

Drones for missiles: Kyiv's response to the war in the Middle East

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Ukraine's response to the US-Israeli attack on Iran and Iran's retaliatory moves against countries in the region, was to express clear support for the United States, citing the hostile actions of the Iranian regime towards Ukraine during Russia's invasion. It also highlighted the US's key role in the so-called peace process and in supporting Ukraine's defence capabilities.

President Volodymyr Zelensky expressed solidarity with those attacked by Iran and held telephone conversations with the leaders of Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Bahrain and Kuwait. Ukraine offered to assist the United States and countries in the region in their defence against Iranian drones by drawing on Ukraine's experience in countering them. It also declared it was ready to provide interceptor drones in exchange for scarce missiles for Patriot air defence systems, which the Ukrainian forces need to shoot down Russian ballistic missiles. Zelensky announced that the first group of Ukrainian experts and military personnel had been sent to the Middle East, along with interceptor drones, to support defensive operations at US military bases in Jordan.

In Ukraine, the war in the Middle East is seen primarily as a source of risks but also of emerging opportunities. The former stem from the destabilisation of missile supplies for its air defence systems as well as a surge in prices and the demand for Russian energy resources. The latter relate to the growing importance of Ukrainian counter-drone technologies and the possibility of exchanging them for scarce defence assets.

Commentary

- **Ukraine takes a positive view of the current weakening of the Iranian regime.** Iran has supplied Russia with a wide range of weapons, including Shahed drones and the technology to produce them. As a result, since the start of the invasion Russia has been able to use more than 57,000 drones of this type against Ukraine. As early as May 2023, Ukraine imposed sanctions on Iran for a period of 50 years. These include bans on trade, the transit of goods, flights, financial operations and the transfer of technology and intellectual property rights. By highlighting the international nature of the threats arising from Russian–Iranian military and intelligence cooperation (Russia is reported to be providing Iran with satellite reconnaissance data) – and by pointing to Iran's use of weapons and components produced in Russia to attack countries in the region, Ukraine is seeking to demonstrate the dangers Russia poses to the United States and its Middle

Eastern partners, as well as the need to counter them jointly, including through tightening sanctions. It is also seeking to create the impression that Russia is not actively defending Iran against attacks by the United States and Israel, as it previously failed to defend the regimes of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela. This is intended to undermine Russia's credibility among its allies.

- **A prolonged conflict around Iran generates serious risks for Ukraine's defence potential.** The Ukrainian government fears growing competition for limited supplies of missiles for Patriot air defence systems (PAC-2 and PAC-3). If the US operation were to drag on, these missiles could be redirected – at the expense of deliveries to Ukraine – to protect targets in the Middle East, above all in Israel. Rising prices and the possible increase in the role of Russian energy resources (the United States has already eased sanctions on the import of Russian oil) as a result of the Iranian blockade of the Strait of Hormuz (see '[Suspension of LNG exports from Qatar – the spectre of another gas crisis](#)') present an additional risk. This could improve Moscow's financial position and enable it to maintain a high intensity of operations on the Ukrainian front. A prolonged war in the Middle East will also increasingly divert the US's attention away from efforts to resolve the armed conflict in Ukraine.
- **Ukraine is seeking to leverage the escalation of the conflict with Iran to promote its own counter-drone solutions.** It treats its experience in countering Russian and Iranian drones as a bargaining chip, offering its know-how to the countries in the region (above all concerning interceptor drones) in exchange for scarce defence assets, particularly missiles for Patriot systems. Ukraine's offer in this area – prepared in response to a US request and involving the deployment of specialists to support the air defence of countries targeted by Iranian strikes – serves as a tool to strengthen cooperation with America and to demonstrate Ukraine's usefulness. At the same time, Kyiv aims to use the war in the Middle East as an impulse to mobilise Europe to enhance defence cooperation, with the broadest possible use of Ukrainian solutions.