



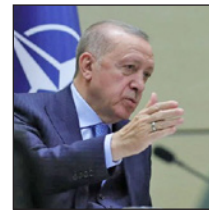
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Zelensky complains he's alone but Belarus talks herald the end of the war

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky recently appeared alone and unfollowed all world leaders on Twitter. Zelensky said he was disappointed after speaking to the leaders of NATO member states after the invasion began, we were left on our own to defend our country, so who is ready to fight on our side? "I don't see anyone. I asked 27 European leaders about my country's membership in NATO, and no one answered," he answered. On the other hand, Zelensky was not satisfied with Belarus as a place for negotiations with the Kremlin because of its hostile positions. Negotiations will begin soon in the Belarusian city of Gomel after military attacks reached the capital, Kyiv. The Russian invasion was by land, sea and air. Russia destroyed more than 950 Ukrainian military sites, and the country's second-largest city, Kharkiv, fell as street battles continued.



President Volodymyr Zelensky



Natali Sevriukova reacts next to her house following a rocket attack on the city of Kyiv

Britain supports Ukraine and sanctions have reached partial exclusion from the SWIFT financial system

On February 20, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson expressed pessimism about evidence suggesting Russia is planning "the biggest war in Europe since 1945. Johnson said on February 26 that Britain and its allies had taken decisive action to prevent Russian banks from using the global SWIFT financial system. "The G7 would make sure that Putin pays for his intervention in Ukraine, accusing Putin of trying to redraw the map of Europe," he said. Johnson said that things are not going as Putin wants, but we are doing what we can to send humanitarian aid and military support. Johnson thanked his Dutch counterpart Mark Rutte for cooperating to send defence aid supplies to Ukraine. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson confirmed that his country would accept refugees from Ukraine, pledging to help "those fleeing fearing for their lives."



Boris Johnson

Iran expands its influence in Syria while Russia is busy with its military invasion of Ukraine

A report by the local Deir ez-Zor 24 website revealed that Iranian militias in Deir ez-Zor and its countryside are carrying out campaigns to recruit Syrian youths, taking advantage of the poor living conditions in the country.

The source said that the militias were able to recruit about 50,000 people, from the people of Deir Ezzor and its countryside, of different age groups. Iran expands its influence in Syria while Russia is busy with its military invasion of Ukraine. Many previous

reports confirmed with documents and evidence the exploitation of poverty in Syria using soft methods by trying to shiitise the Syrians and make them volunteer in Iranian-backed militias taking advantage of their poor living conditions.

Britain is the transatlantic bridge between the EU and NATO



Jassim Mohamad

UK security and defence policies have always been tied to the premise of not allowing a hostile to dominate the continent or to disrupt the “tranquillity of the European balance of power”. Britain tended to achieve this in the past, not by entering into permanent alliances with continental powers, but by concluding shorter-term arrangements as needs dictated. Its participation in five out of the seven coalitions against Napoleon and later in the Crimean War and two world wars is a case in point.

The UK’s withdrawal from the EU end of 2020, calls into question the security implications that the split will have. The UK has continued to support NATO as the primary security provider on the continent and has acted at the forefront to reform the organization to better address the changing security environment in Europe. On the other hand, the EU forges on with its efforts to form an autonomous strategic partnership to ensure European security through collective efforts. Without resistance from London, this policy is likely to go ahead creating uncertainty for the future of NATO in Europe and UK’s place in the security of the continent.

The United Kingdom has played an important role in the design and development of the European Union’s foreign, security and defence policy. While it is among the founding members of NATO, it is also one of the main contributors to European security and played an active part in developing the relationship between both organisations.

Britain also faces an uncertain position within the European security architecture. It therefore needs to redefine its relations with

the European Union and its own position among other member states. Taking into account the development of national security interests and recent political events.

NATO and the UK

While the relationship between NATO and the UK during the alliances more than 70-year history hasn’t always been smooth, the country’s main political parties have always shown strong public support for it. As a founding member of NATO, Britain publicly presents the alliance as key to its defence strategy. But this public support has not extended to providing the necessary support for arms and equipment for the British military. Funding for the armed forces has been an easy target for cuts under British governments of both the left and right.

Nato continues to contribute to international peace and security.

Around 20,000 of its personnel are deployed on operations around the world, including in Turkey, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq. British soldiers take part in many of these deployments. Although the BAOR is long gone, the British Army still plays a major role in the defence of Europe.

In 2014, for example, British soldiers took part in the Anglo-Polish ‘Exercise Black Eagle’, designed to help the two nations’ armies co-operate more effectively. This was part of Nato’s demonstration of support for its allies in Eastern Europe in the face of growing tension with Russia following its actions over neighbouring Ukraine.

Since the referendum to leave the European Union (EU) in 2016, the United Kingdom (UK) has been rethinking its role in world affairs. Under the ‘Global Britain’ banner, the UK sees itself as a force for multilateralism, a strong military

power with global presence and reach, and a strong pillar of the transatlantic alliance.

Reflection on the implications of ‘Global Britain’ for the UK’s future foreign, security and defence policy has resulted in two strategic documents, the Integrated Review and the Defence Command Paper, which outline policy priorities and the government’s strategic vision. Although the EU as such is to a large extent absent from these strategic documents, there are implications to be considered, particularly as the EU has taken significant steps towards defence and military integration and as it is continuing to deepen its relationship with NATO.

With the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the European Union, questions concerning the implications of Brexit on European Union– NATO cooperation arise. As the transatlantic bridge between the EU and NATO.



French presidential candidates put France at a crossroads between NATO and Racism

The French government announced it will hold the presidential elections in April and legislative elections in June. Polls on the 30 French presidential candidates showed that the current president, Emmanuel Macron, is the front runner and the most likely winner so far followed by the far-right populist Marine Le Pen.

Macron and elections

President Emmanuel Macron was elected for a five-year term on 7 May 2017 and assumed power a week later. Although he is the most likely winner, Macron announced on 5 January that he wanted to run for election but that had not made up his mind. "Once the health situation allows it and I have made everything clear -- inside myself and with respect to the political equation -- I will say what it (the decision) is," Mr Macron told the French newspaper *Le Parisien*. "This decision is solidifying deep inside me. I need to be sure that I am able to go as far as I want," he added.

An opinion poll conducted by BFM TV, on 12 January, showed that about half of the French public believe that President Emmanuel Macron will be re-elected as President of France for a second term confirming Macron as the likely winner in the upcoming presidential elections.

The poll showed that nearly one in two French (48%) believed that President Macron would be re-elected next April. 14% of poll participants expected the Republican candidate Valérie Pécresse or Marine Le Pen to win. 6% expected



the nationalist rival Éric Zemmour to win. 5% found that the leader of the far-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon would win the presidential elections while all other candidates received less than 3%.

Le Pen and NATO

Marine Le Pen, the second favourite winner on the list and the leader of the right-wing French National Rally party, issued various statements concerning several affairs. Perhaps the most important of which is France's NATO membership when she called, on BFM TV on 12 January, for France's withdrawal from NATO's joint command saying that institution "needs a reorientation to fight against Islamic terrorism; the biggest threat to the world".

On 23 January, French Interior Minister, Gérald Darmanin, told the French newspaper *"Le Journal de Dimanche"* that the leader of the National Rally party, Marine Le Pen, is the most dangerous person

for the country. "When she says she is going to force judges to take mandatory criminal sanctions, which it is not possible constitutionally: then she is effectively wants to put an end to a cardinal principle of the separation of powers. When she talks about zero immigration, it's not technically possible, nor desirable for the future of the nation. If ever Mrs Le Pen gets to power, it will be national discord, followed by civil war," he explained. Clément Beaune, Secretary of State for European Affairs of France, severely criticized the opponent French politicians' calls to withdraw France from NATO. "The West has to show great strength. I hear that some take the opportunity and called for France's withdrawal from NATO. It would be madness at such times to give the impression of divisions between Western countries. This decision would be the greatest gift that can be given to Russia," he said.

However, Le Pen said during a meeting with her

constituents: "We must defend our interests freely and get out of the logic of military alliances ... Therefore, we will get out of the unified NATO command, so as not to allow us to be dragged again into useless conflicts."

Zemmour and Racism

Besides the candidates who call for withdrawal from NATO, some incite hatred, violence, and racism. French far-right presidential candidate Eric Zemmour was fined 10,000 euros (\$11,400) on January 17 for inciting racial hatred.

The French newspaper *"Le Monde"*, which broke the news, reported that Éric Zemmour was fined for comments he made on TV statements describing immigrant minors as thieves, rapists and murderers. "They have to be sent back and never return," he added. Olivier Pardo, Zemmour's lawyer, confirmed that his client intends to appeal. The problem is that this

was not the first charge he faced for making hate speech comments. In 2011, the Paris Correctional Tribunal fined him 1,000 euros because he said that most of the criminals were black and Arab, however, he did not appeal the conviction. In 2017, a French court fined him 5,000 euros for issuing offensive statements against Muslims; both the Court of Appeal and the Court of Cassation rejected his appeals.

Despite his hate speech, Zemmour is friendlier with Moscow. On 23 January, he called for lifting European sanctions imposed on Russia. "We have to be Russia's friend. France should not allow anymore the United States to use it as a tool," he told France 5.

"The US is trying to divide Russia from France and Germany and every time they get closer to each other, the Americans find a way to divide them. I think France should and could show friendly gestures towards Russia, for example, by lifting sanctions. If I became president, I would say: "There are no more sanctions against Russia, said the French presidential candidate," he added.

2022 French presidential elections are decisive because we might see a government similar to Trump's administration which adopted policies serving only US interests, not that of its allies. The racist voices emerging from France's presidential candidates are reminiscent of Trump's policies. The candidates' promises to leave NATO, completely or partly, and to get closer to Russia might reshape Paris' policies.

Morocco rejects Iran's offers for reconciliation

Tehran does not only want to carry out its expansionist projects in a particular country in the region, but anywhere it can reach, especially in troubled regions such as Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.

However, that equation changes in stable countries, where foreign agendas cannot be easily implemented via the formation of religious militias. Accordingly, Tehran is trying to extend its influence in North Africa, but it is never easy as long as its countries are stable, as is the case in Morocco.

The road to Morocco is from the KSA

Perhaps that goal is one of the reasons that drove Tehran to try to improve relations with the KSA so that it might be able to improve relations with North African countries as well. The Director-General of the Middle East and North Africa Department in the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mir Masoud Hosseinian, said on October 16, their good relations with the KSA will reflect positively on their relations with the GCC and North African countries. "Some countries in the region like Egypt, Sudan, Morocco and others severed relations with us after the KSA did," he said

"Our relations with Egypt would definitely improve if our talks with the KSA succeeded. We are making efforts to improve relations with Cairo. We also aspire to have friendly relations with Morocco which first severed relations with us for baseless reasons," he claimed.

Morocco supports the UAE

However, Iran's ambitions are not fully paved, because it insists on reconciling with the KSA in its own way. Iran is trying to convince the KSA of the validity of its expansionist projects, but the countries of the region are aware of Iran's malicious efforts to change facts. Accordingly, "I would like to reiterate the Kingdom of Morocco's strong and continuous support for the UAE's full

sovereignty over the occupied islands of the Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa," said, on November 6, 2021, that Morocco's representative to the United Nations Omar Hilale stressing, in front of the members of the Fourth Committee of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, the UAE's right to restore its full territorial integrity and that was a severe blow to Iran's ambitions to reconcile with the countries of the region without giving up its expansionist projects.

On January 18, King Mohammed VI of Morocco condemned the "vicious Houthi militia attack on the Emirati civilian facilities and areas, which resulted in many casualties." In a telephone call with the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan extended his sincere condolences for the victims of the attack and wished a quick recovery for the wounded.

The King reiterated the Kingdom of Morocco's firm support for all the steps taken by the UAE against despicable attacks of the Houthi militia and those behind them. Also, he affirmed the Kingdom stands with the United Arab Emirates and is ready to offer its full support to the UAE against all threats to its security.

Morocco faces Iran in Africa

Morocco did not only face the Iranian foreign policies and the attacks of its militias in the GCC, but Morocco

also stood against Tehran's efforts to extend its influence in the continent. "Morocco and Africa's spiritual security is a priority to defend against Iranian ambitions in the continent. Iran is trying to enter West Africa to spread its religious ideology there," Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita told, on January 26, the House of Representatives.

"Morocco's support for the Emirate of Abu Dhabi was a clear condemnation of the Houthi attack & abuses and the foreign policy of Iran supporting them," he stressed. It is worth mentioning Morocco severed relations with Iran in 2018 over Tehran's support for the Polisario Front by training and arming its fighters via Hezbollah militia.

Bourita noted that the security of the GCC is an integral part of the Kingdom's security and reiterated his country's rejection of Iran's interference in the GCC's affairs. "We, in the name of Morocco's King, government and people, condemn the continued attacks of the Houthi militia and those behind them against the civilian and economic facilities of the sister countries the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates," he said.

"Morocco rejects and condemns all forms of blatant Iranian interference in the internal affairs of the GCC countries, especially the sister Kingdom of Bahrain," he added. "Morocco has always considered the GCC's stability and security as

an integral part of its security and stability because it believes in the common destiny of our nations and the convergence of views on various issues of common concern," he affirmed. It is worth noting this is the same thing that King Mohammed VI confirmed in the Morocco-GCC summit in Riyadh on April 20, 2016.

Iranian official slams Morocco

The Kingdom of Morocco's firm positions angered Iran. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh responded, on January 31, to Bourita's statements claiming that "the Moroccan foreign minister knows that his country's interventions in some countries have caused tensions in that region and we advise them to stay away from throwing the accusations here and there. Many of their problems are due to the insistence of some of their officials on normalizing relations with Israel."

He reiterated Iran's condemnation of the normalization of relations with Israel, claiming that the countries that did so would be the first victims of the Hebrew state which he described as "an occupying entity built on terrorism and creating tensions. It is the only apartheid regime in the world." These statements apparently show how desperate Iran is about pushing Arab countries to reconcile with it according to its own conditions.



Khamenei fears the recent and widespread uprising of the people of Isfahan

The City of Isfahan, the capital of the Isfahan Province, is located in the center of Iran. In addition to its historical aspect, it houses several ancient monuments which are considered one of Iran's most important tourist attractions. The City of Isfahan is also one of the most important industrial and agricultural centers of Iran.

Zayandehrood River, which passes through the center of this province, has been one of the manifestations of this city for centuries. Two historical and ancient bridges, "Si O Se Pol Bridge" (meaning 33 bridge) and "Khaju Bridge," were built in the 16th century.

Before the start of the rule of the mullahs in Iran in 1979, the Zayandehrood River was one of the most water-rich rivers in Iran and water flowed in it in all seasons of the year, and at the end, water poured into a wetland called Gavkhoni Wetland, which was the habitat of migratory birds. Farmers in the province also used the water from the river to irrigate their fields. Due to the fertile soil around this river, excellent quality types of vegetables, grains, and fruits were produced in this province.

However, the regime's mismanaged policies and destructive projects, including the building of dams without regard to the province's ecosystem, have resulted in severe ecological problems. This essential river has faced water shortages and droughts for years because of the regime's lack of appropriate environmental policies and colossal corruption.

The river's dryness has directly affected the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of farmers in the province and adversely affected the environment. Government affiliated plants such as Mobarakeh Steel Company or several ceramics factories, etc., have been using the Zayandehrood River water excessively and irrationally, causing the gradual dryness of this important

and vital water source for the ordinary people and farmers.

Additionally, the government has installed several large pipelines to transfer a significant amount of the Zayandehrood River to Yazd which is located in the neighborhood of Isfahan. As a result, the Zayandehrood River and Gavkhoni Wetland dried up, and the farmers' livelihood depended on the water of this river were severely affected and destroyed. Furthermore, the regime had dug a large number of deep wells, withdrawing water from underground reserves, affecting the ecology of the area, causing extensive land subsidence in this province, especially in the city of Isfahan. The situation is so fragile, critical, and unfortunate that even the ancient monuments of this city are exposed to destruction. Large cracks and signs of deterioration have appeared in many of these historical monuments.

Farmers in Isfahan, who have worked hard their entire life and have experienced a demise in their livelihood due to the lack of water, skyrocketing prices of commodities, etc., rallied to demand the opening of the Zayandehrood Dam and the flow of water in the riverbed so that they can irrigate their fields again.

In the last days of his presidency, Hassan Rouhani's government tried to convince the farmers to end their protests and, as usual, offered some hollow promises of compensation and on July 11, the government opened the dam gates, let the water be released to the riverbed for two weeks. However, after two weeks, the water was shut off and redirected to supply the government-affiliated factories' water needs. As usual, the demands and welfare of the farmers and ordinary people were ignored by the government's officials, and the plight of the people of Isfahan met deaf ears of the government officials. On Friday, the 12th day of a sit-in by impoverished farmers in Isfahan, tens of thousands of people demonstrated in support of the farmers' protest

against water shortages and the clerical regime's plundering policies that have led to the drying up of the Zayandehrood River and the destruction of agriculture and livestock. The massive protest spanned a large area of the Zayandehrood Riverbed.

On Friday, November 19, more than 150,000 people in Isfahan joined the rally in support of farmers. They protested, chanting slogans accusing incompetent officials of causing the Zayandehrood River to dry up and demanding water flow into the Zayandehrood River.

Khamenei and his appointed president, Ebrahim Raisi, who see any kind of gathering or rally, a threat to their regime's existence, tried to convince the people to end their protests and repeatedly offered hollow promises and prompt actions. "I have ordered the ministers of energy and agriculture to take immediate steps to deal with the issue," Iran's First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber said on television, hoping to bring the situation to a state of calm.

After experiencing such meaningless promises from all sorts of government officials, the people were not going to be fooled again this time and chanted: "We will not return home until water flows back into the river," "Where is my Zayandehrood River," "Zayandehrood River is our inalienable right," and "Isfahani shout, demand your rights." If they could find a solution, they would do so much sooner.

The Iranian regime's suppressive forces and secret services, who are worried about the presence of supporters and members of the resistance affiliated with the Mojahedin Khalq Organization, tried to send a number of their agents into the crowd and chanted slogans in support of Khamenei and against the Mojahedin. But they faced the raging reaction of the people and continued their slogans pointed at the regime, its officials, and destructive policies. The reality is that the Iranian society

is like a barrel of gunpowder that can explode at any moment with any rally, gathering, anti-government action, etc., due to the incompetence and widespread corruption in the ruling system that has caused the majority of people to fall below the poverty line and inflation to reach the highest level in Iranian history. A few months ago, the same situation occurred in Khuzestan province when the water of Karoon River and Hur-Al-Azim Wetland, which are the main source of work for the cattle breeders and farmers of this province, dried up due to irrational and illogical construction of facilities and manufacturing plants belonging to the Revolutionary Guards that led to widespread protests in the province. The protests rapidly spread to other provinces, and even the people of Tabriz in the northern part of Iran staged several demonstrations in support of the people of Khuzestan. Eventually, the regime was able to temporarily quell the protests by sending its suppressive forces to the area, killing several innocent protestors, arresting hundreds of people, and injuring many. Fearful of the spread of social unrest. Eventually, the regime was forced to listen to the demands of the protestors by partially opening the dam and letting the water be released into the Karoon River. Now, the same issue has arisen again in Isfahan province, which, if it continues, will definitely spread to other parts of Iran. Because all the people of Iran are dissatisfied with the current situation and want a fundamental change in government, this is an undeniable reality that Khamenei is well aware of, and so far has only been able to prevent the uprising of the people through crackdown, fake promises, repression, and killing. Employing such a tactic cannot last for long, a mere fact that many experts in Iran and beyond agree on. Ahmadinejad, the former president of the regime, had recently said that a destructive storm is brewing that would take everyone in the regime with it.

Why did the US administration's decision to put the Houthi militia back on the terrorist list take long?

It has been about a month since US President Joe Biden announced he seriously considers putting the Iranian-backed Houthi militia back on the US list of foreign terrorist groups, after its increasing terrorist attacks on neighbouring countries, expanding operations in Yemen and thwarting the political solution to the Yemeni crisis, the thing that threatens a new catastrophe in Yemen.

However, the decision does not seem to have come into action, and neither the Biden administration nor any of the American authorities announced they would take measures for it, the thing that raises questions about the US position on the militia which has become an international and regional threat.

"Reinstating the designation was under consideration," Biden said last January. Those statements came after US and international condemnations of the Houthi attack against the UAE. The US position on the Houthi militia raises many questions, while observers believe the Biden administration is somewhat tolerant towards the terrorist militia's crimes against civilians and its growing threats to neighbouring countries as a part of Iran's agenda which used the militia as a tool to have strategic political and economic influence in the Middle East.

The US policy on the Houthi militia is not clear

Dr Ahmed Sayed Ahmed, an expert in US affairs and international relations at the al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, believes US President's announcement of putting back the Houthi militia on the US list of foreign terrorist groups is ambiguous..

"President Biden's first decision, after winning the US elections, was announcing the reversal of the decision taken by former President Donald Trump to designate the Houthi militia as a terrorist organization,



although the decision was based on much irrefutable evidence whether in Yemen or outside it but Biden was hasty," Dr Ahmed told Levantnews. "The decision has to be reconsidered at the time being and the Houthi militia has to be put back on the US terrorist lists, especially after the organisation targeted strategic and vital areas in the Arab region, foremost of which is the crime of attack on Abu Dhabi airport, in addition to the almost daily attacks on civilians in the KSA and the UAE and humanitarian crimes in Yemen," he confirmed

"Biden's decision to reverse Trump's decision about the Houthis' designation was based on humanitarian reasons and he justified it that the sanctions on the Houthis will disrupt the flow of humanitarian aids to Yemenis during these difficult humanitarian conditions, but the opposite happened as the Houthis later seized all the aids provided by international organizations, the United Nations, the KSA and the UAE, the thing that increased the Yemeni people's suffering," he explained.

The political solution in Yemen became more complicated to reach

"Biden's decision greatly complicated

the political solution in Yemen and gave the Houthi militia an opportunity to attack neighbouring countries, expand the military operations in Yemen and ignore all initiatives to reach a political solution in the country," he pointed out.

"The US has to reconsider putting back the Houthi organization on terrorist lists because it threatens the Arab region's security and stability. As well, placing the crimes in their normal context and considering the attack on Abu Dhabi Airport as a fully-legal crime punishable by international law and it calls for imposing sanctions on the organization," he confirmed. "Biden's way in dealing with the Houthi organization has encouraged it to expand its operations and be more aggressive. The militia targeted neighbouring countries, threatened maritime navigation in the region, complicated the Yemeni crisis and thwarted the political solution to serve the interests of Iran which uses the Houthis as one of its most important militias to destabilize the Middle East countries and threaten their interests," he thinks.

Crimes need to be punished

"The crimes committed by the Houthi militia in the last few months prompted the US administration to reconsider putting back the Houthi

militia on the terrorist list. Biden's statements are positive but no actions have been yet initiated in this regard although it has been more than a month since Biden announced, thus, his statements are nothing more than an attempt to contain international outrage and deal with international and internal pressures on the current US administration, especially after the UN Security Council unanimously recognized that what this militia is doing is fully-legal crimes against international and regional stability," he noted

"Biden's statements were not translated into deterrent actions like sanctions. Putting pressure on the Houthi militia would make it sit at the negotiation table the thing that supports the political solution but the US administration is trying to find in-between solutions. I don't think the Biden administration will soon take action against the Houthis. It seems that Biden has no real intention to help resolve the crisis and his contradictory positions on the Houthi militia show this," he added.

Earlier, Yemeni, regional and international civil society organizations called on the United Nations General Assembly, with its 193 members, to designate the Houthi militia as a terrorist group and warned of the real danger posed by the Houthi militia to the peace in Yemen and the world.

A human rights statement issued by the Yemeni Coalition for Independent Women in partnership with 90 local, regional and international civil society organisations stressed that the international community's rapid response to designate the Houthi militia as a terrorist group and prosecuting its leaders in the International Criminal Court will help succeed the policy of maximum pressure against the terrorist Houthi group to stop its crimes and dry up its sources of support and help establish peace and delivering humanitarian aids to those in need.

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and Iran's attempts to use it as a bridge to KSA

Despite questioning the OIC (the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) and its significance, in relation to Iran's expansionist plans, Tehran has issued various statements that indicate a desire to build a bridge with Riyadh or at least to put an end to the proxy war in various areas, whether political economic, or defence wise.

Iran's condition

What makes these statements suspicious is Iran's preconditions to engage in a dialogue. While Iran continues to target the GCC security through its Houthi militia, it brazenly claims to be the victim. On 6 January, Iran's foreign minister, Hossein Amirabdollahian, stated that Tehran would be ready to restore relations if Riyadh announces it is ready to do so, claiming that it would never use its power against its neighbours. "I believe the Saudi side is interested in talks on some regional issues as well, but our negotiations, for now, are focused on bilateral issues and on when to return relations to a normal state," he added.

Jalil Rahimi Jahan-Abadi, a member of the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, stated on 16 January that Tehran and Riyadh were reviving their relations and preparing the ground for the reopening of their embassies. "This move will have important impacts on reducing regional tensions and promoting solidarity among Muslim states," he tweeted ignoring the Iranian and Turkish expansionist plans which destabilised the region.

Organisation of Islamic Cooperation

In 2015, the Iranian Representative Office to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Jeddah was closed, when the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia were severed following that attacks on the Saudi embassy in Tehran and consulate

in Mashhad. In the same year, an extraordinary meeting for the foreign ministers of OIC member was held in Jeddah to discuss the attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran. In its final communiqué, the summit condemned the attack on Saudi diplomatic sites in Tehran and Mashhad stating that the attack was a flagrant violation of international law and the Geneva and Vienna Conventions for the protection of political institutions.

In the midst of Saudi calls for peace in the region, it was announced, on 17 January, that Iran's representative office to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in the Saudi city of Jeddah was reopened in the presence of three diplomats following its suspension for the past six years. Iranian Foreign Minister, Hossein Amirabdollahian, stated that "Saudi Arabia has agreed to grant visas to three Iranian diplomats to attend Iran's representation to the organization in Jeddah," adding that "issuing the visas was a positive and good indication."

Foreign Ministry spokesman, Khatib Saeedzadeh, said, "Iran is ready to reopen its embassy in the KSA and that depends on the effective steps taken by the Saudi side; we will do our best to guarantee this is accomplished with operative steps." Iranian diplomats began participating in the OIC meetings in the KSA, on 23 January, for the first time since relations between the two countries were severed in early 2016.

Iran's attempts to exploit the organization

In an attempt to exploit the organization, Tehran issued a series of statements. On 3 February Iranian Foreign Minister, Hossein Amirabdollahian, confirmed that

Iran and the KSA are important countries in the Gulf and hoped that dialogue and cooperation between them would help solve the problems of the region and the Islamic world. The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Abdollahian had made a phone call to the Secretary-General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Hissein Brahim Taha. He stated that the two sides had discussed "issues relating to the Muslim world and Muslim nation, the course of bilateral and multilateral relations, cooperation between Iran and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the reopening of Iran's OIC representative office and regional affairs of common concern." He also praised Brahim Taha's efforts to reopen Iran's representative office at OIC in Jeddah.

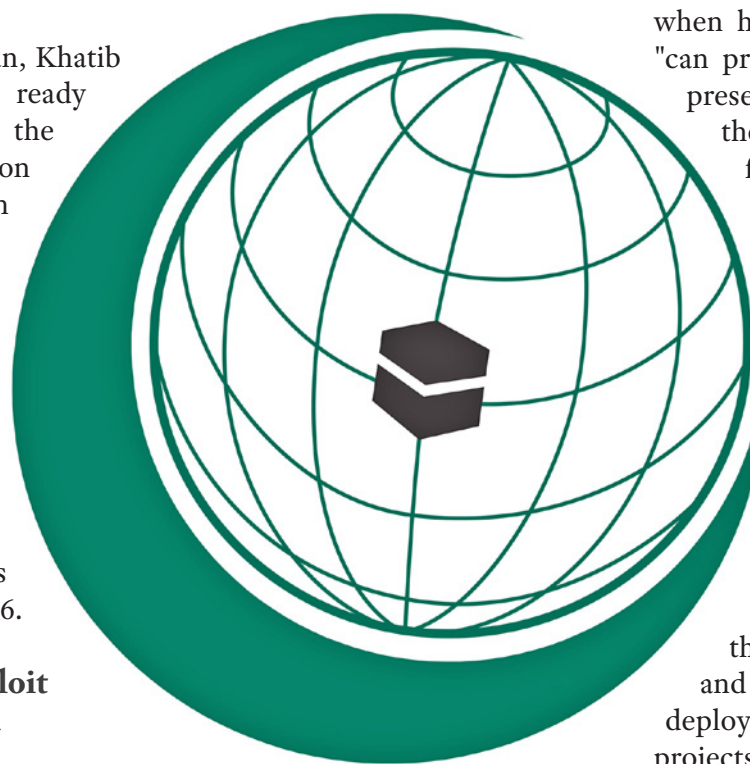
Brahim Taha expressed his support for the process of negotiations between Tehran and Riyadh. "It is sad when we see problems between Muslim

reopening of Iran's representative office at OIC in Jeddah," he added.

Why the organization cannot play the mediator role?

Member of the Iranian Parliament's Foreign Policy Committee, Fada Hossein Maleki, called on OIC, on 6 February, to play a mediator's role with the KSA, stressing the importance of defusing tension between the two countries. "The world public opinion is fully aware that the existing tensions between Islamic countries are inflamed by the USA and the Zionist entity," he said. The Iranian official seemed to have forgotten that Iranian-backed militias have been used to target Muslims. However, it is not feasible to rely on the efforts of OIC or other entities to restore the relations between the KSA and Iran because the main reason for the problem is Tehran's rulers' mentality. They do not intend to change their antics, as demonstrated in Fada Hossein Maliki's words when he said that the organization "can prove to the Saudis that their presence in Yemen is harmful and they should withdraw their forces from there."

He added that the Saudi presence in Muslim countries was a matter of concern because "the US and the Zionist entity were behind it". However, Fada Hossein Maliki could not explain to Muslims how Israel and America are responsible for the militias of Hezbollah, Houthis, the Popular Mobilization Forces, the Fatimids, the Zaynabis, and other Iranian proxies that are deployed to serve its expansionist projects at the cost the same Muslim blood that Iran claims to care about. This reflects the inability of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to play a mediator role between Tehran and Riyadh.



Erdogan's charmingly pragmatic offensive



Ian Black

Rarely has a leader's trip abroad attracted so much attention as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's state visit to the UAE last week. The Turkish leader's journey to Abu Dhabi and Dubai was a landmark event which is likely to have a profound influence on relations between Ankara and Middle Eastern capitals.

It wasn't that surprising after the UAE's de facto leader Mohammed bin Zayid Al-Nahyan visited Turkey last November, the first high-level trip since 2012. But given the symbolic importance of reciprocity in diplomacy at all levels Erdogan's visit was a highly significant development in calming regional tensions.

Turkey and the UAE have been at loggerheads for the past decade. Radically different attitudes to the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011; support of opponents in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia; the boycott of Qatar; and Turkey's backing of Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups and its opposition to gas exploration in the eastern Mediterranean are just some of the areas of disagreement.

Dubai's iconic Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building, was illuminated with the colours of the Turkish flag and the words "Hos Geldiniz," Turkish for "welcome."

The former Emirati foreign minister and presidential adviser Anwar Gargash tweeted, "Erdogan's visit to the UAE ... opens a new positive page in the bilateral relations between the two countries." But by contrast, in a 2020 interview, Gargash called for Europe to join forces against what he said was Erdogan's attempt "to revive the Ottoman Empire."

In the past Ankara was unhappy with the overthrow of Muhammad Morsi by General Abdel-Fatah al-Sissi in 2013 and set out to support Sunni Islamist groups to counter Iranian backing for Shias in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen.

And Turkey accused the UAE of



providing financial support to some of the organizers of a failed 2016 military coup against Erdogan's government. The two countries, in short, have long seen each other as hostile, with Turkey cast as a dangerous bully and the UAE as an arrogant upstart.

So what has changed?

Geopolitics and economic interests is the short answer. The perceived withdrawal from the Middle East by the Biden administration, the Abraham Accords signed by the UAE with Israel, and the increasing vulnerability of Abu Dhabi in the face of recent attacks by the Houthi rebels are all factors.

Following MBZ's visit last November, the UAE announced a \$10 billion fund for investments in Turkey, where the economy has been reeling and inflation last month surged to a near 20-year high. Turkey is in crisis and its national currency having lost 48% of its value in the last year. And Erdogan is facing an election in June 2023.

For its part, the UAE has been pushing to further diversify its economy away from oil and revive itself from the damage of the Covid pandemic. "It made us understand...

that we had to turn back home and let go of certain kinds of engagements in the broader Middle East," an Emirati diplomat said last autumn.

In Abu Dhabi Erdogan and MBZ signed 13 cooperation agreements and memoranda of understanding, including a letter of intent on cooperation in the defence industries. The UAE has vowed to double or even triple trade volumes with Turkey in the near future, seeing Ankara as a key conduit to new markets especially in Africa.

Erdogan has since last year sought to improve ties with regional powers in the face of increasing diplomatic isolation that has caused foreign investment to dry up, particularly from the US and EU. Last month, he said he would also visit Saudi Arabia, the first trip to Riyadh since relations soured over the 2018 murder of Saudi critic Jamal Khashoggi inside the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul.

Turkey is also seeking to mend ties with Israel, now officially a friend of the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco since the Abraham Accords in August 2020. Israeli President Isaac Herzog is scheduled for an official visit to Turkey in March, despite the fact that Turkey in 2020 threatened to cut ties with the UAE over its

normalization deal with Israel. Ankara's backing for Hamas in Gaza is likely to lessen under Israeli, Emirati and US pressure.

This détente comes amid heightened tensions in the region as Iran's nuclear development progresses, and in the wake of a series of drone and missile attacks on the UAE mostly claimed by Yemen's Houthi rebels, who are backed by Tehran.

Relations between Turkey and Iran have also worsened. Turkey maintains close military and trade ties with Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, to Tehran's annoyance. In Syria, Iran and Turkey are on opposite sides of the fence. Ankara still wants to topple Bashar al-Assad, while Iran sees him as a strategic asset to preserve its influence in Lebanon.

The overall lesson from Turkish-UAE reconciliation is this: it makes sense for all countries that are used to tense regional relations to take a break from confrontation, using diplomacy and economic power as a means of securing their own interests and projecting their influence. The Erdogan-MBZ meeting is likely to be considered, in future at least, as the end of the period known as the Arab Spring.

The Rise of the False Flag



James Denselow

The absence of heavy fighting along Russia's borders with Ukraine would in theory mean a clearer picture as to events unfolding. Yet such are the levels of disinformation, propaganda and strategic attempts to control the narrative that we're truly in an age of the 'fog of pre-war'. Within this murky fog one tactic stands out as above, the 'false flag' attack. But what is this phenomenon, where did it come from and how should it be factored into the geopolitics of the modern day?

The term "false flag" originated in the 16th century as a purely figurative expression to mean "a deliberate misrepresentation of someone's affiliation or motives". It was later used to describe a ruse in naval warfare whereby a vessel flew the flag of a neutral or enemy country in order to hide its true identity.

One of the most famous 'false flag' events in history occurred the night before Germany invaded Poland. Seven German SS soldiers

pretending to be Polish stormed the Gleiwitz radio tower on the German side of the border with Poland. They broadcast a short message to say the station was now in Polish hands. Such a minor incident in the context of the World War is of course lost to most but it demonstrated how important even the veneer of a 'just War' was to Hitler.

Today it is associated with a covert operation that is designed to look as if it has been carried out by someone else. In recent years it has been the go-to tactic from extremist groups looking to divert responsibility away from their own actions. For instance, right-wing Fox News host Tucker Carlson even claimed the 6th January insurrection at the US Capitol was a "false flag" attack.

In the crisis in Eastern Europe all sides are accusing each other of the tactic. Indeed, Western intelligence agencies have been more proactive than is their normal ways of working, in stressing that in the absence of a genuine hostile act from Ukraine or its allies, the spark that Russia needs to justify an invasion will be to be manufactured. The shelling of a Kindergarten last week that

thankfully didn't result in deaths was explicitly cited by the British Prime Minister as a 'false flag' attack.

This week Ukraine rejected as "fake news" a claim from the Russian army that it killed five "saboteurs" attempting to cross the border in the Russian region of Rostov. Ukrainian officials said not a single soldier had been killed and their forces were not present in the Rostov region. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defence has also accused pro-Russian forces of destroying civilian infrastructure and claiming that the damage is caused by Ukrainian military artillery strikes.

Meanwhile, the volume of Russian disinformation seeking to frame Ukraine as a threat to justify military action by Russia has more than doubled in the past week, Western officials have said. Liz Truss, the foreign secretary, revealed there had been a two-fold increase in fake Russian claims during comments she made at a security conference in Munich on Saturday.

The need for an incident to justify a wider campaign is clearly important but not necessarily essential. The escalation into the decision made

by President Putin to recognise the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk and send in 'peacekeepers' could of or would of likely happened regardless. The fact is that 'truth' has become a subjective concept useful as far as it goes from the perspective of different types of leaders responding to different political systems. From a Western viewpoint the build, up of troops and their inevitable entry into Ukraine smacks of Russian aggression. Putin meanwhile explained the decision as a response to the West holding a "knife to the throat" of Russia and trying to turn Ukraine into a puppet regime.

The point of no return or departure into a state of conflict appears to have all been reached. Yet this doesn't mean that the 'false flag' tactic is no longer useful or something that we will see more of. Putin seems set on taking chunks of eastern Ukraine, now the question is whether that will be enough? Could 'incidents' occur that mean that his 'peacekeepers' will have to press on in a westerly direction for example? We will all need to keep our critical facilities on red alert for more 'false flag' attacks to come.



Libya: The Question of Legitimacy



Dalia Ziada

After a year of optimistically talking social development, political consensus, and military unification, Libya is back to drowning into the muddy waters of uncertainty. The political elite on both sides of the conflict are cooperating for the first time, not with the purpose to end the misery of the Libyan people, but to break down the current interim Government of National Unity (GNU) and thus halt the entire political solution process, so they can remain powerful for as long as they can.

On the morning of February 10th, a few hours after GNU Prime Minister, Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, survived an assassination attempt, the Libyan parliament announced the installation of a new interim government, to be headed by Fathi Bashagha, who had served as a Minister of Interior in the former interim Government of National Accord (GNA). However, Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh insisted on holding on to his position until the political solution process is accomplished by holding the presidential and parliamentary elections in June. Dbeibeh, also, attacked the parliament for solely making the decision to dissolve the GNU, without a public referendum or even consulting with the United Nations mission and the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF). In fact, the parliament's uninvited and unwelcome decision dropped as a surprise to almost all concerned parties, on the local, regional, and international levels. The GNU's term of eighteen months has not ended, yet, and the country is already preparing for a presidential and parliamentary elections in June, in compliance with the political solution process, which was endorsed by the 75 members of the LPDF under the UN supervision, in late 2020.

The parliament speaker, Aguila Saleh, justified the decision by

holding Dbeibeh, exclusively, guilty for the country's failure to hold public elections in December. That is despite the fact that, all the active players inside Libya, including the parliament itself, participated in making the decision of postponing the elections under the claim of "force majeure." Even more, Aguila Saleh claimed that Dbeibeh lost his legitimacy by running for president, in the postponed elections. However, in fact, Dbeibeh was not the only state official, on duty, to run in these elections. Fathi Bashagah, and Aguila Saleh himself, are competing over the presidential seat, too.

In addition, the biases of Aguila Saleh and a large number of the members of parliament, which is based in Tobruk, should make us question the true intentions behind such a decision. Aguila Saleh is a strong supporter of warlord Khalifa Haftar, who leads the Libyan National Army (LNA) forces in the eastern territories of Libya. He has always been using his power, as the parliament speaker, to push the parliament to make decisions that enhances Haftar's escalation against the legitimate governments in Tripoli. He even endorsed Haftar's attempts to raid on Tripoli by force, in 2019, until the Turkish military intervened on the side of GNA to deter him away.

When the GNU took power, via the LPDF, in March 2021, Haftar and Saleh congratulated the move; especially Haftar who had high hopes to be appointed as Minister of Defense in the GNU, and then as a president of state later. Wisely, the GNU Prime Minister, Dbeibeh, decided to keep the seat of the defense minister empty until the Military Committee (5+5) comes to an agreement about unifying the armed forces in Tripoli and Benghazi under one national flag.

To avenge, Haftar and his ally Saleh started to level economic and security pressures on Dbeibeh and the GNU to make them appear as a failure government in the eyes of the Libyan people and the international community. For example, the parliament has been declining to

approve the government budget, since last June, and Haftar launched more than one military action in the south, including closing Libyan borders with Algeria, against the will of the legitimate government and the Presidential Council in Tripoli. Despite that, Dbeibeh was able to navigate through all the hardships thrown on his way by the eastern rivals and bring the country to a state of relative stability, that allowed organizing for holding elections in December. However, only three days before the voting is due, the High National Elections Commission (HNEC), announced its inability to proceed with holding the elections due to a persistent state of "force majeure."

On the morning of the same day when the decision was made to postpone the elections, Fathi Bashagha and Ahmed Maiteeq, two officials from the former GNA, visited Benghazi and held reconciliation meetings with Haftar and Saleh. It was surprising to see them together, at that particular day because, for years, the animosity between the GNA officials and eastern politicians had been very intense; it was not only limited to political rivalry but also reached the verge of a violent civil war. Apparently, in this particular meeting some deal was made between Bashagha and Haftar to ouster Dbeibeh and seize Tripoli through a game of political manipulation by the parliament.

That is exactly what manifested one month later in the form of a flawed decision by Aguila Saleh's parliament to dissolve the GNU and put Bashagha in the Prime Minister's seat. Both Bashagha and Haftar has an interest of pushing Dbeibeh out of the political scene, as his popularity among the public has been increasing to a level that threatens their power. His potential to win the postponed presidential elections was very high, compared to Haftar, Bashagha, Saleh, or any other members of the political elite, either from the east or the west. In a local television interview, two days after the parliamentary decision, Dbeibeh said that Aguila Saleh sent him an

indirect message that "if he wants to remain in power for another year or so, he should withdraw from running in the presidential elections," but he refused.

All these facts should put the legitimacy of the decisions of the parliament in question. In fact, the legitimacy of the parliament itself as a representative to the will of the Libyan people is also in question. This is an expired parliament, that should have been re-elected, since eight years ago. In other words, Aguila Saleh's parliament in Tobruk does not represent the Libyan people, and thus is not a legitimate body, and should be regarded as such by the United Nations and the interested members of the international community, when dealing with the Libyan crisis. Unfortunately, the shrinking interest of the international community, which is currently hyper-focused on the Russia-Ukraine tensions, as well as the shuffling regional order and power alliances of the Middle East, are further complicating Libya's political crisis. However, on the bright side, Turkey and Egypt, the most important regional actors with direct involvement in and influence on Libya, are for the first time adopting a similar position regarding the current political crisis. In two separate statements, the Egyptian and the Turkish presidents reiterated their support to the continuity of the political solution process and holding the election, rather than encouraging a third interim government to take over. Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has quit supporting Haftar, as part of its efforts to fix strained ties with Turkey.

At the end, it is hard to predict what could happen with Libya, next. The two sides of conflict are miraculously joining forces against the UN-backed political solution process, at a time when the regional and international backers of the contending parties are busy with other urgent issues. Yet, let's be hopeful that the current political clash may give a finite answer to the question of political legitimacy, that has been dragging Libya since the fall of Gaddafi.

Russia Has Invaded Ukraine But What Next?



Jwan Dibo

Although the Russian invasion of Ukraine is still in the beginning, the question that comes to mind is what after Ukraine? It is very difficult to predict what next step Putin intends to take. But what is clear so far is that Putin knows very well what he is doing.

Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, Putin began to mobilise tens of thousands of Russian troops on Ukrainian border to exert pressure on the West and obtain the concessions required from it. This was followed by Moscow's recognition of Lugansk and Donetsk as independent states.

A few days later, Putin ordered an assault on Ukraine, which continues at the time of writing this article. It is clear that Putin is proceeding systematically with his offensive plan, which does not seem to stop in Ukraine but has just started with it. The balance of power in the Russian-Ukrainian Western conflict is in favour of Russia, not in favour of the West and Ukraine. According to the



Russian President Vladimir Putin

"Global Firepower" website, the Russian army ranks second in the world in terms of equipment, while the Ukrainian army ranks 22nd. Thus, Russia's options in this dispute are much more than those of the West. Russia can use military force against Ukraine, an ally of the West, while the West cannot enter into an open military confrontation with Russia.

Indeed, the West represented by NATO is powerful than Russia, but

the outcomes of a military clash with Russia will be dire because of the caveats of the use of nuclear weapons. The land and the air in this battle are on the side of Russia. Therefore, the West has no choice but to impose more economic, banking, commercial and investment sanctions against the Russian tsar and his entourage.

If Putin wins in Ukraine, and it is most likely that he will win, then Tsar's ambitions for expansion and growth will revive, and he will ask the

West again and again to implement his demands in full. Otherwise, escalation is the alternative, which means engaging the old continent in another destructive war that no one wants, and everyone will lose in it, including Russia itself.

Perhaps, we can say that the Ukraine that the West wants is over, at least for the foreseeable future. If the West does not listen to the Russian demands and warnings, then the Kremlin tsar will continue his adventures that may impact Europe and the whole world and in this case the price will be much higher than we can imagine.

For Putin, Ukraine is only the beginning. As for the end, for the tsar, or as some call him the new Stalin, is to restore what can be restored from the glories of the former Soviet Union, so that Russia returns as one of the poles of the world order.

The very difficult question is will Putin succeed in eliminating the unipolar system and restoring the bipolar or multipolar system so that Russia will be one of its poles? perhaps, the features of the intricate answer to this crucial question will be revealed, within the next few months.



The very successful facelift of Ammar al-Hakim and Muqtada al-Sadr



Sami Moubayed

Two of the most successful face-lifts in contemporary Arab politics can be attributed to Iraqi Shiite clerics Ammar al-Hakim and Muqtada al-Sadr. Both began their careers as staunch allies of Iran and yet, they have managed to brilliantly rebrand themselves as Iraqi nationalists, speaking for all sects and not just their native Shiite community. Those who have never visited Iraq and are unfamiliar with the inner workings of the Shiite community took their words at face-value, to the extent of portraying them as “critics” of Iran. That is a very flawed assessment, however, blatantly un-informed and both historically and factually incorrect. Last October, Sadr swept the lion’s share of seats in the Iraqi Chamber of Deputies (a total of 73), putting him at daggers-end with the Coordination Framework, a coalition of Iran-backed Shiite parties that lost their majority standing in the Iraqi Parliament. The Coordination Framework includes the Fatah Alliance of Hadi al-Amiri, the Nasr Alliance of ex-Prime Minister Haidar Abadi, and the State of Law Coalition of former premier, Nouri al-Malki, in addition to Ammar al-Hakim’s al-Hikam Party. Hakim and Sadr are presently at daggers-end, each claiming to represent mainstream Iraqi Shiites. They agree on practically nothing, neither on who holds the biggest bloc into parliament nor on who Iraq’s new prime minister should be. This is not new, however. It has always been that way, mirroring a historic conflict between the Hakim and Sadr families that has been handed down from one generation to another, spanning an entire century.

The rise of Ammar al-Hakim

Hakim is a member of the third

generation of the powerful Hakim family, which claims its lineage to the Prophet Mohammad. His grandfather was a renowned scholar and leading authority in the Shia community and six of his sons were killed at Saddam Hussein orders. The Hakims fled to Iran after the Khomeini Revolution in 1979, and with Iranian funds, they set up the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Their men famously took up arms against the Iraqi Army in Iran-Iraq War, openly calling for the establishment of an Iraq-inspired Shiite theocracy in Baghdad.

With the overthrow of Saddam’s regime in 2003, the Hakims returned to Iraq and leadership of the family eventually went to Ammar after the death of his father, Abdul-Aziz. As reward for helping bring down the Saddam regime, SCIRI was given control of the powerful Ministry of Interior, where it used Iraq’s police to hunt down traditional enemies of the Hakim family, whether among Sunnis or within the Shiite community as well (notably, the Sadrist).

Born in 1971, Ammar al-Hakim grew up in Iran and speaks flawless Persian, having studied at private Iranian schools and graduated from the Islamic Arab University in Qom. He never trained as a cleric but put on Islamic uniform when assuming leadership of the family in 2009, also running by the honorific title “Sayyed” (which means descendant of the Prophet).

In 2017, Hakim announced that he was parting ways with SCIRI, and by extension, with Iran, setting up a new political party called al-Hikma (Wisdom). Some took him at face-value, others argued that this was nothing but a PR stunt ahead of Iraq’s 2018 elections, aimed at re-branding him as an independent speaking for all Iraqis, not just Muslim Shiites.

On paper, Hakim’s party seems to distance itself from everything Hakim has stood for throughout his political career. It condemns the militarization of Iraqi society, forgetting that SCIRI’s

armed wing, the Badr Brigade, was one of the most ferocious militias in post-2003 Iraq. He claims that al-Hikma is not a Shiite party and that it is open to Sunnis as well, using flashy slogans like “accountability, constitutionalism, and rule of law” to appeal to a new generation of Iraqis, none of which ever applied to Hakim or SCIRI.

Muqtada al-Sadr’s PR stunts

On the opposite end of the Shiite community, Muqtada al-Sadr has been trying to pull off another stunt, with far greater success than Hakim. He too hailed from a prominent family of Shiite clerics, who, unlike Hakim, were never on Iranian payroll. They too had been persecuted, jailed, and killed by Saddam. Sadr launched his career with a famed insurgency against the Americans back in 2004, which had Iran’s fingerprints all over it, creating a powerful militia known as the Mehdi Army. It rose to fame as protector of the Shiite neighborhood called Sadr City, and marketed itself as a prime opponent of Hakim’s SCIRI. Sadr sheltered his men from accountability, giving them a free hand to run the streets of Iraq, in exchange for their unwavering loyalty. They rose to fame in December 2006, when appearing as masked executioners they put the noose around Saddam Hussein’s neck while chanting: “Muqtada, Muqtada.”

Two years later, the Iranians brought Sadr to Qom, with the aim of sharpening his religious credentials. Back in Iraq, they put a freeze on activities of the Mehdi Army, purging it from rowdy thugs. Sadr returned to Iraq a newborn statesman, made intellectually, financially, and politically stronger by the Iranians. He switched from bullets to ballots, establishing himself as a kingmaker in Iraqi politics, whose final say helped keep Nouri al-Malki in power until 2014, when he played a crucial role in replacing him, first by Haidar Abadi and then, by Adel Abdul

Mehdi in 2019. All three premiers were handpicked for the job by the Iranians.

Over the past ten years, Sadr repeatedly spoken out against foreign tutelage in Iraq, which many saw as thinly-veiled criticism of Iran. Three years ago, he supported demonstrators that took to the streets in Basra, demanding better services as they torched the Iranian consulate. In April 2017, he called on Iran’s top ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, to step down, yet another stunt that western pundits considered, very erroneously, as a break with Tehran. Three months later, he showed up in the port city of Jeddah for a meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS). Both stunts made world headlines, coming at the heels of Saudi-Iranian polarization in the Muslim World. What didn’t appear in mainstream media, however, was Sadr’s September 2019 visit to Tehran, where he was received by none other than the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Sadr was pictured seated at the Ayatollah’s knees—a privilege in Iran, reserved only for those who are 100% loyal, and far beyond suspicion. Last summer, he sent a cable to the Presidential Palace in Damascus, congratulating Assad on his re-election.

Shortly after sweeping the parliamentary elections in October 2021, Sadr announced that he was disbanding the Mahdi Army, now known as the Promised Day Brigade. He called on other militias to follow suit, just like Ammar al-Hakim had done back in 2017. Both men tried coming across as responsible and cross-sectarian politicians, regardless of their political history. Had it not been for their militias, then neither Sadr nor Hakim would have been at the helm of the Shiite community in 2022. Both relied on their armed men after the breakdown of law and order in 2003, and both used them to eliminate potential opponents, within the Shiite community and beyond.

What does Putin's recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions as independent states mean?



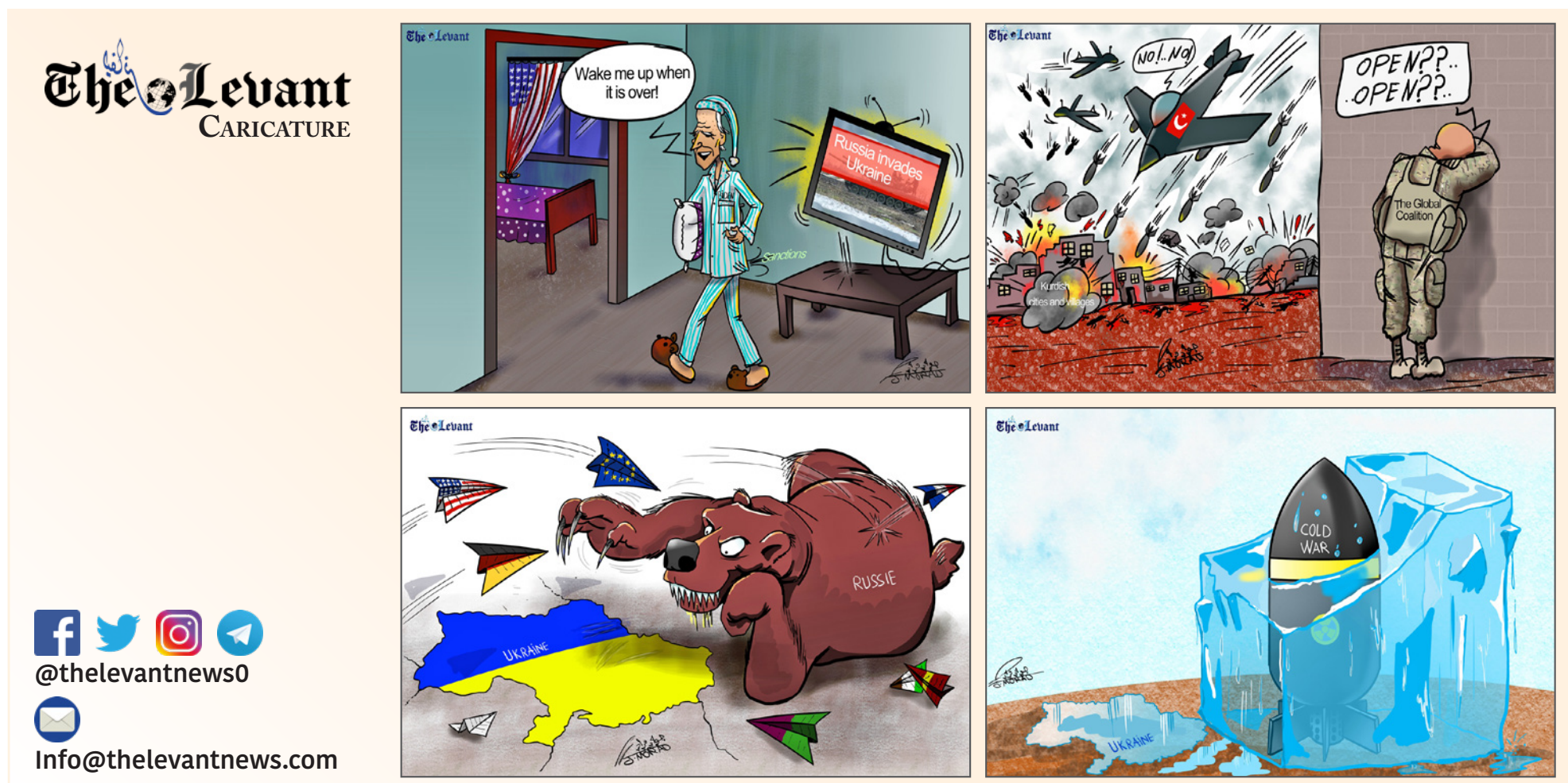
Zara Saleh

Russian President Vladimir Putin has officially recognized the independence of the Ukraine regions of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states. He also considers the two republics are not more part of Ukraine's territories. Added to that, the Russian President has ordered and sent his troops to control the two republics on a "peacekeeping mission" force in East Ukraine. The same scenario has been done by Moscow in 2008 when Russia recognised the independence of the two Georgian regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia which could be a scenario now applied to Ukraine. Going back to the core of the Russian-Ukraine crisis in 2014, Russian-backed separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk, east Ukraine has announced themselves as two

independent republics from the Ukraine government but without any official recognition by the international community except Moscow. Since that, more than 14,000 people have been killed during the conflict between Ukraine and Russian-backed separatists. Then, the ceasefire has been reached with the mediation of France and Germany in 2015 that called the Minsk Agreement. In other words, Putin's recognition and sending the Russian military to the two Ukraine regions means firstly the end of the Minsk peace agreement between Ukraine and Russia. Secondly, such as step will mean that Moscow formally is occupying sovereignty of Ukrainian territory for the second time after the occupation of Crimea in 2014. Finally, Russia's decision demonstrates the ending of the dialogue path and could lead to the invasion of Ukraine by Russia and as a declaration of the war by Putin. On the other hand, Russia's

decision will definitely escalate the situation and increase the tension between Nato and Russia. Moscow will face financial and political sanctions, especially after breaking the Minsk peace agreement. For example, the UK government has declared a series of economic sanctions against Moscow today in the house of parliament in London. Boris Johnson, the UK Prime Minister said these sanctions were a "first barrage" against Russia and could be extended. Furthermore, the Europe and Western response to the Russian decision and to the current crisis will consequence further sanctions by the EU and the US of their own. Germany, for instance, has halted the Russian gas pipeline as sanctions against Putin's orders to send Russian troops to Ukraine. In contrast to Vladimir Putin's actions in Ukraine, the Russian policies and response in Syria were controversial regarding the notions of sovereignty and the federal system

of governance. For example, during all Astana-Sochi meetings about the Syrian conflict, Russia has always been calling for the protection of the sovereignty and unity of Syria's territories. Moscow has always been accusing the US of supporting the Kurdish "separatists" of splitting the Syrian territories and threatening the unity of Syria. Whereas, Putin has officially recognised the independence of "its separatists" in Donetsk and Luhansk. Added to that, the Russian foreign secretary Lavrov has accused Kurds and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) of separatism and attempting them to establish a 'Kurdish State' in northeast Syria with the American support. Following its decision in Ukraine, the Russian President Vladimir Putin should recognise the independence of the Kurds in Syria or at least the federalism for Kurdish region and Syria to become a Federal state similarly to the two independent republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.



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