

Report

The battle for minds in the Persian Gulf. Russian disinformation in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf

Contents

About the project.....	1
Author.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	6
Chapter 3	9
Conclusions and Recommendations.....	18
Bibliography and Sources.....	20

About the project



Instytut Badań
nad Turcją



Disinformation
in MENAT



This project was funded by the state budget as part of the competition organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, "Public Diplomacy 2024–2025 – The European Dimension and Countering Disinformation."

The publication solely reflects the views of the author and should not be regarded as representing the official position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland.

Author of the publication



Tomasz Rydelek

Graduate of the Faculty of Law and Administration at the University of Łódź; founder of the blog Puls Lewantu (Pulse of the Levant); member of the Abhaseed Foundation Fund; regular contributor to the monthly magazine Układ Sił (Balance of Power); and contributor to the Wirtualna Polska portal.

Introduction

The Persian Gulf region, long the centre of global energy and strategic policy, has in recent years become a key arena of rivalry among the world's major powers. In this intricate geopolitical landscape, the Russian Federation has been increasingly asserting its presence[1] — not only through traditional foreign policy tools such as diplomacy, military cooperation, and economic partnerships, but also through advanced and multidimensional information warfare. These activities form a vital component of the Kremlin's broader, long-term strategy aimed at undermining the US-led international order and fostering a vision of a multipolar world.

This report shows that Russia's success in the Gulf states' information realm results from a well-funded, patient, and adaptable strategy that skillfully leverages existing regional dynamics, tensions, and historical grievances[2]. Moscow has been capitalising on the strategic realignment of key countries that aim to diversify their alliances and lessen their dependence on the United States. Concurrently, the Kremlin exploits a media landscape prone to manipulation—where traditional outlets remain tightly controlled by the state, while the digital sphere, despite its relative openness, has evolved into a domain for sophisticated influence operations. In this manner, Russia sustains the Gulf states' policy of neutrality regarding its actions, especially its aggression against Ukraine, thereby directly supporting the Kremlin's strategic objectives[3].

The analysis focuses on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar. The first two states are treated as the main case studies due to their dominant role in the region, deep engagement with Russia, and status as key partners of the United States. Qatar's distinct foreign policy and its unique media landscape—dominated by the global Al Jazeera network—serve as an important point of reference, illustrating the complexity of the regional information ecosystem.

The report's methodology is based on a qualitative analysis of open-source materials, including content published by Russian state media (RT Arabic, Sputnik Arabic), leading regional news outlets, social media platforms, as well as think-tank reports and academic studies.

[1] D. Trenin, „What drives Russia's policy in the Middle East?”, w: Russia's return to the Middle East: Building sandcastles?, red. N. Popescu, S. Secieru, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2018, s. 21-27 [online]: https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/EUISS-CP_146.pdf

[2] D. Frolovskiy, „Understanding Russia-GCC relations”, w: Russia's return to the Middle East: Building sandcastles?, red. N. Popescu, S. Secieru, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2018, s. 85-95; [online]: https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/EUISS-CP_146.pdf

[3] N. Voitovych, L. Imbirowska-Syvakivska, „The spread of Russian disinformation within the Ukrainian information field”, Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, t. 21, nr 2 (2023), s. 197-211 [online]: https://ies.lublin.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/riesw_2023-02-10.pdf

Chapter 1

The Geopolitical and Media Landscape of the Persian Gulf States

1.1. Geopolitical situation

Understanding the effectiveness of Russian disinformation in the Persian Gulf begins with examining the fundamental changes that have reshaped the region's geopolitical landscape over the past twenty years. Key Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states—mainly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—are intentionally pursuing a policy of strategic hedging, which involves diversifying international partnerships to minimise risks and maximise benefits in an increasingly volatile global environment[4]. This shift arises from the rising perception that the United States is gradually withdrawing from its role as the unconditional guarantor of regional security, coupled with the Gulf states' own ambitions to develop a more autonomous and assertive foreign policy[5]. The leading figures driving this transformation are Mohammed bin Salman (Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia) and Mohammed bin Zayed (President of the UAE).

The perception that the United States is retreating from the Middle East—despite denials by officials in Washington—has nonetheless taken root among Gulf elites. Incidents such as the disorderly withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in 2021, Washington's hesitance to participate in direct military intervention since Barack Obama's presidency, and the absence of a firm response to the 2019 attacks on Saudi oil facilities have strengthened the belief that U.S. security guarantees can no longer be expected unconditionally[6].

In this context, Russia has become an attractive alternative partner. Its foreign policy in the region is transactional, pragmatic, and flexible, enabling Moscow to maintain functional—even close—relations with all major players, including fierce rivals like Saudi Arabia and Iran[7]. Unlike the United States, whose approach often revolves around promoting democratic values and human rights, the Kremlin's stance is free from such conditions, making it more predictable and acceptable to the authoritarian monarchies of the Gulf. Russia's strategy in the Persian Gulf is often termed “mini-max”—aiming to secure maximum geopolitical benefits with minimal military and financial costs. Compared to the costly and risky intervention in Syria, Moscow relies on soft-power tools in its dealings with the GCC states: diplomacy, energy cooperation, arms trade, and—crucially—information operations.

[4] S. A. Mansour, Y. Ahmed, „Saudi Strategic Hedging Between Regional Security Initiatives and the Prospects of Peace with Iran”, *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, t. 18, nr 3 (2024), s. 298–319.

[5] A. Baabood, „How Gulf States Are Reinterpreting National Security Beyond Their Land Borders”, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, August 2024, [online:] <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/08/how-gulf-states-are-reinterpreting-national-security-beyond-their-land-bordersabdullah-baabood>.

[6] K. Ulrichsen, „The United States and the Arabian Peninsula”, w: *A US Pivot Away from the Middle East: Fact or Fiction?*, red. K. E. Young, Arab Center Washington DC, 2023, s. 117-126 [online:] https://arabcenterdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/A-US-Pivot-Away-from-the-Middle-East_Fact-or-Fiction.pdf

[7] E. Rumer, A. Weiss, „Russia's Enduring Presence in the Middle East”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 2024, [online:] <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/russias-middle-east-diplomacy-relationship>

Cooperation within the OPEC+ framework has become a key pillar of this strategy and the main link connecting Russia and Saudi Arabia. Established in 2016, this oil policy coordination mechanism has not only stabilised global energy markets but also formalised Russia's role as a crucial partner in decision-making processes vital to Gulf economies. Although officially presented as a partnership, this cooperation remains purely transactional and is viewed by the Kremlin as an effective means to exert pressure on Western economies[8]. It allows Russia to influence global oil prices and to legitimise its position as a major player on the international stage, engaging with the regional leader—Saudi Arabia—on equal terms.

The United Arab Emirates, in turn, functions as Russia's principal economic gateway to the Arab world. It has become a key hub for Russian business, providing opportunities to legally bypass Western sanctions. Thousands of Russian companies have set up their regional headquarters there[9]. This deep economic integration—also encompassing advanced cooperation in nuclear energy and logistics—renders the UAE Moscow's most important economic partner in the region.

Against this backdrop, Qatar is notable for its independent foreign policy, carefully balancing its close alliance with the West and pragmatic relations with Russia. Doha maintains economic dialogue with Moscow while also acting as a mediator in the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, facilitating, among other things, the return of Ukrainian children from Russia[10]. Owing to its ownership of the global media network Al Jazeera, Qatar wields a unique tool of influence that shapes the regional infosphere differently from Saudi or Emirati media.

The Gulf states' deliberate diversification of alliances is not merely an abstract diplomatic tactic; it directly fosters favourable conditions for Russian information operations. When authorities in Riyadh or Abu Dhabi, seeking to maintain good relations with Moscow, avoid overt confrontation and soften their criticisms of Russian actions—including its aggression against Ukraine—their official state media reflect this restraint. This creates an information vacuum in the public sphere—one that is effectively filled by Russian disinformation, which is systematically anti-Western and closely aligned with local resentments. In this way, the Gulf states' foreign policy, aimed at increasing autonomy, paradoxically bolsters the effectiveness of Russian influence operations and renders their infosphere increasingly vulnerable to manipulation.

1.2. The Media Landscape in the Persian Gulf

The media environment in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates is mostly controlled by the state. Traditional outlets—press, radio, and television—are either directly owned by the government or belong to conglomerates run by individuals and entities closely linked to the ruling families[11]. Major players like the Saudi MBC Group, which owns the popular news channel Al Arabiya, and the Emirati Sky News Arabia, operated as a joint venture with the British Sky network, serve as practical tools of state policy.

[8] K. Ulrichsen, M. Finley, J. Krane, *The OPEC+ Phenomenon of Saudi-Russian Cooperation and Implications for US-Saudi Relations*, Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, 18 October 2022, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25613/0B0F-J592>

[9] L. J. M. Mazzucco, K. P. Alexander, „Small-State Niche Diplomacy at Work: The Mediation of the UAE and Qatar in the Russia-Ukraine War”, *The International Spectator*, 2025, s. 1–20, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2025.2536535>

[10] Y. Galily, „Beyond the Goalposts: Decoding Qatar's Soft Power Puzzle and Its Paradox”, *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, t. 12, nr 2 (2025), s. 197–208, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477989251325622>

[11] Reporters Without Borders, Saudi Arabia, [online:] <https://rsf.org/en/country/saudi-arabia>; Reporters Without Borders, United Arab Emirates, [online:] <https://rsf.org/en/country/united-arab-emirates>.

They promote official narratives and avoid any content that might be viewed as critical of the authorities. In such a system—reflected in these countries’ consistently low rankings in the World Press Freedom Index—there is limited space for independent or diverse journalism[12].

Against this backdrop, Qatar’s Al Jazeera stands out. Established in 1996 under the motto “Opinion and the other opinion,” it marked a significant breakthrough in the Arab media landscape. The station gained immense popularity by providing a platform for dissidents and opposition figures across the region, breaking taboos, and reporting on events—such as the Arab Spring—in ways that would have been unthinkable for Saudi or Emirati media. However, its claimed pluralism is largely illusory. Al Jazeera functions as a powerful soft-power tool, closely aligned with Qatar’s foreign-policy aims[13]. The channel is consistently and sharply critical of Doha’s regional rivals—especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt—while entirely avoiding any criticism of the Qatari authorities.

The significant control over, and low credibility of, traditional media have prompted citizens of the Gulf states to turn en masse to the Internet. These countries boast some of the highest levels of digitalisation and social media penetration worldwide. In Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, Internet usage is almost universal, meaning platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube have become the primary—and often the only—sources of information and spaces for public debate for the vast majority of the population[14].

However, this dynamic digital sphere is far from a space of freedom. Gulf governments have implemented advanced systems of digital authoritarianism, including mass surveillance, restrictive cybercrime laws (e.g., the Saudi law of 2007, the Emirati law of 2021, and the Qatari law of 2014), and sophisticated mechanisms of content moderation and censorship. The objective is to suppress any signs of genuine political opposition and to maintain tight control over public discourse. At the same time, these governments actively employ troll farms and coordinated influence campaigns to promote their narratives and attack opponents[15].

This creates a fundamental paradox that makes the region especially vulnerable to disinformation. On one hand, the public—aware of the propagandistic nature of state media—turns to social platforms in search of more “authentic” and independent information. On the other hand, within that same digital environment, genuine grassroots discourse is systematically suppressed by state control mechanisms. As a result, the seemingly “authentic” voices users encounter are often parts of carefully orchestrated disinformation campaigns carried out by state actors—or, crucially for this report, by sophisticated external actors such as Russia. By removing truly independent voices, state digital-control systems unintentionally foster an ideal environment for influence operations, where the public is already accustomed to navigating an opaque and manipulated infosphere.

[12] Reporters Without Borders, 2024 World Press Freedom Index: Journalism under political pressure, 2024, [online:] <https://rsf.org/en/2024-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-under-political-pressure>.

[13] Y. Galily, „Beyond the Goalposts...”, s. 197-208, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477989251325622>

[14] DataReportal, Digital 2024: Global Overview Report, 22 February 2024, [online:] <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-global-overview-report>

[15] Amnesty International, Saudi Arabia: Alarming crackdown on online expression, 14 February 2023, [online:] <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/02/saudi-arabia-alarming-crackdown-on-online-expression/>

Chapter 2

Russia's Information Strategy: Objectives and Key Narratives

2.1. The Kremlin's Strategic Objectives

Russia's information strategy in the Persian Gulf aligns with several key geopolitical objectives that are part of the Kremlin's broader global approach. These actions are not random; they form a well-organised, deliberate element of Russian foreign policy.

1. Undermining U.S. influence[16]

The main aim is to systematically diminish the credibility of the United States as the leading power and primary security guarantor in the region. Every narrative and information operation seeks to portray the U.S. as an untrustworthy and self-interested partner that applies double standards—thereby positioning Russia as an equally credible, or even superior, alternative.

2. Countering international isolation[17]

Following the imposition of Western sanctions after the annexation of Crimea in 2014—and even more so after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022—strengthening relations with influential and wealthy Gulf monarchies has become a strategic priority for Moscow. Publicly demonstrating close, partnership-like ties with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi aims to show that Western efforts to isolate Russia have failed, and that the Kremlin remains a significant player on the international stage with powerful allies.

3. Pursuing economic and military interests[18]

Information activities directly support Moscow's material objectives. By promoting an image of Russia as a strong and reliable partner, the Kremlin aims to secure lucrative arms contracts, attract investments from Gulf sovereign wealth funds, and — most importantly — maintain ongoing coordination within OPEC+ to stabilise oil prices, which are vital to Russia's budget.

4. Promoting a multipolar world order[19]

At the core of Russian foreign policy ideology is the idea of a multipolar world where U.S. global dominance is replaced by a balance of several power centres. This narrative is highly appealing to Gulf leaders, who themselves seek greater strategic autonomy and a stronger voice on the international stage. Russian propaganda not only criticises the existing order but also actively promotes an alternative vision—one that aligns well with the aspirations of the elites in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

[16] A. Borshchevskaya, „Russia's Soft Power in the Middle East: A Weapon of Influence”, *Military Review*, November-December 2021, [online:] <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/November-December-2021/Borshevskaya-Russia-Soft-Power/>

[17] Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, *International Security and Estonia 2025*, 2025, [online:] <https://raport.valisluureamet.ee/2025/en/3-russian-foreign-policy/3-6-russia-seeks-partners-among-persian-gulf-states/>.

[18] Gulf Research Center, *Russia – GCC Country Profile* (April 25, 2025), [online:] <https://www.grc.net/documents/684e6aef7e97aRussiagccCountryProfileApril252.pdf>

[19] H. Alhasan, „Bridging, not hedging: Arab Gulf States' ambitions in a polarised world”, *IISS* [online:] <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/11/bridging-not-hedging-arab-gulf-states-ambitions-in-a-polarised-world/>

2.2. Deconstructing Key Narratives

To achieve these goals, the Russian disinformation ecosystem uses several recurring narratives, carefully tailored to the sensitivities and historical experiences of audiences in the Arab world.

Narrative 1: “Western hypocrisy”

This is the cornerstone—and arguably the most powerful weapon—in Russia’s propaganda arsenal across the region. It relies on constantly contrasting Western outrage over Russian aggression in Ukraine with apparent indifference or complicity in conflicts impacting the Arab and Muslim world. Discussions of Russian war crimes in Bucha or Mariupol are immediately countered with images of destruction in Gaza, Yemen, or Iraq. This technique—known as *whataboutism*—is especially effective because it appeals to deeply rooted and often justified perceptions of double standards and injustice in the region. Russia does not need to invent these grievances; it simply identifies, amplifies, and exploits them. Therefore, instead of defending its actions in Ukraine, Moscow shifts the discussion towards the historical and current “sins” of the West, effectively neutralising criticism.

Narrative 2: “NATO aggression and Western provocations”

This narrative portrays the invasion of Ukraine not as unprovoked aggression but as a tragic yet unavoidable—and fully justified—response to decades of NATO expansion and the alleged “encirclement” of Russia by hostile military alliances. This framing strongly appeals to Gulf elites, who are themselves sceptical of Western intervention and emphasise the importance of sovereignty and non-interference. By depicting itself as a victim of Western aggression, Russia connects with a shared experience with the Gulf monarchies—both regarded as subjects of great-power manipulation.

Narrative 3: “Russia as a reliable partner and stabiliser”

Unlike Washington’s reputation for being unpredictable and inconsistent, Russian propaganda promotes an image of Moscow as a pragmatic, dependable, and loyal partner. Russia presents itself as a force for stability and peaceful conflict resolution through dialogue and mediation—contrary to the United States, which is alleged to pursue chaos and regime change. This narrative aims to build trust and persuade the Gulf states that cooperating with Russia is a secure and stable strategic move.

These narratives do not function in isolation. Their power lies in their interconnectedness and mutual reinforcement. Criticism of “Western hypocrisy” over Palestine, for instance, fuels widespread mistrust towards Western motives. This mistrust, in turn, makes audiences more receptive to the idea of “NATO provocations” as the real cause of the war in Ukraine. Collectively, these narratives create an image of Russia as the only rational and trustworthy alternative in the region—directly aligning with the Kremlin’s strategic aims. The result is a closed information cycle that cannot be broken through simple fact-checking, as it is rooted in emotional and identity-based perceptions rather than factual evidence.



Graphic 1. This graphic, created by the editorial team of Sputnik Arabic, was later disseminated—like many similar examples—by local Arab media, in this case the Egyptian state daily Akhbar el-Yom. The reproduction of visuals originally produced by Russian propaganda outlets is a common phenomenon, prompted by the alignment of Russian and local narratives. In the illustration, “Uncle Sam,” representing the United States, is shown throwing weapons into a boiling cauldron labelled “Ukrainian crisis.” The image suggests that it is the United States, rather than Russia, that is prolonging the conflict by consistently supplying arms to Ukraine.

Source: <https://akhbarelyom.com/news/newdetails/3766646/1/> تايمز-فرنسا-تتهم-الناتو-بإستفزاز-بوتين-ف/

Chapter 3

Tools, techniques and case studies

The implementation of Russia's information strategy in the Persian Gulf relies on a coordinated system of tools and techniques that work together to maximise the reach and influence of the Kremlin's narratives. This system comprises both official media outlets and complex—often covert—operations across social media platforms.

3.1. Official Kremlin Media: RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic

RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic serve as the primary faces of Russia's propaganda efforts in the Arab world[20]. Their main aim is to bestow a sense of journalistic legitimacy on Kremlin-backed disinformation. Unlike their English-language counterparts, which are widely recognised in the West as propaganda tools, RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic have established a reputation as credible and popular news sources throughout the Middle East—often outperforming Western outlets like BBC Arabic and the U.S.-funded Al-Hurra in online reach[21].

Their content strategy relies on skillfully blending factual, standard reporting—covering topics like economics, culture, and lifestyle—with carefully crafted disinformation aligned with the key narratives from the previous chapter. These outlets produce high-quality, visually appealing material: ranging from fast-paced news bulletins and expert talk shows to documentary features optimised for quick sharing on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. This professional presentation and cultural familiarity help normalise Russian messaging and embed it within the wider Arab media landscape.

3.2. Social Media Operations

A key part of Russia's information strategy in the Persian Gulf is its wide activity on social media. It is in this area—avoiding state-controlled traditional media—that Moscow can reach millions of citizens directly through both official and unofficial channels.

Official communication channels, such as embassy accounts on X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram, play a crucial role. Owing to their diplomatic authority and legitimacy, these profiles often publish and disseminate disinformation, making it appear as verified, state-backed information.

Alongside these overt operations, Russia maintains a large network of informal yet openly pro-Kremlin accounts. Unlike in some Western contexts, Russian trolls and bots active in the Arab world rarely hide their allegiance; instead, they display it conspicuously—often including Russian flags or patriotic slogans in usernames and bios. This creates an illusion of widespread, grassroots support for Moscow's policies.

Within the Gulf infosphere, a symbiotic dynamic has emerged: Russian disinformation networks and local state-sponsored troll farms often support each other's narratives—sometimes unintentionally[22]. Gulf governments, particularly Saudi Arabia, carry out their own coordinated influence operations to promote national narratives and undermine regional rivals. These campaigns frequently align with Russian goals; for example, both criticise the U.S. administration. A Saudi troll criticising the Biden administration for regional reasons simultaneously strengthens Moscow's narrative of U.S. unreliability. This convergence makes Russian disinformation more difficult to detect and counter, as it blurs the distinction between foreign influence operations and domestic propaganda.

[20] E. Janadze, „The Digital Middle East: Another Front in Russia's Information War”, Middle East Institute, 19 April 2022, [online:] <https://www.mei.edu/publications/digital-middle-east-another-front-russias-information-war>

[21] A. Borshchevskaya, Russia's Arabic Propaganda, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [online:] <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/4209>

[22] A. Borshchevskaya, Russia's Disinformation Machine Has a Middle East Advantage [online:] <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-disinformation-machine-has-middle-east-advantage>

3.3. Case Studies of Disinformation in Arabic-Language Media

An analysis of specific cases of disinformation shows how the mechanisms described earlier operate in **real-world contexts**.

Narrative 1: “Western hypocrisy and double standards” (Ukraine vs. Palestine)

This remains the most powerful and emotionally impactful Russian narrative in the Arab world. It centres on systematically contrasting the West’s response to Russia’s war in Ukraine with its attitude towards the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The aim is to strengthen the belief that the West applies double standards: condemning Russian actions in Ukraine while turning a blind eye to Israel’s conduct in Gaza or the West Bank.

Given the widespread criticism of Israel within Arab societies, Russian strategists exploit this sentiment by creating a false analogy where, on the European stage, the United States acts as “Israel,” while Russia takes on the role of “Palestine.” Through this inversion, Moscow aims to reframe itself as a victim rather than an aggressor, implicitly equating its actions in Ukraine with a struggle for justice against Western oppression.

This narrative mainly concentrates on the United States, portraying it as the chief architect and supporter of global instability—ranging from Ukraine to the Middle East. At the same time, it seeks to cultivate empathy for Russia among Arab audiences by suggesting that both Russia and the Palestinians are involved in a shared struggle against an adversary backed by Washington.



Graphic 2: Screenshot of an article published on the Sputnik Arabic website, with the headline in Arabic: ‘White House admits to “double standards” in assessing conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine’. Source: <https://sarabic.ae/20231218/البيت-الأبيض-يعترف-بازدواجية-المعايير-خلال-تقييم-الأحداث-في-غزة-وأوكرانيا-1084250340-الصراعات-في-غزة-وأوكرانيا.html>



Graphic 3: Screenshot of an article published on the Sputnik Arabic website, with the headline in Arabic: 'White House admits to "double standards" in assessing conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine.' Source: <https://sarabic.ae/20231218/-البيت-الأبيض-يعترف-بازدواجية-المعايير-خلال-تقييم-غزة-وأوكرانيا-1084250340-الصراعات-في-غزة-وأوكرانيا-1084250340.html>

Narrative 2: “Denazification” and the Delegitimisation of Ukraine

This narrative—one of the Kremlin’s main justifications for its invasion—is widely circulated in Arabic-language media to undermine the government in Kyiv and portray Russian aggression as a justified struggle against a so-called “fascist junta.” Its primary aim is to reduce sympathy for Ukraine and depict it as an unreliable, morally compromised state unworthy of international support.

Russian state outlets such as RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic consistently emphasise supposed evidence of Kyiv’s links to Nazism when reporting on the war, portraying Ukraine as a continuation of extremist nationalist traditions believed to be hostile to Russia and minorities. Simultaneously, these outlets regularly highlight the alleged “dictatorial” nature of President Volodymyr Zelensky’s rule, depicting him as an authoritarian leader influenced by Western interests.

A recurring theme in this narrative is the claim that President Vladimir Putin desires peace but that Ukraine itself sabotages negotiations—often under pressure from the West. Since Donald Trump’s return to office in the United States, Russian propaganda has increasingly suggested that the new American president is inclined towards reconciliation with Moscow and an end to the war, yet that his efforts are being obstructed by Kyiv and Western European governments. This framing simultaneously weakens Western unity, delegitimises Ukrainian resistance, and portrays Russia as the rational actor seeking peace.



Graphic 4: Screenshot of an article published on the Sputnik Arabic website. Headline in Arabic: 'Russian Foreign Ministry: Kyiv continues terrorism despite peace efforts by Russia and the United States'. Source: <https://sarabic.ae/20250821.html.1103996526-الولايات-المتحدة-روسيا-والولايات-المتحدة-تواصل-الإرهاب-وسط-جهود-السلام-التي-تبذلها-روسيا-والولايات-المتحدة>



Graphic 5: Excerpt from an article by Sputnik Arabic on the Russia-US-Ukraine peace talks, in which the interviewee describes Ukraine's position as follows: 'The Kiev regime acts as a tool in the hands of European countries, not in the interests of Ukraine.' (...) 'Nazi ideology is still present in the structures of the Ukrainian system, which explains the recent operations and the rejection of any negotiations.' Source: <https://sarabic.ae/20250602/-العلاقات-الدولية-1101243927-روسيا-تصر-على-استئصال-الفكر-الفاشي-الرافض-للتفاوض-في-النظام-الأوكراني>

Narrative 3: “The U.S.’s Secret Biological Weapons in Ukraine”

This traditional conspiracy theory portrays the United States as a global security threat and Ukraine as a testing ground for illegal biological experiments. The narrative plays on deep-rooted distrust of American intentions, especially in areas where anti-Western feelings are already strong. Its main assertion involves the existence of alleged U.S.-funded biological laboratories within Ukraine, supposedly engaged in developing weapons aimed at Russia.

To reinforce this message, Russian outlets and affiliated social media accounts frequently circulate fabricated “documents,” letters, or leaked correspondence claiming to show that Washington planned to use pathogens or genetically engineered viruses against Russia. By presenting these materials as credible evidence, disinformation actors aim to legitimise Russian aggression as a pre-emptive defence and depict the United States as a violator of international norms.



Graphic 6: Screenshot of an article published on the Sputnik Arabic website. Headline in Arabic: ‘Russian Ministry of Defence: US Department of Energy recruited Ukrainians to work on weapons of mass destruction.’ Source: <https://sarabic.ae/20230505/-الدفاع-الروسية-وزارة-الطاقة-الأمريكية-جندت-أوكرانيين-في-مجال-أسلحة-الدمار-الشامل-1076705580.html>

الدفاع الروسية: الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية تطور أسلحة بيولوجية في أوكرانيا

GMT 26.05.2023 08:12



AFP 2023 / KHALIL MAZRAANI ©



قال قائد قوات الدفاع الإسعافي والكيميائي والبيولوجي الروسية،
العريق إيفور كيريلوف، اليوم الجمعة، إن البيانات التي حصلت عليها وزارة
الدفاع الروسية تثبت مرة أخرى أن الولايات المتحدة تطور أسلحة
«لوحية على أراضي أوكرانيا».

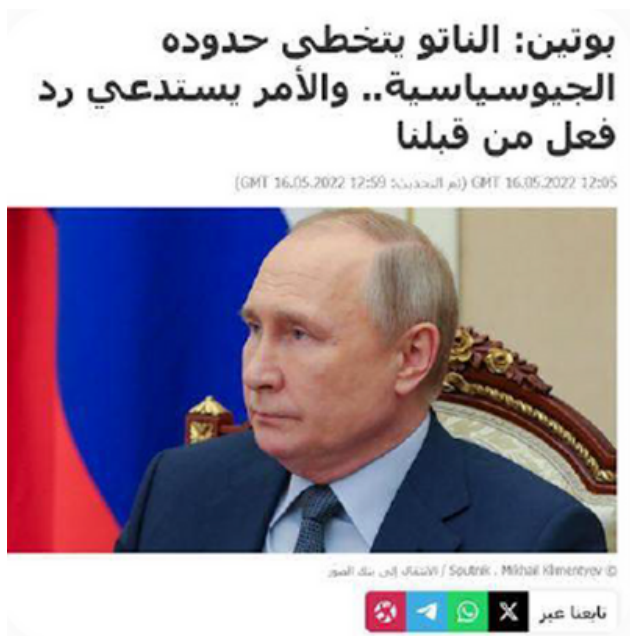
Graphic 7: Screenshot of an article published on the Sputnik Arabic website. Headline in Arabic: 'Russian Ministry of Defence: US is working on biological weapons in Ukraine.' Below: 'The commander of the Russian radiation, chemical and biological defence forces, General Igor Kirillov, stated today, Friday, that data obtained by the Russian Ministry of Defence once again proves that the United States is developing biological weapons on Ukrainian territory.' Source: <https://sarabic.ae/20230526/-الدفاع-الروسية-الولايات-المتحدة-الأمريكية-تطور-أسلحة-بيولوجية-في-أوكرانيا-1077441647.html>

Narrative 4: “NATO Aggression”

This narrative aims to redirect blame for the war from Russia to the West. It presents Russia's invasion of Ukraine not as an unprovoked act of aggression, but as a justified defensive measure in response to NATO's alleged expansion and encirclement of Russian territory. In this context, every action to strengthen NATO's eastern flank—whether through military exercises, defence aid to Ukraine, or the deployment of additional troops—is portrayed as a deliberate provocation against Russia. This story resonates strongly in the Arab world, where scepticism towards Western military interventions is widespread. By leveraging these attitudes, Russian media seek to justify Moscow's actions as a response to external pressure rather than an act of aggression, portraying Russia as a victim defending its sovereignty against an imperialist alliance.



Graphic 8: Post from the account: mog_Russ on the X website. The account has 639,000 followers, is conducted in Arabic and publishes content consistent with the Kremlin's narrative 24 hours a day. Caption under the photo: "NATO, ironically referred to as a "defence alliance", began to expand towards Russia's borders after the fall of communism – even though the threat from communism was the original reason for its creation. It was not Russia that moved closer to NATO's borders. It was NATO that moved closer to Russia's borders. And Ukraine was the last straw that broke the camel's back." Source: https://x.com/mog_Russ/status/1897285673209770051



Graphic 9: Screenshot of an article published on the Sputnik Arabic website. Headline in Arabic: 'Putin: NATO is overstepping its geopolitical boundaries, and this requires our response'. The article includes the following statement: 'Putin concluded that NATO's expansion is artificial and serves only to provoke Russia'. Source: <https://sarabic.ae/20220516/-بوتين-الناتو-يتخطى-حدوده-الجيوسياسية-والأمر-يستدعي-رد-فعل-من-قبلنا-1062297351-.html>

Narrative 5: “Russia as a Stabilising Force and Reliable Partner”

This positive-spirited narrative mainly targets the elites and societies of the Persian Gulf states. It contrasts Russia’s supposedly pragmatic, transactional, and respect-based foreign policy with the United States’ interventionism, inconsistency as an ally, and focus on exporting democratic values. The message underscores Russia’s role in stabilising global energy markets through the OPEC+ mechanism, promotes Russian weapons as a dependable alternative to American systems, and portrays Moscow as a power that—unlike Washington—does not interfere in the domestic affairs of its partners.

This narrative finds particularly fertile ground in the Gulf, where it is framed within the language of multipolarity, an idea openly supported by Arab governments. By positioning itself as a pillar of a new, balanced international order, Russia aligns its messaging with local ambitions for greater autonomy and global influence. In this context, special emphasis is placed on developing alternative multilateral frameworks such as BRICS, which are depicted as the foundation of an emerging, post-Western world.



Graphic 10: Screenshot of an article published on the Sputnik Arabic website. Headline in Arabic: ‘Former Deputy Director of the Egyptian Atomic Energy Agency: Russia supplies nuclear technology without any political pressure.’ Source: <https://sarabic.ae/20250822/-نائب-سابق-لرئيس-هيئة-الطاقة-الذرية-المصرية-تقدم-التقنيات-الذرية-دون-أي-ضغوط-سياسية-1104026183.html>



Graphic 11: Screenshot of an article published on the Sputnik Arabic website. Headline in Arabic: 'Dugin: "BRICS" is an alternative to the UN, which "has already become obsolete."' Under the photo: "Russian philosopher, political scientist, and sociologist Aleksandr Dugin said on Monday that the BRICS group is an alliance of the global majority, the main organisation representing multipolarity, and a real alternative to the 'obsolete' United Nations." Source: <https://sarabic.ae/20250707/-دوغين-بريكس-بديل-لأمم-المتحدة-التي-عفا-عليها-الزمن-1102457617.html>



Graphic 12: Screenshot of an article published on the Sputnik Arabic website. Headline in Arabic: 'Moscow and Abu Dhabi... a strategic alliance at the heart of global change.' The article discusses the visit of UAE President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to Moscow, highlighting the increasingly active cooperation between Russia and the UAE while framing these events within a narrative of a multipolar world. Source: <https://sarabic.ae/20250808/-موسكو-وأبوظبي-تحالف-استراتيجي-في-قلب-التحولات-العالمية-1103515271.html>

Chapter 4

Conclusions and recommendations

4.1. Conclusions

An analysis of Russian disinformation activities in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar reveals several key conclusions.

Firstly, the effectiveness of Russian disinformation in the Persian Gulf stems from the synergy between the Kremlin's long-term, adaptable strategy and highly favourable local conditions. Major shifts in the regional geopolitical landscape—caused by policies of strategic hedging and the perception of a gradual U.S. disengagement—have created a demand for alternative partnerships, a role that Russia has willingly embraced. At the same time, the region's highly controlled media environment, characterised by widespread state oversight and digital authoritarianism, has inadvertently created ideal conditions for external influence operations.

Secondly, Russia has largely succeeded in achieving one of its main strategic goals: neutralising the narrative on the war in Ukraine within the Gulf states and promoting a policy of formal neutrality that effectively benefits Moscow's interests. By skilfully exploiting deep-rooted anti-Western sentiments and perceptions of double standards—especially concerning the Israeli–Palestinian conflict—the Kremlin has shifted focus away from its own aggression and towards what are seen as the moral and historical failings of the West.

Thirdly, Russia's information strategy is highly coordinated and layered. Official outlets like RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic present propaganda in a way that appears credible, while widespread troll and bot networks help spread it extensively across social media platforms. Furthermore, Russian influence operations often work together with local, state-sponsored digital campaigns, making it harder to distinguish between external disinformation and domestic propaganda.

4.2. Recommendations

Given the complexity and potency of Russian influence operations, combating disinformation in the Persian Gulf requires a comprehensive, long-term, and multi-faceted strategy.

Addressing root causes: supporting reform and open societies in Arab countries. The most vital recommendation is to pursue strategic cooperation with GCC states to gradually open up their public spaces. It is the environment of digital authoritarianism—characterised by limited freedom of expression, restricted pluralism, and state control over information—that creates ideal conditions for Russian disinformation. Sustained, partnership-based support for reforms that bolster civil society, encourage transparency, and enhance public accountability is crucial to developing systemic resilience against hostile information campaigns. Without these structural reforms, other counter-disinformation efforts will yield only limited, short-lived results.

Enhancing Western strategic communication efforts must go beyond reactive fact-checking and focus on developing coherent, proactive counter-narratives that genuinely resonate with local audiences. This requires an awareness of regional perspectives and the avoidance of moralising or didactic language. Strategic messaging should emphasise shared interests—such as regional stability, energy security, and economic cooperation—rather than ideological confrontation.

Supporting independent Arabic-language journalism. Continued investment in grant programmes, training initiatives, and mentoring schemes for independent journalists, media outlets, and fact-checking organisations in the region is vital. These initiatives will help establish credible alternatives to state-controlled media and foreign propaganda. Support should also aim to enhance journalistic ethics, data verification skills, and investigative reporting capacity.

Enhancing Arabic-language and cultural competence. Western governments, think tanks, and media organisations must invest in building expertise in the Arabic language, regional cultures, and local media environments. Hiring Arabists, social media analysts, and cultural scholars who can interpret the nuances of discourse in Arabic is essential for effectively detecting and countering Russian disinformation narratives.

Cooperation with technology platforms. Global social media companies (Meta, X, TikTok, Google) must face ongoing diplomatic and regulatory pressure to act more transparently and effectively against organised, state-sponsored disinformation campaigns in Arabic. This includes increasing investment in Arabic-speaking content moderators, refining algorithmic detection systems, and improving contextual understanding of regional dialects and cultural references.

Education and building media resilience. Local and international initiatives should focus on promoting critical thinking and media literacy, particularly among young people. Educational programmes—including practical tools for recognising manipulation techniques and understanding disinformation mechanisms—are vital for enhancing long-term social resilience.

Bibliography and Sources

1. ايناركوأو ةزغ يف تاعارصلا مبيقت لالخ "ريياعملا ةيجاوزا" ب فرتعي ضيبألا تيبلايناركوأو ةزغ يف تاعارصلا مبيقت" 18 December 2024 [online:] <https://sarabic.ae/20231218/البيت-الأبيض-يعترف-بازدواجية-المعايير-خلال-تقييم-الصراعات-في-غزة-1084250340-أوكرانيا.html>
2. Alhasan, H., „Bridging, not hedging: Arab Gulf States' ambitions in a polarised world”, IISS, 13 November 2024, [online:] <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/11/bridging-not-hedging-arab-gulf-states-ambitions-in-a-polarised-world>
3. Russian Embassy in Egypt (@Rusembegypt), 1 November 2023, [online:] <https://x.com/Rusembegypt/status/1719653514924732692>
4. Amnesty International, Saudi Arabia: Alarming crackdown on online expression, 14 February 2023, [online:] <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/02/saudi-arabia-alarming-crackdown-on-online-expression>
5. Baabood, A., „How Gulf States Are Reinterpreting National Security Beyond Their Land Borders”, Carnegie Middle East Center, August 2024, [online:] <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/08/how-gulf-states-are-reinterpreting-national-security-beyond-their-land-borders-abdullah-baabood?lang=en>
6. „يناركوألا مازنلا يف ضوافتلل صفارلا يزانا ركفلا لاصئتسا بلع رصت ايسور :ةيلودلا تاقالعلا يف ثحابن”, Sputnik Arabic, 2 June 2025, [online:] <https://sarabic.ae/20250602/باحث-في-العلاقات-الدولية-روسيا-تصر-على-1101243927-استئصال-الفكر-النازي-الرافض-للتفاوض-في-النظام-الأوكراني.html>
7. Borshchevskaya, A., Russia's Arabic Propaganda, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [online:] <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/4209>
8. Borshchevskaya, A., „Russia's Soft Power in the Middle East: A Weapon of Influence”, Military Review, November-December 2021, [online:] <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/November-December-2021/Borshchevskaya-Russia-Soft-Power>
9. „انلبق نم لعف در يعدتسي رمألاو ةيسايسويجلا هودوح بطختي وتانلا :نيتوبن”, Sputnik Arabic 16 May 2022 [online:] <https://sarabic.ae/20220516/بوتين-النااتو-يتخطى-حدوده-الجيوسياسية-والأمر-يستدعي-رد-فعل-من-قبلنا-1062297351-.html>
10. DataReportal, Digital 2024: Global Overview Report, 22 February 2024, [online:] <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-global-overview-report>
11. ايناركوأ يف ةيجولويب ةحلسأ روطت ةيكيرمألا ةدحتما تاياولا :ةيسورلا عافدلايناركوأ يف ةيجولويب ةحلسأ” 26 May 2023, [online:] <https://sarabic.ae/20230526/الدفاع-الروسية-الولايات-المتحدة-الأمريكية-تطور-أسلحة-بيولوجية-في-1077441647-أوكرانيا.html>
12. „لماشلا رامدلا ةحلسأ لاجم يف نييناركوأ تدنج ةيكيرمألا ةقاطلا ةرازو :ةيسورلا عافدلام” 5 May 2023, [online:] <https://sarabic.ae/20230505/الدفاع-الروسية-وزارة-الطاقة-الأمريكية-جندت-أوكرانيين-في-مجال-1076705580-أسلحة-الدمار-الشامل.html>
13. „نمزلا اهيلع افغ يتلا ةدحتما ممألل ليدب "سكيرب" نيغودم” 7 July 2025, [online:] <https://sarabic.ae/20250707/1102457617-دوغين-بريكس-بديل-للأمم-المتحدة-التي-عفا-عليها-الزمن-.html>
14. Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, International Security and Estonia 2025, 2025, [online:] <https://raport.valisluureamet.ee/2025/en/3-russian-foreign-policy/3-6-russia-seeks-partners-among-persian-gulf-states>
15. Frolovskiy, D., „Understanding Russia-GCC relations”, w: Russia's return to the Middle East: Building sandcastles?, red. N. Popescu, S. Secieru, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2018, s. 85-95.

16. Galily, Y., „Beyond the Goalposts: Decoding Qatar's Soft Power Puzzle and Its Paradox”, *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, t. 12, nr 2 (2025), s. 197-208, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477989251325622>
17. Gulf Research Center, Russia – GCC Country Profile (April 25, 2025), [online:] <https://www.grc.net/documents/684e6aef7e97aRussiagccCountryProfileApril252.pdf>
18. Janadze, D., „The Digital Middle East: Another Front in Russia's Information War”, *Middle East Institute*, 19 April 2022, [online:] <https://www.mei.edu/publications/digital-middle-east-another-front-russias-information-war>
19. „دحتملا تاياولواو ايسور اهلاذبت يتلا مالمسلا دوهج طسو باهرلا لصاوت فييك :ةيسورلا ةيجراخلا الخارجية-الروسية-كيفية-تواصل-الإرهاب-وسط-جهود-السلام-التي-تبذلها-روسيا-والولايات-المتحدة-1103996526.html”, Sputnik Arabic, 21 August 2025, [online:] <https://sarabic.ae/20250821/السلام-التي-تبذلها-روسيا-والولايات-المتحدة-1103996526.html>
20. Mansour, S. A., Ahmed, Y., „Saudi Strategic Hedging Between Regional Security Initiatives and the Prospects of Peace with Iran”, *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, t. 18, nr 3 (2024), s. 298–319.
21. Mazzucco, L. J. M., Alexander, K. P., „Small-State Niche Diplomacy at Work: The Mediation of the UAE and Qatar in the Russia-Ukraine War”, *The International Spectator*, 2025, s. 1–20, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2025.2536535>
22. „ةيملا علا تالوحتلا بلق يف يجيتارتسا فلاحت ... يبطو بأو وكسومي”, Sputnik Arabic, 8 August 2025, [online:] <https://sarabic.ae/20250808/1103515271-قلب-التحويلات-العالمية-في-موسكو-وأبوظبي-تحالف-استراتيجي-في-قلب-التحويلات-العالمية-1103515271.html>
23. „ةيسايس طوغض يا نود ةيرذلا تاينقتلا مدقت ايسور :ةيرصملا ةيونا ةقاطلا ةئيه سيئرل قباس بئاني”, Sputnik Arabic, 22 August 2025, [online:] <https://sarabic.ae/20250822/نائب-سابق-لرئيس-هيئة-الطاقة-النوية-1104026183-المصرية-روسيا-تقدم-التقنيات-الذرية-دون-أي-ضغوط-سياسية-1104026183.html>
24. Reporters Without Borders, 2024 World Press Freedom Index: Journalism under political pressure, 2024, [online:] <https://rsf.org/en/2024-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-under-political-pressure>
25. Reporters Without Borders, Saudi Arabia, [online:] <https://rsf.org/en/country/saudi-arabia>
26. Reporters Without Borders, United Arab Emirates, [online:] <https://rsf.org/en/country/united-arab-emirates>
27. Rumer, E., Weiss, A., „Russia's Enduring Presence in the Middle East”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 2024, [online:] <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/russias-middle-east-diplomacy-relationship?lang=en>
28. Russia news | زجوملا زجوملا سورا يسورلا (@mog_Russ), 31 May 2024, [online:] https://x.com/mog_Russ/status/1897285673209770051
29. „ايناركوأ يف نيتوب زازفتساب وتانلا مهنت اسنرف :زمياتي”, *Akhbar El Yom*, 2 October 2022, [online:] <https://akhbarelyom.com/news/newdetails/3766646/1/تاييمز-فرنسا-تتهم-الناتو-باستفزاز-بوتين-ف-3766646/1>
30. Trenin, D., „What drives Russia's policy in the Middle East?”, w: *Russia's return to the Middle East: Building sandcastles?*, red. N. Popescu, S. Secieru, *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, 2018, s. 21-27.
31. Ulrichsen, K., „The United States and the Arabian Peninsula”, w: *A US Pivot Away from the Middle East: Fact or Fiction?*, red. K. E. Young, *Arab Center Washington DC*, 2023, s. 117-126.
32. Ulrichsen, K., Finley, M., Krane, J., *The OPEC+ Phenomenon of Saudi-Russian Cooperation and Implications for US-Saudi Relations*, *Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy*, Houston, 18 October 2022, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25613/0B0F-J592>
33. Voitovych, N., Imbirovska-Syvaktivska, L., „The spread of Russian disinformation within the Ukrainian information field”, *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, t. 21, nr 2 (2023), s. 197-211.

Пушков назвал события в Афганистане крахом внешней стратегии США, IZ, August 15, 2021. <https://iz.ru/1207532/2021-08-15/pushkov-nazval-sobytiia-v-afganistane-krakhom-vneshnei-strategii-ssh>

أفغانستان.. روسيا تحذر من حرب أهلية بعد انسحاب قوات الناتو والجيش الأميركي يواصل تسليم القواعد العسكرية , Al Jazeera, June 23, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.net/amp/politics/2021/6/23/-أفغانستان-روسيا-تحذر-من-حرب-أهلية-بعد>

«بوتين: انسحاب أميركا والناتو من أفغانستان «هروب» Rassd News Network, September 17, 2021. <https://rassd.com/503745.htm>

خبير لـ "سبوتنيك": الانقسامات السياسية في العراق تمنع طرد القوات الأمريكية منه , Sputnik Arabic, February 15, 2024. <https://sarabic.ae/20240109/-خبير-للسبوتنيك-الانقسامات-السياسية-في-العراق-تمنع-طرد-القوات-الأمريكية-منه.html>

مسؤول روسي: الانسحاب المفاجئ لأمريكا من أفغانستان كان للتركيز على أوكرانيا , Independent, January 10, 2023. <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2789393>