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TRANSCRIPT

Babel: Translating the Middle East
“Russia in the Middle East After Ukraine”

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FEATURING

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Jon Alterman: Hanna Notte is affiliated with the James Martin Center for Non-Proliferation Studies, a research organization in Monterey, California, although she's talking to us from Berlin. Hanna, welcome to Babel.

Hanna Notte: Thank you for having me.

Jon Alterman: You have been spending a lot of time trying to understand Russia and trying to understand the Middle East. Both have gone through a fundamental change in relations since Russia invaded Ukraine last February. Looking broadly, how have Russia's goals in the Middle East changed with the Ukraine invasion?

Hanna Notte: To answer that question, we need to outline what those interests in the Middle East were in the first place. Broadly speaking, Russia has always wanted to keep bad things away from its own borders, so one interest in the region is to prevent the spillover of instability or extremism from the Middle East to Russia. Russia also wanted to draw a red line against what it perceived as Western fermented regime change, or democracy promotion, in the region—especially after Libya in 2011. More recently, there's been another dimension to Russian security interest in the region. Russia has also used its presence in the region—especially in Syria at the Port of Tartus and the airbase at Khmeimim—in order to sort of complement an arc of deterrence against NATO. Basically, Russia has instrumentalized its presence in the Middle East to deter NATO. Economically, Russia is interested in the broader diversification of economic ties—especially in the wake of the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the sanctions that were leveled against Russia by the West. But those economic interests have always been secondary to security interests. The main economic interests that Russia has focused on in the region have been Russian arms sales to the Middle East, the building of nuclear power plants, grain exports, and Russian tourists going to places like Turkey and Egypt. Then, there is also this status dimension. Russia has really tried to have a seat at the table on each and every conflict dossier in the region to signal that it is a Great Power. Those fundamental interests have not changed with the war in Ukraine because the view in Moscow is that the break with the West is for good. Moscow believes there is going to be a longstanding confrontation with the West. I think the Middle East and North Africa is becoming ever more important to Russia in that context. That said, of course, the Middle East doesn't have the same priority for Russia as the war in Ukraine—which now demands a lot of resources and bandwidth. That fact does leave an imprint on Russian activities in the region in various ways. The first example is Syria. I would argue that we've seen a certain degree of risk aversion by the Russians in Syria. Over the past year, there's been some sort of posturing vis-a-vis U.S. forces, but overall, the Russians have been sitting tight —driven by a recognition that they only have

so much bandwidth while their military is consumed by Ukraine. The recent vote at the UN Security Council, where the Russians did not veto the resolution to allow cross-border humanitarian aid to be delivered into northwest Syria is indicative of that risk aversion and a desire to not rock the boat with Turkey, which is an important Russian partner. The second example where the Ukraine war left an imprint on Russia's regional policy is Iran. Here, we've seen a growing alignment between Russia and Iran. Partially driven by the requirements of war in Ukraine, Russia has become more reliant on economic and battlefield support from Iran, procuring drones from Iran, for example. There seems to be a calculation now in the Kremlin that as long as the war in Ukraine continues, Russia needs to put a premium on that Iranian partnership. You can also see that play out in talks surrounding the restoration of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—the Iran nuclear deal—where I think the Russians have been less able and willing to nudge the Iranians towards an agreement. They might in fact see utility in the JCPOA being in continued limbo because that generates tensions in the Middle East and consumes U.S. bandwidth. So, these are sort of examples where you see the war in Ukraine affecting what the Russians do. There's also a separate question about tools and leverage. Because they're so consumed by Ukraine, the Russians have a bit less bandwidth for the Middle East. They've lost some leverage over Iran and Turkey. But in terms of their broad interests and the way they look at the region, I don't think much has changed.

Jon Alterman: What does that mean for the future of Syria, where Russia and Iran have an uneasy alliance and were arguably pushing toward different goals in Syria? Have the Russians decided to yield the future of Syria to the Iranians. Is this an interregnum, or they will try to come back and reimpose their vision? What does both the Russian reliance on Iran for drones and their preoccupation with Ukraine mean for the near-term future of Syria?

Hanna Notte: I don't think the Russians are yielding the future of Syria happily to Iran. It's true that they're perhaps affording the Iranians some greater bandwidth—especially in the southwest of the country—but at the same time, I see the Russians as always, concerned with insurance, ensuring that there's a certain balance between different external powers in Syria. In this instance, that balance is particularly between Iran and Turkey. At the same time, Russia is trying to further encourage the normalization of Syria with Arab states, particularly the Arab Gulf states, in order to take some of the burden for reconstruction activities in Syria off themselves. For that, Russia will surely have very limited bandwidth going forward while it remains under sanctions by Western countries. So, I don't see Russia as yielding too much to the Iranians in Syria. You can see a similar dynamic playing out in the South Caucasus, where we've also seen somewhat reduced Russian bandwidth, especially in Nagorno-Karabakh. Again, this is a region in which the Russians

will want the Turks and the Iranians to balance each other out.

Jon Alterman: You mentioned the Russian relationship with the Arabs. How has the Ukraine war changed the way Arab states look at Russia, or how they relate to Russia?

Hanna Notte: I'm not sure that the fact that Russia started this war against Ukraine changed Arab perceptions of Russia all that much. First, from the beginning, there has been a widespread perception among the Arab states that the Ukraine War is not their war. They view it as a sort of NATO-Russia war—a war fueled in part by NATO actions toward Russia. I think this perception is perhaps sustained by a tendency to view international politics through the prism of actions driven by Great Powers, and not so much by the agency of small countries. But I don't think this war has registered as a war over the rules-based international order, as we like to say in Western capitals. The second thing to note is that there have been accusations of Western double standards in Arab societies and among Arab elites in terms of how the West has responded to this war. The West came with this expectation that Arab states would support it in sanctioning Russia, and that was rightly or wrongly viewed as proof that the West cares much more about wars in its own neighborhood than it does about those in the Middle East. Most recently, we've seen this play out when Iranian drones were deployed by Russia in Ukraine. That generated uproar in Western societies that again reaffirmed that perception in the Arab Gulf states because they said, "We've been sitting here in Riyadh or Abu Dhabi and have contended with Iranian drones and missiles for the longest time, and you didn't really care. But now that this threat is coming to your neighborhood, you are mobilizing against it." A third point is that Arab states have pursued their distinct economic, security, and political interests with Russia for years, so they have their own reasons not to antagonize Russia. I don't think that has changed all that much with the war in Ukraine. For the Egyptians, it's grain supplies or the fact that Rosatom is going ahead with building the El Dabaa nuclear power plant. For the Saudis or the Emiratis, it's more alignment in global oil markets or expanded business ties. There is a reluctance to give that up. Now, I do think that Arab states worry about the broader implications of this war. They worry about the implications for U.S. bandwidth to protect their own security because there is a feeling—not just in the Middle East, but also in the Asia-Pacific—that the requirements for U.S. extended deterrents or for reassuring U.S. allies have gone up with this war against Ukraine, a conventional war waged under the shadow of nuclear blackmail. I think the Middle Eastern states worry about the robustness of U.S. conventional security guarantees, but that is not just a product of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It reflects more longstanding concerns among the Arab states. So, I think that the war against Ukraine has amplified pre-existing concerns, but I do think that non-alignment by the Arab states in this Great Power competition will be durable. I'm hard-pressed to see circumstances under which the Arab states will drop

Russia and go all in with the Western camp or the United States. If I mull over this question, I can basically only see two circumstances that could flip that calculus, and they're extreme circumstances. The first would be Russian nuclear use in the war in Ukraine. I think that would reshuffle the cards because it would be seen as such a taboo break from norms. The second circumstance would be very clear indications—which I don't think we've seen to date—that Russia is not just torpedoing diplomacy on the Iran nuclear dossier, but, in fact, actively assisting an Iran nuclear weapons program and Iranian nuclear weaponization. I think that could change sentiments, but short of that, I don't see this balancing act by the Arab States ending.

Jon Alterman: Where do you see the Russia-Iran relationship going in the longer term? Let's say that we get through the war. You say that there's a durable Russian split with the West. Does that mean that Russia and Iran grow durably closer? And does that create a certain amount of distance between the Arab states and Russia?

Hanna Notte: It is an excellent question, and I think one of the most pertinent questions to reflect on. First, I am among those who believe that this war in Ukraine will last for a long time, and that Russia's standoff with the West will last for a long time. Against that geopolitical backdrop, I think Russia has decided to put a premium on closer partnership with Iran. You can see it play out in many different areas. On the economic front, you can see it in the sheer activity that has been going on in recent months with several energy projects coming online or being discussed in the Iranian upstream and downstream sector—projects that had been stalled for a long time. Quite frankly, the Russian-Iranian economic relationship wasn't all that interesting for the longest time. There was more talk than action, but there appears to be a shift. There are also efforts to facilitate trade between Russia and Iran—both logistically with both countries spending billions of dollars to facilitate trade across the Caspian and financially with the Russian Mir payment system being integrated with the Iranian payment system. If you just monitor the relationship, you can see with which frequency senior Russian officials are now visiting Tehran, and there really seems to be a qualitative change. The most important area where this is playing out is the military defense relationship. I've already mentioned Russia's procurement of Iranian drones. There is this worry that Russia might procure missiles as well, which would be seen as another game changer. There is also fear that Russia in return will give military assets to the Iranians that they've always withheld and were never willing to give to Iran, even though the Iranians were asking for them, like helicopters, air defense systems, and the SU35 fighter jet, which has been in the news quite a lot in recent weeks. While there is a war in Ukraine, the Russians will cater to the Russian Iranian partnership. While they remain reliant on Iranian weapons, they won't seek to antagonize the Iranians. That will influence JCPOA-related diplomacy. There will be a recalibration of

leverage in what was previously more of a patron-client relationship. When you see Russian analysts writing about this, you can see that there is a feeling that the Iranians can simply ask for more from Russia than was the case before this invasion. Does all that mean that Russia will come to see Iran as a full-fledged ally? I don't think so. I do think there is a qualitative shift in the relationship, but I just cannot see Russia wanting to risk its ties with other actors in the region—Turkey, Israel, and the Arab Gulf states—so, the Russians will try to walk that tightrope and balance between those competing interests. Whether they will be successful in that is another matter, but I think that's what the Russians will try to.

Jon Alterman: We've been talking at this strategic level. At the tactical level, the Russians use private military contractors (PMCs) in Syria and in Libya. They are using them in Ukraine. What does the Ukraine war mean for Russia's use of these contractors in ongoing conflicts, and what does it mean for the future use of these contractors in the Middle East?

Hanna Notte: Indeed, we've seen Russian PMCs deployed in recent years, not just in Syria and Libya, but also in the Central African Republic, Mali, and Sudan. Those deployments have been relatively cheap and low responsibility from a Russian point of view. They could give those PMCs second-grade weapons from Russian stockpiles, and they could be sent at relatively low cost—at a minimum burden to the Russian military. And of course, you had this added advantage of plausible deniability on the Russian side. Now, looking at the latest numbers, what you can see since the invasion is some reduction in PMC Wagner deployments—particularly in Syria and Libya, though I wouldn't say that those drawdowns have threatened the general durability of Russian presence in either country. Looking at the latest estimates in Libya, by the end of last year, there were around 2,000 PMC personnel in Libya at various airbases that Russia controls. On the other hand, we've heard of the very high PMC casualties in Ukraine that Russia has had to contend with—especially in recent weeks in the city of Bakhmut in eastern Ukraine. Casualties in the thousands have been reported. What does that mean for the future? Taking everything together, I don't think that we should discard Russia's bandwidth to deploy PMCs in the future, including in the Middle East. U.S. intelligence has recently indicated that PMC Wagner is still ramping up its activities in theaters outside Ukraine and given the scale of PMC Wagner's activities in Ukraine and connections that leadership of PMCs in Russia enjoys with the Kremlin, you can also be fairly confident that their influence in the overall Russian system of power is set to grow going forward. PMC Wagner opened a center in St. Petersburg in November that was widely publicized, so there seems to be a sort of confidence and comfortableness in Russia with the growing public profile of these PMCs, which suggests more of a normalization of that practice. If we assume a long war in Ukraine, Russia will simply have reduced conventional military bandwidth for theaters other than Ukraine, so it will have to rely more on

hybrid means—we can call them gray zone tools—to exert influence elsewhere. That toolbox will include things like disinformation, electoral meddling, and cyber warfare, but it will also continue to include MC deployments to the extent that Russia sees it as useful.

Jon Alterman: Hanna Notte, thank you very much for joining us on Babel.

Hanna Notte: Thank you so much for having me.