

The Region
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TOP STORY: Iranian Revolutionaries Publish Manifesto Calling for Post-Regime Secular Constitution

In a sign that Iran's internal protest movement may be maturing into a potentially revolutionary programme, a coalition of protest groups have published [a 43-article political and social manifesto](#) that appears to be an outline for a new, post-Islamic-Republic constitution. The manifesto was published for the first time by [an alliance of 30 anonymous youth groups](#) who call themselves [United Youth of Iran \(UYI\)](#). The manifesto calls for the ["getting rid of the Islamic Republic", establishing secular governance, and forming of inclusive and democratic government](#), as well as reforming Iran's foreign policy. "The country's foreign policy should be based on securing national interests and maintaining global peace, and no-interference," the manifesto reads. The manifesto also envisions that *"the future government of Iran should be committed to international charters and conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and Convention on the Rights of the Child."*

The group also issued a statement urging expatriate opposition groups ["to agree on a mechanism and procedure to elucidate](#) the perspective on the day after the victory of the revolution and under one flag, for the sake of the innocent bloodshed in this path, to introduce the path of solidarity so that others will join along." Meanwhile, Iranian diaspora groups announced that [one million people have signed a petition asking the G7 to expel Iranian regime diplomats from their countries.](#)

GULF REGION

Emirati and Qatari Heads of State Meet After Years of Severed Relations

[\[Use this photo\]](#)

Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MbZ), the head of state of the UAE, [visited Qatar this week](#) to attend the FIFA World Cup and meet with Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. The visit to Doha was MbZ's first since the 2017 rupture in relations between the two countries, which took place as part of the broader rift between Qatar and all

other members of the GCC except Oman. The Emirati delegation included Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed, MbZ's National Security Advisor and a key decision maker in the UAE's regional policy and trade. Both countries' news outlets published joint statements promising positive outcomes from the visit and the restoration of relations. MbZ's meeting with the Qatari emir came just days after Saudi Crown Prince [Muhammad bin Salman also visited Qatar and met with Emir Tamim](#) during the FIFA World Cup. The two visits in close succession indicate the political rupture between the two sides—which sometimes manifested itself in proxy warfare, such as in Libya—has ended, a development that will have far-reaching implications in the region.

Saudi Arabia: Are America's Saudi Allies Shifting to China?

Last week, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Saudi Arabia for summits with Saudi leaders and with leaders from the Arab League. While the Saudis and Chinese [did not announce that Riyadh will enter into military trade with China](#), the dozens of other agreements the two countries signed have unleashed concerns that the burgeoning Riyadh-Beijing relationship could create security risks for U.S. interests in the region. [Saudi media outlets declared Xi's visit the start of a new strategic partnership](#) that could serve the Kingdom's interests better than the United States, which they claimed “makes demands” and “interferes” in Saudi affairs in ways that China will not do.

Saudi Foreign Minister Warns of Arms Race if Iran Gets a Nuclear Weapon

Speaking at an international conference in Abu Dhabi, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan warned that [if the Iranians acquire an operational nuclear weapon, then “all bets are off,”](#) and the other countries of the region will take whatever measures are needed to secure themselves against an Iranian nuclear threat. Prince Faisal's remarks implied that Saudi Arabia and its allied Arab countries will arm themselves either with a nuclear deterrent of their own or with advanced weapons that can deter Iran. Prince Faisal added that the Saudi government remained skeptical that the United States and others can restore the nuclear agreement with Iran. He noted that in any case, the nuclear agreement would need to be seen as a “starting point” rather than an ending point, given, as one Emirati official noted, the regional countries' concerns over Iranian threats beyond the nuclear agreement such as missiles and drones.

NORTH AFRICA

Massive Celebrations Across the Arab World as Morocco's Football Team Reaches World Cup Semifinals

From Casablanca to Baghdad, and in most European nations and the United States, [Arabs celebrated Morocco's World Cup quarterfinals win over Portugal](#). The victory in Doha marked the first time an Arab or African country has reached the semifinals in 92 years of World Cup competition. On viral video even showed Syrians living under harsh conditions in internally displaced persons camps [erupting with joy](#) after Morocco's first goal, a header by Moroccan star Yusif Al Nusiri. The World Cup competition has been a source of immense pride for Arab populations around the world, with landmark performances such as Saudi Arabia's victory over Argentina, Tunisia's victory over France, and Morocco's historic run to the semifinals.

Libya: US Takes Custody of Libyan Man Suspected of Making 1988 Lockerbie Bomb

Scottish and US law enforcement authorities announced on Sunday that [Lockerbie bombing suspect Abu Agela Mas'ud Kheir Al-Marimi has been transferred to US custody](#). In 2020, the United States charged Al-Marimi, a Libyan, for his suspected role in the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988. The U.S. alleges that Marimi made the bomb that destroyed the plane over Lockerbie, Scotland. Marimi is the third Libyan man charged in the terrorist attack, along with Abdel Basit Megrahi, who died shortly after release from prison in 2009, and Lamem Khalifa Fhimah, who was acquitted of the charge.

IRAN

Iranian Regime Criticizes China Over Xi Jinping's Gulf Visit

Iran's foreign ministry [summoned China's Ambassador](#) to express Tehran's "[intense discontent](#)" over the joint statement made by Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Gulf hosts during Xi's visit to Saudi Arabia last week. The joint statement called for a "peaceful solution" of the issue of three small islands [that have been the subject of a territorial dispute between the UAE and Iran since the 1970s](#). The joint statement implied that China supports the UAE's claim to the islands, which have been occupied by Iran for decades.

Iranian government-aligned media outlets were vehement in their criticism of Xi's visit. The government-aligned Tehran Times published an article referring to China-Saudi summit as a ["pompous visit"](#) and labeling the new partnership between the GCC and China a ["betrayal led by Beijing."](#) Former Iranian diplomat Abdolreza Farjirad told one local news outlet in Tehran that it is unlikely Tehran's relations with China would be the same this joint statement and noted that he ["never imagined before that China would ever take a step against Iran's interests."](#) Farjirad also added that if this shift in China's behavior continues, then in less than a decade China will cause as much concern for Iran as America does, concluding that "it appears that China has given up its 25-year cooperation deal with Iran."

Meanwhile, according to government-controlled media, the Chinese Ambassador in Tehran sought to soften the Iranians' ire by telling Iranian officials that his country seeks to maintain a "balanced" policy towards the Persian Gulf, and noting that there will be [an upcoming visit to Iran led by the Chinese deputy prime minister.](#)

Iran's Economic Woes Deepen

Economically, in addition to [the whopping 84 percent year-on-year inflation in food prices](#) in more than 12 provinces, the Iranian Rial recorded historic losses against the dollar, reaching almost [a 50 percent](#) decline in the last 15 months. The Rial is now trading at an incredible 377,000 to the dollar. Iran International also reported this week on an [exodus of Iranian professionals](#). More than 30,000 medical, engineering, and business professionals reportedly have emigrated from Iran in the past year.

Iranian Regime's Former Media Chief Denounces the Regime's Crackdown

Iran's former chief of state Radio and TV, Mohammed Sarafaraz released a video message this week in which he denounced the brutal beatings and killings of protestors and [blamed Supreme Leader Khamenei's son Mojtaba for the crackdown](#). It was a remarkable public statement by a man who was appointed to his former position by Khamenei. Acknowledging the dangerous nature of his statement, Sarafaraz said that he has already written a will in case anything happens to him after these statements. [The video statements](#) were made during Sarafaraz's discussion with Shahrzad Mirqali Khan, [who was arrested and imprisoned for five years in the US](#) for trying to send military equipment to Iran and later became the public relations manager of Press TV.

Despite mounting criticism at home and abroad, the Iranian regime last week held [its first executions of anti-government protesters](#), sparking international condemnation and more nationwide protests.

IRAQ

Iraqi Government Sentences Activist to Jail for Criticizing Iran on Social Media, Then Shoots Protesters Demanding His Release

On December 5, an Iraqi court sentenced 23-year-old activist Haider Zaidi to three years in prison for the crime of “insulting the Popular Mobilization Forces.” Zaidi has been a vocal critic of Iran’s interference in Iraq and has particularly criticized the role of militant Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, an IRGC-Quds Force associate who was killed in the same raid that killed IRGC-Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani in 2020. After news broke of Zaidi’s sentence, protesters demanded his release and clashed with government security forces in the southern city of Nasiriyah. The [government forces fired on the protesters](#), killing two and wounded 21. Zaidi’s sentencing came at the same time that a court in Baghdad [sentenced in absentia Iraqi politician Mithal al Alusi to seven years in prison](#) for the alleged crime of “insulting the judiciary” due to Alusi’s public allegations that Iraq’s highest court is under Iranian influence.

Iraqi Parliament Speaker Acknowledges Murders and Kidnappings by Militias

Iraqi parliament speaker [Mohamed Al-Halbousi](#) stated that Iran-backed militias have kidnapped and killed hundreds to thousands of people who went missing in Iraq from 2014 to 2016. Halbousi made the revelation during an interview with a local Iraqi television channel. He added that the names of those killed by the militias have not yet been released.

LEBANON

Israel Warns It Will Bomb Beirut Airport if Iranians Smuggle Weapons There

Last Thursday an Arabic media outlet published a report that the Iranian regime’s Revolutionary Guards had begun [smuggling weapons into Lebanon via the Iranian civilian airline Miraj](#). The Lebanese government was quick to deny the report, but on Saturday [Israel warned that it would bomb Beirut’s international airport](#) if the airport’s

terminal are used as an Iranian weapons smuggling route. The Israeli warning came after reports in the Arabic media that the Iranian regime planned to shift its weapons smuggling from Syria to Lebanon as a result of intense Israeli airstrikes against such Iranian activity in Syria. Israeli political sources in Tel Aviv told Asharq Al-Awsat, a London-based Arabic newspaper, that Israel is investigating whether Tehran has been smuggling weapons through civilian flights to Beirut airport.

SYRIA

U.S. Congress Pushes for Crackdown on Assad's Narcotrafficking Empire

This week the U.S. Senate is poised to pass the Pentagon's annual budget bill into law. This year the National Defense Authorization Act, or NDAA, contains a provision that will require the U.S. government to formulate a strategy [to combat the Assad regime's burgeoning narcotrafficking network for the drug Captagon](#), a development that has caught the attention of Arabic media. The Captagon narco-trade has provided the Assad regime and its partners with [more than \\$5 billion in annual revenues](#) and has victimized regional states such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The Congressional initiative against Assad's regime-sponsored drug trafficking, if fully implemented, could have as significant an effect on Assad's viability as the 2019 Caesar Act, which levied sanctions against Assad in response to his regime's mass killings of detainees.

Assad Regime Economy Grinds to a Halt As Fuel and Electricity Shortages Hit

Last week the Syrian government was forced to shut down government offices, schools, and services to cut costs and fuel consumption in the face of an [unprecedented fuel crisis](#). The severe shortage of fuel in Assad regime territories has paralyzed the regime economy's major sectors and left Syria's city streets empty of commerce. At the same time, [the Syrian government's currency collapsed to an all-time low](#) of more than 6,000 to the U.S. dollar last week, rendering virtually all licit imports into Syria unaffordable.

Syrian Telecom Provider Has Close Ties to Iran's Revolutionary Guards

Despite Syria's economic paralysis, there continue to be signs that Bashar al Assad allows the Syrian economy to be exploited by his external patrons such as the Iranian regime. In a bombshell report last week, an NGO called the Observatory of Political and Economic Networks (OPEN) published an investigation showing that [Syria's newest mobile telecomms operator, Wafa Telecom, is partly owned by a company linked to](#)

[Iran's Revolutionary Guards](#). OPEN reported that the company's ties to the IRGC had previously been obscured by an opaque ownership structure, but that until 2019 the Malaysia-based company had been directly owned by an Iran who is now under sanctions for facilitating IRGC oil sales. OPEN reported that another of the company's key shareholders is none other than Bashar al-Assad's close confidant and money man, Yassar Ibrahim, a man already sanctioned by the United States.

Operations Against ISIS Resume in Eastern Syria

The apparent pause last week in Turkish preparations for a ground offensive into Syria enabled the Syrian Democratic Forces and coalition forces to [resume operations against ISIS remnants in eastern Syria](#), which had been paused by the SDF/YPG last week as it appeared a Turkish incursion was imminent. The U.S. military stated that its forces had conducted a helicopter raid in eastern Syria on Saturday night, and that the raid had resulted in the deaths of two ISIS leaders.

TURKEY

Turkey Remains on the Brink of A New Syria Invasion; YPG Commander Says U.S. Response Has Been "Weak"

On Sunday, President Erdogan held a phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss regional security, economic, and energy issues. Erdogan told Putin that [Turkey still insists on removing the YPG militia from the Turkey-Syria border zone](#), to a depth of 30 km into Syria. Erdogan said that Russia had agreed to this point in the two countries' 2019 deal signed in Sochi, but that Russia had thus far failed to implement its part of the agreement by compelling the YPG to leave that zone.

Previously, last Wednesday, YPG commander Mazloun Abdi told the Arabic news outlet Al Sharq al Awsat that [American and Russian pressure had caused Turkey to delay its military incursion](#) into Syria, but that the American response to Turkey's aerial bombardment had been "weak," especially since Turkish airstrikes had targeted locations in northeast Syria close to U.S. troops. Mazloun said that the YPG were open to the idea of integrating into the Syrian government's military forces, provided that the YPG-backed administration of northeast Syria can retain its autonomy within Syria. But Mazloun said that he would not go to Damascus to negotiate such a deal until "conditions for a political solution are ripe."

Separately, former Ambassador James Jeffrey, who served at separate points as the top U.S. envoy Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, [called for the United States to broker a compromise between Turkey and the YPG](#) that could address Turkey's security concerns but avert a Turkish military incursion into Syria. Jeffrey said that Washington should return to the framework of earlier security arrangements in order to put a realistic offer on the table.

U.S. Sanctions Erdogan Associate for Helping Iran's Revolutionary Guards Evade Sanctions

On Thursday the U.S. Treasury [sanctioned Sitki Ayan, a prominent Turkish businessman and close associate of President Erdogan](#), for his role in helping Iran's Revolutionary Guards evade U.S. sanctions. The Treasury said that Ayan had helped the Iranian regime raise \$1 billion in illicit oil revenues in 2020, and that he had done so by helping to make shipping arrangements and launder funds while hiding the IRGC's involvement. The Treasury also said Ayan had used his company's accounts in Turkey to transfer about \$80 million to the IRGC-Quds Force.

Lavrov Claims Turkey Agreed to "Neutralize" Syrian Opposition Factions

Last Wednesday, Putin's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov told a conference in Moscow that Russia and Turkey had agreed to ["sort" the Syrian opposition factions according to their willingness to have a dialogue with the Assad regime](#). Lavrov said that armed groups that are willing to negotiate with Assad should be "neutralized" from other Syrian opposition groups, though he gave no further details on what this "neutralization" would entail. Turkey has not corroborated Lavrov's assertion, though Turkish Foreign Minister Cavasoglu said last month that only ["reconciliation" between the Syrian opposition and the Assad regime](#) could bring stability to Syria.

YEMEN

New Reports of Large-Scale Human Rights Violations by Houthis

Two new human rights reports scrutinized Houthi violations in Yemen. On Sunday, the Yemeni Network for Human Rights released a report documenting more than [127,000 instances of human rights violations committed by Houthi forces](#) since 2014, including the killing of more than 14,000 civilians. In a separate report last Thursday, the Women's Coalition for Peace in Yemen stated that [Houthi militias had committed 1,893](#)

[documented cases of kidnapping, torture, and rape](#) against women from Decemember 2017 to October 2022. The report also said that minors were subject to harsh treatment in Houthi prisons.