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How Not to Lose Friends and Influence in the Middle East: The Narratives Advancing Russia and China's Soft Power

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Executive Summary

The West must realise the front lines of great-power competition extend beyond Eastern Europe and the Taiwan Strait. Chinese President Xi Jinping's three-day visit to the Middle East and attendance at the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in early December 2022 bring this into sharp focus for the West. Hailed as a "new era" in China-Arab relations, the meetings have resulted in greater cooperation on key strategic areas, such as space and nuclear energy, with President Xi and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia agreeing to advance their separate "comprehensive strategic partnership".

Visits by US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin earlier in 2022 also underscore the pivotal role the region is playing, both from a strategic perspective as well as in burgeoning economic and cultural opportunities. As governments in the Middle East chart their paths through an increasingly complex geopolitical environment, the time has come for Western governments to adopt a new strategy for the Middle East.

For more than two decades, Russia and China have been pursuing strategies to increase their geopolitical footprints in the Middle East. As the West's security presence has reduced in locations such as Iraq and Syria, Russian influence has proliferated. While Western energy interests have diminished in Gulf states, China has become the largest investor in the Middle East. Prevarication by countries in the Middle East at the United Nations (UN) over Russia's invasion of Ukraine earlier this year, and more recent energy-policy decisions, are symptomatic of a changing geopolitics that is catching the West off-guard.

These developments should not come as a surprise. This report highlights years of advancing Russian and Chinese influence in the Middle East. The region is a primary destination for Russian military hardware whether in conflict zones including Libya and Syria or traditional export destinations such as Algeria. The Russian flag is also carried by paramilitary groups, notably the Wagner Group. As the West, led by the United States, implemented its "pivot" to Asia, China announced a "westward march" that has been designed to enhance its economic and soft-power presence in the Middle East. China is now the largest single contributor of economic investment to the region, with Iraq alone receiving \$10.5 billion in construction deals from the country last year.¹

This report begins with a simple question: how do Russia and China want the people of the Middle East to view them?

Through analysis of regional media, this report reveals the full extent of Russia and China's soft-power narratives. By assessing the reach of Russian and Chinese media platforms, including RT Arabic and CGTN Arabic, across the Middle East, we show how they are successfully engaging with as many people as regional and Western sources. We look closely at this soft-power positioning in seven countries:

Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, the Palestinian territories and Saudi Arabia. We demonstrate the sophistication of the strategies deployed by Russia and China and their sensitivity to local politics and culture. Their narratives encapsulate a delicate geopolitical balancing act that seeks to retain strong ties with countries in the region hostile to one another. Both are seeking to educate the people of the Middle East on Russian and Chinese culture while being deeply critical of the West. Our findings also demonstrate the diplomatic savvy of Chinese and Russian officials, especially on social-media platforms.

Key Findings

- As part of their economic and security strategies for the Middle East, Russia and China have invested substantially in soft power. Both have set up sophisticated media platforms aimed at expanding knowledge of their respective countries among the people of the Middle East in order to inculcate their strategic narratives.
- Russian and Chinese soft-power narratives are aggressively anti-West. By weaving the common thread of anti-colonialism through their narratives, their soft-power strategies actively discredit Western countries to diminish the standing of the West in comparison with Russia and China.
- Soft-power strategies are also aimed at addressing perceived weaknesses. In particular, China's strategy of whitewashing and deflecting criticism of its treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, who are mostly Muslim, can be observed throughout the Middle East.
- Russia and China have prolific and proactive diplomatic strategies, especially on social media. Diplomats post frequently, with content tailored to topical and cultural trends.
- Polling commissioned by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change in 2022 has shown that people in the Middle East favour the West more than might be expected, but China is viewed equally positively. Russia is favourable in countries such as Iraq, where it has the most involvement, but is viewed less enthusiastically by people in other nations of the Middle East.

As the United States and its allies consider a new strategy for the Middle East, they should be conscious of great-power competition in three interrelated spheres: soft power, security and trade. Soft-power strategies are aimed at augmenting the economic influence of China and the hard-security interests of Russia. A renewed Western approach should aim to achieve the same on soft power in the Middle East.

As a secondary question, this report sets out to examine the extent to which the soft-power strategies of China and Russia are working. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Tony Blair Institute commissioned Zogby Research Services to ask people in the Middle East about their views of other countries. [Polling](#) carried out in March and April 2022 in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia reveals a favourable view of many Western countries but, often, China is of equal or more interest to people in the region. Russia's investment in target countries seems to be paying

off while some Western nations such as the United Kingdom and France, with strong ties and long histories in the region, are not among the top choices of preferred partner.

The West must wake up to the threat of Russian and Chinese soft power in the Middle East. In both cases, they are seeking to undermine the West. The Middle East is not a region the West can afford to turn away from and so it must take concrete steps to address this growing imbalance. As the Middle East's leadership modernises economies and societies, Western countries must seize the opportunity to become key international partners by increasing their foreign-direct investment (FDI), opening their markets to innovation from the Middle East and cultivating more research and development exchange.

Alongside Africa, the Middle East is one of the world's youngest regions and is set to become an epicentre of economic dynamism this century. As China invests in infrastructure, the West should invest in ideas. The Abraham Accords have established a warm peace between the countries involved and are already paying economic dividends, but they can also be considered an alliance against regressive extremists. Islamist extremists, including those behind Iran's Islamic Republic, have caused untold damage to the region and indeed to Western countries. Instability in the Middle East always has implications for the West, including on security and migration. Today, three of the top five source countries for refugees seeking asylum in the UK are in the Middle East.² The West must redouble its efforts to underpin the region's positive forces for peace and prosperity, while shoring up a comprehensive security architecture that can effectively counter destabilisation and the spread of destructive ideologies.

Our polling indicates a desire among the people of the Middle East for partnerships with selected Western countries as well as generally favourable attitudes towards nations in the West. Putting aside the misplaced belief held by some in the West that the people of the Middle East are hostile towards them, it is clear the door for engagement is open.

Recommendations

To move forward, we recommend the West expands its soft-power strategy in the Middle East, with a view to supporting the development of positive regional architecture. This should include the Abraham Accords, which are already leading to greater cooperation and better integration across the region:

- As a result of decades of conflict, the Middle East is one of the least institutionally interconnected regions of the world. Following the historic Abraham Accords, countries are coming together to cooperate across a range of sectors and fields to a greater extent than before. In addition to security matters, there has been a flourishing of cultural, trade and research ties between countries that previously had no formally recognised relations. The West should seek to enhance and build on these steps, including through the Abraham Accords, in areas of mutual strength.³ Horizon 2020 is the

world's largest multinational research fund, with observer states already including Israel, Turkey and Tunisia. The United States and the United Kingdom should join with Europe to cultivate a new regional Middle East research fund to support student mobility, early-career grants and major research grants. As states in the Middle East seek to diversify their economies beyond natural resources, supporting the region's knowledge and learning would be a meaningful and substantial contribution.

- The UK and its allies should work to better integrate Middle East countries into international institutions, including by encouraging them to join the Commonwealth. Countries such as Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia are already members of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, which aims to increase cooperation among member countries in the French-speaking world. As new member states without a historic connection to Britain join the Commonwealth, such as Gabon and Togo earlier this year, this path should also be open to countries of the Middle East.⁴ The Commonwealth offers important opportunities for expanding people-to-people ties, particularly for scholars and athletes, but also for business and trade. The inclusion of Middle East nations will energise historical networks, such as the Commonwealth and La Francophonie, and expand the opportunities for multilayered relationships grounded in common interest to be built across the region.

Russia and China have embedded influential media platforms in the Middle East that are now competing successfully with their Western counterparts. However, unlike their Western equivalents, they are heavily mandated to spread their own favourable Russian and Chinese narratives as well as ones that are outwardly hostile to the West. While Western media must retain its objectivity and credibility, it should nevertheless focus programming on the values that both societies share, as identified by polling in our *Think Again: Inside the Modernisation of the New Middle East* report.

- In response to Russian and Chinese disinformation, the West should redouble its support for objective media platforms that have long served the Middle East. This includes reversing decisions such as plans to reduce the reach of the BBC Arabic and BBC Persian stations, through the cancellation of non-digital radio programming, as well as developing new and innovative vehicles aimed at countering Russian and Chinese narratives.⁵ French and American equivalents should also scale up their presence in the Middle East. In addition to informative and credible current affairs, programming should emphasise shared values between societies and focus on joint priorities, such as intercultural understanding, tolerance and coexistence.
- Western countries should invest more in cultural diplomacy. This includes enhancing resources for long-standing mechanisms such as the British Council and BBC Media Action. While there is growing interest in China as a result of its soft-power strategies, people in the Middle East are still keen to engage with Western businesses and cultural institutions. Cultural and social programming should not only continue to focus on the opportunities provided by Western countries, it should also be extended to networking initiatives led by the Commonwealth, such as the People's Forum, and other projects that enhance collaboration.

- Western diplomats need to be given greater flexibility and liberty to become more creative and nimble with their social-media engagement, more reactive to local contexts and more sensitive to cultural trends. With a view to building up greater reach and independent profiles, diplomats should emphasise sincerity as well as their understanding of local dynamics.

Tilting in the Wrong Direction?

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a turning point in global affairs, representing a shift away from the post-Cold War, liberal international order towards more intense competition and confrontation between great powers and their allies. As in earlier periods when the world has become more multipolar, regions such as the Middle East and Africa have been important stages on which great powers have vied for influence. The West must recognise that it faces increasing competition from Russia and China, but equally acknowledge the right of Middle East countries to chart their own path globally and assert their own agency.

The response from Middle East countries to the Russian invasion of Ukraine was indicative of a shift in regional perspectives, with the West's long-standing leadership in question. Back-to-back visits to the region this year by Presidents Biden, Putin and, most recently, Xi, demonstrate the growing interest in the Middle East by international leaders.

Changing relations around the world can be seen in parallel to a new regional alignment in the Middle East, following the historic Abraham Accords. The Negev Summit in March 2022 involving Israel and four allied Arab countries suggests that an anti-Iran alliance could be crystallising.⁶ This is not an alignment limited to the cold reality of security, but one of deeper and more robust economic and societal engagement that goes beyond a strategic marriage of convenience.

Despite having mediated the Abraham Accords, are Western leaders fully grasping the struggle for influence underway in the Middle East? With former US President Barack Obama's administration declaring its intention to pivot to Asia and as clearly expressed in the United Kingdom's Integrated Review 2021, the West is actively tilting towards the Asia-Pacific region. Furthermore, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken made the intentions of the current administration clear before assuming office when he said that a Biden presidency would do "less, not more" in the Middle East.⁷

The tragic fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban in summer 2021, following the rapid withdrawal of US forces, sent a startlingly acute message to the region's leadership about waning US investment in geopolitical security. The Middle East warranted little more than a paragraph in the UK's landmark foreign-policy agenda, the Integrated Review, released last year. French President Emmanuel Macron has taken a leadership role in trying to resolve the tortuous crisis in Lebanon, but the West lacks a long-term and coherent strategy of engagement. It is either a short-term "firefighter" or a passive investor.

This struggle for influence should not come as a surprise. For the past two decades, Russia and China have accelerated their presence in the Middle East. Looking to make up for lost time following its absence in the 1990s, Russia has established a security foothold in Libya and Syria as well as in countries

with natural resources of interest, such as Iraq. China has prioritised the Middle East as a critical component of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with the re-establishment of a new silk road, as seen by its significant economic investment in the region.

Enhanced Russian security influence and expanding Chinese economic interests are important and are therefore discussed in this report. However, Russia and China are also aiming to change perspectives on the ground in the Middle East. The Tony Blair Institute commissioned BBC Monitoring to analyse activities on country-affiliated media platforms, social-media activity and traditional media content in order to help uncover dominant Russian and Chinese narratives that are discrediting the West. Through our analysis of the findings, we have identified that Russian and Chinese soft-power strategies in the Middle East are sophisticated, well-funded and aligned with their hard-power interests. But are they working?

The Tony Blair Institute also conducted polling in seven Middle East countries following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February to understand what people really think about other places in the world. We find that countries such as the United States and United Kingdom are viewed more favourably than is often assumed, but that China is viewed just as positively as the former. On the other hand, favourable attitudes towards Russia are inconsistent across countries although its investment in states such as Iraq is leading to greater interest in Russia among the populations there.

In response to the significant hard- and soft-power investments in the Middle East by the West's competitors, what should a revitalised approach to the Middle East look like? This report concludes by arguing that the West must compete with Russia on security while this focus must shift to the economic field with China. Through a renewed security commitment, an ambitious investment agenda and reinvestment in soft power and accompanying narratives, the West can still reassert its leadership in the Middle East and support the agency of its allies.

The Return of the Bear: Russia's Challenge to the West in the Middle East

Since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the largest prisoner swap between the two sides took place in September 2022 enabled by the mediation of Turkey and Saudi Arabia.⁸ The unexpected exchange involved foreign nationals, including Americans and Britons, being flown to Saudi Arabia. With Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman retaining close ties to Russian President Putin, Saudi Arabia's involvement is a signal to the West of the strengthening ties between the two countries and the kingdom's desire for an enhanced global role.

In a further indication that the West's traditional position of leadership in the Middle East is under strain, members of the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)+, which include Russia and Saudi Arabia, agreed to cut oil production during a recent meeting. At a time of critical energy shortages in Europe and instability in the global market, the decision left Russia the clear beneficiary⁹ and came as a direct rebuff to President Biden's administration. The US president had personally visited Saudi Arabia in July hoping to achieve the opposite result.

When considering Russia's resurgent role in the Middle East over the past two decades and exploring its soft-power narrative strategies, the OPEC decision is not surprising.

Russia's Hard Power and Economic Presence

Syria

Russia's most enduring security presence in the Middle East has been in Syria. Since it backed the regime of Bashar al-Assad during his most vulnerable period as president – the 11-year-long Syrian civil war – Russia has become the most influential great power in the country. Starting back in 2015, Russia has intervened in the conflict with military airstrikes and the deployment of more than 63,000 forces. Two major Russian military bases – the aerodrome in Hmeimim based in the northwest and the naval port of Tartus, protected by Russian air-defence systems – are today located in Syria.

Along with several African countries, Syria is believed to be the location of a "shadow army" of Russian mercenaries, including those working for the "private" military company, the Wagner Group. Russia's military presence has opened up economic opportunities, with Syria a source of oil and minerals, but it is expanding its soft-power influence there too. Examples of this include the newly renovated Russian cultural centre in Damascus and the Syrian Ministry of Education's move to add Russian as an optional

second language in schools.¹⁰ During Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, it has been from Syria that it has recruited its largest number of foreign combatants. Getting involved in the Syrian civil war has been serving Moscow's interests in three interlinked ways: first, by allowing Russia to gain an advantage in Syria's complex conflict; second, expanding its role in broader Middle Eastern dynamics; and, finally, in its particular conception of the wider world order.¹¹ Syria has become a permanent base from which Russia can engage and spread its influence across the Middle East.

Iraq

After Syria, Russia's next deepest security and economic presence is in Iraq. Dating back to the 1950s when the Soviet Union supported Iraq's turn away from the West, Russia retained its influence there up to and including the 1980s, when it heavily backed Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq war. As in Africa and other parts of the world, Russia's presence in Iraq waned considerably after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the chaos of the 1990s before returning notably in the 2010s, prompted by the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS) as a shared threat in the region. This resulted in a renewed partnership between Russia and Iraq, namely the Russia-Syria-Iran-Iraq security coalition (RSII) in 2015.

Russia's more recent offer to supply the S-400 missile system to Iraq as well as its growing energy interests in the country are further signs of its proliferating influence.¹² Investment in energy is seen as a way of Russia leveraging its commercial interests in the service of its foreign-policy objectives. Since the increasing sectarian violence of the 2000s, Russia has sought to fill the gap left by Western energy companies exiting as a result of security concerns in Iraq. Beginning in 2008, Putin wrote off most of Iraq's Soviet-era debt, equivalent to \$12.9 billion, in exchange for a \$4 billion oil deal.¹³ To date, Russia has invested \$10 billion in the country's energy sector with another \$20 billion promised for hydrocarbon-extraction projects in the future, including in the Zarubezhneft, Tatneft and Rosneftegaz oil and gas companies.¹⁴ This relationship is of mutual benefit for the Iraqi government, which is dependent on oil and gas exports for more than 90 per cent of its revenue. Investment is not limited to the Iraqi state; after signing a loan deal with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) worth \$3.5 billion, Russian energy giant Rosneft bought a majority stake in the KRG oil pipeline to Turkey, agreeing to construct a parallel gas pipe.

Moscow's interests in Iraq go beyond energy and include a security presence. It has links with Iranian-backed Shia militias, including a deepening partnership with Hashd al-Shaabi, an umbrella organisation of 40 such militias. This relationship was cemented following a 2016 meeting between Hashd al-Shaabi's leader Falih al-Fayyadh and the Secretary of Russia's Security Council Nikolai Patrushev when the two discussed counterterrorism strategies that would not infringe upon state sovereignty.¹⁵ Since around 2012, representatives of the Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr have also been visiting Moscow.¹⁶ Fiercely opposed to American influence in Iraq and as a force that is becoming increasingly important within Iraqi

domestic politics, this relationship could entrench Russian influence in Iraq even more deeply. At the state level, the partnership is developing too, with more than 60 visits between Russian and Iraqi officials taking place in 2019 alone.¹⁷ Last year, Russia helped to establish a command centre in Baghdad under an intelligence-sharing agreement that included Syria and Iran.¹⁸ Despite the above, Russia's influence over the Iraqi state is limited compared with Tehran's, with Iran in more of a position to shape Iraq's political and military establishments.¹⁹

Iran

Russia's bilateral ties with Iran are at the intersection of its hard-power interests in Syria and Iraq. Alongside Russia, Iran is the other state that has sought to benefit the most from the instability in Iraq and Syria over the past two decades. While Russia and Iran hold parallel interests in preventing Western interests from growing in either country, there are points on which they diverge. In Syria, the instability in the country has allowed Iran to cultivate and exercise control over Shia-militia networks, including using them as a base for launching attacks against Israel as well as to serve as a corridor to Lebanon. However, this approach does not align with Russia's interests, which are principally concerned with stabilising the country and securing the leadership of Assad. Additionally, Russia's long-standing approach of "looking the other way" when Israel strikes Iranian-backed militias in Syria debilitates Iran's ability to harden its presence there. However, Putin's visit to Tehran in summer 2022 was a signal that broader joint interests between the two countries now outweigh any areas of difference. Both Russia and Iran have been severely sanctioned by the US administration and are making every effort to strengthen their economic ties. With its military hardware depleting in Ukraine, Russia's increased reliance on Iranian-made drones to strike deep inside Ukrainian-held territory has cemented the link between the two anti-West regimes.²⁰ Ultimately, both are committed to a multipolar world, with a diminished Western presence in the Middle East.

Gulf states

Despite its warming relations with Tehran, Russia has nonetheless been strengthening its ties with the Gulf states. While the major rift in the Middle East is between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Russia recognises that becoming more involved in regional politics may strain relations with either party while also acknowledging that the Gulf remains a US sphere of influence.²¹ Notably, however, the changing relationship with the United States has had a knock-on effect on the Gulf states' relations with Russia. Following a cooling-off period between 2012 and 2014 caused by the GCC's condemnation of Russian support for the Assad regime, there has been a continuing rapprochement. This included the landmark 2017 visit to Moscow by the Saudi crown prince to cement coordination on oil prices in combination with increasing doubts about the security commitments of the United States in the region. Washington's

tepid response to Iranian-backed attacks on Saudi oil facilities in 2019 and its chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan have fed into this narrative.

Economic cooperation has deepened in recent years, with total trade volume between GCC states and Russia increasing from \$1.5 billion in 2010 to \$4.4 billion in 2019, with the bulk belonging to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Indicative of this pace, total trade volume between the United Arab Emirates and Russia reached \$4 billion in 2021.²² Agricultural products are particularly important to this trade between Russia and the GCC. For example, in 2019, the largest single export from Russia to Saudi Arabia, accounting for 18.8 per cent of the total, was barley worth \$232 million. Wheat comprised 32.7 per cent and 6.1 per cent of total Russian exports to Oman and the United Arab Emirates respectively in the same year. Notably, the GCC is not as dependent on Russian grain as are Egypt and Turkey.²³

According to the [SIPRI Arms Transfers Database](#), Russia's arms exports to the GCC rose from \$48 million in 2015 to \$331 million in 2020, with the United Arab Emirates the largest recipient. In 2018, Russia and the United Arab Emirates signed a declaration of strategic partnership to collectively invest in military developments.²⁴ This has since been buttressed by the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RIDF) working with Emirati sovereign-wealth funds on multiple projects, including Siberian oil fields and the joint development of a Su-57 fifth-generation fighter jet²⁵ by Russian defence firm Roster in collaboration with the United Arab Emirates Ministry of Defence.

Russian-Saudi cooperation has been underpinned by partnerships between sovereign-wealth funds. For example, the RIDF and the kingdom's Public Investment Fund (PIF) began working together in 2015. Two years later, a Russia-Saudi investment fund was established, with a total commitment of \$6 billion for projects fostering economic cooperation.²⁶ As Saudi Arabia signs more deals with Russian firms, such as Rosoboronexport,²⁷ a growing trend of GCC-Russia relations based on economic cooperation and militarisation is detectable. This economisation or monetisation covers joint ventures and the cofinancing and codevelopment of new technologies to create jobs and export markets, while militarisation in this context involves the extension of military influence into everyday life through economic opportunities.²⁸

The response of the Gulf states to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been muted to date, with support expressed for a diplomatic solution, partly reflecting a reluctance to be drawn into taking sides. Beneath this seemingly united front, however, fault lines have begun to appear as Kuwait and Qatar cautiously take positions that align with Ukraine while Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates lean towards Russia. Oman and Bahrain in the meantime maintain their low profile. Relations with the US administration further soured over American insistence on returning to the nuclear deal – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – with Iran. Riyadh is known to strongly object to the deal, with cuts to oil production used as a threat against the United States.²⁹

Turkey

Russia and Turkey have a complex relationship, which has at times involved being fierce competitors. For example, they back opposing parties in Syria, Libya and the disputed South Caucasus territory of Nagorno-Karabakh while Turkey is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). However, the two countries share deep economic and cultural ties, enabling regional cooperation that has been described as a “compartmentalisation”³⁰ of differences. This means they can pursue shared goals while disagreeing on other fronts. In 2019, bilateral trade totalled €23 billion with Russia comprising Turkey’s second-biggest trading partner after the EU. Most significantly, Russia is Turkey’s main energy supplier; 41 per cent of all Turkish gas imports come from the country. Turkey’s geopolitically strategic location, as home of the sole maritime passage between the Black Sea and Mediterranean, makes it a key transit route for Russia’s fossil fuels while several pipelines run through its territory, including TurkStream and Blue Stream.³¹ Turkish exports to Russia have been surging this year. From May to July alone, Turkish exports to Russia were worth \$2.04 billion, \$642 million higher than the same period in 2021.³²

Over the past decade, Turkey has drifted away from alignment with the West under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This shift has resulted in Turkey being removed from the F-35 fighter-jet programme, with its defence officials sanctioned after it bought the Russian-made S-400 air-defence system in 2017.

A long-standing area of contention is conflicting Russian and Turkish interests in Syria. Russia’s military campaign in Syria targeted Turkish-backed groups. Turkey’s subsequent decision to shoot down a Russian plane that seemed to pose no military threat to Ankara may have been intended to discourage Moscow’s further intervention. This has not happened. Pro-Assad forces, with Russia’s backing, have expelled rebels from most parts of the country. Furthermore, Ankara has been angered by Russia’s support for Kurdish forces engaged in eliminating extremist groups, such as ISIS, from Syria and its calls for Kurdish officials to be involved in UN peace talks. During the recent Libyan civil war, the two states supported opposing sides, with Russia propping up the Libyan National Army and Turkey throwing itself behind the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA).³³

The Russian invasion of Ukraine means this is a pivotal point for Turkish relations both with the West and Russia. Could there be a return for Turkey into the NATO fold if it is sufficiently threatened by the revival of Russian power, especially in the Black Sea?³⁴ Additionally, since Turkey has cultivated a strong relationship with Ukraine, it could be concerned by the violations of its sovereignty by an empowered Putin. However, if Putin eventually wins in Ukraine, this could equally accelerate Turkey’s move to a post-NATO position, confirming Erdoğan’s belief that the West’s relevance as a security guarantor is waning.³⁵ With Turkey positioning itself as the key broker between the West and Russia – for instance, it

recently secured the passage of Ukrainian and Russian grain by sea following a damaging blockade – its position in relation to Russia and the West is still unsettled.³⁶

Algeria

With relations between Algeria and the United States at their nadir following the latter's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara, Algeria's ties with Russia are likely to deepen. This relationship is long-standing, with the two countries signing a 2006 memorandum of understanding allowing Gazprom to assist Algeria's state-owned Sonatrach to evolve its liquified-natural-gas output. Security cooperation is especially strong, with Algeria having purchased 81 per cent of its military equipment from Russia over the past three years to become its third-largest arms-export destination after China and India.³⁷ With plans for joint military exercises, Algeria has been steadfast in its refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, including by abstaining during UN voting on the crisis.

Egypt

Over the past decade, Moscow has also been cultivating ever closer links with the Egyptian government led by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Most recently, in June 2022, Russia's state-owned atomic-energy firm Rosatom announced it would begin producing equipment for the country's first nuclear-power plant in El Dabaa.³⁸ And the two countries are working together on an industrial zone in the Suez Canal, which is expected to attract \$7 billion in investment. Close economic ties have geopolitical implications, with Egypt refusing to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, instead choosing to remain neutral despite pressure on its food security. This turn to Russia has been further cemented following the occasional suspension of aid by the United States in response to Egypt's human-rights record.³⁹

Libya

During the ongoing civil conflict in Libya, Russia has both backed Khalifa Haftar's LNA and inserted itself into the country's economic and political systems to establish patronage networks that benefit both Moscow and local agents. The aim is to create an enduring dependence.

The provision of lethal military equipment to the LNA has been linked to Russian entities since late 2014 while some mercenaries from Russia's Wagner Group have provided training, hardware and battlefield advice – a similar situation has occurred in Syria and several African countries. By 2017, international media had established that men from a Russian company called RSB Group were supporting Haftar's forces in Libya. The Wagner Group arrived the following year after Russia's foreign-military intelligence had conducted a preparatory mission.⁴⁰ By late 2019, these mercenaries were supplied with Russian

aircraft and missiles to support Haftar's bid to seize Tripoli, with more than 1,200 Wagner Group contractors located in the country.⁴¹

Since May 2016, the Russian manufacturing company Goznak has produced more than LYD14 billion worth of banknotes (equivalent to \$10 billion) for the LNA – so the force can pay high salaries to its members – without consulting the country's internationally recognised central bank. Moscow's interference has not stopped there: its economic intervention is based on a strategy of long-term investment and securing Haftar as a loyal client. This involves controlling Libya's resources and signing energy contracts that entrench Russian influence within this vital cash-generating industry.⁴² There is also a diplomatic element to the relationship. Since 2015, when Haftar established relations with the Kremlin, Moscow's support at the UN has been growing, culminating in a move to block a resolution denouncing the LNA's assault on Tripoli in 2019.⁴³

Russia's Soft-Power Manoeuvring

Soft-power activities undertaken by Russia in the region are aimed at fortifying economic and security interests. Given its inability to constantly offer the same level of security involvement as the United States, Russia is using soft power as a low-cost, low-risk way to enhance its influence among the leadership of the Middle East. Russia's soft-power approach is sophisticated, with its diplomats and journalists cultivating long-term and personal relationships, often in the local language, as part of efforts to develop an extensive linguistic and cultural understanding of the region.

Pro-Russia narratives are most prominent in countries where Russia has the deepest hard-power interests, such as Syria and Iraq. However, the same strategy and reach have been developed in countries with looser historic and geopolitical connections. What is particularly striking is the support among Islamist militia – both Shia and Sunni groups – for Russian narratives and its soft-power model.

Russian content is vociferously anti-US and anti-West, aiming to embed scepticism about the West's leadership and convey the view the world is no longer unipolar. Its narrative suggests an order that is becoming multipolar, with Russia reassuming a role as a great power. At the same time, it also promotes the idea that the United States and other Western countries are colonial powers in contrast to its own anti-colonial stance and resistance. There is evidence that these soft-power efforts have worked, with Arab media outlets in the Middle East being relatively circumspect in their criticism of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent food crisis created by its grain blockades. Additionally, there is little attention paid to the reality that Muslim Russians may be among those conscripted to fight in the war while Russia appears to have been successful, on some platforms, for example those in Palestine, in framing the conflict as a response to NATO expansion.

Russian Platforms and Reach

The Tony Blair Institute commissioned BBC Monitoring in summer 2022 to carry out the media analysis of Arabic-language sources featured in this report, with a focus on Russian and Chinese content. This analysis focused on regional media as well as country-focused research on Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, the Palestinian territories and Saudi Arabia.

Russia's flagship media platforms, Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik, operate extensive Arabic-language reportage and serve as primary channels through which to disseminate narratives. Media and diplomacy, interwoven as the two major pillars of Russia's soft-power strategy, are designed to augment one another. For instance, Arabic-speaking diplomat Aydar Rashidovich Aganin was appointed director of news channel RT Arabic at the time of its founding and remained at the helm for four years before returning to the foreign service.

Demonstrating the region's importance to Russia, state-controlled RT Arabic (formerly known as Rusiya Al-Yaum) was launched in 2007, two years after RT's first international venture, its English-language channel. RT Arabic is operated by RIA Novosti, part of the state-owned international news agency Rossiya Segodnya, and has numerous offices across the region, including in Baghdad, Beirut, Cairo, Damascus, Gaza, Jerusalem and Ramallah. Its output focuses on global news, prioritising Russia-related events and a pro-Kremlin narrative, but it also broadcasts talk shows, interviews and documentaries.

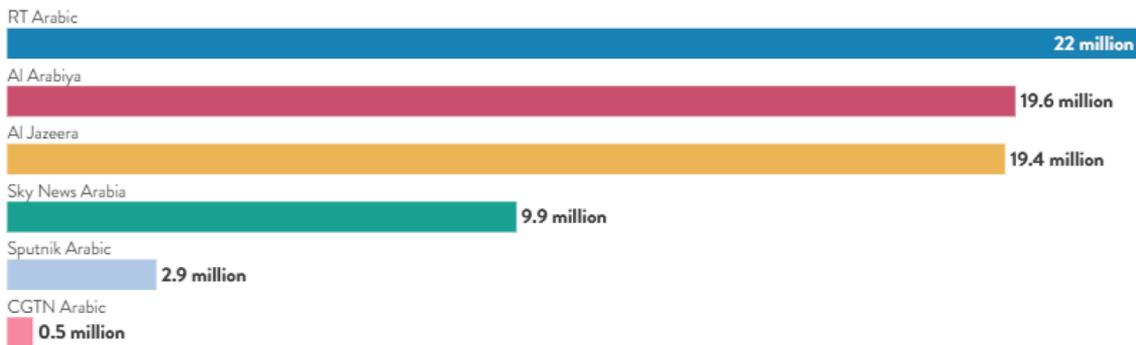
Most presenters hail from Arabic-speaking countries and have previously worked for national or pan-Arab networks. RT Arabic employs many Russian journalists with impeccable Arabic-language skills, including Artyom Kapchuk, the presenter of the "Panorama" current-affairs debate programme. Russian priorities, particularly its war in Ukraine, take precedence over developments in the Arab world, which feature lower down in the order of news bulletins. Demonstrating a solidarity with people's sympathies in the Middle East, it often takes a stance on regional issues that will resonate with viewers. For example, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a big focus, covered in a factual tone but with greater attention given to the Palestinian versions of events.

Russia's platforms have a wide reach. The most recent available data on viewing figures are from 2015 when RIA Novosti announced that RT Arabic was among the top three television stations in the Middle East according to audience numbers, which reached 6.7 million across Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, a significant proportion of the station's overall monthly audience of 11.5 million. It also claims to have outperformed other Arabic-language channels in terms of the "most loyal audience". RT Arabic has its highest audience penetration in Iraq, with 44 per cent of the population tuning in daily to the channel.

In May 2022, RT Arabic noted that its website was maintaining a lead over Al Jazeera and the pan-Arab Al Arabiya in terms of online readership figures, having originally surpassed both these popular online

platforms on numbers in 2019. According to web-analytics company SimilarWeb, RT Arabic had 22 million monthly page views by July 2022, surpassing Al Arabiya's 19.6 million and Al Jazeera's 19.4 million.

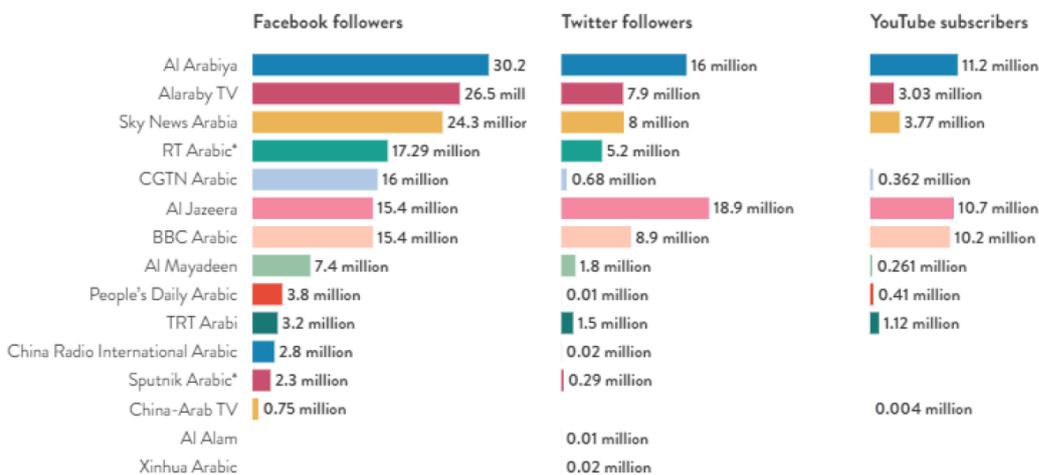
Figure 1 – Monthly page views of pan-Arab networks in July 2022 show the popularity of RT Arabic



Source: SimilarWeb

Russia's platforms are also major competitors when it comes to social-media presence, both regionally and when compared with those linked to the West and China.

Figure 2 – The number of social-media followers of pan-Arab networks in August 2022 reveals the strong performances of Russian platforms



Source: Facebook; Twitter; YouTube (Note*: YouTube suspended RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic's channels in February 2022)

Those who are behind Russia's social-media platforms are assertive and savvy, with RT and Sputnik Arabic's output vastly surpassing their competitors. A large number of posts in multiple languages originating from several of their accounts direct significant traffic to their websites.

The success of Russian platforms can in part be explained by this tactic of posting high volumes of material to reach as many accounts as possible, including some with unclear origins. For example, RT Arabic’s news website became one of the most visited online Arabic-language news sources in the Middle East for the month of April 2022. Although some comments on Twitter posts from the platforms’ official accounts were authentic, some users actively engaging with their tweets have exhibited unusual behaviour. The online activity of these users almost entirely comprises retweeting posts by Russian accounts while they follow other accounts that feature Putin in profile pictures. For instance, Twitter user @SMAA47217854 retweeted content by Russian news sources more than 3,000 times over a period of three months, with an average of 30 retweets of this content per day. Another user, @DaRossia, retweeted content by Russian news sources more than 1,300 times over the same period.

Arabic-language social-media accounts posting content supportive of Russia also appear to have synchronised their engagement to push the Kremlin’s war narrative by using multiple accounts to expand reach and persuade other users of their credibility. Multiple accounts with the same profile picture – featuring the colours of the Russian flag – and which often follow each other, are engaging in online discussions in Arabic about the invasion of Ukraine, producing identical posts that align with Russia’s narrative.

Figure 3 – Synchronising their engagement, Twitter accounts with similar profiles push Russia’s war narrative



Source: Twitter/TBI

As in other parts of world, the Arabic-language output of Russia’s social-media platforms has attracted criticism on the grounds of disinformation and inauthentic behaviour, especially when it relates to the invasion of Ukraine. Since the beginning of the war in February 2022, there has been an uptick in Russian media publishing in Arabic. Online spaces have been flooded with reporting about the war, with

thousands of posts and news reports propagating the Kremlin's narratives and countering Western accounts of the conflict.

Some of the Twitter users have similar account handles, such as @AjlAlrwsyt, @AAAlrwsyt and @AlrwsytAlahdath, as well as @russia880 and @russia590. While each has very few followers, the accounts have posted identical tweets in the same minute, suggesting synchronised social-media activity. Similar findings on Russian social-media narratives were shared in a *Politico* interview with regional online analyst Moustafa Ayad. In its July newsletter, the publication said that ten Twitter accounts, with a combined total of nearly 360,000 followers, "have been peddling Kremlin narratives, mostly about Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, with some directly linking themselves to Russian state-media outlets".

Politico also noted that Syrian media on Facebook and Twitter "pumped out Russian talking points about the war to a massive online audience – almost always running without disclaimers, fact-checking labels or any acknowledgment of who was behind the posts". In Iraq, Iranian-backed militias have also been buying Facebook adverts to promote disinformation about Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, according to Ayad's research.

Diplomatic accounts also have a role to play. The Russian foreign-ministry's Arabic-language Twitter account, which has more than 142,000 followers and focuses almost entirely on Russian foreign relations, is the most prolific social-media profile targeting audiences in the Middle East. Other active accounts include the Russian embassies in Egypt with around 31,000 followers, in Saudi Arabia with 10,400 followers and in Lebanon with 7,700 followers. Their activity consists of reposts from central-government and foreign-ministry accounts in English and Arabic. From a narrative standpoint, the embassy in Egypt's account has recently used Israeli strikes on Gaza as a means to further its own narrative on the war in Ukraine.

The Narratives Underpinning Russia's Soft Power

Key to Russia's engagement with the leadership of the Middle East is that it functions without normative conditions, such as the upholding of human rights and democracy, that have historically come with Western involvement. Russia, China and other actors cast the West's emphasis on human rights as paternalistic, which is also fundamental to the post-colonial, "anti-imperialist" concept underpinning their narratives. This is especially true of Russian ones.

Russia's anti-imperialist and anti-West rhetoric aligns with Iran's "axis-of-resistance" narrative, which has long been championed by the Islamic Republic through the prism of both Shia theology and geopolitics. This same narrative is shared by entities belonging to Hizbullah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine as well as Iran-backed factions in Iraq and Syria. This understanding of a variety of local contexts not only

demonstrates the sophistication of Russian narratives but also the way the country is able to identify nuances to suit them, as explored below.

There is an emphasis on communicating stories about Russia's large Muslim population to audiences in the Middle East. Speaking in 2009 about the goals of RT Arabic, Aganin told Kuwait's official news agency ⁴⁴ KUNA: "Our policy is to provide coverage for Russian issues, Russian-Arab issues... and cultural issues in Arab countries... our motto is 'a new project from an old friend'. We report on the life of Muslims and Islamic culture within Russia; by this, we build the bridges of understanding and dialogue between Muslim Russia and the Arab audiences in the Arab region."

Iraq

Given the importance of Iraq to Russia's natural-resource interests, it is not surprising that Sputnik Arabic largely focuses on political and economic news – particularly energy matters – as well as health issues. RT Arabic similarly emphasises oil-market-related developments. Despite Russia's significant influence in the country, Iraqi domestic media usually report factually on news relating to the country, without loaded or biased terms, particularly when covering the invasion of Ukraine. State media have maintained a neutral editorial line, with Iraqia News channel reporting factually on the war.

Despite this, Russia and its sympathisers have tried to control the narrative on the war. In early March, domestic-media outlets – including the privately owned Kurdish Shafaq News website – reported a statement attributed to the Russian consulate in Basra that said it had "received many requests from Iraqis wishing to join Russian forces in the battle in Ukraine". Around the same time, media outlets reported on the appearance of a billboard in central Baghdad that featured the text "We Support Russia" next to a picture of Putin. Pictures of the billboard, said to have been installed by the Iran-backed Asaib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous) militia, were shared widely on Iraqi social media, as well as by the Russian foreign-ministry's Twitter account. Iraqi journalist Rasha al-Aqeedi later tweeted a video that showed security personnel taking it down.

Figure 4 – A pro-Putin billboard appeared in Baghdad in early March 2022



Source: Russian Embassy in Iraq via Twitter

In contrast to state media, outlets affiliated to Iran-backed political factions and Iraqi militia groups do not conceal their support of Russia. Moscow is considered part of a larger alliance, including Iran, which stands firm against “international arrogance” – a term often used by Iranian leaders to refer to the United States and the West. This is evident not only in op-eds and commentaries published by these outlets, but also in news reports. A report published on 16 July on the website of Al-Ahad TV, affiliated to the Asaib Ahl al-Haq militia, criticised the recent agreement between Iraq and Saudi Arabia to connect their power grids, suggesting it was designed to place Iraq in a US-led alliance against Iran, Russia and China.

In an article published on 7 July 2022 on the website of the Buratha News Agency – affiliated to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, a Shia political group founded in Iran – political analyst Qasim al-Gharawi praised Russia’s role and relations in the Middle East, stating that Moscow was “trying to restore the balance of power in the face of the expansion of NATO, the EU and the US in the region... Russia, China, [North] Korea and Iran are seeking to establish a multi-polar [system] that is considered more secure and more stable for the world”. In another published on Al-Ahad’s website on 20 July 2022, political analyst Mohammed Ali al-Sultani criticised US President Biden’s attendance at a regional

summit in the Saudi city of Jeddah days earlier.⁴⁵ He argued that “Arab countries should be aware of a new emerging pole in the world, represented in China, Russia and Iran,” adding that the “interests of Arab countries with this pole are plentiful and extensive”.

Lebanon

There has been widespread interest in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in Lebanese media, with TV channels and print media dedicating daily coverage to military developments and the war’s humanitarian toll. The divide between support for and against Russia’s actions became apparent in March as pro-Russian rallies and counter-rallies were held in Beirut, receiving extensive coverage in domestic media.

Most recently, media coverage has shown Russia in a slightly more favourable light, following an agreement signed by Ukraine, Turkey, Russia and the UN in Istanbul on 22 July to lift the blockade of grain exports from Ukrainian ports. The Lebanese government taking a stand to officially condemn the invasion and urge Russia to withdraw its forces was largely reported factually in domestic media, with little weight given to whether this was a positive or negative development.

Figure 5 – Putin’s July visit to the Islamic Republic in Tehran dominated coverage on Al Mayadeen



Source: Al Mayadeen

Assessing the positions taken for or against the invasion, channels with a clear pro-Syrian and pro-Iranian editorial line began to reflect the official Kremlin narrative that Russia was in a fight against “Nazi elements” in Ukraine. The pro-Iranian Al Mayadeen and Hizbullah-run Al-Manar are two leading television channels that support the Syria-Iran-Russia alliance, closely followed by the pro-Syrian, pro-Iranian *Al-Akhbar* newspaper.

These outlets also closely follow Russian military developments elsewhere, particularly in Syria.

Palestine

RT Arabic’s website reports widely on developments in the Palestinian territories. The outlet’s coverage often sympathises with the Palestinians, sometimes using the phrase “Israeli occupation” to refer to Israeli forces. In addition, reports related to the killing of veteran Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh reflect a pro-Palestinian editorial line. Russian media has been critical of interactions between the signatories of the Abraham Accords, with headlines including: “Warnings and concern over Israeli infiltration of Morocco’s universities.” Sputnik Arabic exhibits clear sympathies with the Palestinians against Israel too.

Reporting and commentary about Russia in the Palestinian media have been predominantly positive, both before and after the invasion of Ukraine. While coverage of the war has mostly rehashed material from other sources, the Arabic-language output has tended to favour Russia’s position. In certain cases, the idea of war has been criticised generically, but without any direct blame pointed at Russia.

The popular Jerusalem-based *Al-Quds* newspaper carried an op-ed by well-known columnist Mohammad al-Nubani in which he described a similarity between Ukraine’s situation in this war and its stance at the beginning of the second world war, referring to the Ukrainians as “neo-Nazis”. He went on to say that when Arabs and Palestinians side with Russia, “they are siding with themselves”. Another commentator wrote in the Palestinian-Authority-owned *Al-Hayat al-Jadeed* newspaper that “the West, under Washington’s leadership, had dragged Russia into the war with Ukraine”.

Some newspaper commentaries written by figures associated with the Palestinian Authority welcomed what they described as the world changing from a unipolar to multipolar system. Most adopted the position that Russia has to “defend itself” from NATO on its doorstep. A prominent focus of Palestinian social media has been criticism of Western countries and media for rushing to condemn Russia over its invasion of Ukraine while not responding in the same way to Israel over its occupation of Palestine.

Israel’s position on the war in Ukraine has been discredited by direct comparisons made to its treatment of Palestinians. A tweet by the Russian embassy in Egypt shared a screenshot of a post by Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid from April 2022, when he was foreign minister, in which he condemned mass killings in the Ukrainian town of Bucha, discovered in the wake of a Russian army withdrawal, as a war crime. The

embassy account wrote: “Compare the lies by Yair Lapid in April and his attempts to place blame and responsibility on Russia for the deaths of people in Bucha, who were brutally killed by the Ukrainian Nazis, with his call in August for bombarding Palestinian territory in Gaza. Aren’t these double standards and a total disregard and contempt for the lives of Palestinians?!”

Saudi Arabia

Outlets in Saudi Arabia have not taken an obvious position on the war although the kingdom voted in favour of a UN General Assembly resolution in March denouncing Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Saudi media coverage of the war has been less anti-Russian from the outset than may have been expected given the kingdom’s historic ties with the West.

The influential Al Arabiya – the most followed Saudi outlet on Twitter – aired special programming at the start of the war for its audiences across the Middle East. In the early days, the channel shifted between referring to the conflict as “the military operation that Russia is carrying out against Ukraine” and “the military operation in Ukraine” – the latter being closer to Moscow’s own description. However, the phrasing did not reflect the same level of alignment as had been seen in reporting by Syrian state media, which fully adopted the Kremlin’s terminology, calling it the “special military operation” in “the Donbas” or, increasingly, “Ukraine”.

A report on Al Arabiya’s website on 30 June 2022 said the Russian army was “continuing to strike Ukrainian forces’ positions and military infrastructure and liberating the Donbas territory”, while Kyiv was “receiving financial and military support to confront the Russian bear”. Later in the report, Al Arabiya again referred to Russian forces “liberating” territory, in reference to remarks by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, a Putin ally. The previous day, Saudi-owned newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat* had run a report about Russian attempts to shore up control of “occupied Ukrainian regions” such as Kherson, “which Russian forces have occupied since March”. Taken together, this reporting suggests a legitimacy to Russia’s claims to Ukrainian territory.

Algeria

Russia has long-standing, historic ties to Algeria. In its reporting on Algeria, Sputnik Arabic pays special attention to economic developments, particularly those related to energy and investment. Perceptions and portrayals of Russia in Algerian media echo those seen in many other African countries, broadly adopting a narrative that portrays Russia as an opponent of the West and that contrasts the former’s regional activities and ambitions favourably against the latter’s.

State-media outlets have referred to the conflict in Ukraine as “the Russian-Ukrainian crisis”, although coverage has also included occasional uses of the “Russian military operation” phrase. This includes a

report published in March 2022 that described “Russian advances” as well as Russian reports of “foreign mercenaries arriving to compensate for devastating Ukrainian military losses”.

The theme of Western colonial history in Africa, particularly France in Algeria, is a major contextual thread that pervades official and popular perceptions of messaging related to the West, including the war in Ukraine. The conflict has largely been presented through the prism of a geopolitical battle pitting the West against Russia, rather than as an invasion or conflict between two countries. Such criticism of Western policies and actions is a mainstay theme of messaging by the Algerian opposition, civil society and academia.

However, there is little in the way of concerted Russian media effort targeting the Algerian media landscape, whether traditional outlets or social media. This could be because many Russian narratives resonate with long-established and dominant narratives in Algeria, such as portrayals of the West – especially the United States – as pursuers of aggressive imperial policies in Africa and the Middle East.

Libya

Russia’s media content in Libya reinforces its deep interest in the unstable politics of the country, including whom to back. In recent months, RT Arabic has been reporting prominently on an initiative by Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, the son of the late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, in which he called for elections as a way out of the country’s political crisis. The channel highlighted the younger Gaddafi’s initiative as part of its coverage on the crisis. The younger Gaddafi has long been a figure of interest to Russian Arabic outlets. Last year, the Russian foreign-ministry’s spokeswoman Maria Zakharova criticised the Libyan electoral commission for its decision to remove the younger Gaddafi from the list of 2021 general-election candidates, although she did caveat her comments by saying that “all Libyan public and political circles [should] be given equal opportunities to participate in the electoral process”. Weeks before the election was due to be held, Russian sociologist Maksim Shugalei described Gaddafi as someone who “speaks very positively of our country”, but said there was more than one candidate that “looks towards us more openly”.

Every major statement by a Russian figure – particularly the views of the Wagner Group’s head Yevgeny Prigozhin on who should rule Libya – receives very prominent coverage in the country’s media. They are reported by Libyan outlets as part of the general stream of Russia’s fascination with the country and particularly its post-Muammar Gaddafi politics. For example, Sputnik Arabic often publishes interviews with Tobruk-based authorities in the east of the country where Haftar’s LNA retains control, indicating they have good access to these sources. In an interview in March, a senior LNA official used the platform to direct strong criticism at the prime minister of Libya’s unity government, Abdul Hamid Dbeibah.

Reports of Russian remarks often feature alongside those by Western officials on the front pages. But some, especially media more sympathetic to Islamist groups or opposed to the LNA, convey an anti-Russian tone in reporting, particularly when it comes to Russian fighters.

Egypt

As a priority country, Egypt receives significant attention from Russia's media platforms. Statements or decisions taken by President Sisi, who has close relations with Putin, feature prominently in the Arab world-news section of RT Arabic's website.

Mainstream Egyptian media outlets tend to adopt a neutral stance on Russia, echoing the official position of the Egyptian government on the war in Ukraine. Events relating to Russia tend to be reported factually and impartially, with news on the issue of food security steering clear of directing blame at Russia. In opposition media, criticism of the war and its negative impact on the local economy has predominantly focused on the Egyptian government's role.

Sisi has maintained his strong relationship with Russia in the public eye, with domestic media widely covering his participation in the St Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2022. There was also extensive coverage of the one-day visit by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Cairo as part of an African tour the following month. The state-owned Nile News's coverage on 24 July was dominated by the visit, and the channel interviewed a former Egyptian official who said Lavrov's trip was designed to explain Russia's position in response to what he described as the Western-led campaign over food security against Moscow.

Path of the New Silk Road: China's Challenge to the West in the Middle East

On 7 December 2022, Chinese President Xi began a much-anticipated visit to the Middle East in Saudi Arabia. With a view to further positioning China as an alternative partner in the region, Xi met with leadership from Middle East states at the GCC-China and Arab-China Summits for Cooperation and Development.⁴⁶

This visit followed a large delegation of foreign ministers from the Gulf states, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Saudi Arabia, and the GCC's secretary general, visiting China earlier in the year. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian also went the same week.⁴⁷ Their aim was to deepen China's involvement in the Middle East. China has deftly managed to build strong diplomatic and economic ties with countries hostile to one another in the region while avoiding being dragged into its political challenges. However, as its regional presence proliferates, can China continue to navigate between opportunities and potential threats to its interests?

China has recently demonstrated a political agenda for the region. In September 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi attended the opening ceremony of the second Middle East Security Forum via video link.⁴⁸ Building on a series of ministerial-level meetings under the auspices of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), Wang detailed four proposals: a new vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security; a security architecture independently conceived by leaders in the Middle East; support for international law and the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions, particularly with respect to Palestine; and the resumption of peace talks between Palestine and Israel as well as dialogue between Gulf states.

China sees its presence in the Middle East as an opposing force to what it calls "hegemony and bullying".⁴⁹ Following a decade during which the establishment of economic ties between the Middle East and China has accelerated substantially, the latter is now positioning itself as an economic alternative to the United States and an attractive great-power partner for the region. In addition to deepening its economic interests, China's soft-power narratives reflect this overt challenge to the way the West has traditionally tried to influence the region.

China's Economic Presence

Beijing has historically been wary of involvement in a region described as a graveyard burying empires.⁵⁰ It has been careful to avoid replicating what it considers Western-style involvement, which entails

investment and partnership being conditional on a normative vision based on values. Instead, it has advanced a narrative of neutral engagement with all countries. This reflects China's doctrine of non-interference in the affairs of other states. China is particularly keen to avoid a hard-security presence comparable to the past involvements of the United States, United Kingdom, France and Russia, recognising that their embeddedness in the Middle East has become a challenge for them.

While there is less evidence of Chinese than Russian security interests in the region, the "China model" is perhaps the greatest threat to the Middle East's modernisation agenda. Indeed, Middle East-scholar Sun Degang wrote that China proposed a model of developmental peace to rival the Western model of democratic peace. This advances China's belief that the international community should focus on providing economic assistance to the Middle East "instead of exporting ill-fitting democracy".⁵¹ This form of developmental economics has been most obviously pursued through the CASC. Established during a 2004 state visit to Egypt by former President Hu Jintao, the CASC was created as a multilateral platform for China and the 22 member states of the Arab League to promote cooperation in politics, trade, culture and international affairs.

The 2018 CASC ministerial meeting, held in Beijing, signalled the Chinese commitment to stability through development policies in the Middle East and North Africa. China has pledged more than \$23 billion in the form of loans, aid and investments: \$20 billion in loans for countries that have construction needs, \$3 billion in loans for financial centres, \$150 million to support social stability, and \$90 million in humanitarian and reconstruction aid for Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen.⁵² This desire to engage without attaching any conditions has also been evident in the sphere of peace-building and security, a policy approach described by Chinese scholars as "seeking common ground while reserving differences". While China is not seeking to replace the US militarily in the region, it is nevertheless capitalising on the US desire to pivot away from the region.⁵³

Following the Obama administration's pivot to Asia, Chinese officials recognised the opportunity for a march westward.⁵⁴ In Africa and other regions, China's desire for influence is principally driven by its significant economic and natural-resource interests. The country's intentions are articulated in two key Chinese government documents: the 2016 "Arab Policy Paper" and the 2015 "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road". They explain the basis for the "traditional friendship" between China and Arab countries, which is underpinned by "both sides hav[ing] broad consensus on safeguarding state sovereignty and territorial integrity, [and] defending national dignity."⁵⁵ The cooperation framework outlined in these documents focuses on energy, construction, trade and investment in the Middle East.

China has established bilateral agreements with countries in the Middle East based on the vision laid out in these documents. These agreements vary in content, but do not represent alliances. Instead, they signal a level of cooperation and provide a mechanism to strengthen ties in the political, cultural and

economic fields. There are multiple types of diplomatic partnership but the two strongest that China seeks are “strategic partnerships” and a more advanced “comprehensive strategic partnership”. The list of countries with which China has comprehensive strategic partnerships – Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – signifies relationships of particular importance to Beijing. In addition to these relationships, China has a comprehensive innovation partnership with Israel, a strategic cooperation relationship with Turkey, and strategic partnerships with Djibouti, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar and Sudan. ⁵⁶

The “One Belt One Road” initiative, or BRI, launched in 2013 as President Xi’s signature foreign-policy strategy, has been the primary framework for expanding Chinese influence in the Middle East. Measuring the extent of China’s economic investment abroad is challenging, given the range of forms the BRI takes, from aid to state-owned enterprises and private companies. However, estimates suggest the BRI could invest as much as \$1 trillion in global infrastructure and other projects by 2027. ⁵⁷ With nearly all of the Middle East’s 18 countries involved to some extent in the BRI, the area has received 28.5 per cent of the initiative’s funding – more than any other region. East Asia has received 20.4 per cent of funding and sub-Saharan Africa 19 per cent. ⁵⁸ This injection – the equivalent of more than \$120 billion ⁵⁹ – turned China into the Middle East’s largest foreign investor as of 2016. Partly, this is down to the Middle East’s strategic importance to the BRI, given several of the initiative’s economic corridors and its 21st-century maritime silk road run through the region, including the China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor that goes through Iran and Iraq to reach Turkey and Europe, the maritime road via the Suez Canal and the China-Pakistan corridor terminating at Pakistan’s Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea.

Gulf states

Extraction of natural resources, particularly oil imported via the Gulf, is the primary return on China’s investment. China buys nearly half of its crude oil from Arab states, with most imports from Saudi Arabia. ⁶⁰ During his recent visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2022, President Xi expressed his desire to purchase oil and gas in yuan rather than dollars. As elsewhere, China’s infrastructure investment in the Middle East often focuses on critical transport hubs, such as an industrial park in Oman’s Duqm port, a container terminal in Abu Dhabi and Israel’s Haifa port, but it extends to electricity grids too. China’s heavy investment in renewables includes the United Arab Emirates’s Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park, the largest in the world, which is part funded by China’s Silk Road Fund. In addition, Oman has sold a 49 per cent share in its state-owned electrical company to China. ⁶¹

Investment in Middle East infrastructure is a critical part of China’s so-called “ring of pearls” connecting port and major transit infrastructure throughout Asia, Africa and the Middle East. In 2021, trade between China and the Gulf states exceeded \$200 billion for the first time. ⁶² Such investments by China align with the future vision of Gulf countries as they seek to move away from fossil-fuel-

dependent economies. Across the Middle East, the BRI projects are based on converging interests, which are strengthening China's synergy with existing regional objectives that encompass economic and social reforms, whether Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, Oman's Vision 2040, Qatar's Vision 2030, Kuwait's Vision 2035 or Egypt's Vision 2030.⁶³

Although the BRI is largely an economic initiative, it is also complementing wider strategic objectives. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have sought to capitalise on their position on the sea route between Asia, Africa and Europe by developing their port infrastructure. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 aims to diversify the national economy partly by turning the kingdom into a regional port and transportation hub. To that end, it has been upgrading its ports – Damman in the east and Jeddah in the west – to connect the Persian Gulf and Red Sea.⁶⁴ These plans complement China's aim of increasing its capacity to accommodate container ships as part of its agenda to develop the maritime silk road, which connects China to the Mediterranean through the South China Sea, Indian Ocean and Suez Canal.

China's role in furthering these national-development plans without attaching conditions to their investment has been noted by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who said: "The United Arab Emirates is the first Gulf country to have strategic relations with China. There is consensus between the United Arab Emirates and China in many regional and international issues. We seek to consolidate cultural, popular and human relations, in addition to our strong economic and political relations." Efforts to strengthen ties between Beijing and the Gulf states could be paving the way for a free-trade agreement (FTA). Talks over an FTA were first launched in 2004, but were reopened last year following a high-level visit from Beijing.⁶⁵

Although China prioritises economic partnerships over security, it has committed to deepening cooperation with GCC states on arms and military exercises. While still dwarfed by US arms supply, China provides 2 per cent of the GCC's total arms imports, but is becoming more dominant in the market – particularly unmanned aerial drones – as a result of US restrictions. Furthermore, China is increasing the number of military agreements it has with nations in the Middle East.⁶⁶ Following joint naval drills with Saudi Arabia in 2019, China pledged to expand its military cooperation with the kingdom before agreeing a similar deal with Oman. Notably too, China entered into a nuclear-cooperation agreement with Saudi Arabia in 2012 "for peaceful purposes", including developing reactors and building a power plant. US intelligence agencies have also identified that Saudi Arabia is now manufacturing its own ballistic missiles with the help of China, having previously only purchased them from the country.⁶⁷ China has referred to the kingdom as a "good partner" and "good brother".⁶⁸

Iran

With no interest in picking sides when it comes to regional tensions, China also considers Iran a major partner, with a landmark agreement signed between the two in 2021, promising \$400 billion of

investment over the next 25 years in exchange for oil and gas. This 25-year comprehensive strategic partnership is viewed as a broad aspirational framework, reflective of Iran's desire to "look East". This has been a core element of Iran's foreign-policy agenda as it seeks to strengthen the so-called axis of resistance while nuclear talks with the United States remain at a standstill. In order to offset the consequences of US sanctions, Iran has had to export much of its oil to Chinese markets. China has also offered crucial diplomatic support to Iran during the nuclear talks while supporting its membership of regional organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. This support has been extended to China's participation in joint naval drills with Iran and Russia in the Gulf of Oman, as a show of force against the West amid escalating tensions.

Algeria

China entered into a comprehensive strategic partnership with Algeria in 2014, reflecting the warmth of their decades-long bilateral relationship. In 1958, China was the first non-Arab country to recognise the National Liberation Front's (FLN) provisional government and since then, cultural ties between the two countries have deepened, including through exchanges of students and journalists. China was a key benefactor of Algeria's state-infrastructure-spending programme during the 2010s, which included the building of highways, power stations and hospitals. While China's ties with Algeria have remained focused on economic cooperation, there has also been growing political alignment, with Algeria's foreign-policy agenda broadly resonating with China's global vision of a multipolar future.

Egypt

Egypt is an important investment focus for the BRI. In 2018, China and Egypt signed several contracts worth \$18 billion of investment, primarily targeted at the new Cairo administrative capital and the Suez Canal Economic Zone. ⁶⁹

Libya

On the other hand, Libya is not high on China's list of regional priorities and does not enjoy a bilateral partnership with Beijing. Most Chinese businesses fled the country in the wake of the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011. Since then, armed conflict and political instability have turned Libya into a prospect on pause, as far as China is concerned. From 2014, amid the political fragmentation of the country, which was divided between the GNA in Tripoli and the east-based House of Representatives, China stood back and adopted a posture of non-alignment.

Iraq

China has spotted an opportunity to further its influence in the Middle East through the reconstruction of conflict-afflicted countries. For example, Iraq requires around \$88 billion for its post-ISIS recovery needs,⁷⁰ and Beijing has used this as a prime opportunity to increase its visibility. Rather than using hard-power initiatives, China prefers economic investment supported by soft-power strategies. In January 2022, for example, China announced the construction of thousands of schools and health-care centres alongside \$10 billion in contracts as part of the BRI. Indeed, China is reportedly building 7,000 schools in Iraq, the vast majority of the 8,000 schools reportedly needed to fill the gaps in the education sector.

Additionally, China has strategically decided to build nearly 90,000 houses in Sadr City – the stronghold of powerful Iraqi leader and cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr – and 1,000 health-care clinics as well as improve Baghdad’s sewage system.⁷¹ As the natural-resource interests of the United States shrink in Iraq, China’s appetite for oil is bridging the gap, with the country now importing 30 per cent of Iraq’s oil. China’s approach is having the desired effect; earlier this year, Abu Firqan, the leader of one of Iraq’s powerful Shia militias, noted: “We are at their service.” Meanwhile, other Shia militia groups in Syria and Lebanon have praised Chinese involvement in the region.⁷²

Syria

China is attempting to replicate this model across the region, also becoming heavily involved in Syria’s reconstruction efforts. Recognising that it cannot compete with the hard power of Russia or the United States, China has sought to employ its expertise in infrastructure construction and investment. In January, Feng Biao, the Chinese ambassador to Syria, and Fadi Khalil, the head of Syria’s Planning and International Cooperation Commission, signed a memorandum of understanding relating to participation in the BRI.⁷³

Israel and Palestine

The Chinese position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is reflective of its approach to regional political disputes in general. While it was a keen supporter of third-world, anti-imperialist causes under Chairman Mao Zedong, China formalised diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992. Since then, it has maintained pragmatic and functional relations with both Israel and the Palestinians, the latter including both Gaza-based Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, which governs the West Bank. China has continued to make regular symbolic and rhetorical gestures in support of Palestinian rights, including self-determination, and has frequently condemned the Israeli occupation and settlement of the West Bank.

The Narratives Spreading China's Soft Power

The media analysis of Arabic-language sources featured in this report was commissioned by the Tony Blair Institute and carried out by BBC Monitoring in summer 2022.

China regards soft-power projection – described by officials as “people-to-people ties” – as a significant catalyst for the BRI and it has hosted multiple conferences on Chinese-Arab cooperation on radio and television. President Xi has explicitly advocated the development of Chinese-Arab media cooperation as an aid to strategic goals.⁷⁴ Like Russia, China's goal is to maintain ties across political divides – carefully cultivating relations with Iran, Israel, Qatar, Palestine and Saudi Arabia all at once. From a soft-power perspective, China's challenge is to craft a media strategy that minimises the risk of alienating any local audience or segment in the region.

In news coverage, Chinese outlets with a presence in the region have a clear tendency to prioritise stories about China above news from the Arab world. Such China-centric stories depict the country as a land of modernity and technological sophistication, while its governance is presented as a story of quietly efficient technocracy, for example, with glowing narratives of Beijing's pandemic-control efforts underscoring the message. Polling has shown, however, that China remains a largely unknown entity across regional audiences, so in keeping with Beijing's declared aim of building “people-to-people” ties, Chinese-media initiatives in the Middle East and North Africa are heavily focused on showcasing aspects of its culture, history and contemporary life. As part of its narrative, China emphasises the mutual antiquity of civilisations in both regions. Beyond documentaries, comedies, dramas and travel shows broadcast by Chinese outlets themselves, the supply of such programmes to local channels forms a key part of China's media cooperation with the countries of the Middle East. Another notable feature of China's Arabic-language media outlets is the use of Chinese anchors, presenters and interviewers who speak Arabic.

The one major exception to China's lack of polemics in broadcasting is its media messaging on the West. Reflecting China's foreign-policy approach, attacks on Western hegemony are unabashedly strident and increasingly delivered in a triumphalist tone. To this end, Chinese outlets emphasise themes of relative Western decline and the emergence of a multipolar world order in which China will break the Western monopoly over everything from international aid to the global machinery of finance.

Western misdeeds relating to human rights also feature prominently in Chinese messaging – in contrast to its line on the suppression of the Muslim Uyghur minority in Xinjiang province. The Chinese defence of this much-maligned policy largely focuses on deflection, the main takeaway being that Western countries are in no position to lecture others given their own histories of imperialism and racism as well as their discrimination towards different classes of refugees following the invasion of Ukraine. Outright

denial of abuses is also prominent, with Chinese messaging touting the economic development that has taken place in Xinjiang, as well as the purportedly idyllic living conditions experienced by minorities there.

Chinese diplomats also conduct outreach in local languages and the technique appears to have been quite successful in some contexts. Given that the managerial elite of China's foreign-language media operations are drawn from its foreign-policy establishment, the use of Arabic-speaking Chinese staff may well be a conscious and strategic decision to try and appeal to audiences in the region by communicating a respect for their culture.

The Chinese Platforms Spreading the Word

The most visible examples of regional media influence are the Arabic-language services of the state-run China Global Television Network (CGTN) and China Arab Television (CATV), the latter a satellite channel based in the United Arab Emirates that is purportedly privately owned, but which vigorously advocates for the BRI.

CGTN Arabic offers a diverse mix of historical and cultural documentaries, comedies, dramas, travel shows and news, while CATV has a negligible news and current-affairs offering, focusing instead on Chinese culture, art and history, all in Arabic.

Figure 6 – Positive depictions of Chinese culture on channels such as CGTN Arabic are a common theme



Source: CGTN

Both CGTN Arabic and CATV operate Arabic-language websites. CGTN Arabic features articles that underscore all the themes China wants to promote. Opinion pieces castigating US President Biden sit alongside video reports about Chinese-Egyptian cooperation on satellite development or the difficulties facing Syrian glassblowers. Elsewhere on the website, a special section is dedicated to showcasing “real stories of the people of Xinjiang”. The Arabic-language website of CATV is sporadically updated, but emphasises much of the same messaging. In keeping with its marked emphasis on advocating for the BRI, CATV’s website features a section dedicated to the initiative.

Three stalwarts of China’s state-run media have also launched Arabic services online. China’s principal state-run news agency, Xinhua, operates a regularly updated Arabic-language portal featuring content created specifically for Arab audiences – as opposed to articles translated from other languages. A section of the website dedicated to China’s relations with Arab countries includes stories that showcase the fruits of “mutually beneficial” cooperation through the BRI model, such as plans to construct Egypt’s first light-rail system.

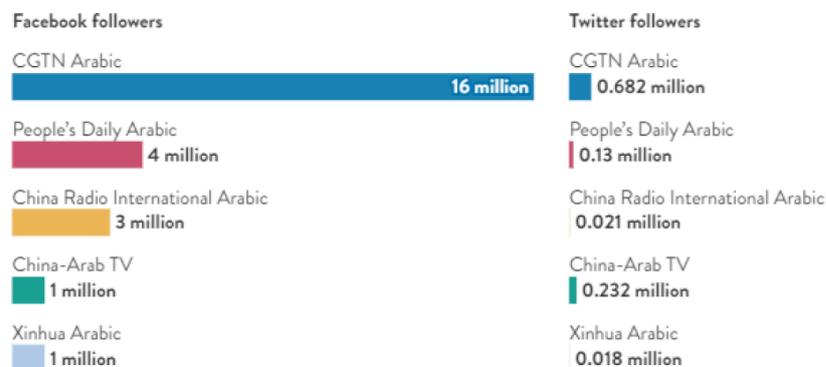
China Radio International (CRI) broadcasts in Arabic and maintains a website in the language. The website is less focused on news, more on cultural exchange, with sections dedicated to “friendly exchanges”, kung fu and photo galleries of life in China. As with the other outlets, its news reporting also emphasises themes such as China’s beneficial economic involvement in the region.

Another official Chinese outlet to have launched an Arabic-language service is People.cn, the website of the premier state-run newspaper, the *People’s Daily*. Least engaging in its subject matter and more focused on current affairs, it also features a section specifically dedicated to Chinese interaction with the countries of the region. In common with the CGTN Arabic website, there is a special section documenting “Xinjiang through the lens of truth”, highlighting the economic development and ethnic harmony that the government claims to have secured in the province.

In general, with the possible exception of CATV, all these outlets tend to prioritise Chinese stories.

Impact and reach are difficult to gauge because the relevant data are unavailable. In the absence of viewership or readership figures, the social-media following of each outlet may be the best indicator of relative popularity and influence in the region.

Figure 7 – The number of social-media followers of China’s Arabic-language networks is one of the best indicators of their popularity in the Middle East, with CGTN Arabic winning the contest



Source: Facebook, Twitter

The Arabic-language Chinese outlet with the biggest Facebook following is CGTN Arabic, on 16 million, while People.cn boasts 3.8 million, CRI Arabic 2.8 million and CATV around 75,000. Xinhua does not maintain a dedicated Facebook page for its Arabic-language service.

When measured against other countries that have invested in regional media influence, China appears to have achieved substantial success, particularly with CGTN Arabic. On Facebook, CGTN Arabic and People.cn in Arabic have more followers than TRT Arabi, the Arabic-language service of the Turkish public broadcaster, while almost all Chinese outlets have won a greater Twitter following than the Iran-backed Al-Alam TV.

From a strategic perspective, the decision to prioritise Chinese news stories above regional ones comes with significant drawbacks. Regional Facebook users appear uninterested in China-centric issues such as the status of Hong Kong or Taiwan, or even the BRI elsewhere. Meanwhile, posts about Arab affairs, particularly on emotive topics such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, can draw significant interest. Although China is potentially turning its back on a rich seam of material that could help drive discussion and engagement, this approach is likely to be informed by its strong desire to preserve its strong ties and strategic relationships across the region.

On the other hand, other China-centric stories have a bearing on global geopolitics, so where these outlets can weave anti-Western themes into their coverage, audience engagement rises substantially. For instance, despite a general lack of regional interest in the issue of Hong Kong, CGTN has been able to attract engagement on the topic by contrasting the UK’s colonial past with its promotion of democracy in the present day. The comments following one such post were full of invective against the UK, with some drawing links to British imperialism in the Middle East.

Patterns of engagement with CGTN content also seem to show that China does best when it contrasts itself to Western hegemony, arrogance and imperialism, despite struggling to put forward its own

compellingly positive narrative and what it stands for. The BRI, which should stand at the centre of such a narrative, seems to generate little interest in its own right, just as CGTN posts about Chinese solidarity with Arab countries have largely failed to cut through to regional audiences, when lacking a strong and explicit emphasis on anti-Western rhetoric.

Chinese Twitter Diplomacy

Chinese diplomats have an active presence on social media, particularly on Twitter, where embassies, ambassadors and consuls present themselves as the positive and relatable face of Chinese public relations. Many of the accounts in the Middle East and North Africa region boast tens of thousands of followers, posting dozens of times a day, with messaging tailored to local audiences in both formal and colloquial Arabic dialects.

These pages are often run as personal accounts, with different styles, tones and areas of interest. A shared focus in recent years has been on countering allegations of anti-Muslim policies in China, with notable spikes in related messaging around the Muslim holidays of Ramadan and Eid.

A salient example is Chinese diplomat Cao Yi, the former ambassador to Iraq and Lebanon: he has the most active diplomatic account and engages in sustained and overt criticism of the United States and other Western countries via Twitter. Cao gets involved with topical geopolitical debates and uses related hashtags, often sending out more than 100 tweets a day to his 129,000 followers. By comparison, most British diplomatic accounts tweet once a day. Cao's prolific activity has contributed to his follower count increasing steadily this year, with a dramatic spike in early 2022 from 46,000 followers in February to 107,000 in May.

These campaigns seem to be working, at least on the surface. Little commotion has been made in Middle East media about allegations that China runs internment camps and forced-labour programmes in Xinjiang, which are imposed on more than a million Muslims.

Gulf states

Given China's natural-resource ties to the Gulf states, this area is a top priority for a strong soft-power presence. Beginning in 1999, Xinhua signed an agreement with the Saudi Press Agency for the two state agencies to share technical and vocational expertise, as well as output in Arabic and English. Article 3 notes that each agency will favour the other's output when it comes to reporting on significant developments in their respective countries. Following China's signing of a comprehensive strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia in 2016, news media was given pride of place on a list of areas in which the two countries could strengthen their cultural cooperation. Partnerships have extended to programming

for children, including the co-production of a 26-episode cartoon series entitled “Hakim and Kong Xiaoxi” in which a young Saudi restaurant owner meets and learns from two Chinese teenagers.

More carefully managed in the region is the issue of the Uyghur minority’s repression in China. Saudi-media coverage appears to track the attempts of rights groups or Western governments to censure China over the matter. For example, coverage spiked when the United States imposed sanctions on Chinese individuals and entities thought to be linked to this repression in Xinjiang, and again when it denounced China’s actions as genocide at the UN Human Rights Council in March 2021. But overall, Saudi media remains largely silent on the Uyghur issue, offering little or no original reporting. This is a particularly sensitive issue in Saudi Arabia, where the authorities continue to derive religious legitimacy partly from the centrality of their nation in the Islamic world.

Finally, the underpinning of geopolitics by economic engagement is central to China’s narrative. The BRI is the central prop for this narrative, which tells of a friendly, responsible and outward-looking great power that seeks mutually beneficial partnerships around the world. Positive and sustained local coverage of the BRI is at the heart of China’s attempts to reflect itself in the region.

Algeria

Like Russia, China has a strong historic connection to Algeria. The history of bilateral media cooperation includes agreements between Xinhua and the official Algerian news agency APS, CGTN and Algeria’s Public Establishment of Television, and China’s National Radio and Television Administration and the Algerian Ministry of Communication. China is very prominent in domestic-media coverage, having received roughly the same volume of mentions as both the United States and Russia over the past five years across major outlets. China’s reputation is likely enhanced by its role in building national landmarks, including the Opera House and Great Mosque of Algiers. China’s investment in large-scale Algerian projects are often the focal point of this coverage. However, as in other countries of the Middle East, the BRI received very little attention in the first two to three years of its existence. Its profile has since expanded, albeit very modestly. Indeed, the measure of a good month for the initiative would be three or four articles in which it is mentioned, but there are month-long periods when it receives none. The Uyghur issue also seems to have received limited coverage in Algeria, with the number of mentions across all 11 outlets surveyed by BBC Monitoring never exceeding four per month.

Egypt

In 2014, China and Egypt agreed on the establishment of the bureaux and representative offices of Xinhua, the *People’s Daily*, CRI and China Central Television (CCTV, now CGTN) in Cairo, as well as the reciprocal establishment of a bureau for Egypt’s state-run Middle East News Agency in Beijing. Since then, Chinese-media organisations have signed further agreements and memoranda of understanding

with Egyptian counterparts, including the State Information Service (SIS), the official body in charge of regulating foreign media in Egypt. There is also a media office at the Egyptian embassy in China, which is responsible for the production and dissemination of China-related content in Egypt.

Egyptian outlets occasionally interview Chinese pundits, as in August 2022 when the privately owned station Sada El-Balad hosted Fayhaa Wang Xin – who is known in the region for her mastery of the Arabic language, regularly contributing to talk shows – to comment on the Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan. The two countries exchange documentaries, as well as artistic and musical programming, with one Egyptian official commenting that this helps to convey “the real image of peoples from the source, unmediated by different ideologies and orientations, this latter being the role played by some foreign satellite channels which engage in the distortion of reality”.

Figure 8 – Chinese pundits with a mastery of the Arabic language have a presence on regional news and talk shows, including in Egypt



Source: ON Network

China’s profile has been in the ascendant in Egyptian media over the past few years. Across the eight major outlets surveyed, there was a year-on year rise in the number of times China was mentioned, from 406 in 2013 to 3,951 in 2019 before Covid-19 struck. Year-on-year, there were also more mentions of the BRI, reaching 449 instances by 2019, with a spike in April when Egyptian President Sisi attended the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing.

Coverage of the Uyghurs tracks the twists and turns of diplomatic wrangling over the issue, generally following a cycle of Western censure followed by Chinese reaction. Early reporting in Egypt suggested the Trump administration was using the issue as a stick with which to beat China. The question of the Uyghurs may be more relevant in Egypt than in Algeria since the former has hosted many Uyghur students who study religion at institutions such as Al-Azhar. Taking up the issue, the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood has scolded China over its treatment of the Uyghurs, describing Chinese actions as “war crimes”. And local-rights groups have criticised the Egyptian government over its reported deportation of Uyghur students.

Libya

In Libya, Chinese media narratives are somewhat thin. While some outlets feature extensive coverage of China, they rely heavily on international agencies to do so.

Iraq

In assessing Iraqi news sources, the themes most frequently associated with China are Covid-19 and great-power competition, with much reliance on the reporting of international news agencies. Reporting on China appears on the whole to be fairly impartial. However, similarly to Russian coverage, those Iraqi outlets affiliated to Iran-backed political factions and militia groups do not conceal their support for China, often spotlighting Beijing’s criticism of the United States. Pro-Iran Iraqi media also depicts Beijing as a key partner in rebuilding Iraq, insisting that China has never played a destructive role in the country, unlike the United States.

The website of Al-Ahad, affiliated to Iran-backed militia, published a cartoon shared on social media by Chinese foreign-ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin to illustrate how the United States “bombs” while China “builds” Iraq.

Figure 9 – This cartoon picked up by the pro-Iran outlet Al-Ahad depicts a narrative of contrasting interventions by China and the United States in Iraq



Source: Al-Ahad

Comparatively, Iraq provides the BRI with some of its most positive and sustained coverage in the Middle East. Reports highlight that the country is one of the chief beneficiaries of the initiative, not only regionally but also globally. For example, the privately owned Al Mada news website picked up a Reuters report showing that Iraq was the top beneficiary in 2021.

In contrast, discussion of the repression in China's Xinjiang Province is not extensive across the outlets surveyed. However, the website of Kurdish outlet Shafaq News has produced a roundup on how the US and Chinese embassies in Baghdad have engaged in a public debate over the issue.

Palestine

Media in the West Bank appear to have either a balanced or a fairly pro-China stance. Some outlets close to the Palestinian Authority have featured articles written by Guo Wei, the Chinese ambassador to Palestine, in which he extols his country's growth model, stresses that Taiwan is part of China and points out his country's supposed solidarity with Islamic nations. China is portrayed as a great power in these outlets, which give it prominence within the top rank of world powers on the basis of its economic, technological, industrial and military strengths. The official Palestinian news agency Wafa tends to emphasise stories that China prefers to disseminate, including distribution of medical aid, its prominence on the world stage and, particularly, its development aid to Palestinians. Outlets in Gaza, however, produce fairly balanced, objective coverage of China and Chinese issues, drawing largely on the reports of international news agencies.

In communicating the Uyghur issue, there is significant variation across the outlets surveyed. While some hardly mention Xinjiang at all, others have been reporting on the issue from as early as 2015, also covering local rallies held to express solidarity with the Uyghurs. This attention is more notable in Gaza-based outlets compared with their West Bank counterparts. Reporting is often factual, with detailed accounts of the specific measures that China is reported to have taken against Uyghurs. In contrast, some features have engaged in Uyghur "truthism", essentially reinforcing Chinese-government talking points about so-called terrorism in Xinjiang and China's developmental achievements in the province.

Lebanon

China has entered into agreements with Lebanon's state-run channel Tele Liban and the National News Agency (NNA), and has provided television programmes to the former. However, the polarised nature of the media landscape in Lebanon has brought close cooperation with private outlets in news and current affairs – which tend to have a sectarian bias – into conflict with China's attempts to remain free of regional political entanglements.

China has tried to tackle the problem caused by this tension. In 2017, it hosted a workshop – a joint project between China's Ministry of Commerce and the Lebanese Ministry of Information – to train journalists and other news professionals from Lebanon. The workshop, which incorporated seminars on bilateral "cultural and media solidarity" and social obligations, was attended by a participant from Lebanon's oldest paper, *An-Nahar*, who subsequently wrote about the amount of time spent on the BRI.

Despite such efforts, China's profile across 14 leading Lebanese news outlets was less prominent than those of Russia and the United States, the latter mentioned twice as often as China. Nevertheless, China's BRI is being mentioned more often, with the initiative covered consistently. However, in what

seems a regional exception, domestic reporting is not restricted to events with a Lebanese angle. Instead, local outlets have regularly covered the global impact of the BRI.

Lebanese media outlets loyal to Syria and Iran tend to report on China in a more positive tone, as they do with Russia. Recent examples in the pro-Hizbullah *Al-Akhbar* newspaper included an item on China's military exercises off the coast of Taiwan following Nancy Pelosi's visit to the island in early August.

Media coverage of the Chinese government's frequent assistance during the Covid-19 pandemic, with medical equipment and vaccines provided as "gifts", was overwhelmingly positive. The participation of China at an international donor conference held virtually in 2021 for Lebanon was another factor that raised China's profile and promoted its "soft power" in the country – without related conditions being placed on the Lebanese government by Beijing.

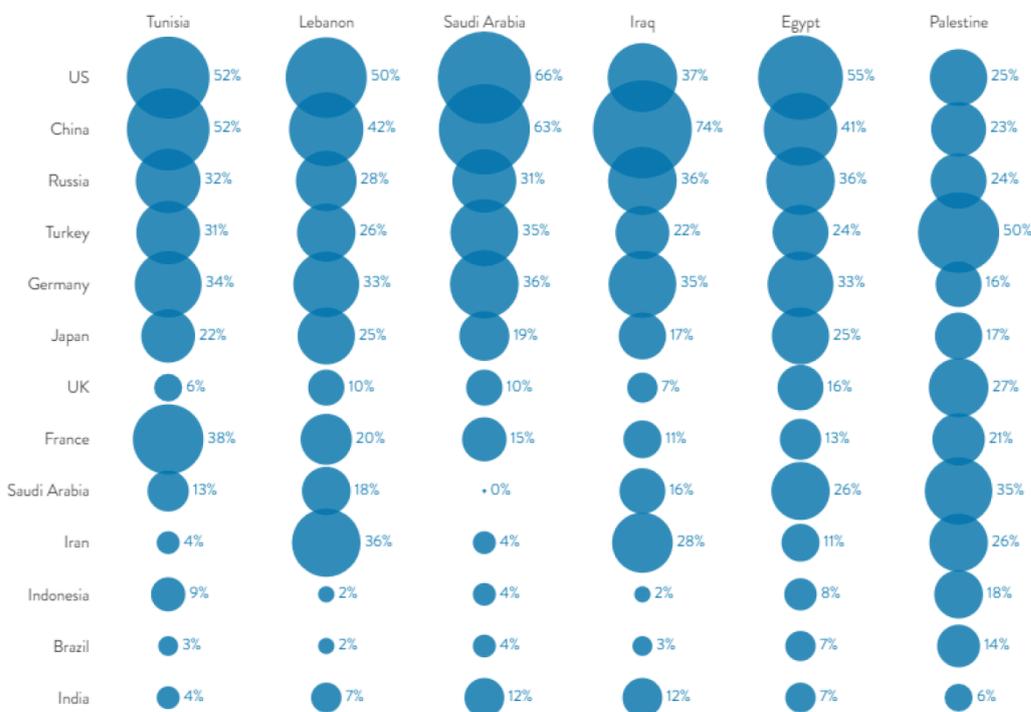
Lebanese media coverage of the Uyghur issue has closely tracked the West's censure and condemnation of China. A random sample of reporting from the past five years shows that the overwhelming majority of coverage – while factual and quite objective, rather than polemical – tends to cast China in a negative light.

Countering Russian and Chinese Soft-Power Advances in the Middle East

Russia and China’s hard and soft power as well as their economic interventions demonstrate a considerable acceleration of their interests in the Middle East over the past 20 years. Soft-power narratives are geared towards supporting their growing economic and security interests as well as the broad objective of competing with Western influence in the region. While the increase in their hard power and economic influence is undeniable, what is less clear is the impact that Russian and Chinese soft-power strategies are having on their target audience: the people of the Middle East.

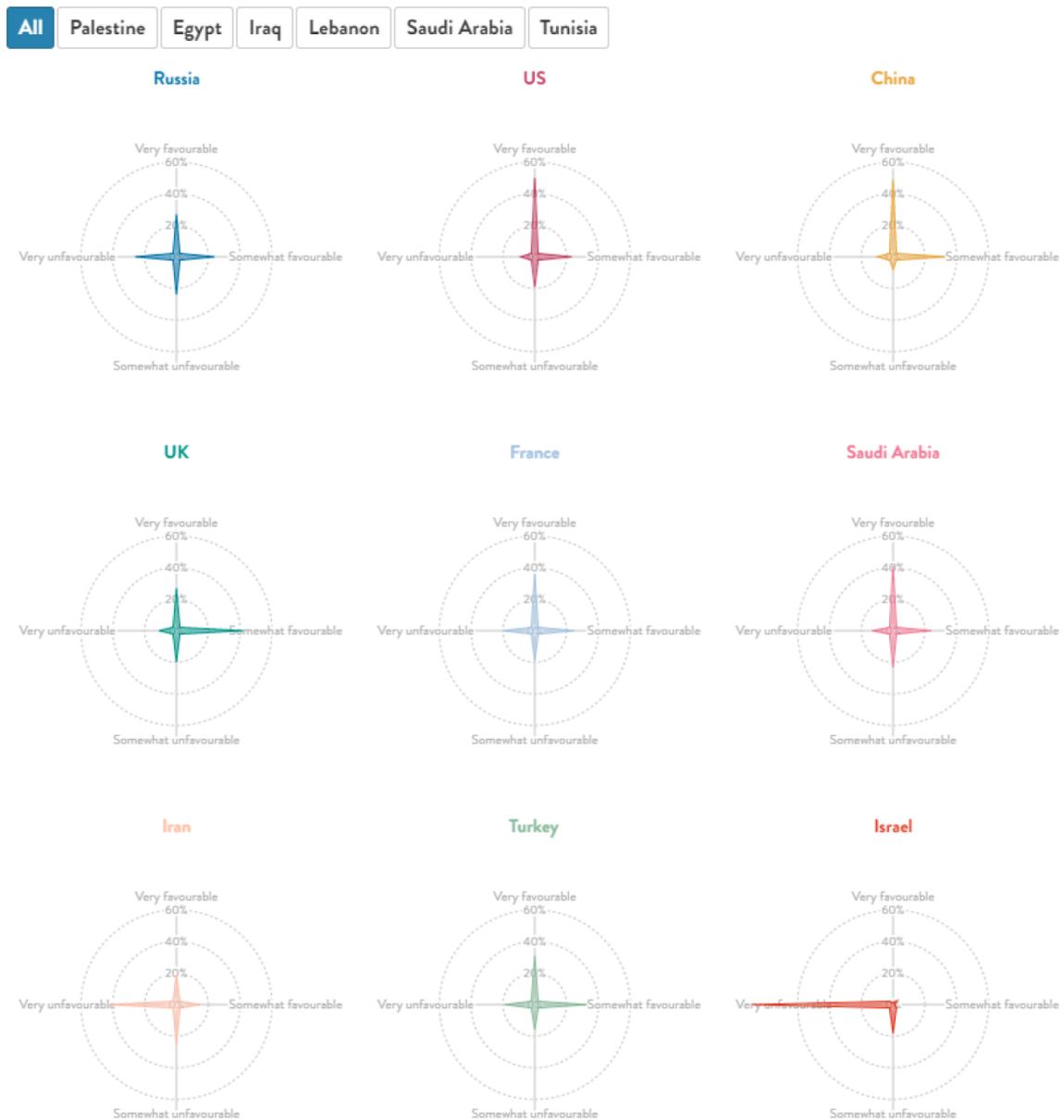
To capture what people in the Middle East think about Russia, China and Western countries, the Tony Blair Institute commissioned Zogby Research Services in March and April 2022 to conduct polling in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia. Among several questions included in the polling, we focus here on the countries that are viewed favourably as well as those that are considered a good choice of partner.

Figure 10 – Asking the people of the Middle East which countries they would like to see their governments partner with



Source: Zogby Research Services (Note: Libya is not included in this figure due to variance in the way the question was asked there)

Figure 11 – Asking the people of the Middle East which countries they view favourably



Source: Zogby Research Services (Note: Libya is not included in this figure due to variance in the way the question was asked there)

Russia

Russia comes among the top five priority countries for partnership among respondents in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia. Moreover, it places third in Iraq where it has significant security and energy interests. Russia’s soft-power strategies aim to establish it as a global power and preferred partner in the Middle East, in place of the West. These efforts appear to be gaining ground, as it places ahead of

countries such as Turkey, Japan and France as the partner of choice. This suggests that Russia's standing, as a result of increased its engagement over the past two decades, has improved.

On the question of whether Russia is viewed favourably, there is more of a mixed picture. Majorities in Egypt, Iraq, Libya and Palestine look on Russia favourably, but others are less convinced. Russia is the country viewed most favourably in Libya, where it is heavily involved, while Palestinians also view it positively. In both these cases, Russia has invested in enhancing its soft-power influence with sensitivity to the local context.

Despite this, the overall picture is not one of overwhelming favour. Broadly speaking, in many of the countries polled, favourable attitudes towards Russia among some of the Middle East's leaders are not shared as enthusiastically by their people. For example, in the majority of countries polled, the United States is viewed more favourably than Russia.

It is noteworthy that our polling was carried out after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Based on Arab Barometer polling from 2021, there doesn't appear to be a dramatic change in the perception of Russia following the invasion, with people still split, but leaning slightly towards an unfavourable opinion.⁷⁵ Does this suggest that Russia's soft-power positioning is successfully countering any damage the war could have caused to its reputation among the people of the Middle East?

Russia's broad efforts to use an anti-colonialist narrative to find alignment with the Middle East must not be discounted, but given the relatively positive attitude towards the United States and other Western countries such as the United Kingdom and France, it does not yet appear to be bearing full fruit among the populations of the region.

China

China, on the other hand, is viewed with slightly more favour across many of the countries polled compared with the United States. Considering the demographic splits, there is a preference, in some countries, among respondents identifying as very religious for China as the country with which their governments should partner. This could be driven by the interest that Islamist groups, such as those in Iraq and Lebanon, have in China. Similarly, in some contexts, respondents identifying as secular show more favourability towards the United States than China. Given China's historic commitment to secularism, this might seem paradoxical even if you take into account the positive coverage granted to China by Islamist media outlets.

In Iraq, the majority of respondents choose China over the United States as a preferred partner. This positive outlook is not surprising given China's extensive investment in the country and the positive light in which China, and in particular the BRI, are cast. This suggests that China's engagement in parts of the

region has been effective from an economic-investment and soft-power perspective. Focusing its efforts on economic rather than security interests, China has successfully avoided becoming militarily entrenched in the region, unlike the United States and Russia. This has allowed China to mostly avoid complicating its preferred soft-power narratives.

China's soft-power narratives underpin its expanded economic role, helping to translate this investment into public interest, a multilayered and strategic approach clearly bearing fruit across most countries polled in the Middle East. It is not clear if China's aggressive anti-West narrative has diminished the favourability or interest in Western countries. However, our data suggest that both Chinese and Russian anti-West, soft-power narratives aren't yet completely winning over intended audiences, considering the relative favour still shown towards countries in the West among our polling respondents.

Chinese leadership identifies the Uyghur issue as a possible "weak" spot, given the majority of the people in the Middle East are Muslim. This is why it has invested substantially in deflecting the issue and contesting Western reporting of its human-rights record in Xinjiang province. China's relative favourability suggests this issue is not resonating negatively among people in the Middle East, or at least not enough to damage its standing compared to Western countries.

What About the West?

Contrary to the long-standing perception in the West that people in the Middle East do not look favourably upon Western countries – a view that has prevailed since military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq – our polling shows this is not the case. In Iraq, 76 per cent of respondents view the United Kingdom favourably, with 64 per cent indicating the same about the United States. In countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia, there are similar sentiments among the majority of our respondents. The pragmatism of the people of the Middle East means the United States is considered an equally compelling partner country as China.

Clearly, ideology is not the factor driving the choice of preferred country partners. What is perhaps most striking is the interest that people have in partnerships with countries such as Germany, which have little history in the region. This compares to a relative disinterest in countries such as the United Kingdom and France, both of which have deep existing ties. This means that favourable attitudes do not always translate into an interest in forming partnerships, which is a wake-up call for some European countries. Since Western nations have deep-rooted economic and security interests in the Middle East, the waning interest in partnering with some of them is puzzling.

As demonstrated in [our recent report](#), the West and the Middle East do share fundamental values. Widespread support for women's employment in business and government, increasing secularisation and protecting the rights of minorities are the values that characterise the region today. People in the Middle

East consider innovation and technology sectors as offering the jobs of the future and they believe their governments should prioritise job creation above all else. These are values and perspectives shared equally by people in the West. However, the general public in many Western countries tend to think they should have less involvement in the Middle East, not more – and China and Russia are capitalising on this disengagement.

Russia and China's Threats to Western Influence on Three Fronts

Russia's hard power and economic interests in the Middle East often conflict with those of the West. Like the United States and its allies, Russia has embedded security interests in the region, particularly in conflict zones such as Syria and Libya. Russia's long-standing support for the Assad regime in Syria has been in direct contrast to the West's desire for a change in leadership there, while the increasing presence of paramilitary groups with links to the Kremlin, such as the Wagner Group in Syria and Libya, are a direct challenge. As seen in recent years in parts of Africa, the growing influence of these groups may compromise Western security interests. From a conventional standpoint, increased Russian arms exports and aligned security architecture present a risk, however distant it may seem, to the West's long-standing dominance as a security guarantor. Additionally, investment in energy and infrastructure sectors continues to translate into political influence, with Russia's long-standing presence in places such as Egypt and Iraq enhancing its leverage with these governments – in direct opposition to the West.

From the soft-power perspective, Russia has made substantial investments over a long period of time and through a range of platforms to inculcate its preferred narratives. Russia's anti-colonialist narrative seeks to capitalise not only on the West's colonial history in the region but also on widespread scepticism about the West's involvement, which is typically tied to conditions relating to democracy and human rights. However, Russia has not yet been as successful in translating this deepening involvement into a soft-power position to rival the United States and its allies, as our recent polling indicates. Still, the support for Russia in places such as Iraq and Libya, where it has deep investment, should serve as a cautionary tale, showing how more Russian influence coincides with greater public interest in the country.

For three decades, the "China model" has demonstrated the potential for a country to achieve rapid economic growth while retaining an authoritarian system of government. The Middle East is in the midst of its own economic transformation, as countries there seek to shift from heavy dependence on natural resources, especially fossil fuels, to innovation-driven economies with entrepreneurship at their heart. Alongside jobs demand, recent popular movements in the region have called for more politically responsive systems and there are some signs that governments are gradually moving in this direction. However, the China model is an enticing path because it allows leadership in the region to delay political reforms in favour of an exclusive focus on economic growth.

From a soft-power perspective, the Chinese narrative that the West is in decline and that it should be considered the preferred partner instead – one that is “anti-colonial” to boot – directly threatens the ability of the West to strengthen its ties to the region. So far, the people of the Middle East do not appear to consider the West with the disfavour that the narrative of Chinese soft power is trying to engender, but as its aggressive investment on this front continues, and the Western footprint declines, continuing favour towards Western countries cannot be guaranteed.

The United States and other Western powers have done little in response to the acceleration of Russian and Chinese influence in the Middle East, either through new overarching policies or substantial economic investment and increased trade. The West must re-engage in the Middle East if it is to meaningfully counter nefarious Russian involvement, which should be seen as a direct threat to Western security and geopolitical interests. China’s economic support for Iranian and Shia militias should also be a cause for concern although the country shows little signs of expanding its involvement to a stronger, hard-security presence. For this reason, the West should consider China as its principal economic competitor in the region.

Recommendations

Taking into account the three pillars of hard, soft and economic power in the Middle East, the West should work towards a coherent, consistent and, where possible, collective approach to countering its two major competitors, using strategies based on soft power, security and trade. Below, we offer recommendations to Western leaders and policymakers on how to strengthen their soft-power influence in the Middle East and support the agency of their allies.

Rather than diminishing access to credible platforms such as BBC Arabic and BBC Persian, the West should enhance resources for existing soft-power institutions and develop new ones to contest the anti-West narratives of Russia and China.⁷⁶ Given the evident success of Chinese and Russian diplomats’ social-media outreach, Western countries must also modernise their engagement strategies and more proactively build constituencies in the region across these platforms.

The West should expand its soft-power strategy, with a view to supporting the development of positive regional architecture. This should include the Abraham Accords, which are already leading to greater cooperation and better integration across the region:

- As a result of decades of conflict, the Middle East is one of the least institutionally interconnected regions of the world. Following the historic Abraham Accords, countries are coming together to cooperate across a range of sectors and fields to a greater extent than before. In addition to security matters, there has been a flourishing of cultural, trade and research ties between countries that previously had no formally recognised relations. The West should seek to enhance and build on these

steps, including through the Abraham Accords, in areas of mutual benefit. Horizon 2020 is the world's largest multinational research fund, with observer states already including Israel, Turkey and Tunisia. The United States and the United Kingdom should join with Europe to cultivate a new regional Middle East research fund to support student mobility, early-career grants and major research grants. As states in the Middle East seek to diversify their economies beyond natural resources, supporting the region's knowledge and learning would be a meaningful and substantial contribution.

- The UK and its allies should work to better integrate Middle East countries into international institutions, including by encouraging them to join the Commonwealth. Countries such as Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia are already members of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, which aims to increase cooperation among member countries in the French-speaking world. As new member states without a historic connection to Britain join the Commonwealth, such as Gabon and Togo earlier this year, this path should also be open to countries of the Middle East. The Commonwealth offers important opportunities for expanding people-to-people ties, particularly for scholars and athletes, but also for business and trade. The inclusion of Middle East nations will energise historical networks, such as the Commonwealth and La Francophonie, and expand the opportunities for multilayered relationships grounded in common interest to be built across the region.

Russia and China have embedded influential media platforms in the Middle East that are now competing successfully with their Western counterparts. However, unlike their Western equivalents, they are heavily mandated to spread their own favourable Russian and Chinese narratives as well as ones that are outwardly hostile to the West. While Western media must retain its objectivity and credibility, it should nevertheless focus programming on the values that both societies share, as identified by polling in our [*Think Again: Inside the Modernisation of the New Middle East*](#) report.

- In response to Russian and Chinese disinformation, the West should redouble its support for objective media platforms that have long served the Middle East. This includes reversing decisions such as plans to reduce the reach of the BBC Arabic and BBC Persian stations, through the cancellation of non-digital radio programming, as well as developing new and innovative vehicles aimed at countering Russian and Chinese narratives.⁷⁷ Rather than cutting nearly £30 million from the BBC World Service, the United Kingdom should restore this funding and expand access to Arabic- and Persian-language content, especially in a region where not all listeners have access to digital platforms. French and American equivalents should also scale up their presence in the Middle East. In addition to informative and credible current affairs, programming should emphasise shared values between societies and focus on joint priorities, such as intercultural understanding, tolerance and coexistence. Efforts to strengthen access to credible media should include objective reporting on the situation in China's Xinjiang province for audiences in the Middle East.
- Western countries should invest more in cultural diplomacy. This includes enhancing resources for long-standing mechanisms such as the British Council and BBC Media Action. While there is growing interest in China as a result of its soft-power strategies, people in the Middle East are still

keen to engage with Western businesses and cultural institutions. Cultural programming should not only continue to focus on the opportunities provided by Western countries, it should also be extended to networking initiatives led by the Commonwealth, such as the People's Forum, and projects that enhance collaboration.

- Western diplomats need to be given greater flexibility and liberty to become more creative and nimble with their social-media engagement, more reactive to local contexts and more sensitive to cultural trends. With a view to building up greater reach and independent profiles, diplomats should emphasise sincerity as well as their understanding of local dynamics.

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