



## Iran in Light of the Invasion of Ukraine: Responses, Lessons and Analysis Dr. Raz Zimmt

March 6, 2022

### Overview

- ▶ **Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Iranian leadership and its backers expressed their support to Russia and blamed the war on NATO and the West.** The reactions of senior regime officials, high-ranking clerics and conservative Iranian media reflect a position that asserts that the acts of NATO, led by the United States, posed a clear threat to Russia's national security, and compelled it to make a move to preserve its vital interests. Alongside this, Iranian officials have voiced concern about the continuation of war and call for ending it as soon as possible.
- ▶ Iran's support for Russia is hardly surprising. In recent years, Iran's increasing international isolation has encouraged it to adopt the "look to the east" policy. This trend became even more pronounced since the election of the **hardline President, Ebrahim Ra'isi**, who shares the point of view of the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, which supports tightening ties with Russia and China as an alternative to ties with the West.
- ▶ The official responses in Iran to the Russian invasion of Ukraine reflect an assessment that recent developments in Europe greatly serve Iranian interests. The invasion has further reinforced the fundamental perception of the regime with regards to the changes to the global balance of power. In the view of the Iranian regime and its supporters, the war in Ukraine is yet another manifestation of the waning power of the West and the United States, which is perceived by Iran as a strategic achievement. The decision of the United States and its European allies to avoid militarily intervening in Ukraine is perceived as proof to the uselessness of relying on Western powers and their treacherousness. This view positions Iran as the opposite of those fickle nations, since Iran stands by its allies. Additionally, the developments in Ukraine are seen as further proof of the need to maintain and improve Iran's strategic military capabilities, and particularly its long-range missile arsenal, which provides it with defensive and deterrence capabilities vis-à-vis its enemies. **Ukraine's denuclearization in exchange for the global powers' obligation to respect its independence and not use military power against it are being presented in Tehran as a**

**strategic mistake.** Additionally, Iranian commentators point to the possible benefits to Iran stemming from the Russian assault on Ukraine, including: the worsening of the crisis in the energy market and rise in oil prices, as well as the opportunity to expand cooperation with Russia in light of its growing isolation (“the bloc of sanctioned countries.”)

► **Contrary to the official Iranian position, which backs Russia, there has been widespread condemnation of Russia and its invasion of Ukraine, coming mostly from circles associated with the pragmatist-reformist camp.** According to their view, Iran must condemn Russia’s aggression and avoid clearly backing Moscow.

► **In sum, the official Iranian position reflects a strategic decision to tighten cooperation with Russia as part of the “look to the east” policy.** Despite this, Iran is well aware that Russia is operating based on its own interests, which do not always align with those of Iran. **Thus, for example, in recent years, Tehran has voiced displeasure of Russia’s policy in Syria, where it is permitting Israel to continue striking Iranian targets,** in addition to Russian efforts to curb Iran’s military influence in Syria, and advancing Russian economic interests at the expense of Iran’s. Russia’s refusal in the past to positively respond to some Iranian requests to purchase advanced weapons systems, the significant delay in the construction of the nuclear reactor in Bushehr, and Russia’s support for the UN Security Council resolution to levy sanctions on Iran due to its nuclear program, are feeding the historical sense of suspicion toward Russia and its aims. This suspiciousness, alongside the challenges the Russian Army has faced in waging the campaign in Ukraine, and the uncertainty concerning future developments in the battlefield and the conclusion of the war in Ukraine, are forcing Iran, at this stage, to adopt a cautious approach concerning the ongoing crisis. **This approach manifested in Iran’s abstention in the vote held at the UN General Assembly on March 2, 2022, condemning the Russian assault on Ukraine.**



“NATO’s friends.” Source: Tasnim, March 2, 2022

## Senior Regime Officials and Its Supporters Back Russia

► Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Iranian leadership has backed Russia and blamed the outbreak of war on NATO and the West. Since the eruption of the conflict, the reactions of senior regime officials, high-ranking clerics and conservative Iranian media reflect a clear position asserting that the efforts of the West, led by the United States and NATO, to expand their influence eastward, posed a clear threat to Russia's national security, and compelled it to act to preserve its vital interests. However, Iranian officials have also voiced concern about the continuation of the war, called for reaching a solution through peaceful means and for an end to the war as soon as possible.

► Shortly after the Russian invasion, the **President of Iran, Ebrahim Ra'isi**, spoke on the phone with **Russian President, Vladimir Putin**. During the call, Ra'isi recognized Russia's security needs in light of the actions undertaken by the United States and NATO. Ra'isi remarked that NATO's expansion eastwards is a source of tensions and a real threat to the stability and security of independent countries around the world (ISNA, February 24, 2022).

► In a speech he delivered on March 1, 2022, on the occasion of Eid al-Mab'ath – the anniversary of the Prophet Mohammad's announcement of his prophethood, **the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei**, addressed the crisis in Ukraine for the first time. Khamenei declared that **Ukraine is a victim of the United States' policy**, which intervened in Ukraine's domestic affairs, supported "color revolutions," and attempts to topple the government, which led Ukraine to its current predicament. He labeled the American administration "a mafia regime" controlled by economic interests and the military-industrial complex, and claimed that the United States creates crises and feeds off of them to serve the interest groups that steer its policies. Khamenei did stress that Iran wishes to see an end to the war and opposes war and destruction (although he did not name Russia in this context), but added that addressing the crisis requires recognizing its roots in the policies of the United States and the West (Fars, March 1, 2022).

► **The Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani**, also placed responsibility on the West for the crisis. In a tweet on his Twitter account (February 24, 2022) Shamkhani wrote that nothing is hated more than war, but when the West threatens the national security of countries through various means, it is the West that is directly responsible

for wars and crises that break out due to efforts to resist the West's strategy. He added that the collapse of the global financial markets and the sharp rise in the prices of energy as a result of the crisis in eastern Europe are a testament that instability and insecurity can cause severe damage to Western interests, adding that the West must draw lessons from this.

► **The Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Amir Abdollahian**, also claimed the West is responsible for the crisis. In a tweet on his Twitter account (February 24, 2022), Abdollahian wrote that the cause of the current crisis is the provocative steps taken by NATO. At the same time, he stressed the need to reach a ceasefire and a political solution to the crisis.

► Iran's support for Russia is hardly surprising. In recent years, Iran's increasing international isolation has encouraged it to adopt the "Look to the East" policy. Iran's efforts to bolster ties with Russia and China were vindicated after the United States under President Donald Trump withdrew from the nuclear accords (JCPOA) and re-instituted economic sanctions on Iran in May 2018, and in light of Tehran's disappointment due to Europe's failure to counteract the American Maximum Pressure Policy toward Iran.

► This trend was further reinforced after the election of the hardline President, Ebrahim Ra'isi, in the summer of 2021. Unlike the previous President, Hassan Rouhani, who supported a policy of greater openness toward the West, Ra'isi shares the worldview of the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, who believes that Iran should expand its ties with Russia and China as an alternative to the West. In October 2018, Khamenei declared that Iran ought to be looking eastward and not westward. In a speech before academics, the supreme leader proclaimed that instead of pinning its hopes on the declining nations of the West, Iran ought to look toward the countries of the East, which are rapidly advancing toward growth (Fars, October 17, 2018). The authoritarian nature of the regimes in Russia and China makes them a better alternative to the liberal regimes of the West, in Iran's view. They are not sensitive to Iran's human rights abuses, and they do not pose a significant threat of Western cultural penetration, which may undermine the values of the Islamic Revolution. Iran's growing ties to Russia and China is also driven by their joint hostility toward the United States and American dominance in the international arena. Iran's strategic decision to deepen its ties with Russia manifested in a recent visit of Iranian President Ra'isi to Moscow on January 19, 2022, and his meeting with President Putin. During the visit, the two countries negotiated a framework agreement concerning long-term bilateral cooperation.



**The meeting of the Russian and Iranian presidents in Moscow.**

**Source: ISNA, January 19, 2022**

- ▶ Unlike its solid relations with Russia, Iran’s relations with Ukraine were significantly harmed after the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) shot down a Ukrainian passenger airline in January 2020. The Ukrainian government condemned Iran’s efforts to conceal the truth concerning the downing of the plane, and claimed that Iran purposefully shot down the plane, to blame the United States for the act.
- ▶ **The official Iranian position concerning the war in Ukraine was also adopted by Friday prayer preachers in mosques and across conservative media outlets**, which expressed support for Russia and blamed the United States and Western countries for the crisis. The Friday prayers Imam in Tehran, Ahmad Khatami, pointed to NATO as the actor responsible for the military offensive without naming Russia. Khatami claimed that NATO’s provocative actions and the conduct of the United States, which unjustifiably sees itself as a superpower, complicated the situation in the region. At the same time, Khatami expressed concern about the death of innocents and stressed that Iran’s policy is to call for restraint and dialogue as a way to solve crises (Tasnim, February 25, 2022).
- ▶ In their coverage, conservative Iranian media outlets clearly sided with Russia and adopted the official Iranian line that blames the West for the crisis. For example, the hardline daily Kayhan presented Ukraine as a victim of Western influence. A commentary published by the paper (February 27, 2022) claimed that the war in Ukraine did not start in late February but a few years ago, when the United States led the “Color Revolutions” in the country and placed a comedian (meaning the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky) in the president’s seat.

## The Lessons of the War and Its Repercussions in Tehran's View

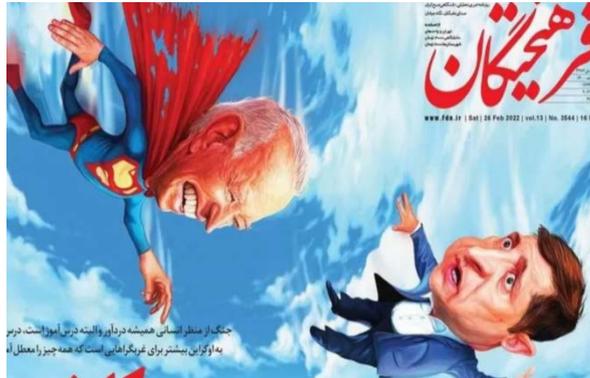
► The official line adopted by Tehran reflects an assessment among Iran's leadership that the recent developments in Europe greatly serve Iranian interests. These developments also validate the fundamental worldview of the regime with regards to changes in the global power balance and the need to maintain Iran's strategic military capabilities.

► **In statements and opinion articles published by Iranian newspapers affiliated with the conservative faction, several central messages were oft-repeated:**

◆ **The West, led by the United States, in the process of decline.** The helplessness of the United States and its European allies in the face of the Russian assault on Ukraine serves as further proof (in addition to the hurried American withdrawal from Afghanistan) of the West's decline and the enfeeblement of the United States. These trends are perceived by Iran as a strategic accomplishment. In a speech delivered on March 1, 2022, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Khamenei, declared that the crisis in Ukraine and the failure on the part of the United States to convince Russia not to attack Ukraine reflect the fact that the U.S. has lost its ability to act as the hegemon on the international arena, and that the U.S. is in the process of decline. The United States is unable to control events and the decline of a global power makes it likely for regional crises to emerge, which it cannot manage (the website of the supreme leader, March 1, 2022).

◆ **The West, and particularly the United States, can not be trusted.** The Supreme Leader Khamenei declared in his speech that the governments supported by Western powers ought to learn the lessons from Ukraine and Afghanistan concerning the unreliability of Western powers, led by the United States. He remarked that the president of Ukraine, like the former president of Afghanistan, admitted that they made a mistake by relying on the United States and Western government, which abandoned them to their fate (website of the supreme leader, March 1, 2022). The daily Kayhan contrasted the conduct of the United States and the West, which betrayed their allies, to that of Iran and the IRGC. Not a single general or officer from NATO or the Pentagon came to assist Ukraine, Kayhan argued. On the other hand, the former Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, and his devoted followers, stood by the side of their allies and

did not forsake them at their toughest hours, even when those partners are not Shia or even Muslims (Kayhan, February 27, 2022).

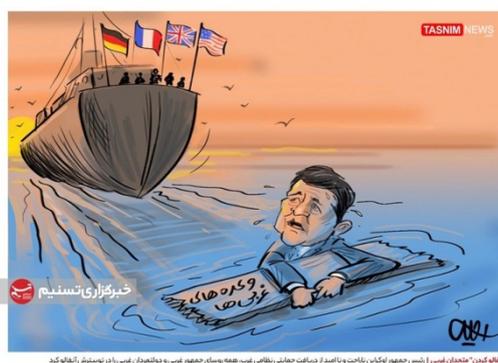


**The flailing president of Ukraine waiting for Superman Biden.**  
**Source: Farhikhtegan, February 26, 2022**

- ◆ **The double standards of the West.** The denunciations and sanctions of Western countries targeting Russia were presented in Iran as another manifestation of the West's hypocrisy, which stands against aggression only when it is directed against a Western country. The Supreme Leader of Iran, Khamenei, accused the West of double-standards, and claimed that while Iran opposes war and destruction in any place in the world, the countries of the West have avoided condemning the ongoing massacres in Yemen and even supported them (the website of the supreme leader, March 1, 2022). The website Asr-e Iran, which is affiliated with the pragmatist camp, also referred to the double-standards applies by the West. A commentary published on the website (March 1, 2022) argued that the Russian attack is undoubtedly a grave violation of international law, and it was justified to place sanctions on Russia. However, the West ought to have adopted similar steps in all cases of aggression, including when Israel strikes Syria or Lebanon, and Saudi bombs cities and kills innocents in Yemen.
- ◆ **The importance of maintaining strategic military capabilities.** Conservative media in Iran presented the limited capacities of Ukraine in the face of the Russian assault as evidence for the need to maintain strategic assets (including nuclear capabilities), which provide countries with defensive and deterrent capabilities vis-à-vis its enemies. A commentary published by Kayhan (February 26, 2022) asserted that Ukraine's inability to protect itself from the Russian invasion is a result of its dependence on the West, and its decision to rely on the West's promises, rather than focusing on developing independent defensive capacities. The paper quoted the Ukrainian ambassador to the United Kingdom, who stated that if his country did not rely on the promises of the United

States, Russia and the UK, and did not disarm of its military capacities, its current situation would have been better. The ambassador was referring to the Budapest Memorandum, under which Ukraine's agreed to dispose of its nuclear weapons, in exchange for a commitment of the United States, Russia and the UK to respect its independence and refrain from using military force against it.

- ◆ The conservative paper Hamshahri also addressed the “mistake” Ukraine made in relying on Western support. A commentary that ran under the headline “Ukraine: The Era of Missiles and Not Talk” (February 27, 2022) argued that Ukraine is now dependent on foreigners in the face of Russian aggression, after relying on the West's help for years, which turned its back on it, instead of creating its own defensive system.
- ◆ The website Mashregh News, which is affiliated with the IRGC, claimed in a commentary (February 25, 2022) that the military developments in Ukraine prove the importance of military power alongside capabilities in the economic, cyber and soft-power spheres. Even countries such as Japan and South Korea, which enjoy significant economic power, are unable to play a central role in global and regional developments due to lack of serious military capabilities. The history of the Islamic Revolution has proven that weakening Iran's military might has always been on the agenda of the West, which has tried to compel it to give up its military capabilities. Recent developments in Ukraine demonstrate that every country ought to bolster its military capabilities to preserve its national power.



**Ukrainian President Zelensky and the promises of the West.**

**Source: Tasnim, February 27, 2022**

- Meanwhile, Iranian commentators pointed to the potential benefits to Iran stemming from the Russian attack on Ukraine, including:

- ◆ The crisis in the energy market, which allows Iran to continue to expand its oil export, whose price has already crossed 100 dollars per barrel. The rise in the sale of oil is particularly significant for Iran if the nuclear talks in Vienna will lead to a return to the nuclear deal (JCPOA) and removal of economic sanctions. In such a scenario, Iran will be able to export oil at higher prices and also have access to funds frozen in foreign banks due to sanctions.
- ◆ The imposition of sanctions on Russia makes it harder for the United States to enforce the sanctions regime on Iran, particularly in the case of the collapse of the nuclear talks, which would lead the U.S. administration to tighten the enforcement of sanctions against Iran.
- ◆ Russia's growing isolation creates opportunities for expanding cooperation between Iran and Russia, in the diplomatic sphere (for example, obtaining Russian support for Iran in the UN Security Council), and in the financial sphere (for example, options for expanding cooperation between sanctioned banks in both countries).
- ◆ The ongoing crisis in Ukraine may bolster Iran's bargaining position in the negotiations concerning Iran's nuclear program held in Vienna.

## The War on Ukraine as a Source of Contention in Iran

- ▶ Unlike the unequivocal support offered by the leadership of the regime and supporters of the regime's official line, **reformist-pragmatist camp circles have voiced concern about the Russian invasion.** The critical position of Iranian pragmatists concerning the Russian assault on Ukraine appeared against a backdrop of growing warnings by this faction of Iran's growing dependence on Russia, which may, according to them, sacrifice Iranian national interests on the altar of Russia's regional and global interests.
- ▶ **The former Deputy Speaker of the Majlis, Ali Motahhari,** a member of the moderate conservative faction, and one of the prominent supporters of the former President, Hassan Rouhani, argued that Iran ought to condemn the Russian attack on Ukraine and thus show its independence. In a tweet on his Twitter account (February 24, 2022), Motahhari also criticized the coverage of the war by Iranian official media outlets, which according to him, are depicting the war as if they are operating out of a Russian colony. . He remarked that Iran

ought to remember the role Russia under the Czar played in tearing Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia from Iranian territory (as part of the Treaty of Turkmenchay between Iran and Russia in 1828) and the support the USSR offered to Saddam Hussein's regime during the Iran-Iraq War.

► The daily Jomhuri-ye Eslami warned of President Putin expansionist desires, which may harm Iran too. A commentary published by the paper (February 27, 2022) argued that the Russian attack on Ukraine ought to serve as a reminder for Iran concerning Russia's conduct over the past 200 years, during which it harmed Iran and acted against Iranian national interests. The paper stressed the need to operate based on the motto "neither East, nor West, only the Islamic Republic," which was one of the prominent slogans of the Islamic Revolution and reflected the rejection of revolutionary Iran of both the United States and the USSR.

► **The former Chairman of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of the Maklis, Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh,** compared President Putin to Adolf Hitler and wrote on his Twitter account (February 24, 2022) that Hitler, Stalin, Reagan, Bush, Trump and Putin are "bloodthirsty politicians" who did not allow humans to live in peace. He warned that the Russian assault on Ukraine is the start of a new hot war, global anarchy and takeover of authoritarian and oppressive leaders.



**Putin sinking in the Ukrainian quagmire. Caricature by artist Mohammad Faraji.**

**Source: Khabar Online, February 28, 2022**

► In a commentary published by the paper E'temad (March 2, 2022), **reformist politician Esmail Garami-Moghaddam,** argued that Iranian national interests obligate Iran to stand against the Russian aggression. He put forward several arguments to support his call for an Iranian condemnation of Russia, including: the aggression Iran itself faced when attacked in 1980 by Iraq; Iran's unyielding support for the Palestinian and Yemenis in the face of Israeli and Saudi aggression; Iran's historical record of being subjected to Russian aggression;

standing alongside the international community in its entirety against Russia; and the need to display that Iran is an independent nation.

► The **political commentator and regime critic, Sadegh Zibakalam**, was even more explicit in his position vis-à-vis Russia. In a tweet on his Twitter account (February 26, 2022) Zibakalam published an apology to Ukraine for his government's support for Russia, writing that most Iranians support Ukraine and condemn the Russian attack, but they are not able to express their position.

► Iranian social media users also expressed criticism toward Russia and expressed their support and solidarity with Ukraine and criticism of Russia's aggression. On the night of February 26, 2022, a group of Iranian citizens held a small protest in front of the Ukrainian embassy in Tehran, during which they chanted against Russia and President Putin.



**Iranians protest in solidarity with Ukraine in front of the Ukrainian embassy in Tehran. Source: Twitter, February 27, 2022**