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SHORT COMMENTS

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Saudi and Ukrainian Defense Futures*

By Irina Tsukerman, National Security Lawyer and Geopolitical Analyst

Athens, March 2026

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Desert Falcons and Black Sea Shields: The Strategic Convergence of Saudi and Ukrainian Defense Futures

By Irina Tsukerman, National Security Lawyer and Geopolitical Analyst

The expansion of Saudi Arabian and Ukrainian defense relations reflects a strategic convergence shaped by shared security pressures, economic modernization priorities, and the personal diplomacy of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and President Volodymyr Zelensky. This partnership rests on foundations established before Russia's full-scale invasion, when Riyadh began examining Ukraine as capable of contributing to Saudi Arabia's industrial localization goals. In August 2021, Saudi Arabian special forces received [Kozak-5 armored vehicles](#) from the Ukrainian company Practika, reflecting recognition of Ukraine's engineering base and willingness to engage in technology transfer aligned with Vision 2030.

This early engagement formed part of Saudi Arabia's broader effort to diversify defense partnerships while building domestic capacity. For Ukraine, Saudi Arabia represented both a strategic investor and a gateway to Middle Eastern defense markets, particularly at a time when Ukraine sought to demonstrate the global competitiveness of its defense sector beyond its traditional European customer base.

Personal rapport between Mohammed bin Salman and Zelensky accelerated this trajectory. Bin Salman's personal [mediation](#) in prisoner exchanges elevated Riyadh's diplomatic profile and strengthened trust between leadership circles. The Crown Prince's [humanitarian outreach](#) and [reconstruction discussions](#) reinforced the perception in Kyiv that Saudi Arabia viewed Ukraine as a long term strategic partner rather than a temporary crisis relationship. The Crown Prince's [personal engagement](#) also reflected his broader effort to position Saudi Arabia as an independent diplomatic actor capable of engaging across geopolitical divides.

Saudi Arabia's official posture toward the war remains influenced by a tradition emphasizing diversification and strategic autonomy. Elements within the Saudi establishment promote engagement with Russia through [energy coordination](#) and [commercial ties](#) linked to emerging [multipolar economic frameworks](#), even as Saudi Arabia continued cooperation with

the United States. Russian narratives regarding Ukraine and NATO also found receptive audiences among advocates of geopolitical balancing, producing a complex policy environment characterized by simultaneous engagement with competing power centers.

These debates also reflect internal divisions between reform oriented economic planners and networks prioritizing opportunistic geopolitical diversification tied to legacy commercial relationships. The uneven nature of this balancing policy is visible in Saudi mediation diplomacy, continued commercial ties with Russia, and parallel Saudi efforts to expand economic engagement with Ukraine's reconstruction sectors. This internal competition shapes the pace and direction of Saudi policy toward the war and increasingly highlighted the tension between long term strategic planning and short-term commercial opportunism.

Russia's deepening strategic relationship with Iran exposed the limits of this balancing approach. Russian cooperation with Tehran advanced despite Iranian support for attacks against Saudi infrastructure. Iranian supplied drone and missile attacks against Saudi energy facilities demonstrated these risks, particularly when Saudi defenses were forced into repeated engagements against low-cost aerial threats. Russian diplomacy failed to restrain Iranian escalation, reinforcing doubts among Saudi reformers regarding Moscow's reliability as a security partner.

These vulnerabilities became more visible following the United States and Israeli air campaign against Iranian nuclear and missile infrastructure beginning on 24 February 2026. Iranian retaliation extended beyond Israel to include pressure on Gulf states viewed as aligned with Washington. On 27 February Saudi defenses intercepted Shahed-136 drones approaching Abqaiq, with falling debris causing localized disruption. On 3 March additional drones launched from militia-controlled territory in southern Iraq targeted logistics corridors near Dammam using low altitude terrain masking tactics similar to Russian operations in Ukraine.

On 5 March a drone strike attempt near Ras Tanura required multiple Patriot interceptors against inexpensive threats, highlighting the economic asymmetry of modern air defense. On 8 March drones probed King Abdulaziz Air Base near Dhahran. On 9 March desalination facilities were threatened. On 10 March drones approached NEOM logistics sites, signaling willingness to target Vision 2030 economic infrastructure. These incidents

reinforced a Saudi assessment that Iranian pressure would focus on sustained economic disruption through low-cost aerial harassment rather than conventional escalation.

Saudi planners increasingly assess that the threat environment reflects maturation of saturation tactics involving mixed drone waves, reconnaissance platforms, and decoys intended to overload radar discrimination and interceptor allocation. Ukrainian experience [countering](#) similar Russian sequencing tactics through decentralized detection and mobile interception units corresponds directly to Saudi infrastructure defense requirements.

Ukraine's expertise in counter drone warfare and infrastructure defense therefore gained [particular relevance](#). Ukrainian defense of Kyiv, Odesa, and Kharkiv against Shahed attacks translates into knowledge applicable to protecting Saudi energy infrastructure, desalination facilities, and economic development zones. Ukrainian mobile fire teams combining heavy weapons, thermal optics, electronic jamming, and interceptor drones offer a practical defensive model.

Saudi planners identified Ukrainian strengths in distributed detection grids, electronic warfare corridors, and mobile jammer systems comparable to Bukovel-AD and Nota concepts. Ukrainian development of low-cost interceptor drones provides an operational solution for defending dispersed infrastructure and maintaining defensive sustainability during prolonged threat cycles.

The attraction of Ukrainian cooperation also reflects a structural gap in Saudi Arabia's air defense architecture. Saudi systems remain optimized for ballistic missile interception through Patriot and THAAD deployments, while legacy short-range systems focus on aircraft threats. The emergence of low altitude drone warfare exposed the absence of an integrated middle defensive layer. Ukrainian doctrine evolved precisely to address this gap through layered electronic warfare, short range interception, and mobile defensive teams.

Ukraine has [offered](#) Saudi Arabia [expertise](#) in interceptor drones, electronic warfare disruption, GPS denial, rapid runway repair, and decentralized air defense coordination. Ukrainian firms can also provide counter drone software integration, FPV interceptor adaptation, and layered sensor-shooter networks developed under sustained combat

conditions. Systems attracting Saudi attention include electronic warfare platforms comparable to Bukovel-AD, Nota suppression systems, and Kvertus counter-UAS solutions, as well as Ukrainian air-to-air FPV interceptor drones and mobile counter drone vehicles integrating thermal optics and jamming capabilities.

Saudi procurement discussions have therefore focused on interceptor drones, electronic warfare vehicles, command software, acoustic detection towers, radar integration, and hardened communications. Saudi Arabia is also exploring acquisition of Ukrainian loitering interceptor drones and programmable anti-drone ammunition. These discussions reflect Saudi interest in constructing a layered defensive structure rather than acquiring isolated systems. Patriot and THAAD would remain responsible for ballistic threats, while Ukrainian technologies would strengthen intermediate and lower defensive layers.

Saudi interest also reflects Ukraine's development of cost-efficient interception strategies designed to counter Russian drone saturation. Ukrainian interceptor drones costing thousands rather than millions create a sustainable model for continuous defensive operations. Saudi planners evaluate these approaches as a means to reduce dependence on high-cost interceptors while preserving strategic missile inventories.

This cost imbalance has acquired urgency as Saudi Arabia [confronts](#) interceptor stockpile constraints under sustained drone pressure. Iranian aligned forces demonstrated the ability to launch repeated waves intended to exhaust defenses through attrition. Ukrainian layered defense combining electronic warfare, mobile gun platforms, and interceptor drones provide a tested response. Ukraine's concept of economic air defense, matching defensive cost to threat cost, aligns directly with Saudi requirements to preserve strategic interceptors and maintain defensive endurance under sustained pressure.

This relationship continues expanding across defense procurement, reconstruction investment, and strategic dialogue. Saudi Arabia gains access to defensive innovation shaped by combat experience. Ukraine gains entry into Middle Eastern investment networks. Their partnership reflects alignment between a state rebuilding under fire and a state transforming its security architecture.

Saudi Arabia is positioned to emerge as Ukraine's most significant defense partner outside NATO. Saudi financial capacity combined with Ukraine's industrial requirements creates a foundation for sustained cooperation. Saudi participation in Ukrainian defense industrial recovery and joint production can establish a level of defense interdependence that reflects both economic logic and shared security incentives, particularly as both countries seek to reduce overdependence on traditional security suppliers.

This evolution carries implications for Gulf security architecture. Ukrainian battlefield innovation introduces a partner defined by recent combat adaptation rather than legacy doctrine. Ukrainian solutions address drone warfare and infrastructure defense challenges now central to Gulf defense planning. Saudi adoption of Ukrainian counter drone doctrine may establish a regional model replicated across the Gulf Cooperation Council as Iranian drone proliferation continues.

Saudi Arabia and Ukraine also share exposure to sustained information warfare campaigns directed at their leadership. Both Mohammed bin Salman and Zelensky became targets of reputational attacks intended to weaken international legitimacy and constrain reform trajectories. Mohammed bin Salman's modernization agenda faces resistance from entrenched networks and external actors opposed to Saudi transformation. Zelensky faces parallel campaigns portraying Ukraine as unstable, or externally manipulated. Both leaders became focal points for narrative warfare intended to weaken national reform efforts.

This shared experience reinforces mutual understanding that modern security partnerships extend beyond military cooperation into resilience against reputational warfare. Their convergence reflects alignment between a country innovating for survival and a country modernizing for strategic transformation.





Irina Tsukerman, is a national security lawyer and geopolitical analyst based in the US. Her interests include information warfare, energy security, cybersecurity, big tech and innovation, emerging transnational threats, and Great Power Competition. She is a member of several legal associations and committees focused on these issues. She is also the President of Scarab Rising, Inc., a security and geopolitical risk strategic advisory, and regularly appears on international media to discuss US politics and foreign policy, Russia/Ukraine conflict and related issues, the Middle East and Africa, and other concerns. Irina's writings have been translated into over a dozen languages. She is also a frequent contributor to various academic conferences.