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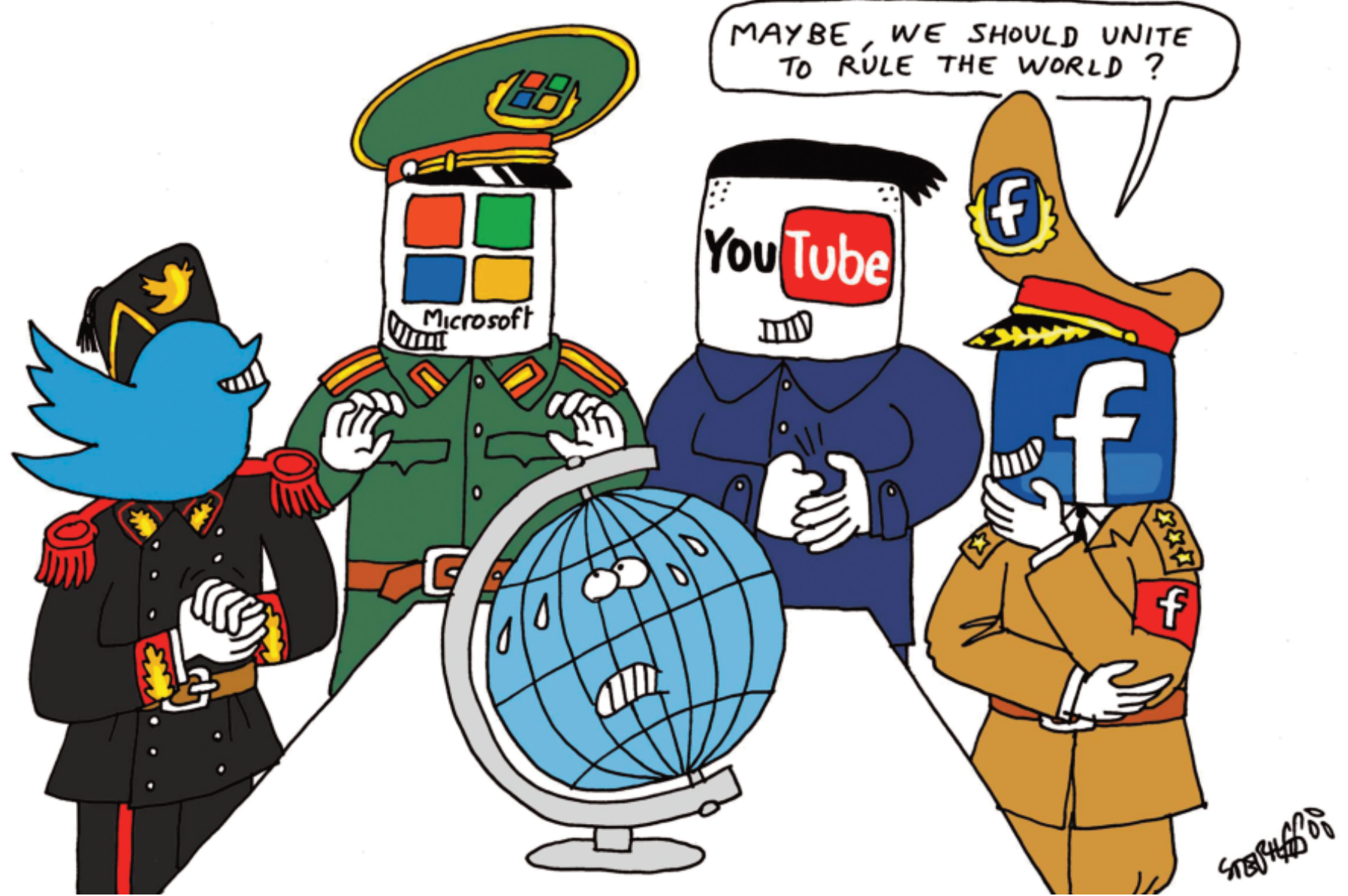
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BIG SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES TEAM UP TO FIGHT TERRORIST PROPAGANDA



IRAN CLOSED MOSUL 'HORSESHOE' AND CHANGED WAR

In the early days of the assault on Islamic State in Mosul, Iran successfully pressed Iraq to change its battle plan and seal off the city, an intervention which has since shaped the tortuous course of the conflict, sources briefed on the plan say. The original campaign strategy called for Iraqi forces to close in around Mosul in a horseshoe formation, blocking three fronts but leaving open the fourth - to the west of the city leading to Islamic State territory in neighboring Syria.

That model, used to recapture several Iraqi cities from the ultra-hardline militants in the last two years, would have left fighters and civilians a clear route of escape and could have made the Mosul battle quicker and simpler. But Tehran, anxious that retreating fighters would sweep back into Syria just as Iran's ally President Bashar al-Assad was gaining the upper hand in his country's five-year civil war, wanted Islamic State crushed and eliminated in Mosul.

The sources say Iran lobbied for Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization fighters to be sent to the western front to seal off the link between Mosul and Raqqa, the two main cities of Islamic State's self-declared cross-border caliphate. That link is now broken. For the first time in Iraq's two-and-a-half-year, Western-backed drive to defeat Islamic State, several thousand militants have little choice but to fight to the death, and 1 million remaining Mosul citizens have no escape from the frontlines creeping ever closer to the city center.

"If you corner your enemy and don't leave an escape, he will fight till the end," said a Kurdish official involved in planning the Mosul battle. "In the west, the initial idea was to have a corridor... but the Hashid (Popular Mobilization) insisted on closing this loophole to prevent them from going to Syria," he told Reuters.

The battle for Mosul is the biggest in Iraq since the US-led invasion of 2003. In all, around 100,000 people are fighting on the government side, including Iraqi soldiers and police, "peshmerga" troops of the autonomous Kurdish region and fighters in

the Popular Mobilization units. A US-led international coalition is providing air and ground support.

Iraqi army commanders have repeatedly said that the presence of civilians on the battlefield has complicated and slowed their seven-week-old operation, restricting air strikes and the use of heavy weapons in populated areas. They considered a change in strategy to allow civilians out, but rejected the idea because they feared that fleeing residents could be massacred by the militants, who have executed civilians to prevent them from escaping other battles. Authorities and aid groups would also struggle to deal with a mass exodus.

Kill Box

Planning documents drawn up by humanitarian organizations before the campaign, seen by Reuters, show they prepared camps in Kurdish-controlled areas of Syria for around 90,000 refugees expected to head west out of Mosul. "Iran didn't agree and insisted that no safe corridor be allowed to Syria," said a humanitarian worker. "They wanted the whole region west of Mosul to be a kill box."

Hisham Al-Hashemi, an Iraqi analyst on Islamist militants who was briefed on the battle plan in advance, also said it initially envisaged leaving one flank open. "The first plan had the shape of a horseshoe, allowing for the population and the militants to retreat westward as the main thrust of the offensive came from the east," he said. About a week before the launch of the campaign, Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, a close ally of Iran, accused the United States of planning to allow Islamic State a way out to Syria.

"The Iraqi army and popular forces must defeat it in Mosul, otherwise, they will be obliged to move to eastern Syria in order to fight the terrorist group," he said. Hezbollah is fighting in support of Assad in Syria. Hashid spokesman Karim Al-Nuri denied that Tehran was behind the decision to deploy the Shiite fighters west of Mosul. "Iran has no interest here. The

majority of these statements are mere analysis - they are simply not true," he said.

Nevertheless, securing territory west of Mosul by the Iranian-backed militias has other benefits for Iran's allies, by giving the Shiite fighters a launchpad into neighboring Syria to support Assad. If Islamic State is defeated in Syria and Iraq, Tehran's allies would gain control of an arc of territory stretching from Iran itself across the Middle East to Lebanon and the Mediterranean coast.

Russian Pressure

Iraq was not the only country pressing for the escape to be closed west of Mosul. Russia, another powerful Assad ally, also wanted to block any possible movement of militants into Syria, said Hashemi. The Russian defense ministry did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment. One of Assad's biggest enemies, France, was also concerned that hundreds of fighters linked to attacks in Paris and Brussels might escape. The French have contributed ground and air support to the Mosul campaign.

A week after the campaign was launched, French President Francois Hollande said any flow of people out of Mosul would include "terrorists who will try to go further, to Raqqa in particular". Still, the battle plan did not foresee closing the road to the west of Mosul until Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi agreed in late October to dispatch the Popular Mobilization militias. "The government agreed to Iran's request, thinking that it would take a long time for the Hashid to get to the road to Syria, and during that time the escape route would be open and the battle would still proceed as planned," Hashemi said.

The Hashid move to cut the western corridor was announced on Oct 28, 11 days after the start of the wider Mosul campaign. Fighters made swift progress, sweeping up from a base south of Mosul to seal off the western route out of the city. Abadi "was surprised to see them reaching

the road in just a few days," Hashemi said. "The battle has taken a different shape since then - no food, no fuel is reaching Mosul and Daesh (Islamic State) fighters are bent on fighting to the end."

Iraq Stronghold

Once the Iraqi Shiite militia advance west of Mosul had begun, Islamic State leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi told his followers there could be no retreat from the city where he first proclaimed his caliphate in July 2014. Those tempted to flee should "know that the value of staying on your land with honor is a thousand times better than the price of retreating with shame," Baghdadi said in an audio recording released five days after the Shiite militias announced they were moving to cut off the last route out.

Since then his fighters have launched hundreds of suicide car bombs, mortar barrages and sniper attacks against the advancing forces, using a network of tunnels under residential areas and using civilians as human shields, Iraqi soldiers say. A senior US officer in international coalition which is supporting the campaign said that waging war amidst civilians would always be tough, but the Baghdad government was best placed to decide on strategy.

"They've got 15 years of war (experience)... I can't think of anyone more calibrated to make that decision and as a result that why as a coalition we supported the government of Iraq's decision," Brigadier General Scott Efland, deputy commanding general in the coalition, told Reuters. "The opening and closing of that corridor, hypothetically, realistically, did not fundamentally change the plans of the battle," he added. "It changes how we prosecute the fight, but that does not necessarily make it easier or harder." But the Kurdish official was less sanguine, saying the battle for Mosul was now "more difficult" and could descend into a long drawn out siege similar to those seen in Syria. It could "turn Mosul into Aleppo," he said. —Reuters

'DEMOLITION MAN' ARCHITECT OF HIS OWN DOWNFALL

When former Italian president Giorgio Napolitano tapped Matteo Renzi as prime minister in Feb 2014, he urged his younger colleague to change the constitution in order to make it easier to govern Italy. Early this year, Napolitano fretted that Renzi was taking the wrong approach in doing so. A referendum on the constitutional changes had been called. But instead of focusing the election campaign on the merits of the ambitious reform, Renzi had turned it into a de facto plebiscite on himself by promising to quit if people voted against the changes.

At a time when anti-establishment parties were gaining ground across Europe and when the Renzi government was struggling to revive an anaemic economy, a popularity contest was a dangerous tactic, Napolitano believed. "If Renzi loses, Italy will also lose a lot of credibility," Napolitano, then 90, told friends at an April dinner, according to one person present. He said he had warned Renzi, 50 years his junior, that it was a "mistake to make this too personal".

On Sunday, Renzi paid the price for that mistake. Sixty percent of Italians voted to reject the plans to abolish a directly elected upper house Senate and streamline the legislative process. Within an hour of polls closing, a chastened Renzi announced his resignation. Interviews with a dozen government officials, ministers and close advisers show that Renzi persisted in effectively making the ballot a vote on himself - despite warnings from some of his closest advisors not to do so.

That allowed disparate politicians from opposition parties to join forces in egging on the electorate to oust him. Even after acknowledging in August that the personalization had been a mistake, Renzi sidelined most of his own ministers to dominate primetime television shows, giving more than 20 major media interviews in the last week of campaigning alone. Renzi's defeat is the story of a personal gamble that went awry. But it also speaks to the fast-shifting loyalties of Europe's electorate amid the rising appeal of populist parties across the continent.

Renzi stormed to power following a ruthless internal party coup less than three years ago, hailed as an anti-establishment figure determined to revitalize a lethargic country. But he was ultimately rejected by the very people he had tried to court, the young and disaffected, who viewed him as one of the elite. Renzi is not disappearing from the political scene; he remains the leader of Italy's biggest party and, at the age of 41, has time to craft a return to government. Still, his biggest rivals are the anti-system 5-Star Movement, founded by a populist former comedian.

Safe bet

Renzi raised the stakes on his flagship reform early in his tenure. "I will bet all my political life on it," he told Corriere della Sera newspaper in March 2014. At the time it appeared a safe bet. The opposition party Forza Italia (Go Italy!) of former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi had given its support and opinion polls suggested that more than 70 percent of the electorate were in favor. But Berlusconi soon pulled his backing as a broad policy pact with Renzi collapsed. That left the government alone as it embarked on the most comprehensive overhaul of the constitution since its introduction after World War Two.

It took two years of fierce debate before the changes finally got parliamentary approval in April. But because they involved altering the constitution, Renzi had to call a referendum to get it turned definitively into law. That same month, with polls still predicting victory, Renzi hired the Messina Group, headed by Jim Messina who led US President Barack Obama's successful 2012 re-election bid, for help in developing his campaign strategy.

Messina at the time was also advising British Prime Minister David Cameron in his efforts to keep Britain in the European Union - an effort that failed. Cameron's defeat in the June "Brexit" referendum shocked Renzi, according to close associates. The premier drew two lessons: He would

not repeat Cameron's so-called "project fear", which had predicted dire economic troubles in case of defeat. Renzi also decided he would not associate himself too closely to corporate leaders to avoid accusations that he was in the sway of big business.

Still, Renzi continued putting himself centre stage, meaning that the merits of his reform were being drowned out. Messina found it hard to convince Renzi to do otherwise, a source close to the prime minister said. "The prime minister needs to be a bit more malleable," the communications maestro told the premier's inner circle in July, provoking a burst of laughter, according to someone present. Messina's office declined to comment.

Genie has escaped

Polls showed momentum slipping from Renzi in the summer. In August, the premier finally acknowledged in interviews that he had been wrong to pin his future to the referendum. He tried to change direction by refusing to discuss the vote in connection with what he would do if he lost. But the change in tack came too late: Leaders of the political opposition accused Renzi of trying to go back on his promise to resign. "The genie had escaped and it was impossible to put it back in the bottle," said Matteo Richetti, a lawmaker from the ruling PD who was in constant touch with Renzi.

In the three weeks before the Dec 4 vote, the prime minister went back to his original strategy - playing on his own appeal to try to sway voters and making clear he would indeed quit if he failed. He also played the fear card, warning that defeat could open the door to a tax-hiking technocrat government and presenting himself as the only guarantor of stability. Instead of keeping his distance from business leaders, he campaigned alongside Fiat Chrysler Automobiles Chief Executive Sergio Marchionne, even though a government minister urged against it. "He didn't listen," the minister said. —Reuters

Focus

WHY INDIA POOR ARE DEVOTED TO DEMIGOD LEADERS

"To me, she was a goddess," said party worker Shankar as he joined a sea of mourners bidding farewell to Jayalalithaa Jayaram, highlighting the messianic devotion of India's poor for often controversial champions. Hundreds of thousands of people attended Tuesday's funeral in Chennai for the veteran Tamil leader, an outpouring of emotion usually reserved for global figures such as Fidel Castro or Princess Diana. AFP looks at other Indian political leaders who engendered similar devotion and why they and former movie star Jayalalithaa were so popular:

Championing the poor

Post-colonial India's first mass funeral saw around two million people mourn Mahatma Gandhi after his 1948 assassination, while millions took to the streets when Mother Teresa of Calcutta died in 1997. Up to 15 million people reportedly attended the funeral of CN Annadurai, one of Jayalalithaa's predecessors as Tamil Nadu chief minister in 1969, while Mumbai ground to a halt when local Hindu nationalist leader Bal Thackeray died four years ago.

Like Jayalalithaa, they drew their support from the legions of poor rather than from within Delhi's corridors of power. "People who are powerless feel compelled to look up to someone who seems to offer some kind of hope," said veteran commentator Parsa Venkateshwar Rao. "It's a kind of psychological dependency." Teresa, declared a saint in September for her work with the poor, was widely derided in her lifetime as a fraud, while Thackeray was criticized for divisive rhetoric.

Jayalalithaa was twice jailed over corruption allegations and famed for a vast sari collection. But she won the loyalty of many with a series of populist schemes, including lunches that cost just three rupees (five cents) and election-time giveaways ranging from laptops to goats. "Economists criticized her populist schemes but the impact on the people's psyche was immense," said columnist Shubha Singh. "She struck a chord with the masses, there was a direct chord between the leader and the people."

'Messiah Status'

While the idea of deifying a living person is idiosyncratic for South Asia's Muslims, India's Hindus often elevate heroes to God-like status. The now-retired cricketer Sachin Tendulkar was often greeted with banners proclaiming "Sachin is God" while fans of Narendra Modi wanted to open a temple in his honour last year before the Indian premier nixed the idea. "The kind of blind adulation that we see for political leaders is not unique to India but what is perhaps unique in one respect is the fact that these leaders are perceived as superhuman beings," said Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, editor of the Economic and Political Weekly.

"They become larger than life, they acquire a messianic status. Here is a person who is a benefactor, saviour of all, he almost becomes God." While neighboring China would never allow a personality cult to develop around a politician from outside the ruling Communist party, India is free to choose its heroes. "Ours is a mass democracy," said Rao. "We give vent to our emotions. We are not restrained, stiff-upper lip British types."

One of the family

While never marrying or having children, 68-year-old Jayalalithaa was known among Tamils as Amma, meaning mother - a powerful image in a country where the notion of "Mother India" runs deep. The cheap meals were served in "Amma canteens" while state-subsidized products such as "Amma water" and "Amma cement" left people in no doubt over whom they should be grateful to. Annadurai was known as Anna, which translates as elder brother, and Jayalalithaa was often compared to West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerji, another unmarried woman known as "Didi", Bengali for elder sister.

Christina Paun, a professor who was among the mourners in Chennai, said Jayalalithaa inspired such adoration partly "because she didn't have a family of her own". "She was always a very loving woman, and her love went to her people," she said. Singh, the columnist, attributed Jayalalithaa's popularity to her image as "a mother figure". "She was a consummate politician and her followers find a kind of aura around her," he said. "The emotional connect they felt with Amma made them blind to her flaws." —AFP

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