ukraine is attempting to position itself within the West Asia region’s security architecture amid the US–Israel war on Iran and deepening Russia–Iran cooperation.

Key regional actors, including the Gulf States, Türkiye and Syria, have adopted cautious and differentiated approaches to the Russia–Ukraine war, reflecting a preference for strategic flexibility amid evolving geopolitical uncertainties. The Gulf states have largely pursued a pragmatic, non-aligned posture, engaging both Kyiv and Moscow, while avoiding direct involvement, and in some cases, such as Saudi Arabia, offering mediation efforts in October 2024<sup>2</sup> and, in the UAE’s case, successfully mediating a prisoner-of-war exchange on 11 April 2026.<sup>3</sup>

Türkiye has pursued a balanced approach, supporting Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity while preserving functional ties with Russia and positioning itself as a mediator. Syria, meanwhile, reflects a more limited engagement, maintaining working relations with Moscow while cautiously opening channels with Ukraine, indicative of a hedging approach shaped by its own security and reconstruction priorities.

## Ukraine’s West Asia Outreach in Context

Ukraine’s engagement with Gulf and other regional states reflects an effort to export its war-derived defence capabilities, particularly to counter drone and missile threats. According to Ukrainian experts, ballistic missiles and drones currently pose the main threats in the West Asia region. In contrast, ballistic attacks can only be effectively countered by air defence systems. Ukraine has developed far more cost-effective solutions to tackle drones.<sup>4</sup> The tensions are rooted in the expanding role of

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<sup>1</sup> [“It Has Been a Very Fruitful Visit to the Middle East and the Gulf Region: We Have Agreed on Opportunities to Strengthen Air Defense, on the Joint Development of Defense Production, and on Energy Cooperation – Address by the President”](#), President of Ukraine Official Website, 30 March 2026.

<sup>2</sup> [“Saudi Arabia is Ready to Mediate Between Russia and Ukraine, TASS Cites Envoy as Saying”](#), *Reuters*, 29 October 2024.

<sup>3</sup> [“Russia, Ukraine Carry Out POW Swap, Defence Ministry Says”](#), *Reuters*, 11 April 2026.

<sup>4</sup> [“Volodymyr Zelenskyy Received Briefings from Ukrainian Experts Sharing Experience and Expertise in Qatar”](#), President of Ukraine Official Website, 28 March 2026.

Iranian-supplied drones in the Ukraine conflict, with Kyiv attributing that 60,000 drones supplied by Iran have been utilised against Ukraine since 2022.<sup>5</sup> This has, in turn, driven Ukraine to seek partnerships with West Asian states to counter similar threats.

On 27 March 2026 in Jeddah, Zelenskyy met Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to explore ways to deepen bilateral cooperation. They emphasised building a mutually beneficial partnership, particularly in defence. Respective defence ministries signed the ‘Arrangement on Defense Cooperation’, which is expected to facilitate future contracts, technological cooperation and investment.<sup>6</sup> The agreement also positions Ukraine as a security partner, with commitments to support Saudi Arabia in strengthening its capabilities against aerial threats.

Moreover, Ukrainian military experts have been deployed in Saudi Arabia, identifying gaps and recommending measures to strengthen the protection of civilians against Iranian Shahed drones and missile threats. They had already shared Ukraine’s practical experience in safeguarding infrastructure, with discussions focusing in particular on improving air defence strategies and drone interception.<sup>7</sup>

On 28 March 2026, Zelenskyy met the President of the UAE, Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, in Abu Dhabi to discuss cooperation on protecting lives. The UAE leader appreciated Ukraine’s expert support for many weeks, while Zelenskyy stressed the shared principle of countering threats. Both sides highlighted the need for long-term collaboration through investments, joint production and modernisation of protection systems for critical and social infrastructure, agreed to deepen cooperation in security and defence, and are finalising the details of related agreements.<sup>8</sup>

On 28 March 2026, in Doha, Zelenskyy met the Amir of the State of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, to discuss developing integrated systems to protect lives and prevent the war’s expansion. Notably, the meeting culminated in a 10-year intergovernmental agreement on cooperation in the defence sector, covering areas such as air defence, defence industry and technologies, counter-drone capabilities, military training, cybersecurity, Artificial Intelligence, and command and control systems, while also enabling joint defence industry projects, co-production facilities,

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<sup>5</sup> [“Ukraine Rejects Iran's Accusations of Complicity in US-Led War”](#), *New Ukraine Daily*, 30 March 2026.

<sup>6</sup> [“President of Ukraine and Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Discussed Opportunities to Strengthen Both Countries”](#), President of Ukraine Official Website, 27 March 2026.

<sup>7</sup> [“President Met With Ukrainian Military Experts Working In Saudi Arabia”](#), President of Ukraine Official Website, 27 March 2026.

<sup>8</sup> [“Joint Work to Protect Lives and the Situation on the Global Oil Market were the Key Topics Discussed During a Meeting Between the President of Ukraine and the President of the UAE”](#), President of Ukraine Official Website, 28 March 2026.

and technological partnerships, thereby deepening bilateral ties and paving the way for long-term investment and contracts.<sup>9</sup>

On 29 March 2026, Zelenskyy met Jordan’s King Abdullah II in Amman to explore a potential security partnership, focusing on cooperation against evolving drone and missile threats. Zelenskyy highlighted Ukraine’s experience in building integrated defence systems during the war, stressing the need for constant technological adaptation and mutual strengthening through shared expertise, while both leaders also discussed the broader situation in West Asia and the Gulf, with Ukraine condemning Iranian strikes and their spillover impact on the region.<sup>10</sup>

Evolving Gulf threat perceptions and shifting expectations from traditional security partners also shape this receptivity. Reports indicate that major Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar, are reassessing the scope of their engagements with the United States across defence, energy and infrastructure.<sup>11</sup> This reflects a broader effort to expand strategic partnerships rather than rely on a single security provider. At the same time, this reassessment does not signal a break with Washington; instead, it reflects a more cautious approach shaped by evolving regional threats and shifting expectations from long-standing allies.

Gulf States have conveyed to the United States that any settlement with Iran must go beyond a ceasefire and address its missile, drone and proxy capabilities, reflecting deep concerns over long-term security and exposure to asymmetric threats.<sup>12</sup> In this context, Ukraine’s outreach may also be seen as offering an additional layer of reassurance to regional states, likely with implicit US involvement, particularly amid growing concerns about the reliability of existing security guarantees in the face of missile, drone and maritime threats.

Notably, Iran’s missile and drone capabilities, and its demonstrated ability to disrupt energy and maritime infrastructure, continue to reinforce Gulf dependence on the United States as the only actor capable of providing credible deterrence and integrated defence systems. As a result, Gulf States are likely to deepen security

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<sup>9</sup> [\*\*“The President of Ukraine and the Amir of the State of Qatar Agreed on a 10-Year Defense Partnership”\*\*](#), President of Ukraine Official Website, 28 March 2026.

<sup>10</sup> [\*\*“President of Ukraine and King of Jordan Discussed Potential Security Partnership”\*\*](#), President of Ukraine Official Website, 29 March 2026.

<sup>11</sup> Angie Omar, [\*\*“Shockwaves Across the Gulf”\*\*](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 12 March 2026.

<sup>12</sup> Samia Nakhoul, [\*\*“Gulf States Tell US Ending the War is Not Enough, Iran’s Capabilities Must Be Degraded”\*\*](#), *Reuters*, 27 March 2026.

coordination with Washington even as they explore additional partnerships to strengthen their overall resilience.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond the Gulf, Ukraine has also expanded its engagement with key regional actors, including Türkiye and Syria, further broadening its outreach. On 4 April 2026, Zelenskyy met Türkiye’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to discuss strengthening cooperation in security and energy, with Ukraine expressing gratitude for Türkiye’s support since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale aggression and for its assistance in securing the return of captives.<sup>14</sup>

Both leaders agreed on new steps in security cooperation, including the possibility of joint projects in the defence industry and support through expertise, technology and experience. At the same time, Türkiye reaffirmed its support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and its readiness to host further talks involving Ukraine, the US and Russia, alongside discussions on removing obstacles to bilateral trade and advancing energy cooperation through joint gas infrastructure development and the exploration of gas fields.<sup>15</sup>

During his first official visit to Syria on 5 April 2026, Zelenskyy met Syria’s President Ahmed al-Sharaa in Damascus, where they agreed to work together to enhance security and development opportunities, and expressed mutual interest in exchanging military and security experience.<sup>16</sup> The talks additionally focused on Ukraine’s role as a reliable supplier of food products and opportunities to strengthen regional food security, alongside cooperation to address Syria’s energy and infrastructure challenges.

## Russia–Iran Cooperation

The Russia–Iran Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, which entered into force in October 2025, marks a formal upgradation of ties between Moscow and Tehran.<sup>17</sup> Replacing the earlier 2001 framework, the 20-year agreement institutionalises cooperation across defence, energy, finance and emerging domains

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<sup>13</sup> Angie Omar, “[Shockwaves Across the Gulf](#)”, no. 11.

<sup>14</sup> “[During a Meeting in Istanbul, the Presidents of Ukraine and Türkiye Discussed Strengthening Cooperation in the Areas of Security and Energy](#)”, President of Ukraine Official Website, 4 April 2026.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> “[Security Cooperation and the Situation in the Middle East and the Gulf Region: The President of Ukraine Met With the President of Syria](#)”, President of Ukraine Official Website, 5 April 2026.

<sup>17</sup> Raed Jaber, “[Russia–Iran ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’ Treaty Takes Effect](#)”, *Asharq Al Awsat*, 3 October 2025.

such as cybersecurity and nuclear energy, while stopping short of a mutual defence pact. Instead, it reflects a calibrated alignment driven by shared geopolitical pressures, particularly Western sanctions, and a mutual interest in sustaining strategic autonomy without entering into binding alliance commitments.

This alignment is most visible in the expansion of military-technical cooperation, including Iran’s supply of drones and Fath-360 short-range missile systems to Russia, as well as reported reciprocal assistance in air defence and intelligence sharing. Reportedly, Iran has agreed to a convert US\$ 589 million arms deal with Russia to procure thousands of advanced shoulder-fired air defence systems.<sup>18</sup> The agreement, reportedly signed in Moscow in December 2025, commits Russia to deliver 500 ‘Verba’ launch units and 2,500 ‘9M336’ missiles over three years (2027–2029).

From Ukraine’s perspective, such cooperation enhances Iran’s strike and intelligence capabilities and contributes to wider regional instability, reinforcing Kyiv’s assessment of a deepening Russia–Iran axis.<sup>19</sup> On 31 March 2026, Zelenskyy emphasised that he had shared evidence with Arab leaders of Russia’s assistance to Iran, particularly in enhancing strike capabilities, while also expressing that Israel had not engaged with Ukraine’s offer to share counter-drone expertise.<sup>20</sup> He suggested that Israel’s cautious approach, partly to avoid antagonising Russia, has limited the cooperation with Ukraine.

It is within this context that Ukraine’s outreach to West Asia takes on added significance, positioning Kyiv not only as a recipient of security assistance but also as an emerging provider of cost-effective defence solutions in a region increasingly shaped by asymmetric threats. Parallel to these developments, the US issued a new temporary sanctions waiver on 19 March 2026, allowing limited transactions involving Russian-origin crude oil and petroleum products, aimed at stabilising global energy markets amid rising tensions in West Asia.<sup>21</sup> This indirectly benefits Russia by sustaining its energy revenues, even as the conflict environment it is linked to imposes additional strategic costs on Ukraine.

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<sup>18</sup> [“Iran Agreed Secret Shoulder-Fired Missile Deal With Russia, FT Reports”](#), *Reuters*, 22 February 2026.

<sup>19</sup> [“There is Information from Our Intelligence that the Russians are Preparing a Massive Strike – Address by the President”](#), President of Ukraine Official Website, 23 March 2026; Nava Freiberg, [“Zelensky: Putin Helping Iran, Yet Netanyahu Wants to ‘Balance’ Between Russia and Ukraine”](#), *The Times of Israel*, 31 March 2026.

<sup>20</sup> Nava Freiberg, [“Zelensky: Putin Helping Iran, Yet Netanyahu Wants to ‘Balance’ Between Russia and Ukraine”](#), no. 19.

<sup>21</sup> [“US Issues New 30-Day Waiver for Sale of Russian Oil, Adding Cuba, N. Korea Exceptions”](#), *Reuters*, 20 March 2026.

## Iran’s Response

Iran has interpreted Ukraine’s growing regional role through a security lens, framing it as direct alignment with US–Israeli interests. Iran has accused Ukraine of actively supporting US–Israeli military actions against it, following claims that Kyiv deployed hundreds of experts to assist Gulf states. On 30 March 2026, in a letter to the UN Secretary-General, Iran’s Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the UN Amir Saeid Irvani argued that such involvement amounts to operational and financial support for what Tehran terms an unlawful aggression that began on 28 February 2026.<sup>22</sup>

Irvani further contended that Ukraine’s role could constitute a violation of international law, including the prohibition on the use of force under the UN Charter (Article 2, Paragraph 4), and raised concerns regarding complicity in internationally wrongful acts. He criticised attempts to justify strikes on Iran’s critical infrastructure as inconsistent with international humanitarian law. At the same time, Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmaeil Baghaei warned against linking the Ukraine conflict with ongoing developments in West Asia, calling it a serious strategic miscalculation.<sup>23</sup>

However, Ukraine’s entry into West Asian security markets remains constrained by wartime capacity and political risk. In February 2026, Kyiv had only just authorised its first wartime foreign sales, while the defence sector still operates under bureaucratic export controls and domestic procurement priorities; Ukrainian drone makers also said their output must not undercut Ukraine’s own battlefield needs.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

Ukraine’s March–April 2026 outreach to West Asia underscores Kyiv’s attempt to leverage its battlefield experience to engage Gulf states and regional actors such as Türkiye and Syria on security, energy and development issues. This engagement reflects both regional demand for diversified partnerships amid evolving missile and drone threats and Ukraine’s effort to embed itself within these emerging security conversations without displacing existing arrangements. At the same time, the deepening alignment between Russia and Iran provides a structural backdrop that enhances the relevance of Ukraine’s outreach, even as regional actors continue to adopt cautious and flexible approaches to the conflict.

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<sup>22</sup> [“Ukraine Actively Involved in US-Israeli Aggression Against Iran: Envoy to UN”](#), *Press TV*, 30 March 2026.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Yuliia Dysa, [“Ukraine’s 2026 Defence Exports Could Hit ‘Several Billion Dollars’, Official Says”](#), *Reuters*, 20 February 2026.

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