

**Headlines:**

- **US Admits Goal is to 'Weaken' Russia**
- **Egypt Imposes 'Paranoid' Ramadan and Eid Restrictions**
- **Russia Warns Poland, Bulgaria of Gas Supply Cuts**

**Details:**

**US admits Goal is to 'Weaken' Russia**

After a meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Kyiv, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin told reporters that one of the US's goals in Ukraine is to see a "weakened" Russia. "We want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine," Austin told reporters in Poland when asked what the US goal was in Ukraine. *The New York Times* reported that by calling for a weakened Russia, Austin was acknowledging a shift in the US view of the war from a battle for Ukraine to one that pits Washington more directly against Moscow. For weeks the US has been providing Ukraine with weapons, but the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky has been begging for more heavy weapons, which the US has not provided and this means Ukraine cannot deliver a decisive blow to Russia, who has been struggling with its invasion in Ukraine. For the US the longer the war continues, the more it can achieve its broader objectives such as forcing the European Union to align with the US after transatlantic reached rock bottom under the Trump administration. The US has also been able to drive a wedge between Russian allies with its economic war with Russia. The Biden administration has claimed it is doing everything it can to end the war in Ukraine, but in reality, it has abandoned diplomacy with Russia. Blinken hasn't spoken with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, since February 15, and the Russian ambassador to the US has said the Russian Embassy in Washington is "under blockade."

**Egypt Imposes 'Paranoid' Ramadan and Eid Restrictions**

Egypt has imposed tight restrictions on congregational prayers in the holy month of Ramadan and Eid citing Covid-19 rules, triggering widespread anger. The restrictions include limiting night prayers to 30 minutes and banning spiritual retreats commonly held overnight at mosques during the last 10 days of Ramadan. The government will also ban Eid prayers in open spaces, and will only allow them to be held in a select number of mosques, with imams approved by the government and a single state-sanctioned sermon. The ministry of religious affairs announced the controversial decision, saying it was to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Health officials, however, have said the pandemic is in significant decline in Egypt, and no distancing restrictions are imposed on other social activities. Many have attributed the decisions to the government's fear of large gatherings that could turn into protests as the country suffers an unprecedented economic crisis. "The Egyptian government is paranoid of any gatherings, including religious ones," said Essam Telaima, an Egyptian religious researcher and former government-appointed imam.

**Russia Warns Poland, Bulgaria of Gas Supply Cuts**

Russian energy giant Gazprom has told Poland and Bulgaria it will halt gas supplies, in a major escalation of Russia's broader row with the West over its invasion of Ukraine. Poland and Bulgaria would be the first countries to have their gas cut off by Europe's main supplier since Moscow started what it calls a military operation in Ukraine on Feb. 24. The move to cut off supplies also followed sanctions imposed by Warsaw against Russian individuals and companies. Russian President Vladimir Putin has demanded that countries he terms "unfriendly" agree to a scheme under which they would open accounts at Gazprombank and make payments for Russian gas imports in euros or dollars that would be converted into rubles.