

Countering Russia's Strategy of Arming Anti-American Proxies

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Aug 2, 2024

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Brief Analysis

From rumored Houthi missile upgrades to Libyan arms deliveries by the ton, Moscow is doing all it can to empower hostile forces and undermine stability in the Middle East.

According to a recent *Wall Street Journal* report (<https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/u-s-launches-effort-to-stop-russia-from-arming-houthis-with-antiship-missiles-98131a8a>) citing U.S. intelligence sources, Moscow is poised to provide the Iran-backed Houthi militia in Yemen with advanced antiship missiles. If the report is accurate, it would mark yet another Russian escalation in tensions with the West and further fuel an assault on longstanding international norms.

Arming or otherwise empowering proxies is consistent with the Kremlin playbook. Since the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, Vladimir Putin has predictably (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-relationship-hamas-and-putins-global-calculations>) aligned even more closely with destabilizing anti-American forces in the Middle East. He has chosen low-intensity conflict with the West because Russia has fewer resources. For Moscow, distracting the United States at a low cost and forcing it to expend its resources against empowered proxies has proven to be an effective tactic in its larger battle to reshape the international system. Too often, Washington's responses to Russian provocations have been siloed in specific regional theaters rather than tied to a holistic strategy. As a result, they have not appreciably changed Putin's strategy of undermining U.S. interests via proxy warfare.

Syria as a Template

Russia's increased reliance on proxies stretches back to 2014-15, when it illegally annexed Crimea from Ukraine and then intervened militarily in Syria. Since then, Russia has been pursuing what then-chief of staff Valery Gerasimov, speaking about Syria at the annual defense conference of the Russian Academy of Sciences in early 2019, described as a strategy of "limited action." Future warfare was a key theme of that conference, and according to [expert accounts](https://jamestown.org/program/gerasimov-unveils-russias-strategy-of-limited-actions/) (<https://jamestown.org/program/gerasimov-unveils-russias-strategy-of-limited-actions/>), Gerasimov appeared to imply that Syria would serve as an example for future Russian operations.

Over the years, Moscow has armed (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-sudan-war-saf-rsf-hedges-bets-both-sides-support>) Iran's top proxy, Hezbollah (<https://iranwire.com/en/features/67448/>), on the Syrian battlefield. In the process, Hezbollah apparently learned (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahs-russian->

military-education-syria) quite a bit from the Russian military, including the ability to conduct offensive maneuver warfare. Supported by Russian air and artillery cover, the group subsequently helped regime forces **destroy** (<https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2016/02/hezbollah-is-learning-russian?lang=en>) key rebel strongholds and turn the tide of the war in Bashar al-Assad's favor. The Kremlin relied on other actors to do the heavy lifting, especially Iran and its proxies. Indeed, the Russia-Iran relationship reached unprecedented heights as a result of Moscow's intervention in Syria, even before the invasion of Ukraine.

In the absence of a consistent Western approach to countering Russia in Syria, Putin achieved both his short-term goal of keeping Assad in power and his long-term goal of establishing a permanent military position on the East Mediterranean. Moscow has since leveraged its position in Syria in multiple ways. This includes enabling other proxies in the region, thereby boosting its ability to periodically escalate with the United States.

Recent Escalation

Beginning in March 2023, Russia significantly **escalated** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/deterring-russias-horizontal-escalation-syria>) in Syria through increased military harassment of U.S. aircraft. This took place in the broader context of unanswered escalation across the Black Sea, where Russia repeatedly intercepted U.S. MQ-9 Reaper surveillance drones, culminating in a midair collision with a Su-30 fighter jet. In response, Washington publicly denounced the behavior of Russian forces as unsafe and unprofessional, then launched cross-theater exercises to confuse them and drain their readiness. Afterward, the harassment stopped.

Then came the October 7 attack on Israel and subsequent Iranian escalation across the region, during which Russia **increased** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/putins-alignment-middle-east-should-signal-israel-its-time-change-allegiance>) its support for Israel's enemies. In response, the United States **sent** (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-deploys-advanced-f-35-jets-destroyer-to-middle-east-to-brush-back-iranian-forces-7d9a92cf>) F-35 fighter jets and a Navy destroyer to the Middle East in a show of strength. This quieted things down. But such moves have a limited shelf life when they are temporary, reactive, and not part of a holistic strategy for countering Moscow.

By November, reports were surfacing that Russian Wagner Group paramilitary forces in Syria **might transfer** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/assessing-reported-pantsir-delivery-hezbollah>) the Pantsir S-1 (SA-22 Greyhound) anti-aircraft system to Hezbollah in Lebanon, reportedly with Assad's assent. The Kremlin denied the report, but such a transfer is certainly conceivable, along with further Russian (and Iranian) escalation as the United States considers withdrawing from northeast Syria.

Libya and Africa

Libya has been a proxy battleground for more than a decade between Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, France, and Egypt. Putin **has established** (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-11-05/putin-s-move-to-secure-libya-bases-is-new-regional-worry-for-us>) Russia's position of power broker in this bigger game, and the West has done little to deter him. Over the years, Moscow developed ties with both the UN-backed government of Fayeze al-Sarraj and Gen. Khalifa Haftar, the strongman who controls the country's oil-rich eastern region. Despite hedging its bets, however, Russia always leaned closer to Haftar. To be sure, the Kremlin would never fully trust someone with that background, since Haftar is an American citizen and a former CIA asset. Yet its ties with him have grown over the years, and he has established himself as another Kremlin proxy. In turn, Moscow has increased its military presence in eastern Libya.

This spring, after Russian deputy defense minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov repeatedly visited Haftar, Moscow **delivered** (<https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2024/04/19/russia-funneling-weapons-through-libyan-port-eying-gateway-to-africa/>) thousands of tons of military equipment from its naval facility in Tartus, Syria, to Libya's eastern port of Tobruk. Reports continue to surface that Moscow is pushing Haftar to grant it deepwater **port rights** (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-11-05/putin-s-move-to-secure-libya-bases-is-new-regional-worry-for-us>) in Tobruk for basing nuclear attack submarines. Russia's presence in Libya has allowed the Kremlin to **access** (<https://adf-magazine.com/2024/07/russia-sends-1800-fighters-to-libya-with-eyes-on-greater-influence-across-africa/#:~:text=Wagner%20and%20Russian%20forces%20control,naval%20presence%20in%20the%20Mediterranean.>)

the country's airfields, from which it moves supplies and smuggles fuel, gold, and drugs to raise revenue for both its war on Ukraine and its push into other parts of Africa. The Kremlin typically plays both sides even if it leans more toward one, as seen in Sudan, where it [provided arms \(https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-sudan-war-saf-rsf-hedges-bets-both-sides-support#:~:text=Russia%20is%20moving%20to%20develop,paramilitary%2C%20through%20the%20Wagner%20Group.\)](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-sudan-war-saf-rsf-hedges-bets-both-sides-support#:~:text=Russia%20is%20moving%20to%20develop,paramilitary%2C%20through%20the%20Wagner%20Group.) to both the Sudanese Armed Forces and its adversary, the Rapid Support Forces paramilitary. This has allowed Moscow to move deeper into the Sahel, where it has taken advantage of anti-American and anti-European sentiment to support coups in Niger (<https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/12/africa/russian-weapons-trainers-niger-intl/index.html>), Mali (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/as-europe-withdraws-from-mali-russia-gets-the-upper-hand/>), and Burkina Faso (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-63171771>). In return, local partners have ejected Western military trainers and advisors and allowed Russia to establish its own.

Why Enable the Houthis?

The context described above frames Russia's current interests in the Red Sea. In January, President Biden [acknowledged \(https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/18/politics/biden-houthi-strikes/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/18/politics/biden-houthi-strikes/index.html) that military strikes had failed to deter the Houthis from further attacks, whether against commercial ships in regional waterways or against Israel amid the Gaza war. Meanwhile, the ongoing U.S. effort to keep global sea lanes open has led to [a critical shortfall \(https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/us-navys-missile-production-problem-looks-dire-211772\)](https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/us-navys-missile-production-problem-looks-dire-211772) of U.S. air defense missiles—particularly SM-3 interceptors (<https://www.twz.com/sea/more-sm-3-interceptors-needed-after-downing-iranian-ballistic-missiles-navy-secretary>), one of the most valuable and expensive American weapons systems and one that is [necessary \(https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/march/next-taiwan-crisis-will-almost-certainly-involve-nuclear-threats\)](https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/march/next-taiwan-crisis-will-almost-certainly-involve-nuclear-threats) to ensure preparedness for any potential U.S.-China conflict in the Pacific, a reality of which Moscow is likely well aware.

Moreover, as U.S. partners in the Middle East observe Washington's inability to resolve this crisis, it bolsters Moscow's narrative that the United States is an unreliable guarantor of stability and creates additional reasons for them to balance their foreign policy by engaging with Russia (and China). Putin therefore has more to gain than lose by helping fuel the Red Sea crisis, whether through arming the Houthis or enabling them by other means. In his view, this is no different from what the United States is doing to support Ukraine.

Some might argue that Russia, like other countries, is hurting financially from what the Houthis are doing, even if it publicly [condemns \(https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-requests-un-security-council-meeting-after-us-britain-strike-yemen-2024-01-12/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-requests-un-security-council-meeting-after-us-britain-strike-yemen-2024-01-12/) the United States and Britain for taking military action against the group. True, Russia does require freedom of navigation in the Red Sea to deliver its petroleum exports to East Asia, and diverting ships around the Cape of Good Hope [raises costs and shipping time \(https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=62224\)](https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=62224). But the available data [suggests \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/russian-oil-flows-through-red-sea-still-face-lower-risks-2024-02-01/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/russian-oil-flows-through-red-sea-still-face-lower-risks-2024-02-01/) that the crisis has [affected \(https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=62263#:~:text=Although%20the%20Red%20Sea%20disruption,in%202023%2C%20as%20a%20whole.\)](https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=62263#:~:text=Although%20the%20Red%20Sea%20disruption,in%202023%2C%20as%20a%20whole.) Russia's oil cargoes relatively less than those of its competitors. Russian oil tankers [continue \(https://www.bfm.ru/news/540508\)](https://www.bfm.ru/news/540508) to go through the Suez Canal, Red Sea, and Gulf of Oman relatively unhindered. The Houthis have [largely \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-attacks-russia-linked-tankers\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-attacks-russia-linked-tankers) spared Russian vessels, most likely because they have no connection to the United States or Israel (though they have occasionally attacked other vessels carrying Russian cargoes if those ships visited Israeli ports).

Thus, while Moscow may bear some costs for empowering the Houthis, the benefits likely outweigh them. Moscow has dealt with difficult proxies before, such as Haftar. And despite being severely limited in what arms it can export due to the Ukraine war, Russia can send antiship missiles to the Houthis without affecting that front.

Putin has tied his actions to what he defines as the [larger conflict \(http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565\)](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565) with the West. If Ukraine is about more than just Ukraine in his eyes, then the United States should likewise take a higher-level strategic view and connect Russia's actions across different theaters, including when Moscow resorts to asymmetric tactics.

In the Red Sea, a military solution alone appears unlikely to resolve the crisis. In addition to addressing the critical shortage of SM-3 interceptors, Washington needs creative ideas on assembling a coalition—especially with Middle Eastern partners—and formulating clear objectives for a negotiated outcome to the crisis. This goal will necessarily include deterring the Houthis' patrons in Tehran. Indeed, American adversaries are emboldened now in part because Russia is still able to wage war on Ukraine.

Washington should also consider the potential regional benefits it could derive from [countering Russia's "ghost fleet \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/nato-summit-another-chance-counter-russia-south\)"](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/nato-summit-another-chance-counter-russia-south) of unregistered cargo ships that financially sustain the war effort in Ukraine. One NATO state has [already started a discussion \(https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/denmark-aims-limit-shadow-fleet-russian-oil-tankers-2024-06-17/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/denmark-aims-limit-shadow-fleet-russian-oil-tankers-2024-06-17/) on stopping the fleet. Although targeting it would not directly resolve the Houthi crisis, it would undermine Russia's ability to empower the group—not to mention all the other theaters Putin is steadily destabilizing. Until the United States does more to push back on these multi-theater efforts, Moscow's proxy strategy will continue to exacerbate crises, drain U.S. military strength, and erode U.S. credibility.

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