

Washington makes Ukraine war new flashpoint in its confrontation with Iran

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The Biden administration, backed to the hilt by its European imperialist allies, has opened up a new front in its campaign of aggression and intrigue against Iran, focusing on Tehran's increasing economic and military ties with Russia.

Washington is vilifying Iran as an accomplice of Russian "aggression," even "genocide," so as to further isolate Iran's beleaguered Shia clergy-led bourgeois nationalist regime, and bully the Gulf States and Israel, which have hitherto sought to balance between Ukraine and Russia, into giving their unconditional support to the US/NATO-instigated war in Ukraine.

This development underscores the degree to which US imperialism's brutal and reckless war in Ukraine, alongside its broader preparations for war with China, are exacerbating explosive conflicts across the Middle East, even as living standards plummet.

Washington has denounced Iran for selling Moscow hundreds of its "kamikaze" Shahid 136 self-detonating drones, also known as swarming drones, that have been used to target Ukraine's civilian infrastructure and leave millions of Ukrainians in freezing conditions without power, heat, mobile phone service and even water.

The cynicism and hypocrisy of the imperialist powers has no limits. These drones pale in comparison with the air firepower, including advanced missiles and drones, some of which have been used to strike deep inside Russia, that the US has supplied Ukraine—to say nothing of the tens of billions of dollars of other advanced weaponry it and the NATO powers have showered on Kiev.

As its \$5,000-\$20,000 cost indicates, the Shahed 136 has quite limited capabilities. With a maximum speed of 185 kilometres (115 miles) per hour and a range of 2,200 kilometres, it can carry a warhead of up to 40 kilograms (88 pounds). It is not very good at evading air defence systems. Hundreds have reportedly been shot down over Ukraine in recent weeks. But being cheap, they can be deployed in swarms so that even if most are intercepted, a few will reach their targets to devastating effect.

In recent weeks, numerous articles have appeared in the US, European and Israeli media citing unnamed intelligence and other government officials charging Iran with stepping up drone deliveries to Russia and planning shipments of more sophisticated weaponry. Kiev has claimed that Russia has ordered 2,600 or more Shahed 136 drones from Tehran, while the *Washington Post* reported in November that intelligence officials told it Iran is building a drone-manufacturing facility in Russia. Iran has also been accused of planning to provide Moscow with short-range ballistic missiles, including the Fateh-110 and Zolfaghar. They can strike at distances of 300 and 700 kilometres (186 and 435 miles), but would be significantly harder to shoot down.

In addition to these claims, US and British officials have publicly charged that military-strategic cooperation between Russia and Iran has reached an "unprecedented level." "In return for having supplied more than 300 kamikaze drones, Russia now intends to provide Iran with advanced military components, undermining both Middle East and

international security," British Defence Minister Ben Wallace declared last month. Wallace declined to provide any details. But it has been suggested that Moscow is considering selling Tehran everything from its S-400 missile defence system to Sukhoi-35 fighter jets.

For his part, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has labelled Iran Russia's main defence partner and accused Tehran of actively considering providing Moscow with ballistic missiles that could target West European cities.

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky repeated and amplified these claims in his Dec. 21 speech, which was carefully crafted to dovetail with Washington's line, to a joint session of the US Congress. He denounced Iran as Russia's "ally" in its "genocidal" use of missiles to destroy Ukrainian cities: "That is how one terrorist has found the other. It is just a matter of time when they will strike against your other allies if we do not stop them now. We must do it."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken followed up Zelensky's plea for a massive injection of aid and weaponry, including advanced systems capable of shooting down ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and Russian warplanes, with an announcement that the US would send Kiev at least one battery of Patriot surface-to-air missiles.

Israel's spy chief David Barnea simultaneously warned that Iran "intends" to "expand and deepen its supply of advanced weaponry to Russia," presaging "attacks on Muslim countries in the region."

Ties between Russia and Iran have become closer over the past year. In July, just days after Biden had visited Saudi Arabia and Israel as part of a Mideast tour focused on forging a US-led alliance against Iran, Russian President Vladimir Putin travelled to Tehran for a summit meeting with Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. Following that meeting, Khamenei, according to Reuters, wrote on his website that if Russia had not invaded Ukraine, "the other side would have taken the initiative and caused the war."

However, the partnership between the Islamic Republic and the Putin regime is purely one of convenience, with each pursuing its own interests and ambitions.

Whatever the truth in the claims Iran continues to supply Russia with drones or plans to build a drone factory there—claims both have denied—there is no evidence that either country is providing or plans to provide advanced weaponry to the other. Such cooperation would threaten key tenets of current Russian policy in the Middle East.

In Syria, where both countries have intervened to prop up President Bashar al-Assad's regime against the Islamist proxies backed by the CIA, the Gulf petro-states and Turkey, Moscow has allowed Israel—whose prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has close relations with Putin—to launch hundreds if not thousands of aerial strikes on facilities and personnel belonging to Iran, Hezbollah and other allies, as well as on Syria's civilian airports. Similarly, supplying Tehran, which is desperate to replace its aging air fleet, with advanced weaponry would jeopardise Putin's burgeoning relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab

Emirates, Egypt and Israel, all of which are virulently hostile to Iran.

None of this excludes the possibility that as the US-NATO war on Russia escalates during 2023 and Washington intensifies pressure on Iran, Moscow and Tehran will be forced into a tighter embrace, adding a further explosive dimension to their respective conflicts with the Western imperialist powers.

Indeed, there is a growing danger that the US-NATO drive to militarily defeat and subjugate Russia will, whether directly or indirectly, help trigger a major Mideast war, or the expansion of the current war, as it assumes the form of an ever more direct confrontation between Russia and US imperialism, to the Middle East.

The US counter-offensive against Iran's drones

In an article co-written by the veteran CIA conduit David Sanger and published by the *New York Times* on Dec. 28, Washington announced it has launched a major campaign to thwart Iran's ability to manufacture drones and deliver them to Russia. According to the *Times*, this is "an endeavor that has echoes of its years-long program to cut off Tehran's access to nuclear technology."

National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson described the wide-ranging actions the US has initiated, saying, "We are looking at ways to target Iranian U.A.V. (unmanned aerial vehicle) production through sanctions, export controls, and talking to private companies whose parts have been used in the production." The US, the article explained, will also step up its efforts to provide Ukraine with the ability to shoot down Iranian "kamikaze" drones.

However, the article also cited warnings from officials and analysts that such approaches are likely to have a limited impact. Without stating it explicitly, the article hinted that the US, in conjunction with its attack dog in Tel Aviv, will undertake a new campaign of sabotage against Iran, paralleling the cyberattacks, assassinations of key personnel, and other covert actions it has used to disrupt Iran's nuclear program.

Washington's targeting of Tehran's supplying of drones to Russia marks an escalation and a new front in its confrontation with Iran. Through crippling economic sanctions, military provocations and threats of war, successive US administrations, under Republicans and Democrats alike, have sought to engineer a pro-US political realignment in Tehran, if not full-scale regime change.

In August of last year, it appeared that the Biden administration was on the brink of signing off on an agreement with Tehran to revive the 2015 nuclear accord, having extracted further concessions from Iran by continuing the campaign of "maximum pressure" aimed at crashing Iran's economy that the Trump administration had launched when it unilaterally withdrew the US from the accord in 2018.

However, Washington suddenly changed course and, backed by its European allies, has now indicated that reviving the nuclear accord is no longer a "priority." The intensification of the Ukraine war is the principal cause of this shift. It came after Ukrainian military forces, armed with ever more powerful and expensive US weapons systems and assisted by American intelligence and logistical support, began to inflict a series of humiliating defeats on Russian forces. In response, Moscow has attacked Ukrainian infrastructure—attacks that have become more frequent in recent months and in which Iranian-made drones have apparently come to play a major role.

Washington and its allies are clearly determined to make Iran pay for interfering, however modestly, in their plans to subjugate Russia and plunder its resources. Tehran continues to insist it is ready to make a deal with Washington and that back-channel talks continue. Insofar as the latter

is true, it can be certain Washington, London, Paris and Berlin are demanding iron-clad guarantees from the Iranian regime that any and all military aid for Moscow will cease.

The imperialist attempt to leverage the mass anti-government protests in Iran

The imperialist powers have also sought to intensify pressure on the Iranian regime by intervening in the mass anti-government protests that erupted last September against the political privileges, social control and endemic corruption of the Islamic Republic's Shia clerical elite, as well as soaring prices and mass joblessness. The protests were triggered by the September police detention death of Mahsa Amini, who had been arrested for wearing her hijab improperly.

The likes of Biden and French President Emmanuel Macron have publicly called for the regime's overthrow, and the Western media and political establishment are relentlessly promoting a plethora of pro-imperialist émigré leaders and groups, from Reza Pahlavi, the Shah's son and would-be successor to the Peacock Throne, to US-allied Kurdish nationalist militia.

Shedding crocodile tears, the Western powers have seized on the regime's bloody suppression of the anti-government protests to rail against the "mullahs' regime," announce new rounds of sanctions and engineer a vote at the UN's Human Rights Council to mount an investigation into human rights abuses in Iran.

Now the US, Britain and France are mendaciously trying to argue that Iran's export of drones to Russia is in breach of UN Security Council Resolution 2231—the resolution endorsing the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, under which Tehran accepted unprecedented limits on its civilian nuclear program in exchange for the promised withdrawal of punishing economic sanctions.

They were furious when UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, at a meeting of the Security Council on December 19, rejected their proposal to send officials to Kiev to investigate this supposed violation of Resolution 2231. US Deputy UN Ambassador Robert Wood accused Guterres of "apparently yielding to Russian threats."

Iran's UN ambassador Amir Saeid Iravani reiterated Iran's claim that the drones were supplied before the war started in February, saying they "have not been transferred for use in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine." He likewise rejected the argument that the Council had banned the export of Iranian drones, pointing out that all restrictions on Iran's arms trade under resolution 2231 ended in 2020, paving the way for Iran to resume arms exports. Thus, the Western claim that Tehran needed prior approval "has no legal merit"

Guterres said UN officials were examining "if and when" to send officials to Kiev "in the broader picture of everything we are doing in the context of the war." His top priority, his aides said, was to ensure that a deal with Russia allowing the export of Ukrainian grain to alleviate worldwide grain shortages is not jeopardized.

The *New York Times* has also reported that the Biden administration is working closely with Israel on the drone issue, drawing attention to a recent video meeting that Jake Sullivan, the US National Security Advisor, held with Israel's senior security, military and intelligence officials. At this quarterly meeting, normally devoted to discussing plans to disrupt Iran's nuclear capabilities, they "discussed Iran's growing military relationship with Russia, including the transfer of weapons the Kremlin is deploying against Ukraine, targeting its civilian infrastructure and Russia's provision of military technology to Iran in return."

Tel Aviv has long worked as Washington's subcontractor, carrying out

its dirty work in the region—including cyberattacks on Iran’s nuclear centrifuges and infrastructure, assassinations, and attacks by land, sea and air on Iran’s facilities and allies in the region—while giving its paymaster deniability.

The meeting took place as Benjamin Netanyahu, who has long sought to incite war against Iran, was in the process of forming a coalition government with far right and fascistic forces. On formally taking office, Netanyahu declared that his top priorities were “Stopping Iran” and “Dramatically expanding the circle of peace,” by which he meant Israel’s “normalization” deals with Arab countries aimed at forging an anti-Iran alliance, crucially with Saudi Arabia. Riyadh still has no overt diplomatic relations with Israel but was believed to be moving closer to normalisation, at least until Jewish Power leader Itamar ben-Gvir’s provocation at the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem’s Old City earlier this week.

The threat of escalating conflicts and new wars poses the urgent necessity of uniting workers—the only force that can stop the drive to war—across the region in a common struggle against capitalism and for the building of a socialist society, which would tear down the artificial borders which divide the peoples and economies of the region. Only in this way can the region liberate itself from war and imperialist oppression, fuelled by the profit drive and predatory strategic interests of foreign capitalists and the native ruling classes.



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